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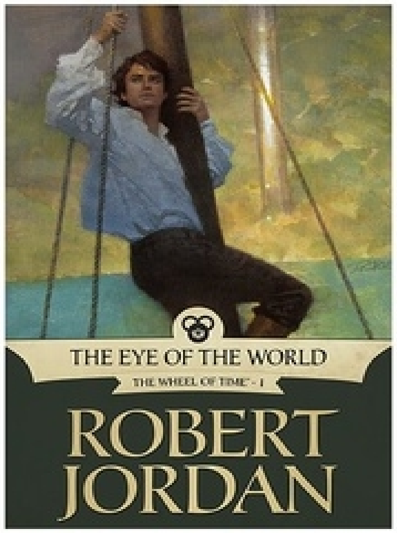
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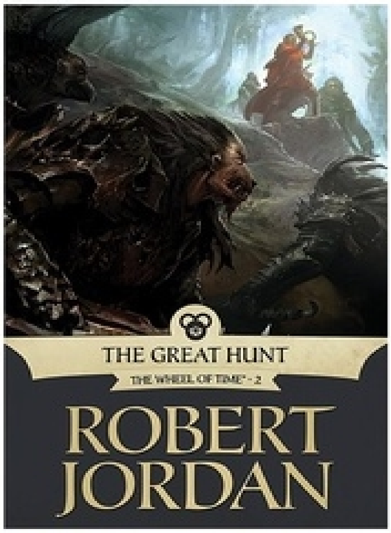
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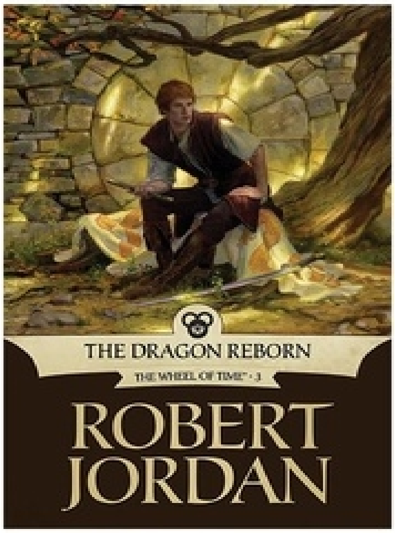
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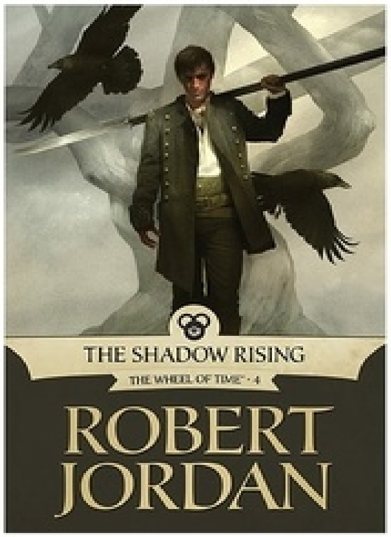
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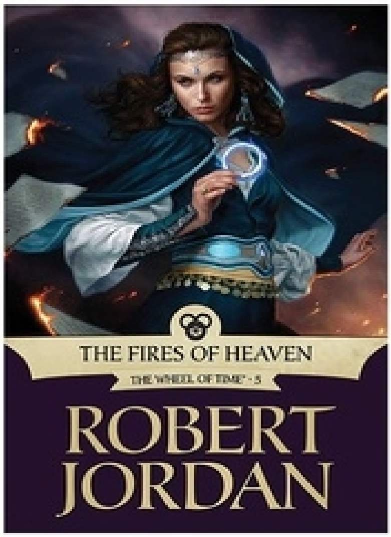
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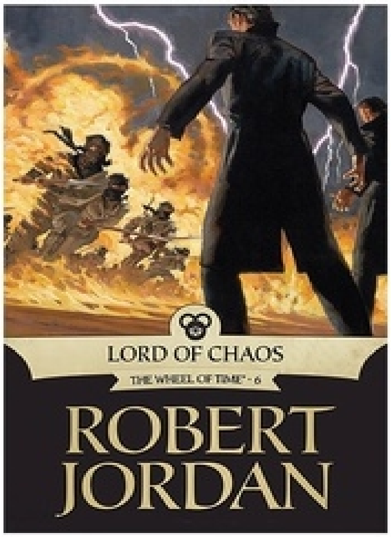
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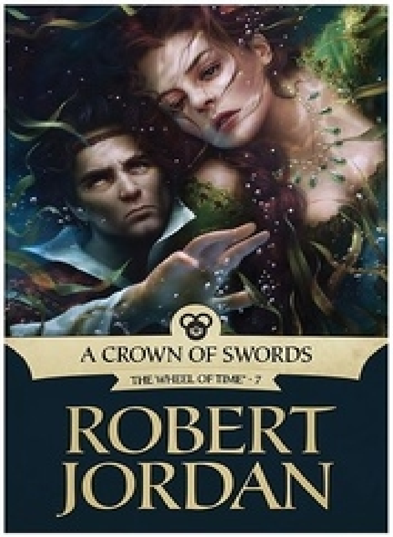
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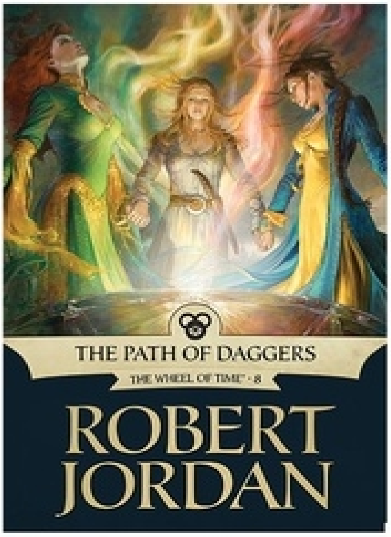
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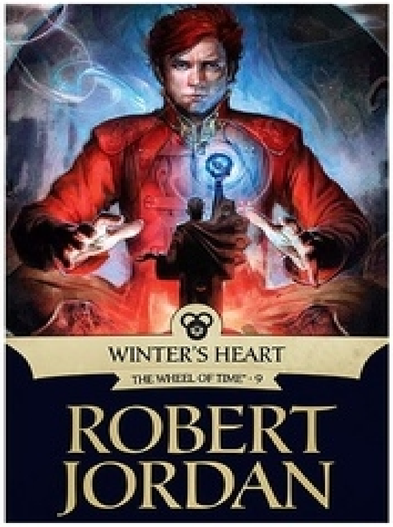
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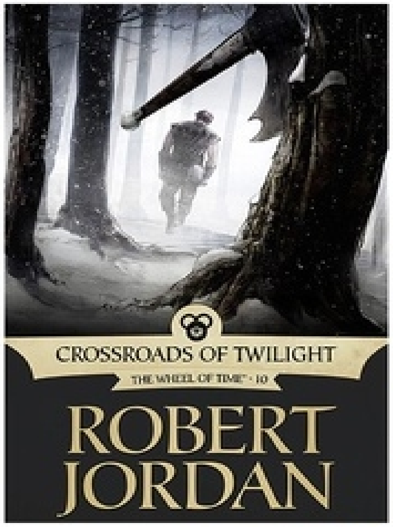
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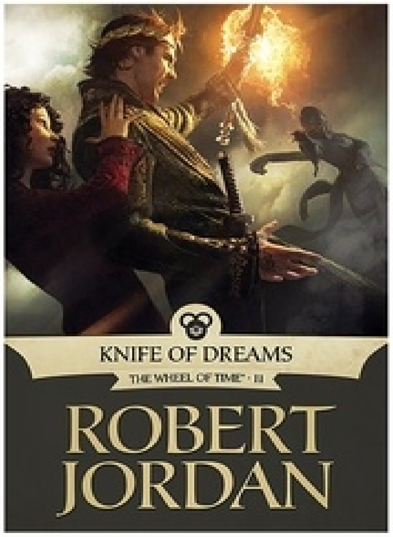
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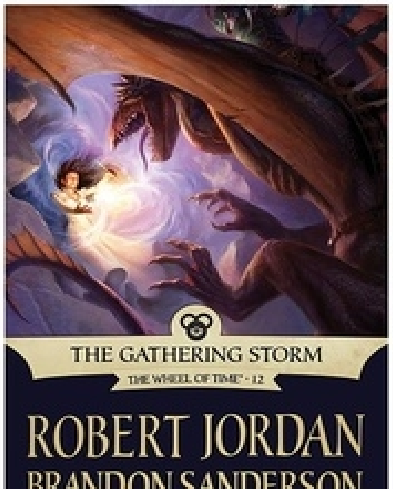
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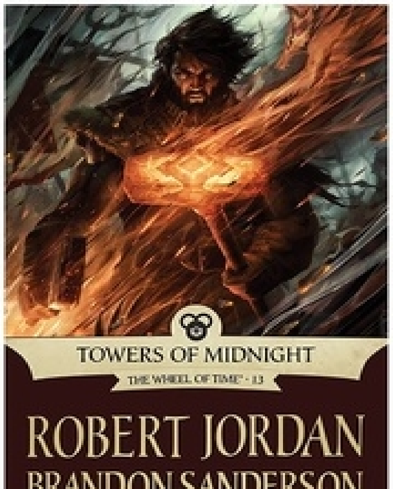
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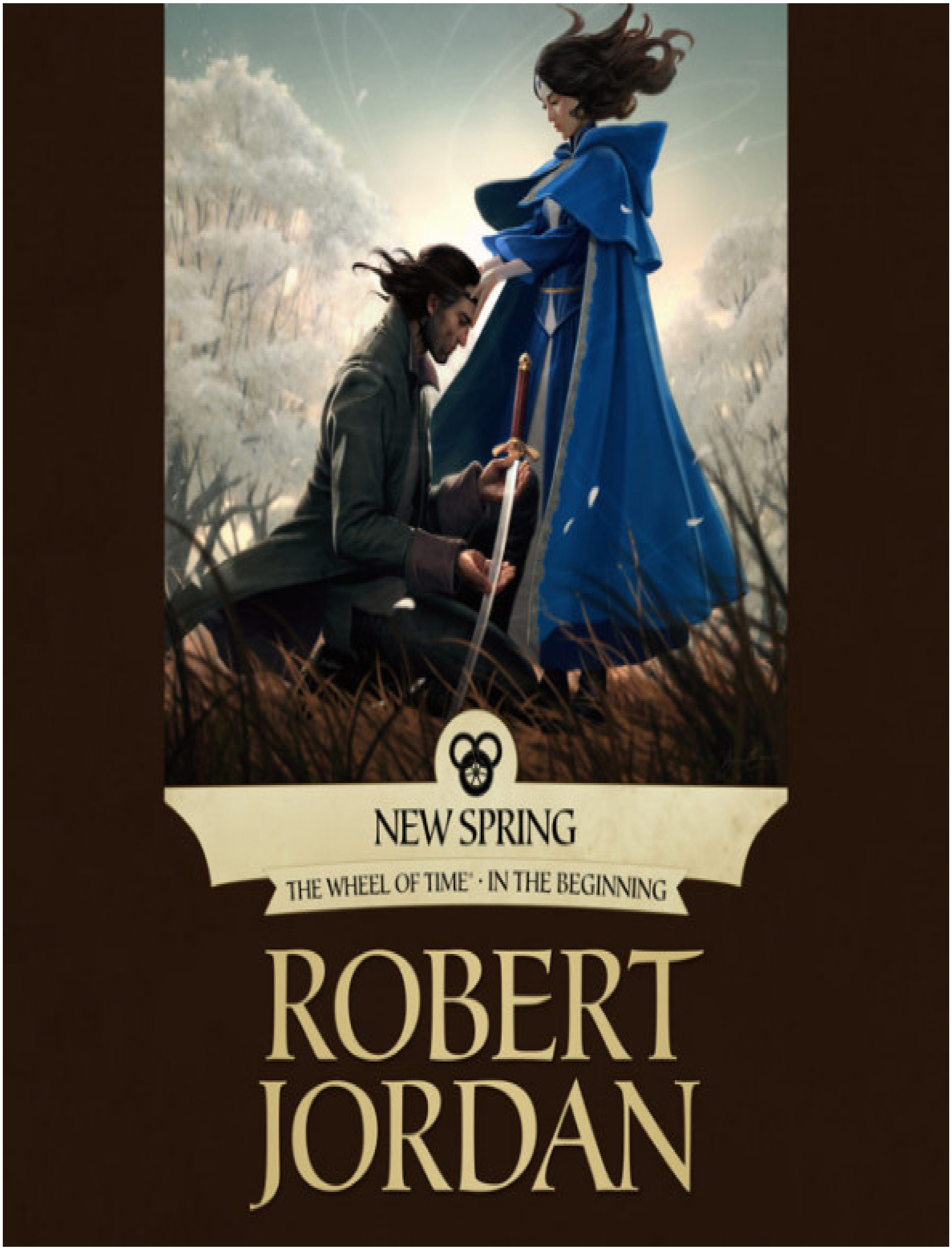
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About the Author

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Chapter 1

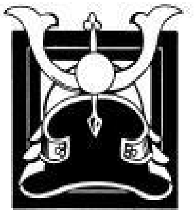

The Hook

A cold wind gusted through the night, across the snow-covered land where men had been killing one another for the past three days. The air was crisp, if not so icy as Lan expected for this time of year. It was still cold enough for his steel breastplate to carry the chill through his coat, and his breath to mist in front of his face when the wind did not whip it away. The blackness in the sky was just beginning to fade, the thousands of stars like the thick-scattered dust of diamonds slowly dimming. The fat sickle of the moon hung low, giving barely light to make out the silhouettes of the men guarding the fireless camp in the sprawling copse of oak and leatherleaf. Fires would have given them away to the Aiel. He had fought the Aiel long before this war began, on the Shienaran marches, a matter of duty to friends. Aielmen were bad enough in daylight. Facing them in the night was as close to staking your life on the toss of a coin as made no difference. Of course, sometimes they found you without fires.

Resting a gauntleted hand on his sword in its scabbard, he pulled his cloak back around himself and continued his round of the sentries through calf-deep snow. It was an ancient sword, made with the One Power before the Breaking of the World, during the War of the Shadow, when the Dark One had touched the world for a time. Only legends remained of that Age, except perhaps for what the Aes Sedai might know, yet the blade was hard fact. It could not be broken and never needed sharpening. The hilt had been replaced countless times over the long centuries, but not even tarnish could touch the blade. Once, it had been the sword of Malkieri kings.

The next sentry he came to, a short stocky fellow in a long dark cloak, was leaning back against the trunk of a heavy-limbed oak, his head slumped on his chest. Lan touched the sentry's shoulder, and the man jerked upright, almost dropping the horn-and-sinew horsebow gripped in his gloved hands. The hood of his cloak slid back, revealing his conical steel helmet for an instant before he hastily pulled the cowl up again. In the pale moonlight, Lan could not make out the man’s face behind the vertical bars of his faceguard, but he knew him. Lan’s own helmet was open, in the style of dead Malkier, supporting a steel crescent moon above his forehead.

“I wasn’t sleeping, my Lord,” the fellow said quickly. “Just resting a moment.” A copper-skinned Domani, he sounded embarrassed, and rightly so. This was not his first battle, or even his first war.

“An Aiel would have wakened you by slitting your throat or putting a spear through your heart, Basram,” Lan said in a quiet voice. Men listened closer to calm tones than to the loudest shouts, so long as firmness and certainty accompanied the calm. “Maybe it would be better without the temptation of the tree so near.” He refrained from adding that even if the Aiel did not kill him, the man risked frostbite standing in one place too long. Basram knew that. Winters were nearly as cold in Arad Doman as in the Borderlands.

Mumbling an apology, the Domani respectfully touched his helmet and moved three paces out from the tree. He held himself erect, now, and peered into the darkness. He shifted his feet, too, guarding against blackened toes. Rumor said Aes Sedai were offering Healing, closer to the river, injuries and sickness gone as if they had never been, but without that, amputation was the usual way to stop a man losing his feet to black-rot, and maybe his legs as well. In any case, it was best to avoid becoming involved with Aes Sedai more than absolutely necessary. Years later you could find one of them had tied strings to you just in case she might have need. Aes Sedai thought far ahead, and seldom seemed to care who they used in their schemes or how. That was one reason Lan avoided them.

How long would Basram’s renewed alertness last? Lan wished he had the answer, but there was no point in taking the Domani to task further. All of the men he commanded were bone-weary. Likely every man in the army of the grandly named Great Coalition—sometimes it was called the Grand Coalition, or the Grand Alliance, or half a dozen other things, some worse than uncomplimentary—likely every last man was near exhaustion. A battle was hot work, snow or no snow, and tiring. Muscles could knot from tension even when they had the chance to stop for a time, and the last few days had offered small chance to stop very long.

The camp held well over three hundred men, a full quarter of them on guard at any given time—against Aiel, Lan wanted as many eyes as he could manage—and before he had gone another two hundred paces, he had

had to wake three more, one asleep on his feet without any support at all. Jaim’s head was up, and his eyes open. That was a trick some soldiers learned, especially old soldiers like Jaim. Cutting off the gray-bearded man’s protests that he could not have been asleep, not standing up straight, Lan promised to let Jaim’s friends know if he found him sleeping again.

Jaim’s mouth hung open for a moment; then he swallowed hard. “Won’t happen again, my Lord. The Light sear my soul if it does!” He sounded sincere to his bones. Some men would have been afraid that their friends would drub them senseless for putting the rest in danger, but given the company Jaim kept, more likely he dreaded the humiliation of having been caught.

As Lan walked on, he found himself chuckling. He seldom laughed, and it was a fool thing to laugh over, but laughter was better than worrying over what he could not change, such as weary men drowsing on guard. As well worry about death. What could not be changed must be endured.

Abruptly, he stopped and raised his voice. “Bukama, why are you sneaking about? You’ve been following me since I woke.” A startled grunt came from behind him. Doubtless Bukama had thought he was being silent, and in truth, very few men would have heard the faint crunching of his boots in the snow, yet he should have known Lan would. After all, he had been one of Lan’s teachers, and one of the first lessons had been to be aware of his surroundings at all times, even in his sleep. Not an easy lesson for a boy to learn, but only the dead could afford oblivion. The oblivious soon became the dead, in the Blight beyond the Borderlands.

“I’ve been watching your back,” Bukama announced gruffly, striding up to join him. “One of these black-veiled Aiel Darkfriends could sneak in and cut *your* throat for all the care you’re taking. Have you forgotten everything I taught you?” Bluff and broad, Bukama was almost as tall as he, taller than most men, and wearing a Malkieri helmet without a crest, though he had the right to one. He had more concern for his duties than his rights, which was proper, but Lan wished he would not spurn his rights so completely.

When the nation of Malkier died, twenty men had been given the task of carrying the infant Lan Mandragoran to safety. Only five had survived that journey, to raise Lan from the cradle and train him, and Bukama was the last left alive. His hair was solid gray now, worn cut at the shoulder as tradition required, but his back was straight, his arms hard, his blue eyes clear and keen. Tradition infused Bukama. A thin braided leather cord held his hair back, resting in the permanent groove across his forehead it had made over the years. Few men still wore the *hadori*. Lan did. He would die wearing it, and go into the ground wearing that and nothing else. If there was anyone to bury him where he died. He glanced north, toward his distant home. Most people would have thought it a strange place to call home, but he had felt the pull of it ever since he came south.

"I remembered enough to hear you," he replied. There was too little light to make out Bukama's weathered face, yet he knew it wore a glower. He could not recall seeing any other expression from his friend and teacher even when he spoke praise. Bukama was steel clothed in flesh. Steel his will, duty his soul. "Do you still believe the Aiel are pledged to the Dark One?"

The other man made a sign to ward off evil, as if Lan had spoken the Dark One's true name. Shai'tan. They had both seen the misfortune that followed speaking that name aloud, and Bukama was one of those who believed that merely thinking it drew the Dark One's attention. *The Dark One and all the Forsaken are bound in Shayol Ghul,* Lan recited the catechism in his head, *bound by the Creator at the moment of creation. May we shelter safe beneath the Light, in the Creator's hand.* He did not believe thinking that name was enough, but better safe than sorry when it came to the Shadow.

"If they aren't, then why are we here?" Bukama said sourly. And surprisingly. He liked to grumble, but always about inconsequential things or prospects for the future. Never the present.

"I gave my word to stay until the end," Lan replied mildly.

Bukama scrubbed at his nose. His grunt might have been abashed this time. It was hard to be sure. Another of his lessons had been that a man's word must be as good as an oath sworn beneath the Light or it was no good at all.

The Aiel had indeed seemed like a horde of Darkfriends when they suddenly spilled across the immense mountain range called the Spine of the World. They had burned the great city of Cairhien, ravaged the nation of Cairhien, and, in the two years since, had fought through Tear and then Andor before reaching these killing fields, outside the huge island city of Tar Valon. In all the years since the nations of the present day had been carved out of Artur Hawkwing's empire, the Aiel had never before left the desert called the Waste. They might have invaded before that; no one could be sure, except maybe the Aes Sedai in Tar Valon, but, as so often with the women of the White Tower, they were not saying. What Aes Sedai knew, they held close, and doled out by dribbles and drops when and if they chose. In the world outside of Tar Valon, though, many men had claimed to see a pattern. A thousand years had passed between the Breaking of the World and the Trolloc Wars, or so most historians said. Those wars had destroyed the nations that existed then, and no one doubted that the Dark One's hand had been behind them, imprisoned or not, as surely as it had been behind the War of the Shadow, and the Breaking, and the end of the Age of Legends. A thousand years from the Trolloc Wars until Hawkwing built an empire and that, too, was destroyed, after his death, in the War of the Hundred Years. Some historians said they saw the Dark One's hand in that war, too. And now, close enough to a thousand years after Hawkwing's empire died, the Aiel came, burning and killing. It *had* to be a pattern. Surely the Dark One must have directed them. Lan would never have come south if he had not believed that. He no longer did. But he had given his word.

He wriggled his toes in his turned-down boots. Whether or not it was as cold as he was used to, iciness burrowed into your feet if you stood too long in one place in snow. "Let's walk," he said. "I don't doubt I'll have to wake a dozen more men if not two." And make another round to wake others.

Before they could take a step, however, a sound brought them up short, and alert: the sound of a horse walking in the snow. Lan's hand drifted to his sword hilt, half consciously easing the blade in its sheath. A faint rasp of steel on leather came from Bukama doing the same. Neither feared an attack; Aiel rode only at great need, and reluctantly even then. But a lone horseman at this hour had to be a messenger, and messengers rarely brought good news, these days. Especially not in the night.

Horse and rider materialized out of the darkness following a lean man afoot, one of the sentries by the horsebow he carried. The horse had the arched neck of good Tairen bloodstock, and the rider was plainly from Tear as well. For one thing, the scent of roses came ahead of him on the wind, from the oils glistening on his pointed beard, and only Tairens were fool enough to wear scent, as if the Aiel had no noses. Besides, no one else wore those helmets with a high ridge across the top and a rim that cast the man's narrow face in shadow. A single short white plume on the helmet marked him an officer, an odd choice for a messenger, albeit an officer of low rank. He huddled in his high-cantled saddle and held his dark cloak tightly around him. He seemed to be shivering. Tear lay far to the south. On the coast of Tear, it never snowed so much as a single flake. Lan had never quite believed that, whatever he had read, until he had seen it for himself.

“Here he is, my Lord,” the sentry said in a hoarse voice. A grizzled Saldaean named Rakim, he had received that voice a year back, along with a ragged scar that he liked to show off when drinking, from an Aiel arrow in the throat. Rakim considered himself lucky to be alive, and he was. Unfortunately, he also believed that having cheated death once, he would continue to do so. He took chances, and even when not drinking, he boasted about his luck, a fool thing to do. There was no point to taunting fate.

“Lord Mandragoran?” The rider drew rein in front of Lan and Bukama. Remaining in his saddle, he eyed them uncertainly, no doubt because their armor was unadorned, their coats and cloaks plain wool and somewhat worn. A little embroidery was a fine thing, but some southern men decked themselves out like tapestries. Likely under his cloak the Tairen wore a gilded breastplate and a silk satin coat striped in his house colors. His high boots were certainly embroidered in scrollwork that shone in the moonlight with the glitter of silver. In any case, the man went on with barely a pause for breath. “The Light burn my soul, I was sure you were the closest, but I was beginning to think I’d never find you. Lord Emares is following about five or six hundred Aiel with six hundred of his armsmen.” He shook his head slightly. “Odd thing is, they’re heading east. Away from the river. At any rate, the snow slows them as much as it does us, and Lord Emares thinks if you can place an anvil on that ridgeline they call the Hook, he can take them from behind with a hammer. Lord Emares doubts they can reach it before first light.”

Lan’s mouth tightened. Some of these southlanders had peculiar notions of polite behavior. Not dismounting before he spoke, not naming himself. As a guest, he should have named himself first. Now Lan could not without sounding boastful. The fellow had failed even to offer his lord’s compliments or good wishes. And he seemed to think they did not know that east would be away from the River Erinin. Perhaps that was just carelessness in speech, but the rest was rudeness. Bukama had not moved, yet Lan laid a hand on his sword-arm anyway. His oldest friend could be touchy.

The Hook lay a good league from the camp, and the night was failing, but he nodded. “Inform Lord Emares that I will be there by first light,” he told the horseman. The name Emares was unfamiliar, but the army was so large, near two hundred thousand men representing more than a dozen nations, plus Tower Guards from Tar Valon and even a contingent of the Children of the Light, that it was impossible to know above a handful of names. “Bukama, rouse the men.”

Bukama grunted, savagely this time, and with a gesture for Rakim to follow, stalked away into the camp, his voice rising as he went. “Wake and saddle! We ride! Wake and saddle!”

“Ride hard,” the nameless Tairen said with at least a hint of command in his voice. “Lord Emares would regret riding against those Aiel without an anvil in place.” He seemed to be implying that Lan would regret this Emares’ regretting.

Lan formed the image of a flame in his mind and fed emotion into it, not anger alone but everything, every scrap, until it seemed that he floated in emptiness. After years of practice, achieving *ko’di*, the oneness, needed less than a heartbeat. Thought and his own body grew distant, but in this state he became one with the ground beneath his feet, one with the night, with the sword he would not use on this mannerless fool. “I said that I would be there,” he said levelly. “What I say, I do.” He no longer wished to know the man’s name.

The Tairen offered him a curt bow from his saddle, turned his horse, and booted the animal to a quick trot.

Lan held the *ko’di* a moment longer to be sure his emotions were firmly under control. It was beyond unwise to enter battle angry. Anger narrowed the vision and made for foolish choices. How had that fellow managed to stay alive this long? In the Borderlands, he would have sparked a dozen duels in a day. Only when Lan was sure that he was calm, almost as cool as if he were still wrapped in the oneness, did he turn. Summoning the Tairen’s shadowed face brought no anger with it. Good.

By the time he reached the center of the camp among the trees, it would have seemed a kicked ant-heap to most men. To one who knew, it was ordered activity, and almost silent. No wasted motion or breath. There were no tents to be struck, since pack animals would have been an encumbrance when it came to fighting. Some men were already on their horses, breastplates buckled in place, helmets on their heads, and in their hands lances tipped with a foot or more of steel. Nearly all of the rest were tightening saddle girths or fastening leather-cased horsebows and full quivers behind the tall cantles of their saddles. The slow had died in the first year fighting the Aiel. Most now were Saldaeans and Kandori, the rest Domani. Some Malkieri had come south, but Lan would not lead them, not even here. Bukama rode with him, but he did not follow.

Bukama met him carrying a lance and leading his yellow roan gelding, Sun Lance, followed by a beardless youth named Caniedrin, who was carefully leading Lan's Cat Dancer. The bay stallion was only half-trained, but Caniedrin was well advised to take care. Even a half-trained warhorse was a formidable weapon. Of course, the Kandori was not as innocent as his fresh face suggested. An efficient and experienced soldier, an archer of rare skill, he was a cheerful killer who often laughed while he fought. He was smiling now, at the prospect of fighting to come. Cat Dancer tossed his head, also impatient.

Whatever Caniedrin's experience, Lan checked Cat Dancer's saddle girths carefully before taking the reins. A loose girth could kill as quickly as a spear-thrust.

"I told them what we're about this morning," Bukama muttered after Caniedrin had headed off to his own mount, "but with these Aiel, an anvil can turn into a pincushion if the hammer is slow in coming." He never grumbled in front of the men, just to Lan.

"And the hammer can become a pincushion if it strikes with no anvil in place," Lan replied, swinging into the saddle. The sky was plainly gray now. Still a dark gray, but only a scattered handful of stars remained. "We will have to ride hard to reach the Hook before first light." He raised his voice. "Mount!"

Ride hard they did, cantering half a mile, then trotting, then leading the animals by the reins at a fast walk before mounting to begin over. In stories, men galloped for ten miles, twenty, but even without snow, to gallop the whole four or five miles would have lamed half the horses and winded the rest long before reaching the Hook. The silence of the fading night was broken only by the crunch of hooves or boots in the snow crust, the creak of saddle leather, and sometimes the muttered curses of men who caught a toe on a hidden stone. No one wasted breath on complaints or talk. They had all done this often, and men and horses hit an easy rhythm that covered ground quickly.

The land around Tar Valon was rolling plain for the most part, dotted with widely spaced copses and thickets, few large, but all thick with darkness. Large or small, Lan eyed those clumps of trees carefully as he led his men past, and he kept the column well away. Aiel were very good at using whatever cover they could find, places where most men would be sure a dog could not hide, and very good at springing ambushes. Nothing stirred, though. For all his eyes could see, the band he led could have been the only living men in the world. The hoot of an owl was the only sound he heard that they did not make.

The sky in the east was a much paler gray by the time the low ridge called the Hook came into sight. Well under a mile in length, the treeless crest rose little more than forty feet above the surrounding ground, but any elevation gave some advantage in defense. The name came from the way the northern end curved back toward the south, a feature plainly visible as he arranged his men in a long line along the top of the ridge to either side of him. The light was definitely growing. To the west, he thought he could make out the pale bulk of the White Tower itself, rising in the center of Tar Valon some three leagues distant.

The Tower was the tallest structure in the known world, yet it was overshadowed by the bulk of the lone mountain that rose out of the plains beyond the city, on the other side of the river. That was clear enough when there was any light at all. In the deepest night, you could see it blocking the stars. Dragonmount would have been a giant in the Spine of the World, but there on the plain, it was monstrous, piercing the clouds and rising taller. Higher above the clouds than most mountains were below, its broken peak always emitted a streamer of smoke. A symbol of hope and despair. A mountain of prophecy. Glancing at it, Bukama made another sign against evil. No one wanted that prophecy fulfilled. But it would be, of course, one day.

From the ridgeline, gently rolling ground ran more than a mile to the west, to one of the larger thickets, half a league wide. Three trampled paths crisscrossed the snow between, where large numbers of horses or men afoot had passed. Without going closer, it was impossible to say who had made them, Aiel or men of the so-called Coalition, only that they had been made since the snowfall stopped, late two days ago.

There was no sign of Aiel yet, but if they had not changed direction, which was always possible, they could appear out of those trees any moment. Without waiting for Lan's order, men drove their lances point-down into the ground beneath the snow, where they could be snatched up again easily at need. Uncasing their horsebows, they pulled arrows from their quivers and nocked them, but did not draw. Only newlings thought they could hold a drawn bow for long. Lan alone carried no bow. His duty was to direct the fight, not to select targets. The bow was the preferred weapon against the Aiel, though many southlanders disdained it. Emares and his Tairens would ride straight into the Aiel with their lances and swords. There were times when that was the only way, but it was foolish to lose men needlessly, before you must, and as surely as peaches were poison, you did lose men in close quarters with Aiel.

He had no fear that the Aiel would turn aside on seeing them. They were not wild fighters, no matter what some said; they refused battle when the odds were too great. But six hundred Aiel would see the numbers as just right; they would be facing fewer than four hundred, although placed on the high ground. They would rush forward to attack and be met with a hail of arrows. A good horsebow could kill a man at three hundred paces and wound at four, if the man drawing it had the skill. That was a long corridor of steel for the Aiel to run. Unfortunately, they carried bows made of horn-and-sinew, too, just as effective as the horsebows. The worst would be if the Aiel stood and exchanged arrows; both sides would lose men however quickly Emares arrived. Best would be if the Aiel decided to close; a running man could not shoot a bow with any accuracy. At least, it would be best if Emares was not behind time. Then the Aiel might try for the flanks, especially if they knew they were being followed, and that would kick open the hornets' nest. Either way, when Emares struck them from the rear, Lan would gather the lances and ride down.

In essence, that was the hammer and anvil. One force to hold the Aiel in place until the other struck it, then both closing in. A simple tactic, but effective; most effective tactics were simple. Even the pigheaded Cairhienin had learned to use it. A good many Altarans and Murandians had died because they refused to learn.

Grayness welled into light. The sun would be peeking over the horizon behind them soon, silhouetting them on the ridge. The wind gusted, catching Lan's cloak, but he assumed the *ko'di* once more and ignored the cold. He could hear Bukama and the other men near him breathing. Along the line, horses stamped their hooves impatiently in the snow. A hawk quartered above the open ground, hunting along the edge of the wide thicket.

Suddenly the hawk wheeled away and a column of Aiel appeared, coming out of the trees at a quick trot, twenty men abreast. The snow did not appear to hamper them to any great degree. Lifting their knees high, they moved as quickly as most men would have on cleared ground. Lan pulled his looking glass from the leather case tied to his saddle. It was a good glass, Cairhienin made, and when he pressed the brass-bound tube to his eyes, the Aiel, still a mile off, seemed to leap closer. They were tall men, many as tall as he and some taller, wearing coats and breeches in shades of brown and gray that stood out against the snow. Each had a cloth wrapped around his head, and a dark veil hiding his face to the eyes. Some might be women—Aiel women sometimes fought alongside the men—but most would be men. Each carried a short spear tipped in one hand, with a round, bull-hide buckler and several more spears clutched in the other. Their bows were in cases on their backs. They could do deadly work with those spears. And their bows.

The Aiel would have had to be blind to miss the horsemen waiting on them, but they came on without a pause, their column a thick serpent sliding out of the trees toward the ridge. Far to the west a trumpet sounded, thin with distance, and then another; to be that faint, they had to be near to the river, or even on the other side. The Aiel kept coming. A third trumpet called, far off, and a fourth, a fifth, more. Among the Aiel, heads swung, looking back. Was it the trumpets drew their attention, or did they know Emares was following?

The Aiel continued to issue from the trees. Someone had miscounted badly, or else more Aiel had joined the first party. Over a thousand were clear of the trees, now, and still more came. Fifteen hundred, and more behind. He slid the looking glass back into its case.

“Embrace death,” Bukama muttered, sounding like cold steel, and Lan heard other Borderlanders echo the words. He merely thought them; it was enough. Death came for every man eventually, and seldom where or when he expected. Of course, some men died in their beds, but from boyhood Lan had known he would not.

Calmly, he looked left and right along the line of his men. The Saldaeans and Kandori were standing firm, of course, but he was pleased to see that none of the Domani showed any signs of edginess, either. No one looked over a shoulder for a path to run. Not that he expected any less after two years fighting alongside them, but he always had more trust of men from the Borderlands than elsewhere. Bordermen knew that sometimes hard choices had to be made. It was in their bones.

The last of the Aiel cleared the trees, easily two thousand of them, a number that changed everything, and nothing. Two thousand Aiel were enough to overrun his men and still deal with Emares, unless the Dark One's own luck was with them. The thought of withdrawing never arose. If Emares struck without the anvil in place, the Tairens would be slaughtered, but if he could hold until Emares arrived, then both hammer and anvil might be able to draw clear. Besides, he had given his word. Still, he did not mean to die here to no purpose, nor to have his men die to none. If Emares failed to arrive by the time the Aiel came inside two hundred paces, he would wheel his company off the ridge and try to ride around the Aiel to join the Tairen. Sliding his sword from its scabbard, he held it loosely at his side. It was just a sword now, with nothing about it to catch the eye or set it out. It would never again be anything except a sword. But it held his past, and his future. The trumpets to the west were sounding almost continuously.

Abruptly, one of the Aiel in the front of the column raised his spear overhead, holding it up for the length of three strides. When he brought it down, the column came to a halt. A good five hundred paces separated them from the ridgeline, well beyond bowshot. Why under the Light? As soon as they were halted, the rear half of the column turned to face the way they had come. Were they simply being cautious? Safer to assume they knew about Emares.

Drawing out his looking glass again, left-handed, he studied the Aiel. Men in the front rank were shading their eyes with their spear-hands, studying the horsemen on the ridge. It made no sense. At best they would be able to make out dark shapes against the sunrise, perhaps the crest on a helmet. No more than that. The Aielmen seemed to be talking to each other. One of the men in the lead suddenly raised his hand overhead, holding a spear, and others did the same. Lan lowered his looking glass. All of the Aiel were facing forward, now, and every one held a spear raised high. He had never seen anything like this before.

As one, the spears came down, and the Aiel shouted a single word that boomed clearly across the space between, drowning the trumpets' distant calls. "*Aan'allein!*"

Lan exchanged wondering glances with Bukama. That was the Old Tongue, the language that had been spoken in the Age of Legends, and in the centuries before the Trolloc Wars. The best translation Lan could come up with was One Man Alone. But what did it *mean*? Why would the Aiel shout such a thing?

"They're moving," Bukama muttered, and the Aiel were.

But not toward the ridge. Turning northward, the column of veiled Aiel quickly reached a trot again and, once the head of it was well beyond the end of the ridge, began to angle eastward once more. Madness piled on madness. This was no flanking maneuver, not on only one side.

"Maybe they're going back to the Waste," Caniedrin called. He sounded disappointed. Other voices scoffed him loudly. The general view was that the Aiel would never leave until they were all killed.

"Do we follow?" Bukama asked quietly.

After a moment, Lan shook his head. "We will find Lord Emares and talk—politely—concerning hammers and anvils," he said. He wanted to find out what all those trumpets were about, too. This day was beginning strangely, and he had the feeling there would be more oddities before it was done.

* * *

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Chapter

2

A Wish Fulfilled

Despite a fire blazing on the green marble hearth, the Amyrlin's sitting room was cold enough to make Moiraine shiver, and only a tight jaw kept her teeth from chattering. Of course, it also stopped her from yawning, which would never have done, half a night's sleep or not. The colorful winter tapestries hanging on the walls, bright scenes of spring and garden parks, ought to have had a coating of frost, and icicles should have been hanging from the scroll-carved cornices. For one thing, the fireplace lay on the other side of the room from her, and its warmth did not extend far. For another, the tall glassed casements behind her, filling the arched windows that let onto the balcony overlooking the Amyrlin's private garden, did not fit as well as they might, and they leaked cold around the edges. Whenever the wind gusted outside, an icy breeze hit her back and cut through her woolen dress. Another struck her closest friend, as well, but for all that Siuan was Tairen, she would not have let it show if she were freezing to death. The Sun Palace in Cairhien, where Moiraine had done most of her growing up, had often been as cold in winter, yet there she had never been forced to stand in drafts. The chill seeped from the marble floor tiles through the flowered Illianer carpet and Moiraine's slippers, too. The golden Great Serpent ring on her left hand, the snake biting its own tail that symbolized eternity and continuity and an initiate's bond to the Tower, felt like a band of ice. When the Amyrlin told an Accepted to stand over there and not bother her, however, the Accepted stood where the Amyrlin pointed and tried not to let her notice any shivers. Worse than the cold, really, was the heavy smell of acrid smoke that even the heavy drafts could not dispel. It was not the smoke of chimneys, but of burned villages around Tar Valon.

Concentration on the cold kept her from fretting over the smoke. And the battle. The sky outside the windows held the gray of early morning, now. Soon, the fighting would begin again, if it had not already. She wanted to know how the battle was going. She had a *right* to know. Her uncle had started this war. She certainly did not excuse the Aiel in the slightest for the destruction they had brought to Cairhien, city and nation, but she knew where the ultimate blame lay. Since the Aiel arrived, though, Accepted had been confined to the Tower grounds as strictly as novices. The world outside the walls might as well have ceased to exist.

Reports came at regular intervals from Azil Mareed, High Captain of the Tower Guard, but the contents were not shared with anyone except full sisters, if with them. Questions about the fighting addressed to Aes Sedai earned admonitions to concentrate on your studies. As though the largest battle fought since Artur Hawkwing’s time, and practically under her nose, was a mere distraction! Moiraine knew she could not be involved in any meaningful way—not in any way, really—yet she wanted to be, if only by knowing what was happening. That might be illogical, but then, she had never thought she was going to join the White Ajah once she gained the shawl.

The two silk-gowned women in shades of blue, seated on opposite sides of the small writing table on one side of the room, gave no sign that they were aware of the smoke or the cold, though they were almost as far from the fireplace as she. Of course, they were Aes Sedai, with ageless faces, and for the smoke, they had certainly seen the aftermath of more battles than any general. They could remain serenity made flesh if a thousand villages burned right in front of them. No one became Aes Sedai without learning to control her emotions at need, inwardly and outwardly. Tamra and Gitara did not seem tired, though they had taken only catnaps since the fighting began. That was why they had Accepted in attendance all night, in case they wanted errands run or someone brought to them. As for the cold, neither cold nor heat touched sisters the way it did other people. They always appeared unaware of either. Moiraine had tried to work out how that was done; every Accepted tried sooner or later. However it was worked, it did not involve the One Power, or she would have been able to see the weaves, or at least feel them.

Tamra was more than simply Aes Sedai, she was the Amyrlin Seat, the ruler over all Aes Sedai. She had been raised from the Blue, but of course the long stole draped on her shoulders was striped in the colors of the seven Ajahs, to show that the Amyrlin was of all Ajahs and none. Over the history of the Tower, some Amyrlins had taken that more literally than others. Tamra’s skirts were slashed with all seven colors, though that was not required. No Ajah could feel itself advantaged or disadvantaged with her. Beyond the Tower, when Tamra Ospenya spoke, kings and queens listened, whether they had Aes Sedai advisors or hated the White Tower. That was the power of an Amyrlin Seat. They might not take her advice or obey her instructions, but they listened, and politely. Even the High Lords of Tear and the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light did that much. Her long hair, lightly streaked with gray and caught in a jeweled silver net, framed a square, determined face. She usually got her way with rulers, but she did not take her power lightly, or use it indiscriminately, either outside the Tower or inside. Tamra was fair and just, which were not always the same thing, and she was often kind. Moiraine admired her greatly.

The other woman, Tamra's Keeper of the Chronicles, was a different matter altogether. Perhaps the second most powerful woman in the Tower, and certainly at least equal to the Sitters, Gitara Moroso was always just, and usually fair, but kindness never seemed to occur to her. She was also flamboyant enough for a Green or a Yellow. Tall and close to voluptuous, she wore a wide necklace of firedrops, earrings with rubies the size of pigeon's eggs, and three jeweled rings beside her Great Serpent ring. Her dress was a deeper blue than Tamra's and brocaded, and the Keeper's stole on her shoulders—blue, since she also had been raised from the Blue—was nearly wide enough to be called a shawl. Moiraine had heard that Gitara still considered herself a Blue, which would be shocking if true. The width of her stole certainly spoke in favor of the whispers; that was a matter of personal choice.

As with all Aes Sedai, once they had worked long enough with the One Power, it was impossible to put an age to Gitara's face. At a glance, you might think she was no more than twenty-five, perhaps less, then a second glance would say a youthful forty-five or fifty and still just short of great beauty, while a third changed it all again. That smooth, ageless face was the mark of Aes Sedai, to those who knew. To those who did not know, and many did not, her hair would have added to the confusion. Caught with carved ivory combs, it was white as snow. By whispered rumor, she was over three hundred years old, very old even for an Aes Sedai. Speaking of a sister's age was extremely rude. Even another sister would be given a penance for it; a novice or Accepted would find herself sent to the Mistress of Novices for a switching. But surely thinking about it did not count.

Something else placed Gitara out of the ordinary. She had the Foretelling sometimes, the Talent of speaking what was still in the future.

That was a very rare Talent, and came to her only occasionally, but gossip—the Accepted's quarters overflowed with tittle-tattle—gossip said that Gitara had had more than one Foretelling in the last few months. Some claimed that the reason the armies outside the city had been in place when the Aiel came was one of Gitara's Foretellings. No one among the Accepted knew for certain, of course. Maybe some of the other sisters did. Maybe. Even when the fact that Gitara had had a Foretelling was common knowledge, sometimes no one other than Tamra learned what it had been. It was foolish to hope to be present when Gitara had a Foretelling, yet Moiraine had hoped. But in the four hours since she and Siuan had replaced Temaile and Brendas in attendance on the Amyrlin, Gitara had only sat there writing a letter.

It suddenly hit her that close on four hours was a very long time to spend on one letter. And Gitara had not covered half of one sheet of paper yet. She was sitting there with her pen suspended above the cream-colored page. As if Moiraine thinking of it had somehow reached her, Gitara glanced at the pen and made a small sound of irritation, then swirled the steel nib in a small red-glazed bowl of alcohol to clean away dried ink, clearly not for the first time. The liquid in the bowl was as black as that in the silver-capped ink jar of cut glass on the table. A gilt-edged leather folder full of papers lay open in front of Tamra, and she appeared to be studying them intently, yet Moiraine could not remember seeing the Amyrlin turn over a single sheet. The two Aes Sedai's faces were images of cool calm, but plainly they were worried, and that made her worried, too. She bit at her lower lip in furious thought, then had to stop when a yawn threatened. The biting, not the thinking.

It had to be something to make them worry today in particular. She had seen Tamra in the corridors yesterday, and if there had ever been a woman bubbling with confidence, it had been she. So. The battle that had been raging for the last three days. If Gitara really had Foretold the battle, if she really had had other Foretellings, what else might they have been? Guessing would do no good, but reasoning might. The Aiel crossing the bridges and breaking into the city? Impossible. In three thousand years, while nations rose and fell and even Hawkwing's empire was swept away in fire and chaos, no army had managed to breach Tar Valon's walls or break down its gates, and quite a few had tried over that time. Perhaps the battle turning to disaster in some other way? Or something needed to avoid disaster? Tamra and Gitara were the only two Aes Sedai actually in the Tower at that moment, unless some had returned in the night. There had been talk of injured soldiers in such numbers that all sisters with the smallest ability at Healing were needed, but no one had said straight out that that was where they were going. Aes Sedai could not lie, yet they often spoke obliquely, and they were not above misdirection. Sisters also could use the Power as a weapon if they or their Warders were in danger. No Aes Sedai had taken part in a battle since the Trolloc Wars, when they faced Shadowspawn and armies of Darkfriends, but perhaps Gitara had Foretold disaster unless Aes Sedai joined. But why wait until the third day? Could a Foretelling be that detailed? Maybe if the sisters had entered the battle earlier, *that* would have caused….

Out of the corner of her eye, Moiraine saw Siuan smiling at her. That smile turned Siuan's face from handsome to pretty and made her clear blue eyes twinkle. Nearly a hand taller than Moiraine—Moiraine had gotten over the irritation she had once felt at being shorter than nearly all the women around her, but she could never help noticing height—taller and almost as fair-skinned as she, Siuan wore her formal Accepted's dress with an air of assurance that Moiraine had never quite mastered. The high-necked dresses were the purest white except for the bands at hem and cuffs that copied the Amyrlin's seven-colored stole. She could not understand how so many sisters of the White Ajah could bear to wear white all the time, as if they were forever in mourning. For her, the hardest thing about being a novice had been dressing in plain white day after day. The hardest aside from learning to control her temper, anyway. That still dropped her in hot water now and then, but not so often as during her first year.

"We'll find out when we find out," Siuan whispered with a quick glance at Tamra and Gitara. Neither moved an inch. Gitara's pen was held over the letter again, the ink drying.

Moiraine could not help smiling back. Siuan had that gift, making her smile when she wanted to frown and laugh when she wanted to weep. The smile turned into a yawn, and she looked hastily to see whether the Amyrlin or the Keeper had noticed. They were still absorbed in their own thoughts. When she turned back, Siuan had a hand over her own mouth and was glaring at her over it. Which almost set her giggling.

It had surprised her at first, she and Siuan becoming friends, but among novices and Accepted, the closest friends always seemed to be very much alike or very different. In some things she and Siuan were alike. They were both orphans; their mothers had died while they were young, their fathers since they left home. And both had been born with the spark, which was uncommon. They would have begun channeling the Power eventually whether or not they had tried to learn how; not every woman could learn, by any means.

That was where the differences began, before they arrived in Tar Valon, and it was not just that Siuan had been born poor and she wealthy. In Cairhien, Aes Sedai were respected, and Moiraine had been given a grand dance in the Sun Palace to celebrate her departure for the Tower. In Tear, channeling was outlawed, and Aes Sedai were not popular. Siuan had been bundled onto a ship bound upriver for Tar Valon the very day a sister discovered she could learn to channel. There were so many differences, though none mattered between them. Among other things, Siuan had come to the Tower in full control of her temper, she was quick with puzzles, which Moiraine was not, she could not abide horses, which Moiraine loved, and she learned at a rate that left Moiraine dazed.

Oh, not about channeling the One Power. They had been entered in the novice book on the same day, and moved almost in lockstep with the Power, even to passing for Accepted on the same day. Moiraine, though, had received the education expected of a noblewoman, everything from history to the Old Tongue, which she spoke and read well enough that she had been excused classes in it. The daughter of a Tairen fisherman, Siuan arrived barely able to read or do more than the simplest arithmetic, but she had soaked her lessons in like sand soaking up water. She *taught* the Old Tongue to novices, now. At least the beginning classes.

Siuan Sanche was held up to novices as an example of what they should aspire to. Well, both of them were. Only one other woman had ever finished novice training in just three years. Elaida a’Roihan, a detestable woman, had completed her time as Accepted in three years, too, also a record, and it seemed at least possible that they might match that, as well. Moiraine was all too aware of her own shortcomings, but she thought that Siuan would make a perfect Aes Sedai.

She opened her mouth to whisper that patience was for stones, but wind rattled the casements, and another blast of freezing air hit her. She might as well have been standing in her shift for all the protection her dress gave. Instead of whispering, she gasped, loudly.

Tamra turned her head toward the windows, yet not because of Moiraine. The sound of distant trumpets suddenly was floating on the wind, dozens of them. No, hundreds. To be heard here inside the Tower, there would have to be hundreds. And the sound was continuous, call rolling over call. Whatever the cause, it must be urgent. The Amyrlin closed the folder lying before her with a slap.

"Go see if there's news from the battlefield, Moiraine." Tamra spoke almost normally, but her voice held an unidentifiable edge, a sharpness. "Siuan, make some tea. Quickly, child."

Moiraine blinked. The Amyrlin *was* worried. But there was only one thing to do.

"It will be as you say, Mother," she and Siuan said together without hesitation, offering deep curtsies, and turned for the door to the anteroom, beside the fireplace. The gold-chased silver teapot sat on a ropework tray on a table near that door, along with a tea canister, a honey jar, a small pitcher of milk, and a large pitcher of water, all in worked silver. A second tray held cups made of delicate green Sea Folk porcelain. Moiraine felt a faint tingle as Siuan opened herself to the Source and embraced *saidar,* the female half of the Power; a glow surrounded her, though it would be visible only to another woman who could channel. Normally, channeling to do chores was forbidden, yet the Amyrlin had said quickly. Siuan was already preparing a thin thread of Fire to bring the tea water to a boil. Neither Tamra nor Gitara spoke a word to stop her.

The anteroom to the Amyrlin's apartments was not large, since it was only meant to hold a few visitors until they could be announced. Delegations came to the Amyrlin in one of the audience halls or in her study next door, not her private chambers. Backed by the sitting-room fireplace, the anteroom was almost warm. There was only one chair, simply carved but large, yet despite its weight, the chair had been dragged closer to one of the gilded stand-lamps, so Elin Warrel, the slender novice on duty, would have better light to read. Facing away from the sitting-room door and intent on her wood-bound book, she did not hear Moiraine cross the fringed carpet.

Elin should have felt her presence long before she was close enough to peer over the child's shoulder. Not really a child, since she had been seven years a novice and had come to the Tower at eighteen, but a novice was referred to as a child no matter her age. For that matter, Aes Sedai called Accepted "child," too. Moiraine had been able to feel the child's ability to channel soon after entering the room. Elin certainly should have been able to sense hers from this near. One woman who could channel could never sneak up on another if the second was paying attention.

Peering over Elin's shoulder, she recognized the book instantly. *Hearts of Flame*, a collection of love stories. The Tower Library was the largest in the known world, containing copies of almost every book that had ever been printed, but this was unsuitable for a novice. Accepted were granted a little leeway—by that time, you knew that you would watch a husband age and die, and your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, while you changed not at all—but novices were quietly discouraged from thinking about men or love, and kept away from men entirely. It would never do for a novice to try running away to get married or, worse, to get herself with child. Novice training was purposefully hard—if you were going to break, better it happened as a novice than as a sister. Being Aes Sedai was truly hard—and adding a child to it would only make matters beyond difficult.

"You should find more appropriate reading, Elin," Moiraine said levelly. "And pay more attention to your duties."

Before Moiraine finished speaking, Elin leaped to her feet with a startled gasp, the book tumbling to the floor, and whirled around. She was not tall for an Andoran, but Moiraine still had to look up to meet her eyes. When she saw Moiraine, she heaved a small sigh of relief. Very small. To novices, Accepted were only a tiny step below Aes Sedai. Elin spread her plain white skirts in a hasty curtsy. "No one could have come in without my seeing, Moiraine. Merean Sedai said I could read." She tilted her head to one side, toying with the wide white ribbon that held her hair. Everything novices wore was white, even their thin leather slippers. "Why's that book inappropriate, Moiraine?" She was three years the elder, but the Great Serpent ring and banded skirts marked a fount of knowledge in novice eyes. Unfortunately, there were subjects Moraine felt uncomfortable talking about with just anyone. There was such a thing as decorum.

Picking up the volume, she handed it to the novice. "The Librarians would be very put out if you returned one of their books in damaged condition." She felt a measure of satisfaction at that. It was the sort of reply a full sister might have given when she did not want to answer the question.

Accepted practiced the Aes Sedai way of speaking against the day they gained the shawl, but the only ones to practice on safely were the novices. Some tried it with the servants, for a little while, but that only got them laughed at. Servants knew very well that in Aes Sedai eyes, Accepted were not a small step below the sisters but a small step above the novices.

As hoped for, Elin anxiously began examining the book for damage, and Moiraine went on before the novice could come back to her embarrassing question. “Have there been any messages from the field of battle, child?”

Elin’s eyes widened indignantly. “You know I’d have brought it in right away if there’d been any message, Moiraine. You know I would.”

She did know. Tamra had known, too. But while the Keeper or a Sitter might point out that the Amyrlin had given a foolish order—at least, she thought they might—an Accepted could only obey. For that matter, novices were not supposed to point out that an Accepted had asked a foolish question. “Is that the proper way to answer, Elin?”

“No, Moiraine,” Elin said contritely, bobbing another curtsy. “There hasn’t been any message the whole time I’ve been here.” Her head tilted again. “Did Gitara Sedai have a Foretelling?”

“Go back to your reading, child.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Moiraine knew they were wrong, contradicting what she had said before. It was too late for a recovery, now, though. Turning quickly, and hoping that Elin had not noticed the blush suddenly heating her face, she glided out of the anteroom with as much dignity as she could muster. Well, the Mistress of Novices had told the child she could read, and the Librarians had let her take the book, if one of the Accepted had not loaned it to her. But Moiraine did hate sounding like a fool.

A faint trickle of steam was rising from the teapot’s spout and more from the water pitcher when Moiraine reentered the sitting room and closed the door. The glow of *saidar* no longer shone around Siuan. Water boiled very quickly when the One Power was used; the trick was to keep it all from flashing to steam. Siuan had filled two of the green cups and was stirring honey into one. The other was milky.

Siuan pushed the cup she had been stirring toward Moiraine. “Gitara’s,” she said softly. And then in a whisper, with a grimace, “She likes enough honey to turn it to syrup. She told me not to be stingy!” The porcelain was just barely too hot on Moiraine’s fingertips, but it should be cooled to exactly the right point by the time she crossed the room to the writing table where Gitara still sat, now drumming her fingers on the tabletop impatiently. The polished blackwood clock on the mantel over the fireplace chimed First Rise. The trumpets were still calling. They seemed to sound frantic, though Moiraine knew that was only imagination.

Tamra was standing at the windows, peering out at a sky that was growing brighter by the moment. She continued to stare out after Siuan had curtsied and proffered her cup, then finally turned and saw Moiraine. Instead of taking the tea, she said, "What news, Moiraine? You know better than to delay." Oh, she *was* on edge, to speak so. She had to know Moiraine would have spoken immediately if there had been anything.

Moiraine was just offering Gitara her own cup, but before she could reply, the Keeper jerked to her feet, bumping the table so hard that the ink jar overturned, spreading a pool of black across the tabletop. Trembling, she stood with her arms rigid at her sides and stared over the top of Moiraine's head, wide-eyed with terror. It *was* terror, plain and simple.

"He is born again!" Gitara cried. "I feel him! The Dragon takes his first breath on the slope of Dragonmount! He is coming! He is coming! Light help us! Light help the world! He lies in the snow and cries like the thunder! He burns like the sun!"

With the last word, she gasped, a tiny sound, and fell forward into Moiraine's arms. Moiraine dropped the teacup to try to catch her, but the truth of it was that the larger woman bore both of them to the carpet. It was all Moiraine could do to end up on her knees holding the Keeper rather then lying beneath her.

In an instant, Tamra was there, kneeling careless of the ink trickling from the table. The light of *saidar* already surrounded her, and she already had a weave prepared of Spirit, Air and Water. Gripping Gitara's head between her hands, she let the weave sink into the still form. But delving, used to check health, did not turn to Healing. Looking helplessly into Gitara's staring eyes, Moiraine knew why not. She had hoped there was some tiny fragment of life left, something that Tamra could work with. Healing could cure any sickness, mend any injury. But you could not Heal death. The pool of ink on the table had spread to ruin whatever the Keeper had been writing. It was very odd, what you noticed at a time like this.

"Not now, Gitara," Tamra breathed softly. She sounded weary to the bone. "Not now, when I need you most."

Slowly, her eyes came up to meet Moiraine’s, and Moiraine started back on her knees. It was said Tamra’s stare could make a stone move, and at that moment, Moiraine believed. The Amyrlin shifted her gaze to Siuan, still standing in front of the windows. Siuan had both hands pressed to her mouth, and the teacup she had been carrying lay on the carpet at her feet. She gave a jerk under that gaze, too.

Moiraine’s eye found the cup she had been carrying. *A good thing the cups did not break,* she thought. *Sea Folk porcelain is quite expensive.* Oh, the mind did play odd tricks when you wanted to avoid thinking about something.

“You are both intelligent,” Tamra said finally. “And not deaf, unfortunately. You know what Gitara just Foretold.” There was just enough question in that for both of them to nod and say that they did. Tamra sighed as if she had been wishing for a different response.

Taking Gitara out of Moiraine’s arms, the Amyrlin eased her down to the carpet and smoothed her hair. After a moment, she pulled the wide blue stole from Gitara’s shoulders, folded it carefully, and laid it over the Keeper’s face.

“With your permission, Mother,” Siuan said in a husky voice, “I’ll send Elin to fetch the Keeper’s serving woman to do what’s needful.”

“Stay!” Tamra barked. That iron-hard gaze studied them both. “You will tell no one about this, not for any reason. If necessary, lie. Even to a sister. Gitara died without speaking. Do you understand me?”

Moiraine nodded jerkily, and was aware of Siuan doing the same. They were not Aes Sedai, yet—they still could lie, and some did occasionally, for all their efforts to behave like full sisters—but she had never been expected to be *ordered* to, especially not to Aes Sedai, and never by the Amyrlin Seat.

“Good,” Tamra said tiredly. “Send—the novice on duty is named Elin?—send Elin in to me. I’ll tell her where to find Gitara’s woman.” And make sure that Elin had heard nothing through the closed door, obviously. Otherwise, the task would have been Siuan’s or Moiraine’s. “When the girl comes in, the two of you may go. And remember! Not a word! Not one!” The emphasis only drove home the peculiarity. An order from the Amyrlin Seat was to be obeyed as if on oath. There was no need to emphasize anything.

I wished to hear a Foretelling, Moiraine thought as she made her final curtsy before leaving, *and what I received was a Foretelling of doom*. Now, she wished very much that she had been more careful of what she wished for.

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Chapter 3

Practice

The wide corridor outside the Amyrlin’s apartments was as cold as her sitting room had been, and full of drafts. Some were strong enough to ripple one or another of the long, heavy tapestries on the white marble walls. Atop the gilded stand-lamps between the bright wall hangings, the flames flickered, nearly blown out. The novices would be at their breakfast at this hour, and likely most of the other Accepted, too. For the moment, the hallways were empty save for Siuan and Moiraine. They walked along the blue runner, half the width of the corridor, taking advantage of the small protection the carpet gave from the chill of the floor tiles, a repeating pattern in the colors of all seven Ajahs. Moiraine was too stunned to speak. The faint sound of the trumpets still sounding barely registered on her.

They turned the corner into a hallway where the floor tiles were white, the runner green. To their right, another wide, tapestry-hung corridor lined with stand-lamps spiraled gently upward, toward the Ajahs’ quarters, the visible portion floored in blue and yellow, with a runner patterned in gray and brown and red. Inside each Ajah’s quarters, the Ajah’s own color predominated, and some others might be missing altogether, but in the communal areas of the Tower, the colors of all the Ajahs were used in equal proportion. Irrelevant thoughts drifted through her head. Why equal, when some Ajahs were larger than others? Had they once been the same size? How could that have been achieved? A newly raised Aes Sedai chose her Ajah freely. Yet each Ajah had quarters of the same size. Irrelevant thoughts were better than….

“Do you want breakfast?” Siuan said.

Moiraine gave a small start of surprise. Breakfast? “I could not swallow a bite, Siuan.”

The other woman shrugged. “I have no appetite myself. I just thought I’d keep you company if you wanted something.”

“I am going back to my room and try to get a little sleep, if I can settle myself. I have a novice class in two hours.” And likely more classes to teach today, if the sisters did not start returning soon. Novices could not miss classes for little things like battles or…. She did not want to think about the “or.” She would miss lessons, too, if the Aes Sedai failed to return. Accepted studied on their own for the most part, but she had a private class scheduled with Meilyn Sedai, and another with Larelle Sedai.

“Sleep would be wasting time we don’t have,” Siuan said firmly. “We’ll practice for the testing. We might have almost a month, but it could be tomorrow just as easily.”

“We cannot be sure we *will* be tested any time soon. Merean just said she thought we were close.”

Siuan snorted. Loudly. While she was still a novice the sisters had cleaned up her language, which had been strongly redolent of the docks and often rough with it, but they still had not managed to smooth away all the edges of her. Which was just as well. Rough edges were a part of Siuan. “When Merean says someone is close, she tests within the month, and you know it, Moiraine. We’ll practice.”

Moiraine sighed. She did not really believe she could sleep, not now, but she doubted she could concentrate very well, either. Practice took concentration. “Oh, all right, Siuan.”

The second surprise, after their friendship, had been the realization that between them, the fisherman’s daughter led and the noblewoman followed. Of course, rank in the outside world carried no rights inside the Tower. There had been two daughters of beggars who rose to be Amyrlin Seat, as well as daughters of merchants and farmers and craftsfolk, including three daughters of cobblers, but only one daughter of a ruler. Besides, Moiraine had been taught to judge people’s capabilities long before she left home. In the Sun Palace especially, you began learning that as soon as you were old enough to walk. Siuan had been born to lead. It felt surprisingly natural to follow where Siuan led.

“I wager you will be in the Hall of the Tower by the time you have worn the shawl a hundred years, and Amyrlin before fifty more,” she said, not for the first time. It brought the same reaction it always did.

“Don’t ill-wish me,” Siuan said with a scowl. “I intend to see the world. Maybe parts of it no other sister has seen. I used to watch the ships sail into Tear full of silk and ivory from Shara, and I’d wonder if any of the crew had had the nerve to sneak outside the trade ports. I would have." Her face matched Tamra's for determination. "Once, my father took his boat all the way downriver to the Sea of Storms, and I could hardly pull on the nets for staring south, wondering what lay beyond the horizon. I'll see it, one day. And the Aryth Ocean. Who knows what lies west of the Aryth Ocean? Strange lands with strange customs. Maybe cities as great as Tar Valon, and mountains higher than the Spine of the World. Just think of it, Moiraine. Just think!"

Moiraine suppressed a smile. Siuan was so fierce about her intended adventures, though she would never call them that. Adventures were what took place in stories and books, not in life, as Siuan would point out to anyone who used the word. Without a doubt, though, once she had the shawl, she would be off like an arrow leaving the bow. And then they might see one another twice in ten years if not longer. That brought a pang of sadness, but she did not doubt that her own predictions would come true, as well. It did not take Foretelling. No; that was thinking in the wrong direction.

As they turned another corner and walked past a narrow marble staircase leading down, Siuan's scowl faded, and she began studying Moiraine in sidelong glances. The floor tiles here were a vivid green, the runner deep yellow, and the white walls were plain and bare. The stand-lamps were not gilded in this part of the Tower, which was used more by servants than sisters.

"You're trying to change the subject, aren't you," Siuan said abruptly.

"Which subject?" Moiraine asked, half laughing. "Practice or breakfast?"

"You know what subject, Moiraine. What do you think about it?"

The bubble of laugher vanished. There was no need to ask what "it" was. Exactly the thing that she did *not* want to think about. *He is born again.* She could hear Gitara's voice in her head. *The Dragon takes his first breath….* Her shiver had nothing to dowith the cold this time.

For more than three thousand years the world had waited on the Prophecies of the Dragon to be fulfilled, fearing them, yet knowing they told of the world's only hope. And now a boychild was about to be born—very soon, perhaps, by the way Gitara had spoken—to bring those Prophecies to a conclusion. He would be born on the slopes of Dragonmount, reborn where it was said the man he had once been had died.

Three thousand years ago and more, the Dark One had almost broken free into the world of humankind and brought on the War of the Shadow, which had ended only with the Breaking of the World. Everything had been destroyed, the very face of the earth changed, humanity reduced to ragged refugees. Centuries passed before the simple struggle for survival gave way to building cities and nations once more. That infant's birth meant the Dark One would break free again, for the child would be born to face the Dark One in Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle. On him rested the fate of the world. The Prophecies said he was the only chance. They did not say he would win.

Maybe worse than the thought of his defeat, though, was the fact that he would channel *saidin*, the male half of the One Power. Moiraine did not shiver at that; she shuddered. *Saidin* bore the Dark One's taint. Men still tried to channel from time to time. Some actually managed to teach themselves, and survived learning without a teacher, no easy feat. Among women, only one in four survived trying to learn on their own. Some of those men caused wars, usually false Dragons, men who claimed to be the Dragon Reborn, while others attempted to hide in ordinary lives, but unless they were caught and brought to Tar Valon to be gentled—cut off from the Power forever—every one of them went mad. That could take years, or just months, yet it was inevitable. Madmen who could tap into the One Power that turned the Wheel of Time and drove the universe. The histories were full of the horrors men like that had done. And the Prophecies said that the Dragon Reborn would bring a new Breaking of the World. Would his victory be any better than a victory by the Dark One? Yes; yes, it must be. Even the Breaking had left people alive to rebuild, eventually. The Dark One would leave only a charnel house. And in any case, prophecies did not turn aside for the wishes of Accepted. Not for the prayers of nations.

"What I think is that the Amyrlin told us not to talk about it," she said.

Siuan shook her head. "She told us not to tell anyone else. Since we already know, it must be all right for us to talk about it between us." She cut off as a stout serving woman with the white Flame of Tar Valon on her breast appeared around a corner just ahead of them.

As the round woman walked past, she peered down her long nose at them suspiciously. Perhaps they looked guilty. Male servants often turned a blind eye to what Accepted, and even novices, got up to; perhaps they wanted no more involvement with Aes Sedai than their jobs entailed.

Female servants, on the other hand, kept as close a watch as the sisters themselves.

“As long as we’re careful,” Siuan breathed, once the liveried woman was beyond earshot. However certain she was that talking between themselves was all right, she seemed content to say no more until they reached the Accepted’s quarters, in the Tower’s western wing.

There, stone-railed galleries in a hollow well surrounded a small garden, three levels below. The garden was only a handful of evergreen bushes poking through the snow at this time of year. An Accepted who put her feet too far wrong might find herself clearing away that snow with a shovel—the sisters were great believers that physical labor built character—but no one had gotten into that much trouble lately. Resting her hands on the railing, Moiraine peered up at the bright winter-morning sky, past the six silent rows of galleries above. Her breath made a white mist in front of her face. The trumpets were more audible here than in the hallways, the stink of smoke stronger in the air.

There were rooms for over a hundred Accepted in this well, and the same in a second well, too. Perhaps the numbers would not have come to mind now except for Gitara’s Foretelling, yet she had thought about them before. They were etched in her brain as if with acid. Space for above two hundred Accepted, but the second well had been shut up since time out of memory for any living Aes Sedai, and barely more than sixty of these rooms were occupied. The novices’ quarters also had two wells, with rooms for almost four hundred girls, but one of those was long closed, too, and the other held under a hundred. She had read that once novices and Accepted had both been housed two to a room. Once, half the girls who were entered in the novice book had been tested for the ring; fewer than twenty of the current novices would be allowed to. The Tower had been built to house three thousand sisters, but only four hundred and twenty-three were in residence at the moment, with perhaps twice as many more scattered across the nations. Numbers that still burned like acid. No Aes Sedai would say it aloud, and she would never dare say it where a sister might hear, but the White Tower was failing. The Tower was failing, and the Last Battle was coming.

“You worry too much,” Siuan said gently. “My father used to say, ‘Change what you can if it needs changing, but learn to live with what you can’t change.’ You’ll only get a sick stomach, otherwise. That was me, not my father." With another snort, she gave an overdone shiver and wrapped her arms around herself. "Can we get inside now? I'm freezing. My room is closest. Come on."

Moiraine nodded. The Tower taught its students to live with what they could not change, too. But some things were important enough to try even if you were sure to fail. That had been one of *her* lessons as a child.

Accepted's rooms were identical, except in detail, slightly wider at the back than at the door, with plain wall panels of dark wood. None of the furnishings were fine, or indeed anything a sister would have tolerated. There was a small, square Taraboner rug woven in faded blue and green stripes on Siuan's floor, and the mirrored washstand in the corner held a chipped white pitcher sitting in the washbasin. Accepted were required to make do unless something actually broke, and if it broke, they had best have a good explanation why. The small table, with three leather-bound books stacked on it, and the two ladder-back chairs could have come from a penniless farmer's house, but Siuan's slept-in bed with its tumbled blankets was wide, like something from a moderately prosperous farmhouse. A small wardrobe completed the furnishings. Nothing was carved or ornamented in any way. When Moiraine had moved from the small, stark room of a novice, she had felt as if she were moving into a palace, though the chamber was half the size of any room in her apartments in the Sun Palace. Best of all, at the moment, was the fireplace of dressed gray stone. Today, any room with a fireplace would seem a palace, if she could stand near it.

Siuan hastily moved three pieces of split wood to the fireirons on the hearth—the woodbox was almost empty; serving men brought Aes Sedai their firewood, but Accepted had to carry theirs up themselves—then grunted when she discovered that her efforts at banking the coals of last night's fire had failed. No doubt in a hurry to reach the Amyrlin's chambers, she had not covered them with ashes well enough to stop them from burning out. A frown creased her forehead for a moment, and then Moiraine felt that small tingle again as the light of *saidar* briefly surrounded the other woman. Any woman who could channel could feel another wielding the Power if she was close enough, but the tingle was unusual. Women who spent a lot of time together in their training sometimes felt it, but the sensation was supposed to fade away over time. Hers and Siuan's never had. Sometimes Moiraine thought it was a sign of how close their friendship was. When the glow winked out, the short lengths of log were burning merrily.

Moiraine said nothing, but Siuan gave her a look as if she had delivered a speech. "I was too cold to wait, Moiraine," she said defensively. "Besides, you must remember Akarrin's lecture two weeks ago. 'You must know the rules to the letter,'" she quoted, "'and live with them before you can know which rules you may break and when.' That says right out that sometimes you can break the rules."

Akarrin, a slender Brown with quick eyes to catch who was not following her, had been lecturing about being Aes Sedai, not Accepted, but Moiraine held her tongue. Siuan had not needed the lecture to think about breaking rules. Oh, she never broke the major strictures—she never tried to run away or was disrespectful to a sister or anything of that sort, and she would never think of stealing—but she had had a liking for pranks from the start. Well, Moiraine did, too. Most Accepted did, at least now and then, and some novices, as well. Playing jokes was a way to relieve the strain of constant study with few freedays. Accepted had no chores beyond those necessary to keep themselves and their rooms tidy, unless they got into trouble at least, but they were expected to work hard at their studies, harder than novices dreamed of. Some relief was needed, or you would crack like an egg dropped on stone.

Nothing she and Siuan had done was malicious, of course. Washing a hated Accepted's shift with itchoak did not count. Elaida had made their first year as novices a misery, setting standards for them that no one could have met, yet insisting they be met. The second year, after she gained the shawl, had been worse until she left the Tower. Most of their pranks had been much more benign, though even the most innocent could bring swift punishment, especially if the target was an Aes Sedai. Their major triumph had been filling the largest fountain in the Water Garden with fat green trout one night the previous summer. Major in part because of the difficulty, and in part because they had escaped discovery. A few sisters had directed suspicious looks at them, but luckily no one could prove they had done it. Luckily, asking them whether they had was simply not done with Accepted. Putting trout in the fountain might not have brought a visit to the Mistress of Novices' study, but leaving the Tower grounds without permission in order to buy them—and worse, at night!—surely would have. Moiraine hoped that Siuan was not building up to a prank with this talk of breaking rules. She herself was too tired; they were bound to be caught.

“Will you go first, or shall I?” she asked. Maybe the practice would take Siuan’s mind off getting into trouble.

“You need the practice more. We’ll concentrate on you this morning. And this afternoon. And tonight.”

Moiraine grimaced, but it was true. The test for the shawl consisted of creating one hundred different weaves perfectly and in a precise order while under great stress. And it was necessary to display complete calm the entire time. Exactly what that stress would be, they did not know, except that attempts would be made to distract them, and to break their composure. For practice, they provided the distractions for each other, and Siuan was very good at throwing her off at the worst moment or provoking her temper. Too much temper, and you could not hold on to *saidar* at all; even after her six years of work at it, her channeling required at least a degree of calm. Siuan could seldom *be* unsettled, and her temper was held with an iron grip.

Embracing the True Source, Moiraine let *saidar* fill her. Not as much of it as she could hold, but enough for practicing. Channeling was tiring work, and the more of the Power you channeled, the worse. Even that tiny amount spread through her, filling her with joy and life, with exultation. The wonder of it was near to torment. When she had first embraced *saidar,* she had not known whether to weep or laugh. She immediately felt the urge to draw more, and forced the desire down. All of her senses were clearer, sharper, with the Power in her. She thought she could almost hear Siuan’s heart beating. She could feel the currents of air moving against her face and hands, and the colors banding her friend’s dress were more vivid, the white of the wool whiter. She could make out tiny cracks in the wall panels that she could not have seen without putting her nose against the wall, lacking the Power that suffused her totally. It was exhilarating. She felt…more alive. Part of her wished she could hold *saidar* every waking moment, but that was strictly prohibited. That desire could lead to drawing more and more, until eventually you drew more than you could handle. And that either killed you, or else burned the ability to channel out of you. Losing this…bliss…would be much worse than death.

Siuan took one of the chairs, and the glow enveloped her. Moiraine could not see the light around herself, of course. Weaving a ward against eavesdropping around the inside of the room, flat against walls and floor and ceiling, Siuan tied it off so she did not have to maintain it. Holding two weaves at once was more than twice as taxing as one, three more than twice as wearing as two. Beyond that, difficult no longer sufficed as a description, though it could be done. She motioned for Moiraine to turn her back.

With a frown for the ward, Moiraine complied. It would be easy to avoid distraction if she could see the weaves Siuan was preparing for her. But why ward against eavesdropping? Someone with an ear pressed to the door would hear nothing if she screamed at the top of her lungs. Surely Siuan would not do anything to make her scream. No. It had to be the first part of trying to unsettle her, by making her wonder over it. She felt Siuan handling flows, Earth and Air, then Fire, Water and Spirit, then Earth and Spirit, always changing. Without looking, there was no way to tell whether the other woman was creating a weave or just trying another diversion. Taking a deep breath, she concentrated on utter calm.

Most of the weaves in the test were extremely complex, and had been designed solely for the test. Oddly, none required any gestures, which a good many weaves did. The motion was not really part of the weave, except that if you did not make it, the weave did not work. Supposedly, the gestures set certain pathways in your mind. The lack of gestures made it seem possible that you might lack the use of your hands during at least part of the test, and that sounded ominous. Another oddity was that none of those incredibly intricate weaves actually *did* anything, and even done incorrectly, they would not produce anything dangerous. Not too dangerous, anyway. That was a very real possibility with a number of weaves. Some of the simplest could prove disastrous, done just a little off. Women had died in the testing, but obviously not from bungling a weave. Still, a mistake with the first could yield a deafening thunderclap.

She channeled very thin flows of Air, weaving them just so. This was a fairly simple weave, but you could not force *saidar* no matter how small the threads. The Power was like a vast river, flowing inexorably onward; try to force it, and you would be swept away like a twig on the River Erinin. You had to use its overwhelming strength to guide it as you wanted. In any case, size was not specified, and small was less work And the noise would be smaller if Siuan managed to….

“Moiraine, do you think the Reds will be able to make themselves leave him alone?”

Moiraine gave a jerk even before the weave she was making produced a boom like a kettledrum. Any sister was expected to deal with a man who could channel if she encountered one, but Reds concentrated on hunting them down. Siuan meant the boychild. That explained the ward. And maybe the talk of breaking rules. Maybe Siuan was not so sure as she pretended that Tamra would not care if they discussed the child between themselves. Moiraine glared over her shoulder.

“Don’t stop,” Siuan said calmly. She was still channeling, but not doing anything beyond handling the flows. “You really do need practice if you fumbled that one. Well, do you? About the Reds?”

This time, the weave produced a silver-blue disc the size of a small coin that dropped into Moiraine’s outstretched hand. The shape was not specified, either, another oddity, but discs and balls were easiest. Woven of Air yet hard as steel, it felt slightly cold. She released the weave, and the “coin” vanished, leaving only a residue of the Power that would soon fade away as well.

The next weave was one of the complex and useless sort, requiring all of the Five Powers, but Moiraine answered as she wove it. She *could* talk and channel at the same time, after all. Air and Fire so, and Earth thus. Spirit, then Air once more. She wove without stopping. For some reason, you could not hold these weaves only partly done for very long or they collapsed into something else entirely. Spirit again, then Fire and Earth together. “They will have twenty years to learn how. Or nearly so, at worst. At best, they will have longer.” Girls sometimes, if rarely, began channeling as young as twelve or thirteen, if they were born with the spark, but even with the spark boys never did before eighteen or nineteen, unless they tried to learn how, and in some men the spark did not come out until they were as old as thirty. Air again, then Spirit and Water, all placed precisely. “Besides, he will be the Dragon Reborn. Even the Reds will have to see that he cannot be gentled until after he fights the Last Battle.” A grim fate, to save the world if he could, then for reward be cut off from this wonder. Prophecy was not known for mercy any more than for yielding to prayers. Earth again, then Fire, then more Air. The thing was beginning to look like the most hopeless knot in the world.

“Will that be enough? I’ve heard some Reds don’t try all that hard to take those poor men alive.”

She had heard that, too, but it was only a rumor. And a violation of Tower law. A sister could be birched for it, and likely exiled to a secluded farm to think on her crime for a time. It should be counted as murder, but given what those men would do unrestrained, she could almost see why it was not. More Spirit laid down, and Earth threaded through. Invisible fingers seemed to run up her sides to her armpits. She was ticklish, as Siuan knew well, but the other woman would need to do better than that. She barely flinched. "As someone told me not long ago, learn to live with what you cannot change," she said wryly. "The Wheel of Time weaves as the Wheel wills, and Ajahs do what they do." More Air, and Fire like so, followed by Water, Earth *and* Spirit. Then all five at once. Light, what a ghastly tangle! And not done yet.

"What I think," Siuan began, and the door banged open, letting in a surge of freezing air that swept away all the warmth of the fire. With *saidar* filling her, her awareness heightened, Moiraine felt suddenly covered with a coat of ice from head to toe.

The door also let in Myrelle Berengari, an Accepted from Altara who had earned the ring in the same year as they. Olive-skinned and beautiful, and almost as tall as Siuan, Myrelle was gregarious and also mercurial, with a boisterous sense of humor and a temper even worse than Moiraine's when she let it go. The two of them had begun with heated words as novices that got them both switched and had somehow found themselves friends. Oh, not so close as Siuan and she, but still friends, the only reason she did not snap at the other Accepted for walking in without knocking. Not that they would have heard if she had pounded, with the ward set. Not that *that* mattered. There was the principle of the thing!

"How long before the Last Battle, do you think?" Myrelle asked, shutting the door. She took in the half-completed weave in front of Moiraine and the ward around the room, and a grin appeared on her lips. "Practicing for the test, I see. Have you been making her squeal, Siuan? I can help, if you like. I know a sure way to make her squeal like a piglet caught in a net."

Moiraine hurriedly let the weave dissipate before it could collapse and exchanged confused looks with Siuan. How could Myrelle know?

"I did not squeal like…in the way you said," she said primly, playing for time. Most Accepted's pranks were aimed at other Accepted, and Myrelle's numbers almost matched hers and Siuan's. That particular one had involved ice in the depths of summer heat, when even shade felt like an oven. But she had not sounded *anything* like a piglet!

“What do you mean, Myrelle?” Siuan asked cautiously.

“Why, the Aiel, of course. What else could I mean?”

Moiraine exchanged another look with Siuan, of chagrin this time. A number of sisters claimed that various passages in the Prophecies of the Dragon referred to the Aiel. Of course, just as many said they did not. At the beginning of the war, there had been rather animated discussions about the matter. They would have been called shouting arguments if the women involved had not been Aes Sedai. But with what they knew now, all of that had slipped right out of Moiraine’s head, and plainly out of Siuan’s, as well. Keeping their knowledge hidden was going to take constant vigilance.

“The pair of you have a secret, don’t you?” Myrelle said. “I don’t know anybody for having secrets like you two. Well, don’t think I’ll ask, because I won’t.” By her expression, she was dying to ask.

“It isn’t ours to tell,” Siuan replied, and Moiraine’s eyebrows climbed before she could control her face. What was Siuan up to? Was she trying to play *Daes Dae’mar*? Moiraine had tried to teach her how the Game of Houses worked. In Cairhien, even servants and farmers knew how to maneuver for advantage and deflect others from their own plans and secrets. In Cairhien, nobles and commoners alike lived by *Daes Dae’mar,* more so than anywhere else, and the Game was played everywhere, even in lands where everyone denied it. For all Moiraine’s efforts, though, Siuan had never shown much facility. She was just too straightforward. “But you can help me with Moiraine,” the woman went on, even more surprisingly. Their practice was always just the two of them. “She knows my tricks too well by now.”

Laughing, Myrelle rubbed her hands together gleefully and took the second chair, the light of the Power springing up around her.

Grimly, Moiraine turned her back again and took up the second weave, but Siuan said, “From the beginning, Moiraine. You know better. You have to have the order fixed in your head so firmly that *nothing* can make you fumble it.”

With a small sigh, Moiraine produced the silver-blue coin of Air once more, then moved on.

Siuan was right, in a way, about her knowing Siuan’s tricks. Siuan liked to use tickles at the worst possible moment, sudden pokes in unpleasant places, embarrassing caresses, and startling noises right beside her ear. That and saying the most shocking things she could think of, and she had a vivid imagination even after the sisters' work with her language. Knowing the other woman's tricks did not make it any easier to hold on to complete composure, though. She had to start over twice because of Siuan. Myrelle was worse. She liked ice. Ice was easy to make, a matter of using Water and Fire to draw it out of the air. But Moiraine would like to see how Myrelle managed to make it materialize *inside* her dress, in the worst places. Myrelle also channeled flows to make sly pinches and sharp flicks as if Moiraine had been snapped with a switch, and sometimes a solid blow across her bottom like the fall of a strap. They were real pinches and real blows; the bruises they left were real, too. Once, Myrelle lifted her a foot off the ground with ropes of Air—she was certain it was her; Siuan had never done anything like this—and slowly rotated her head down and feet pointed toward the ceiling so her skirts fell down over her head. Heart pounding and close to frantic, she pushed her skirts up from in front of her face with her hands. It was not modesty; she had to keep weaving. You could hold a weave without seeing it, but you could not weave, and if this particular bundle of the Five Powers collapsed, it would give her a painful shock, as though she had scuffled her feet across a carpet and then touched a piece of iron, only three times as bad and felt all over. She managed to complete that one successfully, but all in all, Myrelle broke her concentration *four* times!

She felt a growing irritation over that, but with herself, not Myrelle. One thing every Accepted agreed on was that whatever the sisters did to you in the test would be worse than anything your friends could think of. And if they *were* your friends, they would do the worst they could think of, short of actual harm, to help you prepare. Light, if Myrelle and Siuan could make her fail six times in so short a time, what hope did she have in the actual test? But she kept on with unbending determination. She would pass, and on her first try. She would!

She was making that second weave yet again when the door opened once more, and she let the flows vanish, reluctantly let go of *saidar* altogether. There was always a reluctance to let go. Life seemed to drain away along with the Power; the world became drab. But she would not have had time to finish in any case before her novice class. Accepted were not allowed clocks, which were too expensive for most to afford in any event, and the gongs that sounded the hour were not always audible inside the Tower, so it was best if you developed a keen sense of time. Accepted were no more permitted to be late than novices were.

The woman who stood holding the door open was not a friend. Taller than Siuan, Tarna Feir was from the north of Altara, close to Andor, but her pale yellow hair was not her only difference from Myrelle. Accepted were not allowed to be arrogant, yet one look into those cold blue eyes told you that she was. She possessed no sense of humor, either, and as far as anyone knew, she had never played a joke on anyone. Tarna had gained the ring a year before Siuan and Moiraine, after nine years as a novice, and she had had few friends as a novice and few now. She did not seem to notice the lack. A *very* different woman from Myrelle.

"I should have expected to find you two together," she said coolly. There never seemed to be any heat in her. "I can't understand why you don't just move into the same room. Are you joining Siuan's coterie now, Myrelle?" All said matter-of-factly, yet Myrelle's eyes began to flash. The glow had vanished from Siuan, but Myrelle still held the Power. Moiraine hoped she was not rash enough to use it.

"Go away, Tarna," Siuan said with a quick dismissive gesture. "We're busy. And close the door." Tarna did not move.

"I have to hurry to make my novice class," Moiraine said, to Siuan. Tarna, she ignored. "They are just learning how to make a ball of fire, and if I am not there, one of them is sure to try it anyway." Novices were forbidden to channel or even embrace the Source without a sister or one of the Accepted looking over their shoulders, but they did anyway, given half a chance. New girls never really believed the dangers involved, while the older were always sure they knew how to avoid those dangers.

"The novices have been given a freeday," Tarna said, "so no classes today." Being dismissed and ignored did not disconcert her a bit. Nothing did. No doubt Tarna would pass for the shawl on her first try with ease. "The Accepted are summoned to the Oval Lecture Hall. The Amyrlin is going to address us. One other thing you should know. Gitara Moroso died just a few hours ago."

The light surrounding Myrelle winked out. "So that's the secret you were keeping!" she exclaimed. Her eyes flashed hotter than they had for Tarna.

“I told you it wasn’t ours to share,” Siuan replied. An Aes Sedai answer if ever there was one. It was enough to make Myrelle nod agreement, however reluctantly. And that nod *was* reluctant. Her eyes did not lose their heat. Moiraine expected that she and Siuan might soon have surprising encounters with ice.

Still holding the door open—was the woman immune to the cold, like a sister?—Tarna studied Moiraine and then Siuan. “That’s right; you two would have been in attendance. What happened? All the rest of us have heard is that she died.”

“I was handing her a cup of tea when she gasped and fell dead in my arms,” Moiraine replied. And that was an even better Aes Sedai answer than Siuan’s, every word true while avoiding the whole truth.

To her surprise, an expression of sadness crossed Tarna’s face. It was fleeting, but it had been there. Tarna *never* showed emotion. She was carved from stone. “Gitara Sedai was a great woman,” she murmured. “She will be badly missed.”

“Why is the Amyrlin going to speak to us?” Moiraine asked. Plainly Gitara’s death had already been announced, and by custom, her funeral would be tomorrow, so there was no need to announce that. Surely Tamra did not mean to tell the *Accepted* about the Foretelling?

“I don’t know,” Tarna replied, all coolness once more. “But I shouldn’t have stood here talking. Everyone else was told to leave breakfast immediately. If we run, we can just make it before the Amyrlin arrives.”

Accepted were required to maintain a certain amount of dignity, preparation for the day they reached the shawl. They certainly were never supposed to run unless ordered to. But run they did, Tarna as hard as the rest of them, hiking their skirts to their knees and ignoring the startled looks of liveried servants in the corridors. Aes Sedai did not keep the Amyrlin Seat waiting. Accepted never even *thought* of it.

The Oval Lecture Hall, with its wide scrollwork crown running beneath a gently domed ceiling painted with sky and white clouds, was seldom used. Moiraine and the others were the last of the Accepted to arrive, yet the rows of polished wooden benches were less than a quarter filled. The babble of voices, Accepted offering suggestions of why the Amyrlin would address them, seemed to emphasize how few they were compared to what the chamber had been built to hold. Moiraine put dwindling numbers firmly out of her head. Maybe, if the sisters…. No. She would *not* brood.

Thankfully, the dais at the front of the hall was still empty. She and Siuan found places at the back of the crowd, and Tarna sat beside them, but clearly not with them. The woman wore aloofness like a cloak. Myrelle, still in a huff over not being told about Gitara, stalked around to the other end of the row. Half the women in the room seemed to be talking, all on top of one another. It was nearly impossible to make out what anyone in particular was saying, and the little Moiraine did hear was utter nonsense. *All* of them to be tested for the shawl? *Immediately?* Aledrin must have brain fever to be spouting such drivel. Well, she *was* excitable. Brendas was even worse. Normally sensible, she was claiming they were all to be sent home because Gitara had Foretold the end of the White Tower, or maybe of the world, before she died. Likely by noon there would be a dozen tales about Gitara having a Foretelling if there were not more than that already—rumors grew in the Accepted’s quarters like roses in a hothouse—but Moiraine still did not like hearing one. To keep their secret, she was going to have to spin the truth like a top, at least for the next few days. She hoped she was up to it.

“Does anybody know anything,” Siuan asked the Accepted next to her, a slim, very dark woman with straight black hair hanging to her waist and a scattering of black tattoos on her hands, “or is it all just wind?”

Zemaille regarded her soberly for a moment before saying, “Wind, I think.” Zemaille always took her time. For that matter, she was always sober and thoughtful. Very likely, she would choose Brown when she was raised. Or perhaps White.

She was a rarity in the Tower, one of the Sea Folk, the Atha’an Miere. There were only four Sea Folk Aes Sedai, all Browns, and two of them were almost as old as Gitara had been. Atha’an Miere girls never came to the Tower unless they manifested the spark or managed to begin learning on their own. In either case, a delegation of Sea Folk delivered the girl, then left as soon as they could. The Atha’an Miere disliked being very long away from salt water, and the nearest sea to Tar Valon lay four hundred leagues to the south.

Zemaille, though, seemed to want to forget her origins. At least, she would never talk about the Sea Folk unless pressed by an Aes Sedai. And she was diligent, intently focused on earning the shawl from her first day, so

Moiraine had heard, though she was not quick to learn. Not slower than most, just not quick. She had been Accepted for eight years, now, and ten years a novice before that, and Moiraine had seen her fumble a weave time after time before suddenly setting it so perfectly that you wondered why she had failed before. But then, everyone progressed at her own pace, and the Tower never pushed harder than you could go.

A tall Accepted on the row in front of them, Aisling Noon, twisted around. She was almost bouncing on the bench with excitement. "It's the Foretelling, I say. Gitara had a Foretelling before she died, and the Amyrlin is going to tell us what it was. You two had the duty this morning, didn't you? You were with her when she died. What did she say?"

Siuan stiffened, and Moiraine opened her mouth to lie, but Tarna saved her. "Moiraine told me Gitara didn't have a Foretelling, Aisling. We'll find out what the Amyrlin wants to tell us when she arrives." Her voice was cool, as always, but not cutting. Aisling blushed furiously anyway.

She was another rarity for the Tower, one of the Tuatha'an, the Tinkers. The Tuatha'an lived in garishly painted wagons, traveling from village to village, and like the Sea Folk, they wanted no self-taught wilders among them. If a band discovered the spark coming out in one of their girls, they turned their train of wagons and headed for Tar Valon as fast as their horses could move. Verin, a stout Brown who was even shorter than Moiraine, said that Tinker girls never tried to find their way to channeling on their own, that they did not want to channel or become Aes Sedai. It must be so, since Verin had said it, yet Aisling applied herself with just as much determination as Zemaille, and with more success. She had earned the ring in five years, in the same year as Moraine and Siuan, and Moiraine thought she might test for the shawl in another year, perhaps less.

One of the doors at the back of the dais opened, and Tamra glided out, still in the blue dress she had worn the night before, the Amyrlin's stole draped around her neck. Moiraine was one of the first to see her, the first to rise, but in moments everyone was on her feet and silent. It seemed strange to see the Amyrlin by herself. Always when Tamra was seen in the corridors, she was accompanied by at least a few Aes Sedai, whether ordinary sisters presenting petitions or Sitters in the Hall of the Tower discussing some matter that was before the Hall. She looked weary, to Moiraine. Oh, her back was straight, and her expression said she could walk through a wall if she took it in mind, but something about her eyes spoke of tiredness that had little to do with missing sleep.

“In thanksgiving for the continued safety of Tar Valon,” she said, her voice carrying easily to everyone, “I have decided the Tower will give a bounty of one hundred crowns in gold to every woman in the city who bore a child between the day the first soldiers arrived and the day the threat is ended. It is being announced on the streets even as I speak.”

Everyone knew better than to make a sound while the Amyrlin was speaking, yet that brought a few murmurs, including one from Siuan. Actually, hers was more of a grunt. She had never seen ten gold crowns in one place, much less a hundred. A hundred would buy a very large farm, or who knew how many fishing boats.

Ignoring the break in the proprieties, Tamra continued without a pause. “As some of you may already know, an army is always accompanied by camp followers, sometimes more camp followers than there are soldiers. Many of these are craftsfolk an army needs, the armorers and fletchers, the blacksmiths and farriers and wagonwrights, but among them are soldiers’ wives and other women. Since the army provided the shield to Tar Valon, I have decided to extend the bounty to those women also.”

Moiraine realized she was biting at her lower lip, and made herself stop. It was a habit she was trying to break. There was certainly no point to letting anyone who saw you know that you were thinking furiously. At least now they knew what Tamra was after. She must believe the boychild really would be born soon. But why under the Light tell Accepted?

“That threat might continue for some time,” Tamra said, “though I have reports this morning that the Aiel may be retreating, yet the situation appears safe enough to begin collecting names, at least in the camps closest to the city. To be fair to those women, we must begin as soon as possible, before any of them leave. Some will, if the Aiel really are going. Many of the soldiers will follow the Aiel, soon to be joined by their camp followers, and other soldiers will return to their homes. No sisters have returned to the Tower yet, so I am sending all of you to begin taking names. Since, inevitably, some women will slip away before you find them, you also will ask after those who gave birth and can’t be found. Write down everything that might help locate them. Who the father is, from what town or village, what country, everything. You will each be accompanied by four Tower Guards to make sure no one troubles you.”

Moiraine almost choked trying to keep silent. Astonished gasps rose from women less successful than she. It was rare enough for Accepted to be allowed to leave the city, but without a *sister*? That was unheard of!

With a small, indulgent smile, Tamra paused to let order restore itself. She plainly knew she had startled them out of their wits. She also apparently heard something that Moiraine did not catch. As silence fell again, the Amyrlin said, “If I hear that someone has used the Power to defend herself, Alanna, that someone will sit very tenderly after a visit to the Mistress of Novices.”

A few of the Accepted were still unsettled enough to giggle, and one or two laughed aloud. Alanna was a shy woman at heart, but she worked hard at being fierce. She told anyone who would listen that she wanted to belong to the Green, the Battle Ajah, and have a dozen Warders. Only Greens bonded more than a single Warder. None had *that* many Warders, of course, but that was Alanna, always exaggerating.

Tamra slapped her palms together, quieting gigglers and laughers alike at a stroke. There were limits to her indulgence. “You will all take great care, and heed the soldiers escorting you.” There were no smiles, now. Her voice was firm. The Amyrlin Seat brooked no nonsense from rulers; she certainly would not from Accepted. “The Aiel are not the only danger outside Tar Valon’s walls. Some may think you are Aes Sedai, and you may let them so long as you aren’t foolish enough to claim that you are.” That deepened the stillness; claiming to be Aes Sedai when you were not violated a Tower law that was enforced strictly, even against women who were not initiates of the Tower. “But there are ruffians who will see only a youthful woman’s face. Easy prey, they might think, if not for your escort. Better to remove temptation and avoid the problem altogether. And don’t forget that there are Children of the Light in the army. A Whitecloak will know an Accepted’s dress when he sees one, and if he can safely put an arrow through her back, it will please him as much as if she were Aes Sedai.”

It hardly seemed possible the room could grow any quieter, yet it did. Moiraine thought she could have heard people breathing, except that no one seemed to *be* breathing. When an Aes Sedai went out into the world and vanished, as sometimes happened, the first thought was always the Whitecloaks. The Children called Aes Sedai Darkfriends and claimed that touching the One Power was blasphemy punishable by death, a sentence they were all too willing to carry out. No one could understand why they had come to help defend Tar Valon. No one among the Accepted, at least.

The Amyrlin ran her eyes slowly along the rows. At last she gave a nod, satisfied that her warning had sunk in. “Horses are being saddled for you at the West Stable. There will be food for midday in the saddlebags, and everything else you will need. Now, return to your rooms, put on stout shoes, and fetch your cloaks. It will be a long day for you, and cold. Go in the Light.” It was a dismissal, and they offered curtsies almost as one, but as they began moving toward the door to the corridor, she added, as though it had just occurred to her, “Oh, yes.” The words jerked everyone to a halt. “When you record the woman’s name, also put down the infant’s name and sex, the day he or she was born, and exactly where. The Tower’s records must be complete in this matter. You may go.” Just as though what she had left till last was not the most important thing. That was how Aes Sedai hid things in plain sight. Some said Aes Sedai had invented the Game of Houses.

Moiraine could not help exchanging excited glances with Siuan. Siuan absolutely hated anything that smacked of clerical work, but she wore a wide grin. They were going to help find the Dragon Reborn. Just his name, of course, and his mother’s name, but it was as near to an adventure as Accepted could dare to hope for.

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Chapter

4

Leaving the Tower

Moiraine’s room was little different from Siuan’s. Her small square table, with four books lying on it, and the two cushionless straight-backed chairs could have come from the same farmhouse that had provided Siuan’s. Her bed was narrower, her Illianer carpet round and flowered, and darned in several places, while on her washstand, it was the basin that had taken a blow sometime in the past. The mirror had a crack in one corner. Apart from that, they could have been the same room. She did not bother with starting a fire. She had banked her coals more carefully than Siuan, but there was no time to so much as take the edge off the room’s chill.

Reaching into the back of her wardrobe, slightly larger than Siuan’s but just as plain, she brought out a stout pair of shoes that made her grimace. Ugly things, made of leather much thicker than her slippers. The laces could have done to mend a saddle. But the shoes would keep her feet dry in the snow, and her slippers would not. Adding a pair of woolen stockings, she sat on the edge of her unmade bed to pull them on over those she was already wearing. For a moment, she considered donning a second shift, as well. However cold it was inside the Tower, it would be colder where she was going. But time was short. And besides, she did not want to take off her dress in that icy air. Surely recording names would be done in some sort of shelter, with a fire or a brazier for warmth. Of course it would. Most people in the camps likely would take them for sisters, just as Tamra had suggested.

Next out of the wardrobe came a narrow, worked leather belt with silver buckle and a plain scabbard holding a slim, silver-mounted dagger, its blade a little longer than her hand. She had not worn that since arriving in the Tower, and it felt awkward at first, hanging at her waist. Perhaps she was forbidden to use the Power to defend herself, but the dagger would do nicely, if need be. Transferring her belt pouch from the white leather belt she had laid on the bed, she thought for a moment. It was all very well for

Tamra to say that everything they needed would be waiting, but depending on someone else, even the Amyrlin Seat, to provide *everything* was unwise. She tucked her ivory comb and ivory-handled hairbrush into a leather scrip. No matter how urgent the need to gather names, she doubted that any Accepted who let herself go untidy for long would escape sharp words at best. Her good riding gloves, dark blue leather with just a touch of embroidery on the back, followed, plus a small sewing kit in a carved blackwood box, a ball of stout twine, two pairs of spare stockings in case those she was wearing got wet, several kerchiefs in various sizes, and a number of other items that might be useful, including a little knife that folded, for trimming quill pens, in the event that was what they found themselves using. Sisters would never be forced to put up with such an inconvenience, but they were not sisters.

Hanging the scrip from one shoulder, she gathered her cloak, with its banded hem and another band bordering the hood, and rushed out just in time to see Meidani and Brendas go scurrying through the doorway that led off the gallery, cloaks flaring behind them. Siuan was waiting impatiently, a scrip on her shoulder, too, beneath her cloak, and her blue eyes sparkling with excitement. She was not alone in being caught up in the moment. On the other side of the gallery, Katerine Alruddin popped out of her room, demanding at the top of her lungs that Carlinya return her sewing kit, then darted back inside without waiting for an answer.

“Alanna, Pritalle, can one of you lend me a pair of clean stockings?” someone called from below.

“I loaned you a pair yesterday, Edesina,” came a reply from above.

Doors banged throughout the well as women rushed out to shout for Temaile or Desandre, Coladara or Atuan or a score of others to return this or that borrowed item or lend something. Had a sister been present, the cacophony would put them all in the soup kettle to their necks, on a hot fire.

“What kept you, Moiraine?” Siuan said breathlessly. “Come on before we’re left behind.” She set off at a rapid stride, as though she really expected the Guardsmen to be gone if they did not hurry. There was no chance of that, of course, but Moiraine did not dawdle. She was not about to drag her feet at a chance to leave the city. Especially not at this chance.

Outside, the sun was still well short of halfway to its noonday peak. Thickening dark gray clouds rolled across the sky. They might have more snowfall today. That would not make the task ahead any easier. The walk *was* easy, since the wide, graveled path through the trees that led to the West Stable, beyond the Tower wing that held the Accepted's quarters, had been cleared. Not for the convenience of the Accepted, of course; most of the sisters kept their horses in the West Stable, and workmen shoveled that path clean two or three times a day if necessary.

The stable itself was three sprawling stories of gray stone, larger than the main stables of the Sun Palace, the wide stone-paved stableyard in front of it almost filled by a crowd of rough-coated grooms and saddled horses and helmeted Tower Guards who wore gray steel breastplates over nearly black coats and equally dark cloaks worked with the white teardrop of the Flame of Tar Valon. Seven-striped tabards over the breastplates marked out bannermen and the lone officer. Brendas and Meidani were climbing into their saddles, and half a dozen other Accepted, cloaked and hooded in a strung-out line, were already riding toward the Sunset Gate surrounded by their Guards. Moiraine felt a moment of irritation that so many had beaten her and Siuan down. Had they packed nothing, to be so quick? But they did not know what they really were looking for. That buoyed her spirits again.

Pushing through the crowd, she found her bay mare, the reins held by a lanky groom with a disapproving expression on her narrow face. Very likely she frowned on an Accepted having her own horse. Few did—most could not afford to keep a horse, and besides, opportunities to ride anywhere outside the Tower grounds were rare—but Moiraine had purchased Arrow to celebrate attaining the ring. An act of ostentation that she suspected had nearly earned her a trip to Merean's study. She did not regret the purchase, even so. The mare was not tall, since she despised looking like a child, which she did on tall animals, yet Arrow could keep running long after larger horses had tired out. A fast mount was good, but a mount with endurance was better. Arrow was both. And she could jump fences that few other horses would even try. Finding that out *had* earned a visit to the Mistress of Novices. Sisters took a dim view of Accepted risking a broken neck. A very dim view.

The groom tried to hand her the reins, but she hung the scrip from the saddle's tall pommel by its strap, then unbuckled the flaps of the saddlebags. One side held a cloth-wrapped parcel that proved to contain half a loaf of dark bread, dried apricots in oiled paper, and a large piece of pale yellow cheese. More than she could eat by herself, but some of the others had larger appetites. The other side bulged with a polished wooden lapdesk, complete with a thick sheaf of good paper and two good steel-nibbed pens inside.

No need for the penknife, she thought ruefully, careful to keep her face smooth. She did not intend to let the groom see her look abashed. At least she had been prepared.

The lapdesk also held a tightly stoppered ink jar of heavy glass. Much to the groom's undisguised amusement, she checked to make sure it *was* tightly stoppered. Well, the woman could snicker all she wanted, not bothering to hide it behind a hand, but she would not have had to deal with the mess if the ink leaked out over everything. Sometimes Moiraine thought it a pity the servants did not see Accepted the way novices did.

The groom made a derisory bow as she finally took the reins, and bent to offer cupped hands for a mounting step, another mocking gesture, but Moiraine disdained the help. Donning her snug riding gloves, she swung easily up into the saddle. Let the woman snicker at that! She had been put on her first pony—on a lead, to be sure—as soon as she was old enough to walk without someone holding her hand, and had been given her first real horse at ten. Unfortunately, Accepted's dresses did not have skirts divided for riding, and the necessity of pushing her skirts down, vainly trying to cover her legs, spoiled the dignity of the moment somewhat. It was the cold that concerned her, not modesty. Well, partly modesty. She noticed some of the Guardsmen studying her stockinged legs, bare almost to the knee, and blushed furiously. Attempting to ignore the men, she looked for Siuan.

She had wanted to buy Siuan a horse in celebration, too, and now she wished she had not let Siuan talk her out of it. Siuan could have used whatever practice she might then have had. She scrambled onto her mount, a stout gray gelding, so awkwardly that the placid-seeming animal twisted his head around to look at her in consternation. She nearly fell off trying to get her other foot into the stirrup. That done, she gripped her reins so tightly that her dark gray gloves strained over her knuckles, her face set in a grim expression, as if prepared for an onerous test she might fail. For her, it was. Siuan could ride; she was just very bad at it. Some of the men stared at her half-exposed legs, too, but she appeared not to notice. Of course, if she had, it would not have flustered her. According to her, working a fishing boat meant tying your skirts up, and exhibiting your legs well *above* the knee!

As soon as they were both mounted, a slim young under-lieutenant, his helmet marked by a short white plume, told off eight Guardsmen for the escort. He was quite pretty, really, behind the face-bars of his helmet, but any Tower Guard knew better than to smile at Accepted, and he barely looked at her and Siuan before turning away. Not that she wanted him to smile, or to smile back—she was no brainless novice—but she would have enjoyed looking at him a while longer.

The leader of the escort was not pretty. A tall, grizzled bannerman with a permanent scowl who curtly introduced himself in a deep, gravelly voice as Steler formed his soldiers in a loose ring around the pair of them and turned his rangy roan gelding toward the Sunset Gate without another word. The Guardsmen heeled their mounts after him, and Siuan and she found themselves being herded along. Herded! She held on to calmness with an effort. It was good practice. Siuan seemed not to think she needed any practice.

"We are supposed to go to the west bank," she called, glowering at Steler's back. He did not answer. Thumping her heels against the gray's plump flanks, she pushed up beside the man, almost sliding out of her saddle in the process. "Did you hear me? We are to go to the west bank."

The bannerman sighed loudly, and finally turned his head to look at Siuan. "I was told to take you to the west bank…." Hepaused as if thinking of what title to use in addressing her. Guardsmen seldom had reason to speak to Accepted. Nothing occurred to him, apparently, because when he went on, it was without honorifics and in a firmer tone. "Now, if one of you gets herself bruised, I'm going to hear about it, and I don't want to hear about it, so you stay inside the ring, hear? Well, go on, now. Or we'll stop right here until you do."

Clenching her jaw, Siuan fell back beside Moiraine.

With a quick glance to make sure none of the soldiers was close enough to overhear, Moiraine whispered, "You cannot think we will actually be the ones, Siuan." She hoped for it, true, but this was real life, not a gleeman's tale. "He might not even be born, yet."

"As much chance us as anyone else," Siuan muttered. "More, since we know what we're really looking for." She had not stopped scowling at the bannerman. "When I bond a Warder, the first thing I'll make sure of is that he does what he's told."

"You are thinking of bonding Steler?" Moiraine asked in an innocent voice. Siuan's stare was such a blend of astonishment and horror that she nearly laughed. But Siuan nearly fell off her horse again, too, and she could not laugh at that.

Once past the iron-strapped Sunset Gate, with the gilded setting suns that gave it its name set high in the thick timbers, it quickly became apparent that they were angling southwest through the stone-paved streets, toward the Alindaer Gate. There were any number of water gates to the city, where small boats could enter, and of course Northharbor and Southharbor for riverships, but only six bridge gates. The Alindaer Gate was the most southerly of the three to the west, and not a good omen for coming near to Dragonmount, but Moiraine did not think Steler would let himself be turned. *Live with what you cannot change,* she told herself sourly. Siuan must be ready to chew nails.

Siuan was silently studying Steler's back, though. Not glaring any longer, but studying, the way she did with the puzzles she loved so much, the maddening intricate sort, with pieces fitted together so it seemed they could never come apart. Only, they always did come apart eventually, for Siuan. The word puzzles, too, and the number puzzles. Siuan saw patterns where no one else could. She was so absorbed with the bannerman that she actually rode with some ease, if not skill. At least she did not seem ready to topple off at every other step.

Perhaps she would figure out a way to turn him, but Moiraine gave herself over to enjoying the ride through the city. It was not as if even Accepted were allowed outside the Tower grounds every day, after all, and Tar Valon was the largest city, the grandest city, in the known world. In the whole world, surely. The island was nearly ten miles long, and except for public parks and private gardens—and the Ogier Grove, of course—the city covered every square foot of it.

The streets they rode along were wide and long since cleared of snow, and all seemed full to overflowing with people, mostly afoot, though sedan chairs and closed litters wove through the crowd. In that press, walking was faster than riding, and only the proudest and most stubborn—a Tairen noblewoman, stiff-necked in a tall lace collar, with her entourage of servants and guards, a cluster of sober-eyed Kandori merchants with silver chains across their chests, several knots of brightly coated Murandian dandies with curled mustaches who should have been out in the fighting—were mounted. Or those with a long way to go, she amended, making another futile effort at covering her legs and frowning at a tilt-eyed

Saldaean, a tradesman or craftsman by his plain woolen coat, who was ogling them much too openly. Light! Men never seemed to understand, or care, when a woman wished to be looked at and when not. In any case, Steler and his soldiers managed to clear a path ahead of them with their mere presence. No one wanted to impede the way of eight armed and armored Tower Guards. It had to be that which opened the crush of people. She doubted that anyone in the crowd would know that a banded dress indicated an initiate of the White Tower. People who came to Tar Valon stayed clear of the Tower unless they had business there.

Every country seemed to be represented in that crowd. The world comes to Tar Valon, so the saying went. Taraboner men from the far west, wearing veils that covered their faces to the eyes, and were transparent enough to show their thick mustaches clearly, rubbed shoulders with sailors, leather-skinned and barefoot even in this cold, from the riverships that plied the Erinin. A Borderman in plate-and-mail passed them riding in the other direction, a stone-faced Shienaran with his crested helmet hanging from his saddle and his head shaved except for a topknot. He was certainly a messenger headed for the Tower, and Moiraine briefly considered stopping him. But he would not reveal his message to her, and she would have had to force her way through Steler’s Guardsmen. Light, she hated not knowing!

There were dark-clad Cairhienin, easy to pick out because they were shorter and paler than nearly everyone else, Altaran men in heavily embroidered coats, Altaran women clutching their cloaks, bright red or green or yellow, to shield what their low-cut dresses exposed to the icy air, Tairens in broad-striped coats or lace-trimmed dresses, and plainly garbed Andorans who strode along as though they not only knew exactly where they were going but intended to reach there as soon as possible. Andorans always focused on one matter at a time; they were stubborn people, over-proud, and they lacked imagination. Half a dozen copper-skinned Domani women in fancifully worked cloaks—doubtless merchants; most Domani women seen abroad were—stood buying meat pies from a pushbarrow, and nearby, an Arafellin wearing a coat with red-slashed sleeves, his black hair dangling down his back in two braids decorated with silver bells, was waving his arms and arguing with a stolid Illianer who appeared more interested in wrapping his vividly striped cloak around his bulk. She even glimpsed a charcoal-skinned fellow who might have been one of the Sea Folk, though some Tairens were as dark. His hands were hidden in his frayed cloak as he scuttled away in the throng, so she could not see whether they were tattooed.

So many people made a din just by their normal talking, but wagons and carts added to it with the squeak of poorly greased axles, the clatter of hooves and the grate of steel-rimmed wheels on the paving stones. The carters and wagon drivers shouted for people to give way, which they did reluctantly, and hawkers cried ribbons or needles or roasted nuts or a dozen things more from barrows and trays. Despite the cold, jugglers and tumblers were performing on some street corners, men and women with caps laid out to collect coins were playing flute or pipes or harp, and shopkeepers standing in front of their shops called out the superiority of their goods over any others. Streetcleaners with their brooms and shovels and barrows cleaned away what the horses left behind, and any other trash as well, shouting, “Make way for clean shoes! Make way if you want clean shoes!” It was so…normal. No one appeared to notice the heavy smell of sour smoke that hung in the air. A battle outside Tar Valon could not alter what went on inside Tar Valon’s walls. Perhaps even a war could not. But you could see as much in Cairhien, if not in quite the same numbers or quite as much variety. It was Tar Valon itself that made the city unlike any other.

The White Tower rose from the center of the city, a thick bone-white shaft climbing almost a hundred spans into the sky and visible for miles. It was the first thing anyone approaching the city saw, long before they could make out the city itself. The heart of Aes Sedai power, that alone was sufficient to mark Tar Valon apart, but other, smaller towers rose throughout the city. Not simply spires, but spirals and fluted towers, some close enough together to be linked by bridges a hundred feet in the air, or two hundred, or higher. Even the topless towers of Cairhien did not come close to matching them. Every square had its fountain or monument in the center, or a huge statue, some atop plinths as much as fifty paces tall, but the buildings themselves were grander than most monuments in other cities. Around the palatial homes of wealthy merchants and bankers, with their domes and spires and colonnaded walks, crowded shops and inns, taverns and stables, apartment buildings and the homes of ordinary folk, yet even they were ornamented with carvings and friezes fit for palaces. A fair number could have passed for palaces. Nearly all were Ogier built, and Ogier built for beauty. More wondrous still were the structures dotted through the city, half a dozen in sight on every street, where the Ogier masons had been given a free hand. A three-story banking house suggested a flight of golden marble birds taking wing, while the Kandori merchants' guild hall seemed to represent horses running in surf, or perhaps surf turning into horses, and a very large inn called The Blue Cat strongly resembled exactly that, a blue cat curled up to sleep. The Great Fish Market, the largest in the city, seemed to *be* a school of huge fish, green and red and blue and striped. Other cities boasted of Ogier-built buildings, but nothing like what Tar Valon possessed.

Scaffolding surrounded one of the Ogier-made structures, obscuring its form so that all she could make out was green and white stone and the fact that it seemed all curves, and Ogier stonemasons moved on the wooden platforms, some hoisting large pieces of white stone on a long wooden crane that stuck out over the street. Even Ogier work needed mending now and then, and no human mason could duplicate their craft. They were not often seen, though. One of them was standing in the street, at the foot of the broad ladder leading up to the first platform, in a long dark coat that flared out above his boot tops, with a thick roll of paper under one arm. Plans, no doubt. He could have been taken for human, if you squinted. And ignored the fact that his huge eyes were on a level with Moiraine's as she drew abreast of him. That and the long, tufted ears that stuck up through his hair, a nose nearly as wide as his face, and a mouth that all but cut that face in two. His eyebrows dangled onto his cheeks like mustaches. She offered him a formal bow from her saddle, and he returned it with equal gravity, stroking the narrow beard that hung down his chest. But his ears twitched, and she thought she saw a grin as he turned to begin climbing the ladder. Any Ogier who came to Tar Valon would know an Accepted's dress when he saw one.

Flushing, she glanced from the corner of her eye to see whether Siuan had seen, but the other woman was still studying Steler. She might not even have noticed the Ogier. Siuan could become very engrossed in her puzzles, but to miss seeing an *Ogier*?

Nearly an hour after leaving the Tower, they reached the Alindaer Gate, wide enough for five or six wagons abreast to pass uncrowded and flanked by tall towers with crenellated tops. There were towers all along the city's high white walls, thrusting out into the river, but none so tall or strong as the bridge towers. The huge, bronze-strapped gates stood wide open, yet Guardsmen atop the gate towers were keeping watch, ready to order them winched shut, and two dozen more at the side of the road, carrying halberds, kept an eye on the very few who passed by. She and Siuan and their escort drew those eyes like iron filings to magnets. Or rather, the banded dresses did. No one said anything about Accepted leaving the city, though, which suggested that another party had gone out of this gate already. Unlike the bustling streets, the gate had no traffic. All who had wanted to seek the safety of Tar Valon's walls were long since inside, and despite the apparent normality inside the walls, no one seemed to think it safe to depart just yet. One of the Guardsmen on the roadside, a wide-shouldered bannerman, nodded to Steler, who nodded back without stopping.

As their horses' hooves rang on the bridge, she felt her breath catch. The bridges themselves were marvels, constructed with the aid of the Power, stone lacework arching nearly a mile to solid ground beyond the marshy riverbank, unsupported that whole way and high enough at the center for the largest rivership to sail beneath. That was not what struck her, though. She was out of the city. The sisters impressed deeply on every novice that so much as setting foot on the bridges constituted an attempt to run away, which was the worst crime a novice could commit short of murder. The same held true for Accepted; they just did not need to be reminded. And she was out of the city, as free as if she already wore the shawl. She glanced at the soldiers around her. Well, nearly as free.

At the highest point of the bridge, more than fifty paces above the river, Steler abruptly drew rein. Was he mad enough to pause for the view of Dragonmount rising in the distance, its broken peak emitting a ribbon of smoke? In her euphoria, she had forgotten the cold, but a strong breeze slicing down the Alindrelle Erinin, slicing right through her cloak, reminded her quickly enough. The stench of charred wood seemed particularly strong on that wind. The trumpets had stopped, she realized. Somehow, the silence seemed as ominous as their calling had been.

Then she saw the cluster of horsemen at the foot of the bridge, nine or ten of them, staring at the city walls. Why the trumpets had gone silent no longer seemed so worrisome. The riders' burnished breastplates and helmets shone like silver, and they all wore long white cloaks, spread across their mounts' cruppers. Embracing the Source filled her with life and joy, but more importantly at the moment, it sharpened her sight. As she had suspected, a flaring golden sun was embroidered on the left breast of each of those cloaks. Children of the Light. And they dared to block traffic on one of Tar Valon’s bridges? Well, there was only her and Siuan and the Guardsmen, but the principle was the same. The fact that it was Siuan and her and Tower Guards made it worse, in truth. That made it intolerable.

“Bannerman Steler,” she said loudly, “Whitecloaks must not be allowed to think they can intimidate initiates of the Tower. Or Tower Guards. We ride forward.” The fool man did not so much as glance around at her from his study of the Whitecloaks. Perhaps if she gave him a little rap on top of his head with a small flow of Air….

“Moiraine!” Siuan’s whisper was low, but managed a sharp edge.

She looked at her friend in surprise. Siuan wore a scowl. How had the other woman known? She had not begun to weave! Still, Siuan was right. Some things were just not allowed. Guiltily, she released *saidar,* and sighed as all of that joyous exultation drained away. Shivering, she pulled her cloak tighter. As if that would do any good.

At last the Whitecloaks turned and rode back into the village. Alindaer was a very large village, practically a town, with brick houses of two or even three stories roofed in blue tiles, where they showed through the snow, and its own inns and shops and markets. The blanket of white made it appear clean and peaceful. For long moments, the Whitecloaks vanished. Only when they appeared in a gap between two buildings, on a street heading north, did Steler heel his mount into motion. His gauntleted hand rested on his sword hilt and his head swiveled constantly, searching the streets ahead, as they rode down the final length of the bridge. Where there was one group of Whitecloaks, there might be another. Moiraine felt suddenly very grateful for the presence of Steler and his men. A dagger would not be much use against a Whitecloak’s arrow. *None* of her preparations were turning out to be very useful.

When they reached the edge of the town, Siuan again thumped her gray up beside the bannerman, still so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she rode with something approaching…not grace, certainly, but at least steadiness. “Bannerman Steler.” Her tone combined firmness with civility, and a strong element of certainty. It was very much a voice of command. Steler turned his head to her, blinking in surprise. “You know why we are here, of course,” she went on, and barely waited for his nod. “The women most likely to leave before hearing of the bounty are those in the camps most distant from the city. Visiting them yesterday would have entailed some danger, but the Amyrlin has reports that the Aiel are retreating.” Light, she sounded for all the world as though the Amyrlin regularly shared reports with her! “The Amyrlin has expressed her unwillingness to let any of these women slip away without receiving the bounty, Bannerman, so I strongly suggest that we follow the Amyrlin’s urging and begin with the more distant camps.” Her gesture might have seemed vague to anyone other than Moiraine, but it just happened to point straight at Dragonmount. “The Amyrlin Seat will wish it.”

Moiraine held her breath. Could Siuan have found the key?

“There’s not an Aiel this side of the Erinin, so I hear,” Steler replied in an agreeable voice. The next moment, he dashed her hopes. “But I was told the camps closest the river, so that’s what it’ll be. And I was told if anybody made a fuss, I was to take her right back to the Tower. You’re not making a fuss, are you? I thought not.”

Reining her mount in to let Moiraine catch up, Siuan fell in alongside Arrow. She was not scowling, but her stare at the bannerman’s back was blue ice. The glow of *saidar* abruptly surrounded her.

“No, Siuan,” Moiraine said quietly.

Siuan frowned at her. “I could just be trying to see further ahead, you know. In case there are more Whitecloaks.”

Moiraine arched an eyebrow, and Siuan blushed, the light around her vanishing. She had no right to look so surprised. After six years practically in one another’s belt pouches, Moiraine knew at a glance when her friend was thinking of mischief. For someone as intelligent as she was, Siuan was blind sometimes.

“I don’t see how you can stand this,” the taller woman muttered, half rising in her stirrups. Moiraine had to put out a hand to keep her from toppling to the ground. “If the camp is much further, I’ll need a sister for Healing.”

“I have an ointment,” Moiraine said, patting the scrip hanging from her saddle with a touch of satisfaction. The penknife and the dagger might be useless, but at least she had thought of the ointment.

“Now if only you had a carriage in there,” Siuan grumbled, but Moiraine only smiled.

Alindaer lay empty and still. The village had been burned at least three times in the Trolloc Wars, once more near the end of the War of the Second Dragon, and twice during the twenty-year siege of Tar Valon by Artur Hawkwing’s armies, and it seemed the inhabitants had expected the same again. Here a chair sat in the snow-covered street, there a table, a child's doll, a cookpot, all dropped by people hurrying to get inside the city with whatever they could take with them. Then again, every window appeared to be shuttered tightly, every door closed and no doubt locked, whatever remained behind kept safe against the people's return. But the stink of burning was stronger here than on the bridge, and the only sounds were the creak of swinging inn signs and the dull clop of the horses' hooves on the paving stones beneath the snow. The place no longer seemed so pristine; it seemed…dead.

Moiraine felt a great relief when they left the village behind, even if they were riding south and away from Dragonmount. The countryside was supposed to be quiet, and the smell of burning faded the farther they went. Siuan plainly was not relieved. From time to time she looked over her shoulder toward the great black peak of Dragonmount—half the time, she needed a steadying hand from Moiraine to keep her in her saddle—and more than once she ground her teeth audibly. They had often discussed what Ajah they might join, and Moiraine had long since settled on the Blue for herself, but she thought Siuan might well end choosing Green.

The first camp they came to, two miles below Alindaer, was a cookfire-dotted sprawl of wagons and carts and tents in every size and state of repair mixed with rude shelters made of brush. Hammers rang on anvils at three different forges, and children ran shouting and playing in trampled, dirty snow as though unaware that there had been a battle or that their fathers might be dead. Perhaps they were. It would be a mercy. The horselines were nearly empty, and aside from the blacksmiths, few men were in evidence, but a long line of women—well above fifty!—stood in front of a canvas pavilion where an Accepted was seated at a table with four Tower Guards arrayed behind her, so Steler did not so much as slow down. Moiraine embraced the Source briefly and felt Siuan do the same. Just to better see who it was, of course. A multitude of thin Taraboner braids surrounded the distant Accepted's face. Sarene was the most beautiful woman in the Accepted's quarters, except perhaps for Ellid, though she seemed completely unconscious of it, which Ellid definitely was not, but she had remarkably little tact for a shopkeeper's daughter. Her mother must have been glad to see Sarene's sharp tongue go off to Tar Valon.

"I hope it doesn't get her in hot water this time," Siuan said softly, just as if she could read Moiraine's thoughts. But then, they both knew Sarene all too well. A friend, but a nettlesome one at times. Her saving grace was that she seemed as unaware of what she had said wrong as she was of her face.

A hundred paces later, the light around Siuan vanished, and Moiraine released the Power, too. A sister might see them, after all.

The next camp, less than a mile farther south, was even larger and more disorderly, and without anyone taking names. It was noisier, as well, with six forges working, and twice as many children rushing about shouting. The relative absence of men was the same, and the nearly bare horselines, but surprisingly, a number of closed coaches dotted the camp. Moiraine winced when she heard the Murandian accents as they rode in. Murandians were a quarrelsome lot, prickly over points of honor no one else could see, always fighting duels. But when Steler announced the purpose of their visit in a bellow that would have frightened a bull, no one wanted to quarrel in the least. In short order two weedy young men in worn cloaks carried out a table and a pair of stools for Moiraine and Siuan. They placed the table in the open, but two other youths brought three-legged braziers that they set at either end of the table. This might not be too unpleasant after all.

* * *

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Chapter 5

The Human Heart

Once Moiraine was seated on one of the stools with her lapdesk open on the table in front of her, she changed her mind about the unpleasantness. The warmth of the braziers dissipated rapidly in the open air, barely lessening the chill, and eddies of the thin gray smoke drifted into her face, stinging her eyes and sometimes making her cough. Stout shoes and extra stockings or not, her feet had grown quite cold on the ride; resting on the trampled snow, they quickly became frigid. And what appeared to be close to a hundred women, the greater number clutching infants, formed a crowd around the table, all clamoring at once for their names to be taken first. Most wore plain, thick woolens, but half a dozen or so were in silks or at least ornately embroidered dresses of fine cut that indicated wealth or nobility or both. They shouted as loudly as anyone, though. Noblewomen, shouting along with the commoners! Murandians had little sense of proper behavior.

Helmet held on his hip, Steler bellowed till his face turned dark for everyone to be quiet and form a line, and no one took any notice at all. Two of the Guardsmen moved as if to begin pushing the women back, until a sharp motion from the bannerman halted them, and well that it did. That sort of thing could start a riot. Moiraine stood up to try putting things to rights, though she was uncertain how. She had never had to face the like on any of her estates; she doubted any of her stewards had, for that matter, and people were more outspoken with a steward than with the lady of the estate. But Siuan was ahead of her, climbing atop her stool with a scowl. She gripped the edges of her cloak as though to keep from shaking her fists.

The light of *saidar* enveloped her, and she wove Air and Fire. It was a simple weave using tiny amounts of the Power, but when she spoke, her voice boomed like thunder. “Be quiet!” It was simply a command, if impressively delivered, without anger, yet startled women shrank back, suddenly as hushed as stones. Even the ring of hammers on anvils ceased.

The entire camp grew still, so that Moiraine could hear picketed horses stamping hooves. Steler gave Siuan a look of approbation—bannermen approved of leather lungs, in Moiraine's experience—and the women around the table a glare. A number of babies began crying shrilly, though, and when Siuan went on, it was without the weave. Still in a loud, firm voice that carried, however. "If you want to see a penny, you'll line up and keep yourselves orderly. The White Tower does not treat with mobs of unruly children. Behave as grown women, or you'll wish you had." She nodded once, for emphasis, then frowned at the mass of women to see whether they had taken her words in. They had.

As she climbed down from the stool, the women rushed to form two lines in front of the table, with only a little elbowing and jostling that Moiraine could see. The more finely dressed women were at the front, of course, with serving women carrying their babes, yet they were not above trying to push ahead of one another and exchanging scowls. Maybe they were merchants, though what trade they could find here was beyond her. Once, she had seen two well-dressed, seemingly dignified Murandian merchants get into a fistfight in the street, bloodying noses and rolling in the gutter. Despite the petty scuffling, no one spoke a word, and those with crying children seemed to be making every effort to soothe them. A cluster of girls, perhaps ten or twelve years old, gathered off to one side, huddling in their cloaks, pointing at her and Siuan and whispering excitedly. She thought she heard Aes Sedai mentioned. Another young woman, three or four years older, about the age she had been when she came to Tar Valon, stood nearby pretending that she was not watching avidly. Many girls dreamed of becoming Aes Sedai; few had the nerve to take the first step beyond dreaming. Tossing back her cloak on the right side, Moiraine uncapped her ink jar and picked up a pen. She kept her gloves on; the thin leather did not provide a great deal of protection against the chill, yet it was better than nothing.

"Your name, my Lady?" she said. The plump, smiling woman wore a high-necked green riding dress that was not of the best silk, but it *was* silk, as was her fur-lined blue cloak, embroidered in red and gold. And she wore a jeweled ring on every finger. Perhaps she was not a noble, even so, yet flattery cost nothing. "And your babe's?"

"I am the Lady Meri do Ahlan a'Conlin, a direct descendant of Katrine do Catalan a'Coralle, the first Queen of Murandy." The plump woman's smile remained, but her voice was frosty with pride. It carried those lilting Murandian accents that made you think they must be peaceable people until you learned better. With one hand, she pulled forward a stout woman in dark wool who had a heavy shawl wrapped around her head and a gurgling infant in her arms, swaddled so that only its face showed. “This is my son, Sedrin. He was born just a week ago. I refused to stay behind when my husband rode to war, of course. I’ll have the coins mounted in a frame, so Sedrin will always know he was honored by the White Tower.”

Moiraine forbore to mention that Sedrin would share that honor with hundreds of others, perhaps thousands, if the other camps were anything like this. Light, she had never expected so many women to have given birth! Keeping her face smooth, she studied the infant for an instant. She was not an innocent—she had observed horse-breeding and helped at foaling; if you did not know how a thing was done, how could you know whether your servants did it properly?—but she had no experience with babies. The child could have been ten days old, or a month or two for all of her. Steler and his soldiers were keeping watch a short distance from the table against any further outbreaks, but they were no help here. At least, she could not bring herself to ask. If Lady a’Conlin was lying, a full sister would have to sort it out. Moiraine glanced sideways. The woman in front of Siuan was holding a larger child, but Siuan was writing.

Dipping her pen, she saw a woman walk past with an infant feeding at her breast. Half hidden in the woman’s cloak, the child looked no larger than Sedrin, yet she was ignoring the line quite pointedly. “Why is that woman not in line? Is her babe too old?”

Lady a’Conlin’s smile faded, and her eyebrows rose. The temperature of her voice dropped. “I’m not accustomed to keeping track of every brat born in the camp.” She pointed imperiously at the paper on the table. The ring on that finger mounted a large but visibly flawed firedrop. “Put down my name. I want to return to the warmth of my tent.”

“I will write your name, and the other information we require, just as soon as you tell me about that woman,” Moiraine said, trying for that voice of command that Siuan used.

The attempt did not work very well. Meri a’Conlin’s brows knitted in a frown, and her lips bunched belligerently. She appeared on the point of bursting. Or striking out. Before she could do either, the round-faced serving woman spoke up hurriedly, ducking in the semblance of a curtsy every few words.

"Careme's girl is the same age as Lord Sedrin to the day, begging your pardon for speaking, my Lady, begging your pardon, Aes Sedai. But the fellow Careme wanted to marry, he run off thinking to become a Warder, and she don't like who she did marry half so well." She gave an emphatic shake of her head. "Oh, she wants nothing from the White Tower, Careme don't."

"Even so, she will receive the bounty," Moiraine said firmly. Tamra had said to get every name, after all. She wondered whether Careme's love had achieved his goal. Few men possessed the necessary skills. A Warder did not simply use weapons, he *was* a weapon, and that was only the first requirement. "What is her full name? And the child's."

"She's Careme Mowly, Aes Sedai, and her girl's Ellya." Wonder of wonders, Lady a'Conlin appeared content to let her serving woman answer. Not only that, her scowl had vanished, and she was studying Moiraine warily. Perhaps a firm tone was all that was needed. That and being thought Aes Sedai.

"From what town or village?" Moiraine asked, writing.

"And where exactly was your girl born?" she heard Siuan saying. Siuan had doffed her gloves, a nameday present from Moiraine, to protect them from ink stains. The impatient silk-clad woman in front of her might have been a beauty if not for an unfortunate nose. She was also quite tall, nearly a hand taller than Siuan. "In a haybarn a mile west of here? No, not the place you'd expect to give birth to your heir. Perhaps you shouldn't have been out riding so close to your term, not to mention the fighting that was going on. Now, do you know any woman who's had a child in the last sixteen days and isn't here? What is her name? No backtalk, my Lady. Just answer the question." The lady did, with no further complaint. But then, Siuan's manner allowed for no complaints or difficulties. She neither raised her voice nor spoke harshly; she was just obviously in charge. How did she do it?

Whatever thoughts Moiraine had of adventure in hunting for the Dragon Reborn faded in short order, along with the thrill of being outside the city walls. Asking the same questions over and over and writing down the answers, carefully setting aside the filled pages to dry and starting anew on a fresh sheet, soon became boring drudgery. The only breaks in the routine were pauses to warm her hands over the brazier at her end of the table. An indescribable pleasure under the circumstances, with her fingers aching from the cold, yet hardly anything to thrill over. The only surprise was the number of women who were not Murandian. Soldiers gone to war, it seemed, frequently acquired foreign-born wives. The anvils started up again after a time, and some fellows working on a wagon began hammering away as well, trying to force a new wheel into place. The clanging threatened to give her a headache. It was all quite miserable.

She made a special effort not to take out her discontent on the women she spoke to, though a handful did try to give her cause. Some of the noblewomen had to be dissuaded from reciting their complete lineage back to Artur Hawkwing's day and beyond, and a few of the plainly clad women wanted to argue against giving the father's name or telling where they came from, glowering suspiciously as though this might be some sort of trick to bilk them of the coins, but it took no more than a level look to quell most. Not even Murandians wanted to go too far with women they thought Aes Sedai, a notion that was spreading fast. It made the lines move a little more smoothly, if not in any way that could be called swift.

Her eyes kept drifting to the women she saw walking by who were great with child. Some paused to look at the table as though thinking of their turn to stand in line. One of them might be the mother of the Dragon Reborn, at least if she chose to journey to Dragonmount to give birth for some reason. The only two infants born that day, after Gitara's Foretelling, were girls and, like every other newborn, birthed within a mile of the camp. Some other Accepted was going to find the boychild without knowing what she had found. She herself likely would not hear of it for years. Light, but it hardly seemed fair. She *knew*, and it meant nothing.

Coming onto midday, Moiraine looked up to find a slim young woman in dark wool standing before her with a blanket-wrapped child in the crook of her arm.

"Susa Wynn, Aes Sedai," the woman said meekly. "That's me. This is my Cyril," she added, stroking the boy's head.

Moiraine might have had no experience of babies, but she could tell a child of six or seven months from a newborn. As she opened her mouth to tell the woman not to try her for a fool, Siuan laid a hand briefly on her arm. That was all—Siuan never stopped questioning the woman whose name she was writing—but it made Moiraine take another look. Susa Wynn was not slim, she was near to gaunt, with deep shadows beneath her eyes and a lost, desperate look about her. Her dress and cloak were worn and much-darned. Neatly darned, but in places there seemed to be more darning than original dress.

“The father’s name?” Moiraine asked, playing for time to decide. This child was too old by far, and that was that. Except….

“Jac, Aes Sedai. Jac Wynn. He….” Tears welled in the woman’s sunken eyes. “Jac died before the fighting even started. Slipped in the snow and cracked his head on a stone. Hardly seems right, to come all this way and die for slipping in the snow.” The baby began to cough, a chesty sound, and Susa bent over him anxiously.

Moiraine was not certain whether it was the child’s cough, or the tears, or a dead husband, but she entered the woman’s particulars carefully. The Tower could afford a hundred gold crowns for a woman and child who might die without some sort of help. The child seemed plump enough, true, but Susa clearly was starving. And Meri a’Conlin intended to *frame* her coins. It was all she could do not to demand to know who Jac Wynn had served. Whoever it was should never have allowed matters to come to this state! Noble blood carried as many responsibilities as rights! More, as she had been taught. On top of that, where were the woman’s friends? Murandians!

“The Light bless you, Aes Sedai.” Susa tried to gulp back more tears and failed. She did not sob; the tears simply spilled down her cheeks. “The Light shine on you forever.”

“Yes, yes,” Moiraine said gently. “Do you have a Reader in this camp?” No, Murandians had another name for women who knew herbs and cures. What was it? Verin Sedai had lectured on the subject the first year she and Siuan were Accepted. “A Wisdom? A Wise Woman?” At Susa’s nod, she took her purse from her belt pouch and pressed a silver penny into the woman’s free hand. “Take your child to her.”

That brought still more weeping and more thanks, and an attempt to kiss her hand that she barely avoided. Light, Susa was not her liege woman. It was hardly decent.

“With the bounty to come,” Siuan whispered once Susa had finally gone, “the Wise Woman would have given credit.” She did not move her eyes from what she was writing in a precise hand, but what Moiraine could see of her face expressed disapproval. Siuan was very careful with the little money she had.

Moiraine sighed—done was done—and then again when she realized that a flurry of whispers was rushing along the two lines of women. Word that one of the "Aes Sedai" had accepted Susa Wynn's child spread like wildfire in dry grass, and in no time she saw women hurrying to join the end of the line, at least one *leading* her child by the hand.

"My Danil, he's been real peaky lately, Aes Sedai," the roundfaced woman in front of her said with a hopeful smile. And a glint of avarice in her pale eyes. The infant cradled in her arms made happy, burbling noises. "I surely wish I could afford to see the Wise Woman." The woman's gray woolen dress looked almost new.

Moiraine's temper flared, and for once, she made no effort to force it down. "I could Heal him," she replied coolly. "Of course, he is very young. He might not survive. Very likely not." At that age, he certainly would not survive the rigors of Healing, and besides, that was one of the few weaves that Accepted were forbidden to make without a sister watching. A mistake with Healing could harm more than the weaver. The woman did not know any of that, however, and when Moiraine stretched out a gloved hand, she jerked back, clutching the infant protectively, her eyes nearly coming out of her head with fright.

"No, Aes Sedai. Thank you, but no. I…I'll scrape together the coin, I will."

Temper faded—it never lasted long—and for a moment, Moiraine felt ashamed of herself. Only for a moment. The Tower could afford to be generous, yet no one could be allowed to take Aes Sedai for fools. A good part of the Tower's power came from the belief that sisters were the very opposite of fools in every way. Whispers again flashed down the lines, and the woman leading her child by the hand scurried away more quickly than she had come. At least that would not have to be dealt with. There would have been no way to avoid harsh words with someone who thought the Tower could be gulled so easily.

"Well done," Siuan murmured, her pen scratching away. "Very well done."

"Danil," Moiraine said, writing. "And your name?" Her smile was for the compliment, but Danil's mother seemed to take it as a sign of forgiveness, offering her answers in a relieved voice. Moiraine was glad to hear it. Many people feared the White Tower, occasionally with reason—the Tower could be stern when it must—but fear was a poor tool, and one that always cut the user eventually. She had learned that long before coming to the Tower.

Once the sun passed its zenith, Siuan and she went to fetch the food from their saddlebags. There was certainly no point in asking one of Steler's men to do it. They were already squatting on their heels, making a meal from dried meat and flatbread, not far from where their mounts were tethered on one of the horselines. None looked ready to stir a foot short of being attacked. But Steler bowed his head to her and Siuan as they turned from their mounts, only the slightest bob, yet approving she thought. Men were decidedly…odd.

With less than half the women's names recorded, she expected grumbling at least, but those remaining scattered to find their own food without a single complaint. A dark woman with a Tairen accent brought a battered tin teapot filled to the brim with hot, dark tea to the table, and a pair of green mugs with cracked glazing, and a lean, gray-haired woman brought two steaming wooden tankards that gave off the scent of hot spiced wine. Her leathery face looked as though a smile had never touched it.

"Susa Wynn's too proud to take more than a little food from anybody, except for her babe," she said, in a deep voice for a woman, as she set the tankards down. "What you did was kindly done, and well." With a nod, she turned and strode away across the snow, her back as straight as a Guardsman on parade. That was certainly a peculiar manner with an Aes Sedai.

"She knows who we really are," Siuan said softly, picking up the tankard in both hands to let the warmth soak in. Moiraine did the same, gloves or no. Poor Siuan's fingers must have been freezing.

"She will not tell," Moiraine said after a moment, and Siuan nodded. Not that the truth would cause any real problems, not with Steler and his men present, but it was better to avoid the embarrassment. To think that one of the commoners would know an Aes Sedai's face when none of the noblewomen had. An Aes Sedai's face or an Accepted's dress. Or both. "She went to the Tower when she was young, I think." A woman who could not be taught to channel was sent away, yet she would have seen Aes Sedai and Accepted.

Siuan gave her a sideways look, as though she had said water was wet. Sometimes it could be irritating when Siuan puzzled things out ahead of her.

They spoke little while they ate their bread and fruit and cheese. Novices were expected to keep silent during meals, and Accepted to maintain a measure of dignity, so they had grown accustomed to eating quietly. The wine they barely touched—Accepted had wine with meals, but watered, and it would never do for one of them to grow tipsy—yet Moiraine was surprised to find that she had devoured every scrap of the meal she had been certain was too much. Perhaps being out in the cold had increased her appetite.

She was folding up the cloths the food had been bundled in—and wishing there had been a few more of the dried apricots—when Siuan suddenly muttered, “Oh, no.”

Moiraine looked up, and her heart sank.

Two sisters were riding into the camp, slowly picking their way between the tents and wagons. In the current state of affairs, women dressed in silk yet moving about the countryside without an entourage had to be sisters, and these were followed by just one man, a dark fellow in a cloak that shifted colors and blended with what lay behind him so that parts of him and parts of his black gelding seemed not to be there at all. His eyes never rested long in one place; he made the Tower guards seem half-asleep lapdogs compared to a hunting leopard. A Warder’s cloak was a disconcerting sight, and murmurs rose in the camp, people gaping and pointing. The blacksmiths lowered their hammers in silence once more.

It was not the appearance of just any sisters that made Moiraine’s stomach feel hollow. She recognized the faces framed by the hoods of their cloaks. Meilyn Arganya, with her silver-gray hair and thrusting chin, was one of the most respected women in the Tower. It was said that no one had a bad word for Meilyn. By herself, she would not have given Moiraine a moment’s pause. The other, however, was Elaida a’Roihan. Light, what was *she* doing here? Elaida had become advisor to the Queen of Andor nearly three years ago. She did return to the Tower for occasional visits, to confer with the Amyrlin on events in Andor, but Siuan and Moiraine always learned of her arrival very quickly, to their regret.

They offered curtsies as soon as the sisters came near, and Siuan burst out with, “We have permission to be here.” Even Meilyn might become upset if she began to berate them only to learn she had no cause. Elaida would be furious; she absolutely hated looking foolish. “The Amyrlin Seat ordered us—”

“We know about that,” Meilyn cut in mildly. “The way word is spreading, I suspect the cats in Seleisin know by now.” From her tone, you could not say whether she agreed with Tamra’s decision. Meilyn’s smooth face never showed any hint of emotion. Her startling blue eyes held serenity as a cup held water. With a dark-gloved hand she carefully adjusted one of her divided skirts, so slashed with white that it seemed white trimmed with blue. She was one of the relatively few Whites to have a Warder; wrapped up in questions of rationality and philosophy, the greater number saw no need. Moiraine wished she would dismount. Meilyn’s dappled gelding was tall, and she herself was as tall as most men. Most Cairhienin men, at least. Looking up at her in the saddle threatened to give Moiraine an ache in her neck.

“You are surprised to see me?” Elaida said, looking down from her fine-ankled bay mare. Her brocaded dress was not a muted red or a faint red, but a bright hue, as though she were screaming her Ajah to the world. Her cloak, lined with black fur, was exactly the same shade. A color fit for a Tinker’s wagon, Moiraine thought. Elaida was smiling, yet that failed to lessen the severity of her face. She might have been beautiful except for that. Everything about her was severe. “I reached Tar Valon just before the Aiel, and I’ve been busy since, but never fear, I will call on both of you.”

Moiraine had been sure her heart could sink no further, but she had been mistaken. It was very hard not to groan in despair.

Meilyn sighed. “You pay these girls too much mind, Elaida. They’ll get above themselves if they start thinking they’re your pets. They may already.”

Moiraine exchanged shocked glances with Siuan. Pets? Goats staked out for lions, perhaps, but never *pets.*

Since gaining the shawl, Elaida had never deferred to anyone other than the Amyrlin Seat or a Sitter that Moiraine had seen, yet she bowed her head and murmured, “As you say, Meilyn. But it seems possible they might test before the end of the year. I expect them to, and I expect them to pass easily. I’ll accept nothing less from either.” Even that lacked her usual intensity. Normally, Elaida seemed as stiff-necked as a bull. Normally, she browbeat everyone who crossed her path.

The White sister gave a slight shrug, as though the matter was not important enough to say more. “Do you children have everything you need? Good. Some of you children came very poorly prepared, I must say. How many names do you have left to take here?”

“About fifty, Meilyn Sedai,” Siuan told her. “Maybe a few more.”

Meilyn glanced up at the sun, its fall toward the western horizon well begun. The dark clouds that threatened snow were moving south, leaving behind clear sky. “In that case, write quickly. You must be back in the Tower before dark, you know.”

“Are all the camps like this?” Moiraine asked. “I would think that men fighting a war would have their minds on that, not on….” She trailed off, her face heating.

“…spawning like silverpike,” Siuan whispered under her breath. Moiraine only just heard, but the words deepened her blush. Why *ever* had she asked such a question in the first place?

“Cairhienin,” Meilyn breathed. She sounded very nearly…*amused*! But she went on in a serious tone. “When a man believes he may die, he wants to leave something of himself behind. When a woman believes her man may die, she wants that part of him desperately. The result is a great many babies born during wars. It’s illogical, given the hardship that comes if the man does die, or the woman, but the human heart is seldom logical.”

Which explained a great deal, and left Moiraine feeling that her face might burn off. There were things one did in public and talked about, and things that were done in private and definitely *not* talked about. She struggled to regain control of herself, performing mental exercises for seeking calm. She was the river, contained by the bank; she was the bank, containing the river. She was a flower bud, opening to the sun. It did not help that Elaida was studying her and Siuan like a sculptor hefting hammer and chisel, deciding which piece of stone to remove next in order to bring out the form she wanted.

“Yes, yes, Andro,” Meilyn said suddenly. “We will go in a moment.” She had not even looked back at her Warder, yet he nodded as though she had responded to something he had said. Lean and no taller than his Aes Sedai, he appeared youthful. Until you noticed his eyes.

Moiraine found herself gaping, embarrassment forgotten, and not because of Andro’s unblinking gaze. A sister and her bonded Warder could sense each other’s emotions and physical condition, and each knew exactly where the other was, if they were close enough, and at least a direction if they were far apart, but this seemed on the order of reading minds. Some said that full sisters could do that. There were a number of things that you were not taught until you had attained the shawl, after all. Such as the weave for bonding a Warder.

Meilyn looked straight into her eyes. “No,” she said softly, “I can’t read his thoughts.” Moiraine’s scalp prickled as though her hair were trying to stand on end. It must be true, since Meilyn had said it, yet…. “When you’ve had a Warder long enough, you will know what he is thinking, and he will know what you are. A matter of interpretation.” Elaida sniffed, though quietly. Alone among the Ajahs, the Red refused to bond Warders. Most Reds seemed to dislike men altogether.

“Logically,” Meilyn said, her serene gaze going to the other sister, “Reds have greater need of Warders than any except Greens, perhaps greater even than Greens. But no matter. The Ajahs choose as they will.” She lifted her fringed reins. “Are you coming, Elaida? We must reach as many of the children as possible. Some are certain to lose their heads and remain too long without a reminder. Remember, children; before dark.”

Moiraine expected some sort of eruption from Elaida, or at least a flash of anger in her eyes. That comment about Warders came very close to violating the codes of courtesy and privacy that governed sisters’ lives, all the rules of what an Aes Sedai could say to or ask of another and what not. They were not laws, but rather customs stronger than law, and every Accepted had to memorize them. Surprisingly, Elaida merely turned her bay to follow.

Watching the two sisters leave the camp trailed by Andro, Siuan heaved a relieved sigh. “I was afraid she’d stay to supervise us.”

“Yes,” Moiraine said. There was no need to say which woman Siuan meant. It would have been right in Elaida’s character. *Nothing* they did could escape her demands for absolute perfection. “But why did she not?”

Siuan had no answer for that, and in any event, there was no time to discuss it. With Moiraine’s and her meal clearly finished, the women had taken their places in line again. And after Meilyn and Elaida’s visit, they no longer seemed so certain that the two were Aes Sedai. A level look and a firm voice failed to squelch argument, now. Siuan took to shouting when necessary, which it frequently was, and running her hands through her hair in frustration. Three times Moiraine had to threaten to cease taking down any names at all before a woman carrying a child that was obviously too old would leave the line. She might have been tempted had one of them resembled Susa, but they were well fed and plainly no poorer than anyone else, just greedy.

To cap it off, with above a dozen women still in front of the table, Steler appeared, helmet on his head and leading his mount. The other soldiers were not far behind, two of them holding the reins of Arrow and Siuan’s animal. “Time to go,” Steler said in that gravelly voice. “I left it as long as I could, but leave it any longer, and we’ll be hard-pressed to make the Tower by sunset.”

“Here now,” one of the women protested. “They’ve got to take our names!” Angry mutters rose from the rest.

“Look at the sun, man,” Siuan said, sounding harassed. She looked it, as well, with hair sticking up from the constant raking of her fingers. “We have plenty of time.”

Moiraine did look at the sun, sitting low in the west, and she was not so sure. It was six miles back to the Tower, the last of it through streets that would be just as crowded come nightfall as they had been that morning. Excuses would not be admitted.

Frowning, Steler opened his mouth, but abruptly the leathery-faced woman who had given them wine was right in front of him with six or seven others, all gray-haired or graying, crowding him and forcing him back. “You leave those girls be,” the lean woman shouted at him. “You hear me?”

More women came running from every direction, until Steler was surrounded ten deep, and his Guardsmen as well. Half the women seemed to be screaming and shaking fists, while the rest scowled in sullen silence and gripped the hilts of their belt knives. The anvils went still once more, the blacksmiths watching the crowd of women closely and hefting their hammers. Young men, boys really, began to gather, all hot-eyed and angry. Some had their belt knives drawn. Light, they *were* going to have a riot.

“Write!” Siuan commanded. “They won’t hold him long. Your name?” she demanded of the woman in front of her.

Moiraine wrote. The women waiting to give their names seemed to agree with Siuan. There were no more arguments. By this time, they knew the questions and spilled out the answers as soon as they came in front of her, some so quickly that she had to ask them to start over. When Steler and his men finally managed to push through the women encircling them without doing anything that would have brought the men and boys still in the camp running, Moiraine was blowing on the last name to dry the ink, and Siuan was hastily straightening her hair with her carved blackwood comb.

The bannerman's face was grim behind the steel bars of his faceguard, but all he said was "We'll need a bit of luck, now."

He led them out of the camp at a trot, with the horses' hooves flinging clods of snow and Siuan bouncing in her saddle so badly that he assigned men to ride on either side of her and keep her from falling. Clinging desperately to the tall pommel of her saddle, she grimaced at them, but she did not order them away. Moiraine realized that Siuan had never asked for the ointment; she was going to have more need of it than ever. After half a mile, Steler slowed to a walk, but only for another half mile, and then he picked up the trot again. Only the two soldiers kept Siuan in the saddle. Moiraine started to protest, but a glance at Siuan's determined face—and another at the sun—held her quiet. Siuan would take days to forgive her calling attention to how badly she rode. She might never forgive her if she caused them to be called to Merean's study for being late.

That was the pace Steler kept all the way back to the city, trot then walk, trot then walk, and Moiraine suspected he would have maintained it there if not for the crowded streets. A walk was the best they could manage in that throng. The sun was just a low dome of red-gold atop the walls of the Tower grounds when they rode into the yard of the West Stable. Grooms came out to take Arrow and Siuan's mount, along with a sour-faced young under-lieutenant who scowled up at Steler even as he returned the bannerman's salute, an arm laid across the chest.

"You're the last," he growled, sounding as if he wanted an excuse to lash out at anyone who was handy. "Did they cause problems?"

Helping a groaning Siuan dismount, Moiraine held her breath.

"No more than lambs," Steler replied, and she exhaled. Stepping down from his horse, the bannerman turned to his men. "I want the horses rubbed down and the tack oiled before anybody even thinks of supper. You know why I'm looking at you, Malvin."

Moiraine inquired of the young officer what they should do with the lapdesks. He glared at her before saying, "Leave them where they are.

They'll be collected." And he stalked off so quickly that his cloak flared behind him.

"Why is he so angry?" she wondered aloud.

Steler glanced at the Guardsmen leading their animals into the stable, then answered in a voice too low for them to hear. "He wanted to go fight the Aiel."

"I don't care whether the fool man wanted to be a hero," Siuan said sharply. She was leaning on Moiraine, who suspected that only her arm around the other woman's waist was keeping her upright. "I want a hot wash and my bed, never mind supper."

"That sounds lovely," Moiraine breathed. Except the part about supper, anyway. She thought she could eat a whole sheep!

Siuan managed to walk on her own, but she hobbled, tight-jawed and clearly suppressing groans. She refused to let Moiraine carry her scrip, though. Siuan never gave in to pain. She never gave in to anything. When they reached their gallery in the Accepted's quarters, thoughts of hot water vanished. Katerine was waiting.

"About time," she said, huddling in her banded cloak. "I thought I'd freeze to death before you got back." A sharp-faced woman with a mass of wavy black hair that hung to her waist, she could have an acid tongue. With novices and other Accepted, she could. With Aes Sedai, she was milder than milk-water, all obsequious smiles. "Merean wants you in her study, Moiraine."

"Why does she want us?" Siuan demanded. "It isn't full sunset even now."

"Oh, Merean always tells me her reasons, Siuan. And it's just Moiraine this time, not you. Well, you've been told, and I want my supper and my bed. We have to do this whole miserable thing over again tomorrow, starting at sunrise. Who'd have thought I'd rather stay in and study than go for a ride in the countryside?"

Siuan frowned at Katerine's back as the other woman flounced away. "One day she'll cut herself with that tongue. Do you want me to come with you, Moiraine?"

Moiraine wanted nothing more. She had not done anything, not lately, yet a summons to Merean's study was never good. Many of the novices and Accepted visited that room to cry on Merean's shoulder when homesickness or the strain of learning grew too great. A summons was another matter entirely. But she shook her head and handed her cloak and scrip to Siuan. “The jar of ointment is in there. It is very good for soreness.” Her friend’s face lit up.

“I could still come with you. I don’t need salving that badly.”

“You can barely walk. Go on. Whatever Merean wants, I am sure she will not keep me long.” Light, she hoped Merean had not uncovered some prank she thought safely hidden. But if so, at least Siuan would escape punishment. In her present state, she could not have borne that.

The study of the Mistress of Novices lay on the other side of the Tower, near the novices’ quarters and one level below the Amyrlin’s study, on a wide hallway where the floor tiles were red and green and the runner blue. Moiraine took a deep breath in front of the plain door between two bright wall hangings and patted her hair, wishing she had taken time to use her brush, then knocked twice, firmly. Merean told everyone not to tap like mice in the wainscoting.

“Come,” a voice inside called.

Taking another deep breath, Moiraine went in.

Unlike the Amyrlin’s study, Merean’s was rather small and quite plain, the walls paneled in dark wood, the furniture sturdy and completely unadorned for the most part. Moiraine suspected that women who had been Accepted a hundred years ago would recognize everything in the room. Maybe two hundred years ago. The narrow tea-table beside the door, lightly carved on the legs in a strange pattern, might well have been older than that, and one wall held a mirror, its frame spotted with faded fragments of gilding. Against the opposite wall stood a narrow cabinet that she avoided looking at. The strap and the switch were kept in there, along with a slipper that was worse in a way.

To her surprise, Merean was on her feet rather than seated behind her writing table. She was tall—Moiraine’s head only reached Merean’s plump chin—with hair that was more gray than not, gathered at the nape of her neck, and a motherly look to her that almost overwhelmed the agelessness of her features. That was one reason most of the young women in training felt comfortable weeping on Merean’s shoulder despite her having made them weep herself often enough. She was also kind and gentle and understanding. So long as you did not break the rules. Merean had a positive Talent for finding out what you most wanted to keep hidden.

“Sit down, child,” she said gravely.

Moiraine warily seated herself on the stool in front of the writing table. It had to be bad news of some sort. But what?

"There is no way to make this easy, child. King Laman was killed yesterday, along with both of his brothers. Remember that we are all threads in the Pattern, and the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills."

"The Light illumine their souls," Moiraine said solemnly, "and may they shelter in the Creator's hand until they are born again."

Merean's eyebrows twitched upward, doubtless in surprise that she had not burst into tears on hearing that she had lost three uncles in one day. But then, Merean did not know Laman Damodred, a distant man who burned with ambition, the only warmth in him. Moiraine's opinion was that he had remained unmarried for the simple reason that even the inducement of becoming Queen of Cairhien was not enough to convince any woman to marry him. Moressin and Aldecain had been worse, each filled with sufficient heat for ten men, which they had expressed in anger and cruelty. And in contempt for her father because he was a scholar, because he had taken another scholar for his second wife rather than marrying to bring lands or connections to House Damodred. She would pray for their souls, yet she felt more sadness for Jac Wynn than for all three of her uncles combined.

"Shock," Merean murmured. "You're in shock, but it will pass. When it does, come to me, child. Until then, there's no need for you to go out tomorrow. I'll inform the Amyrlin." The Mistress of Novices had the final say when it came to novices and Accepted. Merean must have been put out to learn that Tamra had sent them out of the city without consulting her.

"Thank you for the kindness," Moiraine said quickly, "but please, no. Having something to do will help, and being with friends. If I remain behind tomorrow, I will be alone."

Merean seemed doubtful, but after more soothing words—words to soothe the hurt she seemed sure Moiraine must be hiding—she let Moiraine return to her room, where she found both of her oil lamps lit and a fire crackling on her hearth. Siuan's work, no doubt. She thought of dropping into Siuan's room, but the other woman was certainly fast asleep by now.

Supper would be available in the dining halls for at least another hour, but she put away any thought of food and instead spent that time kneeling in prayer for her uncles' souls. A penance. She did not mean to be one of those sisters who took on penances at every turn—maintaining a balance in their lives, they called it; she thought it ostentatious foolishness—yet she should feel something for the deaths of her own blood kin, however horrible they had been. It was wrong not to. Only when she knew that the dining halls would be full of serving women mopping the floors did she rise and undress to wash herself. After using a trickle of Fire to heat the water. Cold water would have been another penance, but there were limits.

Extinguishing her lamps, she wove a ward to keep her dreams from affecting anyone else's—that could happen with those who could channel; others nearby could find themselves sharing your dreams—and crawled beneath her blankets. She truly was tired, and sleep came quickly. Unfortunately, nightmares came, too. Not of her uncles, or even of Jac Wynn, but of an infant lying in the snow on Dragonmount. Lightning flashed in the pitch-black sky, and his wails were the thunder. Dreams of a faceless young man. There was lightning in those dreams, too, but he called this lightning from the sky, and cities burned. Nations burned. The Dragon was Reborn. She woke weeping.

The fire had burned down to a few glowing coals. Rather than adding more wood, she used the fire-shovel to scoop ashes over the coals, and rather than climbing back into bed, she wrapped a blanket around herself and went out into the night. She was not sure she could go back to sleep, but one thing she was certain of. She did not want to sleep alone.

She was certain that Siuan must be asleep, but when she slipped into her friend's room, quickly closing the door behind her, Siuan said softly, "Moiraine?" A few flames still flickered on Siuan's small hearth, giving enough light to see her pull one side of her blankets back.

Moiraine wasted no time climbing in. "Did you have nightmares, too?"

"Yes," Siuan breathed. "What can they do, Moiraine? Even if they find him, what can they do?"

"They can bring him to the Tower," Moiraine replied, putting more confidence into her voice than she felt. "He can be protected here." She hoped he could. More than the Reds might want him dead or gentled, whatever the Prophecies said. "And educated." The Dragon Reborn would have to be educated. He would need to know as much of politics as any queen, as much of war as any general. As much of history as any scholar. Verin Sedai said that most mistakes made by rulers came from not knowing history; they acted in ignorance of the mistakes others had made before them. “He can be guided.” That would be the most important of all, to make sure that he made the right decisions.

“The Tower can’t teach him to channel, Moiraine.”

That was true. What men did was…different. As different as men and women, Verin said. A bird could not teach a fish to fly. He would have to survive learning on his own. The Prophecies did not say that he would, or that he would avoid going mad before the Last Battle, only that he had to be at Tarmon Gai’don for any hope of victory, yet she had to believe. She had to!

“Do you think Tamra is having bad dreams tonight, Siuan?”

Siuan snorted. “Aes Sedai don’t have bad dreams.”

They were not yet Aes Sedai, however. Neither of them could close her eyes through the rest of the night. Moiraine did not know what Siuan saw, lying there staring up at the ceiling—she could not make herself ask—but she saw a babe crying in the snow on Dragonmount, and a faceless man calling down lightning. Being awake was no protection against these nightmares.

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Chapter 6

Surprises

A scratching at Siuan’s door near morning proved to be a timid novice named Setsuko, a stocky girl shorter than Moiraine, who told them that the Amyrlin had ordered all Accepted to be at the West Stable before Third Rise, ready to carry on with their task. By the light of the lamp she carried, Setsuko’s pale eyes were bleak with envy. The Arafellin girl already knew that her stay in the Tower would end in a few months.

Setsuko had talked openly of running away until a visit to Merean’s study taught her discretion if not wisdom. Bitter as the knowledge must be, she could never reach the shawl, but she must be kept until the sisters were certain she could channel without harming herself or others. Despite that, she still might have flight in mind. Novices did run from time to time, and even the rare Accepted who flinched at what lay ahead of her, but they were always caught eventually, and their return to the Tower was painfully unpleasant to say the least. It was much better for everyone if that could be avoided.

Another time, weary as she was, Moiraine might have offered comforting words. Or a caution. This morning, however, the gong for First Rise had already sounded, and it was no more than half an hour to Second. They could snatch a bite to eat and reach the stable before Third, but only just. Yawning, Moiraine gave Siuan a last hug and hurried out into the darkness, wrapped in her blanket, before Setsuko reached the next door and began scratching, trying to wake Sheriam. The child would have to do better. Sheriam slept like the dead.

Half a dozen novices carrying lamps were tapping at other doors, ghostly images in the night. At hers, a very tall girl with golden hair spilling down her back offered a sulky curtsy when Moiraine dismissed her. Lisandre would be allowed to test for Accepted, but only if her sulkiness could be cured. Likely it would be. When the Tower saw a fault in one of its students, that fault usually was cured, one way or another.

She washed and dressed hastily, barely taking time to scrub her teeth with salt and soda and brush her hair into some semblance of order, yet when she reached the gallery with her scrip hanging beneath the edge of her cloak, the darkness was definitely gray. Siuan was already outside, cloaked and ready, talking to a visibly chafing, flame-haired Sheriam, and other Accepted were already scurrying to breakfast.

"Sheriam says the Aiel really are retreating, Moiraine," Siuan said excitedly, hitching her scrip on her shoulder. "She says they're all leagues east of the river."

Sheriam nodded and started to follow the others, but Moiraine caught the edge of her cloak.

"Are you certain?" Moiraine nearly winced. Had she been less tired, she would have used greater care choosing her words; you learned nothing if you put someone's back up to start.

Luckily, the slim Accepted had none of the temper that her hair and her tilted green eyes might have indicated. She merely sighed and looked longingly toward the door leading from the gallery. "I had it first from a Guardsman who had it from a Shienaran soldier, a courier, but later, I was told the same by Serafelle, by Ryma, *and* by Jennet. One sister may be mistaken, but when three tell you something, you may be sure they have the right of it." She was an enjoyable companion to pass an evening with, yet she did have a way of making casual statements sound like lectures. "Why are you two grinning like fools?" she demanded suddenly.

"I didn't know I was grinning," Siuan replied, schooling her features. She still looked eager, rising up on her toes as though to run.

"Is not a chance to ride in the countryside worth grinning over?" Moiraine asked. Now, perhaps they could convince their escort to take them to the camps closest to Dragonmount. She was unsure exactly when she had adopted Siuan's view, yet it was her own, now. They would find him first. Somehow, they would. Grin? She could have laughed aloud and danced.

"Sometimes, you two are passing strange," Sheriam said. "I'm saddle-sore near to hobbling, myself. Well, you can stand here and talk if you wish. I want my breakfast." But as she turned to go, she stopped dead and exhaled in shock.

Merean had come onto the gallery in the fading darkness, her vine-woven shawl draped over her arms so the blue fringe almost brushed the floor. She attracted a good many stares from the Accepted. Sisters seldom wore their shawls inside the Tower except for official occasions. An appearance here by the Mistress of Novices, wearing hers, meant someone was in very deep trouble. Or else being summoned for testing. A few of the women lingered on the gallery hopefully, while a handful sped off as fast as they could short of running, no doubt propelled by guilty consciences. They should have known better. All they achieved was to have Merean note them with a glance, and she would dig until she discovered what they felt guilt about. In Cairhien, a gooseherd would have known as much. She paid them no heed now, however, as she glided calmly along the gallery, the Accepted she passed rising from their curtsies with regret painting their faces.

Sheriam was one of those who lingered, and it was in front of her, Siuan and Moiraine that Merean stopped. Moiraine's heart fluttered, and she struggled to breathe evenly as she curtsied. She struggled just to breathe in the first place. Maybe Siuan had been right. Well, she *was* right, in point of fact. When Merean said an Accepted might test soon, it always came within the month. But she was not ready! Siuan's face shone with eagerness, of course, her eyes bright. Sheriam's lips were parted in hopeful anticipation. Light, every last Accepted must think herself more ready than Moiraine Damodred did.

"You'll be late if you don't hurry, child," the Blue sister told Sheriam sharply. And surprisingly. Merean was *never* sharp, even when there was punishment in the offing. When she lectured on your misdeeds while applying switch or strap or the hated slipper, her voice was merely firm.

As the fire-haired woman darted away, the Mistress of Novices focused her attention on Siuan and Moiraine. Moiraine thought her heart would pound its way through her ribs. Not yet. Light, please, not yet.

"I've spoken with the Amyrlin, Moiraine, and she agrees with me that you must be in shock. The other Accepted will have to make do without you today." Merean's mouth tightened for an instant before serenity returned to her face. Her voice remained a needle, though. "I'd have kept you all in, but people will cooperate better with initiates of the Tower than with clerks, even White Tower clerks, and the sisters would be up in arms if they were asked to do the task. The Mother was right about that much."

Light! She must have argued with Tamra to be upset enough to say all of that to Accepted. No wonder she was being sharp. Relief welled up in Moiraine that she was not to be whisked off and tested for the shawl immediately, yet it could not compete with disappointment. They could reach the camps around Dragonmount today. Well, one of the camps, at least. They could!

“Please, Merean, I—”

The sister raised one finger. That was her warning not to argue, and however kind and gentle she was in the general course of things, she never gave a second. Moiraine closed her mouth promptly.

“You shouldn’t be left to brood,” Merean went on. Smooth face or no, the way she shifted her shawl to her shoulders spoke of irritation. “Some of the girls’ writing is like chicken scratches.” Yes, she was definitely upset. When she had any criticism, however slight, it was delivered to the target of it and no one else. “The Mother agreed that you can copy out the lists that are near unreadable. You have a clear hand. A bit over-flowery, but clear.”

Moiraine tried desperately to think of something to say that the sister would not take for argument, but nothing came. How was she to escape?

“That’s a very good idea, Moiraine,” Siuan said, and Moiraine gaped at her friend in amazement. Her friend! But Siuan went merrily ahead with betrayal. “She didn’t sleep a wink last night, Merean. No more than an hour at most, anyway. I don’t think she’s safe to go riding. She’ll fall off inside a mile.” *Siuan* said that!

“I’m glad you concur with my decision, Siuan,” Merean said dryly. Moiraine would have blushed to have that tone directed at her, yet Siuan was made of sterner material, meeting the sister’s raised eyebrow with an open-eyed smile of innocence. “She shouldn’t be left alone, either, so you can help her. You have a good clear hand yourself.” The smile froze on Siuan’s face, but the sister affected not to notice. “Come along, then. Come along. I’ve more to do today than usher the pair of you around.”

Gliding ahead of them like a plump swan on a stream, a fast-swimming swan, she led the way to a small windowless room a little down from the Amyrlin’s apartments and across the corridor. A richly carved writing table, with two straight-backed armchairs behind it, held a tray of pens, large glass ink jars, sand jars for blotting, stacks of good white paper, and a great disorderly stack of pages covered in writing. Hanging her cloak on a peg and setting her scrip on the floor by the table, Moiraine stared at that ragged pile as glumly as Siuan did. At least there was a fireplace, and a fire going on the narrow hearth. The room was warm compared to the corridors. Much warmer than a ride in the snow. There was that.

"Once you've finished breakfast," Merean said, "come back here and set to work. Leave the copies in the anteroom of the Amyrlin's study."

"Light, Siuan," Moiraine said with feeling as soon as the sister was gone, "what made you think this was a good idea?"

"You—" Siuan grimaced ruefully. "We will get a look at more names this way. Maybe all the names, if Tamra keeps us in the job. We could be the first to know who he is. I doubt there could be two boys born on Dragonmount. I just thought it would be 'you,' not 'us.'" She breathed a gloomy sigh, then suddenly frowned at Moiraine. "Why would you be brooding? Why are you supposed to be in shock?"

Last night, revealing her woes had seemed out of place, a trifle compared to what they knew the world faced, but Moiraine had no hesitation in telling her now. Before she finished, Siuan enveloped her in a strong, comforting hug. They had wept on each other's shoulders much more often than either had availed herself of Merean's. She had never been as close to anyone as she was to Siuan. Or loved anyone as much.

"You know I have six uncles who are fine men," Siuan said softly, "and one who died proving how fine a man he was. What you don't know is, I have two others my father wouldn't let cross his doorstep, one his own brother. My father wouldn't even say their names. They're street robbers, shoulderthumpers and drunkards, and when they've guzzled enough ale, or brandy if they've stolen enough to afford it, they start fights with anyone who looks at them the wrong way. Usually, it's both of them together setting on the same poor fellow with fists and boots and anything that comes to hand. One day, they'll hang for killing somebody, if they haven't already. When they do, I won't shed a tear. Some people just aren't worth a tear."

Moiraine hugged her back. "You always know the right thing to say. But I will still pray for my uncles."

"I'll pray for those two scoundrels when they die, too. I just won't fret myself over them, alive or dead. Come. Let's go to breakfast. It's going to be a long day, and we won't even have a nice ride for exercise." She had to be joking, yet there was not so much as a twinkle of mirth in her blue eyes. Then again, she truly did hate doing clerical work. *No* one enjoyed that.

The dining hall most often used by Accepted lay on the lowest level of the Tower, a large room with stark white walls and a white-tiled floor, full of long, polished tables, and plain benches that could hold two women, or three at a pinch. The other Accepted ate quickly, sometimes gulping their food with unseemly haste. Sheriam spilled porridge on her dress and hurried from the room proclaiming that she had time to change. She very nearly ran. Everyone was hurrying. Even Katerine all but trotted off, still eating a crusty roll and brushing crumbs from her dress. It seemed a chance to leave the city was not so miserable, at that. Siuan dawdled over her porridge, laced with stewed apples, and Moiraine kept her company with another cup of strong black tea containing just a drop of honey. After all, the chance that the boychild's name was among those awaiting them had to be vanishingly small.

Soon they were alone at the tables, and one of the cooks came out to frown at them, fists planted on her hips. A plump woman in a long, spotless white apron, Laras was short of her middle years and more than pretty, yet she could frown a hole through a stone. No Accepted was ever fool enough to come over high-handed with Laras, at least not more than once. Even Siuan gave way beneath that unwavering gaze, hastily spooning the last bits of apple from her bowl. Laras began calling for the scullions to bring their mops before Siuan and Moiraine reached the door.

Moiraine expected the work to be drudgery, and it was, though not so bad as she had feared. Not quite so bad. They began by digging their own lists out of the mound, and added those already in a readable hand, which reduced the stack by half. But only by half. If you came to the Tower unable to write, you were taught a decent hand as a novice, but those who came writing badly often took years to reach legibility, if they ever did. Some full sisters used the clerks for anything they wanted someone else to understand.

Most of the lists appeared to be shorter than hers and Siuan's, yet even counting Meilyn's explanation, it seemed that an astonishing number of women had given birth. And this was only from the camps nearest the river! Noticing Siuan scanning each page before setting it to one side, she began doing the same. Without any great hope, yet vanishingly small was not the same as impossible. Except that the more she read, the further her spirits fell.

Many of the entries were shockingly vague. Born within sight of Tar Valon's walls? The city's walls were visible for leagues, visible from the slopes of Dragonmount. This particular child was a girl, with a Tairen father and a Cairhienin mother, yet the note boded ill for locating the boychild. There were far too many like that. Or, born in sight of the White Tower.

Light, the Tower could be seen from nearly as far as Dragonmount! Well, from a good many miles, at least. Other entries were sad. Salia Pomfrey had given birth to a boy and had left to return to her village in Andor after her husband died on the second day of fighting. There was a note beneath the name, in Myrelle's flowing script. *Women in the camp tried to dissuade her, but she was said to be half mad or more from grief. Light help her.* Sad to weeping. And in a colder vein, as troubling as the inexact entries. No name was recorded for her village, and Andor was the largest nation between the Spine of the World and the Aryth Ocean. How could she be found? Salia's child had been born on the wrong side of the Erinin and too early by six days, but if the Dragon Reborn's mother was like her, how could he be found? The pages were dotted with names like that, though usually they seemed to be women others had heard of, so the information might be written in full elsewhere. Or it might not. The task had seemed so simple when Tamra set it.

The Light help us, Moiraine thought. The Light help the world.

They wrote steadily, sometimes putting their heads together to decipher a hand that really did resemble chicken scratches, took an hour at midday to go down to the dining hall for bread and lentil soup, then returned to their pens. Elaida appeared, in a high-necked dress even redder than that she had worn the day before, to stride around the table and silently stare over first Siuan's shoulder and then Moiraine's as though to study their writing. Her red-fringed shawl was richly embroidered with flowered vines. Flowered and, more fittingly, barbed with long thorns. Finding nothing to criticize, she left as abruptly as she had come, and Moiraine echoed Siuan's sigh of relief. Other than that, they were left alone. When Moiraine dusted her last page with fine sand and poured it into the wooden box sitting on the floor between the chairs, the hour for supper had come. A number of boychildren had been born yesterday—the birth had to come after Gitara's Foretelling—but not one had seemed remotely possible for the child they sought.

After a night of troubled, restless sleep, she needed no urging from Siuan to return to that small room rather than joining the other Accepted hurrying to the stables. Though some were not hurrying so quickly, today. It seemed that even a trip outside the city could pall when all you had to do was sit on a bench and write names all day. Moiraine was looking forward to writing names. No one had told them not to, after all. And they had been wakened by the sounds of the other women getting ready, not by a novice bringing orders to ride out with the rest. As Siuan often said, it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission. Though the Tower was rather short on forgiveness for Accepted.

Yesterday's gleanings were waiting on the table, an untidy stack as tall as the first had been. While they were sorting out the readable lists, two clerks walked in and stopped in surprise, a stout woman with the Flame of Tar Valon worked on one dark sleeve, her gray hair in a neat roll on the nape of her neck, and a strapping young fellow who looked more suited to armor than to his plain gray woolen coat. He had beautiful brown eyes. And a lovely smile.

"I dislike being set a task only to learn someone else is already performing it," the woman said acerbically. Noticing the younger clerk's smile, she shot him a cold stare. Her voice turned to ice. "You know better than that if you want to keep your place, Martan. Come with me." Smile sliding away in worry and red-faced with embarrassment, Martan followed her from the room.

Moiraine looked apprehensively at Siuan, but Siuan never stopped sorting. "Keep working," she said. "If we look to be busy enough…." Her voice trailed off. It was a small hope, if clerks had been assigned the work, but it was all they had.

By a matter of minutes they managed to be copying names by the time Tamra herself walked into the room. Wearing plain blue silk today, the Amyrlin was Aes Sedai calm made flesh. No one would have thought that her friend had died right in front of her only the day before yesterday, or that she was waiting on a name that would save the world. Tamra was followed closely by the gray-haired clerk, who wore satisfaction on her face like too much rouge, and young Martan stood behind her, smiling over her shoulder at Moiraine and Siuan. He really would lose his place if he did that too often.

Moiraine bobbed to her feet and offered her courtesies so fast that she forgot the pen in her hand. She felt it twist, though, and winced at the ink stain it left, a black smear spreading to the size of a coin on the white wool. Siuan was just as quick, but much more steady. She remembered to lay her pen on the tray before spreading her skirts. *Calm,* Moiraine thought. *I must be calm.* Running through the mental exercises did little good.

The Amyrlin studied them closely, and when Tamra scrutinized someone, the most thick-skinned and insensitive felt measured to the inch and weighed to the ounce. Moiraine only just managed not to shift in unease. Surely that gaze would see everything they planned. If that could be graced with the name of plan.

"I had intended you to have a freeday, to read or study as you chose," Tamra said slowly, still considering them. "Or perhaps to practice for your testing," she added with a smile that did nothing to lessen her scrutiny. A long pause, and then she nodded slightly to herself. "You are still troubled by your uncles' deaths, child?"

"I had nightmares again last night, Mother." True, but once more they had been of a baby crying in the snow, and a faceless young man breaking the world anew even while he saved it. The steadiness of her own voice amazed her. She had never thought she would dare give an Aes Sedai answer to the Amyrlin Seat.

Tamra nodded again. "Very well, if you think you need to be occupied, you may continue. When the boredom of copying all day overcomes you, leave a note with your finished work, and I will see to replacing you." Half turning, she paused. "Ink is very difficult to remove, especially from white cloth. I won't tell you not to channel to do it; you know that already." Another smile, and she gathered up the gray-haired clerk, herding her from the room. "No need to look so indignant, Mistress Wellin," she said soothingly. Only fools upset clerks; their mistakes, accidental or on purpose, could cause too much damage. "I'm sure you have much more important tasks than…." Her voice faded to a receding murmur in the corridor.

Moiraine lifted her skirt to look at the stain. It had spread to the size of a large coin. Ordinarily, removing it would require hours of careful soaking in bleach that stung your hands and offered no guarantee of success. "She just told me to use the Power to clean my dress," she said wonderingly.

Siuan's eyebrows attempted to climb atop her head. "Don't talk nonsense. I heard her as well as you, and she said nothing of the sort."

"You have to listen to what people mean as well as what they say, Siuan." Interpreting what others really meant was integral to the Game of Houses, and put together, Tamra's smile, the cast of her eye, and the phrasing she had used were as good as written permission.

Embracing the Power, she wove Air, Water and Earth exactly so, laying the weave atop the stain. Just because Accepted were forbidden to channel to do chores did not mean they were not taught how; there was no such prohibition for sisters, who frequently traveled without a maid. The black smear suddenly glistened wetly and began to shrink, rising onto the surface of the wool as it did. Smaller and smaller it became, until it was only a small ebon bead of dried ink that fell into her cupped palm.

"I might keep this as a memento," she said, setting the black bead on the edge of the table. A reminder that Siuan had been correct. There were times when the rules could be broken.

"And if a sister had walked in?" Siuan asked wryly. "Would you have tried to tell *her* it was all part of the Game of Houses?"

Moiraine's face grew hot, and she released the Source. "I would have told her…. I would have…. Must we talk of this now? There must be as many names as yesterday, and I would like to finish before supper is done."

Siuan laughed uproariously. You might have thought the redness of Moiraine's face was a fool's paint.

They had been writing above an hour when Moiraine came to an entry that gave her pause. Born in sight of Dragonmount, it said, which was as ridiculous as saying in sight of the Tower. But Willa Mandair had given birth to a son, west of the river, and on the day of Gitara's Foretelling. She copied the entry slowly. Raising her pen at the end, she did not dip it in the ink jar or look for the next name in Ellid's spiky hand. Her gaze rose to the ebon bead. She was one of the Accepted, not a sister. But she would be tested soon. Bili Mandair could have been born on the riverbank and his mother still have been in sight of Dragonmount. But nothing Ellid had written indicated how far the camp she had gone to was from the mountain. Or how close. The earlier entries just said "born in Lord Ellisar's encampment outside Tar Valon."

The white page in front of her was only half filled with her writing, but she drew another blank sheet across the table and copied the particulars for Bili Mandair. A humble name, if he was the one. But it was more likely the Dragon Reborn would be the son of a simple soldier than of a lord.

Suddenly she noticed Siuan writing in a little leather-bound book, small enough to fit in her belt pouch, while keeping one eye on the doorway. "You have to be prepared," Siuan said.

Nodding, Moiraine slid the page bearing a single entry across the table to Siuan, who carefully copied the information into her little book. Tomorrow, Moiraine would bring her own book.

The day produced quite a few names of children “born in sight of Dragonmount” or even “born near Dragonmount,” a number of them on the east side of the Erinin. Moiraine knew she should have expected it. The mountain was the most easily identifiable landmark for leagues, after all. But this was only the second day’s list, and they added nine more boys to Siuan’s book. Light, how many names would they gather before it was done?

There were other surprises. Shortly after midmorning, Jarna Malari swept into the room, elegant in dark gray silk, with slashes of white at her temples that added to her commanding presence, sapphires in her long black hair, and more around her neck. The silken fringe on her shawl was so long that it nearly touched the floor with the shawl resting on her shoulders. Jarna was a Sitter for the Gray. Sitters rarely seemed to notice Accepted, but she motioned to Moiraine. “Walk with me a brief while, child.”

In the corridor, Jarna strolled slowly in silence for a time, and Moiraine was content to have it so. Light, what could a Sitter want with her? A task to be done, or a message to be carried, would have been mentioned right away. In any case, Accepted did not try to hurry sisters. As well attempt hurrying the Amyrlin as a Sitter. The drafts that made the stand-lamps flicker did not bother Jarna, of course, but Moiraine began to wish she had her cloak.

“I hear you are troubled by your uncles’ deaths,” the Sitter said at last. “That is understandable.”

Moiraine made a sound that she hoped Jarna took for agreement. Aes Sedai answers were all very well, but she wanted to avoid outright lying. If she could. She tried not to strain for every inch, but the top of her head only came to the other woman’s shoulder. What *did* the woman want?

“I fear that affairs of state never wait on grief, Moiraine. Tell me, child, who in House Damodred do you think will ascend to the Sun Throne now that Laman and his brothers are dead?”

Tripping over her own feet, Moiraine staggered and would have fallen had Jarna not steadied her with a hand. A *Sitter* was asking her opinion on politics? Of her native land, to be sure, but Sitters knew more of most countries’ politics than their own rulers did. Jarna’s liquid brown eyes gazed at her serenely, patiently. Waiting.

“I have given the matter no thought, Aes Sedai,” Moiraine said truthfully. “I think perhaps the Sun Throne will pass to another House, but I cannot say which.”

“Perhaps,” Jarna murmured, half lidding her eyes for the space of the word. “House Damodred has acquired an ill reputation that Laman only made worse.”

Moiraine frowned before she could stop herself, and hurriedly smoothed away the lines hoping that Jarna had not noticed. It was true. Her father had been alone among his generation in lacking a dark character, men and women alike. The preceding generations had been nearly as bad, when not worse. The deeds done by House Damodred had blackened the name. But she did not like hearing anyone say it.

“Your half-brother Taringail is denied by his marriage to the Queen of Andor,” Jarna went on. “A ridiculous law, but he cannot change it unless he is king, and he cannot become king until it is changed. What of your elder sisters? Are they not well thought of? The…taint…seems largely to have skipped your generation.”

“Well thought of, but not for the throne,” Moiraine replied. “Anvaere cares for nothing except horses and hawking.” And no one would trust her temper, far worse than Moiraine’s had ever been, on the Sun Throne. But that was something she would say only to Siuan. “And if Innloine gained the throne, everyone knows affairs of state would come a poor second, at best, to playing with her children.” Likely because in playing with her children, she had forgotten all about the affairs of state. Innloine was a warm and loving mother, but the truth was, she was not terribly bright, although very stubborn. A dangerous combination in a ruler. “No one will support either for the throne, Aes Sedai, even within House Damodred.”

Jarna peered down into Moiraine’s eyes for a long moment, reminding her uncomfortably of Meilyn saying she could not read thoughts. There was nothing for it but to meet that gaze with patience and apparent openness. As well as a fervent hope that Meilyn had not found a way around the Three Oaths.

“I see,” Jarna said finally. “You may return to your work, child.”

“What did she want?” Siuan asked when Moiraine returned to the room.

“I am not sure,” she said slowly, taking up her pen. That was the first lie she had ever told Siuan. She was all too afraid that she knew exactly what Jarna wanted.

By the time they laid the completed copies on the rose-carved writing table that had been Gitara’s, in the spacious anteroom to the Amyrlin’s study, six more Sitters had come to take Moiraine aside. One from each Ajah, all with very much the same questions. Tsutama Rath, beautiful and hard-eyed enough to make Moiraine flinch, put it to her directly.

“Have you never thought,” Tsutama said casually, toying with the red fringe of her shawl, “of being Queen of Cairhien yourself?”

Thus she gained another nightmare to join the babe in the snow and the faceless man. She sat on the Sun Throne wearing the shawl of an Aes Sedai, and in the streets outside, the mobs were destroying the city. No Aes Sedai had been a queen in over a thousand years, and even before that, the few who admitted it openly had fared badly. But if that was the goal of the Hall of the Tower, how could she forestall it? Only by fleeing the Tower as soon as she did gain the shawl and staying away until matters resolved themselves in Cairhien. She spent most of that sleepless night praying to be tested soon. Even tomorrow would not be too soon. Light, she was not ready, but she had to escape. Somehow.

* * *

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Chapter 7

The Itch

The following day brought still more names that met the criteria, and in larger number, all with vague reference to Dragonmount for the place of birth. Moiraine realized she and Siuan would never see a name with “born on the slopes of Dragonmount” attached. The Prophecies of the Dragon were known to many people, though often known wrongly, especially among the common folk, but the mountain’s connection remained in even the most nonsensical versions. No woman would want to admit that she had birthed a son who would channel the Power one day, with all that entailed, the child of her body doomed to madness and terror. How much less would she admit to bearing a child who might become the Dragon Reborn? She could not deny Dragonmount entirely, or her acquaintances might call her on it, yet “near the mountain” or “in sight of it” was safe enough. The child they sought would surely be hidden behind such a half truth.

Someone would need to visit each of those women with closer questions, prudently phrased and carefully asked. She rehearsed those questions in her mind, the delicate probing to elicit information while giving away nothing. Rouse the mother’s suspicions, and she would lie again. And likely run as soon as the questioner’s back was turned. It would be playing *Daes Dae’mar* with the world at stake. Far from a task she would relish, yet how to resist imagining?

The morning also brought a visit from Tamra, who abruptly walked in just as Moiraine was slipping her little book, bearing a fresh name, back into her belt pouch. She tried to disguise the movement, make it part of her curtsy, a touch of clumsiness brought on by surprise. She thought it well done, yet she held her breath as the Amyrlin studied her. Had the other woman seen the book? Suddenly, the notion of asking forgiveness rather than permission seemed very frail. Discovery would gain them neither. In all likelihood, discovery would bring rustication, working on an isolated farm from sunrise to sunset, cut off from friends and studies, forbidden to channel. For novices and Accepted, that was the penultimate penalty, one last chance to learn correct behavior, before being sent away forever. Far worse than blistered hands, though, it would certainly separate them forever from the hunt for the child.

"I'd have thought yesterday would have sated your appetites for boredom," Tamra said finally, and Moiraine breathed again. "Especially yours, Siuan."

Siuan seldom blushed, but her face colored at that. Everyone knew her dislike of clerical work. Copying lines was the punishment she dreaded most.

Moiraine put in, "The lists help me govern my thoughts, Mother." Once you began giving misleading answers, they came more and more easily, even to the Amyrlin Seat.

In truth, those thoughts still flashed into her head when least expected, lists or no lists. Thoughts of a babe in the snow and a faceless man. Equally dire, of the Sun Throne. She wanted to beg Tamra to halt that scheme, yet she knew begging would be useless. The Tower was no less implacable in its weaving than the Wheel of Time itself. In both cases, the threads were human lives, and the pattern they made more important than any individual thread.

"Very well, child. So long as your studies don't suffer." Tamra held out a folded paper that Moiraine had not noticed, sealed with a circle of green wax. "Take this to Kerene Nagashi. She should be in her rooms. Give it to no one else." As if she would do that!

Some Accepted complained, very quietly and very privately, over having to climb the wide corridors that spiraled upward through the Tower, but even with a climb halfway to the top, Moiraine enjoyed any errand that took her to the Ajah quarters. A great deal could be learned through seeing people where they lived. Even Aes Sedai let their guard down in those circumstances. They did a little, at any rate; enough for one who knew how to listen and observe.

The Ajah quarters were identical in number of rooms and how they were laid out, but the details differed widely. The impression of a full-sized sword was worked into each of the huge white floorstones of the Green Ajah quarters, swords in two dozen different styles, single-edged and double, curved and straight. Every door along the hallways was carved with a sword, point-up, gilded for the rooms of Sitters and silvered or lacquered for many others. The tapestries on the walls, between tall gilded stand-lamps on bases worked in the form of stacked halberds, were of martial scenes, charging horsemen and battles and famous last stands, alternating with ancient battle standards from lands long dead, many torn and stained and all preserved through the centuries by weaves of the One Power. No Aes Sedai had ridden to war since the Trolloc Wars, but when the Last Battle came, the Battle Ajah would ride in the forefront. Until then, they fought for justice where it often could be obtained only through their Warders' swords, but that was just what they did while they waited on Tarmon Gai'don.

Another difference here was the number of men. Not just any men, of course. Warders. Tall or short, wide or slim, even quite stout in one case, they moved like lions or leopards. None wore the distinctive cloak indoors, but the cloak was a mere decoration for a discerning eye. You could see Warders in any Ajah's quarters, excepting the Red, but most kept rooms in the Guards' barracks or even in the city. Greens' Warders often lived in the same apartments as the sister!

A green-eyed Warder who made up for his lack of height through width glanced at her as he strode by quickly, as if on an errand. Three others, standing together, fell silent at her approach, their quiet conversation taken up again after she passed. One wore silver bells in his dark Arafellin braids, one had a thick Taraboner mustache, and the third was very dark, perhaps a Tairen or a southern Altaran, yet aside from the grace of their movements, there was another thing they shared with each other, and with the heavyset man, and with every man to be seen here. Once, while hawking with cousins, she had looked into the eyes of a caped eagle, with its ruff of black feathers around its head. Meeting a Warder's gaze was akin to that. Not fierce, but full of self-knowledge, absolutely aware of their own capabilities, their capacity for violence.

And yet, it was a violence in restraint, disciplined by their own wills and their bonds to their Aes Sedai. Here, they were simply going about their daily lives. A lean man, his head shaven except for a Shienaran topknot, was resting against a wall with one booted foot up, tuning a fiddle and ignoring the good-natured gibing of another Warder, who said that it sounded like a wet cat caught in a net. Two others, in shirtsleeves, were practicing with wooden swords in a broad side corridor, the bundled lathes clattering with each swift blow.

Rina Hafden, who somehow made a square face lovely and a stocky build both elegant and graceful, was urging them on with a wide smile, calling, “Well struck, Waylin! Oh, very well struck, Elyas!” For size, they might have been twins, though one was dark and clean-shaven, the other fair, with a short beard. Grinning, they moved faster and faster. Their sweat-sodden shirts clung to broad shoulders and backs, yet the pair seemed fresh and untired.

Through an open door, Moiraine saw a round-faced Warder playing a stately melody on a flute while gray-haired Jala Bandevin, an imposing woman despite standing near a hand shorter than Moiraine, attempted to teach a new Warder the steps of a court dance. He had to be new, a blushing, pale-haired boy of no more than twenty, yet no man gained the bond unless he already possessed all the requisite skills. All save dancing, at least.

Kerene’s door, bearing a sword lacquered in red, gold and black, also stood open, with the sounds of merry music coming out. Moiraine had no idea what the lacquering meant, or the colors, and she suspected she never would unless she chose the Green. That would not be, yet she disliked not knowing. Once she identified something she did not know, the ignorance became an itch on her shoulder blade, just beyond reach. Not for the first time, she filed the swords in the back of her mind, beside many other things seen in Ajah quarters. The itch receded, yet she knew it would return when next she saw these doors.

The few tapestries in Kerene’s sitting room were scenes of war or hunting, but most of the wall space was given over to bookshelves carved in the styles of half a dozen countries. Along with a few books, they held a large lion’s skull and an even bigger from a bear, glazed bowls, vases in odd shapes, daggers adorned with gems and gold and daggers with plain wooden hilts, one with just the nub of a broken blade. A blacksmith’s hammer with the head split in two lay next to a cracked wooden bowl that held a single fat firedrop, fine enough to grace a crown. A gilded barrel clock with the hands frozen at just before noon, or midnight, stood beside a steel-backed gauntlet stained black with what Moiraine was sure was blood. They and all the rest were mementos of well over a hundred years wearing the shawl.

Of memories before the shawl, there were few. Just a row of painted miniatures on the wave-carved mantel over the fireplace, showing a plainly dressed, dignified man, a plump, smiling woman, and five children, three of them girls. They were Kerene's family, long since passed into the grave along with her nieces and nephews, and their children, and their children's children and more. That was the pain borne by Aes Sedai. Families died, and everything you knew vanished. Except the Tower. The White Tower always remained.

Two of Kerene's Warders were in the sitting room with her. Massive Karile, whose hair and beard gave him the aspect of a golden-maned lion, was reading a book in front of the fireplace with his boots resting on the ornate brass fender, a feather of blue smoke rising from the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. Stepin, looking more a clerk than a Warder, with his narrow shoulders and sad brown eyes, sat on a stool playing a lively jig on a twelve string bittern, fingers flashing as skillfully as any hired musician's. Neither man stopped what he was doing for the arrival of an Accepted.

Kerene herself stood working at an embroidery frame mounted on a stand. It always seemed incongruous to see a Green doing needlework. Especially when, as now, the subject was a field of wildflowers. How did that accord with the violence and death decorating her walls? A tall, slim woman, Kerene looked exactly what she was, her ageless face strong and beautiful, her nearly black eyes pools of serenity. Even here, she wore a riding dress, the divided skirts slashed with emerald green, and her dark hair, lightly touched with white, was cut shorter than either Karile's or Stepin's, above her shoulders, and gathered in a thick braid. No doubt it was easier to care for while traveling, cut like that. Kerene seldom remained in the Tower long before setting out again. She placed her needle on the embroidery frame, took the letter, and broke the green sealing wax with a thumb. Tamra always sealed her messages to sisters with wax in the Ajah color of the recipient. Of all Ajahs and none.

Whatever Tamra had written was quickly read, and no change came to Kerene's face, but before the Green finished, Stepin leaned his bittern against a side table and began buttoning up his coat. Karile placed his book on a shelf, tapped the dottle from his pipe onto the hearth and stuffed the pipe into a capacious coat pocket. That was all, but they were plainly waiting and ready. Despite his sad eyes, Stepin did not look a clerk any longer. They were both leopards awaiting the command to hunt.

"Will there be a reply, Aes Sedai?" Moiraine asked.

“I’ll carry it myself, child,” Kerene replied, starting for the door with a brisk stride that made her silk skirts rasp softly. “Tamra wants me *urgently,*” she told the two Warders, who were heeling her like hunting hounds, “but she doesn’t say why.”

Moiraine allowed herself a brief smile. As with servants, sisters often forgot Accepted had ears. Sometimes, the best way to learn was to keep silent and listen.

As she was making her way back down along the drafty, spiraling corridor, thinking about what she had learned and trying to ignore the cold, Siuan came running up behind her. There were no sisters to be seen, but still….

“Another message,” Siuan explained. “To Aisha Raveneos. She kept muttering something about urgent, making it a question. I’ll wager it was the same as you carried to Kerene. What do you suppose Tamra wants with a Gray and a Green together?”

The Gray handled matters of mediation and justice, where it came from laws rather than swords, and Aisha was reputed to adhere to the strictest letter of the law no matter her own feelings, whether pity or contempt. A trait she shared with Kerene. And both women had worn the shawl for a very long time, though that could be unimportant. Moiraine might not be so handy with puzzles as Siuan, but this truly was like the Game of Houses.

She looked around carefully, including a glance over her shoulder. A maid was trimming the wicks on a stand-lamp farther along the hallway, and two liveried men, one atop a tall ladder, were doing something concerning one of the wall hangings. There still was not a sister in sight, but she lowered her voice anyway. “Tamra wants…searchers…to look for the boychild. Oh, this changes everything. I was wrong, Siuan. And you were right.”

“Right and wrong about what? What makes you think she’s recruiting these searchers?” How *could* the woman be so deft with puzzles and not see the pattern here?

“What matter could be more urgent to Tamra right now than the boychild, Siuan?” she said patiently. “Or more secret, so she dares not put the reason on paper? That secrecy means that she believes the Reds cannot be trusted. That is what you were right about. More than that, how many other sisters will at first want to deny that this child really is the one prophesied? Particularly if he evades discovery until he is a grown man and already channeling. No, she means to use sisters she is sure of to search for him. Where I was wrong was in thinking he would be brought to the Tower. That would only expose him to the Reds, and others who might be untrustworthy. Once found, Tamra will send him into hiding. His education will be at the hands of her searchers, the women she trusts most."

Siuan clapped a hand atop her head. "I think my skull will explode," she muttered. "You built all of that from two messages, and you don't even know what they said."

"I know one thing they said and one they did not. It is simply a matter of seeing the patterns and fitting the pieces together, Siuan. Really, you should be able to do it easily."

"Oh? Ellid gave me a blacksmith's puzzle last week. Said she was bored with it, but I think she couldn't solve it. Want to try your hand?"

"Thank you, no," Moiraine said politely. And, after a quick look for lurking sisters, stuck her tongue out at the other woman.

The next day, Tamra sent three more messages. The first went to Meilyn Arganya, the second to Valera Gorovni, a plump little Brown who always wore a smile and seemed to be bustling even while standing still, and the third to Ludice Daneen, a bony Yellow whose long, grim face was framed by brightly beaded Taraboner braids that hung to her waist. None let slip a hint of the messages' content, yet all three had worn the shawl well over a hundred years, and all three shared that reputation for strict adherence to the law. Moiraine saw it as confirmation, and even Siuan began to believe.

Five seemed too few to undertake the search for the boychild—day by day the names entered into their small notebooks filled more and more pages—yet Tamra sent no further messages. At least, not by them. Aeldra Najaf was raised Keeper of the Chronicles to replace Gitara, and she might have carried them, or more likely sent them by a novice. For a time, Moiraine and Siuan tried keeping an unobtrusive watch on the Amyrlin's study and her apartments, taking turns to peek around the edge of the doorway, but Tamra had a steady flow of visitors. Not constant, but steady. Sitters could be dismissed from consideration, since Sitters rarely left the confines of the city while they held a chair in the Hall of the Tower, yet any of the others could have been searchers. Or not. It was extremely frustrating for Moiraine. That itch on the shoulder blade, just where her fingers could not reach.

Soon enough they gave up attempts to spy. For one thing, there seemed no point. For another, with only one copying, recording the names went much too slowly. And Aeldra, returning to the Amyrlin's study, caught Moiraine lurking in the doorway.

White hair was the sole similarity between Aeldra and Gitara, and Aeldra's was straight and cut as short as Kerene's. The new Keeper was lean, her coppery skin turned to leather from long exposure to sun and wind, yet assuredly no one had ever called her a beauty, with her narrow jaw and sharp nose. For jewelry, she wore the Great Serpent ring alone; her dress was of blue wool, finely woven but simply cut, and the deep blue stole on her shoulders was no more than two fingers wide. A very different woman from Gitara.

"What are you looking at, child?" she asked gently.

"Just the sisters going in and out of the Amyrlin's study, Aes Sedai," Moiraine replied. Every word true.

Aeldra smiled. "Dreaming of the shawl? Perhaps your time would be better spent in study, and practice."

"We find time for both, Aes Sedai, and this work occupies my mind otherwise." Also true. The search for the boychild occupied every scrap of her mind not given to thoughts she would rather not have.

A faint frown creasing her forehead, Aeldra laid a hand on Moiraine's cheek, almost as if checking for fever. "Do those other dreams still trouble you? Some of the Browns know a great deal about herbs. I'm sure one will give you something to help you sleep, if you need it."

"Verin Sedai already has." The concoction had had a foul taste, but it did help her sleep. A pity it did not help her forget the nightmares that came when she did. "The dreams are not so bad, now." Sometimes, there was no way to use evasion.

"Good, then." Aeldra's smile returned, but she shook a mildly reproving finger under Moiraine's nose. "Nevertheless, daydreaming in doorways is not proper for one of the Accepted, child. If I see it again, I will have to take notice. You understand me?"

"Yes, Aes Sedai." There would be no more spying. Moiraine began to think she would scream from that cursed itch.

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Chapter 8

Shreds of Serenity

There was no evading their private lessons with the sisters, either. Not that Moiraine wanted to, or Siuan, either, but long hours sitting and writing left them surprisingly tired, and also left only the evenings free, after supper. The Accepted who still rode out every day at sunrise did the same, though many grumbled at it—when there were no Aes Sedai around to overhear. At least, they took lessons when lessons were offered. Some sisters refused, saying they would teach Accepted again when they no longer had to give novice classes that should have been taught by Accepted. All too many Aes Sedai disliked the situation. Gossip said that petitions had been presented to the Amyrlin requesting a return to normal routines, but if so, Tamra rejected them. The sisters' faces remained masks of serenity, yet frequently the eyes of even the mildest flashed with a fire that made novices squeak and Accepted step very gingerly. In the depths of winter's cold, the Tower seemed feverish.

Siuan never spoke of her own experiences, but Moiraine quickly realized that she herself attracted particularly heated looks from nearly every Aes Sedai she encountered, and she understood why. Unlike the rest, she and Siuan could have given novice classes and taken their own lessons at a more reasonable hour. A few sisters who taught others at night pronounced themselves busy when either of them tried to schedule a lesson. In some ways, Aes Sedai could be as petty as anyone else, though that was something no Accepted dared say aloud. Moiraine hoped these small enmities would fade soon. Paltry irritations sometimes had a way of festering into lifelong antagonisms. What could she do, though? Apologize humbly to those who seemed most angry, begging their indulgence, and hope. She would not give up the lists.

Not all sisters were so reluctant. Kerene met with her to discuss the relatively few facts known to historians of Artur Hawkwing's empire, Meilyn tested her on the ancient writer Willim of Manaches and his influence on the Saldaean philosopher Shivena Kayenzi, and Aisha questioned her closely on the differences in the structure of law in Shienar and Amadicia. That was the sort of lesson she took, now. What they could teach her of the Power, what she could learn of it—not always the same—had been imparted months past. Had she dared, she would have asked why they were still in the Tower. Why were they not out hunting down the names on the list? Why?

And yet, she knew the answer. What had to be the answer. Nothing else fit. But they felt no urgency. Taking the boy from his mother straightaway would be cruel. Maybe they thought they had years to find him, but if that was the case, they had not even seen the list yet, with so many entries lacking as much as a home village. Maybe they were waiting for its completion. She hoped there *were* other searchers, because Siuan reported Valera and Ludice were still in the Tower.

No urgency! Moiraine burned with it. Rumor said the fighting continued, many leagues southeast, but only in skirmishes, though some were said to be fierce. Apparently no one among the commanders of the Coalition army wanted to press too hard on dangerous foes who were, after all, in retreat. That last was certain, at least, reported by Aes Sedai. Rumor said many of the Murandians and Altarans had already packed up and headed south for home, that the Amadicians and Ghealdanin planned on following soon. Rumor added that word had come of troubles along the Blight, and the Borderlanders would soon ride north. Aes Sedai, it seemed, paid no heed to rumors. She tried bringing the tales up with them, but….

“Rumor is irrational and has no place here, child,” Meilyn told her firmly, her gaze serene above the teacup balanced on her fingertips. “Now. When Shivena said that reality is illusion, where did she gain insight from Willim and what was her own?”

“If you want to talk of rumors, make them rumors of Hawkwing,” Kerene said, voice sharp. She always toyed with one of her knives while teaching, using it for a pointer. Tonight, it was a poor man’s belt knife, so old that the wooden handle was cracked and warped. “The Light knows, half what we have of him is rumor.”

Aisha sighed and pointed a stout finger, her soft brown eyes suddenly quite hard. A plain-faced woman who could have passed for a farmer’s wife, she wore a wealth of jewelry, earrings with large firedrops, long necklaces of both emeralds and rubies, but only the golden Great Serpent for a finger ring. “If you cannot keep your mind on the matter at hand, perhaps a visit to Merean is in order. Yes, I thought you’d say that.”

No, making them see the urgency was just impossible! All she could do was wait. And practice not grinding her teeth. Light, let her test soon. With the shawl on her shoulders, she would be out of the Tower and searching for the boy like an arrow leaving the bow. Soon, but not before she had all of the names. Oh, it was *such* a quandary!

The Accepted’s quarters seethed with rumors more than usual, though not about who had had a spat with whom or which Green was said to be behaving scandalously with a Warder. These tales were gotten from Guardsmen, from soldiers, from men and women in the camps, about the fighting, about men who had died heroically, and those who had been heroes and still lived. Those were particularly talked over; such a one might have the qualities of a Warder, a subject much discussed by Accepted, save the few who already knew they wanted the Red. There were tales of camps breaking, though no one knew whether they were moving east after the army or returning home, and tales of small groups remaining behind to make sure that women’s names were entered for the Tower’s bounty. At least that reduced the chances that the right woman would slip away unknown, but if she was already entered and already gone, would she be among those who would be easily found? Moiraine could have *screamed* from frustration.

Ellid Abareim had a story from an Aes Sedai, though she insisted it was no rumor.

“I heard Adelorna tell Shemaen,” Ellid said with a smile. Ellid always smiled when she saw herself in a mirror, and when she smiled, she always seemed to be looking into one. A gusting evening breeze in the well rippled the waves of golden hair framing her perfect face. Her eyes were like large sapphires, her skin like rich cream. The only fault in her appearance that Moiraine could see was an over-abundance of bosom. And she was very tall, nearly as tall as most men. Men smiled at Ellid, when they did not leer. Novices mooned after her, and too many fools among the Accepted envied her. “Adelorna said Gitara had a Foretelling that Tarmon Gai’don will come during the lifetimes of sisters now breathing. I can’t wait. I intend to choose Green, you know.” Every Accepted knew that. “I mean to have six Warders when I ride to the Last Battle.” Every Accepted knew that, too. Ellid was always telling you what she intended to do. She almost always did it, too. That hardly seemed fair.

“So,” Moiraine said softly when Ellid had joined the others streaming off to supper. “Gitara did have other Foretellings. At least one, and if one, then perhaps more.”

Siuan frowned. “We already know the Last Battle is coming.” She fell silent while Katerine and Sarene passed, talking wearily of whether they were too tired to eat, then went on once they were beyond earshot. “What does it matter if Gitara had a dozen Foretellings, or a hundred?”

“Siuan, did you never wonder how Tamra could be *certain* this is the time, that the boy will be born *now*? I would say it is very likely that at least one of those other Foretellings spoke of him. Something that, put with what we heard her say, told Tamra that now is the time.” It was Moiraine’s turn to frown, in thought. “Do you know how the Foretelling was with Gitara?” It took different women in different ways, including how they gave voice to a Foretelling. “The way she spoke, he could have been being born at that instant. Maybe the shock of that was what killed her.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” Siuan said glumly, then gave herself a shake. “Light! Let’s go eat. You still need practice.”

They had resumed the practicing, too, at least at night, and Myrelle continued to help, when she was not so tired that she went straight to her bed after supper. Or sometimes before. Enough of the Accepted did one or the other that the galleries were still and silent long before the lamps were extinguished. The practice went poorly for Moiraine, especially in the beginning. The very first night, Elaida entered her room while she was suffering Siuan and Myrelle’s torments on her flowered rug. The fire had been built as high as the small hearth would accept, but the best that could be said was that the blaze took the edge off the chill. At least it was not freezing.

“I’m glad to see you’re not taking the excuse of your work to avoid practice,” the Red sister said. Her tone said she was surprised to see it, and contempt wrapped the word “work.” Once again her dress was pure red, and she wore her fringed shawl as though on appointed duties. Moving to a corner facing Moiraine, she folded her arms beneath her breasts. “Continue. I wish to observe.” There was nothing for it but to obey.

Perhaps spurred by Elaida’s presence, Siuan and Myrelle did their very best. Which meant their very worst for startling slaps and pinches, sudden bangs beside Moiraine's ear and switch-like blows across her legs, always just when she needed her concentration most. She tried not to look at Elaida, but the sister stood where she could not avoid seeing her. Elaida's judgmental gaze made her nervous, yet maybe it inspired her, as well. Or drove her. Focusing herself, concentrating with all she had, she managed to complete sixty-one weaves before the sixty-second collapsed in a tangle of Earth, Air, Water and Spirit that left her skin clammy until she let it dissipate. Not a wonderful performance, but neither was it so terrible. She had come close to completing all one hundred on numerous occasions, but she had actually done it only twice, once by the skin of her teeth.

"Pitiful," Elaida said, cold as ice. "You'll never pass like that. And I *want* you to pass, child. You *will* pass, or I'll make you take off your skin and dance in your bones before you're sent away. You two are pitiful friends, if that's how you help her. We knew how to practice when I was Accepted." Directing Siuan and Myrelle to the corner where she had been standing, she took their place at the table. "This will show you how it is done properly. Again, child."

Wetting her lips, Moiraine turned her back. Myrelle gave her an encouraging smile, and Siuan nodded confidently, but she could see their worry. What would Elaida do? She began. As soon as she embraced the Power, flashes of light began streaking across her line of vision, leaving black and silver flecks dancing in her eyes. Bangs and piercing whistles made her ears ring. Blows as from hard-swung straps or switches struck her one after another. It was all continuous, with no letup until she completed a weave, and then only a short pause until she began to weave again.

And all the while, Elaida harangued her in a cold, matter-of-fact tone. "Faster, child. You must weave faster. The weave must almost leap into being complete. Faster. Faster."

Clutching at serenity with her fingernails, Moiraine reached only the twelfth weave before her concentration broke completely. The weave not only collapsed, she lost *saidar* entirely. Blinking, she tried to clear the dancing flecks from her sight. And more successfully, to blink back tears. Pain covered her from shoulders to ankles, bruises aching, welts throbbing, stinging from sweat. A constant chime was sounding in her ears.

"Thank you, Aes Sedai," Siuan said quickly. "We see what we must do, now." Myrelle's hands were clutching her skirts in fists; her face was ashen, her eyes wide with horror.

"Again," Elaida said. It took everything Moiraine had in her to make herself turn her back once more.

The only difference was that she finished just nine weaves this time.

"Again," Elaida said.

On the third try, she completed six weaves, and only three on the fourth. Sweat rolled down her face. After a while, the flashing lights and ear-piercing whistles hardly seemed more than annoyances. Only the incessant beating mattered. Only the endless beating, and the endless pain. On the fifth attempt, she fell to her knees weeping beneath the first shower of blows. The pummeling ceased instantly, but huddling in on herself, she sobbed as though she would never stop. Oh, Light, she had never hurt like this before. Never.

She was not even aware of Siuan kneeling beside her until the other woman said gently, "Can you stand, Moiraine?" Raising her head from the rug, she stared up at Siuan's face, full of concern. With an effort she had not thought in her, she managed to master her weeping, barely, then nodded and began to push herself up laboriously. Bruised muscles did not want to lift her. Every movement scrubbed her shift against the sweat-stung welts, clothing her in burning agony.

"She will live," Elaida said dryly. "A little pain tonight will drive the lesson home. You must be fast! I will come back in the morning to Heal her. And you, too, Siuan. Help her to the bed and begin."

Siuan's face paled, but when an Aes Sedai commanded….

Moiraine did not want to watch, yet Siuan had been forced to, so she held her eyes open by force of will. It made her want to begin weeping all over again. Often when they practiced, Siuan managed to complete every last weave despite anything Moiraine could do. She never failed less than two-thirds of the way through. Tonight, under Elaida's strict tutelage, she managed twenty the first time. The second, it was seventeen, and fourteen on the third. Her face was drained of color and slick with sweat. Her breath came raggedly. But she had not shed a tear. And when a weave failed, she started from the beginning again without so much as a moment's pause. On the fourth try, she finished twelve. And twelve on the fifth, the sixth. Doggedly, she began to weave once more.

"That's enough for tonight," Elaida said. Not one drop of pity touched her voice. Slowly, painfully, Siuan turned, the light of *saidar* vanishing. Her face was absolutely devoid of expression. Elaida went on calmly, adjusting the shawl on her shoulders. “Even if you managed to finish, as you are, you would still fail. There isn’t a shred of serenity in you.” She fixed first Siuan and then Moiraine with a stern eye. “Remember, you must be serene *whatever* is done to you. And you *must* be fast. If you are slow, you will fail as surely as if you fall to panic or fear. Tomorrow night, we will see if you can do better.”

Siuan waited until the door closed behind the Aes Sedai, then threw back her head. “Oh, Light!” she wailed, falling to her knees with a thud, and the tears she had held back came in torrents.

Moiraine bounded from the bed. Well, she tried to bound. It was actually more of a pained hobble, and Myrelle reached Siuan first. The three of them knelt there, holding one another and weeping, Myrelle as hard as she or Siuan.

Finally, Myrelle pushed back, sniffing and wiping tears from her cheeks with her fingers. “Wait here,” she said, as if they were in condition to go anywhere, and darted from the room. Soon she returned with a red-glazed jar the size of her two fists, and also Sheriam and Ellid to help get Siuan and Moiraine undressed and apply the ointment in the jar.

“This is wrong!” Ellid said fiercely once the pair of them were naked and she was opening the jar, all the gasping over their welts and bruises finished. Sheriam and Myrelle nodded quick agreement. “The law forbids using the Power to discipline an initiate!”

“Oh?” Siuan growled. “And how often have you had your ear flicked with the Power by a sister, or gotten a stripe across your bottom?” A gasp broke from her mouth. “There’s no need to rub that clear to the bone, is there?”

“I’m sorry,” Ellid said in contrite tones. “I’ll try to be easier.” Vanity was a powerful fault, but that was her only real fault. Her only one. It was very hard to like Ellid. “You two should report this. We could all go to Merean.”

“No,” Moiraine breathed hoarsely. Going on, the salve stung worse than the welts. It was better after. A little better. “I think Elaida really is trying to help us. She said she *wants* us to pass.”

Siuan stared at her as though she had sprouted feathers. “I don’t recall hearing her say that. Myself, *I* think she’s trying to make us fail!”

“Besides,” Moiraine added, “who ever heard—? Oh! Oh!” Sheriam muttered an apology, but the ointment still stung. “Who ever heard of an

Accepted complaining without paying for it?”

That brought three nods. Grudgingly given, yet they nodded. Novices who complained received a gentle if firm explanation of why matters were how they were. Accepted were expected to know better. They were required to learn endurance every bit as much as history or the One Power.

“Maybe she’ll decide to leave you alone,” Sheriam said, but she did not sound as if she believed it would happen.

When they finally departed, Myrelle left the jar of ointment behind. Only Verin’s vile-tasting concoction let them sleep, huddled beneath the blankets in Moiraine’s narrow bed, and it was the grim reminder of that jar sitting on the mantel that warred with sleep as much as their welts and bruises.

Elaida was as good as her word, appearing before daybreak to use Healing on them. And it *was* used, not offered. She merely cupped their heads between her hands and wove without asking. When the intricate weave of Spirit, Air and Water touched her, Moiraine gasped and convulsed. For a moment it felt as though she were totally immersed in icy water, but when the weave vanished, her yellowing bruises were gone. Unfortunately, Elaida supplied a new crop that night, and another on the following. Moiraine lasted through seven attempts and then ten before pain and tears overwhelmed her. Siuan made ten on the second night and twelve on the third. And Siuan never wept until Elaida was gone. Not one tear.

Sheriam, Myrelle and Ellid must have kept watch, for each night, after Elaida left, they appeared to offer commiseration while undressing Siuan and her and spreading the salve on their injuries. Ellid even tried telling jokes, but no one felt like laughing. Moiraine began to wonder whether the jar held enough ointment to last. Had she misheard? Could Siuan be right, that Elaida wanted them to fail? A cold terror settled in her belly, a leaden lump of ice. She was afraid that the next time, she would beg Elaida to stop. But Elaida would not; she was certain of that, and it made her want to cry.

On the morning after Elaida’s third visit, though, it was Merean who woke them in Siuan’s bed and offered Healing.

“She will not trouble you in this manner again,” the motherly Aes Sedai told them once their bruises were gone.

“How did you find out?” Moraine asked, hurriedly pulling her shift over her head. With them sleeping like the dead under the influence of Verin’s mixture, the fire had burned down to ashes in the night, and the air in the room was cold, if not quite so cold as it had been only days earlier, but the floor was little warmer. She snatched up her stockings from where they had been left draped over a chairback.

“I have my ways, as you should know,” Merean replied mysteriously. Moraine suspected Myrelle or Sheriam or Ellid, if not all three, but Merean *was* Aes Sedai. Never a straight answer when mystery would do, and perhaps do better. “In any case, she very nearly earned herself an imposed penance, and I informed her that I’d ask the Amyrlin for Mortification of the Flesh. And I reminded her that what I must deal to sisters is harsher than what I give novices or Accepted. She was convinced.”

“Why shouldn’t she get a penance for what she did to us?” Siuan asked, reaching behind herself to do up the buttons on her dress.

The Mistress of Novices raised an eyebrow at her tone, which came very close to demanding. But perhaps she believed they deserved a little leeway after Elaida. “Had she used *saidar* to punish or coerce you, I’d have seen her strapped to the triangle for birching, yet what she did broke no law.” Merean’s eyes twinkled suddenly, and her lips curved in a small smile. “Perhaps I shouldn’t tell you, but I will. Her penance would have been for helping you cheat in the test for the shawl. All that saved her was the question of whether it actually was cheating. I trust you will accept her gift in the spirit it was given. After all, she paid a price in humiliation for giving it when I confronted her.”

“Believe me, Aes Sedai, I will,” Siuan said flatly. What she meant was plain. Merean sighed and shook her head, but said nothing more.

The icy lump that had melted from Moiraine’s middle when she learned there would be no further lessons from Elaida returned twice as large. She had almost helped them cheat? Could she have given them a foretaste of the actual test for the shawl? Light, if the test meant being beaten the whole way…! Oh, Light, how could she possibly pass? But whatever comprised the test, every woman who wore the shawl had undergone it and succeeded. She would, as well. Somehow, she would! She pushed Myrelle and Siuan to be harder on her, but though they sometimes made her weep, they refused to do what Elaida had done. Even so, again and again she failed to complete all one hundred weaves. That lump of ice grew a little larger every day.

They did not see Elaida again for two days, and then it was on their way to dinner at midday. The Red sister stopped beside a tall stand-lamp at the sight of them, speaking not a word as they curtsied. Still silent, she turned to watch as they passed her. Her face was a severe mask of serenity, but her eyes burned. Her gaze should have scorched the wool of their dresses.

Moiraine's heart sank. Clearly, Elaida thought they had gone to the Mistress of Novices themselves. And she had "paid a price in humiliation," according to Merean. Moiraine could think of several ways that the threat of a penance could be used to make Elaida give way, and every one of them would have wrung the sister with humiliation. The only question was, how hard had Merean wrung? Very hard, likely; she *did* speak of the novices and Accepted as being hers. Oh, this was no small enmity that might fester over time. What was in Elaida's eyes was full-blown animosity. They had acquired an enemy for life.

When she told Siuan as much, and her reasoning, the taller woman grunted sourly. "Well, I never wanted to be her friend, did I? I tell you, once I gain the shawl, if she ever tries to harm me again, I'll make her pay."

"Oh, Siuan," Moiraine laughed, "Aes Sedai do *not* go about harming one another." But her friend would not be assuaged.

One week to the day after Gitara made her Foretelling, the weather warmed suddenly. The sun rose in a cloudless sky on what seemed like a cool spring day, and before sunset most of the snow had melted. All of it was gone around Dragonmount, except on the very peak. The ground around the mountain had its own warmth, and snow always melted there first. The limit had been set. It was a boy born within those ten days that they sought. Two days later, the number who met the criteria began to dwindle sharply, and near a week on, five days had passed without another name being added to their small books. They could only hope that no more were found, though.

Nine days after the thaw, in the dim light before dawn. Merean appeared on the gallery as Siuan and Moiraine were leaving for breakfast. She was wearing her shawl. "Moiraine Damodred," she said formally, "you are summoned to be tested for the shawl of an Aes Sedai. The Light keep you whole and see you safe."

* * *

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Chapter 9

It Begins

Merean barely allowed time for a quick hug from Siuan before leading Moiraine away, and with every step, the lump of ice in Moiraine’s middle grew. She was not ready! In all of her practices, she had managed to complete all of the weaves only twice, and never under anything approaching the pressure Elaida had put on her. She was going to fail and be put out of the Tower. She was going to fail. Those words throbbed in her head, a drumbeat marking the walk to the headsman’s axe. She was going to fail.

As she followed Merean down a narrow staircase that spiraled deep into the bedrock beneath the Tower, a thought occurred to her. If she failed, she would still be able to channel, at least so long as she remained circumspect. The Tower frowned on ostentation in the women who were sent away, and when the Tower frowned on something, only fools failed to take heed. The sisters said those sent away all but gave up touching *saidar* for fear of overstepping the Tower’s strictures inadvertently, but giving up that rapture was beyond her comprehension. She knew she never would, whatever happened. Another thought, seemingly unconnected. If she failed, she would still be Moiraine Damodred, scion of a powerful if disreputable House. Her estates would no doubt need years to recover from the ravages of the Aiel, but surely could still supply an adequate income.

A third thought, and it all came together, so obvious that clearly she had been thinking of it all along on some deeper level. She still had her book with its hundreds of names in her belt pouch. Even if she failed, she could take up the search for the boy. That carried dangers, of course. The Tower more than merely disliked outsiders meddling in its affairs, and she would be an outsider, then. Rulers had learned bitter regret for interfering where the Tower planned. How much worse for a young exile, however powerful her House? No matter. What would be, would be.

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” she murmured, earning a sharp look from Merean. The ritual was far from complex, but it must be adhered to. That she had forgotten that once below ground she must be silent until addressed said little for her chances in the actual test.

It was very odd. She wanted to be Aes Sedai more than she wanted life, yet the knowledge that she could take up the search, whatever happened here, the knowledge that she would, quieted that drumbeat in her head. It even made the frozen lump dwindle. A little. One way or another, in a few days she would begin her own search. Light let it be as Aes Sedai.

The lofty passages Merean led her along, carved through the rock of the island, as wide as any in the Tower, were lit by lamps in iron brackets high on the pale walls, though many crossing corridors lay shrouded in darkness, or with only widely spaced lamps making small lonely pools of light. The smooth stone floor was free of any speck of dust. The way had been prepared for them. The air was cool and dry, and, beyond the faint scuff of their slippers, silent. Except for storerooms on the highest levels, these basements were seldom used, and everything was plain and unadorned. Dark wooden doors lined the corridors, all shut, and, as they went deeper, securely locked. Many things were kept down here safe from prying eyes. What was done down here was never for outside eyes, either.

On the very lowest level, Merean stopped before paired doors larger than any they had passed, as tall and wide as fortress gates, but polished to glistening and lacking iron straps. The Aes Sedai channeled, and flows of Air swung the doors open silently on well-oiled hinges. Taking a deep breath, Moiraine followed her into a large, round, domed chamber ringed by stand-lamps. Their light, reflected from the polished white stone walls, dazzled after the comparative dimness of the passages.

Blinking, her eyes went immediately to the object centered beneath the dome, a great oval ring, narrow at top and bottom, its rounded rim little thicker than her arm. Well above a span in height and perhaps a pace across at its widest, it glittered in the lamplight, now silver, now gold or green or blue or swirls of all, never the same for more than a moment, and—a seeming impossibility—it stood unsupported. That was a *ter’angreal,* a device made to use the One Power in the long-ago Age of Legends. Within it, she would be tested. She would not fail. She would not!

“Attend,” Merean said formally. The other Aes Sedai already in the chamber, one from each Ajah, came to stand in a ring around them, fringed shawls draped on their shoulders. One was Elaida, and Moiraine's heart fluttered uneasily. "You come in ignorance, Moiraine Damodred. How would you depart?"

Light, why had Elaida been allowed to be part of this? She wanted desperately to ask, but the words were prescribed. She was surprised to hear her voice come out steady. "In knowledge of myself."

"For what reason have you been summoned here?" Merean intoned.

"To be tried." Calm was all-important, but though her voice sounded it, within was another matter. She could not shake Elaida from her thoughts.

"For what reason should you be tried?"

"So that I may learn whether I am worthy." All of the sisters would try to make her fail—that *was* the test, after all—but Elaida might try the hardest. Oh, Light, what could she do?

"For what would you be found worthy?"

"To wear the shawl." And with that, she began to disrobe. According to ancient custom, she must test clad in the Light, symbolizing that she trusted to the Light's protection alone.

As she undid her belt, she suddenly remembered the small book in her pouch. If that were discovered…! Butto falter now was to fail. She laid belt and pouch on the floor beside her feet and reached behind her back to work at her buttons.

"Therefore I will instruct you," Merean went on. "You will see this sign upon the ground." She channeled, and her finger drew a six-pointed star in the air, two overlapping triangles written for an instant in fire.

Moiraine felt one of the sisters behind her embrace *saidar,* and a weave touched the back of her head. "Remember what must be remembered," the sister murmured. It was Anaiya, the Blue. But this was not part of what she had been taught. What did it mean? She made her fingers march steadily along the buttons down her back. It had begun, and she must proceed in utter calm.

"When you see that sign, you will go to it immediately, at a steady pace, neither hurrying nor hanging back, and only then may you embrace the Power. The weaving required must begin immediately, and you may not leave that sign until it is completed."

"Remember what must be remembered," Anaiya murmured.

"When the weave is complete," Merean said, "you will see that sign again, marking the way you must go, again at a steady pace, without hesitation.”

“Remember what must be remembered.”

“One hundred times you will weave, in the order you have been given and in perfect composure.”

“Remember what must be remembered,” Anaiya murmured for a final time, and Moiraine felt the weaving settle into her, much as Healing did.

All of the sisters save Merean moved away and formed a circle around the *ter’angreal*. Kneeling on the stone floor, each embraced *saidar*. Surrounded by the light of the Power, they channeled, and the color-shifting of the oval ring increased in speed, until it flashed like a kaleidoscope attached to a mill wheel. All of the Five Powers they wove, in a complexity nearly as great as anything required in the test, every sister concentrating on her task. No, not true. Not completely. Elaida glanced away, and her gaze was stern and heated when it touched Moiraine. A red-hot awl fit to bore into her skull.

She wanted to wet her lips, yet “perfect composure” meant exactly that. Protection of the Light or no, removing her clothes in front of so many was not easy, but most of the sisters were concentrating on the *ter’angreal*. Only Merean was watching her, now. Watching for hesitation, for a break in her outward serenity. It was begun, and a break now brought failure. Yet it was just outward calm, a mask of smooth features that carried no deeper than her skin.

Continuing to undress, she carefully folded each garment and placed it in a neat pile atop her belt and pouch. That should do. All of the sisters save Merean would be occupied until her test was done—at least, she thought they would—and she doubted the Mistress of Novices would rummage through her clothing. In any case, there was nothing else to do, now. Slipping off her Great Serpent ring, last of all, and laying the circlet of gold atop the rest brought a pang. Since winning that, she had worn it even when bathing. Her heart was racing, thudding so hard she was certain Merean must be able to hear. Oh, Light, Elaida. She would have to be very wary. The woman knew how to break her. She must watch and be ready.

After that, she could only stand and wait. Her skin quickly pebbled with gooseflesh in the cool air, and she wanted to shift her bare feet on the stone floor, which was more than cool. Perfect composure. She stood still, back straight, hands at her sides, and breathed evenly. Perfect composure. Light, help her. She refused to fail just because of Elaida. She refused! But that lump of ice in her belly spread its chill along her bones. She let none of it show. A perfect mask of composure.

The air in the opening of the ring suddenly turned to a sheet of white. It seemed somehow whiter than the wool of her skirts, whiter than snow or the finest paper, yet rather than reflect the stand-lamps, it seemed to absorb some of their light, making the chamber grow dim. And then, the tall oval ring began to revolve slowly on its base, without the slightest sound of stone grating against whatever it was made of.

No one spoke. They did not need to. She knew what must be done. Unwavering, at least on the outside, she walked toward the turning ring at a steady pace, neither hurrying nor hanging back. She *would* pass, whatever Elaida did. She would! She stepped into the whiteness and through, and….

…Wondered where in the Light she was and how she had come there. She was standing in a plain stone corridor lined with stand-lamps, and the only door, at the far end, stood open on sunlight. In fact, the only way out. Behind her was a smooth wall. Very strange. She was certain she had never seen this place before. And why was she there…*unclothed*? Only the certainty that she must display absolute calm kept her from covering herself with her hands. Anyone might walk in through that far door at any moment, after all. Suddenly she noticed a dress lying on a narrow table halfway down the hall. She was positive neither table nor dress had been there a moment earlier, but things did not suddenly appear from thin air. She thought she was certain of that.

Fighting not to hurry, she walked to the table and found a full set of garments. The slippers were embroidered black velvet, the white shift and stockings of the finest silk, the dress of only slightly heavier material, in a dark, shimmering green, well cut and meticulously sewn. Bars of red, green and white, each two inches tall, made a narrow line of color down the front of the dress from the high neck to below knee-level. How could a dress with her own House colors be here? She could not recall the last time she had worn a dress in that style, which was very odd, for surely it had passed out of fashion no more than a year or two ago. Her memory seemed full of holes. Chasms. Still, once she was clothed again, looking over her shoulder to do up the tiny mother-of-pearl buttons by her reflection in the stand-mirror…. Where had that come from? No, best not to worry over what seemed beyond explanation. The garments fit as though her own seamstress had measured her. Once she was dressed, she began to feel every inch the

Lady Moiraine Damodred. Only having her hair arranged in elaborate coils on the sides of her head could have made it more so. When had she begun wearing her hair loose? No matter. Inside Cairhien, only a handful of people could order Moiraine Damodred. Most obeyed her commands. She had no doubt she could maintain whatever serenity was necessary. Not now.

The door at the end of the hallway opened onto a large, circular courtyard surrounded by tall brick arches supporting a columned walk. Gilded spires and domes suggested a palace, yet there was no one in sight. All lay silent and still beneath a clear spring sky. Spring, or a cool summer day, perhaps. She could not even remember what time of year it was! But she remembered *who* she was, the Lady Moiraine, who had been raised in the Sun Palace, and that was sufficient. She paused only long enough to locate the six-pointed star, made of polished brass set into the paving stones in the center of the courtyard, and, gathering her skirts, stepped outside. She moved as one born in a palace, head high, unhurrying.

At her second step, the dress vanished, leaving her in her shift. That was impossible! By force of will, she continued her regal walk. Serene. Confident. Two more steps, and her shift melted away. By the time silk stockings and lace garters went, halfway to the shiny brass star, they seemed a grievous loss. That made no sense, but at least they had been *some* covering. A steady pace. Serene and confident.

Three men strolled out from one of the brick arches, bulky, unshaven fellows in rough-woven coats, the sort who wasted their days drinking in taverns or the common rooms of inns. Certainly not men who would be allowed to wander inside a palace. Color touched her checks even before they noticed her and began leering. Ogling *her*! Anger flashed in her, and she suppressed it. Serenity. A steady movement, neither hurrying nor hanging back. It had to be so. She did not know why, only that it must be.

One of the men raked his fingers through his greasy hair as though to straighten it, making a greater mess in the process. Another straightened his ragged coat. They began sauntering toward her, oily smirks twisting their faces. She had no fear of them, just the burning consciousness that these…these…*ruffians*…were seeing her without a stitch—without a single stitch!—yet she dared not channel until she reached the star. Utter calm and a steady pace. Deep-buried anger twitched and strained, but she held it down.

Her foot touched the brass star, and she wanted to gasp with relief. Instead, she turned to face the three louts and, embracing *saidar,* channeled

Air in the required weave. A solid wall of Air, three paces high, flashed into being around them, and she tied it off. That was allowed. It rang with the sound of steel when one of them struck it.

There was a six-pointed star gleaming in the brickwork at the top of the very arch the men had come out of. She was certain it had not been there earlier, yet it certainly was now. Walking at a steady pace became difficult passing the wall of Air, and she was glad she still held the Power. By the curses and shouts she could hear from inside it, the men were attempting to climb out by scrambling atop one another's shoulders. Again, she was not afraid of them. Just of them seeing her naked again. Color stained her cheeks once more. It was very hard not to pick up her step. But she concentrated on that, on keeping her face smooth and unruffled however red.

Stepping through the arch, she turned, ready in case they….

Light, where was she? And why was she…*unclothed*? Why was she holding *saidar*? She released it uneasily as well as reluctantly. She knew she had completed the first weave of one hundred she must make, out there in that empty courtyard. She knew that much and no more. Except that she must go on.

Luckily, a set of garments lay on the floor just inside the arch. They were rough wool and thick, the stockings scratchy, yet they fit as though made for her. Even the heavy leather shoes. Ugly things, but she put them on.

It was very strange, given that what had seemed a palace courtyard lay behind her, but the doorless corridor she walked along was rough-dressed stone, lit by lamps set in iron brackets high on the walls. More suited to a fortress than a palace. It was not entirely doorless, of course; it could not be. She had to go on, and that meant she had to go *somewhere*. Even odder than the corridor was what the lone doorway at the far end revealed.

A tiny village lay before her, a dozen small thatch-roofed houses and ramshackle barns, apparently abandoned in a dire drought. Warped doors creaked on their hinges as the wind blew dust along the single dirt street beneath a pitiless noonday sun. The heat struck her like a hammer, drenching her in sweat before she had gone ten paces. She was suddenly glad for the stout shoes; the ground was rocky, and might well have burned her in slippers. One stone well stood in the middle of what might once have been called the village green, a patch of dry dirt with scattered tufts of desiccated grass. On the cracked green tiles that made a rim around the well, where once men and women had stood to draw water, someone had painted a six-pointed star in red paint now faded pale and chipped.

As soon as she stepped onto that star, she began to channel. Air and Fire, then Earth. As far as she could see lay parched fields and twisted, bare-branched trees. Nothing moved in that landscape. How had she come here? However it had happened, she wanted to be away from this dead place. Suddenly, she was ensnared in blackclaw bushes, the dark inch-long thorns driving through her woolens, pricking her cheeks, her scalp. She did not bother with thinking it was impossible. She just wanted out. Every piercing burned, and she could feel blood trickling from some. Calm. She must display complete calm. Unable to move her head, she tried to feel for a way to pull at least a few of the tangled brown branches away, and very nearly gasped as sharp points dug into her flesh. Fresh blood dribbled down her arms. Calm. She could channel other weaves than what was required, but how to get rid of these cursed thorns? Fire was useless; the bushes looked dry as tinder, and burning them would envelop her in flames, too. She continued weaving while she thought, of course. Spirit, then Air. Spirit followed by Earth and Air together. Air, then Spirit and Water.

Something moved on one of the branches, a small dark shape on eight legs. A memory drifted up from somewhere, and her breath caught in spite of herself. Keeping her face smooth strained her abilities to the utmost. The death's-head spider came from the Aiel Waste. How did she know that? Its name came from more than the gray marking on its back that resembled a human skull. One bite could sicken a strong man for days. Two could kill him.

Still weaving the useless snarl of the Five Powers—why *would* she want to weave such a thing? but she must—still weaving, she swiftly divided the flows and touched the spider with a tiny but very intricate weave of Fire. The thing flashed to ash so quickly it did not so much as scorch the branch. It would not take much to set the bushes alight. Before she could feel relief, however, she spotted another spider crawling toward her, and killed it with that small weave, and then another, and another. Light, how many were there? Her eyes, the only part of her that could move, searched hurriedly, and almost everywhere they lit, she found another death's-head, crawling toward her. Every one she saw, she killed, but so many where her eyes could find them begged the question. How many were below her sight? Or behind her? Calm!

Burning spiders as rapidly as she could locate them, she began to weave faster at that great useless lump. In several places, thin tendrils of smoke rose from blackened spots on the branches. Holding her face in a smooth, frozen mask, she wove faster and faster. Dozens more spiders died, and more tendrils of smoke rose, some thicker. Once the first flame showed, it would spread like the wind. Faster. Faster.

The last threads fell into place in the worthless weave, and as soon as she stopped weaving, the blackclaw bushes vanished. They were simply gone! The thorn-pricks were not, but they hardly concerned her right then. She very much wanted to scramble out of her clothes and shake them out thoroughly. Using flows of Air. The spiders on the bushes had disappeared with the bushes, but what about any that might have crawled onto her dress? Or inside it? Instead, she searched for another six-pointed star, and found it carved above the door of one of the thatch-roofed houses. Once inside, she could search her clothing. Calmly. She stepped through into pitch blackness.

And found herself wondering where she was and how she had gotten there. Why was she dressed in a farmer’s woolens, and why was she bleeding as though she had rolled in a thornbush? She knew that she had completed two of the one hundred weaves she must make, and nothing more. Not even where the first had been made. Nothing except that the way she must go lay through this house. She did look back at the bleak landscape behind her.

All she could see ahead was a faint patch of light across the room. Strange; she was sure the windows had been unshuttered. Perhaps that glow indicated some way out, a crack beside a door, perhaps. She could have made a light, but she must not embrace the Power again yet. Darkness held no fears for her, but she walked carefully to avoid bumping into anything. Nothing impeded her, though. For nearly a quarter of an hour she walked, with the patch of light slowly growing larger, before realizing that what she saw was a doorway. A quarter of an hour, in a house she could have walked around twice in a quarter of that. A very peculiar place, this. A dream, she would have thought, had she not known it was not.

It took almost as long again to reach the doorway, which opened onto a scene as strange as that long walk. A solid wall of massive stones, five paces high and thirty on a side, surrounded a stone-paved square, but she saw nothing beyond it, not one building, not a tree. Nor were there any gates or doors; the one she had come out of was gone when she glanced back. A very casual glance, with her face holding its mask of calm as though it were carved. The air was moist and spring-like, the sky bright and clear save for a few drifting white clouds, yet that failed to dent the ominous feel of the place.

The six-pointed star, a span across, was carved into the center of the square, and she walked toward it as close to quickly as she dared. Just before she reached it, a massive form in spiked mail pulled itself up on the wall and dropped down inside. It was as tall as an Ogier, but no amount of squinting could make it seem human, though the body was human in form. A wolf's jaws and twitching ears made a horror of a face otherwise that of a man. She had seen drawings of Trollocs, but never before one in the flesh. Shadowspawn born of the war that ended the Age of Legends, servants of the Dark One, Trollocs inhabited the Shadow-corrupted Blight along the Borderlands. Could she be in the Blight? Her blood chilled at the thought. Behind her, she heard the thud of boots landing heavily, and of hooves. Not all Trollocs had human feet. The wolf-muzzled creature drew a huge, scythe-curved sword that had been hanging on its back and began to run at her. Light, the thing was fast! She heard more running feet, running hooves. More Trollocs dropped over the wall ahead of her, faces marred with eagles' beaks and boars' tusked snouts.

One more step, and she was on the star. Straightaway, she embraced *saidar* and began to weave. The required weave first, but as soon as the first strands of Air, Earth and Spirit were laid down, she divided her flows, making a second weave, and a third, of Fire. There were a number of ways to produce balls of fire, and she chose the simplest. Throwing with both hands, she hurled them at the nearest Trollocs and spun, still weaving Fire. She had to pause in the more important weave, but so long as she was quick enough…. Light, there were a dozen Trollocs in the square with her, and more climbing over the walls! With both hands she threw, as fast as she could weave, aiming for those closest, and where her fireballs struck, they exploded, decapitating a creature with a ram's snout and horns, blowing a goat-horned Trolloc in two, ripping off legs. She felt no pity. Trollocs took human prisoners only for food.

Completing her spin, she was just in time to catch the major weave on the point of collapse. Just in time to hurl balls of fire that removed an eagle-beaked head, only paces away, and half the torso of a wolf-muzzled Trolloc that staggered across the edge of the star before toppling in a lifeless sprawl. It was not going to work. There were too many Trollocs, with more crossing the walls all the while, and she could not neglect the important weave even spinning as quickly as she could. There had to be a way. She *would* not fail! Somehow, the thought of being killed and eaten by Trollocs never entered into it. She would not fail; that was the whole.

Abruptly, the way came to her, and she smiled and began to hum the quickest court dance that she knew. Perhaps the way; a chance, in any case. The rapid steps took her around the rim of the star without ever requiring her to lose sight of the weave she had to complete above all else. After all, however quickly her feet moved, what could be more serene than a court dance, with her face properly smooth, as though she were dancing in the Sun Palace? She wove the Five Powers as fast as she could, faster than she had ever woven before, she was certain. In some way, the dancing helped, and the intricate weave began to take shape like the finest Mardina lace. Dancing, she wove, hurling fire with both hands, killing Shadowspawn with both hands. Sometimes they came so close that their blood spattered her face, sometimes so close that she had to dance out of their way as they fell, dance away from their down-curving swords, but she ignored the blood and danced.

The final weave fell into place, and she let the whole thing evaporate, but there were still Trollocs in the square. A quick step took her to the center of the star, where she danced in a tiny circle, back-to-back with an imaginary partner. Working three separate weaves at once had left her exhausted, but she summoned the strength to manage three again. Dancing, she hurled fire and called lightning from the sky, harrowing the square with explosions.

At last, nothing moved except for her, dancing. She circled three more times before she realized it and stopped. Stopped humming. There was an archway in the wall now, a shadowed opening with the star carved above it. Her heart turned to ice. An archway that led out to where the Trollocs had come from. Into the Blight. Only madmen entered the Blight willingly. Gathering her rough skirts, she made herself cross that charnel square toward the gate. It was the way she had to go.

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Chapter 10

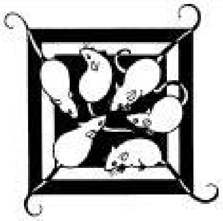

It Finishes

Ninety-nine weaves. She found the six-pointed star laid out in round river stones amid the towering dunes of a desert where the heat made her lightheaded and sucked the moisture from her skin before sweat had time to form. She found it drawn in the snow on a mountainside where gale winds beat at her and lightning struck all around, and in a great city of impossible towers where people babbled at her incomprehensibly. She found it in a night-shrouded forest, in a blackwater swamp, in a marsh of tall grass that cut like knives, on farms and plains, in hovels and palaces. Sometimes she found it while she was clothed, but her clothing frequently vanished, and just as often, she had none to begin. Sometimes she was suddenly bound with ropes or manacles, bent into contorted positions that twisted her joints, or hanging suspended by her wrists or ankles. She faced poisonous serpents and toothed water lizards three spans long, rampaging wild boars and hunting lions, hungry leopards and stampeding herds of wild cattle. She was stung by hornets and groundwasps, bitten by swarms of ants and horseflies and insects she did not recognize. Mobs carrying torches tried to drag her away for burning, Whitecloaks to hang her, robbers to stab her, footpads to strangle her. And every time, she forgot, and wondered how she had gotten a slash across her cheek, what had to be a sword-cut along her ribs, three gouges down her back that must have come from claws, other wounds and injuries and bruises that left her bleeding, limping. And she was weary. Oh, so weary, down to the bone. More than channeling even ninety-nine weaves could explain. Perhaps her wounds did. Ninety-nine weaves.

Clutching her plain woolen skirts, she hobbled to the six-pointed star, marked out in red tiles beside a burbling marble fountain in a small garden surrounded by a colonnade of thin, fluted columns. She could barely stand, and maintaining a smooth face took her to the limits of her ability. Pain throbbed in every part of her. No, agony was a better description than pain. But this was the last. Once it was done, this would be done as well, whatever this was, and she would be free to seek Healing. If she could find an Aes Sedai. Otherwise, a Reader would do.

This was another of the useless weaves, producing only a shower of shining colorful flecks if woven correctly. Incorrectly woven, it would redden her skin, painfully, as from a bad sunburn. She began very carefully.

Her father walked out of the colonnade right in front of her, in a long coat of a style at least a year out of fashion, with bars of the House Damodred colors marching from his high collar down to below his knees. He was very tall, for a Cairhienin man, just an inch short of six feet, with hair more gray than not worn in a club at the nape of his neck. He had always stood straight as a blade, except when bending to let her leap into his arms as a child, but now his shoulders were slumped. She could not understand why the sight of him made her suddenly teary.

"Moiraine," he said, worry adding lines to his gentle face, "you must come with me immediately. It is your mother, child. She is dying. There is just time, if you come now."

It was too much. She wanted to weep. She wanted to rush off with him. She did neither. The weave seemed to complete itself in a sudden blur, and gaily glittering flecks fell around them. The display seemed especially bitter. She opened her mouth to ask where her mother was, and saw the second star behind him, worked in red tile above the colonnade just where he had first appeared. A steady pace, without hesitation.

"I love you, Father," she said calmly. Light, how could she stay calm? But she must. "Please tell Mother that I love her with all my heart."

Brushing past him, she limped toward the second star. She thought he called after her, that he ran after and plucked at her sleeve, but her mind was a haze from the effort of keeping a smooth face and a steady tread. A stumble, really, but she neither hung back nor hurried. She stepped between the fluted columns, beneath the star, and….

…found herself staggering into a round white chamber, the reflected light of stand-lamps dazzling her eyes. Memory crashed back into her, nearly buckling her knees. Unable to think as that torrent flooded in on her, she managed three more steps before stumbling to a halt. She remembered everything, the making of every weave, where every injury had been received. All of her missteps, her frantic efforts to hold on to some outward semblance of serenity.

“It is done,” Merean intoned, clapping her hands together with a loud crack. “Let no one ever speak of what has passed here. It is for us to share in silence with she who experienced it. It is done.” Again she clapped her hands loudly, the blue fringe of her shawl swinging. “Moiraine Damodred, you will spend tonight in prayer and contemplation of the burdens you will take up on the morrow, when you don the shawl of an Aes Sedai. It is done.” For a third time she clapped her hands together.

Gathering her skirts, the Mistress of Novices started for the doors, but the rest of the sisters came quickly to Moiraine. All except Elaida, she realized. Shawl wrapped around her as though she felt the coolness, Elaida was leaving with Merean.

“Will you accept Healing, child?” Anaiya asked. A hand taller than Moiraine, her plain features nearly overwhelmed agelessness and made her look more a farmer than an Aes Sedai despite her finely cut blue woolens with their intricate embroidery on the sleeves. “I don’t know why I ask. You’re not in as bad a state as some I’ve seen, but bad enough.”

“I…passed?” she said in amazement.

“If blushes counted as breaking calm, no one would ever reach the shawl,” Anaiya replied, adjusting her own with a laugh.

Light, they had seen everything! Of course, they would have to, but she remembered a stunningly handsome man who had snatched her up and begun kissing her quite thoroughly just as she started the forty-third weave, and her face reddened. They had *seen* that!

“You really should Heal the child before she falls over, Anaiya,” Verin said. Short and dreamy-eyed, she was quite plump in her fine russet wool and brown-fringed shawl. Moiraine liked Verin, yet she felt a chill at the sight of her clothing in the Brown sister’s hands.

“I suppose I should at that,” Anaiya said, and clasping Moiraine’s head between her hands, she channeled.

These injuries were far worse than the welts and bruises Elaida had given, and this time Moiraine felt as though she were caked in ice rather than dunked in cold water. When it passed, though, all of the cuts and gouges and gashes were gone. The weariness remained, seeming even heavier than before. And she was starving. How long had she been down here? Her carefully learned sense of time seemed utterly scrambled.

One touch at her pouch told her the book was still there, but she could do no more in front of the sisters. Besides, she very much wanted to be clothed once more. But there was a question she wanted answered. Her tests had not been simply a matter of chance, completely a product of the *ter'angreal*. The continual assaults on her modesty left no doubts. "The last test was very cruel," she said, pausing with her dress ready to lift over her head. Pausing to watch their faces.

"It is not to be spoken of, however cruel," Anaiya said firmly. "Not ever, to anyone."

But Yuan, a slim Yellow, half glanced toward the door, displeasure in her gray eyes. So. Merean had been no part of the test. Elaida *had* tried to make her fail, and harder than anyone else, or the Arafellin sister would not have disapproved. So.

The other three sisters went their own way, but Anaiya and Verin escorted her back above ground, using a different route than she had come down by. When they left her, she went to the room where she and Siuan had spent so many days copying names, and found two clerks doing the work, harassed-looking women who were none too pleased to be interrupted with questions about an Accepted of whom they knew nothing. Could it be? Oh, Light, could it?

She hurried to the Accepted's quarters—and was three times called down for it by sisters; she was still only Accepted, until tomorrow—she all but ran, and found Siuan's room and her own both empty. Some of the name-taking excursions were ending earlier, now, and it was well past midday, so she searched through the other rooms until she found Sheriam and Myrelle sitting before the fire in Myrelle's room, where the small rug had a ragged red fringe and the washbasin and pitcher were blue.

"Merean came for Siuan a little while ago," Myrelle said excitedly. "For her test."

"Did you…? Didyou pass?" Sheriam asked.

"Yes," she replied, and felt a touch of sadness at the sudden withdrawal in their faces. They even stood, hands going to skirts, almost making to curtsy. A gulf had opened between them. She was still Accepted, until tomorrow, but friendship was at an end, until they also gained the shawl. They did not ask her to leave, yet neither did they ask her to stay, and they seemed relieved when she said she wanted to go to her room to wait alone for Siuan's return.

Once in her room, she examined the book in her belt pouch, but nothing indicated that it had been touched, no pages creased by someone reading carelessly. Which did not mean no one *had* read. But then, no one would have know what they were looking at unless they knew what Moiraine and Siuan did. And Tamra's searchers. She offered a silent prayer of thanks that none of them had been among the sisters testing her. So far as she knew.

A serving woman, or perhaps a novice, had laid a fire on the hearth and placed a tray on her small table, and removing the crisp white cloth that covered it revealed a larger meal than she thought she had ever eaten in her life, piled slices of roasted beef, turnips with a cream sauce, broad beans with crumbly white goat cheese, cabbage with pine nuts. There was a round loaf of crusty brown bread, and a huge pot of tea. The tray must only just have been left, because everything was still warm. The Tower had a way of timing things to a nicety.

Much too much food, yet she ate every shred, even the bread. The whole loaf. Her whole body yearned for sleep, but that would never do. If Siuan failed, and survived failing—Light, let her live, at least—she would be brought back only long enough to gather her possessions and say her goodbyes. Moiraine refused to take the risk. So she curled up on her bed, but with a small leather-bound book. *Hearts of Flame* might be unsuitable for a novice, but it was one of *her* favorites. And Siuan's. Now, she stared at the first page for minutes before realizing she had not read a word She got up to pace awhile before taking up the book again, yawning, but she still could not manage to hold a sentence. Siuan *would* come back. She would *not* be put out of the Tower. But there were so many ways to misstep, so many ways to fail. No! Siuan would pass. She had to. It would be unfair for Moiraine to reach the shawl and not Siuan. She knew her friend would be a better Aes Sedai than she could ever manage.

Throughout the afternoon she heard the sounds of other Accepted returning, some laughing, others complaining, all loudly. The noise always turned to stillness very quickly, though, as word spread that she had been tested and had passed, that she was in her room. Tomorrow she would be raised Aes Sedai, yet they behaved as though she already was, moving in a hush so as not to disturb her. The hour for supper came and passed. She actually thought she could eat a little something in spite of her huge, and late, dinner, but she did not go to the dining hall. For one thing, she doubted she could bear the stares of the others or, worse, their downcast gazes. For another, Siuan might return while she was gone.

She was on her bed, yawning and making yet another attempt at reading, when Siuan walked in, her expression unreadable.

"Did you…?" Moiraine began, and could not finish.

"It was as easy as falling off a boat," Siuan answered. "Into a school of silverpike. I almost swallowed my heart when I remembered this…" she slapped her belt pouch, where she also carried her book of names, "but after that, it went well." Her whole face suddenly turned bright red. She managed a smile through it. "We'll be raised together, Moiraine."

Moiraine leaped to her feet, and laughing, they danced hand in hand for joy. She ached to ask what had happened in Siuan's test. That furious blush—from Siuan!—begged intriguing questions, but…. To be shared in silence, and only then with the women who had shared it with you. How long since they two had failed to share everything? Even here, the shawl brought separations.

"You must be starved," Moiraine said, stopping the dance. She was so tired, she had begun to stagger, and Siuan was not much steadier. "And there must be a tray waiting in your room." She indicated the one on her table. It might have been brought up to her on this special occasion, but she was expected to carry the dirty dishes down herself. And feel lucky if she did not have to wash them, for waiting so long.

"I could eat an oar, but there's better than food in my room." Siuan grinned suddenly. "I got six mice from one of the grooms this morning."

"We are practically sisters," Moiraine protested. "We cannot put mice in someone's bed. Anyway, beyond improper, it would not be fair. Nearly everyone has been out for most of the day, and they must be as tired as you are."

"Practically sisters isn't the same as being, Moiraine. Think. It's our last chance. It really won't be proper once we have the shawl." Siuan's grin faded to grimness. "And Elaida hasn't been out of the Tower that I know. Mice are a small repayment for those beatings, Moiraine. We owe her. We owe her!"

Moiraine drew breath. Without Elaida, she might never have practiced trying to weave faster, and without that, she might well have failed. But she suspected her father had not been Elaida's only special addition to her test. Too often, her weaknesses had been laid bare by someone who knew them particularly well. The woman had tried to *make* her fail.

"Only after you have eaten," she said.

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Chapter 11

Just Before Dawn

By the light of a single lamp and the low fire on her narrow hearth, Moiraine dressed herself carefully, making an effort to stifle her yawns. It needed effort. A night of contemplation meant a night of no sleep; her eyes were grainy, her limbs leaden. Well, sleep would have been beyond her in any case, simply because of what lay ahead this morning. Oh, why had she not argued Siuan out of that mad prank? It was a question she had asked herself often during the night, and as foolish this time as the first. She rarely won arguments with Siuan.

If only Siuan were with her now. Contemplating the burdens and duties of an Aes Sedai turned inevitably to the task Moiraine meant to take up, and the scale of that search had loomed larger and larger as the night went on, until it reared before her like unscalable Dragonmount itself. Company would have helped. But the ritual was explicit. Each must be alone when they came for her. Missteps now brought no penalties beyond embarrassment, and likely a reputation as flighty dunces that they might never shake off—of course, they might already have achieved the reputation—yet it had seemed best to be beyond reproach as far as they could.

Once dressed, she laid out her few belongings on the bed, but except for a change of shift and stockings, she left the remaining garments in the wardrobe. They would be washed and put away against a novice gaining the ring who could wear them. None among those currently in white would be able to wear those dresses, without huge alterations, anyway, but no matter; the White Tower was patient. The little book was snug in her belt pouch, the safest place she could think of. She had just put her small rosewood box on the bed, containing the few pieces of jewelry she had brought with her to the Tower, when a knock came at the door, three firm raps. She jumped at the noise, and her heart fluttered. Suddenly, she was almost as nervous as before the test. It was very hard not to run to answer. Instead, she checked her hair carefully in the mirror on the washstand, used her hairbrush to tame a few strands that really did not need taming, laid the brush on the bed and only then went to the door.

Seven sisters awaited her in the night, one from each Ajah, all wearing their vine-covered shawls over silks or fine woolens, their faces ageless masks. So the ritual required. Elaida was the Red, but Moiraine managed to meet the woman's stern gaze levelly, her features smooth. Well, as smooth as she could make them. Another hour, or just a little more, and they would be equals, at least to some degree. Never again would Elaida be able to make her quail.

Without a word, she stepped outside, closing the door behind her for the last time, and wordlessly they formed a ring around her, escorting her along the dark gallery to Siuan's door. Silence was required. Jeaine, a slim, copper-skinned Domani, knocked three times, the green fringe of her shawl swaying. Siuan opened the door so quickly she must have been waiting on her toes for the third knock. The ring of sisters parted to let her in, and her eyebrow twitched at the sight of Elaida, but at least she did not grimace, the Light be thanked. Moiraine clenched her jaw to suppress a yawn. She *would* finish without breaking the proprieties.

With the soft brush of their slippers on floor tiles they passed along corridors of the Tower where nothing moved save themselves and the flames flickering atop the stand-lamps. Moiraine was surprised not to see any servants. Much of their work was done in the hours before the sisters rose or after they retired for the night. In silence they climbed down into the levels beneath the Tower, along well-lighted passages and past dark. The doors to the chamber where she and Siuan had been tested stood open wide, but there in the corridor, they all stopped, the ring of Aes Sedai breaking apart to form a line behind the two of them as they turned to face the gaping doorway.

"Who comes here?" Tamra's voice demanded from within.

"Moiraine Damodred," Moiraine answered clearly, and if her face remained smooth, her heart fluttered. With joy, this time. Siuan spoke her own name at the same instant, defiance touching her tone, if only lightly. She insisted that Elaida would still find some way to rob them of the shawl, if she could.

Their teachers had never brought up the matter of precedence—perhaps they had never expected the two of them to march this far in complete lockstep—but Moiraine heard someone's breath catch behind her, and when Tamra spoke again, it was after a pause so slight that she might have imagined it.

"For what reason do you come?"

"To swear the Three Oaths and thereby claim the shawl of an Aes Sedai," they answered together. Breach of the proprieties or not, they intended to do everything together this morning insofar as possible.

"By what right do you claim this burden?"

"By right of having made the passage, submitting myself to the will of the White Tower."

"Then enter, if you dare, and bind yourself to the White Tower."

Hand in hand, they entered. Together. A smooth face and a steady tread, neither hurrying nor lagging back. The will of the Tower awaited them in the flesh.

Tamra, in pale brocaded blue with the Amyrlin's striped stole around her neck, stood framed by the oval *ter'angreal,* its colors slowly shifting through silver and gold, blue and green, with Aeldra at her side in a darker shade of blue, holding a black velvet cushion in both hands. Along the circular wall stood the shawl-draped Sitters in the Hall of the Tower, grouped by Ajah, and in front of each three Sitters, two more sisters of that Ajah, shawled and each with another shawl folded over one arm. Expressionless eyes watched Siuan and Moiraine cross the floor.

The *ter'angreal* presented the first problem to their plan. The tall oval was too narrow for both to pass through at once, not without squeezing together, and that hardly conformed to the required dignity. This was one argument Moiraine had won. Siuan gave her a look—it seemed impossible those blue eyes could turn sharp without altering her smooth expression, yet they did—and, gathering her skirts, stepped through with Moiraine following behind. Side by side they knelt in front of the Amyrlin Seat.

From the velvet cushion Aeldra held, Tamra took the Oath Rod, a smooth ivory-white cylinder a foot long and only slightly thicker than Moiraine's wrist. A *ter'angreal,* the Oath Rod would bind them to the Three Oaths, and thus to the Tower.

For an instant, Tamra hesitated, as though uncertain which of them to bind first, but only for an instant. Moiraine promptly raised her hands in front of her, palms upward, and Tamra placed the Rod there. This was the price Siuan had exacted, a favor to be granted, for Moiraine's yielding precedence through the oval. Needless to say, she had not revealed her “favor” until Moiraine accepted. She would become Aes Sedai first by minutes. It was so unfair!

But there was no time for thinking of how she should have known Siuan was up to something when she gave in so easily. The glow of *saidar* surrounded Tamra, and she touched the Oath Rod with a thin flow of Spirit.

Moiraine closed her hands around the Rod. It felt like glass, only somehow smoother. “Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I vow that I will speak no word that is not true.” The Oath settled on her, and suddenly the air seemed to press harder against her skin. *Red is white,* she thought. *Up is down.* She could still think a lie, but her tongue would not work to utter it now. “Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I vow that I will make no weapon for one man to kill another.” The pressure grew abruptly; it felt as though she had been sewn into an invisible garment, much too tight, that molded her from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet. To her chagrin, sweat popped out on her forehead, yet she managed to keep her face calm. “Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I vow that I will never use the One Power as a weapon except against Shadowspawn, or in the last extreme of defending my life or that of my Warder or another sister.” That garment shrank to still greater snugness, and she breathed heavily through her nose, clamping her jaws to keep it from becoming a gasp. Invisible and utterly flexible, yet oh, so tight! This feeling that her flesh was being compressed would fade, but not entirely for a whole year. Light! She wondered how Elaida had enjoyed taking that last oath, with its mention of Warders. The Three Oaths remained unchanged whatever Ajah you intended to join. Thinking of that helped, a little.

“It is half done,” the Amyrlin intoned, “and the White Tower is graven on your bones.” But she did not complete the ceremony. Instead, she took the Rod and placed it in Siuan’s hands. Moiraine fought down a smile. She could have kissed Tamra.

There was no sweating or gasping from Siuan. She rendered the Oaths in a clear, strong voice, never so much as blinking as each settled onto her. No physical hardship could faze Siuan, who had never wept until after Elaida was gone, had never shed a tear until they left Merean’s study. Siuan had the heart of a lion.

“It is half done, and the White Tower is graven on your bones,” Tamra said, replacing the Oath Rod on Aeldra’s cushion. “Rise now, Aes Sedai, and choose your Ajah, and all will be done that may be done under the Light.”

However much equanimity Siuan had shown swearing the Oaths, she moved no less stiffly than Moiraine as they rose and curtsied formally to Tamra, bending to kiss her Great Serpent ring.

Together, they walked toward the Blue sisters. Slowly, with as much grace as they could muster, and not holding hands; that would never have done, not now. Like any Accepted, they had often discussed which Ajah they might enter, arguing merits and faults as though they knew more than the surface, yet for the last year or more, those discussions had been merely to prove a choice already made. The Blue sought to right wrongs, which was not always the same as seeking justice, like Greens and Grays. “Seekers after Causes,” Verin had called Blues, and the capitals were there to be heard in her voice. Moiraine could not imagine belonging elsewhere. Siuan was smiling, which she should not have done. But then, so was she herself, she realized, and she could not make it go away.

Once their direction became clear, the sisters from other Ajahs began making their courtesies to the Amyrlin and departing, first the Yellows, then the Greens, gliding from the chamber with their Sitters leading the way in regal procession. The Browns left, and then the Whites. What set the order, Moiraine did not know, but once the Reds were gone, the last, Tamra glided from the chamber after them. What passed here now was for the Blue alone. Aeldra remained to watch.

The three remaining Sitters gathered around as copper-skinned Leane, willowy and as tall as most men, bent to lay the blue-fringed shawl around Moiraine’s shoulders and Rafela, slim, dark and pretty, performed the same office for Siuan. Neither had the ageless face yet, but they wore dignity like cloaks. The Sitters were dignity incarnate.

Stout Eadyth, with white hair spilling to her waist, kissed Siuan lightly on both cheeks and then Moiraine, each time murmuring, “Welcome home, sister. We have waited long for you.” Anlee, grave-faced and graying in green-slashed blue and almost as many rings and necklaces as Gitara had worn, repeated the kisses and the words, and then Lelaine, whose solemn expression broke into a smile as she spoke. Lelaine became a great beauty when she smiled.

"Welcome home, sister," Leane said, bending once more to kiss Moiraine. "We have waited long for you."

Aeldra also kissed their cheeks and spoke words, then surprisingly added, "You each owe me a pie, made with your own hands. It's customary among us for the sixth sister who gives you the welcome kiss."

Moiraine blinked and exchanged glances with Siuan. Was the ceremony done so abruptly? A *pie*? She doubted Aeldra would be able to eat hers. She had never cooked anything in her life.

Eadyth clicked her tongue and adjusted her shawl along her arms. "Really, Aeldra," she said firmly. "Just because these two have chosen to step beyond the bounds in so many ways is no reason for you to forget *your* dignity. Now." Long blue silk fringe swung as she raised her hands. "I charge you, Leane Sharif, escort Moiraine Damodred that the White Tower may see that a Blue sister has come home. I charge you, Rafela Cindal, escort Siuan Sanche that the White Tower may see that a Blue sister has come home."

Gathering Aeldra, Eadyth led the other Sitters from the chamber, but it seemed the rest of them were not entirely done.

"Custom is a precious thing that should not be allowed to wither," Rafela said, eyeing Siuan and her each in turn. "Will you proceed to the Blue Ajah quarters clad in the Light, as ancient custom required?" Siuan clutched at her shawl as though she never meant to remove it, and Rafela added hastily, "And in your shawl, of course. To show that you need no protection beyond the Light and the shawl of an Aes Sedai."

Moiraine realized she was clutching her own shawl in identical fashion, and made her hands relax, stroking the silk softly with her fingers. The Three Oaths had made her Aes Sedai, yet she had not felt Aes Sedai until the shawl was put onto her shoulders. But if she was required to go out in public wearing nothing else…! Oh, Light, now her face was turning hot! She had *never* seen an Aes Sedai blush.

"Oh, do give over, Rafela," Leane said with a quick, reassuring smile shared between Moiraine and Siuan. She had been Accepted with them for a time, and by the warmth of that smile it seemed their friendship might be taking up where it had left off. "A thousand years ago, women came to be raised clad in the Light and left the same way—everyone here would have been—but the only part of that custom left is keeping the hallways clear until you reach the Ajah's quarters," she explained briskly. Leane did everything briskly. “I doubt anyone but a few Browns even remembers the custom. Rafela is half mad with trying to bring back dead customs. Don’t deny it, Rafela. Remember the apple blossoms? Even the Greens don’t remember what battle that was supposed to commemorate.”

Strangely, though Rafela had reached the shawl a year before Leane, she only sighed. “Customs should not be forgotten,” she said, but without any force.

Leane shook her head. “Come along. I know you must want your breakfast, but that has to wait on a few things, including this walk. Which will not include all of the public corridors,” she added, cocking an eyebrow at Rafela. “Nor will we stop at each Ajah’s quarters calling for them to come out and see a sister of the Blue.” Shaking her head, she herded them through the doors, channeling briefly to swing them shut. “I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life. You should have been the one blushing, Rafela. Verin told her she had such a sweet voice, she should take up singing. One Red came out to tell us to stop caterwauling and go away. And the Greens! Some Greens have a…rough…sense of humor.” Whether or not Rafela had blushed then, color tinged her cheeks faintly now.

How rough had those Greens’ sense of humor been, Moiraine wondered. At least Rafela’s blushes made her stop worrying about her own. Of course the sisters would present a different face to each other than they did to those who did not wear the shawl. Which she did, now. It made her feel inches taller, even if Leane did tower head and shoulders above her. The other woman had shortened her stride, yet Moiraine still had to trot to keep up as they climbed back up through the basements to Tower corridors empty of life save for them. The hallways were seldom crowded, but the absence of people made them seem cavernous. Imagining the Tower completely empty became all too easy. It would be, one day, if matters continued as they were.

“Is the ceremony done with this walk?” she asked. “The Blue Ajah part, I mean. May we ask questions?” She supposed she should have asked that first, but she wanted the sound of voices to chase away ill thoughts.

“Not completely done,” Leane replied, “but you can ask whatever you like. Some questions, though, can’t be answered till you’ve met the First Selector, the head of our Ajah.”

“You must never reveal that title,” Rafela put in quickly.

Moiraine nodded, though she already knew that. Accepted were taught that every Ajah had secrets, as Rafela had to be aware. More than one sister had told Moiraine that she would have almost as much to learn once she gained the shawl as before. She intended to step very carefully until she learned more.

“I have a question,” Siuan said with a frown. “Are there many customs like this pie? I can cook, but my eldest sister did all the baking.”

“Oh, yes,” Rafela said happily, and she regaled them with arcane customs while they walked along the Tower’s first level, some as silly as wearing blue stockings when leaving Tar Valon, some as sensible as refraining from marriage. Aes Sedai did marry now and then, but Moiraine could not see how that could end other than poorly. The torrent of information continued as they climbed one of the spiraling hallways, only stopping when they reached the plain, polished doors that led into the Blue quarters.

“You can hear the others later,” Rafela said, shifting her shawl down to her arms. “Be sure to learn them all quickly. Some are enforced as strictly as Tower law. I think they all should be, but at least some are.”

“Give over, Rafela,” Leane said, and she and the dark sister each took a brass door handle and pushed one of the doors open.

They had not channeled. Perhaps that was another custom. Riding would be uncomfortable for a few days, and she intended using the time until she could leave the city to memorize those customs, at least those that were enforced. She was not about to have the beginning of her search delayed by something as ridiculous as not wearing all blue on the first day of the month. Light, surely they did not enforce that one. Safer to be sure, though.

She and Siuan stepped through the doorway, and stopped in surprise. The Blue was the second smallest Ajah, after the White, but every Blue sister currently in Tar Valon was lining the main corridor, all save Aeldra formally wrapped in their shawls.

* * *

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Chapter 12

Entering Home

Anaiya was the first to step forward and kiss their cheeks, saying, “Welcome home, sister. We have waited long for you. Aeldra told me how she stole my pies,” she added, giving her shawl a twitch of irritation that was obvious pretense, betrayed by a laugh. “It wasn’t fair of her to take advantage of her position that way.”

“Or mine, perhaps, if I’d been a trifle quicker,” Kairen said after giving the formal greeting. A beautiful woman, and not overly tall, her smile belied the coolness of her steady blue eyes. “May we at least hope you two bake poorly? Aeldra likes pranks almost as much as you two, and it would be nice to see her repaid properly.”

Moiraine laughed and hugged Siuan. She could not help it. She truly had come home. *They* had come home.

The Blue quarters held none of the flamboyance of the Green’s and Yellow’s, though they were not so plain as the Brown’s or the White’s. The brightly colored winter wall hangings along the main corridor were scenes of spring gardens and fields of wildflowers, brooks running over stones and birds in flight. The stand-lamps against the pale walls were gilded, but quite simple in decoration. Only the floor tiles, in every shade of blue from a pale morning sky to the deep violet of twilight and laid in a wavy pattern, gave any hint of grandeur. Moving slowly along those waves, she and Siuan received the welcome kiss thirty-nine more times before reaching Eadyth and the other two Sitters.

“Rooms have been prepared for you,” the round-faced sister told them, “along with proper clothing and some breakfast, but change and eat quickly. There are things I must tell you, things you must know before it is really safe for you to set foot outside our quarters. Or even to walk within it, in truth, though most are tolerant of a new sister. Cabriana, will you show them the way?”

A pale-eyed sister, light golden hair hanging almost to her waist, spread her blue-slashed skirts in a slight curtsy. Not all sisters taught classes by far, and Moiraine did not recognize her. There was a fierce directness in her gaze suitable for a Green, yet her tone was quite meek as she said, “As you say, Eadyth.” And to Siuan and Moiraine, almost as meekly, “Will you come with me, please?” It was very odd, that blend of fierceness and…well, docility seemed the closest description.

“Is she the First Selector?” Moiraine asked cautiously as soon as they were out of Eadyth’s earshot. And of anyone else’s, she hoped. The sisters who had gathered were dispersing by ones and twos, removing their shawls.

“Oh, yes,” Anaiya said, joining them with Kairen. Cabriana had her mouth open to answer, but she closed it without a trace of protest at being overridden. “It’s unusual for the First Selector also to be a Sitter,” Anaiya went on, “but unlike some, we Blues like to make full use of ability.”

Folding her shawl and laying it across one arm, Kairen nodded. “Eadyth is perhaps the most capable Blue in the last hundred years, but if she were a Brown or a White, they’d let her potter off wherever she wanted.”

“Oh, yes,” Cabriana said, making a tssking sound. “Some of the Brown Sitters have been disgraceful. For Sitters, at least. But Browns always let their minds wander. In any case, you may rest assured that whatever talents you have, a use will be found for them.”

Disliking the sound of that, Moiraine exchanged a guarded glance with Siuan. Well, neither of them had any special abilities. But what danger was Eadyth going to warn them about? A danger even here. She wanted to ask the three sisters escorting them down the hallway, but she was certain the information had to come from Eadyth, and in private; otherwise she would simply have told them then and there. Light! Their new home might have as many undercurrents as the Sun Palace. A definite time for caution. A time to listen and observe and say little.

The apartments chosen for Siuan and her were side by side a little off the main corridor, each containing a spacious bedchamber, a large sitting room, a dressing room, and a study, with fireplaces of carved marble whose crackling fires had taken the chill from the air. The polished wall panels were bare, but patterned carpets, some fringed, from half a dozen countries lay on the blue-tiled floors. The furniture was disparate, too, here a table inlaid with mother-of-pearl in a fashion used in Cairhien a hundred years ago, there a chair with vine-carved legs from the Light alone knew where, and the lamps and mirrors in as many styles as there were lamps and mirrors, but nothing was chipped or cracked and every piece of wood or metal had been polished till it shone softly. The belongings they had left laid out in the Accepted's quarters had been brought up, and Moiraine's own brush and comb on the washstand, her blackwood lapdesk on the writing table in the study, her jewelry box on a side table in the bedchamber, already put her mark on her rooms.

"We thought you'd like to be close together," Anaiya said when they finished up in Moiraine's sitting room. Kairen and Cabriana stood flanking her on the scroll-worked carpet, and looking to her as often as at Siuan or Moiraine, as well. They talked among themselves with the ease of long friendship, yet Kairen and Cabriana clearly took their lead from Anaiya. It was quite subtle, but obvious to eyes trained in the Sun Palace. Not that it meant anything—in any group there was always one who took the lead—but Moiraine filed it away.

"You can choose other rooms, if you wish," Kairen added. "We have all too many empty, though I fear some are as dusty as the worst of the basements." She was leaving Tar Valon soon, had spoken casually of some business she had in Tear. Could she be one of Tamra's searchers? There was no way to know. Aes Sedai were always leaving the Tower, and others returning.

"If you want to change rooms, I can arrange for the cleaning," Cabriana said, gathering her skirts as if to see to it immediately. She sounded almost anxious! Why was she behaving so strangely? Plainly she was the low woman among the three, yet she acted the same way toward Siuan and her, too.

"Thank you, no." Fingering the lace edging a chair's cushion, she tried to say the rooms were very nice—the three sisters had seen to preparing everything, though the carpets and furnishings were a gift from the Ajah—but her tongue refused to form the lie, so she settled for, "These are more than adequate." Every last cushion in the rooms had lace ruffles, and so did the coverlets on the beds *and* the pillowcases. Some of the *ruffles* seemed to have ruffles! The rooms would be much more than adequate once she got rid of all those frills. Siuan had actually smiled at the lace on her bed, as though she would enjoy sleeping in a sea of froth. Moiraine shuddered at the thought.

She offered tea or hot spiced wine before realizing she had no idea how to procure either, but Anaiya said that they must be eager to change and have breakfast, with the other two nodding agreement, and they gathered their skirts together.

"Food can wait," Siuan said as soon as the door closed behind the three sisters. "Eadyth first. Have you winkled out any hint of what she has to tell us? It sounds like your Game of Houses, to me."

"Eadyth first, breakfast later," Moiraine agreed, though the smell of warm porridge and stewed apricots from the cloth-covered tray on a side table made her mouth water. "But I have no clue, Siuan. None." Yet it *was* reminiscent of *Daes Dae'mar*.

Four dresses of fine blue wool, plain but well cut, were hanging in the dressing room, two of them with skirts divided for riding, and she changed into one with a full skirt and left the banded Accepted's dress folded in the wicker laundry basket. The small notebook she transferred from the white belt pouch that would be taken away to the plain blue pouch she found in the capacious wardrobe. Even here, perhaps especially here, there seemed no safer place than on her own person. Unsurprisingly, the new dress fit perfectly. It was said the Tower knew more of its initiates than their seamstresses and hairdressers combined. Not that she had had either in some time, of course, a lack she intended to remedy. The seamstress, at least. She had grown accustomed to wearing her hair loose, but she would need more than four dresses before she left Tar Valon, and in better than wool. Silk was hardly cheap, but it did wear wonderfully.

From her carved jewelry box, she took her favorite piece, a *kesiera*. She had regretted not being able to wear that here, but even after six years her hands remembered how to weave the thin gold chain into her hair so the small sapphire hung in the middle of her forehead. Studying herself in a wall mirror with a scroll-worked wooden frame, she smiled. She might lack the ageless face yet, but now she looked the Lady Moiraine Damodred, and Lady Moiraine Damodred had navigated the Sun Palace where hidden currents could pull you under even at fifteen or sixteen. Now she was ready to navigate the currents here. Settling her blue-fringed shawl on her shoulders, she went in search of Siuan, and met her in the hall, wrapped in her own shawl and coming the other way.

The first sister they saw, Natasia, a slim Saldaean with dark tilted eyes and high cheekbones who was a lenient teacher, gave them directions to

Eadyth's rooms with a twist of distaste on her full lips. Moiraine wondered whether Natasia had some dislike for Eadyth, which it surely would be odd for her to display openly, but Eadyth herself imitated the expression with near exactness as she showed them to tall, cushioned chairs before her sitting room's broad fireplace, where flames danced. And then she stood warming her hands as though reluctant to speak. There was no offer of tea or wine, or any sort of welcome. Siuan fidgeted impatiently on the edge of her chair, but Moiraine schooled herself to stillness. With difficulty, but she did it. The tightness of the Three Oaths was particularly harsh, sitting. Be quiet, listen, and observe.

Eadyth's sitting room was larger than theirs, with a cornice carved in rolling waves, and two tapestries, of flowers and brightly colored birds, on the walls, though her stand-lamps were as plain. The massive furnishings were of dark wood inlaid with ivory and turquoise, except for one delicate little table that appeared to be carved ivory or bone. However long Eadyth had occupied these rooms, she had added few personal touches here, just a tall vase of glistening yellow Sea Folk porcelain, a wide bowl of hammered silver, and a pair of crystal figures, a man and a woman each reaching a hand toward the other, on the mantel above the fireplace. All of which told her nothing except that the white-haired sister had good taste and restraint. Be silent, listen, and observe.

Squirming on her seat cushion, Siuan appeared about to stand when Eadyth finally turned to face them. Folding her arms beneath her breasts, she took a deep breath. "For six years you have been taught that the second greatest rudeness is to speak directly of someone's strength in the One Power." Her mouth twisted again briefly. "In truth, I find it difficult to do so now, necessary though it is. For six years, you have been strongly discouraged from thinking of your own strength in the Power or anyone else's. Now, you must learn to compare your strength to that of every sister you meet. In time, it will become second nature, and you will do it without thought, but you must be very careful until you reach that point. If another sister stands higher than you in the Power, whatever her Ajah, you must defer to her. The higher she stands above you, the greater your deference. Failure in that is the third greatest rudeness, and third only by a hair. The most common reason for new sisters to be given penance is a misstep of that sort, and since the penance is set by the offended sister, it is seldom light. A month or two of Labor or Deprivation is the least you can expect.

Mortification of the Spirit and Mortification of the Flesh are not unheard of.”

Moiraine nodded slowly. Of course. That explained Elaida’s deference to Meilyn, and Rafela yielding to Leane. And Cabriana; Cabriana was not very strong at all. That thought came very hard. When the White Tower wanted to strongly discourage something, it was well and truly discouraged. Light, the Tower rooted something out of you, then made you use that very thing to determine precedence. What a tangle. At least she and Siuan were near identical in strength, and likely would be as they gained their full potential. They had moved in lockstep so far. It would have seemed unnatural if Siuan had been forced to defer to her.

“Do we have to obey them?” Siuan asked, finally giving in and standing, and Eadyth sighed heavily.

“I thought I was quite clear, Siuan. The higher she stands above you, the greater your deference. I truly dislike talking about this, so please don’t make me repeat myself. It works the other way around as well, of course, but remember that it doesn’t apply if your Ajah or the Tower has set someone above you. If you’re attached to an embassy, for example, you obey the Tower’s emissary as you would me, if she was barely allowed to test for Accepted. Now. Do you have that clear in your heads? Good. Because I myself feel an urgent need to clean my teeth.” And she hustled them from her rooms as if she really did intend to rush for the salt and soda.

“I was scared half out my wits,” Siuan said once they were back in the corridor, “but that wasn’t so bad. I thought we’d have to start at the bottom, but we’re not so far from the top already. In another five years, we’ll be close.” Whether or not they thought about it, everyone knew when they would reach their full strength; the length of time could vary considerably from woman to woman, but it was always a smooth climb in a straight line.

“I was frightened, too,” Moiraine said with a sigh, “but it is not so simple as you make it sound. At what point does deference become obedience? Even if she did not call it so, that is what she meant. We must observe the other sisters closely, and until we know for certain, we must err on the side of prudence. A month from now, I mean to be leagues from Tar Valon, not sweating on a farm across the river.”

Siuan snorted. “So we step carefully. What else have we been doing for six years? But it still could be worse. What say I bring my tray to your rooms and we breakfast together.”

Before they reached their rooms, however, another Aes Sedai intercepted them, a tall, square-faced woman in sky-blue silk with her steel-gray hair in a multitude of blue-beaded braids that hung to her waist. Moiraine had been certain that every Blue in the Tower had been at the welcome, but she did not recall seeing this sister ever before. She made herself aware of the woman's ability, her strength, and realized that it was nearly as great as her own and Siuan's would be eventually. Surely more than simple deference was required here. Should she curtsy? She settled for waiting politely with her hands folded at her waist.

"I am Cetalia Delarme," the sister said in a strong Taraboner accent, eyeing her up and down. "By your description, the pretty little porcelain doll, you are Moiraine."

Moiraine stiffened. A…pretty…little…porcelain…*doll*? It was all she could do to keep her face smooth, to keep her hands from clutching her shawl in fists. The thought of that farm helped.

But Cetalia's attention had already left her. "Which makes you Siuan, no? I am told you are a great solver of puzzles. What do you make of this little puzzle?" she said, thrusting a thin stack of pages at Siuan.

Siuan frowned as she read, and so did Moiraine, reading past her friend's shoulder. Siuan riffled through the pages too quickly for her to catch everything, but it seemed to be nothing but the names of playing cards, in no particular order she could see. The Ruler of Cups was followed by the Lord of Winds, the Ruler of Flames by the Lady of Rods, but then it was the Five of Coins followed by the Four of Cups. A puzzle? It was nonsense.

"I'm not certain," Siuan said finally, handing the pages back. Which settled it. If the thing were a puzzle, she would have seen the solution.

"Oh?" That word held a world of disappointment, but after a moment, Cetalia went on, the beads in her braids rattling softly as she tilted her head thoughtfully. "You don't say you do not know, so you have the glimmer of something. Of what are you uncertain?"

"There's a game I've read about," Siuan said slowly, "a game wealthy women play with cards, called Arrays. You have to put the cards in descending order in one of a set of patterns, but only certain suits can be played on others. I think someone wrote down each card as it was played. In a winning game."

Cetalia arched one eyebrow. "You have only read of the game?"

“Fishermen’s daughters can’t afford playing cards,” Siuan replied dryly, and Cetalia’s eyes took on a dangerous look. For a moment, Moiraine thought a penance hovered.

But all the Taraboner sister said was “I’ll wager Moiraine has played the Arrays, yet I suspect she would have called it just the nonsensical list of playing cards or some such. Most would. But you, who have only read of the game, deduced the correct answer. Come with me. I have some more puzzles I wish to test you on.”

“I haven’t had my breakfast yet,” Siuan protested.

“You can eat later. Come.” Obviously, *Cetalia* thought more than mere deference was due.

Watching a reluctant Siuan follow Cetalia up the corridor, Moiraine let herself glare at the woman’s back. Surely that behavior at least skirted rudeness. Apparently there were gradations. Well, nuance was everything in the Sun Palace, too. They would only have to bear it a short time, though. Inside the week, they would be gone, and she for one did not intend to return until she was at her full strength. Except to let Tamra know where the boychild was, of course. Actually being the ones to find him would be wonderful.

Her own breakfast porridge still held enough warmth to be edible, and she settled gingerly onto a plump-cushioned chair at the table, but before she could take a second bite, Anaiya walked in. Anaiya was nearly as strong in the Power as Cetalia, so she set down her silver spoon and stood.

“I’d tell you to sit down and eat,” the motherly woman said, “but Tamra sent a novice to fetch you. I told the child I’d carry her message because I wanted to offer you Healing. It can help with the tightness of the Oaths in some cases.”

Moiraine reddened. Of course everyone knew by now. Light! “Thank you,” she said, both for the Healing—the tightness did not loosen by a hair, but it was *much* more comfortable, after—and for the clue. If she did not have to stand for Anaiya, she surely did not have to obey her. Unless Anaiya was simply being courteous, of course. She very nearly sighed. More observation was in order before she reached any conclusions.

Leaving the Blue quarters with her shawl wrapped firmly around her shoulders—she did not mean to go without that just yet; for one thing, it helped with the chill—she wondered what Tamra wanted with her. Only one possibility came to mind. Now that she and Siuan were full sisters, Tamra might mean to put them among her searchers. After all, they already knew. Nothing else made sense. Her steps quickened eagerly.

“But I don’t want a job,” Siuan protested, her belly rumbling with hunger yet again. She felt wrung out after hours in Cetalia’s rooms, so full of books and stacked boxes of papers that they seemed to belong to a Brown. And the woman seemed never to have heard of a chair cushion. Her chairs were hard as stone!

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the gray-haired sister said dismissively, crossing her legs. She tossed the last pages she had given Siuan carelessly onto a writing table already littered six deep with others. “You didn’t do too badly for a beginner. I have need of you, and that is that. I expect you here at Second Rise tomorrow morning. Now go get something to eat. You are Aes Sedai, now; you cannot go around sounding like the leaky drain pipe.”

There was no point in protesting again. The bloody woman had already made it clear that two protests in succession came dangerously close to rudeness in her book. Bloody, *bloody* woman! She let nothing of anger touch her face, a lesson learned long before Tar Valon. On the fishing docks, displaying anger or fear either one could lead to trouble. Sometimes it could lead to a knife in your back.

“As you say, Cetalia,” she muttered, earning yet another raised eyebrow, and just managed not to stalk out of the woman’s apartments. Outside, she did stalk, and the Dark One take anyone who did not like it!

Burn her, why had she been fool enough to let the woman goad her? Moiraine had counseled caution, and instead, she had tried to wipe the doubt from bloody Cetalia’s bloody voice by thinking like Moiraine. Unskilled hands on the tiller put the boat aground when they did not capsize it. Her unskilled steering meant she would not be leaving the Tower any time soon. Not for years, until she was strong enough to tell Cetalia what she could do with her job. At least the woman had not gotten her claws on Moiraine. With her mind, she would have been a wonder as Cetalia’s assistant.

Hungry or not, she went in search of Moiraine rather than dinner, to let her know she would be searching by herself. The sight of Moiraine always made her smile. Cetalia had been wrong in one particular. She was not a pretty little porcelain doll; she was a beautiful little porcelain doll. On the outside, anyway. Inside, where it counted, was another matter. The first time

Siuan saw her, she had been sure the Cairhienin girl would crack like a spindle-shell in a matter of days. But Moiraine had turned out to be as tough as she herself if not tougher. No matter how often she was knocked down, she climbed back to her feet straightaway. Moiraine did not know the meaning of "give up." Which was why it was a surprise to find her slumped in a chair in her sitting room, her shawl slung over the chairback, with a sulky expression on her face. A green-glazed teapot on a tray gave off the smell of hot tea, but the white cups looked unused.

"What happened to you?" Siuan asked. "You haven't earned a penance already, have you?"

"Worse," Moiraine replied disconsolately. Her voice usually minded Siuan of silver bells, but Moiraine hated hearing that. "Tamra has put me in charge of distributing the bounty."

"Blood and bloody ashes!" Siuan tested the words on her tongue. There would be no switchings now for speaking like herself. She had heard Aes Sedai who could have made any dockman blush. She did seem to sense a faint taste of soap, though. "Does she suspect? Is she trying to make sure you can't interfere?" Maybe that was why Cetalia had latched hold of her. No, she had done well on the bloody woman's tests, the more fool her.

"I think not, Siuan. I was taught to manage an estate, though I only did it for a few months before coming to the Tower. She said that gave me all the skills I needed." Her mouth twisted wryly. "I was 'lying around loose,' as she put it, and I suspect she decided to give an onerous task to a Blue as a way of being fair. What about you? What sort of puzzles did Cetalia want you to look at?"

"A lot of old reports," Siuan grumbled, easing down onto a cushioned chair. If only her skin did not feel three sizes too small! Without asking, she poured herself a cup of tea. They never asked about things like that. "She wanted me to puzzle out what happened forty or fifty years ago in Tarabon and Saldaea and Altara." As soon as the words were out of her she wanted to clap a hand over her mouth, but it was too late for that.

Moiraine sat up straight, suddenly very interested. "Cetalia heads the Blue Ajah eyes-and-ears." It was not a question. Trust her to see straight to the heart right away.

"Don't even whisper that. The bloody woman will boil me down like an oil fish if she learns I let it slip. She'll probably have it anyway, but I don't want to give her cause before she finds it." She certainly would, if today had been any guide. “Look now, handing out the bounty can’t last more than a few months. After, you’re free to go. Let me know where you’re going, and if I learn anything, I’ll try to get word to you.” The Blue had an extensive network of eyes-and-ears, as useful for passing messages out as for sending reports in.

“I do not know that I can afford a few months,” Moiraine said in a small voice, dropping her eyes, very unlike herself. “I…. Ihave been keeping a secret from you, Siuan.” But they never kept secrets from each other! “I am very afraid the Hall means to put me on the Sun Throne.”

Siuan blinked. Moiraine, a queen? “You’d make a wonderful queen. And don’t bring up those Aes Sedai queens who came to bad ends. That was a very long time ago. There’s hardly a ruler anywhere who doesn’t have an Aes Sedai advisor. Who’s ever said a word against them except the Whitecloaks?”

“It is a long step from advisor to queen, Siuan.” Moiraine sat up, carefully arranging her skirts, and her voice took on that infuriatingly patient tone she used explaining things. “Obviously, the Hall thinks I could take the throne without bringing mobs into the streets, but I do not want to take the chance they are wrong. Cairhien has endured enough these last two years without that. And even if they are right, no one has ruled Cairhien for long without being willing to stoop to kidnapping, assassination and worse. My great-grandmother, Carewin, ruled more than fifty years, and the Tower calls her a very successful ruler because Cairhien prospered and had few wars under her, but her name is still used to frighten children. Better to be forgotten than remembered like Carewin Damodred, but even with the Tower behind me, I will have to try matching her if the Hall succeeds.” Suddenly, her shoulders slumped, and her face broke close to tears. “What can I do, Siuan? I am caught like a fox in a trap, and I cannot even chew off my own foot to escape.”

Setting her teacup on the tray, Siuan knelt beside Moiraine’s chair and put her hands on the other woman’s shoulders. “We’ll find a way out,” she said, putting far more confidence into her voice than she felt. “We’ll find a way.” She was a little surprised the First Oath allowed her to say those words. She could imagine no way out for either of them.

“If you say so, Siuan.” Moiraine did not sound as if she believed, either. “There is one thing I can remedy. May I offer you Healing?”

Siuan could have kissed her. In fact, she did.

There was still considerable snow close to the mountains that rose up ahead of Lan, and the trampled tracks of a large body of men lay clear beneath the afternoon sun, leading straight across the hills toward the cloud-capped heights that reared higher and higher the deeper you looked. He raised his looking glass, but he could discern no movement ahead. The Aiel must already be into the mountains. Cat Dancer stamped a hoof impatiently.

“Are those the Spine of the World?” Rakim called in that rasping voice. “Impressive, but somehow I thought they’d be taller.”

“That’s Kinslayer’s Dagger,” a well-traveled Arafellin laughed. “Call them the foothills to the Spine and you won’t be far wrong.”

“Why are we just standing here?” Caniedrin demanded, low-voiced enough not be called down for it but loud enough for Lan to hear. Caniedrin liked to press the edges where he could.

Bukama relieved him of the necessity to answer. “Only fools try fighting Aiel in mountains,” he said loudly. Twisting toward Lan in his saddle, he lowered his own voice to a near whisper, and the creases of his permanent scowl deepened. “The Light send Pedron Niall doesn’t choose now to paint his face.” Niall, Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light, had the command today.

“He won’t,” Lan said simply. Only a handful knew war as well as Niall. Which meant that this particular war might very well end this day. He wondered whether it would be called a victory. Sliding the looking glass back into its saddle-case, he found himself looking north. Feeling the pull, an iron filing feeling the lodestone. It was almost pain, after so long. Some wars could not be won, yet they still must be fought.

Studying his face, Bukama shook his head. “And only a fool jumps from one war straight into another.” He did not bother to speak softly, and several Domani in Lan’s sight gave him odd looks, clearly wondering what Bukama was talking about. No Borderlander needed to wonder. They knew who he was.

“A month or two will rest me, Bukama.” That was how long it would take to ride home. A month, with luck.

“A year, Lan. Just one year. Oh, all right. Eight months.” Bukama made that sound a great concession. Perhaps he felt tired? He had always seemed made of iron, but he was no longer young.

“Four months,” Lan conceded. He had borne waiting two years; he could bear another four months. And if Bukama still felt weary then…. That was a chasm he would have to cross when he came to it.

As it happened, Niall had not chosen to become a fool, which was very well indeed, given that above half the army had already departed in the belief the victory had been won days ago if not when the Aiel first began their retreat. And they were calling it a great victory. At least, those who had not fought were, the hangers-on and bystanders, and the historians already writing as if they knew everything. Lan was willing to let them. His mind was already two hundred leagues to the north.

Saying their goodbyes, he and Bukama turned their faces southward toward softer lands, avoiding Tar Valon altogether. It was a great and wondrous city by all accounts, but too full of Aes Sedai for any comfort. Bukama talked animatedly of what they might see, in Andor and perhaps Tear. They had been in both lands, but contending with Aiel, they had not seen even the fabled Stone of Tear or any of the great cities. Lan did not speak at all unless Bukama addressed him. He felt the pull of home sharply. All he wanted was a return to the Blight. And no encounters with Aes Sedai.

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Chapter 13

Business in the City

They could have had food brought to their rooms, but after Moiraine Healed Siuan, they went down to the first sitting of dinner. Neither was willing to miss her first meal as Aes Sedai in the sisters' main dining hall, where Accepted came only by rare invitation and novices only to serve at table. It was a spacious high-ceilinged room, colorful winter tapestries decorating the white walls, broad cornice gleaming under a weight of gold leaf. The square tables, their slender legs elegantly carved, were only large enough for four, and most spaced far apart for privacy of conversation, though today some were placed together to accommodate larger groups. The only women in the room wearing their shawls, they attracted looks from other sisters, not to mention a few amused smiles. Moiraine felt her cheeks heating, but it would take more than smiles to make her give up wearing the shawl every time she left her rooms. More than outright laughter. She had worked too hard to earn it. Siuan marched across the bright floor tiles, patterns of all the Ajah colors, with a queenly grace, casually adjusting her shawl along her arms as though to draw attention to it. Siuan was seldom shy.

There were no benches here, but low-backed chairs carved to match the table legs, and where, in their own dining hall, Accepted ate whatever the kitchen prepared, a young serving woman with the Flame of Tar Valon on her breast curtsied before reciting what the kitchens here had to offer in the singsong voice of one who made the same recitation often. Where Accepted ate on heavy glazed pottery and had to serve and clear away their own plates, the same serving woman brought their food on a ropework silver tray, in dishes of thin white Taraboner porcelain impressed with the Flame of Tar Valon all around the rim. Tarabon's work could not compare with what came from the islands of the Atha'an Miere, but it was hardly inexpensive.

Siuan complained that her fish was too heavily seasoned, yet she left nothing except the bones, and looked around as though thinking of asking for another. Moiraine had a rich soup of vegetables and beef, but she found she had little appetite, and in the end ate only a small piece of dark bread and drank a single cup of tea. She had to escape, but there was no escape. Just walking away from a task assigned by the Amyrlin Seat was unthinkable. Maybe the Hall would decide the plan was untenable. No one had approached her concerning the matter since Tsutama had asked whether she had thought of being Queen of Cairhien. They might decide so. It seemed a thin hope, but thin hopes were all she could find.

As soon as they returned to the Blue quarters, Eadyth summoned them to her rooms again and without ceremony handed each a letter-of-rights in the amount of one thousand crowns gold. “You will receive the same from the Tower each year on this day,” she said, “or if you are not here, it will be deposited as you specify.” The distaste of her earlier lecture had departed entirely. She wore a serene smile, serene and pleased at having gained two new Blues. “Spend wisely. You can obtain more if need be, but ask too often, and you will have to answer questions in the Hall. Believe me, being questioned in the Hall is never pleasant. Never.”

Siuan’s eyes grew very round reading the amount, and impossible as it seemed, wider still at mention of getting more. Few merchants cleared more gold in a year, and many minor nobles made do with far less, but the Tower could not afford to have sisters seen in poverty. The Sun Palace had taught Moiraine that power often grew from others deciding that you already had power, and an appearance of wealth could give that.

She had her own banker, but Siuan deposited her letter-of-rights with the Tower, in spite of an offered introduction. Siuan’s father had not earned a thousand crowns over his entire life, and she was not about to put that sum at any risk whatsoever. Nothing Moiraine said could convince her. Safety alone concerned her, and it seemed a banking house old enough to have loaned gold to Artur Hawkwing could not be challenged in that regard by the first bank founded after the Breaking.

Wearing her blue-fringed shawl displayed proudly on her shoulders, Moiraine hired a sedan chair in the great square in front of the Tower, where the milling midafternoon crowd of strollers and hawkers, tumblers and jugglers, musicians and barrowmen selling meat pies and roasted nuts, all kept their distance from the huge structure. Few people went nearer than a hundred paces unless they had business with the Tower, or wanted to present a petition. The two bearers, husky fellows in dark brown coats with their long hair neatly tied back, carried her smoothly through the streets, the lead man crying, “Make way for an Aes Sedai! Make way for an Aes Sedai!”

The shouting seemed to impress no one, and perhaps was not believed. Even with the heavy curtains tied back, the fringe on her shawl would remain hidden unless she propped her arms in-elegantly on the windowsills. No one moved aside any faster than they did for wagon drivers’ shouts and often more slowly, since the wagon drivers carried long whips and were not reluctant to use them. Even so, soon enough they reached what appeared to be a small palace, on a broad boulevard with tall leafless trees marching down the center strip, and unfastened the poles so she could open the door. The building was in a southern style, with a high white dome, and narrow spires at the four corners, and broad marble stairs climbing to a wide, white-columned portico, yet there was a restraint about it. The stone carvings, friezes of vines and leaves, were well done, yet simple and not overly plentiful. No one would leave money with a banking house that was poor, but neither would anyone with a bank that spent too lavishly on itself.

A doorman with two bands of red on his dark coatsleeves bowed her through the tall front doors and handed her over to a plain-coated footman, a pretty young man, if too tall, who gravely guided her to the study of Mistress Dormaile, a slim, graying little woman a full hand shorter than Moiraine. Her father had banked with Ilain Dormaile’s elder brother, who still handled her own accounts in Cairhien, making her choice easy in Tar Valon.

A slight smile broke Mistress Dormaile’s usual solemn expression when she saw the shawl, and she spread her dark, red-banded skirts in a precise curtsy, neither too brief nor too deep. But then, she had given the same courtesy even when Moiraine had come in an Accepted’s dress. After all, she knew how much Moiraine had left with the bank on her first arrival in the city, and how much more her estates had sent over the years. Still, the smile was genuine.

“May I offer congratulations, Moiraine Sedai?” she said warmly, escorting Moiraine to a cushioned chair with a high, carved back. “Will you have spiced wine, or tea? Perhaps some honeyed cakes, or poppy seed?”

"The wine, thank you," Moiraine replied with a smile. "That will suffice." Moiraine Sedai. This was the first time anyone had called her that, and she rather liked the sound.

Once the other woman had issued orders to the footman, she took a chair facing Moiraine without asking. You did not require your banker to stand too far on ceremony. "I assume you have come to deposit your stipend." Of course a banker would know of that. "If you seek further information, I fear I put everything I knew into the letter I sent to you, and I have learned nothing more."

For an instant, Moiraine's smile froze in place. With an effort, she unfroze it, made her voice casual. "Suppose you tell it to me again. I may winnow out something hearing it fresh."

Mistress Dormaile inclined her head slightly. "As you say. Nine days ago a man came to me, a Cairhienin, wearing the uniform of a captain in the Tower Guard and giving the name Ries Gorthanes. He spoke with cultured accents, an educated man, perhaps even nobility, and he was tall, a good three hands or more taller than me, and broad-shouldered, with a soldier's bearing. He was clean-shaven, of course, and his face was well-proportioned, and good-looking despite a scar about an inch long, here." With one finger, she drew a line from the corner of her left eye back toward her ear.

Neither name nor description jogged anything in Moiraine's memory, not that she would have spoken if they had. She made a small gesture for the banker to go on.

"He presented an order purportedly signed and sealed by the Amyrlin Seat directing me to lay open your finances to him. Unfortunately for him, I know Tamra Ospenya's signature well, and the White Tower knows I would never reveal the affairs of my patrons in any respect. I had several footmen overpower him and lock him in an empty strongroom, and then I sent for real Tower Guards. I regret failing to take the opportunity to thrash his mistress or master's name out of him, but as you know, White Tower law takes a dim view of that."

The footman returned with an ornate silver pitcher and two silver goblets on a tray, and the banker fell silent until he had gone. "He escaped before the Guards arrived," she went on, pouring dark wine that gave off the sweet scent of spices. "A matter of bribery." A grimace of distaste twisted her mouth for a moment as she offered Moiraine a goblet with a small bow. “I had the young man involved strapped so I wager he still feels it when he sits down. I then hired him out as a bilgeboy on a rivership running ice peppers to Tear where he will be put ashore penniless, unless he persuades the captain to keep him on. I made sure of that by convincing her to give me his wages in advance. He is a pretty youth. He might persuade her. I think she had it in mind when she handed over the coins.”

Directing a level look at the other woman across her goblet, Moiraine raised a quizzical eyebrow. She was quite proud of her outer coolness, as great as anything she had displayed while being tested.

“The false Guard captain broke Tower law, Moiraine Sedai,” Mistress Dormaile blandly answered the unspoken question, “and I was required to hand him over to the justice of the Tower, but internal matters I prefer to keep internal. I tell you only because you were involved. You understand?”

Moiraine nodded. Of course. No bank could afford to have it known one of its employees took bribes. She suspected the young man had gotten off so lightly because he was someone’s son or nephew, else he might well have floated downriver on his own. Bankers were hard folk.

Mistress Dormaile did not ask what Moiraine knew or thought of the matter. Such was no business of hers. Her face did not even show curiosity. This discretion was one reason Moiraine had never kept more than a little coin with the Tower. As a novice, without access to the city, it had been unnecessary, but her own sense of privacy made her continue the practice as Accepted. Tower law required equal representation of every Ajah in the Tower’s bank, and now that she wore the shawl, she did not want her affairs known to other Blues, much less other Ajahs, especially after what she had just been told.

The only reason the Tower would have held back Mistress Dormaile’s letter was that the Hall hoped to lull her into thinking they had decided against putting her on the Sun Throne. But they had made their first moves, or rather, since they would have been as careful as thieves trying to cut a well-guarded lady’s purse, many more than the first. Enough for someone to puzzle out their intention. Nothing else explained a Cairhienin trying to find out how she was dispersing money, and to whom. Oh, Light, they were going to do it before she knew what was happening, unless she found a way out.

She let nothing show on her face, of course, merely sipping her wine, letting the warm sweetness slide down her throat, all outward serenity. “You have done very well by me, Mistress Dormaile, to the pain of your house. Please transfer a suitable recompense from my accounts to your own." Very properly, the banker demurred twice, bowing her head, before accepting with a show of reluctance that Moiraine barely noticed. Light, she had to find a way out!

She began laying plans. Not to run away, but to be ready. She signed over her letter-of-rights and, before leaving, gave instructions at which Mistress Dormaile displayed no hint of surprise. Perhaps that was because she also was Cairhienin and so accustomed to *Daes Dae'mar,* or maybe bankers were all stoic. Perhaps she had other Aes Sedai as patrons. If so, Moiraine would learn of it only if the sisters told her. The grave was less discreet than Ilain Dormaile.

Back in the Tower, she asked around until she settled on the name of a seamstress. No fewer than five Blues named Tamore Alkohima as the best in Tar Valon, and even those who spoke other names allowed that Tamore was very good, so the following afternoon, she and Siuan took sedan chairs to Mistress Alkohima's shop, with Siuan grumbling about the fare. Really. It was only a silver penny. It had taken considerable effort to induce Siuan to go with her. How *could* the woman think four dresses sufficient? She was going to have to learn not to be parsimonious.

Mistress Alkohima's establishment, its walls lined with tall shelves bearing stacked bolts of silk and fine wool in every hue imaginable, was one of a number of large shops that occupied the ground floor of a building that seemed to be all curves. It suited Tamore very well. Fair-skinned for a Domani, she would have made Gitara seem almost boyish in comparison. When she came to greet them—their fringed shawls assured a personal greeting—rather than simply walking, she seemed to flow gracefully between the smaller shelves full of laces and ribbons, and the dressmaker's forms clothed in half-finished garments. Her half-dozen assistants all curtsied deeply, young pretty women garbed in finely sewn examples of their native lands' styles, each different, but there were no curtsies from the seamstress. She knew her place in this world. Her pale green dress, elegant and simple at the same time, spoke well of her talents, though it did cling in an alarming manner, molding her in a way that left no doubts of exactly what lay beneath the silk.

Tamore's languorous smile widened at hearing their order, and well it should have. Few of her patrons would come for an entire wardrobe in one visit. At least, it widened for Moiraine. Under prodding, Siuan had agreed on six dresses, to make up one for each day of the week with what she already had, but she wanted them in wool. Moiraine ordered twenty, half with skirts divided for riding, all in the best silk. She could have done with fewer, but the Hall might check. An order for twenty would make them think her settled in Tar Valon.

She and Siuan quickly found themselves in a back room, where Tamore watched as four of her assistants undressed them to the skin and measured them, turning them this way and that for the seamstress to see what she had to work with. Under almost any other circumstances, that would have embarrassed Moiraine near to death. But this was for a seamstress, and that made all the difference. Then it was time for the fabric to come out, for choices. Tamore knew what the fringe on their shawls meant, and shades of blue predominated.

"I want decent dresses, mind," Siuan said. "High necks, and nothing too snug." That with a pointed look at Tamore's garment. Moiraine nearly groaned. Light send Siuan did not mean to go on this way!

"I think perhaps this is too light for me," Moiraine murmured as a tall yellow-haired girl, in green with a square-cut neckline that displayed too much cleavage, draped sky-blue silk over her. "I was thinking of Cairhienin styles, without House colors or embroidery," she suggested. She could never wear Damodred colors inside the Tower.

"A Cairhienin cut, of course," Tamore said, thumbing her full lower lip thoughtfully. "That will suit you very well. But that hue is lovely against your pale skin. Half of your dresses must be of light color, and half embroidered. You require elegance, not plainness."

"Perhaps only a quarter in each?" A Cairhienin cut suited her very well? Was the woman implying she could not succeed in wearing a Domani dress? Not that she would. Tamore's garment was indecent! But there was the principle of the thing.

The seamstress shook her head. "At least a third in light colors," she said firmly. "At least. And half embroidered." Frowning slightly, she rubbed her thumb across her underlip again.

"A third and half," Moiraine agreed before the woman could go higher, as she seemed to be considering. With a good seamstress, it was always a matter of negotiation. She could live with a little embroidery.

“Do you have anything cheaper, Mistress Alkohima?” Siuan demanded, frowning down at the fine blue wool draped on her. Light, she had been asking prices! No wonder the girls with her looked scandalized.

“Will you excuse me just a brief moment, Tamore?” Moiraine said, and when the seamstress nodded, she handed the length of silk to the Andoran girl and hurriedly took Siuan aside.

“Listen to me, Siuan, and do not argue,” she whispered in a rush. “We must not keep Tamore waiting long. Do *not* ask after prices; she will tell us the cost after we make our selections. Nothing you buy here will be cheap, but the dresses Tamore sews for you will make you look Aes Sedai as much as the shawl does. And it *is* Tamore, not Mistress Alkohima. You must observe the proprieties, or she will believe you are mocking her. But try thinking of her as a sister who stands just a little above you. A touch of deference is necessary. Just a touch, but she will tell you what to wear as much as she asks.”

Siuan scowled over her shoulder at the Domani woman. Light, she *scowled*! “And will the bloody shoemaker tell us what kind of slippers to buy and charge us enough to buy fifty new sets of nets?”

“No,” Moiraine said impatiently. Tamore was only arching one eyebrow, yet her face might as well have been like a thunderhead. The meaning of that eyebrow was clear as the finest crystal. They had already made the seamstress wait too long, and there would be a price for it. And that scowl! She hurried on, whispering as fast as she could. “The shoemaker will make what we want, and we will bargain the price with him, but not too hard if we want his best work. The same with the glovemaker, the stockingmaker, the shiftmaker, and all the rest. Just be glad neither of us needs a hairdresser. The best hairdressers are true tyrants, nearly as bad as perfumers.” Siuan barked a laugh, as if she were joking, but she would learn if she ever sat for a hairdresser, not knowing how her hair was to be arranged until the hairdresser was finished and allowed her to look in a mirror. At least, that was how it was in Cairhien.

Once the choices of colors had been agreed upon, and the forms of embroidery—negotiation was necessary even there, as well as on which dresses were to be embroidered—they still had to stay for the first dress to be cut and pinned on them, a task Tamore deftly performed herself with a pincushion fastened to her wrist. Moiraine quickly learned what the price would be for making the woman wait. The fabric she pinned for Moiraine was a blue even paler than the sky blue, almost a blue-tinged white, and the way she pinned Siuan's dark blue wool, it was going to be nearly as snug at bosom and hips as her own garment. It could have been worse. The seamstress could have "accidentally" stuck them a dozen times *and* demanded a pinning for every dress. But Moiraine was sure her first dresses would all be the lightest shades.

The prices Tamore mentioned, once the pinned garments had been slipped off them and onto dressmaker's forms, made Siuan's eyes pop, though at least she remained silent. She *would* learn. In a city like Tar Valon, one gold crown for a woolen dress and ten for a silk were reasonable from a seamstress of Tamore's quality. Still, Moiraine murmured that she would give a generous gratuity for speedy completion. Otherwise, they might not see anything for months.

Before leaving, she told Tamore that she had decided on five more riding dresses, in the strictest Cairhienin style, which was to say dark, though she did not put it that way, each with six slashes across the breast in red, green and white, far fewer than she had a right to. The Domani woman's expression did not alter at this evidence that she was a rather minor member of a noble House. Sewing for Aes Sedai would count with sewing for the High Seat of a House, or perhaps even a ruler.

"I would like them made last, if you please," Moiraine told her. "And do not send them. Someone will pick them up."

"I can promise you they will be last, Aes Sedai."

Oh, yes; her first dresses were going to be pale. But the second part of her plan was accomplished. For the moment, she was as ready as she could be.

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Chapter 14

Changes

The sisters who had said there was almost as much to learn after gaining the shawl as before were proven right in short order. Moiraine and Siuan had learned the complexities of White Tower customs as Accepted, especially which ones had been in existence so long they had the force of law, and the penalties for violating them. Now Rafela and others spent hours instructing them in the long list of Blue Ajah customs, accreted over three thousand years. Siuan actually retained most of what Rafela had told them during their first walk to the Blue quarters, and Moiraine had to work hard to catch up. It would have been a shame to gain a penance for something so trivial as wearing red inside the Tower. Red gems were allowed, firedrops or rubies or garnets, but the color was forbidden in clothing, a matter of some long-standing animosity between the Blue and the Red, so old no one was actually certain what had begun it or when. Blue and Red opposed each other as a matter of course, at times bringing the Hall to a near standstill.

The very idea of enmity between Ajahs startled her, yet there were other oppositions. While the Green and the Blue had seen few breaks in their accord for several centuries, the situation was far different regarding other Ajahs. At the moment, there was a slight strain with the White, for reasons known only to the White, and something more tense with the Yellow, with sisters of each accusing sisters of the other of interfering with their actions in Altara some hundred years past. Strong custom forbade interference with another sister, a custom that provided the sole release from the customary deference. Outside the Tower, at least. And then there were the permutations. For example, the Brown supported the White against the Blue, but supported the Blue against the Yellow. For the time being, anyway. These things could last for centuries, or shift in the blink of an eye. It also was necessary to learn what antagonisms and rivalries existed between other Ajahs, too, where they were known. Each was a snare lying in wait for an unwary step or a careless word. Light, the tangle of it all made *Daes Dae'mar* child's play!

Siuan heard her recitations every night, just as they had as novice and Accepted, and she heard Siuan's, though there hardly seemed a point. Siuan never made any mistakes.

They found themselves studying the Power again, with Lelaine and Natasia and Anaiya and others taking turns, learning the Warder bond and other weaves not trusted to Accepted, including a few known only to the Blue. Moiraine found that very interesting. If the Blue included weaves among their Ajah secrets, surely the other Ajahs did as well, and if the Ajahs, perhaps individual sisters. After all, she had had one, her first learned, before coming to Tar Valon, and had carefully concealed it from the sisters. They had been aware the spark was already ignited in her, but she told them only about lighting candles and making a ball of light to find her way in the dark. No one lived in the Sun Palace without learning to keep secrets. Did Siuan have any secret weaves? It was not the sort of question you could ask your closest friend.

Although they knew enough now of *saidar* to learn quickly, there simply was too much for a day or a week. At least, Moiraine could not do it. The method of ignoring heat or cold turned out to be a trick of mental concentration simple enough once you knew how, or so Natasia pronounced.

"The mind must be as still as an unruffled pond throughout," she said pedantically, just as she lectured in the classroom. They were in her rooms, where almost every flat surface was covered with figurines and small carvings and painted miniatures. These lessons always took place in the teacher's rooms. "Focusing on a point behind your navel, in the center of your body, you begin to breathe at an unvarying pace, but not as normally. Each inhalation must take exactly the same length of time, and each exhalation, and between, for that same space, you do not breathe. In time, that will come quite naturally. Breathing so, focused so, soon your mind becomes detached from the outer world, no longer acknowledging heat or cold. You might walk naked in a blizzard or across a desert without shivering or sweating." Taking a sip of tea, Natasia laughed, her dark tilted eyes twinkling. "Frostbite and sunburn would still present difficulties, after a time. Only the mind is truly distanced, the body much less so."

Simple perhaps, yet for above a week Moiraine's focus might slip at any time, sitting at supper or walking down a corridor, and she would let out a gasp as the cold suddenly rushed in and bit down three times as hard as before she began the meditation. In public, all that huffing attracted stares from other sisters. She very much feared she was gaining a reputation as a dreamer. And as a constant blusher. It was hardly to be borne. Needless to say, Siuan picked up the trick straightaway and never shivered again that Moiraine saw.

The Feast of Lights came to mark the turning of the year, and for two days every window in Tar Valon shone brightly from twilight till dawn. In the Tower, servants entered chambers that had been unused for centuries, to light lamps and make sure they burned the whole two days. It was a joyous celebration, with processions of citizens carrying lamps through the night-cloaked streets and merry gatherings that frequently lasted until sunrise in even the poorest homes, but it filled Moiraine with sadness. Chambers unused for centuries. The White Tower was dwindling, and she could not see what was to be done about it. But then, if women who had worn the shawl two hundred years or more could find no solution, why should she be able to?

Many sisters received ornately inscribed invitations to balls during the feast, and quite a number accepted. Aes Sedai could like dancing as well as any other woman. Moiraine got invitations, too, from Cairhienin nobles of two dozen Houses and almost as many merchants wealthy enough to rub shoulders with the nobility. Only the Hall's plans for her could have placed so many powerful Cairhienin in the city at one time. She tossed the stiff white cards into the fireplace unanswered. A dangerous move in *Daes Dae'mar,* with no way to tell how it might be interpreted, but she was not playing the Game of Houses. She was hiding.

Surprisingly, their first dresses were delivered early on the first day of the feast. Either Tamore was eager for her gratuity, or more likely, she thought they would want the garments for feastday festivities. She came with two of her assistants to see whether any adjustments were necessary, but none were. Tamore was excellent at what she did. Moiraine had been right, though. The darkest of her six was in a hue little deeper than sky blue, and only two were embroidered, which meant nearly everything else would be. She would have to keep on wearing the woolens the Ajah had given her a while longer. At least all of her riding dresses would be dark. Even

Tamore could not ask for a riding dress in too light a hue. Siuan's dresses, only one divided for riding, displayed all the elegance Tamore was capable of, making them suitable for a palace despite being wool, but they emphasized her bosom and hips quite strongly. Siuan affected not to notice, or perhaps did not. She really cared very little about clothing.

Some things were not easy for Siuan, either. She returned from Cetalia's apartments with a face that grew stiffer by the day. Every day she became more prickly and irritable, but she refused to reveal what the problem was, and even snapped at Moiraine when she persisted in asking. That was worrying; she could count on the fingers of one hand, with fingers left over, the times Siuan had gotten angry with her in six years. The day Tamore delivered the dresses, however, Siuan joined her for tea in her rooms before going down to supper, but instead of taking a cup, she flung herself down in a leaf-carved armchair and folded her arms angrily beneath her breasts. Her face was anything but stiff, and her eyes were blue fire.

"That bloody fangfish of a woman will be the bloody death of me yet," she growled. That half a week had undone every scrap of the sisters' hard work with her language. "Fish guts! She expects me to jump like a spawning redtail! I never jumped so fast when I was a—!" She gave a strangled grunt and her eyes popped as the First Oath clamped down. Coughing, her face turning pale, she pounded a fist on her chest. Moiraine hastily poured a cup of tea, but it was minutes before Siuan could drink. Her mind must have been racing for her to come that close.

"Well, not when I was Accepted, anyway," she muttered once she could speak again. "From the moment I arrive it's 'Find this, Siuan' and 'Do that, Siuan' and 'Aren't you finished yet, Siuan?' Cetalia snaps her fingers and bloody well expects me to jump."

"That is how things are," Moiraine said judiciously. The situation could have been much worse, but Siuan's mind apparently had changed on that point, and she did not want to start an argument. "It will not last forever, and only a handful of sisters stand so high above us."

"That's easy for you to say," Siuan grumbled. "You don't have bloody Cetalia snapping her fingers at you."

That was true, yet it hardly meant her task was easy. The new lessons left her little free time, but she had hoped distributing the bounty would allow her to search among the camps that still remained. Instead, for two or three hours each morning she sat in a windowless room, on the eighth level of the Tower, just large enough for a plain writing table and two straight-backed chairs. Mirrored stand-lamps of unadorned brass stood in the four corners, giving a good and very necessary light. Lacking them, the chamber would have been twilight dark at noon. Normally, a senior clerk sat there, but whoever that was, she or he had left no imprint on the room at all. Only inkwell, pen tray, sand jar and a small white bowl of alcohol for cleaning the pens sat on the table, and the pale stone walls were bare.

The considerably larger outer room was crowded by rows of high, narrow writing desks and tall stools, but as soon as she arrived, the clerks formed a line that stretched from her writing table and nearly circled their own room, bringing her lists of women who had received the bounty and reports on arrangements to send the money to women who had already left. The number of those reports was distressing. Few camps remained, and the last were melting away like frost in sunlight. None of the clerks used her second chair, only stood respectfully while she read each page and signed her approval at the bottom, then curtsied or bowed and made way for the next without a word. Very quickly she began to think it really might be possible to die of boredom.

She tried to make them arrange the distribution faster—the Tower's vast resources could have seen to it in a week, surely; the Tower held hundreds more clerks—but clerks worked at their own pace. They even seemed to slow down after her suggestion of speed. She considered begging Tamra to release her from the task, but why put her herself to useless effort? What better way to keep her shackled in Tar Valon until the Hall's schemes came to fruition? Boredom *and* frustration. Still, she had her plan. That helped, a bit. Slowly, a conviction settled in her. If worse came to worst, she *would* run, whatever penance that earned her. Any penance lay in the future, and must end eventually. The Sun Throne would be a sentence for life.

The day after the Feast of Lights, Ellid was summoned to her testing, though Moiraine only heard of it after. The beautiful Accepted who wanted to become a Green failed to come out of the *ter'angreal*. There was no announcement; the White Tower never flaunted its failures, and a woman dying in her test was counted a great failure on the Tower's part. Ellid simply disappeared, and her belongings were taken away. There was a day of mourning, however, and Moiraine wore white ribbons in her hair and tied a long, lace-edged white silk kerchief around each arm so they dangled to her wrists. She had never liked Ellid, but the woman deserved her grief.

Not every sister who was strong enough to make them jump showed any desire to do so. Elaida avoided them, or at least they did not see her again before hearing she had left to return to Andor. Even so, learning she was gone was a relief. She stood as high as they would one day, and could have made their lives a misery almost as badly as she had when they were novice and Accepted. Perhaps worse. The petty errands novice and Accepted took as expected would have been near a penance for them as Aes Sedai. Perhaps more than near.

Lelaine, who stood as high as Elaida and was a Sitter to boot, had them to tea several times, to ease the strain of the first weeks as she put it. Siuan got on very well with her, though she made Moiraine a little nervous with that penetrating gaze. It always seemed that Lelaine knew more of you than she revealed, that you had no secrets with her. But then, Siuan appeared unable to understand Moiraine’s liking for Anaiya. It was not the Healing. Anaiya was warm and open, and made you feel that all would come out well in the end. Almost any conversation with Anaiya turned out comforting. Moiraine thought that in time she might become as close a friend as Leane, if not so close as Siuan.

That friendship with Leane took up right where it had left off, for her and Siuan both, and brought with it Adine Canford, a plump, blue-eyed woman with short-cut black hair who displayed not a hint of arrogance despite being Andoran. Of course, she was not very strong in the Power. It really was becoming second nature to consider that. They renewed acquaintance with sisters of other Ajahs who had been Accepted with them and found that in some cases friendship revived within a few words and in others had shrunk to mere amity, while a few had grown too accustomed to the gap between Aes Sedai and Accepted to close it again now they wore the shawl, too. It was enough. Friends lightened many burdens, even those they did not know of.

Friends or no friends, though, the days passed with glacial slowness. Meilyn finally departed the Tower, and then Kerene, followed in turn by Aisha, Ludice and Valera, but Moiraine’s relief that the search was under way at last was tempered by frustration at being kept out of it. Siuan began to grow interested in her job, to the point where her complaints started to seem more for the form of the thing. She headed off to Cetalia’s rooms earlier than need be, and often remained until the second or third sitting of supper. Moiraine had no such buffer. Her nightmares continued, of the babe in the snow and the faceless man and the Sun Throne, although not as frequently, save the last. Ever as bad, though. She banished most of the lace and ruffles from her rooms, which required only a visit to a cushionmaker and a small wait for their alteration by twos and threes. Not all, because of Anaiya's obvious if silent disappointment at seeing them go, so her bed remained an ocean of froth that made Siuan giggle with delight. But she spent more time in her other rooms, so the bed it had to be. After numerous efforts, she managed to bake a pie without burning it black, but Aeldra took one bite and turned pale green. Siuan produced a fish pie that the gray-haired sister declared quite tasty, only within the hour she was running for the privy and required Healing. No one accused them of doing anything deliberate, which they had not, but Anaiya and Kairen thought it an excellent repayment for greediness.

Only a week after Ellid, on High Chasaline, Sheriam was tested and passed. Technically, Siuan was the newest Blue by a hair, but Cetalia refused to lose her services for even a few hours, so it was Moiraine who laid the shawl on the fire-haired Saldaean's shoulders when she chose the Blue the following day, and escorted her beaming back to the Blue quarters for the welcome. Where Siuan managed to nip in for the sixth kiss. Sheriam was a very good cook, and loved to bake.

It was the Day of Reflection in Cairhien, yet Moiraine could not manage to dwell on her sins and faults. She and Siuan had regained a friend they had feared might be lost for a year. Siuan even suggested bringing Sheriam into their search, and talking her out of it required hours. It was not that Moiraine feared Sheriam would expose them to Tamra, but Sheriam had been one of the biggest gossips in the Accepted's quarters. She never told what she promised to keep hidden, yet she would be unable to resist giving hints of such a juicy secret, hints that she had a secret, as Siuan should have known very well. Let others know you possessed a secret, and some would work to learn it; that was a fact of nature. Sometimes Siuan did not known the meaning of caution. Sometimes? No; never.

Sisters began to talk of a resurgence in the Tower, with so many passing for the shawl in so short a time, and perhaps another one or two who might very soon. By custom, none spoke of Ellid, but Moiraine thought of her. One woman dead and three raised to the shawl in the space of two weeks, but the only novice to test for Accepted in that time had failed and been sent away, and not one name was added to the novice book, while above twenty novices too weak ever to reach the shawl were put out. Those chambers would remain unused for centuries more at this rate. Until they were all unused. Siuan tried to soothe her, but how could she be happy when the White Tower was destined to become a monument to the dead?

Three days later, Moiraine wished she had spent the Day of Reflection properly. She was not superstitious, but failure to do so always brought ill luck to someone you cared for, so it was said. She was at the second sitting of breakfast, slowly eating her porridge and fretting over the boredom of torture by clerk to come, when Ryma Galfrey glided into the dining hall. Slim and elegant in yellow-slashed green, much of a height with Moiraine, she was not one of those Moiraine needed to defer to, but she had a regal bearing accentuated by the rubies in her hair like a crown, and a haughty cast typical of Yellows to her face. Startlingly, she wove Air and Fire to make her voice clearly audible in every corner of the dining hall.

“Last night, Tamra Ospenya, the Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, died in her sleep. May the Light shine on her soul.” Her voice was perfectly self-possessed, as though she had announced it would rain that day, and she waited only long enough to run a cool eye over the room to make sure her words had been absorbed before leaving.

A buzz of talk started up immediately at the other tables, but Moiraine sat stunned. Aes Sedai died before their time as often as anyone else, and sisters did not grow feeble with the years—death came in apparent full good health—yet this was so unexpected that she felt hit on the head by a hammer. The Light illumine Tamra’s soul, she prayed silently. The Light illumine her soul. Surely it would. What would happen to the search for the boychild now? Nothing, of course. Tamra’s chosen searchers knew their task; they would inform the new Amyrlin of their task. Perhaps the new Amyrlin would release her from her own labor, if she got to the woman before the Hall informed her of their scheme.

Self-disgust immediately stabbed her heart, and she pushed the bowl of porridge away, all appetite gone. A woman she admired with all her soul had died, and she thought of *advantage* in it! *Daes Dae’mar* truly was ingrained in her bones, and maybe all the darkness of the Damodreds.

She very nearly asked Merean for a penance, but the Mistress of Novices might give her something that would hold her in Tar Valon longer. Considering that just added to her guilt. So she set her own penance. Only one dress she owned came close to the white of grieving, the blue so pale it seemed more white tinged with blue, and she put that on for Tamra’s funeral rites. Tamore had embroidered the garment front and back and sleeves with a fine, intricate blue mesh that looked innocent enough until she actually donned the dress. Then it seemed as blatant as what the seamstress herself had worn. No, not seemed; it was. She very nearly wept after examining herself in the stand-mirror.

Siuan blinked at the sight of her in the corridor outside their rooms. “Are you sure you want to wear that?” She sounded half-strangled. Long white ribbons were tied in her hair, and longer tied around her arms. The passing sisters all wore variations of the same. Aes Sedai never put on full mourning, except for Whites, who did not consider it so.

“Sometimes a penance is required,” Moiraine replied, deliberately moving her shawl down into the crooks of her elbows, and Siuan asked no more. There were questions one asked, and questions one did not. That was strong custom. And friendship.

Wearing their shawls, every sister residing in the Tower gathered at a secluded clearing in a woody part of the Tower grounds, where Tamra’s body lay on a bier, sewn into a simple blue shroud. The morning air was more than brisk—Moiraine was aware of that despite feeling no urge to shiver—and even the surrounding oaks were still leafless beneath a gray sky, their thick twisted limbs suitable framing for a funeral. Moiraine’s garment earned more than a few raised eyebrows, but the sisters’ disapproval was part of her penance. Mortification of the Spirit was always the hardest to endure. Strangely, the Whites all wore glossy *black* ribbons, yet it must have been an Ajah custom, for it garnered no frowns or stares from the other sisters. They must have seen it before. Any who wished were allowed to speak a prayer or a few words in memory, and most did. Only the Sitters spoke among the Reds, and then in very few words, but perhaps that was custom as well.

Moiraine made herself go forward and stand before the bier, shawl loosely draped, exposing herself, knowing she would be the focus of every eye. The hardest to bear. “May the Light illumine Tamra’s soul, brightly as she deserved, and may she shelter in the Creator’s hand until her rebirth. The Light send her a radiant rebirth. I cannot think of any woman I admired more than Tamra. I admire her and honor her still. I always will.” Tears welled in her eyes, and not from the humiliation that stabbed her like long thorns. She had never really known Tamra—novices and Accepted never really knew sisters, much less the Amyrlin Seat—but, oh, Light, she would miss her.

According to Tamra's wishes, her body was consumed by flows of Fire, and her ashes scattered across the grounds of the White Tower by the sisters of the Ajah she had been raised from, the Ajah to which she had returned in death. Moiraine was not alone in weeping. Aes Sedai serenity could not armor against all things.

The rest of the day she wore that shaming dress, and that night burned it. She would never have been able to look at it again without remembering.

Until a new Amyrlin was raised, the Hall of the Tower reigned over the Tower, but there were increasingly strict measures in the law to insure they did not dally too long, and by the evening after Tamra's funeral, Sierin Vayu had been raised from the Gray. An Amyrlin was supposed to grant indulgences and relief from penances on the day she assumed the stole and the staff. None came from Sierin, and in the space of half a week, every last male clerk in the Tower had been dismissed without a character, supposedly for flirting with novices or Accepted, or for "inappropriate looks and glances," which could have meant anything. Even men so old their grandchildren had children went, and some who had no liking for women at all. No one commented on it, however. No one dared, not where it might come to Sierin's ears.

Three sisters were exiled from Tar Valon for a year, and twice Moiraine was forced to join the others in the Traitor's Court to watch an Aes Sedai stripped and stretched tight on the triangle, then birched till she howled. A ward that formed a shimmering gray dome over the stone-paved Court held in the shrieks till they seemed to crowd in on Moiraine, stifling thought, stifling breath. For the first time in a week she lost focus and shivered in the cold. And not only from the cold. She feared those screams would ring in her ears for a very long time, waking or sleeping. Sierin watched, and listened, with utter calm.

A new Amyrlin chose her own Keeper, of course, and could choose a new Mistress of Novices if she wished. Sierin had done both. Oddly, Amira, the stocky woman whose long beaded braids flailed as she worked the birch with a will, was a Red, and so was the new Keeper, Duhara. Neither law nor custom demanded that either Keeper or Mistress of Novices be of the Amyrlin's former Ajah, yet it was expected. But then, whispers told of considerable surprise when Sierin had chosen the Gray over the Red.

Moiraine did not think any of Tamra's searchers would tell Sierin of the hunt for the boychild.

On the day after the second birching, she presented herself in the anteroom to the Amyrlin's study, where Duhara sat rigidly upright behind her writing table with a red stole a hand wide draped around her neck. Her dark dress was so slashed with scarlet it might as well have been all scarlet. A Domani, Duhara was slim and beautiful despite being near a hand and a half taller than she, but the woman's full lips had a meanness about them, and her eyes searched for fault. Moraine reminded herself that, without the Keeper's stole, Duhara would have had to jump when she snapped her fingers, should she have chosen to. As she opened her mouth, the door to the Amyrlin's study banged open, and Sierin strode out with a paper in her hand.

"Duhara, I need you to—now, what do *you* want?" That last was barked at Moiraine, who curtsied promptly, and as deeply as she had as a novice, kissing the Great Serpent ring on the Amyrlin's right hand before rising. That ring was Sierin's only display of jewelry. Her seven-striped stole was half the width of Duhara's stole, and her dark gray silks were simply cut. Quite plump, her round face appeared to have been constructed for jolliness, but she wore implacable grimness as though it had been carved there. Moiraine could almost look her straight in the eyes. Hard eyes.

Her mouth felt dry, and she fought not to shiver in a cold that suddenly seemed worse than the heart of winter, but quick calming exercises failed to produce the composure necessary. She had learned a great deal about Sierin from the whispers about the new Amyrlin. One fact struck deep, right that moment, like a sharp knife. To Sierin, her own view of the law *was* the law, and without a shred of mercy to be found in it. Or in her.

"Mother, I ask to be relieved of my duties regarding the bounty." Her voice was steady, thank the Light. "The clerks are carrying out the task as quickly as they can, but making them stand in line each day for a sister to approve what they have done only robs them of hours they could be working."

Sierin pursed her mouth as though she had bitten a sour persimmon. "I'd stop that fool bounty entirely if it wouldn't put the Tower in bad odor. A ridiculous waste of coin. Very well; the clerks may send their papers to another for signature. A Brown, perhaps. They like that sort of thing."

Moiraine's heart soared before the Amyrlin added, "You will remain in Tar Valon, of course. As you know, we will have need of you, soon."

"As you say, Mother," Moiraine replied, heart sinking into her stomach, down to her ankles after that brief flight. Offering another deep curtsy, she kissed the Amyrlin's ring once again. With a woman like Sierin, best to take no chances.

Siuan was waiting in her rooms when she returned. Her friend leaned forward expectantly and looked a question.

"I am free of the bounty, but I am ordered to remain in Tar Valon. 'As you know, we will have need of you, soon.'" She thought that a fine mimicry of Sierin's voice, if a bit streaked with bitterness.

"Fish guts!" Siuan muttered, leaning back. "What will you do now?"

"I am going for a ride. You know where I will be, in what order."

Siuan's breath caught. "The Light protect you," she said after a moment.

There was no point in waiting, so Moiraine changed into a riding dress, with Siuan's help to make the changing faster. The dress was a suitably dark blue, with a few leafy silver vines climbing the sleeves to encircle the high neck. All of her darkest garments were embroidered, but she had begun to think a little needlework might not be so bad. Leaving her shawl folded in the tall wardrobe, she took out a cloak lined with black fox, and tucked her hairbrush and comb into one of the small pockets the cloakmaker had sewn inside and her sewing kit into the other. Gathering her riding gloves, she gave Siuan a hug and hurried out. Long goodbyes would have turned to tears, and she could not risk that.

Sisters in the corridor glanced at her as she passed, but most seemed intent on their own affairs, though Kairen and Sheriam both said it seemed a cool day for a ride. Only Eadyth said more, stopping her with a half-raised hand, eyeing her in a way that seemed all too like Lelaine.

"Ruined farms and villages will hardly make for a refreshing outing, I fear," the white-haired Sitter murmured.

"Sierin has ordered me to remain in Tar Valon," Moiraine replied, her face a perfect Aes Sedai mask, "and I think she might see crossing one of the bridges for a few hours as disobedience."

Eadyth's mouth tightened for an instant, so briefly it might have been Moiraine's imagination. Clearly she had read Sierin's revelation of the plans in that response, and she was displeased. “The Amyrlin can be fearsome toward anyone who goes against her wishes in the smallest way, Moiraine.”

Moiraine almost smiled. Light, the woman had given her a chance to say it straight out. Well, nearly straight. A suitable Aes Sedai answer. “As well I do not intend to cross a bridge, then. I have no wish to be birched.”

In the West Stable, she had Arrow saddled, without saddlebags. There was no need for them for a ride in the city, and no matter what she had told Eadyth, the Sitter might send someone to check. Moiraine would have. With luck, no one would suspect anything before nightfall.

Her first stop was Mistress Dormaile’s, where the banker had a number of letters-of-rights ready in various amounts and four fat leather purses containing two hundred crowns in gold and silver between them. The coin would sustain Moiraine for some time. The letters-of-rights were for after the coin was gone, and for emergencies. Once she used one, she would need to move fast. The Tower’s eyes-and-ears would be looking for her, and no matter how discreet bankers were, the Tower generally learned what it wanted to learn. Mistress Dormaile asked no questions, of course, but on learning that Moiraine was alone, she offered four of her footmen as escort, and Moiraine accepted. She had no fear of footpads, who were few in Tar Valon and easily handled in any event, but if anyone did think of robbery, better they were frightened off by a bodyguard than chased away with the Power. That would attract attention. Wealthy women often rode with bodyguards, even in Tar Valon.

The men who walked in a box around Arrow as she departed the banker’s might have been called footmen, but though they wore plain gray coats, they were muscular men who looked accustomed to the swords hanging from their belts. Doubtless they were the “footmen” who had overcome Master Gorthanes, or whatever his true name was, they or men like them. Banks always had guards, though never called that.

At Tamore’s shop, she sent two of the men with coin to purchase a travel trunk and hire a pair of porters, then changed into one of the riding dresses that marked her as a minor Cairhienin noble. Three of the five were embroidered, but lightly, and she did not complain. Too late to have it picked out in any case. Tamore asked no more questions that Mistress Dormaile had; one deferred to one’s seamstress, but in the end, she *was* a seamstress. And, too, seamstresses had their own sense of discretion, or they did not remain in business long. Before leaving, Moiraine tucked her

Great Serpent ring into her belt pouch. Her hand felt oddly naked without it, her finger itched for the small circle of gold, but too many in Tar Valon knew what it meant. For now, she truly must hide.

With her small entourage, she progressed northward, making stops that filled the chest on the porters' shoulder-poles with the needful things she could not have brought out of the Tower unnoticed, until at last they reached Northharbor, where the city walls curved out into the river and made a ring near a mile across, broken only by the harbor mouth. Wooden-roofed docks lined the inside of that huge ring, and moored riverships in every size. A few words with the dockmistress, a heavyset, graying woman with a harassed expression, gained her directions to the *Bluewing*, a two-masted vessel. *Bluewing* was not the largest vessel at the docks, but it was scheduled to sail within the hour.

Soon enough, Arrow had been hoisted aboard by a long wooden boom, with straps beneath her belly, and secured on deck, the porters had been paid off, the footmen sent away with a silver mark each in thanks, and her trunk made snug in a small quarterdeck cabin. Still, she would be spending more time than she would like in that cabin, so she remained on deck scratching Arrow's nose while the rivership was untied and pushed off, and the long sweeps pushed out to maneuver *Bluewing* across the harbor like some immense waterbug.

That was why she saw the dockmistress pointing to *Bluewing* and talking to a man who held his dark cloak around him tightly while he stared at the vessel. Immediately, she embraced *saidar,* and everything became clearer in her sight, sharper. The effect was not so good as a fine looking glass, yet she could make out the man's face, peering avidly from his hood. Mistress Dormaile's description had been exact. He was not pretty, but good-looking despite the scar at the corner of his left eye. And he was very tall for a Cairhienin, close to two paces. But how had he found her here, and why had he been searching? She could not think of a pleasant answer to either question, least of all the second. For someone who wanted to stop the Hall's scheme, someone who wanted another House than Damodred on the Sun Throne, the easiest way would be the death of the Hall's candidate. Fixing the fellow's face in memory, she let the Power drain away. Another reason to take great care, it appeared. He knew the vessel she traveled by, and likely every stop intended between here and the Borderlands. That had seemed the best place to begin, far from Cairhien and easily reached by the river.

“Is *Bluewing* a fast ship, Captain Carney?” she asked.

The captain, a wide, sun-dark man with narrow mustaches waxed to spikes, stopped shouting orders and put on a semblance of a respectful smile. He had been quite pleased to take a noblewoman’s gold for herself and a horse. “The fastest on the river to be sure, my Lady,” he said, and returned to shouting at his crew. He already had half the gold, and only needed to show respect enough to ensure he got the rest.

Any captain might have said the same of his vessel, but when the wind caught the triangular sails, *Bluewing* leaped like its namesake, all but flying out of the harbor mouth.

At that moment, Moiraine passed into disobedience to the Amyrlin Seat. Oh, Sierin surely would have seen it from the instant she left the Tower, but intention was not action. Whatever penance the woman set likely would combine Labor, Deprivation, Mortification of the Flesh *and* Mortification of the Spirit. On top of which, she almost certainly had an assassin trailing her. Her knees should have been shaking in fear of Sierin, if not Master Gorthanes, but as Tar Valon and the Tower began shrinking behind her, all she felt was a great burst of freedom and excitement. They could not put her on the Sun Throne, now. By the time the Hall found her, another would be secure in it. And she was off to find the boychild. She was off on an adventure as grand as any ever undertaken by an Aes Sedai.

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Chapter 15

Into Canluum

The air of Kandor held the sharpness of new spring when Lan returned to the lands where he had always known he would die. Long past the arrival of spring in more southerly lands, here trees bore the first red of new growth, and a few scattered wildflowers dotted winter-brown grass where shadows did not cling to patches of snow, yet the pale sun offered little warmth after the south, gray clouds hinted at more than rain, and a cold, gusting breeze cut through his coat. Perhaps the south had softened him more than he knew. A pity, if so. He was almost home. Almost.

A hundred generations had beaten the wide road nearly as hard as the stone of the surrounding hills, and little dust rose, though a steady stream of ox-carts was leaving the morning farmers' markets in Canluum, and merchant trains of tall wagons, surrounded by mounted guards in steel caps and bits of armor, flowed toward the city's high gray walls. Here and there the chains of the Kandori merchants' guild spanned a chest or an Arafellin wore bells in her hair, a ruby decorated this man's ear, a pearl brooch that woman's breast, but for the most part the traders' clothes were as subdued as their manner. A merchant who flaunted too much profit discovered it hard to find bargains.

By contrast, farmers showed off their success when they came to town. Bright embroidery decorated the striding country men's baggy breeches, the women's wide trousers, their cloaks fluttering in the wind. Some wore colored ribbons in their hair, or a narrow fur collar. They might have been dressed for the coming Bel Tine dances and feasting. Yet country folk eyed strangers as warily as any guard, eyed them and hefted spears or axes and hurried along. The times carried an edge in Kandor, maybe all along the Borderlands. Bandits had sprung up like weeds this past year, and more troubles than usual out of the Blight. Rumor even spoke of a man who channeled the One Power, but then, rumor often did.

Leading Cat Dancer toward Canluum, Lan paid as little attention to the stares he and his companion attracted as he did to Bukama's scowls and carping. For all his talk of taking a rest, the longer they had remained in the south, the grumpier Bukama had grown. This time his mutters were for a stone-bruised hoof that had him afoot.

They did attract attention, two very tall men walking their mounts and a packhorse with a pair of tattered wicker hampers, their plain clothes worn and travel-stained. Their harness and weapons were well tended, though. A young man and an old, hair hanging to their shoulders and held back by a braided leather cord around the temples. The *hadori* drew eyes. Especially here in the Borderlands, where people had some idea what it meant.

"Fools," Bukama grumbled. "Do they think we're bandits? Do they think we mean to rob the lot of them, at midday on the high road?" He glared and shifted the sword at his hip in a way that brought considering stares from a number of merchants' guards. A stout farmer prodded his ox wide of them.

Lan kept silent. A certain reputation clung to Malkieri who still wore the *hadori,* though not for banditry, but reminding Bukama would only send him into an even blacker humor for days. His mutters shifted to the chances of a decent bed that night, of a decent meal before. Bukama expected little, and trusted to less.

Neither food nor lodging entered Lan's thoughts, despite the distance they had traveled. His head kept swinging north. He remained aware of everyone around him, especially those who glanced his way more than once, aware of the jingle of harness and the creak of saddles, the clop of hooves, the snap of wagon canvas loose on its hoops. Any sound out of place would shout at him. He remained aware, but the Blight lay north. Still miles away across the hills, yet he could feel it, feel the twisted corruption.

Just his imagination, but no less real for that. It had pulled at him in the south, in Cairhien and Andor, even in Tear, almost five hundred leagues distant. Two years away from the Borderlands, his personal war abandoned for another, and every day the tug grew stronger. He should never have let Bukama talk him into waiting, letting the south soften him. The Aiel had helped maintain his edge.

The Blight meant death to most men. Death and the Shadow, in a rotting land tainted by the Dark One's breath, where anything at all could kill, an insect bite, the prick of the wrong thorn, a touch of the wrong leaf.

Abode of Trollocs and Myrddraal and worse. Two tosses of a coin had decided where to begin anew. Four nations bordered the Blight, but his war covered the length of it, from the Aryth Ocean to the Spine of the World. One place to meet death was as good as another. He was almost home. Almost back to the Blight. He had been away too long.

A drymoat surrounded Canluum's wall, fifty paces wide and ten deep, spanned by five broad stone bridges with towers at either end as tall as those that lined the wall itself. Raids out of the Blight by Trollocs and Myrddraal often struck much deeper into Kandor than Canluum, but none had ever made it inside the city's wall. The Red Stag waved above every tower. A proud man, was Lord Varan, the High Seat of House Marcasiev; Queen Ethenielle did not fly so many of her own banners even in Chachin itself.

The guards at the outer towers, in helmets with Varan's antlered crest and the Red Stag on their chests, peered into the backs of wagons before allowing them to trundle onto the bridge, or occasionally motioned someone to push a hood further back. No more than a gesture was necessary; the law in every Borderland forbade hiding your face inside village or town, and no one wanted to be mistaken for one of the Eyeless trying to sneak into the city. Hard gazes followed Lan and Bukama onto the bridge. Their faces were clearly visible. And their *hadori.* No recognition lit any of those watching eyes, though. Two years was a long time in the Borderlands. A great many men could die in two years.

Lan noticed that Bukama had gone silent, always a bad sign. "Be easy, Bukama."

"I never start trouble," the older man snapped, but he did stop fingering his sword hilt.

The guards on the wall above the open iron-plated gates and those on the bridge wore only back-and breastplates for armor, yet they were no less watchful, especially of a pair of Malkieri with their hair tied back. Bukama's mouth grew tighter at every step.

"Al'Lan Mandragoran! The Light preserve us, we heard you were dead fighting the Aiel at the Shining Walls!" The exclamation came from a young guard, taller than the rest, almost as tall as Lan. Young, perhaps a year or two less than he, yet the gap seemed ten years. A lifetime. The guard bowed deeply, left hand on his knee. "*Tai'shar Malkier!*" True blood of Malkier. "I stand ready, Majesty."

“I am not a king,” Lan said quietly. Malkier was dead. Only the war still lived. In him, at least.

Bukama was not quiet. “You stand ready for *what*, boy?” The heel of his bare hand struck the guard’s breastplate right over the Red Stag, driving the man upright and back a step. “You cut your hair short and leave it unbound!” Bukama spat the words. “You’re sworn to a Kandori lord! By what right do you claim to be Malkieri?”

The young man’s face reddened as he floundered for answers. Other guards started toward the pair, then halted when Lan let his reins fall. Only that, but they knew his name, now. They eyed his bay stallion, standing still and alert behind him, almost as cautiously as they did him. A warhorse was a formidable weapon, and they could not know Cat Dancer was only half-trained yet.

Space opened up as people already through the gates hurried a little distance before turning to watch, while those still on the bridge pressed back. Shouts rose in both directions from people wanting to know what was holding traffic. Bukama ignored it all, intent on the red-faced guard. He had not dropped the reins of the packhorse or his yellow roan gelding. There was that for a hope to walk on without blades being bared.

An officer appeared from the stone guardhouse inside the gates, crested helmet under his arm, but one hand in a steel-backed gauntlet resting on his sword hilt. A bluff, graying man with white scars on his face, Alin Seroku had soldiered forty years along the Blight, yet his eyes widened slightly at the sight of Lan. Plainly he had heard the tales of Lan’s death, too.

“The Light shine upon you, Lord Mandragoran. The son of el’Leanna and al’Akir, blessed be their memories, is always welcome.” Seroku’s eyes flickered toward Bukama, not in welcome. He planted his feet in the middle of the gateway. Five horsemen could have passed easily on either side, but he meant himself for a bar, and he was. None of the guards shifted a boot, yet every one had hand on sword hilt. All but the young man meeting Bukama’s glares with his own. “Lord Marcasiev has commanded us to keep the peace strictly,” Seroku went on, half in apology. But no more than half. “The city is on edge. All these tales of a man channeling are bad enough, but there have been murders in the street this last month and more, in broad daylight, and strange accidents. People whisper about Shadowspawn loose inside the walls.”

Lan gave a slight nod. With the Blight so close, people always muttered of Shadowspawn when they had no other explanation, whether for a sudden death or unexpected crop failure. He did not take up Cat Dancer’s reins, though. “We intend to rest here a few days before riding north.” Rest, and try to regain his edge.

For a moment he thought Seroku was surprised. Did the man expect pledges to keep the peace, or apologies for Bukama’s behavior? Either would shame Bukama, now. A pity if the war ended here. Lan did not want to die killing Kandori.

His old friend turned from the young guard, who stood quivering, fists clenched at his sides. “All fault here is mine,” Bukama announced to the air in a flat voice. “I had no call for what I did. By my mother’s name, I will keep Lord Marcasiev’s peace. By my mother’s name, I will not draw sword inside Canluum’s walls.” Seroku’s jaw dropped, and Lan hid his own shock with difficulty.

Hesitating only a moment, the scar-faced officer stepped aside, bowing and touching sword hilt, then heart. “There is always welcome for Lan Mandragoran Dai Shan,” he said formally. “And for Bukama Marenellin, the hero of Salmarna. May you both know peace, one day.”

“There is peace in the mother’s last embrace,” Lan responded with equal formality, touching hilt and heart.

“May she welcome us home, one day,” Seroku finished. No one really wished for the grave, but that was the only place to find peace in the Borderlands.

Face like iron, Bukama strode ahead pulling Sun Lance and the packhorse after him, not waiting for Lan. This was not well.

Canluum was a city of stone and brick, its paved streets twisting around tall hills. The Aiel invasion had never reached the Borderlands, but the ripples of war always diminished trade a long way from any battles, and now that fighting and winter were both finished, the city had filled with people from every land. Despite the Blight practically on the city’s doorstep, gemstones mined in the surrounding hills made Canluum wealthy. And, strangely enough, some of the finest clockmakers anywhere. The cries of hawkers and shopkeepers shouting their wares rose above the hum of the crowd even away from the terraced market squares. Colorfully dressed musicians, or jugglers, or tumblers performed at every intersection. A handful of lacquered carriages swayed through the mass of people and wagons and carts and barrows, and horses with gold-or silver-mounted saddles and bridles picked their way through the throng, their riders' garb embroidered as ornately as the animals' tack and trimmed with fox or marten or ermine. Hardly a foot of street was left bare anywhere.

Lan even saw several Aes Sedai, women with serene, ageless faces. Enough people recognized them on sight that they created eddies in the crowd, swirls to clear a way. Respect or caution, awe or fear, there were sufficient reasons for a king to step aside for a sister. Once you might have gone a year without seeing an Aes Sedai even in the Borderlands, but the sisters seemed to be everywhere since their old Amyrlin Seat died. Maybe it was those tales of a man channeling; they would not let him run free long, if he existed.

He kept his eyes away from them, walked on quickly to avoid notice. The *hadori* could be enough to attract the interest of a sister seeking a Warder. Supposedly, they asked before bonding a man, but he knew several who had taken that bond, and every time it had come as a surprise. Who would give up his freedom to trot at an Aes Sedai's heels unless there was more to it than asking?

Shockingly, lace veils covered many women's faces. Thin lace, sheer enough to reveal that they had eyes, and no one had ever heard of a female Myrddraal, but Lan had never expected law to yield to mere fashion. Next they would take down the oil lamps lining the streets and let the nights grow black. Even more shocking than the veils, Bukama looked right at some of those women and did not open his mouth. Then a jut-nosed man named Nazar Kurenin rode in front of Bukama's eyes, and he did not blink. The young guard surely had been born after the Blight swallowed Malkier, but Kurenin, his hair cut short and wearing a forked beard, was twice Lan's age. The years had not erased the marks of his *hadori* completely. There were many like Kurenin, and the sight of him should have set Bukama spluttering. Lan eyed his friend worriedly.

They had been moving steadily toward the center of the city, climbing toward the highest hill, Stag's Stand. Lord Marcasiev's fortress-like palace covered the peak, with those of lesser lords and ladies on the terraces below. Any threshold up there offered warm welcome for al'Lan Mandragoran. Perhaps warmer than he wanted now. Balls and hunts, with nobles invited from as much as fifty miles away, including from across the border with Arafel. People avid to hear of his "adventures." Young men wanting to join his forays into the Blight, and old men to compare their experiences there with his. Women eager to share the bed of a man fool stories claimed the Blight could not kill. Kandor and Arafel were as bad as any southland at times; some of those women would be married.

And there would be men like Kurenin, working to submerge memories of lost Malkier, and women who no longer adorned their foreheads with the *ki'sain* in pledge that they would swear their sons to oppose the Shadow while they breathed. He could ignore the false smiles while they named him al'Lan Dai Shan, diademed battle lord and uncrowned king of a nation betrayed while he was in his cradle. In his present mood, Bukama might do murder. Or worse, given his oaths at the gate. He would keep those to the death. But Bukama's hands and feet were dangerous enough to maim a man for life.

“Varan Marcasiev will hold us a week or more with ceremony,” Lan said, turning down a narrower street that led away from the Stand. “With what we've heard of bandits and the like, he will be just as happy if I don't appear to make my bows.” True enough. He had met the High Seat of House Marcasiev only once, years past, but he remembered a grave-faced man given entirely to his duties. Lord Marcasiev would arrange those balls and hunts, and regret every one.

Bukama followed without complaint about missing a palace bed or the feasts the cooks would prepare. It was worrying. Along with regaining his own edge, he needed to find a way to sharpen Bukama's, or they might as well open their veins now.

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Chapter 16

The Deeps

No palaces rose in the hollows toward the north wall, only shops and taverns, inns and stables and wagon yards. Bustle surrounded the factors' long warehouses, but no carriages came to the Deeps, and most streets were barely wide enough for carts. They were just as jammed with people as the wide ways, though, and every bit as noisy. Here, the street performers' finery was tarnished, yet they made up for it by being louder, and buyers and sellers alike bellowed as if trying to be heard in the next street. Likely some of the crowd were cutpurses, slipfingers and other thieves, finished with a morning's business higher up or headed there for the afternoon. It would have been a wonder otherwise, with so many merchants in town. The second time unseen fingers brushed his coat in the crowd, Lan tucked his purse under his shirt. Any banker would advance him more against the Shienaran estate he had been granted on reaching manhood, but loss of the gold on hand meant accepting the hospitality of Stag's Stand.

At the first three inns they tried, slate-roofed cubes of gray stone with bright signs out front, the innkeepers had not a cubbyhole to offer. Lesser traders and merchants' guards filled them to the attics. Bukama began to mutter about making a bed in a hayloft, yet he never mentioned the feather mattresses and linens waiting on the Stand. Leaving their horses with ostlers at a fourth inn, The Blue Rose, Lan entered determined to find some place for them if it took the rest of the day.

Inside, a graying woman, tall and handsome, presided over a crowded common room where talk and laughter almost drowned out the slender girl singing to the music of her zither. Pipe smoke wreathed the ceiling beams, and the smell of roasting lamb floated from the kitchens. As soon as the innkeeper saw Lan and Bukama, she gave her blue-striped apron a twitch and strode toward them, dark eyes sharp.

Before Lan could open his mouth, she seized Bukama's ears, pulled his head down, and kissed him. Kandori women were seldom retiring, but even so it was a remarkably thorough kiss in front of so many eyes. Pointing fingers and snickering grins flashed among the tables.

"It's good to see you again, too, Racelle," Bukama murmured with a small smile when she finally released him. "I didn't know you had an inn here. Do you think—?" He lowered his gaze rather than meeting her eyes rudely, and that proved a mistake. Racelle's fist caught his jaw so hard that his hair flailed as he staggered.

"Six years without a word," she snapped. "Six years!" Grabbing his ears again, she gave him another kiss, longer this time. Took it rather than gave. A sharp twist of his ears met every attempt to do anything besides standing bent over and letting her do as she wished. At least she would not put a knife in his heart if she was kissing him. Perhaps not.

"I think Mistress Arovni might find Bukama a room somewhere," a man's familiar voice said dryly behind Lan. "And you, too, I suppose."

Turning, Lan clasped forearms with the only man in the room beside Bukama of a height with him, Ryne Venamar, his oldest friend except for Bukama. The innkeeper still had Bukama occupied as Ryne led Lan to a small round table in the corner. Five years older, Ryne was Malkieri, too, but his hair fell in two long bell-laced braids, and more silver bells lined the turned-down tops of his boots and ran up the sleeves of his yellow coat. Bukama did not exactly dislike Ryne—not exactly—yet in his present mood only Nazar Kurenin could have had a worse effect.

While the pair of them were settling themselves on benches, a serving maid in a striped apron brought hot spiced wine. Apparently Ryne had ordered as soon as he saw Lan. Dark-eyed and full-lipped, she stared Lan up and down openly as she set his mug in front of him, then whispered her name, Lira, in his ear, and an invitation, if he was staying the night. All he wanted that night was sleep, so he lowered his gaze, murmuring that she honored him too much. Lira did not let him finish. With a raucous laugh, she bent to bite his ear, hard.

"By tomorrow," she announced in a throaty voice, and loudly, "I'll have honored you till your knees won't hold you up." Raucous laughter flared at the tables around them.

Ryne forestalled any possibility of righting matters, tossing her a fat coin and giving her a slap on the bottom to send her off. Lira offered him a dimpled smile as she slipped the silver into the neck of her dress, but she left sending smoky glances over her shoulder at Lan that made him sigh. If he tried to say no now, she might well pull a knife over the insult.

“So your luck still holds with women, too.” Ryne’s laugh had an edge. Perhaps he fancied her himself. “The Light knows, they can’t find you handsome; you get uglier every year. Maybe I ought to try some of that coy modesty, let women lead me by the nose.”

Lan opened his mouth, then took a drink instead of speaking. He should not have to explain, but it was too late for explanation with Ryne in any case. His father had taken him to Arafel the year Lan turned ten. The man wore a single blade on his hip instead of two on his back, yet he was Arafellin to his toenails. He actually started conversations with women who had not spoken to him first. Lan, raised by Bukama and his friends in Shienar, had been surrounded by a small community who held to Malkieri ways. If Lira did share his bed tonight, as seemed certain, she would discover there was nothing shy or retiring about him once they were abed, yet the woman chose when to enter that bed and when to leave.

A number of people around the room were watching their table, sidelong glances over mugs and goblets. A plump copper-skinned woman wearing a much thicker dress than Domani women usually did made no effort to hide her stares as she spoke excitedly to a fellow with curled mustaches and a large pearl in his ear. Probably wondering whether there would be trouble over Lira. Wondering whether a man wearing the *hadori* really would kill at the drop of a pin.

“I didn’t expect to find you in Canluum,” Lan said, setting the wine mug down. “Guarding a merchant train?” Bukama and the innkeeper were nowhere to be seen.

Ryne shrugged. “Out of Shol Arbela. The luckiest trader in Arafel, they say. Said. Much good it did him. We arrived yesterday, and last night footpads slit his throat two streets over. No return money for me this trip.” He flashed a rueful grin and took a deep pull at his wine, perhaps to the memory of the merchant or perhaps to the lost half of his wages. “Burn me if I thought to see you here, either.”

“You shouldn’t listen to rumors, Ryne. I’ve not taken a wound worth mentioning since I rode south.” Lan decided to twit Bukama if they did get a room, about whether it was already paid for and how. Indignation might take him out of his darkness.

“The Aiel,” Ryne snorted. “I never thought *they* could put paid to you.” He had never faced Aiel, of course. “I expected you to be wherever Edeyn Arrel is. Chachin, now, I hear.”

That name snapped Lan’s head back to the man across the table. “Why should I be near the Lady Arrel?” he demanded softly. Softly, but emphasizing her proper title.

“Easy, man,” Ryne said. “I didn’t mean….” Wisely, he abandoned that line. “Burn me, do you mean to say you haven’t heard? She’s raised the Golden Crane. In your name, of course. Since the year turned, she’s been from Fal Moran to Maradon, and coming back now.” Ryne shook his head, the bells in his braids chiming faintly. “There must be two or three hundred men right here in Canluum ready to follow her. You, I mean. Some you’d not believe. Old Kurenin wept when he heard her speak. All ready to carve Malkier out of the Blight again.”

“What dies in the Blight is gone,” Lan said wearily. He felt more than cold inside. Suddenly Seroku’s surprise that he intended to ride north took on new meaning, and the young guard’s assertion that he stood ready. Even the looks here in the common room seemed different. And Edeyn was part of it. Always she liked standing in the heart of the storm. “I must see to my horse,” he told Ryne, scraping his bench back.

Ryne said something about making a round of the taverns that night, but Lan hardly heard. He hurried through the kitchens, hot from iron stoves and stone ovens and open hearths, into the cool of the stableyard, the mingled smells of horse and hay and wood-smoke. A graylark warbled on the edge of the stable roof. Graylarks came even before robins in the spring. Graylarks had been singing in Fal Moran when Edeyn first whispered in his ear.

The horses had already been stabled, bridles and saddles and packsaddle atop saddle blankets on the stall doors, but the wicker hampers were gone. Plainly Mistress Arovni had sent word to the ostlers that he and Bukama were being given accommodation.

There was only a single groom in the dim stable, a lean, hard-faced woman mucking out. Silently she watched him check Cat Dancer and the other horses as she worked, watched him begin to pace the length of the straw-covered floor. He tried to think, but Edeyn’s name kept spinning though his head. Edeyn’s face, surrounded by silky black hair that hung below her waist, a beautiful face with large dark eyes that could drink a man’s soul even when filled with command.

After a bit the groom mumbled something in his direction, touching her lips and forehead, and hurriedly shoved her half-filled barrow out of the stable, glancing over her shoulder at him. She paused to shut the doors, and did that hurriedly, too, sealing him in shadow broken only by a little light from open haydoors in the loft. Dust motes danced in the pale golden shafts.

Lan grimaced. Was she that afraid of a man wearing the *hadori*? Did she think his pacing a threat? Abruptly he became aware of his hands running over the long hilt of his sword, aware of the tightness in his own face. Pacing? No, he had been in the walking stance called Leopard in High Grass, used when there were enemies on all sides. He needed calm.

Seating himself cross-legged on a bale of straw, he assumed the *ko’di* and floated in calm emptiness, one with the bale beneath him, the stable, the scabbarded sword folded behind him. He could “feel” the horses, cropping at their mangers, and flies buzzing in the corners. They were all part of him. Especially the sword. This time, though, it was only the emotionless void that he sought.

From his belt pouch he took a heavy gold signet ring worked with a flying crane and turned it over and over in his fingers. The ring of Malkieri kings, worn by men who had held back the Shadow nine hundred years and more. Countless times it had been remade as time wore it down, always the old ring melted to become part of the new. Some particle might still exist in it of the ring worn by the rulers of Rhamdashar, that had lived before Malkier, and Aramaelle that had been before Rhamdashar. That piece of metal represented over three thousand years fighting the Blight. It had been his almost as long as he had lived, but he had never worn it. Even looking at the ring was a labor, usually. One he disciplined himself to every day. Without the emptiness, he did not think he could have done so today. In *ko’di,* thought floated free, and emotion lay beyond the horizon.

In his cradle he had been given four gifts. The ring in his hands and the locket that hung around his neck, the sword on his hip and an oath sworn in his name. The locket, containing the painted images of the mother and father he could not remember seeing in life, was the most precious, the oath the heaviest. “To stand against the Shadow so long as iron is hard and stone abides. To defend the Malkieri while one drop of blood remains. To avenge what cannot be defended.” And then he had been anointed with oil and named Dai Shan, consecrated as the next King of Malkier and sent away from a land that knew it would die.

Nothing remained to be defended now, only a nation to avenge, and he had been trained to that from his first step. With his mother's gift at his throat and his father's sword in his hand, with the ring branded on his heart, he had fought from his sixteenth nameday to avenge Malkier. But never had he led men into the Blight. Bukama had ridden with him, and others, but he would not lead men there. That war was his alone. The dead could not be returned to life, a land any more than a man. Only, now, Edeyn Arrel wanted to try.

Her name echoed in the emptiness within him. A hundred emotions loomed like stark mountains, but he fed them into the flame until all was still. Until his heart beat time with the slow stamping of the stalled horses, and the flies' wings beat rapid counterpoint to his breath. She was his *carneira,* his first lover. A thousand years of tradition shouted that, despite the stillness that enveloped him.

He had been fifteen, Edeyn more than twice that, when she gathered the hair that had still hung to his waist in her hands and whispered her intentions. Women had still called him beautiful then, enjoying his blushes, and for half a year she had enjoyed parading him on her arm and tucking him into her bed. Until Bukama and the other men gave him the *hadori*. The gift of his sword on his tenth nameday had made him a man by custom along the Border, though years early for it, yet among Malkieri that band of braided leather had been more important. Once that was tied around his head, he alone decided where he went, and when, and why. And the dark song of the Blight had become a howl that drowned every other sound. The oath that had murmured so long in his heart became a dance his feet had to follow.

Almost ten years past now that Edeyn had watched him ride away from Fal Moran, and been gone when he returned, yet he still could recall her face more clearly than that of any woman who had shared his bed since. He was no longer a boy, to think that she loved him just because she had chosen to become his first lover, yet there was an old saying among Malkieri men. *Your* carneira *wears part of your soul as a ribbon in her hair forever.* Custom strong as law made it so.

One of the stable doors creaked open to admit Bukama, coatless, shirt tucked raggedly into his breeches. He looked naked without his sword. As if hesitant, he carefully opened both doors wide before coming all the way in. “What are you going to do?” he said finally. “Racelle told me about…about the Golden Crane.”

Lan tucked the ring away, letting emptiness drain from him. Edeyn’s face suddenly seemed everywhere, just beyond the edge of sight. “Ryne says even Nazar Kurenin is ready to follow,” he said lightly. “Wouldn’t that be a sight to see?” An army could die trying to defeat the Blight. Armies had died trying. But the memories of Malkier already were dying. A nation was memory as much as land. “That boy at the gates might let his hair grow and ask his father for the *hadori*.” People were forgetting, trying to forget. When the last man who bound his hair was gone, the last woman who painted her forehead, would Malkier truly be gone, too? “Why, Ryne might even get rid of those braids.” Any trace of mirth dropped from his voice as he added, “But is it worth the cost? Some seem to think so.” Bukama snorted, yet there had been a pause. He might be one of those who did.

Striding to the stall that held Sun Lance, the older man began to fiddle with his roan’s saddle on the stall door as though suddenly forgetting why he had moved. “There’s always a cost for anything,” he said, not looking up. “But there are costs, and costs. The Lady Edeyn….” He glanced at Lan, then turned to facehim. “She was always one to demand every right and require the smallest obligation be met. Custom ties strings to you, and whatever you choose, she will use them like a set of reins unless you find a way to avoid it.”

Carefully Lan tucked his thumbs behind his sword belt. Bukama had carried him out of Malkier tied to his back. The last of the five who survived that journey. Bukama had the right of a free tongue even when it touched Lan’s *carneira*. “How do you suggest I avoid my obligations without shame?” he asked more harshly than he had intended. Taking a deep breath, he went on in a milder tone. “Come; the common room smells much better than this. Ryne suggested a round of the taverns tonight. Unless Mistress Arovni has claims on you. Oh, yes. How much will our rooms cost? Good rooms? Not too dear, I hope.”

Bukama joined him on the way to the doors, his face going red. “Not too dear,” he said hastily. “You have a pallet in the attic, and I…ah…I’min Racelle’s rooms. I’d like to make a round, but I think Racelle…. I don’t think she means to letme…. I…. Young whelp!” he growled. “There’s a lass named Lira in there who’s letting it be known you won’t be using that pallet tonight, *or* getting much sleep, so don’t think you can—!” He cut off as they walked into the sunlight, bright after the dimness inside. The graylark still sang of spring.

Six men were striding across the otherwise empty yard. Six ordinary men with swords at their belts, like any men on any street in the city. Yet Lan knew before their hands moved, before their eyes focused on him and their steps quickened. He had faced too many men who wanted to kill him not to know. And at his side stood Bukama, bound by oaths that would not let him draw even had he been wearing his blade. Bare hands were poor weapons against swords, especially at these odds. If they both tried to get back inside the stable, the men would be on them before they could haul the doors shut. Time slowed, flowed like cool honey.

“Inside and bar the doors!” Lan snapped as his hand went to his hilt. “Obey me, armsman!”

Never in his life had he given Bukama a command in that fashion, and the man hesitated a heartbeat, then bowed formally. “My life is yours, Dai Shan,” he said in a thick voice. “I obey.”

As Lan moved forward to meet his attackers, he heard the bar drop inside with a muffled thud. Relief was distant. He floated in *ko’di,* one with the sword that came smoothly out of its scabbard. One with the men rushing at him, boots thudding on the hard-packed ground as they bared steel.

A lean heron of a fellow darted ahead of the others, and Lan danced the forms. Time like cool honey. The graylark sang, and the lean man shrieked as Cutting the Clouds removed his right hand at the wrist, and Lan flowed to one side so the rest could not all come at him together, flowed from form to form. Soft Rain at Sunset laid open a fat man’s face, took his left eye, and a ginger-haired young splinter drew a gash across Lan’s ribs with Black Pebbles on Snow. Only in stories did one man face six without injury. The Rose Unfolds sliced down a bald man’s left arm, and ginger-hair nicked the corner of Lan’s eye. Only in stories did one man face six and survive. He had known that from the start. Duty was a mountain, death a feather, and his duty was to Bukama, who had carried an infant on his back. For this moment he lived, though, so he fought, kicking ginger-hair in the head, dancing his way toward death, danced and took wounds, bled and danced the razor’s edge of life. Time like cool honey, flowing from form to form, and there could only be one ending. Thought was distant. Death was a feather. Dandelion in the Wind slashed open the now one-eyed fat man’s throat—he had barely paused when his face was ruined—a fork-bearded fellow with shoulders like a blacksmith gasped in surprise as Kissing the Adder put Lan's steel through his heart.

And suddenly Lan realized that he alone stood, with six men sprawled across the width of the stableyard. The ginger-haired youth thrashed his heels on the ground one last time, and then only Lan of the seven still breathed. He shook blood from his blade, bent to wipe the last drops off on the blacksmith's too-fine coat, sheathed his sword as formally as if he were in the training yard under Bukama's eye.

Abruptly people flooded out of the inn, cooks and stablemen, maids and patrons shouting to know what all the noise was about, staring at the dead men in astonishment. Ryne was the very first, sword already in hand, his face blank as he came to stand by Lan. "Six," he muttered, studying the bodies. "You really do have the Dark One's own flaming luck."

Dark-eyed Lira reached Lan only moments before Bukama, the pair of them gently parting slashes in his clothes to examine his injuries. She shivered delicately as each was revealed, but she discussed whether an Aes Sedai should be sent for to give Healing and how much stitching was needed in as calm a tone as Bukama, and disparagingly dismissed his hand on the needle in favor of her own. Mistress Arovni stalked about, holding her skirts up out of patches of bloody mud, glaring at the corpses littering her stableyard, complaining in a loud voice that gangs of footpads would never be wandering in daylight if the Watch was doing its job. The Domani woman who had stared at Lan inside agreed just as loudly, and for her pains received a sharp command from the innkeeper to fetch the Watch, along with a shove to start her on her way. It was a measure of Mistress Arovni's shock that she treated one of her patrons so, a measure of everyone's shock that the Domani woman went running without complaint. The innkeeper began organizing men to drag the bodies out of sight.

Ryne looked from Bukama to the stable as though he did not understand—perhaps he did not, at that—but what he said was "Not footpads, I think." He pointed to the fellow who looked like a blacksmith. "That one listened to Edeyn Arrel when she was here, and he liked what he heard. One of the others did, too, I think." Bells chimed as he shook his head. "It's peculiar. The first she said of raising the Golden Crane was after we heard you were dead outside the Shining Walls. Your name brings men, but with you dead, she could be el'Edeyn."

He spread his hands at the looks Lan and Bukama shot him. “I make no accusations,” he said hastily. “I’d never accuse the Lady Edeyn of any such thing. I’m sure she is full of all a woman’s tender mercy.” Mistress Arovni gave a grunt hard as a fist, and Lira murmured half under her breath that the pretty Arafellin knew little about women.

Lan shook his head. Not in denial. Edeyn might decide to have him killed if it suited her purposes, she might have left orders here and there in case the rumors about him proved false, but if she had, that was still no reason to speak her name in connection with this, especially in front of strangers.

Bukama’s hands stilled, holding open a slash down Lan’s sleeve. “Where do we go from here?” he asked quietly.

“Chachin,” Lan after a moment. There was always a choice, but sometimes every choice was grim. “You’ll have to leave Sun Lance. I mean to depart at first light tomorrow.” His gold would stretch to a new mount for the man.

“Six!” Ryne growled, sheathing his sword with considerable force. “I think I’ll ride with you. I’d as soon not go back to Shol Arbela until I’m sure Ceiline Noreman doesn’t lay her husband’s death at my boots. And it will be good to see the Golden Crane flying again.”

Lan nodded. To put his hand on the banner and abandon what he had promised himself all those years ago, or to stop her, if he could. Either way, he had to face Edeyn. The Blight would have been much easier.

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Chapter 17

An Arrival

Chasing after prophecy, Moiraine had decided by the end of the first month, involved very little adventure and a great deal of boredom. Now, three months out of Tar Valon, her grand search consisted mainly of frustration. The Three Oaths still made her skin feel too tight, and now saddlesoreness added to the mix. The wind rattled the closed shutters against their latches, and she shifted on the hard wooden chair, hiding impatience behind a sip of honeyless tea. In Kandor, comforts were kept to a minimum in a house of mourning. She would not have been overly surprised to see frost on the leaf-carved furniture or the steel-cased clock above the cold hearth.

“It was all so strange, my Lady,” Jurine Najima sighed, and for the tenth time hugged her daughters to her fiercely, as though she would never release them. They seemed to find comfort in the crushing grip. Perhaps thirteen or fourteen, standing on either side of Jurine’s chair, Colar and Eselle had her long black hair and large blue eyes still full of loss. Their mother’s eyes seemed big, too, in a face shrunken by tragedy, and her plain gray dress appeared made for a larger woman. “Josef was always careful with lanterns in the stable,” she went on, “and he never allowed any kind of open flame. The boys must have carried little Jerid out to see their father at his work, and….” Another hollow sigh. “They were all trapped. How could the whole stable be ablaze so fast? It makes no sense.”

“Little is ever senseless, Mistress Najima,” Moiraine said soothingly, setting her cup on the small table at her elbow. She felt sympathy, but the woman had begun repeating herself. “We cannot always see the reason, yet we can take some comfort in knowing there is one. The Wheel of Time weaves us into the Pattern as it wills, but the Pattern is the work of the Light.”

Hearing herself, she suppressed a wince. Those words required dignity and weight her youth failed to supply. For a moment, she wished for the agelessness, but the last thing she could afford was to have the name Aes Sedai attached to her visit. No sister had come calling on Jurine yet, but one would sooner or later.

“As you say, my Lady Alys,” the other woman murmured politely, though an unguarded shift of pale eyes spoke her thoughts. This outlander was a foolish child, noble or not.

The small blue stone of the *kesiera* dangling onto Moiraine’s forehead and one of Tamore’s riding dresses, in dark green, upheld her supposed rank. People allowed questions from a noble they never would from a commoner, and accepted odd behavior as natural. Supposedly, she was making sympathy calls in mourning for her own king. Not that many people seemed to be mourning Laman in Cairhien itself. The latest news she had from there, a month old, spoke of four Houses laying claim to the throne and fierce skirmishes, some approaching battles. Light, how many would die before that was settled? There would have been deaths had she gone along with the Hall—the succession to the Sun Throne was always contested, whether through open warfare or assassination and kidnapping—but at least she had been gone long enough to put paid to that. And *she* would pay for doing so, atop whatever Sierin imposed for disobedience.

Perhaps she let something of her anger show, and Mistress Najima took it to mean her own thoughts had been too clear, because she started up again, speaking anxiously. No one wanted to anger a noble, even an outland noble. “It’s just that Josef was always so lucky, my Lady Alys. Everyone spoke of it. They said if Josef Najima fell down a hole, there’d be opals at the bottom. When he answered the Lady Kareil’s call to go fight the Aiel, I worried, but he never took a scratch. When camp fever struck, it never touched us or the children. Josef gained the Lady’s favor without trying. Then it seemed the Light truly did shine on us. Jerid was born safe and whole, and the war ended, all in a matter of days, and when we came home to Canluum, the Lady gave us the livery stable for Josef’s service, and… and….” She swallowed tears she would not shed. Colar began to weep, and her mother pulled her closer, whispering comfort.

Moiraine rose. More repetition. There was nothing here for her. Jurine stood, too, not a tall woman, yet almost a hand taller than she. Either of the girls could look her in the eyes. Forcing herself to take time, she murmured more condolences and tried to press a washleather purse on the woman as the girls brought her fur-lined cloak and gloves. A small purse. In the beginning, instinct had made her generous, even with the bounty to come if not already received, but before long, she would need to find a bank.

The woman's stiff-necked refusal to take the purse irritated her. No, she understood pride, and besides, Lady Kareil had provided. The presence of a clock spoke of a prosperous household. The real irritant was her own desire to be gone. Jurine Najima had lost her husband and three sons in one fiery morning, but her Jerid had been born in the wrong place by almost twenty miles. Moiraine disliked feeling relief in connection with the death of an infant. Yet she did. The dead boy was not the one she sought.

Outside under a gray sky, she gathered her cloak tightly. Anyone who went about the streets of Canluum with an open cloak would draw stares. Any outlander, at least, unless clearly Aes Sedai. Besides, not allowing the cold to touch you did not make you entirely unaware of it. How these people could call this "new spring" without a hint of mockery was beyond her. Mentally she drew a line through the name of Jurine Najima. Other names in the notebook residing in her belt pouch already had real lines inked through them. The mothers of five boys born in the wrong place or on the wrong day. The mothers of three girls. Her initial optimism that she would be the one to find the boychild had faded to a faint hope. The book contained hundreds of names. Surely one of Tamra's searchers would locate him first. Still, she intended to go on. Years might pass before it was safe for her to return to Tar Valon. A great many years.

Despite the near freezing wind that gusted over the rooftops, the winding streets were packed with milling people and carts and wagons, and hawkers with their trays or barrows. Wagon drivers shouted and cracked their long whips to gain some headway, the women coming nearer to striking flesh than the men, and so managed to move in straight lines, but for her, it was a matter of picking her way, dodging around wagons and high-wheeled carts. She was certainly not the only outlander afoot in the streets. A Taraboner with heavy mustaches pushed past her muttering a hasty apology, and an olive-skinned Altaran woman who scowled at her, then a smiling Illianer with a beard that left his upper lip bare, a very pretty fellow and not too tall. A dark-faced Tairen in a striped cloak, even prettier, eyed her up and down and pursed his lips in betrayal of lascivious thoughts. He even moved as though to speak to her, but she let the wind catch one side of her cloak, flinging it open long enough to reveal the slashes on her breast. That sent him scurrying. He might have been willing to approach a merchant with his beautiful face and lewd suggestions, but a noble was another matter.

Not everyone was forced to crawl. Twice she saw Aes Sedai strolling through the crowds, and those who recognized the ageless face leaped out of their paths and hastily warned others to move aside, so they walked in pools of open space that flowed along the street with them. Neither was a woman she had met, but she kept her head down and stayed to the other side of the street, far enough that they could not sense her ability. Perhaps she should put on a veil. A stout woman brushed by, features blurred behind lace. Sierin Vayu herself could have passed unrecognized at ten feet in one of those. She shivered at the thought, ridiculous at it was.

The inn where she had a small room was called The Gates of Heaven, four sprawling stories of green-roofed stone, Canluum's best and largest. Nearby shops, jewelers and goldsmiths, silversmiths and seamstresses, catered to the lord and ladies on the Stand, looming behind the inn. She would not have stopped in it had she known who else was staying there before paying for her room. There was not another room to be found in the city, but a hayloft would have been preferable. Taking a deep breath, she hurried inside. Neither the sudden warmth from fires on four large hearths nor the good smells from the kitchens eased her tight shoulders.

The common room was large, and every table beneath the bright red ceiling beams was taken. The customers were plainly dressed merchants for the most part, bargaining in low voices over wine, and a sprinkling of well-to-do craftsfolk with rich embroidery covering colorful coats or dresses. She hardly noticed them. No fewer than five sisters were staying at The Gates of Heaven—none known to her from the Tower, the Light be thanked—and all sat in the common room when she walked in. Master Helvin, the innkeeper, would always make room for an Aes Sedai even when he had to force other patrons to double up.

The sisters kept to themselves, barely acknowledging one another, and people who might not have recognized an Aes Sedai on sight knew them now, knew enough not to intrude. Every other table was jammed, yet where any man sat with an Aes Sedai, it was her Warder, a hard-eyed man with a dangerous look about him however ordinary he might seem otherwise. One of the sisters sitting alone was a Red, a fact known only through an overheard comment. Only Felaana Bevaine, a slim yellow-haired Brown in plain dark woolens, wore her shawl. She had been the first to corner

Moiraine when she arrived. They had felt her ability as soon as she came close, of course.

Tucking her gloves behind her belt and folding her cloak over her arm, she started toward the stone stairs at the back of the room. Not too quickly, but not dawdling, either. Looking straight ahead. The sisters' eyes following her seemed the touch of fingers. Not quite grasping. None spoke to her. They thought her a wilder, a woman who had learned to channel on her own. That lucky deception had come about by accident, a misperception on Felaana's part, but it was bolstered by the presence of a true wilder at the inn. No one knew what Mistress Asher was, except the sisters. Many Aes Sedai disliked wilders, considering them a loss to the Tower, yet few went out of their way to make their lives difficult. A merchant in dark gray wool who wore only a red-enameled circle pin for jewelry, Mistress Asher dropped her eyes whenever a sister glanced at her, but they had no interest in her. Her gray hair ensured that.

Then, just as Moiraine reached the staircase, a woman did speak behind her. "Well, now. This is a surprise."

Turning quickly, Moiraine kept her face smooth with an effort as she made a brief curtsy suitable from a minor noblewoman to an Aes Sedai. To two Aes Sedai. Short of Sierin herself, she could hardly have encountered two worse than this pair in sober silks.

The white wings in Larelle Tarsi's long hair emphasized her serene, copper-skinned elegance. She had taught Moiraine in several classes, as both novice and Accepted, and she had a way of asking the last question you wanted to hear. Worse, the other was Merean. Seeing them together was a surprise; she had not thought they particularly liked one another.

Larelle was as strong as Merean, requiring deference, but they were outside the Tower, now. They had no right to interfere with whatever she might be doing here. Yet if either said the wrong thing here, word that Moiraine Damodred was wandering about in disguise would spread with the sisters in the room, and it would reach the wrong ears as surely as peaches were poison. That was the way of the world. A summons back to Tar Valon would find her soon after. Disobeying the Amyrlin Seat once was bad enough. Twice, and very likely sisters would be sent to bring her back. She opened her mouth hoping to forestall the chance, but someone else spoke first.

“No need trying that one,” Felaana said, twisting around on her bench at a nearby table where she was sitting alone. She had been writing intently in a small leather-bound book, and there was an ink stain on the tip of her nose, of all places. “Says she has no interest in going to the Tower. Stubborn as stone about it. Secretive, too. You would think we’d have heard about a wilder popping up even in a lesser Cairhienin House, but this child likes to keep to herself.”

Larelle and Merean looked at Moiraine, Larelle arching a thin eyebrow, Merean apparently trying to suppress a smile.

“It is quite true, Aes Sedai,” Moiraine said carefully, relieved that someone else had laid a foundation. “I have no desire to enroll as a novice, and I will not.”

Felaana fixed her with considering eyes, but she still spoke to the others. “Says she’s twenty-two, but that rule has been bent a time or two. A woman says she’s eighteen, and that’s how she’s enrolled. Unless it’s too obvious a lie, anyway, and this girl could easily pass for—”

“Our rules were not made to be broken,” Larelle said sharply, and Merean added in a wry voice, “I don’t believe this young woman will lie about her age. She doesn’t want to be a novice, Felaana. Let her go her way.” Moiraine almost let out a relieved sigh.

Enough weaker than they to accept being cut off, Felaana still began to rise, plainly meaning to continue the argument. Halfway to her feet she glanced up the stairs behind Moiraine, her eyes widened, and abruptly she sat down again, focusing on her writing as if nothing in the world existed beyond her book. Merean and Larelle gathered their shawls, gray fringe and blue swaying. They looked eager to be elsewhere. They looked as though their feet had been nailed to the floor.

“So this girl does not want to be a novice,” said a woman’s voice from the stairs. A voice Moiraine had heard only once, two years ago, and would never forget. A number of women were stronger than she, but only one could be as much stronger as this one. Unwillingly, she looked over her shoulder.

Nearly black eyes studied her from beneath a bun of iron-gray hair decorated with golden ornaments, stars and birds, crescent moons and fish. Cadsuane, too, wore her shawl, fringed in green. “In my opinion, girl,” she said dryly, “you could profit from ten years in white.”

Everyone had believed Cadsuane Melaidhrin dead somewhere in retirement until she reappeared at the start of the Aiel War, and a good many sisters probably wished her truly in her grave. Cadsuane was a legend, a most uncomfortable thing to have alive and staring at you. Half the tales about her came close to impossibility, while the rest were beyond it, even among those that had proof. A long-ago King of Tarabon winkled out of his palace when it was learned he could channel, carried to Tar Valon to be gentled while an army that did not believe chased after to attempt rescue. A King of Arad Doman and a Queen of Saldaea *both* kidnapped, spirited away in secrecy, and when Cadsuane finally released them, a war that had seemed certain simply faded away. It was said she bent Tower law where it suited her, flouted custom, went her own way and often dragged others with her.

"I thank the Aes Sedai for her concern," Moiraine began, then trailed off under that stare. Not a hard stare. Simply implacable. Supposedly even Amyrlins had stepped warily around Cadsuane over the years. It was whispered that she had actually *assaulted* an Amyrlin, once. Impossible, of course; she would have been executed! Moiraine swallowed and tried to start over, only to find she wanted to swallow again.

Descending the stair, Cadsuane told Merean and Larelle, "Bring the girl." Without a second glance, she glided across the common room. Merchants and craftsfolk looked at her, some openly, some from the corner of an eye, and Warders, too, but every sister kept her gaze on her table.

Merean's face tightened, and Larelle sighed extravagantly, yet they prodded Moiraine after the bobbing golden ornaments. She had no choice but to go. At least Cadsuane could not be one of the women Tamra had called in; she had not returned to Tar Valon since that visit at the beginning of the war.

The Green sister led them to one of the inn's private sitting rooms, where a fire blazed on the black stone hearth and silver lamps hung along the red wall panels. A tall pitcher stood near the fire to keep warm, and a lacquered tray on a small carved table held silver cups. Merean and Larelle took two of the brightly cushioned chairs, but when Moiraine put her cloak on a chair and started to sit, Cadsuane pointed to a spot in front of the other sisters. "Stand there, child," she said.

Fighting down a searing flare of temper, Moiraine made an effort not to clutch her skirt in fists. Even a woman as strong as Cadsuane had no right to order her here. Yet under that remorseless gaze, she stood as directed. Quivering with outrage, she struggled not to utter words she would regret, but she did it. There was something of Siuan about this woman, only magnified. Siuan had been born to lead. Cadsuane had been born to command.

She circled the three of them slowly, once, twice. Merean and Larelle exchanged wondering frowns, and Larelle opened her mouth, but after one look at Cadsuane closed it again. They assumed smooth-faced serenity; any watcher would have thought they knew exactly what was going on. Sometimes Cadsuane glanced at them, but the greater part of her attention stayed on Moiraine.

"Most new sisters," the legendary Green said abruptly, "hardly remove their shawls to sleep or bathe, but here you are without shawl or ring, in one of the most dangerous spots you could choose, short of the Blight itself. Why?"

Moiraine blinked. A direct question. The woman really did ignore custom when it suited her. She made her voice light. "New sisters also seek a Warder." Why was the woman singling her out in this manner? "I have not bonded mine, yet. I am told Bordermen make fine Warders." The Green sent her a stabbing look that made her wish she had been just a little less light.

Stopping behind Larelle, Cadsuane laid a hand on her shoulder. "What do you know of this child?"

Every girl in Larelle's classes had thought her the perfect sister and been intimidated by that cool consideration. They all had been afraid of her, and wanted to be her. "Moiraine was studious and a quick learner," she said thoughtfully. "She and Siuan Sanche were two of the quickest the Tower has ever seen. But you must know that. Let me see. She was rather too free with her opinions, and her temper, until we settled her down. As much as we did settle her. She and the Sanche girl had a continuing fondness for pranks. But they both passed for Accepted on the first try. She needs seasoning, of course, yet she may make something of herself."

Cadsuane moved behind Merean, asking the same question, adding, "A fondness for…pranks, Larelle said. A troublesome child?"

Merean shook her head with a smile. "Not troublesome, really. High-spirited. None of the tricks Moiraine played were mean, but they were plentiful. Novice and Accepted, she was sent to my study more often than any three other girls. Except for her pillow-friend Siuan. Of course, pillow-friends frequently get into tangles together, but with those two, one was never sent to me without the other. The last time the very night after passing for the shawl." Her smile faded into a frown very much like the one she had worn that night. Not angry, but rather disbelieving of the mischief young women could get up to. And a touch amused by it. "Instead of spending the night in contemplation, they tried to sneak mice into a sister's bed—Elaida a'Roihan—and were caught. I doubt any other women have been raised Aes Sedai while still too tender to sit from their last visit to the Mistress of Novices."

Moiraine kept her face smooth, kept her hands from knotting into fists, but she could do nothing about burning cheeks. That ruefully amused frown, as if she were still Accepted. She needed seasoning, did she? Well, perhaps she did, some, but still. And spreading out all these intimacies!

"I think you know all of me that you need to know," she told Cadsuane stiffly. How close she and Siuan had been was no one's business but theirs. And their punishments, *details* of their punishments. "If you are quite satisfied, I must pack my things. I am departing for Chachin."

She swallowed a groan before it could form. She still let her tongue go too free when her temper was up. If Merean or Larelle was part of the search, they must have at least part of the list in her little book. Including Jurine Najima here, the Lady Ines Demain in Chachin, and Avene Sahera, who lived in "a village on the high road between Chachin and Canluum." To strengthen suspicion, all she need do now was say she intended to spend time in Arafel and Shienar next.

Cadsuane smiled, not at all pleasantly. "You'll leave when I say, child. Be silent till you're spoken to. That pitcher should hold spiced wine. Pour for us."

Moiraine quivered. Child! She was no longer a novice. The woman could not order her coming and going. Or her tongue. But she did not protest. She walked to the hearth—stalked, really—and picked up the long-necked silver pitcher.

"You seem very interested in this young woman, Cadsuane," Merean said, turning slightly to watch Moiraine pour. "Is there something about her we should know?"

Larelle's smile held a touch of mockery. Only a touch, with Cadsuane. "Has someone Foretold she'll be Amyrlin one day? I can't say that I see it in her, but then, I don't have the Foretelling."

“I might live another thirty years,” Cadsuane said, putting out a hand for the cup Moiraine offered, “or only three. Who can say?”

Moiraine’s eyes went wide, and she slopped hot wine over her own wrist. Merean gasped, and Larelle looked as though she had been struck in the forehead with a stone.

“A little more care with the other cups,” the Green said, unperturbed by all the gaping. “Child?” Moiraine returned to the hearth still staring, and Cadsuane went on. “Meilyn is considerably older. When she and I are gone, that leaves Kerene the strongest.” Larelle flinched. Did the woman mean to violate *every* custom all in one go? “Am I disturbing you?” Cadsuane’s solicitous tone could not have been more false, and she did not wait for an answer. “Holding our silence about age doesn’t keep people from knowing we live longer than they. Phaaw! From Kerene, it’s a sharp drop to the next five. Five once this child and the Sanche girl reach their potential. And one of those is as old as I am and in retirement to boot.”

“Is there some point to this?” Merean asked, sounding a little sick. Larelle pressed her hands against her middle, her face gray. They barely glanced at the wine Moiraine offered before gesturing it away, and she kept the cup, though she did not think she could swallow a mouthful.

Cadsuane scowled, a fearsome sight. “No one has come to the Tower in a thousand years who could match me. No one to match Meilyn or Kerene in almost six hundred. A thousand years ago, there would have been fifty sisters or more who stood higher than this child. In another hundred years, though, she’ll stand in the first rank. Oh, someone stronger may be found in that time, but there won’t be fifty, and there may be none. We dwindle.”

Moiraine’s ears pricked. Did Cadsuane have some solution to the problem? But how could any solution involve her?

“I don’t understand,” Larelle said sharply. She seemed to have gathered herself, and to be angry for her previous weakness. “We are all aware of the issue, but what does Moiraine have to do with it? Do you think she can somehow attract more girls to the Tower, girls with…with stronger potential?” She had to force that last out, grimacing in disgust, and her snort said what she thought of the notion.

“I would regret her being wasted before she knows up from down. The Tower can’t afford to lose her out of her own ignorance. Look at her. A pretty little doll of a Cairhien noble.” Cadsuane put a finger under

Moiraine’s chin, tilting it up. “Before you find a Warder like that, child, a brigand who wants to see what’s in your purse will put an arrow through your heart. A footpad who’d faint at the sight of a sister in her sleep will crack your head, and you’ll wake at the back of an alley minus your gold and maybe more. I suspect you’ll want to take as much care choosing your first man as you do your first Warder.”

Moiraine jerked back, spluttered with indignation. First her and Siuan, now this. There were things one talked about, and things one did not!

Cadsuane ignored her outrage. Calmly sipping her wine, she turned back to the others. “Until she does find a Warder to guard her back, it might be best to protect her from her own enthusiasm. You two are going to Chachin, I believe. She’ll travel with you, then. I expect you not to let her out of your sight.”

Moiraine found her tongue, but her protests did as much good as her indignation had. Merean and Larelle objected, too, just as vociferously. Aes Sedai did not need “looking after,” no matter how new. They had interests of their own to look after. They did not make clear what those were or whether they were shared between them—few sisters would have—but plainly neither wanted company. Cadsuane paid no attention to anything she did not want to hear, assumed they would do as she wished, pressed wherever they offered an opening. Soon the pair were twisting on their chairs and reduced to saying that they had encountered each other only the day before and were not sure they would be traveling on together. In any event, both meant to spend two or three days in Canluum, while Moiraine wanted to leave today.

“The child will stay until you leave,” Cadsuane said briskly. “Good; that’s done, then. I’m sure you two want to see to whatever brought you to Canluum. I won’t keep you.”

Larelle shifted her shawl irritably at the abrupt dismissal, then stalked out muttering that Moiraine would regret it if she got underfoot or slowed her reaching Chachin. Merean took it better, saying she would look after Moiraine like a daughter, though her smile hardly looked pleased.

When they were gone, Moiraine stared at Cadsuane incredulously. She had never seen anything like it. Except an avalanche, once. The thing to do now was keep silent until she had a chance to leave without Cadsuane or the others seeing. Much the wisest thing. “I agreed to nothing,” she said coolly. Very coolly. “What if I have affairs in Chachin that will not wait?

What if I do not choose to wait here two or three days?” Perhaps she did need to learn to school her tongue a little more.

Cadsuane had been looking thoughtfully at the door that had closed behind Merean and Larelle, but she turned a piercing gaze on Moiraine. “You’ve worn the shawl only four months or so, and you have affairs that cannot wait? Phaaw! You still haven’t learned the first real lesson, that the shawl means you are ready to truly begin learning. The second lesson is caution. I know better than most how hard that is to find when you’re young and have *saidar* at your fingertips and the world at your feet. As you think.” Moiraine tried to fit a word in, but she might as well have stood in front of that avalanche. “You will take great risks in your life, if you live long enough. You already take more than you know. Heed carefully what I say. And do as I say. I will check your bed tonight, and if you are not in it, I will find you and make you weep as you did for those mice. You can dry your tears afterward on that shawl you believe makes you invincible. It does not.”

Staring as the door closed behind Cadsuane, Moiraine suddenly realized she still held the cup of wine and gulped it dry. The woman was… formidable. Custom forbade physical violence against another sister, but Cadsuane had not sidestepped a hair in her threat. She had said it right out, so by the Three Oaths she meant it exactly. Incredible. Was it happenstance that she had mentioned Meilyn Arganya and Kerene Nagashi? They were two of Tamra’s searchers. *Could* Cadsuane be another? Either way, she had very neatly cut Moiraine out of the hunt for the next week or more. If she actually went with Merean and Larelle, at least. But why only a week? If the woman was part of the search…. If Cadsuane knew about her and Siuan…. If…. Standing there fiddling with an empty winecup was getting her nowhere. She snatched up her cloak.

* * *

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Chapter
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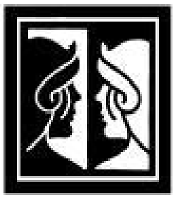

A Narrow Passage

A number of people looked around at Moiraine when she came out into the common room, some with sympathy in their eyes. Doubtless they were imagining what it must be like to be the focus of attention for three Aes Sedai, and they could not imagine any good in it. There was no commiseration on any sister's face. Most took hardly any notice of her at all. Felaana wore a pleased smile, though, probably thinking the Lady Alys' name as good as written in the novice book. At least she did not know the truth, not with that smile. There was some hope of staying hidden from Sierin a while longer. Cadsuane was nowhere in sight, nor the other two.

Picking her way through the tables, Moiraine felt as though she had been spun like a top. There were too many questions, and not an answer to be found. She wished Siuan were there, with her ability to solve puzzles. And nothing shook Siuan. She could have used Siuan's presence for the steadying alone.

A young woman looked in at the door from the street, then jerked out of sight. Moiraine missed a step. Wish for something hard enough, and you could think you saw it. The woman peeked in again, the hood of her cloak fallen atop the bundle on her back, and it really was Siuan, sturdy and handsome in one of Tamore's plain blue riding dresses. This time she saw Moiraine, but instead of rushing to greet her, Siuan nodded up the street and vanished again.

Heart climbing into her throat, Moiraine swept her cloak around her and went out. Down the street, Siuan was slipping through the traffic, glancing back at every third step. A wagon driver hauled her reins hard to avoid running Siuan down, and cracked her whip over Siuan's head, but Siuan seemed unaware of the horses snorting in their traces or the whip or the wagon driver's angry shouts. Moiraine followed quickly, worry growing. Another three or four years would pass before Siuan gained enough strength to tell Cetalia she was leaving the job as Cetalia's assistant.

There would be snow at Sunday before the woman let her go short of that. And the only other possibility for her being in Canluum…. Moiraine groaned, and a big-eared fellow selling pins from a tray gave her a concerned look. She glared so hard that he started back.

Perhaps Siuan had let something slip, or maybe her book of names had been found, or…. No; how it happened did not matter. Sierin must have found out, about everything. It would be just like the woman to send Siuan to bring her back, so their worry could feed on each other during the long ride. Maybe she was building phantasms, but she could not imagine another explanation.

A hundred paces from the inn, Siuan looked back once more, paused till she was sure that Moiraine saw her, then darted into an alley. Moiraine quickened her stride and followed.

Her friend was pacing beneath the still-unlit oil lamps that lined this narrow, dusty passage. The dark blue dress showed signs of hard travel, creases and stains, dust. Nothing frightened Siuan, yet fear glittered in those sharp blue eyes now. Moiraine opened her mouth to confirm her own fears about Sierin, but the taller woman spoke first.

“Light, I thought I’d *never* bloody find you. Tell me you’ve found him, Moiraine. Tell me the Najima boy’s the one, and we can hand him to the Tower with a hundred sisters watching, and it’s done.”

A hundred sisters? “No, Siuan, he is not.” This did not sound like Sierin. “What is the matter? Why did you come yourself instead of sending a message?”

Siuan began to weep. Siuan, who had a lion’s heart. Tears spilled down her cheeks. Throwing her arms around Moiraine, she squeezed hard enough to make Moiraine’s ribs ache. She was trembling. “I couldn’t trust this to a pigeon,” she mumbled, “or to any of the eyes-and-ears. I wouldn’t have dared. They’re all dead. Aisha and Kerene, Valera and Ludice and Meilyn. They say Aisha and her Warder were killed by bandits in Murandy. Kerene supposedly fell off a ship in the Alguenya during a storm and drowned. And Meilyn…Meilyn….” Sobs racked her so she could not go on.

Moiraine hugged her back, making soothing sounds. And staring past Siuan’s shoulder in consternation. “Accidents do happen,” she said slowly. “Bandits. Storms. Aes Sedai can die as easily as anyone else.”

She was having a hard time making herself believe. *All* of them? Her father used to say that once was happenstance, twice might be coincidence, but thrice or more indicated the actions of your enemies. He said he had read it somewhere. But *what* enemies? A thought occurred, and she forced it down. Some things did not bear thinking.

Siuan pushed herself away from Moiraine's embrace. "You don't understand. Meilyn!" Grimacing, she scrubbed at her eyes. "Fish guts! I'm not making this clear. Get hold of yourself, you bloody fool!" That last was growled to herself. Guiding Moiraine to an upended cask with no bung, she sat Moiraine down and shrugged off the bundle from her own back. If that was all she was traveling with, likely she did not have so much as a spare dress. "You won't want to be standing when you hear what I have to say. For that matter, I bloody well don't want to be standing myself."

Dragging a crate with broken slats from further up the alley, she settled on it, fussing with her skirts, peering toward the street, muttering about people looking in as they passed. Her reluctance did nothing to soothe Moiraine's fluttering stomach. It seemed to do little for Siuan's, either. When she started again, she kept pausing to swallow, like a woman who wanted to sick up.

"Meilyn returned to the Tower almost a month ago. I don't know why. She didn't say where she had been, or where she was going, but she only meant to stay a few nights. I…. I'd heard about Kerene the morning Meilyn came back, and the others before that. So I decided to speak to her. Don't look at me that way! I know how to be cautious!"

Cautious? Siuan? Moiraine could have laughed. Only she knew if she did, it might well tip over into tears of her own. This was madness. It had to be madness. She shoved that horrible thought away again. There had to be another explanation. There *had* to be.

"Anyway, I sneaked into her rooms and hid under the bed. So the servants wouldn't see me when they turned down her sheets." Siuan grunted sourly. "I fell asleep under there. Sunrise woke me, and her bed hadn't been slept in. So I sneaked out again—not easy that time of morning, but I'm sure nobody saw me—and went down to the second sitting of breakfast. And while I was spooning my porridge, Chesmal Emry came in to…. She…. She announced that Meilyn had been found in her bed, that she'd died during the night." She finished in a rush and sagged, staring at Moiraine.

Moiraine was very glad to be sitting. Her knees would not have supported a feather. It *was* madness. Murder had been done. "The Red

Ajah?” she suggested finally. A Red might kill a sister she thought intended to protect a man who could channel. It was possible. But she could not have said it aloud, because she did not believe it

Siuan snorted. “Meilyn didn’t have a mark on her. Yellows delved her, of course. They’d have detected poison, or smothering. They found nothing and called it a natural death. But I know it wasn’t. It couldn’t be, not the way they found her. No marks. That means the Power, Moiraine. Could even a Red do that?” Her voice was fierce, but she pulled the bundle up, clutching it on her lap. She seemed to be hiding behind it. Still, there was less fear on her face than anger, now.

“Think, Moiraine. Tamra supposedly died in her sleep, too. Only we know Meilyn didn’t, no matter where she was found. First Tamra, then the others started dying. The only thing that makes sense is that someone noticed her calling sisters in and wanted to know why badly enough that they bloody risked putting the Amyrlin Seat herself to the question. They had to have something to hide to do that, something they’d hazard anything to keep hidden. They killed her to hide it, to hide what they’d done, and then they set out to kill the rest. Which means they don’t want the boy found, not alive. They don’t want the Dragon Reborn at the Last Battle. Any other way to look at it is tossing the slop bucket into the wind and hoping for the best.”

Unconsciously, Moiraine peered toward the mouth of the alley. A few people walking by glanced in, but none more than once. No one paused at seeing them seated there. Some things were easier to speak of when you were not too specific. “The Amyrlin” had been put to the question; “she” had been killed. Not Tamra, not a name that brought up the familiar face. “Someone” had murdered her. “They” did not want the Dragon Reborn found. Putting someone to the question with the Power violated none of the Three Oaths, but murder using *saidar* certainly did, even for…. For those Moiraine did not want to name any more than Siuan did.

Forcing her face to smoothness, forcing her voice to calm, she forced the words out. “The Black Ajah.” Siuan flinched, then nodded, glowering.

Almost any sister grew angry at the suggestion that a secret Ajah existed, hidden inside the others, an Ajah dedicated to the Dark One. Most sisters refused to listen to any mention of it. The White Tower had stood for the Light for over three thousand years. But some sisters did not deny the

Black straight out. Some believed. Very few would admit it even to another sister, though. Moiraine did not want to admit it to herself.

Siuan plucked fretfully at the ties on her bundle, but she went on in a brisk voice. “I don’t think they have our names—Tamra never really thought us part of it; she told us to be quiet, put us aside, and forgot us—else I’d have had an ‘accident,’ too. Just before I left, I slipped a note with my suspicions under Sierin’s door. Not about the boy; about the…. About the Black. Only, I didn’t know how much to trust her even there. The Amyrlin Seat! But if it’s real, then anybody could belong. Anybody! I wrote with my left hand, but I was shaking so hard, no one could recognize my writing if I’d used my right. Burn my liver! Even if we knew who to trust, we have bilgewater for proof.”

“Enough for me.” Light, the Black Ajah! “If they know everything, all the women Tamra chose, there may be none left except us. We will have to move fast if we have a hope of finding the boy.” It all seemed hopeless—who could say how many Black sisters there might be? twenty? fifty? and a terrible thought: more?—but Moiraine tried for a vigorous tone, too. It was gratifying that Siuan only nodded. She would not give up for all her talk of shaking, and she never considered that Moiraine might. *Most* gratifying. Especially when she still doubted her knees. “Perhaps they know us, and perhaps not. Perhaps they think they can leave two new sisters for last. In any case, we cannot trust anyone but ourselves.” The blood drained from her face, and she suddenly felt light-headed. “Oh, Light! I just had an encounter at the inn, Siuan.”

She tried to recall every word, every nuance, from the moment Merean first spoke. Siuan listened with a distant look, filing and sorting. “Cadsuane could be Black Ajah,” she agreed when Moiraine finished. She barely hesitated over the words. “Maybe she’s just trying to get you out of the way until she can dispose of you without rousing suspicion. Or she could be one of Tamra’s chosen. Just because we think she hasn’t been in Tar Valon for two years doesn’t make it so.” Sisters did slip in and out of the Tower quietly sometimes, but Moiraine thought that anywhere Cadsuane arrived shook as though struck by an earthquake. “The trouble is, any of them could be either.” Leaning across her bundle, she touched Moiraine’s knee. “Can you bring your horse from the stable without being seen? I have a good mount, but I don’t know if she can carry both of us. We should be hours from here before they know we’re gone.”

Moiraine smiled in spite of herself. She very much doubted the good mount. Any horse trader could pass off a broken-down cart horse as a charger to Siuan, whose eye for horseflesh was no better than her seat in the saddle. The ride north must have been agony for her. And full of fear. “No one knows you are here at all, Siuan,” she said. “Best if it stays so. You have your book? Good. If I remain until morning, I will have a day’s start on them instead of hours. You go on to Chachin now. Take some of my coin.” By the state of Siuan’s dress, she had spent the last part of that trip sleeping under bushes. She would not have dared draw much from the Tower’s bank before leaving. “Start searching for the Lady Ines, and I will catch you up there, looking for Avene Sahera on the way.”

It was not that easy, of course. Siuan had a stubborn streak as wide as the Erinin.

“I have enough for my needs,” she grumbled, but Moiraine insisted on handing her half the coins in her purse, and when Moiraine reminded her of their pledge during their first months in the Tower, that what one owned belonged to the other as well, she muttered, “We swore we’d find beautiful young princes to bond, too, and marry them besides. Girls say all sorts of silly things. You watch after yourself, now. You leave me alone in this, and I’ll wring your neck.”

Embracing to say goodbye, Moiraine found it hard to let go. An hour ago, her worries had been how long she could escape Sierin’s justice and the birch. Now, that seemed like worrying over stubbing her toe. The Black Ajah. She wanted to empty her stomach. If only she had Siuan’s courage. Watching Siuan slip down the alley adjusting that bundle on her back again, Moiraine wished she were Green. She would have liked at least three or four Warders to guard her back right then.

Walking back up the street, she could not help looking at everyone she passed, man or woman. If the Black Ajah—her stomach twisted every time she thought that name—if they were involved, then ordinary Darkfriends were, too. No one denied that some misguided people believed the Dark One would give them immortality, people who would kill and do every sort of evil to gain that hoped-for reward. And if any sister could be Black Ajah, anyone she met could be a Darkfriend. She hoped Siuan remembered that.

As she approached The Gates of Heaven, a sister appeared in the inn’s doorway. Part of a sister, at least; all she could see was an arm with a fringed shawl over it, and that just for an instant. A very tall man who had just come out, his hair in two belled braids, turned back to speak for a moment, but a hand gestured peremptorily, and he strode past Moiraine wearing a scowl. She would not have thought twice of it if not for thinking about the Black Ajah and Darkfriends. The Light knew, Aes Sedai did speak to men, and some did more than speak. She had been thinking of Darkfriends, though. And Black sisters. If only she could have made out the color of that fringe. She hurried the last thirty-odd paces frowning.

Merean and Larelle were seated together by themselves near the door, both still wearing their shawls. Few sisters did that except for ceremony, or for show. Both women were watching Cadsuane go into that private sitting room followed by a pair of lean, gray-haired men who looked hard as last year's oak. She still wore her shawl, too, with the white Flame of Tar Valon bright on her back amid the woven vines. It could have been any of them. Cadsuane might be looking for another Warder; Greens always seemed to be looking. Merean or Larelle might be, too; neither had one, unless bonded since she left Tar Valon. The fellow's scowl might have been for hearing he did not measure up. There were a hundred possible explanations, and she put the man out of her head. The sure dangers were real enough without inventing more.

Before she was three steps into the common room, Master Helvin bustled up in a green-striped apron, a bald-headed man nearly as wide as he was tall, and handed her a new irritation. "Ah, Lady Alys; just who I was looking for. With three more Aes Sedai stopping here, I fear I need to shuffle the beds again. Certainly you won't mind sharing yours, under the circumstances. Mistress Palan is a most pleasant woman."

Under the circumstances? Under any normal circumstances, he would never have dared suggest doubling to a noblewoman, no matter how many merchants he had to push into one bed. But what he meant was, since she would soon be off to the White Tower. In fact, he more than suggested. He had already moved the woman in! And when she protested….

"If you're displeased, I suggest you speak to one of the Aes Sedai," he said in a firm voice. A firm voice! To her! "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have many things to take care of. We're very busy right now." And off he bustled without another word. Or even a bow!

She could have screamed. She very nearly channeled, to give him a clout on the ear.

Haesel Palan was a rug merchant from Murandy with the lilt of Lugard in her voice. Moiraine heard more of it than she wanted from the moment she stepped into the small room that had been hers alone. Her clothes had been moved from the wardrobe to pegs on the wall, her comb and brush displaced from the washstand for Mistress Palan’s. The plump, graying woman in fine brown woolens surely would have been diffident with “Lady Alys,” but not with a wilder who everybody said was off in the morning to become a novice in the White Tower. She lectured Moiraine on the duties of a novice, all of her information wrong. Some of what she suggested would have killed most of the novices in a week if not on the first day, and the rest was just impossible. Learn to fly? The woman was mad! She followed Moiraine down to supper and gathered other traders of her acquaintance at the table, every woman of them eager to share what she knew of the White Tower. Which was nothing at all. They shared it in great detail, though. If Moiraine truly had been a potential novice, they would have frightened her out of going anywhere near the Tower! She thought to escape by retiring early, but Mistress Palan appeared almost as soon as she had her dress off and talked until she dropped off to sleep.

It was not an easy night. The bed was narrow, the woman’s elbows sharp and her feet icy despite thick blankets trapping the warmth of the small, tiled stove built in beneath the bed. Ignoring cold air was one thing; icy feet were quite something else. The rainstorm that had threatened all day broke, wind and thunder rattling the shutters for hours. Moiraine doubted she could have slept in any event. Darkfriends and the Black Ajah danced in her head. She saw Tamra being dragged from her sleep, dragged away to somewhere secret and tortured by women wielding the Power. Sometimes the women wore Merean’s face, and Larelle’s, and Cadsuane’s, and every sister’s she had ever seen. Sometimes Tamra’s face became her own.

When the door creaked slowly open in the dark hours of morning, Moiraine embraced the Source in a flash. *Saidar* filled her to the point where the sweetness and joy came close to pain. Not as much of the Power as she would be able to handle in another year, much less five, yet a hair more would burn the ability out of her now, or kill her. One was as bad as the other, but she wanted to draw more, and not just because the Power always made you want more.

Cadsuane put her head in. Moiraine had forgotten her promise, her threat. The Green sister saw the glow, of course, could feel how much she held. “Fool girl” was all the woman said before leaving.

Moiraine counted to one hundred slowly, then swung her feet out from under the covers. Now was as good a time as any. Mistress Palan heaved onto her side and began to snore. It sounded like canvas ripping. Even so, Moiraine took care to be quiet. Channeling Fire, she lit one of the lamps and dressed hurriedly. A riding dress, this time, in dark blue silk and embroidered on the neck and sleeves in a golden pattern like Maldine lace. Reluctantly she decided to abandon her saddlebags along with everything else she had to leave behind. Anyone who saw her moving about might not think too much of it even this time of the morning, but not if she had saddlebags over her shoulder. All she took was what she could fit into the pockets sewn inside her cloak, her brush and comb and sewing kit, some spare stockings and a clean shift. There was no room for more. It was enough, with the letters-of-rights and the remaining gold in her belt pouch. Mistress Palan was still snoring as she closed the door behind her.

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Chapter 19

Pond Water

The common room was empty at that hour, though the clatter of pots and the murmur of voices through the kitchen door told of preparations for breakfast. She hurried out through a side door, into the inn's stableyard. Unseen, she was sure. So far, so good. The sky was just beginning to turn gray, and the air retained every ounce of the night's chill, but at least the rain had stopped. There was a weave to keep rain off, but it did tend to attract notice. Gathering her skirts and cloak to keep them out of the puddles on the paving stones, she quickened her step. The faster gone, the less chance of being seen.

Not that she could avoid every eye. The hinges creaked softly as she opened one of the stable doors to slip inside, and the coatless groom on night duty jumped to his feet from the stool where he had no doubt been dozing with his back against a thick roof post. A skinny, hook-nosed fellow with the tilted eyes of Saldaea, he raked his fingers through his hair in a useless effort to straighten it and made a jerky bow.

"How may I help my Lady?" he asked in a raspy voice.

"Saddle my mare, Kazin," she said, putting a silver penny in his ready hand. It was very good luck that this same man had been on duty when she arrived, too. Master Helvin had written a description of Arrow in the stable book, sitting on a slanted ledge by the doors, but she very much doubted Kazin could read. The silver had him knuckling his forehead and scurrying for Arrow's stall. Likely, he more often received coppers.

She regretted leaving her packhorse behind, but not even a fool noble—she had heard Kazin mutter "who but a fool noble would ride out at this hour?"—would take a pack animal for a morning jaunt. At best, he would hurry inside to find out whether she was paid in full with the innkeeper. She was, and for another night besides, but there was always the chance Cadsuane had promised the servants rewards to watch her movements. In the Green sister’s place, she would have. This way, no one would suspect anything until she failed to return that night.

Climbing into Arrow’s high-cantled saddle, she gave the groom a cool smile, because of his comment, and rode slowly out into damp, nearly empty streets. Just out for a ride, however early. It looked to be a good day. The sky looked rained out, for one thing, with barely a cloud blocking the stars, and there was little wind.

The lamps high on the walls of every building were still lit all along the streets and alleys, leaving no more than the palest shadow anywhere, yet the only people to be seen were the Night Watch’s helmeted patrols with their halberds and crossbows, and the Lamplighters, just as heavily armed as they made their rounds to make sure no lamp went out. A wonder that people could live so close to the Blight that a Myrddraal could step out of any dark shadow. Night Watchmen and Lamplighters alike eyed her with surprise as she rode by. No one went out in the night. Not in the Borderlands.

Which was why she was surprised to see she was not the first to reach the western gates. Slowing Arrow, she stayed well back from the three very large men waiting with a packhorse behind their mounts. None wore helmet or armor, but each wore a sword at his hip and carried a heavy horsebow, with a bristling quiver tied in front of his saddle. Few men went unarmed in these lands. Their attention was all on the barred gates, with now and again a word shared with the gate guards. They seemed impatient for the gates to open, and barely glanced in her direction. The lamps near the gates showed their faces clearly. A grizzled old man and a hard-faced young one, in dark, knee-long coats, with braided leather cords tied around their heads. Malkieri? She thought that was what that cord meant. The third was an Arafellin with belled braids, in a dark yellow coat sewn with more bells. The same fellow she had seen leaving The Gates of Heaven.

By the time a bright sliver of sunrise on the horizon allowed the gates to be swung wide, several merchants’ trains had lined up to depart. The three men were first through, but Moiraine let a dozen tall, canvas-covered wagons behind six-horse teams rumble ahead of her, with their outriding guards in helmets and breastplates, before she followed across the bridge and onto the road through the hills. She kept the three in sight, though. They were heading in the same direction so far, after all.

They moved quickly, good riders who barely shifted a rein, but speed suited her. The more distance she put between herself and Cadsuane, the better. She stayed only close enough to maintain sight of the men. No need to attract their attention until she wished. At that pace, the merchants' wagons and their guards fell behind long before she saw the first village near midday, a small cluster of tile-roofed two-story stone houses around a tiny inn on a forested hill slope beside the road. Even after several months it still seemed odd to see villagers wearing swords, and at least one halberd racked outside every door. Crossbows and quivers, too. It made stark contrast to the children rolling hoops and tossing beanbags in the street.

The three men never slowed or turned an eye toward the village, but Moiraine paused long enough to purchase part of a loaf of crusty pale bread and a narrow wedge of hard yellow cheese and ask whether anyone knew a woman named Avene Sahera. The answer was no, and she galloped on until the three appeared on the hard-packed road ahead, their horses still in that ground-eating pace. Maybe they knew nothing more than the name of the sister the Arafellin had spoken to, but anything at all she learned about Cadsuane or the other two would be to the good.

She formulated several plans for approaching them, and discarded each. Three men on a deserted forest road could well decide a young woman alone was a heaven-sent opportunity, especially if they were what she feared. Handling them presented no difficulty, if it came to it, but she wanted to avoid that. Should they turn out to be Darkfriends, or simply brigands, she would have to hold them prisoner long enough to hand them over to some authority. No telling how long that would take, and besides, there would be no hiding that she was Aes Sedai then. News of a woman capturing three outlaws, hardly an event of every day, would spread like wildfire in dry timber. She might as well weave a great column of Fire above her head to help anyone who wanted to find her.

Forest gave way to scattered farms, and farms faded to more forest, towering fir and pine and leatherleaf, massive oaks with only tiny red leaf-buds on their thick branches. A red-crested eagle soared overhead, not twenty paces up, and became a shape against the descending sun. The road ahead was empty except for the three men and their pack animal, and bare of life behind as well. Decent people would be at their suppers. Not that there was so much as a farmhouse in evidence here. As her shadow stretched out behind her, she decided to forget the men and begin looking for a place to sleep. With luck she might see more farms soon, and if a little silver did not bring a bed, a hayloft would have to do. Without luck, her saddle would suffice for a pillow, if a hard one. A meal would be nice, though. That bread and cheese seemed a very long time back.

Ahead, the three men suddenly stopped in the middle of the road, conferring for a moment. She drew rein where she was. Even if they noticed, proper caution for a woman alone called on her not to ride up on them. Then one of the fellows took the packhorse and turned aside into the forest. The others dug in their heels and rode on at a quicker pace, as though suddenly remembering somewhere they needed to be.

Moiraine frowned. The Arafellin was one of the pair rushing off, but since they were traveling together, maybe he had mentioned meeting an Aes Sedai to his companion left behind. The younger Malkieri, she thought. People did talk about encounters of that sort. Relatively few people had actually met a sister and known who or what she was. And one man would certainly be less trouble than three, if she was careful.

Riding to where rider and packhorse had vanished, she dismounted and began searching for sign. Most ladies left tracking to their huntsmen, but she had taken an interest in the years when climbing trees and getting dirty had seemed equal fun. It appeared this man was no woodsman, though. Broken twigs and kicked winter-fall leaves left a trail a child could have followed. A hundred paces or so into the forest, she spotted a wide pond in a hollow through the trees. And the younger of the Malkieri.

He had already unsaddled and hobbled his bay—a finelooking animal; much too fine for his worn coat, perhaps the sign of a bandit—and was setting the packsaddle on the ground. He looked even larger, this close, with very wide shoulders and a narrow waist. Far from a pretty man, too. Not handsome, with that hard, angular face. A suitable face for a brigand. Unbuckling his sword belt, he sat down cross-legged facing the pond, laid sword and belt beside him, and put his hands on his knees. He seemed to be staring off across the water, still glittering through the late afternoon shadows, toward the water reeds that rimmed the far bank. He did not move a muscle.

Moiraine considered. Plainly he had been left to make camp. The others would return, but not quickly, since he was slacking his task. A question or two would not take long. “Which of you met an Aes Sedai recently?” might be enough. And if he was unnerved a little—say at finding her suddenly standing right behind him—he might answer before he thought. *Saidar* must be left till last. She would have to use it almost certainly, but let the fact that she could channel come as an added surprise.

Tying Arrow’s reins to a low branch on a leatherleaf, she gathered her cloak and skirts and moved forward as silently as possible. A small hummock lay behind him, and she stepped up onto that. Added height could help. He was a very tall man. And it might also help if he found her with her belt knife in one hand and his sword in the other. Channeling, she whisked the scabbarded blade from his side. Every little bit of shock she could manage for him—

He moved faster than thought. No one so large could move so fast, yet her grasp closed on the scabbard, and he uncoiled, whirling, one hand clutching the scabbard between hers, the other seizing the front of her dress. Before she could think to channel, she was flying through the air. She had just time to see the pond coming up at her, just time to shout something, she did not know what, and then she struck the surface flat, driving all the wind out of her, struck with a great splash and sank. The water was *freezing*! *Saidar* fled in her shock.

Floundering to her feet, she stood up to her waist in the icy water, coughing, wet hair clinging to her face, sodden cloak dragging at her shoulders. Furiously she twisted around to confront her attacker, furiously embraced the Source once more, prepared to knock him down and drub him till he squealed!

He stood shaking his head and frowning in puzzlement at the spot where she had stood, a long stride from where he had been sitting. She might as well have been a fish! When he *deigned* to notice her, he put down the scabbarded sword and came to the edge of the pond, bending to stretch out a hand.

“Unwise to try separating a man from his sword,” he said, and after a glance at the colored slashes on her dress added, “my Lady.” Hardly an apology. His startlingly blue eyes did not quite meet hers. If he was hiding mirth…!

Muttering under her breath, she splashed awkwardly to where she could take his outstretched hand in both of hers. And heaved with all of her might. Ignoring icy water tickling down your ribs was not easy, and if she was wet, so would he be, and without any need to use the One….

He straightened, raised his arm, and she came out of the water dangling from his hand. In consternation she stared at him until her feet touched the ground and he backed away.

"I'll start a fire and hang up blankets so you can dry yourself," he murmured, still not meeting her gaze. What *was* he hiding? Or perhaps he was shy. She had never heard of a shy Darkfriend, though she supposed there could be some.

He was as good as his word, and by the time the other men reappeared, she was standing beside a small fire surrounded by blankets dug from his packsaddles and hung from the branches of an oak. She had no need of the fire for drying, of course. The proper weave of Water had taken every drop from her hair and clothes while she stayed in them. As well he did not see that, though. Or her, until her hair was combed straight and brushed. And she did appreciate the flame's warmth. Anyway, she had to stay inside the blankets long enough for the man to think she had used the fire as he intended. She very definitely held on to *saidar*. So far, she had proof of nothing.

"Did she follow you, Lan?" a man's voice said as he dismounted to the jingle of bells. The Arafellin.

"Why are those blankets up?" a sour voice demanded gruffly.

Moiraine stared at nothing, missing what reply her assailant made to the questions. They had known? Men watched for bandits in these times, but they had noticed a lone woman and decided she was following them? It made no sense. But why lure her into the woods instead of just confronting her? Three men had no reason to fear one woman. Unless they knew she was Aes Sedai. They would step very cautiously, then. But she was certain the fellow had no idea how she had gotten hold of his sword.

"A Cairhienin, Lan? I suppose you've seen a Cairhienin in her skin, but I never have." That certainly caught her ear, and with the Power filling her, so did another sound. Steel whispering on leather. A sword leaving its sheath. Preparing several weaves that would stop the lot of them in their tracks, she made a crack in the blankets to peek out.

To her surprise, the man who had dunked her—Lan?—stood with his back to her blankets. He was the one with bared steel in hand. The Arafellin, facing him, looked surprised.

"You remember the sight of the Thousand Lakes, Ryne," Lan said coldly. "Does a woman need protection from your eyes?"

For a moment, she thought Ryne was going to draw despite the blade already in Lan's hand, but the older man—Bukama, she heard him called—a much-battered, graying fellow though as tall as the others, calmed matters, took the other two a little distance away with talk of some game called "sevens." A strange game it seemed to be, and more than dangerous in the failing daylight. Lan and Ryne sat cross-legged facing one another, their swords sheathed, then without warning drew, each blade flashing toward the other man's throat, stopping just short of flesh. The older man pointed to Ryne; they sheathed swords, and then did it again. For as long as she watched, that was how it went. Perhaps Ryne had not been so overconfident as he seemed.

Waiting inside the blankets, she tried to recall what she had been taught of Malkier. It had not been a great deal, except as history. Ryne remembered the Thousand Lakes, so he must be Malkieri, too. There had been something about distressed women. Now that she was with them, she might as well stay until she learned what she could.

When she came out from behind the blankets, she was ready. "I claim the right of a woman alone," she told them formally. "I travel to Chachin, and I ask the shelter of your swords." She also pressed a fat silver coin into each man's hand. She was not really sure about this ridiculous "woman alone" business, but silver caught most men's attention. "And two more each, paid in Chachin."

The reactions were not what she expected. Ryne glared at the coin as he turned it over in his fingers. Lan looked at his without expression and tucked it into his coat pocket with a grunt. She had given them some of her last Tar Valon marks, she realized, but Tar Valon coins could be found anywhere, along with those of every other land.

Bukama bowed with his left hand on his knee. "Honor to serve, my Lady," he said. "To Chachin, my life above yours." His eyes were also blue, and they, too, would not quite meet hers. She hoped he did not turn out to be a Darkfriend.

Learning anything proved to be difficult. Impossible. First the men were busy setting up camp, tending the horses, making a larger fire. They did not seem eager to face a new spring night without that. Bukama and Lan barely said a word over a dinner of flatbread and dried meat that she tried not to wolf down. Ryne talked and was quite charming, really, with a dimple in his cheek when he smiled, and a sparkle in his blue eyes, but he gave no opening for her to mention The Gates of Heaven or Aes Sedai. When she finally inquired why he was going to Chachin, his face turned sad.

“Every man has to die somewhere,” he said softly, and went off to make up his blankets. A very odd answer. Worthy of an Aes Sedai.

Lan took the first watch as the moon rose above the trees, sitting cross-legged not far from Ryne, and when Bukama doused the fire and rolled himself up in his blankets near Lan, she wove a ward of Spirit around each man. Flows of Spirit she could hold on to sleeping, and if any of them moved in the night, the ward would wake her without alerting them. It meant waking every time they changed guard, which they did frequently, but there was nothing for it. Her own blankets lay well away from the men, and as she settled her head on her saddle for the third time, Bukama murmured something she could not catch. She heard Lan’s reply plainly enough.

“I’d sooner trust an Aes Sedai, Bukama. Go to sleep.”

All the anger she had tamped down flared up. The man threw her into an icy pond, he did not apologize, he…! She channeled, Air and Water weaving with a touch of Earth. A thick cylinder of water rose from the surface of the pond, stretching up and up in the moonlight, arching over. Crashing down on the fool who was so free with his tongue!

Splattered, Bukama and Ryne bounded to their feet with oaths, but she continued the torrent for a count of ten before letting it end. Freed water splashed down across the campsite. She expected to see a sodden, half-frozen man beaten to the ground and ready to learn proper respect. He *was* dripping wet, a few small fish flopping around his feet. He was standing on his feet. With his sword out.

“Shadowspawn?” Ryne said in a disbelieving tone, and atop him, Lan said, “Maybe! I’ve never heard the like, though. Guard the woman, Ryne! Bukama, take west and circle south; I’ll take east and circle north!”

“Not Shadowspawn!” Moiraine snapped, stopping them in their tracks. They stared at her. She wished she could see their expressions better in the moonshadows, but those cloud-shifting shadows aided her, too, cloaking her in mystery. With an effort she gave her voice every bit of cool Aes Sedai serenity she could muster. “It is unwise to show anything except respect to an Aes Sedai, Master Lan.”

"Aes Sedai?" Ryne whispered. Despite the dim light, the awe on his face was clear. Or maybe it was fear.

No one else made a sound, except for Bukama's grumbles as he shifted his bed away from the mud. Ryne spent a long time moving his blankets in silence, giving her small bows whenever she glanced his way. Lan made no attempt to dry off. He started to choose a new spot for his watch, then stopped and sat back where he had been, in the mud and water. She might have thought it a gesture of humility, only he glanced at her, very nearly meeting her eyes this time. If that was humility, kings were the most humble men on earth.

She wove her wards around them again, of course. If anything, revealing herself only made it more necessary. She did not go to sleep for quite a while, though. She had a great deal to think about. For one thing, none of the men had asked *why* she was following them. The man had been on his *feet*! When she drifted off, she was thinking of Ryne, strangely. A pity if he was afraid of her, now. A great pity if he turned out to be a Darkfriend. He was charming, and quite pretty, really. She did not mind a man wanting to see her unclothed, only his telling others about it.

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Chapter 20

Breakfast in Manala

You may call me Lady Alys,” the strange little woman told them when she climbed drowsily from her blankets at sunrise, stifling yawns with a fist. Apparently she was unused to sleeping on the ground. Lan was certain she had been awake every time he took a turn at guard. People breathed differently awake and asleep. Well, women who wore silks seldom encountered hardships or discomfort.

He doubted the name as much as he did the Great Serpent ring she produced, especially after she tucked it back into her belt pouch and said no one must know she was Aes Sedai, not even other sisters. True, Aes Sedai often pretended to be ordinary women, and carried it off with those who did not know a sister’s face, and true, once he had encountered an Aes Sedai who had not yet attained the ageless look, but one and all they practiced serenity to a fault. Oh, they got angry, but it was a cold anger. He had seen “Alys’” face in the moonlight when the water stopped, though he had not realized what he was seeing till later. Childish glee at playing a prank, and childish disappointment that it had not worked as she wished. Aes Sedai were many things, and convoluted enough with it to make other women seem simple, but they were never childish.

When they had first seen her behind them, outpacing the merchant trains and the shield of their guards, Bukama offered a reason for a woman alone to follow three men. If six swordsmen could not kill a man in daylight, perhaps one woman could in darkness. Bukama had not mentioned Edeyn, of course. In truth, it plainly could not be that, or he would be dead now, yet Edeyn might set a woman to watch him, thinking he would be less on his guard. Only a fool believed women less dangerous than men, but women often seemed to think men fools when it came to women.

In the night, despite his earlier misgivings, Bukama had expressed displeasure at Lan’s refusal to make proper pledge to her, though his own pledge sufficed to tie them to this “Lady Alys” to Chachin. Besides, she had given them money. The woman did not know insult when she offered it. This morning, he grumbled while saddling his black gelding, a horse he claimed was not a patch on Sun Lance. That was going some even for Bukama. The black was a fine animal, with excellent conformation and a good turn of speed, if untrained as a warhorse yet. “Aes Sedai or not, a decent man follows certain forms,” he muttered as he tightened his front saddle girth. “It’s a matter of common decency.”

“Give over, Bukama,” Lan told him quietly. Bukama did not, of course.

“It’s disrespectful to her, Lan, and shameful on your part. An honorable man protects whoever needs protecting, but children above all, and women above men. Pledge her protection for your own honor.”

Lan sighed. Likely, Bukama would keep this up the whole way to Chachin. He should understand. If the woman really was Aes Sedai, Lan wanted no more strings binding him to her. Bukama had already tied one, but his own pledge might lead to worse. If she was Aes Sedai, she might be hunting a Warder. If.

Ryne only waited for the woman to finish brushing out her hair, which she did seated on her saddle on the ground, before offering her a flourishing bow that set his bells chiming. “A beautiful morning, my Lady,” he murmured, “though no sunrise could compare in beauty with the deep, dark pools of your eyes.” And then he twitched, his own eyes going wide as he searched to see whether she was offended. “Ah…. May I saddle your mare, my Lady?” As diffident as a scullion in the withdrawing room.

“Why, thank you,” she said, smiling. A very warm smile. “A gracious offer, Ryne.”

She went with him to saddle her bay, or rather to flirt, as it seemed. She stood very close while he worked, looking up at him with those big eyes he so admired, and whatever she said, Lan heard answering murmurs about her “skin of silky snow.” Which brought a delighted laugh from her.

Lan shook his head. He understood what drew Ryne. The woman’s face was beautiful, and however childishly she behaved, the slim body inside that blue silk belonged to no child. But Ryne was right; he had seen a Cairhienin in her skin, more than one. And they had all tried to mesh him in a scheme, or two, or three. Over one particularly memorable ten days in the south of Cairhien, he had almost been killed six times and nearly married twice. An Aes Sedai, if she really was one, *and* a Cairhienin? There could be no worse combination.

Strangely, she made no complaint about riding on without a bite of breakfast, but when they reached Manala, a considerable village less than an hour along the road, she commanded a halt. And it was a command.

“Hot food now will make the day’s ride easier,” she said firmly, sitting very straight in her saddle and staring a challenge at them. That was certainly like an Aes Sedai, but then, it was like most women. “I wish to reach Chachin as swiftly as possible, and I will not have you falling over from hunger in a foolish attempt to show me how tough you are.” Only Ryne met her gaze directly, with an uneasy smile. The man needed to decide whether he was besotted or afraid.

“It was our plan to stop briefly for food, my Lady,” Bukama said, lowering his eyes respectfully. He did not add that they would have eaten there last night, and slept in beds, if not for her. Had she followed them to Manala, it would have meant nothing. Following Lan into the forest meant she had some interest in them or their plans.

A sprawling collection of stone houses roofed in red or green tiles, Manala was not far short of being called a town, with above twenty streets crisscrossing a pair of low hills. Three inns fronted a large green in the hollow between the hills, alongside the road. There the men of two large merchant trains headed east were reluctantly hitching their horses under the watchful eye of the mounted merchants. A train of some thirty or so wagons was already lumbering away to the west, with some of the outriding guards looking over their shoulders instead of keeping watch as they should. The Bel Tine festivities were under way in Manala.

They had not come to the games of skill and strength and speed yet, but newly married men and women were formally dancing the Spring Pole in the center of the green, feet flashing but bodies rigidly upright as they entwined the two-span-tall pole in long brightly dyed linen ribbons, while older and unmarried adults were dancing in more lively fashion to the music of fiddles and flutes and drums in half a dozen sizes. Everyone wore their feastday best, the women’s pale blouses and wide trousers and the men’s bright coats encrusted with elaborate embroidery. They crowded the wide, open space, yet they were not the whole population of Manala. A steady trickle flowed up the hills, men and women bound on some errand, and a steady trickle flowed back down, often carrying dishes of food to the long tables set out on the far side. It was a merry sight. Laughing children, their faces smeared with honey often as not, ran and played through it all, some of the older ones occasionally feeding the small Bel Tine fires at the corners of the green. Lan was not sure how many really believed that leaping those low flames would burn away any bad luck accumulated since the previous Bel Tine, but he did believe in luck. Both kinds. In the Blight, you lived or died by luck as often as by skill or lack of it.

In stark counterpoint to the merriment on the green, beside the road stood six stakes holding the large heads of Trollocs, wolf-snouted, ram-horned, eagle-beaked below all too human eyes. They looked no more than two or three days old, although the weather was still cool enough to retard decay, too cool for flies. These were the reasons each of those dancing men wore a sword, and the women carried long knives at their belts. He smelled no charred wood, though, so it had been a small raid, and unsuccessful.

"Lady Alys" stopped her mare beside the stakes and stared at them. Not in amazement or fear or disgust. Her face was a perfect mask of calm. For an instant, he could almost believe she truly was Aes Sedai.

"I should have hated to face these creatures armed only with a sword," she murmured. "I cannot imagine the courage needed to do that."

"You have faced Trollocs?" Lan asked in surprise. Ryne and Bukama exchanged startled looks.

"Yes." She grimaced faintly, as if the word had slipped out before thought.

"Where, if I may ask?" he said. Few southerners had ever seen a Trolloc. Some called them tales to frighten children.

Alys eyed him coolly. Very coolly. "Shadowspawn can be found in places you never dream of, Master Lan. Choose us an inn, Ryne," she added with a smile. The woman actually believed she was in charge. From the way Ryne jumped to obey, so did he.

The Plowman's Blade was two stories of red-roofed stone with arrowslits rather than windows on the ground floor and a two-handed sword of the sort farmers carried on their plows hanging point-down above a door of heavy planks. This near the Blight, inns served as strong-points against a Trolloc attack, and so did many houses. The innkeeper, a stout graying woman, her billowing blouse worked with red and yellow flowers and her wide trousers covered in red and blue, came from the green when she saw them tying their horses to the hitching rings set in the front of the inn.

Mistress Tomichi looked uneasy about two Malkieri stopping at her inn, but she brightened when Alys began issuing commands for her breakfast.

“As you say, my Lady,” the round-faced innkeeper murmured, giving Alys a deep curtsy. The Cairhienin had given no name, but her manner and dress did suggest a Lady. “And will you want rooms for yourself and your retainers?”

“Thank you, no,” Alys replied. “I intend to ride on soon.”

Ryne showed no offense at being called a retainer, accepting the word as easily as Alys did, but Bukama’s perpetual scowl darkened. He said nothing, of course, not here, and perhaps would not ever, given his pledge. Lan decided he would have a few quiet words with Alys when he had the chance. There was a limit to how many insults a man could swallow in silence.

He and the other men ordered dark bread and strong tea, and bowls of porridge with slivers of ham in it. Alys did not invite them to share her table in the large common room, so they took benches at another. There were plenty to choose from, given that they were alone except for Mistress Tomichi, who served them with her own hands, explaining that she did not want to pull anyone from the festivities. Indeed, once she had taken payment, she returned to them herself.

Taking advantage of their privacy, Lan and the others discussed the diminutive woman who had attached herself to them. Or rather, they argued about her, in low voices so as not to be overheard. Utterly convinced that Alys was Aes Sedai, Ryne recommended asking no questions. Questions could be dangerous with Aes Sedai, and you might not like the answers. Bukama maintained that they needed to know what she wanted with them, especially if she were Aes Sedai. Tangling in some unknown Aes Sedai scheme could be hazardous. A man could acquire enemies without knowing it, or be sacrificed without warning to further her plans. Lan forbore mentioning that it was Bukama who had placed their feet in that snare. He himself just could not believe she was a sister. He thought her a wilder placed to watch him—by Edeyn, though he did not mention her name, of course. Edeyn likely had eyes-and-ears the breadth of the Borderlands. It did seem an unlikely coincidence that she would happen to have a wilder waiting for him in Canluum, but there had been those six men, and he could not think of anyone else who might have sent them.

“I still say,” Bukama began, then bit off an oath. “Where did she go?”

Alys' bowl sat empty on the table where she had been sitting, but there was no sign of the woman herself. Lan's eyebrows rose in admiration in spite of himself. He had not heard a sound of her leaving.

Scraping his bench back noisily, Ryne rushed to one of the arrowslits and peered out. "Her horse is still there. Maybe she's just visiting the privy." Lan winced inwardly at the crudity. There were matters one spoke of and matters one did not. Ryne fingered one of his braids, then gave it a hard tug that made its bells jingle. "I say we leave her her silver and go before she comes back."

"Go if you wish," Lan said, rising. "Bukama pledged to her, and I'll honor his pledge."

"Better if you honor your own," Bukama grumbled.

Ryne grimaced and gave his braid another hard pull. "If you stay, I stay."

Perhaps the woman had just gone out for a glimpse of the festivities. Telling Bukama to remain in case she returned, Lan took Ryne out to see. She was nowhere among the dancers or the onlookers, though. In her silks, she would have stood out among all that embroidered linen and wool. Some of the women asked them to dance, and Ryne smiled at the prettier ones—the man would stop to smile at a pretty face if a dozen Trollocs were charging him!—but Lan sent him off to look among the houses on the southern hill, while he climbed the one behind The Plowman's Blade. He did not want Alys meeting someone behind his back, perhaps arranging some surprise for later in the day. Just because the woman had not tried to kill him did not mean Edeyn wanted him alive.

He found her in a nearly empty street halfway up the hill, receiving the curtsy of a lean young woman whose blouse and wide trousers were embroidered in red and gold patterns as intricate as those on Alys' riding dress. Kandori were as bad as southerners when it came to embroidery. Stepping softly, he closed to listening distance of Alys' back and stopped.

"There's some Saheras live three streets that way, my Lady," the lean woman said with a gesture. "And I think there's some live on South Hill. But I don't know if any are named Avene."

"You have been a great help, Mistress Marishna," Alys said warmly. "Thank you." Accepting another curtsy, she stood watching the other woman walk on uphill. Once Mistress Marishna was beyond earshot, she spoke again, and her voice was anything but warm. “Shall I show you how eavesdropping is punished in the White Tower, Master Lan?”

He very nearly blinked. First she managed to leave the common without him hearing, and now she heard him when he was trying to be quiet. Remarkable. Perhaps she was Aes Sedai. Which meant she might be looking at Ryne for a Warder.

“I think not,” he told the back of her head. “We have business in Chachin that cannot wait. Perhaps your search will go more quickly if we help you find this Avene Sahera.”

She turned very quickly and peered up at him, straining for height. He thought she might be up on her toes. No, she was no Aes Sedai, despite the icy look of command on her face. He had seen shorter Aes Sedai dominate rooms full of men who had no idea who they were, and without any straining.

“Better for you to forget hearing that name,” she said coldly. “It is unwise to meddle in the affairs of Aes Sedai. You may leave me, now. But I expect to find you ready to go on when I am done. If, that is, Malkieri keep their word as I have been told they do.” With that insult, she stalked off in the direction the lean woman had pointed. Light, the woman had a tongue like a knife!

When he returned to The Plowman’s Blade and told Bukama what he had learned, the older man brightened. Well, his scowl lessened a little. For him, that was as good as a grin from anyone else. “Maybe all she wants from us is protection until she finds this woman.”

“That doesn’t explain why she followed us for a whole day,” Lan said, dropping onto the bench in front of his breakfast bowl. He might as well finish the porridge. “And don’t suggest she was afraid to approach us. I think that woman frightens as easily as you do.” Bukama had no answer for that.

* * *

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Chapter 21

Some Tricks of the Power

Lan knew the ride to Chachin would be one he would rather forget, and the journey met his expectations. They rode hard, passing merchants' trains of wagons, never stopping long in a village and sleeping under the stars most nights, since no one had the coin for inns, not for four people with horses. Barns and haylofts had to do, when there was a barn or hayloft to be found come nightfall. Many of the hills along the road bore neither village nor farm, only towering oak and leatherleaf, pine and fir, with smaller beech and sourgum scattered through. In the Borderlands, there were no such things as isolated farms; sooner or later, a farm set off by itself became a graveyard.

Alys continued her search for the Sahera woman in every village they passed, though she fell silent whenever Lan or one of the others approached, and eyed them frostily until they went away. The woman had a ready way with a frosty eye. For him, anyway. Ryne twitched and peered wide-eyed at her, fetched and trotted and offered up compliments like a courtier on a leash, still bouncing between enraptured and fearful, and she accepted his subservience and his praise alike as her due while laughing at his witticisms.

Not that she focused only on him. She seldom let an hour go by without probing questions directed at each of them in turn, till it seemed she wanted to know the entire story of their lives. The woman was like a swarm of blackflies; no matter how many you swatted, there were always more to bite. Even Ryne knew enough to deflect that sort of interrogation. A man's past belonged to himself and the people who had lived it with him; it was not a matter for gossip with an inquisitive woman. Despite her questions, Bukama continued his carping. Day and night, it seemed every second comment out of his mouth regarded the pledge. Lan began to think the only way to silence the man would be to take oath *not* to give her the pledge.

Twice thick black clouds rolled down out of the Blight to unleash driving downpours of freezing rain mixed with hail large enough to crack a man’s head. The worst storms in spring came from the Blight. When the first of those clouds darkened the sky to the north, he began looking for a place where the trees’ branches might be thick enough to afford some shelter, maybe with the aid of blankets stretched overhead, but when Alys realized what he was doing, she said coolly, “There is no need to stop, Master Lan. You are under my protection.”

Doubtful of that, he was still looking when the storm struck. Lightning flashed in blue-white streaks across a sky that seemed suddenly night and thunder crashed like monstrous kettledrums overhead, but the driving rain sheeted down an invisible dome that moved with their horses, and the hailstones bounced off it in an eerie silence, as though they had struck nothing at all. She performed the same service for the second storm, and both times, she seemed surprised at their offered thanks. Her face hardly altered in its smoothness, a very good imitation of an Aes Sedai’s serene expression, but something flickered about her eyes. A strange woman.

They saw bandits, as rumored, usually a pack of ten or twelve roughly dressed men who counted the odds against three with arrows nocked and melted back into the trees before Lan and the rest reached them. He or Bukama always went after them, just far enough to make sure they really had gone, while the other two guarded Alys. It would have been foolish to ride into an ambush they knew might be waiting.

Noon on the fourth day found them riding through the forested hills along a road that stretched empty as far as the eye could see in either direction. The sky was clear, with just a few scattered white clouds drifting high up, and the only sounds were their horses’ hooves and squirrels chittering on branches. Suddenly horsemen burst from the trees on both sides of the road some thirty paces ahead, twenty or so scruffy fellows who formed a line blocking the way, and the pounding of hooves told of more behind.

Dropping his reins on the pommel of his saddle, Lan snatched two more arrows and held them between his fingers as he drew the one already nocked. He doubted he would have time for even a second shot, but there was always a chance. Three of the men in front of him wore much-battered breastplates stained with rust over their dirty coats, and one had a rust-spotted helmet with a barred faceguard. None carried a bow, not that that made any great difference.

“Twenty-three behind at thirty paces,” Bukama called. “No bows. On your word.”

No difference at all, against a band large enough to attack most merchant trains. He did not loose, however. So long as the men only sat their horses, a chance remained. A small one. Life and death often turned on small chances.

“Let’s not be too hasty,” the helmeted man called, removing it to reveal a grizzled head of greasy hair and a narrow, dirty face that had last been touched by a razor a week gone. His wide smile showed two missing teeth. “You might be able to kill two or three of us before we cut you down, but there’s no need for that. Let us have your coin and the pretty lady’s jewelry, and you can go on your way. Pretty ladies in silk and fur always have lots of jewels, eh?” He leered past Lan at Alys. Maybe he thought it a friendly smile.

There was no temptation in the offer. These fellows wanted no casualties among themselves if they could manage it so, but surrender meant that he and Bukama and Ryne would have their throats slit. They probably intended to keep Alys alive until they decided she was a danger. If she had some trick of the Power up her sleeve, he wished she would—

“You dare impede the way of an Aes Sedai?” she thundered, and it *was* thunder, setting some of the brigands’ horses snorting and plunging. Cat Dancer, knowing what dropped reins meant, remained still beneath him, awaiting the pressures of knee and heel. “Surrender or face my wrath!” And red fire exploded with a roar above the bandits’ heads, sending more of their mounts into panicked bucking that tumbled two of the poorer riders to the road.

“I told you she was Aes Sedai, Coy,” whined a fat, balding fellow in a breastplate that was too small for him. “Didn’t I say that, Coy? A Green with her three Warders, I said.”

The lean man backhanded him across the face without taking his eyes from Lan. Or more likely, from Alys, behind him.

“No talk of surrender, now. There’s still fifty of us and four of you. Rather than face the noose, we’ll take our chances on how many you can kill before we take you.”

“Well and good,” Lan said. “But if I can see one of you at the count of ten, it begins.” With the last word, he started counting in a loud voice.

The bandits did not let him reach two before they were galloping back toward the trees; by four, the dismounted pair stopped trying to gain the saddles on their wild-eyed animals and took off afoot as fast as they could go. There was no need to follow. The pounding and crackle of horses being galloped through brush rather than around it was fast fading into the distance. In the circumstances, it was the best end that could be hoped for. Except that Alys did not see it so.

“You had no right to let them go,” she said indignantly, anger flashing in her eyes as she did her best to skewer each of them with her gaze. She reined her mare around to make certain they each received a dose. “Had they attacked, I could have used the One Power against them. How many people have they robbed and murdered, how many women ravished, how many children orphaned? We should have fought them and taken the survivors to the nearest magistrate.”

Lan, Bukama and Ryne took turns trying to convince her how unlikely it was that any of the four of them would have been among the survivors—the bandits would have fought hard to avoid the gallows, and sheer numbers did count—but she actually seemed to believe she could have defeated close on fifty men by herself. A very strange woman.

Had it been only storms and bandits, that would have been more than he expected on any journey. Ryne’s foolishness and Bukama’s complaints could have been taken as a matter of course, too. But Alys was blind about a great deal, and that made all the difference.

That first night he had sat in the wet to let her know he would accept what she had done. If they were to travel together, better to end it with honors even, as she must see it. Except that she did not. The second night she remained awake till dawn and made sure he did as well, with sharp flicks of an invisible switch whenever he nodded off. The third night, sand somehow got inside his clothes and boots, a thick coating of it. He had shaken out what he could and, without water to wash, rode covered in grit the next day. The night after the bandits…. He could not understand how she managed to make ants crawl into his smallclothes, or make them all bite at once. It had been her doing for sure. She was standing over him when his eyes shot open, and she appeared surprised that he did not cry out.

Clearly, she wanted some response, some reaction, but he could not see what. If she felt that she had not been repaid for her wetting, then she was a very hard woman, but a woman could set the price for her insult or injury, and there were no other women here to call an end when she went beyond what they considered just. All he could do was endure until they reached Chachin. The following night she discovered a patch of blisterleaf near their campsite, and to his shame, he almost lost his temper.

He did not mention the incidents to Bukama or Ryne, of course, though he was certain they knew, but he began to pray for Chachin to loom up ahead at the next rise. Perhaps Edeyn had set the woman to watch him, but it was beginning to seem she meant to kill him after all. Slowly.

Moiraine could not understand the stubbornness of this Lan Mandragoran, though Siuan said that "stubborn" was a redundancy when it came to men. All she wanted was a display of remorse for dunking her. Well, that and an apology. An abject apology. And a proper regard for an Aes Sedai. But he never displayed the slightest scrap of penitence. He was frozen arrogance to the core! His disbelief of her right to the shawl was so plain he might as well have spoken aloud. A part of her admired his fortitude, but only a part. She *would* bring him properly to heel. Not to tame him utterly—a completely tame man was no use to himself or anyone else—but to make certain he recognized his mistakes right down to his bones.

She allowed him his days to reflect, while she planned what she would do to him that night. The ants had been a great disappointment. That was one of the Blue Ajah secrets, a way to repel insects or make them gather and bite or sting, though not intended for the use she had put it to. But she was quite proud of the blisterleaf, which at least made him jump a bit, proving that he really was made of human flesh. She had begun to doubt that.

Oddly, neither of the other men ever offered him a word of commiseration that she heard, though they had to know what she was doing. If he voiced no complaints to her, which was peculiar enough in itself, surely he did to his friends; that was one thing friends were for. But the three were strangely reticent in other ways, too. Even in Cairhien people would talk about themselves, a little, and she had been taught that Borderlanders shunned the Game of Houses, yet they revealed almost nothing about themselves even after she primed their tongues with incidents from her own youth in Cairhien and from the Tower. Ryne at least laughed when the story was funny—once he realized he was supposed to laugh, he did—but Lan and Bukama actually looked embarrassed. She thought that was the emotion they displayed; they could have taught Aes Sedai to control their faces. They admitted having met sisters before her, but when she probed ever so delicately to learn where and when….

“There are Aes Sedai so many places that they are difficult to recall,” Lan replied one evening as they rode ahead of their own long shadows. “We had best stop at those farmhouses ahead and see whether we can hire the use of a hayloft for the night. We won’t see another house till well after full dark.”

That was typical. Those three could have taught Aes Sedai about oblique answers and deflecting questions, too.

Worst of all, she still had no idea whether any of them were Darkfriends. Of course, she had no *real* reason to think that any of the sisters in Canluum had been Black Ajah, and if they were not, Ryne’s visit to The Gates of Heaven likely had had some purely innocent purpose, yet wariness made her continue her questions. She still laid a ward around each of them every night. She could not afford to trust *anyone* except Siuan until she was sure of them. Other Aes Sedai and any men who might be involved with them least of all.

Two days from Chachin, in a village called Ravinda, she finally located Avene Sahera, the very first woman she spoke to in the place. Ravinda was a thriving village, though much smaller than Manala, with a wide field of hard-packed dirt that served as a market for folk from neighboring villages to barter produce and handcrafts and buy from peddlers. Two peddlers’ wagons, their tall canvas covers festooned with pots and pans, stood surrounded by crowds when she and her reticent companions arrived that morning, each peddler glaring at his competitor despite the people clamoring for his own goods. Ravinda also had an inn under construction, the second floor already building, the result of Mistress Sahera receiving the bounty. She intended to call it the White Tower.

“You think the sisters might object?” she said, frowning at the sign already carved and painted and hung above the front door, when Moiraine suggested a change in the name. By the scale, the Tower on the sign would have had to be over a thousand feet high! Avene was a plump, graying woman, with a silver-mounted, foot-long dagger hanging at her worked leather belt and yellow embroidery covering the sleeves of her bright red blouse. Apparently, the bounty had put a touch of feastday into every day for her. Finally, she shook her head. "I can't see why they would, my Lady. The Aes Sedai who took names in our camp was very soft-spoken and pleasant." The woman would learn, the first time a sister who cared to reveal herself happened by.

Moiraine wished she remembered which Accepted had taken Avene Sahera's name and had a chance to give the child a piece of her mind. Avene's son Migel—her tenth child!—had been born thirty miles from Dragonmount and a *week* before Gitara spoke her Foretelling. That sort of carelessness in writing down what you heard was intolerable! How many more names in her book would turn out to have borne children outside the specified ten days?

Riding away from Ravinda, the men's obvious delight that she had been quick turned her smoldering irritation from the unknown Accepted to them. Oh, they did not show it openly, but she heard Ryne say it—"At least she was fast with it this time"—not quite prudent enough about being overheard, and Bukama muttered a sour agreement as they fell in behind her. Lan was riding ahead, plainly shunning her company. In truth, she could understand that, but his broad back, stiffly erect, seemed a rebuke. She began to think on what she might arrange for him that night. With perhaps a touch for the other two as well.

For a time, nothing came to mind that could top what she had already done. Then a wasp buzzed past her face, and she watched it fly into the trees alongside the road. Wasps. Of course, she did not want to kill him. "Master Lan, are you allergic to wasp stings?"

He twisted in his saddle, half reining his stallion around, and suddenly grunted, his eyes growing wide. For an instant, she did not understand. Then she saw the arrowhead sticking out from the front of his right shoulder.

Without thought, she embraced the Source, and *saidar* filled her. It was as though she were back in the testing again. Her weaves flashed into being, first of all a clear shield of Air to block any more arrows away from Lan, then one for herself. She could not have said why she wove them in that order. With the Power in her and her sight sharpened, she scanned the trees where the arrow had come from, and caught motion just inside the edge of the forest. Flows of Air lashed out to seize the man just as he loosed again, the shaft going up at an angle as his bow was snapped tight against his body. Just heartbeats, that all took, beginning to end, as fast as anything she had woven in testing. Just enough time for two arrows fired by Ryne and Bukama to strike home.

With a dismayed groan, she released the bonds of Air, and the man toppled backward. He had attempted murder, but she had not intended holding him up as a target for execution. He *would* have been executed, once they had carried him to a magistrate, yet she disliked having been part of carrying out the sentence, especially before it was given. To her mind, it came very near using *saidar* as a weapon, or making a weapon for men to use in killing. Very near.

Still holding *saidar,* she turned to Lan to offer Healing, but in spite of the arrow sticking from him front and back, he gave her no chance to speak, wheeling his mount and galloping to the edge of the trees, where he dismounted and strode to the fallen man followed by Bukama and Ryne. With the Power in her, she could hear their voices clearly.

"Caniedrin?" Lan said, sounding shocked.

"You know this fellow?" Ryne asked.

"Why?" Bukama growled, and there came the thud of a boot meeting ribs.

A weak voice answered in gasps. "Gold. Why else? You still have…the Dark One's luck…turning just then…or that shaft…would have found…your heart. He should have…told me…she's Aes Sedai…instead of just saying…to kill her first."

As soon as she heard those words, Moiraine dug her heels into Arrow's flanks to gallop the short distance, and flung herself from the saddle already preparing the weave for Healing. "Get those arrows out of him," she called as she ran toward them, holding up her cloak and skirts to keep from tripping. "If the arrows remain, Healing will not keep him alive."

"Why Heal him?" Lan asked, sitting himself down on a storm-fallen tree. Its great spread of dirt-covered roots rose in a fan high above his head. "Are you so eager to see a hanging?"

"He's dead already," Ryne said. "Can you Heal that?" He sounded interested in seeing whether she could.

Moiraine's shoulders slumped. Caniedrin's eyes, open and staring up the branches overhead, were already glazed and empty. Strangely, despite the blood around his mouth he looked a beardless youth in his rumpled coat. Man enough to do murder, though. Man enough to die with a pair of arrows transfixing his chest. Dead, he could never tell her if it was this Gorthanes who had hired him, or where the man might be found, A nearly full quiver was fastened to his belt, and two arrows stuck upright in the ground nearby. Apparently, he had been confident he could kill four people with four shots. Even knowing Lan and Bukama, he had thought so. Knowing them, he had disobeyed his instructions and tried to kill Lan first. The most dangerous of them, as he must have thought.

As she studied the man, it came to her that he might tell her a little, even dead. With her belt knife, she sliced away the pouch hanging behind his quiver and emptied the contents beside him amid the small weeds pushing through the mulch. A wooden comb, a half-eaten piece of cheese covered with lint, a small folding knife, a ball of string that she unwound to make sure nothing was hidden inside, a filthy crumpled handkerchief that she unwadded with the tip of her knife blade. It had been too much to hope for a letter written by Master Gorthanes giving instructions on how to find him. Cutting the cords of the leather purse tied to Caniedrin's belt, she upended that over the litter. A handful of silver and copper spilled out. And ten gold crowns. So. The price of her death in Kandor was the same as the price of a silk dress in Tar Valon. Fat coins, with the Rising Sun of Cairhien on one side and her uncle's profile on the other. A fitting footnote in the history of House Damodred.

"Have you taken to robbing the dead?" Lan asked in that irritatingly cool voice. Just asking, not accusing, but still…!

She straightened angrily just as Ryne snapped off the feathered end of the arrow jutting from Lan's back. Bukama was knotting a narrow strip of rawhide behind the arrowhead. Once he had it tight, he gripped the cord in his fist and gave one quick yank, pulling the arrow the rest of the way through. Lan blinked. The man had an *arrow* pulled out of his body, and he *blinked*! Why that should irritate her, she did not know, but it surely did.

Ryne hurried back to the road while Bukama helped Lan off with his coat and shirt, revealing a puckered hole in his front. Likely the one behind was no better. The blood that had been soaking into coat and shirt began to pour freely down his chest and ribs. Neither man asked for Healing, and she was of half a mind not to offer it. More scars decorated Lan than she expected on a man so young, and a number of partly healed wounds crossed by neat dark stitches. Seemingly, he angered men as easily as he did women. Ryne returned carrying bandaging cloths and mouthing bread for a poultice. None of them were going to ask for Healing until the man bled to death!

“Will you accept Healing?” she asked coldly, reaching toward Lan’s head. He shied back from her touch. He shied back!

“Day after tomorrow in Chachin, you may need your right arm,” Bukama muttered, scrubbing a hand under his nose and not meeting anyone’s eyes. A very peculiar thing to say, but she knew there was no point in asking what it meant.

After a moment, Lan nodded and leaned forward. That was all. He did not ask or even accept her offer. He just leaned forward.

She clapped her hands on his head in something near to a pair of slaps and channeled. The convulsion when the Healing weave hit him, arms flinging wide, ripped him out of her grasp. Very satisfying. Even if he did only breathe hard rather than gasp. His old scars remained, the half-healed wounds were now thin pink lines—the stitches that had been on the outside, now loose, slid down his arms and chest; he might have difficulty picking out the rest—but smooth skin marked where the arrowholes had been. He could meet the wasps in perfect health. She could always Heal him again afterward, if need be. Only if need be, however.

They left the coins lying beside Caniedrin’s body, though the men plainly could have used them. They wanted nothing from the dead man. Bukama found his mount tied a short distance away in the trees, a white-stockinged brown gelding with a look of speed about him and a prancing step. Lan removed the animal’s bridle and tied it to the saddle, then slapped the horse’s rump and sent him racing toward Ravinda.

“So he can eat until somebody finds him,” he explained when he saw her frowning after the gelding.

In all truth, she had been regretting not searching the saddlebags tied behind the gelding’s saddle. But Lan had shown a surprising touch of kindness. She had not expected any such to be found in him. For that, he would escape the wasps. There had to be something memorable, in any case. She had only two more nights to crack him, after all. Once they reached Chachin, she would be too busy to attend to Lan Mandragoran. For a time she would be.

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Chapter 22

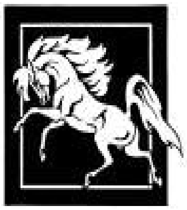

Keeping Custom

If Canluum was a city of hills, Chachin was a city of mountains. The three highest rose almost a mile even with their peaks sheared off short, and all glittered in the noonday sun with colorful glazed tile roofs and tile-covered palaces. Atop the tallest, the Aesdaishar Palace shone brighter than any other in red and green, the prancing Red Horse flying above its largest dome. Three towered ringwalls surrounded the city, as did a deep drymoat a hundred paces wide spanned by two dozen bridges, each with a fortress hulking at its mouth. The traffic was too great here, and the Blight too far away, for the helmeted and breastplated guards with the Red Horse on their chests to be so diligent as in Canluum, but crossing the Bridge of Sunrise, amid tides of wagons and carts and people mounted and afoot flowing both ways, still took some little while.

Once inside the first wall, Lan wasted no time drawing rein, out of the way of the heavy-laden merchants' wagons lumbering past. Even with Edeyn waiting, he had never been so glad to see any place in his life. By the letter of the law, they were not truly inside Chachin—the second, higher, wall lay more than a hundred paces ahead, and the third, still taller, as much beyond that—but he wanted to be done with this Alys. Where in the Light had she found fleas this early in the year? And blackflies! Blackflies should not appear for another month! He was a mass of itching welts. At least she had found no satisfaction in it. Of that, he was certain.

"The pledge was protection to Chachin, and it has been kept," he told the woman. "So long as you avoid the rougher parts of the city, you are as safe on any street as if you had a bodyguard of ten. So you may see to your affairs, and we will see to ours. Keep your coin," he added coldly when she reached for her purse. Irritation flared, for losing self-control. Yet she offered insult atop insult.

Ryne immediately started going on about giving offense to Aes Sedai and offering her smiling apologies and deep bows from his saddle that had his bells ringing like alarm gongs, while Bukama grumbled sourly about men with the manners of pigs, with some justification. Alys herself gazed at him, so near expressionless that she might even have been what she claimed. A dangerous claim if untrue. And if true…He especially wanted no part of her, then.

Whirling Cat Dancer, he galloped up the wide street scattering people afoot and some mounted. Another time that might have sparked duels. The *hadori* and the reputation that went with it certainly would not have held back anyone but commoners. But he rode too fast to hear a cry of challenge, dodging around sedan chairs and tradesmen’s high-wheeled carts and porters carrying loads on their shoulder-poles, without slackening his pace. After the quiet of the country, the rumble of iron-rimmed wheels on paving stones and the cries of hawkers and shopkeepers seemed raucous. The flutes of street musicians sounded strident. The smells of roasted nuts and meat pies on vendors’ barrows, the smells of cooking in the kitchens of dozens of inns and hundreds of homes, blended into an unpleasant stench after the clean air on the road. A hundred stables full of horses added their own flavor.

Bukama and Ryne caught him up with the packhorse before he was halfway up the mountain to the Aesdaishar Palace and fell in to either side. If Edeyn was in Chachin, she would be there. Wisely, Bukama and Ryne held their silence. Bukama, at least, knew what he was about to face. Entering the Blight would be much easier. Leaving the Blight alive, at any rate. Any fool could ride into the Blight. Was he a fool to come here?

The higher they climbed, the more slowly they moved. There were fewer people in the streets high up, where tile-roofed houses gave way to palaces and the homes of wealthy merchants and bankers, their walls covered with bright tiles, and the street musicians to liveried servants scurrying on errands. Brightly lacquered coaches with House sigils on the doors replaced merchants’ wagons and sedan chairs. A coach behind a team of four or six with plumes on their bridles took up a great deal of room, and most had half a dozen outriders as well as a pair of backmen clinging to the rear of the coach, all armed and armored and ready to dispute with anyone who tried brushing by too closely. In particular, with three roughly dressed men who tried. Ryne’s yellow coat did not look so fine as it had in Canluum, and with Lan’s second-best coat bloodstained, he was reduced to wearing his third, worn enough to make Bukama seem well dressed.

Thought of the bloodstains brought other thoughts. He owed Alys a debt for her Healing, as well as for her torments, though in honor it was only the first he could repay. No. He had to get that odd little woman out of his head, although she seemed to have lodged herself inside his skull, somehow. It was Edeyn he needed to concentrate on. Edeyn and the most desperate fight of his life.

The Aesdaishar Palace filled the flattened mountaintop completely, an immense, shining structure of domes and high balconies covering fifty hides, a small city to itself, every surface shining in patterns of red and green. The great bronze gates, worked with the lacquered Red Horse, stood invitingly open beneath a red-tiled arch that led to the Visitor’s Yard, but a dozen guards stepped out to bar the way when Lan and the others approached. The Red Horse was embroidered on the green tabards they wore over their breastplates, and their halberds bore red-and-green streamers. They were quite colorful, with their red helmets and breeches and their polished high green boots, but any man who served here was a veteran of more than a single battle, and they regarded the three new arrivals through the steel face-bars of their helmets with hard eyes.

Lan stepped down from the saddle and bowed, not too deeply, touching forehead, heart and sword hilt. “I am Lan Mandragoran,” he said. Nothing more.

The guards’ stiffness lessened at his name, but they did not give way immediately. A man could claim any name, after all. One of them went running off and returned in moments with a gray-haired officer who carried his red-plumed helmet on his hip. Jurad Shiman was a seasoned campaigner who had ridden with Lan in the south for a time, and his long face broke into a smile.

“Be welcome, al’Lan Mandragoran,” he said, bowing much more deeply than he ever had for Lan on any previous visit. “*Tai’shar Malkier!*” Oh, yes; if Edeyn was not here now, she had been.

Leading his bay, Lan followed Jurad through the red arch onto the smooth paving stones of the Visitor’s Yard feeling as though he should have his sword in hand and his armor on. The balconies of stone fretwork that overlooked the broad courtyard took on the aspect of archers’ balconies to his eye. Ridiculous, of course. Those open balconies, like lace woven from stone, afforded little protection for archers. They were for watching new arrivals on grand occasions, not defense. No enemy had ever broken past the second ringwall, and should Trollocs ever make it this deep into the city, all was lost. Still, Edeyn might be here, and he could not shake the feeling of walking onto a battlefield.

Grooms in red-and-green livery with the Red Horse embroidered on the shoulders came running to take the horses, and more men and women to carry the contents of the packhorse's wicker hampers and show each man to rooms befitting his station. Worryingly, the *shatayan* of the palace herself led them. She was a stately, straight-backed woman in livery, graying hair worn in a thick roll on the nape of her neck. The silvered ring of keys at her belt proclaimed that Mistress Romera had charge of all the Palace servants, but a *shatayan* was more than a servant herself. Usually, only crowned rulers could look for a greeting at the gates from the *shatayan*. He was swimming in a sea of other people's expectations. Men had drowned in seas like that.

He went along to see Bukama's and Ryne's rooms, and express his delight in them to Mistress Romera, not because he expected them to be given anything unsuitable, but because it was necessary that he see to his men before himself. Ryne wore a sour expression, but surely he had not expected better than this small room in one of the palace's stone barracks, the same as Bukama. He had known well enough how things would be here. At least Ryne had a room to himself, a bannerman's room with a tiled stove built in beneath the bed. Ordinary soldiers slept ten to a room and, as Lan recalled, spent half their time in winter arguing over who got the beds nearest the fireplace.

Bukama settled in happily—well, happily for him; his scowl very nearly vanished—talking over pipes of tabac with a few men he had fought alongside, and Ryne seemed to recover himself quickly. At any rate, by the time Lan was led away, Ryne was asking among the soldiers whether there were any pretty girls among the serving maids and how he could go about getting his clothes cleaned and pressed. He cared almost as much about his appearance, especially in front of women, young or old, as he did about women themselves. Perhaps it had been the thought of appearing in travel-stained garb in front of the *shatayan* and the serving women that had soured him.

To Lan's great relief, he was not given a visiting king's apartments despite the *shatayan*'s escort. His three rooms were spacious, with silk tapestries on the blue walls and a broad cornice worked in stylized mountains rimming the high ceilings, and the substantial furniture was simply carved with only a little gilding. The bedchamber had a small balcony overlooking one of the palace gardens and had a bed with a feather mattress wide enough to accommodate four or five. It was all entirely suitable to his station, and he thanked Mistress Romera perhaps a little more profusely than he should have, because she smiled, her hazel eyes crinkling.

"No one can know what the future may hold, my Lord," she said, "but we know who you are." And then she offered him a small curtsy before leaving. A curtsy. Remarkable. Whatever she said, the *shatayan* had her expectations of the future, too.

Along with the rooms, he acquired two square-faced serving women, Anya and Esne, who began placing his meager belongings in the wardrobe, and a lanky young fellow named Bulen, to run errands, who gaped at Lan's helmet and breast- and backplates as he set them on the black-lacquered rack beside the door, though he must have seen the like many times, here.

"Is Her Majesty in residence?" Lan asked politely.

"No, my Lord," Anya replied, frowning at his bloodstained coat and setting it aside with a sigh. The gray-haired one of the pair, she might be Esne's mother, he thought. It was not the sight of blood that made her sigh—she would be accustomed to that—but the difficulty of cleaning the coat. With luck, he would receive it back both cleaned and mended. As well as it could be, anyway. "Queen Ethenielle is making a progress through the heartland."

"And Prince Brys?" He knew the answer to that—Ethenielle and Brys Consort could be out of the city at the same time only during wartime—yet there were forms to be followed.

Bulen's jaw dropped open at the suggestion the Prince Consort might be absent, but an errand boy could not be expected to know all the usages of the court yet. Anya would not have been placed to serve Lan if she were not fully conversant, though. "Oh, yes, my Lord," she said. Lifting the black-stained shirt, she shook her head before laying the garment aside. Not with the coat. Apparently, the shirt was a lost cause. She was shaking her head over most of his garments, even those she put into the wardrobe. Most of them had seen hard use.

"Are any notables visiting?" He had been itching to ask that as badly as he did from flea and blackfly bites.

Anya and Esne exchanged looks. “Only one of true note, my Lord,” Anya replied. She folded a shirt and laid it in the wardrobe, making him wait. “The Lady Edeyn Arrel.” The two women smiled at one another, looking even more alike. Of course they had known from the start what he was trying to find out, but they had no call to go around grinning over it like idiots.

While Bulen gave his boots a much-needed blacking, Lan washed himself from head to toe at the washstand rather than waiting for a bathtub to be brought, and dabbed an ointment that Anya sent Esne for onto his welts, but he let the women dress him. Just because they were servants was no reason to insult them. He had one white silk shirt that did not show too much wear, a pair of tight black silk breeches that showed almost none, and a good black silk coat embroidered along the sleeves with golden bloodroses among their hooked thorns. Bloodroses for loss and remembrance. Fitting. His boots had taken on a gleam he had never expected Bulen to achieve. He was armored as well as he could be. With a weapon in hand, there was little he feared, but Edeyn’s weapons would not be steel. He had small experience in the kind of battle he needed to fight now.

Giving Anya and Esne each a silver mark, and Bulen a silver penny—Mistress Romera would have been outraged to be offered coin, but a visitor’s servants expected something on the first day and on the last—he sent the boy to make sure the stables had followed his instructions about Cat Dancer and set the women in the corridor to guard his door. Then he sat down to wait. His meetings with Edeyn must be public, with as many people around as possible. In private, all advantage belonged to a man’s *carneira.*

He found himself wondering where Alys had gone, what she had wanted with him and the others, and tried to shake her out of his head. Even absent, the woman was a cockleburr down the back of his neck. A tall silver pitcher of tea sat on one of the carved side tables, doubtless flavored with berries and mint, and another of wine, but he ignored them. He was not thirsty, and he needed a clear head and focus for Edeyn. Waiting, he assumed the *ko’di* and sat wrapped in emotionless emptiness. It was always better to go into battle without emotion.

In a shockingly short time, Anya reentered, carefully closing the door behind her. “My Lord, the Lady Edeyn sends a request for your presence in her chambers.” Her tone was very neutral, her face as blank as an Aes Sedai’s.

“Tell her messenger I have not yet recovered from my journey,” he said.

Anya seemed disappointed with that answer as she curtsied.

Courtesy demanded he be given time for that recovery, as much as he required, but in less than half an hour by the gilded ball-clock on the mantel over the fireplace, Anya entered again carrying a letter sealed with a crouching lioness impressed in blue wax. A crouching lioness ready to spring. Edeyn’s personal sigil, and worthy of her. He broke it reluctantly. The letter was very short.

Come to me, sweetling. Come to me now.

There was no signature, but he would have needed none had the sealing wax been blank. Her elaborate hand remained as familiar to him as his own far plainer. The letter was very like Edeyn. Commanding. Edeyn had been born to be a queen, and knew it.

He consigned the page to the flames in the fireplace. There was no seeming about Anya’s disappointment this time. Light, the woman had been placed to serve him, but Edeyn had an ally in her if she knew it. Very likely, Edeyn did. She had a way of learning anything that might be of use to her.

No more summonses came from Edeyn, but as the ball-clock chimed three times for the hour, Mistress Romera appeared.

“My Lord,” she said formally, “are you rested enough to be received by the Prince Consort?” At last.

It was an honor to be conducted by her personally, but outsiders needed a guide to find their way anywhere in the Palace. He had been there many times and still lost himself upon occasion. His sword remained on the lacquered rack by the door. It would do him no good here, and would insult Brys besides, indicating he thought he needed to protect himself. Which he did, only not with steel.

He expected a private meeting first, but Mistress Romera took him to a large formal hall with a dome painted like the sky in the center of the high ceiling, its base supported by thin, fluted white columns, and the hall was full of people and a murmur of conversation that died as his arrival was noticed. Soft-footed servants in livery moved through the crowd offering spiced wine to Kandori lords and ladies in silks embroidered with House sigils, and to folk in fine woolens worked with the sigils of the more important guilds. And to others, too. Lan saw men in long coats wearing the *hadori,* men he knew had not worn it these ten years or more. Women with hair still cut at the shoulders and higher wore the small dot of the *ki'sain* painted on their foreheads. They bowed at his appearance, and made deep curtsies, those men and women who had decided to remember Malkier. They watched the *shatayan* present him to Brys like hawks watching a field mouse. Or like hawks awaiting a signal to take wing. Perhaps he never should have come here. Too late for that decision now. The only way was forward, whatever lay at the end.

Prince Brys was a stocky, rough-hewn man in his middle years who appeared more suited to armor than to his gold-worked green silks, though in truth he was accustomed to either. Brys was Ethenielle's Swordbearer, the general of her armies, as well as her consort, and he had not come by the office through marrying Ethenielle. Brys owned a strong reputation as a general. He caught Lan's shoulders, refusing to allow him to bow.

"None of that from the man who twice saved my life in the Blight, Lan." He laughed.

"And twice you saved mine," Lan said. "Honors are even."

"That's as may be, that's as may be. But your coming seems to have rubbed some of your luck off on Diryk. He fell from a balcony this morning, a good fifty feet to the paving stones, without breaking a bone." He motioned to his second son, a handsome dark-eyed boy of eight in a coat like his. The child came forward. A large bruise marred the side of his head, and he moved with the stiffness of other bruises, yet he made a formal bow spoiled only somewhat by a wide grin. "He should be at his lessons," Brys confided, "but he was so eager to meet you, he'd have forgotten his letters and cut himself on a sword." Frowning, the boy protested that he would never cut himself.

Lan returned the lad's bow with equal formality, but the last shreds of protocol vanished from the boy in an instant.

"They say you've fought Aiel in the south and on the Shienaran marches, my Lord," he said. "Is that true? Are they really ten feet tall? Do they really veil their faces before they kill? And eat their dead? Is the White Tower really taller than a mountain?"

“Give the man a chance to answer, Diryk,” Brys said, mock outrage spoiled by amused laughter. The boy blushed in embarrassment, but still managed an affectionate smile for his father, who ruffled his hair with a quick hand.

“Recall what it is like to be eight, Brys,” Lan said. “Let the boy show his excitement.” For himself, at eight he had been learning the *ko’di* and what he would face when he first entered the Blight. Beginning to learn how to kill with hands and feet. Let Diryk have a happier childhood before he had to think too closely on death.

Freed, Diryk unleashed another torrent of questions, though he did wait for answers this time. Given a chance, the boy would have drained him dry about the Aiel, and the wonders of the great cities in the south like Tar Valon and Far Madding. Likely, he would not have believed Chachin was as big as either of those. At last, his father put an end to it.

“Lord Mandragoran will fill your head to your heart’s content later,” Brys told the boy. “There is someone else he must meet now. Off with you to Mistress Tuval and your books.”

Lan thought everyone in the room was holding their breath in anticipation as Brys escorted him across the red-and-white floor tiles.

Edeyn was exactly as he remembered. Oh, ten years older, with touches of white streaking her temples and a few fine lines at the corners of her eyes, but those large dark eyes gripped him. Her *ki’sain* was still the white of a widow, and her hair still hung in black waves below her waist. She wore a red silk gown in the Domani style, clinging and little short of sheer. She was beautiful, but even she could do nothing here. He made his bow calmly.

For a moment she merely looked at him, cool and considering. “It would have been…easier had you come to me,” she murmured, seeming not to care whether Brys heard. And then, shockingly, she knelt gracefully and took his hands in hers. “Beneath the Light,” she announced in a strong, clear voice, “I, Edeyn ti Gemallen Arrel, pledge fealty to al’Lan Mandragoran, Lord of the Seven Towers, Lord of the Lakes, the true Blade of Malkier. May he sever the Shadow!” Even Brys looked startled. A moment of silence held while she kissed Lan’s fingers; then cheers erupted on every side. Cries of “The Golden Crane!” and even “Kandor rides with Malkier!”

The sound freed him to pull his hands loose, to lift her to her feet. “My Lady,” he said quietly, but in a tight voice, “there is no King of Malkier. The Great Lords have not cast the rods.”

She put a hand over his lips. A warm hand. “Three of the surviving five are in this room, Lan. Shall we ask them how they will cast? What must be, will be.” And then she faded back into the crowd of those who wanted to cluster around him, congratulate him, pledge fealty on the spot had he let them.

Brys rescued him, drawing him off to a long, stone-railed walk above a two-hundred-foot drop to the roofs below. It was known as a place Brys went to be private, and no one followed. Only one door let onto it, no window overlooked it, and no sound from the Palace intruded.

“Had I known she intended that,” the older man said as they walked up and down, hands clasped behind their backs, “I would never have given her welcome. If you wish it, I’ll let her know that welcome is withdrawn. Don’t look at me that way, man. I know enough of Malkieri customs not to insult her. She has you neatly nailed into a box I know you would never choose for yourself.” Brys knew less than he thought he did. However delicate the words, withdrawing the welcome would be a deadly insult.

“‘Even the mountains will be worn down with time,’” Lan quoted. He was unsure whether he could avoid leading men in to the Blight, now. Unsure that he wanted to avoid it. All of those men and women remembering Malkier. Malkier deserved remembrance. But at what price?

“What will you do?” A simple question simply stated, yet very hard to answer.

“I do not know,” Lan replied. She had won only a skirmish, but he felt stunned at the ease of it. A formidable opponent, the woman who wore part of his soul in her hair.

For the rest they spoke quietly of hunting and bandits and whether this past year’s flare-up in the Blight might die down soon. Brys regretted withdrawing his army from the war against the Aiel, but there had been no alternative. They talked of the rumors about a man who could channel—every tale had him in a different place; Brys thought it another jak o’the mists and Lan agreed—and of the Aes Sedai who seemed to be everywhere, for what reason no one knew. Ethenielle had written him that in a village along her progression two sisters had caught a woman pretending to be Aes Sedai. The woman could channel, but that did her no good. The two real

Aes Sedai flogged her squealing through the village, making her confess her crime to every last man and woman who lived there. Then one of the sisters carried her off to Tar Valon for her true punishment, whatever that might be. Lan found himself hoping that Alys had not lied about being Aes Sedai, though he could not think why he should care.

He hoped to avoid Edeyn the rest of the day, too, but when he was guided back to his rooms—by a serving man, this time—she was there, waiting languorously in one of the gilded chairs in the sitting room. His servants were nowhere to be seen. It seemed Anya truly was Edeyn's ally.

"You are no longer beautiful, I fear, sweetling," she said when he came in. "I think you may even be ugly when you are older. But I always enjoyed your eyes more than your face." Her smile became sultry. "And your hands."

He stopped still gripping the door handle. "My Lady, not two hours gone you swore—" She cut him off.

"And I will obey my king. But as the saying goes, a king is not a king, alone with his *carneira*." She laughed, a smoky laugh. Enjoying her power over him. "I brought your *daori*. Bring it to me."

Unwillingly, his eyes followed hers to a flat lacquered box on a small table beside the door. Lifting the hinged lid took as much effort as lifting a boulder. Coiled inside lay a long cord woven of hair. He could recall every moment of the morning after their first night, when she took him to the women's quarters of the Royal Palace in Fal Moran and let ladies and serving women watch as she cut his hair at his shoulders. She even told them what it signified. The women had all been amused, making jokes as he sat at Edeyn's feet to weave the *daori* for her. Edeyn kept custom, but in her own way. The hair felt soft and supple; she must have had it rubbed with lotions every day.

Crossing the floor slowly, he knelt before her and held out his *daori* stretched between his hands. "In token of what I owe to you, Edeyn, always and forever." If his voice did not hold the fervor of that first morning, surely she understood.

She did not take the cord. Instead, she studied him, a lioness studying a fawn. "I knew you had not been gone so long as to forget our ways," she said finally. "Come."

Rising, she grasped his wrist and drew him to the doors to the balcony overlooking the garden ten paces below. Two servants were pouring water from buckets onto chosen plants, and a young woman was strolling along a slate path in a blue dress as bright as any of the early flowers that grew beneath the trees.

“My daughter, Iselle.” For a moment, pride and affection warmed Edeyn’s voice. “Do you remember her? She is seventeen, now. She hasn’t chosen her *carneira*, yet.” Young men were chosen by their *carneira*; young women chose theirs. “But I think it time she married anyway.”

He vaguely recalled a child who always had servants running, the blossom of her mother’s heart, but his head had been full of Edeyn, then. Light, the woman filled his head now, just as the scent of her perfume filled his nose. The scent of her. “She is as beautiful as her mother, I am sure,” he said politely. He twisted the *daori* in his hands. She had too much advantage as long as he held it, all advantage, but she had to take it from him. “Edeyn, we must talk.” She ignored that.

“Time you were married, too, sweetling. Since none of your female relatives is alive, it is up to me to arrange.” She smiled warmly toward the girl below, a loving mother’s smile.

He gasped at what she seemed to be suggesting. At first he could not believe. “*Iselle?*” he said hoarsely. “*Your* daughter?” She might keep custom in her own way, but this was scandalous. “I’ll not be reined into something so shameful, Edeyn. Not by you, or by this.” He shook the *daori* at her, but she only looked at it and smiled.

“Of course you won’t be reined, sweetling. You are a man, not a boy. Yet you do keep custom,” she mused, running a finger along the cord of hair quivering between his hands. “Perhaps we do need to talk.”

But it was to the bed that she led him. At least he would regain some lost ground there, whether or not she took the *daori* from his hands. He was a man, not a fawn, however much the lioness she was. He was not surprised when she told him he could lay it aside to help her undress, though. Edeyn would never give up all of her advantage. Not until she presented his *daori* to his bride on his wedding day. And he could see no way to stop that bride being Iselle.

* * *

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Chapter 23

The Evening Star

Moiraine allowed herself a small smile as Lan's friends galloped after him. If he wanted to be away from her so quickly, then she had made some impression. A deeper one had to wait. So he thought she needed to avoid the rougher parts of Chachin, did he? The way she handled those bandits should have taught him better.

Putting him out of her mind, she went in search of exactly those rougher quarters. When she and Siuan had been allowed a trip into Tar Valon as Accepted, the common rooms Siuan liked to visit were always in that sort of area. Their food and wine were cheap, and they were unlikely to be frequented by Aes Sedai who would surely have disapproved of Accepted having a cup of wine in such a place. Besides, Siuan said she felt more comfortable in those inns than at the better establishments where Moiraine would have preferred to eat. Besides, tightfisted as Siuan was, she certainly would have sought out a room at the cheapest inn to be found.

Moiraine rode through the crowded streets until she found a place inside the first ringwall where there were no sedan chairs or street musicians and the rare pushbarrow vendors had no patrons and faces without hope of having any soon. The stone buildings lining the narrow street had a shabby appearance that belied their brightly tiled roofs, cracked paint on doors and window frames where there was any paint, dirty windows with broken panes. Ragged children ran laughing and playing, but children played and laughed in the direst surroundings. Shopkeepers with cudgels stood guard over the goods displayed on tables in front of their shops and eyed the passersby as though considering every one of them capable of theft. Maybe some of those folk were, in their worn, patched woolens, scuttling along with head down or swaggering with defiant scowls. A poor woman might easily be tempted into theft when she had nothing. Moiraine's fur-lined cloak and silk riding dress drew furtive glances, and so did Arrow. There was not another horse on the street.

As she dismounted in front of the first inn she came to, a dusty-appearing place called The Ruffled Goose, a slat-ribbed yellow dog growled at her, hackles standing, till she flicked it with a fine flow of Air and sent it yelping down the street. Of more concern was a tall young woman in a much-darned red dress that had faded in patches of different shades. She was pretending to search for a stone in her shoe while eyeing Arrow sideways. A covetous gaze, that. There were no hitching posts or rings here. Letting the reins hang free, which would tell Arrow not to move, Moiraine wove hobbles of Air for the mare's forefeet and a ward around her that would warn if anyone tried to move the animal. That one, she held on to rather than tying off.

The dim common room of The Ruffled Goose bore out the exterior. The floor was covered with what might have been sawdust once, but now appeared to be congealed mud. The air stank of stale tabac smoke and sour ale, and something that seemed to be scorching in the kitchen. The patrons huddled over their mugs at the small tables, rough-faced men in rough coats, lifted their heads in surprise at her entrance. The innkeeper proved to be a lean, leathery fellow in a stained gray coat with his narrow face cast in a permanent leer, as villainous in appearance as any of those bandits on the high road had been.

"Do you have a Tairen woman staying here?" she asked. "A young Tairen woman with blue eyes?"

"This place isn't for the likes of you, my Lady," he muttered, rubbing a wiry hand across his stubbly cheek. He might have rearranged some dirt. "Come, let me show you to something more fit."

He started for the door, but she laid a hand on his sleeve. Lightly. Some of the stains on his coat appeared to be encrusted food, and up close, he smelled as though he had not washed in weeks. "The Tairen woman."

"I've never seen a blue-eyed Tairen. Please, my Lady. I know a fine inn, a grand place, only two streets over."

The ward she had set on Arrow tingled against her skin. "Thank you, no," she told the innkeeper, and hurried outside.

The woman in the faded red dress was trying to lead Arrow away, tugging at the reins and growing increasingly frustrated at the mare's tiny mincing steps.

"I would abandon that notion if I were you," Moiraine said loudly. "The penalty for horse-theft is flogging if the horse is recovered, and worse if not." Every Accepted was required to become acquainted with the more common laws of the different nations.

The young woman spun, mouth dropping open. Apparently she had believed she had more time before Moiraine came out. Surprise vanished quickly, though, and she straightened her back and laid a hand on her long-bladed belt knife. "I suppose you think you can make me," she said, contemptuously eyeing Moiraine up and down.

It would have been a pleasure to send the woman off with a few stripes across her back, but doing so might well have revealed who she was. A number of passersby, men and women and children, had stopped to watch. Not to interfere; just to see the outcome. "I will if I must," Moiraine said calmly, coolly.

The young woman frowned, licking her lips and fingering the hilt of her knife. Abruptly, she flung down Arrow's reins. "Keep her then! Truth is, she isn't worth stealing." Turning her back, she strode away shooting defiant glares in every direction.

Temper flared in Moiraine, and she channeled Air, striking the woman a hard blow across the bottom. A very hard blow. With a shriek, the woman leaped at least a foot in the air. Gripping her knife hilt, she spun about, scowling and searching for who had hit her, but there was no one closer than two paces, and people were looking at her in open puzzlement. She started off again, rubbing herself with both hands.

Moiraine gave a small nod of satisfaction. Perhaps in the future the would-be horsethief would know not to insult another woman's horse. Her satisfaction did not last long.

At the second inn on the street, The Blind Pig, a round-faced, squinting woman in a long apron that might have once been white cackled that she had no Tairens in her rooms. Every word out of her mouth came with a shrill laugh. "Best you be off, girl," she said as well. "My trade will have a pretty tender like you for dinner if you don't scurry away quick." Tilting her head back, she roared with laughter that her customers echoed.

At The Silver Penny, the last inn on the street, the innkeeper was a beautiful woman in her middle years, not too overly tall, with a joyous smile and glossy black hair worn in a thick braid that started atop her head. Wonder of wonders, Nedare Satarov's brown woolen dress was neat, clean and well cut, and her common-room floor was freshly swept. Her patrons were rough-faced men and hard-eyed women, but the smells from the kitchen promised something tolerable.

“Why, yes, my Lady,” she said, “I do have a Tairen woman of that description staying here. She’s gone out just now. Why don’t you have a seat and some nice spiced wine while you wait for her.” She held out a wooden mug she had been carrying when she first approached. The mug gave off the sweet smell of fresh spices.

“Thank you,” Moiraine said, returning the woman’s smile with one just as bright. What luck to find Siuan so fast. But her hand stopped just short of the mug. Something had altered in Mistress Satarov’s expression. Just by a hair, but there was definitely a slight air of anticipation about her now. And she had been carrying the mug when she approached. Moiraine had not seen a sign of wine in the first two inns. No one in this part of the city could afford wine. Spices could cover many other tastes.

Embracing the Source, she wove Spirit in one of the Blue’s secret weaves and touched the innkeeper with it. Slight anticipation became definite unease. “Are you certain the young woman meets my description exactly?” she asked, and tightened the weave a fraction. Sweat appeared on Mistress Satarov’s forehead. “Are you absolutely certain?” Another tightening, and a edge of fear appeared in the woman’s eyes.

“Come to think, she doesn’t have blue eyes at that. And…And she left this morning, come to think.”

“How many unwary visitors have you fed wine?” Moiraine asked coldly. “How many women? Do you leave them alive? Or simply wishing they were dead?”

“I…. I don’t know what you’re talking about. If you’ll excuseme, I….”

“Drink,” Moiraine commanded, tightening the weave to just short of panic. Trembling, Mistress Satarov was unable to break free from her gaze. “Drink it all.”

Still staring into Moiraine’s eyes, the woman raised the mug unsteadily to her mouth, and her throat worked convulsively as she swallowed. Abruptly, her eyes widened as she realized what she was doing, and with a cry she flung the mug away in a spray of wine. Moiraine released the weave, but that did not lessen Mistress Satarov’s fear. The woman’s face contorted with terror as she gazed around her common room. Hoisting her skirts above her knees, she began running toward the kitchens, perhaps the stairs at the back of the room, yet in three paces she was staggering from side to side, and in three more she collapsed to the floor as though her bones had melted, her stockinged legs exposed to the thigh. Silk stockings. The woman had made a tidy profit from her vile trade. She waved her arms as though seeking to crawl, but there was no strength in them.

Some of the men and women at the tables looked at Moiraine in wonderment, doubtless amazed that she was not the one lying on the floor, but most seemed to be studying Mistress Satarov's futile attempts to claw her way along. A wiry man with a long scar down his face gained a slow smile that never touched his eyes. A heavyset fellow with a blacksmith's shoulders licked his lips. By twos and threes women began hurrying out into the street, many shrinking back from Moiraine as they passed her. Some of the men went, too. She joined the exodus without looking back. Sometimes justice came from other than laws or swords.

That was how the rest of her day went, finding the scattered districts where people's clothes were worn and patched and everyone went afoot. In Chachin, a matter of five streets could take you from the homes and shops of craftsmen who were at least moderately prosperous to squalid poverty and back again. Rulers always tried to do something about those in need, if they were good and decent rulers, and she had heard that Ethenielle was considered generous, yet every time one man was lifted from penury, another seemed to fall into it. That might not be fair, but it was the way of the world. The frustration of it was another reason she wanted to avoid the Sun Throne.

She asked in common rooms filled with drunken shouts and laughter and in grim ones where the men and women at the tables seemed to want only to drown their troubles in drink, but no one admitted to seeing a blue-eyed young Tairen woman. Three more times she was offered wine under suspicious circumstances, but she did not repeat what she had done to Mistress Satarov. Not that she was not tempted, but word of that sort of thing would spread. Once might be dismissed as rumor; four was something else again. Any Blue hearing about that would certainly suspect another Blue was in the city. She disliked thinking that a Blue sister could really be Black, but any sister at all could be, and she needed to remain hidden as long as she could manage.

Twice she was attacked by pairs of men who seized Arrow's bridle and tried to claw her from the saddle. Had there been more, she might have had to reveal herself, but the fear-inducing weave at full strength sent them dashing away through the crowds in mindless panic. Onlookers stared at the running men in amazement, obviously wondering why strong men intent on stealing a horse should suddenly flee, yet unless there was a wilder among them, no one was any the wiser. No fewer than seven more times someone tried to steal Arrow while she was inside an inn. Once it was a pack of children she scattered with a shout, another time half a dozen young men who thought they could ignore her, until she sent them leaping and yelping their way down the street under a flurry of Air-woven switches. It was not that Chachin was any more lawless than other cities, but she was in places where silk clothing and a fur-lined cloak and a fine horse were simply signs that she was ripe for plucking. Had she lost Arrow there, a magistrate might well have said it was her own fault. There was nothing for it but to grit her teeth and move on. Cold daylight began to settle toward yet another icy night.

She was walking Arrow through lengthening shadows, eyeing darknesses that moved suspiciously in an alley and thinking that she would have to give up for today, when Siuan came bustling up from behind.

“I thought you might look down here when you came,” Siuan said, taking her elbow to hurry her along. She was wearing the same blue wool riding dress. Moiraine doubted she had even considered spending some of the coin Moiraine had given her on another. “I’ve been haunting these regions looking for you. Let’s get inside before we freeze.” Siuan eyed those shadows in the alley, too, and absently fingered her belt knife, as if using the Power could not deal with any ten of them. Well, not without revealing themselves. Perhaps it was best to move quickly. “Not the quarter for you, Moiraine. There are fellows around here would bloody well have you for dinner before you knew you were in the pot. Are you laughing or choking?”

“Both,” Moiraine replied with some difficulty. How often today had she heard some variation on her being something to be cooked and eaten if she was not careful? She had to stop and hug the other woman. “Oh, Siuan, it is so good to see your face. Where are you staying? Somewhere that serves fish, I suppose. May I at least hope the beds lack fleas and lice?”

“Maybe it isn’t what you’re used to,” Siuan replied, “but a sound roof to keep off rain is really all you need. And there are no sisters there, so you can chase fleas and lice to your heart’s content. But we’d better hurry if we want to reach it before full dark.”

Moiraine sighed. And hurried. After dark was not a good time to be out near the sorts of places Siuan favored.

Siuan, it turned out, had a room at a most respectable inn called The Evening Star, three sprawling stories of stone that catered to merchants of middling rank, especially women unwilling to be bothered by noise or rough sorts in the spacious common room. A pair of bull-shouldered fellows, leaning against blue-painted columns as they kept watch on the front door, made sure there was none of that. In truth, they were the only men in the room. A good many of the tables were taken by women, most in well-cut but plain woolens with only a brooch or earrings for jewelry and two with the chains of the Kandori Merchants' Guild looping across their bosoms, though three in bright Domani dresses, discussing something heatedly if in low voices, wore tall chain-necklaces of gold that covered their entire necks. A gray-haired woman plying her hammers on a dulcimer was striking a quiet yet merry tune, and the smells from the kitchens spoke of lamb roasting, not fish.

The innkeeper, Ailene Tolvina, was a lean woman with an air of brooking little nonsense, in a gray dress embroidered with a sprinkling of blue flowers on the shoulders. She had no rooms free, but she made no objection to Moiraine joining Siuan. "So long as the extra for two is paid," she added, holding out a hand. Silks and fur were insufficient to bring curtsies from Mistress Tolvina.

"I can chase fleas to my heart's content?" Moiraine said, hanging her cloak on a peg in Siuan's small room on the top floor. At least it was warm, with a stove built under the not-very-wide bed, and tidy. Siuan was never untidy. "I am surprised you are staying here." The "extra" had been a silver penny, which meant Siuan must be paying two.

"You'll just have to call the fleas first. Why surprised?" Siuan settled cross-legged on the bed, yet she all but bounced. She seemed invigorated since Canluum. A goal always made Siuan bubble with enthusiasm.

Moiraine did not answer the question. They were going to be sharing that bed, and Siuan knew exactly which ticklish spots could reduce her to helpless laughter and pleading. "What have you learned?"

"A great deal and nothing. I've had a time, Moiraine, I tell you. That fool horse nearly beat me to death getting here. The Creator made people to walk or go by boat, not be bounced around. I suppose the Sahera woman wasn't the one, or you'd be jumping like a ladyfish in spring. I found Ines

Demain almost right off, but not where *I* can reach her. She's a new widow, but she did have a son, for sure. Named him Rahien because she saw the dawn come up over Dragonmount. Talk of the streets. Everybody thinks it a fool reason to name a child."

Moiraine pushed down a momentary thrill. Seeing dawn over the mountain did not mean the child had been born on it. There was no chair or stool, nor room for one, so she sat on the end of the bed, wrapping her arms around her knees. "If you have found Ines and her son, Siuan, why is she out of reach?"

"She's in the bloody Aesdaishar Palace, that's why." Siuan could have gained entry easily as Aes Sedai, but otherwise only if the Palace was hiring servants.

The Aesdaishar Palace. "We will take care of that in the morning," Moiraine sighed. It meant risk, yet the Lady Ines had to be questioned. No woman Moiraine had found yet had been able to *see* Dragonmount when her child was born. "Have you seen any sign of…of the Black Ajah?" She *had* to get used to saying that name.

Siuan frowned at her lap and fingered her divided skirt. "This is a strange city, Moiraine," she said finally. "Lamps in the streets, and women who fight duels, even if they do deny it, and more gossip than ten men full of ale could spew. Some of it is interesting." She leaned forward to put a hand on Moiraine's knee. "Everybody's talking about a young blacksmith who died of a broken back a couple of nights ago. Nobody expected much of him, but this last month or so he turned into quite a speaker. Convinced his guild to take up money for the poor who've come into the city, afraid of the bandits, folks not connected to a guild or House."

"Siuan, what under the Light—?"

"Just listen, Moiraine. He collected a lot of silver himself, and it seems he was on his way to the guild house to turn in six or eight bags of it when he was killed. Fool was carrying it all by himself. The point is, there wasn't a bloody coin of it taken, Moiraine. And he didn't have a mark on him, aside from his broken back."

They shared a long look; then Moiraine shook her head. "I cannot see how to tie that to Meilyn or Tamra. A blacksmith? Siuan, we can go mad thinking we see Black sisters everywhere."

"We can die from thinking they aren't there," Siuan replied. "Well. Maybe we can be silverpike in the nets instead of grunters. Just remember silverpike go to the fish-market, too. What do you have in mind about this Lady Ines?”

Moiraine told her. Siuan did not like it, and this time it took most of the night to make her see sense. In truth, Moiraine almost wished Siuan would talk her into trying something else. But Lady Ines had seen dawn over Dragonmount. At least Ethenielle’s Aes Sedai advisor was with her in the south.

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Chapter 24

Making Use of Invisibility

Siuan started up again while they were dressing the next morning. She disliked being argued out of anything, particularly when she thought herself in the right. And she usually did think herself in the right. “I don’t like you taking all the risks,” she muttered, pulling a blue wool dress over her head. She had brought a change, as it turned out, and she had been near to snippy in pointing out that Moiraine was the one with only a single dress to her name.

“I will not *be* taking all the risks,” Moiraine said, suppressing a sigh. They had gone over this and over it last night. “You must take as many as I. Will you help me with these buttons?”

Siuan turned her around by the shoulders almost roughly and attacked the two rows of small mother-of-pearl buttons that ran down her back. “Don’t be a gudgeon,” she grumbled, tugging at the dress much more fiercely than was necessary. “If this works as you say it will, nobody will notice me. You’ll have all sails set, the sweeps out, and banners flying. I say there has to be a better way, and we’re going to sit down and talk it over till you see the right of it.”

Moiraine did sigh then. A bear with a sore tooth would have been better company. Even that fellow Lan! Doing up Siuan’s buttons in turn, she tried distracting the other woman by telling her how much the cut of her dress molded her hips and bosom. Well, for a little more than distraction. Siuan deserved a bit of snippiness back.

“It does attract men’s eyes,” Siuan replied. And giggled! She even gave her hips a twitch! Moiraine thought she might spend the whole day sighing.

When they went down, with their cloaks folded over their arms, the common room was nearly full of merchants chatting over breakfast, still all women. The two Kandori, one with three chains across her chest, the other with two, were eating hurriedly and beaming like women who foresaw a prosperous day ahead. Some had done business the night before, it seemed. One slender woman in dark gray was eyeing her plump, complacent companion with the sickly expression of someone who had been brought near financial ruin. The three Domani picked at their plates, pushing the food around with their forks; by their tight eyes and pallid faces, they were all nursing sore heads from too much drink.

"A big breakfast, and then we can talk," Siuan said, going on tiptoe to scan the room for an empty table. "The kitchens here make a fine breakfast."

"Rolls that we can eat on the way," Moiraine said firmly, and hurried toward Mistress Tolvina, who was giving instructions to a serving girl in a snowy apron with a blue border. The only way to win an argument with Siuan was to sweep her along. If you let up for an instant, you would find yourself the one being swept.

"Good morning, Mistress Tolvina," she said as the innkeeper turned from the waiting girl. "We wish to hire two of your men to escort us for a few hours this morning." The pair watching the door this morning were different from those who had been on duty last night, though just as large.

The lean woman's eyebrows rose slightly, increasing her no-nonsense air. Again, there was no curtsy, though Moiraine had used the Power to make sure her dress looked fresh from the laundress. "Why? If you've gotten yourself engaged in a duel, I'll have no part of it. A fool thing, these whip-duels and the like, and I'll not abet you. You'd just come back lashed bloody, in any case. I certainly doubt you've ever fought before."

Moiraine bit her tongue. Siuan said the innkeeper had all sorts of rules, from locking the outside doors at midnight to no male visitors in rooms, and enforced them strictly, but she would not have spoken so had she known they were Aes Sedai. "I wish to visit a banker," she said once she could trust herself to speak. Getting them thrown out of Siuan's room would not be a disaster, but it would be inconvenient. They had a great deal to do today. "A good and reputable banker. Do you know of one nearby?"

As it happened, Mistress Tolvina did, the one she herself used, and for that purpose, she was willing to have two of her "watchers," as she called them, rousted from their rooms over the stable—for an amount Moiraine was sure at least doubled their daily wage. She paid at once, though. Objecting would only waste time, and might drive the price up. Ailene Tolvina did not look like a woman who bargained. Soon enough, she and

Siuan were sitting facing each other in a large sedan chair borne by four wiry men who hardly looked strong enough to bear the weight, though they trotted up the crowded streets much more easily than the pair of tall men who escorted the chair carrying long, brass-studded cudgels.

“This isn’t going to work,” Siuan muttered between gnaws at a large, crusty roll. “If you think we need more money, all right. Though you do fling it around, Moiraine. But, burn me, this scheme of yours will never work. We’ll be netted right away. They’ll probably send for a sister. If there isn’t one there already. I tell you, we have to find another way.”

Moiraine pretended to be too busy eating her own roll, still warm from the oven, to answer. Besides, she was hungry. If they encountered another Aes Sedai…. That was a chasm they would have to cross when they came to it. She told herself the flutter in her belly was hunger, not fear. But you could think a lie. Her plan had to work. There *was* no other way.

As in Tar Valon, the bank resembled a small palace, this one glittering in the morning sunlight like the real palaces farther up the mountain, with golden tiles on every wall and two tall white domes. The doorman who bowed them inside wore a dark red coat embroidered on the cuffs with silver bees, and the footmen short black coats that exposed their bottoms in their tight breeches. Moiraine’s dress with the slashes of Cairhienin nobility on the front was enough to get them an interview with the banker herself rather than an underling, in a quiet, wood-paneled room with silvered stand-lamps and small lines of gilding on the furniture.

Kamile Noallin was a lovely slim woman in her middle years, with graying hair worn in four long braids and stern, questioning eyes. Kandor was a long way from Cairhien, after all, and from Tar Valon. Still, she had no call to use an enlarging glass to study Ilain Dormaile’s seal at the bottom of Moiraine’s letter-of-rights. At least the letter itself was only a little blurred from its immersion in that pond. It was not the largest she carried, yet even so it produced an imposing pile of gold in ten leather pouches stacked on the banker’s writing table, even after the steep discount for the distance between the two banks.

“You have bodyguards, I hope,” Mistress Noallin murmured politely. Large quantities of gold tended to bring courtesy.

“Is Chachin so lawless two women are not safe by daylight?” Moiraine asked her coolly. An enlarging glass! “I think our business is done.”

A pair of very large footmen carried the purses outside and placed them on the floor of the sedan chair, looking relieved at the sight of Mistress Tolvina's two "watchers" with their cudgels. The bearers hoisted the extra weight effortlessly, it seemed.

"Even that blacksmith must have staggered, loaded down like a mule," Siuan muttered, toeing the purses piled between them. "Who could have broken his back that way? Fish guts! Whatever the reason, Moiraine, it must be the Black Ajah."

The bearers could hear that clearly, but they trotted along without faltering, ignorant of what the words Black Ajah meant, likely ignorant of what an Ajah was, for that matter. On the other hand, an imposing woman gliding by with ivory combs in her hair gave a start, then hiked her skirts to her knees and ran, leaving her two gaping servants to scramble after her through the crowd.

Moiraine directed a reproving look at Siuan. They could not depend on others' ignorance for protection. Siuan flushed slightly, yet her blue eyes were defiant.

The Evening Star had a small strongroom where merchants could store their coin safely, those who did not keep strongboxes in their rooms, but placing most of the gold there did not bring any curtsies from Mistress Tolvina, even after Moiraine gave her a gold crown for her troubles. No doubt she had seen too many merchants lose everything to be impressed just because someone had coin at the moment.

"The best seamstress in Chachin would be Silene Dorelmin," she said in answer to Moiraine's question, "but she's very dear, or so I hear. Very dear." Moiraine took back one of the fat purses, though it dragged her belt down on one side when she tied the strings. That blacksmith *must* have staggered! No, Siuan was seeing jak o'the mists, that was all.

Silene proved to be a slim woman with a haughty air and a cool voice, in a shimmering blue dress with a neckline cut to show most of her cleavage. The garment barely clung to her shoulders! Moiraine did not worry over being pressed into that sort of dress, though. She intended to violate nearly every rule of propriety between a woman and her seamstress. She tolerated the measuring, since there was no way to hasten it, but Silene's eyes narrowed at the speed with which she chose fabrics and colors. For a moment it seemed she would refuse to sew what Siuan needed, but Moiraine calmly said she would pay twice the usual rate. The woman's eyes went almost to slits at the mention of price, yet she nodded. And Moiraine knew she would get what she wanted. Here, at least.

“I want them tomorrow,” she said. “Put all of your seamstresses to work.”

Silene’s eyes did not narrow at that. They widened, flashing with anger. Her voice became icy. “Impossible. At the end of the month, perhaps. Perhaps later. If I can find time at all. A great many ladies have ordered new gowns. The King of Malkier is visiting the Aesdaishar Palace.”

“The last King of Malkier died twenty-five years ago, Silene.” Taking up the fat purse, Moiraine upended it over the table in the measuring room, spilling out thirty gold crowns. She was ordering more than three dresses, but while silk was as expensive in Chachin as in Tar Valon, the sewing was much less, and that was the largest expense in a dress.

Silene eyed the fat coins greedily, and her eyes positively shone when she was told there would be as much again when the dresses were done.

“But I will keep six coins from the second thirty for each day it takes.” Suddenly it seemed that the dresses could be finished sooner than a month after all. Much sooner.

“You should have your dresses made like what that skinny trull was wearing,” Siuan said as they climbed back into the sedan chair. “Ready to fall off. You might as well enjoy men looking at you if you’re going to lay your fool head on the chopping block.”

Moiraine performed a novice exercise, imaging herself a rosebud in stillness, opening to the sun. Thankfully, it brought calm. Though holding on to it around Siuan could prove trying. She would crack a tooth if she kept grinding them. “There is no other way, Siuan.” The day was more than half gone, and much remained to be done. “Do you think Mistress Tolvina will hire out one of her strongarms for more than a few hours?” The King of *Malkier*? Light! The woman must have thought her a complete fool!

At midmorning two days after Moiraine arrived in Chachin, a yellow-lacquered carriage behind a team of four matched grays, driven by a fellow with shoulders like a bull, arrived at the Aesdaishar Palace, with two mares tied behind, a fine-necked bay and a lanky gray. The Lady Moiraine Damodred, colored slashes marching from the high neck of her dark blue gown to below her knees, was received with all due honor, by an upper servant with silvery keys embroidered behind the Red Horse on his shoulder. The name of House Damodred was known, of course, if not hers, and with Laman dead, any Damodred might ascend to the Sun Throne if another House did not seize it. They could not know how she hoped for that.

She was given suitable apartments, three spacious rooms with silk tapestries on the flower-carved wall panels and a marble-railed balcony looking north across the city toward higher, snowcapped peaks, and assigned servants, two maids and an errand boy, who rushed about unpacking the lady's brass-bound chests and pouring hot rose-scented water for the lady to wash. No one but the servants so much as glanced at Suki, the Lady Moiraine's maid.

"All right," Siuan muttered when the servants finally left them alone in the sitting room, "I admit I'm invisible in this." Her dark gray dress was fine wool, entirely plain except for collar and cuffs banded in Damodred colors. "You, though, stand out like a High Lord pulling oar. Light, I nearly swallowed my tongue when you asked if there were any sisters in the Palace. I'm so nervous I'm starting to get light-headed. It feels hard to breathe."

"It is the altitude," Moiraine told her. "You will get used to it. Any visitor would ask about Aes Sedai; you could see, the servants never blinked." She had held her breath, however, until she heard the answer. One sister would have changed everything. "I do not know why I must keep telling you. A royal palace is not an inn; 'You may call me Lady Alys' would satisfy no one, here. That is fact, not opinion. I must be myself. Suppose you make use of that invisibility and see what you can learn about the Lady Ines. I would be pleased if we leave as soon as possible."

Tomorrow, that would be, without causing insult and talk. Siuan was right. Every eye in the palace would be on the outland noblewoman from the House that had started the Aiel War. Any Aes Sedai who came to the Aesdaishar would hear of her immediately, and any Aes Sedai who passed through Chachin might well come. And if this Gorthanes was still trying to find her, word of Moiraine Damodred in the Aesdaishar Palace would reach his ears all too soon. In her experience, palaces were riper for assassination than highways were. Siuan was right; she was standing on a pedestal like a target, and without a clue as to who might be an archer. Tomorrow, early.

Siuan slipped out, but returned quickly with bad news. The Lady Ines was in seclusion, mourning her husband. "He fell over dead in his breakfast porridge ten days ago," she reported, dropping onto a sitting-room chair and hanging an arm over the back. Lessons in deportment were something else forgotten once the shawl was hers. “A much older man, but it seems she loved him. She’s been given ten rooms and a garden on the south side of the palace; her husband was a close friend to Prince Brys.” Ines would remain to herself a full month, seeing no one but close family. Her servants only came out when absolutely necessary.

“She will see an Aes Sedai,” Moiraine sighed. Not even a woman in mourning would refuse to see a sister.

Siuan bolted to her feet. “Are you mad? The Lady Moiraine Damodred attracts enough attention. Moiraine Damodred Aes Sedai might as well send out riders! I thought the idea was to be gone before anyone outside the Palace knows we were here!”

One of the serving women, a plump gray-haired woman named Aiko, came in just then, to announce that the *shatayan* had arrived to escort Moiraine to Prince Brys, and was plainly startled to find Suki standing over her mistress and stabbing a finger at her.

“Tell the *shatayan* I will come to her,” Moiraine said calmly, and as soon as the wide-eyed woman curtsied and backed out, she rose to put herself on a more equal footing, hard enough with Siuan even when one had all the advantage. “What else do you suggest? Remaining almost two weeks till she comes out will be as bad, and you cannot befriend her servants if they are secluded with her.”

“They may only come out for errands, Moiraine, but I think I can get myself invited inside.”

Moiraine started to say that might take as long as the other, but Siuan took her firmly by the shoulders and turned her around, eyeing her up and down critically. “A lady’s maid is supposed to make sure her mistress is properly dressed,” she said, and gave Moiraine a push toward the door. “Go. The *shatayan* is waiting for you. And with any luck, a young footman named Cal is waiting for Suki.”

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Chapter 25

An Answer

The *shatayan* indeed was waiting, a tall handsome woman, wrapped in dignity and frosty at being made to wait. Her hazel eyes could have chilled wine. Any queen who got on the wrong side of a *shatayan* was a fool, so Moiraine made herself pleasant as the woman escorted her through the halls. She thought she made some progress in melting that frost, but it was difficult to concentrate. A young footman? She did not know whether Siuan had ever been with a man, but surely she would not just to reach Ines' servants! Not a *footman*!

Statues and tapestries lined the hallways, most surprising for what she knew of the Borderlands. Marble carvings of women with flowers or children playing, silk weavings of fields of flowers and nobles in gardens and only a few hunting scenes, without a single battle shown anywhere. At intervals along the halls arched windows looked down into many more gardens than she expected, too, and flagged courtyards, some with a splashing marble fountain. In one of those, she saw something that pushed questions about Siuan and a footman to the back of her mind.

It was a simple courtyard, without fountain or columned walk, and men stood in rows along the walls watching two others, stripped to the waist and fighting with wooden practice swords. Ryne and Bukama. It was fighting, if in practice; blows landed on flesh hard enough for her to hear the thuds. All landed by Ryne. She would have to avoid them, and Lan, if he was there, too. He had not bothered to hide his doubts, and he might raise questions she did not dare have asked. Was she Moiraine or Alys? Worse, was she Aes Sedai or a wilder pretending? Questions that would be discussed in the streets by the next night, for any sister to hear, and that last was one any sister would investigate. Fortunately, three wandering soldiers would hardly be present anywhere she was.

Prince Brys, a solid, green-eyed man, greeted her intimately in a large room paneled red and gold. Two of the Prince's married sisters were present with their husbands, and one of Ethenielle's with hers, the men in muted silks, the women in bright colors belted high beneath their breasts and embroidered down the arms and along the hems of their skirts. Liveried servants offered sweetmeats and nuts. Moiraine thought she might get a sore neck from looking up; the shortest of the women was taller than Siuan, and they all stood very straight. Their necks would have bent a little for a sister, men's and women's alike, but they knew themselves the equals of the Lady Moiraine.

The talk ranged from music and the best musicians among the nobles at court to the rigors of travel, from whether to credit rumors of a man who could channel to why so many Aes Sedai seemed to be about, and Moiraine found it difficult to maintain the expected light wittiness. She cared little for music and less for whoever played the instruments; in Cairhien, musicians were hired and forgotten. Everyone knew that travel was arduous, with no assurance of beds or decent food at the end of the day's twenty or thirty miles, and that was when the weather was good. Obviously some of the sisters were about because of rumors about the man, and others to tighten ties that might have loosened during the Aiel War, to make sure thrones and Houses understood they were still expected to meet their obligations to the Tower, both public and private. If an Aes Sedai had not come to the Aesdaishar yet, one soon would, reason enough for her to make heavy going of idle chat. That and thinking about other reasons for sisters to be wandering. The men put a good face on it, but she thought the women found her particularly dull.

When Brys's children were brought in, Moiraine felt a great relief. Having his children introduced to her was a sign of acceptance to his household, but more, it signaled the end of the audience. The eldest son, Antol, was in the south with Ethenielle as heir, leaving a lovely green-eyed girl of twelve named Jarene to lead in her sister and four brothers, formally aligned by age, though in truth the two youngest boys were still in skirts and carried by nursemaids. Stifling her impatience to find out what Siuan had learned, Moiraine complimented the children on their behavior, encouraged them at their lessons. They must think her as dull as their elders did. Something a little less flat.

"And how did you earn your bruises, my Lord Diryk?" she asked, hardly listening to the boy's soberly delivered story of a fall. Until….

“My father says it was Lan’s luck I wasn’t killed, my Lady,” Diryk said, brightening out of his formality. “Lan is the King of Malkier, and the luckiest man in the world, and the best swordsman. Except for my father, of course.”

“The King of Malkier?” Moiraine said, blinking. Diryk nodded vigorously and began explaining in a rush of words about Lan’s exploits in the Blight and the Malkieri who had come to the Aesdaishar to follow him, until his father motioned him to silence.

“Lan is a king if he wishes it, my Lady,” Brys said. A very odd thing to say, and his doubtful tone made it odder. “He keeps much to his rooms,” Brys sounded troubled about that, too, “but you will meet him before you—My Lady, are you well?”

“Not very,” she told him. She had hoped for another meeting with Lan Mandragoran, planned for it, but not here! Her stomach was trying to twist into knots. “I myself may keep to my rooms for a few days, if you will forgive me.”

He would, of course, and everyone was full of regret at missing her company and sympathy for the strain traveling must have put on her. Though she did hear one of the women murmur that southlanders must be very delicate.

A pale-haired young woman in green-and-red was waiting to show Moiraine back to her rooms. Elis bobbed a curtsy every time she spoke, which meant she bobbed quite often in the beginning. She had been told of Moiraine’s “faintness,” and she asked every twenty paces whether Moiraine wished to sit and catch her breath, or have cool damp cloths brought to her rooms, or hot bricks for her feet, or smelling salts, or a dozen more sure cures for “a light head,” until Moiraine curtly told her to be quiet. The fool girl led on in silence, face blank.

Moiraine cared not a whit whether the woman was offended. All she wanted right then was to find Siuan with good news. With the boy in her arms, born on Dragonmount, and his mother packed to travel would be best of all. Most of all, though, she wanted herself out of the halls before she ran into Lan Mandragoran.

Worrying about him, she rounded a corner behind the serving girl and came face-to-face with Merean, blue-fringed shawl looped over her arms. The *shatayan* herself was guiding Merean, and behind the motherly-looking sister came a train of servants, one woman carrying her red riding gloves, another her fur-trimmed cloak, a third her dark velvet hat. Pairs of men bore wicker pack hampers that could have been carried by one, and others had arms full of flowers. An Aes Sedai received more honor than a mere lady, however high her House.

Merean's eyes narrowed at the sight of Moiraine. "A surprise to see you here," she said slowly. "By your dress, I take it you've given over your disguise? But no. Still no ring, I see."

Moiraine was so startled at the woman's sudden appearance that she hardly heard what Merean said. "Are you alone?" she blurted.

For a moment Merean's eyes became slits. "Larelle decided to go her own way. South, I believe. More, I don't know."

"It was Cadsuane, I was thinking of," Moiraine said, blinking in surprise. The more she had thought about Cadsuane, the more she had become convinced the woman must be Black Ajah. What surprised her was Larelle. Larelle had seemed bent on reaching Chachin, and without delay. Of course, plans could change, but suddenly Moiraine realized something that should have been obvious. Black sisters could lie. It was impossible—the Oaths *could* not be broken!—yet it had to be.

Merean moved close to Moiraine, and when Moiraine took a step back, she followed. Moiraine held herself erect, but she still came no higher than the other woman's chin. "Are you so eager to see Cadsuane?" Merean said, looking down at her. Her voice was pleasant, her smooth face comforting, but her eyes were cold iron. "The last I saw her, she said that next time she met you, she'd spank your bottom till you couldn't sit for a week. She'll do it, too."

Abruptly glancing at the servants, she seemed to realize they were not alone. The iron faded, but it did not disappear. "Cadsuane was right, you know. A young woman who thinks she knows more than she does can land herself in very deep trouble. I suggest you be very still and very quiet until we can talk." Her gesture for the *shatayan* to lead on was peremptory, and the dignified woman leaped to obey. A king or queen might find themselves in a *shatayan*'s bad graces, but never an Aes Sedai.

Moiraine stared after Merean until she vanished around a corner far down the corridor. Everything Merean had just said could have come from one of Tamra's chosen. Black sisters could lie. Had Larelle changed her mind about Chachin? Or was she dead somewhere, like Tamra and the others? Suddenly she realized she was smoothing her skirts. Stilling her hands was easy, but she could not stop herself trembling faintly.

Elis was staring at her with her mouth open. “You’re Aes Sedai, too!” the woman squeaked, then gave a jump, taking Moiraine’s wince for a grimace. “You must be in disguise,” she said breathlessly. “I won’t say a word to anyone, Aes Sedai. I swear, by the Light and my father’s grave!” As if every person behind Merean had not heard everything she had. They would not hold their tongues.

“Take me to Lan Mandragoran’s apartments,” Moiraine told her. What was true at sunrise could change by noon, and so could what was necessary. She took the Great Serpent ring from her pouch and put it on her right hand. Sometimes, you had to gamble.

After a long walk, mercifully in silence, Elis rapped at a red door and announced to the gray-haired woman who opened it that the Lady Moiraine Damodred Aes Sedai wished to speak with King al’Lan Mandragoran. The woman had added her own touches to what Moiraine told her. King, indeed! Shockingly, the reply came back that Lord Mandragoran had no wish to speak with any Aes Sedai. The gray-haired woman looked scandalized, but closed the door firmly.

Elis stared at Moiraine wide-eyed. “I can show my Lady Aes Sedai to her own rooms now,” she said uncertainly, “if—” She squeaked when Moiraine pushed open the door and went in.

The gray-haired serving woman and a younger leaped up from where they had been sitting, apparently darning shirts. A bony young man scrambled awkwardly to his feet beside the fireplace, looking to the women for instruction. They simply stared at Moiraine until she raised a questioning eyebrow. Then the gray-haired woman pointed to one of the two doors leading deeper into the apartments.

The door she pointed to led to a sitting room much like Moiraine’s own, but all of the gilded chairs had been moved back against the walls and the flowered carpets rolled up. Shirtless, Lan was practicing the sword in the cleared area. A small golden locket swung at his neck as he moved, his blade a blur. Sweat covered him. And the wounds she had Healed him of had been replaced by…. Claw marks from some wild animal on his back? Or marks left by a woman. Could this cold man actually inspire such passion in a woman that she would…. She felt her cheeks heating at the image that popped into her head. Let him have as many women as he wished, so long as he did what she wished.

He spun gracefully out of the forms to face her, the point of his sword grounding on the floor tiles. He still did not quite meet her gaze, in that strange way he and Bukama had. His hair hung damply, clinging to his face despite the leather cord, but he was not breathing hard.

“You,” he growled. “So you are Aes Sedai *and* a Damodred today. I’ve no time for your games, Cairhienin. I am waiting for someone.” Cold blue eyes flickered to the door behind her. Oddly, what appeared to be a cord woven of hair was tied around the inner handle in an elaborate knot. “She will not be pleased to find another woman here.”

“Your lady love need have no fear of me,” Moiraine told him dryly. “For one thing, you are much too tall, and for another, I prefer men with at least a modicum of charm. And manners. I came for your help. There was a pledge made, and held since the War of the Hundred Years, that Malkier would ride when the White Tower called. I *am* Aes Sedai, and I call you!”

“You know the hills are high, but not how they lie,” he muttered as if quoting some Malkieri saying. Stalking across the room away from her, he snatched up his scabbard and sheathed the sword forcefully. “I’ll give you your help, if you can answer a question. I’ve asked Aes Sedai over the years, but they wriggled away from answering like vipers. If you are Aes Sedai, answer it.”

“If I know the answer, I will.” She would not tell him again that she was what she was, but she embraced *saidar,* and moved one of the gilded chairs out into the middle of the floor. She could not have lifted the thing with her hands, yet it floated easily on flows of Air, and would have had it been twice as heavy. Sitting, she rested her hands on crossed knees where the golden serpent on her finger was plain. The taller person had an advantage when both stood, but someone standing must feel they were being judged by someone sitting, especially an Aes Sedai.

He did not seem to feel anything of the kind. For the first time since she had met him, he met her eyes directly, and his stare was blue ice. “When Malkier died,” he said in tones of quiet steel, “Shienar and Arafel sent men. They could not stop the flood of Trollocs and Myrddraal, yet they came. Men rode from Kandor, and even Saldaea. They came too late, but they came.” Blue ice became blue fire. His voice did not change, but his knuckles grew white gripping his sword. “For nine hundred years we rode when the White Tower called, but where was the Tower when Malkier died? If you are Aes Sedai, answer me that!”

Moiraine hesitated. The answer he wanted was Sealed to the Tower, taught to Accepted in history lessons yet forbidden to any except initiates of the Tower. But what was another penance alongside what she faced? “Over a hundred sisters were ordered to Malkier,” she said more calmly than she felt. By everything she had been taught, she should *ask* a penance for what she had told him already. “Even Aes Sedai cannot fly, however. They were too late.” By the time the first had arrived, the armies of Malkier were already broken by endless hordes of Shadowspawn, the people fleeing or dead. The death of Malkier had been hard and blood-soaked, and fast. “That was before I was born, but I regret it deeply. And I regret that the Tower decided to keep their effort secret.” Better that the Tower be thought to have done nothing than to have it known Aes Sedai had tried and failed. Failure was a blow to stature, and mystery an armor the Tower needed. Aes Sedai had reasons of their own for what they did, and for what they did not do, and those reasons were known only to Aes Sedai. “That is as much answer as I can give. More than I should have, more than any other sister ever will, I think. Will it suffice?”

For a time he simply looked at her, fire slowly fading to ice once more. His eyes fell away. “Almost, I can believe,” he muttered finally, without saying what he almost believed. He gave a bitter laugh. “What help can I give you?”

Moiraine frowned. She very much wanted time alone with this man, to bring him to heel, but that had to wait. She very much hoped he was not a Darkfriend. “There is another sister in the Palace. Merean Redhill. I need to know where she goes, what she does, who she meets.” He blinked, but did not ask the obvious questions. Perhaps he knew he would get no answers, but his silence was still pleasing.

“I have been keeping to my rooms the past few days,” he said, looking at the door again. “I do not know how much watching I can do.”

In spite of herself, she sniffed. The man promised help, then looked anxiously for his lady. Perhaps he was not what she had thought. But he was who she had. “Not you,” she told him. Her visit here would be known throughout the Aesdaishar soon, if it was not already, and if he was noticed spying on Merean…. That could be disaster even if the woman was as innocent as a babe. “I thought you might ask one of the Malkieri I understand have gathered here to follow you. Someone with a sharp eye and a close tongue. This must be done in utter secrecy."

"No one follows me," he said sharply. Glancing at the door once more, he suddenly seemed weary. He did not slump, but he moved to the fireplace and propped his sword beside it with the care of a tired man. Standing with his back to her, he said, "I will ask Bukama and Ryne to watch her, but I cannot promise for them. That is all I can do for you."

She stifled a vexed sound. Whether it was all he could do or all he would, she had no leverage to force him. "Bukama," she said. "Only him." Going by how he had behaved around her, Ryne would be too busy gaping at Merean to see or hear anything. That was if he did not confess what he was doing the moment Merean looked at him. "And do not tell him why."

His head whipped around, but after a moment he nodded. And again he did not ask the questions most people would have. Telling him how to get word to her, by notes passed to her maid Suki, she prayed she was not making a grave mistake.

Back in her own rooms, she discovered just how quickly news had spread. In the sitting room, Siuan was offering a tray of sweetmeats to a tall, full-mouthed young woman in pale green silk, little older than a girl, with black hair that fell well below her hips and a small blue dot painted on her forehead about where the stone of Moiraine's *kesiera* hung. Siuan's face was smooth, but her voice was tight as she made introductions. The Lady Iselle quickly showed why.

"Everyone in the Palace is saying you are Aes Sedai," she said, eyeing Moiraine doubtfully. She did not rise, much less curtsy, or even incline her head. "If that is so, I need your assistance. I wish to go to the White Tower. My mother wants me to marry. I would not mind Lan as my *carneira* if Mother were not already his, but when I marry, I think it will be one of my Warders. I will be Green Ajah." She frowned faintly at Siuan. "Don't hover, girl. Stand over there until you are needed." Siuan took up a stance by the fireplace, back stiff and arms folded beneath her breasts. No real servant would have stood so—or frowned so—but Iselle no longer noticed her. "Do sit down, Moiraine," she went on with a smile, "and I will tell you what I need of you. If you *are* Aes Sedai, of course."

Moiraine stared. Invited to take a chair in her own sitting room. This silly child was certainly a suitable match for Lan when it came to arrogance. Her *carneira*? That meant "first" in the Old Tongue, and plainly something else here. Not what it seemed to, of course; even these Malkieri could not be that peculiar! Sitting, she said dryly, “Choosing your Ajah should at least wait until I test you to see whether there is any point in sending you to the Tower. A few minutes will determine whether you can learn to channel, and your potential strength if you—” The girl blithely broke in.

“Oh, I was tested years ago. The Aes Sedai said I would be very strong. I told her I was fifteen, but she learned the truth. I don’t see why I could not go to the Tower at twelve if I wanted. Mother was furious. She has always said I was to be Queen of Malkier one day, but that means marrying Lan, which I would not want even if Mother weren’t his *carneira*. When you tell her you are taking me to the Tower, she will have to listen. Everyone knows that Aes Sedai take any woman they want for training, and no one can stop them.” That full mouth pursed. “You *are* Aes Sedai, aren’t you?”

Moiraine performed the rosebud exercise. “If you want to go to Tar Valon, then go. I certainly do not have time to escort you. You will find sisters there about whom you can have no doubts. Suki, will you show the Lady Iselle out? No doubt she does not wish to delay in setting off before her mother catches her.”

The chit was all indignation, of course, but Moiraine wanted only to see the back of her, and Siuan very nearly pushed her out into the corridor protesting every step of the way. Moiraine felt Siuan embrace the Source, and the protests cut off with a sharp yelp.

“That one,” Siuan said as she came back dusting her hands, “won’t last a month if she can equal Cadsuane.”

“Sierin herself can toss her from the top of the Tower for all I care,” Moiraine snapped. “Did you learn anything?”

“Well, I learned that young Cal knows how to kiss, and aside from that, I came up with a bucket of bilgewater.” Siuan scowled suddenly. “Why are you looking at me that way? I only kissed him, Moiraine. Have you kissed a pretty man since young Cormanes the night before you left for the Tower? Well, it’s been as long for me, too long, and Cal is *very* pretty.”

“That is all very well,” Moiraine said briskly. Light, how long since she had thought of Cormanes? He had been beautiful.

Surprisingly, learning that Moiraine had approached Lan upset Siuan more than Merean’s appearance.

“Skin me and salt me if you don’t take idiot risks, Moiraine. A man who claims the throne of a dead country is nine kinds of fool. He could be flapping his tongue about you right this minute to anybody who’ll bloody listen! If Merean learns you’re having her watched…. Burn me!”

“He is many kinds of fool, Siuan, but I do not think he ever ‘flaps his tongue.’ Besides, ‘you cannot win if you will not risk a copper,’ as you always tell me your father used to say. We have no choice but to take risks. With Merean here, time may be running out. You must reach the Lady Ines as quickly as you can.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Siuan muttered, and stalked out squaring her shoulders as if for a struggle. But she was smoothing her skirt over her hips, too. Moiraine hoped matters were not going to proceed beyond kissing. Siuan’s business if it did, but that sort of thing was foolish. Especially with a footman!

Night had long since fallen and she was trying to read by lamplight when Siuan returned. Moiraine set her book aside; she had been staring at the same page for the past hour. This time, Siuan did have news, delivered while digging through her woolen dresses and shifts.

For one thing, she had been approached on her way back to Moiraine’s rooms by “a gristly old stork” who asked if she was Suki, then told her Merean had spent almost the entire day with Prince Brys before retiring to her apartments for the night. No clue there to anything. More importantly, Siuan had been able to bring up Rahien in casual conversation with Cal. The footman had not been with the Lady Ines when the boy was born, but he did know the day, one day after the Aiel began their retreat from Tar Valon. Moiraine and Siuan shared a long look over that. One day after Gitara Moroso had made her Foretelling of the Dragon’s Rebirth and dropped dead from the shock of it. Dawn over the mountain, and born during the ten days before that sudden thaw.

“Anyway,” Siuan went on, beginning to make a bundle of clothes and stockings, “I led Cal to believe I’d been dismissed from your service for spilling wine on your dress, and he’s offered me a bed with the Lady Ines’ servants. He thinks he might be able to get me a place with his lady.” She snorted with amusement, then caught Moiraine’s eyes and snorted again, more roughly. “It isn’t *his* bloody bed, Moiraine. And if it was, well, he has a gentle manner and the prettiest brown eyes you’ve ever seen. One of these days, you’re going to find yourself ready to do more than dream about some man, and I hope I’m there to see it!”

“Do not talk nonsense,” Moiraine told her. The task in front of them was too important to spare thoughts for men. In the way Siuan meant, at least. Merean had spent all day with Brys? Without going near Lady Ines? One of Tamra’s chosen or Black Ajah, that made no sense, and it went beyond credibility to believe Merean was not one or the other. She was missing something, and that worried her. What she did not know could kill her. Worse, it could kill the Dragon Reborn in his cradle.

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Chapter

26

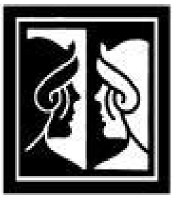

When to Surrender

Lan slipped through the corridors of the Aesdaishar alone, using every bit of the skill he had learned in the Blight, taking care not to round a corner until he was certain the hallway ahead was empty. Wrapped in the *ko'di,* he could almost feel it whenever someone entered the corridor behind him, feel the beginning of another presence and duck out of sight through an open door or an archway before whoever it was could see him. He might have been a ghost.

Anya and Esne took Edeyn's commands ahead of his, now, as though they believed that some part of Malkieri ways. She might have told them it was. Bulen remained loyal, he believed so, but he expected that anyone in the Aesdaishar wearing livery would tell Edeyn where to find him. He thought he knew where he was, now. Despite those previous visits, without a guide he had gotten lost twice since leaving his rooms, and only a feel for direction let him find himself again. He felt a fool for wearing his sword. Steel was no use in this battle. But he felt naked without it, and naked was one thing he could not afford to be against Edeyn.

A flicker of movement made him flatten himself against the wall behind a statue of a woman clad in clouds, her arms full of flowers. Just in time. Two women came out of the crossing corridor ahead, pausing in close conversation. Iselle and the Aes Sedai, Merean. He was as still as the stone he hid behind. It was motion that attracted eyes.

He did not like skulking, but while Edeyn was untying the knot in his *daori* that had kept him penned for two days she had made it clear that she intended to announce his marriage to Iselle soon. Bukama had been right. Edeyn used his *daori* like reins. By custom, most of her power over him would end once Iselle had the cord of his hair among her keepsakes, no longer any more than a token of the past, yet he was certain Edeyn would use Iselle herself in its place. And Iselle would cooperate. He doubted that she had the strength to stand against her mother openly. The only thing to do when faced by an opponent you could not defeat was run, unless your death could serve some greater purpose, and he very much wanted to run. Only Bukama held him here. Bukama and a dream.

At a sharp gesture from Merean, Iselle nodded eagerly and hurried back the way they had come. For a moment Merean watched her go, face unreadable in Aes Sedai serenity. Then, surprisingly, she followed, gliding along the green floor tiles in a way that made Iselle look awkward.

Lan did not waste time wondering what Merean was up to, any more than he had in wondering why Moiraine wanted her watched. A man could go mad trying to puzzle out Aes Sedai. Which Moiraine really must be, or Merean would have her howling up and down the corridors. Waiting long enough for the pair to move well out of sight again, he slipped quietly to the corner and peeked. They were both gone, so he hurried on. Aes Sedai were no concern of his today. He had to talk to Bukama. About dreams.

Running would end Edeyn’s schemes of marriage. If he avoided her long enough, she would find another husband for Iselle. Running would end Edeyn’s dream of reclaiming Malkier; her support would fade like mist under a noon sun once people learned he was gone. Running would end many dreams. The man who had carried an infant tied to his back had a right to dreams, though. Duty was a mountain, but it had to be carried.

Ahead lay a long flight of broad, stone-railed stairs. He turned to start down, and suddenly he was falling. He just had time to go limp, and then he was bouncing from step to step, tumbling head over heels, landing on the tiled floor at the bottom with a crash that drove the last remaining air from his lungs. Spots shimmered in front of his eyes. He struggled to breathe, to push himself up.

Servants appeared from nowhere, helping him to his feet, all exclaiming over his luck in not killing himself in such a fall, asking whether he wanted to see one of the Aes Sedai for Healing. Frowning dizzily up the stairway, he murmured replies, anything in hope of making them go away. He thought he might be as bruised as he had ever been in his life, but bruises went away, and the last thing he wanted at that moment was a sister. Most men would have fought that fall and been lucky to end with half their bones broken. Something had jerked his ankles up there. Something had hit him between the shoulders. There was only one thing it could have been, however little sense it made. He would have known had anyone been close enough to touch him physically. An Aes Sedai had tried to kill him with the Power.

"Lord Mandragoran!" A stocky man in the green coat of a palace guard skidded to a halt and nearly fell over trying to bow while still moving. "We've been looking for you everywhere, my Lord!" he panted. "It's your man, Bukama! Come quickly, my Lord! He may still be alive!"

Cursing, Lan ran behind the guard, shouting for the man to go faster, but he was too late. Too late for the man who had carried an infant. Too late for dreams.

Guards crowding a narrow passage just off one of the practice yards squeezed back to let Lan through. Bukama lay facedown, blood pooled around his mouth, the plain wooden hilt of a dagger rising from the dark stain on the back of his coat. His staring eyes looked surprised. Kneeling, Lan closed those eyes and murmured a prayer for the last embrace of the mother to welcome Bukama home.

"Who found him?" he asked, but he barely heard the jumbled replies about who and where and what. He hoped Bukama was reborn in a world where the Golden Crane flew on the wind, and the Seven Towers stood unbroken, and the Thousand Lakes shone like a necklace beneath the sun. How could he have let anyone get close enough to do this? Bukama could *feel* steel being unsheathed near him. Only one thing was sure. Bukama was dead because Lan had tangled him in an Aes Sedai's schemes.

Rising, he began to run again. Not away from anything, though. Toward someone. And he did not care who saw him.

The muffled crash of the door in the anteroom and outraged shouts from the serving women lifted Moiraine from the cushioned armchair where she had been waiting. For anything but this. Embracing *saidar,* she started from the sitting room, but before she reached the door, it swung open. Lan shook off the liveried women clinging to his arms, shut the door in their faces, and put his back to it, meeting Moiraine's startled gaze. Purpling bruises marred his angular face, and he moved as if he had been beaten. From outside came silence. Whatever he intended, they would be sure she could handle it.

Absurdly, she found herself fingering her belt knife. With the Power she could wrap him up like a child, however large he was, and yet…. He did not glare. There certainly was no fire in thoseeyes. She wanted to step back. No fire, but death seared cold. That black coat suited him with its cruel thorns and stark golden blossoms.

“Bukama is dead with a knife in his heart,” he said calmly, “and not an hour gone, someone tried to kill me with the One Power. At first I thought it must be Merean, but the last I saw of her, she was trailing after Iselle, and unless she saw me and wanted to lull me, she had no time. Few see me when I do not want to be seen, and I don’t think she did. That leaves you.”

Moiraine winced, and only in part for the certainty in his tone. She should have known the fool girl would go straight to Merean. “You would be surprised how little escapes a sister,” she told him. Especially if the sister was filled with *saidar*. “Perhaps I should not have asked Bukama to watch Merean. She is very dangerous.” The woman *was* Black Ajah; she was certain of that, now. Sisters might make painful examples of people caught snooping, but they did not kill them. But what to do about her? Certainty was not proof, surely not proof that would stand up before the Amyrlin Seat. And if Sierin herself was Black…. Nota worry she could do anything about now. What was the woman doing wasting any time at all with Iselle? “If you care for the girl, I suggest you find her as quickly as possible and keep her away from Merean.”

Lan grunted. “All Aes Sedai are dangerous. Iselle is safe enough for the moment; I saw her on my way here, hurrying somewhere with Brys and Diryk. Why did Bukama die, Aes Sedai? What did I snare him in for you?”

Moiraine flung up a hand for silence, and a tiny part of her was surprised when he obeyed. The rest of her thought furiously. Merean with Iselle. Iselle with Brys and Diryk. Merean had tried to kill Lan. Suddenly she saw a pattern, perfect in every line; it made no sense, but she did not doubt it was real.

“Diryk told me you are the luckiest man in the world,” she said, leaning toward Lan intently, “and for his sake, I hope he was right. Where would Brys go for absolute privacy? Somewhere he would not be seen or heard.” It would have to be a place he felt comfortable, yet isolated.

“There is a walk on the west side of the Palace,” Lan said slowly. Then his voice quickened. “If there is danger to Brys, I must rouse the guards.” He was already turning, hand on the door handle.

“No!” she said. She still held the Power, and she prepared a weave of Air to seize him if necessary. “Prince Brys will not appreciate having his guards burst in if Merean is simply talking to him.”

“And if she is not talking?” he demanded.

“Then there is not enough time for rousing the guards, if they would come. We have no proof of anything against her, Lan. Suspicions against the word of an Aes Sedai.” His head jerked angrily, and he growled something about Aes Sedai that she deliberately did not hear. She would have had to make him smart for it, and there was no time. “Take me to this walk, Lan. Let Aes Sedai deal with Aes Sedai. And let us hurry.” If Merean did any talking, Moiraine did not expect her to talk for long.

Hurry Lan surely did, long legs flashing as he ran. All she could do was gather her skirts high and run after him, ignoring the stares and murmurs of servants and others in the corridors at her exposure of stockinged legs, thanking the Light that the man did not outpace her. She let the Power fill her as she ran, till sweetness and joy bordered pain in their intensity, and tried to plan what she would do, what she could do, against a woman considerably stronger than she, a woman who had been Aes Sedai more than a hundred years before her own great-grandmother was born. She wished she were not so afraid. She wished Siuan were with her.

The mad dash led through glittering state chambers, along statuary-lined hallways, and suddenly they were into the open, the sounds of the Palace left behind, on a long stone-railed walk twenty paces wide with a vista across the city roofs far below. A cold wind blew like a storm, tugging at her skirts. Merean was there, surrounded by the glow of *saidar,* and Brys and Diryk, standing by the rail, twisting futilely against bonds and gags of Air. Iselle was frowning at the Prince and his son, and surprisingly, further down the walk stood a glowering Ryne, his arms folded across his chest. So he *was* a Darkfriend.

“…and I could hardly bring Lord Diryk to you without his father,” Iselle was saying petulantly. “I *did* make sure no one knows, but why—?”

Weaving a shield of Spirit, Moiraine hurled it at Merean with every shred of the Power in her, hoping against hope to cut the woman off from the Source. The shield struck and splintered. Merean was too strong, drawing too near her capacity.

She knew she had caught the Blue sister—the Black sister—by surprise, but Merean did not even blink. “You did well enough killing the spy, Ryne,” she said calmly as she wove a gag of Air to stop up Iselle’s mouth and bonds that held the girl stiff and wide-eyed. “See if you can make certain of the younger one this time. You did say you are a better swordsman."

Everything seemed to happen at once. Ryne rushed forward, scowling, the bells in his braids chiming. Lan barely got his own sword out in time to meet him. And before the first clash of steel on steel, Merean struck at Moiraine with the same weave she herself had used, but stronger. In horror Moiraine realized that Merean might have sufficient strength remaining to shield her even while she was embracing as much of *saidar* as she could. Frantically she struck out with Air and Fire, and Merean grunted as the severed flows snapped back into her. In the brief interval, Moiraine tried to slice the flows holding Diryk and the others, but before her weave touched Merean's, Merean sliced hers instead, and this time Merean's attempted shield actually touched her before she could cut it. Moiraine's stomach tried to tie itself in a knot.

"You appear too often, Moiraine," Merean said as though they were simply chatting. She looked as if there were no more to it, serene and motherly, not in the slightest perturbed. "I fear I must ask you how, and why." Moiraine just managed to sever a weave of Fire that would have burned off her clothes and perhaps most of her skin, and Merean smiled, a mother amused at the mischief young women get up to. "Don't worry, child. I'll Heal you to answer my questions. And answer, you will. Out here, no one will hear your screams."

If Moiraine had had any lingering doubts that Merean was Black Ajah, that weave of Fire would have ended them. In the next moments she had more proof, weavings that made sparks dance on her dress and her hair rise, weavings that had her gasping for air that was no longer there, weavings she could not recognize yet surely would have left her broken and bleeding if they settled around her, if she had failed to cut them….

When she could, she tried again and again to cut the bonds holding Diryk and the others, to shield Merean, even to knock her unconscious. She knew she fought for her life—she would die if the other woman won, now or after Merean's questioning—but she never considered that loophole in the Oaths that held her. She had questions of her own for the woman, and the fate of the world might rest on the answers. Unfortunately, most of what she could do was defend herself, and that always on the brink. Her stomach *was* in a knot, and trying to make another. Holding three people bound, Merean was still a match for her, and maybe more. If only Lan could distract the woman.

A hasty glance showed how unlikely that was. Lan and Ryne danced the forms, gracefully flowing from one to another, their blades like whirlwinds, but if there was a hair between their abilities, it rested with Ryne. Blood fanned down the side of Lan's face.

Grimly, Moiraine bore down, not even sparing the bit of concentration necessary to ignore the cold. Shivering, she struck at Merean, defended herself and struck again, defended and struck. If she could manage to wear the woman down, or….

"This is taking too long, don't you think, child?" Merean said. Diryk floated into the air, struggling against the bonds he could not see as he drifted over the railing. Brys's head twisted, following his son, and his mouth worked around his unseen gag.

"No!" Moiraine screamed. Desperately, she flung out flows of Air to drag the boy back to safety. Merean slashed them even as she released her own hold on him. Wailing, Diryk fell, and white light exploded in Moiraine's head.

Groggily she opened her eyes, the boy's fading shriek still echoing in her mind. She was on her back on the stone walk, her head spinning. Until that cleared, she had as much chance of embracing *saidar* as a cat did of singing. Not that it made any difference, now. She could see the shield Merean was holding on her, and even a weaker woman could maintain a shield once in place. She tried to rise, fell back, managed to push up on an elbow.

Only moments had passed. Lan and Ryne still danced their deadly dance to the clash of steel. Brys was rigid for more than his bonds, staring at Merean with such implacable hate it seemed he might break free on the strength of his rage. Iselle was trembling, snuffling and weeping and staring wide-eyed at where the boy had fallen. Diryk. Moiraine made herself think the boy's name, flinched to recall his grinning enthusiasm. Only moments.

"You will hold a little longer for me, I think," Merean said, turning away from her. Brys rose above the walk. The stocky man's face never changed, never stopped staring hatred at Merean.

Moiraine struggled to her knees. She could not channel. She had no courage left, no strength. Only determination. Brys floated over the railing. Moiraine tottered to her feet. Determination. That look of pure hate etched on his face, Brys fell, never making a sound. This had to end. Iselle lifted into the air, writhing frantically, throat working in an effort to scream past her gag. It had to end now! Stumbling, Moiraine drove her belt knife into Merean's back to the hilt, blood spurting over her hands.

They fell to the paving stones together, the glow around Merean vanishing as she died, the shield on Moiraine vanishing. Iselle screamed, swaying where Merean's bonds had let her drop, atop the stone railing. Pushing herself to move, Moiraine scrambled across Merean's corpse, seized one of Iselle's flailing hands in hers just as the girl's slippers slid off into open air.

The jolt pulled Moiraine belly-down across the railing, staring down at the girl held by her blood-slick grip above a drop that seemed to go on forever. It was all Moiraine could do to hold them where they were, teetering. If she tried to pull the girl up, they would both go over. Iselle's face was contorted, her mouth a rictus. Her hand slipped in Moiraine's grasp. Forcing herself to calm, Moiraine reach for the Source and failed. Staring down at those distant rooftops did not help her whirling head. Again she tried, but it was like trying to scoop up water with spread fingers. She *would* save one of the three, though, if the most useless of them. Fighting dizziness, she strove for *saidar*. And Iselle's hand slid out of her bloody fingers. All Moiraine could do was watch her fall, shrieking a long, dwindling cry, hand still stretched up as if she believed someone might yet save her.

An arm pulled Moiraine away from the railing.

"Never watch a death you don't have to," Lan said, setting her on her feet. His right arm hung at his side, a long slash laying open the blood-soaked sleeve and the flesh beneath, and he had other injuries besides the gash on his scalp that still trickled red down his face. Ryne lay on his back ten paces away, staring at the sky in sightless surprise. "A black day," Lan muttered. "As black as ever I've seen."

"A moment," she told him, her voice unsteady. "I am too dizzy to walk far, yet." Her knees wavered as she walked to Merean's body. There would be no answers. The Black Ajah would remain hidden. Bending, she withdrew her belt knife from the woman's back and cleaned it on the traitor's skirts.

"You are a cool one, Aes Sedai," Lan said flatly.

“As cool as I must be,” she told him. Diryk’s scream rang in her ears. Iselle’s face dwindled below her. As in the test for the shawl, all her calm was outward show, but she clung to it tightly. Let go for an instant, and she would be on her knees weeping. Howling with grief. “It seems Ryne was wrong as well as a Darkfriend. You were better than he.”

Lan shook his head slightly. “He was better. But he thought I was finished, with only one arm. He never understood. You surrender after you’re dead.”

Moiraine nodded. Surrender after you are dead. Yes.

It took a little while for her head to clear enough that she could embrace the Source again, and she had to put up with Lan’s anxiety to let the *shatayan* know that Brys and Diryk were dead before word came that their bodies had been found on the rooftops. Understandably, he seemed less eager to inform the Lady Edeyn of her daughter’s death. Moiraine was anxious about time, too, if not for the same reasons. She should have been able to save the girl. That death lay on her as much as on Merean.

She Healed Lan as soon as she was able, and he gasped in shock as the complex weaves of Spirit, Air and Water knit up his wounds, flesh writhing together into unscarred wholeness, but she felt no satisfaction that he finally showed himself mortal. He was weak afterward, drained by Healing atop his fight, weak enough to catch his breath leaning on the stone rail. He would run nowhere for a while. She had to make sure he knew what to say. And she had other plans for him.

Carefully she floated Merean’s body over that rail on flows of Air, and down a little, close to the stone of the mountain. Flows of Fire, and flame enveloped the Black sister, flame so hot there was no smoke, only a thick shimmering in the air, and the occasional crack of a splitting rock.

“What are you—?” Lan began, then changed it to “Why?”

She let herself feel the rising heat, currents of air fit for a furnace. “There is no proof she was Black Ajah, only that she was Aes Sedai.” She winced at her slip. The White Tower needed its armor of secrecy again, more than it had when Malkier died, but she could not tell him that. Not yet. But he did not so much as blink at mention of the Black Ajah. Perhaps he was ignorant of it, but she would not wager on it. The man was as self-contained as any sister. “I cannot lie about what happened here, but I can be silent. Will you be silent, or will you do the Shadow’s work?”

"You are a very hard woman," he said finally. That was the only answer he gave, but it was enough.

"I am as hard as I must be," she told him. Diryk's scream. Iselle's face. There was still Ryne's body to dispose of, and the blood on the floorstones, on their clothing. As hard as she must be.

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Epilogue

Next dawn found the Aesdaishar in mourning, white banners flying from every prominence, the servants with long white cloths tied to their arms. Rumors in the city already talked of portents that had foretold the deaths, comets in the night, fires in the sky. People had a way of folding what they saw into what they knew and what they wanted to believe. The disappearance of a simple soldier, and even of an Aes Sedai, escaped notice alongside bone-deep grief that had strong men weeping in the corridors.

Returning from destroying Merean’s belongings—after searching in vain for any clue to other Black sisters—Moiraine stepped aside for Edeyn Arrel, who glided down the hallway in a white gown, her hair cut raggedly short. Whispers said she intended to retire from the world. Moiraine thought she already had. The woman’s staring eyes looked haggard and old. In a way, they looked much as her daughter’s did, in Moiraine’s mind, full of despair and the knowledge of death coming soon.

When she entered her apartments, Siuan leaped up from a chair in the sitting room. It seemed weeks since Moiraine had seen her. “You look like you reached into the bait well and found a fangfish,” she growled. “Well, it’s no surprise. I always hated mourning when I knew the people. Anyway, we can go whenever you’re ready. Rahien was born in a farmhouse almost two miles from Dragonmount. Merean hasn’t been near him, as of this morning. I don’t suppose she’ll harm him on suspicion even if she is Black.”

Not the one. Somehow, Moiraine had almost expected that. “Merean will not harm anyone ever again, Siuan. Put that mind of yours to a puzzle for me.” Settling in a chair, she began with the end, and hurried through despite Siuan’s gasps and demands for more detail. It was almost like living it again. Getting to what had led her to that confrontation was a relief. “She wanted Diryk dead most of all, Siuan; she killed him first. And she tried to kill Lan.”

“That’s mad,” Siuan growled. “What links an eight-year-old boy to a coldhearted lionfish like Lan?”

“Luck. Diryk survived a fall that should have killed him, and everyone says Lan is the luckiest man alive or the Blight would have killed him years ago. It makes a pattern, but the pattern looks crazy to me. Maybe your blacksmith is even part of it. And Josef Najima, back in Canluum, for all I know. He was lucky, too. Puzzle it out for me if you can. I think it is important, but I cannot see how.”

Siuan strode back and forth across the room, kicking her skirt and rubbing her chin, muttering about “men with luck” and “the blacksmith rose suddenly” and other things Moiraine could not make out. Suddenly she stopped dead and said, “She never went near Rahien, Moiraine. The Black Ajah knows the Dragon was Reborn, but they don’t bloody know *when*! Maybe Tamra managed to keep it back, or maybe they were too rough and she died before they could pry it out of her. That has to be it!” Her eagerness turned to horror. “Light! They’re killing any man or boy who *might* be able to channel! Oh, burn me, thousands could die, Moiraine. Tens of thousands.”

It did make a terrible sense. Men who could channel seldom knew what they were doing, at least in the beginning. At first, they often just seemed to be lucky. Events favored them, and frequently, like the blacksmith, they rose to prominence with unexpected suddenness. Siuan was right. The Black Ajah had begun a slaughter.

“But they do not know to look for a baby,” Moiraine said. As hard as she had to be. “An infant will show no signs. We have more time than we thought. Not enough to be careless, though. Any sister can be Black. I think Cadsuane is. They know others are looking. If one of Tamra’s searchers locates the boy and they find her with him, or if they decide to question one of them instead of killing her as soon as it is convenient….” Siuan was staring at her. “We still have the task,” Moiraine told her.

“I know,” Siuan said slowly. “I just never thought…. Well, when there’s work to do, you haul nets or gut fish.” That lacked her usual force, though. “We can be on our way to Arafel before noon.”

“You go back to the Tower,” Moiraine said. Together, they could search no faster than one could alone, and if they had to be apart, what better place for Siuan than working for Cetalia Delarme, seeing the reports of all the Blue Ajah eyes-and-ears? While Moiraine hunted for the boy, Siuan could learn what was happening in every land, and knowing what she was looking for, she could spot any sign of the Black Ajah or the Dragon

Reborn. Siuan truly could see sense when it was pointed out to her, though it took some effort this time, and when she agreed, she did it with a poor grace.

“Cetalia will use me to caulk drafts for running off without leave,” she grumbled. “Burn me! Hung out on a drying rack in the Tower! I’ll be lucky if she doesn’t have me birched! Moiraine, the politics are enough to make you sweat buckets in midwinter! I hate it!” But she was already pawing through the trunks to see what she could take with her for the ride back to Tar Valon. “I suppose you warned that fellow Lan. Seems to me, he deserves it, much good it’ll do him. I heard he rode out an hour ago, heading for the Blight, and if that doesn’t kill him—Where are you going?”

“I have unfinished business with the man,” Moiraine said over her shoulder. She had made a decision about him the first day she knew him, if he turned out not to be a Darkfriend, and she intended to keep it.

In the stable where Arrow was kept, silver marks tossed like pennies got the mare saddled and bridled almost while the coins were still in air, and she scrambled onto the animal’s back without a care that her skirts pushed up to bare her legs above the knee. Digging her heels in, she galloped out of the Aesdaishar and north through the city, making people leap aside and once setting Arrow to leap cleanly over an empty wagon with a driver too slow to move out of her way. She left a tumult of shouts and shaken fists behind.

On the road north from the city, she slowed enough to ask wagon drivers heading the other way whether they had seen a Malkieri on a bay stallion, and was more than a little relieved the first time she got a “yes.” The man could have gone in fifty directions after crossing the moat bridge. And with an hour’s lead…. She would catch him if she had to follow him into the Blight!

“A Malkieri?” The skinny merchant in a dark blue cloak looked startled. “Well, my guards told me there’s one up there. Dangerous fellows, those Malkieri.” Twisting on his wagon seat, he pointed to a grassy hill a hundred paces off the road. Two horses stood in plain sight at the crest, one a packhorse, and the thin smoke of a fire curled into the breeze.

Lan barely looked up when she dismounted. Kneeling beside the remains of a small fire, he was stirring the ashes with a long twig. Strangely, the smell of burned hair hung in the air. “I had hoped you were done with me,” he said.

“Not quite yet,” she told him. “Burning your future? It will sorrow a great many, I think, when you die in the Blight.”

“Burning my past,” he said, rising. “Burning memories. A nation. The Golden Crane will fly no more.” He started to kick dirt over the ashes, then hesitated and bent to scoop up damp soil and pour it out of his hands almost formally. “No one will sorrow for me when I die, because those who would are dead already. Besides, all men die.”

“Only fools choose to die before they must. I want you to be my Warder, Lan Mandragoran.”

He stared at her unblinking, then shook his head. “I should have known it would be that. I have a war to fight, Aes Sedai, and no desire to help you weave White Tower webs. Find another.”

“I fight the same war as you, against the Shadow. Merean was Black Ajah.” She told him all of it, from Gitara’s Foretelling in the presence of the Amyrlin Seat and two Accepted to what she and Siuan had reasoned out, the deaths of Tamra’s searchers, every last bit. For another man, she would have left most unsaid, but there were few secrets between Warder and Aes Sedai. For another man, she might have softened it, but she did not believe hidden enemies frightened him, not even when they were Aes Sedai. “You said you burned your past. Let the past have its ashes. This is the same war, Lan. The most important battle yet in that war. And this one, you can win.”

For a long time he stood staring north, toward the Blight. She did not know what she would do if he refused. She had told him more than she should have anyone but her bonded Warder.

Suddenly he turned, sword flashing out, and for an instant she thought he meant to attack her. Instead he sank to his knees, the sword lying bare across his hands. “By my mother’s name, I will draw as you say ‘draw’ and sheathe as you say ‘sheathe.’ By my mother’s name, I will come as you say ‘come’ and go as you say ‘go.’” He kissed the blade and looked up at her expectantly. On his knees, he made any king on a throne look meek. She would have to teach him some humility for his own sake. And for a pond’s sake.

“There is a little more,” she said, laying hands on his head.

The weave of Spirit was one of the most intricate known to Aes Sedai. It wove around him, settled into him, vanished. Suddenly she was aware of him, in the way that Aes Sedai were of their Warders. His emotions were a small knot in the back of her head, all steely hard determination, sharp as his blade’s edge. She knew the muted pain of old injuries, tamped down and ignored. She would be able to draw on his strength at need, to find him however far away he was. They were bonded.

He rose smoothly, sheathing his sword, studying her. “Men who weren’t there call it the Battle of the Shining Walls,” he said abruptly. “Men who were, call it the Blood Snow. No more. They know it was a battle. On the morning of the first day, I led nearly five hundred men. Kandori, Saldaeans, Domani. By evening on the third day, half were dead or wounded. Had I made different choices, some of those dead would be alive. And others would be dead in their places. In war, you say a prayer for your dead and ride on, because there is always another fight over the next horizon. Say a prayer for the dead, Moiraine Sedai, and ride on.”

Startled, she came close to gaping. She had forgotten that the bond’s flow worked both ways. He knew her emotions, too, and apparently could make out hers far better than she could his. After a moment, she nodded, though she did not know how many prayers it would take to clear her mind.

Handing her Arrow’s reins, he said, “Where do we ride first?”

“Back to Chachin,” she admitted. “And then Arafel, and….” So few names remained that were easy to find. “The world, if need be. We win this battle, or the world dies.”

Side by side they rode down the hill and turned south. Behind them the sky rumbled and turned black, another late storm rolling down from the Blight.

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The Wheel of Time

by Robert Jordan

The Eye of the World
The Great Hunt
The Dragon Reborn
The Shadow Rising
The Fires of Heaven
Lord of Chaos
A Crown of Swords
The Path of Daggers
Winter's Heart
Crossroads of Twilight

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina, where he now lives with his wife, Harriet, in a house built in 1797. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He is a graduate of The Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Bronze Star with “V,” and two Vietnamese Crosses of Gallantry. A history buff, he has also written dance and theater criticism. He enjoys the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He has been writing since 1977 and intends to continue until they nail shut his coffin.

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NEW SPRING: THE NOVEL

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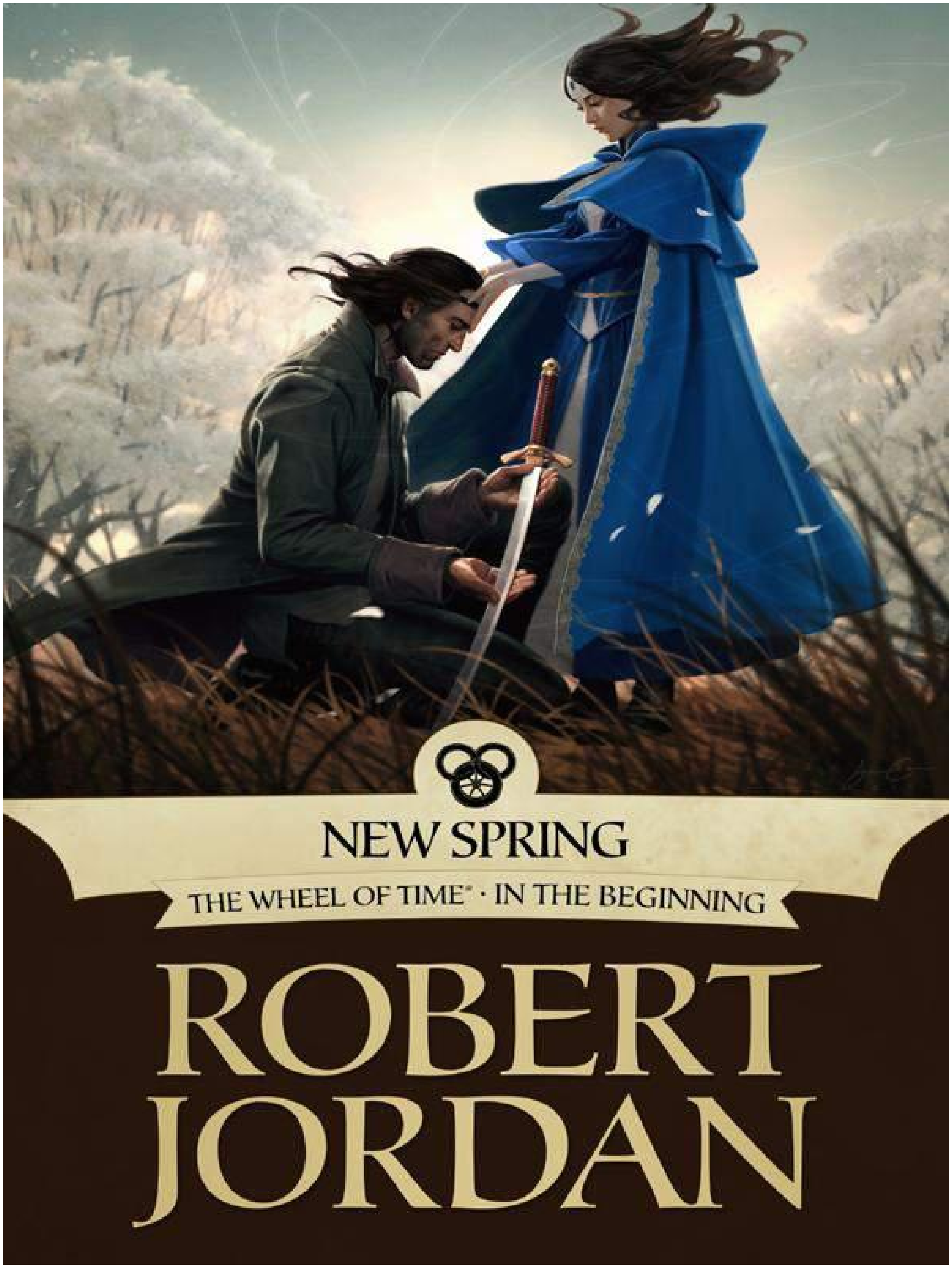
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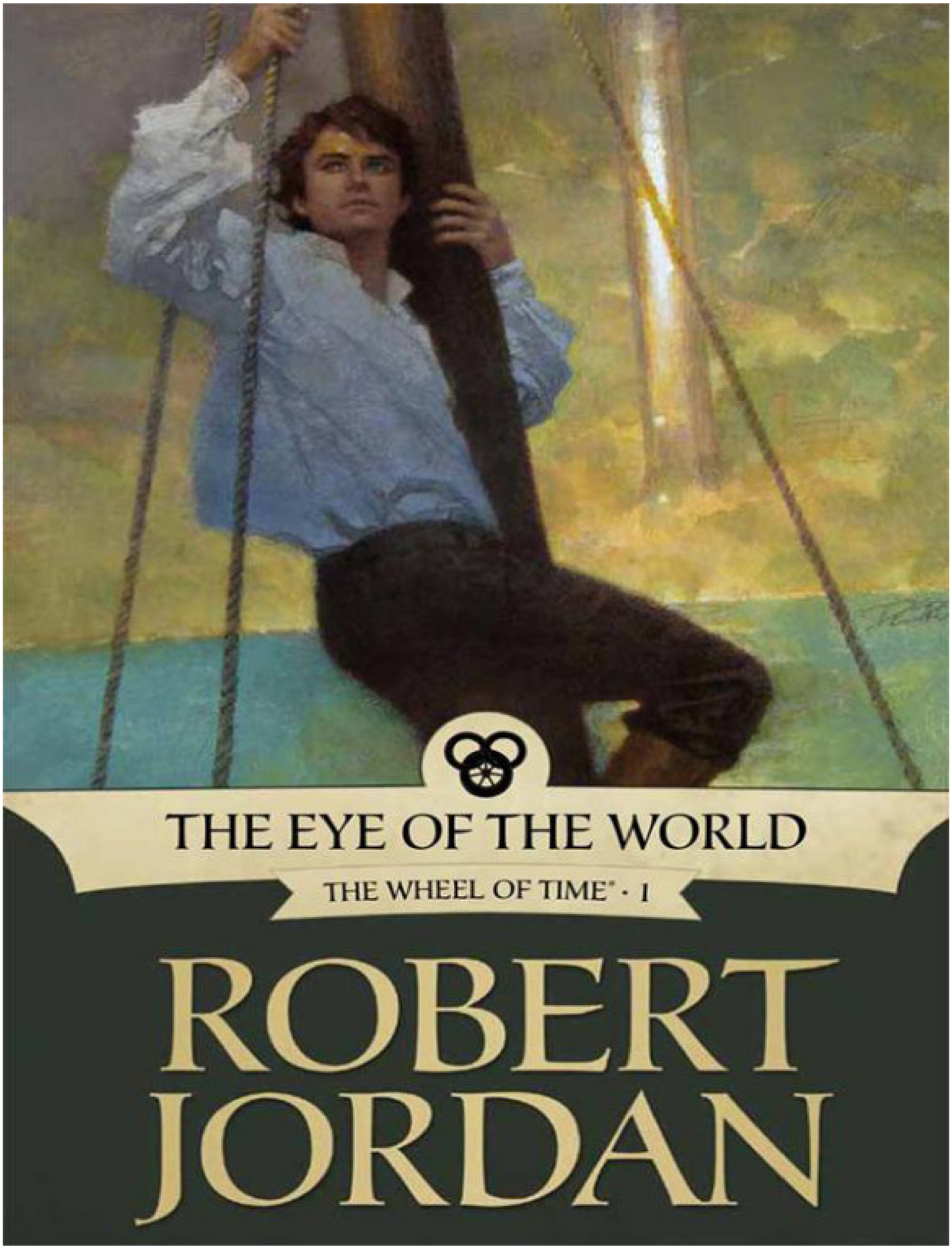
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To Harriet
Heart of my heart,
Light of my life,
Forever.

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PROLOGUE

Dragonmount

The palace still shook occasionally as the earth rumbled in memory, groaned as if it would deny what had happened. Bars of sunlight cast through rents in the walls made motes of dust glitter where they yet hung in the air. Scorch-marks marred the walls, the floors, the ceilings. Broad black smears crossed the blistered paints and gilt of once-bright murals, soot overlaying crumbling friezes of men and animals which seemed to have attempted to walk before the madness grew quiet. The dead lay everywhere, men and women and children, struck down in attempted flight by the lightnings that had flashed down every corridor, or seized by the fires that had stalked them, or sunken into stone of the palace, the stones that had flowed and sought, almost alive, before stillness came again. In odd counterpoint, colorful tapestries and paintings, masterworks all, hung undisturbed except where bulging walls had pushed them awry. Finely carved furnishings, inlaid with ivory and gold, stood untouched except where rippling floors had toppled them. The mind-twisting had struck at the core, ignoring peripheral things.

Lews Therin Telamon wandered the palace, deftly keeping his balance when the earth heaved. “Ilyena! My love, where are you?” The edge of his pale gray cloak trailed through blood as he stepped across the body of a woman, her golden-haired beauty marred by the horror of her last moments, her still-open eyes frozen in disbelief. “Where are you, my wife? Where is everyone hiding?”

His eyes caught his own reflection in a mirror hanging askew from bubbled marble. His clothes had been regal once, in gray and scarlet and gold; now the finely-woven cloth, brought by merchants from across the World Sea, was torn and dirty, thick with the same dust that covered his hair and skin. For a moment he fingered the symbol on his cloak, a circle half white and half black, the colors separated by a sinuous line. It meant something, that symbol. But the embroidered circle could not hold his attention long. He gazed at his own image with as much wonder. A tall man just into his middle years, handsome once, but now with hair already more white than brown and a face lined by strain and worry, dark eyes that had seen too much. Lews Therin began to chuckle, then threw back his head; his laughter echoed down the lifeless halls.

“Ilyena, my love! Come to me, my wife. You must see this.”

Behind him the air rippled, shimmered, solidified into a man who looked around, his mouth twisting briefly with distaste. Not so tall as Lews Therin, he was clothed all in black, save for the snow-white lace at his throat and the silverwork on the turned-down tops of his thigh-high boots. He stepped carefully, handling his cloak fastidiously to avoid brushing the dead. The floor trembled with aftershocks, but his attention was fixed on the man staring into the mirror and laughing.

“Lord of the Morning,” he said, “I have come for you.”

The laughter cut off as if it had never been, and Lews Therin turned, seeming unsurprised. “Ah, a guest. Have you the Voice, stranger? It will soon be time for the Singing, and here all are welcome to take part. Ilyena, my love, we have a guest. Ilyena, where are you?”

The black-clad man’s eyes widened, darted to the body of the golden-haired woman, then back to Lews Therin. “Shai’tan take you, does the taint already have you so far in its grip?”

“That name. Shai—” Lews Therin shuddered and raised a hand as though to ward off something. “You mustn’t say that name. It is dangerous.”

“So you remember that much, at least. Dangerous for you, fool, not for me. What else do you remember? Remember, you Light-blinded idiot! I will not let it end with you swaddled in unawareness! Remember!”

For a moment Lews Therin stared at his raised hand, fascinated by the patterns of grime. Then he wiped his hand on his even dirtier coat and turned his attention back to the other man. “Who are you? What do you want?”

The black-clad man drew himself up arrogantly. “Once I was called Elan Morin Tedronai, but now—”

“Betrayer of Hope.” It was a whisper from Lews Therin. Memory stirred, but he turned his head, shying away from it.

“So you do remember some things. Yes, Betrayer of Hope. So have men named me, just as they named you Dragon, but unlike you I embrace the name. They gave me the name to revile me, but I will yet make them kneel and worship it. What will you do with your name? After this day, men will call you Kinslayer. What will you do with that?”

Lews Therin frowned down the ruined hall. “Ilyena should be here to offer a guest welcome,” he murmured absently, then raised his voice. “Ilyena, where are you?” The floor shook; the golden-haired woman’s body shifted as if in answer to his call. His eyes did not see her.

Elan Morin grimaced. “Look at you,” he said scornfully. “Once you stood first among the Servants. Once you wore the Ring of Tamyrlin, and sat in the High Seat. Once you summoned the Nine Rods of Dominion. Now look at you! A pitiful, shattered wretch. But it is not enough. You humbled me in the Hall of Servants. You defeated me at the Gates of Paaran Disen. But I am the greater, now. I will not let you die without knowing that. When you die, your last thought will be the full knowledge of your defeat, of how complete and utter it is. If I let you die at all.”

“I cannot imagine what is keeping Ilyena. She will give me the rough side of her tongue if she thinks I have been hiding a guest from her. I hope you enjoy conversation, for she surely does. Be forewarned. Ilyena will ask you so many questions you may end up telling her everything you know.”

Tossing back his black cloak, Elan Morin flexed his hands. “A pity for you,” he mused, “that one of your Sisters is not here. I was never very skilled at Healing, and I follow a different power now. But even one of them could only give you a few lucid minutes, if you did not destroy her first. What I can do will serve as well, for my purposes.” His sudden smile was cruel. “But I fear Shai’tan’s healing is different from the sort you know. Be healed, Lews Therin!” He extended his hands, and the light dimmed as if a shadow had been laid across the sun.

Pain blazed in Lews Therin, and he screamed, a scream that came from his depths, a scream he could not stop. Fire seared his marrow; acid rushed along his veins. He toppled backwards, crashing to the marble floor; his head struck the stone and rebounded. His heart pounded, trying to beat its way out of his chest, and every pulse gushed new flame through him. Helplessly he convulsed, thrashing, his skull a sphere of purest agony on the point of bursting. His hoarse screams reverberated through the palace.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the pain receded. The outflowing seemed to take a thousand years and left him twitching weakly, sucking breath through a raw throat. Another thousand years seemed to pass before he could manage to heave himself over, muscles like jellyfish, and shakily push himself up on hands and knees. His eyes fell on the golden-haired woman, and the scream that was ripped out of him dwarfed every sound he had made before. Tottering, almost falling, he scrabbled brokenly across the floor to her. It took every bit of his strength to pull her up into his arms. His hands shook as he smoothed her hair back from her staring face.

“Ilyena! Light help me, Ilyena!” His body curved around hers protectively, his sobs the full-throated cries of a man who had nothing left to live for. “Ilyena, no! *No!*”

“You can have her back, Kinslayer. The Great Lord of the Dark can make her live again, if you will serve him. If you will serve me.”

Lews Therin raised his head, and the black-clad man took an involuntary step back from that gaze. “Ten years, Betrayer,” Lews Therin said softly, the soft sound of steel being bared. “Ten years your foul master has wracked the world. And now this. I will. . . .”

“Ten years! You pitiful fool! This war has not lasted ten years, but since the beginning of time. You and I have fought a thousand battles with the turning of the Wheel, a thousand times a thousand, and we will fight until time dies and the Shadow is triumphant!” He finished in a shout, with a raised fist, and it was Lews Therin’s turn to pull back, breath catching at the glow in the Betrayer’s eyes.

Carefully Lews Therin laid Ilyena down, fingers gently brushing her hair. Tears blurred his vision as he stood, but his voice was iced iron. “For what else you have done, there can be no forgiveness, Betrayer, but for Ilyena’s death I will destroy you beyond anything your master can repair. Prepare to—”

“Remember, you fool! Remember your futile attack on the Great Lord of the Dark! Remember his counterstroke! Remember! Even now the Hundred Companions are tearing the world apart, and every day a hundred men more join them. What hand slew Ilyena Sunhair, Kinslayer? Not mine. Not mine. What hand struck down every life that bore a drop of your blood, everyone who loved you, everyone you loved? Not mine, Kinslayer. Not mine. Remember, and know the price of opposing Shai’tan!”

Sudden sweat made tracks down Lews Therin’s face through the dust and dirt. He remembered, a cloudy memory like a dream of a dream, but he knew it true.

His howl beat at the walls, the howl of a man who had discovered his soul damned by his own hand, and he clawed at his face as if to tear away the sight of what he had done. Everywhere he looked his eyes found the dead. Torn they were, or broken or burned, or half-consumed by stone.

Everywhere lay lifeless faces he knew, faces he loved. Old servants and friends of his childhood, faithful companions through the long years of battle. And his children. His own sons and daughters, sprawled like broken dolls, play stilled forever. All slain by his hand. His children's faces accused him, blank eyes asking why, and his tears were no answer. The Betrayer's laughter flogged him, drowned out his howls. He could not bear the faces, the pain. He could not bear to remain any longer. Desperately he reached out to the True Source, to tainted *saidin,* and he Traveled.

The land around him was flat and empty. A river flowed nearby, straight and broad, but he could sense there were no people within a hundred leagues. He was alone, as alone as a man could be while still alive, yet he could not escape memory. The eyes pursued him through the endless caverns of his mind. He could not hide from them. His children's eyes. Ilyena's eyes. Tears glistened on his cheeks as he turned his face to the sky.

"Light, forgive me!" He did not believe it could come, forgiveness. Not for what he had done. But he shouted to the sky anyway, begged for what he could not believe he could receive. "Light, forgive me!"

He was still touching *saidin,* the male half of the power that drove the universe, that turned the Wheel of Time, and he could feel the oily taint fouling its surface, the taint of the Shadow's counterstroke, the taint that doomed the world. Because of him. Because in his pride he had believed that men could match the Creator, could mend what the Creator had made and they had broken. In his pride he had believed.

He drew on the True Source deeply, and still more deeply, like a man dying of thirst. Quickly he had drawn more of the One Power than he could channel unaided; his skin felt as if it were aflame. Straining, he forced himself to draw more, tried to draw it all.

"Light, forgive me! Ilyena!"

The air turned to fire, the fire to light liquefied. The bolt that struck from the heavens would have seared and blinded any eye that glimpsed it, even for an instant. From the heavens it came, blazed through Lews Therin Telamon, bored into the bowels of the earth. Stone turned to vapor at its touch. The earth thrashed and quivered like a living thing in agony. Only a heartbeat did the shining bar exist, connecting ground and sky, but even after it vanished the earth yet heaved like the sea in a storm. Molten rock fountained five hundred feet into the air, and the groaning ground rose, thrusting the burning spray ever upward, ever higher. From north and south, from east and west, the wind howled in, snapping trees like twigs, shrieking and blowing as if to aid the growing mountain ever skyward. Ever skyward.

At last the wind died, the earth stilled to trembling mutters. Of Lewis Therin Telamon, no sign remained. Where he had stood a mountain now rose miles into the sky, molten lava still gushing from its broken peak. The broad, straight river had been pushed into a curve away from the mountain, and there it split to form a long island in its midst. The shadow of the mountain almost reached the island; it lay dark across the land like the ominous hand of prophecy. For a time the dull, protesting rumbles of the earth were the only sound.

On the island, the air shimmered and coalesced. The black-clad man stood staring at the fiery mountain rising out of the plain. His face twisted in rage and contempt. “You cannot escape so easily, Dragon. It is not done between us. It will not be done until the end of time.”

Then he was gone, and the mountain and the island stood alone. Waiting.

* * *

And the Shadow fell upon the Land, and the World was riven stone from stone. The oceans fled, and the mountains were swallowed up, and the nations were scattered to the eight corners of the World. The moon was as blood, and the sun was as ashes. The seas boiled, and the living envied the dead. All was shattered, and all but memory lost, and one memory above all others, of him who brought the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. And him they named Dragon.

(From *Aleth nin Taerin alta Camora,The Breaking of the World*.
Author unknown, the Fourth Age)

And it came to pass in those days, as it had come before and would come again, that the Dark lay heavy on the land and weighed down the hearts of men, and the green things failed, and hope died. And men cried out to the Creator, saying, O Light of the Heavens, Light of the World, let the Promised One be born of the mountain, according to the prophecies, as he was in ages past and will be in ages to come. Let the Prince of the Morning sing to the land that green things will grow and the valleys give forth lambs. Let the arm of the Lord of the Dawn shelter us from the Dark, and the great sword of justice defend us. Let the Dragon ride again on the winds of time.

(From *Charal Drianaan te Calamon*,*The Cycle of the Dragon.*
Author unknown, the Fourth Age)

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CHAPTER

1

An Empty Road

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the Mountains of Mist. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

Born below the ever cloud-capped peaks that gave the mountains their name, the wind blew east, out across the Sand Hills, once the shore of a great ocean, before the Breaking of the World. Down it flailed into the Two Rivers, into the tangled forest called the Westwood, and beat at two men walking with a cart and horse down the rock-strewn track called the Quarry Road. For all that spring should have come a good month since, the wind carried an icy chill as if it would rather bear snow.

Gusts plastered Rand al'Thor's cloak to his back, whipped the earth-colored wool around his legs, then streamed it out behind him. He wished his coat were heavier, or that he had worn an extra shirt. Half the time when he tried to tug the cloak back around him it caught on the quiver swinging at his hip. Trying to hold the cloak one-handed did not do much good anyway; he had his bow in the other, an arrow nocked and ready to draw.

As a particularly strong blast tugged the cloak out of his hand, he glanced at his father over the back of the shaggy brown mare. He felt a little foolish about wanting to reassure himself that Tam was still there, but it was that kind of day. The wind howled when it rose, but aside from that, quiet lay heavy on the land. The soft creak of the axle sounded loud by comparison. No birds sang in the forest, no squirrels chittered from a branch. Not that he expected them, really; not this spring.

Only trees that kept leaf or needle through the winter had any green about them. Snarls of last year's bramble spread brown webs over stone outcrops under the trees. Nettles numbered most among the few weeds; the rest were the sorts with sharp burrs or thorns, or stinkweed, which left a rank smell on the unwary boot that crushed it. Scattered white patches of snow still dotted the ground where tight clumps of trees kept deep shade. Where sunlight did reach, it held neither strength nor warmth. The pale sun sat above the trees to the east, but its light was crisply dark, as if mixed with shadow. It was an awkward morning, made for unpleasant thoughts.

Without thinking he touched the nock of the arrow; it was ready to draw to his cheek in one smooth movement, the way Tam had taught him. Winter had been bad enough on the farms, worse than even the oldest folk remembered, but it must have been harsher still in the mountains, if the number of wolves driven down into the Two Rivers was any guide. Wolves raided the sheep pens and chewed their way into barns to get the cattle and horses. Bears had been after the sheep, too, where a bear had not been seen in years. It was no longer safe to be out after dark. Men were the prey as often as sheep, and the sun did not always have to be down.

Tam was taking steady strides on the other side of Bela, using his spear as a walking staff, ignoring the wind that made his brown cloak flap like a banner. Now and again he touched the mare's flank lightly, to remind her to keep moving. With his thick chest and broad face, he was a pillar of reality in that morning, like a stone in the middle of a drifting dream. His sun-roughened cheeks might be lined and his hair have only a sprinkling of black among the gray, but there was a solidness to him, as though a flood could wash around him without uprooting his feet. He stumped down the road now impassively. Wolves and bears were all very well, his manner said, things that any man who kept sheep must be aware of, but they had best not try to stop Tam al'Thor getting to Emond's Field.

With a guilty start Rand returned to watching his side of the road, Tam's matter-of-factness reminding him of his task. He was a head taller than his father, taller than anyone else in the district, and had little of Tam in him physically, except perhaps for a breadth of shoulder. Gray eyes and the reddish tinge to his hair came from his mother, so Tam said. She had been an outlander, and Rand remembered little of her aside from a smiling face, though he did put flowers on her grave every year, at Bel Tine, in the spring, and at Sunday, in the summer.

Two small casks of Tam’s apple brandy rested in the lurching cart, and eight larger barrels of apple cider, only slightly hard after a winter’s curing. Tam delivered the same every year to the Winespring Inn for use during Bel Tine, and he had declared that it would take more than wolves or a cold wind to stop him this spring. Even so they had not been to the village for weeks. Not even Tam traveled much these days. But Tam had given his word about the brandy and cider, even if he had waited to make delivery until the day before Festival. Keeping his word was important to Tam. Rand was just glad to get away from the farm, almost as glad as about the coming of Bel Tine.

As Rand watched his side of the road, the feeling grew in him that he was being watched. For a while he tried to shrug it off. Nothing moved or made a sound among the trees, except the wind. But the feeling not only persisted, it grew stronger. The hairs on his arms stirred; his skin prickled as if it itched on the inside.

He shifted his bow irritably to rub at his arms, and told himself to stop letting fancies take him. There was nothing in the woods on his side of the road, and Tam would have spoken if there had been anything on the other. He glanced over his shoulder . . . and blinked. Not more than twenty spans back down the road a cloaked figure on horseback followed them, horse and rider alike black, dull and ungleaming.

It was more habit than anything else that kept him walking backward alongside the cart even while he looked.

The rider’s cloak covered him to his boot tops, the cowl tugged well forward so no part of him showed. Vaguely Rand thought there was something odd about the horseman, but it was the shadowed opening of the hood that fascinated him. He could see only the vaguest outlines of a face, but he had the feeling he was looking right into the rider’s eyes. And he could not look away. Queasiness settled in his stomach. There was only shadow to see in the hood, but he felt hatred as sharply as if he could see a snarling face, hatred for everything that lived. Hatred for him most of all, for him above all things.

Abruptly a stone caught his heel and he stumbled, breaking his eyes away from the dark horseman. His bow dropped to the road, and only an outthrust hand grabbing Bela’s harness saved him from falling flat on his back. With a startled snort the mare stopped, twisting her head to see what had caught her.

Tam frowned over Bela’s back at him. “Are you all right, lad?”

“A rider,” Rand said breathlessly, pulling himself upright. “A stranger, following us.”

“Where?” The older man lifted his broad-bladed spear and peered back warily.

“There, down the. . . .” Rand’s words trailed off as he turned to point. The road behind was empty. Disbelieving, he stared into the forest on both sides of the road. Bare-branched trees offered no hiding place, but there was not a glimmer of horse or horseman. He met his father’s questioning gaze. “He was there. A man in a black cloak, on a black horse.”

“I wouldn’t doubt your word, lad, but where has he gone?”

“I don’t know. But he was there.” He snatched up the fallen bow and arrow, hastily checked the fletching before renocking, and half drew before letting the bowstring relax. There was nothing to aim at. “He was.”

Tam shook his grizzled head. “If you say so, lad. Come on, then. A horse leaves hoofprints, even on this ground.” He started toward the rear of the cart, his cloak whipping in the wind. “If we find them, we’ll know for a fact he was there. If not . . . well, these are days to make a man think he’s seeing things.”

Abruptly Rand realized what had been odd about the horseman, aside from his being there at all. The wind that beat at Tam and him had not so much as shifted a fold of that black cloak. His mouth was suddenly dry. He must have imagined it. His father was right; this was a morning to prickle a man’s imagination. But he did not believe it. Only, how did he tell his father that the man who had apparently vanished into air wore a cloak the wind did not touch?

With a worried frown he peered into the woods around them; it looked different than it ever had before. Almost since he was old enough to walk, he had run loose in the forest. The ponds and streams of the Waterwood, beyond the last farms east of Emond’s Field, were where he had learned to swim. He had explored into the Sand Hills—which many in the Two Rivers said was bad luck—and once he had even gone to the very foot of the Mountains of Mist, him and his closest friends, Mat Cauthon and Perrin Aybara. That was a lot further afield than most people in Emond’s Field ever went; to them a journey to the next village, up to Watch Hill or down to Deven Ride, was a big event. Nowhere in all of that had he found a place that made him afraid. Today, though, the Westwood was not the place he remembered. A man who could disappear so suddenly could reappear just as suddenly, maybe even right beside them.

“No, father, there’s no need.” When Tam stopped in surprise, Rand covered his flush by tugging at the hood of his cloak. “You’re probably right. No point looking for what isn’t there, not when we can use the time getting on to the village and out of this wind.”

“I could do with a pipe,” Tam said slowly, “and a mug of ale where it’s warm.” Abruptly he gave a broad grin. “And I expect you’re eager to see Egwene.”

Rand managed a weak smile. Of all things he might want to think about right then, the Mayor’s daughter was far down the list. He did not need any more confusion. For the past year she had been making him increasingly jittery whenever they were together. Worse, she did not even seem to be aware of it. No, he certainly did not want to add Egwene to his thoughts.

He was hoping his father had not noticed he was afraid when Tam said, “Remember the flame, lad, and the void.”

It was an odd thing Tam had taught him. Concentrate on a single flame and feed all your passions into it—fear, hate, anger—until your mind became empty. Become one with the void, Tam said, and you could do anything. Nobody else in Emond’s Field talked that way. But Tam won the archery competition at Bel Tine every year with his flame and his void. Rand thought he might have a chance at placing this year himself, if he could manage to hold onto the void. For Tam to bring it up now meant he *had* noticed, but he said nothing more about it.

Tam clucked Bela into motion once more, and they resumed their journey, the older man striding along as if nothing untoward had happened and nothing untoward could. Rand wished he could imitate him. He tried forming the emptiness in his mind, but it kept slipping away into images of the black-cloaked horseman.

He wanted to believe that Tam was right, that the rider had just been his imagination, but he could remember that feeling of hatred too well. There *had* been someone. And that someone had meant him harm. He did not stop looking back until the high-peaked, thatched roofs of Emond’s Field surrounded him.

The village lay close onto the Westwood, the forest gradually thinning until the last few trees stood actually among the stout frame houses. The land sloped gently down to the east. Though not without patches of woods, farms and hedge-bordered fields and pastures quilted the land beyond the village all the way to the Waterwood and its tangle of streams and ponds. The land to the west was just as fertile, and the pastures there lush in most years, but only a handful of farms could be found in the Westwood. Even those few dwindled to none miles short of the Sand Hills, not to mention the Mountains of Mist, which rose above the Westwood treetops, distant but in plain sight from Emond's Field. Some said the land was too rocky, as if there were not rocks everywhere in the Two Rivers, and others said it was hard-luck land. A few muttered that there was no point getting any closer to the mountains than needs be. Whatever the reasons, only the hardiest men farmed in the Westwood.

Small children and dogs dodged around the cart in whooping swarms once it passed the first row of houses. Bela plodded on patiently, ignoring the yelling youngsters who tumbled under her nose, playing tag and rolling hoops. In the last months there had been little of play or laughter from the children; even when the weather had slackened enough to let children out, fear of wolves kept them in. It seemed the approach of Bel Tine had taught them how to play again.

Festival had affected the adults as well. Broad shutters were thrown back, and in almost every house the goodwife stood in a window, apron tied about her and long-braided hair done up in a kerchief, shaking sheets or hanging mattresses over the windowsills. Whether or not leaves had appeared on the trees, no woman would let Bel Tine come before her spring cleaning was done. In every yard rugs hung from stretched lines, and children who had not been quick enough to run free in the streets instead vented their frustration on the carpets with wicker beaters. On roof after roof the goodman of the house clambered about, checking the thatch to see if the winter's damage meant calling on old Cenn Buie, the thatcher.

Several times Tam paused to engage one man or another in brief conversation. Since he and Rand had not been off the farm for weeks, everyone wanted to catch up on how things were out that way. Few Westwood men had been in. Tam spoke of damage from winter storms, each one worse than the one before, and stillborn lambs, of brown fields where crops should be sprouting and pastures greening, of ravens flocking in where songbirds had come in years before. Grim talk, with preparations for Bel Tine going on all around them, and much shaking of heads. It was the same on all sides.

Most of the men rolled their shoulders and said, “Well, we’ll survive, the Light willing.” Some grinned and added, “And if the Light doesn’t will, we’ll still survive.”

That was the way of most Two Rivers people. People who had to watch the hail beat their crops or the wolves take their lambs, and start over, no matter how many years it happened, did not give up easily. Most of those who did were long since gone.

Tam would not have stopped for Wit Congar if the man had not come out into the street so they had to halt or let Bela run over him. The Congars—and the Coplins; the two families were so intermarried no one really knew where one family let off and the other began—were known from Watch Hill to Deven Ride, and maybe as far as Taren Ferry, as complainers and troublemakers.

“I have to get this to Bran al’Vere, Wit,” Tam said, nodding to the barrels in the cart, but the scrawny man held his ground with a sour expression on his face. He had been sprawled on his front steps, not up on his roof, though the thatch looked as if it badly needed Master Buie’s attention. He never seemed ready to start over, or to finish what he started the first time. Most of the Coplins and Congars were like that, those who were not worse.

“What are we going to do about Nynaeve, al’Thor?” Congar demanded. “We can’t have a Wisdom like that for Emond’s Field.”

Tam sighed heavily. “It’s not our place, Wit. The Wisdom is women’s business.”

“Well, we’d better do something, al’Thor. She said we’d have a mild winter. And a good harvest. Now you ask her what she hears on the wind, and she just scowls at you and stomps off.”

“If you asked her the way you usually do, Wit,” Tam said patiently, “you’re lucky she didn’t thump you with that stick she carries. Now if you don’t mind, this brandy—”

“Nynaeve al’Meara is just too young to be Wisdom, al’Thor. If the Women’s Circle won’t do something, then the Village Council has to.”

“What business of yours is the Wisdom, Wit Congar?” roared a woman’s voice. Wit flinched as his wife marched out of the house. Daise Congar was twice as wide as Wit, a hard-faced woman without an ounce of fat on her. She glared at him with her fists on her hips. “You try meddling in Women’s Circle business, and see how you like eating your own cooking. Which you won’t do in my kitchen. And washing your own clothes and making your own bed. Which won’t be under my roof.”

“But, Daise,” Wit whined, “I was just. . . .”

“If you’ll pardon me, Daise,” Tam said. “Wit. The Light shine on you both.” He got Bela moving again, leading her around the scrawny fellow. Daise was concentrating on her husband now, but any minute she could realize whom it was Wit had been talking to.

That was why they had not accepted any of the invitations to stop for a bite to eat or something hot to drink. When they saw Tam, the goodwives of Emond’s Field went on point like hounds spotting a rabbit. There was not a one of them who did not know just the perfect wife for a widower with a good farm, even if it was in the Westwood.

Rand stepped along just as quickly as Tam, perhaps even more so. He was sometimes cornered when Tam was not around, with no way to escape outside of rudeness. Herded onto a stool by the kitchen fire, he would be fed pastries or honeycakes or meatpies. And always the goodwife’s eyes weighed and measured him as neatly as any merchant’s scales and tapes while she told him that what he was eating was not nearly so good as her widowed sister’s cooking, or her next-to-eldest cousin’s. Tam was certainly not getting any younger, she would say. It was good that he had loved his wife so—it boded well for the next woman in his life—but he had mourned long enough. Tam needed a good woman. It was a simple fact, she would say, or something very close, that a man just could not do without a woman to take care of him and keep him out of trouble. Worst of all were those who paused thoughtfully at about that point, then asked with elaborate casualness exactly how old *he* was now.

Like most Two Rivers folk, Rand had a strong stubborn streak. Outsiders sometimes said it was the prime trait of people in the Two Rivers, that they could give mules lessons and teach stones. The goodwives were fine and kindly women for the most part, but he hated being pushed into anything, and they made him feel as if he were being prodded with sticks. So he walked fast, and wished Tam would hurry Bela along.

Soon the street opened onto the Green, a broad expanse in the middle of the village. Usually covered with thick grass, the Green this spring showed only a few fresh patches among the yellowish brown of dead grass and the black of bare earth. A double handful of geese waddled about, beadily eyeing the ground but not finding anything worth pecking, and someone had tethered a milkcow to crop the sparse growth.

Toward the west end of the Green, the Winespring itself gushed out of a low stone outcrop in a flow that never failed, a flow strong enough to knock a man down and sweet enough to justify its name a dozen times over. From the spring the rapidly widening Winespring Water ran swiftly off to the east, willows dotting its banks all the way to Master Thane's mill and beyond, until it split into dozens of streams in the swampy depths of the Waterwood. Two low, railed footbridges crossed the clear stream at the Green, and one bridge wider than the others and stout enough to bear wagons. The Wagon Bridge marked where the North Road, coming down from Taren Ferry and Watch Hill, became the Old Road, leading to Deven Ride. Outsiders sometimes found it funny that the road had one name to the north and another to the south, but that was the way it had always been, as far as anyone in Emond's Field knew, and that was that. It was a good enough reason for Two Rivers people.

On the far side of the bridges, the mounds were already building for the Bel Tine fires, three careful stacks of logs almost as big as houses. They had to be on cleared dirt, of course, not on the Green, even sparse as it was. What of Festival did not take place around the fires would happen on the Green.

Near the Winespring a score of older women sang softly as they erected the Spring Pole. Shorn of its branches, the straight, slender trunk of a fir tree stood ten feet high even in the hole they had dug for it. A knot of girls too young to wear their hair braided sat cross-legged and watched enviously, occasionally singing snatches of the song the women sang.

Tam clucked at Bela as if to make her speed her pace, though she ignored it, and Rand studiously kept his eyes from what the women were doing. In the morning the men would pretend to be surprised to find the Pole, then at noon the unmarried women would dance the Pole, entwining it with long, colored ribbons while the unmarried men sang. No one knew when the custom began or why—it was another thing that was the way it had always been—but it was an excuse to sing and dance, and nobody in the Two Rivers needed much excuse for that.

The whole day of Bel Tine would be taken up with singing and dancing and feasting, with time out for footraces, and contests in almost everything. Prizes would be given not only in archery, but for the best with the sling, and the quarterstaff. There would be contests at solving riddles and puzzles, at the rope tug, and lifting and tossing weights, prizes for the best singer, the best dancer and the best fiddle player, for the quickest to shear a sheep, even the best at bowls, and at darts.

Bel Tine was supposed to come when spring had well and truly arrived, the first lambs born and the first crop up. Even with the cold hanging on, though, no one had any idea of putting it off. Everyone could use a little singing and dancing. And to top everything, if the rumors could be believed, a grand display of fireworks was planned for the Green—if the first peddler of the year appeared in time, of course. That had been causing considerable talk; it was ten years since the last such display, and that was still talked about.

The Winespring Inn stood at the east end of the Green, hard beside the Wagon Bridge. The first floor of the inn was river rock, though the foundation was of older stone some said came from the mountains. The whitewashed second story—where Brandelwyn al’Vere, the innkeeper and Mayor of Emond’s Field for the past twenty years, lived in the back with his wife and daughters—jutted out over the lower floor all the way around. Red roof tile, the only such roof in the village, glittered in the weak sunlight, and smoke drifted from three of the inn’s dozen tall chimneys.

At the south end of the inn, away from the stream, stretched the remains of a much larger stone foundation, once part of the inn—or so it was said. A huge oak grew in the middle of it now, with a bole thirty paces around and spreading branches as thick as a man. In the summer, Bran al’Vere set tables and benches under those branches, shady with leaves then, where people could enjoy a cup and a cooling breeze while they talked or perhaps set out a board for a game of stones.

“Here we are, lad.” Tam reached for Bela’s harness, but she stopped in front of the inn before his hand touched leather. “Knows the way better than I do,” he chuckled.

As the last creak of the axle faded, Bran al’Vere appeared from the inn, seeming as always to step too lightly for a man of his girth, nearly double that of anyone else in the village. A smile split his round face, which was topped by a sparse fringe of gray hair. The innkeeper was in his shirtsleeves despite the chill, with a spotless white apron wrapped around him. A silver medallion in the form of a set of balance scales hung on his chest.

The medallion, along with the full-size set of scales used to weigh the coins of the merchants who came down from Baerlon for wool or tabac, was the symbol of the Mayor's office. Bran only wore it for dealing with the merchants and for festival feastdays, and weddings. He had it on a day early now, but that night was Winternight, the night before Bel Tine, when every one would visit back and forth almost the whole night long exchanging small gifts, having a bite to eat and a touch to drink at every house. *After the winter,* Rand thought, *he probably considers Winternight excuse enough not to wait until tomorrow*.

"Tam," the Mayor shouted as he hurried toward them. "The Light shine on me, it's good to see you at last. And you, Rand. How are you, my boy?"

"Fine, Master al'Vere," Rand said. "And you, sir?" But Bran's attention was already back on Tam.

"I was almost beginning to think you wouldn't be bringing your brandy this year. You've never waited so late before."

"I've no liking for leaving the farm these days, Bran," Tam replied. "Not with the wolves the way they are. And the weather."

Bran harrumphed. "I could wish somebody wanted to talk about something besides the weather. Everyone complains about it, and folk who should know better expect me to set it right. I've just spent twenty minutes explaining to Mistress al'Donel that I can do nothing about the storks. Though what she expected me to do. . . ." He shook his head.

"An ill omen," a scratchy voice announced, "no storks nesting on the rooftops at Bel Tine." Cenn Buie, as gnarled and dark as an old root, marched up to Tam and Bran and leaned on his walking staff, near as tall as he was and just as gnarled. He tried to fix both men at once with a beady eye. "There's worse to come, you mark my words."

"Have you become a soothsayer, then, interpreting omens?" Tam asked dryly. "Or do you listen to the wind, like a Wisdom? There's certainly enough of it. Some originating not far from here."

"Mock if you will," Cenn muttered, "but if it doesn't warm enough for crops to sprout soon, more than one root cellar will come up empty before there's a harvest. By next winter there may be nothing left alive in the Two Rivers but wolves and ravens. If it is next winter at all. Maybe it will still be this winter."

"Now what is that supposed to mean?" Bran said sharply.

Cenn gave them a sour look. “I’ve not much good to say about Nynaeve al’Meara. You know that. For one thing, she’s too young to—No matter. The Women’s Circle seems to object to the Village Council even talking about their business, though they interfere in ours whenever they want to, which is most of the time, or so it seems to—”

“Cenn,” Tam broke in, “is there a point to this?”

“This is the point, al’Thor. Ask the Wisdom when the winter will end, and she walks away. Maybe she doesn’t want to tell us what she hears on the wind. Maybe what she hears is that the winter won’t end. Maybe it’s just going to go on being winter until the Wheel turns and the Age ends. There’s your point.”

“Maybe sheep will fly,” Tam retorted, and Bran threw up his hands.

“The Light protect me from fools. You sitting on the Village Council, Cenn, and now you’re spreading that Coplin talk. Well, you listen to me. We have enough problems without. . . .”

A quick tug at Rand’s sleeve and a voice pitched low, for his ear alone, distracted him from the older men’s talk. “Come on, Rand, while they’re arguing. Before they put you to work.”

Rand glanced down, and had to grin. Mat Cauthon crouched beside the cart so Tam and Bran and Cenn could not see him, his wiry body contorted like a stork trying to bend itself double.

Mat’s brown eyes twinkled with mischief, as usual. “Dav and I caught a big old badger, all grouchy at being pulled out of his den. We’re going to let it loose on the Green and watch the girls run.”

Rand’s smile broadened; it did not sound as much like fun to him as it would have a year or two back, but Mat never seemed to grow up. He took a quick look at his father—the men had their heads together still, all three talking at once—then lowered his own voice. “I promised to unload the cider. I can meet you later, though.”

Mat rolled his eyes skyward. “Toting barrels! Burn me, I’d rather play stones with my baby sister. Well, I know of better things than a badger. We have strangers in the Two Rivers. Last evening—”

For an instant Rand stopped breathing. “A man on horseback?” he asked intently. “A man in a black cloak, on a black horse? And his cloak doesn’t move in the wind?”

Mat swallowed his grin, and his voice dropped to an even hoarser whisper. “You saw him, too? I thought I was the only one. Don’t laugh, Rand, but he scared me."

"I'm not laughing. He scared me, too. I could swear he hated me, that he wanted to kill me." Rand shivered. Until that day he had never thought of anyone wanting to kill him, really wanting to kill him. That sort of thing just did not happen in the Two Rivers. A fistfight, maybe, or a wrestling match, but not killing.

"I don't know about hating, Rand, but he was scary enough anyway. All he did was sit on his horse looking at me, just outside the village, but I've never been so frightened in my life. Well, I looked away, just for a moment—it wasn't easy, mind you—then when I looked back he'd vanished. Blood and ashes! Three days, it's been, and I can hardly stop thinking about him. I keep looking over my shoulder." Mat attempted a laugh that came out as a croak. "Funny how being scared takes you. You think strange things. I actually thought—just for a minute, mind—it might be the Dark One." He tried another laugh, but no sound at all came out this time.

Rand took a deep breath. As much to remind himself as for any other reason, he said by rote, "The Dark One and all of the Forsaken are bound in Shayol Ghul, beyond the Great Blight, bound by the Creator at the moment of Creation, bound until the end of time. The hand of the Creator shelters the world, and the Light shines on us all." He drew another breath and went on. "Besides, if he was free, what would the Shepherd of the Night be doing in the Two Rivers watching farmboys?"

"I don't know. But I do know that rider was . . . evil. Don't laugh. I'll take oath on it. Maybe it was the Dragon."

"You're just full of cheerful thoughts, aren't you?" Rand muttered. "You sound worse than Cenn."

"My mother always said the Forsaken would come for me if I didn't mend my ways. If I ever saw anybody who looked like Ishamael, or Aginor, it was him."

"Everybody's mother scared them with the Forsaken," Rand said dryly, "but most grow out of it. Why not the Shadowman, while you're about it?"

Mat glared at him. "I haven't been so scared since. . . . No, I've never been that scared, and I don't mind admitting it."

"Me, either. My father thinks I was jumping at shadows under the trees."

Mat nodded glumly and leaned back against the cart wheel. “So does my da. I told Dav, and Elam Dowtry. They’ve been watching like hawks ever since, but they haven’t seen anything. Now Elam thinks I was trying to trick him. Dav thinks he’s down from Taren Ferry—a sheepstealer, or a chickenthief. A chickenthief!” He lapsed into affronted silence.

“It’s probably all foolishness anyway,” Rand said finally. “Maybe he is just a sheepstealer.” He tried to picture it, but it was like picturing a wolf taking the cat’s place in front of a mouse hole.

“Well, I didn’t like the way he looked at me. And neither did you, not if how you jumped at me is any guide. We ought to tell someone.”

“We already have, Mat, both of us, and we weren’t believed. Can you imagine trying to convince Master al’Vere about this fellow, without him seeing him? He’d send us off to Nynaeve to see if we were sick.”

“There are two of us, now. Nobody could believe we both imagined it.”

Rand rubbed the top of his head briskly, wondering what to say. Mat was something of a byword around the village. Few people had escaped his pranks. Now his name came up whenever a washline dropped the laundry in the dirt or a loose saddle girth deposited a farmer in the road. Mat did not even have to be anywhere around. His support might be worse than none.

After a moment Rand said, “Your father would believe you put me up to it, and mine. . . .” He looked over the cart to where Tam and Bran and Cenn had been talking, and found himself staring his father in the eyes. The Mayor was still lecturing Cenn, who took it now in sullen silence.

“Good morning, Matrim,” Tam said brightly, hefting one of the brandy casks up onto the side of the cart. “I see you’ve come to help Rand unload the cider. Good lad.”

Mat leaped to his feet at the first word and began backing away. “Good morning to you, Master al’Thor. And to you, Master al’Vere. Master Buie. May the Light shine on you. My da sent me to—”

“No doubt he did,” Tam said. “And no doubt, since you are a lad who does his chores right off, you’ve finished the task already. Well, the quicker you lads get the cider into Master al’Vere’s cellar, the quicker you can see the gleeman.”

“Gleeman!” Mat exclaimed, stopping dead in his footsteps, at the same instant that Rand asked, “When will he get here?”

Rand could remember only two gleemen coming into the Two Rivers in his whole life, and for one of those he had been young enough to sit on Tam's shoulders to watch. To have one there actually during Bel Tine, with his harp and his flute and his stories and all. . . . Emond's Field would still be talking about this Festival ten years off, even if there were not any fireworks.

"Foolishness," Cenn grumbled, but fell silent at a look from Bran that had all the weight of the Mayor's office in it.

Tam leaned against the side of the cart, using the brandy cask as a prop for his arm. "Yes, a gleeman, and already here. According to Master al'Vere, he's in a room in the inn right now."

"Arrived in the dead of night, he did." The innkeeper shook his head in disapproval. "Pounded on the front door till he woke the whole family. If not for Festival, I'd have told him to stable his own horse and sleep in the stall with it, gleeman or not. Imagine coming in the dark like that."

Rand stared wonderingly. No one traveled beyond the village by night, not these days, certainly not alone. The thatcher grumbled under his breath again, too low this time for Rand to understand more than a word or two. "Madman" and "unnatural."

"He doesn't wear a black cloak, does he?" Mat asked suddenly.

Bran's belly shook with his chuckle. "Black! His cloak is like every gleeman's cloak I've ever seen. More patches than cloak, and more colors than you can think of."

Rand startled himself by laughing out loud, a laugh of pure relief. The menacing black-clad rider as a gleeman was a ridiculous notion, but. . . . He clapped a hand over his mouth in embarrassment.

"You see, Tam," Bran said. "There's been little enough laughter in this village since winter came. Now even the gleeman's cloak brings a laugh. That alone is worth the expense of bringing him down from Baerlon."

"Say what you will," Cenn spoke up suddenly. "I still say it's a foolish waste of money. And those fireworks you all insisted on sending off for."

"So there are fireworks," Mat said, but Cenn went right on.

"They should have been here a month ago with the first peddler of the year, but there hasn't been a peddler, has there? If he doesn't come by tomorrow, what are we going to do with them? Hold another Festival just to set them off? That's if he even brings them, of course."

"Cenn"—Tam sighed—"you've as much trust as a Taren Ferry man."

“Where is he, then? Tell me that, al’Thor.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Mat demanded in an aggrieved voice. “The whole village would have had as much fun with the waiting as with the gleeman. Or almost, anyway. You can see how everybody’s been over just a rumor of fireworks.”

“I can see,” Bran replied with a sidelong look at the thatcher. “And if I knew for sure how that rumor started . . . if I thought, for instance, that somebody had been complaining about how much things cost where people could hear him when the things are supposed to be secret. . . .”

Cenn cleared his throat. “My bones are too old for this wind. If you don’t mind, I’ll just see if Mistress al’Vere won’t fix me some mulled wine to take the chill off. Mayor. Al’Thor.” He was headed for the inn before he finished, and as the door swung shut behind him, Bran sighed.

“Sometimes I think Nynaeve is right about. . . . Well, that’s not important now. You young fellows think for a minute. Everyone’s excited about the fireworks, true, and that’s only at a rumor. Think how they’ll be if the peddler doesn’t get here in time, after all their anticipating. And with the weather the way it is, who knows when he will come. They’d be fifty times as excited about a gleeman.”

“And feel fifty times as bad if he hadn’t come,” Rand said slowly. “Even Bel Tine might not do much for people’s spirits after that.”

“You have a head on your shoulders when you choose to use it,” Bran said. “He’ll follow you on the Village Council one day, Tam. Mark my words. He couldn’t do much worse right now than someone I could name.”

“None of this is unloading the cart,” Tam said briskly, handing the first cask of brandy to the Mayor. “I want a warm fire, my pipe, and a mug of your good ale.” He hoisted the second brandy cask onto his shoulder. “I’m sure Rand will thank you for your help, Matrim. Remember, the sooner the cider is in the cellar. . . .”

As Tam and Bran disappeared into the inn, Rand looked at his friend. “You don’t have to help. Dav won’t keep that badger long.”

“Oh, why not?” Mat said resignedly. “Like your da said, the quicker it’s in the cellar. . . .” Picking up one of the casks of cider in both arms, he hurried toward the inn in a half trot. “Maybe Egwene is around. Watching you stare at her like a poleaxed ox will be as good as a badger any day.”

Rand paused in the act of putting his bow and quiver in the back of the cart. He really had managed to put Egwene out of his mind. That was unusual in itself. But she would likely be around the inn somewhere. There was not much chance he could avoid her. Of course, it had been weeks since he saw her last.

“Well?” Mat called from the front of the inn. “I didn’t say I would do it by myself. You aren’t on the Village Council yet.”

With a start, Rand took up a cask and followed. Perhaps she would not be there after all. Oddly, that possibility did not make him feel any better.

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CHAPTER

2

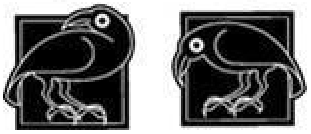

Strangers

When Rand and Mat carried the first barrels through the common room, Master al'Vere was already filling a pair of mugs with his best brown ale, his own make, from one of the casks racked against one wall. Scratch, the inn's yellow cat, crouched atop it with his eyes closed and his tail wrapped around his feet. Tam stood in front of the big fireplace of river rock, thumbing a long-stemmed pipe full of tabac from a polished canister the innkeeper always kept on the plain stone mantel. The fireplace stretched half the length of the big, square room, with a lintel as high as a man's shoulder, and the crackling blaze on the hearth vanquished the chill outside.

At that time of the busy day before Festival, Rand expected to find the common room empty except for Bran and his father and the cat, but four more members of the Village Council, including Cenn, sat in high-backed chairs in front of the fire, mugs in hand and blue-gray pipesmoke wreathing their heads. For once none of the stones boards were in use, and all of Bran's books stood idle on the shelf opposite the fireplace. The men did not even talk, peering silently into their ale or tapping pipestems against their teeth in impatience, as they waited for Tam and Bran to join them.

Worry was not uncommon for the Village Council these days, not in Emond's Field, and likely not in Watch Hill, or Deven Ride. Or even Taren Ferry, though who knew what Taren Ferry folk really thought about anything?

Only two of the men before the fire, Haral Luhhan, the blacksmith, and Jon Thane, the miller, so much as glanced at the boys as they entered. Master Luhhan, though, made it more than a glance. The blacksmith's arms were as big as most men's legs, roped with heavy muscle, and he still wore his long leather apron as if he had hurried to the meeting straight from the forge. His frown took them both in, then he straightened around in his chair deliberately, turning his attention back to an over-studious tamping of his pipe with a thick thumb.

Curious, Rand slowed, then barely bit back a yelp as Mat kicked his ankle. His friend nodded insistently toward the doorway at the back of the common room and hurried on without waiting. Limping slightly, Rand followed less quickly.

“What was that about?” he demanded as soon as he was in the hall that led to the kitchen. “You almost broke my—”

“It’s old Luhhan,” Mat said, peering past Rand’s shoulder into the common room. “I think he suspects I was the one who—” He cut off abruptly as Mistress al’Vere bustled out of the kitchen, the aroma of fresh-baked bread wafting ahead of her.

The tray in her hands carried some of the crusty loaves for which she was famous around Emond’s Field, as well as plates of pickles and cheese. The food reminded Rand abruptly that he had eaten only an end of bread before leaving the farm that morning. His stomach gave an embarrassing rumble.

A slender woman, with her thick braid of graying hair pulled over one shoulder, Mistress al’Vere smiled in a motherly fashion that took in both of them. “There is more of this in the kitchen, if you two are hungry, and I never knew boys your age who weren’t. Or any other age, for that matter. If you prefer, I’m baking honeycakes this morning.”

She was one of the few married women in the area who never tried to play matchmaker with Tam. Toward Rand her motherliness extended to warm smiles and a quick snack whenever he came by the inn, but she did as much for every young man in the area. If she occasionally looked at him as if she wanted to do more, at least she took it no further than looks, for which he was deeply grateful.

Without waiting for a reply she swept on into the common room. Immediately there was the sound of chairs scraping on the floor as the men got to their feet, and exclaimings over the smell of the bread. She was easily the best cook in Emond’s Field, and not a man for miles around but eagerly leaped at a chance to put his feet under her table.

“Honeycakes,” Mat said, smacking his lips.

“After,” Rand told him firmly, “or we’ll never get done.”

A lamp hung over the cellar stairs, just beside the kitchen door, and another made a bright pool in the stone-walled room beneath the inn, banishing all but a little dimness in the furthest corners. Wooden racks along the walls and across the floor held casks of brandy and cider, and larger barrels of ale and wine, some with taps driven in. Many of the wine barrels were marked with chalk in Bran al'Vere's hand, giving the year they had been bought, what peddler had brought them, and in which city they had been made, but all of the ale and brandy was the make of Two Rivers farmers or of Bran himself. Peddlers, and even merchants, sometimes brought brandy or ale from outside, but it was never as good and cost the earth, besides, and nobody ever drank it more than once.

"Now," Rand said, as they set their casks in the racks, "what did you do that you have to avoid Master Luhhan?"

Mat shrugged. "Nothing, really. I told Adan al'Caar and some of his snot-nosed friends—Ewin Finngar and Dag Coplin—that some farmers had seen ghost hounds, breathing fire and running through the woods. They ate it up like clotted cream."

"And Master Luhhan is mad at you for that?" Rand said doubtfully.

"Not exactly." Mat paused, then shook his head. "You see, I covered two of his dogs with flour, so they were all white. Then I let them loose near Dag's house. How was I to know they'd run straight home? It really isn't my fault. If Mistress Luhhan hadn't left the door open they couldn't have gotten inside. It isn't like I intended to get flour all over her house." He gave a bark of laughter. "I hear she chased old Luhhan and the dogs, all three, out of the house with a broom."

Rand winced and laughed at the same time. "If I were you, I'd worry more about Alsbet Luhhan than about the blacksmith. She's almost as strong, and her temper is a lot worse. No matter, though. If you walk fast, maybe he won't notice you." Mat's expression said he did not think Rand was funny.

When they went back through the common room, though, there was no need for Mat to hurry. The six men had their chairs in a tight knot before the fireplace. With his back to the fire, Tam was speaking in a low voice, and the others were leaning forward to listen, so intent on his words they would likely not have noticed if a flock of sheep had been driven through. Rand wanted to move closer, to hear what they were talking about, but Mat plucked at his sleeve and gave him an agonized look. With a sigh he followed Mat out to the cart.

On their return to the hallway they found a tray by the top of the steps, and hot honeycakes filling the hall with their sweet aroma. There were two mugs, as well, and a pitcher of steaming mulled cider. Despite his own admonition about waiting until later Rand found himself making the last two trips between cart and cellar while trying to juggle a cask and a piping honeycake.

Setting his final cask in the racks, he wiped crumbs from his mouth while Mat was unburdening himself, then said, “Now for the glee—”

Feet clattered on the stairs, and Ewin Finngar half fell into the cellar in his haste, his pudgy face shining with eagerness to impart his news. “There are strangers in the village.” He caught his breath and gave Mat a wry look. “I haven’t seen any ghost hounds, but I hear somebody floured Master Luhhan’s dogs. I hear Mistress Luhhan has ideas who to look for, too.”

The years separating Rand and Mat from Ewin, only fourteen, were usually more than enough for them to give short shrift to anything he had to say. This time they exchanged one startled glance, then both were talking at once.

“In the village?” Rand asked. “Not in the woods?”

Right on top of him Mat added, “Was his cloak black? Could you see his face?”

Ewin looked uncertainly from one of them to the other, then spoke quickly when Mat took a threatening step. “Of course I could see his face. And his cloak is green. Or maybe gray. It changes. It seems to fade into wherever he’s standing. Sometimes you don’t see him even when you look right at him, not unless he moves. And hers is blue, like the sky, and ten times fancier than any feastday clothes I ever saw. She’s ten times prettier than anybody I ever saw, too. She’s a high-born lady, like in the stories. She must be.”

“Her?” Rand said. “Who are you talking about?” He stared at Mat, who had put both hands on top of his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

“They’re the ones I meant to tell you about,” Mat muttered, “before you got me off onto—” He cut off, opening his eyes for a sharp glance at Ewin. “They arrived last evening,” Mat went on after a moment, “and took rooms here at the inn. I saw them ride in. Their horses, Rand. I never saw horses so tall, or so sleek. They look like they could run forever. I think he works for her.”

“In service,” Ewin broke in. “They call it being in service, in the stories.”

Mat continued as if Ewin had not spoken. “Anyway, he defers to her, does what she says. Only he isn’t like a hired man. A soldier, maybe. The way he wears his sword, it’s part of him, like his hand or his foot. He makes the merchants’ guards look like cur dogs. And her, Rand. I never even imagined anyone like her. She’s out of a gleeman’s story. She’s like . . . like. . . .” He paused to give Ewin a sour look. “. . . Like a high-born lady,” he finished with a sigh.

“But who are they?” Rand asked. Except for merchants, once a year to buy tabac and wool, and the peddlers, outsiders never came into the Two Rivers, or as good as never. Maybe at Taren Ferry, but not this far south. Most of the merchants and peddlers had been coming for years, too, so they did not really count as strangers. Just outsiders. It was a good five years since the last time a real stranger appeared in Emond’s Field, and he had been trying to hide from some sort of trouble up in Baerlon that nobody in the village understood. He had not stayed long. “What do they want?”

“What do they want?” Mat exclaimed. “I don’t care what they want. Strangers, Rand, and strangers like you never even dreamed of. Think of it!”

Rand opened his mouth, then closed it without speaking. The black-cloaked rider had him as nervous as a cat in a dog run. It just seemed like an awful coincidence, three strangers around the village at the same time. Three if this fellow’s cloak that changed colors never changed to black.

“Her name is Moiraine,” Ewin said into the momentary silence. “I heard him say it. Moiraine, he called her. The Lady Moiraine. His name is Lan. The Wisdom may not like her, but I do.”

“What makes you think Nynaeve dislikes her?” Rand said.

“She asked the Wisdom for directions this morning,” Ewin said, “and called her ‘child.’ ” Rand and Mat both whistled softly through their teeth, and Ewin tripped over his tongue in his haste to explain. “The Lady Moiraine didn’t know she was the Wisdom. She apologized when she found out. She did. And asked some questions about herbs, and about who is who around Emond’s Field, just as respectfully as any woman in the village—more so than some. She’s always asking questions, about how old people are, and how long they’ve lived where they live, and . . . oh, I don’t know what all. Anyway, Nynaeve answered like she’d bitten a green sweetberry.

Then, when the Lady Moiraine walked away, Nynaeve stared after her like, like . . . well, it wasn't friendly, I can tell you that."

"Is that all?" Rand said. "You know Nynaeve's temper. When Cenn Buie called her a child last year, she thumped him on the head with her stick, and he's on the Village Council, and old enough to be her grandfather, besides. She flares up at anything, and never stays angry past turning around."

"That's too long for me," Ewin muttered.

"I don't care who Nynaeve thumps"—Mat chortled—"so long as it isn't me. This is going to be the best Bel Tine ever. A gleeman, a lady—who could ask for more? Who needs fireworks?"

"A gleeman?" Ewin said, his voice rising sharply.

"Come on, Rand," Mat went on, ignoring the younger boy. "We're done here. You have to see this fellow."

He bounded up the stairs, with Ewin scrambling behind him calling, "Is there really a gleeman, Mat? This isn't like the ghost hounds, is it? Or the frogs?"

Rand paused long enough to turn down the lamp, then hurried after them.

In the common room Rowan Hum and Samel Crawe had joined the others in front of the fire, so that the entire Village Council was there. Bran al'Vere spoke now, his normally bluff voice pitched so low that only a rumbling murmur traveled beyond the close-gathered chairs. The Mayor emphasized his words by tapping a thick forefinger into the palm of his other hand, and eyed each man in turn. They all nodded in agreement with whatever he was saying, though Cenn more reluctantly than the rest.

The way the men all but huddled together spoke more plainly than a painted sign. Whatever they were talking about, it was for the Village Council alone, at least for now. They would not appreciate Rand trying to listen in. Reluctantly he pulled himself away. There was still the gleeman. And these strangers.

Outside, Bela and the cart were gone, taken away by Hu or Tad, the inn's stablemen. Mat and Ewin stood glaring at one another a few paces from the front door of the inn, their cloaks whipping in the wind.

"For the last time," Mat barked, "I am *not* playing a trick on you. There *is* a gleeman. Now go away. Rand, will you tell this woolhead I am telling the truth so he'll leave me alone?"

Pulling his cloak together, Rand stepped forward to support Mat, but words died as the hairs stirred on the back of his neck. He was being watched again. It was far from the feeling the hooded rider had given him, but neither was it pleasant, especially so soon after that encounter.

A quick look about the Green showed him only what he had seen before—children playing, people preparing for Festival, and no one more than glancing in his direction. The Spring Pole stood alone, now, waiting. Bustle and childish shouts filled the side streets. All was as it should be. Except that he was being watched.

Then something led him to turn around, to raise his eyes. On the edge of the inn's tile roof perched a large raven, swaying a little in the gusting wind from the mountains. Its head was cocked to one side, and one beady, black eye was focused . . . on him, he thought. He swallowed, and suddenly anger flickered in him, hot and sharp.

"Filthy carrion eater," he muttered.

"I am tired of being stared at," Mat growled, and Rand realized his friend had stepped up beside him and was frowning at the raven, too.

They exchanged a glance, then as one their hands darted for rocks.

The two stones flew true . . . and the raven stepped aside; the stones whistled through the space where it had been. Fluffing its wings once, it cocked its head again, fixing them with a dead black eye, unafraid, giving no sign that anything had happened.

Rand stared at the bird in consternation. "Did you ever see a raven do that?" he asked quietly.

Mat shook his head without looking away from the raven. "Never. Nor any other bird, either."

"A vile bird," came a woman's voice from behind them, melodious despite echoes of distaste, "to be mistrusted in the best of times."

With a shrill cry the raven launched itself into the air so violently that two black feathers drifted down from the roof's edge.

Startled, Rand and Mat twisted to follow the bird's swift flight, over the Green and toward the cloud-tipped Mountains of Mist, tall beyond the Westwood, until it dwindled to a speck in the west, then vanished from view.

Rand's gaze fell to the woman who had spoken. She, too, had been watching the flight of the raven, but now she turned back, and her eyes met his. He could only stare. This had to be the Lady Moiraine, and she was everything that Mat and Ewin had said, everything and more.

When he had heard she called Nynaeve child, he had pictured her as old, but she was not. At least, he could not put any age to her at all. At first he thought she was as young as Nynaeve, but the longer he looked the more he thought she was older than that. There was a maturity about her large, dark eyes, a hint of knowing that no one could have gotten young. For an instant he thought those eyes were deep pools about to swallow him up. It was plain why Mat and Ewin named her a lady from a gleeman's tale, too. She held herself with a grace and air of command that made him feel awkward and stumble-footed. She was barely tall enough to come up to his chest, but her presence was such that her height seemed the proper one, and he felt ungainly in his tallness.

Altogether she was like no one he had ever seen before. The wide hood of her cloak framed her face and dark hair, hanging in soft ringlets. He had never seen a grown woman with her hair unbraided; every girl in the Two Rivers waited eagerly for the Women's Circle of her village to say she was old enough to wear a braid. Her clothes were just as strange. Her cloak was sky-blue velvet, with thick silver embroidery, leaves and vines and flowers, all along the edges. Her dress gleamed faintly as she moved, a darker blue than the cloak, and slashed with cream. A necklace of heavy gold links hung around her neck, while another gold chain, delicate and fastened in her hair, supported a small, sparkling blue stone in the middle of her forehead. A wide belt of woven gold encircled her waist, and on the second finger of her left hand was a gold ring in the shape of a serpent biting its own tail. He had certainly never seen a ring like that, though he recognized the Great Serpent, an even older symbol for eternity than the Wheel of Time.

Fancier than any feastday clothes, Ewin had said, and he was right. No one ever dressed like that in the Two Rivers. Not ever.

"Good morning, Mistress . . . ah . . . Lady Moiraine," Rand said. His face grew hot at his tongue's fumbling.

"Good morning, Lady Moiraine," Mat echoed somewhat more smoothly, but only a little.

She smiled, and Rand found himself wondering if there was anything he might do for her, something that would give him an excuse to stay near her. He knew she was smiling at all of them, but it seemed meant for him alone. It really was just like seeing a gleeman's tale come to life. Mat had a foolish grin on his face.

"You know my name," she said, sounding delighted. As if her presence, however brief, would not be the talk of the village for a year! "But you must call me Moiraine, not lady. And what are your names?"

Ewin leaped forward before either of the others could speak. "My name is Ewin Finngar, my lady. I told them your name; that's how they know. I heard Lan say it, but I wasn't eavesdropping. No one like you has ever come to Emond's Field, before. There's a gleeman in the village for Bel Tine, too. And tonight is Winternight. Will you come to my house? My mother has apple cakes."

"I shall have to see," she replied, putting a hand on Ewin's shoulder. Her eyes twinkled with amusement, though she gave no other sign of it. "I do not know how well I could compete against a gleeman, Ewin. But you must all call me Moiraine." She looked expectantly at Rand and Mat.

"I'm Matrim Cauthon, La . . . ah . . . Moiraine," Mat said. He made a stiff, jerking bow, then went red in the face as he straightened.

Rand had been wondering if he should do something of the sort, the way men did in stories, but with Mat's example, he merely spoke his name. At least he did not stumble over his own tongue this time.

Moiraine looked from him to Mat and back again. Rand thought her smile, a bare curve of the corners of her mouth, was now the sort Egwene wore when she had a secret. "I may have some small tasks to be done from time to time while I am in Emond's Field," she said. "Perhaps you would be willing to assist me?" She laughed as their assents tumbled over one another. "Here," she said, and Rand was surprised when she pressed a coin into his palm, closing his hand tightly around it with both of hers.

"There's no need," he began, but she waved aside his protest as she gave Ewin a coin as well, then pressed Mat's hand around one the same way she had Rand's.

"Of course, there is," she said. "You cannot be expected to work for nothing. Consider this a token, and keep it with you, so you will remember that you have agreed to come to me when I ask it. There is a bond between us now."

"I'll never forget," Ewin piped up.

"Later we must talk," she said, "and you must tell me all about yourselves."

“Lady . . . I mean, Moiraine?” Rand asked hesitantly as she turned away. She stopped and looked back over her shoulder, and he had to swallow before going on. “Why have you come to Emond’s Field?” Her expression was unchanged, but suddenly he wished he had not asked, though he could not have said why. He rushed to explain himself, anyway. “I don’t mean to be rude. I’m sorry. It’s just that no one comes into the Two Rivers except the merchants, and peddlers when the snow isn’t too deep to get down from Baerlon. Almost no one. Certainly no one like you. The merchants’ guards sometimes say this is the back end of forever, and I suppose it must seem that way to anyone from outside. I just wondered.”

Her smile did fade then, slowly, as if something had been recalled to her. For a moment she merely looked at him. “I am a student of history,” she said at last, “a collector of old stories. This place you call the Two Rivers has always interested me. Sometimes I study the stories of what happened here long ago, here and at other places.”

“Stories?” Rand said. “What ever happened in the Two Rivers to interest someone like—I mean, what could have happened here?”

“And what else would you call it beside the Two Rivers?” Mat added. “That’s what it has always been called.”

“As the Wheel of Time turns,” Moiraine said, half to herself and with a distant look in her eyes, “places wear many names. Men wear many names, many faces. Different faces, but always the same man. Yet no one knows the Great Pattern the Wheel weaves, or even the Pattern of an Age. We can only watch, and study, and hope.”

Rand stared at her, unable to say a word, even to ask what she meant. He was not sure she had meant for them to hear. The other two were just as tongue-tied, he noticed. Ewin’s mouth hung open.

Moiraine focused on them again, and all three gave a little shake as if waking up. “Later we will talk,” she said. None of them said a word. “Later.” She moved on toward the Wagon Bridge, appearing to glide over the ground rather than walk, her cloak spreading on either side of her like wings.

As she left, a tall man Rand had not noticed before moved away from the front of the inn and followed her, one hand resting on the long hilt of a sword. His clothes were a dark grayish green that would have faded into leaf or shadow, and his cloak swirled through shades of gray and green and brown as it shifted in the wind. It almost seemed to disappear at times, that cloak, fading into whatever lay beyond it. His hair was long, and gray at the temples, held back from his face by a narrow leather headband. That face was made from stony planes and angles, weathered but unlined despite the gray in his hair. When he moved, Rand could think of nothing but a wolf.

In passing the three youths his gaze ran over them, eyes as cold and blue as a midwinter dawn. It was as if he were weighing them in his mind, and there was no sign on his face of what the scales told him. He quickened his pace until he caught up to Moiraine, then slowed to walk by her shoulder, bending to speak to her. Rand let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding.

"That was Lan," Ewin said throatily, as if he, too, had been holding his breath. It had been that kind of look. "I'll bet he's a Warder."

"Don't be a fool." Mat laughed, but it was a shaky laugh. "Warders are just in stories. Anyway, Warders have swords and armor covered in gold and jewels, and spend all their time up north, in the Great Blight, fighting evil and Trollocs and such."

"He *could* be a Warder," Ewin insisted.

"Did you see any gold or jewels on him?" Mat scoffed. "Do we have Trollocs in the Two Rivers? We have sheep. I wonder what could ever have happened here to interest someone like her."

"Something could have," Rand answered slowly. "They say the inn's been here for a thousand years, maybe more."

"A thousand years of sheep," Mat said.

"A silver penny!" Ewin burst out. "She gave me a whole silver penny! Think what I can buy when the peddler comes."

Rand opened his hand to look at the coin she had given him, and almost dropped it in surprise. He did not recognize the fat silver coin with the raised image of a woman balancing a single flame on her upturned hand, but he had watched while Bran al'Vere weighed out the coins merchants brought from a dozen lands, and he had an idea of its value. That much silver would buy a good horse anywhere in the Two Rivers, with some left over.

He looked at Mat and saw the same stunned expression he knew must be on his own face. Tilting his hand so Mat could see the coin but not Ewin, he raised a questioning eyebrow. Mat nodded, and for a minute they stared at one another in perplexed wonder.

"What kind of chores does she have?" Rand asked finally.

"I don't know," Mat said firmly, "and I don't care. I won't spend it, either. Even when the peddler comes." With that he thrust his coin into his coat pocket.

Nodding, Rand slowly did the same with his. He was not sure why, but somehow what Mat said seemed right. The coin should not be spent. Not when it came from her. He could not think of anything else silver was good for, but. . . .

"Do you think I should keep mine, too?" Anguished indecision painted Ewin's face.

"Not unless you want to," Mat said.

"I think she gave it to you to spend," Rand said.

Ewin looked at his coin, then shook his head and stuffed the silver penny into his pocket. "I'll keep it," he said mournfully.

"There's still the gleeman," Rand said, and the younger boy brightened.

"If he ever wakes up," Mat added.

"Rand," Ewin asked, "*is* there a gleeman?"

"You'll see," Rand answered with a laugh. It was clear Ewin would not believe until he set eyes on the gleeman. "He has to come down sooner or later."

Shouting drifted across the Wagon Bridge, and when Rand looked to see what was causing it, his laughter became wholehearted. A milling crowd of villagers, from gray-haired oldsters to toddlers barely able to walk, escorted a tall wagon toward the bridge, a huge wagon drawn by eight horses, the outside of its rounded canvas cover hung about with bundles like bunches of grapes. The peddler had come at last. Strangers and a gleeman, fireworks and a peddler. It was going to be the best Bel Tine ever.

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CHAPTER
3

The Peddler

Clusters of pots clattered and banged as the peddler’s wagon rumbled over the heavy timbers of the Wagon Bridge. Still surrounded by a cloud of villagers and farmers come for Festival, the peddler reined his horses to a stop in front of the inn. From every direction people streamed to swell the numbers around the great wagon, its wheels taller than any of the people with their eyes fastened to the peddler above them on the wagon seat.

The man on the wagon was Padan Fain, a pale, skinny fellow with gangly arms and a massive beak of a nose. Fain, always smiling and laughing as if he knew a joke that no one else knew, had driven his wagon and team into Emond’s Field every spring for as long as Rand could remember.

The door of the inn flew open even as the team halted in a jangle of harness, and the Village Council appeared, led by Master al’Vere and Tam. They marched out deliberately, even Cenn Buie, amid all the excited shouting of the others for pins or lace or books or a dozen other things. Reluctantly the crowd parted to let them to the fore, everyone closing in quickly behind and never stopping their calling to the peddler. Most of all, the villagers called for news.

In the eyes of the villagers, needles and tea and the like were no more than half the freight in a peddler’s wagon. Every bit as important was word of outside, news of the world beyond the Two Rivers. Some peddlers simply told what they knew, throwing it out in a heap, a pile of rubbish with which they could not be bothered. Others had to have every word dragged out of them, speaking grudgingly, with a bad grace. Fain, however, spoke freely if often teasingly, and spun out the telling, making a show to rival a gleeman. He enjoyed being the center of attention, strutting around like an under-sized rooster, with every eye on him. It occurred to Rand that Fain might not be best pleased to find a real gleeman in Emond's Field.

The peddler gave the Council and villagers alike exactly the same attention as he fussed with tying his reins off just so, which was to say hardly any attention at all. He nodded casually at no one in particular. He smiled without speaking, and waved absently to people with whom he was particularly friendly, though his friendliness had always been of a peculiarly distant kind, backslapping without ever getting close.

The demands for him to speak grew louder, but Fain waited, fiddling with small tasks about the driver's seat, for the crowd and the anticipation to reach the size he wanted. The Council alone kept silent. They maintained the dignity befitting their position, but increasing clouds of pipesmoke rising above their heads showed the effort of it.

Rand and Mat edged into the crowd, getting as close to the wagon as they could. Rand would have stopped halfway, but Mat wriggled through the press, pulling Rand behind him, until they were right behind the Council.

"I had been thinking you were going to stay out on the farm through the whole Festival," Perrin Aybara shouted at Rand over the clamor. Half a head shorter than Rand, the curly-haired blacksmith's apprentice was so stocky as to seem a man and a half wide, with arms and shoulders thick enough to rival those of Master Luhhan himself. He could easily have pushed through the throng, but that was not his way. He picked his path carefully, offering apologies to people who had only half a mind to notice anything but the peddler. He made the apologies anyway, and tried not to jostle anyone as he worked through the crowd to Rand and Mat. "Imagine it," he said when he finally reached them. "Bel Tine and a peddler, both together. I'll bet there really are fireworks."

"You don't know a quarter of it." Mat laughed.

Perrin eyed him suspiciously, then looked a question at Rand.

"It's true," Rand shouted, then gestured at the growing mass of people, all giving voice. "Later. I'll explain later. Later, I said!"

At that moment Padan Fain stood up on the wagon seat, and the crowd quieted in an instant. Rand's last words exploded into utter silence, catching the peddler with an arm raised dramatically and his mouth open. Everybody turned to stare at Rand. The bony little man on the wagon, prepared to have everyone hanging on his first words, gave Rand a sharp, searching look.

Rand’s face reddened, and he wished he were Ewin’s size so he did not stand out so clearly. His friends shifted uncomfortably, too. It had only been the year before that Fain had taken notice of them for the first time, acknowledging them as men. Fain did not usually have time for anyone too young to buy a good deal of things off his wagon. Rand hoped he had not been relegated to a child again in the peddler’s eyes.

With a loud harrumph, Fain tugged at his heavy cloak. “No, not later,” the peddler declaimed, once more throwing up a hand grandly. “I will be telling you now.” As he spoke he made broad gestures, casting his words over the crowd. “You are thinking you have had troubles in the Two Rivers, are you? Well, all the world has troubles, from the Great Blight south to the Sea of Storms, from the Aryth Ocean in the west to the Aiel Waste in the east. And even beyond. The winter was harsher than you’ve ever seen before, cold enough to jell your blood and crack your bones? Ahhh! Winter was cold and harsh everywhere. In the Borderlands they’d be calling your winter spring. But spring does not come, you say? Wolves have killed your sheep? Perhaps wolves have attacked men? Is that the way of it? Well, now. Spring is late everywhere. There are wolves everywhere, all hungry for any flesh they can sink a tooth into, be it sheep or cow or man. But there are things worse than wolves or winter. There are those who would be glad to have only your little troubles.” He paused expectantly.

“What could be worse than wolves killing sheep, and men?” Cenn Buie demanded. Others muttered in support.

“Men killing men.” The peddler’s reply, in portentous tones, brought shocked murmurs that increased as he went on. “It is war I mean. There is war in Ghealdan, war and madness. The snows of the Dhallin Forest are red with the blood of men. Ravens and the cries of ravens fill the air. Armies march to Ghealdan. Nations, great houses and great men, send their soldiers to fight.”

“War?” Master al’Vere’s mouth fit awkwardly around the unfamiliar word. No one in the Two Rivers had ever had anything to do with a war. “Why are they having a war?”

Fain grinned, and Rand had the feeling he was mocking the villagers’ isolation from the world, and their ignorance. The peddler leaned forward as if he were about to impart a secret to the Mayor, but his whisper was meant to carry and did. “The standard of the Dragon has been raised, and men flock to oppose. And to support.”

One long gasp left every throat together, and Rand shivered in spite of himself.

“The Dragon!” someone moaned. “The Dark One’s loose in Ghealdan!”

“Not the Dark One,” Haral Luhhan growled. “The Dragon’s not the Dark One. And this is a false Dragon, anyway.”

“Let’s hear what Master Fain has to say,” the Mayor said, but no one would be quieted that easily. People cried out from every side, men and women shouting over one another.

“Just as bad as the Dark One!”

“The Dragon broke the world, didn’t he?”

“He started it! He caused the Time of Madness!”

“You know the prophecies! When the Dragon is reborn, your worst nightmares will seem like your fondest dreams!”

“He’s just another false Dragon. He must be!”

“What difference does that make? You remember the last false Dragon. He started a war, too. Thousands died, isn’t that right, Fain? He laid siege to Illian.”

“It’s evil times! No one claiming to be the Dragon Reborn for twenty years, and now three in the last five years. Evil times! Look at the weather!”

Rand exchanged looks with Mat and Perrin. Mat’s eyes shone with excitement, but Perrin wore a worried frown. Rand could remember every tale he had heard about the men who named themselves the Dragon Reborn, and if they had all proven themselves false Dragons by dying or disappearing without fulfilling any of the prophecies, what they had done was bad enough. Whole nations torn by battle, and cities and towns put to the torch. The dead fell like autumn leaves, and refugees clogged the roads like sheep in a pen. So the peddlers said, and the merchants, and no one in the Two Rivers with any sense doubted it. The world would end, so some said, when the real Dragon was born again.

“Stop this!” the Mayor shouted. “Be quiet! Stop working yourselves to a lather out of your own imaginations. Let Master Fain tell us about this false Dragon.” The people began to quieten, but Cenn Buie refused to be silent.

“*Is* this a false Dragon?” the thatcher asked sourly.

Master al’Vere blinked as if taken by surprise, then snapped, “Don’t be an old fool, Cenn!” But Cenn had kindled the crowd again.

“He can’t be the Dragon Reborn! Light help us, he can’t be!”

“You old fool, Buie! You *want* bad luck, don’t you?”

“Be naming the Dark One, next! You’re taken by the Dragon, Cenn Buie! Trying to bring us all harm!”

Cenn looked around defiantly, trying to stare down the glowers, and raised his voice. “I didn’t hear Fain say this was a false Dragon. Did you? Use your eyes! Where are the crops that should be knee high or better? Why is it still winter when spring should be here a month?” There were angry shouts for Cenn to hold his tongue. “I will not be silent! I’ve no liking for this talk, either, but I won’t hide my head under a basket till a Taren Ferry man comes to cut my throat. And I won’t dangle on Fain’s pleasure, not this time. Speak it out plain, peddler. What have you heard? Eh? Is this man a false Dragon?”

If Fain was perturbed by the news he brought or the upset he had caused, he gave no sign of it. He merely shrugged and laid a skinny finger alongside his nose. “As to that, now, who can say until it is over and done?” He paused with one of his secretive grins, running his eyes over the crowd as if imagining how they would react and finding it funny. “I do know,” he said, too casually, “that he can wield the One Power. The others couldn’t. But he can channel. The ground opens beneath his enemies’ feet, and strong walls crumble at his shout. Lightning comes when he calls and strikes where he points. That I’ve heard, and from men I believe.”

A stunned silence fell. Rand looked at his friends. Perrin seemed to be seeing things he did not like, but Mat *still* looked excited.

Tam, his face only a little less composed than usual, drew the Mayor close, but before he could speak Ewin Finngar burst out.

“He’ll go mad and die! In the stories, men who channel the Power always go mad, and then waste away and die. Only women can touch it. Doesn’t he know that?” He ducked under a cuff from Master Buie.

“Enough of that from you, boy.” Cenn shook a gnarled fist in Ewin’s face. “Show a proper respect and leave this to your elders. Get away with you!”

“Hold steady, Cenn,” Tam growled. “The boy is just curious. There’s no need of this foolishness from you.”

“Act your age,” Bran added. “And for once remember you’re a member of the Council.”

Cenn’s wrinkled face grew darker with every word from Tam and the Mayor, until it was almost purple. “You know what kind of women he’s talking about. Stop frowning at me, Luhhan, and you, too, Crawe. This is a decent village of decent folk, and it’s bad enough to have Fain here talking about false Dragons using the Power without this Dragon-possessed fool of a boy bringing Aes Sedai into it. Some things just shouldn’t be talked about, and I don’t care if you will be letting that fool gleeman tell any kind of tale he wants. It isn’t right or decent.”

“I never saw or heard or smelled anything that couldn’t be talked about,” Tam said, but Fain was not finished.

“The Aes Sedai are already into it,” the peddler spoke up. “A party of them has ridden south from Tar Valon. Since he can wield the Power, none but Aes Sedai can defeat him, for all the battles they fight, or deal with him once he’s defeated. If he is defeated.”

Someone in the crowd moaned aloud, and even Tam and Bran exchanged uneasy frowns. Huddles of villagers clumped together, and some pulled their cloaks tighter around themselves, though the wind had actually lessened.

“Of course, he’ll be defeated,” someone shouted.

“They’re always beaten in the end, false Dragons.”

“He has to be defeated, doesn’t he?”

“What if he isn’t?”

Tam had finally managed to speak quietly into the Mayor’s ear, and Bran, nodding from time to time and ignoring the hubbub around them, waited until he was finished before raising his own voice.

“All of you listen. Be quiet and listen!” The shouting died to a murmur again. “This goes beyond mere news from outside. It must be discussed by the Village Council. Master Fain, if you will join us inside the inn, we have questions to ask.”

“A good mug of hot mulled wine would not go far amiss with me just now,” the peddler replied with a chuckle. He jumped down from the wagon, dusted his hands on his coat, and cheerfully righted his cloak. “Will you be looking after my horses, if you please?”

“I want to hear what he has to say!” More than one voice was raised in protest.

“You can’t take him off! My wife sent me to buy pins!” That was Wit Congar; he hunched his shoulders at the stares some of the others gave him, but he held his ground.

“We’ve a right to ask questions, too,” somebody back in the crowd shouted. “I—”

“Be silent!” the Mayor roared, producing a startled hush. “When the Council has asked its questions, Master Fain will be back to tell you all his news. And to sell you his pots and pins. Hu! Tad! Stable Master Fain’s horses.”

Tam and Bran moved in on either side of the peddler, the rest of the Council gathered behind them, and the whole cluster swept into the Winespring Inn, firmly shutting the door in the faces of those who tried to crowd inside after them. Pounding on the door brought only a single shout from the Mayor.

“Go home!”

People milled around in front of the inn muttering about what the peddler had said, and what it meant, and what questions the Council was asking, and why they should be allowed to listen and ask questions of their own. Some peered in through the front windows of the inn, and a few even questioned Hu and Tad, though it was far from clear what they were supposed to know. The two stolid stablemen just grunted in reply and went on methodically removing the team’s harness. One by one they led Fain’s horses away and, when the last was gone, did not return.

Rand ignored the crowd. He took a seat on the edge of the old stone foundation, gathered his cloak around him, and stared at the inn door. Ghealdan. Tar Valon. The very names were strange and exciting. They were places he knew only from peddlers’ news, and tales told by merchants’ guards. Aes Sedai and wars and false Dragons: those were the stuff of stories told late at night in front of the fireplace, with one candle making strange shapes on the wall and the wind howling against the shutters. On the whole, he believed he would rather have blizzards and wolves. Still, it must be different out there, beyond the Two Rivers, like living in the middle of a gleeman’s tale. An adventure. One long adventure. A whole lifetime of it.

Slowly the villagers dispersed, still muttering and shaking their heads. Wit Congar paused to stare into the now-abandoned wagon as though he might find another peddler hidden inside. Finally only a few of the younger folk were left. Mat and Perrin drifted over to where Rand sat.

"I don't see how the gleeman could beat this," Mat said excitedly. "I wonder if we might get to see this false Dragon?"

Perrin shook his shaggy head. "I don't want to see him. Somewhere else, maybe, but not in the Two Rivers. Not if it means war."

"Not if it means Aes Sedai here, either," Rand added. "Or have you forgotten who caused the Breaking? The Dragon may have started it, but it was Aes Sedai who actually broke the world."

"I heard a story once," Mat said slowly, "from a wool-buyer's guard. He said the Dragon would be reborn in mankind's greatest hour of need, and save us all."

"Well, he was a fool if he believed that," Perrin said firmly. "And you were a fool to listen." He did not sound angry; he was slow to anger. But he sometimes got exasperated with Mat's quicksilver fancies, and there was a touch of that in his voice. "I suppose he claimed we'd all live in a new Age of Legends afterwards, too."

"I didn't say I believed it," Mat protested. "I just heard it. Nynaeve did, too, and I thought she was going to skin me and the guard both. He said—the guard did—that a lot of people do believe, only they're afraid to say so, afraid of the Aes Sedai or the Children of the Light. He wouldn't say any more after Nynaeve lit into us. She told the merchant, and he said it was the guard's last trip with him."

"A good thing, too," Perrin said. "The Dragon going to save us? Sounds like Coplin talk to me."

"What kind of need would be great enough that we'd want the Dragon to save us from it?" Rand mused. "As well ask for help from the Dark One."

"He didn't say," Mat replied uncomfortably. "And he didn't mention any new Age of Legends. He said the world would be torn apart by the Dragon's coming."

"That would surely save us," Perrin said dryly. "Another Breaking."

"Burn me!" Mat growled. "I'm only telling you what the guard said."

Perrin shook his head. "I just hope the Aes Sedai and this Dragon, false or not, stay where they are. Maybe that way the Two Rivers will be spared."

"You think they're really Darkfriends?" Mat was frowning thoughtfully.

"Who?" Rand asked.

"Aes Sedai."

Rand glanced at Perrin, who shrugged. “The stories,” he began slowly, but Mat cut him off.

“Not all the stories say they serve the Dark One, Rand.”

“Light, Mat,” Rand said, “they caused the Breaking. What more do you want?”

“I suppose.” Mat sighed, but the next moment he was grinning again. “Old Bili Congar says they don’t exist. Aes Sedai. Darkfriends. Says they’re just stories. He says he doesn’t believe in the Dark One, either.”

Perrin snorted. “Coplin talk from a Congar. What else can you expect?”

“Old Bili named the Dark One. I’ll bet you didn’t know that.”

“Light!” Rand breathed.

Mat’s grin broadened. “It was last spring, just before the cutworm got into his fields and nobody else’s. Right before everybody in his house came down with yelloweye fever. I heard him do it. He still says he doesn’t believe, but whenever I ask him to name the Dark One now, he throws something at me.”

“You are just stupid enough to do that, aren’t you, Matrim Cauthon?” Nynaeve al’Meara stepped into their huddle, the dark braid pulled over her shoulder almost bristling with anger. Rand scrambled to his feet. Slender and barely taller than Mat’s shoulder, at the moment the Wisdom seemed taller than any of them, and it did not matter that she was young and pretty. “I suspected something of the sort about Bili Congar at the time, but I thought you at least had more sense than to try taunting him into such a thing. You may be old enough to be married, Matrim Cauthon, but in truth you shouldn’t be off your mother’s apron strings. The next thing, you’ll be naming the Dark One yourself.”

“No, Wisdom,” Mat protested, looking as if he would rather be anywhere else than there. “It was old Bil—I mean, Master Congar, not me! Blood and ashes, I—”

“Watch your tongue, Matrim!”

Rand stood up straighter, though her glare was not directed at him. Perrin looked equally abashed. Later one or another of them would almost certainly complain about being scolded by a woman not all that much older than themselves—someone always did after one of Nynaeve’s scoldings, if never in her hearing—but the gap in ages always seemed more than wide enough when face-to-face with her. Especially if she was angry. The stick in her hand was thick at one end and a slender switch at the other, and she was liable to give a flail to anybody she thought was acting the fool—head or hands or legs—no matter their age or position.

The Wisdom so held his attention that at first Rand failed to see she was not alone. When he realized his mistake, he began to think about leaving no matter what Nynaeve would say or do later.

Egwene stood a few paces behind the Wisdom, watching intently. Of a height with Nynaeve, and with the same dark coloring, she could at that moment have been a reflection of Nynaeve's mood, arms crossed beneath her breasts, mouth tight with disapproval. The hood of her soft gray cloak shaded her face, and her big brown eyes held no laughter now.

If there was any fairness, he thought that being two years older than her should give him some advantage, but that was not the way of it. At the best of times he was never very nimble with his tongue when talking to any of the village girls, not like Perrin, but whenever Egwene gave him that intent look, with her eyes as wide as they would go, as if every last ounce of her attention was on him, he just could not seem to make the words go where he wanted. Perhaps he could get away as soon as Nynaeve finished. But he knew he would not, even if he did not understand why.

"If you are done staring like a moonstruck lamb, Rand al'Thor," Nynaeve said, "perhaps you can tell me why you were talking about something even you three great bullcalves ought to have sense enough to keep out of your mouths."

Rand gave a start and pulled his eyes away from Egwene; she had grown a disconcerting smile when the Wisdom began speaking. Nynaeve's voice was tart, but she had the beginnings of a knowing smile on her face, too—until Mat laughed aloud. The Wisdom's smile vanished, and the look she gave Mat cut his laughter off in a strangled croak.

"Well, Rand?" Nynaeve said.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Egwene still smiling. *What does she think is so funny?* "It was natural enough to talk of it, Wisdom," he said hurriedly. "The peddler—Padan Fain . . . ah . . . Master Fain—brought news of a false Dragon in Ghealdan, and a war, and Aes Sedai. The Council thought it was important enough to talk to him. What else would we be talking about?"

Nynaeve shook her head. "So that's why the peddler's wagon stands abandoned. I heard people rushing to meet it, but I couldn't leave Mistress

Ayellin till her fever broke. The Council is questioning the peddler about what's happening in Ghealdan, are they? If I know them, they're asking all the wrong questions and none of the right ones. It will take the Women's Circle to find out anything useful." Settling her cloak firmly on her shoulders she disappeared into the inn.

Egwene did not follow the Wisdom. As the inn door closed behind Nynaeve, the younger woman came to stand in front of Rand. The frowns were gone from her face, but her unblinking stare made him uneasy. He looked to his friends, but they moved away, grinning broadly as they abandoned him.

"You shouldn't let Mat get you mixed up in his foolishness, Rand," Egwene said, as solemn as a Wisdom herself, then abruptly she giggled. "I haven't seen you look like that since Cenn Buie caught you and Mat up in his apple trees when you were ten."

He shifted his feet and glanced at his friends. They stood not far away, Mat gesturing excitedly as he talked.

"Will you dance with me tomorrow?" That was not what he had meant to say. He did want to dance with her, but at the same time he wanted nothing so little as the uncomfortable way he was sure to feel while he was with her. The way he felt right then.

The corners of her mouth quirked up in a small smile. "In the afternoon," she said. "I will be busy in the morning."

From the others came Perrin's exclamation. "A gleeman!"

Egwene turned toward them, but Rand put a hand on her arm. "Busy? How?"

Despite the chill she pushed back the hood of her cloak and with apparent casualness pulled her hair forward over her shoulder. The last time he had seen her, her hair had hung in dark waves below her shoulders, with only a red ribbon keeping it back from her face; now it was worked into a long braid.

He stared at that braid as if it were a viper, then stole a glance at the Spring Pole, standing alone on the Green now, ready for tomorrow. In the morning unmarried women of marriageable age would dance the Pole. He swallowed hard. Somehow, it had never occurred to him that she would reach marriageable age at the same time that he did.

"Just because someone is old enough to marry," he muttered, "doesn't mean they should. Not right away."

"Of course not. Or ever, for that matter."

Rand blinked. "Ever?"

"A Wisdom almost never marries. Nynaeve has been teaching me, you know. She says I have a talent, that I can learn to listen to the wind. Nynaeve says not all Wisdoms can, even if they say they do."

"Wisdom!" he hooted. He failed to notice the dangerous glint in her eye. "Nynaeve will be Wisdom here for another fifty years at least. Probably more. Are you going to spend the rest of your life as her apprentice?"

"There are other villages," she replied heatedly. "Nynaeve says the villages north of the Taren always choose a Wisdom from away. They think it stops her from having favorites among the village folk."

His amusement melted as fast as it had come. "Outside the Two Rivers? I'd never see you again."

"And you wouldn't like that? You have not given any sign lately that you'd care one way or another."

"No one ever leaves the Two Rivers," he went on. "Maybe somebody from Taren Ferry, but they're all strange anyway. Hardly like Two Rivers folk at all."

Egwene gave an exasperated sigh. "Well, maybe I'm strange, too. Maybe I want to see some of the places I hear about in the stories. Have you ever thought of that?"

"Of course I have. I daydream sometimes, but I know the difference between daydreams and what's real."

"And I do not?" she said furiously, and promptly turned her back on him.

"That wasn't what I meant. I was talking about me. Egwene?"

She jerked her cloak around her, a wall to shut him off, and stiffly walked a few paces away. He rubbed his head in frustration. How to explain? This was not the first time she had squeezed meanings from his words that he never knew were in them. In her present mood, a misstep would only make matters worse, and he was fairly sure that nearly anything he said would be a misstep.

Mat and Perrin came back then. Egwene ignored their coming. They looked at her hesitantly, then crowded close to Rand.

"Moiraine gave Perrin a coin, too," Mat said. "Just like ours." He paused before adding, "And he saw the rider."

“Where?” Rand demanded. “When? Did anybody else see him? Did you tell anyone?”

Perrin raised broad hands in a slowing gesture. “One question at a time. I saw him on the edge of the village, watching the smithy, just at twilight yesterday. Gave me the shivers, he did. I told Master Luhhan, only nobody was there when he looked. He said I was seeing shadows. But he carried his biggest hammer around with him while we were banking the forge-fire and putting the tools up. He’s never done that before.”

“So he believed you,” Rand said, but Perrin shrugged.

“I don’t know. I asked him why he was carrying the hammer if all I saw was shadows, and he said something about wolves getting bold enough to come into the village. Maybe he thought that’s what I saw, but he ought to know I can tell the difference between a wolf and a man on horseback, even at dusk. I know what I saw, and nobody is going to make me believe different.”

“I believe you,” Rand said. “Remember, I saw him, too.” Perrin gave a satisfied grunt, as if he had not been sure of that.

“What *are* you talking about?” Egwene demanded suddenly.

Rand suddenly wished he had spoken more quietly. He would have if he had realized she was listening. Mat and Perrin, grinning like fools, fell all over themselves telling her of their encounters with the black-cloaked rider, but Rand kept silent. He was sure he knew what she would say when they were done.

“Nynaeve was right,” Egwene announced to the sky when the two youths fell silent. “None of you is ready to be off leading strings. People do ride horses, you know. That doesn’t make them monsters out of a gleeman’s tale.” Rand nodded to himself; it was just as he had thought. She rounded on him. “And you’ve been spreading these tales. Sometimes you have no sense, Rand al’Thor. The winter has been frightening enough without you going about scaring the children.”

Rand gave a sour grimace. “I haven’t spread anything, Egwene. But I saw what I saw, and it was no farmer out looking for a strayed cow.”

Egwene drew a deep breath and opened her mouth, but whatever she had been going to say vanished as the door of the inn opened and a man with shaggy white hair came hurrying out as if pursued.

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CHAPTER
4

The Gleeman

The door of the inn banged shut behind the white-haired man, and he spun around to glare at it. Lean, he would have been tall if not for a stoop to his shoulders, but he moved in a spry fashion that belied his apparent age. His cloak seemed a mass of patches, in odd shapes and sizes, fluttering with every breath of air, patches in a hundred colors. It was really quite thick, Rand saw, despite what Master al'Vere had said, with the patches merely sewn on like decorations.

"The gleeman!" Egwene whispered excitedly.

The white-haired man whirled, cloak flaring. His long coat had odd, baggy sleeves and big pockets. Thick mustaches, as snowy as the hair on his head, quivered around his mouth, and his face was gnarled like a tree that had seen hard times. He gestured imperiously at Rand and the others with a long-stemmed pipe, ornately carved, that trailed a wisp of smoke. Blue eyes peered out from under bushy white brows, drilling into whatever he looked at.

Rand stared at the man's eyes almost as much as at the rest of him. Everybody in the Two Rivers had dark eyes, and so did most of the merchants, and their guards, and everyone else he had ever seen. The Congars and the Coplins had made fun of him for his gray eyes, until the day he finally punched Ewal Coplin in the nose; the Wisdom had surely gotten onto him for that. He wondered if there was a place where nobody had dark eyes. *Maybe Lan comes from there, too.*

"What sort of place is this?" the gleeman demanded in a deep voice that sounded in some way larger than that of an ordinary man. Even in the open air it seemed to fill a great room and resonate from the walls. "The yokels in that village on the hill tell me I can get here before dark, neglecting to say that that was only if I left well before noon. When I finally do arrive, chilled to the bone and ready for a warm bed, your innkeeper grumbles about the hour as if I were a wandering swineherd and your Village Council hadn't begged me to display my art at this festival of yours. And he never even told me he was the Mayor." He slowed for a breath, taking them all in with a glare, but he was off again on the instant. "When I came downstairs to smoke my pipe before the fire and have a mug of ale, every man in the common room stares at me as if I were his least favorite brother-in-law seeking to borrow money. One old grandfather starts ranting at me about the kind of stories I should or should not tell, then a girl-child shouts at me to get out, and threatens me with a great club when I don't move quickly enough for her. Who ever heard of treating a gleeman so?"

Egwene's face was a study, her goggle-eyed amaze at a gleeman in the flesh marred by a desire to defend Nynaeve.

"Your pardon, Master Gleeman," Rand said. He knew he was grinning foolishly, himself. "That was our Wisdom, and—"

"That pretty little slip of a girl?" the gleeman exclaimed. "A village Wisdom? Why, at her age she should better be flirting with the young men than foretelling the weather and curing the sick."

Rand shifted uncomfortably. He hoped Nynaeve never overheard the man's opinion. At least, not until he had done with his performing. Perrin winced at the gleeman's words, and Mat whistled soundlessly, as if both had had the same thought as he had.

"The men were the Village Council," Rand went on. "I'm sure they intended no discourtesy. You see, we just learned there's a war in Ghealdan, and a man claiming to be the Dragon Reborn. A false Dragon. Aes Sedai are riding there from Tar Valon. The Council is trying to decide if we might be in danger here."

"Old news, even in Baerlon," the gleeman said dismissively, "and that is the last place in the world to hear anything." He paused, looking around the village, and dryly added, "Almost the last place." Then his eyes fell on the wagon in front of the inn, standing alone now, with its shafts on the ground. "So. I thought I recognized Padan Fain in there." His voice was still deep, but the resonance had gone, replaced by scorn. "Fain was always one to carry bad news quickly, and the worse, the faster. There's more raven in him than man."

“Master Fain has come often to Emond’s Field, Master Gleeman,” Egwene said, a hint of disapproval finally breaking through her delight. “He is always full of laughter, and he brings much more good news than bad.”

The gleeman eyed her for a moment, then smiled broadly. “Now you’re a lovely lass. You should have rose buds in your hair. Unfortunately, I cannot pull roses from the air, not this year, but how would you like to stand beside me tomorrow for a part of my performance? Hand me my flute when I want it, and certain other apparatus. I always choose the prettiest girl I can find as my assistant.”

Perrin snickered, and Mat, who had been snickering, laughed out loud. Rand blinked in surprise; Egwene was glaring at him, and he had not even smiled. She straightened around and spoke in a too-calm voice.

“Thank you, Master Gleeman. I would be happy to assist you.”

“Thom Merrilin,” the gleeman said. They stared. “My name is Thom Merrilin, not Master Gleeman.” He hitched the multihued cloak up on his shoulders, and abruptly his voice once more seemed to reverberate in a great hall. “Once a Courtbard, I am now indeed risen to the exalted rank of Master Gleeman, yet my name is plain Thom Merrilin, and gleeman is the simple title in which I glory.” And he swept a bow so elaborate with flourishes of his cloak that Mat clapped and Egwene murmured appreciatively.

“Master . . . ah . . . Master Merrilin,” Mat said, unsure exactly what form of address to take out of what Thom Merrilin had said, “what *is* happening in Ghealdan? Do you know anything about this false Dragon? Or the Aes Sedai?”

“Do I look like a peddler, boy?” the gleeman grumbled, tapping out his pipe on the heel of his palm. He made the pipe disappear somewhere inside his cloak, or his coat; Rand was not sure where it had gone or how. “I am a gleeman, not a newsmonger. And I make a point of never knowing anything about Aes Sedai. Much safer that way.”

“But the war,” Mat began eagerly, only to be cut off by Master Merrilin.

“In wars, boy, fools kill other fools for foolish causes. That’s enough for anyone to know. I am here for my art.” Suddenly he thrust a finger at Rand. “You, lad. You’re a tall one. Not with your full growth on you yet, but I doubt there’s another man in the district with your height. Not many in the village with eyes that color, either, I’ll wager. The point is, you’re an axe handle across the shoulders and as tall as an Aielman. What’s your name, lad?”

Rand gave it hesitantly, not sure whether or not the man was making fun of him, but the gleeman had already turned his attention to Perrin. “And you have almost the size of an Ogier. Close enough. How are you called?”

“Not unless I stand on my own shoulders.” Perrin laughed. “I’m afraid Rand and I are just ordinary folk, Master Merrilin, not made-up creatures from your stories. I’m Perrin Aybara.”

Thom Merrilin tugged at one of his mustaches. “Well, now. Made-up creatures from my stories. Is that what they are? You lads are widely traveled, then, it seems.”

Rand kept his mouth shut, certain they were the butt of a joke, now, but Perrin spoke up.

“We’ve all of us been as far as Watch Hill, and Deven Ride. Not many around here have gone as far.” He was not boasting; Perrin seldom did. He was just telling the truth.

“We’ve all seen the Mire, too,” Mat added, and he did sound boastful. “That’s the swamp at the far end of the Waterwood. Nobody at all goes there—it’s full of quicksands and bogs—except us. And nobody goes to the Mountains of Mist, either, but we did, once. To the foot of them, anyway.”

“As far as that?” the gleeman murmured, brushing at his mustaches now continually. Rand thought he was hiding a smile, and he saw that Perrin was frowning.

“It’s bad luck to enter the mountains,” Mat said, as if he had to defend himself for not going further. “Everybody knows that.”

“That’s just foolishness, Matrim Cauthon,” Egwene cut in angrily. “Nynaeve says. . . .” She broke off, her cheeks turning pink, and the look she gave Thom Merrilin was not as friendly as it had been. “It is not right to make. . . . It isn’t. . . .” Her face went redder, and she fell silent. Mat blinked, as if he was just getting a suspicion of what had been going on.

“You’re right, child,” the gleeman said contritely. “I apologize humbly. I am here to entertain. Aah, my tongue has always gotten me into trouble.”

“Maybe we haven’t traveled as far as you,” Perrin said flatly, “but what does how tall Rand is have to do with anything?”

“Just this, lad. A little later I will let you try to pick me up, but you won’t be able to lift my feet from the ground. Not you, nor your tall friend there—Rand, is it?—nor any other man. Now what do you think of that?”

Perrin snorted a laugh. “I think I can lift you right now.” But when he stepped forward Thom Merrilin motioned him back.

“Later, lad, later. When there are more folk to watch. An artist needs an audience.”

A score of folk had gathered on the Green since the gleeman appeared from the inn, young men and women down to children who peeked, wide-eyed and silent, from behind the older onlookers. All looked as if they were waiting for miraculous things from the gleeman. The white-haired man looked them over—he appeared to be counting them—then gave a slight shake of his head and sighed.

“I suppose I had better give you a small sample. So you can run tell the others. Eh? Just a taste of what you’ll see tomorrow at your festival.”

He took a step back, and suddenly leaped into the air, twisting and somersaulting to land facing them atop the old stone foundation. More than that, three balls—red, white, and black—began dancing between his hands even as he landed.

A soft sound came from the watchers, half astonishment, half satisfaction. Even Rand forgot his irritation. He flashed Egwene a grin and got a delighted one in return, then both turned to stare unabashedly at the gleeman.

“You want stories?” Thom Merrilin declaimed. “I have stories, and I will give them to you. I will make them come alive before your eyes.” A blue ball joined the others from somewhere, then a green one, and a yellow. “Tales of great wars and great heroes, for the men and boys. For the women and girls, the entire *Aptarigine Cycle*. Tales of Artur Paendrag Tanreall, Artur Hawkwing, Artur the High King, who once ruled all the lands from the Aiel Waste to the Aryth Ocean, and even beyond. Wondrous stories of strange people and strange lands, of the Green Man, of Warders and Trollocs, of Ogier and Aiel. *The Thousand Tales of Anla, the Wise Counselor.* ‘Jaem the Giant-Slayer.’ *How Susa Tamed Jain Farstrider.* ‘Mara and the Three Foolish Kings.’ ”

“Tell us about Lenn,” Egwene called. “How he flew to the moon in the belly of an eagle made of fire. Tell about his daughter Salya walking among the stars.”

Rand looked at her out of the corner of his eye, but she seemed intent on the gleeman. She had never liked stories about adventures and long journeys. Her favorites were always the funny ones, or stories about women outwitting people who were supposed to be smarter than everyone else. He was sure she had asked for tales about Lenn and Salya to put a burr under his shirt. Surely she could see the world outside was no place for Two Rivers folk. Listening to tales of adventures, even dreaming about them, was one thing; having them take place around you would be something else again.

"Old stories, those," Thom Merrilin said, and abruptly he was juggling three colored balls with each hand. "Stories from the Age before the Age of Legends, some say. Perhaps even older. But I have *all* stories, mind you now, of Ages that were and will be. Ages when men ruled the heavens and the stars, and Ages when man roamed as brother to the animals. Ages of wonder, and Ages of horror. Ages ended by fire raining from the skies, and Ages doomed by snow and ice covering land and sea. I have all stories, and I will tell all stories. Tales of Mosk the Giant, with his Lance of fire that could reach around the world, and his wars with Elsbet, the Queen of All. Tales of Materese the Healer, Mother of the Wondrous Ind."

The balls now danced between Thom's hands in two intertwining circles. His voice was almost a chant, and he turned slowly as he spoke, as if surveying the onlookers to gauge his effect. "I will tell you of the end of the Age of Legends, of the Dragon, and his attempt to free the Dark One into the world of men. I will tell of the Time of Madness, when Aes Sedai shattered the world; of the Trolloc Wars, when men battled Trollocs for rule of the earth; of the War of the Hundred Years, when men battled men and the nations of our day were wrought. I will tell the adventures of men and women, rich and poor, great and small, proud and humble. *The Siege of the Pillars of the Sky.* 'How Goodwife Karil Cured Her Husband of Snoring.' *King Darith and the Fall of the House of—*"

Abruptly the flow of words and the juggling alike stopped. Thom simply snatched the balls from the air and stopped talking. Unnoticed by Rand, Moiraine had joined the listeners. Lan was at her shoulder, though he had to look twice to see the man. For a moment Thom looked at Moiraine sideways, his face and body still except for making the balls disappear into his capacious coat sleeves. Then he bowed to her, holding his cloak wide. "Your pardon, but you are surely not from this district?"

"Lady!" Ewin hissed fiercely. "The Lady Moiraine."

Thom blinked, then bowed again, more deeply. "Your pardon again . . . ah, Lady. I meant no disrespect."

Moiraine made a small waving-away gesture. “None was perceived, Master Bard. And my name is simply Moiraine. I am indeed a stranger here, a traveler like yourself, far from home and alone. The world can be a dangerous place when one is a stranger.”

“The Lady Moiraine collects stories,” Ewin put in. “Stories about things that happened in the Two Rivers. Though I don’t know what ever happened here to make a story of.”

“I trust you will like my stories, as well . . . Moiraine.” Thom watched her with obvious wariness. He looked not best pleased to find her there. Suddenly Rand wondered what sort of entertainment a lady like her might be offered in a city like Baerlon, or Caemlyn. Surely it could not be anything better than a gleeman.

“That is a matter of taste, Master Bard,” Moiraine replied. “Some stories I like, and some I do not.”

Thom’s bow was his deepest yet, bending his long body parallel to the ground. “I assure you, none of my stories will displease. All will please and entertain. And you do me too much honor. I am a simple gleeman; that and nothing more.”

Moiraine answered his bow with a gracious nod. For an instant she seemed even more the lady Ewin had named her, accepting an offering from one of her subjects. Then she turned away, and Lan followed, a wolf heeling a gliding swan. Thom stared after them, bushy brows drawn down, stroking his long mustaches with a knuckle, until they were halfway up the Green. *He’s not pleased at all,* Rand thought.

“Are you going to juggle some more, now?” Ewin demanded.

“Eat fire,” Mat shouted. “I want to see you eat fire.”

“The harp!” a voice cried from the crowd. “Play the harp!” Someone else called for the flute.

At that moment the door of the inn opened and the Village Council trundled out, Nynaeve in their midst. Padan Fain was not with them, Rand saw; apparently the peddler had decided to remain in the warm common room with his mulled wine.

Muttering about “a strong brandy,” Thom Merrilin abruptly jumped down from the old foundation. He ignored the cries of those who had been watching him, pressing inside past the Councilors before they were well out of the doorway.

“Is he supposed to be a gleeman or a king?” Cenn Buie asked in annoyed tones. “A waste of good money, if you ask me.”

Bran al’Vere half turned after the gleeman, then shook his head. “That man may be more trouble than he’s worth.”

Nynaeve, busy gathering her cloak around her, sniffed loudly. “Worry about the gleeman if you want, Brandelwyn al’Vere. At least he is in Emond’s Field, which is more than you can say for this false Dragon. But as long as you are worrying, there are others here who *should* excite your worry.”

“If you please, Wisdom,” Bran said stiffly, “kindly leave who should worry me to my deciding. Mistress Moiraine and Master Lan are guests in my inn, and decent, respectable folk, so I say. Neither of *them* has called me a fool in front of the whole Council. Neither of *them* has told the Council it hasn’t a full set of wits among them.”

“It seems my estimate was too high by half,” Nynaeve retorted. She strode away without a backward glance, leaving Bran’s jaw working as he searched for a reply.

Egwene looked at Rand as if she were going to speak, then darted after the Wisdom instead. Rand knew there must be some way to stop her from leaving the Two Rivers, but the only way he could think of was not one he was prepared to take, even if she was willing. And she had as much as said she was not willing at all, which made him feel even worse.

“That young woman wants a husband,” Cenn Buie growled, bouncing on his toes. His face was purple, and getting darker. “She lacks proper respect. We’re the Village Council, not boys raking her yard, and—”

The Mayor breathed heavily through his nose, and suddenly rounded on the old thatcher. “Be quiet, Cenn! Stop acting like a black-veiled Aiel!” The skinny man froze on his toes in astonishment. The Mayor never let his temper get the best of him. Bran glared. “Burn me, but we have better things to be about than this foolishness. Or do you intend to prove Nynaeve right?” With that he stumped back into the inn and slammed the door behind him.

The Council members glanced at Cenn, then moved off in their separate directions. All but Haral Luhhan, who accompanied the stony-visaged thatcher, talking quietly. The blacksmith was the only one who could ever get Cenn to see reason.

Rand went to meet his father, and his friends trailed after him.

“I’ve never seen Master al’Vere so mad,” was the first thing Rand said, getting him a disgusted look from Mat.

“The Mayor and the Wisdom seldom agree,” Tam said, “and they agreed less than usual today. That’s all. It’s the same in every village.”

“What about the false Dragon?” Mat asked, and Perrin added eager murmurs. “What about the Aes Sedai?”

Tam shook his head slowly. “Master Fain knew little more than he had already told. At least, little of interest to us. Battles won or lost. Cities taken and retaken. All in Ghealdan, thank the Light. It hasn’t spread, or had not the last Master Fain knew.”

“Battles interest me,” Mat said, and Perrin added, “What did he say about them?”

“Battles don’t interest me, Matrim,” Tam said. “But I’m sure he will be glad to tell you all about them later. What does interest me is that we shouldn’t have to worry about them here, as far as the Council can tell. We can see no reason for Aes Sedai to come here on their way south. And as for the return journey, they aren’t likely to want to cross the Forest of Shadows and swim the White River.”

Rand and the others chuckled at the idea. There were three reasons why no one came into the Two Rivers except from the north, by way of Taren Ferry. The Mountains of Mist, in the west, were the first, of course, and the Mire blocked the east just as effectively. To the south was the White River, which got its name from the way rocks and boulders churned its swift waters to froth. And beyond the White lay the Forest of Shadows. Few Two Rivers folk had ever crossed the White, and fewer still returned if they did. It was generally agreed, though, that the Forest of Shadows stretched south for a hundred miles or more without a road or a village, but with plenty of wolves and bears.

“So that’s an end to it for us,” Mat said. He sounded at least a little disappointed.

“Not quite,” Tam said. “Day after tomorrow we will send men to Deven Ride and Watch Hill, and Taren Ferry, too, to arrange for a watch to be kept. Riders along the White and the Taren, both, and patrols between. It should be done today, but only the Mayor agrees with me. The rest can’t see asking anyone to spend Bel Tine off riding across the Two Rivers.”

“But I thought you said we didn’t have to worry,” Perrin said, and Tam shook his head.

“I said should not, boy, not did not. I’ve seen men die because they were sure that what should not happen, would not. Besides, the fighting will stir up all sorts of people. Most will just be trying to find safety, but others will be looking for a way to profit from the confusion. We’ll offer any of the first a helping hand, but we must be ready to send the second type on their way.”

Abruptly Mat spoke up. “Can we be part of it? I want to, anyway. You know I can ride as well as anyone in the village.”

“You want a few weeks of cold, boredom, and sleeping rough?” Tam chuckled. “Likely that’s all there will be to it. I hope that’s all. We’re well out of the way even for refugees. But you can speak to Master al’Vere if your mind is made up. Rand, it’s time for us to be getting back to the farm.”

Rand blinked in surprise. “I thought we were staying for Winternight.”

“Things need seeing to at the farm, and I need you with me.”

“Even so, we don’t have to leave for hours yet. And I want to volunteer for the patrols, too.”

“We are going now,” his father replied in a tone that brooked no argument. In a softer voice he added, “We’ll be back tomorrow in plenty of time for you to speak to the Mayor. And plenty of time for Festival, too. Five minutes, now, then meet me in the stable.”

“Are you going to join Rand and me on the watch?” Mat asked Perrin as Tam left. “I’ll bet there’s nothing like this ever happened in the Two Rivers before. Why, if we get up to the Taren, we might even see soldiers, or who knows what. Even Tinkers.”

“I expect I will,” Perrin said slowly, “if Master Luhhan doesn’t need me, that is.”

“The war is in Ghealdan,” Rand snapped. With an effort he lowered his voice. “The war is in Ghealdan, and the Aes Sedai are the Light knows where, but none of it is here. The man in the black cloak is, or have you forgotten him already?” The others exchanged embarrassed looks.

“Sorry, Rand,” Mat muttered. “But a chance to do something besides milk my da’s cows doesn’t come along very often.” He straightened under their startled stares. “Well, I do milk them, and every day, too.”

“The black rider,” Rand reminded them. “What if he hurts somebody?”

“Maybe he’s a refugee from the war,” Perrin said doubtfully.

“Whatever he is,” Mat said, “the watch will find him.”

“Maybe,” Rand said, “but he seems to disappear when he wants to. It might be better if they knew to look for him.”

“We’ll tell Master al’Vere when we volunteer for the patrols,” Mat said, “he’ll tell the Council, and they’ll tell the watch.”

“The Council!” Perrin said incredulously. “We’d be lucky if the Mayor didn’t laugh out loud. Master Luhhan and Rand’s father already think the two of us are jumping at shadows.”

Rand sighed. “If we’re going to do it, we might as well do it now. He won’t laugh any louder today than he will tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” Perrin said with a sidelong glance at Mat, “we should try finding some others who’ve seen him. We’ll see just about everybody in the village tonight.” Mat’s scowl deepened, but he still did not say anything. All of them understood that Perrin meant they should find witnesses who were more reliable than Mat. “He won’t laugh any louder tomorrow,” Perrin added when Rand hesitated. “And I’d just as soon have somebody else with us when we go to him. Half the village would suit me fine.”

Rand nodded slowly. He could already hear Master al’Vere laughing. More witnesses certainly could not hurt. And if three of them had seen the fellow, others had to have, too. They must have. “Tomorrow, then. You two find whoever you can tonight, and tomorrow we go to the Mayor. After that. . . .” They looked at him silently, no one raising the question of what happened if they could not find anyone else who had seen the black-cloaked man. The question was clear in their eyes, though, and he had no answer. He sighed heavily. “I’d better go, now. My father will be wondering if I fell into a hole.”

Followed by their goodbyes, he trotted around to the stableyard where the high-wheeled cart stood propped on its shafts.

The stable was a long, narrow building, topped by a high-peaked, thatched roof. Stalls, their floors covered with straw, filled both sides of the dim interior, lit only by the open double doors at either end. The peddler’s team munched their oats in eight stalls, and Master al’Vere’s massive Dhurrans, the team he hired out when farmers had hauling beyond the abilities of their own horses, filled six more, but only three others were occupied. Rand thought he could match up horse and rider with no trouble. The tall, deep-chested black stallion that swung up his head fiercely had to be Lan’s. The sleek white mare with an arched neck, her quick steps as graceful as a girl dancing, even in the stall, could only belong to Moiraine.

And the third unfamiliar horse, a rangy, slab-sided gelding of a dusty brown, fit Thom Merrilin perfectly.

Tam stood in the rear of the stable, holding Bela by a lead rope and speaking quietly to Hu and Tad. Before Rand had taken two steps into the stable his father nodded to the stablemen and brought Bela out, wordlessly gathering up Rand as he went.

They harnessed the shaggy mare in silence. Tam appeared so deep in thought that Rand held his tongue. He did not really look forward to trying to convince his father about the black-cloaked rider, much less the Mayor. Tomorrow would have to be time enough, when Mat and the rest had found others who had seen the man. If they found others.

As the cart lurched into motion, Rand took his bow and quiver from the back, awkwardly belting the quiver at his waist as he half trotted alongside. When they reached the last row of houses in the village, he nocked an arrow, carrying it half raised and partly drawn. There was nothing to see except mostly leafless trees, but his shoulders tightened. The black rider could be on them before either of them knew it. There might not be time to draw the bow if he was not already halfway to it.

He knew he could not keep up the tension on the bowstring for long. He had made the bow himself, and Tam was one of the few others in the district who could even draw it all the way to the cheek. He cast around for something to take his mind off thinking about the dark rider. Surrounded by the forest, their cloaks flapping in the wind, it was not easy.

“Father,” he said finally, “I don’t understand why the Council had to question Padan Fain.” With an effort he took his eyes off the woods and looked across Bela at Tam. “It seems to me, the decision you reached could have been made right on the spot. The Mayor frightened everybody half out of their wits, talking about Aes Sedai and the false Dragon here in the Two Rivers.”

“People are funny, Rand. The best of them are. Take Haral Luhhan. Master Luhhan is a strong man, and a brave one, but he can’t bear to see butchering done. Turns pale as a sheet.”

“What does that have to do with anything? Everybody knows Master Luhhan can’t stand the sight of blood, and nobody but the Coplins and the Congars thinks anything of it.”

“Just this, lad. People don’t always think or behave the way you might believe they would. Those folk back there . . . let the hail beat their crops into the mud, and the wind take off every roof in the district, and the wolves kill half their livestock, and they'll roll up their sleeves and start from scratch. They'll grumble, but they won't waste any time with it. But you give them just the thought of Aes Sedai and a false Dragon in Ghealdan, and soon enough they'll start thinking that Ghealdan is not that far the other side of the Forest of Shadows, and a straight line from Tar Valon to Ghealdan wouldn't pass that much to the east of us. As if the Aes Sedai wouldn't take the road through Caemlyn and Lugard instead of traveling cross-country! By tomorrow morning half the village would have been sure the entire war was about to descend on us. It would take weeks to undo. A fine Bel Tine that would make. So Bran gave them the idea before they could get it for themselves.

"They've seen the Council take the problem under consideration, and by now they'll be hearing what we decided. They chose us for the Village Council because they trust we can reason things out in the best way for everybody. They trust our opinions. Even Cenn's, which doesn't say much for the rest of us, I suppose. At any rate, they will hear there isn't anything to worry about, and they'll believe it. It is not that they couldn't reach the same conclusion, or would not, eventually, but this way we won't have Festival ruined, and nobody has to spend weeks worrying about something that isn't likely to happen. If it does, against all odds . . . well, the patrols will give us enough warning to do what we can. I truly don't think it will come to that, though."

Rand puffed out his cheeks. Apparently, being on the Council was more complicated than he had believed. The cart rumbled on along the Quarry Road.

"Did anyone besides Perrin see this strange rider?" Tam asked.

"Mat did, but—" Rand blinked, then stared across Bela's back at his father. "You believe me? I have to go back. I have to tell them." Tam's shout halted him as he turned to run back to the village.

"Hold, lad, hold! Do you think I waited this long to speak for no reason?"

Reluctantly Rand kept on beside the cart, still creaking along behind patient Bela. "What made you change your mind? Why can't I tell the others?"

"They'll know soon enough. At least, Perrin will. Mat, I'm not sure of. Word must be gotten to the farms as best it can, but in another hour there won’t be anyone in Emond’s Field above sixteen, those who can be responsible about it, at least, who doesn’t know a stranger is skulking around and likely not the sort you would invite to Festival. The winter has been bad enough without this to scare the young ones.”

“Festival?” Rand said. “If you had seen him you wouldn’t want him closer than ten miles. A hundred, maybe.”

“Perhaps so,” Tam said placidly. “He could be just a refugee from the troubles in Ghealdan, or more likely a thief who thinks the pickings will be easier here than in Baerlon or Taren Ferry. Even so, no one around here has so much they can afford to have it stolen. If the man is trying to escape the war . . . well, that’s still no excuse for scaring people. Once the watch is mounted, it should either find him or frighten him off.”

“I hope it frightens him off. But why do you believe me now, when you didn’t this morning?”

“I had to believe my own eyes then, lad, and I saw nothing.” Tam shook his grizzled head. “Only young men see this fellow, it seems. When Haral Luhhan mentioned Perrin jumping shadows, though, it all came out. Jon Thane’s oldest son saw him, too, and so did Samel Crawe’s boy, Bandry. Well, when four of you say you’ve seen a thing—and solid lads, all—we start thinking maybe it’s there whether we can see it or not. All except Cenn, of course. Anyway, that’s why we’re going home. With both of us away, this stranger could be up to any kind of mischief there. If not for Festival, I wouldn’t come back tomorrow, either. But we can’t make ourselves prisoners in our own homes just because this fellow is lurking about.”

“I didn’t know about Ban or Lem,” Rand said. “The rest of us were going to the Mayor tomorrow, but we were worried he wouldn’t believe us, either.”

“Gray hairs don’t mean our brains have curdled,” Tam said dryly. “So you keep a sharp eye. Maybe I’ll catch sight of him, too, if he shows up again.”

Rand settled down to do just that. He was surprised to realize that his step felt lighter. The knots were gone from his shoulders. He was still scared, but it was not so bad as it had been. Tam and he were just as alone on the Quarry Road as they had been that morning, but in some way he felt as if the entire village were with them. That others knew and believed made all the difference. There was nothing the black-cloaked horseman could do that the people of Emond’s Field could not handle together.

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CHAPTER
5

Winternight

The sun stood halfway down from its noonday high by the time the cart reached the farmhouse. It was not a big house, not nearly so large as some of the sprawling farmhouses to the east, dwellings that had grown over the years to hold entire families. In the Two Rivers that often included three or four generations under one roof, including aunts, uncles, cousins, and nephews. Tam and Rand were considered out of the ordinary as much for being two men living alone as for farming in the Westwood.

Here most of the rooms were on one floor, a neat rectangle with no wings or additions. Two bedrooms and an attic storeroom fitted up under the steeply sloped thatch. If the whitewash was all but gone from the stout wooden walls after the winter storms, the house was still in a tidy state of repair, the thatch tightly mended and the doors and shutters well-hung and snug-fitting.

House, barn, and stone sheep pen formed the points of a triangle around the farmyard, where a few chickens had ventured out to scratch at the cold ground. An open shearing shed and a stone dipping trough stood next to the sheep pen. Hard by the fields between the farmyard and the trees loomed the tall cone of a tight-walled curing shed. Few farmers in the Two Rivers could make do without both wool and tabac to sell when the merchants came.

When Rand took a look in the stone pen, the heavy-horned herd ram looked back at him, but most of the black-faced flock remained placidly where they lay, or stood with their heads in the feed trough. Their coats were thick and curly, but it was still too cold for shearing.

“I don’t think the black-cloaked man came here,” Rand called to his father, who was walking slowly around the farmhouse, spear held at the ready, examining the ground intently. “The sheep wouldn’t be so settled if that one had been around.”

Tam nodded but did not stop. When he had made a complete circuit of the house, he did the same around the barn and the sheep pen, still studying the ground. He even checked the smokehouse and the curing shed. Drawing a bucket of water from the well, he filled a cupped hand, sniffed the water, and gingerly touched it with the tip of his tongue. Abruptly he barked a laugh, then drank it down in a quick gulp.

“I suppose he didn’t,” he told Rand, wiping his hand on his coat front. “All this about men and horses I can’t see or hear just makes me look crossways at everything.” He emptied the well water into another bucket and started for the house, the bucket in one hand and his spear in the other. “I’ll start some stew for supper. And as long as we’re here, we might as well get caught up on a few chores.”

Rand grimaced, regretting Winternight in Emond’s Field. But Tam was right. Around a farm the work never really got done; as soon as one thing was finished two more always needed doing. He hesitated about it, but kept his bow and quiver close at hand. If the dark rider did appear, he had no intention of facing him with nothing but a hoe.

First was stabling Bela. Once he had unharnessed her and put her into a stall in the barn next to their cow, he set his cloak aside and rubbed the mare down with handfuls of dry straw, then curried her with a pair of brushes. Climbing the narrow ladder to the loft, he pitched down hay for her feed. He fetched a scoopful of oats for her as well, though there was little enough left and might be no more for a long while unless the weather warmed soon. The cow had been milked that morning before first light, giving a quarter of her usual yield; she seemed to be drying up as the winter hung on.

Enough feed had been left to see the sheep for two days—they should have been in the pasture by now, but there was none worth calling it so—but he topped off their water. Whatever eggs had been laid needed to be gathered, too. There were only three. The hens seemed to be getting cleverer at hiding them.

He was taking a hoe to the vegetable garden behind the house when Tam came out and settled on a bench in front of the barn to mend harness, propping his spear beside him. It made Rand feel better about the bow lying on his cloak a pace from where he stood.

Few weeds had pushed above ground, but more weeds than anything else. The cabbages were stunted, barely a sprout of the beans or peas showed, and there was not a sign of a beet. Not everything had been planted, of course; only part, in hopes the cold might break in time to make a crop of some kind before the cellar was empty. It did not take long to finish hoeing, which would have suited him just fine in years past, but now he wondered what they would do if nothing came up this year. Not a pleasant thought. And there was still firewood to split.

It seemed to Rand like years since there had *not* been firewood to split. But complaining would not keep the house warm, so he fetched the axe, propped up bow and quiver beside the chopping block, and got to work. Pine for a quick, hot flame, and oak for long burning. Before long he was warm enough to put his coat aside. When the pile of split wood grew big enough, he stacked it against the side of the house, beside other stacks already there. Most reached all the way to the eaves. Usually by this time of year the woodpiles were small and few, but not this year. Chop and stack, chop and stack, he lost himself in the rhythm of the axe and the motions of stacking wood. Tam's hand on his shoulder brought him back to where he was, and for a moment he blinked in surprise.

Gray twilight had come on while he worked, and already it was fading quickly toward night. The full moon stood well above the treetops, shimmering pale and bulging as if about to fall on their heads. The wind had grown colder without his noticing, too, and tattered clouds scudded across the darkling sky.

"Let's wash up, lad, and see about some supper. I've already carried in water for hot baths before sleep."

"Anything hot sounds good to me," Rand said, snatching up his cloak and tossing it round his shoulders. Sweat soaked his shirt, and the wind, forgotten in the heat of swinging the axe, seemed to be trying to freeze it now that he had stopped work. He stifled a yawn, shivering as he gathered the rest of his things. "And sleep, too, for that. I might just sleep right through Festival."

"Would you care to make a small wager about that?" Tam smiled, and Rand had to grin back. He would not miss Bel Tine if he had had no sleep in a week. No one would.

Tam had been extravagant with the candles, and a fire crackled in the big stone fireplace, so that the main room had a warm, cheerful feel to it. A broad oaken table was the main feature of the room other than the fireplace, a table long enough to seat a dozen or more, though there had seldom been so many around it since Rand's mother died. A few cabinets and chests, most of them skillfully made by Tam himself, lined the walls, and high-backed chairs stood around the table. The cushioned chair that Tam called his reading chair sat angled before the flames. Rand preferred to do his reading stretched out on the rug in front of the fire. The shelf of books by the door was not nearly as long as the one at the Winespring Inn, but books were hard to come by. Few peddlers carried more than a handful, and those had to be stretched out among everyone who wanted them.

If the room did not look quite so freshly scrubbed as most farm wives kept their homes—Tam's piperack and *The Travels of Jain Farstrider* sat on the table, while another wood-bound book rested on the cushion of his reading chair; a bit of harness to be mended lay on the bench by the fireplace, and some shirts to be darned made a heap on a chair—if not quite so spotless, it was still clean and neat enough, with a lived-in look that was almost as warming and comforting as the fire. Here, it was possible to forget the chill beyond the walls. There was no false Dragon here. No wars or Aes Sedai. No men in black cloaks. The aroma from the stewpot hanging over the fire permeated the room, and filled Rand with ravenous hunger.

His father stirred the stewpot with a long-handled wooden spoon, then took a taste. "A little while longer."

Rand hurried to wash his face and hands; there was a pitcher and basin on the washstand by the door. A hot bath was what he wanted, to take away the sweat and soak the chill out, but that would come when there had been time to heat the big kettle in the back room.

Tam rooted around in a cabinet and came up with a key as long as his hand. He twisted it in the big iron lock on the door. At Rand's questioning look he said, "Best to be safe. Maybe I'm taking a fancy, or maybe the weather is blacking my mood, but. . . ." He sighed and bounced the key on his palm. "I'll see to the back door," he said, and disappeared toward the back of the house.

Rand could not remember either door ever being locked. No one in the Two Rivers locked doors. There was no need. Until now, at least.

From overhead, from Tam's bedroom, came a scraping, as of something being dragged across the floor. Rand frowned. Unless Tam had suddenly decided to move the furniture around, he could only be pulling out the old chest he kept under his bed. Another thing that had never been done in Rand's memory.

He filled a small kettle with water for tea and hung it from a hook over the fire, then set the table. He had carved the bowls and spoons himself. The front shutters had not yet been closed, and from time to time he peered out, but full night had come and all he could see were moon shadows. The dark rider could be out there easily enough, but he tried not to think about that.

When Tam came back, Rand stared in surprise. A thick belt slanted around Tam's waist, and from the belt hung a sword, with a bronze heron on the black scabbard and another on the long hilt. The only men Rand had ever seen wearing swords were the merchants' guards. And Lan, of course. That his father might own one had never even occurred to him. Except for the herons, the sword looked a good deal like Lan's sword.

"Where did that come from?" he asked. "Did you get it from a peddler? How much did it cost?"

Slowly Tam drew the weapon; firelight played along the gleaming length. It was nothing at all like the plain, rough blades Rand had seen in the hands of merchants' guards. No gems or gold adorned it, but it seemed grand to him, nonetheless. The blade, very slightly curved and sharp on only one edge, bore another heron etched into the steel. Short quillons, worked to look like braid, flanked the hilt. It seemed almost fragile compared with the swords of the merchants' guards; most of those were double-edged, and thick enough to chop down a tree.

"I got it a long time ago," Tam said, "a long way from here. And I paid entirely too much; two coppers is too much for one of these. Your mother didn't approve, but she was always wiser than I. I was young then, and it seemed worth the price at the time. She always wanted me to get rid of it, and more than once I've thought she was right, that I should just give it away."

Reflected fire made the blade seem aflame. Rand started. He had often daydreamed about owning a sword. "Give it away? How could you give a sword like that away?"

Tam snorted. "Not much use in herding sheep, now is it? Can't plow a field or harvest a crop with it." For a long minute he stared at the sword as if wondering what he was doing with such a thing. At last he let out a heavy sigh. "But if I am not just taken by a black fancy, if our luck runs sour, maybe in the next few days we'll be glad I tucked it in that old chest, instead." He slid the sword smoothly back into its sheath and wiped his hand on his shirt with a grimace. "The stew should be ready. I'll dish it out while you fix the tea."

Rand nodded and got the tea canister, but he wanted to know everything. Why would Tam have bought a sword? He could not imagine. And where had Tam come by it? How far away? No one ever left the Two Rivers; or very few, at least. He had always vaguely supposed his father must have gone outside—his mother had been an outlander—but a sword . . . ? He had a lot of questions to ask once they had settled at the table.

The tea water was boiling fiercely, and he had to wrap a cloth around the kettle's handle to lift it off the hook. Heat soaked through immediately. As he straightened from the fire, a heavy thump at the door rattled the lock. All thoughts of the sword, or the hot kettle in his hand, flew away.

"One of the neighbors," he said uncertainly. "Master Dautry wanting to borrow. . . ." But the Dautry farm, their nearest neighbor, was an hour away even in the daylight, and Oren Dautry, shameless borrower that he was, was still not likely to leave his house by dark.

Tam softly placed the stew-filled bowls on the table. Slowly he moved away from the table. Both of his hands rested on his sword hilt. "I don't think—" he began, and the door burst open, pieces of the iron lock spinning across the floor.

A figure filled the doorway, bigger than any man Rand had ever seen, a figure in black mail that hung to his knees, with spikes at wrists and elbows and shoulders. One hand clutched a heavy, scythe-like sword; the other hand was flung up before his eyes as if to shield them from the light.

Rand felt the beginnings of an odd sort of relief. Whoever this was, it was not the black-cloaked rider. Then he saw the curled ram's horns on the head that brushed the top of the doorway, and where mouth and nose should have been was a hairy muzzle. He took in all of it in the space of one deep breath that he let out in a terrified yell as, without thinking, he hurled the hot kettle at that half-human head.

The creature roared, part scream of pain, part animal snarl, as boiling water splashed over its face. Even as the kettle struck, Tam's sword flashed. The roar abruptly became a gurgle, and the huge shape toppled back. Before it finished falling, another was trying to claw its way past. Rand glimpsed a misshapen head topped by spike-like horns before Tam struck again, and two huge bodies blocked the door. He realized his father was shouting at him.

“Run, lad! Hide in the woods!” The bodies in the doorway jerked as others outside tried to pull them clear. Tam thrust a shoulder under the massive table; with a grunt he heaved it over atop the tangle. “There are too many to hold! Out the back! Go! Go! I’ll follow!”

Even as Rand turned away, shame filled him that he obeyed so quickly. He wanted to stay and help his father, though he could not imagine how, but fear had him by the throat, and his legs moved on their own. He dashed from the room, toward the back of the house, as fast as he had ever run in his life. Crashes and shouts from the front door pursued him.

He had his hands on the bar across the back door when his eye fell on the iron lock that was never locked. Except that Tam had done just that tonight. Letting the bar stay where it was, he darted to a side window, flung up the sash and threw back the shutters. Night had replaced twilight completely. The full moon and drifting clouds made dappled shadows chase one another across the farmyard.

Shadows, he told himself. Only shadows. The back door creaked as someone outside, or something, tried to push it open. His mouth went dry. A crash shook the door in its frame and lent him speed; he slipped through the window like a hare going to ground, and cowered against the side of the house. Inside the room, wood splintered like thunder.

He forced himself up to a crouch, made himself peer inside, just with one eye, just at the corner of the window. In the dark he could not make out much, but more than he really wanted to see. The door hung askew, and shadowed shapes moved cautiously into the room, talking in low, guttural voices. Rand understood none of what was said; the language sounded harsh, unsuited to a human tongue. Axes and spears and spiked things dully reflected stray glimmers of moonlight. Boots scraped on the floor, and there was a rhythmic click, as of hooves, as well.

He tried to work moisture back into his mouth. Drawing a deep, ragged breath, he shouted as loudly as he could. “They’re coming in the back!” The words came out in a croak, but at least they came out. He had not been sure they would. “I’m outside! Run, father!” With the last word he was sprinting away from the farmhouse.

Coarse-voiced shouts in the strange tongue raged from the back room. Glass shattered, loud and sharp, and something thudded heavily to the ground behind him. He guessed one of them had broken through the window rather than try to squeeze through the opening, but he did not look back to see if he was right. Like a fox running from hounds he darted into the nearest moon-cast shadows as if headed for the woods, then dropped to his belly and slithered back to the barn and its larger, deeper shadows. Something fell across his shoulders, and he thrashed about, not sure if he was trying to fight or escape, until he realized he was grappling with the new hoe handle Tam had been shaping.

Idiot! For a moment he lay there, trying to stop panting. *Coplin fool idiot!* At last he crawled on along the back of the barn, dragging the hoe handle with him. It was not much, but it was better than nothing. Cautiously he looked around the corner at the farmyard and the house.

Of the creature that had jumped out after him there was no sign. It could be anywhere. Hunting him, surely. Even creeping up on him at that very moment.

Frightened bleats filled the sheep pen to his left; the flock milled as if trying to find an escape. Shadowed shapes flickered in the lighted front windows of the house, and the clash of steel on steel rang through the darkness. Suddenly one of the windows burst outward in a shower of glass and wood as Tam leaped through it, sword still in hand. He landed on his feet, but instead of running away from the house he dashed toward the back of it, ignoring the monstrous things scrambling after him through the broken window and the doorway.

Rand stared in disbelief. Why was he not trying to get away? Then he understood. Tam had last heard his voice from the rear of the house. “Father!” he shouted. “I’m over here!”

In mid-stride Tam whirled, not running toward Rand, but at an angle away from him. “Run, lad!” he shouted, gesturing with the sword as if to someone ahead of him. “Hide!” A dozen huge forms streamed after him, harsh shouts and shrill howls shivering the air.

Rand pulled back into the shadows behind the barn. There he could not be seen from the house, in case any of the creatures were still inside. He was safe; for the moment, at least. But not Tam. Tam, who was trying to lead those things away from him. His hands tightened on the hoe handle, and he had to clench his teeth to stop a sudden laugh. A hoe handle. Facing one of those creatures with a hoe handle would not be much like playing at quarterstaffs with Perrin. But he could not let Tam face what was chasing him alone.

"If I move like I was stalking a rabbit," he whispered to himself, "they'll never hear me, or see me." The eerie cries echoed in the darkness, and he tried to swallow. "More like a pack of starving wolves." Soundlessly he slipped away from the barn, toward the forest, gripping the hoe handle so hard that his hands hurt.

At first, when the trees surrounded him, he took comfort from them. They helped hide him from Whatever the creatures were that had attacked the farm. As he crept through the woods, though, moon shadows shifted, and it began to seem as if the darkness of the forest changed and moved, too. Trees loomed malevolently; branches writhed toward him. But were they just trees and branches? He could almost hear the growling chuckles stifled in their throats while they waited for him. The howls of Tam's pursuers no longer filled the night, but in the silence that replaced them he flinched every time the wind scraped one limb against another. Lower and lower he crouched, and moved more and more slowly. He hardly dared to breathe for fear he might be heard.

Suddenly a hand closed over his mouth from behind, and an iron grip seized his wrist. Frantically he clawed over his shoulder with his free hand for some hold on the attacker.

"Don't break my neck, lad," came Tam's hoarse whisper.

Relief flooded him, turning his muscles to water. When his father released him he fell to his hands and knees, gasping as if he had run for miles. Tam dropped down beside him, leaning on one elbow.

"I wouldn't have tried that if I had thought how much you've grown in the last few years," Tam said softly. His eyes shifted constantly as he spoke, keeping a sharp watch on the darkness. "But I had to make sure you didn't speak out. Some Trollocs can hear like a dog. Maybe better."

"But Trollocs are just. . . ." Rand let the words trail off. Not just a story, not after tonight. Those things could be Trollocs or the Dark One himself for all he knew. "Are you sure?" he whispered. "I mean . . . Trollocs?"

"I'm sure. Though what brought them to the Two Rivers. . . . I never saw one before tonight, but I've talked with men who have, so I know a little. Maybe enough to keep us alive. Listen closely. A Trolloc can see better than a man in the dark, but bright lights blind them, for a time at least. That may be the only reason we got away from so many. Some can track by scent or sound, but they're said to be lazy. If we can keep out of their hands long enough, they should give up."

That made Rand feel only a little better. "In the stories they hate men, and serve the Dark One."

"If anything belongs in the Shepherd of the Night's flocks, lad, it is Trollocs. They kill for the pleasure of killing, so I've been told. But that's the end of my knowledge, except that they cannot be trusted unless they're afraid of you, and then not far."

Rand shivered. He did not think he would want to meet anyone a Trolloc was afraid of. "Do you think they're still hunting for us?"

"Maybe, maybe not. They don't seem very smart. Once we got into the forest, I sent the ones after me off toward the mountains without much trouble." Tam fumbled at his right side, then put his hand close to his face. "Best act as if they are, though."

"You're hurt."

"Keep your voice down. It's just a scratch, and there is nothing to be done about it now, anyway. At least the weather seems to be warming." He lay back with a heavy sigh. "Perhaps it won't be too bad spending the night out."

In the back of his mind Rand had just been thinking fond thoughts of his coat and cloak. The trees cut the worst of the wind, but what gusted through still sliced like a frozen knife. Hesitantly he touched Tam's face, and winced. "You're on fire. I have to get you to Nynaeve."

"In a bit, lad."

"We don't have any time to waste. It's a long way in the dark." He scrambled to his feet and tried to pull his father up. A groan barely stifled by Tam's clenched teeth made Rand hastily ease him back down.

"Let me rest a while, boy. I'm tired."

Rand pounded his fist on his thigh. Snug in the farmhouse, with a fire and blankets, plenty of water and willowbark, he might have been willing to wait for daybreak before hitching Bela and taking Tam into the village. Here was no fire, no blankets, no cart, and no Bela. But those things were still back at the house. If he could not carry Tam to them, perhaps he could bring some of them, at least, to Tam. If the Trollocs were gone. They had to go sooner or later.

He looked at the hoe handle, then dropped it. Instead he drew Tam's sword. The blade gleamed dully in the pale moonlight. The long hilt felt odd in his hand; the weight and heft were strange. He slashed at the air a few times before stopping with a sigh. Slashing at air was easy. If he had to do it against a Trolloc he was surely just as likely to run instead, or freeze stiff so he could not move at all until the Trolloc swung one of those odd swords and. . . . *Stop it! It's not helping anything!*

As he started to rise, Tam caught his arm. "Where are you going?"

"We need the cart," he said gently. "And blankets." He was shocked at how easily he pulled his father's hand from his sleeve. "Rest, and I'll be back."

"Careful," Tam breathed.

He could not see Tam's face in the moonlight, but he could feel his eyes on him. "I will be." *As careful as a mouse exploring a hawk's nest,* he thought.

As silently as another shadow, he slid into the darkness. He thought of all the times he had played tag in the woods with his friends as children, stalking one another, straining not to be heard until he put a hand on someone's shoulder. Somehow he could not make this seem the same.

Creeping from tree to tree, he tried to make a plan, but by the time he reached the edge of the woods he had made and discarded ten. Everything depended on whether or not the Trollocs were still there. If they were gone, he could simply walk up to the house and take what he needed. If they were still there. . . . In that case, there was nothing for it but go back to Tam. He did not like it, but he could do Tam no good by getting killed.

He peered toward the farm buildings. The barn and the sheep pen were only dark shapes in the moonlight. Light spilled from the front windows of the house, though, and through the open front door. *Just the candles father lit, or are there Trollocs waiting?*

He jumped convulsively at a nighthawk's reedy cry, then sagged against a tree, shaking. This was getting him nowhere. Dropping to his belly, he began to crawl, holding the sword awkwardly before him. He kept his chin in the dirt all the way to the back of the sheep pen.

Crouched against the stone wall, he listened. Not a sound disturbed the night. Carefully he eased up enough to look over the wall. Nothing moved in the farmyard. No shadows flickered against the lit windows of the house, or in the doorway. *Bela and the cart first, or the blankets and other things.*

It was the light that decided him. The barn was dark. Anything could be waiting inside, and he would have no way of knowing until it was too late. At least he would be able to see what was inside the house.

As he started to lower himself again, he stopped suddenly. There was *no* sound. Most of the sheep might have settled down already and gone back to sleep, though it was not likely, but a few were always awake even in the middle of the night, rustling about, bleating now and again. He could barely make out the shadowy mounds of sheep on the ground. One lay almost beneath him.

Trying to make no noise, he hoisted himself onto the wall until he could stretch out a hand to the dim shape. His fingers touched curly wool, then wetness; the sheep did not move. Breath left him in a rush as he pushed back, almost dropping the sword as he fell to the ground outside the pen. *They kill for fun.* Shakily he scrubbed the wetness from his hand in the dirt.

Fiercely he told himself that nothing had changed. The Trollocs had done their butchery and gone. Repeating that in his mind, he crawled on across the farmyard, keeping as low as he could, but trying to watch every direction, too. He had never thought he would envy an earthworm.

At the front of the house he lay close beside the wall, beneath the broken window, and listened. The dull thudding of blood in his ears was the loudest sound he heard. Slowly he reared up and peered inside.

The stewpot lay upside down in the ashes on the hearth. Splintered, broken wood littered the room; not a single piece of furniture remained whole. Even the table rested at an angle, two legs hacked to rough stubs. Every drawer had been pulled out and smashed; every cupboard and cabinet stood open, many doors hanging by one hinge. Their contents were strewn over the wreckage, and everything was dusted with white. Flour and salt, to judge from the slashed sacks tossed down by the fireplace. Four twisted bodies made a tangle in the remnants of the furnishings. Trollocs.

Rand recognized one by its ram's horns. The others were much the same, even in their differences, a repulsive melange of human faces distorted by muzzles, horns, feathers, and fur. Their hands, almost human, only made it worse. Two wore boots; the others had hooves. He watched without blinking until his eyes burned. None of the Trollocs moved. They had to be dead. And Tam was waiting.

He ran in through the front door and stopped, gagging at the stench. A stable that had not been mucked out in months was the only thing he could think of that might come close to matching it. Vile smears defiled the walls. Trying to breathe through his mouth, he hurriedly began poking through the mess on the floor. There had been a waterbag in one of the cupboards.

A scraping sound behind him sent a chill to his marrow, and he spun, almost falling over the remains of the table. He caught himself, and moaned behind teeth that would have chattered had he not had them clenched until his jaw ached.

One of the Trollocs was getting to its feet. A wolf's muzzle jutted out below sunken eyes. Flat, emotionless eyes, and all too human. Hairy, pointed ears twitched incessantly. It stepped over one of its dead companions on sharp goat hooves. The same black mail the others wore rasped against leather trousers, and one of the huge, scythe-curved swords swung at its side.

It muttered something, guttural and sharp, then said, "Others go away. Narg stay. Narg smart." The words were distorted and hard to understand, coming from a mouth never meant for human speech. Its tone was meant to be soothing, he thought, but he could not take his eyes off the stained teeth, long and sharp, that flashed every time the creature spoke. "Narg know some come back sometime. Narg wait. You no need sword. Put sword down."

Until the Trolloc spoke Rand had not realized that he held Tam's sword wavering before him in both hands, its point aimed at the huge creature. It towered head and shoulders above him, with a chest and arms to dwarf Master Luhhan.

"Narg no hurt." It took a step closer, gesturing. "You put sword down." The dark hair on the backs of its hands was thick, like fur.

"Stay back," Rand said, wishing his voice were steadier. "Why did you do this? Why?"

"Vlja daeg roghda!" The snarl quickly became a toothy smile. "Put sword down. Narg no hurt. Myrddraal want talk you." A flash of emotion crossed the distorted face. Fear. "Others come back, you talk Myrddraal." It took another step, one big hand coming to rest on its own sword hilt. "You put sword down."

Rand wet his lips. Myrddraal! The worst of the stories was walking tonight. If a Fade was coming, it made a Trolloc pale by comparison. He had to get away. But if the Trolloc drew that massive blade he would not have a chance. He forced his lips into a shaky smile. “All right.” Grip tightening on the sword, he let both hands drop to his sides. “I’ll talk.”

The wolf-smile became a snarl, and the Trolloc lunged for him. Rand had not thought anything that big could move so fast. Desperately he brought his sword up. The monstrous body crashed into him, slamming him against the wall. Breath left his lungs in one gasp. He fought for air as they fell to the floor together, the Trolloc on top. Frantically he struggled beneath the crushing weight, trying to avoid thick hands groping for him, and snapping jaws.

Abruptly the Trolloc spasmed and was still. Battered and bruised, half suffocated by the bulk on top of him, for a moment Rand could only lie there in disbelief. Quickly he came to his senses, though, enough to writhe out from under the body, at least. And body it was. The bloodied blade of Tam’s sword stood out from the center of the Trolloc’s back. He had gotten it up in time after all. Blood covered Rand’s hands, as well, and made a blackish smear across the front of his shirt. His stomach churned, and he swallowed hard to keep from being sick. He shook as hard as he had in the worst of his fear, but this time in relief at still being alive.

Others come back, the Trolloc had said. The other Trollocs would be returning to the farmhouse. And a Myrddraal, a Fade. The stories said Fades were twenty feet tall, with eyes of fire, and they rode shadows like horses. When a Fade turned sideways, it disappeared, and no wall could stop them. He had to do what he had come for, and get away quickly.

Grunting with the effort he heaved the Trolloc’s body over to get to the sword—and almost ran when open eyes stared at him. It took him a minute to realize they were staring through the glaze of death.

He wiped his hands on a tattered rag—it had been one of Tam’s shirts only that morning—and tugged the blade free. Cleaning the sword, he reluctantly dropped the rag on the floor. There was no time for neatness, he thought with a laugh that he had to clamp his teeth shut to stop. He did not see how they could ever clean the house well enough for it to be lived in again. The horrible stench had probably already soaked right into the timbers. But there was no time to think of that. *No time for neatness. No time for anything, maybe.*

He was sure he was forgetting any number of things they would need, but Tam was waiting, and the Trollocs were coming back. He gathered what he could think of on the run. Blankets from the bedrooms upstairs, and clean cloths to bandage Tam's wound. Their cloaks and coats. A waterbag that he carried when he took the sheep to pasture. A clean shirt. He did not know when he would have time to change, but he wanted to get out of his blood-smeared shirt at the first opportunity. The small bags of willowbark and their other medicines were part of a dark, muddy-looking pile he could not bring himself to touch.

One bucket of the water Tam had brought in still stood by the fireplace, miraculously unspilled and untouched. He filled the waterbag from it, gave his hands a hasty wash in the rest, and made one more quick search for anything he might have forgotten. He found his bow among the wreckage, broken cleanly in two at the thickest point. He shuddered as he let the pieces fall. What he had gathered already would have to do, he decided. Quickly he piled everything outside the door.

The last thing before leaving the house, he dug a shuttered lantern from the mess on the floor. It still held oil. Lighting it from one of the candles, he closed the shutters—partly against the wind, but mostly to keep from drawing attention—and hurried outside with the lantern in one hand and the sword in the other. He was not sure what he would find in the barn. The sheep pen kept him from hoping too much. But he needed the cart to get Tam to Emond's Field, and for the cart he needed Bela. Necessity made him hope a little.

The barn doors stood open, one creaking on its hinges as it shifted in the wind. The interior looked as it always had, at first. Then his eyes fell on empty stalls, the stall doors ripped from their hinges. Bela and the cow were gone. Quickly he went to the back of the barn. The cart lay on its side, half the spokes broken out of its wheels. One shaft was only a foot-long stump.

The despair he had been holding at bay filled him. He was not sure he could carry Tam as far as the village even if his father could bear to be carried. The pain of it might kill Tam more quickly than the fever. Still, it was the only chance left. He had done all he could do here. As he turned to go, his eyes fell on the hacked-off cart shaft lying on the straw-strewn floor. Suddenly he smiled.

Hurriedly he set the lantern and the sword on the straw-covered floor, and in the next instant he was wrestling with the cart, tipping it back over to fall upright with a snap of more breaking spokes, then throwing his shoulder into it to heave it over on the other side. The undamaged shaft stood straight out. Snatching up the sword he hacked at the well-seasoned ash. To his pleased surprise great chips flew with his strokes, and he cut through as quickly as he could have with a good axe.

When the shaft fell free, he looked at the sword blade in wonder. Even the best-sharpened axe would have dulled chopping through that hard, aged wood, but the sword looked as brightly sharp as ever. He touched the edge with his thumb, then hastily stuck it in his mouth. The blade was still razor-sharp.

But he had no time for wonder. Blowing out the lantern—there was no need to have the barn burn down on top of everything else—he gathered up the shafts and ran back to get what he had left at the house.

Altogether it made an awkward burden. Not a heavy one, but hard to balance and manage, the cart shafts shifting and twisting in his arms as he stumbled across the plowed field. Once back in the forest they were even worse, catching on trees and knocking him half off his feet. They would have been easier to drag, but that would leave a clear trail behind him. He intended to wait as long as possible before doing that.

Tam was right where he had left him, seemingly asleep. He hoped it was sleep. Suddenly fearful, he dropped his burdens and put a hand to his father's face. Tam still breathed, but the fever was worse.

The touch roused Tam, but only into a hazy wakefulness. "Is that you, boy?" he breathed. "Worried about you. Dreams of days gone. Nightmares." Murmuring softly, he drifted off again.

"Don't worry," Rand said. He lay Tam's coat and cloak over him to keep off the wind. "I'll get you to Nynaeve just as quick as I can." As he went on, as much to reassure himself as for Tam's benefit, he peeled off his bloodstained shirt, hardly even noticing the cold in his haste to be rid of it, and hurriedly pulled on the clean one. Throwing his old shirt away made him feel as if he had just had a bath. "We'll be safe in the village in no time, and the Wisdom will set everything right. You'll see. Everything's going to be all right."

That thought was like a beacon as he pulled on his coat and bent to tend Tam's wound. They would be safe once they reached the village, and Nynaeve would cure Tam. He just had to get him there.

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CHAPTER

6

The Westwood

In the moonlight Rand could not really see what he was doing, but Tam's wound seemed to be only a shallow gash along the ribs, no longer than the palm of his hand. He shook his head in disbelief. He had seen his father take more of an injury than that and not even stop work except to wash it off. Hastily he searched Tam from head to foot for something bad enough to account for the fever, but the one cut was all he could find.

Small as it was, that lone cut was still grave enough; the flesh around it burned to the touch. It was even hotter than the rest of Tam's body, and the rest of him was hot enough to make Rand's jaws clench. A scalding fever like that could kill, or leave a man a husk of what he had once been. He soaked a cloth with water from the skin and laid it across Tam's forehead.

He tried to be gentle about washing and bandaging the gash on his father's ribs, but soft groans still interrupted Tam's low muttering. Stark branches loomed around them, threatening as they shifted as in the wind. Surely the Trollocs would go on their way when they failed to find Tam and him, when they came back to the farmhouse and found it still empty. He tried to make himself believe it, but the wanton destruction at the house, the senselessness of it, left little room for belief of that sort. Believing they would give up short of killing everyone and everything they could find was dangerous, a foolish chance he could not afford to take.

Trollocs. Light above, Trollocs! Creatures out of a gleeman's tale coming out of the night to bash in the door. And a Fade. Light shine on me, a Fade!

Abruptly he realized he was holding the untied ends of the bandage in motionless hands. *Frozen like a rabbit that's seen a hawk's shadow,* he thought scornfully. With an angry shake of his head he finished tying the bandage around Tam's chest.

Knowing what he had to do, even getting on with it, did not stop him being afraid. When the Trollocs came back they would surely begin searching the forest around the farm for some trace of the people who had escaped them. The body of the one he had killed would tell them those people were not far off. Who knew what a Fade would do, or could do? On top of that, his father's comment about Trollocs' hearing was as loud in his mind as if Tam had just said it. He found himself resisting the urge to put a hand over Tam's mouth, to still his groans and murmurs. *Some track by scent. What can I do about that? Nothing.* He could not waste time worrying over problems he could do nothing about.

"You have to keep quiet," he whispered in his father's ear. "The Trollocs will be back."

Tam spoke in hushed, hoarse tones. "You're still lovely, Kari. Still lovely as a girl."

Rand grimaced. His mother had been dead fifteen years. If Tam believed she was still alive, then the fever was even worse than Rand had thought. How could he be kept from speaking, now that silence might mean life?

"Mother wants you to be quiet," Rand whispered. He paused to clear his throat of a sudden tightness. She had had gentle hands; he remembered that much. "Kari wants you to be quiet. Here. Drink."

Tam gulped thirstily from the waterskin, but after a few swallows he turned his head aside and began murmuring softly again, too low for Rand to understand. He hoped it was too low to be heard by hunting Trollocs, too.

Hastily he got on with what was needed. Three of the blankets he wove around and between the shafts cut from the cart, contriving a makeshift litter. He would only be able to carry one end, letting the other drag on the ground, but it would have to do. From the last blanket he cut a long strip with his belt knife, then tied one end of the strip to each of the shafts.

As gently as he could, he lifted Tam onto the litter, wincing with every moan. His father had always seemed indestructible. Nothing could harm him; nothing could stop him, or even slow him down. For him to be in this condition almost robbed Rand of what courage he had managed to gather. But he had to keep on. That was all that kept him moving. He had to.

When Tam finally lay on the litter, Rand hesitated, then took the sword belt from his father's waist. When he fastened it around himself, it felt odd there; it made him feel odd. Belt and sheath and sword together only weighed a few pounds, but when he sheathed the blade it seemed to drag at him like a great weight.

Angrily he berated himself. This was no time or place for foolish fancies. It was only a big knife. How many times had he daydreamed about wearing a sword and having adventures? If he could kill one Trolloc with it, he could surely fight off any others as well. Only, he knew all too well that what had happened in the farmhouse had been the purest luck. And his daydream adventures had never included his teeth chattering, or running for his life through the night, or his father at the point of death.

Hastily he tucked the last blanket around Tam, and laid the waterskin and the rest of the cloths beside his father on the litter. With a deep breath he knelt between the shafts and lifted the strip of blanket over his head. It settled across his shoulders and under his arms. When he gripped the shafts and straightened, most of the weight was on his shoulders. It did not seem like very much. Trying to keep a smooth pace, he set out for Emond's Field, the litter scraping along behind him.

He had already decided to make his way to the Quarry Road and follow that to the village. The danger would almost certainly be greater along the road, but Tam would receive no help at all if he got them lost trying to find his way through the woods and the dark.

In the darkness he was almost out onto the Quarry Road before he knew it. When he realized where he was, his throat tightened like a fist. Hurriedly he turned the litter around and dragged it back into the trees a way, then stopped to catch his breath and let his heart stop pounding. Still panting, he turned east, toward Emond's Field.

Traveling through the trees was more difficult than taking Tam down the road, and the night surely did not help, but going out onto the road itself would be madness. The idea was to reach the village *without* meeting any Trollocs; without even seeing any, if he had his wish. He had to assume the Trollocs were still hunting them, and sooner or later they would realize the two had set off for the village. That was the most likely place to go, and the Quarry Road the most likely route. In truth, he found himself closer to the road than he liked. The night and the shadows under the trees seemed awfully bare cover in which to hide from the eyes of anyone traveling along it.

Moonlight filtering through bare branches gave only enough illumination to fool his eyes into thinking they saw what was underfoot. Roots threatened to trip him at every step, old brambles snagged his legs, and sudden dips or rises in the ground had him half falling as his foot met nothing but air where he expected firm earth, or stumbling when his toe struck dirt while still moving forward. Tam's mutterings broke into a sharp groan whenever one of the shafts bumped too quickly over root or rock.

Uncertainty made him peer into the darkness until his eyes burned, listen as he had never listened before. Every scrape of branch against branch, every rustle of pine needles, brought him to a halt, ears straining, hardly daring to breathe for fear he might not hear some warning sound, for fear he might hear that sound. Only when he was sure it was just the wind would he go on.

Slowly weariness crept into his arms and legs, driven home by a night wind that mocked his cloak and coat. The weight of the litter, so little at the start, now tried to pull him to the ground. His stumbles were no longer all from tripping. The almost constant struggle not to fall took as much out of him as did the actual work of pulling the litter. He had been up before dawn to begin his chores, and even with the trip to Emond's Field he had done almost a full day's work. On any normal night he would be resting before the fireplace, reading one of Tam's small collection of books before going to bed. The sharp chill soaked into his bones, and his stomach reminded him that he had had nothing to eat since Mistress al'Vere's honeycakes.

He muttered to himself, angry at not taking some food at the farm. A few minutes more could not have made any difference. A few minutes to find some bread and cheese. The Trollocs would not have come back in just a few minutes more. Or just the bread. Of course, Mistress al'Vere would insist on putting a hot meal in front of him once they reached the inn. A steaming plate of her thick lamb stew, probably. And some of that bread she had been baking. And lots of hot tea.

"They came over the Dragonwall like a flood," Tam said suddenly, in a strong, angry voice, "and washed the land with blood. How many died for Laman's sin?"

Rand almost fell from surprise. Wearily he lowered the litter to the ground and untangled himself. The strip of blanket left a burning groove in his shoulders. Shrugging to work the knots out, he knelt beside Tam. Fumbling for the waterbag, he peered through the trees, trying vainly in the dim moonlight to see up and down the road, not twenty paces away. Nothing moved there but shadows. Nothing but shadows.

"There isn't any flood of Trollocs, father. Not now, anyway. We'll be safe in Emond's Field soon. Drink a little water."

Tam brushed aside the waterbag with an arm that seemed to have regained all of its strength. He seized Rand's collar, pulling him close enough to feel the heat of his father's fever in his own cheek. "They called them savages," Tam said urgently. "The fools said they could be swept aside like rubbish. How many battles lost, how many cities burned, before they faced the truth? Before the nations stood together against them?" He loosed his hold on Rand, and sadness filled his voice. "The field at Marath carpeted with the dead, and no sound but the cries of ravens and the buzzing of flies. The topless towers of Cairhien burning in the night like torches. All the way to the Shining Walls they burned and slew before they were turned back. All the way to—"

Rand clamped a hand over his father's mouth. The sound came again, a rhythmic thudding, directionless in the trees, fading then growing stronger again as the wind shifted. Frowning, he turned his head slowly, trying to decide from where it came. A flicker of motion caught the corner of his eye, and in an instant he was crouched over Tam. He was startled to feel the hilt of the sword clutched tight in his hand, but most of him concentrated on the Quarry Road as if the road were the only real thing in the entire world.

Wavering shadows to the east slowly resolved themselves into a horse and rider followed up the road by tall, bulky shapes trotting to keep up with the animal. The pale light of the moon glittered from spearheads and axe blades. Rand never even considered that they might be villagers coming to help. He knew what they were. He could feel it, like grit scraping his bones, even before they drew close enough for moonlight to reveal the hooded cloak swathing the horseman, a cloak that hung undisturbed by the wind. All of the shapes appeared black in the night, and the horse's hooves made the same sounds that any other's would, but Rand knew this horse from any other.

Behind the dark rider came nightmare forms with horns and muzzles and beaks, Trollocs in a double file, all in steps, boots and hooves striking the ground at the same instant as if obeying a single mind. Rand counted twenty as they ran past. He wondered what kind of man would dare turn his back on so many Trollocs. Or on one, for that matter.

The trotting column disappeared westward, thumping footfalls fading into the darkness, but Rand remained where he was, not moving a muscle except to breathe. Something told him to be certain, absolutely certain, they were gone before he moved. At long last he drew a deep breath and began to straighten.

This time the horse made no sound at all. In eerie silence the dark rider returned, his shadowy mount stopping every few steps as it walked slowly back down the road. The wind gusted higher, moaning through the trees; the horseman's cloak lay still as death. Whenever the horse halted, that hooded head swung from side to side as the rider peered into the forest, searching. Exactly opposite Rand the horse stopped again, the shadowed opening of the hood turning toward where he crouched above his father.

Rand's hand tightened convulsively on the sword hilt. He felt the gaze, just as he had that morning, and shivered again from the hatred even if he could not see it. That shrouded man hated everyone and everything, everything that lived. Despite the cold wind, sweat beaded on Rand's face.

Then the horse was moving on, a few soundless steps and stop, until all Rand could see was a barely distinguishable blur in the night far down the road. It could have been anything, but he had not taken his eyes off it for a second. If he lost it, he was afraid the next time he saw the black-cloaked rider might be when that silent horse was on top of him.

Abruptly the shadow was rushing back, passing him in a silent gallop. The rider looked only ahead of him as he sped westward into the night, toward the Mountains of Mist. Toward the farm.

Rand sagged, gulping air and scrubbing cold sweat off his face with his sleeve. He did not care any more about why the Trollocs had come. If he never found out why, that would be fine, just as long as it was all ended.

With a shake he gathered himself, hastily checking his father. Tam was still murmuring, but so softly Rand could not make out the words. He tried to give him a drink, but the water spilled over his father's chin. Tam coughed and choked on the trickle that made it into his mouth, then began muttering again as if there had not been any interruption.

Rand splashed a little more water on the cloth on Tam's forehead, pushed the waterbag back on the litter, and scrambled between the shafts again.

He started out as if he had had a good night's sleep, but the new strength did not last long. Fear masked his tiredness in the beginning, but though the fear remained, the mask melted away quickly. Soon he was back to stumbling forward, trying to ignore hunger and aching muscles. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other without tripping.

In his mind he pictured Emond's Field, shutters thrown back and the houses lit for Winternight, people shouting greetings as they passed back and forth on their visits, fiddles filling the streets with "Jaem's Folly" and "Heron on the Wing." Haral Luhhan would have one too many brandies and start singing "The Wind in the Barley" in a voice like a bullfrog—he always did—until his wife managed to shush him, and Cenn Buie would decide to prove he could still dance as well as ever, and Mat would have something planned that would not quite happen the way he intended, and everybody would know he was responsible even if no one could prove it. He could almost smile thinking about how it would be.

After a time Tam spoke up again.

"*Avendesora.* It's said it makes no seed, but they brought a cutting to Cairhien, a sapling. A royal gift of wonder for the king." Though he sounded angry, he was barely loud enough for Rand to understand. Anyone who could hear him would be able to hear the litter scraping across the ground, too. Rand kept on, only half listening. "They never make peace. Never. But they brought a sapling, as a sign of peace. Five hundred years it grew. Five hundred years of peace with those who make no peace with strangers. Why did he cut it down? Why? Blood was the price for *Avendoraldera.* Blood the price for Laman's pride." He faded off into muttering once more.

Tiredly Rand wondered what fever-dream Tam could be having now. *Avendesora.* The Tree of Life was supposed to have all sorts of miraculous qualities, but none of the stories mentioned any sapling, or any "they." There was only the one, and that belonged to the Green Man.

Only that morning he might have felt foolish at musing over the Green Man and the Tree of Life. They were only stories. *Are they? Trollocs were just stories this morning.* Maybe all the stories were as real as the news the peddlers and merchants brought all the gleeman's tales and all the stories told at night in front of the fireplace. Next he might actually meet the Green Man, or an Ogier giant, or a wild, black-veiled Aielman.

Tam was talking again, he realized, sometimes only murmuring, sometimes loud enough to understand. From time to time he stopped to pant for breath, then went on as if he thought he had been speaking the whole time.

“. . . battles are always hot, even in the snow. Sweat heat. Blood heat. Only death is cool. Slope of the mountain . . . only place didn’t stink of death. Had to get away from smell of it . . . sight of it. . . . heard a baby cry. Their women fight alongside the men, sometimes, but why they had let her come, I don’t . . . gave birth there alone, before she died of her wounds. . . . covered the child with her cloak, but the wind . . . blown the cloak away. . . . child, blue with the cold. Should have been dead, too. . . . crying there. Crying in the snow. I couldn’t just leave a child. . . . no children of our own. . . . always knew you wanted children. I knew you’d take it to your heart, Kari. Yes, lass. Rand is a good name. A good name.”

Suddenly Rand’s legs lost the little strength they had. Stumbling, he fell to his knees. Tam moaned with the jolt, and the strip of blanket cut into Rand’s shoulders, but he was not aware of either. If a Trolloc had leaped up in front of him right then, he would just have stared at it. He looked over his shoulder at Tam, who had sunk back into wordless murmurs. *Fever-dreams*, he thought dully. Fevers always brought bad dreams, and this was a night for nightmares even without a fever.

“You are my father,” he said aloud, stretching back a hand to touch Tam, “and I am—” The fever was worse. Much worse.

Grimly he struggled to his feet. Tam murmured something, but Rand refused to listen to any more. Throwing his weight against the improvised harness he tried to put all of his mind into taking one leaden step after another, into reaching the safety of Emond’s Field. But he could not stop the echo in the back of his mind. *He’s my father. It was just a fever-dream. He’s my father. It was just a fever-dream. Light, who am I?*

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CHAPTER
7

Out of the Woods

Gray first light came while Rand still trudged through the forest. At first he did not really see. When he finally did, he stared at the fading darkness in surprise. No matter what his eyes told him, he could hardly believe he had spent all night trying to travel the distance from the farm to Emond's Field. Of course, the Quarry Road by day, rocks and all, was a far cry from the woods by night. On the other hand, it seemed days since he had seen the black-cloaked rider on the road, weeks since he and Tam had gone in for their supper. He no longer felt the strip of cloth digging into his shoulders, but then he felt nothing in his shoulders except numbness, nor in his feet, for that matter. In between, it was another matter. His breath came in labored pants that had long since set his throat and lungs to burning, and hunger twisted his stomach into queasy sickness.

Tam had fallen silent some time before. Rand was not sure how long it had been since the murmurs ceased, but he did not dare halt now to check on Tam. If he stopped he would never be able to force himself to start out again. Anyway, Whatever Tam's condition, he could do nothing beyond what he was doing. The only hope lay ahead, in the village. He tried wearily to increase his pace, but his wooden legs continued their slow plod. He barely even noticed the cold, or the wind.

Vaguely he caught the smell of woodsmoke. At least he was almost there if he could smell the village chimneys. A tired smile had only begun on his face, though, when it turned to a frown. Smoke lay heavy in the air—too heavy. With the weather, a fire might well be blazing on every hearth in the village, but the smoke was still too strong. In his mind he saw again the Trollocs on the road. Trollocs coming from the east, from the direction of Emond's Field. He peered ahead, trying to make out the first houses, and ready to shout for help at the first sight of anyone, even Cenn Buie or one of the Coplins. A small voice in the back of his head told him to hope someone there could still give help.

Suddenly a house became visible through the last bare-branched trees, and it was all he could do to keep his feet moving. Hope turning to sharp despair, he staggered into the village.

Charred piles of rubble stood in the places of half the houses of Emond's Field. Soot-coated brick chimneys thrust like dirty fingers from heaps of blackened timbers. Thin wisps of smoke still rose from the ruins. Grimy-faced villagers, some yet in their night clothes, poked through the ashes, here pulling free a cookpot, there simply prodding forlornly at the wreckage with a stick. What little had been rescued from the flames dotted the streets; tall mirrors and polished sideboards and highchests stood in the dust among chairs and tables buried under bedding, cooking utensils, and meager piles of clothing and personal belongings.

The destruction seemed scattered at random through the village. Five houses marched untouched in one row, while in another place a lone survivor stood surrounded by desolation.

On the far side of the Winespring Water, the three huge Bel Tine bonfires roared, tended by a cluster of men. Thick columns of black smoke bent northward with the wind, flecked by careless sparks. One of Master al'Vere's Dhurran stallions was dragging something Rand could not make out over the ground toward the Wagon Bridge, and the flames.

Before he was well out of the trees, a sooty-faced Haral Luhhan hurried to him, clutching a woodsman's axe in one thick-fingered hand. The burly blacksmith's ash-smeared nightshirt hung to his boots, the angry red welt of a burn across his chest showing through a ragged tear. He dropped to one knee beside the litter. Tam's eyes were closed, and his breathing came low and hard.

"Trollocs, boy?" Master Luhhan asked in a smoke-hoarse voice. "Here, too. Here, too. Well, we may have been luckier than anyone has a right to be, if you can credit it. He needs the Wisdom. Now where in the Light is she? Egwene!"

Egwene, running by with her arms full of bedsheets torn into bandages, looked around at them without slowing. Her eyes stared at something in the far distance; dark circles made them appear even larger than they actually were. Then she saw Rand and stopped, drawing a shuddering breath. “Oh, no, Rand, not your father? Is he . . . ? Come, I’ll take you to Nynaeve.”

Rand was too tired, too stunned, to speak. All through the night Emond’s Field had been a haven, where he and Tam would be safe. Now all he could seem to do was stare in dismay at her smoke-stained dress. He noticed odd details as if they were very important. The buttons down the back of her dress were done up crookedly. And her hands were clean. He wondered why her hands were clean when smudges of soot marked her cheeks.

Master Luhhan seemed to understand what had come over him. Laying his axe across the shafts, the blacksmith picked up the rear of the litter and gave it a gentle push, prodding him to follow Egwene. He stumbled after her as if walking in his sleep. Briefly he wondered how Master Luhhan knew the creatures were Trollocs, but it was a fleeting thought. If Tam could recognize them, there was no reason why Haral Luhhan could not.

“All the stories are real,” he muttered.

“So it seems, lad,” the blacksmith said. “So it seems.”

Rand only half heard. He was concentrating on following Egwene’s slender shape. He had pulled himself together just enough to wish she would hurry, though in truth she was keeping her pace to what the two men could manage with their burden. She led them halfway down the Green, to the Calder house. Char blackened the edges of its thatch, and smut stained the whitewashed walls. Of the houses on either side only the foundation stones were left, and two piles of ash and burned timbers. One had been the house of Berin Thane, one of the miller’s brothers. The other had been Abell Cauthon’s. Mat’s father. Even the chimneys had toppled.

“Wait here,” Egwene said, and gave them a look as if expecting an answer. When they only stood there, she muttered something under her breath, then dashed inside.

“Mat,” Rand said. “Is he . . . ?”

“He’s alive,” the blacksmith said. He set down his end of the litter and straightened slowly. “I saw him a little while ago. It’s a wonder any of us are alive. The way they came after my house, and the forge, you’d have thought I had gold and jewels in there. Alsbet cracked one’s skull with a frying pan. She took one look at the ashes of our house this morning and set out hunting around the village with the biggest hammer she could dig out of what’s left of the forge, just in case any of them hid instead of running away. I could almost pity the thing if she finds one." He nodded to the Calder house. "Mistress Calder and a few others took in some of those who were hurt, the ones with no home of their own still standing. When the Wisdom's seen Tam, we'll find him a bed. The inn, maybe. The Mayor offered it already, but Nynaeve said the hurt folk would heal better if there weren't so many of them together."

Rand sank to his knees. Shrugging out of his blanket harness, he wearily busied himself with checking Tam's covers. Tam never moved or made a sound, even when Rand's wooden hands jostled him. But he was still breathing, at least. *My father. The other was just the fever talking.* "What if they come back?" he said dully.

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills," Master Luhhan said uneasily. "If they come back. . . . Well, they're gone, now. So we pick up the pieces, build up what's been torn down." He sighed, his face going slack as he knuckled the small of his back. For the first time Rand realized that the heavyset man was as tired as he was himself, if not more so. The blacksmith looked at the village, shaking his head. "I don't suppose today will be much of a Bel Tine. But we'll make it through. We always have." Abruptly he took up his axe, and his face firmed. "There's work waiting for me. Don't you worry, lad. The Wisdom will take good care of him, and the Light will take care of us all. And if the Light doesn't, well, we'll just take care of ourselves. Remember, we're Two Rivers folk."

Still on his knees, Rand looked at the village as the blacksmith walked away, really looked for the first time. Master Luhhan was right, he thought, and was surprised that he was not surprised by what he saw. People still dug in the ruins of their homes, but even in the short time he had been there more of them had begun to move with a sense of purpose. He could almost feel the growing determination. But he wondered. They had seen Trollocs; had they seen the black-cloaked rider? Had they felt his hatred?

Nynaeve and Egwene appeared from the Calder house, and he sprang to his feet. Or rather, he tried to spring to his feet; it was more of a stumbling lurch that almost put him on his face in the dust.

The Wisdom dropped to her knees beside the litter without giving him so much as a glance. Her face and dress were even dirtier than Egwene's, and the same dark circles lined her eyes, though her hands, too, were clean. She felt Tam's face and thumbed open his eyelids. With a frown she pulled down the coverings and eased the bandage aside to look at the wound.

Before Rand could see what lay underneath she had replaced the wadded cloth. Sighing, she smoothed the blanket and cloak back up to Tam's neck with a gentle touch, as if tucking a child in for the night.

"There's nothing I can do," she said. She had to put her hands on her knees to straighten up. "I'm sorry, Rand."

For a moment he stood, not understanding, as she started back to the house, then he scrambled after her and pulled her around to face him. "He's dying," he cried.

"I know," she said simply, and he sagged with the matter-of-factness of it.

"You have to do something. You have to. You're the Wisdom."

Pain twisted her face, but only for an instant, then she was all hollow-eyed resolve again, her voice emotionless and firm. "Yes, I am. I know what I can do with my medicines, and I know when it's too late. Don't you think I would do something if I could? But I can't. I can't, Rand. And there are others who need me. People I *can* help."

"I brought him to you as quickly as I could," he mumbled. Even with the village in ruins, there had been the Wisdom for hope. With that gone, he was empty.

"I know you did," she said gently. She touched his cheek with her hand. "It isn't your fault. You did the best anyone could. I am sorry, Rand, but I have others to tend to. Our troubles are just beginning, I'm afraid."

Vacantly he stared after her until the door of the house closed behind her. He could not make any thought come except that she would not help.

Suddenly he was knocked back a step as Egwene cannoned into him, throwing her arms around him. Her hug was hard enough to bring a grunt from him any other time; now he only looked silently at the door behind which his hopes had vanished.

"I'm so sorry, Rand," she said against his chest. "Light, I wish there was something I could do."

Numbly he put his arms around her. "I know. I . . . I have to do something, Egwene. I don't know what, but I can't just let him. . . ." His voice broke, and she hugged him harder.

"Egwene!" At Nynaeve's shout from the house, Egwene jumped. "Egwene, I need you! And wash your hands again!"

She pushed herself free from Rand's arms. "She needs my help, Rand."

“Egwene!”

He thought he heard a sob as she spun away from him. Then she was gone, and he was left alone beside the litter. For a moment he looked down at Tam, feeling nothing but hollow helplessness. Suddenly his face hardened. “The Mayor will know what to do,” he said, lifting the shafts once more. “The Mayor will know.” Bran al’Vere always knew what to do. With weary obstinacy he set out for the Winespring Inn.

Another of the Dhurran stallions passed him, its harness straps tied around the ankles of a big shape draped with a dirty blanket. Arms covered with coarse hair dragged in the dirt behind the blanket, and one corner was pushed up to reveal a goat’s horn. The Two Rivers was no place for stories to become horribly real. If Trollocs belonged anywhere it was in the world outside, for places where they had Aes Sedai and false Dragons and the Light alone knew what else come to life out of the tales of gleemen. Not the Two Rivers. Not Emond’s Field.

As he made his way down the Green, people called to him, some from the ruins of their homes, asking if they could help. He heard them only as murmurs in the background, even when they walked alongside him for a distance as they spoke. Without really thinking about it he managed words that said he needed no help, that everything was being taken care of. When they left him, with worried looks, and sometimes a comment about sending Nynaeve to him, he noticed that just as little. All he let himself be aware of was the purpose he had fixed in his head. Bran al’Vere could do something to help Tam. What that could be he tried not to dwell on. But the Mayor would be able to do something, to think of something.

The inn had almost completely escaped the destruction that had taken half the village. A few scorch marks marred its walls, but the red roof tiles glittered in the sunlight as brightly as ever. All that was left of the peddler’s wagon, though, were blackened iron wheel-rims leaning against the charred wagon box, now on the ground. The big round hoops that had held up the canvas cover slanted crazily, each at a different angle.

Thom Merrilin sat cross-legged on the old foundation stones, carefully snipping singed edges from the patches on his cloak with a pair of small scissors. He set down cloak and scissors when Rand drew near. Without asking if Rand needed or wanted help, he hopped down and picked up the back of the litter.

“Inside? Of course, of course. Don’t you worry, boy. Your Wisdom will take care of him. I’ve watched her work, since last night, and she has a deft touch and a sure skill. It could be a lot worse. Some died last night. Not many, perhaps, but any at all are too many for me. Old Fain just disappeared, and that’s the worst of all. Trollocs will eat anything. You should thank the Light your father’s still here, and alive for the Wisdom to heal.”

Rand blotted out the words—*He* is *my father!*—reducing the voice to meaningless sound that he noticed no more than a fly’s buzzing. He could not bear any more sympathy, any more attempts to boost his spirits. Not now. Not until Bran al’Vere told him how to help Tam.

Suddenly he found himself facing something scrawled on the inn door, a curving line scratched with a charred stick, a charcoal teardrop balanced on its point. So much had happened that it hardly surprised him to find the Dragon’s Fang marked on the door of the Winespring Inn. Why anyone would want to accuse the innkeeper or his family of evil, or bring the inn bad luck, was beyond him, but the night had convinced him of one thing. Anything was possible. Anything at all.

At a push from the gleeman he lifted the latch, and went in.

The common room was empty except for Bran al’Vere, and cold, too, for no one had found time to lay a fire. The Mayor sat at one of the tables, dipping his pen in an inkwell with a frown of concentration on his face and his gray-fringed head bent over a sheet of parchment. Nightshirt tucked hastily into his trousers and bagging around his considerable waist, he absently scratched at one bare foot with the toes of the other. His feet were dirty, as if he had been outside more than once without bothering about boots, despite the cold. “What’s your trouble?” he demanded without looking up. “Be quick with it. I have two dozen things to do right this minute, and more that should have been done an hour ago. So I have little time or patience. Well? Out with it!”

“Master al’Vere?” Rand said. “It’s my father.”

The Mayor’s head jerked up. “Rand? Tam!” He threw down the pen and knocked over his chair as he leaped up. “Perhaps the Light hasn’t abandoned us altogether. I was afraid you were both dead. Bela galloped into the village an hour after the Trollocs left, lathered and blowing as if she’d run all the way from the farm, and I thought. . . . No time for that, now. We’ll take him upstairs.” He seized the rear of the litter, shouldering the gleeman out of the way. “You go get the Wisdom, Master Merrilin. And tell her I said hurry, or I’ll know the reason why! Rest easy, Tam. We’ll soon have you in a good, soft bed. Go, gleeman, go!”

Thom Merrilin vanished through the doorway before Rand could speak. “Nynaeve wouldn’t do anything. She said she couldn’t help him. I knew . . . I hoped you’d think of something.”

Master al’Vere looked at Tam more sharply, then shook his head. “We will see, boy. We will see.” But he no longer sounded confident. “Let’s get him into a bed. He can rest easy, at least.”

Rand let himself be prodded toward the stairs at the back of the common room. He tried hard to keep his certainty that somehow Tam would be all right, but it had been thin to begin with, he realized, and the sudden doubt in the Mayor’s voice shook him.

On the second floor of the inn, at the front, were half a dozen snug, well-appointed rooms with windows overlooking the Green. Mostly they were used by the peddlers, or people down from Watch Hill or up from Deven Ride, but the merchants who came each year were often surprised to find such comfortable rooms. Three of them were taken now, and the Mayor hurried Rand to one of the unused ones.

Quickly the down comforter and blankets were stripped back on the wide bed, and Tam was transferred to the thick feather mattress, with goose-down pillows tucked under his head. He made no sound beyond hoarse breathing as he was moved, not even a groan, but the Mayor brushed away Rand’s concern, telling him to set a fire to take the chill off the room. While Rand dug wood and kindling from the woodbox next to the fireplace, Bran threw back the curtains on the window, letting in the morning light, then began to gently wash Tam’s face. By the time the gleeman returned, the blaze on the hearth was warming the room.

“She will not come,” Thom Merrilin announced as he stalked into the room. He glared at Rand, his bushy white brows drawing down sharply. “You didn’t tell me she had seen him already. She almost took my head off.”

“I thought . . . I don’t know . . . maybe the Mayor could do something, could make her see. . . .” Hands clenched in anxious fists, Rand turned from the fireplace to Bran. “Master al’Vere, what can I do?” The rotund man shook his head helplessly. He laid a freshly dampened cloth on Tam’s forehead and avoided meeting Rand’s eye. “I can’t just watch him die, Master al'Vere. I have to do something." The gleeman shifted as if to speak. Rand rounded on him eagerly. "Do you have an idea? I'll try anything."

"I was just wondering," Thom said, tamping his long-stemmed pipe with his thumb, "if the Mayor knew who scrawled the Dragon's Fang on his door." He peered into the bowl, then looked at Tam and replaced the unlit pipe between his teeth with a sigh. "Someone seems not to like him anymore. Or maybe it's his guests they don't like."

Rand gave him a disgusted look and turned away to stare into the fire. His thoughts danced like the flames, and like the flames they concentrated fixedly on one thing. He would not give up. He could not just stand there and watch Tam die. *My father,* he thought fiercely. *My father.* Once the fever was gone, that could be cleared up as well. But the fever first. Only, how?

Bran al'Vere's mouth tightened as he looked at Rand's back, and the glare he directed at the gleeman would have given a bear pause, but Thom just waited expectantly as if he had not noticed it.

"It's probably the work of one of the Congars, or a Coplin," the Mayor said finally, "though the Light alone knows which. They're a large brood, and if there's ill to be said of someone, or even if there isn't, they'll say it. They make Cenn Buie sound honey-tongued."

"That wagonload who came in just before dawn?" the gleeman asked. "They hadn't so much as smelled a Trolloc, and all they wanted to know was when Festival was going to start, as if they couldn't see half the village in ashes."

Master al'Vere nodded grimly. "One branch of the family. But none of them are very different. That fool Darl Coplin spent half the night demanding I put Mistress Moiraine and Master Lan out of the inn, out of the village, as if there would be any village at all left without them."

Rand had only half listened to the conversation, but this last tugged him to speak. "What did they do?"

"Why, she called ball lightning out of a clear night sky," Master al'Vere replied. "Sent it darting straight at the Trollocs. You've seen trees shattered by it. The Trollocs stood it no better."

"Moiraine?" Rand said incredulously, and the Mayor nodded.

"Mistress Moiraine. And Master Lan was a whirlwind with that sword of his. His sword? The man himself is a weapon, and in ten places at once, or so it seemed. Burn me, but I still wouldn't believe it if I couldn't step outside and see. . . ." He rubbed a hand over his bald head. "Winternight visits just beginning, our hands full of presents and honeycakes and our heads full of wine, then the dogs snarling, and suddenly the two of them burst out of the inn, running through the village, shouting about Trollocs. I thought they'd had too much wine. After all . . . Trollocs? Then, before anyone knew what was happening, those . . . those things were right in the streets with us, slashing at people with their swords, torching houses, howling to freeze a man's blood." He made a sound of disgust in his throat. "We just ran like chickens with a fox in the henyard till Master Lan put some backbone into us."

"No need to be so hard," Thom said. "You did as well as anyone could. Not every Trolloc lying out there fell to the two of them."

"Umm . . . yes, well." Master al'Vere gave himself a shake. "It's still almost too much to believe. An Aes Sedai in Emond's Field. And Master Lan is a Warder."

"An Aes Sedai?" Rand whispered. "She can't be. I talked to her. She isn't. . . . She doesn't. . . ."

"Did you think they wore signs?" the Mayor said wryly. " 'Aes Sedai' painted across their backs, and maybe, 'Danger, stay away'?" Suddenly he slapped his forehead. "Aes Sedai. I'm an old fool, and losing my wits. There's a chance, Rand, if you're willing to take it. I can't tell you to do it, and I don't know if I'd have the nerve, if it were me."

"A chance?" Rand said. "I'll take any chance, if it'll help."

"Aes Sedai can heal, Rand. Burn me, lad, you've heard the stories. They can cure where medicines fail. Gleeman, you should have remembered that better than I. Gleemen's tales are full of Aes Sedai. Why didn't you speak up, instead of letting me flail around?"

"I'm a stranger here," Thom said, looking longingly at his unlit pipe, "and Goodman Coplin isn't the only one who wants nothing to do with Aes Sedai. Best the idea came from you."

"An Aes Sedai," Rand muttered, trying to make the woman who had smiled at him fit the stories. Help from an Aes Sedai was sometimes worse than no help at all, so the stories said, like poison in a pie, and their gifts always had a hook in them, like fishbait. Suddenly the coin in his pocket, the coin Moiraine had given him, seemed like a burning coal. It was all he could do not to rip it out of his coat and throw it out the window.

"Nobody wants to get involved with Aes Sedai, lad," the Mayor said slowly. "It is the only chance I can see, but it's still no small decision. I cannot make it for you, but I have seen nothing but good from Mistress Moiraine . . . Moiraine Sedai, I should call her, I suppose. Sometimes”—he gave a meaningful look at Tam—“you have to take a chance, even if it’s a poor one.”

“Some of the stories are exaggerated, in a way,” Thom added, as if the words were being dragged from him. “Some of them. Besides, boy, what choice do you have?”

“None,” Rand sighed. Tam still had not moved a muscle; his eyes were sunken as if he had been sick a week. “I’ll . . . I’ll go find her.”

“The other side of the bridges,” the gleeman said, “where they are . . . disposing of the dead Trollocs. But be careful, boy. Aes Sedai do what they do for reasons of their own, and they aren’t always the reasons others think.”

The last was a shout that followed Rand through the door. He had to hold onto the sword hilt to keep the scabbard from tangling in his legs as he ran, but he would not take the time to remove it. He clattered down the stairs and dashed out of the inn, tiredness forgotten for the moment. A chance for Tam, however small, was enough to overcome a night without sleep, for a time at least. That the chance came from an Aes Sedai, or what the price of it might be, he did not want to consider. And as for actually facing an Aes Sedai. . . . He took a deep breath and tried to move faster.

The bonfires stood well beyond the last houses to the north, on the Westwood side of the road to Watch Hill. The wind still carried the oily black columns of smoke away from the village, but even so a sickly sweet stink filled the air, like a roast left hours too long on the spit. Rand gagged at the smell, then swallowed hard when he realized its source. A fine thing to do with Bel Tine fires. The men tending the fires had cloths tied over their noses and mouths, but their grimaces made it plain the vinegar dampening the cloths was not enough. Even if it did kill the stench, they still knew the stench was there, and they still knew what they were doing.

Two of the men were untying the harness straps of one of the big Dhurrans from a Trolloc’s ankles. Lan, squatting beside the body, had tossed back the blanket enough to reveal the Trolloc’s shoulders and goat-snouted head. As Rand trotted up the Warder unfastened a metal badge, a blood-red enameled trident, from one spiked shoulder of the Trolloc’s shirt of black mail.

"Ko'bal," he announced. He bounced the badge on his palm and snatched it out of the air with a growl. "That makes seven bands so far."

Moiraine, seated cross-legged on the ground a short distance off, shook her head tiredly. A walking staff, covered from end to end in carved vines and flowers, lay across her knees, and her dress had the rumpled look of having been worn too long. "Seven bands. Seven! That many have not acted together since the Trolloc Wars. Bad news piles on bad news. I am afraid, Lan. I thought we had gained a march, but we may be further behind than ever."

Rand stared at her, unable to speak. An Aes Sedai. He had been trying to convince himself that she would not look any different now that he knew who . . . what he was looking at, and to his surprise she did not. She was no longer quite so pristine, not with wisps of her hair sticking out in all directions and a faint streak of soot across her nose, yet not really different, either. Surely there must be something about an Aes Sedai to mark her for what she was. On the other hand, if outward appearance reflected what was inside, and if the stories were true, then she should look closer to a Trolloc than to a more than handsome woman whose dignity was not dented by sitting in the dirt. And she could help Tam. Whatever the cost, there was that before anything else.

He took a deep breath. "Mistress Moiraine . . . I mean, Moiraine Sedai." Both turned to look at him, and he froze under her gaze. Not the calm, smiling gaze he remembered from the Green. Her face was tired, but her dark eyes were a hawk's eyes. Aes Sedai. Breakers of the world. Puppeteers who pulled strings and made thrones and nations dance in designs only the women from Tar Valon knew.

"A little more light in the darkness," the Aes Sedai murmured. She raised her voice. "How are your dreams, Rand al'Thor?"

He stared at her. "My dreams?"

"A night like that can give a man bad dreams, Rand. If you have nightmares, you must tell me of it. I can help with bad dreams, sometimes."

"There's nothing wrong with my. . . . It's my father. He's hurt. It's not much more than a scratch, but the fever is burning him up. The Wisdom won't help. She says she can't. But the stories—" She raised an eyebrow, and he stopped and swallowed hard. *Light,* is *there a story with an Aes Sedai where she isn't a villain?* He looked at the Warder, but Lan appeared more interested in the dead Trolloc than in anything Rand might say.

Fumbling his way under her eyes, he went on. “I . . . ah . . . it’s said Aes Sedai can heal. If you can help him . . . anything you can do for him . . . Whatever the cost. . . . I mean. . . .” He took a deep breath and finished up in a rush. “I’ll pay any price in my power if you help him. Anything.”

“Any price,” Moiraine mused, half to herself. “We will speak of prices later, Rand, if at all. I can make no promises. Your Wisdom knows what she is about. I will do what I can, but it is beyond my power to stop the Wheel from turning.”

“Death comes sooner or later to everyone,” the Warder said grimly, “unless they serve the Dark One, and only fools are willing to pay that price.”

Moiraine made a clucking sound. “Do not be so gloomy, Lan. We have some reason to celebrate. A small one, but a reason.” She used the staff to pull herself to her feet. “Take me to your father, Rand. I will help him as much as I am able. Too many here have refused to let me help at all. They have heard the stories, too,” she added dryly.

“He’s at the inn,” Rand said. “This way. And thank you. Thank you!”

They followed, but his pace took him quickly ahead. He slowed impatiently for them to catch up, then darted ahead again and had to wait again.

“Please hurry,” he urged, so caught up in actually getting help for Tam that he never considered the temerity of prodding an Aes Sedai. “The fever is burning him up.”

Lan glared at him. “Can’t you see she’s tired? Even with an *angreal*, what she did last night was like running around the village with a sack of stones on her back. I don’t know that you are worth it, sheepherder, no matter what she says.”

Rand blinked and held his tongue.

“Gently, my friend,” Moiraine said. Without slowing her pace, she reached up to pat the Warder’s shoulder. He towered over her protectively, as if he could give her strength just by being close. “You think only of taking care of me. Why should he not think the same of his father?” Lan scowled, but fell silent. “I am coming as quickly as I can, Rand, I promise you.”

The fierceness of her eyes, or the calm of her voice—not gentle, exactly; more firmly in command—Rand did not know which to believe. Or perhaps they did go together. Aes Sedai. He was committed, now. He matched his stride to theirs, and tried not to think of what the price might be that they would talk about later.

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CHAPTER

8

A Place of Safety

While he was still coming through the door Rand's eyes went to his father—his father no matter what *anyone* said. Tam had not moved an inch; his eyes were still shut, and his breath came in labored gasps, low and rasping. The white-haired gleeman cut off a conversation with the Mayor—who was bent over the bed again, tending Tam—and gave Moiraine an uneasy look. The Aes Sedai ignored him. Indeed, she ignored everyone except for Tam, but at him she stared with an intent frown.

Thom stuck his unlit pipe between his teeth, then snatched it out again and glowered at it. "Man cannot even smoke in peace," he muttered. "I had better make sure some farmer doesn't steal my cloak to keep his cow warm. At least I can have my pipe out there." He hurried out of the room.

Lan stared after him, his angular face as expressionless as a rock. "I do not like that man. There is something about him I don't trust. I did not see a hair of him last night."

"He was there," Bran said, watching Moiraine uncertainly. "He must have been. His cloak did not get singed in front of the fireplace."

Rand did not care if the gleeman had spent the night hiding in the stable. "My father?" he said to Moiraine pleadingly.

Bran opened his mouth, but before he could speak Moiraine said, "Leave me with him, Master al'Vere. There is nothing you can do here now except get in my way."

For a minute Bran hesitated, torn between dislike of being ordered about in his own inn and reluctance to disobey an Aes Sedai. Finally, he straightened to clap Rand on the shoulder. "Come along, boy. Let us leave Moiraine Sedai to her . . . ah . . . her. . . . There's plenty you can give me a hand with downstairs. Before you know it Tam will be shouting for his pipe and a mug of ale."

"Can I stay?" Rand spoke to Moiraine, though she did not really seem to be aware of anyone besides Tam. Bran's hand tightened, but Rand ignored him. "Please? I'll keep out of your way. You won't even know I am here. He's my father," he added with a fierceness that startled him and widened the Mayor's eyes in surprise. Rand hoped the others put it down to tiredness, or the strain of dealing with an Aes Sedai.

"Yes, yes," Moiraine said impatiently. She had tossed her cloak and staff carelessly across the only chair in the room, and now she pushed up the sleeves of her gown, baring her arms to her elbows. Her attention never really left Tam, even while she spoke. "Sit over there. And you, too, Lan." She gestured vaguely in the direction of a long bench against the wall. Her eyes traveled slowly from Tam's feet to his head, but Rand had the prickly feeling that she was looking *beyond* him in some fashion. "You may talk if you wish," she went on absently, "but do it quietly. Now, you go, Master al'Vere. This is a sickroom, not a gathering hall. See that I am not disturbed."

The Mayor grumbled under his breath, though not loudly enough to catch her attention, of course, squeezed Rand's shoulder again, then obediently, if reluctantly, closed the door behind him.

Muttering to herself, the Aes Sedai knelt beside the bed and rested her hands lightly on Tam's chest. She closed her eyes, and for a long time she neither moved nor made a sound.

In the stories Aes Sedai wonders were always accompanied by flashes and thunderclaps, or other signs to indicate mighty works and great powers. *The* Power. The One Power, drawn from the True Source that drove the Wheel of Time. That was not something Rand wanted to think about, the Power involved with Tam, himself in the same room where the Power might be used. In the same village was bad enough. For all he could tell, though, Moiraine might just as well have gone to sleep. But he thought Tam's breathing sounded easier. She must be doing something. So intent was he that he jumped when Lan spoke softly.

"That is a fine weapon you wear. Is there by chance a heron on the blade, as well?"

For a moment Rand stared at the Warder, not grasping what it was he was talking about. He had completely forgotten Tam's sword in the lather of dealing with an Aes Sedai. It did not seem so heavy anymore. “Yes, there is. What is she doing?”

“I’d not have thought to find a heron-mark sword in a place like this,” Lan said.

“It belongs to my father.” He glanced at Lan’s sword, the hilt just visible at the edge of his cloak; the two swords did look a good deal alike, except that no herons showed on the Warder’s. He swung his eyes back to the bed. Tam’s breathing did sound easier; the rasp was gone. He was sure of it. “He bought it a long time ago.”

“Strange thing for a sheepherder to buy.”

Rand spared a sidelong look for Lan. For a stranger to wonder about the sword was prying. For a Warder to do it. . . . Still, he felt he had to say something. “He never had any use for it, that I know of. He said it *had* no use. Until last night, anyway. I didn’t even know he had it till then.”

“He called it useless, did he? He must not always have thought so.” Lan touched the scabbard at Rand’s waist briefly with one finger. “There are places where the heron is a symbol of the master swordsman. That blade must have traveled a strange road to end up with a sheepherder in the Two Rivers.”

Rand ignored the unspoken question. Moiraine still had not moved. *Was* the Aes Sedai doing anything? He shivered and rubbed his arms, not sure he really wanted to know what she was doing. An Aes Sedai.

A question of his own popped into his head then, one he did not want to ask, one he needed an answer to. “The Mayor—” He cleared his throat, and took a deep breath. “The Mayor said the only reason there’s anything left of the village is because of you and her.” He made himself look at the Warder. “If you had been told about a man in the woods . . . a man who made people afraid just by looking at them . . . would that have warned you? A man whose horse doesn’t make any noise? And the wind doesn’t touch his cloak? Would you have known what was going to happen? Could you and Moiraine Sedai have stopped it if you’d known about him?”

“Not without half a dozen of my sisters,” Moiraine said, and Rand started. She still knelt by the bed, but she had taken her hands from Tam and half turned to face the two of them on the bench. Her voice never raised, but her eyes pinned Rand to the wall. “Had I known when I left Tar Valon that I would find Trollocs and Myrddraal here, I would have brought half a dozen of them, a dozen, if I had to drag them by the scruffs of their necks. By myself, a month's warning would have made little difference. Perhaps none. There is only so much one person can do, even calling on the One Power, and there were probably well over a hundred Trollocs scattered around this district last night. An entire fist."

"It would still have been good to know," Lan said sharply, the sharpness directed at Rand. "When did you see him, exactly, and where?"

"That's of no consequence now," Moiraine said. "I will not have the boy thinking he is to blame for something when he is not. I am as much to blame. That accursed raven yesterday, the way it behaved, should have warned me. And you, too, my old friend." Her tongue clicked angrily. "I was overconfident to the point of arrogance, sure that the Dark One's touch could not have spread so far. Nor so heavily, not yet. So sure."

Rand blinked. "The raven? I don't understand."

"Carrion eaters." Lan's mouth twisted in distaste. "The Dark One's minions often find spies among creatures that feed on death. Ravens and crows, mainly. Rats, in the cities, sometimes."

A quick shiver ran through Rand. Ravens and crows as spies of the Dark One? There were ravens and crows everywhere now. The Dark One's touch, Moiraine had said. The Dark One was always there—he knew that—but if you tried to walk in the Light, tried to live a good life, and did not name him, he could not harm you. That was what everybody believed, what everybody learned with his mother's milk. But Moiraine seemed to be saying. . . .

His glance fell on Tam, and everything else was pushed right out of his head. His father's face was noticeably less flushed than it had been, and his breathing sounded almost normal. Rand would have leaped up if Lan had not caught his arm. "You've done it."

Moiraine shook her head and sighed. "Not yet. I hope it is only not yet. Trolloc weapons are made at forges in the valley called Thakan'dar, on the very slopes of Shayol Ghul itself. Some of them take a taint from that place, a stain of evil in the metal. Those tainted blades make wounds that will not heal unaided, or cause deadly fevers, strange sicknesses that medicines cannot touch. I have soothed your father's pain, but the mark, the taint, is still in him. Left alone, it will grow again, and consume him."

"But you won't leave it alone." Rand's words were half plea, half command. He was shocked to realize he had spoken to an Aes Sedai like that, but she seemed not to notice his tone.

“I will not,” she agreed simply. “I am very tired, Rand, and I have had no chance to rest since last night. Ordinarily it would not matter, but for this kind of hurt. . . . This”—she took a small bundle of white silk from her pouch—“is an *angreal.*” She saw his expression. “You know of *angreal,* then. Good.”

Unconsciously he leaned back, further away from her and what she held. A few stories mentioned *angreal,* those relics of the Age of Legends that Aes Sedai used to perform their greatest wonders. He was startled to see her unwrap a smooth ivory figurine, age-darkened to deep brown. No longer than her hand, it was a woman in flowing robes, with long hair falling about her shoulders.

“We have lost the making of these,” she said. “So much is lost, perhaps never to be found again. So few remain, the Amyrlin Seat almost did not allow me to take this one. It is well for Emond’s Field, and for your father, that she did give her permission. But you must not hope too much. Now, even with it, I can do little more than I could have without it yesterday, and the taint is strong. It has had time to fester.”

“You can help him,” Rand said fervently. “I know you can.”

Moiraine smiled, a bare curving of her lips. “We shall see.” Then she turned back to Tam. One hand she laid on his forehead; the other cupped the ivory figure. Eyes closed, her face took on a look of concentration. She scarcely seemed to breathe.

“That rider you spoke of,” Lan said quietly, “the one who made you afraid—that was surely a Myrddraal.”

“A Myrddraal!” Rand exclaimed. “But Fades are twenty feet tall and. . . .” The words faded away under the Warder’s mirthless grin.

“Sometimes, sheepherder, stories make things larger than truth. Believe me, the truth is big enough with a Halfman. Halfman, Lurk, Fade, Shadowman; the name depends on the land you’re in, but they all mean Myrddraal. Fades are Trolloc spawn, throwbacks almost to the human stock the Dreadlords used to make the Trollocs. Almost. But if the human strain is made stronger, so is the taint that twists the Trollocs. Halfmen have powers of a kind, the sort that stem from the Dark One. Only the weakest Aes Sedai would fail to be a match for a Fade, one against one, but many a good man and true has fallen to them. Since the wars that ended the Age of Legends, since the Forsaken were bound, they have been the brain that tells the

Trolloc fists where to strike. In the days of the Trolloc Wars, Halfmen led the Trollocs in battle, under the Dreadlords."

"He scared me," Rand said faintly. "He just looked at me, and. . . ." He shivered.

"No need for shame, sheepherder. They scare me, too. I've seen men who have been soldiers all their lives freeze like a bird facing a snake when they confronted a Halfman. In the north, in the Borderlands along the Great Blight, there is a saying. The look of the Eyeless is fear."

"The Eyeless?" Rand said, and Lan nodded.

"Myrddraal see like eagles, in darkness or in light, but they have no eyes. I can think of few things more dangerous than facing a Myrddraal. Moiraine Sedai and I both tried to kill the one that was here last night, and we failed every time. Halfmen have the Dark One's own luck."

Rand swallowed. "A Trolloc said the Myrddraal wanted to talk to me. I didn't know what it meant."

Lan's head jerked up; his eyes were blue stones. "You *talked* to a Trolloc?"

"Not exactly," Rand stammered. The Warder's gaze held him like a trap. "It talked to me. It said it wouldn't hurt me, that the Myrddraal wanted to talk to me. Then it tried to kill me." He licked his lips and rubbed his hand along the nobby leather of the sword hilt. In short, choppy sentences he explained about returning to the farmhouse. "I killed it, instead," he finished. "By accident, really. It jumped at me, and I had the sword in my hand."

Lan's face softened slightly, if rock could be said to soften. "Even so, that is something to speak of, sheepherder. Until last night there were few men south of the Borderlands who could say they had seen a Trolloc, much less killed one."

"And fewer still who have slain a Trolloc alone and unaided," Moiraine said wearily. "It is done, Rand. Lan, help me up."

The Warder sprang to her side, but he was no quicker than Rand darting to the bed. Tam's skin was cool to the touch, though his face had a pale, washed-out look, as if he had spent far too long out of the sun. His eyes were still closed, but he drew the deep breaths of normal sleep.

"He will be all right now?" Rand asked anxiously.

"With rest, yes," Moiraine said. "A few weeks in bed, and he will be as good as ever." She walked unsteadily, despite holding Lan's arm. He swept her cloak and staff from the chair cushion for her to sit, and she eased herself down with a sigh. With a slow care she rewrapped the *angreal* and returned it to her pouch.

Rand's shoulders shook; he bit his lip to keep from laughing. At the same time he had to scrub a hand across his eyes to clear away tears. "Thank you."

"In the Age of Legends," Moiraine went on, "some Aes Sedai could fan life and health to flame if only the smallest spark remained. Those days are gone, though—perhaps forever. So much was lost; not just the making of *angreal*. So much that could be done which we dare not even dream of, if we remember it at all. There are far fewer of us now. Some talents are all but gone, and many that remain seem weaker. Now there must be both will and strength for the body to draw on, or even the strongest of us can do nothing in the way of Healing. It is fortunate that your father is a strong man, both in body and spirit. As it is, he used up much of his strength in the fight for life, but all that is left now is for him to recuperate. That will take time, but the taint is gone."

"I can never repay you," he told her without taking his eyes from Tam, "but anything I can do for you, I will. Anything at all." He remembered the talk of prices, then, and his promise. Kneeling beside Tam he meant it even more than before, but it still was not easy to look at her. "Anything. As long as it does not hurt the village, or my friends."

Moiraine raised a hand dismissively. "If you think it is necessary. I would like to talk with you, anyway. You will no doubt leave at the same time we do, and we can speak at length then."

"Leave!" he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. "Is it really that bad? Everyone looked to me as if they were ready to start rebuilding. We are pretty settled folk in the Two Rivers. Nobody ever leaves."

"Rand—"

"And where would we go? Padan Fain said the weather is just as bad everywhere else. He's . . . he was . . . the peddler. The Trollocs. . . ." Rand swallowed, wishing Thom Merrilin had not told him what Trollocs ate. "The best I can see to do is stay right here where we belong, in the Two Rivers, and put things back together. We have crops in the ground, and it has to warm enough for the shearing, soon. I don't know who started this talk about leaving—one of the Coplins, I'll bet—but whoever it was—"

"Sheepherder," Lan broke in, "you talk when you should be listening."

He blinked at both of them. He had been half babbling, he realized, and he had rambled on while she tried to talk. While an Aes Sedai tried to talk. He wondered what to say, how to apologize, but Moiraine smiled while he was still thinking.

"I understand how you feel, Rand," she said, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that she really did. "Think no more of it." Her mouth tightened, and she shook her head. "I have handled this badly, I see. I should have rested, first, I suppose. It is you who will be leaving, Rand. You who must leave, for the sake of your village."

"Me?" He cleared his throat and tried again. "Me?" It sounded a little better this time. "Why do I have to go? I don't understand any of this. I don't want to go anywhere."

Moiraine looked at Lan, and the Warder unfolded his arms. He looked at Rand from under his leather headband, and Rand had the feeling of being weighed on invisible scales again. "Did you know," Lan said suddenly, "that some homes were not attacked?"

"Half the village is in ashes," he protested, but the Warder waved it away.

"Some houses were only torched to create confusion. The Trollocs ignored them afterwards, and the people who fled from them as well, unless they actually got in the way of the true attack. Most of the people who've come in from the outlying farms never saw a hair of a Trolloc, and that only at a distance. Most never knew there was any trouble until they saw the village."

"I did hear about Darl Coplin," Rand said slowly. "I suppose it just didn't sink in."

"Two farms were attacked," Lan went on. "Yours and one other. Because of Bel Tine everyone who lived at the second farm was already in the village. Many people were saved because the Myrddraal was ignorant of Two Rivers customs. Festival and Winternight made its task all but impossible, but it did not know that."

Rand looked at Moiraine, leaning back in the chair, but she said nothing, only watched him, a finger laid across her lips. "Our farm, and who else's?" he asked finally.

"The Aybara farm," Lan replied. "Here in Emond's Field, they struck first at the forge, and the blacksmith's house, and Master Cauthon's house."

Rand's mouth was suddenly dry. "That's crazy," he managed to get out, then jumped as Moiraine straightened.

"Not crazy, Rand," she said. "Purposeful. The Trollocs did not come to Emond's Field by happenstance, and they did not do what they did for the pleasure of killing and burning, however much that delighted them. They knew what, or rather who, they were after. The Trollocs came to kill or capture young men of a certain age who live near Emond's Field."

"My age?" Rand's voice shook, and he did not care. "Light! Mat. What about Perrin?"

"Alive and well," Moiraine assured him, "if a trifle sooty."

"Ban Crawe and Lem Thane?"

"Were never in any danger," Lan said. "At least, no more than anyone else."

"But they saw the rider, the Fade, too, and they're the same age as I am."

"Master Crawe's house was not even damaged," Moiraine said, "and the miller and his family slept through half the attack before the noise woke them. Ban is ten months older than you, and Lem eight months younger." She smiled dryly at his surprise. "I told you I asked questions. And I also said young men of a *certain* age. You and your two friends are within weeks of one another. It was you three the Myrddraal sought, and none others."

Rand shifted uneasily, wishing she would not look at him like that, as if her eyes could pierce his brain and read what lay in every corner of it. "What would they want with us? We're just farmers, shepherds."

"That is a question that has no answer in the Two Rivers," Moiraine said quietly, "but the answer is important. Trollocs where they have not been seen in almost two thousand years tells us that much."

"Lots of stories tell about Trolloc raids," Rand said stubbornly. "We just never had one here before. Warders fight Trollocs all the time."

Lan snorted. "Boy, I expect to fight Trollocs along the Great Blight, but not here, nearly six hundred leagues to the south. That was as hot a raid last night as I'd expect to see in Shienar, or any of the Borderlands."

"In one of you," Moiraine said, "or all three, there is something the Dark One fears."

"That . . . that's impossible." Rand stumbled to the window and stared out at the village, at the people working among the ruins. "I don't care what's happened, that is just impossible." Something on the Green caught his eye. He stared, then realized it was the blackened stump of the Spring Pole. A fine Bel Tine, with a peddler, and a gleeman, and strangers. He shivered, and shook his head violently. “No. No, I’m a shepherd. The Dark One can’t be interested in me.”

“It took a great deal of effort,” Lan said grimly, “to bring so many Trollocs so far without raising a hue and cry from the Borderlands to Caemlyn and beyond. I wish I knew how they did it. Do you really believe they went to all that bother just to burn a few houses?”

“They will be back,” Moiraine added.

Rand had his mouth open to argue with Lan, but that brought him up short. He spun to face her. “Back? Can’t you stop them? You did last night, and you were surprised, then. Now you know they are here.”

“Perhaps,” Moiraine replied. “I could send to Tar Valon for some of my sisters; they might have time to make the journey before we need them. The Myrddraal knows *I* am here, too, and it probably will not attack—not openly, at least—lacking reinforcements, more Myrddraal and more Trollocs. With enough Aes Sedai and enough Warders, the Trollocs can be beaten off, though I cannot say how many battles it will take.”

A vision danced in his head, of Emond’s Field all in ashes. All the farms burned. And Watch Hill, and Deven Ride, and Taren Ferry. All ashes and blood. “No,” he said, and felt a wrenching inside as if he had lost his grip on something. “That’s why I have to leave, isn’t it? The Trollocs won’t come back if I am not here.” A last trace of obstinacy made him add, “If they really are after me.”

Moiraine’s eyebrows raised as if she were surprised that he was not convinced, but Lan said, “Are you willing to bet your village on it, sheepherder? Your whole Two Rivers?”

Rand’s stubbornness faded. “No,” he said again, and felt that emptiness inside again, too. “Perrin and Mat have to go, too, don’t they?” Leaving the Two Rivers. Leaving his home and his father. At least Tam would get better. At least he would be able to hear him say all that on the Quarry Road had been nonsense. “We could go to Baerlon, I suppose, or even Caemlyn. I’ve heard there are more people in Caemlyn than in the whole Two Rivers. We’d be safe there.” He tried out a laugh that sounded hollow. “I used to daydream about seeing Caemlyn. I never thought it would come about like this.”

There was a long silence, then Lan said, “I would not count on Caemlyn for safety. If the Myrddraal want you badly enough, they will find a way. Walls are a poor bar to a Halfman. And you would be a fool not to believe they want you very badly indeed.”

Rand thought his spirits had sunk as low as they possibly could, but at that they slid deeper.

“There is a place of safety,” Moiraine said softly, and Rand’s ears pricked up to listen. “In Tar Valon you would be among Aes Sedai and Warders. Even during the Trolloc Wars the forces of the Dark One feared to attack the Shining Walls. The one attempt was their greatest defeat until the very end. And Tar Valon holds all the knowledge we Aes Sedai have gathered since the Time of Madness. Some fragments even date from the Age of Legends. In Tar Valon, if anywhere, you will be able to learn why the Myrddraal want you. Why the Father of Lies wants you. That I can promise.”

A journey all the way to Tar Valon was almost beyond thinking. A journey to a place where he would be surrounded by Aes Sedai. Of course, Moiraine had healed Tam—or it looked as if she had, at least—but there were all those stories. It was uncomfortable enough to be in a room with one Aes Sedai, but to be in a city full of them. . . . And she still had not demanded her price. There was always a price, so the stories said.

“How long will my father sleep?” he asked at last. “I . . . I have to tell him. He shouldn’t just wake and find me gone.” He thought he heard Lan give a sigh of relief. He looked at the Warder curiously, but Lan’s face was as expressionless as ever.

“It is unlikely he will wake before we depart,” Moiraine said. “I mean to go soon after full dark. Even a single day of delay could be fatal. It will be best if you leave him a note.”

“In the night?” Rand said doubtfully, and Lan nodded.

“The Halfman will discover we are gone soon enough. There is no need to make things any easier for it than we must.”

Rand fussed with his father’s blankets. It was a very long way to Tar Valon. “In that case. . . . In that case, I had better go find Mat and Perrin.”

“I will attend to that.” Moiraine got to her feet briskly and donned her cloak with suddenly restored vigor. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he tried very hard not to flinch. She did not press hard, but it was an iron grip that held him as surely as a forked stick held a snake. “It will be best if we keep all of this just among us. Do you understand? The same ones who put the Dragon’s Fang on the inn door might make trouble if they knew.”

“I understand.” He drew a relieved breath when she took her hand away.

“I will have Mistress al’Vere bring you something to eat,” she went on just as if she had not noticed his reaction. “Then you need to sleep. It will be a hard journey tonight even if you are rested.”

The door closed behind them, and Rand stood looking down at Tam—looking at Tam, but seeing nothing. Not until that very minute had he realized that Emond’s Field was a part of him as much as he was a part of it. He realized it now because he knew that was what he had felt tearing loose. He was apart from the village, now. The Shepherd of the Night wanted him. It was impossible—he was only a farmer—but the Trollocs had come, and Lan was right about one thing. He could not risk the village on the chance Moiraine was wrong. He could not even tell anyone; the Coplins really would make trouble about something like that. He had to trust an Aes Sedai.

“Don’t wake him, now,” Mistress al’Vere said, as the Mayor shut the door behind his wife and himself. The cloth-covered tray she carried gave off delicious, warm smells. She set it on the chest against the wall, then firmly moved Rand away from the bed.

“Mistress Moiraine told me what he needs,” she said softly, “and it does not include you falling on top of him from exhaustion. I’ve brought you a bite to eat. Don’t let it get cold, now.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call her that,” Bran said peevishly. “Moiraine Sedai is proper. She might get mad.”

Mistress al’Vere gave him a pat on the cheek. “You just leave me to worry about that. She and I had a long talk. And keep your voice down. If you wake Tam, you’ll have to answer to me *and* Moiraine Sedai.” She put an emphasis on Moiraine’s title that made Bran’s insistence seem foolish. “The two of you keep out of my way.” With a fond smile for her husband, she turned to the bed and Tam.

Master al’Vere gave Rand a frustrated look. “She’s an Aes Sedai. Half the women in the village act as if she sits in the Women’s Circle, and the rest as if she were a Trolloc. Not a one of them seems to realize you have to be careful around Aes Sedai. The men may keep looking at her sideways, but at least they aren’t doing anything that might provoke her.”

Careful, Rand thought. It was not too late to start being careful. “Master al’Vere,” he said slowly, “do you know how many farms were attacked?”

“Only two that I’ve heard of so far, including your place.” The Mayor paused, frowning, then shrugged. “It doesn’t seem enough, with what happened here. I should be glad of it, but. . . . Well, we’ll probably hear of more before the day is out.”

Rand sighed. No need to ask which farms. “Here in the village, did they. . . . I mean, was there anything to show what they were after?”

“After, boy? I don’t know that they were after anything, except maybe killing us all. It was just the way I said. The dogs barking, and Moiraine Sedai and Lan running through the streets, then somebody shouted that Master Luhhan’s house and the forge were on fire. Abell Cauthon’s house flared up—odd that; it’s nearly in the middle of the village. Anyway, the next thing the Trollocs were all among us. No, I don’t think they were *after* anything.” He gave an abrupt bark of a laugh, and cut it short with a wary look at his wife. She did not look around from Tam. “To tell the truth,” he went on more quietly, “they seemed almost as confused as we were. I doubt they expected to find an Aes Sedai here, or a Warder.”

“I suppose not,” Rand said, grimacing.

If Moiraine had told the truth about that, she probably had told the truth about the rest, too. For a moment he thought about asking the Mayor’s advice, but Master al’Vere obviously knew little more about Aes Sedai than anyone else in the village. Besides, he was reluctant to tell even the Mayor what was going on—what Moiraine said was going on. He was not sure if he was more afraid of being laughed at or being believed. He rubbed a thumb against the hilt of Tam’s sword. His father had been out into the world; he must know more about Aes Sedai than the Mayor did. But if Tam really had been out of the Two Rivers, then maybe what he had said in the Westwood. . . . He scrubbed both hands through his hair, scattering that line of thought.

“You need sleep, lad,” the Mayor said.

“Yes, you do,” Mistress al’Vere added. “You’re almost falling down where you stand.”

Rand blinked at her in surprise. He had not even realized she had left his father. He did need sleep; just the thought set off a yawn.

“You can take the bed in the next room,” the Mayor said. “There’s already a fire laid.”

Rand looked at his father; Tam was still deep in sleep, and that made him yawn again. “I’d rather stay in here, if you don’t mind. For when he wakes up.”

Sickroom matters were in Mistress al’Vere’s province, and the Mayor left it to her. She hesitated only a moment before nodding. “But you let him wake on his own. If you bother his sleep. . . .” He tried to say he would do as she ordered, but the words got tangled in yet another yawn. She shook her head with a smile. “You will be asleep yourself in no time at all. If you must stay, curl up next to the fire. And drink a little of that beef broth before you doze off.”

“I will,” Rand said. He would have agreed to anything that kept him in that room. “And I won’t wake him.”

“See that you do not,” Mistress al’Vere told him firmly, but not in an unkindly way. “I’ll bring you up a pillow and some blankets.”

When the door finally closed behind them, Rand dragged the lone chair in the room over beside the bed and sat down where he could watch Tam. It was all very well for Mistress al’Vere to talk about sleep—his jaws cracked as he stifled a yawn—but he could not sleep yet. Tam might wake at any time, and maybe only stay awake a short while. Rand had to be waiting when he did.

He grimaced and twisted in the chair, absently shifting the sword hilt out of his ribs. He still felt backward about telling anyone what Moiraine had said, but this was Tam, after all. This was. . . . Without realizing it he set his jaw determinedly. *My father. I can tell my* father *anything.*

He twisted a little more in the chair and put his head against the chairback. Tam was his father, and nobody could tell him what to say or not say to his father. He just had to stay awake until Tam woke up. He just had to. . . .

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CHAPTER

9

Tellings of the Wheel

Rand’s heart pounded as he ran, and he stared in dismay at the barren hills surrounding him. This was not just a place where spring was late in coming; spring had never come here, and never would come. Nothing grew in the cold soil that crunched under his boots, not so much as a bit of lichen. He scrambled past boulders, twice as tall as he was; dust coated the stone as if never a drop of rain had touched it. The sun was a swollen, blood-red ball, more fiery than on the hottest day of summer and bright enough to sear his eyes, but it stood stark against a leaden cauldron of a sky where clouds of sharp black and silver roiled and boiled on every horizon. For all the swirling clouds, though, no breath of breeze stirred across the land, and despite the sullen sun the air burned cold like the depths of winter.

Rand looked over his shoulder often as he ran, but he could not see his pursuers. Only desolate hills and jagged black mountains, many topped by tall plumes of dark smoke rising to join the milling clouds. If he could not see his hunters, though, he could hear them, howling behind him, guttural voices shouting with the glee of the chase, howling with the joy of blood to come. Trollocs. Coming closer, and his strength was almost gone.

With desperate haste he scrambled to the top of a knife-edged ridge, then dropped to his knees with a groan. Below him a sheer rock wall fell away, a thousand-foot cliff plummeting into a vast canyon. Steamy mists covered the canyon floor, their thick gray surface rolling in grim waves, rolling and breaking against the cliff beneath him, but more slowly than any ocean wave had ever moved. Patches of fog glowed red for an instant as if great fires had suddenly flared beneath, then died. Thunder rumbled in the depths of the valley, and lightning crackled through the gray, sometimes striking up at the sky.

It was not the valley itself that sapped his strength and filled the empty spaces left with helplessness. From the center of the furious vapors a mountain thrust upward, a mountain taller than any he had ever seen in the Mountains of Mist, a mountain as black as the loss of all hope. That bleak stone spire, a dagger stabbing at the heavens, was the source of his desolation. He had never seen it before, but he knew it. The memory of it flashed away like quicksilver when he tried to touch it, but the memory was there. He knew it was there.

Unseen fingers touched him, pulled at his arms and legs, trying to draw him to the mountain. His body twitched, ready to obey. His arms and legs stiffened as if he thought he could dig his fingers and toes into the stone. Ghostly strings entwined around his heart, pulling him calling him to the spire mountain. Tears ran down his face, and he sagged to the ground. He felt his will draining away like water out of a holed bucket. Just a little longer, and he would go where he was called. He would obey, do as he was told. Abruptly he discovered another emotion: anger. Push him, pull him, he was not a sheep to be prodded into a pen. The anger squeezed itself into one hard knot, and he clung to it as he would have clung to a raft in a flood.

Serve me, a voice whispered in the stillness of his mind. A familiar voice. If he listened hard enough he was sure he would know it. *Serve me.* He shook his head to try to get it out of his head. *Serve me!* He shook his fist at the black mountain. “The Light consume you, Shai’tan!”

Abruptly the smell of death lay thick around him. A figure loomed over him, in a cloak the color of dried blood, a figure with a face. . . . He did not want to see the face that looked down at him. He did not want to think of that face. It hurt to think of it, turned his mind to embers. A hand reached toward him. Not caring if he fell over the edge, he threw himself away. He had to get away. Far away. He fell, flailing at the air, wanting to scream, finding no breath for screaming, no breath at all.

Abruptly he was no longer in the barren land, no longer falling. Winter-brown grass flattened under his boots; it seemed like flowers. He almost laughed to see scattered trees and bushes, leafless as they were, dotting the gently rolling plain that now surrounded him. In the distance reared a single mountain, its peak broken and split, but this mountain brought no fear or despair. It was just a mountain, though oddly out of place there, with no other in sight.

A broad river flowed by the mountain, and on an island in the middle of that river was a city such as might live in a gleeman's tale, a city surrounded by high walls gleaming white and silver beneath the warm sun. With mingled relief and joy he started for the walls, for the safety and serenity he somehow knew he would find behind them.

As he came closer he made out soaring towers, many joined by wondrous walkways that spanned the open air. High bridges arched from both banks of the river to the island city. Even at a distance he could see lacy stonework on those spans, seemingly too delicate to withstand the swift waters that rushed beneath them. Beyond those bridges lay safety. Sanctuary.

Of a sudden a chill ran along his bones; an icy clamminess settled on his skin, and the air around him turned fetid and dank. Without looking back he ran, ran from the pursuer whose freezing fingers brushed his back and tugged at his cloak, ran from the light-eating figure with the face that. . . . He could not remember the face, except as terror. He did not want to remember the face. He ran, and the ground passed beneath his feet, rolling hills and flat plain . . . and he wanted to howl like a dog gone mad. The city was receding before him. The harder he ran, the further away drifted the white shining walls and haven. They grew smaller, and smaller, until only a pale speck remained on the horizon. The cold hand of his pursuer clutched at his collar. If those fingers touched him he knew he would go mad. Or worse. Much worse. Even as that surety came to him he tripped and fell . . .

"Noooo!" he screamed.

. . . and grunted as paving stones smacked the breath out of him. Wonderingly he got to his feet. He stood on the approaches to one of the marvelous bridges he had seen rearing over the river. Smiling people walked by on either side of him, people dressed in so many colors they made him think of a field of wildflowers. Some of them spoke to him, but he could not understand, though the words sounded as if he should. But the faces were friendly, and the people gestured him onward, over the bridge with its intricate stonework, onward toward the shining, silver-streaked walls and the towers beyond. Toward the safety he knew waited there.

He joined the throng streaming across the bridge and into the city through massive gates set in tall, pristine walls. Within was a wonderland where the meanest structure seemed a palace. It was as though the builders had been told to take stone and brick and tile and create beauty to take the breath of mortal men. There was no building, no monument that did not make him stare with goggling eyes. Music drifted down the streets, a hundred different songs, but all blending with the clamor of the crowds to make one grand, joyous harmony. The scents of sweet perfumes and sharp spices, of wondrous foods and myriad flowers, all floated in the air, as if every good smell in the world were gathered there.

The street by which he entered the city, broad and paved with smooth, gray stone, stretched straight before him toward the center of the city. At its end loomed a tower larger and taller than any other in the city, a tower as white as fresh-fallen snow. That tower was where safety lay, and the knowledge he sought. But the city was such as he had never dreamed of seeing. Surely it would not matter if he delayed just a short time in going to the tower? He turned aside onto a narrower street, where jugglers strolled among hawkers of strange fruits.

Ahead of him down the street was a snow-white tower. The same tower. In just a little while, he thought, and rounded another corner. At the far end of this street, too, lay the white tower. Stubbornly he turned another corner, and another, and each time the alabaster tower met his eyes. He spun to run away from it . . . and skidded to a halt. Before him, the white tower. He was afraid to look over his shoulder, afraid it would be there, too.

The faces around him were still friendly, but shattered hope filled them now, hope he had broken. Still the people gestured him forward, pleading gestures. Toward the tower. Their eyes shone with desperate need, and only he could fulfill it, only he could save them.

Very well, he thought. The tower was, after all, where he wanted to go.

Even as he took his first step forward disappointment faded from those about him, and smiles wreathed every face. They moved with him, and small children strewed his path with flower petals. He looked over his shoulder in confusion, wondering who the flowers were meant for, but behind him were only more smiling people gesturing him on. *They must be for me,* he thought, and wondered why that suddenly did not seem strange at all. But wonderment lasted only a moment before melting away; all was as it should be.

First one, then another of the people began to sing, until every voice was lifted in a glorious anthem. He still could not understand the words, but a dozen interweaving harmonies shouted joy and salvation. Musicians capered through the on-flowing crowd, adding flutes and harps and drums in a dozen sizes to the hymn, and all the songs he had heard before blended in without seam. Girls danced around him, laying garlands of sweet-smelling blossoms across his shoulders, twining them about his neck. They smiled at him, their delight growing with every step he took. He could not help but smile back. His feet itched to join in their dance, and even as he thought of it he was dancing, his steps fitting as if he had known it all from birth. He threw back his head and laughed; his feet were lighter than they had ever been, dancing with. . . . He could not remember the name, but it did not seem important.

It is your destiny, a voice whispered in his head, and the whisper was a thread in the paean.

Carrying him like a twig on the crest of a wave, the crowd flowed into a huge square in the middle of the city, and for the first time he saw that the white tower rose from a great palace of pale marble, sculpted rather than built, curving walls and swelling domes and delicate spires fingering the sky. The whole of it made him gasp in awe. Broad stairs of pristine stone led up from the square, and at the foot of those stairs the people halted, but their song rose ever higher. The swelling voices buoyed his feet. *Your destiny,* the voice whispered, insistent now, eager.

He no longer danced, but neither did he stop. He mounted the stairs without hesitation. This was where he belonged.

Scrollwork covered the massive doors at the top of the stairs, carvings so intricate and delicate that he could not imagine a knife blade fine enough to fit. The portals swung open, and he went in. They closed behind him with an echoing crash like thunder.

“We have been waiting for you,” the Myrddraal hissed.

Rand sat bolt upright, gasping for breath and shivering, staring. Tam was still asleep on the bed. Slowly his breathing slowed. Half-consumed logs blazed in the fireplace with a good bed of coals built up around the fire-irons; someone had been there to tend it while he slept. A blanket lay at his feet, where it had fallen when he woke. The makeshift litter was gone, too, and his and Tam’s cloaks had been hung by the door.

He wiped cold sweat from his face with a hand that was none too steady and wondered if naming the Dark One in a dream brought his attention the same way that naming him aloud did.

Twilight darkened the window; the moon was well up, round and fat, and evening stars sparkled above the Mountains of Mist. He had slept the day away. He rubbed a sore spot on his side. Apparently he had slept with the sword hilt jabbing him in the ribs. Between that and an empty stomach and the night before, it was no wonder he had had nightmares.

His belly rumbled, and he got up stiffly and made his way to the table where Mistress al'Vere had left the tray. He twitched aside the white napkin. Despite the time he had slept, the beef broth was still warm, and so was the crusty bread. Mistress al'Vere's hand was plain; the tray had been replaced. Once she decided you needed a hot meal, she did not give up till it was inside you.

He gulped down some broth, and it was all he could do to put some meat and cheese between two pieces of bread before stuffing it in his mouth. Taking big bites, he went back to the bed.

Mistress al'Vere had apparently seen to Tam, as well. Tam had been undressed, his clothes now clean and neatly folded on the bedside table, and a blanket was drawn up under his chin. When Rand touched his father's forehead, Tam opened his eyes.

"There you are, boy. Marin said you were here, but I couldn't even sit up to see. She said you were too tired for her to wake just so I could look at you. Even Bran can't get around her when she has her mind set."

Tam's voice was weak, but his gaze was clear and steady. *The Aes Sedai was right,* Rand thought. With rest he would be as good as ever.

"Can I get you something to eat? Mistress al'Vere left a tray."

"She fed me already . . . if you can call it that. Wouldn't let me have anything but broth. How can a man avoid bad dreams with nothing but broth in his. . . ." Tam fumbled a hand from under the cover and touched the sword at Rand's waist. "Then it wasn't a dream. When Marin told me I was sick, I thought I had been. . . . But you're all right. That is all that matters. What of the farm?"

Rand took a deep breath. "The Trollocs killed the sheep. I think they took the cow, too, and the house needs a good cleaning." He managed a weak smile. "We were luckier than some. They burned half the village."

He told Tam everything that had happened, or at least most of it. Tam listened closely, and asked sharp questions, so he found himself having to tell about returning to the farmhouse from the woods, and that brought in the Trolloc he had killed. He had to tell how Nynaeve had said Tam was dying to explain why the Aes Sedai had tended him instead of the Wisdom. Tam's eyes widened at that, an Aes Sedai in Emond's Field. But Rand could see no need to go over every step of the journey from the farm, or his fears, or the Myrddraal on the road. Certainly not his nightmares as he slept by the bed. Especially he saw no reason to mention Tam's ramblings under the fever. Not yet. Moiraine's story, though: there was no avoiding that.

"Now that's a tale to make a gleeman proud," Tam muttered when he was done. "What would Trollocs want with you boys? Or the Dark One, Light help us?"

"You think she was lying? Master al'Vere said she was telling the truth about only two farms being attacked. And about Master Luhhan's house, and Master Cauthon's."

For a moment Tam lay silent before saying, "Tell me what she said. Her exact words, mind, just as she said them."

Rand struggled. Who ever remembered the *exact* words they heard? He chewed at his lip and scratched his head, and bit by bit he brought it out, as nearly as he could remember. "I can't think of anything else," he finished. "Some of it I'm not too sure she didn't say a little differently, but it's close, anyway."

"It's good enough. It has to be, doesn't it? You see, lad, Aes Sedai are tricksome. They don't lie, not right out, but the truth an Aes Sedai tells you is not always the truth you think it is. You take care around her."

"I've heard the stories," Rand retorted. "I'm not a child."

"So you're not, so you're not." Tam sighed heavily, then shrugged in annoyance. "I should be going along with you, just the same. The world outside the Two Rivers is nothing like Emond's Field."

That was an opening to ask about Tam going outside and all the rest of it, but Rand did not take it. His mouth fell open, instead. "Just like that? I thought you would try to talk me out of it. I thought you'd have a hundred reasons I should not go." He realized he had been hoping Tam would have a hundred reasons, and good ones.

"Maybe not a hundred," Tam said with a snort, "but a few did come to mind. Only they don't count for much. If Trollocs are after you, you will be safer in Tar Valon than you could ever be here. Just remember to be wary. Aes Sedai do things for their own reasons, and those are not always the reasons you think."

"The gleeman said something like that," Rand said slowly.

“Then he knows what he’s talking about. You listen sharp, think deep, and guard your tongue. That’s good advice for any dealings beyond the Two Rivers, but most especially with Aes Sedai. And with Warders. Tell Lan something, and you’ve as good as told Moiraine. If he’s a Warder, then he’s bonded to her as sure as the sun rose this morning, and he won’t keep many secrets from her, if any.”

Rand knew little about the bonding between Aes Sedai and Warders, though it played a big part in every story about Warders he had ever heard. It was something to do with the Power, a gift to the Warder, or maybe some sort of exchange. The Warders got all sorts of benefits, according to the stories. They healed more quickly than other men, and could go longer without food or water or sleep. Supposedly they could sense Trollocs, if they were close enough, and other creatures of the Dark One, too, which explained how Lan and Moiraine had tried to warn the village before the attack. As to what the Aes Sedai got out of it, the stories were silent, but he was not about to believe they did not get something.

“I’ll be careful,” Rand said. “I just wish I knew why. It doesn’t make any sense. Why me? Why us?”

“I wish I knew, too, boy. Blood and ashes, I wish I knew.” Tam sighed heavily. “Well, no use trying to put a broken egg back in the shell, I suppose. How soon do you have to go? I’ll be back on my feet in a day or two, and we can see about starting a new flock. Oren Dautry has some good stock he might be willing to part with, with the pastures all gone, and so does Jon Thane.”

“Moiraine . . . the Aes Sedai said you had to stay in bed. She said weeks.” Tam opened his mouth, but Rand went on. “And she talked to Mistress al’Vere.”

“Oh. Well, maybe I can talk Marin around.” Tam did not sound hopeful of it, though. He gave Rand a sharp look. “The way you avoided answering means you have to leave soon. Tomorrow? Or tonight?”

“Tonight,” Rand said quietly, and Tam nodded sadly.

“Yes. Well, if it must be done, best not to delay. But we will see about this ‘weeks’ business.” He plucked at his blankets with more irritation than strength. “Perhaps I’ll follow in a few days anyway. Catch you up on the road. We will see if Marin can keep me in bed when I want to get up.”

There was a tap at the door, and Lan stuck his head into the room. “Say your goodbyes quickly, sheepherder, and come. There may be trouble.”

"Trouble?" Rand said, and the Warder growled at him impatiently.

"Just hurry!"

Hastily Rand snatched up his cloak. He started to undo the sword belt, but Tam spoke up.

"Keep it. You will probably have more need of it than I, though, the Light willing, neither of us will. Take care, lad. You hear?"

Ignoring Lan's continued growls, Rand bent to grab Tam in a hug. "I will come back. I promise you that."

"Of course you will." Tam laughed. He returned the hug weakly, and ended by patting Rand on the back. "I know that. And I'll have twice as many sheep for you to tend when you return. Now go, before that fellow does himself an injury."

Rand tried to hang back, tried to find the words for the question he did not want to ask, but Lan entered the room to catch him by the arm and pull him into the hall. The Warder had donned a dull gray-green tunic of overlapping metal scales. His voice rasped with irritation.

"We have to hurry. Don't you understand the word *trouble*?"

Outside the room Mat waited, cloaked and coated and carrying his bow. A quiver hung at his waist. He was rocking anxiously on his heels, and he kept glancing off toward the stairs with what seemed to be equal parts impatience and fear. "This isn't much like the stories, Rand, is it?" he said hoarsely.

"What kind of trouble?" Rand demanded, but the Warder ran ahead of him instead of answering, taking the steps down two at a time. Mat dashed after him with quick gestures for Rand to follow.

Shrugging into his cloak, he caught up to them downstairs. Only a feeble light filled the common room; half the candles had burned out and most of the rest were guttering. It was empty except for the three of them. Mat stood next to one of the front windows, peeping out as if trying not to be seen. Lan held the door open a crack and peered into the inn yard.

Wondering what they could be watching, Rand went to join him. The Warder muttered at him to take a care, but he did open the door a trifle wider to make room for Rand to look, too.

At first he was not sure exactly what he was seeing. A crowd of village men, some three dozen or so, clustered near the burned-out husk of the peddler's wagon, night pushed back by the torches some of them carried. Moiraine faced them, her back to the inn, leaning with seeming casualness on her walking staff. Hari Coplin stood in the front of the crowd with his brother, Darl, and Bili Congar. Cenn Buie was there, as well, looking uncomfortable. Rand was startled to see Hari shake his fist at Moiraine.

"Leave Emond's Field!" the sour-faced farmer shouted. A few voices in the crowd echoed him, but hesitantly, and no one pushed forward. They might be willing to confront an Aes Sedai from within a crowd, but none of them wanted to be singled out. Not by an Aes Sedai who had every reason to take offense.

"You brought those monsters!" Darl roared. He waved a torch over his head, and there were shouts of, "You brought them!" and "It's your fault!" led by his cousin Bili.

Hari elbowed Cenn Buie, and the old thatcher pursed his lips and gave him a sidelong glare. "Those things . . . those Trollocs didn't appear until after you came," Cenn muttered, barely loud enough to be heard. He swung his head from side to side dourly as if wishing he were somewhere else and looking for a way to get there. "You're an Aes Sedai. We want none of your sort in the Two Rivers. Aes Sedai bring trouble on their backs. If you stay, you will only bring more."

His speech brought no response from the gathered villagers, and Hari scowled in frustration. Abruptly he snatched Darl's torch and shook it in her direction. "Get out!" he shouted. "Or we'll burn you out!"

Dead silence fell, except for the shuffling of a few feet as men drew back. Two Rivers folk could fight back if they were attacked, but violence was far from common, and threatening people was foreign to them, beyond the occasional shaking of a fist. Cenn Buie, Bili Congar, and the Coplins were left out front alone. Bili looked as if he wanted to back away, too.

Hari gave an uneasy start at the lack of support, but he recovered quickly. "Get out!" he shouted again, echoed by Darl and, more weakly, by Bili. Hari glared at the others. Most of the crowd failed to meet his eye.

Suddenly Bran al'Vere and Haral Luhhan moved out of the shadows, stopping apart from both the Aes Sedai and the crowd. In one hand the Mayor casually carried the big wooden maul he used to drive spigots into casks. "Did someone suggest burning my inn?" he asked softly.

The two Coplins took a step back, and Cenn Buie edged away from them. Bili Congar dived into the crowd. "Not that," Darl said quickly. "We never said that, Bran . . . ah, Mayor."

Bran nodded. “Then perhaps I heard you threatening to harm guests in my inn?”

“She’s an Aes Sedai,” Hari began angrily, but his words cut off as Haral Luhhan moved.

The blacksmith simply stretched, thrusting thick arms over his head, tightening massive fists until his knuckles cracked, but Hari looked at the burly man as if one of those fists had been shaken under his nose. Haral folded his arms across his chest. “Your pardon, Hari. I did not mean to cut you off. You were saying?”

But Hari, shoulders hunched as though he were trying to draw into himself and disappear, seemed to have nothing more to say.

“I’m surprised at you people,” Bran rumbled. “Paet al’Caar, your boy’s leg was broken last night, but I saw him walking on it today—because of her. Eward Candwin, you were lying on your belly with a gash down your back like a fish for cleaning, till she laid hands on you. Now it looks as if it happened a month ago, and unless I misdoubt there’ll barely be a scar. And you, Cenn.” The thatcher started to fade back into the crowd, but stopped, held uncomfortably by Bran’s gaze. “I’d be shocked to see any man on the Village Council here, Cenn, but you most of all. Your arm would still be hanging useless at your side, a mass of burns and bruises, if not for her. If you have no gratitude, have you no shame?”

Cenn half lifted his right hand, then looked away from it angrily. “I cannot deny what she did,” he muttered, and he did sound ashamed. “She helped me, and others,” he went on in a pleading tone, “but she’s an Aes Sedai, Bran. If those Trollocs didn’t come because of her, why did they come? We want no part of Aes Sedai in the Two Rivers. Let them keep their troubles away from us.”

A few men, safely back in the crowd, shouted then. “We want no Aes Sedai troubles!” “Send her away!” “Drive her out!” “Why did they come if not because of her?”

A scowl grew on Bran’s face, but before he could speak Moiraine suddenly whirled her vine-carved staff above her head, spinning it with both hands. Rand’s gasp echoed that of the villagers, for a hissing white flame flared from each end of the staff, standing straight out like spearpoints despite the rod’s whirling. Even Bran and Haral edged away from her. She snapped her arms down straight out before her, the staff parallel to the ground, but the pale fire still jetted out, brighter than the torches. Men shied away, held up hands to shield their eyes from the pain of that brilliance.

"Is this what Aemon's blood has come to?" The Aes Sedai's voice was not loud, but it overwhelmed every other sound. "Little people squabbling for the right to hide like rabbits? You have forgotten who you were, forgotten what you were, but I had hoped some small part was left, some memory in blood and bone. Some shred to steel you for the long night coming."

No one spoke. The two Coplins looked as if they never wanted to open their mouths again.

Bran said, "Forgotten who we were? We are who we always have been. Honest farmers and shepherds and craftsmen. Two Rivers folk."

"To the south," Moiraine said, "lies the river you call the White River, but far to the east of here men call it still by its rightful name. Manetherendrelle. In the Old Tongue, Waters of the Mountain Home. Sparkling waters that once coursed through a land of bravery and beauty. Two thousand years ago Manetherendrelle flowed by the walls of a mountain city so lovely to behold that Ogier stonemasons came to stare in wonder. Farms and villages covered this region, and that you call the Forest of Shadows, as well, and beyond. But all of those folk thought of themselves as the people of the Mountain Home, the people of Manetheren.

"Their King was Aemon al Caar al Thorin, Aemon son of Caar son of Thorin, and Eldrene ay Ellan ay Carlan was his Queen. Aemon, a man so fearless that the greatest compliment for courage any could give, even among his enemies, was to say a man had Aemon's heart. Eldrene, so beautiful that it was said the flowers bloomed to make her smile. Bravery and beauty and wisdom and a love that death could not sunder. Weep, if you have a heart, for the loss of them, for the loss of even their memory. Weep, for the loss of their blood."

She fell silent then, but no one spoke. Rand was as bound as the others in the spell she had created. When she spoke again, he drank it in, and so did the rest.

"For nearly two centuries the Trolloc Wars had ravaged the length and breadth of the world, and wherever battles raged, the Red Eagle banner of Manetheren was in the forefront. The men of Manetheren were a thorn to the Dark One's foot and a bramble to his hand. Sing of Manetheren, that would never bend knee to the Shadow. Sing of Manetheren, the sword that could not be broken.

“They were far away, the men of Manetheren, on the Field of Bekkar, called the Field of Blood, when news came that a Trolloc army was moving against their home. Too far to do else but wait to hear of their land’s death, for the forces of the Dark One meant to make an end of them. Kill the mighty oak by hacking away its roots. Too far to do else but mourn. But they were the men of the Mountain Home.

“Without hesitation, without thought for the distance they must travel, they marched from the very field of victory, still covered in dust and sweat and blood. Day and night they marched, for they had seen the horror a Trolloc army left behind it, and no man of them could sleep while such a danger threatened Manetheren. They moved as if their feet had wings, marching further and faster than friends hoped or enemies feared they could. At any other day that march alone would have inspired songs. When the Dark One’s armies swooped down upon the lands of Manetheren, the men of the Mountain Home stood before it, with their backs to the Tarendrelle.”

Some villager raised a small cheer then, but Moiraine kept on as if she had not heard. “The host that faced the men of Manetheren was enough to daunt the bravest heart. Ravens blackened the sky; Trollocs blackened the land. Trollocs and their human allies. Trollocs and Darkfriends in tens of tens of thousands, and Dreadlords to command. At night their cook-fires outnumbered the stars, and dawn revealed the banner of Ba’alzamon at their head. Ba’alzamon, Heart of the Dark. An ancient name for the Father of Lies. The Dark One could not have been free of his prison at Shayol Ghul, for if he had been, not all the forces of humankind together could have stood against him, but there was power there. Dreadlords, and some evil that made that light-destroying banner seem no more than right and sent a chill into the souls of the men who faced it.

“Yet, they knew what they must do. Their homeland lay just across the river. They must keep that host, and the power with it, from the Mountain Home. Aemon had sent out messengers. Aid was promised if they could hold for but three days at the Tarendrelle. Hold for three days against odds that should overwhelm them in the first hour. Yet somehow, through bloody assault and desperate defense, they held through an hour, and the second hour, and the third. For three days they fought, and though the land became a butcher’s yard, no crossing of the Tarendrelle did they yield. By the third night no help had come, and no messengers, and they fought on alone. For six days. For nine. And on the tenth day Aemon knew the bitter taste of betrayal. No help was coming, and they could hold the river crossings no more.”

“What did they do?” Hari demanded. Torchfires flickered in the chill night breeze, but no one made a move to draw a cloak tighter.

“Aemon crossed the Tarendrelle,” Moiraine told them, “destroying the bridges behind him. And he sent word throughout his land for the people to flee, for he knew the powers with the Trolloc horde would find a way to bring it across the river. Even as the word went out, the Trolloc crossing began, and the soldiers of Manetheren took up the fight again, to buy with their lives what hours they could for their people to escape. From the city of Manetheren, Eldrene organized the flight of her people into the deepest forests and the fastness of the mountains.

“But some did not flee. First in a trickle, then a river, then a flood, men went, not to safety, but to join the army fighting for their land. Shepherds with bows, and farmers with pitchforks, and woodsmen with axes. Women went, too, shouldering what weapons they could find and marching side by side with their men. No one made that journey who did not know they would never return. But it was their land. It had been their fathers’, and it would be their children’s, and they went to pay the price of it. Not a step of ground was given up until it was soaked in blood, but at the last the army of Manetheren was driven back, back to here, to this place you now call Emond’s Field. And here the Trolloc hordes surrounded them.”

Her voice held the sound of cold tears. “Trolloc dead and the corpses of human renegades piled up in mounds, but always more scrambled over those charnel heaps in waves of death that had no end. There could be but one finish. No man or woman who had stood beneath the banner of the Red Eagle at that day’s dawning still lived when night fell. The sword that could not be broken was shattered.

“In the Mountains of Mist, alone in the emptied city of Manetheren, Eldrene felt Aemon die, and her heart died with him. And where her heart had been was left only a thirst for vengeance, vengeance for her love, vengeance for her people and her land. Driven by grief she reached out to the True Source, and hurled the One Power at the Trolloc army. And there the Dreadlords died wherever they stood, whether in their secret councils or exhorting their soldiers. In the passing of a breath the Dreadlords and the generals of the Dark One’s host burst into flame. Fire consumed their bodies, and terror consumed their just-victorious army.

“Now they ran like beasts before a wildfire in the forest, with no thought for anything but escape. North and south they fled. Thousands drowned attempting to cross the Tarendrelle without the aid of the Dreadlords, and at the Manetherendrelle they tore down the bridges in their fright at what might be following them. Where they found people, they slew and burned, but to flee was the need that gripped them. Until, at last, no one of them remained in the lands of Manetheren. They were dispersed like dust before the whirlwind. The final vengeance came more slowly, but it came, when they were hunted down by other peoples, by other armies in other lands. None was left alive of those who did murder at Aemon’s Field.

“But the price was high for Manetheren. Eldrene had drawn to herself more of the One Power than any human could ever hope to wield unaided. As the enemy generals died, so did she die, and the fires that consumed her consumed the empty city of Manetheren, even the stones of it, down to the living rock of the mountains. Yet the people had been saved.

“Nothing was left of their farms, their villages, or their great city. Some would say there was nothing left for them, nothing but to flee to other lands, where they could begin anew. They did not say so. They had paid such a price in blood and hope for their land as had never been paid before, and now they were bound to that soil by ties stronger than steel. Other wars would wrack them in years to come, until at last their corner of the world was forgotten and at last they had forgotten wars and the ways of war. Never again did Manetheren rise. Its soaring spires and splashing fountains became as a dream that slowly faded from the minds of its people. But they, and their children, and their children’s children, held the land that was theirs. They held it when the long centuries had washed the why of it from their memories. They held it until, today, there is you. Weep for Manetheren. Weep for what is lost forever.”

The fires on Moiraine’s staff winked out, and she lowered it to her side as if it weighed a hundred pounds. For a long moment the moan of the wind was the only sound. Then Paet al’Caar shouldered past the Coplins.

“I don’t know about your story,” the long-jawed farmer said. “I’m no thorn to the Dark One’s foot, nor ever likely to be, neither. But my Wil is walking because of you, and for that I am ashamed to be here. I don’t know if you can forgive me, but whether you will or no, I’ll be going. And for me, you can stay in Emond’s Field as long as you like.”

With a quick duck of his head, almost a bow, he pushed back through the crowd. Others began to mutter then, offering shamefaced penitence before they, too, slipped away one by one. The Coplins, sour-mouthed and scowling once more, looked at the faces around them and vanished into the night without a word. Bili Congar had disappeared even before his cousins.

Lan pulled Rand back and shut the door. “Let’s go, boy.” The Warder started for the back of the inn. “Come along, both of you. Quickly!”

Rand hesitated, exchanging a wondering glance with Mat. While Moiraine had been telling the story, Master al’Vere’s Dhurrans could not have dragged him away, but now something else held his feet. This was the real beginning, leaving the inn and following the Warder into the night. . . . He shook himself, and tried to firm his resolve. He had no choice but to go, but he would come back to Emond’s Field, however far or long this journey was.

“What are you waiting for?” Lan asked from the door that led out of the back of the common room. With a start Mat hurried to him.

Trying to convince himself that he was beginning a grand adventure, Rand followed them through the darkened kitchen and out into the stableyard.

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CHAPTER

10

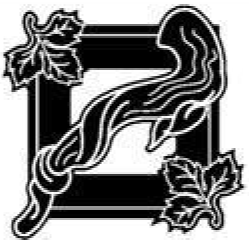

Leavetaking

A single lantern, its shutters half closed, hung from a nail on a stall post, casting a dim light. Deep shadows swallowed most of the stalls. As Rand came through the doors from the stableyard, hard on the heels of Mat and the Warder, Perrin leaped up in a rustle of straw from where he had been sitting with his back against a stall door. A heavy cloak swathed him.

Lan barely paused to demand, “Did you look the way I told you, blacksmith?”

“I looked,” Perrin replied. “There’s nobody here but us. Why would anybody hide—”

“Care and a long life go together, blacksmith.” The Warder ran a quick eye around the shadowed stable and the deeper shadows of the hayloft above, then shook his head. “No time,” he muttered, half to himself. “Hurry, she says.”

As if to suit his words, he strode quickly to where the five horses stood tethered, bridled and saddled at the back of the pool of light. Two were the black stallion and white mare that Rand had seen before. The others, if not quite so tall or so sleek, certainly appeared to be among the best the Two Rivers had to offer. With hasty care Lan began examining cinches and girth straps, and the leather ties that held saddlebags, water-skins, and blanketrolls behind the saddles.

Rand exchanged shaky smiles with his friends, trying hard to look as if he really was eager to be off.

For the first time Mat noticed the sword at Rand’s waist, and pointed to it. “You becoming a Warder?” He laughed, then swallowed it with a quick glance at Lan. The Warder apparently took no notice. “Or at least a merchant’s guard,” Mat went on with a grin that seemed only a little forced. He hefted his bow. “An honest man’s weapon isn’t good enough for him.”

Rand thought about flourishing the sword, but Lan being there stopped him. The Warder was not even looking in his direction, but he was sure the man was aware of everything that went on around him. Instead he said with exaggerated casualness, “It might be useful,” as if wearing a sword were nothing out of the ordinary.

Perrin moved, trying to hide something under his cloak. Rand glimpsed a wide leather belt encircling the apprentice blacksmith’s waist, with the handle of an axe thrust through a loop on the belt.

“What do you have there?” he asked.

“Merchant’s guard, indeed,” Mat hooted.

The shaggy-haired youth gave Mat a frown that suggested he had already had more than his fair share of joking, then sighed heavily and tossed back his cloak to uncover the axe. It was no common woodsman’s tool. A broad half-moon blade on one side of the head and a curved spike on the other made it every bit as strange for the Two Rivers as Rand’s sword. Perrin’s hand rested on it with a sense of familiarity, though.

“Master Luhhan made it about two years ago, for a wool-buyer’s guard. But when it was done the fellow wouldn’t pay what he had agreed, and Master Luhhan would not take less. He gave it to me when”—he cleared his throat, then shot Rand the same warning frown he’d given Mat—“when he found me practicing with it. He said I might as well have it since he couldn’t make anything useful from it.”

“Practicing,” Mat snickered, but held up his hands soothingly when Perrin raised his head. “As you say. It’s just as well one of us knows how to use a real weapon.”

“That bow is a real weapon,” Lan said suddenly. He propped an arm across the saddle of his tall black and regarded them gravely. “So are the slings I’ve seen you village boys with. Just because you never used them for anything but hunting rabbits or chasing a wolf away from the sheep makes no difference. Anything can be a weapon, if the man or woman who holds it has the nerve and will to make it so. Trollocs aside, you had better have that clear in your minds before we leave the Two Rivers, before we leave Emond’s Field, if you want to reach Tar Valon alive.”

His face and voice, cold as death and hard as a rough-hewn gravestone, stifled their smiles and their tongues. Perrin grimaced and pulled his cloak back over the axe. Mat stared at his feet and stirred the straw on the stable floor with his toe. The Warder grunted and went back to his checking, and the silence lengthened.

“It isn’t much like the stories,” Mat said, finally.

“I don’t know,” Perrin said sourly. “Trollocs, a Warder, an Aes Sedai. What more could you ask?”

“Aes Sedai,” Mat whispered, sounding as if he were suddenly cold.

“Do you believe her, Rand?” Perrin asked. “I mean, what would Trollocs want with us?”

As one, they glanced at the Warder. Lan appeared absorbed in the white mare’s saddle girth, but the three of them moved back toward the stable door, away from Lan. Even so, they huddled together and spoke softly.

Rand shook his head. “I don’t know, but she had it right about our farms being the only ones attacked. And they attacked Master Luhhan’s house and the forge first, here in the village. I asked the Mayor. It’s as easy to believe they are after us as anything else I can think of.” Suddenly he realized they were both staring at him.

“You asked the Mayor?” Mat said incredulously. “She said not to tell anybody.”

“I didn’t tell him why I was asking,” Rand protested. “Do you mean you didn’t talk to anybody at all? You didn’t let anybody know you’re going?”

Perrin shrugged defensively. “Moiraine Sedai said not anybody.”

“We left notes,” Mat said. “For our families. They’ll find them in the morning. Rand, my mother thinks Tar Valon is the next thing to Shayol Ghul.” He gave a little laugh to show he did not share her opinion. It was not very convincing. “She’d try to lock me in the cellar if she believed I was even thinking of going there.”

“Master Luhhan is stubborn as stone,” Perrin added, “and Mistress Luhhan is worse. If you’d seen her digging through what’s left of the house, saying she hoped the Trollocs did come back so she could get her hands on them. . . .”

“Burn me, Rand,” Mat said, “I know she’s an Aes Sedai and all, but the Trollocs were really here. She said not to tell anybody. If an Aes Sedai doesn’t know what to do about something like this, who does?”

"I don't know." Rand rubbed at his forehead. His head hurt; he could not get that dream out of his mind. "My father believes her. At least, he agreed that we had to go."

Suddenly Moiraine was in the doorway. "You talked to your father about this journey?" She was clothed in dark gray from head to foot, with a skirt divided for riding astride, and the serpent ring was the only gold she wore now.

Rand eyed her walking staff; despite the flames he had seen, there was no sign of charring, or even soot. "I couldn't go off without letting him know."

She eyed him for a moment with pursed lips before turning to the others. "And did you also decide that a note was not enough?" Mat and Perrin talked on top of each other, assuring her they had only left notes, the way she had said. Nodding, she waved them to silence, and gave Rand a sharp look. "What is done is already woven in the Pattern. Lan?"

"The horses are ready," the Warder said, "and we have enough provisions to reach Baerlon with some to spare. We can leave at any time. I suggest now."

"Not without me." Egwene slipped into the stable, a shawl-wrapped bundle in her arms. Rand nearly fell over his own feet.

Lan's sword had come half out of its sheath; when he saw who it was he shoved the blade back, his eyes suddenly flat. Perrin and Mat began babbling to convince Moiraine they had not told Egwene about leaving. The Aes Sedai ignored them; she simply looked at Egwene, tapping her lips thoughtfully with one finger.

The hood of Egwene's dark brown cloak was pulled up, but not enough to hide the defiant way she faced Moiraine. "I have everything I need here. Including food. And I will not be left behind. I'll probably never get another chance to see the world outside the Two Rivers."

"This isn't a picnic trip into the Waterwood, Egwene," Mat growled. He stepped back when she looked at him from under lowered brows.

"Thank you, Mat. I wouldn't have known. Do you think you three are the only ones who want to see what's outside? I've dreamed about it as long as you have, and I don't intend to miss this chance."

"How did you find out we were leaving?" Rand demanded. "Anyway, you can't go with us. We aren't leaving for the fun of it. The Trollocs are after us.” She gave him a tolerant look, and he flushed and stiffened indignantly.

“First,” she told him patiently, “I saw Mat creeping about, trying hard not to be noticed. Then I saw Perrin attempting to hide that absurd great axe under his cloak. I knew Lan had bought a horse, and it suddenly occurred to me to wonder why he needed another. And if he could buy one, he could buy others. Putting that with Mat and Perrin sneaking about like bull calves pretending to be foxes . . . well, I could see only one answer. I don’t know if I’m surprised or not to find you here, Rand, after all your talk about daydreams. With Mat and Perrin involved, I suppose I should have known you would be in it, too.”

“I have to go, Egwene,” Rand said. “All of us do, or the Trollocs will come back.”

“The Trollocs!” Egwene laughed incredulously. “Rand, if you’ve decided to see some of the world, well and good, but please spare me any of your nonsensical tales.”

“It’s true,” Perrin said as Mat began, “The Trollocs—”

“Enough,” Moiraine said quietly, but it cut their talk as sharply as a knife. “Did anyone else notice all of this?” Her voice was soft, but Egwene swallowed and drew herself up before answering.

“After last night, all they can think about is rebuilding, that and what to do if it happens again. They couldn’t see anything else unless it was pushed under their noses. And I told no one what I suspected. No one.”

“Very well,” Moiraine said after a moment. “You may come with us.”

A startled expression darted across Lan’s face. It was gone in an instant, leaving him outwardly calm, but furious words erupted from him. “No, Moiraine!”

“It is part of the Pattern, now, Lan.”

“It is ridiculous!” he retorted. “There’s no reason for her to come along, and every reason for her not to.”

“There *is* a reason for it,” Moiraine said calmly. “A part of the Pattern, Lan.” The Warder’s stony face showed nothing, but he nodded slowly.

“But, Egwene,” Rand said, “the Trollocs will be chasing us. We won’t be safe until we get to Tar Valon.”

“Don’t try to frighten me off,” she said. “I am going.”

Rand knew that tone of voice. He had not heard it since she decided that climbing the tallest trees was for children, but he remembered it well.

“If you think being chased by Trollocs will be fun,” he began, but Moiraine interrupted.

“We have no time for this. We must be as far away as possible by daybreak. If she is left behind, Rand, she could rouse the village before we have gone a mile, and that would surely warn the Myrddraal.”

“I would not do that,” Egwene protested.

“She can ride the gleeman’s horse,” the Warder said. “I’ll leave him enough to buy another.”

“That will not be possible,” came Thom Merrilin’s resonant voice from the hayloft. Lan’s sword left its sheath this time, and he did not put it back as he stared up at the gleeman.

Thom tossed down a blanketroll, then slung his cased flute and harp across his back and shouldered bulging saddlebags. “This village has no use for me, now, while on the other hand, I have never performed in Tar Valon. And though I usually journey alone, after last night I have no objections at all to traveling in company.”

The Warder gave Perrin a hard look, and Perrin shifted uncomfortably. “I didn’t think of looking in the loft,” he muttered.

As the long-limbed gleeman scrambled down the ladder from the loft, Lan spoke, stiffly formal. “Is this part of the Pattern, too, Moiraine Sedai?”

“Everything is a part of the Pattern, my old friend,” Moiraine replied softly. “We cannot pick and choose. But we shall see.”

Thom put his feet on the stable floor and turned from the ladder, brushing straw from his patch-covered cloak. “In fact,” he said in more normal tones, “you might say that I insist on traveling in company. I have given many hours over many mugs of ale to thinking of how I might end my days. A Trolloc’s cookpot was not one of the thoughts.” He looked askance at the Warder’s sword. “There’s no need for that. I am not a cheese for slicing.”

“Master Merrilin,” Moiraine said, “we must go quickly, and almost certainly in great danger. The Trollocs are still out there, and we go by night. Are you sure that you want to travel with us?”

Thom eyed the lot of them with a quizzical smile. “If it is not too dangerous for the girl, it can’t be too dangerous for me. Besides, what gleeman would not face a little danger to perform in Tar Valon?”

Moiraine nodded, and Lan scabbarded his sword. Rand suddenly wondered what would have happened if Thom had changed his mind, or if

Moiraine had not nodded. The gleeman began saddling his horse as if similar thoughts had never crossed his mind, but Rand noticed that he eyed Lan's sword more than once.

"Now," Moiraine said. "What horse for Egwene?"

"The peddler's horses are as bad as the Dhurrans," the Warder replied sourly. "Strong, but slow plodders."

"Bela," Rand said, getting a look from Lan that made him wish he had kept silent. But he knew he could not dissuade Egwene; the only thing left was to help. "Bela may not be as fast as the others, but she's strong. I ride her sometimes. She can keep up."

Lan looked into Bela's stall, muttering under his breath. "She might be a little better than the others," he said finally. "I don't suppose there is any other choice."

"Then she will have to do," Moiraine said. "Rand, find a saddle for Bela. Quickly, now! We have tarried too long already."

Rand hurriedly chose a saddle and blanket in the tack room, then fetched Bela from her stall. The mare looked back at him in sleepy surprise when he put the saddle on her back. When he rode her, it was barebacked; she was not used to a saddle. He made soothing noises while he tightened the girth strap, and she accepted the oddity with no more than a shake of her mane.

Taking Egwene's bundle from her, he tied it on behind the saddle while she mounted and adjusted her skirts. They were not divided for riding astride, so her wool stockings were bared to the knee. She wore the same soft leather shoes as all the other village girls. They were not at all suited for journeying to Watch Hill, much less Tar Valon.

"I still think you shouldn't come," he said. "I wasn't making it up about the Trollocs. But I promise I will take care of you."

"Perhaps I'll take care of you," she replied lightly. At his exasperated look she smiled and bent down to smooth his hair. "I know you'll look after me, Rand. We will look after each other. But now you had better look after getting on your horse."

All of the others were already mounted and waiting for him, he realized. The only horse left riderless was Cloud, a tall gray with a black mane and tail that belonged to Jon Thane, or had. He scrambled into the saddle, though not without difficulty as the gray tossed his head and pranced sideways as Rand put his foot in the stirrup, and his scabbard caught in his legs. It was not chance that his friends had not chosen Cloud. Master Thane often raced the spirited gray against merchants' horses, and Rand had never known him to lose, but he had never known Cloud to give anyone an easy ride, either. Lan must have given a huge price to make the miller sell. As he settled in the saddle Cloud's dancing increased, as if the gray were eager to run. Rand gripped the reins firmly and tried to think that he would have no trouble. Perhaps if he convinced himself, he could convince the horse, too.

An owl hooted in the night outside, and the village people jumped before they realized what it was. They laughed nervously and exchanged shamefaced looks.

"Next thing, field mice will chase us up a tree," Egwene said with an unsteady chuckle.

Lan shook his head. "Better if it had been wolves."

"Wolves!" Perrin exclaimed, and the Warder favored him with a flat stare.

"Wolves don't like Trollocs, blacksmith, and Trollocs don't like wolves, or dogs, either. If I heard wolves I would be sure there were no Trollocs waiting out there for us." He moved into the moonlit night, walking his tall black slowly.

Moiraine rode after him without a moment's hesitation, and Egwene kept hard to the Aes Sedai's side. Rand and the gleeman brought up the rear, following Mat and Perrin.

The back of the inn was dark and silent, and dappled moon shadows filled the stableyard. The soft thuds of the hooves faded quickly, swallowed by the night. In the darkness the Warder's cloak made him a shadow, too. Only the need to let him lead the way kept the others from clustering around him. Getting out of the village without being seen was going to be no easy task, Rand decided as he neared the gate. At least, without being seen by villagers. Many windows in the village emitted pale yellow light, and although those glows seemed very small in the night now, shapes moved frequently within them, the shapes of villagers watching to see what this night brought. No one wanted to be caught by surprise again.

In the deep shadows beside the inn, just on the point of leaving the stableyard, Lan abruptly halted, motioning sharply for silence.

Boots rattled on the Wagon Bridge, and here and there on the bridge moonlight glinted off metal. The boots clattered across the bridge, grated on gravel, and approached the inn. No sound at all came from those in the shadow. Rand suspected his friends, at least, were too frightened to make a noise. Like him.

The footsteps halted before the inn in the grayness just beyond the dim light from the common-room windows. It was not until Jon Thane stepped forward, a spear propped on his stout shoulder, an old jerkin sewn all over with steel disks straining across his chest, that Rand saw them for what they were. A dozen men from the village and the surrounding farms, some in helmets or pieces of armor that had lain dust-covered in attics for generations, all with a spear or a woodaxe or a rusty bill.

The miller peered into a common-room window, then turned with a curt, “It looks right here.” The others formed in two ragged ranks behind him, and the patrol marched into the night as if stepping to three different drums.

“Two Dha’vol Trollocs would have them all for breakfast,” Lan muttered when the sound of their boots had faded, “but they have eyes and ears.” He turned his stallion back. “Come.”

Slowly, quietly, the Warder took them back across the stableyard, down the bank through the willows and into the Winespring Water. So close to the Winespring itself the cold, swift water, gleaming as it swirled around the horses’ legs, was deep enough to lap against the soles of the riders’ boots.

Climbing out on the far bank, the line of horses wound its way under the Warder’s deft direction, keeping away from any of the village houses. From time to time Lan stopped, signing them all to be quiet, though no one else heard or saw anything. Each time he did, however, another patrol of villagers and farmers soon passed. Slowly they moved toward the north edge of the village.

Rand peered at the high-peaked houses in the dark, trying to impress them on his memory. *A fine adventurer I am,* he thought. He was not even out of the village yet, and already he was homesick. But he did not stop looking.

They passed beyond the last farmhouses on the outskirts of the village and into the countryside, paralleling the North Road that led to Taren Ferry. Rand thought that surely no night sky elsewhere could be as beautiful as the Two Rivers sky. The clear black seemed to reach to forever, and myriad stars gleamed like points of light scattered through crystal. The moon, only a thin slice less than full, appeared almost close enough to touch, if he stretched, and. . . .

A black shape flew slowly across the silvery ball of the moon. Rand's involuntary jerk on the reins halted the gray. A bat, he thought weakly, but he knew it was not. Bats were a common sight of an evening, darting after flies and bitemes in the twilight. The wings that carried this creature might have the same shape, but they moved with the slow, powerful sweep of a bird of prey. And it was hunting. The way it cast back and forth in long arcs left no doubt of that. Worst of all was the size. For a bat to seem so large against the moon it would have had to be almost within arm's reach. He tried to judge in his mind how far away it must be, and how big. The body of it had to be as large as a man, and the wings. . . . It crossed the face of the moon again, wheeling suddenly downward to be engulfed by the night.

He did not realize that Lan had ridden back to him until the Warder caught his arm. "What are you sitting here and staring at, boy? We have to keep moving." The others waited behind Lan.

Half expecting to be told he was letting fear of the Trollocs overcome his sense, Rand told what he had seen. He hoped that Lan would dismiss it as a bat, or a trick of his eyes.

Lan growled a word, sounding as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. "Draghkar." Egwene and the other Two Rivers folk stared at the sky nervously in all directions, but the gleeman groaned softly.

"Yes," Moiraine said. "It is too much to hope otherwise. And if the Myrddraal has a Draghkar at his command, then he will soon know where we are, if he does not already. We must move more quickly than we can cross-country. We may still reach Taren Ferry ahead of the Myrddraal, and he and his Trollocs will not cross as easily as we."

"A Draghkar?" Egwene said. "What is it?"

It was Thom Merrilin who answered her hoarsely. "In the war that ended the Age of Legends, worse than Trollocs and Halfmen were created."

Moiraine's head jerked toward him as he spoke. Not even the dark could hide the sharpness of her look.

Before anyone could ask the gleeman for more, Lan began giving directions. "We take to the North Road, now. For your lives, follow my lead, keep up and keep together."

He wheeled his horse about, and the others galloped wordlessly after him.

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CHAPTER

11

The Road to Taren Ferry

On the hard-packed dirt of the North Road the horses stretched out, manes and tails streaming back in the moonlight as they raced northward, hooves pounding a steady rhythm. Lan led the way, black horse and shadow-clad rider all but invisible in the cold night. Moiraine’s white mare, matching the stallion stride for stride, was a pale dart speeding through the dark. The rest followed in a tight line, as if they were all tied to a rope with one end in the Warder’s hands.

Rand galloped last in line, with Thom Merrilin just ahead and the others less distinct beyond. The gleeman never turned his head, reserving his eyes for where they ran, not what they ran from. If Trollocs appeared behind, or the Fade on its silent horse, or that flying creature, the Draghkar, it would be up to Rand to sound an alarm.

Every few minutes he craned his neck to peer behind while he clung to Cloud’s mane and reins. The Draghkar. . . . Worse than Trollocs and Fades, Thom had said. But the sky was empty, and only darkness and shadows met his eyes on the ground. Shadows that could hide an army.

Now that the gray had been let loose to run, the animal sped through the night like a ghost, easily keeping pace with Lan’s stallion. And Cloud wanted to go faster. He wanted to catch the black, strained to catch the black. Rand had to keep a firm hand on the reins to hold him back. Cloud lunged against his restraint as if the gray thought this were a race, fighting him for mastery with every stride. Rand clung to saddle and reins with every muscle taut. Fervently he hoped his mount did not detect how uneasy he was. If Cloud did, he would lose the one real edge he held, however precariously.

Lying low on Cloud's neck, Rand kept a worried eye on Bela and on her rider. When he had said the shaggy mare could stay with the others, he had not meant on the run. She kept up now only by running as he had not thought she could. Lan had not wanted Egwene in their number. Would he slow for her if Bela began to flag? Or would he try to leave her behind? The Aes Sedai and the Warder thought Rand and his friends were important in some way, but for all of Moiraine's talk of the Pattern, he did not think they included Egwene in that importance.

If Bela fell back, he would fall back, too, whatever Moiraine and Lan had to say about it. Back where the Fade and the Trollocs were. Back where the Draghkar was. With all his heart and desperation he silently shouted at Bela to run like the wind, silently tried to will strength into her. *Run!* His skin prickled, and his bones felt as if they were freezing, ready to split open. *The Light help her, run!* And Bela ran.

On and on they sped, northward into the night, time fading into an indistinct blur. Now and again the lights of farmhouses flashed into sight, then disappeared as quickly as imagination. Dogs' sharp challenges faded swiftly behind, or cut off abruptly as the dogs decided they had been chased away. They raced through darkness relieved only by watery pale moonlight, a darkness where trees along the road loomed up without warning, then were gone. For the rest, murk surrounded them, and only a solitary night-bird's cry, lonely and mournful, disturbed the steady pounding of hooves.

Abruptly Lan slowed, then brought the file of horses to a stop. Rand was not sure how long they had been moving, but a soft ache filled his legs from gripping the saddle. Ahead of them in the night, lights sparkled, as if a tall swarm of fireflies held one place among the trees.

Rand frowned at the lights in puzzlement, then suddenly gasped with surprise. The fireflies were windows, the windows of houses covering the sides and top of a hill. It was Watch Hill. He could hardly believe they had come so far. They had probably made the journey as fast as it had ever been traveled. Following Lan's example, Rand and Thom Merrilin dismounted. Cloud stood head down, sides heaving. Lather, almost indistinguishable from the horse's smoky sides, flecked the gray's neck and shoulders. Rand thought that Cloud would not be carrying anyone further that night.

"Much as I would like to put all these villages behind me," Thom announced, "a few hours rest would not go amiss right now. Surely we have enough of a lead to allow that?"

Rand stretched, knuckling the small of his back. “If we’re stopping the rest of the night in Watch Hill, we may as well go on up.”

A vagrant gust of wind brought a fragment of song from the village, and smells of cooking that made his mouth water. They were still celebrating in Watch Hill. There had been no Trollocs to disturb their Bel Tine. He looked for Egwene. She was leaning against Bela, slumped with weariness. The others were climbing down as well, with many a sigh and much stretching of aching muscles. Only the Warder and the Aes Sedai showed no visible sign of fatigue.

“I could do with some singing,” Mat put in tiredly. “And maybe a hot mutton pie at the White Boar.” Pausing, he added, “I’ve never been further than Watch Hill. The White Boar’s not nearly as good as the Winespring Inn.”

“The White Boar isn’t so bad,” Perrin said. “A mutton pie for me, too. And lots of hot tea to take the chill off my bones.”

“We cannot stop until we are across the Taren,” Lan said sharply. “Not for more than a few minutes.”

“But the horses,” Rand protested. “We’ll run them to death if we try to go any further tonight. Moiraine Sedai, surely you—”

He had vaguely noticed her moving among the horses, but he had not paid any real attention to what she did. Now she brushed past him to lay her hands on Cloud’s neck. Rand fell silent. Suddenly the horse tossed his head with a soft whicker, nearly pulling the reins from Rand’s hands. The gray danced a step sideways, as restive as if he had spent a week in a stable. Without a word Moiraine went to Bela.

“I did not know she could do that,” Rand said softly to Lan, his cheeks hot.

“You, of all people, should have suspected it,” the Warder replied. “You watched her with your father. She will wash all the fatigue away. First from the horses, then from the rest of you.”

“The rest of us. Not you?”

“Not me, sheepherder. I don’t need it, not yet. And not her. What she can do for others, she cannot do for herself. Only one of us will ride tired. You had better hope she does not grow too tired before we reach Tar Valon.”

“Too tired for what?” Rand asked the Warder.

“You were right about your Bela, Rand,” Moiraine said from where she stood by the mare. “She has a good heart, and as much stubbornness as the rest of you Two Rivers folk. Strange as it seems, she may be the least weary of all.”

A scream ripped the darkness, a sound like a man dying under sharp knives, and wings swooped low above the party. The night deepened in the shadow that swept over them. With panicked cries the horses reared wildly.

The wind of the Draghkar’s wings beat at Rand with a feel like the touch of slime, like chittering in the dank dimness of a nightmare. He had no time even to feel the fear of it, for Cloud exploded into the air with a scream of his own, twisting desperately as if attempting to shake off some clinging thing. Rand, hanging onto the reins, was jerked off his feet and dragged across the ground, Cloud screaming as though the big gray felt wolves tearing at his hocks.

Somehow he maintained his grip on the reins; using the other hand as much as his legs he scrambled onto his feet, taking leaping, staggering steps to keep from being pulled down again. His breath came in ragged pants of desperation. He could not let Cloud get away. He threw out a frantic hand, barely catching the bridle. Cloud reared, lifting him into the air; Rand clung helplessly, hoping against hope that the horse would quieten.

The shock of landing jarred Rand to his teeth, but suddenly the gray was still, nostrils flaring and eyes rolling, stiff-legged and trembling. Rand was trembling as well, and all but hanging from the bridle. *That jolt must have shaken the fool animal, too,* he thought. He took three or four deep, shaky breaths. Only then could he look around and see what had happened to the others.

Chaos reigned among the party. They clutched reins against jerking heads, trying with little success to calm the rearing horses that dragged them about in a milling mass. Only two seemingly had no trouble at all with their mounts. Moiraine sat straight in her saddle, the white mare stepping delicately away from the confusion as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened. On foot, Lan scanned the sky, sword in one hand and reins in the other; the sleek black stallion stood quietly beside him.

Sounds of merrymaking no longer came from Watch Hill. Those in the village must have heard the cry, too. Rand knew they would listen awhile, and perhaps watch for what had caused it, then return to their jollity. They would soon forget the incident, its memory submerged by song and food and dance and fun. Perhaps when they heard the news of what had happened in Emond’s Field some would remember, and wonder. A fiddle began to play, and after a moment a flute joined in. The village was resuming its celebration.

“Mount!” Lan commanded curtly. Sheathing his sword, he leaped onto the stallion. “The Draghkar would not have showed itself unless it had already reported our whereabouts to the Myrddraal.” Another strident shriek drifted down from far above, fainter but no less harsh. The music from Watch Hill silenced raggedly once more. “It tracks us now, marking us for the Halfman. He won’t be far.”

The horses, fresh now as well as fear-struck, pranced and backed away from those trying to mount. A cursing Thom Merrilin was the first into his saddle, but the others were up soon after. All but one.

“Hurry, Rand!” Egwene shouted. The Draghkar gave shrill voice once more, and Bela ran a few steps before she could rein the mare in. “Hurry!”

With a start Rand realized that instead of trying to mount Cloud he had been standing there staring at the sky in a vain attempt to locate the source of those vile shrieks. More, all unaware, he had drawn Tam’s sword as if to fight the flying thing.

His face reddened, making him glad for the night to hide him. Awkwardly, with one hand occupied by the reins, he re-sheathed the blade, glancing hastily at the others. Moiraine, Lan, and Egwene all were looking at him, though he could not be sure how much they could see in the moonlight. The rest seemed too absorbed with keeping their horses under control to pay him any mind. He put a hand on the pommel and reached the saddle in one leap, as if he had been doing the like all his life. If any of his friends had noticed the sword, he would surely hear about it later. There would be time enough to worry about it then.

As soon as he was in the saddle they were all off at a gallop again, up the road and by the dome-like hill. Dogs barked in the village; their passage was not entirely unnoticed. *Or maybe the dogs smelled Trollocs,* Rand thought. The barking and the village lights alike vanished quickly behind them.

They galloped in a knot, horses all but jostling together as they ran. Lan ordered them to spread out again, but no one wanted to be even a little alone in the night. A scream came from high overhead. The Warder gave up and let them run clustered.

Rand was close behind Moiraine and Lan, the gray straining in an effort to force himself between the Warder’s black and the Aes Sedai’s trim mare. Egwene and the gleeman raced on either flank of him, while Rand’s friends crowded in behind. Cloud, spurred by the Draghkar’s cries, ran beyond anything Rand could do to slow him even had he wished to, yet the gray could not gain so much as a step on the other two horses.

The Draghkar’s shriek challenged the night.

Stout Bela ran with neck outstretched and tail and mane streaming in the wind of her running, matching the larger horses’ every stride. *The Aes Sedai must have done something more than simply ridding her of fatigue.*

Egwene’s face in the moonlight was smiling in excited delight. Her braid streamed behind like the horses’ manes, and the gleam in her eyes was not all from the moon, Rand was sure. His mouth dropped open in surprise, until a swallowed biteme set him off into a fit of coughing.

Lan must have asked a question, for Moiraine suddenly shouted over the wind and the pounding of hooves. “I cannot! Most especially not from the back of a galloping horse. They are not easily killed, even when they can be seen. We must run, and hope.”

They galloped through a tatter of fog, thin and no higher than the horses’ knees. Cloud sped through it in two strides, and Rand blinked, wondering if he had imagined it. Surely the night was too cold for fog. Another patch of ragged gray whisked by them to one side, larger than the first. It had been growing, as if the mist oozed from the ground. Above them, the Draghkar screamed in rage. Fog enveloped the riders for a brief moment and was gone, came again and vanished behind. The icy mist left a chill dampness on Rand’s face and hands. Then a wall of pale gray loomed before them, and they were suddenly enshrouded. The thickness of it muffled the sound of their hooves to dullness, and the cries from overhead seemed to come through a wall. Rand could only just make out the shapes of Egwene and Thom Merrilin on either side of him.

Lan did not slow their pace. “There is still only one place we can be going,” he called, his voice sounding hollow and directionless.

“Myrddraal are sly,” Moiraine replied. “I will use its own slyness against it.” They galloped on silently.

Slaty mist obscured both sky and ground, so that the riders, themselves turned to shadow, appeared to float through night clouds. Even the legs of their own horses seemed to have vanished.

Rand shifted in his saddle, shrinking away from the icy fog. Knowing that Moiraine could do things, even seeing her do them, was one thing; having those things leave his skin damp was something else again. He realized he was holding his breath, too, and called himself nine kinds of idiot. He could not ride all the way to Taren Ferry without breathing. She had used the One Power on Tam, and he seemed all right. Still, he had to make himself let that breath go and inhale. The air was heavy, but if colder it was otherwise no different than that on any other foggy night. He told himself that, but he was not sure he believed it.

Lan encouraged them to keep close, now, to stay where each could see the outlines of others in that damp, frosty grayness. Yet the Warder still did not slacken his stallion’s dead run. Side by side, Lan and Moiraine led the way through the fog as if they could see clearly what lay ahead. The rest could only trust and follow. And hope.

The shrill cries that had hounded them faded as they galloped, and then were gone, but that gave small comfort. Forest and farmhouses, moon and road were shrouded and hidden. Dogs still barked, hollow and distant in the gray haze, when they passed farms, but there was no other sound save the dull drumming of their horses’ hooves. Nothing in that featureless ashen fog changed. Nothing gave any hint of the passage of time except the growing ache in thigh and back.

It had to have been hours, Rand was sure. His hands had clutched his reins until he was not sure he could release them, and he wondered if he would ever walk properly again. He glanced back only once. Shadows in the fog raced behind him, but he could not even be certain of their number. Or even that they really were his friends. The chill and damp soaked through his cloak and coat and shirt, soaked into his bones, so it seemed. Only the rush of air past his face and the gather and stretch of the horse beneath him told him he was moving at all. It must have been hours.

“Slow,” Lan called suddenly. “Draw rein.”

Rand was so startled that Cloud forced between. Lan and Moiraine, forging ahead for half a dozen strides before he could pull the big gray to a halt and stare.

Houses loomed in the fog on all sides, houses strangely tall to Rand’s eye. He had never seen this place before, but he had often heard descriptions. That tallness came from high redstone foundations, necessary when the spring melt in the Mountains of Mist made the Taren overflow its banks. They had reached Taren Ferry.

Lan trotted the black warhorse past him. “Don’t be so eager, sheepherder.”

Discomfited, Rand fell into place without explaining as the party moved deeper into the village. His face was hot, and for the moment the fog was welcome.

A lone dog, unseen in the cold mist, barked at them furiously, then ran away. Here and there a light appeared in a window as some early-riser stirred. Other than the dog, no sound save the muted clops of their horses’ hooves disturbed the last hour of the night.

Rand had met few people from Taren Ferry. He tried to recall what little he knew about them. They seldom ventured down into what they called “the lower villages,” with their noses up as if they smelled something bad. The few he had met bore strange names, like Hilltop and Stoneboat. One and all, Taren Ferry folk had a reputation for slyness and trickery. If you shook hands with a Taren Ferry man, people said, you counted your fingers afterwards.

Lan and Moiraine stopped before a tall, dark house that looked exactly like any other in the village. Fog swirled around the Warder like smoke as he leaped from his saddle and mounted the stairs that rose to the front door, as high above the street as their heads. At the top of the stairs Lan hammered with his fist on the door.

“I thought he wanted quiet,” Mat muttered.

Lan’s pounding went on. A light appeared in the window of the next house, and someone shouted angrily, but the Warder kept on with his drumming.

Abruptly the door was flung back by a man in a nightshirt that flapped about his bare ankles. An oil lamp in one hand illumined a narrow face with pointed features. He opened his mouth angrily, then let it stay open as his head swiveled to take in the fog, eyes bulging. “What’s this?” he said. “What’s this?” Chill gray tendrils curled into the doorway, and he hurriedly stepped back away from them.

“Master Hightower,” Lan said. “Just the man I need. We want to cross over on your ferry.”

“He never even saw a high tower,” Mat snickered. Rand made shushing motions at his friend. The sharp-faced fellow raised his lamp higher and peered down at them suspiciously.

After a minute Master Hightower said crossly, “The ferry goes over in daylight. Not in the night. Not ever. And not in this fog, neither. Come back when the sun’s up and the fog’s gone.”

He started to turn away, but Lan caught his wrist. The ferryman opened his mouth angrily. Gold glinted in the lamplight as the Warder counted out coins one by one into the other’s palm. Hightower licked his lips as the coins clinked, and by inches his head moved closer to his hand, as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

“And as much again,” Lan said, “when we are safely on the other side. But we leave now.”

“Now?” Chewing his lower lip, the ferrety man shifted his feet and peered out at the mist-laden night, then nodded abruptly. “Now it is. Well, let loose my wrist. I have to rouse my haulers. You don’t think I pull the ferry across myself, do you?”

“I will wait at the ferry,” Lan said flatly. “For a little while.” He released his hold on the ferryman.

Master Hightower jerked the handful of coins to his chest and, nodding agreement, hastily shoved the door closed with his hip.

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CHAPTER
12

Across the Taren

Lan came down the stairs, telling the company to dismount and lead their horses after him through the fog. Again they had to trust that the Warder knew where he was going. The fog swirled around Rand's knees, hiding his feet, obscuring everything more than a yard away. The fog was not as heavy as it had been outside the town, but he could barely make out his companions.

Still no human stirred in the night except for them. A few more windows than before showed a light, but the thick mist turned most of them to dim patches, and as often as not that hazy glow, hanging in the gray, was all that was visible. Other houses, revealing a little more, seemed to float on a sea of cloud or to thrust abruptly out of the mist while their neighbors remained hidden, so that they could have stood alone for miles around.

Rand moved stiffly from the ache of the long ride, wondering if there was any way he could walk the rest of the way to Tar Valon. Not that walking was much better than riding at that moment, of course, but even so his feet were almost the only part of him that was not sore. At least he was used to walking.

Only once did anyone speak loudly enough for Rand to hear clearly. “You must handle it,” Moiraine said in answer to something unheard from Lan. “He will remember too much as it is, and no help for it. If I stand out in his thoughts.…”

Rand grumpily shifted his now-sodden cloak on his shoulders, keeping close with the others. Mat and Perrin grumbled to themselves, muttering under their breaths, with bitten-off exclamations whenever one stubbed a toe on something unseen. Thom Merrilin grumbled, too, words like “hot meal” and “fire” and “mulled wine” reaching Rand, but neither the Warder nor the Aes Sedai took notice. Egwene marched along without a word, her back straight and her head high. It was a somewhat painfully hesitant march, to be sure, for she was as unused to riding as the rest.

She was getting her adventure, he thought glumly, and as long as it lasted he doubted if she would notice little things like fog or damp or cold. There must be a difference in what you saw, it seemed to him, depending on whether you sought adventure or had it forced on you. The stories could no doubt make galloping through a cold fog, with a Draghkar and the Light alone knew what else chasing you, sound thrilling. Egwene might be feeling a thrill; he only felt cold and damp and glad to have a village around him again, even if it was Taren Ferry.

Abruptly he walked into something large and warm in the murk: Lan's stallion. The Warder and Moiraine had stopped, and the rest of the party did the same, patting their mounts as much to comfort themselves as the animals. The fog was a little thinner here, enough for them to see one another more clearly than they had in a long while, but not enough to make out much more. Their feet were still hidden by low billows like gray floodwater. The houses seemed to have all been swallowed.

Cautiously Rand led Cloud forward a little way and was surprised to hear his boots scrape on wooden planks. The ferry landing. He backed up carefully, making the gray back as well. He had heard what the Taren Ferry landing was like—a bridge that led nowhere except to the ferryboat. The Taren was supposed to be wide and deep, with treacherous currents that could pull under the strongest swimmer. Much wider than the Winespring Water, he supposed. With the fog added in.… It was a relief when he felt dirt under his feet again.

A fierce "Hsst!" from Lan, as sharp as the fog. The Warder gestured at them as he dashed to Perrin's side and threw back the stocky youth's cloak, exposing the great axe. Obediently, if still not understanding, Rand tossed his own cloak over his shoulder to show his sword. As Lan moved swiftly back to his horse, bobbing lights appeared in the mist, and muffled footsteps approached.

Six stolid-faced men in rough clothes followed Master Hightower. The torches they carried burned away a patch of fog around them. When they stopped, all of the party from Emond's Field could be plainly seen, the lot of them surrounded by a gray wall that seemed thicker for the torchlight reflected from it. The ferryman examined them, his narrow head tilted, nose twitching like a weasel sniffing the breeze for a trap.

Lan leaned against his saddle with apparent casualness, but one hand rested ostentatiously on the long hilt of his sword. There was an air about him of a metal spring, compressed, waiting.

Rand hurriedly copied the Warder's pose—at least insofar as putting his hand on his sword. He did not think he could achieve that deadly-seeming slouch. *They'd probably laugh if I tried.*

Perrin eased his axe in its leather loop and planted his feet deliberately. Mat put a hand to his quiver, though Rand was not sure what condition his bowstring was in after being out in all this damp. Thom Merrilin stepped forward grandly and held up one empty hand, turning it slowly. Suddenly he gestured with a flourish, and a dagger twirled between his fingers. The hilt slapped into his palm, and, abruptly nonchalant, he began trimming his fingernails.

A low, delighted laugh floated from Moiraine. Egwene clapped as if watching a performance at Festival, then stopped and looked abashed, though her mouth twitched with a smile just the same.

Hightower seemed far from amused. He stared at Thom, then cleared his throat loudly. “There was mention made of more gold for the crossing.” He looked around at them again, a sullen, sly look. “What you gave me before is in a safe place now, hear? It's none of it where you can get at it.”

“The rest of the gold,” Lan told him, “goes into your hand when we are on the other side.” The leather purse hanging at his waist clinked as he gave it a little shake.

For a moment the ferryman's eyes darted, but at last he nodded. “Let's be about it, then,” he muttered, and stalked out onto the landing followed by his six helpers. The fog burned away around them as they moved; gray tendrils closed in behind, quickly filling where they had been. Rand hurried to keep up.

The ferry itself was a wooden barge with high sides, boarded by a ramp that could be raised to block off the end. Ropes as thick as a man's wrist ran along each side of it, ropes fastened to massive posts at the end of the landing and disappearing into the night over the river. The ferryman's helpers stuck their torches in iron brackets on the ferry's sides, waited while everyone led their horses aboard, then pulled up the ramp. The deck creaked beneath hooves and shuffling feet, and the ferry shifted with the weight.

Hightower muttered half under his breath, growling for them to keep the horses still and stay to the center, out of the haulers' way. He shouted at his helpers, chivvying them as they readied the ferry to cross, but the men moved at the same reluctant speed whatever he said, and he was halfhearted about it, often cutting off in mid-shout to hold his torch high and peer into the fog. Finally he stopped shouting altogether and went to the bow, where he stood staring into the mist that covered the river. He did not move until one of the haulers touched his arm; then he jumped, glaring.

“What? Oh. You, is it? Ready? About time. Well, man, what are you waiting for?” He waved his arms, heedless of the torch and the way the horses whickered and tried to move back. “Cast off! Give way! Move!” The man slouched off to comply, and Hightower peered once more into the fog ahead, rubbing his free hand uneasily on his coat front.

The ferry lurched as its moorings were loosed and the strong current caught it, then lurched again as the guide-ropes held it. The haulers, three to a side, grabbed hold of the ropes at the front of the ferry and laboriously began walking toward the back, muttering uneasily as they edged out onto the gray-cloaked river.

The landing disappeared as mist surrounded them, tenuous streamers drifting across the ferry between the flickering torches. The barge rocked slowly in the current. Nothing except the steady tread of the haulers, forward to take hold of the ropes and back down again pulling, gave a hint of any other movement. No one spoke. The villagers kept as close to the center of the ferry as they could. They had heard the Taren was far wider than the streams they were used to; the fog made it infinitely vaster in their minds.

After a time Rand moved closer to Lan. Rivers a man could not wade or swim or even see across were nervous-making to someone who had never seen anything broader or deeper than a Waterwood pond. “Would they really have tried to rob us?” he asked quietly. “He acted more as if he were afraid we would rob him.”

The Warder eyed the ferryman and his helpers—none appeared to be listening—before answering just as softly. “With the fog to hide them… well, when what they do is hidden, men sometimes deal with strangers in ways they wouldn't if there were other eyes to see. And the quickest to harm a stranger are the soonest to think a stranger will harm them. This fellow… I believe he might sell his mother to Trollocs for stew meat if the price was right. I'm a little surprised you ask. I heard the way people in Emond's Field speak of those from Taren Ferry.”

“Yes, but.… Well, everyone says they.… But I never thought they would actually.…” Rand decided he had better stop thinking that he knew anything at all of what people were like beyond his own village. “He might tell the Fade we crossed on the ferry,” he said at last. “Maybe he'll bring the Trollocs over after us.”

Lan chuckled dryly. “Robbing a stranger is one thing, dealing with a Halfman something else again. Can you really see him ferrying Trollocs over, especially in this fog, no matter how much gold was offered? Or even talking to a Myrddraal, if he had any choice? Just the thought of it would keep him running for a month. I don't think we have to worry very much about Darkfriends in Taren Ferry. Not here. We are safe… for a time, at least. From this lot, anyway. Watch yourself.”

Hightower had turned from peering into the fog ahead. Pointed face pushed forward and torch held high, he stared at Lan and Rand as if seeing them clearly for the first time. Deck-planks creaked under the haulers' feet and the occasional stamp of a hoof. Abruptly the ferryman twitched as he realized they were watching him watching them. With a leap he spun back to looking for the far bank, or whatever it was he sought in the fog.

“Say no more,” Lan said, so softly Rand almost could not understand. “These are bad days to speak of Trollocs, or Darkfriends, or the Father of Lies, with strange ears to hear. Such talk can bring worse than the Dragon's Fang scrawled on your door.”

Rand felt no desire to go on with his questions. Gloom settled on him even more than it had before. Darkfriends! As if Fades and Trollocs and Draghkar were not enough to worry about. At least you could tell a Trolloc at sight.

Abruptly pilings loomed shadowy in the mist before them. The ferry thudded against the far bank, and then the haulers were hurrying to lash the craft fast and let down the ramp at that end with a thump, while Mat and Perrin announced loudly that the Taren was not half as wide as they had heard. Lan led his stallion down the ramp, followed by Moiraine and the others. As Rand, the last, took Cloud down behind Bela, Master Hightower called out angrily.

“Here, now! Here! Where's my gold?”

“It shall be paid.” Moiraine's voice came from somewhere in the mist. Rand's boots clumped from the ramp to a wooden landing. “And a silver mark for each of your men,” the Aes Sedai added, “for the quick crossing.”

The ferryman hesitated, face pushed forward as if he smelled danger, but at the mention of silver the haulers roused themselves. Some paused to seize a torch, but they all thumped down the ramp before Hightower could open his mouth. With a sullen grimace, the ferryman followed his crew.

Cloud's hooves clumped hollowly in the fog as Rand made his way carefully along the landing. The gray mist was as thick here as over the river. At the foot of the landing, the Warder was handing out coins, surrounded by the torches of Hightower and his fellows. Everyone else except Moiraine waited just beyond in an anxious cluster. The Aes Sedai stood looking at the river, though what she could see was beyond Rand. With a shiver he hitched up his cloak, sodden as it was. He was really out of the Two Rivers, now, and it seemed much farther away than the width of a river.

“There,” Lan said, handing a last coin to Hightower. “As agreed.” He did not put up his purse, and the ferrety-faced man eyed it greedily.

With a loud creak, the landing shivered. Hightower jerked upright, head swiveling back toward the mist-cloaked ferry. The torches remaining on board were a pair of dim, fuzzy points of light. The landing groaned, and with a thunderous crack of snapping wood, the twin glows lurched, then began to revolve. Egwene cried out wordlessly, and Thom cursed.

“It's loose!” Hightower screamed. Grabbing his haulers, he pushed them toward the end of the landing. “The ferry's loose, you fools! Get it! Get it!”

The haulers stumbled a few steps under Hightower's shoves, then stopped. The faint lights on the ferry spun faster, then faster still. The fog above them swirled, sucked into a spiral. The landing trembled. The cracking and splintering of wood filled the air as the ferry began breaking apart.

“Whirl pool,” one of the haulers said, his voice filled with awe.

“No whirl pools on the Taren.” Hightower sounded empty. “Never been a whirl pool.…”

“An unfortunate occurrence.” Moiraine's voice was hollow in the fog that made her a shadow as she turned from the river.

“Unfortunate,” Lan agreed in a flat tone. “It seems you'll be carrying no one else across the river for a time. An ill thing that you lost your craft in our service.” He delved again into his purse, ready in his hand. “This should repay you.”

For a moment Hightower stared at the gold, glinting in Lan's hand in the torchlight, then his shoulders hunched and his eyes darted to the others he had carried across. Made indistinct by the fog, the Emond's Fielders stood silently. With a frightened, inarticulate cry, the ferryman snatched the coins from Lan, whirled, and ran into the mist. His haulers were only half a step behind him, their torches quickly swallowed as they vanished upriver.

“There is nothing further to hold us here,” the Aes Sedai said as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Leading her white mare, she started away from the landing, up the bank.

Rand stood staring at the hidden river. *It could have been happenstance. No whirl pools, he said, but it.…* Abruptly he realized everyone else had gone. Hurriedly he scrambled up the gently sloping bank.

In the space of three paces the heavy mist faded away to nothing. He stopped dead and stared back. Along a line running down the shore thick gray hung on one side, on the other shone a clear night sky, still dark though the sharpness of the moon hinted at dawn not far off.

The Warder and the Aes Sedai stood conferring beside their horses a short distance beyond the border of the fog. The others huddled a little apart; even in the moonlit darkness their nervousness was palpable. All eyes were on Lan and Moiraine, and all but Egwene were leaning back as if torn between losing the pair and getting too close. Rand trotted the last few spans to Egwene's side, leading Cloud, and she grinned at him. He did not think the shine in her eyes was all from moonlight.

“It follows the river as if drawn with a pen,” Moiraine was saying in satisfied tones. “There are not ten women in Tar Valon who could do that unaided. Not to mention from the back of a galloping horse.”

“I don't mean to complain, Moiraine Sedai,” Thom said, sounding oddly diffident for him, “but would it not have been better to cover us a little further? Say to Baerlon? If that Draghkar looks on this side of the river, we'll lose everything we have gained.”

“Draghkar are not very smart, Master Merrilin,” the Aes Sedai said dryly. “Fearsome and deadly dangerous, and with sharp eyes, but little intelligence. It will tell the Myrddraal that this side of the river is clear, but the river itself is cloaked for miles in both directions. The Myrddraal will know the extra effort that cost me. He will have to consider that we may be escaping down the river, and that will slow him. He will have to divide his efforts. The fog should hold long enough that he will never be sure that we did not travel at least partway by boat. I could have extended the fog a little way toward Baerlon, instead, but then the Draghkar could search the river in a matter of hours, and the Myrddraal would know exactly where we were headed.”

Thom made a puffing sound and shook his head. “I apologize, Aes Sedai. I hope I did not offend.”

“Ah, Moi… ah, Aes Sedai.” Mat stopped to swallow audibly. “The ferry… ah… did you… I mean… I don't understand why.…” He trailed off weakly, and there was a silence so deep that the loudest sound Rand heard was his own breathing.

Finally Moiraine spoke, and her voice filled the empty silence with sharpness. “You all want explanations, but if I explained my every action to you, I would have no time for anything else.” In the moonlight, the Aes Sedai seemed taller, somehow, almost looming over them. “Know this. I intend to see you safely in Tar Valon. That is the one thing you need to know.”

“If we keep standing here,” Lan put in, “the Draghkar will not need to search the river. If I remember correctly.…” He led his horse on up the riverbank.

As if the Warder's movement had loosened something in his chest, Rand drew a deep breath. He heard others doing the same, even Thom, and remembered an old saying. Better to spit in a wolf's eye than to cross an Aes Sedai. Yet the tension had lessened. Moiraine was not looming over anyone; she barely reached his chest.

“I don't suppose we could rest a bit,” Perrin said hopefully, ending with a yawn. Egwene, slumped against Bela, sighed tiredly.

It was the first sound even approaching a complaint that Rand had heard from her. *Maybe now she realizes this isn't some grand adventure after all.* Then he guiltily remembered that, unlike him, she had not slept the day away. “We do need to rest, Moiraine Sedai,” he said. “After all, we have ridden all night.”

“Then I suggest we see what Lan has for us,” Moiraine said. “Come.”

She led them on up the bank, into the woods beyond the river. Bare branches thickened the shadows. A good hundred spans from the Taren they came to a dark mound beside a clearing. Here a long-ago flood had undermined and toppled an entire stand of leatherleafs, washing them together into a great, thick tangle, an apparently solid mass of trunks and branches and roots. Moiraine stopped, and suddenly a light appeared low to the ground, coming from under the heap of trees.

Thrusting a stub of a torch ahead of him, Lan crawled out from under the mound and straightened. “No unwelcome visitors,” he told Moiraine. “And the wood I left is still dry, so I started a small fire. We will rest warm.”

“You expected us to stop here?” Egwene said in surprise.

“It seemed a likely place,” Lan replied. “I like to be prepared, just in case.”

Moiraine took the torch from him. “Will you see to the horses? When you are done I will do what I can about everyone's tiredness. Right now I want to talk to Egwene. Egwene?”

Rand watched the two women crouch down and disappear under the great pile of tree trunks. There was a low opening, barely big enough to crawl into. The light of the torch vanished.

Lan had included feedbags and a small quantity of oats in the supplies, but he stopped the others from unsaddling their horses. Instead he produced the hobbles he had also packed. “They would rest easier without the saddles, but if we must leave quickly, there may be no time to replace them.”

“They don't look to me like they need any rest,” Perrin said as he attempted to slip a feedbag over his mount's muzzle. The horse tossed its head before allowing him to put the straps in place. Rand was having difficulties with Cloud, too, taking three tries before he could get the canvas bag over the gray's nose.

“They do,” Lan told them. He straightened from hobbling his stallion. “Oh, they can still run. They will run at their fastest, if we let them, right up to the second they drop dead from exhaustion they never even felt. I would rather Moiraine Sedai had not had to do what she did, but it was necessary.” He patted the stallion's neck, and the horse bobbed his head as if acknowledging the Warder's touch. “We must go slowly with them for the next few days, until they recover. More slowly than I would like. But with luck it will be enough.”

“Is that… ?” Mat swallowed audibly. “Is that what she meant? About our tiredness?”

Rand patted Cloud's neck and stared at nothing. Despite what she had done for Tam, he had no desire for the Aes Sedai to use the Power on him. *Light, she as much as admitted sinking the ferry.*

“Something like it.” Lan chuckled wryly. “But you will not have to worry about running yourself to death. Not unless things get a lot worse than they are. Just think of it as an extra night's sleep.”

The shrill scream of the Draghkar suddenly echoed from above the fog-covered river. Even the horses froze. Again it came, closer now, and again, piercing Rand's skull like needles. Then the cries were fading, until they had faded away entirely.

“Luck,” Lan breathed. “It searches the river for us.” He gave a quick shrug and abruptly sounded matter-of-fact. “Let's get inside. I could do with some hot tea and something to fill my belly.”

Rand was the first to crawl on hands and knees through the opening in the tangle of trees and down a short tunnel. At the end of it, he stopped, still crouching. Ahead was an irregularly shaped space, a woody cave easily large enough to hold them all. The roof of tree trunks and branches came too low to allow any but the women to stand. Smoke from a small fire on a bed of river stones drifted up and through; the draft was enough to keep the space free of smoke, but the interweaving was too thick to let out even a glimmer of the flames. Moiraine and Egwene, their cloaks thrown aside, sat cross-legged, facing one another beside the fire.

“The One Power,” Moiraine was saying, “comes from the True Source, the driving force of Creation, the force the Creator made to turn the Wheel of Time.” She put her hands together in front of her and pushed them against each other. “*Saidin,* the male half of the True Source, and *saidar,* the female half, work against each other and at the same time together to provide that force. *Saidin*”—she lifted one hand, then let it drop—“is fouled by the touch of the Dark One, like water with a thin slick of rancid oil floating on top. The water is still pure, but it cannot be touched without touching the foulness. Only *saidar* is still safe to be used.” Egwene's back was to Rand. He could not see her face, but she was leaning forward eagerly.

Mat poked Rand from behind and muttered something, and he moved on into the tree cavern. Moiraine and Egwene ignored his entry. The other men crowded in behind him, tossing off damp cloaks, settling around the fire, and holding hands out to the warmth. Lan, the last to enter, pulled waterbags and leather sacks from a nook in the wall, took out a kettle, and began to prepare tea. He paid no attention to what the women were saying, but Rand's friends began to stop toasting their hands and stare openly. Thom pretended that all of his interest was engaged in loading his thickly carved pipe, but the way he leaned toward the women gave him away. Moiraine and Egwene acted as if they were alone.

“No,” Moiraine said in answer to a question Rand had missed, “the True Source cannot be used up, any more than the river can be used up by the wheel of a mill. The Source is the river; the Aes Sedai, the waterwheel.”

“And you really think I can learn?” Egwene asked. Her face shone with eagerness. Rand had never seen her look so beautiful, or so far away from him. “I can become an Aes Sedai?”

Rand jumped up, cracking his head against the low roof of logs. Thom Merrilin grabbed his arm, yanking him back down.

“Don't be a fool,” the gleeman murmured. He eyed the women—neither seemed to have noticed—and the look he gave Rand was sympathetic. “It's beyond you now, boy.”

“Child,” Moiraine said gently, “only a very few can learn to touch the True Source and use the One Power. Some of those can learn to a greater degree, some to a lesser. You are one of the bare handful for whom there is no need to learn. At least, touching the Source will come to you whether you want it or not. Without the teaching you can receive in Tar Valon, though, you will never learn to channel it fully, and you may not survive. Men who have the ability to touch *saidin* born in them die, of course, if the Red Ajah does not find them and gentle them.…”

Thom growled deep in his throat, and Rand shifted uncomfortably. Men like those of whom the Aes Sedai spoke were rare—he had only heard of three in his whole life, and thank the Light never in the Two Rivers—but the damage they did before the Aes Sedai found them was always bad enough for the news to carry, like the news of wars, or earthquakes that destroyed cities. He had never really understood what the Ajahs did. According to the stories they were societies among the Aes Sedai that seemed to plot and squabble among themselves more than anything else, but the stories were clear on one point. The Red Ajah held its prime duty to be the prevention of another Breaking of the World, and they did it by hunting down every man who even dreamed of wielding the One Power. Mat and Perrin looked as if they suddenly wished they were back home in their beds.

“... but some of the women die, too. It is hard to learn without a guide. The women we do not find, those who live, often become… well, in this part of the world they might become Wisdoms of their villages.” The Aes Sedai paused thoughtfully. “The old blood is strong in Emond's Field, and the old blood sings. I knew you for what you were the moment I saw you. No Aes Sedai can stand in the presence of a woman who can channel, or who is close to her change, and not feel it.” She rummaged in the pouch at her belt and produced the small blue gem on a gold chain that she had earlier worn in her hair. “You are very close to your change, your first touching. It will be better if I guide you through it. That way you will avoid the… unpleasant effects that come to those who must find their own way.”

Egwene's eyes widened as she looked at the stone, and she wet her lips repeatedly. “Is… does that have the Power?”

“Of course not,” Moiraine snapped. “*Things* do not have the Power, child. Even an *angreal* is only a tool. This is just a pretty blue stone. But it can give off light. Here.”

Egwene's hands trembled as Moiraine laid the stone on her fingertips. She started to pull back, but the Aes Sedai held both her hands in one of hers and gently touched the other to the side of Egwene's head.

“Look at the stone,” the Aes Sedai said softly. “It is better this way than fumbling alone. Clear your mind of everything but the stone. Clear your mind, and let yourself drift. There is only the stone and emptiness. I will begin it. Drift, and let me guide you. No thoughts. Drift.”

Rand's fingers dug into his knees; his jaws clenched until they hurt. *She has to fail. She has to.*

Light bloomed in the stone, just one flash of blue and then gone, no brighter than a firefly, but he flinched as if it had been blinding. Egwene and Moiraine stared into the stone, faces empty. Another flash came, and another, until the azure light pulsed like the beating of a heart. *It's the Aes Sedai,* he thought desperately. *Moiraine's doing it. Not Egwene.*

One last, feeble flicker, and the stone was merely a bauble again. Rand held his breath.

For a moment Egwene continued to stare at the small stone, then she looked up at Moiraine. “I… I thought I felt… something, but.… Perhaps you're mistaken about me. I am sorry I wasted your time.”

“I have wasted nothing, child.” A small smile of satisfaction flitted across Moiraine's lips. “That last light was yours alone.”

“It was?” Egwene exclaimed, then slid immediately back into glumness. “But it was barely there at all.”

“Now you are behaving like a foolish village girl. Most who come to Tar Valon must study for many months before they can do what you just did. You may go far. Perhaps even the Amyrlin Seat, one day, if you study hard and work hard.”

“You mean…?” With a cry of delight Egwene threw her arms around the Aes Sedai. “Oh, thank you. Rand, did you hear? I'm going to be an Aes Sedai!”

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CHAPTER

13

Choices

Before they went to sleep Moiraine knelt by each in turn and laid her hands on their heads. Lan grumbled that he had no need and she should not waste her strength, but he did not try to stop her. Egwene was eager for the experience, Mat and Perrin clearly frightened of it, and frightened to say no. Thom jerked away from the Aes Sedai's hands, but she seized his gray head with a look that allowed no nonsense. The gleeman scowled through the entire thing. She smiled mockingly once she took her hands away. His frown deepened, but he did look refreshed. They all did.

Rand had drawn back into a niche in the uneven wall where he hoped he would be overlooked. His eyes wanted to slide closed once he leaned back against the timber jumble, but he forced himself to watch. He pushed a fist against his mouth to stifle a yawn. A little sleep, an hour or two, and he would be just fine. Moiraine did not forget him, though.

He flinched at the coolness of her fingers on his face, and said, "I don't—" His eyes widened in wonder. Tiredness drained out of him like water running downhill; aches and soreness ebbed to dim memories and vanished. He stared at her with his mouth hanging open. She only smiled and withdrew her hands.

"It is done," she said, and as she stood with a weary sigh he was reminded that she could not do the same for herself. Indeed, she only drank a little tea, refusing the bread and cheese Lan tried to press on her, before curling up beside the fire. She seemed to fall asleep the instant she wrapped her cloak around her.

The others, all save Lan, were dropping asleep wherever they could find a space to stretch out, but Rand could not imagine why. He felt as if he had already had a full night in a good bed. No sooner did he lean back against the log wall, though, than sleep rolled him under. When Lan poked him awake an hour later he felt as though he had had three days rest.

The Warder awakened them all, except Moiraine, and he sternly hushed any sound that might disturb her. Even so, he allowed them only a short stay in the snug cave of trees. Before the sun was twice its own height above the horizon, all traces that anyone had ever stopped there had been cleared away and they were all mounted and moving north toward Baerlon, riding slowly to conserve the horses. The Aes Sedai's eyes were shadowed, but she sat her saddle upright and steady.

Fog still hung thick over the river behind them, a gray wall resisting the efforts of the feeble sun to burn it away and hiding the Two Rivers from view. Rand watched over his shoulder as he rode, hoping for one last glimpse, even of Taren Ferry, until the fogbank was lost to sight.

"I never thought I'd ever be this far from home," he said when the trees at last hid both the fog and the river. "Remember when Watch Hill seemed a long way?" *Two days ago, that was. It seems like forever.*

"In a month or two, we'll be back," Perrin said in a strained voice. "Think what we'll have to tell."

"Even Trollocs can't chase us forever," Mat said. "Burn me, they can't." He straightened around with a heavy sigh, slumping in his saddle as if he did not believe a word that had been said.

"Men!" Egwene snorted. "You get the adventure you're always prating about, and already you're talking about home." She held her head high, yet Rand noticed a tremor to her voice, now that nothing more was to be seen of the Two Rivers.

Neither Moiraine nor Lan made any attempt to reassure them, not a word to say that of course they would come back. He tried not to think on what that might mean. Even rested, he was full enough of doubts without searching out more. Hunching in his saddle he began a waking dream of tending the sheep alongside Tam in a pasture with deep, lush grass and larks singing of a spring morning. And a trip into Emond's Field, and Bel Tine the way it had been, dancing on the Green with never a care beyond whether he might stumble in the steps. He managed to lose himself in it for a long time.

The journey to Baerlon took almost a week. Lan muttered about the laggardness of their travel, but it was he who set the pace and forced the rest to keep it. With himself and his stallion, Mandarb—he said it meant

“Blade” in the Old Tongue—he was not so sparing. The Warder covered twice as much ground as they did, galloping ahead, his color-shifting cloak swirling in the wind, to scout what lay before them, or dropping behind to examine their backtrail. Any others who tried to move at more than a walk, though, got cutting words on taking care of their animals, biting words on how well they would do afoot if the Trollocs did appear. Not even Moiraine was proof against his tongue if she let the white mare pick up her step. Aldieb, the mare was called; in the Old Tongue, “Westwind,” the wind that brought the spring rains.

The Warder’s scouting never turned up any sign of pursuit, or ambush. He spoke only to Moiraine of what he saw, and that quietly, so it could not be overheard, and the Aes Sedai informed the rest of them of what she thought they needed to know. In the beginning, Rand looked over his shoulder as much as he did ahead. He was not the only one. Perrin fingered his axe often, and Mat rode with an arrow nocked to his bow, in the beginning. But the land behind remained empty of Trollocs or figures in black cloaks, the sky remained empty of Draghkar. Slowly, Rand began to think perhaps they really had escaped.

No very great cover was to be had, even in the thickest parts of the woods. Winter clung as hard north of the Taren as it did in the Two Rivers. Stands of pine or fir or leatherleaf, and here and there a few spicewoods or laurels, dotted a forest of otherwise bare, gray branches. Not even the elders showed a leaf. Only scattered green sprigs of new growth stood out against brown meadows beaten flat by the winter’s snows. Here, too, much of what did grow was stinging nettles and coarse thistle and stinkweed. On the bare dirt of the forest floor some of the last snow still hung on, in shady patches and in drifts beneath the low branches of evergreens. Everyone kept their cloaks drawn well about them, for the thin sunlight had no warmth to it and the night cold pierced deep. No more birds flew here than in the Two Rivers, not even ravens.

There was nothing leisurely about the slowness of their movement. The North Road—Rand continued to think of it that way, though he suspected it might have a different name here, north of the Taren—still ran almost due north, but at Lan’s insistence their path snaked this way and that through the forest as often as it ran along the hard-packed dirt road. A village, or a farm, or any sign of men or civilization sent them circling for miles to avoid it, though there were few enough of any of those. The whole first day Rand saw no evidence aside from the road that men had ever been in that woods. It came to him that even when he had gone to the foot of the Mountains of Mist he might not have been as far from a human habitation as he was that day.

The first farm he saw—a large frame house and tall barn with high-peaked, thatched roofs, a curl of smoke rising from a stone chimney—was a shock.

"It's no different from back home," Perrin said, frowning at the distant buildings, barely visible through the trees. People moved around the farmyard, as yet unaware of the travelers.

"Of course it is," Mat said. "We're just not close enough to see."

"I tell you, it's no different," Perrin insisted.

"It must be. We're north of the Taren, after all."

"Quiet, you two," Lan growled. "We don't want to be seen, remember? This way." He turned west, to circle the farm through the trees.

Looking back, Rand thought Perrin was right. The farm looked much the same as any around Emond's Field. There was a small boy toting water from the well, and older boys tending sheep behind a rail fence. It even had a curing shed, for tabac. But Mat was right, too. *We're north of the Taren. It must be different.*

Always they halted while light still clung to the sky, to choose a spot sloped for drainage and sheltered from the wind that seldom died completely, only changed direction. Their fire was always small and hidden from only a few yards off, and once tea was brewed, the flames were doused and the coals buried.

At their first stop, before the sun sank, Lan began teaching the boys what to do with the weapons they carried. He started with the bow. After watching Mat put three arrows into a knot the size of a man's head, on the fissured trunk of a dead leatherleaf, at a hundred paces, he told the others to take their turns. Perrin duplicated Mat's feat, and Rand, summoning the flame and the void, the empty calm that let the bow become a part of him, or him of it, clustered his three where the points almost touched one another. Mat gave him a congratulatory clap on the shoulder.

"Now if you all had bows," the Warder said dryly when they started grinning, "and if the Trollocs agreed not to come so close you couldn't use them. . . ." The grins faded abruptly. "Let me see what I can teach you in case they do come that close."

He showed Perrin a bit of how to use that great-bladed axe; raising an axe to someone, or something, that had a weapon was not at all like chopping wood or flailing around in pretend. Setting the big apprentice blacksmith to a series of exercises, block, parry, and strike, he did the same for Rand and his sword. Not the wild leaping about and slashing that Rand had in mind whenever he thought about using it, but smooth motions, one flowing into another, almost a dance.

"Moving the blade is not enough," Lan said, "though some think it is. The mind is part of it, most of it. Blank your mind, sheepherder. Empty it of hate or fear, of everything. Burn them away. You others listen to this, too. You can use it with the axe or the bow, with a spear, or a quarterstaff, or even your bare hands."

Rand stared at him. "The flame and the void," he said wonderingly. "That's what you mean, isn't it? My father taught me about that."

The Warder gave him an unreadable look in return. "Hold the sword as I showed you, sheepherder. I cannot make a mud-footed villager into a blademaster in an hour, but perhaps I can keep you from slicing off your own foot."

Rand sighed and held the sword upright before him in both hands. Moiraine watched without expression, but the next evening she told Lan to continue the lessons.

The meal at evening was always the same as at midday and breakfast, flatbread and cheese and dried meat, except that evenings they had hot tea to wash it down instead of water. Thom entertained them, evenings. Lan would not let the gleeman play harp or flute—no need to rouse the countryside, the Warder said—but Thom juggled and told stories. "Mara and the Three Foolish Kings," or one of the hundreds about Anla the Wise Counselor, or something filled with glory and adventure, like *The Great Hunt of the Horn,* but always with a happy ending and a joyous homecoming.

Yet if the land was peaceful around them, if no Trollocs appeared among the trees, no Draghkar among the clouds, it seemed to Rand that they managed to raise their tension themselves, whenever it was in danger of vanishing.

There was the morning that Egwene awoke and began unbraiding her hair. Rand watched her from the corner of his eye as he made up his blanketroll. Every night when the fire was doused, everyone took to their blankets except for Egwene and the Aes Sedai. The two women always went aside from the others and talked for an hour or two, returning when the others were asleep. Egwene combed her hair out—one hundred strokes; he counted—while he was saddling Cloud, tying his saddlebags and blanket behind the saddle. Then she tucked the comb away, swept her loose hair over her shoulder, and pulled up the hood of her cloak.

Startled, he asked, "What are you doing?" She gave him a sidelong look without answering. It was the first time he had spoken to her in two days, he realized, since the night in the log shelter on the bank of the Taren, but he did not let that stop him. "All your life you've waited to wear your hair in a braid, and now you're giving it up? Why? Because she doesn't braid hers?"

"Aes Sedai don't braid their hair," she said simply. "At least, not unless they want to."

"You aren't an Aes Sedai. You're Egwene al'Vere from Emond's Field, and the Women's Circle would have a fit if they could see you now."

"Women's Circle business is none of yours, Rand al'Thor. And I *will* be an Aes Sedai. Just as soon as I reach Tar Valon."

He snorted. "As soon as you reach Tar Valon. Why? Light, tell me that. You're no Darkfriend."

"Do you think Moiraine Sedai is a Darkfriend? Do you?" She squared around to face him with her fists clenched, and he almost thought she was going to hit him. "After she saved the village? After she saved your father?"

"I don't know what she is, but whatever she is, it doesn't say anything about the rest of them. The stories—"

"Grow up, Rand! Forget the stories and use your eyes."

"My eyes saw her sink the ferry! Deny that! Once you get an idea in your head, you won't budge even if somebody points out you're trying to stand on water. If you weren't such a Light-blinded fool, you'd see—!"

"Fool, am I? Let me tell you a thing or two, Rand al'Thor! You are the muliest, most wool-headed—!"

"You two trying to wake everybody inside ten miles?" the Warder asked.

Standing there with his mouth open, trying to get a word in edgewise, Rand suddenly realized he had been shouting. They both had.

Egwene's face went scarlet to her eyebrows, and she spun away with a muttered, "Men!" that seemed as much for the Warder as for him.

Warily, Rand looked around the camp. Everybody was looking at him, not just the Warder. Mat and Perrin, with their faces white. Thom, tensed as if ready to run or fight. Moiraine. The Aes Sedai's face was expressionless, but her eyes seemed to bore into his head. Desperately, he tried to recall exactly what he had said, about Aes Sedai and Darkfriends.

"It is time to be going," Moiraine said. She turned to Aldieb, and Rand shivered as if he had been let out of a trap. He wondered if he had been.

Two nights later, with the fire burning low, Mat licked the last crumbs of cheese from his fingers and said, "You know, I think we've lost them for good." Lan was off in the night, taking a last look around. Moiraine and Egwene had gone aside for one of their conversations. Thom was half dozing over his pipe, and the young men had the fire to themselves.

Perrin, idly poking the embers with a stick, answered. "If we've lost them, why does Lan keep scouting?" Nearly asleep, Rand rolled over, his back to the fire.

"We lost them back at Taren Ferry." Mat lay back with his fingers laced behind his head, staring at the moon-filled sky. "If they were even really after us."

"You think that Draghkar was chasing us because it liked us?" Perrin asked.

"I say, stop worrying about Trollocs and such," Mat went on as if Perrin had not spoken, "and start thinking about seeing the world. We're out where the stories come from. What do you think a real city is like?"

"We're going to Baerlon," Rand said sleepily, but Mat snorted.

"Baerlon's all very well, but I've seen that old map Master al'Vere has. If we turn south once we reach Caemlyn, the road leads all the way to Illian, and beyond."

"What's so special about Illian?" Perrin said, yawning.

"For one thing," Mat replied, "Illian isn't full of Aes Se—"

A silence fell, and Rand was suddenly wide awake. Moiraine had come back early. Egwene was with her, but it was the Aes Sedai, standing at the edge of the firelight, who held their attention. Mat lay there on his back, his mouth still open, staring at her. Moiraine's eyes caught the light like dark, polished stones. Abruptly Rand wondered how long she had been standing there.

"The lads were just—" Thom began, but Moiraine spoke right over the top of him.

“A few days respite, and you are ready to give up.” Her calm, level voice contrasted sharply with her eyes. “A day or two of quiet, and already you have forgotten Winternight.”

“We haven’t forgotten,” Perrin said. “It’s just—” Still not raising her voice, the Aes Sedai treated him as she had the gleeman.

“Is that the way you all feel? You are all eager to run off to Illian and forget about Trollocs, and Halfmen, and Draghkar?” She ran her eyes over them—that stony glint playing against the everyday tone of voice made Rand uneasy—but she gave no one a chance to speak. “The Dark One is after you three, one or all, and if I let you go running off wherever you want to go, he will take you. Whatever the Dark One wants, I oppose, so hear this and know it true. Before I let the Dark One have you, I will destroy you myself.”

It was her voice, so matter-of-fact, that convinced Rand. The Aes Sedai would do exactly what she said, if she thought it was necessary. He had a hard time sleeping that night, and he was not the only one. Even the gleeman did not begin snoring till long after the last coals died. For once, Moiraine offered no help.

Those nightly talks between Egwene and the Aes Sedai were a sore point for Rand. Whenever they disappeared into the darkness, aside from the rest for privacy, he wondered what they were saying, what they were doing. What was the Aes Sedai doing to Egwene?

One night, he waited until the other men had all settled down, Thom snoring like a saw cutting an oak knot. Then he slipped away, clutching his blanket around him. Using every bit of skill he had gained stalking rabbits, he moved with the moon shadows until he was crouched at the base of a tall leatherleaf tree, thick with tough, broad leaves, close enough to hear Moiraine and Egwene, where they sat on a fallen log with a small lantern for light.

“Ask,” Moiraine was saying, “and if I can tell you now, I will. Understand, there is much for which you are not yet ready, things you cannot learn until you have learned other things which require still others to be learned before them. But ask what you will.”

“The Five Powers,” Egwene said slowly. “Earth, Wind, Fire, Water, and Spirit. It doesn’t seem fair that men should have been strongest in wielding Earth and Fire. Why should they have had the strongest Powers?”

Moiraine laughed. “Is that what you think, child? Is there a rock so hard that wind and water cannot wear it away, a fire so strong that water cannot quench it or wind snuff it out?”

Egwene was silent for a time, digging her toe into the forest floor. “They . . . they were the ones who . . . who tried to free the Dark One and the Forsaken, weren’t they? The male Aes Sedai?” She took a deep breath and picked up speed. “The women were not part of it. It was the men who went mad and broke the world.”

“You are afraid,” Moiraine said grimly. “If you had remained in Emond’s Field, you would have become Wisdom, in time. That was Nynaeve’s plan, was it not? Or, you would have sat in the Women’s Circle and managed the affairs of Emond’s Field while the Village Council thought it was doing so. But you did the unthinkable. You left Emond’s Field, left the Two Rivers, seeking adventure. You wanted to do it, and at the same time you are afraid of it. And you are stubbornly refusing to let your fear best you. You would not have asked me how a woman becomes an Aes Sedai, otherwise. You would not have thrown custom and convention over the fence, otherwise.”

“No,” Egwene protested. “I’m not afraid. I do want to become an Aes Sedai.”

“Better for you if you were afraid, but I hope you hold to that conviction. Few women these days have the ability to become initiates, much less have the wish to.” Moiraine’s voice sounded as if she had begun musing to herself. “Surely never before two in one village. The old blood is indeed still strong in the Two Rivers.”

In the shadows, Rand shifted. A twig snapped under his foot. He froze instantly, sweating and holding his breath, but neither of the women looked around.

“Two?” Egwene exclaimed. “Who else? Is it Kari? Kari Thane? Lara Ayellan?”

Moiraine gave an exasperated click of her tongue, then said sternly, “You must forget I said that. Her road lies another way, I fear. Concern yourself with your own circumstances. It is not an easy road you have chosen.”

“I will not turn back,” Egwene said.

“Be that as it may. But you still want reassurance, and I cannot give it to you, not in the way you want.”

"I don't understand."

"You want to know that Aes Sedai are good and pure, that it was those wicked men of the legends who caused the Breaking of the World, not the women. Well, it was the men, but they were no more wicked than any men. They were insane, not evil. The Aes Sedai you will find in Tar Valon are human, no different from any other women except for the ability that sets us apart. They are brave and cowardly, strong and weak, kind and cruel, warm-hearted and cold. Becoming an Aes Sedai will not change you from what you are."

Egwene drew a heavy breath. "I suppose I was afraid of that, that I'd be changed by the Power. That and the Trollocs. And the Fade. And. . . . Moiraine Sedai, in the name of the Light, why did the Trollocs come to Emond's Field?"

The Aes Sedai's head swung, and she looked straight at Rand's hiding place. His breath seized in his throat; her eyes were as hard as when she had threatened them, and he had the feeling they could penetrate the leatherleaf's thick branches. *Light, what will she do if she finds me listening?*

He tried to melt back into the deeper shadows. With his eyes on the women, a root snagged his foot, and he barely caught himself from tumbling into dead brush that would have pointed him out with a crackle of snapping branches like fireworks. Panting, he scrambled away on all fours, keeping silent as much by luck as by anything he did. His heart pounded so hard he thought that might give him away itself. *Fool! Eavesdropping on an Aes Sedai!*

Back where the others were sleeping, he managed to slip in among them silently. Lan moved as he dropped to the ground and jerked his blanket up, but the Warder settled back with a sigh. He had only been rolling over in his sleep. Rand let out a long, silent breath.

A moment later Moiraine appeared out of the night, stopping where she could study the slumbering shapes. Moonlight made a nimbus around her. Rand closed his eyes and breathed evenly, all the while listening hard for footsteps coming closer. None did. When he opened his eyes again, she was gone.

When finally sleep came, it was fitful and filled with sweaty dreams where all the men in Emond's Field claimed to be the Dragon Reborn and all the women had blue stones in their hair like the one Moiraine wore. He did not try to overhear Moiraine and Egwene again.

On into the sixth day the slow journey stretched. The warmthless sun slid slowly toward the treetops, while a handful of thin clouds drifted high to the north. The wind gusted higher for a moment, and Rand pulled his cloak back up onto his shoulders, muttering to himself. He wondered if they would ever get to Baerlon. The distance they had traveled from the river already was more than enough to take him from Taren Ferry to the White River, but Lan always said it was just a short journey whenever he was asked, hardly worth calling a journey at all. It made him feel lost.

Lan appeared ahead of them in the woods, returning from one of his forays. He reined in and rode beside Moiraine, his head bent close to hers.

Rand grimaced, but he did not ask any questions. Lan simply refused to acknowledge all such questions aimed at him.

Only Egwene, among the others, even appeared to notice Lan's return, so used to this arrangement had they become, and she kept back, too. The Aes Sedai might have begun acting as if Egwene were in charge of the Emond's Fielders, but that gave her no say when the Warder made his reports. Perrin was carrying Mat's bow, wrapped in the thoughtful silence that seemed to take them all more and more as they got further from the Two Rivers. The horses' slow walk allowed Mat to practice juggling three small stones under Thom Merrilin's watchful eye. The gleeman had given lessons each night, too, as well as Lan.

Lan finished whatever he had been telling Moiraine, and she twisted in her saddle to look back at the others. Rand tried not to stiffen when her eyes moved across him. Did they linger on him a moment longer than on anyone else? He had the queasy feeling that she knew who had been listening in the darkness that night.

"Hey, Rand," Mat called, "I can juggle four!" Rand waved in reply without looking around. "I told you I'd get to four before you. I—Look!"

They had topped a low hill, and below them, a scant mile away through the stark trees and the stretching shadows of evening, lay Baerlon. Rand gasped, trying to smile and gape at the same time.

A log wall, nearly twenty feet tall, surrounded the town, with wooden watchtowers scattered along its length. Within, rooftops of slate and tile glinted with the sinking sun, and feathers of smoke drifted upward from chimneys. Hundreds of chimneys. There was not a thatched roof to be seen.

A broad road ran east from the town, and another west, each with at least a dozen wagons and twice as many ox-carts trudging toward the palisade. Farms lay scattered about the town, thickest to the north while only a few broke the forest to the south, but they might as well not have existed so far as Rand was concerned. *It's bigger than Emond's Field and Watch Hill and Deven Ride all put together! And maybe Taren Ferry, too.*

"So that's a city," Mat breathed, leaning forward across his horse's neck to stare.

Perrin could only shake his head. "How can so many people live in one place?"

Egwene simply stared.

Thom Merrilin glanced at Mat, then rolled his eyes and blew out his mustaches. "City!" he snorted.

"And you, Rand?" Moiraine said. "What do you think of your first sight of Baerlon?"

"I think it's a long way from home," he said slowly, bringing a sharp laugh from Mat.

"You have further to go yet," Moiraine said. "Much further. But there is no other choice, except to run and hide and run again for the rest of your lives. And short lives they would be. You must remember that, when the journey becomes hard. You have no choice."

Rand exchanged glances with Mat and Perrin. By their faces, they were thinking the same thing he was. How could she talk as if they had any choice after what she had said? *The Aes Sedai's made our choices.*

Moiraine went on as if their thoughts were not plain. "The danger begins again here. Watch what you say within those walls. Above all, do not mention Trollocs, or Halfmen, or any such. You must not even think of the Dark One. Some in Baerlon have even less love for Aes Sedai than do the people of Emond's Field, and there may even be Darkfriends." Egwene gasped, and Perrin muttered under his breath. Mat's face paled, but Moiraine went on calmly. "We must attract as little attention as possible." Lan was exchanging his cloak of shifting grays and greens for one of dark brown, more ordinary, though of fine cut and weave. His color-changing cloak made a large bulge in one of his saddlebags. "We do not go by our own names here," Moiraine continued. "Here I am known as Alys, and Lan is Andra. Remember that. Good. Let us be within the walls before night catches us. The gates of Baerlon are closed from sundown to sunrise."

Lan led the way down the hill and through the woods toward the log wall. The road passed half a dozen farms—none lay close, and none of the people finishing their chores seemed to notice the travelers—ending at heavy wooden gates bound with wide straps of black iron. They were closed tight, even if the sun was not down yet.

Lan rode close to the wall and gave a tug to a frayed rope hanging down beside the gates. A bell clanged on the other side of the wall. Abruptly a wizened face under a battered cloth cap peered down suspiciously from atop the wall, glaring between the cut-off ends of two of the logs, a good three spans over their heads.

“What’s all this, eh? It’s too late in the day to be opening this gate. Too late, I say. Go around to the Whitebridge Gate if you want to—” Moiraine’s mare moved out to where the man atop the wall had a clear view of her. Suddenly his wrinkles deepened in a gap-toothed smile, and he seemed to quiver between speaking and doing his duty. “I didn’t know it was you, mistress. Wait. I’ll be right down. Just wait. I’m coming. I’m coming.”

The head dipped out of sight, but Rand could still hear muffled shouts for them to stay where they were, that he was coming. With great creaks of disuse, the right-hand gate slowly swung outward. It stopped when open just wide enough for one horse to pass through at a time, and the gatekeeper poked his head into the gap, flashed his half-toothless smile at them again and darted back out of the way. Moiraine followed Lan through, with Egwene right behind her.

Rand trotted Cloud after Bela and found himself in a narrow street fronted by high wooden fences and warehouses, tall and windowless, broad doors closed up tight. Moiraine and Lan were already on foot, speaking to the wrinkle-faced gatekeeper, so Rand dismounted, too.

The little man, in a much-mended cloak and coat, held his cloth cap crumpled in one hand and ducked his head whenever he spoke. He peered at those dismounting behind Lan and Moiraine, and shook his head. “Downcountry folk.” He grinned. “Why, Mistress Alys, you taken up collecting downcountry folk with hay in their hair?” His look took in Thom Merrilin, then. “You ain’t a sheepfarmer. I remember letting you go through some days back, I do. Didn’t like your tricks downcountry, eh, gleeman?”

“I hope you remembered to forget letting us through, Master Avin,” Lan said, pressing a coin into the man’s free hand. “And letting us back in, too.”

"No need for that, Master Andra. No need for that. You give me plenty when you went out. Plenty." Just the same, Avin made the coin disappear as deftly as if he were a gleeman, too. "I ain't told nobody, and I won't, neither. Especially not them Whitecloaks," he finished with a scowl. He pursed up his lips to spit, then glanced at Moiraine and swallowed, instead.

Rand blinked, but kept his mouth shut. The others did, too, though it appeared to be an effort for Mat. *Children of the Light,* Rand thought wonderingly. Stories told about the Children by peddlers and merchants and merchants' guards varied from admiration to hatred, but all agreed the Children hated Aes Sedai as much as they did Darkfriends. He wondered if this was more trouble already.

"The Children are in Baerlon?" Lan demanded.

"They surely are." The gatekeeper bobbed his head. "Came the same day you left, as I recall. Ain't nobody here likes them at all. Most don't let on, of course."

"Have they said why they are here?" Moiraine asked intently.

"Why they're here, mistress?" Avin was so astonished he forgot to duck his head. "Of course, they said why—Oh, I forgot. You been downcountry. Likely you ain't heard nothing but sheep bleating. They say they're here because of what's going on down in Ghealdan. The Dragon, you know—well, him as calls himself Dragon. They say the fellow's stirring up evil—which I expect he is—and they're here to stamp it out, only he's down there in Ghealdan, not here. Just an excuse to meddle in other people's business, is what I figure. There's already been the Dragon's Fang on some people's doors." This time he did spit.

"Have they caused much trouble, then?" Lan said, and Avin shook his head vigorously.

"Not that they don't want to, I expect, only the Governor don't trust them no more than I do. He won't let but maybe ten or so inside the walls at one time, and ain't they mad about that. The rest have a camp a little ways north, I hear. Bet they got the farmers looking over their shoulders. The ones that do come in, they just stalk around in those white cloaks, looking down their noses at honest folk. Walk in the Light, they say, and it's an order. Near come to blows more than once with the wagoneers and miners and smelters and all, and even the Watch, but the Governor wants it all peaceful, and that's how it's been so far. If they're hunting evil, I say why aren't they up in Saldaea? There's some kind of trouble up there, I hear. Or down in Ghealdan? There's been a big battle down there, they say. Real big."

Moiraine drew a soft breath. "I had heard that Aes Sedai were going to Ghealdan."

"Yes, they did, mistress." Avin's head started bobbing again. "They went to Ghealdan, all right, and that's what started this battle, or so I hear. They say some of those Aes Sedai are dead. Maybe all of them. I know some folks don't hold with Aes Sedai, but I say, who else is going to stop a false Dragon? Eh? And those damned fools who think they can be men Aes Sedai or some such. What about them? Course, some say—not the Whitecloaks, mind, and not me, but some folks—that maybe this fellow really is the Dragon Reborn. He can do things, I hear. Use the One Power. There's thousands following him."

"Don't be a fool," Lan snapped, and Avin's face folded into a hurt look.

"I'm only saying what I heard, ain't I? Just what I heard, Master Andra. They say, some do, that he's moving his army east and south, toward Tear." His voice became heavy with meaning. "They say he's named them the People of the Dragon."

"Names mean little," Moiraine said calmly. If anything she had heard disturbed her, she gave no outward sign of it now. "You could call your mule People of the Dragon, if you wanted."

"Not likely, mistress." Avin chuckled. "Not with the Whitecloaks around, for sure. I don't expect anybody else would look kindly on a name like that, neither. I see what you mean, but . . . oh, no, mistress. Not *my* mule."

"No doubt a wise decision," Moiraine said. "Now we must be off."

"And don't you worry, mistress," Avin said, with a deep bob of his head, "I ain't seen nobody." He darted to the gate and began tugging it closed with quick jerks. "Ain't seen nobody, and ain't seen nothing." The gate thudded shut, and he pulled down the locking bar with a rope. "In fact, mistress, this gate ain't been open in days."

"The Light illumine you, Avin," Moiraine said.

She led them away from the gate, then. Rand looked back, once, and Avin was still standing in front of the gate. He seemed to be polishing a coin with an edge of his cloak and chuckling.

The way led through dirt streets barely the width of two wagons, empty of people, all lined with warehouses and occasional high, wooden fences. Rand walked a time beside the gleeman. "Thom, what was all that about Tear, and the People of the Dragon? Tear is a city all the way down on the Sea of Storms, isn't it?"

"The Karaethon Cycle," Thom said curtly.

Rand blinked. *The Prophecies of the Dragon.* "Nobody tells the . . . those stories in the Two Rivers. Not in Emond's Field, anyway. The Wisdom would skin them alive, if they did."

"I suppose she would, at that," Thom said dryly. He glanced at Moiraine up ahead with Lan, saw she could not overhear, and went on. "Tear is the greatest port on the Sea of Storms, and the Stone of Tear is the fortress that guards it. The Stone is said to be the first fortress built after the Breaking of the World, and in all this time it has never fallen, though more than one army has tried. One of the Prophecies says that the Stone of Tear will never fall until the People of the Dragon come to the Stone. Another says the Stone will never fall till the Sword That Cannot Be Touched is wielded by the Dragon's hand." Thom grimaced. "The fall of the Stone will be one of the major proofs that the Dragon has been reborn. May the Stone stand till I am dust."

"The sword that cannot be touched?"

"That's what it says. I don't know whether it is a sword. Whatever it is, it lies in the Heart of the Stone, the central citadel of the fortress. None but the High Lords of Tear can enter there, and they never speak of what lies inside. Certainly not to gleemen, anyway."

Rand frowned. "The Stone cannot fall until the Dragon wields the sword, but how can he, unless the Stone has already fallen? Is the Dragon supposed to be a High Lord of Tear?"

"Not much chance of that," the gleeman said dryly. "Tear hates anything to do with the Power even more than Amador, and Amador is the stronghold of the Children of the Light."

"Then how can the Prophecy be fulfilled?" Rand asked. "I'd like it well enough if the Dragon was never reborn, but a prophecy that cannot be fulfilled doesn't make much sense. It sounds like a story meant to make people think the Dragon never will be reborn. Is that it?"

"You ask an awful lot of questions, boy," Thom said. "A prophecy that was easily fulfilled would not be worth much, now would it?" Suddenly his voice brightened. “Well, we’re here. Wherever here is.”

Lan had stopped by a section of head-high wooden fence that looked no different from any other they had passed. He was working the blade of his dagger between two of the boards. Abruptly he gave a grunt of satisfaction, pulled, and a length of the fence swung out like a gate. In fact it was a gate, Rand saw, though one meant to be opened only from the other side. The metal latch that Lan had lifted with his dagger showed that.

Moiraine went through immediately, drawing Aldieb behind her. Lan motioned the others to follow, and brought up the rear, closing the gate behind him.

On the other side of the fence Rand found himself in the stableyard of an inn. A loud bustle and clatter came from the building’s kitchen, but what struck him was its size: it covered more than twice as much ground as the Winespring Inn, and was four stories high besides. Well over half the windows were aglow in the deepening twilight. He wondered at this city, that could have so many strangers in it.

No sooner had they come well into the stableyard than three men in dirty canvas aprons appeared at the huge stable’s broad, arched doors. One, a wiry fellow and the only one without a manure fork in his hands, came forward waving his arms.

“Here! Here! You can’t come in that way! You’ll have to go round the front!”

Lan’s hand went to his purse again, but even as it did another man, as big around as Master al’Vere, came hurrying out of the inn. Puffs of hair stuck out above his ears, and his sparkling white apron was as good as a sign proclaiming him the innkeeper.

“It’s all right, Mutch,” the newcomer said. “It’s all right. These folk are expected guests. Take care of their horses, now. Good care.”

Mutch sullenly knuckled his forehead, then motioned his two companions to come help. Rand and the others hurriedly got their saddlebags and blanketrolls down while the innkeeper turned to Moiraine. He gave her a deep bow, and spoke with a genuine smile.

“Welcome, Mistress Alys. Welcome. It’s good to be seeing you, you and Master Andra, both. Very good. Your fine conversation has been missed. Yes, it has. I must say I worried, you going downcountry and all. Well, I mean, at a time like this, with the weather all crazy and wolves howling right up to the walls in the night.” Abruptly he slapped both hands against his round belly and shook his head. “Here I go on like this, chattering away, instead of taking you inside. Come. Come. Hot meals and warm beds, that’s what you’ll be wanting. And the best in Baerlon are right here. The very best.”

“And hot baths, too, I trust, Master Fitch?” Moiraine said, and Egwene echoed her fervently. “Oh, yes.”

“Baths?” the innkeeper said. “Why, just the best and the hottest in Baerlon. Come. Welcome to the Stag and Lion. Welcome to Baerlon.”

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CHAPTER

14

The Stag and Lion

Inside, the inn was every bit as busy as the sounds coming from it had indicated and more. The party from Emond’s Field followed Master Fitch through the back door, soon weaving around and between a constant stream of men and women in long aprons, platters of food and trays of drink held high. The bearers murmured quick apologies when they got in anyone’s way, but they never slowed by a step. One of the men took hurried orders from Master Fitch and disappeared at a run.

“The inn is near full, I’m afraid,” the innkeeper told Moiraine. “Almost to the rafters. Every inn in the town is the same. With the winter we just had . . . well, as soon as it cleared enough for them to get down out of the mountains we were inundated—yes, that’s the word—inundated by men from the mines and smelters, all telling the most horrible tales. Wolves, and worse. The kind of tales men tell when they’ve been cooped up all winter. I can’t think there’s anyone left up there at all, we have that many here. But never fear. Things may be a little crowded, but I’ll do my best by you and Master Andra. And your friends, too, of course.” He glanced curiously once or twice at Rand and the others; except for Thom their clothes named them country folk, and Thom’s gleeman’s cloak made him a strange traveling companion as well for “Mistress Alys” and “Master Andra.” “I will do my best, you may rest assured.”

Rand stared at the bustle around them and tried to avoid being stepped on, though none of the help really seemed to be in any danger of that. He kept thinking of how Master al’Vere and his wife tended the Winespring Inn with sometimes a little assistance from their daughters.

Mat and Perrin craned their necks in interest toward the common room, from which rolled a wave of laughter and singing and jovial shouting whenever the wide door at the end of the hall swung open. Muttering about finding out the news, the Warder grimly disappeared through that swinging door, swallowed by a wave of merriment.

Rand wanted to follow him, but he wanted a bath even more. He could have done with people and laughing right then, but the common room would appreciate his presence more when he was clean. Mat and Perrin apparently felt the same; Mat was scratching surreptitiously.

“Master Fitch,” Moiraine said, “I understand there are Children of the Light in Baerlon. Is there likely to be trouble?”

“Oh, never you worry about them, Mistress Alys. They’re up to their usual tricks. Claim there’s an Aes Sedai in the town.” Moiraine lifted an eyebrow, and the innkeeper spread his plump hands. “Don’t you worry. They’ve tried it before. There’s no Aes Sedai in Baerlon, and the Governor knows it. The Whitecloaks think if they show an Aes Sedai, some woman they claim is an Aes Sedai, people will let all of them inside the walls. Well, I suppose some would. Some would. But most people know what the Whitecloaks are up to, and they support the Governor. No one wants to see some harmless old woman hurt just so the Children can have an excuse for whipping up a frenzy.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Moiraine said dryly. She put a hand on the innkeeper’s arm. “Is Min still here? I wish to talk with her, if she is.”

Master Fitch’s answer was lost to Rand in the arrival of attendants to lead them to the baths. Moiraine and Egwene vanished behind a plump woman with a ready smile and an armload of towels. The gleeman and Rand and his friends found themselves following a slight, dark-haired fellow, Ara by name.

Rand tried asking Ara about Baerlon, but the man barely said two words together except to say Rand had a funny accent, and then the first sight of the bath chamber drove all thoughts of talk right out of Rand’s head. A dozen tall, copper bathtubs sat in a circle on the tiled floor, which sloped down slightly to a drain in the center of the big stone-walled room. A thick towel, neatly folded, and a large cake of yellow soap sat on a stool behind each tub, and big black iron cauldrons of water stood heating over fires along one wall. On the opposite wall logs blazing in a deep fireplace added to the general warmth.

“Almost as good as the Winespring Inn back home,” Perrin said loyally, if not exactly with a great attention to truth.

Thom barked a laugh, and Mat sniggered, “Sounds like we brought a Coplin with us and didn’t know it.”

Rand shrugged out of his cloak and stripped off his clothes while Ara filled four of the copper tubs. None of the others was far behind Rand in choosing a bathtub. Once their clothes were all in piles on the stools, Ara brought them each a large bucket of hot water and a dipper. That done, he sat on a stool by the door, leaning back against the wall with his arms crossed, apparently lost in his own thoughts.

There was little in the way of conversation while they lathered and sluiced away a week of grime with dippers of steaming water. Then it was into the tubs for a long soak; Ara had made the water hot enough that settling in was a slow process of luxuriant sighs. The air in the room went from warm to misty and hot. For a long time there was no sound except the occasional long, relaxing exhalation as tight muscles loosened and a chill that they had come to think permanent was drawn out of their bones.

“Need anything else?” Ara asked suddenly. He did not have much room to talk about people’s accents; he and Master Fitch both sounded as if they had a mouth full of mush. “More towels? More hot water?”

“Nothing,” Thom said in his reverberant voice. Eyes closed, he gave an indolent wave of his hand. “Go and enjoy the evening. At a later time I will see that you receive more than adequate recompense for your services.” He settled lower in the tub, until the water covered everything but his eyes and nose.

Ara’s eyes went to the stools behind the tubs, where their clothes and belongings were stacked. He glanced at the bow, but lingered longest over Rand’s sword and Perrin’s axe. “Is there trouble downcountry, too?” he said abruptly. “In the Rivers, or whatever you call it?”

“The Two Rivers,” Mat said, pronouncing each separate word distinctly. “It’s the Two Rivers. As for trouble, why—”

“What do you mean, too?” Rand asked. “Is there some kind of trouble here?”

Perrin, enjoying his soak, murmured, “Good! Good!” Thom raised himself back up a little, and opened his eyes.

“Here?” Ara snorted. “Trouble? Miners having fistfights in the streets in the dark of the morning aren’t trouble. Or. . . .” He stopped and eyed them a moment. “I meant the Ghealdan kind of trouble,” he said finally. “No, I suppose not. Nothing but sheep downcountry, is there? No offense. I just meant it’s quiet down there. Still, it’s been a strange winter. Strange things in the mountains. I heard the other day there were Trollocs up in Saldaea. But that’s the Borderlands then, isn’t it?” He finished with his mouth still open, then snapped it shut, appearing surprised that he had said so much.

Rand had tensed at the word *Trollocs,* and tried to hide it by wringing his washcloth out over his head. As the fellow went on he relaxed, but not everyone kept his mouth shut.

“Trollocs?” Mat chortled. Rand splashed water at him, but Mat just wiped it off of his face with a grin. “You just let me tell you about Trollocs.”

For the first time since climbing into his tub, Thom spoke. “Why don’t you not? I am a little tired of hearing my own stories back from you.”

“He’s a gleeman,” Perrin said, and Ara gave him a scornful look.

“I saw the cloak. You going to perform?”

“Just a minute,” Mat protested. “What’s this about me telling Thom’s stories? Are you all—?”

“You just don’t tell them as well as Thom,” Rand cut him off hastily, and Perrin hopped in. “You keep adding in things, trying to make it better, and they never do.”

“And you get it all mixed up, too,” Rand added. “Best leave it to Thom.”

They were all talking so fast that Ara stared at them with his mouth hanging open. Mat stared, too, as if everyone else had suddenly gone crazy. Rand wondered how to shut him up short of jumping on him.

The door banged open to admit Lan, brown cloak slung over one shoulder, along with a gust of cooler air that momentarily thinned the mist.

“Well,” the Warder said, rubbing his hands, “this is what I have been waiting for.” Ara picked up a bucket, but Lan waved it away. “No, I will see to myself.” Dropping his cloak on one of the stools, he bundled the bath attendant out of the room, despite the fellow’s protests, and shut the door firmly after him. He waited there a moment, his head cocked to listen, and when he turned back to the rest of them his voice was stony and his eyes stabbed at Mat. “It’s a good thing I got back when I did, farmboy. Don’t you listen to what you are told?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Mat protested. “I was just going to tell him about the Trollocs, not about. . . .” He stopped, and leaned back from the

Warder’s eyes, flat against the back of the tub.

“Don’t talk about Trollocs,” Lan said grimly. “Don’t even think about Trollocs.” With an angry snort he began filling himself a bathtub. “Blood and ashes, you had better remember, the Dark One has eyes and ears where you least expect. And if the Children of the Light heard Trollocs were after you, they’d be burning to get their hands on you. To them, it would be as much as naming you Darkfriend. It may not be what you are used to, but until we get where we are going, keep your trust small unless Mistress Alys or I tell you differently.” At his emphasis on the name Moiraine was using, Mat flinched.

“There was something that fellow wouldn’t tell us,” Rand said. “Something he thought was trouble, but he wouldn’t say what it was.”

“Probably the Children,” Lan said, pouring more hot water into his tub. “Most people consider them trouble. Some don’t, though, and he did not know you well enough to risk it. You might have gone running to the Whitecloaks, for all he knew.”

Rand shook his head; this place already sounded worse than Taren Ferry could possibly be.

“He said there were Trollocs in . . . in Saldaea, wasn’t it?” Perrin said.

Lan hurled his empty bucket to the floor with a crash. “You will talk about it, won’t you? There are always Trollocs in the Borderlands, blacksmith. Just you put it in the front of your mind that we want no more attention than mice in a field. Concentrate on that. Moiraine wants to get you all to Tar Valon alive, and I will do it if it can be done, but if you bring any harm to her. . . .”

The rest of their bathing was done in silence, and dressing afterwards, too.

When they left the bath chamber, Moiraine was standing at the end of the hall with a slender girl not much taller than herself. At least, Rand thought it was a girl, though her dark hair was cut short and she wore a man’s shirt and trousers. Moiraine said something, and the girl looked at the men sharply, then nodded to Moiraine and hurried away.

“Well, now,” Moiraine said as they drew closer, “I am sure a bath has given you all an appetite. Master Fitch has given us a private dining room.” She talked on inconsequentially as she turned to lead the way, about their rooms and the crowding in the town, and how the innkeeper hoped Thom would favor the common room with some music and a story or two. She never mentioned the girl, if girl it had been.

The private dining room had a polished oak table with a dozen chairs around it, and a thick rug on the floor. As they entered, Egwene, freshly gleaming hair combed out around her shoulders, turned from warming her hands at the fire crackling on the hearth. Rand had had plenty of time for thought during the long silence in the bath chamber. Lan’s constant admonitions not to trust anyone, and especially Ara being afraid to trust them, had made him think of just how alone they really were. It seemed they could not trust anyone but themselves, and he was still not too sure how far they could trust Moiraine, or Lan. Just themselves. And Egwene was still Egwene. Moiraine said it would have happened to her anyway, this touching the True Source. She had no control over it, and that meant it was not her fault. And she was still Egwene.

He opened his mouth to apologize, but Egwene stiffened and turned her back before he could get a word out. Staring sullenly at her back, he swallowed what he had been going to say. *All right, then. If she wants to be like that, there’s nothing I can do.*

Master Fitch bustled in then, followed by four women in white aprons as long as his, with a platter holding three roast chickens and others bearing silver, and pottery dishes, and covered bowls. The women began setting the table immediately, while the innkeeper bowed to Moiraine.

“My apologies, Mistress Alys, for making you wait like this, but with so many people in the inn, it’s a wonder anybody gets served at all. I am afraid the food isn’t what it should be, either. Just the chickens, and some turnips and henpeas, with a little cheese for after. No, it just isn’t what it should be. I truly do apologize.”

“A feast.” Moiraine smiled. “For these troubled times, a feast indeed, Master Fitch.”

The innkeeper bowed again. His wispy hair, sticking out in all directions as if he constantly ran his hands through it, made the bow comical, but his grin was so pleasant that anyone who laughed would be laughing with him, not at him. “My thanks, Mistress Alys. My thanks.” As he straightened he frowned and wiped an imagined bit of dust from the table with a corner of his apron. “It isn’t what I would have laid before you a year ago, of course. Not nearly. The winter. Yes. The winter. My cellars are emptying out, and the market is all but bare. And who can blame the farm folk? Who? There's certainly no telling when they'll harvest another crop. No telling at all. It's the wolves get the mutton and beef that should go on people's tables, and. . . ."

Abruptly he seemed to realize that this was hardly the conversation to settle his guests to a comfortable meal. "How I do run on. Full of old wind, that's me. Old wind. Mari, Cinda, let these good people eat in peace." He made shooing gestures at the women and, as they scurried from the room, swung back to bow to Moiraine yet again. "I hope you enjoy your meal, Mistress Alys. If there's anything else you need, just speak it, and I will fetch it. Just you speak it. It is a pleasure serving you and Master Andra. A pleasure." He gave one more deep bow and was gone, closing the door softly behind him.

Lan had slouched against the wall through all of this as if half asleep. Now he leaped up and was at the door in two long strides. Pressing an ear to a door panel, he listened intently for a slow count of thirty, then snatched open the door and stuck his head into the hall. "They're gone," he said at last, closing the door. "We can talk safely."

"I know you say not to trust anyone," Egwene said, "but if you suspect the innkeeper, why stay here?"

"I suspect him no more than anyone else," Lan replied. "But then, until we reach Tar Valon, I suspect everyone. There, I'll suspect only half."

Rand started to smile, thinking the Warder was making a joke. Then he realized there was not a trace of humor on Lan's face. He really would suspect people in Tar Valon. Was anywhere safe?

"He exaggerates," Moiraine told them soothingly. "Master Fitch is a good man, honest and trustworthy. But he does like to talk, and with the best will in the world he might let something slip to the wrong ear. And I have never yet stopped at an inn where half the maids did not listen at doors and spend more time gossiping than making beds. Come, let us be seated before our meal gets cold."

They took places around the table, with Moiraine at the head and Lan at the foot, and for a while everyone was too busy filling their plates for talk. It might not have been a feast, but after close to a week of flatbread and dried meat, it tasted like one.

After a time, Moiraine asked, "What did you learn in the common room?" Knives and forks stilled, suspended in midair, and all eyes turned to the Warder.

“Little that’s good,” Lan replied. “Avin was right, at least as far as talk has it. There was a battle in Ghealdan, and Logain was the victor. A dozen different stories are floating about, but they all agree on that.”

Logain? That must be the false Dragon. It was the first time Rand had heard a name put to the man. Lan sounded almost as if he knew him.

“The Aes Sedai?” Moiraine asked quietly, and Lan shook his head.

“I don’t know. Some say they were all killed, some say none.” He snorted. “Some even say they went over to Logain. There’s nothing reliable, and I did not care to show too much interest.”

“Yes,” Moiraine said. “Little that is good.” With a deep breath she brought her attention back to the table. “And what of our own circumstances?”

“There, the news is better. No odd happenings, no strangers around who might be Myrddraal, certainly no Trollocs. And the Whitecloaks are busy trying to make trouble for Governor Adan because he won’t cooperate with them. They will not even notice us unless we advertise ourselves.”

“Good,” Moiraine said. “That agrees with what the bath maid said. Gossip does have its points. Now,” she addressed the entire company, “we have a long journey still ahead of us, but the last week has not been easy, either, so I propose to remain here tonight and tomorrow night, and leave early the following morning.” All the younger folk grinned; a city for the first time. Moiraine smiled, but she still said, “What does Master Andra say to that?”

Lan eyed the grinning faces flatly. “Well enough, if they remember what I’ve told them for a change.”

Thom snorted through his mustaches. “These country folk loose in a . . . a city.” He snorted again and shook his head.

With the crowding at the inn there were only three rooms to be had, one for Moiraine and Egwene, and two to take the men. Rand found himself sharing with Lan and Thom, on the fourth floor at the back, close up under the overhanging eaves, with a single small window that overlooked the stableyard. Full night had fallen, and light from the inn made a pool outside. It was a small room to begin, and an extra bed set up for Thom made it smaller, though all three were narrow. And hard, Rand found when he threw himself down on his. Definitely not the best room.

Thom stayed only long enough to uncase his flute and harp, then left already practicing grand poses. Lan went with him.

It was strange, Rand thought as he shifted uncomfortably on the bed. A week ago he would have been downstairs like a falling rock for just the chance he might see a gleeman perform, for just the rumor of it. But he had heard Thom tell his stories every night for a week, and Thom would be there tomorrow night, and the next, and the hot bath had loosened kinks in muscles that he had thought would be there forever, and his first hot meal in a week oozed lethargy into him. Sleepily he wondered if Lan really did know the false Dragon, Logain. A muffled shout came from belowstairs, the common room greeting Thom's arrival, but Rand was already asleep.

The stone hallway was dim and shadowy, and empty except for Rand. He could not tell where the light came from, what little there was of it; the gray walls were bare of candles or lamps, nothing at all to account for the faint glow that seemed to just be there. The air was still and dank, and somewhere in the distance water dripped with a steady, hollow plonk. Wherever this was, it was not the inn. Frowning, he rubbed at his forehead. Inn? His head hurt, and thoughts were hard to hold on to. There had been something about . . . an inn? It was gone, whatever it was.

He licked his lips and wished he had something to drink. He was awfully thirsty, dry-as-dust thirsty. It was the dripping sound that decided him. With nothing to choose by except his thirst, he started toward that steady *plonk—plonk—plonk.*

The hallway stretched on, without any crossing corridor and without the slightest change in appearance. The only features at all were the rough doors set at regular intervals in pairs, one on either side of the hall, the wood splintered and dry despite the damp in the air. The shadows receded ahead of him, staying the same, and the dripping never came any closer. After a long time he decided to try one of those doors. It opened easily, and he stepped through into a grim, stone-walled chamber.

One wall opened in a series of arches onto a gray stone balcony, and beyond that was a sky such as he had never seen. Striated clouds in blacks and grays, reds and oranges, streamed by as if storm winds drove them, weaving and interweaving endlessly. *No one* could ever have seen a sky like that; it could not exist.

He pulled his eyes away from the balcony, but the rest of the room was no better. Odd curves and peculiar angles, as if the chamber had been melted almost haphazardly out of the stone, and columns that seemed to grow out of the gray floor. Flames roared on the hearth like a forge-fire with the bellows pumping, but gave no heat. Strange oval stones made the fireplace; they just looked like stones, wet-slick despite the fire, when he looked straight at them, but when he glimpsed them from the corner of his eye they seemed to be faces instead, the faces of men and women writhing in anguish, screaming silently. The high-backed chairs and the polished table in the middle of the room were perfectly ordinary, but that in itself emphasized the rest. A single mirror hung on the wall, but that was not ordinary at all. When he looked at it he saw only a blur where his reflection should have been. Everything else in the room was shown true, but not him.

A man stood in front of the fireplace. He had not noticed the man when he first came in. If he had not known it was impossible, he would have said no one had been there until he actually looked at the man. Dressed in dark clothes of a fine cut, he seemed in the prime of his maturity, and Rand supposed women would have found him good-looking.

“Once more we meet face-to-face,” the man said and, just for an instant, his mouth and eyes became openings into endless caverns of flame.

With a yell Rand hurled himself backwards out of the room, so hard that he stumbled across the hall and banged into the door there, knocking it open. He twisted and grabbed at the doorhandle to keep from falling to the floor—and found himself staring wide-eyed into a stone room with an impossible sky through the arches leading to a balcony, and a fireplace. . . .

“You cannot get away from me that easily,” the man said.

Rand twisted, scrambling back out of the room, trying to regain his feet without slowing down. This time there was no corridor. He froze half crouched not far from the polished table, and looked at the man by the fireplace. It was better than looking at the fireplace stones, or at the sky.

“This is a dream,” he said as he straightened. Behind him he heard the click of the door closing. “It’s some kind of nightmare.” He shut his eyes, thinking about waking up. When he was a child the Wisdom had said if you could do that in a nightmare, it would go away. *The . . . Wisdom? What?* If only his thoughts would stop sliding away. If only his head would stop hurting, then he could think straight.

He opened his eyes again. The room was still as it had been, the balcony, the sky. The man by the fireplace.

“Is it a dream?” the man said. “Does it matter?” Once again, for a moment, his mouth and eyes became peepholes into a furnace that seemed to stretch forever. His voice did not change; he did not seem to notice it happening at all.

Rand jumped a little this time, but he managed to keep from yelling. *This is a dream. It has to be.* All the same, he stepped backwards all the way to the door, never taking his eyes off the fellow by the fire, and tried the handle. It did not move; the door was locked.

“You seem thirsty,” the man by the fire said. “Drink.”

On the table was a goblet, shining gold and ornamented with rubies and amethysts. It had not been there before. He wished he could stop jumping. It was only a dream. His mouth felt like dust.

“I am, a little,” he said, picking up the goblet. The man leaned forward intently, one hand on the back of a chair, watching him. The smell of spiced wine drove home to Rand just how thirsty he was, as if he had had nothing to drink in days. *Have I?*

With the wine halfway to his mouth, he stopped. Whispers of smoke were rising from the chairback between the man’s fingers. And those eyes watched him so sharply, flickering rapidly in and out of flames.

Rand licked his lips and put the wine back on the table, untasted. “I’m not as thirsty as I thought.” The man straightened abruptly, his face without expression. His disappointment could not have been more plain if he had cursed. Rand wondered what was in the wine. But that was a stupid question, of course. This was all a dream. *Then why won’t it stop?* “What do you want?” he demanded. “Who are you?”

Flames rose in the man’s eyes and mouth; Rand thought he could hear them roar. “Some call me Ba’alzamon.”

Rand found himself facing the door, jerking frantically at the handle. All thought of dreams had vanished. The Dark One. The doorhandle would not budge, but he kept twisting.

“Are you the one?” Ba’alzamon said suddenly. “You cannot hide it from me forever. You cannot even hide yourself from me, not on the highest mountain or in the deepest cave. I know you down to the smallest hair.”

Rand turned to face the man—to face Ba’alzamon. He swallowed hard. A nightmare. He reached back to give the door-handle one last pull, then stood up straighter.

“Are you expecting glory?” Ba’alzamon said. “Power? Did they tell you the Eye of the World would serve you? What glory or power is there for a puppet? The strings that move you have been centuries weaving. Your father was chosen by the White Tower, like a stallion roped and led to his business. Your mother was no more than a brood mare to their plans. And those plans lead to your death."

Rand's hands knotted in fists. "My father is a good man, and my mother was a good woman. Don't you talk about them!"

The flames laughed. "So there is some spirit in you after all. Perhaps you *are* the one. Little good it will do you. The Amyrlin Seat will use you until you are consumed, just as Davian was used, and Yurian Stonebow, and Guaire Amalasan, and Raolin Darksbane. Just as Logain is being used. Used until there is nothing left of you."

"I don't know. . . ." Rand swung his head from side to side. That one moment of clear thinking, born in anger, was gone. Even as he groped for it again he could not remember how he had reached it the first time. His thoughts spun around and around. He seized one like a raft in the whirlpool. He forced the words out, his voice strengthening the further he went. "You . . . are bound . . . in Shayol Ghul. You and all the Forsaken . . . bound by the Creator until the end of time."

"The end of time?" Ba'alzamon mocked. "You live like a beetle under a rock, and you think your slime is the universe. The death of time will bring me power such as you could not dream of, worm."

"You are bound—"

"Fool, I have never been bound!" The fires of his face roared so hot that Rand stepped back, sheltering behind his hands. The sweat on his palms dried from the heat. "I stood at Lews Therin Kinslayer's shoulder when he did the deed that named him. It was I who told him to kill his wife, and his children, and all his blood, and every living person who loved him or whom he loved. It was I who gave him the moment of sanity to know what he had done. Have you ever heard a man scream his soul away, worm? He could have struck at me, then. He could not have won, but he could have tried. Instead he called down his precious One Power upon himself, so much that the earth split open and reared up Dragonmount to mark his tomb.

"A thousand years later I sent the Trollocs ravening south, and for three centuries they savaged the world. Those blind fools in Tar Valon said I was beaten in the end, but the Second Covenant, the Covenant of the Ten Nations, was shattered beyond remaking, and who was left to oppose me then? I whispered in Artur Hawkwing's ear, and the length and breadth of the land Aes Sedai died. I whispered again, and the High King sent his armies across the Aryth Ocean, across the World Sea, and sealed two dooms. The doom of his dream of one land and one people, and a doom yet to come. At his deathbed I was there when his councilors told him only Aes Sedai could save his life. I spoke, and he ordered his councilors to the stake. I spoke, and the High King's last words were to cry that Tar Valon must be destroyed.

"When men such as these could not stand against me, what chance do you have, a toad crouching beside a forest puddle. You will serve me, or you will dance on Aes Sedai strings until you die. And then you *will* be mine. The dead belong to me!"

"No," Rand muttered, "this is a dream. It is a dream!"

"Do you think you are safe from me in your dreams? Look!" Ba'alzamon pointed commandingly, and Rand's head turned to follow, although he did not turn it; he did not want to turn.

The goblet was gone from the table. Where it had been, crouched a large rat, blinking at the light, sniffing the air warily. Ba'alzamon crooked his finger, and with a squeak the rat arched its back, forepaws lifting into the air while it balanced awkwardly on its hind feet. The finger curved more, and the rat toppled over, scrabbling frantically, pawing at nothing, squealing shrilly, its back bending, bending, bending. With a sharp snap like the breaking of a twig, the rat trembled violently and was still, lying bent almost double.

Rand swallowed. "Anything can happen in a dream," he mumbled. Without looking he swung his fist back against the door again. His hand hurt, but he still did not wake up.

"Then go to the Aes Sedai. Go to the White Tower and tell them. Tell the Amyrlin Seat of this . . . dream." The man laughed; Rand felt the heat of the flames on his face. "That is one way to escape them. They will not use you, then. No, not when they know that I know. But will they let you live, to spread the tale of what they do? Are you a big enough fool to believe they will? The ashes of many like you are scattered on the slopes of Dragonmount."

"This is a dream," Rand said, panting. "It's a dream, and I am going to wake up."

"Will you?" Out of the corner of his eye he saw the man's finger move to point at him. "Will you, indeed?" The finger crooked, and Rand screamed as he arched backwards, every muscle in his body forcing him further. “Will you ever wake again?”

Convulsively Rand jerked up in the darkness, his hands tightening on cloth. A blanket. Pale moonlight shone through the single window. The shadowed shapes of the other two beds. A snore from one of them, like canvas ripping: Thom Merrilin. A few coals gleamed among the ashes on the hearth.

It had been a dream, then, like that nightmare in the Winespring Inn the day of Bel Tine, everything that he had heard and done all jumbled in together with old tales and nonsense from nowhere. He pulled the blanket up around his shoulders, but it was not cold that made him shake. His head hurt, too. Perhaps Moiraine could do something to stop these dreams. *She said she could help with nightmares.*

With a snort he lay back. Were the dreams really bad enough for him to ask the help of an Aes Sedai? On the other hand, could anything he did now get him in any deeper? He had left the Two Rivers, come away with an Aes Sedai. But there had not been any choice, of course. So did he have any choice but to trust her? An Aes Sedai? It was as bad as the dreams, thinking about it. He huddled under his blanket, trying to find the calmness of the void the way Tam had taught him, but sleep was a long time returning.

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CHAPTER

15

Strangers and Friends

Sunlight streaming across his narrow bed finally woke Rand out of a deep but restless sleep. He pulled a pillow over his head, but it did not really shut out the light, and he did not really want to go back to sleep. There had been more dreams after the first. He could not remember any but the first, but he knew he wanted no more.

With a sigh he tossed the pillow aside and sat up, wincing as he stretched. All the aches he thought had soaked out in the bath were back. And his head still hurt, too. It did not surprise him. A dream like that was enough to give anybody a headache. The others had already faded, but not that one.

The other beds were empty. Light poured in through the window at a steep angle; the sun stood well above the horizon. By this hour back on the farm he would have already fixed something to eat and been well into his chores. He scrambled out of bed, muttering angrily to himself. A city to see, and they did not even wake him. At least someone had seen that there was water in the pitcher, and still warm, too.

He washed and dressed quickly, hesitating a moment over Tam’s sword. Lan and Thom had left their saddlebags and blanketrolls behind in the room, of course, but the Warder’s sword was nowhere to be seen. Lan had worn his sword in Emond’s Field even before there was any hint of trouble. He thought he would take the older man’s lead. Telling himself it was not because he had often daydreamed about walking the streets of a real city wearing a sword, he belted it on and tossed his cloak over his shoulder like a sack.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he hurried down to the kitchen. That was surely the quickest place to get a bite, and on his only day in Baerlon he did not want to waste any more time than he already had. *Blood and ashes, but they could have waked me.*

Master Fitch was in the kitchen, confronting a plump woman whose arms were covered in flour to her elbows, obviously the cook. Rather, she was confronting him, shaking her finger under his nose. Serving maids and scullions, potboys and spitboys, hurried about their tasks, elaborately ignoring what was going on in front of them.

“. . . my Cirri is a good cat,” the cook was saying sharply, “and I won’t hear a word otherwise, do you hear? Complaining about him doing his job too well, that’s what you’re doing, if you ask me.”

“I have had complaints,” Master Fitch managed to get in. “Complaints, mistress. Half the guests—”

“I won’t hear of it. I just won’t hear of it. If they want to complain about my cat, let *them* do the cooking. My poor old cat, who’s just doing his job, and me, we’ll go somewhere where we’re appreciated, see if we don’t.” She untied her apron and started to lift it over her head.

“No!” Master Fitch yelped, and leaped to stop her. They danced in a circle with the cook trying to take her apron off and the innkeeper trying to put it back on her. “No, Sara,” he panted. “There’s no need for this. No need, I say! What would I do without you? Cirri’s a fine cat. An excellent cat. He’s the best cat in Baerlon. If anyone else complains, I’ll tell them to be thankful the cat is doing his job. Yes, thankful. You mustn’t go. Sara? Sara!”

The cook stopped their circling and managed to snatch her apron free of him. “All right, then. All right.” Clutching the apron in both hands, she still did not retie it. “But if you expect me to have anything ready for midday, you’d best get out of here and let me get to it. This may be your inn, but it’s my kitchen. Unless you want to do the cooking?” She made as if to hand the apron to him.

Master Fitch stepped back with his hands spread wide. He opened his mouth, then stopped, looking around for the first time. The kitchen help still studiously ignored the cook and the innkeeper, and Rand began an intensive search of his coat pockets, though except for the coin Moiraine had given him there was nothing in them but a few coppers and a handful of odds and ends. His pocket knife and sharpening stone. Two spare bowstrings and a piece of string he had thought might be useful.

“I am sure, Sara,” Master Fitch said carefully, “that everything will be up to your usual excellence.” With that he took one last suspicious look at the kitchen help, then left with as much dignity as he could manage.

Sara waited until he was gone before briskly tying her apron strings again, then fastened her eye on Rand. “I suppose you want something to eat, eh? Well, come on in.” She gave him a quick grin. “I don’t bite, I don’t, no matter what you may have seen as you shouldn’t. Ciel, get the lad some bread and cheese and milk. That’s all there is right now. Sit yourself, lad. Your friends have all gone out, except one lad I understand wasn’t feeling well, and I expect you’ll be wanting to do the same.”

One of the serving maids brought a tray while Rand took a stool at the table. He began eating as the cook went back to kneading her bread dough, but she was not finished talking.

“You mustn’t take any mind of what you saw, now. Master Fitch is a good enough man, though the best of you aren’t any bargains. It’s the folk complaining as has him on edge, and what do they have to complain about? Would they rather find live rats than dead ones? Though it isn’t like Cirri to leave his handiwork behind. And over a dozen? Cirri wouldn’t let so many get into the inn, he wouldn’t. It’s a clean place, too, and not one to be so troubled. And all with backs broken.” She shook her head at the strangeness of it all.

The bread and cheese turned to ashes in Rand’s mouth. “Their backs were broken?”

The cook waved a floury hand. “Think on happier things, that’s my way of looking. There’s a gleeman, you know. In the common room right this minute. But then, you came with him, didn’t you? You are one of those as came with Mistress Alys last evening, aren’t you? I thought you were. I won’t get much chance to see this gleeman myself, I’m thinking, not with the inn as full as it is, and most of them riffraff down from the mines.” She gave the dough an especially heavy thump. “Not the sort we’d let in most times, only the whole town is filled up with them. Better than some they could be, though, I suppose. Why, I haven’t seen a gleeman since before the winter, and. . . .”

Rand ate mechanically, not tasting anything, not listening to what the cook said. Dead rats, with their backs broken. He finished his breakfast hastily, stammered his thanks, and hurried out. He had to talk to someone.

The common room of the Stag and Lion shared little except its purpose with the same room at the Winespring Inn. It was twice as wide and three times as long, and colorful pictures of ornate buildings with gardens of tall trees and bright flowers were painted high on the walls. Instead of one huge fireplace, a hearth blazed on each wall, and scores of tables filled the floor, with almost every chair, bench, or stool taken.

Every man among the crowd of patrons with pipes in their teeth and mugs in their fists leaned forward with his attention on one thing: Thom, standing atop a table in the middle of the room, his many-colored cloak tossed over a nearby chair. Even Master Fitch held a silver tankard and a polishing cloth in motionless hands.

". . . prancing, silver hooves and proud, arched necks," Thom proclaimed, while somehow seeming not only to be riding a horse, but to be one of a long procession of riders. "Silken manes flutter with tossed heads. A thousand streaming banners whip rainbows against an endless sky. A hundred brazen-throated trumpets shiver the air, and drums rattle like thunder. Wave on wave, cheers roll from watchers in their thousands, roll across the rooftops and towers of Illian, crash and break unheard around the thousand ears of riders whose eyes and hearts shine with their sacred quest. The Great Hunt of the Horn rides forth, rides to seek the Horn of Valere that will summon the heroes of the Ages back from the grave to battle for the Light. . . ."

It was what the gleeman had called Plain Chant, those nights beside the fire on the ride north. Stories, he said, were told in three voices, High Chant, Plain Chant, and Common, which meant simply telling it the way you might tell your neighbor about your crop. Thom told stories in Common, but he did not bother to hide his contempt for the voice.

Rand closed the door without going in and slumped against the wall. He would get no advice from Thom. Moiraine—what *would* she do if she knew?

He became aware of people staring at him as they passed, and realized he was muttering under his breath. Smoothing his coat, he straightened. He had to talk to somebody. The cook had said one of the others had not gone out. It was an effort not to run.

When he rapped on the door of the room where the other boys had slept and poked his head in, only Perrin was there, lying on his bed and still not dressed. He twisted his head on the pillow to look at Rand, then closed his eyes again. Mat's bow and quiver were propped in the corner.

"I heard you weren't feeling well," Rand said. He came in and sat on the next bed. "I just wanted to talk. I. . . ." He did not know how to bring it up, he realized. "If you're sick," he said, half standing, "maybe you ought to sleep. I can go."

"I don't know if I'll ever sleep again." Perrin sighed. "I had a bad dream, if you must know, and couldn't get back to sleep. Mat will be quick enough to tell you. He laughed this morning, when I told them why I was too tired to go out with him, but he dreamed, too. I listened to him for most of the night, tossing and muttering, and you can't tell me he got a good night's sleep." He threw a thick arm across his eyes. "Light, but I'm tired. Maybe if I just stay here for an hour or two, I'll feel like getting up. Mat will never let me hear the end of it if I miss seeing Baerlon because of a dream."

Rand slowly lowered himself to the bed again. He licked his lips, then said quickly, "Did he kill a rat?"

Perrin lowered his arm and stared at him. "You, too?" he said finally. When Rand nodded, he said, "I wish I was back home. He told me . . . he said. . . . What are we going to do? Have you told Moiraine?"

"No. Not yet. Maybe I won't. I don't know. What about you?"

"He said. . . . Blood and ashes, Rand, I don't know." Perrin raised up on his elbow abruptly. "Do you think Mat had the same dream? He laughed, but it sounded forced, and he looked funny when I said I couldn't sleep because of a dream."

"Maybe he did," Rand said. Guiltily, he felt relieved he was not the only one. "I was going to ask Thom for advice. He's seen a lot of the world. You . . . you don't think we should tell Moiraine, do you?"

Perrin fell back on his pillow. "You've heard the stories about Aes Sedai. Do you think we can trust Thom? If we can trust anybody. Rand, if we get out of this alive, if we ever get back home, and you hear me say anything about leaving Emond's Field, even to go as far as Watch Hill, you kick me. All right?"

"That's no way to talk," Rand said. He put on a smile, as cheerful as he could make it. "Of course we'll get home. Come on, get up. We're in a city, and we have a whole day to see it. Where are your clothes?"

“You go. I just want to lie here awhile.” Perrin put his arm back across his eyes. “You go ahead. I’ll catch you up in an hour or two.”

“It’s your loss,” Rand said as he got up. “Think of what you might miss.” He stopped at the door. “Baerlon. How many times have we talked about seeing Baerlon one day?” Perrin lay there with his eyes covered and did not say a word. After a minute Rand stepped out and closed the door behind him.

In the hallway he leaned against the wall, his smile fading. His head still hurt; it was worse, not better. He could not work up much enthusiasm for Baerlon, either, not now. He could not summon enthusiasm about anything.

A chambermaid came by, her arms full of sheets, and gave him a concerned look. Before she could speak he moved off down the hall, shrugging into his cloak. Thom would not be finished in the common room for hours yet. He might as well see what he could. Perhaps he could find Mat, and see if Ba’alzamon had been in his dreams, too. He went downstairs more slowly this time, rubbing his temple.

The stairs ended near the kitchen, so he took that way out, nodding to Sara but hurrying on when she seemed about to take up where she had left off. The stableyard was empty except for Mutch, standing in the stable door, and one of the other ostlers carrying a sack on his shoulder into the stable. Rand nodded to Mutch, too, but the stableman gave him a truculent look and went inside. He hoped the rest of the city was more like Sara and less like Mutch. Ready to see what a city was like, he picked up his step.

At the open stableyard gates, he stopped and stared. People packed the street like sheep in a pen, people swathed to the eyes in cloaks and coats, hats pulled down against the cold, weaving in and out at a quick step as though the wind whistling over the rooftops blew them along, elbowing past one another with barely a word or a glance. *All strangers,* he thought. *None of them know each other.*

The smells were strange, too, sharp and sour and sweet all mixed in a hodgepodge that had him rubbing his nose. Even at the height of Festival he had never seen so many people so jammed together. Not even half so many. And this was only one street. Master Fitch and the cook said the whole city was full. The whole city . . . like this?

He backed slowly away from the gate, away from the street full of people. It really was not right to go off and leave Perrin sick in bed. And what if Thom finished his storytelling while Rand was off in the city? The gleeman might go out himself, and Rand needed to talk to someone. Much better to wait a bit. He breathed a sigh of relief as he turned his back on the swarming street.

Going back inside the inn did not appeal to him, though, not with his headache. He sat on an upended barrel against the back of the inn and hoped the cold air might help his head.

Mutch came to the stable door from time to time to stare at him, and even across the stableyard he could make out the fellow’s disapproving scowl. Was it country people the man did not like? Or had he been embarrassed by Master Fitch greeting them after he had tried to chase them off for coming in the back way? *Maybe he’s a Darkfriend,* he thought, expecting to chuckle at the idea, but it was not a funny thought. He rubbed his hand along the hilt of Tam’s sword. There was not much left that was funny at all.

“A shepherd with a heron-mark sword,” said a low, woman’s voice. “That’s almost enough to make me believe anything. What trouble are you in, downcountry boy?”

Startled, Rand jumped to his feet. It was the crop-haired young woman who had been with Moiraine when he came out of the bath chamber, still dressed in a boy’s coat and breeches. She was a little older than he was, he thought, with dark eyes even bigger than Egwene’s, and oddly intent.

“You are Rand, aren’t you?” she went on. “My name is Min.”

“I’m not in trouble,” he said. He did not know what Moiraine had told her, but he remembered Lan’s admonition not to attract any notice. “What makes you think I’m in trouble? The Two Rivers is a quiet place, and we’re all quiet people. No place for trouble, unless it has to do with crops, or sheep.”

“Quiet?” Min said with a faint smile. “I’ve heard men talk about you Two Rivers folk. I’ve heard the jokes about wooden-headed sheepherders, and then there are men who have actually been downcountry.”

“Wooden-headed?” Rand said, frowning. “What jokes?”

“The ones who know,” she went on as if he had not spoken, “say you walk around all smiles and politeness, just as meek and soft as butter. On the surface, anyway. Underneath, they say, you’re all as tough as old oak roots. Prod too hard, they say, and you dig up stone. But the stone isn’t buried very deep in you, or in your friends. It’s as if a storm has scoured away almost all the covering. Moiraine didn’t tell me everything, but I see what I see.”

Old oak roots? Stone? It hardly sounded like the sort of thing the merchants or their people would say. That last made him jump, though.

He looked around quickly; the stableyard was empty, and the nearest windows were closed. “I don’t know anybody named—what was it again?”

“Mistress Alys, then, if you prefer,” Min said with an amused look that made his cheeks color. “There’s no one close enough to hear.”

“What makes you think Mistress Alys has another name?”

“Because she told me,” Min said, so patiently that he blushed again. “Not that she had a choice, I suppose. I saw she was . . . different . . . right away. When she stopped here before, on her way downcountry. She knew about me. I’ve talked to . . . others like her before.”

“ ‘Saw’?” Rand said.

“Well, I don’t suppose you’ll go running to the Children. Not considering who your traveling companions are. The Whitecloaks wouldn’t like what I do any more than they like what she does.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She says I see pieces of the Pattern.” Min gave a little laugh and shook her head. “Sounds too grand, to me. I just see things when I look at people, and sometimes I know what they mean. I look at a man and a woman who’ve never even talked to one another, and I know they’ll marry. And they do. That sort of thing. She wanted me to look at you. All of you together.”

Rand shivered. “And what did you see?”

“When you’re all in a group? Sparks swirling around you, thousands of them, and a big shadow, darker than midnight. It’s so strong, I almost wonder why everybody can’t see it. The sparks are trying to fill the shadow, and the shadow is trying to swallow the sparks.” She shrugged. “You are all tied together in something dangerous, but I can’t make any more of it.”

“All of us?” Rand muttered. “Egwene, too? But they weren’t after—I mean—”

Min did not seem to notice his slip. “The girl? She’s part of it. And the gleeman. All of you. You’re in love with her.” He stared at her. “I can tell that even without seeing any images. She loves you, too, but she’s not for you, or you for her. Not the way you both want.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

"When I look at her, I see the same as when I look at . . . Mistress Alys. Other things, things I don't understand, too, but I know what *that* means. She won't refuse it."

"This is all foolishness," Rand said uncomfortably. His headache was fading to numbness; his head felt packed with wool. He wanted to get away from this girl and the things she saw. And yet. . . . "What do you see when you look at . . . the rest of us?"

"All sorts of things," Min said, with a grin as if she knew what he really wanted to ask. "The War . . . ah . . . Master Andra has seven ruined towers around his head, and a babe in a cradle holding a sword, and. . . ." She shook her head. "Men like him—you understand?—always have so many images they crowd one another. The strongest images around the gleeman are a man—not him—juggling fire, and the White Tower, and that doesn't make any sense at all for a man. The strongest things I see about the big, curly-haired fellow are a wolf, and a broken crown, and trees flowering all around him. And the other one—a red eagle, an eye on a balance scale, a dagger with a ruby, a horn, and a laughing face. There are other things, but you see what I mean. This time I can't make up or down out of any of it." She waited then, still grinning, until he finally cleared his throat and asked.

"What about me?"

Her grin stopped just short of outright laughter. "The same kind of things as the rest. A sword that isn't a sword, a golden crown of laurel leaves, a beggar's staff, you pouring water on sand, a bloody hand and a white-hot iron, three women standing over a funeral bier with you on it, black rock wet with blood—"

"All right," he broke in uneasily. "You don't have to list it all."

"Most of all, I see lightning around you, some striking at you, some coming out of you. I don't know what any of it means, except for one thing. You and I will meet again." She gave him a quizzical look, as if she did not understand that either.

"Why shouldn't we?" he said. "I'll be coming back this way on my way home."

"I suppose you will, at that." Suddenly her grin was back, wry and mysterious, and she patted his cheek. "But if I told you everything I saw, you'd be as curly-haired as your friend with the shoulders."

He jerked back from her hand as if it were red-hot. "What do you mean? Do you see anything about rats? Or dreams?"

"Rats! No, no rats. As for dreams, maybe it's your idea of a dream, but I never thought it was mine."

He wondered if she was crazy, grinning like that. "I have to go," he said, edging around her. "I . . . I have to meet my friends."

"Go, then. But you won't escape."

He didn't exactly break into a run, but every step he took was quicker than the step before.

"Run, if you want," she called after him. "You can't escape from me." Her laughter sped him across the stableyard and out into the street, into the hubbub of people. Her last words were too close to what Ba'alzamon had said. He blundered into people as he hurried through the crowd, earning hard looks and hard words, but he did not slow down until he was several streets away from the inn.

After a time he began to pay attention again to where he was. His head felt like a balloon, but he stared and enjoyed anyway. He thought Baerlon was a grand city, if not exactly in the same way as cities in Thom's stories. He wandered up broad streets, most paved with flagstone, and down narrow, twisting lanes, wherever chance and the shifting of the crowd took him. It had rained during the night, and the streets that were unpaved had already been churned to mud by the crowds, but muddy streets were nothing new to him. None of the streets in Emond's Field was paved.

There certainly were no palaces, and only a few houses were very much bigger than those back home, but every house had a roof of slate or tile as fine as the roof of the Winespring Inn. He supposed there would be a palace or two in Caemlyn. As for inns, he counted nine, not one smaller than the Winespring and most as large as the Stag and Lion, and there were plenty of streets he had not seen yet.

Shops dotted every street, with awnings out front sheltering tables covered with goods, everything from cloth to books to pots to boots. It was as if a hundred peddlers' wagons had spilled out their contents. He stared so much that more than once he had to hurry on at the suspicious look of a shopkeeper. He had not understood the first shopkeeper's stare. When he did understand, he started to get angry until he remembered that here he was the stranger. He could not have bought much, anyway. He gasped when he saw how many coppers were exchanged for a dozen discolored apples or a handful of shriveled turnips, the sort that would be fed to the horses in the Two Rivers, but people seemed eager to pay.

There were certainly more than enough people, to his estimation. For a while the sheer number of them almost overwhelmed him. Some wore clothes of finer cut than anyone in the Two Rivers—almost as fine as Moiraine's—and quite a few had long, fur-lined coats that flapped around their ankles. The miners everybody at the inn kept talking about, they had the hunched look of men who grubbed underground. But most of the people did not look any different from those he had grown up with, not in dress or in face. He had expected they would, somehow. Indeed, some of them had so much the look of the Two Rivers in their faces that he could imagine they belonged to one family or another that he knew around Emond's Field. A toothless, gray-haired fellow with ears like jug handles, sitting on a bench outside one of the inns and peering mournfully into an empty tankard, could easily have been Bili Congar's close cousin. The lantern-jawed tailor sewing in front of his shop might have been Jon Thane's brother, even to the same bald spot on the back of his head. A near mirror image of Samel Crawe pushed past Rand as he turned a corner, and. . . .

In disbelief he stared at a bony little man with long arms and a big nose, shoving hurriedly through the crowd in clothes that looked like a bundle of rags. The man's eyes were sunken and his dirty face gaunt, as if he had not eaten or slept in days, but Rand could swear. . . . The ragged man saw him then, and froze in mid-step, heedless of people who all but stumbled over him. The last doubt in Rand's mind vanished.

"Master Fain!" he shouted. "We all thought you were—"

As quick as a blink the peddler darted away, but Rand dodged after him, calling apologies over his shoulder to the people he bumped. Through the crowd he just caught sight of Fain dashing into an alleyway, and he turned after.

A few steps into the alleyway the peddler had stopped in his tracks. A tall fence made it into a dead end. As Rand skidded to a halt, Fain rounded on him, crouching warily and backing away. He flapped grimy hands at Rand to stay back. More than one rip showed in his coat, and his cloak was worn and tattered as if it had seen much harder use than it was meant for.

"Master Fain?" Rand said hesitantly. "What is the matter? It's me, Rand al'Thor, from Emond's Field. We all thought the Trollocs had taken you."

Fain gestured sharply and, still in a crouch, ran a few crabbed steps toward the open end of the alley. He did not try to pass Rand, or even come close to him. “Don’t!” he rasped. His head shifted constantly as he tried to see everything in the street beyond Rand. “Don’t mention”—his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper, and he turned his head away, watching Rand with quick, sidelong glances—“*them.* There be Whitecloaks in the town.”

“They have no reason to bother us,” Rand said. “Come back to the Stag and Lion with me. I’m staying there with friends. You know most of them. They’ll be glad to see you. We all thought you were dead.”

“Dead?” the peddler snapped indignantly. “Not Padan Fain. Padan Fain knows which way to jump and where to land.” He straightened his rags as if they were feastday clothes. “Always have, and always will. I’ll live a long time. Longer than—” Abruptly his face tightened and his hands clutched hold of his coat front. “They burned my wagon, and all my goods. Had no cause to be doing that, did they? I couldn’t get to my horses. *My* horses, but that fat old innkeeper had them locked up in his stable. I had to step quick not to get my throat slit, and what did it get me? All that I’ve got left is what I stand up in. Now, is that fair? Is it, now?”

“Your horses are safe in Master al’Vere’s stable. You can get them anytime. If you come to the inn with me, I’m sure Moiraine will help you get back to the Two Rivers.”

“Aaaaah! She’s . . . she’s the Aes Sedai, is she?” A guarded look came over Fain’s face. “Maybe, though. . . .” He paused, licking his lips nervously. “How long will you be at this—What was it? What did you call it?—the Stag and Lion?”

“We leave tomorrow,” Rand said. “But what does that have to do with —?”

“You just don’t know,” Fain whined, “standing there with a full belly and a good night’s sleep in a soft bed. I’ve hardly slept a wink since that night. My boots are all worn out with running, and as for what I’ve had to eat. . . .” His face twisted. “I don’t want to be within miles of an Aes Sedai,” he spat the last words, “not miles and miles, but I may have to. I’ve no choice, have I? The thought of her eyes on me, of her even knowing where I am. . . .” He reached toward Rand as if he wanted to grab his coat, but his hands stopped short, fluttering, and he actually took a step back. “Promise me you won’t tell her. She frightens me. There’s no need to be telling her, no reason for an Aes Sedai to even be knowing I’m alive. You have to promise. You have to!”

“I promise,” Rand said soothingly. “But there’s no reason for you to be afraid of her. Come with me. The least you’ll get is a hot meal.”

“Maybe. Maybe.” Fain rubbed his chin pensively. “Tomorrow, you say? In that time. . . . You won’t forget your promise? You won’t be letting her . . . ?”

“I won’t let her hurt you,” Rand said, wondering how he could stop an Aes Sedai, whatever she wanted to do.

“She won’t hurt me,” Fain said. “No, she won’t. I won’t be letting her.” Like a flash he hared past Rand into the crowd.

“Master Fain!” Rand called. “Wait!”

He dashed out of the alley just in time to catch sight of a ragged coat disappearing around the next corner. Still calling, he ran after it, darted around the corner. He only had time to see a man’s back before he crashed into it and they both went down in a heap in the mud.

“Can’t you watch where you’re going?” came a mutter from under him, and Rand scrambled up in surprise.

“Mat?”

Mat sat up with a baleful glare and began scraping mud off his cloak with his hands. “You must really be turning into a city man. Sleep all morning and run right over people.” Climbing to his feet, he stared at his muddy hands, then muttered and wiped them off on his cloak. “Listen, you’ll never guess who I thought I just saw.”

“Padan Fain,” Rand said.

“Padan Fa—How did you know?”

“I was talking to him, but he ran off.”

“So the Tro—” Mat stopped to look around warily, but the crowd was passing them by with never a glance. Rand was glad he had learned a little caution. “So they didn’t get him. I wonder why he left Emond’s Field, without a word like that? Probably started running then, too, and didn’t stop until he got here. But why was he running just now?”

Rand shook his head and wished he had not. It felt as though it might fall off. “I don’t know, except that he’s afraid of M . . . Mistress Alys.” All this watching what you said was not easy. “He doesn’t want her to know he’s here. He made me promise I wouldn’t tell her.”

“Well, his secret is safe with me,” Mat said. “I wish she didn’t know where I was, either.”

“Mat?” People still streamed by without paying them any heed, but Rand lowered his voice anyway, and leaned closer. “Mat, did you have a nightmare last night? About a man who killed a rat?”

Mat stared at him without blinking. “You, too?” he said finally. “And Perrin, I suppose. I almost asked him this morning, but. . . . He must have. Blood and ashes! Now somebody’s making us dream things. Rand, Iwish *nobody* knew where I was.”

“There were dead rats all over the inn this morning.” He did not feel as afraid at saying it as he would have earlier. He did not feel much of anything. “Their backs were broken.” His voice rang in his own ears. If he was getting sick, he might have to go to Moiraine. He was surprised that even the thought of the One Power being used on him did not bother him.

Mat took a deep breath, hitching his cloak, and looked around as if searching for somewhere to go. “What’s happening to us, Rand? What?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to ask Thom for advice. About whether to tell . . . anyone else.”

“No! Not her. Maybe him, but not her.”

The sharpness of it took Rand by surprise. “Then you believed him?” He did not need to say which “him” he meant; the grimace on Mat’s face said he understood.

“No,” Mat said slowly. “It’s the chances, that’s all. If we tell her, and he was lying, then maybe nothing happens. Maybe. But maybe just him being in our dreams is enough for. . . . I don’t know.” He stopped to swallow. “If we don’t tell her, maybe we’ll have some more dreams. Rats or no rats, dreams are better than. . . . Remember the ferry? I say we keep quiet.”

“All right.” Rand remembered the ferry—and Moiraine’s threat, too—but somehow it seemed a long time ago. “All right.”

“Perrin won’t say anything, will he?” Mat went on, bouncing on his toes. “We have to get back to him. If he tells her, she’ll figure it out about all of us. You can bet on it. Come on.” He started off briskly through the crowd.

Rand stood there looking after him until Mat came back and grabbed him. At the touch on his arm he blinked, then followed his friend.

“What’s the matter with you?” Mat asked. “You going to sleep again?”

“I think I have a cold,” Rand said. His head was as tight as a drum, and almost as empty.

“You can get some chicken soup when we get back to the inn,” Mat said. He kept up a constant chatter as they hunted through the packed streets. Rand made an effort to listen, and even to say something now and then, but it *was* an effort. He was not tired; he did not want to sleep. He just felt as if he were drifting. After a while he found himself telling Mat about Min.

“A dagger with a ruby, eh?” Mat said. “I like that. I don’t know about the eye, though. Are you sure she wasn’t making it up? It seems to me she would know what it all means if she really is a soothsayer.”

“She didn’t say she’s a soothsayer,” Rand said. “I believe she does see things. Remember, Moiraine was talking to her when we finished our baths. And she knows who Moiraine is.”

Mat frowned at him. “I thought we weren’t supposed to use that name.”

“No,” Rand muttered. He rubbed his head with both hands. It was so hard to concentrate on anything.

“I think maybe you really are sick,” Mat said, still frowning. Suddenly he pulled Rand to a stop by his coat sleeve. “Look at them.”

Three men in breastplates and conical steel caps, burnished till they shone like silver, were making their way down the street toward Rand and Mat. Even the mail on their arms gleamed. Their long cloaks, pristine white and embroidered on the left breast with a golden sunburst, just cleared the mud and puddles of the street. Their hands rested on their sword hilts, and they looked around them as if looking at things that had wriggled out from under a rotting log. Nobody looked back, though. Nobody even seemed to notice them. Just the same, the three did not have to push through the crowd; the bustle parted to either side of the white-cloaked men as if by happenstance, leaving them to walk in a clear space that moved with them.

“Do you suppose they’re Children of the Light?” Mat asked in a loud voice. A passerby looked hard at Mat, then quickened his pace.

Rand nodded. Children of the Light. Whitecloaks. Men who hated Aes Sedai. Men who told people how to live, causing trouble for those who refused to obey. If burned farms and worse could be called as mild as trouble. *I should be afraid,* he thought. *Or curious.* Something, at any rate. Instead he stared at them passively.

“They don’t look like so much to me,” Mat said. “Full of themselves, though, aren’t they?”

“They don’t matter,” Rand said. “The inn. We have to talk to Perrin.”

“Like Eward Congar. He always has his nose in the air, too.” Suddenly Mat grinned, a twinkle in his eye. “Remember when he fell off the Wagon Bridge and had to tramp home dripping wet? That took him down a peg for a month.”

“What does that have to do with Perrin?”

“See that?” Mat pointed to a cart resting on its shafts in an alleyway just ahead of the Children. A single stake held a dozen stacked barrels in place on the flat bed. “Watch.” Laughing, he darted into a cutler’s shop to their left.

Rand stared after him, knowing he should do something. That look in Mat’s eyes always meant one of his tricks. But oddly, he found himself looking forward to whatever Mat was going to do. Something told him that feeling was wrong, that it was dangerous, but he smiled in anticipation anyway.

In a minute Mat appeared above him, climbing half out of an attic window onto the tile roof of the shop. His sling was in his hands, already beginning to whirl. Rand’s eyes went back to the cart. Almost immediately there was a sharp crack, and the stake holding the barrels broke just as the Whitecloaks came abreast of the alley. People jumped out of the way as the barrels rolled down the cart shafts with an empty rumble and jounced into the street, splashing mud and muddy water in every direction. The three Children jumped no less quickly than anyone else, their superior looks replaced by surprise. Some passersby fell down, making more splashes, but the three moved agilely, avoiding the barrels with ease. They could not avoid the flying mud that splattered their white cloaks, though.

A bearded man in a long apron hurried out of the alley, waving his arms and shouting angrily, but one look at the three trying vainly to shake the mud from their cloaks and he vanished back into the alley even faster than he had come out. Rand glanced up at the shop roof; Mat was gone. It had been an easy shot for any Two Rivers lad, but the effect was certainly all that could be hoped for. He could not help laughing; the humor seemed to be wrapped in wool, but it was still funny. When he turned back to the street, the three Whitecloaks were staring straight at him.

“You find something funny, yes?” The one who spoke stood a little in front of the others. He wore an arrogant, unblinking look, with a light in his eyes as if he knew something important, something no one else knew.

Rand's laughter cut off short. He and the Children were alone with the mud and the barrels. The crowd that had been all around them had found urgent business up or down the street.

"Does fear of the Light hold your tongue?" Anger made the Whitecloak's narrow face seem even more pinched. He glanced dismissively at the sword hilt sticking out from Rand's cloak. "Perhaps you are responsible for this, yes?" Unlike the others he had a golden knot beneath the sunburst on his cloak.

Rand moved to cover the sword, but instead swept his cloak back over his shoulder. In the back of his head was a frantic wonder at what he was doing, but it was a distant thought. "Accidents happen," he said. "Even to the Children of the Light."

The narrow-faced man raised an eyebrow. "You are that dangerous, youngling?" He was not much older than Rand.

"Heron-mark, Lord Bornhald," one of the others said warningly.

The narrow-faced man glanced at Rand's sword hilt again—the bronze heron was plain—and his eyes widened momentarily. Then his gaze rose to Rand's face, and he sniffed dismissively. "He is too young. You are not from this place, yes?" he said coldly to Rand. "You come from where?"

"I just arrived in Baerlon." A tingling thrill ran along Rand's arms and legs. He felt flushed, almost warm. "You wouldn't know of a good inn, would you?"

"You avoid my questions," Bornhald snapped. "What evil is in you that you do not answer me?" His companions moved up to either side of him, faces hard and expressionless. Despite the mudstains on their cloaks, there was nothing funny about them now.

The tingling filled Rand; the heat had grown to a fever. He wanted to laugh, it felt so good. A small voice in his head shouted that something was wrong, but all he could think of was how full of energy he felt, nearly bursting with it. Smiling, he rocked on his heels and waited for what was going to happen. Vaguely, distantly, he wondered what it would be.

The leader's face darkened. One of the others drew his sword enough for an inch of steel to show and spoke in a voice quivering with anger. "When the Children of the Light ask questions, you gray-eyed bumpkin, we expect answers, or—" He cut off as the narrow-faced man threw an arm across his chest. Bornhald jerked his head up the street.

The Town Watch had arrived, a dozen men in round steel caps and studded leather jerkins, carrying quarterstaffs as if they knew how to use them. They stood watching, silently, from ten paces off.

"This town has lost the Light," growled the man who had half drawn his sword. He raised his voice to shout at the Watch. "Baerlon stands in the Shadow of the Dark One!" At a gesture from Bornhald he slammed his blade back into its scabbard.

Bornhald turned his attention back to Rand. The light of knowing burned in his eyes. "Darkfriends do not escape us, youngling, even in a town that stands in the Shadow. We will meet again. You may be sure of it!"

He spun on his heel and strode away, his two companions close behind, as if Rand had ceased to exist. For the moment, at least. When they reached the crowded part of the street, the same seemingly accidental pocket as before opened around them. The Watchmen hesitated, eyeing Rand, then shouldered their quarterstaffs and followed the white-cloaked three. They had to push their way into the crowd, shouting, "Make way for the Watch!" Few did make way, except grudgingly.

Rand still rocked on his heels, waiting. The tingle was so strong that he almost quivered; he felt as if he were burning up.

Mat came out of the shop, staring at him. "You aren't sick," he said finally. "You are crazy!"

Rand drew a deep breath, and abruptly it was all gone like a pricked bubble. He staggered as it vanished, the realization of what he had just done flooding in on him. Licking his lips, he met Mat's stare. "I think we had better go back to the inn, now," he said unsteadily.

"Yes," Mat said. "Yes. I think we better had."

The street had begun to fill up again, and more than one passerby stared at the two boys and murmured something to a companion. Rand was sure the story would spread. A crazy man had tried to start a fight with three Children of the Light. That was something to talk about. *Maybe the dreams* are *driving me crazy.*

The two lost their way several times in the haphazard streets, but after a while they fell in with Thom Merrilin, making a grand procession all by himself through the throng. The gleeman said he was out to stretch his legs and for a bit of fresh air, but whenever anyone looked twice at his colorful cloak he would announce in a resounding voice, "I am at the Stag and Lion, tonight only."

It was Mat who began disjointedly telling Thom about the dream and their worry over whether or not to tell Moiraine, but Rand joined in, for there were differences in exactly how they remembered it. *Or maybe each dream* was *a little different,* he thought. The major part of the dreams was the same, though.

They had not gone far in the telling before Thom started paying full attention. When Rand mentioned Ba’alzamon, the gleeman grabbed them each by a shoulder with a command to hold their tongues, raised on tiptoe to look over the heads of the crowd, then hustled them out of the press to a dead-end alley that was empty except for a few crates and a slat-ribbed, yellow dog huddled out of the cold.

Thom stared out at the crowd, looking for anyone stopping to listen, before turning his attention to Rand and Mat. His blue eyes bored into theirs, between flickering away to watch the mouth of the alley. “Don’t ever say that name where strangers can hear.” His voice was low, but urgent. “Not even where a stranger *might* hear. It is a very dangerous name, even where Children of the Light are not wandering the streets.”

Mat snorted. “I could tell you about Children of the Light,” he said with a wry look at Rand.

Thom ignored him. “If only one of you had had this dream. . . .” He tugged at his mustache furiously. “Tell me everything you can remember about it. Every detail.” He kept up his wary watch while he listened.

“. . . he named the men he said had been used,” Rand said finally. He thought he had told everything else. “Guaire Amalasan. Raolin Darksbane.”

“Davian,” Mat added before he could go on. “And Yurian Stonebow.”

“And Logain,” Rand finished.

“Dangerous names,” Thom muttered. His eyes seemed to drill at them even more intently than before. “Nearly as dangerous as that other, one way and another. All dead, now, except for Logain. Some long dead. Raolin Darksbane nearly two thousand years. But dangerous just the same. Best you don’t say them aloud even when you’re alone. Most people wouldn’t recognize a one of them, but if the wrong person overhears. . . .”

“But who were they?” Rand said.

“Men,” Thom murmured. “Men who shook the pillars of heaven and rocked the world on its foundations.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Forget about them. They are dust now.”

“Did the . . . were they used, like he said?” Mat asked. “And killed?” “You might say the White Tower killed them. You might say that.” Thom’s mouth tightened momentarily, then he shook his head again. “But used . . . ? No, I cannot see that. The Light knows the Amyrlin Seat has enough plots going, but I can’t see that.”

Mat shivered. “He said so many things. Crazy things. All that about Lews Therin Kinslayer, and Artur Hawkwing. And the Eye of the World. What in the Light is that supposed to be?”

“A legend,” the gleeman said slowly. “Maybe. As big a legend as the Horn of Valere, at least in the Borderlands. Up there, young men go hunting the Eye of the World the way young men from Illian hunt the Horn. Maybe a legend.”

“What do we do, Thom?” Rand said. “Do we tell her? I don’t want any more dreams like that. Maybe she could do something.”

“Maybe we wouldn’t like what she did,” Mat growled.

Thom studied them, considering and stroking his mustache with a knuckle. “I say hold your peace,” he said finally. “Don’t tell anyone, for the time, at least. You can always change your mind, if you have to, but once you tell, it’s done, and you’re tied up worse than ever with . . . with her.” Suddenly he straightened, his stoop almost disappearing. “The other lad! You say he had the same dream? Does he have sense enough to keep his mouth shut?”

“I think so,” Rand said at the same time that Mat said, “We were going back to the inn to warn him.”

“The Light send we’re not too late!” Cloak flapping around his ankles, patches fluttering in the wind, Thom strode out of the alley, looking back over his shoulder without stopping. “Well? Are your feet pegged to the ground?”

Rand and Mat hurried after him, but he did not wait for them to catch up. This time he did not pause for people who looked at his cloak, or those who hailed him as a gleeman, either. He clove through the crowded streets as if they were empty, Rand and Mat half running to follow in his wake. In much less time than Rand expected they were hurrying up to the Stag and Lion.

As they started in, Perrin came speeding out, trying to throw his cloak around his shoulders as he ran. He nearly fell in his effort not to carom into them. “I was coming looking for you two,” he panted when he had caught his balance.

Rand grabbed him by the arm. “Did you tell anyone about the dream?”

“Say that you didn’t,” Mat demanded.

“It’s very important,” Thom said.

Perrin looked at them in confusion. “No, I haven’t. I didn’t even get out of bed until less than an hour ago.” His shoulders slumped. “I’ve given myself a headache trying not to think about it, much less talk about it. Why did you tell him?” He nodded at the gleeman.

“We had to talk to somebody or go crazy,” Rand said.

“I will explain later,” Thom added with a significant look at the people passing in and out of the Stag and Lion.

“All right,” Perrin replied slowly, still looking confused. Suddenly he slapped his head. “You almost made me forget why I was looking for you, not that I don’t wish I could. Nynaeve is inside.”

“Blood and ashes!” Mat yelped. “How did she get here? Moiraine. . . . The ferry. . . .”

Perrin snorted. “You think a little thing like a sunken ferry could stop her? She rooted Hightower out—I don’t know how he got back over the river, but she said he was hiding in his bedroom and didn’t want to go near the river—anyway, she bullied him into finding a boat big enough for her and her horse and rowing her across. Himself. She only gave him time to find one of his haulers to work another set of oars.”

“Light!” Mat breathed.

“What is she doing here?” Rand wanted to know. Mat and Perrin both gave him a scornful look.

“She came after us,” Perrin said. “She’s with . . . with Mistress Alys right now, and it’s cold enough in there to snow.”

“Couldn’t we just go somewhere else for a while?” Mat asked. “My da says, only a fool puts his hand in a hornet nest until he absolutely has to.”

Rand cut in. “She can’t make us go back. Winternight should have been enough to make her see that. If she doesn’t, we will have to make her.”

Mat’s eyebrows lifted higher with every word, and when Rand finished he let out a low whistle. “You ever try to make Nynaeve see something she doesn’t want to see? I have. I say we stay away till night, and sneak in then.”

"From my observation of the young woman," Thom said, "I don't think she will stop until she has had her say. If she is not allowed to have it soon, she might keep on until she attracts attention none of us wants."

That brought them all up short. They exchanged glances, drew deep breaths, and marched inside as if to face Trollocs.

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CHAPTER
16

The Wisdom

Perrin led the way into the depths of the inn. Rand was so intent on what he intended to say to Nynaeve that he did not see Min until she seized his arm and pulled him to one side. The others kept on a few steps down the hall before realizing he had stopped, then they halted, too, half impatient to go on, half reluctant to do so.

"We don't have time for that, boy," Thom said gruffly.

Min gave the white-haired gleeman a sharp look. "Go juggle something," she snapped, drawing Rand further away from the others.

"I really don't have time," Rand told her. "Certainly not for any more fool talk about escaping and the like." He tried to get his arm loose, but every time he pulled free, she grabbed it again.

"And I don't have time for your foolishness, either. Will you be still!" She gave the others a quick look, then moved closer, lowering her voice. "A woman arrived a little while ago—shorter than I, young, with dark eyes and dark hair in a braid down to her waist. She's part of it, right along with the rest of you."

For a minute Rand just stared at her. *Nynaeve? How can she be involved? Light, how can I be involved?* "That's . . . impossible."

"You know her?" Min whispered.

"Yes, and she can't be mixed in . . . in whatever it is you. . . ."

"The sparks, Rand. She met Mistress Alys coming in, and there were sparks, with just the two of them. Yesterday I couldn't see sparks without at least three or four of you together, but today it's all sharper, and more furious." She looked at Rand's friends, waiting impatiently, and shivered before turning back to him. "It's almost a wonder the inn doesn't catch fire. You're all in more danger today than yesterday. Since she came."

Rand glanced at his friends. Thom, his brows drawn down in a bushy V, was leaning forward on the point of taking some action to hurry him along. “She won’t do anything to hurt us,” he told Min. “I have to go, now.” He succeeded in getting his arm back, this time.

Ignoring her squawk, he joined the others, and they started off again down the corridor. Rand looked back once. Min shook her fist at him and stamped her foot.

“What did she have to say?” Mat asked.

“Nynaeve is part of it,” Rand said without thinking, then shot Mat a hard look that caught him with his mouth open. Then understanding slowly spread across Mat’s face.

“Part of what?” Thom said softly. “Does that girl know something?”

While Rand was still trying to gather in his head what to say, Mat spoke up. “Of course she’s part of it,” he said grumpily. “Part of the same bad luck we’ve been having since Winternight. Maybe having the Wisdom show up is no great affair to you, but I’d as soon have the Whitecloaks here, myself.”

“She saw Nynaeve arrive,” Rand said. “Saw her talking to Mistress Alys, and thought she might have something to do with us.” Thom gave him a sidelong look and ruffled his mustaches with a snort, but the others seemed to accept Rand’s explanation. He did not like keeping secrets from his friends, but Min’s secret could be as dangerous for her as any of theirs was for them.

Perrin stopped suddenly in front of a door, and despite his size he seemed oddly hesitant. He drew a deep breath, looked at his companions, took another breath, then slowly opened the door and went in. One by one the rest of them followed. Rand was the last, and he closed the door behind him with the utmost reluctance.

It was the room where they had eaten the night before. A blaze crackled on the hearth, and a polished silver tray sat in the middle of the table holding a gleaming silver pitcher and cups. Moiraine and Nynaeve sat at opposite ends of the table, neither taking her eyes from the other. All the other chairs were empty. Moiraine’s hands rested on the table, as still as her face. Nynaeve’s braid was thrown over her shoulder, the end gripped in one fist; she kept giving it little tugs the way she did when she was being even more stubborn than usual with the Village Council. *Perrin was right.* Despite the fire it seemed freezing cold, and all coming from the two women at the table.

Lan was leaning against the mantel, staring into the flames and rubbing his hands for warmth. Egwene, her back flat against the wall, had her cloak on with the hood pulled up. Thom, Mat, and Perrin stopped uncertainly in front of the door.

Shrugging uncomfortably, Rand walked to the table. *Sometimes you have to grab the wolf by the ears,* he reminded himself. But he remembered another old saying, too. *When you have a wolf by the ears, it's as hard to let go as to hold on.* He felt Moiraine's eyes on him, and Nynaeve's, and his face became hot, but he sat down anyway, halfway between the two.

For a minute the room was as still as a carving, then Egwene and Perrin, and finally Mat, made their reluctant way to the table and took seats—toward the middle, with Rand. Egwene tugged her hood further forward, enough to half hide her face, and they all avoided looking at anyone.

"Well," Thom snorted, from his place beside the door. "At least that much is done."

"Since everyone is here," Lan said, leaving the fireplace and filling one of the silver cups with wine, "perhaps you will finally take this." He proffered the cup to Nynaeve; she looked at it suspiciously. "There is no need to be afraid," he said patiently. "You saw the innkeeper bring the wine, and neither of us has had a chance to put anything in it. It is quite safe."

The Wisdom's mouth tightened angrily at the word *afraid,* but she took the cup with a murmured, "Thank you."

"I am interested," he said, "in how you found us."

"So am I." Moiraine leaned forward intently. "Perhaps you are willing to speak now that Egwene and the boys have been brought to you?"

Nynaeve sipped the wine before answering the Aes Sedai. "There was nowhere for you to go except Baerlon. To be safe, though, I followed your trail. You certainly cut back and forth enough. But then, I suppose you would not care to risk meeting decent people."

"You . . . followed our trail?" Lan said, truly surprised for the first time that Rand could remember. "I must be getting careless."

"You left very little trace, but I can track as well as any man in the Two Rivers, except perhaps Tam al'Thor." She hesitated, then added, "Until my father died, he took me hunting with him, and taught me what he would have taught the sons he never had." She looked at Lan challengingly, but he only nodded with approval.

"If you can follow a trail I have tried to hide, he taught you well. Few can do that, even in the Borderlands."

Abruptly Nynaeve buried her face in her cup. Rand's eyes widened. She was blushing. Nynaeve never showed herself even the least bit disconcerted. Angry, yes; outraged, often; but never out of countenance. But she was certainly red-cheeked now, and trying to hide in the wine.

"Perhaps now," Moiraine said quietly, "you will answer a few of my questions. I have answered yours freely enough."

"With a great sackful of gleeman's tales," Nynaeve retorted. "The only *facts* I can see are that four young people have been carried off, for the Light alone knows what reason, by an Aes Sedai."

"You have been told that isn't known here," Lan said sharply. "You must learn to guard your tongue."

"Why should I?" Nynaeve demanded. "Why should I help hide you, or what you are? I've come to take Egwene and the boys back to Emond's Field, not help you spirit them away."

Thom broke in, in a scornful voice. "If you want them to see their village again—or you, either—you had better be more careful. There are those in Baerlon who would kill her"—he jerked his head toward Moiraine — "for what she is. Him, too." He indicated Lan, then abruptly moved forward to put his fists on the table. He loomed over Nynaeve, and his long mustaches and thick eyebrows suddenly seemed threatening.

Her eyes widened, and she started to lean back, away from him; then her back stiffened defiantly. Thom did not appear to notice; he went right on in an ominously soft voice. "They'd swarm over this inn like murderous ants on a rumor, a whisper. Their hate is that strong, their desire to kill or take any like these two. And the girl? The boys? You? You are all associated with them, enough for the Whitecloaks, anyway. You wouldn't like the way they ask questions, especially when the White Tower is involved. Whitecloak Questioners assume you're guilty before they start, and they have only one sentence for that kind of guilt. They don't care about finding the truth; they think they know that already. All they go after with their hot irons and pincers is a confession. Best you remember some secrets are too dangerous for saying aloud, even when you think you know who hears." He straightened with a muttered, "I seem to tell that to people often of late."

"Well put, gleeman," Lan said. The Warder had that weighing look in his eyes again. "I'm surprised to find you so concerned."

Thom shrugged. “It’s known I arrived with you, too. I don’t care for the thought of a Questioner with a hot iron telling me to repent my sins and walk in the Light.”

“That,” Nynaeve put in sharply, “is just one more reason for them to come home with me in the morning. Or this afternoon, for that matter. The sooner we’re away from you and on our way back to Emond’s Field, the better.”

“We can’t,” Rand said, and was glad that his friends all spoke up at the same time. That way Nynaeve’s glare had to be spread around; she spared no one as it was. But he had spoken first, and they all fell silent, looking at him. Even Moiraine sat back in her chair, watching him over steepled fingers. It was an effort for him to meet the Wisdom’s eyes. “If we go back to Emond’s Field, the Trollocs will come back, too. They’re . . . hunting us. I don’t know why, but they are. Maybe we can find out why in Tar Valon. Maybe we can find out how to stop it. It’s the only way.”

Nynaeve threw up her hands. “You sound just like Tam. He had himself carried to the village meeting and tried to convince everybody. He’d already tried with the Village Council. The Light knows how your . . . Mistress Alys”—she invested the name with a wagonload of scorn—“managed to make him believe; he has a mite of sense, usually, more than most men. In any case, the Council is a pack of fools most of the time, but not foolish enough for that, and neither was anyone else. They agreed you had to be found. Then Tam wanted to be the one to come after you, and him not able to stand by himself. Foolishness must run in your family.”

Mat cleared his throat, then mumbled, “What about my da? What did he say?”

“He’s afraid you’ll try your tricks with outlanders and get your head thumped. He seemed more afraid of that than of . . . Mistress Alys, here. But then, he was never much brighter than you.”

Mat seemed unsure how to take what she had said, or how to reply, or even whether to reply.

“I expect,” Perrin began hesitantly. “I mean, I suppose Master Luhhan was not too pleased about my leaving, either.”

“Did you expect him to be?” Nynaeve shook her head disgustedly and looked at Egwene. “Maybe I should not be surprised at this harebrained idiocy from you three, but I thought others had more judgment.”

Egwene sat back so she was shielded by Perrin. “I left a note,” she said faintly. She tugged at the hood of her cloak as if she was afraid her unbound hair showed. “I explained everything.” Nynaeve’s face darkened.

Rand sighed. The Wisdom was on the point of one of her tongue-lashings, and it looked as if it might be a first-rate one. If she took a position in the heat of anger—if she said she intended to see them back in Emond’s Field no matter what anybody said, for instance—she would be nearly impossible to budge. He opened his mouth.

“A note!” Nynaeve began, just as Moiraine said, “You and I must still talk, Wisdom.”

If Rand could have stopped himself, he would have, but the words poured out as if it were a floodgate he had opened instead of his mouth. “All this is very well, but it doesn’t change anything. We can’t go back. We have to go on.” He spoke more slowly toward the end, and his voice sank, so he finished in a whisper, with the Wisdom and the Aes Sedai both looking at him. It was the sort of look he received if he came on women talking Women’s Circle business, the sort that said he had stepped in where he did not belong. He sat back, wishing he was somewhere else.

“Wisdom,” Moiraine said, “you must believe that they are safer with me than they would be back in the Two Rivers.”

“Safer!” Nynaeve tossed her head dismissively. “You are the one who brought them here, where the Whitecloaks are. The same Whitecloaks who, if the gleeman tells the truth, may harm them because of *you*. Tell me how they are safer, Aes Sedai.”

“There are many dangers from which I cannot protect them,” Moiraine agreed, “any more than you can protect them from being struck by lightning if they go home. But it is not lightning of which they must be afraid, nor even Whitecloaks. It is the Dark One, and minions of the Dark One. From those things I *can* protect. Touching the True Source, touching *saidar*, gives me that protection, as it does to every Aes Sedai.” Nynaeve’s mouth tightened skeptically. Moiraine’s grew tighter, too, with anger, but she went on, her voice hard on the edge of patience. “Even those poor men who find themselves wielding the Power for a short time gain that much, though sometimes touching *saidin* protects, and sometimes the taint makes them more vulnerable. But I, or any Aes Sedai, can extend my protection to those close by me. No Fade can harm them as long as they are as close to me as they are right now. No Trolloc can come within a quarter of a mile without

Lan knowing it, feeling the evil of it. Can you offer them half as much if they return to Emond’s Field with you?”

“You stand up straw men,” Nynaeve said. “We have a saying in the Two Rivers. ‘Whether the bear beats the wolf or the wolf beats the bear, the rabbit always loses.’ Take your contest somewhere else and leave Emond’s Field folk out of it.”

“Egwene,” Moiraine said after a moment, “take the others and leave the Wisdom alone with me for a while.” Her face was impassive; Nynaeve squared herself at the table as if getting ready for an all-in wrestling match.

Egwene bounced to her feet, her desire to be dignified obviously warring with her desire to avoid a confrontation with the Wisdom over her unbraided hair. She had no difficulty gathering up everyone by eye, though. Mat and Perrin scraped back their chairs hurriedly, making polite murmurs while trying not to actually run on their way out. Even Lan started for the door at a signal from Moiraine, drawing Thom with him.

Rand followed, and the Warder shut the door behind them, then took up guard across the hallway. Under Lan’s eyes the others moved on down the hall a short distance; they were not to be allowed even the slightest chance of eavesdropping. When they had gone far enough to suit him, Lan leaned back against the wall. Even without his color-shifting cloak, he was so still that it would be easy not to notice him until you were right on him.

The gleeman muttered something about better things to do with his time and left with a stern, “Remember what I said,” over his shoulder to the boys. No one else seemed inclined to leave.

“What did he mean?” Egwene asked absently, her eyes on the door that hid Moiraine and Nynaeve. She kept fiddling with her hair as if torn between continuing to hide the fact that it was no longer braided and pushing back the hood of her cloak.

“He gave us some advice,” Mat said.

Perrin gave him a sharp look. “He said not to open our mouths until we were sure what we were going to say.”

“That sounds like good advice,” Egwene said, but clearly she was not really interested.

Rand was engrossed in his own thoughts. How could Nynaeve possibly be part of it? How could any of them be involved with Trollocs, and Fades, and Ba’alzamon appearing in their dreams? It was crazy. He wondered if Min had told Moiraine about Nynaeve. *What are they saying in there??*

He had no idea how long he had been standing there when the door finally opened. Nynaeve stepped out, and gave a start when she saw Lan. The Warder murmured something that made her toss her head angrily, then he slipped past her through the door.

She turned toward Rand, and for the first time he realized the others had all quietly disappeared. He did not want to face the Wisdom alone, but he could not get away now that he had met Nynaeve's eye. *A particularly searching eye,* he thought, puzzled. *What did they say?* He drew himself up as she came closer.

She indicated Tam's sword. "That seems to fit you, now, though I would like it better if it did not. You've grown, Rand."

"In a week?" He laughed, but it sounded forced, and she shook her head as if he did not understand. "Did she convince you?" he asked. "It really is the only way." He paused, thinking of Min's sparks. "Are you coming with us?"

Nynaeve's eyes opened wide. "Coming with you! Why would I do that? Mavra Mallen came up from Deven Ride to see to things till I return, but she'll be wanting to get back as soon as she can. I still hope to make you see sense and come home with me."

"We can't." He thought he saw something move at the still-open door, but they were alone in the hallway.

"You told me that, and she did, too." Nynaeve frowned. "If *she* wasn't mixed up in it. . . . Aes Sedai are not to be trusted, Rand."

"You sound as if you really do believe us," he said slowly. "What happened at the village meeting?"

Nynaeve looked back at the doorway before answering; there was no movement there now. "It was a shambles, but there is no need for her to know we can't handle our affairs any better than that. And I believe only one thing: you are all in danger as long as you are with her."

"Something happened," he insisted. "Why do you want us to go back if you think there's even a chance we are right? And why you, at all? As soon send the Mayor himself as the Wisdom."

"You *have* grown." She smiled, and for a moment her amusement had him shifting his feet. "I can think of a time when you would not have questioned where I chose to go or what I chose to do, wherever or whatever it was. A time just a week ago."

He cleared his throat and pressed on stubbornly. "It doesn't make sense. Why are you really here?"

She half glanced at the still-empty doorway, then took his arm. "Let's walk while we talk." He let himself be led away, and when they were far enough from the door not to be overheard, she began again. "As I said, the meeting was a shambles. Everybody agreed someone had to be sent after you, but the village split into two groups. One wanted you rescued, though there was considerable argument over how that was to be done considering that you were with a . . . the likes of *her*."

He was glad she was remembering to watch what she said. "The others believed Tam?" he said.

"Not exactly, but they thought you shouldn't be among strangers, either, especially not with someone like *her*. Either way, though, almost every man wanted to be one of the party. Tam, and Bran al'Vere, with the scales of office around his neck, and Haral Luhhan, till Alsbet made him sit down. Even Cenn Buie. The Light save me from men who think with the hair on their chests. Though I don't know as there are any other kind." She gave a hearty sniff, and looked up at him, an accusing glance. "At any rate, I could see it would be another day, perhaps more, before they came to any decision, and somehow . . . somehow I was sure we did not dare wait that long. So I called the Women's Circle together and told them what had to be done. I cannot say they liked it, but they saw the right of it. And that is why I am here; because the men around Emond's Field are stubborn wool-heads. They're probably still arguing about who to send, though I left word I would take care of it."

Nynaeve's story explained her presence, but it did nothing to reassure him. She was still determined to bring them back with her.

"What did she say to you in there?" he asked. Moiraine would surely have covered every argument, but if there was one she had missed, he would make it.

"More of the same," Nynaeve replied. "And she wanted to know about you boys. To see if she could reason out why you . . . have attracted the kind of attention you have . . . she *said*." She paused, watching him out of the corner of her eye. "She tried to disguise it, but most of all she wanted to know if any of you was born outside the Two Rivers."

His face was suddenly as taut as a drumhead. He managed a hoarse chuckle. “She does think of some odd things. I hope you assured her we’re all Emond’s Field born.”

“Of course,” she replied. There had only been a heartbeat’s pause before she spoke, so brief he would have missed it if he had not been watching for it.

He tried to think of something to say, but his tongue felt like a piece of leather. *She knows.* She was the Wisdom, after all, and the Wisdom was supposed to know everything about everyone. *If she knows, it was no fever-dream. Oh, Light help me, father!*

“Are you all right?” Nynaeve asked.

“He said . . . said I . . . wasn’t his son. When he was delirious . . . with the fever. He said he found me. I thought it was just. . . .” His throat began to burn, and he had to stop.

“Oh, Rand.” She stopped and took his face in both hands. She had to reach up to do it. “People say strange things in a fever. Twisted things. Things that are not true, or real. Listen to me. Tam al’Thor ran away seeking adventure when he was a boy no older than you. I can just remember when he came back to Emond’s Field, a grown man with a red-haired, outlander wife and a babe in swaddling clothes. I remember Kari al’Thor cradling that child in her arms with as much love given and delight taken as I have ever seen from any woman with a babe. Her child, Rand. You. Now you straighten up and stop this foolishness.”

“Of course,” he said. *I was born outside the Two Rivers.* “Of course.” Maybe Tam had been having a fever-dream, and maybe he had found a baby after a battle. “Why didn’t you tell her?”

“It is none of any outlander’s business.”

“Were any of the others born outside?” As soon as the question was out, he shook his head. “No, don’t answer. It’s none of my business, either.” But it would be nice to know if Moiraine had some special interest in him, over and above what she had in the whole lot of them. *Would it?*

“No, it isn’t your business,” Nynaeve agreed. “It might not mean anything. She could just be searching blindly for a reason, any reason, why those things are after you. After *all* of you.”

Rand managed a grin. “Then you do believe they’re chasing us.”

Nynaeve shook her head wryly. “You’ve certainly learned how to twist words since you met her.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

She studied him; he met her eyes steadily. “Today, I am going to have a bath. For the rest, we will have to see, won’t we?”

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CHAPTER

17

Watchers and Hunters

After the Wisdom left him, Rand made his way to the common room. He needed to hear people laughing, to forget what Nynaeve had said and the trouble she might cause alike.

The room was crowded indeed, but no one was laughing, though every chair and bench was filled and people lined the walls. Thom was performing again, standing on a table against the far wall, his gestures grand enough to fill the big room. It was *The Great Hunt of the Horn* again, but no one complained, of course. There were so many tales to be told about each of the Hunters, and so many Hunters to tell of, that no two tellings were ever the same. The whole of it in one telling would have taken a week or more. The only sound competing with the gleeman's voice and harp was the crackling of the fires in the fireplaces.

". . . To the eight corners of the world, the Hunters ride, to the eight pillars of heaven, where the winds of time blow and fate seizes the mighty and the small alike by the forelock. Now, the greatest of the Hunters is Rogosh of Talmour, Rogosh Eagle-eye, famed at the court of the High King, feared on the slopes of Shayol Ghul. . . ." The Hunters were always mighty heroes, all of them.

Rand spotted his two friends and squeezed onto a place Perrin made for him on the end of their bench. Kitchen smells drifting into the room reminded him that he was hungry, but even the people who had food in front of them gave it little attention. The maids who should have been serving stood entranced, clutching their aprons and looking at the gleeman, and nobody seemed to mind at all. Listening was better than eating, no matter how good the food.

“. . . since the day of her birth has the Dark One marked Blaes as his own, but not of this mind is she—no Darkfriend, Blaes of Matuchin! Strong as the ash she stands, lithe as the willow branch, beautiful as the rose. Golden-haired Blaes. Ready to die before she yields. But hark! Echoing from the towers of the city, trumpets blare, brazen and bold. Her heralds proclaim the arrival of a hero at her court. Drums thunder and cymbals sing! Rogosh Eagle-eye comes to do homage . . .”

“The Bargain of Rogosh Eagle-eye” wound its way to an end, but Thom paused only to wet his throat from a mug of ale before launching into “Lian’s Stand.” In turn that was followed by “The Fall of Aleth-Loriel,” and “Gaidal Cain’s Sword,” and “The Last Ride of Buad of Albhain.” The pauses grew longer as the evening wore on, and when Thom exchanged the harp for his flute, everyone knew it was the end of storytelling for the night. Two men joined Thom, with a drum and a hammered dulcimer, but sitting beside the table while he remained atop it.

The three young men from Emond’s Field began clapping their hands with the first note of “The Wind That Shakes the Willow,” and they were not the only ones. It was a favorite in the Two Rivers, and in Baerlon, too, it seemed. Here and there voices even took up the words, not so off-key as for anyone to hush them.

“My love is gone, carried awayby the wind that shakes the willow,and
all the land is beaten hardby the wind that shakes the willow.But I will hold
her close to mein heart and dearest memory,and with her strength to steel
my soul,her love to warm my heart-strings,I will stand where we once
sang,though cold wind shakes the willow.”

The second song was not so sad. In fact, “Only One Bucket of Water” seemed even more merry than usual by comparison, which might have been the gleeman’s intent. People rushed to clear tables from the floor to make room for dancing, and began kicking up their heels until the walls shook from the stomping and whirling. The first dance ended with laughing dancers leaving the floor holding their sides, and new people taking their places.

Thom played the opening notes of “Wild Geese on the Wing,” then paused for people to take their places for the reel.

“I think I’ll try a few steps,” Rand said, getting to his feet. Perrin popped up right behind him. Mat was the last to move, and so found himself staying behind to guard the cloaks, along with Rand’s sword and Perrin’s axe.

“Remember I want a turn, too,” Mat called after them.

The dancers formed two long lines facing each other, men in one, women in the other. First the drum and then the dulcimer took up the beat, and all the dancers began bending their knees in time. The girl across from Rand, her dark hair in braids that made him think of home, gave him a shy smile, and then a wink that was not shy at all. Thom’s flute leaped into the tune, and Rand moved forward to meet the dark-haired girl; she threw back her head and laughed as he spun her around and passed her on to the next man in line.

Everyone in the room was laughing, he thought as he danced around his next partner, one of the serving maids with her apron flapping wildly. The only unsmiling face he saw was on a man huddled by one of the fireplaces, and that fellow had a scar that crossed his whole face from one temple to the opposite jaw, giving his nose a slant and drawing the corner of his mouth down. The man met his gaze and grimaced, and Rand looked away in embarrassment. Maybe with that scar the fellow could not smile.

He caught his next partner as she spun, and whirled her in a circle before passing her on. Three more women danced with him as the music gained speed, then he was back with the first dark-haired girl for a fast promenade that changed the lines about completely. She was still laughing, and she gave him another wink.

The scar-faced man was scowling at him. His step faltered and his cheeks grew hot. He had not meant to embarrass the fellow; he really did not think he had stared. He turned to meet his next partner and forgot all about the man. The next woman to dance into his arms was Nynaeve.

He stumbled through the steps, almost tripping over his own feet, nearly stepping on hers. She danced gracefully enough to make up for his clumsiness, smiling the while.

“I thought you were a better dancer,” she laughed as they changed partners.

He had only a moment to gather himself before they changed again, and he found himself dancing with Moiraine. If he had thought he was stumble-footed with the Wisdom, it was nothing to how he felt with the Aes

Sedai. She glided across the floor smoothly, her gown swirling about her; he almost fell twice. She gave him a sympathetic smile, which made it worse rather than helping. It was a relief to go to his next partner in the pattern, even if it was Egwene.

He regained some of his poise. After all, he had danced with her for years. Her hair still hung unbraided, but she had gathered it back with a red ribbon. *Probably couldn't decide whether to please Moiraine or Nynaeve,* he thought sourly. Her lips were parted, and she looked as if she wanted to say something, but she never spoke, and he was not about to speak first. Not after the way she had cut off his earlier attempt in the private dining room. They stared at one another soberly and danced apart without a word.

He was glad enough to return to the bench when the reel was done. The music for another dance, a jig, began while he was sitting down. Mat hurried to join in, and Perrin slid onto the bench as he was leaving.

"Did you see her?" Perrin began before he was even seated. "Did you?" "Which one?" Rand asked. "The Wisdom, or Mistress Alys? I danced with both of them."

"The Ae . . . Mistress Alys, too?" Perrin exclaimed. "I danced with Nynaeve. I didn't even know she danced. She never does at any of the dances back home."

"I wonder," Rand said thoughtfully, "what the Women's Circle would say about the Wisdom dancing? Maybe that's why."

Then the music and the clapping and the singing were too loud for any further talk. Rand and Perrin joined in the clapping as the dancers circled the floor. Several times he became aware of the scar-faced man staring at him. The man had a right to be touchy, with that scar, but Rand did not see anything he could do now that would not make matters worse. He concentrated on the music and avoided looking at the fellow.

The dancing and singing went on into the night. The maids finally did remember their duties; Rand was glad to wolf down some hot stew and bread. Everyone ate where they sat or stood. Rand joined in three more dances, and he managed his steps better when he found himself dancing with Nynaeve again, and with Moiraine, as well. This time they both complimented him on his dancing, which made him stammer. He danced with Egwene again, too; she stared at him, dark-eyed and always seeming on the point of speaking, but never saying a word. He was just as silent as she, but he was sure he did not scowl at her, no matter what Mat said when he returned to the bench.

Toward midnight Moiraine left. Egwene, after one harried look from the Aes Sedai to Nynaeve, hurried after her. The Wisdom watched them with an unreadable expression, then deliberately joined in another dance before she left, too, with a look as if she had gained a point on the Aes Sedai.

Soon Thom was putting his flute into its case and arguing good-naturedly with those who wanted him to stay longer. Lan came by to gather up Rand and the others.

“We have to make an early start,” the Warder said, leaning close to be heard over the noise, “and we will need all the rest we can get.”

“There’s a fellow been staring at me,” Mat said. “A man with a scar across his face. You don’t think he could be a . . . one of the *friends* you warned us about?”

“Like this?” Rand said, drawing a finger across his nose to the corner of his mouth. “He stared at me, too.” He looked around the room. People were drifting away, and most of those still left clustered around Thom. “He’s not here, now.”

“I saw the man,” Lan said. “According to Master Fitch, he’s a spy for the Whitecloaks. He’s no worry to us.” Maybe he was not, but Rand could see something was bothering the Warder.

Rand glanced at Mat, who had the stiff expression on his face that always meant he was hiding something. *A Whitecloak spy. Could Bornhald want to get back at us that much?* “We’re leaving early?” he said. “Really early?” Maybe they could be gone before anything came of it.

“At first light,” the Warder replied.

As they left the common room, Mat singing snatches of song under his breath, and Perrin stopping now and again to try out a new step he had learned, Thom joined them in high spirits. Lan’s face was expressionless as they headed for the stairs.

“Where is Nynaeve sleeping?” Mat asked. “Master Fitch said we got the last rooms.”

“She has a bed,” Thom said dryly, “in with Mistress Alys and the girl.” Perrin whistled between his teeth, and Mat muttered, “Blood and ashes! I wouldn’t be in Egwene’s shoes for all the gold in Caemlyn!”

Not for the first time, Rand wished Mat could think seriously about something for more than two minutes. Their own shoes were not very comfortable right then. “I’m going to get some milk,” he said. Maybe it would help him sleep. *Maybe I won’t dream tonight.*

Lan looked at him sharply. “There’s something wrong tonight. Don’t wander far. And remember, we leave whether you are awake enough to sit your saddle or have to be tied on.”

The Warder started up the stairs; the others followed him, their jollity subdued. Rand stood in the hall alone. After having so many people around, it was lonely indeed.

He hurried to the kitchen, where a scullery maid was still on duty. She poured a mug of milk from a big stone crock for him.

As he came out of the kitchen, drinking, a shape in dull black started toward him down the length of the hall, raising pale hands to toss back the dark cowl that had hidden the face beneath. The cloak hung motionless as the figure moved, and the face. . . . A man’s face, but pasty white, like a slug under a rock, and eyeless. From oily black hair to puffy cheeks was as smooth as an eggshell. Rand choked, spraying milk.

“You are one of them, boy,” the Fade said, a hoarse whisper like a file softly drawn across bone.

Dropping the mug, Rand backed away. He wanted to run, but it was all he could do to make his feet take one halting step at a time. He could not break free of that eyeless face; his gaze was held, and his stomach curdled. He tried to shout for help, to scream; his throat was like stone. Every ragged breath hurt.

The Fade glided closer, in no hurry. Its strides had a sinuous, deadly grace, like a viper, the resemblance emphasized by the overlapping black plates of armor down its chest. Thin, bloodless lips curved in a cruel smile, made more mocking by the smooth, pale skin where eyes should have been. The voice made Bornhald’s seem warm and soft. “Where are the others? I know they are here. Speak, boy, and I will let you live.”

Rand’s back struck wood, a wall or a door—he could not make himself look around to see which. Now that his feet had stopped, he could not make them start again. He shivered, watching the Myrddraal slither nearer. His shaking grew harder with every slow stride.

“Speak, I say, or—”

From above came a quick clatter of boots, from the stairs up the hall, and the Myrddraal cut off, whirling. The cloak hung still. For an instant the Fade's head tilted, as if that eyeless gaze could pierce the wooden wall. A sword appeared in a dead-white hand, blade as black as the cloak. The light in the hall seemed to grow dimmer in the presence of that blade. The pounding of boots grew louder, and the Fade spun back to Rand, an almost boneless movement. The black blade rose; narrow lips peeled back in a rictus snarl.

Trembling, Rand knew he was going to die. Midnight steel flashed at his head . . . and stopped.

"You belong to the Great Lord of the Dark." The breathy grating of that voice sounded like fingernails scratched across a slate. "You are his."

Spinning in a black blur, the Fade darted down the hall away from Rand. The shadows at the end of the hall reached out and embraced it, and it was gone.

Lan leaped down the last stairs, landing with a crash, sword in hand.

Rand struggled to find his voice. "Fade," he gasped. "It was. . . ."Abruptly he remembered his sword. With the Myrddraal facing him he had never thought of it. He fumbled the heron-mark blade out now, not caring if it was too late. "It ran that way!"

Lan nodded absently; he seemed to be listening to something else. "Yes. It's going; fading. No time to pursue it, now. We're leaving, sheepherder."

More boots stumbled down the stairs; Mat and Perrin and Thom, hung about with blankets and saddlebags. Mat was still buckling his bedroll, with his bow awkward under his arm.

"Leaving?" Rand said. Sheathing his sword, he took his things from Thom. "Now? In the night?"

"You want to wait for the Halfman to come back, sheepherder?" the Warder said impatiently. "For half a dozen of them? It knows where we are, now."

"I will ride with you again," Thom told the Warder, "if you have no great objections. Too many people remember that I arrived with you. I fear that before tomorrow this will be a bad place to be known as your friend."

"You can ride with us, or ride to Shayol Ghul, gleeman." Lan's scabbard rattled from the force with which he rammed his sword home.

A stableman came darting past them from the rear door, and then Moiraine appeared with Master Fitch, and behind them Egwene, with her bundled shawl in her arms. And Nynaeve. Egwene looked frightened almost to tears, but the Wisdom's face was a mask of cool anger.

"You must take this seriously," Moiraine was telling the innkeeper. "You will certainly have trouble here by morning. Darkfriends, perhaps; perhaps worse. When it comes, quickly make it clear that we are gone. Offer no re sis tance. Just let whoever it is know that we left in the night, and they should bother you no further. It is us they are after."

"Never you worry about trouble," Master Fitch replied jovially. "Never a bit. If any come around my inn trying to make trouble for my guests . . . well, they'll get short shrift from the lads and I. Short shrift. And they'll hear not a word about where you've gone or when, or even if you were ever here. I've no use for that kind. Not a word will be spoken about you by any here. Not a word!"

"But—"

"Mistress Alys, I really must see to your horses if you're going to leave in good order." He pulled loose from her grip on his sleeve and trotted in the direction of the stables.

Moiraine sighed vexedly. "Stubborn, stubborn man. He will not listen."

"You think Trollocs might come here hunting for us?" Mat asked.

"Trollocs!" Moiraine snapped. "Of course not! There are other things to fear, not the least of which is how we were found." Ignoring Mat's bristle, she went right on. "The Fade cannot believe we will remain here, now that we know it has found us, but Master Fitch takes Darkfriends too lightly. He thinks of them as wretches hiding in the shadows, but Darkfriends can be found in the shops and streets of every city, and in the highest councils, too. The Myrddraal may send them to see if he can learn of our plans." She turned on her heel and left, Lan close behind her.

As they started for the stableyard, Rand fell in beside Nynaeve. She had her saddlebags and blankets, too. "So you're coming after all," he said. *Min was right.*

"*Was* there something down here?" she asked quietly. "*She* said it was —" She stopped abruptly and looked at him.

"A Fade," he answered. He was amazed that he could say it so calmly. "It was in the hall with me, and then Lan came."

Nynaeve shrugged her cloak against the wind as they left the inn. “Perhaps there is something after you. But I came to see you safely back in Emond’s Field, all of you, and I will not leave till that is done. I won’t leave you alone with *her* sort.” Lights moved in the stables where the ostlers were saddling the horses.

“Mutch!” the innkeeper shouted from the stable door where he stood with Moiraine. “Stir your bones!” He turned back to her, appearing to attempt to soothe her rather than really listening when she spoke, though he did it deferentially, with bows interspersed among the orders called to the stablemen.

The horses were led out, the stablemen grumbling softly about the hurry and the lateness. Rand held Egwene’s bundle, handing it up to her when she was on Bela’s back. She looked back at him with wide, fear-filled eyes. *At least she doesn’t think it’s an adventure anymore.*

He was ashamed as soon as he thought it. She was in danger because of him and the others. Even riding back to Emond’s Field alone would be safer than going on. “Egwene, I. . . .”

The words died in his mouth. She was too stubborn to just turn back, not after saying she was going all the way to Tar Valon. *What about what Min saw? She’s part of it. Light, part of what?*

“Egwene,” he said, “I’m sorry. I can’t seem to think straight anymore.”

She leaned down to grip his hand hard. In the light from the stable he could see her face clearly. She did not look as frightened as she had.

Once they were all mounted, Master Fitch insisted on leading them to the gates, the stablemen lighting the way with their lamps. The round-bellied innkeeper bowed them on their way with assurances that he would keep their secrets, and invitations to come again. Mutch watched them leave as sourly as he had watched them arrive.

There was one, Rand thought, who would not give short shrift to anyone, or any kind of shrift. Mutch would tell the first person who asked him when they had gone and everything else he could think of concerning them. A little distance down the street, he looked back. One figure stood, lamp raised high, peering after them. He did not need to see the face to know it was Mutch.

The streets of Baerlon were abandoned at that hour of the night; only a few faint glimmers here and there escaped tightly closed shutters, and the light of the moon in its last quarter waxed and waned with the wind-driven clouds. Now and again a dog barked as they passed an alleyway, but no other sound disturbed the night except their horses' hooves and the wind whistling across the rooftops. The riders held an even deeper silence, huddled in their cloaks and their own thoughts.

The Warder led the way, as usual, with Moiraine and Egwene close behind. Nynaeve kept near the girl, and the others brought up the rear in a tight cluster. Lan kept the horses moving at a brisk walk.

Rand watched the streets around them warily, and he noticed his friends doing the same. Shifting moon shadows recalled the shadows at the end of the hall, the way they had seemed to reach out to the Fade. An occasional noise in the distance, like a barrel toppling, or another dog barking, jerked every head around. Slowly, bit by bit as they made their way through the town, they all bunched their horses closer to Lan's black stallion and Moiraine's white mare.

At the Caemlyn Gate Lan dismounted and hammered with his fist on the door of a small square stone building squatting against the wall. A weary Watchman appeared, rubbing sleepily at his face. As Lan spoke, his sleepiness vanished, and he stared past the Warder to the others.

"You want to leave?" he exclaimed. "Now? In the night? You must be mad!"

"Unless there is some order from the Governor that prohibits our leaving," Moiraine said. She had dismounted as well, but she stayed back from the door, out of the light that spilled into the dark street.

"Not exactly, mistress." The Watchman peered at her, frowning as he tried to make out her face. "But the gates stay shut from sundown to sunup. No one to come in except in daylight. That's the order. Anyway, there're wolves out there. Killed a dozen cows in the last week. Could kill a man just as easy."

"No one to come in, but nothing about leaving," Moiraine said as if that settled the matter. "You see? We are not asking you to disobey the Governor."

Lan pressed something into the Watchman's hand. "For your trouble," he murmured.

"I suppose," the Watchman said slowly. He glanced at his hand; gold glinted before he hastily stuffed it in his pocket. "I suppose leaving wasn't mentioned at that. Just a minute." He stuck his head back inside. "Arin!

Dar! Get out here and help me open the gate. There’s people want to leave. Don’t argue. Just do it.”

Two more of the Watch appeared from inside, stopping to stare in sleepy surprise at the party of eight waiting to leave. Under the first Watchman’s urgings they shuffled over to heave at the big wheel that raised the thick bar across the gates, then turned their efforts to cranking the gates open. The crank-and-ratchet made a rapid clicking sound, but the well-oiled gates swung outward silently. Before they were even a quarter open, though, a cold voice spoke out of the darkness.

Five white-cloaked men walked into the light from the guardhouse door. Their cowls were drawn up to hide their faces, but each man rested his hand on his sword, and the golden suns on their left breasts were a plain announcement of who they were. Mat muttered under his breath. The Watchmen stopped their cranking and exchanged uneasy looks.

“What is this? Are these gates not ordered closed until sunrise?”

Five white-cloaked men walked into the light from the guardhouse door. Their cowls were drawn up to hide their faces, but each man rested his hand on his hand on his sword, and the golden suns on their left breasts were a plain announcement of who they were. Mat muttered under his breath. The Watchmen stopped their cranking and exchanged uneasy looks.

“This is none of your affair,” the first Watchman said belligerently. Five white hoods turned to regard him, and he finished in a weaker tone. “The Children hold no sway here. The Governor—”

“The Children of the Light,” the white-cloaked man who had first spoken said softly, “hold sway wherever men walk in the Light. Only where the Shadow of the Dark One reigns are the Children denied, yes?” He swung his hood from the Watchman to Lan, then suddenly gave the Warder a second, more wary, look.

The Warder had not moved; in fact, he seemed completely at ease. But not many people could look at the Children so uncaringly. Lan’s stony face could as well have been looking at a bootblack. When the Whitecloak spoke again, he sounded suspicious.

“What kind of people want to leave town walls in the night during times like these? With wolves stalking the darkness, and the Dark One’s handiwork seen flying over the town?” He eyed the braided leather band that crossed Lan’s forehead and held his long hair back. “A northerner, yes?”

Rand hunched lower in his saddle. A Draghkar. It had to be that, unless the man just named anything he did not understand as the Dark One's handiwork. With a Fade at the Stag and Lion, he should have expected a Draghkar, but at the moment he was hardly thinking about it. He thought he recognized the Whitecloak's voice.

"Travelers," Lan replied calmly. "Of no interest to you or yours."

"Everyone is of interest to the Children of the Light."

Lan shook his head slightly. "Are you really after more trouble with the Governor? He has limited your numbers in the town, even had you followed. What will he do when he discovers you're harassing honest citizens at his gates?" He turned to the Watchmen. "Why have you stopped?" They hesitated, put their hands back on the crank, then hesitated again when the Whitecloak spoke.

"The Governor does not know what happens under his nose. There is evil he does not see, or smell. But the Children of the Light see." The Watchmen looked at one another; their hands opened and closed as if regretting the spears left inside the guard house. "The Children of the Light smell the evil." The Whitecloak's eyes turned to the people on horseback. "We smell it, and root it out. Wherever it is found."

Rand tried to make himself even smaller, but the movement drew the man's attention.

"What have we here? Someone who does not wish to be seen? What do you—? Ah!" The man brushed back the hood of his white cloak, and Rand was looking at the face he had known would be there. Bornhald nodded with obvious satisfaction. "Clearly, Watchman, I have saved you from a great disaster. These are Darkfriends you were about to help escape from the Light. You should be reported to your Governor for discipline, or perhaps given to the Questioners to discover your true intent this night." He paused, eyeing the Watchman's fear; it seemed to have no effect on him. "You would not wish that, no? Instead, I will take these ruffians to our camp, that they may be questioned in the Light—instead of you, yes?"

"You will take me to your camp, Whitecloak?" Moiraine's voice came suddenly from every direction at once. She had moved back into the night at the Children's approach, and shadows clumped around her. "You will question me?" Darkness wreathed her as she took a step forward; it made her seem taller. "You will bar my way?"

Another step, and Rand gasped. She *was* taller, her head level with his where he sat on the gray's back. Shadows clung about her face like thunderclouds.

"Aes Sedai!" Bornhald shouted, and five swords flashed from their sheaths. "Die!" The other four hesitated, but he slashed at her in the same motion that cleared his sword.

Rand cried out as Moiraine's staff rose to intercept the blade. That delicately carved wood could not possibly stop hard-swung steel. Sword met staff, and sparks sprayed in a fountain, a hissing roar hurling Bornhald back into his white-cloaked companions. All five went down in a heap. Tendrils of smoke rose from Bornhald's sword, on the ground beside him, blade bent at a right angle where it had been melted almost in two.

"You dare attack me!" Moiraine's voice roared like a whirlwind. Shadow spun in on her, draped her like a hooded cloak; she loomed as high as the town wall. Her eyes glared down, a giant staring at insects.

"Go!" Lan shouted. In one lightning move he snatched the reins of Moiraine's mare and leaped into his own saddle. "Now!" he commanded. His shoulders brushed either gate as his stallion tore through the narrow opening like a flung stone.

For a moment Rand remained frozen, staring. Moiraine's head and shoulders stood above the wall, now. Watchmen and Children alike cowered away from her, huddling with their backs against the front of the guard house. The Aes Sedai's face was lost in the night, but her eyes, as big as full moons, shone with impatience as well as anger when they touched him. Swallowing hard, he booted Cloud in the ribs and galloped after the others.

Fifty paces from the wall, Lan drew them up, and Rand looked back. Moiraine's shadowed shape towered high over the log palisade, head and shoulders a deeper darkness against the night sky, surrounded by a silver nimbus from the hidden moon. As he watched, mouth hanging open, the Aes Sedai stepped over the wall. The gates began swinging shut frantically. As soon as her feet were on the ground outside, she was suddenly her normal size again.

"Hold the gates!" an unsteady voice shouted inside the wall. Rand thought it was Bornhald. "We must pursue them, and take them!" But the Watchmen did not slow the pace of closing. The gates slammed shut, and moments later the bar crashed into place, sealing them. *Maybe some of* *those other Whitecloaks aren't as eager to confront an Aes Sedai as Bornhald.*

Moiraine hurried to Aldieb, stroking the white mare's nose once before she tucked her staff under the girth strap. Rand did not need to look this time to know there was not even a nick in the staff.

"You were taller than a giant," Egwene said breathlessly, shifting on Bela's back. No one else spoke, though Mat and Perrin edged their horses away from the Aes Sedai.

"Was I?" Moiraine said absently as she swung into her saddle.

"I saw you," Egwene protested.

"The mind plays tricks in the night; the eye sees what is not there."

"This is no time for games," Nynaeve began angrily, but Moiraine cut her off.

"No time for games indeed. What we gained at the Stag and Lion we may have lost here." She looked back at the gate and shook her head. "If only I could believe the Draghkar was on the ground." With a self-deprecatory sniff she added, "Or if only the Myrddraal were truly blind. If I am wishing, I might as well wish for the truly impossible. No matter. They know the way we must go, but with luck we will stay a step ahead of them. Lan!"

The Warder moved off eastward down the Caemlyn Road, and the rest followed close behind, hooves thudding rhythmically on the hard-packed earth.

They kept to an easy pace, a fast walk the horses could maintain for hours without any Aes Sedai help. Before they had been even one hour on their way, though, Mat cried out, pointing back the way they had come.

"Look there!"

They all drew rein and stared.

Flames lit the night over Baerlon as if someone had built a house-size bonfire, tinting the undersides of the cloud with red. Sparks whipped into the sky on the wind.

"I warned him," Moiraine said, "but he would not take it seriously." Aldieb danced sideways, an echo of the Aes Sedai's frustration. "He would not take it seriously."

"The inn?" Perrin said. "That's the Stag and Lion? How can you be sure?"

“How far do you want to stretch coincidence?” Thom asked. “It could be the Governor’s house, but it isn’t. And it isn’t a warehouse, or somebody’s kitchen stove, or your grandmother’s haystack.”

“Perhaps the Light shines on us a little this night,” Lan said, and Egwene rounded on him angrily.

“How can you say that? Poor Master Fitch’s inn is burning! People may be hurt!”

“If they have attacked the inn,” Moiraine said, “perhaps our exit from the town and my . . . display went unnoticed.”

“Unless that’s what the Myrddraal wants us to think,” Lan added.

Moiraine nodded in the darkness. “Perhaps. In any case, we must press on. There will be little rest for anyone tonight.”

“You say that so easily, Moiraine,” Nynaeve exclaimed. “What about the people at the inn? People must be hurt, and the innkeeper has lost his livelihood, because of you! For all your talk about walking in the Light you’re ready to go on without sparing a thought for him. His trouble is because of you!”

“Because of those three,” Lan said angrily. “The fire, the injured, the going on—all because of those three. The fact that the price must be paid is proof that it is worth paying. The Dark One wants those boys of yours, and anything he wants this badly, he must be kept from. Or would you rather let the Fade have them?”

“Be at ease, Lan,” Moiraine said. “Be at ease. Wisdom, you think I can help Master Fitch and the people at the inn? Well, you are right.” Nynaeve started to say something, but Moiraine waved it away and went on. “I can go back by myself and give some help. Not too much, of course. That would draw attention to those I helped, attention they would not thank me for, especially with the Children of the Light in the town. And that would leave only Lan to protect the rest of you. He is very good, but it will take more than him if a Myrddraal and a fist of Trollocs find you. Of course, we could all return, though I doubt I can get all of us back into Baerlon unnoticed. And that would expose all of you to whomever set that fire, not to mention the Whitecloaks. Which alternative would you choose, Wisdom, if you were I?”

“I would do something,” Nynaeve muttered unwillingly.

“And in all probability hand the Dark One his victory,” Moiraine replied. “Remember what—who—it is that he wants. We are in a war, as surely as anyone in Ghealdan, though thousands fight there and only eight of us here. I will have gold sent to Master Fitch, enough to rebuild the Stag and Lion, gold that cannot be traced to Tar Valon. And help for any who were hurt, as well. Any more than that will only endanger them. It is far from simple, you see. Lan." The Warder turned his horse and took up the road again.

From time to time Rand looked back. Eventually all he could see was the glow on the clouds, and then even that was lost in the darkness. He hoped Min was all right.

All was still pitch-dark when the Warder finally led them off the packed dirt of the road and dismounted. Rand estimated there were no more than a couple of hours till dawn. They hobbled the horses, still saddled, and made a cold camp.

"One hour," Lan warned as everyone except him was wrapping up in their blankets. He would stand guard while they slept. "One hour, and we must be on our way." Silence settled over them.

After a few minutes Mat spoke in a whisper that barely reached Rand. "I wonder what Dav did with that badger." Rand shook his head silently, and Mat hesitated. Finally he said, "I thought we were safe, you know, Rand. Not a sign of anything since we crossed the Taren, and there we were in a city, with walls around us. I thought we were safe. And then that dream. And a Fade. Are we ever going to be safe again?"

"Not until we get to Tar Valon," Rand said. "That's what she told us."

"Will we be safe then?" Perrin asked softly, and all three of them looked to the shadowy mound that was the Aes Sedai. Lan had melded into the darkness; he could have been anywhere.

Rand yawned suddenly. The others twitched nervously at the sound. "I think we'd better get some sleep," he said. "Staying awake won't answer anything."

Perrin spoke quietly. "She should have done something."

No one answered.

Rand squirmed onto his side to avoid a root, tried his back, then rolled off of a stone onto his belly and another root. It was not a good campsite they had stopped at, not like the spots the Warder had chosen on the way north from the Taren. He fell asleep wondering if the roots digging into his ribs would make him dream, and woke at Lan's touch on his shoulder, ribs aching, and grateful that if any dreams had come he did not remember them.

It was still the dark just before dawn, but once the blankets were rolled and strapped behind their saddles Lan had them riding east again. As the sun rose they made a bleary-eyed breakfast on bread and cheese and water, eating while they rode, huddled in their cloaks against the wind. All except Lan, that is. He ate, but he was not bleary-eyed, and he did not huddle. He had changed back into his shifting cloak, and it whipped around him, fluttering through grays and greens, and the only mind he paid it was to keep it clear of his sword-arm. His face remained without expression, but his eyes searched constantly, as if he expected an ambush any moment.

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CHAPTER

18

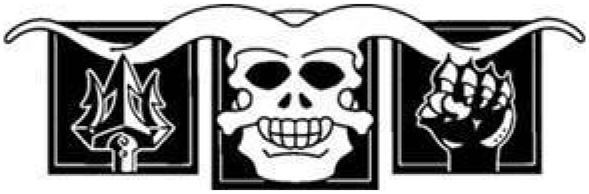

The Caemlyn Road

The Caemlyn Road was not very different from the North Road through the Two Rivers. It was considerably wider, of course, and showed the wear of much more use, but it was still hard-packed dirt, lined on either side by trees that would not have been at all out of place in the Two Rivers, especially since only the evergreens carried a leaf.

The land itself was different, though, for by midday the road entered low hills. For two days the road ran through the hills—cut right through them, sometimes, if they were wide enough to have made the road go much out of its way and not so big as to have made digging through too difficult. As the angle of the sun shifted each day it became apparent that the road, for all it appeared straight to the eye, curved slowly southward as it ran east. Rand had daydreamed over Master al'Vere's old map—half the boys in Emond's Field had daydreamed over it—and as he remembered, the road curved around something called the Hills of Absher until it reached Whitebridge.

From time to time Lan had them dismount atop one of the hills, where he could get a good view of the road both ahead and behind, and the surrounding countryside as well. The Warder would study the view while the others stretched their legs or sat under the trees and ate.

"I used to like cheese," Egwene said on the third day after leaving Baerlon. She sat with her back to the bole of a tree, grimacing over a dinner that was once again the same as breakfast, as supper would be. "Not a chance of tea. Nice hot tea." She pulled her cloak tighter and shifted around the tree in a vain effort to avoid the swirling wind.

"Flatwort tea and andilay root," Nynaeve was saying to Moiraine, "are best for fatigue. They clear the head and dim the burn in tired muscles."

“I am sure they do,” the Aes Sedai murmured, giving Nynaeve a sidelong glance.

Nynaeve’s jaw tightened, but she continued in the same tone. “Now, if you must go without sleep. . . .”

“No tea!” Lan said sharply to Egwene. “No fire! We can’t see them yet, but they are back there, somewhere, a Fade or two and their Trollocs, and they know we are taking this road. No need to tell them exactly where we are.”

“I wasn’t asking,” Egwene muttered into her cloak. “Just regretting.”

“If they know we’re on the road,” Perrin asked, “why don’t we go straight across to Whitebridge?”

“Even Lan cannot travel as fast cross-country as by road,” Moiraine said, interrupting Nynaeve, “especially not through the Hills of Absher.” The Wisdom gave an exasperated sigh. Rand wondered what she was up to; after ignoring the Aes Sedai completely for the first day, Nynaeve had spent the last two trying to talk to her about herbs. Moiraine moved away from the Wisdom as she went on. “Why do you think the road curves to avoid them? And we would have to come back to this road eventually. We might find them ahead of us instead of following.”

Rand looked doubtful, and Mat muttered something about “the long way round.”

“Have you seen a farm this morning?” Lan asked. “Or even the smoke from a chimney? You haven’t, because it’s all wilderness from Baerlon to Whitebridge, and Whitebridge is where we must cross the Arinelle. That is the only bridge spanning the Arinelle south of Maradon, in Saldaea.”

Thom snorted and blew out his mustaches. “What is to stop them from having someone, something, at Whitebridge already?”

From the west came the keening wail of a horn. Lan’s head whipped around to stare back down the road behind them. Rand felt a chill. A part of him remained calm enough to think, ten miles, no more.

“Nothing stops them, gleeman,” the Warder said. “We trust to the Light and luck. But now we know for certain there are Trollocs behind us.”

Moiraine dusted her hands. “It is time for us to move on.” The Aes Sedai mounted her white mare.

That set off a scramble for the horses, speeded by a second winding of the horn. This time others answered, the thin sounds floating out of the west like a dirge. Rand made ready to put Cloud to a gallop right away, and everyone else settled their reins with the same urgency. Everyone except Lan and Moiraine. The Warder and the Aes Sedai exchanged a long look.

“Keep them moving, Moiraine Sedai,” Lan said finally. “I will return as soon as I am able. You will know if I fail.” Putting a hand on Mandarb’s saddle, he vaulted to the back of the black stallion and galloped down the hill. Heading west. The horns sounded again.

“The Light go with you, last Lord of the Seven Towers,” Moiraine said almost too softly for Rand to hear. Drawing a deep breath, she turned Aldieb to the east. “We must go on,” she said, and started off at a slow, steady trot. The others followed her in a tight file.

Rand twisted once in his saddle to look for Lan, but the Warder was already lost to sight among the low hills and leafless trees. Last Lord of the Seven Towers, she had called him. He wondered what that meant. He had not thought anyone besides himself had heard, but Thom was chewing the ends of his mustaches, and he had a speculative frown on his face. The gleeman seemed to know a great many things.

The horns called and answered once more behind them. Rand shifted in his saddle. They were closer this time; he was sure of it. Eight miles. Maybe seven. Mat and Egwene looked over their shoulders, and Perrin hunched as if he expected something to hit him in the back. Nynaeve rode up to speak to Moiraine.

“Can’t we go any faster?” she asked. “Those horns are getting closer.”

The Aes Sedai shook her head. “And why do they let us know they are there? Perhaps so we will hurry on without thinking of what might be ahead.”

They kept on at the same steady pace. At intervals the horns gave cry behind them, and each time the sound was closer. Rand tried to stop thinking of how close, but the thought came unbidden at every brazen wail. Five miles, he was thinking anxiously, when Lan suddenly burst around the hill behind them at a gallop.

He came abreast of Moiraine, reining in the stallion. “At least three fists of Trollocs, each led by a Halfman. Maybe five.”

“If you were close enough to see them,” Egwene said worriedly, “they could have seen you. They could be right on your heels.”

“He was not seen.” Nynaeve drew herself up as everyone looked at her. “I have followed his trail, remember.”

“Hush,” Moiraine commanded. “Lan is telling us there are perhaps five hundred Trollocs behind us.” A stunned silence followed, then Lan spoke again.

“And they are closing the gap. They will be on us in an hour or less.”

Half to herself, the Aes Sedai said, “If they had that many before, why were they not used at Emond’s Field? If they did not, how did they come here since?”

“They are spread out to drive us before them,” Lan said, “with scouts quartering ahead of the main parties.”

“Driving us toward what?” Moiraine mused. As if to answer her a horn sounded in the distance to the west, a long moan that was answered this time by others, all ahead of them. Moiraine stopped Aldieb; the others followed her lead, Thom and the Emond’s Field folk looking around fearfully. Horns cried out before them, and behind. Rand thought they held a note of triumph.

“What do we do now?” Nynaeve demanded angrily. “Where do we go?”

“All that is left is north or south,” Moiraine said, more thinking aloud than answering the Wisdom. “To the south are the Hills of Absher, barren and dead, and the Taren, with no way to cross, and no traffic by boat. To the north, we can reach the Arinelle before nightfall, and there will be a chance of a trader’s boat. If the ice has broken at Maradon.”

“There is a place the Trollocs will not go,” Lan said, but Moiraine’s head whipped around sharply.

“No!” She motioned to the Warder, and he put his head close to hers so their talk could not be overheard.

The horns winded, and Rand’s horse danced nervously.

“They’re trying to frighten us,” Thom growled, attempting to steady his mount. He sounded half angry and half as if the Trollocs were succeeding. “They’re trying to scare us until we panic and run. They’ll have us, then.”

Egwene’s head swung with every blast of a horn, staring first ahead of them, then behind, as if looking for the first Trollocs. Rand wanted to do the same thing, but he tried to hide it. He moved Cloud closer to her.

“We go north,” Moiraine announced.

The horns keened shrilly as they left the road and trotted into the surrounding hills.

The hills were low, but the way was all up and down, with never a flat stretch, beneath bare-branched trees and through dead undergrowth. The horses climbed laboriously up one slope only to canter down the other. Lan set a hard pace, faster than they had used on the road.

Branches lashed Rand across the face and chest. Old creepers and vines caught his arms, and sometimes snagged his foot right out of the stirrup. The keening horns came ever closer, and ever more frequently.

As hard as Lan pushed them, they were not getting farther on very quickly. They traveled two feet up or down for every one forward, and every foot was a scrambling effort. And the horns were coming nearer. *Two miles,* he thought. *Maybe less.*

After a time Lan began peering first one way then another, the hard planes of his face as close to worry as Rand had seen them. Once the Warder stood in his stirrups to stare back the way they had come. All Rand could see were trees. Lan settled back into his saddle and unconsciously pushed back his cloak to clear his sword as he resumed searching the forest.

Rand met Mat's eye questioningly, but Mat only grimaced at the Warder's back and shrugged helplessly.

Lan spoke, then, over his shoulder. "There are Trollocs nearby." They topped a hill and started down the other side. "Some of the scouts, sent ahead of the rest. Probably. If we come on them, stay with me at all costs, and do as I do. We must keep on the way we are going."

"Blood and ashes!" Thom muttered. Nynaeve motioned to Egwene to keep close.

Scattered stands of evergreens provided the only real cover, but Rand tried to peer in every direction at once, his imagination turning gray tree trunks caught out of the corner of his eye into Trollocs. The horns were closer, too. And directly behind them. He was sure of it. Behind and coming closer.

They topped another hill.

Below them, just starting up the slope, marched Trollocs carrying poles tipped with great loops of rope or long hooks. Many Trollocs. The line stretched far to either side, the ends out of sight, but at its center, directly in front of Lan, a Fade rode.

The Myrddraal seemed to hesitate as the humans appeared atop the hill, but in the next instant it produced a sword with the black blade Rand remembered so queasily, and waved it over its head. The line of Trollocs scrambled forward.

Even before the Myrddraal moved, Lan's sword was in his hand. "Stay with me!" he cried, and Mandarb plunged down the slope toward the Trollocs. "For the Seven Towers!" he shouted.

Rand gulped and booted the gray forward; the whole group of them streamed after the Warder. He was surprised to find Tam's sword in his fist. Caught up by Lan's cry, he found his own. "Manetheren! Manetheren!"

Perrin took it up. "Manetheren! Manetheren!"

But Mat shouted, *"Carai an Caldazar! Carai an Ellisande! Al Ellisande!"*

The Fade's head turned from the Trollocs to the riders charging toward him. The black sword froze over its head, and the opening of its cowl swiveled, searching among the oncoming horsemen.

Then Lan was on the Myrddraal, as the human folk fell on the Trolloc line. Warder's blade met black steel from the forges at Thakan'dar with a clang like a great bell, the toll echoing in the hollow, a flash of blue light filling the air like sheet lightning.

Beast-muzzled almost-men swarmed around each of the humans, catchpoles and hooks flailing. Only Lan and the Myrddraal did they avoid; those two fought in a clear circle, black horses matching step for step, swords matching stroke for stroke. The air flashed and pealed.

Cloud rolled his eyes and screamed, rearing and lashing out with his hooves at the snarling, sharp-toothed faces surrounding him. Heavy bodies crowded shoulder-to-shoulder around him. Digging his heels in ruthlessly, Rand forced the gray on regardless, swinging his sword with little of the skill Lan had tried to impart, hacking as if hewing wood. *Egwene!* Desperately he searched for her as he kicked the gray onward, slashing a path through the hairy bodies as though chopping undergrowth.

Moiraine's white mare dashed and cut at the slightest touch of the Aes Sedai's hand on the reins. Her face was as hard as Lan's as her staff lashed out. Flame enveloped Trollocs, then burst with a roar that left misshapen forms unmoving on the ground. Nynaeve and Egwene rode close to the Aes Sedai with frantic urgency, teeth bared almost as fiercely as the Trollocs', belt knives in hand. Those short blades would be no use at all if a Trolloc came close. Rand tried to turn Cloud toward them, but the gray had the bit in his teeth. Screaming and kicking, Cloud struggled forward however hard Rand tugged at the reins.

Around the three women a space opened as Trollocs tried to flee from Moiraine’s staff, but as they attempted to avoid her, she sought them out. Fires roared, and the Trollocs howled in rage and fury. Above roar and howl crashed the tolling of the Warder’s sword against the Myrddraal’s; the air flared blue around them, flared again. Again.

A noose on the end of a pole swept at Rand’s head. With an awkward slash, he cut the catchpole in two, then hacked the goat-faced Trolloc that held it. A hook caught his shoulder from behind and tangled in his cloak, jerking him backwards. Frantically, almost losing his sword, he clutched the pommel of his saddle to keep his seat. Cloud twisted, shrieking. Rand hung onto saddle and reins desperately; he could feel himself slipping, inch by inch, falling to the hook. Cloud swung around; for an instant Rand saw Perrin, half out of his saddle, struggling to wrest his axe away from three Trollocs. They had him by one arm and both legs. Cloud plunged, and only Trollocs filled Rand’s eyes.

A Trolloc dashed in and seized Rand’s leg, forcing his foot free of the stirrup. Panting, he let go of the saddle to stab it. Instantly the hook pulled him out of the saddle, to Cloud’s hindquarters; his death-grip on the reins was all that kept him from the ground. Cloud reared and shrieked. And in that same moment the pulling vanished. The Trolloc at his leg threw up its hands and screamed. All of the Trollocs screamed, a howl like all the dogs in the world gone mad.

Around the humans Trollocs fell writhing to the ground, tearing at their hair, clawing their own faces. All of the Trollocs. Biting at the ground, snapping at nothing, howling, howling, howling.

Then Rand saw the Myrddraal. Still upright in the saddle of its madly dancing horse, black sword still flailing, it had no head.

“It won’t die until nightfall,” Thom had to shout, between heavy breaths, over the unrelenting screams. “Not completely. That is what I’ve heard, anyway.”

“Ride!” Lan shouted angrily. The Warder had already gathered Moiraine and the other two women and had them halfway up the next hill. “This is not all of them!” Indeed, the horns dirged again, above the shrieks of the Trollocs on the ground, to east and west and south.

For a wonder, Mat was the only one who had been unhorsed. Rand trotted toward him, but Mat tossed a noose away from him with a shudder, gathered his bow, and scrambled into his saddle unaided, though rubbing at his throat.

The horns bayed like hounds with the scent of a deer. Hounds closing in. If Lan had set a hard pace before, he doubled it now, till the horses scrabbled uphill faster than they had gone down before, then nearly threw themselves at the other side. But still the horns came ever nearer, until the guttural shouts of pursuit were heard whenever the horns paused, until eventually the humans reached a hilltop just as Trollocs appeared on the next hill behind them. The hilltop blackened with Trollocs, snouted, distorted faces howling, and three Myrddraal overawed them all. Only a hundred spans separated the two parties.

Rand's heart shriveled like an old grape. *Three!*

The Myrddraal's black swords rose as one; Trollocs boiled down the slope, thick, triumphant cries rising, catchpoles bobbing above as they ran.

Moiraine climbed down from Aldieb's back. Calmly she removed something from her pouch, unwrapped it. Rand glimpsed dark ivory. The *angreal*. With *angreal* in one hand and staff in the other, the Aes Sedai set her feet, facing the onrushing Trollocs and the Fades' black swords, raised her staff high, and stabbed it down into the earth.

The ground rang like an iron kettle struck by a mallet. The hollow clang dwindled, faded away. For an instant then, it was silent. Everything was silent. The wind died. The Trolloc cries stilled; even their charge forward slowed and stopped. For a heartbeat, everything waited. Slowly the dull ringing returned, changing to a low rumble, growing until the earth moaned.

The ground trembled beneath Cloud's hooves. This was Aes Sedai work like the stories told about; Rand wished he were a hundred miles away. The tremble became a shaking that set the trees around them quivering. The gray stumbled and nearly fell. Even Mandarb and riderless Aldieb staggered as if drunk, and those who rode had to cling to reins and manes, to anything, to keep their seats.

The Aes Sedai still stood as she had begun, holding the *angreal* and her upright staff thrust into the hilltop, and neither she nor the staff moved an inch, for all that the ground shook and shivered around her. Now the ground rippled, springing out from in front of her staff, lapping toward the

Trollocs like ripples on a pond, ripples that grew as they ran, toppling old bushes, flinging dead leaves into the air, growing, becoming waves of earth, rolling toward the Trollocs. Trees in the hollow lashed like switches in the hands of small boys. On the far slope Trollocs fell in heaps, tumbled over and over by the raging earth.

Yet as if the ground were not rearing all around them, the Myrddraal moved forward in a line, their dead-black horses never missing a step, every hoof in unison. Trollocs rolled on the ground all about the black steeds, howling and grabbing at the hillside that heaved them up, but the Myrddraal came slowly on.

Moiraine lifted her staff, and the earth stilled, but she was not done. She pointed to the hollow between the hills, and flame gouted from the ground, a fountain twenty feet high. She flung her arms wide, and the fire raced to left and right as far as the eye could see, spreading into a wall separating humans and Trollocs. The heat made Rand put his hands in front of his face, even on the hilltop. The Myrddraal's black mounts, whatever strange powers they had, screamed at the fire, reared and fought their riders as the Myrddraal beat at them, trying to force them through the flames.

"Blood and ashes," Mat said faintly. Rand nodded numbly.

Abruptly Moiraine wavered and would have fallen had Lan not leaped from his horse to catch her. "Go on," he told the others. The harshness of his voice was at odds with the gentle way he lifted the Aes Sedai to her saddle. "That fire won't burn forever. Hurry! Every minute counts!"

The wall of flame roared as if it would indeed burn forever, but Rand did not argue. They galloped northward as fast as they could make their horses go. The horns in the distance shrilled out disappointment, as if they already knew what had happened, then fell silent.

Lan and Moiraine soon caught up with the others, though Lan led Aldieb by the reins while the Aes Sedai swayed and held the pommel of her saddle with both hands. "I will be all right soon," she said to their worried looks. She sounded tired yet confident, and her gaze was as compelling as ever. "I am not at my strongest when working with Earth and Fire. A small thing."

The two of them moved into the lead again at a fast walk. Rand did not think Moiraine could stay in the saddle at any faster pace. Nynaeve rode foward beside the Aes Sedai, steadying her with a hand. For a time as the party went on across the hills the two women whispered, then the Wisdom delved into her cloak and handed a small packet to Moiraine. Moiraine unfolded it and swallowed the contents. Nynaeve said something more, then fell back with the others, ignoring their questioning looks. Despite their circumstances, Rand thought she had a slight look of satisfaction.

He did not really care what the Wisdom was up to. He rubbed the hilt of his sword continually, and whenever he realized what he was doing, he stared down at it in wonder. *So that's what a battle is like.* He could not remember much of it, not any particular part. Everything ran together in his head, a melted mass of hairy faces and fear. Fear and heat. It had seemed as hot as a midsummer noon while it was going on. He could not understand that. The icy wind was trying to freeze beads of perspiration all over his face and body.

He glanced at his two friends. Mat was scrubbing sweat off his face with the edge of his cloak. Perrin, staring at something in the distance and not liking what he was seeing, appeared unaware of the beads glistening on his forehead.

The hills grew smaller, and the land began to level out, but instead of pressing on, Lan stopped. Nynaeve moved as if to rejoin Moiraine, but the Warder's look kept her away. He and the Aes Sedai rode ahead and put their heads together, and from Moiraine's gestures it became apparent they were arguing. Nynaeve and Thom stared at them, the Wisdom frowning worriedly, the gleeman muttering under his breath and pausing to stare back the way they had come, but everyone else avoided looking at them altogether. Who knew what might come out of an argument between an Aes Sedai and a Warder?

After a few minutes Egwene spoke to Rand quietly, casting an uneasy eye at the still-arguing pair. "Those things you were shouting at the Trollocs." She stopped as if unsure how to proceed.

"What about them?" Rand asked. He felt a little awkward—warcries were all right for Warders; Two Rivers folk did not do things like that, whatever Moiraine said—but if she made fun of him over it. . . . "Mat must have repeated that story ten times."

"And badly," Thom put in. Mat grunted in protest.

"However he told it," Rand said, "we've all heard it any number of times. Besides, we had to shout something. I mean, that's what you do at a time like that. You heard Lan."

"And we have a right," Perrin added thoughtfully. "Moiraine says we're all descended from those Manetheren people. They fought the Dark One, and we're fighting the Dark One. That gives us a right."

Egwene sniffed as if to show what she thought of that. "I wasn't talking about that. What . . . what was it you were shouting, Mat?"

Mat shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't remember." He stared at them defensively. "Well, I don't. It's all foggy. I don't know what it was, or where it came from, or what it means." He gave a self-deprecating laugh. "I don't suppose it means anything."

"I . . . I think it does," Egwene said slowly. "When you shouted, I thought—just for a minute—I thought I understood you. But it's all gone, now." She sighed and shook her head. "Perhaps you're right. Strange what you can imagine at a time like that, isn't it?"

"Carai an Caldazar," Moiraine said. They all twisted to stare at her. "*Carai an Ellisande. Al Ellisande.* For the honor of the Red Eagle. For the honor of the Rose of the Sun. The Rose of the Sun. The ancient warcry of Manetheren, and the warcry of its last king. Eldrene was called the Rose of the Sun." Moiraine's smile took in Egwene and Mat both, though her gaze may have rested a moment longer on him than on her. "The blood of Aemon's line is still strong in the Two Rivers. The old blood still sings."

Mat and Egwene looked at each other, while everyone else looked at them both. Egwene's eyes were wide, and her mouth kept quirking into a smile that she bit back every time it began, as if she was not sure just how to take this talk of the old blood. Mat was sure, from the scowling frown on his face.

Rand thought he knew what Mat was thinking. The same thing he was thinking. If Mat was a descendant of the ancient kings of Manetheren, maybe the Trollocs were really after him and not all three of them. The thought made him ashamed. His cheeks colored, and when he caught a guilty grimace on Perrin's face, he knew Perrin had been having the same thought.

"I can't say that I have ever heard the like of this," Thom said after a minute. He shook himself and became brusque. "Another time I might even make a story out of it, but right now. . . . Do you intend to remain here for the rest of the day, Aes Sedai?"

"No," Moiraine replied, gathering her reins.

A Trolloc horn keened from the south as if to emphasize her word. More horns answered, east and west. The horses whickered and sidled about nervously.

"They have passed the fire," Lan said calmly. He turned to Moiraine. "You are not strong enough for what you intend, not yet, not without rest. And neither Myrddraal nor Trolloc will enter that place."

Moiraine raised a hand as if to cut him off, then sighed and let it fall instead. "Very well," she said irritably. "You are right, I suppose, but I would rather there was any other choice." She pulled her staff from under the girth strap of her saddle. "Gather in around me, all of you. As close as you can. Closer."

Rand urged Cloud nearer the Aes Sedai's mare. At Moiraine's insistence they kept on crowding closer in a circle around her until every horse had its head stretched over the croup or withers of another. Only then was the Aes Sedai satisfied. Then, without speaking, she stood in the stirrups and swung her staff over their heads, stretching to make certain it covered everyone.

Rand flinched each time the staff passed over him. A tingle ran through him with every pass. He could have followed the staff without seeing it, just by following the shivers as it moved over people. It was no surprise to him that Lan was the only one not affected.

Abruptly Moiraine thrust the staff out to the west. Dead leaves whirled into the air and branches whipped as if a dust-devil ran along the line she pointed to. As the invisible whirlwind vanished from sight she settled back into her saddle with a sigh.

"To the Trollocs," she said, "our scents and our tracks will seem to follow that. The Myrddraal will see through it in time, but by then. . . ."

"By then," Lan said, "we will have lost ourselves."

"Your staff is very powerful," Egwene said, earning a sniff from Nynaeve.

Moiraine made a clicking sound. "I have told you, child, things do not have power. The One Power comes from the True Source, and only a living mind can wield it. This is not even an *angreal,* merely an aid to concentration." Wearily she slid the staff back under her girth strap. "Lan?"

"Follow me," the Warder said, "and keep quiet. It will ruin everything if the Trollocs hear us."

He led the way north again, not at the crashing pace they had been making, but rather in the quick walk with which they had traveled the Caemlyn Road. The land continued to flatten, though the forest remained as thick.

Their path was no longer straight, as it had been before, for Lan chose out a route that meandered over hard ground and rocky outcrops, and he no longer let them force their way through tangles of brush, instead taking the time to make their way around. Now and again he dropped to the rear, intently studying the trail they made. If anyone so much as coughed, it drew a sharp grunt from him.

Nynaeve rode beside the Aes Sedai, concern battling dislike on her face. And there was a hint of something more, Rand thought, almost as if the Wisdom saw some goal in sight. Moiraine's shoulders were slumped, and she held her reins and the saddle with both hands, swaying with every step Aldieb took. It was plain that laying the false trail, small as that might have seemed beside producing an earthquake and a wall of flame, had taken a great deal out of her, strength she no longer had to lose.

Rand almost wished the horns would start again. At least they were a way of telling how far back the Trollocs were. And the Fades.

He kept looking behind them, and so was not the first to see what lay ahead. When he did, he stared, perplexed. A great, irregular mass stretched off to either side out of sight, in most places as high as the trees that grew right up to it, with even taller spires here and there. Leafless vines and creepers covered it all in thick layers. A cliff? *The vines will make climbing easy, but we'll never get the horses up.*

Suddenly, as they rode a little closer, he saw a tower. It was clearly a tower, not some kind of rock formation, with an odd, pointed dome on the top. "A city!" he said. And a city wall, and the spires were guard towers on the wall. His jaw dropped. It had to be ten times as big as Baerlon. Fifty times as big.

Mat nodded. "A city," he agreed. "But what's a city doing in the middle of a forest like this?"

"And without any people," Perrin said. When they looked at him, he pointed to the wall. "Would people let vines grow over everything like that? You know how creepers can tear down a wall. Look how it's fallen."

What Rand saw adjusted itself in his mind again. It was as Perrin said. Under almost every low place in the wall was a brush-covered hill; rubble from the collapsed wall above. No two of the guard towers were the same height.

“I wonder what city it was,” Egwene mused. “I wonder what happened to it. I don’t remember anything from papa’s map.”

“It was called Aridhol,” Moiraine said. “In the days of the Trolloc Wars, it was an ally of Manetheren.” Staring at the massive walls, she seemed almost unaware of the others, even of Nynaeve, who supported her in the saddle with a hand on her arm. “Later Aridhol died, and this place was called by another name.”

“What name?” Mat asked.

“Here,” Lan said. He stopped Mandarb in front of what had once been a gate wide enough for fifty men to march through abreast. Only the broken, vine-encrusted watchtowers remained; of the gates there was no sign. “We enter here.” Trolloc horns shrieked in the distance. Lan peered in the direction of the sound, then looked at the sun, halfway down toward the treetops in the west. “They have discovered it’s a false trail. Come, we must find shelter before dark.”

“What name?” Mat asked again.

Moiraine answered as they rode into the city. “Shadar Logoth,” she said. “It is called Shadar Logoth.”

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CHAPTER

19

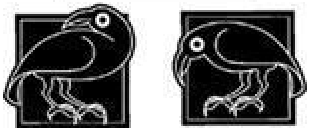

Shadow's Waiting

Broken paving stones crunched under the horses' hooves as Lan led the way into the city. The entire city was broken, what Rand could see of it, and as abandoned as Perrin had said. Not so much as a pigeon moved, and weeds, mainly old and dead, sprouted from cracks in walls as well as pavement. More buildings had roofs fallen in than had them whole. Tumbled walls spilled fans of brick and stone into the streets. Towers stopped, abrupt and jagged, like broken sticks. Uneven rubble hills with a few stunted trees growing on their slopes could have been the remains of palaces or of entire blocks of the city.

Yet what was left standing was enough to take Rand's breath. The largest building in Baerlon would have vanished in the shadows of almost anything here. Pale marble palaces topped with huge domes met him wherever he looked. Every building appeared to have at least one dome; some had four or five, and each one shaped differently. Long walks lined by columns ran hundreds of paces to towers that seemed to reach the sky. At every intersection stood a bronze fountain, or the alabaster spire of a monument, or a statue on a pedestal. If the fountains were dry, most of the spires toppled, and many of the statues broken, what remained was so great that he could only marvel.

And I thought Baerlon was a city! Burn me, but Thom must have been laughing up his sleeve. Moiraine and Lan, too.

He was so caught up in staring that he was taken by surprise when Lan suddenly stopped in front of a white stone building that had once been twice as big as the Stag and Lion in Baerlon. There was nothing to say what it had been when the city lived and was great, perhaps even an inn. Only a hollow shell remained of the upper floors—the afternoon sky was visible through empty window frames, glass and wood alike long since gone—but the ground floor seemed sound enough.

Moiraine, hands still on the pommel, studied the building intently before nodding. “This will do.”

Lan leaped from his saddle and lifted the Aes Sedai down in his arms. “Bring the horses inside,” he commanded. “Find a room in the back to use for a stable. Move, farmboys. This isn’t the village green.” He vanished inside carrying the Aes Sedai.

Nynaeve scrambled down and hurried after him, clutching her bag of herbs and ointments. Egwene was right behind her. They left their mounts standing.

“ ‘Bring the horses inside,’ ” Thom muttered wryly, and puffed out his mustaches. He climbed down, stiff and slow, knuckled his back, and gave a long sigh, then took Aldieb’s reins. “Well?” he said, lifting an eyebrow at Rand and his friends.

They hurried to dismount, and gathered up the rest of the horses. The doorway, without anything to say there had ever been a door in it, was more than big enough to get the animals through, even two abreast.

Inside was a huge room, as wide as the building, with a dirty tile floor and a few ragged wall hangings, faded to a dull brown, that looked as if they would fall apart at a touch. Nothing else. Lan had made a place in the nearest corner for Moiraine with his cloak and hers. Nynaeve, muttering about the dust, knelt beside the Aes Sedai, digging in her bag, which Egwene held open.

“I may not like her, it is true,” Nynaeve was saying to the Warder as Rand, leading Bela and Cloud, came in behind Thom, “but I help anyone who needs my help, whether I like them or not.”

“I made no accusation, Wisdom. I only said, have a care with your herbs.”

She gave him a look from the corner of her eye. “The fact is, she needs my herbs, and so do you.” Her voice was acerbic to start, and grew more tart as she spoke. “The fact is, she can only do so much, even with her One Power, and she has done about as much as she can without collapsing. The fact is, your sword cannot help her now, Lord of the Seven Towers, but my herbs can.”

Moiraine laid a hand on Lan’s arm. “Be at ease, Lan. She means no harm. She simply does not know.” The Warder snorted derisively.

Nynaeve stopped digging in her bag and looked at him, frowning, but it was to Moiraine she spoke. “There are many things I don’t know. What thing is this?"

"For one," Moiraine replied, "all I truly need is a little rest. For another, I agree with you. Your skills and knowledge will be more useful than I thought. Now, if you have something that will help me sleep for an hour and not leave me groggy—?"

"A weak tea of foxtail, marisin, and—"

Rand missed the last of it as he followed Thom into a room behind the first, a chamber just as big and even emptier. Here was only the dust, thick and undisturbed until they came. Not even the tracks of birds or small animals marked the floor.

Rand began to unsaddle Bela and Cloud, and Thom, Aldieb and his gelding, and Perrin, his horse and Mandarb. All but Mat. He dropped his reins in the middle of the room. There were two doorways from the room besides the one by which they had entered.

"Alley," Mat announced, drawing his head back in from the first. They could all see that much from where they were. The second doorway was only a black rectangle in the rear wall. Mat went through slowly, and came out much faster, vigorously brushing old cobwebs out of his hair. "Nothing in there," he said, giving the alleyway another look.

"You going to take care of your horse?" Perrin said. He had already finished his own and was lifting the saddle from Mandarb. Strangely, the fierce-eyed stallion gave him no trouble at all, though he did watch Perrin. "Nobody is going to do it for you."

Mat gave the alley one last look and went to his horse with a sigh.

As Rand laid Bela's saddle on the floor, he noticed that Mat had taken on a glum stare. His eyes seemed a thousand miles away, and he was moving by rote.

"Are you all right, Mat?" Rand said. Mat lifted the saddle from his horse, and stood holding it. "Mat? Mat!"

Mat gave a start and almost dropped the saddle. "What? Oh. I . . . I was just thinking."

"Thinking?" Perrin hooted from where he was replacing Mandarb's bridle with a hackamore. "You were asleep."

Mat scowled. "I was thinking about . . . about what happened back there. About those words I. . . ." Everybody turned to look at him then, not just Rand, and he shifted uneasily. "Well, you heard what Moiraine said. It's as if some dead man was speaking with my mouth. I don't like it." His scowl grew deeper when Perrin chuckled.

"Aemon's warcry, she said—right? Maybe you're Aemon come back again. The way you go on about how dull Emond's Field is, I'd think you would like that—being a king and hero reborn."

"Don't say that!" Thom drew a deep breath; everybody stared at him now. "That is dangerous talk, stupid talk. The dead can be reborn, or take a living body, and it is not something to speak of lightly." He took another breath to calm himself before going on. "The old blood, she said. The blood, not a dead man. I've heard that it can happen, sometimes. Heard, though I never really thought. . . . It was your roots, boy. A line running from you to your father to your grandfather, right on back to Manetheren, and maybe beyond. Well, now you know your family is old. You ought to let it go at that and be glad. Most people don't know much more than that they had a father."

Some of us can't even be sure of that, Rand thought bitterly. *Maybe the Wisdom was right. Light, I hope she was.*

Mat nodded at what the gleeman said. "I suppose I should. Only . . . do you think it has anything to do with what's happened to us? The Trollocs and all? I mean . . . oh, I don't know what I mean."

"I think you ought to forget about it, and concentrate on getting out of here safely." Thom produced his long-stemmed pipe from inside his cloak. "And I think I am going to have a smoke." With a waggle of the pipe in their direction, he disappeared into the front room.

"We are all in this together, not just one of us," Rand told Mat.

Mat gave himself a shake, and laughed, a short bark. "Right. Well, speaking of being in things together, now that we're done with the horses, why don't we go see a little more of this city. A real city, and no crowds to jostle your elbow and poke you in the ribs. Nobody looking down their long noses at us. There's still an hour, maybe two, of daylight left."

"Aren't you forgetting the Trollocs?" Perrin said.

Mat shook his head scornfully. "Lan said they wouldn't come in here, remember? You need to listen to what people say."

"I remember," Perrin said. "And I do listen. This city—Aridhol?—was an ally of Manetheren. See? I listen."

"Aridhol must have been the greatest city in the Trolloc Wars," Rand said, "for the Trollocs to still be afraid of it. They weren't afraid to come into the Two Rivers, and Moiraine said Manetheren was—how did she put it?—a thorn to the Dark One's foot."

Perrin raised his hands. "Don't mention the Shepherd of the Night. Please?"

"What do you say?" Mat laughed. "Let's go."

"We should ask Moiraine," Perrin said, and Mat threw up his hands.

"Ask Moiraine? You think she'll let us out of her sight? And what about Nynaeve? Blood and ashes, Perrin, why not ask Mistress Luhhan while you're about it?"

Perrin nodded reluctant agreement, and Mat turned to Rand with a grin. "What about you? A real city? With palaces!" He gave a sly laugh. "And no Whitecloaks to stare at us."

Rand gave him a dirty look, but he hesitated only a minute. Those palaces were like a gleeman's tale. "All right."

Stepping softly so as not to be heard in the front room, they left by the alley, following it away from the front of the building to a street on the other side. They walked quickly, and when they were a block away from the white stone building Mat suddenly broke into a capering dance.

"Free." He laughed. "Free!" He slowed until he was turning a circle, staring at everything and still laughing. The afternoon shadows stretched long and jagged, and the sinking sun made the ruined city golden. "Did you ever even dream of a place like this? Did you?"

Perrin laughed, too, but Rand shrugged uncomfortably. This was nothing like the city in his first dream, but just the same. . . . "If we're going to see anything," he said, "we had better get on with it. There isn't much daylight left."

Mat wanted to see everything, it seemed, and he pulled the others along with his enthusiasm. They climbed over dusty fountains with basins wide enough to hold everybody in Emond's Field and wandered in and out of structures chosen at random, but always the biggest they could find. Some they understood, and some not. A palace was plainly a palace, but what was a huge building that was one round, white dome as big as a hill outside and one monstrous room inside? And a walled place, open to the sky and big enough to have held all of Emond's Field, surrounded by row on row on row of stone benches?

Mat grew impatient when they found nothing but dust, or rubble, or colorless rags of wall hangings that crumbled at a touch. Once some wooden chairs stood stacked against a wall; they all fell to bits when Perrin tried to pick one up.

The palaces, with their huge, empty chambers, some of which could have held the Winespring Inn with room to spare on every side and above as well, made Rand think too much of the people who had once filled them. He thought everybody in the Two Rivers could have stood under that round dome, and as for the place with the stone benches. . . . He could almost imagine he could see the people in the shadows, staring in disapproval at the three intruders disturbing their rest.

Finally even Mat tired, grand as the buildings were, and remembered that he had had only an hour's sleep the night before. Everyone began to remember that. Yawning, they sat on the steps of a tall building fronted by row on row of tall stone columns and argued about what to do next.

"Go back," Rand said, "and get some sleep." He put the back of his hand against his mouth. When he could talk again, he said, "Sleep. That's all I want."

"You can sleep anytime," Mat said determinedly. "Look at where we are. A ruined city. Treasure."

"Treasure?" Perrin's jaws cracked. "There isn't any treasure here. There isn't anything but dust."

Rand shaded his eyes against the sun, a red ball sitting close to the rooftops. "It's getting late, Mat. It'll be dark soon."

"There could be treasure," Mat maintained stoutly. "Anyway, I want to climb one of the towers. Look at that one over there. It's whole. I'll bet you could see for miles from up there. What do you say?"

"The towers are not safe," said a man's voice behind them.

Rand leaped to his feet and spun around clutching his sword hilt, and the others were just as quick.

A man stood in the shadows among the columns at the top of the stairs. He took half a step forward, raised his hand to shield his eyes, and stepped back again. "Forgive me," he said smoothly. "I have been quite a long time in the dark inside. My eyes are not yet used to the light."

"Who are you?" Rand thought the man's accent sounded odd, even after Baerlon; some words he pronounced strangely, so Rand could barely understand them. "What are you doing here? We thought the city was empty."

"I am Mordeth." He paused as if expecting them to recognize the name. When none of them gave any sign of doing so, he muttered something under his breath and went on. "I could ask the same questions of you. There has been no one in Aridhol for a long time. A long, long time. I would not have thought to find three young men wandering its streets."

"We're on our way to Caemlyn," Rand said. "We stopped to take shelter for the night."

"Caemlyn," Mordeth said slowly, rolling the name around his tongue, then shook his head. "Shelter for the night, you say? Perhaps you will join me."

"You still haven't said what you're doing here," Perrin said.

"Why, I am a treasure hunter, of course."

"Have you found any?" Mat demanded excitedly.

Rand thought Mordeth smiled, but in the shadows he could not be sure. "I have," the man said. "More than I expected. Much more. More than I can carry away. I never expected to find three strong, healthy young men. If you will help me move what I *can* take to where my horses are, you may each have a share of the rest. As much as you can carry. Whatever I leave will be gone, carried off by some other treasure hunter, before I can return for it."

"I told you there must be treasure in a place like this," Mat exclaimed. He darted up the stairs. "We'll help you carry it. Just take us to it." He and Mordeth moved deeper into the shadows among the columns.

Rand looked at Perrin. "We can't leave him." Perrin glanced at the sinking sun, and nodded.

They went up the stairs warily, Perrin easing his axe in its belt loop. Rand's hand tightened on his sword. But Mat and Mordeth were waiting among the columns, Mordeth with arms folded, Mat peering impatiently into the interior.

"Come," Mordeth said. "I will show you the treasure." He slipped inside, and Mat followed. There was nothing for the others to do but go on.

The hall inside was shadowy, but almost immediately Mordeth turned aside and took some narrow steps that wound around and down through deeper and deeper dark until they fumbled their way in pitch-blackness. Rand felt along the wall with one hand, unsure there would be a step below until his foot met it. Even Mat began to feel uneasy, judging by his voice when he said, "It's awfully dark down here."

“Yes, yes,” Mordeth replied. The man seemed to be having no trouble at all with the dark. “There are lights below. Come.”

Indeed the winding stairs abruptly gave way to a corridor dimly lit by scattered, smoky torches set in iron sconces on the walls. The flickering flames and shadows gave Rand his first good look at Mordeth, who hurried on without pausing, motioning them to follow.

There was something odd about him, Rand thought, but he could not pick out what it was, exactly. Mordeth was a sleek, somewhat overfed man, with drooping eyelids that made him seem to be hiding behind something and staring. Short, and completely bald, he walked as if he were taller than any of them. His clothes were certainly like nothing Rand had ever seen before, either. Tight black breeches and soft red boots with the tops turned down at his ankles. A long, red vest thickly embroidered in gold, and a snowy white shirt with wide sleeves, the points of his cuffs hanging almost to his knees. Certainly not the kind of clothes in which to hunt through a ruined city in search of treasure. But it was not that which made him seem strange, either.

Then the corridor ended in a tile-walled room, and he forgot about any oddities Mordeth might have. His gasp was an echo of his friends’. Here, too, light came from a few torches staining the ceiling with their smoke and giving everyone more than one shadow, but that light was reflected a thousand times by the gems and gold piled on the floor, mounds of coins and jewelry, goblets and plates and platters, gilded, gem-encrusted swords and daggers, all heaped together carelessly in waist-high mounds.

With a cry Mat ran forward and fell to his knees in front of one of the piles. “Sacks,” he said breathlessly, pawing through the gold. “We’ll need sacks to carry all of this.”

“We can’t carry it all,” Rand said. He looked around helplessly; all the gold the merchants brought to Emond’s Field in a year would not have made the thousandth part of just one of those mounds. “Not now. It’s almost dark.”

Perrin pulled an axe free, carelessly tossing back the gold chains that had been tangled around it. Jewels glittered along its shiny black handle, and delicate gold scrollwork covered the twin blades. “Tomorrow, then,” he said, hefting the axe with a grin. “Moiraine and Lan will understand when we show them this.”

“You are not alone?” Mordeth said. He had let them rush past him into the treasure room, but now he followed. “Who else is with you?”

Mat, wrist deep in the riches before him, answered absently. “Moiraine and Lan. And then there’s Nynaeve, and Egwene, and Thom. He’s a gleeman. We’re going to Tar Valon.”

Rand caught his breath. Then the silence from Mordeth made him look at the man.

Rage twisted Mordeth’s face, and fear, too. His lips pulled back from his teeth. “Tar Valon!” He shook clenched fists at them. “Tar Valon! You said you were going to this . . . this . . . Caemlyn! You lied to me!”

“If you still want,” Perrin said to Mordeth, “we’ll come back tomorrow and help you.” Carefully he set the axe back on the heap of gem-encrusted chalices and jewelry. “If you want.”

“No. That is. . . .” Panting, Mordeth shook his head as if he could not decide. “Take what you want. Except. . . . Except. . . .”

Suddenly Rand realized what had been nagging at him about the man. The scattered torches in the hallway had given each of them a ring of shadows, just as the torches in the treasure room did. Only. . . . He was so shocked he said it out loud. “You don’t have a shadow.”

A goblet fell from Mat’s hand with a crash.

Mordeth nodded, and for the first time his fleshy eyelids opened all the way. His sleek face suddenly appeared pinched and hungry. “So.” He stood straighter, seeming taller. “It is decided.” Abruptly there was no seeming to it. Like a balloon Mordeth swelled, distorted, head pressed against the ceiling, shoulders butting the walls, filling the end of the room, cutting off escape. Hollow-cheeked, teeth bared in a rictus snarl, he reached out with hands big enough to engulf a man’s head.

With a yell Rand leaped back. His feet tangled in a gold chain, and he crashed to the floor, the wind knocked out of him. Struggling for breath, he struggled at the same time for his sword, fighting his cloak, which had become wrapped around the hilt. The yells of his friends filled the room, and the clash of gold platters and goblets clattering across the floor. Suddenly an agonized scream shivered in Rand’s ears.

Almost sobbing, he managed to inhale at last, just as he got the sword out of its sheath. Cautiously, he got to his feet, wondering which of his friends had given that scream. Perrin looked back at him wide-eyed from across the room, crouched and holding his axe back as if about to chop down a tree. Mat peered around the side of a treasure pile, clutching a dagger snatched from the trove.

Something moved in the deepest part of the shadows left by the torches, and they all jumped. It was Mordeth, clutching his knees to his chest and huddled as deep into the furthest corner as he could get.

"He tricked us," Mat panted. "It was some kind of trick."

Mordeth threw back his head and wailed; dust sifted down as the walls trembled. "You are all dead!" he cried. "All dead!" And he leaped up, diving across the room.

Rand's jaw dropped, and he almost dropped the sword as well. As Mordeth dove through the air, he stretched out and thinned, like a tendril of smoke. As thin as a finger he struck a crack in the wall tiles and vanished into it. A last cry hung in the room as he vanished, fading slowly away after he was gone.

"You are all dead!"

"Let's get out of here," Perrin said faintly, firming his grip on his axe while he tried to face every direction at once. Gold ornaments and gems scattered unnoticed under his feet.

"But the treasure," Mat protested. "We *can't* just leave it now."

"I don't want anything of his," Perrin said, still turning one way after another. He raised his voice and shouted at the walls. "It's your treasure, you hear? We are not taking any of it!"

Rand stared angrily at Mat. "Do you want him coming after us? Or are you going to wait here stuffing your pockets until he comes back with ten more like him?"

Mat just gestured to all the gold and jewels. Before he could say anything, though, Rand seized one of his arms and Perrin grabbed the other. They hustled him out of the room, Mat struggling and shouting about the treasure.

Before they had gone ten steps down the hall, the already dim light behind them began to fail. The torches in the treasure room were going out. Mat stopped shouting. They hastened their steps. The first torch outside the room winked out, then the next. By the time they reached the winding stairs there was no need to drag Mat any longer. They were all running, with the dark closing in behind them. Even the pitch-black of the stairs only made them hesitate an instant, then they sped upwards, shouting at the top of their lungs. Shouting to scare anything that might be waiting; shouting to remind themselves they were still alive.

They burst out into the hall above, sliding and falling on the dusty marble, scrambling out through the columns, to tumble down the stairs and land in a bruised heap in the street.

Rand untangled himself and picked Tam's sword up from the pavement, looking around uneasily. Less than half of the sun still showed above the rooftops. Shadows reached out like dark hands, made blacker by the remaining light, nearly filling the street. He shivered. The shadows looked like Mordeth, reaching.

"At least we're out of it." Mat got up from the bottom of the pile, dusting himself off in a shaky imitation of his usual manner. "And at least I —"

"Are we?" Perrin said.

Rand knew it was not his imagination this time. The back of his neck prickled. Something was watching them from the darkness in the columns. He spun around, staring at the buildings across the way. He could feel eyes on him from there, too. His grip tightened on his sword hilt, though he wondered what good it would be. Watching eyes seemed to be everywhere. The others looked around warily; he knew they could feel it, too.

"We stay in the middle of the street," he said hoarsely. They met his eyes; they looked as frightened as he felt. He swallowed hard. "We stay in the middle of the street, keep out of shadows as much as we can, and walk fast."

"Walk very fast," Mat agreed fervently.

The watchers followed them. Or else there were lots of watchers, lots of eyes staring out of almost every building. Rand could not see anything move, hard as he tried, but he could feel the eyes, eager, hungry. He did not know which would be worse. Thousands of eyes, or just a few, following them.

In the stretches where the sun still reached them, they slowed, just a little, squinting nervously into the darkness that always seemed to lay ahead. None of them was eager to enter the shadows; no one was really sure something might not be waiting. The watchers' anticipation was a palpable thing whenever shadows stretched across the street, barring their way. They ran through those dark places shouting. Rand thought he could hear dry, rustling laughter.

At last, with twilight falling, they came in sight of the white stone building they had left what seemed like days ago. Suddenly the watching eyes departed. Between one step and the next, they vanished in a blink. Without a word Rand broke into a trot, followed by his friends, then a full run that only ended when they hared through the doorway and collapsed, panting.

A small fire burned in the middle of the tile floor, the smoke vanishing through a hole in the ceiling in a way that reminded Rand unpleasantly of Mordeth. Everyone except Lan was there, gathered around the flames, and their reactions varied considerably. Egwene, warming her hands at the fire, gave a start as the three burst into the room, clutching her hands to her throat; when she saw who it was, a relieved sigh spoiled her attempt at a withering look. Thom merely muttered something around his pipestem, but Rand caught the word "fools" before the gleeman went back to poking the flames with a stick.

"You wool-headed witlings!" the Wisdom snapped. She bristled from head to foot; her eyes glittered, and bright spots of red burned on her cheeks. "Why under the Light did you run off like that? Are you all right? Have you no sense at all? Lan is out looking for you now, and you'll be luckier than you deserve if he does not pound some sense into the lot of you when he gets back."

The Aes Sedai's face betrayed no agitation at all, but her hands had loosed a white-knuckled grip on her dress at the sight of them. Whatever Nynaeve had given her must have helped, for she was on her feet. "You should not have done what you did," she said in a voice as clear and serene as a Waterwood pond. "We will speak of it later. Something happened out there, or you would not be falling all over one another like this. Tell me."

"You said it was safe," Mat complained, scrambling to his feet. "You said Aridhol was an ally of Manetheren, and Trollocs wouldn't come into the city, and—"

Moiraine stepped forward so suddenly that Mat cut off with his mouth open, and Rand and Perrin paused in getting up, halfway crouched or on their knees. "Trollocs? Did you see Trollocs inside the walls?"

Rand swallowed. "Not Trollocs," he said, and all three began talking excitedly, all at the same time.

Everyone began in a different place. Mat started with finding the treasure, sounding almost as if he had done it alone, while Perrin began explaining why they had gone off in the first place without telling anyone. Rand jumped right to what he thought was important, meeting the stranger among the columns. But they were all so excited that nobody told anything in the order it happened; whenever one of them thought of something, he blurted it out with no regard for what came before or after, or for who was saying what. The watchers. They all babbled about the watchers.

It made the whole tale close to incoherent, but their fear came through. Egwene began casting uneasy glances at the empty windows fronting the street. Out there the last remnants of twilight were fading; the fire seemed very small and dim. Thom took his pipe from between his teeth and listened with his head cocked, frowning. Moiraine's eyes showed concern, but not an undue amount. Until. . . .

Suddenly the Aes Sedai hissed, and grabbed Rand's elbow in a tight grip. "Mordeth! Are you sure of that name? Be very sure, all of you. Mordeth?"

They murmured a chorused "Yes," taken aback by the Aes Sedai's intensity.

"Did he touch you?" she asked them all. "Did he give you anything, or did you do anything for him? I must know."

"No," Rand said. "None of us. None of those things."

Perrin nodded agreement, and added, "All he did was try to kill us. Isn't that enough? He swelled up until he filled half the room, shouted that we were all dead men, then vanished." He moved his hand to demonstrate. "Like smoke." Egwene gave a squeak.

Mat twisted away petulantly. "Safe, you said! All that talk about Trollocs not coming here. What were we supposed to think?"

"Apparently you did not think at all," she said, coolly composed once more. "Anyone who thinks would be wary of a place that Trollocs are afraid to enter."

"Mat's doing," Nynaeve said, certainty in her voice. "He's always talking some mischief or other, and the others lose the little wits they were born with when they're around him."

Moiraine nodded briefly, but her eyes remained on Rand and his two friends. "Late in the Trolloc Wars, an army camped within these ruins—Trollocs, Darkfriends, Myrddraal, Dreadlords, thousands in all. When they did not come out, scouts were sent inside the walls. The scouts found weapons, bits of armor, and blood splattered everywhere. And messages scratched on walls in the Trolloc tongue, calling on the Dark One to aid them in their last hour. Men who came later found no trace of the blood or the messages. They had been scoured away. Halfmen and Trollocs remember still. That is what keeps them outside this place."

"And this is where you picked for us to hide?" Rand said in disbelief. "We'd be safer out there trying to outrun them."

"If you had not gone running off," Moiraine said patiently, "you would know that I set wards around this building. A Myrddraal would not even know these wards were there, for it is a different kind of evil they are meant to stop, but what resides in Shadar Logoth will not cross them, or even come too near. In the morning it will be safe for us to go; these things cannot stand the light of the sun. They will be hiding deep in the earth."

"Shadar Logoth?" Egwene said uncertainly. "I thought you said this city was called Aridhol."

"Once it was called Aridhol," Moiraine replied, "and was one of the Ten Nations, the lands that made the Second Covenant, the lands that stood against the Dark One from the first days after the Breaking of the World. In the days when Thorin al'Toren al Ban was King of Manetheren, the King of Aridhol was Balwen Mayel, Balwen Ironhand. In a twilight of despair during the Trolloc Wars, when it seemed the Father of Lies must surely conquer, the man called Mordeth came to Balwen's court."

"The same man?" Rand exclaimed, and Mat said, "It couldn't be!" A glance from Moiraine silenced them. Stillness filled the room except for the Aes Sedai's voice.

"Before Mordeth had been long in the city he had Balwen's ear, and soon he was second only to the King. Mordeth whispered poison in Balwen's ear, and Aridhol began to change. Aridhol drew in on itself, hardened. It was said that some would rather see Trollocs come than the men of Aridhol. The victory of the Light is all. That was the battlecry Mordeth gave them, and the men of Aridhol shouted it while their deeds abandoned the Light.

"The story is too long to tell in full, and too grim, and only fragments are known, even in Tar Valon. How Thorin's son, Caar, came to win Aridhol back to the Second Covenant, and Balwen sat his throne, a withered shell with the light of madness in his eyes, laughing while Mordeth smiled at his side and ordered the deaths of Caar and the embassy as Friends of the Dark. How Prince Caar came to be called Caar One-Hand. How he escaped the dungeons of Aridhol and fled alone to the Borderlands with Mordeth's unnatural assassins at his heels. How there he met Rhea, who did not know who he was, and married her, and set the skein in the Pattern that led to his death at her hands, and hers by her own hand before his tomb, and the fall of Aleth-Loriel. How the armies of Manetheren came to avenge Caar and found the gates of Aridhol torn down, no living thing inside the walls, but something worse than death. No enemy had come to Aridhol but Aridhol. Suspicion and hate had given birth to something that fed on that which created it, something locked in the bedrock on which the city stood. Mashadar waits still, hungering. Men spoke of Aridhol no more. They named it Shadar Logoth, the Place Where the Shadow Waits, or more simply, Shadow's Waiting.

"Mordeth alone was not consumed by Mashadar, but he was snared by it, and he, too, has waited within these walls through the long centuries. Others have seen him. Some he has influenced through gifts that twist the mind and taint the spirit, the taint waxing and waning until it rules . . . or kills. If ever he convinces someone to accompany him to the walls, to the boundary of Mashadar's power, he will be able to consume the soul of that person. Mordeth will leave, wearing the body of the one he worse than killed, to wreak his evil on the world again."

"The treasure," Perrin mumbled when she stopped. "He wanted us to help carry the treasure to his horses." His face was haggard. "I'll bet they were supposed to be outside the city somewhere." Rand shivered.

"But we are safe, now, aren't we?" Mat asked. "He didn't give us anything, and he didn't touch us. We're safe, aren't we, with the wards you set?"

"We are safe," Moiraine agreed. "He cannot cross the ward lines, nor can any other denizen of this place. And they must hide from the sunlight, so we can leave safely once it is day. Now, try to sleep. The wards will protect us until Lan returns."

"He has been gone a long time." Nynaeve looked worriedly at the night outside. Full dark had fallen, as black as pitch.

"Lan will be well," Moiraine said soothingly, and spread her blankets beside the fire while she spoke. "He was pledged to fight the Dark One before he left the cradle, a sword placed in his infant hands. Besides, I would know the minute of his death and the way of it, just as he would know mine. Rest, Nynaeve. All will be well." But as she was rolling herself into her blankets, she paused, staring at the street as if she, too, would have liked to know what kept the Warder.

Rand’s arms and legs felt like lead and his eyes wanted to slide shut on their own, yet sleep did not come quickly, and once it did, he dreamed, muttering and kicking off his blankets. When he woke, it was suddenly, and he looked around for a moment before he remembered where he was.

The moon was up, the last thin sliver before the new moon, its faint light defeated by the night. Everyone else was still asleep, though not all soundly. Egwene and his two friends twisted and murmured inaudibly. Thom’s snores, soft for once, were broken from time to time by half-formed words. There was still no sign of Lan.

Suddenly he felt as if the wards were no protection at all. Anything at all could be out there in the dark. Telling himself he was being foolish, he added wood to the last coals of the fire. The blaze was too small to give much warmth, but it gave more light.

He had no idea what had awakened him from his unpleasant dream. He had been a little boy again, carrying Tam’s sword and with a cradle strapped to his back, running through empty streets, pursued by Mordeth, who shouted that he only wanted his hand. And there had been an old man who watched them and cackled with mad laughter the whole time.

He gathered his blankets and lay back, staring at the ceiling. He wanted very much to sleep, even if he had more dreams like the last one, but he could not make his eyes close.

Suddenly the Warder trotted silently out of the darkness into the room. Moiraine came awake and sat up as if he had rung a bell. Lan opened his hand; three small objects fell to the tiles in front of her with the clink of iron. Three blood-red badges in the shape of horned skulls.

“There are Trollocs inside the walls,” Lan said. “They will be here in little more than an hour. And the Dha’vol are the worst of them.” He began waking the others.

Moiraine smoothly began folding her blankets. “How many? Do they know we are here?” She sounded as if there were no urgency at all.

“I don’t think they do,” Lan replied. “There are well over a hundred, frightened enough to kill anything that moves, including one another. The Halfmen are having to drive them—four just to handle one fist—and even the Myrddraal seem to want nothing more than to pass through the city and out as quickly as possible. They are not going out of their way to search, and they’re so slipshod that if they were not heading nearly straight for us I would say we had nothing to worry about.” He hesitated.

“There is something else?”

“Only this,” Lan said slowly. “The Myrddraal forced the Trollocs into the city. What forced the Myrddraal?”

Everyone had been listening in silence. Now Thom cursed under his breath, and Egwene breathed a question. “The Dark One?”

“Don’t be a fool, girl,” Nynaeve snapped. “The Dark One is bound in Shayol Ghul by the Creator.”

“For the time being, at least,” Moiraine agreed. “No, the Father of Lies is not out there, but we must leave in any case.”

Nynaeve eyed her narrowly. “Leave the protection of the wards, and cross Shadar Logoth in the night.”

“Or stay here and face the Trollocs,” Moiraine said. “To hold them off here would require the One Power. It would destroy the wards and attract the very thing the wards are meant to protect against. Besides, as well build a signal fire atop one of those towers for every Halfman within twenty miles. To leave is not what I would choose to do, but we are the hare, and it is the hounds who dictate the chase.”

“What if there are more outside the walls?” Mat asked. “What are we going to do?”

“We will use my original plan,” Moiraine said. Lan looked at her. She held up a hand and added, “Which I was too tired to carry out before. But I am rested, now, thanks to the Wisdom. We will make for the river. There, with our backs guarded by the water, I can raise a smaller ward that will hold the Trollocs and Halfmen back until we can make rafts and cross over. Or better yet, we may even be able to hail a trader’s boat coming down from Saldaea.”

The faces of the Emond’s Fielders looked blank. Lan noticed.

“Trollocs and Myrddraal loathe deep water. Trollocs are terrified of it. Neither can swim. A Halfman will not wade anything more than waist deep, especially if it’s moving. Trollocs won’t do even that if they can find any way to avoid it.”

“So once we get across the river we’re safe,” Rand said, and the Warder nodded.

“The Myrddraal will find it almost as hard to make the Trollocs build rafts as it was to drive them into Shadar Logoth, and if they try to make them cross the Arinelle that way, half will run away and the rest probably drown.”

“Get to your horses,” Moiraine said. “We are not across the river yet.”

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CHAPTER
20

Dust on the Wind

As they left the white stone building on their nervously shifting horses, the icy wind came in gusts, moaning across the rooftops, whipping cloaks like banners, driving thin clouds across the thin sliver of the moon. With a quiet command to stay close, Lan led off down the street. The horses danced and tugged at the reins, eager to be away.

Rand looked up warily at the buildings they passed, looming now in the night with their empty windows like eye sockets. Shadows seemed to move. Occasionally there was a clatter—rubble toppled by the wind. *At least the eyes are gone.* His relief was momentary. Why *are they gone?*

Thom and the Emond's Fielders made a cluster with him, all keeping close enough to touch one another. Egwene's shoulders were hunched, as if she were trying to ease Bela's hooves to the pavement. Rand did not even want to breathe. Sound might attract attention.

Abruptly he realized that a distance had opened ahead of them, separating them from the Warder and the Aes Sedai. The two were indistinct shapes a good thirty paces ahead.

"We're falling behind," he murmured, and booted Cloud to a quicker step. A thin tendril of silver-gray fog drifted low across the street ahead of him.

"Stop!" It was a strangled shout from Moiraine, sharp and urgent, but pitched not to carry far.

Uncertain, he pulled up short. The splinter of fog lay completely across the street now, slowly fattening as if more were oozing out of the buildings on either side of the street. It was as thick as a man's arm now. Cloud whickered and tried to back further away as Egwene and Thom and the others came up on him. Their horses, too, tossed their heads and bridled against coming too near the fog.

Lan and Moiraine rode slowly toward the fog, grown to as big around as a leg, stopping on the other side, well back. The Aes Sedai studied the branch of mist that separated them. Rand shrugged at a sudden itch of fear between his shoulder blades. A faint light accompanied the fog, growing as the foggy tentacle became fatter, but still only a little more than the moonlight. The horses shifted uneasily, even Aldieb and Mandarb.

“What is it?” Nynaeve asked.

“The evil of Shadar Logoth,” Moiraine replied. “Mashadar. Unseeing, unthinking, moving through the city as aimlessly as a worm burrows through the earth. If it touches you, you will die.” Rand and the others let their horses dance a few quick steps back, but not too far. As much as Rand would have given to be free of the Aes Sedai, she was as safe as home compared to what lay around them.

“Then how do we join you?” Egwene said. “Can you kill it . . . clear a way?”

Moiraine’s laugh was bitter and short. “Mashadar is vast, girl, as vast as Shadar Logoth itself. The whole White Tower could not kill it. If I damaged it enough to let you pass, drawing that much of the One Power would pull the Halfmen like a trumpet call. And Mashadar would rush in to heal whatever harm I did, rush in and perhaps catch us in its net.”

Rand exchanged looks with Egwene, then asked her question again. Moiraine sighed before answering.

“I do not like it, but what must be done, must be done. This thing will not be above ground everywhere. Other streets will be clear. See that star?” She twisted in her saddle to point to a red star low in the eastern sky. “Keep on toward that star, and it will bring you to the river. Whatever happens, keep moving toward the river. Go as quickly as you can, but above all make no noise. There are still the Trollocs, remember. And four Halfmen.”

“But how will we find you again?” Egwene protested.

“I will find you,” Moiraine said. “Be assured, I can find you. Now be off. This thing is utterly mindless, but it can sense food.” Indeed, ropes of silver-gray had lifted from the larger body. They drifted, wavering, like the tentacles of a hundredarms on the bottom of a Waterwood pond.

When Rand looked up from the thick trunk of opaque mist, the Warder and the Aes Sedai were gone. He licked his lips and met his companions’ eyes. They were as nervous as he was. And something worse: they all seemed to be waiting for someone else to move first. Night and ruins surrounded them. The Fades were out there, somewhere, and the Trollocs, maybe around the next corner. The tentacles of fog drifted nearer, halfway to them now, and no longer wavering. They had chosen their intended prey. Suddenly he missed Moiraine very much.

Everyone was still staring, wondering which way to go. He turned Cloud, and the gray broke into a half trot, tugging against the reins to go faster. As if moving first had made him the leader, everyone followed.

With Moiraine gone, there was no one to protect them should Mordeth appear. And the Trollocs. And. . . . Rand forced himself to stop thinking. He would follow the red star. He could hold onto that thought.

Three times they had to backtrack from a street blocked from side to side by a hill of stone and brick the horses could never have crossed. Rand could hear the others breathing, short and sharp, just shy of panic. He gritted his teeth to stop his own panting. *You have to at least make them think you're not afraid. You're doing a good job, wool-head! You'll get everybody out safely.*

They rounded the next corner. A wall of fog bathed the broken pavement with a light as bright as a full moon. Streamers as thick as their horses broke off toward them. Nobody waited. Wheeling, they galloped away in a tight knot with no heed for the clatter of hooves they raised.

Two Trollocs stepped into the street before them, not ten spans away.

For an instant the humans and the Trollocs just stared at one another, each more surprised than the other. Another pair of Trollocs appeared, and another, and another, colliding with the ones in front, folding into a shocked mass at the sight of the humans. Only for an instant did they remain frozen, though. Guttural howls echoed from the buildings, and the Trollocs bounded forward. The humans scattered like quail.

Rand's gray reached full gallop in three strides. "This way!" he shouted, but he heard the same cry from five throats. A hasty glance over his shoulder showed him his companions disappearing in as many directions, Trollocs pursuing them all.

Three Trollocs ran at his own heels, catchpoles waving in the air. His skin crawled as he realized they were matching Cloud stride for stride. He dropped low on Cloud's neck and urged the gray on, chased by thick cries.

The street narrowed ahead, broken-topped buildings leaning out drunkenly. Slowly the empty windows filled with a silvery glow, a dense mist bulging outward. Mashadar.

Rand risked a glance over his shoulder. The Trollocs still ran less than fifty paces back; the light from the fog was enough to see them clearly. A Fade rode behind them now, and they seemed to flee the Halfman as much as to pursue Rand. Ahead of Rand, half a dozen gray tendrils wavered from the windows, a dozen, feeling the air. Cloud tossed his head and screamed, but Rand dug his heels in brutally, and the horse lunged forward wildly.

The tendrils stiffened as Rand galloped between them, but he crouched low on Cloud's back and refused to look at them. The way beyond was clear. *If one of them touches me. . . . Light!* He booted Cloud harder, and the horse leaped forward into the welcome shadows. With Cloud still running, he looked back as soon as the glow of Mashadar began to lessen.

The waving gray tentacles of Mashadar blocked half the street, and the Trollocs were balking, but the Fade snatched a whip from its saddlebow, cracking it over the heads of the Trollocs with a sound like a lightning bolt, popping sparks in the air. Crouching, the Trollocs lurched after Rand. The Halfman hesitated, black cowl studying Mashadar's reaching arms, before it, too, spurred forward.

The thickening tentacles of fog swung uncertainly for a moment, then struck like vipers. At least two latched to each Trolloc, bathing them in gray light; muzzled heads went back to scream, but fog rolled over open mouths, and in, eating the howls. Four leg-thick tentacles whipped around the Fade, and the Halfman and its black horse twitched as if dancing, till the cowl fell back, baring that pale, eyeless face. The Fade shrieked.

There was no sound from that cry, any more than from the Trollocs, but something came through, a piercing whine just beyond hearing, like all the hornets in the world, digging into Rand's ears with all the fear that could exist. Cloud convulsed, as if he, too, heard, and ran harder than ever. Rand hung on, panting, his throat as dry as sand.

After a time he realized he could no longer hear the silent shriek of the Fade dying, and suddenly the clatter of his gallop seemed as loud as shouts. He reined Cloud hard, stopping beside a jagged wall, right where two streets met. A nameless monument reared in the darkness before him.

Slumped in the saddle, he listened, but there was nothing to hear except the blood pounding in his ears. Cold sweat beaded on his face, and he shivered as the wind flailed his cloak.

Finally he straightened. Stars spangled the sky where the clouds did not hide them, but the red star low in the east was easy to mark. *Is anybody* *else alive to see it?* Were they free, or in the Trollocs' hands? *Egwene, Light blind me, why didn't you follow me?* If they were alive and free, they would be following that star. If not. . . . The ruins were vast; he could search for days without finding anyone, if he could keep away from the Trollocs. And the Fades, and Mordeth, and Mashadar. Reluctantly he decided to make for the river.

He gathered the reins. On the crossing street, one stone fell against another with a sharp click. He froze, not even breathing. He was hidden in the shadows, one step from the corner. Frantically he thought of backing up. What was behind him? What would make a noise and give him away? He could not remember, and he was afraid to take his eyes from the corner of the building.

Darkness bulked at that corner, with the longer darkness of a shaft sticking out of it. Catchpole! Even as the thought flashed into Rand's head, he dug his heels into Cloud's ribs and his sword flew from the scabbard; a wordless shout accompanied his charge, and he swung the sword with all of his might. Only a desperate effort stopped the blade short. With a yelp Mat tumbled back, half falling off his horse and nearly dropping his bow.

Rand drew a deep breath and lowered his sword. His arm shook. "Have you seen anybody else?" he managed.

Mat swallowed hard before pulling himself awkwardly back into his saddle. "I . . . I. . . . Just Trollocs." He put a hand to his throat, and licked his lips. "Just Trollocs. You?"

Rand shook his head. "They must be trying to reach the river. We better do the same." Mat nodded silently, still feeling his throat, and they started toward the red star.

Before they had covered a hundred spans the keening cry of a Trolloc horn rose behind them in the depths of the city. Another answered, from outside the walls.

Rand shivered, but he kept to his slow pace, watching the darkest places and avoiding them when he could. After one jerk at his reins as if he might gallop off, Mat did the same. Neither horn sounded again, and it was in silence that they came to an opening in the vine-shrouded wall where a gate had once been. Only the towers remained, standing broken-topped against the black sky.

Mat hesitated at the gateway, but Rand said softly, "Is it any safer in here than out there?" He did not slow the gray, and after a moment Mat followed him out of Shadar Logoth, trying to look every way at once. Rand let out a slow breath; his mouth was dry. *We're going to make it. Light, we're going to make it!*

The walls vanished behind, swallowed by the night and the forest. Listening for the slightest sound, Rand kept the red star dead ahead.

Suddenly Thom galloped by from behind, slowing only long enough to shout, "Ride, you fools!" A moment later hunting cries and crashes in the brush behind him announced the presence of Trollocs on his trail.

Rand dug in his heels, and Cloud sprang after the gleeman's gelding. *What happens when we get to the river without Moiraine? Light, Egwene!*

Perrin sat his horse in the shadows, watching the open gateway, some little distance off yet, and absently ran his thumb along the blade of his axe. It seemed to be a clear way out of the ruined city, but he had sat there for five minutes studying it. The wind tossed his shaggy curls and tried to carry his cloak away, but he pulled the cloak back around him without really noticing what he was doing.

He knew that Mat, and almost everyone else in Emond's Field, considered him slow of thought. It was partly because he was big and usually moved carefully—he had always been afraid he might accidentally break something or hurt somebody, since he was so much bigger than the boys he grew up with—but he really did prefer to think things all the way through if he could. Quick thinking, careless thinking, had put Mat into hot water one time after another, and Mat's quick thinking usually managed to get Rand, or him, or both, in the cookpot alongside Mat, too.

His throat tightened. *Light, don't think about being in a cookpot.* He tried to order his thoughts again. Careful thought was the way.

There had been some sort of square in front of the gate once, with a huge fountain in its middle. Part of the fountain was still there, a cluster of broken statues standing in a big, round basin, and so was the open space around it. To reach the gate he would have to ride nearly a hundred spans with only the night to shield him from searching eyes. That was not a pleasant thought, either. He remembered those unseen watchers too well.

He considered the horns he had heard in the city a little while earlier. He had almost turned back, thinking some of the others might have been taken, before realizing that he could not do anything alone if they had been captured. *Not against—what did Lan say—a hundred Trollocs and four Fades. Moiraine Sedai said get to the river.*

He went back to consideration of the gate. Careful thought had not given him much, but he had made his decision. He rode out of the deeper shadow into the lesser darkness.

As he did, another horse appeared from the far side of the square and stopped. He stopped, too, and felt for his axe; it gave him no great sense of comfort. If that dark shape was a Fade. . . .

"Rand?" came a soft, hesitant call.

He let out a long, relieved breath. "It's Perrin, Egwene," he called back, just as softly. It still sounded too loud in the darkness.

The horses came together near the fountain.

"Have you seen anybody else?" they both asked at the same time, and both answered by shaking their heads.

"They'll be all right," Egwene muttered, patting Bela's neck. "Won't they?"

"Moiraine Sedai and Lan will look after them," Perrin replied. "They will look after all of us once we get to the river." He hoped it was so.

He felt a great relief once they were beyond the gate, even if there *were* Trollocs in the forest. Or Fades. He stopped that line of thought. The bare branches were not enough to keep him from guiding on the red star, and they were beyond Mordeth's reach now. That one had frightened him worse than the Trollocs ever had.

Soon they would reach the river and meet Moiraine, and she would put them beyond the Trollocs' reach as well. He believed it because he needed to believe. The wind scraped branches together and rustled the leaves and needles on the evergreens. A nighthawk's lonely cry drifted in the dark, and he and Egwene moved their horses closer together as though they were huddling for warmth. They were very much alone.

A Trolloc horn sounded somewhere behind them, quick, wailing blasts, urging the hunters to hurry, hurry. Then thick, half-human howls rose on their trail, spurred on by the horn. Howls that grew sharper as they caught the human scent.

Perrin put his horse to a gallop, shouting, "Come on!" Egwene came, both of them booting their horses, heedless of noise, heedless of the branches that slapped at them.

As they raced through the trees, guided as much by instinct as by the dim moonlight, Bela fell behind. Perrin looked back. Egwene kicked the mare and flailed her with the reins, but it was doing no good. By their sounds, the Trollocs were coming closer. He drew in enough not to leave her behind.

"Hurry!" he shouted. He could make out the Trollocs now, huge dark shapes bounding through the trees, bellowing and snarling to chill the blood. He gripped the haft of his axe, hanging at his belt, until his knuckles hurt. "Hurry, Egwene! Hurry!"

Suddenly his horse screamed, and he was falling, tumbling out of the saddle as the horse dropped away beneath him. He flung out his hands to brace himself and splashed headfirst into icy water. He had ridden right off the edge of a sheer bluff into the Arinelle.

The shock of freezing water ripped a gasp from him, and he swallowed more than a little before he managed to fight his way to the surface. He felt more than heard another splash, and thought that Egwene must have come right after him. Panting and blowing, he treaded water. It was not easy to keep afloat; his coat and cloak were already sodden, and his boots had filled. He looked around for Egwene, but saw only the glint of moonlight on the black water, ruffled by the wind.

"Egwene? Egwene!"

A spear flashed right in front of his eyes and threw water in his face. Others splashed into the river around him, too. Guttural voices raised in argument on the riverbank, and the Trolloc spears stopped coming, but he gave up on calling for the time being.

The current washed him downriver, but the thick shouts and snarls followed along the bank, keeping pace. Undoing his cloak, he let the river take it. A little less weight to drag him down. Doggedly, he set out swimming for the far bank. There were no Trollocs there. He hoped.

He swam the way they did back home, in the ponds in the Waterwood, stroking with both hands, kicking with both feet, keeping his head out of the water. At least, he tried to keep his head out of the water; it was not easy. Even without the cloak, his coat and boots each seemed to weigh as much as he did. And the axe dragged at his waist, threatening to roll him over if it did not pull him under. He thought about letting the river have that, too; he thought about it more than once. It would be easy, much easier than struggling out of his boots, for instance. But every time he thought of it, he thought of crawling out on the far bank to find Trollocs waiting. The axe would not do him much good against half a dozen Trollocs—or even against one, maybe—but it was better than his bare hands.

After a while he was not even certain he would be able to lift the axe if Trollocs were there. His arms and legs became leaden; it was an effort to move them, and his face no longer came as far out of the river with each stroke. He coughed from water that went up his nose. *A day at the forge has no odds on this,* he thought wearily, and just then his kicking foot struck something. It was not until he kicked it again that he realized what it was. The bottom. He was in the shallows. He was across the river.

Sucking air through his mouth, he got to his feet, splashing about as his legs almost gave way. He fumbled his axe out of its loop as he floundered ashore, shivering in the wind. He did not see any Trollocs. He did not see Egwene, either. Just a few scattered trees along the riverbank, and a moonlight ribbon on the water.

When he had his breath again, he called their names again and again. Faint shouts from the far side answered him; even at that distance he could make out the harsh voices of Trollocs. His friends did not answer, though.

The wind surged, its moan drowning out the Trollocs, and he shivered. It was not cold enough to freeze the water soaking his clothes, but it felt as if it was; it sliced to the bone with an icy blade. Hugging himself was only a gesture that did not stop the shivering. Alone, he climbed tiredly up the riverbank to find shelter against the wind.

Rand patted Cloud's neck, soothing the gray with whispers. The horse tossed his head and danced on quick feet. The Trollocs had been left behind—or so it seemed—but Cloud had the smell of them thick in his nostrils. Mat rode with an arrow nocked, watching for surprises out of the night, while Rand and Thom peered through the branches, searching for the red star that was their guide. Keeping it in view had been easy enough, even with all the branches overhead, so long as they were riding straight toward it. But then more Trollocs had appeared, ahead, and they went galloping off to the side with both packs howling after them. The Trollocs could keep up with a horse, but only for a hundred paces or so, and finally they left the pursuit and the howls behind. But with all the twists and turns, they had lost the guiding star.

“I still say it’s over there,” Mat said, gesturing off to his right. “We were going north at the end, and that means east is that way.”

“There it is,” Thom said abruptly. He pointed through the tangled branches to their left, straight at the red star. Mat mumbled something under his breath.

Out of the corner of his eye Rand caught the movement as a Trolloc leaped out from behind a tree without a sound, swinging its catchpole. Rand dug his heels in, and the gray bounded forward just as two more plunged from the shadows after the first. A noose brushed the back of Rand’s neck, sending a shiver down his spine.

An arrow took one of the bestial faces in the eye, then Mat swung in beside him as their horses pounded through the trees. They were running toward the river, he realized, but he was not sure it was going to do any good. The Trollocs sped after them, almost close enough to reach out and grab the streaming tails of their horses. Half a step gained, and the catchpoles could drag them both out of their saddles.

He leaned low on the gray’s neck to put that much more distance between his own neck and the nooses. Mat’s face was nearly buried in his horse’s mane. But Rand wondered where Thom was. Had the gleeman decided he was better off on his own, since all three Trollocs had fastened on the boys?

Suddenly Thom’s gelding galloped out of the night, hard behind the Trollocs. The Trollocs had only time enough to look back in surprise before the gleeman’s hands whipped back and then forward. Moonlight flashed off steel. One Trolloc tumbled forward, rolling over and over before landing in a heap, while a second dropped to its knees with a scream, clawing at its back with both hands. The third snarled, baring a muzzleful of sharp teeth, but as its companions toppled it whirled away into the darkness. Thom’s hand made the whip-like motion again, and the Trolloc shrieked, but the shrieks faded into the distance as it ran.

Rand and Mat pulled up and stared at the gleeman.

“My second-best knives,” Thom muttered, but he made no effort to get down and retrieve them. “That one will bring others. I hope the river isn’t too far. I hope. . . .” Instead of saying what else he hoped, he shook his head and set off at a quick canter. Rand and Mat fell in behind him.

Soon they reached a low bank where trees grew right to the edge of the night-black water, its moon-streaked surface riffled by the wind. Rand could not see the far side at all. He did not like the idea of crossing on a raft in the dark, but he liked the idea of staying on this side even less. *I'll swim if I have to.*

Somewhere away from the river a Trolloc horn brayed, sharp, quick, and urgent in the darkness. It was the first sound from the horns since they had left the ruins. Rand wondered if it meant some of the others had been captured.

"No use staying here all night," Thom said. "Pick a direction. Upriver, or down?"

"But Moiraine and the others could be anywhere," Mat protested. "Any way we choose could just take us further away."

"So it could." Clucking to his gelding, Thom turned downriver, heading along the bank. "So it could." Rand looked at Mat, who shrugged, and they turned after him.

For a time nothing changed. The bank was higher in some places, lower in others, the trees grew thicker, or thinned out in small clearings, but the night and the river and the wind were all the same, cold and black. And no Trollocs. That was one change Rand was glad to forgo.

Then he saw a light ahead, just a single point. As they drew closer he could see that the light was well above the river, as if it were in a tree. Thom quickened the pace and began to hum under his breath.

Finally they could make out the source of the light, a lantern hoisted atop one of the masts of a large trader's boat, tied up for the night beside a small clearing in the trees. The boat, a good eighty feet long, shifted slightly with the current, tugging against the mooring ropes tied to trees. The rigging hummed and creaked in the wind. The lantern doubled the moonlight on the deck, but no one was in sight.

"Now that," Thom said as he dismounted, "is better than an Aes Sedai's raft, isn't it?" He stood with his hands on his hips, and even in the dark his smugness was apparent. "It doesn't look as if this vessel is made to carry horses, but considering the danger he's in, which we are going to warn him of, the captain may be reasonable. Just let me do all the talking. And bring your blankets and saddlebags, just in case."

Rand climbed down and began untying the things behind his saddle. "You don't mean to leave without the others, do you?"

Thom had no chance to say what he meant to do. Into the clearing burst two Trollocs, howling and waving their catchpoles, with four more right behind. The horses reared and whinnied. Shouts in the distance said more Trollocs were on the way.

"Onto the boat!" Thom shouted. "Quick! Leave all that! Run!" Suiting his own words, he ran for the boat, patches flapping and instrument cases on his back banging together. "You on the boat!" he shouted. "Wake up, you fools! Trollocs!"

Rand jerked his blanketroll and saddlebags free of the last thong and was right on the gleeman's heels. Tossing his burdens over the rail, he vaulted after them. He just had time to see a man curled up on the deck, beginning to sit up as if he had only that moment awakened, when his feet came down right on top of the fellow. The man grunted loudly, Rand stumbled, and a hooked catchpole slammed into the railing just where he had come over. Shouts rose all over the boat, and feet pounded along the deck.

Hairy hands caught the railing beside the catchpole, and a goat-horned head lifted above it. Off balance, stumbling, Rand still managed to draw his sword and swing. With a scream the Trolloc dropped away.

Men ran everywhere on the boat, shouting, hacking mooring lines with axes. The boat lurched and swung as if eager to be off. Up in the bow three men struggled with a Trolloc. Someone thrust over the side with a spear, though Rand could not see what he was stabbing at. A bowstring snapped, and snapped again. The man Rand had stepped on scrabbled away from him on hands and knees, then flung up his hands when he saw Rand looking at him.

"Spare me!" he cried. "Take whatever you want, take the boat, take everything, but spare me!"

Suddenly something slammed across Rand's back, smashing him to the deck. His sword skittered away from his outstretched hand. Openmouthed, gasping for a breath that would not come, he tried to reach the sword. His muscles responded with agonized slowness; he writhed like a slug. The fellow who wanted to be spared gave one frightened, covetous look at the sword, then vanished into the shadows.

Painfully Rand managed to look over his shoulder, and knew his luck had run out. A wolf-muzzled Trolloc stood balanced on the railing, staring down at him and holding the splintered end of the catchpole that had knocked the wind out of him. Rand struggled to reach the sword, to move, to get away, but his arms and legs moved jerkily, and only half as he wanted. They wobbled and went in odd directions. His chest felt as if it were strapped with iron bands; silver spots swam in his eyes. Frantically he hunted for some way to escape. Time seemed to slow as the Trolloc raised the jagged pole as if to spear him with it. To Rand the creature appeared to be moving as if in a dream. He watched the thick arm go back; he could already feel the broken haft ripping through his spine, feel the pain of it tearing him open. He thought his lungs would burst. *I'm going to die! Light help me, I'm going to . . . !* The Trolloc's arm started forward, driving the splintered shaft, and Rand found the breath for one yell. "No!"

Suddenly the ship lurched, and a boom swung out of the shadows to catch the Trolloc across the chest with a crunch of breaking bones, sweeping it over the side.

For a moment Rand lay panting and staring up at the boom swinging back and forth above him. *That has to have used up my luck,* he thought. *There can't be any more after that.*

Shakily he got to his feet and picked up his sword, for once holding it in both hands the way Lan had taught him, but there was nothing left on which to use it. The gap of black water between the boat and the bank was widening quickly; the cries of the Trollocs were fading behind in the night.

As he sheathed his sword and slumped against the railing, a stocky man in a coat that hung to his knees strode up the deck to glare at him. Long hair that fell to his thick shoulders and a beard that left his upper lip bare framed a round face. Round but not soft. The boom swung out again, and the bearded man spared part of his glare for that as he caught it; it made a crisp *splat* against his broad palm.

"Gelb!" he bellowed. "Fortune! Where do you be, Gelb?" He spoke so fast, with all the words running together, that Rand could barely understand him. "You can no hide from me on my own ship! Get Floran Gelb out here!"

A crewman appeared with a bull's-eye lantern, and two more pushed a narrow-faced man into the circle of light it cast. Rand recognized the fellow who had offered him the boat. The man's eyes shifted from side to side, never meeting those of the stocky man. The captain, Rand thought. A bruise was coming up on Gelb's forehead where one of Rand's boots had caught him.

"Were you no supposed to secure this boom, Gelb?" the captain asked with surprising calm, though just as fast as before.

Gelb looked truly surprised. “But I did. Tied it down tight. I admit I’m a little slow about things now and then, Captain Domon, but I get them done.”

“So you be slow, do you? No so slow at sleeping. Sleeping when you should be standing watch. We could be murdered to a man, for all of you.”

“No, Captain, no. It was him.” Gelb pointed straight at Rand. “I was on guard, just like I was supposed to be, when he sneaked up and hit me with a club.” He touched the bruise on his head, winced, and glared at Rand. “I fought him, but then the Trollocs came. He’s in league with them, Captain. A Darkfriend. In league with the Trollocs.”

“In league with my aged grandmother!” Captain Domon roared. “Did I no warn you the last time, Gelb? At Whitebridge, off you do go! Get out of my sight before I put you off now.” Gelb darted out of the lantern light, and Domon stood opening and closing his hands while he stared at nothing. “These Trollocs do be following me. Why will they no leave me be? Why?”

Rand looked over the rail and was shocked to find the riverbank no longer in sight. Two men manned the long steering oar that stuck out over the stern, and there were six sweeps working to a side now, pulling the ship like a waterbug further out into the river.

“Captain,” Rand said, “we have friends back there. If you go back and pick them up, I am sure they’ll reward you.”

The captain’s round face swung toward Rand, and when Thom and Mat appeared he included them in his expressionless stare as well.

“Captain,” Thom began with a bow, “allow me to—”

“You come below,” Captain Domon said, “where I can see what manner of thing be hauled up on my deck. Come. Fortune desert me, somebody secure this horn-cursed boom!” As crewmen rushed to take the boom, he stumped off toward the stern of the boat. Rand and his two companions followed.

Captain Domon had a tidy cabin in the stern, reached by climbing down a short ladder, where everything gave the impression of being in its proper place, right down to the coats and cloaks hanging from pegs on the back of the door. The cabin stretched the width of the ship, with a broad bed built against one side and a heavy table built out from the other. There was only one chair, with a high back and sturdy arms, and the captain took that himself, motioning the others to find places on various chests and benches that were the only other furnishings. A loud harrumph stopped Mat from sitting on the bed.

"Now," said the captain when they were all seated. "My name be Bayle Domon, captain and owner of the *Spray,* which be this ship. Now who be you, and where be you going out here in the middle of nowhere, and why should I no throw you over the side for the trouble you've brought me?"

Rand still had as much trouble as before in following Domon's rapid speech. When he worked out the last part of what the captain had said he blinked in surprise. *Throw us over the side?*

Mat hurriedly said, "We didn't mean to cause you any trouble. We're on our way to Caemlyn, and then to—"

"And then where the wind takes us," Thom interrupted smoothly. "That's how gleemen travel, like dust on the wind. I am a gleeman, you understand, Thom Merrilin by name." He shifted his cloak so the multihued patches stirred, as if the captain could have missed them. "These two country louts want to become my apprentices, though I am not yet sure I want them." Rand looked at Mat, who grinned.

"That be all very well, man," Captain Domon said placidly, "but it tells me nothing. Less. Fortune prick me, that place be on no road to Caemlyn from anywhere I ever heard tell of."

"Now that is a story," Thom said, and he straightaway began to unfold it.

According to Thom, he had been trapped by the winter snows in a mining town in the Mountains of Mist beyond Baerlon. While there he heard legends of a treasure dating from the Trolloc Wars, in the lost ruin of a city called Aridhol. Now it just so happened that he had earlier learned the location of Aridhol from a map given him many years ago by a dying friend in Illian whose life he had once saved, a man who expired breathing that the map would make Thom rich, which Thom never believed until he heard the legends. When the snows melted enough, he set out with a few companions, including his two would-be apprentices, and after a journey of many hardships they actually found the ruined city. But it turned out the treasure had belonged to one of the Dreadlords themselves, and Trollocs had been sent to fetch it back to Shayol Ghul. Almost every danger they really had faced—Trollocs, Myrddraal, Draghkar, Mordeth, Mashadar—assailed them at one point or another of the story, though the way Thom told it they all seemed to be aimed at him personally, and to have been handled by him with the greatest adroitness. With much derring-do, mostly by Thom, they escaped, pursued by Trollocs, though they became separated in the night, until finally Thom and his two companions sought refuge on the last place left to them, Captain Domon's most welcome ship.

As the gleeman finished up, Rand realized his mouth had been hanging open for some time and shut it with a click. When he looked at Mat, his friend was staring wide-eyed at the gleeman.

Captain Domon drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "That be a tale many folk would no believe. Of course, I did see the Trollocs, did I no."

"Every word true," Thom said blandly, "from one who lived it."

"Happen you have some of this treasure with you?"

Thom spread his hands regretfully. "Alas, what little we managed to carry away was with our horses, which bolted when those last Trollocs appeared. All I have left are my flute and my harp, a few coppers, and the clothes on my back. But believe me, you want no part of that treasure. It has the taint of the Dark One. Best to leave it to the ruins and the Trollocs."

"So you've no money to pay your passage. I'd no let my own brother sail with me if he could no pay his passage, especially if he brought Trollocs behind him to hack up my railings and cut up my rigging. Why should I no let you swim back where you came from, and be rid of you?"

"You wouldn't just put us ashore?" Mat said. "Not with Trollocs there?"

"Who said anything about shore?" Domon replied dryly. He studied them a moment, then spread his hands flat on the table. "Bayle Domon be a reasonable man. I'd no toss you over the side if there be a way out of it. Now, I see one of your apprentices has a sword. I need a good sword, and fine fellow that I be, I'll let you have passage far as Whitebridge for it."

Thom opened his mouth, and Rand spoke up quickly, "No!" Tam had not given it to him to trade away. He ran his hand down the hilt, feeling the bronze heron. As long as he had it, it was as if Tam were with him.

Domon shook his head. "Well, if it be no, it be no. But Bayle Domon no give free passage, not to his own mother."

Reluctantly Rand emptied his pocket. There was not much, a few coppers and the silver coin Moiraine had given him. He held it out to the captain. After a second, Mat sighed and did the same. Thom glared, but a smile replaced it so quickly that Rand was not sure it had been there at all.

Captain Domon deftly plucked the two fat silver coins out of the boys' hands and produced a small set of scales and a clinking bag from a brass-bound chest behind his chair. After careful weighing, he dropped the coins in the bag and returned them each some smaller silver and copper. Mostly copper. "As far as Whitebridge," he said, making a neat entry in a leatherbound ledger.

"That's a dear passage just to Whitebridge," Thom grumbled.

"Plus damages to my vessel," the captain answered placidly. He put the scales and the bag back in the chest and closed it in a satisfied way. "Plus a bit for bringing Trollocs down on me so I must run downriver in the night when there be shallows aplenty to pile me up."

"What about the others?" Rand asked. "Will you take them, too? They should have reached the river by now, or they soon will, and they'll see that lantern on your mast."

Captain Domon's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Happen you think we be standing still, man? Fortune prick me, we be three, four miles downriver from where you came aboard. Trollocs make those fellows put their backs into the oars—they know Trollocs better than they like—and the current helps, too. But it makes no nevermind. I'd no put in again tonight if my old grandmother was on the riverbank. I may no put in again at all until I reach Whitebridge. I've had my fill of Trollocs dogging my heels long before tonight, and I'll have no more can I help it."

Thom leaned forward interestedly. "You have had encounters with Trollocs before? Lately?"

Domon hesitated, eyeing Thom narrowly, but when he spoke he merely sounded disgusted. "I wintered in Saldaea, man. Not my choice, but the river froze early and the ice broke up late. They say you can see the Blight from the highest towers in Maradon, but I've no mind for that. I've been there before, and there always be talk of Trollocs attacking a farm or the like. This winter past, though, there be farms burning every night. Aye, and whole villages, too, betimes. They even came right up to the city walls. And if that no be bad enough, the people be all saying it meant the Dark One be stirring, that the Last Days be come." He gave a shiver, and scratched at his head as if the thought made his scalp itch. "I can no wait to get back where people think Trollocs be just tales, the stories I tell be traveler’s lies.”

Rand stopped listening. He stared at the opposite wall and thought about Egwene and the others. It hardly seemed right for him to be safe on the *Spray* while they were still back there in the night somewhere. The captain’s cabin did not seem so comfortable as before.

He was surprised when Thom pulled him to his feet. The gleeman pushed Mat and him toward the ladder with apologies over his shoulder to Captain Domon for the country louts. Rand climbed up without a word.

Once they were on deck Thom looked around quickly to make sure he would not be overheard, then growled, “I could have gotten us passage for a few songs and stories if you two hadn’t been so quick to show silver.”

“I’m not so sure,” Mat said. “He sounded serious about throwing us in the river to me.”

Rand walked slowly to the rail and leaned against it, staring back up the night-shrouded river. He could not see anything but black, not even the riverbank. After a minute Thom put a hand on his shoulder, but he did not move.

“There isn’t anything you can do, lad. Besides, they’re likely safe with the . . . with Moiraine and Lan by this time. Can you think of any better than those two for getting the lot of them clear?”

“I tried to talk her out of coming,” Rand said.

“You did what you could, lad. No one could ask more.”

“I told her I’d take care of her. I should have tried harder.” The creak of the sweeps and the hum of the rigging in the wind made a mournful tune. “I should have tried harder,” he whispered.

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CHAPTER
21

Listen to the Wind

Sunrise creeping across the River Arinelle found its way into the hollow not far from the riverbank where Nynaeve sat with her back against the trunk of a young oak, breathing the deep breath of sleep. Her horse slept, too, head down and legs spraddled in the manner of horses. The reins were wrapped around her wrist. As sunlight fell on the horse’s eyelids, the animal opened its eyes and raised its head, jerking the reins. Nynaeve came awake with a start.

For a moment she stared, wondering where she was, then stared around even more wildly when she remembered. But there were only the trees, and her horse, and a carpet of old, dry leaves across the bottom of the hollow. In the deepest dimness, some of last year’s shadowshand mushrooms made rings on a fallen log.

“The Light preserve you, woman,” she murmured, sagging back, “if you can’t stay awake one night.” She untied the reins and massaged her wrist as she stood. “You could have awakened in a Trolloc cookpot.”

The dead leaves rustled as she climbed to the lip of the hollow and peeped over. No more than a handful of ash trees stood between her and the river. Their fissured bark and bare branches made them seem dead. Beyond, the wide blue-green water flowed by. Empty. Empty of anything. Scattered clumps of evergreens, willows and firs, dotted the far bank, and there seemed to be fewer trees altogether than on her side. If Moiraine or any of the younglings were over there, they were well hidden. Of course, there was no reason they had to have crossed, or tried to cross, in sight of where she was. They could be anywhere ten miles upriver or down. *If they’re alive at all, after last night.*

Angry with herself for thinking of the possibility, she slid back down into the hollow. Not even Winternight, or the battle before Shadar Logoth, had prepared her for last night, for that thing, Mashadar. All that frantic galloping, wondering if anyone else was still alive, wondering when she was going to come face-to-face with a Fade, or Trollocs. She had heard Trollocs growling and shouting in the distance, and the quivering shrieks of Trolloc horns had chilled her deeper than the wind ever could, but aside from that first encounter in the ruins she saw Trollocs only once, and that once she was outside. Ten or so of them seemed to spring out of the ground not thirty spans in front of her, bounding toward her on the instant, howling and shouting, brandishing hooked catchpoles. Yet as she pulled her horse around, they fell silent, lifting muzzles to sniff at the air. She watched, too astonished to run, as they turned their backs and vanished into the night. And that had been the most frightening of all.

"They know the smell of who they want," she told her horse, standing in the hollow, "and it is not me. The Aes Sedai is right, it seems, the Shepherd of the Night swallow her up."

Reaching a decision, she set out downriver, leading her horse. She moved slowly, keeping a wary watch on the forest around her; just because the Trollocs had not wanted her last night did not mean they would let her go if she stumbled on them again. As much attention as she gave the woods, she gave even more to the ground in front of her. If the others had crossed below her during the night, she should see some signs of them, signs she might miss from horseback. She might even come on them all still on this side. If she found neither, the river would take her to Whitebridge eventually, and there was a road from Whitebridge to Caemlyn, and all the way to Tar Valon if need be.

The prospect was almost enough to daunt her. Before this she had been no further from Emond's Field than had the boys. Taren Ferry had seemed strange to her; Baerlon would have had her staring in wonder if she had not been so set on finding Egwene and the others. But she allowed none of that to weaken her resolve. Sooner or later she would find Egwene and the boys. Or find a way to make the Aes Sedai answer for whatever had happened to them. One or the other, she vowed.

At intervals she found tracks, plenty of them, but usually her best efforts could not say whether those who made them had been searching or chasing or pursued. Some had been made by boots that could have belonged to humans or Trollocs either one. Others were hoofprints, like goats or oxen; those were Trollocs for sure. But never a clear sign that she could definitely say came from any of those she sought.

She had covered perhaps four miles when the wind brought her a whiff of woodsmoke. It came from further downriver, and not too far, she thought. She hesitated only a moment before tying her horse to a fir tree, well back from the river in a small, thick stand of evergreens that should keep the animal hidden. The smoke could mean Trollocs, but the only way to find out was to look. She tried not to think about the use Trollocs might be making of a fire.

Crouching, she slipped from tree to tree, mentally cursing the skirts she had to hold up out of the way. Dresses were not made for stalking. The sound of a horse slowed her, and when she finally peered cautiously around the trunk of an ash, the Warder was dismounting from his black warhorse in a small clearing on the bank. The Aes Sedai sat on a log beside a small fire where a kettle of water was just coming to a boil. Her white mare browsed behind her among sparse weeds. Nynaeve remained where she was.

“They are all gone,” Lan announced grimly. “Four Halfmen started south about two hours before dawn, as near as I can tell—they don’t leave much trace behind—but the Trollocs have vanished. Even the corpses, and Trollocs are not known for carrying off their dead. Unless they’re hungry.”

Moiraine tossed a handful of something into the boiling water and moved the kettle from the fire. “One could always hope they had gone back into Shadar Logoth and been consumed by it, but that would be too much to wish for.”

The delicious odor of tea drifted to Nynaeve. *Light, don’t let my stomach grumble.*

“There was no clear sign of the boys, or any of the others. The tracks are too muddled to tell anything.” In her concealment, Nynaeve smiled; the Warder’s failure was a slight vindication of her own. “But this other is important, Moiraine,” Lan went on, frowning. He waved away the Aes Sedai’s offer of tea and began marching up and down in front of the fire, one hand on his sword hilt and his cloak changing colors as he turned. “I could accept Trollocs in the Two Rivers, even a hundred Trollocs. But this? There must have been almost a thousand in the hunt for us yesterday.”

“We were very lucky that not all stayed to search Shadar Logoth. The Myrddraal must have doubted we would hide there, but they also feared to return to Shayol Ghul leaving even the slightest chance uncovered. The Dark One was never a lenient master."

"Don't try to evade it. You know what I am saying. If those thousand were here to be sent into the Two Rivers, why were they not? There is only one answer. They were sent only after we crossed the Taren, when it was known that one Myrddraal and a hundred Trollocs were no longer enough. How? How were they sent? If a thousand Trollocs can be brought so far south from the Blight, so quickly, unseen—not to mention being taken off the same way—can ten thousand be sent into the heart of Saldaea, or Arafel, or Shienar? The Borderlands could be overrun in a year."

"The whole world will be overrun in five if we do not find those boys," Moiraine said simply. "The question worries me, also, but I have no answers. The Ways are closed, and there has not been an Aes Sedai powerful enough to Travel since the Time of Madness. Unless one of the Forsaken is loose—the Light send it is not so, yet or ever—there is still no one who can. In any case, I do not think all the Forsaken together could move a thousand Trollocs. Let us deal with the problems that face us here and now; everything else must wait."

"The boys." It was not a question.

"I have not been idle while you were away. One is across the river, and alive. As for the others, there was a faint trace downriver, but it faded away as I found it. The bond had been broken for hours before I began my search."

Crouched behind her tree, Nynaeve frowned in puzzlement.

Lan stopped his pacing. "You think the Halfmen heading south have them?"

"Perhaps." Moiraine poured herself a cup of tea before going on. "But I will not admit the possibility of them being dead. I cannot. I dare not. You know how much is at stake. I must have those young men. That Shayol Ghul will hunt them, I expect. Opposition from within the White Tower, even from the Amyrlin Seat, I accept. There are always Aes Sedai who will accept only one solution. But. . . ." Suddenly she put her cup down and sat up straight, grimacing. "If you watch the wolf too hard," she muttered, "a mouse will bite you on the ankle." And she looked right at the tree behind which Nynaeve was hiding. "Mistress al'Meara, you may come out now, if you wish."

Nynaeve scrambled to her feet, hastily dusting dead leaves from her dress. Lan had spun to face the tree as soon as Moiraine's eyes moved; his sword was in his hand before she finished speaking Nynaeve's name. Now he sheathed it again with more force than was strictly necessary. His face was almost as expressionless as ever, but Nynaeve thought there was a touch of chagrin about the set of his mouth. She felt a stab of satisfaction; the Warder had not known she was there, at least.

Satisfaction lasted only a moment, though. She fastened her eyes on Moiraine and walked toward her purposefully. She wanted to remain cold and calm, but her voice quivered with anger. "What have you meshed Egwene and the boys in? What filthy Aes Sedai plots are you planning to use them in?"

The Aes Sedai picked up her cup and calmly sipped her tea. When Nynaeve was close, though, Lan put out an arm to bar her way. She tried to brush the obstruction aside, and was surprised when the Warder's arm moved no more than an oak branch would have. She was not frail, but his muscles were like iron.

"Tea?" Moiraine offered.

"No, I don't want any tea. I would not drink your tea if I was dying of thirst. You won't use any Emond's Field folk in your dirty Aes Sedai schemes."

"You have very little room to talk, Wisdom." Moiraine showed more interest in her hot tea than in anything she was saying. "You can wield the One Power yourself, after a fashion."

Nynaeve pushed at Lan's arm again; it still did not move, and she decided to ignore it. "Why don't you try claiming I am a Trolloc?"

Moiraine's smile was so knowing that Nynaeve wanted to hit her. "Do you think I can stand face-to-face with a woman who can touch the True Source and channel the One Power, even if only now and then, without knowing what she is? Just as you sensed the potential in Egwene. How do you think I knew you were behind that tree? If I had not been distracted, I would have known the moment you came close. You certainly are not a Trolloc, for me to feel the evil of the Dark One. So what did I sense, Nynaeve al'Meara, Wisdom of Emond's Field and unknowing wielder of the One Power?"

Lan was looking down at Nynaeve in a way she did not like; surprised and speculative, it seemed to her, though nothing had changed about his face but his eyes. Egwene *was* special; she had always known that. Egwene would make a fine Wisdom. *They're working together,* she thought, *trying to put me off balance.* "I won't listen to any more of this. You—"

"You must listen," Moiraine said firmly. "I had my suspicions in Emond's Field even before I met you. People told me how upset the Wisdom was that she had not predicted the hard winter and the lateness of spring. They told me how good she was at foretelling weather, at telling the crops. They told me how wonderful her cures were, how she sometimes healed injuries, that should have been crippling, so well there was barely a scar, and not a limp or a twinge. The only ill word I heard about you was from a few who thought you too young for the responsibility, and that only strengthened my suspicions. So much skill so young."

"Mistress Barran taught me well." She tried looking at Lan, but his eyes still made her uncomfortable, so she settled for staring over the Aes Sedai's head at the river. *How dare the village gossip in front of an outlander!* "Who said I was too young?" she demanded.

Moiraine smiled, refusing to be diverted. "Unlike most women who claim to listen to the wind, you actually can, sometimes. Oh, it has nothing to do with the wind, of course. It is of Air and Water. It is not something you needed to be taught; it was born into you, just as it was born into Egwene. But you have learned to handle it, which she still has to learn. Two minutes after I came face-to-face with you, I knew. Do you remember how I suddenly asked you if you were the Wisdom? Why, do you think? There was nothing to distinguish you from any other pretty young woman getting ready for Festival. Even looking for a young Wisdom I expected someone half again your age."

Nynaeve remembered that meeting all too well; this woman, more self-possessed than anyone in the Women's Circle, in a dress more beautiful than any she had ever seen, addressing her as a child. Then Moiraine had suddenly blinked as if surprised and out of a clear sky asked. . . .

She licked lips gone abruptly dry. They were both looking at her, the Warder's face as unreadable as a stone, the Aes Sedai's sympathetic yet intent. Nynaeve shook her head. "No! No, it's impossible. I would know. You are just trying to trick me, and it will not work."

"Of course you do not know," Moiraine said soothingly. "Why should you even suspect? All of your life you have heard about listening to the wind. In any case, you would as soon announce to all of Emond's Field that you were a Darkfriend as admit to yourself, even in the deepest recesses of your mind, that you have anything to do with the One Power, or the dreaded Aes Sedai." Amusement flitted across Moiraine's face. "But I can tell you how it began."

"I don't want to hear any more of your lies," she said, but the Aes Sedai went right on.

"Perhaps as much as eight or ten years ago—the age varies, but always comes young—there was something you wanted more than anything else in the world, something you needed. And you got it. A branch suddenly falling where you could pull yourself out of a pond instead of drowning. A friend, or a pet, getting well when everyone thought they would die.

"You felt nothing special at the time, but a week or ten days later you had your first reaction to touching the True Source. Perhaps fever and chills that came on suddenly and put you to bed, then disappeared after only a few hours. None of the reactions, and they vary, lasts more than a few hours. Headaches and numbness and exhilaration all mixed together, and you taking foolish chances or acting giddy. A spell of dizziness, when you tripped and stumbled whenever you tried to move, when you could not say a sentence without your tongue mangling half the words. There are others. Do you remember?"

Nynaeve sat down hard on the ground; her legs would not hold her up. She remembered, but she shook her head anyway. It had to be coincidence. Or else Moiraine had asked more questions in Emond's Field than she had thought. The Aes Sedai had asked a great many questions. It had to be that. Lan offered a hand, but she did not even see it.

"I will go further," Moiraine said when Nynaeve kept silent. "You used the Power to Heal either Perrin or Egwene at some time. An affinity develops. You can sense the presence of someone you have Healed. In Baerlon you came straight to the Stag and Lion, though it was not the nearest inn to any gate by which you could have entered. Of the people from Emond's Field, only Perrin and Egwene were at the inn when you arrived. Was it Perrin, or Egwene? Or both?"

"Egwene," Nynaeve mumbled. She had always taken it for granted that she could sometimes tell who was approaching her even when she could not see them; not until now had she realized that it was always someone on whom her cures had worked almost miraculously well. And she had always known when the medicine would work beyond expectations, always felt the certainty when she said the crops would be especially good, or that the rains would come early or late. That was the way she thought it was supposed to be. Not all Wisdoms could listen to the wind, but the best could. That was what Mistress Barran always said, just as she said Nynaeve would be one of the best.

“She had breakbone fever.” She kept her head down and spoke to the ground. “I was still apprentice to Mistress Barran, and she set me to watch Egwene. I was young, and I didn’t know the Wisdom had everything well in hand. It’s terrible to watch, breakbone fever. The child was soaked with sweat, groaning and twisting until I could not understand why I didn’t hear her bones snapping. Mistress Barran had told me the fever would break in another day, two at the most, but I thought she was doing me a kindness. I thought Egwene was dying. I used to look after her sometimes when she was a toddler—when her mother was busy—and I started crying because I was going to have to watch her die. When Mistress Barran came back an hour later, the fever had broken. She was surprised, but she made over me more than Egwene. I always thought she believed I had given the child something and was too frightened to admit it. I always thought she was trying to comfort me, to make sure I knew I hadn’t hurt Egwene. A week later I fell on the floor in her sitting room, shaking and burning up by turns. She bundled me into bed, but by suppertime it was gone.”

She dropped her head in her hands as she finished speaking. *The Aes Sedai chose a good example,* she thought, *Light burn her! Using the Power like an Aes Sedai. A filthy, Darkfriend Aes Sedai!*

“You were very lucky,” Moiraine said, and Nynaeve sat erect. Lan stepped back as if what they talked about was none of his business, and busied himself with Mandarb’s saddle, not even glancing at them.

“Lucky!”

“You have managed a crude control over the Power, even if touching the True Source still comes at random. If you had not, it would have killed you eventually. As it will, in all probability, kill Egwene if you manage to stop her from going to Tar Valon.”

“If I learned to control it. . . .” Nynaeve swallowed hard. It was like admitting all over again that she could do what the Aes Sedai said. “If I learned to control it, so can she. There is no need for her to go to Tar Valon, and get mixed up in your intrigues.”

Moiraine shook her head slowly. “Aes Sedai search for girls who can touch the True Source unguided just as assiduously as we search for men who can do so. It is not a desire to increase our numbers—or at least, not only that—nor is it a fear that those women will misuse the Power. The rough control of the Power they may gain, if the Light shines on them, is rarely enough to do any great damage, especially since the actual touching of the Source is beyond their control without a teacher, and comes only randomly. And, of course, they do not suffer the madness that drives men to evil or twisted things. We want to save their lives. The lives of those who never do manage any control at all.”

“The fever and chills I had couldn’t kill anyone,” Nynaeve insisted. “Not in three or four hours. I had the other things, too, and they couldn’t kill anybody, either. And they stopped after a few months. What about that?”

“Those were only reactions,” Moiraine said patiently. “Each time, the reaction comes closer to the actual touching of the Source, until the two happen almost together. After that there are no more reactions that can be seen, but it is as if a clock has begun ticking. A year. Two years. I know one woman who lasted five years. Of four who have the inborn ability that you and Egwene have, three die if we do not find them and train them. It is not as horrible a death as the men die, but neither is it pretty, if any death can be called so. Convulsions. Screaming. It takes days, and once it begins there is nothing that can be done to stop it, not by all the Aes Sedai in Tar Valon together.”

“You’re lying. All those questions you asked in Emond’s Field. You found out about Egwene’s fever breaking, about my fever and chills, all of it. You made all of this up.”

“You know I did not,” Moiraine said gently.

Reluctantly, more reluctantly than she had ever done anything in her life, Nynaeve nodded. It had been a last stubborn effort to deny what was plain, and there was never any good in that, however unpleasant it might be. Mistress Barran’s first apprentice had died the way the Aes Sedai said when Nynaeve was still playing with dolls, and there had been a young woman in Deven Ride only a few years ago. She had been a Wisdom’s apprentice, too, one who could listen to the wind.

“You have great potential, I think,” Moiraine continued. “With training you might become even more powerful than Egwene, and I believe she can become one of the most powerful Aes Sedai we have seen in centuries.”

Nynaeve pushed herself back from the Aes Sedai as she would have from a viper. “No! I’ll have nothing to do with—” *With what? Myself?* She slumped, and her voice became hesitant. “I would ask you not to tell anyone about this. Please?” The word nearly stuck in her throat. She would rather Trollocs had appeared than she had been forced to say please to this woman. But Moiraine only nodded assent, and some of her spirit returned. “None of this explains what you want with Rand, and Mat, and Perrin.”

“The Dark One wants them,” Moiraine replied. “If the Dark One wants a thing, I oppose it. Can there be a simpler reason, or a better?” She finished her tea, watching Nynaeve over the rim of her cup. “Lan, we must be going. South, I think. I fear the Wisdom will not be accompanying us.”

Nynaeve’s mouth tightened at the way the Aes Sedai said “Wisdom”; it seemed to suggest she was turning her back on great things in favor of something petty. *She doesn’t want me along. She’s trying to put my back up so I’ll go back home and leave them alone with her.* “Oh, yes, I will be going with you. You cannot keep me from it.”

“No one will try to keep you from it,” Lan said as he rejoined them. He emptied the tea kettle over the fire and stirred the ashes with a stick. “A part of the Pattern?” he said to Moiraine.

“Perhaps so,” she replied thoughtfully. “I should have spoken to Min again.”

“You see, Nynaeve, you are welcome to come.” There was a hesitation in the way Lan said her name, a hint of an unspoken “Sedai” after it.

Nynaeve bristled, taking it for mockery, and bristled, too, at the way they spoke of things in front of her—things she knew nothing about—without the courtesy of an explanation, but she would not give them the satisfaction of asking.

The Warder went on preparing for departure, his economical motions so sure and swift that he was quickly done, saddlebags, blankets, and all fastened behind the saddles of Mandarb and Aldieb.

“I will fetch your horse,” he told Nynaeve as he finished with the last saddle tie.

He started up the riverbank, and she allowed herself a small smile. After the way she had watched him undiscovered, he was going to try to find her horse unaided. He would learn that she left little in the way of tracks when she was stalking. It would be a pleasure when he came back empty-handed.

“Why south?” she asked Moiraine. “I heard you say one of the boys is across the river. And how do you know?”

“I gave each of the boys a token. It created a bond of sorts between them and me. So long as they are alive and have those coins in their possession, I will be able to find them.” Nynaeve’s eyes turned in the direction the Warder had gone, and Moiraine shook her head. “Not like that. It only allows me to discover if they still live, and find them should we become separated. Prudent, do you not think, under the circumstances?”

“I don’t like anything that connects you with anyone from Emond’s Field,” Nynaeve said stubbornly. “But if it will help us find them. . . .”

“It will. I would gather the young man across the river first, if I could.” For a moment frustration tinged the Aes Sedai’s voice. “He is only a few miles from us. But I cannot afford to take the time. He should make his way down to Whitebridge safely now that the Trollocs have gone. The two who went downriver may need me more. They have lost their coins, and Myrddraal are either pursuing them or else trying to intercept us all at Whitebridge.” She sighed. “I must take care of the greatest need first.”

“The Myrddraal could have . . . could have killed them,” Nynaeve said.

Moiraine shook her head slightly, denying the suggestion as if it were too trivial to be considered. Nynaeve’s mouth tightened. “Where is Egwene, then? You haven’t even mentioned her.”

“I do not know,” Moiraine admitted, “but I hope that she is safe.”

“You don’t know? You hope? All that talk about saving her life by taking her to Tar Valon, and she could be dead for all you know!”

“I could look for her and allow the Myrddraal more time before I arrive to help the two young men who went south. It is them the Dark One wants, not her. They would not bother with Egwene, so long as their true quarry remains uncaught.”

Nynaeve remembered her own encounter, but she refused to admit the sense of what Moiraine said. “So the best you have to offer is that she may be alive, if she was lucky. Alive, maybe alone, frightened, even hurt, days from the nearest village or help except for us. And you intend to leave her.”

“She may just as easily be safe with the boy across the river. Or on her way to Whitebridge with the other two. In any case, there are no longer Trollocs here to threaten her, and she is strong, intelligent, and quite capable of finding her way to Whitebridge alone, if need be. Would you rather stay on the chance that she may need help, or do you want to try to help those we know are in need? Would you have me search for her and let the boys—and the Myrddraal who are surely pursuing them—go? As much as I hope for Egwene's safety, Nynaeve, I fight against the Dark One, and for now that sets my path."

Moiraine's calm never slipped while she laid out the horrible alternatives; Nynaeve wanted to scream at her. Blinking back tears, she turned her face so the Aes Sedai could not see. *Light, a Wisdom is supposed to look after* all *of her people. Why do I have to choose like this?*

"Here is Lan," Moiraine said, rising and settling her cloak about her shoulders.

To Nynaeve it was only a tiny blow as the Warder led her horse out of the trees. Still, her lips thinned when he handed her the reins. It would have been a small boost to her spirits if there had been even a trace of gloating on his face instead of that insufferable stony calm. His eyes widened when he saw her face, and she turned her back on him to wipe tears from her cheeks. *How dare he mock my crying!*

"Are you coming, Wisdom?" Moiraine asked coolly.

She took one last, slow look at the forest, wondering if Egwene was out there, before sadly mounting her horse. Lan and Moiraine were already in their saddles, turning their horses south. She followed, stiff-backed, refusing to let herself look back; instead she kept her eyes on Moiraine. The Aes Sedai was so confident in her power and her plans, she thought, but if they did not find Egwene and the boys, all of them, alive and unharmed, not all of her power would protect her. Not all her Power. *I can use it, woman! You told me so yourself. I can use it against you!*

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CHAPTER 22

A Path Chosen

In a small copse of trees, beneath a pile of cedar branches roughly cut in the dark, Perrin slept long after sunrise. It was the cedar needles, pricking him through his still-damp clothes, that finally pricked through his exhaustion as well. Deep in a dream of Emond's Field, of working at Master Luhhan's forge, he opened his eyes and stared, uncomprehending, at the sweet-smelling branches interwoven over his face, sunlight trickling through.

Most of the branches fell away as he sat up in surprise, but some hung haphazardly from his shoulders, and even his head, making him appear something like a tree himself. Emond's Field faded as memory rushed back, so vivid that for a moment the night before seemed more real than anything around him now.

Panting, frantic, he scrabbled his axe out of the pile. He clutched it in both hands and peered around cautiously, holding his breath. Nothing moved. The morning was cold and still. If there were Trollocs on the east bank of the Arinelle, they were not moving, at least not close to him. Taking a deep, calming breath, he lowered the axe to his knees, and waited a moment for his heart to stop pounding.

The small stand of evergreens surrounding him was the first shelter he had found last night. It was sparse enough to give little protection against watching eyes if he stood up. Plucking branches from his head and shoulders, he pushed aside the rest of his prickly blanket, then crawled on hands and knees to the edge of the copse. There he lay studying the riverbank and scratching where the needles had stabbed him.

The cutting wind of the night before had faded to a silent breeze that barely rippled the surface of the water. The river ran by, calm and empty.

And wide. Surely too wide and too deep for Fades to cross. The far bank appeared a solid mass of trees as far as he could see upriver and down. Certainly nothing moved in his view over there.

He was not sure how he felt about that. Fades and Trollocs he could do without quite easily, even on the other side of the river, but a whole list of worries would have vanished with the appearance of the Aes Sedai, or the Warder, or, even better, any of his friends. *If wishes were wings, sheep would fly.* That was what Mistress Luhhan always said.

He had not seen a sign of his horse since riding over the bluff—he hoped it had swum out of the river safely—but he was more used to walking than riding anyway, and his boots were stout and well soled. He had nothing to eat, but his sling was still wrapped around his waist, and that or the snarelines in his pocket ought to yield a rabbit in a little time. Everything for making a fire was gone with his saddlebags, but the cedar trees would yield tinder and a firebow with a bit of work.

He shivered as the breeze gusted into his hiding place. His cloak was somewhere in the river, and his coat and everything else he wore were still clammy cold from the soaking in the river. He had been too tired for the cold and damp to bother him last night, but now he was wide awake to every chill. Just the same, he decided against hanging his clothes on the branches to dry. If the day was not precisely cold, it was not even close to warm.

Time was the problem, he thought with a sigh. Dry clothes, with a little time. A rabbit to roast and a fire to roast it over, with a little time. His stomach rumbled, and he tried to forget about eating altogether. There were more important uses for that time. One thing at a time, and the most important first. That was his way.

His eyes followed the strong flow of the Arinelle downriver. He was a stronger swimmer than Egwene. If she had made it across. . . . No, not *if*. The place where she *had* made it across would be downriver. He drummed on the ground with his fingers, weighing, considering.

His decision made, he wasted no time in picking up his axe and setting off down the river.

This side of the Arinelle lacked the thick forest of the west bank. Clumps of trees spotted across what would be grassland if spring ever came. Some were big enough to be called thickets, with swathes of evergreens among the barren ash and alder and hardgum. Down by the river the stands were smaller and not so tight. They gave poor cover, but they were all the cover there was.

He dashed from growth to growth in a crouch, throwing himself down when he was among the trees to study the riverbanks, the far side as well as his. The Warder said the river would be a barrier to Fades and Trollocs, but would it? Seeing him might be enough to overcome their reluctance to cross deep water. So he watched carefully from behind the trees and ran from one hiding place to the next, fast and low.

He covered several miles that way, in spurts, until suddenly, halfway to the beckoning shelter of a growth of willows, he grunted and stopped dead, staring at the ground. Patches of bare earth spotted the matted brown of last year's grass, and in the middle of one of those patches, right under his nose, was a clear hoofprint. A slow smile spread across his face. Some Trollocs had hooves, but he doubted if any wore horseshoes, especially horseshoes with the double crossbar Master Luhhan added for strength.

Forgetting possible eyes on the other side of the river, he cast about for more tracks. The plaited carpet of dead grass did not take impressions well, but his sharp eyes found them anyway. The scanty trail led him straight away from the river to a dense stand of trees, thick with leatherleaf and cedar that made a wall against wind or prying eyes. The spreading branches of a lone hemlock towered in the middle of it all.

Still grinning, he pushed his way through the interwoven branches, not caring how much noise he made. Abruptly he stepped into a little clearing under the hemlock—and stopped. Behind a small fire, Egwene crouched, her face grim, with a thick branch held like a club and her back against Bela's flank.

"I guess I should have called out," he said with an abashed shrug.

Tossing her club down, she ran to throw her arms around him. "I thought you had drowned. You're still wet. Here, sit by the fire and warm yourself. You lost your horse, didn't you?"

He let her push him to a place by the fire and rubbed his hands over the flames, grateful for the warmth. She produced an oiled paper packet from her saddlebags and gave him some bread and cheese. The package had been so tightly wrapped that even after its dunking the food was dry. *Here you were worrying about her, and she's done better than you did.*

"Bela got me across," Egwene said, patting the shaggy mare. "She headed away from the Trollocs and just towed me along." She paused. "I haven’t seen anybody else, Perrin.”

He heard the unspoken question. Regretfully eyeing the packet that she was rewrapping, he licked the last crumbs from his fingers before speaking. “I’ve seen no one but you since last night. No Fades or Trollocs, either; there’s that.”

“Rand has to be all right,” Egwene said, quickly adding, “they all do. They have to. They’re probably looking for us right now. They might find us anytime now. Moiraine is an Aes Sedai, after all.”

“I keep being reminded of that,” he said. “Burn me, I wish I could forget.”

“I did not hear you complaining when she stopped the Trollocs from catching us,” Egwene said tartly.

“I just wish we could do without her.” He shrugged uncomfortably under her steady gaze. “I suppose we can’t, though. I’ve been thinking.” Her eyebrows rose, but he was used to surprise whenever he claimed an idea. Even when his ideas were as good as theirs, they always remembered how deliberate he was in thinking of them. “We can wait for Lan and Moiraine to find us.”

“Of course,” she cut in. “Moiraine Sedai said she would find us if we were separated.”

He let her finish, then went on. “Or the Trollocs could find us, first. Moiraine could be dead, too. All of them could be. No, Egwene. I’m sorry, but they could be. I hope they are all safe. I hope they’ll walk up to this fire any minute. But hope is like a piece of string when you’re drowning; it just isn’t enough to get you out by itself.”

Egwene closed her mouth and stared at him with her jaw set. Finally, she said, “You want to go downriver to Whitebridge? If Moiraine Sedai doesn’t find us here, that’s where she will look next.”

“I suppose,” he said slowly, “that Whitebridge is where we *should* go. But the Fades probably know that, too. That’s where they’ll be looking, and this time we don’t have an Aes Sedai or a Warder to protect us.”

“I suppose you’re going to suggest running off somewhere, the way Mat wanted to? Hiding somewhere the Fades and Trollocs won’t find us? Or Moiraine Sedai, either?”

“Don’t think I haven’t considered it,” he said quietly. “But every time we think we are free, Fades and Trollocs find us again. I don’t know if there *is* anyplace we could hide from them. I don't like it much, but we need Moiraine."

"I don't understand then, Perrin. Where do we go?"

He blinked in surprise. She was waiting for his answer. Waiting for *him* to tell her what to do. It had never occurred to him that she would look to him to take the lead. Egwene never liked doing what someone else had planned out, and she never let anybody tell her what to do. Except maybe the Wisdom, and he thought sometimes she balked at that. He smoothed the dirt in front of him with his hand and cleared his throat roughly.

"If this is where we are now, and that is Whitebridge," he stabbed the ground twice with his finger, "then Caemlyn should be somewhere around here." He made a third mark, off to the side.

He paused, looking at the three dots in the dirt. His entire plan was based on what he remembered of her father's old map. Master al'Vere said it was not too accurate, and, anyway, he had never mooned over it as much as Rand and Mat. But Egwene said nothing. When he looked up, she was still watching him with her hands in her lap.

"Caemlyn?" She sounded stunned.

"Caemlyn." He drew a line in the dirt between two of the dots. "Away from the river, and straight across. Nobody would expect that. We'll wait for them in Caemlyn." He dusted his hands and waited. He thought it was a good plan, but surely she would have objections now. He expected she would take charge—she was always bullying him into something—and that was all right with him.

To his surprise, she nodded. "There must be villages. We can ask directions."

"What worries me," Perrin said, "is what we do if the Aes Sedai *doesn't* find us there. Light, who'd ever have thought I'd worry about something like that? What if she doesn't come to Caemlyn? Maybe she thinks we're dead. Maybe she'll take Rand and Mat straight to Tar Valon."

"Moiraine Sedai said she could find us," Egwene said firmly. "If she can find us here, she can find us in Caemlyn, and she will."

Perrin nodded slowly. "If you say so, but if she doesn't appear in Caemlyn in a few days, we go on to Tar Valon and put our case before the Amyrlin Seat." He took a deep breath. *Two weeks ago you'd never even seen an Aes Sedai, and now you're talking about the Amyrlin Seat. Light!* "According to Lan, there's a good road from Caemlyn." He looked at the oiled paper packet beside Egwene and cleared his throat. “What chance of a little more bread and cheese?”

“This might have to last a long time,” she said, “unless you have better luck with snares than I did last night. At least the fire was easy.” She laughed softly as if she had made a joke, tucking the packet back into her saddlebags.

Apparently there were limits to how much leadership she was willing to accept. His stomach rumbled. “In that case,” he said, standing, “we might as well start now.”

“But you’re still wet,” she protested.

“I’ll walk myself dry,” he said firmly, and began kicking dirt over the fire. If he was the leader, it was time to start leading. The wind from the river was picking up.

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CHAPTER
23

Wolfbrother

From the start Perrin knew the journey to Caemlyn was going to be far from comfortable, beginning with Egwene’s insistence that they take turns riding Bela. They did not know how far it was, she said, but it was too far for her to be the only one who rode. Her jaw firmed, and her eyes stared at him unblinking.

“I’m too big to ride Bela,” he said. “I’m used to walking, and I’d rather.”

“And I am not used to walking?” Egwene said sharply.

“That isn’t what I—”

“I’m the only one who’s supposed to get saddlesore, is that it? And when you walk till your feet are ready to fall off, you’ll expect me to look after you.”

“Let it be,” he breathed when she looked like going on. “Anyway, you’ll take the first turn.” Her face turned even more stubborn, but he refused to let her get a word in edgewise. “If you won’t get in the saddle by yourself, I’ll put you there.”

She gave him a startled look, and a small smile curved her lips. “In that case. . . .” She sounded as if she were about to laugh, but she climbed up.

He grumbled to himself as he turned away from the river. Leaders in stories never had to put up with this sort of thing.

Egwene did insist on him taking his turns, and whenever he tried to avoid it, she bullied him into the saddle. Blacksmithing did not lend itself to a slender build, and Bela was not very large as horses went. Every time he put his foot in the stirrup the shaggy mare looked at him with what he was sure was reproach. Small things, perhaps, but they irritated. Soon he flinched whenever Egwene announced, “It’s your turn, Perrin.”

In stories leaders seldom flinched, and they were never bullied. But, he reflected, they never had to deal with Egwene, either.

There were only short rations of bread and cheese to begin with, and what there was gave out by the end of the first day. Perrin set snares along likely rabbit runs—they looked old, but it was worth a chance—while Egwene began laying a fire. When he was done, he decided to try his hand with his sling before the light failed altogether. They had not seen a sign of anything at all alive, but. . . . To his surprise, he jumped a scrawny rabbit almost at once. He was so surprised when it burst from under a bush right beneath his feet that it almost got away, but he fetched it at forty paces, just as it was darting around a tree.

When he came back to the camp with the rabbit, Egwene had broken limbs all laid for the fire, but she was kneeling beside the pile with her eyes closed. "What are you doing? You can't wish a fire."

Egwene gave a jump at his first words, and twisted around to stare at him with a hand to her throat. "You . . . you startled me."

"I was lucky," he said, holding up the rabbit. "Get your flint and steel. We eat well tonight, at least."

"I don't have a flint," she said slowly. "It was in my pocket, and I lost it in the river."

"Then how . . . ?"

"It was so easy back there on the riverbank, Perrin. Just the way Moiraine Sedai showed me. I just reached out, and. . . ." She gestured as if grasping for something, then let her hand fall with a sigh. "I can't find it, now."

Perrin licked his lips uneasily. "The . . . the Power?" She nodded, and he stared at her. "Are you crazy? I mean . . . the One Power! You can't just play around with something like that."

"It was so easy, Perrin. I can do it. I can channel the Power."

He took a deep breath. "I'll make a firebow, Egwene. Promise you won't try this . . . this . . . *thing* again."

"I will not." Her jaw firmed in a way that made him sigh. "Would you give up that axe of yours, Perrin Aybara? Would you walk around with one hand tied behind your back? I won't do it!"

"I'll make the firebow," he said wearily. "At least, don't try it again tonight? Please?"

She acquiesced grudgingly, and even after the rabbit was roasting on a spit over the flames, he had the feeling she felt she could have done it better. She would not give up trying, either, every night, though the best she ever did was a trickle of smoke that vanished almost immediately. Her eyes dared him to say a word, and he wisely kept his mouth shut.

After that one hot meal, they subsisted on coarse wild tubers and a few young shoots. With still no sign of spring, none of it was plentiful, and none of it tasty, either. Neither complained, but not a meal passed without one or the other sighing regretfully, and they both knew it was for the tang of a bit of cheese, or even the smell of bread. A find of mushrooms—Queen's Crowns, the best—one afternoon in a shady part of the forest was enough to seem a great treat. They gobbled them down, laughing and telling stories from back in Emond's Field, stories that began, "Do you remember when—" but the mushrooms did not last long, and neither did the laughter. There was little mirth in hunger.

Whichever was walking carried a sling, ready to let fly at the sight of a rabbit or squirrel, but the only time either hurled a stone was in frustration. The snares they set so carefully each evening yielded nothing at dawn, and they did not dare stay a day in one place to leave the snares out. Neither of them knew how far it was to Caemlyn, and neither would feel safe until they got there, if then. Perrin began to wonder if his stomach could shrink enough to make a hole all the way through his middle.

They made good time, as he saw it, but as they got farther and farther from the Arinelle without seeing a village, or even a farmhouse where they could ask directions, his doubts about his own plan grew. Egwene continued to appear outwardly as confident as when they set out, but he was sure that sooner or later she would say it would have been better to risk the Trollocs than to wander around lost for the rest of their lives. She never did, but he kept expecting it.

Two days from the river the land changed to thickly forested hills, as gripped by the tail end of winter as everywhere else, and a day after that the hills flattened out again, the dense forest broken by glades, often a mile or more across. Snow still lay in hidden hollows, and the air was brisk of a morning, and the wind cold always. Nowhere did they see a road, or a plowed field, or chimney smoke in the distance, or any other sign of human habitation—at least, none where men still dwelt.

Once the remains of tall stone ramparts encircled a hilltop. Parts of roofless stone houses stood inside the fallen circle. The forest had long swallowed it; trees grew right through everything, and spiderwebs of old creeper enveloped the big stone blocks. Another time they came on a stone tower, broken-topped and brown with old moss, leaning on the huge oak whose thick roots were slowly toppling it. But they found no place where men had breathed in living remembrance. Memories of Shadar Logoth kept them away from the ruins and hurried their footsteps until they were once more deep in places that seemed never to have known a human footstep.

Dreams plagued Perrin's sleep, fearful dreams. Ba'alzamon was in them, chasing him through mazes, hunting him, but Perrin never met him face-to-face, so far as he remembered. And their journey had been enough to bring a few bad dreams. Egwene complained of nightmares about Shadar Logoth, especially the two nights after they found the ruined fort and the abandoned tower. Perrin kept his own counsel even when he woke sweating and shaking in the dark. She was looking to him to lead them safely to Caemlyn, not share worries about which they could do nothing.

He was walking at Bela's head, wondering if they would find anything to eat this evening, when he first caught the smell. The mare flared her nostrils and swung her head in the next moment. He seized her bridle before she could whicker.

"That's smoke," Egwene said excitedly. She leaned forward in the saddle, drew a deep breath. "A cookfire. Somebody is roasting dinner. Rabbit."

"Maybe," Perrin said cautiously, and her eager smile faded. He exchanged his sling for the wicked half-moon of the axe. His hands opened and closed uncertainly on the thick haft. It was a weapon, but neither his hidden practice behind the forge nor Lan's teachings had really prepared him to use it as one. Even the battle before Shadar Logoth was too vague in his mind to give him any confidence. He could never quite manage that void that Rand and the Warder talked about, either.

Sunlight slanted through the trees behind them, and the forest was a still mass of dappled shadows. The faint smell of woodsmoke drifted around them, tinged with the aroma of cooking meat. *It could be rabbit,* he thought, and his stomach grumbled. And it could be something else, he reminded himself. He looked at Egwene; she was watching him. There were responsibilities to being leader.

“Wait here,” he said softly. She frowned, but he cut her off as she opened her mouth. “And be quiet! We don’t know who it is, yet.” She nodded. Reluctantly, but she did it. Perrin wondered why that did not work when he was trying to make her take his turn riding. Drawing a deep breath, he started for the source of the smoke.

He had not spent as much time in the forests around Emond’s Field as Rand or Mat, but still he had done his share of hunting rabbits. He crept from tree to tree without so much as snapping a twig. It was not long before he was peering around the bole of a tall oak with spreading, serpentine limbs that bent to touch the ground then rose again. Beyond lay a campfire, and a lean, sun-browned man was leaning against one of the limbs not far from the flames.

At least he was not a Trolloc, but he was the strangest fellow Perrin had ever seen. For one thing, his clothes all seemed to be made from animal skins, with the fur still on, even his boots and the odd, flat-topped round cap on his head. His cloak was a crazy quilt of rabbit and squirrel; his trousers appeared to be made from the long-haired hide of a brown and white goat. Gathered at the back of his neck with a cord, his graying brown hair hung to his waist. A thick beard fanned across half his chest. A long knife hung at his belt, almost a sword, and a bow and quiver stood propped against a limb close to hand.

The man leaned back with his eyes closed, apparently asleep, but Perrin did not stir from his concealment. Six sticks slanted over the fellow’s fire, and on each stick a rabbit was skewered, roasted brown and now and then dripping juice that hissed in the flames. The smell of them, so close, made his mouth water.

“You done drooling?” The man opened one eye and cocked it at Perrin’s hiding place. “You and your friend might as well sit and have a bite. I haven’t seen you eat much the last couple of days.”

Perrin hesitated, then stood slowly, still gripping his axe tightly. “You’ve been watching me for two days?”

The man chuckled deep in his throat. “Yes, I been watching you. And that pretty girl. Pushes you around like a bantam rooster, doesn’t she? Heard you, mostly. The horse is the only one of you doesn’t trample around loud enough to be heard five miles off. You going to ask her in, or are you intending to eat all the rabbit yourself?”

Perrin bristled; he knew he did not make much noise. You could not get close enough to a rabbit in the Waterwood to fetch it with a sling if you made noise. But the smell of rabbit made him remember that Egwene was hungry, too, not to mention waiting to discover if it was a Trolloc fire they had smelled.

He slipped the haft of his axe through the belt loop and raised his voice. “Egwene! It’s all right! It *is* rabbit!” Offering his hand, he added in a more normal tone, “My name is Perrin. Perrin Aybara.”

The man considered his hand before taking it awkwardly, as if unused to shaking hands. “I’m called Elyas,” he said, looking up. “Elyas Machera.”

Perrin gasped, and nearly dropped Elyas’s hand. The man’s eyes were yellow, like bright, polished gold. Some memory tickled at the back of Perrin’s mind, then fled. All he could think of right then was that all of the Trollocs’ eyes he had seen had been almost black.

Egwene appeared, cautiously leading Bela. She tied the mare’s reins to one of the smaller branches of the oak, and made polite sounds when Perrin introduced her to Elyas, but her eyes kept drifting to the rabbits. She did not seem to notice the man’s eyes. When Elyas motioned them to the food, she fell to with a will. Perrin hesitated only a minute longer before joining her.

Elyas waited silently while they ate. Perrin was so hungry he tore off pieces of meat so hot he had to juggle them from hand to hand before he could hold them in his mouth. Even Egwene showed little of her usual neatness; greasy juice ran down her chin. Day faded into twilight before they began to slow down, moonless darkness closing in around the fire, and then Elyas spoke.

“What are you doing out here? There isn’t a house inside fifty miles in any direction.”

“We’re going to Caemlyn,” Egwene said. “Perhaps you could—” Her eyebrows lifted coolly as Elyas threw back his head and roared with laughter. Perrin stared at him, a rabbit leg half raised to his mouth.

“Caemlyn?” Elyas wheezed when he could talk again. “The path you’re following, the line you’ve taken the last two days, you’ll pass a hundred miles or more north of Caemlyn.”

“We were going to ask directions,” Egwene said defensively. “We just haven’t found any villages or farms, yet.”

“And none you will,” Elyas said, chuckling. “The way you’re going, you can travel all the way to the Spine of the World without seeing another human. Of course, if you managed to climb the Spine—it can be done, some places—you could find people in the Aiel Waste, but you wouldn't like it there. You'd broil by day, and freeze by night, and die of thirst anytime. It takes an Aielman to find water in the Waste, and they don't like strangers much. No, not much, I'd say." He set off into another, more furious, burst of laughter, this time actually rolling on the ground. "Not much at all," he managed.

Perrin shifted uneasily. *Are we eating with a madman?*

Egwene frowned, but she waited until Elyas's mirth faded a little, then said, "Perhaps you could show us the way. You seem to know a good deal more about where places are than we do."

Elyas stopped laughing. Raising his head, he replaced his round fur cap, which had fallen off while he was rolling about, and stared at her from under lowered brows. "I don't much like people," he said in a flat voice. "Cities are full of people. I don't go near villages, or even farms, very often. Villagers, farmers, they don't like my friends. I wouldn't even have helped you if you hadn't been stumbling around as helpless and innocent as newborn cubs."

"But at least you can tell us which way to go," she insisted. "If you direct us to the nearest village, even if it's fifty miles away, surely they'll give us directions to Caemlyn."

"Be still," Elyas said. "My friends are coming."

Bela suddenly whinnied in fear, and began jerking to pull her reins free. Perrin half rose as shapes appeared all around them in the darkening forest. Bela reared and twisted, screaming.

"Quiet the mare," Elyas said. "They won't hurt her. Or you, if you're still."

Four wolves stepped into the firelight, shaggy, waist-high forms with jaws that could break a man's leg. As if the people were not there they walked up to the fire and lay down between the humans. In the darkness among the trees firelight reflected off the eyes of more wolves, on all sides.

Yellow eyes, Perrin thought. Like Elyas's eyes. That was what he had been trying to remember. Carefully watching the wolves among them, he reached for his axe.

"I would not do that," Elyas said. "If they think you mean harm, they'll stop being friendly."

They were staring at him, those four wolves, Perrin saw. He had the feeling that all the wolves, those in the trees, as well, were staring at him. It made his skin itch. Cautiously he moved his hands away from the axe. He imagined he could feel the tension ease among the wolves. Slowly he sat back down; his hands shook until he gripped his knees to stop them. Egwene was so stiff she almost quivered. One wolf, close to black with a lighter gray patch on his face, lay nearly touching her.

Bela had ceased her screaming and rearing. Instead she stood trembling and shifting in an attempt to keep all of the wolves in view, kicking occasionally to show the wolves that she could, intending to sell her life dearly. The wolves seemed to ignore her and everyone else. Tongues lolling out of their mouths, they waited at their ease.

“There,” Elyas said. “That’s better.”

“Are they tame?” Egwene asked faintly, and hopefully, too. “They’re . . . pets?”

Elyas snorted. “Wolves don’t tame, girl, not even as well as men. They’re my friends. We keep each other company, hunt together, converse, after a fashion. Just like any friends. Isn’t that right, Dapple?” A wolf with fur that faded through a dozen shades of gray, dark and light, turned her head to look at him.

“You talk to them?” Perrin marveled.

“It isn’t exactly talking,” Elyas replied slowly. “The words don’t matter, and they aren’t exactly right, either. Her name isn’t Dapple. It’s something that means the way shadows play on a forest pool at a midwinter dawn, with the breeze rippling the surface, and the tang of ice when the water touches the tongue, and a hint of snow before nightfall in the air. But that isn’t quite it, either. You can’t say it in words. It’s more of a feeling. That’s the way wolves talk. The others are Burn, Hopper, and Wind.” Burn had an old scar on his shoulder that might explain his name, but there was nothing about the other two wolves to give any indication of what their names might mean.

For all the man’s gruffness, Perrin thought Elyas was pleased to have the chance to talk to another human. He seemed eager enough to do it, at least. Perrin eyed the wolves’ teeth glistening in the firelight and thought it might be a good idea to keep him talking. “How . . . how did you learn to talk to wolves, Elyas?”

“They found out,” Elyas replied, “I didn’t. Not at first. That’s always the way of it, I understand. The wolves find you, not you them. Some people thought me touched by the Dark One, because wolves started appearing wherever I went. I suppose I thought so, too, sometimes. Most decent folk began to avoid me, and the ones who sought me out weren’t the kind I wanted to know, one way or another. Then I noticed there were times when the wolves seemed to know what I was thinking, to respond to what was in my head. That was the real beginning. They were curious about me. Wolves can sense people, usually, but not like this. They were glad to find me. They say it’s been a long time since they hunted with men, and when they say a long time, the feeling I get is like a cold wind howling all the way down from the First Day.”

“I never heard of men hunting with wolves,” Egwene said. Her voice was not entirely steady, but the fact that the wolves were just lying there seemed to give her heart.

If Elyas heard her, he gave no sign. “Wolves remember things differently from the way people do,” he said. His strange eyes took on a faraway look, as if he were drifting off on the flow of memory himself. “Every wolf remembers the history of all wolves, or at least the shape of it. Like I said, it can’t be put into words very well. They remember running down prey side-by-side with men, but it was so long ago that it’s more like the shadow of a shadow than a memory.”

“That’s very interesting,” Egwene said, and Elyas looked at her sharply. “No, I mean it. It is.” She wet her lips. “Could . . . ah . . . could you teach us to talk to them?”

Elyas snorted again. “It can’t be taught. Some can do it, some can’t. They say he can.” He pointed at Perrin.

Perrin looked at Elyas’s finger as if it were a knife. *He really is a madman*. The wolves were staring at him again. He shifted uncomfortably.

“You say you’re going to Caemlyn,” Elyas said, “but that still doesn’t explain what you’re doing out here, days from anywhere.” He tossed back his fur-patch cloak and lay down on his side, propped on one elbow and waiting expectantly.

Perrin glanced at Egwene. Early on they had concocted a story for when they found people, to explain where they were going without bringing them any trouble. Without letting anyone know where they were really from, or where they were really going, eventually. Who knew what careless word might reach a Fade's ear? They had worked on it every day, patching it together, honing out flaws. And they had decided Egwene was the one to tell it. She was better with words than he was, and she claimed she could always tell when he was lying by his face.

Egwene began at once, smoothly. They were from the north, from Saldaea, from farms outside a tiny village. Neither of them had been more than twenty miles from home in their whole lives before this. But they had heard gleemen's stories, and merchants' tales, and they wanted to see some of the world. Caemlyn, and Illian. The Sea of Storms, and maybe even the fabled islands of the Sea Folk.

Perrin listened with satisfaction. Not even Thom Merrilin could have made a better tale from the little they knew of the world outside the Two Rivers, or one better suited to their needs.

"From Saldaea, eh?" Elyas said when she was done.

Perrin nodded. "That's right. We thought about seeing Maradon first. I'd surely like to see the King. But the capital city would be the first place our fathers would look."

That was his part of it, to make it plain they had never been to Maradon. That way no one would expect them to know anything about the city, just in case they ran into someone who really had been there. It was all a long way from Emond's Field and the events of Winternight. Nobody hearing the tale would have any reason to think of Tar Valon, or Aes Sedai.

"Quite a story." Elyas nodded. "Yes, quite a story. There's a few things wrong with it, but the main thing is Dapple says it's all a lump of lies. Every last word."

"Lies!" Egwene exclaimed. "Why would we lie?"

The four wolves had not moved, but they no longer seemed to be just lying there around the fire; they crouched, instead, and their yellow eyes watched the Emond's Fielders without blinking.

Perrin did not say anything, but his hand strayed to the axe at his waist. The four wolves rose to their feet in one quick movement, and his hand froze. They made no sound, but the thick hackles on their necks stood erect. One of the wolves back under the trees raised a growling howl into the night. Others answered, five, ten, twenty, till the darkness rippled with them. Abruptly they, too, were still. Cold sweat trickled down Perrin's face.

"If you think. . . ." Egwene stopped to swallow. Despite the chill in the air there was sweat on her face, too. "If you think we are lying, then you'll probably prefer that we make our own camp for the night, away from yours.”

“Ordinarily I would, girl. But right now I want to know about the Trollocs. And the Halfmen.” Perrin struggled to keep his face impassive, and hoped he was doing better at it than Egwene. Elyas went on in a conversational tone. “Dapple says she smelled Halfmen and Trollocs in your minds while you were telling that fool story. They all did. You’re mixed up with Trollocs, somehow, and the Eyeless. Wolves hate Trollocs and Halfmen worse than wildfire, worse than anything, and so do I.

“Burn wants to be done with you. It was Trollocs gave him that mark when he was a yearling. He says game is scarce, and you’re fatter than any deer he’s seen in months, and we should be done with you. But Burn is always impatient. Why don’t you tell me about it? I hope you’re not Darkfriends. I don’t like killing people after I’ve fed them. Just remember, they’ll know if you lie, and even Dapple is already near as upset as Burn.” His eyes, as yellow as the wolves’ eyes, blinked no more than theirs did. *They* are *a wolf’s eyes,* Perrin thought.

Egwene was looking at him, he realized, waiting for him to decide what they should do. *Light, suddenly I’m the leader again*. They had decided from the first that they could not risk telling the real story to anyone, but he saw no chance for them to get away even if he managed to get his axe out before. . . .

Dapple growled deep in her throat, and the sound was taken up by the other three around the fire, then by the wolves in the darkness. The menacing rumble filled the night.

“All right,” Perrin said quickly. “All right!” The growling cut off, sharp and sudden. Egwene unclenched her hands and nodded. “It all started a few days before Winternight,” Perrin began, “when our friend Mat saw a man in a black cloak. . . .”

Elyas never changed his expression or the way he lay on his side, but there was something about the tilt of his head that spoke of ears pricking up. The four wolves sat down as Perrin went on; he had the impression they were listening, too. The story was a long one, and he told almost all of it. The dream he and the others had had in Baerlon, though, he kept to himself. He waited for the wolves to make some sign they had caught the omission, but they only watched. Dapple seemed friendly, Burn angry. He was hoarse by the time he finished.

“. . . and if she doesn’t find us in Caemlyn, we’ll go on to Tar Valon. We don’t have any choice except to get help from the Aes Sedai.”

“Trollocs and Halfmen this far south,” Elyas mused. “Now that’s something to consider.” He rooted behind him and tossed Perrin a hide waterbag, not really looking at him. He appeared to be thinking. He waited until Perrin had drunk and replaced the plug before he spoke again. “I don’t hold with Aes Sedai. The Red Ajah, those that like hunting for men who mess with the One Power, they wanted to gentle me, once. I told them to their faces they were Black Ajah; served the Dark One, I said, and they didn’t like that at all. They couldn’t catch me, though, once I got into the forest, but they did try. Yes, they did. Come to that, I doubt any Aes Sedai would take kindly to me, after that. I had to kill a couple of Warders. Bad business, that, killing Warders. Don’t like it.”

“This talking to wolves,” Perrin said uneasily. “It . . . it has to do with the Power?”

“Of course not,” Elyas growled. “Wouldn’t have worked on me, gentling, but it made me mad, them wanting to try. This is an old thing, boy. Older than Aes Sedai. Older than anybody using the One Power. Old as humankind. Old as wolves. They don’t like that either, Aes Sedai. Old things coming again. I’m not the only one. There are other things, other folk. Makes Aes Sedai nervous, makes them mutter about ancient barriers weakening. Things are breaking apart, they say. They’re afraid the Dark One will get loose, is what. You’d think I was to blame, the way some of them looked at me. Red Ajah, anyway, but some others, too. The Amyrlin Seat. . . . Aaaah! I keep clear of them, mostly, and clear of friends of Aes Sedai, as well. You will, too, if you’re smart.”

“I’d like nothing better than to stay away from Aes Sedai,” Perrin said.

Egwene gave him a sharp look. He hoped she would not burst out that she wanted to be an Aes Sedai. But she said nothing, though her mouth tightened, and Perrin went on.

“It isn’t as if we have a choice. We’ve had Trollocs chasing us, and Fades, and Draghkar. Everything but Darkfriends. We can’t hide, and we can’t fight back alone. So who is going to help us? Who else is strong enough, except Aes Sedai?”

Elyas was silent for a time, looking at the wolves, most often at Dapple or Burn. Perrin shifted nervously and tried not to watch. When he watched he had the feeling that he could almost hear what Elyas and the wolves were saying to one another. Even if it had nothing to do with the Power, he wanted no part of it. *He* had *to be making some crazy joke. I can't talk to wolves*. One of the wolves—Hopper, he thought—looked at him and seemed to grin. He wondered how he had put a name to him.

"You could stay with me," Elyas said finally. "With us." Egwene's eyebrows shot up, and Perrin's mouth dropped open. "Well, what could be safer?" Elyas challenged. "Trollocs will take any chance they get to kill a wolf by itself, but they'll go miles out of their way to avoid a pack. And you won't have to worry about Aes Sedai, either. They don't often come into these woods."

"I don't know." Perrin avoided looking at the wolves to either side of him. One was Dapple, and he could feel her eyes on him. "For one thing, it isn't just the Trollocs."

Elyas chuckled coldly. "I've seen a pack pull down one of the Eyeless, too. Lost half the pack, but they wouldn't give up once they had its scent. Trollocs, Myrddraal, it's all one to the wolves. It's you they really want, boy. They've heard of other men who can talk to wolves, but you're the first they've ever met besides me. They'll accept your friend, too, though, and you'll all be safer here than in any city. There's Darkfriends in cities."

"Listen," Perrin said urgently, "I wish you'd stop saying that. I can't—do that . . . what you do, what you're saying."

"As you wish, boy. Play the goat, if you've a mind to. Don't you want to be safe?"

"I'm not deceiving myself. There's nothing to deceive myself about. All we want—"

"We are going to Caemlyn," Egwene spoke up firmly. "And then to Tar Valon."

Closing his mouth, Perrin met her angry look with one of his own. He knew that she followed his lead when she wanted to and not when she did not, but she could at least let him answer for himself. "What about you, Perrin?" he said, and answered himself. "Me? Well, let me think. Yes. Yes, I think I'll go on." He turned a mild smile on her. "Well, Egwene, that makes both of us. I guess I'm going with you, at that. Good to talk these things out before making a decision, isn't it?" She blushed, but the set of her jaw never lessened.

Elyas grunted. "Dapple said that's what you'd decide. She said the girl's planted firmly in the human world, while you"—he nodded at Perrin

— “stand halfway between. Under the circumstances, I suppose we’d better go south with you. Otherwise, you’ll probably starve to death, or get lost, or —”

Abruptly Burn stood up, and Elyas turned his head to regard the big wolf. After a moment Dapple rose, too. She moved closer to Elyas, so that she also was meeting Burn’s stare. The tableau was frozen for long minutes, then Burn whirled and vanished into the night. Dapple shook herself, then resumed her place, flopping down as if nothing had happened.

Elyas met Perrin’s questioning eyes. “Dapple runs this pack,” he explained. “Some of the males could best her if they challenged, but she’s smarter than any of them, and they all know it. She’s saved the pack more than once. But Burn thinks the pack is wasting time with you three. Hating Trollocs is about all there is to him, and if there are Trollocs this far south he wants to be off killing them.”

“We quite understand,” Egwene said, sounding relieved. “We really can find our own way . . . with some directions, of course, if you’ll give them.”

Elyas waved a hand. “I said Dapple leads this pack, didn’t I? In the morning, I’ll start south with you, and so will they.” Egwene looked as if that was not the best news she could have heard.

Perrin sat wrapped in his own silence. He could *feel* Burn leaving. And the scarred male was not the only one; a dozen others, all young males, loped after him. He wanted to believe it was all Elyas playing on his imagination, but he could not. Just before the departing wolves faded from his mind, he felt a thought he knew came from Burn, as sharp and clear as if it were his own thought. Hatred. Hatred and the taste of blood.

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CHAPTER

24

Flight Down the Arinelle

Water dripped in the distance, hollow splashes echoing and reechoing, losing their source forever. There were stone bridges and railless ramps everywhere, all sprouting off from broad, flat-topped stone spires, all polished and smooth and streaked with red and gold. Level on level, the maze stretched up and down through the murk, without any apparent beginning or end. Every bridge led to a spire, every ramp to another spire, other bridges. Whatever direction Rand looked, as far as his eye could make out in the dimness it was the same, above as well as below. There was not enough light to see clearly, and he was almost glad of it. Some of those ramps led to platforms that had to be directly above the ones below. He could not see the base of any of them. He pressed, seeking freedom, knowing it was an illusion. Everything was illusion.

He knew the illusion; he had followed it too many times not to know. However far he went, up or down or in any direction, there was only the shiny stone. Stone, but the dankness of deep, fresh-turned earth permeated the air, and the sickly sweetness of decay. The smell of a grave opened out of its time. He tried not to breathe, but the smell filled his nostrils. It clung to his skin like oil.

A flicker of motion caught his eye, and he froze where he was, half crouched against the polished guardwall around one of the spire tops. It was no hiding place. From a thousand places a watcher could have seen him. Shadow filled the air, but there were no deeper shadows in which to hide. The light did not come from lamps, or lanterns, or torches; it was simply there, such as it was, as if it seeped out of the air. Enough by which to see, after a fashion; enough by which to be seen. But stillness gave a little protection.

The movement came again, and now it was clear. A man striding up a distant ramp, careless of the lack of railings and the drop to nothing below. The man's cloak rippled with his stately haste, and his head turned, searching, searching. The distance was too far for Rand to see more than the shape in the murk, but he did not need to be closer to know the cloak was the red of fresh blood, that the searching eyes blazed like two furnaces.

He tried tracing the maze with his eyes, to see how many connections Ba'alzamon needed before reaching him, then gave it up as useless. Distances were deceiving here, another lesson he had learned. What seemed far away might be reached by turning a corner; what appeared close could be out of reach altogether. The only thing to do, as it had been from the beginning, was to keep moving. Keep moving, and not think. Thinking was dangerous, he knew.

Yet, as he turned away from Ba'alzamon's distant form, he could not help wondering about Mat. Was Mat somewhere in this maze? *Or are there two mazes, two Ba'alzamons?* His mind skittered away from that; it was too dreadful to dwell on. *Is this like Baerlon? Then why can't he find me?* That was a little better. A small comfort. *Comfort? Blood and ashes, where's the comfort in it?*

There had been two or three close brushes, though he could not remember them clearly, but for a long, long time—how long?—he had run while Ba'alzamon vainly pursued. Was this like Baerlon, or was it only a nightmare, only a dream like other men's dreams?

For an instant, then—just for the length of time it took to take a breath—he knew why it was dangerous to think, what it was dangerous to think about. As it had before, every time he allowed himself to think of what surrounded him as a dream, the air shimmered, clouding his eyes. It turned to jell, holding him. Just for an instant.

The gritty heat prickled his skin, and his throat had long since gone dry as he trotted down the thorn-hedge maze. How long had it been now? His sweat evaporated before it had a chance to bead, and his eyes burned. Overhead—and not too far overhead, at that—boiled furious, steely clouds streaked with black, but not a breath of air stirred in the maze. For a moment he thought it had been different, but the thought evaporated in the heat. He had been here a long time. It was dangerous to think, he knew that.

Smooth stones, pale and rounded, made a sketchy pavement, half buried in the bone-dry dust that rose in puffs at even his lightest step. It tickled his nose, threatening a sneeze that might give him away; when he tried to breathe through his mouth, dust clogged his throat until he choked.

This was a dangerous place; he knew that, too. Ahead of him he could see three openings in the high wall of thorns, then the way curved out of sight. Ba'alzamon could be approaching any one of those corners at that very moment. There had been two or three encounters already, though he could not remember much beyond that they had happened and he had escaped . . . somehow. Dangerous to think too much.

Panting in the heat, he stopped to examine the maze wall. Thickly woven thorn bushes, brown and dead-looking, with cruel black thorns like inch-long hooks. Too tall to see over, too dense to see through. Gingerly he touched the wall, and gasped. Despite all his care, a thorn pierced his finger, burning like a hot needle. He stumbled back, his heels catching on the stones, shaking his hand and scattering thick drops of blood. The burn began to subside, but his whole hand throbbed.

Abruptly he forgot the pain. His heel had overturned one of the smooth stones, kicked it out of the dry ground. He stared at it, and empty eye sockets stared back. A skull. A human skull. He looked along the pathway at all the smooth, pale stones, all exactly alike. He shifted his feet hastily, but he could not move without walking on them, and he could not stay still without standing on them. A stray thought took vague shape, that things might not be what they seemed, but he pushed it down ruthlessly. Thinking was dangerous here.

He took a shaky hold on himself. Staying in one place was dangerous, too. That was one of the things he knew dimly but with certainty. The flow of blood from his finger had dwindled to a slow drip, and the throb was almost gone. Sucking his fingertip, he started down the path in the direction he happened to be facing. One way was as good as another in here.

Now he remembered hearing once that you could get out of a maze by always turning in the same direction. At the first opening in the wall of thorns he turned right, then right again at the next. And found himself face-to-face with Ba'alzamon.

Surprise flitted across Ba'alzamon's face, and his blood-red cloak settled as he stopped short. Flames soared in his eyes, but in the heat of the maze Rand barely felt them.

"How long do you think you can evade me, boy? How long do you think you can evade your fate? You are mine!"

Stumbling back, Rand wondered why he was fumbling at his belt, as if for a sword. “Light help me,” he muttered. “Light help me.” He could not remember what it meant.

“The Light will not help you, boy, and the Eye of the World will not serve you. You are my hound, and if you will not course at my command, I will strangle you with the corpse of the Great Serpent!”

Ba’alzamon stretched out his hand, and suddenly Rand knew a way to escape, a misty, half-formed memory that screamed danger, but nothing to the danger of being touched by the Dark One.

“A dream!” Rand shouted. “This is a dream!”

Ba’alzamon’s eyes began to widen, in surprise or anger or both, then the air shimmered, and his features blurred, and faded.

Rand turned about in one spot, staring. Staring at his own image thrown back at him a thousandfold. Ten thousandfold. Above was blackness, and blackness below, but all around him stood mirrors, mirrors set at every angle, mirrors as far as he could see, all showing him, crouched and turning, staring wide-eyed and frightened.

A red blur drifted across the mirrors. He spun, trying to catch it, but in every mirror it drifted behind his own image and vanished. Then it was back again, but not as a blur. Ba’alzamon strode across the mirrors, ten thousand Ba’alzamons, searching, crossing and recrossing the silvery mirrors.

He found himself staring at the reflection of his own face, pale and shivering in the knife-edge cold. Ba’alzamon’s image grew behind his, staring at him; not seeing, but staring still. In every mirror, the flames of Ba’alzamon’s face raged behind him, enveloping, consuming, merging. He wanted to scream, but his throat was frozen. There was only one face in those endless mirrors. His own face. Ba’alzamon’s face. One face.

Rand jerked, and opened his eyes. Darkness, lessened only slightly by a pale light. Barely breathing, he moved nothing except his eyes. A rough wool blanket covered him to his shoulders, and his head was cradled on his arms. He could feel smooth wooden planks under his hands. Deck planks. Rigging creaked in the night. He let out a long breath. He was on the *Spray*. It was over . . . for another night, at least.

Without thinking he put his finger in his mouth. At the taste of blood, he stopped breathing. Slowly he put his hand close to his face, to where he could see in the dim moonlight, to where he could watch the bead of blood form on his fingertip. Blood from the prick of a thorn.

The *Spray* made haste slowly down the Arinelle. The wind came strong, but from directions that made the sails useless. With all Captain Domon's demand for speed, the vessel crept along. By night a man in the bows cast a tallowed lead by lantern light, calling back the depth to the steersman, while the current carried her downriver against the wind with the sweeps pulled in. There were no rocks to fear in the Arinelle, but shallows and shoals there were aplenty, where a boat could go hard aground to remain, bows and more dug into the mud, until help came. If it was help that came first. By day the sweeps worked from sunrise to sunset, but the wind fought them as if it wanted to push the boat back upriver.

They did not put in to shore, neither by day nor by night. Bayle Domon drove boat and crew alike hard, railing at the contrary winds, cursing the slow pace. He blistered the crew for sluggards at the oars and flayed them with his tongue for every mishandled line, his low, hard voice painting Trollocs ten feet tall among them on the deck, ripping out their throats. For two days that was enough to send every man leaping. Then the shock of the Trolloc attack began to fade, and men began to mutter about an hour to stretch their legs ashore, and about the dangers of running downriver in the dark.

The crew kept their grumbles quiet, watching out of the corners of their eyes to make sure Captain Domon was not close enough to hear, but he seemed to hear everything said on his boat. Each time the grumblings began, he silently brought out the long, scythe-like sword and cruelly hooked axe that had been found on the deck after the attack. He would hang them on the mast for an hour, and those who had been wounded would finger their bandages, and the mutterings quieted for a day or so, at least, until one or another of the crew began thinking once more that surely they had left the Trollocs far behind by now, and the cycle began yet again.

Rand noticed that Thom Merrilin stayed clear of the crew when they began whispering together and frowning, though usually he was slapping backs and telling jokes and exchanging banter in a way that put a grin on even the hardest-working man. Thom watched those secretive mutters with a wary eye while appearing to be absorbed in lighting his long-stemmed pipe, or tuning his harp, or almost anything except paying any mind at all to the crew. Rand did not understand why. It was not the three who had come aboard chased by Trollocs whom the crew seemed to blame, but rather Floran Gelb.

For the first day or two Gelb's wiry figure could almost always be found addressing any crewman he could corner, telling his version of the night Rand and the others came on board. Gelb's manner slid from bluster to whines and back again, and his lip always curled when he pointed to Thom or Mat, or especially Rand, trying to lay the blame on them.

"They're strangers," Gelb pleaded, quietly and with an eye out for the captain. "What do we know of them? The Trollocs came with them, that's what we know. They're in league."

"Fortune, Gelb, stow it," growled a man with his hair in a pigtail and a small blue star tattooed on his cheek. He did not look at Gelb as he coiled a line on deck, working it in with his bare toes. All the sailors went barefoot despite the cold; boots could slip on a wet deck. "You'd call your mother Darkfriend if it'd let you slack. Get away from me!" He spat on Gelb's foot and went back to the line.

All the crew remembered the watch Gelb had not kept, and the pigtailed man's was the politest response he got. No one even wanted to work with him. Gelb found himself relegated to solitary tasks, all of them filthy, such as scrubbing the galley's greasy pots, or crawling into the bilges on his belly to search for leaks among years of slime. Soon he stopped talking to anyone. His shoulders took on a defensive hunch, and injured silence became his stance—the more people watching, the more injured, though it earned him no more than a grunt. When Gelb's eyes fell on Rand, however, or on Mat or Thom, murder flashed across his long-nosed face.

When Rand mentioned to Mat that Gelb would cause them trouble sooner or later, Mat looked around the boat, saying, "Can we trust any of them? Any at all?" Then he went off to find a place where he could be alone, or as alone as he could get on a boat less than thirty paces from its raised bow to the sternpost where the steering oars were mounted. Mat had spent too much time alone since the night at Shadar Logoth; brooding, as Rand saw it.

Thom said, "Trouble won't come from Gelb, boy, if it comes. Not yet, at least. None of the crew will back him, and he hasn't the nerve to try anything alone. But the others, now . . . ? Domon almost seems to think the Trollocs are chasing him, personally, but the rest are beginning to think the danger is past. They might just decide they have had enough. They’re on the edge of it, as it is.” He hitched his patch-covered cloak, and Rand had the feeling he was checking his hidden knives—his second-best set. “If they mutiny, boy, they won’t leave passengers behind to tell the tale. The Queen’s Writ might not have much force this far from Caemlyn, but even a village mayor will do something about that.” That was when Rand, too, began trying not to be noticed when he watched the crewmen.

Thom did his part in diverting the crew from thoughts of mutiny. He told stories, with all the flourishes, every morning and every night, and in between he played any song they requested. To support the notion that Rand and Mat wanted to be apprentice gleemen, he set aside a time each day for lessons, and that was an entertainment for the crew, as well. He would not let either of them touch his harp, of course, and their sessions with the flute produced pained winces, in the beginning, at least, and laughter from the crew even while they were covering their ears.

He taught the boys some of the easier stories, a little simple tumbling, and, of course, juggling. Mat complained about what Thom demanded of them, but Thom blew out his mustaches and glared right back.

“I don’t know how to play at teaching, boy. I either teach a thing, or I don’t. Now! Even a country bumpkin ought to be able to do a simple handstand. Up you go.”

Crewmen who were not working always gathered, squatting in a circle around the three. Some even tried their hand at the lessons Thom taught, laughing at their own fumblings. Gelb stood alone and watched it all darkly, hating them all.

A good part of each day Rand spent leaning on the railing, staring at the shore. It was not that he really expected to see Egwene or any of the others suddenly appear on the riverbank, but the boat traveled so slowly that he sometimes hoped for it. They could catch up without riding too hard. If they had escaped. If they were still alive.

The river rolled on without any sign of life, nor any boat to be seen except the *Spray*. But that was not to say there was nothing to see, and wonder at. In the middle of the first day, the Arinelle ran between high bluffs that stretched for half a mile on either side. For that whole length the stone had been cut into figures, men and women a hundred feet tall, with crowns proclaiming them kings and queens. No two were alike in that royal procession, and long years separated the first from the last. Wind and rain had worn those at the north end smooth and almost featureless, with faces and details becoming more distinct as they went south. The river lapped around the statues' feet, feet washed to smooth nubs, those that were not gone completely. *How long have they stood there,* Rand wondered. *How long for the river to wear away so much stone?* None of the crew so much as looked up from their work, they had seen the ancient carvings so many times before.

Another time, when the eastward shore had become flat grassland again, broken only occasionally by thickets; the sun glinted off something in the distance. "What can that be?" Rand wondered aloud. "It looks like metal."

Captain Domon was walking by, and he paused, squinting toward the glint. "It do be metal," he said. His words still ran together, but Rand had come to understand without having to puzzle it out. "A tower of metal. I have seen it close up, and I know. River traders use it as a marker. We be ten days from Whitebridge at the rate we go."

"A metal tower?" Rand said, and Mat, sitting cross-legged with his back against a barrel, roused from his brooding to listen.

The captain nodded. "Aye. Shining steel, by the look and feel of it, but no a spot of rust. Two hundred feet high, it be, as big around as a house, with no a mark on it and never an opening to be found."

"I'll bet there's treasure inside," Mat said. He stood up and stared toward the far tower as the river carried the *Spray* beyond it. "A thing like that must have been made to protect something valuable."

"Mayhap, lad," the captain rumbled. "There be stranger things in the world than this, though. On Tremalking, one of the Sea Folk's isles, there be a stone hand fifty feet high sticking out of a hill, clutching a crystal sphere as big as this vessel. There be treasure under that hill if there be treasure anywhere, but the island people want no part of digging there, and the Sea Folk care for naught but sailing their ships and searching for the Coramoor, their Chosen One."

"I'd dig," Mat said. "How far is this . . . Tremalking?" A clump of trees slid in front of the shining tower, but he stared as if he could see it yet.

Captain Domon shook his head. "No, lad, it no be the treasure that makes for seeing the world. If you find yourself a fistful of gold, or some dead king's jewels, all well and good, but it be the strangeness you see that pulls you to the next horizon. In Tanchico—that be a port on the Aryth

Ocean—part of the Panarch's Palace were built in the Age of Legends, so it be said. There be a wall there with a frieze showing animals no man living has ever seen."

"Any child can draw an animal nobody's ever seen," Rand said, and the captain chuckled.

"Aye, lad, so they can. But can a child make the bones of those animals? In Tanchico they have them, all fastened together like the animal was. They stand in a part of the Panarch's Palace where any can enter and see. The Breaking left a thousand wonders behind, and there been half a dozen empires or more since, some rivaling Artur Hawkwing's, every one leaving things to see and find. Lightsticks and razorlace and heartstone. A crystal lattice covering an island, and it hums when the moon is up. A mountain hollowed into a bowl, and in its center, a silver spike a hundred spans high, and any who comes within a mile of it, dies. Rusted ruins, and broken bits, and things found on the bottom of the sea, things not even the oldest books know the meaning of I've gathered a few, myself. Things you never dreamed of, in more places than you can see in ten lifetimes. That be the strangeness that will draw you on."

"We used to dig up bones in the Sand Hills," Rand said slowly. "Strange bones. There was part of a fish—I think it was a fish—as big as this boat, once. Some said it was bad luck, digging in the hills."

The captain eyed him shrewdly. "You thinking about home already, lad, and you just set out in the world? The world will put a hook in your mouth. You'll set off chasing the sunset, you wait and see . . . and if you ever go back, your village'll no be big enough to hold you."

"No!" He gave a start. How long had it been since he had thought of home, of Emond's Field? And what of Tam? It had to be days. It felt like months. "I will go home, one day, when I can. I'll raise sheep, like . . . like my father, and if I never leave again it will be too soon. Isn't that right, Mat? As soon as we can we're going home and forget all this even exists."

With a visible effort Mat pulled away from staring upriver after the vanished tower. "What? Oh. Yes, of course. We'll go home. Of course." As he turned to go, Rand heard him muttering under his breath. "I'll bet he just doesn't want anybody else going after the treasure." He did not seem to realize he had spoken aloud.

Four days into their trip downriver found Rand atop the mast, sitting on the blunt end with his legs wrapped in the stays. The *Spray* rolled gently on the river, but fifty feet above the water that easy roll made the top of the mast sway back and forth through wide arcs. He threw back his head and laughed into the wind that blew in his face.

The oars were out, and from here the boat looked like some twelve-legged spider creeping down the Arinelle. He had been as high as this before, in trees back in the Two Rivers, but this time there were no branches to block his view. Everything on deck, the sailors at the sweeps, men on their knees scrubbing the deck with smoothstones, men doing things with lines and hatchcovers, looked so odd when seen from right overhead, all squat and foreshortened, that he had spent an hour just staring at them and chuckling.

He still chuckled whenever he looked down at them, but now he was staring at the riverbanks flowing by. That was the way it seemed, as if he were still—except for the swaying back and forth, of course—and the banks slid slowly by, trees and hills marching along to either side. He was still, and the whole world moved past him.

On sudden impulse he unwrapped his legs from the stays bracing the mast and held his arms and legs out to either side, balancing against the sway. For three complete arcs he kept his balance like that, then suddenly it was gone. Arms and legs windmilling, he toppled forward and grabbed the forestay. Legs splayed to either side of the mast, nothing holding him to his precarious perch but his two hands on the stay, he laughed. Gulping huge breaths of the fresh, cold wind, he laughed with the exhilaration of it.

“Lad,” came Thom’s hoarse voice. “Lad, if you’re trying to break your fool neck, don’t do it by falling on me.”

Rand looked down. Thom clung to the ratlines just below him, staring up the last few feet grimly. Like Rand, the gleeman had left his cloak below. “Thom,” he said delightedly. “Thom, when did you come up here?”

“When you wouldn’t pay any attention to people shouting at you. Burn me, boy, you’ve got everybody thinking you’ve gone mad.”

He looked down and was surprised to see all the faces staring up at him. Only Mat, sitting cross-legged up in the bows with his back to the mast, was not looking at him. Even the men at the oars had their eyes raised, letting their stroke go ragged. And no one was berating them for it. Rand twisted his head around to look under his arm at the stern. Captain Domon stood by the steering oar, ham-like fists on his hips, glaring at him atop the mast. He turned back to grin at Thom. “You want me to come down, then?”

Thom nodded vigorously. “I would appreciate it greatly.”

“All right.” Shifting his grip on the forestay, he sprang forward off the mast top. He heard Thom bite off an oath as his fall was cut short and he dangled from the forestay by his hands. The gleeman scowled at him, one hand half stretched out to catch him. He grinned at Thom again. “I’m going down now.”

Swinging his legs up, he hooked one knee over the thick line that ran from the mast to the bow, then caught it in the crook of his elbow and let go with his hands. Slowly, then with increasing speed, he slid down. Just short of the bow he dropped to his feet on the deck right in front of Mat, took one step to catch his balance, and turned to face the boat with arms spread wide, the way Thom did after a tumbling trick.

Scattered clapping rose from the crew, but he was looking down at Mat in surprise, and at what Mat held, hidden from everyone else by his body. A curved dagger with a gold scabbard worked in strange symbols. Fine gold wire wrapped the hilt, which was capped by a ruby as big as Rand’s thumbnail, and the quillons were golden-scaled serpents baring their fangs.

Mat continued to slide the dagger in and out of its sheath for a moment. Still playing with the dagger he raised his head slowly; his eyes had a faraway look. Suddenly they focused on Rand, and he gave a start and stuffed the dagger under his coat.

Rand squatted on his heels, with his arms crossed on his knees. “Where did you get that?” Mat said nothing, looking quickly to see if anyone else was close by. They were alone, for a wonder. “You didn’t take it from Shadar Logoth, did you?”

Mat stared at him. “It’s your fault. Yours and Perrin’s. The two of you pulled me away from the treasure, and I had it in my hand. Mordeth didn’t give it to me. I took it, so Moiraine’s warnings about his gifts don’t count. You won’t tell anybody, Rand. They might try to steal it.”

“I won’t tell anybody,” Rand said. “I think Captain Domon is honest, but I wouldn’t put anything past the rest of them, especially Gelb.”

“Not anybody,” Mat insisted. “Not Domon, not Thom, not anybody. We’re the only two left from Emond’s Field, Rand. We can’t afford to trust anybody else.”

"They're alive, Mat. Egwene, and Perrin. I know they're alive." Mat looked ashamed. "I'll keep your secret, though. Just the two of us. At least we don't have to worry about money now. We can sell it for enough to travel to Tar Valon like kings."

"Of course," Mat said after a minute. "If we have to. Just don't tell anybody until I say so."

"I said I wouldn't. Listen, have you had any more dreams since we came on the boat? Like in Baerlon? This is the first chance I've had to ask without six people listening."

Mat turned his head away, giving him a sidelong look. "Maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe? Either you have or you haven't."

"All right, all right, I have. I don't want to talk about it. I don't even want to think about it. It doesn't do any good."

Before either of them could say more Thom came striding up the deck, his cloak over his arm. The wind whipped his white hair about, and his long mustaches seemed to bristle. "I managed to convince the captain you aren't crazy," he announced, "that it was part of your training." He caught hold of the forestay and shook it. "That fool stunt of yours, sliding down the rope, helped, but you are lucky you didn't break your fool neck."

Rand's eyes went to the forestay and followed it up to the top of the mast, and as they did his mouth dropped open. He *had* slid down that. And he had been sitting on top of. . . .

Suddenly he could see himself up there, arms and legs spread wide. He sat down hard, and barely caught himself short of ending up flat on his back. Thom was looking at him thoughtfully.

"I didn't know you had such a good head for heights, lad. We might be able to play in Illian, or Ebou Dar, or even Tear. People in the big cities in the south like tightrope walkers and slackwire artists."

"We're going to—" At the last minute Rand remembered to look around for anyone close enough to overhear. Several of the crew were watching them, including Gelb, glaring as usual, but none could hear what he was saying. "To Tar Valon," he finished. Mat shrugged as if it were all the same to him where they went.

"At the moment, lad," Thom said, settling down beside them, "but tomorrow . . . who knows? That's the way with a gleeman's life." He took a handful of colored balls from one of his wide sleeves. "Since I have you down out of the air, we'll work on the triple crossover."

Rand’s gaze drifted to the top of the mast, and he shivered. *What’s happening to me? Light, what?* He had to find out. He had to get to Tar Valon before he really did go mad.

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CHAPTER

25

The Traveling People

Bela walked along placidly under the weak sun as if the three wolves trotting not far off were only village dogs, but the way she rolled her eyes at them from time to time, showing white all the way around, indicated she felt nothing of the sort. Egwene, on the mare's back, was just as bad. She watched the wolves constantly from the corner of her eye, and sometimes she twisted in the saddle to look around. Perrin was sure she was hunting for the rest of the pack, though she denied it angrily when he suggested as much, denied being afraid of the wolves that paced them, denied worrying about the rest of the pack or what it was up to. She denied, and went right on looking, tight-eyed and wetting her lips uneasily.

The rest of the pack was far distant; he could have told her that. *What good, even if she believed me? Especially if she did*. He was of no mind to open that basket of snakes until he had to. He did not want to think about *how* he knew. The fur-clad man loped ahead of them, sometimes looking almost like a wolf himself, and he never looked around when Dapple, Hopper, and Wind appeared, but he knew, too.

The Emond's Fielders had wakened at dawn that first morning to find Elyas cooking more rabbit and watching them over his full beard without much expression. Except for Dapple, Hopper, and Wind, no wolves were to be seen. In the pale, early daylight, deep shade still lingered under the big oak, and the bare trees beyond looked like fingers stripped to the bone.

"They're around," Elyas answered when Egwene asked where the rest of the pack had gone. "Close enough to help, if need be. Far enough off to avoid any human trouble we get into. Sooner or later there's always trouble when there's two humans together. If we need them, they'll be there."

Something tickled the back of Perrin's mind as he ripped free a bite of roast rabbit. A direction, vaguely sensed. *Of course! That's where they*. . . . The hot juices in his mouth abruptly lost all taste. He picked at the tubers

Elyas had cooked in the coals—they tasted something like turnips—but his appetite was gone.

When they had started out Egwene insisted that everyone take a turn riding, and Perrin did not even bother to argue.

“First turn is yours,” he told her.

She nodded. “And then you, Elyas.”

“My own legs are good enough for me,” Elyas said. He looked at Bela, and the mare rolled her eyes as if he were one of the wolves. “Besides, I don’t think she wants me riding her.”

“That’s nonsense,” Egwene replied firmly. “There is no point in being stubborn about it. The sensible thing is for everybody to ride sometimes. According to you we have a long way still to go.”

“I said no, girl.”

She took a deep breath, and Perrin was wondering if she would succeed in bullying Elyas the way she did him, when he realized she was standing there with her mouth open, not saying a word. Elyas was looking at her, just looking, with those yellow wolf’s eyes. Egwene stepped back from the raw-boned man, and licked her lips, and stepped back again. Before Elyas turned away, she had backed all the way to Bela and scrambled up onto the mare’s back. As the man turned to lead them south, Perrin thought his grin was a good deal like a wolf’s, too.

For three days they traveled in that manner, walking and riding south and east all day, stopping only when twilight thickened. Elyas seemed to scorn the haste of city men, but he did not believe in wasting time when there was somewhere to go.

The three wolves were seldom seen. Each night they came to the fire for a time, and sometimes in the day they showed themselves briefly, appearing close at hand when least expected and vanishing in the same manner. Perrin knew they were out there, though, and where. He knew when they were scouting the path ahead and when they were watching the backtrail. He knew when they left the pack’s usual hunting grounds, and Dapple sent the pack back to wait for her. Sometimes the three that remained faded from his mind, but long before they were close enough to see again, he was aware of them returning. Even when the trees dwindled to wide-scattered groves separated by great swathes of winter-dead grass, they were as ghosts when they did not want to be seen, but he could have pointed a finger straight at them at any time. He did not know how he knew, and he tried to convince himself that it was just his imagination playing tricks, but it did no good. Just as Elyas knew, he knew.

He tried not thinking about wolves, but they crept into his thoughts all the same. He had not dreamed about Ba'alzamon since meeting Elyas and the wolves. His dreams, as much as he remembered of them on waking, were of everyday things, just as he might have dreamed at home . . . before Baerlon . . . before Winternight. Normal dreams—with one addition. In every dream he remembered there was a point where he straightened from Master Luhhan's forge to wipe the sweat from his face, or turned from dancing with the village girls on the Green, or lifted his head from a book in front of the fireplace, and whether he was outside or under a roof, there was a wolf close to hand. Always the wolf's back was to him, and always he knew—in the dreams it seemed the normal course of things, even at Alsbet Luhhan's dinner table—that the wolf's yellow eyes were watching for what might come, guarding against what might come. Only when he was awake did the dreams seem strange.

Three days they journeyed, with Dapple, Hopper, and Wind bringing them rabbits and squirrels, and Elyas pointing out plants, few of which Perrin recognized, as good to eat. Once a rabbit burst out almost from under Bela's hooves; before Perrin could get a stone in his sling, Elyas skewered it with his long knife at twenty paces. Another time Elyas brought down a fat pheasant, on the wing, with his bow. They ate far better than they had when on their own, but Perrin would as soon have gone back on short rations if it had meant different company. He was not sure how Egwene felt, but he would have been willing to go hungry if he could do it without the wolves. Three days, into the afternoon.

A stand of trees lay ahead, larger than most they had seen, a good four miles across. The sun sat low in the western sky, pushing slanted shadows off to their right, and the wind was picking up. Perrin felt the wolves give over quartering behind them and start forward, not hurrying. They had smelled and seen nothing dangerous. Egwene was taking her turn on Bela. It was time to start looking for a camp for the night, and the big copse would serve the purpose well.

As they came close to the trees, three mastiffs burst from cover, broadmuzzled dogs as tall as the wolves and even heavier, teeth bared in loud, rumbling snarls. They stopped short as soon as they were in the open, but no more than thirty feet separated them from the three people, and their dark eyes kindled with a killing light.

Bela, already on edge from the wolves, whinnied and almost unseated Egwene, but Perrin had his sling whirling around his head in an instant. No need to use the axe on dogs; a stone in the ribs would send the worst dog running.

Elyas waved a hand at him without taking his eyes from the stiff-legged dogs. “Hssst! None of that now!”

Perrin gave him a puzzled frown, but let the sling slow its spin and finally fall to his side. Egwene managed to get Bela under control; she and the mare both watched the dogs warily.

The mastiffs’ hackles stood stiff, and their ears were laid back, and their growls sounded like earthquakes. Abruptly Elyas raised one finger shoulder high and whistled, a long, shrill whistle that rose higher and higher and did not end. The growls cut off raggedly. The dogs stepped back, whining and turning their heads as if they wanted to go but were held. Their eyes remained locked to Elyas’s finger.

Slowly Elyas lowered his hand, and the pitch of his whistle lowered with it. The dogs followed, until they lay flat on the ground, tongues lolling from their mouths. Three tails wagged.

“See,” Elyas said, walking to the dogs. “There’s no need for weapons.” The mastiffs licked his hands, and he scratched their broad heads and fondled their ears. “They look meaner than they are. They meant to frighten us off, and they wouldn’t have bitten unless we tried to go into the trees. Anyway, there’s no worry of that, now. We can make the next thicket before full dark.”

When Perrin looked at Egwene, her mouth was hanging open. He shut his own mouth with a click of teeth.

Still patting the dogs, Elyas studied the stand of trees. “There’ll be Tuatha’an here. The Traveling People.” They stared at him blankly, and he added, “Tinkers.”

“Tinkers?” Perrin exclaimed. “I’ve always wanted to see the Tinkers. They camp across the river from Taren Ferry sometimes, but they don’t come down into the Two Rivers, as far as I know. I don’t know why not.”

Egwene sniffed. “Probably because the Taren Ferry folk are as great thieves as the Tinkers. They’d no doubt end up stealing each other blind. Master Elyas, if there really are Tinkers close by, shouldn’t we go on? We don’t want Bela stolen, and . . . well, we do not have much else, but everybody knows Tinkers will steal anything.”

“Including infants?” Elyas asked dryly. “Kidnap children, and all that?” He spat, and she blushed. Those stories about babies were told sometimes, but most often by Cenn Buie or one of the Coplins or Congars. The other tales, everybody knew. “The Tinkers make me sick sometimes, but they don’t steal any more than most folks. A good bit less than some I know.”

“It will be getting dark soon, Elyas,” Perrin said. “We have to camp somewhere. Why not with them, if they’ll have us?” Mistress Luhhan had a Tinker-mended pot that she claimed was better than new. Master Luhhan was not too happy about his wife’s praise of the Tinker work, but Perrin wanted to see how it was done. Yet there was a reluctance about Elyas that he did not understand. “Is there some reason we shouldn’t?”

Elyas shook his head, but the reluctance was still there, in the set of his shoulders and the tightness of his mouth. “May as well. Just don’t pay any mind to what they say. Lot of foolishness. Most times the Traveling People do things any which way, but there’s times they set a store by formality, so you do what I do. And keep your secrets. No need to tell the world everything.”

The dogs trailed along beside them, wagging their tails, as Elyas led the way into the trees. Perrin felt the wolves slow, and knew they would not enter. They were not afraid of the dogs—they were contemptuous of dogs, who had given up freedom to sleep by a fire—but people they avoided.

Elyas walked surely, as if he knew the way, and near the center of the stand the Tinkers’ wagons appeared, scattered among the oak and ash.

Like everyone else in Emond’s Field, Perrin had heard a good deal about the Tinkers even if he had never seen any, and the camp was just what he expected. Their wagons were small houses on wheels, tall wooden boxes lacquered and painted in bright colors, reds and blues and yellows and greens and some hues to which he could not put a name. The Traveling People were going about work that was disappointingly everyday, cooking, sewing, tending children, mending harness, but their clothes were even more colorful than the wagons—and seemingly chosen at random; sometimes coat and breeches, or dress and shawl, went together in a way that hurt his eyes. They looked like butterflies in a field of wildflowers.

Four or five men in different places around the camp played fiddles and flutes, and a few people danced like rainbow-hued hummingbirds. Children and dogs ran playing among the cookfires. The dogs were mastiffs just like those that had confronted the travelers, but the children tugged at their ears and tails and climbed on their backs, and the massive dogs accepted it all placidly. The three with Elyas, tongues hanging out, looked up at the bearded man as if he were their best friend. Perrin shook his head. They were still big enough to reach a man's throat while barely getting their front feet off the ground.

Abruptly the music stopped, and he realized all the Tinkers were looking at him and his companions. Even the children and dogs stood still and watched, warily, as if on the point of flight.

For a moment there was no sound at all, then a wiry man, gray-haired and short, stepped forward and bowed gravely to Elyas. He wore a high-collared red coat, and baggy, bright green trousers tucked into knee boots. "You are welcome to our fires. Do you know the song?"

Elyas bowed in the same way, both hands pressed to his chest. "Your welcome warms my spirit, Mahdi, as your fires warm the flesh, but I do not know the song."

"Then we seek still," the gray-haired man intoned. "As it was, so shall it be, if we but remember, seek, and find." He swept an arm toward the fires with a smile, and his voice took on a cheerful lightness. "The meal is almost ready. Join us, please."

As if that had been a signal the music sprang up again, and the children took up their laughter and ran with the dogs. Everyone in the camp went back to what they had been doing just as though the newcomers were long-accepted friends.

The gray-haired man hesitated, though, and looked at Elyas. "Your . . . other friends? They will stay away? They frighten the poor dogs so."

"They'll stay away, Raen." Elyas's headshake had a touch of scorn. "You should know that by now."

The gray-haired man spread his hands as if to say nothing was ever certain. As he turned to lead them into the camp, Egwene dismounted and moved close to Elyas. "You two are friends?" A smiling Tinker appeared to take Bela; Egwene gave the reins up reluctantly, after a wry snort from Elyas.

"We know each other," the fur-clad man replied curtly.

“His name is Mahdi?” Perrin said.

Elyas growled something under his breath. “His name’s Raen. Mahdi’s his title. Seeker. He’s the leader of this band. You can call him Seeker if the other sounds odd. He won’t mind.”

“What was that about a song?” Egwene asked.

“That’s why they travel,” Elyas said, “or so they say. They’re looking for a song. That’s what the Mahdi seeks. They say they lost it during the Breaking of the World, and if they can find it again, the paradise of the Age of Legends will return.” He ran his eye around the camp and snorted. “They don’t even know what the song is; they claim they’ll know it when they find it. They don’t know how it’s supposed to bring paradise, either, but they’ve been looking near to three thousand years, ever since the Breaking. I expect they’ll be looking until the Wheel stops turning.”

They reached Raen’s fire, then, in the middle of the camp. The Seeker’s wagon was yellow trimmed in red, and the spokes of its tall, red-rimmed wheels alternated red and yellow. A plump woman, as gray as Raen but smooth-cheeked still, came out of the wagon and paused on the steps at its back end, straightening a blue-fringed shawl on her shoulders. Her blouse was yellow and her skirt red, both bright. The combination made Perrin blink, and Egwene made a strangled sound.

When she saw the people following Raen, the woman came down with a welcoming smile. She was Ila, Raen’s wife, a head taller than her husband, and she soon made Perrin forget about the colors of her clothes. She had a motherliness that reminded him of Mistress al’Vere and had him feeling welcome from her first smile.

Ila greeted Elyas as an old acquaintance, but with a distance that seemed to pain Raen. Elyas gave her a dry grin and a nod. Perrin and Egwene introduced themselves, and she clasped their hands in both of hers with much more warmth than she had shown Elyas, even hugging Egwene.

“Why, you’re lovely, child,” she said, cupping Egwene’s chin and smiling. “And chilled to the bone, too, I expect. You sit close to the fire, Egwene. All of you sit. Supper is almost ready.”

Fallen logs had been pulled around the fire for sitting. Elyas refused even that concession to civilization. He lounged on the ground, instead. Iron tripods held two small kettles over the flames, and an oven rested in the edge of the coals. Ila tended them.

As Perrin and the others were taking their places, a slender young man wearing green stripes strolled up to the fire. He gave Raen a hug and Ila a kiss, and ran a cool eye over Elyas and the Emond's Fielders. He was about the same age as Perrin, and he moved as if he were about to begin dancing with his next step.

"Well, Aram"—Ila smiled fondly—"you have decided to eat with your old grandparents for a change, have you?" Her smile slid over to Egwene as she bent to stir a kettle hanging over the cookfire. "I wonder why?"

Aram settled to an easy crouch with his arms crossed on his knees, across the fire from Egwene. "I am Aram," he told her in a low, confident voice. He no longer seemed aware that anyone was there except her. "I have waited for the first rose of spring, and now I find it at my grandfather's fire."

Perrin waited for Egwene to snicker, then saw that she was staring back at Aram. He looked at the young Tinker again. Aram had more than his share of good looks, he admitted. After a minute Perrin knew who the fellow reminded him of. Wil al'Seen, who had all the girls staring and whispering behind his back whenever he came up from Deven Ride to Emond's Field. Wil courted every girl in sight, and managed to convince every one of them that he was just being polite to all the others.

"Those dogs of yours," Perrin said loudly, and Egwene gave a start, "look as big as bears. I'm surprised you let the children play with them."

Aram's smile slipped, but when he looked at Perrin it came back again, even more sure than before. "They will not harm you. They make a show to frighten away danger, and warn us, but they are trained according to the Way of the Leaf."

"The Way of the Leaf?" Egwene said. "What is that?"

Aram gestured to the trees, his eyes fastened intently on hers. "The leaf lives its appointed time, and does not struggle against the wind that carries it away. The leaf does no harm, and finally falls to nourish new leaves. So it should be with all men. And women." Egwene stared back at him, a faint blush rising in her cheeks.

"But what does that mean?" Perrin said. Aram gave him an irritated glance, but it was Raen who answered.

"It means that no man should harm another for any reason whatsoever." The Seeker's eyes flickered to Elyas. "There is no excuse for violence. None. Not ever."

“What if somebody attacks you?” Perrin insisted. “What if somebody hits you, or tries to rob you, or kill you?”

Raen sighed, a patient sigh, as if Perrin was just not seeing what was so clear to him. “If a man hit me, I would ask him why he wanted to do such a thing. If he still wanted to hit me, I would run away, as I would if he wanted to rob or kill me. Much better that I let him take what he wanted, even my life, than that I should do violence. And I would hope that he was not harmed too greatly.”

“But you said you wouldn’t hurt him,” Perrin said. “I would not, but violence harms the one who does it as much as the one who receives it.” Perrin looked doubtful. “You could cut down a tree with your axe,” Raen said. “The axe does violence to the tree, and escapes unharmed. Is that how you see it? Wood is soft compared to steel, but the sharp steel is dulled as it chops, and the sap of the tree will rust and pit it. The mighty axe does violence to the helpless tree, and is harmed by it. So it is with men, though the harm is in the spirit.”

“But—”

“Enough,” Elyas growled, cutting Perrin off. “Raen, it’s bad enough you trying to convert village younglings to that nonsense—it gets you in trouble almost everywhere you go, doesn’t it?—but I didn’t bring this lot here for you to work on them. Leave over.”

“And leave them to you?” Ila said, grinding herbs between her palms and letting them trickle into one of the kettles. Her voice was calm, but her hands rubbed the herbs furiously. “Will you teach them your way, to kill or die? Will you lead them to the fate you seek for yourself, dying alone with only the ravens and your . . . your friends to squabble over your body?”

“Be at peace, Ila,” Raen said gently, as if he had heard this all and more a hundred times. “He has been welcomed to our fire, my wife.”

Ila subsided, but Perrin noticed that she made no apology. Instead she looked at Elyas and shook her head sadly, then dusted her hands and began taking spoons and pottery bowls from a red chest on the side of the wagon.

Raen turned back to Elyas. “My old friend, how many times must I tell you that we do not try to convert anyone. When village people are curious about our ways, we answer their questions. It is most often the young who ask, true, and sometimes one of them will come with us when we journey on, but it is of their own free will.”

"You try telling that to some farm wife who's just found out her son or daughter has run off with you Tinkers," Elyas said wryly. "That's why the bigger towns won't even let you camp nearby. Villages put up with you for your mending things, but the cities don't need it, and they don't like you talking their young folks into running off."

"I would not know what the cities allow." Raen's patience seemed inexhaustible. He certainly did not appear to be getting angry at all. "There are always violent men in cities. In any case, I do not think the song could be found in a city."

"I don't mean to offend you, Seeker," Perrin said slowly, "but. . . . Well, I don't look for violence. I don't think I've even wrestled anybody in years, except for feastday games. But if somebody hit me, I'd hit him back. If I didn't, I would just be encouraging him to think he could hit me whenever he wanted to. Some people think they can take advantage of others, and if you don't let them know they can't, they'll just go around bullying anybody weaker than they are."

"Some people," Aram said with a heavy sadness, "can never overcome their baser instincts." He said it with a look at Perrin that made it clear he was not talking about the bullies Perrin spoke of.

"I'll bet you get to run away a lot," Perrin said, and the young Tinker's face tightened in a way that had nothing to do with the Way of the Leaf.

"I think it is interesting," Egwene said, glaring at Perrin, "to meet someone who doesn't believe his muscles can solve every problem."

Aram's good spirits returned, and he stood, offering her his hands with a smile. "Let me show you our camp. There is dancing."

"I would like that." She smiled back.

Ila straightened from taking loaves of bread from the small iron oven. "But supper is ready, Aram."

"I'll eat with mother," Aram said over his shoulder as he drew Egwene away from the wagon by her hand. "We will both eat with mother." He flashed a triumphant smile at Perrin. Egwene was laughing as they ran.

Perrin got to his feet, then stopped. It was not as if she could come to any harm, not if the camp followed this Way of the Leaf as Raen said. Looking at Raen and Ila, both staring dejectedly after their grandson, he said, "I'm sorry. I am a guest, and I shouldn't have—"

"Don't be foolish," Ila said soothingly. "It was his fault, not yours. Sit down and eat."

“Aram is a troubled young man,” Raen added sadly. “He is a good boy, but sometimes I think he finds the Way of the Leaf a hard way. Some do, I fear. Please. My fire is yours. Please?”

Perrin sat back down slowly, still feeling awkward. “What happens to somebody who can’t follow the Way?” he asked. “A Tinker, I mean.”

Raen and Ila exchanged a worried look, and Raen said, “They leave us. The Lost go to live in the villages.”

Ila stared in the direction her grandson had gone. “The Lost cannot be happy.” She sighed, but her face was placid again when she handed out the bowls and spoons.

Perrin stared at the ground, wishing he had not asked, and there was no more talk while Ila filled their bowls with a thick vegetable stew and handed out thick slices of her crusty bread, nor while they ate. The stew was delicious, and Perrin finished three bowls before he stopped. Elyas, he noted with a grin, emptied four.

After the meal Raen filled his pipe, and Elyas produced his own and stuffed it from Raen’s oilskin pouch. When the lighting and tamping and relighting were done, they settled back in silence. Ila took out a bundle of knitting. The sun was only a blaze of red above the treetops to the west. The camp had settled in for the night, but the bustle did not slow, only changed. The musicians who had been playing when they entered the camp had been replaced by others, and even more people than before danced in the light of the fires, their shadows leaping against the wagons. Somewhere in the camp a chorus of male voices rose. Perrin slid down in front of the log and soon felt himself dozing.

After a time Raen said, “Have you visited any of the Tuatha’an, Elyas, since you were with us last spring?”

Perrin’s eyes drifted open and half shut again.

“No,” Elyas replied around his pipestem. “I don’t like being around too many people at once.”

Raen chuckled. “Especially people who live in a way so opposite to your own, eh? No, my old friend, don’t worry. I gave up years ago hoping you would come to the Way. But I have heard a story since last we met, and if you have not heard it yet, it might interest you. It interests me, and I have heard it again and again, every time we meet others of the People.”

“I’ll listen.”

"It begins in the spring two years ago, with a band of the People who were crossing the Waste by the northern route."

Perrin's eyes shot open. "The Waste? The Aiel Waste? They were crossing the Aiel Waste?"

"Some people can enter the Waste without being bothered," Elyas said. "Gleemen. Peddlers, if they're honest. The Tuatha'an cross the Waste all the time. Merchants from Cairhien used to, before the Tree, and the Aiel War."

"The Aielmen avoid us," Raen said sadly, "though many of us have tried to speak with them. They watch us from a distance, but they will not come near us, nor let us come near them. Sometimes I worry that they might know the song, though I suppose it isn't likely. Among Aiel, men do not sing, you know. Isn't that strange? From the time an Aiel boy becomes a man he will not sing anything but battle chants, or their dirge for the slain. I have heard them singing over their dead, and over those they have killed. That song is one to make the stones weep." Ila, listening, nodded agreement over her knitting.

Perrin did some quick rethinking. He had thought the Tinkers must be afraid all the time, with all this talk of running away, but no one who was afraid would even think of crossing the Aiel Waste. From what he had heard, no one who was sane would try crossing the Waste.

"If this is some story about a song," Elyas began, but Raen shook his head.

"No, my old friend, not a song. I am not sure I know what it is about." He turned his attention to Perrin. "Young Aiel often travel into the Blight. Some of the young men go alone, thinking for some reason that they have been called to kill the Dark One. Most go in small groups. To hunt Trollocs." Raen shook his head sadly, and when he went on his voice was heavy. "Two years ago a band of the People crossing the Waste about a hundred miles south of the Blight found one of these groups."

"Young women," Ila put in, as sorrowful as her husband. "Little more than girls."

Perrin made a surprised sound, and Elyas grinned at him wryly.

"Aiel girls don't have to tend house and cook if they don't want to, boy. The ones who want to be warriors, instead, join one of the warrior societies, *Far Dareis Mai*, the Maidens of the Spear, and fight right alongside the men."

Perrin shook his head. Elyas chuckled at his expression.

Raen took up the story again, distaste and perplexity mingled in his voice. “The young women were all dead except one, and she was dying. She crawled to the wagons. It was clear she knew they were Tuatha’an. Her loathing outweighed her pain, but she had a message so important to her that she must pass it on to someone, even us, before she died. Men went to see if they could help any of the others—there was a trail of her blood to follow—but all were dead, and so were three times their number in Trollocs.”

Elyas sat up, his pipe almost falling from between his teeth. “A hundred miles into the Waste? Impossible! *Djevik K’Shar*, that’s what Trollocs call the Waste. The Dying Ground. They wouldn’t go a hundred miles into the Waste if all the Myrddraal in the Blight were driving them.”

“You know an awful lot about Trollocs, Elyas,” Perrin said.

“Go on with your story,” Elyas told Raen gruffly.

“From trophies the Aiel carried, it was obvious they were coming back from the Blight. The Trollocs had followed, but by the tracks only a few lived to return after killing the Aiel. As for the girl, she would not let anyone touch her, even to tend her wounds. But she seized the Seeker of that band by his coat, and this is what she said, word for word. ‘Leafblighter means to blind the Eye of the World, Lost One. He means to slay the Great Serpent. Warn the People, Lost One. Sightburner comes. Tell them to stand ready for He Who Comes With the Dawn. Tell them. . . .’ And then she died. Leafblighter and Sightburner,” Raen added to Perrin, “are Aiel names for the Dark One, but I don’t understand another word of it. Yet she thought it important enough to approach those she obviously despised, to pass it on with her last breath. But to who? We are ourselves, the People, but I hardly think she meant it for us. The Aiel? They would not let us tell them if we tried.” He sighed heavily. “She called *us* the Lost. I never knew before how much they loathe us.” Ila set her knitting in her lap and touched his head gently.

“Something they learned in the Blight,” Elyas mused. “But none of it makes sense. Slay the Great Serpent? Kill time itself? And blind the Eye of the World? As well say he’s going to starve a rock. Maybe she was babbling, Raen. Wounded, dying, she could have lost her grip on what was real. Maybe she didn’t even know who those Tuatha’an were.”

“She knew what she was saying, and to whom she was saying it. Something more important to her than her own life, and we cannot even understand it. When I saw you walking into our camp, I thought perhaps we would find the answer at last, since you were”—Elyas made a quick motion with his hand, and Raen changed what he had been going to say—“are a friend, and know many strange things.”

“Not about this,” Elyas said in a tone that put an end to talk. The silence around the campfire was broken only by the music and laughter drifting from other parts of the night-shrouded camp.

Lying with his shoulders propped on one of the logs around the fire, Perrin tried puzzling out the Aiel woman’s message, but it made no more sense to him than it had to Raen or Elyas. The Eye of the World. That had been in his dreams, more than once, but he did not want to think about those dreams. Elyas, now. There was a question there he would like answered. What had Raen been about to say about the bearded man, and why had Elyas cut him off? He had no luck with that, either. He was trying to imagine what Aiel girls were like—going into the Blight, where only Warders went that he had ever heard; fighting Trollocs—when he heard Egwene coming back, singing to herself.

Scrambling to his feet, he went to meet her at the edge of the firelight. She stopped short, looking at him with her head tilted to one side. In the dark he could not read her expression.

“You’ve been gone a long time,” he said. “Did you have fun?”

“We ate with his mother,” she answered. “And then we danced . . . and laughed. It seems like forever since I danced.”

“He reminds me of Wil al’Seen. You always had sense enough not to let Wil put you in his pocket.”

“Aram is a gentle boy who is fun to be with,” she said in a tight voice. “He makes me laugh.”

Perrin sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m glad you had fun dancing.”

Abruptly she flung her arms around him, weeping on his shirt. Awkwardly he patted her hair. *Rand would know what to do*, he thought. Rand had an easy way with girls. Not like him, who never knew what to do or say. “I told you I’m sorry, Egwene. I really am glad you had fun dancing. Really.”

“Tell me they’re alive,” she mumbled into his chest.

“What?”

She pushed back to arm’s length, her hands on his arms, and looked up at him in the darkness. “Rand and Mat. The others. Tell me they are alive.”

He took a deep breath and looked around uncertainly. “They are alive,” he said finally.

“Good.” She scrubbed at her cheeks with quick fingers. “That is what I wanted to hear. Good night, Perrin. Sleep well.” Standing on tiptoe, she brushed a kiss across his cheek and hurried past him before he could speak.

He turned to watch her. Ila rose to meet her, and the two women went into the wagon talking quietly. *Rand might understand it*, he thought, *but I don’t*.

In the distant night the wolves howled the first thin sliver of the new moon toward the horizon, and he shivered. Tomorrow would be time enough to worry about the wolves again. He was wrong. They were waiting to greet him in his dreams.

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CHAPTER

26

Whitebridge

The last unsteady note of what had been barely recognizable as “The Wind That Shakes the Willow” faded mercifully away, and Mat lowered Thom’s gold-and-silver-chased flute. Rand took his hands from his ears. A sailor coiling a line on the deck nearby heaved a loud sigh of relief. For a moment the only sounds were the water slapping against the hull, the rhythmic creak of the oars, and now and again the hum of rigging strummed by the wind. The wind blew dead on to the *Spray*’s bow, and the useless sails were furled.

“I suppose I should thank you,” Thom Merrilin muttered finally, “for teaching me how true the old saying is. Teach him how you will, a pig will never play the flute.” The sailor burst out laughing, and Mat raised the flute as if to throw it at him. Deftly, Thom snagged the instrument from Mat’s fist and fitted it into its hard leather case. “I thought all you shepherds whiled away the time with the flock playing the pipes or the flute. That will show me to trust what I don’t know firsthand.”

“Rand’s the shepherd,” Mat grumbled. “He plays the pipes, not me.”

“Yes, well, he does have a little aptitude. Perhaps we had better work on juggling, boy. At least you show some talent for that.”

“Thom,” Rand said, “I don’t know why you’re trying so hard.” He glanced at the sailor and lowered his voice. “After all, we aren’t really trying to become gleemen. It’s only something to hide behind until we find Moiraine and the others.”

Thom tugged at an end of his mustache and seemed to be studying the smooth, dark brown leather of the flute case on his knees. “What if you don’t find them, boy? There’s nothing to say they’re even still alive.”

“They’re alive,” Rand said firmly. He turned to Mat for support, but Mat’s eyebrows were pinched down on his nose, and his mouth was a thin line, and his eyes were fixed on the deck. “Well, speak up,” Rand told him. “You can’t be that mad over not being able to play the flute. I can’t either, not very well. You never wanted to play the flute before.”

Mat looked up, still frowning. “What if they are dead?” he said softly. “We have to accept facts, right?”

At that moment the lookout in the bow sang out, “Whitebridge! Whitebridge ahead!”

For a long minute, unwilling to believe that Mat could say something like that so casually, Rand held his friend’s gaze amid the scramble of sailors preparing to put in. Mat glowered at him with his head pulled down between his shoulders. There was so much Rand wanted to say, but he could not manage to get it all into words. They had to believe the others were alive. They had to. *Why?* nagged a voice in the back of his head. *So it will all turn out like one of Thom’s stories? The heroes find the treasure and defeat the villain and live happily ever after? Some of his stories don’t end that way. Sometimes even heroes die. Are you a hero, Rand al’Thor? Are you a hero, sheepherder?*

Abruptly Mat flushed and pulled his eyes away. Freed from his thoughts, Rand jumped up to move through the hurly-burly to the rail. Mat came after him slowly, not even making an effort to dodge the sailors who ran across his path.

Men dashed about the boat, bare feet thumping the deck, hauling on ropes, tying off some lines and untying others. Some brought up big oilskin bags stuffed almost to bursting with wool, while others readied cables as thick as Rand’s wrist. Despite their haste, they moved with the assurance of men who had done it all a thousand times before, but Captain Domon stumped up and down the deck shouting orders and cursing those who did not move fast enough to suit him.

Rand’s attention was all for what lay ahead, coming plainly into sight as they rounded a slight bend of the Arinelle. He had heard of it, in song and story and peddlers’ tales, but now he would actually see the legend.

The White Bridge arched high over the wide waters, twice as high as the *Spray*’s mast and more, and from end to end it gleamed milky white in the sunlight, gathering the light until it seemed to glow. Spidery piers of the same stuff plunged into the strong currents, appearing too frail to support the weight and width of the bridge. It looked all of one piece, as if it had been carved from a single stone or molded by a giant's hand, broad and tall, leaping the river with an airy grace that almost made the eye forget its size. All in all it dwarfed the town that sprawled about its foot on the east bank, though Whitebridge was larger by far than Emond's Field, with houses of stone and brick as tall as those in Taren Ferry and wooden docks like thin fingers sticking out into the river. Small boats dotted the Arinelle thickly, fishermen hauling their nets. And over it all the White Bridge towered and shone.

"It looks like glass," Rand said to no one in particular.

Captain Domon paused behind him and tucked his thumbs behind his broad belt. "Nay, lad. Whatever it be, it no be glass. Never so hard the rains come, it no be slippery, and the best chisel and the strongest arm no make a mark on it."

"A remnant from the Age of Legends," Thom said. "I have always thought it must be."

The captain gave a dour grunt. "Mayhap. But still useful despite. Could be someone else built it. Does no *have* to be Aes Sedai work, Fortune prick me. It no has to be so old as all that. Put your back into it, you bloody fool!" He hurried off down the deck.

Rand stared even more wonderingly. *From the Age of Legends*. Made by Aes Sedai, then. That was why Captain Domon felt the way he did, for all his talk about the wonder and strangeness of the world. Aes Sedai work. One thing to hear about it, another to see it, and touch it. *You know that, don't you?* For an instant it seemed to Rand that a shadow rippled through the milk-white structure. He pulled his eyes away, to the docks coming nearer, but the bridge still loomed in the corner of his vision.

"We made it, Thom," he said, then forced a laugh. "And no mutiny."

The gleeman only harrumphed and blew out his mustaches, but two sailors readying a cable nearby gave Rand a sharp glance, then bent quickly back to their work. He stopped laughing and tried not to look at the two for the rest of the approach to Whitebridge.

The *Spray* curved smoothly in beside the first dock, thick timbers sitting on heavy, tar-coated pilings, and stopped with a backing of oars that swirled the water to froth around the blades. As the oars were drawn in, sailors tossed cables to men on the dock, who fastened them off with a flourish, while other crewmen slung the bags of wool over the side to protect the hull from the dock pilings.

Before the boat was even pulled snug against the dock, carriages appeared at the end of the dock, tall and lacquered shiny black, each one with a name painted on the door in large letters, gold or scarlet. The carriages' passengers hurried up the gangplank as soon as it dropped in place, smooth-faced men in long velvet coats and silk-lined cloaks and cloth slippers, each followed by a plainly dressed servant carrying his iron-bound moneybox.

They approached Captain Domon with painted smiles that slipped when he abruptly roared in their faces. "You!" He thrust a thick finger past them, stopping Floran Gelb in his tracks at the length of the boat. The bruise on Gelb's forehead from Rand's boot had faded away, but he still fingered the spot from time to time as if to remind himself. "You've slept on watch for the last time on my vessel! Or on any vessel, if I have my way of it. Choose your own side—the dock or the river—but off my vessel *now*!"

Gelb hunched his shoulders, and his eyes glittered hate at Rand and his friends, at Rand especially, a poisonous glare. The wiry man looked around the deck for support, but there was little hope in that look. One by one, every man in the crew straightened from what he was doing and stared back coldly. Gelb wilted visibly, but then his glare returned, twice as strong as it had been. With a muttered curse he darted below to the crew's quarters. Domon sent two men after him to see he did no mischief and dismissed him with a grunt. When the captain turned back to them, the merchants took up their smiles and bows as if they had never been interrupted.

At a word from Thom, Mat and Rand began gathering their things together. There was not much aside from the clothes on their backs, not for any of them. Rand had his blanketroll and saddlebags, and his father's sword. He held the sword for a minute, and homesickness rolled over him so strongly that his eyes stung. He wondered if he would ever see Tam again. Or home? Home. *Going to spend the rest of your life running, running and afraid of your own dreams*. With a shuddering sigh he slipped the belt around his waist over his coat.

Gelb came back on deck, followed by his twin shadows. He looked straight ahead, but Rand could still feel hatred coming off him in waves. Back rigid and face dark, Gelb walked stiff-legged down the gangplank and pushed roughly into the thin crowd on the dock. In a minute he was gone from sight, vanished beyond the merchants' carriages.

There were not a great many people on the dock, and those were a plainly dressed mix of workmen, fishermen mending nets, and a few townspeople who had come out to see the first boat of the year to come downriver from Saldaea. None of the girls was Egwene and no one looked the least bit like Moiraine, or Lan, or anyone else Rand was hoping to see.

"Maybe they didn't come down to the dock," he said.

"Maybe," Thom replied curtly. He settled his instrument cases on his back with care. "You two keep an eye out for Gelb. He will make trouble if he can. We want to pass through Whitebridge so softly that nobody remembers we were here five minutes after we're gone."

Their cloaks flapped in the wind as they walked to the gangplank. Mat carried his bow crossed in front on his chest. Even after all their days on the boat, it still got a few looks from the crewmen; their bows were short affairs.

Captain Domon left the merchants to intercept Thom at the gangplank.

"You be leaving me now, gleeman? Can I no talk you into continuing on? I be going all the way down to Illian, where folk have a proper regard for gleemen. There be no finer place in the world for your art. I'd get you there in good time for the Feast of Sefan. The competitions, you know. A hundred gold marks for the best telling of *The Great Hunt of the Horn*."

"A great prize, Captain," Thom replied with an elaborate bow and a flourish of his cloak that set the patches to fluttering, "and great competitions, which rightly draw gleemen from the whole world over. But," he added dryly, "I fear we could not afford the fare at the rates you charge."

"Aye, well, as to that. . . ." The captain produced a leather purse from his coat pocket and tossed it to Thom. It clinked when Thom caught it. "Your fares back, and a bit more besides. The damage was no so bad as I thought, and you've worked your way and more with your tales and your harp. I could maybe manage as much again if you stay aboard to the Sea of Storms. And I would set you ashore in Illian. A good gleeman can make his fortune there, even aside from the competitions."

Thom hesitated, weighing the purse on his palm, but Rand spoke up. "We're meeting friends here, Captain, and going on to Caemlyn together. We'll have to see Illian another time."

Thom's mouth twisted wryly, then he blew out his long mustaches and tucked the purse into his pocket. "Perhaps if the people we are to meet are not here, Captain."

"Aye," Domon said sourly. "You think on it. Too bad I can no keep Gelb aboard to take the others' anger, but I do what I say I will do. I suppose I must ease up now, even if it means taking three times as long to reach Illian as I should. Well, mayhap those Trollocs *were* after you three."

Rand blinked but kept silent, but Mat was not so cautious. "Why do you think they weren't?" he demanded. "They were after the same treasure we were hunting."

"Mayhap," the captain grunted, sounding unconvinced. He combed thick fingers through his beard, then pointed at the pocket where Thom had put the purse. "Twice that if you come back to keep the men's minds off how hard I work them. Think on it. I sail with the first light on the morrow." He turned on his heel and strode back to the merchants, arms spreading wide as he began an apology for keeping them waiting.

Thom still hesitated, but Rand hustled him down the gangplank without giving him a chance to argue, and the gleeman let himself be herded. A murmur passed through the people on the dock as they saw Thom's patch-covered cloak, and some called out to discover where he would be performing. *So much for not being noticed,* Rand thought, dismayed. By sundown it would be all over Whitebridge that there was a gleeman in town. He hurried Thom along, though, and Thom, wrapped in sulky silence, did not even try to slow down enough to preen under the attention.

The carriage drivers looked down at Thom with interest from their high perches, but apparently the dignity of their positions forbade shouting. With no idea of where to go exactly, Rand turned up the street that ran along the river and under the bridge.

"We need to find Moiraine and the others," he said. "And fast. We should have thought of changing Thom's cloak."

Thom suddenly shook himself and stopped dead. "An innkeeper will be able to tell us if they're here, or if they've passed through. The right innkeeper. Innkeepers have all the news and gossip. If they aren't here. . . ."He looked back and forth from Rand to Mat. "We have to talk, we three." Cloak swirling around his ankles, he set off into the town, away from the river. Rand and Mat had to step quickly to keep up.

The broad, milk-white arch that gave the town its name dominated Whitebridge as much close up as it did from afar, but once Rand was in the streets he realized that the town was every bit as big as Baerlon, though not so crowded with people. A few carts moved in the streets, pulled by horse or ox or donkey or man, but no carriages. Those most likely all belonged to the merchants and were clustered down at the dock.

Shops of every description lined the streets, and many of the tradesmen worked in front of their establishments, under the signs swinging in the wind. They passed a man mending pots, and a tailor holding folds of cloth up to the light for a customer. A shoemaker, sitting in his doorway, tapped his hammer on the heel of a boot. Hawkers cried their services at sharpening knives and scissors, or tried to interest the passersby in their skimpy trays of fruit or vegetables, but none was getting much interest. Shops selling food had the same pitiful displays of produce Rand remembered from Baerlon. Even the fishmongers displayed only small piles of small fish, for all the boats on the river. Times were not really hard yet, but everyone could see what was coming if the weather did not change soon, and those faces that were not fixed into worried frowns seemed to stare at something unseen, something unpleasant.

Where the White Bridge came down in the center of the town was a big square, paved with stones worn by generations of feet and wagon wheels. Inns surrounded the square, and shops, and tall, red brick houses with signs out front bearing the same names Rand had seen on the carriages at the dock. It was into one of those inns, seemingly chosen at random, that Thom ducked. The sign over the door, swinging in the wind, had a striding man with a bundle on his back on one side and the same man with his head on a pillow on the other, and proclaimed The Wayfarers' Rest.

The common room stood empty except for the fat innkeeper drawing ale from a barrel and two men in rough workman's clothes staring glumly into their mugs at a table in the back. Only the innkeeper looked up when they came in. A shoulder-high wall split the room in two from front to back, with tables and a blazing fireplace on each side. Rand wondered idly if all innkeepers were fat and losing their hair.

Rubbing his hands together briskly, Thom commented to the innkeeper on the late cold and ordered hot spiced wine, then added quietly, "Is there somewhere my friends and I could talk without being disturbed?"

The innkeeper nodded to the low wall. “The other side that’s as best I’ve got unless you want to take a room. For when sailors come up from the river. Seems like half the crews got grudges against the other half. I won’t have my place broke up by fights, so I keep them apart.” He had been eyeing Thom’s cloak the whole while, and now he cocked his head to one side, a sly look in his eyes. “You staying? Haven’t had a gleeman here in some time. Folks would pay real good for something as would take their minds off things. I’d even take some off on your room and meals.”

Unnoticed, Rand thought glumly.

“You are too generous,” Thom said with a smooth bow. “Perhaps I will take up your offer. But for now, a little privacy.”

“I’ll bring your wine. Good money here for a gleeman.”

The tables on the far side of the wall were all empty, but Thom chose one right in the middle of the space. “So no one can listen without us knowing,” he explained. “Did you hear that fellow? He’ll take some off. Why, I’d double his custom just by sitting here. Any honest innkeeper gives a gleeman room and board and a good bit besides.”

The bare table was none too clean, and the floor had not been swept in days if not weeks. Rand looked around and grimaced. Master al’Vere would not have let his inn get that dirty if he had had to climb out of a sickbed to see to it. “We’re only after information. Remember?”

“Why here?” Mat demanded. “We passed other inns that looked cleaner.”

“Straight on from the bridge,” Thom said, “is the road to Caemlyn. Anyone passing through Whitebridge comes through this square, unless they’re going by river, and we know your friends aren’t doing that. If there is no word of them here, it doesn’t exist. Let me do the talking. This has to be done carefully.”

Just then the innkeeper appeared, three battered pewter mugs gripped in one fist by the handles. The fat man flicked at the table with a towel, set the mugs down, and took Thom’s money. “If you stay, you won’t have to pay for your drinks. Good wine, here.”

Thom’s smile touched only his mouth. “I will think on it, innkeeper. What news is there? We have been away from hearing things.”

“Big news, that’s what. Big news.”

The innkeeper draped the towel over his shoulder and pulled up a chair. He crossed his arms on the table, took root with a long sigh, saying what a comfort it was to get off his feet. His name was Bartim, and he went on about his feet in detail, about corns and bunions and how much time he spent standing and what he soaked them in, until Thom mentioned the news, again, and then he shifted over with hardly a pause.

The news was just as big as he said it was. Logain, the false Dragon, had been captured after a big battle near Lugard while he was trying to move his army from Ghealdan to Tear. The Prophecies, they understood? Thom nodded, and Bartim went on. The roads in the south were packed with people, the lucky ones with what they could carry on their backs. Thousands fleeing in all directions.

“None”—Bartim chuckled wryly—“supported Logain, of course. Oh, no, you won’t find many to admit to that, not now. Just refugees trying to find a safe place during the troubles.”

Aes Sedai had been involved in taking Logain, of course. Bartim spat on the floor when he said that, and again when he said they were taking the false Dragon north to Tar Valon. Bartim was a decent man, he said, a respectable man, and Aes Sedai could all go back to the Blight where they came from and take Tar Valon with them, as far as he was concerned. He would get no closer to an Aes Sedai than a thousand miles, if he had his way. Of course, they were stopping at every village and town on the way north to display Logain, so he had heard. To show people that the false Dragon had been taken and the world was safe again. He would have liked to see that, even if it did mean getting close to Aes Sedai. He was halfway tempted to go to Caemlyn.

“They’ll be taking him there to show to Queen Morgase.” The innkeeper touched his forehead respectfully. “I’ve never seen the Queen. Man ought to see his own Queen, don’t you think?”

Logain could do “things,” and the way Bartim’s eyes shifted and his tongue darted across his lips made it clear what he meant. He had seen the last false Dragon, two years ago, when he was paraded through the countryside, but that was just some fellow who thought he could make himself a king. There had been no need for Aes Sedai, that time. Soldiers had had him chained up on a wagon. A sullen-looking fellow who moaned in the middle of the wagonbed, covering his head with his arms whenever people threw stones or poked him with sticks. There had been a lot of that, and the soldiers had done nothing to stop it, as long as they did not kill the fellow. Best to let the people see he was nothing special after all. He could not do “things.” This Logain would be something to see, though. Something for Bartim to tell his grandchildren about. If only the inn would let him get away.

Rand listened with an interest that did not have to be faked. When Padan Fain had brought word to Emond’s Field of a false Dragon, a man actually wielding the Power, it had been the biggest news to come into the Two Rivers in years. What had happened since had pushed it to the back of his mind, but it was still the sort of thing people would be talking about for years, and telling their grandchildren about, too. Bartim would probably tell his that he had seen Logain whether he did or not. Nobody would ever think what happened to some village folk from the Two Rivers was worth talking about, not unless they were Two Rivers people themselves.

“That,” Thom said, “would be something to make a story of, a story they’d tell for a thousand years. I wish I had been there.” He sounded as if it was the simple truth, and Rand thought it really was. “I might try to see him anyway. You didn’t say what route they were taking. Perhaps there are some other travelers around? They might have heard the route.”

Bartim waved a grubby hand dismissively. “North, that’s all anybody knows around here. You want to see him, go to Caemlyn. That’s all I know, and if there’s anything to know in Whitebridge, I know it.”

“No doubt you do,” Thom said smoothly. “I expect a lot of strangers passing through stop here. Your sign caught my eye from the foot of the White Bridge.”

“Not just from the west, I’ll have you know. Two days ago there was a fellow in here, an Illianer, with a proclamation all done up with seals and ribbons. Read it right out there in the square. Said he’s taking it all the way to the Mountains of Mist, maybe even to the Aryth Ocean, if the passes are open. Said they’ve sent men to read it in every land in the world.” The innkeeper shook his head. “The Mountains of Mist. I hear they’re covered with fog all the year round, and there’s things in the fog will strip the flesh off your bones before you can run.” Mat snickered, earning a sharp look from Bartim.

Thom leaned forward intently. “What did the proclamation say?”

“Why, the hunt for the Horn, of course,” Bartim exclaimed. “Didn’t I say that? The Illianers are calling on everybody as will swear their lives to the hunt to gather in Illian. Can you imagine that? Swearing your life to a legend? I suppose they’ll find some fools. There’s always fools around.

This fellow claimed the end of the world is coming. The last battle with the Dark One." He chuckled, but it had a hollow sound, a man laughing to convince himself something really was worth laughing at. "Guess they think the Horn of Valere has to be found before it happens. Now what do you think of that?" He chewed a knuckle pensively for a minute. "Course, I don't know as I could argue with them after this winter. The winter, and this fellow Logain, and those other two before, as well. Why all these fellows the last few years claiming to be the Dragon? And the winter. Must mean something. What do you think?"

Thom did not seem to hear him. In a soft voice the gleeman began to recite to himself.

"In the last, lorn fight
'gainst the fall of long night,
the mountains stand guard,
and the dead shall be ward,
for the grave is no bar to my call."

"That's it." Bartim grinned as if he could already see the crowds handing him their money while they listened to Thom. "That's it. *The Great Hunt of the Horn*. You tell that one, and they'll be hanging from the rafters in here. Everybody's heard about the proclamation."

Thom still seemed to be a thousand miles away, so Rand said, "We're looking for some friends who were coming this way. From the west. Have there been many strangers passing through in the last week or two?"

"Some," Bartim said slowly. "There's always some, from east and west both." He looked at each of them in turn, suddenly wary. "What do they look like, these friends of yours?"

Rand opened his mouth, but Thom, abruptly back from wherever he had been, gave him a sharp, silencing look. With an exasperated sigh the gleeman turned to the innkeeper. "Two men and three women," he said reluctantly. "They may be together, or maybe not." He gave thumbnail sketches, painting each one in just a few words, enough for anyone who had seen them to recognize without giving away anything about who they were.

Bartim rubbed one hand over his head, disarranging his thinning hair, and stood up slowly. "Forget about performing here, gleeman. In fact, I'd appreciate it if you drank your wine and left. Leave Whitebridge, if you're smart."

"Someone else has been asking after them?" Thom took a drink, as if the answer were the least important thing in the world, and raised an eyebrow at the innkeeper. "Who would that be?"

Bartim scrubbed his hand through his hair again and shifted his feet on the point of walking away, then nodded to himself. "About a week ago, as near as I can say, a weaselly fellow came over the bridge. Crazy, everybody thought. Always talking to himself, never stopped moving even when he was standing still. Asked about the same people . . . some of them. He asked like it was important, then acted like he didn't care what the answer was. Half the time he was saying as he had to wait here for them, and the other half as he had to go on, he was in a hurry. One minute he was whining and begging, the next making demands like a king. Near got himself a thrashing a time or two, crazy or not. The Watch almost took him in custody for his own safety. He went off toward Caemlyn that same day, talking to himself and crying. Crazy, like I said."

Rand looked at Thom and Mat questioningly, and they both shook their heads. If this weaselly fellow was looking for them, he was still nobody they recognized.

"Are you sure it was the same people he wanted?" Rand asked.

"Some of them. The fighting man, and the woman in silk. But it wasn't them as he cared about. It was three country boys." His eyes slid across Rand and Mat and away again so fast that Rand was not sure if he had really seen the look or imagined it. "He was desperate to find them. But crazy, like I said."

Rand shivered, and wondered who the crazy man could be, and why he was looking for them. *A Darkfriend? Would Ba'alzamon use a madman?*

"He was crazy, but the other one. . . ." Bartim's eyes shifted uneasily, and his tongue ran over his lips as if he could not find enough spit to moisten them. "Next day . . . next day the other one came for the first time." He fell silent.

"The other one?" Thom prompted finally.

Bartim looked around, although their side of the divided room was still empty except for them. He even raised up on his toes and looked over the low wall. When he finally spoke, it was in a whispered rush.

"All in black he is. Keeps the hood of his cloak pulled up so you can't see his face, but you can feel him looking at you, feel it like an icicle shoved into your spine. He . . . he spoke to me." He flinched and stopped to chew at his lip before going on. "Sounded like a snake crawling through dead leaves. Fair turned my stomach to ice. Every time as he comes back, he asks the same questions. Same questions the crazy man asked. Nobody ever sees him coming—he's just there all of a sudden, day or night, freezing you where you stand. People are starting to look over their shoulders. Worst of it is, the gatetenders claim as he's never passed through any of the gates, coming or going."

Rand worked at keeping his face blank; he clenched his jaw until his teeth ached. Mat scowled, and Thom studied his wine. The word none of them wanted to say hung in the air between them. Myrddraal.

"I think I'd remember if I ever met anyone like that," Thom said after a minute.

Bartim's head bobbed furiously. "Burn me, but you would. Light's truth, you would. He . . . he wants the same lot as the crazy man, only he says as there's a girl with them. And"—he glanced sideways at Thom—"and a white-haired gleeman."

Thom's eyebrows shot up in what Rand was sure was unfeigned surprise. "A white-haired gleeman? Well, I'm hardly the only gleeman in the world with a little age on him. I assure you, I don't know this fellow, and he can have no reason to be looking for me."

"That's as may be," Bartim said glumly. "He didn't say it in so many words, but I got the impression as he would be very displeased with anyone as tried to help these people, or tried to hide them from him. Anyway, I'll tell you what I told him. I haven't seen any of them, nor heard tell of them, and that's the truth. Not any of them," he finished pointedly. Abruptly he slapped Thom's money down on the table. "Just finish your wine and go. All right? All right?" And he trundled away as fast as he could, looking over his shoulder.

"A Fade," Mat breathed when the innkeeper was gone. "I should have known they'd be looking for us here."

"And he'll be back," Thom said, leaning across the table and lowering his voice. "I say we sneak back to the boat and take Captain Domon up on his offer. The hunt will center on the road to Caemlyn while we're on our way to Illian, a thousand miles from where the Myrddraal expect us."

“No,” Rand said firmly. “We wait for Moiraine and the others in Whitebridge, or we go on to Caemlyn. One or the other, Thom. That’s what we decided.”

“That’s crazed, boy. Things have changed. You listen to me. No matter what this innkeeper says, when a Myrddraal stares at him, he’ll tell all about us down to what we had to drink and how much dust we had on our boots.” Rand shivered, remembering the Fade’s eyeless stare. “As for Caemlyn. . . . You think the Halfmen don’t know you want to get to Tar Valon? It’s a good time to be on a boat headed south.”

“No, Thom.” Rand had to force the words out, thinking of being a thousand miles from where the Fades were looking, but he took a deep breath and managed to firm his voice. “No.”

“Think, boy. Illian! There isn’t a grander city on the face of the earth. And the Great Hunt of the Horn! There hasn’t been a Hunt of the Horn in near four hundred years. A whole new cycle of stories waiting to be made. Just think. You never dreamed of anything like it. By the time the Myrddraal figure out where you’ve gone to, you’ll be old and gray and so tired of watching your grandchildren you won’t care if they do find you.”

Rand’s face took on a stubborn set. “How many times do I have to say no? They’ll find us wherever we go. There’d be Fades waiting in Illian, too. And how do we escape the dreams? I want to know what’s happening to me, Thom, and why. I’m going to Tar Valon. With Moiraine if I can; without her if I have to. Alone, if I have to. I need to know.”

“But Illian, boy! And a safe way out, downriver while they’re looking for you in another direction. Blood and ashes, a dream can’t hurt you.”

Rand kept silent. *A dream can’t hurt? Do dream thorns draw real blood?* He almost wished he had told Thom about that dream, too. *Do you dare tell anybody? Ba’alzamon is in your dreams, but what’s between dreaming and waking, now? Who do you dare to tell that the Dark One is touching you?*

Thom seemed to understand. The gleeman’s face softened. “Even *those* dreams, lad. They are still just dreams, aren’t they? For the Light’s sake, Mat, talk to him. I know you don’t want to go to Tar Valon, at least.”

Mat’s face reddened, half embarrassment and half anger. He avoided looking at Rand and scowled at Thom instead. “Why are you going to all this fuss and bother? You want to go back to the boat? Go back to the boat. We’ll take care of ourselves.”

The gleeman’s thin shoulders shook with silent laughter, but his voice was anger tight. “You think you know enough about Myrddraal to escape by yourself, do you? You’re ready to walk into Tar Valon alone and hand yourself over to the Amyrlin Seat? Can you even tell one Ajah from another? The Light burn me, boy, if you think you can even get to Tar Valon alone, you tell me to go.”

“Go,” Mat growled, sliding a hand under his cloak. Rand realized with a shock that he was gripping the dagger from Shadar Logoth, maybe even ready to use it.

Raucous laughter broke out on the other side of the low wall dividing the room, and a scornful voice spoke up loudly.

“Trollocs? Put on a gleeman’s cloak, man! You’re drunk! Trollocs! Borderland fables!”

The words doused anger like a pot of cold water. Even Mat half turned to the wall, eyes widening.

Rand stood just enough to see over the wall, then ducked back down again with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Floran Gelb sat on the other side of the wall, at the table in the back with the two men who had been there when they came in. They were laughing at him, but they were listening. Bartim was wiping a table that badly needed it, not looking at Gelb and the two men, but he was listening, too, scrubbing one spot over and over with his towel and leaning toward them until he seemed almost ready to fall over.

“Gelb,” Rand whispered as he dropped back into his chair, and the others tensed. Thom swiftly studied their side of the room.

On the other side of the wall the second man’s voice chimed in. “No, no, there used to be Trollocs. But they killed them all in the Trolloc Wars.”

“Borderland fables!” the first man repeated.

“It’s true, I tell you,” Gelb protested loudly. “I’ve been in the Borderlands. I’ve seen Trollocs, and these were Trollocs as sure as I’m sitting here. Those three claimed the Trollocs were chasing them, but I know better. That’s why I wouldn’t stay on the *Spray.* I’ve had my suspicions about Bayle Domon for some time, but those three are Darkfriends for sure. I tell you. . . .” Laughter and coarse jokes drowned out the rest of what Gelb had to say.

How long, Rand wondered, before the innkeeper heard a description of “those three”? If he had not already. If he did not just leap to the three strangers he had already seen. The only door from their half of the common room would take them right past Gelb's table.

"Maybe the boat isn't such a bad idea," Mat muttered, but Thom shook his head.

"Not anymore." The gleeman spoke softly and fast. He pulled out the leather purse Captain Domon had given him and hastily divided the money into three piles. "That story will be all through the town in an hour, whether anybody believes it or not, and the Halfman could hear any time. Domon isn't sailing until tomorrow morning. At best he'll have Trollocs chasing him all the way to Illian. Well, he's half expecting it for some reason, but that won't do us any good. There's nothing for it but to run, and run hard."

Mat quickly stuffed the coins Thom shoved in front of him into his pocket. Rand picked his pile up more slowly. The coin Moiraine had given him was not among them. Domon had given an equal weight of silver, but Rand, for some reason he could not fathom, wished he had the Aes Sedai's coin instead. Stuffing the money in his pocket, he looked a question at the gleeman.

"In case we're separated," Thom explained. "We probably won't be, but if it does happen . . . well, you two will make out all right by yourselves. You're good lads. Just keep clear of Aes Sedai, for your lives."

"I thought you were staying with us," Rand said.

"I am, boy. I am. But they're getting close, now, and the Light only knows. Well, no matter. It isn't likely anything will happen." Thom paused, looking at Mat. "I hope you no longer mind me staying with you," he said dryly.

Mat shrugged. He eyed each of them, then shrugged again. "I'm just on edge. I can't seem to get rid of it. Every time we stop for a breath, they're there, hunting us. I feel like somebody's staring at the back of my head all the time. What are we going to do?"

The laughter erupted on the other side of the wall, broken again by Gelb, trying loudly to convince the two men that he was telling the truth. How much longer, Rand wondered. Sooner or later Bartim had to put together Gelb's three and the three of them.

Thom eased his chair and rose, but kept his height crouched. No one looking casually toward the wall from the other side could see him. He motioned for them to follow, whispering, "Be very quiet."

The windows on either side of the fireplace on their side of the wall looked out into an alleyway. Thom studied one of the windows carefully before drawing it up just enough for them to squeeze through. It barely made a sound, nothing that could have been heard three feet away over the laughing argument on the other side of the low wall.

Once in the alley, Mat started for the street right away, but Thom caught his arm. “Not so fast,” the gleeman told him. “Not till we know what we’re doing.” Thom lowered the window again as much as he could from outside, and turned to study the alley.

Rand followed Thom’s eyes. Except for half a dozen rain barrels against the inn and the next building, a tailor shop, the alley was empty, the hard-packed dirt dry and dusty.

“Why are you doing this?” Mat demanded again. “You’d be safer if you left us. Why are you staying with us?”

Thom stared at him for a long moment. “I had a nephew, Owyn,” he said wearily, shrugging out of his cloak. He made a pile with his blanketroll as he talked, carefully setting his cased instruments on top. “My brother’s only son, my only living kin. He got in trouble with the Aes Sedai, but I was too busy with . . . other things. I don’t know what I could have done, but when I finally tried, it was too late. Owyn died a few years later. You could say Aes Sedai killed him.” He straightened up, not looking at them. His voice was still level, but Rand glimpsed tears in his eyes as he turned his head away. “If I can keep you two free of Tar Valon, maybe I can stop thinking about Owyn. Wait here.” Still avoiding their eyes, he hurried to the mouth of the alley, slowing before he reached it. After one quick look around, he strolled casually into the street and out of sight.

Mat half rose to follow, then settled back. “He won’t leave these,” he said, touching the leather instrument cases. “You believe that story?”

Rand squatted patiently beside the rain barrels. “What’s the matter with you, Mat? You aren’t like this. I haven’t heard you laugh in days.”

“I don’t like being hunted like a rabbit,” Mat snapped. He sighed, letting his head fall back against the brick wall of the inn. Even like that he seemed tense. His eyes shifted warily. “Sorry. It’s the running, and all these strangers, and . . . and just everything. It makes me jumpy. I look at somebody, and I can’t help wondering if he’s going to tell the Fades about us, or cheat us, or rob us, or. . . . Light, Rand, doesn’t it make you nervous?”

Rand laughed, a quick bark in the back of his throat. “I’m too scared to be nervous.”

“What do you think the Aes Sedai did to his nephew?”

“I don’t know,” Rand said uneasily. There was only one kind of trouble that he knew of for a man to get into with Aes Sedai. “Not like us, I guess.”

“No. Not like us.”

For a time they leaned against the wall, not talking. Rand was not sure how long they waited. A few minutes, probably, but it felt like an hour, waiting for Thom to come back, waiting for Bartim and Gelb to open the window and denounce them for Darkfriends. Then a man turned in at the mouth of the alley, a tall man with the hood of his cloak pulled up to hide his face, a cloak black as night against the light of the street.

Rand scrambled to his feet, one hand wrapped around the hilt of Tam’s sword so hard that his knuckles hurt. His mouth went dry, and no amount of swallowing helped. Mat rose to a crouch with one hand under his cloak.

The man came closer, and Rand’s throat grew tighter with every step. Abruptly the man stopped and tossed back his cowl. Rand’s knees almost gave way. It was Thom.

“Well, if you don’t recognize me”—the gleeman grinned—“I guess it’s a good enough disguise for the gates.”

Thom pushed past them and began transferring things from his patch-covered cloak to his new one so nimbly that Rand could not make out any of them. The new cloak was dark brown, Rand saw now. He drew a deep, ragged breath; his throat still felt as if it were clutched in a fist. Brown, not black. Mat still had his hand under his cloak, and he stared at Thom’s back as if he were thinking of using the hidden dagger.

Thom glanced up at them, then gave them a sharper look. “This is no time to get skittish.” Deftly he began folding his old cloak into a bundle around his instrument cases, inside out so the patches were hidden. “We’ll walk out of here one at a time, just close enough to keep each other in sight. Shouldn’t be remembered especially, that way. Can’t you slouch?” he added to Rand. “That height of yours is as bad as a banner.” He slung the bundle across his back and stood, drawing his hood back up. He looked nothing like a white-haired gleeman. He was just another traveler, a man too poor to afford a horse, much less a carriage. “Let’s go. We’ve wasted too much time already.”

Rand agreed fervently, but even so he hesitated before stepping out of the alley into the square. None of the sparse scattering of people gave them a second look—most did not look at them at all—but his shoulders knotted, waiting for the cry of Darkfriend that could turn ordinary people into a mob bent on murder. He ran his eyes across the open area, over people moving about on their daily business, and when he brought them back a Myrddraal was halfway across the square.

Where the Fade had come from, he could not begin to guess, but it strode toward the three of them with a slow deadliness, a predator with the prey under its gaze. People shied away from the black-cloaked shape, avoided looking at it. The square began to empty out as people decided they were needed elsewhere.

The black cowl froze Rand where he stood. He tried to summon up the void, but it was like fumbling after smoke. The Fade's hidden gaze knifed to his bones and turned his marrow to icicles.

"Don't look at its face," Thom muttered. His voice shook and cracked, and it sounded as if he were forcing the words out. "The Light burn you, don't look at its face!"

Rand tore his eyes away—he almost groaned; it felt like tearing a leech off of his face—but even staring at the stones of the square he could still see the Myrddraal coming, a cat playing with mice, amused at their feeble efforts to escape, until finally the jaws snapped shut. The Fade had halved the distance. "Are we just going to stand here?" he mumbled. "We have to run . . . get away." But he could not make his feet move.

Mat had the ruby-hilted dagger out at last, in a trembling hand. His lips were drawn back from his teeth, a snarl and a rictus of fear.

"Think. . . ." Thom stopped to swallow, and went on hoarsely. "Think you can outrun it, do you, boy?" He began to mutter to himself; the only word Rand could make out was "Owyn." Abruptly Thom growled, "I never should have gotten mixed up with you boys. Should never have." He shrugged the bundled gleeman's cloak off of his back and thrust it into Rand's arms. "Take care of that. When I say run, you run and don't stop until you get to Caemlyn. The Queen's Blessing. An inn. Remember that, in case. . . . Just remember it."

"I don't understand," Rand said. The Myrddraal was not twenty paces away, now. His feet felt like lead weights.

“Just remember it!” Thom snarled. “The Queen’s Blessing. Now. RUN!”

He gave them a push, one hand on the shoulder of each of them, to get them started, and Rand stumbled away in a lurching run with Mat at his side.

“RUN!” Thom sprang into motion, too, with a long, wordless roar. Not after them, but toward the Myrddraal. His hands flourished as if he were performing at his best, and daggers appeared. Rand stopped, but Mat pulled him along.

The Fade was just as startled. Its leisurely pace faltered in mid-stride. Its hand swept toward the hilt of the black sword hanging at its waist, but the gleeman’s long legs covered the distance quickly. Thom crashed into the Myrddraal before the black blade was half drawn, and both went down in a thrashing heap. The few people still in the square fled.

“RUN!” The air in the square flashed an eye-searing blue, and Thom began to scream, but even in the middle of the scream he managed a word. *“RUN!”*

Rand obeyed. The gleeman’s screams pursued him.

Clutching Thom’s bundle to his chest, he ran as hard as he could. Panic spread from the square out through the town as Rand and Mat fled on the crest of a wave of fear. Shopkeepers abandoned their goods as the boys passed. Shutters banged down over storefronts, and frightened faces appeared in the windows of houses, then vanished. People who had not been close enough to see ran through the streets wildly, paying no heed. They bumped into one another, and those who were knocked down scrambled to their feet or were trampled. Whitebridge roiled like a kicked anthill.

As he and Mat pounded toward the gates, Rand abruptly remembered what Thom had said about his height. Without slowing down, he crouched as best he could without looking as if he was crouching. But the gates themselves, thick wood bound with black iron straps, stood open. The two gatetenders, in steel caps and mail tunics worn over cheap-looking red coats with white collars, fingered their halberds and stared uneasily into the town. One of them glanced at Rand and Mat, but they were not the only ones running out of the gates. A steady stream boiled through, panting men clutching wives, weeping women carrying babes and dragging crying children, pale-faced craftsmen still in their aprons, still heedlessly gripping their tools.

There would be no one who could tell which way they had gone, Rand thought as he ran, dazed. *Thom. Oh, Light save me, Thom.*

Mat staggered beside him, caught his balance, and they ran until the last of the fleeing people had fallen away, ran until the town and the White Bridge were far out of sight behind them.

Finally Rand fell to his knees in the dust, pulling air raggedly into his raw throat with great gulps. The road behind stretched empty until it was lost to sight among bare trees. Mat plucked at him.

“Come on. Come on.” Mat panted the words. Sweat and dust streaked his face, and he looked ready to collapse. “We have to keep going.”

“Thom,” Rand said. He tightened his arms around the bundle of Thom’s cloak; the instrument cases were hard lumps inside. “Thom.”

“He’s dead. You saw. You heard. Light, Rand, he’s dead!”

“You think Egwene and Moiraine and the rest are dead, too. If they’re dead, why are the Myrddraal still hunting them? Answer me that?”

Mat dropped to his knees in the dust beside him. “All right. Maybe they are alive. But Thom—You saw! Blood and ashes, Rand, the same thing can happen to us.”

Rand nodded slowly. The road behind them was still empty. He had been halfway expecting—hoping, at least—to see Thom appear, striding along, blowing out his mustaches to tell them how much trouble they were. The Queen’s Blessing in Caemlyn. He struggled to his feet and slung Thom’s bundle on his back alongside his blanketroll. Mat stared up at him, narrow-eyed and wary.

“Let’s go,” Rand said, and started down the road toward Caemlyn. He heard Mat muttering, and after a moment he caught up to Rand.

They trudged along the dusty road, heads down and not talking. The wind spawned dustdevils that whirled across their path. Sometimes Rand looked back, but the road behind was always empty.

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CHAPTER
27

Shelter From the Storm

Perrin fretted over the days spent with the Tuatha'an, traveling south and east in a leisurely fashion. The Traveling People saw no need to hurry; they never did. The colorful wagons did not roll out of a morning until the sun was well above the horizon, and they stopped as early as mid afternoon if they came across a congenial spot. The dogs trotted easily alongside the wagons, and often the children did, too. They had no difficulty in keeping up. Any suggestion that they might go further, or more quickly, was met with laughter, or perhaps, "Ah, but would you make the poor horses work so hard?"

He was surprised that Elyas did not share his feelings. Elyas would not ride on the wagons—he preferred to walk, sometimes loping along at the head of the column—but he never suggested leaving, or pressing on ahead.

The strange bearded man in his strange skin clothes was so different from the gentle Tuatha'an that he stood out wherever he went among the wagons. Even from across the camp there was no mistaking Elyas for one of the People, and not just because of clothes. Elyas moved with the lazy grace of a wolf, only emphasized by his skins and his fur hat, radiating danger as naturally as a fire radiated heat, and the contrast with the Traveling People was sharp. Young and old, the People were joyful on their feet. There was no danger in their grace, only delight. Their children darted about filled with the pure zest of moving, of course, but among the Tuatha'an, graybeards and grandmothers, too, still stepped lightly, their walk a stately dance no less exuberant for its dignity. All the People seemed on the point of dancing, even when standing still, even during the rare times when there was no music in the camp. Fiddles and flutes, dulcimers and zithers and drums spun harmony and counterpoint around the wagons at almost any hour, in camp or on the move. Joyous songs, merry songs, laughing songs, sad songs; if someone was awake in the camp there was usually music.

Elyas met friendly nods and smiles at every wagon he passed, and a cheerful word at any fire where he paused. This must be the face the People always showed to outsiders—open, smiling faces. But Perrin had learned that hidden beneath the surface was the wariness of a half-tame deer. Something deep lay behind the smiles directed at the Emond's Fielders, something that wondered if they were safe, something that faded only slightly over the days. With Elyas the wariness was strong, like deep summer heat shimmering in the air, and it did not fade. When he was not looking they watched him openly as if unsure what he was going to do. When he walked across the camp, feet ready for dancing seemed ready for flight, as well.

Elyas was certainly no more comfortable with their Way of the Leaf than they were with him. His mouth wore a permanent twist when he was around the Tuatha'an. It was not quite condescension and certainly not contempt, but looked as though he would rather be elsewhere than where he was, almost anywhere else. Yet whenever Perrin brought up leaving, Elyas made soothing noises about resting, just for a few days.

"You had hard days before you met me," Elyas said, the third or fourth time he asked, "and you'll have harder still ahead, with Trollocs and Halfmen after you, and Aes Sedai for friends." He grinned around a mouthful of Ila's dried-apple pie. Perrin still found his yellow-eyed gaze disconcerting, even when he was smiling. Perhaps even more when he was smiling; smiles seldom touched those hunter's eyes. Elyas lounged beside Raen's fire, as usual refusing to sit on the logs drawn up for the purpose. "Don't be in such a bloody hurry to put yourself in Aes Sedai hands."

"What if the Fades find us? What's to keep them from it if we just sit here, waiting? Three wolves can't hold them off, and the Traveling People won't be any help. They won't even defend themselves. The Trollocs will butcher them, and it will be our fault. Anyway, we have to leave them sooner or later. It might as well be sooner."

"Something tells me to wait. Just a few days."

"Something!"

"Relax, lad. Take life as it comes. Run when you have to, fight when you must, rest when you can."

"What are you talking about, something?"

"Have some of this pie. Ila doesn't like me, but she surely feeds me well when I visit. Always good food in the People's camps."

"What 'something'?" Perrin demanded. "If you know something you aren't telling the rest of us. . . ."

Elyas frowned at the piece of pie in his hand, then set it down and dusted his hands together. "Something," he said finally, with a shrug of his shoulders as if he did not understand it completely himself. "Something tells me it's important to wait. A few more days. I don't get feelings like this often, but when I do, I've learned to trust them. They've saved my life in the past. This time it's different, somehow, but it's important. That's clear. You want to run on, then run on. Not me."

That was all he would say, no matter how many times Perrin asked. He lay about, talking with Raen, eating, napping with his hat over his eyes, and refused to discuss leaving. Something told him to wait. Something told him it was important. He would know when it was time to go. Have some pie, lad. Don't lather yourself. Try some of this stew. Relax.

Perrin could not make himself relax. At night he wandered among the rainbow wagons worrying, as much because no one else seemed to see anything to worry about as for any other reason. The Tuatha'an sang and danced, cooked and ate around their campfires—fruits and nuts, berries and vegetables; they ate no meat—and went about a myriad domestic chores as if they had not a care in the world. The children ran and played everywhere, hide-and-seek among the wagons, climbing in the trees around the camp, laughing and rolling on the ground with the dogs. Not a care in the world, for anyone.

Watching them, he itched to get away. *Go, before we bring the hunters down on them. They took us in, and we repay their kindness by endangering them. At least they have reason to be lighthearted. Nothing is hunting them. But the rest of us. . . .*

It was hard to get a word with Egwene. Either she was talking with Ila, their heads together in a way that said no men were welcome, or she was dancing with Aram, swinging round and round to the flutes and fiddles and drums, to tunes the Tuatha'an had gathered from all over the world, or to the sharp, trilling songs of the Traveling People themselves, sharp whether they were quick or slow. They knew many songs, some he recognized from home, though often under different names than they were called in the Two Rivers. "Three Girls in the Meadow," for instance, the Tinkers named

"Pretty Maids Dancing," and they said "The Wind From the North" was called "Hard Rain Falling" in some lands and "Berin's Retreat" in others. When he asked, not thinking, for "The Tinker Has My Pots," they fell all over themselves laughing. They knew it, but as "Toss the Feathers."

He could understand wanting to dance to the People's songs. Back in Emond's Field no one considered him more than an adequate dancer, but these songs tugged at his feet, and he thought he had never danced so long, or so hard, or so well in his life. Hypnotic, they made his blood pound in rhythm to the drums.

It was the second evening when for the first time Perrin saw women dance to some of the slow songs. The fires burned low, and the night hung close around the wagons, and fingers tapped a slow rhythm on the drums. First one drum, then another, until every drum in the camp kept the same low, insistent beat. There was silence except for the drums. A girl in a red dress swayed into the light, loosening her shawl. Strings of beads hung in her hair, and she had kicked off her shoes. A flute began the melody, wailing softly, and the girl danced. Outstretched arms spread her shawl behind her; her hips undulated as her bare feet shuffled to the beat of the drums. The girl's dark eyes fastened on Perrin, and her smile was as slow as her dance. She turned in small circles, smiling over her shoulder at him.

He swallowed hard. The heat in his face was not from the fire. A second girl joined the first, the fringe on their shawls shaking in time to the drums and the slow rotation of their hips. They smiled at him, and he cleared his throat hoarsely. He was afraid to look around; his face was as red as a beet, and anyone who was not watching the dancers was probably laughing at him. He was sure of it.

As casually as he could manage, he slid off the log as if he were just getting comfortable, but he carefully ended up looking away from the fire, away from the dancers. There was nothing like that in Emond's Field. Dancing with the girls on the Green on a feastday did not even come close. For once he wished that the wind would pick up, to cool him off.

The girls danced into his field of view again, only now they were three. One gave him a sly wink. His eyes darted frantically. *Light,* he thought. *What do I do now? What would Rand do? He knows about girls.*

The dancing girls laughed softly; beads clicked as they tossed their long hair on their shoulders, and he thought his face would burn up. Then a slightly older woman joined the girls, to show them how it was done. With a groan, he gave up altogether and shut his eyes. Even behind his eyelids their laughter taunted and tickled. Even behind his eyelids he could still see them. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and he wished for the wind.

According to Raen the girls did not dance that dance often, and the women rarely did, and according to Elyas it was thanks to Perrin's blushes that they did so every night thereafter.

"I have to thank you," Elyas told him, his tone sober and solemn. "It's different with you young fellows, but at my age it takes more than a fire to warm my bones." Perrin scowled. There was something about Elyas's back as he walked away that said even if nothing showed, he was laughing inside.

Perrin soon learned better than to look away from the dancing women and girls, though the winks and smiles still made him wish he could. One would have been all right, maybe—but five or six, with everyone watching. . . . He never did entirely conquer his blushes.

Then Egwene began learning the dance. Two of the girls who had danced that first night taught her, clapping the rhythm while she repeated the shuffling steps with a borrowed shawl swaying behind her. Perrin started to say something, then decided it was wiser not to crack his teeth. When the girls added the hip movements Egwene started laughing, and the three girls fell giggling into one another's arms. But Egwene persevered, with her eyes glistening and bright spots of color in her cheeks.

Aram watched her dancing with a hot, hungry gaze. The handsome young Tuatha'an had given her a string of blue beads that she wore all the time. Worried frowns now replaced the smiles Ila had worn when she first noticed her grandson's interest in Egwene. Perrin resolved to keep a close eye on young Master Aram.

Once he managed to get Egwene alone, beside a wagon painted in green and yellow. "Enjoying yourself, aren't you?" he said.

"Why shouldn't I?" She fingered the blue beads around her neck, smiling at them. "We don't all have to work at being miserable, the way you do. Don't we deserve a little chance to enjoy ourselves?"

Aram stood not far off—he never got far from Egwene—with his arms folded across his chest, a little smile on his face, half smugness and half challenge. Perrin lowered his voice. "I thought you wanted to get to Tar Valon. You won't learn to be an Aes Sedai here."

Egwene tossed her head. “And I thought you didn’t like me wanting to become an Aes Sedai,” she said, too sweetly.

“Blood and ashes, do you believe we’re safe here? Are these people safe with us here? A Fade could find us anytime.”

Her hand trembled on the beads. She lowered it and took a deep breath. “Whatever is going to happen will happen whether we leave today or next week. That’s what I believe now. Enjoy yourself, Perrin. It might be the last chance we have.”

She brushed his cheek sadly with her fingers. Then Aram held out his hand to her, and she darted to him, already laughing again. As they ran away to where fiddles sang, Aram flashed a triumphant grin over his shoulder at Perrin as if to say, she is not yours, but she will be mine.

They were all falling too much under the spell of the People, Perrin thought. *Elyas is right. They don’t have to try to convert you to the Way of the Leaf. It seeps into you.*

Ila had taken one look at him huddling out of the wind, then produced a thick wool cloak out of her wagon; a dark green cloak, he was pleased to see, after all the reds and yellows. As he swung it round his shoulders, thinking what a wonder it was that the cloak was big enough for him, Ila said primly, “It could fit better.” She glanced at the axe at his belt, and when she looked up at him her eyes were sad above her smile. “It could fit much better.”

All the Tinkers did that. Their smiles never slipped, there was never any hesitation in their invitations to join them for a drink or to listen to the music, but their eyes always touched the axe, and he could feel what they thought. A tool of violence. There is never any excuse for violence to another human being. The Way of the Leaf.

Sometimes he wanted to shout at them. There were Trollocs in the world, and Fades. There were those who would cut down every leaf. The Dark One was out there, and the Way of the Leaf would burn in Ba’alzamon’s eyes. Stubbornly he continued to wear the axe. He took to keeping his cloak thrown back, even when it was windy, so the half-moon blade was never hidden. Now and again Elyas looked quizzically at the weapon hanging heavy at his side and grinned at him, those yellow eyes seeming to read his mind. That almost made him cover the axe. Almost.

If the Tuatha’an camp was a source of constant irritation, at least his dreams were normal there. Sometimes he woke up sweating from a dream of Trollocs and Fades storming into the camp, rainbow-colored wagons turning to bonfires from hurled torches, people falling in pools of blood, men and women and children who ran and screamed and died but made no effort to defend themselves against slashing scythe-like swords. Night after night he bolted upright in the dark, panting and reaching for his axe before he realized the wagons were not in flames, that no bloody-muzzled shapes snarled over torn and twisted bodies littering the ground. But those were ordinary nightmares, and oddly comforting in their way. If there was ever a place for the Dark One to be in his dreams, it was in those, but he was not. No Ba'alzamon. Just ordinary nightmares.

He was aware of the wolves, though, when he was awake. They kept their distance from the camps, and from the caravan on the move, but he always knew where they were. He could feel their contempt for the dogs guarding the Tuatha'an. Noisy beasts who had forgotten what their jaws were for, had forgotten the taste of warm blood; they might frighten humans, but they would slink away on their bellies if the pack ever came. Each day his awareness was sharper, more clear.

Dapple grew more impatient with every sunset. That Elyas wanted to do this thing of taking the humans south made it worth doing, but if it must be done, then let it be done. Let this slow travel end. Wolves were meant to roam, and she did not like being away from the pack so long. Impatience burned in Wind, too. Hunting was worse than poor here, and he despised living on field mice, something for cubs to stalk while learning to hunt, fit food for the old, no longer able to pull down a deer or hamstring a wild ox. Sometimes Wind thought that Burn had been right; leave human troubles to humans. But he was wary of such thoughts when Dapple was around, and even more so around Hopper. Hopper was a scarred and grizzled fighter, impassive with the knowledge of years, with guile that more than made up for anything of which age might have robbed him. For humans he cared nothing, but Dapple wished this thing done, and Hopper would wait as she waited and run as she ran. Wolf or man, bull or bear, Whatever challenged Dapple would find Hopper's jaws waiting to send him to the long sleep. That was the whole of life for Hopper, and that kept Wind cautious, and Dapple seemed to ignore the thoughts of both.

All of it was clear in Perrin's mind. Fervently he wished for Caemlyn, for Moiraine and Tar Valon. Even if there were no answers, there could be an end to it. Elyas looked at him, and he was sure the yellow-eyed man knew. *Please, let there be an end.*

The dream began more pleasantly than most he had of late. He was at Alsbet Luhhan's kitchen table, sharpening his axe with a stone. Mistress Luhhan never allowed forge work, or anything that smacked of it, to be brought into the house. Master Luhhan even had to take her knives outside to sharpen them. But she tended her cooking and never said a word about the axe. She did not even say anything when a wolf entered from deeper in the house and curled up between Perrin and the door to the yard. Perrin went on sharpening; it would be time to use it, soon.

Abruptly the wolf rose, rumbling deep in its throat, the thick ruff of fur on its neck rising. Ba'alzamon stepped into the kitchen from the yard. Mistress Luhhan went on with her cooking.

Perrin scrambled to his feet, raising the axe, but Ba'alzamon ignored the weapon, concentrating on the wolf, instead. Flames danced where his eyes should be. "Is this what you have to protect you? Well, I have faced this before. Many times before."

He crooked a finger, and the wolf howled as fire burst out of its eyes and ears and mouth, out of its skin. The stench of burning meat and hair filled the kitchen. Alsbet Luhhan lifted the lid on a pot and stirred with a wooden spoon.

Perrin dropped the axe and jumped forward, trying to beat out the flames with his hands. The wolf crumpled to black ash between his palms. Staring at the shapeless pile of char on Mistress Luhhan's clean-swept floor, he backed away. He wished he could wipe the greasy soot from his hands, but the thought of scrubbing it off on his clothes turned his stomach. He snatched up the axe, gripping the haft until his knuckles cracked.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted. Mistress Luhhan tapped the spoon on the rim of the pot and replaced the lid, humming to herself.

"You cannot run from me," Ba'alzamon said. "You cannot hide from me. If you are the one, you are mine." The heat from the fires of his face forced Perrin across the kitchen until his back came up against the wall. Mistress Luhhan opened the oven to check her bread. "The Eye of the World will consume you," Ba'alzamon said. "I mark you mine!" He flung out his clenched hand as if throwing something; when his fingers opened, a raven streaked at Perrin's face.

Perrin screamed as the black beak pierced his left eye . . .

. . . and sat up, clutching his face, surrounded by the sleeping wagons of the Traveling People. Slowly he lowered his hands. There was no pain, no blood. But he could remember it, remember the stabbing agony.

He shuddered, and suddenly Elyas was squatting beside him in the predawn, one hand outstretched as if to shake him awake. Beyond the trees where the wagons lay, the wolves howled, one sharp cry from three throats. He shared their sensations. *Fire. Pain. Fire. Hate. Hate! Kill!*

"Yes," Elyas said softly. "It is time. Get up, boy. It's time for us to go."

Perrin scrambled out of his blankets. While he was still bundling his blanketroll, Raen came out of his wagon, rubbing sleep from his eyes. The Seeker glanced at the sky and froze halfway down the steps, his hands still raised to his face. Only his eyes moved as he studied the sky intently, though Perrin could not understand what he was looking at. A few clouds hung in the east, undersides streaked with pink from the sun yet to rise, but there was nothing else to see. Raen seemed to listen, as well, and smell the air, but there was no sound except the wind in the trees and no smell but the faint smoky remnant of last night's campfires.

Elyas returned with his own scanty belongings, and Raen came the rest of the way down. "We must change the direction we travel, my old friend." The Seeker looked uneasily at the sky again. "We go another way this day. Will you be coming with us?" Elyas shook his head, and Raen nodded as if he had known all along. "Well, take care, my old friend. There is something about today. . . ." He started to look up once more, but pulled his eyes back down before they rose above the wagon tops. "I think the wagons will go east. Perhaps all the way to the Spine of the World. Perhaps we'll find a *stedding,* and stay there awhile."

"Trouble never enters the *stedding,*" Elyas agreed. "But the Ogier are none too open to strangers."

"Everyone is open to the Traveling People," Raen said, and grinned. "Besides, even Ogier have pots and things to mend. Come, let us have some breakfast, and we'll talk about it."

"No time," Elyas said. "We move on today, too. As soon as possible. It's a day for moving, it seems."

Raen tried to convince him to at least stay long enough for food, and when Ila appeared from the wagon with Egwene, she added her arguments, though not as strenuously as her husband. She said all of the right words, but her politeness was stiff, and it was plain she would be glad to see Elyas's back, if not Egwene's.

Egwene did not notice the regretful, sidelong looks Ila gave her. She asked what was going on, and Perrin prepared himself for her to say she wanted to stay with the Tuatha'an, but when Elyas explained she only nodded thoughtfully and hurried back into the wagon to gather her things.

Finally Raen threw up his hands. "All right. I don't know that I have ever let a visitor leave this camp without a farewell feast, but. . . ." Uncertainly, his eyes raised toward the sky again. "Well, we need an early start ourselves, I think. Perhaps we will eat as we journey. But at least let everyone say goodbye."

Elyas started to protest, but Raen was already hurrying from wagon to wagon, pounding on the doors where there was no one awake. By the time a Tinker came, leading Bela, the whole camp had turned out in their finest and brightest, a mass of color that made Raen and Ila's red-and-yellow wagon seem almost plain. The big dogs strolled through the crowd with their tongues lolling out of their mouths, looking for someone to scratch their ears, while Perrin and the others endured handshake after handshake and hug after hug. The girls who had danced every night would not be content with shaking hands, and their hugs made Perrin suddenly wish he was not leaving after all—until he remembered how many others were watching, and then his face almost matched the Seeker's wagon.

Aram drew Egwene a little aside. Perrin could not hear what he had to say to her over the noise of goodbyes, but she kept shaking her head, slowly at first, then more firmly as he began to gesture pleadingly. His face shifted from pleading to arguing, but she continued to shake her head stubbornly until Ila rescued her with a few sharp words to her grandson. Scowling, Aram pushed away through the crowd, abandoning the rest of the farewell. Ila watched him go, hesitating on the point of calling him back. *She's relieved, too,* Perrin thought. *Relieved he doesn't want to go with us—with Egwene.*

When he had shaken every hand in the camp at least once and hugged every girl at least twice, the crowd moved back, opening a little space around Raen and Ila, and the three visitors.

"You came in peace," Raen intoned, bowing formally, hands on his chest. "Depart now in peace. Always will our fires welcome you, in peace. The Way of the Leaf is peace."

“Peace be on you always,” Elyas replied, “and on all the People.” He hesitated, then added, “I will find the song, or another will find the song, but the song will be sung, this year or in a year to come. As it once was, so shall it be again, world without end.”

Raen blinked in surprise, and Ila looked completely flabbergasted, but all the other Tuatha’an murmured in reply, “World without end. World and time without end.” Raen and his wife hurriedly said the same after everyone else.

Then it really was time to go. A few last farewells, a few last admonitions to take care, a few last smiles and winks, and they were making their way out of the camp. Raen accompanied them as far as the edge of the trees, a pair of the dogs cavorting by his side.

“Truly, my old friend, you must take great care. This day. . . . There is wickedness loose in the world, I fear, and Whatever you pretend, you are not so wicked that it will not gobble you up.”

“Peace be on you,” Elyas said.

“And on you,” Raen said sadly.

When Raen was gone, Elyas scowled at finding the other two looking at him. “So I don’t believe in their fool song,” he growled. “No need to make them feel bad by messing up their ceremony, was there? I told you they set a store by ceremony sometimes.”

“Of course,” Egwene said gently. “No need at all.” Elyas turned away muttering to himself.

Dapple, Wind, and Hopper came to greet Elyas, not frolicking as the dogs had done, but a dignified meeting of equals. Perrin caught what passed between them. *Fire eyes. Pain. Heartfang. Death. Heartfang.* Perrin knew what they meant. The Dark One. They were telling about his dream. Their dream.

He shivered as the wolves ranged out ahead, scouting the way. It was Egwene’s turn to ride Bela, and he walked beside her. Elyas led, as usual, a steady, ground-eating pace.

Perrin did not want to think about his dream. He had thought that the wolves made them safe. *Not complete. Accept. Full heart. Full mind. You still struggle. Only complete when you accept.*

He forced the wolves out of his head, and blinked in surprise. He had not known he could do that. He determined not to let them back in again. *Even in dreams?* He was not sure if the thought was his or theirs.

Egwene still wore the string of blue beads Aram had given her, and a little sprig of something with tiny, bright red leaves in her hair, another gift from the young Tuatha’an. That Aram had tried to talk her into staying with the Traveling People, Perrin was sure. He was glad she had not given in, but he wished she did not finger the beads so fondly.

Finally he said, “What did you spend so much time talking about with Ila? If you weren’t dancing with that long-legged fellow, you were talking to her like it was some kind of secret.”

“Ila was giving me advice on being a woman,” Egwene replied absently. He began laughing, and she gave him a hooded, dangerous look that he failed to see.

“Advice! Nobody tells us how to be men. We just are.”

“That,” Egwene said, “is probably why you make such a bad job of it.” Up ahead, Elyas cackled loudly.

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CHAPTER
28

Footprints in Air

Nynaeve stared in wonder at what lay ahead down the river, the White Bridge gleaming in the sun with a milky glow. Another legend, she thought, glancing at the Warder and the Aes Sedai, riding just ahead of her. *Another legend, and they don't even seem to notice.* She resolved not to stare where they could see. *They'll laugh if they see me gaping like a country bumpkin.* The three rode on silently toward the fabled White Bridge.

Since that morning after Shadar Logoth, when she had found Moiraine and Lan on the bank of the Arinelle, there had been little in the way of real conversation between her and the Aes Sedai. There had been talk, of course, but nothing of substance as Nynaeve saw it. Moiraine's attempts to talk her into going to Tar Valon, for instance. Tar Valon. She would go there, if need be, and take their training, but not for the reasons the Aes Sedai thought. If Moiraine had brought harm to Egwene and the boys. . . .

Sometimes, against her will, Nynaeve had found herself thinking of what a Wisdom could do with the One Power, of what she could do. Whenever she realized what was in her head, though, a flash of anger burned it out. The Power was a filthy thing. She would have nothing to do with it. Unless she had to.

The cursed woman only wanted to talk about taking her to Tar Valon for training. Moiraine would not tell her anything! It was not as if she wanted to know so much.

"How do you mean to find them?" she remembered demanding.

"As I have told you," Moiraine replied without bothering to look back at her, "I will know when I am close to the two who have lost their coins." It was not the first time Nynaeve had asked, but the Aes Sedai's voice was like a still pond that refused to ripple no matter how many stones Nynaeve threw; it made the Wisdom’s blood boil every time she was exposed to it. Moiraine went on as if she could not feel Nynaeve’s eyes on her back; Nynaeve knew she must be able to, she was staring so hard. “The longer it takes, the closer I must come, but I will know. As for the one who still has his token, so long as he has it in his possession I can follow him across half the world, if need be.”

“And then? What do you plan when you’ve found them, Aes Sedai?” She did not for a minute believe the Aes Sedai would be so intent on finding them if she did not have plans.

“Tar Valon, Wisdom.”

“Tar Valon, Tar Valon. That’s all you ever say, and I am becoming—”

“Part of the training you will receive in Tar Valon, Wisdom, will teach you to control your temper. You can do nothing with the One Power when emotion rules your mind.” Nynaeve opened her mouth, but the Aes Sedai went right on. “Lan, I must speak with you a moment.”

The two put their heads together, and Nynaeve was left with a sullen glower that she hated every time she realized it was on her face. It came too often as the Aes Sedai deftly turned her questions off onto another subject, slid easily by her conversational traps, or ignored her shouts until they ended in silence. The scowl made her feel like a girl who had been caught acting the fool by someone in the Women’s Circle. That was a feeling Nynaeve was not used to, and the calm smile on Moiraine’s face only made it worse.

If only there was some way to get rid of the woman. Lan would be better by himself—a Warder should be able to handle what was needed, she told herself hastily, feeling a sudden flush; no other reason—but one meant the other.

And yet, Lan made her even more furious than Moiraine. She could not understand how he managed to get under her skin so easily. He rarely said anything—sometimes not a dozen words in a day—and he never took part in any of the . . . discussions with Moiraine. He was often apart from the two women, scouting the land, but even when he was there he kept a little to one side, watching them as if watching a duel. Nynaeve wished he would stop. If it was a duel, she had not managed to score once, and Moiraine did not even seem to realize she was in a fight. Nynaeve could have done without his cool blue eyes, without even a silent audience.

That had been the way of their journey, for the most part. Quiet, except when her temper got the best of her, and sometimes when she shouted the sound of her voice seemed to crash in the silence like breaking glass. The land itself was quiet, as if the world were pausing to catch its breath. The wind moaned in the trees, but all else was still. The wind seemed distant, too, even when it was cutting through the cloak on her back.

At first the stillness was restful after everything that had happened. It seemed as if she had not known a moment of quiet since before Winternight. By the end of the first day alone with the Aes Sedai and the Warder, though, she was looking over her shoulder and fidgeting in her saddle as if she had an itch in the middle of her back where she could not reach. The silence seemed like crystal doomed to shatter, and waiting for the first crack put her teeth on edge.

It weighed on Moiraine and Lan, too, as outwardly unperturbable as they were. She soon realized that, beneath their calm surfaces, hour by hour they wound tighter and tighter, like clocksprings being forced to the breaking point. Moiraine seemed to listen to things that were not there, and what she heard put a crease in her forehead. Lan watched the forest and the river as if the leafless trees and wide, slow water carried the signs of traps and ambushes waiting ahead.

Part of her was glad that she was not the only one who apprehended that poised-on-the-brink feel to the world, but if it affected them, it was real, and another part of her wanted nothing so much as for it to be just her imagination. Something of it tickled the corners of her mind, as when she listened to the wind, but now she knew that that had to do with the One Power, and she could not bring herself to embrace those ripples at the edge of thought.

“It is nothing,” Lan said quietly when she asked. He did not look at her while he spoke; his eyes never ceased their scanning. Then, contradicting what he had just said, he added, “You should go back to your Two Rivers when we reach Whitebridge, and the Caemlyn Road. It’s too dangerous here. Nothing will try to stop you going back, though.” It was the longest speech he made all that day.

“She is part of the Pattern, Lan,” Moiraine said chidingly. Her gaze was elsewhere, too. “It is the Dark One, Nynaeve. The storm has left us . . . for a time, at least.” She raised one hand as though feeling the air, then scrubbed it on her dress unconsciously, as if she had touched filth. “He is still watching, however"—she sighed—"and his gaze is stronger. Not on us, but on the world. How much longer before he is strong enough to. . . ."

Nynaeve hunched her shoulders; suddenly she could almost feel someone staring at her back. It was one explanation she would just as soon the Aes Sedai had not given her.

Lan scouted their path down the river, but where before he had chosen the way, now Moiraine did so, as surely as if she followed some unseen track, footprints in air, the scent of memory. Lan only checked the route she intended, to see that it was safe. Nynaeve had the feeling that even if he said it was not, Moiraine would insist on it anyway. And he would go, she was sure. Straight down the river to. . . .

With a start, Nynaeve pulled out of her thoughts. They were at the foot of the White Bridge. The pale arch shone in the sunlight, a milky spiderweb too delicate to stand, sweeping across the Arinelle. The weight of a man would bring it crashing down, much less that of a horse. Surely it would collapse under its own weight any minute.

Lan and Moiraine rode unconcernedly ahead, up the gleaming white approach and onto the bridge, hooves ringing, not like steel on glass, but like steel on steel. The surface of the bridge certainly looked as slick as glass, wet glass, but it gave the horses a firm, sure footing.

Nynaeve made herself follow, but from the first step she half waited for the entire structure to shatter under them. *If lace were made of glass,* she thought, *it would look like this.*

It was not until they were almost all the way across that she noticed the tarry smell of char thickening the air. In a moment she saw.

Around the square at the foot of the White Bridge piles of blackened timbers, still leaking smoky threads, replaced half a dozen buildings. Men in poorly fitting red uniforms and tarnished armor patrolled the streets, but they marched quickly, as if afraid of finding anything, and they looked over their shoulders as they went. Townspeople—the few who were out—almost ran, shoulders hunched, as though something were chasing them.

Lan looked grim, even for him, and people walked wide of the three of them, even the soldiers. The Warder sniffed the air and grimaced, growling under his breath. It was no wonder to Nynaeve, with the stink of burn so strong.

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills," Moiraine mumbled. "No eye can see the Pattern until it is woven."

In the next moment she was down off Aldieb and speaking to townsfolk. She did not ask questions; she gave sympathy, and to Nynaeve's surprise it appeared genuine. People who shied away from Lan, ready to hurry from any stranger, stopped to speak with Moiraine. They appeared startled themselves at what they were doing, but they opened up, after a fashion, under Moiraine's clear gaze and soothing voice. The Aes Sedai's eyes seemed to share the people's hurt, to empathize with their confusion, and tongues loosened.

They still lied, though. Most of them. Some denied there had been any trouble at all. Nothing at all. Moiraine mentioned the burned buildings all around the square. Everything was fine, they insisted, staring past what they did not want to see.

One fat fellow spoke with a hollow heartiness, but his cheek twitched at every noise behind him. With a grin that kept slipping, he claimed an overturned lamp had started a fire that spread with the wind before anything could be done. One glance showed Nynaeve that no burned structure stood alongside another.

There were almost as many different stories as there were people. Several women lowered their voices conspiratorially. The truth of the matter was there was a man somewhere in the town meddling with the One Power. It was time to have the Aes Sedai in; past time, was the way they saw it, no matter what the men said about Tar Valon. Let the Red Ajah settle matters.

One man claimed it had been an attack by bandits, and another said a riot by Darkfriends. "Those ones going to see the false Dragon, you know," he confided darkly. "They're all over the place. Darkfriends, every one."

Still others spoke of some kind of trouble—they were vague about exactly what kind—that had come downriver on a boat.

"We showed them," a narrow-faced man muttered, scrubbing his hand together nervously. "Let them keep that kind of thing in the Borderlands, where it belongs. We went down to the docks and—" He cut off so abruptly his teeth clicked. Without another word he scurried off, peering back over his shoulder at them as if he thought they might chase him down.

The boat had gotten away—that much was clear, eventually, from others—cutting its moorings and fleeing downriver only the day before while a mob poured onto the docks. Nynaeve wondered if Egwene and the boys had been on board. One woman said that a gleeman had been on the boat. If that had been Thom Merrilin. . . .

She tried her opinion on Moiraine, that some of the Emond’s Fielders might have fled on the boat. The Aes Sedai listened patiently, nodding, until she was done.

“Perhaps,” Moiraine said then, but she sounded doubtful.

An inn still stood in the square, the common room divided in two by a shoulder-high wall. Moiraine paused as she stepped into the inn, feeling the air with her hand. She smiled at Whatever it was she felt, but she would say nothing of it, then.

Their meal was consumed in silence, silence not only at their table, but throughout the common room. The handful of people eating there concentrated on their own plates and their own thoughts. The innkeeper, dusting tables with a corner of his apron, muttered to himself continually, but always too low to be heard. Nynaeve thought it would not be pleasant sleeping there; even the air was heavy with fear.

About the time they pushed their plates away, wiped clean with the last scraps of bread, one of the red-uniformed soldiers appeared in the doorway. He seemed resplendent to Nynaeve, in his peaked helmet and burnished breastplate, until he took a pose just inside the door, with a hand resting on the hilt of his sword and a stern look on his face, and used a finger to ease his too-tight collar. It made her think of Cenn Buie trying to act the way a Village Councilor should.

Lan spared him one glance and snorted. “Militia. Useless.”

The soldier looked over the room, letting his eyes come to rest on them. He hesitated, then took a deep breath before stomping over to demand, all in a rush, who they were, what their business was in Whitebridge, and how long they intended to stay.

“We are leaving as soon as I finish my ale,” Lan said. He took another slow swallow before looking up at the soldier. “The Light illumine good Queen Morgase.”

The red-uniformed man opened his mouth, then took a good look at Lan’s eyes and stepped back. He caught himself immediately, with a glance at Moiraine and her. She thought for a moment that he was going to do something foolish to keep from looking the coward in front of two women. In her experience, men were often idiots that way. But too much had happened in Whitebridge; too much uncertainty had escaped from the cellars of men's minds. The militiaman looked back at Lan and reconsidered once more. The Warder's hard-planed face was expressionless, but there were those cold blue eyes. So cold.

The militiaman settled on a brisk nod. "See that you do. Too many strangers around these days for the good of the Queen's peace." Turning on his heel he stomped out again, practicing his stern look on the way. None of the locals in the inn seemed to notice.

"Where are we going?" Nynaeve demanded of the Warder. The mood in the room was such that she kept her voice low, but she made sure it was firm, too. "After the boat?"

Lan looked at Moiraine, who shook her head slightly and said, "First I must find the one I can be sure of finding, and at present he is somewhere to the north of us. I do not think the other two went with the boat in any case." A small, satisfied smile touched her lips. "They were in this room, perhaps a day ago, no more than two. Afraid, but they left alive. The trace would not have lasted without that strong emotion."

"Which two?" Nynaeve leaned over the table intently. "Do you know?" The Aes Sedai shook her head, the slightest of motions, and Nynaeve settled back. "If they're only a day or two ahead, why don't we go after them first?"

"I know they were here," Moiraine said in that insufferably calm voice, "but beyond that I cannot say if they went east or north or south. I trust they are smart enough to have gone east, toward Caemlyn, but I do not know, and lacking their tokens, I will not know where they are until I am perhaps within half a mile. In two days they could have gone twenty miles, or forty, in any direction, if fear urged them, and they were certainly afraid when they left here."

"But—"

"Wisdom, however fearful they were, in Whatever direction they ran, eventually they will remember Caemlyn, and it is there I will find them. But I will help the one I can find now, first."

Nynaeve opened her mouth again, but Lan cut her off in a soft voice. "They had reason to be afraid." He looked around, then lowered his voice. "There was a Halfman here." He grimaced, the way he had in the square. "I can still smell him everywhere."

Moiraine sighed. "I will keep hope until I know it is gone. I refuse to believe the Dark One can win so easily. I will find all three of them alive and well. I must believe it.”

“I want to find the boys, too,” Nynaeve said, “but what about Egwene? You never even mention her, and you ignore me when I ask. I thought you were going to take her off to”—she glanced at the other tables, and lowered her voice—“to Tar Valon.”

The Aes Sedai studied the tabletop for a moment before raising her eyes to Nynaeve’s, and when she did, Nynaeve started back from a flash of anger that almost seemed to make Moiraine’s eyes glow. Then her back stiffened, her own anger rising, but before she could say a word, the Aes Sedai spoke coldly.

“I hope to find Egwene alive and well, too. I do not easily give up young women with that much ability once I have found them. But it will be as the Wheel weaves.”

Nynaeve felt a cold ball in the pit of her stomach. *Am I one of those young women you won’t give up? We’ll see about that, Aes Sedai. The Light burn you, we’ll see about that!*

The meal was finished in silence, and it was a silent three who rode through the gates and down the Caemlyn Road. Moiraine’s eyes searched the horizon to the northeast. Behind them, the smoke-stained town of Whitebridge cowered.

* * *

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CHAPTER
29

Eyes Without Pity

Elyas pushed for speed across the brown grass flatland as if trying to make up for the time spent with the Traveling People, setting a pace southward that had even Bela grateful to stop when twilight deepened. Despite his desire for haste, though, he took precautions he had not taken before. At night they had a fire only if there was dead wood already on the ground. He would not let them break so much as a twig off of a standing tree. The fires he made were small, and always hidden in a pit carefully dug where he had cut away a plug of sod. As soon as their meal was prepared, he buried the coals and replaced the plug. Before they set out again in the gray false dawn, he went over the campsite inch by inch to make sure there was no sign that anyone had ever been there. He even righted overturned rocks and straightened bent-down weeds. He did it quickly, never taking more than a few minutes, but they did not leave until he was satisfied.

Perrin did not think the precautions were much good against dreams, but when he began to think of what they might be good against, he wished it were only the dreams. The first time, Egwene asked anxiously if the Trollocs were back, but Elyas only shook his head and urged them on. Perrin said nothing. He knew there were no Trollocs close; the wolves scented only grass and trees and small animals. It was not fear of Trollocs that drove Elyas, but that something else of which even Elyas was not sure. The wolves knew nothing of what it was, but they sensed Elyas's urgent wariness, and they began to scout as if danger ran at their heels or waited in ambush over the next rise.

The land became long, rolling crests, too low to be called hills, rising across their path. A carpet of tough grass, still winter sere and dotted with rank weeds, spread before them, rippled by an east wind that had nothing to cut it for a hundred miles. The groves of trees grew more scattered. The sun rose reluctantly, without warmth.

Among the squat ridges Elyas followed the contours of the land as much as possible, and he avoided topping the rises whenever possible. He seldom talked, and when he did. . . .

“You know how long this is taking, going around every bloody little hill like this? Blood and ashes! I’ll be till summer getting you off my hands. No, we can’t just go in a straight line! How many times do I have to tell you? You have any idea, even the faintest, how a man stands out on a ridgeline in country like this? Burn me, but we’re going back and forth as much as forward. Wiggling like a snake. I could move faster with my feet tied. Well, you going to stare at me, or you going to walk?”

Perrin exchanged glances with Egwene. She stuck her tongue out at Elyas’s back. Neither of them said anything. The one time Egwene had protested that Elyas was the one who wanted to go around the hills and he should not blame them, it got her a lecture on how sound carried, delivered in a growl that could have been heard a mile off. He gave the lecture over his shoulder, and he never even slowed to give it.

Whether he was talking or not, Elyas’s eyes searched all around them, sometimes staring as if there were something to see except the same coarse grass that was under their feet. If he did see anything, Perrin could not, and neither could the wolves. Elyas’s forehead grew extra furrows, but he would not explain, not why they had to hurry, not what he was afraid was hunting them.

Sometimes a longer ridge than usual lay across their path, stretching miles and miles to east and west. Even Elyas had to agree that going around those would take them too far out of their way. He did not let them simply cross over, though. Leaving them at the base of the slope, he would creep up to the crest on his belly, peering over as cautiously as though the wolves had not scouted there ten minutes before. Waiting at the bottom of the ridge, minutes passed like hours, and the not knowing pressed on them. Egwene chewed her lip and unconsciously clicked the beads Aram had given her through her fingers. Perrin waited doggedly. His stomach twisted up in a sick knot, but he managed to keep his face calm, managed to keep the turmoil hidden inside.

The wolves will warn if there’s danger. It would be wonderful if they went away, if they just vanished, but right now . . . right now, they’ll give *warning. What is he looking for? What?*

After a long search with only his eyes above the rise, Elyas always motioned them to come ahead. Every time the way ahead was clear—until the next time they found a ridge they could not go around. At the third such ridge, Perrin's stomach lurched. Sour fumes rose in his throat, and he knew if he had to wait even five minutes he would vomit. "I. . . ." He swallowed. "I'm coming, too."

"Keep low," was all Elyas said.

As soon as he spoke Egwene jumped down from Bela.

The fur-clad man pushed his round hat forward and peered at her from under the edge. "You expecting to make that mare crawl?" he said dryly.

Her mouth worked, but no sound came out. Finally she shrugged, and Elyas turned away without another word and began climbing the easy slope. Perrin hurried after him.

Well short of the crest Elyas made a downward motion and a moment later flattened himself on the ground, wriggling forward the last few yards. Perrin flopped on his belly.

At the top, Elyas took off his hat before raising his head ever so slowly. Peering through a clump of thorny weeds, Perrin saw only the same rolling plain that lay behind them. The down-slope was bare, though a clump of trees a hundred paces across grew in the hollow, perhaps half a mile south from the ridge. The wolves had already been through it, smelling no trace of Trollocs or Myrddraal.

East and west the land was the same as far as Perrin could see, rolling grassland and wide-scattered thickets. Nothing moved. The wolves were more than a mile ahead, out of sight; at that distance he could barely feel them. They had seen nothing when they covered this ground. *What is he looking for? There's nothing there.*

"We're wasting time," he said, starting to stand, and a flock of ravens burst out of the trees below, fifty, a hundred black birds, spiraling into the sky. He froze in a crouch as they milled over the trees. *The Dark One's Eyes. Did they see me?* Sweat trickled down his face.

As if one thought had suddenly sparked in a hundred tiny minds, every raven broke sharply in the same direction. South. The flock disappeared over the next rise, already descending. To the east another thicket disgorged more ravens. The black mass wheeled twice and headed south.

Shaking, he lowered himself to the ground slowly. He tried to speak, but his mouth was too dry. After a minute he managed to work up some spit. “Was that what you were afraid of? Why didn’t you say something? Why didn’t the wolves see them?”

“Wolves don’t look up in trees much,” Elyas growled. “And no, I wasn’t looking for this. I told you, I didn’t know what. . . .” Far to the west a black cloud rose over yet another grove and winged southward. They were too far off to make out individual birds. “It isn’t a big hunt, thank the Light. They don’t know. Even after. . . .” He turned to stare back the way they had come.

Perrin swallowed. Even after the dream, Elyas had meant. “Not big?” he said. “Back home you won’t see that many ravens in a whole year.”

Elyas shook his head. “In the Borderlands I’ve seen sweeps with a thousand ravens to the flock. Not too often—there’s a bounty on ravens there—but it has happened.” He was still looking north. “Hush, now.”

Perrin felt it, then; the effort of reaching out to the distant wolves. Elyas wanted Dapple and her companions to quit scouting ahead, to hurry back and check their backtrail. His already gaunt face tightened and thinned under the strain. The wolves were so far away Perrin could not even feel them. *Hurry. Watch the sky. Hurry.*

Faintly Perrin caught the reply from far to the south. *We come.* An image flashed in his mind—wolves running, muzzles pointing into the wind of their haste, running as if wildfire raced behind, running—flashed and was gone in an instant.

Elyas slumped and drew a deep breath. Frowning, he peered over the ridge, then back to the north, and muttered under his breath.

“You think there are more ravens behind us?” Perrin asked.

“Could be,” Elyas said vaguely. “They do it that way, sometimes. I know a place, if we can reach it by dark. We have to keep moving until full dark anyway, even if we don’t get there, but we can’t go as fast as I would like. Can’t afford to get too close to the ravens ahead of us. But if they’re behind us, too. . . .”

“Why dark?” Perrin said. “What place? Somewhere safe from the ravens?”

“Safe from ravens,” Elyas said, “but too many people know. . . . Ravens roost for the night. We don’t have to worry about them finding us in the dark. The Light send ravens are all we have to worry about then.” With one more look over the crest, he rose and waved to Egwene to bring Bela up. “But dark is a long way off. We have to get moving.” He started down the far slope in a shambling run, each stride barely catching him on the edge of falling. “Move, burn you!”

Perrin moved, half running, half sliding, after him.

Egwene topped the rise behind them, kicking Bela to a trot. A grin of relief bloomed on her face when she saw them. “What’s going on?” she called, urging the shaggy mare to catch up. “When you disappeared like that, I thought. . . . What happened?”

Perrin saved his breath for running until she reached them. He explained about the ravens and Elyas’s safe place, but it was a disjointed story. After a strangled, “Ravens!” she kept interrupting with questions for which, as often as not, he had no answers. Between them, he did not finish until they reached the next ridge.

Ordinarily—if anything about the journey could be called ordinary—they would have gone around this one rather than over, but Elyas insisted on scouting anyway.

“You want to just saunter right into the middle of them, boy?” was his sour comment.

Egwene stared at the crest of the ridge, licking her lips, as if she wanted to go with Elyas this time and wanted to stay where she was, too. Elyas was the only one who showed no hesitation.

Perrin wondered if the ravens ever doubled back. It would be a fine thing to reach the crest at the same time as a flock of ravens.

At the top he inched his head up until he could just see, and heaved a sigh of relief when all he saw was a copse of trees a little to the west. There were no ravens to be seen. Abruptly a fox burst out of the trees, running hard. Ravens poured from the branches after it. The beat of their wings almost drowned out a desperate whining from the fox. A black whirlwind dove and swirled around it. The fox’s jaws snapped at them, but they darted in, and darted away untouched, black beaks glistening wetly. The fox turned back toward the trees, seeking the safety of its den. It ran awkwardly now, head low, fur dark and bloody, and the ravens flapped around it, more and more of them at once, the fluttering mass thickening until it hid the fox completely. As suddenly as they had descended the ravens rose, wheeled, and vanished over the next rise to the south. A misshapen lump of torn fur marked what had been the fox.

Perrin swallowed hard. *Light! They could do that to us. A hundred ravens. They could—*

"Move," Elyas growled, jumping up. He waved to Egwene to come on, and without waiting set off at a trot toward the trees. "Move, burn you!" he called over his shoulder. "Move!"

Egwene galloped Bela over the rise and caught them before they reached the bottom of the slope. There was no time for explanations, but her eyes picked out the fox right away. Her face went as white as snow.

Elyas reached the trees and turned there, at the edge of the copse, waving vigorously for them to hurry. Perrin tried to run faster and stumbled. Arms windmilling, he barely caught himself short of going flat on his face. *Blood and ashes! I'm running as fast as I can!*

A lone raven winged out of the copse. It tilted toward them, screamed, and spun toward the south. Knowing he was already too late, Perrin fumbled his sling from around his waist. He was still trying to get a stone from his pocket to the sling when the raven abruptly folded up in mid-air and plummeted to the ground. His mouth dropped open, and then he saw the sling hanging from Egwene's hand. She grinned at him unsteadily.

"Don't stand there counting your toes!" Elyas called.

With a start Perrin hurried into the trees, then jumped out of the way to avoid being trampled by Egwene and Bela.

Far to the west, almost out of sight, what seemed like a dark mist rose into the air. Perrin felt the wolves passing in that direction, heading north. He felt them notice ravens, to the left and right of them, without slowing. The dark mist swirled northward as if pursuing the wolves, then abruptly broke off and flashed to the south.

"Do you think they saw us?" Egwene asked. "We were already in the trees, weren't we? They couldn't see us at that distance. Could they? Not that far off."

"We saw them at that distance," Elyas said dryly. Perrin shifted uneasily, and Egwene drew a frightened breath. "If they had seen us," Elyas growled, "they'd have been down on us like they were on that fox. Think, if you want to stay alive. Fear will kill you if you don't control it." His penetrating stare held on each of them for a moment. Finally he nodded. "They're gone, now, and we should be, too. Keep those slings handy. Might be useful again."

As they moved out of the copse, Elyas angled them westward from the line of march they had been following. Perrin's breath snagged in his throat; it was as if they were chasing after the last ravens they had seen. Elyas kept on tirelessly, and there was nothing for them to do but follow. After all, Elyas knew a safe place. Somewhere. So he said.

They ran to the next hill, waited till the ravens moved on, then ran again, waited, ran. The steady progress they had been keeping had been tiring enough, but all except Elyas quickly began to flag under this jerky pace. Perrin's chest heaved, and he gulped air when he had a few minutes to lie on a hilltop, leaving the search to Elyas. Bela stood head down, nostrils flaring, at every stop. Fear lashed them on, and Perrin did not know if it was controlled or not. He only wished the wolves would tell them what was behind them, if anything was, Whatever it was.

Ahead were more ravens than Perrin ever hoped to see again. To the left and right the black birds billowed up, and to the south. A dozen times they reached the hiding place of a grove or the scant shelter of a slope only moments before ravens swept into the sky. Once, with the sun beginning to slide from its midday height, they stood in the open, frozen as still as statues, half a mile from the nearest cover, while a hundred of the Dark One's feathered spies flashed by a bare mile to the east. Sweat rolled down Perrin's face despite the wind, until the last black shape dwindled to a dot and vanished. He lost count of the stragglers they brought down with their slings.

He saw more than enough evidence lying in the path the ravens had covered to justify his fear. He had stared with a queasy fascination at a rabbit that had been torn to pieces. The eyeless head stood upright, with the other bits—legs, entrails—scattered in a rough circle around it. Birds, too, stabbed to shapeless masses of feathers. And two more foxes.

He remembered something Lan had said. All the Dark One's creatures delight in killing. The Dark One's power is death. And if the ravens found them? Pitiless eyes shining like black beads. Stabbing beaks swirling around them. Needle-sharp beaks drawing blood. A hundred of them. *Or can they call more of their kind? Maybe all of them in the hunt?* A sickening image built up in his mind. A pile of ravens as big as a hill, seething like maggots, fighting over a few bloody shreds.

Suddenly the image was swept away by others, each one clear for an instant, then spinning and fading into another. The wolves had found ravens to the north. Screaming birds dove and whirled and dove again, beaks drawing blood with every swoop. Snarling wolves dodged and leaped, twisting in the air, jaws snapping. Again and again Perrin tasted feathers and the foul taste of fluttering ravens crushed alive, felt the pain of oozing gashes all over his body, knew with a despair that never touched on giving up that all his effort was not enough. Suddenly the ravens broke away, wheeling overhead for one last shriek of rage at the wolves. Wolves did not die as easily as foxes, and they had a mission. A flap of black wings, and they were gone, a few black feathers drifting down on their dead. Wind licked at a puncture on his left foreleg. There was something wrong with one of Hopper's eyes. Ignoring her own hurts, Dapple gathered them and they settled into a painful lope in the direction the ravens had gone. Blood matted their fur. *We come. Danger comes before us.*

Moving in a stumbling trot, Perrin exchanged a glance with Elyas. The man's yellow eyes were expressionless, but he knew. He said nothing, just watched Perrin and waited, all the while maintaining that effortless lope.

Waiting for me. Waiting for me to admit I feel the wolves.

"Ravens," Perrin panted reluctantly. "Behind us."

"He was right," Egwene breathed. "You can talk to them."

Perrin's feet felt like lumps of iron on the ends of wooden posts, but he tried to make them move faster. If he could outrun their eyes, outrun the ravens, outrun the wolves, but above all Egwene's eyes, that knew him now for what he was. *What are you? Tainted, the Light blind me! Cursed!*

His throat burned as it never had from breathing the smoke and heat of Master Luhhan's forge. He staggered and hung on to Egwene's stirrup until she climbed down and all but pushed him into the saddle despite his protests that he could keep going. It was not long, though, before she was clutching the stirrup as she ran, holding up her skirts with her other hand, and only a little while after that until he dismounted, his knees still wobbling. He had to pick her up to make her take his place, but she was too tired to fight him.

Elyas would not slow down. He urged them, and taunted them, and kept them so close behind the searching ravens to the south that Perrin thought all it would take would be for one bird to look back. "Keep moving, burn you! Think you'll do any better than that fox did, if they catch us? The one with its insides piled on its head?" Egwene swayed out of the saddle and vomited noisily. "I knew you'd remember. Just keep going a little more.

That's all. Just a little more. Burn you, I thought farm youngsters had endurance. Work all day and dance all night. Sleep all day and sleep all night, looks like to me. Move your bloody feet!"

They began coming down off the hills as soon as the last raven vanished over the next one, then while the last trailers still flapped above the hilltop. *One bird looking back.* To east and west the ravens searched while they hurried across the open spaces between. *One bird is all it will take.*

The ravens behind were coming fast. Dapple and the other wolves worked their way around them and were coming on without stopping to lick their wounds, but they had learned all the lessons they needed about watching the sky. *How close? How long?* The wolves had no notions of time the way men did, no reasons to divide a day into hours. The seasons were time enough for them, and the light and the dark. No need for more. Finally Perrin worked out an image of where the sun would stand in the sky when the ravens overran them from behind. He glanced over his shoulder at the setting sun, and licked his lips with a dry tongue. In an hour the ravens would be on them, maybe less. An hour, and it was a good two hours to sunset, at least two to full dark.

We'll die with the setting sun, he thought, staggering as he ran. Slaughtered like the fox. He fingered his axe, then moved to his sling. That would be more use. Not enough, though. Not against a hundred ravens, a hundred darting targets, a hundred stabbing beaks.

"It's your turn to ride, Perrin," Egwene said tiredly.

"In a bit," he panted. "I'm good for miles, yet." She nodded, and stayed in the saddle. *She* is *tired. Tell her? Or let her think we still have a chance to escape? An hour of hope, even if it is desperate, or an hour of despair?*

Elyas was watching him again, saying nothing. He must know, but he did not speak. Perrin looked at Egwene again and blinked away hot tears. He touched his axe and wondered if he had the courage. In the last minutes, when the ravens descended on them, when all hope was gone, would he have the courage to spare her the death the fox had died? *Light make me strong!*

The ravens ahead of them suddenly seemed to vanish. Perrin could still make out dark, misty clouds, far to the east and west, but ahead . . . nothing. *Where did they go? Light, if we've overrun them. . . .*

Abruptly a chill ran through him, one cold, clean tingle as if he had jumped into the Winespring Water in midwinter. It rippled through him and seemed to carry away some of his fatigue, a little of the ache in his legs and the burning of his lungs. It left behind . . . something. He could not say what, only he felt different. He stumbled to a halt and looked around, afraid.

Elyas watched him, watched them all, with a gleam behind his eyes. He knew what it was, Perrin was sure of it, but he only watched them.

Egwene reined in Bela and looked around uncertainly, half wondering and half fearful. "It's . . . strange," she whispered. "I feel as if I lost something." Even the mare had her head up expectantly, nostrils flaring as if they detected a faint odor of new-mown hay.

"What . . . what was that?" Perrin asked.

Elyas cackled suddenly. He bent over, shoulders shaking, to rest his hands on his knees. "Safety, that's what. We made it, you bloody fools. No raven will cross that line . . . not one that carries the Dark One's eyes, anyways. A Trolloc would have to be driven across, and there'd need to be something fierce pushing the Myrddraal to make him do the driving. No Aes Sedai, either. The One Power won't work here; they can't touch the True Source. Can't even feel the Source, like it vanished. Makes them itch inside, that does. Gives them the shakes like a seven-day drunk. It's safety."

At first, to Perrin's eyes, the land was unchanged from the rolling hills and ridges they had crossed the whole day. Then he noticed green shoots among the grass; not many, and they were struggling, but more than he had seen anywhere else. There were fewer weeds in the grass, too. He could not imagine what it was, but there was . . . something about this place. And something in what Elyas said tickled his memory.

"What is it?" Egwene asked. "I feel. . . . What is this place? I don't think I like it."

"A *stedding,*" Elyas roared. "You never listen to stories? Of course, there hasn't been an Ogier here in three thousand odd years, not since the Breaking of the World, but it's the *stedding* makes the Ogier, not the Ogier make the *stedding*."

"Just a legend," Perrin stammered. In the stories, the *stedding* were always havens, places to hide, whether it was from Aes Sedai or from creatures of the Father of Lies.

Elyas straightened; if not exactly fresh, he gave no sign that he had spent most of a day running. "Come on. We'd better get deeper into this legend. The ravens can't follow, but they can still see us this close to the edge, and there could be enough of them to watch the whole border of it. Let them keep hunting right on by it."

Perrin wanted to stay right there, now that he was stopped; his legs trembled and told him to lie down for a week. Whatever refreshment he had felt had been momentary; all the weariness and aches were back. He forced himself to take one step, then another. It did not get easier, but he kept at it. Egwene flapped the reins to get Bela moving again. Elyas settled into an effortless lope, only slowing to a walk when it became apparent the others could not keep up. A fast walk.

"Why don't—we stay here?" Perrin panted. He was breathing through his mouth, and he forced the words out between deep, wracking breaths. "If it's really—a *stedding*. We'd be safe. No Trollocs. No Aes Sedai. Why don't we—just stay here—until it's all over?" *Maybe the wolves won't come here, either.*

"How long will that be?" Elyas looked over his shoulder with one eyebrow raised. "What would you eat? Grass, like the horse? Besides, there's others know about this place, and nothing keeps men out, not even the worst of them. And there is only one place where there's still water to be found." Frowning uneasily, he turned in a complete circle, scanning the land. When he was done, he shook his head and muttered to himself. Perrin felt him calling to the wolves. *Hurry. Hurry.* "We take our chances on a choice of evils, and the ravens are sure. Come on. It's only another mile or two."

Perrin would have groaned if he had been willing to spare the breath.

Huge boulders began to dot the low hills, irregular lumps of gray, lichen-coated stone half buried in the ground, some as big as a house. Brambles webbed them, and low brush half hid most. Here and there amid the desiccated brown of brambles and brush a lone green shoot announced that this was a special place. Whatever wounded the land beyond its borders hurt it, too, but here the wound did not go quite as deep.

Eventually they straggled over one more rise, and at the base of this hill lay a pool of water. Any of them could have waded across it in two strides, but it was clear and clean enough to show the sandy bottom like a sheet of glass. Even Elyas hurried eagerly down the slope.

Perrin threw himself full length on the ground when he reached the pool and plunged his head in. An instant later he was spluttering from the cold of water that had welled up from the depths of the earth. He shook his head, his long hair spraying a rain of drops. Egwene grinned and splashed back at him. Perrin's eyes grew sober. She frowned and opened her mouth, but he stuck his face back in the water. *No questions. Not now. No explanations. Not ever.* But a small voice taunted him. *But you would have done it, wouldn't you?*

Eventually Elyas called them away from the pool. "Anybody wants to eat, I want some help."

Egwene worked cheerfully, laughing and joking as they prepared their scanty meal. There was nothing left but cheese and dried meat; there had been no chance to hunt. At least there was still tea. Perrin did his share, but silently. He felt Egwene's eyes on him, saw growing worry on her face, but he avoided meeting her eyes as much as he could. Her laughter faded, and the jokes came further apart, each one more strained than the last. Elyas watched, saying nothing. A somber mood descended, and they began their meal in silence. The sun grew red in the west, and their shadows stretched out long and thin.

Not quite an hour till dark. If not for the stedding*, all of you would be dead now. Would you have saved her? Would you have cut her down like so many bushes? Bushes don't bleed, do they? Or scream, and look in your eyes and ask, why?*

Perrin drew in on himself more. He could feel something laughing at him, deep in the back of his mind. Something cruel. Not the Dark One. He almost wished it was. Not the Dark One; himself.

For once Elyas had broken his rule about fires. There were no trees, but he had snapped dead branches from the brush and built his fire against a huge chunk of rock sticking out of the hillside. From the layers of soot staining the stone, Perrin thought the site must have been used by generation after generation of travelers.

What showed above ground of the big rock was rounded somewhat, with a sharp break on one side where moss, old and brown, covered the ragged surface. The grooves and hollows eroded in the rounded part looked odd to Perrin, but he was too absorbed in gloom to wonder about it. Egwene, though, studied it as she ate.

"That," she said finally, "looks like an eye." Perrin blinked; it *did* look like an eye, under all that soot.

“It is,” Elyas said. He sat with his back to the fire and the rock, studying the land around them while he chewed a strip of dried meat almost as tough as leather. “Artur Hawkwing’s eye. The eye of the High King himself. This is what his power and glory came to, in the end.” He said it absently. Even his chewing was absentminded; his eyes and his attention were on the hills.

“Artur Hawkwing!” Egwene exclaimed. “You’re joking with me. It isn’t an eye at all. Why would somebody carve Artur Hawkwing’s eye on a rock out here?”

Elyas glanced over his shoulder at her, muttering, “What do they teach you village whelps?” He snorted and straightened back to his watching, but he went on talking. “Artur Paendrag Tanreall, Artur Hawkwing, the High King, united all the lands from the Great Blight to the Sea of Storms, from the Aryth Ocean to the Aiel Waste, and even some beyond the Waste. He even sent armies the other side of the Aryth Ocean. The stories say he ruled the whole world, but what he really did rule was enough for any man outside of a story. And he brought peace and justice to the land.”

“All stood equal before the law,” Egwene said, “and no man raised his hand against another.”

“So you’ve heard the stories, at least.” Elyas chuckled, a dry sound. “Artur Hawkwing brought peace and justice, but he did it with fire and sword. A child could ride alone with a bag of gold from the Aryth Ocean to the Spine of the World and never have a moment’s fear, but the High King’s justice was as hard as that rock there for anyone who challenged his power, even if it was just by being who they were, or by people thinking they were a challenge. The common folk had peace, and justice, and full bellies, but he laid a twenty-year siege to Tar Valon and put a price of a thousand gold crowns on the head of every Aes Sedai.”

“I thought you didn’t like Aes Sedai,” Egwene said.

Elyas gave a wry smile. “Doesn’t matter what I like, girl. Artur Hawkwing was a proud fool. An Aes Sedai healer could have saved him when he took sick—or was poisoned, as some say—but every Aes Sedai still alive was penned up behind the Shining Walls, using all their Power to hold off an army that lit up the night with their campfires. He wouldn’t have let one near him, anyway. He hated Aes Sedai as much as he hated the Dark One.”

Egwene’s mouth tightened, but when she spoke, all she said was, “What does all that have to do with whether that’s Artur Hawkwing’s eye?”

“Just this, girl. With peace except for what was going on across the ocean, with the people cheering him wherever he went—they really loved him, you see; he was a harsh man, but never with the common folk—well, with all of that, he decided it was time to build himself a capital. A new city, not connected in any man’s mind with any old cause or faction or rivalry. Here, he’d build it, at the very center of the land bordered by the seas and the Waste and the Blight. Here, where no Aes Sedai would ever come willing or could use the Power if they did. A capital from which, one day, the whole world would receive peace and justice. When they heard the proclamation, the common people subscribed enough money to build a monument to him. Most of them looked on him as only a step below the Creator. A short step. It took five years to carve and build. A statue of Hawkwing, himself, a hundred times bigger than the man. They raised it right here, and the city was to rise around it.”

“There was never any city here,” Egwene scoffed. “There would have to be something left if there was. Something.”

Elyas nodded, still keeping his watch. “Indeed there was not. Artur Hawkwing died the very day the statue was finished, and his sons and the rest of his blood fought over who would sit on Hawkwing’s throne. The statue stood alone in the midst of these hills. The sons and the nephews and the cousins died, and the last of the Hawkwing’s blood vanished from the earth—except maybe for some of those who went over the Aryth Ocean. There were those who would have erased even the memory of him, if they could. Books were burned just because they mentioned his name. In the end there was nothing left of him but the stories, and most of them wrong. That’s what his glory came to.

“The fighting didn’t stop, of course, just because the Hawkwing and his kin were dead. There was still a throne to be won, and every lord and lady who could muster fighting men wanted it. It was the beginning of the War of the Hundred Years. Lasted a hundred and twenty-three, really, and most of the history of that time is lost in the smoke of burning towns. Many got a part of the land, but none got the whole, and sometime during those years the statue was pulled down. Maybe they couldn’t stand measuring themselves against it any longer.”

“First you sound as if you despise him,” Egwene said, “and now you sound as if you admire him.” She shook her head.

Elyas turned to look at her, a flat, unblinking stare. “Get some more tea now, if you want any. I want the fire out before dark.”

Perrin could make out the eye clearly now, despite the failing light. It was bigger than a man’s head, and the shadows falling across it made it seem like a raven’s eye, hard and black and without pity. He wished they were sleeping somewhere else.

* * *

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CHAPTER
30

Children of Shadow

Egwene sat by the fire, staring up at the fragment of statue, but Perrin went down by the pool to be alone. Day was fading, and the night wind was already rising out of the east, ruffling the surface of the water. He took the axe from the loop on his belt and turned it over in his hands. The ashwood haft was as long as his arm, and smooth and cool to the touch. He hated it. He was ashamed of how proud he had been of the axe back in Emond's Field. Before he knew what he might be willing to do with it.

"You hate her that much?" Elyas said behind him.

Startled, he jumped and half raised the axe before he saw who it was. "Can . . . ? Can you read my mind, too? Like the wolves?"

Elyas cocked his head to one side and eyed him quizzically. "A blind man could read your face, boy. Well, speak up. Do you hate the girl? Despise her? That's it. You were ready to kill her because you despise her, always dragging her feet, holding you back with her womanish ways."

"Egwene never dragged her feet in her life," he protested. "She always does her share. I don't despise her, I love her." He glared at Elyas, daring him to laugh. "Not like that. I mean, she isn't like a sister, but she and Rand. . . . Blood and ashes! If the ravens caught us. . . . If. . . . I don't know."

"Yes, you do. If she had to choose her way of dying, which do you think she'd pick? One clean blow of your axe, or the way the animals we saw today died? I know which I'd take."

"I don't have any right to choose for her. You won't tell her, will you? About. . . ." His hands tightened on the axe haft; the muscles in his arms corded, heavy muscles for his age, built by long hours swinging the hammer at Master Luhhan's forge. For an instant he thought the thick wooden shaft would snap. “I hate this bloody thing,” he growled. “I don’t know what I’m doing with it, strutting around like some kind of fool. I couldn’t have done it, you know. When it was all pretend and maybe, I could swagger, and play as if I. . . .” He sighed, his voice fading. “It’s different, now. I don’t ever want to use it again.”

“You’ll use it.”

Perrin raised the axe to throw it in the pool, but Elyas caught his wrist.

“You’ll use it, boy, and as long as you hate using it, you will use it more wisely than most men would. Wait. If ever you don’t hate it any longer, then will be the time to throw it as far as you can and run the other way.”

Perrin hefted the axe in his hands, still tempted to leave it in the pool. *Easy for him to say wait. What if I wait and then* can’t *throw it away?*

He opened his mouth to ask Elyas, but no words came out. A sending from the wolves, so urgent that his eyes glazed over. For an instant he forgot what he had been going to say, forgot he had been going to say anything, forgot even how to speak, how to breathe. Elyas’s face sagged, too, and his eyes seemed to peer inward and far away. Then it was gone, as quickly as it had come. It had only lasted a heartbeat, but that was enough.

Perrin shook himself and filled his lungs deeply. Elyas did not pause; as soon as the veil lifted from his eyes, he sped toward the fire without any hesitation. Perrin ran wordlessly behind him.

“Douse the fire!” Elyas called hoarsely to Egwene. He gestured urgently, and he seemed to be trying to shout in a whisper. “Get it out!”

She rose to her feet, staring at him uncertainly, then stepped closer to the fire, but slowly, clearly not understanding what was happening.

Elyas pushed roughly past her and snatched up the tea kettle, cursing when it burned him. Juggling the hot pot, he upended it over the fire just the same. A step behind him, Perrin arrived in time to start kicking dirt over the hissing coals as the last of the tea splashed into the fire, hissing and rising in tendrils of steam. He did not stop until the last vestige of the fire was buried.

Elyas tossed the kettle to Perrin, who immediately let it fall with a choked-off yell. Perrin blew on his hands, frowning at Elyas, but the fur-clad man was too busy giving their campsite a hasty look to pay any attention.

"No chance to hide that somebody's been here," Elyas said. "We'll just have to hurry and hope. Maybe they won't bother. Blood and ashes, but I was sure it was the ravens."

Hurriedly Perrin tossed the saddle on Bela, propping the axe against his thigh while he bent to tighten the girth.

"What is it?" Egwene asked. Her voice shook. "Trollocs? A Fade?"

"Go east or west," Elyas told Perrin. "Find a place to hide, and I'll join you as soon as I can. If they see a wolf. . . ." He darted away, crouching almost as if he intended to go to all fours, and vanished into the lengthening shadows of evening.

Egwene hastily gathered her few belongings, but she still demanded an explanation from Perrin. Her voice was insistent and growing more frightened by the minute as he kept silent. He was frightened, too, but fear made them move faster. He waited until they were headed toward the setting sun. Trotting ahead of Bela and holding the axe across his chest in both hands, he told what he knew over his shoulder in snatches while hunting for a place to go to ground and wait for Elyas.

"There are a lot of men coming, on horses. They came up behind the wolves, but the men didn't see them. They're heading toward the pool. Probably they don't have anything to do with us; it's the only water for miles. But Dapple says. . . ." He glanced over his shoulder. The evening sun painted odd shadows on her face, shadows that hid her expression. *What is she thinking? Is she looking at you as if she doesn't know you anymore? Does she know you?* "Dapple says they smell wrong. It's . . . sort of the way a rabid dog smells wrong." The pool was lost to sight behind them. He could still pick out boulders—fragments of Artur Hawkwing's statue—in the deepening twilight, but not to tell which was the stone where the fire had been. "We'll stay away from them, find a place to wait for Elyas."

"Why should they bother us?" she demanded. "We're supposed to be safe here. It's supposed to be safe. Light, there has to be someplace safe."

Perrin began looking harder for somewhere to hide. They could not be very far from the pool, but the twilight was thickening. Soon it would be too dark to travel. Faint light still bathed the crests. From the hollows between, where there was barely enough to see, it seemed bright by contrast. Off to the left a dark shape stood sharp against the sky, a large, flat stone slanting out of a hillside, cloaking the slope beneath in darkness.

"This way," he said.

He trotted toward the hill, glancing over his shoulder for any sign of the men who were coming. There was nothing—yet. More than once he had to stop and wait while the others stumbled after him. Egwene was crouched over Bela’s neck, and the mare was picking her way carefully over the uneven ground. Perrin thought they both must be more tired than he had believed. *This had better be a good hiding place. I don’t think we can hunt for another.*

At the base of the hill he studied the massive, flat rock outlined against the sky, jutting out the slope almost at the crest. There was an odd familiarity to the way the top of the huge slab seemed to form irregular steps, three up and one down. He climbed the short distance and felt across the stone, walking along it. Despite the weathering of centuries he could still feel four joined columns. He glanced up at the step-like top of the stone, towering over his head like a huge lean-to. Fingers. *We’ll shelter in Artur Hawkwing’s hand. Maybe some of his justice is left here.*

He motioned for Egwene to join him. She did not move, so he slid back down to the base of the hill and told her what he had found.

Egwene peered up the hill with her head pushed forward. “How can you see anything?” she asked.

Perrin opened his mouth, then shut it. He licked his lips as he looked around, for the first time really aware of what he was seeing. The sun was down. All the way down, now, and clouds hid the full moon, but it still seemed like the deep purple fringes of twilight to him. “I felt the rock,” he said finally. “That’s what it has to be. They won’t be able to pick us out against the shadow of it even if they come this far.” He took Bela’s bridle to lead her to the shelter of the hand. He could feel Egwene’s eyes on his back.

As he was helping her down from the saddle, the night broke out in shouts back toward the pool. She laid a hand on Perrin’s arm, and he heard her unspoken question.

“The men saw Wind,” he said reluctantly. It was difficult to pick out the meaning of the wolves’ thoughts. Something about fire. “They have torches.” He pressed her down at the base of the fingers and crouched beside her. “They’re breaking up into parties to search. So many of them, and the wolves are all hurt.” He tried to make his voice heartier. “But Dapple and the others should be able to keep out of their way, even injured, and they don’t expect us. People don’t see what they don’t expect. They’ll give up soon enough and make camp.” Elyas was with the wolves, and would not leave them while they were hunted. *So many riders. So persistent. Why so persistent?*

He saw Egwene nod, but in the dark she did not realize it. “We’ll be all right, Perrin.”

Light, he thought wonderingly, she’s *trying to comfort* me.

The shouts went on and on. Small knots of torches moved in the distance, flickering points of light in the darkness.

“Perrin,” Egwene said softly, “will you dance with me at Sunday? If we’re home by then?”

His shoulders shook. He made no sound, and he did not know if he was laughing or crying. “I will. I promise.” Against his will his hands tightened on the axe, reminding him that he still held it. His voice dropped to a whisper. “I promise,” he said again, and hoped.

Groups of torch-carrying men now rode through the hills, bunches of ten or twelve. Perrin could not tell how many groups there were. Sometimes three or four were in sight at once, quartering back and forth. They continued to shout to one another, and sometimes there were screams in the night, the screams of horses, the screams of men.

He saw it all from more than one vantage. He crouched on the hillside with Egwene, watching the torches move through the darkness like fireflies, and in his mind he ran in the night with Dapple, and Wind, and Hopper. The wolves had been too hurt by the ravens to run far or fast, so they intended to drive the men out of the darkness, drive them to the shelter of their fires. Men always sought the safety of fires in the end, when wolves roamed the night. Some of the mounted men led strings of horses without riders; they whinnied and reared with wide, rolling eyes when the gray shapes darted among them, screaming and pulling their lead ropes from the hands of the men who held them, scattering in all directions as fast as they could run. Horses with men on their backs screamed, too, when gray shadows flashed out of the dark with hamstringing fangs, and sometimes their riders screamed as well, just before jaws tore out their throats. Elyas was out there, also, more dimly sensed, stalking the night with his long knife, a two-legged wolf with one sharp steel tooth. The shouts became curses more often than not, but the searchers refused to give up.

Abruptly Perrin realized that the men with torches were following a pattern. Each time some of the parties came in view, one of them, at least, was closer to the hillside where he and Egwene were hiding. Elyas had said to hide, but. . . . *What if we run? Maybe we could hide in the dark, if we keep moving. Maybe. It has to be dark enough for that.*

He turned to Egwene, but as he did the decision was taken away from him. Bunched torches, a dozen of them, came around the base of the hill, wavering with the trot of the horses. Lanceheads gleamed in the torchlight. He froze, holding his breath, hands tightening on his axe haft.

The horsemen rode past the hill, but one of the men shouted, and the torches swung back. He thought desperately, seeking for a way to go. But as soon as they moved they would be seen, if they had not already been, and once they were marked they would have no chance, not even with the darkness to help.

The horsemen drew up at the foot of the hill, each man holding a torch in one hand and a long lance in the other, guiding his horse by the pressure of his knees. By the light of the torches Perrin could see the white cloaks of the Children of the Light. They held the torches high and leaned forward in their saddles, peering up at the deep shadows under Artur Hawkwing's fingers.

"There *is* something up there," one of them said. His voice was too loud, as if he was afraid of what lay outside the light of his torch. "I told you somebody could hide in that. Isn't that a horse?"

Egwene laid a hand on Perrin's arm; her eyes were big in the dark. Her silent question plain despite the shadow hiding her features. What to do? Elyas and the wolves still hunted through the night. The horses below shifted their feet nervously. *If we run now, they'll chase us down.*

One of the Whitecloaks stepped his horse forward and shouted up the hill. "If you can understand human speech, come down and surrender. You'll not be harmed if you walk in the Light. If you don't surrender, you will all be killed. You have one minute." The lances lowered, long steel heads bright with torchlight.

"Perrin," Egwene whispered, "we can't outrun them. If we don't give up, they'll kill us. Perrin?"

Elyas and the wolves were still free. Another distant, bubbling scream marked a Whitecloak who had hunted Dapple too closely. *If we run*. . . . Egwene was looking at him, waiting for him to tell her what to do. *If we run*. . . . He shook his head wearily and stood up like a man in a trance, stumbling down the hill toward the Children of the Light. He heard Egwene sigh and follow him, her feet dragging reluctantly. *Why are the Whitecloaks* *so persistent, as if they hate wolves with a passion? Why do they smell wrong?* He almost thought he could smell the wrongness himself, when the wind gusted from the riders.

“Drop that axe,” the leader barked.

Perrin stumbled toward him, wrinkling his nose to get rid of the smell he thought he smelt.

“Drop it, bumpkin!” The leader’s lance shifted toward Perrin’s chest.

For a moment he stared at the lancehead, enough sharp steel to go completely through him, and abruptly he shouted, “No!” It was not at the horseman he shouted.

Out of the night Hopper came, and Perrin was one with the wolf. Hopper, the cub who had watched the eagles soar, and wanted so badly to fly through the sky as the eagles did. The cub who hopped and jumped and leaped until he could leap higher than any other wolf, and who never lost the cub’s yearning to soar through the sky. Out of the night Hopper came and left the ground in a leap, soaring like the eagles. The Whitecloaks had only a moment to begin cursing before Hopper’s jaws closed on the throat of the man with his lance leveled at Perrin. The big wolf’s momentum carried them both off the other side of the horse. Perrin felt the throat crushing, tasted the blood.

Hopper landed lightly, already apart from the man he had killed. Blood matted his fur, his own blood and that of others. A gash down his face crossed the empty socket where his left eye had been. His good eye met Perrin’s two for just an instant. *Run, brother!* He whirled to leap again, to soar one last time, and a lance pinned him to the earth. A second length of steel thrust through his ribs, driving into the ground under him. Kicking, he snapped at the shafts that held him. *To soar.*

Pain filled Perrin, and he screamed, a wordless scream that had something of a wolf’s cry in it. Without thinking he leaped forward, still screaming. All thought was gone. The horsemen had bunched too much to be able to use their lances, and the axe was a feather in his hands, one huge wolf’s tooth of steel. Something crashed into his head, and as he fell, he did not know if it was Hopper or himself who died.

“. . . soar like the eagles.”

Mumbling, Perrin opened his eyes woozily. His head hurt, and he could not remember why. Blinking against the light, he looked around.

Egwene was kneeling and watching him where he lay. They were in a square tent as big as a medium-sized room in a farmhouse, with a ground cloth for a floor. Oil lamps on tall stands, one in each corner, gave a bright light.

"Thank the Light, Perrin," she breathed. "I was afraid they had killed you."

Instead of answering, he stared at the gray-haired man seated in the lone chair in the tent. A dark-eyed, grandfatherly face looked back at him, a face at odds in his mind with the white-and-gold tabard the man wore, and the burnished armor strapped over his pure-white undercoat. It seemed a kindly face, bluff and dignified, and something about it fit the elegant austerity of the tent's furnishings. A table and a folding bed, a washstand with a plain white basin and pitcher, a single wooden chest inlaid in simple geometric patterns. Where there was wood, it was polished to a soft glow, and the metal gleamed, but not too brightly, and nothing was showy. Everything in the tent had the look of craftsmanship, but only someone who had watched the work of craftsmen—like Master Luhhan, or Master Aydaer, the cabinetmaker—would see it.

Frowning, the man stirred two small piles of objects on the table with a blunt finger. Perrin recognized the contents of his pockets in one of those piles, and his belt knife. The silver coin Moiraine had given him toppled out, and the man pushed it back thoughtfully. Pursing his lips, he left the piles and lifted Perrin's axe from the table, hefting it. His attention came back to the Emond's Fielders.

Perrin tried to get up. Sharp pain stabbing along his arms and legs turned the movement into a flop. For the first time he realized that he was tied, hand and foot. His eyes went to Egwene. She shrugged ruefully, and twisted so that he could see her back. Half a dozen lashings wrapped her wrists and ankles, the cords making ridges in her flesh. A length of rope ran between the bonds around ankles and wrists, short enough to stop her from straightening to more than a crouch if she got to her feet.

Perrin stared. That they were tied was shock enough, but they wore enough ropes to hold horses. *What do they think we are?*

The gray-haired man watched them, curious and thoughtful, like Master al'Vere puzzling out a problem. He held the axe as if he had forgotten it.

The tent flap shifted aside, and a tall man stepped into the tent. His face was long and gaunt, with eyes so deeply set they seemed to look out from caves. There was no excess flesh on him, no fat at all; his skin was pulled tight over the muscle and bone beneath.

Perrin had a glimpse of night outside, and campfires, and two white-cloaked guards at the entrance of the tent, then the flap fell back into place. As soon as the newcomer was into the tent, he stopped, standing as rigid as an iron rod, staring straight ahead of him at the far wall of the tent. His plate-and-mail armor gleamed like silver against his snowy cloak and undercoat.

"My Lord Captain." His voice was as hard as his posture, and grating, but somehow flat, without expression.

The gray-haired man made a casual gesture. "Be at your ease, Child Byar. You have tallied our costs for this . . . encounter?"

The tall man moved his feet apart, but other than that Perrin did not see anything ease about his stance. "Nine men dead, my Lord Captain, and twenty-three injured, seven seriously. All can ride, though. Thirty horses had to be put down. They were hamstrung!" He emphasized that in his emotionless voice, as if what had happened to the horses were worse than the deaths and injuries to men. "Many of the remounts are scattered. We may find some at daybreak, my Lord Captain, but with wolves to send them on their way, it will take days to gather them all. The men who were supposed to be watching them have been assigned to night guard until we reach Caemlyn."

"We do not have days, Child Byar," the gray-haired man said mildly. "We ride at dawn. Nothing can change that. We must be in Caemlyn in time, yes?"

"As you command, my Lord Captain."

The gray-haired man glanced at Perrin and Egwene, then away again. "And what have we to show for it, aside from these two younglings?"

Byar drew a deep breath and hesitated. "I have had the wolf that was with this lot skinned, my Lord Captain. The hide should make a fine rug for my Lord Captain's tent."

Hopper! Not even realizing what he was doing, Perrin growled and struggled against his bonds. The ropes dug into his skin—his wrists became slippery with blood—but they did not give.

For the first time Byar looked at the prisoners. Egwene started back from him. His face was as expressionless as his voice, but a cruel light burned in his sunken eyes, as surely as flames burned in Ba’alzamon’s. Byar hated them as if they were enemies of long years instead of people never seen before tonight.

Perrin stared back defiantly. His mouth curled into a tight smile at the thought of his teeth meeting in the man’s throat.

Abruptly his smile faded, and he shook himself. *My teeth? I’m a man, not a wolf! Light, there has to be an end to this!* But he still met Byar’s glare, hate for hate.

“I do not care about wolf-hide rugs, Child Byar.” The rebuke in the Lord Captain’s voice was gentle, but Byar’s back snapped rigid again, his eyes locking to the wall of the tent. “You were reporting on what we achieved this night, no? If we achieved anything.”

Lord Captain’s voice was gentle, but Byar’s back snapped rigid again, his eyes locking to the wall of the tent. “You were reporting on what we achieved this night, no? If we achieved anything.”

“I would estimate the pack that attacked us at fifty beasts or more, my Lord Captain. Of that, we killed at least twenty, perhaps thirty. I did not consider it worth the risk of losing more horses to have the carcasses brought in tonight. In the morning I will have them gathered and burned, those that aren’t dragged off in the dark. Besides these two, there were at least a dozen other men. I believe we disposed of four or five, but it is unlikely we will find any bodies, given the Darkfriends’ propensity for carrying away their dead to hide their losses. This seems to have been a coordinated ambush, but that raises the question of. . . .”

Perrin’s throat tightened as the gaunt man went on. Elyas? Cautiously, reluctantly, he felt for Elyas, for the wolves . . . and found nothing. It was as if he had never been able to feel a wolf’s mind. *Either they’re dead, or they’ve abandoned you.* He wanted to laugh, a bitter laugh. At last he had what he had been wishing for, but the price was high.

The gray-haired man did laugh, just then, a rich, wry chuckle that made a red spot bloom on each of Byar’s cheeks. “So, Child Byar, it is your considered estimate that we were attacked in a planned ambush by upwards of fifty wolves and better than half a score of Darkfriends? Yes? Perhaps when you’ve seen a few more actions . . . .”

“But, my Lord Captain Bornhald . . . .”

“I would say six or eight wolves, Child Byar, and perhaps no other humans than these two. You have the true zeal, but no experience outside the cities. It is a different thing, bringing the Light, when streets and houses are far distant. Wolves have a way of seeming more than they are, in the night—and men, also. Six or eight at most, I think.” Byar’s flush deepened slowly. “I also suspect they were here for the same reason we are: the only easy water for at least a day in any direction. A much simpler explanation than spies or traitors within the Children, and the simplest explanation is usually the truest. You will learn, with experience.”

Byar’s face went deathly white as the grandfatherly man spoke; by contrast, the two spots in his hollow cheeks deepened from red to purple. He cut his eyes toward the two prisoners for an instant.

He hates us even more, now, Perrin thought, *for hearing this. But why did he hate us in the first place?*

“What do you think of this?” the Lord Captain said, holding up Perrin’s axe.

Byar looked a question at his commander and waited for an answering nod before he broke his rigid stance to take the weapon. He hefted the axe and gave a surprised grunt, then whirled it in a tight arc above his head that barely missed the top of the tent. He handled it as surely as if he had been born with an axe in his hands. A look of grudging admiration flickered across his face, but by the time he lowered the axe he was expressionless once more.

“Excellently balanced, my Lord Captain. Plainly made, but by a very good weaponsmith, perhaps even a master.” His eyes burned darkly at the prisoners. “Not a villager’s weapon, my Lord Captain. Nor a farmer’s.”

“No.” The gray-haired man turned toward Perrin and Egwene with a weary, slightly chiding smile, a kindly grandfather who knew his grandchildren had been up to some mischief. “My name is Geofram Bornhald,” he told them. “You are Perrin, I understand. But you, young woman, what is your name?”

Perrin glowered at him, but Egwene shook her head. “Don’t be silly, Perrin. I’m Egwene.”

“Just Perrin, and just Egwene,” Bornhald murmured. “But I suppose if you truly are Darkfriends, you wish to hide your identities as much as possible.”

Perrin heaved himself up to his knees; he could rise no further because of the way he was bound. “We aren’t Darkfriends,” he protested angrily.

The words were not completely out of his mouth before Byar reached him. The man moved like a snake. He saw the handle of his own axe swinging toward him and tried to duck, but the thick haft caught him over the ear. Only the fact that he was moving away from the blow kept his skull from being split. Even so, lights flashed in his eyes. Breath left him as he struck the ground. His head rung, and blood ran down his cheek.

“You have no right,” Egwene began, and screamed as the axe handle whipped toward her. She threw herself aside, and the blow whistled through empty air as she tumbled to the ground cloth.

“You will keep a civil tongue,” Byar said, “when speaking to an Anointed of the Light, or you will have no tongue.” The worst of it was his voice still had no emotion at all. Cutting out their tongues would give him no pleasure and no regret; it was just something he would do.

“Go easy, Child Byar.” Bornhald looked at the captives again. “I expect you do not know much about the Anointed, or about Lords Captain of the Children of the Light, do you? No, I thought not. Well, for Child Byar’s sake, at least, try not to argue or shout, yes? I want no more than that you should walk in the Light, and letting anger get the better of you won’t help any of us.”

Perrin looked up at the gaunt-faced man standing over them. *For Child Byar’s sake?* He noticed that the Lord Captain did not tell Byar to leave them alone. Byar met his eyes and smiled; the smile touched only his mouth, but the skin of his face drew tighter, until it looked like a skull. Perrin shivered.

“I have heard of this thing of men running with wolves,” Bornhald said musingly, “though I have not seen it before. Men supposedly talking with wolves, and with other creatures of the Dark One. A filthy business. It makes me fear the Last Battle is indeed coming soon.”

“Wolves aren’t—” Perrin cut off as Byar’s boot drew back. Taking a deep breath, he went on in a milder tone. Byar lowered his foot with a disappointed grimace. “Wolves aren’t creatures of the Dark One. They hate the Dark One. At least, they hate Trollocs, and Fades.” He was surprised to see the gaunt-faced man nod as if to himself.

Bornhald raised an eyebrow. “Who told you that?”

“A Warder,” Egwene said. She scrunched away from Byar’s heated eyes. “He said wolves hate Trollocs, and Trollocs are afraid of wolves.” Perrin was glad she had not mentioned Elyas.

“A Warder,” the gray-haired man sighed. “A creature of the Tar Valon witches. What else would that sort tell you, when he is a Darkfriend himself, and a servant of Darkfriends? Do you not know Trollocs have wolves’ muzzles and teeth, and wolves’ fur?”

Perrin blinked, trying to clear his head. His brain still felt like jellied pain, but there was something wrong here. He could not get his thoughts straight enough to puzzle it out.

“Not all of them,” Egwene muttered. Perrin gave Byar a wary look, but the gaunt man only watched her. “Some of them have horns, like rams or goats, or hawks’ beaks, or . . . or . . . all sorts of things.”

Bornhald shook his head sadly. “I give you every chance, and you dig yourself deeper with every word.” He held up one finger. “You run with wolves, creatures of the Dark One.” A second finger. “You admit to being acquainted with a Warder, another creature of the Dark One. I doubt he would have told you what he did if it was only in passing.” A third finger. “You, boy, carry a Tar Valon mark in your pocket. Most men outside Tar Valon get rid of those as fast as they can. Unless they serve the Tar Valon witches.” A fourth. “You carry a fighting man’s weapon while you dress like a farmboy. A skulker, then.” The thumb rose. “You know Trollocs, and Myrddraal. This far south, only a few scholars and those who have traveled in the Borderlands believe they are anything but stories. Perhaps you have been to the Borderlands? If so, tell me where? I have traveled a good deal in the Borderlands; I know them well. No? Ah, well, then.” He looked at his spread hand, then dropped it hard on the table. The grandfatherly expression said the grandchildren had been up to some very serious mischief indeed. “Why do you not tell me the truth of how you came to be running in the night with wolves?”

Egwene opened her mouth, but Perrin saw the stubborn set of her jaw and knew right away she was going to tell one of the stories they had worked out. That would not do. Not now, not here. His head ached, and he wished he had time to think it out, but there was no time. Who could tell where this Bornhald had traveled, with what lands and cities he was familiar? If he caught them in a lie, there would be no going back to the truth. Bornhald would be convinced they were Darkfriends, then.

“We’re from the Two Rivers,” he said quickly.

Egwene stared at him openly before she caught herself, but he pressed on with the truth—or a version of it. The two of them had left the Two Rivers to see Caemlyn. On the way they had heard of the ruins of a great city, but when they found Shadar Logoth, there were Trollocs there. The two of them managed to escape across the River Arinelle, but by that time they were completely lost. Then they fell in with a man who offered to guide them to Caemlyn. He had said his name was none of their business, and he hardly seemed friendly, but they needed a guide. The first either of them had seen of wolves had been after the Children of the Light appeared. All they had been trying to do was hide so they would not get eaten by wolves or killed by the men on horses.

“. . . If we’d known you were Children of the Light,” he finished, “we’d have gone to you for help.”

Byar snorted with disbelief. Perrin did not care overmuch; if the Lord Captain was convinced, Byar could not harm them. It was plain that Byar would stop breathing if Lord Captain Bornhald told him to.

“There is no Warder in that,” the gray-haired man said after a moment.

Perrin’s invention failed him; he knew he should have taken time to think it out. Egwene leaped into the breach. “We met him in Baerlon. The city was crowded with men who had come down from the mines after the winter, and we were put at the same table in an inn. We only talked to him for the length of a meal.”

Perrin breathed again. *Thank you, Egwene.*

“Give them back their belongings, Child Byar. Not the weapons, of course.” When Byar looked at him in surprise, Bornhald added, “Or are you one of those who have taken to looting the unenlightened, Child Byar? It is a bad business, that, yes? No man can be a thief and walk in the Light.” Byar seemed to struggle with disbelief at the suggestion.

“Then you’re letting us go?” Egwene sounded surprised. Perrin lifted his head to stare at the Lord Captain.

“Of course not, child,” Bornhald said sadly. “You may be telling the truth about being from the Two Rivers, since you know about Baerlon, and the mines. But Shadar Logoth . . . ? That is a name very, very few know, most of them Darkfriends, and anyone who knows enough to know the name, knows enough not to go there. I suggest you think of a better story on the journey to Amador. You will have time, since we must pause in

Caemlyn. Preferably the truth, child. There is freedom in truth and the Light."

Byar forgot some of his diffidence toward the gray-haired man. He spun from the prisoners, and there was an outraged snap to his words. "You can't! It is not allowed!" Bornhald raised one eyebrow quizzically, and Byar pulled himself up short, swallowing. "Forgive me, my Lord Captain. I forgot myself, and I humbly beg pardon and submit myself for penance, but as my Lord Captain himself has pointed out, we must reach Caemlyn in time, and with most of our remounts gone, we will be hard pressed enough without carrying prisoners along."

"And what would you suggest?" Bornhald asked calmly.

"The penalty for Darkfriends is death." The flat voice made it all the more jarring. He might have been suggesting stepping on a bug. "There is no truce with the Shadow. There is no mercy for Darkfriends."

"Zeal is to be applauded, Child Byar, but, as I must often tell my son, Dain, overzealousness can be a grievous fault. Remember that the Tenets also say, 'No man is so lost that he cannot be brought to the Light.' These two are young. They cannot yet be deep in the Shadow. They can yet be led to the Light, if they will only allow the Shadow to be lifted from their eyes. We must give them that chance."

For a moment Perrin almost felt affection for the grandfatherly man who stood between them and Byar. Then Bornhald turned his grandfather's smile on Egwene.

"If you refuse to come to the Light by the time we reach Amador, I will be forced to turn you over to the Questioners, and beside them Byar's zeal is but a candle beside the sun." The gray-haired man sounded like a man who regretted what he must do, but who had no intention of ever doing anything but his duty as he saw it. "Repent, renounce the Dark One, come to the Light, confess your sins and tell what you know of this vileness with wolves, and you will be spared that. You will walk free, in the Light." His gaze centered on Perrin, and he sighed sadly. Ice filled Perrin's spine. "But you, just Perrin from the Two Rivers. You killed two of the Children." He touched the axe that Byar still held. "For you, I fear, a gibbet waits in Amador."

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CHAPTER

31

Play for Your Supper

Rand narrowed his eyes, watching the dust-tail that rose ahead, three or four bends of the road away. Mat was already headed toward the wild hedgerow alongside the roadway. Its evergreen leaves and densely intermeshed branches would hide them as well as a stone wall, if they could find a way through to the other side. The other side of the road was marked by the sparse brown skeletons of head-high bushes, and beyond was an open field for half a mile to the woods. It might have been part of a farm not too long abandoned, but it offered no quick hiding place. He tried to judge the speed of the dust-tail, and the wind.

A sudden gust swirled road dust up around him, obscuring everything. He blinked and adjusted the plain, dark scarf across his nose and mouth. None too clean now, it made his face itch, but it kept him from inhaling dust with every breath. A farmer had given it to him, a long-faced man with grooves in his cheeks from worry.

“I don’t know what you’re running from,” he had said with an anxious frown, “and I don’t want to. You understand? My family.” Abruptly the farmer had dug two long scarves out of his coat pocket and pushed the tangle of wool at them. “It’s not much, but here. Belong to my boys. They have others. You don’t know me, understand? It’s hard times.”

Rand treasured the scarf. The list of kindnesses he had made in his mind in the days since Whitebridge was a short one, and he did not believe it would get much longer.

Mat, all but his eyes hidden by the scarf wrapped around his head, hunted swiftly along the tall hedgerow, pulling at the leafy branches. Rand touched the heron-marked hilt at his belt, but let his hand fall away. Once already, cutting a hole through a hedge had almost given them away. The dust-tail was moving toward them, and staying together too long. Not the wind. At least it was not raining. Rain settled the dust. No matter how hard it fell, it never turned the hard-packed road to mud, but when it rained there was no dust. Dust was the only warning they had before whoever it was came close enough to hear. Sometimes that was too late.

"Here," Mat called softly. He seemed to step right through the hedge. Rand hurried to the spot. Someone had cut a hole there, once. It was partly grown over, and from three feet away it looked as solid as the rest, but close up there was only a thin screen of branches. As he pushed through, he heard horses coming. Not the wind.

He crouched behind the barely covered opening, clutching the hilt of his sword as the horsemen rode by. Five . . . six . . . seven of them. Plainly dressed men, but swords and spears said they were not villagers. Some wore leather tunics with metal studs, and two had round steel caps. Merchants' guards, perhaps, between hirings. Perhaps.

One of them casually swung his eyes toward the hedge as he went by the opening, and Rand bared an inch of his sword. Mat snarled silently like a cornered badger, squinting above his scarf. His hand was under his coat; he always clutched the dagger from Shadar Logoth when there was danger. Rand was no longer sure if it was to protect himself or to protect the ruby-hilted dagger. Of late Mat seemed to forget he had a bow, sometimes.

The riders passed at a slow trot, going somewhere with a purpose but not too great a haste. Dust sifted through the hedge.

Rand waited until the clop of the hooves faded before he stuck his head cautiously back through the hole. The dust-tail was well down the road, going the way they had come. Eastward the sky was clear. He climbed out onto the roadway, watching the column of dust move west.

"Not after us," he said, halfway between a statement and a question.

Mat scrambled out after him, looking warily in both directions. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe."

Rand had no idea which way he meant it, but he nodded. Maybe. It had not begun like this, their journey down the Caemlyn Road.

For a long time after leaving Whitebridge, Rand would suddenly find himself staring back down the road behind them. Sometimes he would see someone who made his breath catch, a tall, skinny man hurrying up the road, or a lanky, white-haired fellow up beside the driver on a wagon, but it was always a pack-peddler, or farmers making their way to market, never Thom Merrilin. Hope faded as the days passed.

There was considerable traffic on the road, wagons and carts, people on horses and people afoot. They came singly and in groups, a train of merchants’ wagons or a dozen horsemen together. They did not jam the road, and often there was nothing in sight except the all but leafless trees lining the hard-packed roadbed, but there were certainly more people traveling than Rand had ever seen in the Two Rivers.

Most traveled in the same direction that they did, eastward toward Caemlyn. Sometimes they got a ride in a farmer’s wagon for a little distance, a mile, or five, but more often they walked. Men on horseback they avoided; when they spotted even one rider in the distance they scrambled off the road and hid until he was past. None ever wore a black cloak, and Rand did not really think a Fade would let them see him coming, but there was no point in taking chances. In the beginning it was just the Halfmen they feared.

The first village after Whitebridge looked so much like Emond’s Field that Rand’s steps dragged when he saw it. Thatched roofs with high peaks, and goodwives in their aprons gossiping over the fences between their houses, and children playing on a village green. The women’s hair hung unbraided around their shoulders, and other small things were different, too, but the whole together was like home. Cows cropped on the green, and geese waddled self-importantly across the road. The children tumbled, laughing, in the dust where the grass was gone altogether. They did not even look around when Rand and Mat went by. That was another thing that was different. Strangers were no oddity there; two more did not draw so much as a second glance. Village dogs only raised their heads to sniff as he and Mat passed; none stirred themselves.

It was coming on evening as they went through the village, and he felt a pang of homesickness as lights appeared in the windows. *No matter what it looks like,* a small voice whispered in his mind, *it isn’t really home. Even if you go into one of those houses Tam won’t be there. If he was, could you look him in the face? You know, now, don’t you? Except for little things like where you come from and who you are. No fever-dreams.* He hunched his shoulders against taunting laughter inside his head. *You might as well stop,* the voice snickered. *One place is as good as another when you aren’t from anywhere, and the Dark One has you marked.*

Mat tugged at his sleeve, but he pulled loose and sared at the houses. He did not want to stop, but he did want to look and remember. *So much like home, but you'll never see that again, will you?*

Mat yanked at him again. His face was taut, the skin around his mouth and eyes white. "Come on," Mat muttered. "Come on." He looked at the village as if he suspected something of hiding there. "Come on. We can't stop yet."

Rand turned in a complete circle, taking in the whole village, and sighed. They were not very far from Whitebridge. If the Myrddraal could get past Whitebridge's wall without being seen, it would have no trouble at all searching this small village. He let himself be drawn on into the countryside beyond, until the thatch-roofed houses were left behind.

Night fell before they found a spot by moonlight, under some bushes still bearing their dead leaves. They filled their bellies with cold water from a shallow rivulet not far away and curled up on the ground, wrapped in their cloaks, without a fire. A fire could be seen; better to be cold.

Uneasy with his memories, Rand woke often, and every time he could hear Mat muttering and tossing in his sleep. He did not dream, that he could remember, but he did not sleep well. *You'll never see home again.*

That was not the only night they spent with just their cloaks to protect them from the wind, and sometimes the rain, cold and soaking. It was not the only meal they made from nothing but cold water. Between them they had enough coins for a few meals at an inn, but a bed for the night would take too much. Things cost more outside the Two Rivers, more this side of the Arinelle than in Baerlon. What money they had left had to be saved for an emergency.

One afternoon Rand mentioned the dagger with the ruby in its hilt, while they were trudging down the road with bellies too empty to rumble, and the sun low and weak, and nothing in view for the coming night but more bushes. Dark clouds built up overhead for rain during the night. He hoped they were lucky; maybe no more than an icy drizzle.

He went on a few steps before he realized that Mat had stopped. He stopped, too, wriggling his toes in his boots. At least his feet felt warm. He eased the straps across his shoulders. His blanketroll and Thom's bundled cloak were not heavy, but even a few pounds weighed heavy after miles on an empty stomach. "What's the matter, Mat?" he said.

“Why are you so anxious to sell it?” Mat demanded angrily. “I found it, after all. You ever think I might like to keep it? For a while, anyway. If you want to sell something, sell that bloody sword!”

Rand rubbed his hand along the heron-marked hilt. “My father gave this sword to me. It was his. I wouldn’t ask you to sell something your father gave you. Blood and ashes, Mat, do you like going hungry? Anyway, even if I could find somebody to buy it, how much would a sword bring? What would a farmer want with a sword? That ruby would fetch enough to take us all the way to Caemlyn in a carriage. Maybe all the way to Tar Valon. And we’d eat every meal in an inn, and sleep every night in a bed. Maybe you like the idea of walking halfway across the world and sleeping on the ground?” He glared at Mat, and his friend glared back.

They stood like that in the middle of the road until Mat suddenly gave an uncomfortable shrug, and dropped his eyes to the road. “Who would I sell it to, Rand? A farmer would have to pay in chickens; we couldn’t buy a carriage with chickens. And if I even showed it in any village we’ve been through, they’d probably think we stole it. The Light knows what would happen then.”

After a minute Rand nodded reluctantly. “You’re right. I know it. I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to snap at you. It’s only that I’m hungry and my feet hurt.”

“Mine, too.” They started down the road again, walking even more wearily than before. The wind gusted up, blowing dust in their faces. “Mine, too.” Mat coughed.

Farms did provide some meals and a few nights out of the cold. A haystack was nearly as warm as a room with a fire, at least compared to lying under the bushes, and a haystack, even one without a tarp over it, kept all but the heaviest rain off, if you dug yourself in deeply enough. Sometimes Mat tried his hand at stealing eggs, and once he attempted to milk a cow left unattended, staked out on a long rope to crop in a field. Most farms had dogs, though, and farm dogs were watchful. A two-mile run with baying hounds at their heels was too high a price for two or three eggs as Rand saw it, especially when the dogs sometimes took hours to go away and let them down out of the tree where they had taken shelter. The hours were what he regretted.

He did not really like doing it, but Rand preferred to approach a farmhouse openly in broad daylight. Now and again they had the dogs set on them anyway, without a word being said, for the rumors and the times made everyone who lived apart from other people nervous about strangers, but often an hour or so chopping wood or hauling water would earn a meal and a bed, even if the bed was a pile of straw in the barn. But an hour or two doing chores was an hour or two of daylight when they were standing still, an hour or two for the Myrddraal to catch up. Sometimes he wondered how many miles a Fade could cover in an hour. He begrudged every minute of it—though admittedly not so much when he was wolfing down a goodwife's hot soup. And when they had no food, knowing they had spent every possible minute moving toward Caemlyn did not do much to soothe an empty belly. Rand could not make up his mind if it was worse to lose time or go hungry, but Mat went beyond worrying about his belly or pursuit.

"What do we know about them, anyway?" Mat demanded one afternoon while they were mucking out stalls on a small farm.

"Light, Mat, what do they know about us?" Rand sneezed. They were working stripped to the waist, and sweat and straw covered them both liberally, and motes of straw-dust hung in the air. "What I know is they'll give us some roast lamb and a real bed to sleep in."

Mat dug his hayfork into the straw and manure and gave a sidelong frown at the farmer, coming from the back of the barn with a bucket in one hand and his milking stool in the other. A stooped old man with skin like leather and thin, gray hair, the farmer slowed when he saw Mat looking at him, then looked away quickly and hurried on out of the barn, slopping milk over the rim of the bucket in his haste.

"He's up to something, I tell you," Mat said. "See the way he wouldn't meet my eye? Why are they so friendly to a couple of wanderers they never laid eyes on before? Tell me that."

"His wife says we remind her of their grandsons. Will you stop worrying about them? What we have to worry about is behind us. I hope."

"He's up to something," Mat muttered.

When they finished, they washed up at the trough in front of the barn, their shadows stretching long with the sinking sun. Rand toweled off with his shirt as they walked to the farmhouse. The farmer met them at the door; he leaned on a quarterstaff in a too-casual manner. Behind him his wife clutched her apron and peered past his shoulder, chewing her lip. Rand sighed; he did not think he and Mat reminded them of their grandsons any longer.

“Our sons are coming to visit tonight,” the old man said. “All four of them. I forgot. They’re all four coming. Big lads. Strong. Be here any time, now. I’m afraid we don’t have the bed we promised you.”

His wife thrust a small bundle wrapped in a napkin past him. “Here. It’s bread, and cheese, and pickles, and lamb. Enough for two meals, maybe. Here.” Her wrinkled face asked them to please take it and go.

Rand took the bundle. “Thank you. I understand. Come on, Mat.”

Mat followed him, grumbling while he pulled his shirt over his head. Rand thought it best to cover as many miles as they could before stopping to eat. The old farmer had a dog.

It could have been worse, he thought. Three days earlier, while they were still working, they’d had the dogs set on them. The dogs, and the farmer, and his two sons waving cudgels chased them out to the Caemlyn Road and half a mile down it before giving up. They had barely had time to snatch up their belongings and run. The farmer had carried a bow with a broad-head arrow nocked.

“Don’t come back, hear!” he had shouted after them. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but don’t let me see your shifty eyes again!”

Mat had started to turn back, fumbling at his quiver, but Rand pulled him on. “Are you crazy?” Mat gave him a sullen look, but at least he kept running.

Rand sometimes wondered if it was worthwhile stopping at farms. The further they went, the more suspicious of strangers Mat became, and the less he was able to hide it. Or bothered to. The meals got skimpier for the same work, and sometimes not even the barn was offered as a place to sleep. But then a solution to all their problems came to Rand, or so it seemed, and it came at Grinwell’s farm.

Master Grinwell and his wife had nine children, the eldest a daughter not more than a year younger than Rand and Mat. Master Grinwell was a sturdy man, and with his children he probably had no need of any more help, but he looked them up and down, taking in their travel-stained clothes and dusty boots, and allowed as how he could always find work for more hands. Mistress Grinwell said that if they were going to eat at her table, they would not do it in those filthy things. She was about to do laundry, and some of her husband’s old clothes would fit them well enough for working.

She smiled when she said it, and for a minute she looked to Rand just like Mistress al'Vere, though her hair was yellow; he had never seen hair that color before. Even Mat seemed to lose some of his tension when her smile touched him. The eldest daughter was another matter.

Dark-haired, big-eyed, and pretty, Else grinned impudently at them whenever her parents were not looking. While they worked, moving barrels and sacks of grain in the barn, she hung over a stall door, humming to herself and chewing the end of one long pigtail, watching them. Rand she watched especially. He tried to ignore her, but after a few minutes he put on the shirt Master Grinwell had loaned him. It was tight across the shoulders and too short, but it was better than nothing. Else laughed out loud when he tugged it on. He began to think that this time it would not be Mat's fault when they were chased off.

Perrin would know how to handle this, he thought. *He'd make some offhand comment, and pretty soon she'd be laughing at his jokes instead of mooning around where her father can see.* Only he could not think of any offhand comment, or any jokes, either. Whenever he looked in her direction, she smiled at him in a way that would have her father loosing the dogs on them if he saw. Once she told him she liked tall men. All the boys on the farms around there were short. Mat gave a nasty snicker. Wishing he could think of a joke, Rand tried to concentrate on his hayfork.

The younger children, at least, were a blessing in Rand's eyes. Mat's wariness always eased a little when there were children around. After supper they all settled in front of the fireplace, with Master Grinwell in his favorite chair thumbing his pipe full of tabac and Mistress Grinwell fussing with her sewing box and the shirts she had washed for him and Mat. Mat dug out Thom's colored balls and began to juggle. He never did that unless there were children. The children laughed when he pretended to be dropping the balls, snatching them at the last minute, and they clapped for fountains and figure-eights and a six-ball circle that he really did almost drop. But they took it in good part, Master Grinwell and his wife applauding as hard as their children. When Mat was done, bowing around the room with as many flourishes as Thom might have made, Rand took Thom's flute from its case.

He could never handle the instrument without a pang of sadness. Touching its gold-and-silver scrollwork was like touching Thom's memory. He never handled the harp except to see that it was safe and dry—Thom had always said the harp was beyond a farmboy’s clumsy hands—but whenever a farmer allowed them to stay, he always played one tune on the flute after supper. It was just a little something extra to pay the farmer, and maybe a way of keeping Thom’s memory fresh.

With a laughing mood already set by Mat’s juggling, he played “Three Girls in the Meadow.” Master and Mistress Grinwell clapped along, and the smaller children danced around the floor, even the smallest boy, who could barely walk, stomping his feet in time. He knew he would win no prizes at Bel Tine, but after Thom’s teaching he would not be embarrassed to enter.

Else was sitting cross-legged in front of the fire, and as he lowered the flute after the last note, she leaned forward with a long sigh and smiled at him. “You play so beautifully. I never heard anything so beautiful.”

Mistress Grinwell suddenly paused in her sewing and raised an eyebrow at her daughter, then gave Rand a long, appraising look.

He had picked up the leather case to put the flute away, but under her stare he dropped the case and almost the flute, too. If she accused him of trifling with her daughter. . . . In desperation he put the flute back to his lips and played another song, then another, and another. Mistress Grinwell kept watching him. He played “The Wind That Shakes the Willow,” and “Coming Home From Tarwin’s Gap,” and “Mistress Aynora’s Rooster,” and “The Old Black Bear.” He played every song he could think of, but she never took her eyes off him. She never said anything, either, but she watched, and weighed.

It was late when Master Grinwell finally stood up, chuckling and rubbing his hands together. “Well, this has been rare fun, but it’s way past our bedtime. You traveling lads make your own hours, but morning comes early on a farm. I’ll tell you lads, I have paid good money at an inn for no better entertainment than I’ve had this night. For worse.”

“I think they should have a reward, father,” Mistress Grinwell said as she picked up her youngest boy, who had long since fallen asleep in front of the fire. “The barn is no fit place to sleep. They can sleep in Else’s room tonight, and she will sleep with me.”

Else grimaced. She was careful to keep her head down, but Rand saw it. He thought her mother did, too.

Master Grinwell nodded. “Yes, yes, much better than the barn. If you don’t mind sleeping two to a bed, that is.” Rand flushed; Mistress Grinwell was still looking at him. “I do wish I could hear more of that flute. And your juggling, too. I like that. You know, there's a little task you could help with tomorrow, and—"

"They'll be wanting an early start, father," Mistress Grinwell cut in. "Arien is the next village the way they're going, and if they intend to try their luck at the inn there, they'll have to walk all day to get there before dark."

"Yes, mistress," Rand said, "we will. And thank you."

She gave him a tight-lipped smile as if she knew very well that his thanks were for more than her advice, or even supper and a warm bed.

The whole next day Mat twitted him about Else as they made their way down the road. He kept trying to change the subject, and what the Grinwells had suggested about performing at inns was the easiest thing to mind. In the morning, with Else pouting as he left, and Mistress Grinwell watching with a sharp-eyed look of good-riddance and soonest-mended, it was just something to keep Mat from talking. By the time they did reach the next village, it was something else again.

With dusk descending, they entered the only inn in Arien, and Rand spoke to the innkeeper. He played "Ferry O'er the River"—which the plump innkeeper called "Darling Sara"—and part of "The Road to Dun Aren," and Mat did a little juggling, and the upshot was that they slept in a bed that night and ate roasted potatoes and hot beef. It was the smallest room in the inn, to be sure, up under the eaves in the back, and the meal came in the middle of a long night of playing and juggling, but it was still a bed beneath a roof. Even better, to Rand, every daylight hour had been spent traveling. And the inn's patrons did not seem to care if Mat stared at them suspiciously. Some of them even looked askance at one another. The times made suspicion of strangers a commonplace, and there were always strangers at an inn.

Rand slept better than he had since leaving Whitebridge, despite sharing a bed with Mat and his nocturnal muttering. In the morning the innkeeper tried to talk them into staying another day or two, but when he could not, he called over a bleary-eyed farmer who had drunk too much to drive his cart home the night before. An hour later they were five miles further east, sprawling on their backs on the straw in the back of Eazil Forney's cart.

That became the way of their traveling. With a little luck, and maybe a ride or two, they could almost always reach the next village by dark. If there was more than one inn in a village, the innkeepers would bid for them once they heard Rand’s flute and saw Mat juggle. Together they still did not come close to a gleeman, but they were more than most villages saw in a year. Two or three inns in a town meant a better room, with two beds, and more generous portions of a better cut of meat, and sometimes even a few coppers in their pockets when they left besides. In the mornings there was almost always someone to offer a ride, another farmer who had stayed too late and drunk too much, or a merchant who had liked their entertainment enough not to mind if they hopped up on the back of one of his wagons. Rand began to think their problems were over till they reached Caemlyn. But then they came to Four Kings.

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CHAPTER
32

Four Kings in Shadow

The village was bigger than most, but still a scruffy town to bear a name like Four Kings. As usual, the Caemlyn Road ran straight through the center of the town, but another heavily traveled highway came in from the south, too. Most villages were markets and gathering places for the farmers of the area, but there were few farmers to be seen here. Four Kings survived as a stopover for merchants' wagon trains on their way to Caemlyn and to the mining towns in the Mountains of Mist beyond Baerlon, as well as the villages between. The southern road carried Lugard's trade with the mines in the west; Lugarder merchants going to Caemlyn had a more direct route. The surrounding country held few farms, barely enough to feed themselves and the town, and everything in the village centered on the merchants and their wagons, the men who drove them and the laborers who loaded the goods.

Plots of bare earth, ground to dust, lay scattered through Four Kings, filled with wagons parked wheel to wheel and abandoned except for a few bored guards. Stables and horse-lots lined the streets, all of which were wide enough to allow wagons to pass and deeply rutted from too many wheels. There was no village green, and the children played in the ruts, dodging wagons and the curses of wagon drivers. Village women, their heads covered with scarves, kept their eyes down and walked quickly, sometimes followed by wagoneers' comments that made Rand blush; even Mat gave a start at some of them. No woman stood gossiping over the fence with a neighbor. Drab wooden houses stood cheek by jowl, with only narrow alleys between and whitewash—where anyone had bothered to whitewash the weathered boards—faded as if it had not been freshened in years. Heavy shutters on the houses had not been open in so long that the hinges were solid lumps of rust. Noise hung over everything, clanging from blacksmiths, shouts from the wagon drivers, raucous laughter from the town’s inns.

Rand swung down from the back of a merchant’s canvas-topped wagon as they came abreast of a garishly painted inn, all greens and yellows that caught the eye from afar among the leaden houses. The line of wagons kept moving. None of the drivers even seemed to notice that he and Mat had gone; dusk was falling, and they all had their eyes on unhitching the horses and reaching the inns. Rand stumbled in a rut, then leaped quickly to avoid a heavy-laden wagon clattering the other way. The driver shouted a curse at him as the wagon rolled by. A village woman stepped around him and hurried on without ever meeting his eye.

“I don’t know about this place,” he said. He thought he could hear music mixed in the din, but he could not tell from where it was coming. From the inn, maybe, but it was hard to be sure. “I don’t like it. Maybe we’d better go on this time.”

Mat gave him a scornful look, then rolled his eyes at the sky. Dark clouds thickened overhead. “And sleep under a hedge tonight? In that? I’m used to a bed again.” He cocked his head to listen, then grunted. “Maybe one of these places doesn’t have musicians. Anyway, I’ll bet they don’t have a juggler.” He slung his bow across his shoulders and started for the bright yellow door, studying everything through narrowed eyes. Rand followed doubtfully.

There were musicians inside, their zither and drum almost drowned in coarse laughter and drunken shouting. Rand did not bother to find the landlord. The next two inns had musicians as well, and the same deafening cacophony. Roughly dressed men filled the tables and stumbled across the floor, waving mugs and trying to fondle serving maids who dodged with fixed, long-suffering smiles. The buildings shook with the racket, and the smell was sour, a stench of old wine and unwashed bodies. Of the merchants, in their silk and velvet and lace, there was no sign; private dining rooms abovestairs protected their ears and noses. He and Mat only put their heads in the doors before leaving. He was beginning to think they would have no choice but to move on.

The fourth inn, The Dancing Cartman, stood silent.

It was as gaudy as the other inns, yellow trimmed in bright red and bilious, eye-wrenching green, though here the paint was cracked and peeling. Rand and Mat stepped inside.

Only half a dozen men sat at the tables that filled the common room, hunched over their mugs, each one glumly alone with his thoughts. Business was definitely not good, but it had been better once. Exactly as many serving maids as there were patrons busied themselves around the room. There was plenty for them to do—dirt crusted the floor and cobwebs filled the corners of the ceiling—but most were not doing anything really useful, only moving so they would not be seen standing still.

A bony man with long, stringy hair to his shoulders turned to scowl at them as they came through the door. The first slow peal of thunder rumbled across Four Kings. “What do you want?” He was rubbing his hands on a greasy apron that hung to his ankles. Rand wondered if more grime was coming off on the apron or on the man’s hands. He was the first skinny innkeeper Rand had seen. “Well? Speak up, buy a drink, or get out! Do I look like a raree show?”

Flushing, Rand launched into the spiel he had perfected at inns before this. “I play the flute, and my friend juggles, and you’ll not see two better in a year. For a good room and a good meal, we’ll fill this common room of yours.” He remembered the filled common rooms he had already seen that evening, especially the man who had vomited right in front of him at the last one. He had had to step lively to keep his boots untouched. He faltered, but caught himself and went on. “We’ll fill your inn with men who will repay the little we cost twenty times over with the food and drink they buy. Why should—”

“I’ve got a man plays the dulcimer,” the innkeeper said sourly.

“You have a drunk, Saml Hake,” one of the serving maids said. She was passing him with a tray and two mugs, and she paused to give Rand and Mat a plump smile. “Most times, he can’t see well enough to find the common room,” she confided in a loud whisper. “Haven’t even seen him in two days.”

Without taking his eyes off Rand and Mat, Hake casually backhanded her across the face. She gave a surprised grunt and fell heavily to the unwashed floor; one of the mugs broke, and the spilled wine washed rivulets in the dirt. “You’re docked for the wine and breakage. Get ’em fresh drinks. And hurry. Men don’t pay to wait while you laze around.” His tone was as offhand as the blow. None of the patrons looked up from their wine, and the other serving maids kept their eyes averted.

The plump woman rubbed her cheek and stared pure murder at Hake, but she gathered the empty mug and the broken pieces on her tray and went off without a word.

Hake sucked his teeth thoughtfully, eyeing Rand and Mat. His gaze clung to the heron-mark sword before he pulled it away. “Tell you what,” he said finally. “You can have a couple of pallets in an empty storeroom in the back. Rooms are too expensive to give away. You eat when everybody’s gone. There ought to be something left.”

Rand wished there was an inn in Four Kings they had not yet tried. Since leaving Whitebridge he had met coolness, indifference, and outright hostility, but nothing that gave him the sense of unease that this man and this village did. He told himself it was just the dirt and squalor and noise, but the misgivings did not go away. Mat was watching Hake as if he suspected some trap, but he gave no sign of wanting to give up The Dancing Cartman for a bed under a hedge. Thunder rattled the windows. Rand sighed.

“The pallets will do if they’re clean, and if there are enough clean blankets. But we eat two hours after full dark, no later, and the best you have. Here. We’ll show you what we can do.” He reached for the flute case, but Hake shook his head.

“Don’t matter. This lot’ll be satisfied with any kind of screeching so long as it sounds something like music.” His eyes touched Rand’s sword again; his thin smile touched nothing but his lips. “Eat when you want, but if you don’t bring the crowd in, out you go in the street.” He nodded over his shoulder at two hard-faced men sitting against the wall. They were not drinking, and their arms were thick enough for legs. When Hake nodded at them, their eyes shifted to Rand and Mat, flat and expressionless.

Rand put one hand on his sword hilt, hoping the twisting in his stomach did not show on his face. “As long as we get what’s agreed on,” he said in a level tone.

Hake blinked, and for a moment he seemed uneasy himself. Abruptly he nodded. “What I said, isn’t it? Well, get started. You won’t bring anybody in just standing there.” He stalked off, scowling and shouting at the serving maids as if there were fifty customers they were neglecting.

There was a small, raised platform at the far end of the room, near the door to the back. Rand lifted a bench up on it, and settled his cloak, blanketroll, and Thom’s bundled cloak behind the bench with the sword lying atop them.

He wondered if he had been wise to keep wearing the sword openly. Swords were common enough, but the heron-mark attracted attention and speculation. Not from everybody, but any notice at all made him uncomfortable. He could be leaving a clear trail for the Myrddraal—if Fades needed that kind of trail. They did not seem to. In any case, he was reluctant to stop wearing it. Tam had given it to him. His father. As long as he wore the sword, there was still some connection between Tam and him, a thread that gave him the right to still call Tam father. *Too late now,* he thought. He was not sure what he meant, but he was sure it was true. *Too late.*

At the first note of “Cock o’ the North” the half-dozen patrons in the common room lifted their heads out of their wine. Even the two bouncers sat forward a little. They all applauded when he finished, including the two toughs, and once more when Mat sent a shower of colored balls spinning through his hands. Outside, the sky muttered again. The rain was holding off, but the pressure of it was palpable; the longer it waited, the harder it would fall.

Word spread, and by the time it was dark outside the inn was packed full with men laughing and talking so loud that Rand could barely hear what he was playing. Only the thunder overpowered the noise in the common room. Lightning flashed in the windows, and in the momentary lulls he could faintly hear rain drumming on the roof. Men who came in now dripped trails across the floor.

Whenever he paused, voices shouted the names of tunes through the din. A good many names he did not recognize, though when he got someone to hum a bit of it, he often found he did know the song. It had been that way other places, before. “Jolly Jaim” was “Rhea’s Fling” here, and had been “Colors of the Sun” at an earlier stop. Some names stayed the same; others changed with ten miles’ distance, and he had learned new songs, too. “The Drunken Peddler” was a new one, though sometimes it was called “Tinker in the Kitchen.” “Two Kings Came Hunting” was “Two Horses Running” and several other names besides. He played the ones he knew, and men pounded the tables for more.

Others called for Mat to juggle again. Sometimes fights broke out between those wanting music and those who fancied juggling. Once a knife flashed, and a woman screamed, and a man reeled back from a table with blood streaming down his face, but Jak and Strom, the two bouncers, closed in swiftly and with complete impartiality threw everyone involved into the street with lumps on their heads. That was their tactic with any trouble. The talk and the laughing went on as if nothing had occurred. Nobody even looked around except those the bouncers jostled on their way to the door.

The patrons were free with their hands, too, when one of the serving maids let herself grow unwary. More than once Jak or Strom had to rescue one of the women, though they were none too quick about it. The way Hake carried on, screaming and shaking the woman involved, he always considered it her fault, and the teary eyes and stammered apologies said she was willing to accept his opinion. The women jumped whenever Hake frowned, even if he was looking somewhere else. Rand wondered why any of them put up with it.

Hake smiled when he looked at Rand and Mat. After a while Rand realized Hake was not smiling at them; the smiles came when his eyes slid behind them, to where the heron-mark sword lay. Once, when Rand set the gold-and-silver-chased flute down beside his stool, the flute got a smile, too.

The next time he changed places with Mat at the front of the dais, he leaned over to speak in Mat's ear. Even that close he had to speak loudly, but with all the noise he doubted if anyone else could hear. "Hake's going to try to rob us."

Mat nodded as if it was nothing he had not expected. "We'll have to bar our door tonight."

"Bar our door? Jak and Strom could break down a door with their fists. Let's get out of here."

"Wait till after we eat, at least. I'm hungry. They can't do anything here," Mat added. The packed common room shouted impatiently for them to get on with it. Hake was glaring at them. "Anyway, you want to sleep outside tonight?" An especially strong crack of lightning drowned out everything else, and for an instant the light through the windows was stronger than the lamps.

"I just want to get out without my head being broken," Rand said, but Mat was already slouching back to take his rest on the stool. Rand sighed and launched into "The Road to Dun Aren." A lot of them seemed to like that one; he had already played it four times, and they still shouted for it.

The trouble was that Mat was right, as far as he went. He was hungry, too. And he could not see how Hake could give them any trouble while the common room was full, and getting fuller. For every man who left or was thrown out by Jak and Strom, two came in from the street. They shouted for the juggling or for a particular tune, but mostly they were interested in drinking and fondling the serving maids. One man was different, though.

He stood out in every way among the crowd in The Dancing Cartman. Merchants apparently had no use for the run-down inn; there were not even any private dining rooms for them, as far as he could make out. The patrons were all rough-dressed, with the tough skin of men who labored in the sun and wind. This man was sleekly fleshy, with a soft look to his hands, and a velvet coat, and a dark green velvet cloak lined with blue silk was slung around his shoulders. All of his clothes had an expensive cut to them. His shoes—soft velvet slippers, not boots—were not made for the rutted streets of Four Kings, or for any streets at all, for that matter.

He came in well after dark, shaking the rain off his cloak as he looked around, a twist of distaste on his mouth. He scanned the room once, already turning to go, then suddenly gave a start at nothing Rand could see and sat down at a table Jak and Strom had just emptied. A serving maid stopped at his table, then brought him a mug of wine which he pushed to one side and never touched again. She seemed in a hurry to leave his table both times, though he did not try to touch her or even look at her. Whatever it was about him that made her uneasy, others who came close to him noticed it, too. For all of his soft look, whenever some callus-handed wagon driver decided to share his table, one glance was all it took to send the man looking elsewhere. He sat as if there were no one else in the room but him—and Rand and Mat. Them he watched over steepled hands that glittered with a ring on each finger. He watched them with a smile of satisfied recognition.

Rand murmured to Mat as they were changing places again, and Mat nodded. “I saw him,” he muttered. “Who *is* he? I keep thinking I know him.”

The same thought had occurred to Rand, tickling the back of his memory, but he could not bring it forward. Yet he was sure that face was one he had never seen before.

When they had been performing for two hours, as near as Rand could estimate, he slipped the flute into its case and he and Mat gathered up their belongings. As they were stepping down from the low platform, Hake came bustling up, anger twisting his narrow face.

“It’s time to eat,” Rand said to forestall him, “and we don’t want our things stolen. You want to tell the cook?” Hake hesitated, still angry, trying unsuccessfully to keep his eyes off what Rand held in his arms. Casually Rand shifted his bundles so he could rest one hand on the sword. “Or you can *try* throwing us out.” He made the emphasis deliberately, then added, “There’s a lot of night left for us to play, yet. We have to keep our strength up if we’re going to perform well enough to keep this crowd spending money. How long do you think this room will stay full if we fall over from hunger?”

Hake’s eyes twitched over the room full of men putting money in his pocket, then he turned and stuck his head through the door to the rear of the inn. “Feed ’em!” he shouted. Rounding on Rand and Mat, he snarled, “Don’t be all night about it. I expect you up there till the last man’s gone.”

Some of the patrons were shouting for the musician and the juggler, and Hake turned to soothe them. The man in the velvet cloak was one of the anxious ones. Rand motioned Mat to follow him.

A stout door separated the kitchen from the front of the inn, and, except when it opened to let a serving maid through, the rain pounding the roof was louder in the kitchen than the shouts from the common room. It was a big room, hot and steamy from stoves and ovens, with a huge table covered with half-prepared food and dishes ready to be served. Some of the serving maids sat clustered on a bench near the rear door, rubbing their feet and chattering away all at once with the fat cook, who talked back at the same time and waved a big spoon to emphasize her points. They all glanced up as Rand and Mat came in, but it did not slow their conversation or stop their foot rubbing.

“We ought to get out of here while we have the chance,” Rand said softly, but Mat shook his head, his eyes fixed oh the two plates the cook was filling with beef and potatoes and peas. She hardly looked at the two of them, keeping up her talk with the other women while she pushed things aside on the table with her elbows and set the plates down, adding forks.

“After we eat is time enough.” Mat slid onto a bench and began using his fork as if it were a shovel.

Rand sighed, but he was right behind Mat. He had had only a butt-end of bread to eat since the night before. His belly felt as empty as a beggar’s purse, and the cooking smells that filled the kitchen did not help. He quickly had his mouth full, though Mat was getting his plate refilled by the cook before he had finished half of his.

He did not mean to eavesdrop on the women's talk, but some of the words reached out and grabbed him.

"Sounds crazy to me."

"Crazy or not, it's what I hear. He went to half the inns in town before he came here. Just walked in, looked around, and walked out without saying one word, even at the Royal Inn. Like it wasn't raining at all."

"Maybe he thought here was the most comfortable." That brought gales of laughter.

"What I hear is he didn't even get to Four Kings till after nightfall, and his horses blowing like they'd been pushed hard."

"Where'd he come from, to get caught out after dark? Nobody but a fool or a madman travels anywhere and plans it that badly."

"Well, maybe he's a fool, but he's a rich one. I hear he even has another carriage for his servants and baggage. There's money there, mark my words. Did you see that cloak of his? I wouldn't mind having that my ownself."

"He's a little plump for my taste, but I always say a man can't be too fat if enough gold comes with it." They all doubled over giggling, and the cook threw back her head and roared with laughter.

Rand dropped his fork on his plate. A thought he did not like bubbled in his head. "I'll be back in a minute," he said. Mat barely nodded, stuffing a piece of potato into his mouth.

Rand picked up his sword belt along with his cloak as he stood, and buckled it around his waist on the way to the back door. No one paid him any mind.

The rain was bucketing down. He swung his cloak around his shoulders and pulled the hood over his head, holding the cloak closed as he trotted across the stableyard. A curtain of water hid everything except when lightning flashed, but he found what he was hunting. The horses had been taken into the stable, but the two black-lacquered carriages glistened wetly outside. Thunder grumbled, and a bolt of lightning streaked above the inn. In the brief burst of light he made out a name in gold script on the coach doors. Howal Gode.

Unmindful of the rain beating at him, he stood staring at the name he could no longer see. He remembered where he had last seen black-lacquered coaches with their owners' names on the door, and sleek, overfed men in silk-lined velvet cloaks and velvet slippers. Whitebridge. A Whitebridge merchant could have a perfectly legitimate reason to be on his way to Caemlyn. *A reason that sends him to half the inns in town before he chooses the one where you are? A reason that makes him look at you as if he's found what he's searching for?*

Rand shivered, and suddenly he was aware of rain trickling down his back. His cloak was tightly woven, but it had never been meant to stand up to this kind of downpour. He hurried back to the inn, splashing through deepening puddles. Jak blocked the door as he started through.

"Well, well, well. Out here alone in the dark. Dark's dangerous, boy."

Rain slicked Rand's hair down across his forehead. The stableyard was empty except for them. He wondered if Hake had decided he wanted the sword and the flute badly enough to forgo keeping the crowd in the common room.

Brushing water out of his eyes with one hand, he put the other on his sword. Even wet, the nobby leather made a sure grip for his fingers. "Has Hake decided all those men will stay just for his ale, instead of going where there's entertainment, too? If he has, we'll call the meal even for what we've done so far and be on our way."

Dry in the doorway, the big man looked out at the rain and snorted. "In this?" His eyes slid down to Rand's hand on the sword. "You know, me and Strom got a bet. He figures you stole that from your old grandmother. Me, I figure your grandmother'd kick you round the pigpen and hang you out to dry." He grinned. His teeth were crooked and yellow, and the grin made him look even meaner. "Night's long yet, boy."

Rand brushed past him, and Jak let him by with an ugly chuckle.

Inside, he tossed off his cloak and dropped on the bench at the table he had left only minutes before. Mat was done with his second plate and working on a third, eating more slowly now, but intently, as if he planned to finish every bite if it killed him. Jak took up a place by the door to the stableyard, leaning against the wall and watching them. Even the cook seemed to feel no urge to talk with him there.

"He's from Whitebridge," Rand said softly. There was no need to say who "he" was. Mat's head swiveled toward him, a piece of beef on the end of the fork suspended halfway to his mouth. Conscious of Jak watching, Rand stirred the food on his plate. He could not have gotten a mouthful down if he had been starving, but he tried to pretend an interest in the peas as he told Mat about the carriages, and what the women had said, in case Mat had not been listening.

Obviously he had not been. Mat blinked in surprise and whistled between his teeth, then frowned at the meat on his fork and grunted as he tossed the fork onto his plate. Rand wished he would make at least an effort to be circumspect.

“After us,” Mat said when he finished. The creases in Mat’s forehead deepened. “A Darkfriend?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Rand glanced at Jak and the big man stretched elaborately, shrugging shoulders as big as any blacksmith’s. “Do you think we can get past him?”

“Not without him making enough noise to bring Hake and the other one. I knew we should never have stopped here.”

Rand gaped, but before he could say anything Hake pushed through the door from the common room. Strom bulked large over his shoulder. Jak stepped in front of the back door. “You going to eat all night?” Hake barked. “I didn’t feed you so you could lie around out here.”

Rand looked at his friend. Later, Mat mouthed, and they gathered their things under the watchful eyes of Hake, Strom, and Jak.

In the common room, cries for juggling and the names of tunes burst through the clamor as soon as Rand and Mat appeared. The man in the velvet cloak—Howal Gode—still appeared to ignore everyone around him, but he was nonetheless seated on the edge of his chair. At the sight of them he leaned back, the satisfied smile returning to his lips.

Rand took the first turn at the front of the dais, playing “Drawing Water From the Well” with only half his mind on it. No one seemed to notice the few wrong notes. He tried to think of how they were going to get away, and tried to avoid looking at Gode, too. If he was after them, there was no point in letting him know they knew it. As for getting away. . . .

He had never realized before what a good trap an inn made. Hake, Jak, and Strom did not even have to keep a close eye on them; the crowd would let them know if he or Mat left the dais. As long as the common room was full of people, Hake could not send Jak and Strom after them, but as long as the common room was full of people they could not get away without Hake knowing. And Gode was watching their every move, too. It was so funny he would have laughed if he had not been on the point of throwing up. They would just have to be wary and wait their chance.

When he changed places with Mat, Rand groaned to himself. Mat glared at Hake, at Strom, at Jak, without a care to whether they noticed or wondered why. When he was not actually handling the balls, his hand rested under his coat. Rand hissed at him, but he paid no attention. If Hake saw that ruby, he might not wait until they were alone. If the men in the common room saw it, half of them might join in with Hake.

Worst of all, Mat stared at the Whitebridge merchant—the Darkfriend?—twice as hard as at anyone else, and Gode noticed. There was no way he could avoid noticing. But it did not disturb his aplomb in the least. His smile deepened, if anything, and he nodded to Mat as if to an old acquaintance, then looked at Rand and raised a questioning eyebrow. Rand did not want to know what the question was. He tried to avoid looking at the man, but he knew it was too late for that. *Too late. Too late again.*

Only one thing seemed to shake the velvet-cloaked man's equilibrium. Rand's sword. He had left it on. Two or three men staggered up to ask if he thought his playing was so bad that he needed protection, but none of them had noticed the heron on the hilt. Gode noticed. His pale hands clenched, and he frowned at the sword for a long time before his smile came back. When it did, it was not as sure as before.

One good thing, at least, Rand thought. *If he believes I can live up to the heron-mark, maybe he'll leave us alone. Then all we have to worry about is Hake and his bullies.* It was hardly a comforting thought, and, sword or no sword, Gode kept watching. And smiling.

To Rand the night seemed to last a year. All those eyes looking at him: Hake and Jak and Strom like vultures watching a sheep caught in a bog, Gode waiting like something even worse. He began to think that everybody in the room was watching with some hidden motive. Sour wine fumes and the stench of dirty, sweating bodies made his head swim, and the din of voices beat at him till his eyes blurred and even the sound of his own flute scratched at his ears. The crash of the thunder seemed to be inside his skull. Weariness hung on him like an iron weight.

Eventually the need to be up with the dawn began to pull men reluctantly out into the dark. A farmer had only himself to answer to, but merchants were notoriously unfeeling about hangovers when they were paying drivers' wages. In the small hours the common room slowly emptied as even those who had rooms abovestairs staggered off to find their beds.

Gode was the last patron. When Rand reached for the leather flute case, yawning, Gode stood up and slung his cloak over his arm. The serving maids were cleaning up, muttering among themselves about the mess of spilled wine and broken crockery. Hake was locking the front door with a big key. Gode cornered Hake for a moment, and Hake called one of the women to show him to a room. The velvet-cloaked man gave Mat and Rand a knowing smile before he disappeared upstairs.

Hake was looking at Rand and Mat. Jak and Strom stood at his shoulders.

Rand hastily finished hanging his things from his shoulders, holding them all awkwardly behind him with his left hand so he could reach his sword. He made no move toward it, but he wanted to know it was ready. He suppressed a yawn; how tired he was was something they should not know.

Mat shouldered his bow and his few other belongings awkwardly, but he put his hand under his coat as he watched Hake and his toughs approach.

Hake was carrying an oil lamp, and to Rand's surprise he gave a little bow and gestured to a side door with it. "Your pallets are this way." Only a slight twist of his lips spoiled his act.

Mat thrust his chin out at Jak and Strom. "You need those two to show us our beds?"

"I'm a man of property," Hake said, smoothing the front of his soiled apron, "and men of property can't be too careful." A crash of thunder rattled the windows, and he glanced significantly at the ceiling, then gave them a toothy grin. "You want to see your beds or not?"

Rand wondered what would happen if he said they wanted to leave. *If you really did know more about using a sword than the few exercises Lan showed you. . . .* "Lead the way," he said, trying to make his voice hard. "I don't like having anybody behind me."

Strom snickered, but Hake nodded placidly and turned toward the side door, and the two big men swaggered after him. Taking a deep breath, Rand gave a wishful glance at the door to the kitchen. If Hake had already locked the back door, running now would only begin what he was hoping to avoid. He followed the innkeeper glumly.

At the side door he hesitated, and Mat crowded into his back. The reason for Hake's lamp was apparent. The door let into a hall as black as pitch. Only the lamp Hake carried, silhouetting Jak and Strom, gave him the courage to keep on. If they turned, he would know it. *And do what?* The floor creaked under his boots.

The hall ended in a rough, unpainted door. He had not seen if there were any other doors along the way. Hake and his bullies went through, and he followed quickly, before they could have a chance to set a trap, but Hake merely lifted the lamp high and gestured at the room.

"Here it is."

An old storeroom, he had called it, and by the look of it not used in some time. Weathered barrels and broken crates filled half the floor. Steady drips fell from more than one place on the ceiling, and a broken pane in the filthy window let the rain blow in freely. Unidentifiable odds and ends littered the shelves, and thick dust covered almost everything. The presence of the promised pallets was a surprise.

The sword makes him nervous. He won't try anything until we're sound asleep. Rand had no intention of sleeping under Hake's roof. As soon as the innkeeper left, he intended to be out the window. "It'll do," he said. He kept his eyes on Hake, wary for a signal to the two grinning men at the innkeeper's side. It was an effort not to wet his lips. "Leave the lamp."

Hake grunted, but pushed the lamp onto a shelf. He hesitated, looking at them, and Rand was sure he was about to give the word for Jak and Strom to jump them, but his eyes went to Rand's sword with a calculating frown, and he jerked his head at the two big men. Surprise flashed across their broad faces, but they followed him out of the room without a backward glance.

Rand waited for the *creak-creak-creak* of their footsteps to fade away, then counted to fifty before sticking his head into the hall. The blackness was broken only by a rectangle of light that seemed as distant as the moon: the door to the common room. As he pulled his head in, something big moved in the darkness near the far door. Jak or Strom, standing guard.

A quick examination of the door told him all he needed to know, little of it good. The boards were thick and stout, but there was no lock, and no bar on the inside. It did open into the room, though.

"I thought they were going for us," Mat said. "What are they waiting for?" He had the dagger out, gripped in a white-knuckled fist. Lamplight flickered on the blade. His bow and quiver lay forgotten on the floor.

"For us to go to sleep." Rand started rummaging through the barrels and crates. "Help me find something to block the door."

"Why? You don't really intend to sleep here, do you? Let's get out the window and gone. I'd rather be wet than dead."

"One of them is at the end of the hall. We make any noise, and they'll be down on us before we can blink. I think Hake would rather face us awake than risk letting us get away."

Muttering, Mat joined his search, but there was nothing useful in any of the litter on the floor. The barrels were empty, the crates splintered, and the whole lot of them piled in front of the door would not stop anyone from opening it. Then something familiar on a shelf caught Rand's eye. Two splitting wedges, covered with rust and dust. He took them down with a grin.

Hastily he shoved them under the door and, when the next roll of thunder rattled the inn, drove them in with two quick kicks of his heel. The thunder faded, and he held his breath, listening. All he heard was the rain pounding on the roof. No floorboards creaking under running feet.

"The window," he said.

It had not been opened in years, from the dirt crusted around it. They strained together, pushing up with all their might. Rand's knees wobbled before the sash budged; it groaned with each reluctant inch. When the opening was wide enough for them to slip through, he crouched, then stopped.

"Blood and ashes!" Mat growled. "No wonder Hake wasn't worried about us slipping out."

Iron bars in an iron frame glistened wetly in the light from the lamp. Rand pushed at them; they were as solid as a boulder.

"I saw something," Mat said. He pawed hurriedly through the litter on the shelves and came back with a rusty crowbar. He rammed the end of it under the iron frame on one side, and Rand winced.

"Remember the noise, Mat."

Mat grimaced and muttered under his breath, but he waited. Rand put his hands on the crowbar and tried to find good footing in the growing puddle of water under the window. Thunder rolled and they heaved. With a tortured squeal of nails that made the hairs lift on Rand's neck, the frame shifted—a quarter of an inch, if that. Timing themselves to peals of thunder and lightning cracks, they heaved on the crowbar again and again. Nothing. A quarter of an inch. Nothing. A hairsbreadth. Nothing. Nothing.

Suddenly Rand's feet slipped in the water, and they crashed to the floor. The crowbar clattered against the bars like a gong. He lay in a puddle holding his breath and listening. Silence but for the rain.

Mat nursed bruised knuckles and glared at him. "We'll never get out at this rate." The iron frame was pushed out from the window not quite far enough to get two fingers under it. Dozens of thick nails crossed the narrow opening.

"We just have to keep trying," Rand said, getting up. But as he set the crowbar under the edge of the frame, the door creaked as someone tried to open it. The splitting wedges held it shut. He exchanged a worried look with Mat. Mat pulled the dagger out again. The door gave another screak.

Rand took a deep breath and tried to make his voice steady. "Go away, Hake. We're trying to sleep."

"I fear you mistake me." The voice was so sleek and full of itself that it named its owner. Howal Gode. "Master Hake and his . . . minions will not trouble us. They sleep soundly, and in the morning they will only be able to wonder where you vanished to. Let me in, my young friends. We must talk."

"We don't have anything to talk to you about," Mat said. "Go away and let us sleep."

Gode's chuckle was nasty. "Of course we have things to talk about. You know that as well as I. I saw it in your eyes. I know what you are, perhaps better than you do. I can feel it coming from you in waves. Already you halfway belong to my master. Stop running and accept it. Things will be so much easier for you. If the Tar Valon hags find you, you'll wish you could cut your own throat before they are done, but you won't be able to. Only my master can protect you from them."

Rand swallowed hard. "We don't know what you're talking about. Leave us alone." The floorboards in the hall squeaked. Gode was not alone. How many men could he have brought in two carriages?

"Stop being foolish, my young friends. You know. You know very well. The Great Lord of the Dark has marked you for his own. It is written that when he awakes, the new Dreadlords will be there to praise him. You must be two of them, else I would not have been sent to find you. Think of it. Life everlasting, and power beyond dreams.” His voice was thick with hunger for that power himself.

Rand glanced back at the window just as lightning split the sky, and he almost groaned. The brief flash of light showed men outside, men ignoring the rain that drenched them as they stood watching the window.

“I tire of this,” Gode announced. “You will submit to my master—to your master—or you will be made to submit. That would not be pleasant for you. The Great Lord of the Dark rules death, and he can give life in death or death in life as he chooses. Open this door. One way or another, your running is at an end. Open it, I say!”

He must have said something else, too, for suddenly a heavy body thudded against the door. It shivered, and the wedges slid a fraction of an inch with a grate of rust rubbing off on wood. Again and again the door trembled as bodies hurled themselves at it. Sometimes the wedges held; sometimes they slid another tiny bit, and bit by tiny bit the door crept inexorably inward.

“Submit,” Gode demanded from the hall, “or spend eternity wishing that you had!”

“If we don’t have any choice—” Mat licked his lips under Rand’s stare. His eyes darted like the eyes of a badger in a trap; his face was pale, and he panted as he spoke. “We could say yes, and then get away later. Blood and ashes, Rand, there’s no way out!”

The words seemed to drift to Rand through wool stuffed in his ears. *No way out.* Thunder muttered overhead, and was drowned in a slash of lightning. *Have to find a way out.* Gode called to them, demanding, appealing; the door slid another inch toward being open. *A way out!*

Light filled the room, flooding vision; the air roared and burned. Rand felt himself picked up and dashed against the wall. He slid down in a heap, ears ringing and every hair on his body trying to stand on end. Dazed, he staggered to his feet. His knees wobbled, and he put a hand against the wall to steady himself. He looked around in amazement.

The lamp, lying on its side on the edge of one of the few shelves still clinging to the walls, still burned and gave light. All the barrels and crates, some blackened and smoldering, lay toppled where they had been hurled. The window, bars and all, and most of the wall, too, had vanished, leaving a splintered hole. The roof sagged, and tendrils of smoke fought the rain around the jagged edges of the opening. The door hung off its hinges, jammed in the doorframe at an angle slanting into the hall.

With a feeling of woozy unreality he stood the lamp up. It seemed the most important thing in the world was making sure it did not break.

A pile of crates suddenly heaved apart, and Mat stood up in the middle of it. He weaved on his feet, blinking and fumbling at himself as if wondering if everything was still attached. He peered toward Rand. “Rand? Is that you? You’re alive. I thought we were both—” He broke off, biting his lip and shaking. It took Rand a moment to realize he was laughing, and on the edge of hysteria.

“What happened, Mat? Mat? Mat! What happened?”

One last shiver wracked Mat, and then he was still. “Lightning, Rand. I was looking right at the window when it hit the bars. Lightning. I can’t see worth—” He broke off, squinting at the aslant door, and his voice went sharp. “Where’s Gode?”

Nothing moved in the dark corridor beyond the door. Of Gode and his companions there was neither sign nor sound, though anything could have lain in the blackness. Rand found himself hoping they were dead, but he would not have put his head into the hall to find out for sure if he had been offered a crown. Nothing moved out in the night beyond where the wall had been, either, but others were up and about. Confused shouts came from abovestairs in the inn, and the pounding of running feet.

“Let’s go while we can,” Rand said.

Hastily helping separate their belongings from the rubble, he grabbed Mat’s arm and half pulled, half guided his friend through the gaping hole into the night. Mat clutched his arm, stumbling beside him with his head pushed forward in an effort to see.

As the first rain hit Rand’s face, lightning forked above the inn, and he came to a convulsive stop. Gode’s men were still there, lying with their feet toward the opening. Pelted by the rain, their open eyes stared at the sky.

“What is it?” Mat asked. “Blood and ashes! I can hardly see my own bloody hand!”

“Nothing,” Rand said. *Luck. The Light’s own. . . . Is it?* Shivering, he carefully guided Mat around the bodies. “Just the lightning.”

There was no light save the lightning, and he stumbled in the ruts as they ran staggering away from the inn. With Mat almost hanging on him, every stumble almost pulled them both down, but tottering, panting, they ran.

Once he looked back. Once, before the rain thickened to a deafening curtain that blotted The Dancing Cartman from sight. Lightning silhouetted the figure of a man at the back of the inn, a man shaking his fist at them, or at the sky. Gode or Hake, he did not know, but either one was as bad as the other. The rain came in a deluge, isolating them in a wall of water. He hurried through the night, listening through the roar of the storm for the sound of pursuit.

* * *

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CHAPTER

33

The Dark Waits

Under a leaden sky the high-wheeled cart bumped east along the Caemlyn Road. Rand pulled himself out of the straw in back to look over the side. It was easier than it had been an hour earlier. His arms felt as if they might stretch instead of drawing him up, and for a minute his head wanted to keep on going and float away, but it was easier. He hooked his elbows over the low slats and watched the land roll past. The sun, still hidden by dull clouds, yet stood high overhead, but the cart was clattering into another village of vine-covered, red brick houses. Towns had been getting closer together since Four Kings.

Some of the people waved or called a greeting to Hyam Kinch, the farmer whose cart it was. Master Kinch, leathery-faced and taciturn, shouted back a few words each time, around the pipe in his teeth. The clenched teeth made what he said all but unintelligible, but it sounded jovial and seemed to satisfy; they went back to what they were doing without another glance at the cart. No one appeared to pay any mind to the farmer’s two passengers.

The village inn moved through Rand’s field of vision. It was whitewashed, with a gray slate roof. People bustled in and out, nodding casually and waving to one another. Some of them stopped to speak. They knew one another. Villagers, mostly, by their clothes—boots and trousers and coats not much different from what he wore himself, though with an inordinate fondness for colorful stripes. The women wore deep bonnets that hid their faces and white aprons with stripes. Maybe they were all townsmen and local farmfolk. *Does that make any difference?*

He dropped back on the straw, watching the village dwindle between his feet. Fenced fields and trimmed hedges lined the road, and small farmhouses with smoke rising from red brick chimneys. The only woods near the road were coppices, well tended for firewood, tame as a farmyard. But the branches stood leafless against the sky, as stark as in the wild woods to the west.

A line of wagons heading the other way rumbled down the center of the road, crowding the cart over onto the verge. Master Kinch shifted his pipe to the corner of his mouth and spat between his teeth. With one eye on his off-side wheel, to make sure it did not tangle in the hedge, he kept the cart moving. His mouth tightened as he glanced at the merchants' train.

None of the wagon drivers cracking their long whips in the air above eight-horse teams, none of the hard-faced guards slouching in their saddles alongside the wagons, looked at the cart. Rand watched them go, his chest tight. His hand was under his cloak, gripping his sword hilt, until the last wagon lurched by.

As that final wagon rattled away toward the village they had just left, Mat turned on the seat beside the farmer and leaned back until he found Rand's eyes. The scarf that did duty for dust, when need be, shaded his own eyes, folded over thickly and tied low around his forehead. Even so he squinted in the gray daylight. "You see anything back there?" he asked quietly. "What about the wagons?"

Rand shook his head, and Mat nodded. He had seen nothing either.

Master Kinch glanced at them out of the corner of his eye, then shifted his pipe again, and flapped the reins. That was all, but he had noticed. The horse picked up the pace a step.

"Your eyes still hurt?" Rand asked.

Mat touched the scarf around his head. "No. Not much. Not unless I look almost right at the sun, anyway. What about you? Are you feeling any better?"

"Some." He really was feeling better, he realized. It was a wonder to get over being sick so fast. More than that, it was a gift of the Light. *It has to be the Light. It has to be.*

Suddenly a body of horsemen was passing the cart, heading west like the merchants' wagons. Long white collars hung down over their mail and plate, and their cloaks and undercoats were red, like the gatetenders' uniforms in Whitebridge, but better made and better fitting. Each man's conical helmet shone like silver. They sat their horses with straight backs.

Thin red streamers fluttered beneath the heads of their lances, every lance held at the same angle.

Some of them glanced into the cart as they passed in two columns. A cage of steel bars masked each face. Rand was glad his cloak covered his sword. A few nodded to Master Kinch, not as if they knew him, but in a neutral greeting. Master Kinch nodded back in much the same way, but despite his unchanging expression there was a hint of approval in his nod.

Their horses were at a walk, but with the speed of the cart added, they went by quickly. With a part of his mind Rand counted them. Ten . . . twenty . . . thirty . . . thirty-two. He raised his head to watch the columns move on down the Caemlyn Road.

“Who were they?” Mat asked, half wondering, half suspicious.

“Queen’s Guards,” Master Kinch said around his pipe. He kept his eyes on the road ahead. “Won’t go much further than Breen’s Spring, ’less they’re called for. Not like the old days.” He sucked on his pipe, then added, “I suppose, these days, there’s parts of the Realm don’t see the Guards in a year or more. Not like the old days.”

“What are they doing?” Rand asked.

The farmer gave him a look. “Keeping the Queen’s peace and upholding the Queen’s law.” He nodded to himself as if he liked the sound of that, and added, “Searching out malefactors and seeing them before a magistrate. Mmmph!” He let out a long streamer of smoke. “You two must be from pretty far off not to recognize the Queen’s Guard. Where you from?”

“Far off,” Mat said at the same instant that Rand said, “The Two Rivers.” He wished he could take it back as soon as he said it. He still was not thinking clearly. Trying to hide, and mentioning a name a Fade would hear like a bell.

Master Kinch glanced at Mat out of the corner of his eye, and puffed his pipe in silence for a while. “That’s far off, all right,” he said finally. “Almost to the border of the Realm. But things must be worse than I thought if there’s places in the Realm where people don’t even *recognize* the Queen’s Guards. Not like the old days at all.”

Rand wondered what Master al’Vere would say if someone told him the Two Rivers was part of some Queen’s Realm. The Queen of Andor, he supposed. Perhaps the Mayor did know—he knew a lot of things that surprised Rand—and maybe others did, too, but he had never heard anyone mention it. The Two Rivers was the Two Rivers. Each village handled its own problems, and if some difficulty involved more than one village the Mayors, and maybe the Village Councils, solved it between them.

Master Kinch pulled on the reins, drawing the cart to a halt. “Far as I go.” A narrow cart path led off to the north; several farmhouses were visible in that direction across open fields, plowed but still bare of crops. “Two days will see you in Caemlyn. Least, it would if your friend had his legs under him.”

Mat hopped down and retrieved his bow and other things, then helped Rand climb off the tail of the cart. Rand’s bundles weighed on him, and his legs wobbled, but he shrugged off his friend’s hand and tried a few steps on his own. He still felt unsteady, but his legs held him up. They even seemed to grow stronger as he used them.

The farmer did not start his horse up again right away. He studied them for a minute, sucking on his pipe. “You can rest up a day or two at my place, if you want. Won’t miss anything in that time, I suppose. Whatever sickness you’re getting over, young fellow . . . well, the old woman and me, we already had about every sickness you can think of before you were born, and nursed our younglings through ’em, too. I expect you’re past the catching stage, anyway.”

Mat’s eyes narrowed, and Rand caught himself frowning. *Not everyone is part of it. It can’t be everybody.*

“Thank you,” he said, “but I’m all right. Really. How far to the next village?”

“Carysford? You can reach it before dark, walking.” Master Kinch took his pipe from between his teeth and pursed his lips thoughtfully before going on. “First off, I reckoned you for runaway ’prentices, but now I expect it’s something more serious you’re running from. Don’t know what. Don’t care. I’m a good enough judge to say you’re not Darkfriends, and not likely to rob or hurt anybody. Not like some on the road these days. I got in trouble a time or two myself when I was your age. You need a place to keep out of sight a few days, my farm is five miles that way”—he jerked his head toward the cart track—“and don’t nobody ever come out there. Whatever’s chasing you, won’t likely find you there.” He cleared his throat as if embarrassed by speaking so many words together.

“How would you know what Darkfriends look like?” Mat demanded. He backed away from the cart, and his hand went under his coat. “What do you know about Darkfriends?”

Master Kinch’s face tightened. “Suit yourselves,” he said, and clucked to his horse. The cart rolled off down the narrow path, and he never looked back.

Mat looked at Rand, and his scowl faded. “Sorry, Rand. You need a place to rest. Maybe if we go after him. . . .” He shrugged. “I just can’t get over the feeling that everybody’s after us. Light, I wish I knew why they were. I wish it was over. I wish. . . .” He trailed off miserably.

“There are still some good people,” Rand said. Mat started toward the cart path, jaw clenched as if it were the last thing he wanted to do, but Rand stopped him. “We can’t afford to stop just to rest, Mat. Besides, I don’t think there is anywhere to hide.”

Mat nodded, his relief evident. He tried to take some of Rand’s burdens, the saddlebags and Thom’s cloak wrapped around the cased harp, but Rand held onto them. His legs really did feel stronger. *What ever’s chasing us?* he thought as they started off down the road. *Not chasing. Waiting.*

The rain had continued through the night they staggered away from The Dancing Cartman, hammering at them as hard as the thunder out of a black sky split by lightning. Their clothes became sodden in minutes; in an hour Rand’s skin felt sodden, too, but they had left Four Kings behind them. Mat was all but blind in the dark, squinting painfully at the sharp flashes that made trees stand out starkly for an instant. Rand led him by the hand, but Mat still felt out each step uncertainly. Worry creased Rand’s forehead. If Mat did not regain his sight, they would be slowed to a crawl. They would never get away.

Mat seemed to sense his thought. Despite the hood of his cloak, the rain had plastered Mat’s hair across his face. “Rand,” he said, “you won’t leave me, will you? If I can’t keep up?” His voice quavered.

“I won’t leave you.” Rand tightened his grip on his friend’s hand. “I won’t leave you no matter what.” *Light help us!* Thunder crashed overhead, and Mat stumbled, almost falling, almost pulling him down, too. “We have to stop, Mat. If we keep going, you’ll break a leg.”

“Gode.” Lightning split the dark right above them as Mat spoke, and the thunder crack pounded every other sound into the ground, but in the flash Rand could make out the name on Mat’s lips.

"He's dead." *He has to be. Light, let him be dead.*

He led Mat to some bushes the lightning flash had showed him. They had leaves enough to give a little shelter from the driving rain. Not as much as a good tree might, but he did not want to risk another lightning strike. They might not be so lucky, next time.

Huddled together beneath the bushes, they tried to arrange their cloaks to make a little tent over the branches. It was far too late to think of staying dry, but just stopping the incessant pelting of the raindrops would be something. They crouched against each other to share what little body warmth was left to them. Dripping wet as they were, and more drips coming through the cloaks, they shivered themselves into sleep.

Rand knew right away it was a dream. He was back in Four Kings, but the town was empty except for him. The wagons were there, but no people, no horses, no dogs. Nothing alive. He knew someone was waiting for him, though.

As he walked down the rutted street, the buildings seemed to blur as they slid behind him. When he turned his head, they were all there, solid, but the indistinctness remained at the corners of his vision. It was as if only what he saw really existed, and then just while he was seeing. He was sure if he turned quickly enough he would see. . . . He was not sure what, but it made him uneasy, thinking about it.

The Dancing Cartman appeared in front of him. Somehow its garish paint seemed gray and lifeless. He went in. Gode was there, at a table.

He only recognized the man from his clothes, his silk and dark velvets. Gode's skin was red, burned and cracked and oozing. His face was almost a skull, his lips shriveled to bare teeth and gums. As Gode turned his head, some of his hair cracked off, powdering to soot when it hit his shoulder. His lidless eyes stared at Rand.

"So you are dead," Rand said. He was surprised that he was not afraid. Perhaps it was knowing that it was a dream this time.

"Yes," said Ba'alzamon's voice, "but he did find you for me. That deserves some reward, don't you think?"

Rand turned, and discovered he could be afraid, even knowing it was a dream. Ba'alzamon's clothes were the color of dried blood, and rage and hate and triumph battled on his face.

"You see, youngling, you cannot hide from me forever. One way or another I find you. What protects you also makes you vulnerable. One time you hide, the next you light a signal fire. Come to me, youngling." He held out his hand to Rand. "If my hounds must pull you down, they may not be gentle. They are jealous of what you will be, once you have knelt at my feet. It is your destiny. You belong to me." Gode's burned tongue made an angry, eager garble of sound.

Rand tried to wet his lips, but he had no spit in his mouth. "No," he managed, and then the words came more easily. "I belong to myself. Not you. Not ever. Myself. If your Darkfriends kill me, you'll never have me."

The fires in Ba'alzamon's face heated the room till the air swam. "Alive or dead, youngling, you are mine. The grave belongs to me. Easier dead, but better alive. Better for you, youngling. The living have more power in most things." Gode made a gabbling sound again. "Yes, my good hound. Here is your reward."

Rand looked at Gode just in time to see the man's body crumble to dust. For an instant the burned face held a look of sublime joy that turned to horror in the final moment, as if he had seen something waiting he did not expect. Gode's empty velvet garments settled on the chair and the floor among the ash.

When he turned back, Ba'alzamon's outstretched hand had become a fist. "You are mine, youngling, alive or dead. The Eye of the World will never serve you. I mark you as mine." His fist opened, and a ball of flame shot out. It struck Rand in the face, exploding, searing.

Rand lurched awake in the dark, water dripping through the cloaks onto his face. His hand trembled as he touched his cheeks. The skin felt tender, as if sunburned.

Suddenly he realized Mat was twisting and moaning in his sleep. He shook him, and Mat came awake with a whimper.

"My eyes! Oh, Light, my eyes! He took my eyes!"

Rand held him close, cradling him against his chest as if he were a baby. "You're all right, Mat. You're all right. He can't hurt us. We won't let him." He could feel Mat shaking, sobbing into his coat. "He can't hurt us," he whispered, and wished he believed it. *What protects you makes you vulnerable. I* am *going mad.*

Just before first light the downpour dwindled, the last drizzle fading as dawn came. The clouds remained, threatening until well into the morning. The wind came up, then, driving the clouds off to the south, baring a warmthless sun and slicing through their dripping wet clothes. They had not slept again, but groggily they donned their cloaks and set off eastward, Rand leading Mat by the hand. After a while Mat even felt well enough to complain about what the rain had done to his bowstring. Rand would not let him stop to exchange it for a dry string from his pocket, though; not yet.

They came on another village shortly after midday. Rand shivered harder at the sight of snug brick houses and smoke rising from chimneys, but he kept clear, leading Mat through the woods and fields to the south. A lone farmer working with a spading fork in a muddy field was the only person he saw, and he took care that the man did not see them, crouching through the trees. The farmer’s attention was all on his work, but Rand kept one eye on him till he was lost to sight. If any of Gode’s men were alive, perhaps they would believe he and Mat had taken the southern road out of Four Kings when they could not find anyone who had seen them in this village. They came back to the road out of sight of the town, and walked their clothes, if not dry, at least to just damp.

An hour beyond the town a farmer gave them a ride in his half-empty haywain. Rand had been taken by surprise while lost in worry about Mat. Mat shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand, weak as the afternoon light was, squinting through slitted lids even so, and he muttered continually about how bright the sun was. When Rand heard the rumble of the haywain, it was too late already. The sodden road deadened sound, and the wagon with its two-horse hitch was only fifty yards behind them, the driver already peering at them.

To Rand’s surprise he drew up and offered them a lift. Rand hesitated, but it was too late to avoid being seen, and refusing a ride might fix them in the man’s mind. He helped Mat up to the seat beside the farmer, then climbed up behind him.

Alpert Mull was a stolid man, with a square face and square hands, both worn and grooved from hard work and worry, and he wanted someone to talk to. His cows had gone dry, his chickens had stopped laying, and there was no pasture worth the name. For the first time in memory he had had to buy hay, and half a wagon was all “old Bain” would let him have. He wondered whether there was any chance of getting hay on his own land this year, or any kind of crop.

“The Queen should do something, the Light illumine her,” he muttered, knuckling his forehead respectfully but absentmindedly.

He hardly looked at Rand or Mat, but when he let them down by the narrow, rail-lined track that led off to his farm, he hesitated, then said, almost as if to himself, “I don’t know what you’re running from, and I don’t want to. I have a wife and children. You understand? My family. It’s hard times for helping strangers.”

Mat tried to stick his hand under his coat, but Rand had his wrist and he held on. He stood in the road, looking at the man without speaking.

“If I was a good man,” Mull said, “I’d offer a couple of lads soaked to the skin a place to dry out and get warm in front of my fire. But it’s hard times, and strangers . . . . I don’t know what you’re running from, and I don’t want to. You understand? My family.” Suddenly he pulled two long, woolen scarves, dark and thick, out of his coat pocket. “It’s not much, but here. Belong to my boys. They have others. You don’t know me, understand? It’s hard times.”

“We never even saw you,” Rand agreed as he took the scarves. “You *are* a good man. The best we’ve met in days.”

The farmer looked surprised, then grateful. Gathering his reins, he turned his horses down the narrow lane. Before he completed the turn Rand was leading Mat on down the Caemlyn Road.

The wind stiffened as dusk closed in. Mat began to ask querulously when they were going to stop, but Rand kept moving, pulling Mat behind him, searching for more shelter than a spot under a hedge. With their clothes still clammy and the wind getting colder by the minute, he was not sure they could survive another night in the open. Night fell without him spotting anything useful. The wind grew icy, beating his cloak. Then, through the darkness ahead, he saw lights. A village.

His hand slid into his pocket, feeling the coins there. More than enough for a meal and a room for the two of them. A room out of the cold night. If they stayed in the open, in the wind and cold in damp clothes, anyone who found them would likely as not find only two corpses. They just had to keep from attracting any more notice than they could help. No playing the flute, and with his eyes, Mat certainly could not juggle. He grasped Mat’s hand again and set out toward the beckoning lights.

“When are we going to stop?” Mat asked again. The way he peered ahead, with his head stuck forward, Rand was not sure if Mat could see him, much less the village lights.

“When we’re somewhere warm,” he replied.

Pools of light from house windows lit the streets of the town, and people walked them unconcerned with what might be out in the dark. The only inn was a sprawling building, all on one floor, with the look of having had rooms added in bunches over the years without any particular plan. The front door opened to let someone out, and a wave of laughter rolled out after him.

Rand froze in the street, the drunken laughter at The Dancing Cartman echoing in his head. He watched the man go down the street with a none-too-steady stride, then took a deep breath and pushed the door open. He took care that his cloak covered his sword. Laughter swept over him.

Lamps hanging from the high ceiling made the room bright, and right away he could see and feel the difference from Saml Hake's inn. There was no drunkenness here, for one thing. The room was filled with people who looked to be farmers and townsmen, if not entirely sober, not too far from it. The laughter was real, if a bit forced around the edges. People laughing to forget their troubles, but with true mirth in it, too. The common room itself was neat and clean, and warm from a fire roaring in a big fireplace at the far end. The serving maids' smiles were as warm as the fire, and when they laughed Rand could tell it was because they wanted to.

The innkeeper was as clean as his inn, with a gleaming white apron around his bulk. Rand was glad to see he was a stout man; he doubted if he would ever again trust a skinny innkeeper. His name was Rulan Allwine—a good omen, Rand thought, with so much of the sound of Emond's Field to it—and he eyed them up and down, then politely mentioned paying in advance.

"Not suggesting you're the sort, understand, but there's some on the road these days aren't too particular about paying up come morning. Seems to be a lot of young folks headed for Caemlyn."

Rand was not offended, not as damp and bedraggled as he was. When Master Allwine mentioned the price, though, his eyes widened, and Mat made a sound as if he had choked on something.

The innkeeper's jowls swung as he shook his head regretfully, but he seemed to be used to it. "Times are hard," he said in a resigned voice. "There isn't much, and what there is costs five times what it used to. It'll be more next month, I'll lay oath on it."

Rand dug his money out and looked at Mat. Mat's mouth tightened stubbornly. "You want to sleep under a hedge?" Rand asked. Mat sighed and reluctantly emptied his pocket. When the reckoning was paid, Rand grimaced at the little that remained to divide with Mat.

But ten minutes later they were eating stew at a table in a corner near the fireplace, pushing it onto their spoons with chunks of bread. The portions were not as large as Rand could have wished, but they were hot, and filling. Warmth from the hearth seeped into him slowly. He pretended to keep his eyes on his plate, but he watched the door intently. Those who came in or went out all looked like farmers, but it was not enough to quiet his fear.

Mat ate slowly, savoring each bite, though he muttered about the light from the lamps. After a time he dug out the scarf Alpert Mull had given him and wound it around his forehead, pulling it down until his eyes were almost hidden. That got them some looks Rand wished they could have avoided. He cleaned his plate hurriedly, urging Mat to do the same, then asked Master Allwine for their room.

The innkeeper seemed surprised that they were retiring so early, but he made no comment. He got a candle and showed them through a jumble of corridors to a small room, with two narrow beds, back in a far corner of the inn. When he left, Rand dropped his bundles beside his bed, tossed his cloak over a chair, and fell on the coverlet fully dressed. All of his clothes were still damp and uncomfortable, but if they had to run, he wanted to be ready. He left the sword belt on, too, and slept with his hand on the hilt.

A rooster crowing jerked him awake in the morning. He lay there, watching dawn lighten the window, and wondered if he dared sleep a little longer. Sleep during daylight, when they could be moving. A yawn made his jaws crack.

“Hey,” Mat exclaimed, “I can see!” He sat up on his bed, squinting around the room. “Some, anyway. Your face is still a little blurry, but I can tell who you are. I knew I’d be all right. By tonight I’ll see better than you do. Again.”

Rand sprang out of bed, scratching as he scooped up his cloak. His clothes were wrinkled from drying on him while he slept, and they itched. “We’re wasting daylight,” he said. Mat scrambled up as fast as he had; he was scratching, too.

Rand did feel good. They were a day away from Four Kings, and none of Gode’s men had showed up. A day closer to Caemlyn, where Moiraine would be waiting for them. She would. No more worrying about

Darkfriends once they were back with the Aes Sedai and the Warder. It was strange to be looking forward so much to being with an Aes Sedai. *Light, when I see Moiraine again, I'll kiss her!* He laughed at the thought. He felt good enough to invest some of their dwindling stock of coins in breakfast—a big loaf of bread and a pitcher of milk, cold from the spring house.

They were eating in the back of the common room when a young man came in, a village youth by the look of him, with a cocky spring to his walk and twirling a cloth cap, with a feather in it, on one finger. The only other person in the room was an old man sweeping out; he never looked up from his broom. The young man's eyes swept jauntily around the room, but when they lit on Rand and Mat, the cap fell off his finger. He stared at them for a full minute before snatching the cap from the floor, then stared some more, running his fingers through his thick head of dark curls. Finally he came over to their table, his feet dragging.

He was older than Rand, but he stood looking down at them diffidently. "Mind if I sit down?" he asked, and immediately swallowed hard as if he might have said the wrong thing.

Rand thought he might be hoping to share their breakfast, though he looked able to buy his own. His blue-striped shirt was embroidered around the collar, and his dark blue cloak all around the hem. His leather boots had never been near any work that scuffed them, that Rand could see. He nodded to a chair.

Mat stared at the fellow as he drew the chair to the table. Rand could not tell if he was glaring or just trying to see clearly. In any case, Mat's frown had an effect. The young man froze halfway to sitting, and did not lower himself all the way until Rand nodded again.

"What's your name?" Rand asked.

"My name? My name. Ah . . . call me Paitr." His eyes shifted nervously. "Ah . . . this is not my idea, you understand. I have to do it. I didn't want to, but they made me. You have to understand that. I don't—"

Rand was beginning to tense when Mat growled, "Darkfriend."

Paitr gave a jerk and half lifted out of his chair, staring wildly around the room as if there were fifty people to overhear. The old man's head was still bent over the broom, his attention on the floor. Paitr sat back down and looked from Rand to Mat and back uncertainly. Sweat beaded on his upper lip. It was accusation enough to make anyone sweat, but he said not a word against it.

Rand shook his head slowly. After Gode, he knew that Darkfriends did not necessarily have the Dragon's Fang on their foreheads, but except for his clothes this Paitr could have fit right in Emond's Field. Nothing about him hinted at murder and worse. Nobody would have remarked him twice. At least Gode had been . . . different.

"Leave us alone," Rand said. "And tell your friends to leave us alone. We want nothing from them, and they'll get nothing from us."

"If you don't," Mat added fiercely, "I'll name you for what you are. See what your village friends think of that."

Rand hoped he did not really mean it. That could cause as much trouble for the two of them as it did for Paitr.

Paitr seemed to take the threat seriously. His face grew pale. "I . . . I heard what happened at Four Kings. Some of it, anyway. Word travels. We have ways of hearing things. But there's nobody here to trap you. I'm alone, and . . . and I just want to talk."

"About what?" Mat asked at the same time that Rand said, "We're not interested." They looked at each other, and Mat shrugged. "We're not interested," he said.

Rand gulped the last of the milk and stuffed the heel of his half of the bread into his pocket. With their money almost gone, it might be their next meal.

How to leave the inn? If Paitr discovered that Mat was almost blind, he would tell others . . . other Darkfriends. Once Rand had seen a wolf separate a crippled sheep from the flock; there were other wolves around, and he could neither leave the flock nor get a clear shot with his bow. As soon as the sheep was alone, bleating with terror, hobbling frantically on three legs, the one wolf chasing it became ten as if by magic. The memory of it turned his stomach. They could not stay there, either. Even if Paitr was telling the truth about being alone, how long would he stay that way?

"Time to go, Mat," he said, and held his breath. As Mat started to stand, he pulled Paitr's eyes to himself by leaning forward and saying, "Leave us alone, Darkfriend. I won't tell you again. Leave—us—alone."

Paitr swallowed hard and pressed back in his chair; there was no blood left in his face at all. It made Rand think of a Myrddraal.

By the time he looked back at Mat, Mat was on his feet, his awkwardness unseen. Rand hastily hung his own saddlebags and other bundles around him, trying to keep his cloak over the sword as he did.

Maybe Paitr already knew about it; maybe Gode had told Ba'alzamon, and Ba'alzamon had told Paitr; but he did not think so. He thought Paitr had only the vaguest idea of what had happened in Four Kings. That was why he was so frightened.

The comparatively bright outline of the door helped Mat make a beeline for it, if not quickly, then not slow enough to seem unnatural, either. Rand followed closely, praying for him not to stumble. He was thankful Mat had a clear, straight path, with no tables or chairs in the way.

Behind him Paitr suddenly leaped to his feet. "Wait," he said desperately. "You have to wait."

"Leave us alone," Rand said without looking back. They were almost to the door, and Mat had not put a foot wrong yet.

"Just listen to me," Paitr said, and put his hand on Rand's shoulder to stop him.

Images spun in his head. The Trolloc, Narg, leaping at him in his own home. The Myrddraal threatening at the Stag and Lion in Baerlon. Halfmen everywhere, Fades chasing them to Shadar Logoth, coming for them in Whitebridge. Darkfriends everywhere. He whirled, his hand balling up. "I said, leave us alone!" His fist took Paitr flush on the nose.

The Darkfriend fell on his bottom and sat there on the floor staring at Rand. Blood trickled from his nose. "You won't get away," he spat angrily. "No matter how strong you are, the Great Lord of the Dark is stronger. The Shadow will swallow you!"

There was a gasp from further into the common room, and the clatter of a broom handle hitting the floor. The old man with the broom had finally heard. He stood staring wide-eyed at Paitr. The blood drained from his wrinkled face and his mouth worked, but no sound came out. Paitr stared back for an instant, then gave a wild curse and sprang to his feet, darting out of the inn and down the street as if starving wolves were at his heels. The old man shifted his attention to Rand and Mat, looking not a whit less frightened.

Rand hustled Mat out of the inn and out of the village as fast as he could, listening all the while for a hue and cry that never came but was no less loud in his ears for that.

"Blood and ashes," Mat growled, "they're always there, always right on our heels. We'll never get away."

“No they’re not,” Rand said. “If Ba’alzamon knew we were here, do you think he’d have left it to that fellow? There’d have been another Gode, and twenty or thirty bullyboys. They’re still hunting, but they won’t know until Paitr tells them, and maybe he really is alone. He might have to go all the way to Four Kings, for all we know.”

“But he said—”

“I don’t care.” He was unsure which “he” Mat meant, but it changed nothing. “We’re not going to lie down and let them take us.”

They got six rides, short ones, during the day. A farmer told them that a crazy old man at the inn in Market Sheran was claiming there were Darkfriends in the village. The farmer could hardly talk for laughing; he kept wiping tears off his cheeks. Darkfriends in Market Sheran! It was the best story he had heard since Ackley Farren got drunk and spent the night on the inn roof.

Another man, a round-faced wagonwright with tools hanging from the sides of his cart and two wagon wheels in the back, told a different story. Twenty Darkfriends had held a gathering in Market Sheran. Men with twisted bodies, and the women worse, all dirty and in rags. They could make your knees grow weak and your stomach heave just by looking at you, and when they laughed, the filthy cackles rang in your ears for hours and your head felt as if it were splitting open. He had seen them himself, just at a distance, far enough off to be safe. If the Queen would not do something, then somebody ought to ask the Children of the Light for help. Somebody should do something.

It was a relief when the wagonwright let them down.

With the sun low behind them they walked into a small village, much like Market Sheran. The Caemlyn Road split the town neatly in two, but on both sides of the wide road stood rows of small brick houses with thatched roofs. Webs of vine covered the bricks, though only a few leaves hung on them. The village had one inn, a small place no bigger than the Winespring Inn, with a sign on a bracket out front, creaking back and forth in the wind. The Queen’s Man.

Strange, to think of the Winespring Inn as small. Rand could remember when he thought it was about as big as a building could be. Anything bigger would be a palace. But he had seen a few things, now, and suddenly he realized that nothing would look the same to him when he got back home. *If you ever do.*

He hesitated in front of the inn, but even if prices at The Queen's Man were not as high as in Market Sheran, they could not afford a meal or a room, either one.

Mat saw where he was looking and patted the pocket where he kept Thom's colored balls. "I can see well enough, as long as I don't try to get too fancy." His eyes had been getting better, though he still wore the scarf around his forehead, and had squinted whenever he looked at the sky during the day. When Rand said nothing, Mat went on. "There can't be Darkfriends at every inn between here and Caemlyn. Besides, I don't want to sleep under a bush if I can sleep in a bed." He made no move toward the inn, though, just stood waiting for Rand.

After a moment Rand nodded. He felt as tired as he had at any time since leaving home. Just thinking of a night in the open made his bones ache. *It's all catching up. All the running, all the looking over your shoulder.*

"They can't be everywhere," he agreed.

With the first step he took into the common room, he wondered if he had made a mistake. It was a clean place, but crowded. Every table was filled, and some men leaned against the walls because there was nowhere for them to sit. From the way the serving maids scurried between the tables with harried looks—and the landlord, too—it was a larger crowd than they were used to. Too many for this small village. It was easy to pick out the people who did not belong there. They were dressed no differently from the rest, but they kept their eyes on their food and drink. The locals watched the strangers as much as anything else.

A drone of conversation hung in the air, enough that the innkeeper took them into the kitchen when Rand made him understand that they needed to talk to him. The noise was almost as bad there, with the cook and his helpers banging pots and darting about.

The innkeeper mopped his face with a large handkerchief. "I suppose you're on your way to Caemlyn to see the false Dragon like every other fool in the Realm. Well, it's six to a room and two or three to a bed, and if that doesn't suit, I've nothing for you."

Rand gave his spiel with a feeling of queasiness. With so many people on the road, every other one could be a Darkfriend, and there was no way to pick them out from the rest. Mat demonstrated his juggling—he kept it to three balls, and was careful even then—and Rand took out Thom's flute.

After only a dozen notes of “The Old Black Bear,” the innkeeper nodded impatiently.

“You’ll do. I need something to take those idiots’ minds off this Logain. There’s been three fights already over whether or not he’s really the Dragon. Stow your things in the corner, and I’ll go clear a space for you. If there’s any room to. Fools. The world’s full of fools who don’t know enough to stay where they belong. That’s what’s causing all the trouble. People who won’t stay where they belong.” Mopping his face again, he hurried out of the kitchen, muttering under his breath.

The cook and his helpers ignored Rand and Mat. Mat kept adjusting the scarf around his head, pushing it up, then blinking at the light and tugging it back down again. Rand wondered if he could see well enough to do anything more complicated than juggle three balls. As for himself. . . .

The queasiness in his stomach grew thicker. He dropped on a low stool, holding his head in his hands. The kitchen felt cold. He shivered. Steam filled the air; stoves and ovens crackled with heat. His shivers became stronger, his teeth chattering. He wrapped his arms around himself, but it did no good. His bones felt as if they were freezing.

Dimly he was aware of Mat asking him something, shaking his shoulder, and of someone cursing and running out of the room. Then the innkeeper was there, with the cook frowning at his side, and Mat was arguing loudly with them both. He could not make out any of what they said; the words were a buzz in his ears, and he could not seem to think at all.

Suddenly Mat took his arm, pulling him to his feet. All of their things—saddlebags, blanketrolls, Thom’s bundled cloak and instrument cases—hung from Mat’s shoulders with his bow. The innkeeper was watching them, wiping his face anxiously. Weaving, more than half supported by Mat, Rand let his friend steer him toward the back door.

“S-s-sorry, M-m-mat,” he managed. He could not stop his teeth from chattering. “M-m-must have . . . b-been t-the . . . rain. O-one m-more . . . night out . . . w-won’t h-hurt . . . I guess.” Twilight darkened the sky, spotted by a handful of stars.

“Not a bit of it,” Mat said. He was trying to sound cheerful, but Rand could hear the hidden worry. “He was scared the other folk would find out there was somebody sick in his inn. I told him if he kicked us out, I’d take you into the common room. That'd empty half his rooms in ten minutes. For all his talk about fools, he doesn't want that."

"Then w-where?"

"Here," Mat said, pulling open the stable door with a loud creak of hinges.

It was darker inside than out, and the air smelled of hay and grain and horses, with a strong undersmell of manure. When Mat lowered him to the straw-covered floor, he folded over with his chest on his knees, still hugging himself and shaking from head to toe. All of his strength seemed to go for the shaking. He heard Mat stumble and curse and stumble again, then a clatter of metal. Suddenly light blossomed. Mat held up a battered old lantern.

If the inn was full, so was its stable. Every stall had a horse, some raising their heads and blinking at the light. Mat eyed the ladder to the hayloft, then looked at Rand, crouched on the floor, and shook his head.

"Never get you up there," Mat muttered. Hanging the lantern on a nail, he scrambled up the ladder and began tossing down armloads of hay. Hurriedly climbing back down, he made a bed at the back of the stable and got Rand onto it. Mat covered him with both their cloaks, but Rand pushed them off almost immediately.

"Hot," he murmured. Vaguely he knew that he had been cold only a moment before, but now he felt as if he were in an oven. He tugged at his collar, tossing his head. "Hot." He felt Mat's hand on his forehead.

"I'll be right back," Mat said, and disappeared.

He twisted fitfully on the hay, how long he was not sure, until Mat returned with a heaped plate in one hand, a pitcher in the other, and two white cups dangling from fingers by their handles.

"There's no Wisdom here," he said, dropping to his knees beside Rand. He filled one of the cups and held it to Rand's mouth. Rand gulped the water down as if he had had nothing to drink in days; that was how he felt. "They don't even know what a Wisdom is. What they do have is somebody called Mother Brune, but she's off somewhere birthing a baby, and nobody knows when she'll be back. I did get some bread, and cheese, and sausage. Good Master Inlow will give us anything as long as we stay out of sight of his guests. Here, try some."

Rand turned his head away from the food. The sight of it, the thought of it, made his stomach heave. After a minute Mat sighed and settled down to eat himself. Rand kept his eyes averted, and tried not to listen.

The chills came once more, and then the fever, to be replaced by the chills, and the fever again. Mat covered him when he shook, and fed him water when he complained of thirst. The night deepened, and the stable shifted in the flickering lantern light. Shadows took shape and moved on their own. Then he saw Ba'alzamon striding down the stable, eyes burning, a Myrddraal at either side with faces hidden in the depths of their black cowls.

Fingers scrabbling for his sword hilt, he tried to get to his feet, yelling, "Mat! Mat, they're here! Light, they're here!"

Mat jerked awake where he sat cross-legged against the wall. "What? Darkfriends? Where?"

Wavering on his knees, Rand pointed frantically down the stable . . . and gaped. Shadows stirred, and a horse stamped in its sleep. Nothing more. He fell back on the straw.

"There's nobody but us," Mat said. "Here, let me take that." He reached for Rand's sword belt, but Rand tightened his grip on the hilt.

"No. No. I have to keep it. He's my father. You understand? He's m-my f-father!" The shivering swept over him once more, but he clung to the sword as if to a lifeline. "M-my f-father!" Mat gave up trying to take it and pulled the cloaks back over him.

There were other visitations in the night, while Mat dozed. Rand was never sure if they were really there or not. Sometimes he looked at Mat, with his head on his chest, wondering if he would see them, too, if he woke.

Egwene stepped out of the shadows, her hair in a long, dark braid as it had been in Emond's Field, her face pained and mournful. "Why did you leave us?" she asked. "We're dead because you left us."

Rand shook his head weakly on the hay. "No, Egwene. I didn't want to leave you. Please."

"We're all dead," she said sadly, "and death is the kingdom of the Dark One. The Dark One has us, because you abandoned us."

"No. I had no choice, Egwene. Please. Egwene, don't go. Come back, Egwene!"

But she turned into the shadows, and was shadow.

Moiraine's expression was serene, but her face was bloodless and pale. Her cloak might as well have been a shroud, and her voice was a lash. "That is right, Rand al'Thor. You have no choice. You must go to Tar Valon, or the

Dark One will take you for his own. Eternity chained in the Shadow. Only Aes Sedai can save you, now. Only Aes Sedai."

Thom grinned at him sardonically. The gleeman's clothes hung in charred rags that made him see the flashes of light as Thom wrestled with the Fade to give them time to run. The flesh under the rags was blackened and burned. "Trust Aes Sedai, boy, and you'll wish you were dead. Remember, the price of Aes Sedai help is always smaller than you can believe, always greater than you can imagine. And what Ajah will find you first, eh? Red? Maybe Black. Best to run, boy. Run."

Lan's stare was as hard as granite, and blood covered his face. "Strange to see a heron-mark blade in the hands of a sheepherder. Are you worthy of it? You had better be. You're alone, now. Nothing to hold to behind you, and nothing before, and anyone can be a Darkfriend." He smiled a wolf's smile, and blood poured but of his mouth. "Anyone."

Perrin came, accusing, pleading for help. Mistress al'Vere, weeping for her daughter, and Bayle Domon, cursing him for bringing Fades down on his vessel, and Master Fitch, wringing his hands over the ashes of his inn, and Min, screaming in a Trolloc's clutches, people he knew, people he had only met. But the worst was Tam. Tam stood over him, frowning and shaking his head, and said not a word.

"You have to tell me," Rand begged him. "Who am I? Tell me, please. Who am I? *Who am I?*" he shouted.

"Easy, Rand."

For a moment he thought it was Tam answering, but then he saw that Tam was gone. Mat bent over him, holding a cup of water to his lips.

"Just rest easy. You're Rand al'Thor, that's who you are, with the ugliest face and the thickest head in the Two Rivers. Hey, you're sweating! The fever's broken."

"Rand al'Thor?" Rand whispered. Mat nodded, and there was something so comforting in it that Rand drifted off to sleep without even touching the water.

It was a sleep untroubled by dreams—at least by any he remembered—but light enough that his eyes drifted open whenever Mat checked on him. Once he wondered if Mat was getting any sleep at all, but he fell back asleep himself before the thought got very far.

The squeal of the door hinges roused him fully, but for a moment he only lay there in the hay wishing he was still asleep. Asleep he would not be aware of his body. His muscles ached like wrung-out rags, and had about as much strength. Weakly he tried to raise his head; he made it on the second try.

Mat sat in his accustomed place against the wall, within arm's reach of Rand. His chin rested on his chest, which rose and fell in the easy rhythm of deep sleep. The scarf had slipped down over his eyes.

Rand looked toward the door.

A woman stood there holding it open with one hand. For a moment she was only a dark shape in a dress, outlined by the faint light of early morning, then she stepped inside, letting the door swing shut behind her. In the lantern light he could see her more clearly. She was about the same age as Nynaeve, he thought, but she was no village woman. The pale green silk of her dress shimmered as she moved. Her cloak was a rich, soft gray, and a frothy net of lace caught up her hair. She fingered a heavy gold necklace as she looked thoughtfully at Mat and him.

"Mat," Rand said, then louder, "Mat!"

Mat snorted and almost fell over as he came awake. Scrubbing sleep from his eyes, he stared at the woman.

"I came to look at my horse," she said, gesturing vaguely at the stalls. She never took her eyes away from the two of them, though. "Are you ill?"

"He's all right," Mat said stiffly. "He just caught a chill in the rain, that's all."

"Perhaps I should look at him," she said. "I have some knowledge. . . ."

Rand wondered if she were Aes Sedai. Even more than her clothes, her self-assured manner, the way she held her head as if on the point of giving a command, did not belong here. *And if she is Aes Sedai, of what Ajah?*

"I'm fine, now," he told her. "Really, there's no need."

But she came down the length of the stable, holding her skirt up and placing her gray slippers gingerly. With a grimace for the straw, she knelt beside him and felt his forehead.

"No fever," she said, studying him with a frown. She was pretty, in a sharp-featured fashion, but there was no warmth in her face. It was not cold, either; it just seemed to lack any feeling whatsoever. "You *were* sick, though. Yes. Yes. And still weak as a day-old kitten. I think. . . ." She reached under her cloak, and suddenly things were happening too fast for Rand to do more than give a strangled shout.

Her hand flashed from under her cloak; something glittered as she lunged across Rand toward Mat. Mat toppled sideways in a flurry of motion, and there was a solid *tchunk* of metal driven into wood. It all took just an instant, and then everything was still.

Mat lay half on his back, one hand gripping her wrist just above the dagger she had driven into the wall where his chest had been, his other hand holding the blade from Shadar Logoth to her throat.

Moving nothing but her eyes, she tried to look down at the dagger Mat held. Eyes widening, she drew a ragged breath and tried to pull back from it, but he kept the edge against her skin. After that, she was as still as a stone.

Licking his lips, Rand stared at the tableau above him. Even if he had not been so weak, he did not believe he could have moved. Then his eyes fell on her dagger, and his mouth went dry. The wood around the blade was blackening; thin tendrils of smoke rose from the char.

“Mat! Mat, her dagger!”

Mat flicked a glance at the dagger, then back to the woman, but she had not moved. She was licking *her* lips nervously. Roughly Mat pried her hand off the hilt and gave her a push; she toppled back, sprawling away from them and catching herself with her hands behind her, still watching the blade in his hand. “Don’t move,” he said. “I’ll use this if you move. Believe me, I will.” She nodded slowly; her eyes never left Mat’s dagger. “Watch her, Rand.”

Rand was not sure what he was supposed to do if she tried anything—shout, maybe; he certainly could not run after her if she tried to flee—but she sat there without twitching while Mat yanked her dagger free of the wall. The black spot stopped growing, though a faint wisp of smoke still trailed up from it.

Mat looked around for somewhere to put the dagger, then thrust it toward Rand. He took it gingerly, as if it were a live adder. It looked ordinary, if ornate, with a pale ivory hilt and a narrow, gleaming blade no longer than the palm of his hand. Just a dagger. Only he had seen what it could do. The hilt was not even warm, but his hand began to sweat. He hoped he did not drop it in the hay.

The woman did not move from her sprawl as she watched Mat slowly turn toward her. She watched him as if wondering what he would do next, but Rand saw the sudden tightening of Mat's eyes, the tightening of his hand on the dagger. "Mat, no!"

"She tried to kill me, Rand. She'd have killed you, too. She's a Darkfriend." Mat spat the word.

"But we're not," Rand said. The woman gasped as if she had just realized what Mat had intended. "We are not, Mat."

For a moment Mat remained frozen, the blade in his fist catching the lantern light. Then he nodded. "Move over there," he told the woman, gesturing with the dagger toward the door to the tack room.

She got to her feet slowly, pausing to brush the straw from her dress. Even when she started in the direction Mat indicated, she moved as if there were no reason to hurry. But Rand noticed that she kept a wary eye on the ruby-hilted dagger in Mat's hand. "You really should stop struggling," she said. "It would be for the best, in the end. You will see."

"The best?" Mat said wryly, rubbing his chest where her blade would have gone if he had not moved. "Get over there."

She gave a casual shrug as she obeyed. "A mistake. There has been considerable . . . confusion since what happened with that egotistical fool Gode. Not to mention whoever the idiot was who started the panic in Market Sheran. No one is sure what happened there, or how. That makes it more dangerous for you, don't you see? You will have honored places if you come to the Great Lord of your own free will, but as long as you run, there will be pursuit, and who can tell what will happen then?"

Rand felt a chill. *My hounds are jealous, and may not be gentle.*

"So you're having trouble with a couple of farmboys." Mat's laugh was grim. "Maybe you Darkfriends aren't as dangerous as I've always heard."

He flung open the door of the tack room and stepped back.

She paused just through the doorway, looking at him over her shoulder. Her gaze was ice, and her voice colder still. "You will find out how dangerous we are. When the Myrddraal gets here—"

Whatever else she had to say was cut off as Mat slammed the door and pulled the bar down into its brackets. When he turned, his eyes were worried. "Fade," he said in a tight voice, tucking the dagger back under his coat. "Coming here, she says. How are your legs?"

"I can't dance," Rand muttered, "but if you'll help me get on my feet, I can walk." He looked at the blade in his hand and shuddered. "Blood and ashes, I'll run."

Hurriedly hanging himself about with their possessions, Mat pulled Rand to his feet. Rand's legs wobbled, and he had to lean on his friend to stay upright, but he tried not to slow Mat down. He held the woman's dagger well away from himself. Outside the door was a bucket of water. He tossed the dagger into it as they passed. The blade entered the water with a hiss; steam rose from the surface. Grimacing, he tried to take faster steps.

With light come, there were plenty of people in the streets, even so early. They were about their own business, though, and no one had any attention to spare for two young men walking out of the village, not with so many strangers about. Just the same, Rand stiffened every muscle, trying to stand straight. With each step he wondered if any of the folk hurrying by were Darkfriends. *Are any of them waiting for the woman with the dagger? For the Fade?*

A mile outside the village his strength gave out. One minute he was panting along, hanging on Mat; the next they were both on the ground. Mat tugged him over to the side of the road.

"We have to keep going," Mat said. He scrubbed his hand through his hair, then tugged the scarf down above his eyes. "Sooner or later, somebody will let her out, and they'll be after us again."

"I know," Rand panted. "I know. Give me a hand."

Mat pulled him up again, but he wavered there, knowing it was no good. The first time he tried to take a step, he would be flat on his face again.

Holding him upright, Mat waited impatiently for a horse-cart, approaching from the village, to pass them. Mat gave a grunt of surprise when the cart slowed to a stop before them. A leathery-faced man looked down from the driver's seat.

"Something wrong with him?" the man asked around his pipe. "He's just tired," Mat said.

Rand could see that was not going to do, not leaning on Mat the way he was. He let go of Mat and took a step away from him. His legs quivered, but he willed himself to stay erect. "I haven't slept in two days," he said. "Ate something that made me sick. I'm better, now, but I haven't slept."

The man blew a streamer of smoke from the corner of his mouth. "Going to Caemlyn, are you? Was your age, I expect I might be off to see this false Dragon myself."

"Yes." Mat nodded. "That's right. We're going to see the false Dragon."

"Well, climb on up, then. Your friend in the back. If he's sick again, best it's on the straw, not up here. Name's Hyam Kinch."

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CHAPTER
34

The Last Village

It was after dark when they reached Carysford, longer than Rand had thought it would take from what Master Kinch said when he let them down. He wondered if his whole sense of time was getting skewed. Only three nights since Howal Gode and Four Kings, two since Paitr had surprised them in Market Sheran. Just a bare day since the nameless Darkfriend woman tried to kill them in the stable of The Queen’s Man, but even that seemed a year ago, or a lifetime.

Whatever was happening to time, Carysford appeared normal enough, on the surface, at least. Neat, vine-covered brick houses and narrow lanes, except for the Caemlyn Road itself, quiet and outwardly peaceful. *But what’s underneath?* he wondered. Market Sheran had been peaceful to look at, and so had the village where the woman. . . . He had never learned the name of that one, and he did not want to think about it.

Light spilled from the windows of the houses into streets all but empty of people. That suited Rand. Slinking from corner to corner, he avoided the few people abroad. Mat stuck to his shoulder, freezing when the crunch of gravel announced the approach of a villager, dodging from shadow to shadow when the dim shape had gone past.

The River Cary was a bare thirty paces wide there, and the black water moved sluggishly, but the ford had long since been bridged over. Centuries of rain and wind had worn the stone abutments until they seemed almost like natural formations. Years of freight wagons and merchant trains had ground at the thick wooden planks, too. Loose boards rattled under their boots, sounding as loud as drums. Until long after they were through the village and into the countryside beyond, Rand waited for a voice to demand to know who they were. Or worse, knowing who they were.

The countryside had been filling up the further they went, becoming more and more settled. There were always the lights of farmhouses in sight. Hedges and rail fences lined the road and the fields beyond. Always the fields were there, and never a stretch of woods close to the road. It seemed as if they were always on the outskirts of a village, even when they were hours from the nearest town. Neat and peaceful. And with never an indication that Darkfriends or worse might be lurking.

Abruptly Mat sat down in the road. He had pushed the scarf up on top of his head, now that the only light came from the moon. “Two paces to the span,” he muttered. “A thousand spans to the mile, four miles to the league. . . . I’m not walking another ten paces unless there’s a place to sleep at the end of it. Something to eat wouldn’t be amiss, either. You haven’t been hiding anything in your pockets, have you? An apple, maybe? I won’t hold it against you if you have. You could at least look.”

Rand peered down the road both ways. They were the only things moving in the night. He glanced at Mat, who had pulled off one boot and was rubbing his foot. Or they had been. His own feet hurt, too. A tremor ran up his legs as if to tell him he had not yet regained as much strength as he thought.

Dark mounds stood in a field just ahead of them. Haystacks, diminished by winter feeding, but still haystacks.

He nudged Mat with his toe. “We’ll sleep there.”

“Haystacks again.” Mat sighed, but he tugged on his boot and got up.

The wind was rising, the night chill growing deeper. They climbed over the smooth poles of the fence and quickly were burrowing into the hay. The tarp that kept the rain off the hay cut the wind, too.

Rand twisted around in the hollow he had made until he found a comfortable position. Hay still managed to poke at him through his clothes, but he had learned to put up with that. He tried counting the haystacks he had slept in since Whitebridge. Heroes in the stories never had to sleep in haystacks, or under hedges. But it was not easy to pretend, anymore, that he was a hero in a story, even for a little while. With a sigh, he pulled his collar up in the hopes of keeping hay from getting down his back.

“Rand?” Mat said softly. “Rand, do you think we’ll make it?”

“Tar Valon? It’s a long way yet, but—”

“Caemlyn. Do you think we’ll make it to Caemlyn?”

Rand raised his head, but it was dark in their burrow; the only thing that told him where Mat was was his voice. “Master Kinch said two days. Day after tomorrow, the next day, we’ll get there.”

“If there aren’t a hundred Darkfriends waiting for us down the road, or a Fade or two.” There was silence for a moment, then Mat said, “I think we’re the last ones left, Rand.” He sounded frightened. “Whatever it’s all about, it’s just us two, now. Just us.”

Rand shook his head. He knew Mat could not see in the darkness, but it was more for himself than Mat, anyway. “Go to sleep, Mat,” he said tiredly. But he lay awake a long time himself, before sleep came. *Just us.*

A cock’s crow woke him, and he scrambled out into the false dawn, brushing hay off his clothes. Despite his precautions some had worked its way down his back; the straws clung between his shoulder blades, itching. He took off his coat and pulled his shirt out of his breeches to get to it. It was while he had one hand down the back of his neck and the other twisted up behind him that he became aware of the people.

The sun was not yet truly up, but already a steady trickle moved down the road in ones and twos, trudging toward Caemlyn, some with packs or bundles on their backs, others with nothing but a walking staff, if that. Most were young men, but here and there was a girl, or someone older. One and all they had the travel-stained look of having walked a long way. Some had their eyes on their feet and a weary slump to their shoulders, early as it was; others had their gaze fixed on something out of sight ahead, something toward the dawn.

Mat rolled out of the haystack, scratching vigorously. He only paused long enough to wrap the scarf around his head; it shaded his eyes a little less this morning. “You think we might get something to eat today?”

Rand’s stomach rumbled in sympathy. “We can think about that when we’re on the road,” he said. Hastily arranging his clothes, he dug his share of their bundles out of the haystack.

By the time they reached the fence, Mat had noticed the people, too. He frowned, stopping in the field while Rand climbed over. A young man, not much older than they, glanced at them as he passed. His clothes were dusty, and so was the blanketroll strapped across his back.

“Where are you bound?” Mat called. “Why, Caemlyn, for to see the Dragon,” the fellow shouted back without stopping. He raised an eyebrow at the blankets and saddlebags hanging from their shoulders, and added, “Just like you.” With a laugh he went on, his eyes already seeking eagerly ahead.

Mat asked the same question several times during the day, and the only people who did not give much the same answer were local folk. If those answered at all, it was by spitting and turning away in disgust. They turned away, but they kept a watchful eye, too. They looked at all the travelers the same way, out of the corners of their eyes. Their faces said strangers might get up to anything if not watched.

People who lived in the area were not only wary of the strangers, they seemed more than a little put out. Just enough people were on the road, scattered out just enough, that when farmers’ carts and wagons appeared with the sun peeking over the horizon, even their usually slow pace was halved. None of them was in any mood to give a ride. A sour grimace, and maybe a curse for the work they were missing, were more likely.

The merchants’ wagons rolled by with little hindrance beyond shaken fists, whether they were going toward Caemlyn or away from it. When the first merchants’ train appeared, early on in the morning, coming at a stiff trot with the sun barely above the horizon behind the wagons, Rand stepped out of the road. They gave no sign of slowing for anything, and he saw other folk scrambling out of the way. He moved all the way over onto the verge, but kept walking.

A flicker of motion as the first wagon rumbled close was all the warning he had. He went sprawling on the ground as the wagon driver’s whip cracked in the air where his head had been. From where he lay he met the driver’s eyes as the wagon rolled by. Hard eyes above a mouth in a tight grimace. Not a care that he might have drawn blood, or taken an eye.

“Light blind you!” Mat shouted after the wagon. “You can’t—” A mounted guard caught him on the shoulder with the butt of his spear, knocking him down atop Rand.

“Out of the way, you dirty Darkfriend!” the guard growled without slowing.

After that, they kept their distance from the wagons. There were certainly enough of them. The rattle and clatter of one hardly faded before another could be heard coming. Guards and drivers, they all stared at the travelers heading for Caemlyn as if seeing dirt walk.

Once Rand misjudged a driver’s whip, just by the length of the tip. Clapping his hand to the shallow gash over his eyebrow, he swallowed hard to keep from vomiting at how close it had come to his eye. The driver smirked at him. With his other hand he grabbed Mat, to stop him nocking an arrow.

“Let it go,” he said. He jerked his head at the guards riding alongside the wagons. Some of them were laughing; others gave Mat’s bow a hard eye. “If we’re lucky, they’d just beat us with their spears. If we’re lucky.”

Mat grunted sourly, but he let Rand pull him on down the road.

Twice squadrons of the Queen’s Guards came trotting down the road, streamers on their lances fluttering in the wind. Some of the farmers hailed them, wanting something done about the strangers, and the Guards always paused patiently to listen. Near midday Rand stopped to listen to one such conversation.

Behind the bars of his helmet, the Guard captain’s mouth was a tight line. “If one of them steals something, or trespasses on your land,” he growled at the lanky farmer frowning beside his stirrup, “I’ll haul him before a magistrate, but they break no Queen’s Law by walking on the Queen’s Highway.”

“But they’re all over the place,” the farmer protested. “Who knows who they are, or what they are. All this talk about the Dragon. . . .”

“Light, man! You only have a handful here. Caemlyn’s walls are bulging with them, and more coming every day.” The captain’s scowl deepened as he caught sight of Rand and Mat, standing in the road nearby. He gestured down the road with a steel-backed gauntlet. “Get on with you, or I’ll have you in for blocking traffic.”

His voice was no rougher with them than with the farmer, but they moved on. The captain’s eyes followed them for a time; Rand could feel them on his back. He suspected the Guards had little patience left with the wanderers, and no sympathy for a hungry thief. He decided to stop Mat if he suggested stealing eggs again.

Still, there was a good side to all the wagons and people on the road, especially all the young men heading for Caemlyn. For any Darkfriends hunting them, it would be like trying to pick out two particular pigeons in a flock. If the Myrddraal on Winternight had not known exactly who it was after, maybe its fellow would do no better here.

His stomach rumbled frequently, reminding him that they had next to no money left, certainly not enough for a meal at the prices charged this close to Caemlyn. He realized once he had a hand on the flute case, and firmly pushed it around to his back. Gode had known all about the flute, and the juggling. There was no telling how much Ba'alzamon had learned from him before the end—if what Rand had seen had *been* the end—or how much had been passed to other Darkfriends.

He looked regretfully at a farm they were passing. A man patrolled the fences with a pair of dogs, growling and tugging at their leashes. The man looked as if he wanted nothing more than an excuse to let them loose. Not every farm had the dogs out, but no one was offering jobs to travelers.

Before the sun went down, he and Mat walked through two more villages. The village folk stood in knots, talking among themselves and watching the steady stream pass by. Their faces were no friendlier than the faces of the farmers, or the wagon drivers, or the Queen's Guards. All these strangers going to see the false Dragon. Fools who did not know enough to stay where they belonged. Maybe followers of the false Dragon. Maybe even Darkfriends. If there was any difference between the two.

With evening coming, the stream began to thin at the second town. The few who had money disappeared into the inn, though there seemed to be some argument about letting them inside; others began hunting for handy hedges or fields with no dogs. By dusk he and Mat had the Caemlyn Road to themselves. Mat began talking about finding another haystack, but Rand insisted on keeping on.

"As long as we can see the road," he said. "The further we go before stopping, the further ahead we are." *If they are chasing you. Why should they chase now, when they've been waiting for you to come to them so far?*

It was argument enough for Mat. With frequent glances over his shoulder, he quickened his step. Rand had to hurry to keep up.

The night thickened, relieved only a bit by scant moonlight. Mat's burst of energy faded, and his complaints started up again. Aching knots formed in Rand's calves. He told himself he had walked further in a hard day working on the farm with Tam, but repeat it as often as he would, he could not make himself believe it. Gritting his teeth, he ignored the aches and pains and would not stop.

With Mat complaining and him concentrating on the next step, they were almost on the village before he saw the lights. He tottered to a stop, suddenly aware of a burning that ran from his feet right up his legs. He thought he had a blister on his right foot.

At the sight of the village lights, Mat sagged to his knees with a groan. “Can we stop now?” he panted. “Or do you want to find an inn and hang out a sign for the Darkfriends? Or a Fade.”

“The other side of the town,” Rand answered, staring at the lights. From this distance, in the dark, it could have been Emond’s Field. *What’s waiting there?* “Another mile, that’s all.”

“All! I’m not walking another span!”

Rand’s legs felt like fire, but he made himself take a step, and then another. It did not get any easier, but he kept on, one step at a time. Before he had gone ten paces he heard Mat staggering after him, muttering under his breath. He thought it was just as well he could not make out what Mat was saying.

It was late enough for the streets of the village to be empty, though most houses had a light in at least one window. The inn in the middle of town was brightly lit, surrounded by a golden pool that pushed back the darkness. Music and laughter, dimmed by thick walls, drifted from the building. The sign over the door creaked in the wind. At the near end of the inn, a cart and horse stood in the Caemlyn Road with a man checking the harness. Two men stood at the far end of the building, on the very edge of the light.

Rand stopped in the shadows beside a house that stood dark. He was too tired to hunt through the lanes for a way around. A minute resting could not hurt. Just a minute. Just until the men went away. Mat slumped against the wall with a grateful sigh, leaning back as if he meant to go to sleep right there.

Something about the two men at the rim of the shadows made Rand uneasy. He could not put a finger on anything, at first, but he realized the man at the cart felt the same way about them. He reached the end of the strap he was checking, adjusted the bit in the horse’s mouth, then went back and started over from the beginning again. He kept his head down the whole while, his eyes on what he was doing and away from the other men. It could have been that he simply was not aware of them, though they were less than fifty feet off, except for the stiff way he moved and the way he sometimes turned awkwardly in what he was doing so he would not be looking toward them.

One of the men in the shadows was only a black shape, but the other stood more into the light, with his back to Rand. Even so it was plain he was not overjoyed at the conversation he was having. He wrung his hands and kept his eyes on the ground, jerking his head in a nod now and then at something the other had said. Rand could not hear anything, but he got the impression that the man in the shadows was doing all the talking; the nervous man just listened, and nodded, and wrung his hands anxiously.

Eventually the one who was wrapped in darkness turned away, and the nervous fellow started back into the light. Despite the chill he was mopping his face with the long apron he wore, as if he were drenched in sweat.

Skin prickling, Rand watched the shape moving off in the night. He did not know why, but his uneasiness seemed to follow that one, a vague tingling in the back of his neck and the hair stirring on his arms as if he had suddenly realized something was sneaking up on him. With a quick shake of his head, he rubbed his arms briskly. *Getting as foolish as Mat, aren't you?*

At that moment the form slipped by the edge of the light from a window—just on the brink of it—and Rand's skin crawled. The inn's sign went *scree-scree-scree* in the wind, but the dark cloak never stirred.

"Fade," he whispered, and Mat jerked to his feet as if he had shouted.

"What—?"

He clamped a hand over Mat's mouth. "Softly." The dark shape was lost in the darkness. *Where?* "It's gone, now. I think. I hope." He took his hand away; the only sound Mat made was a long, indrawn breath.

The nervous man was almost to the inn door. He stopped and smoothed down his apron, visibly composing himself before he went inside.

"Strange friends you've got, Raimun Holdwin," the man by the cart said suddenly. It was an old man's voice, but strong. The speaker straightened, shaking his head. "Strange friends in the dark for an innkeeper."

The nervous man jumped when the other spoke, looking around as if he had not seen the cart and the other man until right then. He drew a deep breath and gathered himself, then asked sharply, "And what do you mean by that, Almen Bunt?"

"Just what I said, Holdwin. Strange friends. He's not from around here, is he? Lot of odd folk coming through the last few weeks. Awful lot of odd folk."

"You're a fine one to talk." Holdwin cocked an eye at the man by the cart. "I know a lot of men, even men from Caemlyn. Not like you, cooped up alone out on that farm of yours.” He paused, then went on as if he thought he had to explain further. “He’s from Four Kings. Looking for a couple of thieves. Young men. They stole a heron-mark sword from him.”

Rand’s breath had caught at the mention of Four Kings; at the mention of the sword he glanced at Mat. His friend had his back pressed hard against the wall and was staring into the darkness with eyes so wide they seemed to be all whites. Rand wanted to stare into the night, too—the Halfman could be anywhere—but his eyes went back to the two men in front of the inn.

“A heron-mark sword!” Bunt exclaimed. “No wonder he wants it back.”

Holdwin nodded. “Yes, and them, too. My friend’s a rich man, a . . . a merchant, and they’ve been stirring up trouble with the men who work for him. Telling wild stories and getting people upset. They’re Darkfriends, and followers of Logain, too.”

“Darkfriends *and* followers of the false Dragon? And telling wild stories, too? Getting up to a lot for young fellows. You did say they were young?” There was a sudden note of amusement in Bunt’s voice, but the innkeeper did not seem to notice.

“Yes. Not yet twenty. There’s a reward—a hundred crowns in gold—for the two of them.” Holdwin hesitated, then added, “They’ve sly tongues, these two. The Light knows what kind of tales they’ll tell, trying to turn people against one another. And dangerous, too, even if they don’t look it. Vicious. Best you stay clear if you think you see them. Two young men, one with a sword, and both looking over their shoulders. If they’re the right ones, my . . . my friend will pick them up once they’re located.”

“You sound almost as if you know them to look at.”

“I’ll know them when I see them,” Holdwin said confidently. “Just don’t try to take them yourself. No need for anyone to get hurt. Come tell me if you see them. My . . . friend will deal with them. A hundred crowns for the two, but he wants the pair.”

“A hundred crowns for the two,” Bunt mused. “How much for this sword he wants so bad?”

Abruptly Holdwin appeared to realize the other man was making fun of him. “I don’t know why I’m telling you,” he snapped. “You’re still fixed on that fool plan of yours, I see.”

“Not such a fool plan,” Bunt replied placidly. “There might not be another false Dragon to see before I die—Light send it so!—and I’m too old to eat some merchant's dust all the way to Caemlyn. I'll have the road to myself, and I'll be in Caemlyn bright and early tomorrow."

"To yourself?" The innkeeper's voice had a nasty quiver. "You can never tell what might be out in the night, Almen Bunt. All alone on the road, in the dark. Even if somebody hears you scream, there's no one will unbar a door to help. Not these days, Bunt. Not your nearest neighbor."

None of that seemed to ruffle the old farmer at all; he answered as calmly as before. "If the Queen's Guards can't keep the road safe this close to Caemlyn, then we're none of us safe even in our own beds. If you ask me, one thing the Guards could do to make sure the roads are safe would be clap that friend of yours in irons. Sneaking around in the dark, afraid to let anybody get a look at him. Can't tell me he's not up to no good."

"Afraid!" Holdwin exclaimed. "You old fool, if you knew—" His teeth clicked shut abruptly, and he gave himself a shake. "I don't know why I'm wasting time on you. Get off with you! Stop cluttering up the front of my place of business." The door of the inn boomed shut behind him.

Muttering to himself, Bunt took hold of the edge of the cart seat and set his foot on the wheelhub.

Rand hesitated only a moment. Mat caught his arm as he started forward.

"Are you crazy, Rand? He'll recognize us for sure!"

"You'd rather stay here? With a Fade around? How far do you think we'll get on foot before it finds us?" He tried not to think of how far they would get in a cart if it found them. He shook free of Mat and trotted up the road. He carefully held his cloak shut so the sword was hidden; the wind and the cold were excuse enough for that.

"I couldn't help overhearing you're going to Caemlyn," he said.

Bunt gave a start, jerking a quarterstaff out of the cart. His leathery face was a mass of wrinkles and half his teeth were gone, but his gnarled hands held the staff steady. After a minute he lowered one end of the staff to the ground and leaned on it. "So you two are going to Caemlyn. To see the Dragon, eh?"

Rand had not realized that Mat had followed him. Mat was keeping well back, though, out of the light, watching the inn and the old farmer with as much suspicion as he was the night.

"The false Dragon," Rand said with emphasis.

Bunt nodded. “Of course. Of course.” He threw a sideways look at the inn, then abruptly shoved his staff back under the cart seat. “Well, if you want a ride, get in. I’ve wasted enough time.” He was already climbing to the seat.

Rand clambered over the back as the farmer flicked the reins. Mat ran to catch up as the cart started off. Rand caught his arms and pulled him aboard.

The village faded quickly into the night at the pace Bunt set. Rand lay back on the bare boards, fighting the lulling creak of the wheels. Mat stifled his yawns with a fist, warily staring into the countryside. Darkness weighed heavily on the fields and farms, dotted with the lights of farmhouses. The lights seemed distant, seemed to struggle vainly against the night. An owl called, a mourner’s cry, and the wind moaned like lost souls in the Shadow.

It could be out there anywhere, Rand thought.

Bunt seemed to feel the oppression of the night, too, for he suddenly spoke up. “You two ever been to Caemlyn before?” He gave a little chuckle. “Don’t suppose you have. Well, wait till you see it. The greatest city in the world. Oh, I’ve heard all about Illian and Ebou Dar and Tear and all—there’s always some fool thinks a thing is bigger and better just because it’s off somewheres over the horizon—but for my money, Caemlyn is the grandest there is. Couldn’t be grander. No, it couldn’t. Unless maybe Queen Morgase, the Light illumine her, got rid of that witch from Tar Valon.”

Rand was lying back with his head pillowed on his blanketroll atop the bundle of Thom’s cloak, watching the night drift by, letting the farmer’s words wash by him. A human voice kept the darkness at bay and muted the mournful wind. He twisted around to look up at the dark mass of Bunt’s back. “You mean an Aes Sedai?”

“What else would I mean? Sitting there in the Palace like a spider. I’m a good Queen’s man—never say I’m not—but it just isn’t right. I’m not one of those saying Elaida’s got too much influence over the Queen. Not me. And as for the fools who claim Elaida’s really the queen in all but name. . . .” He spat into the night. “That for them. Morgase is no puppet to dance for any Tar Valon witch.”

Another Aes Sedai. If . . . when Moiraine got to Caemlyn, she might well go to a sister Aes Sedai. If the worst happened, this Elaida might help them reach Tar Valon. He looked at Mat, and just as if he had spoken aloud

Mat shook his head. He could not see Mat's face, but he knew it was fixed in denial.

Bunt went right on talking, flicking the reins whenever his horse slowed but otherwise letting his hands rest on his knees. "I'm a good Queen's man, like I said, but even fools say something worthwhile now and again. Even a blind pig finds an acorn sometimes. There's got to be some changes. This weather, the crops failing, cows drying up, calves and lambs born dead, or with two heads. Bloody ravens don't even wait for things to die. People are scared. They want somebody to blame. Dragon's Fang turning up on people's doors. Things creeping about in the night. Barns getting burned. Fellows around like that friend of Holdwin, scaring people. The Queen's got to do something before it's too late. You see that, don't you?" Rand made a noncommittal sound. It sounded as if they had been even luckier than he had thought to find this old man and his cart. They might not have gotten further than that last village if they had waited for daylight. Things creeping about in the night. He lifted up to look over the side of the cart at the darkness. Shadows and shapes seemed to writhe in the black. He dropped back before his imagination convinced him there was something there.

Bunt took it for agreement. "Right. I'm a good Queen's man, and I'll stand against any who try to harm her, but I'm right. You take the Lady Elayne and the Lord Gawyn, now. There's a change wouldn't harm anything, and might do some good. Sure, I know we've always done it that way in Andor. Send the Daughter-Heir off to Tar Valon to study with the Aes Sedai, and the eldest son off to study with the Warders. I believe in tradition, I do, but look what it got us last time. Luc dead in the Blight before he was ever anointed First Prince of the Sword, and Tigraine vanished—run off or dead—when it came time for her to take the throne. Still troubling us, that.

"There's some saying she's still alive, you know, that Morgase isn't the rightful Queen. Bloody fools. I remember what happened. Remember like it was yesterday. No Daughter-Heir to take the throne when the old Queen died, and every House in Andor scheming and fighting for the right. And Taringail Damodred. You wouldn't have thought he'd lost his wife, him hot to figure which House would win so he could marry again and become Prince Consort after all. Well, he managed it, though why Morgase chose . . . ah, no man knows the mind of a woman, and a queen is twice a woman, wed to a man, wed to the land. He got what he wanted, anyway, if not the way he wanted it.

“Brought Cairhien into the plotting before he was done, and you know how that ended. The Tree chopped down, and black-veiled Aiel coming over the Dragonwall. Well, he got himself decently killed after he’d fathered Elayne and Gawyn, so there’s an end to it, I suppose. But why send them to Tar Valon? It’s time men didn’t think of the throne of Andor and Aes Sedai in the same thought anymore. If they’ve got to go some place else to learn what they need, well, Illian’s got libraries as good as Tar Valon, and they’ll teach the Lady Elayne as much about ruling and scheming as ever the witches could. Nobody knows more about scheming than an Illianer. And if the Guards can’t teach the Lord Gawyn enough about soldiering, well, they’ve soldiers in Illian, too. And in Shienar, and Tear, for that matter. I’m a good Queen’s man, but I say let’s stop all this truck with Tar Valon. Three thousand years is long enough. Too long. Queen Morgase can lead us and put things right without help from the White Tower. I tell you, there’s a woman makes a man proud to kneel for her blessing. Why, once. . . .”

Rand fought the sleep his body cried out for, but the rhythmic creak and sway of the cart lulled him and he floated off on the drone of Bunt’s voice. He dreamed of Tam. At first they were at the big oak table in the farmhouse, drinking tea while Tam told him about Prince Consorts, and Daughter-Heirs, and the Dragonwall, and black-veiled Aielmen. The heron-mark sword lay on the table between them, but neither of them looked at it. Suddenly he was in the Westwood, pulling the makeshift litter through the moon-bright night. When he looked over his shoulder, it was Thom on the litter, not his father, sitting cross-legged and juggling in the moonlight.

“The Queen is wed to the land,” Thom said as brightly colored balls danced in a circle, “but the Dragon . . . the Dragon is one with the land, and the land is one with the Dragon.”

Further back Rand saw a Fade coming, black cloak undisturbed by the wind, horse ghosting silently through the trees. Two severed heads hung at the Myrddraal’s saddlebow, dripping blood that ran in darker streams down its mount’s coal-black shoulder. Lan and Moiraine, faces distorted in grimaces of pain. The Fade pulled on a fistful of tethers as it rode. Each tether ran back to the bound wrists of one of those who ran behind the soundless hooves, their faces blank with despair. Mat and Perrin. And Egwene.

"Not her!" Rand shouted. "The Light blast you, it's me you want, not her!"

The Halfman gestured, and flames consumed Egwene, flesh crisping to ash, bone blacking and crumbling.

"The Dragon is one with the land," Thom said, still juggling unconcernedly, "and the land is one with the Dragon."

Rand screamed . . . and opened his eyes.

The cart creaked along the Caemlyn Road, filled with night and the sweetness of long-vanished hay and the faint smell of horse. A shape blacker than the night rested on his chest, and eyes blacker than death looked into his.

"You are mine," the raven said, and the sharp beak stabbed into his eye. He screamed as it plucked his eyeball out of his head.

With a throat-ripping shriek, he sat up, clapping both hands to his face.

Early morning daylight bathed the cart. Dazed, he stared at his hands. No blood. No pain. The rest of the dream was already fading, but that. . . . Gingerly he felt his face and shuddered.

"At least. . . ." Mat yawned, cracking his jaws. "At least you got some sleep." There was little sympathy in his bleary eyes. He was huddled under his cloak, with his blanketroll doubled up beneath his head. "He talked all bloody night."

"You all the way awake?" Bunt said from the driver's seat. "Gave me a start, you did, yelling like that. Well, we're there." He swept a hand out in front of them in a grand gesture. "Caemlyn, the grandest city in the world."

* * *

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CHAPTER
35

Caemlyn

Rand twisted up to kneel behind the driver's seat. He could not help laughing with relief. "We made it, Mat! I told you we'd. . . ." Words died in his mouth as his eyes fell on Caemlyn. After Baerlon, even more after the ruins of Shadar Logoth, he had thought he knew what a great city would look like, but this . . . this was more than he would have believed.

Outside the great wall, buildings clustered as if every town he had passed through had been gathered and set down there, side-by-side and all pushed together. Inns thrust their upper stories above the tile roofs of houses, and squat warehouses, broad and windowless, shouldered against them all. Red brick and gray stone and plastered white, jumbled and mixed together, they spread as far as the eye could see. Baerlon could have vanished into it without being noticed, and Whitebridge swallowed up twenty times over with hardly a ripple.

And the wall itself. The sheer, fifty-foot height of pale gray stone, streaked with silver and white, swept out in a great circle, curving to north and south till he wondered how far it must run. All along its length towers rose, round and standing high above the wall's own height, red-and-white banners whipping in the wind atop each one. From inside the wall other towers peeked out, slender towers even taller than those at the walls, and domes gleaming white and gold in the sun. A thousand stories had painted cities in his mind, the great cities of kings and queens, of thrones and powers and legends, and Caemlyn fit into those mind-deep pictures as water fits into a jug.

The cart creaked down the wide road toward the city, toward tower-flanked gates. The wagons of a merchants' train rolled out of those gates, under a vaulting archway in the stone that could have let a giant through, or ten giants abreast. Unwalled markets lined the road on both sides, roof tiles glistening red and purple, with stalls and pens in the spaces between. Calves bawled, cattle lowed, geese honked, chickens clucked, goats bleated, sheep baaed, and people bargained at the top of their lungs. A wall of noise funneled them toward the gates of Caemlyn.

"What did I tell you?" Bunt had to raise his voice to near a shout in order to be heard. "The grandest city in the world. Built by Ogier, you know. Least, the Inner City and the Palace were. It's that old, Caemlyn is. Caemlyn, where good Queen Morgase, the Light illumine her, makes the law and holds the peace for Andor. The greatest city on earth."

Rand was ready to agree. His mouth hung open, and he wanted to put his hands over his ears to shut out the din. People crowded the road, as thick as folk in Emond's Field crowded the Green at Bel Tine. He remembered thinking there were too many people in Baerlon to be believed, and almost laughed. He looked at Mat and grinned. Mat did have his hands over his ears, and his shoulders were hunched up as if he wanted to cover them with those, too.

"How are we going to hide in this?" he demanded loudly when he saw Rand looking. "How can we tell who to trust with so many? So bloody many. Light, the noise!"

Rand looked at Bunt before answering. The farmer was caught up in staring at the city; with the noise, he might not have heard anyway. Still, Rand put his mouth close to Mat's ear. "How can they find us among so many? Can't you see it, you wool-headed idiot? We're safe, if you ever learn to watch your bloody tongue!" He flung out a hand to take in everything, the markets, the city walls still ahead. "Look at it, Mat! Anything could happen here. Anything! We might even find Moiraine waiting for us, and Egwene, and all the rest."

"If they're alive. If you ask me, they're as dead as the gleeman."

The grin faded from Rand's face, and he turned to watch the gates come nearer. Anything could happen in a city like Caemlyn. He held that thought stubbornly.

The horse could not move any faster, flap the reins as Bunt would; the closer to the gates they came, the thicker the crowd grew, jostling together shoulder to shoulder, pressing against the carts and wagons heading in. Rand was glad to see a good many were dusty young men afoot with little in the way of belongings. Whatever their ages, a lot of the crowd pushing toward the gates had a travel-worn look, rickety carts and tired horses, clothes wrinkled from many nights of sleeping rough, dragging steps and weary eyes. But weary or not, those eyes were fixed on the gates as if getting inside the walls would strip away all their fatigue.

Half a dozen of the Queen's Guards stood at the gates, their clean red-and-white tabards and burnished plate-and-mail a sharp contrast to most of the people streaming under the stone arch. Backs rigid and heads straight, they eyed the incomers with disdainful wariness. It was plain they would just as soon have turned away most of those coming in. Aside from keeping a way clear for traffic leaving the city, though, and having a hard word with those who tried to push too fast, they did not hinder anyone.

"Keep your places. Don't push. Don't push, the Light blind you! There's room for everybody, the Light help us. Keep your places."

Bunt's cart rolled past the gates with the slow tide of the throng, into Caemlyn.

The city rose on low hills, like steps climbing to a center. Another wall encircled that center, shining pure white and running over the hills. Inside that were even more towers and domes, white and gold and purple, their elevation atop the hills making them seem to look down on the rest of Caemlyn. Rand thought that must be the Inner City of which Bunt had spoken.

The Caemlyn Road itself changed as soon as it was inside the city, becoming a wide boulevard, split down the middle by broad strips of grass and trees. The grass was brown and the tree branches bare, but people hurried by as if they saw nothing unusual, laughing, talking, arguing, doing all the things that people do. Just as if they had no idea that there had been no spring yet this year and might be none. They did not see, Rand realized, could not or would not. Their eyes slid away from leafless branches, and they walked across the dead and dying grass without once looking down. What they did not see, they could ignore; what they did not see was not really there.

Gaping at the city and the people, Rand was taken by surprise when the cart turned down a side street, narrower than the boulevard, but still twice as wide as any street in Emond's Field. Bunt drew the horse to a halt and turned to look back at them hesitantly. The traffic was a bit lighter here; the crowd split around the cart without breaking stride.

“What you’re hiding under your cloak, is it really what Holdwin says?”

Rand was in the act of tossing his saddlebags over his shoulder. He did not even twitch. “What do you mean?” His voice was steady, too. His stomach was a sour knot, but his voice was steady.

Mat stifled a yawn with one hand, but he shoved the other under his coat—clutching the dagger from Shadar Logoth, Rand knew—and his eyes had a hard, hunted look under the scarf around his head. Bunt avoided looking at Mat, as if he knew there was a weapon in that hidden hand.

“Don’t mean nothing, I suppose. Look, now, if you heard I was coming to Caemlyn, you were there long enough to hear the rest. Was I after a reward, I’d have made some excuse to go in the Goose and Crown, speak to Holdwin. Only I don’t much like Holdwin, and I don’t like that friend of his, not at all. Seems like he wants you two more than he wants . . . anything else.”

“I don’t know what he wants,” Rand said. “We’ve never seen him before.” It might even be the truth; he could not tell one Fade from another.

“Uh-huh. Well, like I say, I don’t know nothing, and I guess I don’t want to. There’s enough trouble around for everybody without I go looking for more.”

Mat was slow in gathering his things, and Rand was already in the street before he started climbing down. Rand waited impatiently. Mat turned stiffly from the cart, hugging bow and quiver and blanketroll to his chest, muttering under his breath. Heavy shadows darkened the undersides of his eyes.

Rand’s stomach rumbled, and he grimaced. Hunger combined with a sour twisting in his gut made him afraid he was going to vomit. Mat was staring at him now, expectantly. *Which way to go? What to do now?*

Bunt leaned over and beckoned him closer. He went, hoping for advice about Caemlyn.

“I’d hide that. . . .” The old farmer paused and looked around warily. People pushed by on both sides of the cart, but except for a few passing curses about blocking the way, no one paid them any attention. “Stop wearing it,” he said, “hide it, sell it. Give it away. That’s my advice. Thing like that’s going to draw attention, and I guess you don’t want any of that.”

Abruptly he straightened, clucking to his horse, and drove slowly on down the crowded street without another word or a backward glance. A wagon loaded with barrels rumbled toward them. Rand jumped out of the way, staggered, and when he looked again Bunt and his cart were lost to sight.

“What do we do now?” Mat demanded. He licked his lips, staring wide-eyed at all the people pushing by and the buildings towering as much as six stories above the street. “We’re in Caemlyn, but what do we do?” He had uncovered his ears, but his hands twitched as if he wanted to put them back. A hum lay on the city, the low, steady drone of hundreds of shops working, thousands of people talking. To Rand it was like being inside a giant beehive, constantly buzzing. “Even if they are here, Rand, how could we find them in all of this?”

“Moiraine will find us,” Rand said slowly. The immensity of the city was a weight on his shoulders; he wanted to get away, to hide from all the people and noise. The void eluded him despite Tam’s teachings; his eyes drew the city into it. He concentrated instead on what was right around him, ignoring everything that lay beyond. Just looking at that one street, it almost seemed like Baerlon. Baerlon, the last place they had all thought they were safe. *Nobody’s safe anymore. Maybe they* are *all dead. What do you do then?*

“They’re alive! Egwene’s alive!” he said fiercely. Several passersby looked at him oddly.

“Maybe,” Mat said. “Maybe. What if Moiraine doesn’t find us? What if nobody does but the . . . the. . . .” He shuddered, unable to say it.

“We’ll think about that when it happens,” he told Mat firmly. “If it happens.” The worst meant seeking out Elaida, the Aes Sedai in the Palace. He would go on to Tar Valon, first. He did not know if Mat remembered what Thom had said about the Red Ajah—and the Black—but he surely did. His stomach twisted again. “Thom said to find an inn called The Queen’s Blessing. We’ll go there first.”

“How? We can’t afford one meal between the two of us.”

“At least it’s a place to start. Thom thought we could find help there.”

“I can’t. . . . Rand, they’re everywhere.” Mat dropped his eyes to the paving stones and seemed to shrink in on himself, trying to pull away from the people that were all around them. “Wherever we go, they’re right behind us, or they’re waiting for us. They’ll be at The Queen’s Blessing, too. I can’t. . . . I. . . . Nothing’s going to stop a Fade.”

Rand grabbed Mat's collar in a fist that he was trying hard to keep from trembling. He needed Mat. Maybe the others were alive—*Light, please!*—but right then and there, it was just Mat and him. The thought of going on alone. . . . He swallowed hard, tasting bile.

He looked around quickly. No one seemed to have heard Mat mention the Fade; the crowd pressed past lost in its own worries. He put his face close to Mat's. "We've made it this far, haven't we?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "They haven't caught us yet. We can make it all the way, if we just don't quit. I won't just quit and wait for them like a sheep for slaughter. I won't! Well? Are you going to stand here till you starve to death? Or until they come pick you up in a sack?"

He let go of Mat and turned away. His fingernails dug into his palms, but his hands still trembled. Suddenly Mat was walking alongside him, his eyes still down, and Rand let out a long breath.

"I'm sorry, Rand," Mat mumbled.

"Forget it," Rand said.

Mat barely looked up enough to keep from walking into people while the words poured out in a lifeless voice. "I can't stop thinking I'll never see home again. I want to go home. Laugh if you want; I don't care. What I wouldn't give to have my mother blessing me out for something right now. It's like weights on my brain; hot weights. Strangers all around, and no way to tell who to trust, if I can trust anybody. Light, the Two Rivers is so far away it might as well be on the other side of the world. We're alone, and we'll never get home. We're going to die, Rand."

"Not yet, we won't," Rand retorted. "Everybody dies. The Wheel turns. I'm not going to curl up and wait for it to happen, though."

"You sound like Master al'Vere," Mat grumbled, but his voice had a little spirit in it.

"Good," Rand said. "Good." *Light, let the others be all right. Please don't let us be alone.*

He began asking directions to The Queen's Blessing. The responses varied widely, a curse for all those who did not stay where they belonged or a shrug and a blank look being the most common. Some stalked on by with no more than a glance, if that.

A broad-faced man, nearly as big as Perrin, cocked his head and said, "The Queen's Blessing, eh? You country boys Queen's men?" He wore a white cockade on his wide-brimmed hat, and a white armband on his long coat. “Well, you’ve come too late.”

He went off roaring with laughter, leaving Rand and Mat to stare at one another in puzzlement. Rand shrugged; there were plenty of odd folk in Caemlyn, people like he had never seen before.

Some of them stood out in the crowd, skins too dark or too pale, coats of strange cut or bright colors, hats with pointed peaks or long feathers. There were women with veils across their faces, women in stiff dresses as wide as the wearer was tall, women in dresses that left more skin bare than any tavernmaid he had seen. Occasionally a carriage, all vivid paint and gilt, squeezed through the thronged streets behind a four-or six-horse team with plumes on their harness. Sedan chairs were everywhere, the polemen pushing along with never a care for who they shoved aside.

Rand saw one fight start that way, a brawling heap of men swinging their fists while a pale-skinned man in a red-striped coat climbed out of the sedan chair lying on its side. Two roughly dressed men, who seemed to have been just passing by up till then, jumped on him before he was clear. The crowd that had stopped to watch began to turn ugly, muttering and shaking fists. Rand pulled at Mat’s sleeve and hurried on. Mat needed no second urging. The roar of a small riot followed them down the street.

Several times men approached the two of them instead of the other way around. Their dusty clothes marked them as newcomers, and seemed to act like a magnet on some types. Furtive fellows who offered relics of Logain for sale with darting eyes and feet set to run. Rand calculated he was offered enough scraps of the false Dragon’s cloak and fragments of his sword to make two swords and half a dozen cloaks. Mat’s face brightened with interest, the first time at least, but Rand gave them all a curt no, and they took it with a bob of the head and a quick, “Light illumine the Queen, good master,” and vanished. Most of the shops had plates and cups painted with fanciful scenes purporting to show the false Dragon being displayed before the Queen in chains. And there were Whitecloaks in the streets. Each walked in an open space that moved with him, just as in Baerlon.

Staying unnoticed was something Rand thought about a great deal. He kept his cloak over his sword, but that would not be good enough for very long. Sooner or later someone would wonder what he was hiding. He would not—could not—take Bunt’s advice to stop wearing it, not his link to Tam. To his father.

Many others among the throng wore swords, but none with the heronmark to pull the eye. All the Caemlyn men, though, and some of the strangers, had their swords wound in strips of cloth, sheath and hilt, red bound with white cord, or white bound with red. A hundred heron-marks could be hidden under those wrappings and no one would see. Besides, following local fashion would make them seem to fit in more.

A good many shops were fronted with tables displaying the cloth and cord, and Rand stopped at one. The red cloth was cheaper than the white, though he could see no difference apart from the color, so he bought that and the white cord to go with it, despite Mat's complaints about how little money they had left. The tight-lipped shopkeeper eyed them up and down with a twist to his mouth while he took Rand's coppers, and cursed them when Rand asked for a place inside to wrap his sword.

"We didn't come to see Logain," Rand said patiently. "We just came to see Caemlyn." He remembered Bunt, and added, "The grandest city in the world." The shopkeeper's grimace remained in place. "The Light illumine good Queen Morgase," Rand said hopefully.

"You make any trouble," the man said sourly, "and there's a hundred men in sound of my voice will take care of you even if the Guards won't." He paused to spit, just missing Rand's foot. "Get on about your filthy business."

Rand nodded as if the man had bid him a cheerful farewell, and pulled Mat away. Mat kept looking back over his shoulder toward the shop, growling to himself, until Rand tugged him into an empty alleyway. With their backs to the street no passerby could see what they were doing. Rand pulled off the sword belt and set to wrapping the sheath and hilt.

"I'll bet he charged you double for that bloody cloth," Mat said. "Triple."

It was not as easy as it looked, fastening the strips of cloth and the cord so the whole thing would not fall off.

"They'll all be trying to cheat us, Rand. They think we've come to see the false Dragon, like everybody else. We'll be lucky if somebody doesn't hit us on the head while we sleep. This is no place to be. There are too many people. Let's leave for Tar Valon now. Or south, to Illian. I wouldn't mind seeing them gather for the Hunt of the Horn. If we can't go home, let's just go."

“I’m staying,” Rand said. “If they’re not here already, they’ll come here sooner or later, looking for us.”

He was not sure if he had the wrappings done the way everyone else did, but the herons on scabbard and hilt were hidden and he thought it was secure. As he went back out on the street, he was sure that he had one less thing to worry about causing trouble. Mat trailed along beside him as reluctantly as if he were being pulled on a leash.

Bit by bit Rand did get the directions he wanted. At first they were vague, on the order of “somewhere in that direction” and “over that way.” The nearer they came, though, the clearer the instructions, until at last they stood before a broad stone building with a sign over the door creaking in the wind. A man kneeling before a woman with red-gold hair and a crown, one of her hands resting on his bowed head. The Queen’s Blessing.

“Are you sure about this?” Mat asked.

“Of course,” Rand said. He took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

The common room was large and paneled with dark wood, and fires on two hearths warmed it. A serving maid was sweeping the floor, though it was clean, and another was polishing candlesticks in the corner. Each smiled at the two newcomers before going back to her work.

Only a few tables had people at them, but a dozen men was a crowd for so early in the day, and if none looked exactly happy to see him and Mat, at least they looked clean and sober. The smells of roasting beef and baking bread drifted from the kitchen, making Rand’s mouth water.

The innkeeper was fat, he was pleased to see, a pink-faced man in a starched white apron, with graying hair combed back over a bald spot that it did not quite cover. His sharp eye took them in from head to toe, dusty clothes and bundles and worn boots, but he had a ready, pleasant smile, too. Basel Gill was his name.

“Master Gill,” Rand said, “a friend of ours told us to come here. Thom Merrilin. He—” The innkeeper’s smile slipped. Rand looked at Mat, but he was too busy sniffing the aromas coming from the kitchen to notice anything else. “Is something wrong? You do know him?”

“I know him,” Gill said curtly. He seemed more interested in the flute case at Rand’s side now, than in anything else. “Come with me.” He jerked his head toward the back. Rand gave Mat a jerk to get him started, then followed, wondering what was going on.

In the kitchen, Master Gill paused to speak to the cook, a round woman with her hair in a bun at the back of her head who almost matched the innkeeper pound for pound. She kept stirring her pots while Master Gill talked. The smells were so good—two days' hunger made a fine sauce for anything, but this smelled as good as Mistress al'Vere's kitchen—that Rand's stomach growled. Mat was leaning toward the pots, nose first. Rand nudged him; Mat hastily wiped his chin where he had begun drooling.

Then the innkeeper was hurrying them out the back door. In the stableyard he looked around to make sure no one was close, then rounded on them. On Rand. "What's in the case, lad?"

"Thom's flute," Rand said slowly. He opened the case, as if showing the gold-and-silver-chased flute would help. Mat's hand crept under his coat.

Master Gill did not take his eyes off Rand. "Aye, I recognize it. I saw him play it often enough, and there's not likely two like that outside a royal court." The pleasant smiles were gone, and his sharp eyes were suddenly as sharp as a knife. "How did you come by it? Thom would part with his arm as soon as that flute."

"He gave it to me." Rand took Thom's bundled cloak from his back and set it on the ground, unfolding enough to show the colored patches, as well as the end of the harp case. "Thom's dead, Master Gill. If he was your friend, I'm sorry. He was mine, too."

"Dead, you say. How?"

"A . . . a man tried to kill us. Thom pushed this at me and told us to run." The patches fluttered in the wind like butterflies. Rand's throat caught; he folded the cloak carefully back up again. "We'd have been killed if it hadn't been for him. We were on our way to Caemlyn together. He told us to come here, to your inn."

"I'll believe he's dead," the innkeeper said slowly, "when I see his corpse." He nudged the bundled cloak with his toe and cleared his throat roughly. "Nay, nay, I believe you saw Whatever it was you saw; I just don't believe he's dead. He's a harder man to kill than you might believe, is old Thom Merrilin."

Rand put a hand on Mat's shoulder. "It's all right, Mat. He's a friend."

Master Gill glanced at Mat, and sighed. "I suppose I am at that."

Mat straightened up slowly, folding his arms over his chest. He was still watching the innkeeper warily, though, and a muscle in his cheek twitched.

“Coming to Caemlyn, you say?” The innkeeper shook his head. “This is the last place on earth I’d expect Thom to come, excepting maybe it was Tar Valon.” He waited for a stableman to pass, leading a horse, and even then he lowered his voice. “You’ve trouble with the Aes Sedai, I take it.”

“Yes,” Mat grumbled at the same time that Rand said, “What makes you think that?”

Master Gill chuckled dryly. “I know the man, that’s what. He’d jump into that kind of trouble, especially to help a couple of lads about the age of you. . . .” The reminiscence in his eyes flickered out, and he stood up straight with a chary look. “Now . . . ah . . . I’m not making any accusations, mind, but . . . ah . . . I take it neither of you can . . . ah . . . what I’m getting at is . . . ah . . . what exactly is the nature of your trouble with Tar Valon, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Rand’s skin prickled as he realized what the man was suggesting. The One Power. “No, no, nothing like that. I swear. There was even an Aes Sedai helping us. Moiraine was. . . .” He bit his tongue, but the innkeeper’s expression never changed.

“Glad to hear it. Not that I’ve all that much love for Aes Sedai, but better them than . . . that other thing.” He shook his head slowly. “Too much talk of that kind of thing, with Logain being brought here. No offense meant, you understand, but . . . well, I had to know, didn’t I?”

“No offense,” Rand said. Mat’s murmur could have been anything, but the innkeeper appeared to take it for the same as Rand had said.

“You two look the right sort, and I do believe you were—are—friends of Thom, but it’s hard times and stony days. I don’t suppose you can pay? No, I didn’t think so. There’s not enough of anything, and what there is costs the earth, so I’ll give you beds—not the best, but warm and dry—and something to eat, and I cannot promise more, however much I’d like.”

“Thank you,” Rand said with a quizzical glance at Mat. “It’s more than I expected.” What was the right sort, and why *should* he promise more?

“Well, Thom’s a good friend. An old friend. Hotheaded and liable to say the worst possible thing to the one person he shouldn’t, but a good friend all the same. If he doesn’t show up . . . well, we’ll figure something out then. Best you don’t talk any more talk about Aes Sedai helping you. I’m a good Queen’s man, but there are too many in Caemlyn right now who’d take it wrong, and I don’t mean just the Whitecloaks.”

Mat snorted. “For all I care, the ravens can take every Aes Sedai straight to Shayol Ghul!”

“Watch your tongue,” Master Gill snapped. “I said I don’t love them; I didn’t say I’m a fool thinks they’re behind everything that’s wrong. The Queen supports Elaida, and the Guards stand for the Queen. The Light send things don’t go so bad that changes. Anyway, lately some Guards have forgotten themselves enough to be a little rough with folks they overhear speaking against Aes Sedai. Not on duty, thank the Light, but it’s happened, just the same. I don’t need off-duty Guards breaking up my common room to teach you a lesson, and I don’t need Whitecloaks egging somebody on to paint the Dragon’s Fang on my door, so if you want any help out of me, you just keep thoughts about Aes Sedai to yourself, good or bad.” He paused thoughtfully, then added, “Maybe it’s best you don’t mention Thom’s name, either, where anyone but me can hear. Some of the Guards have long memories, and so does the Queen. No need taking chances.”

“Thom had trouble with the Queen?” Rand said incredulously, and the innkeeper laughed.

“So he didn’t tell you everything. Don’t know why he should. On the other hand, I don’t know why you shouldn’t know, either. Not like it’s a secret, exactly. Do you think every gleeman thinks as much of himself as Thom does? Well, come to think of it, I guess they do, but it always seemed to me Thom had an extra helping of thinking a lot of himself. He wasn’t always a gleeman, you know, wandering from village to village and sleeping under a hedge as often as not. There was a time Thom Merrilin was Courtbard right here in Caemlyn, and known in every royal court from Tear to Maradon.”

“Thom?” Mat said.

Rand nodded slowly. He could picture Thom at a Queen’s court, with his stately manner and grand gestures.

“That he was,” Master Gill said. “It was not long after Taringail Damodred died that the . . . trouble about his nephew cropped up. There were some said Thom was, shall we say, closer to the Queen than was proper. But Morgase was a young widow, and Thom was in his prime, then, and the Queen can do as she wishes is the way I look at it. Only she’s always had a temper, has our good Morgase, and he took off without a word when he learned what kind of trouble his nephew was in. The Queen didn’t much like that. Didn’t like him meddling in Aes Sedai matters, either. Can’t say I think it was right, either, nephew or no. Anyway, when he came back, he said some words, all right. Words you don’t say to a Queen. Words you don’t say to any woman with Morgase’s spirit. Elaida was set against him because of his trying to mix in the business with his nephew, and between the Queen’s temper and Elaida’s animosity, Thom left Caemlyn half a step ahead of a trip to prison, if not the headsman’s axe. As far as I know, the writ still stands.”

“If it was a long time ago,” Rand said, “maybe nobody remembers.”

Master Gill shook his head. “Gareth Bryne is Captain-General of the Queen’s Guards. He personally commanded the Guardsmen Morgase sent to bring Thom back in chains, and I misdoubt he’ll ever forget returning empty-handed to find Thom had already been back to the Palace and left again. And the Queen never forgets *anything.* You ever know a woman who did? My, but Morgase was in a taking. I’ll swear the whole city walked soft and whispered for a month. Plenty of other Guardsmen old enough to remember, too. No, best you keep Thom as close a secret as you keep that Aes Sedai of yours. Come, I’ll get you something to eat. You look as if your bellies are gnawing at your backbones.”

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CHAPTER

36

Web of the Pattern

Master Gill took them to a corner table in the common room and had one of the serving maids bring them food. Rand shook his head when he saw the plates, with a few thin slices of gravy-covered beef, a spoonful of mustard greens, and two potatoes on each. It was a rueful, resigned headshake, though, not angry. Not enough of anything, the innkeeper had said. Picking up his knife and fork, Rand wondered what would happen when there was nothing left. It made his half-covered plate seem like a feast. It made him shiver.

Master Gill had chosen a table well away from anyone else, and he sat with his back to the corner, where he could watch the room. Nobody could get close enough to overhear what they said without him seeing. When the maid left, he said softly, “Now, why don’t you tell me about this trouble of yours? If I’m going to help, I’d best know what I’m getting into.”

Rand looked at Mat, but Mat was frowning at his plate as if he were mad at the potato he was cutting. Rand took a deep breath. “I don’t really understand it myself,” he began.

He kept the story simple, and he kept Trollocs and Fades out of it. When somebody offered help, it would not do to tell them it was all about fables. But he did not think it was fair to understate the danger, either, not fair to pull someone in when they had no idea what they were getting into. Some men were after him and Mat, and a couple of friends of theirs, too. They appeared where they were least expected, these men, and they were deadly dangerous and set on killing him and his friends, or worse. Moiraine said some of them were Darkfriends. Thom did not trust Moiraine completely, but he stayed on with them, he said, because of his nephew. They had been separated during an attack while trying to reach Whitebridge, and then, in Whitebridge, Thom died saving them from another attack. And there had been other tries. He knew there were holes in it, but it was the best he could do on short notice without telling more than was safe.

“We just kept on till we reached Caemlyn,” he explained. “That was the plan, originally. Caemlyn, and then Tar Valon.” He shifted uncomfortably on the edge of his chair. After keeping everything secret for so long, it felt odd to be telling somebody even as much as he was. “If we stay on that route, the others will be able to find us, sooner or later.”

“If they’re alive,” Mat muttered at his plate.

Rand did not even glance at Mat. Something compelled him to add, “It could bring you trouble, helping us.”

Master Gill waved it off with a plump hand. “Can’t say as I want trouble, but it wouldn’t be the first I’ve seen. No bloody Darkfriend will make me turn my back on Thom’s friends. This friend of yours from up north, now—if she comes to Caemlyn, I’ll hear. There are people keep their eyes on comings and goings like that around here, and word spreads.”

Rand hesitated, then asked, “What about Elaida?”

The innkeeper hesitated, too, and finally shook his head. “I don’t think so. Maybe if you didn’t have a connection to Thom. She’d winkle it out, and then where would you be? No telling. Maybe in a cell. Maybe worse. They say she has a way of feeling things, what’s happened, what’s going to happen. They say she can cut right through to what a man wants to hide. I don’t know, but I wouldn’t risk it. If it wasn’t for Thom, you could go to the Guards. They’d take care of any Darkfriends quick enough. But even if you could keep Thom quiet from the Guards, word would reach Elaida as soon as you mentioned Darkfriends, and then you’re back where we started.”

“No Guards,” Rand agreed. Mat nodded vigorously while stuffing a fork into his mouth and got gravy on his chin.

“Trouble is, you’re caught up in the fringes of politics, lad, even if it’s none of your doing, and politics is a foggy mire full of snakes.”

“What about—” Rand began, but the innkeeper grimaced suddenly, his chair creaking under his bulk as he sat up straight.

The cook was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, wiping her hands with her apron. When she saw the innkeeper looking she motioned for him to come, then vanished back into the kitchen.

“Might as well be married to her.” Master Gill sighed. “Finds things that need fixing before I know there’s anything wrong. If it’s not the drains stopped up, or the downspouts clogged, it’s rats. I keep a clean place, you understand, but with so many people in the city, rats are everywhere. Crowd people together and you get rats, and Caemlyn has a plague of them all of a sudden. You wouldn't believe what a good cat, a prime ratter, fetches these days. Your room is in the attic. I'll tell the girls which; any of them can show you to it. And don't worry about Darkfriends. I can't say much good about the Whitecloaks, but between them and the Guards, that sort won't dare show their filthy faces in Caemlyn." His chair squeaked again as he pushed it back and stood. "I hope it isn't the drains again."

Rand went back to his food, but he saw that Mat had stopped eating. "I thought you were hungry," he said. Mat kept staring at his plate, pushing one piece of potato in a circle with his fork. "You have to eat, Mat. We need to keep up our strength if we're going to reach Tar Valon."

Mat let out a low, bitter laugh. "Tar Valon! All this time it's been Caemlyn. Moiraine would be waiting for us in Caemlyn. We'd find Perrin and Egwene in Caemlyn. Everything would be all right if we only got to Caemlyn. Well, here we are, and nothing's right. No Moiraine, no Perrin, no anybody. Now it's everything will be all right if we only get to Tar Valon."

"We're alive," Rand said, more sharply than he had intended. He took a deep breath and tried to moderate his tone. "We are alive. That much is all right. And I intend to stay alive. I intend to find out why we're so important. I won't give up."

"All these people, and any of them could be Darkfriends. Master Gill promised to help us awfully quick. What kind of man just shrugs off Aes Sedai and Darkfriends? It isn't natural. Any decent person would tell us to get out, or . . . or . . . or something."

"Eat," Rand said gently, and watched until Mat began chewing a piece of beef.

He left his own hands resting beside his plate for a minute, pressing them against the table to keep them from shaking. He was scared. Not about Master Gill, of course, but there was enough without that. Those tall city walls would not stop a Fade. Maybe he should tell the innkeeper about that. But even if Gill believed, would he be as willing to help if he thought a Fade might show up at The Queen's Blessing? And the rats. Maybe rats did thrive where there were a lot of people, but he remembered the dream that was not a dream in Baerlon, and a small spine snapping. *Sometimes the Dark One uses carrion eaters as his eyes,* Lan had said. *Ravens, crows, rats. . . .*

He ate, but when he was done he could not remember tasting a single bite.

A serving maid, the one who had been polishing candlesticks when they came in, showed them up to the attic room. A dormer window pierced the slanting outer wall, with a bed on either side of it and pegs beside the door for hanging their belongings. The dark-eyed girl had a tendency to twist her skirt and giggle whenever she looked at Rand. She was pretty, but he knew if he said anything to her he would just make a fool of himself. She made him wish he had Perrin's way with girls; he was glad when she left.

He expected some comment from Mat, but as soon as she was gone, Mat threw himself on one of the beds, still in his cloak and boots, and turned his face to the wall.

Rand hung his things up, watching Mat's back. He thought Mat had his hand under his coat, clutching that dagger again.

"You just going to lie up here hiding?" he said finally.

"I'm tired," Mat mumbled.

"We have questions to ask Master Gill, yet. He might even be able to tell us how to find Egwene, and Perrin. They could be in Caemlyn already if they managed to hang onto their horses."

"They're dead," Mat said to the wall.

Rand hesitated, then gave up. He closed the door softly behind him, hoping Mat really would sleep.

Downstairs, however, Master Gill was nowhere to be found, though the sharp look in the cook's eye said she was looking for him, too. For a while Rand sat in the common room, but he found himself eyeing every patron who came in, every stranger who could be anyone—or anything—especially in the moment when he was first silhouetted as a cloaked black shape in the doorway. A Fade in the room would be like a fox in a chicken coop.

A Guardsman entered from the street. The red-uniformed man stopped just inside the door, running a cool eye over those in the room who were obviously from outside the city. Rand studied the tabletop when the Guardsman's eyes fell on him; when he looked up again, the man was gone.

The dark-eyed maid was passing with her arms full of towels. "They do that sometimes," she said in a confiding tone as she went by. "Just to see there's no trouble. They look after good Queen's folk, they do. Nothing for you to worry about." She giggled.

Rand shook his head. Nothing for him to worry about. It was not as if the Guardsman would have come over and demanded to know if he knew Thom Merrilin. He was getting as bad as Mat. He scraped back his chair.

Another maid was checking the oil in the lamps along the wall.

“Is there another room where I could sit?” he asked her. He did not want to go back upstairs and shut himself up with Mat’s sullen withdrawal. “Maybe a private dining room that’s not being used?”

“There’s the library.” She pointed to a door. “Through there, to your right, at the end of the hall. Might be empty, this hour.”

“Thank you. If you see Master Gill, would you tell him Rand al’Thor needs to talk to him if he can spare a minute?”

“I’ll tell him,” she said, then grinned. “Cook wants to talk to him, too.”

The innkeeper was probably hiding, he thought as he turned away from her.

When he stepped into the room to which she had directed him, he stopped and stared. The shelves must have held three or four hundred books, more than he had ever seen in one place before. Clothbound, leatherbound with gilded spines. Only a few had wooden covers. His eyes gobbled up the titles, picking out old favorites. *The Travels of Jain Farstrider. The Essays of Willim of Maneches.* His breath caught at the sight of a leatherbound copy of *Voyages Among the Sea Folk.* Tam had always wanted to read that.

Picturing Tam, turning the book over in his hands with a smile, getting the feel of it before settling down before the fireplace with his pipe to read, his own hand tightened on his sword hilt with a sense of loss and emptiness that dampened all his pleasure in the books.

A throat cleared behind him, and he suddenly realized he was not alone. Ready to apologize for his rudeness, he turned. He was used to being taller than almost everyone he met, but this time his eyes traveled up and up and up, and his mouth fell open. Then he came to the head almost reaching the ten-foot ceiling. A nose as broad as the face, so wide it was more a snout than a nose. Eyebrows that hung down like tails, framing pale eyes as big as teacups. Ears that poked up to tufted points through a shaggy, black mane. *Trolloc!* He let out a yell and tried to back up and draw his sword. His feet got tangled, and he sat down hard, instead.

“I wish you humans wouldn’t do that,” rumbled a voice as deep as a drum. The tufted ears twitched violently, and the voice became sad. “So few of you remember us. It’s our own fault, I suppose. Not many of us have gone out among men since the Shadow fell on the Ways. That’s . . . oh, six generations, now. Right after the War of the Hundred Years, it was.” The shaggy head shook and let out a sigh that would have done credit to a bull. “Too long, too long, and so few to travel and see, it might as well have been none.”

Rand sat there for a minute with his mouth hanging open, staring up at the apparition in wide-toed, knee-high boots and a dark blue coat that buttoned from the neck to the waist, then flared out to his boot tops like a kilt over baggy trousers. In one hand was a book, seeming tiny by comparison, with a finger broad enough for three marking the place.

“I thought you were—” he began, then caught himself. “What are—?” That was not any better. Getting to his feet, he gingerly offered his hand. “My name is Rand al’Thor.”

A hand as big as a ham engulfed his; it was accompanied by a formal bow. “Loial, son of Arent son of Halan. Your name sings in my ears, Rand al’Thor.”

That sounded like a ritual greeting to Rand. He returned the bow. “Your name sings in my ears, Loial, son of Arent . . . ah . . . son of Halan.”

It was all a little unreal. He still did not know *what* Loial was. The grip of Loial’s huge fingers was surprisingly gentle, but he was still relieved to get his hand back in one piece.

“You humans are very excitable,” Loial said in that bass rumble. “I had heard all the stories, and read the books, of course, but I didn’t realize. My first day in Caemlyn, I could not believe the uproar. Children cried, and women screamed, and a mob chased me all the way across the city, waving clubs and knives and torches, and shouting, ‘Trolloc!’ I’m afraid I was almost beginning to get a little upset. There’s no telling what would have happened if a party of the Queen’s Guards hadn’t come along.”

“A lucky thing,” Rand said faintly.

“Yes, but even the Guardsmen seemed almost as afraid of me as the others. Four days in Caemlyn now, and I haven’t been able to put my nose outside this inn. Good Master Gill even asked me not to use the common room.” His ears twitched. “Not that he hasn’t been very hospitable, you understand. But there was a bit of trouble that first night. All the humans seemed to want to leave at once. Such screaming and shouting, everyone trying to get through the door at the same time. Some of them could have been hurt."

Rand stared in fascination at those twitching ears.

"I'll tell you, it was not for this I left the *stedding.*"

"You're an Ogier!" Rand exclaimed. "Wait! Six generations? You said the War of the Hundred Years! How old are you?" He knew it was rude as soon as he said it, but Loial became defensive rather than offended.

"Ninety years," the Ogier said stiffly. "In only ten more I'll be able to address the Stump. I think the Elders should have let me speak, since they were deciding whether I could leave or not. But then they always worry about anyone of any age going Outside. You humans are so hasty, so erratic." He blinked and gave a short bow. "Please forgive me. I shouldn't have said that. But you do fight all the time, even when there's no need to."

"That's all right," Rand said. He was still trying to take in Loial's age. Older than old Cenn Buie, and still not old enough to. . . . He sat down in one of the high-backed chairs. Loial took another, made to hold two; he filled it. Sitting, he was as tall as most men standing. "At least they did let you go."

Loial looked at the floor, wrinkling his nose and rubbing at it with one thick finger. "Well, as to that, now. You see, the Stump had not been meeting very long, not even a year, but I could tell from what I heard that by the time they reached a decision I would be old enough to go without their permission. I am afraid they'll say I put a long handle on my axe, but I just . . . left. The Elders always said I was too hotheaded, and I fear I've proven them right. I wonder if they have realized I'm gone, yet? But I had to go."

Rand bit his lip to keep from laughing. If Loial was a hotheaded Ogier, he could imagine what most Ogier were like. Had not been meeting very long, not even a year? Master al'Vere would just shake his head in wonder; a Village Council meeting that lasted half a day would have everybody jumping up and down, even Haral Luhhan. A wave of homesickness swept over him, making it hard to breathe for memories of Tam, and Egwene, and the Winespring Inn, and Bel Tine on the Green in happier days. He forced them away.

"If you don't mind my asking," he said, clearing his throat, "why did you want to go . . . ah, Outside, so much? I wish I'd never left my home, myself."

"Why, to see," Loial said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I read the books, all the travelers' accounts, and it began to burn in me that I had to see, not just read." His pale eyes brightened, and his ears stiffened. "I studied every scrap I could find about traveling, about the Ways, and customs in human lands, and the cities we built for you humans after the Breaking of the World. And the more I read, the more I knew that I had to go Outside, go to those places we had been, and see the groves for myself."

Rand blinked. "Groves?"

"Yes, the groves. The trees. Only a few of the Great Trees, of course, towering to the sky to keep memories of the *stedding* fresh." His chair groaned as he shifted forward, gesturing with his hands, one of which still held the book. His eyes were brighter than ever, and his ears almost quivered. "Mostly they used the trees of the land and the place. You cannot make the land go against itself. Not for long; the land will rebel. You must shape the vision to the land, not the land to the vision. In every grove was planted every tree that would grow and thrive in that place, each balanced against the next, each placed to complement the others, for the best growing, of course, but also so that the balance would sing in the eye and the heart. Ah, the books spoke of groves to make Elders weep and laugh at the same time, groves to remain green in memory forever."

"What about the cities?" Rand asked. Loial gave him a puzzled look. "The cities. The cities the Ogier built. Here, for instance. Caemlyn. Ogier built Caemlyn, didn't you? The stories say so."

"Working with stone. . . ." His shoulders gave a massive shrug. "That was just something learned in the years after the Breaking, during the Exile, when we were still trying to find the *stedding* again. It is a fine thing, I suppose, but not the true thing. Try as you will—and I have read that the Ogier who built those cities truly did try—you cannot make stone live. A few still do work with stone, but only because you humans damage the buildings so often with your wars. There were a handful of Ogier in . . . ah . . . Cairhien, it's called now . . . when I passed through. They were from another *stedding,* luckily, so they didn't know about me, but they were still suspicious that I was Outside alone so young. I suppose it's just as well there was no reason for me to linger there. In any case, you see, working with stone is just something that was thrust on us by the weaving of the Pattern; the groves came from the heart."

Rand shook his head. Half the stories he had grown up with had just been stood on their heads. “I didn’t know Ogier believed in the Pattern, Loial.”

“Of course, we believe. The Wheel of Time weaves the Pattern of the Ages, and lives are the threads it weaves. No one can tell how the thread of his own life will be woven into the Pattern, or how the thread of a people will be woven. It gave us the Breaking of the World, and the Exile, and Stone, and the Longing, and eventually it gave us back the *stedding* before we all died. Sometimes I think the reason you humans are the way you are is because your threads are so short. They must jump around in the weaving. Oh, there, I’ve done it again. The Elders say you humans don’t like to be reminded of how short a time you live. I hope I didn’t hurt your feelings.”

Rand laughed and shook his head. “Not at all. I suppose it’d be fun to live as long as you do, but I never really thought about it. I guess if I live as long as old Cenn Buie, that’ll be long enough for anybody.”

“He is a very old man?”

Rand just nodded. He was not about to explain that old Cenn Buie was not quite as old as Loial.

“Well,” Loial said, “perhaps you humans do have short lives, but you do so much with them, always jumping around, always so hasty. And you have the whole world to do it in. We Ogier are bound to our *stedding*.”

“You’re Outside.”

“For a time, Rand. But I must go back, eventually. This world is yours, yours and your kind’s. The *stedding* are mine. There’s too much hurly-burly Outside. And so much is changed from what I read about.”

“Well, things do change over the years. Some, anyway.”

“Some? Half the cities I read about aren’t even there any longer, and most of the rest are known by different names. You take Cairhien. The city’s proper name is Al’cair’rahienallen, Hill of the Golden Dawn. They don’t even remember, for all of the sunrise on their banners. And the grove there. I doubt if it has been tended since the Trolloc Wars. It’s just another forest, now, where they cut firewood. The Great Trees are all gone, and no one remembers them. And here? Caemlyn is still Caemlyn, but they let the city grow right over the grove. We’re not a quarter of a mile from the center of it right where we sit—from where the center of it should be. Not a tree of it left. I’ve been to Tear and Illian, too. Different names, and no memories.

There’s only pasture for their horses where the grove was at Tear, and at Illian the grove is the King’s park, where he hunts his deer, and none allowed inside without his permission. It has all changed, Rand. I fear very much that I will find the same everywhere I go. All the groves gone, all the memories gone, all the dreams dead.”

“You can’t give up, Loial. You can’t ever give up. If you give up, you might as well be dead.” Rand sank back in his chair as far as he could go, his face turning red. He expected the Ogier to laugh at him, but Loial nodded gravely instead.

“Yes, that’s the way of your kind, isn’t it?” The Ogier’s voice changed, as if he were quoting something. “Till shade is gone, till water is gone, into the Shadow with teeth bared, screaming defiance with the last breath, to spit in Sightblinder’s eye on the Last Day.” Loial cocked his shaggy head expectantly, but Rand had no idea what it was he expected.

A minute went by with Loial waiting, then another, and his long eyebrows began to draw down in puzzlement. But he still waited, the silence growing uncomfortable for Rand.

“The Great Trees,” Rand said finally, just for something to break that silence. “Are they like *Avendesora*?”

Loial sat up sharply; his chair squealed and cracked so loudly Rand thought it was going to come apart. “You know better than that. You, of all people.”

“Me? How would I know?”

“Are you playing a joke on me? Sometimes you Aielmen think the oddest things are funny.”

“What? I’m not an Aielman! I’m from the Two Rivers. I never even saw an Aielman!”

Loial shook his head, and the tufts on his ears drooped outward. “You see? Everything is changed, and half of what I know is useless. I hope I did not offend you. I’m sure your Two Rivers is a very fine place, wherever it is.”

“Somebody told me,” Rand said, “that it was once called Manetheren. I’d never heard it, but maybe you. . . .”

The Ogier’s ears had perked up happily. “Ah! Yes. Manetheren.” The tufts went down again. “There was a very fine grove there. Your pain sings in my heart, Rand al’Thor. We could not come in time.”

Loial bowed where he sat, and Rand bowed back. He suspected Loial would be hurt if he did not, would think he was rude at the least. He wondered if Loial thought he had the same sort of memories the Ogier seemed to. The corners of Loial's mouth and eyes were certainly turned down as if he were sharing the pain of Rand's loss, just as if the destruction of Manetheren were not something that happened two thousand years ago, near enough, something that Rand only knew about because of Moiraine's story.

After a time Loial sighed. "The Wheel turns," he said, "and no one knows its turning. But you have come almost as far from your home as I have. A very considerable distance, as things are now. When the Ways were freely open, of course—but that is long past. Tell me, what brings you so far? Is there something you want to see, too?"

Rand opened his mouth to say that they had come to see the false Dragon—and he could not say it. Perhaps it was because Loial acted as if he were no older than Rand, ninety years old or no ninety years old. Maybe for an Ogier ninety years was not any older than he was. It had been a long time since he had been able to really talk to anyone about what was happening. Always the fear that they might be Darkfriends, or think he was. Mat was so drawn in on himself, feeding his fears on his own suspicions, that he was no good for talking. Rand found himself telling Loial about Winternight. Not a vague story about Darkfriends; the truth about Trollocs breaking in the door, and a Fade on the Quarry Road.

Part of him was horrified at what he was doing, but it was almost as if he were two people, one trying to hold his tongue while the other only felt the relief at being able to tell it all finally. The result was that he stumbled and stuttered and jumped around in the story. Shadar Logoth and losing his friends in the night, not knowing if they were alive or dead. The Fade in Whitebridge, and Thom dying so they could escape. The Fade in Baerlon. Darkfriends later, Howal Gode, and the boy who was afraid of them, and the woman who tried to kill Mat. The Halfman outside the Goose and Crown.

When he started babbling about dreams, even the part of him that wanted to talk felt the hackles rising on the back of his neck. He bit his tongue clamping his teeth shut. Breathing heavily through his nose, he watched the Ogier warily, hoping he thought he had meant nightmares. The

Light knew it all sounded like a nightmare, or enough to give anyone nightmares. Maybe Loial would just think he was going mad. Maybe. . . .

"Ta'veren," Loial said.

Rand blinked. "What?"

"Ta'veren." Loial rubbed behind a pointed ear with one blunt finger and gave a little shrug. "Elder Haman always said I never listened, but sometimes I did. Sometimes, I listened. You know how the Pattern is woven, of course?"

"I never really thought about it," he said slowly. "It just is."

"Um, yes, well. Not exactly. You see, the Wheel of Time weaves the Pattern of the Ages, and the threads it uses are lives. It is not fixed, the Pattern, not always. If a man tries to change the direction of his life and the Pattern has room for it, the Wheel just weaves on and takes it in. There is always room for small changes, but sometimes the Pattern simply won't accept a big change, no matter how hard you try. You understand?"

Rand nodded. "I could live on the farm or in Emond's Field, and that would be a small change. If I wanted to be a king, though. . . ." He laughed, and Loial gave a grin that almost split his face in two. His teeth were white, and as broad as chisels.

"Yes, that's it. But sometimes the change chooses you, or the Wheel chooses it for you. And sometimes the Wheel bends a life-thread, or several threads, in such a way that all the surrounding threads are forced to swirl around it, and those force other threads, and those still others, and on and on. That first bending to make the Web, that is *ta'veren,* and there is nothing you can do to change it, not until the Pattern itself changes. The Web—*ta'maral'ailen,* it's called—can last for weeks, or for years. It can take in a town, or even the whole Pattern. Artur Hawkwing was *ta'veren.* So was Lews Therin Kinslayer, for that matter, I suppose." He let out a booming chuckle. "Elder Haman would be proud of me. He always droned on, and the books about traveling were much more interesting, but I did listen sometimes."

"That's all very well," Rand said, "but I don't see what it has to do with me. I'm a shepherd, not another Artur Hawkwing. And neither is Mat, or Perrin. It's just . . . ridiculous."

"I didn't say you were, but I could almost feel the Pattern swirl just listening to you tell your tale, and I have no Talent there. You are *ta'veren,* all right. You, and maybe your friends, too." The Ogier paused, rubbing the bridge of his broad nose thoughtfully. Finally he nodded to himself as if he had reached a decision. “I wish to travel with you, Rand.”

For a minute Rand stared, wondering if he had heard correctly. “With me?” he exclaimed when he could speak. “Didn’t you hear what I said about . . . ?” He eyed the door suddenly. It was shut tight, and thick enough that anyone trying to listen on the other side would hear only a murmur, even with his ear pressed against the wooden panels. Just the same he went on in a lower voice. “About who’s chasing me? Anyway, I thought you wanted to go see your trees.”

“There is a very fine grove at Tar Valon, and I have been told the Aes Sedai keep it well tended. Besides, it is not just the groves I want to see. Perhaps you are not another Artur Hawkwing, but for a time, at least, part of the world will shape itself around you, perhaps is even now shaping itself around you. Even Elder Haman would want to see that.”

Rand hesitated. It would be good to have someone else along. The way Mat was behaving, being with him was almost like being alone. The Ogier was a comforting presence. Maybe he was young as Ogier reckoned age, but he seemed as unflappable as a rock, just like Tam. And Loial had been all of those places, and knew about others. He looked at the Ogier, sitting there with his broad face a picture of patience. Sitting there, and taller sitting than most men standing. *How do you hide somebody almost ten feet tall?* He sighed and shook his head.

“I don’t think that is a good idea, Loial. Even if Moiraine finds us here, we’ll be in danger all the way to Tar Valon. If she does not. . . .” *If she doesn’t, then she’s dead and so is everyone else. Oh, Egwene.* He gave himself a shake. Egwene was not dead, and Moiraine would find them.

Loial looked at him sympathetically and touched his shoulder. “I am sure your friends are well, Rand.”

Rand nodded his thanks. His throat was too tight to speak.

“Will you at least talk with me sometimes?” Loial sighed, a bass rumble. “And perhaps play a game of stones? I have not had anyone to talk to in days, except good Master Gill, and he is busy most of the time. The cook seems to run him unmercifully. Perhaps she really owns the inn?”

“Of course, I will.” His voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat and tried to grin. “And if we meet in Tar Valon, you can show me the grove there.” *They have to be all right. Light send they’re all right.*

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CHAPTER

37

The Long Chase

Nynaeve gripped the reins of the three horses and peered into the night as if she could somehow pierce the darkness and find the Aes Sedai and the Warder. Skeletal trees surrounded her, stark and black in the dim moonlight. The trees and the night made an effective screen for Whatever Moiraine and Lan were doing, not that either of them had paused to let her know what that was. A low “Keep the horses quiet,” from Lan, and they were gone, leaving her standing like a stableboy. She glanced at the horses and sighed with exasperation.

Mandarb blended into the night almost as well as his master’s cloak. The only reason the battle-trained stallion was letting her get this close was because Lan had handed her the reins himself. He seemed calm enough now, but she remembered all too well the lips drawing back silently when she reached for his bridle without waiting for Lan’s approval. The silence had made the bared teeth seem that much more dangerous. With a last wary look at the stallion, she turned to peer in the direction the other two had gone, idly stroking her own horse. She gave a startled jump when Aldieb pushed a pale muzzle under her hand, but after a minute she gave the white mare a pat, too.

“No need to take it out on you, I suppose,” she whispered, “just because your mistress is a cold-faced—” She strained at the darkness again. *What were they doing?*

After leaving Whitebridge they had ridden through villages that seemed unreal in their normality, ordinary market villages that seemed to Nynaeve unconnected to a world that had Fades and Trollocs and Aes Sedai. They had followed the Caemlyn Road, until at last Moiraine sat forward in Aldieb’s saddle, peering eastward as if she could see the whole length of the great highway, all the many miles to Caemlyn, and see, too, what waited there.

Eventually the Aes Sedai let out a long breath and settled back. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” she murmured, “but I cannot believe it weaves an end to hope. I must first take care of that of which I can be certain. It will be as the Wheel weaves.” And she turned her mare north, off the road into the forest. One of the boys was in that direction with the coin Moiraine had given him. Lan followed.

Nynaeve gave a long last look at the Caemlyn Road. Few people shared the roadway with them there, a couple of high-wheeled carts and one empty wagon in the distance, a handful of folk afoot with their belongings on their backs or piled on pushcarts. Some of those were willing to admit they were on their way to Caemlyn to see the false Dragon, but most denied it vehemently, especially those who had come through Whitebridge. At Whitebridge she had begun to believe Moiraine. Somewhat. More, at any rate. And there was no comfort in that.

The Warder and the Aes Sedai were almost out of sight through the trees before she started after them. She hurried to catch up. Lan looked back at her frequently, and waved for her to come on, but he kept at Moiraine’s shoulder, and the Aes Sedai had her eyes fixed ahead.

One evening after they left the road, the invisible trail failed. Moiraine, the unflappable Moiraine, suddenly stood up beside the small fire where the tea kettle was boiling, her eyes widening. “It is gone,” she whispered at the night.

“He is . . . ?” Nynaeve could not finish the question. *Light, I don’t even know which one it is!*

“He did not die,” the Aes Sedai said slowly, “but he no longer has the token.” She sat down, her voice level and her hands steady as she took the kettle off the flames and tossed in a handful of tea. “In the morning we will keep on as we’ve been going. When I get close enough, I can find him without the coin.”

As the fire burned down to coals, Lan rolled himself in his cloak and went to sleep. Nynaeve could not sleep. She watched the Aes Sedai. Moiraine had her eyes closed, but she sat upright, and Nynaeve knew she was awake.

Long after the last glow had faded from the coals, Moiraine opened her eyes and looked at her. She could feel the Aes Sedai’s smile even in the dark. “He has regained the coin, Wisdom. All will be well.” She lay down on her blankets with a sigh and almost at once was breathing deep in slumber.

Nynaeve had a hard time joining her, tired as she was. Her mind conjured up the worst no matter how she tried to stop it. *All will be well.* After Whitebridge, she could no longer make herself believe that so easily.

Abruptly Nynaeve was jerked from memory back to the night; there really was a hand on her arm. Stifling the cry that rose in her throat, she fumbled for the knife at her belt, her hand closing on the hilt before she realized that the hand was Lan’s.

The Warder’s hood was thrown back, but his chameleon-like cloak blended so well with the night that the dim blur of his face seemed to hang suspended in the night. The hand on her arm appeared to come out of thin air.

She drew a shuddering breath. She expected him to comment on how easily he had come on her unaware, but instead he turned to dig into his saddlebags. “You are needed,” he said, and knelt to fasten hobbles on the horses.

As soon as the horses were secured, he straightened, grasped her hand, and headed off into the night again. His dark hair fit into the night almost as well as his cloak, and he made even less noise than she did. Grudgingly she had to admit that she could never have followed him through the darkness without his grip as a guide. She was not certain she could pull loose if he did not want to release her, anyway; he had very strong hands.

As they came up on a small rise, barely enough to be called a hill, he sank to one knee, pulling her down beside him. It took her a moment to see that Moiraine was there, too. Unmoving, the Aes Sedai could have passed for a shadow in her dark cloak. Lan gestured down the hillside to a large clearing in the trees.

Nynaeve frowned in the dim moonlight, then suddenly smiled in understanding. Those pale blurs were tents in regular rows, a darkened encampment.

“Whitecloaks,” Lan whispered, “two hundred of them, maybe more. There’s good water down there. And the lad we’re after.”

“In the camp?” She felt, more than saw, Lan nod.

“In the middle of it. Moiraine can point right to him. I went close enough to see he’s under guard.”

“A prisoner?” Nynaeve said. “Why?”

“I don’t know. The Children should not be interested in a village boy, not unless there was something to make them suspicious. The Light knows it doesn’t take much to make Whitecloaks suspicious, but it still worries me.”

“How are you going to free him?” It was not until he glanced at her that she realized how much assurance there had been in her that he could march into the middle of two hundred men and come back with the boy. *Well, he* is *a Warder.* Some *of the stories must be true.*

She wondered if he was laughing at her, but his voice was flat and businesslike. “I can bring him out, but he’ll likely be in no shape for stealth. If we’re seen, we may find two hundred Whitecloaks on our heels, and us riding double. Unless they are too busy to chase us. Are you willing to take a chance?”

“To help an Emond’s Fielder? Of course! What kind of chance?”

He pointed into the darkness again, beyond the tents. This time she could make out nothing but shadows. “Their horse-lines. If the picket-ropes are cut, not all the way through, but enough so they’ll break when Moiraine creates a diversion, the Whitecloaks will be too busy chasing their own horses to come after us. There are two guards on that side of the camp, beyond the picket-lines, but if you are half as good as I think you are, they’ll never see you.”

She swallowed hard. Stalking rabbits was one thing; guards, though, with spears and swords. . . . *So he thinks I’m good, does he?* “I’ll do it.”

Lan nodded again, as if he had expected no less. “One other thing. There are wolves about, tonight. I saw two, and if I saw that many, there are probably more.” He paused, and though his voice did not change she had the feeling he was puzzled. “It was almost as if they wanted me to see them. Anyway, they shouldn’t bother you. Wolves usually stay away from people.”

“I wouldn’t have known that,” she said sweetly. “I only grew up around shepherds.” He grunted, and she smiled into the darkness.

“We’ll do it now, then,” he said.

Her smile faded as she peered down at the camp full of armed men. Two hundred men with spears and swords and. . . . Before she could reconsider, she eased her knife in its sheath and started to slip away. Moiraine caught her arm in a grip almost as strong as Lan’s.

“Take care,” the Aes Sedai said softly. “Once you cut the ropes, return as quickly as you can. You are a part of the Pattern, too, and I would not risk you, any more than any of the others, if the whole world was not at risk in these days.”

Nynaeve rubbed her arm surreptitiously when Moiraine released it. She was not about to let the Aes Sedai know the grip had hurt. But Moiraine turned back to watching the camp below as soon as she let go. And the Warder was gone, Nynaeve realized with a start. She had not heard him leave. *Light blind the bloody man!* Quickly she tied her skirts up to give her legs freedom, and hurried into the night.

After that first rush, with fallen branches cracking under her feet, she slowed down, glad there was no one there to see her blush. The idea was to be quiet, and she was not in any kind of competition with the Warder. *Oh, no?*

She shook off the thought and concentrated on making her way through the dark woods. It was not hard in and of itself; the faint light of the waning moon was more than enough for anyone who had been taught by her father, and the ground had a slow, easy roll. But the trees, bare and stark against the night sky, constantly reminded her that this was no childhood game, and the keening wind sounded all too much like Trolloc horns. Now that she was alone in the darkness, she remembered that the wolves that usually ran away from people had been behaving differently in the Two Rivers this winter.

Relief flooded through her like warmth when she finally caught the smell of horses. Almost holding her breath, she got down on her stomach and crawled upwind, toward the smell.

She was nearly on the guards before she saw them, marching toward her out of the night, white cloaks flapping in the wind and almost shining in the moonlight. They might as well have carried torches; torchlight could not have made them much more visible. She froze, trying to make herself a part of the ground. Nearly in front of her, not ten paces away, they marched to a halt with a stomp of feet, facing each other, spears shouldered. Just beyond them she could make out shadows that had to be the horses. The stable smell, horse and manure, was strong.

“All is well with the night,” one white-cloaked shape announced. “The Light illumine us, and protect us from the Shadow.”

"All is well with the night," the other replied. "The Light illumine us, and protect us from the Shadow."

With that they turned and marched off into the darkness again.

Nynaeve waited, counting to herself while they made their circuit twice. Each time they took exactly the same count, and each time they rigidly repeated the same formula, not a word more or less. Neither so much as glanced to one side; they stared straight ahead as they marched up, then marched away. She wondered if they would have noticed her even if she had been standing up.

Before the night swallowed the pale swirls of their cloaks a third time, she was already on her feet, running in a crouch toward the horses. As she came close, she slowed so as not to startle the animals. The Whitecloak guards might not see what was not shoved under their noses, but they would certainly investigate if the horses suddenly began whickering.

The horses along the picket-lines—there was more than one row—were barely realized masses in the darkness, heads down. Occasionally one snorted or stamped a foot in its sleep. In the dim moonlight she was nearly on the endpost of the picket-line before she saw it. She reached for the picket-line, and froze when the nearest horse raised its head and looked at her. Its single lead-rein was tied in a big loop around the thumb-thick line that ended at the post. *One whinny.* Her heart tried to pound its way out of her chest, sounding loud enough to bring the guards.

Never taking her eyes off the horse, she sliced at the picket-rope, feeling in front of her blade to see how far she had cut. The horse tossed its head, and her breath went cold. *Just one whinny.*

Only a few thin strands of hemp remained whole under her fingers. Slowly she headed toward the next line, watching the horse until she could no longer see if it was looking at her or not, then drew a ragged breath. If they were all like that, she did not think she would last.

At the next picket-rope, though, and the next, and the next, the horses remained asleep, even when she cut her thumb and bit off a yelp. Sucking the cut, she looked warily back the way she had come. Upwind as she was, she could no longer hear the guards make their exchange, but they might have heard her if they were in the right place. If they were coming to see what the noise had been, the wind would keep her from hearing them until they were right on top of her. *Time to go. With four horses out of five running loose, they won't be chasing anyone.*

But she did not move. She could imagine Lan’s eyes when he heard what she had done. There would be no accusation in them; her reasoning was sound, and he would not expect any more of her. She was a Wisdom, not a bloody great invincible Warder who could make himself all but invisible. Jaw set, she moved to the last picket-line. The first horse on it was Bela.

There was no mistaking that squat, shaggy shape; for there to be another horse like that, here and now, was too big a coincidence. Suddenly she was so glad that she had not left off this last line that she was shaking. Her arms and legs trembled so that she was afraid to touch the picket-rope, but her mind was as clear as the Winespring Water. Whichever of the boys was in the camp, Egwene was there, too. And if they left riding double, some of the Children would catch them no matter how well the horses were scattered, and some of them would die. She was as certain as if she were listening to the wind. That stuck a spike of fear into her belly, fear of *how* she was certain. This had nothing to do with weather or crops or sickness. *Why did Moiraine tell me I can use the Power? Why couldn’t she leave me alone?*

Strangely, the fear stilled her trembling. With hands as steady as if she were grinding herbs in her own house she slit the picket-rope as she had the others. Thrusting the dagger back into its sheath, she untied Bela’s lead-rein. The shaggy mare woke with a start, tossing her head, but Nynaeve stroked her nose and spoke comforting words softly in her ear. Bela gave a low snort and seemed content.

Other horses along that line were awake, too, and looking at her. Remembering Mandarb, she reached hesitantly to the next lead-rein, but that horse gave no objection to a strange hand. Indeed, it seemed to want some of the muzzle-stroking that Bela had received. She gripped Bela’s rein tightly and wrapped the other around her other wrist, all the while watching the camp nervously. The pale tents were only thirty yards off, and she could see men moving among them. If they noticed the horses stirring and came to see what caused it. . . .

Desperately she wished for Moiraine not to wait on her return. Whatever the Aes Sedai was going to do, let her do it now. *Light, make her do it now, before. . . .*

Abruptly lightning shattered the night overhead, for a moment obliterating darkness. Thunder smote her ears, so hard she thought her knees would buckle, as a jagged trident stabbed the ground just beyond the horses, splashing dirt and rocks like a fountain. The crash of riven earth fought the thunderstroke. The horses went mad, screaming and rearing; the picket-ropes snapped like thread where she had cut them. Another lightning bolt sliced down before the image of the first faded.

Nynaeve was too busy to exult. At the first clash Bela jerked one way while the other horse reared away in the opposite direction. She thought her arms were being pulled out of their sockets. For an endless minute she hung suspended between the horses, her feet off the ground, her scream flattened by the second crash. Again the lightning struck, and again, and again, in one continuous, raging roar from the heavens. Balked in the way they wanted to go, the horses surged back, letting her drop. She wanted to crouch on the ground and soothe her tortured shoulders, but there was no time. Bela and the other horse buffeted her, eyes rolling wildly till only whites showed, threatening to knock her down and trample her. Somehow she made her arms lift, clutched her hands in Bela’s mane, pulled herself onto the heaving mare’s back. The other rein was still around her wrist, pulled tight into the flesh.

Her jaw dropped as a long, gray shadow snarled past, seeming to ignore her and the horses with her, but teeth snapping at the crazed animals now darting in every direction. A second shadow of death followed close behind. Nynaeve wanted to scream again, but nothing came out. *Wolves! Light help us! What is Moiraine doing?*

The heels she dug into Bela’s sides were not needed. The mare ran, and the other was more than happy to follow. Anywhere, so long as they could run, so long as they could escape the fire from the sky that killed the night.

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CHAPTER

38

Rescue

Perrin shifted as best he could with his wrists bound behind him and finally gave up with a sigh. Every rock he avoided brought him two more. Awkwardly he tried to work his cloak back over him. The night was cold, and the ground seemed to draw all the heat out of him, as it had every night since the Whitecloaks took them. The Children did not think prisoners needed blankets, or shelter. Especially not dangerous Darkfriends.

Egwene lay huddled against his back for warmth, sleeping the deep sleep of exhaustion. She never even murmured at his shifting. The sun was long hours below the horizon, and he ached from head to foot after a day walking behind a horse with a halter around his neck, but sleep would not come for him.

The column did not move that fast. With most of their remounts lost to the wolves in the *stedding*, the Whitecloaks could not push on as hard as they wanted; the delay was another thing they held against the Emond's Fielders. The sinuous double line did move steadily, though—Lord Bornhald meant to reach Caemlyn in time for Whatever it was—and always in the back of Perrin's mind was the fear that if he fell the Whitecloak holding his leash would not stop, no matter Lord Captain Bornhald's orders to keep them alive for the Questioners in Amador. He knew he could not save himself if that happened; the only times they freed his hands were when he was fed and for visits to the latrine pit. The halter made every step momentous, every rock underfoot potentially fatal. He walked with muscles tense, scanning the ground with anxious eyes. Whenever he glanced at Egwene, she was doing the same. When she met his eyes, her face was tight and frightened. Neither of them dared take their eyes off the ground long enough for more than a glance.

Usually he collapsed like a wrung-out rag as soon as the Whitecloaks let him stop, but tonight his mind was racing. His skin crawled with dread that had been building for days. If he closed his eyes, he would see only the things Byar promised for them once they reached Amador.

He was sure Egwene still did not believe what Byar told them in that flat voice. If she did, she would not be able to sleep no matter how tired she was. In the beginning he had not believed Byar either. He still did not want to; people just did not do things like that to other people. But Byar did not really threaten; as if he were talking about getting a drink of water he talked about hot irons and pincers, about knives slicing away skin and needles piercing. He did not appear to be trying to frighten them. There was never even a touch of gloating in his eyes. He just did not care if they were frightened or not, if they were tortured or not, if they were alive or not. That was what brought cold sweat to Perrin's face once it got through to him. That was what finally convinced him Byar was telling the simple truth.

The two guards' cloaks gleamed grayly in the faint moonlight. He could not make out their faces, but he knew they were watching. As if they could try something, tied hand and foot the way they were. From when there had still been light enough to see, he remembered the disgust in their eyes and the pinched looks on their faces, as though they had been set to guard filth-soaked monsters, stinking and repellent to look at. All the Whitecloaks looked at them that way. It never changed. *Light, how do I make them believe we aren't Darkfriends when they're already convinced we are?* His stomach twisted sickeningly. In the end, he would probably confess to anything just to make the Questioners stop.

Someone was coming, a Whitecloak carrying a lantern. The man stopped to speak with the guards, who answered respectfully. Perrin could not hear what was said, but he recognized the tall, gaunt shape.

He squinted as the lantern was held close to his face. Byar had Perrin's axe in his other hand; he had appropriated the weapon as his own. At least, Perrin never saw him without it.

"Wake up," Byar said emotionlessly, as if he thought Perrin slept with his head raised. He accompanied the words with a heavy kick in the ribs.

Perrin gave a grunt through gritted teeth. His sides were a mass of bruises already from Byar's boots.

"I said, wake up." The foot went back again, and Perrin spoke quickly.

"I'm awake." You had to acknowledge what Byar said, or he found ways to get your attention.

Byar set the lantern on the ground and bent to check his bonds. The man jerked roughly at his wrist, twisting his arms in their sockets. Finding those knots still as tight as he had left them, Byar pulled at his ankle rope, scraping him across the rocky ground. The man looked too skeletal to have any strength, but Perrin might as well have been a child. It was a nightly routine.

As Byar straightened, Perrin saw that Egwene was still asleep. "Wake up!" he shouted. "Egwene! Wake up!"

"Wha . . . ? What?" Egwene's voice was frightened and still thick with sleep. She lifted her head, blinking in the lantern light.

Byar gave no sign of disappointment at not being able to kick her awake; he never did. He just jerked at her ropes the same way he had Perrin's, ignoring her groans. Causing pain was another of those things that seemed not to affect him one way or another; Perrin was the only one he really went out of his way to hurt. Even if Perrin could not remember it, Byar remembered that he had killed two of the Children.

"Why should Darkfriends sleep," Byar said dispassionately, "when decent men must stay awake to guard them?"

"For the hundredth time," Egwene said wearily, "we aren't Darkfriends."

Perrin tensed. Sometimes such a denial brought a lecture delivered in a grating near monotone, on confession and repentance, leading into a description of the Questioners' methods of obtaining them. Sometimes it brought the lecture and a kick. To his surprise, this time Byar ignored it.

Instead the man squatted in front of him, all angles and sunken hollows, with the axe across his knees. The golden sun on his cloak's left breast, and the two golden stars beneath it, glittered in the lantern light. Taking off his helmet, he set it beside the lantern. For a change there was something besides disdain or hatred on his face, something intent and unreadable. He rested his arms on the axehandle and studied Perrin silently. Perrin tried not to shift under that hollow-eyed stare.

"You are slowing us down, Darkfriend, you and your wolves. The Council of the Anointed has heard reports of such things, and they want to know more, so you must be taken to Amador and given to the Questioners, but you are slowing us down. I had hoped we could move fast enough, even without the remounts, but I was wrong.” He fell silent, frowning at them.

Perrin waited; Byar would tell him when he was ready.

“The Lord Captain is caught in the cleft of a dilemma,” Byar said finally. “Because of the wolves he must take you to the Council, but he must reach Caemlyn, too. We have no spare horses to carry you, but if we continue to let you walk, we will not reach Caemlyn by the appointed time. The Lord Captain sees his duties with a single-minded vision, and he intends to see you before the Council.”

Egwene made a sound. Byar was staring at Perrin, and he stared back, almost afraid to blink. “I don’t understand,” he said slowly.

“There is nothing to understand,” Byar replied. “Nothing but idle speculation. If you escaped, we would not have time to track you down. We don’t have an hour to spare if we are to reach Caemlyn in time. If you frayed your ropes on a sharp rock, say, and vanished into the night, the Lord Captain’s problem would be solved.” Never taking his gaze from Perrin, he reached under his cloak and tossed something on the ground.

Automatically Perrin’s eyes followed it. When he realized what it was, he gasped. A rock. A split rock with a sharp edge.

“Just idle speculation,” Byar said. “Your guards tonight also speculate.”

Perrin’s mouth was suddenly dry. *Think it through! Light help me, think it through and don’t make any mistakes!*

Could it be true? Could the Whitecloaks’ need to get to Caemlyn quickly be important enough for this? Letting suspected Darkfriends escape? There was no use trying that way; he did not know enough. Byar was the only Whitecloak who would talk to them, aside from Lord Captain Bornhald, and neither was exactly free with information. Another way. If Byar wanted them to escape, why not simply cut their bonds? If Byar wanted them to escape? Byar, who was convinced to his marrow that they were Darkfriends. Byar, who hated Darkfriends worse than he did the Dark One himself. Byar, who looked for any excuse to cause him pain because he had killed two Whitecloaks. *Byar* wanted them to escape?

If he had thought his mind was racing before, now it sped like an avalanche. Despite the cold, sweat ran down his face in rivulets. He glanced at the guards. They were only shadows of pale gray, but it seemed to him that they were poised, waiting. If he and Egwene were killed trying to escape, and their ropes had been cut on a rock that could have been lying there by chance. . . . The Lord Captain's dilemma would be solved, all right. And Byar would have them dead, the way he wanted them.

The gaunt man picked up his helmet from beside the lantern and started to stand.

"Wait," Perrin said hoarsely. His thoughts tumbled over and over as he searched in vain for some way out. "Wait, I want to talk. I—"

Help comes!

The thought blossomed in his mind, a clear burst of light in the midst of chaos, so startling that for a moment he forgot everything else, even where he was. Dapple was alive. *Elyas,* he thought at the wolf, demanding without words to know if the man was alive. An image came back. Elyas, lying on a bed of evergreen branches beside a small fire in a cave, tending a wound in his side. It all took only an instant. He gaped at Byar, and his face broke into a foolish grin. Elyas was alive. Dapple was alive. Help was coming.

Byar paused, risen only to a crouch, looking at him. "Some thought has come to you, Perrin of the Two Rivers, and I would know what it is."

For a moment Perrin thought he meant the thought from Dapple. Panic fled across his face, followed by relief. Byar could not possibly know.

Byar watched his changes of expression, and for the first time the Whitecloak's eyes went to the rock he had tossed on the ground.

He was reconsidering, Perrin realized. If he changed his mind about the rock, would he dare risk leaving them alive to talk? Ropes could be frayed after the people wearing them were dead, even if it made for risk of discovery. He looked into Byar's eyes—the shadowed hollows of the man's eye sockets made them appear to stare at him from dark caves—and he saw death decided.

Byar opened his mouth, and as Perrin waited for sentence to be pronounced, things began to happen too fast for thought.

Suddenly one of the guards vanished. One minute there were two dim shapes, the next the night swallowed one of them. The second guard turned, the beginning of a cry on his lips, but before the first syllable was uttered there was a solid *tchunk* and he toppled over like a felled tree.

Byar spun, swift as a striking viper, the axe whirling in his hands so fast that it hummed. Perrin's eyes bulged as the night seemed to flow into the lantern light. His mouth opened to yell, but his throat locked tight with fear. For an instant he even forgot that Byar wanted to kill them. The Whitecloak was another human being, and the night had come alive to take them all.

Then the darkness invading the light became Lan, cloak swirling through shades of gray and black as he moved. The axe in Byar's hands lashed out like lightning . . . and Lan seemed to lean casually aside, letting the blade pass so close he must have felt the wind of it. Byar's eyes widened as the force of his blow carried him off balance, as the Warder struck with hands and feet in rapid succession, so quick that Perrin was not sure what he had just seen. What he was sure of was Byar collapsing like a puppet. Before the falling Whitecloak had finished settling to the ground, the Warder was on his knees extinguishing the lantern.

In the sudden return to darkness, Perrin stared blindly. Lan seemed to have vanished again.

"Is it really . . . ?" Egwene gave a stifled sob. "We thought you were dead. We thought you were all dead."

"Not yet." The Warder's deep whisper was tinged with amusement.

Hands touched Perrin, found his bonds. A knife sliced through the ropes with barely a tug, and he was free. Aching muscles protested as he sat up. Rubbing his wrists, he peered at the graying mound that marked Byar. "Did you . . . ? Is he . . . ?"

"No," Lan's voice answered quietly from the darkness. "I do not kill unless I mean to. But he won't bother anyone for a while. Stop asking questions and get a pair of their cloaks. We do not have much time."

Perrin crawled to where Byar lay. It took an effort to touch the man, and when he felt the Whitecloak's chest rising and falling he almost jerked his hands away. His skin crawled as he made himself unfasten the white cloak and pull it off. Despite what Lan said, he could imagine the skull-faced man suddenly rearing up. Hastily he fumbled around till he found his axe, then crawled to another guard. It seemed strange, at first, that he felt no reluctance to touch this unconscious man, but the reason came to him. All the Whitecloaks hated him, but that was a human emotion. Byar felt nothing beyond that he should die; there was no hate in it, no emotion at all.

Gathering the two cloaks in his arms, he turned—and panic grabbed him. In the darkness he suddenly had no sense of direction, of how to find his way back to Lan and the others. His feet rooted to the ground, afraid to move. Even Byar was hidden by the night without his white cloak. There was nothing by which to orient himself. Any way he went might be out into the camp.

"Here."

He stumbled toward Lan's whisper until hands stopped him. Egwene was a dim shadow, and Lan's face was a blur; the rest of the Warder seemed not to be there at all. He could feel their eyes on him, and he wondered if he should explain.

"Put on the cloaks," Lan said softly. "Quickly. Bundle your own. And make no sound. You aren't safe yet."

Hurriedly Perrin passed one of the cloaks to Egwene, relieved at being saved from having to tell of his fear. He made his own cloak into a bundle to carry, and swung the white cloak around his shoulders in its place. He felt a prickle as it settled around his shoulders, a stab of worry between his shoulder blades. Was it Byar's cloak he had ended up with? He almost thought he could smell the gaunt man on it.

Lan directed them to hold hands, and Perrin gripped his axe in one hand and Egwene's hand with the other, wishing the Warder would get on with their escape so he could stop his imagination from running wild. But they just stood there, surrounded by the tents of the Children, two shapes in white cloaks and one that was sensed but not seen.

"Soon," Lan whispered. "Very soon."

Lightning broke the night above the camp, so close that Perrin felt the hair on his arms, his head, lifting as the bolt charged the air. Just beyond the tents the earth erupted from the blow, the explosion on the ground merging with that in the sky. Before the light faded Lan was leading them forward.

At their first step another strike sliced open the blackness. Lightning came like hail, so that the night flickered as if the darkness were coming in momentary flashes. Thunder drummed wildly, one roar rumbling into the next, one continuous, rippling peal. Fear-stricken horses screamed, their whinnies drowned except for moments when the thunder faded. Men tumbled out of their tents, some in their white cloaks, some only half clothed, some dashing to and fro, some standing as if stunned.

Through the middle of it Lan pulled them at a trot, Perrin bringing up the rear. Whitecloaks looked at them, wild-eyed, as they passed. A few shouted at them, the shouts lost in the pounding from the heavens, but with their white cloaks gathered around them no one tried to stop them. Through the tents, out of the camp and into the night, and no one raised a hand against them.

The ground turned uneven under Perrin's feet, and brush slapped at him as he let himself be drawn along. The lightning flickered fitfully and was gone. Echoes of thunder rolled across the sky before they, too, faded away. Perrin looked over his shoulder. A handful of fires burned back there, among the tents. Some of the lightning must have struck home, or perhaps men had knocked over lamps in their panic. Men still shouted, voices tiny in the night, trying to restore order, to find out what had happened. The land began to slope upwards, and tents and fires and shouting were left behind.

Suddenly he almost trod on Egwene's heels as Lan stopped. Ahead in the moonlight stood three horses.

A shadow stirred, and Moiraine's voice came, weighted with irritation. "Nynaeve has not returned. I fear that young woman has done something foolish." Lan spun on his heel as if to return the way they had come, but a single whip-crack word from Moiraine halted him. "No!" He stood looking at her sideways, only his face and hands truly visible, and they but dimly shadowed blurs. She went on in a gentler tone; gentler but no less firm. "Some things are more important than others. You know that." The Warder did not move, and her voice hardened again. "Remember your oaths, al'Lan Mandragoran, Lord of the Seven Towers! What of the oath of a Diademed Battle Lord of the Malkieri?"

Perrin blinked. Lan was all of that? Egwene was murmuring, but he could not take his eyes off the tableau in front of him, Lan standing like a wolf from Dapple's pack, a wolf at bay before the diminutive Aes Sedai and vainly seeking escape from doom.

The frozen scene was broken by a crash of breaking branches in the woods. In two long strides Lan was between Moiraine and the sound, the pale moonlight rippling along his sword. To the crackle and snap of underbrush a pair of horses burst from the trees, one with a rider.

"Bela!" Egwene exclaimed at the same time that Nynaeve said from the shaggy mare's back, "I almost didn't find you again. Egwene! Thank the Light you're alive!"

She slid down off Bela, but as she started toward the Emond's Fielders Lan caught her arm and she stopped short, staring up at him.

"We must go, Lan," Moiraine said, once more sounding unruffled, and the Warder released his grip.

Nynaeve rubbed her arm as she hurried to hug Egwene, but Perrin thought he heard her give a low laugh, too. It puzzled him because he did not think it had anything to do with her happiness at seeing them again.

“Where are Rand and Mat?” he asked.

“Elsewhere,” Moiraine replied, and Nynaeve muttered something in a sharp tone that made Egwene gasp. Perrin blinked; he had caught the edge of a wagoneer’s oath, and a coarse one. “The Light send they are well,” the Aes Sedai went on as if she had not noticed.

“We will none of us be well,” Lan said, “if the Whitecloaks find us. Change your cloaks, and get mounted.”

Perrin scrambled up onto the horse Nynaeve had brought behind Bela. The lack of a saddle did not hamper him; he did not ride often at home, but when he did it was more likely bareback than not. He still carried the white cloak, now rolled up and tied to his belt. The Warder said they must leave no more traces for the Children to find than they could help. He still thought he could smell Byar on it.

As they started out, the Warder leading on his tall black stallion, Perrin felt Dapple’s touch on his mind once more. *One day again.* More a feeling than words, it sighed with the promise of a meeting foreordained, with anticipation of what was to come, with resignation to what was to come, all streaked in layers. He tried to ask when and why, fumbling in haste and sudden fear. The trace of the wolves grew fainter, fading. His frantic questions brought only the same heavy-laden answer. *One day again.* It hung haunting in his mind long after awareness of the wolves winked out.

Lan pressed southward slowly but steadily. The night-draped wilderness, all rolling ground and underbrush hidden until it was underfoot, shadowed trees thick against the sky, allowed no great speed in any case. Twice the Warder left them, riding back toward the slivered moon, he and Mandarb becoming one with the night behind. Both times he returned to report no sign of pursuit.

Egwene stayed close beside Nynaeve. Soft-spoken scraps of excited talk floated back to Perrin. Those two were as buoyed up as if they had found home again. He hung back at the tail of their little column. Sometimes the Wisdom turned in her saddle to look back at him, and each time he gave her a wave, as if to say that he was all right, and stayed where he was. He had a lot to think about, though he could not get any of it straight in his head. *What was to come. What* was *to come?*

Perrin thought it could not be much short of dawn when Moiraine finally called a halt. Lan found a gully where he could build a fire hidden within a hollow in one of the banks.

Finally they were allowed to rid themselves of the white cloaks, burying them in a hole dug near the fire. As he was about to toss in the cloak he had used, the embroidered golden sun on the breast caught his eye, and the two golden stars beneath. He dropped the cloak as if it stung and walked away, scrubbing his hands on his coat, to sit alone.

“Now,” Egwene said, once Lan was shoveling dirt into the hole, “will somebody tell me where Rand and Mat are?”

“I believe they are in Caemlyn,” Moiraine said carefully, “or on their way there.” Nynaeve gave a loud, disparaging grunt, but the Aes Sedai went on as if she had not been interrupted. “If they are not, I will yet find them. That I promise.”

They made a quiet meal on bread and cheese and hot tea. Even Egwene’s enthusiasm succumbed to weariness. The Wisdom produced an ointment from her bag for the weals the ropes had left on Egwene’s wrists, and a different one for her other bruises. When she came to where Perrin sat on the edge of the firelight, he did not look up.

She stood looking at him silently for a time, then squatted with her bag beside her, saying briskly, “Take your coat and shirt off, Perrin. They tell me one of the Whitecloaks took a dislike to you.”

He complied slowly, still half lost in Dapple’s message, until Nynaeve gasped. Startled, he stared at her, then at his own bare chest. It was a mass of color, the newer, purple blotches overlaying older ones faded into shades of brown and yellow. Only thick slabs of muscle earned by hours at Master Luhhan’s forge had saved him from broken ribs. With his mind filled by the wolves, he had managed to forget the pain, but he was reminded of it now, and it came back gladly. Involuntarily he took a deep breath, and clamped his lips on a groan.

“How could he have disliked you so much?” Nynaeve asked wonderingly.

I killed *two men.* Aloud, he said, “I don’t know.”

She rummaged in her bag, and he flinched when she began spreading a greasy ointment over his bruises. “Ground ivy, five-finger, and sunburst root,” she said.

It was hot and cold at the same time, making him shiver while he broke into a sweat, but he did not protest. He had had experience of Nynaeve's ointments and poultices before. As her fingers gently rubbed the mixture in, the heat and cold vanished, taking the pain with them. The purple splotches faded to brown, and the brown and yellow paled, some disappearing altogether. Experimentally, he took a deep breath; there was barely a twinge.

"You look surprised," Nynaeve said. She looked a little surprised herself, and strangely frightened. "Next time, you can go to *her*."

"Not surprised," he said soothingly, "just glad." Sometimes Nynaeve's ointments worked fast and sometimes slow, but they always worked. "What. . . what happened to Rand and Mat?"

Nynaeve began stuffing her vials and pots back into her bag, jamming each one in as if she were thrusting it through a barrier. " *She* says they're all right. *She* says we'll find them. In Caemlyn, *she* says. *She* says it's too important for us not to, Whatever *that* means. *She* says a great many things."

Perrin grinned in spite of himself. Whatever else had changed, the Wisdom was still herself, and she and the Aes Sedai were still far from fast friends.

Abruptly Nynaeve stiffened, staring at his face. Dropping her bag, she pressed the backs of her hands to his cheeks and forehead. He tried to pull back, but she caught his head in both hands and thumbed back his eyelids, peering into his eyes and muttering to herself. Despite her small size she held his face easily; it was never easy to get away from Nynaeve when she did not want you to.

"I don't understand," she said finally, releasing him and settling back to sit on her heels. "If it was yelloweye fever, you wouldn't be able to stand. But you don't have any fever, and the whites of your eyes aren't yellowed, just the irises."

"Yellow?" Moiraine said, and Perrin and Nynaeve both jumped where they sat. The Aes Sedai's approach had been utterly silent. Egwene was asleep by the fire, wrapped in her cloaks, Perrin saw. His own eyelids wanted to slide closed.

"It isn't anything," he said, but Moiraine put a hand under his chin and turned his face up so she could peer into his eyes the way Nynaeve had. He jerked away, prickling. The two women were handling him as if he were a child. “I said it isn’t anything.”

“There was no foretelling this.” Moiraine spoke as if to herself. Her eyes seemed to look at something beyond him. “Something ordained to be woven, or a change in the Pattern? If a change, by what hand? The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. It must be that.”

“Do you know what it is?” Nynaeve asked reluctantly, then hesitated. “Can you do something for him? Your Healing?” The request for aid, the admission that she could do nothing, came out of her as if dragged.

Perrin glared at both the women. “If you’re going to talk about me, talk to me. I’m sitting right here.” Neither looked at him.

“Healing?” Moiraine smiled. “Healing can do nothing about this. It is not an illness, and it will not. . . .” She hesitated briefly. She did glance at Perrin, then, a quick look that regretted many things. The look did not include him, though, and he muttered sourly as she turned back to Nynaeve. “I was going to say it will not harm him, but who can say what the end will be? At least I can say it will not harm him directly.”

Nynaeve stood, dusting off her knees, and confronted the Aes Sedai eye to eye. “That’s not good enough. If there’s something wrong with—”

“What is, is. What is woven already is past changing.” Moiraine turned away abruptly. “We must sleep while we can and leave at first light. If the Dark One’s hand grows too strong. . . . We must reach Caemlyn quickly.”

Angrily, Nynaeve snatched up her bag and stalked off before Perrin could speak. He started to growl an oath, but a thought hit him like a blow and he sat there gaping silently. Moiraine knew. The Aes Sedai knew about the wolves. And she thought it could be the Dark One’s doing. A shiver ran through him. Hastily he shrugged back into his shirt, tucking it in awkwardly, and pulled his coat and cloak back on. The clothing did not help very much; he felt chilled right down to his bones, his marrow like frozen jelly.

Lan dropped to the ground cross-legged, tossing back his cloak. Perrin was glad of that. It was unpleasant, looking at the Warder and having his eyes slide past.

For a long moment they simply stared at one another. The hard planes of the Warder’s face were unreadable, but in his eyes Perrin thought he saw . . . something. Sympathy? Curiosity? Both?

“You know?” he said, and Lan nodded.

"I know some, not all. Did it just come to you, or did you meet a guide, an intermediary?"

"There was a man," Perrin said slowly. *He knows, but does he think the same as Moiraine?* "He said his name was Elyas. Elyas Machera." Lan drew a deep breath, and Perrin looked at him sharply. "You know him?"

"I knew him. He taught me much, about the Blight, and about this." Lan touched his sword hilt. "He was a Warder, before . . . before what happened. The Red Ajah. . . ." He glanced to where Moiraine was, lying before the fire.

It was the first time Perrin could remember any uncertainty in the Warder. At Shadar Logoth Lan had been sure and strong, and when he was facing Fades and Trollocs. He was not afraid now—Perrin was convinced of that—but he was wary, as if he might say too much. As if what he said could be dangerous.

"I've heard of the Red Ajah," he told Lan.

"And most of what you've heard is wrong, no doubt. You must understand, there are . . . factions within Tar Valon. Some would fight the Dark One one way, some another. The goal is the same, but the differences . . . the differences can mean lives changed, or ended. The lives of men or nations. He is well, Elyas?"

"I think so. The Whitecloaks said they killed him, but Dapple—" Perrin glanced at the Warder uncomfortably. "I don't know." Lan seemed to accept that he did not, reluctantly, and it emboldened him to go on. "This communicating with the wolves. Moiraine seems to think it's something the . . . something the Dark One did. It isn't, is it?" He would not believe Elyas was a Darkfriend.

But Lan hesitated, and sweat started on Perrin's face, chill beads made colder by the night. They were sliding down his cheeks by the time the Warder spoke.

"Not in itself, no. Some believe it is, but they are wrong; it was old and lost long before the Dark One was found. But what of the chance involved, blacksmith? Sometimes the Pattern has a randomness to it—to our eyes, at least—but what chance that you should meet a man who could guide you in this thing, and you one who could follow the guiding? The Pattern is forming a Great Web, what some call the Lace of Ages, and you lads are central to it. I don't think there is much chance left in your lives, now. Have you been chosen out, then? And if so, by the Light, or by the Shadow?"

"The Dark One can't touch us unless we name him." Immediately Perrin thought of the dreams of Ba'alzamon, the dreams that were more than dreams. He scrubbed the sweat off his face. "He can't."

"Rock-hard stubborn," the Warder mused. "Maybe stubborn enough to save yourself, in the end. Remember the times we live in, blacksmith. Remember what Moiraine Sedai told you. In these times many things are dissolving, and breaking apart. Old barriers weaken, old walls crumble. The barriers between what is and what was, between what is and what will be." His voice turned grim. "The walls of the Dark One's prison. This may be the end of an Age. We may see a new Age born before we die. Or perhaps it is the end of Ages, the end of time itself. The end of the world." Suddenly he grinned, but his grin was as dark as a scowl; his eyes sparkled merrily, laughing at the foot of the gallows. "But that's not for us to worry about, eh, blacksmith? We'll fight the Shadow as long as we have breath, and if it overruns us, we'll go under biting and clawing. You Two Rivers folk are too stubborn to surrender. Don't you worry whether the Dark One has stirred in your life. You are back among friends, now. Remember, the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and even the Dark One cannot change that, not with Moiraine to watch over you. But we had better find your friends soon."

"What do you mean?"

"They have no Aes Sedai touching the True Source to protect them. Blacksmith, perhaps the walls have weakened enough for the Dark One himself to touch events. Not with a free hand, or we'd be done already, but maybe tiny shiftings in the threads. A chance turning of one corner instead of another, a chance meeting, a chance word, or what seems like chance, and they could be so far under the Shadow not even Moiraine could bring them back."

"We have to find them," Perrin said, and the Warder gave a grunt of a laugh.

"What have I been saying? Get some sleep, blacksmith." Lan's cloak swung back around him as he stood. In the faint light from fire and moon he seemed almost part of the shadows beyond. "We have a hard few days to Caemlyn. Just you pray we find them there."

"But Moiraine . . . she can find them anywhere, can't she? She says she can."

"But can she find them in time? If the Dark One is strong enough to take a hand himself, time is running out. You pray we find them in

Caemlyn, blacksmith, or we may all be lost.”

* * *

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CHAPTER

39

Weaving of the Web

Rand looked down on the crowds from the high window of his room in The Queen’s Blessing. They ran shouting along the street, all streaming in the same direction, waving pennants and banners, the white lion standing guard on a thousand fields of red. Caemlyners and outlanders, they ran together, and for a change no one appeared to want to bash anyone else’s head. Today, maybe, there was only one faction.

He turned from the window grinning. Next to the day when Egwene and Perrin walked in, alive and laughing over what they had seen, this was the day he had been waiting for most.

“Are you coming?” he asked again.

Mat glowered from where he lay curled up in a ball on his bed. “Take that Trolloc you’re so friendly with.”

“Blood and ashes, Mat, he’s not a Trolloc. You’re just being stubborn stupid. How many times do you want to have this argument? Light, it’s not as if you’d never heard of Ogier before.”

“I never heard they looked like Trollocs.” Mat pushed his face into his pillow and curled himself tighter.

“Stubborn stupid,” Rand muttered. “How long are you going to hide up here? I’m not going to keep bringing you your meals up all those stairs forever. You could do with a bath, too.” Mat shrugged around on the bed as if he were trying to burrow deeper into it. Rand sighed, then went to the door. “Last chance to go together, Mat. I’m leaving now.” He closed the door slowly, hoping that Mat would change his mind, but his friend did not stir. The door clicked shut.

In the hallway, he leaned against the doorframe. Master Gill said there was an old woman two streets over, Mother Grubb, who sold herbs and poultices, besides birthing babies, tending the sick, and telling fortunes. She sounded a little like a Wisdom. Nynaeve was who Mat needed, or maybe Moiraine, but Mother Grubb was who he had. Bringing her to The Queen's Blessing might bring the wrong kind of attention as well, though, if she would even come. For her as well as for Mat and him.

Herbalists and hedge-doctors were lying low in Caemlyn right now; there was talk against anyone who did any kind of healing, or fortunetelling. Every night the Dragon's Fang was scrawled on doors with a free hand, sometimes even in the daylight, and people might forget who had cured their fevers and poulticed their toothaches when the cry of Darkfriend went up. That was the temper in the city.

It was not as if Mat were really sick. He ate everything Rand carried up from the kitchen—he would take nothing from anyone else's hand, though—and never complained about aches or fever. He just refused to leave the room. But Rand had been sure today would bring him out.

He settled his cloak on his shoulders and hitched his sword belt around so the sword, and the red cloth wrapped around it, was covered more.

At the foot of the stairs he met Master Gill just starting up. "There's someone been asking after you in the city," the innkeeper said around his pipe. Rand felt a surge of hope. "Asking after you and those friends of yours, by name. You younglings, anyway. Seems to want you three lads most."

Anxiety replaced hope. "Who?" Rand asked. He still could not help glancing up and down the hall. Except for they two, it was empty, from the exit into the alley to the common room door.

"Don't know his name. Just heard about him. I hear most things in Caemlyn, eventually. Beggar." The innkeeper grunted. "Half mad, I hear. Even so, he could take the Queen's Bounty at the Palace, even with things as hard as they are. On High Days, the Queen gives it out with her own hands, and there's never anyone turned away for any reason. No one needs to beg in Caemlyn. Even a man under warrant can't be arrested while he's taking the Queen's Bounty."

"A Darkfriend?" Rand said reluctantly. *If the Darkfriends know our names. . . .*

"You've got Darkfriends on the brain, young fellow. They're around, certainly, but just because the Whitecloaks have everybody stirred up is no reason for you to think the city's full of them. Do you know what rumor those idiots have started now? ‘Strange shapes.’ Can you believe it? Strange shapes creeping around outside the city in the night.” The innkeeper chuckled till his belly shook.

Rand did not feel like laughing. Hyam Kinch had talked about strange shapes, and there had surely enough been a Fade back there. “What kind of shapes?”

“What kind? I don’t know what kind. Strange shapes. Trollocs, probably. The Shadowman. Lews Therin Kinslayer himself, come back fifty feet high. What kind of shapes do you *think* people will imagine now the idea’s in their heads? It’s none of our worry.” Master Gill eyed him for a moment. “Going out, are you? Well, I can’t say I care for it, myself, even today, but there’s hardly anybody left here but me. Not your friend?”

“Mat’s not feeling very well. Maybe later.”

“Well, be that as it may. You watch yourself, now. Even today good Queen’s men will be outnumbered out there, Light burn the day I ever thought to see it so. Best you leave by the alleyway. There’s two of those blood-be-damned traitors sitting across the street watching my front door. They know where I stand, by the Light!”

Rand stuck his head out and looked both ways before slipping into the alley. A bulky man Master Gill had hired stood at the head of the alley, leaning on a spear and watching the people run past with an apparent lack of interest. It was only apparent, Rand knew. The fellow—his name was Lamgwin—saw everything through those heavy-lidded eyes, and for all his bullish bulk he could move like a cat. He also thought Queen Morgase was the Light made flesh, or near enough. There were a dozen like him scattered around The Queen’s Blessing.

Lamgwin’s ear twitched when Rand reached the mouth of the alley, but he never took his disinterest off the street. Rand knew the man had heard him coming.

“Watch your back today, man.” Lamgwin’s voice sounded like gravel in a pan. “When the trouble starts, you’ll be a handy one to have here, not somewhere with a knife in your back.”

Rand glanced at the blocky man, but his surprise was muted. He always tried to keep the sword out of sight, but this was not the first time one of Master Gill’s men had assumed he would know his way in a fight. Lamgwin did not look back at him. The man’s job was guarding the inn, and he did it.

Pushing his sword back a little further under his cloak, Rand joined the flow of people. He saw the two men the innkeeper had mentioned, standing on upturned barrels across the street from the inn so they could see over the crowd. He did not think they noticed him coming out of the alley. They made no secret of their allegiance. Not only were their swords wrapped in white tied with red, they wore white armbands and white cockades on their hats.

He had not been in Caemlyn long before learning that red wrappings on a sword, or a red armband or cockade, meant support for Queen Morgase. White said the Queen and her involvement with Aes Sedai and Tar Valon were to blame for everything that had gone wrong. For the weather, and the failed crops. Maybe even for the false Dragon.

He did not want to get involved in Caemlyn politics. Only, it was too late, now. It was not just that he had already chosen—by accident, but there it was. Matters in the city had gone beyond letting anyone stay neutral. Even outlanders wore cockades and armbands, or wrapped their swords, and more wore the white than the red. Maybe some of them did not think that way, but they were far from home and that was the way sentiment was running in Caemlyn. Men who supported the Queen went about in groups for their own protection, when they went out at all.

Today, though, it was different. On the surface, at least. Today, Caemlyn celebrated a victory of the Light over the Shadow. Today the false Dragon was being brought into the city, to be displayed before the Queen before he was taken north to Tar Valon.

No one talked about that part of it. No one but the Aes Sedai could deal with a man who could actually wield the One Power, of course, but no one wanted to talk about it. The Light had defeated the Shadow, and soldiers from Andor had been in the forefront of the battle. For today, that was all that was important. For today, everything else could be forgotten.

Or could it, Rand wondered. The crowd ran, singing and waving banners, laughing, but men displaying the red kept together in knots of ten or twenty, and there were no women or children with them. He thought there were at least ten men showing white for every one proclaiming allegiance to the Queen. Not for the first time, he wished white cloth had been the cheaper. *But would Master Gill have helped if you'd been showing the white?*

The crowd was so thick that jostling was inevitable. Even Whitecloaks did not enjoy their little open spaces in the throng today. As Rand let the crowd carry him toward the Inner City, he realized that not all animosities were being reined in. He saw one of the Children of the Light, one of three, bumped so hard he almost fell. The Whitecloak barely caught himself and started an angry oath at the man who had bumped him when another man staggered him with a deliberate, aimed shoulder. Before matters could go any further the Whitecloak's companions pulled him over to the side of the street to where they could shelter in a doorway. The three seemed caught between their normal glaring stare and disbelief. The crowd streamed on by as if none had noticed, and perhaps none had.

No one would have dared do such a thing two days earlier. More, Rand realized, the men who had done the bumping wore white cockades on their hats. It was widely believed the Whitecloaks supported those who opposed the Queen and her Aes Sedai advisor, but that made no difference. Men were doing things of which they had never before thought. Jostling a Whitecloak, today. Tomorrow, perhaps pulling down a Queen? Suddenly he wished there were a few more men close to him showing red; jostled by white cockades and armbands, he abruptly felt very alone.

The Whitecloaks noticed him looking at them and stared back as if meeting a challenge. He let a singing swirl in the crowd sweep him out of their sight, and joined in their song.

> *"Forward the Lion,forward the Lion,the White Lion takes the field.Roar defiance at the Shadow.Forward the Lion,forward, Andor triumphant."*

The route that would bring the false Dragon into Caemlyn was well known. Those streets themselves were kept clear by solid lines of the Queen's Guards and red-cloaked pikemen, but people packed the edges of them shoulder to shoulder, even the windows and the rooftops. Rand worked his way into the Inner City, trying to get closer to the Palace. He had some thought of actually seeing Logain displayed before the Queen. To see the false Dragon and a Queen, both . . . that was something he had never dreamed of back home.

The Inner City was built on hills, and much of what the Ogier had made still remained. Where streets in the New City mostly ran every which way in a crazy-quilt, here they followed the curves of the hills as if they were a natural part of the earth. Sweeping rises and dips presented new and surprising vistas at every turn. Parks seen from different angles, even from above, where their walks and monuments made patterns pleasing to the eye though barely touched with green. Towers suddenly revealed, tile-covered walls glittering in the sunlight with a hundred changing colors. Sudden rises where the gaze was thrown out across the entire city to the rolling plains and forests beyond. All in all, it would have been something to see if not for the crowd that hurried him along before he had a chance to really take it in. And all those curving streets made it impossible to see very far ahead.

Abruptly he was swept around a bend, and there was the Palace. The streets, even following the natural contours of the land, had been laid out to spiral in on this—this gleeman's tale of pale spires and golden domes and intricate stonework traceries, with the banner of Andor waving from every prominence, a centerpiece for which all the other vistas had been designed. It seemed more sculpted by an artist than simply built like ordinary buildings.

That glimpse showed him he would get no nearer. No one was being allowed close to the Palace. Queen's Guards made scarlet ranks ten deep flanking the Palace gates. Along the tops of the white walls, on high balconies and towers, more Guards stood rigidly straight, bows precisely slanted across breastplated chests. They, too, looked like something out of a gleeman's tale, a guard of honor, but Rand did not believe that was why they were there. The clamoring crowd lining the streets was almost solid with white-wrapped swords, white armbands, and white cockades. Only here and there was the white wall broken by a knot of red. The red-uniformed guards seemed a thin barrier against all that white.

Giving up on making his way closer to the Palace, he sought a place where he could use his height to advantage. He did not have to be in the front row to see everything. The crowd shifted constantly, people shoving to get nearer the front, people hurrying off to what they thought was a better vantage point. In one of those shifts he found himself only three people from the open street, and all in front of him were shorter than he, including the pikemen. Almost everyone was. People crowded against him from both sides, sweating from the press of so many bodies. Those behind him muttered about not being able to see, and tried to wriggle past. He stood his ground, making an impervious wall with those to either side. He was content. When the false Dragon passed by, he would be close enough to see the man's face clearly.

Across the street and down toward the gates to the New City, a ripple passed through the tight-packed crowd; around the curve, an eddy of people was drawing back to let something go by. It was not like the clear space that followed Whitecloaks on any day but today. These people jerked themselves back with startled glances that became grimaces of distaste. Pressing themselves out of the way, they turned their faces from Whatever it was, but watched out of the corners of their eyes until it was past.

Other eyes around him noted the disturbance, too. Keyed for the coming of the Dragon but with nothing to do now but wait, the crowd found anything at all worthy of comment. He heard speculation ranging from an Aes Sedai to Logain himself, and a few coarser suggestions that brought rough laughter from the men and disdainful sniffs from the women.

The ripple meandered through the crowd, drawing closer to the edge of the street as it came. No one seemed to hesitate in letting it go where it wanted, even if that meant losing a good spot for viewing as the crowd flowed back in on itself behind the passing. Finally, directly across from Rand, the crowd bulged into the street, pushing aside red-cloaked pikemen who struggled to shove them back, and broke open. The stooped shape that shuffled hesitantly out into the open looked more like a pile of filthy rags than a man. Rand heard murmurs of disgust around him.

The ragged man paused on the far edge of the street. His cowl, torn and stiff with dirt, swung back and forth as if searching for something, or listening. Abruptly he gave a wordless cry and flung out a dirty claw of a hand, pointing straight at Rand. Immediately he began to scuttle across the street like a bug.

The beggar. Whatever ill chance had led the man to find him like this, Rand was suddenly sure that, Darkfriend or not, he did not want to meet him face-to-face. He could feel the beggar’s eyes, like greasy water on his skin. Especially he did not want the man close to him here, surrounded by people balanced on the brink of violence. The same voices that had laughed before now cursed him as he pushed his way back, away from the street.

He hurried, knowing the densely packed mass through which he had to shove and wriggle would give way before the filthy man. Struggling to force a path through the crowd, he staggered and almost fell when he abruptly broke free. Flailing his arms to keep his balance he turned the stagger into a run. People pointed at him; he was the only one not pressing the other way, and running at that. Shouts followed him. His cloak flapped behind him, exposing his red-clad sword. When he realized that, he ran faster. A lone supporter of the Queen, running, could well spark a white-cockaded mob to pursuit, even today. He ran, letting his long legs eat paving stones. Not until the shouts were left far behind did he allow himself to collapse against a wall, panting.

He did not know where he was, except that he was still within the Inner City. He could not remember how many twists and turns he had taken along those curving streets. Poised to run again, he looked back the way he had come. Only one person moved on the street, a woman walking placidly along with her shopping basket. Almost everyone in the city was gathered for a glimpse of the false Dragon. *He can't have followed me. I must have left him behind.*

The beggar would not give up; he was sure of it, though he could not say why. That ragged shape would be working its way through the crowds at that very minute, searching, and if Rand returned to see Logain he ran the risk of a meeting. For a moment he considered going back to The Queen's Blessing, but he was sure he would never get another chance to see a Queen, and he hoped he would never have another to see a false Dragon. There seemed to be something cowardly in letting a bent beggar, even a Darkfriend, chase him into hiding.

He looked around, considering. The way the Inner City was laid out, buildings were kept low, if there were buildings at all, so that someone standing at a particular spot would have nothing to interrupt the planned view. There had to be places from where he could see the procession pass with the false Dragon. Even if he could not see the Queen, he could see Logain. Suddenly determined, he set off.

In the next hour he found several such places, every last one already packed cheek-to-cheek with people avoiding the crush along the procession route. They were a solid front of white cockades and armbands. No red at all. Thinking what the sight of his sword might do in a crowd like that, he slipped away carefully, and quickly.

Shouting floated up from the New City, cries and the blaring of trumpets, the martial beat of drums. Logain and his escort were already in Caemlyn, already on their way to the Palace.

Dispirited, he wandered the all but empty streets, still halfheartedly hoping to find some way to see Logain. His eyes fell on the slope, bare of buildings, rising above the street where he was walking. In a normal spring the slope would be an expanse of flowers and grass, but now it was brown all the way to the high wall along its crest, a wall over which the tops of trees were visible.

This part of the street had not been designed for any grand view, but just ahead, over the rooftops, he could see some of the Palace spires, topped by White Lion banners fluttering in the wind. He was not sure exactly where the curve of the street ran after it rounded the hill beyond his sight, but he suddenly had a thought about that hilltop wall.

The drums and trumpets were drawing nearer, the shouting growing louder. Anxiously he scrambled up the slope. It was not meant to be climbed, but he dug his boots into the dead sod and pulled himself up using leafless shrubs as handholds. Panting as much with desire as effort, he scrambled the last yards to the wall. It reared above him, easily twice his height and more. The air thundered with the drumbeat, rang with trumpet blasts.

The face of the wall had been left much in the natural state of the stone, the huge blocks fitted together so well that the joins were nearly invisible, the roughness making it seem almost a natural cliff. Rand grinned. The cliffs just beyond the Sand Hills were higher, and even Perrin had climbed those. His hands sought rocky knobs, his booted feet found ridges. The drums raced him as he climbed. He refused to let them win. He would reach the top before they reached the Palace. In his haste, the stone tore his hands and scraped his knees through his breeches, but he flung his arms over the top and heaved himself up with a sense of victory.

Hastily he twisted himself around to a seat on the flat, narrow top of the wall. The leafy branches of a towering tree stuck out over his head, but he had no thought for that. He looked across tiled rooftops, but from the wall his line of sight was clear. He leaned out, just a little, and could see the Palace gate, and the Queen’s Guards drawn up there, and the expectant crowd. Expectant. Their shouts drowned out by the thunder of drums and trumpets, but waiting still. He grinned. *I won.*

Even as he settled in place, the first part of the procession rounded the final curve before the Palace. Twenty ranks of trumpeters came first, splitting the air with peal after triumphant peal, a fanfare of victory. Behind them, as many drummers thundered. Then came the banners of Caemlyn, white lions on red, borne by mounted men, followed by the soldiers of Caemlyn, rank on rank on rank of horsemen, armor gleaming, lances proudly held, crimson pennants fluttering. Treble rows of pikemen and archers flanked them, and came on and on after the horsemen began passing between the waiting Guards and through the Palace gates.

The last of the foot soldiers rounded the curve, and behind them was a massive wagon. Sixteen horses pulled it in hitches of four. In the center of its flat bed was a large cage of iron bars, and on each corner of the wagonbed sat two women, watching the cage as intently as if the procession and the crowd did not exist. Aes Sedai, he was certain. Between the wagon and the footmen, and to either side, rode a dozen Warders, their cloaks swirling and tangling the eye. If the Aes Sedai ignored the crowd, the Warders scanned it as if there were no other guards but they.

With all of that, it was the man in the cage who caught and held Rand's eyes. He was not close enough to see Logain's face, as he had wanted to, but suddenly he thought he was as close as he cared for. The false Dragon was a tall man, with long, dark hair curling around his broad shoulders. He held himself upright against the sway of the wagon with one hand on the bars over his head. His clothes seemed ordinary, a cloak and coat and breeches that would not have caused comment in any farming village. But the way he wore them. The way he held himself. Logain was a king in every inch of him. The cage might as well not have been there. He held himself erect, head high, and looked over the crowd as if they had come to do him honor. And wherever his gaze swept, there the people fell silent, staring back in awe. When Logain's eyes left them, they screamed with redoubled fury as if to make up for their silence, but it made no difference in the way the man stood, or in the silence that passed along with him. As the wagon rolled through the Palace gates, he turned to look back at the assembled masses. They howled at him, beyond words, a wave of sheer animal hate and fear, and Logain threw back his head and laughed as the Palace swallowed him.

Other contingents followed behind the wagons, with banners representing more who had fought and defeated the false Dragon. The Golden Bees of Illian, the three White Crescents of Tear, the Rising Sun of Cairhien, others, many others, of nations and of cities, and of great men with their own trumpets, their own drums to thunder their grandeur. It was anticlimactic after Logain.

Rand leaned out a bit further to try to catch one last sight of the caged man. *He* was *defeated, wasn't he? Light, he wouldn't be in a bloody cage if* *he wasn’t defeated.*

Overbalanced, he slipped and grabbed at the top of the wall, pulled himself back to a somewhat safer seat. With Logain gone, he became aware of the burning in his hands, where the stone had scraped his palms and fingers. Yet he could not shake free of the images. The cage and the Aes Sedai. Logain, undefeated. No matter the cage, that had not been a defeated man. He shivered and rubbed his stinging hands on his thighs.

“Why were the Aes Sedai watching him?” he wondered aloud.

“They’re keeping him from touching the True Source, silly.”

He jerked to look up, toward the girl’s voice, and suddenly his precarious seat was gone. He had only time to realize that he was toppling backward, falling, when something struck his head and a laughing Logain chased him into spinning darkness.

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CHAPTER

40

The Web Tightens

It seemed to Rand that he was sitting at table with Logain and Moiraine. The Aes Sedai and the false Dragon sat watching him silently, as if neither knew the other was there. Abruptly he realized the walls of the room were becoming indistinct, fading off into gray. A sense of urgency built in him. Everything was going, blurring away. When he looked back to the table, Moiraine and Logain had vanished, and Ba'alzamon sat there instead. Rand's whole body vibrated with urgency; it hummed inside his head, louder and louder. The hum became the pounding of blood in his ears.

With a jerk he sat up, and immediately groaned and clutched his head, swaying. His whole skull hurt; his left hand found sticky dampness in his hair. He was sitting on the ground, on green grass. That troubled him, vaguely, but his head spun and everything he looked at lurched, and all he could think of was lying down until it stopped.

The wall! The girl's voice!

Steadying himself with one hand flat on the grass, he looked around slowly. He had to do it slowly; when he tried to turn his head quickly everything started whirling again. He was in a garden, or a park; a slate-paved walk meandered by through flowering bushes not six feet away, with a white stone bench beside it and a leafy arbor over the bench for shade. He *had* fallen inside the wall. *And the girl?*

He found the tree, close behind his back, and found her, too—climbing down out of it. She reached the ground and turned to face him, and he blinked and groaned again. A deep blue velvet cloak lined with pale fur rested on her shoulders, its hood hanging down behind to her waist with a cluster of silver bells at the peak. They jingled when she moved. A silver filigree circlet held her long, red-gold curls, and delicate silver rings hung at her ears, while a necklace of heavy silver links and dark green stones he thought were emeralds lay around her throat. Her pale blue dress was smudged with bark stains from her tree climbing, but it was still silk, and embroidered with painstakingly intricate designs, the skirt slashed with inserts the color of rich cream. A wide belt of woven silver encircled her waist, and velvet slippers peeked from under the hem of her dress.

He had only ever seen two women dressed in this fashion, Moiraine and the Darkfriend who had tried to kill Mat and him. He could not begin to imagine who would choose to climb trees in clothes like that, but he was sure she had to be someone important. The way she was looking at him redoubled the impression. She did not seem in the least troubled at having a stranger tumble into her garden. There was a self-possession about her that made him think of Nynaeve, or Moiraine.

He was so enmeshed in worrying whether or not he had gotten himself into trouble, whether or not she was someone who could and would call the Queen's Guards even on a day when they had other things to occupy them, that it took him a few moments to see past the elaborate clothes and lofty attitude to the girl herself. She was perhaps two or three years younger than he, tall for a girl, and beautiful, her face a perfect oval framed by that mass of sunburst curls, her lips full and red, her eyes bluer than he could believe. She was completely different from Egwene in height and face and body, but every bit as beautiful. He felt a twinge of guilt, but told himself that denying what his eyes saw would not bring Egwene safely to Caemlyn one whit faster.

A scrabbling sound came from up in the tree and bits of bark fell, followed by a boy dropping lightly to the ground behind her. He was a head taller than she and a little older, but his face and hair marked him as her close kin. His coat and cloak were red and white and gold, embroidered and brocaded, and for a male even more ornate than hers. That increased Rand's anxiety. Only on a feastday would any ordinary man dress in anything like that, and never with that much grandeur. This was no public park. Perhaps the Guards were too busy to bother with trespassers.

The boy studied Rand over the girl's shoulder, fingering the dagger at his waist. It seemed more a nervous habit than any thought that he might use it. Not completely, though. The boy had the same self-possession as the girl, and they both looked at him as if he were a puzzle to be solved. He had the odd feeling that the girl, at least, was cata loguing everything about him from the condition of his boots to the state of his cloak.

“We will never hear the end of this, Elayne, if mother finds out,” the boy said suddenly. “She told us to stay in our rooms, but you just had to get a look at Logain, didn’t you? Now look what it has got us.”

“Be quiet, Gawyn.” She was clearly the younger of the two, but she spoke as though she took it for granted that he would obey. The boy’s face struggled as if he had more to say, but to Rand’s surprise he held his peace. “Are you all right?” she said suddenly.

It took Rand a minute to realize she was speaking to him. When he did, he tried to struggle to his feet. “I’m fine. I just—” He tottered, and his legs gave way. He sat back down hard. His head swam. “I’ll just climb back over the wall,” he muttered. He attempted to stand again, but she put a hand on his shoulder, pressing him down. He was so dizzy the slight pressure was enough to hold him in place.

“You *are* hurt.” Gracefully she knelt beside him. Her fingers gently parted the blood-matted hair on the left side of his head. “You must have struck a branch coming down. You will be lucky if you didn’t break anything more than your scalp. I don’t think I ever saw anyone as skillful at climbing as you, but you don’t do so well falling.”

“You’ll get blood on your hands,” he said, drawing back.

Firmly she pulled his head back to where she could get at it. “Hold still.” She did not speak sharply, but again there was that note in her voice as if she expected to be obeyed. “It does not look *too* bad, thank the Light.” From pockets on the inside of her cloak she began taking out an array of tiny vials and twisted packets of paper, finishing with a handful of wadded bandage.

He stared at the collection in amazement. It was the sort of thing he would have expected a Wisdom to carry, not someone dressed as she was. She had gotten blood on her fingers, he saw, but it did not seem to bother her.

“Give me your water flask, Gawyn,” she said. “I need to wash this.”

The boy she called Gawyn unfastened a leather bottle from his belt and handed it to her, then squatted easily at Rand’s feet with his arms folded on his knees. Elayne went about what she was doing in a very workmanlike manner. He did not flinch at the sting of cold water when she washed the cut in his scalp, but she held the top of his head with one hand as if she expected him to try to pull away again and would have none of it. The ointment she smoothed on after, from one of her small vials, soothed almost as much as one of Nynaeve's preparations would have.

Gawyn smiled at him as she worked, a calming smile, as if he, too, expected Rand to jerk away and maybe even run. "She's always finding stray cats and birds with broken wings. You are the first human being she has had to work on." He hesitated, then added, "Do not be offended. I am not calling you a stray." It was not an apology, just a statement of fact.

"No offense taken," Rand said stiffly. But the pair were acting as if he were a skittish horse.

"She does know what she is doing," Gawyn said. "She has had the best teachers. So do not fear, you are in good hands."

Elayne pressed some of the bandaging against his temple and pulled a silk scarf from her belt, blue and cream and gold. For any girl in Emond's Field it would have been a treasured feastday cloth. Elayne deftly began winding it around his head to hold the wad of bandage in place.

"You can't use that," he protested.

She went on winding. "I told you to hold still," she said calmly.

Rand looked at Gawyn. "Does she always expect everybody to do what she tells them?"

A flash of surprise crossed the young man's face, and his mouth tightened with amusement. "Most of the time she does. And most of the time they do."

"Hold this," Elayne said. "Put your hand there while I tie—" She exclaimed at the sight of his hands. "You did not do that falling. Climbing where you should not have been climbing is more like it." Quickly finishing her knot, she turned his hands palms upward in front of him, muttering to herself about how little water was left. The washing made the lacerations burn, but her touch was surprisingly delicate. "Hold still, this time."

The vial of ointment was produced again. She spread it thinly along the scrapes, all of her attention apparently on rubbing it in without hurting him. A coolness spread through his hands, as if she were rubbing the torn places away.

"Most of the time they do exactly what she says," Gawyn went on with an affectionate grin at the top of her head. "Most people. Not Mother, of course. Or Elaida. And not Lini. Lini was her nurse. You can't give orders to someone who switched you for stealing figs when you were little. And even not so little.” Elayne raised her head long enough to give him a dangerous look. He cleared his throat and carefully blanked his expression before hurrying on. “And Gareth, of course. No one gives orders to Gareth.”

“Not even Mother,” Elayne said, bending her head back over Rand’s hands. “She makes suggestions, and he always does what she suggests, but I’ve never heard her give him a command.” She shook her head.

“I don’t know why that always surprises you,” Gawyn answered her. “Even you don’t try telling Gareth what to do. He’s served three Queens and been Captain-General, and First Prince Regent, for two. I daresay there are some think he’s more a symbol of the Throne of Andor than the Queen is.”

“Mother should go ahead and marry him,” she said absently. Her attention was on Rand’s hands. “She wants to; she can’t hide it from me. And it would solve so many problems.”

Gawyn shook his head. “One of them must bend first. Mother cannot, and Gareth will not.”

“If she commanded him. . . .”

“He would obey. I think. But she won’t. You know she won’t.”

Abruptly they turned to stare at Rand. He had the feeling they had forgotten he was there. “Who . . . ?” He had to stop to wet his lips. “Who is your mother?”

Elayne’s eyes widened in surprise, but Gawyn spoke in an ordinary tone that made his words all the more jarring. “Morgase, by the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of the House Trakand.”

“The Queen,” Rand muttered, shock spreading through him in waves of numbness. For a minute he thought his head was going to begin spinning again. *Don’t attract any attention. Just fall into the Queen’s garden and let the Daughter-Heir tend your cuts like a hedge-doctor.* He wanted to laugh, and knew it for the fringes of panic.

Drawing a deep breath, he scrambled hastily to his feet. He held himself tightly in rein against the urge to run, but the need to get away filled him, to get away before anyone else discovered him there.

Elayne and Gawyn watched him calmly, and when he leaped up they rose gracefully, not hurried in the least. He put up a hand to pull the scarf from his head, and Elayne seized his elbow. “Stop that. You will start the bleeding again.” Her voice was still calm, still sure that he would do as he was told.

“I have to go,” Rand said. “I’ll just climb back over the wall and—”

“You really didn’t know.” For the first time she seemed as startled as he was. “Do you mean you climbed up on that wall to see Logain without even knowing where you were? You could have gotten a much better view down in the streets.”

“I . . . I don’t like crowds,” he mumbled. He sketched a bow to each of them. “If you’ll pardon me, ah . . . my Lady.” In the stories, royal courts were full of people all calling one another Lord and Lady and Royal Highness and Majesty, but if he had ever heard the correct form of address for the Daughter-Heir, he could not think clearly enough to remember. He could not think clearly about anything beyond the need to be far away. “If you will pardon me, I’ll just leave now. Ah . . . thank you for the. . . .” He touched the scarf around his head. “Thank you.”

“Without even telling us your name?” Gawyn said. “A poor payment for Elayne’s care. I’ve been wondering about you. You sound like an Andorman, though not a Caemlyner, certainly, but you look like. . . . Well, you know our names. Courtesy would suggest you give us yours.”

Looking longingly at the wall, Rand gave his right name before he thought what he was doing, and even added, “From Emond’s Field, in the Two Rivers.”

“From the west,” Gawyn murmured. “Very far to the west.”

Rand looked around at him sharply. There had been a note of surprise in the young man’s voice, and Rand caught some of it still on his face when he turned. Gawyn replaced it with a pleasant smile so quickly, though, that he almost doubted what he had seen.

“Tabac and wool,” Gawyn said. “I have to know the principal products of every part of the Realm. Of every land, for that matter. Part of my training. Principal products and crafts, and what the people are like. Their customs, their strengths and weaknesses. It’s said Two Rivers people are stubborn. They can be led, if they think you are worthy, but the harder you try to push them, the harder they dig in. Elayne ought to choose her husband from there. It’ll take a man with a will like stone to keep from being trampled by her.”

Rand stared at him. Elayne was staring, too. Gawyn looked as much under control as ever, but he was babbling. *Why?*

“What’s this?”

All three of them jumped at the sudden voice, and spun to face it.

The young man who stood there was the handsomest man Rand had ever seen, almost too handsome for masculinity. He was tall and slender, but his movements spoke of whipcord strength and a sure confidence. Dark of hair and eye, he wore his clothes, only a little less elaborate in red and white than Gawyn’s, as if they were of no importance. One hand rested on his sword hilt, and his eyes were steady on Rand.

“Stand away from him, Elayne,” the man said. “You, too, Gawyn.”

Elayne stepped in front of Rand, between him and the newcomer, head high and as confident as ever. “He is a loyal subject of our mother, and a good Queen’s man. And he is under my protection, Galad.”

Rand tried to remember what he had heard from Master Kinch, and since from Master Gill. Galadedrid Damodred was Elayne’s half-brother, Elayne’s and Gawyn’s, if he remembered correctly; the three shared the same father. Master Kinch might not have liked Taringail Damodred too well—neither did anyone else that he had heard—but the son was well thought of by wearers of the red and the white alike, if talk in the city was any guide.

“I am aware of your fondness for strays, Elayne,” the slender man said reasonably, “but the fellow is armed, and he hardly looks reputable. In these days, we cannot be too careful. If he’s a loyal Queen’s man, what is he doing here where he does not belong? It is easy enough to change the wrappings on a sword, Elayne.”

“He is here as my guest, Galad, and I vouch for him. Or have you appointed yourself my nurse, to decide whom I may talk to, and when?”

Her voice was rich with scorn, but Galad seemed unmoved. “You know I make no claims for control over your actions, Elayne, but this . . . guest of yours is not proper, and you know that as well as I. Gawyn, help me convince her. Our mother would—”

“Enough!” Elayne snapped. “You are right that you have no say over my actions, nor have you any right to judge them. You may leave me. Now!”

Galad gave Gawyn a rueful look; at one and the same time it seemed to ask for help while saying that Elayne was too headstrong to be helped. Elayne’s face darkened, but just as she opened her mouth again, he bowed, in all formality yet with the grace of a cat, took a step back, then turned and strode down the paved path, his long legs carrying him quickly out of sight beyond the arbor.

“I hate him,” Elayne breathed. “He is vile and full of envy.”

“There you go too far, Elayne,” Gawyn said. “Galad does not know the meaning of envy. Twice he has saved my life, with none to know if he held his hand. If he had not, he would be your First Prince of the Sword in my place.”

“Never, Gawyn. I would choose anyone before Galad. Anyone. The lowest stableboy.” Suddenly she smiled and gave her brother a mock-stern look. “You say I am fond of giving orders. Well, I command you to let nothing happen to you. I command you to be my First Prince of the Sword when I take the throne—the light send that day is far off!—and to lead the armies of Andor with the sort of honor Galad cannot dream of.”

“As you command, my Lady.” Gawyn laughed, his bow a parody of Galad’s.

Elayne gave Rand a thoughtful frown. “Now we must get you out of here quickly.”

“Galad always does the right thing,” Gawyn explained, “even when he should not. In this case, finding a stranger in the gardens, the right thing is to notify the Palace guards. Which I suspect he is on his way to do right this minute.”

“Then it’s time I was back over the wall,” Rand said. *A fine day for going unnoticed! I might as well carry a sign!* He turned to the wall, but Elayne caught his arm.

“Not after the trouble I went to with your hands. You’ll only make fresh scrapes and then let some back-alley crone put the Light knows what on them. There is a small gate on the other side of the garden. It’s overgrown, and no one but me even remembers it’s there.”

Suddenly Rand heard boots pounding toward them over the slate paving stones.

“Too late,” Gawyn muttered. “He must have started running as soon as he was out of eyeshot.”

Elayne growled an oath, and Rand’s eyebrows shot up. He had heard that one from the stablemen at The Queen’s Blessing and had been shocked then. The next moment she was in cool self-possession once more.

Gawyn and Elayne appeared content to remain where they were, but he could not make himself stay for the Queen’s Guards with such equanimity. He started once more for the wall, knowing he would be no more than halfway up before the guards arrived, but unable to stand still.

Before he had taken three steps red-uniformed men burst into sight, breastplates catching the sun as they dashed up the path. Others came like breaking waves of scarlet and polished steel, seemingly from every direction. Some held drawn swords; others only waited to set their boots before raising bows and nocking feathered shafts. Behind the barred faceguards every eye was grim, and every broadhead arrow was pointed unwaveringly at him.

Elayne and Gawyn leaped as one, putting themselves between him and the arrows, their arms spread to cover him. He stood very still and kept his hands in plain sight, away from his sword.

While the thud of boots and the creak of bowstrings still hung in the air, one of the soldiers, with the golden knot of an officer on his shoulder, shouted, “My Lady, my Lord, down, quickly!”

Despite her outstretched arms Elayne drew herself up regally. “You dare to bring bare steel into my presence, Tallanvor? Gareth Bryne will have you mucking stables with the meanest trooper for this, if you are lucky!”

The soldiers exchanged puzzled glances, and some of the bowmen uneasily half lowered their bows. Only then did Elayne let her arms down, as if she had only held them up because she wished to. Gawyn hesitated, then followed her example. Rand could count the bows that had not been lowered. The muscles of his stomach tensed as though they could stop a broadhead shaft at twenty paces.

The man with the officer’s knot seemed the most perplexed of all. “My Lady, forgive me, but Lord Galadedrid reported a dirty peasant skulking in the gardens, armed and endangering my Lady Elayne and my Lord Gawyn.” His eyes went to Rand, and his voice finned. “If my Lady and my Lord will please to step aside, I will take the villain into custody. There is too much riff-raff in the city these days.”

“I doubt very much if Galad reported anything of the kind,” Elayne said. “Galad does not lie.”

“Sometimes I wish he would,” Gawyn said softly, for Rand’s ear. “Just once. It might make living with him easier.”

“This man is my guest,” Elayne continued, “and here under my protection. You may withdraw, Tallanvor.”

“I regret that will not be possible, my Lady. As my Lady knows, the Queen, your lady mother, has given orders regarding anyone on Palace grounds without Her Majesty’s permission, and word has been sent to Her Majesty of this intruder.” There was more than a hint of satisfaction in Tallanvor’s voice. Rand suspected the officer had had to accept other commands from Elayne that he did not think proper; this time the man was not about to, not when he had a perfect excuse.

Elayne stared back at Tallanvor; for once she seemed at a loss.

Rand looked a question at Gawyn, and Gawyn understood. “Prison,” he murmured. Rand’s face went white, and the young man added quickly, “Only for a few days, and you will not be harmed. You’ll be questioned by Gareth Bryne, the Captain-General, personally, but you will be set free once it’s clear you meant no harm.” He paused, hidden thoughts in his eyes. “I hope you were telling the truth, Rand al’Thor from the Two Rivers.”

“You will conduct all three of us to my mother,” Elayne announced suddenly. A grin bloomed on Gawyn’s face.

Behind the steel bars across his face, Tallanvor appeared taken aback. “My Lady, I—”

“Or else conduct all three of us to a cell,” Elayne said. “We will remain together. Or will you give orders for hands to be laid upon my person?” Her smile was victorious, and the way Tallanvor looked around as if he expected to find help in the trees said he, too, thought she had won.

Won what? How?

“Mother is viewing Logain,” Gawyn said softly, as if he had read Rand’s thoughts, “and even if she was not busy, Tallanvor would not dare troop into her presence with Elayne and me, as if *we* were under guard. Mother has a bit of a temper, sometimes.”

Rand remembered what Master Gill had said about Queen Morgase. *A bit of a temper?*

Another red-uniformed soldier came running down the path, skidding to a halt to salute with an arm across his chest. He spoke softly to Tallanvor, and his words brought satisfaction back to Tallanvor’s face.

“The Queen, your lady mother,” Tallanvor announced, “commands me to bring the intruder to her immediately. It is also the Queen’s command that my Lady Elayne and my Lord Gawyn attend her. Also immediately.”

Gawyn winced, and Elayne swallowed hard. Her face composed, she still began industriously brushing at the stains on her dress. Aside from dislodging a few pieces of bark, her effort did little good.

"If my Lady pleases?" Tallanvor said smugly. "My Lord?"

The soldiers formed around them in a hollow box that started along the slate path with Tallanvor leading. Gawyn and Elayne walked on either side of Rand, both appearing lost in unpleasant thoughts. The soldiers had sheathed their swords and returned arrows to quivers, but they were no less on guard than when they had had weapons in hand. They watched Rand as if they expected him at any moment to snatch his sword and try to cut his way to freedom.

Try anything? I won't try anything. *Unnoticed! Hah!*

Watching the soldiers watching him, he suddenly became aware of the garden. One thing had happened after another, each new shock coming before the last had a chance to fade, and his surroundings had been a blur, except for the wall and his devout wish to be back on the other side of it. Now he *saw* the green grass that had only tickled the back of his mind before. *Green!* A hundred shades of green. Trees and bushes green and thriving, thick with leaves and fruit. Lush vines covering arbors over the path. Flowers everywhere. So many flowers, spraying the garden with color. Some he knew—bright golden sunburst and tiny pink tallowend, crimson starblaze and purple Emond's Glory, roses in every color from purest white to deep, deep red—but others were strange, so fanciful in shape and hue he wondered if they could be real.

"It's green," he whispered. "Green." The soldiers muttered to themselves; Tallanvor gave them a sharp look over his shoulder and they fell silent.

"Elaida's work," Gawyn said absently.

"It is not right," Elayne said. "She asked if I wanted to pick out the one farm she could do the same for, while all around it the crops still failed, but it still isn't right for us to have flowers when there are people who do not have enough to eat." She drew a deep breath, and refilled her self-possession. "Remember yourself," she told Rand briskly. "Speak up clearly when you are spoken to, and keep silent otherwise. And follow my lead. All will be well."

Rand wished he could share her confidence. It would have helped if Gawyn had seemed to have it as well. As Tallanvor led them into the Palace, he looked back at the garden, at all the green streaked with blossoms, colors wrought for a Queen by an Aes Sedai's hand. He was in deep water, and there was no bank in sight.

Palace servants filled the halls, in red liveries with collars and cuffs of white, the White Lion on the left breast of their tunics, scurrying about intent on tasks that were not readily apparent. When the soldiers trooped by with Elayne and Gawyn, and Rand, in their midst, they stopped dead in their tracks to stare openmouthed.

Through the middle of all the consternation a gray-striped tomcat wandered unconcernedly down the hall, weaving between the goggling servants. Suddenly the cat struck Rand as odd. He had been in Baerlon long enough to know that even the meanest shop had cats lurking in every corner. Since entering the Palace, the tom was the only cat he had seen.

"You don't have rats?" he said in disbelief. *Every* place had rats.

"Elaida doesn't like rats," Gawyn muttered vaguely. He was frowning worriedly down the hall, apparently already seeing the coming meeting with the Queen. "We never have rats."

"Both of you be quiet." Elayne's voice was sharp, but as absent as her brother's. "I am trying to think."

Rand watched the cat over his shoulder until the guards took him round a corner, hiding the tom from sight. A lot of cats would have made him feel better; it would have been nice if there was one thing normal about the Palace, even if it was rats.

The path Tallanvor took turned so many times that Rand lost his sense of direction. Finally the young officer stopped before tall double doors of dark wood with a rich glow, not so grand as some they had passed, but still carved all over with rows of lions, finely wrought in detail. A liveried servant stood to either side.

"At least it isn't the Grand Hall." Gawyn laughed unsteadily. "I never heard that Mother commanded anyone's head cut off from here." He sounded as if he thought she might set a precedent.

Tallanvor reached for Rand's sword, but Elayne moved to cut him off. "He is my guest, and by custom and law, guests of the royal family may go armed even in Mother's presence. Or will you deny my word that he is my guest?"

Tallanvor hesitated, locking eyes with her, then nodded. "Very well, my Lady." She smiled at Rand as Tallanvor stepped back, but it lasted only a moment. "First rank to accompany me," Tallanvor commanded.

"Announce the Lady Elayne and the Lord Gawyn to Her Majesty," he told the doorkeepers. "Also Guardsman-Lieutenant Tallanvor, at Her Majesty's command, with the intruder under guard."

Elayne scowled at Tallanvor, but the doors were already swinging open. A sonorous voice sounded, announcing those who came.

Grandly Elayne swept through the doors, spoiling her regal entrance only a little by motioning for Rand to keep close behind her. Gawyn squared his shoulders and strode in flanking her, one measured pace to her rear. Rand followed, uncertainly keeping level with Gawyn on her other side. Tallanvor stayed close to Rand, and ten soldiers came with him. The doors closed silently behind them.

Suddenly Elayne dropped into a deep curtsy, simultaneously bowing from the waist, and stayed there, holding her skirt wide. Rand gave a start, then hastily emulated Gawyn and the other men, shifting awkwardly until he had it right. Down on his right knee, head bowed, bending forward to press the knuckles of his right hand against the marble tiles, his left hand resting on the end of his sword hilt. Gawyn, without a sword, put his hand on his dagger the same way.

Rand was just congratulating himself on getting it right when he noticed Tallanvor, his head still bent, glaring sideways at him from behind his face-guard. *Was I supposed to do something else?* He was suddenly angry that Tallanvor expected him to know what to do when no one had told him. And angry over being afraid of the guards. He had done nothing to be fearful for. He knew his fear was not Tallanvor's fault, but he was angry at him anyway.

Everyone held their positions, frozen as if waiting for the spring thaw. He did not know what they were waiting for, but he took the opportunity to study the place to which he had been brought. He kept his head down, just turning it enough to see. Tallanvor's scowl deepened, but he ignored it.

The square chamber was about the size of the common room at The Queen's Blessing, its walls presenting hunting scenes carved in relief in stone of the purest white. The tapestries between the carvings were gentle images of bright flowers and brilliantly plumaged hummingbirds, except for the two at the far end of the room, where the White Lion of Andor stood taller than a man on scarlet fields. Those two hangings flanked a dais, and on the dais a carved and gilded throne where sat the Queen.

A bluff, blocky man stood bareheaded by the Queen’s right hand in the red of the Queen’s Guards, with four golden knots on the shoulder of his cloak and wide golden bands breaking the white of his cuffs. His temples were heavy with gray, but he looked as strong and immovable as a rock. That had to be the Captain-General, Gareth Bryne. Behind the throne and to the other side a woman in deep green silk sat on a low stool, knitting something out of dark, almost black, wool. At first the knitting made Rand think she was old, but at second glance he could not put an age to her at all. Young, old, he did not know. Her attention seemed to be entirely on her needles and yarn, just as if there were not a Queen within arm’s reach of her. She was a handsome woman, outwardly placid, yet there was something terrible in her concentration. There was no sound in the room except for the click of her needles.

He tried to look at everything, yet his eyes kept going back to the woman with the gleaming wreath of finely wrought roses on her brow, the Rose Crown of Andor. A long red stole, the Lion of Andor marching along its length, hung over her silken dress of red and white pleats, and when she touched the Captain-General’s arm with her left hand, a ring in the shape of the Great Serpent, eating its own tail, glittered. Yet it was not the grandeur of clothes or jewelry or even crown that drew Rand’s eyes again and again: it was the woman who wore them.

Morgase had her daughter’s beauty, matured and ripened. Her face and figure, her presence, filled the room like a light that dimmed the other two with her. If she had been a widow in Emond’s Field, she would have had a line of suitors outside her door even if she was the worst cook and most slovenly house keeper in the Two Rivers. He saw her studying him and ducked his head, afraid she might be able to tell his thoughts from his face. *Light, thinking about the Queen like she was a village woman! You fool!*

“You may rise,” Morgase said in a rich, warm voice that held Elayne’s assurance of obedience a hundred times over.

Rand stood with the rest.

“Mother—” Elayne began, but Morgase cut her off.

“You have been climbing trees, it seems, daughter.” Elayne plucked a stray fragment of bark from her dress and, finding there was no place to put it, held it clenched in her hand. “In fact,” Morgase went on calmly, “it would seem that despite my orders to the contrary you have contrived to take your look at this Logain. Gawyn, I have thought better of you. You must learn not only to obey your sister, but at the same time to be counterweight for her against disaster.” The Queen’s eyes swung to the blocky man beside her, then quickly away again. Bryne remained impassive, as if he had not noticed, but Rand thought those eyes noticed everything. “That, Gawyn, is as much the duty of the First Prince as is leading the armies of Andor. Perhaps if your training is intensified, you will find less time for letting your sister lead you into trouble. I will ask the Captain-General to see that you do not lack for things to do on the journey north.”

Gawyn shifted his feet as if about to protest, then bowed his head instead. “As you command, mother.”

Elayne grimaced. “Mother, Gawyn cannot keep me out of trouble if he is not with me. It was for that reason alone he left his rooms. Mother, surely there could be no harm in just looking at Logain. Almost everyone in the city was closer to him than we.”

“Everyone in the city is not the Daughter-Heir.” Sharpness underlay the Queen’s voice. “I have seen this fellow Logain from close, and he is dangerous, child. Caged, with Aes Sedai to guard him every minute, he is still as dangerous as a wolf. I wish he had never been brought near Caemlyn.”

“He will be dealt with in Tar Valon.” The woman on the stool did not take her eyes from her knitting as she spoke. “What is important is that the people see that the Light has once again vanquished the Dark. And that they see you are part of that victory, Morgase.”

Morgase waved a dismissive hand. “I would still rather he had never come near Caemlyn. Elayne, I know your mind.”

“Mother,” Elayne protested, “I do mean to obey you. Truly I do.”

“You do?” Morgase asked in mock surprise, then chuckled. “Yes, you do try to be a dutiful daughter. But you constantly test how far you may go. Well, I did the same with my mother. That spirit will stand you in good stead when you ascend to the throne, but you are not Queen yet, child. You have disobeyed me and had your look at Logain. Be satisfied with that. On the journey north you will not be allowed within one hundred paces of him, neither you nor Gawyn. If I did not know just how hard your lessons will be in Tar Valon, I would send Lini along to see that you obey. She, at least, seems able to make you do as you must.”

Elayne bowed her head sullenly.

The woman behind the throne seemed occupied with counting her stitches. “In one week,” she said suddenly, “you will be wanting to come home to your mother. In a month you will be wanting to run away with the Traveling People. But my sisters will keep you away from the unbeliever. That sort of thing is not for you, not yet.” Abruptly she turned on the stool to look intently at Elayne, all her placidity gone as if it had never been. “You have it in you to be the greatest Queen that Andor has ever seen, that any land has seen in more than a thousand years. It is for that we will shape you, if you have the strength for it.”

Rand stared at her. She had to be Elaida, the Aes Sedai. Suddenly he was glad he had not come to her for help, no matter what her Ajah. A sternness far beyond Moiraine’s radiated from her. He had sometimes thought of Moiraine as steel covered with velvet; with Elaida the velvet was only an illusion.

“Enough, Elaida,” Morgase said, frowning uneasily. “She has heard that more than enough. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.” For a moment she was silent, looking at her daughter. “Now there is the problem of this young man”—she gestured to Rand without taking her eyes off Elayne’s face—“and how and why he came here, and why you claimed guest-right for him to your brother.”

“May I speak, mother?” When Morgase nodded her assent, Elayne told of events simply, from the time she first saw Rand climbing up the slope to the wall. He expected her to finish by proclaiming the innocence of what he had done, but instead she said, “Mother, often you tell me I must know our people, from the highest to the lowest, but whenever I meet any of them it is with a dozen attendants. How can I come to know anything real or true under such circumstances? In speaking with this young man I have already learned more about the people of the Two Rivers, what kind of people they are, than I ever could from books. It says something that he has come so far and has put on the red, when so many incomers wear the white from fear. Mother, I beg you not to misuse a loyal subject, and one who has taught me much about the people you rule.”

“A loyal subject from the Two Rivers.” Morgase sighed. “My child, you should pay more heed to those books. The Two Rivers has not seen a tax collector in six generations, nor the Queen’s Guards in seven. I daresay they seldom even think to remember they are part of the Realm.” Rand shrugged uncomfortably, recalling his surprise when he was told the Two

Rivers was part of the Realm of Andor. The Queen saw him, and smiled ruefully at her daughter. “You see, child?”

Elaida had put down her knitting, Rand realized, and was studying him. She rose from her stool and slowly came down from the dais to stand before him. “From the Two Rivers?” she said. She reached a hand toward his head; he pulled away from her touch, and she let her hand drop. “With that red in his hair, and gray eyes? Two Rivers people are dark of hair and eye, and they seldom have such height.” Her hand darted out to push back his coat sleeve, exposing lighter skin the sun had not reached so often. “Or such skin.”

It was an effort not to clench his fists. “I was born in Emond’s Field,” he said stiffly. “My mother was an outlander; that’s where my eyes come from. My father is Tam al’Thor, a shepherd and farmer, as I am.”

Elaida nodded slowly, never taking her eyes from his face. He met her gaze with a levelness that belied the sour feeling in his stomach. He saw her note the steadiness of his look. Still meeting him eye to eye, she moved her hand slowly toward him again. He resolved not to flinch this time.

It was his sword she touched, not him, her hand closing around the hilt at the very top. Her fingers tightened and her eyes opened wide with surprise. “A shepherd from the Two Rivers,” she said softly, a whisper meant to be heard by all, “with a heron-mark sword.”

Those last few words acted on the chamber as if she had announced the Dark One. Leather and metal creaked behind Rand, boots scuffling on the marble tiles. From the corner of his eye he could see Tallanvor and another of the guardsmen backing away from him to gain room, hands on their swords, prepared to draw and, from their faces, prepared to die. In two quick strides Gareth Bryne was at the front of the dais, between Rand and the Queen. Even Gawyn put himself in front of Elayne, a worried look on his face and a hand on his dagger. Elayne herself looked at him as if she were seeing him for the first time. Morgase did not change expression, but her hands tightened on the gilded arms of her throne.

Only Elaida showed less reaction than the Queen. The Aes Sedai gave no sign that she had said anything out of the ordinary. She took her hand from the sword, causing the soldiers to tense even more. Her eyes stayed on his, unruffled and calculating.

“Surely,” Morgase said, her voice level, “he is too young to have earned a heron-mark blade. He cannot be any older than Gawyn.”

"It belongs with him," Gareth Bryne said.

The Queen looked at him in surprise. "How can that be?"

"I do not know, Morgase," Bryne said slowly. "He *is* too young, yet still it belongs with him, and he with it. Look at his eyes. Look how he stands, how the sword fits him, and he it. He is too young, but the sword is his."

When the Captain-General fell silent, Elaida said, "How did you come by this blade, Rand al'Thor from the Two Rivers?" She said it as if she doubted his name as much as she did where he was from.

"My father gave it to me," Rand said. "It was his. He thought I'd need a sword, out in the world."

"Yet *another* shepherd from the Two Rivers with a heron-mark blade." Elaida's smile made his mouth go dry. "When did you arrive in Caemlyn?"

He had had enough of telling this woman the truth. She made him as afraid as any Darkfriend had. It was time to start hiding again. "Today," he said. "This morning."

"Just in time," she murmured. "Where are you staying? Don't say you have not found a room somewhere. You look a little tattered, but you have had a chance to freshen. Where?"

"The Crown and Lion." He remembered passing The Crown and Lion while looking for The Queen's Blessing. It was on the other side of the New City from Master Gill's inn. "I have a bed there. In the attic." He had the feeling that she knew he was lying, but she only nodded.

"What chance this?" she said. "Today the unbeliever is brought into Caemlyn. In two days he will be taken north to Tar Valon, and with him goes the Daughter-Heir for her training. And at just this juncture a young man appears in the Palace gardens, claiming to be a loyal subject from the Two Rivers . . ."

"I *am* from the Two Rivers." They were all looking at him, but all ignored him. All but Tallanvor and the guards; those eyes never blinked.

". . . with a story calculated to entice Elayne and bearing a heron-mark blade. He does not wear an armband or a cockade to proclaim his allegiance, but wrappings that carefully conceal the heron from inquisitive eyes. What chance this, Morgase?"

The Queen motioned the Captain-General to stand aside, and when he did she studied Rand with a troubled look. It was to Elaida that she spoke, though. “What are you naming him? Darkfriend? One of Logain’s followers?”

“The Dark One stirs in Shayol Ghul,” the Aes Sedai replied. “The Shadow lies across the Pattern, and the future is balanced on the point of a pin. This one is dangerous.”

Suddenly Elayne moved, throwing herself onto her knees before the throne. “Mother, I beg you not to harm him. He would have left immediately had I not stopped him. He wanted to go. It was I who made him stay. I cannot believe he is a Darkfriend.”

Morgase made a soothing gesture toward her daughter, but her eyes remained on Rand. “Is this a Foretelling, Elaida? Are you reading the Pattern? You say it comes on you when you least expect it and goes as suddenly as it comes. If this is a Foretelling, Elaida, I command you to speak the truth clearly, without your usual habit of wrapping it in so much mystery that no one can tell if you have said yes or no. Speak. What do you see?”

“This I Foretell,” Elaida replied, “and swear under the Light that I can say no clearer. From this day Andor marches toward pain and division. The Shadow has yet to darken to its blackest, and I cannot see if the Light will come after. Where the world has wept one tear, it will weep thousands. This I Foretell.”

A pall of silence clung to the room, broken only by Morgase expelling her breath as if it were her last.

Elaida continued to stare into Rand’s eyes. She spoke again, barely moving her lips, so softly that he could barely hear her less than an arm’s length away. “This, too, I Foretell. Pain and division come to the whole world, and this man stands at the heart of it. I obey the Queen,” she whispered, “and speak it clearly.”

Rand felt as if his feet had become rooted in the marble floor. The cold and stiffness of the stone crept up his legs and sent a shiver up his spine. No one else could have heard. But she was still looking at him, and he had heard.

“I’m a shepherd,” he said for the entire room. “From the Two Rivers. A shepherd.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” Elaida said aloud, and he could not tell if there was a touch of mockery in her tone or not.

“Lord Gareth,” Morgase said, “I need the advice of my Captain-General.”

The blocky man shook his head. “Elaida Sedai says the lad is dangerous, my Queen, and if she could tell more I would say summon the headsman. But all she says is what any of us can see with our own eyes. There’s not a farmer in the countryside won’t say things will get worse, without any Foretelling. Myself, I believe the boy is here through mere happenstance, though an ill one for him. To be safe, my Queen, I say clap him in a cell till the Lady Elayne and the Lord Gawyn are well on their way, then let him go. Unless, Aes Sedai, you have more to Foretell concerning him?”

“I have said all that I have read in the Pattern, Captain-General,” Elaida said. She flashed a hard smile at Rand, a smile that barely bent her lips, mocking his inability to say that she was not telling the truth. “A few weeks imprisoned will not harm him, and it may give me a chance to learn more.” Hunger filled her eyes, deepening his chill. “Perhaps another Foretelling will come.”

For a time Morgase considered, chin on her fist and elbow on the arm of her throne. Rand would have shifted under her frowning gaze if he could have moved at all, but Elaida’s eyes froze him solid. Finally the Queen spoke.

“Suspicion is smothering Caemlyn, perhaps all of Andor. Fear and black suspicion. Women denounce their neighbors for Darkfriends. Men scrawl the Dragon’s Fang on the doors of people they have known for years. I will not become part of it.”

“Morgase—” Elaida began, but the Queen cut her off.

“I will not become part of it. When I took the throne I swore to uphold justice for the high and the low, and I will uphold it even if I am the last in Andor to remember justice. Rand al’Thor, do you swear under the Light that your father, a shepherd in the Two Rivers, gave you this heronmark blade?”

Rand worked his mouth to get enough moisture to speak. “I do.” Abruptly remembering to whom he was speaking he hastily added, “My Queen.” Lord Gareth raised a heavy eyebrow, but Morgase did not seem to mind.

“And you climbed the garden wall simply to gain a look at the false Dragon?”

“Yes, my Queen.”

“Do you mean harm to the throne of Andor, or to my daughter, or my son?” Her tone said the last two would gain him even shorter shrift than the first.

“I mean no harm to anyone, my Queen. To you and yours least of all.”

“I will give you justice then, Rand al’Thor,” she said. “First, because I have the advantage of Elaida and Gareth in having heard Two Rivers speech when I was young. You have not the look, but if a dim memory can serve me you have the Two Rivers on your tongue. Second, no one with your hair and eyes would claim that he is a Two Rivers shepherd unless it was true. And that your father gave you a heron-mark blade is too preposterous to be a lie. And third, the voice that whispers to me that the best lie is often one too ridiculous to be taken for a lie . . . that voice is not proof. I will uphold the laws I have made. I give you your freedom, Rand al’Thor, but I suggest you take a care where you trespass in the future. If you are found on the Palace grounds again, it will not go so easily with you.”

“Thank you, my Queen,” he said hoarsely. He could feel Elaida’s displeasure like a heat on his face.

“Tallanvor,” Morgase said, “escort this . . . escort my daughter’s guest from the Palace, and show him every courtesy. The rest of you go as well. No, Elaida, you stay. And if you will too, please, Lord Gareth. I must decide what to do about these Whitecloaks in the city.”

Tallanvor and the guardsmen sheathed their swords reluctantly, ready to draw again in an instant. Still Rand was glad to let the soldiers form a hollow box around him and to follow Tallanvor. Elaida was only half attending what the Queen was saying; he could feel her eyes on his back. *What would have happened if Morgase had not kept the Aes Sedai with her?* The thought made him wish the soldiers would walk faster.

To his surprise, Elayne and Gawyn exchanged a few words outside the door, then fell in beside him. Tallanvor was surprised, too. The young officer looked from them back to the doors, closing now.

“My mother,” Elayne said, “ordered him to be escorted from the Palace, Tallanvor. With every courtesy. What are you waiting for?”

Tallanvor scowled at the doors, behind which the Queen was conferring with her advisors. “Nothing, my Lady,” he said sourly, and needlessly ordered the escort forward.

The wonders of the Palace slid by Rand unseen. He was befuddled, snatches of thought spinning by too fast to grasp. *You have not the look. This man stands at the heart of it.*

The escort stopped. He blinked, startled to find himself in the great court at the front of the Palace, standing at the tall, gilded gates, gleaming in the sun. Those gates would not be opened for a single man, certainly not for a trespasser, even if the Daughter-Heir did claim guest-right for him. Wordlessly Tallanvor unbarred a sally-port, a small door set within one gate.

"It is the custom," Elayne said, "to escort guests as far as the gates, but not to watch them go. It is the pleasure of a guest's company that should be remembered, not the sadness of parting."

"Thank you, my Lady," Rand said. He touched the scarf bandaging his head. "For everything. Custom in the Two Rivers is for a guest to bring a small gift. I'm afraid I have nothing. Although," he added dryly, "apparently I did teach you something of the Two Rivers folk."

"If I had told Mother I think you are handsome, she certainly would have had you locked in a cell." Elayne favored him with a dazzling smile. "Fare you well, Rand al'Thor."

Gaping, he watched her go, a younger version of Morgase's beauty and majesty.

"Do not try to bandy words with her." Gawyn laughed. "She will win every time."

Rand nodded absently. *Handsome? Light, the Daughter-Heir to the throne of Andor!* He gave himself a shake to clear his head.

Gawyn seemed to be waiting for something. Rand looked at him for a moment.

"My Lord, when I told you I was from the Two Rivers you were surprised. And everybody else, your mother, Lord Gareth, Elaida Sedai"—a shiver ran down his back—"none of them. . . ." He could not finish it; he was not even sure why he started. *I am Tam al'Thor's son, even if I was not born in the Two Rivers.*

Gawyn nodded as if it was for this he had been waiting. Still he hesitated. Rand opened his mouth to take back the unspoken question, and Gawyn said, "Wrap a *shoufa* around your head, Rand, and you would be the image of an Aielman. Odd, since Mother seems to think you *sound* like a

Two Rivers man, at least. I wish we could have come to know one another, Rand al'Thor. Fare you well."

An Aielman.

Rand stood watching Gawyn's retreating back until an impatient cough from Tallanvor reminded him where he was. He ducked through the sallyport, barely clearing his heels before Tallanvor slammed it behind him. The bars inside were jammed into place loudly.

The oval plaza in front of the Palace was empty, now. All the soldiers gone, all the crowds, trumpets, and drums vanished in silence. Nothing left but a scattering of litter blowing across the pavement and a few people hurrying about their business now that the excitement was done. He could not make out if they showed the red or the white.

Aielman.

With a start he realized he was standing right in front of the Palace gates, right where Elaida could find him easily once she finished with the Queen. Pulling his cloak close, he broke into a trot, across the plaza and into the streets of the Inner City. He looked back frequently to see if anyone was following him, but the sweeping curves kept him from seeing very far. He could remember Elaida's eyes all too well, though, and imagined them watching. By the time he reached the gates to the New City, he was running.

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CHAPTER

41

Old Friends and New Threats

Back at The Queen’s Blessing, Rand threw himself against the front doorframe, panting. He had run all the way, not caring if anyone saw that he wore the red, or even if they took his running as an excuse to chase him. He did not think even a Fade could have caught him.

Lamgwin was sitting on a bench by the door, a brindle cat in his arms, when he came running up. The man stood to look for trouble the way Rand had come, still calmly scratching behind the cat’s ears. Seeing nothing, he sat back down again, careful not to disturb the animal. “Fools tried to steal some of the cats a while back,” he said. He examined his knuckles before going back to his scratching. “Good money in cats these days.”

The two men showing the white were still across the way, Rand saw, one with a black eye and a swollen jaw. That one wore a sour scowl and rubbed his sword hilt with a sullen eagerness as he watched the inn.

“Where’s Master Gill?” Rand asked.

“Library,” Lamgwin replied. The cat began purring, and he grinned. “Nothing bothers a cat for long, not even somebody trying to stick him in a sack.”

Rand hurried inside, through the common room, now with its usual complement of men wearing the red and talking over their ale. About the false Dragon, and whether the Whitecloaks would make trouble when he was taken north. No one cared what happened to Logain, but they all knew the Daughter-Heir and Lord Gawyn would be traveling in the party, and no man there would countenance any risk to them.

He found Master Gill in the library, playing stones with Loial. A plump tabby sat on the table, feet tucked under her, watching their hands move over the cross-hatched board.

The Ogier placed another stone with a touch oddly delicate for his thick fingers. Shaking his head, Master Gill took the excuse of Rand's appearance to turn from the table. Loial almost always won at stones. "I was beginning to worry where you were, lad. Thought you might have had trouble with some of those white-flashing traitors, or run into that beggar or something."

For a minute Rand stood there with his mouth open. He had forgotten all about that bundle-of-rags of a man. "I saw him," he said finally, "but that's nothing. I saw the Queen, too, and Elaida; that's where the trouble is."

Master Gill snorted a laugh. "The Queen, eh? You don't say. We had Gareth Bryne out in the common room an hour or so ago, arm-wrestling the Lord Captain-Commander of the Children, but the Queen, now . . . that's something."

"Blood and ashes," Rand growled, "everybody thinks I'm lying today." He tossed his cloak across the back of a chair and threw himself onto another. He was too wound up to sit back. He perched on the front edge, mopping his face with a handkerchief. "I saw the beggar, and he saw me, and I thought. . . . That's not important. I climbed up on a wall around a garden, where I could see the plaza in front of the Palace, where they took Logain in. And I fell off, on the inside."

"I almost believe you aren't making fun," the innkeeper said slowly.

"Ta'veren," Loial murmured.

"Oh, it happened," Rand said. "Light help me, it did."

Master Gill's skepticism melted slowly as he went on, turning to quiet alarm. The innkeeper leaned more and more forward until he was perched on the edge of his chair the same as Rand was. Loial listened impassively, except that every so often he rubbed his broad nose and the tufts on his ears gave a little twitch.

Rand told everything that had happened, everything except what Elaida had whispered to him. And what Gawyn had said at the Palace gate. One he did not want to think about; the other had nothing to do with anything. *I'm Tam al'Thor's son, even if I wasn't born in the Two Rivers. I am! I'm Two Rivers blood, and Tam is my father.*

Abruptly he realized he had stopped talking, caught up in his thoughts, and they were looking at him. For one panicky moment he wondered if he had said too much.

“Well,” Master Gill said, “there’s no more waiting for your friends for you. You will have to leave the city, and fast. Two days at the most. Can you get Mat on his feet in that time, or should I send for Mother Grubb?”

Rand gave him a perplexed look. “Two days?”

“Elaida is Queen Morgase’s advisor, right next to Captain-General Gareth Bryne himself. Maybe ahead of him. If she sets the Queen’s Guards looking for you—Lord Gareth won’t stop her unless she interferes with their other duties—well, the Guards can search every inn in Caemlyn in two days. And that’s saying some ill chance doesn’t bring them here the first day, or the first hour. Maybe there’s a little time if they start over at the Crown and Lion, but none for dawdling.”

Rand nodded slowly. “If I can’t get Mat out of that bed, you send for Mother Grubb. I have a little money left. Maybe enough.”

“I’ll take care of Mother Grubb,” the innkeeper said gruffly. “And I suppose I can lend you a couple of horses. You try walking to Tar Valon and you’ll wear through what’s left of your boots halfway there.”

“You’re a good friend,” Rand said. “It seems like we’ve brought you nothing but trouble, but you’re still willing to help. A good friend.”

Master Gill seemed embarrassed. He shrugged his shoulders and cleared his throat and looked down. That brought his eyes to the stones board, and he jerked them away again. Loial was definitely winning. “Aye, well, Thom’s always been a good friend to me. If he’s willing to go out of his way for you, I can do a little bit, too.”

“I would like to go with you when you leave, Rand,” Loial said suddenly.

“I thought that was settled, Loial.” He hesitated—Master Gill still did not know the whole of the danger—then added, “You know what waits for Mat and me, what’s chasing us.”

“Darkfriends,” the Ogier replied in a placid rumble, “and Aes Sedai, and the Light knows what else. Or the Dark One. You are going to Tar Valon, and there is a very fine grove there, which I have heard the Aes Sedai tend well. In any case, there is more to see in the world than the groves. You truly are *ta’veren*, Rand. The Pattern weaves itself around you, and you stand in the heart of it.”

This man stands at the heart of it. Rand felt a chill. “I don’t stand at the heart of anything,” he said harshly.

Master Gill blinked, and even Loial seemed taken aback at his anger. The innkeeper and the Ogier looked at each other, and then at the floor. Rand forced his expression smooth, drawing deep breaths. For a wonder he found the void that had eluded him so often of late, and calmness. They did not deserve his anger.

"You can come, Loial," he said. "I don't know why you would want to, but I'd be grateful for the company. You . . . you know how Mat is."

"I know," Loial said. "I still cannot go into the streets without raising a mob shouting 'Trolloc' after me. But Mat, at least, only uses words. He has not tried to kill me."

"Of course not," Rand said. "Not Mat." *He wouldn't go that far. Not Mat.*

A tap came at the door, and one of the serving maids, Gilda, stuck her head into the room. Her mouth was tight, and her eyes worried. "Master Gill, come quickly, please. There's Whitecloaks in the common room."

Master Gill leaped up with an oath, sending the cat jumping from the table to stalk out of the room, tail stiff and offended. "I'll come. Run tell them I'm coming, then stay out of their way. You hear me, girl? Keep away from them." Gilda bobbed her head and vanished. "You had best stay here," he told Loial.

The Ogier snorted, a sound like sheets ripping. "I have no desire for any more meetings with the Children of the Light."

Master Gill's eye fell on the stones board and his mood seemed to lighten. "It looks as if we'll have to start the game over later."

"No need for that." Loial stretched an arm to the shelves and took down a book; his hands dwarfed the clothbound volume. "We can take up from where the board lies. It is your turn."

Master Gill grimaced. "If it isn't one thing, it's another," he muttered as he hurried from the room.

Rand followed him, but slowly. He had no more desire than Loial to become involved with the Children. *This man stands at the heart of it.* He stopped at the door to the common room, where he could see what went on, but far enough back that he hoped he would not be noticed.

Dead silence filled the room. Five Whitecloaks stood in the middle of the floor, studiously being ignored by the folk at the tables. One of them had the silver lightning-flash of an under-officer beneath the sunburst on his cloak. Lamgwin was lounging against the wall by the front door, intently cleaning his fingernails with a splinter. Four more of the guards Master Gill had hired were spaced across the wall from him, all industriously paying no attention at all to the Whitecloaks. If the Children of the Light noticed anything, they gave no sign. Only the under-officer showed any emotion at all, impatiently tapping his steel-backed gauntlets against his palm as he waited for the innkeeper.

Master Gill crossed the room to him quickly, a cautiously neutral look on his face. “The Light illumine you,” he said with a careful bow, not too deep, but not slight enough to actually be insulting, either, “and our good Queen Morgase. How may I help—”

“I’ve no time for your drivel, innkeeper,” the under-officer snapped. “I’ve been to twenty inns already today, each a worse pigsty than the last, and I’ll see twenty more before the sun sets. I’m looking for Darkfriends, a boy from the Two Rivers—”

Master Gill’s face grew darker with every word. He puffed up as if he would explode, and finally he did, cutting the Whitecloak off in turn. “There are no Darkfriends in my establishment! Every man here is a good Queen’s man!”

“Yes, and we all know where Morgase stands,” the under-officer twisted the Queen’s name into a sneer, “and her Tar Valon witch, don’t we?”

The scrape of chair legs was loud. Suddenly every man in the room was on his feet. They stood still as statues, but every one staring grimly at the Whitecloaks. The under-officer did not appear to notice, but the four behind him looked around uneasily.

“It will go easier with you, innkeeper,” the under-officer said, “if you cooperate. The temper of the times goes hard with those who shelter Darkfriends. I wouldn’t think an inn with the Dragon’s Fang on its door would get much custom. Might have trouble with fire, with that on your door.”

“You get out of here now,” Master Gill said quietly, “or I’ll send for the Queen’s Guards to cart what’s left of you to the middens.”

Lamgwin’s sword rasped out of its sheath, and the coarse scrape of steel on leather was repeated throughout the room as swords and daggers filled hands. Serving maids scurried for the doors.

The under-officer looked around in scornful disbelief. “The Dragon’s Fang—”

“Won’t help you five,” Master Gill finished for him. He held up a clenched fist and raised his forefinger. “One.”

“You must be mad, innkeeper, threatening the Children of the Light.”

“Whitecloaks hold no writ in Caemlyn. Two.”

“Can you really believe this will end here?”

“Three.”

“We’ll be back,” the under-officer snapped, and then he was hastily turning his men around, trying to pretend he was leaving in good order and in his own time. He was hampered in this by the eagerness his men showed for the door, not running, but not making secret that they wanted to be outside.

Lamgwin stood across the door with his sword, only giving way in response to Master Gill’s frantic waves. When the Whitecloaks were gone, the innkeeper dropped heavily onto a chair. He rubbed a hand across his forehead, then stared at it as if surprised that it was not covered with sweat. All over the room men seated themselves again, laughing over what they had done. Some went over to clap Master Gill on the shoulder.

When he saw Rand, the innkeeper tottered off the chair and over to him. “Who would have thought I had it in me to be a hero?” he said wonderingly. “The Light illumine me.” Abruptly he gave himself a shake, and his voice regained almost its normal tone. “You’ll have to stay out of sight until I can get you out of the city.” With a careful look back into the common room, he pushed Rand deeper into the hall. “That lot will be back, or else a few spies wearing red for the day. After that little show I put on, I doubt they’ll care whether you’re here or not, but they’ll act as though you are.”

“That’s crazy,” Rand protested. At the innkeeper’s gesture he lowered his voice. “The Whitecloaks don’t have any reason to be after me.”

“I don’t know about reasons, lad, but they’re after you and Mat for certain sure. What *have* you been up to? Elaida *and* the Whitecloaks.”

Rand raised his hands in protest, then let them fall. It made no sense, but he had heard the Whitecloak. “What about you? The Whitecloaks will make trouble for you even when they don’t find us.”

“No worries about that, lad. The Queen’s Guards still uphold the law, even if they do let traitors strut around showing white. As for the night . . . well, Lamgwin and his friends might not get much sleep, but I could almost pity anybody who tries to put a mark on my door.”

Gilda appeared beside them, dropping a curtsy to Master Gill. “Sir, there’s . . . there’s a lady. In the kitchens.” She sounded scandalized at the combination. “She’s asking for Master Rand, sir, and Master Mat, by name.”

Rand exchanged a puzzled look with the innkeeper.

“Lad,” Master Gill said, “if you’ve actually managed to bring the Lady Elayne down from the Palace to my inn, we’ll all end up facing the headsman.” Gilda squeaked at the mention of the Daughter-Heir and gave Rand a round-eyed stare. “Off with you, girl,” the innkeeper said sharply. “And keep quiet about what you’ve heard. It’s nobody’s business.” Gilda bobbed again and darted down the hallway, flashing glances over her shoulder at Rand as she went. “In five minutes”—Master Gill sighed—“she will be telling the other women you’re a prince in disguise. By nightfall it will be all over the New City.”

“Master Gill,” Rand said, “I never mentioned Mat to Elayne. It can’t be—” Suddenly a huge smile lit up his face, and he ran for the kitchens.

“Wait!” the innkeeper called behind him. “Wait until you know. Wait, you fool!”

Rand threw open the door to the kitchens, and there they were. Moiraine rested her serene eyes on him, unsurprised. Nynaeve and Egwene ran laughing to throw their arms around him, with Perrin crowding in behind them, all three patting his shoulders as if they had to be convinced that he was really there. In the doorway leading to the stableyard Lan lounged with one boot up on the doorframe, dividing his attention between the kitchen and the yard outside.

Rand tried to hug the two women and shake Perrin’s hand, all at the same time, and it was a tangle of arms and laughter complicated by Nynaeve trying to feel his face for fever. They looked somewhat the worse for wear—bruises on Perrin’s face, and he had a way of keeping his eyes downcast that he had never had before—but they were alive, and together again. His throat was so tight he could barely talk. “I was afraid I’d never see you again,” he managed finally. “I was afraid you were all. . . .”

“I knew you were alive,” Egwene said against his chest. “I always knew it. Always.”

“I did not,” Nynaeve said. Her voice was sharp for just that moment, but it softened in the next, and she smiled up at him. “You look well, Rand. Not overfed by any means, but well, thank the Light.”

"Well," Master Gill said behind him, "I guess you know these people after all. Those friends you were looking for?"

Rand nodded. "Yes, my friends." He made introductions all around; it still felt odd to be giving Lan and Moiraine their right names. They both eyed him sharply when he did.

The innkeeper greeted everyone with an open smile, but he was properly impressed at meeting a Warder, and especially at Moiraine. At her he gaped openly—it was one thing knowing an Aes Sedai had been helping the boys, quite something else having her appear in the kitchen—then bowed deeply. "You are welcome to The Queen's Blessing, Aes Sedai, as my guest. Though I suppose you will be staying at the Palace with Elaida Sedai, and the Aes Sedai who came with the false Dragon." Bowing again, he gave Rand a quick, worried look. It was all very well to say he did not speak ill of Aes Sedai, but that was not the same as saying he wanted one sleeping under his roof.

Rand nodded encouragingly, trying to tell him silently that it was all right. Moiraine was not like Elaida, with a threat hidden behind every glance, under every word. *Are you sure? Even now, are you sure?*

"I believe I will stay here," Moiraine said, "for the short time I remain in Caemlyn. And you must allow me to pay."

A calico cat sauntered in from the hallway to strop the innkeeper's ankles. No sooner had the calico begun than a fuzzy gray sprang from under the table, arching its back and hissing. The calico crouched with a threatening growl, and the gray streaked past Lan into the stableyard.

Master Gill began apologizing for the cats at the same time he protested that Moiraine would honor him by being his guest, and was she sure she would not prefer the Palace, which he would quite understand, but he hoped she would accept his best room as a gift. It made a jumble to which Moiraine seemed to pay no attention at all. Instead she bent down to scratch the orange-and-white cat; it promptly left Master Gill's ankles for hers.

"I've seen four other cats here, so far," she said. "You have a problem with mice? Rats?"

"Rats, Moiraine Sedai." The innkeeper sighed. "A terrible problem. Not that I don't keep a clean place, you understand. It's all the people. The whole city is full of people and rats. But my cats take care of it. You'll not be troubled, I promise."

Rand exchanged a fleeting look with Perrin, who put his eyes down again right away. There was something odd about Perrin's eyes. And he was so silent; Perrin was almost always slow to speak, but now he was saying nothing at all. "It could be all the people," he said.

"With your permission, Master Gill," Moiraine said, as if she took it for granted. "It is a simple matter to keep rats away from this street. With luck, the rats will not even realize they are being kept away."

Master Gill frowned at that last, but he bowed, accepting her offer. "If you are sure you don't want to stay at the Palace, Aes Sedai."

"Where is Mat?" Nynaeve said suddenly. "*She* said he was here, too."

"Upstairs," Rand said. "He's . . . not feeling well."

Nynaeve's head came up. "He's sick? I'll leave the rats to *her,* and I'll attend to him. Take me to him now, Rand."

"All of you go up," Moiraine said. "I will join you in a few minutes. We are crowding Master Gill's kitchen, and it would be best if we could all be somewhere quiet for a time." There was an undercurrent in her voice. *Stay out of sight. The hiding is not done yet.*

"Come on," Rand said. "We'll go up the back way."

The Emond's Field folk crowded after him to the back staircase, leaving the Aes Sedai and the Warder in the kitchen with Master Gill. He could not get over being back together. It was nearly as if he were home again. He could not stop grinning.

The same relief, almost joyous, seemed to be affecting the others. They chuckled to themselves, and kept reaching out to grip his arm. Perrin's voice seemed subdued, and he still kept his head down, but he began to talk as they climbed.

"Moiraine said she could find you and Mat, and she did. When we rode into the city, the rest of us couldn't stop staring—well, all except Lan, of course—all the people, the buildings, everything." His thick curls swung as he shook his head in disbelief. "It's all so big. And so many people. Some of them kept staring at us, too, shouting 'Red or white?' like it made some kind of sense."

Egwene touched Rand's sword, fingering the red wrappings. "What does it mean?"

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing important. We're leaving for Tar Valon, remember?"

Egwene gave him a look, but she removed her hand from the sword and took up where Perrin had left off. “Moiraine didn’t look at anything any more than Lan did. She led us back and forth through all those streets so many times, like a dog hunting a scent, that I thought you couldn’t be here. Then, all of a sudden, she took off down a street, and the next thing I knew we were handing the horses to the stablemen and marching into the kitchen. She never even asked if you were here. Just told a woman who was mixing batter to go tell Rand al’Thor and Mat Cauthon that someone wanted to see them. And there you were”—she grinned—“like a ball popping into the gleeman’s hand out of nowhere.”

“Where is the gleeman?” Perrin asked. “Is he with you?”

Rand’s stomach lurched and the good feeling of having friends around him dimmed. “Thom’s dead. I think he’s dead. There was a Fade. . . .” He could not say any more. Nynaeve shook her head, muttering under her breath.

The silence thickened around them, stifling the little chuckles, flattening the joy, until they reached the head of the stairs.

“Mat’s not sick, exactly,” he said then. “It’s. . . . You’ll see.” He flung open the door to the room he shared with Mat. “Look who’s here, Mat.”

Mat was still curled up in a ball on the bed, just as Rand had left him. He raised his head to stare at them. “How do you know they’re really who they look like?” he said hoarsely. His face was flushed, the skin tight and slick with sweat. “How do I know you’re who you look like?”

“Not sick?” Nynaeve gave Rand a disdainful look as she pushed past him, already unslinging her bag from her shoulder.

“Everybody changes,” Mat rasped. “How can I be sure? Perrin? Is that you? You’ve changed, haven’t you?” His laugh sounded more like a cough. “Oh, yes, you’ve changed.”

To Rand’s surprise Perrin dropped onto the edge of the other bed with his head in hands, staring at the floor. Mat’s hacking laughter seemed to pierce him.

Nynaeve knelt beside Mat’s bed and put a hand to his face, pushing up his headcloth. He jerked back from her with a scornful look. His eyes were bright and glazed. “You’re burning,” she said, “but you should not be sweating with this much fever.” She could not keep the worry out of her voice. “Rand, you and Perrin fetch some clean cloths and as much cool water as you can carry. I’ll bring your temperature down first, Mat, and—”

“Pretty Nynaeve,” Mat spat. “A Wisdom isn’t supposed to think of herself as a woman, is she? Not a pretty woman. But you do, don’t you? Now. You can’t make yourself forget that you’re a pretty woman, now, and it frightens you. Everybody changes.” Nynaeve’s face paled as he spoke—whether with anger or something else, Rand could not tell. Mat gave a sly laugh, and his feverish eyes slid to Egwene. “Pretty Egwene,” he croaked. “Pretty as Nynaeve. And you share other things now, don’t you? Other dreams. What do you dream about now?” Egwene took a step back from the bed.

“We are safe from the Dark One’s eyes for the time being,” Moiraine announced as she walked into the room with Lan at her heels. Her eyes fell on Mat as she stepped through the doorway, and she hissed as if she had touched a hot stove. “Get away from him!”

Nynaeve did not move except for turning to stare at the Aes Sedai in surprise. In two quick steps Moiraine seized the Wisdom by the shoulders, hauling her across the floor like a sack of grain. Nynaeve struggled and protested, but Moiraine did not release her until she was well away from the bed. The Wisdom continued her protests as she got to her feet, angrily straightening her clothes, but Moiraine ignored her completely. The Aes Sedai watched Mat to the exclusion of everything else, eyeing him the way she would a viper.

“All of you stay away from him,” she said. “And be quiet.”

Mat stared back as intently as she. He bared his teeth in a silent, snarling rictus, and pulled himself into an ever tighter knot, but he never took his eyes from hers. Slowly she put one hand on him, lightly, on a knee drawn up to his chest. A convulsion shook him at her touch, a shudder of revulsion spasming through his entire body, and abruptly he pulled one hand out, slashing at her face with the ruby-hilted dagger.

One minute Lan was in the doorway, the next he was at the bedside, as if he had not bothered with the intervening space. His hand caught Mat’s wrist, stopping the slash as if it had struck stone. Still Mat held himself in that tight ball. Only the hand with the dagger tried to move, straining against the Warder’s implacable grip. Mat’s eyes never left Moiraine, and they burned with hate.

Moiraine also did not move. She did not flinch from the blade only inches from her face, as she had not when he first struck. “How did he come by this?” she asked in a steel voice. “I asked if Mordeth had given you anything. I asked, and I warned you, and you said he had not.”

“He didn’t,” Rand said. “He. . . . Mat took it from the treasure room.”Moiraine looked at him, her eyes seeming to burn as much as Mat’s. He almost stepped back before she turned away again, back to the bed. “I didn’t know until after we were separated. I didn’t know.”

“You did not know.” Moiraine studied Mat. He still lay with his knees pulled up to his chest, still snarled soundlessly at her, and his hand yet fought Lan to reach her with the dagger. “It is a wonder you got this far, carrying this. I felt the evil of it when I laid eyes on him, the touch of Mashadar, but a Fade could sense it for miles. Even though he would not know exactly where, he would know it was near, and Mashadar would draw his spirit while his bones remembered that this same evil swallowed an army—Dreadlords, Fades, Trollocs, and all. Some Darkfriends could probably feel it, too. Those who have truly given away their souls. There could not help but be those who would wonder at suddenly feeling this, as if the very air around them itched. They would be compelled to seek it. It should have drawn them to it as a magnet draws iron filings.”

“There were Darkfriends,” Rand said, “more than once, but we got away from them. And a Fade, the night before we reached Caemlyn, but he never saw us.” He cleared his throat. “There are rumors of strange things in the night outside the city. It could be Trollocs.”

“Oh, it’s Trollocs, sheepherder,” Lan said wryly. “And where Trollocs are, there are Fades.” Tendons stood out on the back of his hand from the effort of holding Mat’s wrist, but there was no strain in his voice. “They’ve tried to hide their passage, but I have seen sign for two days. And heard farmers and villagers mutter about things in the night. The Myrddraal managed to strike into the Two Rivers unseen, somehow, but every day they come closer to those who can send soldiers to hunt them down. Even so, they won’t stop now, sheepherder.”

“But we’re in Caemlyn,” Egwene said. “They can’t get to us as long as —”

“They can’t?” the Warder cut her off. “The Fades are building their numbers in the countryside. That’s plain enough from the sign, if you know what to look for. Already there are more Trollocs than they need just to watch all the ways out of the city, a dozen fists, at least. There can only be one reason; when the Fades have enough numbers, they will come into the city after you. That act may send half the armies of the south marching to the Borderlands, but the evidence is that they're willing to take that risk. You three have escaped them too long. It looks as if you've brought a new Trolloc War to Caemlyn, sheepherder."

Egwene gave a gasping sob, and Perrin shook his head as though to deny it. Rand felt a sickness in his stomach at the thought of Trollocs in the streets of Caemlyn. All those people at one another's throats, never realizing the real threat waiting to come over the walls. What would they do when they suddenly found Trollocs and Fades in their midst, killing them? He could see the towers burning, flames breaking through the domes, Trollocs pillaging through the curving streets and vistas of the Inner City. The Palace itself in flames. Elayne, and Gawyn, and Morgase . . . dead.

"Not yet," Moiraine said absently. She was still intent on Mat. "If we can find a way out of Caemlyn, the Halfmen will have no more interest here. If. So many if's."

"Better we were all dead," Perrin said suddenly, and Rand jumped at the echo of his own thoughts. Perrin still sat staring at the floor—glaring at it now—and his voice was bitter. "Everywhere we go, we bring pain and suffering on our backs. It would be better for everyone if we were dead."

Nynaeve rounded on him, her face half fury and half worried fear, but Moiraine forestalled her.

"What do you think to gain, for yourself or anyone else, by dying?" the Aes Sedai asked. Her voice was level, yet sharp. "If the Lord of the Grave has gained as much freedom to touch the Pattern as I fear, he can reach you dead more easily than alive, now. Dead, you can help no one, not the people who have helped you, not your friends and family back in the Two Rivers. The Shadow is falling over the world, and none of you can stop it dead."

Perrin raised his head to look at her, and Rand gave a start. The irises of his friend's eyes were more yellow than brown. With his shaggy hair and the intensity of his gaze, there was something about him. . . . Rand could not grasp it enough to make it out.

Perrin spoke with a soft flatness that gave his words more weight than if he had shouted. "We can't stop it alive, either, now can we?"

"I will have time to argue with you later," Moiraine said, "but your friend needs me now." She stepped aside so they could all see Mat clearly. His eyes still on her with a rage-filled stare, he had not moved or changed his position on the bed. Sweat stood out on his face, and his lips were bloodless in an unchanging snarl. All of his strength seemed to be pouring into the effort to reach Moiraine with the dagger Lan held motionless. “Or had you forgotten?”

Perrin gave an embarrassed shrug and spread his hands wordlessly.

“What’s wrong with him?” Egwene asked, and Nynaeve added, “Is it catching? I can still treat him. I don’t seem to catch sick, no matter what it is.”

“Oh, it is catching,” Moiraine said, “and your . . . protection would not save you.” She pointed to the ruby-hilted dagger, careful not to let her finger touch it. The blade trembled as Mat strained to reach her with it. “This is from Shadar Logoth. There is not a pebble of that city that is not tainted and dangerous to bring outside the walls, and this is far more than a pebble. The evil that killed Shadar Logoth is in it, and in Mat, too, now. Suspicion and hatred so strong that even those closest are seen as enemies, rooted so deep in the bone that eventually the only thought left is to kill. By carrying the dagger beyond the walls of Shadar Logoth he freed it, this seed of it, from what bound it to that place. It will have waxed and waned in him, what he is in the heart of him fighting what the contagion of Mashadar sought to make him, but now the battle inside him is almost done, and he almost defeated. Soon, if it does not kill him first, he will spread that evil like a plague wherever he goes. Just as one scratch from that blade is enough to infect and destroy, so, soon, a few minutes with Mat will be just as deadly.”

Nynaeve’s face had gone white. “Can you do anything?” she whispered.

“I hope so.” Moiraine sighed. “For the sake of the world, I hope I am not too late.” Her hand delved into the pouch at her belt and came out with the silk-shrouded *angreal*. “Leave me. Stay together, and find somewhere you will not be seen, but leave me. I will do what I can for him.”

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CHAPTER
42

Remembrance of Dreams

It was a subdued group that Rand led back down the stairs. None of them wanted to talk to him now, or to one another. He did not feel much like talking, either.

The sun was far enough across the sky to dim the back stairwell, but the lamps had not yet been lit. Sunlight and shadow striped the stairs. Perrin's face was as closed as the others, but where worry creased everyone else's brow, his was smooth. Rand thought the look Perrin wore was resignation. He wondered why, and wanted to ask, but whenever Perrin walked through a deeper patch of shadow, his eyes seemed to gather in what little light there was, glowing softly like polished amber.

Rand shivered and tried to concentrate on his surroundings, on the walnut paneled walls and the oak stair railing, on sturdy, everyday things. He wiped his hands on his coat several times, but each time sweat sprang out on his palms anew. *It'll all be all right, now. We're together again, and. . . . Light, Mat.*

He took them to the library by the back way that went by the kitchens, avoiding the common room. Not many travelers used the library; most of those who could read stayed at more elegant inns in the Inner City. Master Gill kept it more for his own enjoyment than for the handful of patrons who wanted a book now and then. Rand did not want to think why Moiraine wanted them to keep out of sight, but he kept remembering the Whitecloak under-officer saying he would be back, and Elaida's eyes when she asked where he was staying. Those were reasons enough, Whatever Moiraine wanted.

He took five steps into the library before he realized that everyone else had stopped, crowded together in the doorway, openmouthed and goggling. A brisk blaze crackled in the fireplace, and Loial was sprawled on the long couch, reading, a small black cat with white feet curled and half asleep on his stomach. When they entered he closed the book with a huge finger marking his place and gently set the cat on the floor, then stood to bow formally.

Rand was so used to the Ogier that it took him a minute to realize that Loial was the object of the others' stares. "These are the friends I was waiting for, Loial," he said. "This is Nynaeve, the Wisdom of my village. And Perrin. And this is Egwene."

"Ah, yes," Loial boomed, "Egwene. Rand has spoken of you a great deal. Yes. I am Loial."

"He's an Ogier," Rand explained, and watched their amazement change in kind. Even after Trollocs and Fades in the flesh, it was still astonishing to meet a legend walking and breathing. Remembering his own first reaction to Loial, he grinned ruefully. They were doing better than he had.

Loial took their gaping in his stride. Rand supposed he hardly noticed it compared with a mob shouting "Trolloc." "And the Aes Sedai, Rand?" Loial asked.

"Upstairs with Mat."

The Ogier raised one bushy eyebrow thoughtfully. "Then he *is* ill. I suggest we all be seated. She will be joining us? Yes. Then there's nothing to do but wait."

The act of sitting seemed to loosen some catch inside the Emond's Field folk, as if being in a well-stuffed chair with a fire in the fireplace and a cat now curled up on the hearth made them feel at home. As soon as they were settled they excitedly began asking the Ogier questions. To Rand's surprise, Perrin was the first to speak.

"The *stedding*, Loial. Are they really havens, the way the stories say?" His voice was intent, as if he had a particular reason for asking.

Loial was glad to tell about the *stedding*, and how he came to be at The Queen's Blessing, and what he had seen in his travels. Rand soon leaned back, only partly listening. He had heard it all before, in detail. Loial liked to talk, and talk at length when he had the slightest chance, though he usually seemed to think a story needed two or three hundred years of background to make it understood. His sense of time was very strange; to him three hundred years seemed a reasonable length of time for a story or explanation to cover. He always talked about leaving the *stedding* as if it were just a few months before, but it had finally come out that he had been gone more than three years.

Rand's thoughts drifted to Mat. *A dagger. A bloody knife, and it might kill him just from carrying it. Light, I don't want any more adventure. If she can heal him, we should all go . . . not home. Can't go home. Somewhere. We'll all go somewhere they've never heard of Aes Sedai or the Dark One. Somewhere.*

The door opened, and for a moment Rand thought he was still imagining. Mat stood there, blinking, with his coat buttoned up and the dark scarf wrapped low around his forehead. Then Rand saw Moiraine, with her hand on Mat's shoulder, and Lan behind them. The Aes Sedai was watching Mat carefully, as one watches someone only lately out of a sickbed. As always, Lan was watching everything while appearing to watch nothing.

Mat looked as if he had never been sick a day. His first, hesitant smile included everyone, though it slipped into an openmouthed stare at the sight of Loial, as if he were seeing the Ogier for the first time. With a shrug and a shake, he turned his attention back to his friends. "I . . . ah . . . that is. . . ." He took a deep breath. "It . . . ah . . . it seems I've been acting . . . ah . . . sort of oddly. I don't remember much of it, really." He gave Moiraine an uneasy look. She smiled back confidently, and he went on. "Everything is hazy after Whitebridge. Thom, and the. . . ." He shivered and hurried on. "The further from Whitebridge, the hazier it gets. I don't really remember arriving in Caemlyn at all." He eyed Loial askance. "Not really. Moiraine Sedai says I . . . upstairs, I . . . ah. . . ." He grinned, and suddenly he truly was the old Mat. "You can't hold a man to blame for what he does when he's crazy, can you?"

"You always were crazy," Perrin said, and for a moment he, too, sounded as of old.

"No," Nynaeve said. Tears made her eyes bright, but she was smiling. "None of us blames you."

Rand and Egwene began talking at once then, telling Mat how happy they were to see him well and how well he looked, with a few laughing comments thrown in about hoping that he was done with tricks now that one so ugly had been played on him. Mat met banter with banter as he found a chair with all of his old swagger. As he sat down, still grinning, he absentmindedly touched his coat as if to make sure that something tucked behind his belt was still there, and Rand's breath caught.

“Yes,” Moiraine said quietly, “he still has the dagger.” The laughter and talk was still going on among the rest of the Emond’s Field folk, but she had noticed his sudden intake of breath and had seen what had caused it. She moved closer to his chair, where she did not have to raise her voice for him to hear clearly. “I cannot take it away from him without killing him. The binding has lasted too long, and grown too strong. That must be unknotted in Tar Valon; it is beyond me, or any lone Aes Sedai, even with an *angreal*.”

“But he doesn’t look sick anymore.” He had a thought and looked up at her. “As long as he has the dagger, the Fades will know where we are. Darkfriends, too, some of them. You said so.”

“I have contained that, after a fashion. If they come close enough to sense it now, they will be on top of us anyway. I cleansed the taint from him, Rand, and did what I could to slow its return, but return it will, in time, unless he receives help in Tar Valon.”

“A good thing that’s where we’re going, isn’t it?” He thought maybe it was the resignation in his voice, and the hope for something else, that made her give him a sharp look before turning away.

Loial was on his feet, bowing to her. “I am Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, Aes Sedai. The *stedding* offers sanctuary to the Servants of the Light.”

“Thank you, Loial, son of Arent,” Moiraine answered dryly, “but I would not be too free with that greeting if I were you. There are perhaps twenty Aes Sedai in Caemlyn at this moment, and every one but I of the Red Ajah.” Loial nodded sagely, as if he understood. Rand could only shake his head in confusion; he would be Lightblinded if *he* knew what she meant. “It is strange to find you here,” the Aes Sedai went on. “Few Ogier leave the *stedding* in recent years.”

“The old stories caught me, Aes Sedai. The old books filled my unworthy head with pictures. I want to see the groves. And the cities we built, too. There do not seem to be many of either still standing, but if buildings are a poor substitute for trees, they are still worth seeing. The Elders think I’m odd, wanting to travel. I always have, and they always have. None of them believe there is anything worth seeing outside the *stedding*. Perhaps when I return and tell them what I’ve seen, they will change their minds. I hope so. In time.”

“Perhaps they will,” Moiraine said smoothly. “Now, Loial, you must forgive me for being abrupt. It is a failing of humankind, I know. My companions and I have urgent need to plan our journey. If you could excuse us?”

It was Loial’s turn to look confused. Rand came to his rescue. “He’s coming with us. I promised him he could.”

Moiraine stood looking at the Ogier as if she had not heard, but finally she nodded. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” she murmured. “Lan, see that we are not taken unaware.” The Warder vanished from the room, silently but for the click of the door shutting behind him.

Lan’s disappearance acted like a signal; all talk was cut off. Moiraine moved to the fireplace, and when she turned back to the room every eye was on her. Slight of build as she was, her presence dominated. “We cannot remain long in Caemlyn, nor are we safe here in The Queen’s Blessing. The Dark One’s eyes are already in the city. They have not found what they are searching for, or they would not still be looking. That we have to our advantage. I have set wards to keep them away, and by the time the Dark One realizes that there is a part of the city the rats no longer enter, we will be gone. Any ward that will turn a man aside, though, would be as good as a beacon fire for the Myrddraal, and there are Children of the Light in Caemlyn, also, looking for Perrin and Egwene.” Rand made a sound, and Moiraine raised an eyebrow at him.

“I thought they were looking for Mat and me,” he said.

The explanation made both the Aes Sedai’s eyebrows lift. “Why would you think the Whitecloaks were looking for you?”

“I heard one say they were looking for someone from the Two Rivers. Darkfriends, he said. What else was I supposed to think? With everything that’s been happening, I’m lucky I can think at all.”

“It has been confusing, I know, Rand,” Loial put in, “but you can think more clearly than that. The Children hate Aes Sedai. Elaida would not—”

“Elaida?” Moiraine cut in sharply. “What has Elaida Sedai to do with this?”

She was looking at Rand so hard that he wanted to lean back. “She wanted to throw me in prison,” he said slowly. “All I wanted was a look at Logain, but she wouldn’t believe I was in the Palace gardens with Elayne and Gawyn just by chance.” They were all staring at him as if he had suddenly sprouted a third eye, all except Loial. “Queen Morgase let me go.

She said there was no proof I meant any harm and she was going to uphold the law no matter what Elaida suspected.” He shook his head, the memory of Morgase in all her radiance making him forget for a minute that anyone was looking at him. “Can you imagine me meeting a Queen? She’s beautiful, like the queens in stories. So is Elayne. And Gawyn . . . you’d like Gawyn, Perrin. Perrin? Mat?” They were still staring. “Blood and ashes, I just climbed up on the wall for a look at the false Dragon. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That’s what I always say,” Mat said blandly, though he was suddenly grinning hard, and Egwene asked in a decidedly neutral voice, “Who’s Elayne?”

Moiraine muttered something crossly.

“A Queen,” Perrin said, shaking his head. “You really have had adventures. All we met were Tinkers and some Whitecloaks.” He avoided looking at Moiraine so obviously that Rand saw the avoidance plain. Perrin touched the bruises on his face. “On the whole, singing with the Tinkers was more fun than the Whitecloaks.”

“The Traveling People live for their songs,” Loial said. “For all songs, for that matter. For the search for them, at least. I met some Tuatha’an a few years back, and they wanted to learn the songs we sing to trees. Actually, the trees won’t listen to very many anymore, and so not many Ogier learn the songs. I have a scrap of that Talent, so Elder Arent insisted I learn. I taught the Tuatha’an what they could learn, but the trees never listen to humans. For the Traveling People they were only songs, and just as well received for that, since none was the song they seek. That’s what they call the leader of each band, the Seeker. They come to Stedding Shangtai, sometimes. Few humans do.”

“If you please, Loial,” Moiraine said, but he cleared his throat suddenly and went on in a quick rumble as if afraid she might stop him.

“I’ve just remembered something, Aes Sedai, something I have always wanted to ask an Aes Sedai if ever I met one, since you know many things and have great libraries in Tar Valon, and now I have, of course, and . . . may I?”

“If you make it brief,” she said curtly.

“Brief,” he said as though wondering what it meant. “Yes. Well. Brief. There was a man came to Stedding Shangtai a little time back. This was not unusual in itself, at the time, since a great many refugees had come to the

Spine of the World fleeing what you humans call the Aiel War." Rand grinned. A little time back; twenty years, near enough. "He was at the point of death, though there was no wound or mark on him. The Elders thought it might be something Aes Sedai had done"—Loial gave Moiraine an apologetic look—"since as soon as he was within the *stedding* he quickly got well. A few months. One night he left without a word to anyone, simply sneaked away when the moon was down." He looked at Moiraine's face and cleared his throat again. "Yes. Brief. Before he left, he told a curious tale which he said he meant to carry to Tar Valon. He said the Dark One intended to blind the Eye of the World, and slay the Great Serpent, kill time itself. The Elders said he was as sound in his mind as in his body, but that was what he said. What I have wanted to ask is, can the Dark One do such a thing? Kill time itself? And the Eye of the World? Can he blind the eye of the Great Serpent? What does it mean?"

Rand expected almost anything from Moiraine except what he saw. Instead of giving Loial an answer, or telling him she had no time for it now, she stood there staring right through the Ogier, frowning in thought.

"That's what the Tinkers told us," Perrin said.

"Yes," Egwene said, "the Aiel story."

Moiraine turned her head slowly. No other part of her moved. "What story?"

It was an expressionless look she gave them, but it made Perrin take a deep breath, though when he spoke he was as deliberate as ever. "Some Tinkers crossing the Waste—they said they could do that unharmed—found Aiel dying after a battle with Trollocs. Before the last Aiel died, she—they were all women, apparently—told the Tinkers what Loial just said. The Dark One—they called him Sightblinder—intends to blind the Eye of the World. This was only three years ago, not twenty. Does it mean something?"

"Perhaps everything," Moiraine said. Her face was still, but Rand had the feeling her mind raced behind those dark eyes.

"Ba'alzamon," Perrin said suddenly. The name cut off all sound in the room. No one appeared to breathe. Perrin looked at Rand, then at Mat, his eyes strangely calm and more yellow than ever. "At the time I wondered where I'd heard that name before . . . the Eye of the World. Now I remember. Don't you?"

"I don't want to remember anything," Mat said stiffly.

“We have to tell her,” Perrin continued. “It’s important now. We can’t keep it secret any longer. You see it, don’t you, Rand?”

“Tell me what?” Moiraine’s voice was harsh, and she seemed to be bracing for a blow. Her gaze had settled on Rand.

He did not want to answer. He did not want to remember any more than Mat, but he did remember—and he knew Perrin was right. “I’ve. . . .” He looked at his friends. Mat nodded reluctantly, Perrin decisively, but at least they had done it. He did not have to face her alone. “We have had . . . dreams.” He rubbed the spot on his finger where the thorn had stuck him once, remembering the blood when he woke. Queasily remembering the sunburned feel of his face another time. “Except maybe they weren’t dreams, exactly. Ba’alzamon was in them.” He knew why Perrin had used that name; it was easier than saying the Dark One had been in your dreams, inside your head. “He said . . . he said all sorts of things, but once he said the Eye of the World would never serve me.” For a minute his mouth was as dry as dust.

“He told me the same thing,” Perrin said, and Mat sighed heavily, then nodded. Rand found he had spit in his mouth again. “You aren’t angry with us?” Perrin asked, sounding surprised, and Rand realized that Moiraine did not seem angry. She was studying them, but her eyes were clear and calm, if intent.

“More with myself than you. But I did ask you to tell me if you had strange dreams. In the beginning, I asked.” Though her voice remained level, a flash of anger crossed her eyes, and was gone in an instant. “Had I known after the first such, I might have been able to. . . . There has not been a Dreamwalker in Tar Valon for nearly a thousand years, but I could have tried. Now it is too late. Each time the Dark One touches you, he makes the next touching easier for him. Perhaps my presence can still shield you somewhat, but even then. . . . Remember the stories of the Forsaken binding men to them? Strong men, men who had fought the Dark One from the start. Those stories are true, and none of the Forsaken had a tenth of the strength of their master, not Aginor or Lanfear, not Balthamel or Demandred, not even Ishamael, the Betrayer of Hope himself.”

Nynaeve and Egwene were looking at him, Rand saw, him and Mat and Perrin all three. The women’s faces were a blood-drained blend of fear and horror. *Are they afraid for us, or afraid of us?*

“What can we do?” he asked. “There has to be something.”

“Staying close by me,” Moiraine replied, “will help. Some. The protection from touching the True Source extends around me a little, remember. But you cannot always remain close to me. You can defend yourself, if you have the strength for it, but you must find the strength and will within yourself. I cannot give it to you.”

“I think I’ve already found my protection,” Perrin said, sounding resigned rather than happy.

“Yes,” Moiraine said, “I suppose you have.” She looked at him until he dropped his eyes, and even then she stood considering. Finally she turned to the others. “There are limits to the Dark One’s power inside you. Yield even for an instant and he will have a string tied to your heart, a string you may never be able to cut. Surrender, and you will be his. Deny him, and his power fails. It is not easy when he touches your dreams, but it can be done. He can still send Halfmen against you, and Trollocs, and Draghkar, and other things, but he cannot make you his unless you let him.”

“Fades are bad enough,” Perrin said.

“I don’t want him inside my head again,” Mat growled. “Isn’t there any way to keep him out?”

Moiraine shook her head. “Loial has nothing to fear, nor Egwene, nor Nynaeve. Out of the mass of humanity, the Dark One can touch an individual only by chance, unless that person seeks it. But for a time, at least, you three are central to the Pattern. A Web of Destiny is being woven, and every thread leads straight to you. What else did the Dark One say to you?”

“I don’t remember it all that well,” Perrin said. “There was something about one of us being chosen, something like that. I remember him laughing,” he finished bleakly, “about who we were chosen by. He said I—we could serve him or die. And then we’d still serve him.”

“He said the Amyrlin Seat would try to use us,” Mat added, his voice fading as he remembered to whom he was speaking. He swallowed and went on. “He said just like Tar Valon used—he had some names. Davian, I think. I can’t remember very well, either.”

“Raolin Darksbane,” Perrin said.

“Yes,” Rand said, frowning. He had tried to forget everything about those dreams. It was unpleasant bringing them back. “Yurian Stonebow was another, and Guaire Amalasan.” He stopped suddenly, hoping Moiraine had not noticed how suddenly. “I don’t recognize any of them.”

But he had recognized one, now that he dredged them from the depths of memory. The name he had barely stopped himself from saying. Logain. The false Dragon. *Light! Thom said they were dangerous names. Is that what Ba'alzamon meant? Moiraine wants to use one of us as a false Dragon? Aes Sedai hunt* down *false Dragons, they don't use them. Do they? Light help me, do they?*

Moiraine was looking at him, but he could not read her face. "Do you know them?" he asked her. "Do they mean anything?"

"The Father of Lies is a good name for the Dark One," Moiraine replied. "It was always his way to seed the worm of doubt wherever he could. It eats at men's minds like a canker. When you believe the Father of Lies, it is the first step toward surrender. Remember, if you surrender to the Dark One, he will make you his."

An Aes Sedai never lies, but the truth she speaks may not be the truth you think you hear. That was what Tam had said, and she had not really answered his question. He kept his face expressionless and held his hands still on his knees, trying not to scrub the sweat off them on his breeches.

Egwene was crying softly. Nynaeve had her arms around her, but she looked as if she wanted to cry, too. Rand almost wished he could.

"They are *all ta'veren,*" Loial said abruptly. He seemed brightened by the prospect, looking forward to watching from close by as the Pattern wove itself around them. Rand looked at him incredulously, and the Ogier gave an abashed shrug, but it was not enough to dim his eagerness.

"So they are," Moiraine said. "*Three* of them, when I expected one. A great many things have happened that I did not expect. This news concerning the Eye of the World changes much." She paused, frowning. "For a time the Pattern does seem to be swirling around all three of you, just as Loial says, and the swirl will grow greater before it becomes less. Sometimes being *ta'veren* means the Pattern is forced to bend to you, and sometimes it means the Pattern forces you to the needed path. The Web can still be woven many ways, and some of those designs would be disastrous. For you, for the world.

"We cannot remain in Caemlyn, but by any road, Myrddraal and Trollocs will be on us before we have gone ten miles. And just at this point we hear of a threat to the Eye of the World, not from one source, but three, each seeming independent of the others. The Pattern is forcing our path. The Pattern still weaves itself around you three, but what hand now sets the warp, and what hand controls the shuttle? Has the Dark One's prison weakened enough for him to exert that much control?"

"There's no need for that kind of talk!" Nynaeve said sharply. "You'll only frighten them."

"But not you?" Moiraine asked. "It frightens me. Well, perhaps you are right. Fear cannot be allowed to affect our course. Whether this is a trap or a timely warning, we must do what we must, and that is to reach the Eye of the World quickly. The Green Man must know of this threat."

Rand gave a start. *The Green Man?* The others stared, too, all but Loial, whose broad face looked worried.

"I cannot even risk stopping in Tar Valon for help," Moiraine continued. "Time traps us. Even if we could ride out of the city unhindered, it would take many weeks to reach the Blight, and I fear we no longer have weeks."

"The Blight!" Rand heard himself echoed in a chorus, but Moiraine ignored them all.

"The Pattern presents a crisis, and at the same time a way to surmount it. If I did not know it was impossible, I could almost believe the Creator is taking a hand. There is a way." She smiled as if at a private joke, and turned to Loial. "There was an Ogier grove here at Caemlyn, and a Waygate. The New City now spreads out over where the grove once stood, so the Waygate must be inside the walls. I know not many Ogier learn the Ways now, but one who has a Talent and learns the old Songs of Growing must be drawn to such knowledge, even if he believes it will never be used. Do you know the Ways, Loial?"

The Ogier shifted his feet uneasily. "I do, Aes Sedai, but—"

"Can you find the path to Fal Dara along the Ways?"

"I've never heard of Fal Dara," Loial said, sounding relieved.

"In the days of the Trolloc Wars it was known as Mafal Dadaranell. Do you know *that* name?"

"I know it," Loial said reluctantly, "but—"

"Then you can find the path for us," Moiraine said. "A curious turn, indeed. When we can neither stay nor leave by any ordinary means, I learn of a threat to the Eye, and in the same place there is one who can take us there in days. Whether it is the Creator, or fate, or even the Dark One, the Pattern has chosen our path for us."

“No!” Loial said, an emphatic rumble like thunder. Everyone turned to look at him and he blinked under the attention, but there was nothing hesitant about his words. “If we enter the Ways, we will all die—or be swallowed by the Shadow.”

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CHAPTER

43

Decisions and Apparitions

The Aes Sedai appeared to know what Loial meant, but she said nothing. Loial peered at the floor, rubbing under his nose with a thick finger, as if he was abashed by his outburst. No one wanted to speak.

“Why?” Rand asked at last. “Why would we die? What *are* the Ways?”

Loial glanced at Moiraine. She turned away to take a chair in front of the fireplace. The little cat stretched, its claws scratching on the hearthstone, and languidly walked over to butt its head against her ankles. She rubbed behind its ears with one finger. The cat’s purring was a strange counterpoint to the Aes Sedai’s level voice. “It is your knowledge, Loial. The Ways are the only path to safety for us, the only path to forestalling the Dark One, if only for a time, but the telling is yours.”

The Ogier did not appear comforted by her speech. He shifted awkwardly on his chair before beginning. “During the Time of Madness, while the world was still being broken, the earth was in upheaval, and humankind was being scattered like dust on the wind. We Ogier were scattered, too, driven from the *stedding*, into the Exile and the Long Wandering, when the Longing was graven on our hearts.” He gave Moiraine another sidelong look. His long eyebrows drew down into two points. “I will try to be brief, but this is not a thing that can be told too briefly. It is of the others I must speak, now, those few Ogier who held in their *stedding* while around them the world was tearing apart. And of the Aes Sedai”—he avoided looking at Moiraine, now—“the male Aes Sedai who were dying even as they destroyed the world in their madness. It was to those Aes Sedai—those who had so far managed to avoid the madness—that the *stedding* first made the offer of sanctuary. Many accepted, for in the *stedding* they were protected from the taint of the Dark One that was killing their kind. But they were cut off from the True Source. It was not just that they could not wield the One Power, or touch the Source; they could no longer even sense that the Source existed. In the end, none could accept that isolation, and one by one they left the *stedding,* hoping that by that time the taint was gone. It never was."

"Some in Tar Valon," Moiraine said quietly, "claim that Ogier sanctuary prolonged the Breaking and made it worse. Others say that if all of those men had been allowed to go mad at once, there would have been nothing left of the world. I am of the Blue Ajah, Loial; unlike the Red Ajah, we hold to the second view. Sanctuary helped to save what could be saved. Continue, please."

Loial nodded gratefully. Relieved of a concern, Rand realized.

"As I was saying," the Ogier went on, "the Aes Sedai, the male Sedai, left. But before they went, they gave a gift to the Ogier in thanks for our sanctuary. The Ways. Enter a Waygate, walk for a day, and you may depart through another Waygate a hundred miles from where you started. Or five hundred. Time and distance are strange in the Ways. Different paths, different bridges, lead to different places, and how long it takes to get there depends on which path you take. It was a marvelous gift, made more so by the times, for the Ways are not part of the world we see around us, nor perhaps of any world outside themselves. Not only did the Ogier so gifted not have to travel through the world, where even after the Breaking men fought like animals to live, in order to reach another *stedding,* but within the Ways there was no Breaking. The land between two *stedding* might split open into deep canyons or rise in mountain ranges, but in the Way between them there was no change.

"When the last Aes Sedai left the *stedding,* they gave to the Elders a key, a talisman, that could be used for growing more. They are a living thing in some fashion, the Ways and the Waygates. I do not understand it; no Ogier ever has, and even the Aes Sedai have forgotten, I am told. Over the years the Exile ended for us. As those Ogier who had been gifted by the Aes Sedai found a *stedding* where Ogier had returned from the Long Wandering, they grew a Way to it. With the stonework we learned during the Exile, we built cities for men, and planted the groves to comfort the Ogier who did the building, so the Longing would not overcome them. To those groves Ways were grown. There was a grove, and a Waygate, at Mafal Dadaranell, but that city was razed during the Trolloc Wars, no stone left standing on another, and the grove was chopped down and burned for Trolloc fires." He left no doubt which had been the greater crime.

"Waygates are all but impossible to destroy," Moiraine said, "and humankind not much less so. There are people at Fal Dara still, though not the great city the Ogier built, and the Waygate yet stands."

"How did they make them?" Egwene asked. Her puzzled look took in Moiraine and Loial both. "The Aes Sedai, the men. If they couldn't use the One Power in a *stedding,* how could they make the Ways? Or did they use the Power at all? Their part of the True Source was tainted. Is tainted. I don't know much about what Aes Sedai can do, yet. Maybe it's a silly question."

Loial explained. "Each *stedding* has a Waygate on its border, but outside. Your question is not silly. You've found the seed of why we do not dare travel the Ways. No Ogier has used the Ways in my lifetime, and before. By edict of the Elders, all the Elders of all the *stedding,* none may, human or Ogier.

"The Ways were made by men wielding Power fouled by the Dark One. About a thousand years ago, during what you humans call the War of the Hundred Years, the Ways began to change. So slowly in the beginning that none really noticed, they grew dank and dim. Then darkness fell along the bridges. Some who went in were never seen again. Travelers spoke of being watched from the dark. The numbers who vanished grew, and some who came out had gone mad, raving about *Machin Shin,* the Black Wind. Aes Sedai Healers could aid some, but even with Aes Sedai help they were never the same. And they never remembered anything of what had occurred. Yet it was as if the darkness had sunken into their bones. They never laughed again, and they feared the sound of the wind."

For a moment there was silence but for the cat purring beside Moiraine's chair, and the snap and crackle of the fire, popping out sparks. Then Nynaeve burst out angrily, "And you expect us to follow you into that? You must be mad!"

"Which would you choose instead?" Moiraine asked quietly. "The Whitecloaks within Caemlyn, or the Trollocs without? Remember that my presence in itself gives some protection from the Dark One's works."

Nynaeve settled back with an exasperated sigh.

"You still have not explained to me," Loial said, "why I should break the edict of the Elders. And I have no desire to enter the Ways. Muddy as they often are, the roads men make have served me well enough since I left Stedding Shangtai."

"Humankind and Ogier, everything that lives, we are at war with the Dark One," Moiraine said. "The greater part of the world does not even know it yet, and most of the few who do fight skirmishes and believe they are battles. While the world refuses to believe, the Dark One may be at the brink of victory. There is enough power in the Eye of the World to undo his prison. If the Dark One has found some way to bend the Eye of the World to his use. . . ."

Rand wished the lamps in the room were lit. Evening was creeping over Caemlyn, and the fire in the fireplace did not give enough light. He wanted no shadows in the room.

"What can we do?" Mat burst out. "Why are we so important? Why do we have to go to the Blight? The Blight!"

Moiraine did not raise her voice, but it filled the room, compelling. Her chair by the fire suddenly seemed like a throne. Suddenly even Morgase would have paled in her presence. "One thing we can do. We can try. What seems like chance is often the Pattern. Three threads have come together here, each giving a warning: the Eye. It cannot be chance; it is the Pattern. You three did not choose; you were chosen by the Pattern. And you are here, where the danger is known. You can step aside, and perhaps doom the world. Running, hiding, will not save you from the weaving of the Pattern. Or you can try. You can go to the Eye of the World, three *ta'veren*, three centerpoints of the Web, placed where the danger lies. Let the Pattern be woven around you there, and you may save the world from the Shadow. The choice is yours. I cannot make you go."

"I'll go," Rand said, trying to sound resolute. However hard he sought the void, images kept flashing through his head. Tam, and the farmhouse, and the flock in the pasture. It had been a good life; he had never really wanted anything more. There was comfort—a small comfort—hearing Perrin and Mat add their agreement to his. They sounded as dry-mouthed as he.

"I suppose there isn't any choice for Egwene or me, either," Nynaeve said.

Moiraine nodded. "You are part of the Pattern, too, both of you, in some fashion. Perhaps not *ta'veren*—perhaps—but strong even so. I have known it since Baerlon. And no doubt by this time the Fades know it, too.

And Ba’alzamon. Yet you have as much choice as the young men. You could remain here, proceed to Tar Valon once the rest of us have gone.”

“Stay behind!” Egwene exclaimed. “Let the rest of you go off into danger while we hide under the covers? I won’t do it!” She caught the Aes Sedai’s eye and drew back a little, but not all of her defiance vanished. “I won’t do it,” she muttered stubbornly.

“I suppose that means both of us will accompany you.” Nynaeve sounded resigned, but her eyes flashed when she added, “You still need my herbs, Aes Sedai, unless you’ve suddenly gained some ability I don’t know about.” Her voice held a challenge Rand did not understand, but Moiraine merely nodded and turned to the Ogier.

“Well, Loial, son of Arent son of Halan?”

Loial opened his mouth twice, his tufted ears twitching, before he spoke. “Yes, well. The Green Man. The Eye of the World. They’re mentioned in the books, of course, but I don’t think any Ogier has actually seen them in, oh, quite a long time. I suppose. . . . But must it be the Ways?”Moiraine nodded, and his long eyebrows sagged till the ends brushed his cheeks. “Very well, then. I suppose I must guide you. Elder Haman would say it’s no less than I deserve for being so hasty all the time.”

“Our choices are made, then,” Moiraine said. “And now that they are made, we must decide what to do about them, and how.”

Long into the night they planned. Moiraine did most of it, with Loial’s advice concerning the Ways, but she listened to questions and suggestions from everyone. Once dark fell Lan joined them, adding his comments in that iron-cored drawl. Nynaeve made a list of what supplies they needed, dipping her pen in the inkwell with a steady hand despite the way she kept muttering under her breath.

Rand wished he could be as matter-of-fact as the Wisdom. He could not stop pacing up and down, as if he had energy to burn or burst from it. He knew his decision was made, knew it was the only one he could make with the knowledge he had, but that did not make him like it. The Blight. Shayol Ghul was somewhere in the Blight, beyond the Blasted Lands.

He could see the same worry in Mat’s eyes, the same fear he knew was in his own. Mat sat with his hands clasped, knuckles white. If he let go, Rand thought, he would be clutching the dagger from Shadar Logoth instead.

There was no worry on Perrin’s face at all, but what was there was worse: a mask of weary resignation. Perrin looked as though he had fought something until he could fight it no longer and was waiting for it to finish him. Yet sometimes. . . .

“We do what we must, Rand,” he said. “The Blight. . . .” For an instant those yellow eyes lit with eagerness, flashing in the fixed tiredness of his face, as if they had a life of their own apart from the big blacksmith’s apprentice. “There’s good hunting along the Blight,” he whispered. Then he shuddered, as if he had just heard what he had said, and once more his face was resigned.

And Egwene. Rand drew her apart at one point, over by the fireplace where those planning around the table could not hear. “Egwene, I. . . .”Her eyes, like big dark pools drawing him in, made him stop and swallow. “It’s me the Dark One’s after, Egwene. Me, and Mat, and Perrin. I don’t care what Moiraine Sedai says. In the morning you and Nynaeve could start for home, or Tar Valon, or anywhere you want to go, and nobody will try to stop you. Not the Trollocs, not the Fades, not anybody. As long as you aren’t with us. Go home, Egwene. Or go to Tar Valon. But go.”

He waited for her to tell him she had as much right to go where she wanted as he did, that he had no right to tell her what to do. To his surprise, she smiled and touched his cheek.

“Thank you, Rand,” she said softly. He blinked, and closed his mouth as she went on. “You know I can’t, though. Moiraine Sedai told us what Min saw, in Baerlon. You should have told me who Min was. I thought. . . . Well, Min says I am part of this, too. And Nynaeve. Maybe I’m not *ta’veren,*” she stumbled over the word, “but the Pattern sends me to the Eye of the World, too, it seems. Whatever involves you, involves me.”

“But, Egwene—”

“Who is Elayne?”

For a minute he stared at her, then told the simple truth. “She’s the Daughter-Heir to the throne of Andor.”

Her eyes seemed to catch fire. “If you can’t be serious for more than a minute, Rand al’Thor, I do not want to talk to you.”

Incredulous, he watched her stiff back return to the table, where she leaned on her elbows next to Moiraine to listen to what the Warder was saying. *I need to talk to Perrin,* he thought. *He knows how to deal with women.*

Master Gill entered several times, first to light the lamps, then to bring food with his own hands, and later to report on what was happening outside. Whitecloaks were watching the inn from down the street in both directions. There had been a riot at the gates to the Inner City, with the Queen's Guards arresting white cockades and red alike. Someone had tried to scratch the Dragon's Fang on the front door and been sent on his way by Lamgwin's boot.

If the innkeeper found it odd that Loial was with them, he gave no sign of it. He answered the few questions Moiraine put to him without trying to discover what they were planning, and each time he came he knocked at the door and waited till Lan opened it for him, just as if it were not his inn and his library. On his last visit, Moiraine gave him the sheet of parchment covered in Nynaeve's neat hand.

"It won't be easy this time of night," he said, shaking his head as he perused the list, "but I'll arrange it all."

Moiraine added a small wash-leather bag that clinked as she handed it to him by the drawstrings. "Good. And see that we are wakened before daybreak. The watchers will be at their least alert, then."

"We'll leave them watching an empty box, Aes Sedai." Master Gill grinned.

Rand was yawning by the time he shuffled out of the room with the rest in search of baths and beds. As he scrubbed himself, with a coarse cloth in one hand and a big yellow cake of soap in the other, his eyes drifted to the stool beside Mat's tub. The golden-sheathed tip of the dagger from Shadar Logoth peeked from under the edge of Mat's neatly folded coat. Lan glanced at it from time to time, too. Rand wondered if it was really as safe to have around as Moiraine claimed.

"Do you think my da'll ever believe it?" Mat laughed, scrubbing his back with a long-handled brush. "Me, saving the world? My sisters won't know whether to laugh or cry."

He sounded like the old Mat. Rand wished he could forget the dagger.

It was pitch-black when he and Mat finally got up to their room under the eaves, the stars obscured by clouds. For the first time in a long while Mat undressed before getting into bed, but he casually tucked the dagger under his pillow, too. Rand blew out the candle and crawled into his own bed. He could feel the wrongness from the other bed, not from Mat, but from beneath his pillow. He was still worrying about it when sleep came.

From the first he knew it was a dream, one of those dreams that was not entirely dream. He stood staring at the wooden door, its surface dark and cracked and rough with splinters. The air was cold and dank, thick with the smell of decay. In the distance water dripped, the splashes hollow echoes down stone corridors.

Deny it. Deny him, and his power fails.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on The Queen's Blessing, on his bed, on himself asleep in his bed. When he opened his eyes the door was still there. The echoing splashes came on his heartbeat, as if his pulse counted time for them. He sought the flame and the void, as Tam had taught him, and found inner calm, but nothing outside of him changed. Slowly he opened the door and went in.

Everything was as he remembered it in the room that seemed burned out of the living rock. Tall, arched windows led onto an unrailed balcony, and beyond it the layered clouds streamed like a river in flood. The black metal lamps, their flames too bright to look at, gleamed, black yet somehow as bright as silver. The fire roared but gave no heat in the fearsome fireplace, each stone still vaguely like a face in torment.

All was the same, but one thing was different. On the polished tabletop stood three small figures, the rough, featureless shapes of men, as if the sculptor had been hasty with his clay. Beside one stood a wolf, its clear detail emphasized by the crudeness of the man-shape, and another clutched a tiny dagger, a point of red on the hilt glittering in the light. The last held a sword. The hair stirring on the back of his neck, he moved close enough to see the heron in exquisite detail on that small blade.

His head jerked up in panic, and he stared directly into the lone mirror. His reflection was still a blur, but not so misty as before. He could almost make out his own features. If he imagined he was squinting, he could nearly tell who it was.

"You've hidden from me too long."

He whirled from the table, breath rasping his throat. A moment before he had been alone, but now Ba'alzamon stood before the windows. When he spoke caverns of flame replaced his eyes and mouth.

"Too long, but not much longer."

"I deny you," Rand said hoarsely. "I deny that you hold any power over me. I deny that you are."

Ba’alzamon laughed, a rich sound rolling from fire. “Do you think it is that easy? But then, you always did. Each time we have stood like this, you have thought you could defy me.”

“What do mean, each time? I deny you!”

“You always do. In the beginning. This contest between us has taken place countless times before. Each time your face is different, and your name, but each time it is you.”

“I deny you.” It was a desperate whisper.

“Each time you throw your puny strength against me, and each time, in the end, you know which of us is the master. Age after Age, you kneel to me, or die wishing you still had strength to kneel. Poor fool, you can never win against me.”

“Liar!” he shouted. “Father of Lies. Father of Fools if you can’t do better than that. Men found you in the last Age, in the Age of Legends, and bound you back where you belong.”

Ba’alzamon laughed again, peal after mocking peal, until Rand wanted to cover his ears to shut it out. He forced his hands to stay at his sides. Void or no, they were trembling when the laughter finally stopped.

“You worm, you know nothing at all. As ignorant as a beetle under a rock, and as easily crushed. This struggle has gone on since the moment of creation. Always men think it a new war, but it is just the same war discovered anew. Only now change blows on the winds of time. Change. This time there will be no drifting back. Those proud Aes Sedai who think to stand you up against me. I will dress them in chains and send them running naked to do my bidding, or stuff their souls into the Pit of Doom to scream for eternity. All but those who already serve me. They will stand but a step beneath me. You can choose to stand with them, with the world groveling at your feet. I offer it one more time, one last time. You can stand above them, above every power and dominion but mine. There have been times when you made that choice, times when you lived long enough to know your power.”

Deny him! Rand grabbed hold to what he could deny. “No Aes Sedai serve you. Another lie!”

“Is that what they told you? Two thousand years ago I took my Trollocs across the world, and even among Aes Sedai I found those who knew despair, who knew the world could not stand before Shai’tan. For two thousand years the Black Ajah has dwelt among the others, unseen in the shadows. Perhaps even those who claim to help you."

Rand shook his head, trying to shake away the doubts that came welling up in him, all the doubts he had had about Moiraine, about what the Aes Sedai wanted with him, about what she planned for him. "What do you want from me?" he cried. *Deny him! Light help me deny him!*

"Kneel!" Ba'alzamon pointed to the floor at his feet. "Kneel, and acknowledge me your master! In the end, you will. You will be my creature, or you will die."

The last word echoed through the room, reverberating back on itself, doubling and redoubling, till Rand threw up his arms as if to shield his head from a blow. Staggering back until he thumped into the table, he shouted, trying to drown the sound in his ears. "Noooooooooooo!"

As he cried out, he spun, sweeping the figures to the floor. Something stabbed his hand, but he ignored it, stomping the clay to shapeless smears underfoot. But when his shout failed, the echo was still there, and growing stronger:

die-die-die-die-die-Die-Die-Die-Die-Die-DIE-DIE-DIE-DIE-DIE-DIE

The sound pulled on him like a whirl pool, drawing him in, ripping the void in his mind to shreds. The light dimmed, and his vision narrowed down to a tunnel with Ba'alzamon standing tall in the last spot of brightness at the end, dwindling until it was the size of his hand, a fingernail, nothing. Around and around the echo whirled him, down into blackness and death.

The thump as he hit the floor woke him, still struggling to swim up out of that darkness. The room was dark, but not so dark as that. Frantically he tried to center on the flame, to shovel fear into it, but the calm of the void eluded him. Tremors ran down his arms and legs, but he held the image of the single flame until the blood stopped pounding in his ears.

Mat was tossing and twisting on his bed, groaning in his sleep. ". . . deny you, deny you, deny you. . . ." It faded off into unintelligible moans.

Rand reached out to shake him awake, and at the first touch Mat sat up with a strangled grunt. For a minute Mat stared around wildly, then drew a long, shuddering breath and dropped his head into his hands. Abruptly he twisted around, digging under his pillow, then sank back clutching the ruby-hilted dagger in both hands on his chest. He turned his head to look at Rand, his face hidden in shadow. "He's back, Rand."

"I know."

Mat nodded. “There were these three figures. . . .”

“I saw them, too.”

“He knows who I am, Rand. I picked up the one with the dagger, and he said, ‘So that’s who you are.’ And when I looked again, the figure had my face. My face, Rand! It looked like flesh. It felt like flesh. Light help me, I could feel my own hand gripping me, like I was the figure.”

Rand was silent for a moment. “You have to keep denying him, Mat.”

“I did, and he laughed. He kept talking about some eternal war, and saying we’d met like that a thousand times before, and. . . . Light, Rand, the Dark One knows me.”

“He said the same thing to me. I don’t think he does,” he added slowly. “I don’t think he knows which of us. . . .” *Which of us what?*

As he levered himself up, pain stabbed his hand. Making his way to the table, he managed to get the candle lit after three tries, then spread his hand open in the light. Driven into his palm was a thick splinter of dark wood, smooth and polished on one side. He stared at it, not breathing. Abruptly he was panting, plucking at the splinter, fumbling with haste.

“What’s the matter?” Mat asked.

“Nothing.”

Finally he had it, and a sharp yank pulled it free. With a grunt of disgust he dropped it, but the grunt froze in his throat. As soon as the splinter left his fingers, it vanished.

The wound was still there in his hand, though, bleeding. There was water in the stoneware pitcher. He filled the basin, his hands shaking so that he splashed water onto the table. Hurriedly he washed his hands, kneading his palm till his thumb brought more blood, then washed them again. The thought of the smallest sliver remaining in his flesh terrified him.

“Light,” Mat said, “he made me feel dirty, too.” But he still lay where he was, holding the dagger in both hands.

“Yes,” Rand said. “Dirty.” He fumbled a towel from the stack beside the basin. There was a knock at the door, and he jumped. It came again. “Yes?” he said.

Moiraine put her head into the room. “You are awake already. Good. Dress quickly and come down. We must be away before first light.”

“Now?” Mat groaned. “We haven’t had an hour’s sleep yet.”

“An hour?” she said. “You have had four. Now hurry, we do not have much time.”

Rand shared a confused look with Mat. He could remember every second of the dream clearly. It had begun as soon as he closed his eyes, and lasted only minutes.

Something in that exchange must have communicated itself to Moiraine. She gave them a penetrating look and came all the way in. “What has happened? The dreams?”

“He knows who I am,” Mat said. “The Dark One knows my face.” Rand held up his hand wordlessly, palm toward her. Even in the shadowed light from the one candle the blood was plain.

The Aes Sedai stepped forward and grasped his upheld hand, her thumb across his palm covering the wound. Cold pierced him to the bone, so chill that his fingers cramped and he had to fight to keep them open. When she took her fingers away, the chill went, too.

He turned his hand, then, stunned, scrubbed the thin smear of blood away. The wound was gone. Slowly he raised his eyes to meet those of the Aes Sedai.

“Hurry,” she said softly. “Time grows very short.”

He knew she was not speaking of the time for their leaving anymore.

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CHAPTER
44

The Dark Along the Ways

In the darkness just before dawn Rand followed Moiraine down to the back hall, where Master Gill and the others were waiting, Nynaeve and Egwene as anxiously as Loial, Perrin almost as calm as the Warder. Mat stayed on Rand's heels as if he were afraid to be even a little alone now, even as much as a few feet away. The cook and her helpers straightened, staring as the party passed silently into the kitchen, already brightly lit and hot with preparations for breakfast. It was not usual for patrons of the inn to be up and out at that hour. At Master Gill's soothing words, the cook gave a loud sniff and slapped her dough down hard. They were all back to tending griddles and kneading dough before Rand reached the stableyard door.

Outside, the night was still pitch-black. To Rand, everyone else was only a darker shadow at best. He followed the innkeeper and Lan blindly, blind in truth, hoping Master Gill's knowledge of his own stableyard and the Warder's instincts would get them across it without someone breaking a leg. Loial stumbled more than once.

"I don't see why we can't have just one light," the Ogier grumbled. "We don't go running about in the dark in the *stedding*. I'm an Ogier, not a cat." Rand had a sudden image of Loial's tufted ears twitching irritably.

The stable loomed up suddenly out of the night, a threatening mass until the stable door creaked open, spilling a narrow stream of light into the yard. The innkeeper only opened it wide enough for them to go in one at a time, and hastily pulled it to behind Perrin, almost clipping his heels. Rand blinked in the sudden light inside.

The stablemen were not surprised by their appearance, as the cook had been. Their horses were saddled and waiting. Mandarb stood arrogantly, ignoring everyone but Lan, but Aldieb stretched her nose out to nuzzle Moiraine's hand. There was a pack horse, bulky with wicker panniers, and a huge animal with hairy fetlocks, taller even than the Warder's stallion, for

Loial. It looked big enough to pull a loaded haywain by itself, but compared with the Ogier it seemed a pony.

Loial eyed the big horse and muttered doubtfully, “My own feet have always been good enough.”

Master Gill motioned to Rand. The innkeeper was lending him a bay almost the color of his own hair, tall and deep of chest, but with none of the fire in his step that Cloud had had, Rand was glad to see. Master Gill said his name was Red.

Egwene went straight to Bela, and Nynaeve to her long-legged mare.

Mat brought his dun-colored horse over by Rand. “Perrin’s making me nervous,” he muttered. Rand looked at him sharply. “Well, he’s acting strange. Don’t you see it, too? I swear it’s not my imagination, or . . . or. . . .”

Rand nodded. *Not the dagger taking hold of him again, thank the Light.* “He is, Mat, but just be easy. Moiraine knows about . . . Whatever it is. Perrin’s fine.” He wished he could believe it, but it seemed to satisfy Mat, a little at least.

“Of course,” Mat said hastily, still watching Perrin out of the corner of his eye. “I never said he wasn’t.”

Master Gill conferred with the head groom. That leathery-skinned man, with a face like one of the horses, knuckled his forehead and hurried to the back of the stable. The innkeeper turned to Moiraine with a satisfied smile on his round face. “Ramey says the way is clear, Aes Sedai.”

The rear wall of the stable appeared solid and stout, lined with heavy racks of tools. Ramey and another stableman cleared away the hayforks, rakes, and shovels, then reached behind the racks to manipulate hidden latches. Abruptly a section of the wall swung inward on hinges so well concealed that Rand was not sure he could find them even with the disguised door standing open. Light from the stable illuminated a brick wall only a few feet away.

“It’s only a narrow run between buildings,” the innkeeper said, “but nobody outside this stable knows there’s a way into it from here. Whitecloaks or white cockades, there’ll not be any watchers to see where you come out.”

The Aes Sedai nodded. “Remember, good innkeeper, if you fear any trouble from this, write to Sheriam Sedai, of the Blue Ajah, in Tar Valon, and she will help. I fear my sisters and I have a good deal to put right already for those who have helped me.”

Master Gill laughed; not the laugh of a worried man. “Why, Aes Sedai, you’ve already given me the only inn in all of Caemlyn without any rats. What more could I ask for? I can double my custom on that alone.” His grin faded into seriousness. “Whatever you’re up to, the Queen holds with Tar Valon, and I hold with the Queen, so I wish you well. The Light illumine you, Aes Sedai. The Light illumine you all.”

“The Light illumine you, also, Master Gill,” Moiraine replied with a bow of her head. “But if the Light is to shine on any of us, we must be quick.” Briskly she turned to Loial. “Are you ready?”

With a wary look at its teeth, the Ogier took the reins of the big horse. Trying to keep that mouth the length of the reins from his hand, he led the animal to the opening at the back of the stable. Ramey hopped from one foot to the other, impatient to close it again. For a moment Loial paused with his head cocked as if feeling a breeze on his cheek. “This way,” he said, and turned down the narrow alley.

Moiraine followed right behind Loial’s horse, then Rand, and Mat. Rand had the first turn leading the pack horse. Nynaeve and Egwene made the middle of the column, with Perrin behind them, and Lan bringing up the rear. The hidden door swung hastily shut as soon as Mandarb stepped into the dirt alleyway. The *snick-snick* of latches locking, shutting them off, sounded unnaturally loud to Rand.

The run, as Master Gill had called it, was very narrow indeed, and even darker than the stableyard, if that was possible. Tall, blank walls of brick or wood lined both sides, with only a narrow strip of black sky overhead. The big, woven baskets slung on the pack horse scraped the buildings on both sides. The panniers bulged with supplies for the journey, most of it clay jars filled with oil. A bundle of poles was lashed lengthwise down the horse’s back, and each had a lantern swinging at the end of it. In the Ways, Loial said, it was darker than the darkest night.

The partially-filled lanterns sloshed with the motion of the horse, and clinked against each other with a tinny sound. It was not a very loud noise, but in the hour before dawn Caemlyn was quiet. Silent. The dull metallic clinks sounded as if they could be heard a mile away.

When the run let out into a street, Loial chose his direction without a pause. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, now, as if the route he needed to follow was becoming clearer. Rand did not understand how the Ogier could find the Waygate, and Loial had not been able to explain very well. He just knew, he said; he could feel it. Loial claimed it was like trying to explain how to breathe.

As they hurried up the street Rand looked back toward the corner where The Queen's Blessing lay. According to Lamgwin, there were still half a dozen Whitecloaks not far down from that corner. Their interest was all on the inn, but a noise would surely bring them. No one was out at this hour for a reputable reason. The horse shoes seemed to ring on the paving stones like bells; the lanterns clattered as if the pack horse were shaking them deliberately. Not until they had rounded another corner did he stop looking over his shoulder. He heard relieved sighs from the other Emond's Fielders as they came round it, too.

Loial appeared to be following the most direct path to the Waygate, wherever it took them. Sometimes they trotted down broad avenues, empty save for an occasional dog skulking in the dark. Sometimes they hurried along alleys as narrow as the stable run, where things squished under an unwary step. Nynaeve complained softly about the resulting smells, but no one slowed down.

The darkness began to lessen, fading toward a dark gray. Faint glimmers of dawn pearled the sky above the eastern rooftops. A few people appeared on the streets, bundled up against the early cold, heads down while they yet dreamed of their beds. Most paid no mind to anyone else. Only a handful even glanced at the line of people and horses with Loial at its head, and only one of those truly saw them.

That one man flicked his eyes at them, just like the others, already sinking back into his own thoughts when suddenly he stumbled and almost fell, turning himself back around to stare. There was only light enough to see shapes, but that was too much. Seen at a distance by himself, the Ogier could have passed for a tall man leading an ordinary horse, or for an ordinary man leading an under-sized horse. With the others in a line behind him to give perspective, Loial looked exactly as big as he was, half again as tall as any man should be. The man took one look and, with a strangled cry, set off running, his cloak flapping behind him.

There would be more people in the streets soon—very soon. Rand eyed a woman hurrying past on the other side of the street, seeing nothing but the pavement in front of her feet. More people to notice soon. The eastern sky grew lighter.

“There,” Loial announced at last. “It is under there.” It was a shop he pointed to, still closed for the night. The tables out front were bare, the awnings over them rolled up tight, the door stoutly shuttered. The windows above, where the shopkeeper lived, were still dark.

“Under?” Mat exclaimed incredulously. “How in the Light can we—?”

Moiraine raised a hand that cut him off, and motioned for them to follow her into the alley beside the shop. Horses and people together, they crowded the opening between the two buildings. Shaded by the walls, it was darker there than on the street, near to full night again.

“There must be a cellar door,” Moiraine muttered. “Ah, yes.”

Abruptly light blossomed. A coolly glowing ball the size of a man’s fist hung suspended over the Aes Sedai’s palm, moving as she moved her hand. Rand thought that it was a measure of what they had been through that everyone seemed to take it as a matter of course. She put it close to the doors she had found, slanted almost flat to the ground, with a hasp held by thick bolts and an iron lock bigger than Rand’s hand and thick with old rust.

Loial gave the lock a tug. “I can pull it off, hasp and all, but it will make enough noise to wake the whole neighborhood.”

“Let us not damage the goodman’s property if we can avoid it.” Moiraine studied the lock intently for a moment. Suddenly she gave the rusty iron a tap with her staff, and the lock fell open neatly.

Hastily Loial undid the lock and swung the doors up, propping them back. Moiraine went down the ramp thus revealed, lighting her way with the glowing ball. Aldieb stepped delicately behind her.

“Light the lanterns and come down,” she called softly. “There is plenty of room. Hurry. It will be light out soon.”

Rand hurriedly untied the poled lanterns off the pack horse, but even before the first was lit he realized he could see Mat’s features. People would be filling the streets in minutes, and the shopkeeper would be coming down to open up for business, all wondering why the alleyway was crammed full of horses. Mat muttered something nervously about taking horses indoors, but Rand was glad to lead his down the ramp. Mat followed, grumbling but no less quickly.

Rand’s lantern swung on the end of its pole, bumping the ceiling if he was not careful, and neither Red nor the pack horse liked the ramp. Then he was down and getting out of Mat’s way. Moiraine let her floating light die, but as the rest joined them, the added lanterns lit the open space.

The cellar was as long and as wide as the building above, much of the space taken up by brick columns, flaring up from narrow bases to five times as big at the ceiling. The place seemed made up from a series of arches. There was plenty of room, but Rand still felt crowded. Loial’s head brushed the ceiling. As the rusted lock had foretold, the cellar had not been used in a long time. The floor was bare except for a few broken barrels filled with odds and ends, and a thick layer of dust. Motes, stirred up by so many feet, sparkled in the lantern light.

Lan was last in, and as soon as he had Mandarb down the ramp he climbed back to pull the doors shut.

“Blood and ashes,” Mat growled, “why would they build one of these gates in a place like this?”

“It was not always like this,” Loial said. His rumbling voice echoed in the cavernous space. “Not always. No!” The Ogier was angry, Rand realized with a shock. “Once trees stood here. Every kind of tree that would grow in this place, every kind of tree that Ogier could coax to grow here. The Great Trees, a hundred spans high. Shade of branch, and cool breezes to catch the smell of leaf and flower and hold the memory of the peace of the *stedding*. All that, murdered for this!” His fist thumped a column.

The column seemed to shake under that blow. Rand was certain he heard bricks crack. Waterfalls of dry mortar slid down the column.

“What is already woven cannot be undone,” Moiraine said gently. “It will not make the trees grow again for you to bring the building down on our heads.” Loial’s drooping eyebrows made him look more abashed than a human face could have managed. “With your help, Loial, perhaps we can keep the groves that still stand from falling under the Shadow. You have brought us to what we seek.”

As she moved to one of the walls, Rand realized that that wall was different from the others. They were ordinary brick; this was intricately worked stone, fanciful swirls of leaves and vines, pale even under its coat of dust. The brick and mortar were old, but something about the stone said it had stood there long, long before the brick was fired. Later builders, themselves centuries gone, had incorporated what already stood, and still later men had made it part of a cellar.

One part of the carved stone wall, right in the center, was more elaborate than the rest. As well done as the rest was, it appeared a crude copy in comparison. Worked in hard stone, those leaves seemed soft, caught in one frozen moment as a gentle summer breeze stirred them. For all of that, they had the feel of age, as much greater than the rest of the stone as the rest was older than the brick. That old and more. Loial looked at them as if he would rather be anywhere else but there, even out in the streets with another mob.

"Avendesora," Moiraine murmured, resting her hand on a trefoil leaf in the stonework. Rand scanned the carving; that was the only leaf of its kind he could find. "The leaf of the Tree of Life is the key," the Aes Sedai said, and the leaf came away in her hand.

Rand blinked; from behind him he heard gasps. That leaf had seemed no less a part of the wall than any other. Just as simply, the Aes Sedai set it against the pattern a handspan lower. The three-pointed leaf fit there as if the space had been intended for it, and once more it was a part of the whole. As soon as it was in place the entire nature of the central stonework changed.

He was sure now that he could see the leaves ruffled by some unfelt breeze; he almost thought they were verdant under the dust, a tapestry of thick spring greenery there in the lantern-lit cellar. Almost imperceptibly at first, a split opened up in the middle of the ancient carving, widening as the two halves slowly swung into the cellar until they stood straight out. The backs of the gates were worked as the fronts, the same profusion of vines and leaves, almost alive. Behind, where should have been dirt or the cellar of the next building, a dull, reflective shimmering faintly caught their images.

"I have heard," Loial said, half mourning, half fearful, "that once the Waygates shone like mirrors. Once, who entered the Ways walked through the sun and the sky. Once."

"We have no time for waiting," Moiraine said.

Lan went past her, leading Mandarb, poled lantern in hand. His shadowy reflection approached him, leading a shadowy horse. Man and reflection seemed to step into each other at the shimmering surface, and both were gone. For a moment the black stallion balked, an apparently continuous rein connecting him to the dim shape of his own image. The rein tightened, and the warhorse, too, vanished.

For a minute everyone in the cellar stood staring at the Waygate.

"Hurry," Moiraine urged. "I must be the last through. We cannot leave this open for anyone to find by chance. Hurry."

With a heavy sigh Loial strode into the shimmer. Tossing its head, his big horse tried to hold back from the surface and was hauled through. They were gone as completely as the Warder and Mandarb.

Hesitantly, Rand poked his lantern at the Waygate. The lantern sank into its reflection, the two merging until both were gone. He made himself keep on walking forward, watching the pole disappear into itself inch by inch, and then he was stepping into himself, entering the gate. His mouth fell open. Something icy slid along his skin, as if he were passing through a wall of cold water. Time stretched out; the cold enveloped one hair at a time, shivered over his clothes thread by thread.

Abruptly the chill burst like a bubble, and he paused to catch his breath. He was inside the Ways. Just ahead Lan and Loial waited patiently by their horses. All around them was blackness that seemed to stretch on forever. Their lanterns made a small pool of light around them, too small, as if something pressed back the light, or ate it.

Of a sudden anxious, he jerked at his reins. Red and the pack horse came leaping through, nearly knocking him down. Stumbling, he caught himself and hurried to the Warder and the Ogier, pulling the nervous horses behind him. The animals whickered softly. Even Mandarb appeared to take some comfort from the presence of other horses.

"Go easy when you pass through a Waygate, Rand," Loial cautioned. "Things are . . . different inside the Ways than out. Look."

He looked back the way the Ogier pointed, thinking to see the same dull shimmer. Instead he could see into the cellar, as if through a large piece of smoked glass set in the blackness. Disturbingly the darkness around the window into the cellar gave a sense of depth, as though the opening stood alone with nothing around or behind it but the dark. He said as much with a shaky laugh, but Loial took him seriously.

"You could walk all the way around it, and you would not see a thing from the other side. I would not advise it, though. The books aren't very clear about what lies behind the Waygates. I think you could become lost there, and never find your way out."

Rand shook his head and tried to concentrate on the Waygate itself rather than what lay behind it, but that was just as disturbing in its own fashion. If there had been anything to look at in the darkness besides the Waygate, he would have looked at it. In the cellar, through the smoky dimness, Moiraine and the others were plain enough, but they moved as if in a dream. Every blink of an eye seemed a deliberate, exaggerated gesture. Mat was making his way to the Waygate as though walking through clear jelly, his legs seeming to swim forward.

"The Wheel turns faster in the Ways," Loial explained. He looked at the darkness surrounding them, and his head sunk in between his shoulders. "None alive know more than fragments. I fear what I don't know about the Ways, Rand."

"The Dark One," Lan said, "cannot be defeated without chancing risks. But we are alive at this moment, and before us is the hope of remaining alive. Do not surrender before you are beaten, Ogier."

"You would not speak so confidently if you had ever been in the Ways." The normal distant thunder of Loial's voice was muted. He stared at the blackness as if he saw things there. "I never have before, either, but I've seen Ogier who have been through a Waygate and come out again. You would not speak so if you had."

Mat stepped through the gate and regained normal speed. For an instant he stared at the seemingly endless darkness, then came running to join them, his lantern bobbing on its pole, his horse leaping behind him, almost sending him sprawling. One by one the others passed through, Perrin and Egwene and Nynaeve, each pausing in shocked silence before hurrying to join the rest. Each lantern enlarged the pool of light, but not as much as it should have. It was as if the dark became denser the more light there was, thickening as it fought against being diminished.

That was not a line of reasoning Rand wanted to follow. It was bad enough just being there without giving the darkness a will of its own. Everyone seemed to feel the oppressiveness, though. There were no wry comments from Mat here, and Egwene looked as if she wished she could rethink her decision to come. They all silently watched the Waygate, that last window into the world they knew.

Finally only Moiraine was left in the cellar, dimly lit by the lantern she had taken. The Aes Sedai still moved in that dreamlike way. Her hand crept as it found the leaf of *Avendesora.* It was located lower in the stonework on this side, Rand saw, just where she had placed it on the other. Plucking it free, she put it back in the original position. He wondered suddenly if the leaf on the other side had moved back, too.

The Aes Sedai came through, leading Aldieb, as the stone gates slowly, slowly began closing behind her. She came to join them, the light of her lantern leaving the gates before they were shut. Blackness swallowed the narrowing view of the cellar. In the constrained light of their lanterns, blackness surrounded them totally.

Suddenly it seemed as if the lanterns were the only light left in the world. Rand realized that he was jammed shoulder-to-shoulder in between Perrin and Egwene. Egwene gave him a wide-eyed look and pressed closer, and Perrin made no move to give him room. There was something comforting about touching another human being when the whole world had just been swallowed up by dark. Even the horses seemed to feel the Ways pushing them into a tighter and tighter knot.

Outwardly unconcerned, Moiraine and Lan swung into their saddles, and the Aes Sedai leaned forward, arms resting on her carved staff across the high pommel of her saddle. “We must be on our way, Loial.”

Loial gave a start, and nodded vigorously. “Yes. Yes, Aes Sedai, you are right. Not a minute longer than need be.” He pointed to a broad strip of white running under their feet, and Rand stepped away from it hastily. All the Two Rivers folk did. Rand thought the floor had been smooth once, but the smoothness was pitted now, as if the stone had the pox. The white line was broken in several places. “This leads from the Waygate to the first Guiding. From there. . . .” Loial looked around anxiously, then scrambled onto his horse with none of the reluctance he had shown earlier. The horse wore the biggest saddle the head groom had been able to find, but Loial filled it from pommel to cantle. His feet hung down on either side almost to the animal’s knees. “Not a minute longer than need be,” he muttered. Reluctantly the others mounted.

Moiraine and Lan rode on either side of the Ogier, following the white line through the dark. Everyone else crowded in behind as close as they could get, the lanterns bobbing over their heads. The lanterns should have given enough light to fill a house, but ten feet away from them it stopped. The blackness stopped it as if it had struck a wall. The creak of saddles and click of horse shoes on stone seemed to travel only to the edge of light.

Rand’s hand kept drifting to his sword. It was not that he thought there was anything out there against which he could use the sword to defend himself; it did not seem as if there was anywhere for something to be. The bubble of light around them could as well have been a cave surrounded by stone, completely surrounded, with no way out. The horses might have been walking a treadmill for the change around them. He gripped the hilt as if the pressure of his hand there could press away the stone he felt weighing down on him. Touching the sword, he could remember Tam's teaching. For a little while he could find the calm of the void. But the weight always returned, compressing the void until it was only a cavern inside his mind, and he had to start over again, touching Tam's sword to remember.

It was a relief when something did change, even if it was only a tall slab of stone, standing on end, that appeared out of the dark before them, the broad white line stopping at its base. Sinuous curves of metal inlaid the wide surface, graceful lines that vaguely reminded Rand of vines and leaves. Discolored pocks marked stone and metal alike.

"The Guiding," Loial said, and leaned out of his saddle to frown at the cursive metal inlays.

"Ogier script," Moiraine said, "but so broken I can barely make out what it says."

"I hardly can, either," Loial said, "but enough to know we go this way." He turned his horse aside from the Guiding.

The edges of their light caught other stoneworks, what appeared to be stone-walled bridges arcing off into the darkness, and gently sloping ramps, without railings of any kind, leading up and down. Between the bridges and the ramps ran a chest-high balustrade, however, as though falling was a danger there at any rate. Plain white stone made the balustrade, in simple curves and rounds fitted together in complex patterns. Something about all of it seemed almost familiar to Rand, but he knew it had to be his imagination groping for anything familiar where everything was strange.

At the foot of one of the bridges Loial paused to read the single line on the narrow column stone there. Nodding, he rode up onto the bridge. "This is the first bridge of our path," he said over his shoulder.

Rand wondered what held the bridge up. The horses' hooves made a gritty sound, as if bits of stone flaked off at every step. Everything he could see was covered with shallow holes, some tiny pinpricks, others shallow, rough-edged craters a stride across, as if there had been a rain of acid, or the stone was rotting. The guardwall showed cracks and holes, too. In places it was gone altogether for as much as a span. For all he knew the bridge could be solid stone all the way to the center of the earth, but what he saw made him hope it would stand long enough for them to reach the other end. *Wherever that is.*

The bridge did end, eventually, in a place that looked no different from its beginning. All Rand could see was what their little pool of light touched, but he had the impression that it was a large space, like a flat-topped hill, with bridges and ramps leaving all around it. An Island, Loial called it. There was another script-covered Guiding—Rand placed it in the middle of the Island, with no way of knowing if he was right or not. Loial read, then took them up one of the ramps, curving up and up.

After an interminable climb, curving continuously, the ramp let off onto another Island just like the one where it had begun. Rand tried to imagine the curve of the ramp and gave up. *This Island can't be right on top of the other one. It* can't *be.*

Loial consulted yet another slab filled with Ogier script, found another signpost column, led them onto another bridge. Rand no longer had any idea in what direction they were traveling.

In their huddle of light in the dark, one bridge was exactly like another, except that some had breaks in the guardwalls and some did not. Only the degree of damage to the Guidings gave any difference to the Islands. Rand lost track of time; he was not even sure how many bridges they had crossed or how many ramps they had traveled. The Warder must have had a clock in his head, though. Just when Rand felt the first stir of hunger, Lan announced quietly that it was midday and dismounted to parcel out bread and cheese and dried meat from the pack horse. Perrin was leading the animal by that time. They were on an Island, and Loial was busily deciphering the directions on the Guiding.

Mat started to climb down from his saddle, but Moiraine said, "Time is too valuable in the Ways to waste. For us, much too valuable. We will stop when it is time to sleep." Lan was already back on Mandarb.

Rand's appetite slipped at the thought of sleeping in the Ways. It was always night there, but not the kind of night for sleeping. He ate while he rode, though, like everyone else. It was an awkward affair, trying to juggle his food, the lantern pole, and his reins, but for all of his imagined lack of appetite he licked the last crumbs of bread and cheese off his hands when he was done, and thought fondly of more. He even began to think the Ways were not so bad, not nearly as bad as Loial made out. They might have the heavy feel of the hour before a storm, but nothing changed. Nothing happened. The Ways were almost boring.

Then the silence was broken by a startled grunt from Loial. Rand stood in his stirrups to peer past the Ogier, and swallowed hard at what he saw. They were in the middle of a bridge, and only a few feet ahead of Loial the bridge ended in a jagged gap.

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CHAPTER

45

What Follows in Shadow

The light of their lanterns stretched just far enough to touch the other side, thrusting out of the dark like a giant's broken teeth. Loial's horse stamped a hoof nervously, and a loose stone fell away into the dead black below. If there was any sound of it striking bottom, Rand never heard it.

He edged Red closer to the gap. As far down as he could thrust his lantern on its pole, there was nothing. Blackness below as blackness above, shearing off the light. If there was a bottom, it could be a thousand feet down. Or never. But on the other side, he could see what was under the bridge, holding it up. Nothing. Less than a span in thickness, and absolutely nothing underneath.

Abruptly the stone under his feet seemed as thin as paper, and the endless drop over the edge pulled at him. The lantern and pole seemed suddenly heavy enough to pull him right out of the saddle. Head spinning, he backed the bay away from the abyss as cautiously as he had approached.

“Is it to this you've brought us, Aes Sedai?” Nynaeve said. “All this just to find out we have to go back to Caemlyn after all?”

“We do not have to go back,” Moiraine said. “Not all the way to Caemlyn. There are many paths along the Ways to any place. We need only go back far enough for Loial to find another path that will lead to Fal Dara. Loial? Loial!”

The Ogier pulled himself away from staring at the gap with a visible effort. “What? Oh. Yes, Aes Sedai. I can find another path. I had.…” His eyes drifted back to the chasm, and his ears twitched. “I had not dreamed the decay had gone so far. If the bridges themselves are breaking, it may be that I cannot find the path you want. It may be that I cannot find a path back, either. The bridges could be falling behind us even now.”

“There has to be a way,” Perrin said, his voice flat. His eyes seemed to gather the light, to glow golden. *A wolf at bay,* Rand thought, startled. *That's what he looks like.*

“It will be as the Wheel weaves,” Moiraine said, “but I do not believe the decay is as fast as you fear. Look at the stone, Loial. Even I can tell that this is an old break.”

“Yes,” Loial said slowly. “Yes, Aes Sedai. I can see it. There is no rain or wind here, but that stone has been in the air for ten years, at least.” He nodded with a relieved grin, so happy with the discovery that for a moment he seemed to forget his fear. Then he looked around and shrugged uncomfortably. “I could find other paths more easily than Mafal Dadaranell. Tar Valon, for instance? Or Stedding Shangtai. It's only three bridges to Stedding Shangtai from the last Island. I suppose the Elders want to talk to me by this time.”

“Fal Dara, Loial,” Moiraine said firmly. “The Eye of the World lies beyond Fal Dara, and we must reach the Eye.”

“Fal Dara,” the Ogier agreed reluctantly.

Back at the Island Loial pored over the script-covered slab intently, drooping eyebrows drawn down as he muttered half to himself. Soon he was talking completely to himself, for he dropped into the Ogier language. That inflected tongue sounded like deep-voiced birds singing. It seemed odd to Rand that a people so big had such a musical language.

Finally the Ogier nodded. As he led them to the chosen bridge, he turned to peer forlornly at the signpost beside another. “Three crossings to Stedding Shangtai.” He sighed. But he took them on past without stopping and turned onto the third bridge beyond. He looked back regretfully as they started across, though the bridge to his home was hidden in the dark.

Rand took the bay up beside the Ogier. “When this is over, Loial, you show me your *stedding,* and I'll show you Emond's Field. No Ways, though. We'll walk, or ride, if it takes all summer.”

“You believe it will ever be over, Rand?”

He frowned at the Ogier. “You said it would take two days to reach Fal Dara.”

“Not the Ways, Rand. All the rest.” Loial looked over his shoulder at the Aes Sedai, talking softly with Lan as they rode side-by-side. “What makes you believe it will ever be over?”

The bridges and ramps led up and down and across. Sometimes a white line ran off into the dark from the Guiding, just like the line they had followed from the Waygate in Caemlyn. Rand saw that he was not the only one who eyed those lines curiously, and a little wistfully. Nynaeve, Perrin, Mat, and even Egwene left the lines reluctantly. There was a Waygate at the other end of each of them, a gate back into the world, where there was sky and sun and wind. Even the wind would have been welcome. Leave them they did, under the Aes Sedai's sharp eye. But Rand was not the only one to look back even after dark swallowed Island and Guiding and line.

Rand was yawning by the time Moiraine announced that they would stop for the night on one of the Islands. Mat looked at the blackness all around them and snickered loudly, but he got down as quickly as anyone else. Lan and the boys unsaddled and hobbled the horses while Nynaeve and Egwene set up a small oil stove to make tea. Looking like the base of a lantern, it was what Lan said Warders used in the Blight, where the wood could be dangerous to burn. The Warder produced tripod legs from the baskets they took off the pack horse, so the lantern poles could be set in a circle around their campsite.

Loial examined the Guiding for a moment, then dropped down crosslegged and rubbed a hand across the dusty, pockmarked stone. “Once things grew on the Islands,” he said sadly. “All the books tell of it. There was green grass to sleep on, soft as any feather bed. Fruit trees to spice the food you'd brought with an apple or a pear or a bellfruit, sweet and crisp and juicy Whatever the time of year outside.”

“Nothing to hunt,” Perrin growled, then looked surprised that he had spoken.

Egwene handed Loial a cup of tea. He held it without drinking, staring at it as if he could find the fruit trees in its depths.

“Aren't you going to set wards?” Nynaeve asked Moiraine. “Surely there must be worse than rats in this. Even if I haven't seen anything, I can still feel.”

The Aes Sedai rubbed her fingers against her palms distastefully. “You feel the taint, the corruption of the Power that made the Ways. I will not use the One Power in the Ways unless I must. The taint is so strong that Whatever I tried to do would surely be corrupted.”

That made everyone as silent as Loial. Lan settled down to his meal methodically, as if he were stoking a fire, the food less important than fueling his body. Moiraine ate well, too, and as tidily as if they were not squatting on bare stone quite literally in the middle of nowhere, but Rand only picked at his food. The tiny flame of the oil stove gave just enough heat to boil water, but he crouched toward it as if he could soak up warmth. His shoulders brushed Mat and Perrin. They all made a tight circle around the stove. Mat held his bread and meat and cheese forgotten in his hands, and Perrin set his tin plate down after only a few bites. The mood became more and more glum, and everyone looked down, avoiding the dark around them.

Moiraine studied them as she ate. Finally she put her plate aside and patted her lips with a napkin. “I can tell you one cheerful thing. I do not think Thom Merrilin is dead.”

Rand looked at her sharply. “But… the Fade.…”

“Mat told me what happened in Whitebridge,” the Aes Sedai said. “People there mentioned a gleeman, but they said nothing of him dying. They would have, I think, if a gleeman had been killed. Whitebridge is not so big as for a gleeman to be a small thing. And Thom is a part of the Pattern that weaves itself around you three. Too important a part, I believe, to be cut off yet."

Too important? Rand thought. *How could Moiraine know…?* "Min? She saw something about Thom?"

"She saw a great deal," Moiraine said wryly. "About all of you. I wish I could understand half of what she saw, but even she does not. Old barriers fail. But whether what Min does is old or new, she sees true. Your fates are bound together. Thom Merrilin's, too."

Nynaeve gave a dismissive sniff and poured herself another cup of tea.

"I don't see how she saw anything about any of us," Mat said with a grin. "As I remember it, she spent most of her time looking at Rand."

Egwene raised an eyebrow. "Oh? You didn't tell me that, Moiraine Sedai."

Rand glanced at her. She was not looking at him, but her tone had been too carefully neutral. "I talked to her once," he said. "She dresses like a boy, and her hair is as short as mine."

"You talked to her. Once." Egwene nodded slowly. Still not looking at him, she raised her cup to her lips.

"Min was just somebody who worked at the inn in Baerlon," Perrin said. "Not like Aram."

Egwene choked on her tea. "Too hot," she muttered.

"Who's Aram?" Rand asked. Perrin smiled, much like Mat's smile in the old days when he was up to mischief, and hid behind his cup.

"One of the Traveling People," Egwene said casually, but red spots bloomed in her cheeks.

"One of the Traveling People," Perrin said blandly. "He dances. Like a bird. Wasn't that what you said, Egwene? It was like flying with a bird?"

Egwene set her cup down deliberately. "I don't know if anyone else is tired, but I'm going to sleep."

As she rolled herself up in her blankets, Perrin reached over to nudge Rand in the ribs and winked. Rand found himself grinning back. *Burn me, if I didn't come out best for a change. I wish I knew as much about women as Perrin.*

"Maybe, Rand," Mat said slyly, "you ought to tell Egwene about Farmer Grinwell's daughter, Else." Egwene lifted her head to stare first at Mat, then at him.

He hastily got up to fetch his own blankets. "Sleep sounds good to me right now."

All the Emond's Field people began seeking their blankets then, and Loial, too. Moiraine sat sipping her tea. And Lan. The Warder did not look as if he ever intended to sleep, or needed to.

Even rolled up for sleep, no one wanted to get very far from the others. They made a small circle of blanket-covered mounds right around the stove, almost touching one another.

“Rand,” Mat whispered, “*was* there anything between you and Min? I barely got a look at her. She *was* pretty, but she must be nearly as old as Nynaeve.”

“What about this Else?” Perrin added from the other side of him. “She pretty?”

“Blood and ashes,” he mumbled, “can't I even talk to a girl? You two are as bad as Egwene.”

“As the Wisdom would say,” Mat chided mockingly, “watch your tongue. Well, if you won't talk about it, I'm going to get some sleep.”

“Good,” Rand grumbled. “That's the first decent thing you've said.”

Sleep was not easily come by, though. The stone was hard, however Rand lay, and he could feel the pits through his blanket. There was no way to imagine he was anywhere but in the Ways, made by the men who had broken the world, tainted by the Dark One. He kept picturing the broken bridge, and the nothing under it.

When he turned one way he found Mat looking at him; looking through him, really. Mocking was forgotten when the dark around them was remembered. He rolled the other way, and Perrin had his eyes open, too. Perrin's face was less afraid than Mat's, but he had his hands on his chest, tapping his thumbs together worriedly.

Moiraine made a circuit of them, kneeling by each person's head and bending down to speak softly. Rand could not hear what she said to Perrin, but it made his thumbs stop. When she bent over Rand, her face almost touching his, she said in a low, comforting voice, “Even here, your destiny protects you. Not even the Dark One can change the Pattern completely. You are safe from him, so long as I am close. Your dreams are safe. For a time, yet, they are safe.”

As she passed from him to Mat, he wondered if she thought it was that simple, that she could tell him he was safe and he would believe it. But somehow he did feel safe—safer, at least. Thinking that, he drifted into sleep and did not dream.

Lan woke them. Rand wondered if the Warder had slept; he did not look tired, not even as tired as those who had laid some hours on the hard stone. Moiraine allowed enough time to make tea, but only one cup apiece. They ate breakfast in the saddle, Loial and the Warder leading. It was the same meal as the others, bread and meat and cheese. Rand thought it would be easy to get tired of bread and meat and cheese.

Not long after the last crumb was licked off a finger, Lan said quietly, “Someone is following us. Or something.” They were in the middle of a bridge, both ends of it hidden.

Mat jerked an arrow from his quiver and, before anyone could stop him, loosed it in the dark behind them.

"I knew I shouldn't have done this," Loial muttered. "Never deal with an Aes Sedai except in a *stedding*."

Lan pushed the bow down before Mat could nock another. "Stop that, you village idiot. There's no way to tell who it is."

"That's the only place they're safe," the Ogier went on.

"What else would be in a place like this besides something evil?" Mat demanded.

"That's what the Elders say, and I should have listened to them."

"We are, for one," the Warder said dryly.

"Maybe it's another traveler," Egwene said hopefully. "An Ogier, perhaps."

"Ogier have more sense than to use the Ways," Loial growled. "All but Loial, who has no sense at all. Elder Haman always said it, and it's true."

"What do you feel, Lan?" Moiraine asked. "Is it something that serves the Dark One?"

The Warder shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said as if that surprised him. "I cannot tell. Perhaps it's the Ways, and the taint. It all feels wrong. But whoever it is, or what ever, he's not trying to catch us. He almost caught up at the last Island and scampered back across the bridge so as not to. If I fall behind, I might surprise him though, and see who, or what, he is."

"If you fall behind, Warder," Loial said firmly, "you'll spend the rest of your life in the Ways. Even if you can read Ogier, I have never heard or read of a human who could find his path off the first Island lacking an Ogier guide. *Can* you read Ogier?"

Lan shook his head again, and Moiraine said, "So long as he does not trouble us, we will not trouble him. We have no time. No time."

As they rode off the bridge onto the next Island, Loial said, "If I remember the last Guiding correctly, there is a path from here that leads toward Tar Valon. Half a day's journey at most. Not quite as long as it will take us to reach Mafal Dadaranell. I'm sure that—"

He cut off as the light of their lanterns reached the Guiding. Near the top of the slab, deeply chiseled lines, sharp and angular, made wounds in the stone. Suddenly Lan's alertness was no longer hidden. He remained easily erect in his saddle, but Rand had the sudden impression that the Warder could feel everything around him, even feel the rest of them breathing. Lan began circling his stallion around the Guiding, spiraling outward. He rode as if he were ready to be attacked, or to attack himself.

“This explains much,” Moiraine said softly, “and it makes me afraid. So much. I should have guessed. The taint, the decay. I should have guessed.”

“Guessed what?” Nynaeve demanded just as Loial asked, “What is it? Who did this? I've never seen or heard of anything like it.”

The Aes Sedai faced them calmly. “Trollocs.” She ignored their frightened gasps. “Or Fades. Those are Trolloc runes. The Trollocs have discovered how to enter the Ways. That must be how they got to the Two Rivers undiscovered; through the Waygate at Manetheren. There is at least one Waygate in the Blight.” She glanced toward Lan before continuing; the Warder was far enough away that only the faint light of his lantern could be seen. “Manetheren was destroyed, but almost nothing can destroy a Waygate. That is how the Fades could gather a small army around Caemlyn without raising an alarm in every nation between the Blight and Andor.” Pausing, she touched her lips thoughtfully. “But they cannot know all the paths yet, else they would have been pouring into Caemlyn through the gate we used. Yes.”

Rand shivered. Walking through the Waygate to find Trollocs waiting in the dark, hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, twisted giants with half-animal faces snarling as they leaped forward in the blackness to kill. Or worse.

“They don't use the Ways easily,” Lan called. His lantern was no more than twenty spans off, but the light of it was only a dim, fuzzy ball that seemed very distant to those around the Guiding. Moiraine led the way to him. Rand wished his stomach were empty when he saw what the Warder had found.

At the foot of one of the bridges the frozen shapes of Trollocs reared, caught flailing about them with hooked axes and scythe-like swords. Gray and pitted like the stone, the huge bodies were half sunken in the swollen, bubbled surface. Some of the bubbles had burst, revealing more snouted faces, forever snarling with fear. Rand heard someone retching behind him, and swallowed hard to keep from joining whoever it was. Even for Trollocs it had been a horrible way to die.

A few feet beyond the Trollocs the bridge ended. The signpost lay shattered into a thousand shards.

Loial got down from his horse gingerly, eyeing the Trollocs, as if he thought they might come back to life. He examined the remains of the signpost hurriedly, picking out the metal script that had been inlaid in the stone, then scrambled back into his saddle. “This was the first bridge of the path from here to Tar Valon,” he said.

Mat was scrubbing the back of his hand across his mouth, with his head turned away from the Trollocs. Egwene hid her face in her hands. Rand moved his horse close to Bela and touched her shoulder. She twisted around and clutched him, shuddering. He wanted to shudder, too; her holding him was the only thing that kept him from it.

“As well we are not going to Tar Valon yet,” Moiraine said.

Nynaeve rounded on the Aes Sedai. “How can you take it so calmly? The same could happen to us!”

“Perhaps,” Moiraine said serenely, and Nynaeve ground her teeth so hard Rand could hear them grate. “It is more likely, though,” Moiraine went on, unruffled, “that the men, the Aes Sedai, who made the Ways protected them, building in traps for creatures of the Dark One. It is something they must have feared then, before the Halfmen and Trollocs had been driven into the Blight. In any case, we cannot tarry here, and Whatever way we choose, back or ahead, is as likely to have a trap as any other. Loial, do you know the next bridge?”

“Yes. Yes, they did not ruin that part of the Guiding, thank the Light.” For the first time Loial seemed as eager to go on as Moiraine did. He had his big horse moving before he finished speaking.

Egwene clung to Rand's arm for two more bridges. He regretted it when she finally let go with a murmured apology and a forced laugh, and not just because it had felt good having her hold onto him that way. It was easier to be brave, he discovered, when someone needed your protection.

Moiraine might not have believed a trap could be set for them, but for all the haste she spoke of, she made them travel more slowly than before, pausing before letting them onto any bridge, or off one onto an Island. She would step Aldieb forward, feeling the air in front of her with an outstretched hand, and not even Loial, or Lan, was allowed to go ahead until she gave permission.

Rand had to trust her judgment about traps, but he peered into the darkness around them as if he could actually see anything more than ten feet away, and strained his ears listening. If Trollocs could use the Ways, then Whatever was following them could be another creature of the Dark One. Or more than one. Lan had said he could not tell in the Ways. But as they crossed bridge after bridge, ate a midday meal riding, and crossed still more bridges, all he could hear were their own saddles creaking, and the horses' hooves, and sometimes one of the others coughing, or muttering to himself. Later there was a distant wind, too, off in the black somewhere. He could not say in which direction. At first he thought it was his imagination, but with time he became sure.

It'll be good to feel the wind again, even if it's cold.

Suddenly he blinked. “Loial, didn't you say there isn't any wind in the Ways?”

Loial pulled his horse up just short of the next Island and cocked his head to listen. Slowly his face paled, and he licked his lips. *“Machin Shin,”* he whispered hoarsely. “The Black Wind. The Light illumine and protect us. It's the Black Wind.”

“How many more bridges?” Moiraine asked sharply. “Loial, how many more bridges?”

“Two. I think, two.”

“Quickly, then,” she said, trotting Aldieb onto the Island. “Find it quickly!”

Loial talked to himself, or to anyone who was listening, while he read the Guiding. “They came out mad, screaming about *Machin Shin.* Light help us! Even those Aes Sedai could heal, they.…” He scanned the stone hastily, and galloped toward the chosen bridge with a shouted, “This way!”

This time Moiraine did not wait to check. She urged them on to a gallop, the bridge trembling beneath the horses, lanterns swinging wildly overhead. Loial ran his eyes over the next Guiding and wheeled his big mount around like a racer almost before it had stopped. The sound of the wind became louder. Rand could hear it even over the pounding of hooves on stone. Behind them, and gusting closer.

They did not bother with the last Guiding. As soon as the light of the lanterns caught the white line running from it, they swung in that direction, still galloping. The Island vanished behind, and there was only the pitted, gray stone underfoot and the white line. Rand was breathing so hard he was no longer sure if he could hear the wind.

Out of the darkness the gates appeared, vine-carved and standing alone in the black like a tiny piece of wall in the night. Moiraine leaned out of her saddle, reaching toward the carvings, and suddenly pulled back. “The *Avendesora* leaf is not here!” she said. “The key is gone!”

“Light!” Mat shouted. “Bloody light!” Loial threw back his head and gave a mournful cry, like a howl of dying.

Egwene touched Rand's arm. Her lips trembled, but she only looked at him. He put his hand on top of hers, hoping he did not look more frightened than she did. He felt it. Back toward the Guiding, the wind howled. He almost thought he could hear voices in it, voices screaming vileness that, even half understood, brought bile up in his throat.

Moiraine raised her staff and flame lanced from the end of it. It was not the pure, white flame that Rand remembered from Emond's Field, and the battle before Shadar Logoth. Sickly yellow streaked through the fire, and slow-drifting flecks of black, like soot. A thin, acrid smoke drifted from the flame, setting Loial coughing and the horses dancing nervously, but Moiraine thrust it at the gates. The smoke rasped Rand's throat and burned his nose.

Stone melted like butter, leaf and vine withering in the flame and vanishing. The Aes Sedai moved the fire as fast as she could, but cutting an opening big enough for everyone to get through was no quick task. To Rand, it seemed as if the line of melted stone crept along its arc at a snail's pace. His cloak stirred, as if caught by the edge of a breeze, and his heart froze.

“I can feel it,” Mat said, his voice quavering. “Light, I can bloody feel it!”

The flame winked out, and Moiraine lowered her staff. “Done,” she said. “Half done.”

A thin line ran across the stone carving. Rand thought he could see light—dim, but still light—through the crack. But despite the cutting, the two big, curved wedges of stone still stood there, half an arc out of each door. The opening would be big enough for everyone to ride through, though Loial might have to lie flat on his horse's back. Once the two wedges of stone were gone, it would be big enough. He wondered how much each weighed. A thousand pounds? More? *Maybe if we all get down and push. Maybe we can push one of them over before the wind gets here.* A gust tugged at his cloak. He tried not to listen to what the voices cried.

As Moiraine stepped back, Mandarb leaped forward, straight toward the gates, Lan crouched in the saddle. At the last instant the warhorse twisted to catch the stone with his shoulder, just as he had been taught to catch other horses in battle. With a crash the stone toppled outward, and the Warder and his horse were carried by their momentum through the smoky shimmer of a Waygate. The light that came through was mid-morning light, pale and thin, but it seemed to Rand as if the noonday summer sun blazed in his face.

On the far side of the gate Lan and Mandarb slowed to a crawl, stumbling in slow motion as the Warder reined back around toward the gate. Rand did not wait. Pushing Bela's head toward the opening, he slapped the shaggy mare hard on the croup. Egwene had just enough time to throw a startled look over her shoulder at him before Bela carried her out of the Ways.

“All of you, out!” Moiraine directed. “Quickly! Go!”

As she spoke, the Aes Sedai thrust her staff out at arm's length, pointed back toward the Guiding. Something leaped from the end of the staff, like liquid light rendered to a syrup of fire, a blazing spear of white and red and yellow, streaking into the black, exploding, coruscating like shattered diamonds. The wind shrieked in agony; it screamed in rage. The thousand murmurs that hid in the wind roared like thunder, roars of madness, half-heard voices cackling and howling promises that twisted Rand's stomach as much by the pleasure in them as by what he almost understood them to say.

He booted Red forward, crowding into the opening, squeezing after the others, all forcing through the smoky glistening at once. The icy chill ran through him again, the peculiar sensation of being slowly lowered facedown into a winter pond, the cold water crawling across his skin by infinitesimal increments. Just as before it seemed to go on forever, while his mind raced, wondering if the wind could catch them while they were held like that.

As suddenly as a pricked bubble the chill vanished, and he was outside. His horse, for one abrupt instant moving twice as fast as he had been, stumbled and almost pitched him over his head. He threw both arms around the bay's neck and hung on for dear life. While he got back into the saddle, Red shook himself, then trotted over to join the others as calmly as if nothing at all odd had happened. It was cold, not the chill of the Waygate, but welcome, natural winter-cold that slowly, steadily burrowed into flesh.

He pulled his cloak around him, his eyes on the dull glimmer of the Waygate. Beside him Lan leaned forward in his saddle, one hand on his sword; man and horse were tensed, as if on the point of charging back through if Moiraine did not appear.

The Waygate stood in a jumble of stones at the base of a hill, hidden by bushes except where the falling pieces had broken down the bare, brown branches. Alongside the carvings on the remains of the gates, the brush looked more lifeless than the stone.

Slowly the murky surface bulged like some strange, long bubble rising to the surface of a pond. Moiraine's back broke through the bubble. Inchmeal, the Aes Sedai and her dim reflection backed out of each other. She still held her staff out in front of her, and she kept it there as she drew Aldieb out of the Waygate after her, the white mare dancing with fear, eyes rolling. Still watching the Waygate, Moiraine backed away.

The Waygate darkened. The hazy shimmer became murkier, sinking through gray to charcoal, then to black as deep as the heart of the Ways. As if from a great distance the wind howled at them, hidden voices filled with an unquenchable thirst for living things, filled with a hunger for pain, filled with frustration.

The voices seemed to whisper in Rand's ears, right at the brink of understanding, and within it. *Flesh so fine, so fine to tear, to gash the skin; skin to strip, to plait, so nice to plait the strips, so nice, so red the drops that fall; blood so red, so red, so sweet; sweet screams, pretty screams, singing screams, scream your song, sing your screams.…*

The whispers drifted, the blackness lessened, faded, and the Waygate was again a murky shimmer seen through an arch of carved stone.

Rand let out a long, shuddering breath. He was not the only one; he heard other relieved exhalations. Egwene had Bela alongside Nynaeve's horse, and the two women had their arms around each other, their heads on each other's shoulders. Even Lan seemed relieved, though the hard planes of his face showed nothing; it was more in the way he sat Mandarb, a loosening of the shoulders as he looked at Moiraine, a tilt of the head.

“It could not pass,” Moiraine said. “I thought it could not; I hoped it could not. Faugh!” She tossed her staff on the ground and scrubbed her hand on her cloak. Char, thick and black, marked the staff for over half its length. “The taint corrupts everything in that place.”

“What was that?” Nynaeve demanded. “What was it?”

Loial appeared confused. “Why, *Machin Shin,* of course. The Black Wind that steals souls.”

“But *what* is it?” Nynaeve persisted. “Even with a Trolloc, you can look at it, touch it if you have a strong stomach. But that.…” She gave a convulsive shiver.

“Something left from the Time of Madness, perhaps,” Moiraine replied. “Or even from the War of the Shadow, the War of Power. Something hiding in the Ways so long it can no longer get out. No one, not even among the Ogier, knows how far the Ways run, or how deep. It could even be something of the Ways themselves. As Loial said, the Ways are living things, and all living things have parasites. Perhaps even a creature of the corruption itself, something born of the decay. Something that hates life and light.”

“Stop!” Egwene cried. “I don't want to hear any more. I could hear *it*, saying.…” She cut off, shivering.

“There is worse to be faced yet,” Moiraine said softly. Rand did not think she meant it to be heard.

The Aes Sedai climbed into her saddle wearily and settled there with a grateful sigh. “This is dangerous,” she said, looking at the broken gates. Her charred staff received only a glance. “The thing cannot get out, but anyone could wander in. Agelmar must send men to wall it up, once we reach Fal Dara.” She pointed to the north, to towers in the misty distance above the barren treetops.

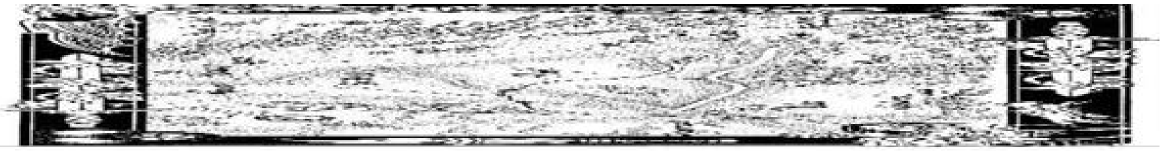

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CHAPTER
46

Fal Dara

The country around the Waygate was rolling, forested hills, but aside from the gates themselves there was no sign of any Ogier grove. Most of the trees were gray skeletons clawing at the sky. Fewer evergreens than Rand was used to dotted the forest, and of them, dead, brown needles and leaves covered many. Loial made no comment beyond a sad shaking of his head.

“As dead as the Blasted Lands,” Nynaeve said, frowning. Egwene pulled her cloak around her and shivered.

“At least we’re out,” Perrin said, and Mat added, “Out where?”

“Shienar,” Lan told them. “We’re in the Borderlands.” In his hard voice was a note that said home, almost.

Rand gathered his cloak against the cold. The Borderlands. Then the Blight was close by. The Blight. The Eye of the World. And what they had come to do.

“We are close to Fal Dara,” Moiraine said. “Only a few miles.” Across the treetops, towers rose to the north and east of them, dark against the morning sky. Between the hills and the woods, the towers often vanished as they rode, only to reappear again when they topped a particularly tall rise.

Rand noticed trees split open as if struck by lightning.

“The cold,” Lan answered when he asked. “Sometimes the winter is so cold here the sap freezes, and trees burst. There are nights when you can hear them cracking like fireworks, and the air is so sharp you think that might shatter, too. There are more than usual, this winter past.”

Rand shook his head. Trees *bursting*? And that was during an ordinary winter. What must this winter have been like? Surely like nothing he could imagine.

“Who says winter’s past?” Mat said, his teeth chattering.

“Why this, a fine spring, sheepherder,” Lan said. “A fine spring to be alive. But if you want warm, well, it will be warm in the Blight.”

Softly Mat muttered, “Blood and ashes. Blood and bloody ashes!” Rand barely heard him, but it sounded heartfelt.

They began to pass farms, but though it was the hour for midday meals to be cooking, no smoke rose from the high stone chimneys. The fields were empty of men and livestock both, though sometimes a plow or a wagon stood abandoned as if the owner meant to be back any minute.

At one farm close by the road a lone chicken scratched in the yard. One barn door swung freely with the wind; the other had broken off the bottom hinge and hung at an angle. The tall house, odd to Rand’s Two Rivers eyes, with its sharp-peaked roof of big wooden shingles running almost to the ground, was still and silent. No dog came out to bark at them. A scythe lay in the middle of the barnyard; buckets were overturned in a heap beside the well.

Moiraine frowned at the farmhouse as they rode by. She lifted Aldieb’s reins, and the white mare quickened her pace.

The Emond’s Fielders were clustered with Loial a little behind the Aes Sedai and the Warder.

Rand shook his head. He could not imagine anything growing there ever. But then he could not really imagine the Ways, either. Even now that he was past them, he could not.

“I don’t think she expected this,” Nynaeve said quietly, with a gesture that took in all the empty farms they had seen.

“Where did they all go?” Egwene said. “Why? They can’t have been gone very long.”

“What makes you say that?” Mat asked. “From the look of that barn door, they could have been gone all winter.” Nynaeve and Egwene both looked at him as if he were slow-witted.

“The curtains in the windows,” Egwene said patiently. “They look too light for winter curtains, even here. As cold as it is here, no woman would have had those up more than a week or two, maybe less.” The Wisdom nodded.

“Curtains.” Perrin chuckled. He immediately wiped the smile off his face when the two women raised their eyebrows at him. “Oh, I agree with you. There wasn't enough rust on that scythe for any more than a week in the open. You should have seen that, Mat. Even if you missed the curtains."

Rand glanced sideways at Perrin, trying not to stare. His eyes were sharper than Perrin's—or had been, when they used to hunt rabbits together—but he had not been able to see that scythe-blade well enough to make out any rust.

"I really don't care where they went," Mat grumbled. "I just want to find someplace with a fire. Soon."

"But why did they go?" Rand said under his breath. The Blight was not far off here. The Blight, where all the Fades and Trollocs were, those not down in Andor chasing them. The Blight, where they were going.

He raised his voice enough to be heard by those close to him. "Nynaeve, maybe you and Egwene don't have to go to the Eye with us." The two women looked at him as if he were speaking gibberish, but with the Blight so close he had to make one last try. "Maybe it's enough for you to be close. Moiraine didn't say you have to go. Or you, Loial. You could stay at Fal Dara. Until we come back. Or you could start for Tar Valon. Maybe there'll be a merchant train, or I'll bet Moiraine would even hire a coach. We will meet in Tar Valon, when it's all over."

"Ta'veren." Loial's sigh was a rumble like thunder on the horizon. "You swirl lives around you, Rand al'Thor, you and your friends. Your fate chooses ours." The Ogier shrugged, and suddenly a broad grin split his face. "Besides, it will be something to meet the Green Man. Elder Haman always talks about his meeting with the Green Man, and so does my father, and most of the Elders."

"So many?" Perrin said. "The stories say the Green Man is hard to find, and no one can find him twice."

"Not twice, no," Loial agreed. "But then, I have never met him, and neither have you. He doesn't seem to avoid Ogier quite the way he does you humans. He knows so much about trees. Even the Tree Songs."

Rand said, "The point I was trying to make is—"

The Wisdom cut him off. "*She* says Egwene and I are part of the Pattern, too. All woven in with you three. If she is to be believed, there's something about the way that piece of the Pattern is woven that might stop the Dark One. And I am afraid I do believe her; too much has happened not to. But if Egwene and I go away, what might we change about the Pattern?"

"I was only trying to—"

Again Nynaeve interrupted, sharply. “I know what you were trying to do.” She looked at him until he shifted uneasily in his saddle, then her face softened. “I know what you were trying to do, Rand. I have little liking for any Aes Sedai, and this one least of all, I think. I have less for going into the Blight, but least of all is the liking I have for the Father of Lies. If you boys . . . you men, can do what has to be done when you’d rather do almost anything else, why do you think I will do less? Or Egwene?” She did not appear to expect an answer. Gathering her reins, she frowned toward the Aes Sedai up ahead. “I wonder if we’re going to reach this Fal Dara place soon, or does she mean us to spend the night out in this?”

As she trotted toward Moiraine, Mat said, “She called us men. It seems like only yesterday she was saying we shouldn’t be off leading strings, and now she calls us men.”

“You still shouldn’t be off your mother’s apron strings,” Egwene said, but Rand did not think her heart was in it. She moved Bela close to his bay, and lowered her voice so none of the others could hear although Mat, at least, tried. “I only danced with Aram, Rand,” she said softly, not looking at him. “You wouldn’t hold it against me, dancing with somebody I will never see again, would you?”

“No,” he told her. *What had made her bring it up now?* “Of course not.” But suddenly he remembered something Min had said in Baerlon, what seemed a hundred years ago. *She’s not for you, nor you for her; at least, not in the way you both want.*

The town of Fal Dara was built on hills higher than the surrounding country. It was nowhere near as big as Caemlyn, but the wall around it was as high as Caemlyn’s. For a full mile outside that wall in every direction the ground was clear of anything taller than grass, and that cut low. Nothing could come close without being seen from one of the many tall towers topped by wooden hoardings. Where the walls of Caemlyn had a beauty about them, the builders of Fal Dara seemed not to have cared if anyone found their wall beautiful. The gray stone was grimly implacable, proclaiming that it existed for one purpose alone: to hold. Pennants atop the hoardings whipped in the wind, making the stooping Black Hawk of Shienar seem to fly all along the walls.

Lan tossed back the hood of his cloak and, despite the cold, motioned for the others to do the same. Moiraine had already lowered hers. “It’s the law in Shienar," the Warder said. "In all the Borderlands. No one may hide his face inside a town's walls."

"Are they all that good-looking?" Mat laughed.

"A Halfman can't hide with his face exposed," the Warder said in a flat voice.

Rand's grin slid off his face. Hastily Mat pushed back his hood.

The gates stood open, tall and covered with dark iron, but a dozen armored men stood guard in golden yellow surcoats bearing the Black Hawk. The hilts of long swords on their backs peeked over their shoulders, and broadsword or mace or axe hung at every waist. Their horses were tethered nearby, made grotesque by the steel bardings covering chests and necks and heads, with lances to stirrup, all ready to ride at an instant. The guards made no move to stop Lan and Moiraine and the others. Indeed, they waved and called out happily.

"Dai Shan!" one cried, shaking steel-gauntleted fists over his head as they rode past. "Dai Shan!"

A number of others shouted, "Glory to the Builders!" and, *"Kiserai ti Wansho!"* Loial looked surprised, then a broad smile split his face and he waved to the guards.

One man ran alongside Lan's horse a little way, unhampered by the armor he wore. "Will the Golden Crane fly again, Dai Shan?"

"Peace, Ragan," was all the Warder said, and the man fell away. He returned the guards' waves, but his face was suddenly even more grim.

As they rode through stone-paved streets crowded with people and wagons, Rand frowned worriedly. Fal Dara was bulging at the seams, but the people were neither the eager crowds of Caemlyn, enjoying the grandeur of the city even as they squabbled, nor the milling throngs of Baerlon. Packed cheek by jowl, these folk watched their party ride by with leaden eyes and faces blanked of emotion. Carts and wagons jammed every alleyway and half the streets, piled high with jumbled household furnishings, and carved chests packed so tight that clothes spilled. On top sat the children. Adults kept the younglings up where they could be seen and did not let them stray even to play. The children were even more silent than their elders, their eyes bigger, more haunting in their stares. The nooks and crannies between the wagons were filled with shaggy cattle and black-spotted pigs in makeshift pens. Crates of chickens and ducks and geese fitfully made up for the silence of the people. He knew now where all the farmers had gone.

Lan led the way to the fortress in the middle of the town, a massive stone pile atop the highest hill. A dry moat, deep and wide, its bottom a forest of sharp steel spikes, razor-edged and as tall as a man, surrounded the towered walls of the keep. A place for a last defense, if the rest of the town fell. From one of the gate towers an armored man called down, “Welcome, Dai Shan.” Another shouted to the inside of the fortress, “The Golden Crane! The Golden Crane!”

Their hooves drummed on the heavy timbers of the lowered drawbridge as they crossed the moat and rode under the sharp points of the stout portcullis. Once through the gates, Lan swung down out of his saddle to lead Mandarb, signaling the others to dismount.

The first courtyard was a huge square paved with big stone blocks and surrounded by towers and battlements as fierce as those on the outside of the walls. As big as it was, the courtyard appeared just as crowded as the streets, and as much in turmoil, though there was an order to the crowding here. Everywhere were armored men and armored horses. At half a dozen smithies around the court, hammers clanged, and big bellows, tugged by two leather-aproned men apiece, made the forge-fires roar. A steady stream of boys ran with new-made horse shoes for the farriers. Fletchers sat making arrows, and every time a basket was filled it was whisked away and replaced with an empty one.

Liveried grooms appeared on the run, eager and smiling in black-and-gold. Rand hastily untied his belongings from behind the saddle and gave the bay up to one of the grooms as a man in plate-and-mail and leather bowed formally. He wore a bright yellow cloak edged in red over his armor, with the Black Hawk on the breast, and a yellow surcoat bearing a gray owl. He wore no helmet and was bareheaded, truly, for his hair had all been shaved except for a topknot tied with a leather cord. “It has been long, Moiraine Aes Sedai. It is good to see you, Dai Shan. Very good.” He bowed again, to Loial, and murmured, “Glory to the Builders. *Kiserai ti Wansho.*”

“I am unworthy,” Loial replied formally, “and the work small. *Tsingu ma choba.*”

“You honor us, Builder,” the man said. *“Kiserai ti Wansho.”* He turned back to Lan. “Word was sent to Lord Agelmar, Dai Shan, as soon as you were seen coming. He is waiting for you. This way, please.”

As they followed him into the fortress, along drafty stone corridors hung with colorful tapestries and long silk screens of hunting scenes and battles, he continued. “I am glad the call reached you, Dai Shan. Will you raise the Golden Crane banner once more?” The halls were stark except for the wall hangings, and even they used the fewest figures made with the fewest lines necessary to convey meaning, though in bright colors.

“Are things really as bad as they appear, Ingtar?” Lan asked quietly. Rand wondered if his own ears were twitching like Loial’s.

The man’s topknot swayed as he shook his head, but he hesitated before putting on a grin. “Things are never as bad as they appear, Dai Shan. A little worse than usual this year, that is all. The raids continued through the winter, even in the hardest of it. But the raiding was no worse than anywhere else along the Border. They still come in the night, but what else can be expected in the spring, if this can be called spring. Scouts return from the Blight—those who do come back—with news of Trolloc camps. Always fresh news of more camps. But we will meet them at Tarwin’s Gap, Dai Shan, and turn them back as we always have.”

“Of course,” Lan said, but he did not sound certain.

Ingtar’s grin slipped, but came back immediately. Silently he showed them into Lord Agelmar’s study, then claimed the press of his duties and left.

It was a room as purpose-made as all the rest of the fortress, with arrowslits in the outer wall and a heavy bar for the thick door, which had its own arrowpiercings and was bound by iron straps. Only one tapestry hung here. It covered an entire wall and showed men, armored like the men of Fal Dara, fighting Myrddraal and Trollocs in a mountain pass.

A table, one chest, and a few chairs were the only furnishings except for two racks on the wall, and they caught Rand’s eye as much as the tapestry. One held a two-handed sword, taller than a man, a more ordinary broadsword, and below them a studded mace and a long, kite-shaped shield bearing three foxes. From the other hung a suit of armor, complete and arranged as one would wear it. Crested helmet with its barred faceguard over a double-mail camail. Mail hauberk, split for riding, and leather undercoat, polished from wear. Breastplate, steel gauntlets, knee and elbow cops, and half-plate for shoulders and arms and legs. Even here in the heart of the Keep, weapons and armor seemed ready to be donned at any moment. Like the furniture, they were simply and severely decorated with gold.

Agelmar himself rose at their entrance and came around the table, littered with maps and sheafs of paper and pens standing in inkpots. He seemed at first glance too peaceful for the room in his blue velvet coat with its tall, wide collar, and soft leather boots, but a second look showed Rand differently. Like all the fighting men he had seen, Agelmar's head was shaved except for a topknot, and that pure white. His face was as hard as Lan's, the only lines creases at the corners of his eyes, and those eyes like brown stone, though they bore a smile now.

"Peace, but it is good to see you, Dai Shan," the Lord of Fal Dara said. "And you, Moiraine Aes Sedai, perhaps even more. Your presence warms me, Aes Sedai."

"Ninte calichniye no domashita, Agelmar Dai Shan," Moiraine replied formally, but with a note in her voice that said they were old friends. "Your welcome warms me, Lord Agelmar."

"Kodome calichniye ga ni Aes Sedai hei. Here is always a welcome for Aes Sedai." He turned to Loial. "You are far from the *stedding,* Ogier, but you honor Fal Dara. Always glory to the Builders. *Kiserai ti Wansho hei.*"

"I am unworthy," Loial said, bowing. "It is you who do me honor." He glanced at the stark stone walls and seemed to struggle with himself. Rand was glad the Ogier managed to refrain from adding further comment.

Servants in black-and-gold appeared on silent, soft-slippered feet. Some brought folded cloths, damp and hot, on silver trays for wiping the dust from faces and hands. Others bore mulled wine and silver bowls of dried plums and apricots. Lord Agelmar gave orders for rooms to be prepared, and baths.

"A long journey from Tar Valon," he said. "You must be tired."

"A short journey the path we came," Lan told him, "but more tiring than the long way."

Agelmar looked puzzled when the Warder said no more, but he merely said, "A few days' rest will put you all in fine fettle."

"I ask one night's shelter, Lord Agelmar," Moiraine said, "for ourselves and our horses. And fresh supplies in the morning, if you can spare them. We must leave you early, I am afraid."

Agelmar frowned. "But I thought. . . . Moiraine Sedai, I have no right to ask it of you, but you would be worth a thousand lances in Tarwin's Gap.

And you, Dai Shan. A thousand men *will* come when they hear the Golden Crane flies once more."

"The Seven Towers are broken," Lan said harshly, "and Malkier is dead; the few of her people left, scattered across the face of the earth. I am a Warder, Agelmar, sworn to the Flame of Tar Valon, and I am bound into the Blight."

"Of course, Dai Sh—Lan. Of course. But surely a few days' delay, a few weeks at most, will make no difference. You are needed. You, and Moiraine Sedai."

Moiraine took a silver goblet from one of the servants. "Ingtar seems to believe you will defeat this threat as you have defeated many others across the years."

"Aes Sedai," Agelmar said wryly, "if Ingtar had to ride alone to Tarwin's Gap, he would ride the whole way proclaiming that the Trollocs would be turned back once more. He has almost pride enough to believe he *could* do it alone."

"He is not as confident as you think, this time, Agelmar." The Warder held a cup, but he did not drink. "How bad is it?"

Agelmar hesitated, pulling a map from the tangle on the table. He stared unseeing at the map for a moment, then tossed it back. "When we ride to the Gap," he said quietly, "the people will be sent south to Fal Moran. Perhaps the capital can hold. Peace, it must. Something must hold."

"That bad?" Lan said, and Agelmar nodded wearily.

Rand exchanged worried looks with Mat and Perrin. It was easy to believe the Trollocs gathering in the Blight were after him, after them. Agelmar went on grimly.

"Kandor, Arafel, Saldaea—the Trollocs raided them all straight through the winter. Nothing like that has happened since the Trolloc Wars; the raids have never been so fierce, or so large, or pressed home so hard. Every king and council is sure a great thrust is coming out of the Blight, and every one of the Borderlands believes it is coming at them. None of their scouts, and none of the Warders, report Trolloc massing above their borders, as we have here, but they believe, and each is afraid to send fighting men elsewhere. People whisper that the world is ending, that the Dark One is loose again. Shienar will ride to Tarwin's Gap alone, and we will be outnumbered at least ten to one. At least. It may be the last Ingathering of the Lances.

“Lan—no!—Dai Shan, for you *are* a Diademed Battle Lord of Malkier Whatever you say. Dai Shan, the Golden Crane banner in the van would put heart into men who know they are riding north to die. The word will spread like wildfire, and though their kings have told them to hold where they are, lances will come from Arafel and Kandor, and even from Saldaea. Though they cannot come in time to stand with us in the Gap, they may save Shienar.”

Lan peered into his wine. His face did not change, but wine slopped over his hand; the silver goblet crumpled in his grip. A servant took the ruined cup and wiped the Warder’s hand with a cloth; a second put a fresh goblet in his hand while the other was whisked away. Lan did not seem to notice. “I cannot!” he whispered hoarsely. When he raised his head his blue eyes burned with a fierce light, but his voice was calm again, and flat. “I am a Warder, Agelmar.” His sharp gaze slid across Rand and Mat and Perrin to Moiraine. “At first light I ride to the Blight.”

Agelmar sighed heavily. “Moiraine Sedai, will you not come, at least? An Aes Sedai could make the difference.”

“I cannot, Lord Agelmar.” Moiraine seemed troubled. “There is indeed a battle to be fought, and it is not chance that the Trollocs gather above Shienar, but our battle, the true battle with the Dark One, will take place in the Blight, at the Eye of the World. You must fight your battle, and we ours.”

“You cannot be saying he is loose!” Rocklike Agelmar sounded shaken, and Moiraine quickly shook her head.

“Not yet. If we win at the Eye of the World, perhaps not ever again.”

“Can you even find the Eye, Aes Sedai? If holding the Dark One depends on that, we might as well be dead. Many have tried and failed.”

“I can find it, Lord Agelmar. Hope is not lost yet.”

Agelmar studied her, and then the others. He appeared puzzled by Nynaeve and Egwene; their farmclothes contrasted sharply with Moiraine’s silk dress, though all were travel-stained. “They are Aes Sedai, too?” he asked doubtfully. When Moiraine shook her head, he seemed even more confused. His gaze ran over the young men from Emond’s Field, settling on Rand, brushing the red-wrapped sword at his waist. “A strange guard you take with you, Aes Sedai. Only one fighting man.” He glanced at Perrin, and at the axe hanging from his belt. “Perhaps two. But both barely more than lads. Let me send men with you. A hundred lances more or less will make no difference in the Gap, but you will need more than one Warder and three youths. And two women will not help, unless they are Aiel in disguise. The Blight is worse than usual this year. It—stirs.”

“A hundred lances would be too many,” Lan said, “and a thousand not enough. The larger the party we take into the Blight, the more chance we will attract attention. We must reach the Eye without fighting, if we can. You know the outcome is all but foretold when Trollocs force battle inside the Blight.”

Agelmar nodded grimly, but he refused to give up. “Fewer, then. Even ten good men would give you a better chance of escorting Moiraine Sedai and the other two women to the Green Man than will just these young fellows.”

Rand abruptly realized the Lord of Fal Dara assumed it was Nynaeve and Egwene who with Moiraine would fight against the Dark One. It was natural. That sort of struggle meant using the One Power, and that meant women. *That sort of struggle means using the Power.* He tucked his thumbs behind his sword belt and gripped the buckle hard to keep his hands from shaking.

“No men,” Moiraine said. Agelmar opened his mouth again, and she went on before he could speak. “It is the nature of the Eye, and the nature of the Green Man. How many from Fal Dara have ever found the Green Man and the Eye?”

“Ever?” Agelmar shrugged. “Since the War of the Hundred Years, you could count them on the fingers of one hand. No more than one in five years from all the Borderlands together.”

“No one finds the Eye of the World,” Moiraine said, “unless the Green Man wants them to find it. Need is the key, and intention. I know where to go—I have been there before.” Rand’s head whipped around in surprise; his was not the only one among the Emond’s Fielders, but the Aes Sedai did not seem to notice. “But one among us seeking glory, seeking to add his name to those four, and we may never find it though I take us straight to the spot I remember.”

“You have seen the Green Man, Moiraine Sedai?” The Lord of Fal Dara sounded impressed, but in the next breath he frowned. “But if you have already met him once. . . .”

“Need is the key,” Moiraine said softly, “and there can be no greater need than mine. Than ours. And I have something those other seekers have not.”

Her eyes barely stirred from Agelmar’s face, but Rand was sure they had drifted toward Loial, just for an instant before the Aes Sedai pulled them back. Rand met the Ogier’s eyes, and Loial shrugged.

“Ta’veren,” the Ogier said softly.

Agelmar threw up his hands. “It will be as you say, Aes Sedai. Peace, if the real battle is to be at the Eye of the World, I am tempted to take the Black Hawk banner after you instead of to the Gap. I could cut a path for you—”

“That would be disaster, Lord Agelmar. Both at Tarwin’s Gap and at the Eye. You have your battle, and we ours.”

“Peace! As you say, Aes Sedai.”

Having reached a decision, however much he disliked it, the shaven-headed Lord of Fal Dara seemed to put it out of his mind. He invited them to table with him, all the while making conversation about hawks and horses and dogs, but with never a mention of Trollocs, or Tarwin’s Gap, or the Eye of the World.

The chamber where they ate was as stark and plain as Lord Agelmar’s study had been, with little more furnishing it than the table and chairs themselves, and they were severe in line and form. Beautiful, but severe. A big fireplace warmed the room, but not so much that a man called out hurriedly would be stunned by the cold outside. Liveried servants brought soup and bread and cheese, and the talk was of books and music until Lord Agelmar realized the Emond’s Field folk were not talking. Like a good host he asked gently probing questions designed to bring them out of their quiet.

Rand soon found himself competing to tell about Emond’s Field and the Two Rivers. It was an effort not to say too much. He hoped the others were guarding their tongues, Mat especially. Nynaeve alone held herself back, eating and drinking silently.

“There’s a song in the Two Rivers,” Mat said. “ ‘Coming Home From Tarwin’s Gap.’ ” He finished hesitantly, as if suddenly realizing that he was bringing up what they had been avoiding, but Agelmar handled it smoothly.

“Little wonder. Few lands have not sent men to hold back the Blight over the years.”

Rand looked at Mat and Perrin. Mat silently formed the word Manetheren.

Agelmar whispered to one of the servants, and while others cleared the table that man vanished and returned with a canister, and clay pipes for Lan, Loial, and Lord Agelmar. “Two Rivers tabac,” the Lord of Fal Dara said as they filled their pipes. “Hard to come by, here, but worth the cost.”

When Loial and the two older men were puffing contentedly, Agelmar glanced at the Ogier. “You seem troubled, Builder. Not beset by the Longing, I hope. How long have you been away from the *stedding*?”

“It is not the Longing; I have not been gone such a time as that.” Loial shrugged, and the blue-gray streamer rising from his pipe made a spiral above the table as he gestured. “I expected—hoped—that the grove would still be here. Some remnant of Mafal Dadaranell, at least.”

“Kiserai ti Wansho,” Agelmar murmured. “The Trolloc Wars left nothing but memories, Loial, son of Arent, and people to build on them. They could not duplicate the Builders’ work, any more than could I. Those intricate curves and patterns your people create are beyond human eyes and hands to make. Perhaps we wished to avoid a poor imitation that would only have been an ever-present reminder to us of what we had lost. There is a different beauty in simplicity, in a single line placed just so, a single flower among the rocks. The harshness of the stone makes the flower more precious. We try not to dwell too much on what is gone. The strongest heart will break under that strain.”

“The rose petal floats on water,” Lan recited softly. “The kingfisher flashes above the pond. Life and beauty swirl in the midst of death.”

“Yes,” Agelmar said. “Yes. That one has always symbolized the whole of it to me, too.” The two men bowed their heads to one another.

Poetry out of Lan? The man was like an onion; every time Rand thought he knew something about the Warder, he discovered another layer underneath.

Loial nodded slowly. “Perhaps I also dwell too much on what is gone. And yet, the groves were beautiful.” But he was looking at the stark room as if seeing it anew, and suddenly finding things worth seeing.

Ingtar appeared and bowed to Lord Agelmar. “Your pardon, Lord, but you wanted to know of anything out of the ordinary, however small.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“A small thing, Lord. A stranger tried to enter the town. Not of Shienar. By his accent, a Lugarder. Sometimes, at least. When the South Gate guards attempted to question him, he ran away. He was seen to enter the forest, but only a short time later he was found scaling the wall."

"A small thing!" Agelmar's chair scraped across the floor as he stood. "Peace! The tower watch is so negligent a man can reach the walls unseen, and you call it a small thing?"

"He is a madman, Lord." Awe touched Ingtar's voice. "The Light shields madmen. Perhaps the Light cloaked the tower watch's eyes and allowed him to reach the walls. Surely one poor madman can do no harm."

"Has he been brought to the keep yet? Good. Bring him to me here. Now." Ingtar bowed and left, and Agelmar turned to Moiraine. "Your pardon, Aes Sedai, but I must see to this. Perhaps he is only a pitiful wretch with his mind blinded by the Light, but. . . . Two days gone, five of our own people were found in the night trying to saw through the hinges of a horse-gate. Small, but enough to let Trollocs in." He grimaced. "Darkfriends, I suppose, though I hate to think it of any Shienaran. They were torn to pieces by the people before the guards could take them, so I'll never know. If Shienarans can be Darkfriends, I must be especially careful of outlanders in these days. If you wish to withdraw, I will have you shown to your rooms."

"Darkfriends know neither border nor blood," Moiraine said. "They are found in every land, and are *of* none. I, too, am interested in seeing this man. The Pattern is forming a Web, Lord Agelmar, but the final shape of the Web is not yet set. It may yet entangle the world, or unravel and set the Wheel to a new weaving. At this point, even small things can change the shape of the Web. At this point I am wary of small things out of the ordinary."

Agelmar glanced at Nynaeve and Egwene. "As you wish, Aes Sedai."

Ingtar returned, with two guards carrying long bills, and escorting a man who looked like a ragbag turned inside out. Grime layered his face and matted his scraggly, uncut hair and beard. He hunched into the room, sunken eyes darting this way and that. A rancid smell wafted ahead of him.

Rand sat forward intently, trying to see through all the dirt.

"You've no cause to be holding me like this," the filthy man whined. "I'm only a poor destitute, abandoned by the Light and seeking a place, like everyone else, to shelter from the Shadow."

"The Borderlands are a strange place to seek—" Agelmar began, when Mat cut him off.

"The peddler!"

“Padan Fain,” Perrin agreed, nodding.

“The beggar,” Rand said, suddenly hoarse. He sat back at the sudden hatred that flared in Fain’s eyes. “He’s the man who was asking about us in Caemlyn. He has to be.”

“So this concerns you after all, Moiraine Sedai,” Agelmar said slowly.

Moiraine nodded. “I greatly fear that it does.”

“I didn’t want to.” Fain began to cry. Fat tears cut runnels in the dirt on his cheeks, but they were unable to reach the bottom layer. “He made me! Him and his burning eyes.” Rand flinched. Mat had his hand under his coat, no doubt clutching the dagger from Shadar Logoth again. “He made me his hound! His hound, to hunt and follow with never a bit of rest. Only his hound, even after he threw me away.”

“It does concern us all,” Moiraine said grimly. “Is there a place where I can talk with him alone, Lord Agelmar?” Her mouth tightened with distaste. “And wash him first. I may need to touch him.” Agelmar nodded and spoke softly to Ingtar, who bowed and disappeared through the door.

“I will not be compelled!” The voice was Fain’s, but he was no longer crying, and an arrogant snap had replaced the whine. He stood upright, not crouching at all. Throwing back his head, he shouted at the ceiling. “Never again! I—will—not!” He faced Agelmar as if the men flanking him were his own bodyguard and the Lord of Fal Dara his equal rather than his captor. His tone became sleek and oily. “There is a misunderstanding here, Great Lord. I am sometimes taken by spells, but that will pass soon. Yes, soon I will be rid of them.” Contemptuously he flicked his fingers against the rags he wore. “Do not be misled by these, Great Lord. I have had to disguise myself against those who have tried to stop me, and my journey has been long and hard. But at last I have reached lands where men still know the dangers of Ba’alzamon, where men still fight the Dark One.”

Rand stared, goggling. It *was* Fain’s voice, but the words did not sound like the peddler at all.

“So you’ve come here because we fight Trollocs,” Agelmar said. “And you are so important that someone wants to stop you. These people say you are a peddler called Padan Fain, and that you are following them.”

Fain hesitated. He glanced at Moiraine and hurriedly pulled his eyes away from the Aes Sedai. His gaze ran across the Emond’s Fielders, then jerked back to Agelmar. Rand felt the hate in that look, and the fear. When Fain spoke again, though, his voice was unruffled. “Padan Fain is simply one of the many disguises I have been forced to wear over the years. Friends of the Dark pursue me, for I have learned how to defeat the Shadow. I can show you how to defeat him, Great Lord."

"We do as well as men can," Agelmar said dryly. "The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, but we have fought the Dark One almost since the Breaking of the World without peddlers to teach us how."

"Great Lord, your might is unquestioned, but can it stand against the Dark One forever? Do you not often find yourself pressed to hold? Forgive my temerity, Great Lord; he will crush you in the end, as you are. I know; believe me, I do. But I can show you how to scour the Shadow from the land, Great Lord." His tone became even more unctuous, though still haughty. "If you but try what I advise, you will see, Great Lord. You will cleanse the land. You, Great Lord, can do it, if you direct your might in the right direction. Avoid letting Tar Valon entangle you in its snares, and you can save the world. Great Lord, you will be the man remembered through history for bringing final victory to the Light." The guards held their places, but their hands shifted on the long shafts of the bills as if they thought they might have to use them.

"He thinks a great deal of himself for a peddler," Agelmar said to Lan over his shoulder. "I think Ingtar is right. He is mad."

Fain's eyes tightened angrily, but his voice remained smooth. "Great Lord, I know my words must appear grandiose, but if you will only—" He cut off abruptly, stepping back, as Moiraine rose and started slowly around the table. Only the guards' lowered bills kept Fain from backing right out of the room.

Stopping behind Mat's chair, Moiraine put a hand on his shoulder and bent to whisper in his ear. Whatever she said, the tension went out of his face, and he took his hand from under his coat. The Aes Sedai went on until she stood beside Agelmar, confronting Fain. As she came to a halt, the peddler sank into a crouch once more.

"I hate him," he whimpered. "I want to be free of him. I want to walk in the Light again." His shoulders began to shake, and tears streamed down his face even more heavily than before. "He made me do it."

"I am afraid he is more than a peddler, Lord Agelmar," Moiraine said. "Less than human, worse than vile, more dangerous than you can imagine. He can be bathed after I have spoken with him. I dare not waste a minute. Come, Lan."

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CHAPTER
47

More Tales of the Wheel

An itchy restlessness had Rand pacing beside the dining table. Twelve strides. The table was exactly twelve strides long no matter how many times he stepped it off. Irritably he made himself stop keeping tally. *Stupid thing to be doing. I don't care how long the bloody table is.* A few minutes later he discovered that he was counting the number of trips he made up the table and back. *What* is *he saying to Moiraine and Lan? Does he know why the Dark One is after us? Does he know* which *of us the Dark One wants?*

He glanced at his friends. Perrin had crumbled a piece of bread and was idly pushing the crumbs around on the table with one finger. His yellow eyes stared unblinking at the crumbs, but they seemed to see something far off. Mat slouched in his chair, eyes half closed and the beginnings of a grin on his face. It was a nervous grin, not amusement. Outwardly he looked like the old Mat, but from time to time he unconsciously touched the Shadar Logoth dagger through his coat. *What is Fain telling her? What does he know?*

Loial, at least, did not look worried. The Ogier was studying the walls. First he had stood in the middle of the room and stared, turning slowly in a circle; now he was almost pressing his broad nose against the stone while he gently traced a particular join with fingers thicker than most men's thumbs. Sometimes he closed his eyes, as if the feeling was more important than seeing. His ears gave an occasional twitch, and he muttered to himself in Ogier, appearing to have forgotten anyone else was in the room with him.

Lord Agelmar stood talking quietly with Nynaeve and Egwene in front of the long fireplace at the end of the room. He was a good host, adept at making people forget their troubles; several of his stories had Egwene in giggles. Once even Nynaeve threw back her head and roared with laughter. Rand gave a start at the unexpected sound, and jumped again when Mat's chair crashed to the floor.

“Blood and ashes!” Mat growled, ignoring the way Nynaeve’s mouth tightened at his language. “What’s taking her so long?” He righted his chair and sat back down without looking at anyone. His hand strayed to his coat.

The Lord of Fal Dara looked at Mat disapprovingly—his gaze took in Rand and Perrin without any improvement—then turned back to the women. Rand’s pacing had taken him close to them.

“My Lord,” Egwene was saying, as glibly as if she had been using titles all of her life, “I thought he was a Warder, but you call him Dai Shan, and talk about a Golden Crane banner, and so did those other men. Sometimes you sound almost as if he’s a king. I remember once Moiraine called him the last Lord of the Seven Towers. Who is he?”

Nynaeve began studying her cup intently, but it was obvious to Rand that abruptly she was listening even more closely than was Egwene. Rand stopped and tried to overhear without seeming to eavesdrop.

“Lord of the Seven Towers,” Agelmar said with a frown. “An ancient title, Lady Egwene. Not even the High Lords of Tear have older, though the Queen of Andor comes close.” He heaved a sigh, and shook his head. “He will not speak of it, yet the story is well known along the Border. He is a king, or should have been, al’Lan Mandragoran, Lord of the Seven Towers, Lord of the Lakes, crownless King of the Malkieri.” His shaven head lifted high, and there was a light in his eye as if he felt a father’s pride. His voice grew stronger, filled with the force of his feeling. The whole room could hear without straining. “We of Shienar call ourselves Bordermen, but fewer than fifty years ago, Shienar was not truly of the Borderlands. North of us, and of Arafel, was Malkier. The lances of Shienar rode north, but it was Malkier that held back the Blight. Malkier, Peace favor her memory, and the Light illumine her name.”

“Lan is from Malkier,” the Wisdom said softly, looking up. She seemed troubled.

It was not a question, but Agelmar nodded. “Yes, Lady Nynaeve, he is the son of al’Akir Mandragoran, last crowned King of the Malkieri. How did he become as he is? The beginning, perhaps, was Lain. On a dare, Lain Mandragoran, the King’s brother, led his lances through the Blight to the Blasted Lands, perhaps to Shayol Ghul itself. Lain’s wife, Breyan, made that dare for the envy that burned her heart that al’Akir had been raised to the throne instead of Lain. The King and Lain were as close as brothers could be, as close as twins even after the royal ‘al’ was added to Akir’s name, but jealousy wracked Breyan. Lain was acclaimed for his deeds, and rightfully so, but not even he could outshine al'Akir. He was, man and king, such as comes once in a hundred years, if that. Peace favor him, and el'Leanna.

"Lain died in the Blasted Lands with most of those who followed him, men Malkier could ill afford to lose, and Breyan blamed the King, saying that Shayol Ghul itself would have fallen if al'Akir had led the rest of the Malkieri north with her husband. For revenge, she plotted with Cowin Gemallan, called Cowin Fairheart, to seize the throne for her son, Isam. Now Fairheart was a hero almost as well loved as al'Akir himself, and one of the Great Lords, but when the Great Lords had cast the rods for king, only two separated him from Akir, and he never forgot that two men laying a different color on the Crowning Stone would have set him on the throne instead. Between them, Cowin and Breyan moved soldiers back from the Blight to seize the Seven Towers, stripping the Borderforts to bare garrisons.

"But Cowin's jealousy ran deeper." Disgust tinged Agelmar's voice. "Fairheart the hero, whose exploits in the Blight were sung throughout the Borderlands, was a Darkfriend. With the Borderforts weakened, Trollocs poured into Malkier like a flood. King al'Akir and Lain together might have rallied the land; they had done so before. But Lain's doom in the Blasted Lands had shaken the people, and the Trolloc invasion broke men's spirit and their will to resist. Too many men. Overwhelming numbers pushed the Malkieri back into the heartland.

"Breyan fled with her infant son Isam, and was run down by Trollocs as she rode south with him. No one knows their fate of a certainty, but it can be guessed. I can find pity only for the boy. When Cowin Fairheart's treachery was revealed and he was taken by young Jain Charin—already called Jain Farstrider—when Fairheart was brought to the Seven Towers in chains, the Great Lords called for his head on a pike. But because he had been second only to al'Akir and Lain in the hearts of the people, the King faced him in single combat and slew him. Al'Akir wept when he killed Cowin. Some say he wept for a friend who had given himself to the Shadow, and some say for Malkier." The Lord of Fal Dara shook his head sadly.

"The first peal of the doom of the Seven Towers had been struck. There was no time to gather aid from Shienar or Arafel, and no hope that

Malkier could stand alone, with five thousand of her lances dead in the Blasted Lands, her Borderforts overrun.

“Al’Akir and his Queen, el’Leanna, had Lan brought to them in his cradle. Into his infant hands they placed the sword of Malkieri kings, the sword he wears today. A weapon made by Aes Sedai during the War of Power, the War of the Shadow that brought down the Age of Legends. They anointed his head with oil, naming him Dai Shan, a Diademed Battle Lord, and consecrated him as the next King of the Malkieri, and in his name they swore the ancient oath of Malkieri kings and queens.” Agelmar’s face hardened, and he spoke the words as if he, too, had sworn that oath, or one much similar. “To stand against the Shadow so long as iron is hard and stone abides. To defend the Malkieri while one drop of blood remains. To avenge what cannot be defended.” The words rang in the chamber.

“El’Leanna placed a locket around her son’s neck, for remembrance, and the infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes by the Queen’s own hand, was given over to twenty chosen from the King’s Bodyguard, the best swordsmen, the most deadly fighters. Their command: to carry the child to Fal Moran.

“Then did al’Akir and el’Leanna lead the Malkieri out to face the Shadow one last time. There they died, at Herat’s Crossing, and the Malkieri died, and the Seven Towers were broken. Shienar, and Arafel, and Kandor, met the Halfmen and the Trollocs at the Stair of Jehaan and threw them back, but not as far as they had been. Most of Malkier remained in Trolloc hands, and year by year, mile by mile, the Blight has swallowed it.” Agelmar drew a heavyhearted breath. When he went on, there was a sad pride in his eyes and voice.

“Only five of the Bodyguards reached Fal Moran alive, every man wounded, but they had the child unharmed. From the cradle they taught him all they knew. He learned weapons as other children learn toys, and the Blight as other children their mother’s garden. The oath sworn over his cradle is graven in his mind. There is nothing left to defend, but he can avenge. He denies his titles, yet in the Borderlands he is called the Uncrowned, and if ever he raised the Golden Crane of Malkier, an army would come to follow. But he will not lead men to their deaths. In the Blight he courts death as a suitor courts a maiden, but he will not lead others to it.

"If you must enter the Blight, and with only a few, there is no man better to take you there, nor to bring you safely out again. He is the best of the Warders, and that means the best of the best. You might as well leave these boys here, to gain a little seasoning, and put your entire trust in Lan. The Blight is no place for untried boys."

Mat opened his mouth, and shut it again at a look from Rand. *I wish he'd learn to keep it shut.*

Nynaeve had listened just as wide-eyed as Egwene, but now she was staring into her cup again, her face pale. Egwene put a hand on her arm and gave her a sympathetic look.

Moiraine appeared in the doorway, Lan at her heels. Nynaeve turned her back on them.

"What did he say?" Rand demanded. Mat rose, and Perrin, too.

"Country oaf," Agelmar muttered, then raised his voice to a normal tone. "Did you learn anything, Aes Sedai, or is he simply a madman?"

"He is mad," Moiraine said, "or close to it, but there is nothing simple about Padan Fain." One of the black-and-gold-liveried servants bowed his way in with a blue washbasin and pitcher, a bar of yellow soap, and a small towel on a silver tray; he looked anxiously at Agelmar. Moiraine directed him to put them on the table. "Your pardon for commanding your servants, Lord Agelmar," she said. "I took the liberty of asking for this."

Agelmar nodded to the servant, who put the tray on the table and left hurriedly. "My servants are yours to command, Aes Sedai."

The water Moiraine poured into the basin steamed as if only just off the boil. She pushed up her sleeves and began vigorously washing her hands without regard for the heat of the water. "I said he was worse than vile, but I did not come close. I do not believe I have ever met someone so abject and debased, yet at the same time so foul. I feel soiled from touching him, and I do not mean for the filth on his skin. Soiled in here." She touched her breast. "The degradation of his soul almost makes me doubt he has one. There is something worse to him than a Darkfriend."

"He looked so pitiful," Egwene murmured. "I remember him arriving in Emond's Field each spring, always laughing and full of news from outside. Surely there's some hope for him? 'No man can stand in the Shadow so long that he cannot find the Light again,' " she quoted.

The Aes Sedai toweled her hands briskly. "I have always believed it so," she said. "Perhaps Padan Fain can be redeemed. But he has been a

Darkfriend more than forty years, and what he has done for that, in blood and pain and death, would freeze your heart to hear. Among the least of these—though not small to you, I suspect—he brought the Trollocs to Emond's Field."

"Yes," Rand said softly. He heard Egwene gasp. *I should have guessed. Burn me, I should have, as soon as I recognized him.*

"Did he bring any here?" Mat asked. He looked at the stone walls around them and shivered. Rand thought he was remembering the Myddraal more than Trollocs; walls had not stopped the Fade at Baerlon, or at Whitebridge.

"If he did"—Agelmar laughed—"they'll break their teeth on the walls of Fal Dara. Many others have before." He was speaking to everyone, but obviously addressing his words to Egwene and Nynaeve, from the glances he gave them. "And do not worry yourself about Halfmen, either." Mat's face reddened. "Every street and alley in Fal Dara is lit by night. And no man may hide his face inside the walls."

"Why would Master Fain do that?" Egwene asked.

"Three years ago. . . ." With a heavy sigh Moiraine sat down, folding up as if what she had done with Fain had drained her. "Three years, this summer. As far back as that. The Light surely favors us, else the Father of Lies would have triumphed while I still sat planning in Tar Valon. Three years, Fain has been hunting you for the Dark One."

"That's crazy!" Rand said. "He's come into the Two Rivers every spring as regular as a clock. Three years? We've been right there in front of him, and he never looked at any of us twice before last year." The Aes Sedai pointed a finger at him, fixing him.

"Fain told me everything, Rand. Or almost everything. I believe he managed to hold back something, something important, despite all I could do, but he said enough. Three years ago, a Halfman came for him in a town in Murandy. Fain was terrified, of course, but it is considered a very great honor among Darkfriends to be so summoned. Fain believed he had been chosen for great things, and he had, though not in the manner he believed. He was brought north to the Blight, to the Blasted Lands. To Shayol Ghul. Where he met a man with eyes of fire, who named himself Ba'alzamon."

Mat shifted uneasily, and Rand swallowed hard. It had to have been that way, of course, but that did not make it any easier to accept. Only Perrin looked at the Aes Sedai as if nothing could surprise him any longer.

“The Light protect us,” Agelmar said fervently.

“Fain did not like what was done to him at Shayol Ghul,” Moiraine continued calmly. “While we talked, he screamed often of fire and burning. It almost killed him, bringing it all out from where he had it hidden. Even with my Healing he is a shattered ruin. It will take much to make him whole again. I will make the effort, though, if for no other reason than to learn what more he still hides. He had been chosen because of where he did his peddling. No,” she said quickly when they stirred, “not the Two Rivers only, not then. The Father of Lies knew roughly where to find what he sought, but not much better than we in Tar Valon.

“Fain said he has been made the Dark One’s hound, and in a way he is right. The Father of Lies set Fain to hunt, first changing him so he could carry out that hunt. It is the things done to bring about those changes that Fain fears to remember; he hates his master for them as much as he fears him. So Fain was sent sniffing and hunting through all the villages around Baerlon, and all the way to the Mountains of Mist, and down to the Taren and across into the Two Rivers.”

“Three springs ago?” Perrin said slowly. “I remember that spring. Fain came later than usual, but what was strange was that he lingered on. A whole week he remained, idle and gnashing his teeth about laying out money for a room at the Winespring Inn. Fain likes his money.”

“I remember, now,” Mat said. “Everybody was wondering was he sick, or had he fallen for a local woman? Not that any of them would marry a peddler, of course. As well marry one of the Traveling People.” Egwene raised an eyebrow at him, and he shut his mouth.

“After that, Fain was taken to Shayol Ghul again, and his mind was—distilled.” Rand’s stomach turned over at the tone in the Aes Sedai’s voice; it told more of what she meant than the grimace that flashed across her face. “What he had . . . sensed . . . was concentrated and fed back. When he entered the Two Rivers the next year, he was able to choose his targets out more clearly. Indeed, more clearly even than the Dark One had expected. Fain knew for a certainty that the one he sought was one of three in Emond’s Field.”

Perrin grunted, and Mat began cursing in a soft monotone that even Nynaeve’s glare did not stop. Agelmar looked at them curiously. Rand felt only the faintest chill, and wondered at it. Three years the Dark One had been hunting him . . . hunting them. He was sure it should have made his teeth chatter.

Moiraine did not allow Mat to interrupt her. She raised her voice enough to be heard over him. “When Fain returned to Lugard, Ba’alzamon came to him in a dream. Fain abased himself and performed rites that would strike you deaf to hear the half of them, binding himself even more tightly to the Dark One. What is done in dreams can be more dangerous than what is done awake.” Rand stirred at the sharp, warning look, but she did not pause. “He was promised great rewards, power over kingdoms after Ba’alzamon’s victory, and told that when he returned to Emond’s Field he was to mark the three he had found. A Halfman would be there, waiting for him with Trollocs. We know now how the Trollocs came to the Two Rivers. There must have been an Ogier grove and a Waygate at Manetheren.”

“The most beautiful of all,” Loial said, “except for Tar Valon.” He had been listening as intently as everyone else. “Manetheren is remembered fondly by the Ogier.” Agelmar formed the name silently, his eyebrows raised in wonder. Manetheren.

“Lord Agelmar,” Moiraine said, “I will tell you how to find the Waygate of Mafal Dadaranell. It must be walled up and a guard set, and none allowed near. The Halfmen have not learned all of the Ways yet, but that Waygate is to the south and only hours from Fal Dara.”

The Lord of Fal Dara gave himself a shake, as if he were coming out of a trance. “South? Peace! We don’t need that, the Light shine on us. It shall be done.”

“Did Fain follow us through the Ways?” Perrin asked. “He must have done.”

Moiraine nodded. “Fain would follow you three into the grave, because he must. When the Myrddraal failed at Emond’s Field, it brought Fain with the Trollocs on our trail. The Fade would not let Fain ride with him; although he thought he should have the best horse in the Two Rivers and ride at the head of the band, the Myrddraal forced him to run with the Trollocs, and the Trollocs to carry him when his feet gave out. They talked so that he could understand, arguing about the best way to cook him when his usefulness was done. Fain claims he turned against the Dark One before they reached the Taren. But sometimes his greed for his promised rewards seeps into the open.

“When we had escaped across the Taren the Myrddraal took the Trollocs back to the closest Waygate, in the Mountains of Mist, and sent Fain across alone. He thought he was free then, but before he reached Baerlon another Fade found him, and that one was not so kind. It made him sleep doubled up on himself in a Trolloc kettle at night, to remind him of the price of failure. That one used him as far as Shadar Logoth. By then Fain was willing to give the Myrddraal his mother if it would free him, but the Dark One never willingly loosens a hold he has gained.

“What I did there, sending an illusion of our tracks and smell off toward the mountains, fooled the Myrddraal, but not Fain. The Halfmen did not believe him; afterward, they dragged him behind them on a leash. Only when we seemed to keep always just ahead, no matter how hard they pressed, did some begin to credit him. Those were the four who returned to Shadar Logoth. Fain claims it was Ba’alzamon himself who drove the Myrddraal.”

Agelmar shook his head contemptuously. “The Dark One? Pah! The man’s lying or mad. If Heartsbane were loose, we’d all of us be dead by now, or worse.”

“Fain spoke the truth as he saw it,” Moiraine said. “He could not lie to me, though he hid much. His words. ‘Ba’alzamon appeared like a flickering candle flame, vanishing and reappearing, never in the same place twice. His eyes seared the Myrddraal, and the fires of his mouth scourged us.’ ”

“Something,” Lan said, “drove four Fades to where they feared to go—a place they fear almost as much as they fear the wrath of the Dark One.”

Agelmar grunted as if he had been kicked; he looked sick.

“It was evil against evil in the ruins of Shadar Logoth,” Moiraine continued, “foul fighting vile. When Fain spoke of it, his teeth chattered and he whimpered. Many Trollocs were slain, consumed by Mashadar and other things, including the Trolloc that held Fain’s leash. He fled the city as if it were the Pit of Doom, at Shayol Ghul.

“Fain believed he was free at last. He intended to run until Ba’alzamon could never find him again, to the ends of the earth if necessary. Imagine his horror when he discovered that the compulsion to hunt did not lessen. Instead, it grew stronger and sharper with every day that passed. He could not eat, except what he could scavenge while he hunted you—beetles and lizards snatched while he ran, half-rotten refuse dug from midden heaps in the dark of night—nor could he stop until exhaustion collapsed him like an empty sack. And as soon as he had strength to stand again, he was driven on. By the time he reached Caemlyn he could *feel* his quarry even when it was a mile away. Here, in the cells below, he would sometimes look up without realizing what he was doing. He was looking in the direction of this room."

Rand had a sudden itch between his shoulder blades; it was as if he could feel Fain's eyes on him then, through the intervening stone. The Aes Sedai noticed his uneasy shrug, but she went on implacably.

"If Fain was half mad by the time he reached Caemlyn, he sank even further when he realized that only two of those he sought were there. He was compelled to find *all* of you, but he could do no other than follow the two who were there, either. He spoke of screaming when the Waygate opened in Caemlyn. The knowledge of how to do it was in his mind; he does not know how it came there; his hands moved of their own accord, burning with the fires of Ba'alzamon when he tried to stop them. The owner of the shop, who came to investigate the noise, Fain murdered. Not because he had to, but out of envy that the man could walk freely out of the cellar while his feet carried him inexorably into the Ways."

"Then Fain was the one you sensed following us," Egwene said. Lan nodded. "How did he escape the . . . the Black Wind?" Her voice shook; she stopped to swallow. "It was right behind us at the Waygate."

"He escaped, and he did not," Moiraine said. "The Black Wind caught him—and he claimed to understand the voices. Some greeted him as like to them; others feared him. No sooner did the Wind envelop Fain than it fled."

"The Light preserve us." Loial's whisper rumbled like a giant bumblebee.

"Pray that it does," Moiraine said. "There is much yet hidden about Padan Fain, much I must learn. The evil goes deeper in him, and stronger, than in any man I have yet seen. It maybe that the Dark One, in doing what he did to Fain, impressed some part of himself on the man, perhaps even, unknowing, some part of his intent. When I mentioned the Eye of the World, Fain clamped his jaws shut, but I felt something knowing behind the silence. If only I had the time now. But we cannot wait."

"If this man knows something," Agelmar said, "I can get it out of him." His face held no mercy for Darkfriends; his voice promised no pity for Fain. "If you can learn even a part of what you will face in the Blight, it’s worth an extra day. Battles have been lost for not knowing what the enemy intends.”

Moiraine sighed and shook her head ruefully. “My lord, if we did not need at least one good night’s sleep before facing the Blight, I would ride within the hour, though it meant the risk of meeting a Trolloc raid in the dark. Consider what I did learn from Fain. Three years ago the Dark One had to have Fain brought to Shayol Ghul to touch him, despite the fact that Fain is a Darkfriend dedicated to his marrow. One year ago, the Dark One could command Fain, the Darkfriend, through his dreams. This year, Ba’alzamon walks in the dreams of those who live in the Light, and actually appears, if with difficulty, at Shadar Logoth. Not in his own body, of course, but even a projection of the Dark One’s mind, even a projection that flickers and cannot hold, is more deathly dangerous to the world than all the Trolloc hordes combined. The seals on Shayol Ghul are weakening desperately, Lord Agelmar. There is no time.”

Agelmar bowed his head in acquiescence, but when he raised it again there was still a stubborn set to his mouth. “Aes Sedai, I can accept that when I lead the lances to Tarwin’s Gap we will be no more than a diversion, or a skirmish on the outskirts of the real battle. Duty takes men where it will as surely as does the Pattern, and neither promises that what we do will have greatness. But our skirmish will be useless, even should we win, if you lose the battle. If you say your party must be small, I say well and good, but I beg you to make every effort to see that you *can* win. Leave these young men here, Aes Sedai. I swear to you that I can find three experienced men with no thought of glory in their heads to replace them, good swordsmen who are almost as handy in the Blight as Lan. Let me ride to the Gap knowing that I have done what I can to help you be victorious.”

“I must take them and no others, Lord Agelmar,” Moiraine said gently. “They are the ones who will fight the battle at the Eye of the World.”

Agelmar’s jaw dropped, and he stared at Rand and Mat and Perrin. Suddenly the Lord of Fal Dara took a step back, his hand groping unconsciously for the sword he never wore inside the fortress. “They aren’t. . . . You are not Red Ajah, Moiraine Sedai, but surely not even you would. . . .” Sudden sweat glistened on his shaven head.

“They are *ta’veren,*” Moiraine said soothingly. “The Pattern weaves itself around them. Already the Dark One has tried to kill each of them more than once. Three *ta’veren* in one place are enough to change the life around them as surely as a whirl pool changes the path of a straw. When the place is the Eye of the World, the Pattern might weave even the Father of Lies into itself, and make him harmless again."

Agelmar stopped trying to find his sword, but he still looked at Rand and the others doubtfully. "Moiraine Sedai, if you say they are, then they are, but I cannot see it. Farmboys. Are you certain, Aes Sedai?"

"The old blood," Moiraine said, "split out like a river breaking into a thousand times a thousand streams, but sometimes streams join together to make a river again. The old blood of Manetheren is strong and pure in almost all these young men. Can you doubt the strength of Manetheren's blood, Lord Agelmar?"

Rand glanced sideways at the Aes Sedai. *Almost all.* He risked a look at Nynaeve; she had turned back to watch as well as listen, though she still avoided looking at Lan. He caught the Wisdom's eye. She shook her head; she had not told the Aes Sedai that he was not Two Rivers born. *What does Moiraine know?*

"Manetheren," Agelmar said slowly, nodding. "I would not doubt that blood." Then, more quickly, "The Wheel brings strange times. Farmboys carry the honor of Manetheren into the Blight, yet if any blood can strike a fell blow at the Dark One, it would be the blood of Manetheren. It shall be done as you wish, Aes Sedai."

"Then let us go to our rooms," Moiraine said. "We must leave with the sun, for time grows short. The young men must sleep close to me. Time is too short before the battle to allow the Dark One another strike at them. Too short."

Rand felt her eyes on him, studying him and his friends, weighing their strength, and he shivered. Too short.

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CHAPTER

48

The Blight

The wind whipped Lan’s cloak, sometimes making him hard to see even in the sunlight, and Ingtar and the hundred lances Lord Agelmar had sent to escort them to the Border, in case they met a Trolloc raid, made a brave display in double column with their armor and their red pennants and their steel-clad horses led by Ingtar’s Gray Owl banner. They were easily as grand as a hundred of the Queen’s Guards, but it was the towers just in sight ahead of them that Rand studied. He had had all morning to watch the Shienaran lances.

Each tower stood tall and solid atop a hill, half a mile from its neighbor. East and west others rose, and more beyond those. A broad, walled ramp spiraled around each stone shaft, winding all the way around by the time it reached the heavy gates halfway to the crenellated top. A sortie from the garrison would be protected by the wall until it reached the ground, but enemies striving to reach the gate would climb under a hail of arrows and stones and hot oil from the big kettles poised on the outward flaring ramparts above. A large steel mirror, carefully turned down, away from the sun, now, glittered atop each tower below the high iron cup where signal fires could be lit when the sun did not shine. The signal would be flashed, to towers further from the Border, and by those to still others, and so relayed to the heartland fortresses, from where the lances would ride to turn back the raid. Were times normal, they would.

From the two nearest tower tops men watched them approach. Just a few men on each, peering curiously through the crenels. In the best of times the towers were only manned enough for self-defense, depending more on stone walls than strong arms to survive, but every man who could be spared, and more, was riding to Tarwin's Gap. The fall of the towers would not matter if the lances failed to hold the Gap.

Rand shivered as they rode between the towers. It was almost as if he had ridden through a wall of colder air. This was the Border. The land beyond looked no different from Shienar, but out there, somewhere beyond the leafless trees, was the Blight.

Ingtar lifted a steel fist to halt the lances short of a plain stone post in sight of the towers. A borderpost, marking the boundary between Shienar and what once was Malkier. "Your pardon, Moiraine Aes Sedai. Pardon, Dai Shan. Pardon, Builder. Lord Agelmar commanded me to go no further." He sounded unhappy about it, disgruntled at life in general.

"That is as we planned, Lord Agelmar and I," Moiraine said.

Ingtar grunted sourly. "Pardon, Aes Sedai," he apologized, not sounding as if he meant it. "To escort you here means we may not reach the Gap before the fighting is done. I am robbed of the chance to stand with the rest, and at the same time I am commanded not to ride one step beyond the borderpost, as if I had never before been in the Blight. And My Lord Agelmar will not tell me why." Behind the bars of his face-guard, his eyes turned the last word into a question to the Aes Sedai. He scorned to look at Rand and the others; he had learned they would accompany Lan into the Blight.

"He can have my place," Mat muttered to Rand. Lan gave them both a sharp look. Mat dropped his eyes, his face turning red.

"Each of us has his part in the Pattern, Ingtar," Moiraine said firmly. "From here we must thread ours alone."

Ingtar's bow was stiffer than his armor made it. "As you wish it, Aes Sedai. I must leave you, now, and ride hard in order to reach Tarwin's Gap. At least I will be . . . *allowed* . . . to face Trollocs there."

"Are you truly that eager?" Nynaeve asked. "To fight Trollocs?"

Ingtar gave her a puzzled look, then glanced at Lan as if the Warder might explain. "That is what I do, Lady," he said slowly. "That is why I am." He raised a gauntleted hand to Lan, open palm toward the warder. "*Suravye ninto manshima taishite, Dai Shan.* Peace favor your sword." Pulling his horse around, Ingtar rode east with his bannerman and his hundred lances. They went at a walk, but a steady pace, as fast as armored horses could manage with a far distance yet to go.

“What a strange thing to say,” Egwene said. “Why do they use it like that? Peace.”

“When you have never known a thing except to dream,” Lan replied, heeling Mandarb forward, “it becomes more than a talisman.”

As Rand followed the Warder past the stone borderpost, he turned in his saddle to look back, watching Ingtar and the lances disappear behind barren trees, and the borderpost vanish, and last of all the towers on their hilltops, looking over the trees. All too soon they were alone, riding north under the leafless canopy of the forest. Rand sank into watchful silence, and for once even Mat had nothing to say.

That morning the gates of Fal Dara had opened with the dawn. Lord Agelmar, armored and helmeted now like his soldiers, rode with the Black Hawk banner and the Three Foxes from the East Gate toward the sun, still only a red sliver above the trees. Like a steel snake undulating to mounted kettledrums, the column wound its way out of the town four abreast, Agelmar at its head hidden in the forest before its tail left Fal Dara keep. There were no cheers in the streets to speed them on their way, only their own drums and their pennants’ cracking in the wind, but their eyes looked toward the rising sun with purpose. Eastward they would join other steel serpents, from Fal Moran, behind King Easar himself with his sons at his side, and from Ankor Dail, that held the Eastern Marches and guarded the Spine of the World; from Mos Shirare and Fal Sion and Camron Caan, and all the other fortresses in Shienar, great and small. Joined into a greater serpent, they would turn north to Tarwin’s Gap.

Another exodus had begun at the same time, using the King’s Gate that led out on the way to Fal Moran. Carts and wagons, people mounted and people afoot, driving their livestock, carrying children on their backs, faces as long as the morning shadows. Reluctance to leave their homes, perhaps forever, slowed their feet, yet fear of what was coming spurred them, so that they went in bursts, feet dragging, then breaking into a run for a dozen paces only to fall back, once more, to shuffling through the dust. A few paused outside the town to watch the soldiers’ armored line winding into the forest. Hope blossomed in some eyes, and prayers were muttered, prayers for the soldiers, prayers for themselves, before they turned south again, trudging.

The smallest column went out of the Malkier Gate. Left behind were a few who would remain, soldiers and a sprinkling of older men, their wives dead and their grown children making the slow way south. A last handful so that Whatever happened in Tarwin's Gap, Fal Dara would not fall undefended. Ingtar's Gray Owl led the way, but it was Moiraine who took them north. The most important column of all, and the most desperate.

For at least an hour after they passed the borderpost there was no change in land or forest. The Warder kept them at a hard pace, as fast a walk as the horses could maintain, but Rand kept wondering when they would reach the Blight. The hills became a little higher, but the trees, and the creepers, and the underbrush were no different than what he had seen in Shienar, gray and all but leafless. He began to feel warmer, warm enough to sling his cloak across the pommel of his saddle.

"This is the best weather we've seen all year," Egwene said, shrugging out of her own cloak.

Nynaeve shook her head, frowning as if listening to the wind. "It feels wrong."

Rand nodded. He could feel it, too, though he could not say what it was exactly he was feeling. The wrongness went beyond the first warmth he could remember out of doors this year; it was more than the simple fact that it should not be so warm this far north. It must be the Blight, but the land was the same.

The sun climbed high, a red ball that could not give so much warmth despite the cloudless sky. A little while later he unbuttoned his coat. Sweat trickled down his face.

He was not the only one. Mat took his coat off, openly displaying the gold-and-ruby dagger, and wiped his face with the end of his scarf. Blinking, he rewound the scarf into a narrow band low over his eyes. Nynaeve and Egwene fanned themselves; they rode slumped as if they were wilting. Loial undid his high-collared tunic all the way down, and his shirt as well; the Ogier had a narrow strip of hair up the middle of his chest, as thick as fur. He muttered apologies all around.

"You must forgive me. Stedding Shangtai is in the mountains, and cool." His broad nostrils flared, drawing in air that was becoming warmer by the minute. "I don't like this heat, and damp."

It *was* damp, Rand realized. It felt like the Mire in the depths of summer, back in the Two Rivers. In that boggy swamp every breath came as if through a wool blanket soaked in hot water. There was no soggy ground here—only a few ponds and streams, trickles to someone used to the

Waterwood—but the air was like that in the Mire. Only Perrin, still in his coat, was breathing easily. Perrin and the Warder.

There were a few leaves now, on trees that were not evergreen. Rand reached out to touch a branch, and stopped with his hand short of the leaves. Sickly yellow mottled the red of the new growth, and black flecks like disease.

"I told you not to touch anything." The Warder's voice was flat. He still wore his shifting cloak, as if heat made no more impression on him than cold; it almost made his angular face seem to float unsupported above Mandarb's back. "Flowers can kill in the Blight, and leaves maim. There's a little thing called a Stick that likes to hide where the leaves are thickest, looking like its name, waiting for something to touch it. When something does, it bites. Not poison. The juice begins to digest the Stick's prey for it. The only thing that can save you is to cut off the arm or leg that was bitten. But a Stick won't bite unless you touch it. Other things in the Blight will."

Rand jerked his hand back, leaves untouched, and wiped it on his pants leg.

"Then we're in the Blight?" Perrin said. Strangely, he did not sound frightened.

"Just the fringe," Lan said grimly. His stallion kept moving forward, and he spoke over his shoulder. "The real Blight still lies ahead. There are things in the Blight that hunt by sound, and some may have wandered this far south. Sometimes they cross the Mountains of Dhoom. Much worse than Sticks. Keep quiet and keep up, if you want to stay alive." He continued to set a hard pace, not waiting for an answer.

Mile by mile the corruption of the Blight became more apparent. Leaves covered the trees in ever greater profusion, but stained and spotted with yellow and black, with livid red streaks like blood poisoning. Every leaf and creeper seemed bloated, ready to burst at a touch. Flowers hung on trees and weeds in a parody of spring, sickly pale and pulpy, waxen things that appeared to be rotting while Rand watched. When he breathed through his nose, the sweet stench of decay, heavy and thick, sickened him; when he tried breathing through his mouth, he almost gagged. The air tasted like a mouthful of spoiled meat. The horses' hooves made a soft squishing as rotten-ripe things broke open under them.

Mat leaned out of his saddle and spewed until his stomach was empty. Rand sought the void, but calmness was little help against the burning bile that kept creeping up his throat. Empty or not, Mat heaved again a mile later, bringing up nothing, and yet again after that. Egwene looked as if she wanted to be sick, too, swallowing constantly, and Nynaeve's face was a white mask of determination, her jaw set and her eyes fixed on Moiraine's back. The Wisdom would not admit to feeling ill unless the Aes Sedai did, first, but Rand did not think she would have to wait long. Moiraine's eyes were tight, and her lips pale.

Despite the heat and damp, Loial wrapped a scarf around his nose and mouth. When he met Rand's gaze, the Ogier's outrage and disgust were plain in his eyes. "I had heard—" he began, his voice muffled by the wool, then stopped to clear his throat with a grimace. "Faugh! It tastes like. . . . Faugh! I had heard and read about the Blight, but nothing could describe. . . ." His gesture somehow took in the smell as well as the eye-sickening growth. "That even the Dark One should do this to trees! Faugh!"

The Warder was not affected, of course, at least not that Rand could see, but to his surprise neither was Perrin. Or rather, not in the way the rest of them were. The big youth glared at the obscene forest through which they rode as he might have at an enemy, or the banner of an enemy. He caressed the axe at his belt as if unaware of what he was doing, and muttered to himself, half growling in a way that made the hair on Rand's neck stir. Even in full sunlight his eyes glowed, golden and fierce.

The heat did not abate as the bloody sun fell toward the horizon. In the distance to the north, mountains rose, higher than the Mountains of Mist, black against the sky. Sometimes an icy wind from the sharp peaks gusted far enough to reach them. The torrid humidity leached away most of the mountain chill, but what remained was winter-cold compared to the swelter it replaced, if just for a moment. The sweat on Rand's face seemed to flash into beads of ice; as the wind died, the beads melted again, running angry lines down his cheeks, and the thick heat returned harder than before by comparison. For the instant the wind surrounded them, it swept away the fetor, yet he would have done without that, too, if he could have. The cold was the chill of the grave, and it carried the dusty must of an old tomb newly opened.

"We cannot reach the mountains by nightfall," Lan said, "and it is dangerous to move at night, even for a Warder alone."

"There is a place not far off," Moiraine said. "It will be a good omen for us to camp there."

The Warder gave her a flat look, then nodded reluctantly. “Yes. We must camp somewhere. It might as well be there.”

“The Eye of the World was beyond the high passes when I found it,” Moiraine said. “Better to cross the Mountains of Dhoom in full daylight, at noon, when the Dark One’s powers in this world are weakest.”

“You talk as if the Eye isn’t always in the same place.” Egwene spoke to the Aes Sedai, but it was Loial who answered.

“No two among the Ogier have found it in exactly the same place. The Green Man seems to be found where he is needed. But it has always been beyond the high passes. They are treacherous, the high passes, and haunted by creatures of the Dark One.”

“We must reach the passes before we need worry about them,” Lan said. “Tomorrow we will be truly into the Blight.”

Rand looked at the forest around him, every leaf and flower diseased, every creeper decaying as it grew, and he could not repress a shudder. *If this isn’t truly the Blight, what is?*

Lan turned them westward, at an angle to the sinking sun. The Warder maintained the pace he had set before, but there was reluctance in the set of his shoulders.

The sun was a sullen red ball just touching the treetops when they crested a hill and the Warder drew rein. Beyond them to the west lay a network of lakes, the waters glittering darkly in the slanting sunlight, like beads of random size on a necklace of many strings. In the distance, circled by the lakes, stood jagged-topped hills, thick in the creeping shadows of evening. For one brief instant the sun’s rays caught the shattered tops, and Rand’s breath stilled. Not hills. The broken remnants of seven towers. He was not sure if anyone else had seen it; the sight was gone as quickly as it came. The Warder was dismounting, his face as lacking in emotion as a stone.

“Couldn’t we camp down by the lakes?” Nynaeve asked, patting her face with her kerchief. “It must be cooler down by the water.”

“Light,” Mat said, “I’d just like to stick my head in one of them. I might never take it out.”

Just then something roiled the waters of the nearest lake, the dark water phosphorescing as a huge body rolled beneath the surface. Length on man-thick length sent ripples spreading, rolling on and on until at last a tail rose, waving a point like a wasp’s stinger for an instant in the twilight, at least five spans into the air. All along that length fat tentacles writhed like monstrous worms, as many as a centipede's legs. It slid slowly beneath the surface and was gone, only the fading ripples to say it had ever been.

Rand closed his mouth and exchanged a look with Perrin. Perrin's yellow eyes were as disbelieving as he knew his own must be. Nothing that big could live in a lake that size. *Those couldn't have been* hands *on those tentacles. They couldn't have been.*

"On second thought," Mat said faintly, "I like it right here just fine."

"I will set guarding wards around this hill," Moiraine said. She had already dismounted from Aldieb. "A true barrier would draw the attention we do not want like flies to honey, but if any creation of the Dark One or anything that serves the Shadow comes within a mile of us, I will know."

"I'd be happier with the barrier," Mat said as his boots touched the ground, "just as long as it kept that, that . . . thing on the other side."

"Oh, do be quiet, Mat," Egwene said curtly, at the same time as Nynaeve spoke. "And have them waiting for us when we leave in the morning? You *are* a fool, Matrim Cauthon." Mat glowered at the two women as they climbed down, but he kept his mouth shut.

As he took Bela's reins, Rand shared a grin with Perrin. For a moment it was almost like being home, having Mat saying what he should not at the worst possible time. Then the smile faded from Perrin's face; in the twilight his eyes *did* glow, as if they had a yellow light behind them. Rand's grin slipped away, too. *It isn't like home at all.*

Rand and Mat and Perrin helped Lan unsaddle and hobble the horses while the others began setting up the camp. Loial muttered to himself as he set up the Warder's tiny stove, but his thick fingers moved deftly. Egwene was humming as she filled the tea kettle from a bulging waterbag. Rand no longer wondered why the Warder had insisted on bringing so many full waterskins.

Setting the bay's saddle in line with the others, he unfastened his saddlebags and blanketroll from the cantle, turned, and stopped with a tingle of fear. The Ogier and the women were gone. So was the stove and all the wicker panniers from the pack horse. The hilltop was empty except for evening shadows.

With a numb hand he fumbled for his sword, dimly hearing Mat curse. Perrin had his axe out, his shaggy head swiveling to find the danger.

“Sheepherders,” Lan muttered. Unconcernedly the Warder strode across the hilltop, and at his third step, he vanished.

Rand exchanged wide-eyed looks with Mat and Perrin, and then they were all darting for where the Warder had disappeared. Abruptly Rand skidded to a halt, taking another step when Mat ran into his back. Egwene looked up from setting the kettle atop the tiny stove. Nynaeve was closing the mantle on a second lit lantern. They were all there, Moiraine sitting cross-legged, Lan lounging on an elbow, Loial taking a book out of his pack.

Cautiously Rand looked behind him. The hillside was there as it had been, the shadowed trees, the lakes beyond sinking into darkness. He was afraid to step back, afraid they would all disappear again and perhaps this time he would not be able to find them. Edging carefully around him, Perrin let out a long breath.

Moiraine noticed the three of them standing there, gaping. Perrin looked abashed, and slipped his axe back into the heavy belt loop as if he thought no one might notice. A smile touched her lips. “It is a simple thing,” she said, “a bending, so any eye looking at us sees around us, instead. We cannot have the eyes that will be out there seeing our lights tonight, and the Blight is no place to be in the dark.”

“Moiraine Sedai says I might be able to do it.” Egwene’s eyes were bright. “She says I can handle enough of the One Power right now.”

“Not without training, child,” Moiraine cautioned. “The simplest matter concerning the One Power can be dangerous to the untrained, and to those around them.” Perrin snorted, and Egwene looked so uncomfortable that Rand wondered if she had already been trying her abilities.

Nynaeve set down the lantern. Together with the tiny flame of the stove, the pair of lanterns gave a generous light. “When you go to Tar Valon, Egwene,” she said carefully, “perhaps I’ll go with you.” The look she gave Moiraine was strangely defensive. “It will do her good to see a familiar face among strangers. She’ll need someone to advise her besides Aes Sedai.”

“Perhaps that would be for the best, Wisdom,” Moiraine said simply.

Egwene laughed and clapped her hands. “Oh, that *will* be wonderful. And you, Rand. You’ll come, too, won’t you?” He paused in the act of sitting across the stove from her, then slowly lowered himself. He thought her eyes had never been bigger, or brighter, or more like pools that he could lose himself in. Spots of color appeared in her cheeks, and she gave a smaller laugh. “Perrin, Mat, you two will come, won’t you? We’ll all be together.” Mat gave a grunt that could have signified anything, and Perrin only shrugged, but she took it for assent. “You see, Rand. We’ll all be together.”

Light, but a man could drown in those eyes and be happy doing it. Embarrassed, he cleared his throat. “Do they have sheep in Tar Valon? That’s all I know, herding sheep and growing tabac.”

“I believe,” Moiraine said, “that I can find something for you to do in Tar Valon. For all of you. Not herding sheep, perhaps, but something you will find interesting.”

“There,” Egwene said as if it were settled. “I know. I will make you my Warder, when I’m an Aes Sedai. You would like being a Warder, wouldn’t you? My Warder?” She sounded sure, but he saw the question in her eyes. She wanted an answer, needed it.

“I’d like being your Warder,” he said. *She’s not for you, nor you for her. Why did Min have to tell me that?*

Darkness came down heavily, and everyone was tired. Loial was the first to roll over and ready himself for sleep, but others followed soon after. No one used their blankets, except for a pillow. Moiraine had put something in the oil of the lamps that dispelled the stench of the Blight from the hilltop, but nothing diminished the heat. The moon gave a wavering, watery light, but the sun might have been at its zenith for all the cool the night had.

Rand found sleep impossible, even with the Aes Sedai stretched out not a span away to shield his dreams. It was the thick air that kept him awake. Loial’s soft snores were a rumble that made Perrin’s seem nonexistent, but they did not stop weariness from claiming the others. The Warder was still awake, seated not far from him with his sword across his knees, watching the night. To Rand’s surprise, so was Nynaeve.

The Wisdom looked at Lan silently for a long time, then poured a cup of tea and brought it to him. When he reached out with a murmur of thanks, she did not let go right away. “I should have known you would be a king,” she said quietly. Her eyes were steady on the Warder’s face, but her voice trembled slightly.

Lan looked back at her just as intently. It seemed to Rand that the Warder’s face actually softened. “I am not a king, Nynaeve. Just a man. A man without as much to his name as even the meanest farmer’s croft.”

Nynaeve’s voice steadied. “Some women don’t ask for land, or gold. Just the man.”

“And the man who would ask her to accept so little would not be worthy of her. You are a remarkable woman, as beautiful as the sunrise, as fierce as a warrior. You are a lioness, Wisdom.”

“A Wisdom seldom weds.” She paused to take a deep breath, as if steeling herself. “But if I go to Tar Valon, it may be that I will be something other than a Wisdom.”

“Aes Sedai marry as seldom as Wisdoms. Few men can live with so much power in a wife, dimming them by her radiance whether she wishes to or not.”

“Some men are strong enough. I know one such.” If there could have been any doubt, her look left none as to whom she meant.

“All I have is a sword, and a war I cannot win, but can never stop fighting.”

“I’ve told you I care nothing for that. Light, you’ve made me say more than is proper already. Will you shame me to the point of asking you?”

“I will never shame you.” The gentle tone, like a caress, sounded odd to Rand’s ears in the Warder’s voice, but it made Nynaeve’s eyes brighten. “I will hate the man you choose because he is not me, and love him if he makes you smile. No woman deserves the sure knowledge of widow’s black as her brideprice, you least of all.” He set the untouched cup on the ground and rose. “I must check the horses.”

Nynaeve remained there, kneeling, after he had gone.

Sleep or no, Rand closed his eyes. He did not think the Wisdom would like it if he watched her cry.

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CHAPTER

49

The Dark One Stirs

Dawn woke Rand with a start, the sullen sun pricking his eyelids as it peeked reluctantly over the treetops of the Blight. Even so early, heat covered the spoiled lands in a heavy blanket. He lay on his back with his head pillowed on his blanketroll, staring at the sky. It was still blue, the sky. Even here, that, at least, was untouched.

He was surprised to realize that he had slept. For a minute the dim memory of a conversation overheard seemed like part of some dream. Then he saw Nynaeve's red-rimmed eyes; she had not slept, obviously. Lan's face was harder than ever, as if he had resumed a mask and did not intend to let it slip again.

Egwene went over and crouched beside the Wisdom, her face concerned. He could not make out what they said. Egwene spoke, and Nynaeve shook her head. Egwene said something else, and the Wisdom waved her away dismissively. Instead of going, Egwene bent her head closer, and for a few minutes the two women talked even more softly, with Nynaeve still shaking her head. The Wisdom ended it with a laugh, hugging Egwene and, by her expression, making soothing talk. When Egwene stood, though, she glared at the Warder. Lan did not seem to notice; he did not look in Nynaeve's direction at all.

Shaking his head, Rand gathered his things, and gave his hands and face and teeth a hasty wash with the little water Lan allowed for such things. He wondered if women had a way of reading men's minds. It was an unsettling thought. *All women are Aes Sedai.* Telling himself he was letting the Blight get to him, he rinsed out his mouth and hurried to get the bay saddled.

It was more than a little disconcerting, having the campsite disappear before he reached the horses, but by the time his saddle girth was tight everything on the hill winked back into view. Everyone was hurrying.

The seven towers stood plain in the morning light, distant broken stumps, like huge, rough hills that merely hinted at grandeur gone. The hundred lakes were a smooth, unruffled blue. Nothing broke the surface this morning. When he looked at the lakes and the ruined towers, he could almost ignore the sickly things growing around the hill. Lan did not seem to be avoiding looking at the towers, any more than he seemed to be avoiding Nynaeve, but somehow he never did as he concentrated on getting them ready to go.

After the wicker panniers were fastened on the pack horse, after every scrap and smudge and track were gone and everyone else was mounted, the Aes Sedai stood in the middle of the hilltop with her eyes closed, not even seeming to breathe. Nothing happened that Rand could see, except that Nynaeve and Egwene shivered despite the heat and rubbed their arms briskly. Egwene’s hands suddenly froze on her arms, and she opened her mouth, staring at the Wisdom. Before she could speak, Nynaeve also ceased her rubbing and gave her a sharp look. The two women looked at one another, then Egwene nodded and grinned, and after a moment Nynaeve did, too, though her smile was only halfhearted.

Rand scrubbed his fingers through his hair, already more damp with sweat than with the water he had splashed in his face. He was sure there was something in the silent exchange that he should understand, but that feather-light brush across his mind vanished before he could grasp it.

“What are we waiting for?” Mat demanded, the low band of his scarf across his forehead. He had his bow across the pommel of his saddle with an arrow nocked, and his quiver pulled around on his belt for an easy reach.

Moiraine opened her eyes and started down the hill. “For me to remove the last vestige of what I did here last night. The residues would have dissipated on their own in a day, but I will not take any risk I can avoid now. We are too close, and the Shadow is too strong here. Lan?”

The Warder only waited for her to settle in Aldieb’s saddle before he led them north, toward the Mountains of Dhoom, looming in the near distance. Even under the sunrise the peaks rose black and lifeless, like jagged teeth. In a wall they stretched, east and west as far as the eye could see.

“Will we reach the Eye today, Moiraine Sedai?” Egwene asked.

The Aes Sedai gave Loial a sidelong look. “I hope that we will. When I found it before, it was just the other side of the mountains, at the foot of the high passes.”

“He says it moves,” Mat said, nodding at Loial. “What if it isn’t where you expect?”

“Then we will continue to hunt until we do find it. The Green Man senses need, and there can be no need greater than ours. Our need is the hope of the world.”

As the mountains drew closer, so did the true Blight. Where a leaf had been spotted black and mottled yellow before, now foliage fell wetly while he watched, breaking apart from the weight of its own corruption. The trees themselves were tortured, crippled things, twisted branches clawing at the sky as if begging mercy from some power that refused to hear. Ooze slid like pus from bark cracked and split. As if nothing truly solid was left to them, the trees seemed to tremble from the passage of the horses over the ground.

“Look as if they want to grab us,” Mat said nervously. Nynaeve gave him an exasperated, scornful look, and he added fiercely, “Well, they do look it.”

“And some of them do want it,” the Aes Sedai said. Her eyes over her shoulder were harder than Lan’s for an instant. “But they want no part of what I am, and my presence protects you.”

Mat laughed uneasily, as if he thought it a joke on her part.

Rand was not so sure. This *was* the Blight, after all. *But trees don’t move. Why would a tree grab a man, even if it could? We’re imagining things, and she’s just trying to keep us alert.*

Abruptly he stared off to his left, into the forest. That tree, not twenty paces away, *had* trembled, and it was none of his imagination. He could not say what kind it was, or had been, so gnarled and tormented was its shape. As he watched, the tree suddenly whipped back and forth again, then bent down, flailing at the ground. Something screamed, shrill and piercing. The tree sprang back straight; its limbs entwined around a dark mass that writhed and spat and screamed.

He swallowed hard and tried to edge Red away, but trees stood on every side, and trembled. The bay rolled his eyes, whites showing all the way around. Rand found himself in a solid knot of horse flesh as everyone else tried to do the same as he.

“Keep moving,” Lan commanded, drawing his sword. The Warder wore steel-backed gauntlets now, and his gray-green scale tunic. “Stay with Moiraine Sedai.” He pulled Mandarb around, not toward the tree and its prey, but in the other direction. With his color-shifting cloak, he was swallowed by the Blight before the black stallion was out of sight.

“Close,” Moiraine urged. She did not slow her white mare, but she motioned the others to huddle nearer to her. “Stay as close as you can.”

A roar sprang up from the direction the Warder had gone. It beat at the air, and the trees quivered from it, and when it faded away, it seemed to echo still. Again the roar came, filled with rage and death.

“Lan,” Nynaeve said. “He—”

The awful sound cut her off, but there was a new note in it. Fear. Abruptly it was gone.

“Lan can look after himself,” Moiraine said. “Ride, Wisdom.”

From out of the trees the Warder appeared, holding his sword well clear of himself and his mount. Black blood stained the blade, and steam rose from it. Carefully, Lan wiped the blade clean with a cloth he took from his saddlebags, examining the steel to make sure he had gotten every spot. When he dropped the cloth, it fell apart before it reached the ground, even the fragments dissolving.

Silently a massive body leaped out of the trees at them. The Warder spun Mandarb, but even as the warhorse reared, ready to strike with steelshod hooves, Mat’s arrow flashed, piercing the one eye in a head that seemed mostly mouth and teeth. Kicking and screaming, the thing fell, one bound short of them. Rand stared as they hurried past. Stiff hair like long bristles covered it, and it had too many legs, joining a body as big as a bear at odd angles. Some of them at least, those coming out of its back, had to be useless for walking, but the finger-long claws at their ends tore the earth in its death agony.

“Good shooting, sheepherder.” Lan’s eyes had already forgotten what was dying behind them, and were searching the forest.

Moiraine shook her head. “It should not have been willing to come so close to one who touches the True Source.”

“Agelmar said the Blight stirs,” Lan said. “Perhaps the Blight also knows a Web is forming in the Pattern.”

“Hurry.” Moiraine dug her heels into Aldieb’s flanks. “We must get over the high passes quickly.”

But even as she spoke the Blight rose against them. Trees whipped in, reaching for them, not caring if Moiraine touched the True Source or not.

Rand’s sword was in his hand; he did not remember unsheathing it. He struck out again and again, the heron-mark blade slicing through corrupted limbs. Hungry branches jerked back severed, writhing stumps—he almost thought he heard them scream—but always more came, wriggling like snakes, attempting to snare his arms, his waist, his neck. Teeth bared in a rictus snarl, he sought the void, and found it in the stony, stubborn soil of the Two Rivers. “Manetheren!” He screamed back at the trees till his throat ached. The heron-mark steel flashed in the strengthless sunlight. “Manetheren! Manetheren!”

Standing in his stirrups, Mat sent arrow after arrow flashing into the forest, striking at deformed shapes that snarled and gnashed uncounted teeth on the shafts that killed them, bit at the clawed forms fighting to get over them, to reach the mounted figures. Mat, too, was lost to the present. *“Carai an Caldazar!”* he shouted as he drew fletchings to cheek and loosed. *“Carai an Ellisande! Al Ellisande! Mordero daghain pas duente cuebiyar! Al Ellisande!”*

Perrin also stood in his stirrups, silent and grim. He had taken the lead, and his axe hewed a path through forest and foul flesh alike, whichever came before him. Flailing trees and howling things shied from the stocky axeman, shying as much from the fierce golden eyes as from the whistling axe. He forced his horse forward, step by determined step.

Fireballs streaked from Moiraine’s hands, and where they struck, a writhing tree became a torch, a toothed shape shrieked and beat with human hands, rent its own flaming flesh with fierce claws until it died.

Again and again the Warder took Mandarb into the trees, his blade and gauntlets dripping with blood that bubbled and steamed. When he came back now, more often than not there were gashes in his armor, bleeding gashes in his flesh, and his warhorse stumbled and bled, too. Each time the Aes Sedai paused to lay her hands on the wounds, and when she took them away, only the blood was left on unmarked flesh.

“I light signal fires for the Halfmen,” she said bitterly. “Press on. Press on!” They made their way one slow pace at a time.

If the trees had not struck into the mass of attacking flesh as much as at the humans, if the creatures, no two alike, had not fought the trees and one another as much as to reach them, Rand was sure they would have been overwhelmed. He was not certain it would not happen still. Then a fluting cry arose behind them. Distant and thin, it cut through the snarling from the denizens of the Blight around them.

In an instant the snarling ceased, as if it had been sliced off with a knife. The attacking shapes froze; the trees went still. As suddenly as the things with legs had appeared, they melted away, vanishing into the twisted forest.

The reedy shrill came again, like a cracked shepherd’s pipes, and was answered in kind by a chorus. Half a dozen, singing among themselves, far behind.

“Worms,” Lan said grimly, bringing a moan from Loial. “They’ve given us a respite, if we have time to use it.” His eyes were mea suring the distance yet to the mountains. “Few things in the Blight will face a Worm, can it be avoided.” He dug his heels into Mandarb’s flanks. “Ride!” The whole party plunged after him, through a Blight that suddenly seemed truly dead, except for the piping behind.

“They were scared off by worms?” Mat said incredulously. He was bouncing in his saddle, trying to sling his bow across his back.

“A Worm”—there was a sharp difference in the way the Warder said it from the way Mat had—“can kill a Fade, if the Fade hasn’t the Dark One’s own luck with it. We have an entire pack on our trail. Ride! Ride!” The dark peaks were closer now. An hour, Rand estimated, at the pace the Warder was setting.

“Won’t the Worms follow us into the mountains?” Egwene asked breathlessly, and Lan gave a sharp laugh.

“They won’t. Worms are afraid of what lives in the high passes.” Loial moaned again.

Rand wished the Ogier would stop doing that. He was well aware that Loial knew more about the Blight than any of them except Lan, even if it was from reading books in the safety of a *stedding. But why does he have to keep reminding me that there’s worse yet than we’ve seen?*

The Blight flowed past, weeds and grasses splashing rotten under galloping hooves. Trees of the kinds that had earlier attacked did not so much as twitch even when they rode directly under the twisted branches.

The Mountains of Dhoom filled the sky ahead, black and bleak, and almost near enough to touch, it seemed. The piping came both sharp and clear, and there were squishing sounds behind them, louder than the things crushed under hooves. Too loud, as if half-decayed trees were being crushed by huge bodies slithering over them. Too near. Rand looked over his shoulder. Back there treetops whipped and went down like grass. The land began sloping upward, toward the mountains, tilting enough so that he knew they were climbing.

“We are not going to make it,” Lan announced. He did not slow Mandarb’s gallop, but his sword was suddenly in his hand again. “Watch yourself in the high passes, Moiraine, and you’ll get through.”

“No, Lan!” Nynaeve called.

“Be quiet, girl! Lan, even you cannot stop a Wormpack. I will not have it. I will need you for the Eye.”

“Arrows,” Mat called breathlessly.

“The Worms wouldn’t even feel them,” the Warder shouted. “They must be cut to pieces. Don’t feel much but hunger. Sometimes fear.”

Clinging to his saddle with a deathgrip, Rand shrugged, trying to loosen the tightness in his shoulders. His whole chest felt tight, until he could hardly breathe, and his skin stung in hot pinpricks. The Blight had turned to foothills. He could see the route they must climb once they reached the mountains, the twisting path and the high pass beyond, like an axe blow cleaving into the black stone. *Light, what’s up ahead that can scare what’s behind? Light help me, I’ve never been so afraid. I don’t want to go any further. No further!* Seeking the flame and the void, he railed at himself. *Fool! You frightened, cowardly fool! You can’t stay here, and you can’t go back. Are you going to leave Egwene to face it alone?* The void eluded him, forming, then shivering into a thousand points of light, re-forming and shattering again, each point burning into his bones until he quivered with the pain and thought he must burst open. *Light help me, I can’t go on. Light help me!*

He was gathering the bay’s reins to turn back, to face the Worms or anything rather than what lay ahead, when the nature of the land changed. Between one slope of a hill and the next, between crest and peak, the Blight was gone.

Green leaves covered peacefully spreading branches. Wildflowers made a carpet of bright patches in grasses stirred by a sweet spring breeze.

Butterflies fluttered from blossom to blossom, with buzzing bees, and birds trilled their songs.

Gaping, he galloped on, until he suddenly realized that Moiraine and Lan and Loial had stopped, the others, too. Slowly he drew rein, his face frozen in astonishment. Egwene's eyes were about to come out of her head, and Nynaeve's jaw had dropped.

"We have reached safety," Moiraine said. "This is the Green Man's place, and the Eye of the World is here. Nothing of the Blight can enter here."

"I thought it was on the other side of the mountains," Rand mumbled. He could still see the peaks filling the northern horizon, and the high passes. "You said it was always beyond the passes."

"This place," said a deep voice from the trees, "is always where it is. All that changes is where those who need it are."

A figure stepped out of the foliage, a man-shape as much bigger than Loial as the Ogier was bigger than Rand. A man-shape of woven vines and leaves, green and growing. His hair was grass, flowing to his shoulders; his eyes, huge hazelnuts; his fingernails, acorns. Green leaves made his tunic and trousers; seamless bark, his boots. Butterflies swirled around him, lighting on his fingers, his shoulders, his face. Only one thing spoiled the verdant perfection. A deep fissure ran up his cheek and temple across the top of his head, and in that the vines were brown and withered.

"The Green Man," Egwene whispered, and the scarred face smiled. For a moment it seemed as if the birds sang louder.

"Of course I am. Who else would be here?" The hazelnut eyes regarded Loial. "It is good to see you, little brother. In the past, many of you came to visit me, but few of recent days."

Loial scrambled down from his big horse and bowed formally. "You honor me, Treebrother. *Tsingu ma choshih, T'ingshen.*"

Smiling, the Green Man put an arm around the Ogier's shoulders. Alongside Loial, he looked like a man beside a boy. "There is no honoring, little brother. We will sing Tree Songs together, and remember the Great Trees, and the *stedding,* and hold the Longing at bay." He studied the others, just now getting down from their horses, and his eyes lit on Perrin. "A Wolfbrother! Do the old times truly walk again then?"

Rand stared at Perrin. For his part, Perrin turned his horse so it was between him and the Green Man, and bent to check the girth. Rand was sure he just wanted to avoid the Green Man's searching gaze. Suddenly the Green Man spoke to Rand.

"Strange clothes you wear, Child of the Dragon. Has the Wheel turned so far? Do the People of the Dragon return to the first Covenant? But you wear a sword. That is neither now nor then."

Rand had to work moisture in his mouth before he could speak. "I don't know what you're talking about. What do you mean?"

The Green Man touched the brown scar across his head. For a moment he seemed confused. "I . . . cannot say. My memories are torn and often fleeting, and much of what remains is like leaves visited by caterpillars. Yet, I am sure. . . . No, it is gone. But you are welcome here. You, Moiraine Sedai, are more than a surprise. When this place was made, it was made so that none could find it twice. How have you come here?"

"Need," Moiraine replied. "My need, the world's need. Most of all is the world's need. We have come to see the Eye of the World."

The Green Man sighed, the wind sighing through thick-leafed branches. "Then it has come again. That memory remains whole. The Dark One stirs. I have feared it. Every turning of years, the Blight strives harder to come inside, and this turn the struggle to keep it out has been greater than ever since the beginning. Come, I will take you."

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CHAPTER

50

Meetings at the Eye

Leading the bay, Rand followed the Green Man with the other Emond's Fielders, all staring as if they could not decide whether to look at the Green Man or the forest. The Green Man was a legend, of course, with stories told about him, and the Tree of Life, in front of every fireplace in the Two Rivers, and not just for the children. But after the Blight, the trees and flowers would have been a wonder of normality even if the rest of the world was not still trapped in winter.

Perrin hung a little to the rear. When Rand glanced back, the big, curly-haired youth looked as if he did not want to hear anything else the Green Man had to say. He could understand that. *Child of the Dragon.* Warily he watched the Green Man, walking ahead with Moiraine and Lan, butterflies surrounding him in a cloud of yellows and reds. *What did he mean? No. I don't want to know.*

Even so, his step felt lighter, his legs springier. The uneasiness still lay in his gut, churning his stomach, but the fear had become so diffuse it might as well be gone. He did not think he could expect more, not with the Blight half a mile away, even if Moiraine was right about nothing from the Blight being able to enter here. The thousands of burning points piercing his bones had winked out; at the very moment he came within the Green Man's domain, he was sure. *It's him that winked them out,* he thought, *the Green Man, and this place.*

Egwene felt it, and Nynaeve, too, the soothing peace, the calm of beauty. He could tell. They wore small, serene smiles, and brushed flowers with their fingers, pausing to smell, and breathing deep.

When the Green Man noticed, he said, "Flowers are meant to adorn. The plants or humans, it is much the same. None mind, so long as you don't take too many." And he began plucking one from this plant and one from that, never more than two from any. Soon Nynaeve and Egwene wore caps of blossoms in their hair, pink wildrose and yellowbell and white morningstar. The Wisdom's braid seemed a garden of pink and white to her waist. Even Moiraine received a pale garland of morningstar on her brow, woven so deftly that the flowers still seemed to be growing.

Rand was not sure they were not growing. The Green Man tended his forest garden as he walked, while he talked softly to Moiraine, taking care of Whatever needed care without really thinking about it. His hazelnut eyes caught a crooked limb on a climbing wildrose, forced into an awkward angle by the blossom-covered limb of an apple tree, and he paused, still talking, to run his hand along the bend. Rand was not sure if his eyes were playing tricks, or if thorns actually did bend out of the way so as not to prick those green fingers. When the towering shape of the Green Man moved on, the limb ran straight and true, spreading red petals among the white of apple blossoms. He bent to cup one huge hand around a tiny seed lying on a patch of pebbles, and when he straightened, a small shoot had roots through the rocks to good soil.

"All things must grow where they are, according to the Pattern," he explained over his shoulder, as if apologizing, "and face the turning of the Wheel, but the Creator will not mind if I give just a little help."

Rand led Red around the shoot, careful not to let the bay's hooves crush it. It did not seem right to destroy what the Green Man had done just to avoid an extra step. Egwene smiled at him, one of her secret smiles, and touched his arm. She was so pretty, with her unbound hair full of flowers, that he smiled back at her until she blushed and lowered her eyes. *I will protect you,* he thought. *Whatever else happens, I will see you safe, I swear it.*

Into the heart of the spring forest the Green Man took them, to an arched opening in the side of a hill. It was a simple stone arch, tall and white, and on the keystone was a circle halved by a sinuous line, one half rough, the other smooth. The ancient symbol of Aes Sedai. The opening itself was shadowed.

For a moment everyone simply looked in silence. Then Moiraine removed the garland from her hair and gently hung it on the limb of a sweetberry bush beside the arch. It was as if her movement restored speech.

"It's in there?" Nynaeve asked. "What we've come for?"

"I'd really like to see the Tree of Life," Mat said, not taking his eyes off the halved circle above them. "We can wait that long, can't we?"

The Green Man gave Rand an odd look, then shook his head. "*Avendesora* is not here. I have not rested beneath its ungentle branches in two thousand years."

"The Tree of Life is not why we came," Moiraine said firmly. She gestured to the arch. "In there, is."

"I will not go in with you," the Green Man said. The butterflies around him swirled as if they shared some agitation. "I was set to guard it long, long ago, but it makes me uneasy to come too close. I feel myself being unmade; my end is linked with it, somehow. I remember the making of it. Some of the making. Some." His hazelnut eyes stared, lost in memory, and he fingered his scar. "It was the first days of the Breaking of the World, when the joy of victory over the Dark One turned bitter with the knowledge that all might yet be shattered by the weight of the Shadow. A hundred of them made it, men and women together. The greatest Aes Sedai works were always done so, joining *saidin* and *saidar,* as the True Source is joined. They died, all, to make it pure, while the world was torn around them. Knowing they would die, they charged me to guard it against the need to come. It was not what I was made for, but all was breaking apart, and they were alone, and I was all they had. It was not what I was made for, but I have kept the faith." He looked down at Moiraine, nodding to himself. "I have kept faith, until it was needed. And now it ends."

"You have kept the faith better than most of us who gave you the charge," the Aes Sedai said. "Perhaps it will not come as badly as you fear."

The scarred, leafy head shook slowly from side to side. "I know an ending when it comes, Aes Sedai. I will find another place to make things grow." Nutbrown eyes swept sadly over the green forest. "Another place, perhaps. When you come out, I will see you again, if there is time." With that he strode away, trailing butterflies, becoming one with the forest more completely than Lan's cloak ever could.

"What did he mean?" Mat demanded. "If there's time?"

"Come," Moiraine said. And she stepped through the arch. Lan went at her heels.

Rand was not sure what he expected when he followed. The hair stirred uneasily on his arms, and rose on the back of his neck. But it was only a corridor, its polished walls rounded overhead like the arch, winding gently downward. There was headroom enough and to spare for Loial; there would have been room enough for the Green Man. The smooth floor, slick to the eye like oiled slate, yet somehow gave a sure footing. Seamless, white walls glittered with uncounted flecks in untold colors, giving a low, soft light even after the sunlit archway vanished around a curve behind. He was sure the light was no natural thing, but he sensed it was benign, too. *Then why is your skin still crawling?* Down they went, and down.

"There," Moiraine said at last, pointing. "Ahead."

And the corridor opened into a vast, domed space, the rough, living rock of its ceiling dotted with clumps of glowing crystals. Below it, a pool took up the entire cavern, except for the walkway around it, perhaps five paces wide. In the oval shape of an eye, the pool was lined about its rim with a low, flat edging of crystals that glowed with a duller, yet fiercer, light than those above. Its surface was as smooth as glass and as clear as the Winespring Water. Rand felt as if his eyes could penetrate it forever, but he could not see any bottom to it.

"The Eye of the World," Moiraine said softly beside him.

As he looked around in wonder, he realized that the long years since the making—three thousand of them—had worked their way while no one came. Not all the crystals in the dome glowed with the same intensity. Some were stronger, some weaker; some flickered, and others were only faceted lumps to sparkle in a captured light. Had all shone, the dome would have been as bright as noonday, but they made it only late afternoon, now. Dust coated the walkway, and bits of stone and even crystal. Long years waiting, while the Wheel turned and ground.

"But *what* is it?" Mat asked uneasily. "That doesn't look like any water I ever saw." He kicked a lump of dark stone the size of his fist over the edge. "It—"

The stone struck the glassy surface and slid into the pool without a splash, or so much as a ripple. As it sank, the rock began to swell, growing ever larger, larger and more attenuated, a blob the size of his head that Rand could almost see through, a faint blur as wide as his arm was long. Then it was gone. He thought his skin would creep right off his body.

"What is it?" he demanded, and was shocked at the hoarse harshness of his own voice.

"It might be called the essence of *saidin*." The Aes Sedai's words echoed round the dome. "The essence of the male half of the True Source, the pure essence of the Power wielded by men before the Time of Madness.

The Power to mend the seal on the Dark One's prison, or to break it open completely."

"The Light shine on us and protect us," Nynaeve whispered. Egwene clutched her as if she wanted to hide behind the Wisdom. Even Lan stirred uneasily, though there was no surprise in his eyes.

Stone thudded into Rand's shoulders, and he realized he had backed as far as the wall, as far from the Eye of the World as he could get. He would have pushed himself right through the wall, if he could have. Mat, too, was splayed out against the stone as flat as he could make himself. Perrin was staring at the pool with his axe half drawn. His eyes shone, yellow and fierce.

"I always wondered," Loial said uneasily. "When I read about it, I always wondered what it was. Why? Why did they do it? And how?"

"No one living knows." Moiraine no longer looked at the pool. She was watching Rand and his two friends, studying them, her eyes weighing. "Neither the how, nor more of the why than that it would be needed one day, and that that need would be the greatest and most desperate the world had faced to that time. Perhaps ever would face.

"Many in Tar Valon have attempted to find a way to use this Power, but it is as untouchable for any woman as the moon is for a cat. Only a man could channel it, but the last male Aes Sedai is nearly three thousand years gone. Yet the need they saw was a desperate one. They worked through the taint of the Dark One on *saidin* to make it, and make it pure, knowing that doing so would kill them all. Male Aes Sedai and female together. The Green Man spoke true. The greatest wonders of the Age of Legends were done in that way, *saidin* and *saidar* together. All the women in Tar Valon, all the Aes Sedai in all the courts and cities, even with those in the lands beyond the Waste, even counting those who may still live beyond the Aryth Ocean, could not fill a spoon with the Power, lacking men to work with them."

Rand's throat rasped as if he had been screaming. "Why did you bring us here?"

"Because you are *ta'veren.*" The Aes Sedai's face was unreadable. Her eyes shimmered, and seemed to pull at him. "Because the Dark One's power will strike here, and because it must be confronted and stopped, or the Shadow will cover the world. There is no need greater than that. Let us go out into the sunlight again, while there is yet time." Without waiting to see if they would follow, she started back up the corridor with Lan, who stepped perhaps a bit more quickly than usual for him. Egwene and Nynaeve hurried behind her.

Rand edged along the wall—he could not make himself get even one step closer to what the pool was—and scrambled into the corridor in a tangle with Mat and Perrin. He would have run if it had not meant trampling Egwene and Nynaeve, Moiraine and Lan. He could not stop shaking even when he was back outside.

“I do not like this, Moiraine,” Nynaeve said angrily when the sun shone on them again. “I believe the danger is as great as you say or I would not be here, but this is—”

“I have found you at last.”

Rand jerked as if a rope had tightened around his neck. The words, the voice . . . for a moment he believed it was Ba’alzamon. But the two men who walked out of the trees, faces hidden by their cowls, did not wear cloaks the color of dried blood. One cloak was a dark gray, the other almost as dark a green, and they seemed musty even in the open air. And the men were not Fades; the breeze stirred their cloaks.

“Who are you?” Lan’s stance was cautious, his hand on his sword hilt. “How did you come here? If you are seeking the Green Man—”

“He guided us.” The hand that pointed to Mat was old and shriveled to scarcely human, lacking a fingernail and with knuckles gnarled like knots in a piece of rope. Mat took a step back, eyes widening. “An old thing, an old friend, an old enemy. But he is not the one we seek,” the green-cloaked man finished. The other man stood as if he would never speak.

Moiraine straightened to her full height, no more than shoulder high to any man there, but suddenly seeming as tall as the hills. Her voice rang like a bell, demanding, “Who are you?”

Hands pushed back hoods, and Rand goggled. The old man was older than old; he made Cenn Buie look like a child in the bloom of health. The skin of his face was like crazed parchment drawn tight over a skull, then pulled tighter still. Wispy tufts of brittle hair stood at odd places on his scabrous scalp. His ears were withered bits like scraps of ancient leather; his eyes sunken, peering out of his head as if from the ends of tunnels. Yet the other was worse. A tight, black leather carapace covered that one’s head and face completely, but the front of it was worked into a perfect face, a young man’s face, laughing wildly, laughing insanely, frozen forever. *What* *is he hiding if the other shows what he shows?* Then even thought froze in his head, shattered to dust and blew away.

"I am called Aginor," the old one said. "And he is Balthamel. He no longer speaks with his tongue. The Wheel grinds exceedingly fine over three thousand years imprisoned." His sunken eyes slid to the arch; Balthamel leaned forward, his mask's eyes on the white stone opening, as if he wanted to go straight in. "So long without," Aginor said softly. "So long."

"The Light protect—" Loial began, his voice shaking, and cut off abruptly when Aginor looked at him.

"The Forsaken," Mat said hoarsely, "are bound in Shayol Ghul—"

"Were bound." Aginor smiled; his yellowed teeth had the look of fangs. "Some of us are bound no longer. The seals weaken, Aes Sedai. Like Ishamael, we walk the world again, and soon the rest of us will come. I was too close to this world in my captivity, I and Balthamel, too close to the grinding of the Wheel, but soon the Great Lord of the Dark will be free, and give us new flesh, and the world will be ours once more. You will have no Lews Therin Kinslayer, this time. No Lord of the Morning to save you. We know the one we seek now, and there is no more need for the rest of you."

Lan's sword sprang from its scabbard too fast for Rand's eye to follow. Yet the Warder hesitated, eyes flickering to Moiraine, to Nynaeve. The two women stood well apart; to put himself between either of them and the Forsaken would put him further from the other. Only for a heartbeat the hesitation lasted, but as the Warder's feet moved, Aginor raised his hand. It was a scornful gesture, a flipping of his gnarled fingers as if to shoo away a fly. The Warder flew backwards through the air as though a huge fist had caught him. With a dull thud Lan struck the stone arch, hanging there for an instant before dropping in a flaccid heap, his sword lying near his outstretched hand.

"NO!" Nynaeve screamed.

"Be still!" Moiraine commanded, but before anyone else could move the Wisdom's knife had left her belt, and she was running toward the Forsaken, her small blade upraised.

"The Light blind you," she cried, striking at Aginor's chest.

The other Forsaken moved like a viper. While her blow still fell, Balthamel's leather-cased hand darted out to seize her chin, fingers sinking into one cheek while thumb dug into the other, driving the blood out with their pressure and raising the flesh in pale ridges. A convulsion wracked Nynaeve from head to toe, as if she had been cracked like a whip. Her knife dropped uselessly from dangling fingers as Balthamel lifted her by his grip, brought her up to where the leather mask stared into her stillquivering face. Her toes spasmed a foot above the ground; flowers rained from her hair.

“I have almost forgotten the pleasures of the flesh.” Aginor’s tongue crossed his withered lips, sounding like stone on rough leather. “But Balthamel remembers much.” The laughter of the mask seemed to grow wilder, and the wail that left Nynaeve burned Rand’s ears like despair ripped from her living heart.

Suddenly Egwene moved, and Rand saw that she was going to help Nynaeve. “Egwene, no!” he shouted, but she did not stop. His hand had gone to his sword at Nynaeve’s cry, but now he abandoned it and threw himself at Egwene. He thudded into her before she took her third step, carrying them both to the ground. Egwene landed under him with a gasp, immediately thrashing to get free.

Others were moving, too, he realized. Perrin’s axe whirled into his hands, and his eyes glowed golden and fierce. “Wisdom!” Mat howled, the dagger from Shadar Logoth in his fist.

“No!” Rand called. “You can’t fight the Forsaken!” But they ran past him as if they had not heard, their eyes on Nynaeve and the two Forsaken.

Aginor glanced at them, unconcernedly . . . and smiled.

Rand felt the air stir above him like the crack of a giant’s whip. Mat and Perrin, not even halfway to the Forsaken, stopped as if they had run into a wall, bounced back to sprawl on the ground.

“Good,” Aginor said. “A fitting place for you. If you learn to abase yourself properly in worship of us, I might let you live.”

Hastily Rand scrambled to his feet. Perhaps he could not fight the Forsaken—no ordinary human could—but he would not let them believe for a minute that he was groveling before them. He tried to help Egwene up, but she slapped his hands away and stood by herself, angrily brushing off her dress. Mat and Perrin had also stubbornly pushed themselves unsteadily erect.

“You will learn,” Aginor said, “if you want to live. Now that I have found what I need”—his eyes went to the stone archway—“I may take the time to teach you.”

“This shall not be!” The Green Man strode out of the trees with a voice like lightning striking an ancient oak. “You do not belong here!”

Aginor spared him a brief, contemptuous glance. “Begone! Your time is ended, all your kind but you long since dust. Live what life is left to you and be glad you are beneath our notice.”

“This is my place,” the Green Man said, “and you shall hurt no living thing here.”

Balthamel tossed Nynaeve aside like a rag, and like a crumpled rag she fell, eyes staring, limp as if all her bones had melted. One leather-clad hand lifted, and the Green Man roared as smoke rose from the vines that wove him. The wind in the trees echoed his pain.

Aginor turned back to Rand and the others, as if the Green Man had been dealt with, but one long stride and massive, leafy arms wrapped themselves around Balthamel, raising him high, crushing him against a chest of thick creepers, black leather mask laughing into hazelnut eyes dark with anger. Like serpents Balthamel’s arms writhed free, his gloved hands grasping the Green Man’s head as though he would wrench it off. Flames shot up where those hands touched, vines withering, leaves falling. The Green Man bellowed as thick, dark smoke poured out between the vines of his body. On and on he roared, as if all of him were coming out of his mouth with the smoke that billowed between his lips.

Suddenly Balthamel jerked in the Green Man’s grasp. The Forsaken’s hands tried to push him away instead of clutching him. One gloved hand flung wide . . . and a tiny creeper burst through the black leather. A fungus, such as rings trees in the deep shadows of the forest, ringed his arm, sprang from nowhere to full-grown, swelling to cover the length of it. Balthamel thrashed, and a shoot of stinkweed ripped open his carapace, lichens dug in their roots and split tiny cracks across the leather of his face, nettles broke the eyes of his mask, deathshead mushrooms tore open the mouth.

The Green Man threw the Forsaken down. Balthamel twisted and jerked as all the things that grew in the dark places, all the things with spores, all the things that loved the dank, swelled and grew, tore cloth and leather and flesh—Was it flesh, seen in that brief moment of verdant rage?—to tattered shreds and covered him until only a mound remained, indistinguishable from many in the shaded depths of the green forest, and the mound moved no more than they.

With a groan like a limb breaking under too great a weight, the Green Man crashed to the ground. Half his head was charred black. Tendrils of smoke still rose from him, like gray creepers. Burned leaves fell from his arm as he painfully stretched out his blackened hand to gently cup an acorn.

The earth rumbled as an oak seedling pushed up between his fingers. The Green Man's head fell, but the seedling reached for the sun, straining. Roots shot out and thickened, delved beneath the ground and rose again, thickened more as they sank. The trunk broadened and stretched upward, bark turning gray and fissured and ancient. Limbs spread and grew heavy, as big as arms, as big as men, and lifted to caress the sky, thick with green leaves, dense with acorns. The massive web of roots turned the earth like plows as it spread; the already huge trunk shivered, grew wider, round as a house. Stillness came. And an oak that could have stood five hundred years covered the spot where the Green Man had been, marking the tomb of a legend. Nynaeve lay on the gnarled roots, grown curved to her shape, to make a bed for her to rest upon. The wind sighed through the oak's branches; it seemed to murmur farewell.

Even Aginor seemed stunned. Then his head lifted, cavernous eyes burning with hate. "Enough! It is past time to end this!"

"Yes, Forsaken," Moiraine said, her voice as cold as deepwinter ice. "Past time!"

The Aes Sedai's hand rose, and the ground fell away beneath Aginor's feet. Flame roared from the chasm, whipped to a frenzy by wind howling in from every direction, sucking a maelstrom of leaves into the fire, which seemed to solidify into a red-streaked yellow jelly of pure heat. In the middle of it Aginor stood, his feet supported only by air. The Forsaken looked startled, but then he smiled and took a step forward. It was a slow step, as if the fire tried to root him to the spot, but he took it, and then another.

"Run!" Moiraine commanded. Her face was white with strain. "All of you run!" Aginor stepped across the air, toward the edge of the flames.

Rand was aware of others moving, Mat and Perrin dashing away at the edge of his vision, Loial's long legs carrying him into the trees, but all he could really see was Egwene. She stood there rigid, face pale and eyes closed. It was not fear that held her, he realized. She was trying to throw her puny, untrained wielding of the Power against the Forsaken.

Roughly he grabbed her arm and pulled her around to face him. “Run!” he shouted at her. Her eyes opened, staring at him, angry with him for interfering, liquid with hate for Aginor, with fear of the Forsaken. “Run,” he said, pushing her toward the trees hard enough to start her. “Run!” Once started, she did run.

But Aginor’s withered face turned toward him, toward the running Egwene behind him, as the Forsaken walked through the flames, as if what the Aes Sedai was doing did not concern Aginor at all. Toward Egwene.

“Not her!” Rand shouted. “The Light burn you, not her!” He snatched up a rock and threw it, meaning to draw Aginor’s attention. Halfway to the Forsaken’s face, the stone turned to a handful of dust.

He hesitated only a moment, long enough to glance over his shoulder and see that Egwene was hidden in the trees. The flames still surrounded Aginor, patches of his cloak smoldering, but he walked as if he had all the time in the world, and the fire’s rim was near. Rand turned and ran. Behind him he heard Moiraine begin to scream.

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CHAPTER

51

Against the Shadow

The land tended upward the way Rand went, but fear lent his legs strength and they ate ground in long strides, tearing his way through flowering bushes and tangles of wildrose, scattering petals, not caring if thorns ripped his clothes or even his flesh. Moiraine had stopped screaming. It seemed as if the shrieks had gone on forever, each one more throat-wrenching than the last, but he knew they had lasted only moments altogether. Moments before Aginor would be on his trail. He knew it would be him that Aginor followed. He had seen the certainty in the Forsaken’s hollow eyes, in that last second before terror whipped his feet to run.

The land grew ever steeper, but he scrambled on, pulling himself forward by handfuls of undergrowth, rocks and dirt and leaves spilling down the slope from under his feet, finally crawling on hands and knees when the slant became too great. Ahead, above, it leveled out a little. Panting, he scrabbled his way the last few spans, got to his feet, and stopped, wanting to howl aloud.

Ten paces in front of him, the hilltop dropped away sharply. He knew what he would see before he reached it, but he took the steps anyway, each heavier than the one before, hoping there might be some track, a goat path, anything. At the edge he looked down a sheer hundred-foot drop, a stone wall as smooth as planed timber.

There has to be some way. I’ll go back and find a way around. Go back and—

When he turned, Aginor was there, just reaching the crest. The Forsaken topped the hill without any difficulty, walking up the steep slope as if it were level ground. Deep-sunken eyes burned at him from that drawn parchment face; somehow, it seemed less withered than before, more fleshed, as if Aginor had fed well on something. Those eyes were fixed on him, yet when Aginor spoke, it was almost to himself.

“Ba’alzamon will give rewards beyond mortal dreaming for the one who brings you to Shayol Ghul. Yet my dreams have always been beyond those of other men, and I left mortality behind millennia ago. What difference if you serve the Great Lord of the Dark alive or dead? None, to the spread of the Shadow. Why should I share power with you? Why should I bend knee to you? I, who faced Lews Therin Telamon in the Hall of the Servants itself. I, who threw my might against the Lord of the Morning and met him stroke for stroke. I think not.”

Rand’s mouth dried like dust; his tongue felt as shriveled as Aginor. The edge of the precipice grated under his heels, stone falling away. He did not dare look back, but he heard the rocks bounding and rebounding from the sheer wall, just as his body would if he moved another inch. It was the first he knew that he had been backing up, away from the Forsaken. His skin crawled until he thought he must see it writhing if he looked, if he could only take his eyes off the Forsaken. *There has to be some way to get away from him. Some way to escape! There has to be! Some way!*

Suddenly he felt something, saw it, though he knew it was not there to see. A glowing rope ran off from Aginor, behind him, white like sunlight seen through the purest cloud, heavier than a blacksmith’s arm, lighter than air, connecting the Forsaken to something distant beyond knowing, something within the touch of Rand’s hand. The rope pulsed, and with every throb Aginor grew stronger, more fully fleshed, a man as tall and strong as himself, a man harder than the Warder, more deadly than the Blight. Yet beside that shining cord, the Forsaken seemed almost not to exist. The cord was all. It hummed. It sang. It called Rand’s soul. One bright finger-strand lifted away, drifted, touched him, and he gasped. Light filled him, and heat that should have burned yet only warmed as if it took the chill of the grave from his bones. The strand thickened. *I have to get away!*

“No!” Aginor shouted. “You shall not have it! It is mine!”

Rand did not move, and neither did the Forsaken, yet they fought as surely as if they grappled in the dust. Sweat beaded on Aginor’s face, no longer withered, no longer old, that of a strong man in his prime. Rand pulsed with the beating in the cord, like the heartbeat of the world. It filled his being. Light filled his mind, till only a corner was left for what was himself. He wrapped the void around that nook; sheltered in emptiness. *Away!*

“Mine!” Aginor cried. “Mine!”

Warmth built in Rand, the warmth of the sun, the radiance of the sun, bursting, the awful radiance of light, of the Light. *Away!*

“Mine!” Flame shot from Aginor’s mouth, broke through his eyes like spears of fire, and he screamed.

Away!

And Rand was no longer on the hilltop. He quivered with the Light that suffused him. His mind would not work; light and heat blinded it. The Light. In the midst of the void, the Light blinded his mind, stunned him with awe.

He stood in a broad mountain pass, surrounded by jagged black peaks like the teeth of the Dark One. It was real; he was there. He felt the rocks under his boots, the icy breeze on his face.

Battle surrounded him, or the tail end of battle. Armored men on armored horses, shining steel dusty now, slashed and stabbed at snarling Trollocs wielding spiked axes and scythe-like swords. Some men fought afoot, their horses down, and barded horses galloped through the fight with empty saddles. Fades moved among them all, nightblack cloaks hanging still however their dark mounts galloped, and wherever their lighteating swords swung, men died. Sound beat at Rand, beat at him and bounced from the strangeness that had him by the throat. The clash of steel against steel, the panting and grunting of men and Trollocs striving, the screams of men and Trollocs dying. Over the din, banners waved in dust-filled air. The Black Hawk of Fal Dara, the White Hart of Shienar, others. And Trolloc banners. In just the little space around him he saw the horned skull of the Dha’vol, the blood-red trident of the Ko’bal, the iron fist of the Dhai’mon.

Yet it was indeed the tail end of battle, a pausing, as humans and Trollocs alike fell back to regroup. None seemed to notice Rand as they paid a few last strokes and broke away, galloping, or running in a stagger, to the ends of the pass.

Rand found himself facing the end of the pass where the humans were re-forming, pennants stirring beneath gleaming lancepoints. Wounded men wavered in their saddles. Riderless horses reared and galloped. Plainly they could not stand another meeting, yet just as plainly they readied themselves for one final charge. Some of them saw him now; men stood in their stirrups to point at him. Their shouts came to him as tiny piping.

Staggering, he turned. The forces of the Dark One filled the other end of the pass, bristling black pikes and spearpoints swelling up onto mountain slopes made blacker still by the great mass of Trollocs that dwarfed the army of Shienar. Fades in hundreds rode across the front of the horde, the fierce, muzzled faces of Trollocs turning away in fear as they passed, huge bodies pulling back to make way. Overhead, Draghkar wheeled on leathery pinions, shrieks challenging the wind. Halfmen saw him now, too, pointed, and Draghkar spun and dove. Two. Three. Six of them, crying shrilly as they plummeted toward him.

He stared at them. Heat filled him, the burning heat of the touched sun. He could see the Draghkar clearly, soulless eyes in pale men’s faces on winged bodies that had nothing of humanity about them. Terrible heat. Crackling heat.

From the clear sky lightning came, each bolt crisp and sharp, searing his eyes, each bolt striking a winged black shape. Hunting cries became shrieks of death, and charred forms fell to leave the sky clean again.

The heat. The terrible heat of the Light.

He fell to his knees; he thought he could hear his tears sizzling on his cheeks. “No!” He clutched at tufts of wiry grass for some hold on reality; the grass burst in flame. “Please, nooooooo!”

The wind rose with his voice, howled with his voice, roared with his voice down the pass, whipping the flames to a wall of fire that sped away from him and toward the Trolloc host faster than a horse could run. Fire burned into the Trollocs, and the mountains trembled with their screams, screams almost as loud as the wind and his voice.

“It has to end!”

He beat at the ground with his fist, and the earth tolled like a gong. He bruised his hands on stony soil, and the earth trembled. Ripples ran through the ground ahead of him in everrising waves, waves of dirt and rock towering over Trollocs and Fades, breaking over them as the mountains shattered under their hooved feet. A boiling mass of flesh and rubble churned across the Trolloc army. What was left standing was still a mighty host, but now no more than twice the human army in numbers, and milling in fright and confusion.

The wind died. The screams died. The earth was still. Dust and smoke swirled back down the pass to surround him.

“The Light blind you, Ba’alzamon! This has to end!”

IT IS NOT HERE.

It was not Rand’s thought, making his skull vibrate.

I WILL TAKE NO PART. ONLY THE CHOSEN ONE CAN DO WHAT MUST BE DONE, IF HE WILL.

“Where?” He did not want to say it, but he could not stop himself. “Where?”

The haze surrounding him parted, leaving a dome of clear, clean air ten spans high, walled by billowing smoke and dust. Steps rose before him, each standing alone and unsupported, stretching up into the murk that obscured the sun.

NOT HERE.

Through the mist, as from the far end of the earth, came a cry. “The Light wills it!” The ground rumbled with the thunder of hooves as the forces of humankind launched their last charge.

Within the void, his mind knew a moment of panic. The charging horsemen could not see him in the dust; their charge would trample right over him. The greater part of him ignored the shaking ground as a petty thing beneath concern. Dull anger driving his feet, he mounted the first steps. *It has to be ended!*

Darkness surrounded him, the utter blackness of total nothing. The steps were still there, hanging in the black, under his feet and ahead. When he looked back, those behind were gone, faded away to nothing, into the nothingness around him. But the cord was yet there, stretching behind him, the glowing line dwindling and vanishing into the distance. It was not so thick as before, but it still pulsed, pumping strength into him, pumping life, filling him with the Light. He climbed.

It seemed forever that he climbed. Forever, and minutes. Time stood still in nothingness. Time ran faster. He climbed until suddenly a door stood before him, its surface rough and splintered and old, a door well-remembered. He touched it, and it burst to fragments. While they still fell, he stepped through, bits of shattered wood falling from his shoulders.

The chamber, too, was as he remembered, the mad, striated sky beyond the balcony, the melted walls, the polished table, the terrible fireplace with its roaring, heatless flames. Some of those faces that made the fireplace, writhing in torment, shrieking in silence, tugged at his memory as if he knew them, but he held the void close, floated within himself in emptiness. He was alone. When he looked at the mirror on the wall, his face was there as clear as if it *was* him. *There is calm in the void.*

“Yes,” Ba’alzamon said from in front of the fireplace, “I thought Aginor’s greed would overcome him. But it makes no difference in the end. A long search, but ended now. You are here, and I know you.”

In the midst of the Light the void drifted, and in the midst of the void floated Rand. He reached for the soil of his home, and felt hard rock, unyielding and dry, stone without pity, where only the strong could survive, only those as hard as the mountains. “I am tired of running.” He could not believe his voice was so calm. “Tired of you threatening my friends. I will run no more.” Ba’alzamon had a cord, too, he saw. A black cord, thicker by far than his own, so wide it should have dwarfed the human body, yet dwarfed by Ba’alzamon, instead. Each pulse along that black vein ate light.

“You think it makes any difference, whether you run or stay?” The flames of Ba’alzamon’s mouth laughed. The faces in the hearth wept at their master’s mirth. “You have fled from me many times, and each time I run you down and make you eat your pride with sniveling tears for spice. Many times you have stood and fought, then groveled in defeat, begging mercy. You have this choice, worm, and this choice only: kneel at my feet and serve me well, and I will give you power above thrones; or be Tar Valon’s puppet fool and scream while you are ground into the dust of time.”

Rand shifted, glancing back through the door as if seeking a way to escape. Let the Dark One think that. Beyond the doorway was still the black of nothing, split by the shining thread that ran from his body. And out there Ba’alzamon’s heavier cord ran as well, so black that it stood out in the dark as if against snow. The two cords beat like heartveins in countertime, against each other, the light barely resisting the waves of dark.

“There are other choices,” Rand said. “The Wheel weaves the Pattern, not you. Every trap you’ve laid for me, I have escaped. I’ve escaped your Fades and Trollocs, escaped your Darkfriends. I tracked you here, and destroyed your army on the way. You do not weave the Pattern.”

Ba’alzamon’s eyes roared like two furnaces. His lips did not move, but Rand thought he heard a curse screamed at Aginor. Then the fires died, and that ordinary human face smiled at him in a way that chilled even through the warmth of the Light.

“Other armies can be raised, fool. Armies you have not dreamed of will yet come. And you tracked me? You slug under a rock, track me? I began the setting of your path the day you were born, a path to lead you to your grave, or here. Aiel allowed to flee, and one to live, to speak the words that would echo down the years. Jain Farstrider, a hero,” he twisted the word to a sneer, “whom I painted like a fool and sent to the Ogier thinking he was free of me. The Black Ajah, wriggling like worms on their bellies across the world to search you out. I pull the strings and the Amyrlin Seat dances and thinks she controls events.”

The void trembled; hastily Rand firmed it again. *He knows it all. He could have done. It could be the way he says.* The Light warmed the void. Doubt cried out and was stilled, till only the seed remained. He struggled, not knowing whether he wanted to bury the seed or make it grow. The void steadied, smaller than before, and he floated in calm.

Ba’alzamon seemed to notice nothing. “It matters little if I have you alive or dead, except to you, and to what power you might have. You will serve me, or your soul will. But I would rather have you kneel to me alive than dead. A single fist of Trollocs sent to your village when I could have sent a thousand. One Darkfriend to face you where a hundred could come on you asleep. And you, fool, you don’t even know them all, neither those ahead, nor those behind, nor those by your side. You are mine, have always been mine, my dog on a leash, and I brought you here to kneel to your master or die and let your soul kneel.”

“I deny you. You have no power over me, and I will not kneel to you, alive or dead.”

“Look,” Ba’alzamon said. “Look.” Unwilling, Rand yet turned his head.

Egwene stood there, and Nynaeve, pale and frightened, with flowers in their hair. And another woman, little older than the Wisdom, gray-eyed and beautiful, clothed in a Two Rivers dress, bright blossoms embroidered round the neck.

“Mother?” he breathed, and she smiled, a hopeless smile. His mother’s smile. “No! My mother is dead, and the other two are safe away from here. I deny you!” Egwene and Nynaeve blurred, became wafting mist, dissipated. Kari al’Thor still stood there, her eyes big with fear.

“She, at least,” Ba’alzamon said, “is mine to do with as I will.”

Rand shook his head. “I deny you.” He had to force the words out. “She is dead, and safe from you in the Light.”

His mother’s lips trembled. Tears trickled down her cheeks; each one burned him like acid. “The Lord of the Grave is stronger than he once was, my son,” she said. “His reach is longer. The Father of Lies has a honeyed tongue for unwary souls. My son. My only, darling son. I would spare you if I could, but he is my master, now, his whim, the law of my existence. I can but obey him, and grovel for his favor. Only you can free me. Please, my son. Please help me. Help me. Help me! PLEASE!”

The wail ripped out of her as barefaced Fades, pale and eyeless, closed round. Her clothes ripped away in their bloodless hands, hands that wielded pincers and clamps and things that stung and burned and whipped against her naked flesh. Her scream would not end.

Rand’s scream echoed hers. The void boiled in his mind. His sword was in his hand. Not the heron-mark blade, but a blade of light, a blade of the Light. Even as he raised it, a fiery white bolt shot from the point, as if the blade itself had reached out. It touched the nearest Fade, and blinding canescence filled the chamber, shining through the Halfmen like a candle through paper, burning through them, blinding his eyes to the scene.

From the midst of the brilliance, he heard a whisper. “Thank you, my son. The Light. The blessed Light.”

The flash faded, and he was alone in the chamber with Ba’alzamon. Ba’alzamon’s eyes burned like the Pit of Doom, but he shied back from the sword as if it truly were the Light itself. “Fool! You will destroy yourself! You cannot wield it so, not yet! Not until I teach you!”

“It is ended,” Rand said, and he swung the sword at Ba’alzamon’s black cord.

Ba’alzamon screamed as the sword fell, screamed till the stone walls trembled, and the endless howl redoubled as the blade of Light severed the cord. The cut ends rebounded apart as if they had been under tension. The end stretching into the nothingness outside began to shrivel as it sprang away; the other whipped back into Ba’alzamon, hurling him against the fireplace. There was silent laughter in the soundless shrieks of the tortured faces. The walls shivered and cracked; the floor heaved, and chunks of stone crashed to the floor from the ceiling.

As all broke apart around him, Rand pointed the sword at Ba’alzamon’s heart. “It is ended!”

Light lanced from the blade, coruscating in a shower of fiery sparks like droplets of molten, white metal. Wailing, Ba’alzamon threw up his arms in a vain effort to shield himself. Flames shrieked in his eyes, joining with other flames as the stone ignited, the stone of the cracking walls, the stone of the pitching floor, the stone showering from the ceiling. Rand felt the bright thread attached to him thinning, till only the glow itself remained, but he strained harder, not knowing what he did, or how, only that this had to be ended. *It* has *to be ended!*

Fire filled the chamber, a solid flame. He could see Ba’alzamon withering like a leaf, hear him howling, feel the shrieks grating on his bones. The flame became pure, white light, brighter than the sun. Then the last flicker of the thread was gone, and he was falling through endless black and Ba’alzamon’s fading howl.

Something struck him with tremendous force, turning him to jelly, and the jelly shook and screamed from the fire raging inside, the hungry cold burning without end.

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CHAPTER

52

There Is Neither Beginning Nor End

He became aware of the sun, first, moving across a cloudless sky, filling his unblinking eyes. It seemed to go by fits and starts, standing still for days, then darting ahead in a streak of light, jerking toward the far horizon, day falling with it. Light. *That should mean something.* Thought was a new thing. *I can think.* I *means me.* Pain came next, the memory of raging fever, the bruises where shaking chills had thrown him around like a rag doll. And a stink. A greasy, burned smell, filling his nostrils, and his head.

With aching muscles, he heaved himself over, pushed up to hands and knees. Uncomprehending, he stared at the oily ashes in which he had been lying, ashes scattered and smeared over the stone of the hilltop. Bits of dark green cloth lay mixed in the char, edge-blackened scraps that had escaped the flames.

Aginor.

His stomach heaved and twisted. Trying to brush black streaks of ash from his clothes, he lurched away from the remains of the Forsaken. His hands flapped feebly, not making much headway. He tried to use both hands and fell forward. A sheer drop loomed under his face, a smooth rock wall spinning in his eyes, depth pulling him. His head swum, and he vomited over the edge of the cliff.

Trembling, he crawled backwards on his belly until there was solid stone under his eyes, then flopped over onto his back, panting for breath. With an effort he fumbled his sword from its scabbard. Only a few ashes remained from the red cloth. His hands shook when he held it up in front of his face; it took both hands. It was a heron-mark blade—*Heron-mark? Yes. Tam. My father*—but only steel for that. He needed three wavering tries to sheathe it again. *It* had *been something else. Or there was another sword.*

“My name,” he said after a while, “is Rand al’Thor.” More memory crashed back into his head like a lead ball, and he groaned. “The Dark One,” he whispered to himself. “The Dark One is dead.” There was no more need for caution. “Shai’tan is dead.” The world seemed to lurch. He shook in silent mirth until tears poured from his eyes. “Shai’tan is dead!” He laughed at the sky. Other memories. “Egwene!” That name meant something important.

Painfully he got to his feet, wavering like a willow in a high wind, and staggered past Aginor’s ashes without looking at them. *Not important anymore.* He fell more than climbed down that first, steep part of the slope, tumbling and sliding from bush to bush. By the time he reached more level ground, his bruises ached twice as much, but he found strength enough to stand, barely. *Egwene.* He broke into a shambling run. Leaves and flower petals showered around him as he blundered through the undergrowth. *Have to find her. Who* is *she?*

His arms and legs seemed to flail about more like long blades of grass than go as he wanted them to. Tottering, he fell against a tree, slamming against the trunk so hard that he grunted. Foliage rained on his head while he pressed his face to the rough bark, clutching to keep from falling. *Egwene.* He pushed himself away from the tree and hurried on. Almost immediately he tilted again, falling, but he forced his legs to work faster, to run into the fall so that he was staggering along at a good clip, all the while one step from falling flat on his face. Moving made his legs begin to obey him more. Slowly, he found himself running upright, arms pumping, long legs pulling him down the slope in leaps. He bounded into the clearing, half-filled now by the great oak marking the Green Man’s grave. There was the white stone arch marked with the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai, and the blackened, gaping pit where fire and wind had tried to trap Aginor and failed.

“Egwene! Egwene, where are you?” A pretty girl looked up with big eyes from where she knelt beneath the spreading branches, flowers in her hair, and brown oak leaves. She was slender and young, and frightened. *Yes, that’s who she is. Of course.* “Egwene, thank the Light you’re all right.”

There were two other women with her, one with haunted eyes and a long braid, still decorated with a few white morningstars. The other lay outstretched, her head pillowed on folded cloaks, her own sky-blue cloak not quite hiding her tattered dress. Charred spots and tears in the rich cloth showed, and her face was pale, but her eyes were open. *Moiraine. Yes, the Aes Sedai. And the Wisdom, Nynaeve.* All three women looked at him, unblinking and intent.

"You *are* all right, aren't you? Egwene? He didn't harm you." He could walk without stumbling, now—the sight of her made him feel like dancing, bruises and all—but it still felt good to drop down cross-legged beside them.

"I never even saw him after you pushed—" Her eyes were uncertain on his face. "What about you, Rand?"

"I'm fine." He laughed. He touched her cheek, and wondered if he had imagined a slight pulling away. "A little rest, and I'll be newmade. Nynaeve? Moiraine Sedai?" The names felt new in his mouth.

The Wisdom's eyes were old, ancient in her young face, but she shook her head. "A little bruised," she said, still watching him. "Moiraine is the only . . . the only one of us who was really hurt."

"I suffered more injury to my pride than anything else," the Aes Sedai said irritably, plucking at her cloak blanket. She looked as if she had been a long time ill, or hard used, but despite the dark circles under them her eyes were sharp and full of power. "Aginor was surprised and angry that I held him as long as I did, but fortunately, he had no time to spare for me. I am surprised myself that I held him so long. In the Age of Legends, Aginor was close behind the Kinslayer and Ishamael in power."

" 'The Dark One and all the Forsaken,' " Egwene quoted in a faint, unsteady voice, " 'are bound in Shayol Ghul, bound by the Creator. . . .' " She drew a shuddering breath.

"Aginor and Balthamel must have been trapped near the surface." Moiraine sounded as if she had already explained this, impatient at doing so again. "The patch on the Dark One's prison weakened enough to free them. Let us be thankful no more of the Forsaken were freed. If they had been, we would have seen them."

"It doesn't matter," Rand said. "Aginor and Balthamel are dead, and so is Shai'—"

"The Dark One," the Aes Sedai cut him off. Ill or not, her voice was firm, and her dark eyes commanding. "Best we still call him the Dark One. Or Ba'alzamon, at least."

He shrugged. "As you wish. But he's dead. The Dark One's dead. I killed him. I burned him with. . . ." The rest of memory flooded back then, leaving his mouth hanging open. *The One Power. I wielded the One Power. No man can. . . .* He licked lips that were suddenly dry. A gust of wind swirled fallen and falling leaves around them, but it was no colder than his heart. They were looking at him, the three of them. Watching. Not even blinking. He reached out to Egwene, and there was no imagination in her drawing back this time. “Egwene?” She turned her face away, and he let his hand drop.

Abruptly she flung her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. “I’m sorry, Rand. I’m sorry. I don’t care. Truly, I don’t.” Her shoulders shook. He thought she was crying. Awkwardly patting her hair, he looked at the other two women over the top of her head.

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” Nynaeve said slowly, “but you are still Rand al’Thor of Emond’s Field. But, the Light help me, the Light help us all, you are too dangerous, Rand.” He flinched from the Wisdom’s eyes, sad, regretting, and already accepting loss.

“What happened?” Moiraine said. “Tell me *everything*!”

And with her eyes on him, compelling, he did. He wanted to turn away, to make it short, leave things out, but the Aes Sedai’s eyes drew everything from him. Tears ran down his face when he came to Kari al’Thor. His mother. He emphasized that. “He had my mother. My mother!” There was sympathy and pain on Nynaeve’s face, but the Aes Sedai’s eyes drove him on, to the sword of Light, to severing the black cord, and the flames consuming Ba’alzamon. Egwene’s arms tightened around him as if she would pull him back from what had happened. “But it wasn’t me,” he finished. “The Light . . . pulled me along. It wasn’t really me. Doesn’t that make any difference?”

“I had suspicions from the first,” Moiraine said. “Suspicions are not proof, though. After I gave you the token, the coin, and made that bonding, you should have been willing to fall in with Whatever I wanted, but you resisted, questioned. That told me something, but not enough. Manetheren blood was always stubborn, and more so after Aemon died and Eldrene’s heart was shattered. Then there was Bela.”

“Bela?” he said. *Nothing makes any difference.*

The Aes Sedai nodded. “At Watch Hill, Bela had no need of me to cleanse her of tiredness; someone had already done it. She could have outrun Mandarb, that night. I should have thought of who Bela carried. With Trollocs on our heels, a Draghkar overhead, and a Halfman the Light alone knew where, how you must have feared that Egwene would be left behind. You needed something more than you had ever needed anything before in your life, and you reached out to the one thing that could give it to you. *Saidin.*"

He shivered. He felt so cold his fingers hurt. "If I never do it again, if I never touch it again, I won't. . . ." He could not say it. Go mad. Turn the land and people around him to madness. Die, rotting while he still lived.

"Perhaps," Moiraine said. "It would be much easier if there was someone to teach you, but it might be done, with a supreme effort of will."

"You can teach me. Surely, you—" He stopped when the Aes Sedai shook her head.

"Can a cat teach a dog to climb trees, Rand? Can a fish teach a bird to swim? I know *saidar,* but I can teach you nothing of *saidin.* Those who could are three thousand years dead. Perhaps you are stubborn enough, though. Perhaps your will is strong enough."

Egwene straightened, wiping reddened eyes with the back of her hand. She looked as if she wanted to say something, but when she opened her mouth, nothing came out. *At least she isn't pulling away. At least she can look at me without screaming.*

"The others?" he said.

"Lan took them into the cavern," Nynaeve said. "The Eye is gone, but there's something in the middle of the pool, a crystal column, and steps to reach it. Mat and Perrin wanted to look for you first—Loial did, too—but Moiraine said. . . ." She glanced at the Aes Sedai, troubled. Moiraine returned her look calmly. "She said we mustn't disturb you while you were. . . ."

His throat constricted until he could hardly breathe. *Will they turn their faces the way Egwene did? Will they scream and run away like I'm a Fade?* Moiraine spoke as if she did not notice the blood draining from his face.

"There was a vast amount of the One Power in the Eye. Even in the Age of Legends, few could have channeled so much unaided without being destroyed. Very few."

"You told them?" he said hoarsely. "If everybody knows. . . ."

"Only Lan," Moiraine said gently. "He must know. And Nynaeve and Egwene, for what they are and what they will become. The others have no need, yet."

"Why not?" The rasp in his throat made his voice harsh. "You will be wanting to gentle me, won't you? Isn't that what Aes Sedai do to men who can wield the Power? Change them so they can't? Make them safe? Thom said men who have been gentled die because they stop wanting to live. Why aren't you talking about taking me to Tar Valon to be gentled?"

"You are *ta'veren,*" Moiraine replied. "Perhaps the Pattern has not finished with you."

Rand sat up straight. "In the dreams Ba'alzamon said Tar Valon and the Amyrlin Seat would try to use me. He named names, and I remember them, now. Raolin Darksbane and Guaire Amalasan. Yurian Stonebow. Davian. Logain." The last was the hardest of all to say. Nynaeve went pale and Egwene gasped, but he pressed on angrily. "Every one a false Dragon. Don't try to deny it. Well, I won't be used. I am not a tool you can throw on the midden heap when it's worn out."

"A tool made for a purpose is not demeaned by being used for that purpose," Moiraine's voice was as harsh as his own, "but a man who believes the Father of Lies demeans himself. You say you will not be used, and then you let the Dark One set your path like a hound sent after a rabbit by his master."

His fists clenched, and he turned his head away. It was too close to the things Ba'alzamon had said. "I am no one's hound. Do you hear me? No one's!"

Loial and the others appeared in the arch, and Rand scrambled to his feet, looking at Moiraine.

"They will not know," the Aes Sedai said, "until the Pattern makes it so."

Then his friends were coming close. Lan led the way, looking as hard as ever but still somewhat the worse for wear. He had one of Nynaeve's bandages around his temples, and a stiffbacked way of walking. Behind him, Loial carried a large gold chest, ornately worked and chased with silver. No one but an Ogier could have lifted it unaided. Perrin had his arms wrapped around a big bundle of folded white cloth, and Mat was cupping what appeared to be fragments of pottery in his two hands.

"So you're alive after all." Mat laughed. His face darkened, and he jerked his head at Moiraine. "She wouldn't let us look for you. Said we had to find out what the Eye was hiding. I'd have gone anyway, but Nynaeve and Egwene sided with her and almost threw me through the arch."

“You’re here, now,” Perrin said, “and not too badly beaten about, by the look of you.” His eyes did not glow, but the irises were all yellow, now. “That’s the important thing. You’re here, and we’re done with what we came for, Whatever it was. Moiraine Sedai says we’re done, and we can go. Home, Rand. The Light burn me, but I want to go home.”

“Good to see you alive, sheepherder,” Lan said gruffly. “I see you hung onto your sword. Maybe you’ll learn to use it, now.” Rand felt a sudden burst of affection for the Warder; Lan knew, but on the surface at least, nothing had changed. He thought that perhaps, for Lan, nothing had changed inside either.

“I must say,” Loial said, setting the chest down, “that traveling with *ta’veren* has turned out to be even more interesting than I expected.” His ears twitched violently. “If it becomes any more interesting, I will go back to Stedding Shangtai immediately, confess everything to Elder Haman, and never leave my books again.” Suddenly the Ogier grinned, that wide mouth splitting his face in two. “It is so good to see you, Rand al’Thor. The Warder is the only one of these three who cares much at all for books, and he won’t talk. What happened to you? We all ran off and hid in the woods until Moiraine Sedai sent Lan to find us, but she would not let us look for you. Why were you gone so long, Rand?”

“I ran and ran,” he said slowly, “until I fell down a hill and hit my head on a rock. I think I hit every rock on the way down.” That should explain his bruises. He tried to watch the Aes Sedai, and Nynaeve and Egwene, too, but their faces never changed. “When I came to, I was lost, and finally I stumbled back here. I think Aginor is dead, burned. I found some ashes, and pieces of his cloak.”

The lies sounded hollow in his ears. He could not understand why they did not laugh with scorn and demand the truth, but his friends nodded, accepting, and made sympathetic sounds as they gathered around the Aes Sedai to show her what they had found.

“Help me up,” Moiraine said. Nynaeve and Egwene lifted her until she was sitting; they had to support her even then.

“How could these things be inside the Eye,” Mat asked, “without being destroyed like that rock?”

“They were not put there to be destroyed,” the Aes Sedai said curtly, and frowned away their questions while she took the pottery fragments, black and white and shiny, from Mat.

They seemed like rubble to Rand, but she fitted them together deftly on the ground beside her, making a perfect circle the size of a man's hand. The ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai, the Flame of Tar Valon joined with the Dragon's Fang, black siding white. For a moment Moiraine only looked at it, her face unreadable, then she took the knife from her belt and handed it to Lan, nodding to the circle.

The Warder separated out the largest piece, then raised the knife high and brought it down with all his might. A spark flew, the fragment leaped with the force of the blow, and the blade snapped with a sharp crack. He examined the stump left attached to the hilt, then tossed it aside. "The best steel from Tear," he said dryly.

Mat snatched the fragment up and grunted, then showed it around. There was no mark on it.

"Cuendillar," Moiraine said. "Heartstone. No one has been able to make it since the Age of Legends, and even then it was made only for the greatest purpose. Once made, nothing can break it. Not the One Power itself wielded by the greatest Aes Sedai who ever lived aided by the most powerful *sa'angreal* ever made. Any power directed against heartstone only makes it stronger."

"Then how . . . ?" Mat's gesture with the piece he held took in the other bits on the ground.

"This was one of the seven seals on the Dark One's prison," Moiraine said. Mat dropped the piece as if it had become white-hot. For a moment, Perrin's eyes seemed to glow again. The Aes Sedai calmly began gathering the fragments.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Rand said. His friends looked at him oddly, and he wished he had kept his mouth shut.

"Of course," Moiraine replied. But she carefully put all the pieces into her pouch. "Bring me the chest." Loial lifted it closer.

The flattened cube of gold and silver appeared to be solid, but the Aes Sedai's fingers felt across the intricate work, pressing, and with a sudden click a top flung back as if on springs. A curled, gold horn nestled within. Despite its gleam, it seemed plain beside the chest that held it. The only markings were a line of silver script inlaid around the mouth of the bell. Moiraine lifted the horn out as if lifting a babe. "This must be carried to Illian," she said softly.

“Illian!” Perrin growled. “That’s almost to the Sea of Storms, nearly as far south of home as we are north now.”

“Is it . . . ?” Loial stopped to catch his breath. “Can it be . . . ?”

“You can read the Old Tongue?” Moiraine asked, and when he nodded, she handed him the horn.

The Ogier took it as gently as she had, delicately tracing the script with one broad finger. His eyes went wider and wider, and his ears stood up straight. *“Tia mi aven Moridin isainde vadin,”* he whispered. “The grave is no bar to my call.”

“The Horn of Valere.” For once the Warder appeared truly shaken; there was a touch of awe in his voice.

At the same time Nynaeve said in a shaky voice, “To call the heroes of the Ages back from the dead to fight the Dark One.”

“Burn me!” Mat breathed.

Loial reverently laid the horn back in its golden nest. “I begin to wonder,” Moiraine said. “The Eye of the World was made against the greatest need the world would ever face, but was it made for the use to which . . . we . . . put it, or to guard these things? Quickly, the last, show it to me.”

After the first two, Rand could understand Perrin’s reluctance. Lan and the Ogier took the bundle of white cloth from him when he hesitated, and unfolded it between them. A long, white banner spread out, lifting on the air. Rand could only stare. The whole thing seemed of a piece, neither woven, nor dyed, nor painted. A figure like a serpent, scaled in scarlet and gold, ran the entire length, but it had scaled legs, and feet with five long, golden claws on each, and a great head with a golden mane and eyes like the sun. The stirring of the banner made it seem to move, scales glittering like precious metals and gems, alive, and he almost thought he could hear it roar defiance.

“What is it?” he said.

Moiraine answered slowly. “The banner of the Lord of the Morning when he led the forces of light against the Shadow. The banner of Lews Therin Telamon. The banner of the Dragon.” Loial almost dropped his end.

“Burn me!” Mat said faintly.

“We will take these things with us when we go,” Moiraine said. “They were not put here by chance, and I must know more.” Her fingers brushed her pouch, where the pieces of the shattered seal were. “It is too late in the day for starting now. We will rest, and eat, but we will leave early. The Blight is all around here, not as along the Border, and strong. Without the Green Man, this place cannot hold long. Let me down,” she told Nynaeve and Egwene. “I must rest.”

Rand became aware of what he had been seeing all along, but not noticing. Dead, brown leaves falling from the great oak. Dead leaves rustling thick on the ground in the breeze, brown mixed with petals dropped from thousands of flowers. The Green Man had held back the Blight, but already the Blight was killing what he had made.

“It is done, isn’t it?” he asked Moiraine. “It is finished.”

The Aes Sedai turned her head on its pillow of cloaks. Her eyes seemed as deep as the Eye of the World. “We have done what we came here to do. From here you may live your life as the Pattern weaves. Eat, then sleep, Rand al’Thor. Sleep, and dream of home.”

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CHAPTER

53

The Wheel Turns

Dawn revealed devastation in the Green Man's garden. The ground was thick with fallen leaves, almost knee-deep in places. All the flowers were gone except a few clinging desperately to the edge of the clearing. Little could grow in the soil under an oak, but a thin circle of flowers and grass centered on the thick trunk above the Green Man's grave. The oak itself retained only half its leaves, and that was far more than any other tree had, as if some remnant of the Green Man still fought to hold there. The cool breezes had died, replaced by a growing sticky heat, the butterflies were gone, the birds silent. It was a silent group who prepared to leave.

Rand climbed into the bay's saddle with a sense of loss. *It shouldn't be this way. Blood and ashes, we won!*

"I wish he had found his other place," Egwene said as she mounted Bela. A litter, fashioned by Lan, was slung between the shaggy mare and Aldieb, to carry Moiraine; Nynaeve would ride beside with the white mare's reins. The Wisdom dropped her eyes whenever she saw Lan glance at her, avoiding his gaze; the Warder looked at her whenever her eyes were averted, but he would not speak to her. No one had to ask who Egwene meant.

"It is not right," Loial said, staring at the oak. The Ogier was the only one still not mounted. "It is not right that Treebrother should fall to the Blight." He handed the reins of his big horse to Rand. "Not right."

Lan opened his mouth as the Ogier walked to the great oak. Moiraine, lying on the litter, weakly raised her hand, and the Warder said nothing.

Before the oak, Loial knelt, closing his eyes and stretching out his arms. The tufts on his ears stood straight as he lifted his face to the sky. And he sang.

Rand could not say if there were words, or if it was pure song. In that rumbling voice it was as if the earth sang, yet he was sure he heard the birds trilling again, and spring breezes sighing softly, and the sound of butterfly wings. Lost in the song, he thought it lasted only minutes, but when Loial lowered his arms and opened his eyes, he was surprised to see the sun stood well above the horizon. It had been touching the trees when the Ogier began. The leaves still on the oak seemed greener, and more firmly attached than before. The flowers encircling it stood straighter, the morningstars white and fresh, the loversknots a strong crimson.

Mopping sweat from his broad face, Loial rose and took his reins from Rand. His long eyebrows drooped, abashed, as if they might think he had been showing off. "I've never sung so hard before. I could not have done it if something of Treebrother was not still there. My Tree Songs do not have his power." When he settled himself in his saddle, there was satisfaction in the look he gave the oak and the flowers. "This little space, at least, will not sink into the Blight. The Blight will not have Treebrother."

"You are a good man, Ogier," Lan said.

Loial grinned. "I will take that as a compliment, but I do not know what Elder Haman would say."

They rode in a single file, with Mat behind the Warder where he could use his bow to effect if needed, and Perrin bringing up the rear with his axe across the pommel of his saddle. They crested a hill, and in an eyeblink the Blight was all around them, twisted and rotted in virulent rainbow hues. Rand looked over his shoulder, but the Green Man's garden was nowhere to be seen. Only the Blight stretching behind them as before. Yet he thought, just for a moment, that he saw the towering top of the oak tree, green and lush, before it shimmered and was gone. Then there was only the Blight.

He half expected they would have to fight their way out as they fought their way in, but the Blight was as quiet and still as death. Not a single branch trembled as if to lash at them, nothing screamed or howled, neither nearby nor in the distance. The Blight seemed to crouch, not to pounce, but as if it had been struck a great blow and waited for the next to fall. Even the sun was less red.

When they passed the necklace of lakes, the sun hung not far past its zenith. Lan kept them well away from the lakes and did not even look at them, but Rand thought the seven towers seemed taller than when he first saw them. He was sure the jagged tops were further from the ground, and above them something almost seen, seamless towers gleaming in the sun, and banners with Golden Cranes flying on the wind. He blinked and stared, but the towers refused to vanish completely. They were there at the edge of vision until the Blight hid the lakes once more.

Before sunset the Warder chose a campsite, and Moiraine had Nynaeve and Egwene help her up to set wards. The Aes Sedai whispered in the other women's ears before she began. Nynaeve hesitated, but when Moiraine closed her eyes, all three women did so together.

Rand saw Mat and Perrin staring, and wondered how they could be surprised. *Every woman is an Aes Sedai,* he thought mirthlessly. *The Light help me, so am I.* Bleakness held his tongue.

"Why is it so different?" Perrin asked as Egwene and the Wisdom helped Moiraine to her bed. "It feels. . . ." His thick shoulders shrugged as if he could not find the word.

"We struck a mighty blow at the Dark One," Moiraine replied, settling herself with a sigh. "The Shadow will be a long time recovering."

"How?" Mat demanded. "What did we do?"

"Sleep," Moiraine said. "We are not out of the Blight yet."

But the next morning, still nothing changed that Rand could see. The Blight faded as they rode south, of course. Twisted trees were replaced by straight. The stifling heat diminished. Rotting foliage gave way to the merely diseased. And then not diseased, he realized. The forest around them became red with new growth, thick on the branches. Buds sprouted on the undergrowth, creepers covered the rocks with green, and new wildflowers dotted the grass as thick and bright as where the Green Man walked. It was as if spring, so long held back by winter, now raced to catch up to where it should be.

He was not the only one who stared. "A mighty blow," Moiraine murmured, and would say no more.

Climbing wildrose entwined the stone column marking the Border. Men came out of the watchtowers to greet them. There was a stunned quality to their laughter, and their eyes shone with amaze, as if they could not believe the new grass under their steel-clad feet.

"The Light has conquered the Shadow!"

"A great victory in Tarwin's Gap! We have had the message! Victory!"

"The Light blesses us again!"

"King Easar is strong in the Light," Lan replied to all their shouts.

The watchmen wanted to tend Moiraine, or at least send an escort with them, but she refused it all. Even flat on her back on a litter, the Aes Sedai's presence was such that the armored men fell back, bowing and acceding to her wishes. Their laughter followed as Rand and the others rode on.

In the late afternoon they reached Fal Dara, to find the grim-walled city ringing with celebration. Ringing in truth. Rand doubted if there could be a bell in the city not clanging, from the tiniest silver harness chime to great bronze gongs in their tower tops. The gates stood wide open, and men ran laughing and singing in the streets, flowers stuck in their topknots and the crevices of their armor. The common people of the town had not yet returned from Fal Moran, but the soldiers were newly come from Tarwin's Gap, and their joy was enough to fill the streets.

"Victory in the Gap! We won!"

"A miracle in the Gap! The Age of Legends has come back!"

"Spring!" a grizzled old soldier laughed as he hung a garland of morningstars around Rand's neck. His own topknot was a white cluster of them. "The Light blesses us with spring once more!"

Learning they wanted to go to the keep, a circle of men clad in steel and flowers surrounded them, running to clear a way through the celebration.

Ingtar's was the first face Rand saw that was not smiling. "I was too late," Ingtar told Lan with a sour grimness. "Too late by an hour to see. Peace!" His teeth ground audibly, but then his expression became contrite. "Forgive me. Grief makes me forget my duties. Welcome, Builder. Welcome to you all. It is good to see you safely out of the Blight. I will bring the healer to Moiraine Sedai in her chambers, and inform Lord Agelmar—"

"Take me to Lord Agelmar," Moiraine commanded. "Take us all." Ingtar opened his mouth to protest, and bowed under the force of her eyes.

Agelmar was in his study, with his swords and armor back on their racks, and his was the second face that did not smile. He wore a troubled frown that deepened when he saw Moiraine carried in on her litter by liveried servants. Women in the black-and-gold fluttered over bringing the Aes Sedai to him without a chance to freshen herself or be brought the healer. Loial carried the gold chest. The pieces of the seal were still in Moiraine's pouch; Lews Therin Kinslayer's banner was wrapped in her blanketroll and still tied behind Aldieb's saddle. The groom who had led the white mare away had received the strictest orders to see the blanketroll was placed untouched in the chambers assigned to the Aes Sedai.

“Peace!” the Lord of Fal Dara muttered. “Are you injured, Moiraine Sedai? Ingtar, why have you not seen the Aes Sedai to her bed and brought the healer to her?”

“Be still, Lord Agelmar,” Moiraine said. “Ingtar has done as I commanded him. I am not so frail as everyone here seems to think.” She motioned two of the women to help her to a chair. For a moment they clasped their hands, exclaiming that she was too weak, that she should be in a warm bed, and the healer brought, and a hot bath. Moiraine’s eyebrows lifted; the women shut their mouths abruptly and hurried to aid her into the chair. As soon as she was settled she waved them away irritably. “I would speak with you, Lord Agelmar.”

Agelmar nodded, and Ingtar waved the servants from the room. The Lord of Fal Dara eyed those who remained expectantly; especially, Rand thought, Loial and the golden chest.

“We hear,” Moiraine said as soon as the door shut behind Ingtar, “that you won a great victory in Tarwin’s Gap.”

“Yes,” Agelmar said slowly, his troubled frown returning. “Yes, Aes Sedai, and no. The Halfmen and their Trollocs were destroyed to the last, but we barely fought. A miracle, my men call it. The earth swallowed them; the mountains buried them. Only a few Draghkar were left, too frightened to do else but fly north as fast as they could.”

“A miracle indeed,” Moiraine said. “And spring has come again.”

“A miracle,” Agelmar said, shaking his head, “but. . . . Moiraine Sedai, men say many things about what happened in the Gap. That the Light took on flesh and fought for us. That the Creator walked in the Gap to strike at the Shadow. But I saw a man, Moiraine Sedai. I saw a man, and what he did, cannot be, must not be.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, Lord of Fal Dara.”

“As you say, Moiraine Sedai.”

“And Padan Fain? He is secure? I must speak with him when I am rested.”

“He is held as you commanded, Aes Sedai, whining at his guards half the time and trying to command them the rest, but. . . . Peace, Moiraine Sedai, what of you, in the Blight? You found the Green Man? I see his hand in the new things growing.”

“We found him,” she said flatly. “The Green Man is dead, Lord Agelmar, and the Eye of the World is gone. There will be no more quests by young men seeking glory.”

The Lord of Fal Dara frowned, shaking his head in confusion. “Dead? The Green Man? He cannot be. . . . Then you were defeated? But the flowers, and the growing things?”

“We won, Lord Agelmar. We won, and the land freed from winter is the proof, but I fear the last battle has not yet been fought.” Rand stirred, but the Aes Sedai gave him a sharp look and he stood still again. “The Blight still stands, and the forges of Thakan’dar still work below Shayol Ghul. There are many Halfmen yet, and countless Trollocs. Never think the need for watchfulness in the Borderlands is gone.”

“I did not think it so, Aes Sedai,” he said stiffly.

Moiraine motioned for Loial to set the gold chest at her feet, and when he did, she opened it, revealing the horn. “The Horn of Valere,” she said, and Agelmar gasped. Rand almost thought the man would kneel.

“With that, Moiraine Sedai, it matters not how many Halfmen or Trollocs remain. With the heroes of old come back from the tomb, we will march to the Blasted Lands and level Shayol Ghul.”

“NO!” Agelmar’s mouth fell open in surprise, but Moiraine continued calmly. “I did not show it to you to taunt you, but so that you will know that in Whatever battles yet come, our might will be as great as that of the Shadow. Its place is not here. The Horn must be carried to Illian. It is there, if fresh battles threaten, that it must rally the forces of the Light. I will ask an escort of your best men to see that it reaches Illian safely. There are Darkfriends still, as well as Halfmen and Trollocs, and those who come to the horn will follow whoever winds it. It must reach Illian.”

“It shall be as you say, Aes Sedai.” But when the lid of the chest closed, the Lord of Fal Dara looked like a man being denied his last glimpse of the Light.

Seven days later, bells still rang in Fal Dara. The people had returned from Fal Moran, adding their celebration to that of the soldiers, and shouts and singing blended with the pealing of the bells on the long balcony where Rand stood. The balcony overlooked Agelmar’s private gardens, green and flowering, but he did not give them a second look. Despite the sun high in the sky, spring in Shienar was cooler than he was used to, yet sweat glistened on his bare chest and shoulders as he swung the heron-mark blade, each move precise yet distant from where he floated in the void. Even there, he wondered how much joy there would be in the town if they knew of the banner Moiraine still kept hidden.

“Good, sheepherder.” Leaning against the railing with his arms folded across his chest, the Warder watched him critically. “You are doing well, but don’t push so hard. You can’t become a blademaster in a few weeks.”

The void vanished like a pricked bubble. “I don’t care about being a blademaster.”

“It’s a blademaster’s blade, sheepherder.”

“I just want my father to be proud of me.” His hand tightened on the rough leather of the hilt. *I just want Tam to be my father.* He slammed the sword into its scabbard. “Anyway, I don’t have a few weeks.”

“Then you’ve not changed your mind?”

“Would you?” Lan’s expression had not altered; the flat planes of his face looked as if they could not change. “You won’t try to stop me? Or Moiraine Sedai?”

“You can do as you will, sheepherder, or as the Pattern weaves for you.” The Warder straightened. “I’ll leave you now.”

Rand turned to watch Lan go, and found Egwene standing there.

“Changed your mind about what, Rand?”

He snatched up his shirt and coat, suddenly feeling the cool. “I’m going away, Egwene.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere. I don’t know.” He did not want to meet her eyes, but he could not stop looking at her. She wore fed wild-roses twined in her hair, flowing about her shoulders. She held her cloak close, dark blue and embroidered along the edge with a thin line of white flowers in the Shienaran fashion, and the blossoms made a line straight up to her face. They were no paler than her cheeks; her eyes seemed so large and dark. “Away.”

“I’m sure Moiraine Sedai will not like you just going off. After . . . after what you’ve done, you deserve some reward.”

“Moiraine does not know I am alive. I have done what she wanted, and that’s an end to it. She doesn’t even speak to me when I go to her. Not that I’ve tried to stay close to her, but she’s avoided me. She won’t care if I go, and I don’t care if she does.”

“Moiraine is still not completely well, Rand.” She hesitated. “I have to go to Tar Valon for my training. Nynaeve is coming, too. And Mat still needs to be Healed of Whatever binds him to that dagger, and Perrin wants to see Tar Valon before he goes . . . wherever. You could come with us.”

“And wait for some Aes Sedai besides Moiraine to find out what I am and gentle me?” His voice was rough, almost a sneer; he could not change it. “Is that what you want?”

“No.”

He knew he would never be able to tell her how grateful he was that she had not hesitated before answering.

“Rand, you aren’t afraid. . . .” They were alone, but she looked around and still lowered her voice. “Moiraine Sedai says you don’t have to touch the True Source. If you don’t touch *saidin*, if you don’t try to wield the Power, you’ll be safe.”

“Oh, I won’t ever touch it again. Not if I have to cut my hand off, first.” *What if I can’t stop? I never* tried *to wield it, not even at the Eye. What if I can’t stop?*

“Will you go home, Rand? Your father must be dying to see you. Even Mat’s father must be dying to see him by now. I’ll be coming back to Emond’s Field next year. For a little while, at least.”

He rubbed his palm over the hilt of his sword, feeling the bronze heron. *My father. Home. Light, how I want to see. . . .* “Not home.” *Someplace where there aren’t any people to hurt if I can’t stop myself. Somewhere alone.* Suddenly it felt as cold as snow on the balcony. “I’m going away, but not home.” *Egwene, Egwene, why did you have to be one of those . . . ?* He put his arms around her, and whispered into her hair. “Not ever home.”

In Agelmar’s private garden, under a thick bower dotted with white blossoms, Moiraine shifted on her bedchair. The fragments of the seal lay on her lap, and the small gem she sometimes wore in her hair spun and glittered on its gold chain from the ends of her fingers. The faint blue glow faded from the stone, and a smile touched her lips. It had no power in itself, the stone, but the first use she had ever learned of the One Power, as a girl, in the Royal Palace in Cairhien, was using the stone to listen to people when they thought they were too far off to be overheard.

“The Prophecies will be fulfilled,” the Aes Sedai whispered. “The Dragon is Reborn.”

The End

of the First Book of

The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai and recorded years After the Breaking of the World (AB). Many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars, so much so that with the end of the Wars there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar was proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrating the supposed freedom from the Trolloc threat and recording each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but this is now known and referred to only by historians. After the widespread destruction, death and disruption of the War of the Hundred Years, a fourth calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Adan, Heran *(ay-DAN, HEH-ran)****:*** Governor of Baerlon.

Aes Sedai *(EYEZ seh-DEYE)****:*** Wielders of the One Power. Since the Time of Madness, all surviving Aes Sedai are women. Widely distrusted and feared, even hated, they are blamed by many for the Breaking of the World, and are generally thought to meddle in the affairs of nations. At the same time, few rulers will be without an Aes Sedai adviser, even in lands where the existence of such a connection must be kept secret. Used as an honorific, so: Sheriam Sedai; and as a high honorific, so: Sheriam Aes Sedai. *See also* Ajah; Amyrlin Seat.

Age Lace: *See* Pattern of an Age.

Age of Legends: The Age ended by the War of the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. A time when Aes Sedai performed wonders now only dreamed of. *See also* Wheel of Time.

Agelmar; Lord Agelmar of House of Jagad *(AGH-el-mar; JAH-gad):* Lord of Fal Dara. His sign is three running red foxes.

Aiel *(eye-EEL):* The people of the Aiel Waste. Fierce and hardy. Also called

Aielmen. They veil their faces before they kill, giving rise to the saying "acting like a black-veiled Aiel" to describe someone who is being violent. Deadly warriors with weapons or with nothing but their bare hands, they will not touch a sword. Their pipers play them into battle with the music of dances, and Aielmen call battle "the Dance."

Aiel Waste: The harsh, rugged and all-but-waterless land east of the Spine of the World. Few outsiders venture there, not only because water is almost impossible to find for one not born there, but because the Aiel consider themselves at war with all other peoples and do not welcome strangers.

Ajah *(AH-jah):* Societies among the Aes Sedai, to which all Aes Sedai belong. They are designated by colors: Blue Ajah, Red Ajah, White Ajah, Green Ajah, Brown Ajah, Yellow Ajah, and Gray Ajah. Each follows a specific philosophy of the use of the One Power and purposes of the Aes Sedai. For example, the Red Ajah bends all its energies to finding and gentling men who are attempting to wield the Power. The Brown Ajah, on the other hand, forsakes involvement with the world and dedicates itself to seeking knowledge. There are rumors (hotly denied, and never safely mentioned in front of any Aes Sedai) of a Black Ajah, dedicated to serving the Dark One.

Al Ellisande! *(ahlehl-lih-SAHN-dah):* In the Old Tongue, "For the Rose of the Sun!"

Aldieb *(ahl-DEEB):* In the Old Tongue, "West Wind," the wind that brings the spring rains. ***al'Meara, Nynaeve*** *(ahl-MEER-ah, NIGH-neev):* The Wisdom of Emond's Field.

al'Thor, Rand *(ahl-THOR, RAND):* A young farmer and sheepherder from the Two Rivers.

al'Vere, Egwene *(ahl-VEER, eh-GWAIN):* Youngest daughter of the innkeeper in Emond's Field.

Amyrlin Seat *(AHM-ehr-lin):* (1.) The title of the leader of the Aes Sedai.

Elected for life by the Hall of the Tower, the highest council of the Aes Sedai, which consists of three representatives from each of the seven Ajahs. The Amyrlin Seat has, theoretically at least, almost supreme authority among the Aes Sedai. She ranks as the equal of a king or queen. (2.) The throne upon which the leader of the Aes Sedai sits.

***Andor (AN-door*)**: The realm within which the Two Rivers lies. The sign of Andor is a rampant white lion on a field of red.

angreal *(ahn-gree-AHL):* A very rare object which allows anyone capable of channeling the One Power to handle a greater amount of the Power than would be safely possible unaided. Remnants of the Age of Legends, the means of their making is no longer known. *See also sa'angreal.*

Arafel *(AH-rah-fehl):* One of the Borderlands. The sign of Arafel is three white roses on a field of red, quartered with three red roses on a field of white.

Aram *(AY-ram):* A young man of the Tuatha'an.

Avendesora *(Ah-vehn-deh-SO-rah):* In the Old Tongue, "the Tree of Life." Mentioned in many stories and legends.

Aybara, Perrin *(ay-BAHR-ah, PEHR-rihn):* A young blacksmith's apprentice from Emond's Field.

Ba'alzamon *(bah-AHL-zah-mon):* In the Trolloc tongue, "Heart of the Dark." Believed to be the Trolloc name for the Dark One.

Baerlon *(BAYR-lon):* A city in Andor on the road from Caemlyn to the mines in the Mountains of Mist.

Barron, Doral *(BAHR-rahn, DOOR-ahl):* The Wisdom in Emond's Field prior to Nynaeve al'Meara.

Bel Tine *(BEHL TINE):* Spring festival in the Two Rivers.

biteme *(BITE-me):* A small, almost invisible biting insect.

Black Ajah:*See* Ajah.

Blasted Lands: Desolated lands surrounding Shayol Ghul, beyond the Great Blight.

Blight, the:*See* Great Blight, the.

Blue Ajah:*See* Ajah.

Borderlands, the: The nations bordering the Great Blight: Saldaea, Arafel, Kandor, and Shienar.

Bornhald, Dain *(BOHRN-hahld, DAY-ihn):* An officer of the Children of the Light, son of Lord Captain Geofram Bornhald.

Bornhald, Geofram *(BOHRN-hahld, JEHF-rahm):* A Lord Captain of the Children of the Light.

Breaking of the World, the: When Lews Therin Telamon and the Hundred Companions resealed the Dark One's prison, the counterstroke tainted *saidin.* Eventually every male Aes Sedai went horribly insane. In their madness these men, who could wield the One Power to a degree now unknown, changed the face of the earth. They caused great earthquakes, leveled mountain ranges, raised new mountains, lifted dry land where seas had been, made the ocean rush in where dry land had been. Many parts of the world were completely depopulated, and the survivors were scattered like dust on the wind. This destruction is remembered in stories, legends and history as the Breaking of the World. *See also* Hundred Companions, the.

Bryne, Gareth *(BRIHN, GAH-rehth):* Captain-General of the Queen's Guard in Andor. Also serves as Morgase's First Prince of the Sword. His sign is three golden stars, each of five rays.

Byar, Jaret *(BY-ahr, JAH-ret):* An officer of the Children of the Light.

Caemlyn *(KAYM-lihn):* The capital city of Andor.

Cairhien *(KEYE-ree-EHN):* Both a nation along the Spine of the World and the capital city of that nation. The city was burned and looted during the Aiel War (976–978 NE). The sign of Cairhien is a many-rayed golden sun rising from the bottom of a field of sky blue.

Carai an Caldazar! *(cah-REYE ahn cahl-dah-ZAHR):* In the Old Tongue, "For the honor of the Red Eagle!" The ancient battle cry of Manetheren.

Carai an Ellisande!**:** In the Old Tongue, “For the honor of the Rose of the Sun!” The battle cry of the last king of Manetheren.

Cauthon, Matrim (Mat) *(CAW-thon, MAT-rihm):* A young farmer from the Two Rivers.

channel: (1) *(verb)* To control the flow of the One Power. (2) *(noun)* The act of controlling the flow of the One Power.

Charin, Jain *(CHAH-rihn, JAY-ihn): See* Farstrider, Jain.

Children of the Light: A society holding strict ascetic beliefs, dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar *(LOH-thayr MAHN-tee-LAHR)* to proselytize against increasing numbers of Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military organization, extremely rigid in their beliefs and completely certain that only they know the truth and the right. They hate Aes Sedai, considering them, and any who support or befriend them, Darkfriends. They are known disparagingly as Whitecloaks; their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white.

Covenant of the Ten Nations: A union formed in the centuries after the Breaking of the World (circa 200 AB). Dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One. Broken apart by the Trolloc Wars.

cuendillar *(CWAIN-deh-yar): See* heartstone.

Damodred, Lord Galadedrid *(DAHM-oh-drehd, gah-LAHD-eh-drihd):* Only son of Taringail Damodred and Tigraine; half-brother to Elayne and Gawyn. His sign is a winged silver sword, point-down.

Damodred, Prince Taringail *(DAHM-oh-drehd, TAH-rihn-gail):* A Royal Prince of Cairhien, he married Tigraine and fathered Galadedrid. When Tigraine disappeared and was declared dead, he married Morgase and fathered Elayne and Gawyn. He died in a hunting accident. His sign was a golden, double-bitted battle axe.

Dark One: Most common name, used in every land, for Shai’tan: the source of evil, antithesis of the Creator. Imprisoned by the Creator at the moment of Creation in a prison at Shayol Ghul; an attempt to free him from that prison brought about the War of the Shadow, the tainting of *saidin,* the Breaking of the World, and the end of the Age of Legends.

Dark One, naming the: Saying the true name of the Dark One (Shai'tan) draws his attention, inevitably bringing ill fortune at best, disaster at worst. For that reason many euphemisms are used, among them the Dark One, Father of Lies, Sightblinder, Lord of the Grave, Shepherd of the Night, Heartsbane, Heartfang, Grassburner, and Leaf blighter. Someone who seems to be inviting ill fortune is often said to be "naming the Dark One."

Darkfriends: Those who follow the Dark One and believe they will gain great power and rewards when he is freed from his prison.

Daughter-heir: Title of the heir to the throne of Andor. The eldest daughter of the Queen succeeds her mother on the throne. Without a surviving daughter, the throne goes to the nearest female blood-relation of the Queen.

Dha'vol, Dhai'mon *(DAH-vohl, DEYE-mon): See* Trollocs.

Djevik K'Shar *(DJEH-vihk KEH-SHAHR):* In the Trolloc tongue, "The Dying Ground." The Trolloc name for the Aiel Waste.

Domon, Bayle *(DOH-mon, BAIL):* The captain of the *Spray.*

Dragon, the: The name by which Lews Therin Telamon was known during the War of the Shadow. In the madness which overtook all male Aes Sedai, Lews Therin killed every living person who carried any of his blood, as well as everyone he loved, thus earning the name Kinslayer. A saying is now used, "taken by the Dragon," or "possessed of the Dragon," to indicate that someone is endangering those around him or threatening them, especially if without cause. *See also* Dragon Reborn.

Dragon, false: Occasionally men claim to be the Dragon Reborn, and sometimes one of them gains following enough to require an army to put it down. Some have begun wars that involved many nations. Over the centuries most have been men unable to channel the One Power, but a few could. All, however, either disappeared, or were captured or killed, without fulfilling any of the Prophecies concerning the Rebirth of the Dragon. These men are called false Dragons. *See also* Dragon Reborn.

Dragon Reborn: According to prophecy and legend the Dragon will be born again at mankind's greatest hour of need to save the world. This is not something people look forward to, both because the prophecies say the Dragon Reborn will bring anew Breaking to the world, and because Lews Therin Kinslayer, the Dragon, is a name to make men shudder, even more than three thousand years after his death. *See also* Dragon, the; Dragon, false.

Dragon's Fang, the: A stylized mark, usually black, in the shape of a teardrop balanced on its point. Scrawled on a door or a house, it is an accusation of evil against the people inside.

Dreadlords: Those men and women who, able to channel the One Power, went over to the Shadow during the Trolloc Wars, acting as commanders of the Trolloc forces.

Easar; King Easar of House Togita *(EE-zar; toh-GHEE-tah):* King of Shienar. His sigh is a white hart, which according to Shienaran custom is held also to be a sign of Shienar along with the Black Hawk.

Elaida *(eh-LY-da):* An Aes Sedai who advises Queen Morgase of Andor.

Elayne *(ee-LAIN):* Queen Morgase's daughter, the Daughter-heir to the Throne of Andor. Her sign is a golden lily.

Else; Else Grinwell *(EHLZ GRIHN-wehl):* A farmer's daughter met on the Caemlyn Road.

Eyeless, the:*See* Myrddraal.

Fade:*See* Myrddraal.

Fain, Padan *(FAIN, PAHD-ahn):* A peddler who arrives in Emond's Field just before Winternight.

Far Dareis Mai *(FAHR DAH-rize MY):* Literally, "Maidens of the Spear." One of a number of warrior societies of the Aiel; unlike any of the others, it admits women and only women. A Maiden may not marry and remain in the society, nor may she fight while carrying a child. Any child born to a Maiden is given to another woman to raise, in such a way that no one knows who the child's mother was. ("You may belong to no man, nor may any man belong to you, nor any child. The spear is your lover, your child, and your life.") These children are treasured, for it is prophesied that a child born of a Maiden will unite the clans and return to the Aiel to the greatness they knew during the Age of Legends.

Farstrider, Jain *(JAY-ihn):* A hero of the northern lands who journeyed to many lands and had many adventures; the author of several books, as well as being the subject of books and stories. He vanished in 981 NE, after returning from a trip into the Great Blight which some say had taken him all the way to Shayol Ghul.

Father of Lies:*See* Dark One.

First Prince of the Sword: Title normally held by the eldest brother of the Queen of Andor, who has been trained since childhood to command the Queen's armies in time of war and to be her adviser in time of peace. If the Queen has no surviving brother, she will appoint someone to that title.

fist: The basic military unit of the Trollocs, varying in number; always more than one hundred, but never more than two hundred. A fist is usually, but not always, commanded by a Myrddraal.

Five Powers, the: There are threads to the One Power, and each person who can channel the One Power can usually grasp some threads better than others. These threads are named according to the sorts of things that can be done under them—Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit—and are called the Five Powers. Any wielder of the One Power will have a greater degree of strength with one, or possibly two, of these, and lesser strength in the others. Some few may have great strength with three, but since the Age of Legends no one has had great strength with all five. Even then this was extremely rare. The degree of strength can vary greatly between individuals, so that some who can channel are much stronger than others. Performing certain acts with the One Power requires ability in one or more of the Five Powers. For example, starting or controlling a fire requires Fire, and affecting the weather requires Air and Water, while Healing requires Water and Spirit. While Spirit was found equally in men and in women, great ability with Earth and/or Fire was found much more often among men, with Water and/or Air among women. There were exceptions, but it was so often so that Earth and Fire came to be regarded as male Powers, Air and Water as female. Generally, no ability is considered stronger than any other, though there is a saying among Aes Sedai: "There is no rock so strong that water and wind cannot wear it away, no fire so fierce that water cannot quench it or wind snuff it out." It should be noted this saying came into use long after the last male Aes Sedai was dead. Any equivalent saying among male Aes Sedai is long lost.

Flame of Tar Valon: The symbol of Tar Valon and the Aes Sedai. A stylized representation of a flame; a white teardrop with the point upward.

Forsaken, the: Name given to thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai ever known, who went over to the Dark One during the War of the Shadow in return for the promise of immortality. According to both legend and fragmentary records, they were imprisoned along with the Dark One when his prison was reseated. Their names are still used to frighten children.

Galad *(gah-LAHD): See* Damodred, Lord Galadedrid.

Gawyn *(GAH-wihn):* Queen Morgase's son, Elayne's brother, who will be First Prince of the Sword when Elayne ascends the throne. His sign is a white boar.

gentling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a male who can channel from the One Power. This is necessary because any man who learns to channel will go insane from the taint upon *saidin* and will almost certainly do horrible things with the Power in his madness. A man who has been gentled can still sense the True Source, but he cannot touch it. Whatever madness has come before gentling is arrested by the act of gentling, but not cured by it, and if it is done soon enough death can be averted.

gleeman: A traveling storyteller, musician, juggler, tumbler and all-around entertainer. Known by their trademark cloaks of many-colored patches, they perform mainly in the villages and smaller towns, since larger towns and cities have other entertainments available.

Great Blight, the: A region in the far north, entirely corrupted by the Dark One. A haunt of Trollocs, Myrddraal, and other creatures of the Dark One.

Great Hunt of the Horn, the: A cycle of stories concerning the legendary search for the Horn of Valere, in the years between the end of the Trolloc Wars and the beginning of the War of the Hundred Years. If told in their entirety, the cycle would take many days.

Great Lord of the Dark: The name by which Darkfriends refer to the Dark One, claiming that to use his true name would be blasphemous.

Great Pattern: The Wheel of Time weaves the Patterns of the Ages into the Great Pattern, which is the whole of existence and reality, past, present and future. Also known as the Lace of Ages. *See also* Pattern of an Age; Wheel of Time.

Great Serpent: A symbol for time and eternity, ancient before the Age of Legends began, consisting of a serpent eating its own tail.

Halfman:*See* Myrddraal.

Hawkwing, Artur: A legendary king who united all the lands west of the Spine of the World, as well as some lands beyond the Aiel Waste. He even sent armies across the Aryth Ocean, but all contact with these was lost at his death, which set off the War of the Hundred Years. His sign was a golden hawk in flight. *See also* War of the Hundred Years.

Heartfang; Heartsbane:*See* Dark One.

heartstone: An indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any known force used in an attempt to break it is absorbed, making heartstone stronger.

Horn of Valere *(vah-LEER):* The legendary object of the Great Hunt of the Horn. The Horn supposedly can call back dead heroes from the grave to fight against the Shadow.

Hundred Companions, the: One hundred male Aes Sedai, among the most powerful of the Age of Legends, who, led by

Lews Therin Telamon, launched the final stroke that ended the War of the Shadow by sealing the Dark One back into his prison. The Dark One's counterstroke tainted *saidin;* the Hundred Companions went mad and began the Breaking of the World.

Illian *(IHL-lee-ahn):* A great port on the Sea of Storms, capital city of the nation of the same name. The sign of Illian is nine golden bees on a field of dark green.

Ingtar; Lord Ingtar of House Shinowa *(IHNG-tahr; shih-NOH-wah):* A Shienaran warrior met at Fal Dara.

Kandor *(KANH-dohr):* One of the Borderlands. The sign of Kandor is a rearing red horse on a field of pale green.

Kinch, Hyam *(KIHNCH, HY-ahm):* A farmer met on the Caemlyn Road.

Ko'bal *(KOH-bahl): See* Trollocs.

Lace of Ages:*See* Great Pattern, the.

Lan; al'Lan Mandragoran *(AHL-LAN man-DRAG-or-an):* A warrior from the north; Moiraine's companion.

Leafblighter:*See* Dark One.

league: A measure of distance equal to four miles. *See also* mile.

Luc; Lord Luc of House Mantear *(LUKE; MAN-tee-ahr):* Tigraine's brother, who would have been her First Prince of the Sword when she ascended the throne. His disappearance in the Great Blight is believed to be in some way connected to Tigraine's later disappearance. His sign was an acorn.

Lurk *(LUHRK): See* Myrddraal.

Machera, Elyas *(mah-CHEER-ah, ee-LY-ahs):* A man encountered by Perrin and Egwene in the forest.

Mahdi *(MAH-dee):* In the Old Tongue, "Seeker." Title of the leader of a Tuatha'an carvan.

Malkier *(mahl-KEER):* A nation, once one of the Borderlands, now consumed by the Blight. The sign of Malkier was a golden crane in flight.

Mandarb (MAHN-dahrb)*:* In the Old Tongue, "Blade."

Manetheren *(mahn-EHTH-ehr-ehn):* One of the Ten Nations that made the Second Covenant, and also the capital city of that nation. Both city and nation were utterly destroyed in the Trolloc Wars.

Maradon *(MAH-rah-don):* The capital city of Saldaea.

Merrilin, Thom *(MER-rih-lihn, TOM):* A gleeman who comes to Emond's Field to perform at Bel Tine.

mile: A measure of distance equal to one thousand spans. Four miles make one league. *See also* span.

Min *(MIN):* A young woman encountered at the Stag and Lion in Baerlon.

Moiraine *(mwah-RAIN):* A visitor to Emond's Field who arrives just before Winternight.

Morgase *(moor-GAYZ):* By the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, High Seat of House Trakand *(TRAHK-ahnd).* Her sign is three golden keys. The sign of House Trakand is a silver keystone.

Myrddraal *(MUHRD-draal):* Creatures of the Dark One, commanders of the Trollocs. Twisted offspring of Trollocs in which the human stock used to create the Trollocs has resurfaced, but tainted by the evil that made the Trollocs. Physically they are like men except that they have no eyes, but can see like eagles in light or dark. They have certain powers stemming from the Dark One, including the ability to cause paralyzing fear with a look and the ability to vanish wherever there are shadows. One of their few known weaknesses is that they are reluctant to cross running water. In different lands they are known by many names, among them Halfmen, the Eyeless, Shadowmen, Lurk, and Fade.

One Power, the: The power drawn from the True Source. The vast majority of people are completely unable to learn to channel the One Power. A very small number can be taught to channel, and an even tinier number have the ability inborn. For these few there is no need to be taught; they will touch the True Source and channel the Power whether they want to or not, perhaps without even realizing what they are doing. This inborn ability usually manifests itself in late adolescence or early adulthood. If control is not taught, or self-learned (extremely difficult, with a success rate of only one in four), death is certain. Since the time of Madness, no man has been able to channel the Power without eventually going completely, horribly mad; and then, even if he has learned some control, dying from a wasting sickness which causes the sufferer to rot alive—a sickness caused, as is the madness, by the Dark One’s taint on *saidin.* For a woman the death that comes without control of the Power is less horrible, but it is death just the same. Aes Sedai search for girls with the inborn ability as much to save their lives as to increase Aes Sedai numbers, and for men with it in order to stop the terrible things they inevitably do with the Power in their madness. *See also* channel; Time of Madness; True Source.

Pattern of an Age: The Wheel of Time weaves the threads of human lives into the Pattern of an Age, which forms the substance of reality for that Age; also known as Age Lace. *See also ta’veren.*

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. Their avowed purposes are discovering the truth in disputations and uncovering Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, as they see it, they are even more zealous than the Children of the Light as a whole. Their normal method of inquiry is by torture; their normal attitude that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. The Questioners refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light, and at times act as if they were entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the Questioners is the High Inquisitor, who sits on the Council of the Anointed.

Red Ajah:*See* Ajah.

sa’angreal *(SAH-ahn-GREE-ahl):* An extremely rare object which allows an individual to channel much more of the One Power than would otherwise be possible or safe. A *sa’angreal* is like unto, but much, much more powerful than, an *angreal.*

Remnants of the Age of Legends, the means of their making is no longer known.

saidar; saidin *(sah-ih-DAHR; sah-ih-DEEN): See* True Source.

Saldaea *(sahl-DAY-ee-ah):* One of the Borderlands. The sign of Saldaea is three silver fish on a field of dark blue.

Sea Folk: Inhabitants of islands in the Aryth *(AH-rihth)* Ocean and the Sea of Storms, they spend little time on those islands, living most of their lives on their ships. Most sea-borne trade is carried by the Sea Folk's ships.

Second Covenant:*See* Covenant of the Ten Nations.

Shadar Logoth *(SHAH-dahr LOH-goth):* In the Old Tongue, "the Place Where the Shadow Waits." A city abandoned and shunned since the Trolloc Wars. Also called "Shadow's Waiting."

Shadowman:*See* Myrddraal.

Shai'tan *(SHAY-ih-TAN): See* Dark One.

Shayol Ghul *(SHAY-ol GHOOL):* A mountain in the Blasted Lands, the site of the Dark One's prison.

Shepherd of the Night:*See* Dark One.

Sheriam *(SHEER-ee-ahm):* An Aes Sedai, of the Blue Ajah.

Shienar *(shy-NAHR):* One of the Borderlands. The sign of Shienar is a stooping black hawk.

shoufa *(SHOO-fah):* A garment of the Aiel, a cloth, usually the color of sand or rock, that wraps around the head and neck, leaving only the face bare.

Sightburner:*See* Dark One.

span: A measure of distance equal to two paces. A thousand spans make a mile.

Spine of the World, the: A towering mountain range, with only a few passes, which separates the Aiel Waste from the lands to the west.

stedding *(STEHD-ding):* An Ogier *(OH-geer)* homeland. Many *stedding* have been abandoned since the Breaking of the World. They are portrayed in story and legend as havens, and with reason. They are shielded in some way, no longer understood, so that within them no Aes Sedai can channel the One Power, nor even sense that the True Source exists. Attempts to wield the One

Power from outside a *stedding* have no effect inside a *stedding* boundary. No Trolloc will enter a *stedding* unless driven, and even a Myrddraal will do so only at the greatest need and then with the greatest reluctance and distaste. Even Darkfriends, if truly dedicated, feel uncomfortable within a *stedding*.

Stone of Tear: The fortress guarding the city of Tear. Said to be the earliest fortress built after the Time of Madness, and said by some to have been built *during* the Time of Madness. *See also* Tear.

Sunday: A feastday and festival in midsummer, widely celebrated.

tabac *(tah-BAHK):* A weed, widely cultivated. The leaves of it, when dried and cured, are burned in wooden holders called *pipes*, the fumes being inhaled.

Tallanvor, Martyn *(TAHL-ahn-vohr, mahr-TEEN):* Guardsman-Lieutenant of the Queen's Guard; met in Caemlyn.

ta'maral'ailen *(tah-MAHR-ahl-EYE-lehn):* In the Old Tongue, "Web of Destiny."

Tanreall, Artur Paendrag *(tahn-REE-ahl, AHR-tuhr PAY-ehn-DRAG): See* Hawkwing, Artur.

Tar Valon *(TAHR VAH-lon):* A city on an island in the River Erinin. The center of Aes Sedai power, and location of the Amyrlin Seat.

ta'veren *(tah-VEER-ehn):* A person around whom the Wheel of Time weaves all surrounding life-threads, perhaps *all* life-threads, to form a Web of Destiny. *See also* Pattern of an Age.

Tear *(TEER):* A great seaport on the Sea of Storms. The sign of Tear is three white crescents on a field of red and gold.

Telamon, Lews Therin *(TEHL-ah-mon, LOOZ THEH-rihn): See also* Dragon, the.

Thakan'dar *(thah-kahn-DAHR):* An eternally fog-shrouded valley below the slopes of Shayol Ghul.

Tigraine *(tee-GRAIN):* As Daughter-heir of Andor, she married Taringail Damodred and bore his son Galadedrid. Her disappearance in 972 NE, shortly after her brother Luc vanished in the Blight, led to the struggle in Andor called the Succession, and caused the events in Cairhien which eventually brought on the Aiel War. Her sign was a woman’s hand gripping a thorny rose-stem with a white blossom.

Time of Madness:*See* Breaking of the World, the.

Tinkers:*See* Tuatha’an.

Traveling People:*See* Tuatha’an.

Trolloc Wars: A series of wars, beginning about 1000 AB and lasting more than three hundred years, during which Trolloc armies ravaged the world. Eventually the Trollocs were slain or driven back into the Great Blight, but some nations ceased to exist, while others were almost depopulated. All records of the time are fragmentary. *See also* Covenant of the Ten Nations.

Trollocs *(TRAHL-lohks):* Creatures of the Dark One, created during the War of the Shadow. Huge in stature, vicious in the extreme, they are a twisted blend of animal and human stock, and kill for the pure pleasure of killing. Sly, deceitful and treacherous, they can be trusted only by those they fear. They are omnivorous and will eat any kind of meat, including human flesh and the flesh of other Trollocs. Largely of human origin, they are able to interbreed with humankind, but the offspring are usually stillborn, and those which are not often fail to survive. They are divided into tribe-like bands, chief among them being the Ahf’frait, Al’ghol, Bhan’sheen, Dha’vol, Dhai’mon, Dhjin’nen, Ghar’ghael, Ghob’hlin, Gho’hlem, Ghraem’lan, Ko’bal, and the Kno’mon.

True Source: The driving force of the universe, which turns the Wheel of Time. It is divided into a male half (*saidin*) and a female half (*saidar*), which work at the same time with and against each other. Only a man can draw on *saidin,* only a woman on *saidar.* Since the beginning of the Time of Madness, *saidin* has been tainted by the Dark One’s touch. *See also* One Power.

Tuatha’an *(too-AH-thah-AHN):* A wandering folk, also known as the Tinkers and as the Traveling People, who live in brightly painted wagons and follow a totally pacifist philosophy called the Way of the Leaf. Things mended by Tinkers are often better than new, but the Tuatha’an are shunned by many villages because of stories that they steal children and try to convert young people to their beliefs.

Village Council: In most villages a group of men, elected by the townsmen and headed by a Mayor, who are responsible for making decisions which affect the village as a whole and for negotiating with the Councils of other villages over matters which affect the villages jointly. They are at odds with the Women's Circle in so many villages that this conflict is seen as almost traditional. *See also* Women's Circle.

War of the Hundred Years: A series of overlapping wars among constantly shifting alliances, precipitated by the death of Artur Hawkwing and the resulting struggle for his empire. It lasted from FY 994 to FY 1117. The war depopulated large parts of the lands between the Aryth Ocean and the Aiel Waste, from the Sea of Storms to the Great Blight. So great was the destruction that only fragmentary records of the time remain. The empire of Artur Hawkwing was pulled apart, and the nations of the present day were formed.

War of the Shadow: Also known as the War of Power, it ended the Age of Legends. It began shortly after the attempt to free the Dark One, and soon involved the whole world. In a world where even the memory of war had been forgotten, every facet of war was rediscovered, often twisted by the Dark One's touch on the World, and the One Power was used as a weapon. The war was ended by the resealing of the Dark One into his prison.

Warder: A warrior bonded to an Aes Sedai. The bonding is a thing of the One Power, and by it he gains such gifts as quick healing, the ability to go long periods without food, water or rest, and the ability to sense the taint of the Dark One at a distance. So long as a Warder lives, the Aes Sedai to whom he is bonded knows he is alive however far away he is, and when he dies she will know the moment and manner of his death. While most Ajahs believe an Aes Sedai may have one Warder bonded to her at a time, the Red Ajah refuses to bond any Warders at all, while the Green Ajah believes an Aes Sedai may bond as many Warders as she wishes. Ethically the Warder must accede to the bonding, but it has been known to be done involuntarily. What the Aes Sedai gain from the bonding is a closely-held secret. *See also* Aes Sedai.

Web of Destiny: A great change in the Pattern of an Age, centered around one or more people who are *ta'veren.*

Wheel of Time, the: Time is a wheel with seven spokes, each spoke an Age. As the Wheel turns, the Ages come and go, each leaving memories that fade to legend, then to myth, and are forgotten by the time that Age comes again. The Pattern of an Age is slightly different each time an Age comes, and each time it is subject to greater change, but each time it is the same Age.

White Ajah:*See* Ajah.

White Tower: The palace of the Amyrlin Seat in Tar Valon.

Whitecloaks:*See* Children of the Light.

Wisdom: In villages, a woman chosen by the Women's Circle to sit in the Circle for her knowledge of such things as healing and foretelling the weather, as well as for common good sense. A position of great responsibility and authority, both actual and implied. She is generally considered the equal of the Mayor, and in some villages his superior. Unlike the Mayor, she is chosen for life, and it is very rare for a Wisdom to be removed from office before her death. Almost traditionally in conflict with the Mayor. *See also* Women's Circle.

Women's Circle: A group of women elected by the women of a village, responsible for deciding such matters as are considered solely women's responsibility (for example, when to plant the crops and when to harvest). Equal in authority to the Village Council, with clearly-delineated lines and areas of responsibility. Often at odds with the Village Council. *See also* Village Council.

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PROLOGUE

A preview of
The Great Hunt

Book Two of
The Wheel of Time

In the Shadow

The man who called himself Bors, at least in this place, sneered at the low murmuring that rolled around the vaulted chamber like the soft gabble of geese. His grimace was hidden by the black silk mask that covered his face, though, just like the masks that covered the hundred other faces in the chamber. A hundred black masks, and a hundred pairs of eyes trying to see what lay behind them.

If one did not look too closely, the huge room could have been in a palace, with its tall marble fireplaces and its golden lamps hanging from the domed ceiling, its colorful tapestries and intricately patterned mosaic floor. If one did not look too closely. The fireplaces were cold, for one thing. Flames danced on logs as thick as a man’s leg, but gave no heat. The walls behind the tapestries, the ceiling high above the lamps, were undressed stone, almost black. There were no windows, and only two doorways, one at either end of the room. It was as if someone had intended to give the semblance of a palace reception chamber but had not cared enough to bother with more than the outline and a few touches for detail.

Where the chamber was, the man who called himself Bors did not know, nor did he think any of the others knew. He did not like to think about where it might be. It was enough that he had been summoned. He did not like to think about that, either, but for such a summons, even he came.

He shifted his cloak, thankful that the fires were cold, else it would have been too hot for the black wool draping him to the floor. All his clothes were black. The bulky folds of the cloak hid the stoop he used to disguise his height, and bred confusion as to whether he was thin or thick. He was not the only one there enveloped in a tailor’s span of cloth.

Silently he watched his companions. Patience had marked much of his life. Always, if he waited and watched long enough, someone made a mistake. Most of the men and women here might have had the same philosophy; they watched, and listened silently to those who had to speak. Some people could not bear waiting, or silence, and so gave away more than they knew.

Servants circulated through the guests, slender, golden-haired youths proffering wine with a bow and a wordless smile. Young men and young women alike, they wore tight white breeches and flowing white shirts. And male and female alike, they moved with disturbing grace. Each looked more than a mirror image of the others, the boys as handsome as the girls were beautiful. He doubted he could distinguish one from another, and he had an eye and a memory for faces.

A smiling, white-clad girl offered her tray of crystal goblets to him. He took one with no intention of drinking; it might appear untrusting—or worse, and either could be deadly here—if he refused altogether, but anything could be slipped into a drink. Surely some among his companions would have no objections to seeing the number of their rivals for power dwindle, whomever the unlucky ones happened to be.

Idly he wondered whether the servants would have to be disposed of after this meeting. *Servants hear everything.* As the serving girl straightened from her bow, his eye caught hers above that sweet smile. Blank eyes. Empty eyes. A doll’s eyes. Eyes more dead than death.

He shivered as she moved gracefully away, and raised the goblet to his lips before he caught himself. It was not what had been done to the girl that chilled him. Rather, every time he thought he detected a weakness in those he now served, he found himself preceded, the supposed weakness cut out with a ruthless precision that left him amazed. And worried. The first rule of his life had always been to search for weakness, for every weakness was a chink where he could probe and pry and influence. If his current masters, his masters for the moment, had no weakness. . . .

Frowning behind his mask, he studied his companions. At least there was plenty of weakness there. Their nervousness betrayed them, even those who had sense enough to guard their tongues. A stiffness in the way this one held himself, a jerkiness in the way that one handled her skirts.

A good quarter of them, he estimated, had not bothered with disguise beyond the black masks. Their clothes told much. A woman standing before a gold-and-crimson wall hanging, speaking softly to a figure—impossible to say whether it were man or woman—cloaked and hooded in gray. She had obviously chosen the spot because the colors of the tapestry set off her garb. Doubly foolish to draw attention to herself, for her scarlet dress, cut low in the bodice to show too much flesh and high at the hem to display golden slippers, marked her from Illian, and a woman of wealth, perhaps even of noble blood.

Not far beyond the Illianer, another woman stood, alone and admirably silent. With a swan's neck and lustrous black hair falling in waves below her waist, she kept her back to the stone wall, observing everything. No nervousness there, only serene self-possession. Very admirable, that, but her coppery skin and her creamy, high-necked gown—leaving nothing buther hands uncovered, yet clinging and only just barely opaque, so that it hinted at everything and revealed nothing—marked her just as clearly of the first blood of Arad Doman. And unless the man who called himself Bors missed his guess entirely, the wide golden bracelet on her left wrist bore her House symbols. They would be for her own House; no Domani bloodborn would bend her stiff pride enough to wear the sigils of another House. Worse than foolishness.

A man in a high-collared, sky-blue Shienaran coat passed him with a wary, head-to-toe glance through the eyeholes of his mask. The man's carriage named him soldier; the set of his shoulders, the way his gaze never rested in one place for long, and the way his hand seemed ready to dart for a sword that was not there, all proclaimed it. The Shienaran wasted little time on the man who called himself Bors; stooped shoulders and a bent back held no threat.

The man who called himself Bors snorted as the Shienaran moved on, right hand clenching and eyes already studying elsewhere for danger. He could read them all, to class and country. Merchant and warrior, commoner and noble. From Kandor and Cairhien, Saldaea and Ghealdan. From every nation and nearly every people. His nose wrinkled in sudden disgust. Even a Tinker, in bright green breeches and a virulent yellow coat. *We can do without* those *come the Day.*

The disguised ones were no better, many of them, cloaked and shrouded as they were. He caught sight, under the edge of one dark robe, of the silver-worked boots of a High Lord of Tear, and under another a glimpse of golden lion-head spurs, worn only by high officers in the Andoran Queen's Guards. A slender fellow—slender even in a floor-dragging black robe and an anonymous gray cloak caught with a plain silver pin—watched from the shadows of his deep cowl. He could be anyone, from anywhere . . . except for the six-pointed star tattooed on the web between thumb and forefinger of his right hand. One of the Sea Folk then, and a look at his left hand would show the marks of his clan and line. The man who called himself Bors did not bother to try.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed, fixing on a woman enveloped in black till nothing showed but her fingers. On her right hand rested a gold ring in the shape of a serpent eating its own tail. Aes Sedai, or at least a woman trained in Tar Valon by Aes Sedai. None else would wear that ring. Either way made no difference to him. He looked away before she could notice his watching, and almost immediately he spotted another woman swathed from head to toe in black and wearing a Great Serpent ring. The two witches gave no sign that they knew each other. In the White Tower they sat like spiders in the middle of a web, pulling the strings that made kings and queens dance, meddling. *Curse them all to death eternal!* He realized that he was grinding his teeth. If numbers must dwindle—and they must, before the Day—there were some who would be missed even less than Tinkers.

A chime sounded, a single, shivering note that came from everywhere at once and cut off all other sounds like a knife.

The tall doors at the far end of the chamber swung open, and two Trollocs stepped into the room, spikes decorating the black mail that hung to their knees. Everyone shied back. Even the man who called himself Bors.

Head and shoulders taller than the tallest man there, they were a stomach-turning blend of man and animal, human faces twisted and altered. One had a heavy, pointed beak where his mouth and nose should have been, and feathers covered his head instead of hair. The other walked on hooves, his face pushed out in a hairy muzzle, and goat horns stuck up above his ears.

Ignoring the humans, the Trollocs turned back toward the door and bowed, servile and cringing. The feathers on the one lifted in a tight crest.

A Myrddraal stepped between them, and they fell to their knees. It was garbed in black that made the Trollocs' mail and the humans' masks seem bright, garments that hung still, without a ripple, as it moved with a viper's grace.

The man who called himself Bors felt his lips drawing back over his teeth, half snarl and half, he was shamed to admit even to himself, fear. It had its face uncovered. Its pasty pale face, a man's face, but eyeless as an egg, like a maggot in a grave.

The smooth white face swiveled, regarding them all one by one, it seemed. A visible shiver ran through them under that eyeless look. Thin, bloodless lips quirked in what might almost have been a smile as, one by one, the masked ones tried to press back into the crowd, milling to avoid that gaze. The Myrddraal's look shaped them into a semicircle facing the door.

The man who called himself Bors swallowed. *There will come a day, Halfman. When the Great Lord of the Dark comes again, he will choose his new Dreadlords, and you will cower before them. You will cower before men. Before me! Why doesn't it speak? Stop staring at me, and speak!*

"Your Master comes." The Myrddraal's voice rasped like a dry snakeskin crumbling. "To your bellies, worms! Grovel, lest his brilliance blind and burn you!"

Rage filled the man who called himself Bors, at the tone as much as the words, but then the air above the Halfman shimmered, and the import drove home. *It can't be! It can't . . . !* The Trollocs were already on their bellies, writhing as if they wanted to burrow into the floor.

Without waiting to see if anyone else moved, the man who called himself Bors dropped facedown, grunting as he bruised himself on the stone. Words sprang to his lips like a charm against danger—they were a charm, though a thin reed against what he feared—and he heard a hundred other voices, breathy with fear, speaking the same against the floor.

"The Great Lord of the Dark is my Master, and most heartily do I serve him to the last shred of my very soul." In the back of his mind a voice chattered with fear. *The Dark One and all the Forsaken are bound. . . .* Shivering, he forced it to silence. He had abandoned that voice long since. "Lo, my Master is death's Master. Asking nothing do I serve against the Day of his coming, yet do I serve in the sure and certain hope of life everlasting." *. . . bound in Shayol Ghul, bound by the Creator at the moment of creation. No, I serve a different master now.* "Surely the faithful shall be exalted in the land, exalted above the unbelievers, exalted above thrones, yet do I serve humbly against the Day of his Return.” *The hand of the Creator shelters us all, and the Light protects us from the Shadow. No, no! A different master.* “Swift come the Day of Return. Swift come the Great Lord of the Dark to guide us and rule the world forever and ever.”

The man who called himself Bors finished the creed panting, as if he had run ten miles. The rasp of breath all around told him he was not the only one.

“Rise. All of you, rise.”

The mellifluous voice took him by surprise. Surely none of his companions, lying on their bellies with their masked faces pressed to the mosaic tiles, would have spoken, but it was not the voice he expected from. . . . Cautiously, he raised his head enough to see with one eye.

The figure of a man floated in the air above the Myrddraal, the hem of his blood red robe hanging a span over the Halfman’s head. Masked in blood red, too. Would the Great Lord of the Dark appear to them as a man? And masked, besides? Yet the Myrddraal, its very gaze fear, trembled and almost cowered where it stood in the figure’s shadow. The man who called himself Bors grasped for an answer his mind could contain without splitting. One of the Forsaken, perhaps.

That thought was only a little less painful. Even so, it meant the Day of the Dark One’s return must be close at hand if one of the Forsaken was free. The Forsaken, thirteen of the most powerful wielders of the One Power in an Age filled with powerful wielders, had been sealed up in Shayol Ghul along with the Dark One, sealed away from the world of men by the Dragon and the Hundred Companions. And the backblast of that sealing had tainted the male half of the True Source; and all the male Aes Sedai, those cursed wielders of the Power, went mad and broke the world, tore it apart like a pottery bowl smashed on rocks, ending the Age of Legends before they died, rotting while they still lived. A fitting death for Aes Sedai, to his mind. Too good for them. He regretted only that the women had been spared.

Slowly, painfully, he forced the panic to the back of his mind, confined it and held it tight though it screamed to get out. It was the best he could do. None of those on their bellies had risen, and only a few had even dared raise their heads.

“Rise.” There was a snap in the red-masked figure’s voice this time. He gestured with both hands. “Stand!”

The man who called himself Bors scrambled up awkwardly, but halfway to his feet, he hesitated. Those gesturing hands were horribly burned, crisscrossed by black fissures, the raw flesh between as red as the figure's robes. *Would the Dark One appear so? Or even one of the Forsaken?* The eyeholes of that blood red mask swept slowly across him, and he straightened hastily. He thought he could feel the heat of an open furnace in that gaze.

The others obeyed the command with no more grace and no less fear in their rising. When all were on their feet, the floating figure spoke.

"I have been known by many names, but the one by which you shall know me is Ba'alzamon."

The man who called himself Bors clamped his teeth to keep them from chattering. Ba'alzamon. In the Trolloc tongue, it meant Heart of the Dark, and even unbelievers knew it was the Trolloc name for the Great Lord of the Dark. He Whose Name Must Not Be Uttered. Not the True Name, Shai'tan, but still forbidden. Among those gathered here, and others of their kind, to sully either with a human tongue was blasphemy. His breath whistled through his nostrils, and all around him he could hear others panting behind their masks. The servants were gone, and the Trollocs as well, though he had not seen them go.

"The place where you stand lies in the shadow of Shayol Ghul." More than one voice moaned at that; the man who called himself Bors was not sure his own was not among them. A touch of what might almost be called mockery entered Ba'alzamon's voice as he spread his arms wide. "Fear not, for the Day of your Master's rising upon the world is near at hand. The Day of Return draws nigh. Does it not tell you so that I am here, to be seen by you favored few among your brothers and sisters? Soon the Wheel of Time will be broken. Soon the Great Serpent will die, and with the power of that death, the death of Time itself, your Master will remake the world in his own image for this Age and for all Ages to come. And those who serve me, faithful and steadfast, will sit at my feet above the stars in the sky and rule the world of men forever. So have I promised, and so shall it be, without end. You shall live and rule forever."

A murmur of anticipation ran through the listeners, and some even took a step forward, toward the floating, crimson shape, their eyes lifted, rapturous. Even the man who called himself Bors felt the pull of that promise, the promise for which he had dealt away his soul a hundred times over.

“The Day of Return comes closer,” Ba’alzamon said. “But there is much yet to do. Much to do.”

The air to Ba’alzamon’s left shimmered and thickened, and the figure of a young man hung there, a little lower than Ba’alzamon. The man who called himself Bors could not decide whether it was a living being or not. A country lad, by his clothes, with a light of mischief in his brown eyes and the hint of a smile on his lips, as if in memory or anticipation of a prank. The flesh looked warm, but the chest did not move with breath, the eyes did not blink.

The air to Ba’alzamon’s right wavered as if with heat, and a second country-clad figure hung suspended a little below Ba’alzamon. A curly-haired youth, as heavily muscled as a blacksmith. And an oddity: a battleaxe hung at his side, a great, steel half-moon balanced by a thick spike. The man who called himself Bors suddenly leaned forward, intent on an even greater strangeness. A youth with yellow eyes.

For the third time air solidified into the shape of a young man, this time directly under Ba’alzamon’s eye, almost at his feet. A tall fellow, with eyes now gray, now almost blue as the light took them, and dark, reddish hair. Another villager, or farmer. The man who called himself Bors gasped. Yet another thing out of the ordinary, though he wondered why he should expect anything to be ordinary here. A sword swung from the figure’s belt, a sword with a bronze heron on the scabbard and another inset into the long, two-handed hilt. *A* village boy *with a heron-mark blade? Impossible! What can it mean? And a boy with* yellow *eyes.* He noticed the Myrddraal looking at the figures, trembling; and unless he misjudged entirely, its trembling was no longer fear, but hatred.

Dead silence had fallen, silence that Ba’alzamon let deepen before he spoke. “There is now one who walks the world, one who was and will be, but is not yet, the Dragon.”

A startled murmur ran through his listeners.

“The Dragon Reborn! We are to kill him, Great Lord?” That from the Shienaran, hand grasping eagerly at his side where his sword would hang.

“Perhaps,” Ba’alzamon said simply. “And perhaps not. Perhaps he can be turned to my use. Sooner or later it will be so, in this Age or another.”

The man who called himself Bors blinked. *In this Age or another? I thought the Day of Return was near. What matter to me what happens in another Age if I grow old and die waiting in this one?* But Ba'alzamon was speaking again.

"Already a bend is forming in the Pattern, one of many points where he who will become the Dragon may be turned to my service. Must be turned! Better that he serve me alive than dead, but alive or dead, serve me he must and will! These three you must know, for each is a thread in the pattern *I* mean to weave, and it will be up to you to see that they are placed as I command. Study them well, that you will know them."

Abruptly all sound was gone. The man who called himself Bors shifted uneasily, and saw others doing the same. All but the Illianer woman, he realized. With her hands spread over her bosom as if to hide the rounded flesh she exposed, eyes wide, half frightened and half ecstatic, she was nodding eagerly as though to someone face-to-face with her. Sometimes she appeared to give a reply, but the man who called himself Bors heard not a word. Suddenly she arched backwards, trembling and rising on her toes. He could not see why she did not fall, unless something unseen held her. Then, just as abruptly, she settled back to her feet and nodded again, bowing, shivering. Even as she straightened, one of the women wearing a Great Serpent ring gave a start and began nodding.

So each of us hears his own instructions, and none hears another's. The man who called himself Bors muttered in frustration. If he knew what even one other was commanded, he might be able to use the knowledge to advantage, but this way. . . . Impatiently he waited for his turn, forgetting himself enough to stand straight.

One by one the gathering received their orders, each walled in silence yet still giving tantalizing clues, if only he could read them. The man of the Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk, stiffening with reluctance as he nodded. The Shienaran, his stance be speaking confusion even while he acquiesced. The second woman of Tar Valon giving a start, as of shock, and the gray-swathed figure whose sex he could not determine shaking its head before falling to its knees and nodding vigorously. Some underwent the same convulsion as the Illianer woman, as if pain itself lifted them to toe tips.

"Bors."

The man who called himself Bors jerked as a red mask filled his eyes. He could still see the room, still see the floating shape of Ba'alzamon and the three figures before him, but at the same time all he could see was the red-masked face. Dizzy, he felt as if his skull were splitting open and his eyes were being pushed out of his head. For a moment he thought he could see flames through the eyeholes of the mask.

"Are you faithful . . . Bors?"

The hint of mocking in the name sent a chill down his backbone. "I am faithful, Great Lord. I cannot hide from you." *I* am *faithful! I swear it!*

"No, you cannot."

The certainty in Ba'alzamon's voice dried his mouth, but he forced himself to speak. "Command me, Great Lord, and I obey."

"Firstly, you are to return to Tarabon and continue your *good* works. In fact, I command you to redouble your efforts."

He stared at Ba'alzamon in puzzlement, but then fires flared again behind the mask, and he took the excuse of a bow to pull his eyes away. "As you command, Great Lord, so shall it be."

"Secondly, you will watch for the three young men, and have your followers watch. Be warned; they are dangerous."

The man who called himself Bors glanced at the figures floating in front of Ba'alzamon. *How can I do that? I can see them, but I can't see anything except* his *face.* His head felt about to burst. Sweat slicked his hands under his thin gloves, and his shirt clung to his back. "Dangerous, Great Lord? Farmboys? Is one of them the—"

"A sword is dangerous to the man at the point, but not to the man at the hilt. Unless the man holding the sword is a fool, or careless, or unskilled, in which case it is twice as dangerous to him as to anyone else. It is enough that I have told you to know them. It is enough that you obey me."

"As you command, Great Lord, so shall it be."

"Thirdly, regarding those who have landed at Toman Head, and the Domani. Of this you will speak to no one. When you return to Tarabon. . . ."

The man who called himself Bors realized as he listened that his mouth was sagging open. The instructions made no sense. *If I knew what some of the others were told, perhaps I could piece it together.*

Abruptly, he felt his head grasped as though by a giant hand crushing his temples, felt himself being lifted, and the world blew apart in a thousand starbursts, each flash of light becoming an image that fled across his mind or spun and dwindled into the distance before he could more than barely grasp it. An impossible sky of striated clouds, red and yellow and black, racing as if driven by the mightiest wind the world had ever seen. A woman—a girl?—dressed in white receded into blackness and vanished as soon as she appeared. A raven stared him in the eye, *knowing* him, and was gone. An armored man in a brutal helm, shaped and painted and gilded like some monstrous, poisonous insect, raised a sword and plunged to one side, beyond his view. A horn, curled and golden, came hurtling out of the far distance. One piercing note it sounded as it flashed toward him, tugging his soul. At the last instant it flashed into a blinding, golden ring of light that passed through him, chilling him beyond death. A wolf leaped from the shadows of lost sight and ripped out his throat. He could not scream. The torrent went on, drowning him, burying him. He could barely remember who he was, or what he was. The skies rained fire, and the moon and stars fell; rivers ran in blood, and the dead walked; the earth split open and fountained molten rock. . . .

The man who called himself Bors found himself half crouching in the chamber with the others, most watching him, all silent. Wherever he looked, up or down or in any direction, the masked face of Ba’alzamon overwhelmed his eyes. The images that had flooded into his mind were fading; he was sure many were already gone from memory. Hesitantly, he straightened, Ba’alzamon always before him.

“Great Lord, what—?”

“Some commands are too important to be known even by he who carries them out.”

The man who called himself Bors bent almost double in his bow. “As you command, Great Lord,” he whispered hoarsely, “so shall it be.”

When he straightened, he was alone in silence once more. Another, the Taren High Lord, nodded and bowed to someone none else saw. The man who called himself Bors put an unsteady hand to his brow, trying to hold on to something of what had burst through his mind, though he was not completely certain he wanted to remember. The last remnant flickered out, and suddenly he was wondering what it was that he was trying to recall. *I know there was something, but what? There* was *something! Wasn’t there?* He rubbed his hands together, grimacing at the feel of sweat under his gloves, and turned his attention to the three figures hanging suspended before Ba’alzamon’s floating form.

The muscular, curly-haired youth; the farmer with the sword; and the lad with the look of mischief on his face. Already, in his mind, the man who called himself Bors had named them the Blacksmith, the Swordsman, and the Trickster. *What is their place in the puzzle?* They must be important, or Ba’alzamon would not have made them the center of this gathering. But from his orders alone they could all die at any time, and he had to think that some of the others, at least, had orders as deadly for the three. *How important are they?* Blue eyes could mean the nobility of Andor—unlikely in those clothes—and there were Borderlanders with light eyes, as well as some Tareni, not to mention a few from Ghealdan, and, of course. . . . No, no help there. But *yellow* eyes? *Who* are *they?* What *are they?*

He started at a touch on his arm, and looked around to find one of the white-clad servants, a young man, standing by his side. The others were back, too, more than before, one for each of the masked. He blinked. Ba’alzamon was gone. The Myrddraal was gone, too, and only rough stone was where the door it had used had been was only rough stone. The three figures still hung there, though. He felt as if they were staring at him.

“If it please you, my Lord Bors, I will show you to your room.”

Avoiding those dead eyes, he glanced once more at the three figures, then followed. Uneasily he wondered how the youth had known what name to use. It was not until the strange carved doors closed behind him and they had walked a dozen paces that he realized he was alone in the corridor with the servant. His brows drew down suspiciously behind his mask, but before he could open his mouth, the servant spoke.

“The others are also being shown to their rooms, my Lord. If you please, my Lord? Time is short, and our Master is impatient.”

The man who called himself Bors ground his teeth, both at the lack of information and at the implication of sameness between himself and the servant, but he followed in silence. Only a fool ranted at a servant, and worse, remembering the fellow’s eyes, he was not sure it would do any good. *And how did he know what I was going to ask?* The servant smiled.

The man who called himself Bors did not feel at all comfortable until he was back in the room where he had waited on first arriving, and then not much. Even finding the seals on his saddlebags untouched was small comfort.

The servant stood in the hallway, not entering. “You may change to your own garments if you wish, my Lord. None will see you depart here, nor arrive at your destination, but it may be best to arrive already properly clothed. Someone will come soon to show you the way.”

Untouched by any visible hand, the door swung shut.

The man who called himself Bors shivered in spite of himself. Hastily he undid the seals and buckles of his saddlebags and pulled out his usual cloak. In the back of his mind a small voice wondered if the promised power, even the immortality, was worth another meeting like this, but he laughed it down immediately. *For that much power, I would praise the Great Lord of the Dark under the Dome of Truth.* Remembering the commands given him by Ba’alzamon, he fingered the golden, flaring sun worked on the breast of the white cloak, and the red shepherd’s crook behind the sun, symbol of his office in the world of men, and he almost laughed. There was work, great work, to be done in Tarabon, and on Almoth Plain.

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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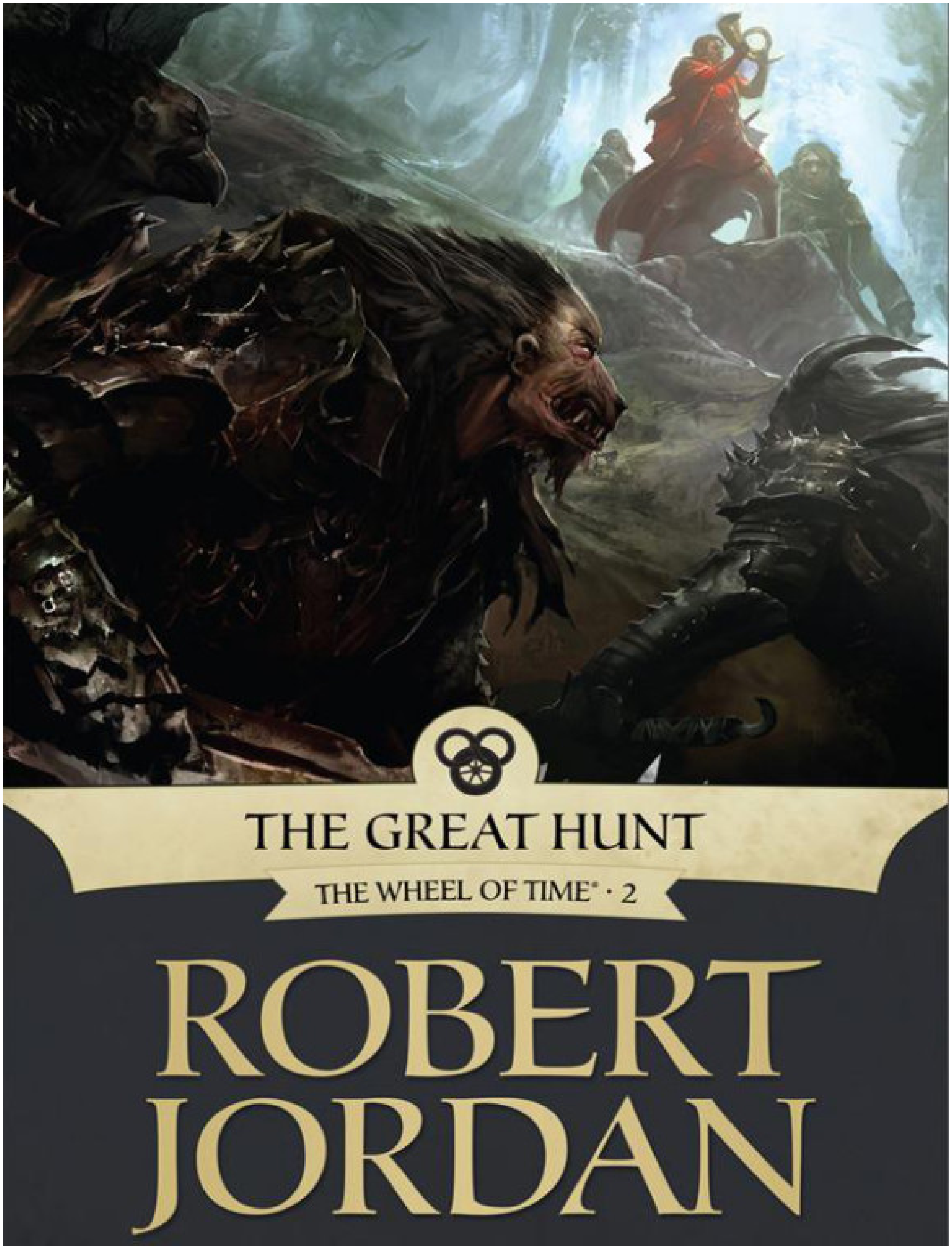
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THE
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HUNT

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This book is dedicated to Lucinda Culpin, Al Dempsey, Tom Doherty, Susan England, Dick Gallen, Cathy Grooms, Marisa Grooms, Wilson and Janet Grooms, John Jarrold, the Johnson City Boys (Mike Leslie, Kenneth Loveless, James D. Lund, Paul R. Robinson), Karl Lundgren, William McDougal, the Montana Gang (Eldon Carter, Ray Grenfell, Ken Miller, Rod Moore, Dick Schmidt, Ray Sessions, Ed Wildey, Mike Wildey, and Sherman Williams), Charlie Moore, Louisa Cheves Popham Raoul, Ted and Sydney Rigney, Robert A. T. Scott, Bryan and Sharon Webb, and Heather Wood.

They came to my aid when God walked across the water and the true Eye of the World passed over my house.

—Robert Jordan
Charleston, SC
February 1990

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And it shall come to pass that what men made shall be shattered, and the Shadow shall lie across the Pattern of the Age, and the Dark One shall once more lay his hand upon the world of man. Women shall weep and men quail as the nations of the earth are rent like rotting cloth. Neither shall anything stand nor abide . . .

Yet one shall be born to face the Shadow, born once more as he was born before and shall be born again, time without end. The Dragon shall be Reborn, and there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth at his rebirth. In sackcloth and ashes shall he clothe the people, and he shall break the world again by his coming, tearing apart all ties that bind. Like the unfettered dawn shall he blind us, and burn us, yet shall the Dragon Reborn confront the Shadow at the Last Battle, and his blood shall give us the Light. Let tears flow, O ye people of the world. Weep for your salvation.

—from *The Karaethon Cycle:*
The Prophecies of the Dragon,
as translated by Ellaine Marise’idin Alshinn,
Chief Librarian at the Court of Arafel,
in the Year of Grace 231
of the New Era, the Third Age

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PROLOGUE

In the Shadow

The man who called himself Bors, at least in this place, sneered at the low murmuring that rolled around the vaulted chamber like the soft gabble of geese. His grimace was hidden by the black silk mask that covered his face, though, just like the masks that covered the hundred other faces in the chamber. A hundred black masks, and a hundred pairs of eyes trying to see what lay behind them.

If one did not look too closely, the huge room could have been in a palace, with its tall marble fireplaces and its golden lamps hanging from the domed ceiling, its colorful tapestries and intricately patterned mosaic floor. If one did not look too closely. The fireplaces were cold, for one thing. Flames danced on logs as thick as a man’s leg, but gave no heat. The walls behind the tapestries, the ceiling high above the lamps, were undressed stone, almost black. There were no windows, and only two doorways, one at either end of the room. It was as if someone had intended to give the semblance of a palace reception chamber but had not cared enough to bother with more than the outline and a few touches for detail.

Where the chamber was, the man who called himself Bors did not know, nor did he think any of the others knew. He did not like to think about where it might be. It was enough that he had been summoned. He did not like to think about that, either, but for such a summons, even he came.

He shifted his cloak, thankful that the fires were cold, else it would have been too hot for the black wool draping him to the floor. All his clothes were black. The bulky folds of the cloak hid the stoop he used to disguise his height, and bred confusion as to whether he was thin or thick. He was not the only one there enveloped in a tailor’s span of cloth.

Silently he watched his companions. Patience had marked much of his life. Always, if he waited and watched long enough, someone made a mistake. Most of the men and women here might have had the same philosophy; they watched, and listened silently to those who had to speak.

Some people could not bear waiting, or silence, and so gave away more than they knew.

Servants circulated through the guests, slender, golden-haired youths proffering wine with a bow and a wordless smile. Young men and young women alike, they wore tight white breeches and flowing white shirts. And male and female alike, they moved with disturbing grace. Each looked more than a mirror image of the others, the boys as handsome as the girls were beautiful. He doubted he could distinguish one from another, and he had an eye and a memory for faces.

A smiling, white-clad girl offered her tray of crystal goblets to him. He took one with no intention of drinking; it might appear untrusting—or worse, and either could be deadly here—if he refused altogether, but anything could be slipped into a drink. Surely some among his companions would have no objections to seeing the number of their rivals for power dwindle, whomever the unlucky ones happened to be.

Idly he wondered whether the servants would have to be disposed of after this meeting. *Servants hear everything.* As the serving girl straightened from her bow, his eye caught hers above that sweet smile. Blank eyes. Empty eyes. A doll’s eyes. Eyes more dead than death.

He shivered as she moved gracefully away, and raised the goblet to his lips before he caught himself. It was not what had been done to the girl that chilled him. Rather, every time he thought he detected a weakness in those he now served, he found himself preceded, the supposed weakness cut out with a ruthless precision that left him amazed. And worried. The first rule of his life had always been to search for weakness, for every weakness was a chink where he could probe and pry and influence. If his current masters, his masters for the moment, had no weakness. . . .

Frowning behind his mask, he studied his companions. At least there was plenty of weakness there. Their nervousness betrayed them, even those who had sense enough to guard their tongues. A stiffness in the way this one held himself, a jerkiness in the way that one handled her skirts.

A good quarter of them, he estimated, had not bothered with disguise beyond the black masks. Their clothes told much. A woman standing before a gold-and-crimson wall hanging, speaking softly to a figure—impossible to say whether it was man or woman—cloaked and hooded in gray. She had obviously chosen the spot because the colors of the tapestry set off her garb. Doubly foolish to draw attention to herself, for her scarlet dress, cut low in the bodice to show too much flesh and high at the hem to display golden slippers, marked her from Illian, and a woman of wealth, perhaps even of noble blood.

Not far beyond the Illianer, another woman stood, alone and admirably silent. With a swan's neck and lustrous black hair falling in waves below her waist, she kept her back to the stone wall, observing everything. No nervousness there, only serene self-possession. Very admirable, that, but her coppery skin and her creamy, high-necked gown—leaving nothing but her hands uncovered, yet clinging and only just barely opaque, so that it hinted at everything and revealed nothing—marked her just as clearly of the first blood of Arad Doman. And unless the man who called himself Bors missed his guess entirely, the wide golden bracelet on her left wrist bore her House symbols. They would be for her own House; no Domani bloodborn would bend her stiff pride enough to wear the sigils of another House. Worse than foolishness.

A man in a high-collared, sky-blue Shienaran coat passed him with a wary, head-to-toe glance through the eyeholes of his mask. The man's carriage named him soldier; the set of his shoulders, the way his gaze never rested in one place for long, and the way his hand seemed ready to dart for a sword that was not there, all proclaimed it. The Shienaran wasted little time on the man who called himself Bors; stooped shoulders and a bent back held no threat.

The man who called himself Bors snorted as the Shienaran moved on, right hand clenching and eyes already studying elsewhere for danger. He could read them all, to class and country. Merchant and warrior, commoner and noble. From Kandor and Cairhien, Saldaea and Ghealdan. From every nation and nearly every people. His nose wrinkled in sudden disgust. Even a Tinker, in bright green breeches and a virulent yellow coat. *We can do without* those *come the Day.*

The disguised ones were no better, many of them, cloaked and shrouded as they were. He caught sight, under the edge of one dark robe, of the silver-worked boots of a High Lord of Tear, and under another a glimpse of golden lion-head spurs, worn only by high officers in the Andoran Queen's Guards. A slender fellow—slender even in a floor-dragging black robe and an anonymous gray cloak caught with a plain silver pin—watched from the shadows of his deep cowl. He could be anyone, from anywhere . . . except for the six-pointed star tattooed on the web between thumb and forefinger of his right hand. One of the Sea Folk then, and a look at his left hand would show the marks of his clan and line. The man who called himself Bors did not bother to try.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed, fixing on a woman enveloped in black till nothing showed but her fingers. On her right hand rested a gold ring in the shape of a serpent eating its own tail. Aes Sedai, or at least a woman trained in Tar Valon by Aes Sedai. None else would wear that ring. Either way made no difference to him. He looked away before she could notice his watching, and almost immediately he spotted another woman swathed from head to toe in black and wearing a Great Serpent ring. The two witches gave no sign that they knew each other. In the White Tower they sat like spiders in the middle of a web, pulling the strings that made kings and queens dance, meddling. *Curse them all to death eternal!* He realized that he was grinding his teeth. If numbers must dwindle—and they must, before the Day—there were some who would be missed even less than Tinkers.

A chime sounded, a single, shivering note that came from everywhere at once and cut off all other sounds like a knife.

The tall doors at the far end of the chamber swung open, and two Trollocs stepped into the room, spikes decorating the black mail that hung to their knees. Everyone shied back. Even the man who called himself Bors.

Head and shoulders taller than the tallest man there, they were a stomach-turning blend of man and animal, human faces twisted and altered. One had a heavy, pointed beak where his mouth and nose should have been, and feathers covered his head instead of hair. The other walked on hooves, his face pushed out in a hairy muzzle, and goat horns stuck up above his ears.

Ignoring the humans, the Trollocs turned back toward the door and bowed, servile and cringing. The feathers on the one lifted in a tight crest.

A Myrddraal stepped between them, and they fell to their knees. It was garbed in black that made the Trollocs’ mail and the humans’ masks seem bright, garments that hung still, without a ripple, as it moved with a viper’s grace.

The man who called himself Bors felt his lips drawing back over his teeth, half snarl and half, he was shamed to admit even to himself, fear. It had its face uncovered. Its pasty pale face, a man’s face, but eyeless as an egg, like a maggot in a grave.

The smooth white face swiveled, regarding them all one by one, it seemed. A visible shiver ran through them under that eyeless look. Thin, bloodless lips quirked in what might almost have been a smile as, one by one, the masked ones tried to press back into the crowd, milling to avoid that gaze. The Myrddraal's look shaped them into a semicircle facing the door.

The man who called himself Bors swallowed. *There will come a day, Halfman. When the Great Lord of the Dark comes again, he will choose his new Dreadlords, and you will cower before them. You will cower before men. Before me! Why doesn't it speak? Stop staring at me, and speak!*

"Your Master comes." The Myrddraal's voice rasped like a dry snake skin crumbling. "To your bellies, worms! Grovel, lest his brilliance blind and burn you!"

Rage filled the man who called himself Bors, at the tone as much as the words, but then the air above the Halfman shimmered, and the import drove home. *It can't be! It can't . . . !* The Trollocs were already on their bellies, writhing as if they wanted to burrow into the floor.

Without waiting to see if anyone else moved, the man who called himself Bors dropped facedown, grunting as he bruised himself on the stone. Words sprang to his lips like a charm against danger—they were a charm, though a thin reed against what he feared—and he heard a hundred other voices, breathy with fear, speaking the same against the floor.

"The Great Lord of the Dark is my Master, and most heartily do I serve him to the last shred of my very soul." In the back of his mind a voice chattered with fear. *The Dark One and all the Forsaken are bound*. . . . Shivering, he forced it to silence. He had abandoned that voice long since. "Lo, my Master is death's Master. Asking nothing do I serve against the Day of his coming, yet do I serve in the sure and certain hope of life everlasting." . . . *bound in Shayol Ghul, bound by the Creator at the moment of creation. No, I serve a different master now.* "Surely the faithful shall be exalted in the land, exalted above the unbelievers, exalted above thrones, yet do I serve humbly against the Day of his Return." *The hand of the Creator shelters us all, and the Light protects us from the Shadow. No, no! A different master.* "Swift come the Day of Return. Swift come the Great Lord of the Dark to guide us and rule the world forever and ever."

The man who called himself Bors finished the creed panting, as if he had run ten miles. The rasp of breath all around told him he was not the only one.

“Rise. All of you, rise.”

The mellifluous voice took him by surprise. Surely none of his companions, lying on their bellies with their masked faces pressed to the mosaic tiles, would have spoken, but it was not the voice he expected from. . . . Cautiously, he raised his head enough to see with one eye.

The figure of a man floated in the air above the Myrddraal, the hem of his blood-red robe hanging a span over the Halfman’s head. Masked in blood-red, too. Would the Great Lord of the Dark appear to them as a man? And masked, besides? Yet the Myrddraal, its very gaze fear, trembled and almost cowered where it stood in the figure’s shadow. The man who called himself Bors grasped for an answer his mind could contain without splitting. One of the Forsaken, perhaps.

That thought was only a little less painful. Even so, it meant the Day of the Dark One’s return must be close at hand if one of the Forsaken was free. The Forsaken, thirteen of the most powerful wielders of the One Power in an Age filled with powerful wielders, had been sealed up in Shayol Ghul along with the Dark One, sealed away from the world of men by the Dragon and the Hundred Companions. And the backblast of that sealing had tainted the male half of the True Source; and all the male Aes Sedai, those cursed wielders of the Power, went mad and broke the world, tore it apart like a pottery bowl smashed on rocks, ending the Age of Legends before they died, rotting while they still lived. A fitting death for Aes Sedai, to his mind. Too good for them. He regretted only that the women had been spared.

Slowly, painfully, he forced the panic to the back of his mind, confined it and held it tight though it screamed to get out. It was the best he could do. None of those on their bellies had risen, and only a few had even dared raise their heads.

“Rise.” There was a snap in the red-masked figure’s voice this time. He gestured with both hands. “Stand!”

The man who called himself Bors scrambled up awkwardly, but halfway to his feet, he hesitated. Those gesturing hands were horribly burned, crisscrossed by black fissures, the raw flesh between as red as the figure’s robes. *Would the Dark One appear so? Or even one of the Forsaken?* The eyeholes of that blood-red mask swept slowly across him, and he straightened hastily. He thought he could feel the heat of an open furnace in that gaze.

The others obeyed the command with no more grace and no less fear in their rising. When all were on their feet, the floating figure spoke.

"I have been known by many names, but the one by which you shall know me is Ba'alzamon."

The man who called himself Bors clamped his teeth to keep them from chattering. Ba'alzamon. In the Trolloc tongue, it meant Heart of the Dark, and even unbelievers knew it was the Trolloc name for the Great Lord of the Dark. He Whose Name Must Not Be Uttered. Not the True Name, Shai'tan, but still forbidden. Among those gathered here, and others of their kind, to sully either with a human tongue was blasphemy. His breath whistled through his nostrils, and all around him he could hear others panting behind their masks. The servants were gone, and the Trollocs as well, though he had not seen them go.

"The place where you stand lies in the shadow of Shayol Ghul." More than one voice moaned at that; the man who called himself Bors was not sure his own was not among them. A touch of what might almost be called mockery entered Ba'alzamon's voice as he spread his arms wide. "Fear not, for the Day of your Master's rising upon the world is near at hand. The Day of Return draws nigh. Does it not tell you so that I am here, to be seen by you favored few among your brothers and sisters? Soon the Wheel of Time will be broken. Soon the Great Serpent will die, and with the power of that death, the death of Time itself, your Master will remake the world in his own image for this Age and for all Ages to come. And those who serve me, faithful and steadfast, will sit at my feet above the stars in the sky and rule the world of men forever. So have I promised, and so shall it be, without end. You shall live and rule forever."

A murmur of anticipation ran through the listeners, and some even took a step forward, toward the floating, crimson shape, their eyes lifted, rapturous. Even the man who called himself Bors felt the pull of that promise, the promise for which he had dealt away his soul a hundred times over.

"The Day of Return comes closer," Ba'alzamon said. "But there is much yet to do. Much to do."

The air to Ba'alzamon's left shimmered and thickened, and the figure of a young man hung there, a little lower than Ba'alzamon. The man who called himself Bors could not decide whether it was a living being or not. A country lad, by his clothes, with a light of mischief in his brown eyes and the hint of a smile on his lips, as if in memory or anticipation of a prank. The flesh looked warm, but the chest did not move with breath, the eyes did not blink.

The air to Ba'alzamon's right wavered as if with heat, and a second country-clad figure hung suspended a little below Ba'alzamon. A curly-haired youth, as heavily muscled as a blacksmith. And an oddity: a battle axe hung at his side, a great, steel half-moon balanced by a thick spike. The man who called himself Bors suddenly leaned forward, intent on an even greater strangeness. A youth with yellow eyes.

For the third time air solidified into the shape of a young man, this time directly under Ba'alzamon's eye, almost at his feet. A tall fellow, with eyes now gray, now almost blue as the light took them, and dark, reddish hair. Another villager, or farmer. The man who called himself Bors gasped. Yet another thing out of the ordinary, though he wondered why he should expect anything to be ordinary here. A sword swung from the figure's belt, a sword with a bronze heron on the scabbard and another inset into the long, two-handed hilt. *A* village boy *with a heron-mark blade? Impossible! What can it mean? And a boy with* yellow *eyes*. He noticed the Myrddraal looking at the figures, trembling; and unless he misjudged entirely, its trembling was no longer fear, but hatred.

Dead silence had fallen, silence that Ba'alzamon let deepen before he spoke. "There is now one who walks the world, one who was and will be, but is not yet, the Dragon."

A startled murmur ran through his listeners.

"The Dragon Reborn! We are to kill him, Great Lord?" That from the Shienaran, hand grasping eagerly at his side where his sword would hang.

"Perhaps," Ba'alzamon said simply. "And perhaps not. Perhaps he can be turned to my use. Sooner or later it will be so, in this Age or another."

The man who called himself Bors blinked. *In this Age or another? I thought the Day of Return was near. What matter to me what happens in another Age if I grow old and die waiting in this one?* But Ba'alzamon was speaking again.

"Already a bend is forming in the Pattern, one of many points where he who will become the Dragon may be turned to my service. Must be turned! Better that he serve me alive than dead, but alive or dead, serve me he must and will! These three you must know, for each is a thread in the pattern *I* mean to weave, and it will be up to you to see that they are placed as I command. Study them well, that you will know them."

Abruptly all sound was gone. The man who called himself Bors shifted uneasily, and saw others doing the same. All but the Illianer woman, he realized. With her hands spread over her bosom as if to hide the rounded flesh she exposed, eyes wide, half frightened and half ecstatic, she was nodding eagerly as though to someone face-to-face with her. Sometimes she appeared to give a reply, but the man who called himself Bors heard not a word. Suddenly she arched backwards, trembling and rising on her toes. He could not see why she did not fall, unless something unseen held her. Then, just as abruptly, she settled back to her feet and nodded again, bowing, shivering. Even as she straightened, one of the women wearing a Great Serpent ring gave a start and began nodding.

So each of us hears his own instructions, and none hears another's. The man who called himself Bors muttered in frustration. If he knew what even one other was commanded, he might be able to use the knowledge to advantage, but this way. . . . Impatiently he waited for his turn, forgetting himself enough to stand straight.

One by one the gathering received their orders, each walled in silence yet still giving tantalizing clues, if only he could read them. The man of the Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk, stiffening with reluctance as he nodded. The Shienaran, his stance bespeaking confusion even while he acquiesced. The second woman of Tar Valon giving a start, as of shock, and the gray-swathed figure whose sex he could not determine shaking its head before falling to its knees and nodding vigorously. Some underwent the same convulsion as the Illianer woman, as if pain itself lifted them to toe tips.

"Bors."

The man who called himself Bors jerked as a red mask filled his eyes. He could still see the room, still see the floating shape of Ba'alzamon and the three figures before him, but at the same time all he could see was the red-masked face. Dizzy, he felt as if his skull were splitting open and his eyes were being pushed out of his head. For a moment he thought he could see flames through the eyeholes of the mask.

"Are you faithful . . . Bors?"

The hint of mocking in the name sent a chill down his backbone. "I am faithful, Great Lord. I cannot hide from you." *I* am *faithful! I swear it!*

"No, you cannot."

The certainty in Ba'alzamon's voice dried his mouth, but he forced himself to speak. "Command me, Great Lord, and I obey."

"Firstly, you are to return to Tarabon and continue your *good* works. In fact, I command you to redouble your efforts."

He stared at Ba'alzamon in puzzlement, but then fires flared again behind the mask, and he took the excuse of a bow to pull his eyes away. "As you command, Great Lord, so shall it be."

"Secondly, you will watch for the three young men, and have your followers watch. Be warned; they are dangerous."

The man who called himself Bors glanced at the figures floating in front of Ba'alzamon. *How can I do that? I can see them, but I can't see anything except* his *face.* His head felt about to burst. Sweat slicked his hands under his thin gloves, and his shirt clung to his back. "Dangerous, Great Lord? Farmboys? Is one of them the—"

"A sword is dangerous to the man at the point, but not to the man at the hilt. Unless the man holding the sword is a fool, or careless, or unskilled, in which case it is twice as dangerous to him as to anyone else. It is enough that I have told you to know them. It is enough that you obey me."

"As you command, Great Lord, so shall it be."

"Thirdly, regarding those who have landed at Toman Head, and the Domani. Of this you will speak to no one. When you return to Tarabon. . . ."

The man who called himself Bors realized as he listened that his mouth was sagging open. The instructions made no sense. *If I knew what some of the others were told, perhaps I could piece it together.*

Abruptly he felt his head grasped as though by a giant hand crushing his temples, felt himself being lifted, and the world blew apart in a thousand starbursts, each flash of light becoming an image that fled across his mind or spun and dwindled into the distance before he could more than barely grasp it. An impossible sky of striated clouds, red and yellow and black, racing as if driven by the mightiest wind the world had ever seen. A woman—a girl?—dressed in white receded into blackness and vanished as soon as she appeared. A raven stared him in the eye, *knowing* him, and was gone. An armored man in a brutal helm, shaped and painted and gilded like some monstrous, poisonous insect, raised a sword and plunged to one side, beyond his view. A horn, curled and golden, came hurtling out of the far distance. One piercing note it sounded as it flashed toward him, tugging his soul. At the last instant it flashed into a blinding, golden ring of light that passed through him, chilling him beyond death. A wolf leaped from the shadows of lost sight and ripped out his throat. He could not scream. The torrent went on, drowning him, burying him. He could barely remember who he was, or what he was. The skies rained fire, and the moon and stars fell; rivers ran in blood, and the dead walked; the earth split open and fountained molten rock. . . .

The man who called himself Bors found himself half crouching in the chamber with the others, most watching him, all silent. Wherever he looked, up or down or in any direction, the masked face of Ba'alzamon overwhelmed his eyes. The images that had flooded into his mind were fading; he was sure many were already gone from memory. Hesitantly, he straightened, Ba'alzamon always before him.

"Great Lord, what—?"

"Some commands are too important to be known even by he who carries them out."

The man who called himself Bors bent almost double in his bow. "As you command, Great Lord," he whispered hoarsely, "so shall it be."

When he straightened, he was alone in silence once more. Another, the Tairen High Lord, nodded and bowed to someone none else saw. The man who called himself Bors put an unsteady hand to his brow, trying to hold on to something of what had burst through his mind, though he was not completely certain he wanted to remember. The last remnant flickered out, and suddenly he was wondering what it was that he was trying to recall. *I know there was something, but what? There* was *something! Wasn't there?* He rubbed his hands together, grimacing at the feel of sweat under his gloves, and turned his attention to the three figures hanging suspended before Ba'alzamon's floating form.

The muscular, curly-haired youth; the farmer with the sword; and the lad with the look of mischief on his face. Already, in his mind, the man who called himself Bors had named them the Blacksmith, the Swordsman, and the Trickster. *What is their place in the puzzle?* They must be important, or Ba'alzamon would not have made them the center of this gathering. But from his orders alone they could all die at any time, and he had to think that some of the others, at least, had orders as deadly for the three. *How important are they?* Blue eyes could mean the nobility of Andor—unlikely in those clothes—and there were Borderlanders with light eyes, as well as some Tairens, not to mention a few from Ghealdan, and, of course. . . . No, no help there. But *yellow* eyes? *Who* are *they? What* are *they?*

He started at a touch on his arm, and looked around to find one of the white-clad servants, a young man, standing by his side. The others were back, too, more than before, one for each of the masked. He blinked. Ba'alzamon was gone. The Myrddraal was gone, too, and only rough stone was where the door it had used had been. The three figures still hung there, though. He felt as if they were staring at him.

"If it please you, my Lord Bors, I will show you to your room."

Avoiding those dead eyes, he glanced once more at the three figures, then followed. Uneasily he wondered how the youth had known what name to use. It was not until the strange carved doors closed behind him and they had walked a dozen paces that he realized he was alone in the corridor with the servant. His brows drew down suspiciously behind his mask, but before he could open his mouth, the servant spoke.

"The others are also being shown to their rooms, my Lord. If you please, my Lord? Time is short, and our Master is impatient."

The man who called himself Bors ground his teeth, both at the lack of information and at the implication of sameness between himself and the servant, but he followed in silence. Only a fool ranted at a servant, and worse, remembering the fellow's eyes, he was not sure it would do any good. *And how did he know what I was going to ask?* The servant smiled.

The man who called himself Bors did not feel at all comfortable until he was back in the room where he had waited on first arriving, and then not much. Even finding the seals on his saddlebags untouched was small comfort.

The servant stood in the hallway, not entering. "You may change to your own garments if you wish, my Lord. None will see you depart here, nor arrive at your destination, but it may be best to arrive already properly clothed. Someone will come soon to show you the way."

Untouched by any visible hand, the door swung shut.

The man who called himself Bors shivered in spite of himself. Hastily he undid the seals and buckles of his saddlebags and pulled out his usual cloak. In the back of his mind a small voice wondered if the promised power, even the immortality, was worth another meeting like this, but he laughed it down immediately. *For that much power, I would praise the Great Lord of the Dark under the Dome of Truth.* Remembering the commands given him by Ba’alzamon, he fingered the golden, flaring sun worked on the breast of the white cloak, and the red shepherd’s crook behind the sun, symbol of his office in the world of men, and he almost laughed. There was work, great work, to be done in Tarabon, and on Almoth Plain.

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CHAPTER

1

The Flame of Tar Valon

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass leaving memories that become legend, then fade to myth, and are long forgot when that Age comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the Mountains of Dhoom. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning.

Born among black, knife-edged peaks, where death roamed the high passes yet hid from things still more dangerous, the wind blew south across the tangled forest of the Great Blight, a forest tainted and twisted by the touch of the Dark One. The sickly sweet smell of corruption faded by the time the wind crossed that invisible line men called the border of Shienar, where spring flowers hung thick in the trees. It should have been summer by now, but spring had been late in coming, and the land had run wild to catch up. New-come pale green bristled on every bush, and red new growth tipped every tree branch. The wind rippled farmers' fields like verdant ponds, solid with crops that almost seemed to creep upward visibly.

The smell of death was all but gone long before the wind reached the stone-walled town of Fal Dara on its hills, and whipped around a tower of the fortress in the very center of the town, a tower atop which two men seemed to dance. Hard-walled and high, Fal Dara, both keep and town, never taken, never betrayed. The wind moaned across wood-shingled rooftops, around tall stone chimneys and taller towers, moaned like a dirge.

Stripped to the waist, Rand al'Thor shivered at the wind's cold caress, and his fingers flexed on the long hilt of the practice sword he held. The hot sun had slicked his chest, and his dark, reddish hair clung to his head in a sweat-curled mat. A faint odor in the swirl of air made his nose twitch, but he did not connect the smell with the image of an old grave fresh-opened that flashed through his head. He was barely aware of odor or image at all;

he strove to keep his mind empty, but the other man sharing the tower top with him kept intruding on the emptiness. Ten paces across, the tower top was, encircled by a chest-high, crenellated wall. Big enough and more not to feel crowded, except when shared with a Warder.

Young as he was, Rand was taller than most men, but Lan stood just as tall and more heavily muscled, if not quite so broad in the shoulders. A narrow band of braided leather held the Warder's long hair back from his face, a face that seemed made from stony planes and angles, a face unlined as if to belie the tinge of gray at his temples. Despite the heat and exertion, only a light coat of sweat glistened on his chest and arms. Rand searched Lan's icy blue eyes, hunting for some hint of what the other man intended. The Warder never seemed to blink, and the practice sword in his hands moved surely and smoothly as he flowed from one stance to another.

With a bundle of thin, loosely bound staves in place of a blade, the practice sword would make a loud clack when it struck anything, and leave a welt where it hit flesh. Rand knew all too well. Three thin red lines stung on his ribs, and another burned his shoulder. It had taken all his efforts not to wear more decorations. Lan bore not a mark.

As he had been taught, Rand formed a single flame in his mind and concentrated on it, tried to feed all emotion and passion into it, to form a void within himself, with even thought outside. Emptiness came. As was too often the case of late it was not a perfect emptiness; the flame still remained, or some sense of light sending ripples through the stillness. But it was enough, barely. The cool peace of the void crept over him, and he was one with the practice sword, with the smooth stones under his boots, even with Lan. All was one, and he moved without thought in a rhythm that matched the Warder's step for step and move for move.

The wind rose again, bringing the ringing of bells from the town. *Somebody's still celebrating that spring has finally come.* The extraneous thought fluttered through the void on waves of light, disturbing the emptiness, and as if the Warder could read Rand's mind, the practice sword whirled in Lan's hands.

For a long minute the swift *clack-clack-clack* of bundled lathes meeting filled the tower top. Rand made no effort to reach the other man; it was all he could do to keep the Warder's strikes from reaching him. Turning Lan's blows at the last possible moment, he was forced back. Lan's expression never changed; the practice sword seemed alive in his hands.

Abruptly the Warder's swinging slash changed in mid-motion to a thrust. Caught by surprise, Rand stepped back, already wincing with the blow he knew he could not stop this time.

The wind howled across the tower . . . and trapped him. It was as if the air had suddenly jelled, holding him in a cocoon. Pushing him forward. Time and motion slowed; horrified, he watched Lan's practice sword drift toward his chest. There was nothing slow or soft about the impact. His ribs creaked as if he had been struck with a hammer. He grunted, but the wind would not allow him to give way; it still carried him forward, instead. The lathes of Lan's practice sword flexed and bent—ever so slowly, it seemed to Rand—then shattered, sharp points oozing toward his heart, jagged lathes piercing his skin. Pain lanced through his body; his whole skin felt slashed. He burned as though the sun had flared to crisp him like bacon in a pan.

With a shout, he threw himself stumbling back, falling against the stone wall. Hand trembling, he touched the gashes on his chest and raised bloody fingers before his gray eyes in disbelief.

"And what was that fool move, sheepherder?" Lan grated. "You know better by now, or should unless you have forgotten everything I've tried to teach you. How badly are you—?" He cut off as Rand looked up at him.

"The wind." Rand's mouth was dry. "It—it pushed me! It. . . . It was solid as a wall!"

The Warder stared at him in silence, then offered a hand. Rand took it and let himself be pulled to his feet.

"Strange things can happen this close to the Blight," Lan said finally, but for all the flatness of the words he sounded troubled. That in itself was strange. Warders, those half-legendary warriors who served the Aes Sedai, seldom showed emotion, and Lan showed little even for a Warder. He tossed the shattered lathe sword aside and leaned against the wall where their real swords lay, out of the way of their practice.

"Not like that," Rand protested. He joined the other man, squatting with his back against the stone. That way the top of the wall was higher than his head, protection of a kind from the wind. If it was a wind. No wind had ever felt . . . solid . . . like that. "Peace! Maybe not even *in* the Blight."

"For someone like you. . . ." Lan shrugged as if that explained everything. "How long before you leave, sheepherder? A month since you said you were going, and I thought you'd be two weeks gone by now."

Rand stared up at him in surprise. *He's acting like nothing happened!* Frowning, he set down the practice sword and lifted his real sword to his knees, fingers running along the long, leather-wrapped hilt inset with a bronze heron. Another bronze heron stood on the scabbard, and yet another was scribed on the sheathed blade. It was still a little strange to him that he had a sword. Any sword, much less one with a blademaster's mark. He was a farmer from the Two Rivers, so far away, now. Maybe far away forever, now. He was a shepherd like his father—*I* was *a shepherd. What am I now?*—and his father had given him a heron-marked sword. *Tam* is *my father, no matter what anybody says.* He wished his own thoughts did not sound as if he was trying to convince himself.

Again Lan seemed to read his mind. "In the Borderlands, sheepherder, if a man has the raising of a child, that child is his, and none can say different."

Scowling, Rand ignored the Warder's words. It was no one's business but his own. "I want to learn how to use this. I need to." It had caused him problems, carrying a heron-marked sword. Not everybody knew what it meant, or even noticed it, but even so a heron-mark blade, especially in the hands of a youth barely old enough to be called a man, still attracted the wrong sort of attention. "I've been able to bluff sometimes, when I could not run, and I've been lucky, besides. But what happens when I can't run, and I can't bluff, and my luck runs out?"

"You could sell it," Lan said carefully. "That blade is rare even among heron-mark swords. It would fetch a pretty price."

"No!" It was an idea he had thought of more than once, but he rejected it now for the same reason he always had, and more fiercely for coming from someone else. *As long as I keep it, I have the right to call Tam father. He gave it to me, and it gives me the right.* "I thought any heron-mark blade was rare."

Lan gave him a sidelong look. "Tam didn't tell you, then? He must know. Perhaps he didn't believe. Many do not." He snatched up his own sword, almost the twin of Rand's except for the lack of herons, and whipped off the scabbard. The blade, slightly curved and single-edged, glittered silvery in the sunlight.

It was the sword of the kings of Malkier. Lan did not speak of it—he did not even like others to speak of it—but al'Lan Mandragoran was Lord of the Seven Towers, Lord of the Lakes, and uncrowned King of Malkier.

The Seven Towers were broken now, and the Thousand Lakes the lair of unclean things. Malkier lay swallowed by the Great Blight, and of all the Malkieri lords, only one still lived.

Some said Lan had become a Warder, bonding himself to an Aes Sedai, so he could seek death in the Blight and join the rest of his blood. Rand had indeed seen Lan put himself in harm's way seemingly without regard for his own safety, but far beyond his own life and safety he held those of Moiraine, the Aes Sedai who held his bond. Rand did not think Lan would truly seek death while Moiraine lived.

Turning his blade in the light, Lan spoke. "In the War of the Shadow, the One Power itself was used as a weapon, and weapons were made with the One Power. Some weapons *used* the One Power, things that could destroy an entire city at one blow, lay waste to the land for leagues. Just as well those were all lost in the Breaking; just as well no one remembers the making of them. But there were simpler weapons, too, for those who would face Myrddraal, and worse things the Dreadlords made, blade to blade.

"With the One Power, Aes Sedai drew iron and other metals from the earth, smelted them, formed and wrought them. All with the Power. Swords, and other weapons, too. Many that survived the Breaking of the World were destroyed by men who feared and hated Aes Sedai work, and others have vanished with the years. Few remain, and few men truly know what they are. There have been legends of them, swollen tales of swords that seemed to have a power of their own. You've heard the gleemen's tales. The reality is enough. Blades that will not shatter or break, and never lose their edge. I've seen men sharpening them—playing at sharpening, as it were—but only because they could not believe a sword did not need it after use. All they ever did was wear away their oilstones.

"Those weapons the Aes Sedai made, and there will never be others. When it was done, war and Age ended together, with the world shattered, with more dead unburied than there were alive and those alive fleeing, trying to find some place, any place, of safety, with every second woman weeping because she'd never see husband or sons again; when it was done, the Aes Sedai who still lived swore they would never again make a weapon for one man to kill another. Every Aes Sedai swore it, and every woman of them since has kept that oath. Even the Red Ajah, and they care little what happens to any male.

"One of those swords, a plain soldier's sword"—with a faint grimace, almost sad, if the Warder could be said to show emotion, he slid the blade back into its sheath—"became something more. On the other hand, those made for lord-generals, with blades so hard no bladesmith could mark them, yet marked already with a heron, those blades became sought after."

Rand's hands jerked away from the sword propped on his knees. It toppled, and instinctively he grabbed it before it hit the floorstones. "You mean Aes Sedai made this? I thought you were talking about *your* sword."

"Not all heron-mark blades are Aes Sedai work. Few men handle a sword with the skill to be named blademaster and be awarded a heron-mark blade, but even so, not enough Aes Sedai blades remain for more than a handful to have one. Most come from master bladesmiths; the finest steel men can make, yet still wrought by a man's hands. But that one, sheepherder . . . that one could tell a tale of three thousand years and more."

"I can't get away from them," Rand said, "can I?" He balanced the sword in front of him on scabbard point; it looked no different than it had before he knew. "Aes Sedai work." *But Tam gave it to me. My* father *gave it to me.* He refused to think of how a Two Rivers shepherd had come by a heron-mark blade. There were dangerous currents in such thoughts, deeps he did not want to explore.

"Do you really want to get away, sheepherder? I'll ask again. Why are you not gone, then? The sword? In five years I could make you worthy of it, make you a blademaster. You have quick wrists, good balance, and you don't make the same mistake twice. But I do not have five years to give over to teaching you, and you do not have five years for learning. You have not even one year, and you know it. As it is, you will not stab yourself in the foot. You hold yourself as if the sword belongs at your waist, sheepherder, and most village bullies will sense it. But you've had that much almost since the day you put it on. So why are you still here?"

"Mat and Perrin are still here," Rand mumbled. "I don't want to leave before they do. I won't ever—I might not see them again for—for years, maybe." His head dropped back against the wall. "Blood and ashes! At least they just think I'm crazy not to go home with them. Half the time Nynaeve looks at me like I'm six years old and I've skinned my knee, and she's going to make it better; the other half she looks like she's seeing a stranger. One she might offend if she looks too closely, at that. She's a Wisdom, and besides that, I don't think she's ever been afraid of anything, but she. . . ."

He shook his head. “And Egwene. Burn me! She knows why I have to go, but every time I mention it she looks at me, and I knot up inside and. . . .” He closed his eyes, pressing the sword hilt against his forehead as if he could press what he was thinking out of existence. “I wish. . . . I wish. . . .”

“You wish everything could be the way it was, sheepherder? Or you wish the girl would go with you instead of to Tar Valon? You think she’ll give up becoming an Aes Sedai for a life of wandering? With you? If you put it to her in the right way, she might. Love is an odd thing.” Lan sounded suddenly weary. “As odd a thing as there is.”

“No.” It was what he had been wishing, that she would want to go with him. He opened his eyes and squared his back and made his voice firm. “No, I wouldn’t let her come with me if she did ask.” He could not do that to her. *But Light, wouldn’t it be sweet, just for a minute, if she said she wanted to?* “She gets muley stubborn if she thinks I’m trying to tell her what to do, but I can still protect her from that.” He wished she were back home in Emond’s Field, but all hope of that had gone the day Moiraine came to the Two Rivers. “Even if it means she does become an Aes Sedai!” The corner of his eye caught Lan’s raised eyebrow, and he flushed.

“And that is all the reason? You want to spend as much time as you can with your friends from home before they go? That’s why you’re dragging your feet? You know what’s sniffing at your heels.”

Rand surged angrily to his feet. “All right, it’s Moiraine! I wouldn’t even be here if not for her, and she won’t as much as talk to me.”

“You’d be dead if not for her, sheepherder,” Lan said flatly, but Rand rushed on.

“She tells me . . . tells me horrible things about myself”—his knuckles whitened on the sword. *That I’m going to go mad and die!*—“and then suddenly she won’t even say two words to me. She acts as if I’m no different than the day she found me, and that smells wrong, too.”

“You want her to treat you like what you are?”

“No! I don’t mean that. Burn me, I don’t know what I mean half the time. I don’t want that, and I’m scared of the other. Now she’s gone off somewhere, vanished . . .”

“I told you she needs to be alone sometimes. It isn’t for you, or anyone else, to question her actions.”

“. . . without telling anybody where she was going, or when she’d be back, or even if she would be back. She has to be able to tell me something to help me, Lan. Something. She has to. If she ever comes back.”

“She’s back, sheepherder. Last night. But I think she has told you all she can. Be satisfied. You’ve learned what you can from her.” With a shake of his head, Lan’s voice became brisk. “You certainly aren’t learning anything standing there. Time for a little balance work. Go through Parting the Silk, beginning from Heron Wading in the Rushes. Remember that that Heron form is only for practicing balance. Anywhere but doing forms, it leaves you wide open; you can strike home from it, if you wait for the other man to move first, but you’ll never avoid his blade.”

“She *has* to be able to tell me something, Lan. That wind. It wasn’t natural, and I don’t care how close to the Blight we are.”

“Heron Wading in the Rushes, sheepherder. And mind your wrists.”

From the south came a faint peal of trumpets, a rolling fanfare slowly growing louder, accompanied by the steady *thrum-thrum-THRUM-thrum* of drums. For a moment Rand and Lan stared at each other, then the drums drew them to the tower wall to stare southward.

The city stood on high hills, the land around the city walls cleared to ankle height for a full mile in all directions, and the keep covered the highest hill of all. From the tower top, Rand had a clear view across the chimneys and roofs to the forest. The drummers appeared first from the trees, a dozen of them, drums lifting as they stepped to their own beat, mallets whirling. Next came trumpeters, long, shining horns raised, still calling the flourish. At that distance Rand could not make out the huge, square banner whipping in the wind behind them. Lan grunted, though; the Warder had eyes like a snow eagle.

Rand glanced at him, but the Warder said nothing, his eyes intent on the column emerging from the forest. Mounted men in armor rode out of the trees, and women ahorseback, too. Then a palanquin borne by horses, one before and one behind, its curtains down, and more men on horseback. Ranks of men afoot, pikes rising above them like a bristle of long thorns, and archers with their bows held slanted across their chests, all stepping to the drums. The trumpets cried again. Like a singing serpent the column wound its way toward Fal Dara.

The wind flapped the banner, taller than a man, straight out to one side. As big as it was, it was close enough now for Rand to see clearly. A swirl of colors that meant nothing to him, but at the heart of it, a shape like a pure white teardrop. His breath froze in his throat. The Flame of Tar Valon.

“Ingtar’s with them.” Lan sounded as if his thoughts were elsewhere. “Back from his hunting at last. Been gone long enough. I wonder if he had any luck?”

“Aes Sedai,” Rand whispered when he finally could. All those women out there. . . . Moiraine was Aes Sedai, yes, but he had traveled with her, and if he did not entirely trust her, at least he knew her. Or thought he did. But she was only one. So many Aes Sedai together, and coming like this, was something else again. He cleared his throat; when he spoke, his voice grated. “Why so many, Lan? Why any at all? And with drums and trumpets and a banner to announce them.”

Aes Sedai were respected in Shienar, at least by most people, and the rest respectfully feared them, but Rand had been in places where it was different, where there was only the fear, and often hate. Where he had grown up, some men, at least, spoke of “Tar Valon witches” as they would speak of the Dark One. He tried to count the women, but they kept no ranks or order, moving their horses around to converse with one another or with whoever was in the palanquin. Goose bumps covered him. He had traveled with Moiraine, and met another Aes Sedai, and he had begun to think of himself as worldly. Nobody ever left the Two Rivers, or almost nobody, but he had. He had seen things no one back in the Two Rivers had ever laid eyes on, done things they had only dreamed of, if they had dreamed so far. He had seen a queen and met the Daughter-Heir of Andor, faced a Myrddraal and traveled the Ways, and none of it had prepared him for this moment.

“Why so many?” he whispered again.

“The Amyrlin Seat’s come in person.” Lan looked at him, his expression as hard and unreadable as a rock. “Your lessons are done, sheepherder.” He paused then, and Rand almost thought there was sympathy on his face. That could not be, of course. “Better for you if you were a week gone.” With that the Warder snatched up his shirt and disappeared down the ladder into the tower.

Rand worked his mouth, trying to get a little moisture. He stared at the column approaching Fal Dara as if it really were a snake, a deadly viper. The drums and trumpets sang, loud in his ears. The Amyrlin Seat, who ordered the Aes Sedai. *She’s come because of me.* He could think of no other reason.

They knew things, had knowledge that could help him, he was sure. And he did not dare ask any of them. He was afraid they had come to gentle him. *And afraid they haven't, too,* he admitted reluctantly. *Light, I don't know which scares me more.*

"I didn't mean to channel the Power," he whispered. "It was an accident! Light, I don't want anything to do with it. I swear I'll never touch it again! I swear it!"

With a start, he realized that the Aes Sedai party was entering the city gates. The wind swirled up fiercely, chilling his sweat like droplets of ice, making the trumpets sound like sly laughter; he thought he could smell an opened grave, strong in the air. *My grave, if I keep standing here.*

Grabbing his shirt, he scrambled down the ladder and began to run.

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CHAPTER

2

The Welcome

The halls of Fal Dara keep, their smooth stone walls sparsely decorated with elegantly simple tapestries and painted screens, bustled with news of the Amyrlin Seat's imminent arrival. Servants in black-and-gold darted about their tasks, running to prepare rooms or carry orders to the kitchens, moaning that they could not have everything ready for so great a personage when they had had no warning. Dark-eyed warriors, their heads shaven except for a topknot bound with a leather cord, did not run, but haste filled their steps and their faces shone with an excitement normally reserved for battle. Some of the men spoke as Rand hurried past.

"Ah, there you are, Rand al'Thor. Peace favor your sword. On your way to clean up? You'll want to look your best when you are presented to the Amyrlin Seat. She'll want to see you and your two friends as well as the women, you can count on it."

He trotted toward the broad stairs, wide enough for twenty men abreast, that led up to the men's apartments.

"The Amyrlin herself, come with no more warning than a pack peddler. Must be because of Moiraine Sedai and you southerners, eh? What else?"

The wide, iron-bound doors of the men's apartments stood open, and half jammed with top-knotted men buzzing with the Amyrlin's arrival.

"Ho, southlander! The Amyrlin's here. Come for you and your friends, I suppose. Peace, what honor for you! She seldom leaves Tar Valon, and she's never come to the Borderlands in my memory."

He fended them all off with a few words. He had to wash. Find a clean shirt. No time to talk. They thought they understood, and let him go. Not a one of them knew a thing except that he and his friends traveled in company with an Aes Sedai, that two of his friends were women who were going to Tar Valon to train as Aes Sedai, but their words stabbed at him as if they knew everything. *She's come for me.*

He dashed through the men's apartments, darted into the room he shared with Mat and Perrin . . . and froze, his jaw dropping in astonishment. The room was filled with women wearing the black-and-gold, all working purposefully. It was not a big room, and its windows, a pair of tall, narrow arrowslits looking down on one of the inner courtyards, did nothing to make it seem larger. Three beds on black-and-white tiled platforms, each with a chest at the foot, three plain chairs, a washstand by the door, and a tall, wide wardrobe crowded the room. The eight women in there seemed like fish in a basket.

The women barely glanced at him, and went right on clearing his clothes—and Mat's and Perrin's—out of the wardrobe and replacing them with new. Anything found in the pockets was put atop the chests, and the old clothes were bundled up carelessly, like rags.

"What are you doing?" he demanded when he caught his breath. "Those are my clothes!" One of the women sniffed and poked a finger through a tear in the sleeve of his only coat, then added it to the pile on the floor.

Another, a black-haired woman with a big ring of keys at her waist, set her eyes on him. That was Elansu, *shatayan* of the keep. He thought of the sharp-faced woman as a housekeeper, though the house she kept was a fortress and scores of servants did her bidding. "Moiraine Sedai said all of your clothes are worn out, and the Lady Amalisa had new made to give you. Just keep out of our way," she added firmly, "and we will be done the quicker." There were few men the *shatayan* could not bully into doing as she wished—some said even Lord Agelmar—and she plainly did not expect any trouble with one man young enough to be her son.

He swallowed what he had been going to say; there was no time for arguing. The Amyrlin Seat could be sending for him at any minute. "Honor to the Lady Amalisa for her gift," he managed, after the Shienaran way, "and honor to you, Elansu Shatayan. Please, convey my words to the Lady Amalisa, and tell her I said, heart and soul to serve." That ought to satisfy the Shienaran love of ceremony for both women. "But now if you'll pardon me, I want to change."

"That is well," Elansu said comfortably. "Moiraine Sedai said to remove all the old. Every stitch. Smallclothes, too." Several of the women eyed him sideways. None of them made a move toward the door.

He bit his cheek to keep from laughing hysterically. Many ways were different in Shienar from what he was used to, and there were some to which he would never become accustomed if he lived forever. He had taken to bathing in the small hours of the morning, when the big, tiled pools were empty of people, after he discovered that at any other time a woman might well climb into the water with him. It could be a scullion or the Lady Amalisa, Lord Agelmar's sister herself—the baths were one place in Shienar where there was no rank—expecting him to scrub her back in return for the same favor, asking him why his face was so red, had he taken too much sun? They had soon learned to recognize his blushes for what they were, and not a woman in the keep but seemed fascinated by them.

I might be dead or worse in another hour, and they're waiting to see me blush! He cleared his throat. "If you'll wait outside, I will pass the rest out to you. On my honor."

One of the women gave a soft chortle, and even Elansu's lips twitched, but the *shatayan* nodded and directed the other women to gather up the bundles they had made. She was the last to leave, and she paused in the doorway to add, "The boots, too. Moiraine Sedai said everything."

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. His boots, at least, were certainly still good, made by Alwyn al'Van, the cobbler back in Emond's Field, and well broken in and comfortable. But if giving up his boots would make the *shatayan* leave him alone so he could go, he would give her the boots, and anything else she wanted. He had no time. "Yes. Yes, of course. On my honor." He pushed on the door, forcing her out.

Alone, he dropped onto his bed to tug off his boots—they *were* still good, a little worn, the leather cracked here and there, but still wearable and well broken-in to fit his feet—then hastily stripped off, piling everything atop the boots, and washed at the basin just as quickly. The water was cold; the water was always cold in the men's apartments.

The wardrobe had three wide doors carved in the simple Shienaran manner, suggesting more than showing a series of waterfalls and rocky pools. Pulling open the center door, he stared for a moment at what had replaced the few garments he had brought with him. A dozen high-collared coats of the finest wool and as well cut as any he had ever seen on a merchant's back or a lord's, most embroidered like feastday clothes. A dozen! Three shirts for every coat, both linen and silk, with wide sleeves and tight cuffs. Two cloaks. Two, when he had made do with one at a time all his life. One cloak was plain, stout wool and dark green, the other deep blue with a stiff-standing collar embroidered in gold with herons . . . and high on the left breast, where a lord would wear his sign. . . .

His hand drifted to the cloak of its own accord. As if uncertain what they would feel, his fingers brushed the stitching of a serpent curled almost into a circle, but a serpent with four legs and a lion's golden mane, scaled in crimson and gold, its feet each tipped with five golden claws. His hand jerked back as if burned. *Light help me! Was it Amalisa had this made, or Moiraine? How many saw it? How many know what it is, what it means? Even one is too many. Burn me, she's trying to get me killed. Bloody Moiraine won't even talk to me, but now she's given me bloody fine new clothes to die in!*

A rap at the door sent him leaping half out of his skin.

"Are you done?" came Elansu's voice. "Every stitch, now. Perhaps I had better. . . ." A creak as if she were trying the knob.

With a start Rand realized he was still naked. "I'm done," he shouted. "Peace! Don't come in!" Hurriedly he gathered up what he had been wearing, boots and all. "I'll bring them!" Hiding behind the door, he opened it just wide enough to shove the bundle into the arms of the *shatayan.* "That's everything."

She tried to peer through the gap. "Are you sure? Moiraine Sedai said everything. Perhaps I had better just look—"

"It's everything," he growled. "On my honor!" He shouldered the door shut in her face, and heard laughter from the other side.

Muttering under his breath, he dressed hurriedly. He would not put it past any of them to find some excuse to come bulling in anyway. The gray breeches were snugger than he was used to, but still comfortable, and the shirt, with its billowy sleeves, was white enough to satisfy any goodwife in Emond's Field on laundry day. The knee-high boots fit as if he had worn them a year. He hoped it was just a good cobbler, and not more Aes Sedai work.

All of these clothes would make a pack as big as he was. Yet, he had grown used to the comfort of clean shirts again, of not wearing the same breeches day after day until sweat and dirt made them as stiff as his boots, then wearing them still. He took his saddlebags from his chest and stuffed what he could into them, then reluctantly spread the fancy cloak out on the bed and piled a few more shirts and breeches on that. Folded with the dangerous sigil inside and tied with a cord looped so it could be slung on a shoulder, it looked not much different from the packs he had seen carried by other young men on the road.

A peal of trumpets rolled through the arrowslits, trumpets calling the fanfare from outside the walls, trumpets answering from the keep towers.

"I'll pick out the stitching when I get a chance," he muttered. He had seen women picking out embroidery when they had made a mistake or changed their mind on the pattern, and it did not look very hard.

The rest of the clothes—most of them, in fact—he stuffed back into the wardrobe. No need to leave evidence of flight to be found by the first person to poke a head in after he went.

Still frowning, he knelt beside his bed. The tiled platforms on which the beds rested were stoves, where a small fire damped down to burn all night could keep the bed warm through the worst night in a Shienaran winter. The nights were still cooler than he was used to this time of year, but blankets were enough for warmth now. Pulling open the firebox door, he took out a bundle he could not leave behind. He was glad Elansu had not thought anyone would keep clothes in there.

Setting the bundle atop the blankets, he untied one end and partially unfolded it. A gleeman's cloak, turned inside out to hide the hundreds of patches that covered it, patches in every size and color imaginable. The cloak itself was sound enough; the patches were a gleeman's badge. Had been a gleeman's badge.

Inside nestled two hard leather cases. The larger held a harp, which he never touched. *The harp was never meant for a farmer's clumsy fingers, boy.* The other, long and slim, contained the gold-and-silver chased flute he had used to earn his supper and bed more than once since leaving home. Thom Merrilin had taught him to play that flute, before the gleeman died. Rand could never touch it without remembering Thom, with his sharp blue eyes and his long white mustaches, shoving the bundled cloak into his hands and shouting for him to run. And then Thom had run himself, knives appearing magically in his hands as if he were performing, to face the Myrddraal that was coming to kill them.

With a shiver, he redid the bundle. "That's all over with." Thinking of the wind on the tower top, he added, "Strange things happen this close to the Blight." He was not sure he believed it, not the way Lan had apparently meant it. In any case, even without the Amyrlin Seat, it was past time for him to be gone from Fal Dara.

Shrugging into the coat he had kept out—it was a deep, dark green, and made him think of the forests at home, Tam's Westwood farm where he had grown up, and the Waterwood where he had learned to swim—he buckled the heron-mark sword to his waist and hung his quiver, bristling with arrows, on the other side. His unstrung bow stood propped in the corner with Mat's and Perrin's, the stave two hands taller than he was. He had made it himself since coming to Fal Dara, and besides him, only Lan and Perrin could draw it. Stuffing his blanketroll and his new cloak through the loops on his bundles, he slung the pair from his left shoulder, tossed his saddlebags atop the cords, and grabbed the bow. *Leave the sword-arm free,* he thought. *Make them think I'm dangerous. Maybe* somebody *will.*

Cracking the door revealed the hall all but empty; one liveried servant dashed by, but he never so much as glanced at Rand. As soon as the man's rapid footfalls faded, Rand slipped out into the corridor.

He tried to walk naturally, casually, but with saddlebags on his shoulder and bundles on his back, he knew he looked like what he was, a man setting out on a journey and not meaning to come back. The trumpets called again, sounding fainter here inside the keep.

He had a horse, a tall bay stallion, in the north stable, called the Lord's Stable, close by the salley gate that Lord Agelmar used when he went riding. Neither the Lord of Fal Dara nor any of his family would be riding today, though, and the stable might be empty except for the stableboys. There were two ways to reach the Lord's Stable from Rand's room. One would take him all the way around the keep, behind Lord Agelmar's private garden, then down the far side and through the farrier's smithy, likewise certainly empty now, to the stableyard. Time enough that way for orders to be given, for a search to start, before he reached his horse. The other was far shorter; first across the outer courtyard, where even now the Amyrlin Seat was arriving with another dozen or more Aes Sedai.

His skin prickled at the thought; he had had more than enough of Aes Sedai for any sane lifetime. One was too many. All the stories said it, and he knew it for fact. But he was not surprised when his feet took him toward the outer courtyard. He would never see legendary Tar Valon—he could not afford that risk, now or ever—but he might catch a glimpse of the Amyrlin Seat before he left. That would be as much as seeing a queen. *There can't be* *anything dangerous in just looking, from a distance. I'll keep moving and be gone before she ever knows I was there.*

He opened a heavy, iron-strapped door onto the outer courtyard and stepped out into silence. People forested the guardwalk atop every wall, top-knotted soldiers, and liveried servants, and menials still in their muck, all pressed together cheek by jowl, with children sitting on shoulders to look over their elders' heads or squeezing in to peer around waists and knees. Every archers' balcony was packed like a barrel of apples, and faces even showed in the narrow arrowslits in the walls. A thick mass of people bordered the courtyard like another wall. And all of them watched and waited in silence.

He pushed his way along the wall, in front of the smithies and fletchers' stalls that lined the court—Fal Dara was a fortress, not a palace, despite its size and grim grandeur, and everything about it served that end—apologizing quietly to the people he jostled. Some looked around with a frown, and a few gave a second stare to his saddlebags and bundles, but none broke the silence. Most did not even bother to look at who had bumped past them.

He could easily see over the heads of most of them, enough to make out clearly what was going on in the courtyard. Just inside the main gate, a line of men stood beside their horses, fourteen of them. No two wore the same kind of armor or carried the same sort of sword, and none looked like Lan, but Rand did not doubt they were Warders. Round faces, square faces, long faces, narrow faces, they all had the look, as if they saw things other men did not see, heard things other men did not hear. Standing at their ease, they looked as deadly as a pack of wolves. Only one other thing about them was alike. One and all they wore the color-shifting cloak he had first seen on Lan, the cloak that often seemed to fade into whatever was behind it. It did not make for easy watching or a still stomach, so many men in those cloaks.

A dozen paces in front of the Warders, a row of women stood by their horses' heads, the cowls of their cloaks thrown back. He could count them, now. Fourteen. Fourteen Aes Sedai. They must be. Tall and short, slender and plump, dark and fair, hair cut short or long, hanging loose down their backs or braided, their clothes were as different as the Warders' were, in as many cuts and colors as there were women. Yet they, too, had a sameness, one that was only obvious when they stood together like this. To a woman, they seemed ageless. From this distance he would have called them all young, but closer he knew they would be like Moiraine. Young-seeming yet not, smooth-skinned but with faces too mature for youth, eyes too knowing.

Closer? Fool! I'm too close already! Burn me, I should have gone the long way. He pressed on toward his goal, another iron-bound door at the far end of the court, but he could not stop looking.

Calmly the Aes Sedai ignored the onlookers and kept their attention on the curtained palanquin, now in the center of the courtyard. The horses bearing it held as still as if ostlers stood at their harness, but there was only one tall woman beside the palanquin, her face an Aes Sedai's face, and she paid no mind to the horses. The staff she held upright before her with both hands was as tall as she, the gilded flame capping it standing above her eyes.

Lord Agelmar faced the palanquin from the far end of the court, bluff and square and face unreadable. His high-collared coat of dark blue bore the three running red foxes of the House Jagad as well as the stooping black hawk of Shienar. Beside him stood Ronan, age-withered but still tall; three foxes carved from red avatine topped the tall staff the *shambayan* bore. Ronan was Elansu's equal in ordering the keep, *shambayan* and *shatayan*, but Elansu left little for him except ceremonies and acting as Lord Agelmar's secretary. Both men's topknots were snow-white.

All of them—the Warders, the Aes Sedai, the Lord of Fal Dara, and his *shambayan*—stood as still as stone. The watching crowd seemed to hold its breath. Despite himself, Rand slowed.

Suddenly Ronan rapped his staff loudly three times on the broad paving stones, calling into the silence, "Who comes here? Who comes here? Who comes here?"

The woman beside the palanquin tapped her staff three times in reply. "The Watcher of the Seals. The Flame of Tar Valon. The Amyrlin Seat."

"Why should we watch?" Ronan demanded.

"For the hope of humankind," the tall woman replied.

"Against what do we guard?"

"The shadow at noon."

"How long shall we guard?"

"From rising sun to rising sun, so long as the Wheel of Time turns."

Agelmar bowed, his white topknot stirring in the breeze. "Fal Dara offers bread and salt and welcome. Well come is the Amyrlin Seat to Fal

Dara, for here is the watch kept, here is the Pact maintained. Welcome.”

The tall woman drew back the curtain of the palanquin, and the Amyrlin Seat stepped out. Dark-haired, ageless as all Aes Sedai were ageless, she ran her eyes over the assembled watchers as she straightened. Rand flinched when her gaze crossed him; he felt as if he had been touched. But her eyes passed on and came to rest on Lord Agelmar. A liveried servant knelt at her side with folded towels, steam still rising, on a silver tray. Formally, she wiped her hands and patted her face with a damp cloth. “I offer thanks for your welcome, my son. May the Light illumine House Jagad. May the Light illumine Fal Dara and all her people.”

Agelmar bowed again. “You honor us, Mother.” It did not sound odd, her calling him son or him calling her Mother, though comparing her smooth cheeks to his craggy face made him seem more like her father, or even grandfather. She had a presence that more than matched his. “House Jagad is yours. Fal Dara is yours.”

Cheers rose on every side, crashing against the walls of the keep like breaking waves.

Shivering, Rand hurried toward the door to safety, careless of whom he bumped into now. *Just your bloody imagination. She doesn’t even know who you are. Not yet. Blood and ashes, if she did. . . .* He did not want to think of what would have happened if she knew who he was, what he was. What would happen when she finally found out. He wondered if she had had anything to do with the wind atop the tower; Aes Sedai could do things like that. When he pushed through that door and slammed it shut behind him, muting the roar of welcome that still shook the courtyard, he heaved a relieved sigh.

The halls here were as empty as the others had been, and he all but ran. Out across a smaller courtyard, with a fountain splashing in the center, down yet another corridor and out into the flagstoned stableyard. The Lord’s Stable itself, built into the wall of the keep, stood tall and long, with big windows here inside the walls, and horses kept on two floors. The smithy across the courtyard stood silent, the farrier and his helpers gone to see the Welcome.

Tema, the leathery-faced head groom, met him at the wide doors with a deep bow, touching his forehead and then his heart. “Spirit and heart to serve, my Lord. How may Tema serve, my Lord?” No warrior’s topknot here; Tema’s hair sat on his head like an inverted gray bowl.

Rand sighed. “For the hundredth time, Tema, I am not a lord.”

“As my Lord wishes.” The groom’s bow was even lower this time.

It was his name that caused the problem, and a similarity. Rand al’Thor. Al’Lan Mandragoran. For Lan, according to the custom of Malkier, the royal “al” named him King, though he never used it himself. For Rand, “al” was just a part of his name, though he had heard that once, long ago, before the Two Rivers was called the Two Rivers, it had meant “son of.” Some of the servants in Fal Dara keep, though, had taken it to mean he was a king, too, or at least a prince. All of his argument to the contrary had only managed to demote him to lord. At least, he thought it had; he had never seen quite so much bowing and scraping, even with Lord Agelmar.

“I need Red saddled, Tema.” He knew better than to offer to do it himself; Tema would not let Rand soil his hands. “I thought I’d spend a few days seeing the country around the town.” Once he was on the big bay stallion’s back, a few days would see him at the River Erinin, or across the border into Arafel. *They’ll never find me then.*

The groom bent himself almost double, and stayed bent. “Forgive, my Lord,” he whispered hoarsely. “Forgive, but Tema cannot obey.”

Flushing with embarrassment, Rand took an anxious look around—there was no one else in sight—then grabbed the man’s shoulder and pulled him upright. He might not be able to stop Tema and a few others from acting like this, but he could try to stop anyone else from seeing it. “Why not, Tema? Tema, look at me, please. Why not?”

“It is commanded, my Lord,” Tema said, still whispering. He kept dropping his eyes, not afraid, but ashamed that he could not do what Rand asked. Shienarans took shame the way other people took being branded a thief. “No horse may leave this stable until the order is changed. Nor any stable in the keep, my Lord.”

Rand had his mouth open to tell the man it was all right, but instead he licked his lips. “No horse from any stable?”

“Yes, my Lord. The order came down only a short time ago. Only moments.” Tema’s voice picked up strength. “All the gates are closed as well, my Lord. None may enter or leave without permission. Not even the city patrol, so Tema has been told.”

Rand swallowed hard, but it did not lessen the feeling of fingers clutching his windpipe. “The order, Tema. It came from Lord Agelmar?”

“Of course, my Lord. Who else? Lord Agelmar did not speak the command to Tema, of course, nor even to the man who did speak to Tema, but, my Lord, who else could give such a command in Fal Dara?”

Who else? Rand jumped as the biggest bell in the keep bell tower let out a sonorous peal. The other bells joined in, then bells from the town.

“If Tema may be bold,” the groom called above the reverberations, “my Lord must be very happy.”

Rand had to shout back to be heard. “Happy? Why?”

“The Welcome is finished, my Lord.” Tema’s gesture took in the bell tower. “The Amyrlin Seat will be sending for my Lord, and my Lord’s friends, to come to her, now.”

Rand broke into a run. He just had time to see the surprise on Tema’s face, and then he was gone. He did not care what Tema thought. *She will be sending for me now.*

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CHAPTER

3

Friends and Enemies

Rand did not run far, only as far as the sally gate around the corner from the stable. He slowed to a walk before he got there, trying to appear casual and unhurried.

The arched gate was closed tight. It was barely big enough for two men to ride through abreast, but like all the gates in the outer wall, it was covered with broad strips of black iron, and locked shut with a thick bar. Two guards stood before the gate in plain conical helmets and plate-and-mail armor, with long swords on their backs. Their golden surcoats bore the Black Hawk on the chest. He knew one of them slightly, Ragan. The scar from a Trolloc arrow made a white triangle against Ragan's dark cheek behind the bars of his face-guard. The puckered skin dimpled with a grin when he saw Rand.

"Peace favor you, Rand al'Thor." Ragan almost shouted to be heard over the bells. "Do you intend to go hit rabbits over the head, or do you still insist that club is a bow?" The other guard shifted to stand more in front of the gate.

"Peace favor you, Ragan," Rand said, stopping in front of them. It was an effort to keep his voice calm. "You know it's a bow. You've seen me shoot it."

"No good from a horse," the other guard said sourly. Rand recognized him, now, with his deep-set, almost-black eyes that never seemed to blink. They peered from his helmet like twin caves inside another cave. He supposed there could be worse luck for him than Masema guarding the gate, but he was not sure how, short of a Red Aes Sedai. "It's too long," Masema added. "I can shoot three arrows with a horsebow while you loose one with that monster."

Rand forced a grin, as if he thought it was a joke. Masema had never made a joke in his hearing, nor laughed at one. Most of the men at Fal Dara accepted Rand; he trained with Lan, and Lord Agelmar had him at table, and most important of all, he had arrived at Fal Dara in company with Moiraine, an Aes Sedai. Some seemed unable to forget his being an outlander, though, barely saying two words to him, and then only if they had to. Masema was the worst of those.

“It’s good enough for me,” Rand said. “Speaking of rabbits, Ragan, how about letting me out? All this noise and bustle is too much for me. Better to be out hunting rabbits, even if I never see one.”

Ragan half turned to look at his companion, and Rand’s hopes began to lift. Ragan was an easygoing man, his manner belying his grim scar, and he seemed to like Rand. But Masema was already shaking his head. Ragan sighed. “It cannot be, Rand al’Thor.” He gave a tiny nod toward Masema as if to explain. If it were up to him alone. . . . “No one is to leave without a written pass. Too bad you did not ask a few minutes ago. The command just came down to bar the gates.”

“But why would Lord Agelmar want to keep *me* in?” Masema was eyeing the bundles on Rand’s back, and his saddlebags. Rand tried to ignore him. “I’m his guest,” he went on to Ragan. “By my honor, I could have left anytime these past weeks. Why would he mean this order for me? It is Lord Agelmar’s order, isn’t it?” Masema blinked at that, and his perpetual frown deepened; he almost appeared to forget Rand’s packs.

Ragan laughed. “Who else could give such an order, Rand al’Thor? Of course, it was Uno who passed it to me, but whose order could it have been?”

Masema’s eyes, fixed on Rand’s face, did not blink. “I just want to go out by myself, that’s all,” Rand said. “I’ll try one of the gardens, then. No rabbits, but at least there won’t be a crowd. The Light illumine you, and peace favor you.”

He walked away without waiting for an answering blessing, resolving not to go near any of the gardens on any account. *Burn me, once the ceremonies are done there could be Aes Sedai in any of them.* Aware of Masema’s eyes on his back—he was sure it was Masema—he kept his pace normal.

Suddenly the bells stopped ringing, and he skipped a step. Minutes were passing. A great many of them. Time for the Amyrlin Seat to be shown to her chambers. Time for her to send for him, to start a search when he was not found. As soon as he was out of sight of the sally gate, he began to run again.

Near the barracks’ kitchens, the Carters’ Gate, where all the foodstuffs for the keep were brought in, stood closed and barred, behind a pair of soldiers. He hurried past, across the kitchen yard, as if he had never meant to stop.

The Dog Gate, at the back of the keep, just high enough and wide enough for one man on foot, had its guards, too. He turned around before they saw him. There were not many gates, even as big as the keep was, but if the Dog Gate was guarded, they all would be.

Perhaps he could find a length of rope. . . . He climbed one of the stairs to the top of the outer wall, to the wide parapet with its crenellated walls. It was not comfortable for him, being so high and exposed if that wind came again, but from there he could see across the tall chimneys and sharp roofs of the town all the way to the city wall. Even after nearly a month, the houses still looked odd to his Two Rivers eyes, eaves reaching almost to the ground as if the houses were all wood-shingled roof, and chimneys angled to let heavy snow slide past. A broad, paved square surrounded the keep, but only a hundred paces from the wall lay streets full of people going about their daily business, aproned shopkeepers out under the awnings in front of their shops, rough-clothed farmers in town to buy and sell, hawkers and tradesmen and townspeople gathered in knots, no doubt to talk about the surprise visit from the Amyrlin Seat. He could see carts and people flowing through one of the gates in the town wall. Apparently the guards there had no orders about stopping anyone.

He looked up at the nearest guardtower; one of the soldiers raised a gauntleted hand to him. With a bitter laugh, he waved back. Not a foot of the wall but was under the eyes of guards. Leaning through an embrasure, he peered down past the slots in the stone for setting hoardings, down the sheer expanse of stone to the drymoat far below. Twenty paces wide and ten deep, faced with stone polished slippery smooth. A low wall, slanted to give no hiding place, surrounded it to keep anyone from falling in by accident, and its bottom was a forest of razor-sharp spikes. Even with a rope to climb down and no guards watching, he could not cross that. What served to keep Trollocs out in the last extreme served just as well to keep him in.

Suddenly he felt weary to the bone, drained. The Amyrlin Seat was there, and there was no way out. No way out, and the Amyrlin Seat there. If she knew he was there, if she had sent the wind that had seized him, then she was already hunting him, hunting with an Aes Sedai's powers. Rabbits had more chance against his bow. He refused to give up, though. There were those who said Two Rivers folk could teach stones and give lessons to mules. When there was nothing else left, Two Rivers people hung on to their stubbornness.

Leaving the wall, he wandered through the keep. He paid no mind to where he went, so long as it was nowhere he would be expected. Not anywhere near his room, nor any of the stables, nor any gate—Masema might risk Uno's tongue to report him trying to leave—nor garden. All he could think of was keeping away from *any* Aes Sedai. Even Moiraine. She *knew* about him. Despite that, she had done nothing against him. *So far. So far as you know. What if she's changed her mind? Maybe she sent for the Amyrlin Seat.*

For a moment, feeling lost, he leaned against the corridor wall, the stone hard under his shoulder. Eyes blank, he stared at a distant nothing and saw things he did not want to see. *Gentled. Would it be so bad, to have it all over?* Really *over?* He closed his eyes, but he could still see himself, huddling like a rabbit with nowhere left to run, and Aes Sedai closing round him like ravens. *They almost always die soon after, men who've been gentled. They stop wanting to live.* He remembered Thom Merrilin's words too well to face that. With a brisk shake, he hurried on down the hall. No need to stay in one place until he was found. *How long till they find you anyway? You're like a sheep in a pen. How long?* He touched the sword hilt at his side. *No, not a sheep. Not for Aes Sedai or anybody else.* He felt a little foolish, but determined.

People were returning to their tasks. A din of voices and clattering pots filled the kitchen that lay nearest the Great Hall, where the Amyrlin Seat and her party would feast that night. Cooks and scullions and potboys all but ran at their work; the spit dogs trotted in their wicker wheels to turn the spitted meats. He made his way quickly through the heat and steam, through the smells of spices and cooking. No one spared him a second glance; they were all too busy.

The back halls, where the servants lived in small apartments, were stirring like a kicked antheap as men and women scurried to don their best livery. Children did their playing in corners, out of the way. Boys waved wooden swords, and girls played with carved dolls, some announcing that *hers* was the Amyrlin Seat. Most of the doors stood open, doorways blocked only by beaded curtains. Normally, that meant whoever lived there was open to visitors, but today it simply meant the residents were in a hurry. Even those who bowed to him did so with hardly a pause.

Would any of them hear, when they went to serve, that he was being sought, and speak of seeing him? Speak to an Aes Sedai and tell her where to find him? The eyes that he passed suddenly appeared to be studying him slyly, and to be weighing and considering behind his back. Even the children took on sharper looks in his mind's eye. He knew it was just his imagination—he was sure it was; it had to be—but when the servants' apartments were behind him, he felt as if he had escaped before a trap could spring shut.

Some places in the keep were empty of people, the folk who normally worked there released for the sudden holiday. The armorer's forge, with all the fires banked, the anvils silent. Silent. Cold. Lifeless. Yet somehow not empty. His skin prickled, and he spun on his heel. No one there. Just the big square tool chests and the quenching barrels full of oil. The hair on the back of his neck stirred, and he whipped round again. The hammers and tongs hung in their places on the wall. Angrily he stared around the big room. *There's nobody there. It's just my imagination. That wind, and the Amyrlin; that's enough to make me imagine things.*

Outside in the armorer's yard, the wind swirled up around him momentarily. Despite himself he jumped, thinking it meant to catch him. For a moment he smelled the faint odor of decay again, and heard someone behind him laughing slyly. Just for a moment. Frightened, he edged in a circle, peering warily. The yard, paved with rough stone, was empty except for him. *Just your bloody imagination!* He ran anyway, and behind him he thought he heard the laughter again, this time without the wind.

In the woodyard, the presence returned, the sense of someone there. The feel of eyes peering at him around tall piles of split firewood under the long sheds, darting glances over the stacks of seasoned planks and timbers waiting on the other side of the yard for the carpenter's shop, now closed up tight. He refused to look around, refused to think of how one set of eyes could move from place to place so fast, could cross the open yard from the firewood shed to the lumbershed without even a flicker of movement that he could see. He was sure it was one set of eyes. *Imagination. Or maybe*

I'm going crazy already. He shivered. *Not yet. Light, please not yet.* Stiff-backed, he stalked across the woodyard, and the unseen watcher followed.

Down deep corridors lit only by a few rush torches, in storerooms filled with sacks of dried peas or beans, crowded with slatted racks heaped with wrinkled turnips and beets, or stacked with barrels of wine and casks of salted beef and kegs of ale, the eyes were always there, sometimes following him, sometimes waiting when he entered. He never heard a footstep but his own, never heard a door creak except when he opened and closed it, but the eyes were there. *Light, I* am *going crazy.*

Then he opened another storeroom door, and human voices, human laughter, drifted out to fill him with relief. There would be no unseen eye here. He went in.

Half the room was stacked to the ceiling with sacks of grain. In the other half a thick semicircle of men knelt in front of one of the bare walls. They all seemed to wear the leather jerkins and bowl-cut hair of menials. No warriors' topknots, no livery. No one who might betray him accidentally. *What about on purpose?* The rattle of dice came through their soft murmurs, and somebody let out a raucous laugh at the throw.

Loial was watching them dice, rubbing his chin thoughtfully with a finger thicker than a big man's thumb, his head almost reaching the rafters nearly two spans up. None of the dicers gave him a glance. Ogier were not exactly common in the Borderlands, or anywhere else, but they were known and accepted here, and Loial had been in Fal Dara long enough to excite little comment. The Ogier's dark, stiff-collared tunic was buttoned up to his neck and flared below the waist over his high boots, and one of the big pockets bulged and sagged with the weight of something. Books, if Rand knew him. Even watching men gamble, Loial would not be far from a book.

In spite of everything, Rand found himself grinning. Loial often had that effect on him. The Ogier knew so much about some things, so little about others, and he seemed to want to know everything. Yet Rand could remember the first time he ever saw Loial, with his tufted ears and his eyebrows that dangled like long mustaches and his nose almost as wide as his face—saw him and thought he was facing a Trolloc. It still shamed him. Ogier and Trollocs. Myrddraal, and things from the dark corners of midnight tales. Things out of stories and legends. That was how he had thought of them before he left Emond's Field. But since leaving home he had seen too many stories walking in the flesh ever to be so sure again. Aes

Sedai, and unseen watchers, and a wind that caught and held. His smile faded.

“All the stories are real,” he said softly.

Loial’s ears twitched, and his head turned toward Rand. When he saw who it was, the Ogier’s face split in a grin, and he came over. “Ah, there you are.” His voice was a deep bumblebee rumble. “I did not see you at the Welcome. That was something I had not seen before. Two things. The Shienaran Welcome, and the Amyrlin Seat. She looks tired, don’t you think? It cannot be easy, being Amyrlin. Worse than being an Elder, I suppose.” He paused, with a thoughtful look, but only for a breath. “Tell me, Rand, do you play at dice, too? They play a simpler game here, with only three dice. We use four in the *stedding*. They won’t let me play, you know. They just say, ‘Glory to the Builders,’ and will not bet against me. I don’t think that’s fair, do you? The dice they use *are* rather small”—he frowned at one of his hands, big enough to cover a human head—“but I still think—”

Rand grabbed his arm and cut him off. *The Builders!* “Loial, Ogier built Fal Dara, didn’t they? Do you know any way out except by the gates? A crawl hole. A drain pipe. Anything at all, if it’s big enough for a man to wiggle through. Out of the wind would be good, too.”

Loial gave a pained grimace, the ends of his eyebrows almost brushing his cheeks. “Rand, Ogier built Mafal Dadaranell, but that city was destroyed in the Trolloc Wars. This”—he touched the stone wall lightly with broad fingertips—“was built by men. I can sketch a plan of Mafal Dadaranell—I saw the maps, once, in an old book in Stedding Shangtai—but of Fal Dara, I know no more than you. It *is* well built, though, isn’t it? Stark, but well made.”

Rand slumped against the wall, squeezing his eyes shut. “I need a way out,” he whispered. “The gates are barred, and they won’t let anyone pass, but I need a way out.”

“But why, Rand?” Loial said slowly. “No one here will hurt you. Are you all right? Rand?” Suddenly his voice rose. “Mat! Perrin! I think Rand is sick.”

Rand opened his eyes to see his friends straightening up out of the knot of dicers. Mat Cauthon, long-limbed as a stork, wearing a half smile as if he saw something funny that no one else saw. Shaggy-haired Perrin Aybara, with heavy shoulders and thick arms from his work as a blacksmith’s apprentice. They both still wore their Two Rivers garb, plain and sturdy, but travel-worn.

Mat tossed the dice back into the semicircle as he stepped out, and one of the men called, “Here, southlander, you can’t quit while you’re winning.”

“Better than when I’m losing,” Mat said with a laugh. Unconsciously he touched his coat at the waist, and Rand winced. Mat had a dagger with a ruby in its hilt under there, a dagger he was never without, a dagger he could not be without. It was a tainted blade, from the dead city of Shadar Logoth, tainted and twisted by an evil almost as bad as the Dark One, the evil that had killed Shadar Logoth two thousand years before, yet still lived among the abandoned ruins. That taint would kill Mat if he kept the dagger; it would kill him even faster if he put it aside. “You’ll have another chance to win it back.” Wry snorts from the kneeling men indicated they did not think there was much chance of that.

Perrin kept his eyes down as he followed Mat across to Rand. Perrin always kept his eyes down these days, and his shoulders sagged as if he carried a weight too heavy even for their width.

“What’s the matter, Rand?” Mat asked. “You’re as white as your shirt. Hey! Where did you get those clothes? You turning Shienaran? Maybe I’ll buy myself a coat like that, and a fine shirt.” He shook his coat pocket, producing a clink of coins. “I seem to have luck with the dice. I can hardly touch them without winning.”

“You don’t have to buy anything,” Rand said tiredly. “Moiraine had all our clothes replaced. They’re burned already for all I know, all but what you two are wearing. Elansu will probably be around to collect those, too, so I’d change fast if I were you, before she takes them off your back.” Perrin still did not look up, but his cheeks turned red; Mat’s grin deepened, though it looked forced. They too had had encounters in the baths, and only Mat tried to pretend it did not matter. “And I’m not sick. I just need to get out of here. The Amyrlin Seat is here. Lan said . . . he said with her here, it would have been better for me if I were gone a week. I need to leave, and all the gates are barred.”

“He said that?” Mat frowned. “I don’t understand. He’d never say *anything* against an Aes Sedai. Why now? Look, Rand, I don’t like Aes Sedai any more than you do, but they aren’t going to do anything to us.” He lowered his voice to say that, and looked over his shoulder to see if any of the gamblers was listening. Feared the Aes Sedai might be, but in the

Borderlands, they were far from being hated, and a disrespectful comment about them could land you in a fight, or worse. "Look at Moiraine. She isn't so bad, even if she is Aes Sedai. You're thinking like old Cenn Buie telling his tall tales back home, in the Winespring Inn. I mean, she hasn't hurt us, and they won't. Why would they?"

Perrin's eyes lifted. Yellow eyes, gleaming in the dim light like burnished gold. *Moiraine hasn't hurt us?* Rand thought. Perrin's eyes had been as deep a brown as Mat's when they left the Two Rivers. Rand had no idea how the change had come about—Perrin did not want to talk about it, or about very much of anything since it happened—but it had come at the same time as the slump in his shoulders, and a distance in his manner as if he felt alone even with friends around him. Perrin's eyes and Mat's dagger. Neither would have happened if they had not left Emond's Field, and it was Moiraine who had taken them away. He knew that was not fair. They would probably all be dead at Trollocs' hands, and a good part of Emond's Field as well, if she had not come to their village. But that did not make Perrin laugh the way he used to, or take the dagger from Mat's belt. *And me? If I was home and still alive, would I still be what I am now? At least I wouldn't be worrying about what the Aes Sedai are going to do to me.*

Mat was still looking at him quizzically, and Perrin had raised his head enough to stare from under his eyebrows. Loial waited patiently. Rand could not tell them why he had to stay away from the Amyrlin Seat. They did not know what he was. Lan knew, and Moiraine. And Egwene, and Nynaeve. He wished none of them knew, and most of all he wished Egwene did not, but at least Mat and Perrin—and Loial, too—believed he was still the same. He thought he would rather die than let them know, than see the hesitation and worry he sometimes caught in Egwene's eyes, and Nynaeve's, even when they were trying their best.

"Somebody's . . . watching me," he said finally. "Following me. Only. . . . Only, there's nobody there."

Perrin's head jerked up, and Mat licked his lips and whispered, "A Fade?"

"Of course not," Loial snorted. "How could one of the Eyeless enter Fal Dara, town or keep? By law, no one may hide his face inside the town walls, and the lamplighters are charged with keeping the streets lit at night so there isn't a shadow for a Myrddraal to hide in. It could not happen."

“Walls don’t stop a Fade,” Mat muttered. “Not when it wants to come in. I don’t know as laws and lamps will do any better.” He did not sound like someone who had half thought Fades were only gleemen’s tales less than half a year before. He had seen too much, too.

“And there was the wind,” Rand added. His voice hardly shook as he told what had happened on the tower top. Perrin’s fists tightened until his knuckles cracked. “I just want to leave here,” Rand finished. “I want to go south. Somewhere away. Just somewhere away.”

“But if the gates are barred,” Mat said, “how do we get out?”

Rand stared at him. “We?” He had to go alone. It would be dangerous for anyone near him, eventually. He would be dangerous, and even Moiraine could not tell him how long he had. “Mat, you know you have to go to Tar Valon with Moiraine. She said that’s the only place you can be separated from that bloody dagger without dying. And you know what will happen if you keep it.”

Mat touched his coat over the dagger, not seeming to realize what he was doing. “ ‘An Aes Sedai’s gift is bait for a fish,’ ” he quoted. “Well, maybe I don’t want to put the hook in my mouth. Maybe whatever she wants to do in Tar Valon is worse than if I don’t go at all. Maybe she’s lying. ‘The truth an Aes Sedai tells is never the truth you think it is.’ ”

“You have any more old sayings you want to rid yourself of?” Rand asked. “ ‘A south wind brings a warm guest, a north wind an empty house’? ‘A pig painted gold is still a pig’? What about, ‘talk shears no sheep’? ‘A fool’s words are dust’?”

“Easy, Rand,” Perrin said softly. “There is no need to be so rough.”

“Isn’t there? Maybe I don’t want you two going with me, always hanging around, falling into trouble and expecting me to pull you out. You ever think of that? Burn me, did it ever occur to you I might be tired of always having you there whenever I turn around? Always there, and I’m tired of it.” The hurt on Perrin’s face cut him like a knife, but he pushed on relentlessly. “There are some here think I’m a lord. A lord. Maybe I like that. But look at you, dicing with stablehands. When I go, I go by myself. You two can go to Tar Valon or go hang yourselves, but I leave here alone.”

Mat’s face had gone stiff, and he clutched the dagger through his coat till his knuckles were white. “If that is how you want it,” he said coldly. “I thought we were. . . . However you want it, al’Thor. But if I decide to leave at the same time you do, I’ll go, and you can stand clear of me.”

“Nobody is going anywhere,” Perrin said, “if the gates are barred.” He was staring at the floor again. Laughter rolled from the gamblers against the wall as someone lost.

“Go or stay,” Loial said, “together or apart, it doesn’t matter. You are all three *ta’veren.* Even I can see it, and I don’t have that Talent, just by what happens around you. And Moiraine Sedai says it, too.”

Mat threw up his hands. “No more, Loial. I don’t want to hear about that anymore.”

Loial shook his head. “Whether you hear it or not, it is still true. The Wheel of Time weaves the Pattern of the Age, using the lives of men for thread. And you three are *ta’veren*, centerpoints of the weaving.”

“No more, Loial.”

“For a time, the Wheel will bend the Pattern around you three, whatever you do. And whatever you do is more likely to be chosen by the Wheel than by you. *Ta’veren* pull history along behind them and shape the Pattern just by being, but the Wheel weaves *ta’veren* on a tighter line than other men. Wherever you go and whatever you do, until the Wheel chooses otherwise you will—”

“No more!” Mat shouted. The men dicing looked around, and he glared at them until they bent back to their game.

“I am sorry, Mat,” Loial rumbled. “I know I talk too much, but I did not mean—”

“I am not staying here,” Mat told the rafters, “with a bigmouthed Ogier and a fool whose head is too big for a hat. You coming, Perrin?” Perrin sighed, and glanced at Rand, then nodded.

Rand watched them go with a stick caught in his threat. *I must go alone. Light help me, I have to.*

Loial was staring after them, too, eyebrows drooping worriedly. “Rand, I really didn’t mean to—”

Rand made his voice harsh. “What are you waiting for? Go on with them! I don’t see why you’re still here. You are no use to me if you don’t know a way out. Go on! Go find your trees, and your precious groves, if they haven’t all been cut down, and good riddance to them if they have.”

Loial’s eyes, as big as cups, looked surprised and hurt, at first, but slowly they tightened into what almost might be anger. Rand did not think it could be. Some of the old stories claimed Ogier were fierce, though they never said how, exactly, but Rand had never met anyone as gentle as Loial.

“If you wish it so, Rand al’Thor,” Loial said stiffly. He gave a rigid bow and stalked away after Mat and Perrin.

Rand slumped against the stacked sacks of grain. *Well,* a voice in his head taunted, *you did it, didn’t you. I had to,* he told it. *I will be dangerous just to be around. Blood and ashes, I’m going to go mad, and. . . . No! No, I won’t! I will not use the Power, and then I won’t go mad, and. . . . But I can’t risk it. I can’t, don’t you see?* But the voice only laughed at him.

The gamblers were looking at him, he realized. All of them, still kneeling against the wall, had turned to stare at him. Shienarans of any class were almost always polite and correct, even to blood enemies, and Ogier were never any enemies of Shienar. Shock filled the gamblers’ eyes. Their faces were blank, but their eyes said what he had done was wrong. Part of him thought they were right, and that drove their silent accusation deep. They only looked at him, but he stumbled out of the storeroom as if they were chasing him.

Numbly he went on through the storerooms, hunting a place to secrete himself until some traffic was allowed through the gates again. Then he could hide in the bottom of a victualer’s cart, maybe. If they did not search the carts on the way out. If they did not search the storerooms, search the whole keep for him. Stubbornly he refused to think about that, stubbornly concentrated on finding a safe place. But every place he found—a hollow in a stack of grain sacks, a narrow alley along the wall behind some wine barrels, an abandoned storeroom half filled with empty crates and shadows—he could imagine searchers finding him there. He could imagine that unseen watcher, whoever it was—or whatever—finding him there, too. So he hunted on, thirsty and dusty and with cobwebs in his hair.

And then he came out into a dimly torch-lit corridor, and Egwene was creeping along it, pausing to peer into the storerooms she passed. Her dark hair, hanging to her waist, was caught back with a red ribbon, and she wore a goose-gray dress in the Shienaran fashion, trimmed in red. At the sight of her, sadness and loss rolled over him, worse than when he had chased Mat and Perrin and Loial away. He had grown up thinking he would marry Egwene one day; they both had. But now. . . .

She jumped when he popped out right in front of her, and her breath caught loudly, but what she said was, “So there you are. Mat and Perrin told me what you did. And Loial. I know what you’re trying to do, Rand, and it is plain foolish.” She crossed her arms under her breasts, and her big, dark eyes fixed him sternly. He always wondered how she managed to seem to be looking down at him—she did it at will—although she was only as tall as his chest, and two years younger besides.

"Good," he said. Her hair suddenly made him angry. He had never seen a grown woman with her hair unbraided until he left the Two Rivers. There, every girl waited eagerly for the Women's Circle of her village to say she was old enough to braid her hair. Egwene certainly had. And here she was with her hair loose except for a ribbon. *I want to go home and can't, and she can't wait to forget Emond's Field.* "You go away and leave me alone, too. You don't want to keep company with a shepherd anymore. There are plenty of Aes Sedai here for you to moon around, now. And don't tell any of them you saw me. They're after me, and I don't need you helping them."

Bright spots of color bloomed in her cheeks. "Do you think I would—"

He turned to walk away, and with a cry she threw herself at him, flung her arms around his legs. They both tumbled to the stone floor, his saddlebags and bundles flying. He grunted when he hit, sword hilt digging into his side, and again when she scrabbled up and plopped herself down on his back as if he were a chair. "My mother," she said firmly, "always told me the best way to learn to deal with a man was to learn to ride a mule. She said they have about equal brains most of the time. Sometimes the mule is smarter."

He raised his head to look over his shoulder at her. "Get off me, Egwene. Get off! Egwene, if you don't get off"—he lowered his voice ominously—"I'll do something to you. You know what I am." He added a glare for good measure.

Egwene sniffed. "You wouldn't, if you could. You would not hurt anybody. But you can't, anyway. I know you cannot channel the One Power whenever you want; it just happens, and you cannot control it. So you are not going to do anything to me or anybody else. I, on the other hand, have been taking lessons with Moiraine, so if you don't listen to some sense, Rand al'Thor, I might just set your breeches on fire. I can manage that much. You keep on as you are and see if I cannot." Suddenly, for just a moment, the torch nearest them on the wall flared up with a roar. She gave a squeak and stared at it, startled.

Twisting around, he grabbed her arm, pulled her off his back, and sat her against the wall. When he sat up himself, she was sitting there across from him, rubbing her arm furiously. “You really would have, wouldn’t you?” he said angrily. “You’re fooling with things you don’t understand. You could have burned both of us to charcoal!”

“Men! When you cannot win an argument, you either run away or resort to force.”

“Hold on there! Who tripped who? Who sat on who? And you threatened—tried!—to—” He raised both hands. “No, you don’t. You do this to me all the time. Whenever you realize the argument isn’t going the way you want, suddenly we are arguing about something else completely. Not this time.”

“I am not arguing,” she said calmly, “and I am not changing the subject, either. What is hiding except running away? And after you hide, you’ll run away for true. And what about hurting Mat, and Perrin, and Loial? And me? I know why. You’re afraid you will hurt somebody even worse if you let them stay near you. If you don’t do what you shouldn’t, then you do not have to worry about hurting anybody. All this running around and striking out, and you don’t even know if there’s a reason. Why should the Amyrlin, or any Aes Sedai but Moiraine, even know you exist?”

For a moment he stared at her. The longer she spent with Moiraine and Nynaeve, the more she took on their manner, at least when she wanted to. They were much alike at times, the Aes Sedai and the Wisdom, distant and knowing. It was disconcerting coming from Egwene. Finally he told her what Lan had said. “What else could he mean?”

Her hand froze on her arm, and she frowned with concentration. “Moiraine knows about you, and she hasn’t done anything, so why should she now? But if Lan. . . .” Still frowning, she met his eyes. “The storerooms are the first place they will look. If they do look. Until we find out if they are looking, we need to put you somewhere they would never think of searching. I know. The dungeon.”

He scrambled to his feet. “The dungeon!”

“Not in a cell, silly. I go there some evenings to visit Padan Fain. Nynaeve does, too. No one will think it odd if I go early today. In truth, with everybody looking to the Amyrlin, no one will even notice us.”

“But, Moiraine. . . .”

“She doesn’t go to the dungeons to question Master Fain. She has him brought to her. And she has not done that very much for weeks. Believe me, you will be safe there.”

Still, he hesitated. Padan Fain. “Why do you visit the peddler, anyway? He’s a Darkfriend, admitted out of his own mouth, and a bad one. Burn me, Egwene, he brought the Trollocs to Emond’s Field! The Dark One’s hound, he called himself, and he has been sniffing on my trail since Winternight.”

“Well, he is safe behind iron bars now, Rand.” It was her turn to hesitate, and she looked at him almost pleading. “Rand, he has brought his wagon into the Two Rivers every spring since before I was born. He knows all the people I know, all the places. It’s strange, but the longer he has been locked up, the easier in himself he has become. It’s almost as if he is breaking free of the Dark One. He laughs again, and tells funny stories, about Emond’s Field folk, and sometimes about places I never heard of before. Sometimes he is almost like his old self. I just like to talk to somebody about home.”

Since I’ve been avoiding you, he thought, *and since Perrin’s been avoiding everybody, and Mat’s been spending all his time gambling and carousing.* “I shouldn’t have kept to myself so much,” he muttered, then sighed. “Well, if Moiraine thinks it’s safe enough for you, I suppose it is safe enough for me. But there’s no need for you to be mixed in it.”

Egwene got to her feet and concentrated on brushing off her dress, avoiding his eye.

“Moiraine *has* said it’s safe? Egwene?”

“Moiraine Sedai has never told me I could not visit Master Fain,” she said carefully.

He stared at her, then burst out, “You never asked her. She doesn’t know. Egwene, that’s stupid. Padan Fain’s a Darkfriend, and as bad as ever a Darkfriend was.”

“He is locked in a cage,” she said stiffly, “and I do not have to ask Moiraine’s permission for everything I do. It is a little late for you to start worrying about doing what an Aes Sedai thinks, isn’t it? Now, are you coming?”

“I can find the dungeon without you. They are looking for me, or will be, and it won’t do you any good to be found with me.”

“Without me,” she said dryly, “you’ll likely trip over your own feet and fall in the Amyrlin Seat’s lap, then confess everything while trying to talk your way out of it.”

“Blood and ashes, you ought to be in the Women’s Circle back home. If men were all as fumble-footed and helpless as you seem to think, we’d never—”

“Are you going to stand here talking until they do find you? Pick up your things, Rand, and come with me.” Not waiting for an answer, she spun around and started off down the hall. Muttering under his breath, he reluctantly obeyed.

There were few people—servants, mainly—in the back ways they took, but Rand had the feeling that they all took special notice of him. Not notice of a man burdened for a journey, but of *him*, Rand al’Thor in particular. He knew it was his imagination—he hoped it was—but even so, he felt no relief when they stopped in a passageway deep beneath the keep, before a tall door with a small iron grill set in it, as thickly strapped with iron as any in the outer wall. A clapper hung below the grill.

Through the grill Rand could see bare walls, and two top-knotted soldiers sitting bareheaded at a table with a lamp on it. One of the men was sharpening a dagger with long, slow strokes of a stone. His strokes never faltered when Egwene rapped with the clapper, a sharp clang of iron on iron. The other man, his face flat and sullen, looked at the door as if considering before he finally rose and came over. He was squat and stocky, barely tall enough to look through the cross-hatched bars.

“What do you want? Oh, it’s you again, girl. Come to see your Darkfriend? Who’s that?” He made no move to open the door.

“He’s a friend of mine, Changu. He wants to see Master Fain, too.”

The man studied Rand, his upper lip quivering back to bare teeth. Rand did not think it was supposed to be a smile. “Well,” Changu said finally. “Well. Tall, aren’t you? Tall. And fancy dressed for your kind. Somebody catch you young in the Eastern Marches and tame you?” He slammed back the bolts and yanked open the door. “Well, come in if you’re coming.” He took on a mocking tone. “Take care not to bump your head, my Lord.”

There was no danger of that; the door was tall enough for Loial. Rand followed Egwene in, frowning and wondering if this Changu meant to make some sort of trouble. He was the first rude Shienaran Rand had met; even Masema was only cold, not really rude. But the fellow just banged the door shut and rammed the heavy bolts home, then went to some shelves beyond the end of the table and took one of the lamps there. The other man never ceased stropping his knife, never even looked up from it. The room was bare except for the table and benches and shelves, with straw on the floor and another iron-bound door leading deeper in.

“You’ll want some light, won’t you,” Changu said, “in there in the dark with your Darkfriend friend.” He laughed, coarse and humorless, and lit the lamp. “He’s waiting for you.” He thrust the lamp at Egwene, and undid the inner door almost eagerly. “Waiting for you. In there, in the dark.”

Rand paused uneasily at the blackness beyond, and Changu grinning behind, but Egwene caught his sleeve and pulled him in. The door slammed, almost catching his heel; the latch bars clanged shut. There was only the light of the lamp, a small pool around them in the darkness.

“Are you sure he’ll let us out?” he asked. The man had never even looked at his sword or bow, he realized, never asked what was in his bundles. “They aren’t very good guards. We could be here to break Fain free for all he knows.”

“They know me better than that,” she said, but she sounded troubled, and she added, “They seem worse every time I come. All the guards do. Meaner, and more sullen. Changu told jokes the first time I came, and Nidao never even speaks anymore. But I suppose working in a place like this can’t give a man a light heart. Maybe it is just me. This place does not do my heart any good, either.” Despite her words, she drew him confidently into the black. He kept his free hand on his sword.

The pale lamplight showed a wide hall with flat iron grills to either side, fronting stone-walled cells. Only two of the cells they passed held prisoners. The occupants sat up on their narrow cots as the light struck them, shielding their eyes with their hands, glaring between their fingers. Even with their faces hidden, Rand was sure they were glaring. Their eyes glittered in the lamplight.

“That one likes to drink and fight,” Egwene murmured, indicating a burly fellow with sunken knuckles. “This time he wrecked the common room of an inn in the town single-handed, and hurt some men badly.” The other prisoner wore a gold-embroidered coat with wide sleeves, and low, gleaming boots. “He tried to leave the city without settling his inn bill”—she sniffed loudly at that; her father was an innkeeper as well as Mayor of Emond’s Field—“nor paying half a dozen shopkeepers and merchants what he owed.”

The men snarled at them, guttural curses as bad as any Rand had heard from merchants’ guards.

“They grow worse every day, too,” she said in a tight voice, and quickened her step.

She was enough ahead of him when they reached Padan Fain’s cell, at the very end, that Rand was out of the light entirely. He stopped there, in the shadows behind her lamp.

Fain was sitting on his cot, leaning forward expectantly as if waiting, just as Changu had said. He was a bony, sharp-eyed man, with long arms and a big nose, even more gaunt now than Rand remembered. Not gaunt from the dungeon—the food here was the same as the servants ate, and not even the worst prisoner was shorted—but from what he had done before coming to Fal Dara.

The sight of him brought back memories Rand would just as soon have done without. Fain on the seat of his big peddler’s wagon wheeling across the Wagon Bridge, arriving in Emond’s Field the day of Winternight. And on Winternight the Trollocs came, killing and burning, hunting. Hunting three young men, Moiraine had said. *Hunting me, if they only knew it, and using Fain for their trail hound.*

Fain stood at Egwene’s approach, not shielding his eyes or even blinking at the light. He smiled at her, a smile that touched only his lips, then raised his eyes above her head. Looking straight at Rand, hidden in the blackness behind the light, he pointed a long finger at him. “I feel you there, hiding, Rand al’Thor,” he said, almost crooning. “You can’t hide, not from me, and not from them. You thought it was over, did you not? But the battle’s never done, al’Thor. They are coming for me, and they’re coming for you, and the war goes on. Whether you live or die, it’s never over for you. Never.” Suddenly he began to chant.

> “Soon comes the day all shall be free.
> Even you, and even me.
> Soon comes the day all shall die.
> Surely you, but never I.”

He let his arm fall, and his eyes rose to stare intently at an angle up into the darkness. A crooked grin twisting his mouth, he chuckled deep in his throat as if whatever he saw was amusing. “Mordeth knows more than all of you. Mordeth knows.”

Egwene backed away from the cell until she reached Rand, and only the edge of the light touched the bars of Fain’s cell. Darkness hid the peddler, but they could still hear his chuckles. Even unable to see him, Rand was sure Fain was still peering off at nothing.

With a shiver, he pried his fingers off his sword hilt. “Light!” he said hoarsely. “This is what you call being like he used to be?”

“Sometimes he’s better, and sometimes worse.” Egwene’s voice was unsteady. “This is worse—much worse than usual.”

“What is he seeing, I wonder. He’s mad, staring at a stone ceiling in the dark.” *If the stone weren’t there, he’d be looking straight at the women’s apartments. Where Moiraine is, and the Amyrlin Seat.* He shivered again. “He’s mad.”

“This was not a good idea, Rand.” Looking over her shoulder at the cell, she drew him away from it and lowered her voice as if afraid Fain might overhear. Fain’s chuckles followed them. “Even if they don’t look here, I cannot stay here with him like this, and I do not think you should, either. There is something about him today that. . . .” She drew a shaky breath. “There is one place even safer from search than here. I did not mention it before because it was easier to get you in here, but they will never look in the women’s apartments. Never.”

“The women’s . . . ! Egwene, Fain may be mad, but you’re madder. You can’t hide from hornets in a hornets’ nest.”

“What better place? What is the one part of the keep no man will enter without a woman’s invitation, not even Lord Agelmar? What is the one place no one would ever think to look for a man?”

“What is the one place in the keep sure to be full of Aes Sedai? It is crazy, Egwene.”

Poking at his bundles, she spoke as if it were all decided. “You must wrap your sword and bow in your cloak, and then it will look as if you are carrying things for me. It should not be too hard to find you a jerkin and a shirt that isn’t so pretty. You will have to stoop, though.”

“I told you, I won’t do it.”

“Since you’re acting stubborn as a mule, you should take right to playing my beast of burden. Unless you would really rather stay down here with him.”

Fain’s laughing whisper came through the black shadows. “The battle’s never done, al’Thor. Mordeth knows.”

“I’d have a better chance jumping off the wall,” Rand muttered. But he unslung his bundles and set about wrapping sword and bow and quiver as she had suggested.

In the darkness, Fain laughed. “It’s never over, al’Thor. Never.”

* * *

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CHAPTER

4

Summoned

Alone in her rooms in the women’s apartments, Moiraine adjusted the shawl, embroidered with curling ivy and grapevines, on her shoulders and studied the effect in the tall frame mirror standing in a corner. Her large, dark eyes could appear as sharp as a hawk’s when she was angry. They seemed to pierce the silvered glass, now. It was only happenstance that she had had the shawl in her saddlebags when she came to Fal Dara. With the blazing white Flame of Tar Valon centered on the wearer’s back and long fringe colored to show her Ajah—Moiraine’s was as blue as a morning sky—the shawls were seldom worn outside Tar Valon, and even there usually only inside the White Tower. Little in Tar Valon besides a meeting of the Hall of the Tower called for the formality of the shawls, and beyond the Shining Walls a sight of the Flame would send too many people running, to hide or perhaps to fetch the Children of the Light. A Whitecloak’s arrow was as fatal to an Aes Sedai as to anyone else, and the Children were too wily to let an Aes Sedai see the bowman before the arrow struck, while she still might do something about it. Moiraine had certainly never expected to wear the shawl in Fal Dara. But for an audience with the Amyrlin, there were proprieties to observe.

She was slender and not at all tall, and smooth-cheeked Aes Sedai agelessness often made her appear younger than she was, but Moiraine had a commanding grace and calm presence that could dominate any gathering. A manner ingrained growing up in the Royal Palace of Cairhien had been heightened, not submerged, by still more years as an Aes Sedai. She knew she might need every bit of it today. Yet much of the calm was on the surface, today. *There must be trouble, or she would not have come herself*, she thought for at least the tenth time. But beyond that lay a thousand questions more. *What trouble, and who did she choose to accompany her? Why here? Why now? It cannot be allowed to go wrong now.*

The Great Serpent ring on her right hand caught the light dully as she touched the delicate golden chain fastened in her dark hair, which hung in waves to her shoulders. A small, clear blue stone dangled from the chain, in the middle of her forehead. Many in the White Tower knew of the tricks she could do using that stone as a focus. It was only a polished bit of blue crystal, just something a young girl had used in her first learning, with no one to guide her. That girl had remembered tales of *angreal* and even more powerful *sa'angreal*—those fabled remnants of the Age of Legends that allowed Aes Sedai to channel more of the One Power than any could safely handle unaided—remembered and thought some such focus was required to channel at all. Her sisters in the White Tower knew a few of her tricks, and suspected others, including some that did not exist, some that had shocked her when she learned of them. The things she did with the stone were simple and small, if occasionally useful; the kind a child would imagine. But if the wrong women had accompanied the Amyrlin, the crystal might put them off balance, because of the tales.

A rapid, insistent knocking came at the chamber door. No Shienaran would knock that way, not at anyone's door, but least of all hers. She remained looking into the mirror until her eyes stared back serenely, all thought hidden in their dark depths. She checked the soft leather pouch hanging at her belt. *Whatever troubles brought her out of Tar Valon, she will forget them when I lay this trouble before her.* A second thumping, even more vigorous than the first, sounded before she crossed the room and opened the door with a calm smile for the two women who had come for her.

She recognized them both. Dark-haired Anaiya in her blue-fringed shawl, and fair-haired Liandrin in her red. Liandrin, not only young-seeming but young and pretty, with a doll's face and a small, petulant mouth, had her hand raised to pound again. Her dark brows and darker eyes were a sharp contrast to the multitude of pale honey braids brushing her shoulders, but the combination was not uncommon in Tarabon. Both women were taller than Moiraine, though Liandrin by less than a hand.

Anaiya's blunt face broke into a smile as soon as Moiraine opened the door. That smile gave her the only beauty she would ever have, but it was enough; almost everyone felt comforted, safe and special, when Anaiya smiled at them. "The Light shine on you, Moiraine. It's good to see you again. Are you well? It has been so long."

“My heart is lighter for your presence, Anaiya.” That was certainly true; it was good to know she had at least one friend among the Aes Sedai who had come to Fal Dara. “The Light illumine you.”

Liandrin’s mouth tightened, and she gave her shawl a twitch. “The Amyrlin Seat, she requires your presence, Sister.” Her voice was petulant, too, and cold-edged. Not for Moiraine’s sake, or not solely; Liandrin always sounded dissatisfied with something. Frowning, she tried to look over Moiraine’s shoulder into the room. “This chamber, it is warded. We cannot enter. Why do you ward against your sisters?”

“Against all,” Moiraine replied smoothly. “Many of the serving women are curious about Aes Sedai, and I do not want them pawing through my rooms when I am not here. There was no need to make a distinction until now.” She pulled the door shut behind her, leaving all three of them in the corridor. “Shall we go? We must not keep the Amyrlin waiting.”

She started down the hallway with Anaiya chatting at her side. Liandrin stood for a moment staring at the door as if wondering what Moiraine was hiding, then hurried to join the others. She bracketed Moiraine, walking as stiffly as a guard. Anaiya merely walked, keeping company. Their slippered footsteps fell softly on thick-woven carpets with simple patterns.

Liveried women curtsied deeply as they passed, many more deeply than they would have for the Lord of Fal Dara himself. Aes Sedai, three together, and the Amyrlin Seat herself in the keep; it was more honor than any woman of the keep had ever expected in her lifetime. A few women of noble Houses were out in the halls, and they curtsied, too, which they most certainly would not have done for Lord Agelmar. Moiraine and Anaiya smiled and bowed their heads to acknowledge each reverence, from servant or noble equally. Liandrin ignored them all.

There were only women here, of course, no men. No Shienaran male above the age of ten would enter the women’s rooms without permission or invitation, although a few small boys ran and played in the halls here. They knelt on one knee, awkwardly, when their sisters dropped deep curtsies. Now and then Anaiya smiled and ruffled a small head as she passed.

“This time, Moiraine,” Anaiya said, “you have been gone from Tar Valon too long. Much too long. Tar Valon misses you. Your sisters miss you. And you are needed in the White Tower.”

“Some of us must work in the world,” Moiraine said gently. “I will leave the Hall of the Tower to you, Anaiya. Yet in Tar Valon, you hear more of what occurs in the world than I. Too often I outrun what happens where I was yesterday. What news have you?”

“Three more false Dragons.” Liandrin bit the words off. “In Saldaea, Murandy, and Tear false Dragons ravage the land. The while, you Blues smile and talk of nothing, and try to hold on to the past.” Anaiya raised an eyebrow, and Liandrin snapped her mouth shut with a sharp sniff.

“Three,” Moiraine mused softly. For an instant her eyes gleamed, but she masked it quickly. “Three in the last two years, and now three more at once.”

“As the others were, these will be dealt with also. This male vermin and any ragtag rabble who follow their banners.”

Moiraine was almost amused by the certainty in Liandrin’s voice. Almost. She was too aware of the realities, too aware of the possibilities. “Have a few months been enough for you to forget, Sister? The last false Dragon all but tore Ghealdan apart before his army, ragtag rabble or not, was defeated. Yes, Logain is in Tar Valon by now, gentled and safe, I suppose, but some of our sisters died to overpower him. Even one sister dead is more loss than we can bear, but Ghealdan’s losses were much worse. The two before Logain could not channel, yet even so the people of Kandor and Arad Doman remember them well. Villages burned and men dead in battle. How easily can the world deal with three at one time? How many will flock to their banners? There has never been a shortage of followers for any man claiming to be the Dragon Reborn. How great will the wars be this time?”

“It isn’t so grim as that,” Anaiya said. “As far as we know, only the one in Saldaea can channel. He has not had time to attract many followers, and sisters should already be there to deal with him. The Tairens are harrying their false Dragon and his followers through Haddon Mirk, while the fellow in Murandy is already in chains.” She gave a short, wondering laugh. “To think the Murandians, of all people, would deal with theirs so quickly. Ask, and they do not even call themselves Murandians, but Lugarders, or Inishlinni, or this or that lord’s or lady’s man. Yet for fear one of their neighbors would take the excuse to invade, the Murandians leaped on their false Dragon almost as soon as he opened his mouth to proclaim himself.”

“Still,” Moiraine said, “three at the same time cannot be ignored. Has any sister been able to do a Foretelling?” It was a slight chance—few Aes Sedai had manifested any part of that Talent, even the smallest part, in centuries—so she was not surprised when Anaiya shook her head. Not surprised, but a little relieved.

They reached a juncture of hallways at the same time as the Lady Amalisa. She dropped a full curtsy, bowing deep and spreading her pale green skirts wide. “Honor to Tar Valon,” she murmured. “Honor to Aes Sedai.”

The sister of the Lord of Fal Dara required more than a nod of the head. Moiraine took Amalisa’s hands and drew her to her feet. “You honor us, Amalisa. Rise, Sister.”

Amalisa straighted gracefully, with a flush on her face. She had never as much as been to Tar Valon, and to be called Sister by an Aes Sedai was heady even for someone of her rank. Short and of middle years, she had a dark, mature beauty, and the color in her cheeks set it off. “You honor me too greatly, Moiraine Sedai.”

Moiraine smiled. “How long have we known each other, Amalisa? Must I now call you my Lady Amalisa, as if we had never sat over tea together?”

“Of course not.” Amalisa smiled back. The strength evident in her brother’s face was in hers, too, and no less for the softer line of cheek and jaw. There were those who said that as hard and renowned a fighter as Agelmar was, he was no better than an even match for his sister. “But with the Amyrlin Seat here. . . . When King Easar visits Fal Dara, in private I call him *Magami,* Little Uncle, as I did when I was a child and he gave me rides on his shoulder, but in public it must be different.”

Anaiya *tsked.* “Sometimes formality is necessary, but men often make more of it than they must. Please, call me Anaiya, and I will call you Amalisa, if I may.”

From the corner of her eye, Moiraine saw Egwene, far down the side hall, disappearing hurriedly around a corner. A stooped shape in a leather jerkin, head down and arms loaded with bundles, shambled at her heels. Moiraine permitted herself a small smile, quickly masked. *If the girl shows as much initiative in Tar Valon,* she thought wryly, *she will sit in the Amyrlin Seat one day. If she can learn to control that initiative. If there is an Amyrlin Seat left on which to sit.*

When she turned her attention back to the others, Liandrin was speaking.

“. . . and I would welcome the chance to learn more of your land.” She wore a smile, open and almost girlish, and her voice was friendly.

Moiraine schooled her face to stillness as Amalisa extended an invitation to join her and her ladies in her private garden, and Liandrin accepted warmly. Liandrin made few friends, and none outside the Red Ajah. *Certainly never outside the Aes Sedai. She would sooner make friends with a man, or a Trolloc.* Moiraine was not sure Liandrin saw much difference between men and Trollocs. She was not sure any of the Red Ajah did.

Anaiya explained that just now they must attend the Amyrlin Seat. “Of course,” Amalisa said. “The Light illumine her, and the Creator shelter her. But later, then.” She stood straight and bowed her head as they left her.

Moiraine studied Liandrin as they walked, never looking at her directly. The honey-haired Aes Sedai was staring straight ahead, rosebud lips pursed thoughtfully. She appeared to have forgotten Moiraine and Anaiya both. *What is she up to?*

Anaiya seemed not to have noticed anything out of the ordinary, but then she always managed to accept people both as they were and as they wanted to be. It constantly amazed Moiraine that Anaiya dealt as well as she did in the White Tower, but those who were devious always seemed to take her openness and honesty, her acceptance of everyone, as cunning devices. They were always caught completely off balance when she turned out to mean what she said and say what she meant. Too, she had a way of seeing to the heart of things. And of accepting what she saw. Now she blithely resumed speaking of the news.

“The word from Andor is both good and bad. The street riots in Caemlyn died down with the coming of spring, but there is still talk, too much talk, blaming the Queen, and Tar Valon as well, for the long winter. Morgase holds her throne less securely than she did last year, but she holds it still, and will so long as Gareth Bryne is Captain-General of the Queen’s Guards. And the Lady Elayne, the Daughter-Heir, and her brother, the Lord Gawyn, have come safely to Tar Valon for their training. There was some fear in the White Tower that the custom would be broken.”

“Not while Morgase has breath in her body,” Moiraine said.

Liandrin gave a little start, as if she had just awakened. “Pray that she continues to have breath. The Daughter-Heir’s party was followed to the River Erinin by the Children of the Light. To the very bridges to Tar Valon. More still camp outside Caemlyn, for the chance of mischief, and inside Caemlyn still are those who listen.”

“Perhaps it is time Morgase learned a little caution,” Anaiya sighed. “The world is becoming more dangerous every day, even for a queen. Perhaps especially for a queen. She was ever headstrong. I remember when she came to Tar Valon as a girl. She did not have the ability to become a full sister, and it rankled in her. Sometimes I think she pushes her daughter because of that, whatever the girl chooses.”

Moiraine sniffed disdainfully. “Elayne was born with the spark in her; it was not a matter of choosing. Morgase would not risk letting the girl die from lack of training if all the Whitecloaks in Amadicia were camped outside Caemlyn. She would command Gareth Byrne and the Queen’s Guards to cut a path through them to Tar Valon, and Gareth Byrne would do it if he had to do it alone.” *But she still must keep the full extent of the girl’s potential secret. Would the people of Andor knowingly accept Elayne on the Lion Throne after Morgase if they knew? Not just a queen trained in Tar Valon according to custom, but a full Aes Sedai?* In all of recorded history there had been only a handful of queens with the right to be called Aes Sedai, and the few who let it be known had all lived to regret it. She felt a touch of sadness. But too much was afoot to spare aid, or even worry, for one land and one throne. “What else, Anaiya?”

“You must know that the Great Hunt of the Horn has been called in Illian, the first time in four hundred years. The Illianers say the Last Battle is coming”—Anaiya gave a little shiver, as well she might, but went on without a pause—“and the Horn of Valere must be found before the final battle against the Shadow. Men from every land are already gathering, all eager to be part of the legend, eager to find the Horn. Murandy and Altara are on their toes, of course, thinking it’s all a mask for a move against one of them. That is probably why the Murandians caught their false Dragon so quickly. In any case, there will be a new lot of stories for the bards and gleemen to add to the cycle. The Light send it is only new stories.”

“Perhaps not the stories they expect,” Moiraine said. Liandrin looked at her sharply, and she kept her face still.

“I suppose not,” Anaiya said placidly. “The stories they least expect will be exactly the ones they will add to the cycle. Beyond that, I have only rumor to offer. The Sea Folk are agitated, their ships flying from port to port with barely a pause. Sisters from the islands say the Coramoor, their Chosen One, is coming, but they won’t say more. You know how close-mouthed the Atha’an Miere are with outsiders about the Coramoor, and in this our sisters seem to think more as Sea Folk than Aes Sedai. The Aiel appear to be stirring, too, but no one knows why. No one ever knows with the Aiel. At least there is no evidence they mean to cross the Spine of the World again, thank the Light.” She sighed and shook her head. “What I would not give for even one sister from among the Aiel. Just one. We know too little of them.”

Moiraine laughed. “Sometimes I think you belong in the Brown Ajah, Anaiya.”

“Almoth Plain,” Liandrin said, and looked surprised that she had spoken.

“Now that truly *is* rumor, Sister,” Anaiya said. “A few whispers heard as we were leaving Tar Valon. There may be fighting on Almoth Plain, and perhaps Toman Head, as well. I say, may be. The whispers were faint. Rumors of rumors. We left before we could hear more.”

“It would have to be Tarabon and Arad Doman,” Moiraine said, and shook her head. “They have squabbled over Almoth Plain for nearly three hundred years, but it has never come to open blows.” She looked at Liandrin; Aes Sedai were supposed to throw off all their old loyalties to lands and rulers, but few did so completely. It was hard not to care for the land of your birth. “Why would they now—?”

“Enough of idle talk,” the honey-haired woman broke in angrily. “For you, Moiraine, the Amyrlin waits.” She took three quick strides ahead of the others and threw open one of a pair of tall doors. “For you, the Amyrlin will have no idle talk.”

Unconsciously touching the pouch at her waist, Moiraine went past Liandrin through the doorway, with a nod as if the other woman were holding the door for her. She did not even smile at the white flash of anger on Liandrin’s face. *What* is *the wretched girl up to?*

Brightly colored carpets covered the anteroom floor in layers, and the room was pleasantly furnished with chairs and cushioned benches and small tables, the wood simply worked or just polished. Brocaded curtains sided the tall arrowslits to make them seem more like windows. No fires burned in the fireplaces; the day was warm, and the Shienaran chill would not come until nightfall.

Fewer than half a dozen of the Aes Sedai who had accompanied the Amyrlin were there. Verin Mathwin and Serafelle, of the Brown Ajah, did not look up at Moiraine's entrance. Serafelle was intently reading an old book with a worn, faded leather cover, handling its tattered pages carefully, while plump Verin, sitting cross-legged beneath an arrowslit, held a small blossom up to the light and made notes and sketches in a precise hand in a book balanced on her knee. She had an open inkpot on the floor beside her, and a small pile of flowers on her lap. The Brown sisters concerned themselves with little beside seeking knowledge. Moiraine sometimes wondered if they were really aware of what was going on in the world, or even immediately around them.

The three other women already in the room turned, but they made no effort to approach Moiraine, only looked at her. One, a slender woman of the Yellow Ajah, she did not know; she spent too little time in Tar Valon to know all the Aes Sedai, although their numbers were no longer very great. She was acquainted with the two remaining, however. Carlinya was as pale of skin and cold of manner as the white fringe on her shawl, the exact opposite in every way of dark, fiery Alanna Mosvani, of the Green, but they both stood and stared at her without speaking, without expression. Alanna sharply snugged her shawl around her, but Carlinya made no move at all. The slender Yellow sister turned away with an air of regret.

"The Light illumine you all, Sisters," Moiraine said. No one answered. She was not sure Serafelle or Verin had even heard. *Where are the others?* There was no need for them all to be there—most would be resting in their rooms, freshing from the journey—but she was on edge now, all the questions she could not ask running through her head. None of it showed on her face.

The inner door opened, and Leane appeared, without her gilt-flamed staff. The Keeper of the Chronicles was as tall as most men, willowy and graceful, still beautiful, with coppery skin and short, dark hair. She wore a blue stole, a hand wide, instead of a shawl, for she sat in the Hall of the Tower, though as Keeper, not to represent her Ajah.

"There you are," she said briskly to Moiraine, and gestured to the door behind her. "Come, Sister. The Amyrlin Seat is waiting." She spoke naturally in a clipped, quick way that never changed, whether she was angry or joyful or excited. As Moiraine followed Leane in, she wondered what emotion the Keeper was feeling now. Leane pulled the door to behind them; it banged shut with something of the sound of a cell door closing.

The Amyrlin Seat herself sat behind a broad table in the middle of the carpet, and on the table rested a flattened cube of gold, the size of a travel chest and ornately worked with silver. The table was heavily built, its legs stout, but it seemed to squat under a weight two strong men would have had trouble lifting.

At the sight of the golden cube Moiraine had difficulty keeping her face unruffled. The last she had seen of it, it had been safely locked in Agelmar’s strongroom. On learning of the Amyrlin Seat’s arrival she had meant to tell her of it herself. That it was already in the Amyrlin’s possession was a trifle, but a worrisome trifle. Events could be outpacing her.

She swept a deep curtsy and said formally, “As you called me, Mother, so have I come.” The Amyrlin extended her hand, and Moiraine kissed her Great Serpent ring, no different from that of any other Aes Sedai. Rising, she made her tone more conversational, but not too much so. She was aware of the Keeper standing behind her, beside the door. “I hope you had a pleasant journey, Mother.”

The Amyrlin had been born in Tear, of a simple fisherman’s family, not a noble House, and her name was Siuan Sanche, though very few had used that name, or even thought of it, in the ten years since she had been raised from the Hall of the Tower. She was the Amyrlin Seat; that was the whole of it. The broad stole on her shoulders was striped in the colors of the seven Ajahs; the Amyrlin was of all Ajahs and of none. She was only of medium height, and handsome rather than beautiful, but her face held a strength that had been there before her elevation, the strength of the girl who had survived the streets of the Maule, Tear’s port district, and her clear blue gaze had made kings and queens, and even the Captain Commander of the Children of the Light, drop their eyes. Her own eyes were strained, now, and there was a new tightness to her mouth.

“We called the winds to speed our vessels up the Erinin, Daughter, and even turned the currents to our aid.” The Amyrlin’s voice was deep, and sad. “I have seen the flooding we caused in villages along the river, and the Light only knows what we have done to the weather. We will not have endeared ourselves by the damage we've done and the crops we may have ruined. All to reach here as quickly as possible." Her eyes strayed to the ornate golden cube, and she half lifted a hand as if to touch it, but when she spoke it was to say, "Elaida is in Tar Valon, Daughter. She came with Elayne and Gawyn."

Moiraine was conscious of Leane standing to one side, quiet as always in the presence of the Amyrlin. But watching, and listening. "I am surprised, Mother," she said carefully. "This is no time for Morgase to be without Aes Sedai counsel." Morgase was one of the few rulers to openly admit to an Aes Sedai councilor; almost all had one, but few admitted it.

"Elaida insisted, Daughter, and queen or not, I doubt Morgase is a match for Elaida in a contest of wills. In any case, perhaps this time she did not wish to be. Elayne has potential. More than I have ever seen before. Already she shows progress. The Red sisters are swollen up like puff-fish with it. I don't think the girl leans to their way of thinking, but she is young, and there is no telling. Even if they don't manage to bend her, it will make little difference. Elayne could well be the most powerful Aes Sedai in a thousand years, and it is the Red Ajah who found her. They have gained much status in the Hall from the girl."

"I have two young women with me in Fal Dara, Mother," Moiraine said. "Both from the Two Rivers, where the blood of Manetheren still runs strong, though they do not even remember there was once a land called Manetheren. The old blood sings, Mother, and it sings loudly in the Two Rivers. Egwene, a village girl, is at least as strong as Elayne. I have seen the Daughter-Heir, and I know. As for the other, Nynaeve was the Wisdom in their village, yet she is little more than a girl herself. It says something of her that the women of her village chose her Wisdom at her age. Once she gains conscious control of what she now does without knowing, she will be as strong as any in Tar Valon. With training, she will shine like a bonfire beside the candles of Elayne and Egwene. And there is no chance these two will choose the Red. They are amused by men, exasperated by them, but they do like them. They will easily counter whatever influence the Red Ajah gains in the White Tower from finding Elayne."

The Amyrlin nodded as if it were all of no consequence. Moiraine's eyebrows lifted in surprise before she caught herself and smoothed her features. Those were the two main concerns in the Hall of the Tower, that fewer girls who could be trained to channel the One Power were found every year, or so it seemed, and that fewer of real power were found. Worse than the fear in those who blamed Aes Sedai for the Breaking of the World, worse than the hatred from the Children of the Light, worse even than the workings of Darkfriends, were the sheer dwindling of numbers and the lessening of abilities. The corridors of the White Tower were sparsely populated where once they had been crowded, and what could once be done easily with the One Power could now be done only with difficulty, or not at all.

“Elaida had another reason for coming to Tar Valon, Daughter. She sent the same message by six different pigeons to make sure I received it—and to whom else in Tar Valon she sent pigeons, I can only guess—then came herself. She told the Hall of the Tower that you are meddling with a young man who is *ta’veren*, and dangerous. He was in Caemlyn, she said, but when she found the inn where he had been staying, she discovered you had spirited him away.”

“The people at that inn served us well and faithfully, Mother. If she harmed any of them. . . .” Moiraine could not keep the sharpness out of her voice, and she heard Leane shift. One did not speak to the Amyrlin Seat in that tone; not even a king on his throne did.

“You should know, Daughter,” the Amyrlin said dryly, “that Elaida harms no one except those she considers dangerous. Darkfriends, or those poor fool men who try to channel the One Power. Or one who threatens Tar Valon. Everyone else who isn’t Aes Sedai might as well be pieces on a stones board as far as she is concerned. Luckily for him, the innkeeper, one Master Gill as I remember, apparently thinks much of Aes Sedai, and so answered her questions to her satisfaction. Elaida actually spoke well of him. But she spoke more of the young man you took away with you. More dangerous than any man since Artur Hawkwing, she said. She has the Foretelling sometimes, you know, and her words carried weight with the Hall.”

For Leane’s sake, Moiraine made her voice as meek as she could. That was not very meek, but it was the best she could do. “I have three young men with me, Mother, but none of them is a king, and I doubt very much if any of them even dreams of uniting the world under one ruler. No one has dreamed Artur Hawkwing’s dream since the War of the Hundred Years.”

“Yes, Daughter. Village youths, so Lord Agelmar tells me. But one of them is *ta’veren*.” The Amyrlin’s eyes strayed to the flattened cube again.

“It was put forward in the Hall that you should be sent into retreat for contemplation. This was proposed by one of the Sitters for the Green Ajah, with the other two nodding approval as she spoke.”

Leane made a sound of disgust, or perhaps frustration. She always kept in the background when the Amyrlin Seat spoke, but Moiraine could understand the small interruption this time. The Green Ajah had been allied with the Blue for a thousand years; since Artur Hawkwing’s time, they had all but spoken with one voice. “I have no desire to hoe vegetables in some remote village, Mother.” *Nor will I, whatever the Hall of the Tower says.*

“It was further proposed, also by the Greens, that your care during your retreat should be given to the Red Ajah. The Red Sitters tried to appear surprised, but they looked like fisher-birds who knew the catch was unguarded.” The Amyrlin sniffed. “The Reds professed reluctance to take custody of one not of their Ajah, but said they would accede to the wishes of the Hall.”

Despite herself, Moiraine shivered. “That would be . . . most unpleasant, Mother.” It would be worse than unpleasant, much worse; the Reds were never gentle. She put the thought of it firmly to one side, to deal with later. “Mother, I cannot understand this apparent alliance between the Greens and the Reds. Their beliefs, their attitudes toward men, their views of our very purposes as Aes Sedai, are completely opposite. A Red and a Green cannot even talk to each other without coming to shouts.”

“Things change, Daughter. Four of the last five women raised Amyrlin have come from the Blue. Perhaps they feel that is too many, or that the Blue way of thinking no longer suffices in a world full of false Dragons. After a thousand years, many things change.” The Amyrlin grimaced and spoke as if to herself. “Old walls weaken, and old barriers fall.” She shook herself, and her voice firmed. “There was yet another proposal, one that still smells like week-old fish on the jetty. Since Leane is of the Blue Ajah and I came from the Blue, it was put forward that sending two sisters of the Blue with me on this journey would give the Blue four representatives. Proposed in the Hall, to my face, as if they were discussing repairing the drains. Two of the White Sisters stood against me, and two Green. The Yellow muttered among themselves, then would not speak for or against. One more saying nay, and your sisters Anaiya and Maigan would not be here. There was even some talk, open talk, that I should not leave the White Tower at all.”

Moiraine felt a greater shock than on hearing that the Red Ajah wanted her in their hands. Whatever Ajah she came from, the Keeper of the Chronicles spoke only for the Amyrlin, and the Amyrlin spoke for all Aes Sedai and all Ajahs. That was the way it had always been, and no one had ever suggested otherwise, not in the darkest days of the Trolloc Wars, not when Artur Hawkwing's armies had penned every surviving Aes Sedai inside Tar Valon. Above all, the Amyrlin Seat was the Amyrlin Seat. Every Aes Sedai was pledged to obey her. No one could question what she did or where she chose to go. This proposal went against three thousand years of custom and law.

"Who would dare, Mother?"

The Amyrlin Seat's laugh was bitter. "Almost anyone, Daughter. Riots in Caemlyn. The Great Hunt called without any of us having a hint of it until the proclamation. False Dragons popping up like redbells after a rain. Nations fading, and more nobles playing at the Game of Houses than at any time since Artur Hawkwing cut all their plottings short. And worst of all, every one of us knows the Dark One is stirring again. Show me a sister who does not think the White Tower is losing its grip on events, and if she is not Brown Ajah, she is dead. Time may be growing short for all of us, Daughter. Sometimes I think I can almost feel it growing shorter."

"As you say, Mother, things change. But there are still worse perils outside the Shining Walls than within."

For a long moment the Amyrlin met Moiraine's gaze, then nodded slowly. "Leave us, Leane. I would talk to my Daughter Moiraine alone."

There was only a moment's hesitation before Leane said, "As you wish, Mother." Moiraine could feel her surprise. The Amyrlin gave few audiences without the Keeper present, especially not to a sister she had reason to chastise.

The door opened and closed behind Leane. She would not say a word in the anteroom of what had occurred inside, but the news that Moiraine was alone with the Amyrlin would spread through the Aes Sedai in Fal Dara like wildfire through a dry forest, and the speculation would begin.

As soon as the door closed the Amyrlin stood, and Moiraine felt a momentary tingle in her skin as the other woman channeled the One Power. For an instant, the Amyrlin Seat seemed to her to be surrounded by a nimbus of bright light.

"I don't know that any of the others have your old trick," the Amyrlin Seat said, lightly touching the blue stone on Moiraine's forehead with one finger, "but most of us have some small tricks remembered from childhood. In any event, no one can hear what we say now."

Suddenly she threw her arms around Moiraine, a warm hug between old friends; Moiraine hugged back as warmly.

"You are the only one, Moiraine, with whom I can remember who I was. Even Leane always acts as if I had *become* the stole and the staff, even when we are alone, as if we'd never giggled together as novices. Sometimes I wish we still were novices, you and I. Still innocent enough to see it all as a gleeman's tale come true, still innocent enough to think we would find men—they would be princes, remember, handsome and strong and gentle?—who could bear to live with women of an Aes Sedai's power. Still innocent enough to dream of the happy ending to the gleeman's tale, of living our lives as other women do, just with more than they."

"We are Aes Sedai, Siuan. We have our duty. Even if you and I had not been born to channel, would you give it up for a home and a husband, even a prince? I do not believe it. That is a village goodwife's dream. Not even the Greens go so far."

The Amyrlin stepped back. "No, I would not give it up. Most of the time, no. But there have been times I envied that village goodwife. At this moment, I almost do. Moiraine, if anyone, even Leane, discovers what we plan, we will both be stilled. And I can't say they would be wrong to do it."

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CHAPTER

5

The Shadow in Shienar

Stilled. The word seemed to quiver in the air, almost visible. When it was done to a man who could channel the Power, who must be stopped before madness drove him to the destruction of all around him, it was called gentling, but for Aes Sedai it was stilling. Stilled. No longer able to channel the flow of the One Power. Able to sense *saidar*, the female half of the True Source, but no longer having the ability to touch it. Remembering what was gone forever. So seldom had it been done that every novice was required to learn the name of each Aes Sedai since the Breaking of the World who had been stilled, and her crime, but none could think of it without a shudder. Women bore being stilled no better than men did being gentled.

Moiraine had known the risk from the first, and she knew it was necessary. That did not mean it was pleasant to dwell on. Her eyes narrowed, and only the gleam in them showed her anger, and her worry. “Leane would follow you to the slopes of Shayol Ghul, Siuan, and into the Pit of Doom. You cannot think she would betray you.”

“No. But then, would she think it betrayal? Is it betrayal to betray a traitor? Do you never think of that?”

“Never. What we do, Siuan, is what must be done. We have both known it for nearly twenty years. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and you and I were chosen for this by the Pattern. We are a part of the Prophecies, and the Prophecies must be fulfilled. Must!”

“The Prophecies must be fulfilled. We were taught that they will be, and must be, and yet that fulfillment is treason to everything else we were taught. Some would say to everything we stand for.” Rubbing her arms, the Amyrlin Seat walked over to peer through the narrow arrowslit at the garden below. She touched the curtains. “Here in the women’s apartments they hang draperies to soften the rooms, and they plant beautiful gardens, but there is no part of this place not purpose-made for battle, death, and killing.” She continued in the same pensive tone. “Only twice since the Breaking of the World has the Amyrlin Seat been stripped of stole and staff.”

“Tetsuan, who betrayed Manetheren for jealousy of Ellisande’s powers, and Bonwhin, who tried to use Artur Hawkwing for a puppet to control the world and so nearly destroyed Tar Valon.”

The Amyrlin continued her study of the garden. “Both of the Red, and both replaced by Amyrlin from the Blue. The reason there has not been an Amyrlin chosen from the Red since Bonwhin, and the reason the Red Ajah will take any pretext to pull down an Amyrlin from the Blue, all wrapped neatly together. I have no wish to be the third to lose the stole and the staff, Moiraine. For you, of course, it would mean being stilled and put outside the Shining Walls.”

“Elaida, for one, would never let me off so easily.” Moiraine watched her friend’s back intently. *Light, what has come over her? She has never been like this before. Where is her strength, her fire?* “But it will not come to that, Siuan.”

The other woman went on as if she had not spoken. “For me, it would be different. Even stilled, an Amyrlin who has been pulled down cannot be allowed to wander about loose; she might be seen as a martyr, become a rallying point for opposition. Tetsuan and Bonwhin were kept in the White Tower as servants. Scullery maids, who could be pointed to as cautions as to what can happen to the mightiest. No one can rally around a woman who must scrub floors and pots all day. Pity her, yes, but not rally to her.”

Eyes blazing, Moiraine leaned her fists on the table. “Look at me, Siuan. Look at me! Are you saying that you want to give up, after all these years, after all we have done? Give up, and let the world go? And all for fear of a switching for not getting the pots clean enough!” She put into it all the scorn she could summon, and was relieved when her friend spun to face her. The strength was still there, strained but still there. Those clear blue eyes were as hot with anger as her own.

“I remember which of the two of us squealed the loudest when we were switched as novices. You had lived a soft life in Cairhien, Moiraine. Not like working a fishing boat.” Abruptly Siuan slapped the table with a loud crack. “No, I am not suggesting giving up, but neither do I propose to watch everything slide out of our hands *while I can do nothing!* Most of my troubles with the Hall stem from you. Even the Greens wonder why I haven’t called you to the Tower and taught you a little discipline. Half the sisters with me think you should be handed over to the Reds, and if that happens, you will wish you were a novice again, with nothing worse to look forward to than a switching. Light! If any of them remember we were friends as novices, I’d be there beside you.

“We had a plan! A plan, Moiraine! Locate the boy and bring him to Tar Valon, where we could hide him, keep him safe and guide him. Since you left the Tower, I have had only two messages from you. Two! I feel as if I’m trying to sail the Fingers of the Dragon in the dark. One message to say you were entering the Two Rivers, going to this village, this Emond’s Field. Soon, I thought. He’s found, and she’ll have him in hand soon. Then word from Caemlyn to say you were coming to Shienar, to Fal Dara, not Tar Valon. Fal Dara, with the Blight almost close enough to touch. Fal Dara, where Trollocs raid and Myrddraal ride as near every day as makes no difference. Nearly twenty years of planning and searching, and you toss all our plans practically in the Dark One’s face. Are you mad?”

Now that she had stirred life in the other woman, Moiraine returned to outward calm, herself. Calm, but firm insistence, too. “The Pattern pays no heed to human plans, Siuan. With all our scheming, we forgot what we were dealing with. *Ta’veren.* Elaida is wrong. Artur Paendrag Tanreall was never this strongly *ta’veren.* The Wheel will weave the Pattern around this young man as *it* wills, whatever our plans.”

The anger left Amyrlin’s face, replaced by white-faced shock. “It sounds as if *you* are saying we might as well give up. Do *you* now suggest standing aside and watching the world burn?”

“No, Siuan. Never standing aside.” *Yet the world will burn, Siuan, one way or another, whatever we do. You could never see that.* “But we must now realize that our plans are precarious things. We have even less control than we thought. Perhaps only a fingernail’s grip. The winds of destiny are blowing, Siuan, and we must ride them where they take us.”

The Amyrlin shivered as if she felt those winds icy on the back of her neck. Her hands went to the flattened cube of gold, blunt, capable fingers finding precise points in the complex designs. Cunningly balanced, the top lifted back to reveal a curled, golden horn nestled within a space designed to hold it. She lifted the instrument and traced the flowing silver script, in the Old Tongue, inlaid around the flaring mouth.

“ ‘The grave is no bar to my call,’ ” she translated, so softly she seemed to be speaking to herself. “The Horn of Valere, made to call dead heroes back from the grave. And prophecy said it would only be found just in time for the Last Battle.” Abruptly she thrust the Horn back into its niche and closed the lid as if she could no longer bear the sight of it. “Agelmar pushed it into my hands as soon as the Welcome was done. He said he was afraid to go into his own strongroom any longer, with it there. The temptation was too great, he said. To sound the Horn himself and lead the host that answered its call north through the Blight to level Shayol Ghul itself and put an end to the Dark One. He burned with the ecstasy of glory, and it was that, he said, that told him it was not to be him, must not be him. He could not wait to be rid of it, yet he wanted it still.”

Moiraine nodded. Agelmar was familiar with the Prophecy of the Horn; most who fought the Dark One were. “ ‘Let whosoever sounds me think not of glory, but only of salvation.’ ”

“Salvation.” The Amyrlin laughed bitterly. “From the look in Agelmar’s eyes, he didn’t know whether he was giving away salvation or rejecting the condemnation of his own soul. He only knew he had to be rid of it before it burned him up. He has tried to keep it secret, but he says there are rumors in the keep already. I do not feel his temptation, yet the Horn still makes my skin crawl. He will have to take it back into his strongroom until I leave. I could not sleep with it even in the next room.” She rubbed frown lines from her forehead and sighed. “And it was not to be found until just before the Last Battle. Can it be that close? I thought, hoped, we would have more time.”

“The Karaethon Cycle.”

“Yes, Moiraine. You do not have to remind me. I’ve lived with the Prophecies of the Dragon as long as you.” The Amyrlin shook her head. “Never more than one false Dragon in a generation since the Breaking, and now three loose in the world at one time, and three more in the past two years. The Pattern demands a Dragon because the Pattern weaves toward Tarmon Gai’don. Sometimes doubt fills me, Moiraine.” She said it musingly, as if wondering at it, and went on in the same tone. “What if Logain was the one? He could channel, before the Reds brought him to the White Tower, and we gentled him. So can Mazrim Taim, the man in Saldaea. What if it is him? There are sisters in Saldaea already; he may be taken by now. What if we have been wrong since the start? What happens if the Dragon Reborn is gentled before the Last Battle even begins? Even prophecy can fail if the one prophesied is slain or gentled. And then we face the Dark One naked to the storm."

"Neither of them is the one, Siuan. The Pattern does not demand *a* Dragon, but the one true Dragon. Until he proclaims himself, the Pattern will continue to throw up false Dragons, but after that there will be no others. If Logain or the other were the one, there would be no others."

" 'For he shall come like the breaking dawn, and shatter the world again with his coming, and make it anew.' Either we go naked in the storm, or cling to a protection that will scourge us. The Light help us all." The Amyrlin shook herself as if to throw off her own words. Her face was set, as though bracing for a blow. "You could never hide what you were thinking from me as you do from everyone else, Moiraine. You have more to tell me, and nothing good."

For answer Moiraine took the leather pouch from her belt and upended it, spilling the contents on the table. It appeared to be only a heap of fragmented pottery, shiny black and white.

The Amyrlin Seat touched one bit curiously, and her breath caught. *"Cuendillar."*

"Heartstone," Moiraine agreed. The making of *cuendillar* had been lost at the Breaking of the World, but what had been made of heartstone had survived the cataclysm. Even those objects swallowed by the earth or sunk in the sea had survived; they must have. No known force could break *cuendillar* once it was complete; even the One Power directed against heartstone only made it stronger. Except that some power *had* broken this.

The Amyrlin hastily assembled the pieces. What they formed was a disk the size of a man's hand, half blacker than pitch and half whiter than snow, the colors meeting along a sinuous line, unfaded by age. The ancient symbol of Aes Sedai, before the world was broken, when men and women wielded the Power together. Half of it was now called the Flame of Tar Valon; the other half was scrawled on doors, the Dragon's Fang, to accuse those within of evil. Only seven like it had been made; everything ever made of heartstone was recorded in the White Tower, and those seven were remembered above all. Siuan Sanche stared at it as she would have at a viper on her pillow.

"One of the seals on the Dark One's prison," she said finally, reluctantly. It was those seven seals over which the Amyrlin Seat was supposed to be Watcher. The secret hidden from the world, if the world ever thought of it, was that no Amyrlin Seat had known where any of the seals were since the Trolloc Wars.

“We know the Dark One is stirring, Siuan. We know his prison cannot stay sealed forever. Human work can never match the Creator’s. We knew he has touched the world again, even if, thank the Light, only indirectly. Darkfriends multiply, and what we called evil but ten years ago seems almost caprice compared with what now is done every day.”

“If the seals are already breaking. . . . We may have no time at all.”

“Little enough. But that little may be enough. It will have to be.”

The Amyrlin touched the fractured seal, and her voice grew tight, as if she were forcing herself to speak. “I saw the boy, you know, in the courtyard during the Welcome. It is one of my Talents, seeing *ta’veren*. A rare Talent these days, even more rare than *ta’veren*, and certainly not of much use. A tall boy, a fairly handsome young man. Not much different from any young man you might see in any town.” She paused to draw breath. “Moiraine, he blazed like the sun. I’ve seldom been afraid in my life, but the sight of him made me afraid right down to my toes. I wanted to cower, to howl. I could barely speak. Agelmar thought I was angry with him, I said so little. That young man . . . he’s the one we have sought these twenty years.”

There was a hint of question in her voice. Moiraine answered it. “He is.”

“Are you certain? Can he . . . ? Can he . . . channel the One Power?”

Her mouth strained around the words, and Moiraine felt the tension, too, a twisting inside, a cold clutching at her heart. She kept her face smooth, though. “He can.” A man wielding the One Power. That was a thing no Aes Sedai could contemplate without fear. It was a thing the whole world feared. *And I will loose it on the world.* “Rand al’Thor will stand before the world as the Dragon Reborn.”

The Amyrlin shuddered. “Rand al’Thor. It does not sound like a name to inspire fear and set the world on fire.” She gave another shiver and rubbed her arms briskly, but her eyes suddenly shone with a purposeful light. “If he is the one, then we truly may have time enough. But is he safe here? I have two Red sisters with me, and I can no longer answer for Green or Yellow, either. The Light consume me, I can’t answer for any of them, not with this. Even Verin and Serafelle would leap on him the way they would a scarlet adder in a nursery."

"He is safe, for the moment."

The Amyrlin waited for her to say more. The silence stretched, until it was plain she would not. Finally the Amyrlin said, "You say our old plan is useless. What do you suggest now?"

"I have purposely let him think I no longer have any interest in him, that he may go where he pleases for all of me." She raised her hands as the Amyrlin opened her mouth. "It was necessary, Siuan. Rand al'Thor was raised in the Two Rivers, where Manetheren's stubborn blood flows in every vein, and his own blood is like rock beside clay compared to Manetheren's. He must be handled gently, or he will bolt in any direction but the one we want."

"Then we'll handle him like a newborn babe. We'll wrap him in swaddling clothes and play with his toes, if that's what you think we need. But to what immediate purpose?"

"His two friends, Matrim Cauthon and Perrin Aybara, are ripe to see the world before they sink back into the obscurity of the Two Rivers. If they can sink back; they are *ta'veren*, too, if lesser than he. I will induce them to carry the Horn of Valere to Illian." She hesitated, frowning. "There is . . . a problem with Mat. He carries a dagger from Shadar Logoth."

"Shadar Logoth! Light, why did you ever let them get near that place. Every stone of it is tainted. There isn't a pebble safe to carry away. Light help us, if Mordeth touched the boy. . . ." The Amyrlin sounded as though she were strangling. "If that happened, the world would be doomed."

"But it did not, Siuan. We do what we must from necessity, and it was necessary. I have done enough so that Mat will not infect others, but he had the dagger too long before I knew. The link is still there. I had thought I must take him to Tar Valon to cure it, but with so many sisters present, it might be done here. So long as there are a few you can trust not to see Darkfriends where there are none. You and I and two others will suffice, using my *angreal*."

"Leane will do for one, and I can find another." Suddenly the Amyrlin Seat gave a wry grin. "The Hall wants that *angreal* back, Moiraine. There are not very many of them left, and you are now considered . . . unreliable."

Moiraine smiled, but it did not touch her eyes. "They will think worse of me before I am done. Mat will leap at the chance to be so big a part of the legend of the Horn, and Perrin should not be hard to convince. He needs something to take his mind off his own troubles. Rand knows what he is—some of it, at least; a little—and he is afraid of it, naturally. He wants to go off somewhere alone, where he cannot hurt anyone. He says he will never wield the Power again, but he fears not being able to stop it."

"As well he might. Easier to give up drinking water."

"Exactly. And he wants to be free from Aes Sedai." Moiraine gave a small, mirthless smile. "Offered the chance to leave Aes Sedai behind and still stay with his friends a while longer, he should be as eager as Mat."

"But how is he leaving Aes Sedai behind? Surely you must travel with him. We can't lose him now, Moiraine."

"I cannot travel with him." *It is a long way from Fal Dara to Illian, but he has traveled almost as far already.* "He must be let off the leash for a time. There is no help for it. I have had all of their old clothes burned. There has been too much opportunity for some shred of what they were wearing to have fallen into the wrong hands. I will cleanse them before they leave; they will not even realize it has been done. There will be no chance they can be tracked that way, and the only other threat of that kind is locked away here in the dungeon." The Amyrlin, midway in nodding approval, gave her a questioning look, but she did not pause. "They will travel as safely as I can manage, Siuan. And when Rand needs me in Illian, I will be there, and I will see that it is he who presents the Horn to the Council of Nine and the Assemblage. I will see to everything in Illian. Siuan, the Illianers would follow the Dragon, or Ba'alzamon himself, if he came bearing the Horn of Valere, and so will the greater part of those gathered for the Hunt. The true Dragon Reborn will not need to gather a following before nations move against him. He will begin with a nation around him and an army at his back."

The Amyrlin dropped back into her chair, but immediately leaned forward. She seemed caught between weariness and hope. "But *will* he proclaim himself? If he's afraid. . . . The Light knows he should be, Moiraine, but men who name themselves as the Dragon *want* the power. If he does not. . . ."

"I have the means to see him named Dragon whether he wills it or not. And even if I somehow fail, the Pattern itself will see him named Dragon whether he wills it or not. Remember, he is *ta'veren*, Siuan. He has no more control over his fate than a candle wick has over the flame."

The Amyrlin sighed. “It’s risky, Moiraine. Risky. But my father used to say, ‘Girl, if you won’t take a chance, you’ll never win a copper.’ We have plans to make. Sit down; this won’t be done quickly. I will send for wine and cheese.”

Moiraine shook her head. “We have been closeted alone too long already. If any did try listening and found your Warding, they will be wondering already. It is not worth the risk. We can contrive another meeting tomorrow.” *Besides, my dearest friend, I cannot tell you everything, and I cannot risk letting you know I am holding anything back.*

“I suppose you are right. But first thing in the morning. There’s so much I have to know.”

“The morning,” Moiraine agreed. The Amyrlin rose, and they hugged again. “In the morning I will tell you everything you need to know.”

Leane gave Moiraine a sharp look when she came out into the anteroom, then darted into the Amyrlin’s chamber. Moiraine tried to put on a chastened face, as if she had endured one of the Amyrlin’s infamous upbraidings—most women, however strong-willed, returned from those big-eyed and weak-kneed—but the expression was foreign to her. She looked more angry than anything else, which served much the same purpose. She was only vaguely aware of the other women in the outer room; she thought some had gone and others come since she went in, but she barely looked at them. The hour was growing late, and there was much to be done before the morning came. Much, before she spoke to the Amyrlin Seat again.

Quickening her step, she moved deeper into the keep.

The column would have made an impressive sight under the waxing moon, moving through the Tarabon night to the jangle of harness, had there been anyone to see it. A full two thousand Children of the Light, well mounted, in white tabards and cloaks, armor burnished, with their train of supply wagons, and farriers, and grooms with the strings of remounts. There were villages in this sparsely forested country, but they had left roads behind, and stayed clear of even farmers’ crofts. They were to meet . . . someone . . . at a flyspeck village near the northern border of Tarabon, at the edge of Almoth Plain.

Geofram Bornhald, riding at the head of his men, wondered what it was all about. He remembered too well his interview with Pedron Niall, Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light, in Amador, but he had learned little there.

"We are alone, Geofram," the white-haired man had said. His voice was thin and reedy with age. "I remember giving you the oath . . . what . . . thirty-six years ago, it must be, now."

Bornhald straightened. "My Lord Captain Commander, may I ask why I was called back from Caemlyn, and with such urgency? A push, and Morgase could be toppled. There are Houses in Andor that see dealing with Tar Valon as we do, and they were ready to lay claim to the throne. I left Eamon Valda in charge, but he seemed intent on following the Daughter-Heir to Tar Valon. I would not be surprised to learn the man has kidnapped the girl, or even attacked Tar Valon." And Dain, Bornhald's son, had arrived just before Bornhald was recalled. Dain was full of zeal. Too much zeal, sometimes. Enough to fall in blindly with whatever Valda proposed.

"Valda walks in the Light, Geofram. But you are the best battle commander among the Children. You will assemble a full legion, the best men you can find, and take them into Tarabon, avoiding any eyes attached to a tongue that may speak. Any such tongue must be silenced, if the eyes see."

Bornhald hesitated. Fifty Children together, or even a hundred, could enter any land without question, at least without open question, but an entire legion. . . . "Is it war, my Lord Captain Commander? There is talk in the streets. Wild rumors, mainly, about Artur Hawkwing's armies come back." The old man did not speak. "The King. . . ."

"Does not command the Children, Lord Captain Bornhald." For the first time there was a snap in the Lord Captain Commander's voice. "I do. Let the King sit in his palace and do what he does best. Nothing. You will be met at a village called Alcruna, and there you will receive your final orders. I expect your legion to ride in three days. Now go, Geofram. You have work to do."

Bornhald frowned. "Pardon, my Lord Captain Commander, but who will meet me? Why am I risking war with Tarabon?"

"You will be told what you must know when you reach Alcruna." The Lord Captain Commander suddenly looked more than his age. Absently he plucked at his white tunic, with the golden sunburst of the Children large on the chest. "There are forces at work beyond what you know, Geofram.

Beyond what even you can *know. Choose your men quickly. Now go. Ask me no more. And the Light ride with you.”*

Now Bornhald straightened in his saddle, working a knot out of his back. *I am getting old,* he thought. A day and a night in the saddle, with two pauses to water the horses, and he felt every gray hair on his head. He would not even have noticed a few years ago. *At least I have not killed any innocents.* He could be as hard on Darkfriends as any man sworn to the Light—Darkfriends must be destroyed before they pulled the whole world under the Shadow—but he wanted to be sure they *were* Darkfriends first. It had been difficult avoiding Taraboner eyes with so many men, even in the backcountry, but he had managed it. No tongues had needed to be silenced.

The scouts he had sent out came riding back, and behind them came more men in white cloaks, some carrying torches to ruin the night vision of everyone at the head of the column. With a muttered curse, Bornhald ordered a halt while he studied those who came to meet him.

Their cloaks bore the same golden sunburst on the breast as his, the same as every Child of the Light, and their leader even had golden knots of rank below it equivalent to Bornhald’s. But behind their sunbursts were red shepherd’s crooks. Questioners. With hot irons and pinchers and dripping water the Questioners pulled confession and repentance from Darkfriends, but there were those who said they decided guilt before ever they began. Geofram Bornhald was one who said it.

I have been sent here to meet Questioners?

“We have been waiting for you, Lord Captain Bornhald,” the leader said in a harsh voice. He was a tall, hook-nosed man with the gleam of certainty in his eyes that every Questioner had. “You could have made better time. I am Einor Saren, second to Jaichim Carridin, who commands the Hand of the Light in Tarabon.” The Hand of the Light—the Hand that dug out truth, so they said. They did not like the name Questioners. “There is a bridge at the village. Have your men move across. We will talk in the inn. It is surprisingly comfortable.”

“I was told by the Lord Captain Commander himself to avoid all eyes.”

“The village has been . . . pacified. Now move your men. *I* command, now. I have orders with the Lord Captain Commander’s seal, if you doubt.”

Bornhald suppressed the growl that rose in his throat. Pacified. He wondered if the bodies had been piled outside the village, or if they had been thrown into the river. It would be like the Questioners, cold enough to kill an entire village for secrecy and stupid enough to throw the bodies into the river to float downstream and trumpet their deed from Alcruna to Tanchico. “What I doubt is why I am in Tarabon with two thousand men, Questioner.”

Saren’s face tightened, but his voice remained harsh and demanding. “It is simple, Lord Captain. There are towns and villages across Almoth Plain with none in authority above a mayor or a Town Council. It is past time they were brought to the Light. There will be many Darkfriends in such places.”

Bornhald’s horse stamped. “Are you saying, Saren, that I’ve brought an entire legion across most of Tarabon in secrecy to root a few Darkfriends out of some grubby villages?”

“You are here to do as you are told, Bornhald. To do the work of the Light! Or are you sliding from the Light?” Saren’s smile was a grimace. “If battle is what you seek, you may have your chance. The strangers have a great force on Toman Head, more than Tarabon and Arad Doman together may be able to hold, even if they can stop their own bickering long enough to work together. If the strangers break through, you will have all the fighting you can handle. The Taraboners claim the strangers are monsters, creatures of the Dark One. Some say they have Aes Sedai to fight for them. If they *are* Darkfriends, these strangers, they will have to be dealt with, too. In their turn.”

For a moment, Bornhald stopped breathing. “Then the rumors are true. Artur Hawkwing’s armies have returned.”

“Strangers,” Saren said flatly. He sounded as if he regretted having mentioned them. “Strangers, and probably Darkfriends, from wherever they came. That is all we know, and all you need to know. They do not concern you now. We are wasting time. Move your men across the river, Bornhald. I will give you your orders in the village.” He whirled his horse and galloped back the way he had come, his torchbearers riding at his heels.

Bornhald closed his eyes to hasten the return of his night sight. *We are being used like stones on a board.* “Byar!” He opened his eyes as his second appeared at his side, stiffening in his saddle before the Lord Captain. The gaunt-faced man had almost the Questioner’s light in his eyes, but he was a good soldier despite. “There is a bridge ahead. Move the legion across the river and make camp. I will join you as soon as I can.”

He gathered his reins and rode in the direction the Questioner had taken. *Stones on a board. But who is moving us? And why?*

Afternoon shadows gave way to evening as Liandrin made her way through the women's apartments. Beyond the arrowslits, darkness grew and pressed on the light from the lamps in the corridor. Twilight was a troubled time for Liandrin of late, that and dawn. At dawn the day was born, just as twilight gave birth to night, but at dawn, night died, and at twilight, day. The Dark One's power was rooted in death; he gained power from death, and at those times she thought she could feel his power stirring. Something stirred in the half dark, at least. Something she almost thought she could catch if she turned quickly enough, something she was sure she could see if she looked hard enough.

Serving women in black-and-gold curtsied as she passed, but she did not respond. She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead, and did not see them.

At the door she sought, she paused for a quick glance up and down the hall. The only women in sight were servants; there were no men, of course. She pushed open the door and went in without knocking.

The outer room of the Lady Amalisa's chambers was brightly lit, and a blazing fire on the hearth held back the chill of the Shienaran night. Amalisa and her ladies sat about the room, in chairs and on the layered carpets, listening while one of their number, standing, read aloud to them. It was *The Dance of the Hawk and the Hummingbird*, by Teven Aerwin, which purported to set forth the proper conduct of men toward women and women toward men. Liandrin's mouth tightened; she certainly had not read it, but she had heard as much as she needed about it. Amalisa and her ladies greeted each pronouncement with gales of laughter, falling against each other and drumming their heels on the carpets like girls.

The reader was the first to become aware of Liandrin's presence. She cut off with a surprised widening of her eyes. The others turned to see what she was staring at, and silence replaced laughter. All but Amalisa scrambled to their feet, hastily smoothing hair and skirts.

The Lady Amalisa rose gracefully, with a smile. "You honor us with your presence, Liandrin. This is a most pleasant surprise. I did not expect you until tomorrow. I thought you would want to rest after your long jour —"

Liandrin cut her off sharply, addressing the air. “I will speak to the Lady Amalisa alone. All of you will leave. Now.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, then the other women made their goodbyes to Amalisa. One by one they curtsied to Liandrin, but she did not acknowledge them. She continued to stare straight ahead at nothing, but she saw them, and heard. Honorifics offered with breathy unease at the Aes Sedai’s mood. Eyes falling when she ignored them. They squeezed past her to the door, pressing back awkwardly so their skirts did not disturb hers.

As the door closed behind the last of them, Amalisa said, “Liandrin, I do not underst—”

“Do you walk in the Light, my daughter?” There would be none of that foolishness of calling her sister here. The other woman was older by some years, but the ancient forms would be observed. However long they had been forgotten, it was time they were remembered.

As soon as the question was out of her mouth, though, Liandrin realized she had made a mistake. It was a question guaranteed to cause doubt and anxiety, coming from an Aes Sedai, but Amalisa’s back stiffened, and her face hardened.

“That is an insult, Liandrin Sedai. I am Shienaran, of a noble House and the blood of soldiers. My line has fought the Shadow since before there *was* a Shienar, three thousand years without fail or a day’s weakness.”

Liandrin shifted her point of attack, but she did not retreat. Striding across the room, she took the leather-bound copy of *The Dance of the Hawk and the Hummingbird* from the mantelpiece and hefted it without looking at it. “In Shienar above other lands, my daughter, the Light must be precious, and the Shadow feared.” Casually she threw the book into the fire. Flames leaped as if it were a log of fatwood, thundering as they licked up the chimney. In the same instant every lamp in the room flared, hissing, so fiercely did they burn, flooding the chamber with light. “Here above all. Here, so close to the cursed Blight, where corruption waits. Here, even one who thinks he walks in the Light may still be corrupted by the Shadow.”

Beads of sweat glistened on Amalisa’s forehead. The hand she had raised in protest for her book fell slowly to her side. Her features still held firm, but Liandrin saw her swallow, and her feet shift. “I do not understand, Liandrin Sedai. Is it the book? It is only foolishness.”

There was a faint quaver in her voice. *Good.* Glass lamp mantles cracked as the flames leaped higher and hotter, lighting the room as bright as unsheltered noon. Amalisa stood as stiff as a post, her face tight as she tried not to squint.

“It is you who are foolish, my daughter. I care nothing for books. Here, men enter the Blight, and walk in its taint. In the very Shadow. Why wonder you that that taint may seep into them? Whether or not against their will, still it may seep. Why think you the Amyrlin Seat herself has come?”

“No.” It was a gasp.

“Of the Red am I, my daughter,” Liandrin said relentlessly. “I hunt all men corrupted.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Not only those foul ones who try the One Power. All men corrupted. High and low do I hunt.”

“I don’t. . . .” Amalisa licked her lips unsteadily and made a visible effort to gather herself. “I do not understand, Liandrin Sedai. Please. . . .”

“High even before low.”

“No!” As if some invisible support had vanished, Amalisa fell to her knees, and her head dropped. “Please, Liandrin Sedai, say you do not mean Agelmar. It cannot be him.”

In that moment of doubt and confusion, Liandrin struck. She did not move, but lashed out with the One Power. Amalisa gasped and gave a jerk, as if she had been pricked with a needle, and Liandrin’s petulant mouth perked in a smile.

This was her own special trick from childhood, the first learned of her abilities. It had been forbidden to her as soon as the Mistress of Novices discovered it, but to Liandrin that only meant one more thing she needed to conceal from those who were jealous of her.

She strode forward and pulled Amalisa’s chin up. The metal that had stiffened her was still there, but it was baser metal now, malleable to the right pressures. Tears trickled from the corners of Amalisa’s eyes, glistening on her cheeks. Liandrin let the fires die back to normal; there was no longer any need for such. She softened her words, but her voice was as unyielding as steel.

“Daughter, no one wants to see you and Agelmar thrown to the people as Darkfriends. I will help you, but you must help.”

“H-help you?” Amalisa put her hands to her temples; she looked confused. “Please, Liandrin Sedai, I don’t . . . understand. It is all so. . . . It’s all. . . .”

It was not a perfect ability; Liandrin could not force anyone to do what she wanted—though she had tried; oh, how she had tried. But she could open them wide to her arguments, make them want to believe her, want more than anything to be convinced of her rightness.

"Obey, daughter. Obey, and answer my questions truthfully, and I promise that no one will speak of you and Agelmar as Darkfriends. You will not be dragged naked through the streets, to be flogged from the city if the people do not tear you to pieces first. I will not let this happen. You understand?"

"Yes, Liandrin Sedai, yes. I will do as you say and answer you truly."

Liandrin straightened, looking down at the other woman. The Lady Amalisa stayed as she was, kneeling, her face as open as a child's, a child waiting to be comforted and helped by someone wiser and stronger. There was a rightness about it to Liandrin. She had never understood why a simple bow or curtsy was sufficient for Aes Sedai when men and women knelt to kings and queens. *What queen has within her my power?* Her mouth twisted angrily, and Amalisa shivered.

"Be easy in yourself, my daughter. I have come to help you, not to punish. Only those who deserve it will be punished. Truth only, speak to me."

"I will, Liandrin Sedai. I will, I swear it by my House and honor."

"Moiraine came to Fal Dara with a Darkfriend."

Amalisa was too frightened to show surprise. "Oh, no, Liandrin Sedai. No. That man came later. He is in the dungeons now."

"Later, you say. But it is true that she speaks often with him? She is often in company with this Darkfriend? Alone?"

"S-sometimes, Liandrin Sedai. Only sometimes. She wishes to find out why he came here. Moiraine Sedai is—" Liandrin held up her hand sharply, and Amalisa swallowed whatever else she had been going to say.

"By three young men Moiraine was accompanied. This I *know*. Where are they? I have been to their rooms, and they are not to be found."

"I—I do not know, Liandrin Sedai. They seem nice boys. Surely you don't think they are Darkfriends."

"Not Darkfriends, no. Worse. By far more dangerous than Darkfriends, my daughter. The entire world is in danger from them. They must be found. You will command your servants to search the keep, and your ladies, and yourself. Every crack and cranny. To this, you will see personally.

Personally! And to no one will you speak of it, save those I name. None else may know. None. From Fal Dara in secrecy these young men must be removed, and to Tar Valon taken. In utter secrecy.”

“As you command, Liandrin Sedai. But I do not understand the need for secrecy. No one here will hinder Aes Sedai.”

“Of the Black Ajah you have heard?”

Amalisa’s eyes bulged, and she leaned back away from Liandrin, raising her hands as though to shield herself from a blow. “A v-vile rumor, Liandrin Sedai. V-vile. There are n-no Aes Sedai who s-serve the Dark One. I do not believe it. You must believe me! Under the Light, I s-swear I do not believe it. By my honor and my House, I swear. . . .”

Coolly Liandrin let her go on, watching the last remaining strength leach out of the other woman with her own silence. Aes Sedai had been known to become angry, very angry, with those who even mentioned the Black Ajah much less those who said they believed in its hidden existence. After this, with her will already weakened by that little childhood trick, Amalisa would be as clay in her hands. After one more blow.

“The Black Ajah is *real,* child. Real, and here within Fal Dara’s walls.” Amalisa knelt there, her mouth hanging open. The Black Ajah. Aes Sedai who were also Darkfriends. Almost as horrible to learn the Dark One himself walked Fal Dara keep. But Liandrin would not let up now. “Any Aes Sedai in the halls you pass, a Black sister could be. This I swear. I cannot tell you which they are, but my protection you can have. If in the Light you walk and me obey.”

“I will,” Amalisa whispered hoarsely. “I will. Please, Liandrin Sedai, please say you will protect my brother, and my ladies. . . .”

“Who deserves protection I will protect. Concern yourself with yourself, my daughter. And think only of what I have commanded of you. Only that. The fate of the world rides on this, my daughter. All else you must forget.”

“Yes, Liandrin Sedai. Yes. Yes.”

Liandrin turned and crossed the room, not looking back until she reached the door. Amalisa was still on her knees, still watching her anxiously. “Rise, my Lady Amalisa.” Liandrin made her voice pleasant, with only a hint of the mocking she felt. *Sister, indeed! Not one day as a novice would she last. And power to command* she *has.* “Rise.” Amalisa straightened in slow, stiff jerks, as if she had been bound hand and foot for hours. As she finally came upright, Liandrin said, the steel back in full strength, “And if you fail the world, if you fail me, that wretched Darkfriend in the dungeon will be your envy.”

From the look on Amalisa’s face, Liandrin did not think failure would come from any lack of effort on her part.

Pulling the door shut behind her, Liandrin suddenly felt a prickling across her skin. Breath catching, she whirled about, looking up and down the dimly lit hall. Empty. It was full night beyond the arrowslits. The hall was empty, yet she was sure there had been eyes on her. The vacant corridor, shadowy between the lamps on the walls, mocked her. She shrugged uneasily, then started down the hall determinedly. *Fancies take me. Nothing more.*

Full night already, and there was much to do before dawn. Her orders had been explicit.

Pitch-blackness covered the dungeons whatever the hour, unless someone brought in a lantern, but Padan Fain sat on the edge of his cot, staring into the dark with a smile on his face. He could hear the other two prisoners grumbling in their sleep, muttering in nightmares. Padan Fain was waiting for something, something he had been awaiting for a long time. For too long. But not much longer.

The door to the outer guardroom opened, spilling in a flood of light, darkly outlining a figure in the doorway.

Fain stood. “You! Not who I expected.” He stretched with a casualness he did not feel. Blood raced through his veins; he thought he could leap over the keep if he tried. “Surprises for everyone, eh? Well, come on. The night’s getting old, and I want some sleep sometime.”

As a lamp came into the cell chamber, Fain raised his head, grinning at something, unseen yet felt, beyond the dungeon’s stone ceiling. “It isn’t over yet,” he whispered. “The battle’s never over.”

* * *

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CHAPTER

6

Dark Prophecy

The farmhouse door shook under furious blows from outside; the heavy bar across the door jumped in its brackets. Beyond the window next to the door moved the heavy-muzzled silhouette of a Trolloc. There were windows everywhere, and more shadowy shapes outside. Not shadowy enough, though. Rand could still make them out.

The windows, he thought desperately. He backed away from the door, clutching his sword before him in both hands. *Even if the door holds, they can break in the windows. Why aren’t they trying the windows?*

With a deafening metallic screech, one of the brackets pulled partly away from the doorframe, hanging loose on nails ripped a finger’s width out of the wood. The bar quivered from another blow, and the nails squealed again.

“We have to stop them!” Rand shouted. *Only we can’t. We can’t stop them.* He looked around for a way to run, but there was only the one door. The room was a box. Only one door, and so many windows. “We have to do something. Something!”

“It’s too late,” Mat said. “Don’t you understand?” His grin looked odd on a bloodless pale face, and the hilt of a dagger stood out from his chest, the ruby that capped it blazing as if it held fire. The gem had more life than his face. “It’s too late for us to change anything.”

“I’ve finally gotten rid of them,” Perrin said, laughing. Blood streamed down his face like a flood of tears from his empty sockets. He held out red hands, trying to make Rand look at what he held. “I’m free, now. It’s over.”

“It’s never over, al’Thor,” Padan Fain cried, capering in the middle of the floor. “The battle’s never done.”

The door exploded in splinters, and Rand ducked away from the flying shards of wood. Two red-clad Aes Sedai stepped through, bowing their master in. A mask the color of dried blood covered Ba’alzamon’s face, but

Rand could see the flames of his eyes through the eyeslits; he could hear the roaring fires of Ba'alzamon's mouth.

"It is not yet done between us, al'Thor," Ba'alzamon said, and he and Fain spoke together as one, "For you, the battle is never done."

With a strangled gasp Rand sat up on the floor, clawing his way awake. It seemed he could still hear Fain's voice, as sharp as if the peddler were standing beside him. *It's never over. The battle's never done.*

Bleary-eyed, he looked around to convince himself that he was still hidden away where Egwene had left him, bedded down on a pallet in a corner of her room. The dim light of a single lamp suffused the room, and he was surprised to see Nynaeve, knitting in a rocking chair on the other side of the lone bed, its covers still in place. It was night outside.

Dark-eyed and slender, Nynaeve wore her hair in a fat braid, pulled over one shoulder and hanging almost to her waist. She had not given up on home. Her face was calm, and she seemed aware of nothing except her knitting as she rocked gently. The steady *click-click* of her knitting needles was the only sound. The rug silenced the rocking chair.

There had been nights of late when he had wished for a carpet on the cold stone floor of his room, but in Shienar men's rooms were always bare and stark. The walls here had two tapestries, mountain scenes with waterfalls, and flower-embroidered curtains alongside the arrowslits. Cut flowers, white morningstars, stood in a flat, round vase on the table by the bed, and more nodded in glazed white sconces on the walls. A tall mirror stood in a corner, and another hung over the washstand, with its blue-striped pitcher and bowl. He wondered why Egwene needed two mirrors; there was none in his room, and he did not miss it. There was only one lamp lit, but four more stood around the room, which was nearly as large as the one he shared with Mat and Perrin. Egwene had it alone.

Without looking up, Nynaeve said, "If you sleep in the afternoon, you can't expect to sleep at night."

He frowned, though she could not see it. At least, he thought she could not. She was only a few years older than he, but being Wisdom added fifty years of authority. "I needed a place to hide, and I was tired," he said, then quickly added, "I didn't just come here. Egwene invited me into the women's apartments."

Nynaeve lowered her knitting and gave him an amused smile. She was a pretty woman. That was something he would never have noticed back home; one just did not think of a Wisdom that way. “The Light help me, Rand, you are becoming more Shienaran every day. Invited into the women’s apartments, indeed.” She sniffed. “Any day now, you’ll start talking about your honor, and asking peace to favor your sword.” He colored, and hoped she did not notice in the dim light. She eyed his sword, its hilt sticking out of the long bundle beside him on the floor. He knew she did not approve of the sword, of any sword, but she said nothing about it for once. “Egwene told me why you need a place to hide. Don’t worry. We will keep you hidden from the Amyrlin, or from any other Aes Sedai, if that is what you want.”

She met his eyes and jerked hers away, but not before he saw her uneasiness. Her doubt. *That’s right, I can channel the Power. A man wielding the One Power! You ought to be helping the Aes Sedai hunt me down and gentle me.*

Scowling, he straightened the leather jerkin Egwene had found for him and twisted around so he could lean back against the wall. “As soon as I can, I will hide in a cart, or sneak out. You won’t have to hide me long.” Nynaeve did not say anything; she fixed on her knitting, making an angry sound when she dropped a stitch. “Where is Egwene?”

She let the knitting fall onto her lap. “I don’t know why I am even trying tonight. I can’t keep track of my stitches for some reason. She has gone down to see Padan Fain. She thinks seeing faces he knows might help him.”

“Mine certainly did not. She ought to stay away from him. He’s dangerous.”

“She wants to help him,” Nynaeve said calmly. “Remember, she was training to be my assistant, and being a Wisdom is not all predicting the weather. Healing is part of it, too. Egwene has the desire to heal, the need to. And if Padan Fain is so dangerous, Moiraine would have said something.”

He barked a laugh. “You didn’t ask her. Egwene admitted it, and I can just see you asking permission for anything.” Her raised eyebrow wiped the laugh off his face. He refused to apologize, though. They were a long way from home, and he did not see how she could go on being Wisdom of Emond’s Field if she was going to Tar Valon. “Have they started to search for me, yet? Egwene is not sure they will, but Lan says the Amyrlin Seat is here because of me, and I think I’ll take his opinion over hers.”

For a moment Nynaeve did not answer. Instead she fussed with her skeins of yarn. Finally she said, “I am not sure. One of the serving women came a little while ago. To turn down the bed, she said. As if Egwene would be going to sleep already, with the feast for the Amyrlin tonight. I sent her away; she didn’t see you.”

“Nobody turns your bed down for you in the men’s quarters.” She gave him a level look, one that would have set him stammering a year ago. He shook his head. “They wouldn’t use the maids to look for me, Nynaeve.”

“When I went to the buttery for a cup of milk earlier, there were too many women in the halls. Those who are attending the feast should have been getting dressed, and the others should either have been helping them or getting ready to serve, or to. . . .” She frowned worriedly. “There’s more than enough work for everybody with the Amyrlin here. And they were not just here in the women’s apartments. I saw the Lady Amalisa herself coming out of a storeroom near the buttery with her face all over dust.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why would she be part of a search? Or any of the women, for that matter. They’d be using Lord Agelmar’s soldiers, and the Warders. And the Aes Sedai. They must just be doing something for the feast. Burn me if I know what a Shienaran feast takes.”

“You are a woolhead, sometimes, Rand. The men I saw didn’t know what the women were doing either. I heard some of them complaining about having to do all the work by themselves. I know it makes no sense that they were looking for you. None of the Aes Sedai seemed to be taking any interest. But Amalisa was not readying herself for the feast by dirtying her dress in a storeroom. They were looking for something, something important. Even if she began right after I saw her, she would barely have time to bathe and change. Speaking of which, if Egwene doesn’t come back soon, she’ll have to choose between changing and being late.”

For the first time, he realized that Nynaeve was not wearing the Two Rivers woolens he was used to. Her dress was pale blue silk, embroidered in snowdrop blossoms around the neck and down the sleeves. Each blossom centered on a small pearl, and her belt was tooled in silver, with a silver buckle set with pearls. He had never seen her in anything like that. Even feastday clothes back home might not match it.

“You’re going to the feast?”

“Of course. Even if Moiraine had not said I should, I would never let her think I was. . . .” Her eyes lit up fiercely for a moment, and he knew what she meant. Nynaeve would never let anyone think she was afraid, even if she was. Certainly not Moiraine, and especially not Lan. He hoped she did not know he was aware of her feelings for the Warder.

After a moment her gaze softened as it fell on the sleeve of her dress. “The Lady Amalisa gave me this,” she said so softly he wondered if she was speaking to herself. She stroked the silk with her fingers, outlining the embroidered flowers, smiling, lost in thought.

“It’s very pretty on you, Nynaeve. You’re pretty tonight.” He winced as soon as he said it. Any Wisdom was touchy about her authority, but Nynaeve was touchier than most. The Women’s Circle back home had always looked over her shoulder because she was young, and maybe because she was pretty, and her fights with the Mayor and the Village Council had been the stuff of stories.

She jerked her hand away from the embroidery and glared at him, brows lowering. He spoke quickly to forestall her.

“They can’t keep the gates barred forever. Once they are opened, I will be gone, and the Aes Sedai will never find me. Perrin says there are places in the Black Hills and the Caralain Grass you can go for days without seeing a soul. Maybe—maybe I can figure out what to do about. . . .” He shrugged uncomfortably. There was no need to say it, not to her. “And if I can’t, there’ll be no one to hurt.”

Nynaeve was silent for a moment, then she said slowly, “I am not so sure, Rand. I can’t say you look like more than another village boy to me, but Moiraine insists you are *ta’veren*, and I don’t think she believes the Wheel is finished with you. The Dark One seems—”

“Shai’tan is dead,” he said harshly, and abruptly the room seemed to lurch. He grabbed his head as waves of dizziness sloshed through him.

“You fool! You pure, blind, idiotic fool! Naming the Dark One, bringing his attention down on you! Don’t you have enough trouble?”

“He’s dead,” Rand muttered, rubbing his head. He swallowed. The dizziness was already fading. “All right, all right. Ba’alzamon, if you want. But he’s dead; I saw him die, saw him burn.”

“And I wasn’t watching you when the Dark One’s eye fell on you just now? Don’t tell me you felt nothing, or I’ll box your ears; I saw your face.”

“He’s dead,” Rand insisted. The unseen watcher flashed through his head, and the wind on the tower top. He shivered. “Strange things happen this close to the Blight.”

"You *are* a fool, Rand al'Thor." She shook a fist at him. "I *would* box your ears for you if I thought it would knock any sense—"

The rest of her words were swallowed as bells crashed out ringing all over the keep.

He bounded to his feet. "That's an alarm! They're searching. . . ." *Name the Dark One, and his evil comes down on you.*

Nynaeve stood more slowly, shaking her head uneasily. "No, I don't think so. If they are searching for you, all the bells do is warn you. No, if it's an alarm, it is not for you."

"Then what?" He hurried to the nearest arrowslit and peered out.

Lights darted through the night-cloaked keep like fireflies, lamps and torches dashing here and there. Some went to the outer walls and towers, but most of those that he could see milled through the garden below and the one courtyard he could just glimpse part of. Whatever had caused the alarm was inside the keep. The bells fell silent, unmasking the shouts of men, but he could not make out what they were calling.

If it isn't for me. . . . "Egwene," he said suddenly. *If he's still alive, if there's any evil, it's supposed to come to me.*

Nynaeve turned from looking through another arrowslit. "What?"

"Egwene." He crossed the room in quick strides and snatched his sword and scabbard free of the bundle. *Light, it's supposed to hurt me, not her.* "She's in the dungeon with Fain. What if he's loose somehow?"

She caught him at the door, grabbing his arm. She was not as tall as his shoulder, but she held on like iron. "Don't be a worse goat-brained fool than you've already been, Rand al'Thor. Even if this doesn't have anything to do with you, the women are looking for something! Light, man, this is the women's apartments. There will be Aes Sedai out there in the halls, likely as not. Egwene will be all right. She was going to take Mat and Perrin with her. Even if she met trouble, they would look after her."

"What if she couldn't find them, Nynaeve? Egwene would never let that stop her. She would go alone, the same as you, and you know it. Light, I told her Fain is dangerous! Burn me, I told her!" Pulling free, he jerked open the door and dashed out. *Light burn me, it's supposed to hurt me!*

A woman screamed at the sight of him, in a laborer's coarse shirt and jerkin with a sword in his hand. Even invited, men did not go armed in the women's apartments unless the keep was under attack. Women filled the corridor, serving women in the black-and-gold, ladies of the keep in silks and laces, women in embroidered shawls with long fringes, all talking loudly at the same time, all demanding to know what was happening. Crying children clung to skirts everywhere. He plunged through them, dodging where he could, muttering apologies to those he shouldered aside, trying to ignore their startled stares.

One of the women in a shawl turned to go back into her room, and he saw the back of her shawl, saw the gleaming white teardrop in the middle of her back. Suddenly he recognized faces he had seen in the outer courtyard. Aes Sedai, staring at him in alarm, now.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“Is the keep under attack? Answer me, man!”

“He’s no soldier. Who is he? What’s happening?”

“It’s the young southland lord!”

“Someone stop him!”

Fear pushed his lips back, baring his teeth, but he kept moving, and tried to move faster.

Then a woman came out into the hall, face-to-face with him, and he stopped in spite of himself. He recognized that face above the rest; he thought he would remember it if he lived forever. The Amyrlin Seat. Her eyes widened at the sight of him, and she started back. Another Aes Sedai, the tall woman he had seen with the staff, put herself between him and the Amyrlin, shouting something at him that he could not make out over the increasing babble.

She knows. Light help me, she knows. Moiraine told her. Snarling, he ran on. *Light, just let me make sure Egwene’s safe before they*. . . . He heard shouting behind him, but he did not listen.

There was enough turmoil around him out in the keep. Men running for the courtyards with swords in hand, never looking at him. Over the clamor of alarm bells, he could make out other noises, now. Shouts. Screams. Metal ringing on metal. He had just time to realize they were the sounds of battle—*Fighting? Inside Fal Dara?*—when three Trollocs came dashing around a corner in front of him.

Hairy snouts distorted otherwise human faces, and one of them had ram’s horns. They bared teeth, raising scythe-like swords as they sped toward him.

The hallway that had been full of running men a moment before was empty now except for the three Trollocs and himself. Caught by surprise, he unsheathed his sword awkwardly, tried Hummingbird Kisses the Honeyrose. Shaken at finding Trollocs in the heart of Fal Dara keep, he did the form so badly Lan would have stalked off in disgust. A bear-snouted Trolloc evaded it easily, bumping the other two off stride for just an instant.

Suddenly there were a dozen Shienarans rushing past him at the Trollocs, men half dressed in finery for the feast, but swords at the ready. The bear-snouted Trolloc snarled as it died, and its companions ran, pursued by shouting men waving steel. Shouts and screams filled the air from everywhere.

Egwene!

Rand turned deeper into the keep, running down halls empty of life, though now and again a dead Trolloc lay on the floor. Or a dead man.

Then he came to a crossing of corridors, and to his left was the tail end of a fight. Six top-knotted men lay bleeding and still, and a seventh was dying. The Myrddraal gave its sword an extra twist as it pulled the blade free of the man's belly, and the soldier screamed as he dropped his sword and fell. The Fade moved with viperous grace, the serpent illusion heightened by the armor of black, overlapping plates that covered its chest. It turned, and that pale, eyeless face studied Rand. It started toward him, smiling a bloodless smile, not hurrying. It had no need to hurry for one man alone.

He felt rooted where he stood; his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. The look of the Eyeless is fear. That was what they said along the Border. His hands shook as he raised his sword. He never even thought of assuming the void. *Light, it just killed seven armed soldiers together. Light, what am I going to do. Light!*

Abruptly the Myrddraal stopped, its smile gone.

"This one is mine, Rand." Rand gave a start as Ingtar stepped up beside him, dark and stocky in a yellow feastday coat, sword held in both hands. Ingtar's dark eyes never left the Fade's face; if the Shienaran felt the fear of that gaze, he gave no sign. "Try yourself on a Trolloc or two," he said softly, "before you face one of these."

"I was coming down to see if Egwene is safe. She was going to the dungeon to visit Fain, and—"

"Then go see to her."

Rand swallowed. "We'll take it together, Ingtar."

“You aren’t ready for this. Go see to your girl. Go! You want Trollocs to find her unprotected?”

For a moment Rand hung there, undecided. The Fade had raised its sword, for Ingtar. A silent snarl twisted Ingtar’s mouth, but Rand knew it was not fear. And Egwene could be alone in the dungeon with Fain, or worse. Still he felt ashamed as he ran for the stairs that led underground. He knew a Fade’s look could make any man afraid, but Ingtar had conquered the dread. His stomach still felt knotted.

The corridors beneath the keep were silent, and feebly lit by flickering, far-spaced lamps on the walls. He slowed as he came closer to the dungeons, creeping as silently as he could on his toes. The grate of his boots on the bare stone seemed to fill his ears. The door to the dungeons stood cracked open a handbreadth. It should have been closed and bolted.

Staring at the door, he tried to swallow and could not. He opened his mouth to call out, then shut it again quickly. If Egwene was in there and in trouble, shouting would only warn whoever was endangering her. Or whatever. Taking a deep breath, he set himself.

In one motion he pushed the door wide open with the scabbard in his left hand and threw himself into the dungeon, tucking his shoulder under to roll through the straw covering the floor and come to his feet, spinning this way and that too quickly to get a clear picture of the room, looking desperately for anyone who might attack him, looking for Egwene. There was no one there.

His eyes fell on the table, and he stopped dead, breath and even thought freezing. On either side of the still-burning lamp, as if to make a centerpiece, sat the heads of the guards in two pools of blood. Their eyes stared at him, wide with fear, and their mouths gaped in a last scream no one could hear. Rand gagged and doubled over; his stomach heaved again and again as he vomited into the straw. Finally he managed to pull himself erect, scrubbing his mouth with his sleeve; his throat felt scraped raw.

Slowly he became aware of the rest of the room, only half seen and not taken in during his hasty search for an attacker. Bloody lumps of flesh lay scattered through the straw. There was nothing he could recognize as human except the two heads. Some of the pieces looked chewed. *So that’s what happened to the rest of their bodies.* He was surprised at the calmness of his thoughts, almost as if he had achieved the void without trying. It was the shock, he knew vaguely.

He did not recognize either of the heads; the guards had been changed since he was there earlier. He was glad for that. Knowing who they were, even Changu, would have made it worse. Blood covered the walls, too, but in scrawled letters, single words and whole sentences splashed on every which way. Some were harsh and angular, in a language he did not know, though he recognized Trolloc script. Others he could read, and wished he could not. Blasphemies and obscenities bad enough to make a stablehand or a merchant's guard go pale.

"Egwene." Calmness vanished. Shoving his scabbard through his belt, he snatched the lamp from the table, hardly noticing when the heads toppled over. "Egwene! Where are you?"

He started toward the inner door, took two steps, and stopped, staring. The words on the door, dark and glistening wetly in the light of his lamp, were plain enough.

> WE WILL MEET AGAIN ON TOMAN HEAD.
>
> IT IS NEVER OVER, AL'THOR.

His sword dropped from a hand suddenly numb. Never taking his eyes off the door, he bent to pick it up. Instead he grabbed a handful of straw and began scrubbing furiously at the words on the door. Panting, he scrubbed until it was all one bloody smear, but he could not stop.

"What do you do?"

At the sharp voice behind him, he whirled, stooping to seize his sword.

A woman stood in the outer doorway, back stiff with outrage. Her hair was like pale gold, in a dozen or more braids, but her eyes were dark, and sharp on his face. She looked not much older than he, and pretty in a sulky way, but there was a tightness to her mouth he did not like. Then he saw the shawl she had wrapped tightly around her, with its long, red fringe.

Aes Sedai. And Light help me, she's Red Ajah. "I. . . . I was just. . . . It's filthy stuff. Vile."

"Everything must be left exactly as it is for us to examine. Touch nothing." She took a step forward, peering at him, and he took one back. "Yes. Yes, as I thought. One of those with Moiraine. What do you have to do with this?" Her gesture took in the heads on the table and the bloody scrawl on the walls.

For a minute he goggled at her. “Me? Nothing! I came down here to find. . . . Egwene!”

He turned to open the inner door, and the Aes Sedai shouted, “No! You will answer me!”

Suddenly it was all he could do to stand up, to keep holding the lamp and his sword. Icy cold squeezed at him from all sides. His head felt caught in a frozen vise; he could barely breathe for the pressure on his chest.

“Answer me, boy. Tell me your name.”

Involuntarily he grunted, trying to answer against the chill that seemed to be pressing his face back into his skull, constricting his chest like frozen iron bands. He clenched his jaws to keep the sound in. Painfully he rolled his eyes to glare at her through a blur of tears. *The Light burn you, Aes Sedai! I won’t say a word, the Shadow take you!*

“Answer me, boy! Now!”

Frozen needles pierced his brain with agony, grated into his bones. The void formed inside him before he even realized he had thought of it, but it could not hold out the pain. Dimly he sensed light and warmth somewhere in the distance. It flickered queasily, but the light was warm, and he was cold. Distant beyond knowing, but somehow just within reach. *Light, so cold. I have to reach . . . what? She’s killing me. I have to reach it, or she’ll kill me.* Desperately he stretched toward the light.

“What is going on here?”

Abruptly the cold and the pressure and the needles vanished. His knees sagged, but he forced them stiff. He would not fall to his knees; he would not give her the satisfaction. The void was gone, too, as suddenly as it had come. *She* was *trying to kill me.* Panting, he raised his head. Moiraine stood in the doorway.

“I asked what is going on here, Liandrin,” she said.

“I found this boy here,” the Red Aes Sedai replied calmly. “The guards are murdered, and here he is. One of yours. And what are you doing here, Moiraine? The battle is above, not here.”

“I could ask the same of you, Liandrin.” Moiraine looked around the room with only a slight tightening of her mouth for the charnel. “Why *are* you here?”

Rand turned away from them, awkwardly shoved back the bolts on the inner door and pulled it open. “Egwene came down here,” he announced for anyone who cared, and went in, holding his lamp high. His knees kept wanting to give way; he was not sure how he stayed on his feet, only that he had to find Egwene. "Egwene!"

A hollow gurgle and a thrashing sound came from his right, and he thrust the lamp that way. The prisoner in the fancy coat was sagging against the iron grille of his cell, his belt looped around the bars and then around his neck. As Rand looked, he gave one last kick, scraping across the straw-covered floor, and was still, tongue and eyes bulging out of a face gone almost black. His knees almost touched the floor; he could have stood anytime he wanted to.

Shivering, Rand peered into the next cell. The big man with the sunken knuckles huddled in the back of his cell, eyes as wide as they could open. At the sight of Rand, he screamed and twisted around, clawing frantically at the stone wall.

"I won't hurt you," Rand called. The man kept on screaming and digging. His hands were bloody, and his scrabblings streaked across dark, conjealed smears. This was not his first attempt to dig through the stone with his bare hands.

Rand turned away, relieved that his stomach was already empty. But there was nothing he could do for either of them. "Egwene!"

His light finally reached the end of the cells. The door to Fain's cell stood open, and the cell was empty, but it was the two shapes on the stone in front of the cell that made Rand leap forward and drop to his knees between them.

Egwene and Mat lay sprawled bonelessly, unconscious . . . or dead. With a flood of relief he saw their chests rise and fall. There did not seem to be a mark on either of them.

"Egwene? Mat?" Setting the sword down, he shook Egwene gently. "Egwene?" She did not open her eyes. "Moiraine! Egwene's hurt! And Mat!" Mat's breathing sounded labored, and his face was deathly pale. Rand felt almost like crying. *It was supposed to hurt me. I named the Dark One. Me!*

"Do not move them." Moiraine did not sound upset, or even surprised.

The chamber was suddenly flooded with light as the two Aes Sedai entered. Each balanced a glowing ball of cool light, floating in the air above her hand.

Liandrin marched straight down the middle of the wide hall, holding her skirts up out of the straw with her free hand, but Moiraine paused to look at the two prisoners before following. “There is nothing to do for the one,” she said, “and the other can wait.”

Liandrin reached Rand first and began to bend toward Egwene, but Moiraine darted in ahead of her and laid her free hand on Egwene’s head. Liandrin straightened with a grimace.

“She is not badly hurt,” Moiraine said after a moment. “She was struck here.” She traced an area on the side of Egwene’s head, covered by her hair; Rand could see nothing different about it. “That is the only injury she has taken. She will be all right.”

Rand looked from one Aes Sedai to the other. “What about Mat?” Liandrin arched an eyebrow at him and turned to watch Moiraine with a wry expression.

“Be quiet,” Moiraine said. Fingers still lying on the area where she said Egwene had been hit, she closed her eyes. Egwene murmured and stirred, then lay still.

“Is she . . . ?”

“She is sleeping, Rand. She will be well, but she must sleep.” Moiraine shifted to Mat, but here she only touched him for a moment before drawing back. “This is more serious,” she said softly. She fumbled at Mat’s waist, pulling his coat open, and made an angry sound. “The dagger is gone.”

“What dagger?” Liandrin asked.

Voices suddenly came from the outer room, men exclaiming in disgust and anger.

“In here,” Moiraine called. “Bring two litters. Quickly.” Someone in the outer room raised a cry for litters.

“Fain is gone,” Rand said.

The two Aes Sedai looked at him. He could read nothing on their faces. Their eyes glittered in the light.

“So I see,” Moiraine said in a flat voice.

“I told her not to come. I told her he was dangerous.”

“When I came,” Liandrin said in a cold voice, “he was destroying the writing in the outer chamber.”

He shifted uneasily on his knees. The Aes Sedai’s eyes seemed alike, now. Measuring and weighing him, cool and terrible.

“It—it was filth,” he said. “Just filth.” They still looked at him, not speaking. “You don’t think I. . . . Moiraine, you can’t think I had anything to do with—with what happened out there.” *Light, did I? I named the Dark One.*

She did not answer, and he felt a chill that was not lessened by men rushing in with torches and lamps. Moiraine and Liandrin let their glowing balls wink out. The lamps and torches did not give as much light; shadows sprang up in the depths of the cells. Men with litters hurried to the figures lying on the floor. Ingtar led them. His topknot almost quivered with anger, and he looked eager to find something on which to use his sword.

“So the Darkfriend is gone, too,” he growled. “Well, it’s the least of what has happened this night.”

“The least even here,” Moiraine said sharply. She directed the men putting Egwene and Mat on the litters. “The girl is to be taken to her room. She needs a woman to watch in case she wakes in the night. She may be frightened, but more than anything else she needs sleep, now. The boy. . . .” She touched Mat as two men lifted his litter, and pulled her hand back quickly. “Take him to the Amyrlin Seat’s chambers. Find the Amyrlin wherever she is, and tell her he is there. Tell her his name is Matrim Cauthon. I will join her as soon as I am able.”

“The Amyrlin!” Liandrin exclaimed. “You think to have the Amyrlin as Healer for your—your pet? You are mad, Moiraine.”

“The Amyrlin Seat,” Moiraine said calmly, “does not share your Red Ajah prejudices, Liandrin. She will Heal a man without need of a special use for him. Go ahead,” she told the litter bearers.

Liandrin watched them leave, Moiraine and the men carrying Mat and Egwene, then turned to stare at Rand. He tried to ignore her. He concentrated on scabbarding his sword and brushing off the straw that clung to his shirt and breeches. When he raised his head, though, she was still studying him, her face as blank as ice. Saying nothing, she turned to consider the other men thoughtfully. One held the body of the hanged man up while another worked to unfasten the belt. Ingtar and the others waited respectfully. With a last glance at Rand, she left, head held like a queen.

“A hard woman,” Ingtar muttered, then seemed surprised that he had spoken. “What happened here, Rand al’Thor?”

Rand shook his head. “I don’t know, except that Fain escaped somehow. And hurt Egwene and Mat doing it. I saw the guardroom”—he shuddered—“but in here. . . . Whatever it was, Ingtar, it scared that fellow bad enough that he hung himself. I think the other one's gone mad from seeing it."

"We are all going mad tonight."

"The Fade . . . you killed it?"

"No!" Ingtar slammed his sword into its sheath; the hilt stuck up above his right shoulder. He seemed angry and ashamed at the same time. "It's out of the keep by now, along with the rest of what we could not kill."

"At least you're alive, Ingtar. That Fade killed seven men!"

"Alive? Is that so important?" Suddenly Ingtar's face was no longer angry, but tired and full of pain. "We had it in our hands. In our hands! And we lost it, Rand. Lost it!" He sounded as if he could not believe what he was saying.

"Lost what?" Rand asked.

"The Horn! The Horn of Valere. It's gone, chest and all."

"But it was in the strongroom."

"The strongroom was looted," Ingtar said wearily. "They did not take much, except for the Horn. What they could stuff in their pockets. I wish they had taken everything else and left that. Ronan is dead, and the watchmen he had guarding the strongroom." His voice became quiet. "When I was a boy, Ronan held Jehaan Tower with twenty men against a thousand Trollocs. He did not go down easily, though. The old man had blood on his dagger. No man can ask more than that." He was silent for a moment. "They came in through the Dog Gate, and left the same way. We put an end to fifty or more, but too many escaped. Trollocs! We've never before had Trollocs inside the keep. Never!"

"How could they get in through the Dog Gate, Ingtar? One man could stop a hundred there. And all the gates were barred." He shifted uneasily, remembering why. "The guards would not have opened it to let anybody in."

"Their throats were cut," Ingtar said. "Both good men, and yet they were butchered like pigs. It was done from inside. Someone killed them, then opened the gate. Someone who could get close to them without suspicion. Someone they knew."

Rand looked at the empty cell where Padan Fain had been. "But that means. . . ."

"Yes. There are Darkfriends inside Fal Dara. Or were. We will soon know if that's the case. Kajin is checking now to see if anyone is missing.

Peace! Treachery in Fal Dara keep!” Scowling, he looked around the dungeon, at the men waiting for him. They all had swords, worn over feastday clothes, and some had helmets. “We aren’t doing any good here. Out! Everyone!” Rand joined the withdrawal. Ingtar tapped Rand’s jerkin. “What is this? Have you decided to become a stableman?”

“It’s a long story,” Rand said. “Too long to tell here. Maybe some other time.” *Maybe never, if I’m lucky. Maybe I can escape in all this confusion. No, I can’t. Not until I know Egwene’s all right. And Mat. Light, what will happen to him without the dagger?* “I suppose Lord Agelmar’s doubled the guard on all the gates.”

“Tripled,” Ingtar said in tones of satisfaction. “No one will pass those gates, from inside or out. As soon as Lord Agelmar heard what had happened, he ordered that no one was to be allowed to leave the keep without his personal permission.”

As soon as he heard . . . ? “Ingtar, what about before? What about the earlier order keeping everyone in?”

“Earlier order? What earlier order? Rand, the keep was not closed until Lord Agelmar heard of this. Someone told you wrong.”

Rand shook his head slowly. Neither Ragan nor Tema would have made up something like that. And even if the Amyrlin Seat had given the order, Ingtar would have to know of it. *So who? And how?* He glanced sideways at Ingtar, wondering if the Shienaran was lying. *You really* are *going mad if you suspect Ingtar.*

They were in the dungeon guardroom, now. The severed heads and the pieces of the guards had been removed, though there were still red smears on the table and damp patches in the straw to show where they had been. Two Aes Sedai were there, placid-looking women with brown-fringed shawls, studying the words scrawled on the walls, careless of what their skirts dragged through in the straw. Each had an inkpot in a writing-case hung at her belt and was making notes in a small book with a pen. They never even glanced at the men trooping through.

“Look here, Verin,” one of them said, pointing to a section of stone covered with lines of Trolloc script. “This looks interesting.”

The other hurried over, picking up reddish stains on her skirt. “Yes, I see. A much better hand than the rest. Not a Trolloc. Very interesting.” She began writing in her book, looking up every so often to read the angular letters on the wall.

Rand hurried out. Even if they had not been Aes Sedai, he would not have wanted to remain in the same room with anyone who thought reading Trolloc script written in human blood was “interesting.”

Ingtar and his men stalked on ahead, intent on their duties. Rand dawdled, wondering where he could go now. Getting back into the women’s apartments would not be easy without Egwene to help. *Light, let her be all right. Moiraine* said *she’d be all right.*

Lan found him before he reached the first stairs leading up. “You can go back to your room, if you want, sheepherder. Moiraine had your things fetched from Egwene’s room and taken to yours.”

“How did she know . . . ?”

“Moiraine knows a great many things, sheepherder. You should understand that by now. You had better watch yourself. The women are all talking about you running through the halls, waving a sword. Staring down the Amyrlin, so they say.”

“Light! I am sorry they’re angry, Lan, but I *was* invited in. And when I heard the alarm . . . burn me, Egwene was down here!”

Lan pursed his lips thoughtfully; it was the only expression on his face. “Oh, they’re not angry, exactly. Though most of them think you need a strong hand to settle you down some. Fascinated is more like it. Even the Lady Amalisa can’t stop asking questions about you. Some of them are starting to believe the servants’ tales. They think you’re a prince in disguise, sheepherder. Not a bad thing. There is an old saying here in the Borderlands: ‘Better to have one woman on your side than ten men.’ The way they are talking among themselves, they’re trying to decide whose daughter is strong enough to handle you. If you don’t watch your step, sheepherder, you will find yourself married into a Shienaran House before you realize what has happened.” Suddenly he burst out laughing; it looked odd, like a rock laughing. “Running through the halls of the women’s apartments in the middle of the night, wearing a laborer’s jerkin and waving a sword. If they don’t have you flogged, at the very least they’ll talk about you for years. They have never seen a male as peculiar as you. Whatever wife they chose for you, she’d probably have you the head of your own House in ten years, and have you thinking you had done it yourself, besides. It is too bad you have to leave.”

Rand had been gaping at the Warder, but now he growled, “I have been trying. The gates are guarded, and no one can leave. I tried while it was still daylight. I couldn’t even take Red out of the stable.”

“No matter, now. Moiraine sent me to tell you. You can leave anytime you want to. Even right now. Moiraine had Agelmar exempt you from the order.”

“Why now, and not earlier? Why couldn’t I leave before? Was she the one who had the gates barred then? Ingtar said he knew nothing about any order to keep people in before tonight.”

Rand thought the Warder looked troubled, but all he said was, “When someone gives you a horse, sheepherder, don’t complain that it isn’t as fast as you’d like.”

“What about Egwene? And Mat? Are they really all right? I can’t leave until I know they’re all right.”

“The girl is fine. She’ll wake in the morning, and probably not even remember what happened. Blows to the head are like that.”

“What about Mat?”

“The choice is up to you, sheepherder. You can leave now, or tomorrow, or next week. It’s up to you.” He walked away, leaving Rand standing there in the corridor deep under Fal Dara keep.

* * *

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CHAPTER

7

Blood Calls Blood

As the litter carrying Mat left the Amyrlin Seat's chambers, Moiraine carefully rewrapped the *angreal*—a small, age-darkened ivory carving of a woman in flowing robes—in a square of silk and put it back into her pouch. Working together with other Aes Sedai, merging their abilities, channeling the flow of the One Power to a single task, was tiring work under the best conditions, even with the aid of an *angreal,* and working through the night without sleep was not the best conditions. And the work they had done on the boy had not been easy.

Leane directed the litter bearers out with sharp gestures and a few crisp words. The two men kept ducking their heads, nervous at being around so many Aes Sedai at once, and one of them the Amyrlin herself, never mind that the Aes Sedai had been using the Power. They had waited in the corridor, squatting against the wall while the work was done, and they were anxious to be gone from the women's apartments. Mat lay with his eyes closed and his face pale, but his chest rose and fell in the even rhythm of a deep sleep.

How will this affect matters? Moiraine wondered. *He is not necessary with the Horn gone, and yet. . . .*

The door closed behind Leane and the litter bearers, and the Amyrlin drew an unsteady breath. "A nasty business that. Nasty." Her face was smooth, but she rubbed her hands together as if she wanted to wash them.

"But quite interesting," Verin said. She had been the fourth Aes Sedai the Amyrlin had chosen for the work. "It is too bad we do not have the dagger so the Healing could be complete. For all we did tonight, he will not live long. Months, perhaps, at best." The three Aes Sedai were alone in the Amyrlin's chambers. Beyond the arrowslits dawn pearled the sky.

"But he will have those months, now," Moiraine said sharply. "And if it can be retrieved, the link can still be broken." *If it can be retrieved. Yes, of* *course.*

“It can still be broken,” Verin agreed. She was a plump, square-faced woman, and even with the Aes Sedai gift of agelessness, there was a touch of gray in her brown hair. That was her only sign of age, but for an Aes Sedai it meant she was very old indeed. Her voice held steady, though, matching her smooth cheeks. “He has been linked to the dagger a long time, however, as a thing like that must be reckoned. And he will be linked longer yet, whether it is found or not. He may already be changed beyond the reach of full Healing, even if no longer enough to contaminate others. Such a small thing, that dagger,” she mused, “but it will corrupt whoever carries it long enough. He who carries it will in turn corrupt those who come in contact with him, and they will corrupt still others, and the hatred and suspicion that destroyed Shadar Logoth, every man and woman’s hand turned against every other, will be loose in the world again. I wonder how many people it can taint in, say, a year. It should be possible to calculate a reasonable approximation.”

Moiraine gave the Brown sister a wry look. *Another danger confronts us, and she sounds as if it is a puzzle in a book. Light, the Browns truly are* not *aware of the world at all.* “Then we must find the dagger, Sister. Agelmar is sending men to hunt those who took the Horn and slew his oathmen, the same who took the dagger. If one is found, the other will be.”

Verin nodded, but frowned at the same time. “Yet, even if it is found, who can return it safely? Whoever touches it risks the taint if they handle it long. Perhaps in a chest, well wrapped and padded, but it would still be dangerous to those nearby for any great time. Without the dagger itself to study, we cannot be sure how much it must be shielded. But you saw it and more, Moiraine. You dealt with it, enough for that young man to survive carrying it and to stop him infecting others. You must have a good idea of how strong its influence is.”

“There is one,” Moiraine said, “who can retrieve the dagger without being harmed by it. One whom we have shielded and buffered against that taint as much as anyone can be. Mat Cauthon.”

The Amyrlin nodded. “Yes, of course. He can do it. If he lives long enough. The Light only knows how far it will be carried before Agelmar’s men find it. If they do find it. And if the boy dies first . . . well, if the dagger is loose that long, we have another worry.” She rubbed her eyes tiredly. “I think we must find this Padan Fain, too. Why is this Darkfriend important enough for them to risk what they did to rescue him? Much easier for them just to steal the Horn. Still risky as a winter gale in the Sea of Storms, coming into the very keep like that, but they compounded their risk to free this Darkfriend. If the Lurks think he is that important"—she paused, and Moiraine knew she was wondering if it truly was still only the Myrddraal giving commands—"then so must we."

"He must be found," Moiraine agreed, hoping that none of the urgency she felt showed, "but it is likely he will be found with the Horn."

"As you say, Daughter." The Amyrlin pressed fingers to her lips to stifle a yawn. "And now, Verin, if you will excuse me, I will just say a few words to Moiraine and then sleep a little. I suppose Agelmar will insist on feasting tonight since last night was spoiled. Your help was invaluable, Daughter. Please remember, say nothing of the nature of the boy's hurt to anyone. There are some of your sisters who would see the Shadow in him instead of a thing men made on their own."

There was no need to name the Red Ajah. And perhaps, Moiraine thought, the Reds were no longer the only ones of whom it was necessary to be wary.

"I will say nothing, of course, Mother." Verin bowed, but made no move toward the door. "I thought you might wish to see this, Mother." She pulled a small notebook, bound in soft, brown leather, from her belt. "What was written on the walls in the dungeon. There were few problems with translation. Most was the usual—blasphemy and boasting; Trollocs seem to know little else—but there was one part done in a better hand. An educated Darkfriend, or perhaps a Myrddraal. It could be only taunting, yet it has the form of poetry, or song, and the sound of prophecy. We know little of prophecies from the Shadow, Mother."

The Amyrlin hesitated only a moment before nodding. Prophecies from the Shadow, dark prophecies, had an unfortunate way of being fulfilled as well as prophecies from the Light. "Read it to me."

Verin ruffled through the pages, then cleared her throat and began in a calm, level voice.

"Daughter of the Night, she walks again.
The ancient war, she yet fights.

Her new lover she seeks, who shall serve her and die, yet serve still.

Who shall stand against her coming?

The Shining Walls shall kneel.

Blood feeds blood.

Blood calls blood.

Blood is, and blood was, and blood shall ever be.

The man who channels stands alone.

He gives his friends for sacrifice.

Two roads before him, one to death beyond dying, one to life eternal.

Which will he choose? Which will he choose?

What hand shelters? What hand slays?

Blood feeds blood.

Blood calls blood.

Blood is, and blood was, and blood shall ever be.

Luc came to the Mountains of Dhoom.

Isam waited in the high passes.

The hunt is now begun. The Shadow’s hounds now course, and kill.

One did live, and one did die, but both are.

The Time of Change has come.

Blood feeds blood.

Blood calls blood.

Blood is, and blood was, and blood shall ever be.

The Watchers wait on Toman’s Head.

The seed of the Hammer burns the ancient tree.

Death shall sow, and summer burn, before the Great Lord comes.

Death shall reap, and bodies fail, before the Great Lord comes.

Again the seed slays ancient wrong, before the Great Lord comes.

Now the Great Lord comes.

Now the Great Lord comes.

Blood feeds blood.

Blood calls blood.

Blood is, and blood was, and blood shall ever be.

Now the Great Lord comes.”

There was a long silence when she finished.

Finally the Amyrlin said, “Who else has seen this, Daughter? Who knows of it?”

“Only Serafelle, Mother. As soon as we had copied it down, I had men scrub the walls. They didn’t question; they were eager to be rid of it.”

The Amyrlin nodded. “Good. Too many in the Borderlands can puzzle out Trolloc script. No need to give them something else to worry over. They have enough.”

“What do you make of it?” Moiraine asked Verin in a careful voice. “Is it prophecy, do you think?”

Verin tilted her head, peering at her notes in thought. “Possibly. It has the form of some of the few dark prophecies we know. And parts of it are clear enough. It could still be only a taunt, though.” She rested a finger on one line. “ ‘Daughter of the Night, she walks again.’ That can only mean Lanfear is loose again. Or someone wants us to think she is.”

“That would be something to worry us, Daughter,” the Amyrlin Seat said, “if it were true. But the Forsaken are still bound.” She glanced at Moiraine, looking troubled for an instant before she schooled her features. “Even if the seals *are* weakening, the Forsaken are still bound.”

Lanfear. In the Old Tongue, Daughter of the Night. Nowhere was her real name recorded, but that was the name she had taken for herself, unlike most of the Forsaken, who had been named by those they betrayed. Some said she had really been the most powerful of the Forsaken, next to Ishamael, the Betrayer of Hope, but had kept her powers hidden. Too little was left from that time for any scholar to say for certain.

“With all the false Dragons that are appearing, it is not surprising someone would try to bring Lanfear into it.” Moiraine’s voice was as unruffled as her face, but inside herself she roiled. Only one thing for certain was known of Lanfear beside the name: before she went over to the Shadow, before Lews Therin Telamon met Ilyena, Lanfear had been his lover. *A complication we do* not *need.*

The Amyrlin Seat frowned as if she had had the same thought, but Verin nodded as if it were all just words. “Other names are clear, too, Mother. Lord Luc, of course, was brother to Tigraine, then the Daughter-Heir of Andor, and he vanished in the Blight. Who Isam is, or what he has to do with Luc, I do not know, however.”

“We will find out what we need to know in time,” Moiraine said smoothly. “There is no proof as yet that this is prophecy.” She knew the name. Isam had been the son of Breyan, wife of Lain Mandragoran, whose attempt to seize the throne of Malkier for her husband had brought the Trolloc hordes crashing down. Breyan and her infant son had both vanished when the Trollocs overran Malkier. And Isam had been blood kin to Lan. *Or* is *blood kin? I must keep this from him, until I know how he will react. Until we are away from the Blight. If he thought Isam were alive. . . .*

“ ‘The Watchers wait on Toman Head,’ ” Verin went on. “There are a few who still cling to the old belief that the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean will return one day, though after all this time. . . .” She gave a disdainful sniff. “The Do Miere A’vron, the Watchers Over the Waves, still have a . . . community is the best word, I suppose . . . on Toman Head, at Falme. And one of the old names for Artur Hawkwing was Hammer of the Light.”

“Are you suggesting, Daughter,” the Amyrlin Seat said, “that Artur Hawkwing’s armies, or rather their descendants, might actually return after a thousand years?”

“There are rumors of war on Almoth Plain and Toman Head,” Moiraine said slowly. “And Hawkwing sent two of his sons, as well as armies. If they did survive in whatever lands they found, there could well be many descendants of Hawkwing. Or none.”

The Amyrlin gave Moiraine a guarded look, obviously wishing they were alone so she could demand to know what Moiraine was up to. Moiraine made a soothing gesture, and her old friend grimaced at her.

Verin, with her nose still buried in her notes, noticed none of it. "I don't know, Mother. I doubt it, though. We know nothing at all of those lands Artur Hawkwing set out to conquer. It's too bad the Sea Folk refuse to cross the Aryth Ocean. They say the Islands of the Dead lie on the other side. I wish I knew what they meant by that, but that accursed Sea Folk closemouthedness. . . ." She sighed, still not raising her head. "All we have is one reference to 'lands under the Shadow, beyond the setting sun, beyond the Aryth Ocean, where the Armies of Night reign.' Nothing there to tell us if the armies Hawkwing sent were enough by themselves to defeat these 'Armies of the Night,' or even to survive Hawkwing's death. Once the War of the Hundred Years started, everyone was too intent on carving out their own part of Hawkwing's empire to spare a thought for his armies across the sea. It seems to me, Mother, that if their descendants still lived, and if they ever intended to return, they would not have waited so long."

"Then you believe it is not prophecy, Daughter?"

"Now, 'the ancient tree,' " Verin said, immersed in her own thoughts. "There have always been rumors—no more than that—that while the nation of Almoth still lived, they had a branch of *Avendesora*, perhaps even a living sapling. And the banner of Almoth was 'blue for the sky above, black for the earth below, with the spreading Tree of Life to join them.' Of course, Taraboners call themselves the Tree of Man, and claim to be descended from rulers and nobles in the Age of Legends. And Domani claim descent from those who made the Tree of Life in the Age of Legends. There are other possibilities, but you will note, Mother, that at least three center around Almoth Plain and Toman Head."

The Amyrlin's voice became deceptively gentle. "Will you make up your mind, Daughter? If Artur Hawkwing's seed is *not* returning, then this is not prophecy and it doesn't matter a rotted fish head what ancient tree is meant."

"I can only give you what I know, Mother," Verin said, looking up from her notes, "and leave the decision in your hands. I believe the last of Artur Hawkwing's foreign armies died long ago, but because I believe it does not make it so. The Time of Change, of course, refers to the end of an Age, and the Great Lord—"

The Amyrlin slapped the tabletop like a thunderclap. “I know very well who the Great Lord is, Daughter. I think you had better go now.” She took a deep breath, and took hold of herself visibly. “Go, Verin. I do not want to become angry with you. I do not want to forget who it was had the cooks leave sweetcakes out at night when I was a novice.”

“Mother,” Moiraine said, “there is nothing in this to suggest prophecy. Anyone with a little wit and a little knowledge could put together as much, and no one has ever said Myrddraal do not have a sly wit.”

“And of course,” Verin said calmly, “the man who channels must be one of the three young men traveling with you, Moiraine.”

Moiraine stared in shock. *Not aware of the world? I* am *a fool.* Before she realized what she was doing, she had reached out to the pulsing glow she always felt there waiting, to the True Source. The One Power surged along her veins, charging her with energy, muting the sheen of Power from the Amyrlin Seat as she did the same. Moiraine had never before even thought of wielding the Power against another Aes Sedai. *We live in perilous times, and the world hangs in the balance, and what must be done, must be done. It must. Oh, Verin, why did you have to put your nose in where it does not belong?*

Verin closed her book and slipped it back behind her belt, then looked from one woman to the other. She could not but be aware of the nimbus surrounding each of them, the light that came from touching the True Source. Only someone trained in channeling herself could see the glow, but there was no chance of any Aes Sedai missing it in another woman.

A hint of satisfaction settled on Verin’s face, but no sign that she realized she had hurled a lightning bolt. She only looked as if she had found another piece that fit in a puzzle. “Yes, I thought it must be so. Moiraine could not do this alone, and who better to help than her girlhood friend who used to sneak down with her to snitch sweetcakes.” She blinked. “Forgive me, Mother. I should not have said that.”

“Verin, Verin.” The Amyrlin shook her head wonderingly. “You accuse your sister—and me?—of. . . . I won’t even say it. And you are worried that you’ve spoken too familiarly to the Amyrlin Seat? You bore a hole in the boat and worry that it’s raining. Think what you are suggesting, Daughter.”

It is too late for that, Siuan, Moiraine thought. *If we had not panicked and reached for the Source, perhaps then. . . . But she is sure, now.* “Why are you telling us this, Verin?” she said aloud. “If you believe what you say, you should be telling it to the other sisters, to the Reds in particular.”

Verin’s eyes widened in surprise. “Yes. Yes, I suppose I should. I hadn’t thought of that. But then, if I did, you would be stilled, Moiraine, and you, Mother, and the man gentled. No one has ever recorded the progression in a man who wields the Power. When does the madness come, exactly, and how does it take him? How quickly does it grow? Can he still function with his body rotting around him? For how long? Unless he is gentled, what will happen to the young man, whichever he is, will happen whether or not I am there to put down the answers. If he is watched and guided, we should be able to keep some record with reasonable safety, for a time, at least. And, too, there is *The Karaethon Cycle*.” She calmly returned their startled looks. “I assume, Mother, that he *is* the Dragon Reborn? I cannot believe you would do this—leave walking free a man who can channel—unless he was the Dragon.”

She thinks only of the knowledge, Moiraine thought wonderingly. *The culmination of the direst prophecy the world knows, perhaps the end of the world, and she cares only about the knowledge. But she is still dangerous, for that.*

“Who else knows of this?” The Amyrlin’s voice was faint, but still sharp. “Serafelle, I suppose. Who else, Verin?”

“No one, Mother. Serafelle is not really interested in anything that someone hasn’t already set down in a book, preferably as long ago as possible. She thinks there are enough old books and manuscripts and fragments scattered about, lost or forgotten, to equal ten times what we have gathered in Tar Valon. She feels certain there is enough of the old knowledge still there to be found for—”

“Enough, Sister,” Moiraine said. She loosed her hold on the True Source, and after a moment felt the Amyrlin do the same. It was always a loss to feel the Power draining away, like blood and life pouring from an open wound. A part of her wanted to hold on, but unlike some of her sisters, she made it a point of self-discipline not to grow too fond of the feeling. “Sit down, Verin, and tell us what you know and how you found it out. Leave out nothing.”

As Verin took a chair—with a look to the Amyrlin for permission to sit in her presence—Moiraine watched her sadly.

“It is unlikely,” Verin began, “that anyone who hasn’t studied the old records thoroughly would notice anything except that you were behaving oddly. Forgive me, Mother. It was nearly twenty years ago, with Tar Valon besieged, that I had my first clue, and that was only. . . .

Light help me, Verin, how I loved you for those sweetcakes, and for your bosom to weep on. But I will do what I must do. I will. I must.

Perrin peered around the corner at the retreating back of the Aes Sedai. She smelled of lavender soap, though most would not have scented it even close up. As soon as she turned out of sight, he hurried for the infirmary door. He had already tried to see Mat once, and that Aes Sedai—Leane, he had heard somebody call her—had nearly snapped his head off without even looking around to see who he was. He felt uneasy around Aes Sedai, especially if they started looking at his eyes.

Pausing at the door to listen—he could hear no footsteps down the corridor either way, and nothing on the other side of the door—he went in and closed it softly behind him.

The infirmary was a long room with white walls, and the entrances to archers’ balconies at either end let in lots of light. Mat was in one of the narrow beds that lined the walls. After last night, Perrin had expected most of the beds to have men in them, but in a moment he realized the keep was full of Aes Sedai. The only thing an Aes Sedai could not cure by Healing was death. To him, the room smelled of sickness anyway.

Perrin grimaced when he thought of that. Mat lay still, eyes closed, hands unmoving atop his blankets. He looked exhausted. Not sick really, but as if he had worked three days in the fields and only now laid down to rest. He smelled . . . wrong, though. It was nothing Perrin could put a name to. Just wrong.

Perrin sat down carefully on the bed next to Mat’s. He always did things carefully. He was bigger than most people, and had been bigger than the other boys as long as he could remember. He had had to be careful so he would not hurt someone accidentally, or break things. Now it was second nature to him. He liked to think things through, too, and sometimes talk them over with somebody. *With Rand thinking he’s a lord, I can’t talk to him, and Mat certainly isn’t going to have much to say.*

He had gone into one of the gardens the night before, to think things through. The memory still made him a little ashamed. If he had not gone, he would have been in his room to go with Egwene and Mat, and maybe he could have kept them from being hurt. More likely, he knew, he would be in one of these beds, like Mat, or dead, but that did not change the way he felt. Still, he had gone to the garden, and it was nothing to do with the Trolloc attack that was worrying him now.

Serving women had found him sitting there in the dark, and one of the Lady Amalisa's attendants, the Lady Timora. As soon as they came upon him, Timora sent one of the others running, and he had heard her say, "Find Liandrin Sedai! Quickly!"

They had stood there watching him as if they had thought he might vanish in a puff of smoke like a gleeman. That had been when the first alarm bell rang, and everybody in the keep started running.

"Liandrin," he muttered now. "Red Ajah. About all they do is hunt for men who channel. You don't think she believes I'm one of those, do you?" Mat did not answer, of course. Perrin rubbed his nose ruefully. "Now I'm talking to myself. I don't need that on top of everything else."

Mat's eyelids fluttered. "Who . . . ? Perrin? What happened?" His eyes did not open all the way, and his voice sounded as if he were still mostly asleep.

"Don't you remember, Mat?"

"Remember?" Mat sleepily raised a hand toward his face, then let it fall again with a sigh. His eyes began to drift shut. "Remember Egwene. Asked me . . . go down . . . see Fain." He laughed, and it turned into a yawn. "She didn't ask. Told me. . . . Don't know what happened after. . . ." He smacked his lips, and resumed the deep, even breathing of sleep.

Perrin leaped to his feet as his ears caught the sound of approaching footsteps, but there was nowhere to go. He was still standing there beside Mat's bed when the door opened and Leane came in. She stopped, put her fists on her hips, and looked him slowly up and down. She was nearly as tall as he was.

"Now you," she said, in tones quiet yet brisk, "are almost a pretty enough boy to make me wish I was a Green. Almost. But if you've disturbed my patient . . . well, I dealt with brothers almost as big as you before I went to the Tower, so you needn't think those shoulders will help you any."

Perrin cleared his throat. Half the time he did not understand what women meant when they said things. *Not like Rand. He always knows what* *to say to the girls.* He realized he was scowling and wiped it away. He did not want to think about Rand, but he certainly did not want to upset an Aes Sedai, especially one who was beginning to tap her foot impatiently. “Ah . . . I didn’t disturb him. He’s still sleeping. See?”

“So he is. A good thing for you. Now, what are you doing in here? I remember chasing you out once; you needn’t think I don’t.”

“I only wanted to know how he is.”

She hesitated. “He is sleeping is how he is. And in a few hours, he will get out of that bed, and you’ll think there was never anything wrong with him.”

The pause made his hackles rise. She was lying, somehow. Aes Sedai never lied, but they did not always tell the truth, either. He was not certain what was going on—Liandrin looking for him, Leane lying to him—but he thought it was time he got away from Aes Sedai. There was nothing he could do for Mat.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’d better let him sleep, then. Excuse me.”

He tried to slide around her to the door, but suddenly her hands shot out and grabbed his face, tilting it down so she could peer into his eyes. Something seemed to pass through him, a warm ripple that started at the top of his head and went to his feet, then came back again. He pulled his head out of her hands.

“You’re as healthy as a young wild animal,” she said, pursing her lips. “But if you were born with those eyes, I am a Whitecloak.”

“They’re the only eyes I ever had,” he growled. He felt a little abashed, speaking to an Aes Sedai in that tone, but he was as surprised as she when he took her gently by the arms and lifted her to one side, setting her down again out of his way. As they stared at each other, he wondered if his eyes were as wide with shock as hers. “Excuse me,” he said again, and all but ran.

My eyes. My Light-cursed eyes! The morning sunlight caught his eyes, and they glinted like burnished gold.

* * *

Rand twisted on his bed, trying to find a comfortable position on the thin mattress. Sunlight streamed through the arrowslits, painting the bare stone walls. He had not slept during the remainder of the night, and tired as he was, he was sure he could not sleep now. The leather jerkin lay on the floor between his bed and the wall, but aside from that he was fully dressed, even to his new boots. His sword stood propped beside the bed, and his bow and quiver rested in a corner across the bundled cloaks.

He could not rid himself of the feeling that he should take the chance Moiraine had given him and leave immediately. The urge had been with him all night. Three times he had risen to go. Twice he had gone as far as opening the door. The halls had been empty except for a few servants doing late chores; the way had been clear. But he had to know.

Perrin came in, head down and yawning, and Rand sat up. “How is Egwene? And Mat?”

“She’s asleep, so they tell me. They wouldn’t let me into the women’s apartments to see her. Mat is—” Suddenly Perrin scowled at the floor. “If you’re so interested, why haven’t you gone to see him yourself? I thought you were not interested in us anymore. You said you weren’t.” He pulled open his door of the wardrobe and began rummaging for a clean shirt.

“I did go to the infirmary, Perrin. There was an Aes Sedai there, that tall one who’s always with the Amyrlin Seat. She said Mat was asleep, and I was in the way, and I could come back some other time. She sounded like Master Thane ordering the men at the mill. You know how Master Thane is, all full of snap and do it right the first time, and do it right now.”

Perrin did not answer. He just shucked off his coat and pulled his shirt off over his head.

Rand studied his friend’s back for a moment, then dug up a laugh. “You want to hear something? You know what she said to me? The Aes Sedai in the infirmary, I mean. You saw how tall she is. As tall as most men. A hand taller, and she could almost look me in the eyes. Well, she stared me up and down, and then she muttered, ‘Tall, aren’t you? Where were you when I was sixteen? Or even thirty?’ And then she laughed, as if it was all a joke. What do you think of that?”

Perrin finished tugging on a clean shirt and gave him a sidelong look. With his burly shoulders and thick curls, he made Rand think of a hurt bear. A bear that did not understand why had he been hurt.

“Perrin, I’m—”

“If you want to make jokes with Aes Sedai,” Perrin broke in, “that’s up to you. My Lord.” He began stuffing his shirttail into his breeches. “I don’t spend much time being—witty; is that the word?—witty with Aes Sedai.

But then, I'm only a clumsy blacksmith, and I might be in somebody's way. My Lord." Snatching his coat from the floor, he started for the door.

"Burn me, Perrin, I'm sorry. I was afraid, and I thought I was in trouble—maybe I was; maybe I still am, I don't know—and I didn't want you and Mat to be in it with me. Light, all the women were looking for me last night. I think that's part of the trouble I'm in. I think so. And Liandrin. . . . She. . . ." He threw up his hands. "Perrin, believe me, you don't want any part of this."

Perrin had stopped, but he stood facing the door and only turned his head enough for Rand to see one golden eye. "Looking for you? Maybe they were looking for all of us."

"No, they were looking for me. I wish they hadn't been, but I know better."

Perrin shook his head. "Liandrin wanted me, anyway, I know. I heard."

Rand frowned. "Why would she . . . ? It doesn't change anything. Look, I opened my mouth and said what I shouldn't. I did not mean it, Perrin. Now, please, would you tell me about Mat?"

"He's asleep. Leane—that's the Aes Sedai—said he would be on his feet in a few hours." He shrugged uncomfortably. "I think she was lying. I know Aes Sedai never lie, not so you can catch them, but she was lying, or keeping something back." He paused, looking at Rand sideways. "You didn't mean all that? We will leave here together? You, and me, and Mat?"

"I can't, Perrin. I can't tell you why, but I really do have to go by myse—Perrin, wait!"

The door slammed behind his friend.

Rand fell back on the bed. "I can't tell you," he muttered. He pounded his fist on the side of the bed. "I can't." *But you can go now,* a voice said in the back of his head. *Egwene's going to be all right, and Mat will be up and around in an hour or two. You can go now. Before Moiraine changes her mind.*

He started to sit up when a pounding on the door made him leap to his feet. If it was Perrin come back, he would not knock. The pounding came again.

"Who is it?"

Lan strode in, pushing the door to behind him with his boot heel. As usual, he wore his sword over a plain coat of green that was nearly invisible in the woods. This time, though, he had a wide, golden cord tied high around his left arm, the fringed ends hanging almost to his elbow. On the knot was pinned a golden crane in flight, the symbol of Malkier.

“The Amyrlin Seat wants you, sheepherder. You can’t go like that. Out of that shirt and brush your hair. You look like a haystack.” He jerked open the wardrobe and began pawing through the clothes Rand meant to leave behind.

Rand stood stiff where he was; he felt as though he had been hit in the head with a hammer. He had expected it, of course, in a way, but he had been sure he would be gone before the summons came. *She knows. Light, I’m sure of it.* “What do you mean, she wants me? I’m leaving, Lan. You were right. I am going to the stable right now, get my horse, and leave.”

“You should have done that last night.” The Warder tossed a white silk shirt onto the bed. “No one refuses an audience with the Amyrlin Seat, sheepherder. Not the Lord Captain Commander of the Whitecloaks himself. Pedron Niall might spend the trip planning how to kill her, if he could do it and get away, but he would come.” He turned around with one of the high-collared coats in his hands and held it up. “This one will do.” Tangled, long-thorned briars climbed each red sleeve in a thick, gold-embroidered line, and ran around each cuff. Golden herons stood on the collars, which were edged with gold. “The color is right, too.” He seemed to be amused at something, or satisfied. “Come on, sheepherder. Change your shirt. Move.”

Reluctantly Rand pulled the coarse wool workman’s shirt over his head. “I’ll feel a fool,” he muttered. “A silk shirt! I never wore a silk shirt in my life. And I never wore so fancy a coat, either, even on a feastday.” *Light, if Perrin sees me in that. . . . Burn me, after all that fool talk about being a lord, if he sees me in that, he’ll never listen to reason.*

“You can’t go before the Amyrlin Seat dressed like a groom fresh out of the stables, sheepherder. Let me see your boots. They’ll do. Well, get on with it, get on with it. You don’t keep the Amyrlin waiting. Wear your sword.”

“My sword!” The silk shirt over his head muffled Rand’s yelp. He yanked it the rest of the way on. “In the women’s apartments? Lan, if I go for an audience with the Amyrlin Seat—the Amyrlin Seat!—wearing a sword, she’ll—”

“Do nothing,” Lan cut him off dryly. “If the Amyrlin is afraid of you—and it’s smarter for you to think she isn’t, because I don’t know anything that could frighten that woman—it won’t be for a sword. Now remember, you kneel when you go before her. One knee only, mind," he added sharply. "You're not some merchant caught giving short weight. Maybe you had better practice it."

"I know how, I think. I saw how the Queen's Guards knelt to Queen Morgase."

The ghost of a smile touched the Warder's lips. "Yes, you do it just as they did. That will give them something to think about."

Rand frowned. "Why are you telling me this, Lan? You're a Warder. You're acting as if you are on my side."

"I am on your side, sheepherder. A little. Enough to help you a bit." The Warder's face was stone, and sympathetic words sounded strange in that rough voice. "What training you've had, I gave you, and I'll not have you groveling and sniveling. The Wheel weaves us all into the Pattern as it wills. You have less freedom about it than most, but by the Light, you can still face it on your feet. You remember who the Amyrlin Seat is, sheepherder, and you show her proper respect, but you do what I tell you, and you look her in the eye. Well, don't stand there gaping. Tuck in your shirt."

Rand shut his mouth and tucked in his shirt. *Remember who she is? Burn me, what I wouldn't give to forget who she is!*

Lan kept up a running flow of instructions while Rand shrugged into the red coat and buckled on his sword. What to say and to whom, and what not to say. What to do, and what not. How to move, even. He was not sure he could remember it all—most of it sounded odd, and easy to forget—and he was sure whatever he forgot would be just the thing to make the Aes Sedai angry with him. *If they aren't already. If Moiraine told the Amyrlin Seat, who else did she tell?*

"Lan, why can't I just leave the way I planned? By the time she knew I was not coming, I'd be a league outside the walls and galloping."

"And she'd have trackers after you before you had gone two. What the Amyrlin wants, sheepherder, she gets." He adjusted Rand's sword belt so the heavy buckle was centered. "What I do is the best I can for you. Believe it."

"But why all this? What does it mean? Why do I put my hand over my heart if the Amyrlin Seat stands up? Why refuse anything but water—not that I want to eat a meal with her—then dribble some on the floor and say 'The land thirsts'? And if she asks how old I am, why tell her how long it is since I was given the sword? I don’t understand half of what you’ve told me.”

“Three drops, sheepherder, don’t pour it. You *sprinkle* three drops only. You can understand later so long as you remember now. Think of it as upholding custom. The Amyrlin will do with you as she must. If you believe you can avoid it, then you believe you can fly to the moon like Lenn. You can’t escape, but maybe you can hold your own for a while, and perhaps you can keep your pride, at least. The Light burn me, I am probably wasting my time, but I’ve nothing better to do. Hold still.” From his pocket the Warder produced a long length of wide, fringed golden cord and tied it around Rand’s left arm in a complicated knot. On the knot he fastened a red-enameled pin, an eagle with its wings spread. “I had that made to give you, and now is as good a time as any. That will make them think.” There was no doubt about it, now. The Warder was smiling.

Rand looked down at the pin worriedly. *Caldazar.* The Red Eagle of Manetheren. “A thorn to the Dark One’s foot,” he murmured, “and a bramble to his hand.” He looked at the Warder. “Manetheren’s long dead and forgotten, Lan. It’s just a name in a book, now. There is only the Two Rivers. Whatever else I am, I’m a shepherd and a farmer. That’s all.”

“Well, the sword that could not be broken was shattered in the end, sheepherder, but it fought the Shadow to the last. There is one rule, above all others, for being a man. Whatever comes, face it on your feet. Now, are you ready? The Amyrlin Seat waits.”

With a cold knot in the pit of his belly, Rand followed the Warder into the hall.

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CHAPTER

8

The Dragon Reborn

Rand walked stiff-legged and nervous at first, beside the Warder. *Face it on your feet.* It was easy for Lan to say. He had not been summoned by the Amyrlin Seat. He was not wondering if he would be gentled before the day was done, or worse. Rand felt as if he had something caught in his throat; he could not swallow, and he wanted to, badly.

The corridors bustled with people, servants going about their morning chores, warriors wearing swords over lounging robes. A few young boys carrying small practice swords stayed near their elders, imitating the way they walked. No sign remained of the fighting, but an air of alertness clung even to the children. Grown men looked like cats waiting for a pack of rats.

Ingtar gave Rand and Lan a peculiar look, almost troubled, opening his mouth, then saying nothing as they passed him. Kajin, tall and lean and sallow, pumped his fists over his head and shouted, *“Tai’shar Malkier! Tai’shar Manetheren!”* True blood of Malkier. True blood of Manetheren.

Rand jumped. *Light, why did he say that? Don’t be a fool,* he told himself. *They all know about Manetheren here. They know every old story, if it has fighting in it. Burn me, I have to take a rein on myself.*

Lan raised his fists in reply. *“Tai’shar Shienar!”*

If he made a run for it, could he lose himself in the crowd long enough to reach his horse? *If she sends trackers after me. . . .* With every step he grew more tense.

As they approached the women’s apartments, Lan suddenly snapped, “Cat Crosses the Courtyard!”

Startled, Rand instinctively assumed the walking stance as he had been taught, back straight but every muscle loose, as if he hung from a wire at the top of his head. It was a relaxed, almost arrogant, saunter. Relaxed on the outside; he certainly did not feel it inside. He had no time to wonder what he was doing. They rounded the last corridor in step with each other.

The women at the entrance to the women’s apartments looked up calmly as they came closer. Some sat behind slanted tables, checking large ledgers and sometimes making an entry. Others were knitting, or working with needle and embroidery hoop. Ladies in silks kept this watch, as well as women in livery. The arched doors stood open, unguarded except for the women. No more was needed. No Shienaran man would enter uninvited, but any Shienaran man stood ready to defend that door if needed, and he would be aghast at the need.

Rand’s stomach churned, harsh and acid. *They’ll take one look at our swords and turn us away. Well, that’s what I want, isn’t it? If they turn us back, maybe I can still get away. If they don’t call the guards down on us.* He clung to the stance Lan had given him as he would have to a floating branch in a flood; holding it was the only thing that kept him from turning tail and running.

One of the Lady Amalisa’s attendants, Nisura, a round-faced woman, put aside her embroidery and stood as they came to a stop. Her eyes flickered across their swords, and her mouth tightened, but she did not mention them. All the women stopped what they were doing to watch, silent and intent.

“Honor to you both,” Nisura said, bowing her head slightly. She glanced at Rand, so quickly he was almost not sure he had seen it; it reminded him of what Perrin had said. “The Amyrlin Seat awaits you.” She motioned, and two other ladies—not servants; they were being honored—stepped forward for escorts. The women bowed, a hair more than Nisura had, and motioned them through the archway. They both gave Rand a sidelong glance, then did not look at him again.

Were they looking for all of us, or just me? Why all of us?

Inside, they got the looks Rand expected—two men in the women’s apartments where men were rare—and their swords caused more than one raised eyebrow, but none of the women spoke. The two men left knots of conversation in their path, soft murmurs too low for Rand to make out. Lan strode along as if he did not even notice. Rand kept pace behind their escorts and wished he could hear.

And then they reached the Amyrlin Seat’s chambers, with three Aes Sedai in the hall outside the door. The tall Aes Sedai, Leane, held her golden-flamed staff. Rand did not know the other two, one of the White Ajah and one Yellow by their fringe. He remembered their faces, though, staring at him as he had run through these same halls. Smooth Aes Sedai faces, with knowing eyes. They studied him with arched eyebrows and pursed lips. The women who had brought Lan and Rand curtsied, handing them over to the Aes Sedai.

Leane looked Rand over with a slight smile. Despite the smile, her voice had a snap to it. “What have you brought the Amyrlin Seat today, Lan Gaidin? A young lion? Better you don’t let any Greens see this one, or one of them will bond him before he can take a breath. Greens like to bond them young.”

Rand wondered if it was really possible to sweat inside your skin. He felt as if he was. He wanted to look at Lan, but he remembered this part of the Warder’s instructions. “I am Rand al’Thor, son of Tam al’Thor, of the Two Rivers, which once was Manetheren. As I have been summoned by the Amyrlin Seat, Leane Sedai, so do I come. I stand ready.” He was surprised that his voice did not shake once.

Leane blinked, and her smile faded to a thoughtful look. “This is supposed to be a shepherd, Lan Gaidin? He was not so sure of himself this morning.”

“He is a man, Leane Sedai,” Lan said firmly, “no more, and no less. We are what we are.”

The Aes Sedai shook her head. “The world grows stranger every day. I suppose the blacksmith will wear a crown and speak in High Chant. Wait here.” She vanished inside to announce them.

She was only gone a few moments, but Rand was uncomfortably aware of the eyes of the remaining Aes Sedai. He tried to return their gaze levelly, the way Lan had told him to, and they put their heads together, whispering. *What are they saying? What do they know? Light, are they going to gentle me? Was that what Lan meant about facing whatever comes?*

Leane returned, motioning Rand to go in. When Lan started to follow, she thrust her staff across his chest, stopping him. “Not you, Lan Gaidin. Moiraine Sedai has a task for you. Your lion cub will be safe enough by himself.”

The door swung shut behind Rand, but not before he heard Lan’s voice, fierce and strong, but low for his ear alone. *“Tai’shar Manetheren!”*

Moiraine sat to one side of the room, and one of the Brown Aes Sedai he had seen in the dungeon sat to the other, but it was the woman in the tall chair behind the wide table who held his eyes. The curtains had been partially drawn over the arrowslits, but the gaps let in enough light behind her to make her face hard to see clearly. He still recognized her, though. The Amyrlin Seat.

Quickly he dropped to one knee, left hand on sword hilt, right fist pressed to the patterned rug, and bowed his head. “As you have summoned me, Mother, so have I come. I stand ready.” He lifted his head in time to see her eyebrows rise.

“Do you now, boy?” She sounded almost amused. And something else he could not make out. She certainly did not look amused. “Stand up, boy, and let me have a look at you.”

He straightened and tried to keep his face relaxed. It was an effort not to clench his hands. *Three Aes Sedai. How many does it take to gentle a man? They sent a dozen or more after Logain. Would Moiraine do that to me?* He met the Amyrlin Seat’s look eye to eye. She did not blink.

“Sit, boy,” she said finally, gesturing to a ladder-back chair that had been pulled around squarely in front of the table. “This will not be short, I fear.”

“Thank you, Mother.” He bowed his head, then, as Lan had told him, glanced at the chair and touched his sword. “By your leave, Mother, I will stand. The watch is not done.”

The Amyrlin Seat made an exasperated sound and looked at Moiraine. “Have you let Lan at him, Daughter? This will be difficult enough without him picking up Warder ways.”

“Lan has been teaching all the boys, Mother,” Moiraine replied calmly. “He has spent a little more time with this one than the others because he carries a sword.”

The Brown Aes Sedai shifted on her chair. “The Gaidin are stiff-necked and proud, Mother, but useful. I would not be without Tomas, as you would not lose Alric. I have even heard a few Reds say they sometimes wish for a Warder. And the Greens, of course. . . .”

The three Aes Sedai were all ignoring him, now. “This sword,” the Amyrlin Seat said. “It appears to be a heron-mark blade. How did he come by that, Moiraine?”

“Tam al’Thor left the Two Rivers as a boy, Mother. He joined the army of Illian, and served in the Whitecloak War and the last two wars with Tear. In time he rose to be a blademaster and the Second Captain of the

Companions. After the Aiel War, Tam al'Thor returned to the Two Rivers with a wife from Caemlyn and an infant boy. It would have saved much, had I known this earlier, but I know it now."

Rand stared at Moiraine. He knew Tam had left the Two Rivers and come back with an outlander wife and the sword, but the rest. . . . *Where did you learn all that? Not in Emond's Field. Unless Nynaeve told you more than she's ever told me. An infant boy. She doesn't say his son. But I am.* "Against Tear." The Amyrlin Seat frowned slightly. "Well, there was blame enough on both sides in those wars. Fool men who would rather fight than talk. Can you tell if the blade is authentic, Verin?"

"There are tests, Mother."

"Then take it and test it, Daughter."

The three women were not even looking at him. Rand stepped back, gripping the hilt hard. "My father gave this sword to me," he said angrily. "Nobody is taking it from me." It was only then that he realized Verin had not moved from her chair. He looked at them in confusion, trying to recover his equilibrium.

"So," the Amyrlin Seat said, "you have some fire in you besides whatever Lan put in. Good. You will need it."

"I am what I am, Mother," he managed smoothly enough. "I stand ready for what comes."

The Amyrlin Seat grimaced. "Lan *has* been at you. Listen to me, boy. In a few hours, Ingtar will leave to find the stolen Horn. Your friend, Mat, will go with him. I expect that your other friend—Perrin?—will go, also. Do you wish to accompany them?"

"Mat and Perrin are going? Why?" Belatedly he remembered to add a respectful, "Mother."

"You know of the dagger your friend carried?" A twist of her mouth showed what she thought of the dagger. "That was taken, too. Unless it is found, the link between him and the blade cannot be broken completely, and he will die. You can ride with them, if you want. Or you can stay here. No doubt Lord Agelmar will let you remain as a guest as long as you wish. I will be leaving today, as well. Moiraine Sedai will accompany me, and so will Egwene and Nynaeve, so you will stay alone, if you stay. The choice is yours."

Rand stared at her. *She is saying I can go as I want. Is that what she brought me here for? Mat is dying!* He glanced at Moiraine, sitting impassively with her hands folded in her lap. She looked as if nothing in the world could concern her less than where he went. *Which way are you trying to push me, Aes Sedai? Burn me, but I'll go another. But if Mat's dying. . . . I can't abandon him. Light, how are we going to find that dagger?*

"You do not have to make the choice now," the Amyrlin said. She did not seem to care, either. "But you will have to choose before Ingtar leaves."

"I will ride with Ingtar, Mother."

The Amyrlin Seat nodded absently. "Now that that is dealt with, we can move on to important matters. I know you can channel, boy. What do you know?"

Rand's mouth fell open. Caught up in worrying about Mat, her casual words hit him like a swinging barn door. All of Lan's advice and instructions went spinning. He stared at her, licking his lips. It was one thing to think she knew, entirely another to find out she really did. The sweat finally seeped out on his forehead.

She leaned forward in her seat, waiting for his answer, but he had the feeling she wanted to lean back. He remembered what Lan had said. *If she's afraid of you*. . . . He wanted to laugh. If *she* was afraid of *him.*

"No, I can't. I mean . . . I didn't do it on purpose. It just happened. I don't want to—to channel the Power. I won't ever do it again. I swear it."

"You don't want to," the Amyrlin Seat said. "Well, that's wise of you. And foolish, too. Some can be taught to channel; most cannot. A few, though, have the seed in them at birth. Sooner or later, they wield the One Power whether they want to or not, as surely as roe makes fish. You will continue to channel, boy. You can't help it. And you had better *learn* to channel, learn to control it, or you will not live long enough to go mad. The One Power kills those who cannot control its flow."

"How am I supposed to learn?" he demanded. Moiraine and Verin just sat there, unruffled, watching him. *Like spiders.* "How? Moiraine claims she can't teach me anything, and I don't know how to learn, or what. I don't want to, anyway. I want to stop. Can't you understand that? To stop!"

"I told you the truth, Rand," Moiraine said. She sounded as if they were having a pleasant conversation. "Those who could teach you, the male Aes Sedai, are three thousand years dead. No Aes Sedai living can teach you to touch *saidin* any more than you could learn to touch *saidar.* A bird cannot teach a fish to fly, nor a fish teach a bird to swim."

"I have always thought that was a bad saying," Verin said suddenly. "There are birds that dive and swim. And in the Sea of Storms are fish that fly, with long fins that stretch out as wide as your outstretched arms, and beaks like swords that can pierce. . . ." Her words trailed off and she became flustered. Moiraine and the Amyrlin Seat were staring at her without expression.

Rand took the interruption to try to regain some control of himself. As Tam had taught him long ago, he formed a single flame in his mind and fed his fears into it, seeking emptiness, the stillness of the void. The flame seemed to grow until it enveloped everything, until it was too large to contain or imagine any longer. With that it was gone, leaving in its place a sense of peace. At its edges, emotions still flickered, fear and anger like black blotches, but the void held. Thought skimmed across its surface like pebbles across ice. The Aes Sedai's attention was only off him for a moment, but when they turned back his face was calm.

"Why are you talking to me like this, Mother?" he asked. "You should be gentling me."

The Amyrlin Seat frowned and turned to Moiraine. "Did Lan teach him this?"

"No, Mother. He had it from Tam al'Thor."

"Why?" Rand demanded again.

The Amyrlin Seat looked him straight in the eye and said, "Because you are the Dragon Reborn."

The void rocked. The world rocked. Everything seemed to spin around him. He concentrated on nothing, and the emptiness returned, the world steadied. "No, Mother. I can channel, the Light help me, but I am not Raolin Darksbane, nor Guaire Amalasan, nor Yurian Stonebow. You can gentle me, or kill me, or let me go, but I will not be a tame false Dragon on a Tar Valon leash."

He heard Verin gasp, and the Amyrlin's eyes widened, a gaze as hard as blue rock. It did not affect him; it slid off the void within.

"Where did you hear those names?" the Amyrlin demanded. "Who told you Tar Valon pulls the lines on *any* false Dragon?"

"A friend, Mother," he said. "A gleeman. His name was Thom Merrilin. He's dead, now." Moiraine made a sound, and he glanced at her. She claimed Thom was not dead, but she had never offered any proof, and he could not see how any man could survive grappling hand-to-hand with a

Fade. The thought was extraneous, and it faded away. There was only the void and the oneness now.

"You are not a false Dragon," the Amyrlin said firmly. "You are the true Dragon Reborn."

"I am a shepherd from the Two Rivers, Mother."

"Daughter, tell him the story. A *true* story, boy. Listen well."

Moiraine began speaking. Rand kept his eyes on the Amyrlin's face, but he heard.

"Nearly twenty years ago the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World, the Dragonwall, the only time they have ever done so. They ravaged through Cairhien, destroyed every army sent against them, burned the city of Cairhien itself, and fought all the way to Tar Valon. It was winter and snowing, but cold or heat mean little to an Aiel. The final battle, the last that counted, was fought outside the Shining Walls, in the shadow of Dragonmount. In three days and three nights of fighting, the Aiel were turned back. Or rather they turned back, for they had done what they came to do, which was to kill King Laman of Cairhien, for his sin against the Tree. It is then that my story begins. And yours."

They came over the Dragonwall like a flood. All the way to the Shining Walls. Rand waited for the memories to fade, but it was Tam's voice he heard, Tam sick and raving, pulling up secrets from his past. The voice clung outside the void, clamoring to get in.

"I was one of the Accepted, then," Moiraine said, "as was our Mother, the Amyrlin Seat. We were soon to be raised to sisterhood, and that night we stood attendance on the then Amyrlin. Her Keeper of the Chronicles, Gitara Moroso, was there. Every other full sister in Tar Valon was out Healing as many wounded as she could find, even the Reds. It was dawn. The fire on the hearth could not keep the cold out. The snow had finally stopped, and in the Amyrlin's chambers in the White Tower we could smell the smoke of outlying villages burned in the fighting."

Battles are always hot, even in the snow. Had to get away from the stink of death. Tam's delirious voice clawed at the empty calm inside Rand. The void trembled and shrank, steadied, then wavered again. The Amyrlin's eyes bored at him. He felt sweat on his face again. "It was all a fever-dream," he said. "He was sick." He raised his voice. "My name is Rand al'Thor. I am a shepherd. My father is Tam al'Thor, and my mother was—"

Moiraine had paused for him, but now her unchanging voice cut him off, soft and relentless. "*The Karaethon Cycle,* the Prophecies of the Dragon, says that the Dragon will be reborn on the slopes of Dragonmount, where he died during the Breaking of the World. Gitara Sedai had the Foretelling sometimes. She was old, her hair as white as the snow outside, but when she had the Foretelling, it was strong. The morning light through the windows was strengthening as I handed her a cup of tea. The Amyrlin Seat asked me what news there was from the field of battle. And Gitara Sedai started up out of her chair, her arms and legs rigid, trembling, her face as if she looked into the Pit of Doom at Shayol Ghul, and she cried out, 'He is born again! I feel him! The Dragon takes his first breath on the slope of Dragonmount! He is coming! He is coming! Light help us! Light help the world! He lies in the snow and cries like the thunder! He burns like the sun!' And she fell forward into my arms, dead."

Slope of the mountain. Heard a baby cry. Gave birth there alone, before she died. Child blue with the cold. Rand tried to force Tam's voice away. The void grew smaller. "A fever-dream," he gasped. *I couldn't leave a child.* "I was born in the Two Rivers." *Always knew you wanted children, Kari.* He pulled his eyes away from the Amyrlin's gaze. He tried to force the void to hold. He knew that was not the way, but it was collapsing in him. *Yes, lass. Rand is a good name.* "I—am—Rand—al'Thor!" His legs trembled.

"And so we knew the Dragon was Reborn," Moiraine went on. "The Amyrlin swore us to secrecy, we two, for she knew not all the sisters would see the Rebirth as it must be seen. She set us to searching. There were many fatherless children after that battle. Too many. But we found a story, that one man had found an infant on the mountain. That was all. A man and an infant boy. So we searched on. For years we searched, finding other clues, poring over the Prophecies. 'He will be of the ancient blood, and raised by the old blood.' That was one; there were others. But there are many places where the old blood, descended from the Age of Legends, remains strong. Then, in the Two Rivers, where the old blood of Manetheren seethes still like a river in flood, in Emond's Field, I found three boys whose name-days were within weeks of the battle at Dragonmount. And one of them can channel. Did you think Trollocs came after you just because you are *ta'veren*? You are the Dragon Reborn."

Rand's knees gave way; he dropped to a squat, hands slapping the rug to catch himself from falling on his face. The void was gone, the stillness shattered. He raised his head, and they were looking at him, the three Aes Sedai. Their faces were serene, smooth as unruffled ponds, but their eyes did not blink. "My father is Tam al'Thor, and I was born. . . ." They stared at him, unmoving. *They're lying. I am not . . . what they say! Some way, somehow, they're lying, trying to use me.* "I will not be used by you."

"An anchor is not demeaned by being used to hold a boat," the Amyrlin said. "You were made for a purpose, Rand al'Thor. 'When the winds of Tarmon Gai'don scour the earth, he will face the Shadow and bring forth Light again in the world.' The Prophecies must be fulfilled, or the Dark One will break free and remake the world in his image. The Last Battle is coming, and you were born to unite mankind and lead them against the Dark One."

"Ba'alzamon is dead," Rand said hoarsely, and the Amyrlin snorted like a stablehand.

"If you believe that, you are as much a fool as the Domani. Many there believe he is dead, or say they do, but I notice they still won't risk naming him. The Dark One lives, and he is breaking free. You will face the Dark One. It is your destiny."

It is your destiny. He had heard that before, in a dream that had maybe not been entirely a dream. He wondered what the Amyrlin would say if she knew Ba'alzamon had spoken to him in dreams. *That's done with. Ba'alzamon is dead. I saw him die.*

Suddenly it came to him that he was crouching like a toad, huddling under their eyes. He tried to form the void again, but voices whirled through his head, sweeping away every effort. *It is your destiny. Babe lying in the snow. You are the Dragon Reborn. Ba'alzamon is dead. Rand is a good name, Kari. I will not be used!* Drawing on his own native stubbornness, he forced himself back upright. *Face it on your feet. You can keep your pride, at least.* The three Aes Sedai watched with no expression.

"What. . . ." With an effort he steadied his voice. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing," the Amyrlin said, and he blinked. It was not the answer he had expected, the one he had feared. "You say you want to accompany your friend with Ingtar, and you may. I have not marked you out in any way. Some of the sisters may know you are *ta'veren*, but no more. Only we three know who you truly are. Your friend Perrin will be brought to me, as you were, and I will visit your other friend in the infirmary. You may go as you will, without fear that we will set the Red sisters on you."

Who you truly are. Anger flared up in him, hot and corrosive. He forced it to stay inside, hidden. "Why?"

"The Prophecies must be fulfilled. We let you walk free, knowing what you are, because otherwise the world we know will die, and the Dark One will cover the earth with fire and death. Mark me, not all Aes Sedai feel the same. There are some here in Fal Dara who would strike you down if they knew a tenth of what you are, and feel no more remorse than for gutting a fish. But then, there are men who've no doubt laughed with you who would do the same, if they knew. Have a care, Rand al'Thor, Dragon Reborn."

He looked at each of them in turn. *Your Prophecies are no part of me.* They returned his gaze so calmly it was hard to believe they were trying to convince him he was the most hated, the most feared man in the history of the world. He had gone right through fear and come out the other side in some place cold. Anger was all that kept him warm. They could gentle him, or burn him to a crisp where he stood, and he no longer cared.

A part of Lan's instructions came back to him. Left hand on the hilt, he twisted the sword behind him, catching the scabbard in his right, then bowed, arms straight. "By your leave, Mother, may I depart this place?"

"I give you leave to go, my son."

Straightening, he stood there a moment longer. "I will not be used," he told them. There was a long silence as he turned and left.

The silence stretched on in the room after Rand left until it was broken by a long breath from the Amyrlin. "I cannot make myself like what we just did," she said. "It was necessary, but. . . . Did it work, Daughters?"

Moiraine shook her head, just the slightest movement. "I do not know. But it *was* necessary, and is."

"Necessary," Verin agreed. She touched her forehead, then peered at the dampness on her fingers. "He is strong. And as stubborn as you said, Moiraine. Much stronger than I expected. We may have to gentle him after all before. . . ." Her eyes widened. "But we cannot, can we? The Prophecies. The Light forgive us for what we are loosing on the world."

"The Prophecies," Moiraine said, nodding. "Afterwards, we will do as we must. As we do now."

“As we must,” the Amyrlin said. “Yes. But when he learns to channel, the Light help us all.”

The silence returned.

There was a storm coming. Nynaeve felt it. A big storm, worse than she had ever seen. She could listen to the wind, and hear what the weather would be. All Wisdoms claimed to be able to do that, though many could not. Nynaeve had felt more comfortable with the ability before learning it was a manifestation of the Power. Any woman who could listen to the wind could channel, though most were probably as she had been, unaware of what she was doing, getting it only in fits and starts.

This time, though, something was wrong. Outside, the morning sun was a golden ball in a clear blue sky, and birds sang in the gardens, but that was not it. There would have been nothing to listening to the wind if she could not foretell the weather before the signs were visible. There was something wrong with the feeling this time, something not quite the way it usually was. The storm felt distant, too far off for her to feel at all. Yet it felt as if the sky above should have been pouring down rain, and snow, and hail, all at the same time, with winds howling to shake the stones of the keep. And she could feel the good weather, too, lasting for days yet, but that was muted under the other.

A bluefinch perched in an arrowslit like a mockery of her weather sense, peering into the hallway. When it saw her, it vanished in a flash of blue and white feathers.

She stared at the spot where the bird had been. *There is a storm, and there isn’t. It means something. But what?*

Far down the hall full of women and small children she saw Rand striding away, his escort of women half running to keep up. Nynaeve nodded firmly. If there was a storm that was not a storm, he would be the center of it. Gathering her skirts, she hurried after him.

Women with whom she had grown friendly since coming to Fal Dara tried to speak to her; they knew Rand had come with her and that they were both from the Two Rivers, and they wanted to know why the Amyrlin had summoned him. *The Amyrlin Seat!* Ice in the pit of her belly, she broke into a run, but before she left the women’s apartments, she had lost him around too many corners and beyond too many people.

“Which way did he go?” she asked Nisura. There was no need to say who. She heard Rand’s name in the conversation of the other women clustered around the arched doors.

“I don’t know, Nynaeve. He came out as fast as if he had Heartsbane himself at his heels. As well he might, coming here with a sword at his belt. The Dark One should be the least of his worries after that. What is the world coming to? And him presented to the Amyrlin in her chambers, no less. Tell me, Nynaeve, is he really a prince in your land?” The other women stopped talking and leaned closer to listen.

Nynaeve was not sure what she answered. Something that made them let her go on. She hurried away from the women’s apartments, head swiveling at every crossing corridor to look for him, fists clenched. *Light, what have they done to him? I should have gotten him away from Moiraine somehow, the Light blind her. I’m his Wisdom.*

Are you, a small voice taunted. *You’ve abandoned Emond’s Field to fend for itself. Can you still call yourself their Wisdom?*

I did not abandon them, she told herself fiercely. *I brought Mavra Mallen up from Deven Ride to look after matters till I get back. She can deal well enough with the Mayor and the Village Council, and she gets on well with the Women’s Circle.*

Mavra will have to get back to her own village. No village can do without its Wisdom for long. Nynaeve cringed inside. She had been gone months from Emond’s Field.

“I am the Wisdom of Emond’s Field!” she said aloud.

A liveried servant carrying a bolt of cloth blinked at her, then bowed low before scurrying off. By his face he was eager to be anywhere else.

Blushing, Nynaeve looked around to see if anyone had noticed. There were only a few men in the hall, engrossed in their own conversations, and some women in black-and-gold going about their business, giving her a bow or curtsy as she passed. She had had that argument with herself a hundred times before, but this was the first time it had come to talking to herself out loud. She muttered under her breath, then pressed her lips firmly together when she realized what she was doing.

She was finally beginning to realize her search was futile when she came on Lan, his back to her, looking down on the outer courtyard through an arrowslit. The noise from the courtyard was all horses and men, neighing and shouting. So intent was Lan that he did not, for once, seem to hear her.

She hated the fact that she could never sneak up on him, however softly she stepped. She had been accounted good at woodscraft back in Emond's Field, though it was not a skill in which many women took any interest.

She stopped in her tracks, pressing her hands to her stomach to quiet a flutter. *I ought to dose myself with rannel and sheepstongue root*, she thought sourly. It was the mixture she gave anyone who moped about and claimed they were sick, or behaved like a goose. Rannel and sheepstongue root would perk you up a little, and did no harm, but mainly it tasted horrible, and the taste lasted all day. It was a perfect cure for acting the fool.

Safe from his eyes, she studied the length of him, leaning against the stone and fingering his chin as he studied what was going on below. *He's too tall, for one thing, and old enough to be my father, for another. A man with a face like that would have to be cruel. No, he's not that. Never that.* And he was a king. His land was destroyed while he was a child, and he would not claim a crown, but he was a king, for that. *What would a king want with a village woman? He's a Warder, too. Bonded to Moiraine. She has his loyalty to death, and ties closer than any lover, and she has him. She has everything I want, the Light burn her!*

He turned from the arrowslit, and she whirled to go.

"Nynaeve." His voice caught and held her like a noose. "I wanted to speak to you alone. You always seem to be in the women's apartments, or in company."

It took an effort to face him, but she was sure her features were calm when she looked up at him. "I'm looking for Rand." She was not about to admit to avoiding him. "We said all we need to say long ago, you and I. I shamed myself—which I will not do again—and you told me to go away."

"I never said—" He took a deep breath. "I told you I had nothing to offer for brideprice but widow's clothes. Not a gift any man could give a woman. Not a man who can call himself a man."

"I understand," she said coolly. "In any case, a king does not give gifts to village women. And this village woman would not take them. Have you seen Rand? I need to talk to him. He was to see the Amyrlin. Do you know what she wanted with him?"

His eyes blazed like blue ice in the sun. She stiffened her legs to keep from stepping back, and met him glare for glare.

"The Dark One take Rand al'Thor and the Amyrlin Seat both," he grated, pressing something into her hand. "I will make you a gift and you will take it if I have to chain it around your neck."

She pulled her eyes away from his. He had a stare like a blue-eyed hawk when he was angry. In her hand was a signet ring, heavy gold and worn with age, almost large enough for both her thumbs to fit through. On it, a crane flew above a lance and crown, all carefully wrought in detail. Her breath caught. The ring of Malkieri kings. Forgetting to glare, she lifted her face. "I cannot take this, Lan."

He shrugged in an offhand way. "It is nothing. Old, and useless, now. But there are those who would know it when they saw it. Show that, and you will have guestright, and help if you need it, from any lord in the Borderlands. Show it to a Warder, and he will give aid, or carry a message to me. Send it to me, or a message marked with it, and I will come to you, without delay and without fail. This I swear."

Her vision blurred at the edges. *If I cry now, I will kill myself.* "I can't. . . . I do not want a gift from you, al'Lan Mandragoran. Here, take it."

He fended off her attempts to give the ring back to him. His hand enveloped hers, gentle but firm as a shackle. "Then take it for my sake, as a favor to me. Or throw it away, if it displeases you. I've no better use for it." He brushed her cheek with a finger, and she gave a start. "I must go now, Nynaeve *mashiara*. The Amyrlin wishes to leave before midday, and there is much yet to be done. Perhaps we will have time to talk on the journey to Tar Valon." He turned and was gone, striding down the hall.

Nynaeve touched her cheek. She could still feel where he had touched her. *Mashiara*. Beloved of heart and soul, it meant, but a love lost, too. Lost beyond regaining. *Fool woman! Stop acting like a girl with her hair still not braided. It's no use letting him make you feel. . . .*

Clutching the ring tightly, she turned around, and jumped when she found herself face-to-face with Moiraine. "How long have you been there?" she demanded.

"Not long enough to hear anything I should not have," the Aes Sedai replied smoothly. "We *will* be leaving soon. I heard that. You must see to your packing."

Leaving. It had not penetrated when Lan said it. "I will have to say goodbye to the boys," she muttered, then gave Moiraine a sharp look. "What have you done to Rand? He was taken to the Amyrlin. Why? Did you tell her about—about . . . ?" She could not say it. He was from her own village, and she was just enough older than he to have looked after him a time or two when he was little, but she could not even think about what he had become without her stomach twisting.

“The Amyrlin will be seeing all three, Nynaeve. *Ta’veren* are not so common that she would miss the chance to see three together in one place. Perhaps she will give them a few words of encouragement, since they are riding with Ingtar to hunt those who stole the Horn. They will be leaving about the time we do, so you had better hurry with any farewells.”

Nynaeve dashed to the nearest arrowslit and peered down at the outer courtyard. Horses were everywhere, pack animals and saddle horses, and men hurrying about them, calling to each other. The only clear space was where the Amyrlin’s palanquin stood, its paired horses waiting patiently without any attendants. Some of the Warders were out there, looking over their mounts, and on the other side of the courtyard, Ingtar stood with a knot of Shienarans around him in armor. Sometimes a Warder or one of Ingtar’s men crossed the paving stones to exchange a word.

“I should have gotten the boys away from you,” she said, still looking out. *Egwene, too, if I could do it without killing her. Light, why did she have to be born with this cursed ability?* “I should have taken them back home.”

“They are more than old enough to be off apron strings,” Moiraine said dryly. “And you know very well why you could never do that. For one of them, at least. Besides, it would mean leaving Egwene to go to Tar Valon alone. Or have you decided to forgo Tar Valon yourself? If your own use of the Power is not schooled, you will never be able to use it against me.”

Nynaeve spun to face the Aes Sedai, her jaw dropping. She could not help it. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Did you think I did not know, child? Well, as you wish it. I take it that you *are* coming to Tar Valon? Yes, I thought so.”

Nynaeve wanted to hit her, to knock away the brief smile that flashed across the Aes Sedai’s face. Aes Sedai had not been able to wield power openly since the Breaking, much less the One Power, but they plotted and manipulated, pulled strings like puppetmasters, used thrones and nations like stones on a stones board. *She wants to use me, too, somehow. If a king or a queen, why not a Wisdom? Just the way she’s using Rand. I’m no child, Aes Sedai.*

“What are you doing with Rand, now? Have you not used him enough? I don’t know why you have not had him gentled, now the Amyrlin’s here with all those other Aes Sedai, but you must have a reason.

It must be some plot you’re hatching. If the Amyrlin knew what you were up to, I wager she’d—”

Moiraine cut her off. “What possible interest could the Amyrlin have in a shepherd? Of course, if he were brought to her attention in the wrong way, he might be gentled, or even killed. He is what he is, after all. And there is considerable anger about last night. Everyone is looking for whom to blame.” The Aes Sedai fell silent, and let the silence stretch. Nynaeve stared at her, grinding her teeth.

“Yes,” Moiraine said finally, “much better to let a sleeping lion sleep. Best you see to your packing, now.” She moved off in the direction Lan had gone, seeming to glide across the floor.

Grimacing, Nynaeve swung her fist back against the wall; the ring dug at her palm. She opened her hand to look at it. The ring seemed to heat her anger, focus her hate. *I* will *learn. You think because you know, you can escape me. But I will learn better than you think, and I will pull you down for what you’ve done. For what you’ve done to Mat, and to Perrin. For Rand, the Light help him and the Creator shelter him. Especially for Rand.* Her hand closed around the heavy circlet of gold. *And for me.*

Egwene watched the liveried maid folding her dresses into a leather-covered travel chest, still a little uncomfortable, even after nearly a month’s practice, with someone else doing what she could very well have done herself. They were such beautiful dresses, all gifts from the Lady Amalisa, just like the gray silk riding dress she wore, though that was plain except for a few white morningstar blossoms worked on the breast. Many of the dresses were much more elaborate. Any one of them would shine at Sunday, or at Bel Tine. She sighed, remembering that she would be in Tar Valon for the next Sunday, not Emond’s Field. From the little Moiraine had told her of novice training—almost nothing, really—she expected she might not be home for Bel Tine, in the spring, or even the Sunday after that.

Nynaeve put her head into the room. “Are you ready?” She came the rest of the way in. “We must be down in the courtyard soon.” She wore a riding dress, too, in blue silk with red loversknots on the bosom. Another gift from Amalisa.

“Nearly, Nynaeve. I am almost sorry to be going. I don’t suppose we’ll have many chances in Tar Valon to wear the nice dresses Amalisa gave us.”

She gave an abrupt laugh. “Still, Wisdom, I won’t miss being able to bathe without looking over my shoulder the whole time.”

“Much better to bathe alone,” Nynaeve said briskly. Her face did not change, but after a moment her cheeks colored.

Egwene smiled. *She’s thinking about Lan.* It was still odd to think of Nynaeve, the Wisdom, mooning after a man. She did not think it would be wise to put it to Nynaeve in quite that way, but of late, sometimes the Wisdom acted as strangely as any girl who had set her heart on a particular man. *And one who doesn’t have enough sense to be worthy of her, at that. She loves him, and I can see he loves her, so why can’t he have sense enough to speak up?*

“I don’t think you should call me Wisdom any longer,” Nynaeve said suddenly.

Egwene blinked. It was not required, exactly, and Nynaeve never insisted on it unless she was angry, or being formal, but this. . . . “Why ever not?”

“You are a woman, now.” Nynaeve glanced at her unbraided hair, and Egwene resisted the urge to hurriedly twist it into a semblance of a braid. Aes Sedai wore their hair any way they wanted, but wearing hers loose had become a symbol of starting on a new life. “You are a woman,” Nynaeve repeated firmly. “We are two women, a long way from Emond’s Field, and it will be longer still before we see home again. It will be better if you simply call me Nynaeve.”

“We will see home again, Nynaeve. We will.”

“Don’t try to comfort the Wisdom, girl,” Nynaeve said gruffly, but she smiled.

There was a knock at the door, but before Egwene could open it, Nisura came in, agitation all over her face. “Egwene, that young man of yours is trying to come into the women’s apartments.” She sounded scandalized. “And wearing a sword. Just because the Amyrlin let him enter that way. . . . Lord Rand should know better. He is causing an uproar. Egwene, you must speak to him.”

“Lord Rand,” Nynaeve snorted. “That young man is growing too big for his breeches. When I get my hands on him, I’ll lord him.”

Egwene put a hand on Nynaeve’s arm. “Let me speak to him, Nynaeve. Alone.”

"Oh, very well. The best of men are not much better than housebroken." Nynaeve paused, and added half to herself, "But then, the best of them are worth the trouble of housebreaking."

Egwene shook her head as she followed Nisura into the hall. Even half a year before, Nynaeve would never have added the second part. *But she'll never housebreak Lan.* Her thoughts turned to Rand. Causing an uproar, was he? "House break him?" she muttered. "If he hasn't learned manners by this time, I'll skin him alive."

"Sometimes that is what it takes," Nisura said, walking quickly. "Men are never more than half-civilized until they're wedded." She gave Egwene a sidelong glance. "Do you intend to marry Lord Rand? I do not mean to pry, but you are going to the White Tower, and Aes Sedai seldom wed—none but some of the Green Ajah, that I've ever heard, and not many of them—and. . . ."

Egwene could supply the rest. She had heard the talk in the women's apartments about a suitable wife for Rand. At first it had caused stabs of jealousy, and anger. He had been all but promised to her since they were children. But she was going to be an Aes Sedai, and he was what he was. A man who could channel. She could marry him. And watch him go mad, watch him die. The only way to stop it would be to have him gentled. *I can't do that to him. I can't!* "I do not know," she said sadly.

Nisura nodded. "No one will poach where you have a claim, but you are going to the Tower, and he will make a good husband. Once he has been trained. There he is."

The women gathered around the entrance to the women's apartments, both inside and out, were all watching three men in the hallway outside. Rand, with his sword buckled over his red coat, was being confronted by Agelmar and Kajin. Neither of them wore a sword; even after what had happened in the night, these were still the women's apartments. Egwene stopped at the back of the crowd.

"You understand why you cannot go in," Agelmar was saying. "I know that things are different in Andor, but you do understand?"

"I didn't try to go in." Rand sounded as if he had explained all this more than once already. "I told the Lady Nisura I wanted to see Egwene, and she said Egwene was busy, and I'd have to wait. All I did was shout for her from the door. I did not try to enter. You'd have thought I was naming the Dark One, the way they all started in on me."

“Women have their own ways,” Kajin said. He was tall for a Shienaran, almost as tall as Rand, lanky and sallow. His topknot was black as pitch. “They set the rules for the women’s apartments, and we abide by them even when they are foolish.” A number of eyebrows were raised among the women, and he hastily cleared his throat. “You must send a message in if you wish to speak to one of the women, but it will be delivered when they choose, and until it is, you must wait. That is our custom.”

“I have to see her,” Rand said stubbornly. “We’re leaving soon. Not soon enough for me, but I still have to see Egwene. We will get the Horn of Valere and the dagger back, and that will be the end of it. The end of it. But I want to see her before I go.” Egwene frowned; he sounded odd.

“No need to be so fierce,” Kajin said. “You and Ingtar will find the Horn, or not. And if not, then another will retrieve it. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and we are but threads in the Pattern.”

“Do not let the Horn seize you, Rand,” Agelmar said. “It can take hold of a man—I know how it can—and that is not the way. A man must seek duty, not glory. What will happen, will happen. If the Horn of Valere is meant to be sounded for the Light, then it will be.”

“Here is your Egwene,” Kajin said, spotting her.

Agelmar looked around, and nodded when he saw her with Nisura. “I will leave you in her hands, Rand al’Thor. Remember, here, her words are law, not yours. Lady Nisura, do not be too hard on him. He only wished to see his young woman, and he does not know our ways.”

Egwene followed Nisura as the Shienaran woman threaded her way through the watching women. Nisura inclined her head briefly to Agelmar and Kajin; she pointedly did not include Rand. Her voice was tight. “Lord Agelmar. Lord Kajin. He should know this much of our ways by now, but he is too big to spank, so I will let Egwene deal with him.”

Agelmar gave Rand a fatherly pat on the shoulder. “You see. You will speak with her, if not exactly in the way you wished. Come, Kajin. We have much to see to yet. The Amyrlin still insists on. . . .” His voice trailed away as he and the other man left. Rand stood there, looking at Egwene.

The women were still watching, Egwene realized. Watching her as well as Rand. Waiting to see what she would do. *So I’m supposed to deal with him, am I?* Yet she felt her heart going out to him. His hair needed brushing. His face showed anger, defiance, and weariness. “Walk with me,” she told him. A murmur started up behind them as he walked down the hall beside her, away from the women's apartments. Rand seemed to be struggling with himself, hunting for what to say.

"I've heard about your . . . exploits," she said finally. "Running through the women's apartments last night with a sword. Wearing a sword to an audience with the Amyrlin Seat." He still said nothing, only walked along frowning at the floor. "She didn't . . . hurt you, did she?" She could not make herself ask if he had been gentled; he looked anything but gentle, but she had no idea what a man looked like afterwards.

He gave a jerk. "No. She didn't. . . . Egwene, the Amyrlin. . . ." He shook his head. "She didn't hurt me."

She had the feeling he had been going to say something else entirely. Usually she could ferret out whatever he wanted to hide from her, but when he really wanted to be stubborn, she could more easily dig a brick out of a wall with her fingernails. By the set of his jaw, he was at his most stubborn right now.

"What did she want with you, Rand?"

"Nothing important. *Ta'veren.* She wanted to see *ta'veren.*" His face softened as he looked down at her. "What about you, Egwene? Are you all right? Moiraine said you would be, but you were so still. I thought you were dead, at first."

"Well, I'm not." She laughed. She could not remember anything that had happened after she had asked Mat to go to the dungeons with her, not until waking in her own bed that morning. From what she had heard of the night, she was almost glad she could not remember. "Moiraine said she would have left me a headache for being foolish if she could have Healed the rest and not that, but she couldn't."

"I told you Fain was dangerous," he muttered. "I told you, but you wouldn't listen."

"If that's the way you are going to talk," she said firmly, "I will give you back to Nisura. She won't talk to you the way I am. The last man who tried to push his way into the women's apartments spent a month up to his elbows in soapy water, helping with the women's laundry, and he was only trying to find his betrothed and make up an argument. At least he knew enough not to wear his sword. The Light knows what they'd do to you."

"Everybody wants to do something to me," he growled. "Everybody wants to use me for something. Well, I won't be used. Once we find the

Horn, and Mat’s dagger, I’ll never be used again.”

With an exasperated grunt, she caught his shoulders and made him face her. She glared up at him. “If you don’t start talking sense, Rand al’Thor, I swear I will box your ears.”

“Now you sound like Nynaeve.” He laughed. As he looked down at her, though, his laughter faded. “I suppose—I suppose I’ll never see you again. I know you have to go to Tar Valon. I know that. And you’ll become an Aes Sedai. I am done with Aes Sedai, Egwene. I won’t be a puppet for them, not for Moiraine, or any of them.”

He looked so lost she wanted to put his head on her shoulder, and so stubborn she really did want to box his ears. “Listen to me, you great ox. I *am* going to be an Aes Sedai, and I’ll find a way to help you. I will.”

“The next time you see me, you will likely want to gentle me.”

She looked around hastily; they were alone in their stretch of the hall. “If you don’t watch your tongue, I will not be able to help you. Do you want everyone to know?”

“Too many know already,” he said. “Egwene, I wish things were different, but they aren’t. I wish. . . . Take care of yourself. And promise me you won’t choose the Red Ajah.”

Tears blurred her vision as she threw her arms around him. “You take care of yourself,” she said fiercely into his chest. “If you don’t, I’ll—I’ll. . . .” She thought she heard him murmur, “I love you,” and then he was firmly unwrapping her arms, gently moving her away from him. He turned and strode away from her, almost running.

She jumped when Nisura touched her arm. “He looks as if you set him a task he won’t enjoy. But you mustn’t let him see you cry over it. That negates the purpose. Come. Nynaeve wants you.”

Scrubbing her cheeks, Egwene followed the other woman. *Take care of yourself, you wool-headed lummox. Light, take care of him.*

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CHAPTER

9

Leavetakings

The outer courtyard was in ordered turmoil when Rand finally reached it with his saddlebags and the bundle containing the harp and flute. The sun climbed toward midday. Men hurried around the horses, tugging at saddle girths and packharness, voices raised. Others darted with last-minute additions to the packsaddles, or water for the men working, or dashed off to fetch something just remembered. But everyone seemed to know exactly what they were doing and where they were going. The guardwalks and archers' balconies were crowded again, and excitement crackled in the morning air. Hooves clattered on the paving stones. One of the packhorses began kicking, and stablemen ran to calm it. The smell of horses hung thick. Rand's cloak tried to flap in the breeze that rippled the swooping-hawk banners on the towers, but his bow, slung across his back, held it down.

From outside the open gates came the sounds of the Amyrlin's pikemen and archers forming up in the square. They had marched around from a side gate. One of the trumpeters tested his horn.

Some of the Warders glanced at Rand as he walked across the courtyard; a few raised eyebrows when they saw the heron-mark sword, but none spoke. Half wore the cloaks that were so queasy-making to look at. Mandarb, Lan's stallion, was there, tall, and black, and fierce-eyed, but the man himself was not, and none of the Aes Sedai, none of the women, were in evidence yet either. Moiraine's white mare, Aldieb, stepped daintily beside the stallion.

Rand's bay stallion was with the other group on the far side of the courtyard, with Ingtar, and a bannerman holding Ingtar's Gray Owl banner, and twenty other armored men with lances tipped with two feet of steel, all mounted already. The bars of their helmets covered their faces, and golden surcoats with the Black Hawk on the chest hid their plate-and-mail. Only Ingtar's helmet had a crest, a crescent moon above his brow, points up.

Rand recognized some of the men. Rough-tongued Uno, with a long scar down his face and only one eye. Ragan and Masema. Others who had exchanged a word, or played a game of stones. Ragan waved to him, and Uno nodded, but Masema was not the only one who gave him a cold stare and turned away. Their packhorses stood placidly, tails swishing.

The big bay danced as Rand tied his saddlebags and bundle behind the high-cantled saddle. He put his foot in the stirrup and murmured, “Easy, Red,” as he swung into the saddle, but he let the stallion frisk away some of his stable-bound energy.

To Rand’s surprise, Loial appeared from the direction of the stables, riding to join them. The Ogier’s hairy-fetlocked mount was as big and heavy as a prime Dhurran stallion. Beside it, all the other animals looked the size of Bela, but with Loial in the saddle, the horse seemed almost a pony.

Loial carried no weapon that Rand could see; he had never heard of any Ogier using a weapon. Their *stedding* were protection enough. And Loial had his own priorities, his own ideas of what was needed for a journey. The pockets of his long coat had a telltale bulge, and his saddlebags showed the square imprints of books.

The Ogier stopped his horse a little way off and looked at Rand, his tufted ears twitching uncertainly.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” Rand said. “I’d think you would have had enough of traveling with us. This time there’s no telling how long it will be, or where we will end up.”

Loial’s ears lifted a little. “There was no telling when I first met you, either. Besides, what held then, holds now. I can’t let the chance pass to see history actually weave itself around *ta’veren*. And to help find the Horn. . . .”

Mat and Perrin rode up behind Loial and paused. Mat looked a little tired around the eyes, but his face wore a bloom of health.

“Mat,” Rand said, “I’m sorry for what I said. Perrin, I didn’t mean it. I was being stupid.”

Mat only glanced at him, then shook his head and mouthed something to Perrin that Rand could not hear. Mat had only his bow and quiver, but Perrin also wore his axe at his belt, with its big half-moon blade balanced by a thick spike.

“Mat? Perrin? Really, I didn’t—” They rode on toward Ingtar.

“That is not a coat for traveling, Rand,” Loial said.

Rand glanced down at the golden thorns climbing his crimson sleeve and grimaced. *Small wonder Mat and Perrin still think I’m putting on airs.* On returning to his room he had found everything already packed and sent on. All of the plain coats he had been given were on the packhorses, so the servants said; every coat left in the wardrobe was at least as ornate as the one he wore. His saddlebags held nothing in the way of clothes but a few shirts, some wool stockings, and a spare pair of breeches. At least he had removed the golden cord from his sleeve, though he had the red eagle pin in his pocket. Lan had meant it for a gift, after all.

“I’ll change when we stop tonight,” he muttered. He took a deep breath. “Loial, I said things to you I should not have, and I hope you’ll forgive me. You have every right to hold them against me, but I hope you won’t.”

Loial grinned, and his ears stood up. He moved his horse closer. “I say things I should not all the time. The Elders always said I spoke an hour before I thought.”

Suddenly Lan was at Rand’s stirrup, in his gray-green scaled armor that would make him all but disappear in forest or darkness. “I need to talk to you, sheepherder.” He looked at Loial. “Alone, if you please, Builder.” Loial nodded and moved his big horse away.

“I don’t know if I should listen to you,” Rand told the Warder. “These fancy clothes, and all those things you told me, they didn’t help much.”

“When you can’t win a big victory, sheepherder, learn to settle for the small ones. If you made them think of you as something more than a farmboy who’ll be easy to handle, then you won a small victory. Now be quiet and listen. I’ve only time for one last lesson, the hardest. Sheathing the Sword.”

“You’ve spent an hour every morning making me do nothing but draw this bloody sword and put it back in the scabbard. Standing, sitting, lying down. I think I can manage to get it back in the sheath without cutting myself.”

“I said listen, sheepherder,” the Warder growled. “There will come a time when you must achieve a goal at all costs. It may come in attack or in defense. And the only way will be to allow the sword to be sheathed in your own body.”

“That’s crazy,” Rand said. “Why would I ever—?”

The Warder cut him off. “You will know when it comes, sheepherder, when the price is worth the gain, and there is no other choice left to you. That is called Sheathing the Sword. Remember it.”

The Amyrlin appeared, striding across the crowded courtyard with Leane and her staff, and Lord Agelmar at her shoulder. Even in a green velvet coat, the Lord of Fal Dara did not look out of place among so many armored men. There was still no sign of the other Aes Sedai. As they went by, Rand caught part of their conversation.

“But, Mother,” Agelmar was protesting, “you’ve had no time to rest from the journey here. Stay at least a few days more. I promise you a feast tonight such as you could hardly get in Tar Valon.”

The Amyrlin shook her head without breaking stride. “I cannot, Agelmar. You know I would if I could. I had never planned to remain long, and matters urgently require my presence in the White Tower. I should be there now.”

“Mother, it shames me that you come one day and leave the next. I swear to you, there will be no repetition of last night. I have tripled the guard on the city gates as well as the keep. I have tumblers in from the town, and a bard coming from Mos Shirare. Why, King Easar will be on his way from Fal Moran. I sent word as soon as. . . .”

Their voices faded as they crossed the courtyard, swallowed up by the din of preparation. The Amyrlin never as much as glanced in Rand’s direction.

When Rand looked down, the Warder was gone, and nowhere to be seen. Loial brought his horseback to Rand’s side. “That is a hard man to catch and hold, isn’t he, Rand? He’s not here, then he’s here, then he’s gone, and you don’t see him coming or going.”

Sheathing the Sword. Rand shivered. *Warders must all be crazy.*

The Warder the Amyrlin was speaking to suddenly sprang into his saddle. He was at a dead gallop before he reached the wide-standing gates. She stood watching him go, and her stance seemed to urge him to go faster.

“Where is he headed in such a hurry?” Rand wondered aloud.

“I heard,” Loial said, “that she was sending someone out today, all the way to Arad Doman. There is word of some sort of trouble on Almoth Plain, and the Amyrlin Seat wants to know exactly what. What I don’t understand is, why now? From what I hear, the rumors of this trouble came from Tar Valon with the Aes Sedai.”

Rand felt cold. Egwene’s father had a big map back at home, a map Rand had pored over more than once, dreaming before he found out what the dreams were like when they came true. It was old, that map, showing some lands and nations the merchants from outside said no longer existed, but Almoth Plain was marked, butting against Toman Head. *We will meet again on Toman Head.* It was all the way across the world he knew, on the Aryth Ocean. “It has nothing to do with us,” he whispered. “Nothing to do with me.”

Loial appeared not to have heard. Rubbing the side of his nose with a finger like a sausage, the Ogier was still peering at the gate where the Warder had vanished. “If she wanted to know, why not send someone before she left Tar Valon? But you humans are always sudden and excitable, always jumping around and shouting.” His ears stiffened with embarrassment. “I *am* sorry, Rand. You see what I mean about speaking before I think. I’m rash and excitable sometimes myself, as you know.”

Rand laughed. It was a weak laugh, but it felt good to have something to laugh at. “Maybe if we lived as long as you Ogier, we’d be more settled.” Loial was ninety years old; by Ogier standards, not old enough by ten years to be outside the *stedding* alone. That he had gone anyway was proof, he maintained, of his rashness. If Loial was an excitable Ogier, Rand thought most of them must be made of stone.

“Perhaps so,” Loial mused, “but you humans do so much with your lives. We do nothing but huddle in our *stedding.* Planting the groves, and even the building, were all done before the Long Exile ended.” It was the groves Loial held dear, not the cities men remembered the Ogier for building. It was the groves, planted to remind Ogier Builders of the *stedding*, that Loial had left his home to see. “Since we found our way back to the *stedding*, we. . . .” His words trailed off as the Amyrlin approached.

Ingtar and the other men shifted in their saddles, preparing to dismount and kneel, but she motioned them to stay as they were. Leane stood at her shoulder, and Agelmar a pace back. From his glum face, he appeared to have given up trying to convince her to remain longer.

The Amyrlin looked at them one by one before she spoke. Her gaze stayed on Rand no longer than on any other.

“Peace favor your sword, Lord Ingtar,” she said finally. “Glory to the Builders, Loial Kiseran.”

“You honor us, Mother. May peace favor Tar Valon.” Ingtar bowed in his saddle, and the other Shienarans did, too.

“All honor to Tar Valon,” Loial said, bowing.

Only Rand, and his two friends on the other side of the party, stayed upright. He wondered what she had said to them. Leane’s frown took in all three of them, and Agelmar’s eyes widened, but the Amyrlin took no notice.

“You ride to find the Horn of Valere,” she said, “and the hope of the world rides with you. The Horn cannot be left in the wrong hands, especially in Darkfriend hands. Those who come to answer its call, will come whoever blows it, and they are bound to the Horn, not to the Light.”

There was a stir among the listening men. Everyone believed that those heroes called back from the grave would fight for the Light. If they could fight for the Shadow, instead. . . .

The Amyrlin went on, but Rand was no longer listening. The watcher was back. The hair stirred on the back of his neck. He peered up at the packed archers’ balconies overlooking the courtyard, at the rows of people jammed along the guardwalks atop the walls. Somewhere among them was the set of eyes that had followed him unseen. The gaze clung to him like dirty oil. *It can’t be a Fade, not here. Then who? Or what?* He twisted in his saddle, pulling Red around, searching. The bay began to dance again.

Suddenly something flashed across in front of Rand’s face. A man passing behind the Amyrlin cried out and fell, a black-fletched arrow jutting from his side. The Amyrlin stood calmly looking at a rent in her sleeve; blood slowly stained the gray silk.

A woman screamed, and abruptly the courtyard rang with cries and shouts. The people on the walls milled furiously, and every man in the courtyard had his sword out. Even Rand, he was surprised to realize.

Agelmar shook his blade at the sky. “Find him!” he roared. “Bring him to me!” His face went from red to white when he saw the blood on the Amyrlin’s sleeve. He fell to his knees, head bowed. “Forgive, Mother. I have failed your safety. I am ashamed.”

“Nonsense, Agelmar,” the Amyrlin said. “Leane, stop fussing over me and see to that man. I’ve cut myself worse than this more than once cleaning fish, and he needs help now. Agelmar, stand up. Stand up, Lord of Fal Dara. You have not failed me, and you have no reason for shame. Last year in the White Tower, with my own guards at every gate and Warders all around me, a man with a knife came within five steps of me. A Whitecloak, no doubt, though I've no proof. Please stand up, or I will be shamed." As Agelmar slowly rose, she fingered her sliced sleeve. "A poor shot for a Whitecloak bowman, or even a Darkfriend." Her eyes flickered up to touch Rand's. "If it was at me he aimed." Her gaze was gone before he could read anything on her face, but he suddenly wanted to dismount and hide.

It wasn't aimed at her, and she knows it.

Leane straightened from where she had been kneeling. Someone had laid a cloak over the face of the man who had taken the arrow. "He is dead, Mother." She sounded tired. "He was dead when he struck the ground. Even if I had been at his side. . . ."

"You did what you could, Daughter. Death cannot be Healed."

Agelmar moved closer. "Mother, if there are Whitecloak killers about, or Darkfriends, you must allow me to send men with you. As far as the river, at least. I could not live if harm came to you in Shienar. Please, return to the women's apartments. I will see them guarded with my life until you are ready to travel."

"Be at ease," she told him. "This scratch will not delay me a moment. Yes, yes, I will gladly accept your men as far as the river, if you insist. But I will not let this delay Lord Ingtar a moment, either. Every heartbeat counts until the Horn is found again. Your leave, Lord Agelmar, to order your oathmen?"

He bowed his head in assent. At that moment he would have given her Fal Dara had she asked.

The Amyrlin turned back to Ingtar and the men gathered behind him. She did not look at Rand again. He was surprised to see her smile suddenly.

"I wager Illian does not give its Great Hunt of the Horn so rousing a send-off," she said. "But yours is the true Great Hunt. You are few, so you may travel quickly, yet enough to do what you must. I charge you, Lord Ingtar of House Shinowa, I charge all of you, find the Horn of Valere, and let nothing bar your way."

Ingtar whipped his sword from his back and kissed the blade. "By my life and soul, by my House and honor, I swear it, Mother."

"Then ride."

Ingtar swung his horse toward the gate.

Rand dug his heels into Red's flanks and galloped after the column already disappearing through the gates.

Unaware of what had occurred within, the Amyrlin's pikemen and archers stood walling a path from the gates to the city proper, the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests. Her drummers and trumpeters waited near the gates, ready to fall in when she left. Behind the rows of armored men, people packed the square in front of the keep. Some cheered Ingtar's banner, and others no doubt thought this was the start of the Amyrlin Seat's departure. A swelling roar followed Rand across the square.

He caught up with Ingtar where low-eaved houses and shops stood to either side, and more people thickly lined the stone-paved street. Some of them cheered, too. Mat and Perrin had been riding at the head of the column with Ingtar and Loial, but the two of them fell back when Rand joined them. *How am I ever going to apologize if they won't stay near me long enough for me to say anything? Burn me, he doesn't* look *like he's dying.*

"Changu and Nidao are gone," Ingtar said abruptly. He sounded cold and angry, but shaken, too. "We counted every head in the keep, alive or dead, last night and again this morning. They are the only ones not accounted for."

"Changu was on guard in the dungeon yesterday," Rand said slowly.

"And Nidao. They had the second watch. They always stayed together, even if they had to trade or do extra duty for it. They were not on guard when it happened, but. . . . They fought at Tarwin's Gap, a month gone, and saved Lord Agelmar when his horse went down with Trollocs all around him. Now this. Darkfriends." He drew a deep breath. "Everything is breaking apart."

A man on horseback forced his way through the throng lining the street and joined in behind Ingtar. He was a townsman, by his clothes, lean, with a lined face and graying hair cut long. A bundle and waterbottles were lashed behind his saddle, and a short-bladed sword and a notched sword-breaker hung at his belt, along with a cudgel.

Ingtar noticed Rand's glances. "This is Hurin, our sniffer. There was no need to let the Aes Sedai know about him. Not that what he does is wrong, you understand. The King keeps a sniffer in Fal Moran, and there's another in Ankor Dail. It's just that Aes Sedai seldom like what they do not understand, and with him being a man. . . . It's nothing to do with the Power, of course. Aaaah! You tell him, Hurin."

"Yes, Lord Ingtar," the man said. He bowed low to Rand from his saddle. "Honor to serve, my Lord."

“Call me Rand.” Rand stuck out his hand, and after a moment Hurin grinned and took it.

“As you wish, my Lord Rand. Lord Ingtar and Lord Kajin don’t mind a man’s ways—and Lord Agelmar, of course—but they say in the town you’re an outland prince from the south, and some outland lords are strict for every man in his place.”

“I’m not a lord.” *At least I’ll get away from that, now.* “Just Rand.”

Hurin blinked. “As you wish, my Lor—ah—Rand. I’m a sniffer, you see. Been one four years this Sunday. I never heard of such a thing before then, but I hear there’s a few others like me. It started slow, catching bad smells where nobody else smelled anything, and it grew. Took a whole year before I realized what it was. I could smell violence, the killing and the hurting. Smell where it happened. Smell the trail of those who did it. Every trail’s different, so there’s no chance of mixing them up. Lord Ingtar heard of it, and took me in his service, to serve the King’s justice.”

“You can smell violence?” Rand said. He could not help looking at the man’s nose. It was an ordinary nose, not large, not small. “You mean you can really follow somebody who, say, killed another man? By smell?”

“I can that, my Lor—ah—Rand. It fades with time, but the worse the violence, the longer it lasts. Aiie, I can smell a battlefield ten years old, though the trails of the men who were there are gone. Up near the Blight, the trails of the Trollocs almost never fade. Not much to a Trolloc but killing and hurting. A fight in a tavern, though, with maybe a broken arm . . . that smell’s gone in hours.”

“I can see where you wouldn’t want Aes Sedai to find out.”

“Ah, Lord Ingtar was right about the Aes Sedai, the Light illumine them—ah—Rand. There was one in Cairhien once—Brown Ajah, but I swear I thought she was Red before she let me go—she kept me a month trying to find out how I do it. She didn’t like not knowing. She kept muttering, ‘Is it old come again, or new?’ and staring at me until you would have thought I *was* using the One Power. Almost had me doubting myself. But I haven’t gone mad, and I don’t *do* anything. I just smell it.”

Rand could not help remembering Moiraine. *Old barriers weaken. There is something of dissolution and change about our time. Old things walk again, and new things are born. We may live to see the end of an Age.* He shivered. “So we’ll track those who took the Horn with your nose.”

Ingtar nodded. Hurin grinned proudly, and said, “We will that—ah—Rand. I followed a murderer to Cairhien, once, and another all the way to Maradon, to bring them back for the King’s justice.” His grin faded, and he looked troubled. “This is the worst ever, though. Murder smells bad, and the trail of a murderer stinks with it, but this. . . .” His nose wrinkled. “There were men in it last night. Darkfriends, must be, but you can’t tell a Darkfriend by smell. What I’ll follow is the Trollocs, and the Halfmen. And something even worse.” He trailed off, frowning and muttering to himself, but Rand could hear it. “Something even worse, the Light help me.”

They reached the city gates, and just beyond the walls Hurin lifted his face to the breeze. His nostrils flared, then he gave a snort of disgust. “That way, my Lord Ingtar.” He pointed south.

Ingtar looked surprised. “Not toward the Blight?”

“No, Lord Ingtar. Faugh!” Hurin wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I can almost taste them. South, they went.”

“She was right, then, the Amyrlin Seat,” Ingtar said slowly. “A great and wise woman, who deserves better than me to serve her. Take the trail, Hurin.”

Rand turned and peered back through the gates, up the street to the keep. He hoped Egwene was all right. *Nynaeve will look after her. Maybe it’s better this way, like a clean cut, too quick to hurt till after it’s done.*

He rode after Ingtar and the Gray Owl banner, south. The wind was making up, and cold against his back despite the sun. He thought he heard laughter in it, faint and mocking.

The waxing moon lit the humid, night-dark streets of Illian, which still rang with celebration left over from daylight. In only a few more days, the Great Hunt of the Horn would be sent forth with pomp and ceremony that tradition claimed dated to the Age of Legends. The festivities for the Hunters had blended into the Feast of Teven, with its famed contests and prizes for gleemen. The greatest prize of all, as always, would go for the best telling of *The Great Hunt of the Horn.*

Tonight the gleemen entertained in the palaces and mansions of the city, where the great and mighty disported themselves, and the Hunters come from every nation to ride out and find, if not the Horn of Valere itself, at least immortality in song and story. They would have music and dancing, and fans and ices to dispel the year’s first real heat, but carnival filled the streets, too, in the moon-bright muggy night. Every day was a carnival, until the Hunt departed, and every night.

People ran past Bayle Domon in masks and costumes bizarre and fanciful, many showing too much flesh. Shouting and singing they ran, a half dozen together, then scattered pairs giggling and clutching each other, then twenty in a raucous knot. Fireworks crackled in the sky, gold and silver bursts against the black. There were almost as many Illuminators in the city as there were gleemen.

Domon spared little thought for fireworks, or for the Hunt. He was on his way to meet men he thought might be trying to kill him.

He crossed the Bridge of Flowers, over one of the city's many canals, into the Perfumed Quarter, the port district of Illian. The canal smelled of too many chamber pots, with never a sign that there had ever been flowers near the bridge. The quarter smelled of hemp and pitch from the shipyards and docks, and sour harbor mud, all of it made fiercer by heated air that seemed nearly damp enough to drink. Domon breathed heavily; every time he returned from the northcountry he found himself surprised, for all he had been born there, at the early summer heat in Illian.

In one hand he carried a stout cudgel, and the other hand rested on the hilt of the short sword he had often used in defending the decks of his river trader from brigands. No few footpads stalked these nights of revelry, where the pickings were rich and most were deep in wine.

Yet he was a broad, muscular man, and none of those out for a catch of gold thought him rich enough, in his plain-cut coat, to risk his size and his cudgel. The few who caught a clear glimpse of him, when he passed through light spilling from a window, edged back till he was well past. Dark hair that hung to his shoulders and a long beard that left his upper lip bare framed a round face, but that face had never been soft, and now it was set as grimly as if he meant to batter his way through a wall. He had men to meet, and he was not happy about it.

More revelers ran past singing off-key, wine mangling their words. *"The Horn of Valere," my aged grandmother!* Domon thought glumly. *It be my ship I do want to hang on to. And my life, Fortune prick me.*

He pushed into an inn, under a sign of a big, white-striped badger dancing on its hind legs with a man carrying a silver shovel. Easing the Badger, it was called, though not even Nieda Sidoro, the innkeeper, knew what the name meant; there had always been an inn of the name in Illian.

The common room, with sawdust on the floor and a musician softly strumming a twelve-stringed bittern in one of the Sea Folk's sad songs, was well lighted and quiet. Nieda allowed no commotion in her place, and her nephew, Bili, was big enough to carry a man out with either hand. Sailors, dockworkers, and warehousemen came to the Badger for a drink and maybe a little talk, for a game of stones or darts. The room was half full now; even men who liked quiet had been lured out by carnival. The talk was soft, but Domon caught mentions of the Hunt, and of the false Dragon the Murandians had taken, and of the one the Tairens were chasing through Haddon Mirk. There seemed to be some question whether it would be preferable to see the false Dragon die, or the Tairens.

Domon grimaced. *False Dragons! Fortune prick me, there be no place safe these days.* But he had no real care for false Dragons, any more than for the Hunt.

The stout proprietress, with her hair rolled at the back of her head, was wiping a mug, keeping a sharp eye on her establishment. She did not stop what she was doing, or even look at him, really, but her left eyelid drooped, and her eyes slanted toward three men at a table in the corner. They were quiet even for the Badger, almost somber, and their bell-shaped velvet caps and dark coats, embroidered across the chest in bars of silver and scarlet and gold, stood out among the plain dress of the other patrons.

Domon sighed and took a table in a corner by himself. *Cairhienin, this time.* He took a mug of brown ale from a serving girl and drew a long swallow. When he lowered the mug, the three men in striped coats were standing beside his table. He made an unobtrusive gesture, to let Nieda know that he did not need Bili.

"Captain Domon?" They were all three nondescript, but there was an air about the speaker that made Domon take him for their leader. They did not appear to be armed; despite their fine clothes, they looked as if they did not need to be. There were hard eyes in those so very ordinary faces. "Captain Bayle Domon, of the *Spray*?"

Domon gave a short nod, and the three sat down without waiting for an invitation. The same man did the talking; the other two just watched, hardly blinking. *Guards*, Domon thought, *for all their fine clothes. Who do he be to have a pair of guards to look over him?*

"Captain Domon, we have a personage who must be brought from Mayene to Illian."

“*Spray* be a river craft,” Domon cut him off. “Her draft be shallow, and she has no the keel for deep water.” It was not exactly true, but close enough for landsmen. *At least it be a change from Tear. They be getting smarter.*

The man seemed unperturbed at the interruption. “We had heard you were giving up the river trade.”

“Maybe I do, and maybe no. I have no decided.” He had, though. He would not go back upriver, back to the Borderlands, for all the silk shipped in Tairen bottoms. Saldaean furs and ice peppers were not worth it, and it had nothing to do with the false Dragon he had heard of there. But he wondered again how anyone knew. He had not spoken of it to anyone, yet the others had known, too.

“You can coast to Mayene easily enough. Surely, Captain, you would be willing to sail along the shoreline for a thousand gold marks.”

Despite himself, Domon goggled. It was four times the last offer, and that had been enough to make a man’s jaw drop. “Who do you want me to fetch for that? The First of Mayene herself? Has Tear finally forced her all the way out, then?”

“You need no names, Captain.” The man set a large leather pouch on the table, and a sealed parchment. The pouch clinked heavily as he pushed them across the table. The big red wax circle holding the folded parchment shut bore the many-rayed Rising Sun of Cairhien. “Two hundred on account. For a thousand marks, I think you need no names. Give that, seal unbroken, to the Port Captain of Mayene, and he will give you three hundred more, and your passenger. I will hand over the remainder when your passenger is delivered here. So long as you have made no effort to discover that personage’s identity.”

Domon drew a deep breath. *Fortune, it be worth the voyage if there be never another penny beyond what be in that sack.* And a thousand was more money than he would clear in three years. He suspected that if he probed a little more, there would be other hints, just hints, that the voyage involved hidden dealings between Illian’s Council of Nine and the First of Mayene. The First’s city-state was a province of Tear in all but name, and she would no doubt like Illian’s aid. And there were many in Illian who said it was time for another war, that Tear was taking more than a fair share of the trade on the Sea of Storms. A likely net to snare him, if he had not seen three like it in the past month.

He reached to take the pouch, and the man who had done all the talking caught his wrist. Domon glared at him, but he looked back undisturbed.

“You must sail as soon as possible, Captain.”

“At first light,” Domon growled, and the man nodded and released his hold.

“At first light, then, Captain Domon. Remember, discretion keeps a man alive to spend his money.”

Domon watched the three of them leave, then stared sourly at the pouch and the parchment on the table in front of him. Someone wanted him to go east. Tear or Mayene, it did not matter so long as he went east. He thought he knew who wanted it. *And then again, I have no a clue to them.* Who could know who was a Darkfriend? But he knew that Darkfriends had been after him since before he left Marabon to come back downriver. Darkfriends and Trollocs. Of that, he was sure. The real question, the one he had not even a glimmer of an answer for, was why?

“Trouble, Bayle?” Nieda asked. “You do look as if you had seen a Trolloc.” She giggled, an improbable sound from a woman her size. Like most people who had never been to the Borderlands, Nieda did not believe in Trollocs. He had tried telling her the truth of it; she enjoyed his stories, and thought they were all lies. She did not believe in snow, either.

“No trouble, Nieda.” He untied the pouch, dug a coin out without looking, and tossed it to her. “Drinks for everyone till that do run out, then I’ll give you another.”

Nieda looked at the coin in surprise. “A Tar Valon mark! Do you be trading with the witches now, Bayle?”

“No,” he said hoarsely. “That I do not!”

She bit the coin, then quickly snugged it away behind her broad belt. “Well, it be gold for that. And I suspect the witches be no so bad as some make them out, anyway. I’d no say so much to many men. I know a money changer who do handle such. You’ll no have to give me another, with as few as be here tonight. More ale for you, Bayle?”

He nodded numbly, though his mug was still almost full, and she trundled off. She was a friend, and would not speak of what she had seen. He sat staring at the leather pouch. Another mug was brought before he could make himself open it enough to look at the coins inside. He stirred them with a callused finger. Gold marks glittered up at him in the lamplight, every one of them bearing the damning Flame of Tar Valon. Hurriedly he tied the bag. Dangerous coins. One or two might pass, but so many would say to most people exactly what Nieda thought. There were Children of the Light in the city, and although there was no law in Illian against dealing with Aes Sedai, he would never make it to a magistrate if the Whitecloaks heard of this. These men had made sure he would not simply take the gold and stay in Illian.

While he was sitting there worrying, Yarin Maeldan, his brooding, stork-like second on *Spray*, came into the Badger with his brows pulled down to his long nose and stood over the captain's table. "Carn's dead, Captain."

Domon stared at him, frowning. Three others of his men had already been killed, one each time he refused a commission that would take him east. The magistrates had done nothing; the streets were dangerous at night, they said, and sailors a rough and quarrelsome lot. Magistrates seldom troubled themselves with what happened in the Perfumed Quarter, as long as no respectable citizens were injured.

"But this time I did accept them," he muttered.

" 'Tisn't all, Captain," Yarin said. "They worked Carn with knives, like they wanted him to tell them something. And some more men tried to sneak aboard *Spray* not an hour gone. The dock watch ran them off. Third time in ten days, and I never knew wharf rats to be so persistent. They like to let an alarm die down before they try again. And somebody tossed my room at the Silver Dolphin last night. Took some silver, so I'd think it was thieves, but they left that belt buckle of mine, the one set with garnets and moonstones, lying right out in plain sight. What's going on, Captain? The men are afraid, and I'm a little nervous myself."

Domon reared to his feet. "Roust the crew, Yarin. Find them and tell them *Spray* sails as soon as there do be men enough aboard to handle her." Stuffing the parchment into his coat pocket, he snatched up the bag of gold and pushed his second out the door ahead of him. "Roust them, Yarin, for I'll leave any man who no makes it, standing on the quay as he is."

Domon gave Yarin a shove to start him running, then stalked off toward the docks. Even footpads who heard the clinking of the pouch he carried steered clear of him, for he walked now like a man going to do murder.

There were already crewmen scrambling aboard *Spray* when he arrived, and more running barefoot down the stone quay. They did not know what he feared was pursuing him, or even that anything did pursue him, but they knew he made good profits, and after the Illianer way, he gave shares to the crew.

Spray was eighty feet long, with two masts, and broad in the beam, with room for deck cargo as well as in the holds. Despite what Domon had told the Cairhienin—if they had been Cairhienin—he thought she could stand the open water. The Sea of Storms was quieter in the summer.

"She'll have to," he muttered, and strode below to his cabin.

He tossed the sack of gold on his bed, built neatly against the hull like everything else in the stern cabin, and dug out the parchment. Lighting a lantern, hanging in its swivel from the overhead, he studied the sealed document, turning it as if he could read what was inside without opening it. A rap on the door made him frown.

"Come."

Yarin stuck his head in. "They're all aboard but three I couldn't find, Captain. But I've spread the word through every tavern, hell, and crib in the quarter. They'll be aboard before it's light enough to start upriver."

"*Spray* do sail now. To sea." Domon cut off Yarin's protests about light and tides, and *Spray* not being built for the open sea. "Now! *Spray* can clear the bars at dead low tide. You've no forgotten how to sail by the stars, have you? Take her out, Yarin. Take her out now, and come back to me when we be beyond the breakwater."

His second hesitated—Domon never let a tricky bit of sailing pass without him on deck giving orders, and taking *Spray* out in the night would be all of that, shallow draft or no—then nodded and vanished. In moments the sounds of Yarin shouting orders and bare feet thumping on the decks overhead penetrated Domon's cabin. He ignored them, even when the ship lurched, catching the tide.

Finally he lifted the mantle of the lantern and stuck a knife into the flame. Smoke curled up as oil burned off the blade, but before the metal could turn red, he pushed charts out of the way and pressed the parchment flat on his desk, working the hot steel slowly under the sealing wax. The top fold lifted.

It was a simple document, without preamble or salutation, and it made sweat break out on his forehead.

The bearer of this is a Darkfriend wanted in Cairhien for murders and other foul crimes, least among them, theft from Our Person. We call upon you to seize this man and all things found in his keeping, to the smallest. Our representative will come to carry away what he has stolen from Us. Let all he possesses, save what We claim, go to you as reward for taking him. Let the vile miscreant himself be hanged immediately, that his Shadow-spawned villainy no longer taint the Light.

Sealed by Our Hand

Galldrian su Riatin Rie

King of Cairhien

Defender of the Dragonwall

In thin red wax below the signature were impressed the Rising Sun seal of Cairhien and the Five Stars of House Riatin.

"Defender of the Dragonwall, my aged grandmother," Domon croaked. "Fine right the man do have to call himself that any longer."

He examined the seals and signature minutely, holding the document close to the lamp, with his nose all but brushing the parchment, but he could find no flaw in the one, and for the other, he had no idea what Galldrian's hand looked like. If it was not the King himself who had signed it, he suspected that whoever had had made a good imitation of Galldrian's scrawl. In any case, it made no real difference. In Tear, the letter would be instantly damning in the hands of an Illianer. Or in Mayene, with Tairen influence so strong. There was no war now, and men from either port came and went freely, but there was as little love for Illianers in Tear as the other way round. Especially with an excuse like this.

For a moment he thought of putting the parchment into the lantern's flame—it was a dangerous thing to have, in Tear or Illian or anywhere he could imagine—but finally he tucked it carefully into a secret cubbyhole behind his desk, concealed by a panel only he knew how to open.

"My possessions, eh?"

He collected old things, as much as he could living on shipboard. What he could not buy, because it was too expensive or too large, he collected by seeing and remembering. All those remnants of times gone, those wonders scattered around the world that had first pulled him aboard a ship as boy. He had added four to his collection in Maradon this last trip, and it had been then that the Darkfriend pursuit began. And Trollocs, too, for a time. He had heard that Whitebridge had been burned to the ground right after he sailed from there, and there had been rumors of Myrddraal as well as Trollocs. It was that, all of it together, that had first convinced him he was not imagining things, that had had him on guard when that first odd commission was offered, too much money for a simple voyage to Tear, and a thin tale for a reason.

Digging into his chest, he set out on the desk what he had bought in Maradon. A lightstick, left from the Age of Legends, or so it was said. Certainly no one knew the making of them any longer. Expensive, that, and rarer than an honest magistrate. It looked like a plain glass rod, thicker than his thumb and not quite as long as his forearm, but when held in the hand it glowed as brightly as a lantern. Lightsticks shattered like glass, too; he had nearly lost *Spray* in the fire caused by the first he had owned. A small, age-dark ivory carving of a man holding a sword. The fellow who sold it claimed if you held it long enough you started to feel warm. Domon never had, and neither had any of the crew he let hold it, but it was old, and that was enough for Domon. The skull of a cat as big as a lion, and so old it was turned to stone. But no lion had ever had fangs, almost tusks, a foot long. And a thick disk the size of a man's hand, half white and half black, a sinuous line separating the colors. The shopkeeper in Maradon had said it was from the Age of Legends, thinking he lied, but Domon had haggled only a little before paying, because he recognized what the shopkeeper did not: the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai from before the Breaking of the World. Not a safe thing to have, precisely, but neither a thing to be passed up by a man with a fascination for the old.

And it was heartstone. The shopkeeper had never dared add that to what he thought were lies. No riverfront shopkeeper in Maradon could afford even one piece of *cuendillar.*

The disk felt hard and smooth in his hand, and not at all valuable except for its age, but he was afraid it was what his pursuers were after. Lightsticks, and ivory carvings, and even bones turned to stone, he had seen other times, other places. Yet even knowing what they wanted—if he did know—he still had no idea why, and he could no longer be sure who his pursuers were. Tar Valon marks, and an ancient Aes Sedai symbol. He scrubbed a hand across his lips; the taste of fear lay bitter on his tongue.

A knock at the door. He set the disk down and pulled an unrolled chart over what lay on his desk. “Come.”

Yarin entered. “We’re beyond the breakwater, Captain.”

Domon felt a flash of surprise, then anger with himself. He should never have gotten so engrossed that he failed to feel *Spray* lifting on the swells. “Make west, Yarin. See to it.”

“Ebou Dar, Captain?”

No far enough. No by five hundred leagues. “We’ll put in long enough for me to get charts and top the water barrels, then we do sail west.”

“West, Captain? Tremalking? The Sea Folk are tight with any traders but their own.”

“The Aryth Ocean, Yarin. Plenty of trade between Tarabon and Arad Doman, and hardly a Taraboner or Domani bottom to worry about. They do no like the sea, I have heard. And all those small towns on Toman Head, every one holding itself free of any nation at all. We can even pick up Saldaean furs and ice peppers brought down to Bandar Eban.”

Yarin shook his head slowly. He always looked at the dark side, but he was a good sailor. “Furs and peppers’ll cost more there than running upriver for them, Captain. And I hear there’s some kind of war. If Tarabon and Arad Doman are fighting, there may be no trade. I doubt we’ll make much off the towns on Toman Head alone, even if they are safe. Falme’s the largest, and it is not big.”

“The Taraboners and the Domani have always squabbled over Almoth Plain and Toman Head. Even if it has come to blows this time, a careful man can always find trade. West, Yarin.”

When Yarin had gone topside, Domon quickly added the black-and-white disk to the cubbyhole, and stowed the rest back in the bottom of his chest. *Darkfriends or Aes Sedai, I’ll no run the way they want me. Fortune prick me, I’ll no.*

Feeling safe for the first time in months, Domon went on deck as *Spray* heeled to catch the wind and put her bow west into the night-dark sea.

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CHAPTER

10

The Hunt Begins

Ingtar set a fast pace for the beginning of a long journey, fast enough that Rand worried a little about the horses. The animals could keep up the trot for hours, but there was still most of the day ahead, and likely days more beyond that. The way Ingtar's face was set, though, Rand thought he might intend to catch those who had stolen the Horn in the first day, in the first hour. Remembering his voice when he swore his oath to the Amyrlin Seat, Rand would not have been surprised. He kept his mouth shut, though. It was Lord Ingtar's command; as friendly as he had been to Rand, he still would not appreciate a shepherd giving advice.

Hurin rode a pace behind Ingtar, but it was the sniffer who led them south, pointing the way for Ingtar. The land was rolling, forested hills, thick with fir and leatherleaf and oak, but the path Hurin set led almost straight as an arrow, never wavering except to go around a few of the taller hills, where the way was clearly quicker around than over. The Gray Owl banner rippled in the wind.

Rand tried to ride with Mat and Perrin, but when Rand let his horse drop back to them, Mat nudged Perrin, and Perrin reluctantly galloped to the head of the column with Mat. Telling himself there was no point riding at the back by himself, Rand rode back to the front. They fell to the rear again, Mat again urging Perrin.

Burn them. I only want to apologize. He felt alone. It did not help that he knew it was his own fault.

Atop one hill, Uno dismounted to examine ground churned by hooves. He poked at some horse droppings and grunted. "Bloody well moving fast, my Lord." He had a voice that sounded as if he were shouting when he was just speaking. "We've not made up an hour on them. Burn me, we may have lost a flaming hour. They'll kill their bloody horses, the way they're going."

He fingered a hoofed track. “No horse, that. Bloody Trolloc. Some flaming goat feet over there.”

“We will catch them,” Ingtar said grimly.

“Our horses, my Lord. Does no good to ride them into the bloody ground before we do catch up, my Lord. Even if they do kill their horses, bloody Trollocs can keep going longer than horses.”

“We will catch them. Mount, Uno.”

Uno looked at Rand with his one eye, then shrugged and climbed into his saddle. Ingtar took them down the far slope at a run, half sliding all the way to the bottom, and galloped up the next.

Why did he look at me that way, Rand wondered. Uno was one of those who had never shown much friendliness toward him. It was not like Masema’s open dislike; Uno was not friendly with anyone except a few veterans as grizzled as himself. *Surely* he *doesn’t believe that tale about me being a lord.*

Uno spent his time studying the country ahead, but when he caught Rand looking at him, he gave back stare for stare, and never said a word. It did not mean much. He would stare Ingtar in the eye, too. That was Uno’s way.

The path chosen by the Darkfriends—*And what else,* Rand wondered; Hurin kept muttering about “something worse”—who had stolen the Horn never came close to any village. Rand saw villages, from one hilltop to another, with a mile or more of up-and-down country between, but there was never one close enough to make out the people in the streets. Or close enough for those people to make out a party heading south. There were farms, too, with low-eaved houses and tall barns and smoking chimneys, on hilltops and on hillsides and in the bottoms, but never one close enough for the farmer to have seen their quarry.

Eventually even Ingtar had to realize that the horses could not keep on as they were going. Rand heard muttered curses, and Ingtar pounded his thigh with a gauntleted fist, but finally he ordered everyone to dismount. They trotted, leading their horses, uphill and down, for a mile, then mounted and rode again. Then it was down again and trot. Trot a mile, then ride a mile. Trot, then ride.

Rand was surprised to see Loial grinning when they were down on the ground, toiling up a hill. The Ogier had been uneasy about riding and horses when they first met, preferring to trust to his own feet, but Rand thought he had long gotten over that.

“Do you like to run, Rand?” Loial laughed. “I do. I was the fastest in Stedding Shangtai. I outran a horse, once.”

Rand only shook his head. He did not want to waste breath on talk. He looked for Mat and Perrin, but they were still at the back, too many men between for Rand to make them out. He wondered how the Shienarans could manage this in their armor. Not a one of them slowed or voiced a complaint. Uno did not even look as if he were breaking a sweat, and the bannerman never let the Gray Owl waver.

It was a quick pace, but twilight began to close without any sight of those they hunted except their tracks. At last, reluctantly, Ingtar called a halt to make camp for the night in the forest. The Shienarans went about getting fires started and setting picket-lines for the horses with a smooth economy of effort born of long experience. Ingtar posted six guards, in pairs, for the first watch.

Rand’s first order of business was finding his bundle in the wicker panniers from the packhorses. It was not hard—there were few personal bundles among the supplies—but when he had it open, he let out a shout that brought every man in the camp erect with sword in hand.

Ingtar came running. “What is it? Peace, did someone get through? I did not hear the guards.”

“It’s these coats,” Rand growled, still staring at what he had unpacked. One coat was black, embroidered with silver thread, the other white worked in gold. Both had herons on the collars, and both were at least as ornate as the scarlet coat he was wearing. “The servants told me I had two good, serviceable coats in here. Look at them!”

Ingtar sheathed his sword over his shoulder. The other men began to settle back down. “Well, they are serviceable.”

“I can’t wear these. I can’t go around dressed like this all the time.”

“You can wear them. A coat’s a coat. I understand Moiraine Sedai herself saw to your packing. Maybe Aes Sedai do not exactly understand what a man wears in the field.” Ingtar grinned. “After we catch these Trollocs, perhaps we’ll have a feast. You will be dressed for it, at least, even if the rest of us are not.” He strolled back to where the cook fires were already burning.

Rand had not moved since Ingtar mentioned Moiraine. He stared at the coats. *What is she doing? Whatever it is, I will not be used.* He bundled everything together again and stuffed the bundle back into the pannier. *I can always go naked,* he thought bitterly.

Shienarans took turns at the cooking when they were in the field, and Masema was stirring the kettle when Rand returned to the fires. The smell of a stew made from turnips, onions, and dried meat settled over the camp. Ingtar was served first, and then Uno, but everyone else stood in line however they happened to come. Masema slopped a big ladle of stew on Rand's plate; Rand stepped back quickly to keep from getting the overflow on his coat, and made room for the next man while sucking a burned thumb. Masema stared at him, with a fixed grin that never reached his eyes. Until Uno stepped up and cuffed him.

"We didn't bloody bring enough for you to be spilling it on the flaming ground." The one-eyed man looked at Rand and left. Masema rubbed his ear, but his glare followed Rand.

Rand went to join Ingtar and Loial, sitting on the ground under a spreading oak. Ingtar had his helmet off, on the ground beside him, but otherwise he was fully armored. Mat and Perrin were already there, eating hungrily. Mat gave a broad sneer at Rand's coat, but Perrin barely looked up, golden eyes shining in the half-light from the fires, before bending back to his plate.

At least they didn't leave this time.

He sat cross-legged on the other side of Ingtar from them. "I wish I knew why Uno keeps looking at me. It's probably this bloody coat."

Ingtar paused thoughtfully around a mouthful of stew. Finally he said, "Uno no doubt wonders if you are worthy of a heron-mark blade." Mat snorted loudly, but Ingtar went on unperturbed. "Do not let Uno upset you. He would treat Lord Agelmar like a raw recruit if he could. Well, perhaps not Agelmar, but anyone else. He has a tongue like a file, but he gives good advice. He should; he's been campaigning since before I was born. Listen to his advice, don't mind his tongue, and you will do all right with Uno."

"I thought he was like Masema." Rand shoveled stew into his mouth. It was too hot, but he gulped it down. They had not eaten since leaving Fal Dara, and he had been too worried to eat that morning. His stomach rumbled, reminding him it was past time. He wondered if telling Masema he liked the food would help. “Masema acts like he hates me, and I don’t understand it.”

“Masema served three years in the Eastern Marches,” Ingtar said. “At Ankor Dail, against the Aiel.” He stirred his stew with his spoon, frowning. “I ask no questions, mind. If Lan Dai Shan and Moiraine Sedai want to say you are from Andor, from the Two Rivers, then you are. But Masema can’t get the look of the Aiel out of his head, and when he sees you. . . .” He shrugged. “I ask no questions.”

Rand dropped his spoon in the plate with a sigh. “Everybody thinks I’m somebody I am not. I am from the Two Rivers, Ingtar. I grew tabac with—with my father, and tended his sheep. That is what I am. A farmer and shepherd from the Two Rivers.”

“He’s from the Two Rivers,” Mat said scornfully. “I grew up with him, though you’d never know it now. You put this Aiel nonsense in his head on top of what’s already there, and the Light knows what we’ll have. An Aiel lord, maybe.”

“No,” Loial said, “he has the look. You remember, Rand, I remarked on it once, though I thought it was just because I didn’t know you humans well enough then. Remember? ‘Till shade is gone, till water is gone, into the Shadow with teeth bared, screaming defiance with the last breath, to spit in Sightblinder’s eye on the Last Day.’ You remember, Rand.”

Rand stared at his plate. *Wrap a* shoufa *around your head, and you would be the image of an Aielman.* That had been Gawyn, brother to Elayne, the Daughter-Heir of Andor. *Everybody thinks I’m somebody I’m not.*

“What was that?” Mat asked. “About spitting in the Dark One’s eye.”

“That’s how long the Aiel say they’ll fight,” Ingtar said, “and I don’t doubt they will. Except for peddlers and gleemen, Aiel divide the world in two. Aiel, and enemies. They changed that for Cairhien five hundred years ago, for some reason no one but an Aiel could understand, but I do not think they will ever do so again.”

“I suppose not,” Loial sighed. “But they do let the Tuatha’an, the Traveling People, cross the Waste. And they don’t see Ogier as enemies, either, though I doubt any of us would want to go out into the Waste. Aiel come to Stedding Shangtai sometimes to trade for sung wood. A hard people, though.”

Ingtar nodded. “I wish I had some as hard. Half as hard.”

“Is that a joke?” Mat laughed. “If I ran a mile wearing all the iron you’re wearing, I would fall down and sleep a week. You’ve done it mile after mile all day.”

“Aiel are hard,” Ingtar said. “Man and woman, hard. I’ve fought them, and I know. They will run fifty miles, and fight a battle at the end of it. They’re death walking, with any weapon or none. Except a sword. They will not touch a sword, for some reason. Or ride a horse, not that they need to. If you have a sword, and the Aielman has his bare hands, it is an even fight. If you’re good. They herd cattle and goats where you or I would die of thirst before the day was done. They dig their villages into huge rock spires out in the Waste. They’ve been there since the Breaking, near enough. Artur Hawkwing tried to dig them out and was bloodied, the only major defeats he ever suffered. By day the air in the Aiel Waste shimmers with heat, and by night it freezes. And an Aiel will give you that blue-eyed stare and tell you there is no place on earth he would rather be. He won’t be lying, either. If they ever tried to come out, we would be hard-pressed to stop them. The Aiel War lasted three years, and that was only four out of thirteen clans.”

“Gray eyes from his mother doesn’t make him an Aiel,” Mat said.

Ingtar shrugged. “As I said, I ask no questions.”

When Rand finally settled down for the night, his head hummed with unwanted thoughts. *Image of an Aielman. Moiraine Sedai wants to say you’re from the Two Rivers. Aiel ravaged all the way to Tar Valon. Born on the slopes of Dragonmount. The Dragon Reborn.*

“I will not be used,” he muttered, but sleep was a long time coming.

Ingtar broke camp before the sun was up in the morning. They had breakfasted and were riding south while the clouds in the east were still red with sunrise to come and dew still hung on the leaves. This time Ingtar put out scouts, and though the pace was hard, it was no longer horse-killing. Rand thought maybe Ingtar had realized they were not going to do it all in a day. The trail still led south, Hurin said. Until, two hours after the sun rose, one of the scouts came galloping back.

“Abandoned camp ahead, my Lord. Just on that hilltop there. Must have been at least thirty or forty of them there last night, my Lord.”

Ingtar put spurs to horse as if he had been told the Darkfriends were still there, and Rand had to keep pace or be trampled by the Shienarans who galloped up the hill behind him.

There was not much to see. The cold ashes of campfires, well hidden in the trees, with what looked like the remnants of a meal tossed in them. A refuse heap too near the fires and already buzzing with flies.

Ingtar kept the others back, and dismounted to walk through the campsite with Uno, examining the ground. Hurin rode the circumference of the site, sniffing. Rand sat his stallion with the other men; he had no desire for any closer look at a place where Trollocs and Darkfriends had camped. And a Fade. *And something worse.*

Mat scrambled up the hill afoot and stalked into the campsite. “Is this what a Darkfriend camp looks like? Smells a bit, but I can’t say it looks any different from anybody else’s.” He kicked at one of the ash heaps, knocking out a piece of burned bone, and stooped to pick it up. “What do Darkfriends eat? Doesn’t look like a sheep bone, or a cow.”

“There was murder done here,” Hurin said mournfully. He scrubbed at his nose with a kerchief. “Worse than murder.”

“There were Trollocs here,” Ingtar said, looking straight at Mat. “I suppose they got hungry, and the Darkfriends were handy.” Mat dropped the blackened bone; he looked as if he were going to be sick.

“They are not going south any longer, my Lord,” Hurin said. That took everyone’s attention. He pointed back, to the northeast. “Maybe they’ve decided to break for the Blight after all. Go around us. Maybe they were just trying to put us off by coming south.” He did not sound as if he believed it. He sounded puzzled.

“Whatever they were trying,” Ingtar snarled, “I’ll have them now. Mount!”

Little more than an hour later, though, Hurin drew rein. “They changed again, my Lord. South again. And they killed someone else here.”

There were no ashes there, in the gap between two hills, but a few minutes’ search found the body. A man curled up and stuffed under some bushes. The back of his head was smashed in, and his eyes still bulged with the force of the blow. No one recognized him, though he was wearing Shienaran clothes.

“We’ll waste no time burying Darkfriends,” Ingtar growled. “We ride south.” He suited his own words almost before they were out of his mouth.

The day was the same as the day before had been, though. Uno studied tracks and droppings, and said they had gained a little ground on their quarry. Twilight came with no sight of Trollocs or Darkfriends, and the next morning there was another abandoned camp—and another murder done, so Hurin said—and another change of direction, this time to the northwest. Less than two hours on that track found another body, a man with his skull split open by an axe, and another change of direction. South again. Again gaining ground, by Uno's reading of the tracks. Again seeing nothing but distant farms until nightfall. And the next day was the same, changes in direction, murders and all. And the next.

Every day brought them a little closer behind their prey, but Ingtar fumed. He suggested cutting straight across when the trail changed direction of a morning—surely they would come on the trail heading south again, and gain more time—and before anyone could speak, he said it was a bad idea, in case this once the men they hunted did not turn south. He urged everyone to greater speed, to start earlier and ride till full dark. He reminded them of the charge the Amyrlin Seat had given them, to recover the Horn of Valere, and let nothing bar their way. He spoke of the glory they would have, their names remembered in story and history, in gleemen's tales and bards' songs, the men who found the Horn. He talked as if he could not stop, and he stared down the trail they followed as if his hope of the Light lay at the end of it. Even Uno began to look at him askance.

And so they came to the River Erinin.

It could not properly be called a village at all, to Rand's mind. He sat his horse among the trees, peering up at half a dozen small houses with wood-shingled roofs and eaves almost to the ground, on a hilltop overlooking the river beneath the morning sun. Few people passed this way. It was only a few hours since they had broken camp, but past time for them to have found the remains of the Darkfriends' resting place if the pattern held. They had seen nothing of the sort, however.

The river itself was not much like the mighty Erinin of story, here so far toward its source in the Spine of the World. Perhaps sixty paces of swift water to the far bank, lined with trees, and a barge-like ferry on a thick rope spanning the distance. The ferry sat snugged against the other side.

For once the trail had led straight to human habitation. Straight to the houses on the hill. No one moved on the single dirt street around which the dwellings clustered.

"Ambush, my Lord?" Uno said softly.

Ingtar gave the necessary orders, and the Shienarans unlimbered their lances, sweeping around to encircle the houses. At a hand signal from Ingtar they galloped between the houses from four directions, thundering in with eyes searching, lances ready, dust rising under their hooves. Nothing moved but them. They drew rein, and the dust began to settle.

Rand returned to his quiver the arrow he had nocked, and slung his bow on his back again. Mat and Perrin did the same. Loial and Hurin had just waited there where Ingtar had left them, watching uneasily.

Ingtar waved, and Rand and the others rode up to join the Shienarans.

“I don’t like the smell of this place,” Perrin muttered as they came among the houses. Hurin gave him a look, and he stared back until Hurin dropped his eyes. “It smells wrong.”

“Bloody Darkfriends and Trollocs went straight through, my Lord,” Uno said, pointing to a few tracks not chopped to pieces by the Shienarans. “Straight through to the goat-kissing ferry, which they bloody left on the other side. Blood and bloody ashes! We’re flaming lucky they didn’t cut it adrift.”

“Where are the people?” Loial asked.

Doors stood open, curtains flapped at open windows, but no one had come out for all the thunder of hooves.

“Search the houses,” Ingtar commanded. Men dismounted and ran to comply, but they came back shaking their heads.

“They’re just gone, my Lord,” Uno said. “Just bloody gone, burn me. Like they’d picked up and decided to flaming walk away in the middle of the bloody day.” He stopped suddenly, pointing urgently to a house behind Ingtar. “There’s a woman at that window. How I bloody missed her. . . .” He was running for the house before anyone else could move.

“Don’t frighten her!” Ingtar shouted. “Uno, we need information. The Light blind you, Uno, don’t frighten her!” The one-eyed man disappeared through the open door. Ingtar raised his voice again. “We will not harm you, good lady. We are Lord Agelmar’s oathmen, from Fal Dara. Do not be afraid! We will not harm you.”

A window at the top of the house flew up, and Uno stuck his head out, staring around wildly. With an oath he pulled back. Thumps and clatters marked his passage back, as if he were kicking things in frustration. Finally he appeared from the doorway.

“Gone, my Lord. But she was there. A woman in a white dress, at the window. I saw her. I even thought I saw her inside, for a moment, but then she was gone, and. . . .” He took a deep breath. “The house is empty, my Lord.” It was a measure of his agitation that he did not curse.

“Curtains,” Mat muttered. “He’s jumping at bloody curtains.” Uno gave him a sharp look, then returned to his horse.

“Where did they go?” Rand asked Loial. “Do you think they ran off when the Darkfriends came?” *And Trollocs, and a Myrddraal. And Hurin’s something worse. Smart people, if they ran as hard as they could.*

“I fear the Darkfriends took them, Rand,” Loial said slowly. He grimaced, almost a snarl with his broad nose like a snout. “For the Trollocs.” Rand swallowed and wished he had not asked; it was never pleasant to think on how Trollocs fed.

“Whatever was done here,” Ingtar said, “our Darkfriends did it. Hurin, was there violence here? Killing? Hurin!”

The sniffer gave a start in his saddle and looked around wildly. He had been staring across the river. “Violence, my Lord? Yes. Killing, no. Or not exactly.” He glanced sideways at Perrin. “I’ve never smelled anything exactly like it before, my Lord. But there was hurting done.”

“Is there any doubt they crossed over? Have they doubled back again?”

“They crossed, my Lord.” Hurin looked uneasily at the far bank. “They crossed. What they did on the other side, though. . . .” He shrugged.

Ingtar nodded. “Uno, I want that ferry back on this side. And I want the other side scouted before we cross. Just because there was no ambush here doesn’t mean there will not be one when we are split by the river. That ferry does not look big enough to carry us all in one trip. See to it.”

Uno bowed, and in moments Ragan and Masema were helping each other out of their armor. Stripped down to breechclouts, with a dagger stuck behind in the small of the back, they trotted to the river on horsemen’s bowed legs and waded in, beginning to work their way hand over hand along the thick rope along which the ferry ran. The cable sagged enough in the middle to put them in the river to their waists, and the current was strong, pulling them downstream, yet in less time than Rand expected they were hauling themselves over the slatted sides of the ferry. Drawing their daggers, they disappeared into the trees.

After what seemed like forever, the two men reappeared and began pulling the ferry slowly across. The barge butted against the bank below the village, and Masema tied it off while Ragan trotted up to where Ingtar waited. His face was pale, the arrow scar on his cheek sharp, and he sounded shaken.

"The far bank. . . . There is no ambush on the far bank, my Lord, but. . . ." He bowed deeply, still wet and shivering from his excursion. "My Lord, you must see for yourself. The big stoneoak, fifty paces south from the landing. I cannot say the words. You must see it yourself."

Ingtar frowned, looking from Ragan to the other bank. Finally, he said, "You have done well, Ragan. Both of you have." His voice became more brisk. "Find these men something to dry themselves on from the houses, Uno. And see if anybody left water on for tea. Put something hot into them, if you can. Then bring the second file and the pack animals over." He turned to Rand. "Well, are you ready to see the south bank of the Erinin?" He did not wait for an answer, but rode down to the ferry with Hurin and half the lancers.

Rand hesitated only a moment before following. Loial went with him. To his surprise, Perrin rode down ahead of them, looking grim. Some of the lancers, making gruff jokes, dismounted to haul on the rope and walk the ferry over.

Mat waited until the last minute, when one of the Shienarans was untying the ferry, before he kicked his horse and crowded aboard. "I have to come sooner or later, don't I?" he said, breathless, to no one in particular. "I have to find it."

Rand shook his head. With Mat looking as healthy as he ever had, he had almost forgotten why he was along. *To find the dagger. Let Ingtar have the Horn. I just want the dagger for Mat.* "We will find it, Mat."

Mat scowled at him—with a sneering glance for his fine red coat—and turned away. Rand sighed.

"It will all come right, Rand," Loial said quietly. "Somehow, it will."

The current took the ferry as it was hauled out from the bank, tugging it against the cable with a sharp creak. The lancers were odd ferrymen, walking the deck in helmets and armor, with swords on their backs, but they took the ferry out into the river well enough.

"This is how we left home," Perrin said suddenly. "At Taren Ferry. The ferrymen's boots clunking on the deck, and the water gurgling around the ferry. This is how we left. It will be worse, this time."

"How can it be worse?" Rand asked. Perrin did not answer. He searched the far bank, and his golden eyes almost seemed to shine, but not with eagerness.

After a minute, Mat asked, "How can it be worse?"

"It will be. I can smell it," was all Perrin would say. Hurin eyed him nervously, but then Hurin seemed to be eyeing everything nervously since they had left Fal Dara.

The ferry bumped against the south bank with a hollow thud of stout planks against hard clay, almost under overhanging trees, and the Shienarans who had been hauling on the rope mounted their horses, except for two Ingtar told to take the ferry back over for the others. The rest followed Ingtar up the bank.

"Fifty paces to a big stoneoak," Ingtar said as they rode into the trees. He sounded too matter-of-fact. If Ragan could not speak of it. . . . Some of the soldiers eased the swords on their backs, and held their lances ready.

At first Rand thought the figures hanging by their arms from the thick gray limbs of the stoneoak were scarecrows. Crimson scarecrows. Then he recognized the two faces. Changu, and the other man who had been on guard with him. Nidao. Eyes staring, teeth bared in a rictus of pain. They had lived a long time after it began.

Perrin made a sound in his throat, nearly a growl.

"As bad as ever I've seen, my Lord," Hurin said faintly. "As bad as ever I've smelled, excepting the dungeon at Fal Dara that night."

Frantically Rand sought the void. The flame seemed to get in the way, the queasy light fluttering in time with his convulsive swallows, but he pushed on until he had wrapped himself in emptiness. The queasiness pulsed in the void with him, though. Not outside, for once, but inside. *No wonder, looking at this.* The thought skittered across the void like a drop of water on a hot griddle. *What happened to them?*

"Skinned alive," he heard someone behind him say, and the sounds of somebody else retching. He thought it was Mat, but it was all far away from him, inside the void. But that nauseous flickering was in there, too. He thought he might throw up himself.

"Cut them down," Ingtar said harshly. He hesitated a moment, then added, "Bury them. We cannot be sure they were Darkfriends. They could have been taken prisoner. They could have been. Let them know the last embrace of the mother, at least.” Men rode forward gingerly with knives; even for battle-hardened Shienarans it was no easy task, cutting down the flayed corpses of men they knew.

“Are you all right, Rand?” Ingtar said. “I am not used to this either.”

“I . . . am all right, Ingtar.” Rand let the void vanish. He felt less sick without it; his stomach still curdled, but it was better. Ingtar nodded and turned his horse so he could watch the men working.

The burial was simple. Two holes dug in the ground, and the bodies laid in as the rest of the Shienarans watched in silence. The grave diggers began shoveling earth into the graves with no more ado.

Rand was shocked, but Loial explained softly. “Shienarans believe we all came from earth, and must return to earth. They never use coffins or shrouds, and the bodies are never clothed. The earth must hold the body. The last embrace of the mother, they call it. And there are never any words except ‘The Light shine on you, and the Creator shelter you. The last embrace of the mother welcome you home.’ ” Loial sighed and shook his huge head. “I do not think anyone will say them this time. No matter what Ingtar says, Rand, there cannot be much doubt that Changu and Nidao slew the guards at the Dog Gate and let the Darkfriends into the keep. It had to be they who were responsible for all of it.”

“Then who shot the arrow at—at the Amyrlin?” Rand swallowed. *Who shot at me?* Loial said nothing.

Uno arrived with the rest of the men and the packhorses as the last earth was being shoveled onto the graves. Someone told him what they had found, and the one-eyed man spat. “Goat-kissing Trollocs do that along the Blight, sometimes. When they want to shake your bloody nerve, or flaming warn you not to follow. Burn me if it works here, either.”

Before they rode away, Ingtar paused on his horse beside the unmarked graves, two mounds of bare earth that looked too small to hold men. After a moment he said, “The Light shine on you, and the Creator shelter you. The last embrace of the mother welcome you home.” When he raised his head, he looked at each man in turn. There was no expression on any face, least of all on Ingtar’s. “They saved Lord Agelmar at Tarwin’s Gap,” he said. Several of the lancers nodded. Ingtar turned his horse. “Which way, Hurin?”

“South, my Lord.”

“Take the trail! We hunt!”

The forest soon gave way to gently rolling flatland, sometimes crossed by a shallow stream that had dug itself a high-banked channel, with never more than a low rise or a squat hill that barely deserved the name. Perfect country for the horses. Ingtar took advantage of it, setting a steady, ground-covering pace. Occasionally Rand saw what might have been a farmhouse in the distance, and once what he thought was a village, with smoke rising from chimneys a few miles off and something flashing white in the sun, but the land near them stayed empty of human life, long swathes of grass dotted with brush and occasional trees, with now and again a small thicket, never more than a hundred paces across.

Ingtar put out scouts, two men riding ahead, in sight only when they topped an occasional rise. He had a silver whistle hanging around his neck to call them back if Hurin said the trail had veered, but it did not. South. Always south.

“We will reach the field of Talidar in three or four days at this rate,” Ingtar said as they rode. “Artur Hawkwing’s greatest single victory, when the Halfmen led the Trollocs out of the Blight against him. Six days and nights, it lasted, and when it was done, the Trollocs fled back into the Blight and never dared challenge him again. He raised a monument there to his victory, a spire a hundred spans high. He would not let them put his own name on it, but rather the names of every man who fell, and a golden sun at the top, symbol that there the Light had triumphed over the Shadow.”

“I would like to see that,” Loial said. “I have never heard of this monument.”

Ingtar was silent for a moment, and when he spoke his voice was quiet. “It is not there any longer, Builder. When Hawkwing died, the ones who fought over his empire could not bear to leave a monument to a victory of his, even if it did not mention his name. There’s nothing left but the mound where it stood. In three or four days we can see that, at least.” His tone did not allow much conversation afterwards.

With the sun hanging golden overhead, they passed a structure, square and made of plastered brick, less than a mile from their path. It was not tall, no more than two stories still standing anywhere he saw, but it covered a good hide of ground. An air of long abandonment hung about it, roofs gone except for a few stretches of dark tile clinging to bits of rafter, most of the once-white plaster fallen to bare the dark, weathered brick beneath, walls fallen to show courtyards and decaying chambers inside. Brush, and even trees, grew in the cracks of what had once been courtyards.

“A manor house,” Ingtar explained. The little humor he had regained seemed to fade as he looked at the structure. “When Harad Dakar still stood, I expect the manorman farmed this land for a league around. Orchards, maybe. The Hardani loved their orchards.”

“Harad Dakar?” Rand said, and Ingtar snorted.

“Does no one learn history any longer? Harad Dakar, the capital city of Hardan, which nation this once was that we are riding across.”

“I’ve seen an old map,” Rand replied in a tight voice. “I know about the nations that aren’t there anymore. Maredo, and Goaban, and Caralain. But there wasn’t any Hardan on it.”

“There were once others that are gone now, too,” Loial said. “Mar Haddon, which is now Haddon Mirk, and Almoth. Kintara. The War of the Hundred Years cut Artur Hawkwing’s empire into many nations, large and small. The small were gobbled up by the large, or else united, like Altara and Murandy. Forced together would be a better word than united, I suppose.”

“So what happened to them?” Mat demanded. Rand had not noticed Perrin and Mat ride up to join them. They had been at the rear, as far from Rand al’Thor as they could get, the last he had seen.

“They could not hold together,” the Ogier replied. “Crops failed, or trade failed. People failed. Something failed in each case, and the nation dwindled. Often neighboring countries absorbed the land, when the nations were gone, but they never lasted, those annexations. In time, the land truly was abandoned. Some villages hang on here and there, but mostly they have all gone to wilderness. It is nearly three hundred years since Harad Dakar was finally abandoned, but even before that it was a shell, with a king who could not control what happened inside the city walls. Harad Dakar itself is completely gone now, I understand. All the towns and cities of Hardan are gone, the stone carted away by farmers and villagers for their own use. Most of the farms and villages made with it are gone, too. So I read, and I’ve seen nothing to change it.”

“It was quite a quarry, Harad Dakar, for almost a hundred years,” Ingtar said bitterly. “The people left, finally, and then the city was hauled away, stone by stone. All faded away, and what has not gone is fading. Everything, everywhere, fading. There is hardly a nation that truly controls the land it claims on a map, and there is hardly a land that claims today on a map what it did even a hundred years ago. When the War of the Hundred Years ended, a man rode from one nation into another without end from the Blight to the Sea of Storms. Now we can ride through wilderness claimed by no nation for almost the whole of the land. We in the Borderlands have our battle with the Blight to keep us strong, and whole. Perhaps they did not have what they needed to keep them strong. You say they failed, Builder? Yes, they failed, and what nation standing whole today will fail tomorrow? We are being swept away, humankind. Swept away like flotsam on a flood. How long until there is nothing left but the Borderlands? How long before we, too, go under, and there is nothing left but Trollocs and Myrddraal all the way to the Sea of Storms?"

There was a shocked silence. Not even Mat broke it. Ingtar rode lost in his own dark thoughts.

After a time the scouts came galloping back, straight in the saddles, lances erect against the sky. "A village ahead, my Lord. We were not seen, but it lies directly in our line of march."

Ingtar shook himself out of his brown study, but did not speak until they had reached the crest of a low ridge looking down on the village, and then it was only to command a halt while he dug a looking glass from his saddlebags and raised it to peer at the village.

Rand studied the village with interest. It was as big as Emond's Field, though that was not very big compared to some of the towns he had seen since leaving the Two Rivers, much less the cities. The houses were all low and plastered with white clay, and they appeared to have grass growing on sloping roofs. A dozen windmills, scattered through the village, turned lazily, their long, cloth-covered arms flashing white in the sun. A low wall encircled the village, grassy dirt and chest high, and outside that was a wide ditch with sharpened stakes thick in the bottom. There was no gate in the one opening he could see in the wall, but he supposed it could be blocked easily enough with a cart or wagon. He could not see any people.

"Not even a dog in sight," Ingtar said, returning the looking glass to his saddlebags. "Are you sure they did not see you?" he asked the scouts.

"Not unless they have the Dark One's own luck, my Lord," one of the men replied. "We never crested the rise. We didn't see anyone moving then either, my Lord."

Ingtar nodded. "The trail, Hurin?"

Hurin drew a deep breath. “Toward the village, my Lord. Straight to it, as near as I can tell from here.”

“Watch sharp,” Ingtar commanded, gathering his reins. “And do not believe that they’re friendly just because they smile. If there is anyone there.” He led them down toward the village at a slow walk, and reached up to loosen his sword in its scabbard.

Rand heard the sounds of others behind him doing the same. After a moment, he eased his, too. Trying to stay alive was not the same as trying to be a hero, he decided.

“You think these people would help Darkfriends?” Perrin asked Ingtar. The Shienaran was slow in answering.

“They have no great love for Shienarans,” he said finally. “They think we should protect them. Us, or the Cairhienin. Cairhien did claim this land, once the last King of Hardan died. All the way to the Erinin, they claimed it. They could not hold it, though. They gave up the claim nearly a hundred years ago. The few people who still live here don’t have to worry about Trollocs this far south, but there are plenty of human brigands. That’s why they have the wall, and the ditch. All their villages do. Their fields will be hidden in hollows around here, but no one will live outside the wall. They would swear fealty to any king who would give them his protection, but we have all we can do against the Trollocs. They do not love us for it, though.” As they reached the opening in the low wall, he added again, “Watch sharp!”

All the streets led toward a village square, but there was no one in the streets, no one peering from a window. Not even a dog moved, not so much as a chicken. Nothing living. Open doors swung, creaking in the wind, counterpoint to the rhythmic squeak of the windmills. The horses’ hooves sounded loud on the packed dirt of the street.

“Like at the ferry,” Hurin muttered, “but different.” He rode hunched in his saddle, head down as if he were trying to hide behind his own shoulders. “Violence done, but . . . I don’t know. It was bad here. It smells bad.”

“Uno,” Ingtar said, “take one file and search the houses. If you find anyone, bring them to me in the square. Do not frighten them this time, though. I want answers, not people running for their lives.” He led the other soldiers toward the center of the village as Uno got his ten dismounted.

Rand hesitated, looking around. The creaking doors, the squealing windmills, the horses' hooves, all made too much noise, as if there were not another sound in the world. He scanned the houses. The curtains in an open window beat against the outside of the house. They all seemed lifeless. With a sigh he got down and walked to the nearest house, then stopped, staring at the door.

It's just a door. What are you afraid of? He wished he did not feel as if there was something waiting on the other side. He pushed it open.

Inside was a tidy room. Or had been. The table was set for a meal, ladder-back chairs gathered around, some plates already served. A few flies buzzed above bowls of turnips and peas, and more crawled on a cold roast sitting in its own congealed grease. There was a slice half carved from the roast, the fork still standing stuck in the meat and the carving knife lying partway in the platter as if dropped. Rand stepped inside.

Blink.

A smiling, bald-headed man in rough clothes laid a slice of meat on a plate held by a woman with a worn face. She was smiling, too, though. She added peas and turnips to the plate and passed it to one of the children lining the table. There were half a dozen children, boys and girls, from nearly grown down to barely tall enough to look over the table. The woman said something, and the girl taking the plate from her laughed. The man started to cut another slice.

Suddenly another girl screamed, pointing at the door to the street. The man dropped the carving knife and whirled, then he screamed, too, face tight with horror, and snatched up a child. The woman grabbed another, and motioned desperately to the others, her mouth working frantically, silently. They all scrabbled toward a door in the back of the room.

That door burst open, and—

Blink.

Rand could not move. The flies buzzing over the table sounded louder. His breath made a cloud in front of his mouth.

Blink.

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That door burst open, and—

Blink.

Rand struggled, but his muscles seemed frozen. The room was colder; he wanted to shiver, but he could not move even that much. Flies crawled all over the table. He groped for the void. The sour light was there, but he did not care. He had to—

Blink.

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That door burst open, and—

Blink.

The room was freezing. *So cold.* Flies blackened the table; the walls were a shifting mass of flies, the floor, the ceiling, all black with them. They crawled on Rand, covering him, crawled over his face, his eyes, into his nose, his mouth. *Light, help me. Cold.* The flies buzzed like thunder. *Cold.* It penetrated the void, mocking the emptiness, encasing him in ice. Desperately he reached for the flickering light. His stomach twisted, but the light was warm. Warm. Hot. He was hot.

Suddenly he was tearing at . . . something. He did not know what, or how. Cobwebs made of steel. Moonbeams carved from stone. They crumbled at his touch, but he knew he had not touched anything. They shriveled and melted with the heat that surged through him, heat like a forge fire, heat like the world burning, heat like—

It was gone. Panting, he looked around with wide eyes. A few flies lay on the half-carved roast, in the platter. Dead flies. *Six flies. Only six.* There were more in the bowls, half a dozen tiny black specks among the cold vegetables. All dead. He staggered out into the street.

Mat was just coming out of a house across the street, shaking his head. “Nobody there,” he told Perrin, still on his horse. “It looks like they just got up in the middle of supper and walked away.”

A shout came from the square.

“They’ve found something,” Perrin said, digging his heels into his horse’s flanks. Mat scrambled into his saddle and galloped after him.

Rand mounted Red more slowly; the stallion shied as if feeling his unease. He glanced at the houses as he rode slowly toward the square, but he could not make himself look at them for long. *Mat went in one, and nothing happened to him.* He resolved not to set foot inside another house in that village no matter what. Booting Red, he quickened his pace.

Everyone was standing like statues in front of a large building with wide double doors. Rand did not think it could be an inn; there was no sign, for one thing. Perhaps a village meeting place. He joined the silent circle, and stared along with the rest.

There was a man spread-eagled across the doors with thick spikes through wrists and shoulders. More spikes had been driven into his eyes to hold his head up. Dark, dried blood made fans down his cheeks. Scuff marks on the wood behind his boots showed that he had been alive when it was done. When it began, anyway.

Rand’s breath caught. Not a man. Those black clothes, blacker than black, had never been worn by any human. The wind flapped an end of the cloak caught behind the body—which it did not always, he knew too well; the wind did not always touch those clothes—but there had never been any eyes in that pale, bloodless face.

“Myrddraal,” he breathed, and it was as if his speaking released all the others. They began to move again, and breathe.

“Who,” Mat began, and had to stop to swallow. “Who could do this to a Fade?” His voice squeaked at the end.

“I don’t know,” Ingtar said. “I do not know.” He looked around, examining faces, or perhaps counting to be sure everyone was there. “And I do not think we will learn anything here. We ride. Mount! Hurin, find the trail out of this place.”

“Yes, my Lord. Yes. With pleasure. That way, my Lord. They’re still heading south.”

They rode away leaving the dead Myrddraal where it hung, the wind stirring its black cloak. Hurin was first beyond the wall, not waiting on Ingtar for a change, but Rand came close behind him.

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CHAPTER

11

Glimmers of the Pattern

For once, Ingtar called a halt to the day’s march with the sun still golden above the horizon. The toughened Shienarans were feeling the effects of what they had seen in the village. Ingtar had not stopped so early before, and the campsite he chose had the look of a place that could be defended. It was a deep hollow, almost round, and big enough to hold all the men and horses comfortably. A sparse thicket of scrub oak and leatherleaf covered the outer slopes. The rim itself stood more than high enough to hide anyone in the campsite even without the trees. The height nearly passed for a hill, in that country.

“All I’m bloody saying,” he heard Uno tell Ragan as they dismounted, “is that I bloody saw her, burn you. Just before we found the goat-kissing Halfman. The same flaming woman as at the flaming ferry. She was there, and then she bloody wasn’t. You say what you bloody want to, but you watch how you flaming say it, or I’ll bloody skin you myself, and burn the goat-kissing hide, you sheep-gutted milk-drinker.”

Rand paused with one foot on the ground and the other still in the stirrup. *The same woman? But there wasn’t any woman at the ferry, just some curtains blowing in the wind. And she couldn’t have gotten to that village ahead of us if there had been.* The village. . . .

He shied away from the thought. Even more than the Fade nailed to the door, he wanted to forget that room, and the flies, and the people who were there and not there. The Halfman had been real—everybody had seen that—but the room. . . . *Maybe I’m finally going mad.* He wished Moiraine was there to talk to. *Wishing for an Aes Sedai. You* are *a fool. You’re well out of that, now stay out. But am I out? What happened there?*

“packhorses and supplies in the middle,” Ingtar commanded as the lancers went about setting up camp. “Rub the horses down, then saddle them again in case we must move quickly. Every man sleeps by his mount, and there'll be no fires tonight. Watch changes every two hours. Uno, I want scouts out, as far as they can ride and return before dark. I want to know what is out there."

He's feeling it, Rand thought. *It isn't just some Darkfriends and a few Trollocs and maybe a Fade anymore.* Just some Darkfriends and a few Trollocs, and maybe a Fade! Even a few days before there would not have been any "just" about it. Even in the Borderlands, even with the Blight less than a day's ride, Darkfriends and Trollocs and Myrddraal had been bad enough for a nightmare, then. Before he had seen a Myrddraal nailed to a door. *What in the Light could have done* that? *What* not *in the Light?* Before he had walked into a room where a family had had their supper and their laughter cut off. *I must have imagined it. I must have.* Even in his own head he did not sound very convincing. He had not imagined the wind on the tower top, or the Amyrlin saying—

"Rand?" He jumped as Ingtar spoke at his shoulder. "Are you going to stay all night with one foot in the stirrup?"

Rand put his other foot on the ground. "Ingtar, what happened back at that village?"

"Trollocs took them. The same as the people at the ferry. That is what happened. The Fade. . . ." Ingtar shrugged and stared down at a flat, canvas-wrapped bundle, large and square, in his arms; he stared at it as if he saw hidden secrets he would rather not know. "The Trollocs took them for food. They do it in villages and farms near the Blight, too, sometimes, if a raid gets past the border towers in the night. Sometimes we get the people back, and sometimes not. Sometimes we get them back and almost wish we hadn't. Trollocs don't always kill before they start butchering. And Halfmen like to have their . . . fun. That's worse than what the Trollocs do." His voice was as steady as if he were talking of every day, and perhaps he was, for a Shienaran soldier.

Rand took a deep breath to steady his stomach. "The Fade back there didn't have any fun, Ingtar. What could nail a Myrddraal to a door, alive?"

Ingtar hesitated, shaking his head, then pushed the big bundle at Rand. "Here. Moiraine Sedai told me to give you this at the first camp south of the Erinin. I don't know what is in it, but she said you would need it. She said to tell you to take care of it; your life may depend on it."

Rand took it reluctantly; his skin prickled at the touch of the canvas. There was something soft inside. Cloth, maybe. He held it gingerly. *He* *doesn't want to think about the Myrddraal either. What happened in that room?* He realized suddenly that for him, the Fade, or even that room, was preferable to thinking about what Moiraine might have sent him.

"I was told to tell you at the same time that if anything happens to me, the lances will follow you."

"Me!" Rand gasped, forgetting the bundle and everything else. Ingtar met his incredulous stare with a calm nod. "That's crazy! I've never led anything but a flock of sheep, Ingtar. They would not follow me anyway. Besides, Moiraine can't tell you who your second is. It's Uno."

"Uno and I were called to Lord Agelmar the morning we left. Moiraine Sedai was there, but it was Lord Agelmar who told me. You are second, Rand."

"But why, Ingtar? Why?" Moiraine's hand was bright and clear in it, hers and the Amyrlin's, pushing him along the path they had chosen, but he had to ask.

The Shienaran looked as if he did not understand it either, but he was a soldier, used to odd commands in the endless war along the Blight. "I heard rumors from the women's apartments that you were really a. . . ." He spread gauntleted hands. "No matter. I know you deny it. Just as you deny the look of your own face. Moiraine Sedai says you're a shepherd, but I never saw a shepherd with a heron-mark blade. No matter. I'll not claim I would have chosen you myself, but I think you have it in you to do what is needed. You will do your duty, if it comes to it."

Rand wanted to say it was no duty of his, but instead he said, "Uno knows about this. Who else, Ingtar?"

"All the lances. When we Shienarans ride, every man knows who is next in line if the man in command falls. A chain unbroken right down to the last man left, even if he's nothing but a horseholder. That way, you see, even if he *is* the last man, he is not just a straggler running and trying to stay alive. He has the command, and duty calls him to do what must be done. If I go to the last embrace of the mother, the duty is yours. You will find the Horn, and you will take it where it belongs. You will." There was a peculiar emphasis in Ingtar's last words.

The bundle in Rand's arms seemed to weigh ten stone. *Light, she could be a hundred leagues off, and she still reaches out and tugs the leash. This way, Rand. That way. You're the Dragon Reborn, Rand.* "I don't want the duty, Ingtar. I will not take it. Light, I'm just a shepherd! Why won't anybody believe that?"

"You will do your duty, Rand. When the man at the top of the chain fails, everything below him falls apart. Too much is falling apart. Too much already. Peace favor your sword, Rand al'Thor."

"Ingtar, I—" But Ingtar was walking away, calling to see if Uno had the scouts out yet.

Rand stared at the bundle in his arms and licked his lips. He was afraid he knew what was in it. He wanted to look, yet he wanted to throw it in a fire without opening it; he thought he might, if he could be sure it would burn without anyone seeing what was inside, if he could be sure what was inside would burn at all. But he could not look there, where other eyes than his might see.

He glanced around the camp. The Shienarans were unloading the pack animals, some already handing out a cold supper of dried meat and flatbread. Mat and Perrin tended their horses, and Loial sat on a stone reading a book, with his long-stemmed pipe clenched between his teeth and a wisp of smoke curling above his head. Gripping the bundle as if afraid he might drop it, Rand sneaked into the trees.

He knelt in a small clearing sheltered by thick-foliaged branches and set the bundle on the ground. For a time he just stared at it. *She wouldn't have. She couldn't.* A small voice answered, *Oh, yes, she could. She could and would.* Finally he set about untying the small knots in the cords that bound it. Neat knots, tied with a precision that spoke loudly of Moiraine's own hand; no servant had done this for her. She would not have dared let any servant see.

When he had the last cord unfastened, he opened out what was folded inside with hands that felt numb, then stared at it, his mouth full of dust. It was all of one piece, neither woven, nor dyed, nor painted. A banner, white as snow, big enough to be seen the length of a field of battle. And across it marched a rippling figure like a serpent scaled in gold and crimson, but a serpent with four scaled legs, each tipped with five golden claws, a serpent with eyes like the sun and a golden lion's mane. He had seen it once before, and Moiraine had told him what it was. The banner of Lews Therin Telamon, Lews Therin Kinslayer, in the War of the Shadow. The banner of the Dragon.

“Look at that! Look what he’s got, now!” Mat burst into the clearing. Perrin came after him more slowly. “First fancy coats,” Mat snarled, “and now a banner! We’ll hear no end of lording it now, with—” Mat got close enough to see the banner clearly, and his jaw dropped. “Light!” He stumbled back a step. “Burn me!” He had been there, too, when Moiraine named the banner. So had Perrin.

Anger boiled up in Rand, anger at Moiraine and the Amyrlin Seat, pushing him, pulling him. He snatched up the banner in both hands and shook it at Mat, words boiling out uncontrollably. “That’s right! The Dragon’s banner!” Mat took another step back. “Moiraine wants me to be a puppet on Tar Valon strings, a false Dragon for the Aes Sedai. She’s going to push it down my throat whatever I want. But—I—will—not—be—used!”

Mat had backed up against a tree trunk. “A false Dragon?” He swallowed. “You? That . . . that’s crazy.”

Perrin had not retreated. He squatted down with his thick arms on his knees and studied Rand with those bright golden eyes. In the evening shadows they seemed to shine. “If the Aes Sedai want you for a false Dragon. . . .” He paused, frowning, thinking things through. Finally, he said quietly, “Rand, can you channel?” Mat gave a strangled gasp.

Rand let the banner drop; he hesitated only a moment before nodding wearily. “I did not ask for it. I don’t want it. But. . . . But I do not think I know how to stop it.” The room with the flies came back unbidden to his mind. “I don’t think they’ll let me stop.”

“Burn me!” Mat breathed. “Blood and bloody ashes! They’ll kill us, you know. All of us. Perrin and me as well as you. If Ingtar and the others find out, they will cut our bloody throats for Darkfriends. Light, they’ll probably think we were part of stealing the Horn, and killing those people in Fal Dara.”

“Shut up, Mat,” Perrin said calmly.

“Don’t tell me to shut up. If Ingtar doesn’t kill us, Rand will go mad and do it for him. Burn me! Burn me!” Mat slid down the tree to sit on the ground. “Why didn’t they gentle you? If the Aes Sedai know, why didn’t they gentle you? I never heard of them letting a man who can wield the Power just walk away.”

“They don’t all know,” Rand sighed. “The Amyrlin—”

"The Amyrlin Seat! *She* knows? Light, no wonder she looked at me so strange."

"—and Moiraine told me I'm the Dragon Reborn, and then they said I could go wherever I wanted. Don't you see, Mat? They are trying to use me."

"Doesn't change you being able to channel," Mat muttered. "If I were you, I'd be halfway to the Aryth Ocean by now. And I would not stop until I found someplace where there were no Aes Sedai, and never likely to be any. And no people. I mean . . . well. . . ."

"Shut up, Mat," Perrin said. "Why *are* you here, Rand? The longer you stay around people, the more likely it is somebody will find out and send for Aes Sedai. Aes Sedai who *won't* tell you to go on about your business." He paused, scratching his head over that. "And Mat's right about Ingtar. I don't doubt he would name you Darkfriend and kill you. Kill all of us, maybe. He seems to like you, but he'd still do it, I think. A false Dragon? So would the others. Masema wouldn't need that much excuse, for you. So why aren't you gone?"

Rand shrugged. "I was going, but first the Amyrlin came, and then the Horn was stolen, and the dagger, and Moiraine said Mat was dying, and. . . . Light, I thought I could stay with you until we found the dagger, at least; I thought I could help with that. Maybe I was wrong."

"You came because of the dagger?" Mat said quietly. He rubbed his nose and grimaced. "I never thought of that. I never thought you wanted to. . . . Aaaah! Are you feeling all right? I mean, you aren't going mad already, are you?"

Rand dug a pebble out of the ground and threw it at him.

"Ouch!" Mat rubbed his arm. "I was just asking. I mean, all those fancy clothes, and all that talk about being a lord. Well, that isn't exactly right in the head."

"I was trying to get rid of you, fool! I was afraid I'd go mad and hurt you." His eyes dropped to the banner, and his voice lowered. "I will, eventually, if I don't stop it. Light, I don't know how to stop it."

"That is what I'm afraid of," Mat said, standing. "No offense, Rand, but I think I will just sleep as far away from you as I can, if you don't mind. That's if you are staying. I heard about a fellow who could channel, once. A merchant's guard told me. Before the Red Ajah found him, he woke one morning, and his whole village was smashed flat. All the houses, all the people, everything but the bed he was sleeping in, like a mountain had rolled over them."

Perrin said, "In that case, Mat, you should sleep cheek by jowl with him."

"I may be a fool, but I intend to be a live fool." Mat hesitated, looking sideways at Rand. "Look, I know you came along to help me, and I am grateful. I really am. But you just are not the same anymore. You understand that, don't you?" He waited as if he expected an answer. None came. Finally he vanished into the trees, back toward the camp.

"What about you?" Rand asked.

Perrin shook his head, shaggy curls swinging. "I don't know, Rand. You are the same, but then again, you aren't. A man channeling; my mother used to frighten me with that, when I was little. I just do not know." He stretched out his hand and touched a corner of the banner. "I think I would burn this, or bury it, if I were you. Then I'd run so far, so fast, no Aes Sedai would ever find me. Mat was right about that." He stood up, squinting at the western sky, beginning to turn red with the sinking sun. "Time to get back to the camp. You think on what I said, Rand. I'd run. But maybe you can't run. Think of that, too." His yellow eyes seemed to look inward, and he sounded tired. "Sometimes you can't run." Then he was gone, too.

Rand knelt there, staring at the banner spread out on the ground. "Well, sometimes you *can* run," he muttered. "Only, maybe she gave me this to make me run. Maybe she has something waiting for me, if I run. I won't do what she wants. I won't. I'll bury it right here. But she said my life may depend on it, and Aes Sedai never lie so you can see it. . . ." Suddenly his shoulders shook with silent laughter. "Now I'm talking to myself. Maybe I *am* going mad already."

When he returned to the camp, he carried the banner wrapped in the canvas once more, tied with knots less neat than Moiraine's had been.

The light had begun to fail and the shadow of the rim covered half the hollow. The soldiers were settling in, all with their horses by their sides, lances propped to hand. Mat and Perrin were bedding down alongside their horses. Rand gave them a sad look, then fetched Red, standing where he had been left with his reins dangling, and went to the other side of the hollow, where Hurin had joined Loial. The Ogier had given over reading and was examining the half-buried stone on which he had been sitting, tracing something on the stone with the long stem of his pipe.

Hurin stood and gave Rand something just short of a bow. “Hope you don’t mind me making my bed here, Lord—uh—Rand. I was just listening to the Builder here.”

“There you are, Rand,” Loial said. “You know, I think this stone was worked once. See, it’s weathered, but it looks as if it was a column of some kind. And there are markings, also. I can’t quite make them out, but they look familiar, somehow.”

“Maybe you’ll be able to see them better in the morning,” Rand said. He pulled the saddlebags from Red. “I’ll be glad of your company, Hurin.” *I’m glad of anybody’s company who isn’t afraid of me. How much longer can I have it, though?*

He shifted everything into one side of the saddlebags—spare shirts and breeches and woolen stockings, sewing kit, tinder box, tin plate and cup, a greenwood box with knife and fork and spoon, a packet of dried meat and flatbread for emergency rations, and all the other traveler’s necessaries—then stuffed the canvas-wrapped banner into the empty pocket. It bulged, the straps barely reaching the buckles, but then, the other side bulged now, too. It would do.

Loial and Hurin seemed to sense his mood, leaving him in silence while he stripped saddle and bridle from Red, rubbed the big bay down with tufts of grass torn from the ground, then resaddled him. Rand refused their offer of food; he did not think he could have stomached the best meal he had ever seen just then. All three of them made their beds there beside the stone, a simple matter of a blanket folded for a pillow and cloak to cover.

The camp was silent now, but Rand lay awake past the fall of full dark. His mind darted back and forth. The banner. *What is she trying to make me do?* The village. *What could kill a Fade like that?* Worst of all, the house in the village. *Did it really happen? Am I going mad already? Do I run, or do I stay? I have to stay. I have to help Mat find the dagger.*

An exhausted sleep finally came, and with sleep, unbidden, the void surrounded him, flickering with an uneasy glow that disturbed his dreams.

Padan Fain stared northward out into the night, past the only fire in his camp, smiling a fixed smile that never touched his eyes. He still thought of himself as Padan Fain—Padan Fain was the core of him—but he had been changed, and he knew it. He knew many things, now, more than any of his old masters could suspect. He had been a Darkfriend long years before

Ba’alzamon summoned him and set him on the track of the three young men from Emond’s Field, distilling what he knew of them, distilling him, and feeding the essence back so that he could *feel* them, *smell* where they had been, follow wherever they ran. Especially the one. A part of him still cringed, remembering what Ba’alzamon had done to him, but it was a small part, hidden, suppressed. He was changed. Following the three had led him into Shadar Logoth. He had not wanted to go, but he had had to obey. Then. And in Shadar Logoth. . . .

Fain drew a deep breath and fingered the ruby-hilted dagger at his belt. That had come from Shadar Logoth, too. It was the only weapon he carried, the only one he needed; it felt like a part of him. He was whole within himself, now. That was all that mattered.

He cast a glance to either side of his fire. The twelve Darkfriends who were left, their once-fine clothes now rumpled and dirty, huddled in the darkness to one side, staring not at the fire, but at him. On the other squatted his Trollocs, twenty in number, the all-too-human eyes in those animal-twisted men’s faces following his every move like mice watching a cat.

It had been a struggle at first, waking each morning to find himself not completely whole, to find the Myrddraal back in command, raging and demanding they go north, to the Blight, to Shayol Ghul. But bit by bit those mornings of weakness grew shorter, until. . . . He remembered the feel of the hammer in his hand, driving the spikes in, and he smiled; this time it did touch his eyes, with the joy of sweet memory.

Weeping from the dark caught his ear, and his smile faded. *I should never have let the Trollocs take so many.* An entire village to slow them down. If those few houses at the ferry had not been deserted, perhaps. . . . But Trollocs were greedy by nature, and in the euphoria of watching the Myrddraal die, he had not paid attention as he should.

He glanced at the Trollocs. Any one of them was nearly twice as tall as he, strong enough to break him to flinders with one hand, yet they edged back, still crouching. “Kill them. All. You may feed, but then make a pile of everything that remains—for our friends to find. Put the heads on top. Neatly, now.” He laughed, and cut it off short. “Go!”

The Trollocs scrambled away, drawing scythe-like swords and raising spiked axes. In moments shrieks and bellows rose from where the villagers were bound. Pleas for mercy and children's screams were cut off by solid thuds and unpleasant squishing noises, like melons being broken.

Fain turned his back on the cacophony to look at his Darkfriends. They were his, too, body and soul. Such souls as they had left. Every one of them was mired as deeply as he had been, before he found his way out. Every one with nowhere to go except to follow him. Their eyes clung to fearful, pleading. "You think they will grow hungry again before we find another village or a farm? They may. You think I will be letting them have some more of you? Well, perhaps one or two. There aren't any more horses to spare."

"The others were only commoners," one woman managed in an unsteady voice. Dirt streaked her face above a finely cut dress that marked her as a merchant, and wealthy. Smears stained the good gray cloth, and a long tear marred her skirt. "They were peasants. We have served—*I* have served—"

Fain cut her off, his easy tone making his words all the harder. "What are you, to me? Less than peasants. Herd cattle for the Trollocs, perhaps? If you want to live, cattle, you must be useful."

The woman's face broke. She sobbed, and suddenly all the rest were babbling, telling him how useful they were, men and women who had had influence and position before they were called to fulfill their oaths at Fal Dara. They spilled out the names of important, powerful people whom they knew in the Borderlands, in Cairhien, and other lands. They babbled of the knowledge they alone had of this land or that, of political situations, alliances, intrigues, all the things they could tell him if he let them serve him. The noise of them blended with the sounds of the Trollocs' slaughter and fit right in.

Fain ignored all of it—he had no fear of turning his back on them, not since they had seen the Fade dealt with—and went to his prize. Kneeling, he ran his hands over the ornate, golden chest, feeling the power locked inside. He had to have a Trolloc carry it—he did not trust the humans enough to load it on a horse and packsaddle; some dreams of power might be strong enough to overcome even fear of him, but Trollocs never dreamed of anything except killing—and he had not yet puzzled out how to open it. But that would come. Everything would come. Everything.

Unsheathing the dagger, he laid it atop the chest before settling himself down beside the fire. That blade was a better guard than Trolloc or human.

They had all seen what happened when he used it, once; none would come within a span of that bared blade without his command, and then reluctantly.

Lying there in his blankets, he stared northward. He could not feel al'Thor, now; the distance between them was too great. Or perhaps al'Thor was doing his vanishing trick. Sometimes, in the keep, the boy had suddenly vanished from Fain's senses. He did not know how, but always al'Thor came back, just as suddenly as he had gone. He would come back this time, too.

“This time you come to me, Rand al'Thor. Before, I followed you like a dog driven on the trail, but now you follow me.” His laughter was a cackle that even he knew was mad, but he did not care. Madness was a part of him, too. “Come to me, al'Thor. The dance is not even begun yet. We'll dance on Toman Head, and I'll be free of you. I'll see you dead at last.”

* * *

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CHAPTER

12

Woven in the Pattern

Egwene hurried after Nynaeve toward the knot of Aes Sedai around the Amyrlin Seat’s horse-borne palanquin, her desire to know what had caused the turmoil in Fal Dara kept outweighing even her worry over Rand. He was beyond her reach, for the moment. Bela, her shaggy mare, was with the Aes Sedai’s horses, and Nynaeve’s mount, too.

The Warders, hands on sword hilts and eyes searching everywhere, made a steel circle around the Aes Sedai and the palanquin. They were an island of relative calm in the courtyard, where Shienaran soldiers still ran amid the keep’s horrified inhabitants. Egwene pushed in beside Nynaeve—the two of them all but ignored after a single sharp glance from the Warders; all knew they would be leaving with the Amyrlin—and caught enough in the crowd’s murmurs to learn of an arrow that had flashed seemingly from nowhere and a bowman yet uncaught.

Egwene stopped, wide-eyed, too shocked even to think that she was surrounded by Aes Sedai. An attempt on the life of the Amyrlin Seat. It went beyond thinking of.

The Amyrlin sat in her palanquin with the curtains drawn back, the bloodstained rip in her sleeve drawing all eyes, and faced down Lord Agelmar. “You will find the bowman or you will not, my son. Either way, my business in Tar Valon is as urgent as that of Ingtar on his quest. I leave now.”

“But, Mother,” Agelmar protested, “this attempt on your life changes everything. We still do not know who sent the man, or why. An hour more, and I will have the bowman and the answers for you.”

The Amyrlin barked a laugh with no amusement in it. “You’ll need slyer bait or finer nets to catch this fish, my son. By the time you have the man, it will be too late in the day for leaving. There are too many who would cheer to see me dead for me to worry overmuch about this one. You may send me news of what you find, if you find anything at all.” Her eyes traveled around the towers overlooking the courtyard, and the ramparts and archers’ balconies, still jammed with people, though silent now. The arrow had to have come from one of those places. “I think this bowman is already fled from Fal Dara.”

“But, Mother—”

The woman in the palanquin cut him off with a sharp gesture of finality. Not even the Lord of Fal Dara could press the Amyrlin Seat too far. Her eyes came to rest on Egwene and Nynaeve, piercing eyes that seemed to Egwene to be seeing everything about herself that she wanted to keep secret. Egwene took a step back, then caught herself and dropped a curtsy, wondering if that were proper; no one had ever explained to her the protocol of meeting the Amyrlin Seat. Nynaeve kept her back straight and returned the Amyrlin’s stare, but she fumbled for Egwene’s hand and gripped as hard as Egwene did.

“So these are your two, Moiraine,” the Amyrlin said. Moiraine gave the barest nod, and the other Aes Sedai turned to stare at the two women from Emond’s Field. Egwene swallowed. They all looked as if they *knew* things, things other people did not, and it was no help at all to know that they truly did. “Yes, I sense a fine spark in each of them. But what will kindle from it? That’s the question, isn’t it?”

Egwene’s mouth felt dry as dust. She had seen Master Padwhin, the carpenter back home, look at his tools much the same way as the Amyrlin was looking at the two of them. This one for this purpose, that one for that.

The Amyrlin said abruptly, “It is time we were gone. To horse. Lord Agelmar and I can say what needs be said without you all gawking like novices on a freeday. To horse!”

At her command the Warders scattered to their mounts, still wary, and the Aes Sedai, all but Leane, glided away from the palanquin to their own horses. As Egwene and Nynaeve turned to obey, a servant appeared at Lord Agelmar’s shoulder with a silver chalice. Agelmar took it with a dissatisfied twist to his mouth.

“With this cup from my hand, Mother, take my wish that you fare well on this day, and every. . . .”

Whatever else they said was lost to Egwene as she scrambled onto Bela. By the time she had given the shaggy mare a pat, and arranged her skirts, the palanquin was already moving toward the open gates, its horses stepping without rein or lead. Leane rode beside the palanquin, her staff propped at her stirrup. Egwene and Nynaeve brought their horses along behind with the rest of the Aes Sedai.

Roars and cheers from the crowds lining the town streets greeted the procession, all but drowning the thunder of the drummers and the blare of the trumpeters. Warders led the column, with the banner bearing the White Flame waving in ripples, and rode guard around the Aes Sedai, keeping the mass of people back; archers and pikemen, the Flame blazoned on their chests, followed behind in precise ranks. The trumpets fell silent as the column wound its way out of the town and turned southward, yet the sounds of cheering from within the town followed still. Egwene glanced back often, until trees and hills hid Fal Dara's walls and towers.

Nynaeve, riding alongside, shook her head. "Rand will be all right. He has Lord Ingtar and twenty lances with him. In any case, there is nothing you can do about it. Nothing either of us can do." She glanced toward Moiraine; the Aes Sedai's trim white mare and Lan's tall black stallion made an odd pair off to one side by themselves. "Not yet."

The column angled westward as it traveled, and it did not cover the ground quickly. Even footmen in half armor could not move fast through the Shienaran hills, not and maintain the pace for long. Still, they pushed as hard as they could.

Camps came late each night, the Amyrlin allowing no stop until barely enough light remained to pitch the tents, flattened white domes just tall enough to stand in. Each pair of Aes Sedai from the same Ajah had one, while the Amyrlin and the Keeper had tents to themselves. Moiraine shared the tent of her two sisters of the Blue. The soldiers slept on the ground in their own encampment, and the Warders wrapped themselves in their cloaks near the tents of the Aes Sedai to whom they were bonded. The tent shared by the Red sisters looked oddly lonely without any Warders, while that of the Greens seemed almost festive, the two Aes Sedai often sitting outside long past dark to talk with the four Warders they had brought between them.

Lan came once to the tent Egwene shared with Nynaeve, taking the Wisdom into the night a little distance away. Egwene peered around the tent flap to watch. She could not hear what they said, except that Nynaeve eventually erupted in anger and came stalking back to wrap herself in her blankets and refuse to talk at all. Egwene thought her cheeks were wet, though she hid her face with a corner of her blanket. Lan stood watching the tent from the darkness for a long time before he went away. After that he did not come again.

Moiraine did not come near them, giving them only a nod in passing. She seemed to spend her waking hours speaking with the other Aes Sedai, all but the Red sisters, drawing them aside one by one as they rode. The Amyrlin allowed few stops for rest, and those short.

“Maybe she doesn’t have time for us anymore,” Egwene observed sadly. Moiraine was the one Aes Sedai she knew. Perhaps—though she did not like to admit it—the only one she was sure she could trust. “She found us, and we are on our way to Tar Valon. I suppose she has other things to concern her, now.”

Nynaeve snorted softly. “I’ll believe she is done with us when she’s dead—or we are. She is sly, that one.”

Other Aes Sedai came to their tent. Egwene almost jumped out of her skin that first night out of Fal Dara, when the tent flap was pushed aside and a plump, square-faced Aes Sedai, with graying hair and a vaguely distracted look in her dark eyes, ducked into their tent. She glanced at the lantern hanging at the highest point of the tent, and the flame rose a little higher. Egwene thought she felt something, thought she almost saw something about the Aes Sedai when the flame grew brighter. Moiraine had told her that one day—when she had more training—she would be able to *see* when another woman channeled, and to tell a woman who could channel even if she did nothing.

“I am Verin Mathwin,” the woman said with a smile. “And you are Egwene al’Vere and Nynaeve al’Maera. From the Two Rivers, which was once Manetheren. Strong blood, that. It sings.”

Egwene exchanged glances with Nynaeve as they got to their feet.

“Is this a summons to the Amyrlin Seat?” Egwene asked.

Verin laughed. The Aes Sedai had a smudge of ink on her nose. “Oh, my, no. The Amyrlin has more important things to deal with than two young women who are not even novices yet. Although, you never can tell. You both have considerable potential, especially you, Nynaeve. One day. . . .” She paused, rubbing a finger thoughtfully right atop the ink smudge. “But this is not one day. I am here to give you a lesson, Egwene. You have been poking in ahead of yourself, I fear.”

Nervously, Egwene looked at Nynaeve. “What have I done? Nothing that I’m aware of.”

“Oh, nothing wrong. Not exactly. Somewhat dangerous, perhaps, but not exactly wrong.” Verin lowered herself to the canvas floor, folding her legs under her. “Sit, both of you. Sit. I don’t mean to crane my neck.” She shifted around until she had a comfortable position. “Sit.”

Egwene settled cross-legged across from the Aes Sedai and did her best not to look at Nynaeve. *No need to look guilty until I know if I am. And maybe not then.* “What is it I’ve done that’s dangerous but not exactly wrong?”

“Why, you’ve been channeling the Power, child.”

Egwene could only gape. Nynaeve burst out, “That is ridiculous. Why are we going to Tar Valon, if not for that?”

“Moiraine has . . . I mean, Moiraine Sedai has been giving me lessons,” Egwene managed.

Verin held up her hands for quiet, and they fell silent. She might seem vague, but she was Aes Sedai, after all. “Child, do you think Aes Sedai immediately teach every girl who says she wants to be one of us how to channel? Well, I suppose you are not exactly every girl, but just the same. . . .” She shook her head gravely.

“Then why did she?” Nynaeve demanded. There had been no lessons for her, and Egwene was still not sure if it rankled Nynaeve or not.

“Because Egwene had already channeled,” Verin said patiently.

“So. . . . So have I.” Nynaeve did not sound happy about it.

“Your circumstances are different, child. That you are still alive shows you weathered the various crises, and did it on your own. I think you know how lucky you are. Of every four women forced to do what you did, only one survives. Of course, wilders—” Verin grimaced. “Forgive me, but I am afraid that *is* what we in the White Tower often call women who, without any training, have managed some rough control—random, and barely enough to be called control, usually, like you, but still control of a sort. Wilders have difficulties, it is true. Almost always they have built up walls to keep themselves from knowing what it was they were doing, and those walls interfere with conscious control. The longer those walls have to build, the harder it is to tear them down, but if they can be demolished—well, some of the most adept sisters ever have been wilders.”

Nynaeve shifted irritably, and looked at the entrance as if thinking of leaving.

“I don’t see what any of that has to do with me,” Egwene said.

Verin blinked at her, almost as if wondering where she had come from. "With you? Why, nothing. Your problem is quite different. Most girls who want to become Aes Sedai—even most girls with the seed inside them, like you—are afraid of it, too. Even after they reach the Tower, even after they've learned what to do and how, for months they need to be led, step by step, by a sister, or by one of the Accepted. But not you. From what Moiraine tells me, you leaped into it as soon as you knew you could, fumbling your way through the dark with never a thought of whether there was a bottomless pit under your next step. Oh, there have been others like you; you are not unique. Moiraine was one herself. Once she knew what you had done, there was nothing for it but for her to begin teaching you. Did Moiraine never explain any of this to you?"

"Never." Egwene wished her voice was not so breathless. "She had . . . other matters to deal with." Nynaeve snorted softly.

"Well, Moiraine has never believed in telling anyone anything they did not need to know. Knowing serves no real purpose, but then, neither does not knowing. Myself, I always prefer knowing to not."

"Is there one? A pit, I mean?"

"Obviously not so far," Verin said, tilting her head. "But the next step?" She shrugged. "You see, child, the more you *try* to touch the True Source, the more you *try* to channel the One Power, the easier it becomes to actually do it. Yes, in the beginning, you stretch out to the Source and more often than not it is like grasping at air. Or you actually touch *saidar*, but even when you feel the One Power flowing through you, you find you can do nothing with it. Or you do something, and it isn't what you intended at all. That is the danger. Usually, with guidance and training—and the girl's own fear slowing her down—the ability to touch the Source and the ability to channel the Power come together with the ability to control what she is doing. But you began trying to channel without anyone there to teach you any control at all of what you do. I know you don't think you're very far along, and you are not, but you are like someone who has taught herself to run up hills—sometimes, at least—without ever learning how to run down the other side, or to walk. Sooner or later you are going to fall, if you don't learn the rest of it. Now, I am not talking about anything like what happens when one of those poor men begins channeling—you will not go mad; you won't die, not with sisters to teach and guide you—but what might you do entirely by accident, never meaning to?" For an instant the vagueness had dropped from Verin's eyes. For an instant, it seemed, the Aes Sedai's gaze had flicked from Egwene to Nynaeve as sharply as the Amyrlin's had. "Your innate abilities are strong, child, and they will grow stronger. You must learn to control them before you harm yourself, or someone else, or a great many people. That is what Moiraine was trying to teach you. That is what I will try to help you with tonight, and what a sister will help you with every night until we put you into Sheriam's most capable hands. She is Mistress of Novices."

Egwene thought, *Can she know about Rand? It isn't possible. She'd never have let him leave Fal Dara if she even suspected.* But she was sure she had not imagined what she saw. "Thank you, Verin Sedai. I will try."

Nynaeve rose smoothly to her feet. "I will go sit by the fire and leave you two alone."

"You should stay," Verin said. "You could profit by it. From what Moiraine has told me, it should take only a little training for you to be raised to the Accepted."

Nynaeve hesitated only a moment before shaking her head firmly. "I thank you for the offer, but I can wait until we reach Tar Valon. Egwene, if you need me, I will be—"

"By any gauge," Verin cut in, "you are a woman grown, Nynaeve. Usually, the younger a novice, the better she does. Not with the training necessarily, but because a novice is expected to do as she is told, when she is told and without question. It is really only of use once the actual training has reached a certain point—a hesitation in the wrong place then, or a doubt of what you have been told to do, can have tragic consequences—but it is better to follow the discipline all the time. The Accepted, on the other hand, are expected to question things, as it is felt they know enough to know what questions to ask and when. Which do you think you would prefer?"

Nynaeve's hands tightened on her skirt, and she looked at the tent flap again, frowning. Finally she gave a short nod and settled back down on the floor. "I suppose I might as well," she said.

"Good," Verin said. "Now. You already know this part, Egwene, but for Nynaeve's sake I will take you through it step by step. In time, it will become second nature—you will do it all faster than you can think of it—but now it is best to go slowly. Close your eyes, please. It goes better in the beginning if you have no distractions at all." Egwene closed her eyes. There was a pause. "Nynaeve," Verin said, "please close your eyes. It will really go better.” Another pause. “Thank you, child. Now, you must empty yourself. Empty your thoughts. There is only one thing in your mind. The bud of a flower. Only that. Only the bud. You can see it in every detail. You can smell it. You can feel it. Every vein of every leaf, every curve of every petal. You can feel the sap pulsing. Feel it. Know it. Be it. You and the bud are the same. You are one. You are the bud.”

Her voice droned on hypnotically, but Egwene no longer really heard; she had done this exercise before, with Moiraine. It was slow, but Moiraine had said it would come more quickly with practice. Inside herself, she was a rosebud, red petals curled tightly. Yet suddenly there was something else. Light. Light pressing on the petals. Slowly the petals unfolded, turning toward the light, absorbing the light. The rose and the light were one. Egwene and the light were one. She could feel the merest trickle of it seeping through her. She stretched for more, strained for more. . . .

In an instant it was all gone, rose and light. Moiraine had also said it could not be forced. With a sigh, she opened her eyes. Nynaeve had a grim look on her face. Verin was as calm as ever.

“You cannot *make* it happen,” the Aes Sedai was saying. “You must *let* it happen. You must surrender to the Power before you can control it.”

“This is complete foolishness,” Nynaeve muttered. “I don’t feel like a flower. If anything, I feel like a blackthorn bush. I think I will wait by the fire after all.”

“As you wish,” Verin said. “Did I mention that novices do chores? They wash dishes, scrub floors, do laundry, serve at table, all sorts of things. I myself think the servants do a better job of it by far, but it is generally felt that such labor builds character. Oh, you are staying? Good. Well, child, remember that even a blackthorn bush has flowers sometimes, beautiful and white among the thorns. We will try it one at a time. Now, from the beginning, Egwene. Close your eyes.”

Several times before Verin left, Egwene felt the flow of the Power through her, but it was never very strong, and the most she managed with it was to produce a stir in the air that made the tent flap stir slightly. She was sure a sneeze could have done as much. She had done better with Moiraine; sometimes, at least. She wished it was Moiraine doing the teaching.

Nynaeve never even felt a glimmer, or so she said. By the end her eyes were set and her mouth so tight that Egwene was afraid she was about to begin berating Verin as if the Aes Sedai were a village woman intruding on her privacy. But Verin simply told her to close her eyes once again, this time without Egwene.

Egwene was sitting, watching the other two between her yawns. The night had grown late, well past the time she would usually be asleep. Nynaeve wore a face like week-old death, her eyes clamped shut as if she never meant to open them and her hands white-knuckled fists in her lap. Egwene hoped the Wisdom's temper did not break loose, not after she had held it this long.

"Feel the flow through you," Verin was saying. Her voice did not change, but suddenly there was a gleam in her eyes. "Feel the flow. Flow of the Power. Flow like a breeze, a gentle stirring in the air." Egwene sat up straight. This was how Verin had guided her each time she had actually had the Power flowing through her. "A soft breeze, the slightest movement of air. Soft."

Abruptly the stacked blankets burst into flame like fatwood.

Nynaeve opened her eyes with a yell. Egwene was not sure if she screamed or not. All Egwene knew was that she was on her feet, trying to kick the burning blankets outside before they set the tent on fire. Before she managed a second kick, the flames vanished, leaving wispy smoke rising from a charred mass and the smell of burned wool.

"Well," Verin said. "Well. I did not expect to have to douse a fire. Don't faint on me, child. It's all right now. I took care of it."

"I—I was angry." Nynaeve spoke through trembling lips in a bloodless face. "I heard you talking about a breeze, telling me what to do, and fire just popped into my head. I—I didn't mean to burn anything. It was just a small fire, in—in my head." She shuddered.

"I suppose it was a small fire, at that." Verin barked a laugh that was gone with another look at Nynaeve's face. "Are you all right, child? If you feel ill, I can. . . ." Nynaeve shook her head, and Verin nodded. "Rest is what you need. Both of you. I've worked you too hard. You must rest. The Amyrlin will have us all up and away before first light." Standing, she toed the charred blankets. "I will have some more blankets brought to you. I hope this shows both of you how important control is. You must learn to do what you mean to do, and nothing more. Aside from harming someone else, if you draw more of the Power than you can safely handle—and you cannot handle much, yet; but it will grow—if you draw too much, you can destroy yourself. You can die. Or you can burn yourself out, destroy what ability you have.” As if she had not told them they were walking a knife edge, she added a cheerful “Sleep well.” With that, she was gone.

Egwene put her arms around Nynaeve and hugged her tight. “It is all right, Nynaeve. There is no need to be frightened. Once you learn to control —”

Nynaeve gave a croaking laugh. “I am not frightened.” She glanced sideways at the smoking blankets and twitched her eyes away. “It takes more than a little fire to frighten me.” But she did not look at the blankets again, even when a Warder came to take them away and leave new.

Verin did not come again, as she had said she would not. Indeed, as they journeyed on, south and west, day by day, as fast as the footmen could move, Verin paid the two women from Emond’s Field no more mind than Moiraine did, than did any of the Aes Sedai. They were not precisely unfriendly, the Aes Sedai, but rather distant and aloof, as if preoccupied. Their coolness heightened Egwene’s unease, and brought back all the tales she had heard as a child.

Her mother had always told her the tales about Aes Sedai were a lot of fool men’s nonsense, but neither her mother nor any other woman in Emond’s Field had ever met an Aes Sedai before Moiraine came there. She herself had spent a good deal of time with Moiraine, and Moiraine was proof to her that not all Aes Sedai were like the tales. Cold manipulators and merciless destroyers. Breakers of the World. She knew now that *those*, at least—the Breakers of the World—had been male Aes Sedai, when there were such, in the Age of Legends, but it did not help a great deal. Not *all* Aes Sedai were like the tales, but how many, and which?

The Aes Sedai who came to the tent each night were so mixed that they did not help at all in clearing her thoughts. Alviarin was as cool and businesslike as a merchant come to buy wool and tabac, surprised that Nynaeve was part of the lesson but accepting, sharp in her criticisms but always ready to try again. Alanna Mosvani laughed and spent as much time talking about the world, and men, as she did teaching. Alanna showed too much interest in Rand and Perrin and Mat for Egwene’s comfort, though. Especially Rand. Worst of all was Liandrin, the only one who wore her shawl; the others had all packed them away before leaving Fal Dara. Liandrin sat fingering her red fringe and taught little, and reluctantly at that. She questioned Egwene and Nynaeve as if they had been accused of a crime, and her questions were all about the three boys. She kept it up until

Nynaeve threw her out—Egwene was not sure why Nynaeve did so—and then she left with a warning.

“Watch yourselves, my daughters. You are in your village no longer. Now you dabble your toes where there are things to bite you.”

Finally the column reached the village of Medo, on the banks of the Mora, which ran along the border between Shienar and Arafel and so into the River Erinin.

Egwene was sure it was the Aes Sedai’s questions about Rand that had made her start dreaming of him, that and worrying about him, about whether he and the others had had to follow the Horn of Valere into the Blight. The dreams were always bad, but at first they were just the ordinary sort of nightmare. By the night they reached Medo, the dreams had changed, though.

“Pardon, Aes Sedai,” Egwene asked diffidently, “but have you seen Moiraine Sedai?” The slender Aes Sedai waved her away and hurried on down the crowded, torch-lit village street, calling for someone to be careful with her horse. The woman was of the Yellow Ajah, though not wearing her shawl now; Egwene knew no more of her than that, not even her name.

Medo was a small village—though Egwene was shocked to realize that what she now thought of as a “small village” was as big as Emond’s Field—and it was overwhelmed now with many more outsiders than there were inhabitants. Horses and people filled the narrow streets, jostling to the docks past villagers who knelt whenever an unseeing Aes Sedai sped by. Harsh torchlight lit everything. The two docks jutted out into the River Mora like stone fingers, and each hosted a pair of small, two-masted ships. There, horses were being hoisted on board by booms and cables and canvas cradles under their bellies. More of the ships—high-sided and stout, with lanterns topping their masts—crowded the moon-streaked river, already loaded or waiting their turn. Rowboats ferried out archers and pikemen, the raised pikes making the boats look like gigantic pricklebacks swimming on the surface.

On the left-hand dock Egwene found Anaiya, watching the loading and chivying those who were not moving fast enough. Though she had never said more than two words to Egwene, Anaiya seemed different from the others, more like a woman from home. Egwene could picture her baking in her kitchen; she could not see any of the others so. “Anaiya Sedai, have you seen Moiraine Sedai? I need to talk to her.”

The Aes Sedai looked around with an absent frown. “What? Oh, it’s you, child. Moiraine is gone. And your friend, Nynaeve, is already out on the *River Queen.* I had to bundle her onto a boat myself, shouting that she would not go without you. Light, what a scramble! You should be aboard, yourself. Find a boat going out to the *River Queen.* You two will be traveling with the Amyrlin Seat, so mind yourself once you’re on board. No scenes or tantrums.”

“Which ship is Moiraine Sedai’s?”

“Moiraine isn’t on a ship, girl. She’s gone, two days gone, and the Amyrlin is in a taking over it.” Anaiya grimaced and shook her head, though most of her attention was still on the workers. “First Moiraine vanishes with Lan, then Liandrin right on Moiraine’s heels, and then Verin, none of them with so much as a word for anyone. Verin did not even take her Warder; Tomas is chewing nails with worry over her.” The Aes Sedai glanced at the sky. The waxing moon shone without the hindrance of clouds. “We will have to call the wind again, and the Amyrlin will not be pleased with that, either. She says she wants us on our way to Tar Valon within an hour, and she will brook no delays. I would not want to be Moiraine, or Liandrin, or Verin, when she sees them next. They’ll wish they were novices again. Why, child, what’s the matter?”

Egwene drew a deep breath. *Moiraine gone? She can’t be! I have to tell somebody, somebody who won’t laugh at me.* She imagined Anaiya back in Emond’s Field, listening to her daughter’s problems; the woman fit the picture. “Anaiya Sedai, Rand is in trouble.”

Anaiya gave her a considering look. “That tall boy from your village? Missing him already, are you? Well, I shouldn’t be surprised if he *is* in trouble. Young men his age usually are. Though it was the other one—Mat?—who had the look of trouble. Very well, child. I don’t mean to mock you or make light. What kind of trouble, and how do you know? He and Lord Ingtar must have the Horn and be back in Fal Dara by now. Or else they’ve had to follow it into the Blight, and there’s nothing to do about that.”

“I—I don’t think they’re in the Blight, or back in Fal Dara. I had a dream.” She said it half defiantly. It sounded silly when she said it, but it had seemed so real. A nightmare for true, but real. First there had been a man with a mask over his face, and fire in place of his eyes. Despite the mask, she had thought he was surprised to see her. His look had frightened her till she thought her bones would break from shivering, but suddenly he vanished, and she saw Rand sleeping on the ground, wrapped in a cloak. A woman had been standing over him, looking down. Her face was in shadow, but her eyes seemed to shine like the moon, and Egwene had known she was evil. Then there was a flash of light, and they were gone. Both of them. And behind it all, almost like another thing altogether, was the feel of danger, as if a trap was just beginning to snap shut on an unsuspecting lamb, a trap with many jaws. As though time had slowed, and she could watch the iron jaws creep closer together. The dream had not faded with waking, the way dreams did. And the danger felt so strong she still wanted to look over her shoulder—only somehow she knew that it was aimed at Rand, not at her.

She wondered if the woman had been Moiraine, and upbraided herself for the thought. Liandrin fit that part better. Or perhaps Alanna; she had been interested in Rand, too.

She could not bring herself to tell Anaiya. Formally, she said, “Anaiya Sedai, I know it sounds foolish, but he is in danger. Great danger. I know it. I could feel it. I still can.”

Anaiya wore a thoughtful look. “Well, now,” she said softly, “that’s a possibility I’ll wager no one has considered. You may be a Dreamer. It is a small chance, child, but. . . . We haven’t had one of those in—oh—four or five hundred years. And Dreaming is close linked to Foretelling. If you really can Dream, it may be that you can Foretell, as well. *That* would be a finger in the Reds’ eye. Of course, it could be just an ordinary nightmare, brought on by a late night, and cold food, and us traveling so hard since we left Fal Dara. And you missing your young man. Much more likely. Yes, yes, child, I know. You are worried about him. Did your dream indicate what kind of danger?”

Egwene shook her head. “He just vanished, and I felt danger. And evil. I felt it even before he vanished.” She shivered and rubbed her hands together. “I can still feel it.”

“Well, we will talk about it more on the *River Queen*. If you *are* a Dreamer, I will see you have the training Moiraine should be here to. . . . You there!” the Aes Sedai barked suddenly, and Egwene jumped. A tall man, who had just sat down on a cask of wine, jumped, too. Several others quickened their step. “That’s for loading aboard, not resting on! We will talk on the boat, child. No, you fool! You can’t carry it by yourself! Do you want to hurt yourself?” Anaiya went striding off down the dock, giving the unfortunate villagers a rougher side of her tongue than Egwene would have suspected she had.

Egwene peered into the dark, toward the south. He was out there, somewhere. Not in Fal Dara, not in the Blight. She was sure of it. *Hold on, you wool-headed idiot. If you get yourself killed before I can get you out of this, I* will *skin you alive.* It did not occur to her to ask how she was going to get him out of anything, going to Tar Valon as she was.

Snugging her cloak around her, she set out to find a boat to the *River Queen.*

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CHAPTER

13

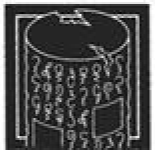

From Stone to Stone

The light of the rising sun woke Rand, and he wondered if he were dreaming. He sat up slowly, staring. Everything had changed, or almost everything. The sun and the sky were as he expected to see, if pallid and all but cloudless. Loial and Hurin still lay on either side of him, wrapped in their cloaks asleep, and their horses still stood hobbled a pace away, but everyone else was gone. Soldiers, horses, his friends, everyone and everything gone.

The hollow itself had changed, too, and they were in the middle of it now, no longer on the edge. At Rand’s head rose a gray stone cylinder, every bit of three spans high and a full pace thick, covered with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of deeply incised diagrams and markings in some language he did not recognize. White stone paved the bottom of the hollow, as level as a floor, polished so smooth it almost glistened. Broad, high steps rose to the rim in concentric rings of different colored stone. And about the rim, the trees stood blackened and twisted as if a firestorm had roared through them. Everything seemed paler than it should be, just like the sun, more subdued, as if seen through mist. Only there was no mist. Just the three of them and the horses appeared truly solid. But when he touched the stone under him, it *felt* solid enough.

He reached out and shook Loial and Hurin. “Wake up! Wake up and tell me I’m dreaming. Please wake up!”

“Is it morning already?” Loial began, sitting up, then his mouth fell open, and his big, round eyes grew wider and wider.

Hurin woke with a start, then leaped to his feet, jumping like a flea on a hot rock to look this way, then that. “Where are we? What’s happened? Where is everybody? Where are we, Lord Rand?” He sank to his knees, wringing his hands, but his eyes still darted. “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know,” Rand said slowly. “I was hoping it was a dream, but. . . . Maybe it is a dream.” He had had experience of dreams that were not dreams, experience he wanted neither to repeat nor to remember. He stood up carefully. Everything stayed as it was.

“I do not think so,” Loial said. He was studying the column, and he did not appear happy. His long eyebrows sagged across his cheeks, and his tufted ears seemed to have wilted. “I think this is the same stone we went to sleep beside last night. I think I know what it is, now.” For once, he sounded miserable about knowing.

“That’s. . . .” *No.* That being the same stone was no more crazy than what he could see around him, Mat and Perrin and the Shienarans gone, and everything changed. *I thought I’d escaped, but it’s started again, and there’s no such thing as crazy anymore. Unless I am.* He looked at Loial and Hurin. They were not acting as if he were mad; they saw it, too. Something about the steps caught his eye, the different colors, seven rising from blue to red. “One for each Ajah,” he said.

“No, Lord Rand,” Hurin moaned. “No. Aes Sedai would not do this to us. They wouldn’t! I walk in the Light.”

“We all do, Hurin,” Rand said. “The Aes Sedai won’t hurt you.” *Unless you get in the way.* Could this be Moiraine’s doing somehow? “Loial, you said you know what the stone is. What is it?”

“I said I think I know, Rand. There was a piece of an old book, just a few pages, but one of them had a drawing of this stone, this Stone”—there was a distinct difference in the way he said it that marked importance—“or one very like it. And underneath, it said, ‘From Stone to Stone run the lines of “if,” between the worlds that might be.’ ”

“What does that mean, Loial? It doesn’t make any sense.”

The Ogier shook his massive head sadly. “It was only a few pages. Part of it said Aes Sedai in the Age of Legends, some of those who could Travel, the most powerful of them, could use these Stones. It did not say how, but I think, from what I could puzzle out, that perhaps those Aes Sedai used the Stones somehow to journey to those worlds.” He glanced up at the seared trees and pulled his eyes down again quickly, as he did not want to think about what lay beyond the rim. “Yet even if Aes Sedai can use them, or could, we had no Aes Sedai with us to channel the Power, so I don’t see how it can be.”

Rand’s skin prickled. *Aes Sedai used them. In the Age of Legends, when there were male Aes Sedai.* He had a vague memory of the void closing round him as he fell asleep, filled with that uneasy glow. And he remembered the room in the village, and the light he had reached for to escape. *If that was the male half of True Source. . . . No, it can’t be. But what if it is? Light, I was wondering whether to run or not, and all the time it’s right inside my head. Maybe I brought us here.* He did not want to think about it. “Worlds that might be? I don’t understand, Loial.”

The Ogier shrugged massively, and uneasily. “Neither do I, Rand. Most of it sounded like this. ‘If a woman go left, or right, does Time’s flow divide? Does the Wheel then weave two Patterns? A thousand, for each of her turnings? As many as the stars? Is one real, the others merely shadows and reflections?’ You see, it was not very clear. Mainly questions, most of which seemed to contradict each other. And there just wasn’t much of it.” He went back to staring at the column, but he looked as if he wished it would go away. “There are supposed to be a good many of these Stones, scattered all over the world, or there were, once, but I never heard of anyone finding one. I never heard of anyone finding anything like this at all.”

“My Lord Rand?” Now on his feet, Hurin seemed calmer, but he clutched his coat at the waist with both hands, his face urgent. “My Lord Rand, you’ll get us back, won’t you? Back where we belong? I’ve a wife, my Lord, and children. Melia’d take it bad enough, me dying, but if she doesn’t even have my body to give to the mother’s embrace, she’ll grieve to the end of her days. You understand, my Lord. I can’t leave her not knowing. You’ll get us back. And if I die, if you can’t take her my body, you’ll let her know, so she has that, at least.” He was no longer questioning at the end. A note of confidence had crept into his voice.

Rand opened his mouth to say again he was not a lord, then shut it without speaking. That was hardly important enough to mention, now. *You got him into this.* He wanted to deny it, but he knew what he was, knew he could channel, even if it always seemed to happen all by itself. Loial said Aes Sedai used the Stones, and that meant the One Power. What Loial said he knew, you could be sure of—the Ogier never claimed to know if he did not—and there was no one else nearby who could wield the Power. *You got him into it, you have to get him out. You have to try.*

"I will do my best, Hurin." And because Hurin was Shienaran, he added, "By my House and honor. A shepherd's House and a shepherd's honor, but I'll make them do as well as a lord's."

Hurin loosed his hold on his coat. The confidence reached his eyes, too. He bowed deeply. "Honor to serve, my Lord."

Guilt rippled through Rand. *He thinks you'll see him home, now, because Shienaran lords always keep their word. What are you going to do,* Lord *Rand?* "None of that, Hurin. There'll be no bowing. I'm not—" Suddenly he knew he could not tell the man again that he was not a lord. All that was holding the sniffer together was his belief in a lord, and he could not take that away, not now. Not here. "No bowing," he finished awkwardly.

"As you say, Lord Rand." Hurin's grin was almost as wide as when Rand first met him.

Rand cleared his throat. "Yes. Well, that's what I say."

They were both watching him, Loial curious, Hurin confident, both waiting to see what he would do. *I brought them here. I must have. So I have to get them back. And that means. . . .*

Drawing a deep breath, he walked across the white paving stones to the symbol-covered cylinder. Small lines of some language he did not know surrounded each symbol, odd letters that flowed in curves and spirals, suddenly turned to jagged hooks and angles, then flowed on. At least it was not Trolloc script. Reluctantly, he put his hands on the column. It looked like any dry, polished stone, but it felt curiously slick, like oiled metal.

He closed his eyes and formed the flame. The void came slowly, hesitantly. He knew his own fear was holding it back, fear of what he was trying. As fast as he fed fear into the flame, more came. *I can't do it. Channel the Power. I don't want to. Light, there has to be another way.* Grimly he forced the thoughts to stillness. He could feel sweat beading on his face. Determinedly he kept on, pushing his fears into the consuming flame, making it grow, and grow. And the void was there.

The core of him floated in emptiness. He could see the light—*saidin*—even with his eyes closed, feel the warmth of it, surrounding him, surrounding everything, suffusing everything. It wavered like a candle flame seen through oiled paper. Rancid oil. Stinking oil.

He reached for it—he was not sure *how* he reached, but it was something, a movement, a stretching toward the light, toward *saidin*—and caught nothing, as if running his hands through water. It felt like a slimy pond, scum floating atop clean water below, but he could not scoop up any of the water. Time and again it trickled through his fingers, not even droplets of the water remaining, only the slick scum, making his skin crawl.

Desperately, he tried to form an image of the hollow as it had been, with Ingtar and the lances sleeping by their horses, with Mat and Perrin, and the Stone lying buried except for one end. Outside the void he formed it, clinging to the shell of emptiness that enclosed him. He tried to link the image with the light, tried to force them together. The hollow as it had been, and he and Loial and Hurin there together. His head hurt. Together, with Mat and Perrin and the Shienarans. Burning, in his head. Together!

The void shattered into a thousand razor shards, slicing his mind.

Shuddering, he staggered back, wide-eyed. His hands hurt from pressing the Stone, and his arms and shoulders quivered with aching; his stomach lurched from the feel of filth covering him, and his head. . . . He tried to steady his breathing. That had never happened before. When the void went, it went like a pricked bubble, just gone, in a twinkling. Never broken like glass. His head felt numb, as if the thousand slashes had happened so quickly the pain had not yet come. But every cut had felt as real as if done with a knife. He touched his temple, and was surprised not to see blood on his fingers.

Hurin still stood there watching him, still confident. If anything, the sniffer seemed more sure by the minute. Lord Rand was doing something. That was what lords were for. They protected the land and the people with their bodies and their lives, and when something was wrong, they set it aright and saw fairness and justice done. As long as Rand was doing something, anything, Hurin would have confidence that it would all come right in the end. That was what lords did.

Loial had a different look, a slightly puzzled frown, but his eyes were on Rand, too. Rand wondered what he was thinking.

“It was worth a try,” he told them. The rancid oil feel, inside his head —*Light, it’s inside me! I don’t want it inside me!*—was fading slowly, but he still thought he might vomit. “I will try again, in a few minutes.”

He hoped he sounded confident. He had no idea how the Stones worked, if what he was doing had any chance of success. *Maybe there are rules for working them. Maybe you have to do something special. Light, maybe you can’t use the same Stone twice, or. . . .* He cut off that line of thought. There was no good in thinking like that. He had to do it. Looking at Loial and Hurin, he thought he knew what Lan had meant about duty pressing down like a mountain.

“My Lord, I think. . . .” Hurin let his words trail off, looking abashed for a moment. “My Lord, maybe, if we find the Darkfriends, we can make one of them tell us how to get back.”

“I would ask a Darkfriend or the Dark One himself if I thought I’d get a true answer back,” Rand said. “But we are all there is. Just us three.” *Just me. I’m the one who has to do it.*

“We could follow their trail, my Lord. If we catch them. . . .”

Rand stared at the sniffer. “You can still smell them?”

“I can, my Lord.” Hurin frowned. “It’s faint, pale-like, like everything else here, but I can smell the trail. Right up there.” He pointed to the rim of the hollow. “I don’t understand it, my Lord, but—Last night, I could have sworn the trail went right on by the hollow back—back where we were. Well, it’s in the same place now, only here, and fainter, like I said. Not old, not faint like that, but. . . . I don’t know, Lord Rand, except that it’s there.”

Rand considered. If Fain and the Darkfriends were here—wherever here was—they might know how to get back. They had to, if they had reached here in the first place. And they had the Horn, and the dagger. Mat had to have that dagger. For that if for nothing else, he had to find them. What finally decided him, he was ashamed to realize, was that he was afraid to try again. Afraid to try channeling the Power. He was less afraid of confronting Darkfriends and Trollocs with only Hurin and Loial than he was of that.

“Then we will go after the Darkfriends.” He tried to sound sure, the way Lan would, or Ingtar. “The Horn must be recovered. If we can’t puzzle out a way to take it from them, at least we will know where they are when we find Ingtar again.” *If only they don’t ask how we’re going to find him again.* “Hurin, make sure it really is the trail we’re after.”

The sniffer leaped into his saddle, eager to be doing something himself, perhaps eager to be away from the hollow, and scrambled his horse up the broad, colored steps. The animal’s hooves rang loudly on the stone, but they made not a mark.

Rand stowed Red’s hobbles in his saddlebags—the banner was still there; he would not have minded if that had been left behind—then gathered his bow and quiver and climbed to the stallion's back. The bundle of Thom Merrilin's cloak made a mound behind his saddle.

Loial led his big mount over to him; with the Ogier standing on the ground, Loial's head came almost to Rand's shoulder, and him in his saddle. Loial still looked puzzled.

"You think we should stay here?" Rand said. "Try again to use the Stone? If the Darkfriends are here, in place, we have to find them. We can't leave the Horn of Valere in Darkfriend hands; you heard the Amyrlin. And we have to get that dagger back. Mat will die without it."

Loial nodded. "Yes, Rand, we do. But, Rand, the Stones. . . ."

"We will find another. You said they were scattered all over, and if they're all like this—all this stonework around them—it should not be too hard to find one."

"Rand, that fragment said the Stones came from an older Age than the Age of Legends, and even the Aes Sedai then did not understand them, though they used them, some of the truly powerful did. They used them with the One Power, Rand. How did you think to use this Stone to take us back? Or any other Stone we find?"

For a moment Rand could only stare at the Ogier, thinking faster than he ever had in his life. "If they are older than the Age of Legends, maybe the people who built them didn't use the Power. There must be another way. The Darkfriends got here, and they certainly couldn't use the Power. Whatever this other way is, I will find it out. I will get us back, Loial." He looked at the tall stone column with its odd markings, and felt a prickle of fear. *Light, if only I* don't *have to use the Power to do it.* "I will, Loial, I promise. One way or another."

The Ogier gave a doubtful nod. He swung up onto his huge horse and followed Rand up the steps to join Hurin among the blackened trees.

The land stretched out, low and rolling, sparsely forested here and there with grassland between, crossed by more than one stream. In the middle distance Rand thought he could see another burned patch. It was all pale, the colors washed. There was no sign of anything made by men except the stone circle behind them. The sky was empty, no chimney smoke, no birds, only a few clouds and the pale yellow sun.

Worst of all, though, the land seemed to twist the eye. What was close at hand looked all right, and what was seen straight ahead in the distance. But whenever Rand turned his head, things that appeared distant when seen from the corner of his eye seemed to rush toward him, to be nearer when he stared straight at them. It made for dizziness; even the horses whickered nervously and rolled their eyes. He tried moving his head slowly; the apparent movement of things that should have been fixed was still there, but it seemed to help a little.

“Did your piece of a book say anything about this?” Rand asked.

Loial shook his head, then swallowed hard as if he wished he had kept it still. “Nothing.”

“I suppose there’s nothing to do for it. Which way, Hurin?”

“South, Lord Rand.” The sniffer kept his eyes on the ground.

“South, then.” *There has to be a way back besides using the Power.* Rand heeled Red’s flanks. He tried to make his voice lighthearted, as if he saw no difficulty at all in what they were about. “What was it Ingtar said? Three or four days to that monument to Artur Hawkwing? I wonder if that exists here, too, the way the Stones do. If this is a world that *could* be, maybe it’s still standing. Wouldn’t that be something to see, Loial?”

They rode south.

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CHAPTER

14

Wolfbrother

"Gone?" Ingtar demanded of the air. "And my guards saw nothing. Nothing! They cannot just be gone!"

Listening, Perrin hunched his shoulders and looked at Mat, who stood a little way off frowning and muttering to himself. Arguing with himself was how Perrin saw it. The sun was peeking over the horizon, past time for them to have been riding. Shadows lay long across the hollow, stretched out and thinned, but still like the trees that made them. The packhorses, loaded and on their lead line, stamped impatiently, but everyone stood by his mount and waited.

Uno came striding up. "Not a goat-kissing track, my Lord." He sounded offended; failure touched on his skill. "Burn me, not so much as a flaming hoof scrape. They just bloody vanished."

"Three men and three horses do not just vanish," Ingtar growled. "Go over the ground again, Uno. If anyone can find where they went, it's you."

"Maybe they just ran away," Mat said. Uno stopped and glared at him. *Like he'd cursed an Aes Sedai*, Perrin thought wonderingly.

"Why would they run away?" Ingtar's voice was dangerously soft. "Rand, the Builder, my sniffer—my sniffer!—why would any of them run, much less all three?"

Mat shrugged. "I don't know. Rand was. . . ." Perrin wanted to throw something at him, hit him, anything to stop him, but Ingtar and Uno were watching. He felt a flood of relief when Mat hesitated, then spread his hands and muttered, "I don't know why. I just thought maybe they had."

Ingtar grimaced. "Ran away," he growled as if he did not believe it for an instant. "The Builder can go as he will, but Hurin would not run away. And neither would Rand al'Thor. He would not; he knows his duty, now. Go on, Uno. Search the ground again." Uno gave a half bow and hurried away, sword hilt bobbing over his shoulder. Ingtar grumbled, "Why would

Hurin leave like that, in the middle of the night, without a word? He knows what we're about. How am I to track this Shadow-spawned filth without him? I would give a thousand gold crowns for a pack of trail hounds. If I did not know better, I would say the Darkfriends managed this so they can slip east or west without me knowing. Peace, I don't know if I *do* know better." He stumped off after Uno.

Perrin shifted uneasily. The Darkfriends were doubtless getting further away with every minute. Getting further away, and with them the Horn of Valere—and the dagger from Shadar Logoth. He did not think that Rand, whatever he had become, whatever had happened to him, would abandon that chase. *But where* did *he go, and why?* Loial might go with Rand for friendship—but why Hurin?

"Maybe he did run away," he muttered, then looked around. No one appeared to have heard; even Mat was not paying him any mind. He scrubbed a hand through his hair. If Aes Sedai had been after him to be a false Dragon, he would have run, too. But worrying about Rand was doing nothing to help track the Darkfriends.

There was a way, perhaps, if he was willing to take it. He did not want to take it. He had been running away from it, but perhaps, now, he could no longer run. *Serves me right for what I told Rand. I wish I* could *run.* Even knowing what he could do to help—what he had to do—he hesitated.

No one was looking at him. No one would know what they were seeing even if they did look. Finally, reluctantly, he closed his eyes and let himself drift, let his thoughts drift, out, away from him.

He had tried denying it from the first, long before his eyes began to change from dark brown to burnished golden yellow. At that first meeting, that first instant of recognition, he had refused to believe, and he had run from the recognition ever since. He still wanted to run.

His thoughts drifted, feeling for what must be out there, what was always out there in country where men were few or far between, feeling for his brothers. He did not like to think of them that way, but they were.

In the beginning he had been afraid that what he did had some taint of the Dark One, or of the One Power—equally bad for a man who wanted nothing more than to be a blacksmith and live his life in the Light, and in peace. From that time, he knew something of how Rand felt, afraid of himself, feeling unclean. He was still not past that entirely. This thing he did was older than humans using the One Power, though, something from the birth of Time. Not the Power, Moiraine had told him. Something long vanished, now come again. Egwene knew, too, though he wished she did not. He wished no one did. He hoped she had not told anyone.

Contact. He felt them, felt other minds. Felt his brothers, the wolves.

Their thoughts came to him as a whirlpool blend of images and emotions. At first he had not been able to make out anything except the raw emotion, but now his mind put words to them. *Wolfbrother. Surprise. Two-legs that talks.* A faded image, dim with time, old beyond old, of men running with wolves, two packs hunting together. *We have heard this comes again. You are Long Tooth?*

It was a faint picture of a man dressed in clothes made of hides, with a long knife in his hand, but overlaid on the image, more central, was a shaggy wolf with one tooth longer than the rest, a steel tooth gleaming in the sunlight as the wolf led the pack in a desperate charge through deep snow toward the deer that would mean life instead of slow death by starvation, and the deer thrashing to run in powder to their bellies, and the sun glinting on the white until it hurt the eyes, and the wind howling down the passes, swirling the fine snow like mist, and. . . . Wolves' names were always complex images.

Perrin recognized the man. Elyas Machera, who had first introduced him to wolves. Sometimes he wished he had never met Elyas.

No, he thought, and tried to picture himself in his mind.

Yes. We have heard of you.

It was not the image he had made, a young man with heavy shoulders and shaggy, brown curls, a young man with an axe at his belt, who others thought moved and thought slowly. That man was there, somewhere in the mind picture that came from the wolves, but stronger by far was a massive, wild bull with curved horns of shining metal, running through the night with the speed and exuberance of youth, curly-haired coat gleaming in the moonlight, flinging himself in among Whitecloaks on their horses, with the air crisp and cold and dark, and blood so red on the horns, and. . . .

Young Bull.

For a moment Perrin lost the contact in his shock. He had not dreamed they had given him a name. He wished he could not remember how he had earned it. He touched the axe at his belt, with its gleaming, half-moon blade. *Light help me, I killed two men. They would have killed me even quicker, and Egwene, but. . . .*

Pushing all that aside—it was done and behind him; he had no wish to remember any of it—he gave the wolves the smell of Rand, of Loial and Hurin, and asked if they had scented the three. It was one of the things that had come to him with the change in his eyes; he could identify people by their smell even when he could not see them. He could see more sharply, too, see in anything but pitch-darkness. He was always careful to light lamps or candles, now, sometimes before anyone else thought they were needed.

From the wolves came a view of men on horses approaching the hollow in late day. That was the last they had seen or smelled of Rand or the other two.

Perrin hesitated. The next step would be useless unless he told Ingtar. *And Mat will die if we don't find that dagger. Burn you, Rand, why did you take the sniffer?*

The one time he had gone to the dungeon, with Egwene, the smell of Fain had made his hair stand on end; not even Trollocs smelled so foul. He had wanted to rip through the bars of the cell and tear the man apart, and finding that inside himself had frightened him more than Fain did. To mask Fain's smell in his own mind, he added the scent of Trollocs before he howled aloud.

From the distance came the cries of a wolfpack, and in the hollow horses stamped and whickered fearfully. Some of the soldiers fingered their long-bladed lances and eyed the rim of the hollow uneasily. Inside Perrin's head, it was much worse. He felt the rage of the wolves, the hate. There were only two things wolves hated. All else they merely endured, but fire and Trollocs they hated, and they would go through fire to kill Trollocs.

Even more than the Trollocs, Fain's scent had put them into a frenzy, as if they smelled something that made Trollocs seem natural and right.

Where?

The sky rolled in his head; the land spun. East and west, wolves did not know. They knew the movements of sun and moon, the shift of seasons, the contours of the land. Perrin puzzled it out. South. And something more. An eagerness to kill the Trollocs. The wolves would let Young Bull share in the killing. He could bring the two-legs with their hard skins if he wanted, but Young Bull, and Smoke, and Two Deer, and Winter Dawn, and all the rest of the pack would hunt down the Twisted Ones who had dared come into their land. The inedible flesh and bitter blood would burn the tongue, but they must be killed. Kill them. Kill the Twisted Ones.

Their fury infected him. His lips peeled back in a snarl, and he took a step, to join them, run with them in the hunt, in the killing.

With an effort he broke the contact except for a thin sense that the wolves were there. He could have pointed to them across the intervening distance. He felt cold inside. *I'm a man, not a wolf. Light help me, I am a man!*

"Are you well, Perrin?" Mat said, moving closer. He sounded the way he always did, flippant—and bitter under it, too, of late—but he looked worried. "That is all I need. Rand run off, and then you get sick. I don't know where I'll find a Wisdom to look after you out here. I think I have some willowbark in my saddlebags. I can make you some willowbark tea, if Ingtar lets us stay that long. Serve you right if I make it too strong."

"I . . . I'm all right, Mat." Shaking off his friend, he went to find Ingtar. The Shienaran lord was scanning the ground on the rim with Uno, and Ragan, and Masema. The others frowned at him as he drew Ingtar aside. He made sure Uno and the rest were too far away to hear before he spoke. "I don't know where Rand or the others went, Ingtar, but Padan Fain and the Trollocs—and I guess the rest of the Darkfriends—are still heading south."

"How do you know this?" Ingtar said.

Perrin drew a deep breath. "Wolves told me." He waited, for what he was not sure. Laughter, scorn, an accusation of being a Darkfriend, of being mad. Deliberately, he tucked his thumbs behind his belt, away from the axe. *I will not kill. Not again. If he tries to kill me for a Darkfriend, I'll run, but I won't kill anybody else.*

"I have heard of things like this," Ingtar said slowly, after a moment. "Rumors. There was a Warder, a man called Elyas Machera, who some said could talk to wolves. He disappeared years ago." He seemed to catch something in Perrin's eyes. "You know him?"

"I know him," Perrin said flatly. "He's the one. . . . I don't want to talk about it. I didn't ask for it." *That's what Rand said. Light, I wish I were home working Master Luhhan's forge.*

"These wolves," Ingtar said, "they will track the Darkfriends and Trollocs for us?" Perrin nodded. "Good. I will have the Horn, whatever it takes." The Shienaran glanced around at Uno and the others still searching for tracks. "Better not to tell anyone else, though. Wolves are considered good luck in the Borderlands. Trollocs fear them. But still, better to keep this between us for the time. Some of them might not understand."

"I would as soon nobody else ever found out," Perrin said.

"I will tell them you think you have Hurin's talent. They know about that; they're easy with it. Some of them saw you wrinkling your nose back in that village, and at the ferry. I've heard jokes about your delicate nose. Yes. You keep us on the trail today, Uno will see enough of their tracks to confirm it *is* the trail, and before nightfall every last man will be sure you are a sniffer. I *will* have the Horn." He glanced at the sky, and raised his voice. "Daylight is wasting! To horse!"

To Perrin's surprise, the Shienarans seemed to accept Ingtar's story. A few of them looked skeptical—Masema went so far as to spit—but Uno nodded thoughtfully, and that was enough for most. Mat was the hardest to convince.

"A sniffer! You? You're going to track murderers by smell? Perrin, you are as crazy as Rand. I am the only sane one left from Emond's Field, with Egwene and Nynaeve trotting off to Tar Valon to become—" He cut himself short with an uneasy glance for the Shienarans.

Perrin took Hurin's place beside Ingtar as the small column rode south. Mat kept up a string of disparaging remarks, until Uno found the first tracks left by Trollocs and by men on horses, but Perrin paid him little mind. It was all he could do to keep the wolves from dashing on ahead to kill the Trollocs. The wolves cared only about killing the Twisted Ones; to them, Darkfriends were no different from any other two-legs. Perrin could almost see the Darkfriends scattering in a dozen directions while the wolves slew Trollocs, running away with the Horn of Valere. Running away with the dagger. And once the Trollocs were dead, he did not think he could interest the wolves in tracking the humans even if he had any idea which of them to track. He had a running argument with them, and sweat covered his forehead long before he got the first flash of images that turned his stomach.

He drew rein, stopping his horse dead. The others did the same, looking at him, waiting. He stared straight ahead and cursed softly, bitterly.

Wolves would kill men, but men were not a preferred prey. Wolves remembered the old hunting together, for one thing, and two-legs tasted bad, for another. Wolves were more particular about their food than he would have believed. They would not eat carrion, unless they were starving, and few would kill more than they could eat. What Perrin felt from the wolves could best be described as disgust. And there were the images. He could see them much more clearly than he wished. Bodies, men and women and children, heaped and tumbled about. Blood-soaked earth churned by hooves and frenzied attempts to escape. Torn flesh. Heads severed. Vultures flapping, their white wings stained red; bloody, featherless heads tearing and gorging. He broke loose before his stomach emptied itself.

Above some trees in the far distance he could just make out black specks whirling low, dropping then rising again. Vultures fighting over their meal.

"There's something bad up there." He swallowed, meeting Ingtar's gaze. How could he fit telling them into the story of being a sniffer? *I don't want to get close enough to look at that. But they'll want to investigate once they can see the vultures. I have to tell them enough so they'll circle around.* "The people from that village. . . . I think the Trollocs killed them."

Uno began cursing quietly, and some of the other Shienarans muttered to themselves. None of them seemed to take his announcement as odd, though. Lord Ingtar said he was a sniffer, and sniffers could smell killing.

"And there is someone following us," Ingtar said.

Mat turned his horse eagerly. "Maybe it's Rand. I knew he wouldn't run out on me."

Thin, scattered puffs of dust rose to the north; a horse was running across patches where the grass grew thin. The Shienarans spread out, lances ready, watching in all directions. It was no place to be casual about a stranger.

A speck appeared—a horse and rider; a woman, to Perrin's eyes, long before anyone else could discern the rider—and quickly drew closer. She slowed to a trot as she came up on them, fanning herself with one hand. A plump, graying woman, with her cloak tied behind her saddle, who blinked at them all vaguely.

"That's one of the Aes Sedai," Mat said disappointedly. "I recognize her. Verin."

"Verin Sedai," Ingtar said sharply, then bowed to her from his saddle.

"Moiraine Sedai sent me, Lord Ingtar," Verin announced with a satisfied smile. "She thought you might need me. Such a gallop I've had. I thought I might not catch you short of Cairhien. You saw that village, of course? Oh, that was very nasty, wasn't it? And that Myrddraal. There were ravens and crows all over the rooftops, but never a one went near it, dead as it was. I had to wave away the Dark One’s own weight in flies, though, before I could make out what it was. A shame I did not have time to take it down. I’ve never had a chance to study a—” Suddenly her eyes narrowed, and the absent manner vanished like smoke. “Where is Rand al’Thor?”

Ingtar grimaced. “Gone, Verin Sedai. Vanished last night, without a trace. Him, the Ogier, and Hurin, one of my men.”

“The Ogier, Lord Ingtar? And your sniffer went with him? What would those two have in common with . . . ?” Ingtar gaped at her, and she snorted. “Did you think you could keep something like that secret?” She snorted again. “Sniffers. Vanished, you say?”

“Yes, Verin Sedai.” Ingtar sounded unsettled. It was never easy discovering Aes Sedai knew the secrets you were trying to keep from them; Perrin hoped Moiraine had not told anyone about him. “But I have—I have a new sniffer.” The Shienaran Lord gestured to Perrin. “This man seems to have the ability, also. I will find the Horn of Valere, as I swore to, have no fear. Your company will be welcome, Aes Sedai, if you wish to ride with us.” To Perrin’s surprise, he did not sound as if he entirely meant it.

Verin glanced at Perrin, and he shifted uneasily. “A new sniffer, just when you lose your old one. How . . . providential. You found no tracks? No, of course not. You said no trace. Odd. Last night.” She twisted in her saddle, looking back north, and for a moment Perrin almost thought she was going to ride back the way she had come.

Ingtar frowned at her. “You think their disappearance has something to do with the Horn, Aes Sedai?”

Verin settled back. “The Horn? No. No, I . . . think not. But it is odd. Very odd. I do not like odd things until I can understand them.”

“I can have two men escort you back to where they disappeared, Verin Sedai. They will have no trouble taking you right to it.”

“No. If you say they vanished without a trace. . . .” For a long moment she studied Ingtar, her face unreadable. “I will ride with you. Perhaps we will find them again, or they will find us. Talk to me as we ride, Lord Ingtar. Tell me everything you can about the young man. Everything he did, everything he said.”

They started off in a jingle of harness and armor, Verin riding close beside Ingtar and questioning him closely, but too low to be overheard. She gave Perrin a look when he tried to maintain his place, and he fell back.

“It’s Rand she’s after,” Mat murmured, “not the Horn.”

Perrin nodded. *Wherever you’ve gotten to, Rand, stay there. It’s safer than here.*

* * *

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CHAPTER

15

Kinslayer

The way the strangely faded distant hills seemed to slide toward Rand when he looked straight at them made his head spin, unless he wrapped himself in the void. Sometimes the emptiness crept up on him unawares, but he avoided it like death. Better to be dizzy than share the void with that uneasy light. Better by far to stare at the faded land. Still, he tried not to look at anything too far away unless it lay right ahead of them.

Hurin wore a fixed look as he concentrated on sniffing the trail, as if he were trying to ignore the land the trail crossed. When the sniffer did notice what lay around them, he would give a start and wipe his hands on his coat, then push his nose forward like a hound, eyes glazing, excluding everything else. Loial rode slumped in his saddle and frowned as he glanced around, ears twitching uneasily, muttering to himself.

Again they crossed land blackened and burned, even the soil crunching under the horses' hooves as if it had been seared. The burned swathes, sometimes a mile wide, sometimes only a few hundred paces, all ran east and west as straight as an arrow's flight. Twice Rand saw the end of a burn, once as they rode over it, once as they passed nearby; they tapered to points at the ends. At least, the ends he saw were so, but he suspected they were all the same.

Once he had watched Whatley Eldin decorate a cart for Sunday, back home in Emond's Field, What painting the scenes in bright colors, and the intricate scrollwork that surrounded them. For the borders, What let the point of his brush touch the cart, making a thin line that grew thicker as he pressed harder, then thinner again as he eased up. That was how the land looked, as if someone had streaked it with a monstrous brush of fire.

Nothing grew where the burns were, though some burns, at least, had the feel of a thing long done. Not so much as a hint of char remained in the air there, not a whiff even when he leaned down to break off a black twig and smell it. Old, yet nothing had come in to reclaim the land. Black gave way to green, and green to black, along knife-edge lines.

In its own way, the rest of the land lay as dead as the burns, though grass covered the ground and leaves covered the trees. Everything had that faded look, like clothes too often washed and too long left in the sun. There were no birds or animals, not that Rand saw or heard. No hawk wheeling in the sky, no bark of a hunting fox, no bird singing. Nothing rustled in the grass or lit on a tree branch. No bees, or butterflies. Several times they crossed streams, the water shallow, though often it had dug itself a deep gulley with steep banks the horses had to scramble down and climb on the other side. The water ran clear except for the mud the horses' hooves stirred, but never a minnow or tadpole wriggled out of the roiling, not even a waterspider dancing across the surface, or a hovering lacewing.

The water was drinkable, which was just as well, since their waterbottles could not last forever. Rand tasted it first, and made Loial and Hurin wait to see if anything happened to him before he let them drink. He had gotten them into this; it was his responsibility. The water was cool and wet, but that was the best that could be said for it. It tasted flat, as if it had been boiled. Loial made a face, and the horses did not like it either, shaking their heads and drinking reluctantly.

There was one sign of life; at least, Rand thought it must be so. Twice he saw a wispy streak crawling across the sky like a line drawn with cloud. The lines were too straight to be natural, it seemed, but he could not imagine what might make them. He did not mention the lines to the others. Perhaps they did not see, Hurin intent on the trail as he was and Loial drawn in on himself. They said nothing of the lines, at any rate.

When they had ridden half the morning, Loial abruptly swung down from his huge horse without a word and strode to a stand of giantsbroom, their trunks splitting into many thick branches, stiff and straight, not a pace above the ground. At the top, all split again, into the leafy brush that gave them their name.

Rand pulled Red up and started to ask what he was doing, but something about the Ogier's manner, as if he himself were uncertain, kept Rand silent. After staring at the tree, Loial put his hands on a trunk and began to sing in a deep, soft rumble.

Rand had heard Ogier Treesong, once, when Loial had sung to a dying tree and brought it back to life, and he had heard of sung wood, objects wrought from trees by the Treesong. The Talent was fading, Loial said, he was one of the few who had the ability, now; that was what made sung wood even more sought after and treasured. When he had heard Loial sing before, it had been as if the earth itself sang, but now the Ogier murmured his song almost diffidently, and the land echoed it in a whisper.

It seemed pure song, music without words, at least none that Rand could make out; if there were words, they faded into the music just as water pours into a stream. Hurin gasped and stared.

Rand was not sure what it was Loial did, or how; soft as the song was, it caught him up hypnotically, filling his mind almost the way the void did. Loial ran his big hands along the trunk, singing, caressing with his voice as well as his fingers. The trunk now seemed smoother, somehow, as if his stroking were shaping it. Rand blinked. He was sure the piece Loial worked on had had branches at its top just like the others, but now it stopped in a rounded end right above the Ogier's head. Rand opened his mouth, but the song quieted him. It seemed so familiar, that song, as if he should know it.

Abruptly Loial's voice rose to a climax—almost a hymn of thanks, it sounded—and ended, fading as a breeze fades.

"Burn me," Hurin breathed. He looked stunned. "Burn me, I never heard anything like. . . . Burn me."

In his hands Loial held a staff as tall as he was and as thick as Rand's forearm, smooth and polished. Where the trunk had been on the giantsbroom was a small stem of new growth.

Rand took a deep breath. *Always something new, always something I didn't expect, and sometimes it isn't horrible.*

He watched Loial mount, resting the staff across his saddle in front of him, and wondered why the Ogier wanted a staff at all, since they were riding. Then he saw the thick rod, not as big as it was, but in relation to the Ogier, saw the way Loial handled it. "A quarterstaff," he said, surprised. "I didn't know Ogier carried weapons, Loial."

"Usually we do not," the Ogier replied almost curtly. "Usually. The price has always been too high." He hefted the huge quarterstaff and wrinkled his broad nose with distaste. "Elder Haman would surely say I am putting a long handle on my axe, but I am not just being hasty or rash, Rand. This place. . . ." He shivered, and his ears twitched.

"We'll find our way back soon," Rand said, trying to sound confident.

Loial spoke as if he had not heard. “Everything is . . . linked, Rand. Whether it lives or not, whether it thinks or not, everything that *is*, fits together. The tree does not think, but it is part of the whole, and the whole has a—a feeling. I can’t explain any more than I can explain what being happy is, but. . . . Rand, this land was glad for a weapon to be made. Glad!”

“The Light shine on us,” Hurin murmured nervously, “and the Creator’s hand shelter us. Though we go to the last embrace of the mother, the Light illumine our way.” He kept repeating the catechism as if it had a charm to protect him.

Rand resisted the impulse to look around. He definitely did not look up. All it would take to break them all was another of those smoky lines across the sky right at that moment. “There’s nothing here to hurt us,” he said firmly. “And we’ll keep a good watch and make sure nothing does.”

He wanted to laugh at himself, sounding so certain. He was not certain about anything. But watching the others—Loial with his tufted ears drooping, and Hurin trying not to look at anything—he knew one of them had to seem to be sure, at least, or fear and uncertainty would break them all apart. *The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.* He squeezed that thought out. *Nothing to do with the Wheel. Nothing to with* ta’veren*, or Aes Sedai, or the Dragon. It’s just the way it is, that’s all.*

“Loial, are you done here?” The Ogier nodded, regretfully rubbing the quarterstaff. Rand turned to Hurin. “Do you still have the trail?”

“I do, Lord Rand. I do that.”

“Then let’s keep on with it. Once we find Fain and the Darkfriends, why, we’ll go home heroes, with the dagger for Mat, and the Horn of Valere. Lead out, Hurin.” *Heroes? I’ll settle for all of us getting out of here alive.*

“I do not like this place,” the Ogier announced flatly. He held the quarterstaff as if he expected to have to use it soon.

“As well we don’t mean to stay here, then, isn’t it?” Rand said. Hurin barked a laugh as if he had made a joke, but Loial gave him a level look.

“As well we don’t, Rand.”

Yet as they rode on southward, he could see that his casual assumption that they would get home had picked them both up a little. Hurin sat a bit straighter in his saddle, and Loial’s ears did not seem so wilted. It was no time or place to let them know he shared their fear, so he kept it to himself, and fought it by himself.

Hurin kept his humor through the morning, murmuring, “As well we don’t mean to stay,” then chuckling, until Rand felt like telling him to be quiet. Toward midday, the sniffer did fall silent, though, shaking his head and frowning, and Rand found he wished the man was still repeating his words and laughing.

“Is there something wrong with the trail, Hurin?” he asked.

The sniffer shrugged, looking troubled. “Yes, Lord Rand, and then again no, as you might say.”

“It must be one or the other. Have you lost the trail? No shame if you have. You said it was weak to start. If we can’t find the Darkfriends, we will find another Stone and get back that way.” *Light, anything but that.* Rand kept his face smooth. “If Darkfriends can come here and leave, so can we.”

“Oh, I haven’t lost it, Lord Rand. I can still pick out the stink of them. It isn’t that. It’s just. . . . It’s. . . .” With a grimace, Hurin burst out, “It’s like I’m remembering it, Lord Rand, instead of smelling it. But I’m not. There’s dozens of trails crossing it all the time, dozens and dozens, and all sorts of smells of violence, some of them fresh, almost, only washed out like everything else. This morning, right after we left the hollow, I could have sworn there were hundreds slaughtered right under my feet, just minutes before, but there weren’t any bodies, and not a mark on the grass but our own hoofprints. A thing like that couldn’t happen without the ground being torn up and bloodied, but there wasn’t a mark. It’s all like that, my Lord. But I am following the trail. I am. This place just has me all on edge. That’s it. That must be it.”

Rand glanced at Loial—the Ogier did come up with the oddest knowledge, at times—but he looked as puzzled as Hurin. Rand made his voice more confident than he felt. “I know you are doing your best, Hurin. We are all of us on edge. Just follow as best you can, and we’ll find them.”

“As you say, Lord Rand.” Hurin booted his horse forward. “As you say.”

But by nightfall, there was still no sign of the Darkfriends, and Hurin said the trail was fainter still. The sniffer kept muttering to himself about “remembering.”

There had been no sign. Really no sign. Rand was not as good a tracker as Uno, but any boy in the Two Rivers was expected to track well enough to find a lost sheep, or a rabbit for dinner. He had seen nothing. It was as if no living thing had ever disturbed the land before they came.

There should have been something if the Darkfriends were ahead of them. But Hurin kept following the trail he said he smelled.

As the sun touched the horizon they made camp in a stand of trees untouched by the burn, eating from their saddlebags. Flatbread and dried meat washed down with flat-tasting water; hardly a filling meal, tough and far from tasty. Rand thought they might have enough for a week. After that. . . . Hurin ate slowly, determinedly, but Loial gulped his down with a grimace and settled back with his pipe, the big quarterstaff close at hand. Rand kept their fire small and well hidden in the trees. Fain and his Darkfriends and Trollocs might be close enough to see a fire, for all of Hurin's worries about the oddness of their trail.

It seemed odd to him that he had begun to think of them as Fain's Darkfriends, Fain's Trollocs. Fain was just a madman. *Then why did they rescue him?* Fain had been part of the Dark One's scheme to find him. Perhaps it had something to do with that. *Then why is he running instead of chasing me? And what killed that Fade? What happened in that room full of flies? And those eyes, watching me in Fal Dara. And that wind, catching me like a beetle in pine sap. No. No, Ba'alzamon has to be dead.* The Aes Sedai did not believe it. Moiraine did not believe it, nor the Amyrlin. Stubbornly, he refused to think about it any longer. All he had to think about now was finding that dagger for Mat. Finding Fain, and the Horn.

It's never over, al'Thor.

The voice was like a thin breeze whispering in the back of his head, a thin, icy murmur working its way into the crevices of his mind. He almost sought the void to escape it, but remembering what waited for him there, he pushed down the desire.

In the half dark of twilight, he worked the forms with his sword, the way Lan had taught, though without the void. Parting the Silk. Hummingbird Kisses the Honeyrose. Heron Wading in the Rushes, for balance. Losing himself in the swift, sure movements, forgetting for a time where he was, he worked until sweat covered him. Yet when he was done, it all came back; nothing was changed. The weather was not cold, but he shivered and pulled his cloak around him as he hunched by the fire. The others caught his mood, and they finished eating quickly and in silence. No one complained when he kicked dirt over the last fitful flames.

Rand took the first watch himself, walking the edges of the copse with his bow, sometimes easing his sword in its scabbard. The chill moon was almost full, standing high in the blackness, and the night was as silent as the day had been, as empty. Empty was the right word. The land was as empty as a dusty milk crock. It was hard to believe there was anyone in the whole world, in this world, except for the three of them, hard to believe even the Darkfriends were there, somewhere ahead.

To keep himself company, he unwrapped Thom Merrilin's cloak, exposing the harp and flute in their hard leather cases atop the many-colored patches. He took the gold-and-silver flute from its case, remembering the gleeman teaching him as he fingered it, and played a few notes of "The Wind That Shakes the Willow," softly so as not to wake the others. Even soft, the sad sound was too loud in that place, too real. With a sigh he replaced the flute and did up the bundle again.

He held the watch long into the night, letting the others sleep. He did not know how late it was when he suddenly realized a fog had risen. Close to the ground it lay, thick, making Hurin and Loial indistinct mounds seeming to hump out of clouds. Thinner higher up, it still shrouded the land around them, hiding everything except the nearest trees. The moon seemed viewed through watered silk. Anything at all could come right up to them unseen. He touched his sword.

"Swords do no good against me, Lews Therin. You should know that."

The fog swirled around Rand's feet as he spun, the sword coming into his hands, heron-mark blade upright before him. The void leaped up inside him; for the first time, he barely noticed the tainted light of *saidin.*

A shadowy figure drew nearer through the mist, walking with a tall staff. Behind it, as if the shadow's shadow were vast, the fog darkened till it was blacker than night. Rand's skin crawled. Closer the figure came, until it resolved into the shape of a man, clothed and gloved in black, with a black silk mask covering his face, and the shadow came with it. His staff was black, too, as if the wood had been charred, yet smooth and shining like water by moonlight. For an instant the eyeholes of the mask glowed, as if fires stood behind them rather than eyes, but Rand did not need that to know who it was.

"Ba'alzamon," he breathed. "This is a dream. It has to be. I fell asleep, and—"

Ba'alzamon laughed like the roar of an open furnace. "You always try to deny what is, Lews Therin. If I stretch out my hand, I can touch you, Kinslayer. I can always touch you. Always and everywhere."

"I am not the Dragon! My name is Rand al'—!" Rand clamped his teeth shut to stop himself.

"Oh, I know the name you use now, Lews Therin. I know every name you have used through Age after Age, long before you were even the Kinslayer." Ba'alzamon's voice began to rise in intensity; sometimes the fires of his eyes flared so high that Rand could see them through the openings in the silk mask, see them like endless seas of flame. "I know you, know your blood and your line back to the first spark of life that ever was, back to the First Moment. You can never hide from me. Never! We are tied together as surely as two sides of the same coin. Ordinary men may hide in the sweep of the Pattern, but *ta'veren* stand out like beacon fires on a hill, and you, *you* stand out as if ten thousand shining arrows stood in the sky to point you out! You are mine, and ever in reach of my hand!"

"Father of Lies!" Rand managed. Despite the void, his tongue wanted to cleave to the roof of his mouth. *Light, please let it be a dream.* The thought skittered outside the emptiness. *Even one of those dreams that isn't a dream. He can't* really *be standing in front of me. The Dark One is sealed in Shayol Ghul, sealed by the Creator at the moment of Creation. . . .* He knew too much of the truth for it to help. "You're well named! If you could just take me, why haven't you? Because you cannot. I walk in the Light, and you cannot touch me!"

Ba'alzamon leaned on his staff and looked at Rand a moment, then moved to stand over Loial and Hurin, peering down at them. The vast shadow moved with him. He did not disturb the fog, Rand saw—he moved, the staff swung with his steps, but the gray mist did not swirl and eddy around his feet as it did around Rand's. That gave him heart. Perhaps Ba'alzamon really was *not* there. Perhaps it *was* a dream.

"You find odd followers," Ba'alzamon mused. "You always did. These two. The girl who tries to watch over you. A poor guardian and weak, Kinslayer. If she had a lifetime to grow, she would never grow strong enough for you to hide behind."

Girl? Who? Moiraine is surely not a girl. "I don't know what you are talking about, Father of Lies. You lie, and lie, and even when you tell the truth, you twist it to a lie."

"Do I, Lews Therin? You know what you are, who you are. I have told you. And so have those women of Tar Valon." Rand shifted, and Ba'alzamon gave a laugh, like a small thunderclap. "They think themselves safe in their White Tower, but my followers number even some of their own. The Aes Sedai called Moiraine told you who you are, did she not? Did she lie? Or is she one of mine? The White Tower means to use you like a hound on a leash. Do I lie? Do I lie when I say you seek the Horn of Valere?" He laughed again; calm of the void or no, it was all Rand could do not to cover his ears. "Sometimes old enemies fight so long that they become allies and never realize it. They think they strike at you, but they have become so closely linked it is as if you guided the blow yourself."

"You don't guide me," Rand said. "I deny you."

"I have a thousand strings tied to you, Kinslayer, each one finer than silk and stronger than steel. Time has tied a thousand cords between us. The battle we two have fought—do you remember any part of that? Do you have any glimmering that we have fought before, battles without number back to the beginning of Time? I know much that you do not! That battle will soon end. The Last Battle is coming. The last, Lews Therin. Do you really think you can avoid it? You poor, shivering worm. You will serve me or die! And this time the cycle will not begin anew with your death. The grave belongs to the Great Lord of the Dark. This time if you die, you will be destroyed utterly. This time the Wheel will be broken whatever you do, and the world remade to a new mold. Serve me! Serve Shai'tan, or be destroyed forever!"

With the utterance of that name, the air seemed to thicken. The darkness behind Ba'alzamon swelled and grew, threatening to swallow everything. Rand felt it engulfing him, colder than ice and hotter than coals both at the same time, blacker than death, sucking him into the depths of it, overwhelming the world.

He gripped his sword hilt till his knuckles hurt. "I deny you, and I deny your power. I walk in the Light. The Light preserves us, and we shelter in the palm of the Creator's hand." He blinked. Ba'alzamon still stood there, and the great darkness still hung behind him, but it was as if all the rest had been illusion.

"Do you want to see my face?" It was a whisper.

Rand swallowed. "No."

"You should." A gloved hand went to the black mask.

"No!"

The mask came away. It was a man's face, horribly burned. Yet between the black-edged, red crevices crossing those features, the skin looked healthy and smooth. Dark eyes looked at Rand; cruel lips smiled with a flash of white teeth. “Look at me, Kinslayer, and see the hundredth part of your own fate.” For a moment eyes and mouth became doorways into endless caverns of fire. “This is what the Power unchecked can do, even to me. But I heal, Lews Therin. I know the paths to greater power. It will burn you like a moth flying into a furnace.”

“I will not touch it!” Rand felt the void around him, felt *saidin.* “I won’t.”

“You cannot stop yourself.”

“Leave—me—ALONE!”

“Power.” Ba’alzamon’s voice became soft, insinuating. “You can have power again, Lews Therin. You are linked to it now, this moment. I know it. I can see it. Feel it, Lews Therin. Feel the glow inside you. Feel the power that could be yours. All you must do is reach out for it. But the Shadow is there between you and it. Madness and death. You need not die, Lews Therin, not ever again.”

“No,” Rand said, but the voice went on, burrowing into him.

“I can teach you to control that power so that it does not destroy you. No one else lives who can teach you that. The Great Lord of the Dark can shelter you from the madness. The power can be yours, and you can live forever. Forever! All you must do in return is serve. Only serve. Simple words—I am yours, Great Lord—and power will be yours. Power beyond anything those women of Tar Valon dream of, and life eternal, if you will only offer yourself up and serve.”

Rand licked his lips. *Not to go mad. Not to die.* “Never! I walk in the Light,” he grated hoarsely, “and you can never touch me!”

“Touch you, Lews Therin? Touch you? I can consume you! Taste it and know, as I knew!”

Those dark eyes became fire again, and that mouth, flame that blossomed and grew until it seemed brighter than a summer sun. Grew, and suddenly Rand’s sword glowed as if just drawn from the forge. He cried out as the hilt burned his hands, screamed and dropped the sword. And the fog caught fire, fire that leaped, fire that burned everything.

Yelling, Rand beat at his clothes as they smoked and charred and fell in ashes, beat with hands that blackened and shriveled as naked flesh cracked and peeled away in the flames. He screamed. Pain beat at the void inside him, and he tried to crawl deeper into the emptiness. The glow was there, the tainted light just out of sight. Half mad, no longer caring what it was, he reached for *saidin*, tried to wrap it around him, tried to hide in it from the burning and the pain.

As suddenly as the fire began, it was gone. Rand stared wonderingly at his hand sticking out of the red sleeve of his coat. There was not so much as a singe on the wool. *I imagined it all.* Frantically, he looked around. Ba’alzamon was gone. Hurin shifted in his sleep; the sniffer and Loial were still only two mounds sticking up out of the low fog. *I did imagine it.*

Before relief had a chance to grow, pain stabbed his right hand, and he turned it up to look. There across the palm was branded a heron. The heron from the hilt of his sword, angry and red, as neatly done as though drawn with an artist’s skill.

Fumbling a kerchief from his coat pocket, he wrapped it around his hand. The hand throbbed, now. The void would help with that—he was *aware* of pain in the void, but he did not *feel* it—but he put the thought out of his head. Twice now, unknowing—and once on purpose; he could not forget that—he had tried to channel the One Power while he was in the void. It was with that that Ba’alzamon wanted to tempt him. It was that that Moiraine and the Amyrlin Seat wanted him to do. He would not.

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CHAPTER

16

In the Mirror of Darkness

“You should not have done it, Lord Rand,” Hurin said when Rand woke the others just at daybreak. The sun yet hid below the horizon, but there was light enough to see. The fog had melted away while dark still held, fading reluctantly. “If you use yourself up to spare us, my Lord, who will see to getting us home?”

“I needed to think,” Rand said. Nothing showed the fog had ever been, or Ba’alzamon. He fingered the kerchief wrapped around his right hand. There was that to prove Ba’alzamon had been there. He wanted to be away from this place. “Time to be in the saddle if we are going to catch Fain’s Darkfriends. Past time. We can eat flatbread while we ride.”

Loial paused in the act of stretching, his arms reaching as high as Hurin could have standing on Rand’s shoulders. “Your hand, Rand. What happened?”

“I hurt it. It’s nothing.”

“I have a salve in my saddlebags—”

“It is nothing!” Rand knew he sounded harsh, but one look at the brand would surely bring questions he did not want to answer. “Time’s wasting. Let us be on our way.” He set about saddling Red, awkwardly because of his injured hand, and Hurin jumped to his own horse.

“No need to be so touchy,” Loial muttered.

A track, Rand decided as they set out, would be something natural in that world. There were too many unnatural things there. Even a single hoofprint would be welcome. Fain and the Darkfriends and the Trollocs had to leave some mark. He concentrated on the ground they passed over, trying to make out any trace that could have been made by another living thing.

There was nothing, not a turned stone, not a disturbed clod of earth. Once he looked at the ground behind them, just to reassure himself that the land did take hoofprints; scraped turf and bent grass marked their passage plainly, yet ahead the ground was undisturbed. But Hurin insisted he could smell the trail, faint and thin, but still heading south.

Once again the sniffer put all his attentions on the trail he followed, like a hound tracking deer, and once again Loial rode lost in his own thoughts, muttering to himself and rubbing the huge quarterstaff held across his saddle in front of him.

They had not been riding more than an hour when Rand saw the spire ahead. He was so busy watching for tracks that the tapering column already stood thick and tall above the trees in the middle distance when he first noticed it. “I wonder what that is.” It lay directly in their path.

“I don’t know what it can be, Rand,” Loial said.

“If this—if this was our own world, Lord Rand. . . .” Hurin shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. “Well, that monument Lord Ingtar was talking about—the one to Artur Hawkwing’s victory over the Trollocs—it was a great spire. But it was torn down a thousand years ago. There’s nothing left but a big mound, like a hill. I saw it, when I went to Cairhien for Lord Agelmar.”

“According to Ingtar,” Loial said, “that is still three or four days ahead of us. If it is here at all. I don’t know why it should be. I don’t think there are any people here at all.”

The sniffer put his eyes back on the ground. “That’s just it, isn’t it, Builder? No people, but there it is ahead of us. Maybe we ought to keep clear of it, my Lord Rand. No telling what it is, or who’s there, in a place like this.”

Rand drummed his fingers on the high pommel of his saddle for a moment, thinking. “We have to stick as close to the trail as we can,” he said finally. “We don’t seem to be getting any closer to Fain as it is, and I don’t want to lose more time, if we can avoid it. If we see any people, or anything out of the ordinary, then we’ll circle around until we pick it up again. But until then, we keep on.”

“As you say, my Lord.” The sniffer sounded odd, and he gave Rand a quick, sidelong look. “As you say.”

Rand frowned for a moment before he understood, and then it was his turn to sigh. Lords did not explain to those who followed them, only to other lords. *I didn’t ask him to take me for a bloody lord. But he did,* a small voice seemed to answer him, *and you let him. You made the choice; now the duty is yours.*

“Take the trail, Hurin,” Rand said.

With a flash of relieved grin, the sniffer heeled his horse onward.

The weak sun climbed as they rode, and by the time it was overhead, they were only a mile or so from the spire. They had reached one of the streams, in a gully a pace deep, and the intervening trees were sparse. Rand could see the mound it was built on, like a round, flat-topped hill. The gray spire itself rose at least a hundred spans, and he could just make out now that the top was carved in the likeness of a bird with outstretched wings.

“A hawk,” Rand said. “It *is* Hawkwing’s monument. It must be. There were people here, whether there are now or not. They just built it in another place here, and never tore it down. Think of it, Hurin. When we get back, you’ll be able to tell them what the monument really looked like. There will only be three of us in the whole world who have ever seen it.”

Hurin nodded. “Yes, my Lord. My children would like to hear that tale, their father seeing Hawkwing’s spire.”

“Rand,” Loial began worriedly.

“We can gallop the distance,” Rand said. “Come on. A gallop will do us good. This place may be dead, but we’re alive.”

“Rand,” Loial said, “I don’t think that is a—”

Not waiting to hear, Rand dug his boots into Red’s flanks, and the stallion sprang forward. He splashed across the shallow ribbon of water in two strides, then scrabbled up the far side. Hurin launched his horse right behind him. Rand heard Loial calling behind them, but he laughed, waved for the Ogier to follow, and galloped on. If he kept his eyes on one spot, the land did not seem to slip and slide so badly, and the wind felt good on his face.

The mound covered a good two hides, but the grassy slope rose at an easy slant. The gray spire reared into the sky, squared and broad enough despite its height to seem massive, almost squat. Rand’s laughter died, and he pulled Red up, his face grim.

“Is that Hawkwing’s monument, Lord Rand?” Hurin asked uneasily. “It doesn’t look right, somehow.”

Rand recognized the harsh, angular script that covered the face of the monument, and he recognized some of the symbols chiseled on the breadth, chiseled as tall as a man. The horned skull of the Dha’vol Trollocs. The iron fist of the Dhai’mon. The trident of the Ko’bal, and the whirlwind of the Ahf’frait. There was a hawk, too, carved near the bottom. With a wingspan of ten paces, it lay on its back, pierced by a lightning bolt, and ravens pecked at its eyes. The huge wings atop the spire seemed to block the sun.

He heard Loial galloping up behind him.

“I tried to tell you, Rand,” Loial said. “It is a raven, not a hawk. I could see it clearly.” Hurin turned his horse, refusing even to look at the spire any longer.

“But how?” Rand said. “Artur Hawkwing won a victory over the Trollocs here. Ingtar said so.”

“Not here,” Loial said slowly. “Obviously not here. ‘From Stone to Stone run the lines of it, between the worlds that might be.’ I’ve been thinking on it, and I believe I know what ‘the worlds that might be’ are. Maybe I do. Worlds our world might have been if things had happened differently. Maybe that’s why it is all so . . . washed-out looking. Because it’s an ‘if,’ a ‘maybe.’ Just a shadow of the real world. In this world, I think, the Trollocs won. Maybe that’s why we have not seen any villages or people.”

Rand’s skin crawled. Where Trollocs won, they did not leave humans alive except for food. If they had won across an entire world. . . . “If the Trollocs had won, they would be everywhere. We’d have seen a thousand of them by now. We’d be dead since yesterday.”

“I do not know, Rand. Perhaps, after they killed the people, they killed one another. Trollocs live to kill. That is all they do; that is all they are. I just don’t know.”

“Lord Rand,” Hurin said abruptly, “something moved down there.”

Rand whirled his horse, ready to see charging Trollocs, but Hurin was pointing back the way they had come, at nothing. “What did you see, Hurin? Where?”

The sniffer let his arm drop. “Right at the edge of that clump of trees there, about a mile. I thought it was . . . a woman . . . and something else I couldn’t make out, but. . . .” He shivered. “It’s so hard to make out things that aren’t under your nose. Aaah, this place has my guts all awhirl. I’m likely imagining things, my Lord. This is a place for queer fancies.” His shoulders hunched as if he felt the spire pressing on them. “No doubt it was just the wind, my Lord.”

Loial said, “There’s something else to consider, I’m afraid.” He sounded troubled again. He pointed southward. “What do you see off there?”

Rand squinted against the way things far off seemed to slide toward him. “Land like what we’ve been crossing. Trees. Then some hills, and mountains. Nothing else. What do you want me to see?”

“The mountains,” Loial sighed. The tufts on his ears drooped, and the ends of his eyebrows were down on his cheeks. “That has to be Kinslayer’s Dagger, Rand. There aren’t any other mountains they could be, unless this world is completely different from ours. But Kinslayer’s Dagger lies more than a hundred leagues south of the Erinin. A good bit more. Distances are hard to judge in this place, but. . . . I think we will reach them before dark.” He did not have to say any more. They could not have covered over a hundred leagues in less than three days.

Without thinking, Rand muttered, “Maybe this place is like the Ways.” He heard Hurin moan, and instantly regretted not keeping a rein on his tongue.

It was not a pleasant thought. Enter a Waygate—they could be found just outside Ogier *stedding,* and in Ogier groves—enter and walk for a day, and you could leave by another Waygate a hundred leagues from where you started. The Ways were dark, now, and foul, and to travel them meant to risk death or madness. Even Fades feared to travel the Ways.

“If it is, Rand,” Loial said slowly, “can a misstep kill us here, too? Are there things we have not yet seen that can do worse than kill us?” Hurin moaned again.

They had been drinking the water, riding along as if they had not a concern in the world. Unconcern would kill quickly in the Ways. Rand swallowed, hoping his stomach would settle.

“It is too late for worrying about what is past,” he said. “From here on, though, we will watch our step.” He glanced at Hurin. The sniffer’s head had sunk between his shoulders, and his eyes darted as if he wondered what would leap at him, and from where. The man had run down murderers, but this was more than he had ever bargained for. “Hold on to yourself, Hurin. We are not dead, yet, and we won’t be. We will just have to be careful from here on. That’s all.”

It was at that moment they heard the scream, thin with distance.

“A woman!” Hurin said. Even this much that was normal seemed to rouse him a little. “I knew I saw—”

Another scream came, more desperate than the first.

“Not unless she can fly,” Rand said. “She’s south of us.” He kicked Red to a dead run in two strides.

“Be careful you said!” Loial shouted after him. “Light, Rand, remember! Be careful!”

Rand lay low on Red’s back, letting the stallion run. The screams drew him on. It was easy to say be careful, but there was terror in that woman’s voice. She did not sound as if she had time for him to be careful. On the edge of another stream, in a sheer-banked channel deeper than most, he drew rein; Red skidded in a shower of stones and dirt. The screams were coming. . . . *There!*

He took it all in at a glance. Perhaps two hundred paces away, the woman stood beside her horse in the stream, both of them backed against the far bank. With a broken length of branch, she was fending off a snarling . . . something. Rand swallowed, stunned for a moment. If a frog were as big as a bear, or if a bear had a frog’s gray-green hide, it might look like that. A big bear.

Not letting himself think about the creature, he leaped to the ground, unlimbering his bow. If he took the time to ride closer, it might be too late. The woman was barely keeping the . . . thing . . . at the edge of the branch. It was a fair distance—he kept blinking as he tried to judge it; the distance seemed to change by spans every time the thing moved—yet a big target. His bandaged hand made drawing awkward, but he had an arrow loosed almost before his feet were set.

The shaft sank into the leathery hide for half its length, and the creature spun to face Rand. Rand took a step back despite the distance. That huge, wedge-shaped head had never been on any animal he could imagine, nor that wide, horny-lipped beak of a mouth, hooked for ripping flesh. And it had three eyes, small, and fierce, and ringed by hard-looking ridges. Gathering itself, the thing bounded toward him down the stream in great, splashing leaps. To Rand’s eye, some of the leaps seemed to cover twice as much distance as others, though he was sure they were all the same.

“An eye,” the woman called. She sounded surprisingly calm, considering her screams. “You must hit an eye to kill it.”

He drew the fletching of another arrow back to his ear. Reluctantly, he sought the void; he did not want to, but it was for this that Tam had taught him, and he knew he could never make the shot without it. *My father*, he thought with a sense of loss, and emptiness filled him. The quavering light of *saidin* was there, but he shut it away. He was one with the bow, with the arrow, with the monstrous shape leaping toward him. One with the tiny eye. He did not even feel the arrow leave the bowstring.

The creature rose in another bound, and at the peak, the arrow struck its central eye. The thing landed, fountaining another huge splash of water and mud. Ripples spread out from it, but it did not move.

"Well shot, and bravely," the woman called. She was on her horse, riding to meet him. Rand felt vaguely surprised that she had not run once the thing's attention was diverted. She rode past the bulk, still surrounded by the ripples of its dying, without even a downward glance, scrambled her horse up the bank and dismounted. "Few men would stand to face the charge of a *grolm,* my Lord."

She was all in white, her dress divided for riding and belted in silver, and her boots, peeking out from under her hems, were tooled in silver, too. Even her saddle was white, and silver-mounted. Her snowy mare, with its arched neck and dainty step, was almost as tall as Rand's bay. But it was the woman herself—she was perhaps Nynaeve's age, he thought—who held his eyes. She was tall, for one thing; a hand taller and she could almost look him in the eyes. For another, she was beautiful, ivory-pale skin contrasting sharply with long, night-dark hair and black eyes. He had seen beautiful women. Moiraine was beautiful, if cool, and so was Nynaeve, when her temper did not get the better of her. Egwene, and Elayne, the Daughter-Heir of Andor, were each enough to take a man's breath. But this woman. . . . His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth; he felt his heart start beating again.

"Your retainers, my Lord?"

Startled, he looked around. Hurin and Loial had joined them. Hurin was staring the way Rand knew he had been, and even the Ogier seemed fascinated. "My friends," he said. "Loial, and Hurin. My name is Rand. Rand al'Thor."

"I have never thought of it before," Loial said abruptly, sounding as if he were talking to himself; "but if there is such a thing as perfect human beauty, in face and form, then you—"

"Loial!" Rand shouted. The Ogier's ears stiffened in embarrassment. Rand's own ears were red; Loial's words had been too close to what he himself was thinking.

The woman laughed musically, but the next instant she was all regal formality, like a queen on her throne. "I am called Selene," she said. "You have risked your life, and saved mine. I am yours, Lord Rand al'Thor." And, to Rand's horror, she knelt before him.

Not looking at Hurin or Loial, he hastily pulled her to her feet. "A man who will not die to save a woman is no man." Immediately he disgraced himself by blushing. It was a Shienaran saying, and he knew it sounded pompous before it was out of his mouth, but her manner had infected him, and he could not stop it. "I mean. . . . That is, it was. . . ." *Fool, you can't tell a woman saving her life was nothing.* "It was my honor." That sounded vaguely Shienaran and formal. He hoped it would do; his mind was as blank of anything else to say as if he were still in the void.

Suddenly he became conscious of her eyes on him. Her expression had not changed, but her dark eyes made him feel as if he were naked. Unbidden, the thought came of Selene with no clothes. His face went red again. "Aaah! Ah, where are you from, Selene? We have not seen another human being since we came here. Is your town nearby?" She looked at him thoughtfully, and he stepped back. Her look made him too aware of how close to her he was.

"I'm not from this world, my Lord," she said. "There are no people here. Nothing living except the *grolm* and a few other creatures like them. I am from Cairhien. And as to how I came here, I don't know, exactly. I was out riding, and I stopped to nap, and when I woke, my horse and I were here. I can only hope, my Lord, that you can save me again, and help me go home."

"Selene, I am not a . . . that is, please call me Rand." His ears felt hot again. *Light, it won't hurt anything if she thinks I'm a lord. Burn me, it won't hurt anything.*

"If you wish it . . . Rand." Her smile made his throat tighten. "You will help me?"

"Of course, I will." *Burn me, but she's beautiful. And looking at me like I'm a hero in a story.* He shook his head to clear it of foolishness. "But first we have to find the men we are following. I'll try to keep you out of danger, but we must find them. Coming with us will be better than staying here alone."

For a moment she was silent, her face blank and smooth; Rand had no idea what she was thinking, except that she seemed to be studying him anew. "A man of duty," she said finally. A small smile touched her lips. "I like that. Yes. Who are these miscreants you follow?"

“Darkfriends and Trollocs, my Lady,” Hurin burst out. He made an awkward bow to her from his saddle. “They did murder in Fal Dara keep and stole the Horn of Valere, my Lady, but Lord Rand will fetch it back.”

Rand stared at the sniffer ruefully; Hurin gave a weak grin. *So much for secrecy.* It did not matter here, he supposed, but once back in their world. . . . “Selene, you must not say anything of the Horn to anyone. If it gets out, we’ll have a hundred people on our heels trying to get the Horn for themselves.”

“No, it would never do,” Selene said, “for *that* to fall into the wrong hands. The Horn of Valere. I could not tell you how often I’ve dreamed of touching it, holding it in my hands. You must promise me, when you have it, you will let me touch it.”

“Before I can do that, we have to find it. We had better be on our way.” Rand offered his hand to help her mount; Hurin scrambled down to hold her stirrup. “Whatever that thing was I killed—a *grolm*?—there may be more of them around.” Her hand was firm—there was surprising strength in her grip—and her skin was. . . . Silk? Something softer, smoother. Rand shivered.

“There always are,” Selene said. The tall white mare frisked and bared her teeth once at Red, yet Selene’s touch on the reins quieted her.

Rand slung his bow across his back and climbed onto Red. *Light, how could anyone’s skin be so soft?* “Hurin, where’s the trail? Hurin? Hurin!”

The sniffer gave a start, and left off staring at Selene. “Yes, Lord Rand. Ah . . . the trail. South, my Lord. Still south.”

“Then let’s ride.” Rand gave an uneasy look at the gray-green bulk of the *grolm* lying in the stream. It had been better believing they were the only living things in that world. “Take the trail, Hurin.”

Selene rode alongside Rand at first, talking of this and that, asking him questions and calling him lord. Half a dozen times he started to tell her he was no lord, only a shepherd, and every time, looking at her, he could not get the words out. A lady like her would not talk the same way with a shepherd, he was sure, even one who had saved her life.

“You will be a great man when you’ve found the Horn of Valere,” she told him. “A man for the legends. The man who sounds the Horn will make his own legends.”

“I don’t want to sound it, and I don’t want to be part of any legend.” He did not know if she was wearing perfume, but there seemed to be a scent to her, something that filled his head with her. Spices, sharp and sweet, tickling his nose, making him swallow.

"Every man wants to be great. You could be the greatest man in all the Ages."

It sounded too close to what Moiraine had said. The Dragon Reborn would certainly stand out through the Ages. "Not me," he said fervently. "I'm just"—he thought of her scorn if he told her now that he was only a shepherd after letting her believe he was a lord, and changed what he had been going to say—"just trying to find it. And to help a friend."

She was silent a moment, then said, "You've hurt your hand."

"It is nothing." He started to put his injured hand inside his coat—it throbbed from holding the reins—but she reached out and took it.

He was so surprised he let her, and then there was nothing to do except either jerk away rudely or else let her unwrap the kerchief. Her touch felt cool and sure. His palm was angrily red and puffy, but the heron still stood out, plainly and clearly.

She touched the brand with a finger, but made no comment on it, not even to ask how he had come by it. "This could stiffen your hand if it's untended. I have an ointment that should help." From a pocket inside her cloak she produced a small stone vial, unstopped it, and began gently rubbing a white salve on the burn as they rode.

The ointment felt cold at first, then seemed to melt away warmly into his flesh. And it worked as well as Nynaeve's ointments sometimes did. He stared in amazement as the redness faded and the swelling went down under her stroking fingers.

"Some men," she said, not raising her eyes from his hand, "choose to seek greatness, while others are forced to it. It is always better to choose than to be forced. A man who's forced is never completely his own master. He must dance on the strings of those who forced him."

Rand pulled his hand free. The brand looked a week old or more, all but healed. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

She smiled at him, and he felt ashamed of his outburst. "Why, the Horn, of course," she said calmly, putting away her salve. Her mare, stepping along beside Red, was tall enough that her eyes were only a little below Rand's. "If you find the Horn of Valere, there will be no avoiding greatness. But will it be forced on you, or will you take it? That's the question."

He flexed his hand. She sounded so much like Moiraine. “Are you Aes Sedai?”

Selene’s eyebrows lifted; her dark eyes glittered at him, but her voice was soft. “Aes Sedai? I? No.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m sorry.”

“Offend me? I am not offended, but I’m no Aes Sedai.” Her lip curled in a sneer; even that was beautiful. “They cower in what they think is safety when they could do so much. They serve when they could rule, let men fight wars when they could bring order to the world. No, never call me Aes Sedai.” She smiled and laid her hand on his arm to show she was not angry—her touch made him swallow—but he was relieved when she let the mare drop back beside Loial. Hurin bobbed his head at her like an old family retainer.

Rand was relieved, but he missed her presence, too. She was only two spans away—he twisted in his saddle to stare at her, riding by Loial’s side; the Ogier was bent half double in his saddle so he could talk with her—but that was not the same as being right there beside him, close enough for him to smell her heady scent, close enough to touch. He settled back angrily. It was not that he wanted to touch her, exactly—he reminded himself that he loved Egwene; he felt guilty at the need for reminding—but she was beautiful, and she thought he was a lord, and she said he could be a great man. He argued sourly with himself inside his head. *Moiraine says you can be great, too; the Dragon Reborn. Selene is not Aes Sedai. That’s right; she’s a Cairhienin noblewoman, and you’re a shepherd. She doesn’t know that. How long do you let her believe a lie? It’s only till we get out of this place. If we get out. If.* On that note, his thoughts subsided to sullen silence.

He tried to keep a watch on the country through which they rode—if Selene said there were more of those things . . . those *grolm* . . . about, he believed her, and Hurin was too intent on smelling the trail to notice anything else; Loial was too wrapped up in his talk with Selene to see anything until it bit him on the heel—but it was hard to watch. Turning his head too quickly made his eyes water; a hill or a stand of trees could seem a mile off when seen from one angle and only a few hundred spans when seen from another.

The mountains were growing closer, of that much he was sure. Kinslayer’s Dagger, looming against the sky now, a sawtooth expanse of snow-capped peaks. The land around them already rose in foothills heralding the coming of the mountains. They would reach the edge of the mountains proper well before dark, perhaps in only another hour or so. *More than a hundred leagues in less than three days. Worse than that. We spent most of a day south of the Erinin in the real world. Over a hundred leagues in less than two days, here.*

"She says you were right about this place, Rand."

Rand gave a start before he realized Loial had ridden up beside him. He looked for Selene and found her riding with Hurin; the sniffer was grinning and ducking his head and all but knuckling his forehead at everything she said. Rand glanced sideways at the Ogier. "I'm surprised you could let her go, the way you two had your heads together. What do you mean, I was right?"

"She is a fascinating woman, isn't she? Some of the Elders don't know as much as she does about history—especially the Age of Legends—and about—oh, yes. She says you were right about the Ways, Rand. The Aes Sedai, some of them, studied worlds like this, and that study was the basis of how they grew the Ways. She says there are worlds where it is time rather than distance that changes. Spend a day in one of those, and you might come back to find a year has passed in the real world, or twenty. Or it could be the other way round. Those worlds—this one, all the others—are reflections of the real world, she says. This one seems pale to us because it is a weak reflection, a world that had little chance of ever being. Others are almost as likely as ours. Those are as solid as our world, and have people. The same people, she says, Rand. Imagine it! You could go to one of them and meet yourself. The Pattern has infinite variation, she says, and every variation that can be, will be."

Rand shook his head, then wished he had not as the landscape flickered back and forth and his stomach lurched. He took a deep breath. "How does she know all that? You know about more things than anybody I ever met before, Loial, and all you knew about this world amounted to no more than a rumor."

"She's Cairhienin, Rand. The Royal Library in Cairhien is one of the greatest in the world, perhaps the greatest outside Tar Valon. The Aiel spared it deliberately, you know, when they burned Cairhien. They will not destroy a book. Did you know that they—"

"I don't care about Aielmen," Rand said hotly. "If Selene knows so much, I hope she read how to get us home from here. I wish Selene—"

“You wish Selene what?” The woman laughed as she joined them.

Rand stared at her as if she had been gone months; that was how he felt. “I wish Selene would come ride with me some more,” he said. Loial chuckled, and Rand felt his face burn.

Selene smiled, and looked at Loial. “You will excuse us, *alantin.*”

The Ogier bowed in his saddle and let his big horse fall back, the tufts on his ears drooping with reluctance.

For a time Rand rode in silence, enjoying Selene’s presence. Now and again he looked at her out of the corner of his eye. He wished he could get his feelings about her straight. Could she be an Aes Sedai, despite her denial? Someone sent by Moiraine to push him along whatever path he was meant to follow in the Aes Sedai’s plans? Moiraine could not have known he would be taken to this strange world, and no Aes Sedai would have tried to fend off that beast with a stick when she could strike it dead or send it running with the Power. Well. Since she took him for a lord and no one in Cairhien knew different, he might keep on letting her think it. She was surely the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, intelligent and learned, and she thought he was brave; what more could a man ask from a wife? *That’s crazy, too. I’d marry Egwene if I could marry anyone, but I can’t ask a woman to marry a man who’s going to go mad, maybe hurt her.* But Selene was so beautiful.

She was studying his sword, he saw. He readied the words in his head. No, he was not a blademaster, but his father had given him the sword. *Tam. Light, why couldn’t you really be my father?* He squashed the thought ruthlessly.

“That was a magnificent shot,” Selene said.

“No, I’m not a—” Rand began, then blinked. “A shot?”

“Yes. A tiny target, that eye, moving, at a hundred paces. You’ve a wonderful hand with that bow.”

Rand shifted awkwardly. “Ah . . . thank you. It’s a trick my father taught me.” He told her about the void, about how Tam had taught him how to use it with the bow. He even found himself telling her about Lan and his sword lessons.

“The Oneness,” she said, sounding satisfied. She saw his questioning look and added, “That is what it is called . . . in some places. The Oneness. To learn the full use of it, it is best to wrap it around you continuously, to dwell in it at all times, or so I’ve heard.”

He did not even have to think about what lay waiting for him in the void to know his answer to that, but what he said was, “I’ll think about it.”

“Wear this void of yours all the time, Rand al’Thor, and you’ll learn uses for it you never suspected.”

“I said I will think about it.” She opened her mouth again, but he cut her off. “You know all these things. About the void—the Oneness, you call it. About this world. Loial reads books all the time; he’s read more books than I’ve ever seen, and he’s never seen anything but a fragment about the Stones.”

Selene drew herself up straight in her saddle. Suddenly she reminded him of Moiraine, and of Queen Morgase, when they were angry.

“There was a book written about these worlds,” she said tightly. “*Mirrors of the Wheel.* You see, the *alantin* has not seen *all* the books that are.”

“What is this *alantin* you call him? I’ve never heard—”

“The Portal Stone beside which I woke is up there,” Selene said, pointing into the mountains, off to the east of their path. Rand found himself wishing for her warmth again, and her smiles. “If you take me to it, you can return me to my home, as you promised. We can reach it in an hour.”

Rand barely looked where she pointed. Using the Stone—Portal Stone, she called it—meant wielding the Power, if he were to take her back to the real world. “Hurin, how is the trail?”

“Fainter than ever, Lord Rand, but still there.” The sniffer spared a quick grin and bob of his head for Selene. “I think it’s starting to angle off to the west. There’s some easier passes there, toward the tip of the Dagger, as I recall from when I went to Cairhien that time.”

Rand sighed. *Fain, or one of his Darkfriends, has to know another way to use the Stones. A Darkfriend couldn’t use the Power.* “I have to follow the Horn, Selene.”

“How do you know your precious Horn is even in this world? Come with me, Rand. You’ll find your legend, I promise you. Come with me.”

“You can use the Stone, this Portal Stone, yourself,” he said angrily. Before the words were out of his mouth he wanted them back. *Why does she have to keep talking about legends?* Stubbornly, he forced himself to go on. “The Portal Stone didn’t bring you here by itself. You did it, Selene. If you made the Stone bring you here, you can make it take you back. I'll take you to it, but then I must go on after the Horn."

"I know nothing about using the Portal Stones, Rand. If I did anything, I don't know what it was."

Rand studied her. She sat her saddle, straight-backed and tall, just as regally as before, but somehow softer, too. Proud, yet vulnerable, and needing him. He had put Nynaeve's age to her—a handful of years older than himself—but he had been wrong, he realized. She was more his own age, and beautiful, and she needed him. The thought, just the thought, of the void flickered through his head, and of the light. *Saidin.* To use the Portal Stone, he must dip himself back into that taint.

"Stay with me, Selene," he said. "We'll find the Horn, and Mat's dagger, and we'll find a way back. I promise you. Just stay with me."

"You always. . . ." Selene drew a deep breath as if to calm herself. "You always are so stubborn. Well, I can admire stubbornness in a man. There is little to a man who's too easily biddable."

Rand colored; it was too much like the things Egwene sometimes said, and they had all but been promised in marriage since they were children. From Selene, the words, and the direct look that went with them, were a shock. He turned to tell Hurin to press on with the trail.

From behind them came a distant, coughing grunt. Before Rand could whirl Red to look, another bark sounded, and three more on its heels. At first he could make out nothing as the landscape seemed to waver in his eyes, but then he saw them through the widespread stands of trees, just topping a hill. Five shapes, it seemed, only half a mile distant, a bare thousand paces at most, and coming in thirty-foot bounds.

"Grolm," Selene said calmly. "A small pack, but they have our scent, it seems."

* * *

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CHAPTER

17

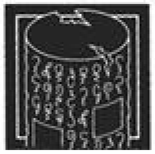

Choices

“We’ll run for it,” Rand said. “Hurin, can you gallop and still follow the trail?”

“Yes, Lord Rand.”

“Then push on. We will—”

“It won’t do any good,” Selene said. Her white mare was the only one of their mounts not dancing at the gruff barks coming from the *grolm.* “They don’t give up, not ever. Once they have your scent, *grolm* keep coming, day and night, until they run you down. You must kill them all, or find a way to go elsewhere. Rand, the Portal Stone can take us elsewhere.”

“No! We *can* kill them. I can. I already killed one. There are only five. If I can just find. . . .” He cast around for the spot he needed, and found it. “Follow me!” Digging his heels in, he set Red to a gallop, confident before he heard their hooves that the others would come.

The place he had chosen was a low, round hill, bare of trees. Nothing could come close without him seeing. He swung down from his saddle and unlimbered his longbow. Loial and Hurin joined him on the ground, the Ogier hefting his huge quarterstaff, the sniffer with his short sword in his fist. Neither quarterstaff nor sword would be of much use if the *grolm* closed with them. *I won’t let them get close.*

“This risk is not necessary,” Selene said. She barely looked toward the *grolm,* bending from her saddle to concentrate on Rand. “We can easily reach the Portal Stone ahead of them.”

“I will stop them.” Hastily Rand counted the arrows remaining in his quiver. Eighteen, each as long as his arm, ten of them with points like chisels, designed to drive through Trolloc armor. They would do as well for *grolm* as for Trollocs. He stuck four of those upright in the ground in front of him; a fifth he nocked to the bow. “Loial, Hurin, you can do no good down here. Mount and be ready to take Selene to the Stone if any get through." He wondered whether he could kill one of the things with his sword, if it came to that. *You* are *mad! Even the Power is not as bad as this.*

Loial said something, but he did not hear; he was already seeking the void, as much to escape his own thoughts as for need. *You know what's waiting. But this way I don't have to touch it.* The glow was there, the light just out of sight. It seemed to flow toward him, but the emptiness was all. Thoughts darted across the surface of the void, visible in that tainted light. *Saidin. The Power. Madness. Death.* Extraneous thoughts. He was one with the bow, with the arrow, with the things topping the next rise.

The *grolm* came on, overreaching one another in their leaps, five great, leathery shapes, triple-eyed, with horny maws gaping. Their grunting calls rebounded from the void, barely heard.

Rand was not aware of raising his bow, or drawing the fletching against his cheek, to his ear. He was one with the beasts, one with the center eye of the first. Then the arrow was gone. The first *grolm* died; one of its companions leaped on it as it fell, beak of a mouth ripping gobbets of flesh. It snarled at the others, and they circled wide. But they came on, and as if compelled, it abandoned its meal and leaped after them, its horny maw already bloody.

Rand worked smoothly, unconsciously, nock and release. Nock and release.

The fifth arrow left his bow, and he lowered it, still deep in the void, as the fourth *grolm* fell like a huge puppet with its strings cut. Though the final arrow still flew, somehow he knew there was no need for another shot. The last beast collapsed as if its bones had melted, a feathered shaft jutting from its center eye. Always the center eye.

"Magnificent, Lord Rand," Hurin said. "I . . . I've never seen shooting like that."

The void held Rand. The light called to him, and he . . . reached . . . toward it. It surrounded him, filled him.

"Lord Rand?" Hurin touched his arm, and Rand gave a start, the emptiness filling up with what was around him. "Are you all right, my Lord?"

Rand brushed his forehead with fingertips. It was dry; he felt as if it should have been covered with sweat. "I. . . . I'm fine, Hurin."

"It grows easier each time you do it, I've heard," Selene said. "The more you live in the Oneness, the easier."

Rand glanced at her. “Well, I won’t need it again, not for a while.” *What happened? I wanted to. . . .* He still wanted to, he realized with horror. He *wanted* to go back into the void, wanted to feel that light filling him again. It had seemed as if he were truly alive then, sickliness and all, and now was only an imitation. No, worse. He had been almost alive, knowing what “alive” would be like. All he had to do was reach out to *saidin. . . .*

“Not again,” he muttered. He gazed off at the dead *grolm,* five monstrous shapes lying on the ground. Not dangerous anymore. “Now we can be on our—”

A coughing bark, all too familiar, sounded beyond the dead *grolm,* beyond the next hill, and others answered it. Still more came, from the east, from the west.

Rand half raised his bow.

“How many arrows do you have left?” Selene demanded. “Can you kill twenty *grolm*? Thirty? A hundred? We *must* go to the Portal Stone.”

“She is right, Rand,” Loial said slowly. “You do not have any choice now.” Hurin was watching Rand anxiously. The *grolm* called, a score of barks overlapping.

“The Stone,” Rand agreed reluctantly. Angrily he threw himself back into his saddle, slung the bow on his back. “Lead us to this Stone, Selene.”

With a nod she turned her mare and heeled it to a trot. Rand and the others followed, they eagerly, he holding back. The barks of *grolm* pursued them, hundreds it seemed. It sounded as if the *grolm* were ranged in a semicircle around them, closing in from every direction but the front.

Swiftly and surely Selene led them through the hills. The land rose in the beginning of mountains, slopes steepening so the horses scrambled over washed-out-looking rocky outcrops and the sparse, faded-looking brush that clung to them. The way became harder, the land slanting more and more upward.

We’re not going to make it, Rand thought, the fifth time Red slipped and slid backwards in a shower of stone. Loial threw his quarterstaff aside; it would be of no use against *grolm,* and it only slowed him. The Ogier had given up riding; he used one hand to haul himself up, and pulled his tall horse behind him with the other. The hairy-fetlocked animal made heavy going, but easier than with Loial on its back. *Grolm* barked behind them, closer now.

Then Selene drew rein and pointed to a hollow nestled below them in the granite. It was all there, the seven wide, colored stairs around a pale floor, and the tall stone column in the middle.

She dismounted and led her mare into the hollow, down the stairs to the column. It loomed over her. She turned to look back up at Rand and the others. The *grolm* gave their grunting barks, scores of them, loud. Near. "They will be on us soon," she said. "You must use the Stone, Rand. Or else find a way to kill all the *grolm.*"

With a sigh, Rand got down from his saddle and led Red into the hollow. Loial and Hurin followed hastily. He stared at the symbol-covered column, the Portal Stone, uneasily. *She must be able to channel, even if she doesn't know it, or it couldn't have brought her here. The Power doesn't harm women.* "If this brought you here," he began, but she interrupted him.

"I know what it is," she said firmly, "but I do not know how to use it. You must do what must be done." She traced one symbol, a little larger than the others, with a finger. A triangle standing on its point inside a circle. "This stands for the true world, our world. I believe it will help if you hold it in your mind while you. . . ." She spread her hands as if unsure exactly what it was he was supposed to do.

"Uh . . . my Lord?" Hurin said diffidently. "There isn't much time." He glanced over his shoulder at the rim of the hollow. The barking was louder. "Those things will be here in minutes, now." Loial nodded.

Drawing a deep breath, Rand put his hand on the symbol Selene had pointed out. He looked at her to see if he was doing it right, but she merely watched, not even the slightest frown of worry wrinkling her pale forehead. *She's confident you can save her. You have to.* The scent of her filled his nostrils.

"Uh . . . my Lord?"

Rand swallowed, and sought the void. It came easily, springing up around him without effort. Emptiness. Emptiness except for the light, wavering in a way that turned his stomach. Emptiness except for *saidin.* But even the queasiness was distant. He was one with the Portal Stone. The column felt smooth and slightly oily under his hand, but the triangle-and-circle seemed warm against the brand on his palm. *Have to get them to safety. Have to get them home.* The light drifted toward him, it seemed, surrounded him, and he . . . embraced . . . it.

Light filled him. Heat filled him. He could see the Stone, see the others watching him—Loial and Hurin anxiously, Selene showing no doubt that he could save her—but they might as well not have been there. The light was all. The heat and the light, suffusing his limbs like water sinking into dry sand, filling him. The symbol burned against his flesh. He tried to suck it all in, all the heat, all the light. All. The symbol. . . .

Suddenly, as if the sun had gone out for the blink of an eye, the world flickered. And again. The symbol was a live coal under his hand; he drank in the light. The world flickered. Flickered. It made him sick, that light; it was water to a man dying of thirst. Flicker. He sucked at it. It made him want to vomit; he wanted it all. Flicker. The triangle-and-circle seared him; he could feel it charring his hand. Flicker. He wanted it all! He screamed, howling with pain, howling with wanting.

Flicker . . . flicker . . . flickerflickerflicker. . . .

Hands pulled at him; he was only vaguely aware of them. He staggered back; the void was slipping away, the light, and the sickness that twisted at him. The light. He watched it go regretfully. *Light, that's crazy to want it. But I was so* full *of it! I was so. . . .* Dazed, he stared at Selene. It was she who held his shoulders, stared wonderingly into his eyes. He raised his hand in front of his face. The heron brand was there, but nothing else. No triangle-and-circle burned into his flesh.

"Remarkable," Selene said slowly. She glanced at Loial and Hurin. The Ogier looked stunned, his eyes as big as plates; the sniffer was squatting with one hand on the ground, as if unsure he could support himself else. "All of us here, and all of our horses. And you do not even know what you did. Remarkable."

"Are we . . . ?" Rand began hoarsely, and had to stop to swallow.

"Look around you," Selene said. "You've brought us home." She gave a sudden laugh. "You brought all of us home."

For the first time Rand became aware of his surroundings again. The hollow surrounded them without any stairs, though here and there lay a suspiciously smooth piece of stone, colored red, or blue. The column lay against the mountainside, half buried in the loose rock of a fall. The symbols were unclear, here; wind and water had worked long on them. And everything looked real. The colors were solid, the granite a strong gray, the brush green and brown. After that other place, it seemed almost too vivid.

"Home," Rand breathed, and then he was laughing, too. "We're home." Loial's laughter sounded like a bull bellowing. Hurin danced a caper.

"You did it," Selene said, leaning closer, until her face filled Rand's eyes. "I knew that you could."

Rand's laughter died. "I—I suppose I did." He glanced at the fallen Portal Stone and managed a weak laugh. "I wish I knew what it was I did, though."

Selene looked deep into his eyes. "Perhaps one day you will know," she said softly. "You are surely destined for great things."

Her eyes seemed as dark and deep as night, as soft as velvet. Her mouth. . . . *If I kissed her*. . . . He blinked and stepped back hurriedly, clearing his throat. "Selene, please don't tell anyone about this. About the Portal Stone, and me. I don't understand it, and neither will anybody else. You know how people are about things they don't understand."

Her face wore no expression at all. Suddenly he wished very much that Mat and Perrin were there. Perrin knew how to talk to girls, and Mat could lie with a straight face. He could manage neither very well.

Suddenly Selene smiled, and dropped a half-mocking curtsy. "I will keep your secret, my Lord Rand al'Thor."

Rand glanced at her, and cleared his throat again. *Is she angry with me? She'd certainly be angry if I had tried to kiss her. I think.* He wished she would not look at him as she was, as if she knew what he was thinking. "Hurin, is there any chance the Darkfriends used this Stone before us?"

The sniffer shook his head ruefully. "They were angling to the west of here, Lord Rand. Unless these Portal Stone things are more common than I've seen, I'd say they're still in that other world. But it wouldn't take me an hour to check it. The land's the same here as there. I could find the place here where I lost the trail there, if you see what I mean, and see if they've already gone by."

Rand glanced at the sky. The sun—a wonderfully strong sun, not pale at all—sat low to the west, stretching their shadows out across the hollow. Another hour would bring full twilight. "In the morning," he said. "But I fear we've lost them." *We can't lose that dagger! We can't!* "Selene, if that's the case, in the morning we will take you on to your home. Is it in the city of Cairhien itself, or . . . ?"

“You may not have lost the Horn of Valere yet,” Selene said slowly. “As you know, I do know a *few* things about those worlds.”

“Mirrors of the Wheel,” Loial said.

She gave him a look, then nodded. “Yes. Exactly. Those worlds truly are mirrors in a way, especially the ones where there are no people. Some of them reflect only great events in the true world, but some have a shadow of that reflection even before the event occurs. The passage of the Horn of Valere would certainly be a great event. Reflections of what will be are fainter than reflections of what is or what was, just as Hurin says the trail he followed was faint.”

Hurin blinked incredulously. “You mean to say, my Lady, I’ve been smelling where those Darkfriends are *going* to be? The Light help me, I wouldn’t like that. It’s bad enough smelling where violence *has* been, without smelling where it *will* be, too. There can’t be many spots where there won’t be *some* kind of violence, *some* time. It would drive me crazy, like as not. That place we just left nearly did. I could smell it all the time, there, killing and hurting, and the vilest evil you could think of. I could even smell it on us. On all of us. Even on you, my Lady, if you’ll forgive me for saying so. It was just that place, twisting me the way it twisted your eye.” He gave himself a shake. “I’m glad we’re out of there. I can’t get it out of my nostrils yet, all the way.”

Rand rubbed absently at the brand on his palm. “What do you think, Loial? Could we really be ahead of Fain’s Darkfriends?”

The Ogier shrugged, frowning. “I don’t know, Rand. I don’t know anything about any of this. I think we are back in our world. I think we are in Kinslayer’s Dagger. Beyond that. . . .” He shrugged again.

“We should be seeing you home, Selene,” Rand said. “Your people will be worried about you.”

“A few days will see if I’m right,” she said impatiently. “Hurin can find where he left the trail; he said so. We can watch over it. The Horn of Valere cannot be much longer reaching here. The Horn of Valere, Rand. Think of it. The man who sounds the Horn will live in legend forever.”

“I don’t want anything to do with legends,” he said sharply. *But if the Darkfriends get by you. . . . What if Ingtar lost them? Then the Darkfriends have the Horn of Valere forever, and Mat dies.* “All right, a few days. At the worst, we will probably meet Ingtar and the others. I can’t imagine they’ve stopped or turned back just because we . . . went away.”

“A wise decision, Rand,” Selene said, “and well thought out.” She touched his arm and smiled, and he found himself again thinking of kissing her.

“Uh . . . we need to be closer to where they’ll come. If they do come. Hurin, can you find us a camp before dark, somewhere we can watch the place where you lost the trail?” He glanced at the Portal Stone and thought about sleeping near it, thought of the way the void had crept up on him in sleep the last time, and the light in the void. “Somewhere well away from here.”

“Leave it in my hands, Lord Rand.” The sniffer scrambled to his saddle. “I vow, I’ll never sleep again without first I see what kind of stone there is nearby.”

As Rand rode Red up out of the hollow, he found himself watching Selene more than he did Hurin. She seemed so cool and self-possessed, no older than he, yet queenly, but when she smiled at him, as she did just then. . . . *Egwene wouldn’t have said I was wise. Egwene would have called me a woolhead.* Irritably, he heeled Red’s flanks.

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CHAPTER

18

To the White Tower

Egwene balanced on the heeling deck as the *River Queen* sped down the wide Erinin under cloud-dark skies, sails full-bellied, White Flame banner whipping furiously at the mainmast. The wind had risen as soon as the last of them was aboard the ships, back in Medo, and it had not failed or flagged for an instant since, day or night. The river had begun to race in flood, as it still did, slapping the ships about while it drove them onward. Wind and river had not slowed, and neither had the ships, all clustered together. The *River Queen* led, only right for the vessel that carried the Amyrlin Seat.

The helmsman held his tiller grimly, feet planted and spread, and sailors padded barefoot at their work, intent on what they did; when they glanced at the sky or the river, they tore their eyes away with low mutters. A village was just fading from view behind, and a boy raced along the bank; he had kept up with the ships for a short distance, but now they were leaving him behind. When he vanished, Egwene made her way below.

In the small cabin they shared, Nynaeve glared up at her from her narrow bed. “They say we’ll reach Tar Valon today. The Light help me, but I’ll be glad to put foot on land again even if it is in Tar Valon.” The ship lurched with wind and current, and Nynaeve swallowed. “I’ll never step on a boat again,” she said breathlessly.

Egwene shook the river spray out of her cloak and hung it on a peg by the door. It was not a big cabin—there were no big cabins on the ship, it seemed, not even the one the Amyrlin had taken over from the captain, though that was larger than the rest. With its two beds built into the walls, shelves beneath them and cabinets above, everything lay close to hand.

Except for keeping her balance, the movements of the ship did not bother her the way they did Nynaeve; she had given up offering Nynaeve food after the third time the Wisdom threw the bowl at her. “I’m worried about Rand,” she said.

“I’m worried about all of them,” Nynaeve replied dully. After a moment, she said, “Another dream last night? The way you’ve been staring at nothing since you got up. . . .”

Egwene nodded. She had never been very good at keeping things from Nynaeve, and she had not tried with the dreams. Nynaeve had tried to dose her at first, until she heard one of the Aes Sedai was interested; then she began to believe. “It was like the others. Different, but the same. Rand is in some kind of danger. I know it. And it is getting worse. He’s done something, or he’s going to do something, that puts him in. . . .” She dropped down on her bed and leaned toward the other woman. “I just wish I could make some sense of it.”

“Channeling?” Nynaeve said softly.

Despite herself, Egwene looked around to see if anyone was there to hear. They were alone, with the door closed, but still she spoke just as softly. “I don’t know. Maybe.” There was no telling what Aes Sedai could do—she had seen enough already to make her believe every story of their powers—and she would not risk eavesdropping. *I won’t risk Rand. If I did right, I’d tell them, but Moiraine knows, and she hasn’t said anything. And it’s Rand! I can’t.* “I don’t know what to do.”

“Has Anaiya said anything more about these dreams?” Nynaeve seemed to make it a point never to add the honorific Sedai, even when the two of them were alone. Most of the Aes Sedai appeared not to care, but the habit had earned a few strange looks, and some hard ones; she was going to train in the White Tower, after all.

“ ‘The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,’ ” Egwene quoted Anaiya. “ ‘The boy is far away, child, and there’s nothing we can do until we know more. I will see to testing you myself once we reach the White Tower, child.’ Aaagh! She *knows* there is something in these dreams. I can tell she does. I like the woman, Nynaeve; I do. But she won’t *tell* me what I want to know. And I can’t tell her everything. Maybe if I could. . . .”

“The man in the mask again?”

Egwene nodded. Somehow, she was sure it was better not to tell Anaiya about him. She could not imagine why, but she was sure. Three times the man whose eyes were fire had been in her dreams each time when she dreamed a dream that convinced her Rand was in danger. He always wore a mask across his face; sometimes she could see his eyes, and sometimes she could only see fire where they should be. “He laughed at me. It was so . . . contemptuous. As though I were a puppy he was going to have to push out of his way with his foot. It frightens me. He frightens me.”

“Are you sure it has anything to do with the other dreams, with Rand? Sometimes a dream is just a dream.”

Egwene threw up her hands. “And sometimes, Nynaeve, you sound just like Anaiya Sedai!” She put a special emphasis on the title, and was pleased to see Nynaeve grimace.

“If I ever get out of this bed, Egwene—”

A knock at the door cut off whatever Nynaeve had been going to say. Before Egwene could speak or move, the Amyrlin herself came in and shut the door behind her. She was alone, for a wonder; she seldom left her cabin, and then always with Leane at her side, and maybe another of the Aes Sedai.

Egwene sprang to her feet. The room was a little crowded, with three of them in it.

“Both of you feeling well?” the Amyrlin said cheerily. She tilted her head at Nynaeve. “Eating well, too, I trust? In good temper?”

Nynaeve struggled to a sitting position, with her back against the wall. “My temper is just fine, thank you.”

“We are honored, Mother,” Egwene began, but the Amyrlin waved her to silence.

“It’s good to be on the water again, but it grows boring as a mill pond after a while with nothing to do.” The ship heeled, and she shifted her balance without seeming to notice. “I will give you your lesson today.” She folded herself onto the end of Egwene’s bed, feet tucked under her. “Sit, child.”

Egwene sat, but Nynaeve began trying to push herself to her feet. “I think I will go on deck.”

“I said, sit!” The Amyrlin’s voice cracked like a whip, but Nynaeve kept rising, wavering. She still had both hands on the bed, but she was almost upright. Egwene held herself ready to catch her when she fell.

Closing her eyes, Nynaeve slowly lowered herself back to the bed. “Perhaps I will stay. It is no doubt windy up there.”

The Amyrlin barked a laugh. “They told me you had a temper in you like a fisher-bird with a bone in its throat. Some of them, child, say you’d do well for some time as a novice, no matter how old you are. I say, if you have the ability I hear of, you deserve to be one of the Accepted." She gave another laugh. "I always believe in giving people what they deserve. Yes. I suspect you will learn a great deal once you reach the White Tower."

"I'd rather one of the Warders taught me how to use a sword," Nynaeve growled. She swallowed convulsively, and opened her eyes. "There is someone I'd like to use it on." Egwene looked at her sharply; did Nynaeve mean the Amyrlin—which was stupid, and dangerous besides—or Lan? She snapped at Egwene every time Lan was mentioned.

"A sword?" the Amyrlin said. "I never thought swords were much use—even if you have the skill, child, there are always men who have as much, and a deal more strength—but if you want a sword. . . ." She held up her hand—Egwene gasped, and even Nynaeve's eyes bulged—and there was a sword in it. With blade and hilt of an odd bluish white, it looked somehow . . . cold. "Made from the air, child, with Air. It's as good as most steel blades, better than most, but still not much use." The sword became a paring knife. There was no shrinking; it just was one thing, then the other. "This, now, is useful." The paring knife turned to mist, and the mist faded away. The Amyrlin put her empty hand back in her lap. "But either takes more effort than it is worth. Better, easier, simply to carry a good knife with you. You have to learn when to use your ability, as well as how, and when it's better to do things the way any other woman would. Let a blacksmith make knives for gutting fish. Use the One Power too often and too freely, and you can come to like it too much. That way lies danger. You begin to want more of it, and sooner or later you run the risk of drawing more than you've learned to handle. And that can burn you out like a guttered candle, or—"

"If I must learn all this," Nynaeve broke in stiffly, "I would as soon learn something useful. All this—this . . . 'Make the air stir, Nynaeve. Light the candle, Nynaeve. Now put it out. Light it again.' Paah!"

Egwene closed her eyes for a moment. *Please, Nynaeve. Please keep a check on your temper.* She bit her lip to keep from saying it out loud.

The Amyrlin was silent for a moment. "Useful," she said at last. "Something useful. You wanted a sword. Suppose a man came at me with a sword. What would I do? Something useful, you can be sure. This, I think."

For an instant, Egwene thought she saw a glow around the woman at the other end of her bed. Then the air seemed to thicken; nothing changed that Egwene could see, but she could surely feel it. She tried to lift her arm; it did not budge any more than if she were buried to her neck in thick jelly. Nothing could move except her head.

“Release me!” Nynaeve grated. Her eyes glared, and her head jerked from side to side, but the rest of her sat as rigidly as a statue. Egwene realized that she was not the only one held. “Let me go!”

“Useful, wouldn’t you say? And it is nothing but Air.” The Amyrlin spoke in a conversational tone, as if they were all chatting over tea. “Big man, with his muscles and his sword, and the sword does him as much good as the hair on his chest.”

“Let me go, I say!”

“And if I don’t like where he is, why, I can pick him up.” Nynaeve squawked furiously as she slowly rose, still in a sitting position, until her head almost touched the ceiling. The Amyrlin smiled. “I’ve often wished I could use this to fly. The records say Aes Sedai *could* fly, in the Age of Legends, but they aren’t clear on how, exactly. Not this way, though. It doesn’t work like that. You might reach out with your hands and pick up a chest that weighs as much as you do; you look strong. But take hold of yourself however you will, you cannot pick yourself up.”

Nynaeve’s head jerked furiously, but not another muscle of her twitched. “The Light burn you, let me go!”

Egwene swallowed hard and hoped she was not also to be lifted.

“So,” the Amyrlin continued, “big, hairy man, and so forth. He can do nothing to me, while I can do anything at all to him. Why, if I had a mind to”—she leaned forward, her eyes intent on Nynaeve; suddenly her smile did not seem very friendly—“I could turn him upside down and paddle his bottom. Just like—” Suddenly the Amyrlin flew backwards so hard her head rebounded from the wall, and there she stayed, as if something were pressing against her.

Egwene stared, her mouth dry. *This isn’t happening. It isn’t.*

“They were right,” the Amyrlin said. Her voice sounded strained, as though she found it hard to breathe. “They said you learned quickly. And they said it took your temper burning to get to the heart of what you can do.” She took a struggling breath. “Shall we release each other together, child?”

Nynaeve, floating in the air with her eyes ablaze, said, “You let me go right now, or I’ll—” Abruptly a look of amazement came over her face, a look of loss. Her mouth worked silently.

The Amyrlin sat up, working her shoulders. “You don’t know everything yet, do you, child? Not the hundredth part of everything. You did not suspect I could cut you off from the True Source. You can still feel it there, but you can’t touch it any more than a fish can touch the moon. When you learn enough to be raised to full sisterhood, no one woman will be able to do that to you. The stronger you become, the more Aes Sedai it will take to shield you against your will. Do you think, now, you want to learn?” Nynaeve pressed her mouth shut in a thin line and stared her in the eye grimly. The Amyrlin sighed. “If you had a hair less potential than you do, child, I would send you to the Mistress of Novices and tell her to keep you the rest of your life. But you will get what you deserve.”

Nynaeve’s eyes widened, and she had just time to start a yell before she dropped, hitting her bed with a loud thud. Egwene winced; the mattresses were thin, and the wood beneath hard. Nynaeve’s face stayed frozen as she shifted the way she sat, just a fraction.

“And now,” the Amyrlin said firmly, “unless you would like further demonstration, we will get on with your lesson. Continue your lesson, we might say.”

“Mother?” Egwene said faintly. She still could not twitch below her chin.

The Amyrlin looked at her questioningly, then smiled. “Oh. I am sorry, child. Your friend was occupying my attention, I’m afraid.” Suddenly Egwene could move again; she raised her arms, just to convince herself that she could. “Are you both ready to learn?”

“Yes, Mother,” Egwene said quickly.

The Amyrlin raised an eyebrow at Nynaeve.

After a moment, Nynaeve said in a tight voice, “Yes, Mother.”

Egwene heaved a sigh of relief.

“Good. Now, then. Empty your thoughts of everything but a flower bud.”

Egwene was sweating by the time the Amyrlin left. She had thought some of the other Aes Sedai had been hard teachers, but that smiling, plain-faced woman coaxed out every last drop of effort, drew it out, and when there was nothing left, she seemed to reach into you and pulled it out. It had gone well, though. As the door closed behind the Amyrlin, Egwene raised one hand; a tiny flame sprang to life, balanced a hairbreadth above the tip of her forefinger, then danced from fingertip to fingertip. She was not supposed to do this without a teacher—one of the Accepted, at the very least—to watch over her, but she was too excited at her progress to pay any mind to that.

Nynaeve bounded to her feet and threw her pillow at the closing door. “That—that vile, contemptible, miserable—hag! The Light burn her! I’d like to feed *her* to the fish. I’d like to dose her with things that would turn her green for the rest of her life! I don’t care if she’s old enough to be my mother, if I had her in Emond’s Field, she wouldn’t sit down comfortably for. . . .” Her teeth ground so loudly that Egwene jumped.

Letting the flame die, Egwene put her eyes firmly on her lap. She wished she could think of a way to sneak out of the room without catching Nynaeve’s eye.

The lesson had not gone well for Nynaeve, because she had held her temper on a tight lead until the Amyrlin was gone. She never could do very much unless she was angry, and then it all burst out of her. After failure upon failure, the Amyrlin had done everything she could to rouse her again. Egwene wished Nynaeve could forget she had been there to see or hear any of it.

Nynaeve stalked stiffly to her bed and stood staring at the wall behind it, her fist clenched at her side. Egwene looked longingly at the door.

“It was not your fault,” Nynaeve said, and Egwene gave a start.

“Nynaeve, I—”

Nynaeve turned to look down at her. “It was not your fault,” she repeated, sounding unconvinced. “But if you ever breathe one word, I’ll—I’ll. . . .”

“Not a word,” Egwene said quickly. “I don’t even remember anything to breathe a word about.”

Nynaeve stared at her a moment longer, then nodded. Abruptly she grimaced. “Light, I did not think *anything* tasted worse than raw sheepstongue root. I’ll remember that, the next time you act the goose, so watch yourself.”

Egwene winced. That had been the first thing the Amyrlin had done trying to rouse Nynaeve’s anger. A dark glob of something that glistened like grease and smelled vile had suddenly appeared and, while the Amyrlin held Nynaeve with the Power, had been forced into the Wisdom’s mouth. The Amyrlin had even held her nose to make her swallow. And Nynaeve remembered things, if she had seen them done once. Egwene did not think there was any way of stopping her if she took it into her mind to do it; for all her own success in making a flame dance, *she* could never have held the Amyrlin against a wall. “At least being on the ship isn’t making you sick anymore.”

Nynaeve grunted, then gave a short, sharp laugh. “I’m too angry to be sick.” With another mirthless laugh, she shook her head. “I’m too miserable to be sick. Light, I feel as if I’ve been dragged through a knothole backwards. If that is what novice training is like, you will have incentive to learn quickly.”

Egwene scowled at her knees. Compared to Nynaeve, the Amyrlin had only coaxed her, smiled at her successes, sympathized with her failures, then coaxed again. But all the Aes Sedai had said things would be different in the White Tower; harder, though they would not say how. If she had to go through what Nynaeve had, day after day, she did not think she could stand it.

Something changed in the motion of the ship. The rocking eased, and feet thumped on the deck above their heads. A man shouted something Egwene could not quite make out.

She looked up at Nynaeve. “Do you think. . . . Tar Valon?”

“There is only one way to find out,” Nynaeve replied, and determinedly took her cloak from its peg.

When they reached the deck, sailors were running everywhere, heaving at lines, shortening sail, readying long sweeps. The wind had died to a breeze, and the clouds were scattering, now.

Egwene rushed to the rail. “It is! It is Tar Valon!” Nynaeve joined her with an expressionless face.

The island was so big it looked more as if the river split in two than contained a bit of land. Bridges that seemed to be made of lace arched from either bank to the island, crossing marshy ground as well as the river. The walls of the city, the Shining Walls of Tar Valon, glistened white as the sun broke through the clouds. And on the west bank, its broken top leaking a thin wisp of smoke, Dragonmount reared black against the sky, one mountain standing among flat lands and rolling hills. Dragonmount, where the Dragon had died. Dragonmount, made by the Dragon’s dying.

Egwene wished she did not think of Rand when she looked at the mountain. *A man channeling. Light, help him.*

The *River Queen* passed through a wide opening in a tall, circular wall that thrust out into the river. Inside, one long wharf surrounded a round harbor. Sailors furled the last sails and used sweeps alone to move the ship stern-first to its docking. Around the long wharf, the other ships that had come downriver were now being snugged into their berths among the ships already there. The White Flame banner set workers scurrying along the already busy wharf.

The Amyrlin came on deck before the shore lines were tied off, but dockworkers ran a gangplank aboard as soon as she appeared. Leane walked at her side, flame-tipped staff in hand, and the other Aes Sedai on the ship followed them ashore. None of them so much as glanced at Egwene or Nynaeve. On the wharf a delegation greeted the Amyrlin—shawled Aes Sedai, bowing formally, kissing the Amyrlin's ring. The wharf bustled, between ships unloading and the Amyrlin Seat arriving; soldiers formed up on disembarking, men set booms for cargo; trumpet flourishes rang from the walls, competing with cheers from the onlookers.

Nynaeve gave a loud sniff. "It seems they've forgotten us. Come along. We'll see to ourselves."

Egwene was reluctant to leave her first sight of Tar Valon, but she followed Nynaeve below to gather their things. When they came back topside, bundles in their arms, soldiers and trumpets were gone—and Aes Sedai, too. Men were swinging back hatches along the deck and lowering cables into the holds.

On the deck, Nynaeve caught a dockman's arm, a burly fellow in a coarse brown shirt with no sleeves. "Our horses," she began.

"I'm busy," he growled, pulling free. "Horses'll all be took to the White Tower." He looked them up and down. "If you've business with the Tower, best you take yourselves on. Aes Sedai don't hold with newlings being tardy." Another man, wrestling with a bale being swung out of the hold on a cable, shouted to him, and he left the women without a backwards glance.

Egwene exchanged looks with Nynaeve. It seemed they really were on their own.

Nynaeve stalked off the ship with grim determination on her face, but Egwene made her way dejectedly down the gangplank and through the tarry smell that hung over the wharf. *All that talk about wanting us here, and now they don't seem to care.*

Broad stairs led up from the dock to a wide arch of dark redstone. On reaching it, Egwene and Nynaeve stopped to stare.

Every building seemed a palace, though most of those close to the arch seemed to contain inns or shops, from the signs over the doors. Fanciful stonework was everywhere, and the lines of one structure seemed designed to complement and set off the next, leading the eye along as if everything were part of one vast design. Some structures did not look like buildings at all, but like gigantic waves breaking, or huge shells, or fanciful, wind-sculpted cliffs. Right in front of the arch lay a broad square, with a fountain and trees, and Egwene could see another square further on. Above everything rose the towers, tall and graceful, some with sweeping bridges between them, high in the sky. And over all rose one tower, higher and wider than all the rest, as white as the Shining Walls themselves.

“Fair takes the breath at first sight,” said a woman’s voice behind them. “At tenth sight, for that. And at hundredth.”

Egwene turned. The woman was Aes Sedai; Egwene was sure of it, though she wore no shawl. No one else had that ageless look; and she held herself with an assurance, a confidence that seemed to confirm it. A glance at her hand showed the golden ring, the serpent biting its own tail. The Aes Sedai was a little plump, with a warm smile, and one of the oddest-appearing women Egwene had ever seen. Her plumpness could not hide high cheekbones, her eyes had a tilt to them and were the clearest, palest green, and her hair was almost the color of fire. Egwene barely stopped herself from goggling at that hair, those slightly slanted eyes.

“Ogier built, of course,” the Aes Sedai went on, “and their best work ever, some say. One of the first cities built after the Breaking. There weren’t half a thousand people here altogether then—no more than twenty sisters—but they built for what would be needed.”

“It is a lovely city,” Nynaeve said. “We are supposed to go to the White Tower. We came here for training, but no one seems to care if we go or stay.”

“They care,” the woman said, smiling. “I came here to meet you, but I was delayed speaking with the Amyrlin. I am Sheriam, the Mistress of Novices.”

“I am not to be a novice,” Nynaeve said in a firm voice, but a little too quickly. “The Amyrlin herself said I was to be one of the Accepted.”

“So I was told.” Sheriam sounded amused. “I have never heard of it being done so before, but they say you are . . . exceptional. Remember, though, even one of the Accepted can be called to my study. It requires more breaking of the rules than for a novice, but it has been known to happen.” She turned to Egwene as if she had not seen Nynaeve frown. “And you are our new novice. It is always good to see a novice come. We have too few, these days. You will make forty. Only forty. And no more than eight or nine of those will be raised to the Accepted. Though I don’t think you will have to worry about that too much, if you work hard and apply yourself. The work is hard, and even for one with the potential they tell me you have, it will not be made any easier. If you cannot stick to it, no matter how hard it is, or if you will break under the strain, better we find it out now, and let you go on your way, than wait until you are a full sister and others are depending on you. An Aes Sedai’s life is not easy. Here, we will prepare you for it, if you have in you what is required.”

Egwene swallowed. *Break under the strain?* “I will try, Sheriam Sedai,” she said faintly. *And I will not break.*

Nynaeve looked at her worriedly. “Sheriam. . . .” She stopped and took a deep breath. “Sheriam Sedai”—she seemed to force the honorific out—“does it have to be so hard on her? Flesh and blood can only take so much. I know . . . something . . . of what novices must go through. Surely there’s no need to try to break her just to find out how strong she is.”

“You mean what the Amyrlin did to you today?” Nynaeve’s back stiffened; Sheriam looked as though she were trying to keep amusement from her face. “I told you I spoke with the Amyrlin. Rest your worries for your friend. Novice training is hard, but not that hard. That is for the first few weeks of being one of the Accepted.” Nynaeve’s mouth fell open; Egwene thought the Wisdom’s eyes were going to come right out of her head. “To catch the few who might have slipped through novice training when they should not have. We cannot risk having one of our number—a full Aes Sedai—who will break under the stress of the world outside.” The Aes Sedai gathered them both up, an arm around the shoulders of each. Nynaeve hardly seemed to realize where she was going. “Come,” Sheriam said, “I will see you settled in your rooms. The White Tower awaits.”

* * *

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CHAPTER

19

Beneath the Dagger

Night on the edge of Kinslayer’s Dagger was cold, as nights in the mountains are always cold. The wind whipped down from the high peaks carrying the iciness of the snowcaps. Rand shifted on the hard ground, tugging at his cloak and blanket, and only half asleep. His hand went to his sword, lying beside him. *One more day*, he thought drowsily. *Just one more, and then we go. If no one comes tomorrow, Ingtar or Darkfriends one, I’ll take Selene to Cairhien.*

He had told himself that before. Every day they had been there on the mountainside, watching the place where Hurin said the trail had been, in that other world—where Selene said the Darkfriends would surely appear in this world—he told himself it was time to leave. And Selene talked of the Horn of Valere, and touched his arm, and looked into his eyes, and before he knew it he had agreed to yet another day before they went on.

He shrugged against the chill of the wind, thinking of Selene touching his arm and looking into his eyes. *If Egwene saw that, she’d shear me for a sheep, and Selene, too. Egwene could already be in Tar Valon by now, learning to be an Aes Sedai. The next time she sees me, she’ll probably try to gentle me.*

As he shifted over, his hand slid past the sword and touched the bundle holding Thom Merrilin’s harp and flute. Unconsciously, his fingers tightened on the gleeman’s cloak. *I was happy then, I think, even running for my life. Playing the flute for my supper. I was too ignorant to know what was going on. There’s no turning back.*

Shivering, he opened his eyes. The only light came from the waning moon, not far past full and low in the sky. A fire would give them away to those for whom they watched. Loial muttered in his sleep, a low rumble. One of the horses stamped a hoof. Hurin had the first watch, from a stone outcrop a little way up the mountain; he would be coming to wake Rand for his turn, soon.

Rand rolled over . . . and stopped. In the moonlight he could see the shape of Selene, bending over his saddlebags, her hands on the buckles. Her white dress gathered the faint light. “Do you need something?”

She gave a jump, and stared toward him. “You—you startled me.”

He rolled to his feet, shedding the blanket and wrapping the cloak around himself, and went to her. He was sure he had left the saddlebags right by his side when he lay down; he always kept them close. He took them from her. All the buckles were fastened, even those on the side that held the damning banner. *How can my life depend on keeping it? If anybody sees it and knows what it is, I’ll die for having it.* He peered at her suspiciously.

Selene stayed where she was, looking up at him. The moon glistened in her dark eyes. “It came to me,” she said, “that I’ve been wearing this dress too long. I could brush it, at least, if I had something else to wear while I did. One of your shirts, perhaps.”

Rand nodded, feeling a sudden relief. Her dress looked as clean to him as when he first saw her, but he knew that if a spot appeared on Egwene’s dress, nothing would do but that she cleaned it immediately. “Of course.” He opened the capacious pocket into which he had stuffed everything except the banner and pulled out one of the white silk shirts.

“Thank you.” Her hands went behind her back. To the buttons, he realized.

Eyes wide, he spun away from her.

“If you could help me with these, it would be much easier.”

Rand cleared his throat. “It would not be proper. It isn’t as if we were promised, or. . . .” *Stop thinking about that! You can never marry anyone.* “It just wouldn’t be proper.”

Her soft laugh sent a shiver down his back, as if she had run a finger along his spine. He tried not to listen to the rustlings behind him. He said, “Ah . . . tomorrow . . . tomorrow, we’ll leave for Cairhien.”

“And what of the Horn of Valere?”

“Maybe we were wrong. Maybe they are not coming here at all. Hurin says there are a number of passes through Kinslayer’s Dagger. If they went only a little further west, they do not have to come into the mountains at all.”

“But the trail we followed came here. They will come here. The Horn will come here. You may turn around, now.”

“You say that, but we don’t know. . . .” He turned, and the words died in his mouth. Her dress lay across her arm, and she wore his shirt, hanging in baggy folds on her. It was a long-tailed shirt, made for his height, but she was tall for a woman. The bottom of it came little more than halfway down her thighs. It was not as if he had never seen a girl’s legs before; girls in the Two Rivers always tied up their skirts to go wading in Waterwood ponds. But they stopped doing it well before they were old enough to braid their hair, and this was in the dark, besides. The moonlight seemed to make her skin glow.

“What is it you don’t know, Rand?”

The sound of her voice unfroze his joints. With a loud cough, he whirled to face the other way. “Ah . . . I think . . . ah . . . I . . . ah. . . .”

“Think of the glory, Rand.” Her hand touched his back, and he almost shamed himself with a squeak. “Think of the glory that will come to the one who finds the Horn of Valere. How proud I’ll be to stand beside him who holds the Horn. You have no idea the heights we will scale together, you and I. With the Horn of Valere in your hand, you can be a king. You can be another Artur Hawkwing. You. . . .”

“Lord Rand!” Hurin panted into the campsite. “My Lord, they. . . .” He skidded to a halt, suddenly making a gurgling sound. His eyes dropped to the ground, and he stood wringing his hands. “Forgive me, my Lady. I didn’t mean to. . . . I. . . . Forgive me.”

Loial sat up, his blanket and cloak falling away. “What’s happening? Is it my turn to watch already?” He looked toward Rand and Selene, and even in the moonlight the widening of his eyes was plain.

Rand heard Selene sigh behind him. He stepped away from her, still not looking at her. *Her legs are so white, so smooth.* “What is it, Hurin?” He made his voice more moderate; was he angry with Hurin, himself, or Selene? *No reason to be angry with her.* “Did you see something, Hurin?”

The sniffer spoke without raising his eyes. “A fire, my Lord, down in the hills. I didn’t see it at first. They made it small, and hid it, but they hid it from somebody following them, not somebody ahead, and up above. Two miles, Lord Rand. Less than three, for sure.”

“Fain,” Rand said. “Ingtar would not be afraid of anyone following him. It must be Fain.” Suddenly he did not know what to do, now. They had been waiting for Fain, but now that the man was only a mile or so away, he was uncertain. “In the morning. . . . In the morning, we will follow. When Ingtar and the others catch up, we’ll be able to point right to them.”

“So,” Selene said. “You will let this Ingtar take the Horn of Valere. And the glory.”

“I don’t want. . . .” Without thinking, he turned, and there she was, legs pale in the moonlight, and as unconcerned that they were bare as if she were alone. *As if* we *were alone*, the thought came. *She wants the man who finds the Horn.* “Three of us cannot take it away from them. Ingtar has twenty lances with him.”

“You don’t know you cannot take it. How many followers does this man have? You don’t know that, either.” Her voice was calm, but intent. “You don’t even know if these men camped down there do have the Horn. The only way is to go down yourself and see. Take the *alantin;* his kind have sharp eyes, even by moonlight. And he has the strength to carry the Horn in its chest, if you make the right decision.”

She’s right. You do not know for sure if it’s Fain. A fine thing it would be to have Hurin casting about for a trail that was not there, all of them out in the open if the real Darkfriends did finally come. “I will go alone,” he said. “Hurin and Loial will stand guard for you.”

Laughing, Selene came to him so gracefully it almost seemed she danced. Moonshadows veiled her face in mystery as she looked up at him, and mystery made her even more beautiful. “I am capable of guarding myself, until you return to protect me. Take the *alantin.*”

“She is right, Rand,” Loial said, rising. “I can see better by moonlight than you. With my eyes, we may not need to go as close as you would alone.”

“Very well.” Rand strode over to his sword and buckled it at his waist. Bow and quiver he left where they lay; a bow was not of much use in the dark, and he intended to look, not fight. “Hurin, show me this fire.”

The sniffer led him scrambling up the slope to the outcrop, like a huge stone thumb thrust out of the mountain. The fire was only a speck—he missed it the first time Hurin pointed. Whoever had made it did not mean for it to be seen. He fixed it in his head.

By the time they returned to the camp, Loial had saddled Red and his own horse. As Rand climbed to the bay’s back, Selene caught his hand.

"Remember the glory," she said softly. "Remember." The shirt seemed to fit her better than he recalled, molding itself to her form.

He drew a deep breath and took his hand back. "Guard her with your life, Hurin. Loial?" He heeled Red's flanks gently. The Ogier's big mount plodded along behind.

They did not try to move quickly. Night shrouded the mountainside, and moon-cast shadows made footing uncertain. Rand could not see the fire any longer—no doubt it was better hidden from eyes on the same level—but he had its location in his mind. For someone who had learned to hunt in the tangle of the Westwood, in the Two Rivers, finding the fire would be no great difficulty. *And what then?* Selene's face loomed before him. *How proud I'll be to stand beside him who holds the Horn.*

"Loial," he said suddenly, trying to clear his thoughts, "what's this *alantin* she calls you?"

"It's the Old Tongue, Rand." The Ogier's horse picked its way uncertainly, but he guided it almost as surely as if it were daylight. "It means Brother, and is short for *tia avende alantin.* Brother to the Trees. Treebrother. It is very formal, but then, I've heard the Cairhienin are formal. The noble Houses are, at least. The common people I saw there were not very formal at all."

Rand frowned. A shepherd would not be very acceptable to a formal Cairhienin noble House. *Light, Mat's right about you. You're crazy, and with a big head to boot. But if I* could *marry. . . .*

He wished he could stop thinking, and before he realized it, the void had formed within him, making thoughts distant things, as if part of someone else. *Saidin* shone at him, beckoned to him. He gritted his teeth and ignored it; it was like ignoring a burning coal inside his head, but at least he could hold it at bay. Barely. He almost left the void, but the Darkfriends were out there in the night, and closer, now. And the Trollocs. He needed the emptiness, needed even the uneasy calm of the void. *I don't have to touch it. I don't.*

After a time, he reined in Red. They stood at the base of a hill, the wide-scattered trees on its slopes black in the night. "I think we must be close by now," he said softly. "Best we go the rest of the way on foot." He slid from the saddle and tied the bay's reins to a branch.

"Are you all right?" Loial whispered, climbing down. "You sound odd."

“I’m fine.” His voice sounded tight, he realized. Stretched. *Saidin* called to him. *No!* “Be careful. I can’t be sure exactly how far it is, but that fire should be somewhere just ahead of us. On the hilltop, I think.” The Ogier nodded.

Slowly Rand stole from tree to tree, placing each foot carefully, holding his sword tight so it did not clatter against a tree trunk. He was grateful for the lack of undergrowth. Loial followed like a big shadow; Rand could not see much more of him than that. Everything was moonshadows and darkness.

Suddenly some trick of the moonlight resolved the shadows ahead of him, and he froze, touching the rough bole of a leatherleaf. Dim mounds on the ground became men wrapped in blankets, and apart from them a group of larger mounds. Sleeping Trollocs. They had doused the fire. One moonbeam, moving through the branches, caught a shine of gold and silver on the ground, halfway between the two groups. The moonlight seemed to brighten; for an instant he could see clearly. The shape of a sleeping man lay close by to the gleam, but that was not what held his eye. *The chest. The Horn.* And something atop it, a point of red flashing in the moonbeam. *The dagger! Why would Fain put . . . ?*

Loial’s huge hand settled over Rand’s mouth, and a good part of his face besides. He twisted to look at the Ogier. Loial pointed off to his right, slowly, as if motion might attract attention.

At first Rand could not see anything, then a shadow moved, not ten paces away. A tall, bulky shadow, and snouted. Rand’s breath caught. A Trolloc. It lifted its snout as if sniffing. Some of them hunted by scent.

For an instant the void wavered. Someone stirred in the Darkfriend camp, and the Trolloc turned to peer that way.

Rand froze, letting the calm of emptiness envelope him. His hand was on his sword, but he did not think of it. The void was all. Whatever happened, happened. He watched the Trolloc without blinking.

A moment longer the snouted shadow watched the Darkfriend camp, then, as if satisfied, folded itself down beside a tree. Almost immediately a low sound, like coarse cloth ripping, drifted from it.

Loial put his mouth close to Rand’s ear. “It’s asleep,” he whispered incredulously.

Rand nodded. Tam had told him Trollocs were lazy, apt to give up any task but killing unless fear kept them to it. He turned back to the camp.

All was still and quiet there again. The moonbeam no longer shone on the chest, but he knew now which shadow it was. He could see it in his mind, floating beyond the void, glittering golden, chased with silver, in the glow of *saidin*. The Horn of Valere and the dagger Mat needed, both almost within reach of his hand. Selene's face drifted with the chest. They could follow Fain's party in the morning, and wait until Ingtar joined them. If Ingtar did come, if he still followed the trail without his sniffer. No, there would never be a better chance. All within reach of his hand. Selene was waiting on the mountain.

Motioning for Loial to follow, Rand dropped to his belly and crawled toward the chest. He heard the Ogier's muffled gasp, but his eyes were fixed on that one shadowed mound ahead.

Darkfriends and Trollocs lay to left and right of him, but once he had seen Tam stalk close enough to a deer to put his hand on its flank before the animal bounded off; he had tried to learn from Tam. *Madness!* The thought flew by dimly, almost out of reach. *This is madness! You—are—going—mad!* Dim thoughts; someone else's thoughts.

Slowly, silently, he slithered to that one special shadow, and put out a hand. Ornate traceries worked in gold met his touch. It *was* the chest that held the Horn of Valere. His hand touched something else, on the lid. The dagger, bare-bladed. In the dark, his eyes widened. Remembering what it had done to Mat, he jerked back, the void shifting with his agitation.

The man sleeping nearby—no more than two paces from the chest; no one else lay so close by spans—groaned in his sleep and thrashed at his blankets. Rand allowed the void to sweep thought and fear away. Murmuring uneasily in his sleep, the man stilled.

Rand let his hand go back to the dagger, not quite touching it. It had not harmed Mat in the beginning. Not much, at least; not quickly. In one swift motion he lifted the dagger, stuck it behind his belt, and pulled his hand away, as if it might help to minimize the time it touched his bare skin. Perhaps it would, and Mat would die without the dagger. He could feel it there, almost a weight pulling him down, pressing against him. But in the void sensation was as distant as thought, and the feel of the dagger faded quickly to something he was used to.

He wasted only a moment more staring at the shadow-wrapped chest—the Horn had to be inside, but he did not know how to open it and he could not lift it by himself—then he looked around for Loial. He found the

Ogier crouched not far behind him, massive head swiveling as he peered back and forth from sleeping human Darkfriends to sleeping Trollocs. Even in the night it was plain Loial's eyes were as wide as they could go; they looked as big as saucers in the light of the moon. Rand reached out and took Loial's hand.

The Ogier gave a start and gasped. Rand put a finger across his lips, set Loial's hand on the chest, and mimed lifting. For a time—it seemed forever, in the night, with Darkfriends and Trollocs all around; it could not have been more than heartbeats—Loial stared. Then, slowly, he put his arms around the golden chest and stood. He made it seem effortless.

Ever so carefully, even more carefully than he had come in, Rand began to walk out of the camp, behind Loial and the chest. Both hands on his sword, he watched the sleeping Darkfriends, the still shapes of the Trollocs. All those shadowed figures began to be swallowed deeper in the darkness as they drew away. *Almost free. We've done it!*

The man who had been sleeping near the chest suddenly sat up with a strangled yell, then leaped to his feet. "It's gone! Wake, you filth! It's gooonnne!" Fain's voice; even in the void Rand recognized it. The others scrambled erect, Darkfriends and Trollocs, calling to know what was happening, growling and snarling. Fain's voice rose to a howl. "I know it is you, al'Thor! You're hiding from me, but I know you are out there! Find him! Find him! Al'Thoooor!" Men and Trollocs scattered in every direction.

Wrapped in emptiness, Rand kept moving. Almost forgotten in entering the camp, *saidin* pulsed at him.

"He cannot see us," Loial whispered low. "Once we reach the horses—"

A Trolloc leaped out of the dark at them, cruel eagle's beak in a man's face where mouth and nose should have been, scythe-like sword already whistling through the air.

Rand moved without thought. He was one with the blade. Cat Dances on the Wall. The Trolloc screamed as it fell, screamed again as it died.

"Run, Loial!" Rand commanded. *Saidin* called to him. "Run!"

He was dimly aware of Loial lumbering to an awkward gallop, but another Trolloc loomed from the night, boar-snouted and tusked, spiked axe raised. Smoothly Rand glided between Trolloc and Ogier; Loial must get the Horn away. Head and shoulders taller than Rand, half again as wide, the Trolloc came at him with a silent snarl. The Courtier Taps His Fan. No scream, this time. He walked backwards after Loial, watching the night. *Saidin* sang to him, such a sweet song. *The Power could burn them all, burn Fain and all the rest to cinders. No!*

Two more Trollocs, wolf and ram, gleaming teeth and curling horns. Lizard in the Thornbush. He rose smoothly from one knee as the second toppled, horns almost brushing his shoulder. The song of *saidin* caressed him with seduction, pulled him with a thousand silken strings. *Burn them all with the Power. No. No! Better dead than that. If I were dead, it would be done with.*

A knot of Trollocs came into sight, hunting uncertainly. Three of them, four. Suddenly one pointed to Rand and raised a howl the rest answered as they charged.

"Let it be done with!" Rand shouted, and leaped to meet them.

For an instant surprise slowed them, then they came on with guttural cries gleeful, bloodthirsty, swords and axes raised. He danced among them to the song of *saidin*. Hummingbird Kisses the Honeyrose. So cunning that song, filling him. Cat on Hot Sand. The sword seemed alive in his hands as it had never been before, and he fought as if a heron-mark blade could keep *saidin* from him. The Heron Spreads Its Wings.

Rand stared at the motionless shapes on the ground around him. "Better to be dead," he murmured. He raised his eyes, back up the hill toward where the camp lay. Fain was there, and Darkfriends, and more Trollocs. Too many to fight. Too many to face and live. He took a step that way. Another.

"Rand, come on!" Loial's urgent, whispered call drifted through the emptiness to him. "For life and the Light, Rand, come on!"

Carefully, Rand bent to wipe his blade on a Trolloc's coat. Then, as formally as if Lan were watching him train, he sheathed it.

"Rand!"

As though he knew of no urgency, Rand joined Loial by the horses. The Ogier was tying the golden chest atop his saddle with straps from his saddlebags. His cloak was stuffed underneath to help balance the chest on the rounded saddle seat.

Saidin sang no more. It was there, that stomach-turning glow, but it held back as if he truly had fought it off. Wonderingly, he let the void vanish. "I think I am going mad," he said. Suddenly realizing where they were, he peered back the way they had come. Shouts and howls came from half a dozen different directions; signs of search, but none of pursuit. Yet. He swung up onto Red’s back.

“Sometimes I do not understand half of what you say,” Loial said. “If you must go mad, could it at least wait until we are back with the Lady Selene and Hurin?”

“How are you going to ride with that in your saddle?”

“I will run!” The Ogier suited his words by breaking into a quick trot, pulling his horse behind him by the reins. Rand followed.

The pace Loial set was as fast as a horse could trot. Rand was sure the Ogier could not keep it for long, but Loial’s feet did not flag. Rand decided that his boast of once outrunning a horse might really be true. Now and again Loial looked behind them as he ran, but the shouts of Darkfriends and howls of Trollocs faded with distance.

Even when the ground began to slope upwards more sharply, Loial’s pace barely slowed, and he trotted into their campsite on the mountainside with only a little hard breathing.

“You have it.” Selene’s voice was exultant as her gaze rested on the ornately worked chest on Loial’s saddle. She was wearing her own dress again; it looked as white as new snow to Rand. “I knew you would make the right choice. May I . . . have a look at it?”

“Did any of them follow, my Lord?” Hurin asked anxiously. He stared at the chest with awe, but his eyes slid off into the night, down the mountain. “If they followed, we’ll have to move quick.”

“I do not think they did. Go to the outcrop and see if you can see anything.” Rand climbed down from his saddle as Hurin hurried up the mountain. “Selene, I don’t know how to open the chest. Loial, do you?” The Ogier shook his head.

“Let me try. . . .” Even for a woman of Selene’s height, Loial’s saddle was high above the ground. She reached up to touch the finely wrought patterns on the chest, ran her hands across them, pressed. There was a click, and she pushed the lid up, let it fall open.

As she stretched on tiptoe to put a hand inside, Rand reached over her shoulder and lifted out the Horn of Valere. He had seen it once before, but never touched it. Though beautifully made, it did not look a thing of great age, or power. A curled golden horn, gleaming in the faint light, with inlaid silver script flowing around the mouth of the bell. He touched the strange letters with a finger. They seemed to catch the moon.

"Tia mi aven Moridin isainde vadin," Selene said. " 'The grave is no bar to my call.' You *will* be greater than Artur Hawkwing ever was."

"I am taking it to Shienar, to Lord Agelmar." *It should go to Tar Valon,* he thought, *but I'm done with Aes Sedai. Let Agelmar or Ingtar take it to them.* He set the Horn back in the chest; it cast back the moonlight, pulled the eye.

"That is madness," Selene said.

Rand flinched at the word. "Mad or not, it is what I'm doing. I told you, Selene, I want no part of greatness. Back there, I thought I did. For a while, I thought I wanted things. . . ." *Light, she's so beautiful. Egwene. Selene. I'm not worthy of either of them.* "Something seemed to take hold of me." Saidin *came for me, but I fought it off with a sword. Or is that mad, too?* He breathed deeply. "Shienar is where the Horn of Valere belongs. Or if not there, Lord Agelmar will know what to do with it."

Hurin appeared from up the mountain. "The fire's there again, Lord Rand, and bigger than ever. And I thought I heard shouting. It was all down in the hills. I don't think they've come upon the mountain, yet."

"You misunderstand me, Rand," Selene said. "You cannot go back, now. You are committed. Those Friends of the Dark will not simply go away because you've taken the Horn from them. Far from it. Unless you know some way to kill them all, they will be hunting you now as you hunted them before."

"No!" Loial and Hurin looked surprised at Rand's vehemence. He softened his tone. "I don't know any way to kill them all. They can live forever for all of me."

Selene's long hair shifted in waves as she shook her head. "Then you cannot go back, only onward. You can reach the safety of Cairhien's walls long before you could return to Shienar. Does the thought of a few more days in my company seem so onerous?"

Rand stared at the chest. Selene's company was far from burdensome, but near her he could not help thinking things he should not. Still, trying to ride back north meant risking Fain and his followers. She was right in that. Fain would never give up. Ingtar would not give up, either. If Ingtar came on southward, and Rand knew of no reason for him to turn aside, he would arrive at Cairhien, soon or late.

"Cairhien," he agreed. "You will have to show me where you live, Selene. I've never been to Cairhien." He reached to close the chest.

“You took something else from the Friends of the Dark?” Selene said. “You spoke earlier of a dagger.”

How could I forget? He left the chest as it was and pulled the dagger from his belt. The bare blade curved like a horn, and the quillons were golden serpents. Set in the hilt, a ruby as big as his thumbnail winked like an evil eye in the moonlight. Ornate as it was, tainted as he knew it was, it felt no different from any other knife.

“Be careful,” Selene said. “Do not cut yourself.”

Rand felt a shiver inside. If simply carrying it was dangerous, he did not want to know what a cut from it would do. “This is from Shadar Logoth,” he told the others. “It will twist whoever carries it for long, taint them to the bone the way Shadar Logoth is tainted. Without Aes Sedai Healing, that taint will kill, eventually.”

“So that is what ails Mat,” Loial said softly. “I never suspected.” Hurin stared at the dagger in Rand’s hand and wiped his own hands on the front of his coat. The sniffer did not look happy.

“None of us must handle it any more than is necessary,” Rand went on. “I will find some way to carry it—”

“It is dangerous.” Selene frowned at the blade as if the snakes were real, and poisonous. “Throw it away. Leave it, or bury it if you wish to keep it from other hands, but be rid of it.”

“Mat needs it,” Rand said firmly.

“It is too dangerous. You said so yourself.”

“He needs it. The Am . . . the Aes Sedai said he would die without it to use in Healing him.” *They still have a string on him, but this blade will cut it. Until I’m rid of it, and the Horn, they have a string on me, but I’ll not dance however much they pull.*

He set the dagger in the chest, inside the curl of the Horn—there was just room for it—and pulled the lid down. It locked with a sharp snap. “That should shield us from it.” He hoped it would. Lan said the time to sound most sure was when you were least certain.

“The chest will surely shield us,” Selene said in a tight voice. “And now I mean to finish what is left of my night’s sleep.”

Rand shook his head. “We are too close. Fain seems able to find me, sometimes.”

“Seek the Oneness if you are afraid,” Selene said.

“I want to be as far from those Darkfriends come morning as we can be. I will saddle your mare.”

“Stubborn!” She sounded angry, and when he looked at her, her mouth curved in a smile that never came close to her dark eyes. “A stubborn man is best, once. . . .” Her voice trailed off, and that worried him. Women often seemed to leave things unsaid, and in his limited experience it was what they did not say that proved the most trouble. She watched in silence as he slung her saddle onto the white mare’s back and bent to fashion the girths.

“Gather them all in!” Fain snarled. The goat-snouted Trolloc backed away from him. The fire, piled high with wood now, lit the hilltop with flickering shadows. His human followers huddled near the blaze, fearful to be out in the dark with the rest of the Trollocs. “Gather them, every one that still lives, and if any think to run, let them know they’ll get what that one got.” He gestured to the first Trolloc that had brought him word al’Thor was not to be found. It still snapped at ground muddied with its own blood, hooves scraping trenches as they jerked. “Go,” Fain whispered, and the goat-snouted Trolloc ran into the night.

Fain glanced contemptuously at the other humans—*They’ll have their uses still*—then turned to stare into the night, toward Kinslayer’s Dagger. Al’Thor was up there, somewhere, in the mountains. With the Horn. His teeth grated audibly at the thought. He did not know where, exactly, but something pulled him toward the mountains. Toward al’Thor. That much of the Dark One’s . . . gift . . . remained to him. He had hardly thought of it, had tried not to think of it, until suddenly, after the Horn was gone—*Gone!*—al’Thor was there, drawing him as meat draws a starving dog.

“I am a dog no longer. A dog no longer!” He heard the others shifting uneasily around the fire, but he ignored them. “You will pay for what was done to me, al’Thor! The world will pay!” He cackled at the night with mad laughter. “The world will pay!”

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CHAPTER

20

Saidin

Rand kept them moving through the night, allowing only a brief stop at dawn, to rest the horses. And to allow Loial rest. With the Horn of Valere in its gold-and-silver chest occupying his saddle, the Ogier walked or trotted ahead of his big horse, never complaining, never slowing them. Sometime during the night they had crossed the border of Cairhien.

“I want to see it again,” Selene said as they halted. She dismounted and strode to Loial’s horse. Their shadows, long and thin, pointed west from the sun just peeking over the horizon. “Bring it down for me, *alantin.*” Loial began to undo the straps. “The Horn of Valere.”

“No,” Rand said, climbing down from Red’s back. “Loial, no.” The Ogier looked from Rand to Selene, his ears twitching doubtfully, but he took his hands away.

“I want to see the Horn,” Selene demanded. Rand was sure she was no older than he, but at that moment she suddenly seemed as old and as cold as the mountains, and more regal than Queen Morgase at her haughtiest.

“I think we should keep the dagger shielded,” Rand said. “For all I know, looking at it may be as bad as touching it. Let it stay where it is until I can put it in Mat’s hands. He—he can take it to the Aes Sedai.” *And what price will they demand for that Healing? But he hasn’t any choice.* He felt a little guilty over feeling relief that he, at least, was through with Aes Sedai. *I* am *done with them. One way or another.*

“The dagger! All you seem to care about is that dagger. I told you to be rid of it. The Horn of Valere, Rand.”

“No.”

She came to him, a sway in her walk that made him feel as if he had something caught in his throat. “All I want is to see it in the light of day. I won’t even touch it. You hold it. It would be something for me to remember, you holding the Horn of Valere in your hands." She took his hands as she said it; her touch made his skin tingle and his mouth go dry.

Something to remember—when she had gone. . . . He could close the dagger up again as soon as the Horn was out of the chest. It would be something to hold the Horn in his hands where he could see it in the light.

He wished he knew more of the Prophecies of the Dragon. The one time he heard a merchant's guard telling a part of it, back in Emond's Field, Nynaeve had broken a broom across the man's shoulders. None of the little he had heard mentioned the Horn of Valere.

Aes Sedai trying to make me do what they want. Selene was still gazing intently into his eyes, her face so young and beautiful that he wanted to kiss her despite what he was thinking. He had never seen an Aes Sedai act the way she did, and she looked young, not ageless. *A girl my age couldn't be Aes Sedai. But. . . .*

"Selene," he said softly, "*are* you an Aes Sedai?"

"Aes Sedai," she almost spat, flinging his hands away. "Aes Sedai! Always you hurl that at me!" She took a deep breath and smoothed her dress, as if gathering herself. "I am what and who I am. And I am no Aes Sedai!" And she wrapped herself in a silent coldness that made even the morning sun seem chill.

Loial and Hurin bore it all with as good a grace as they could manage, trying to make conversation and hiding their embarrassment when she froze them with a look. They rode on.

By the time they made camp that night beside a mountain stream that provided fish for their supper, Selene seemed to have regained some of her temper, chatting with the Ogier about books, speaking kindly to Hurin.

She barely spoke to Rand, though, unless he spoke first, either that evening or the following day as they rode through mountains that reared on either side of them like huge, jagged gray walls, ever climbing. But whenever he looked at her, she was watching him and smiling. Sometimes it was the sort of smile that made him smile back, sometimes the sort that made him clear his throat and blush at his own thoughts, and sometimes the mysterious, knowing smile that Egwene sometimes wore. It was a kind of smile that always put his back up—but at least it was a smile.

She can't *be Aes Sedai.*

The way began to slope downwards, and with the promise of twilight in the air, Kinslayer's Dagger at last gave way to hills, rolling and round, with more brush than trees, more thickets than forest. There was no road, just a dirt track, such as might be used by a few carts now and again. Fields carved some of the hills into terraces, fields full of crops but empty of people at this hour. None of the scattered farm buildings lay close enough to the path they rode for Rand to make out more than that they were all made of stone.

When he saw the village ahead, lights already twinkled in a few windows against the coming of night.

“We’ll sleep in beds tonight,” he said.

“That I will enjoy, Lord Rand.” Hurin laughed. Loial nodded agreement.

“A village inn,” Selene sniffed. “Dirty, no doubt, and full of unwashed men swilling ale. Why can’t we sleep under the stars again? I find I enjoy sleeping under the stars.”

“You would not enjoy it if Fain caught up with us while we slept,” Rand said, “him and those Trollocs. He’s coming after me, Selene. After the Horn, too, but it is me he can find. Why do you think I’ve kept such a close watch these past nights?”

“If Fain catches us, you will deal with him.” Her voice was coolly confident. “And there could be Darkfriends in the village, too.”

“But even if they knew who we are, they can’t do much with the rest of the villagers around. Not unless you think everyone in the village is a Darkfriend.”

“And if they discover you carry the Horn? Whether you want greatness or not, even farmers dream of it.”

“She is right, Rand,” Loial said. “I fear even farmers might want to take it.”

“Unroll your blanket, Loial, and throw it over the chest. Keep it covered.” Loial complied, and Rand nodded. It was obvious there was a box or chest beneath the Ogier’s striped blanket, but nothing suggested it was more than a travel chest. “My Lady’s chest of clothes,” Rand said with a grin and a bow.

Selene met his sally with silence and an unreadable look. After a moment, they started on again.

Almost immediately, off to Rand’s left, a glitter from the setting sun reflected from something on the ground. Something large. Something very large, by the light it threw up. Curious, he turned his horse that way.

“My Lord?” Hurin said. “The village?”

“I just want to see this first,” Rand said. *It’s brighter than sunlight on water. What can it be?*

His eyes on the reflection, he was surprised when Red suddenly stopped. On the point of urging the bay on, he realized that they stood on the edge of a clay precipice, above a huge excavation. Most of the hill had been dug away to a depth of easily a hundred paces. Certainly more than one hill had vanished, and maybe some farmers’ fields, for the hole was at least ten times as wide as it was deep. The far side appeared to have been packed hard to a ramp. There were men on the bottom, a dozen of them, getting a fire started; down there, night was already descending. Here and there among them armor turned the light, and swords swung at their sides. He hardly glanced at them.

Out of the clay at the bottom of the pit slanted a gigantic stone hand holding a crystal sphere, and it was this that shone with the last sunlight. Rand gaped at the size of it, a smooth ball—he was sure not so much as a scratch marred its surface—at least twenty paces through.

Some distance away from the hand, a stone face in proportion had been uncovered. A bearded man’s face, it thrust out of the soil with the dignity of vast years; the broad features seemed to hold wisdom and knowledge.

Unsummoned, the void formed, whole and complete in an instant, *saidin* glowing, beckoning. So intent was he on the face and the hand that he did not even realize what had happened. He had once heard a ship captain speak of a giant hand holding a huge crystal sphere; Bayle Domon had claimed it stuck out of a hill on the island of Tremalking.

“This is dangerous,” Selene said. “Come away, Rand.”

“I believe I can find a way down there,” he said absently. *Saidin* sang to him. The huge ball seemed to glow white with the light of the sinking sun. It seemed to him that in the depths of the crystal, light swirled and danced in time to the song of *saidin.* He wondered why the men below did not appear to notice.

Selene rode close and took hold of his arm. “Please, Rand, you must come away.” He looked at her hand, puzzled, then followed her arm up to her face. She seemed genuinely worried, perhaps even afraid. “If this bank doesn’t give way beneath our horses and break our necks with the fall, those men are guards, and no one puts guards on something they wish every passerby to examine. What good will it do you to avoid Fain, if some lord's guards arrest you? Come away."

Suddenly—a drifting, distant thought—he realized that the void surrounded him. *Saidin* sang, and the sphere pulsed—even without looking, he could *feel* it—and the thought came that if he sang the song *saidin* sang, that huge stone face would open its mouth and sing with him. With him and with *saidin*. All one.

"Please, Rand," Selene said. "I will go to the village with you. I won't mention the Horn again. Only come away!"

He released the void . . . and it did not go. *Saidin* crooned, and the light in the sphere beat like a heart. Like his heart. Loial, Hurin, Selene, they all stared at him, but they seemed oblivious to the glorious blaze from the crystal. He tried to push the void away. It held like granite; he floated in an emptiness as hard as stone. The song of *saidin,* the song of the sphere, he could feel them quivering along his bones. Grimly, he refused to give in, reached deep inside himself . . . *I will not.* . . .

"Rand." He did not know whose voice it was.

. . . reached for the core of who he was, the core of what he was . . .

. . . *will not* . . .

"Rand." The song filled him, filled the emptiness.

. . . touched stone, hot from a pitiless sun, cold from a merciless night. . . .

. . . *not* . . .

Light filled him, blinded him.

"Till shade is gone," he mumbled, "till water is gone . . ."

Power filled him. He was one with the sphere.

". . . into the Shadow with teeth bared . . ."

The power was his. The Power was his.

". . . to spit in Sightblinder's eye . . ."

Power to Break the World.

". . . on the last day!" It came out as a shout, and the void was gone. Red shied at his cry; clay crumbled under the stallion's hoof, spilling into the pit. The big bay went to his knees. Rand leaned forward, gathering the reins, and Red scrambled to safety, away from the edge.

They were all staring at him, he saw. Selene, Loial, Hurin, all of them. "What happened?" *The void*. . . . He touched his forehead. The void had not gone when he released it, and the glow of *saidin* had grown stronger, and. . . . He could not remember anything more. *Saidin.* He felt cold. “Did I . . . do something?” He frowned, trying to remember. “Did I say something?”

“You just sat there stiff as a statue,” Loial said, “mumbling to yourself no matter what anyone said. I couldn’t make out what you were saying, not until you shouted ‘day!’ loud enough to wake the dead and nearly put your horse over the edge. Are you ill? You’re acting more and more oddly every day.”

“I’m not sick,” Rand said harshly, then softened it. “I am all right, Loial.” Selene watched him warily.

From the pit came the sound of men calling, the words indistinguishable.

“Lord Rand,” Hurin said, “I think those guards have finally noticed us. If they know a way up this side, they could be here any minute.”

“Yes,” Selene said. “Let us leave here quickly.”

Rand glanced at the excavation, then away again, quickly. The great crystal held nothing except reflected light from the evening sun, but he did not want to look at it. He could almost remember . . . *something* about the sphere. “I don’t see any reason to wait for them. We didn’t do anything. Let’s find an inn.” He turned Red toward the village, and they soon left pit and shouting guards behind.

As many villages did, Tremonsien covered the top of a hill, but like the farms they had passed, this hill had been sculpted into terraces with stone retaining walls. Square stone houses sat on precise plots of land, with exact gardens behind, along a few straight streets that crossed each other at right angles. The necessity of a curve to streets going around the hill seemed begrudged.

Yet the people seemed open and friendly enough, pausing to nod to each other as they hurried about their last chores before nightfall. They were a short folk—none taller than Rand’s shoulder, and few as tall as Hurin—with dark eyes and pale, narrow faces, and dressed in dark clothes except for a few who wore slashes of color across the chest. Smells of cooking—oddly spiced, to Rand’s nose—filled the air, though a handful of goodwives still hung over their doors to talk; the doors were split, so the top could stand open while the bottom was closed. The people eyed the newcomers curiously, with no sign of hostility. A few stared a moment longer at Loial, an Ogier walking alongside a horse as big as a Dhurran stallion, but never more than a moment longer.

The inn, at the very top of the hill, was stone like every other building in the town, and plainly marked by a painted sign hanging over the wide doors. The Nine Rings. Rand swung down with a smile and tied Red to one of the hitching posts out front. “The Nine Rings” had been one of his favorite adventure stories when he was a boy; he supposed it still was.

Selene still seemed uneasy when he helped her dismount. “Are you all right?” he asked. “I didn’t frighten you back there, did I? Red would never fall over a cliff with me.” He wondered what had really happened.

“You terrified me,” she said in a tight voice, “and I do not frighten easily. You could have killed yourself, killed. . . .” She smoothed her dress. “Ride with me. Tonight. Now. Bring the Horn, and I will stay by your side forever. Think of it. Me by your side, and the Horn of Valere in your hands. And that will only be the beginning, I promise. What more could you ask for?”

Rand shook his head. “I can’t, Selene. The Horn. . . .” He looked around. A man looked out his window across the way, then twitched the curtains closed; evening darkened the street, and there was no one else in sight now except Loial and Hurin. “The Horn is not mine. I told you that.” She turned her back on him, her white cloak walling him off as effectively as bricks.

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CHAPTER

21

The Nine Rings

Rand expected the common room to be empty, since it was nearly suppertime, but half a dozen men crowded one table, dicing among their jacks of ale, and another sat by himself over a meal. Though the dicers carried no weapons in sight and wore no armor, only plain coats and breeches of dark blue, something about the way they held themselves told Rand they were soldiers. His eyes went to the solitary man. An officer, with the tops of his high boots turned down, and his sword propped against the table beside his chair. A single slash of red and one of yellow crossed the chest of the officer's blue coat from shoulder to shoulder, and the front of his head was shaved, though his black hair hung long in the back. The soldiers' hair was clipped short, as if it all had been cut under the same bowl. All seven turned to look as Rand and the others came in.

The innkeeper was a lean woman with a long nose and graying hair, but her wrinkles seemed part of her ready smile more than anything else. She came bustling up, wiping her hands on a spotless white apron. "Good even to you"—her quick eyes took in Rand's gold-embroidered red coat, and Selene's fine white dress—"my Lord, my Lady. I am Maglin Madwen, my Lord. Be welcome to The Nine Rings. And an Ogier. Not many of your kind come this way, friend Ogier. Would you be up from Stedding Tsofu, then?"

Loial managed an awkward half bow under the weight of the chest. "No, good innkeeper. I come the other way, from the Borderlands."

"From the Borderlands, you say. Well. And you, my Lord? Forgive me for asking, but you've not the look of the Borderlands, if you don't mind my saying it."

"I'm from the Two Rivers, Mistress Madwen, in Andor." He glanced at Selene—she did not seem to admit he existed; her level look barely admitted that the room existed, or anyone in it. “The Lady Selene is from Cairhien, from the capital, and I am from Andor.”

“As you say, my Lord.” Mistress Madwen’s glance flickered to Rand’s sword; the bronze herons were plain on scabbard and hilt. She frowned slightly, but her face was clear again in a blink. “You’ll be wanting a meal for yourself and your beautiful Lady, and your followers. And rooms, I expect. I’ll have your horses seen to. I’ve a good table for you, right this way, and pork with yellow peppers on the fire. Would you be hunting the Horn of Valere, then, my Lord, you and your Lady?”

In the act of following her, Rand almost stumbled. “No! Why would you think we were?”

“No offense, my Lord. We’ve had two through here already, all polished to look like heroes—not to suggest anything of the kind about you, my Lord—in the last month. Not many strangers come here, except traders up from the capital to buy oats and barley. I’d not suppose the Hunt has left Illian, yet, but maybe some don’t think they really need the blessing, and they’ll get a jump on the others by missing it.”

“We are not hunting the Horn, mistress.” Rand did not glance at the bundle in Loial’s arms; the blanket with its colorful stripes hung bunched over the Ogier’s thick arms and disguised the chest well. “We surely are not. We are on our way to the capital.”

“As you say, my Lord. Forgive me for asking, but is your Lady well?”

Selene looked at her, and spoke for the first time. “I am quite well.” Her voice left a chill in the air that stifled talk for a moment.

“You’re not Cairhienin, Mistress Madwen,” Hurin said suddenly. Burdened down with their saddlebags and Rand’s bundle, he looked like a walking baggage cart. “Pardon, but you don’t sound it.”

Mistress Madwen’s eyebrows rose, and she shot a glance at Rand, then grinned. “I should have known you’d let your man speak freely, but I’ve grown used to—” Her glance darted toward the officer, who had gone back to his own meal. “Light, no, I’m not Cairhienin, but for my sins, I married one. Twenty-three years I lived with him, and when he died on me—the Light shine on him—I was all ready to go back to Lugard, but he had the last laugh, he did. He left me the inn, and his brother the money, when I was sure it would be the other way round. Tricksome and scheming, Barin was, like every man I’ve ever known, Cairhienin most of all. Will you be seated, my Lord? My Lady?”

The innkeeper gave a surprised blink when Hurin sat at table with them—an Ogier, it seemed, was one thing, but Hurin was clearly a servant in her eyes. With another quick look at Rand, she bustled off to the kitchens, and soon serving girls came with their meal, giggling and staring at the lord and the lady, and the Ogier, till Mistress Madwen chased them back to their work.

At first, Rand stared at his food doubtfully. The pork was cut in small bits, mixed with long strips of yellow peppers, and peas, and a number of vegetables and things he did not recognize, all in some sort of clear, thick sauce. It smelled sweet and sharp, both at the same time. Selene only picked at hers, but Loial was eating with a will.

Hurin grinned at Rand over his fork. “They spice their food oddly, Cairhienin do, Lord Rand, but for all that, it’s not bad.”

“It won’t bite you, Rand,” Loial added.

Rand took a hesitant mouthful, and almost gasped. It tasted just as it smelled, sweet and sharp together, the pork crisp on the outside and tender inside, a dozen different flavors, spices, all blending and contrasting. It tasted like nothing he had ever put in his mouth before. It tasted wonderful. He cleaned his plate, and when Mistress Madwen returned with the serving girls to clear away, he nearly asked for more the way Loial did. Selene’s was still half full, but she motioned curtly for one of the girls to take it.

“A pleasure, friend Ogier.” The innkeeper smiled. “It takes a lot to fill up one of you. Catrine, bring another helping, and be quick.” One of the girls darted away. Mistress Madwen turned her smile on Rand. “My Lord, I had a man here who played the bittern, but he married a girl off one of the farms, and she has him strumming reins behind a plow, now. I couldn’t help noticing what looks like a flute case sticking out of your man’s bundle. Since my musician’s gone, would you let your man favor us with a little music?”

Hurin looked embarrassed.

“He doesn’t play,” Rand explained. “I do.”

The woman blinked. It appeared lords did not play the flute, at least not in Cairhien. “I withdraw the request, my Lord. Light’s own truth, I meant no offense, I assure you. I’d never ask one such as yourself to be playing in a common room.”

Rand hesitated only a moment. It had been too long since he had practiced the flute rather than the sword, and the coins in his pouch would not last forever. Once he was rid of his fancy clothes—once he turned the Horn over to Ingtar and the dagger over to Mat—he would need the flute to earn his supper again while he searched for somewhere safe from Aes Sedai. *And safe from myself? Something* did *happen back there. What?*

"I don't mind," he said. "Hurin, hand me the case. Just slide it out." There was no need to show a gleeman's cloak; enough unspoken questions shone in Mistress Madwen's dark eyes as it was.

Worked gold chased with silver, the instrument looked the sort a lord might play, if lords anywhere played the flute. The heron branded on his right palm did not interfere with his fingering. Selene's salves had worked so well he hardly thought of the brand unless he saw it. Yet it was in his thoughts now, and unconsciously he began to play "Heron on the Wing."

Hurin bobbed his head to the tune, and Loial beat time on the table with a thick finger. Selene looked at Rand as if wondering what he was—*I'm not a lord, my Lady. I'm a shepherd, and I play the flute in common rooms*—but the soldiers turned from their talk to listen, and the officer closed the wooden cover of the book he had begun reading. Selene's steady gaze struck a stubborn spark inside Rand. Determinedly he avoided any song that might fit in a palace, or a lord's manor. He played "Only One Bucket of Water" and "The Old Two Rivers Leaf," "Old Jak's Up a Tree" and "Goodman Priket's Pipe."

With the last, the six soldiers began to sing in raucous tones, though not the words Rand knew.

"We rode down to River Iralell
just to see the Tairen come.
We stood along the riverbank
with the rising of the sun.
Their horses blacked the summer plain,
their banners blacked the sky.
But we stood our ground on the banks of River Iralell.
Oh, we stood our ground.
Yes, we stood our ground.
Stood our ground along the river in the morning."

It was not the first time that Rand had discovered a tune had different words and different names in different lands, sometimes even in villages in the same land. He played along with them until they let the words die away, slapping each other's shoulders and making rude comments on one another's singing.

When Rand lowered the flute, the officer rose and made a sharp gesture. The soldiers fell silent in mid-laugh, scraped back their chairs to bow to the officer with hand on breast—and to Rand—and left without a backwards look.

The officer came to Rand's table and bowed, hand to heart; the shaven front of his head looked as if he had dusted it with white powder. "Grace favor you, my Lord. I trust they did not bother you, singing as they did. They are a common sort, but they meant no insult, I assure you. I am Aldrin Caldevwin, my Lord. Captain in His Majesty's Service, the Light illumine him." His eyes slid over Rand's sword; Rand had the feeling Caldevwin had noticed the herons as soon as he came in.

"They didn't insult me." The officer's accent reminded him of Moiraine's, precise and every word pronounced to its full. *Did she really let me go? I wonder if she's following me. Or waiting for me.* "Sit down, Captain. Please." Caldevwin drew a chair from another table. "Tell me, Captain, if you don't mind. Have you seen any other strangers recently? A lady, short and slender, and a fighting man with blue eyes. He's tall, and sometimes he wears his sword on his back."

"I have seen no strangers at all," he said, lowering himself stiffly to his seat. "Saving yourself and your Lady, my Lord. Few of the nobility ever come here." His eyes flicked toward Loial with a minute frown; Hurin he ignored for a servant.

"It was only a thought."

"Under the Light, my Lord, I mean no disrespect, but may I hear your name? We have so few strangers here that I find I wish to know every one."

Rand gave it—he claimed no title, but the officer seemed not to notice—and said as he had to the innkeeper, "From the Two Rivers, in Andor."

"A wondrous place I have heard, Lord Rand—I may call you so?—and fine men, the Andormen. No Cairhienin has ever worn a blademaster's sword so young as you. I met some Andormen, once, the Captain-General of the Queen's Guards among them. I do not remember his name; an embarrassment. Perhaps you could favor me with it?"

Rand was conscious of the serving girls in the background, beginning to clean and sweep. Caldevwin seemed only to be making conversation, but there was a probing quality to his look. “Gareth Bryne.”

“Of course. Young, to hold so much responsibility.”

Rand kept his voice level. “Gareth Bryne has enough gray in his hair to be your father, Captain.”

“Forgive me, my Lord Rand. I meant to say that he came to it young.” Caldevwin turned to Selene, and for a moment he only stared. He shook himself, finally, as if coming out of a trance. “Forgive me for looking at you so, my Lady, and forgive me for speaking so, but Grace has surely favored you. Will you give me a name to put to such beauty?”

Just as Selene opened her mouth, one of the serving girls let out a cry and dropped a lamp she was taking down from a shelf. Oil splattered, and caught in a pool of flame on the floor. Rand leaped to his feet along with the others at the table, but before any of them could move, Mistress Madwen appeared, and she and the girl smothered the flames with their aprons.

“I have told you to be careful, Catrine,” the innkeeper said, shaking her now-smutty apron under the girl’s nose. “You’ll be burning the inn down, and yourself in it.”

The girl seemed on the point of tears. “I *was* being careful, Mistress, but I had such a twinge in my arm.”

Mistress Madwen threw up her hands. “You always have some excuse, and you still break more dishes than all the rest. Ah, it’s all right. Clean it up, and don’t burn yourself.” The innkeeper turned to Rand and the others, all still standing around the table. “I hope none of you take this amiss. The girl really won’t burn down the inn. She’s hard on the dishes when she starts mooning over some young fellow, but she’s never mishandled a lamp before.”

“I would like to be shown to my room. I do not feel well after all.” Selene spoke in careful tones, as though uncertain of her stomach, but despite that she looked and sounded as cool and calm as ever. “The journey, and the fire.”

The innkeeper clucked like a mother hen. “Of course, my Lady. I have a fine room for you and your Lord. Shall I fetch Mother Caredwain? She has a fine hand with soothing herbs.”

Selene’s voice sharpened. “No. And I wish a room by myself.”

Mistress Madwen glanced at Rand, but the next moment she was bowing Selene solicitously toward the stairs. “As you wish, my Lady. Lidan, fetch the Lady’s things like a good girl, now.” One of the serving girls ran to take Selene’s saddlebags from Hurin, and the women disappeared upstairs, Selene stiff-backed and silent.

Caldevwin stared after them until they were gone, then shook himself again. He waited until Rand had seated himself before taking his chair again. “Forgive me, my Lord Rand, for staring so at your Lady, but Grace has surely favored you in her. I mean no insult.”

“None taken,” Rand said. He wondered if every man felt the way he did when they looked at Selene. “As I was riding to the village, Captain, I saw a huge sphere. Crystal, it seemed. What is it?”

The Cairhienin’s eyes sharpened. “It is part of the statue, my Lord Rand,” he said slowly. His gaze flickered toward Loial; for an instant he seemed to be considering something new.

“Statue? I saw a hand, and a face, too. It must be huge.”

“It is, my Lord Rand. And old.” Caldevwin paused. “From the Age of Legends, so I am told.”

Rand felt a chill. The Age of Legends, when use of the One Power was everywhere, if the stories could be believed. *What happened there? I know there was something.*

“The Age of Legends,” Loial said. “Yes, it must be. No one has done work so vast since. A great piece of work to dig that up, Captain.” Hurin sat silently, as if he not only was not listening, but was not there at all.

Caldevwin nodded reluctantly. “I have five hundred laborers in camp beyond the diggings, and even so it will be past summer’s end before we have it clear. They are men from the Foregate. Half my work is to keep them digging, and the other half to keep them out of this village. Foregaters have a fondness for drinking and carousing, you understand, and these people lead quiet lives.” His tone said his sympathies were all with the villagers.

Rand nodded. He had no interest in Foregaters, whoever they were. “What will you do with it?” The captain hesitated, but Rand only looked back at him until he spoke.

“Galldrian himself has ordered that it be taken to the capital.”

Loial blinked. “A very great piece of work, that. I am not sure how something that big could be moved so far.”

“His Majesty has ordered it,” Caldevwin said sharply. “It will be set up outside the city, a monument to the greatness of Cairhien and of House Riatin. Ogier are not the only ones who know how to move stone.” Loial looked abashed, and the captain visibly calmed himself. “Your pardon, friend Ogier. I spoke in haste, and rudely.” He still sounded a little gruff. “Will you be staying in Tremonsien long, my Lord Rand?”

“We leave in the morning,” Rand said. “We are going to Cairhien.”

“As it happens, I am sending some of my men back to the city tomorrow. I must rotate them; they grow stale after too long watching men swing picks and shovels. You will not mind if they ride in your company?” He put it as a question, but as if acceptance were a foregone conclusion. Mistress Madwen appeared on the stairs, and he rose. “If you will excuse me, my Lord Rand, I must be up early. Until the morning, then. Grace favor you.” He bowed to Rand, nodded to Loial, and left.

As the doors closed behind the Cairhienin, the innkeeper came to the table.

“I have your Lady settled, my Lord. And I’ve good rooms prepared for you and your man, and you, friend Ogier.” She paused, studying Rand. “Forgive me if I overstep myself, my Lord, but I think I can speak freely to a lord who lets his man speak up. If I’m wrong . . . well, I mean no insult. For twenty-three years Barin Madwen and I were arguing when we weren’t kissing, so to speak. That’s by way of saying I have some experience. Right now, you’re thinking your Lady never wants to see you again, but it’s my way of thinking that if you tap on her door tonight, she’ll be taking you in. Smile and say it was your fault, whether it was or not.”

Rand cleared his throat and hoped his face was not turning red. *Light, Egwene would kill me if she knew I’d even thought of it. And Selene would kill me if I did it. Or would she?* That did make his cheeks burn. “I . . . thank you for your suggestion, Mistress Madwen. The rooms. . . .” He avoided looking at the blanket-covered chest by Loial’s chair; they did not dare leave it without someone awake and guarding it. “We three will all sleep in the same room.”

The innkeeper looked startled, but she recovered quickly. “As you wish, my Lord. This way, if you please.”

Rand followed her up the stairs. Loial carried the chest under its blanket—the stairs groaned under the weight of him and the chest together, but the innkeeper seemed to think it was just an Ogier’s bulk—and Hurin still carried all the saddlebags and the bundled cloak with the harp and flute.

Mistress Madwen had a third bed brought in and hastily assembled and made up. One of the beds already there stretched nearly from wall to wall in length, and had obviously been meant for Loial from the start. There was barely room to walk between the beds. As soon as the innkeeper was gone, Rand turned to the others. Loial had pushed the still-covered chest under his bed and was trying the mattress. Hurin was setting out the saddlebags.

“Do either of you know why that captain was so suspicious of us? He was, I’m sure of it.” He shook his head. “I almost think he thought we might steal that statue, the way he was talking.”

“*Daes Dae’mar*, Lord Rand,” Hurin said. “The Great Game. The Game of Houses, some call it. This Caldevwin thinks you must be doing something to your advantage or you wouldn’t be here. And whatever you’re doing might be to his disadvantage, so he has to be careful.”

Rand shook his head. “ ‘The Great Game’? What game?”

“It isn’t a game at all, Rand,” Loial said from his bed. He had pulled a book from his pocket, but it lay unopened on his chest. “I don’t know much about it—Ogier don’t do such things—but I have heard of it. The nobles and the noble Houses maneuver for advantage. They do things they think will help them, or hurt an enemy, or both. Usually, it’s all done in secrecy, or if not, they try to make it seem as if they’re doing something other than what they are.” He gave one tufted ear a puzzled scratch. “Even knowing what it is, I don’t understand it. Elder Haman always said it would take a greater mind than his to understand the things humans do, and I don’t know many as intelligent as Elder Haman. You humans are odd.”

Hurin gave the Ogier a slanted look, but he said, “He has the right of *Daes Dae’mar*, Lord Rand. Cairhienin play it more than most, though all southerners do.”

“These soldiers in the morning,” Rand said. “Are they part of Caldevwin playing this Great Game? We can’t afford to get mixed in anything like that.” There was no need to mention the Horn. They were all too aware of its presence.

Loial shook his head. “I don’t know, Rand. He’s human, so it could mean anything.”

“Hurin?”

“I don’t know, either.” Hurin sounded as worried as the Ogier looked. “He could be doing just what he said, or. . . . That’s the way of the Game of Houses. You never know. I spent most of my time in Cairhien in the Foregate, Lord Rand, and I don’t know much about Cairhienin nobles, but—well, *Daes Dae’mar* can be dangerous anywhere, but especially in

Cairhien, I've heard." He brightened suddenly. "The Lady Selene, Lord Rand. She'll know better than me or the Builder. You can ask her in the morning."

But in the morning, Selene was gone. When Rand went down to the common room, Mistress Madwen handed him a sealed parchment. "If you'll forgive me, my Lord, you should have listened to me. You should have tapped on your Lady's door."

Rand waited until she went away before he broke the white wax seal. The wax had been impressed with a crescent moon and stars.

I must leave you for a time. There are too many people here, and I do not like Caldevwin. I will await you in Cairhien. Never think that I am too far from you. You will be in my thoughts always, as I know that I am in yours.

It was not signed, but that elegant, flowing script had the look of Selene.

He folded it carefully and put it in his pocket before going outside, where Hurin had the horses waiting.

Captain Caldevwin was there, too, with another, younger officer and fifty mounted soldiers crowding the street. The two officers were bareheaded, but wore steel-backed gauntlets, and gold-worked breastplates strapped over their blue coats. A short staff was fastened to the harness on each officer's back, bearing a small, stiff blue banner above his head. Caldevwin's banner bore a single white star, while the younger man's was crossed by two white bars. They were a sharp contrast to the soldiers in their plain armor and helmets that looked like bells with metal cut away to expose their faces.

Caldevwin bowed as Rand came out of the inn. "Good morning to you; my Lord Rand. This is Elricain Tavolin, who will command your escort, if I may call it that." The other officer bowed; his head was shaved as Caldevwin's was. He did not speak.

"An escort will be welcome, Captain," Rand said, managing to sound at ease. Fain would not try anything against fifty soldiers, but Rand wished he could be certain they were only an escort.

The captain eyed Loial, on his way to his horse with the blanket-covered chest. "A heavy burden, Ogier."

Loial almost missed a step. "I never like to be far from my books, Captain." His wide mouth flashed teeth in a self-conscious grin, and he hurried to strap the chest onto his saddle.

Caldevwin looked around, frowning. “Your Lady is not down yet. And her fine animal is not here.”

“She left already,” Rand told him. “She had to go on to Cairhien quickly, during the night.”

Caldevwin’s eyebrows lifted. “During the night? But my men. . . . Forgive me, my Lord Rand.” He drew the younger officer aside, whispering furiously.

“He had the inn watched, Lord Rand,” Hurin whispered. “The Lady Selene must have gotten past them unseen somehow.”

Rand climbed to Red’s saddle with a grimace. If there had been any chance Caldevwin did not suspect them of something, it seemed Selene had finished it. “Too many people, she says,” he muttered. “There’ll be more people by far in Cairhien.”

“You said something, my Lord?”

Rand looked up as Tavolin joined him, mounted on a tall, dust-colored gelding. Hurin was in his saddle, too, and Loial stood beside his big horse’s head. The soldiers were formed up in ranks. Caldevwin was nowhere to be seen.

“Nothing is happening the way I expect,” Rand said.

Tavolin gave him a brief smile, hardly more than a twitch of his lips. “Shall we ride, my Lord?”

The strange procession headed for the hard-packed road that led to the city of Cairhien.

* * *

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CHAPTER

22

Watchers

Nothing is happening as I expect,” Moiraine muttered, not expecting an answer from Lan. The long, polished table before her was littered with books and papers, scrolls and manuscripts, many of them dusty from long storage and tattered with age, some only fragments. The room seemed almost made of books and manuscripts, filling shelves except where there were doors or windows or the fireplace. The chairs were high-backed and well padded, but half of them, and most of the small tables, held books, and some had books and scrolls tucked under them. Only the clutter in front of Moiraine was hers, though.

She rose and moved to the window, peered into the night toward the lights of the village, not far off. No danger of pursuit here. No one would expect her to come here. *Clear my head, and begin again*, she thought. *That is all there is to do.*

None of the villagers had any suspicion that the two elderly sisters living in this snug house were Aes Sedai. One did not suspect such things in a small place like Tifan’s Well, a farming community deep in the grassy plains of Arafel. The villagers came to the sisters for advice on their problems and cures for their ills, and valued them as women blessed by the Light, but no more. Adeleas and Vandene had gone into voluntary retreat together so long ago that few even in the White Tower remembered they still lived.

With the one equally aged Warder who remained to them, they lived quietly, still intending to write the history of the world since the Breaking, and as much as they could include of before. One day. In the meantime, there was so much information to gather, so many puzzles to solve. Their house was the perfect place for Moiraine to find the information she needed. Except that it was not there.

Movement caught her eye, and she turned. Lan was lounging against the yellow brick fireplace, as imperturbable as a boulder. “Do you remember the first time we met, Lan?”

She was watching for some sign, or she would not have seen the quick twitch of his eyebrow. It was not often she caught him by surprise. This was a subject neither of them ever mentioned; nearly twenty years ago she had told him—with all the stiff pride of one still young enough to be called young, she recalled—that she would never speak of it again and expected the same silence of him.

“I remember,” was all he said.

“And still no apology, I suppose? You threw me into a pond.” She did not smile, though she could feel amusement at it, now. “Every stitch I had was soaked, and in what you Bordermen call new spring. I nearly froze.”

“I recall I built a fire, too, and hung blankets so you could warm yourself in privacy.” He poked at the burning logs and returned the firetool to its hook. Even summer nights were cool in the Borderlands. “I also recall that while I slept that night, you dumped half the pond on me. It would have saved a great deal of shivering on both our parts if you had simply told me you were Aes Sedai rather than demonstrating it. Rather than trying to separate me from my sword. Not a good way to introduce yourself to a Borderman, even for a young woman.”

“I *was* young, and alone, and you were as large then as you are now, and your fierceness more open. I did not want you to know I was Aes Sedai. It seemed to me at the time you might answer my questions more freely if you did not know.” She fell silent for a moment, thinking of the years since that meeting. It had been good to find a companion to join her in her quest. “In the weeks that followed, did you suspect that I would ask you to bond to me? I decided you were the one in the first day.”

“I never guessed,” he said dryly. “I was too busy wondering if I could escort you to Chachin and keep a whole skin. A different surprise you had for me every night. The ants I recall in particular. I don’t think I had one good night’s sleep that whole ride.”

She permitted herself a small smile, remembering. “I was young,” she repeated. “And does your bond chafe after all these years? You are not a man to wear a leash easily, even so light a one as mine.” It was a stinging comment; she meant it to be so.

"No." His voice was cool, but he took up the firetool again and gave the blaze a fierce poking it did not need. Sparks cascaded up the chimney. "I chose freely, knowing what it entailed." The iron rod clattered back onto its hook, and he made a formal bow. "Honor to serve, Moiraine Aes Sedai. It has been and will be so, always."

Moiraine sniffed. "Your humility, Lan Gaidin, has always been more arrogance than most kings could manage with their armies at their backs. From the first day I met you, it has been so."

"Why all this talk of days past, Moiraine?"

For the hundredth time—or so it seemed to her—she considered the words to use. "Before we left Tar Valon I made arrangements, should anything happen to me, for your bond to pass to another." He stared at her, silent. "When you feel my death, you will find yourself compelled to seek her out immediately. I do not want you to be surprised by it."

"Compelled," he breathed softly, angrily. "Never once have you used my bond to compel me. I thought you more than disapproved of that."

"Had I left this thing undone, you would be free of the bond at my death, and not even my strongest command to you would hold. I will not allow you to die in a useless attempt to avenge me. And I will not allow you to return to your equally useless private war in the Blight. The war we fight is the same war, if you could only see it so, and I will see that you fight it to some purpose. Neither vengeance nor an unburied death in the Blight will do."

"And do you foresee your death coming soon?" His voice was quiet, his face expressionless, both like stone in a dead winter blizzard. It was a manner she had seen in him many times, usually when he was on the point of violence. "Have you planned something, without me, that will see you dead?"

"I am suddenly glad there is no pond in this room," she murmured, then raised her hands when he stiffened, offended at her light tone. "I see my death in every day, as you do. How could I not, with the task we have followed these years? Now, with everything coming to a head, I must see it as even more possible."

For a moment he studied his hands, large and square. "I had never thought," he said slowly, "that I might not be the first of us to die. Somehow, even at the worst, it always seemed. . . ." Abruptly he scrubbed his hands against each other. “If there is a chance I might be given like a pet lapdog, I would at least like to know to whom I am being given.”

“I have never seen you as a pet,” Moiraine said sharply, “and neither does Myrelle.”

“Myrelle.” He grimaced. “Yes, she would have to be Green, or else some slip of a girl just raised to full sisterhood.”

“If Myrelle can keep her three Gaidin in line, perhaps she has a chance to manage you. Though she would like to keep you, I know, she has promised to pass your bond to another when she finds one who suits you better.”

“So. Not a pet but a parcel. Myrelle is to be a—a caretaker! Moiraine, not even the Greens treat their Warders so. No Aes Sedai has passed her Warder’s bond to another in four hundred years, but you intend to do it to me not once, but twice!”

“It is done, and I will not undo it.”

“The Light blind me, if I am to be passed from hand to hand, do you at least have some idea in whose hand I will end?”

“What I do is for your own good, and perhaps it may be for another’s, as well. It may be that Myrelle will find a slip of a girl just raised to sisterhood—was that not what you said?—who needs a Warder hardened in battle and wise in the ways of the world, a slip of a girl who may need someone who will throw her into a pond. You have much to offer, Lan, and to see it wasted in an unmarked grave, or left to the ravens, when it could go to a woman who needs it would be worse than the sin of which the Whitecloaks prate. Yes, I think she will have need of you.”

Lan’s eyes widened slightly; for him it was the same as another man gasping in shocked surmise. She had seldom seen him so off balance. He opened his mouth twice before he spoke. “And who do you have in mind for this—”

She cut him off. “Are you sure the bond does not chafe, Lan Gaidin? Do you realize for the first time, only now, the strength of that bond, the depth of it? You could end with some budding White, all logic and no heart, or with a young Brown who sees you as nothing more than a pair of hands to carry her books and sketches. I can hand you where I will, like a parcel—or a lapdog—and you can do no more than go. Are you sure it does not chafe?”

"Is that what this has been for?" he grated. His eyes burned like blue fire, and his mouth twisted. Anger; for the first time ever that she had seen, open anger etched his face. "Has all this talk been a test—a test!—to see if you could make my bond rub? After all this time? From the day I pledged to you, I have ridden where you said ride, even when I thought it foolish, even when I had reason to ride another way. Never did you need my bond to force me. On your word I have watched you walk into danger and kept my hands at my sides when I wanted nothing more than to out sword and carve a path to safety for you. After this, you test me?"

"Not a test, Lan. I spoke plainly, not twisting, and I have done as I said. But at Fal Dara, I began to wonder if you were still wholly with me." A wariness entered his eyes. *Lan, forgive me. I would not have cracked the walls you hold so hard, but I must know.* "Why did you do as you did with Rand?" He blinked; it was obviously not what he expected. She knew what he had thought was coming, and she would not let up now that he was off balance. "You brought him to the Amyrlin speaking and acting as a Border lord and a soldier born. It fit, in a way, with what I planned for him, but you and I never spoke of teaching him any of that. Why, Lan?"

"It seemed . . . right. A young wolfhound must meet his first wolf someday, but if the wolf sees him as a puppy, if he acts the puppy, the wolf will surely kill him. The wolfhound must be a wolfhound in the wolf's eyes even more than in his own, if he is to survive."

"Is that how you see Aes Sedai? The Amyrlin? Me? Wolves out to pull down your young wolfhound?" Lan shook his head. "You know what he is, Lan. You know what he must become. Must. What I have worked for since the day you and I met, and before. Do you now doubt what I do?"

"No. No, but. . . ." He was recovering himself, building his walls again. But they were not rebuilt yet. "How many times have you said that *ta'veren* pull those around them like twigs in a whirlpool? Perhaps I was pulled, too. I only know that it felt right. Those farm folk needed someone on their side. Rand did, at least. Moiraine, I believe in what you do, even as now, when I know not half of it; believe as I believe in you. I have not asked to be released from my bond, nor will I. Whatever your plans for dying and seeing me safely—disposed of—I will take great pleasure in keeping you alive and seeing those plans, at least, go for nothing."

"*Ta'veren,*" Moiraine sighed. "Perhaps it was that. Rather than guiding a chip floating down a stream, I am trying to guide a log through rapids.

Every time I push at it, it pushes at me, and the log grows larger the farther we go. Yet I must see it through to the end.” She gave a little laugh. “I will not be unhappy, my old friend, if you manage to put those plans awry. Now, please leave me. I need to be alone to think.” He hesitated only a moment before turning for the door. At the last moment, though, she could not let him go without one more question. “Do you ever dream of something different, Lan?”

“All men dream. But I know dreams for dreams. This”—he touched his sword hilt—“is reality.” The walls were back, as high and hard as ever.

For a time after he left, Moiraine leaned back in her chair, looking into the fire. She thought of Nynaeve and cracks in a wall. Without trying, without thinking what she was doing, that young woman had put cracks in Lan’s walls and seeded the cracks with creepers. Lan thought he was secure, imprisoned in his fortress by fate and his own wishes, but slowly, patiently, the creepers were tearing down the walls to bare the man within. Already he was sharing some of Nynaeve’s loyalties; in the beginning he had been indifferent to the Emond’s Field folk, except as people in whom Moiraine had some interest. Nynaeve had changed that as she had changed Lan.

To her surprise, Moiraine felt a flash of jealousy. She had never felt that before, certainly not for any of the women who had thrown their hearts at his feet, or those who had shared his bed. Indeed, she had never thought of him as an object of jealousy, had never thought so of any man. She was married to her battle, as he was married to his. But they had been companions in those battles for so long. He had ridden a horse to death, then run himself nearly to death, carrying her in his arms at the last, to Anaiya for Healing. She had tended his wounds more than once, keeping with her arts a life he had been ready to throw away to save hers. He had always said he was wedded with death. Now a new bride had captured his eyes, though he was blind to it. He thought he still stood strong behind his walls, but Nynaeve had laced bridal flowers in his hair. Would he still find himself able to court death so blithely? Moiraine wondered when he would ask her to release him from his bond. And what she would do when he did.

With a grimace, she got to her feet. There were more important matters. Far more important. Her eyes ran over the open books and papers crowding the room. So many hints, but no answers.

Vandene came in with a teapot and cups on a tray. She was slender and graceful, with a straight back, and the hair gathered neatly at the nape of her neck was almost white. The agelessness of her smooth face was that of long, long years. “I would have had Jaem bring this, and not disturb you myself, but he’s out in the barn practicing with his sword.” She made a clucking sound as she pushed a battered manuscript aside to set the tray on the table. “Lan being here has him remembering he’s more than a gardener and handyman. Gaidin are so stiff-necked. I thought Lan would still be here; that’s why I brought an extra cup. Have you found what you were seeking?”

“I am not even sure what it is I am seeking.” Moiraine frowned, studying the other woman. Vandene was of the Green Ajah, not Brown like her sister, yet the two of them had studied so long together that she knew as much of history as Adeleas.

“Whatever it is, you don’t even seem to know where to look.” Vandene shifted some of the books and manuscripts on the table, shaking her head. “So many subjects. The Trolloc Wars. The Watchers Over the Waves. The legend of the Return. Two treatises on the Horn of Valere. Three on dark prophecy, and—Light, here’s Santhra’s book on the Forsaken. Nasty, that. As nasty as this on Shadar Logoth. And the Prophecies of the Dragon, in three translations *and* the original. Moiraine, whatever *are* you after? The Prophecies, I can understand—we hear some news here, remote as we are. We hear some of what’s happening in Illian. There’s even a rumor in the village that someone has already found the Horn.” She gestured with a manuscript on the Horn, and coughed in the dust that rose from it. “I discount that, of course. There would be rumors. But what—? No. You said you wanted privacy, and I’ll give it to you.”

“Stop a moment,” Moiraine said, halting the other Aes Sedai short of the door. “Perhaps you can answer some questions for me.”

“I will try.” Vandene smiled suddenly. “Adeleas claims I should have chosen Brown. Ask.” She poured two cups of tea and handed one to Moiraine, then took a chair by the fire.

Steam curled over the cups while Moiraine chose her questions carefully. *To find the answers, and not reveal too much.* “The Horn of Valere is not mentioned in the Prophecies, but is it linked to the Dragon anywhere?”

“No. Except for the fact that the Horn must be found before Tarmon Gai’don and that the Dragon Reborn is supposed to fight the Last Battle, there is no link between them at all.” The white-haired woman sipped her tea and waited.

“Does anything link the Dragon with Toman Head?”

Vandene hesitated. “Yes, and no. This is a bone between Adeleas and me.” Her voice took on a lecturing tone, and for a time she did sound like a Brown. “There is a verse in the original that translates literally as ‘Five ride forth, and four return. Above the watchers shall he proclaim himself, bannered cross the sky in fire. . . .’ Well, it goes on. The point is, the word *ma’vron.* I say it should be translated not simply as ‘watchers,’ which is *a’vron. Ma’vron* has more importance to it. I say it means the Watchers Over the Waves, though they call themselves *Do Miere A’vron*, of course, not *Ma’vron.* Adeleas tells me I am quibbling. But I believe it means the Dragon Reborn will appear somewhere above Toman Head, in Arad Doman, or Saldaea. Adeleas may think I’m foolish, but I listen to every scrap I hear coming from Saldaea these days. Mazrim Taim can channel, so I hear, and our sisters haven’t managed to corner him yet. If the Dragon is Reborn, and the Horn of Valere found, then the Last Battle is coming soon. We may never finish our history.” She gave a shiver, then abruptly laughed. “Odd thing to worry about. I suppose I *am* becoming more a Brown. Horrible thing to contemplate. Ask your next question.”

“I do not think you need worry about Taim,” Moiraine said absently. It was a link with Toman Head, however small and tenuous. “He will be dealt with as Logain was. What of Shadar Logoth?”

“Shadar Logoth!” Vandene snorted. “In brief, the city was destroyed by its own hate, every living thing except Mordeth, the councilor who began it all, using the tactics of the Darkfriends against the Darkfriends, and he now lies trapped there waiting for a soul to steal. It is not safe to enter, and nothing in the city is safe to touch. But every novice close to being Accepted knows as much as that. In full, you will have to stay here a month and listen to Adeleas lecture—she has the true knowledge of it—but even I can tell you there’s nothing of the Dragon in it. That place was dead a hundred years before Yurian Stonebow rose from the ashes of the Trolloc Wars, and he lies closest to it in history of all the false Dragons.”

Moiraine raised a hand. “I did not speak clearly, and I do not speak of the Dragon, now, Reborn or false. Can you think of any reason why a Fade would take something that had come from Shadar Logoth?”

“Not if it knew the thing for what it was. The hate that killed Shadar Logoth was hate they thought to use *against* the Dark One; it would destroy Shadowspawn as surely as it would those who walk in the Light. They rightly fear Shadar Logoth as much as we.”

“And what can you tell me of the Forsaken?”

“You do leap from subject to subject. I can tell you little more than you learned as a novice. No one knows much more of the Nameless than that. Do you expect me to ramble on with what we both learned as girls?”

For an instant, Moiraine was silent. She did not want to say too much, but Vandene and Adeleas had more knowledge at their fingertips than existed anywhere else but the White Tower, and more complications awaited her there than she cared to deal with now. She let the name slip between her lips as if it were escaping. “Lanfear.”

“For once,” the other woman sighed, “I know not a whit more than I did as a novice. The Daughter of the Night remains as much a mystery as if she truly had cloaked herself in darkness.” She paused, peering into her cup, and when she looked up, her eyes were sharp on Moiraine’s face. “Lanfear was linked to the Dragon, to Lews Therin Telamon. Moiraine, do you have some clue as to where the Dragon will be Reborn? Or was Reborn? Has he come already?”

“If I did,” Moiraine replied levelly, “would I be here, instead of in the White Tower? The Amyrlin knows as much as I, that I swear. Have you received a summons from her?”

“No, and I suppose we would. When the time comes that we must face the Dragon Reborn, the Amyrlin will need every sister, every Accepted, every novice who can light a candle unguided.” Vandene’s voice lowered, musing. “With such power as he will wield, we must overwhelm him before he has a chance to use it against us, before he can go mad and destroy the world. Yet first we must let him face the Dark One.” She laughed mirthlessly at the look on Moiraine’s face. “I am not a Red. I’ve studied the Prophecies enough to know we dare not gentle him first. If we *can* gentle him. I know as well as you, as well as any sister who cares to find out, that the seals holding the Dark One in Shayol Ghul are weakening. The Illianers call the Great Hunt of the Horn. False Dragons abound. And two of them, Logain and now this fellow in Saldaea, able to channel. When was the last time the Reds found two men channeling in less than a year? When did they last find one in five years? Not in my lifetime, and I am a good deal older than you. The signs are everywhere. Tarmon Gai'don is coming. The Dark One will break free. And the Dragon will be Reborn." Her cup rattled as she set it down. "I suppose that is why I feared you might have seen some sign of him."

"He will come," Moiraine said smoothly, "and we will do what must be done."

"If I thought it would do any good, I'd pull Adeleas's nose out of her book and set off for the White Tower. But I find I am glad to be here where I am instead. Perhaps we will have time to finish our history."

"I hope that you will, Sister."

Vandene rose to her feet. "Well, I have tasks to be about before bed. If you have no more questions, I will leave you to your studies." But she paused and revealed that however long she had spent with books, she was still of the Green Ajah. "You should do something about Lan, Moiraine. The man is rumbling inside worse than Dragonmount. Sooner or later, he will erupt. I've known enough men to see when one is troubled with a woman. You two have been together a long time. Perhaps he has finally come to see you are a woman as well as Aes Sedai."

"Lan sees me as what I am, Vandene. Aes Sedai. And still as a friend, I hope."

"You Blues. Always so ready to save the world that you lose yourselves."

After the white-haired Aes Sedai left, Moiraine gathered her cloak and, muttering to herself, went into the garden. There was something in what Vandene had said that tugged at her mind, but she could not remember what it was. An answer, or a hint to an answer, for a question she had not asked—but she could not bring the question to mind, either.

The garden was small, like the house, but neat even in moonlight aided by the yellow glow from the cottage windows, with sandy walks between careful beds of flowers. She settled her cloak loosely on her shoulders against the soft coolness of the night. *What was the answer, and what was the question?*

Sand crunched behind her, and she turned, thinking it was Lan.

A shadow loomed dimly only a few paces from her, a shadow that appeared to be a too-tall man wrapped in his cloak. But the face caught the moon, gaunt-cheeked, pale, with black eyes too big above a puckered, red-lipped mouth. The cloak opened, unfolding into great wings like a bat's.

Knowing it was too late, she opened herself to *saidar*, but the Draghkar began to croon, and its soft hum filled her, fragmenting her will. *Saidar* slipped away. She felt only a vague sadness as she stepped toward the creature; the deep crooning that drew her closer suppressed feeling. White, white hands—like a man's hands, but tipped with claws—reached for her, and lips the color of blood curved in a travesty of a smile, baring sharp teeth, but dimly, so dimly, she knew it would not bite or tear. Fear the Draghkar's kiss. Once those lips touched her, she would be as good as dead, to be drained of soul, then of life. Whoever found her, even if they came as the Draghkar let her fall, would find a corpse without a mark and cold as if dead two days. And if they came before she was dead, what they found would be worse, and not really her at all any longer. The croon pulled her within reach of those pale hands, and the Draghkar's head bent slowly toward her.

She felt only the smallest surprise when a sword blade flashed over her shoulder to pierce the Draghkar's breast, and little more when a second crossed her other shoulder to strike beside the first.

Dazed, swaying, she watched as if from a great distance as the creature was pushed back, away from her. Lan came into her view, then Jaem, the gray-haired Warder's bony arms holding his blade as straight and true as the younger man's. The Draghkar's pale hands bloodied as they tore at the sharp steel, wings buffeting the two men with thunderclaps. Suddenly, wounded and bleeding, it began to croon again. To the Warders.

With an effort, Moiraine gathered herself; she felt almost as drained as if the thing had managed its kiss. *No time to be weak.* In an instant she opened herself to *saidar* and, as the Power filled her, steeled herself to touch the Shadowspawn directly. The two men were too close; anything else would harm them, as well. Even using the One Power, she knew she would feel soiled by the Draghkar.

But even as she began, Lan cried out, "Embrace death!" Jaem echoed him firmly. "Embrace death!" And the two men stepped within reach of the Draghkar's touch, drove home their blades to the hilt.

Throwing back its head, the Draghkar bellowed, a shriek that seemed to pierce Moiraine's head with needles. Even wrapped in *saidar* she could feel it. Like a tree falling, the Draghkar toppled, one wing knocking Jaem to his knees. Lan sagged as if exhausted.

Lanterns hurried from the house, borne by Vandene and Adeleas.

"What was that noise?" Adeleas demanded. She was almost a mirror image of her sister. "Has Jaem gone and. . . ." The lantern light fell on the Draghkar; her voice trailed off.

Vandene took Moiraine's hands. "It did not . . . ?" She left the question unfinished as, to Moiraine's eyes, a nimbus surrounded her. Feeling strength flowing into her from the other woman, Moiraine wished, not for the first time, that Aes Sedai could do as much for themselves as they could for others.

"It did not," she said gratefully. "See to the Gaidin."

Lan looked at her, mouth tight. "If you had not made me so angry I had to go work forms with Jaem, so angry I gave it up to come back to the house. . . ."

"But I did," she said. "The Pattern takes everything into the weaving." Jaem was muttering, but still allowing Vandene to see to his shoulder. He was all bone and tendon, yet looked as hard as old roots.

"How," Adeleas demanded, "could any creature of the Shadow come so close without us sensing it?"

"It was warded," Moiraine said.

"Impossible," Adeleas snapped. "Only a sister could—" She stopped, and Vandene turned from Jaem to look at Moiraine.

Moiraine said the words none of them wanted to hear. "The Black Ajah." Shouts drifted from the village. "Best you hide this"—she gestured to the Draghkar, sprawled across a flower bed—"quickly. They will be coming to ask if you need help, but seeing this will start talk you will not like."

"Yes, of course," Adeleas said. "Jaem, go and meet them. Tell them you don't know what made the noise, but all is well here. Slow them down." The gray-haired Warder hurried into the night toward the sound of approaching villagers. Adeleas turned to study the Draghkar as if it were a puzzling passage in one of her books. "Whether Aes Sedai are involved or not, whatever could have brought it here?" Vandene regarded Moiraine silently.

"I fear I must leave you," Moiraine said. "Lan, will you ready the horses?" As he left, she said, "I will leave letters with you to be sent on to the White Tower, if you will arrange it.” Adeleas nodded absently, her attention still on the thing on the ground.

“And will you find your answers where you are going?” Vandene asked.

“I may already have found one I did not know I sought. I only hope I am not too late. I will need pen and parchment.” She drew Vandene toward the house, leaving Adeleas to deal with the Draghkar.

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CHAPTER

23

The Testing

Nynaeve warily eyed the huge chamber, far beneath the White Tower, and eyed Sheriam, at her side, just as warily. The Mistress of Novices seemed expectant, perhaps even a little impatient. In her few days in Tar Valon, Nynaeve had seen only serenity in the Aes Sedai, and a smiling acceptance of events coming in their own time.

The domed room had been carved out of the bedrock of the island; the light of lamps on tall stands reflected from pale, smooth stone walls. Centered under the dome was a thing made of three rounded, silver arches, each just tall enough to walk under, sitting on a thick silver ring with their ends touching each other. Arches and ring were all of one piece. She could not see what lay inside; there the light flickered oddly, and made her stomach flutter with it if she looked too long. Where arch touched ring, an Aes Sedai sat cross-legged on the bare stone of the floor, staring at the silvery construction. Another stood nearby, beside a plain table on which sat three large silver chalices. Each, Nynaeve knew—or at least, she had been told—was filled with clear water. All four Aes Sedai wore their shawls, as Sheriam did; blue-fringed for Sheriam, red for the swarthy woman by the table, green, white, and gray for the three around the arches. Nynaeve still wore one of the dresses she had been given in Fal Dara, pale green embroidered with small white flowers.

“First you leave me to stare at my thumbs from morning to night,” Nynaeve muttered, “and now it’s all in a rush.”

“The hour waits on no woman,” Sheriam replied. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and *when* it wills. Patience is a virtue that must be learned, but we must all be ready for the change of an instant.”

Nynaeve tried not to glare. The most irritating thing she had yet discovered about the flame-haired Aes Sedai was that she sometimes sounded as if she were quoting sayings even when she was not. “What is that thing?”

“A *ter’angreal*.”

“Well, that tells me nothing. What does it do?”

“*Ter’angreal* do many things, child. Like *angreal* and *sa’angreal*, they are remnants of the Age of Legends that use the One Power, though they are not quite so rare as the other two. While some *ter’angreal* must be made to work by Aes Sedai, as this one must, others will do what they do simply with the presence of any woman who can channel. There are even supposed to be some that will function for anyone at all. Unlike *angreal* and *sa’angreal*, they were made to do specific things. One other we have in the Tower makes oaths binding. When you are raised to full sisterhood, you will take your final vows holding that *ter’angreal*. To speak no word that is not true. To make no weapon for one man to kill another. Never to use the One Power as a weapon except against Darkfriends or Shadowspawn, or in the last extreme of defending your own life, that of your Warder, or that of another sister.”

Nynaeve shook her head. It sounded either like too much to swear or too little, and she said so.

“Once, Aes Sedai were not required to swear oaths. It was known what Aes Sedai were and what they stood for, and there was no need for more. Many of us wish it were so still. But the Wheel turns, and the times change. That we swear these oaths, that we are known to be bound, allows the nations to deal with us without fearing that we will throw up our own power, the One Power, against them. Between the Trolloc Wars and the War of the Hundred Years we made these choices, and because of them the White Tower still stands, and we can still do what we can against the Shadow.” Sheriam drew a deep breath. “Light, child, I am trying to teach you what any other woman standing where you are would have learned over the course of years. It cannot be done. *Ter’angreal* are what must concern you, now. We don’t know why they were made. We dare use only a handful of them, and the ways in which we do dare to use them may be nothing like the purposes the makers intended. Most, we have learned to our cost to avoid. Over the years, no few Aes Sedai have been killed or had their Talent burned out of them, learning that.”

Nynaeve shivered. “And you want me to walk into this one?” The light inside the arches flickered less, now, but she could see what lay in it no better.

“We know what this one does. It will bring you face-to-face with your greatest fears.” Sheriam smiled pleasantly. “No one will ask you what you have faced; you need tell no more than you wish. Every woman’s fears are her own property.”

Vaguely, Nynaeve thought about her nervousness concerning spiders, especially in the dark, but she did not think that was what Sheriam meant. “I just walk through one arch and out another? Three times through, and it’s done?”

The Aes Sedai adjusted her shawl with an irritated hitch of her shoulder. “If you wish to boil it down that far, yes,” she said dryly. “I told you on the way here what you must know about the ceremony, as much as anyone is allowed to know beforehand. If you were a novice come to this, you would know it by heart, but don’t worry about making mistakes. I will remind you, if necessary. Are you sure you are ready to face it? If you want to stop now, I can still write your name in the novice book.”

“No!”

“Very well, then. Two things I will tell you now that no woman hears until she is in this room. The first is this. Once you begin, you must continue to the end. Refuse to go on, and no matter your potential, you will be very kindly put out of the Tower with enough silver to support you for a year, and you will never be allowed back.” Nynaeve opened her mouth to say she would not refuse, but Sheriam cut her off with a sharp gesture. “Listen, and speak when you know what to say. Second. To seek, to strive, is to know danger. You will know danger here. Some women have entered, and never come out. When the *ter’angreal* was allowed to grow quiet, they—were—not—there. And they were never seen again. If you will survive, you must be steadfast. Falter, fail, and. . . .” Her silence was more eloquent than any words. “This is your last chance, child. You may turn back now, right now, and I will put your name in the novice book, and you will have only one mark against you. Twice more you will be allowed to come here, and only at the third refusal will you be put out of the Tower. It is no shame to refuse. Many do. I myself could not do it, my first time here. Now you may speak.”

Nynaeve gave the silver arches a sidelong look. The light in them no longer flickered; they were filled with a soft, white glow. To learn what she wanted to learn, she needed the freedom of the Accepted to question, to study on her own, with no more guidance than she asked for. *I must make Moiraine pay for what she has done to us. I must.* “I am ready.”

Sheriam started slowly into the chamber. Nynaeve went beside her.

As if that were a signal, the Red sister spoke in loud, formal tones. “Whom do you bring with you, Sister?” The three Aes Sedai around the *ter’angreal* continued their attentions to it.

“One who comes as a candidate for Acceptance, Sister,” Sheriam replied just as formally.

“Is she ready?”

“She is ready to leave behind what she was, and, passing through her fears, gain Acceptance.”

“Does she know her fears?”

“She has never faced them, but now is willing.”

“Then let her face what she fears.”

Sheriam stopped, two spans from the arches, and Nynaeve stopped with her. “Your dress,” Sheriam whispered, not looking at her.

Nynaeve’s cheeks colored at forgetting already what Sheriam had told her on the way down from her room. Hastily she removed her clothes, her shoes and stockings. For a moment she could almost forget the arches in folding her garments and putting them neatly to one side. She tucked Lan’s ring carefully under her dress; she did not want anyone staring at that. Then she was done, and the *ter’angreal* was still there, still waiting.

The stone felt cold under her bare feet, and she broke out all over in goose bumps, but she stood straight and breathed slowly. She would not let any of them see she was afraid.

“The first time,” Sheriam said, “is for what was. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.”

Nynaeve hesitated. Then she stepped forward, through the arch and into the glow. It surrounded her, as if the air itself were shining, as if she were drowning in light. The light was everywhere. The light was everything.

Nynaeve gave a start when she realized she was naked, then stared in amazement. A stone wall stood to either side of her, twice as tall as she was and smooth, as if carved. Her toes wriggled on dusty, uneven stone paving. The sky above seemed flat and leaden, for all the lack of clouds, and the sun hung overhead swollen and red. In both directions were openings in the wall, gateways marked by short, square columns. The walls narrowed her field of view, but the ground sloped down from where she stood, both in front and behind. Through the gateways she could see more thick walls, and passages between. She was in a gigantic maze.

Where is this? How did I come here? Like a different voice, another thought came. *The way out will come but once.*

She shook her head. “If there’s only one way out, I’ll not find it standing here.” At least the air was warm and dry. “I hope I find some clothes before I find people,” she muttered.

Dimly, she remembered playing mazes on paper as a child; there had been a trick to finding your way out, but she could not bring it to mind. Everything in the past seemed vague, as if it had happened to someone else. Trailing a hand along the wall, she started out, dust rising in puffs beneath her bare feet.

At the first opening in the wall, she found herself peering down another passage that seemed indistinguishable from the one she was in already. Taking a deep breath, she went on straight, through more passages that all looked exactly alike. Presently she came to something different. The way forked. She took the left turning, and eventually it forked again. Once more she went left. At the third fork, left brought her to a blank wall.

Grimly she walked back to the last fork and went right. This time it took four turnings right to bring her to a dead end. For a moment, she stood glaring at it. “How did I get here?” she demanded loudly. “Where is this place?” *The way out will come but once.*

Once more she turned back. She was sure there had to be a trick to the maze. At the last fork, she went left, then right at the next. Determined, she kept on. Left, then right. Straight until she came to a fork. Left, then right.

It seemed to her to be working. At least, she had gone past a dozen forkings this time without finding an end. She came to another.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flicker of motion. When she turned to look, there was only the dusty passage between smooth stone walls. She started to take the left fork . . . and spun around at another glimpse of movement. There was nothing there, but this time she was sure. There had been someone behind her. Was someone. She broke into a nervous trot in the opposite direction.

Again and again, now, just at the edge of vision down this side passage or that, she saw something move, too quick to make out, gone before she could turn her head to see it plainly. She broke into a run. Few boys had been able to outrun her when she was a girl in the Two Rivers. *The Two Rivers? What is that?*

A man stepped out from an opening ahead of her. His dark clothes had a musty, half-rotted look, and he was old. Older than old. Skin like crazed parchment covered his skull too tightly, as if there were no flesh beneath. Wispy tufts of brittle hair covered a scabbed scalp, and his eyes were so sunken they seemed to peer out of two caves.

She skidded to a stop, the uneven paving stones rough under her feet.

“I am Aginor,” he said, smiling, “and I have come for you.”

Her heart tried to leap out of her chest. One of the Forsaken. “No. No, it cannot be!”

“You are a pretty one, girl. I will enjoy you.”

Suddenly Nynaeve remembered she wore not a stitch. With a yelp and a face red only partly from anger, she darted away down the nearest crossing passage. Cackling laughter pursued her, and the sound of a shuffling run that seemed to match her best speed, and breathy promises of what he would do when he caught her, promises that curdled her stomach even only half heard.

Desperately she searched for a way out, peering frantically as she ran with fists clenched. *The way out will come but once. Be steadfast.* There was nothing, only more of the endless maze. As hard as she could run, his filthy words came always right behind her. Slowly, fear turned completely to anger.

“Burn him!” she sobbed. “The Light burn him! He has no right!” Within her she felt a flowering, an opening up, an unfolding to light.

Teeth bared, she turned to face her pursuer just as Aginor appeared, laughing, in a lurching gallop.

“You have no right!” She flung her fist toward him, fingers opening as if she were throwing something. She was only half surprised to see a ball of fire leave her hand.

It exploded against Aginor’s chest, knocking him to the ground. For only an instant he sprawled there, then rose, staggering. He seemed unaware of the smoldering front of his coat. “You dare? You dare!” He quivered, and spittle leaked down his chin.

Abruptly there were clouds in the sky, threatening billows of gray and black. Lightning leaped from the cloud, straight for Nynaeve’s heart.

It seemed to her, just for a heartbeat, as if time had suddenly slowed, as though that heartbeat took forever. She felt the flow inside her—*saidar*, came a distant thought—felt the answering flow in the lightning. And she altered the direction of the flow. Time leaped forward.

With a crash, the bolt shattered stone above Aginor's head. The Forsaken's sunken eyes widened, and he tottered back. "You cannot! It cannot be!" He leaped away as lightning struck where he had stood, stone erupting in a fountain of shards.

Grimly Nynaeve started toward him. And Aginor fled.

Saidar was a torrent racing through her. She could feel the rocks around her, and the air, feel the tiny, flowing bits of the One Power that suffused them, and made them. And she could feel Aginor doing . . . something, as well. Dimly she felt it, and far distant, as if it were something she could never truly know, but around her she saw the effects and knew them for what they were.

The ground rumbled and heaved under her feet. Walls toppled in front of her, piles of stone to block her way. She scrambled over them, uncaring if sharp rock cut hands and feet, always keeping Aginor in sight. A wind rose, howling down the passages against her, raging till it flattened her cheeks and made her eyes water, trying to knock her down; she changed the flow, and Aginor tumbled along the passageway like an uprooted bush. She touched the flow in the ground, redirected it, and stone walls collapsed around Aginor, sealing him in. Lightning fell with her glare, striking around him, stone exploding ever closer and closer. She could feel him fighting to push it back at her, but foot by foot the dazzling bolts moved toward the Forsaken.

Something gleamed off to her right, something uncovered by the collapsing walls.

Nynaeve could feel Aginor weakening, feel his efforts to strike at her grow more feeble and more frantic. Yet somehow she knew he had not given up. If she let him go now, he would chase after her as strongly as before, convinced she was too weak to defeat him after all, too weak to stop him from doing with her as he wished.

A silver arch stood where stone had been, an arch filled with soft silver radiance. *The way back. . . .*

She knew when the Forsaken abandoned his attack, the moment when all his efforts were given over to staving her off. And his power was not enough, he could no longer deflect her blows. Now he had to fling himself away from the leaping gouts of stone thrown up by her lightning, the explosions flinging him down again.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

The lightning no longer fell. Nynaeve turned from the scrabbling Aginor to look at the arch. She looked back at Aginor, just in time to see him crawl out of sight over the mounded stone and disappear. She hissed in frustration. Much of the maze still stood, and a hundred new places to hide in the rubble she and the Forsaken had made. It would take time to find him again, but she was sure if she did not find him first, he would find her. In his full strength, he would come on her when she least expected him.

The way back will come but once.

Frightened, she looked again and was relieved to see the arch still there. If she could find Aginor quickly. . . .

Be steadfast.

With a cry of thwarted anger, she climbed over the tumbled stone toward the arch. “Whoever’s responsible for me being here,” she muttered, “I’ll make them wish they had gotten what Aginor got. I’ll—” She stepped into the arch, and the light overwhelmed her.

“I’ll—” Nynaeve stepped out of the arch and stopped to stare. It was all as she remembered—the silver *ter’angreal*, the Aes Sedai, the chamber—but remembering was like a blow, absent memories crashing back into her head. She had come out of the same arch by which she went in.

The Red sister raised one of the silver chalices high and poured a stream of cool, clear water over Nynaeve’s head. “You are washed clean of what sin you may have done,” the Aes Sedai intoned, “and of those done against you. You are washed clean of what crime you may have committed, and of those committed against you. You come to us washed clean and pure, in heart and soul.”

Nynaeve shivered as the water ran down her body, dripping on the floor.

Sheriam took her arm with a relieved smile, but the Mistress of Novices’ voice gave no hint of past worry. “You do well so far. Coming back is doing well. Remember what your purpose is, and you will continue to be well.” The redhead began to lead her around the *ter’angreal* to another arch.

“It was so real,” Nynaeve said in a whisper. She could remember everything, remember channeling the One Power as easily as lifting her hand. She could remember Aginor, and the things the Forsaken wanted to do to her. She shivered again. “Was it real?”

“No one knows,” Sheriam replied. “It seems real in memory, and some have come out bearing the actual wounds of hurts taken inside. Others have been cut to the bone inside, and come back without a mark. It is all of it different every time for every woman who goes in. The ancients said there were many worlds. Perhaps this *ter’angreal* takes you to them. Yet if so, it does so under very stringent rules for something meant just to take you from one place to another. I believe it is not real. But remember, whether what happens is real or not, the *danger* is as real as a knife plunging into your heart.”

“I channeled the Power. It was so easy.”

Sheriam missed a step. “That isn’t supposed to be possible. You should not even remember being able to channel.” She studied Nynaeve. “And yet you are not harmed. I can still sense the ability in you, as strong as it ever was.”

“You sound as if it were dangerous,” Nynaeve said slowly, and Sheriam hesitated before answering.

“It isn’t thought necessary to give a warning, since you shouldn’t be able to remember it, but. . . . This *ter’angreal* was found during the Trolloc Wars. We have the records of its examination in the archives. The first sister to enter was warded as strongly as she could be, since no one knew what it would do. She kept her memories, and she channeled the One Power when she was threatened. And she came out with her abilities burned to nothing, unable to channel, unable even to sense the True Source. The second to go in was also warded, and she, too, was destroyed in the same way. The third went unprotected, remembered nothing once she was inside, and returned unharmed. That is one reason why we send you completely unprotected. Nynaeve, you must not channel inside the *ter’angreal* again. I know it is hard to remember anything, but try.”

Nynaeve swallowed. She could remember everything, could remember not remembering. “I won’t channel,” she said. *If I can remember not to.* She wanted to laugh hysterically.

They had reached the next arch. The glow still filled them all. Sheriam gave Nynaeve a last warning look, and left her standing alone.

“The second time is for what is. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.”

Nynaeve stared at the shining silver arch. *What is in there this time?* The others were waiting, watching. She stepped firmly through into the light.

Nynaeve stared down at the plain brown dress she wore with surprise, then gave a start. Why was she staring at her own dress? *The way back will come but once.*

Looking around her, she smiled. She stood on the edge of the Green in Emond’s Field, with thatch-roofed houses all around, and the Winespring Inn right in front of her. The Winespring itself rose in a gush from the stone outcrop thrusting up through the grass of the Green, and the Wine-spring Water rushed off east under the willows beside the inn. The streets were empty, but most people would be at their chores this time of the morning.

Looking at the inn, her smile faded. There was more than an air of neglect about it, whitewash faded, a shutter hanging loose, the rotted end of a rafter showing at a gap in the roof tiles. *What’s gotten into Bran? Is he spending so much time being Mayor he’s forgetting to take care of his inn?*

The inn door swung open, and Cenn Buie came out, stopping dead when he saw her. The old thatcher was as gnarled as an oak root, and the look he gave her was just as friendly. “So you’ve come back, have you? Well, you might as well be off again.”

She frowned as he spat at her feet and hurried on past her; Cenn was never a pleasant man, but he was seldom openly rude. Never to her, at least. Never to her face. Following him with her eye, she saw signs of neglect all through the village, thatch that should have been mended, weeds filling yards. The door on Mistress al’Caar’s house hung aslant on a broken hinge.

Shaking her head, Nynaeve pushed into the inn. *I’ll have more than one word with Bran about this.*

The common room was empty except for a lone woman, her thick, graying braid pulled over her shoulder. She was wiping a table, but from the way she stared at the tabletop, Nynaeve did not think she was aware of what she doing. The room seemed dusty.

“Marin?”

Marin al’Vere jumped, one hand clutching her throat, and stared. She looked years older than Nynaeve remembered. Worn. “Nynaeve? Nynaeve!

Oh, it is you. Egwene? Have you brought Egwene back? Say you have."

"I. . . ." Nynaeve put a hand to her head. *Where is Egwene?* It seemed she *should* be able to remember. "No. No, I haven't brought her back." *The way back will come but once.*

Mistress al'Vere sagged into one of the straight-backed chairs. "I was so hoping. Ever since Bran died. . . ."

"Bran is dead?" Nynaeve could not imagine it; that broad, smiling man had always seemed as if he would go on forever. "I should have been here."

The other woman jumped to her feet and hurried to peer anxiously through a window at the Green and the village. "If Malena knows you're here, there will be trouble. I just know Cenn went scurrying off to find her. He's the Mayor, now."

"Cenn? How did even those wool-headed men choose Cenn?"

"It was Malena. She had the whole Women's Circle after their husbands for him." Marin pressed her face almost against the window, trying to look every way at once. "Silly men don't talk about whose name they're putting in the box beforehand; I suppose every man who voted for Cenn thought he was the only one whose wife had badgered him into it. Thought one vote would make no difference. Well, they learned better. We all did."

"Who is this Malena who has the Women's Circle doing her bidding? I've never heard of her."

"She's from Watch Hill. She's the Wis. . . ." Marin turned from the window wringing her hands. "Malena Aylar's the Wisdom, Nynaeve. When you didn't come back. . . . Light, I hope she doesn't find out you're here."

Nynaeve shook her head in wonder. "Marin, you're afraid of her. You are shaking. What kind of woman is she? Why did the Women's Circle ever choose someone like her?"

Mistress al'Vere gave a bitter laugh. "We must have been mad. Malena came down to see Mavra Mallen the day before Mavra had to go back to Deven Ride, and that night some children took sick, and Malena stayed to look after them, and then the sheep started dying, and Malena took care of that, too. It just seemed natural to choose her, but. . . . She's a bully, Nynaeve. She browbeats you into doing what she wants. She keeps at you, and keeps at you, until you're too tired to say no anymore. And worse. She knocked Alsbet Luhhan down."

A picture flashed in Nynaeve's head of Alsbet Luhhan and her husband, Haral, the blacksmith. She was nearly as tall as him, and stoutly built, though handsome. "Alsbet's almost as strong as Haral. I can't believe. . . ."

"Malena's not a big woman, but she's—she's fierce, Nynaeve. She beat Alsbet all around the Green with a stick, and none of us who saw had the nerve to try to stop it. When they found out, Bran and Haral said she had to go, even if they were interfering in Women's Circle business. I think some of the Circle might have listened, but Bran and Haral both took sick the same night, and died within a day of each other." Marin bit her lip and looked around the room as if she thought someone might be hiding there. Her voice lowered. "Malena mixed medicine for them. She said it was her duty even if they had spoken against her. I saw. . . . I saw gray fennel in what she took away with her."

Nynaeve gasped. "But. . . . Are you sure, Marin? Are you certain?" The other woman nodded, her face wrinkling on the point of tears. "Marin, if you even suspected this woman might have poisoned Bran, how could you not go to the Circle?"

"She said Bran and Haral didn't walk in the Light," Marin mumbled, "talking against the Wisdom the way they did. She said that was why they died; the Light abandoned them. She talks about sin all the time. She said Paet al'Caar sinned, talking against her after Bran and Haral died. All he said was she didn't have the way with Healing you did, but she drew the Dragon's Fang on his door, right out where everyone could see her with the charcoal in her hand. Both his boys were dead before the week was out—just dead when their mother went to wake them. Poor Nela. We found her wandering, laughing and crying all at the same time, screaming that Paet was the Dark One, and he'd killed her boys. Paet hung himself the next day." She shuddered, and her voice went so soft Nynaeve could barely hear it. "I have four daughters still living under my roof. Living, Nynaeve. Do you understand what I'm saying. They're still alive, and I want to keep them alive."

Nynaeve felt cold to her bones. "Marin, you can't allow this." *The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.* She pushed it away. "If the Women's Circle stands together, you can be rid of her."

"Stand together against Malena?" Marin's laugh was nearer a sob. "We're all afraid of her. But she's good with the children. There are always children sick these days, it seems, but Malena does the best she can. Almost no one ever died of sickness when you were Wisdom."

"Marin, listen to me. Don't you see why there are always children sick? If she can't make you afraid of her, she makes you think you need her for the children. She's doing it, Marin. Just as she did it to Bran."

"She couldn't," Marin breathed. "She wouldn't. Not the little ones."

"She is, Marin." *The way back*—Nynaeve suppressed the thought ruthlessly. "Is there anyone in the Circle who isn't afraid? Anyone who will listen?"

The other woman said, "No one who isn't afraid. But Corin Ayellin might listen. If she does, she might bring two or three more. Nynaeve, if enough of the Circle listens, will you be our Wisdom again? I think you may be the only one who won't back down to Malena, even if we all know. You don't know what she's like."

"I will." *The way back—No! These are my people!* "Get your cloak, and we'll go to Corin."

Marin was hesitant about leaving the inn, and once Nynaeve had her outside she slunk along from doorstep to doorstep, crouching and watching.

Before they were halfway to Corin Ayellin's house, Nynaeve saw a tall, scrawny woman striding down the other side of the Green toward the inn, slashing the heads off weeds with a thick willow switch. Bony as she was, she had a look of wiry strength, and a set, determined slash of a mouth. Cenn Buie scuttled along in her wake.

"Malena." Marin pulled Nynaeve into the space between two houses, and whispered as if afraid the woman might hear across the Green. "I knew Cenn would go to her."

Something made Nynaeve look over her shoulder. Behind her stood a silver arch, reaching from house to house, glowing whitely. *The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.*

Marin gave a soft scream. "She's seen us. Light help us, she's coming this way!"

The tall woman had turned across the Green, leaving Cenn standing uncertainly. There was no uncertainty on Malena's face. She walked slowly, as if there were no hope of escape, a cruel smile growing with every step.

Marin tugged at Nynaeve's sleeve. "We have to run. We have to hide. Nynaeve, come on. Cenn will have told her who you are. She hates anyone even to speak of you."

The silver arch pulled Nynaeve’s eyes. *The way back*. . . . She shook her head, trying to remember. *It is not real.* She looked at Marin; stark terror twisted the woman’s face. *You must be steadfast to survive.*

“Please, Nynaeve. She’s seen me with you. She—has—seen—me! Please, Nynaeve!”

Malena came closer, implacable. *My people.* The arch shone. *The way back. It is not real.*

With a sob, Nynaeve tore her arm out of Marin’s grasp and plunged toward the silvery glow.

Marin’s shriek hounded her. “For the love of the Light, Nynaeve, help me! HELP ME!”

The glow enveloped her.

* * *

Staring, Nynaeve staggered out of the arch, barely aware of the chamber or the Aes Sedai. Marin’s last cry still rang in her ears. She did not flinch when cold water was suddenly poured over her head.

“You are washed clean of false pride. You are washed clean of false ambition. You come to us washed clean, in heart and soul.” As the Red Aes Sedai stepped back, Sheriam came to take Nynaeve’s arm.

Nynaeve gave a start, then realized who it was. She seized the collar of Sheriam’s dress in both hands. “Tell me it was not real. Tell me!”

“Bad?” Sheriam pried her hands loose as if she were used to this reaction. “It is always worse, and the third is the worst of all.”

“I left my friend . . . I left my *people* . . . in the Pit of Doom to come back.” *Please, Light, it was not real. I didn’t really. . . . I* have *to make Moiraine pay. I* have *to!*

“There is always some reason not to return, something to prevent you, or distract you. This *ter’angreal* weaves traps for you from your own mind, weaves them tight and strong, harder than steel and more deadly than poison. That is why we use it as a test. You must want to be Aes Sedai more than anything else in the whole world, enough to face anything, fight free of anything, to achieve it. The White Tower cannot accept less. We demand it of you.”

“You demand a great deal.” Nynaeve stared at the third arch as the red-haired Aes Sedai took her toward it. *The third is the worst.* “I’m afraid,” she whispered. *What could be worse than what I just did?*

"Good," Sheriam said. "You seek to be Aes Sedai, to channel the One Power. No one should approach that without fear and awe. Fear will keep you cautious; caution will keep you alive." She turned Nynaeve to face the arch, but she did not step back immediately. "No one will force you to enter a third time, child."

Nynaeve licked her lips. "If I refuse, you'll put me out of the Tower and never let me come back." Sheriam nodded. "And this is the worst." Sheriam nodded again. Nynaeve drew breath. "I am ready."

"The third time," Sheriam intoned formally, "is for what will be. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast."

Nynaeve threw herself at the arch in a run.

Laughing, she ran through swirling clouds of butterflies rising from wild-flowers that covered the hilltop meadow with a knee-deep blanket of color. Her gray mare danced nervously, reins dangling, at the edge of the meadow, and Nynaeve stopped running so as not to frighten the animal more. Some of the butterflies settled on her dress, on flowers of embroidery and seed pearls, or flittered around the sapphires and moonstones in her hair, hanging loose about her shoulders.

Below the hill, the necklace of the Thousand Lakes spread through the city of Malkier, reflecting the cloud-brushing Seven Towers, with Golden Crane banners flying at their heights in the mists. The city had a thousand gardens, but she preferred this wild garden on the hilltop. *The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.*

The sound of hooves made her turn.

Al'Lan Mandragoran, King of Malkier, leaped from the back of his charger and strolled toward her through the butterflies, laughing. His face had the look of a hard man, but the smiles he wore for her softened the stony planes.

She gaped at him, taken by surprise when he gathered her into his arms and kissed her. For a moment she clung to him, lost, kissing him back. Her feet dangled a foot in the air, and she did not care.

Suddenly she pushed at him, pulled her face back. "No." She pushed harder. "Let me go. Put me down." Puzzled, he lowered her until her feet touched ground; she backed away from him. "Not this," she said. "I cannot face this. Anything but this." *Please, let me face Aginor again.* Memory swirled. *Aginor?* She did not know where that thought had come from. Memory lurched and tilted, shifting fragments like broken ice on a flooding river. She clawed for the pieces, clawed for something to hang on to.

"Are you well, my love?" Lan asked worriedly.

"Do not call me that! I am not your love! I cannot marry you!"

He startled her by throwing back his head and roaring with laughter. "Your implication that we are not married might upset our children, wife. And how are you not my love? I have no other, and will have no other."

"I must go back." Desperately she looked for the arch, found only meadow and sky. *Harder than steel and more deadly than poison. Lan. Lan's babies. Light, help me!* "I must go back now."

"Go back? Where? To Emond's Field? If you wish it. I'll send letters to Morgase, and command an escort."

"Alone," she muttered, still searching. *Where is it? I have to go.* "I won't be tangled up in this. I couldn't bear it. Not this. I have to go *now!*"

"Tangled up in what, Nynaeve? What is it you couldn't bear? No, Nynaeve. You can ride alone here if you wish it, but if the Queen of the Malkieri came to Andor without a proper escort, Morgase would be scandalized, if not offended. You don't want to offend her, do you? I thought you two were friends."

Nynaeve felt as if she had been hit in the head, blow after dazing blow. "Queen?" she said hesitantly. "We have babies?"

"Are you certain you're well? I think I had better take you to Sharina Sedai."

"No." She backed away from him again. "No Aes Sedai." *It isn't real. I won't be pulled into it this time. I won't!*

"Very well," he said slowly. "As my wife, how could you not be Queen? We are Malkieri here, not southlanders. You were crowned in the Seven Towers at the same time we exchanged rings." Unconsciously he moved his left hand; a plain gold band encircled his forefinger. She glanced at her own hand, at the ring she knew would be there; she clasped her other hand over it, but whether to deny its presence by hiding it or to hold it, she could not have said. "Do you remember, now?" he went on. He stretched out a hand as if to brush her cheek, and she went back another six steps. He sighed. "As you wish, my love. We have three children, though only one can properly be called a baby. Maric is almost to your shoulder and can't decide if he likes horses or books better. Elnore has already begun practicing how to turn boys' heads, when she is not pestering Sharina about when she'll be old enough to go to the White Tower."

"Elnore was my mother's name," she said softly.

"So you said when you chose it. Nynaeve—"

"No. I will not be pulled into it this time. Not this. I won't!" Beyond him, among the trees beside the meadow, she saw the silver arch. The trees had hidden it before. *The way back will come but once.* She turned toward it. "I must go." He caught her hand, and it was as if her feet had become rooted in stone; she could not make herself pull away.

"I do not know what is troubling you, wife, but whatever it is, tell me and I will make it right. I know I am not the best of husbands. I was all hard edges when I found you, but you've smoothed some of them away, at least."

"You are the very best of husbands," she murmured. To her horror, she found herself remembering him as her husband, remembering laughter and tears, bitter arguments and sweet making up. They were dim memories, but she could feel them growing stronger, warmer. "I cannot." The arch stood there, only a few steps away. *The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.*

"I do not know what is happening, Nynaeve, but I feel as if I were losing you. I could not bear that." He put a hand in her hair; closing her eyes, she pressed her cheek against his fingers. "Stay with me, always."

"I want to stay," she said softly. "I want to stay with you." When she opened her eyes, the arch was gone . . . *come but once.* "No. No!"

Lan turned her to face him. "What troubles you? You must tell me if I'm to help."

"This is not real."

"Not real? Before I met you, I thought nothing except the sword was real. Look around you, Nynaeve. It *is* real. Whatever you want to be real, we can make real together, you and I."

Wonderingly, she did look around. The meadow was still there. The Seven Towers still stood over the Thousand Lakes. The arch was gone, but nothing else had changed. *I could stay here. With Lan. Nothing has changed.* Her thoughts turned. *Nothing has changed. Egwene is alone in the White Tower. Rand will channel the Power and go mad. And what of Mat and Perrin? Can they take back any shred of their lives? And Moiraine, who tore all our lives apart, still walks free.*

“I must go back,” she whispered. Unable to bear the pain on his face, she pulled free of him. Deliberately she formed a flower bud in her mind, a white bud on a blackthorn branch. She made the thorns sharp and cruel, wishing they could pierce her flesh, feeling as if she already hung in the blackthorn’s branches. Sheriam Sedai’s voice danced just out of hearing, telling her it was dangerous to attempt to channel the Power. The bud opened, and *saidar* filled her with light.

“Nynaeve, tell me what is the matter.”

Lan’s voice slid across her concentration; she refused to let herself hear it. There had to be a way back still. Staring at where the silver arch had been, she tried to find some trace of it. There was nothing.

“Nynaeve . . .”

She tried to picture the arch in her mind, to shape it and form it to the last detail, curve of gleaming metal filled with a glow like snowy fire. It seemed to waver there, in front of her, first there between her and the trees, then not, then there.

“. . . I love you . . .”

She drew at *saidar*, drinking in the flow of the One Power till she thought she would burst. The radiance filling her, shining around her, hurt her own eyes. The heat seemed to consume her. The flickering arch firmed, steadied, stood whole before her. Fire and pain seemed to fill her; her bones felt as if they were burning; her skull seemed a roaring furnace.

“. . . with all my heart.”

She ran toward the silver curve, not letting herself look back. She had been sure the bitterest thing she would ever hear was Marin al’Vere’s cry for help as Nynaeve abandoned her, but that was honey beside the sound of Lan’s anguished voice pursuing her. “Nynaeve, please don’t leave me.”

The white glow consumed her.

Naked, Nynaeve staggered through the arch and fell to her knees, slack-mouthed and sobbing, tears streaming down her cheeks. Sheriam knelt beside her. She glared at the red-haired Aes Sedai. “I hate you!” she managed fiercely, gulping. “I hate all Aes Sedai!”

Sheriam gave a small sigh, then pulled Nynaeve to her feet. “Child, almost every woman who does this says much the same thing. It is no small thing to be made to face your fears. What is this?” she said sharply, turning Nynaeve’s palms up.

Nynaeve's hands quivered with a sudden pain she had not felt before. Driven through the palm of each hand, right in the center, was a long black thorn. Sheriam drew them out carefully; Nynaeve felt the cool Healing of the Aes Sedai's touch. When each thorn came free, it left only a small scar on front and back of the hand.

Sheriam frowned. "There shouldn't be any scarring. And how did you only get two, and both placed so precisely? If you tangled yourself in a blackthorn bush, you should be covered with scratches and thorns."

"I should," Nynaeve agreed bitterly. "Maybe I thought I had already paid enough."

"There is always a price," the Aes Sedai agreed. "Come, now. You have paid the first price. Take what you have paid for." She gave Nynaeve a slight push forward.

Nynaeve realized there were more Aes Sedai in the chamber. The Amyrlin in her striped stole was there, with a shawled sister from each Ajah ranged to either side of her, all of them watching Nynaeve. Remembering Sheriam's instruction, Nynaeve tottered forward and knelt before the Amyrlin. It was she who held the last chalice, and she tipped it slowly over Nynaeve's head.

"You are washed clean of Nynaeve al'Maera from Emond's Field. You are washed clean of all ties that bind you to the world. You come to us washed clean, in heart and soul. You are Nynaeve al'Maera, Accepted of the White Tower." Handing the chalice to one of the sisters, the Amyrlin drew Nynaeve to her feet. "You are sealed to us, now."

The Amyrlin's eyes seemed to hold a dark glow. Nynaeve's shiver had nothing to do with being naked and wet.

* * *

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CHAPTER

24

New Friends and Old Enemies

Egwene followed the Accepted through the halls of the White Tower. Tapestries and paintings covered walls as white as the outside of the tower; patterned tiles made the floor. The Accepted’s white dress was exactly like hers, except for seven narrow bands of color at hem and cuffs. Egwene frowned, looking at that dress. Since yesterday Nynaeve had worn an Accepted’s dress, and she seemed to have no joy of it, nor of the golden ring, a serpent eating its own tail, that marked her level. The few times Egwene had been able to see the Wisdom, Nynaeve’s eyes had seemed shadowed, as if she had seen things she wished with all her heart not to have seen.

“In here,” the Accepted said curtly, gesturing to a door. Named Pedra, she was a short, wiry woman, a little older than Nynaeve, and with a briskness always in her voice. “You’re given this time because it is your first day, but I’ll expect you in the scullery when the gong sounds High, and not one moment later.”

Egwene curtsied, then stuck out her tongue at the Accepted’s retreating back. It might have been only the evening before that Sheriam had finally put her name in the novice book, but already she knew she did not like Pedra. She pushed open the door and went in.

The room was plain and small, with white walls, and there was a young woman, with reddish gold hair spilling around her shoulders, sitting on one of two hard benches. The floor was bare; novices did not get much use of rooms with carpets. Egwene thought the girl was about her own age, but there was a dignity and self-possession about her that made her seem older. The plainly cut novice dress appeared somehow more, on her. Elegant. That was it.

“My name is Elayne,” she said. She tilted her head, studying Egwene. “And you are Egwene. From Emond’s Field, in the Two Rivers.” She said it as if it had some significance, but went right on anyway. “Someone who has been here a little while is always assigned to a new novice for a few days, to help her find her way. Sit, please.”

Egwene took the other bench, facing Elayne. “I thought the Aes Sedai would teach me, now that I’m finally a novice. But all that’s happened so far is that Pedra woke me a good two hours before first light and put me to sweeping the halls. She says I have to help wash dishes after dinner, too.”

Elayne grimaced. “I hate washing dishes. I never had to—well, that doesn’t matter. You will have training. From now on, you will be at training at this hour every day, as a matter of fact. From breakfast until High, then again from dinner to Trine. If you are especially quick or especially slow, they may take you from supper to Full, as well, but that is usually for more chores.” Elayne’s blue eyes took on a thoughtful expression. “You were born with it, weren’t you?” Egwene nodded. “Yes, I thought I felt it. So was I, born with it. Do not be disappointed if you did not know. You will learn to feel the ability in other women. I had the advantage of growing up around an Aes Sedai.”

Egwene wanted to ask about that—*Who grows up with Aes Sedai?*—but Elayne went on.

“And also do not be disappointed if it takes you some time before you can achieve anything. With the One Power, I mean. Even the simplest thing takes a little time. Patience is a virtue that must be learned.” Her nose wrinkled. “Sheriam Sedai always says that, and she does her best to make us all learn it, too. Try to run when she says walk, and she’ll have you in her study before you can blink.”

“I’ve had a few lessons already,” Egwene said, trying to sound modest. She opened herself to *saidar*—that part of it was easier now—and felt the warmth suffuse her body. She decided to try the biggest thing she knew how to do. She stretched out her hand, and a glowing sphere formed over it, pure light. It wavered—she still could not manage to hold it steady—but it was there.

Calmly, Elayne held out her hand, and a ball of light appeared above her palm. Hers flickered, too.

After a moment, a faint light glowed all around Elayne. Egwene gasped, and her ball vanished.

Elayne giggled suddenly, and her light went out, both the sphere and the light around her. “You saw it around me?” she said excitedly. “I saw it around you. Sheriam Sedai said I would, eventually. This was the first time. For you, too?"

Egwene nodded, laughing along with the other girl. "I like you, Elayne. I think we're going to be friends."

"I think so, too, Egwene. You are from the Two Rivers, from Emond's Field. Do you know a boy named Rand al'Thor?"

"I know him." Abruptly Egwene found herself remembering a tale Rand had told, a tale she had not believed, about falling off a wall into a garden and meeting. . . . "You're the Daughter-Heir of Andor," she gasped.

"Yes," Elayne said simply. "If Sheriam Sedai as much as heard I'd mentioned it, I think she would have me into her study before I finished talking."

"Everyone talks about being called to Sheriam's study. Even the Accepted. Does she scold so fiercely? She seems kindly to me."

Elayne hesitated, and when she spoke it was slowly, not meeting Egwene's eye. "She keeps a willow switch on her desk. She says if you can't learn to follow the rules in a civilized way, she will teach you another way. There are so many rules for novices, it is very hard not to break some of them," she finished.

"But that's—that's horrible! I'm not a child, and neither are you. I won't be treated as one."

"But we are children. The Aes Sedai, the full sisters, are the grown women. The Accepted are the young women, old enough to be trusted without someone looking over their shoulders every moment. And novices are the children, to be protected and cared for, guided in the way they should go, and punished when they do what they should not. That is the way Sheriam Sedai explains it. No one is going to punish you over your lessons, not unless you try something you've been told not to. It is hard not to try, sometimes; you will find you want to channel as much as you want to breathe. But if you break too many dishes because you are daydreaming when you should be washing, if you're disrespectful to an Accepted, or leave the Tower without permission, or speak to an Aes Sedai before she speaks to you, or. . . . The only thing to do is the best you can. There isn't anything else *to* do."

"It sounds almost as if they're trying to make us want to leave," Egwene protested.

“They aren’t, but then again, they are. Egwene, there are only forty novices in the Tower. Only forty, and no more than seven or eight will become Accepted. That is not enough, Sheriam Sedai says. She says there are not enough Aes Sedai now to do what needs to be done. But the Tower will not . . . cannot . . . lower its standards. The Aes Sedai cannot take a woman as a sister if she does not have the ability, and the strength, and the desire. They can’t give the ring and the shawl to one who cannot channel the Power well enough, or who will allow herself to be intimidated, or who will turn back when the road turns rough. Training and testing take care of the channeling, and for strength and desire. . . . Well, if you want to go, they will let you. Once you know enough that you won’t die of ignorance.”

“I suppose,” Egwene said slowly, “Sheriam told us some of that. I never thought about there not being enough Aes Sedai, though.”

“She has a theory. She says we have culled humankind. You know about culling? Cutting out of the herd those animals that have traits you don’t like?” Egwene nodded impatiently; no one could grow up around sheep without knowing about culling the flock. “Sheriam Sedai says that with the Red Ajah hunting down men who could channel for three thousand years, we are culling the ability to channel out of us all. I would not mention this around any Reds, if I were you. Sheriam Sedai has been in more than one shouting match over it, and we are only novices.”

“I won’t.”

Elayne paused, and then said, “Is Rand well?”

Egwene felt a sudden stab of jealousy—Elayne was very pretty—but over it came a stronger stab of fear. She went over the little she knew of Rand’s one meeting with the Daughter-Heir, reassuring herself: Elayne could not possibly know that Rand could channel.

“Egwene?”

“He is as well as he can be.” *I hope he is, the wool-headed idiot.* “He was riding with some Shienaran soldiers the last I saw him.”

“Shienarans! He told me he was a shepherd.” She shook her head. “I find myself thinking of him at the oddest times. Elaida thinks he is important in some way. She didn’t come right out and say so, but she ordered a search for him, and she was in a fury when she learned he had left Caemlyn.”

“Elaida?”

“Elaida Sedai. My mother’s councilor. She is Red Ajah, but Mother seems to like her despite that.”

Egwene’s mouth felt dry. *Red Ajah, and interested in Rand.* “I—I don’t know where he is, now. He left Shienar, and I don’t think he was going back.”

Elayne gave her a level look. “I would not tell Elaida where to find him if I knew, Egwene. He has done no wrong that I know, and I fear she wants to use him in some manner. Anyway, I’ve not seen her since the day we arrived, with Whitecloaks dogging our trail. They are still camped on the Dragonmount side.” Abruptly she bounded to her feet. “Let us talk of happier things. There are two others here who know Rand, and I would like you to meet one of them.” She took Egwene’s hand and pulled her out of the room.

“Two girls? Rand seems to meet a lot of girls.”

“Ummm?” Still drawing Egwene down the corridor, Elayne studied her. “Yes. Well. One of them is a lazy chit named Else Grinwell. I don’t think she will be here long. She shirks her chores, and she is always sneaking off to watch the Warders practice their swords. She says Rand came to her father’s farm, with a friend of his. Mat. It seems they put notions of the world beyond the next village into her head, and she ran away to come be an Aes Sedai.”

“Men,” Egwene muttered. “I dance a few dances with a nice boy, and Rand goes around looking like a dog with a sore tooth, but he—” She cut off as a man stepped into the hall ahead of them. Beside her, Elayne stopped, too, and her hand tightened on Egwene’s.

There was nothing alarming about him, aside from the suddenness of his appearance. He was tall and handsome, short of middle years, with long, dark curling hair, but his shoulders sagged, and there was sadness in his eyes. He made no move toward Egwene and Elayne, only stood looking at them until one of the Accepted appeared at his shoulder.

“You should not be in here,” she said to him, not unkindly.

“I wanted to walk.” His voice was deep, and as sad as his eyes.

“You can walk out in the garden, where you are supposed to be. The sunshine will be good for you.”

The man rumbled a bitter laugh. “With two or three of you watching my every move? You’re just afraid I’ll find a knife.” At the look in the

Accepted’s eyes, he laughed again. “For myself, woman. For myself. Lead me to your garden, and your watching eyes.”

The Accepted touched his arm lightly, and led him away.

“Logain,” Elayne said when he was gone.

“The false Dragon!”

“He has been gentled, Egwene. He is no more dangerous than any other man, now. But I remember seeing him before, when it took six Aes Sedai to keep him from wielding the Power and destroying us all.” She shivered.

Egwene did, too. That was what the Red Ajah would do to Rand.

“Do they always have to be gentled?” she asked. Elayne stared at her, mouth agape, and she quickly added, “It is just that I’d think the Aes Sedai would find some other way to deal with them. Anaiya and Moiraine both said the greatest feats of the Age of Legends required men and women working together with the Power. I just thought they’d try to find a way.”

“Well, do not let any Red sister hear you thinking it aloud. Egwene, they did try. For three hundred years after the White Tower was built, they tried. They gave up because there was nothing to find. Come on. I want you to meet Min. Not in the garden where Logain is going, thank the Light.”

The name sounded vaguely familiar to Egwene, and when she saw the young woman, she knew why. There was a narrow stream in the garden, with a low stone bridge over it, and Min sat cross-legged on the wall of the bridge. She wore a man’s tight breeches and baggy shirt, and with her dark hair cut short she could almost pass for a boy, though an uncommonly pretty one. A gray coat lay beside her on the coping.

“I know you,” Egwene said. “You worked at the inn in Baerlon.” A light breeze riffled the water beneath the bridge, and graywings warbled in the trees of the garden.

Min smiled. “And you were one of those who brought the Darkfriends down on us to burn it down. No, don’t worry. The messenger who came to fetch me brought enough gold that Master Fitch is building it back again twice as big. Good morning, Elayne. Not slaving over your lessons? Or over some pots?” It was said in a bantering tone, as between friends, as Elayne’s answering grin proved.

“I see Sheriam has not yet managed to get you into a dress.”

Min’s laugh was wicked. “I’m no novice.” She made her voice squeaky. “Yes, Aes Sedai. No, Aes Sedai. May I sweep another floor, Aes

Sedai? I," she said, resuming her own low voice, "clothe myself the way I want." She turned to Egwene. "Is Rand well?"

Egwene's mouth tightened. *He should wear ram's horns like a Trolloc*, she thought angrily. "I was sorry when your inn caught fire, and I am glad Master Fitch was able to rebuild. Why have you come to Tar Valon? It's clear you do not mean to be an Aes Sedai." Min arched an eyebrow in what Egwene was sure was amusement.

"She likes him," Elayne explained.

"I know." Min glanced at Egwene, and for an instant Egwene thought she saw sadness—or regret?—in her eyes. "I am here," Min said carefully, "because I was sent for, and was given the choice between riding and coming tied in a sack."

"You always exaggerate it," Elayne said. "Sheriam Sedai saw the letter, and she says it was a request. Min sees things, Egwene. That's why she's here; so the Aes Sedai can study how she does it. It isn't the Power."

"Request," Min snorted. "When an Aes Sedai requests your presence, it's like a command from a queen with a hundred soldiers to back it up."

"Everybody sees things," Egwene said.

Elayne shook her head. "Not like Min. She sees—auras—around people. And images."

"Not all the time," Min put in. "Not around everybody."

"And she can read things about you from them, though I'm not sure she always tells the truth. She said I'd have to share my husband with two other women, and I'd never put up with that. She just laughs, and says it was never her idea of how to run things, either. But she said I would be a queen before she knew who I was; she said she saw a crown, and it was the Rose Crown of Andor."

Despite herself, Egwene asked, "What do you see when you look at me?"

Min glanced at her. "A white flame, and. . . . Oh, all sorts of things. Idon't know what it means."

"She says that a great deal," Elayne said dryly. "One of the things she said she saw looking at me was a severed hand. Not mine, she says. She claims she does not know what it means, either."

"Because I don't," Min said. "I don't know what half of it means."

The crunch of boots on the walk brought them around to look at two young men with their shirts and coats across their arms, leaving sweaty chests bare, and scabbarded swords in their hands. Egwene found herself staring at the most handsome man she had ever seen. Tall and slim, but hard, he moved with a cat-like grace. She suddenly realized he was bowing over her hand—she had not even felt him take it in his—and fumbled in her mind for the name she had heard.

“Galad,” she murmured. His dark eyes stared back into hers. He was older than she. Older than Rand. At the thought of Rand, she gave a start and came to herself.

“And I am Gawyn”—the other young man grinned—“since I don’t think you heard the first time.” Min was grinning, too, and only Elayne wore a frown.

Egwene abruptly remembered her hand, still held by Galad, and freed it.

“If your duties allow,” Galad said, “I would like to see you again, Egwene. We could walk, or if you obtain permission to leave the Tower, we could picnic outside the city.”

“That—that would be nice.” She was uncomfortably aware of the others, Min and Gawyn still with their amused grins, Elayne still with her scowl. She tried to settle herself, to think of Rand. *He’s so . . . beautiful.* She gave a jump, half afraid she had spoken aloud.

“Until then.” Finally taking his eyes from hers, Galad bowed to Elayne. “Sister.” Lithe as a blade, he strolled on across the bridge.

“That one,” Min murmured, peering after him, “will always do what is right. No matter who it hurts.”

“Sister?” Egwene said. Elayne’s scowl had lessened only slightly. “I thought he was your. . . . I mean, the way you’re frowning. . . .” She had thought Elayne was jealous, and she still was not sure.

“I am not his sister,” Elayne said firmly. “I refuse to be.”

“Our father was his father,” Gawyn said dryly. “You cannot deny that, unless you want to call Mother a liar, and that, I think, would take more nerve than we have between us.”

For the first time Egwene realized that he had the same reddish gold hair as Elayne, though darkened and curled by sweat.

“Min is right,” Elayne said. “Galad has not the smallest part of humanity in him. He takes right above mercy, or pity, or. . . . He is no more human than a Trolloc.”

Gawyn's grin came back. "I do not know about that. Not from the way he was looking at Egwene, here." He caught her look, and his sister's, and held up his hands as if to fend them off with his sheathed sword. "Besides, he has the best hand with a sword I've ever seen. The Warders only need show him something once, and he's learned it. They sweat me nearly to death to learn half what Galad does without trying."

"And being good with a sword is enough?" Elayne sniffed. "Men! Egwene, as you may have guessed, this disgracefully unclothed lummox is my brother. Gawyn, Egwene knows Rand al'Thor. She is from the same village."

"Is she? Was he really born in the Two Rivers, Egwene?"

Egwene made herself nod calmly. *What does he know?* "Of course, he was. I grew up with him."

"Of course," Gawyn said slowly. "Such a strange fellow. A shepherd, he said, though he never looked or acted like any shepherd I ever saw. Strange. I have met all sorts of people, and they've met Rand al'Thor. Some do not even know his name, but the description could not be anyone else, and he's shifted every one of their lives. There was an old farmer who came to Caemlyn just to see Logain, when Logain was brought through on his way here; yet the farmer stayed to stand for Mother when the riots started. Because of a young man off to see the world, who made him think there was more to life than his farm. Rand al'Thor. You could almost think he was *ta'veren.* Elaida is certainly interested in him. I wonder if meeting him will shift our lives in the Pattern?"

Egwene looked at Elayne and Min. She was sure they could not have a clue that Rand really was *ta'veren.* She had never really thought about that part of it before; he was Rand, and he had been cursed with the ability to channel. But *ta'veren* did move people, whether they wanted to be moved or not. "I really do like you," she said abruptly, including both girls in her gesture. "I want to be your friend."

"And I want to be yours," Elayne said.

Impulsively, Egwene hugged her, and then Min jumped down, and the three of them stood there on the bridge hugging one another all together.

"We three *are* tied together," Min said, "and we cannot let any man get in the way of that. Not even him."

"Would one of you mind telling me what this is all about?" Gawyn inquired gently.

“You would not understand,” his sister said, and the three girls all caught a fit of the giggles.

Gawyn scratched his head, then shook it. “Well, if it has anything to do with Rand al’Thor, be sure you don’t let Elaida hear of it. She has been at me like a Whitecloak Questioner three times since we arrived. I do not think she means him any—” He gave a start; there was a woman crossing the garden, a woman in a red-fringed shawl. “ ‘Name the Dark One,’ ” he quoted, “ ‘and he appears.’ I do not need another lecture about wearing my shirt when I’m out of the practice yards. Good morning to you all.”

Elaida spared a glance for the departing Gawyn as she came up the bridge. She was a handsome woman rather than beautiful, Egwene thought, but that ageless look marked her as surely as her shawl; only the newest-made sisters lacked it. When her gaze swept over Egwene, pausing only a moment, Egwene suddenly saw a hardness in the Aes Sedai. She had always thought of Moiraine as strong, steel under silk, but Elaida dispensed with the silk.

“Elaida,” Elayne said, “this is Egwene. She was born with the seed in her, too. And she has already had some lessons, so she is as far along as I am. Elaida?”

The Aes Sedai’s face was blank and unreadable. “In Caemlyn, child, I am councilor to the Queen your mother, but this is the White Tower, and you, a novice.” Min made as if to go, but Elaida stopped her with a sharp, “Stay, girl. I would speak with you.”

“I’ve known you all my life, Elaida,” Elayne said incredulously. “You watched me grow up, and made the gardens bloom in winter so I could play.”

“Child, there you were the Daughter-Heir. Here you are a novice. You must learn that. You will be great one day, but you must learn!”

“Yes, Aes Sedai.”

Egwene was astounded. If someone had snubbed her so before others, she would have been in a fury.

“Now, off with both of you.” A gong began to toll, deep and sonorous, and Elaida tilted her head. The sun stood halfway to its pinnacle. “High,” Elaida said. “You must hurry, if you do not want further admonishment. And Elayne? See the Mistress of Novices in her study after your chores. A novice does not speak to Aes Sedai unless bidden to. Run, both of you. You will be late. Run!”

They ran, holding their skirts up. Egwene looked at Elayne. Elayne had two spots of color in her cheeks and a determined look on her face.

"I will be Aes Sedai," Elayne said softly, but it sounded like a promise.

Behind them, Egwene heard the Aes Sedai begin, "I am given to understand, girl, that you were brought here by Moiraine Sedai."

She wanted to stay and listen, to hear if Elaida asked about Rand, but High rang through the White Tower, and she was summoned to chores. She ran as she had been commanded to run.

"I will be Aes Sedai," she growled. Elayne flashed a quick smile of understanding, and they ran faster.

Min's shirt clung to her when she finally left the bridge. Not sweat from the sun, but from the heat of Elaida's questions. She looked over her shoulder to make sure the Aes Sedai was not following her, but Elaida was nowhere in sight.

How did Elaida know that Moiraine had summoned her? Min had been sure that was a secret known only to her, Moiraine, and Sheriam. And all those questions about Rand. It had not been easy keeping a smooth face and a steady eye while telling an Aes Sedai to her face that she had never heard of him and knew nothing of him. *What does* she *want with him? Light, what does Moiraine want with him? What is he? Light, I don't want to fall in love with a man I've only met once, and a farmboy at that.*

"Moiraine, the Light blind you," she muttered, "whatever you brought me here for, come out from wherever you're hiding and tell me so I can go!"

The only answer was the sweet song of the graywings. With a grimace she went in search of a place to cool off.

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CHAPTER

25

Cairhien

The city of Cairhien lay across hills against the River Alguenya, and Rand's first sight of it came from the hills to the north, by the light of the midday sun. Elricain Tavolin and the fifty Cairhienin soldiers still seemed like guards to him—the more since crossing the bridge at the Gaelin; they became more stiff the further south they rode—but Loial and Hurin did not appear to mind, so he tried not to. He studied the city, as large as any he had seen. Fat ships and broad barges filled the river, and tall granaries sprawled along the far bank, but Cairhien seemed to be laid out in a precise grid behind its high, gray walls. Those walls themselves made a perfect square, with one side hard along the river. In just as exact a pattern, towers rose within the walls, soaring as much as twenty times the height of the wall, yet even from the hills Rand could see that each one ended in a jagged top.

Outside the city walls, surrounding them from riverbank to riverbank, lay a warren of streets, crisscrossing at all angles and teeming with people. Foregate, Rand knew it was called, from Hurin; once there had been a market village for every city gate, but over the years they had all grown into one, a hodgepodge of streets and alleys growing up every which way.

As Rand and the others rode into those dirt streets, Tavolin put some of his soldiers to clearing a path through the throng, shouting and urging their horses forward as if to trample any who did not get out of the way quickly. People moved aside with no more than a glance, as if it were an everyday occurrence. Rand found himself smiling, though.

The Foregate people's clothes were shabby more often than not, yet much of it was colorful, and there was a raucous bustle of life to the place. Hawkers cried their wares, and shopkeepers called for people to examine the goods displayed on tables before their shops. Barbers, fruit-peddlers, knife-sharpeners, men and women offering a dozen services and a hundred things for sale, wandered through the crowds. Music drifted through the babble from more than one structure; at first Rand thought they were inns, but the signs out front all showed men playing flutes or harps, tumbling or juggling, and large as they were, they had no windows. Most of the buildings in Foregate seemed to be wood, however big they were, and a good many looked new, if poorly made. Rand gaped at several that stood seven stories or more; they swayed slightly, though the people hurrying in and out did not seem to notice.

"Peasants," Tavolin muttered, staring straight ahead in disgust. "Look at them, corrupted by outland ways. They should not be here."

"Where should they be?" Rand asked. The Cairhienin officer glared at him and spurred his horse forward, flogging at the crowd with his quirt.

Hurin touched Rand's arm. "It was the Aiel War, Lord Rand." He looked to make sure none of the soldiers were close enough to hear. "Many of the farmers were afraid to go back to their lands near the Spine of the World, and they all came here, near enough. That's why Galldrian has the river full of grain barges up from Andor and Tear. There's no crops coming from farms in the east because there aren't any farms anymore. Best not to mention it to a Cairhienin though, my Lord. They like to pretend the war never happened, or at least that they won it."

Despite Tavolin's quirt, they were forced to halt while a strange procession crossed their path. Half a dozen men, beating tambours and dancing, led the way for a string of huge puppets, each half again as tall as the men who worked them with long poles. Giant crowned figures of men and women in long, ornate robes bowed to the crowd amid the shapes of fanciful beasts. A lion with wings. A goat, walking on its hind legs, with two heads, both of which were apparently meant to be breathing fire, from the crimson streamers hanging from the two mouths. Something that seemed to be half cat and half eagle, and another with a bear's head on a man's body, which Rand took to be a Trolloc. The crowd cheered and laughed as they pranced by.

"Man who made that never saw a Trolloc," Hurin grumbled. "Head's too big, and it's too skinny. Likely didn't believe in them, either, my Lord, any more than in those other things. The only monsters these Foregate folk believe in are Aiel."

"Are they having a festival?" Rand asked. He did not see any sign of it other than the procession, but he thought that there must be a reason for that. Tavolin ordered his soldiers forward again.

“No more than every day, Rand,” Loial said. Walking alongside his horse, the blanket-wrapped chest still strapped to his saddle, the Ogier drew as many looks as the puppets had. Some even laughed and clapped as they had for the puppets. “I fear Galldrian keeps his people quiet by entertaining them. He gives gleemen and musicians the King’s Gift, a bounty in silver, to perform here in the Foregate, and he sponsors horse races down by the river every day. There are fireworks many nights, too.” He sounded disgusted. “Elder Haman says Galldrian is a disgrace.” He blinked, realizing what he had said, and looked around hurriedly to see if any of the soldiers had heard. None seemed to have.

“Fireworks,” Hurin said, nodding. “The Illuminators have built a chapter house here, I’ve heard, the same as in Tanchico. I didn’t half mind seeing the fireworks, when I was here before.”

Rand shook his head. He had never seen fireworks elaborate enough to require even one Illuminator. He had heard they only left Tanchico to put on displays for rulers. It was a strange place he was coming to.

At the tall, square archway of the city gate, Tavolin ordered a halt and dismounted by a squat stone building just inside the walls. It had arrow-slits instead of windows, and a heavy, iron-bound door.

“A moment, my Lord Rand,” the officer said. Tossing his reins to one of the soldiers, he disappeared inside.

With a wary look at the soldiers—they sat their horses rigidly in two long files; Rand wondered what they would do if he and Loial and Hurin tried to leave—he took the opportunity to study the city that lay before him.

Cairhien proper was a sharp contrast to the chaotic bustle of the Foregate. Broad, paved streets, wide enough to make the people in them seem fewer than they were, crossed each other at right angles. Just as in Tremonsien, the hills had been carved and terraced to straight lines. Closed sedan chairs, some with small pennants bearing the sigil of a House, moved with deliberateness, and carriages rolled down the streets slowly. People went silently in dark clothes, with no bright colors except here and there slashes across the breast of coat or dress. The more slashes, the more proudly the wearer moved, but no one laughed, or even smiled. The buildings on their terraces were all of stone, and the ornamentation was straight-lined and sharp-angled. There were no hawkers or peddlers in the streets, and even the shops seemed subdued, with only small signs and no wares displayed outside.

He could see the great towers more clearly, now. Scaffolds of lashed poles surrounded them, and workmen swarmed on the scaffolding, laying new stones to push the towers higher still.

"The Topless Towers of Cairhien," Loial murmured sadly. "Well, they were tall enough to warrant the name, once. When the Aiel took Cairhien, about the time you were born, the towers burned, and cracked, and fell. I don't see any Ogier among the stonemasons. No Ogier could like working here—the Cairhienin want what they want, without embellishment—but there were Ogier when I was here before."

Tavolin came out, trailing another officer and two clerks, one carrying a large, wood-bound ledger and the other a tray with writing implements. The front of the officer's head was shaven like Tavolin's, though advancing baldness seemed to have taken more hair than the razor. Both officers looked from Rand to the chest hidden by Loial's striped blanket and back again. Neither asked what was under the blanket. Tavolin had looked at it often on the way from Tremonsien, but he had never asked, either. The balding man looked at Rand's sword, too, and pursed his lips for an instant.

Tavolin gave the other officer's name as Asan Sandair, and announced loudly, "Lord Rand of House al'Thor, in Andor, and his man, called Hurin, with Loial, an Ogier of Stedding Shangtai." The clerk with the ledger opened it across his two arms, and Sandair wrote the names in a round hand.

"You must return to this guardhouse by this same hour tomorrow, my Lord," Sandair said, leaving the sanding to the second clerk, "and give the name of the inn where you are staying."

Rand looked at the staid streets of Cairhien, then back at the liveliness of the Foregate. "Can you tell me the name of a good inn out there?" He nodded to the Foregate.

Hurin made a frantic *hsst* and leaned close. "It would not be proper, Lord Rand," he whispered. "If you stay in the Foregate, being a lord and all, they'll be sure you are up to something."

Rand could see the sniffer was right. Sandair's mouth had dropped open and Tavolin's brows had risen at his question, and they were both still watching him intently. He wanted to tell them he was not playing their Great Game, but instead he said, "We will take rooms in the city. We can go now?"

"Of course, my Lord Rand." Sandair made a bow. "But . . . the inn?"

“I will let you know when we find one.” Rand turned Red, then paused. Selene’s note crackled in his pocket. “I need to find a young woman from Cairhien. The Lady Selene. She is my age, and beautiful. I don’t know her House.”

Sandair and Tavolin exchanged looks, then Sandair said, “I will make inquiries, my Lord. Perhaps I will be able to tell you something when you come tomorrow.”

Rand nodded and led Loial and Hurin into the city. They attracted little notice, though there were few riders. Even Loial attracted almost none. The people seemed nearly ostentatious about minding their own business.

“Will they take it the wrong way,” Rand asked Hurin, “my asking after Selene?”

“Who can say with Cairhienin, Lord Rand? They seem to think everything has to do with *Daes Dae’mar.*”

Rand shrugged. He felt as if people were looking at him. He could not wait to get a good, plain coat again, and stop pretending to be what he was not.

Hurin knew several inns in the city, though his time in Cairhien had been spent mainly in the Foregate. The sniffer led them to one called The Defender of the Dragonwall, the sign bearing a crowned man with his foot on another man’s chest and his sword at the man’s throat. The fellow on his back had red hair.

A hostler came to take their horses, darting quick looks at Rand and at Loial when he thought he was not observed. Rand told himself to stop having fancies; not everyone in the city could be playing this Game of theirs. And if they were, he was no part of it.

The common room was neat, with the tables laid out as strictly as the city, and only a few people at them. They glanced up at the newcomers, then back to their wine immediately; Rand had the feeling they were still watching, though, and listening. A small fire burned in the big fireplace, though the day was warming.

The innkeeper was a plump, unctuous man with a single stripe of green across his dark gray coat. He gave a start at his first sight of them, and Rand was not surprised. Loial, with the chest in his arms under its striped blanket, had to duck his head to make it in through the door, Hurin was burdened with all their saddlebags and bundles, and his own red coat was a sharp contrast to the somber colors the people at the tables wore.

The innkeeper took in Rand's coat and his sword, and his oily smile came back. He bowed, washing his smooth hands. "Forgive me, my Lord. It was just that for a moment I took you for—Forgive me. My brain is not what it was. You wish rooms, my Lord?" He added another, lesser bow for Loial. "I am called Cuale, my Lord."

He thought I was Aiel, Rand thought sourly. He wanted to be gone from Cairhien. But it was the one place Ingtar might find them. And Selene had said she would wait for him in Cairhien.

It took a little time for their rooms to be readied, Cuale explaining with too many smiles and bows that it was necessary to move a bed for Loial. Rand wanted them all to share a room again, but between the innkeeper's scandalized looks and Hurin's insistence—"We have to show these Cairhienin we know what's right as well as they do, Lord Rand"—they ended with two, one for him alone, with a connecting door.

The rooms were much the same except that theirs had two beds, one sized for an Ogier, while his had only one bed, and that almost as big as the other two, with massive square posts that nearly reached the ceiling. His tall-backed, padded chair and the washstand were square and massive, too, and the wardrobe standing against his wall was carved in a heavy, rigid style that made the thing look ready enough to fall over on him. A pair of windows siding his bed looked out on the street, two floors below.

As soon as the innkeeper left, Rand opened the door and admitted Loial and Hurin into his room. "This place gnaws at me," he told them. "Everybody looks at you as if they think you're doing something. I'm going back to the Foregate, for an hour anyway. At least the people laugh, there. Which of you is willing to take the first watch on the Horn?"

"I will stay," Loial said quickly. "I'd like a chance to do a little reading. Just because I didn't see any Ogier does not mean there are no stonemasons down from Stedding Tsofu. It is not far from the city."

"I'd think you would want to meet them."

"Ah . . . no, Rand. They asked enough questions the last time about why I was outside alone as it was. If they've had word from Stedding Shangtai. . . . Well, I will just rest here and read, I think."

Rand shook his head. He often forgot that Loial had run away from home, in effect, to see the world. "What about you, Hurin? There's music in the Foregate, and people laughing. I'll wager no one is playing *Daes Dae'mar* there."

“I would not be so certain of that myself, Lord Rand. In any case, I thank you for the invitation, but I think not. There’s so many fights—and killings, too—in Foregate, that it stinks, if you know what I mean. Not that they’re likely to bother a lord, of course; the soldiers would be down on them if they did. But if it pleases you, I would like to have a drink in the common room.”

“Hurin, you don’t need my permission for anything. You know that.”

“As you say, my Lord.” The sniffer gave a suggestion of a bow.

Rand took a deep breath. If they did not leave Cairhien soon, Hurin would be bowing and scraping left and right. And if Mat and Perrin saw that, they would never let him forget it. “I hope nothing delays Ingtar. If he doesn’t come quickly, we’ll have to take the Horn back to Fal Dara ourselves.” He touched Selene’s note through his coat. “We will have to. Loial, I’ll come back so you can see some of the city.”

“I’d rather not risk it,” Loial said.

Hurin accompanied Rand downstairs. As soon as they reached the common room, Cuale was bowing in front of Rand, pushing a tray at him. Three folded and sealed parchments lay on the tray. Rand took them, since that was what the innkeeper seemed to intend. They were a fine grade of parchment, soft and smooth to his touch. Expensive.

“What are these?” he asked.

Cuale bowed again. “Invitations, of course, my Lord. From three of the noble Houses.” He bowed himself away.

“Who would send me invitations?” Rand turned them over in his hand. None of the men at the tables looked up, but he had the feeling they were watching just the same. He did not recognize the seals. None was the crescent moon and stars Selene had used. “Who would know I was here?”

“Everyone by now, Lord Rand,” Hurin said quietly. He seemed to feel eyes watching, too. “The guards at the gate would not keep their mouths closed about an outland lord coming to Cairhien. The hostler, the innkeeper . . . everybody tells what they know where they think it will do them the most good, my Lord.”

With a grimace, Rand took two steps and hurled the invitations into the fire. They caught immediately. “I am not playing *Daes Dae’mar,*” he said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. Not even Cuale looked at him. “I’ve nothing to do with your Great Game. I am just here to wait for some friends.”

Hurin caught his arm. “Please, Lord Rand.” His voice was an urgent whisper. “Please don’t do that again.”

“Again? You really think I’ll receive more?”

“I’m certain. Light, but you mind me of the time Teva got so mad at a hornet buzzing round his ears, he kicked the nest. You’ve likely just convinced everyone in the room you are in some deep part of the Game. It must be deep, as they’ll see it, if you deny playing at all. *Every* lord and lady in Cairhien plays it.” The sniffer glanced at the invitations, curling blackly in the fire, and winced. “And you have surely made enemies of three Houses. Not great Houses, or they’d not have moved so quickly, but still noble. You must answer any more invitations you receive, my Lord. Decline if you will—though they’ll read things into whose invitations you do decline. And into whose you accept. Of course, if you decline them all, or accept them all—”

“I’ll have no part of it,” Rand said quietly. “We are leaving Cairhien as soon as we can.” He thrust his fists into his coat pockets, and felt Selene’s note crumple. Pulling it out, he smoothed it on his coat front. “As soon as we can,” he muttered, putting it back in his pocket again. “Have your drink, Hurin.”

He stalked out angrily, not sure whether he was angry with himself, or with Cairhien and its Great Game, or Selene for vanishing, or Moiraine. She had started it all, stealing his coats and giving him a lord’s clothes instead. Even now that he called himself free of them, an Aes Sedai still managed to interfere in his life, and without even being there.

He went back through the same gate by which he had entered the city, since that was the way he knew. A man standing in front of the guardhouse took note of him—his bright coat marked him out, as well as his height among the Cairhienin—and hurried inside, but Rand did not notice. The laughter and music of the Foregate were pulling him on.

If his gold-embroidered red coat made him stand out inside the walls, it fit right into the Foregate. Many of the men milling through the crowded streets were dressed just as darkly as those in the city, but just as many wore coats of red, or blue, or green, or gold—some bright enough to be a Tinker’s clothes—and even more of the women had embroidered dresses and colored scarves or shawls. Most of the finery was tattered and ill-fitting, as if made for someone else originally, but if some of those who wore it eyed his fine coat, none seemed to take it amiss.

Once he had to stop for another procession of giant puppets. While the drummers beat their tambours and capered, a pig-faced Trolloc with tusks fought a man in a crown. After a few desultory blows, the Trolloc collapsed to laughter and cheers from the onlookers.

Rand grunted. *They don't die so easily as that.*

He glanced into one of the large, windowless buildings, stopping to look through the door. To his surprise, it seemed to be one huge room, open to the sky in the middle and lined with balconies, with a large dais at one end. He had never seen or heard of anything like it. People jammed the balconies and the floor watching people perform on the dais. He peeked into others as he passed them, and saw jugglers, and musicians, any number of tumblers, and even a gleeman, with his cloak of patches, declaiming a story from *The Great Hunt of the Horn* in sonorous-voice High Chant.

That made him think of Thom Merrilin, and he hurried on. Memories of Thom were always sad. Thom had been a friend. A friend who had died for him. *While I ran away and let him die.*

In another of the big structures, a woman in voluminous white robes appeared to make things vanish from one basket and appear in another, then disappear from her hands in great puffs of smoke. The crowd watching her *oohed* and *aahed* loudly.

"Two coppers, my good Lord," a ratty little man in the doorway said. "Two coppers to see the Aes Sedai."

"I don't think so." Rand glanced back at the woman. A white dove had appeared in her hands. *Aes Sedai?* "No." He gave the ratty man a small bow and left.

He was making his way through the throng, wondering what to see next, when a deep voice, accompanied by the plucking of a harp, drifted out from a doorway with the sign of a juggler over it.

". . . cold blows the wind down Shara Pass; cold lies the grave unmarked. Yet every year at Sunday, upon those piled stones appears a single rose, one crystal teardrop like dew upon the petals, laid by the fair hand of Dunsinin, for she keeps fast to the bargain made by Rogosh Eagle-eye."

The voice drew Rand like a rope. He pushed through the doorway as applause rose within.

"Two coppers, my good Lord," said a rat-faced man who could have been twin to the other. "Two coppers to see—"

Rand dug out some coins and thrust them at the man. He walked on in a daze, staring at the man bowing on the dais to the clapping of his listeners, cradling his harp in one arm and with the other spreading his patch-covered cloak as if to trap all the sound they made. He was a tall man, lanky and not young, with long mustaches as white as the hair on his head. And when he straightened and saw Rand, the eyes that widened were sharp and blue.

"Thom." Rand's whisper was lost in the noise of the crowd.

Holding Rand's eye, Thom Merrilin nodded slightly toward a small door beside the dais. Then he was bowing again, smiling and basking in the applause.

Rand made his way to the door and through it. It was only a small hallway, with three steps leading up to the dais. In the other direction from the dais Rand could see a juggler practicing with colored balls, and six tumblers limbering themselves.

Thom appeared on the steps, limping as though his right leg did not bend as well as it had. He eyed the juggler and the tumblers, blew out his mustaches disdainfully, and turned to Rand. "All they want to hear is *The Great Hunt of the Horn*. You would think, with the news from Haddon Mirk and Saldaea, one of them would ask for *The Karaethon Cycle*. Well, maybe not that, but I'd pay myself to tell something else." He looked Rand up and down. "You look as if you're doing well, boy." He fingered Rand's collar and pursed his lips. "Very well."

Rand could not help laughing. "I left Whitebridge sure you were dead. Moiraine said you were still alive, but I. . . . Light, Thom, it's good to see you again! I should have gone back to help you."

"Bigger fool if you had, boy. That Fade"—he looked around; there was no one close enough to hear, but he lowered his voice anyway—"had no interest in me. It left me a little present of a stiff leg and ran off after you and Mat. All you could have done was die." He paused, looking thoughtful. "Moiraine said I was still alive, did she? Is she with you, then?"

Rand shook his head. To his surprise, Thom seemed disappointed.

"Too bad, in a way. She's a fine woman, even if she is. . . ." He left it unsaid. "So it was Mat or Perrin she was after. I won't ask which. They were good boys, and I don't want to know." Rand shifted uneasily, and gave a start when Thom fixed him with a bony finger. "What I do want to know is, do you still have my harp and flute? I want them back, boy. What I have now are not fit for a pig to play."

“I have them, Thom. I’ll bring them to you, I promise. I can’t believe you are alive. And I can’t believe you aren’t in Illian. The Great Hunt setting out. The prize for the best telling of *The Great Hunt of the Horn*. You were dying to go.”

Thom snorted. “After Whitebridge? Likely I’d die if I did go. Even if I could have reached the boat before it sailed, Domon and his whole crew would be spreading the tale all over Illian about how I was being chased by Trollocs. If they saw the Fade, or heard of it, before Domon cut his lines. . . . Most Illianers think Trollocs and Fades are fables, but enough others might want to know why a man was pursued by them to make Illian somewhat more than uncomfortable.”

“Thom, I have so much to tell you.”

The gleeman cut him off. “Later, boy.” He was exchanging glares down the length of the hall with the narrow-faced man from the door. “If I don’t go back and tell another, he will no doubt send the juggler out, and that lot will tear the hall down around our heads. You come to The Bunch of Grapes, just beyond the Jangai Gate. I have a room there. Anyone can tell you where to find it. I’ll be there in another hour or so. One more tale will have to satisfy them.” He started back up the steps, flinging over his shoulder, “And bring my harp and my flute!”

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CHAPTER

26

Discord

Rand darted through the common room of The Defender of the Dragonwall and hurried upstairs, grinning at the startled look the innkeeper had given him. Rand wanted to grin at everything. *Thom's alive!*

He flung open the door to his room and went straight to the wardrobe.

Loial and Hurin put their heads in from the other room, both in their shirtsleeves and with pipes in their teeth trailing thin streams of smoke.

“Has something happened, Lord Rand?” Hurin asked anxiously.

Rand slung the bundle made from Thom's cloak on his shoulder. “The best thing that could, next to Ingtar coming. Thom Merrilin's alive. And he's here, in Cairhien.”

“The gleeman you told me about?” Loial said. “That is wonderful, Rand. I would like to meet him.”

“Then come with me, if Hurin's willing to keep watch awhile.”

“It would be a pleasure, Lord Rand.” Hurin took the pipe out of his mouth. “That lot in the common room kept trying to pump me—without letting on what they were doing, of course—about who you are, my Lord, and why we're in Cairhien. I told them we were waiting here to meet friends, but being Cairhienin, they figured I was hiding something deeper.”

“Let them think what they want. Come on, Loial.”

“I think not.” The Ogier sighed. “I really would rather stay here.” He raised a book with a thick finger marking his place. “I can meet Thom Merrilin some other time.”

“Loial, you can't stay cooped up in here forever. We do not even know how long we'll be in Cairhien. Anyway, we didn't see any Ogier. And if we do, they would not be hunting for you, would they?”

“Not hunting, precisely, but. . . . Rand, I may have been too hasty in leaving Stedding Shangtai the way I did. When I do go home, I may be in a great deal of trouble.” His ears wilted. “Even if I wait until I’m as old as Elder Haman. Perhaps I could find an abandoned *stedding* to stay in until then.”

“If Elder Haman won’t let you come back, you can live in Emond’s Field. It’s a pretty place.” *A beautiful place.*

“I am sure it is, Rand, but that would never work. You see—”

“We will talk about it when it comes to that, Loial. Now you are coming to see Thom.”

The Ogier stood half again as tall as Rand, but Rand pushed him into his long tunic and cloak and down the stairs. When they came pounding through the common room, Rand winked at the innkeeper, then laughed at his startled look. *Let him think I’m off to play his bloody Great Game. Let him think what he wants. Thom’s alive.*

Once through the Jangai Gate, in the east wall of the city, everyone seemed to know The Bunch of Grapes. Rand and Loial quickly found themselves there, on a street that was quiet for the Foregate, with the sun halfway down the afternoon sky.

It was an old three-story structure, wooden and rickety, but the common room was clean and full of people. Some men were playing at dice in one corner, and some women at darts in another. Half had the look of Cairhienin, slight and pale, but Rand heard Andoran accents as well as others he did not know. All wore the clothes of the Foregate, though, a blend of the styles of half a dozen countries. A few looked around when he and Loial came in, but they all turned back to what they had been doing.

The innkeeper was a woman with hair as white as Thom’s, and sharp eyes that studied Loial as well as Rand. She was not Cairhienin, by her dark skin and her speech. “Thom Merrilin? Aye, he has a room. Top of the stairs, first door on the right. Likely Dena will let you wait for him there”—she eyed Rand’s red coat, with its herons on the high collar and golden brambles embroidered up the sleeves, and his sword—“my Lord.”

The stairs creaked under Rand’s boots, let alone Loial’s. Rand was not sure if the building would stand up much longer. He found the door and knocked, wondering who Dena was.

“Come in,” a woman’s voice called. “I cannot open it for you.”

Rand opened the door hesitantly and put his head in. A big, rumpled bed was shoved against one wall, and the rest of the room was all but taken up by a pair of wardrobes, several brass-bound trunks and chests, a table and two wooden chairs. The slender woman sitting cross-legged on the bed with her skirts tucked under her was keeping six colored balls spinning in a wheel between her hands.

"Whatever it is," she said, looking at her juggling, "leave it on the table. Thom will pay you when he comes back."

"Are you Dena?" Rand asked.

She snatched the balls out of the air and turned to regard him. She was only a handful of years older than he, pretty, with fair Cairhienin skin and dark hair hanging loose to her shoulders. "I do not know you. This is my room, mine and Thom Merrilin's."

"The innkeeper said you might let us wait here for Thom," Rand said. "If you're Dena?"

"Us?" Rand moved into the room so Loial could duck inside, and the young woman's eyebrows lifted. "So the Ogier have come back. I am Dena. What do you want?" She looked at Rand's coat so deliberately that the failure to add "my Lord" had to be purposeful, though her brows went up again at the herons on his scabbard and sword hilt.

Rand hefted the bundle he carried. "I've brought Thom back his harp and his flute. And I want to visit with him," he added quickly; she seemed on the point of telling him to leave them. "I haven't seen him in a long time."

She eyed the bundle. "Thom always moans about losing the best flute and the best harp he ever had. You would think he was a court-bard, the way he carries on. Very well. You can wait, but I must practice. Thom says he will let me perform in the halls next week." She rose gracefully and took one of the two chairs, motioning Loial to sit on the bed. "Zera would make Thom pay for six chairs if you broke one of these, friend Ogier."

Rand gave their names as he sat in the other chair—it creaked alarmingly under even his weight—and asked doubtfully, "Are you Thom's apprentice?"

Dena gave a small smile. "You might say that." She had resumed her juggling, and her eyes were on the whirling balls.

"I have never heard of a woman gleeman," Loial said.

"I will be the first." The one big circle became two smaller, overlapping circles. "I will see the whole world before I am done. Thom says once we have enough money, we will go down to Tear." She switched to juggling three balls in each hand. "And then maybe out to the Sea Folk's islands. The Atha'an Miere pay gleemen well."

Rand eyed the room, with all the chests and trunks. It did not look like the room of someone intending to move on soon. There was even a flower growing in a pot on the windowsill. His gaze fell on the single big bed, where Loial was sitting. *This is my room, mine and Thom Merrilin's.* Dena gave him a challenging look through the large wheel she had resumed. Rand's face reddened.

He cleared his throat. "Maybe we ought to wait downstairs," he began when the door opened and Thom came in with his cloak flapping around his ankles, patches fluttering. Cased flute and harp hung on his back; the cases were reddish wood, polished by handling.

Dena made the balls disappear inside her dress and ran to throw her arms around Thom's neck, standing atiptoe to do it. "I missed you," she said, and kissed him.

The kiss went on for some time, so long that Rand was beginning to wonder if he and Loial should leave, but Dena let her heels drop to the floor with a sigh.

"Do you know what that lack-wit Seaghan's done now, girl?" Thom said, looking down at her. "He's taken on a pack of louts who call themselves 'players.' They walk around pretending to *be* Rogosh Eagle-eye, and Blaes, and Gaidal Cain, and. . . . Aaagh! They hang a scrap of painted canvas behind them, supposed to make the audience believe these fools are in Matuchin Hall, or the high passes of the Mountains of Dhoom. *I* make the listener see every banner, smell every battle, feel every emotion. I make them believe *they* are Gaidal Cain. Seaghan will have his hall torn down around his ears if he puts this lot on to follow me."

"Thom, we have visitors. Loial, son of Arent son of Halan. Oh, and a boy who calls himself Rand al'Thor."

Thom looked over her head at Rand, frowning. "Leave us for a while, Dena. Here." He pressed some silver coins into her hand. "Your knives are ready. Why don't you go pay Ivon for them?" He brushed her smooth cheek with a gnarled knuckle. "Go on. I'll make it up to you."

She gave him a dark look, but she tossed her cloak around her shoulders, muttering, “Ivon better have the balance right.”

“She’ll be a bard one day,” Thom said with a note of pride after she was gone. “She listens to a tale once—once only, mind!—and she has it right, not just the words, but every nuance, every rhythm. She has a fine hand on the harp, and she played the flute better the first time she picked it up than you ever did.” He set the wooden instrument cases atop one of the larger trunks, then dropped into the chair she had abandoned. “When I passed through Caemlyn on the way here, Basel Gill told me you’d left in company with an Ogier. Among others.” He bowed toward Loial, even managing a flourish of his cloak despite the fact that he was sitting on it. “I am pleased to meet you, Loial, son of Arent son of Halan.”

“And I to meet you, Thom Merrilin.” Loial stood to make his bow in return; when he straightened, his head almost brushed the ceiling, and he quickly sat down again. “The young woman said she wants to be a gleeman.”

Thom’s head shake was disparaging. “That’s no life for a woman. Not much of a life for a man, for that. Wandering from town to town, village to village, wondering how they’ll try to cheat you this time, half the time wondering where your next meal is coming from. No, I’ll talk her around. She’ll be court-bard to a king or a queen before she’s done. Aaaah! You didn’t come here to talk about Dena. My instruments, boy. You’ve brought them?”

Rand pushed the bundle across the table. Thom undid it hurriedly—he blinked when he saw it was his old cloak, all covered with colorful patches like the one he wore—and opened the hard leather flute case, nodding at the sight of the gold-and-silver flute nestled inside.

“I earned my bed and meals with that after we parted,” Rand said.

“I know,” the gleeman replied dryly. “I stopped at some of the same inns, but I had to make do with juggling and a few simple stories since you had my—You didn’t touch the harp?” He pulled open the other dark leather case and took out a gold-and-silver harp as ornate as the flute, cradling it in his hands like a baby. “Your clumsy sheepherder’s fingers were never meant for the harp.”

“I didn’t touch it,” Rand assured him.

Thom plucked two strings, wincing. “At least you weren’t fool enough to try keeping it tuned,” he muttered. “Could have ruined it.”

Rand leaned across the table toward him. “Thom, you wanted to go to Illian, to see the Great Hunt set out, and be one of the first to make new stories about it, but you couldn’t. What would you say if I told you you could still be a part of it? A big part?”

Loial stirred uneasily. “Rand, are you sure . . . ?” Rand waved him to silence, his eyes on Thom.

Thom glanced at the Ogier and frowned. “That would depend on what part, and how. If you’ve reason to believe one of the Hunters is coming this way. . . . I suppose they could have left Illian already, but he’d be weeks reaching here if he rode straight on, and why would he? Is this one of the fellows who never went to Illian? He’ll never make it into the stories without the blessing, whatever he does.”

“It doesn’t matter if the Hunt has left Illian or not.” Rand heard Loial’s breath catch. “Thom, we have the Horn of Valere.”

For a moment there was dead silence. Thom broke it with a great guffaw of laughter. “You two have the Horn? A shepherd and a beardless Ogier have the Horn of. . . .” He doubled over, pounding his knee. “The Horn of Valere!”

“But we do have it,” Loial said seriously.

Thom drew a deep breath. Small aftershocks of laughter still seemed to catch him unaware. “I don’t know what you found, but I can take you to ten taverns where a fellow will tell you that he knows a man who knows the man who’s already found the Horn, and he will tell you how it was found, too—as long as you buy his ale. I can take you to three men who will *sell* you the Horn, and swear their souls under the Light it’s the real one and true. There is even a lord in the city has what he claims is the Horn locked up inside his manor. He says it’s a treasure handed down in his House since the Breaking. I don’t know if the Hunters will ever find the Horn, but they will hunt down ten thousand lies along the way.”

“Moiraine says it’s the Horn,” Rand said.

Thom’s mirth was cut short. “She does, does she? I thought you said she was not with you.”

“She isn’t, Thom. I have not seen her since I left Fal Dara, in Shienar, and for a month before that she said no more than two words together to me.” He could not keep the bitterness out of his voice. *And when she did talk, I wished she’d kept on ignoring me. I’ll never dance to her tune again, the Light burn her and every other Aes Sedai. No. Not Egwene. Not*

Nynaeve. He was conscious of Thom watching him closely. “She isn’t here, Thom. I do not know where she is, and I do not care.”

“Well, at least you have sense enough to keep it secret. If you hadn’t, it would be all over the Foregate by now, and half of Cairhien would be lying in wait to take it away. Half the world.”

“Oh, we’ve kept it secret, Thom. And I have to bring it back to Fal Dara without Darkfriends or anyone else taking it away. That’s story enough for you right there, isn’t it? I could use a friend who knows the world. You’ve been everywhere; you know things I can’t even imagine. Loial and Hurin know more than I do, but we’re all three floundering in deep water.”

“Hurin . . . ? No, don’t tell me how. I do not want to know.” The gleeman pushed back his chair and went to stare out of the window. “The Horn of Valere. That means the Last Battle is coming. Who will notice? Did you see the people laughing in the streets out there? Let the grain barges stop a week, and they won’t laugh. Galldrian will think they’ve all become Aiel. The nobles all play the Game of Houses, scheming to get close to the King, scheming to gain more power than the King, scheming to pull down Galldrian and *be* the next King. Or Queen. They will think Tarmon Gai’don is only a ploy in the Game.” He turned away from the window. “I don’t suppose you are talking about simply riding to Shienar and handing the Horn to—who?—the King? Why Shienar? The legends all tie the Horn to Illian.”

Rand looked at Loial. The Ogier’s ears were sagging. “Shienar, because I know who to give it to, there. And there are Trollocs and Darkfriends after us.”

“Why does that not surprise me? No. I may be an old fool, but I will be an old fool in my own way. You take the glory, boy.”

“Thom—”

“No!”

There was a silence, broken only by the creaking of the bed as Loial shifted. Finally, Rand said, “Loial, would you mind leaving Thom and me alone for a bit? Please?”

Loial looked surprised—the tufts on his ears went almost to points—but he nodded and rose. “That dice game in the common room looked interesting. Perhaps they will let me play.” Thom eyed Rand suspiciously as the door closed behind the Ogier.

Rand hesitated. There were things he needed to know, things he was sure Thom knew—the gleeman had once seemed to know a great deal about a surprising number of things—but he was not sure how to ask. “Thom,” he said at last, “are there any books that have *The Karaethon Cycle* in them?” Easier to call it that than the Prophecies of the Dragon.

“In the great libraries,” Thom said slowly. “Any number of translations, and even in the Old Tongue, here and there.” Rand started to ask if there was any way for him to find one, but the gleeman went on. “The Old Tongue has music in it, but too many even of the nobles are impatient with listening to it these days. Nobles are all expected to know the Old Tongue, but many only learn enough to impress people who don’t. Translations don’t have the same sound, unless they’re in High Chant, and sometimes that changes meanings even more than most translations. There is one verse in the Cycle—it doesn’t scan well, translated word for word, but there’s no meaning lost—that goes like this.

“Twice and twice shall he be marked,

twice to live, and twice to die.

Once the heron, to set his path.

Twice the heron, to name him true.

Once the Dragon, for remembrance lost.

Twice the Dragon, for the price he must pay.”

He reached out and touched the herons embroidered on Rand’s high collar.

For a moment, Rand could only gape at him, and when he could speak, his voice was unsteady. “The sword makes five. Hilt, scabbard, and blade.” He turned his hand down on the table, hiding the brand on his palm. For the first time since Selene’s salve had done its work, he could feel it. Not hurting, but he knew it was there.

“So they do.” Thom barked a laugh. “There’s another comes to mind.

“Twice dawns the day when his blood is shed.

Once for mourning, once for birth.

Red on black, the Dragon’s blood stains the rock of Shayol Ghul.

In the Pit of Doom shall his blood free men from the Shadow.”

Rand shook his head, denying, but Thom seemed not to notice. “I don’t see how a day can dawn twice, but then a lot of it doesn’t really make much sense. The Stone of Tear will never fall till *Callandor* is wielded by the Dragon Reborn, but the Sword That Cannot Be Touched lies in the Heart of the Stone, so how can he wield it first, eh? Well, be that as it may. I suspect Aes Sedai would want to make events fit the Prophecies as closely as they can. Dying somewhere in the Blasted Lands would be a high price to pay for going along with them.”

It was an effort for Rand to make his voice calm, but he did it. “No Aes Sedai are using me for anything. I told you, the last I saw of Moiraine was in Shienar. She said I could go where I wanted, and I left.”

“And there’s no Aes Sedai with you now? None at all?”

“None.”

Thom knuckled his dangling white mustaches. He seemed satisfied, and at the same time puzzled. “Then why ask about the Prophecies? Why send the Ogier out of the room?”

“I . . . didn’t want to upset him. He’s nervous enough about the Horn. That’s what I wanted to ask. Is the Horn mentioned in the—the Prophecies?” He still could not make himself say it all the way out. “All these false Dragons, and now the Horn is found. Everybody thinks the Horn of Valere is supposed to summon dead heroes to fight the Dark One in the Last Battle, and the . . . the Dragon Reborn . . . is supposed to fight the Dark One in the Last Battle. It seemed natural enough to ask.”

“I suppose it is. Not many know that about the Dragon Reborn fighting the Last Battle, or if they do, they think he’ll fight alongside the Dark One. Not many read the Prophecies to find out. What was that you said about the Horn? ‘Supposed to’?”

“I’ve learned a few things since we parted, Thom. They will come for whoever blows the Horn, even a Darkfriend.”

Bushy eyebrows rose nearly to Thom’s hairline. “Now that I didn’t know. You have learned a few things.”

“It doesn’t mean I would let the White Tower use me for a false Dragon. I don’t want anything to do with Aes Sedai, or false Dragons, or the Power, or. . . .” Rand bit his tongue. *Get mad and you start babbling. Fool!*

“For a time, boy, I thought you were the one Moiraine wanted, and I even thought I knew why. You know, no man chooses to channel the Power. It is something that happens to him, like a disease. You cannot blame a man for falling sick, even if it might kill you, too.”

“Your nephew could channel, couldn’t he? You told me that was why you helped us, because your nephew had had trouble with the White Tower and there was nobody to help him. There’s only one kind of trouble men can have with Aes Sedai.”

Thom studied the tabletop, pursing his lips. “I don’t suppose there is any use in denying it. You understand, it is not the kind of thing a man talks about, having a male relative who could channel. Aaagh! The Red Ajah never gave Owyn a chance. They gentled him, and then he died. He just gave up wanting to live. . . .” He exhaled sadly.

Rand shivered. *Why didn’t Moiraine do that to me?* “A chance, Thom? Do you mean there was some way he could have dealt with it? Not gone mad? Not died?”

“Owyn held it off almost three years. He never hurt anyone. He didn’t use the Power unless he had to, and then only to help his village. He. . . .” Thom threw up his hands. “I suppose there was no choice. The people where he lived told me he was acting strange that whole last year. They did not much want to talk about it, and they nearly stoned me when they found out I was his uncle. I suppose he *was* going mad. But he was my blood, boy. I can’t love the Aes Sedai for what they did to him, even if they had to. If Moiraine’s let you go, then you are well out of it.”

For a moment Rand was silent. *Fool! Of course there’s no way to deal with it. You’re going to go mad and die whatever you do. But Ba’alzamon said*— “No!” He colored under Thom’s scrutiny. “I mean . . . I am out of it, Thom. But I still have the Horn of Valere. Think of it, Thom. The Horn of Valere. Other gleemen might tell tales about it, but you could say you had it in your hands.” He realized he sounded like Selene, but all that did was make him wonder where she was. “There’s nobody I’d rather have with us than you, Thom.”

Thom frowned as if considering it, but in the end he shook his head firmly. “Boy, I like you well enough, but you know as well as I do that I only helped before because there was an Aes Sedai mixed in it. Seaghan doesn’t try to cheat me more than I expect, and with the King’s Gift added in, I could never earn as much in the villages. To my very great surprise, Dena seems to love me, and—as much a surprise—I return the feeling. Now, why should I leave that to go be chased by Trollocs and Darkfriends? The Horn of Valere? Oh, it is a temptation, I’ll admit, but no. No, I will not get mixed up in it again.”

He leaned over to pick up one of the wooden instrument cases, long and narrow. When he opened it, a flute lay inside, plainly made but mounted with silver. He closed it again and slid it across the table. “You might need to earn your supper again someday, boy.”

“I might at that,” Rand said. “At least we can talk. I will be in—”

The gleeman was shaking his head. “A clean break is best, boy. If you’re always coming around, even if you never mention it, I won’t be able to get the Horn out of my head. And I won’t be tangled in it. I won’t.”

After Rand left, Thom threw his cloak on the bed and sat with his elbows on the table. *The Horn of Valere. How did that farmboy find. . . .* He shut off that line of thought. Think about the Horn too long, and he would find himself running off with Rand to carry it to Shienar. *That* would *make a story, carrying the Horn of Valere to the Borderlands with Trollocs and Darkfriends pursuing.* Scowling, he reminded himself of Dena. Even if she had not loved him, talent such as hers was not to be found every day. And she did love, even if he could not begin to imagine why.

“Old fool,” he muttered.

“Aye, an old fool,” Zera said from the door. He gave a start; he had been so absorbed in his thoughts that he had not heard the door open. He had known Zera for years, off and on in his wanderings, and she always took full advantage of the friendship to speak her mind. “An old fool who’s playing the Game of Houses again. Unless my ears are failing, that young lord has the sound of Andor on his tongue. He’s no Cairhienin, that’s for certain sure. *Daes Dae’mar* is dangerous enough without letting an outland lord mix you in his schemes.”

Thom blinked, then considered the way Rand had looked. That coat had surely been fine enough for a lord. He was growing old, letting things like that slip by him. Ruefully, he realized he was considering whether to tell Zera the truth or let her continue thinking as she did. *All it takes is to* *think about the Great Game, and I start playing it.* “The boy is a shepherd, Zera, from the Two Rivers.”

She laughed scornfully. “And I’m the Queen of Ghealdan. I tell you, the Game has grown dangerous in Cairhien the last few years. Nothing like what you knew in Caemlyn. There are murders done, now. You’ll have your throat cut for you, if you don’t watch out.”

“I tell you, I am not in the Great Game any longer. That’s all twenty years in the past, near enough.”

“Aye.” She did not sound as if she believed it. “But be that as it may, and young outland lords aside, you’ve begun performing at the lords’ manors.”

“They pay well.”

“And they’ll pull you into their plots as soon as they see how. They see a man, and think how to use him, as naturally as breathing. This young lord of yours won’t help you; they will eat him alive.”

He gave up on trying to convince her he was out of it. “Is that what you came up to say, Zera?”

“Aye. Forget playing the Great Game, Thom. Marry Dena. She’ll take you, the more fool her, bony and white-haired as you are. Marry her, and forget this young lord and *Daes Dae’mar.*”

“I thank you for the advice,” he said dryly. *Marry her? Burden her with an old husband. She’ll never be a bard with my past hanging around her neck.* “If you don’t mind, Zera, I want to be alone for a while. I perform for Lady Arilyn and her guests tonight, and I need to prepare.”

She gave him a snort and a shake of her head and banged the door shut behind her.

Thom drummed his fingers on the table. Coat or no coat, Rand was still only a shepherd. If he had been more, if he had been what Thom once suspected—a man who could channel—neither Moiraine nor any other Aes Sedai would ever have let him walk away ungentled. Horn or no Horn, the boy was only a shepherd.

“He is out of it,” he said aloud, “and so am I.”

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CHAPTER

27

The Shadow in the Night

"I do not understand it," Loial said. "I was winning, most of the time. And then Dena came in and joined the game, and she won it all right back. Every toss. She called it a little lesson. What did she mean by that?"

Rand and the Ogier were making their way through the Foregate, The Bunch of Grapes behind them. The sun sat low in the west, a red ball half below the horizon, throwing long shadows behind them. The street was empty save for one of the big puppets, a goat-horned Trolloc with a sword at its belt, coming toward them with five men working the poles, but sounds of merriment drifted still from other parts of the Foregate, where the halls of entertainment and the taverns stood. Here, doors were already barred and windows shuttered.

Rand stopped fingering the wooden flute case and slung it on his back. *I suppose I couldn't expect him to throw over everything and come with me, but at least he could talk to me. Light, I wish Ingtar would show up.* He stuffed his hands in his pockets and felt Selene's note.

"You don't suppose she. . . ." Loial paused uncomfortably. "You don't suppose she cheated, do you? Everybody was grinning as if she were doing something clever."

Rand shrugged at his cloak. *I have to take the Horn and go. If we wait for Ingtar, anything can happen. Fain will come sooner or later. I have to stay ahead of him.* The men with the puppet were almost to them.

"Rand," Loial said suddenly, "I don't think that's a—"

Abruptly the men let their poles clatter to the packed dirt street; instead of collapsing, the Trolloc leaped for Rand with outstretched hands.

There was no time to think. Instinct brought the sword out of its sheath in a flashing arc. The Moon Rises Over the Lakes. The Trolloc staggered back with a bubbling cry, snarling even as it fell.

For an instant everyone stood frozen. Then the men—the Darkfriends, they had to be—looked from the Trolloc lying in the street to Rand, with the sword in his hands and Loial at his side. They turned and ran.

Rand was staring at the Trolloc, too. The void had surrounded him before his hand touched hilt; *saidin* shone in his mind, beckoning, sickening. With an effort, he made the void vanish, and licked his lips. Without the emptiness, fear crawled on his skin.

"Loial, we have to get back to the inn. Hurin's alone, and they—" He grunted as he was lifted into the air by a thick arm long enough to pin both of his to his chest. A hairy hand grabbed his throat. He caught sight of a tusked snout just over his head. A rank smell filled his nose, equal parts sour sweat and pigsty.

As quickly as it had seized him, the hand at his throat was torn away. Stunned, Rand stared at it, at the thick Ogier fingers clutching the Trolloc's wrist.

"Hold on, Rand." Loial's voice sounded strained. The Ogier's other hand came around and took hold of the arm still holding Rand above the ground. "Hold on."

Rand was shaken from side to side as Ogier and Trolloc struggled. Abruptly he fell free. Staggering, he took two steps to get clear and turned back with sword raised.

Standing behind the boar-snouted Trolloc, Loial had it by wrist and forearm, holding its arms spread wide, breathing hard with the effort. The Trolloc snarled gutturally in the harsh Trolloc tongue, throwing its head back in efforts to catch Loial with a tusk. Their boots scuffled across the dirt of the street.

Rand tried to find a place to put his blade in the Trolloc without hurting Loial, but Ogier and Trolloc spun in their rough dance so much that he could find no opening.

With a grunt, the Trolloc pulled its left arm free, but before it could loose itself completely, Loial snapped his own arm around its neck, hugging the creature close. The Trolloc clawed at its sword; the scythe-like blade hung on the wrong side for left-handed use, but inch by inch the dark steel began sliding out of the scabbard. And still they thrashed about so that Rand could not strike without risking Loial.

The Power. That could do it. How, he did not know, but he knew nothing else to try. The Trolloc had its sword half unsheathed. When the curved blade was bare, it would kill Loial.

Reluctantly, Rand formed the void. *Saidin* shone at him, pulled at him. Dimly, he seemed to recall a time when it had sung to him, but now it only drew him, a flower's perfume drawing a bee, a midden's stench drawing a fly. He opened himself up, reached for it. There was nothing there. He could as well have been reaching for light in truth. The taint slid off onto him, soiling him, but there was no flow of light inside him. Driven by a distant desperation, he tried again and again. And again and again there was only the taint.

With a sudden heave, Loial threw the Trolloc aside, so hard that the thing cartwheeled against the side of a building. It struck, headfirst, with a loud crack, and slid down the wall to lie with its neck twisted at an impossible angle. Loial stood staring at it, his chest heaving.

Rand looked out of the emptiness for a moment before he realized what had happened. As soon as he did, though, he let void and tainted light go, and hurried to Loial's side.

"I never . . . killed before, Rand." Loial drew a shuddering breath.

"It would have killed you if you hadn't," Rand told him. Anxiously, he looked at the alleys and shuttered windows and barred doors. Where there were two Trollocs, there had to be more. "I'm sorry you had to do it, Loial, but it would have killed both of us, or worse."

"I know. But I cannot like it. Even a Trolloc." Pointing toward the setting sun, the Ogier seized Rand's arm. "There's another of them."

Against the sun, Rand could not make out details, but it appeared to be another group of men with a huge puppet, coming toward Loial and him. Except that now he knew what to look for, the "puppet" moved its legs too naturally, and the snouted head rose to sniff the air without anyone lifting a pole. He did not think the Trolloc and Darkfriends could see him among the evening shadows, or what lay in the street around him; they moved too slowly for that. Yet it was plain they were hunting, and coming closer.

"Fain knows I am out here somewhere," he said, hastily wiping his blade on a dead Trolloc's coat. "He's set them to find me. He is afraid of the Trollocs being seen, though, or he wouldn't have them disguised. If we can reach a street where there are people, we'll be safe. We have to get back to Hurin. If Fain finds him, alone with the Horn. . . ."

He pulled Loial along to the next corner and turned toward the nearest sounds of laughter and music, but long before they reached it, another group of men appeared ahead of them in the otherwise empty street with a puppet that was no puppet. Rand and Loial took the next turning. It led east.

Every time Rand tried to reach the music and laughter, there was a Trolloc in the way, often sniffing the air for a scent. Some Trollocs hunted by scent. Sometimes, here where there were no eyes to see, a Trolloc stalked alone. More than once he was sure it was one he had seen before. They were closing in, and making sure he and Loial did not leave the deserted streets with their shuttered windows. Slowly the two of them were forced east, away from the city and Hurin, away from other people, along narrow, slowly darkening streets that ran in all directions, uphill and down. Rand eyed the houses they passed, the tall buildings closed up tight for the night, with more than a little regret. Even if he pounded on a door until someone opened it, even if they took Loial and him in, none of the doors he saw would stop a Trolloc. All that would do would be to offer up more victims with Loial and himself.

“Rand,” Loial said finally, “there is nowhere else to go.”

They had reached the eastern edge of the Foregate; the tall buildings to either side of them were the last. Lights in windows on the upper stories mocked him, but the lower floors were all shut tight. Ahead lay the hills, cloaked in first twilight and bare of so much as a farmhouse. Not entirely empty, though. He could just make out pale walls surrounding one of the larger hills, perhaps a mile away, and buildings inside.

“Once they push us out there,” Loial said, “they won’t have to worry who sees them.”

Rand gestured to the walls around the hill. “Those should stop a Trolloc. It must be a lord’s manner. Maybe they’ll let us in. An Ogier, and an outland lord? This coat has to be good for something sooner or later.” He looked back down the street. No Trollocs in sight yet, but he drew Loial around the side of the building anyway.

“I think that is the Illuminators’ chapter house, Rand. Illuminators guard their secrets tightly. I don’t think they would let Galldrian himself inside there.”

“What trouble have you gotten yourself into now?” said a familiar woman’s voice. There was suddenly a spicy perfume in the air.

Rand stared: Selene stepped around the corner they had just rounded, her white dress bright in the dimness. “How did you get here? What are you doing here? You have to leave immediately. Run! There are Trollocs after us."

"So I saw." Her voice was dry, yet cool and composed. "I came to find you, and I find you allowing Trollocs to herd you like sheep. Can the man who possesses the Horn of Valere let himself be treated so?"

"I don't have it with me," he snapped, "and I don't know how it could help if I did. The dead heroes are not supposed to come back to save me from Trollocs. Selene, you have to get away. Now!" He peered around the corner.

Not more than a hundred paces away, a Trolloc was sticking its horned head cautiously into the street, smelling the night. A large shadow by its side had to be another Trolloc, and there were smaller shadows, too. Darkfriends.

"Too late," Rand muttered. He shifted the flute case to pull off his cloak and wrap it around her. It was long enough to hide her white dress entirely, and trail on the ground besides. "You'll have to hold that up to run," he told her. "Loial, if they won't let us in, we will have to find a way to sneak in."

"But, Rand—"

"Would you rather wait for the Trollocs?" He gave Loial a push to start him, and took Selene's hand to follow at a trot. "Find us a path that won't break our necks, Loial."

"You're letting yourself become flustered," Selene said. She seemed to have less trouble following Loial in the failing light than Rand did. "Seek the Oneness, and be calm. One who would be great must always be calm."

"The Trollocs might hear you," he told her. "I don't want greatness." He thought he heard an irritated grunt from her.

Stones sometimes turned underfoot, but the way across the hills was not hard despite the twilight shadows. Trees, and even brush, had long since been cleared from the hills for firewood. Nothing grew except knee-high grass that rustled softly around their legs. A night breeze came up softly. Rand worried that it might carry their scent to the Trollocs.

Loial stopped when they reached the wall; it stood twice as high as the Ogier, the stones covered with a whitish plaster. Rand peered back toward the Foregate. Bands of lighted windows reached out like spokes of a wheel from the city walls.

"Loial," he said softly, "can you see them? Are they following us?"

The Ogier looked in the direction of the Foregate, and nodded unhappily. “I only see some of the Trollocs, but they are coming this way. Running. Rand, I really don’t think—”

Selene cut him off. “If he wants to go in, *alantin*, he needs a door. Such as that one.” She pointed to a dark patch a little down the wall. Even with her telling him, Rand was not certain it *was* a door, but when she strode to it and pulled, it opened.

“Rand,” Loial began.

Rand pushed him to the door. “Later, Loial. And softly. We’re hiding, remember?” He got them inside and closed the door behind them. There were brackets for a bar, but no bar to be seen. It would not stop anyone, but maybe the Trollocs would hesitate to come inside the walls.

They were in an alleyway leading up the hill between two long, low windowless buildings. At first he thought they were stone, too, but then he realized the white plaster had been laid over wood. It was dark enough now for the moon reflecting from the walls to give a semblance of light.

“Better to be arrested by the Illuminators than taken by Trollocs,” he murmured, starting up the hill.

“But that is what I was trying to tell you,” Loial protested. “I’ve heard the Illuminators kill intruders. They keep their secrets hard and fast, Rand.”

Rand stopped dead and stared back at the door. The Trollocs were still out there. At the worst, humans had to be better to deal with than Trollocs. He might be able to talk the Illuminators into letting them go; Trollocs did not listen before they killed. “I’m sorry I got you into this, Selene.”

“Danger adds a certain something,” she said softly. “And so far, you handle it well. Shall we see what we find?” She brushed past him up the alleyway. Rand followed, the spicy smell of her filling his nostrils.

Atop the hill, the alleyway opened onto a wide expanse of smoothly flattened clay, almost as pale as the plaster and nearly surrounded by more white, windowless buildings with the shadows of narrow alleys between, but to Rand’s right stood one building with windows, light falling onto the pale clay. He pulled back into the shadows of the alley as a man and a woman appeared, walking slowly across the open space.

Their clothes were certainly not Cairhienin. The man wore breeches as baggy as his shirt sleeves, both in a soft yellow, with embroidery on the legs of his breeches and across the chest of his shirt. The woman’s dress, worked elaborately across the breast, seemed a pale green, and her hair was done in a multitude of short braids.

“All is in readiness, you say?” the woman demanded. “You are certain, Tammuz? All?”

The man spread his hands. “Always you check behind me, Aludra. All is in readiness. The display, it could be given this very moment.”

“The gates and doors, they are all barred? All of the . . . ?” Her voice faded as they moved on to the far end of the lighted building.

Rand studied the open area, recognizing almost nothing. In the middle of it, several dozen upright tubes, each nearly as tall as he and a foot or more across, sat on large wooden bases. From each tube, a dark, twisted cord ran across the ground and behind a low wall, perhaps three paces long, on the far side. All around the open space stood a welter of wooden racks with troughs and tubes and forked sticks and a score of other things.

All the fireworks he had ever seen could be held in one hand, and that was as much as he knew, except that they burst with a great roar, or whizzed along the ground in spirals of sparks, or sometimes shot into the air. They always came with warnings from the Illuminators that opening one could cause it to go off. In any case, fireworks were too expensive for the Village Council to have allowed anybody unskilled to open one. He could well remember the time when Mat had tried to do just that; it was nearly a week before anyone but Mat’s own mother would speak to him. The only thing that Rand found familiar at all was the cords—the fuses. That, he knew, was where you set the fire.

With a glance back at the unbarred door, he motioned the others to follow and started around the tubes. If they were going to find a place to hide, he wanted to be as far from that door as he could.

It meant making their way between the racks, and Rand held his breath every time he brushed against one. The things in them shifted with the slightest touch, rattling. All of them seemed to be made of wood, without a piece of metal. He could imagine the racket if one were knocked over. He eyed the tall tubes warily, remembering the bang made by one the size of his finger. If those were fireworks, he did not want to be this close to them.

Loial muttered to himself continually, especially when he bumped one of the racks, then started back so fast that he bumped another. The Ogier crept along in a cloud of clatters and muttering.

Selene was no less unnerving. She strode as casually as if they were on a city street. She did not bump anything, did not make a sound, but she also made no effort to keep the cloak closed. The white of her dress seemed brighter than all the walls together. He peered at the lighted windows, waiting for someone to appear. All it would take was one; Selene could not fail to be seen, the alarm given.

The windows remained empty, though. Rand was just breathing a sigh of relief as they approached the low wall—and the alleys and buildings behind it—when Loial brushed against another rack, standing right beside the wall. It held ten soft-looking sticks, as long as Rand's arm, with thin streams of smoke rising from their tips. The rack made hardly a sound when it fell, the smoldering sticks sprawling across one of the fuses. With a crackling hiss, the fuse burst into flame, and the flame raced toward one of the tall tubes.

Rand goggled for an instant, then he tried to whisper a shout. "Behind the wall!"

Selene made an angry noise when he bore her to the ground behind the wall, but he did not care. He tried to spread himself over her protectively as Loial crowded beside them. Waiting for the tube to burst, he wondered if there would be anything left of the wall. There was a hollow thump that he felt through the ground as much as heard. Cautiously, he lifted himself off of Selene enough to peer around the edge of the wall. She fisted him in the ribs, hard, and wriggled out from under him with an oath in a language he did recognize, but he was beyond noticing.

A trickle of smoke was leaking from the top of one of the tubes. That was all. He shook his head wonderingly. *If that's all there is to it. . . .*

With a crash like thunder, a huge flower of red and white bloomed high in the now dark sky, then slowly began drifting away in sparkles.

As he goggled at it, the lighted building erupted with noise. Shouting men and women filled the windows, staring and pointing.

Rand longingly eyed the dark alleyway, only a dozen steps away. And the first step would be in full view of the people at the windows. Pounding feet poured from the building.

He pressed Loial and Selene back against the wall, hoping they looked like just another shadow. "Be still and be silent," he whispered. "It's our only hope."

“Sometimes,” Selene said quietly, “if you are very still, no one can see you at all.” She did not sound the least bit worried.

Boots thumped back and forth on the other side of the wall, and voices were raised in anger. Especially the one Rand recognized as Aludra.

“You great buffoon, Tammuz! You great pig, you! Your mother, she was a goat, Tammuz! One day you will kill us all.”

“I am not to blame for this, Aludra,” the man protested. “I have been sure to put everything where it belonged, and the punks, they were—”

“You will not speak to me, Tammuz! A great pig does not deserve to speak like a human!” Aludra’s voice changed in answer to another man’s question. “There is no time to prepare another. Galldrian, he must be satisfied with the rest for tonight. And one early. And you, Tammuz! You will set everything right, and tomorrow you will leave with the carts to buy the manure. Does anything else go wrong this night, I will not trust you again even with so much as the manure!”

Footsteps faded back toward the building to the accompaniment of Aludra’s muttering. Tammuz remained, growling under his breath about the unfairness of it all.

Rand stopped breathing as the man came over to right the toppled stand. Pressed back in the shadows against the wall, he could see Tammuz’s back and shoulder. All the man had to do was turn his head, and he could not miss seeing Rand and the others. Still complaining to himself, Tammuz arranged the smoldering sticks in the stand, then stalked off toward the building where everyone else had gone.

Letting his breath go, Rand took a quick look after the man, then pulled back into the shadows. A few people still stood at the windows. “We can’t expect any more luck tonight,” he whispered.

“It is said great men make their own luck,” Selene said softly.

“Will you stop that,” he told her wearily. He wished the smell of her did not fill his head so; it made it hard to think clearly. He could remember the feel of her body when he pushed her down—softness and firmness in a disturbing blend—and that did not help either.

“Rand?” Loial was peering around the end of the wall away from the lighted building. “I think we need some more luck, Rand.”

Rand shifted to look over the Ogier’s shoulder. Beyond open space, in the alleyway that led to the barless door, three Trollocs were peering cautiously out of the shadows toward the lighted windows. One woman was standing at a window; she did not seem to see the Trollocs.

“So,” Selene said quietly. “It becomes a trap. These people may kill you if they take you. The Trollocs surely will. But perhaps you can slay the Trollocs too quickly for them to make any outcry. Perhaps you can stop the people from killing you to preserve their little secrets. You may not want greatness, but it will take a great man to do these things.”

“You don’t have to sound happy about it,” Rand said. He tried to stop thinking about how she smelled, how she felt, and the void almost surrounded him. He shook it away. The Trollocs did not seem to have located them, yet. He settled back, staring at the nearest dark alleyway. Once they made a move toward it, the Trollocs would surely see, and so would the woman at the window. It would be a race as to whether Trollocs or Illuminators reached them first.

“Your greatness will make me happy.” Despite the words, Selene sounded angry. “Perhaps I should leave you to find your own way for a time. If you’ll not take greatness when it is in your grasp, perhaps you deserve to die.”

Rand refused to look at her. “Loial, can you see if there’s another door down that alley?”

The Ogier shook his head. “There is too much light here and too much dark there. If I were in the alley, yes.”

Rand fingered the hilt of his sword. “Take Selene. As soon as you see a door—*if* you do—call out, and I’ll follow. If there isn’t a door at the end, you will have to lift her so she can reach the top of the wall and climb over.”

“All right, Rand.” Loial sounded worried. “But when we move, those Trollocs will come after us, no matter who is watching. Even if there is a door, they will be on our heels.”

“You let me worry about the Trollocs.” *Three of them. I might do it, with the void.* The thought of *saidin* decided him. Too many strange things had happened when he let the male half of the True Source come close. “I will follow as soon as I can. Go.” He turned to peer around the wall at the Trollocs.

From the corner of his eye, he had an impression of Loial’s bulk moving, of Selene’s white dress, half covered by his cloak. One of the Trollocs beyond the tubes pointed to them excitedly, but still the three hesitated, glancing up at the window where the woman still watched. *Three of them. There has to be a way. Not the void. Not* saidin.

“There is a door!” came Loial’s soft call. One of the Trollocs took a step out of the shadows, and the others followed, gathering themselves. As from a distance, Rand heard the woman at the window cry out, and Loial shouted something.

Without thinking, Rand was on his feet. He had to stop the Trollocs somehow, or they would run him down, and Loial and Selene. He snatched one of the smoldering sticks and hurled himself at the nearest tube. It tilted, started to fall over, and he caught the square wooden base; the tube pointed straight at the Trollocs. They slowed uncertainly—the woman at the window screamed—and Rand touched the smoking end of the stick to the fuse right where it joined the tube.

The hollow thump came immediately, and the thick wooden base slammed against him, knocking him down. A roar like a thunderclap broke the night and a blinding burst of light tore away the dark.

Blinking, Rand staggered to his feet, coughing in thick, acrid smoke, ears ringing. He stared in amazement. Half the tubes and all of the racks lay on their sides, and one corner of the building beside which the Trollocs had stood was simply gone, flames licking at ends of planks and rafters. Of the Trollocs there was no sign.

Through the ringing in his ears, Rand heard shouts from the Illuminators in the building. He broke into a tottering run, lumbered into the alley. Halfway down it he stumbled over something and realized it was his cloak. He snatched it up without pausing. Behind him, the cries of the Illuminators filled the night.

Loial was bouncing impatiently on his feet beside the open door. And he was alone.

“Where is Selene?” Rand demanded.

“She went back, Rand. I tried to grab her, and she slipped right out of my hands.”

Rand turned back toward the noise. Through the incessant sound in his ears, some of the shouts were barely distinguishable. There was light there, now, from the flames.

“The sand buckets! Fetch the sand buckets quickly!”

“This is disaster! Disaster!”

“Some of them went that way!”

Loial grabbed Rand's shoulder. "You cannot help her, Rand. Not by being taken yourself. We must go." Someone appeared at the end of the alley, a shadow outlined by the glow of flames behind, and pointed toward them. "Come on, Rand!"

Rand let himself be pulled out of the door into the darkness. The fire faded behind them until it was only a glow in the night, and the lights of the Foregate came closer. Rand almost wished more Trollocs would appear, something he could fight. But there was only the night breeze ruffling the grass.

"I tried to stop her," Loial said. There was a long silence. "We really couldn't have done anything. They would just have taken us, too."

Rand sighed. "I know, Loial. You did what you could." He walked backwards a few steps, staring at the glow. It seemed less; the Illuminators must be putting out the flames. "I have to help her somehow." *How?* Saidin? *The Power?* He shivered. "I have to."

They went through the Foregate by the lighted streets, wrapped in a silence that shut out the gaiety around them.

When they entered The Defender of the Dragonwall, the innkeeper held out his tray with a sealed parchment.

Rand took it, and stared at the white seal. A crescent moon and stars. "Who left this? When?"

"An old woman, my Lord. Not a quarter of an hour gone. A servant, though she did not say from what House." Cuale smiled as if inviting confidences.

"Thank you," Rand said, still staring at the seal. The innkeeper watched them go upstairs with a thoughtful look.

Hurin took his pipe out of his mouth when Rand and Loial entered the room. Hurin had his short sword and sword-breaker on the table, wiping them with an oily rag. "You were long with the gleeman, my Lord. Is he well?"

Rand gave a start. "What? Thom? Yes he's. . . ." He broke open the seal with his thumb and read.

When I think I know what you are going to do, you do something else. You are a dangerous man. Perhaps it will not be long before we are together again. Think of the Horn. Think of the glory. And think of me, for you are always mine.

Again, it bore no signature but the flowing hand itself.

“Are all women crazy?” Rand demanded of the ceiling. Hurin shrugged. Rand threw himself into the other chair, the one sized for an Ogier; his feet dangled above the floor, but he did not care. He stared at the blanket-covered chest under the edge of Loial’s bed. *Think of the glory.* “I wish Ingtar would come.”

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CHAPTER

28

A New Thread in the Pattern

Perrin watched the mountains of Kinslayer's Dagger uncomfortably as he rode. The way still slanted upwards, and looked as if it would climb forever, though he thought the crest of the pass must not be too much further. To one side of the trail, the land sloped sharply down to a shallow mountain stream, dashing itself to froth over sharp rocks; to the other side the mountains reared in a series of jagged cliffs, like frozen stone waterfalls. The trail itself ran through fields of boulders, some the size of a man's head, and some as big as a cart. It would take no great skill to hide in that.

The wolves said there were people in the mountains. Perrin wondered if they were some of Fain's Darkfriends. The wolves did not know, or care. They only knew the Twisted Ones were somewhere ahead. Still far ahead, though Ingtar had pressed the column hard. Perrin noticed that Uno was watching the mountains around them much the way he himself was.

Mat, his bow slung across his back, rode with seeming unconcern, juggling three colored balls, yet he looked paler than he had. Verin examined him two and three times a day now, frowning, and Perrin was sure she had even tried Healing at least once, but it made no difference Perrin could see. In any case, she seemed to be more absorbed in something about which she did not speak.

Rand, Perrin thought, looking at the Aes Sedai's back. She always rode at the head of the column with Ingtar, and she always wanted them to move even faster than the Shienaran lord would allow. *Somehow, she knows about Rand.* Images from the wolves flickered in his head—stone farmhouses and terraced villages, all beyond the mountain peaks; the wolves saw them no differently than they saw hills or meadows, except with a feeling that they were spoiled land. For a moment he found himself sharing that regret, remembering places the two-legs had long since abandoned, remembering the swift rush through the trees, and the ham-stringing snap of his jaws as the deer tried to flee, and. . . . With an effort he pushed the wolves out of his head. *These Aes Sedai are going to destroy all of us.*

Ingtar let his horse fall back beside Perrin’s. Sometimes, to Perrin’s eyes, the crescent crest on the Shienaran’s helmet looked like a Trolloc’s horns. Ingtar said softly, “Tell me again what the wolves said.”

“I’ve told you ten times,” Perrin muttered.

“Tell me again! Anything I may have missed, anything that will help me find the Horn. . . .” Ingtar drew a breath and let it out slowly. “I must find the Horn of Valere, Perrin. Tell me again.”

There was no need for Perrin to order it in his mind, not after so many repetitions. He droned it out. “Someone—or something—attacked the Darkfriends in the night and killed those Trollocs we found.” His stomach no longer lurched at that. Ravens and vultures were messy feeders. “The wolves call him—or it—Shadowkiller; I think it was a man, but they wouldn’t go close enough to see clearly. They are not afraid of this Shadowkiller; awe is more like it. They say the Trollocs now follow Shadowkiller. And they say Fain is with them”—even after so long the remembered smell of Fain, the feel of the man, made his mouth twist—“so the rest of the Darkfriends must be, too.”

“Shadowkiller,” Ingtar murmured. “Something of the Dark One, like a Myrddraal? I have seen things in the Blight that might be called Shadowkillers, but. . . . Did they see nothing else?”

“They would not come close to him. It was not a Fade. I’ve told you, they will kill a Fade quicker than they will a Trolloc, even if they lose half the pack. Ingtar, the wolves who saw it passed this to others, then still others, before it reached me. I can only tell you what they passed on, and after so many tellings. . . .” He let the words die as Uno joined them.

“Aielman in the rocks,” the one-eyed man said quietly.

“This far from the Waste?” Ingtar said incredulously. Uno somehow managed to look offended without changing his expression, and Ingtar added, “No, I don’t doubt you. I am just surprised.”

“He flaming wanted me to see him, or I likely wouldn’t have.” Uno sounded disgusted at admitting it. “And his bloody face wasn’t veiled, so he’s not out for killing. But when you see one bloody Aiel, there’s always more you don’t.” Suddenly his eye widened. “Burn me if it doesn’t look like he bloody wants more than to be seen.” He pointed: a man had stepped into the way ahead of them.

Instantly Masema's lance dropped to a couch, and he dug his heels into his horse, leaping to a dead gallop in three strides. He was not the only one; four steel points hurtled toward the man on the ground.

"Hold!" Ingtar shouted. "Hold, I said! I'll have the ears of any man who doesn't stop where he stands!"

Masema pulled in his horse viciously, sawing the reins. The others also stopped, in a cloud of dust not ten paces from the man, their lances still held steady on the man's chest. He raised a hand to wave away the dust as it drifted toward him; it was the first move he had made.

He was a tall man, with skin dark from the sun and red hair cut short except for a tail in the back that hung to his shoulders. From his soft, laced knee-high boots to the cloth wrapped loosely around his neck, his clothes were all in shades of brown and gray that would blend into rock or earth. The end of a short horn bow peeked over his shoulder, and a quiver bristled with arrows at his belt at one side. A long knife hung at the other. In his left hand he gripped a round hide buckler and three short spears, no more than half as long as he was tall, with points fully as long as those of the Shienaran lances.

"I have no pipers to play the tune," the man announced with a smile, "but if you wish the dance. . . ." He did not change his stance, but Perrin caught a sudden air of readiness. "My name is Urien, of the Two Spires sept of the Reyn Aiel. I am a Red Shield. Remember me."

Ingtar dismounted and walked forward, removing his helmet. Perrin hesitated only a moment before climbing down to join him. He could not miss the chance to see an Aiel close up. Acting like a black-veiled Aiel. In story after story Aiel were as deadly and dangerous as Trollocs—some even said they were all Darkfriends—but Urien's smile somehow did not look dangerous despite the fact that he seemed poised to leap. His eyes were blue.

"He looks like Rand." Perrin looked around to see that Mat had joined them, too. "Maybe Ingtar's right," Mat added quietly. "Maybe Rand is an Aiel."

Perrin nodded. "But it doesn't change anything."

"No, it doesn't." Mat sounded as if he were talking about something beside what Perrin meant.

"We are both far from our homes," Ingtar said to the Aiel, "and we, at least, have come for other things than fighting." Perrin revised his opinion of Urien’s smile; the man actually looked disappointed.

“As you wish it, Shienaran.” Urien turned to Verin, just getting down off her horse, and made an odd bow, digging the points of his spears into the ground and extending his right hand, palm up. His voice became respectful. “Wise One, my water is yours.”

Verin handed her reins to one of the soldiers. She studied the Aiel as she came closer. “Why do you call me that? Do you take me for an Aiel?”

“No, Wise One. But you have the look of those who have made the journey to Rhuidean and survived. The years do not touch the Wise Ones in the same way as other women, or as they touch men.”

An excited look appeared on the Aes Sedai’s face, but Ingtar spoke impatiently. “We are following Darkfriends and Trollocs, Urien. Have you seen any sign of them?”

“Trollocs? Here?” Urien’s eyes brightened. “It is one of the signs the prophecies speak of. When the Trollocs come out of the Blight again, we will leave the Three-fold Land and take back our places of old.” There was muttering from the mounted Shienarans. Urien eyed them with a pride that made him seem to be looking down from a height.

“The Three-fold Land?” Mat said.

Perrin thought he looked still paler; not sick, exactly, but as if he had been out of the sun too long.

“You call it the Waste,” Urien said. “To us it is the Three-fold Land. A shaping stone, to make us; a testing ground, to prove our worth; and a punishment for the sin.”

“What sin?” Mat asked. Perrin caught his breath, waiting for the spears in Urien’s hand to flash.

The Aiel shrugged. “So long ago it was, that none remember. Except the Wise Ones and the clan chiefs, and they will not speak of it. It must have been a very great sin if they cannot bring themselves to tell us, but the Creator punishes us well.”

“Trollocs,” Ingtar persisted. “Have you seen Trollocs?”

Urien shook his head. “I would have killed them if I had, but I have seen nothing but the rocks and the sky.”

Ingtar shook his head, losing interest, but Verin spoke, sharp concentration in her voice. “This Rhuidean. What is it? Where is it? How are the girls chosen to go?”

Urien's face went flat, his eyes hooded. "I cannot speak of it, Wise One."

In spite of himself Perrin's hand gripped his axe. There was that in Urien's voice. Ingtar had also set himself, ready to reach for his sword, and there was a stir among the mounted men. But Verin stepped up to the Aiel, until she was almost touching his chest, and looked up into his face.

"I am not a Wise One as you know them, Urien," she said insistently. "I am Aes Sedai. Tell me what you can say of Rhuidean."

The man who had been ready to face twenty men now looked as if he wished for an escape from this one plump woman with graying hair. "I . . . can tell you only what is known to all. Rhuidean lies in the lands of the Jenn Aiel, the thirteenth clan. I cannot speak of them except to name them. None may go there save women who wish to become Wise Ones, or men who wish to be clan chiefs. Perhaps the Jenn Aiel choose among them; I do not know. Many go; few return, and those are marked as what they are—Wise Ones, or clan chiefs. No more can I say, Aes Sedai. No more."

Verin continued to look up at him, pursing her lips.

Urien looked at the sky as though he was trying to remember it. "Will you slay me now, Aes Sedai?"

She blinked. "What?"

"Will you slay me now? One of the old prophecies says that if ever we fail the Aes Sedai again, they will slay us. I know your power is greater than that of the Wise Ones." The Aiel laughed suddenly, mirthlessly. There was a wild light in his eyes. "Bring your lightnings, Aes Sedai. I will dance with them."

The Aiel thought he was going to die, and he was not afraid. Perrin realized his mouth was open and closed it with a snap.

"What would I not give," Verin murmured, gazing up at Urien, "to have you in the White Tower. Or just willing to talk. Oh, be still, man. I won't harm you. Unless you mean to harm me, with your talk of dancing."

Urien seemed astounded. He looked at the Shienarans, sitting their horses all around, as if he suspected some trick. "You are not a Maiden of the Spear," he said slowly. "How could I strike at a woman who has not wedded the spear? It is forbidden except to save life, and then I would take wounds to avoid it."

"Why are you here, so far from your own lands?" she asked. "Why did you come to us? You could have remained in the rocks, and we would never have known you were there.” The Aiel hesitated, and she added, “Tell only what you are willing to say. I do not know what your Wise Ones do, but I’ll not harm you, or try to force you.”

“So the Wise Ones say,” Urien said dryly, “yet even a clan chief must have a strong belly to avoid doing as they want.” He seemed to be picking his words carefully. “I search for . . . someone. A man.” His eye ran across Perrin, Mat, the Shienarans, dismissing them all. “He Who Comes With the Dawn. It is said there will be great signs and portents of his coming. I saw that you were from Shienar by your escort’s armor, and you had the look of a Wise One, so I thought you might have word of great events, the events that might herald him.”

“A man?” Verin’s voice was soft, but her eyes were as sharp as daggers. “What are these signs?”

Urien shook his head. “It is said we will know them when we hear of them, as we will know him when we see him, for he will be marked. He will come from the west, beyond the Spine of the World, but be of our blood. He will go to Rhuidean, and lead us out of the Three-fold Land.” He took a spear in his right hand. Leather and metal creaked as soldiers reached for their swords, and Perrin realized he had taken hold of his axe again, but Verin waved them all to stillness with an irritated look. In the dirt Urien scraped a circle with his spearpoint, then drew across it a sinuous line. “It is said that under this sign, he will conquer.”

Ingtar frowned at the symbol, no recognition on his face, but Mat muttered something coarsely under his breath, and Perrin felt his mouth go dry. *The ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai.*

Verin scraped the marking away with her foot. “I cannot tell you where he is, Urien,” she said, “and I have heard of no signs or portents to guide you to him.”

“Then I will continue my search.” It was not a question, yet Urien waited until she nodded before he eyed the Shienarans proudly, challengingly, then turned his back on them. He walked away smoothly, and vanished into the rocks without looking back.

Some of the soldiers began muttering. Uno said something about “crazy bloody Aiel,” and Masema growled that they should have left the Aiel for the ravens.

“We have wasted valuable time,” Ingtar announced loudly. “We will ride harder to make it up.”

“Yes,” Verin said, “we must ride harder.”

Ingtar glanced at her, but the Aes Sedai was staring at the smudged ground, where her foot had obliterated the symbol. “Dismount,” he ordered. “Armor on the packhorses. We’re inside Cairhien, now. We do not want the Cairhienin thinking we have come to fight them. Be quick about it!”

Mat leaned close to Perrin. “Do you . . . ? Do you think he was talking about Rand? It’s crazy, I know, but even Ingtar thinks he’s Aiel.”

“I don’t know,” Perrin said. “Everything has been crazy since we got mixed up with Aes Sedai.”

Softly, as to herself, Verin spoke, still staring at the ground. “It must be a part, and yet how? Does the Wheel of Time weave threads into the Pattern of which we know nothing? Or does the Dark One touch the Pattern again?”

Perrin felt a chill.

Verin looked up at the soldiers removing their armor. “Hurry!” she commanded with more snap than Ingtar and Uno combined. “We must hurry!”

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CHAPTER

29

Seanchan

Geofram Bornhald ignored the smell of burning houses and the bodies that lay sprawled on the dirt of the street. Byar and a white-cloaked guard of a hundred rode into the village at his heels, half the men he had with him. His legion was too scattered for his liking, with Questioners having too many of the commands, but his orders had been explicit: Obey the Questioners.

There had been but slight resistance here; only half a dozen dwellings gave off columns of smoke. The inn was still standing, he saw, white-plastered stone like almost every structure on Almoth Plain.

Reining up before the inn, his eyes went past the prisoners his soldiers held near the village well to the long gibbet marring the village green. It was hastily made, only a long pole on uprights, but it held thirty bodies, their clothes ruffled by the breeze. There were small bodies hanging among their elders. Even Byar stared at that in disbelief.

“Muadh!” he roared. A grizzled man trotted away from those holding the prisoners. Muadh had fallen into the hands of Darkfriends, once; his scarred face took even the strongest aback. “Is this your work, Muadh, or the Seanchan?”

“Neither, my Lord Captain.” Muadh’s voice was a hoarse, whispered growl, another leaving of the Darkfriends. He said no more.

Bornhald frowned. “Surely that lot did not do it,” he said, gesturing to the prisoners. The Children did not look so neat as when he had brought them across Tarabon, but they seemed ready to parade compared with the rabble that crouched under their watchful eyes. Men in rags and bits of armor, with sullen faces. Remnants of the army Tarabon had sent against the invaders on Toman Head.

Muadh hesitated, then said carefully, “The villagers say they wore Taraboner cloaks, my Lord Captain. There was a big man among them, with gray eyes and a long mustache, that sounds twin to Child Earwin, and a young lad, trying to hide a pretty face behind a yellow beard, who fought with his left hand. Sounds almost like Child Wuan, my Lord Captain.”

“Questioners!” Bornhald spat. Earwin and Wuan were among those he had had to hand over to the Questioners’ command. He had seen Questioner tactics before, but this was the first time he had ever been faced with children’s bodies.

“If my Lord Captain says so.” Muadh made it sound like fervent agreement.

“Cut them down,” Bornhald said wearily. “Cut them down, and make sure the villagers know there will be no more killing.” *Unless some fool decides to be brave because his woman is watching, and I have to make an example.* He dismounted, eyeing the prisoners again, as Muadh hurried off calling for ladders and knives. He had more to think about than Questioners’ overzealousness; he wished he could stop thinking about Questioners altogether.

“They do not put up much fight, my Lord Captain,” Byar said, “either these Taraboners or what is left of the Domani. They snap like cornered rats, but run as soon as anything snaps back.”

“Let us see how we do against the invaders, Byar, before we look down on these men, yes?” The prisoners’ faces bore a defeated look that had been there before his men came. “Have Muadh pick one out for me.” Muadh’s face was enough to soften most men’s resolve by itself. “An officer, preferably. One who looks intelligent enough to tell what he has seen without embroidery, but young enough not to have yet grown a full backbone. Tell Muadh to be not too gentle about it, yes? Make the fellow believe that I mean to see worse happen to him than he ever dreamed of, unless he convinces me otherwise.” He tossed his reins to one of the Children and strode into the inn.

The innkeeper was there, for a wonder, an obsequious, sweating man, his dirty shirt straining over his belly until the embroidered red scrollwork seemed ready to pop off. Bornhald waved the man away; he was vaguely aware of a woman and some children huddling in a doorway, until the fat innkeeper shepherded them out.

Bornhald pulled off his gauntlets and sat at one of the tables. He knew too little about the invaders, the strangers. That was what almost everyone called them, those who did not just babble about Artur Hawkwing. He knew they called themselves the Seanchan, and *Hailene.* He had enough of the Old Tongue to know the latter meant Those Who Come Before, or the Forerunners. They also called themselves *Rhyagelle,* Those Who Come Home, and spoke of *Corenne,* the Return. It was almost enough to make him believe the tales of Artur Hawkwing's armies come back. No one knew where the Seanchan had come from, other than that they had landed in ships. Bornhald's requests for information from the Sea Folk had been met with silence. Amador did not hold the Atha'an Miere in good favor, and the attitude was returned with interest. All he knew of the Seanchan he had heard from men like those outside. Broken, beaten rabble who spoke, wide-eyed and sweating, of men who came into battle riding monsters as often as horses, who fought with monsters by their sides, and brought Aes Sedai to rend the earth under their enemies' feet.

A sound of boots in the doorway made him put on a wolfish grin, but Byar was not accompanied by Muadh. The Child of the Light who stood beside him, back braced and helmet in the crook of his arm, was Jeral, who Bornhald expected to be a hundred miles away. Over his armor, the young man wore a cloak of Domani cut, trimmed with blue, not the white cloak of the Children.

"Muadh is talking to a young fellow now, my Lord Captain," Byar said. "Child Jeral has just ridden in with a message."

Bornhald waved for Jeral to begin.

The young man did not unbend. "The compliments of Jaichim Carridin," he started, looking straight ahead, "who guides the Hand of the Light in—"

"I have no need of the Questioner's compliments," Bornhald growled, and saw the young man's startled look. Jeral was young, yet. For that matter, Byar looked uncomfortable, as well. "You will give me his message, yes? Not word for word, unless I ask it. Simply tell me what he wants."

The Child, set to recite, swallowed before he began. "My Lord Captain, he—he says you are moving too many men too close to Toman Head. He says the Darkfriends on Almoth Plain must be rooted out, and you are—forgive me, Lord Captain—you are to turn back at once and ride toward the heart of the plain." He stood stiffly, waiting.

Bornhald studied him. The dust of the plain stained Jeral's face as well as his cloak and his boots. "Go and get yourself something to eat," Bornhald told him. "There should be wash water in one of these houses, if you wish it. Return to me in an hour. I will have messages for you to carry.” He waved the young man out.

“The Questioners may be right, my Lord Captain,” Byar said when Jeral was gone. “There are many villages scattered on the plain, and the Darkfriends—”

Bornhald’s hand slapping the table cut him off. “What Darkfriends? I have seen nothing in any village he has ordered taken except farmers and craftsmen worried that we will burn their livelihoods, and a few old women who tend the sick.” Byar’s face was a study in lack of expression; he was always readier than Bornhald to see Darkfriends. “And children, Byar? Do children here become Darkfriends?”

“The sins of the mother are visited to the fifth generation,” Byar quoted, “and the sins of the father to the tenth.” But he looked uneasy. Even Byar had never killed a child.

“Has it never occurred to you, Byar, to wonder why Carridin has taken away our banners, and the cloaks of the men the Questioners lead? Even the Questioners themselves have put off the white. This suggests something, yes?”

“He must have his reasons, Lord Captain,” Byar said slowly. “The Questioners always have reasons, even when they do not tell the rest of us.”

Bornhald reminded himself that Byar was a good soldier. “Children to the north wear Taraboner cloaks, Byar, and those to the south Domani. I do not like what this suggests to me. There are Darkfriends here, but they are in Falme, not on the plain. When Jeral rides, he will not ride alone. Messages will go to every group of the Children I know how to find. I mean to take the legion onto Toman Head, Byar, and see what the true Darkfriends, these Seanchan, are up to.”

Byar looked troubled, but before he could speak, Muadh appeared with one of the prisoners. The sweating young man in a battered, ornate breastplate shot frightened looks at Muadh’s hideous face.

Bornhald drew his dagger and began trimming his nails. He had never understood why that made some men nervous, but he used it just the same. Even his grandfatherly smile made the prisoner’s dirty face pale. “Now, young man, you will tell me everything you know about these strangers, yes? If you need to think on what to say, I will send you back out with Child Muadh to consider it.”

The prisoner darted a wide-eyed look at Muadh. Then words began to pour out of him.

The long swells of the Aryth Ocean made *Spray* roll, but Domon's spread feet balanced him as he held the long tube of the looking glass to his eye and studied the large vessel that pursued them. Pursued, and was slowly overtaking. The wind where *Spray* ran was not the best or the strongest, but where the other ship smashed the swells into mountains of foam with its bluff bow, it could not have blown better. The coastline of Toman Head loomed to the east, dark cliffs and narrow strips of sand. He had not cared to take *Spray* too far out, and now he feared he might pay for it.

"Strangers, Captain?" Yarin had the sound of sweat in his voice. "Is it a strangers' ship?"

Domon lowered the looking glass, but his eye still seemed filled by that tall, square-looking ship with its odd ribbed sails. "Seanchan," he said, and heard Yarin groan. He drummed his thick fingers on the rail, then told the helmsman, "Take her closer in. That ship will no dare enter the shallow waters *Spray* can sail."

Yarin shouted commands, and crewmen ran to haul in booms as the helmsman put the tiller over, pointing the bow more toward the shoreline. *Spray* moved more slowly, heading so far into the wind, but Domon was sure he could reach shoal waters before the other vessel came up on him. *Did her holds be full, she could still take shallower water than ever that great hull can.*

His ship rode a little higher in the water than she had on sailing from Tanchico. A third of the cargo of fireworks he had taken on there was gone, sold in the fishing villages on Toman Head, but with the silver that flowed for the fireworks had come disturbing reports. The people spoke of visits from the tall, boxy ships of the invaders. When Seanchan ships anchored off the coast, the villagers who drew up to defend their homes were rent by lightning from the sky while small boats were still ferrying the invaders ashore, and the earth erupted in fire under their feet. Domon had thought he was hearing nonsense until he was shown the blackened ground, and he had seen it in too many villages to doubt any longer. Monsters fought beside the Seanchan soldiers, not that there was ever much resistance left, the villagers said, and some even claimed that the Seanchan themselves were monsters, with heads like huge insects.

In Tanchico, no one had even known what they called themselves, and the Taraboners spoke confidently of their soldiers driving the invaders into the sea. But in every coastal town, it was different. The Seanchan told astonished people they must swear again oaths they had forsaken, though never deigning to explain when they had forsaken them, or what the oaths meant. The young women were taken away one by one to be examined, and some were carried aboard the ships and never seen again. A few older women had also vanished, some of the Guides and Healers. New mayors were chosen by the Seanchan, and new Councils, and any who protested the disappearances of the women or having no voice in the choosing might be hung, or burst suddenly into flame, or be brushed aside like yapping dogs. There was no way of telling which it would be until it was too late.

And when the people had been thoroughly cowed, when they had been made to kneel and swear, bewildered, to obey the Forerunners, await the Return, and serve Those Who Come Home with their lives, the Seanchan sailed away and usually never returned. Falme, it was said, was the only town they held fast.

In some of the villages they had left, men and women crept back toward their former lives, to the extent of talking about electing their Councils again, but most eyed the sea nervously and made pale-cheeked protests that they meant to hold to the oaths they had been made to swear even if they did not understand them.

Domon had no intention of meeting any Seanchan, if he could avoid it.

He was raising the glass to see what he could make out on the nearing Seanchan decks, when, with a roar, the surface of the sea broke into fountaining water and flame not a hundred paces from his larboard side. Before he had even begun to gape, another column of flame split the sea on the other side, and as he was spinning to stare at that, another burst up ahead. The eruptions died as quickly as they were born, spray from them blown across the deck. Where they had been, the sea bubbled and steamed as if boiling.

“We . . . we’ll reach shallow water before they can close with us,” Yarin said slowly. He seemed to be trying not to look at the water roiling under clouds of mist.

Domon shook his head. “Whatever they did, they can shatter us, even do I take her into the breakers.” He shivered, thinking of the flame inside the fountains of water, and his holds full of fireworks. “Fortune prick me, we might no live to drown." He tugged at his beard and rubbed his bare upper lip, reluctant to give the order—the vessel and what it contained were all he had in the world—but finally he made himself speak. "Bring her into the wind, Yarin, and down sail. Quickly, man, quickly! Before they do think we still try to escape."

As crewmen ran to lower the triangular sails, Domon turned to watch the Seanchan ship approach. *Spray* lost headway and pitched in the swells. The other vessel stood taller above the water than Domon's ship, with wooden towers at bow and stern. Men were in the rigging, raising those strange sails, and armored figures stood atop the towers. A longboat was put over the side, and sped toward *Spray* under ten oars. It carried armored shapes, and—Domon frowned in surprise—two women crouched in the stern. The longboat thumped against *Spray*'s hull.

The first to climb up was one of the armored men, and Domon saw immediately why some of the villagers claimed the Seanchan themselves were monsters. The helmet looked very much like some monstrous insect's head, with thin red plumes like feelers; the wearer seemed to be peering out through mandibles. It was painted and gilded to increase the effect, and the rest of the man's armor was also worked with paint and gold. Overlapping plates in black and red outlined with gold covered his chest and ran down the outsides of his arms and the fronts of his thighs. Even the steel backs of his gauntlets were red and gold. Where he did not wear metal, his clothes were dark leather. The two-handed sword on his back, with its curved blade, was scabbarded and hilted in black-and-red leather.

Then the armored figure removed his helmet, and Domon stared. He was a woman. Her dark hair was cut short, and her face was hard, but there was no mistaking it. He had never heard of such a thing, except among the Aiel, and Aiel were well known to be crazed. Just as disconcerting was the fact that her face did not look as different as he had expected of a Seanchan. Her eyes were blue, it was true, and her skin exceedingly fair, but he had seen both before. If this woman wore a dress, no one would look at her twice. He eyed her and revised his opinion, that cold stare and those hard cheeks would make her remarked anywhere.

The other soldiers followed the woman onto the deck. Domon was relieved to see, when some of them removed their strange helmets, that they, at least, were men; men with black eyes, or brown, who could have gone unnoticed in Tanchico or Illian. He had begun to have visions of armies of blue-eyed women with swords. *Aes Sedai with swords*, he thought, remembering the sea erupting.

The Seanchan woman surveyed the ship arrogantly, then picked Domon out as captain—it had to be him or Yarin, by their clothes; the way Yarin had his eyes closed and was muttering prayers under his breath pointed to Domon—and fixed him with a stare like a spike.

"Are there any women among your crew or passengers?" She spoke with a soft slurring that made her hard to understand, but there was a snap in her voice that said she was used to getting answers. "Speak up, man, if you are the captain. If not, wake that other fool and tell him to speak."

"I do be captain, my Lady," Domon said cautiously. He had no idea how to address her, and he did not want to put a foot wrong. "I have no passengers, and there be no women in my crew." He thought of the girls and women who had been carried off, and, not for the first time, wondered what these folk wanted with them.

The two women dressed as women were coming up from the longboat, one drawing the other—Domon blinked—by a leash of silvery metal as she climbed aboard. The leash went from a bracelet worn by the first woman to a collar around the neck of the second. He could not tell whether it was woven or jointed—it seemed somehow to be both—but it was clearly of a piece with both bracelet and collar. The first woman gathered the leash in coils as the other came onto the deck. The collared woman wore plain dark gray and stood with her hands folded and her eyes on the planks under her feet. The other had red panels bearing forked, silver lightning bolts on the breast of her blue dress and on the sides of her skirts, which ended short of the ankles of her boots. Domon eyed the women uneasily.

"Speak slowly, man," the blue-eyed woman demanded in her slurred speech. She came across the deck to confront him, staring up at him and in some way seeming taller and larger than he. "You are even harder to understand than the rest in this Light-forsaken land. And I make no claim to be of the Blood. Not yet. After *Corenne*. . . . I am Captain Egeanin."

Domon repeated himself, trying to speak slowly, and added, "I do be a peaceful trader, Captain. I mean no harm to you, and I have no part in your war." He could not help eyeing the two women connected by the leash again.

"A peaceful trader?" Egeanin mused. "In that case, you will be free to go once you have sworn fealty again." She noticed his glances and turned to smile at the women with the pride of ownership. “You admire my *damane*? She cost me dear, but she was worth every coin. Few but nobles own a *damane,* and most are property of the throne. She is strong, trader. She could have broken your ship to splinters, had I wished it so.”

Domon stared at the women and the silver leash. He had connected the one wearing the lightning with the fiery fountains in the sea, and assumed she was an Aes Sedai. Egeanin had just set his head whirling. *No one could do that to*. . . . “She is Aes Sedai?” he said disbelievingly.

He never saw the casual backhand blow coming. He staggered as her steel-backed gauntlet split his lip.

“That name is never spoken,” Egeanin said with a dangerous softness. “There are only the *damane*, the Leashed Ones, and now they serve in truth as well as name.” Her eyes made ice seem warm.

Domon swallowed blood and kept his hand clenched at his sides. If he had had a sword to hand, he would not have led his crew to slaughter against a dozen armored soldiers, but it was an effort to make his voice humble. “I meant no disrespect, Captain. I know nothing of you or your ways. If I do offend, it is ignorance, no intention.”

She looked at him, then said, “You are all ignorant, Captain, but you will pay the debt of your forefathers. This land was ours, and it will be ours again. With the Return, it will be ours again.” Domon did not know what to say—*Surely she can no mean that nattering about Artur Hawkwing be true?*—so he kept his mouth shut. “You will sail your vessel to Falme”—he tried to protest, but her glare silenced him—“where you and your ship will be examined. If you are no more than a peaceful trader, as you claim, you will be allowed to go your way when you have sworn the oaths.”

“Oaths, Captain? What oaths?”

“To obey, to await, and to serve. Your ancestors should have remembered.”

She gathered her people—except for a single man in plain armor, which marked him of low rank as much as the depth of his bow to Captain Egeanin—and their longboat pulled away toward the larger ship. The remaining Seanchan gave no orders, only sat cross-legged on the deck and began sharpening his sword while the crew put sail on and got under way. He seemed to have no fear at being alone, and Domon would have personally thrown overboard any crewman who raised a hand to him, for as *Spray* made her way along the coast, the Seanchan ship followed, out in deeper water. There was a mile between the two vessels, but Domon knew there was no hope of escape, and he meant to deliver the man back to Captain Egeanin as safely as if he had been cradled in his mother's arms.

It was a long passage to Falme, and Domon finally persuaded the Seanchan to talk, a little. A dark-eyed man in his middle years, with an old scar above his eyes and another nicking his chin, his name was Caban, and he had nothing but contempt for anyone this side of the Aryth Ocean. That gave Domon a moment's pause. *Maybe they truly do be. . . . No, that do be madness*. Caban's speech had the same slur as Egeanin's, but where hers was silk sliding across iron, his was leather rasping on rock, and mostly he wanted to talk about battles, drinking, and women he had known. Half the time, Domon was not certain if he were speaking of here and now, or of wherever he had come from. The man was certainly not forthcoming about anything Domon wanted to know.

Once Domon asked about the *damane*. Caban reached up from where he sat in front of the helmsman and put the point of his sword to Domon's throat. "Watch what your tongue touches, or you will lose it. That's the business of the Blood, not your kind. Or mine." He grinned while he said it, and as soon as he was done, he went back to sliding a stone along his heavy, curved blade.

Domon touched the point of blood welling above his collar and resolved not to ask that again, at least.

The closer the two vessels came to Falme, the more of the tall, square-looking Seanchan ships they passed, some under sail, but more anchored. Every one was bluff-bowed and towered, as big as anything Domon had ever seen, even among the Sea Folk. A few local craft, he saw, with their sharp bows and slanted sails, darted across the green swells. The sight gave him confidence that Egeanin had spoken the truth about letting him go free.

When *Spray* came up on the headland where Falme stood, Domon gaped at the numbers of the Seanchan ships anchored off the harbor. He tried counting them and gave up at a hundred, less than halfway done. He had seen as many ships in one place before—in Illian, and Tear, and even Tanchico—but those vessels had included many smaller craft. Muttering glumly to himself, he took *Spray* into the harbor, shepherded by her great Seanchan watchdog.

Falme stood on a spit of land at the very tip of Toman Head, with nothing further west of it except the Aryth Ocean. High cliffs ran to the harbor mouth on both sides, and atop one of those, where every ship running into the harbor had to pass under them, stood the towers of the Watchers Over the Waves. A cage hung over the side of one of the towers, with a man sitting in it despondently, legs dangling through the bars.

“Who is that?” Domon asked.

Caban had finally given over sharpening his sword, after Domon had begun to wonder if he meant to shave with it. The Seanchan glanced up to where Domon pointed. “Oh. That is the First Watcher. Not the one who sat in the chair when we first came, of course. Every time he dies, they choose another, and we put him in the cage.”

“But why?” Domon demanded.

Caban’s grin showed too many teeth. “They watched for the wrong thing, and forgot when they should have been remembering.”

Domon tore his eyes away from the Seanchan. *Spray* slid down the last real sea swell and into the quieter waters of the harbor. *I do be a trader, and it is none of my business*.

Falme rose from stone docks up the slopes of the hollow that made the harbor. Domon could not decide whether the dark stone houses made up a goodly sized town or a small city. Certainly he saw no building in it to rival the smallest palace in Illian.

He guided *Spray* to a place at one of the docks, and wondered, while the crew tied the ship fast, if the Seanchan might buy some of the fireworks in his hold. *None of my business*.

To his surprise, Egeanin had herself rowed to the dock with her *damane*. There was another woman wearing the bracelet this time, with the red panels and forked lightning on her dress, but the *damane* was the same sad-faced woman who never looked up unless the other spoke to her. Egeanin had Domon and his crew herded off the ship to sit on the dock under the eyes of a pair of her soldiers—she seemed to think no more were needed, and Domon was not about to argue with her—while others searched *Spray* under her direction. The *damane* was part of the search.

Down the dock, a thing appeared. Domon could think of no other way to describe it. A hulking creature with a leathery, gray-green hide and a beak of a mouth in a wedge-shaped head. And three eyes. It lumbered along beside a man whose armor bore three painted eyes, just like those of the creature. The local people, dockmen and sailors in roughly embroidered shirts and long vests to their knees, shied away as the pair passed, but no

Seanchan gave them a second glance. The man with the beast seemed to be directing it with hand signals.

Man and creature turned in among the buildings, leaving Domon staring and his crew muttering to themselves. The two Seanchan guards sneered at them silently. *No my business*, Domon reminded himself. His business was his ship.

The air had a familiar smell of salt water and pitch. He shifted uneasily on the stone, hot from the sun, and wondered what the Seanchan were searching for. What the *damane* was searching for. Wondered what that thing had been. Gulls cried, wheeling above the harbor. He thought of the sounds a caged man might make. *It is no my business*.

Eventually Egeanin led the others back onto the dock. The Seanchan captain had something wrapped in a piece of yellow silk, Domon noted warily. Something small enough to carry in one hand, but which she held carefully in both.

He got to his feet—slowly, for the soldiers' sake, though their eyes held the same contempt Caban's did. "You see, Captain? I do be only a peaceful trader. Perhaps your people would care to buy some fireworks?"

"Perhaps, trader." There was an air of suppressed excitement about her that made him uneasy, and her next words increased the feeling. "You will come with me."

She told two soldiers to come along, and one of them gave Domon a push to get him started. It was not a rough shove; Domon had seen farmers push a cow in the same way to make it move. Setting his teeth, he followed Egeanin.

The cobblestone street climbed the slope, leaving the smell of the harbor behind. The slate-roofed houses grew larger and taller as the street climbed. Surprisingly for a town held by invaders, the streets held more local people than Seanchan soldiers, and now and again a curtained palanquin was borne past by bare-chested men. The Falmen seemed to be going about their business as if the Seanchan were not there. Or almost not there. When palanquin or soldier passed, both poor folk, with only a curling line or two worked on their dirty clothes, and the richer, with shirts, vests, and dresses covered from shoulder to waist in intricately embroidered patterns, bowed and remained bent until the Seanchan were gone. They did the same for Domon and his guard. Neither Egeanin nor her soldiers so much as glanced at them.

Domon realized with a sudden shock that some of the local people they passed wore daggers at their belts, and in a few cases swords. He was so surprised that he spoke without thinking. “Some of them be on your side?”

Egeanin frowned over her shoulder at him, obviously puzzled. Without slowing, she looked at the people and nodded to herself. “You mean the swords. They are our people, now, trader; they have sworn the oaths.” She stopped abruptly, pointing at a tall, heavy-shouldered man with a heavily embroidered vest and a sword swinging on a plain leather baldric. “You.”

The man halted in mid-step, one foot in the air and a frightened look suddenly on his face. It was a hard face, but he looked as if he wanted to run. Instead, he turned to her and bowed, hands on knees, eyes fixed on her boots. “How may this one serve the captain?” he asked in a tight voice.

“You are a merchant?” Egeanin said. “You have sworn the oaths?”

“Yes, Captain. Yes.” He did not take his eyes from her feet.

“What do you tell the people when you take your wagons inland?”

“That they must obey the Forerunners, Captain, await the Return, and serve Those Who Come Home.”

“And do you never think to use that sword against us?”

The man’s hands went white-knuckled gripping his knees, and there was suddenly sweat in his voice. “I have sworn the oaths, Captain. I obey, await, and serve.”

“You see?” Egeanin said, turning to Domon. “There is no reason to forbid them weapons. There must be trade, and merchants must protect themselves from bandits. We allow the people to come and go as they will, so long as they obey, await, and serve. Their forefathers broke their oaths, but these have learned better.” She started back up the hill, and the soldiers pushed Domon after her.

He looked back at the merchant. The man stayed bent as he was till Egeanin was ten paces up the street, then he straightened and hurried the other way, leaping down the sloping street.

Egeanin and his guards did not look around, either, when a mounted Seanchan troop passed them, climbing the street. The soldiers rode creatures that looked almost like cats the size of horses, but with lizards’ scales rippling bronze beneath their saddles. Clawed feet grasped the cobblestones. A three-eyed head turned to regard Domon as the troop climbed by; aside from everything else, it seemed too—knowing—for

Domon's peace of mind. He stumbled and almost fell. All along the street, the Falmen were pressing themselves back against the fronts of the buildings, some closing their eyes. The Seanchan paid them no heed.

Domon understood why the Seanchan could allow the people as much freedom as they did. He wondered if he would have had nerve enough to resist. *Damane*. Monsters. He wondered if there was anything to stop the Seanchan from marching all the way to the Spine of the World. *No my business*, he reminded himself roughly, and considered whether there was any way to avoid the Seanchan in his future trading.

They reached the top of the incline, where the town gave way to hills. There was no town wall. Ahead were the inns that served merchants who traded inland, and wagon yards and stables. Here, the houses would have made respectable manors for the minor lords in Illian. The largest of them had an honor guard of Seanchan soldiers out front, and a blue-edged banner bearing a golden, spread-winged hawk rippling above it. Egeanin surrendered her sword and dagger before taking Domon inside. Her two soldiers remained in the street. Domon began to sweat. He smelled a lord in this; it was never good to do business with a lord on the lord's own ground.

In the front hall Egeanin left Domon at the door and spoke to a servant. A local man, judging by the full sleeves of his shirt and the spirals embroidered across his chest; Domon believed he caught the words "High Lord." The servant hurried away, returning finally to lead them to what was surely the largest room in the house. Every stick of furniture had been cleared out of it, even the rugs, and the stone floor was polished to a bright gleam. Folding screens painted with strange birds hid walls and windows.

Egeanin stopped just inside the room. When Domon tried to ask where they were and why, she silenced him with a savage glare and a wordless growl. She did not move, but she seemed on the point of bouncing on her toes. She held whatever it was she had taken from his ship as if it were precious. He tried to imagine what it could be.

Suddenly a gong sounded softly, and the Seanchan woman dropped to her knees, setting the silk-wrapped something carefully beside her. At a look from her, Domon got down as well. Lords had strange ways, and he suspected Seanchan lords might have stranger ones than he knew.

Two men appeared in the doorway at the far end of the room. One had the left side of his scalp shaved, his remaining pale golden hair braided and hanging down over his ear to his shoulder. His deep yellow robe was just long enough to let the toes of yellow slippers peek out when he walked. The other wore a blue silk robe, brocaded with birds and long enough to trail nearly a span on the floor behind him. His head was shaved bald, and his fingernails were at least an inch long, those on the first two fingers of each hand lacquered blue. Domon's mouth dropped open.

"You are in the presence of the High Lord Turak," the yellow-haired man intoned, "who leads Those Who Come Before, and succors the Return."

Egeanin prostrated herself with her hands at her sides. Domon imitated her with alacrity. *Even the High Lords of Tear would no demand this*, he thought. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Egeanin kissing the floor. With a grimace, he decided there was a limit to imitation. *They can no see whether I do or no anyway*.

Egeanin suddenly stood. He started to rise as well, and made it as far as one knee before a growl in her throat and a scandalized look on the face of the man with the braid put him back down, face to the floor and muttering under his breath. *I would no do this for the King of Illian and the Council of Nine together*.

"Your name is Egeanin?" It had to be the voice of the man in the blue robe. His slurring speech had a rhythm almost like singing.

"I was so named on my sword-day, High Lord," she replied humbly.

"This is a fine specimen, Egeanin. Quite rare. Do you wish a payment?"

"That the High Lord is pleased is payment enough. I live to serve, High Lord."

"I will mention your name to the Empress, Egeanin. After the Return, new names will be called to the Blood. Show yourself fit, and you may shed the name Egeanin for a higher."

"The High Lord honors me."

"Yes. You may leave me."

Domon could see nothing but her boots backing out of the room, pausing at intervals for bows. The door closed behind her. There was a long silence. He was watching sweat from his forehead drip onto the floor when Turak spoke again.

"You may rise, trader."

Domon got to his feet, and saw what Turak held in his long-nailed fingers. The *cuendillar* disk shaped into the ancient seal of the Aes Sedai.

Remembering Egeanin's reaction when he mentioned Aes Sedai, Domon began to sweat in earnest. There was no animosity in the High Lord's dark eyes, only a slight curiosity, but Domon did not trust lords.

"Do you know what this is, trader?"

"No, High Lord." Domon's reply was as steady as a rock; no trader lasted long who could not lie with a straight face and an easy voice.

"And yet you kept it in a secret place."

"I do collect old things, High Lord, from times past. There do be those who would steal such, did they lay easy to hand."

Turak regarded the black-and-white disk for a moment. "This is *cuendillar*, trader—do you know that name?—and older than you perhaps know. Come with me."

Domon followed the man cautiously, feeling a little more sure of himself. With any lord of the lands he knew, if guards were going to be summoned, they already would have been. But the little he had seen of Seanchan told him they did not do things as other men did. He schooled his face to stillness.

He was led into another room. He thought the furniture here had to have been brought by Turak. It seemed to be made of curves, with no straight lines at all, and the wood was polished to bring out strange graining. There was one chair, on a silk carpet woven in birds and flowers, and one large cabinet made in a circle. Folding screens made new walls.

The man with the braid opened the doors of the cabinet to reveal shelves holding an odd assortment of figurines, cups, bowls, vases, fifty different things, no two alike in size or shape. Domon's breath caught as Turak carefully set the disk beside its exact twin.

"Cuendillar," Turak said. "That is what I collect, trader. Only the Empress herself has a finer collection."

Domon's eyes almost popped out of his head. If everything on those shelves was truly *cuendillar*, it was enough to buy a kingdom, or at the least to found a great House. Even a king might beggar himself to buy so much of it, if he even knew where to find so much. He put on a smile.

"High Lord, please accept this piece as a gift." He did not want to let it go, but that was better than angering this Seanchan. *Maybe the Darkfriends will chase him now*. "I do be but a simple trader. I want only to trade. Let me sail, and I do promise that—"

Turak’s expression never changed, but the man with the braid cut Domon off with a snapped, “Unshaven dog! You speak of giving the High Lord what Captain Egeanin has already given. You bargain, as if the High Lord were a—a merchant! You will be flayed alive over nine days, dog, and—” The barest motion of Turak’s finger silenced him.

“I cannot allow you to leave me, trader,” the High Lord said. “In this shadowed land of oath-breakers, I find none who can converse with a man of sensibilities. But you are a collector. Perhaps your conversation will be interesting.” He took the chair, lolling back in its curves to study Domon.

Domon put on what he hoped was an ingratiating smile. “High Lord, I do be a simple trader, a simple man. I do no have the way of talking with great Lords.”

The man with the braid glared at him, but Turak seemed not to hear. From behind one of the screens, a slim, pretty young woman appeared on quick feet to kneel beside the High Lord, offering a lacquered tray bearing a single cup, thin and handleless, of some steaming black liquid. Her dark, round face was vaguely reminiscent of the Sea Folk. Turak took the cup carefully in his long-nailed fingers, never looking at the young woman, and inhaled the fumes. Domon took one look at the girl and pulled his eyes away with a strangled gasp; her white silk robe was embroidered with flowers, but so sheer he could see right through it, and there was nothing beneath but her own slimness.

“The aroma of *kaf*,” Turak said, “is almost as enjoyable as the flavor. Now, trader. I have learned that *cuendillar* is even more rare here than in Seanchan. Tell me how a simple trader came to possess a piece.” He sipped his *kaf* and waited.

Domon took a deep breath and set about trying to lie his way out of Falme.

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CHAPTER

30

Daes Dae’mar

In the room shared by Hurin and Loial, Rand peered through the window at the ordered lines and terraces of Cairhien, the stone buildings and slate roofs. He could not see the Illuminators’ chapter house; even if huge towers and great lords’ houses had not been in the way, the city walls would have prevented it. The Illuminators were on everyone’s tongues in the city, even now, days after the night when they had lofted only one nightflower into the sky, and that early. A dozen different versions of the scandal were being told, discounting minor variations, but none close to the truth.

Rand turned away. He hoped no one had been hurt in the fire, but the Illuminators had not so far admitted there had been a fire. They were a close-mouthed lot about what went on inside their chapter house.

“I will take the next watch,” he told Hurin, “as soon as I come back.”

“There is no need, my Lord.” Hurin bowed as deeply as any Cairhienin. “I can keep watch. Truly, my Lord need not trouble himself.”

Rand drew a deep breath and exchanged looks with Loial. The Ogier only shrugged. The sniffer was growing more formal every day they remained in Cairhien; the Ogier simply commented that humans often acted oddly.

“Hurin,” Rand said, “you used to call me Lord Rand, and you used not to bow every time I looked at you.” *I want him to unbend and call me Lord Rand again,* he thought with amazement. *Lord Rand! Light, we have to get out of here before I start* wanting *him to bow*. “Will you please sit down? You make me tired, looking at you.”

Hurin stood with his back stiff, yet appeared ready to leap to perform any task Rand might request. He neither sat down nor relaxed now. “It wouldn’t be proper, my Lord. We have to show these Cairhienin we know how to be every bit as proper as—”

“Will you stop saying that!” Rand shouted.

“As you wish, my Lord.”

It was an effort for Rand not to sigh again. “Hurin, I’m sorry. I should not have shouted at you.”

“It’s your right, my Lord,” Hurin said simply. “If I don’t do the way you want, it’s your right to shout.”

Rand stepped toward the sniffer with the intention of grabbing the man’s collar and shaking him.

A knock on the connecting door to Rand’s room froze them all, but Rand was pleased to see that Hurin did not wait to ask permission before picking up his sword. The heron-mark blade was at Rand’s waist; going out, he touched its hilt. He waited for Loial to seat himself on his long bed, arranging his legs and the tails of his coat to further obscure the blanket-covered chest under the bed, then yanked open the door.

The innkeeper stood there, rocking with eagerness and pushing his tray at Rand. Two sealed parchments lay on the tray. “Forgive me, my Lord,” Cuale said breathlessly. “I could not wait until you came down, and then you were not in your own room, and—and. . . . Forgive me, but. . . .” He jiggled the tray.

Rand snatched the invitations—there had been so many—without looking at them, took the innkeeper’s arm, and turned him toward the door to the hall. “Thank you, Master Cuale, for taking the trouble. If you’ll leave us alone, now, please. . . .”

“But, my Lord,” Cuale protested, “these are from—”

“Thank you.” Rand pushed the man into the hall and pulled the door shut firmly. He tossed the parchments onto the table. “He hasn’t done that before. Loial, do you think he was listening at the door before he knocked?”

“You are starting to think like these Cairhienin.” The Ogier laughed, but his ears twitched thoughtfully and he added, “Still, he is Cairhienin, so he may well have been. I don’t think we said anything he should not have heard.”

Rand tried to remember. None of them had mentioned the Horn of Valere, or Trollocs, or Darkfriends. When he found himself wondering what Cuale could make of what they actually had said, he gave himself a shake. “This place is getting to you, too,” he muttered to himself.

“My Lord?” Hurin had picked up the sealed parchments and was gazing wide-eyed at the seals. “My Lord, these are from Lord Barthanes, High Seat of House Damodred, and from"—his voice dropped with awe—"the King."

Rand waved them away. "They still go in the fire like the rest. Unopened."

"But, my Lord!"

"Hurin," Rand said patiently, "you and Loial between you have explained this Great Game to me. If I go wherever it is they've invited me, the Cairhienin will read something into it and think I am part of somebody's plot. If I don't go, they'll read something into that. If I send back an answer, they will dig for meaning in it, and the same if I don't answer. And since half of Cairhien apparently spies on the other half, everybody knows what I do. I burned the first two, and I will burn these, just like all the others." One day there had been twelve in the pile he tossed into the common-room fireplace, seals unbroken. "Whatever they make of it, at least it's the same for everybody. I am not for anyone in Cairhien, and I am not against anyone."

"I have tried to tell you," Loial said, "I don't think it works that way. Whatever you do, Cairhienin will see some sort of plot in it. At least, that is what Elder Haman always said."

Hurin held the sealed invitations out to Rand as if offering gold. "My Lord, this one bears the personal seal of Galldrian. His personal seal, my Lord. And this one the personal seal of Lord Barthanes, who is next to the King himself in power. My Lord, burn these, and you make enemies as powerful as you can find. Burning them's worked so far because the other Houses are all waiting to see what you're up to, and thinking you must have powerful allies to risk insulting them. But Lord Barthanes—and the King! Insult them, and they'll act for sure."

Rand scrubbed his hands through his hair. "What if I refuse them both?"

"It won't work, my Lord. Every last House has sent you an invitation, now. If you decline these—well, for sure at least one of the other Houses will figure, if you're not allied with the King or Lord Barthanes, then they can answer your insult of burning their invitation. My Lord, I hear the Houses in Cairhien use killers, now. A knife in the street. An arrow from a rooftop. Poison slipped in your wine."

"You could accept them both," Loial suggested. "I know you don't want to, Rand, but it might even be fun. An evening at a lord's manor, or even at the Royal Palace. Rand, the Shienarans believed in you."

Rand grimaced. He knew it had been chance that the Shienarans thought he was a lord; a chance likeness of names, a rumor among the servants, and Moiraine and the Amyrlin stirring it all. But Selene had believed it, too. *Maybe she'll be at one of these*.

Hurin was shaking his head violently, though. "Builder, you don't know *Daes Dae'mar* as well as you think you do. Not the way they play it in Cairhien, not now. With most Houses, it wouldn't matter. Even when they're plotting against each other to the knife, they act like they aren't, out where everybody can see. But not these two. House Damodred held the throne until Laman lost it, and they want it back. The King would crush them, if they weren't nearly as powerful as he is. You can't find bitterer rivals than House Riatin and House Damodred. If my Lord accepts both, both Houses will know it as soon as he sends his answers, and they'll both think he's part of some plot by the other against them. They'll use the knife and the poison as quick as look at you."

"And I suppose," Rand growled, "if I only accept one, the other will think I'm allied with that House." Hurin nodded. "And they will probably try to kill me to stop whatever I'm involved in." Hurin nodded again. "Then do you have any suggestion as to how I avoid *any* of them wanting to see me dead?" Hurin shook his head. "I wish I'd never burned those first two."

"Yes, my Lord. But it wouldn't have made much difference, I'm guessing. Whoever you accepted or rejected, these Cairhienin would see something in it."

Rand held out his hand, and Hurin laid the two folded parchments in it. The one was sealed, not with the Tree and Crown of House Damodred, but with Barthanes's Charging Boar. The other bore Galldrian's Stag. Personal seals. Apparently he had managed to rouse interest in the highest quarters by doing nothing at all.

"These people are crazy," he said, trying to think of a way out of this.

"Yes, my Lord."

"I will let them see me in the common room with these," he said slowly. Whatever was seen in the common room at midday was known in ten Houses before nightfall, and in all of them by daybreak next. "I won't break the seals. That way, they will know I have not answered either one yet. As long as they are waiting to see which way I jump, maybe I can earn a few more days. Ingtar has to come soon. He has to."

“Now that is thinking like a Cairhienin, my Lord,” Hurin said, grinning.

Rand gave him a sour look, then stuffed the parchments into his pocket on top of Selene’s letters. “Let’s go, Loial. Maybe Ingtar has arrived.”

When he and Loial reached the common room, no man and woman in it looked at Rand. Cuale was polishing a silver tray as if his life depended on its gleam. The serving girls hurried between the tables as if Rand and the Ogier did not exist. Every last person at the tables stared into his or her mug as if the secrets of power lay in wine or ale. Not one of them said a word.

After a moment, he pulled the two invitations from his pocket and studied the seals, then stuck them back. Cuale gave a little jump as Rand started for the door. Before it closed behind him, he heard conversation spring up again.

Rand strode down the street so fast that Loial did not have to shorten his stride to stay beside him. “We have to find a way out of the city, Loial. This trick with the invitations can’t work more than two or three days. If Ingtar doesn’t come by then, we must leave anyway.”

“Agreed,” Loial said.

“But how?”

Loial began ticking off points on his thick fingers. “Fain is out there, or there would not have been Trollocs in the Foregate. If we ride out, they will be on us as soon as we are out of sight of the city. If we travel with a merchant train, they’ll certainly attack it.” No merchant would have more than five or six guards, and they would probably run as soon as they saw a Trolloc. “If only we knew how many Trollocs Fain has, and how many Darkfriends. You have cut his numbers down.” He did not mention the Trolloc he had killed, but from his frown, his long eyebrows hanging down onto his cheeks, he was thinking of it.

“It doesn’t matter how many he has,” Rand said. “Ten are as bad as a hundred. If ten Trollocs attack us, I don’t think we’ll get away again.” He avoided thinking of the way he might, just might, deal with ten Trollocs. It had not worked when he tried to help Loial, after all.

“I do not think we could, either. I don’t think we have money to take passage very far, but even so, if we tried to reach the Foregate docks—well, Fain must have Darkfriends watching. If he thought we were taking ship, I don’t believe he would care who saw the Trollocs. Even if we fought free of them somehow, we would have to explain ourselves to the city guards, and they would certainly not believe we cannot open the chest, so—"

"We are not letting any Cairhienin see that chest, Loial."

The Ogier nodded. "And the city docks are no good, either." The city docks were reserved for the grain barges and the pleasure craft of the lords and ladies. No one came to them without permission. One could look down on them from the wall, but it was a drop that would break even Loial's neck. Loial wiggled his thumb as if trying to think of a point for that, too. "I suppose it is too bad we cannot reach Stedding Tsofu. Trollocs would never come into a *stedding*. But I don't suppose they would let us get that far without attacking."

Rand did not answer. They had reached the big guardhouse just inside the gate by which they had first entered Cairhien. Outside, the Foregate teemed and milled, and a pair of guards kept watch on them. Rand thought a man, dressed in what had once been good Shienaran clothes, ducked back into the crowd at the sight of him, but he could not be sure. There were too many people in clothes from too many lands, all of them hurrying. He went up the steps into the guardhouse, past breastplated guards on either side of the door.

The large anteroom had hard wooden benches for people with business there, mainly folk waiting with a humble patience, wearing the plain, dark garments that marked the poorer commoners. There were a few Foregaters among them, picked out by shabbiness and bright colors, no doubt hoping for permission to seek work inside the walls.

Rand went straight to the long table in the back of the room. There was only one man seated behind it, not a soldier, with one green bar across his coat. A plump fellow whose skin looked too tight, he adjusted documents on the table and shifted the position of his inkwell twice before looking up at Rand and Loial with a false smile.

"How may I help you, my Lord?"

"The same way I hoped you could help me yesterday," Rand said with more patience than he felt, "and the day before, and the day before that. Has Lord Ingtar come?"

"Lord Ingtar, my Lord?"

Rand took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Lord Ingtar of House Shinowa, from Shienar. The same man I have asked after every day I've come here."

“No one of that name has entered the city, my Lord.”

“Are you certain? Don’t you need to look at your lists, at least?”

“My Lord, the lists of foreigners who have come to Cairhien are exchanged among the guardhouses at sunrise and at sunset, and I examine them as soon as they come before me. No Shienaran lord has entered Cairhien in some time.”

“And the Lady Selene? Before you ask again, I do not know her House. But I’ve given you her name, and I have described her to you three times. Isn’t that enough?”

The man spread his hands. “I am sorry, my Lord. Not knowing her House makes it very difficult.” He had a bland look on his face. Rand wondered whether he would tell even if he knew.

A movement at one of the doors behind the desk caught Rand’s eye—a man starting to step into the anteroom, then turning away hurriedly. “Perhaps Captain Caldevwin can help me,” Rand told the clerk.

“Captain Caldevwin, my Lord?”

“I just saw him behind you.”

“I am sorry, my Lord. If there was a Captain Caldevwin in the guardhouse, I would know.”

Rand stared at him until Loial touched his shoulder. “Rand, I think we might as well go.”

“Thank you for your help,” Rand said in a tight voice. “I will return tomorrow.”

“It is my pleasure to do what I may,” the man said with his false smile.

Rand stalked out of the guardhouse so fast that Loial had to hurry to catch him up in the street. “He was lying, you know, Loial.” He did not slow down, but rather hurried along as if he could burn away some of his frustration through physical exertion. “Caldevwin was there. He could be lying about all of it. Ingtar could already be here, looking for us. I’ll bet he knows who Selene is, too.”

“Perhaps, Rand. *Daes Dae’mar*—”

“Light, I’m tired of hearing about the Great Game. I don’t want to play it. I do not want to be any part of it.” Loial walked beside him, saying nothing. “I know,” Rand said at last. “They think I’m a lord, and in Cairhien, even outland lords are part of the Game. I wish I’d never put on this coat.” *Moiraine*, he thought bitterly. *She’s still causing me trouble*. Almost immediately, though, if reluctantly, he admitted that she could hardly be blamed for this. There had always been some reason to pretend to be what he was not. First keeping Hurin's spirits up, and then trying to impress Selene. After Selene, there had not seemed to be any way out of it. His steps slowed until he came to a halt. "When Moiraine let me go, I thought things would be simple again. Even chasing after the Horn, even with—with everything, I thought it would be simple." *Even with* saidin *inside your head?* "Light, what I wouldn't give to have everything be simple again."

"Ta'veren," Loial began.

"I do not want to hear about that, either." Rand started off again as fast as before. "All I want is to give the dagger to Mat, and the Horn to Ingtar." *Then what? Go mad? Die? If I die before I go mad, at least I won't hurt anybody else. But I don't want to die, either. Lan can talk about Sheathing the Sword, but I'm a shepherd, not a Warder*. "If I can just not touch it," he muttered, "maybe I can. . . . Owyn almost made it."

"What, Rand? I didn't hear that."

"It was nothing," Rand said wearily. "I wish Ingtar would get here. And Mat, and Perrin."

They walked along in silence for a time, with Rand lost in thought. Thom's nephew had lasted almost three years by channeling only when he thought he had to. If Owyn had managed to limit how often he channeled, it must be possible to not channel at all, no matter how seductive *saidin* was.

"Rand," Loial said, "there's a fire up ahead."

Rand got rid of his unwelcome thoughts and looked off into the city, frowning. A thick column of black smoke billowed up above the rooftops. He could not see what lay at the base of it, but it was too close to the inn.

"Darkfriends," he said, staring at the smoke. "Trollocs can't come inside the walls without being seen, but Darkfriends. . . . Hurin!" He broke into a run, Loial easily keeping pace beside him.

The closer they came, the more certain it was, until they rounded the last stone-terraced corner and there was The Defender of the Dragonwall, smoke pouring out of its upper windows and flames breaking through the roof. A crowd had gathered in front of the inn. Cuale, shouting and jumping about, was directing men carrying furnishings out into the street. A double line of men passed inside buckets filled with water from a well down the street and empty buckets back out. Most of the people only stood and watched; a new gout of flame burst through the slate roof, and they gave a loud *aaaah*.

Rand pushed through the crowd to the innkeeper. “Where is Hurin?”

“Careful with that table!” Cuale shouted. “Do not scrape it!” He looked at Rand and blinked. His face was smudged with smoke. “My Lord? Who? Your manservant? I do not remember seeing him, my Lord. No doubt he went out. Do not drop those candlesticks, fool! They are silver!” Cuale danced off to harangue the men lugging his belongings out of the inn.

“Hurin wouldn’t have gone out,” Loial said. “He would not have left the. . . .” He looked around and left it unsaid; some of the onlookers seemed to find an Ogier as interesting as the fire.

“I know,” Rand said, and plunged into the inn.

The common room hardly seemed as if the building were on fire. The double line of men stretched up the stairs, passing their buckets, and others scrambled to carry out what furniture was left, but there was no more smoke down here than if something had been burning the kitchen. As Rand pressed upstairs, it began to thicken. Coughing, he ran up the steps.

The lines stopped short of the second landing, men halfway up the stairs hurling their water up into a smoke-filled hallway. Flames licking up the walls flickered red through the black smoke.

One of the men grabbed Rand’s arm. “You cannot go up there, my Lord. It is all lost above here. Ogier, speak to him.”

It was the first Rand realized that Loial had followed him. “Go back, Loial. I’ll bring him out.”

“You cannot carry Hurin and the chest both, Rand.” The Ogier shrugged. “Besides, I won’t leave my books to burn.”

“Then keep low. Under the smoke.” Rand dropped to his hands and knees on the stairs, and scrambled up the rest of the way. There was cleaner air down near the floor; still smoky enough to make him cough, but he could breathe it. Yet even the air seemed blistering hot. He could not get enough of it through his nose. He breathed through his mouth, and felt his tongue drying.

Some of the water the men threw landed on him, soaking him to the skin. The coolness was only a momentary relief; the heat came right back. He crawled on determinedly, aware of Loial behind him only from the Ogier’s coughing.

One wall of the hallway was almost solid flame, and the floor near it had already begun to add thin tendrils to the cloud that hung over his head. He was glad he could not see what lay above the smoke. Ominous crackling told enough.

The door to Hurin's room had not caught yet, but it was hot enough that he had to try twice before he could manage to push it open. The first thing to meet his eye was Hurin, sprawled on the floor. Rand crawled to the sniffer and lifted him up. There was a lump on the side of his head the size of a plum.

Hurin opened unfocused eyes. "Lord Rand?" he murmured faintly. ". . . knock at the door . . . thought it was more invi. . . ." His eyes rolled back in his head. Rand felt for a heartbeat, and sagged with relief when he found it.

"Rand. . . ." Loial coughed. He was beside his bed, with the covers thrown up to reveal the bare boards underneath. The chest was gone.

Above the smoke, the ceiling creaked, and flaming pieces of wood fell to the floor.

Rand said, "Get your books. I will take Hurin. Hurry." He started to drape the limp sniffer over his shoulders, but Loial took Hurin from him.

"The books will have to burn, Rand. You can't carry him and crawl, and if you stand up, you will never reach the stairs." The Ogier pulled Hurin up onto his broad back, arms and legs hanging to either side. The ceiling gave a loud crack. "We must hurry, Rand."

"Go, Loial. Go, and I'll follow."

The Ogier crawled into the hall with his burden, and Rand started after him. Then he stopped, staring back at the connecting door to his room. The banner was still in there. The banner of the Dragon. *Let it burn*, he thought, and an answering thought came as if he had heard Moiraine say it. *Your life may depend on it. She's still trying to use me. Your life may depend on it. Aes Sedai never lie*.

With a groan, he rolled across the floor and kicked open the door to his room.

The other room was a mass of flame. The bed was a bonfire, red runners already crossed the floor. There would be no crawling across that. Getting to his feet, he ran crouching into the room, flinching from the heat, coughing, choking. Steam rose from his damp coat. One side of the wardrobe was already burning. He snatched open the door. His saddlebags lay inside, still protected from the fire, one side bulging with the banner of Lews Therin Telamon, the wooden flute case beside them. For an instant, he hesitated. *I could still let it burn*.

The ceiling above him groaned. He grabbed saddlebags and flute case and threw himself back through the door, landing on his knees as burning timbers crashed where he had stood. Dragging his burden, he crawled into the hall. The floor shook with more falling beams.

The men with the buckets were gone when he reached the stairs. He all but slid down the steps to the next landing, scrambled to his feet and ran through the now-empty building into the street. The onlookers stared at him, with his face blackened and his coat covered with smut, but he staggered to where Loial had propped Hurin against the wall of a house across the street. A woman from the crowd was wiping Hurin’s face with a cloth, but his eyes were still closed, and his breath came in heaves.

“Is there a Wisdom nearby?” Rand demanded. “He needs help.” The woman looked at him blankly, and he tried to remember the other names he had heard people call the women who would be Wisdoms in the Two Rivers. “A Wise Woman? A woman you call Mother somebody? A woman who knows herbs and healing?”

“I am a Reader, if that is what you mean,” the woman said, “but all I know to do for this one is to make him comfortable. Something is broken inside his head, I fear.”

“Rand! It *is* you!”

Rand stared. It was Mat, leading his horse through the crowd, with his bow strung across his back. A Mat whose face was pale and drawn, but still Mat, and grinning, if weakly. And behind him came Perrin, his yellow eyes shining in the fire and earning as many looks as the blaze. And Ingtar, dismounting in a high-collared coat instead of armor, but still with his sword hilt sticking up over his shoulder.

Rand felt a shiver run through him. “It’s too late,” he told them. “You came too late.” And he sat down in the street and began to laugh.

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CHAPTER

31

On the Scent

Rand did not know Verin was there until the Aes Sedai took his face in her hands. For a moment he could see worry in her face, perhaps even fear, and then suddenly he felt as if he had been doused with cold water, not the wet but the tingle. He gave one abrupt shudder and stopped laughing; she left him to crouch over Hurin. The Reader watched her carefully. So did Rand. *What is she doing here? As if I didn't know*.

"Where did you go?" Mat demanded hoarsely. "You all just disappeared, and now you're in Cairhien ahead of us. Loial?" The Ogier shrugged uncertainly and eyed the crowd, his ears twitching. Half the people had turned from the fire to watch the newcomers. A few edged closer trying to listen.

Rand let Perrin give him a hand up. "How did you find the inn?" He glanced at Verin, kneeling with her hands on the sniffer's head. "Her?"

"In a way," Perrin said. "The guards at the gate wanted our names, and a fellow coming out of the guardhouse gave a jump when he heard Ingtar's name. He said he didn't know it, but he had a smile that shouted 'lie' a mile off."

"I think I know the man you mean," Rand said. "He smiles that way all the time."

"Verin showed him her ring," Mat put in, "and whispered in his ear." He looked and sounded sick, his cheeks flushed and tight, but he managed a grin. Rand had never noticed his cheekbones before. "I couldn't hear what she said, but I didn't know whether his eyes were going to pop out of his head or he was going to swallow his tongue first. All of a sudden, he couldn't do enough for us. He told us you were waiting for us, and right where you were staying. Offered to guide us himself, but he really looked relieved when Verin told him no." He snorted. "Lord Rand of House al'Thor."

"It's too long a story to explain now," Rand said. "Where are Uno and the rest? We will need them."

"In the Foregate." Mat frowned at him, and went on slowly, "Uno said they'd rather stay there than inside the walls. From what I can see, I'd rather be with them. Rand, why will we need Uno? Have you found . . . *them*?"

It was the moment Rand realized suddenly he had been avoiding. He took a deep breath and looked his friend in the eye. "Mat, I had the dagger, and I lost it. The Darkfriends took it back." He heard gasps from the Cairhienin listening, but he did not care. They could play their Great Game if they wanted, but Ingtar had come, and he was finished with it at last. "They can't have gone far, though."

Ingtar had been silent, but now he stepped forward and gripped Rand's arm. "You had it? And the"—he looked around at the onlookers—"the other thing?"

"They took that back, too," Rand said quietly. Ingtar pounded a fist into his palm and turned away; some of the Cairhienin backed off from the look on his face.

Mat chewed his lip, then shook his head. "I didn't know it was found, so it isn't as if I had lost it again. It is just still lost." It was plain he was speaking of the dagger, not the Horn of Valere. "We'll find it again. We have two sniffers, now. Perrin is one, too. He followed the trail all the way to the Foregate, after you vanished with Hurin and Loial. I thought you might have just run off . . . well, you know what I mean. Where *did* you go? I still don't understand how you got so far ahead of us. That fellow said you have been here days."

Rand glanced at Perrin—*He's a sniffer?*—and found Perrin studying him in return. He thought Perrin muttered something. *Shadowkiller? I must have heard him wrong*. Perrin's yellow gaze held him for a moment, seeming to hold secrets about him. Telling himself he was having fancies—*I'm not mad. Not yet*.—he pulled his eyes away.

Verin was just helping a still-shaky Hurin to his feet. "I feel right as goose feathers," he was saying. "Still a little tired, but. . . ." He let the words trail off, seeming to see her for the first time, to realize what had happened for the first time.

"The tiredness will last a few hours," she told him. "The body must strain to heal itself quickly."

The Cairhienin Reader rose. “Aes Sedai?” she said softly. Verin inclined her head, and the Reader made a full curtsy.

As quiet as they had been, the words “Aes Sedai” ran through the crowd in tones ranging from awe to fear to outrage. Everyone was watching now—not even Cuale gave any attention to his own burning inn—and Rand thought a little caution might not be amiss after all.

“Do you have rooms yet?” he asked. “We need to talk, and we can’t do it here.”

“A good idea,” Verin said. “I have stayed here before at The Great Tree. We will go there.”

Loial went to fetch the horses—the inn roof had now fallen in completely, but the stables had not been touched—and soon they were making their way through the streets, all riding except for Loial, who claimed he had grown used to walking again. Perrin held the lead line to one of the packhorses they had brought south.

“Hurin,” Rand said, “how soon can you be ready to follow their trail again? Can you follow it? The men who hit you and started the fire left a trail, didn’t they?”

“I can follow it now, my Lord. And I could smell them in the street. It won’t last long, though. There weren’t any Trollocs, and they didn’t kill anybody. Just men, my Lord. Darkfriends, I suppose, but you can’t always be sure of that by smell. A day, maybe, before it fades.”

“I don’t think they can open the chest either, Rand,” Loial said, “or they would just have taken the Horn. It would be much easier to take that if they could, rather than the whole chest.”

Rand nodded. “They must have put it in a cart, or on a horse. Once they get it beyond the Foregate, they’ll join the Trollocs again, for sure. You will be able to follow that trail, Hurin.”

“I will, my Lord.”

“Then you rest until you’re fit,” Rand told him. The sniffer looked steadier, but he rode slumped, and his face was weary. “At best, they will only be a few hours ahead of us. If we ride hard. . . .” Suddenly he noticed that the others were looking at him, Verin and Ingtar, Mat and Perrin. He realized what he had been doing, and his face colored. “I am sorry, Ingtar. It’s just that I’ve become used to being in charge, I suppose. I’m not trying to take your place.”

Ingtar nodded slowly. “Moiraine chose well when she made Lord Agelmar name you my second. Perhaps it would have been better if the Amyrlin Seat had given you the charge.” The Shienaran barked a laugh. “At least you have actually managed to touch the Horn.”

After that they rode in silence.

The Great Tree could have been twin to The Defender of the Dragonwall, a tall stone cube of a building with a common room paneled in dark wood and decorated with silver, a large, polished clock on the mantel over the fireplace. The innkeeper could have been Cuale’s sister. Mistress Tiedra had the same slightly plump look and the same unctuous manner—and the same sharp eyes, the same air of listening to what was behind the words you spoke. But Tiedra knew Verin, and her welcoming smile for the Aes Sedai was warm; she never mentioned Aes Sedai aloud, but Rand was sure she knew.

Tiedra and a swarm of servants saw to their horses and settled them in their rooms. Rand’s room was as fine as the one that had burned, but he was more interested in the big copper bathtub two serving men wrestled through the door, and the steaming buckets of water scullery maids brought up from the kitchen. One look in the mirror above the washstand showed him a face that looked as if he had rubbed it with charcoal, and his coat had black smears across the red wool.

He stripped off and climbed into the tub, but he thought as much as washed. Verin was there. One of three Aes Sedai that he could trust not to try to gentle him themselves, or turn him over to those who would. Or so it seemed, at least. One of three who wanted him to believe he was the Dragon Reborn, to use him as a false Dragon. *She’s Moiraine’s eyes watching me, Moiraine’s hand trying to pull my strings. But I have cut the strings*.

His saddlebags had been brought up, and a bundle from the pack horse containing fresh clothes. He toweled off and opened the bundle—and sighed. He had forgotten that both the other coats he had were as ornate as the one he had tossed on the back of a chair for a maid to clean. After a moment, he chose the black coat, to suit his mood. Silver herons stood on the high collar, and silver rapids ran down his sleeves, water battered to froth against jagged rocks.

Transferring things from his old coat to his new, he found the parchments. Absently, he stuffed the invitations in his pocket as he studied

Selene's two letters. He wondered how he could have been such a fool. She was the beautiful young daughter of a noble House. He was a shepherd whom Aes Sedai were trying to use, a man doomed to go mad if he did not die first. Yet he could still feel the pull of her just looking at her writing, could almost smell the perfume of her.

"I am a shepherd," he told the letters, "not a great man, and if I could marry anyone, it would be Egwene, but she wants to be Aes Sedai, and how can I marry any woman, love any woman, when I'll go mad and maybe kill her?"

Words could not lessen his memory of Selene's beauty, though, or the way she made his blood go warm just by looking at him. It almost seemed to him that she was in the room with him, that he could smell her perfume, so much so that he looked around, and laughed to find himself alone.

"Having fancies like I'm addled already," he muttered.

Abruptly he tipped back the mantle of the lamp on the bedside table, lit it, and thrust the letters into the flame. Outside the inn, the wind picked up to a roar, leaking in through the shutters and fanning the flames to engulf the parchment. Hurriedly he tossed the burning letters into the cold hearth just before the fire reached his fingers. He waited until the last blackened curl went out before he buckled on his sword and left the room.

Verin had taken a private dining room, where shelves along the dark walls held even more silver than those in the common room. Mat was juggling three boiled eggs and trying to appear nonchalant. Ingtar peered into the unlit fireplace, frowning. Loial had a few books from Fal Dara still in his pockets, and was reading one beside a lamp.

Perrin slouched at the table, studying his hands clasped on the tabletop. To his nose, the room smelled of beeswax used to polish the paneling. *It was him*, he thought. *Rand is the Shadowkiller. Light, what's happening to all of us?* His hands tightened into fists, large and square. *These hands were meant for a smith's hammer, not an axe*.

He glanced up as Rand entered. Perrin thought he looked determined, set on some course of action. The Aes Sedai motioned Rand to a high-backed armchair across from her.

"How is Hurin?" Rand asked her, arranging his sword so he could sit. "Resting?"

"He insisted on going out," Ingtar answered. "I told him to follow the trail only until he smelled Trollocs. We can follow it from there tomorrow. Or do you want to go after them tonight?"

"Ingtar," Rand said uneasily, "I really wasn't trying to take command. I just didn't think." Yet not as nervously as he would have once, Perrin thought. *Shadowkiller. We're all of us changing*.

Ingtar did not answer, but only kept staring into the fireplace.

"There are some things that interest me greatly, Rand," Verin said quietly. "One is how you vanished from Ingtar's camp without a trace. Another is how you arrived in Cairhien a week before us. That clerk was very clear on that. You would have had to fly."

One of Mat's eggs hit the floor and cracked. He did not look at it, though. He was looking at Rand, and Ingtar had turned around. Loial pretended to be reading still, but he wore a worried look, and his ears were up in hairy points.

Perrin realized he was staring, too. "Well, he did not fly," he said. "I don't see any wings. Maybe he has more important things to tell us." Verin shifted her attention to him, just for a moment. He managed to meet her eyes, but he was the first to look away. *Aes Sedai. Light, why were we ever fools enough to follow an Aes Sedai?* Rand gave him a grateful look, too, and Perrin grinned at him. He was not the old Rand—he seemed to have grown into that fancy coat; it looked right on him, now—but he was still the boy Perrin had grown up with. *Shadowkiller. A man the wolves hold in awe. A man who can channel*.

"I don't mind," Rand said, and told his tale simply.

Perrin found himself gaping. Portal Stones. Other worlds, where the land seemed to shift. Hurin following the trail of where the Darkfriends *would* be. And a beautiful woman in distress, just like one in a gleeman's tale.

Mat gave a soft, wondering whistle. "And she brought you back? By one of these—these Stones?"

Rand hesitated for a second. "She must have," he said. "So you see, that's how we got so far ahead of you. When Fain came, Loial and I managed to steal back the Horn of Valere in the night, and we rode on to Cairhien because I didn't think we could make it past them once they were roused, and I knew Ingtar would keep coming south after them and reach Cairhien eventually."

Shadowkiller. Rand looked at him, eyes narrowing, and Perrin realized he had spoken the name aloud. Apparently not loud enough for anyone else to hear, though. No one else glanced at him. He found himself wanting to tell Rand about the wolves. *I know about you. It's only fair you know my secret, too*. But Verin was there. He could not say it in front of her.

"Interesting," the Aes Sedai said, a thoughtful expression on her face. "I would very much like to meet this girl. If she can use a Portal Stone. . . . Even that name is not very widely known." She gave herself a shake. "Well, that is for another time. A tall girl should not be difficult to find in the Cairhienin Houses. Aah, here is our meal."

Perrin smelled lamb even before Mistress Tiedra led in a procession bearing trays of food. His mouth watered more for that than for the peas and squash, the carrots and cabbage that came with it, or the hot crusty rolls. He still found vegetables tasty, but sometimes, of late, he dreamed of red meat. Not even cooked, usually. It was disconcerting to find himself thinking that the nicely pink slices of lamb that the innkeeper carved were too well done. He firmly took helpings of everything. And two of the lamb.

It was a quiet meal, with everyone concentrating on his own thoughts. Perrin found it painful to watch Mat eat. Mat's appetite was as healthy as ever, despite the feverish flush to his face, and the way he shoveled food into his mouth made it look like his last meal before dying. Perrin kept his eyes on his plate as much as possible, and wished they had never left Emond's Field.

After the maids cleared the table and left again, Verin insisted they remain together until Hurin returned. "He may bring word that will mean we must move at once."

Mat returned to his juggling, and Loial to his reading. Rand asked the innkeeper if there were any more books, and she brought him *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*. Perrin liked that one, too, with its stories of adventures among the Sea Folk and journeys to the lands beyond the Aiel Waste, where silk came from. He did not feel like reading, though, so he set up a stones board on the table with Ingtar. The Shienaran played with a slashing, daring style. Perrin had always played doggedly, giving ground reluctantly, but he found himself placing the stones with as much recklessness as Ingtar. Most of the games ended in a draw, but he managed to win as many as Ingtar did. The Shienaran was eyeing him with a new respect by early evening, when the sniffer returned.

Hurin’s grin was at the same time triumphant and perplexed. “I found them, Lord Ingtar. Lord Rand. I tracked them to their lair.”

“Lair?” Ingtar said sharply. “You mean they’re hiding somewhere close by?”

“Aye, Lord Ingtar. The ones who took the Horn, I followed straight there, and there was Trolloc scent all around the place, though sneaking as if they didn’t dare be seen, even there. And no wonder.” The sniffer took a deep breath. “It’s the great manor Lord Barthanes just finished building.”

“Lord Barthanes!” Ingtar exclaimed. “But he . . . he’s . . . he’s. . . .”

“There are Darkfriends among the high as well as the low,” Verin said smoothly. “The mighty give their souls to the Shadow as often as the weak.” Ingtar scowled as if he did not want to think of that.

“There’s guards,” Hurin went on. “We’ll not get in with twenty men, not and get out again. A hundred could do it, but two would be better. That’s what I think, my Lord.”

“What about the King?” Mat demanded. “If this Barthanes is a Darkfriend, the King will help us.”

“I am quite sure,” Verin said dryly, “that Galldrian Riatin would move against Barthanes Damodred on the *rumor* that Barthanes is a Darkfriend, and glad of the excuse. I am also quite sure Galldrian would never let the Horn of Valere out of his grasp once he had it. He would bring it out on feastdays to show the people and tell them how great and mighty Cairhien is, and no one would ever see it else.”

Perrin blinked with shock. “But the Horn of Valere has to be there when the Last Battle is fought. He couldn’t just keep it.”

“I know little of Cairhienin,” Ingtar told him, “but I’ve heard enough of Galldrian. He would feast us and thank us for the glory we had brought to Cairhien. He would stuff our pockets with gold and heap honors on our heads. And if we tried to leave with the Horn, he’d cut our honored heads off without pausing to take a breath.”

Perrin ran a hand through his hair. The more he found out about kings, the less he liked them.

“What about the dagger?” Mat asked diffidently. “He wouldn’t want that, would he?” Ingtar glared at him, and he shifted uncomfortably. “I know the Horn is important, but I’m not going to be fighting in the Last Battle. That dagger. . . .”

Verin rested her hands on the arms of her chair. “Galldrian shall not have it, either. What we need is some way inside Barthanes’s manor house. If we can only find the Horn, we may also find a way to take it back. Yes, Mat, and the dagger. Once it is known that an Aes Sedai is in the city—well, I usually avoid these things, but if I let slip to Tiedra that I would like to see Barthanes’s new manor, I should have an invitation in a day or two. It should not be difficult to bring at least some of the rest of you. What is it, Hurin?”

The sniffer had been rocking anxiously on his heels from the moment she mentioned an invitation. “Lord Rand already has one. From Lord Barthanes.”

Perrin stared at Rand, and he was not the only one.

Rand pulled two sealed parchments from his coat pocket and handed them to the Aes Sedai without a word.

Ingtar came to look wonderingly over her shoulder at the seals. “Barthanes, and. . . . And Galldrian! Rand, how did you come by these? What have you been doing?”

“Nothing,” Rand said. “I haven’t done anything. They just sent them to me.” Ingtar let out a long breath. Mat’s mouth was hanging open. “Well, they did just send them,” Rand said quietly. There was a dignity to him that Perrin did not remember; Rand was looking at the Aes Sedai and the Shienaran lord as equals.

Perrin shook his head. *You* are *fitting that coat. We’re all changing*.

“Lord Rand burned all the rest,” Hurin said. “Every day they came, and every day he burned them. Until these, of course. Every day from mightier Houses.” He sounded proud.

“The Wheel of Time weaves us all into the Pattern as it wills,” Verin said, looking at the parchments, “but sometimes it provides what we need before we know we need it.”

Casually she crumpled the King’s invitation and tossed it into the fireplace, where it lay white on the cold logs. Breaking the other seal with her thumb, she read. “Yes. Yes, this will do very well.”

“How can I go?” Rand asked her. “They will know I’m no lord. I am a shepherd, and a farmer.” Ingtar looked skeptical. “I am, Ingtar. I told you I am.” Ingtar shrugged; he still did not look convinced. Hurin stared at Rand with flat disbelief.

Burn me, Perrin thought, *if I didn't know him, I wouldn't believe it either*. Mat was watching Rand with his head tilted, frowning as if looking at something he had never seen before. *He sees it, too, now*. "You can do it, Rand," Perrin said. "You can."

"It will help," Verin said, "if you don't tell everyone what you are not. People see what they expect to see. Beyond that, look them in the eye and speak firmly. The way you have been talking to me," she added dryly, and Rand's cheeks colored, but he did not drop his eyes. "It doesn't matter what you say. They will attribute anything out of place to your being an outlander. It will also help if you remember the way you behaved before the Amyrlin. If you are that arrogant, they will believe you are a lord if you wear rags." Mat snickered.

Rand threw up his hands. "All right. I'll do it. But I still think they will know five minutes after I open my mouth. When?"

"Barthanes has asked you for five different dates, and one is tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow!" Ingtar exploded. "The Horn could be fifty miles downriver by tomorrow night, or—"

Verin cut him off. "Uno and your soldiers can watch the manor. If they try to take the Horn anywhere, we can easily follow, and perhaps retrieve it more easily than from inside Barthanes's walls."

"Perhaps so," Ingtar agreed grudgingly. "I just do not like to wait, now that the Horn is almost in my hands. I will have it. I must! I must!"

Hurin stared at him. "But, Lord Ingtar, that isn't the way. What happens, happens, and what is meant to be, will—" Ingtar's glare cut him off, though he still muttered under his breath, "It isn't the way, talking of 'must.' "

Ingtar turned back to Verin stiffly. "Verin Sedai, Cairhienin are very strict in their protocol. If Rand does not send a reply, Barthanes may be so insulted he will not let us in, even with that parchment in our hands. But if Rand does . . . well, Fain, at least, knows him. We could be warning them to set a trap."

"We will surprise them." Her brief smile was not pleasant. "But I think Barthanes will want to see Rand in any case. Darkfriend or not, I doubt he has given up plots against the throne. Rand, he says you took an interest in one of the King's projects, but he doesn't say what. What does he mean?"

“I don’t know,” Rand said slowly. “I haven’t done anything at all since I arrived. Wait. Maybe he means the statue. We came through a village where they were digging up a huge statue. From the Age of Legends, they said. The King means to move it to Cairhien, though I don’t know how he can move something that big. But all I did was ask what it was.”

“We passed it in the day, and did not stop to ask questions.” Verin let the invitation fall in her lap. “Not a wise thing for Galldrian to do, perhaps, unearthing that. Not that there is any real danger, but it is never wise for those who don’t know what they are doing to meddle with things from the Age of Legends.”

“What is it?” Rand asked.

“A *sa’angreal*.” She sounded as if it were really not very important, but Perrin suddenly had the feeling the two of them had entered a private conversation, saying things no one else could hear. “One of a pair, the two largest ever made, that we know of. And an odd pair, as well. One, still buried on Tremalking, can only be used by a woman. This one can only be used by a man. They were made during the War of the Powers, to be a weapon, but if there is anything to be thankful for in the end of that Age or the Breaking of the World, it is that the end came before they could be used. Together, they might well be powerful enough to Break the World again, perhaps even worse than the first Breaking.”

Perrin’s hands tightened to knots. He avoided looking directly at Rand, but even from the corner of his eye he could see a whiteness around Rand’s mouth. He thought Rand might be afraid, and he did not blame him a bit.

Ingtar looked shaken, as well he might. “That thing should be buried again, and as deeply as they can pile dirt and stone. What would have happened if Logain had found it? Or any wretched man who can channel, let alone one claiming he’s the Dragon Reborn. Verin Sedai, you must warn Galldrian what he’s doing.”

“What? Oh, there is no need for that, I think. The two must be used in unison to handle enough of the One Power to Break the World—that was the way in the Age of Legends; a man and a woman working together were always ten times as strong as they were apart—and what Aes Sedai today would aid a man in channeling? One by itself is powerful enough, but I can think of few women strong enough to survive the flow through the one on Tremalking. The Amyrlin, of course. Moiraine, and Elaida. Perhaps one or two others. And three still in training. As for Logain, it would have taken all his strength simply to keep from being burned to a cinder, with nothing left for doing anything. No, Ingtar, I don’t think you need worry. At least, not until the real Dragon Reborn proclaims himself, and then we will all have enough to worry about as it is. Let us worry now about what we shall do when we are inside Barthanes’s manor.”

She was talking to Rand. Perrin knew it, and from the queasy look in Mat’s eye, he did, too. Even Loial shifted nervously in his chair. *Oh, Light, Rand,* Perrin thought. *Light, don’t let her use you*.

Rand’s hands were pressing the tabletop so hard that his knuckles were white, but his voice was steady. His eyes never left the Aes Sedai. “First we have to take back the Horn, and the dagger. And then it is done, Verin. Then it is done.”

Watching Verin’s smile, small and mysterious, Perrin felt a chill. He did not think Rand knew half what he thought he did. Not half.

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CHAPTER

32

Dangerous Words

Lord Barthanes's manor crouched like a huge toad in the night, covering as much ground as a fortress, with all its walls and outbuildings. It was no fortress, though, with tall windows everywhere, and lights, and the sounds of music and laughter drifting out, yet Rand saw guards moving on the tower tops and along the roofwalks, and none of the windows were close to the ground. He got down from Red's back and smoothed his coat, adjusted his sword belt. The others dismounted around him, at the foot of broad, whitestone stairs leading up to the wide, heavily carved doors of the manor.

Ten Shienarans, under Uno, made an escort. The one-eyed man exchanged small nods with Ingtar before taking his men to join the other escorts, where ale had been provided and a whole ox was roasting on a spit by a big fire.

The other ten Shienarans had been left behind, along with Perrin. Every one of them had to be there for a purpose, Verin had said, and Perrin had no purpose to serve this night. An escort was necessary for dignity in Cairhienin eyes, but more than ten would seem suspicious. Rand was there because he had received the invitation. Ingtar had come to lend the prestige of his title, while Loial was there because Ogier were sought after in the upper reaches of the Cairhienin nobility. Hurin pretended to be Ingtar's bodyservant. His true purpose was to sniff out the Darkfriends and Trollocs if he could; the Horn of Valere should not be far from them. Mat, still grumbling about it, was pretending to be Rand's servant, since he could feel the dagger when it was close. If Hurin failed, perhaps he could find the Darkfriends.

When Rand had asked Verin why she was there, she had only smiled and said, “To keep the rest of you out of trouble.”

As they mounted the stairs, Mat muttered, “I still don’t see why I have to be a servant.” He and Hurin followed behind the others. “Burn me, if Rand can be a lord, I can put on a fancy coat, too.”

“A servant,” Verin said without looking back at him, “can go many places another man cannot, and many nobles will not even see him. You and Hurin have your tasks.”

“Be quiet now, Mat,” Ingtar put in, “unless you want to give us away.” They were approaching the doors, where half a dozen guards stood with the Tree and Crown of House Damodred on their chests, and an equal number of men in dark green livery with Tree and Crown on the sleeve.

Taking a deep breath, Rand proffered the invitation. “I am Lord Rand of House al’Thor,” he said all in a rush, to get it over with. “And these are my guests. Verin Aes Sedai of the Brown Ajah. Lord Ingtar of House Shinowa, in Shienar. Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, from Stedding Shangtai.” Loial had asked that his *stedding* be left out of it, but Verin insisted they needed every bit of formality they could offer.

The servant who had reached for the invitation with a perfunctory bow gave a little jerk at each additional name; his eyes popped at Verin’s. In a strangled voice he said, “Be welcome in House Damodred, my lords. Be welcome, Aes Sedai. Be welcome, friend Ogier.” He waved the other servants to open the doors wide, and bowed Rand and the others inside, where he hurriedly passed the invitation to another liveried man and whispered in his ear.

This man had the Tree and Crown large on the chest of his green coat. “Aes Sedai,” he said, using his long staff to make a bow, almost bending his head to his knees, to each of them in turn. “My lords. Friend Ogier. I am called Ashin. Please to follow me.”

The outer hall held only servants, but Ashin led them to a great room filled with nobles, with a juggler performing at one end and tumblers at the other. Voices and music coming from elsewhere said these were not the only guests, or the only entertainments. The nobles stood in twos, and threes and fours, sometimes men and women together, sometimes only one or the other, always with careful space between so no one could overhear what was said. The guests wore the dark Cairhienin colors, each with bright stripes at least halfway down his or her chest, and some had them all the way to their waists. The women had their hair piled high in elaborate towers of curls, every one different, and their dark skirts were so wide they would have had to turn sideways to pass through any doorway narrower than those of the manor. None of the men had the shaved heads of soldiers—they all wore dark velvet hats over long hair, some shaped like bells, others flat—and as with the women, lace ruffles like dark ivory almost hid their hands.

Ashin rapped his staff and announced them in a loud voice, Verin first.

They drew every eye. Verin wore her brown-fringed shawl, embroidered in grape vines; the announcement of an Aes Sedai sent a murmur through the lords and ladies, and made the juggler drop one of his hoops, though no one was watching him any longer. Loial received almost as many looks, even before Ashin spoke his name. Despite the silver embroidery on collar and sleeves, the otherwise unrelieved black of Rand's coat made him seem almost stark beside the Cairhienin, and his and Ingtar's swords drew many glances. None of the lords appeared to be armed. Rand heard the words "heron-mark blade" more than once. Some of the glances he was receiving looked like frowns; he suspected they came from men he had insulted by burning their invitations.

A slim, handsome man approached. He had long, graying hair, and multihued stripes crossed the front of his deep gray coat from his neck almost to the hem just above his knees. He was extremely tall for a Cairhienin, no more than half a head shorter than Rand, and he had a way of standing that made him seem even taller, with his chin up so he seemed to be looking down at everyone else. His eyes were black pebbles. He looked warily at Verin, though.

"Grace honors me with your presence, Aes Sedai." Barthanes Damodred's voice was deep and sure. His gaze swept across the others. "I did not expect so distinguished a company. Lord Ingtar. Friend Ogier." His bow to each was little more than a nod of the head; Barthanes knew exactly how powerful he was. "And you, my young Lord Rand. You excite much comment in the city, and in the Houses. Perhaps we will have a chance to talk this night." His tone said that he would not miss it if the chance never came, that he had not been excited to any comment, but his eyes slid a fraction before he caught them, to Ingtar and Loial, and to Verin. "Be welcome." He let himself be drawn away by a handsome woman who laid a beringed hand buried in lace on his arm, but his gaze drifted back to Rand as he walked away.

The murmur of conversation picked up once more, and the juggler spun his hoops again in a narrow loop that almost reached the worked plaster ceiling, a good four spans up. The tumblers had never stopped; a woman leaped into the air from the cupped hands of one of her compatriots, her oiled skin shining in the light of a hundred lamps as she spun, and landed on her feet on the hands of a man who was already standing atop another's shoulders. He lifted her up on outstretched arms as the man below raised him in the same way, and she spread her arms as if for applause. None of the Cairhienin seemed to notice.

Verin and Ingtar drifted into the crowd. The Shienaran received a few wary looks; some looked at the Aes Sedai with wide eyes, others with the worried frowns of those finding a rabid wolf within arm's reach. The latter came from men more often than women, and some of the women spoke to her.

Rand realized that Mat and Hurin had already disappeared to the kitchens, where all the servants who had come with the guests would be gathering until sent for. He hoped they would not have trouble sneaking away.

Loial bent down to speak for his ear alone. "Rand, there is a Waygate nearby. I can feel it."

"You mean this was an Ogier grove?" Rand said softly, and Loial nodded.

"Stedding Tsofu had not been found again when it was planted, or the Ogier who helped build Al'cair'rahienallen would not have needed a grove to remind them of the *stedding*. This was all forest when I came through Cairhien before, and belonged to the King."

"Barthanes probably took it away in some plot." Rand looked around the room nervously. Everyone was still talking, but more than a few were watching the Ogier and him. He could not see Ingtar. Verin stood at the center of a knot of women. "I wish we could stay together."

"Verin says not, Rand. She says it would make them all suspicious and angry, thinking we were holding ourselves aloof. We have to allay suspicion until Mat and Hurin find whatever they find."

"I heard what she said as well as you, Loial. But I still say, if Barthanes is a Darkfriend, then he must know why we're here. Going off by ourselves is just asking to be knocked on the head."

“Verin says he won’t do anything until he finds out whether he can make use of us. Just do what she told us, Rand. Aes Sedai know what they are about.” Loial walked into the crowd, gathering a circle of lords and ladies before he had gone ten steps.

Others started toward Rand, now that he was alone, but he turned in the other direction and hurried away. *Aes Sedai may know what they’re about, but I wish I did. I don’t like this. Light, but I wish I knew if she was telling the truth. Aes Sedai never lie, but the truth you hear may not be the truth you think it is*.

He kept moving to avoid talking with the nobles. There were many other rooms, all filled with lords and ladies, all with entertainers: three different gleemen in their cloaks, more jugglers and tumblers, and musicians playing flutes, bitterns, dulcimers, and lutes, plus five different sizes of fiddle, six kinds of horn, straight or curved or curled, and ten sizes of drum from tambour to kettle. He gave some of the horn players a second look, those with curled horns, but the instruments were all plain brass.

They wouldn’t have the Horn of Valere out here, fool, he thought. *Not unless Barthanes means to have dead heroes come as part of the entertainment*.

There was even a bard in silver-worked Tairen boots and a yellow coat, strolling through the rooms plucking his harp and sometimes stopping to declaim in High Chant. He glared contemptuously at the gleemen and did not linger in the rooms where they were, but Rand saw little difference between him and them except for their clothes.

Suddenly Barthanes was walking by Rand’s side. A liveried servant immediately offered his silver tray with a bow. Barthanes took a blown-glass goblet of wine. Walking backwards ahead of them still bowing, the servant held the tray toward Rand until Rand shook his head, then melted into the crowd.

“You seem restless,” Barthanes said, sipping.

“I like to walk.” Rand wondered how to follow Verin’s advice, and remembering what she had said about his visit to the Amyrlin, he settled into Cat Crosses the Courtyard. He knew no more arrogant way to walk than that. Barthanes’s mouth tightened, and Rand thought perhaps the lord found it too arrogant, but Verin’s advice was all he had to go by, so he did not stop. To take some of the edge off, he said pleasantly, “This is a fine party. You have many friends, and I’ve never seen so many entertainers.”

“Many friends,” Barthanes agreed. “You can tell Galldrian how many, and who. Some of the names might surprise him.”

“I have never met the King, Lord Barthanes, and I don’t expect I ever will.”

“Of course. You just happened to be in that flyspeck village. You were not checking on the progress of retrieving that statue. A great undertaking, that.”

“Yes.” He had begun thinking of Verin again, wishing she had given him some advice on how to talk with a man who assumed he was lying. He added without thinking, “It’s dangerous to meddle with things from the Age of Legends if you don’t know what you are doing.”

Barthanes peered into his wine, musing as if Rand had just said something profound. “Are you saying you do not support Galldrian in this?” he asked finally.

“I told you, I’ve never met the King.”

“Yes, of course. I did not know Andormen played at the Great Game so well. We do not see many here in Cairhien.”

Rand took a deep breath to stop from telling the man angrily that he was not playing their Game. “There are many grain barges from Andor in the river.”

“Merchants and traders. Who notices such as they? As well notice the beetles on the leaves.” Barthanes’s voice carried equal contempt for both beetles and merchants, but once again he frowned as if Rand had hinted at something. “Not many men travel in company with Aes Sedai. You seem too young to be a Warder. I suppose Lord Ingtar is Verin Sedai’s Warder?”

“We are who we said we are,” Rand said, and grimaced. *Except me*.

Barthanes was studying Rand’s face almost openly. “Young. Young to carry a heron-mark blade.”

“I am less than a year old,” Rand said automatically, and immediately wished he had it back. It sounded foolish, to his ear, but Verin had said act as he had with the Amyrlin Seat, and that was the answer Lan had given him. A Borderman considered the day he was given his sword to be his nameday.

“So. An Andorman, and yet Borderland-trained. Or is it Warder-trained?” Barthanes’s eyes narrowed, studying Rand. “I understand Morgase has only one son. Named Gawyn, I have heard. You must be much like him in age.”

“I have met him,” Rand said cautiously.

“Those eyes. That hair. I have heard the Andoran royal line has almost Aiel coloring in their hair and eyes.”

Rand stumbled, though the floor was smooth marble. “I’m not Aiel, Lord Barthanes, and I’m not of the royal line, either.”

“As you say. You have given me much to think on. I believe we may find common ground when we talk again.” Barthanes nodded and raised his glass in a small salute, then turned to speak to a gray-haired man with many stripes of color down his coat.

Rand shook his head and moved on, away from more conversation. It had been bad enough talking to one Cairhienin lord; he did not want to risk two. Barthanes appeared to find deep meanings in the most trivial comments. Rand realized he had just now learned enough of *Daes Dae’mar* to know he had no idea at all how it was played. *Mat, Hurin, find* something *fast, so we can get out of here. These people are crazy*.

And then he entered another room, and the gleeman at the end of it, strumming his harp and reciting a tale from *The Great Hunt of the Horn*, was Thom Merrilin. Rand stopped dead. Thom did not seem to see him, though the gleeman’s gaze passed over him twice. It seemed that Thom had meant what he said. A clean break.

Rand turned to go, but a woman stepped smoothly in front of him and put a hand on his chest, the lace falling back from a soft wrist. Her head did not quite come to his shoulder, but her tall array of curls easily reached as high as his eyes. The high neck of her gown put lace ruffles under her chin, and stripes covered the front of her dark blue dress below her breasts. “I am Alaine Chuliandred, and you are the famous Rand al’Thor. In Barthanes’s own manor, I suppose he has the right to speak to you first, but we are all fascinated by what we hear of you. I even hear that you play the flute. Can it be true?”

“I play the flute.” *How did she . . . ? Caldevwin. Light, everybody does hear everything in Cairhien*. “If you will excuse—”

“I have heard that some outland lords play music, but I never believed it. I would like very much to hear you play. Perhaps you will talk with me, of this and that. Barthanes seemed to find your conversation fascinating. My husband spends his days sampling his own vineyards, and leaves me quite alone. He is never there to talk with me.”

“You must miss him,” Rand said, trying to edge around her and her wide skirts. She gave a tinkling laugh as if he had said the funniest thing in the world.

Another woman sidled in beside the first, and another hand was laid on his chest. She wore as many stripes as Alaine, and they were of an age, a good ten years older than he. “Do you think to keep him to yourself, Alaine?” The two women smiled at each other while their eyes threw daggers. The second turned her smile on Rand. “I am Belevaere Osiellin. Are all Andormen so tall? And so handsome?”

He cleared his throat. “Ah . . . some are as tall. Pardon me, but if you will—”

“I saw you talking with Barthanes. They say you know Galldrian, as well. You must come to see me, and talk. My husband is visiting our estates in the south.”

“You have the sublety of a tavern wench,” Alaine hissed at her, and immediately was smiling up at Rand. “She has no polish. No man could like a woman with a manner so rough. Bring your flute to my manor, and we will talk. Perhaps you will teach me to play?”

“What Alaine thinks of as subtlety,” Belevaere said sweetly, “is but lack of courage. A man who wears a heron-mark sword must be brave. That truly is a heron-mark blade, is it not?”

Rand tried backing away from them. “If you will just excuse me, I—” They followed step for step until his back hit the wall; the width of their skirts together made another wall in front of him.

He jumped as a third woman crowded in beside the other two, her skirts joining theirs to the wall on that side. She was older than they, but just as pretty, with an amused smile that did not lessen the sharpness of her eyes. She wore half again as many stripes as Alaine and Belevaere; they made tiny curtsies and glared at her sullenly.

“Are these two spiders trying to toil you in their webs?” The older woman laughed. “Half the time they tangle themselves more firmly than anyone else. Come with me, my fine young Andoran, and I will tell you some of the troubles they would give you. For one thing, I have no husband to worry about. Husbands always make trouble.”

Over Alaine’s head he could see Thom, straightening from a bow to no applause or notice whatsoever. With a grimace the gleeman snatched a goblet from the tray of a startled servant.

"I see someone I must speak to," Rand told the women, and squeezed out of the box they had put him in just as the last woman reached for his arm. All three stared after him as he hurried to the gleeman.

Thom eyed him over the lip of the goblet, then took another long swallow.

"Thom, I know you said a clean break, but I had to get away from those women. All they wanted to talk about was their husbands being away, but they were already hinting at other things." Thom choked on his wine, and Rand slapped his back. "You drink too fast, and something always goes down the wrong way. Thom, they think I am plotting with Barthanes, or maybe Galldrian, and I don't think they will believe me when I say I'm not. I just needed an excuse to leave them."

Thom stroked his long mustaches with one knuckle and peered across the room at the three women. They were still standing together, watching Rand and him. "I recognize those three, boy. Breane Taborwin alone would give you an education such as every man should have at least once in his life, if he can live through it. Worried about their husbands. I like that, boy." Abruptly his eyes sharpened. "You told me you were clear of Aes Sedai. Half the talk here tonight is of the Andoran *lord* appearing with no warning, and an Aes Sedai at his side. Barthanes and Galldrian. You've let the White Tower put you in the cooking pot this time."

"She only came yesterday, Thom. And as soon as the Horn is safe, I'll be free of them again. I mean to see to it."

"You sound as if it isn't safe now," Thom said slowly. "You didn't sound that way before."

"Darkfriends stole it, Thom. They brought it here. Barthanes is one of them."

Thom seemed to study his wine, but his eyes darted to make sure no one was close enough to listen. More than the three women were watching them with sideways glances while pretending to talk among themselves, but every knot maintained its distance from every other. Still, Thom spoke softly. "A dangerous thing to say if it isn't true, and more dangerous if it is. An accusation like that, against the most powerful man in the kingdom. . . . You say he has the Horn? I suppose you're after my help again, now that you're tangled with the White Tower once more."

"No." He had decided Thom had been right, even if the gleeman did not know why. He could not involve anyone else in his troubles. "I just wanted to get away from those women.”

The gleeman blew out his mustaches, taken aback. “Well. Yes. That is well. The last time I helped you, I got a limp out of it, and you seem to have let yourself be tied to Tar Valon strings again. You’ll have to get yourself out of it this time.” He sounded as if he were trying to convince himself.

“I will, Thom. I will.” *Just as soon as the Horn is safe and Mat has that bloody dagger back. Mat, Hurin, where are you?*

As if the thought had been a summons, Hurin appeared in the room, eyes searching among the lords and ladies. They looked through him; servants did not exist unless needed. When he found Rand and Thom, he made his way between the small clusters of nobles and bowed to Rand. “My Lord, I was sent to tell you. Your manservant had a fall and twisted his knee. I don’t know how bad, my Lord.”

For a moment Rand stared before he understood. Conscious of all the eyes on him, he spoke loudly enough for the nobles closest to overhear. “Clumsy fool. What good is he to me if he can’t walk? I suppose I’d better come see how badly he’s hurt himself.”

It seemed to be the right thing to say. Hurin sounded relieved when he bowed again and said, “As my Lord wishes. If my Lord will follow me?”

“You play very well at being a lord,” Thom said softly. “But remember this. Cairhienin may play *Daes Dae’mar*, but it was the White Tower made the Great Game in the first place. Watch yourself, boy.” With a glare at the nobles, he set his empty goblet on the tray of a passing servant and strolled away, plucking his harp. He began reciting *Goodwife Mili and the Silk Merchant*.

“Lead on, man,” Rand told Hurin, feeling foolish. As he followed the sniffer out of the room, he could feel the eyes following him.

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CHAPTER

33

A Message from the Dark

“Have you found it?” Rand asked as he followed Hurin down a cramped flight of stairs. The kitchens lay on the lower levels, and the servants who had come attending the guests had all been sent there. “Or is Mat really hurt?”

“Oh, Mat’s fine, Lord Rand.” The sniffer frowned. “At least, he sounds all right, and he grumbles like a hale man. I didn’t mean to worry you, but I needed a reason for you to come below. I found the trail easy enough. The men who set fire to the inn all entered a walled garden behind the manor. Trollocs joined them, went into the garden with them. Sometime yesterday, I think. Maybe even night before last.” He hesitated. “Lord Rand, they didn’t come out again. They must still be in there.”

At the foot of the stairs the sounds of the servants enjoying themselves drifted down the hall, laughter and singing. Someone had a bittern, strumming a raucous tune to clapping and the thump of dancing. There was no worked plaster or fine tapestries here, only bare stone and plain wood. Light in the halls came from rush torches, smoking the ceiling and spread far enough apart that the light faded between them.

“I’m glad you are talking to me naturally again,” Rand said. “The way you have been bowing and scraping, I was beginning to think you were more Cairhienin than the Cairhienin.”

Hurin’s face colored. “Well, as to that. . . .” He glanced down the hall toward the noise and looked as if he wanted to spit. “They all pretend to be so proper, but. . . . Lord Rand, every one of them says he’s loyal to his master or mistress, but they all hint they’re willing to sell what they know, or have heard. And when they have a few drinks in them, they’ll tell you, all whispering in your ear, things about the lords and ladies they serve that’d fair make your hair stand on end. I know they’re Cairhienin, but I never heard of such goings on.”

“We will be out of here soon, Hurin.” Rand hoped it was true. “Where is this garden?” Hurin turned down a side hall leading toward the back of the manor. “Did you bring Ingtar and the others down already?”

The sniffer shook his head. “Lord Ingtar had let himself be cornered by six or seven of those who call themselves ladies. I couldn’t get close enough to speak to him. And Verin Sedai was with Barthanes. She gave me such a look when I came near, I never even tried to tell her.”

They rounded another corner just then, and there were Loial and Mat, the Ogier standing a little stooped for the lower ceiling.

Loial’s grin almost split his face. “There you are. Rand, I was never so glad to get away from anyone as from those people upstairs. They kept asking me if the Ogier were coming back, and if Galldrian had agreed to pay what was owed. It seems the reason all the Ogier stonemasons left is because Galldrian stopped paying them, except with promises. I kept telling them I didn’t know anything about it, but half of them seemed to think that I was lying, and the other half that I was hinting at something.”

“We’ll be out of here soon,” Rand assured him. “Mat, are you all right?” His friend’s face looked more hollow-cheeked than he remembered, even back at the inn, and his cheekbones more prominent.

“I feel fine,” Mat said grumpily, “but I certainly didn’t have any trouble leaving the *other* servants. The ones who weren’t asking if you starved me thought I was sick and didn’t want to come too close.”

“Have you sensed the dagger?” Rand asked.

Mat shook his head glumly. “The only thing I’ve sensed is that somebody’s watching me, most of the time. These people are as bad as Fades for sneaking around. Burn me, I nearly jumped out of my skin when Hurin told me he’d located the Darkfriends’ trail. Rand, I can’t feel it at all, and I’ve been through this bloody building from rafters to basement.”

“That does not mean it isn’t here, Mat. I put it in the chest with the Horn, remember. Maybe that keeps you from feeling it. I don’t think Fain knows how to open it, else he’d not have gone to the trouble of carrying the weight when he fled Fal Dara. Even that much gold isn’t important beside the Horn of Valere. When we find the Horn, we will find the dagger. You’ll see.”

“As long as I don’t have to pretend to be your servant anymore,” Mat muttered. “As long as you don’t go mad and. . . .” He let the words die with a twist of his mouth.

“Rand is not mad, Mat,” Loial said. “The Cairhienin would never have let him in here if he were not a lord. They are the ones who are mad.”

“I’m not mad,” Rand said harshly. “Not yet. Hurin, show me this garden.”

“This way, Lord Rand.”

They went out into the night by a small door that Rand had to duck to get through; Loial was forced to bend over and hunch his shoulders. There was enough light in yellow pools from the windows above for Rand to make out brick walks between square flower beds. The shadows of stables and other outbuildings bulked in the darkness to either side. Occasional fragments of music drifted out, from the servants below or from those entertaining their masters above.

Hurin led them along the walks until even the dim glow failed and they made their way by moonlight alone, their boots crunching softly on the brick. Bushes that would have been bright with flowers by daylight now made strange humps in the dark. Rand fingered his sword and did not let his eyes stay on any one spot too long. A hundred Trollocs could be hiding around them unseen. He knew Hurin would have smelled Trollocs if they were there, but that did not help a great deal. If Barthanes was a Darkfriend, then at least some of his servants and guards had to be, too, and Hurin could not always smell a Darkfriend. Darkfriends leaping out of the night would not be much better than Trollocs.

“There, Lord Rand,” Hurin whispered, pointing.

Ahead, stone walls not much higher than Loial’s head enclosed a square perhaps fifty paces on a side. Rand could not be sure, in the shadows, but it looked as if the gardens stretched on beyond the walls. He wondered why Barthanes had built a walled enclosure in the middle of his garden. No roof showed above the wall. *Why would they go in there and stay?*

Loial bent to put his mouth close to Rand’s ear. “I told you this was all an Ogier grove, once. Rand, the Waygate is within that wall. I can feel it.”

Rand heard Mat sigh despairingly. “We can’t give up, Mat,” he said.

“I’m not giving up. I just have enough brains not to want to travel the Ways again.”

“We may have to,” Rand told him. “Go find Ingtar and Verin. Get them alone somehow—I don’t care how—and tell them I think Fain has taken the Horn through a Waygate. Just don’t let anyone else hear. And remember to limp; you are supposed to have had a fall." It was a wonder to him that even Fain would risk the Ways, but it seemed the only answer. *They wouldn't spend a day and a night just sitting in there, without a roof over their heads.*

Mat swept a low bow, and his voice was heavy with sarcasm. "At once, my Lord. As my Lord wishes. Shall I carry your banner, my Lord?" He started back for the manor, his grumbles fading away. "Now I have to limp. Next it'll be a broken neck, or. . . ."

"He's just worried about the dagger, Rand," Loial said.

"I know," Rand said. *But how long before he tells somebody what I am, not even meaning to?* He could not believe Mat would betray him on purpose; there was that much of their friendship left, at least. "Loial, boost me up where I can see over the wall."

"Rand, if the Darkfriends are still—"

"They aren't. Boost me up, Loial."

The three of them moved close to the wall, and Loial made a stirrup with his hands for Rand's foot. The Ogier straightened easily with the weight, lifting Rand's head just high enough to see over the top of the wall.

The thin, waning moon gave little light, and most of the area was in shadow, but there did not seem to be any flowers or shrubs inside the walled square. Only a lone bench of pale marble, placed as if one man might sit on it to stare at what stood in the middle of the space like a huge upright stone slab.

Rand caught the top of the wall and pulled himself up. Loial gave a low *hsst* and grabbed at his foot, but he jerked free and rolled over the wall, dropping inside. There was close-cropped grass under his feet; he thought vaguely that Barthanes must let sheep in, at least. Staring at the shadowed stone slab, the Waygate, he was startled to hear boots thump to the ground beside him.

Hurin climbed to his feet, dusting himself off. "You should be careful doing that, Lord Rand. Could be anybody hiding in here. Or anything." He peered into the darkness within the walls, feeling at his belt as if for the short sword and sword-breaker he had had to leave at the inn; servants did not go armed in Cairhien. "Jump in a hole without looking, and there'll be a snake in it every time."

"You would smell them," Rand said.

"Maybe." The sniffer inhaled deeply. "But I can only smell what they've done, not what they intend."

There was a scraping sound from over Rand's head, and then Loial was letting himself down from the wall. The Ogier did not even have to straighten his arms completely before his boots touched the ground. "Rash," he muttered. "You humans are always so rash and hasty. And now you have me doing it. Elder Haman would speak to me severely, and my mother. . . ." The darkness hid his face, but Rand was sure his ears were twitching vigorously. "Rand, if you don't start being a little careful, you are going to get me in trouble."

Rand walked to the Waygate, walked all the way around it. Even close up it looked like nothing more than a thick square of stone, taller than he was. The back was smooth and cool to the touch—he only brushed his hand against it quickly—but the front had been carved by an artist's hands. Vines, leaves, and flowers covered it, each so finely done that in the dim moonlight they seemed almost real. He felt the ground in front of it; the grass had been scraped partly away in two arcs such as those gates would make in opening.

"Is that a Waygate?" Hurin asked uncertainly. "I've heard tell of them, of course, but. . . ." He sniffed the air. "The trail goes right to it and stops, Lord Rand. How are we going to follow them, now? I've heard if you go through a Waygate, you come out mad, if you come out at all."

"It can be done, Hurin. I've done it, and Loial, and Mat and Perrin." Rand never took his eyes from the tangles of leaves on the stone. There was one unlike any other carved there, he knew. The trefoil leaf of fabled *Avendesora*, the Tree of Life. He put his hand on it. "I'll bet you can smell their trail along the Ways. We can follow anywhere they can run." It would not hurt to prove to himself that he could make himself step through a Waygate. "I'll prove it to you." He heard Hurin groan. The leaf was worked in the stone just as the others were, but it came away in his hand. Loial groaned, too.

In an instant the illusion of living plants seemed suddenly real. Stone leaves appeared to stir with a breeze, flowers appeared to have color even in the dark. Down the center of the mass a line appeared, and the two halves of the slab swung slowly toward Rand. He stepped back to let them open. He did not find himself looking at the other side of the walled square, but neither did he see the dull silver reflection he remembered. The space between the opening gates was a black so dark it seemed to make the night around it lighter. The pitch-blackness oozed out between the still-moving gates.

Rand leaped back with a shout, dropping the *Avendesora* leaf in his haste, and Loial cried out, "*Machin Shin*. The Black Wind."

The sound of wind filled their ears; the grass stirred in ripples toward the walls, and dirt swirled up, sucked into the air. And in the wind a thousand insane voices seemed to cry, ten thousand, overlapping, drowning each other. Rand could make out some of them, though he tried not to.

. . . blood so sweet, so sweet to drink the blood, the blood that drips, drips, drops so red; pretty eyes, fine eyes, I have no eyes, pluck the eyes from out of your head; grind your bones, split your bones inside your flesh, suck your marrow while you scream; scream, scream, singing screams, sing your screams. . . . And worst of all, a whispering thread through all the rest. *Al'Thor. Al'Thor. Al'Thor*.

Rand found the void around him and embraced it, never minding the tantalizing, sickening glow of *saidin* just out of his sight. Greatest of all the dangers along the Ways was the Black Wind that took the souls of those it killed, and drove mad those it let live, but *Machin Shin* was a part of the Ways; it could not leave them. Only it was flowing into the night, and the Black Wind called his name.

The Waygate was not yet fully open. If they could only put the *Avendesora* leaf back. . . . He saw Loial scrambling on his hands and knees, fumbling and searching the grass in the darkness.

Saidin filled him. He felt as if his bones were vibrating, felt the red-hot, ice-cold flow of the One Power, felt truly alive as he never was without it, felt the oil-slick taint. . . . *No!* And silently he screamed back at himself from beyond the emptiness, *It's coming for you! It'll kill all of us!* He hurled it all at the black bulge, standing out a full span from the Waygate, now. He did not know what it was that he hurled, or how, but in the heart of that darkness bloomed a coruscating fountain of light.

The Black Wind shrieked, ten thousand wordless howls of agony. Slowly, giving way inch by reluctant inch, the bulge lessened; slowly the oozing reversed, back into the still-open Waygate.

The Power raced through Rand in a torrent. He could feel the link between himself and *saidin*, like a river in flood, between himself and the pure fire blazing in the heart of the Black Wind, a raging cataract. The heat inside him went to white-heat, and beyond, to a shimmer that would have melted stone and vaporized steel and made the air burst into flame. The cold grew till the breath in his lungs should have frozen solid and hard as metal. He could feel it overwhelming him, feel life eroding like a soft clay riverbank, feel what was him wearing away.

Can't stop! If it gets out. . . . Have to kill it! I—can—not—stop! Desperately he clung to fragments of himself. The One Power roared through him; he rode it like a chip of wood in rapids. The void began to melt and flow; the emptiness steamed with freezing cold.

The motion of the Waygate halted, and reversed.

Rand stared, sure, in the dim thoughts floating outside the void, that he was only seeing what he wanted to see.

The gates drifted closer together, pushing back *Machin Shin* as if the Black Wind had solid substance. The inferno still roared in its breast.

With a vague, distant wondering, Rand saw Loial, still on hands and knees, backing away from the closing gates.

The gap narrowed, vanished. The leaves and vines merged into a solid wall, and were stone.

Rand felt the link between him and the fire snap, the flow of Power through him cease. A moment more, and it would have swept him away completely. Shaking, he dropped to his knees. It was still there inside. *Saidin*. No longer flowing, but there, in a pool. He was a pool of the One Power. He trembled with it. He could smell the grass, the dirt beneath, the stone of the walls. Even in the darkness he could see each blade of grass, separate and whole, all of them at once. He could feel each minute stirring of the air on his face. His tongue curdled with the taste of the taint; his stomach knotted and spasmed.

Frantically he clawed his way out of the void; still on his knees, not moving, he fought free. And then all that was left was the fading foulness on his tongue, and the cramping in his stomach, and the memory. *So—alive*.

"You saved us, Builder." Hurin had his back pressed against the wall, and his voice was hoarse. "That thing—that was the Black Wind?—it was worse than—was it going to hurl that fire at us? Lord Rand! Did it harm you? Did it touch you?" He came running as Rand got to his feet, helping him the last bit. Loial was getting up, too, dusting his hands and his knees.

"We'll never follow Fain through that." Rand touched Loial's arm. "Thank you. You *did* save us." *You saved me, at least. It was killing me.*

Killing me, and it felt—wonderful. He swallowed; a faint trace of the taste still coated his mouth. “I want something to drink.”

“I only found the leaf and put it back,” Loial said, shrugging. “It seemed that if we could not get the Waygate closed, it would kill us. I am afraid I’m not a very good hero, Rand. I was so afraid I could hardly think.”

“We were both afraid,” Rand said. “We may be a poor pair of heroes, but we are what there is. It’s a good thing Ingtar is with us.”

“Lord Rand,” Hurin said diffidently, “could we—leave, now?”

The sniffer made a fuss about Rand going over the wall first, with not knowing who was waiting outside, until Rand pointed out that he had the only weapon among them. Even then Hurin did not seem to like letting Loial lift Rand to catch the top of the wall and pull himself over.

Rand landed on his feet with a thud, listening and peering into the night. For a moment he thought he saw something move, heard a boot scrape on the brick walk, but neither was repeated, and he dismissed it as nervousness. He thought that he had a right to be nervous. He turned to help Hurin down.

“Lord Rand,” the sniffer said as soon as his feet were solidly on the ground, “how are we going to follow them now? From what I’ve heard of those things, the whole lot of them could be halfway across the world by now, in any direction.”

“Verin will know a way.” Rand suddenly wanted to laugh; to find the Horn and the dagger—if they could be found, now—he had to go back to the Aes Sedai. They had let him loose, and now he had to go back. “I won’t let Mat die without trying.”

Loial joined them, and they went back toward the manor, to be met at the small door by Mat, who opened it just as Rand reached for the handle. “Verin says you’re not to do anything. If Hurin’s found where the Horn is kept, then she says that’s all we can do, now. She says we’ll leave as soon as you come back, and make a plan. And I say this is the last time I go running back and forth with messages. If you want to say something to somebody, you can talk to them yourself from now on.” Mat peered past them into the darkness. “Is the Horn out there somewhere? In an outbuilding? Did you see the dagger?”

Rand turned him around and got him back inside. “It isn’t in an outbuilding, Mat. I hope Verin has a good idea of what to do now; I don’t have any.”

Mat looked as if he wanted to ask questions, but he let himself be pushed along the dimly lit corridor. He even remembered to limp as they started upstairs.

When Rand and the others reentered the rooms filled with nobles, they received a number of looks. Rand wondered if they somehow knew something of what had happened outside, or if he should have sent Hurin and Mat to the front hall to wait, but then he realized the looks were no different from what they had been before, curious and calculating, wondering what the lord and the Ogier had been up to. Servants were invisible to these people. No one tried to approach them, since they were together. It seemed there were protocols to conspiracy in the Great Game; anyone might try to listen to a private conversation, but they would not intrude on it.

Verin and Ingtar were standing together, and thus also alone. Ingtar looked a little dazed. Verin gave Rand and the other three a brief glance, frowned at their expressions, then resettled her shawl and started for the entry hall.

As they reached it, Barthanes appeared as if someone had told him they were leaving. “You go so soon? Verin Sedai, can I not entreat you to stay longer?”

Verin shook her head. “We must go, Lord Barthanes. I’ve not been in Cairhien in some years. I was glad of your invitation to young Rand. It has been . . . interesting.”

“Then Grace see you safely to your inn. The Great Tree, is it not? Perhaps you will favor me with your presence again? You would honor me, Verin Sedai, and you, Lord Rand, and you, Lord Ingtar, not to mention you, Loial, son of Arent son of Halan.” His bow was a little deeper for the Aes Sedai than for the others, but still no more than a slight inclination.

Verin nodded in acknowledgment. “Perhaps. The Light illumine you, Lord Barthanes.” She turned for the doors.

As Rand moved to follow the others, Barthanes caught his sleeve with two fingers, holding him back. Mat looked as if he might stay, too, until Hurin pulled him to join Verin and the rest.

“You wade even deeper in the Game than I thought,” Barthanes said softly. “When I heard your name, I could not believe it, yet you came, and you fit the description, and. . . . I was given a message for you. I think I *will* deliver it after all.”

Rand had felt a prickling along his backbone as Barthanes spoke, but at the last, he stared. “A message? From whom? Lady Selene?”

“A man. Not the sort for whom I would usually carry messages, but he has . . . certain . . . claims on me that I cannot ignore. He gave no name, but he was a Lugarder. Aaah! You know him.”

“I know him.” *Fain left a message?* Rand looked around the wide hall. Mat and Verin and the others were waiting by the doors. Liveried servants stood stiffly along the walls, ready to leap at a command yet appearing neither to hear nor see. The sounds of the gathering floated from deeper in the manor. It did not look like a place where Darkfriends might attack. “What message?”

“He says he will wait for you on Toman Head. He has what you seek, and if you want it, you must follow. If you refuse to follow him, he says he will hound your blood, and your people, and those you love until you will face him. It sounds mad, of course, a man like that saying he will hound a lord, and yet, there was something about him. I think he *is* mad—he even denied you are a lord, as any eye can plainly see—but there is still something. What is it he carries with him, with Trollocs to guard it? What is it you seek?” Barthanes seemed shocked at the directness of his own questions.

“The Light illumine you, Lord Barthanes.” Rand managed a bow, but his legs wobbled as he joined Verin and the others. *He* wants *me to follow? And he’ll hurt Emond’s Field, Tam, if I don’t.* He had no doubt Fain could do it, would do it. *At least Egwene is safe, in the White Tower*. He had sickening images of Trollocs descending in hordes on Emond’s Field, of eyeless Fades stalking Egwene. *But how* can *I follow him? How?*

Then he was out in the night, mounting Red. Verin and Ingtar and the others were all already on their horses, and the escort of Shienarans was closing round them.

“What did you find?” Verin demanded. “Where does he keep it?” Hurin cleared his throat loudly, and Loial shifted in his high saddle. The Aes Sedai peered at them.

“Fain has taken the Horn to Toman Head through a Waygate,” Rand said dully. “By this time, he’s probably already waiting there for me.”

“We will speak of this later,” Verin said, so firmly that no one spoke at all on the ride back to the city, to The Great Tree.

Uno left them there, after a quiet word from Ingtar, taking the soldiers back to their inn in the Foregate. Hurin took one look at Verin's set face by the light of the common room, muttered something about ale, and scurried to a table in a corner, alone. The Aes Sedai brushed aside the innkeeper's solicitous hopes that she had enjoyed herself, and silently led Rand and the rest to the private dining room.

Perrin looked up from *The Travels of Jain Farstrider* when they walked in, and frowned when he saw their faces. "It didn't go well, did it?" he said, closing the leatherbound book. Lamps and beeswax candles around the room gave a good light; Mistress Tiedra charged heavily, but she did not stint.

Verin carefully folded her shawl and laid it across the back of a chair. "Tell me again. The Darkfriends took the Horn through a *Waygate*? At Barthanes's manor?"

"The ground under the manor used to be an Ogier grove," Loial explained. "When we built. . . ." His voice trailed off and his ears wilted under her look.

"Hurin followed them right to it." Rand wearily threw himself into a chair. *I have to follow more than ever, now. But how?* "I opened it to show him he could still follow the trail wherever they went, and the Black Wind was there. It tried to reach us, but Loial managed to close the gates before it could come all the way out." He colored a little at that, but Loial *had* closed the gates, and for all he knew *Machin Shin* might have made it out without that. "It was standing guard."

"The Black Wind," Mat breathed, frozen halfway into a chair. Perrin was staring at Rand, too. So were Verin and Ingtar. Mat dropped into the chair with a thump.

"You must be mistaken," Verin said at last. "*Machin Shin* could not be used as a guard. No one can constrain the Black Wind to do anything."

"It's a creature of the Dark One," Mat said numbly. "They're Darkfriends. Maybe they knew how to ask it for help, or make it help."

"No one knows exactly what *Machin Shin* is," Verin said, "unless, perhaps, it is the essence of madness and cruelty. It cannot be reasoned with, Mat, or bargained with, or talked to. It cannot even be forced, not by any Aes Sedai living today, and perhaps not by any who ever lived. Do you really think Padan Fain could do what ten Aes Sedai could not?" Mat shook his head.

There was an air of despair in the room, of hope and purpose lost. The goal they had sought had vanished, and even Verin's face wore a floundering expression.

"I'd never have thought Fain had the courage for the Ways." Ingtar sounded almost mild, but suddenly he banged his fist against the wall. "I do not care how, or even if, *Machin Shin* works on Fain's behalf. They have taken the Horn of Valere into the Ways, Aes Sedai. By now they could be in the Blight, or halfway to Tear or Tanchico, or the other side of the Aiel Waste. The Horn is lost. I am lost." His hands dropped to his sides, and his shoulders slumped. "I am lost."

"Fain is taking it to Toman Head," Rand said, and was immediately the object of all eyes again.

Verin studied him narrowly. "You said that before. How do you know?"

"He left a message with Barthanes," Rand said.

"A trick," Ingtar sneered. "He'd not tell us where to follow."

"I don't know what the rest of you are going to do," Rand said, "but I am going to Toman Head. I have to. I leave at first light."

"But, Rand," Loial said, "it will take us months to reach Toman Head. What makes you think Fain will wait there for us?"

"He will wait." *But how long before he decides I'm not coming? Why did he set that guard if he wants me to follow?* "Loial, I mean to ride as hard as I can, and if I ride Red to death, I'll buy another horse, or steal another, if I have to. Are you sure you want to come?"

"I've stayed with you this long, Rand. Why would I stop now?" Loial pulled out his pipe and pouch and began thumbing tabac into the big bowl. "You see, I like you. I would like you even if you weren't *ta'veren*. Maybe I like you despite it. You do seem to get me neck-deep in hot water. In any case, I am going with you." He sucked on the pipestem to test the draw, then took a splinter from the stone jar on the mantel and thrust it into a candle flame for a light. "And I don't think you can really stop me."

"Well, I'm going," Mat said. "Fain still has that dagger, so I'm going. But all that servant business ended tonight."

Perrin sighed, an introspective look in his yellow eyes. "I suppose I'll come along, too." After a moment, he grinned. "Somebody has to keep Mat out of trouble."

“Not even a clever trick,” Ingtar muttered. “Somehow, I’ll get Barthanes alone, and I will learn the truth. I mean to have the Horn of Valere, not chase Jak o’ the Wisps.”

“It may not be a trick,” Verin said carefully, seeming to study the floor under her toes. “There were certain things left in the dungeons at Fal Dara, writings that indicated a connection between what happened that night and”—she gave Rand a quick glance under lowered brows—“Toman Head. I still do not understand them completely, but I believe we must go to Toman Head. And I believe we will find the Horn there.”

“Even if they are going to Toman Head,” Ingtar said, “by the time we reach it, Fain or one of the other Darkfriends could have blown the Horn a hundred times, and the heroes returned from the grave will ride for the Shadow.”

“Fain could have blown the Horn a hundred times since leaving Fal Dara,” Verin told him. “And I think he would have, if he could open the chest. What we must worry about is that he might find someone who does know how to open it. We must follow him along the Ways.”

Perrin’s head came up sharply, and Mat shifted in his chair. Loial gave a low moan.

“Even if we could somehow sneak past Barthanes’s guards,” Rand said, “I think we’ll find *Machin Shin* still there. We cannot use the Ways.”

“How many of us could sneak onto Barthanes’s grounds?” Verin said dismissively. “There are other Waygates. Stedding Tsofu lies not far from the city, south and east. It is a young *stedding*, rediscovered only perhaps six hundred years ago, but the Ogier Elders were still growing the Ways, then. Stedding Tsofu will have a Waygate. It is there and we will ride at first light.”

Loial made a slightly louder sound, and Rand was not sure whether it referred to the Waygate or the *stedding*.

Ingtar still did not seem convinced, but Verin was as smooth and as implacable as snow sliding down a mountainside. “You will have your soldiers ready to ride, Ingtar. Send Hurin to tell Uno before he goes to bed. I think we should all go to bed as soon as possible. These Darkfriends have gained at least a day on us already, and I mean to make up as much of it as I can tomorrow.” So firm was the plump Aes Sedai’s manner that she was already herding Ingtar to the door before she finished speaking.

Rand followed the others out, but at the door he stopped beside the Aes Sedai and watched Mat heading down the candle-lit hall. “Why does he look like that?” he asked her. “I thought you Healed him, enough to give him some time, anyway.”

She waited until Mat and the others had turned up the stairs before speaking. “Apparently, it did not work so well as we believed. The sickness takes an interesting course in him. His strength remains; he will keep that to the end, I think. But his body wastes away. Another few weeks, at most, I would say. You see, there is reason for haste.”

“I do not need another spur, Aes Sedai,” Rand said, making the title sound hard. *Mat. The Horn. Fain’s threat. Light, Egwene! Burn me, I don’t need another spur*.

“And what of you, Rand al’Thor? Do you feel well? Do you fight it still, or have you yet surrendered to the Wheel?”

“I ride with you to find the Horn,” he told her. “Beyond that, there is nothing between me and any Aes Sedai. Do you understand me? Nothing!”

She did not speak, and he walked away from her, but when he turned to take the stairs she was still watching him, dark eyes sharp and considering.

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CHAPTER

34

The Wheel Weaves

The first light of morning already pearled the sky by the time Thom Merrilin found himself trudging back to The Bunch of Grapes. Even where the halls and taverns lay thickest, there was a brief time when the Foregate lay quiet, gathering its breath. In his present mood, Thom would not have noticed if the empty street had been on fire.

Some of Barthanes's guests had insisted on keeping him long after most had gone, long after Barthanes had taken himself to bed. It had been his own fault for leaving *The Great Hunt of the Horn*, changing to the sort of tales he told and songs he sang in the villages, "Mara and the Three Foolish Kings" and *How Susa Tamed Jain Farstrider* and stories of Anla the Wise Councilor. He had meant the choices to be a private comment on their stupidity, never dreaming any of them might listen, much less be intrigued. Intrigued in a way. They had demanded more of the same, but they had laughed in the wrong places, at the wrong things. They had laughed at him, too, apparently thinking he would not notice, or else that a full purse stuffed in his pocket would heal any wounds. He had almost thrown it away twice already.

The heavy purse burning his pocket and pride was not the only reason for his mood, nor even the nobles' contempt. They had asked questions about Rand, not even bothering to be subtle with a mere gleeman. Why was Rand in Cairhien? Why had an Andoran lord taken him, a gleeman, aside? Too many questions. He was not sure his answers had been clever enough. His reflexes for the Great Game were rusty.

Before turning toward The Bunch of Grapes, he had gone to The Great Tree; it was not difficult to find where someone was staying in Cairhien, if you pressed a palm or two with silver. He was still not sure what he had intended to say. Rand was gone with his friends, and the Aes Sedai. It left a feeling of something not done. *The boy's on his own, now. Burn me, I'm out of it!*

He strode through the common room, empty as it seldom was, and took the steps two at a time. At least, he tried to; his right leg did not bend well, and he nearly fell. Muttering to himself, he climbed the rest of the way at a slower pace, and opened the door to his room softly, so as not to wake Dena.

Despite himself, he smiled when he saw her lying on the bed with her face turned to the wall, still in her dress. *Fell asleep waiting for me. Fool girl*. But it was a kindly thought; he was not sure there was anything she would do that he would not forgive or excuse. Deciding on the spur of the moment that tonight was the night he'd let her perform for the first time, he lowered his harp case to the floor and put a hand on her shoulder, to wake her and tell her.

She rolled limply onto her back, staring up at him, glazed eyes open wide above the gash across her throat. The side of the bed that had been hidden by her body was dark and sodden.

Thom's stomach heaved; if his throat had not been so tight he could not breathe, he would have vomited, or screamed, or both.

He had only the creaking of wardrobe doors for warning. He spun, knives coming out of his sleeves and leaving his hands in the same motion. The first blade took the throat of a fat, balding man with a dagger in his hand; the man stumbled back, blood bubbling around his clutching fingers as he tried to cry out.

Spinning on his bad leg threw Thom's other blade off, though; the knife stuck in the right shoulder of a heavily muscled man with scars on his face, who was climbing out of the other wardrobe. The big man's knife dropped from a hand that suddenly would not do what he wanted, and he lumbered for the door.

Before he could take a second step, Thom produced another knife and slashed him across the back of his leg. The big man yelled and stumbled, and Thom seized a handful of greasy hair, slamming his face against the wall beside the door; the man screamed again as the knife hilt sticking out of his shoulder hit the door.

Thom thrust the blade in his hand to within an inch of the man's dark eye. The scars on the big man's face gave him a hard look, but he stared at the point without blinking and did not move a muscle. The fat man, lying half in the wardrobe, kicked a last kick and was still.

"Before I kill you," Thom said, "tell me. Why?" His voice was quiet, numb; he felt numb inside.

"The Great Game," the man said quickly. His accent was of the streets, and his clothes as well, but they were a shade too fine, too unworn; he had more coin to spend than any Foregater should. "Nothing against you personal, you see? It is just the Game."

"The Game? I'm not mixed up in *Daes Dae'mar*! Who would want to kill me for the Great Game?" The man hesitated. Thom moved his blade closer. If the fellow blinked, his eyelashes would brush the point. "Who?"

"Barthanes," came the hoarse answer. "Lord Barthanes. We would not have killed you. Barthanes wants information. We just wanted to find out what you know. There can be gold in it for you. A nice, fat golden crown for what you know. Maybe two."

"Liar! I was in Barthanes's manor last night, as close to him as I am to you. If he wanted anything of me, I'd never have left alive."

"I tell you, we have been looking for you, or anyone who knows about this Andoran lord, for days. I never heard your name until last night, downstairs. Lord Barthanes is generous. It could be five crowns."

The man tried to pull his head away from the knife in Thom's hand, and Thom pushed him harder against the wall. "What Andoran lord?" But he knew. The Light help him, he knew.

"Rand. Of House al'Thor. Tall. Young. A blademaster, or at least he wears the sword. I know he came to see you. Him and an Ogier, and you talked. Tell me what you know. I might even throw in a crown or two, myself."

"You fool," Thom breathed. *Dena died for this? Oh, Light, she's dead*. He felt as if he wanted to cry. "The boy's a shepherd." *A shepherd in a fancy coat, with Aes Sedai around him like bees around honeyroses*. "Just a shepherd." He tightened his grip in the man's hair.

"Wait! Wait! You can make more than any five crowns, or even ten. A hundred, more like. Every House wants to know about this Rand al'Thor. Two or three have approached me. With what you know, and my knowing who wants to know it, we could both fill our pockets. And there has been a woman, a lady, I have seen more than once while asking after him. If we can find out who she is . . . why, we could sell that, too."

“You’ve made one real mistake in it all,” Thom said.

“Mistake?” The man’s far hand was beginning to slide down toward his belt. No doubt he had another dagger there. Thom ignored it.

“You should never have touched the girl.”

The man’s hand darted for his belt, then he gave one convulsive start as Thom’s knife went home.

Thom let him fall over away from the door and stood a moment before bending tiredly to tug his blades free. The door banged open, and he whirled with a snarl on his face.

Zera jerked back, a hand to her throat, staring at him. “That fool Ella just told me,” she said unsteadily, “that two of Barthanes’s men were asking after you last night, and with what I’ve heard this morning. . . . I thought you said you didn’t play in the Game anymore.”

“They found me,” he said wearily.

Her eyes dropped from his face and widened as they took in the bodies of the two men. Hastily she stepped into the room, shutting the door behind her. “This is bad, Thom. You’ll have to leave Cairhien.” Her gaze fell on the bed, and her breath caught. “Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, Thom, I’m so sorry.”

“I cannot leave yet, Zera.” He hesitated, then tenderly drew a blanket over Dena, covering her face. “I have another man to kill, first.”

The innkeeper gave herself a shake and pulled her eyes away from the bed. Her voice was more than a little breathy. “If you mean Barthanes, you’re too late. Everybody’s talking about it already. He is dead. His servants found him this morning, torn to pieces in his bedchamber. The only way they knew it was him was his head stuck on a spike over the fireplace.” She laid a hand on his arm. “Thom, you can’t hide that you were there last night, not from anybody who wants to know. Add these two in, and there’s nobody in Cairhien who won’t believe you were involved.” There was a slight questioning note in her last words, as if she, too, were wondering.

“It doesn’t matter, I suppose,” he said dully. He could not stop looking down at the blanket-covered shape on the bed. “Perhaps I will go back to Andor. To Caemlyn.”

She took his shoulders, turning him away from the bed. “You men,” she sighed, “always thinking with either your muscles or your hearts, and never your heads. Caemlyn is as bad as Cairhien, for you. Either place, you’ll end up dead, or in prison. Do you think she’d want that? If you want to honor her memory, stay alive.”

“Will you take care of. . . .” He could not say it. *Growing old*, he thought. *Going soft*. He pulled the heavy purse from his pocket and folded her hands around it. “This should take care of . . . everything. And help when they start asking questions about me, too.”

“I will see to everything,” she said gently. “You must go, Thom. Now.”

He nodded reluctantly, and slowly began stuffing a few things in a set of saddlebags. While he worked, Zera got her first close look at the fat man sprawled partway in the wardrobe, and she gave a loud gasp. He looked at her inquiringly; as long as he had known her, she had never been one to go faint over blood.

“These aren’t Barthanes’s men, Thom. At least, that one isn’t.” She nodded toward the fat man. “It’s the worst kept secret in Cairhien that he works for House Riatin. For Galldrian.”

“Galldrian,” he said flatly. *What has that bloody shepherd gotten me into? What have the Aes Sedai gotten us both into? But it was Galldrian’s men murdered her*.

There must have been something of his thoughts on his face. Zera said sharply, “Dena wants you alive, you fool! You try to kill the King, and you’ll be dead before you get within a hundred spans of him, if you come that close!”

A roar came from the city walls, as if half of Cairhien were shouting. Frowning, Thom peered from his window. Beyond the top of the gray walls above the rooftops of the Foregate, a thick column of smoke was rising into the sky. Far beyond the walls. Beside the first black pillar, a few gray tendrils quickly grew into another, and more wisps appeared further on. He estimated the distance and took a deep breath.

“Perhaps you had better think about leaving, too. It looks as if someone is firing the granaries.”

“I have lived through riots before. Go now, Thom.” With a last look at Dena’s shrouded form, he gathered his things, but as he started to leave, Zera spoke again. “You have a dangerous look in your eyes, Thom Merrilin. Imagine Dena sitting here, alive and hale. Think what she would say. Would she let you go off and get yourself killed to no purpose?”

“I’m only an old gleeman,” he said from the door. *And Rand al’Thor is only a shepherd, but we both do what we must*. “Who could I possibly be dangerous to?”

As he pulled the door to, hiding her, hiding Dena, a mirthless, wolfish grin came onto his face. His leg hurt, but he barely felt it as he hurried purposefully down the stairs and out of the inn.

Padan Fain reined in his horse atop a hill above Falme, in one of the few sparse thickets remaining on the hills outside the town. The pack horse bearing his precious burden bumped his leg, and he kicked it in the ribs without looking; the animal snorted and jerked back to the end of the lead he had tied to his saddle. The woman had not wanted to give up her horse, no more than any of the Darkfriends who had followed him had wanted to be left alone in the hills with the Trollocs, without Fain's protecting presence. He had solved both problems easily. Meat in a Trolloc cookpot had no need of a horse. The woman's companions had been shaken by the journey along the Ways, to a Waygate outside a long-abandoned *stedding* on Toman Head, and watching the Trollocs prepare their dinner had made the surviving Darkfriends extremely biddable.

From the edge of the trees, Fain studied the unwalled town and sneered. One short merchant train was rumbling in among the stables and horse lots and wagon yards that bordered the town, while another rumbled out, raising little dust from dirt packed by many years of such traffic. The men driving the wagons and the few riding beside them were all local men by their clothing, yet the mounted men, at least, had swords on baldrics, and even a few spears and bows. The soldiers he saw, and there were few, did not seem to be watching the armed men they had supposedly conquered.

He had learned something of these people, these Seanchan, in his day and a night on Toman Head. At least, as much as the defeated folk knew. It was never hard to find someone alone, and they always answered questions properly put. Men gathered more information on the invaders, as if they actually believed they would eventually do something with what they knew, but they sometimes tried to hold back. Women, by and large, seemed interested in going on with their lives whoever their rulers were, yet they noted details men did not, and they talked more quickly once they stopped screaming. Children talked the quickest of all, but they seldom said much that was worthwhile.

He had discarded three quarters of what he had heard as nonsense and rumors growing into fables, but he took some of those conclusions back, now. Anyone at all could enter Falme, it appeared. With a start, he saw the truth of a little more “nonsense” as twenty soldiers rode out of the town. He could not make out their mounts clearly, but they were certainly not horses. They ran with a fluid grace, and their dark skins seemed to have a glint in the morning sun, as of scales. He craned his neck to watch them disappear inland, then booted his horse toward the town.

The local folk among the stables and parked wagons and fenced horse lots gave him no more than a glance or two. He had no interest in them, either; he rode on into the town, onto its cobblestone streets sloping down to the harbor. He could see the harbor clearly, and the large, oddly shaped Seanchan ships anchored there. No one bothered him as he searched streets that were neither crowded nor empty. There were more Seanchan soldiers here. The people hurried about their business with eyes down, bowing whenever soldiers passed, but the Seanchan paid them no mind. It all seemed peaceful on the surface, despite the armored Seanchan in the streets and the ships in the harbor, but Fain could sense the tension underneath. He always did well where men were tense and afraid.

He came to a large house with more than a dozen soldiers standing guard before it. Fain stopped and dismounted. Except for one obvious officer, most wore armor of unrelieved black, and their helmets made him think of locusts’ heads. Two leathery-skinned beasts with three eyes and horny beaks instead of mouths flanked the front door, squatting like crouching frogs; the soldier standing by each of the creatures had three eyes painted on the breast of his armor. Fain eyed the blue-bordered banner flapping above the roof, the spread-winged hawk clutching lightning bolts, and chortled inside himself.

Women went in and out of a house across the street, women linked by silver leashes, but he ignored them. He knew about *damane* from the villagers. They might be of some use later, but not now.

The soldiers were looking at him, especially the officer, whose armor was all gold and red and green.

Forcing an ingratiating smile onto his face, Fain made himself bow deeply. “My lords, I have something here that will interest your Great Lord. I assure you, he will want to see it, and me, personally.” He gestured to the squarish shape on his pack horse, still wrapped in the huge, striped blanket in which his people had found it.

The officer stared him up and down. “You sound a foreigner to this land. Have you taken the oaths?”

"I obey, await, and will serve," Fain replied smoothly. Everyone he had questioned spoke of the oaths, though none had understood what they meant. If these people wanted oaths, he was prepared to swear anything. He had long since lost count of the oaths he had taken.

The officer motioned two of his men to see what was under the blanket. Surprised grunts at the weight as they lifted it down from the packsaddle turned to gasps when they stripped the blanket away. The officer stared with no expression on his face at the silver-worked golden chest resting on the cobblestones, then looked at Fain. "A gift fit for the Empress herself. You will come with me."

One of the soldiers searched Fain roughly, but he endured it in silence, noting that the officer and the two soldiers who took up the chest surrendered their swords and daggers before going inside. Anything he could learn of these people, however small, might help, though he was confident of his plan already. He was always confident, but never more than where lords feared an assassin's knife from their own followers.

As they went through the door, the officer frowned at him, and for a moment Fain wondered why. *Of course. The beasts*. Whatever they were, they were certainly no worse than Trollocs, nothing at all beside a Myrddraal, and he had not given them a second look. It was too late to pretend to be afraid of them now. But the Seanchan said nothing, only led him deeper into the house.

And so Fain found himself on his face, in a room bare of furnishings except for folding screens that hid its walls, while the officer told the High Lord Turak of him and his offering. Servants brought a table on which to set the chest so the High Lord would have no need to stoop; all Fain saw of them were scurrying slippers. He bided his time impatiently. Eventually there would come a time when he was not the one to bow.

Then the soldiers were dismissed, and Fain told to rise. He did so slowly, studying both the High Lord, with his shaven head and his long fingernails and his blue silk robe brocaded with blossoms, and the man who stood beside him with the unshaven half of his pale hair in a long braid. Fain was sure the fellow in green was only a servant, however great, but servants could be useful, especially if they stood high in their master's sight.

"A marvelous gift." Turak's eyes lifted from the chest to Fain. A scent of roses wafted from the High Lord. "Yet the question asks itself; how did one like you come by a chest many lesser lords could not afford? Are you a thief?"

Fain tugged at his worn, none-too-clean coat. "It is sometimes necessary for a man to appear less than he is, High Lord. My present shabbiness allowed me to bring this to you unmolested. This chest is old, High Lord—as old as the Age of Legends—and within it lies a treasure such as few eyes have ever seen. Soon—very soon, High Lord—I will be able to open it, and give you that which will enable you to take this land as far as you wish, to the Spine of the World, the Aiel Waste, the lands beyond. Nothing will stand against you, High Lord, once I—" He cut off as Turak began running his long-nailed fingers over the chest.

"I have seen chests such as this, chests from the Age of Legends," the High Lord said, "though none so fine. They are meant to be opened only by those who know the pattern, but I—ah!" He pressed among the ornate whorls and bosses, there was a sharp click, and he lifted back the lid. A flicker of what might have been disappointment passed across his face.

Fain bit the inside of his mouth till blood came to keep from snarling. It lessened his bargaining position that he was not the one who had opened the chest. Still, all the rest could go as he had planned if he could only make himself be patient. But he had been patient so long.

"These are treasures from the Age of Legends?" Turak said, lifting out the curled Horn in one hand and the curved dagger with the ruby in its golden hilt in the other. Fain clutched his hands in fists at his sides so he would not grab the dagger. "The Age of Legends," Turak repeated softly, tracing the silver script inlaid around the golden bell of the Horn with the tip of the dagger's blade. His brows rose in startlement, the first open expression Fain had seen from him, but in the next instant Turak's face was as smooth as ever. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

"The Horn of Valere, High Lord," Fain said smoothly, pleased to see the mouth of the man with the braid drop open. Turak only nodded as if to himself.

The High Lord turned away. Fain blinked and opened his mouth, then, at a sharp gesture from the yellow-haired man, followed without speaking.

It was another room with all the original furnishings gone, replaced by folding screens and a single chair facing a tall round cabinet. Still holding the Horn and the dagger, Turak looked at the cabinet, then away. He said nothing, but the other Seanchan snapped quick orders, and in moments men in plain woolen robes appeared through a door behind the screens bearing another small table. A young woman with hair so pale it was almost white came behind them, her arms full of small stands of polished wood in various sizes and shapes. Her garment was white silk, and so thin that Fain could see her body clearly through it, but he had eyes only for the dagger. The Horn was a means to an end, but the dagger was a part of him.

Turak briefly touched one of the wooden stands the girl held, and she placed it on the center of the table. The men turned the chair to face it under the direction of the man with the braid. The lower servants' hair hung to their shoulders. They scurried out with bows that almost put their heads on their knees.

Placing the Horn on the stand so that it stood upright, Turak laid the dagger on the table in front of it and went to sit in the chair.

Fain could stand it no longer. He reached for the dagger.

The yellow-haired man caught his wrist in a crushing grip. "Unshaven dog! Know that the hand that touches the property of the High Lord unbidden is cut off."

"It is mine," Fain growled. *Patience! So long*.

Turak, lounging back in the chair, lifted one blue-lacquered fingernail, and Fain was pulled out of the way so the High Lord could view the Horn unobstructed.

"Yours?" Turak said. "Inside a chest you could not open? If you interest me sufficiently, I may give you the dagger. Even if it is from the Age of Legends, I have no interest in such as that. Before all else, you will answer me a question. Why have you brought the Horn of Valere to me?"

Fain eyed the dagger longingly a moment more, then jerked his wrist free and rubbed it as he bowed. "That you may sound it, High Lord. Then you may take all of this land, if you wish. All of the world. You may break the White Tower and grind the Aes Sedai to dust, for even their powers cannot stop heroes come back from the dead."

"*I* am to sound it." Turak's tone was flat. "And break the White Tower. Again, why? You claim to obey, await, and serve, but this is a land of oath-breakers. Why do you give your land to me? Do you have some private quarrel with these . . . women?"

Fain tried to make his voice convincing. *Patient, like a worm boring from within*. "High Lord, my family has passed down a tradition, generation upon generation. We served the High King, Artur Paendrag Tanreall, and when he was murdered by the witches of Tar Valon, we did not abandon our oaths. When others warred and tore apart what Artur Hawkwing had made, we held to our swearing, and suffered for it, but held to it still. This is our tradition, High Lord, handed father to son, and mother to daughter, down all the years since the High King was murdered. That we await the return of the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean, that we await the return of Artur Hawkwing's blood to destroy the White Tower and take back what was the High King's. And when the Hawkwing's blood returns, we will serve and advise, as we did for the High King. High Lord, except for its border, the banner that flies over this roof is the banner of Luthair, the son Artur Paendrag Tanreall sent with his armies across the ocean." Fain dropped to his knees, giving a good imitation of being overwhelmed. "High Lord, I wish only to serve and advise the blood of the High King."

Turak was silent so long that Fain began to wonder if he needed further convincing; he was ready with more, as much as was required. Finally, though, the High Lord spoke. "You seem to know what none, neither the high nor the low, has spoken since sighting this land. The people here speak it as one rumor among ten, but you know. I can see it in your eyes, hear it in your voice. I could almost think you were sent to entangle me in a trap. But who, possessing the Horn of Valere, would use it so? None of those of the Blood who came with the *Hailene* could have had the Horn, for the legend says it was hidden in this land. And surely any lord of this land would use it against me rather than put it in my hands. How did you come to possess the Horn of Valere? Do you claim to be a hero, as in the legend? Have you done valorous deeds?"

"I am no hero, High Lord." Fain ventured a self-deprecating smile, but Turak's face did not alter, and he let it go. "The Horn was found by an ancestor of mine during the turmoil after the High King's death. He knew how to open the chest, but that secret died with him in the War of the Hundred Years, that rent Artur Hawkwing's empire, so that all we who followed him knew was that the Horn lay within and we must keep it safe until the High King's blood returned."

"Almost could I believe you."

"Believe, High Lord. Once you sound the Horn—"

"Do not ruin what convincing you have managed to do. I shall not sound the Horn of Valere. When I return to Seanchan, I shall present it to the Empress as the chiefest of my trophies. Perhaps the Empress will sound it herself.”

“But, High Lord,” Fain protested, “you must—” He found himself lying on his side, his head ringing. Only when his eyes cleared did he see the man with the pale braid rubbing his knuckles and realize what had happened.

“Some words,” the fellow said softly, “are never used to the High Lord.”

Fain decided how the man was going to die.

Turak looked from Fain to the Horn as placidly as if he had seen nothing. “Perhaps I will give you to the Empress along with the Horn of Valere. She might find you amusing, a man who claims his family held true where all others broke their oaths or forgot them.”

Fain hid his sudden elation in the act of climbing back to his feet. He had not even known of the existence of an Empress until Turak mentioned her, but access to a ruler again . . . that opened new paths, new plans. Access to a ruler with the might of the Seanchan beneath her and the Horn of Valere in her hands. Much better than making this Turak a Great King. He could wait for some parts of his plan. *Softly. Mustn’t let him know how much you want it. After so long, a little more patience will not hurt*. “As the High Lord wishes,” he said, trying to sound like a man who only wanted to serve.

“You seem almost eager,” Turak said, and Fain barely suppressed a wince. “I will tell you why I will not sound the Horn of Valere, or even keep it, and perhaps that will cure your eagerness. I do not wish a gift of mine to offend the Empress by his actions; if your eagerness cannot be cured, it will never be satisfied, for you will never leave these shores. Do you know that whoever blows the Horn of Valere is linked to it thereafter? That so long as he or she lives, it is no more than a horn to any other?” He did not sound as if he expected answers, and in any case, he did not pause for them. “I stand twelfth in line of succession to the Crystal Throne. If I kept the Horn of Valere, all between myself and the throne would think I meant to be first hereafter, and while the Empress, of course, wishes that we contend with one another so that the strongest and most cunning will follow her, she currently favors her second daughter, and she would not look well on any threat to Tuon. If I sounded it, even if I then laid this land at her feet, and every woman in the White Tower leashed, the Empress, may she live forever, would surely believe I meant to be more than merely her heir."

Fain stopped himself short of suggesting how possible that would be with the aid of the Horn. Something in the High Lord's voice suggested—as hard as Fain found it to believe—that he actually meant his wish for her to live forever. *I must be patient. A worm in the root.*

"The Empress's Listeners may be anywhere," Turak continued. "They may be anyone. Huan was born and raised in the House of Aladon, and his family for eleven generations before him, yet even he could be a Listener." The man with the braid half made a protesting gesture, before jerking himself back to stillness. "Even a high lord or a high lady can find their deepest secrets known to Listeners, can wake to find themselves already handed over to the Seekers for Truth. Truth is always difficult to find, but the Seekers spare no pain in their search, and they will search as long as they think there is need. They make great efforts not to allow a high lord or high lady to die in their care, of course, for no man's hand may slay one in whose veins flows the blood of Artur Hawkwing. If the Empress must order such a death, the unfortunate one is placed alive in a silken bag, and that bag hung over the side of the Tower of the Ravens and left there until it rots away. No such care would be taken for one such as you. At the Court of the Nine Moons, in Seandar, one such as you could be given to the Seekers for a shift of your eye, for a misspoken word, for a whim. Are you still eager?"

Fain managed a tremble in his knees. "I wish only to serve and advise, High Lord. I know much that may be useful." This court of Seandar sounded a place where his plans and skills would find fertile soil.

"Until I sail back to Seanchan, you will amuse me with your tales of your family and its tradition. It is a relief to find a second man in this Light-forsaken land who can amuse me, even if you both tell lies, as I suspect. You may leave me." No other word was spoken, but the girl with the nearly white hair and the almost-transparent robe appeared on quick feet to kneel with downcast head beside the High Lord, offering a single steaming cup on a lacquered tray.

"High Lord," Fain said. The man with the braid, Huan, took hold of his arm, but he pulled loose. Huan's mouth tightened angrily as Fain made his deepest bow yet. *I will kill him slowly, yes.* "High Lord, there are those who follow me. They mean to take the Horn of Valere. Darkfriends and worse, High Lord, and they cannot be more than a day or two behind me."

Turak took a sip of black liquid from the thin cup balanced on long-nailed fingertips. “Few Darkfriends remain in Seanchan. Those who survive the Seekers for Truth meet the axe of the headsman. It might be amusing to meet a Darkfriend.”

“High Lord, they are dangerous. They have Trollocs with them. They are led by one who calls himself Rand al’Thor. A young man, but vile in the Shadow beyond belief, with a lying, devious tongue. In many places he has claimed to be many things, but always the Trollocs come when he is there, High Lord. Always the Trollocs come . . . and kill.”

“Trollocs,” Turak mused. “There were no Trollocs in Seanchan. But the Armies of the Night had other allies. Other things. I have often wondered if a *grolm* could kill a Trolloc. I will have watch kept for your Trollocs and your Darkfriends, if they are not another lie. This land wearies me with boredom.” He sighed and inhaled the fumes from his cup.

Fain let the grimacing Huan pull him out of the room, hardly even listening to the snarled lecture on what would happen if he ever again failed to leave Lord Turak’s presence when given permission to do so. He barely noticed when he was pushed into the street with a coin and instructions to return on the morrow. Rand al’Thor was his, now. *I will see him dead at last. And then the world will pay for what was done to me*.

Giggling under his breath, he led his horses down into the town in search of an inn.

* * *

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CHAPTER

35

Stedding Tsofu

The river hills on which the city of Cairhien stood gave way to flatter lands and forests when Rand and the others had ridden half a day, the Shienarans still with their armor on the packhorses. There were no roads where they went, only a scattering of cart tracks, and few farms or villages. Verin pressed for speed, and Ingtar—grumbling constantly that they were letting themselves be tricked, that Fain would never have told them where he was really going, yet grumbling at the same time about riding in the opposite direction from Toman Head, as if part of him believed and Toman Head were not months away except by the way they took—Ingtar obliged her. The Gray Owl banner flew on the wind of their passage.

Rand rode with grim determination, avoiding conversation with Verin. He had this thing to do—this duty, Ingtar would have called it—and then he could be free of Aes Sedai once and for all. Perrin seemed to share something of his mood, staring straight ahead at nothing as they rode. When they finally stopped for the night at the edge of a forest, with full dark almost on them, Perrin asked Loial questions about the *stedding*. Trollocs would not enter a *stedding;* would wolves? Loial replied shortly that it was only creatures of the Shadow that were reluctant to enter *stedding*. And Aes Sedai, of course, since they could not touch the True Source inside a *stedding*, or channel the One Power. The Ogier himself appeared the most reluctant of all to go to Stedding Tsofu. Mat was the only one who seemed eager, almost desperately so. His skin looked as if he had not seen the sun in a year, and his cheeks had begun to go hollow, though he said he felt ready to run a footrace. Verin put her hands on him for Healing before he rolled into his blankets, and again before they mounted their horses in the morning, but it made no difference in how he looked. Even Hurin frowned when he looked at Mat.

The sun stood high on the second day when Verin suddenly sat up straight in her saddle and looked around. Beside her, Ingtar gave a start.

Rand could not see anything different about the forest now surrounding them. The undergrowth was not too thick; they had found an easy way under the canopy of oak and hickory, blackgum and beech, pierced here and there by a tall pine or leatherleaf, or the white slash of a paperbark. But as he followed them, he suddenly felt a chill pass through him, as though he had leaped into a Waterwood pond in winter. It flashed through him and was gone, leaving behind a feeling of refreshment. And there was a dull and distant sense of loss, too, though he could not imagine of what.

Every rider, as he reached that point, gave a jerk or made some exclamation. Hurin's mouth dropped open, and Uno whispered, "Bloody, flaming. . . ." Then he shook his head as if he could not think of anything else to say. There was a look of recognition in Perrin's yellow eyes.

Loial took a deep, slow breath and let it out. "It feels . . . good . . . to be back in a *stedding*."

Frowning, Rand looked around. He had expected a *stedding* to be somehow different, but except for that one chill, the forest was the same as what they had been riding through all day. There was the sudden sense of being rested, of course. Then an Ogier stepped out from behind an oak.

She was shorter than Loial—which meant she stood head and shoulders taller than Rand—but with the same broad nose and big eyes, the same wide mouth and tufted ears. Her eyebrows were not so long as Loial's, though, and her features seemed delicate beside his, the tufts on her ears finer. She wore a long green dress and a green cloak embroidered with flowers, and carried a bunch of silverbell blossoms as if she had been gathering them. She looked at them calmly, waiting.

Loial scrambled down from his tall horse and bowed hastily. Rand and the others did the same, if not so quickly as Loial; even Verin inclined her head. Loial gave their names formally, but he did not mention the name of his *stedding*.

For a moment the Ogier girl—Rand was sure she was no older than Loial—studied them, then smiled. "Be welcome to Stedding Tsofu." Her voice was a lighter version of Loial's, too; the softer rumble of a smaller bumblebee. "I am Erith, daughter of Iva daughter of Alar. Be welcome. We have had so few human visitors since the stonemasons left Cairhien, and now so many at once. Why, we even had some of the Traveling People, though, of course, they left when the. . . . Oh, I talk too much. I will take you to the Elders. Only. . . .” She searched among them for the one in charge, and settled finally on Verin. “Aes Sedai, you have so many men with you, and armed. Could you please leave some of them Outside? Forgive me, but it is always unsettling to have very many armed humans in the *stedding* at once.”

“Of course, Erith,” Verin said. “Ingtar, will you see to it?”

Ingtar gave orders to Uno, and so it was that he and Hurin were the only Shienarans to follow Erith deeper into the *stedding*.

Leading his horse like the others, Rand looked up as Loial came closer, with many glances at Erith up ahead with Verin and Ingtar. Hurin walked midway between, staring around in amazement, though Rand was not sure at what exactly. Loial bent to speak quietly. “Is she not beautiful, Rand? And her voice sings.”

Mat snickered, but when Loial looked at him questioningly, he said, “Very pretty, Loial. A little tall for my taste, you understand, but very pretty, I’m sure.”

Loial frowned uncertainly, but nodded. “Yes, she is.” His expression lightened. “It does feel good to be back in a *stedding*. Not that the Longing was taking me, you understand.”

“The Longing?” Perrin said. “I do not understand, Loial.”

“We Ogier are bound to the *stedding*, Perrin. It is said that before the Breaking of the World, we could go where we wished for as long as we wished, like you humans, but that changed with the Breaking. Ogier were scattered like every other people, and they could not find any of the *stedding* again. Everything was moved, everything changed. Mountains, rivers, even the seas.”

“Everybody knows about the Breaking,” Mat said impatiently. “What does it have to do with this—this Longing?”

“It was during the Exile, while we wandered lost, that the Longing first came on us. The desire to know the *stedding* once more, to know our homes again. Many died of it.” Loial shook his head sadly. “More died than lived. When we finally began to find the *stedding* again, one at a time, in the years of the Covenant of the Ten Nations, it seemed we had defeated the Longing at last, but it had changed us, put seeds in us. Now, if an Ogier is Outside too long, the Longing comes again; he begins to weaken, and he dies if he does not return."

"Do you need to stay here awhile?" Rand asked anxiously. "There's no need to kill yourself to go with us."

"I will know it when it comes." Loial laughed. "It will be long before it is strong enough to cause harm to me. Why, Dalar spent ten years among the Sea Folk without ever seeing a *stedding*, and she came safely home."

An Ogier woman appeared out of the trees, pausing a moment to speak with Erith and Verin. She looked Ingtar up and down and seemed to dismiss him, which made him blink. Her eyes swept across Loial, flicked over Hurin and the Emond's Fielders, before she went off into the forest again; Loial seemed to be trying to hide behind his horse. "Besides," he said, peering cautiously across his saddle after her, "it is a dull life in the *stedding* compared to traveling with three *ta'veren*."

"If you are going to start that again," Mat muttered, and Loial spoke up quickly. "Three friends, then. You are my friends, I hope."

"I am," Rand said simply, and Perrin nodded.

Mat laughed. "How could I not be friends with somebody who dices so badly?" He threw up his hands when Rand and Perrin looked at him. "Oh, all right. I like you, Loial. You're my friend. Just don't go on about. . . . Aaah! Sometimes you're as bad to be around as Rand." His voice sank to a mutter. "At least we're safe here in a *stedding*."

Rand grimaced. He knew what Mat meant. *Here in a* stedding, *where I can't channel*.

Perrin punched Mat's shoulder, but looked sorry that he had when Mat grimaced at him with that gaunt face.

It was the music Rand became aware of first, unseen flutes and fiddles in a jolly tune that floated through the trees, and deep voices singing and laughing.

"Clear the field, smooth it low.

Let no weed or stubble stand.

Here we labor, here we toil,

here the towering trees will grow."

Almost at the same moment he realized that the huge shape he was seeing through the trees was itself a tree, with a ridged, buttressed trunk that must have been twenty paces thick. Gaping, he followed it up with his eyes, up through the forest canopy, to branches spreading like the top of a gigantic mushroom a good hundred paces above the ground. And beyond it were taller still.

"Burn me," Mat breathed. "You could build ten houses from just one of those. Fifty houses."

"Cut down a Great Tree?" Loial sounded scandalized, and more than a little angry. His ears were stiff and still, his long eyebrows down on his cheeks. "We never cut down one of the Great Trees, not unless it dies, and they almost never do. Few survived the Breaking, but some of the largest were seedlings during the Age of Legends."

"I'm sorry," Mat said. "I was just saying how big they are. I won't hurt your trees." Loial nodded, seeming mollified.

More Ogier appeared now, walking among the trees. Most seemed intent on whatever they were about; though all looked at the newcomers, and even gave a friendly nod or a small bow, none stopped or spoke. They had a curious way of moving, in some manner blending a careful deliberateness with an almost childlike carefree joyfulness. They knew and liked who and what they were and where they were, and they seemed at peace with themselves and everything around them. Rand found himself envying them.

Few of the Ogier men were any taller than Loial, but it was easy to pick out the older men; one and all they wore mustaches as long as their dangling eyebrows and narrow beards under their chins. All of the younger were smooth-shaven, like Loial. Many of the men were in their shirtsleeves, and carried shovels and mattocks or saws and buckets of pitch; the others wore plain coats that buttoned to the neck and flared about their knees like kilts. The women seemed to favor embroidered flowers, and many wore flowers in their hair, too. The embroidery was limited to the cloaks of the younger women; the older women's dresses were embroidered, as well, and some women with gray hair had flowers and vines from neck to hem. A handful of the Ogier, women and girls for the most part, did seem to take special notice of Loial; he walked staring straight ahead, ears twitching more wildly the further they went.

Rand was startled to see an Ogier apparently walking up out of the ground, out of one of the grassy, wildflower-covered mounds that lay scattered all among the trees here. Then he saw windows in the mounds, and an Ogier woman standing at one apparently rolling a piecrust, and realized he was looking at Ogier houses. The window frames were stone, but they not only seemed natural formations, they appeared to have been sculpted by wind and water over generations.

The Great Trees, with their massive trunks and spreading roots as thick as horses, needed a great deal of room between them, but several grew right in the town. Dirt ramps took the paths over the roots. In fact, aside from the pathways, the only way to tell town from forest at a glance was a large open space in the center of the town, around what could only be the stump of one of the Great Trees. Nearly a hundred paces across, its surface was polished as smooth as any floor, and there were steps built up to it at several places. Rand was imagining how tall that tree had been when Erith spoke loudly enough for them all to hear.

“Here come our other guests.”

Three human women came walking around the side of the huge stump. The youngest was carrying a wooden bowl.

“Aiel,” Ingtar said. “Maidens of the Spear. As well I *did* leave Masema with the others.” Yet he stepped away from Verin and Erith, and reached over his shoulder to loosen his sword in its scabbard.

Rand studied the Aiel with an uneasy curiosity. They were what too many people had tried to tell him he was. Two of the women were mature, the other little more than a girl, but all three were tall for women. Their short-cut hair ranged from a reddish brown to almost golden, with a narrow, shoulder-length tail left long at the back. They wore loose breeches tucked into soft boots, and all their clothes were some shade of brown or gray or green; he thought the garments would fade into rock or woods almost as well as a Warder’s cloak. Short bows poked over their shoulders, quivers and long knives hung at their belts, and each carried a small, round shield of hide and a cluster of spears with short shafts and long points. Even the youngest moved with a grace that suggested she knew how to use the weapons she carried.

Abruptly the women became aware of the other humans; they seemed as startled at being startled as they did at the sight of Rand and the others, but they moved like lightning. The youngest one shouted, “Shienarans!”

and turned to set the bowl carefully behind her. The other two quickly lifted brown cloths from around their shoulders, wrapping them around their heads instead. The older women were raising black veils across their faces, hiding everything but their eyes, and the youngest straightened to imitate them. Crouching low, they advanced at a deliberate pace, shields held forward with their clusters of spears, except for the one each woman held ready in her other hand.

Ingtar's sword came out of its sheath. "Stand clear, Aes Sedai. Erith, stand clear." Hurin snatched out his sword-breaker, wavered between cudgel and sword for his other hand; after another glance at the Aiel's spears, he chose the sword.

"You must not," the Ogier girl protested. Wringing her hands, she turned from Ingtar to the Aiel and back. "You must not."

Rand realized the heron-mark blade was in his hands. Perrin had his axe half out of the loop at his belt and was hesitating, shaking his head.

"Are you two crazy?" Mat demanded. His bow still slanted across his back. "I don't care if they are Aiel, they're women."

"Stop this!" Verin demanded. "Stop this immediately!" The Aiel never broke stride, and the Aes Sedai clenched her fists in frustration.

Mat moved back to put a foot in his stirrup. "I'm leaving," he announced. "You hear me? I'm not staying to let them stick those things in me, and I am not going to shoot a woman!"

"The Pact!" Loial was shouting. "Remember the Pact!" It had no more effect than the continued pleas from Verin and Erith.

Rand noticed that both the Aes Sedai and the Ogier girl were keeping well out of the Aiel's way. He wondered if Mat had the right idea. He was not sure he could hurt a woman even if she *was* trying to kill him. What decided him was the thought that even if he did manage to reach Red's saddle, the Aiel were now no more than thirty paces away. He suspected those short spears could be thrown that far. As the women came closer, still crouching, spears ready, he stopped worrying about not hurting them and began worrying about how to stop them from hurting him.

Nervously, he sought the void, and it came. And the distant thought floated outside it that it was only the void. The glow of *saidin* was not there. The emptiness was more empty than he ever remembered, vaster, like a hunger great enough to consume him. A hunger for more; there was *supposed* to be something more.

Abruptly an Ogier strode in between the two groups, his narrow beard quivering. “What is the meaning of this? Put up your weapons.” He sounded scandalized. “For you”—his glare took in Ingtar and Hurin, Rand and Perrin, and did not spare Mat for all his empty hands—“there is some excuse, but for you—” He rounded on the Aiel women, who had stopped their advance. “Have you forgotten the Pact?”

The women uncovered their heads and faces so hastily that it seemed they were trying to pretend they had never been covered. The girl’s face was bright red, and the other women looked abashed. One of the older women, the one with the reddish hair, said, “Forgive us, Treebrother. We remember the Pact, and we would not have bared steel, but we are in the land of the Treekillers, where every hand is against us, and we saw armed men.” Her eyes were gray, Rand saw, like his own.

“You are in a *stedding*, Rhian,” the Ogier said gently. “Everyone is safe in the *stedding*, little sister. There is no fighting here, and no hand raised against another.” She nodded, ashamed, and the Ogier looked at Ingtar and the others.

Ingtar sheathed his sword, and Rand did the same, though not so quickly as Hurin, who looked almost as embarrassed as the Aiel. Perrin had never gotten his axe all the way out. As he took hand from hilt, Rand let the void go, too, and shivered. The void went, but it left behind a slowly fading echo of the emptiness all through him, and a desire for something to fill it.

The Ogier turned to Verin and bowed. “Aes Sedai, I am Juin, son of Lacel son of Laud. I have come to take you to the Elders. They would know why an Aes Sedai comes among us, with armed men and one of our own youths.” Loial hunched his shoulders as if trying to disappear.

Verin gave the Aiel a regretful look, as if she wanted to talk with them, then motioned Juin to lead, and he took her away without another word or even the first look at Loial.

For a few moments, Rand and the others stood facing the three Aiel women uneasily. At least, Rand knew he was uneasy. Ingtar seemed steady as a stone, with no more expression than one. The Aiel might have unveiled their faces, but they still had spears in their hands, and they studied the four men as though trying to see inside them. Rand in particular received increasingly angry looks. He heard the youngest woman mutter, “He is wearing a sword,” in tones of mingled horror and contempt. Then the three were leaving, stopping to retrieve the wooden bowl and looking over their shoulders at Rand and the others until they vanished among the trees.

"Maidens of the Spear," Ingtar muttered. "I never thought they'd stop once they veiled their faces. Certainly not for a few words." He looked at Rand and his two friends. "You should see a charge by Red Shields, or Stone Dogs. As easy to stop as an avalanche."

"They would not break the Pact once it was recalled to them," Erith said, smiling. "They came for sung wood." A note of pride entered her voice. "We have two Treesingers in Stedding Tsofu. They are rare, now. I have heard that Stedding Shangtai has a young Treesinger who is very talented, but we have two." Loial blushed, but she did not appear to notice. "If you will come with me, I will show you where you may wait until the Elders have spoken."

As they followed her, Perrin murmured, "Sung wood, my left foot. Those Aiel are searching for He Who Comes With the Dawn."

And Mat added dryly, "They're looking for you, Rand."

"For me! That is crazy. What makes you think—"

He cut off as Erith showed them down the steps of a wildflower-covered house apparently set aside for human guests. The rooms were twenty paces from stone wall to stone wall, with painted ceilings a good two spans above the floor, but the Ogier had done their best making something that would be comfortable for humans. Even so, the furniture was a little too large for comfort, the chairs tall enough to lift a man's heels off the floor, the table higher than Rand's waist. Hurin, at least, could have walked erect into the stone fireplace, which seemed to have been worn by water rather than made by hands. Erith eyed Loial doubtfully, but he waved away her concern and pulled one of the chairs into the corner least easily seen from the door.

As soon as the Ogier girl left, Rand got Mat and Perrin over to one side. "What do you mean they're looking for me? Why? For what reason? They looked right at me, and went away."

"They looked at you," Mat said with a grin, "like you hadn't bathed in a month, and had doused yourself with sheepdip besides." His grin faded. "But they could be looking for you. We met another Aiel."

Rand listened in growing amazement to their tale of the meeting in Kinslayer's Dagger. Mat told most of it, with Perrin putting in a correcting word now and again when he embellished too much. Mat made a great show of how dangerous the Aielman had been, and how close the meeting had come to a fight.

“And since you’re the only Aiel we know,” he finished, “well, it could be you. Ingtar says Aiel never live outside the Waste, so you must be the only one.”

“I don’t think that’s funny, Mat,” Rand growled. “I am not an Aiel.” *The Amyrlin said you are. Ingtar thinks you are. Tam said. . . . He was sick, fevered*. They had severed the roots he had thought he had, the Aes Sedai and Tam between them, though Tam had been too sick to know what he was saying. They had cut him loose to tumble before the wind, then offered him something new to hold on to. False Dragon. Aiel. He could not claim those for roots. He would not. “Maybe I don’t belong to anyone. But the Two Rivers is the only home I know.”

“I didn’t mean anything,” Mat protested. “It’s just. . . . Burn me, Ingtar says you are. Masema says you are. Urien could have been your cousin, and if Rhian put on a dress and said she was your aunt, you’d believe it yourself. Oh, all right. Don’t look at me like that, Perrin. If he wants to say he isn’t, all right. What difference does it make, anyway?” Perrin shook his head.

Ogier girls brought water and towels for washing faces and hands, and cheese and fruit and wine, with pewter goblets a little too large to be comfortable in the hand. Other Ogier women came, too, their dresses all embroidered. One by one they appeared, a dozen of them all told, to ask if the humans were comfortable, if they needed anything. Each turned her attentions to Loial just before she left. He gave his answers respectfully but in as few words as Rand had ever heard him use, standing with an Ogier-sized, wood-bound book clutched to his chest like a shield, and when they went, he huddled in his chair with the book held up in front of his face. The books in the house were one thing not sized for humans.

“Just smell this air, Lord Rand,” Hurin said, filling his lungs with a smile. His feet dangled from one of the chairs at the table; he swung them like a boy. “I never thought most places smelled bad, but this. . . . Lord Rand, I don’t think there’s *ever* been any killing here. Not even any hurting, except by accident.”

“The *stedding* are supposed to be safe for everyone,” Rand said. He was watching Loial. “That’s what the stories say, anyway.” He swallowed a last bit of white cheese and went over to the Ogier. Mat followed with a goblet in his hand. “What’s the matter, Loial?” Rand said. “You’ve been as nervous as a cat in a dogyard ever since we came here.”

“It is nothing,” Loial said, giving the door an uneasy glance from the corner of his eye.

“Are you afraid they’ll find out you left Stedding Shangtai without permission from your Elders?”

Loial looked around wildly, the tufts on his ears vibrating. “Don’t say that,” he hissed. “Not where anyone can hear. If they found out. . . .” With a heavy sigh, he slumped back, looking from Rand to Mat. “I don’t know how humans do it, but among Ogier. . . . If a girl sees a boy she likes, she goes to her mother. Or sometimes the mother sees someone she thinks is suitable. In any case, if they agree, the girl’s mother goes to the boy’s mother, and the next thing the boy knows, his marriage is all arranged.”

“Doesn’t the boy have any say in it?” Mat asked incredulously.

“None. The women always say we would spend our lives married to the trees if it was left to us.” Loial shifted, grimacing. “Half of our marriages take place between *stedding;* groups of young Ogier visit from *stedding* to *stedding* so they can see, and be seen. If they discover I’m Outside without permission, the Elders will almost certainly decide I need a wife to settle me down. Before I know it, they’ll have sent a message to Stedding Shangtai, to my mother, and she will come here and have me married before she washes off the dust of her journey. She’s always said I am too hasty and need a wife. I think she was looking when I left. Whatever wife she chooses for me . . . well, any wife at all won’t let me go back Outside until I have gray in my beard. Wives always say no man should be allowed Outside until he’s settled enough to control his temper.”

Mat gave a guffaw loud enough to draw every head, but at Loial’s frantic gesture he spoke softly. “Among us, men do the choosing, and no wife can stop a man doing what he wants.”

Rand frowned, remembering how Egwene had begun following him around when they were both little. It was then that Mistress al’Vere had begun taking a special interest in him, more than in any of the other boys. Later, some girls would dance with him on feastdays and some would not, and those who would were always Egwene’s friends, while those who would not were girls Egwene did not like. He also seemed to remember Mistress al’Vere taking Tam aside—*And she was muttering about Tam not having a wife for her to talk to!*—and after that, Tam and everyone else had acted as if he and Egwene were promised, even though they had not knelt before the Women's Circle to say the words. He had never thought about it this way before; things between Egwene and him had always just seemed to be the way they were, and that was that.

"I think we do it the same way," he muttered, and when Mat laughed, he added, "Do you remember your father ever doing anything your mother really didn't want him to?" Mat opened his mouth with a grin, then frowned thoughtfully and closed it again.

Juin came down the steps from outside. "If you please, will all of you come with me? The Elders would see you." He did not look at Loial, but Loial still almost dropped the book.

"If the Elders try to make you stay," Rand said, "we'll say we need you to go with us."

"I'll bet it isn't about you at all," Mat said. "I'll bet they are just going to say we can use the Waygate." He shook himself, and his voice fell even lower. "We really have to do it, don't we." It was not a question.

"Stay and get married, or travel the Ways." Loial grimaced ruefully. "Life is very unsettling with *ta'veren* for friends."

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CHAPTER

36

Among the Elders

As Juin took them through the Ogier town, Rand saw that Loial was growing more and more anxious. Loial's ears were as stiff as his back; his eyes grew bigger every time he saw another Ogier looking at him, especially the women and girls, and a large number of them did seem to take notice of him. He looked as if he expected his own execution.

The bearded Ogier gestured to wide steps leading down into a grassy mound that was bigger by far than any other; it was a hill, for all practical purposes, almost at the base of one of the Great Trees.

"Why don't you wait out here, Loial?" Rand said.

"The Elders—" Juin began.

"—Probably just want to see the rest of us," Rand finished for him.

"Why don't they leave him alone," Mat put in.

Loial nodded vigorously. "Yes. Yes, I think. . . ." A number of Ogier women were watching him, from white-haired grandmothers to daughters Erith's age, a knot of them talking among themselves but with all eyes on him. His ears jerked, but he looked at the broad door to which the stone steps led down, and nodded again. "Yes, I will sit out here, and I'll read. That is it. I will read." Fumbling in his coat pocket, he produced a book. He settled himself on the mound beside the steps, the book small in his hands, and fixed his eyes on the pages. "I will just sit here and read until you come out." His ears twitched as if he could feel the women's eyes.

Juin shook his head, then shrugged and motioned to the steps again. "If you please. The Elders are waiting."

The huge, windowless room inside the mound was scaled for Ogier, with a thick-beamed ceiling more than four spans up; it could have fit in any palace, for size at least. The seven Ogier seated on the dais directly in front of the door made it shrink a little by their size, but Rand still felt as if he were in a cavern. The somber floorstones were smooth, if large and irregular in shape, but the gray walls could have been the rough side of a cliff. The ceiling beams, rough-hewn as they were, looked like great roots.

Except for a high-backed chair where Verin sat facing the dais, the only furnishings were the heavy, vine-carved chairs of the Elders. The Ogier woman in the middle of the dais sat in a chair raised a little higher than those of the others, three bearded men to her left in long, flaring coats, three women to her right in dresses like her own, embroidered in vines and flowers from neckline to hem. All had aged faces and pure white hair, even to the tufts on their ears, and an air of massive dignity.

Hurin gaped at them openly, and Rand felt like staring himself. Not even Verin had the appearance of wisdom that was in the Elders' huge eyes, nor Morgase in her crown their authority, nor Moiraine their calm serenity. Ingtar was the first to bow, as formally as Rand had ever seen from him, while the others still stood rooted.

"I am Alar," the Ogier woman on the highest chair said when they had finally taken their places beside Verin, "Eldest of the Elders of Stedding Tsofu. Verin has told us that you have need to use the Waygate here. To recover the Horn of Valere from Darkfriends is a great need, indeed, but we have allowed none to travel the Ways in more than one hundred years. Neither us, nor the Elders of any other *stedding*."

"I will find the Horn," Ingtar said angrily. "I must. If you will not permit us to use the Waygate. . . ." He fell silent as Verin looked at him, but the scowl remained on his face.

Alar smiled. "Be not so hasty, Shienaran. You humans never take time for thought. Only decisions reached in calm can be sure." Her smile faded to seriousness, but her voice kept its own measured calm. "The dangers of the Ways are not to be faced with a sword in your hand, not charging Aiel or ravening Trollocs. I must tell you that to enter the Ways is to risk not only death and madness, but perhaps your very souls."

"We have seen *Machin Shin*," Rand said, and Mat and Perrin agreed. They could not manage to sound eager to do it again.

"I will follow the Horn to Shayol Ghul itself, if need be," Ingtar said firmly. Hurin only nodded as if including himself in Ingtar's words.

"Bring Trayal," Alar commanded, and Juin, who had remained by the door, bowed and left. "It is not enough," she told Verin, "to hear what can happen. You must see it, know it in your heart."

There was an uncomfortable silence until Juin returned, and it became more uncomfortable still as two Ogier women followed him, guiding a dark-bearded Ogier of middle years, who shambled between them as if he did not quite know how his legs worked. His face sagged, without any expression at all, and his big eyes were vacant and unblinking, not staring, not looking, not even seeming to see. One of the women gently wiped drool from the corner of his mouth. They took his arms to stop him; his foot went forward, hesitated, then fell back with a thump. He seemed as content to stand as to walk, or at least as uncaring.

"Trayal was one of the last among us to go along the Ways," Alar said softly. "He came out as you see him. Will you touch him, Verin?"

Verin gave her a long look, then rose and strode to Trayal. He did not move as she laid her hands on his wide chest, not even a flicker of an eye to acknowledge her touch. With a sharp hiss, she jerked back, staring up at him, then whirled to face the Elders. "He is . . . empty. This body lives, but there is nothing inside it. Nothing." Every Elder wore a look of unbearable sadness.

"Nothing," one of the Elders to Alar's right said softly. Her eyes seemed to hold all the pain Trayal's no longer could. "No mind. No soul. Nothing of Trayal remains but his body."

"He was a fine Treesinger," one of the men sighed.

Alar motioned, and the two women turned Trayal to lead him out; they had to move him before he began to walk.

"We know the risks," Verin said. "But whatever the risks, we must follow the Horn of Valere."

The Eldest nodded. "The Horn of Valere. I do not know whether it is worse news that it is in Darkfriend hands, or that it has been found at all." She looked down the row of Elders; each nodded in turn, one of the men tugging his beard doubtfully first. "Very well. Verin tells me time is urgent. I will show you to the Waygate myself." Rand was feeling half relieved and half afraid, when she added, "You have with you a young Ogier. Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, from Stedding Shangtai. He is far from his home."

"We need him," Rand said quickly. His words slowed under surprised stares from the Elders and Verin, but he went on stubbornly. "We need him to go with us, and he wants to."

"Loial's a friend," Perrin said, at the same time that Mat said, "He doesn't get in the way, and he carries his own weight." Neither of them appeared comfortable at having the Elders' focus shift to them, but they did not back down.

"Is there some reason he cannot come with us?" Ingtar asked. "As Mat says, he has held his own. I don't know that we need him, but if he wants to come, why—?"

"We do need him," Verin broke in smoothly. "Few any longer know the Ways, but Loial has studied them. He can decipher the Guidings."

Alar eyed them each in turn, then settled to a study of Rand. She looked as if she knew things; all the Elders did, but she most of all. "Verin says you are *ta'veren*," she said at last, "and I can feel it in you. That I can do so means that you must be very strongly *ta'veren* indeed, for such Talents ever run weakly in us, if at all. Have you drawn Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, into *ta'maral'ailen*, the Web the Pattern weaves around you?"

"I. . . . I just want to find the Horn and. . . ." Rand let the rest of it die. Alar had not mentioned Mat's dagger. He did not know whether Verin had told the Elders, or held it back for some reason. "He is my friend, Eldest."

"Your friend," Alar said. "He is young by our way of thinking. You are young, too, but *ta'veren*. You will look after him, and when the weaving is done, you will see that he comes safely home to Stedding Shangtai."

"I will," he told her. It had the feeling of a commitment, the swearing of an oath.

"Then we will go to the Waygate."

Outside, Loial scrambled to his feet when they appeared, Alar and Verin leading. Ingtar sent Hurin off at a run to fetch Uno and the other soldiers. Loial eyed the Eldest warily, then fell in with Rand at the rear of the procession. The Ogier women who had been watching him were all gone. "Did the Elders say anything about me? Did she . . . ?" He peered at Alar's broad back as she ordered Juin to have their horses brought. She started off with Verin while Juin was still bowing himself away, bending her head to talk quietly.

"She told Rand to take care of you," Mat told Loial solemnly as they followed, "and see you got home safely as a babe. I don't see why you can't stay here and get married."

"She said you could come with us." Rand glared at Mat, which made Mat chortle under his breath. It sounded odd, coming from that drawn face. Loial was twirling the stem of a trueheart blossom between his fingers. "Did you go picking flowers?" Rand asked.

“Erith gave it to me.” Loial watched the yellow petals spin. “She really is very pretty, even if Mat does not see it.”

“Does that mean you don’t want to go with us after all?”

Loial gave a start. “What? Oh, no. I mean, yes. I do want to go. She only gave me a flower. Just a flower.” He took a book out of his pocket, though, and pressed the blossom under the front cover. As he returned the book, he murmured to himself, barely loud enough for Rand to hear, “And she said I was handsome, too.” Mat let out a wheeze and doubled over, staggering along clutching his sides, and Loial’s cheeks colored. “Well . . . she said it. I didn’t.”

Perrin rapped Mat smartly on the top of his head with his knuckles. “Nobody ever said Mat was handsome. He’s just jealous.”

“That’s not true,” Mat said, straightening abruptly. “Marisa Ayellin thinks I’m handsome. She told me so more than once.”

“Is Marisa pretty?” Loial asked.

“She has a face like a goat,” Perrin said blandly. Mat choked, trying to get his protests out.

Rand grinned in spite of himself. Marisa was almost as pretty as Egwene. And this was almost like old times, almost like being back home, bantering back and forth, and nothing more important in the world than a laugh and twitting the other fellow.

As they made their way through the town, Ogier greeted the Eldest, bowing or curtsying, eyeing the human visitors with interest. Alar’s set face kept anyone from stopping to speak, though. The only thing that indicated when they left the town was the absence of the mounds; there were still Ogier about, examining trees, or sometimes working with pitch and saw or axe where there were dead limbs or where a tree needed more sunlight. They handled the tasks tenderly.

Juin joined them, leading their horses, and Hurin came riding with Uno and the other soldiers, and the packhorses, just before Alar pointed and said, “It is over there.” The banter died.

Rand felt a momentary surprise. The Waygate had to be Outside the *stedding*—the Ways had been begun with the One Power; they could not have been made inside—but there was nothing to indicate they had crossed the boundary. Then he realized there was a difference; the sense of something lost that he had felt since entering the *stedding* was gone. That gave him another sort of chill. *Saidin* was there again. Waiting.

Alar led them past a tall oak, and there in a small clearing stood the big slab of the Waygate, the front of it delicately worked in tightly woven vines and leaves from a hundred different plants. Around the edge of the clearing the Ogier had built a low stone coping that seemed as if it had grown there, suggesting a circle of roots. The look of it made Rand uncomfortable. It took him a moment to realize that the roots suggested were those of bramble and briar, burningleaf and itch oak. Not the sort of plants into which anyone would want to stumble.

The Eldest stopped short of the coping. “The wall is meant to warn away any who comes here. Not that many of us do. I myself will not cross it. But you may.” Juin did not go as close as she did; he kept rubbing his hands on the front of his coat, and would not look at the Waygate.

“Thank you,” Verin told her. “The need is great, or I would not have asked it.”

Rand tensed as the Aes Sedai stepped over the coping and approached the Waygate. Loial took a deep breath and muttered to himself. Uno and the rest of the soldiers shifted in their saddles and loosened swords in their scabbards. There was nothing along the Ways against which a sword would be any use, but it was something to convince themselves they were ready. Only Ingtar and the Aes Sedai seemed calm; even Alar gripped her skirt with both hands.

Verin plucked the *Avendesora* leaf, and Rand leaned forward intently. He knew an urge to assume the void, to be where he could reach *saidin* if he needed to.

The greenery carved across the Waygate stirred in an unfelt breeze, leaves fluttering as a gap opened down the center of the mass and the two halves began to swing open.

Rand stared at the first crack. There was no dull, silvery reflection behind it, only blackness blacker than pitch. “Close it!” he shouted. “The Black Wind! Close it!”

Verin took one startled look and thrust the three-pointed leaf back in among all the varied leaves already there; it stayed when she took her hand away and backed toward the coping. As soon as the *Avendesora* leaf was back in its place, the Waygate immediately began to close. The crack disappeared, vines and leaves merging, hiding the blackness of *Machin Shin*, and the Waygate was only stone again, if stone carved in a nearer semblance of life than seemed possible.

Alar let out a shuddering breath. “*Machin Shin*. So close.”

“It didn’t try to come out,” Rand said. Juin made a strangled sound.

“I have told you,” Verin said, “the Black Wind is a creature of the Ways. It cannot leave them.” She sounded calm, but she still wiped her hands on her skirt. Rand opened his mouth, then gave it up. “And yet,” she went on, “I wonder at it being here. First in Cairhien, now here. I wonder.” She gave Rand a sidelong glance that made him jump. The look was so quick that he did not think anyone else noticed it, but to Rand it seemed to connect him with the Black Wind.

“I have never heard of this,” Alar said slowly, “*Machin Shin* waiting when a Waygate was opened. It always roamed the Ways. But it has been long, and perhaps the Black Wind hungers, and hopes to catch some unwary one entering a gate. Verin, assuredly you cannot use this Waygate. And however great your need, I cannot say I am sorry. The Ways belong to the Shadow, now.”

Rand frowned at the Waygate. *Could it be following me?* There were too many questions. Had Fain somehow ordered the Black Wind? Verin said it could not be done. And why would Fain demand that he follow, then try to stop him? He only knew that he believed the message. He had to go to Toman Head. If they found the Horn of Valere and Mat’s dagger under a bush tomorrow, he still had to go.

Verin stood with eyes unfocused in thought. Mat was sitting on the coping with his head in his hands, and Perrin watched him worriedly. Loial seemed relieved that they could not use the Waygate, and ashamed at being relieved.

“We are done for here,” Ingtar announced. “Verin Sedai, I followed you here against my better judgment, but I can no longer follow. I mean to return to Cairhien. Barthanes can tell me where the Darkfriends went, and somehow I will make him do it.”

“Fain went to Toman Head,” Rand said wearily. “And where he went, that’s where the Horn is, and the dagger.”

“I suppose. . . .” Perrin shrugged reluctantly. “I suppose we could try another Waygate. At another *stedding?*”

Loial stroked his chin and spoke quickly, as if to make up for his relief at the failure here. “Stedding Cantoine lies just above the River Iralell, and Stedding Taijing is east of it in the Spine of the World. But the Waygate in

Caemlyn, where the grove was, is closer, and the gate in the grove at Tar Valon is closest of all."

"Whichever Waygate we try to use," Verin said absently, "I fear we will find *Machin Shin* waiting." Alar looked at her questioningly, but the Aes Sedai said no more that anyone could hear. She muttered to herself instead, shaking her head as if arguing with herself.

"What we need," Hurin said diffidently, "is one of those Portal Stones." He looked to Alar, then Verin, and when neither told him to stop, he went on, sounding increasingly confident. "The Lady Selene said those old Aes Sedai had studied those worlds, and that was how they knew how to make the Ways. And that place we were . . . well, it only took us two days—less—to travel a hundred leagues. If we could use a Portal Stone to go to that world, or one like it, why, it'd take no more than a week or two to reach the Aryth Ocean, and we could come back right on Toman Head. Maybe it isn't so quick as the Ways, but it's a long sight quicker than riding off west. What do you say, Lord Ingtar? Lord Rand?"

Verin answered him. "What you suggest might be possible, sniffer, but as well hope to open this Waygate again and find *Machin Shin* gone as hope to find a Portal Stone. I know none closer than the Aiel Waste. Though we could go back into Kinslayer's Dagger, if you, or Rand, or Loial think you could find that Stone again."

Rand looked at Mat. His friend had lifted his head hopefully at this talk of the Stones. A few weeks, Verin had said. If they simply rode west, Mat would never live to see Toman Head.

"I can find it," Rand said reluctantly. He felt ashamed. *Mat's going to die, Darkfriends have the Horn of Valere, Fain will hurt Emond's Field if you don't follow him, and you're afraid to channel the Power. Once to go and once to come back. Twice more won't drive you mad*. What really made him afraid, though, was the eagerness that leaped inside him at the thought of channeling again, of feeling the Power fill him, of feeling truly alive.

"I do not understand this," Alar said slowly. "The Portal Stones have not been used since the Age of Legends. I did not think there was anyone who still knew how to use them."

"The Brown Ajah knows many things," Verin said dryly, "and I know how the Stones may be used."

The Eldest nodded. "Truly there are wonders in the White Tower of which we do not dream. But if you can use a Portal Stone, there is no need for you to ride to Kinslayer’s Dagger. There is a Stone not far from where we stand.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and the Pattern provides what is needful.” The absent look dropped from Verin’s face altogether. “Take us to it,” she said briskly. “We have lost more than enough time already.”

* * *

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CHAPTER

37

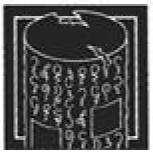

What Might Be

Alar led them away from the Waygate at a dignified pace, though Juin seemed more than anxious to leave the Waygate behind. Mat, at least, looked ahead eagerly, and Hurin seemed confident, while Loial appeared concerned more that Alar might change her mind about his going than about anything else. Rand did not hurry as he pulled Red along by the reins. He did not think Verin meant to use the Stone herself.

The gray stone column stood upright near a beech almost a hundred feet tall and four paces thick; Rand would have thought it a big tree before he saw the Great Trees. There was no warning coping here, only a few wildflowers pushing through the leafy mulch of the forest floor. The Portal Stone itself was weathered, but the symbols covering it were still clear enough to make out.

The mounted Shienaran soldiers spread out in a loose circle around the Stone and those afoot.

"We stood it upright," Alar said, "when we found it many years ago, but we did not move it. It . . . seemed to . . . resist being moved." She went right up to it, and laid a big hand on the Stone. "I have always thought of it as a symbol of what has been lost, what has been forgotten. In the Age of Legends, it could be studied and somewhat understood. To us, it is only stone."

"More than that, I hope." Verin's voice grew brisker. "Eldest, I thank you for your help. Forgive us for our lack of ceremony in leaving you, but the Wheel waits for no woman. At least we will no longer disturb the peace of your *stedding*."

"We called the stonemasons back from Cairhien," Alar said, "but we still hear what happens in the world Outside. False Dragons. The Great Hunt of the Horn. We hear, and it passes us by. I do not think Tarmon Gai'don will pass us by, or leave us in peace. Fare you well, Verin Sedai.

All of you, fare well, and may you shelter in the palm of the Creator's hand. Juin." She paused only for a glance at Loial and a last admonitory look at Rand, and then the Ogier were gone among the trees.

There was a creaking of saddles as the soldiers shifted. Ingtar looked around the circle they made. "Is this necessary, Verin Sedai? Even if it can be done. . . . We do not even know if the Darkfriends really have taken the Horn to Toman Head. I still believe I can make Barthanes—"

"If we cannot be sure," Verin said mildly, cutting him off, "then Toman Head is as good a place to look as any other. More than once I've heard you say you would ride to Shayol Ghul if need be to recover the Horn. Do you hold back now, at this?" She gestured to the Stone under the smooth-barked tree.

Ingtar's back stiffened. "I hold back at nothing. Take us to Toman Head or take us to Shayol Ghul. If the Horn of Valere lies at the end, I will follow you."

"That is well, Ingtar. Now, Rand, you have been transported by a Portal Stone more recently than I. Come." She motioned to him, and he led Red over to her at the Stone.

"You've used a Portal Stone?" He glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one else was close enough to hear. "Then you don't mean for me to." He gave a relieved shrug.

Verin looked at him blandly. "I have never used a Stone; that is why your use is more recent than mine. I am well aware of my limits. I would be destroyed before I came close to channeling enough Power to work a Portal Stone. But I know a little of them. Enough to help you, a bit."

"But I don't know *anything*." He led his horse around the Stone, looking it up and down. "The one thing I remember is the symbol for our world. Selene showed me, but I don't see it here."

"Of course not. Not on a Stone *in* our world; the symbols are aids in getting *to* a world." She shook her head. "What would I not give to talk with this girl of yours? Or better, to put my hands on her book. It is generally thought that no copy of *Mirrors of the Wheel* survived the Breaking whole. Serafelle always tells me there are more books that we believe lost than I could credit waiting to be found. Well, no use in worrying over what I don't know. I do know some things. The symbols on the top half of the Stone stand for worlds. Not all the Worlds That Might Be, of course. Apparently, not every Stone connects to every world, and the

Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends believed that there were possible worlds no Stones at all touched. Do you see nothing that sparks a memory?"

"Nothing." If he found the right symbol, he could use it to find Fain and the Horn, to save Mat, to stop Fain hurting Emond's Field. If he found the symbol, he would have to touch *saidin*. He wanted to save Mat and stop Fain, but he did not want to touch *saidin*. He was afraid to channel, and he hungered for it like a starving man for food. "I don't remember anything."

Verin sighed. "The symbols at the bottom indicate Stones at other places. If you know the trick of it, you could take us, not to this same Stone in another world, but to one of those others there, or even to one of them here. It was something akin to Traveling, I think, but just as no one remembers how to Travel, no one remembers the trick. Without that knowledge, trying it might easily destroy us all." She pointed to two parallel wavy lines crossed by an odd squiggle, carved low on the column. "That indicates a Stone on Toman Head. It is one of three Stones for which I know the symbol; the only one of those three I've visited. And what I learned—after nearly being caught by the snows in the Mountains of Mist and freezing my way across Almoth Plain—was absolutely nothing. Do you play at dice, or cards, Rand al'Thor?"

"Mat's the gambler. Why?"

"Yes. Well, we'll leave him out of this, I think. These other symbols are also known to me."

With one finger she outlined a rectangle containing eight carvings that were much alike, a circle and an arrow, but in half the arrow was contained inside the circle, while in the others the point pierced the circle through. The arrows pointed left, right, up and down, and surrounding each circle was a different line of what Rand was sure was script, though in no language he knew, all curving lines that suddenly became jagged hooks, then flowed on again.

"At least," Verin went on, "I know this much about them. Each stands for a world, the study of which led eventually to the making of the Ways. These are not all of the worlds studied, but the only ones for which I know the symbols. This is where gambling comes in. I don't know what any of these worlds is like. It is believed there are worlds where a year is only a day here, and others where a day is a year here. There are supposed to be worlds where the very air would kill us at a breath, and worlds that barely have enough reality to hold together. I would not speculate on what might happen if we found ourselves in one of those. You must choose. As my father would have said, it's time to roll the dice."

Rand stared, shaking his head. "I could kill all of us, whatever I choose."

"Are you not willing to take that risk? For the Horn of Valere? For Mat?"

"Why are you so willing to take it? I don't even know if I can do it. It—it doesn't work every time I try." He knew no one had come any closer, but he looked anyway. All of them waited in a loose circle around the Stone, watching, but not close enough to eavesdrop. "Sometimes *saidin* is just there. I can feel it, but it might as well be on the moon as far as touching it. And even if it does work, what if I take us someplace we can't breathe? What good will that do Mat? Or the Horn?"

"You are the Dragon Reborn," she said quietly. "Oh, you can die, but I don't think the Pattern will let you die until it is done with you. Then again, the Shadow lies on the Pattern, now, and who can say how that affects the weaving? All you can do is follow your destiny."

"I am Rand al'Thor," he growled. "I am not the Dragon Reborn. I won't be a false Dragon."

"You are what you are. Will you choose, or will you stand here until your friend dies?"

Rand heard his teeth grinding and forced himself to unclench his jaw. The symbols could all have been exactly alike, for all they meant to him. The script could as well have been a chicken's scratchings. At last he settled on one, with an arrow pointing left because it pointed toward Toman Head, an arrow that pierced the circle because it had broken free, as he wanted to. He wanted to laugh. Such small things on which to gamble all their lives.

"Come closer," Verin ordered the others. "It will be best if you are near." They obeyed, with only a little hesitation. "It is time to begin," she said as they gathered round.

She threw back her cloak and put her hands on the column, but Rand saw her watching him from the corner of her eye. He was aware of nervous coughing and throat-clearing from the men around the Stone, a curse from Uno at someone hanging back, a weak joke from Mat, a loud gulp from Loial. He took the void.

It was so easy, now. The flame consumed fear and passion and was gone almost before he thought to form it. Gone, leaving only emptiness, and shining *saidin*, sickening, tantalizing, stomach-turning, seductive. He . . . reached for it . . . and it filled him, made him alive. He did not move a muscle, but he felt as if he were quivering with the rush of the One Power into him. The symbol formed itself, an arrow piercing a circle, floating just beyond the void, as hard as the stuff it was carved on. He let the One Power flow through him to the symbol.

The symbol shimmered, flickered.

“Something is happening,” Verin said. “Something . . .”

The world flickered.

The iron lock spun across the farmhouse floor, and Rand dropped the hot teakettle as a huge figure with ram’s horns on its head loomed in the doorway with the darkness of Winternight behind it.

“Run!” Tam shouted. His sword flashed, and the Trolloc toppled, but it grappled with Tam as it fell, pulling him down.

More crowded in at the door, black-mailed shapes with human faces distorted with muzzles and beaks and horns, oddly curved swords stabbing at Tam as he tried to struggle to his feet, spiked axes swinging, red blood on steel.

“Father!” Rand screamed. Clawing his belt knife from its sheath, he threw himself over the table to help his father, and screamed again as the first sword ran through his chest.

Blood bubbled up into his mouth, and a voice whispered inside his head, *I have won again, Lews Therin*.

Flicker.

Rand struggled to hold the symbol, dimly aware of Verin’s voice. “. . . is not . . .”

The Power flooded.

Flicker.

Rand was happy after he married Egwene, and tried to not let the moods take him, the times when he thought there should have been something more, something different. News of the world outside came into the Two Rivers with peddlers, and merchants come to buy wool and tabac, always news of fresh troubles, of wars and false Dragons everywhere. There was a year when neither merchants nor peddlers came, and when they returned the next they brought word that Artur Hawkwing's armies had come back, or their descendants, at least. The old nations were broken, it was said, and the world's new masters, who used chained Aes Sedai in their battles, had torn down the White Tower and salted the ground where Tar Valon had stood. There were no more Aes Sedai.

It all made little difference in the Two Rivers. Crops still had to be planted, sheep sheared, lambs tended. Tam had grandsons and granddaughters to dandle on his knee before he was laid to rest beside his wife, and the old farmhouse grew new rooms. Egwene became Wisdom, and most thought she was even better than the old Wisdom, Nynaeve al'Maera, had been. It was as well she was, for her cures that worked so miraculously on others were only just able to keep Rand alive from the sickness that constantly seemed to threaten him. His moods grew worse, blacker, and he raged that this was not what was meant to be. Egwene grew frightened when the moods were on him, for strange things sometimes happened when he was at his bleakest—lightning storms she had not heard listening to the wind, wildfires in the forest—but she loved him and cared for him and kept him sane, though some muttered that Rand al'Thor was crazy and dangerous.

When she died, he sat alone for long hours by her grave, tears soaking his gray-flecked beard. His sickness came back, and he wasted; he lost the last two fingers on his right hand and one on his left, his ears looked like scars, and men muttered that he smelled of decay. His blackness deepened.

Yet when the dire news came, none refused to accept him at their side. Trollocs and Fades and things undreamed of had burst out of the Blight, and the world's new masters were being thrown back, for all the powers they wielded. So Rand took up the bow he had just fingers enough left to shoot and limped with those who marched north to the River Taren, men from every village, farm, and corner of the Two Rivers, with their bows, and axes, and boarspears, and swords that had lain rusting in attics. Rand wore a sword, too, with a heron on the blade, that he had found after Tam died, though he knew nothing of how to use it. Women came, too, shouldering what weapons they could find, marching alongside the men. Some laughed, saying that they had the strange feeling they had done this before.

And at the Taren the people of the Two Rivers met the invaders, endless ranks of Trollocs led by nightmare Fades beneath a dead black banner that seemed to eat the light. Rand saw that banner and thought the madness had taken him again, for it seemed that this was what he had been born for, to fight that banner. He sent every arrow at it, straight as his skill and the void would serve, never worrying about the Trollocs forcing their way across the river, or the men and women dying to either side of him. It was one of those Trollocs that ran him through, before it loped howling for blood deeper into the Two Rivers. And as he lay on the bank of the Taren, watching the sky seem to grow dark at noon, breath coming ever slower, he heard a voice say, *I have won again, Lews Therin*.

Flicker.

The arrow-and-circle contorted into parallel wavy lines, and he fought it back again.

Verin's voice. ". . . right. Something . . ."

The Power raged.

Flicker.

Tam tried to console Rand when Egwene took sick and died just a week before their wedding. Nynaeve tried, too, but she was shaken herself, since for all her skill she had no idea what it was that had killed the girl. Rand had sat outside Egwene's house while she died, and there seemed to be nowhere in Emond's Field he could go that he did not still hear her screaming. He knew he could not stay. Tam gave him a sword with a heron-mark blade, and though he explained little of how a shepherd in the Two Rivers had come by such a thing, he taught Rand how to use it. On the day Rand left, Tam gave him a letter he said might get Rand taken into the army of Illian, and hugged him, and said, "I've never had another son, or wanted another. Come back with a wife like I did, if you can, boy, but come back in any case."

Rand had his money stolen in Baerlon, though, and his letter of introduction, and almost his sword, and he met a woman called Min who told him such crazy things about himself that he finally left the city to get away from her. Eventually his wanderings brought him to Caemlyn, and there his skill with the sword earned him a place in the Queen's Guards. Sometimes he found himself looking at the Daughter-Heir, Elayne, and at such times he was filled with odd thoughts that this was not the way things were supposed to be, that there should be something more to his life. Elayne did not look at him, of course; she married a Tairen prince, though she did not seem happy in it. Rand was just a soldier, once a shepherd from a small village so far toward the western border that only lines on a map any longer truly connected it to Andor. Besides, he had a dark reputation, as a man of violent moods.

Some said he was mad, and in ordinary times perhaps not even his skill with the sword would have kept him in the Guard, but these were not ordinary times. False Dragons sprang up like weeds. Every time one was taken down, two more proclaimed themselves, or three, till every nation was torn by war. And Rand's star rose, for he had learned the secret of his madness, a secret he knew he had to keep and did. He could channel. There were always places, times, in a battle when a little channeling, not big enough to be noticed in the confusion, could make luck. Sometimes it worked, this channeling, and sometimes not, but it worked often enough. He knew he was mad, and did not care. A wasting sickness came on him, and he did not care about that, either, and neither did anyone else, for word had come that Artur Hawkwing's armies had returned to reclaim the land.

Rand led a thousand men when the Queen's Guards crossed the Mountains of Mist—he never thought of turning aside to visit the Two Rivers; he seldom thought of the Two Rivers at all, anymore—and he commanded the Guard when the shattered remnants retreated back across the mountains. The length of Andor he fought and fell back, amid hordes of fleeing refugees, until at last he came to Caemlyn. Many of the people of Caemlyn had fled already, and many counseled the army to retreat further, but Elayne was Queen, now, and vowed she would not leave Caemlyn. She would not look at his ruined face, scarred by his sickness, but he could not leave her, and so what was left of the Queen's Guards prepared to defend the Queen while her people ran.

The Power came to him during the battle for Caemlyn, and he hurled lightning and fire among the invaders, and split the earth under their feet, yet the feeling came again, too, that he had been born for something else. For all he did, there were too many of the enemy to stop, and they also had those who could channel. At last, a lightning bolt hurled Rand from the Palace wall, broken, bleeding, and burned, and as his last breath rattled in his throat, he heard a voice whisper, *I have won again, Lews Therin*.

Flicker.

Rand struggled to hold the void as it quivered under the hammer blows of the world flickering, to hold the one symbol as a thousand of them darted along the surface of the void. He struggled to hold on to any one symbol.

“. . . is wrong!” Verin screamed.

The Power was everything.

Flicker. Flicker. Flicker. Flicker. Flicker. Flicker.

He was a soldier. He was a shepherd. He was a beggar, and a king. He was farmer, gleeman, sailor, carpenter. He was born, lived, and died an Aiel. He died mad, he died rotting, he died of sickness, accident, age. He was executed, and multitudes cheered his death. He proclaimed himself the Dragon Reborn and flung his banner across the sky; he ran from the Power and hid; he lived and died never knowing. He held off the madness and the sickness for years; he succumbed between two winters. Sometimes Moiraine came and took him away from the Two Rivers, alone or with those of his friends who had survived Winternight; sometimes she did not. Sometimes other Aes Sedai came for him. Sometimes the Red Ajah. Egwene married him; Egwene, stern-faced in the stole of the Amyrlin Seat, led the Aes Sedai who gentled him; Egwene, with tears in her eyes, plunged a dagger into his heart, and he thanked her as he died. He loved other women, married other women. Elayne, and Min, and a fair-haired farmer’s daughter met on the road to Caemlyn, and women he had never seen before he lived those lives. A hundred lives. More. So many he could not count them. And at the end of every life, as he lay dying, as he drew his final breath, a voice whispered in his ear. *I have won again, Lews Therin. Flicker flicker*.

The void vanished, contact with *saidin* fled, and Rand fell with a thud that would have knocked the breath out of him if he had not already been half numb. He felt rough stone under his cheek, and his hands. It was cold.

He was aware of Verin, struggling from her back to hands and knees. He heard someone vomit roughly, and raised his head. Uno was kneeling on the ground, scrubbing the back of his hand across his mouth. Everyone was down, and the horses stood stiff-legged and quivering, eyes wild and rolling. Ingtar had his sword out, gripping the hilt so hard the blade shook, staring at nothing. Loial sat sprawled, wide-eyed and stunned. Mat was huddled in a ball with his arms wrapped around his head, and Perrin had his fingers dug into his face as if he wanted to rip away whatever he had seen, or perhaps rip out the eyes that had seen it. None of the soldiers were any better. Masema wept openly, tears streaming down his face, and Hurin was looking around as if for a place to run.

"What . . . ?" Rand stopped to swallow. He was lying on rough, weathered stone half buried in the dirt. "What happened?"

"A surge of the One Power." The Aes Sedai tottered to her feet and pulled her cloak tight with a shiver. "It was as if we were being forced . . . pushed. . . . It seemed to come out of nowhere. You must learn to control it. You must! That much of the Power could burn you to a cinder."

"Verin, I. . . . I lived. . . . I was. . . ." He realized the stone under him was rounded. The Portal Stone. Hastily, shakily, he pushed himself to his feet. "Verin, I lived and died, I don't know how many times. Every time it was different, but it was me. It was me."

"The Lines that join the Worlds That Might Be, laid by those who knew the Numbers of Chaos." Verin shuddered; she seemed to be talking to herself. "I've never heard it, but there is no reason we would not be born in those worlds, yet the lives we lived would be different lives. Of course. Different lives for the different ways things might have happened."

"Is that what happened? I . . . we . . . saw how our lives could have been?" *I have won again, Lews Therin. No! I am Rand al'Thor!*

Verin gave herself a shake and looked at him. "Does it surprise you that your life might go differently if you made different choices, or different things happened to you? Though I never thought I—Well. The important thing is, we are here. Though not as we hoped."

"Where is here?" he demanded. The woods of Stedding Tsofu were gone, replaced by rolling land. There seemed to be forest not far to the west, and a few hills. It had been high in the day when they gathered around the Stone in the *stedding* but here the sun stood low toward afternoon in a gray sky. The handful of trees nearby were bare branched, or else held a few leaves bright with color. A cold wind gusted from the east, sending leaves scurrying across the ground.

"Toman Head," Verin said. "This is the Stone I visited. You should not have tried to bring us directly here. I don't know what went wrong—I don't suppose I ever will—but from the trees, I would say it is well into late autumn. Rand, we haven't gained any time by it. We've lost time. I would say we have easily spent four months in coming here."

"But I didn't—"

"You must let me guide you in these things. I cannot teach you, it's true, but perhaps I can at least keep you from killing yourself—and the rest of us—by overreaching. Even if you do not kill yourself, if the Dragon Reborn burns himself out like a guttering candle, who will face the Dark One then?" She did not wait for him to renew his protests, but went to Ingtar instead.

The Shienaran gave a start when she touched his arm, and looked at her with frantic eyes. "I walk in the Light," he said hoarsely. "I will find the Horn of Valere and pull down Shayol Ghul's power. I will!"

"Of course you will," she said soothingly. She took his face in her hands, and he drew a sudden breath, abruptly recovering from whatever had held him. Except that memory still lay in his eyes. "There," she said. "That will do for you. I will see how I can help the rest. We may still recover the Horn, but our path has not grown smoother."

As she started around among the others, stopping briefly by each, Rand went to his friends. When he tried to straighten Mat, Mat jerked and stared at him, then grabbed Rand's coat with both hands. "Rand, I'd never tell anyone about—about you. I wouldn't betray you. You have to believe that!" He looked worse than ever, but Rand thought it was mostly fright.

"I do," Rand said. He wondered what lives Mat had lived, and what he had done. *He must have told someone, or he wouldn't be so anxious about it.* He could not hold it against him. Those had been other Mats, not this one. Besides, after some of the alternatives he had seen for himself. . . . "I believe you. Perrin?"

The curly-haired youth dropped his hands from his face with a sigh. Red marks scored his forehead and cheeks where his nails had dug in. His yellow eyes hid his thoughts. "We don't have many choices really, do we, Rand? Whatever happens, whatever we do, some things are almost always the same." He let out another long breath. "Where are we? Is this one of those worlds you and Hurin were talking about?"

"It's Toman Head," Rand told him. "In our world. Or so Verin says. And it is autumn."

Mat looked worried. "How could—? No, I don't want to know how it happened. But how are we going to find Fain and the dagger now? He could be anywhere by this time.”

“He’s here,” Rand assured him. He hoped he was right. Fain had had time to take ship for anyplace he wanted to go. Time to ride to Emond’s Field. Or Tar Valon. *Please, Light, he didn’t get tired of waiting. If he’s hurt Egwene, or anybody in Emond’s Field, I’ll. . . . Light burn me, I tried to come in time.*

“The larger towns on Toman Head are all west of here,” Verin announced loudly enough for all to hear. Everyone was on their feet again, except for Rand and his two friends; she came and put her hands on Mat as she spoke. “Not that there are many villages large enough to call towns. If we are to find any trace of the Darkfriends, to the west is the place to begin. And I think we should not waste the daylight sitting here.”

When Mat blinked and stood up—he still looked ill, but he moved spryly—she put her hands on Perrin. Rand backed away when she reached for him.

“Don’t be foolish,” she told him.

“I don’t want your help,” he said quietly. “Or any Aes Sedai help.”

Her lips twitched. “As you wish.”

They mounted immediately and rode west, leaving the Portal Stone behind. No one protested, Rand least of all. *Light, let me not be too late.*

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CHAPTER

38

Practice

Sitting cross-legged on her bed in her white dress, Egwene made three tiny balls of light weave patterns above her hands. She was not supposed to do this without at least one of the Accepted to supervise, but Nynaeve, glaring and striding up and down in front of the small fireplace, did after all wear the Serpent ring given to the Accepted, and her white dress had the colored rings encircling the hem, even if she was not allowed to try to teach anyone yet. And Egwene had found over these last thirteen weeks that she could not resist. She knew how easy it was to touch *saidar* now. She could always feel it there, waiting for her, like the smell of perfume or the feel of silk, drawing her, drawing her. And once she did touch it, she could rarely stop from channeling, or at least trying to. She failed almost as often as she succeeded, but that was only another spur to keep on.

It often frightened her. How much she wanted to channel frightened her, and how drab and dreary she felt when she was not channeling, compared to when she was. She wanted to drink it all in, despite the cautions about burning herself out, and that wanting frightened her most of all. Sometimes she wished she had never come to Tar Valon. But the fright could not make her stop for long, any more than the fear of being caught by an Aes Sedai or by any of the Accepted beside Nynaeve.

It was safe enough here, though, in her own room. Min was there, sitting on the three-legged stool watching her, but she knew Min well enough now to know Min would never report her. She thought she was lucky to have made two good friends since coming to Tar Valon.

It was a little, windowless room, as all novices' rooms were. Three short paces took Nynaeve from wall to white-plastered wall; Nynaeve's own room was much larger, but since she had made no friends among the other Accepted, she came to Egwene's room when she needed someone to talk to, even as now when she did not talk at all. The tiny fire on the narrow hearth handily kept the first chill of approaching autumn at bay, though Egwene was sure it would not serve so well when winter came. A small table for study completed the furnishings, and her belongings hung neatly on a row of pegs on the wall or sat on the short shelf above the table. Novices were usually kept too busy to spend time in their rooms, but today was a freeday, only the third since she and Nynaeve had come to the White Tower.

“Else was making calf’s eyes at Galad today while he was working with the Warders,” Min said, rocking the stool on two legs.

The small balls faltered for an instant above Egwene’s hands. “She can look at whoever she wants,” Egwene said casually. “I can’t imagine why I would be interested.”

“No reason, I suppose. He is awfully handsome, if you don’t mind him being so rigid. Very nice to look at, especially with his shirt off.”

The balls spun furiously. “I certainly have no desire to look at Galad, with or without his shirt.”

“I shouldn’t tease you,” Min said contritely. “I’m sorry for that. But you do like to look at him—don’t grimace at me like that—and so does nearly every woman in the White Tower who isn’t a Red. I’ve seen Aes Sedai down at the practice yards when he’s working forms, especially Greens. Checking on their Warders, they say, but I don’t see so many when Galad isn’t there. Even the cooks and maids come out to watch him.”

The balls stopped dead, and for a moment Egwene stared at them. They vanished. Suddenly she giggled. “He *is* good-looking, isn’t he? Even when he walks he looks as if he’s dancing.” The color in her cheeks deepened. “I know I shouldn’t stare at him, but I can’t help myself.”

“I can’t either,” Min said, “and I can see what he is like.”

“But if he is good—?”

“Egwene, Galad is so good he’d make you tear your hair out. He’d hurt a person because he had to serve a greater good. He wouldn’t even notice who was hurt, because he’d be so intent on the other, but if he did, he would expect them to understand and think it was all well and right.”

“I suppose you know,” Egwene said. She had seen Min’s ability to look at people and read all sorts of things about them; Min did not tell everything she saw, and she did not always see anything, but there had been enough for Egwene to believe. She glanced at Nynaeve—the other woman was still pacing, muttering to herself—then reached for *saidar* again and resumed her juggling in a desultory fashion.

Min shrugged. “I guess I might as well tell you. He didn’t even notice what Else was doing. He asked her if she knew whether you might be walking the South Garden after supper, since today is a freeday. I felt sorry for her.”

“Poor Else,” Egwene murmured, and the balls of light became more lively above her hands. Min laughed.

The door banged open, caught by the wind. Egwene gave a yelp and let the balls vanish before she saw it was only Elayne.

The golden-haired Daughter-Heir of Andor pushed the door shut and hung up her cloak on a peg. “I just heard,” she said. “The rumors are true. King Galldrian is dead. That makes it a war of succession.”

Min snorted. “Civil war. War of succession. A lot of silly names for the same thing. Do you mind if we don’t talk about it? That’s all we hear. War in Cairhien. War on Toman Head. They may have caught the false Dragon in Saldaea, but there’s still war in Tear. Most of it is rumors, anyway. Yesterday, I heard one of the cooks saying she’d heard Artur Hawkwing was marching on Tanchico. Artur Hawkwing!”

“I thought you did not want to talk about it,” Egwene said.

“I saw Logain,” Elayne said. “He was sitting on a bench in the Inner Court, crying. He ran when he saw me. I cannot help feeling sorry for him.”

“Better he cries than the rest of us, Elayne,” Min said.

“I know what he is,” Elayne said calmly. “Or rather, what he was. He isn’t anymore, and I can feel sorry for him.”

Egwene slumped back against the wall. *Rand.* Logain always made her think of Rand. She had not dreamed about him in months, now, not the kind of dreams she had had on the *River Queen.* Anaiya still made her write down everything she dreamed, and the Aes Sedai checked them for signs, or connections to events, but there was never anything about Rand except dreams that, Anaiya said, meant she missed him. Oddly, she felt almost as if he were not there any longer, as if he had ceased to exist, along with her dreams, a few weeks after reaching the White Tower. *And I sit thinking about how nicely Galad walks,* she thought bitterly. *Rand has to be all right. If he’d been caught and gentled, I’d have heard something.*

That sent a chill through her, as it never failed to do, the thought of Rand being gentled, Rand weeping and wanting to die as Logain did.

Elayne sat down beside her on the bed, tucking her feet up under her. "If you are mooning over Galad, Egwene, you will have no sympathy from me. I'll have Nynaeve dose you with one of those horrible concoctions she's always talking about." She frowned at Nynaeve, who had taken no notice of her entrance. "What is the matter with her? Don't tell me she has started sighing after Galad, too!"

"I wouldn't bother her." Min leaned toward the two of them and lowered her voice. "That skinny Accepted Irella told her she was as clumsy as a cow and had half the Talents, and Nynaeve clouted her ear." Elayne winced. "Exactly," Min murmured. "They had her up to Sheriam's study before you could blink, and she hasn't been fit to live with since."

Apparently Min had not dropped her voice enough, for there was a growl from Nynaeve. Suddenly the door whipped open once more, and a gale howled into the room. It did not ruffle the blankets on Egwene's bed, but Min and the stool toppled, to roll against the wall. Immediately the wind died, and Nynaeve stood with a stricken look on her face.

Egwene hurried to the door and peeked out. The noonday sun was burning off the last reminders of last night's rainstorm. The still-damp balcony around the Novices' Court was empty, the long row of doors to novices' rooms all shut. The novices who had taken advantage of the freeday to enjoy themselves in the gardens were no doubt catching up on their sleep. No one could have seen. She closed the door and took her place beside Elayne again as Nynaeve helped Min to her feet.

"I'm sorry, Min," Nynaeve said in a tight voice. "Sometimes my temper. . . . I can't ask you to forgive me, not for this." She took a deep breath. "If you want to report me to Sheriam, I will understand. I deserve it."

Egwene wished she had not heard that admission; Nynaeve could grow prickly over such things. Searching for something on which to focus, something Nynaeve could believe she had had her attention on, she found herself touching *saidar* once more, and began juggling the balls of light again. Elayne quickly joined her; Egwene saw the glow form around the Daughter-Heir even before three tiny balls appeared above her hands. They began to pass the little glowing spheres back and forth in increasingly intricate patterns. Sometimes one winked out as one girl or the other failed to maintain it as it came to her, then winked back a little altered in color or size.

The One Power filled Egwene with life. She smelled the faint rose aroma of soap from Elayne’s morning bath. She could feel the rough plaster of the walls, the smooth stones of the floor, as well as she could the bed where she sat. She could hear Min and Nynaeve breathe, much less their quiet words.

“If it comes to forgiving,” Min said, “maybe you should forgive me. You have a temper, and I have a big mouth. I will forgive you if you forgive me.” With murmurs of “forgiven” that sounded meant on both sides, the two women hugged. “But if you do it again,” Min said with a laugh, “I might clout *your* ear.”

“Next time,” Nynaeve replied, “I will throw something at you.” She was laughing, too, but her laughter ceased abruptly as her eye fell on Egwene and Elayne. “You two stop that, or there *will* be someone going to the Mistress of Novices. Two someones.”

“Nynaeve, you wouldn’t!” Egwene protested. When she saw the look in Nynaeve’s eyes, though, she hastily severed all contact with *saidar.* “Very well. I believe you. There’s no need to prove it.”

“We have to practice,” Elayne said. “They ask more and more of us. If we did not practice on our own, we would never keep up.” Her face showed calm composure, but she had let go of *saidar* as hastily as Egwene herself had.

“And what happens when you draw too much,” Nynaeve asked, “and there’s no one there to stop you? I wish you were more afraid. I am. Don’t you think I know what it is like for you? It’s always there, and you want to fill yourself with it. Sometimes it is all I can do to make myself stop; I want all of it. I know it would burn me to a crisp, and I want it anyway.” She shivered. “I just wish you were more afraid.”

“I am afraid,” Egwene said with a sigh. “I’m terrified. But it doesn’t seem to help. What about you, Elayne?”

“The only thing that terrifies me,” Elayne said airily, “is washing dishes. It seems as if I have to wash dishes every day.” Egwene threw her pillow at her. Elayne pulled it off her head and threw it back, but then her shoulders slumped. “Oh, very well. I am so scared I don’t know why my teeth are not chattering. Elaida told me I’d be so frightened that I would want to run away with the Traveling People, but I did not understand. A man who drove oxen as hard as they drive us would be shunned. I am tired all the time. I wake up tired and go to bed exhausted, and sometimes I’m so afraid that I will slip and channel more of the Power than I can handle that I. . . .” Peering into her lap, she let the words trail off.

Egwene knew what she had not spoken. Their rooms lay right next to each other, and as in many of the novice rooms, a small hole had long ago been bored through the wall between, too small to be seen unless you knew where to look, but useful for talk after the lamps were extinguished, when the girls could not leave their rooms. Egwene had heard Elayne crying herself to sleep more than once, and she had no doubt that Elayne had heard her own crying.

“The Traveling People are tempting,” Nynaeve agreed, “but wherever you go, it will not change what you can do. You cannot run from *saidar.*” She did not sound as if she liked what she was saying.

“What do you see, Min?” Elayne said. “Are we all going to be powerful Aes Sedai, or will we spend the rest of our lives washing dishes as novices, or. . . .” She shrugged uncomfortably as if she did not want to voice the third alternative that came to mind. Sent home. Put out of the Tower. Two novices had been put out since Egwene came, and everyone spoke of them in whispers, as if they were dead.

Min shifted on her stool. “I don’t like reading friends,” she muttered. “Friendship gets in the way of the reading. It makes me try to put the best face on what I see. That’s why I don’t do it for you three anymore. Anyway, nothing has changed about you that I can. . . .” She squinted at them, and suddenly frowned. “That’s new,” she breathed.

“What?” Nynaeve asked sharply.

Min hesitated before answering. “Danger. You are all in some kind of danger. Or you will be, very soon. I can’t make it out, but it is danger.”

“You see,” Nynaeve said to the two girls sitting on the bed. “You must take care. We all must. You must both promise not to channel again without someone to guide you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” Egwene said.

Elayne nodded eagerly. “Yes. Let’s talk about something else. Min, if you put on a dress, I’ll wager Gawyn would ask you to go walking with him. You know he’s been looking at you, but I think the breeches and the man’s coat put him off.”

“I dress the way I like, and I won’t change for a lord, even if he is your brother.” Min spoke absently, still squinting at them and frowning; it was a conversation they had had before. “Sometimes it is useful to pass as a boy.”

“No one who looks twice believes you are a boy.” Elayne smiled.

Egwene was uncomfortable. Elayne was forcing a semblance of gaiety, Min was hardly paying attention, and Nynaeve looked as if she wanted to warn them again.

When the door swung open once more, Egwene bounded to her feet to close it, grateful for something to do besides watch the others pretend. Before she reached it, though, a dark-eyed Aes Sedai with her blond hair done in a multitude of braids stepped into the room. Egwene blinked in surprise, as much at it being any Aes Sedai as at Liandrin. She had not heard that Liandrin had returned to the White Tower, but beyond that, novices were sent for if an Aes Sedai wanted them; it could mean no good, a sister coming herself.

The room was crowded with five women in it. Liandrin paused to adjust her red-fringed shawl, eyeing them. Min did not move, but Elayne rose, and the three standing curtsied, though Nynaeve barely flexed her knee. Egwene did not think Nynaeve would ever grow used to having others in authority over her.

Liandrin’s eyes settled on Nynaeve. “And why are you here, in the novices’ quarters, child?” Her tone was ice.

“I am visiting with friends,” Nynaeve said in a tight voice. After a moment she added a belated, “Liandrin Sedai.”

“The Accepted, they can have no friends among the novices. This you should have learned by this time, child. But it is as well that I find you here. You and you”—her finger stabbed at Elayne and Min—“will go.”

“I will return later.” Min rose casually, making a great show of being in no hurry to obey, and strolled by Liandrin with a grin, of which Liandrin took no notice at all. Elayne gave Egwene and Nynaeve a worried look before she dropped a curtsy and left.

After Elayne closed the door behind her, Liandrin stood studying Egwene and Nynaeve. Egwene began to fidget under the scrutiny, but Nynaeve held herself straight, with only a little heightening of her color.

“You two are from the same village as the boys who traveled with Moiraine. Is it not so?” Liandrin said suddenly.

“Do you have some word of Rand?” Egwene asked eagerly. Liandrin arched an eyebrow at her. “Forgive me, Aes Sedai. I forget myself.”

“Have you word of them?” Nynaeve said, just short of a demand. The Accepted had no rule about not speaking to an Aes Sedai until spoken to.

“You have concern for them. That is good. They are in danger, and you might be able to help them.”

“How do you know they’re in trouble?” There was no doubt about the demand in Nynaeve’s voice this time.

Liandrin’s rosebud mouth tightened, but her tone did not change. “Though you are not aware of it, Moiraine has sent letters to the White Tower concerning you. Moiraine Sedai, she worries about you, and about your young . . . friends. These boys, they are in danger. Do you wish to help them, or leave them to their fate?”

“Yes,” Egwene said, at the same time that Nynaeve said, “What kind of trouble? Why do *you* care about helping them?” Nynaeve glanced at the red fringe on Liandrin’s shawl. “And I thought you didn’t like Moiraine.”

“Do not presume too much, child,” Liandrin said sharply. “To be Accepted is not to be a sister. Accepted and novices alike listen when a sister speaks, and do as they are told.” She drew a breath and went on; her tone was coldy serene again, but angry white spots marred her cheeks. “Someday, I am sure, you will serve a cause, and you will learn then that to serve it you must work even with those whom you dislike. I tell you I have worked with many with whom I would not share a room if it were left to me alone. Would you not work alongside the one you hated worst, if it would save your friends?”

Nynaeve nodded reluctantly. “But you still haven’t told us what kind of danger they’re in. Liandrin Sedai.”

“The danger comes from Shayol Ghul. They are hunted, as I understand they once before were. If you will come with me, some dangers, at least, may be eliminated. Do not ask how, for I cannot tell you, but I tell you flatly it is so.”

“We will come, Liandrin Sedai,” Egwene said.

“Come where?” Nynaeve said. Egwene shot her an exasperated look.

“Toman Head.”

Egwene’s mouth fell open, and Nynaeve muttered, “There’s a war on Toman Head. Does this danger have something to do with Artur Hawkwing’s armies?”

“You believe rumors, child? But even if they were true, is that enough to stop you? I thought you called these men friends.” A twist to Liandrin’s words said she would never do the same.

“We will come,” Egwene said. Nynaeve opened her mouth again, but Egwene went right on. “We will go, Nynaeve. If Rand needs our help—and Mat, and Perrin—we have to give it.”

“I know that,” Nynaeve said, “but what I want to know is, why us? What can we do that Moiraine—or you, Liandrin—cannot?”

The white grew in Liandrin’s cheeks—Egwene realized Nynaeve had forgotten the honorific in addressing her—but what she said was, “You two come from their village. In some way I do not entirely understand, you are connected to them. Beyond that, I cannot say. And no more of your foolish questions will I answer. Will you come with me for their sake?” She paused for their assent; a visible tension left her when they nodded. “Good. You will meet me at the northernmost edge of the Ogier grove one hour before sunset with your horses and whatever you will need for the journey. Tell no one of this.”

“We are not supposed to leave the Tower grounds without permission,” Nynaeve said slowly.

“You have my permission. Tell no one. No one at all. The Black Ajah walks the halls of the White Tower.”

Egwene gasped, and heard an echoed gasp from Nynaeve, but Nynaeve recovered quickly. “I thought all Aes Sedai denied the existence of—of that.”

Liandrin’s mouth tightened into a sneer. “Many do, but Tarmon Gai’don approaches, and the time leaves when denials can be made. The Black Ajah, it is the opposite of everything for which the Tower stands, but it exists, child. It is everywhere, any woman could belong to it, and it serves the Dark One. If your friends are pursued by the Shadow, do you think the Black Ajah will leave you alive and free to help them? Tell no one—no one!—or you may not live to reach Toman Head. One hour before sunset. Do not fail me.” With that, she was gone, the door closing firmly behind her.

Egwene collapsed onto her bed with her hands on her knees. “Nynaeve, she’s Red Ajah. She can’t know about Rand. If she did. . . .”

“She cannot know,” Nynaeve agreed. “I wish I knew why a Red wanted to help. Or why she’s willing to work with Moiraine. I’d have sworn neither of them would give the other water if she were dying of thirst.”

“You think she’s lying?”

“She is Aes Sedai,” Nynaeve said dryly. “I’ll wager my best silver pin against a blueberry that every word she said was true. But I wonder if we heard what we thought we did."

"The Black Ajah." Egwene shivered. "There was no mistaking what she said about that, the Light help us."

"No mistaking," Nynaeve said. "And she's forestalled us asking anyone for advice, because after that, who can we trust? The Light help us indeed."

Min and Elayne came bustling in, slamming the door behind them. "Are you really going?" Min asked, and Elayne gestured toward the tiny hole in the wall above Egwene's bed, saying, "We listened from my room. We heard everything."

Egwene exchanged glances with Nynaeve, wondering how much they had overheard, and saw the same concern on Nynaeve's face. *If they manage to cipher out about Rand. . . .*

"You have to keep this to yourselves," Nynaeve cautioned them. "I suppose Liandrin has arranged permission from Sheriam for us to go, but even if she hasn't, even if they start searching the Tower from top to bottom for us tomorrow, you mustn't say a word."

"Keep it to myself?" Min said. "No fear on that. I'm going with you. All I do all day is try to explain to one Brown sister or another something I don't understand myself. I can't even go for a walk without the Amyrlin herself popping out and asking me to read whoever we see. When that woman asks you to do something, there doesn't seem to be any way out of it. I must have read half the White Tower for her, but she always wants another demonstration. All I needed was an excuse to leave, and this is it." Her face wore a look of determination that allowed no argument.

Egwene wondered why Min was so determined to go with them rather than simply leaving on her own, but before she had time to do more than wonder, Elayne said, "I am going, too."

"Elayne," Nynaeve said gently, "Egwene and I are the boys' kith from Emond's Field. You are the Daughter-Heir of Andor. If you disappear from the White Tower, why, it—it could start a war."

"Mother wouldn't start a war with Tar Valon if they dried and salted me, which they may be trying to do. If you three can go off and have an adventure, you needn't think I am going to stay here and wash dishes, and scrub floors, and have some Accepted berating me because I didn't make the fire the exact shade of blue she wanted. Gawyn will die from envy when he finds out." Elayne grinned and reached over to tug playfully at Egwene's hair. “Besides, if you leave Rand lying about loose, I might have a chance to pick him up.”

“I don’t think either of us is going to have him,” Egwene said sadly.

“Then we’ll find whoever he does choose and make her life miserable. But he couldn’t be fool enough to choose someone else when he could have one of us. Oh, please smile, Egwene. I know he’s yours. I just feel”—she hesitated, searching for the word—“free. I’ve never had an adventure. I’ll bet we won’t either of us cry ourselves to sleep on an adventure. And if we do, we will make sure the gleemen leave that part out.”

“This is foolishness,” Nynaeve said. “We are going to Toman Head. You’ve heard the news, and the rumors. It will be dangerous. You must stay here.”

“I heard what Liandrin Sedai said about the—the Black Ajah, too.” Elayne’s voice dropped almost to a whisper at that name. “How safe will I be here, if *they* are here? If Mother even suspected the Black Ajah really existed, she would pitch me into the middle of a battle to get me away from them.”

“But, Elayne—”

“There is only one way for you to stop me coming. That is to tell the Mistress of Novices. We will make a pretty picture, all three of us lined up in her study. All four of us. I don’t think Min would escape from something like this. So since you are not going to tell Sheriam Sedai, I am coming, too.”

Nynaeve threw up her hands. “Perhaps you can say something to convince her,” she told Min.

Min had been leaning against the door, squinting at Elayne, and now she shook her head. “I think she has to come as much as the rest of you. The rest of us. I can see the danger around all of you more clearly, now. Not clearly enough to make it out, but I think it has something to do with you deciding to go. That’s why it is clearer; because it is more certain.”

“That’s no reason for her to come,” Nynaeve said, but Min shook her head again.

“She is linked to—to those boys as much as you, or Egwene, or me. She’s part of it, Nynaeve, whatever it is. Part of the Pattern, I suppose an Aes Sedai would say.”

Elayne seemed taken aback, and interested, too. “I am? What part, Min?”

“I can’t see it clearly.” Min looked at the floor. “Sometimes I wish I couldn’t read people at all. Most people aren’t satisfied with what I see anyway.”

“If we are all going,” Nynaeve said, “then we had best be about making plans.” However much she might argue beforehand, once a course of action had been decided, Nynaeve always went right to the practicalities: what they had to take with them, and how cold it would be by the time they reached Toman Head, and how they could get their horses from the stables without being stopped.

Listening to her, Egwene could not help wondering what the danger was that Min saw for them, and what danger threatened Rand. She knew of only one danger that could threaten him, and it made her cold to think of it. *Hold on, Rand. Hold on, you wool-headed idiot. I’ll help you somehow.*

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CHAPTER

39

Flight from the White Tower

Egwene and Elayne inclined their heads briefly to each group of women they passed as they made their way through the Tower. It was a good thing there were so many women from outside in the Tower today, Egwene thought, too many for each to have an Aes Sedai or an Accepted for escort. Alone or in small groups, garbed richly or poorly, in dress from half a dozen different lands, some still dusty from their journey to Tar Valon, they kept to themselves and waited their turn to ask their questions of the Aes Sedai, or present their petitions. Some women—ladies or merchants or merchants' wives—had female servants with them. Even a few men had come with petitions, standing by themselves, looking unsure about being in the White Tower, and eyeing everyone else uneasily.

In the lead, Nynaeve kept her eyes purposefully ahead, her cloak swirling behind her, walking as if she knew where they were going—which she did, as long as no one stopped them—and had a perfect right to go there—which was a different matter altogether, of course. Dressed now in the clothes they had brought to Tar Valon, they certainly did not look like residents of the Tower. Each had chosen her best dress that had a skirt divided for riding, and cloaks of fine wool rich with embroidery. As long as they kept away from all who might recognize them—they had already dodged several who knew their faces—Egwene thought they might make it.

"This would do better for a turn in some lord's park than a ride to Toman Head," Nynaeve had said dryly as Egwene helped her with the buttons of a gray silk with thread-of-gold work and pearled flowers across the bosom and down the sleeves, "but it may allow us to leave unnoticed."

Now Egwene shifted her cloak and smoothed her own gold-embroidered, green silk dress and glanced at Elayne, in blue slashed with cream, hoping Nynaeve had been right. So far, everyone had taken them for petitioners, nobles, or at least women of wealth, but it seemed that they should stand out. She was surprised to realize why; she felt uncomfortable in the fine dress after wearing a novice's plain white for the past few months.

A little cluster of village women in stout, dark woolens dropped curtsies as they passed. Egwene glanced back at Min as soon as they were beyond. Min had kept her breeches and baggy man's shirt under a boy's brown cloak and coat, with an old, wide-brimmed hat pulled down over her short hair. "One of us has to be the servant," she had said, laughing. "Women dressed the way you are always have at least one. You'll wish you had my breeches if we have to run." She was burdened with four sets of saddlebags bulging with warm clothes, for it would surely be winter before they returned. There were also packets of food pilfered from the kitchens, enough to last until they could buy more.

"Are you sure I can't carry some of those, Min?" Egwene asked softly.

"They're just awkward," Min said with a grin, "not heavy." She seemed to think it was all a game, or else was pretending to think so. "And people would be sure to wonder why a fine lady such as yourself was carrying her own saddlebags. You can carry yours—and mine, too, if you want—once we—" Her grin vanished, and she whispered fiercely, "Aes Sedai!"

Egwene whipped her eyes forward. An Aes Sedai with long, smooth black hair and aged-ivory skin was coming toward them down the corridor, listening to a woman wearing rough farm clothes and a patched cloak. The Aes Sedai had not seen them yet, but Egwene recognized her; Takima, of the Brown Ajah, who taught the history of the White Tower and Aes Sedai, and who could recognize one of her pupils at a hundred paces.

Nynaeve turned down a side hall without breaking stride, but there one of the Accepted, a lanky woman with a permanent frown, hurried past them hauling a red-faced novice by the ear.

Egwene had to swallow before she could speak. "That was Irella, and Else. Did they notice us?" She could not make herself look back to see.

"No," Min said after a moment. "All they saw was our clothes." Egwene let out a long, relieved breath, and heard one from Nynaeve, too.

"My heart may burst before we reach the stables," Elayne murmured. "Is this what an adventure is like all the time, Egwene? Your heart in your mouth, and your stomach in your feet?"

“I suppose it is,” Egwene said slowly. She found it hard to think that there had been a time when she had been eager to have an adventure, to do something dangerous and exciting like the people in stories. Now she thought the exciting part was what you remembered when you looked back, and the stories left out a good deal of unpleasantness. She told Elayne as much.

“Still,” the Daughter-Heir said firmly, “I have never had any real excitement before, and never likely to as long as Mother has any say in it, which she will until I take the throne myself.”

“You two be quiet,” Nynaeve said. They were alone in the hall for a change, with no one in sight in either direction. She pointed to a narrow flight of stairs going down. “That should be what we want. If I haven’t gotten turned around completely, with all the twists and turns we’ve made.”

She took the stairs as if she were certain anyway, and the others followed. Surely enough, the small door at the bottom let out into the dusty yard of the South Stable, where novices’ horses were kept, for those who had them, until they had need of mounts again, which was generally not until they became Accepted or were sent home. The gleaming bulk of the Tower itself rose behind them; the Tower grounds spread over a good many hides of land, with its own walls higher than some city walls.

Nynaeve strode into the stable as if she owned it. It had a clean smell of hay and horse, and two long rows of stalls ran back into shadows barred with light from the vents above. For a wonder, shaggy Bela and Nynaeve’s gray mare stood in stalls near the doors. Bela put her nose over the stall door and whickered softly to Egwene. There was only one groom in evidence, a pleasant-looking fellow with gray in his beard, chewing a straw.

“We will have our horses saddled,” Nynaeve told him in her most commanding tone. “Those two. Min, find your horse and Elayne’s.” Min dropped the saddlebags and drew Elayne deeper into the stables.

The stableman frowned after them and slowly took the straw from his mouth. “There must be some mistake, my Lady. Those animals—”

“—are ours,” Nynaeve said firmly, folding her arms so that the Serpent ring was obvious. “You will saddle them now.”

Egwene held her breath; it was a last-ditch plan, that Nynaeve would try to pass as an Aes Sedai if they had difficulties with anyone who might actually accept her as one. No Aes Sedai or Accepted would, of course, and probably not even a novice, but a stableman. . . .

The man blinked at Nynaeve's ring, then at her. "I was told two," he said at last, sounding unimpressed. "One of the Accepted and a novice. Wasn't nothing said about four of you."

Egwene felt like laughing. Of course Liandrin would not have believed them able to get their horses by themselves.

Nynaeve looked disappointed, and her voice sharpened. "You trot those horses out and saddle them, or you'll have need of Liandrin's Healing, if she will give it to you."

The groom mouthed Liandrin's name, but one look at Nynaeve's face and he saw to the horses with no more than a mutter or two, not loud enough for any but himself to hear. Min and Elayne came back with their own mounts just as he finished tightening the second girth. Min's was a tall dust-colored gelding, Elayne's a bay mare with an arched neck.

When they were mounted, Nynaeve addressed herself to the stableman again. "No doubt you were told to keep this quiet, and that hasn't changed whether we are two or two hundred. If you think it has, think about what Liandrin will do if you talk what you were told to keep quiet."

As they were riding out, Elayne tossed him a coin and murmured, "For your trouble, goodman. You have done well." Outside, she caught Egwene's eye and smiled. "Mother says a stick and honey always work better than a stick alone."

"I hope we don't need either with the guards," Egwene said. "I hope Liandrin spoke to them, too."

At Tarlomen's Gate, though, piercing the tall south wall of the Tower grounds, there was no telling if anyone had spoken to the guards or not. They waved the four women through with no more than a glance and a cursory bow. Guards were meant to keep out those who were dangerous; apparently these had no orders about keeping anyone in.

A cool river breeze gave them an excuse to pull up the hoods of their cloaks as they rode slowly through the streets of the city. The ring of their horses' hooves on the paving stones was lost in the murmur of the crowds filling the streets and the music that came from some of the buildings they passed. People dressed in garments from every land, from the dark and somber mode of Cairhien to the bright, brilliant colors of the Traveling People, and every style in between, split around the horsewomen like a river around a rock, but they still could not move at more than a slow walk.

Egwene gave no attention to the fabulous towers with their sky-borne bridges or the buildings that looked more like breaking waves, or wind-sculpted cliffs, or fanciful shells, than anything made from stone. Aes Sedai often went into the city, and in that crowd they could come face-to-face with one before they knew it. After a time she realized the other women were keeping as close a watch as she, but she still felt more than a glimmer of relief when the Ogier grove came into view.

The Great Trees were now visible beyond the rooftops, their spreading tops a hundred spans and more in the air. Towering oaks and elms, leatherleafs and firs, were dwarfed beneath them. A wall of sorts encompassed the grove, which was a good two miles across, but it was only an endless series of spiraling stone arches, each five spans high and twice as wide. By the outer side of the wall, carriages, carts, and people bustled along a street, while inside lay a wilderness of sorts. The grove had neither the tame look of a park nor the complete haphazardness of the forest depths. Rather, it seemed to be the ideal of nature, as if this were the perfect woods, the most beautiful forest that could be. Some of the leaves had already begun to turn, and even the small swathes of orange and yellow and red among the green seemed to Egwene to be exactly the way autumn foliage should look.

A few people strolled just inside the open arches, and no one looked twice when the four women rode in under the trees. The city was quickly lost to view, even the sounds of it softened, then blocked, by the grove. In the space of ten strides they seemed to be miles from the nearest town.

“The north edge of the grove, she said,” Nynaeve muttered, peering around. “There isn’t any point of it further north than—” She cut off as two horses burst from a copse of black elder, a dark, glossy mare with a rider and a lightly laden pack horse.

The dark mare reared, pawing the air, as Liandrin reined her harshly. The Aes Sedai’s face wore fury like a mask. “I told you not to tell anyone of this! Not anyone!” Egwene noticed pole-lanterns on the pack horse, and thought it odd.

“These are friends,” Nynaeve began, her back stiffening, but Elayne broke in on her.

“Forgive us, Liandrin Sedai. They did not tell us; we overheard. We did not mean to listen to anything we should not have, but we did overhear.

And we want to help Rand al’Thor, too. And the other boys, of course,” she added quickly.

Liandrin peered at Elayne and Min. The late afternoon sunlight, slanting through the branches, shadowed their faces beneath the hoods of their cloaks. “So,” she said finally, still watching those two. “I had made arrangements for you to be taken care of, but as you are here, you are here. Four can make this journey as well as two.”

“Taken care of, Liandrin Sedai?” Elayne said. “I do not understand.”

“Child, you and that other are known as friends of these two. Do you not think there are those who would question you when they are found to be gone? Do you believe the Black Ajah would be gentle with you just because you are heir to a throne? Had you remained in the White Tower, you might not have lived the night.” That silenced them all for a moment, but Liandrin wheeled her horse and called, “Follow me!”

The Aes Sedai led them deeper into the grove, until they came to a tall fence of stout ironwork topped with a hedge of razor-sharp spikes. Curving slightly, as if it enclosed a large area, the fence ran out of sight among the trees to left and right. There was a gate in the fence, secured with a big lock. Liandrin unfastened this with a large key she produced from her cloak, motioned them through, then relocked it behind them and rode on ahead immediately. A squirrel chittered at them from a branch overhead, and from somewhere came the sharp drumming of a woodpecker.

“Where are we going?” Nynaeve demanded. Liandrin did not answer, and Nynaeve looked angrily at the others. “Why are we just riding deeper into these woods? We have to cross a bridge, or else take ship, if we’re going to leave Tar Valon, and there isn’t any bridge or ship in—”

“There is this,” Liandrin announced. “The fence, it keeps away those who might harm themselves, but we have a need this day.” What she gestured to was a tall, thick slab of what seemed to be stone, standing on edge, one side carved intricately in vines and leaves.

Egwene’s throat tightened; suddenly she knew why Liandrin had brought lanterns, and she did not like what she knew. She heard Nynaeve whisper, “A Waygate.” They both remembered the Ways all too well.

“We did it once,” she told herself as much as Nynaeve. “We can do it again.” *If Rand and the others need us, we have to help them. That’s all there is to it.*

“Is that really . . . ?” Min began in a choked voice and could not finish.

“A Waygate,” Elayne breathed. “I did not think the Ways could be used any longer. At least, I did not think their use was allowed.”

Liandrin had already dismounted and plucked the trefoil *Avendesora* leaf out of the carving; like two huge doors woven of living vines, the gates were swinging open, revealing what appeared to be a dull, silvery mirror that gave their reflections back dimly.

“You do not have to come,” Liandrin said. “You can wait here for me, safely enclosed by the fence until I come for you. Or perhaps the Black Ajah will find you before anyone else.” Her smile was not pleasant. Behind her, the Waygate came open to its fullest and stopped.

“I did not say I wouldn’t come,” Elayne said, but she gave the shadowed woods a lingering look.

“If we are going to do this,” Min said hoarsely, “then let’s do it.” She was staring at the Waygate, and Egwene thought she heard her mutter, “The Light burn you, Rand al’Thor.”

“I must go last,” Liandrin said. “All of you, in. I will follow.” She was eyeing the woods now, too, as if she thought someone might be following them. “Quickly! Quickly!”

Egwene did not know what Liandrin expected to see, but if anyone at all came they would probably stop them from using the Waygate. *Rand, you wool-headed idiot*, she thought, *why can’t you just once get yourself into some kind of trouble that doesn’t force me to act like the heroine in a story?*

She dug her heels into Bela’s flanks, and the shaggy mare, restive from too much time in a stable, leaped forward.

“Slowly!” Nynaeve shouted, but it was too late.

Egwene and Bela surged toward their own dull reflections; two shaggy horses touched noses, appeared to flow into each other. Then Egwene was merging into her own image with an icy shock. Time seemed to stretch out, as if the cold crept over her by the width of one hair at a time, and every hair took minutes.

Suddenly Bela was stumbling in pitch-blackness, moving so fast the mare almost pitched over on her head. She caught herself and stood trembling as Egwene dismounted hurriedly, feeling the mare’s legs in the dark to see if she had been hurt. She was almost glad of the dark, to hide her crimson face. She knew that time as well as distance were different the other side of a Waygate; she had moved before thinking.

There was only the blackness around her in every direction, except for the rectangle of the open Waygate, like a window of smoked glass when seen from this side. It let no light in—the black seemed to press right up against it—but through it Egwene could see the others, moving by the slowest increments, like figures in a nightmare. Nynaeve was insisting on handing around the pole-lanterns and lighting them; Liandrin was acceding with a bad grace, apparently insisting on speed.

When Nynaeve came though the Waygate—leading her gray mare slowly, ever so slowly—Egwene almost ran to hug her, and at least half of her feeling was for the lantern Nynaeve carried. The lantern made a smaller pool of light than it should have—the darkness pressed against the light, trying to force it back into the lantern—but Egwene had begun to feel that darkness pressing against her, as if it had weight. Instead, she contented herself with saying, "Bela's all right, and I did not break my neck the way I deserved to."

Once there had been light along the Ways, before the taint on the Power with which they had first been made, the taint of the Dark One on *saidin,* had begun to corrupt them.

Nynaeve thrust the pole of the lantern into her hands and turned to pull another from under her saddle girth. "As long as you know you deserved to," she murmured, "then you didn't deserve to." Suddenly she chuckled. "Sometimes I think it was sayings like that more than anything else that created the title of Wisdom. Well, here's another. You break your neck, and I'll see it mended just so I can break it again."

It was said lightly, and Egwene found herself laughing, too—until she recalled where she was. Nynaeve's amusement did not last long either.

Min and Elayne came though the Waygate hesitantly, leading their horses and carrying lanterns, obviously expecting to find monsters waiting at the least. They looked relieved, at first, to find nothing but darkness, but the oppressiveness of it soon had them shifting nervously from foot to foot. Liandrin replaced the *Avendesora* leaf and rode through the closing Waygate leading the pack horse.

Liandrin did not wait for the gate to finish closing, but tossed the lead line of the pack horse to Min without a word and started along a white line, dimly made out by the light of her lantern, leading into the Ways. The floor seemed to be stone, eaten and pitted by acid. Egwene scrambled hurriedly onto Bela's back, but she was no quicker to follow the Aes Sedai than anyone else. There seemed to be nothing in the world except the rough floor under the horses' hooves.

Straight as an arrow the white line led through the dark to a large stone slab covered with Ogier script inlaid in silver. The same pocking that marked the floor also broke the script in places.

"A Guiding," Elayne murmured, twisting in her saddle to look around uneasily. "Elaida taught me a little about the Ways. She would not say much. Not enough," she added glumly. "Or maybe too much."

Calmly Liandrin compared the Guiding with a parchment, then stuffed it back into a pocket of her cloak before Egwene could get a look.

Their lanterns' light stopped abruptly rather than fading out at the edges, but it was enough for Egwene to see a thick stone balustrade, eaten away in places, as the Aes Sedai led them away from the Guiding. An Island, Elayne called it; the darkness made judging the Island's size difficult, but Egwene thought it might be a hundred paces across.

Stone bridges and ramps pierced the balustrade, each with a stone post beside it marked with a single line in Ogier script. The bridges seemed to arch out into nothing. The ramps led up or down. It was impossible to see more than the beginning of any of them, as they rode past.

Pausing only to eye the stone posts, Liandrin took a ramp that led down, and quickly there was nothing but the ramp and the darkness. A dampening silence hung over everything; Egwene had the feeling that even the clatter of the horses' hooves on the rough stone did not travel very far beyond the light.

Down and down the ramp ran, curving back on itself, until it reached another Island, with its broken balustrade between bridges and ramps, its Guiding that Liandrin compared with her parchment. The Island seemed like solid stone, just as the first one had. Egwene wished she was not sure that the first Island was directly over their heads.

Nynaeve spoke up suddenly, voicing Egwene's thoughts. Her voice sounded steady, but she paused to swallow in the middle of it.

"It—it might be," Elayne said faintly. Her eyes rolled upwards, and quickly dropped again. "Elaida says the rules of nature do not hold in the Ways. At least, not the way they do outside."

"Light!" Min muttered, then raised her voice. "How long do you mean us to stay in here?"

The Aes Sedai’s honey-colored braids swung as she turned to regard them. “Until I take you out,” she said flatly. “The more you bother me, the longer that will be.” She bent back to studying the parchment and the Guiding.

Egwene and the others fell silent.

Liandrin pushed on from Guiding to Guiding, by ramps and bridges that seemed to run unsupported through the endless dark. The Aes Sedai paid very little heed to the rest of them, and Egwene found herself wondering whether Liandrin would turn back to search if one of them fell behind. The others perhaps had the same thought, for they all rode bunched tightly on the dark mare’s heels.

Egwene was surprised to realize that she still felt the attraction of *saidar*, both the presence of the female half of the True Source and the desire to touch it, to channel its flow. Somehow, she had thought the Shadow’s taint on the Ways would hide it from her. She could sense that taint, after a fashion. It was faint and had nothing to do with *saidar*, but she was sure that reaching for the True Source here would be like baring her arm to foul, greasy smoke in order to reach a clean cup. Whatever she did would be tainted. For the first time in weeks she had no trouble at all in resisting the attraction of *saidar.*

It was well into what would have been night in the world outside the Ways when, on an Island, Liandrin abruptly dismounted and announced that they would halt for supper and sleep, and that there was food on the pack horse.

“Parcel it out,” she said, not bothering to assign the task. “It will take us the better part of two days to reach Toman Head. I would not have you arrive hungry if you were too foolish not to bring food yourselves.” Briskly she unsaddled and hobbled her mare, but then she sat down on her saddle and waited for one of them to bring her something to eat.

Elayne took Liandrin her flatbread and cheese. The Aes Sedai made it obvious that she did not want their company, so the rest of them ate their bread and cheese a little apart from her, sitting on their saddles drawn close together. The darkness beyond their lanterns made a poor sauce.

After a time, Egwene said, “Liandrin Sedai, what if we encounter the Black Wind?” Min mouthed the word questioningly, but Elayne gave a squeak. “Moiraine Sedai said it could not be killed, or even hurt very much, and I can feel the taint on this place waiting to twist anything we do with the Power."

"You will not so much as think of the Source unless I tell you to," Liandrin said sharply. "Why, if one such as you tried to channel here, in the Ways, you might well go as mad as a man. You have not the training to deal with the taint of those men who made this. If the Black Wind appears, I will deal with it." She pursed her lips, studying a lump of white cheese. "Moiraine does not know so much as she thinks." She popped the cheese into her mouth with a smile.

"I do not like her," Egwene muttered, low enough to make sure the Aes Sedai could not hear.

"If Moiraine can work with her," Nynaeve said quietly, "so can we. Not that I like Moiraine any better than I do Liandrin, but if they're meddling with Rand and the others again. . . ." She fell silent, hitching her cloak up. The darkness was not cold, but it seemed as if it should be.

"What is this Black Wind?" Min asked. When Elayne had explained, with a great deal of what Elaida had said and what her mother had said, Min sighed. "The Pattern has a great deal to answer for. I don't know that any man is worth this."

"You did not have to come," Egwene reminded her. "You could have gone at any time. No one would have tried to stop you leaving the Tower."

"Oh, I could have wandered off," Min said wryly. "As easily as you, or Elayne. The Pattern doesn't much care what we want. Egwene, what if, after all you are going through for him, Rand doesn't marry you? What if he marries some woman you've never seen before, or Elayne, or me? What then?"

Elayne chortled. "Mother would never approve."

Egwene was silent for a time. Rand might not live to marry anyone. And if he did. . . . She could not imagine Rand hurting anyone. *Not even after he's gone mad?* There had to be some way to stop that, some way to change it; Aes Sedai knew so much, could do so much. *If they could stop it, why don't they?* The only answer was because they could not, and that was not the one she wanted.

She tried to put lightness in her voice. "I don't suppose I *will* marry him. Aes Sedai seldom do marry, you know. But I would not set my heart on him if were you. Or you, Elayne. I do not think. . . ." Her voice caught, and she coughed to cover it. "I do not think he will ever marry. But if he does, I wish well to whoever ends up with him, even one of you.” She thought she sounded as if she meant it. “He is stubborn as a mule, and wrongheaded to a fault, but he *is* gentle.” Her voice shook, but she managed to turn the quaver into a laugh.

“However much you say you do not care,” Elayne said, “I think you’d approve less than Mother would. He *is* interesting, Egwene. More interesting than any man I’ve ever met, even if he is a shepherd. If you are silly enough to throw him away, you will have only yourself to blame if I decide to face down you and Mother both. It would not be the first time the Prince of Andor had no title before he wed. But you won’t be that silly, so don’t try to pretend you will. No doubt you will choose the Green Ajah, and make him one of your Warders. The only Greens I know with only one Warder are married to them.”

Egwene made herself go along with it, saying if she did become a Green she would have ten Warders.

Min watched her, frowning, and Nynaeve watched Min thoughtfully. They all fell silent by the time they changed into more suitable clothes for traveling, from their saddlebags. It was not easy, keeping spirits up in that place.

Sleep came slowly to Egwene, fitfully, and it was filled with bad dreams. She did not dream of Rand, but of the man whose eyes were fire. His face was not masked this time, and it was horrible with almost healed burns. He only looked at her and laughed, but that was worse than the dreams that followed, the dreams of being lost in the Ways forever, the ones where the Black Wind was chasing her. She was grateful when the toe of Liandrin’s riding boot dug into her ribs to waken her; she felt as if she had not slept at all.

Liandrin pushed them hard through the next day, or what passed for day, with only their lanterns for a sun, not letting them stop for sleep until they were swaying in their saddles. Stone made a hard bed, but Liandrin roused them ruthlessly after a few hours, hardly waiting for them to mount before riding on. Ramps and bridges, Islands and Guidings. Egwene saw so many of them in that pitch-dark that she lost count. She had long since lost any count of hours or of days. Liandrin allowed only brief halts to eat and rest the horses, and the darkness weighed down on their shoulders. They slumped in their saddles like sacks of grain, except for Liandrin. The Aes Sedai seemed unaffected by tiredness, or the dark. She was as fresh as she had been back in the White Tower, and as cold. She would not let anyone glimpse the parchment she compared to the Guidings, stuffing it away with a curt, “It is nothing you would understand,” when Nynaeve asked.

And then, while Egwene blinked wearily, Liandrin was riding away from a Guiding, not toward another bridge or ramp, but down a pitted white line that led off into the darkness. Egwene stared at her friends, and then they all hurried to follow. Ahead, by the light of her lantern, the Aes Sedai was already removing the *Avendesora* leaf from the carvings on a Waygate.

“We are here,” Liandrin said, smiling. “I have brought you at last to where you must go.”

* * *

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CHAPTER

40

Damane

Egwene dismounted as the Waygate opened, and when Liandrin motioned them through, she led the shaggy mare carefully out. Even so, she and Bela both stumbled in brush flattened by the opening Waygate as they suddenly seemed to be moving even more slowly. A screen of dense shrubs had surrounded and hidden the Waygate. There were only a few trees close by, and a morning breeze ruffled foliage with a little more color than the leaves had had in Tar Valon.

Watching her friends emerge after her, she had been standing there a good minute before she became aware that others were already there, just out of sight on the other side of the gates. When she did notice them she stared uncertainly; they were as odd a group as she had ever seen, and she had heard too many rumors of the war on Toman Head.

Armored men, at least fifty of them, with overlapping steel plates down their chests and dull black helmets shaped like insects' heads, sat their saddles or stood beside their horses, staring at her and the emerging women, staring at the Waygate, muttering among themselves. The only bareheaded man among them, a tall, dark-faced, hook-nosed fellow standing with a gilded-and-painted helmet on his hip, looked astonished at what he was seeing. There were women with the soldiers, too. Two wore plain, dark gray dresses and wide silver collars, and stood staring intently at those coming out of the Waygate, each with another woman close behind her as if ready to speak into her ear. Two other women, standing a little apart, wore wide, divided skirts that came well short of their ankles, and panels embroidered with forked lightning bolts on their bosoms and skirts. Oddest of all was the last woman, reclining on a palanquin borne by eight muscular, bare-chested men in baggy black trousers. The sides of her scalp were shaved so that only a wide crest of black hair remained to fall down her back. A long, cream-colored robe worked in flowers and birds on blue ovals was carefully arranged to show her skirts of pleated white, and her fingernails were a good inch long, the first two on each hand lacquered blue.

“Liandrin Sedai,” Egwene asked uneasily, “do you know who these people are?” Her friends fingered their reins as if wondering whether to mount and run, but Liandrin replaced the *Avendesora* leaf and stepped forward confidently as the Waygate began to close.

“The High Lady Suroth?” Liandrin said, making it halfway between a question and statement.

The women on the palanquin nodded fractionally. “You are Liandrin.” Her speech was slurred, and it took Egwene a moment to understand. “Aes Sedai,” Suroth added with a twist to her lips, and a murmur rose among the soldiers. “We must be done here quickly, Liandrin. There are patrols, and it would not do to be found. You would enjoy the attentions of the Seekers for Truth no more than I. I mean to be back in Falme before Turak knows I am gone.”

“What are you talking about?” Nynaeve demanded. “What is she talking about, Liandrin?”

Liandrin laid a hand on Nynaeve’s shoulder and one on Egwene’s. “These are the two of whom you were told. And there is another.” She nodded toward Elayne. “She is the Daughter-Heir of Andor.”

The two women with the lightning on their dresses were approaching the party in front of the Waygate—they carried coils of some silvery metal in their hands, Egwene noticed—and the bareheaded soldier came with them. He did not put a hand near the sword hilt sticking up above his shoulder, and he wore a casual smile, but Egwene still watched him narrowly. Liandrin gave no sign of agitation; otherwise Egwene would have jumped onto Bela right then.

“Liandrin Sedai,” she said urgently, “who are these people? Are they here to help Rand and the others, too?”

The hook-nosed man suddenly seized Min and Elayne by the scruffs of their necks, and in the next instant everything seemed to happen at once. The man yelled a curse, and a woman screamed, or perhaps more than one woman; Egwene could not be sure. Abruptly the breeze was a gale that whipped away Liandrin’s angry shout in clouds of dirt and leaves and made the trees bend and groan. Horses reared and whinnied shrilly. And one of the women reached out and fastened something around Egwene’s neck.

Cloak flapping like a sail, Egwene braced against the wind and tugged at what felt like a collar of smooth metal. It would not budge; under her frantic fingers, it felt all of one piece, though she knew it had to have some kind of clasp. The silvery coils the woman had carried now trailed over Egwene's shoulder, their other end joining a bright bracelet on the woman's left wrist. Balling her fist tightly, Egwene hit the woman as hard as she could, right in her eye—and staggered and fell to her knees herself, head ringing. It felt as if a large man had struck her in the face.

When she could see straight once more, the wind had died. A number of horses wandered loose, Bela and Elayne's mare among them, and some of the soldiers were cursing and picking themselves up off the ground. Liandrin was calmly brushing dust and leaves from her dress. Min knelt, supporting herself with her hands, groggily trying to rise further. The hook-nosed man stood over her, his hand dripping blood. Min's knife lay just out of her reach, the blade stained red along one side. Nynaeve and Elayne were nowhere to be seen, and Nynaeve's mare was gone, too. So were some of the soldiers, and one of the pairs of women. The other two were still there, and Egwene could see now that they were linked by a silver cord just like the one that still joined her to the woman standing over her.

That woman was rubbing her cheek as she squatted beside Egwene; there was a bruise already coming up around her left eye. With long, dark hair and big brown eyes, she was pretty, and perhaps as much as ten years older than Nynaeve. "Your first lesson," she said emphatically. There was no animosity in her voice, but what almost sounded like friendliness. "I will not punish you further this time, since I should have been on guard with a newly caught *damane.* Know this. You are a *damane,* a Leashed One, and I am a *sul'dam,* a Holder of the Leash. When *damane* and *sul'dam* are joined, whatever hurt the *sul'dam* feels, the *damane* feels twice over. Even to death. So you must remember that you may never strike at a *sul'dam* in any way, and you must protect your *sul'dam* even more than yourself. I am Renna. How are you called?"

"I am not . . . what you said," Egwene muttered. She pulled at the collar again; it gave no more than before. She thought of knocking the woman down and trying to pry the bracelet from her wrist, but rejected it. Even if the soldiers did not try to stop her—and so far they seemed to be ignoring her and Renna altogether—she had the sinking feeling the woman was telling the truth. Touching her left eye brought a wince; it did not feel puffy, so perhaps she was not actually growing a bruise to match Renna's, but it still hurt. Her left eye, and Renna's left eye. She raised her voice. "Liandrin Sedai? Why are you letting them do this?" Liandrin dusted her hands together, never looking in her direction.

"The very first thing you must learn," Renna said, "is to do exactly as you are told, and without delay."

Egwene gasped. Suddenly her skin burned and prickled as if she had rolled in stinging nettles, from the soles of her feet to her scalp. She tossed her head as the burning sensation increased.

"Many *sul'dam*," Renna went on in that almost friendly tone, "do not believe *damane* should be allowed names, or at least only names they are given. But I am the one who took you, so I will be in charge of your training, and I will allow you to keep your own name. If you do not displease me too far. I am mildly upset with you now. Do you really wish to keep on until I am angry?"

Quivering, Egwene gritted her teeth. Her nails dug into her palms with the effort of not scratching wildly. *Idiot! It's only your name.* "Egwene," she managed to get out. "I am Egwene al'Vere." Instantly the burning itch was gone. She let out a long, unsteady breath.

"Egwene," Renna said. "That is a good name." And to Egwene's horror, Renna patted her on the head as she would a dog.

That, she realized, was what she had detected in the woman's voice—a certain good will for a dog in training, not quite the friendliness one might have toward another human being.

Renna chuckled. "Now you are even angrier. If you intend to strike at me again, remember to make it a small blow, for you will feel it twice as hard as I. Do not attempt to channel; that you will never do without my express command."

Egwene's eye throbbed. She pushed herself to her feet and tried to ignore Renna, as much as it was possible to ignore someone who held a leash fastened to a collar around your neck. Her cheeks burned when the other woman chuckled again. She wanted to go to Min, but the amount of leash Renna had let out would not reach that far. She called softly, "Min, are you all right?"

Sitting slowly back on her heels, Min nodded, then put a hand to her head as if she wished she had not moved it.

Jagged lightning crackled across the clear sky, then struck among the trees some distance off. Egwene jumped, and suddenly smiled. Nynaeve was still free, and Elayne. If anyone could free her and Min, Nynaeve could. Her smile faded into a glare for Liandrin. For whatever the reason the Aes Sedai had betrayed them, there would be a reckoning. *Someday. Somehow.* The glare did no good; Liandrin did not look away from the palanquin.

The bare-chested men knelt, lowering the palanquin to the ground, and Suroth stepped down, carefully arranging her robe, then picked her way to Liandrin on soft-slippered feet. The two women were much of a size. Brown eyes stared levelly into black.

"You were to bring me two," Suroth said. "Instead, I have only one, while two run loose, one of them more powerful by far than I had been led to believe. She will attract every patrol of ours within two leagues."

"I brought you three," Liandrin said calmly. "If you cannot manage to hold them, perhaps our master should find another among you to serve him. You take fright at trifles. If patrols come, kill them."

Lightning flashed again in the near distance, and moments later something roared like thunder not far from where it struck; a cloud of dust rose into the air. Neither Liandrin nor Suroth took any notice.

"I could still return to Falme with two new *damane*," Suroth said. "It grieves me to allow an . . . Aes Sedai"—she twisted the words like a curse—"to walk free."

Liandrin's face did not change, but Egwene saw a nimbus abruptly glow around her.

"Beware, High Lady," Renna called. "She stands ready!"

There was a stir among the soldiers, a reaching for swords and lances, but Suroth only steepled her hands, smiling at Liandrin over her long nails. "You will make no move against me, Liandrin. Our master would disapprove, as I am surely needed here more than you, and you fear him more than you fear being made *damane*."

Liandrin smiled, though white spots marked her cheeks with anger. "And you, Suroth, fear him more than you fear me burning you to a cinder where you stand."

"Just so. We both fear him. Yet even our master's needs will change with time. All *marath'damane* will be leashed eventually. Perhaps I will be the one who places the collar around your lovely throat."

“As you say, Suroth. Our master’s needs will change. I will remind you of it on the day when you kneel to me.”

A tall leatherleaf perhaps a mile away suddenly became a roaring torch.

“This grows tiresome,” Suroth said. “Elbar, recall them.” The hook-nosed man produced a horn no bigger than his fist; it made a hoarse, piercing cry.

“You must find the woman Nynaeve,” Liandrin said sharply. “Elayne is of no importance, but both the woman and this girl here must be taken with you on your ships when you sail.”

“I know very well what has been commanded, *marath’damane*, though I would give much to know why.”

“However much you were told, child,” Liandrin sneered, “that is how much you are allowed to know. Remember that you serve and obey. These two must be removed to the other side of the Aryth Ocean and kept there.”

Suroth sniffed. “I will not remain here to find this Nynaeve. My usefulness to our master will be at an end if Turak hands me over to the Seekers for Truth.” Liandrin opened her mouth angrily, but Suroth refused to allow her a word. “The woman will not remain free for long. Neither of them will. When we sail again, we will take with us every woman on this miserable spit of land who can channel even slightly, leashed and collared. If you wish to remain and search for her, do so. Patrols will be here soon, thinking to engage the rabble that still hides in the countryside. Some patrols take *damane* with them, and they will not care what master you serve. Should you survive the encounter, the leash and collar will teach you a new life, and I do not believe our master will trouble to deliver one foolish enough to let herself be taken.”

“If either is allowed to remain here,” Liandrin said tightly, “our master will trouble himself with you, Suroth. Take them both, or pay the price.” She strode to the Waygate, clutching the reins of her mare. Soon it was closing behind her.

The soldiers who had gone after Nynaeve and Elayne came galloping back with the two women linked by leash, collar, and bracelet, the *damane* and the *sul’dam* riding side by side. Three men led horses with bodies across the saddles. Egwene felt a surge of hope when she realized the bodies all wore armor. They had not caught Nynaeve or Elayne, either one.

Min started to rise to her feet, but the hook-nosed man planted a boot between her shoulder blades and drove her to the ground. Gasping for breath, she twitched there weakly. “I beg permission to speak, High Lady,” he said. Suroth made a small motion with her hand, and he went on. “This peasant cut me, High Lady. If the High Lady has no use for her . . . ?” Suroth motioned slightly again, already turning away, and he reached over his shoulder for the hilt of his sword.

“No!” Egwene shouted. She heard Renna curse softly, and suddenly the burning itch covered her skin again, worse than before, but she did not stop. “Please! High Lady, please! She is my friend!” Pain such as she had never known wracked her through the burning. Every muscle knotted and cramped; she pitched on her face in the dirt, mewling, but she could still see Elbar’s heavy, curved blade come free of its sheath, see him raise it with both hands. “Please! Oh, Min!”

Abruptly, the pain was gone as if it had never been; only the memory remained. Suroth’s blue velvet slippers, dirt-stained now, appeared in front of her face, but it was at Elbar that she stared. He stood there with his sword over his head and all his weight on the foot on Min’s back . . . and he did not move.

“This peasant is your friend?” Suroth said.

Egwene started to rise, but at a surprised arching of Suroth’s eyebrow, she remained lying where she was and only raised her head. She had to save Min. *If it means groveling*. . . . She parted her lips and hoped her gritted teeth would pass for a smile. “Yes, High Lady.”

“And if I spare her, if I allow her to visit you occasionally, you will work hard and learn as you are taught?”

“I will, High Lady.” She would have promised much more to keep that sword from splitting Min’s skull. *I’ll even keep it,* she thought sourly, *as long as I have to.*

“Put the girl on her horse, Elbar,” Suroth said. “Tie her on, if she cannot sit her saddle. If this *damane* proves a disappointment, perhaps then I will let you have the head of the girl.” She was already moving toward her palanquin.

Renna pulled Egwene roughly to her feet and pushed her toward Bela, but Egwene had eyes only for Min. Elbar was no gentler with Min than Renna with her, but she thought Min was all right. At least Min shrugged off Elbar’s attempt to tie her across her saddle and climbed onto her gelding with only a little help.

The odd party started off, westward, with Suroth leading and Elbar slightly to the rear of her palanquin, but close enough to heed any summons immediately. Renna and Egwene rode at the back with Min, and the other *sul’dam* and *damane*, behind the soldiers. The woman who had apparently meant to collar Nynaeve fondled the coiled silver leash she still carried and looked angry. Sparse forest covered the rolling land, and the smoke of the burning leatherleaf was soon only a smudge in the sky behind them.

“You were honored,” Renna said after a time, “having the High Lady speak to you. Another time, I would let you wear a ribbon to mark the honor. But since you brought her attention on yourself. . . .”

Egwene cried out as a switch seemed to lash across her back, then another across her leg, her arm. From every direction they seemed to come; she knew there was nothing to block, but she could not help throwing her arms about as if to stop the blows. She bit her lip to stifle her moans, but tears still rolled down her cheeks. Bela whinnied and danced, but Renna’s grip on the silver leash kept her from carrying Egwene away. None of the soldiers even looked back.

“What are you doing to her?” Min shouted. “Egwene? Stop it!”

“You live on sufferance . . . Min, is it?” Renna said mildly. “Let this be a lesson for you as well. So long as you try to interfere, it will not stop.”

Min raised a fist, then let it fall. “I won’t interfere. Only, please, stop it. Egwene, I’m sorry.”

The unseen blows went on for a few moments more, as if to show Min her intervention had done nothing, then ceased, but Egwene could not stop shuddering. The pain did not go away this time. She pushed back the sleeve of her dress, thinking to see weals; her skin was unmarked, but the feel of them was still there. She swallowed. “It was not your fault, Min.” Bela tossed her head, eyes rolling, and Egwene patted the mare’s shaggy neck. “It wasn’t yours, either.”

“It was your fault, Egwene,” Renna said. She sounded so patient, dealing so kindly with someone who was too dense to see the right, that Egwene wanted to scream. “When a *damane* is punished, it is always her fault, even if she does not know why. A *damane* must anticipate what her *sul’dam* wants. But this time, you do know why. *Damane* are like furniture, or tools, always there ready to be used, but never pushing themselves forward for attention. Especially not for the attention of one of the Blood."

Egwene bit her lip until she tasted blood. *This is a nightmare. It can't be real. Why did Liandrin do this? Why is this happening?* "May . . . may I ask a question?"

"Of me, you may." Renna smiled. "Many *sul'dam* will wear your bracelet over the years—there are always many more *sul'dam* than *damane*—and some would have your hide in strips if you took your eyes off the floor or opened your mouth without permission, but I see no reason not to let you speak, so long as you are careful in what you say." One of the other *sul'dam* snorted loudly; she was linked to a pretty, dark-haired woman in her middle years who kept her eyes on her hands.

"Liandrin"—Egwene would not give her the honorific, not ever again—"and the High Lady spoke of a master they both serve." The thought came into her head of a man with almost healed burns marring his face, and eyes and mouth that sometimes turned to fire, but even if he was only a figure in her dreams that seemed too horrible to contemplate. "Who is he? What does he want with me and—and Min?" She knew it was silly to avoid naming Nynaeve—she did not think any of these people would forget her just because her name was not mentioned, especially the blue-eyed *sul'dam* stroking her empty leash—but it was the only way she could think of fighting back at the moment.

"The affairs of the Blood," Renna said, "are not for me to take notice of, and certainly not for you. The High Lady will tell me what she wishes me to know, and I will tell you what I wish you to know. Anything else that you hear or see must be to you as if it never was said, as if it never happened. This way lies safety, most especially for a *damane. Damane* are too valuable to be killed out of hand, but you might find yourself not only soundly punished, but absent a tongue to speak or hands to write. *Damane* can do what they must without these things."

Egwene shivered, though the air was not very cold. Pulling her cloak up onto her shoulders, her hand brushed the leash, and she jerked at it fitfully. "This is a horrible thing. How can you do this to anyone? What diseased mind ever thought of it?"

The blue-eyed *sul'dam* with the empty leash growled, "This one could do without her tongue already, Renna."

Renna only smiled patiently. “How is it horrible? Could we allow anyone to run loose who can do what a *damane* can? Sometimes men are born who would be *marath’damane* if they were women—it is so here also, I have heard—and they must be killed, of course, but the women do not go mad. Better for them to become *damane* than make trouble contending for power. As for the mind that first thought of the *a’dam*, it was the mind of a woman who called herself Aes Sedai.”

Egwene knew incredulity must be painting her face, because Renna laughed openly. “When Luthair Paendrag Mondwin, son of the Hawkwing, first faced the Armies of the Night, he found many among them who called themselves Aes Sedai. They contended for power among themselves and used the One Power on the field of battle. One such, a woman named Deain, who thought she could do better serving the Emperor—he was not Emperor then, of course—since he had no Aes Sedai in his armies, came to him with a device she had made, the first *a’dam*, fastened to the neck of one of her sisters. Though that woman did not want to serve Luthair, the *a’dam* required her to serve. Deain made more *a’dam*, the first *sul’dam* were found, and women captured who called themselves Aes Sedai discovered that they were in fact only *marath’damane*, Those Who Must Be Leashed. It is said that when she herself was leashed, Deain’s screams shook the Towers of Midnight, but of course she, too, was a *marath’damane*, and *marath’damane* cannot be allowed to run free. Perhaps you will be one of those who has the ability to make *a’dam*. If so, you will be pampered, you may rest assured.”

Egwene looked yearningly at the countryside through which they rode. The land was beginning to rise in low hills, and the thin forest had dwindled to scattered thickets, but she was sure she could lose herself in them. “Am I supposed to look forward to being pampered like a pet dog?” she said bitterly. “A lifetime of being chained to men and women who think I am some kind of animal?”

“Not men.” Renna chuckled. “All *sul’dam* are women. If a man put on this bracelet, most of the time it would be no different than if it were hanging on a peg on the wall.”

“And sometimes,” the blue-eyed *sul’dam* put in harshly, “you and he would both die screaming.” The woman had sharp features and a tight, thin-lipped mouth, and Egwene realized that anger was apparently her permanent expression. “From time to time the Empress plays with lords by linking them to a *damane*. It makes the lords sweat and entertains the Court of the Nine Moons. The lord never knows until it is done whether he will live or die, and neither does the *damane*." Her laugh was vicious.

"Only the Empress can afford to waste *damane* in such a way, Alwhin," Renna snapped, "and I do not mean to train this *damane* only to have her thrown away."

"I have not seen any training at all so far, Renna. Only a great deal of chatter, as if you and this *damane* were girlhood friends."

"Perhaps it is time to see what she can do," Renna said, studying Egwene. "Do you have enough control yet to channel at that distance?" She pointed to a tall oak standing alone on a hilltop.

Egwene frowned at the tree, perhaps half a mile from the line followed by the soldiers and Suroth's palanquin. She had never tried anything much beyond arm's reach, but she thought it might be possible. "I don't know," she said.

"Try," Renna told her. "Feel the tree. Feel the sap in the tree. I want you to make it all not only hot, but so hot that every drop of sap in every branch flashes to steam in an instant. Do it."

Egwene was shocked to discover an urge to do as Renna commanded. She had not channeled, or even touched *saidar*, in two days; the desire to fill herself with the One Power made her shiver. "I"—in half a heartbeat she discarded "will not"; the weals that were not there still burned too sharply for her to be quite that foolish—"cannot," she finished instead. "It is too far, and I've never done anything like that before."

One of the *sul'dam* laughed raucously, and Alwhin said, "She never even tried."

Renna shook her head almost sadly. "When one has been a *sul'dam* long enough," she told Egwene, "one learns to tell many things about *damane* even without the bracelet, but with the bracelet one can always tell whether a *damane* has tried to channel. You must never lie to me, or to any *sul'dam*, not even by a hair."

Suddenly the invisible switches were back, striking at her everywhere. Yelling, she tried to hit Renna, but the *sul'dam* casually knocked her fist away, and Egwene felt as if Renna had hit her arm with a stick. She dug her heels into Bela's flanks, but the *sul'dam*'s grip on the leash nearly pulled her out of her saddle. Frantically she reached for *saidar*, meaning to hurt Renna enough to make her stop, just the kind of hurt she herself had been given. The *sul'dam* shook her head wryly; Egwene howled as her own skin was suddenly scalded. Not until she fled from *saidar* completely did the burn begin to fade, and the unseen blows never ceased or slowed. She tried to shout that she would try, if only Renna would stop, but all she could manage was to scream and writhe.

Dimly, she was aware of Min shouting angrily and trying to ride to her side, of Alwhin tearing Min's reins from her hands, of another *sul'dam* speaking sharply to her *damane*, who looked at Min. And then Min was yelling, too, arms flapping as if trying to ward off blows or beat away stinging insects. In her own pain, Min's seemed distant.

Their cries together were enough to make some of the soldiers twist in their saddles. After one look, they laughed and turned back. How *sul'dam* dealt with *damane* was no affair of theirs.

To Egwene it seemed to go on forever, but at last there was an end. She lay sprawled weakly across the cantle of her saddle, cheeks wet with tears, sobbing into Bela's mane. The mare whickered uneasily.

"It is good that you have spirit," Renna said calmly. "The best *damane* are those who have spirit to be shaped and molded."

Egwene squeezed her eyes shut. She wished she could close her ears, too, to shut out Renna's voice. *I have to get away. I have to, but how? Nynaeve, help me. Light, somebody help me.*

"You will be one of the best," Renna said in tones of satisfaction. Her hand stroked Egwene's hair, a mistress soothing her dog.

Nynaeve leaned out of her saddle to peer around the screen of prickly leafed shrubs. Scattered trees met her eyes, some with leaves turning color. The expanses of grass and brush between seemed empty. Nothing moved that she could see except the thinning column of smoke, wavering in a breeze, from the leatherleaf.

That had been her work, the leatherleaf, and once the lightning called from a clear sky, and a few other things she had not thought to try until those two women tried them on her. She thought they must work together in some way, though she could not understand their relation to each other, apparently leashed as they were. One wore a collar, but the other was chained as surely as she. What Nynaeve was sure of was that one or both were Aes Sedai. She had never had a clear enough sight of them to see the glow of channeling, but it had to be.

I'll certainly take pleasure in telling Sheriam about them, she thought dryly. *Aes Sedai don't use the Power as a weapon, do they?*

She certainly had. She had at least knocked the two women down with that lightning strike, and she had seen one of the soldiers, or his body rather, burn from the ball of fire she made and hurled at them. But she had not seen any of the strangers at all in some time now.

Sweat beaded on her forehead, and it was not all from exertion. Her contact with *saidar* was gone, and she could not bring it back. In that first fury of knowing that Liandrin had betrayed them, *saidar* had been there almost before she knew it, the One Power flooding her. It had seemed she could do anything. And as long as they had chased her, rage at being hunted like an animal had fueled her. Now the chase had vanished. The longer she had gone without seeing an enemy at whom she could strike, the more she had begun to worry that they might be sneaking up on her somehow, and the more she had had time to worry about what was happening to Egwene, and Elayne, and Min. Now she was forced to admit that what she felt most was fear. Fear for them, fear for herself. It was anger she needed.

Something stirred behind a tree.

Her breath caught, and she fumbled for *saidar*, but all the exercises Sheriam and the others had taught her, all the blossoms unfolding in her mind, all the imagined streams that she held like riverbanks, did no good. She could feel it, sense the Source, but she could not touch it.

Elayne stepped from behind the tree in a wary crouch, and Nynaeve sagged with relief. The Daughter-Heir's dress was dirty and torn, her golden hair was a tangle of snarls and leaves, and her searching eyes were as wide as those of a frightened fawn, but she held her short-bladed dagger in a steady hand. Nynaeve picked up her reins and rode into the open.

Elayne gave a convulsive jump, then her hand went to her throat and she drew a deep breath. Nynaeve dismounted, and the two women hugged, taking comfort in having found each other.

"For a moment," Elayne said as they finally stepped apart, "I thought you were. . . . Do you know where they are? There were two men following me. Another few minutes and they would have caught me, but a horn sounded and they turned their horses and galloped off. They could see me, Nynaeve, and they just left."

"I heard it, too, and I haven't seen any of them since. Have you seen Egwene, or Min?"

Elayne shook her head, slumping to sit on the ground. “Not since. . . . That man hit Min, knocked her down. And one of those women was trying to put something around Egwene’s neck. I saw that much before I ran. I don’t think they got away, Nynaeve. I should have done something. Min cut the hand that was holding me, and Egwene. . . . I just ran, Nynaeve. I realized I was free, and I ran. Mother had better marry Gareth Bryne and have another daughter as soon as she can. I am not fit to take the throne.”

“Don’t be a goose,” Nynaeve said sharply. “Remember, I have a packet of sheepstongue root among my herbs.” Elayne had her head in her hands; the gibe did not even produce a murmur. “Listen to me, girl. Did you see me stay to fight twenty or thirty armed men, not to mention the Aes Sedai? If you had waited, the most likely thing by far is that you would be a prisoner, too. If they didn’t just kill you. They seemed to be interested in Egwene and me for some reason. They might not have cared whether you remained alive or not.” *Why* are *they interested in Egwene and me? Why us in particular? Why did Liandrin do this? Why?* She had no more answers now than she had had the first time she asked herself these questions.

“If I had died trying to help them—” Elayne began.

“—you’d be dead. And little good you’d be then, to yourself or them. Now get on your feet and brush off your dress.” Nynaeve rummaged in her saddlebags for a hairbrush. “And fix your hair.”

Elayne got up slowly, and took the brush with a small laugh. “You sound like Lini, my old nurse.” She began to run the brush through her hair, wincing as tangles pulled. “But how are we going to help them, Nynaeve? You may be as strong as a full sister when you are angry, but they have women who can channel, too. I cannot think they’re Aes Sedai, but they might as well be. We do not even know in which direction they took them.”

“West,” Nynaeve said. “That creature Suroth mentioned Falme, and that’s as far west on Toman Head as you can go. We will go to Falme. I hope Liandrin is there. I will make her curse the day her mother laid eyes on her father. But first I think we had better find some clothes of the country. I’ve seen Taraboner and Domani women in the Tower, and what they wear is nothing like what we have on. We would stand out in Falme as strangers.”

“I would not mind a Domani dress—though Mother would surely have a fit if she ever found out I’d worn one, and Lini would never let me hear the end of it—but even if we find a village, can we afford new dresses? I have no idea how much money you have, but I have only ten gold marks and perhaps twice that in silver. That will keep us two or three weeks, but I don't know what we will do after that."

"A few months as a novice in Tar Valon," Nynaeve said, laughing, "has not stopped you thinking like the heir to a throne. I don't have a tenth what you do, but altogether it will keep us two or three months, in comfort. Longer, if we are careful. I have no intention of buying us dresses, and they won't be new in any case. My gray silk dress will do us some good, with all those pearls and that gold thread. If I can't find a woman who will trade us each two or three sturdy changes for that, I will give you this ring, and I will be the novice." She swung up into her saddle and reached a hand down to pull Elayne up behind her.

"What are we going to do when we reach Falme?" Elayne asked as she settled on the mare's rump.

"I won't know that until we are there." Nynaeve paused, letting the horse stand. "Are you sure you want to do this? It will be dangerous."

"More dangerous than it is for Egwene and Min? They would come after us if our circumstances were reversed; I know they would. Are we going to stay here all day?" Elayne dug her heels in, and the mare started off.

Nynaeve turned the horse until the sun, still short of its noonday crest, shone at their backs. "We are going to have to be cautious. The Aes Sedai we know can recognize a woman who can channel just by being within arm's length of her. These Aes Sedai may be able to pick us out of a crowd if they are looking for us, and we had better assume they are." *They were certainly looking for Egwene and me. But why?*

"Yes, cautious. You were right before, too. We will not do them any good letting ourselves be caught as well." Elayne was silent for a moment. "Do you think it was all lies, Nynaeve? What Liandrin told us about Rand being in danger? And the others? Aes Sedai do not lie."

It was Nynaeve's turn to be silent, remembering Sheriam telling her of the oaths a woman took on being raised to full sisterhood, oaths spoken holding a *ter'angreal* that bound her to keep them. *To speak no word that is not true.* That was one, but everyone knew that the truth an Aes Sedai said might not be the truth you thought you heard. "I expect Rand is warming his feet in front of Lord Agelmar's fire in Fal Dara this minute," she said. *I can't worry about him, now. I have to think about Egwene and Min.*

“I suppose he is,” Elayne said with a sigh. She shifted behind the saddle. “If it is very far to Falme, Nynaeve, I expect to ride in the saddle half the time. This is not a very comfortable seat. We will never reach Falme at all if you let this horse set her own pace the whole way.”

Nynaeve booted the mare to a quick trot, and Elayne yelped and caught at her cloak. Nynaeve told herself that she would take a turn riding behind and not complain if Elayne put the horse to a gallop, but for the most part she ignored the gasps of the woman bouncing behind her. She was too busy hoping that by the time they reached Falme, she could stop being afraid and start being angry.

The breeze freshened, cool and brisk with a hint of cold yet to come.

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CHAPTER

41

Disagreements

Thunder rumbled across the slate-dark afternoon sky. Rand pulled the hood of his cloak further up, hoping to keep at least some of the cold rain off. Red stepped through muddy puddles doggedly. The hood hung sodden around Rand's head, as the rest of the cloak did around his shoulders, and his fine black coat was just as wet, and as cold. The temperature would not have far to drop before snow or sleet came down instead of rain. Snow would fall soon, again; the people in the village they had passed through said two snows had already come this year. Shivering, Rand almost wished it was snowing. Then, at least, he would not be soaked to the skin.

The column plodded along, keeping a wary eye on the rolling country. Ingtar's Gray Owl hung heavily even when the wind gusted. Hurin sometimes pulled his cowl back to sniff the air; he said neither rain nor cold had any effect on a trail, certainly not on the kind of trail he was seeking, but so far the sniffer had found nothing. Behind him, Rand heard Uno mutter a curse. Loial kept checking his saddlebags; he did not seem to mind getting wet himself, but he worried continually about his books. Everyone was miserable except for Verin, who appeared too lost in thought to even notice that her hood had slid back, exposing her face to the rain.

"Can't you do something about this?" Rand demanded of her. A small voice in the back of his head told him he could do it himself. All he need do was embrace *saidin.* So sweet, the call of *saidin.* To be filled with the One Power, to be one with the storm. Turn the skies to sunlight, or ride the storm as it raged, whip it to fury and scour Toman Head clean from the sea to the plain. Embrace *saidin.* He suppressed the longing ruthlessly.

The Aes Sedai gave a start. "What? Oh. I suppose. A little. I couldn't stop a storm this big, not by myself—it covers too much area—but I could lessen it some. Where we are, at least." She wiped rain from her face, seemed to realize for the first time that her hood had slipped, and pulled it back up absently.

“Then why don’t you?” Mat said. The shivering face peering out from under his hood looked at death’s door, but his voice was vigorous.

“Because if I used that much of the One Power, any Aes Sedai closer than ten miles would know someone had channeled. We don’t want to bring these Seanchan down on us with some of their *damane*.” Her mouth tightened angrily.

They had learned a little of the invaders in that village, called Atuan’s Mill, though most of what they had heard hatched more questions than it answered. The people had babbled one moment and clamped their mouths shut the next, trembling and looking over their shoulders. They all shook with fear that the Seanchan would return with their monsters and their *damane*. That women who should have been Aes Sedai were instead leashed like animals frightened the villagers even more than the strange creatures the Seanchan commanded, things the folk of Atuan’s Mill could only describe in whispers as coming from nightmares. And worst of all, the examples the Seanchan had made before leaving still chilled the people to their marrow. They had buried their dead, but they feared to clean away the large charred patch in the village square. None of them would say what had happened there, but Hurin had vomited as soon as they entered the village, and he would not go near the blackened ground.

Atuan’s Mill had been half deserted. Some had fled to Falme, thinking the Seanchan would not be so harsh in a town they held fast, and others had gone east. More had said they were thinking of it. There was fighting on Almoth Plain, Taraboners battling Domani it was said, but such houses and barns as were burned there were kindled by torches in the hands of men. Even a war was easier to face than what the Seanchan had done, what they might do.

“Why did Fain bring the Horn here?” Perrin muttered. The question had been asked by each of them at one time or another, and no one had an answer. “There’s war, and these Seanchan, and their monsters. Why here?”

Ingtar turned in his saddle to look back at them. His face appeared almost as haggard as Mat’s. “There are always men who see chances for their own advantage in the confusion of war. Fain is one like that. No doubt he thinks to steal the Horn again, from the Dark One this time, and use it for his own profit.”

“The Father of Lies never lays simple plans,” Verin said. “It may be that he wants Fain to bring the Horn here for some reason known only in Shayol Ghul.”

“Monsters,” Mat snorted. His cheeks were sunken, now, his eyes hollow. That he *sounded* healthy only made it worse. “They saw some Trollocs, or a Fade, if you ask me. Well, why not? If the Seanchan have Aes Sedai fighting for them, why not Fades and Trollocs?” He caught Verin staring at him and flinched. “Well, they are, on leashes or not. They can channel, and that makes them Aes Sedai.” He glanced at Rand and gave a ragged laugh. “That makes you Aes Sedai, the Light help us all.”

Masema came galloping from ahead, through the mud and the steady rain. “There is another village ahead, my Lord,” he said as he pulled in beside Ingtar. His eyes only swept past Rand, but they tightened, and he did not look at Rand again. “It’s empty, my Lord. No villagers, no Seanchan, nobody at all. The houses all look sound, though, except for two or three that . . . well, they aren’t there anymore, my Lord.”

Ingtar raised his hand and signaled for a trot.

The village Masema had found covered the slopes of a hill, with a paved square at the top around a circle of stone walls. The houses were of stone, all flat-roofed and few more than a single story. Three that had been larger, along one side of the square, were only heaps of blackened rubble; shattered chunks of stone and roof beams lay scattered across the square. A few shutters banged when the wind gusted.

Ingtar dismounted in front of the only large building still standing. The creaking sign above its door bore a woman juggling stars, but no name; rain came off the corners in two steady drizzles. Verin hurried inside while Ingtar spoke. “Uno, search every house. If there is anyone left, perhaps they can tell us what happened here, and maybe a little more about these Seanchan. And if there’s any food, bring that, too. And blankets.” Uno nodded and began telling off men. Ingtar turned to Hurin. “What do you smell? Did Fain come through here?”

Hurin, rubbing his nose, shook his head. “Not him, my Lord, and not the Trollocs, neither. Whoever did that left a stench, though.” He pointed to the wreckage that had been houses. “It was killing, my Lord. There were people in there.”

“Seanchan,” Ingtar growled. “Let’s get inside. Ragan, find some sort of stable for the horses.”

Verin already had fires going in both of the big fireplaces, at either end of the common room, and was warming her hands at one, her sodden cloak spread out on one of the tables dotting the tiled floor. She had found a few candles, too, now burning on a table stuck in their own tallow. Emptiness and quiet, except for the occasional grumble of thunder, added to the flickering shadows to give the place a cavernous feel. Rand tossed his equally wet cloak and coat on a table and joined her. Only Loial seemed more interested in checking his books than in warming himself.

"We will never find the Horn of Valere this way," Ingtar said. "Three days since we . . . since we arrived here"—he shuddered and scrubbed a hand through his hair; Rand wondered what the Shienaran had seen in his other lives—"another two, at least, to Falme, and we have not found so much as a hair of Fain or Darkfriends. There are scores of villages along the coast. He could have gone to any of them and taken ship anywhere by now. If he was ever here."

"He is here," Verin said calmly, "and he went to Falme."

"And he's still here," Rand said. *Waiting for me. Please, Light, he's still waiting.*

"Hurin still hasn't caught a whiff of him," Ingtar said. The sniffer shrugged as if he felt himself at fault for the failure. "Why would he choose Falme? If those villagers are to be believed, Falme is held by these Seanchan. I would give my best hound to know who they are, and where they came from."

"Who they are is not important to us." Verin knelt and unfastened her saddlebags, pulling out dry clothes. "At least we have rooms in which to change our clothes, though it will do us little good unless the weather changes. Ingtar, it may well be that what the villagers told us is right, that they are the descendants of Artur Hawkwing's armies come back. What matters is that Padan Fain has gone to Falme. The writings in the dungeon at Fal Dara—"

"—never mentioned Fain. Forgive me, Aes Sedai, but that could have been a trick as easily as dark prophecy. I can't believe even Trollocs would be stupid enough to tell us everything they were going to do before they did it."

She twisted to look up at him. "And what do you mean to do, if you will not take my advice?"

“I mean to have the Horn of Valere,” Ingtar said firmly. “Forgive me, but I have to trust my own senses before some words scrawled by a Trolloc . . .”

“A Myrddraal, surely,” Verin murmured, but he did not even pause.

“. . . or a Darkfriend seeming to betray himself out of his own mouth. I mean to quarter the ground until Hurin smells a trail or we find Fain in the flesh. I must have the Horn, Verin Sedai. I must!”

“That isn’t the way,” Hurin said softly. “Not ‘must.’ What happens, happens.” No one paid him any mind.

“We all must,” Verin murmured, peering into her saddlebags, “yet some things may be even more important than that.”

She did not say more, but Rand grimaced. He longed to get away from her and her prods and hints. *I am not the Dragon Reborn. Light, but I wish I could just get away from Aes Sedai completely.* “Ingtar, I think I’m riding on to Falme. Fain is there—I’m sure he is—and if I don’t come soon, he—he will do something to hurt Emond’s Field.” He had not mentioned that part before.

They all stared at him, Mat and Perrin frowning, worried but considering; Verin as if she had just seen a new piece added to a puzzle. Loial looked astonished, and Hurin seemed confused. Ingtar was openly disbelieving.

“Why would he do that?” the Shienaran said.

“I don’t know,” Rand lied, “but that was part of the message he left with Barthanes.”

“And did Barthanes say Fain was going to Falme?” Ingtar demanded. “No. It wouldn’t matter if he had.” He gave a bitter laugh. “Darkfriends lie as naturally as they breathe.”

“Rand,” Mat said, “if I knew how to stop Fain from hurting Emond’s Field, I would. If I was sure he was going to. But I need that dagger, Rand, and Hurin has the best chance of finding it.”

“I will go wherever you go, Rand,” Loial said. He had finished making sure the books were dry and was taking off his sodden coat. “But I don’t see where a few more days will change anything one way or another, now. Try being a little less hasty for once.”

“It doesn’t matter to me whether we go to Falme now, later, or never,” Perrin said with a shrug, “but if Fain really is threatening Emond’s Field . . . well, Mat’s right. Hurin is the best way to find him.”

“I can find him, Lord Rand,” Hurin put in. “Let me get one sniff of him, and I’ll take you right to him. There’s never anything else left a trail like his.”

“You must make your own choice, Rand,” Verin said carefully, “but remember that Falme is held by invaders about whom we still know next to nothing. If you go to Falme alone, you may find yourself a prisoner, or worse, and that will serve nothing. I am sure whatever choice you make will be the right one.”

“Ta’veren,” Loial rumbled.

Rand threw up his hands.

Uno came in from the square, shaking rain off his cloak.

“Not a flaming soul to be found, my Lord. Looks to me like they ran like striped pigs. Livestock’s all gone, and there isn’t a bloody cart or wagon left, either. Half the houses are stripped to the flaming floors. I’ll wager my next month’s pay you could follow them by the bloody furniture they tossed on the side of the road when they realized it was only weighing down their flaming wagons.”

“What about clothes?” Ingtar asked.

Uno blinked his one eye in surprise. “Just a few bits and pieces, my Lord. Mainly what they didn’t think was bloody worth taking with them.”

“They will have to do. Hurin, I mean to dress you and a few more as local people, as many as we can manage, so you won’t stand out. I want you to swing wide, north and south, until you cross the trail.” More soldiers were coming in, and they all gathered around Ingtar and Hurin to listen.

Rand leaned his hands on the mantel over the fireplace and stared into the flames. They made him think of Ba’alzamon’s eyes. “There isn’t much time,” he said. “I feel . . . something . . . pulling me to Falme, and there isn’t much time.” He saw Verin watching him, and added harshly, “Not that. It’s Fain I have to find. It has nothing to do with . . . that.”

Verin nodded. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and we are all woven into the Pattern. Fain has been here weeks before us, perhaps months. A few more days will make little difference in whatever is going to happen.”

“I’m going to get some sleep,” he muttered, picking up his saddlebags. “They can’t have carried off all the beds.”

Upstairs, he did find beds, but only a few still had mattresses, and those so lumpy he thought it might be more comfortable to sleep on the floor. Finally he chose a bed where the mattress simply sagged in the middle. There was nothing else in the room except one wooden chair and a table with a rickety leg.

He took off his wet things, putting on a dry shirt and breeches before lying down, since there were no sheets or blankets, and propped his sword beside the head of the bed. Wryly, he thought that the only thing dry he had for a coverlet was the Dragon's banner; he left it safely buckled inside the saddlebags.

Rain drummed on the roof, and thunder growled overhead, and now and again a lightning flash lit the windows. Shivering, he rolled this way and that on the mattress, seeking some comfortable way to lie, wondering if the banner would not do for a blanket after all, wondering if he should ride on to Falme.

He rolled to his other side, and Ba'alzamon was standing beside the chair with the pure white length of the Dragon's banner in his hands. The room seemed darker there, as if Ba'alzamon stood on the edge of a cloud of oily black smoke. Nearly healed burns crisscrossed his face, and as Rand looked, his pitch-dark eyes vanished for an instant, replaced by endless caverns of fire. Rand's saddlebags lay by his feet, buckles undone, flap thrown back where the banner had been hidden.

"The time comes closer, Lews Therin. A thousand threads draw tight, and soon you will be tied and trapped, set to a course you cannot change. Madness. Death. Before you die, will you once more kill everything you love?"

Rand glanced at the door, but he made no move except to sit up on the side of the bed. What good to try running from the Dark One? His throat felt like sand. "I am not the Dragon, Father of Lies!" he said hoarsely.

The darkness behind Ba'alzamon roiled, and furnaces roared as Ba'alzamon laughed. "You honor me. And belittle yourself. I know you too well. I have faced you a thousand times. A thousand times a thousand. I know you to your miserable soul, Lews Therin Kinslayer." He laughed again; Rand put a hand in front of his face against the heat of that fiery mouth.

"What do you want? I will not serve you. I will not do anything that you want. I'll die first!"

"You *will* die, worm! How many times have you died across the span of the Ages, fool, and how much has death availed you? The grave is cold and lonely, save for the worms. The grave is mine. This time there will be no rebirth for you. This time the Wheel of Time will be broken and the world remade in the image of the Shadow. This time your death will be forever! Which will you choose? Death everlasting? Or life eternal—and power!"

Rand hardly realized that he was on his feet. The void had surrounded him, *saidin* was there, and the One Power flowed into him. That fact almost cracked the emptiness. Was this real? Was it a dream? Could he channel in a dream? But the torrent rushing into him swept away his doubts. He hurled it at Ba'alzamon, hurled the pure One Power, the force that turned the Wheel of Time, a force that could make seas burn and eat mountains.

Ba'alzamon took half a step back, holding the banner clutched before him. Flames leaped in his wide eyes and mouth, and the darkness seemed to cloak him in shadow. In the Shadow. The Power sank into that black mist and vanished, soaked up like water on parched sand.

Rand drew on *saidin*, pulled for more, and still more. His flesh seemed so cold it must shatter at a touch; it burned as if it must boil away. His bones felt on the point of crisping to cold crystal ash. He did not care; it was like drinking life itself.

"Fool!" Ba'alzamon roared. "You will destroy yourself!"

Mat. The thought floated somewhere beyond the consuming flood. *The dagger. The Horn. Fain. Emond's Field. I can't die yet.*

He was not sure how he did it, but suddenly the Power was gone, and *saidin*, and the void. Shuddering uncontrollably, he fell to his knees beside the bed, arms wrapped around himself in a vain effort to stop their twitching.

"That is better, Lews Therin." Ba'alzamon tossed the banner to the floor and put his hands on the chair back; wisps of smoke rose from between his fingers. The shadow no longer encompassed him. "There is your banner, Kinslayer. Much good will it do you. A thousand strings laid over a thousand years have drawn you here. Ten thousand woven throughout the Ages tie you like a sheep for slaughter. The Wheel itself holds you prisoner to your fate Age after Age. But I can set you free. You cowering cur, I alone in the entire world can teach you how to wield the Power. I alone can stop it killing you before you have a chance to go mad. I alone can stop the madness. You have served me before. Serve me again, Lews Therin, or be destroyed forever!"

“My name,” Rand forced between chattering teeth, “is Rand al’Thor.” His shivering forced him to squeeze his eyes shut, and when he opened them again, he was alone.

Ba’alzamon was gone. The shadow was gone. His saddlebags stood against the chair with the buckles done up and one side bulging with the bulk of the Dragon’s banner, just as he had left it. But on the chair back, tendrils of smoke still rose from the charred impressions of fingers.

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CHAPTER

42

Falme

Nynaeve pressed Elayne back into the narrow alleyway between a cloth merchant’s shop and a potter’s works as the pair of women linked by a silvery leash passed by, heading down the cobblestone street toward Falme harbor. They did not dare allow that pair to come too close. The people in the street made way for those two even more quickly than they did for Seanchan soldiers, or the occasional noble’s palanquin, thickly curtained now that the days were cold. Even the street artists did not offer to draw them in chalks or pencils, although they pestered everyone else. Nynaeve’s mouth tightened as her eyes followed the *sul’dam* and the *damane* through the crowd. Even after weeks in the town, the sight sickened her. Perhaps it sickened her more, now. She could not imagine doing that to any woman, not even Moiraine or Liandrin.

Well, maybe Liandrin, she admitted sourly. Sometimes, at night, in the small, smelly room the two of them had rented above a fishmonger, she thought of what she would like to do to Liandrin when she got her hands on her. Liandrin even more than Suroth. More than once she had been shocked at her own cruelty, even while she was delighted at her inventiveness.

Still trying to keep the pair in sight, her eyes fell on a bony man, well down the street, before the shifting throng hid him again. She had only a flash of a big nose in a narrow face. He wore a rich bronze velvet robe of Seanchan cut over his clothes, but she thought that he was no Seanchan, though the servant following him was, and a servant of high degree, with one temple shaved. The local people had not taken to Seanchan fashions, particularly that one. *That looked like Padan Fain*, she thought incredulously. *It couldn’t be. Not here.*

“Nynaeve,” Elayne said softly, “could we move on, now? That fellow selling apples is looking at his table as if he’s thinking he had more a few moments ago, and I would not want him wondering what I have in my pockets."

They both wore long coats made of sheepskin, with the fleece turned in and bright red spirals embroidered across the breast. It was country garb, but it passed well enough in Falme, where many people had come in from the farms and villages. Among so many strangers the two of them had been able to sink in unnoticed. Nynaeve had combed out her braid, and her gold ring, the serpent eating its own tail, now nestled under her dress beside Lan's heavy ring on the leather cord around her neck.

The large pockets of Elayne's coat bulged suspiciously.

"You stole those apples?" Nynaeve hissed quietly, pulling Elayne out into the crowded street. "Elayne, we don't have to steal. Not yet, anyway."

"No? How much money do we have left? You have been 'not hungry' very often at mealtimes the last few days."

"Well, I am not hungry," Nynaeve snapped, trying to ignore the hollow in her middle. Everything cost considerably more than she had expected; she had heard local people complaining about how prices had risen since the Seanchan came. "Give me one of those." The apple Elayne dug out of her pocket was small and hard, but it crunched with a delicious sweetness when Nynaeve bit into it. She licked the juice from her lips. "How did you manage to—" She jerked Elayne to a halt and peered into her face. "Did you . . . ? Did you . . . ?" She could not think of a way to say it with so many streaming by, but Elayne understood.

"Only a little. I made that stack of old melons with the soft spots fall, and when he started putting them back. . . ." She did not even have the grace, as Nynaeve saw it, to blush or look embarrassed. Unconcernedly eating one of the apples, she shrugged. "There is no need to frown at me like that. I looked carefully to make sure there was no *damane* close." She sniffed. "If I were being held prisoner, I would not help my captors find other women to enslave. Although, the way these Falmen behave, you would think they were lifelong servants of those who should be their enemies to the death." She looked around, openly contemptuous, at the people hurrying by; it was possible to follow the path of any Seanchan, even common soldiers and even at a distance, by the ripples of bowing. "They should resist. They should fight back."

"How? Against . . . that."

They had to step to the side of the street along with everyone else as a Seanchan patrol neared, climbing from the direction of the harbor. Nynaeve managed the bow, hands on knees, with face schooled to a perfect smoothness; Elayne was slower, and made her bow with a distasteful twist of her mouth.

There were twenty armored men and women in the patrol, riding horses, for which Nynaeve was grateful. She could not become used to seeing people riding things that looked like bronze-scaled, tailless cats, and a rider on one of the flying beasts was always enough to make her feel dizzy; she was glad there were so few of them. Still, two leashed creatures trotted along with the patrol, like wingless birds with coarse leather skin, and sharp beaks higher above the cobblestones than the helmeted heads of the soldier. Their long, sinewy legs looked as if they could run faster than any horse.

She straightened slowly after the Seanchan were gone. Some of those who had bowed for the patrol came close to running; no one was comfortable at the sight of the Seanchan's beasts except the Seanchan themselves. "Elayne," she said softly as they resumed their climb, "if we are caught, I swear that before they kill us, or do whatever they do, I will beg them on bended knees to let me stripe you from top to bottom with the stoutest switch I can find! If you still can't learn to be careful, maybe it's time to think about sending you back to Tar Valon, or home to Caemlyn, or anywhere but here."

"I am careful. At least I looked to be sure there was no *damane* close by. What about you? I have seen you channel with one in plain sight."

"I made sure they weren't looking at me," Nynaeve muttered. She had had to ball up all her anger at women being chained like animals to manage it. "And I only did it once. And it was only a trickle."

"A trickle? We had to spend three days hiding in our room breathing fish while they searched the town for whoever had done it. Do you call that being careful?"

"I had to know if there was a way to unfasten those collars." She thought there was. She would have to test one more collar at least before she was certain, and she was not looking forward to it. She had thought, like Elayne, that the *damane* must all be prisoners eager to escape, but it had been the woman in the collar who raised the pry.

A man pushing a barrow that bumped over the cobblestones passed by them, crying his services to sharpen scissors and knives. "They should resist, somehow," Elayne growled. "They act as if they do not see anything that happens around them if there's a Seanchan in it."

Nynaeve only sighed. It did not help that she thought Elayne was at least partly right. At first she had thought some of the Falmen submission, at least, must be a pose, but she had found no evidence of any resistance at all. She had looked at first, hoping to find help in freeing Egwene and Min, but everyone took fright at the merest hint that they might oppose the Seanchan, and she stopped asking before she drew the wrong sort of attention. In truth, she could not imagine how the people *could* fight. *Monsters and Aes Sedai. How can you fight monsters and Aes Sedai?*

Ahead stood five tall stone houses, among the largest in the town, all together making up a block. One street short of them, Nynaeve found an alleyway beside a tailor shop, where they could keep an eye on some of the tall houses' entrances, at least. It was not possible to see every door at once—she did not want to risk letting Elayne go off on her own to watch more—but it was not wise to go any closer. Above the rooftops, on the next street, the golden hawk banner of the High Lord Turak flapped in the wind.

Only women went in or out of those houses, and most of those were *sul'dam*, alone or with *damane* in tow. The buildings had been taken over by the Seanchan to house the *damane*. Egwene had to be in there, and likely Min; they had found no sign of Min so far, though it was possible she was as hidden by the crowds as they. Nynaeve had heard many tales of women and girls being seized on the streets or brought in from the villages; they all went into those houses, and if they were seen again, they wore a collar.

Settling herself on a crate beside Elayne, she dug into the other woman's coat for a handful of the small apples. There were fewer local folk in the streets here. Everyone knew what the houses were, and everyone avoided them, just as they avoided the stables where the Seanchan kept their beasts. It was not difficult to keep an eye on the doors through spaces between the passersby. Just two women stopping for a bite; just two more people who could not afford to eat at an inn. Nothing to attract more than a passing glance.

Eating mechanically, Nynaeve tried once more to plan. Being able to open the collar—if she really could—did no good at all unless she could reach Egwene. The apples did not taste so sweet anymore.

From the narrow window of her tiny room under the eaves, one of a number roughly walled together from whatever had been there before, Egwene could see the garden where *damane* were being walked by their *sul'dam.* It had been several gardens before the Seanchan knocked down the walls that separated them and took the big houses to keep their *damane.* The trees were all but leafless, but the *damane* were still taken out for air, whether they wanted it or not. Egwene watched the garden because Renna was down there, talking with another *sul'dam*, and as long as she could see Renna, then Renna was not going to enter and surprise her.

Some other *sul'dam* might come—there were many more *sul'dam* than *damane,* and every *sul'dam* wanted her turn wearing a bracelet; they called it being complete—but Renna still had charge of her training, and it was Renna who wore her bracelet four times out of five. If anyone came, they would find no impediment to entering. There were no locks on the doors of *damane*'s rooms. Egwene's room held only a hard, narrow bed, a washstand with a chipped pitcher and bowl, one chair and a small table, but it had no room for more. *Damane* had no need of comfort, or privacy, or possessions. *Damane* were possessions. Min had a room just like this, in another house, but Min could come and go as she would, or almost as she would. Seanchan were great ones for rules; they had more, for everyone, than the White Tower did for novices.

Egwene stood far back from the window. She did not want any of the women below to look up and see the glow that she knew surrounded her as she channeled the One Power, probing delicately at the collar around her neck, searching futilely; she could not even tell whether the band was woven or made of links—sometimes it seemed one, sometimes the other—but it seemed all of a piece all the time. It was only a tiny trickle of the Power, the merest drip that she could imagine, but it still beaded sweat on her face and made her stomach clench. That was one of the properties of the *a'dam;* if a *damane* tried to channel without a *sul'dam* wearing her bracelet, she felt sick, and the more of the Power she channeled, the sicker she became. Lighting a candle beyond the reach of her arm would have made Egwene vomit. Once Renna had ordered her to juggle her tiny balls of light with the bracelet lying on the table. Remembering still made her shudder.

Now, the silver leash snaked across the bare floor and up the unpainted wooden wall to where the bracelet hung on a peg. The sight of it hanging there made her jaws clench with fury. A dog leashed so carelessly could have run away. If a *damane* moved her bracelet as much as a foot from where it had last been touched by a *sul'dam*. . . . Renna had made her do that, too—had made her carry her own bracelet across the room. Or try to. She was sure it had only been minutes before the *sul'dam* snapped the bracelet firmly on her own wrist, but to Egwene the screaming and the cramps that had had her writhing on the floor had seemed to go on for hours.

Someone tapped at the door, and Egwene jumped, before she realized it could not be a *sul'dam.* None of them would knock first. She let *saidar* go, anyway; she was beginning to feel decidedly ill. “Min?”

“Here I am for my weekly visit,” Min announced as she slipped inside and shut the door. Her cheeriness sounded a little forced, but she always did what she could to keep Egwene's spirits up. “How do you like it?” She spun in a little circle, showing off her dark green wool dress of Seanchan cut. A heavy, matching cloak hung over her arm. There was even a green ribbon catching up her dark hair, though her hair was hardly long enough for it. Her knife was still in its sheath at her waist, though. Egwene had been surprised when Min first showed up wearing it, but it seemed the Seanchan trusted everyone. Until they broke a rule.

“It's pretty,” Egwene said cautiously. “But, why?”

“I haven't gone over to the enemy, if that is what you are thinking. It was this, or else find someplace to stay out in the town, and maybe not be able to visit you again.” She started to straddle the chair as she would have in breeches, gave a wry shake of her head, and turned it around to sit. “ ‘Everyone has a place in the Pattern,’ ” she mimicked, “ ‘and the place of everyone must be readily apparent.’ That old hag Mulaen apparently got tired of not knowing what my place was on sight and decided I ranked with the serving girls. She gave me the choice. You should see some of the things Seanchan serving girls wear, the ones who serve the lords. It might be fun, but not unless I was betrothed, or, better yet, married. Well, there's no going back. Not yet, anyway. Mulaen burned my coat and breeches.” Grimacing to show what she thought of that, she picked up a rock from a small pile on the table and bounced it from hand to hand. “It isn't so bad,” she said with a laugh, “except that it has been so long since I wore skirts that I keep tripping over them.”

Egwene had had to watch her clothes being burned, too, including that lovely green silk. It had made her glad she had not brought more of the clothes the Lady Amalisa had given her, though she might never see any of them, or the White Tower, again. What she had on now was the same dark gray all *damane* wore. Damane *have no possessions,* it had been explained to her. *The dress a* damane *wears, the food she eats, the bed she sleeps in, are all gifts from her* sul'dam. *If a* sul'dam *chooses that a* damane *sleep on the floor instead of in a bed, or in a stall in a stable, it is purely the choice of the* sul'dam. Mulaen, who had charge of the *damane* quarters, had a droning nasal voice, but she was sharp with any *damane* who did not remember every word of her boring lectures.

"I don't think there will be any going back for me ever," Egwene said, sighing, sinking down on her bed. She gestured to the rocks on the table. "Renna gave me a test, yesterday. I picked out the piece of iron ore, and the copper ore, blindfolded, every time she mixed them up. She left them all here to remind me of my success. She seemed to think it was some kind of reward to be reminded."

"It doesn't seem any worse than the rest—not nearly as bad as making things explode like fireworks—but couldn't you have lied? Told her you didn't know which was which?"

"You still do not know what this is like." Egwene tugged at the collar; pulling did no more good than channeling had. "When Renna is wearing that bracelet, she knows what I am doing with the Power, and what I am not. Sometimes she even seems to know when she isn't wearing it; she says *sul'dam* develop—an affinity, she calls it—after a while." She sighed. "No one even thought to test me on this earlier. Earth is one of the Five Powers that was strongest in men. When I picked out those rocks, she took me outside the town, and I was able to point right to an abandoned iron mine. It was all overgrown, and there wasn't any opening to be seen at all, but once I knew how, I could feel the iron ore still in the ground. There hasn't been enough to make it worth working in a hundred years, but I knew it was there. I couldn't lie to her, Min. She knew I had sensed the mine as soon as I did. She was so excited, she promised me a pudding with my supper." She felt her cheeks growing hot, in anger and embarrassment. "Apparently," she said bitterly, "I am now too valuable to be wasted making things explode. Any *damane* can do that; only a handful can find ores in the ground. Light, I hate making things explode, but I wish that was all I could do."

The color in her cheeks deepened. She did hate it, making trees tear themselves to splinters and the earth erupt; that was meant for battle, for killing, and she wanted no part of it. Yet anything the Seanchan let her do was another chance to touch *saidar*, to feel the Power flowing through her. She hated the things Renna and the other *sul'dam* made her do, but she was sure that she could handle much more of the Power now than she could before leaving Tar Valon. She certainly knew she could do things with it that no sister in the Tower had ever thought of doing; they never thought of tearing the earth apart to kill men.

"Perhaps you won't have to worry about any of it much longer," Min said, grinning. "I've found us a ship, Egwene. The captain has been held here by the Seanchan, and he is about ready to sail with or without permission."

"If he will take you, Min, go with him," Egwene said wearily. "I told you I'm valuable, now. Renna says in a few days they're sending a ship back to Seanchan. Just to take me."

Min's grin vanished, and they stared at each other. Suddenly Min hurled her rock at the pile on the table, scattering them. "There has to be a way out of here. There has to be a way to take that bloody thing off your neck!"

Egwene leaned her head back against the wall. "You know the Seanchan have collected every woman they've been able to find who can channel even a speck. They come from all over, not just from here in Falme, but from the fishing villages, and from farming towns inland. Taraboner and Domani women, passengers off ships they've stopped. There are two Aes Sedai among them."

"Aes Sedai!" Min exclaimed. By habit she looked around to make sure no Seanchan had overheard her saying that name. "Egwene, if there are Aes Sedai here, they can help us. Let me talk to them, and—"

"They can't even help themselves, Min. I only talked to one—her name is Ryma; the *sul'dam* don't call her that, but that's her name; she wanted to make sure I knew it—and she told me there is another. She told me in between bouts of tears. She's Aes Sedai, and she was crying, Min! She has a collar on her neck, they make her answer to Pura, and she can't do anything more about it than I can. They captured her when Falme fell. She was crying because she's beginning to stop fighting against it, because she cannot take being punished anymore. She was crying because she wants to take her own life, and she cannot even do that without permission. Light, I know how she feels!"

Min shifted uneasily, smoothing her dress with suddenly nervous hands. "Egwene, you don't want to. . . . Egwene, you must not think of harming yourself. I will get you out somehow. I will!"

"I am not going to kill myself," Egwene said dryly. "Even if I could. Let me have your knife. Come on. I won't hurt myself. Just hand it to me."

Min hesitated before slowly taking her knife from its sheath at her waist. She held it out warily, obviously ready to leap if Egwene tried anything.

Egwene took a deep breath and reached for the hilt. A soft quiver ran through the muscles of her arm. As her hand came within a foot of the knife, a cramp suddenly contorted her fingers. Eyes fixed, she tried to force her hand closer. The cramp seized her whole arm, knotting muscles to her shoulder. With a groan, she sank back, rubbing her arm and concentrating her thoughts on *not* touching the knife. Slowly, the pain began to lessen.

Min stared at her incredulously. "What . . . ? I don't understand."

"*Damane* are not allowed to touch a weapon of any kind." She worked her arm, feeling the tightness go. "Even our meat is cut for us. I don't want to hurt myself, but I could not if I did want to. No *damane* is ever left alone where she might jump from a height—that window is nailed shut—or throw herself in a river."

"Well, that's a good thing. I mean. . . . Oh, I don't know what I mean. If you could jump in a river, you might escape."

Egwene went on dully, as if the other woman had not spoken. "They are training me, Min. The *sul'dam* and the *a'dam* are training me. I cannot touch anything I even think of as a weapon. A few weeks ago I considered hitting Renna over the head with that pitcher, and I could not pour wash water for three days. Once I'd thought of it that way, I not only had to stop thinking about hitting her with it, I had to convince myself I would never, under any circumstances, hit her with it before I could touch it again. She knew what had happened, told me what I had to do, and would not let me wash anywhere except with that pitcher and bowl. You are lucky it happened between your visiting days. Renna made sure I spent those days sweating from the time I woke to the time I fell asleep, exhausted. I am trying to fight them, but they are training me as surely as they're training Pura." She clapped a hand to her mouth, moaning through her teeth. "Her name is Ryma. I have to remember *her* name, not the name they've put on her. She is Ryma, and she's Yellow Ajah, and she has fought them as long and as hard as she could. It is no fault of hers that she hasn't the strength left to fight any longer. I wish I knew who the other sister is that Ryma mentioned. I wish I knew her name. Remember both of us, Min. Ryma, of the Yellow Ajah, and Egwene al'Vere. Not Egwene the *damane;* Egwene al'Vere of Emond's Field. Will you do that?"

"Stop it!" Min snapped. "You stop it right this instant! If you get shipped off to Seanchan, I'll be right there with you. But I don't think you will. You know I've read you, Egwene. I don't understand most of it—I almost never do—but I see things I am sure link you to Rand, and Perrin, and Mat, and—yes, even Galad, the Light help you for a fool. How can any of that happen if the Seanchan take you off across the ocean?"

"Maybe they're going to conquer the whole world, Min. If they conquer the world, there's no reason Rand and Galad and the rest could not end up in Seanchan."

"You ninny-headed goose!"

"I am being practical," Egwene said sharply. "I don't intend to stop fighting, not as long as I can breathe, but I don't see any hope that I'll ever have the *a'dam* off me, either. Just as I don't see any hope that anyone is going to stop the Seanchan. Min, if this ship captain will take you, go with him. At least then one of us will be free."

The door swung open, and Renna stepped in.

Egwene jumped to her feet and bowed sharply, as did Min. The tiny room was crowded for bowing, but Seanchan insisted on protocol before comfort.

"Your visiting day, is it?" Renna said. "I had forgotten. Well, there is training to be done even on visiting days."

Egwene watched sharply as the *sul'dam* took down the bracelet, opened it, and fastened it again around her wrist. She could not see how it was done. If she could have probed with the One Power, she would have, but Renna would have known that immediately. As the bracelet closed around Renna's wrist a look came onto the *sul'dam*'s face that made Egwene's heart sink.

"You have been channeling." Renna's voice was deceptively mild; there was a spark of anger in her eyes. "You know that is forbidden except when we are complete." Egwene wet her lips. "Perhaps I have been too lenient with you. Perhaps you believe that because you are valuable now, you will be allowed license. I think I made a mistake letting you keep your old name. I had a kitten called Tuli when I was a child. From now on, your name is Tuli. You will go now, Min. Your visiting day with Tuli is ended.”

Min hesitated only long enough for one anguished look at Egwene before leaving. Nothing Min could say or do would do anything except make matters worse, but Egwene could not help looking longingly at the door as it closed behind her friend.

Renna took the chair, frowning at Egwene. “I must punish you severely for this. We will both be called to the Court of the Nine Moons—you for what you can do; I as your *sul’dam* and trainer—and I will not allow you to disgrace me in the eyes of the Empress. I will stop when you tell me how much you love being *damane* and how obedient you will be after this. And, Tuli. Make me believe every word.”

* * *

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CHAPTER

43

A Plan

Outside in the low-ceilinged hallway, Min dug her nails into her palms at the first piercing cry from the room. She took a step toward the door before she could stop herself, and when she did stop, tears sprang up in her eyes. *Light help me, all I can do is make it worse. Egwene, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

Feeling worse than useless, she picked up her skirts and ran, and Egwene's screams pursued her. She could not make herself stay, and leaving made her feel a coward. Half blind with weeping, she found herself in the street before she knew it. She had intended to go back to her room, but now she could not do it. She could not stand the thought that Egwene was being hurt while she sat warm and safe under the next roof. Scrubbing the tears from her eyes, she swept her cloak around her shoulders and started down the street. Every time she cleared her eyes, new tears began trickling along her cheeks. She was not accustomed to weeping openly, but then she was not accustomed to feeling so helpless, so useless. She did not know where she was going, only that it had to be as far as she could reach from Egwene's cries.

"Min!"

The low-pitched shout brought her up short. At first, she could not make out who had called. Relatively few people walked the street this close to where the *damane* were housed. Aside from a lone man trying to interest two Seanchan soldiers in buying the picture he would draw of them with his colored chalks, everyone local tried to step along quickly without actually appearing to run. A pair of *sul'dam* strolled by, *damane* trailing behind with eyes down; the Seanchan women were talking about how many more *marath'damane* they expected to find before they sailed. Min's eyes passed right over the two women in long fleece coats, then swung back in wonder as they came toward her. "Nynaeve? Elayne?"

“None other.” Nynaeve’s smile was strained; both women had tight eyes, as if they fought worried frowns. Min thought she had never seen anything as wonderful as the sight of them. “That color becomes you,” Nynaeve continued. “You should have taken up dresses long since. Though I’ve thought of breeches myself since I saw them on you.” Her voice sharpened as she drew close enough to see Min’s face. “What is the matter?”

“You’ve been crying,” Elayne said. “Has something happened to Egwene?”

Min gave a start and looked back over her shoulder. A *sul’dam* and *damane* came down the steps she had used and turned the other way, toward the stables and horse yards. Another woman with the lightning panels on her dress stood at the top of the stairs talking with someone still inside. Min grabbed her friends by the arms and hurried them down the street toward the harbor. “It’s dangerous for you two here. Light, it’s dangerous for you to be in Falme. There are *damane* everywhere, and if they find you. . . . You do know what *damane* are? Oh, you don’t know how good it is to see you both.”

“I imagine about as half as good as it is to see you,” Nynaeve said. “Do you know where Egwene is? Is she in one of those buildings? Is she all right?”

Min hesitated a fraction before saying, “She’s as well as can be expected.” Min could see it all too well, if she told them what was happening to Egwene right that moment. Nynaeve was as likely as not to go storming back in an attempt to stop it. *Light, let it be over by now. Light, make her bend her stubborn neck just once before they almost break it first.* “I don’t know how to get her out, though. I found a ship captain who I think will take us if we can reach his ship with her—he won’t help unless we make it that far, and I cannot say I blame him—but I have no idea how to do even that much.”

“A ship,” Nynaeve said thoughtfully. “I had meant to simply ride east, but I must say I’ve worried about it. As nearly as I can make out, we would have to be almost off Toman Head before we were clear of Seanchan patrols completely, and then there’s supposed to be fighting of some sort on Almoth Plain. I never thought of a ship. We have horses, and we do not have money for passage. How much does this man want?”

Min shrugged. “I never got that far. We don’t have any money, either. I thought I could put off paying until after we sail. Afterwards . . . well, I don’t think he’ll put into any port where there are Seanchan. Wherever he threw us off, it would have to be better than here. The problem is convincing him to sail at all. He wants to, but they patrol off the harbor, too, and there is no way of telling if there’s a *damane* on one of their ships until it’s too late. ‘Give me a *damane* of my own on my deck,’ he says, ‘and I will sail this instant.’ Then he starts talking about drafts and shoals and lee shores. I don’t understand any of that, but as long as I smile and nod every now and then, he keeps talking, and I think if I can keep him talking long enough, he’ll talk himself into sailing.” She drew a shuddering breath; her eyes started stinging again. “Only, I don’t think there’s time to let him talk himself into it anymore. Nynaeve, they’re going to send Egwene back to Seanchan, and soon.”

Elayne gasped. “But, why?”

“She is able to find ore,” Min said miserably. “A few days, she says, and I don’t know if a few days is enough for this man to convince himself to sail. Even if it is, how do we take that Shadow-spawned collar off her? How do we get her out of the house?”

“I wish Rand were here.” Elayne sighed, and when they both looked at her, she blushed and quickly added, “Well, he does have a sword. I wish we had somebody with a sword. Ten of them. A hundred.”

“It isn’t swords or brawn we need now,” Nynaeve said, “but brains. Men usually think with the hair on their chests.” She touched her chest absently, as if feeling something through her coat. “Most of them do.”

“We would need an army,” Min said. “A large army. The Seanchan were outnumbered when they faced the Taraboners, and the Domani, and they won every battle easily, from what I hear.” She hurriedly pulled Nynaeve and Elayne to the opposite side of the street as a *damane* and *sul’dam* climbed past them on the other side. She was relieved there was no need for urging; the other two watched the linked women go as warily as she. “Since we don’t have an army, the three of us will have to do it. I hope one of you can think of something I haven’t; I’ve wracked my brains, and I always stumble when it comes to the *a’dam*, the leash and collar. *Sul’dam* don’t like anyone watching too closely when they open them. I think I can get you inside, if that will help. One of you, anyway. They think of me as a servant, but servants may have visitors, as long as they keep to the servants' quarters."

Nynaeve wore a thoughtful frown, but her face cleared almost immediately, taking on a purposeful look. "Don't you worry, Min. I have a few ideas. I have not spent my time here idly. You take me to this man. If he is any harder to handle than the Village Council with their backs up, I will eat this coat."

Elayne nodded, grinning, and Min felt the first real hope she had had since arriving in Falme. For an instant Min found herself reading the auras of the other two women. There was danger, but that was to be expected—and new things, too, among the images she had seen before; it was like that, sometimes. A man's ring of heavy gold floated above Nynaeve's head, and above Elayne's, a red-hot iron and an axe. They meant trouble, she was sure, but it seemed distant, somewhere in the future. Only for a moment did the reading last, and then all she saw was Elayne and Nynaeve, watching her expectantly.

"It's down near the harbor," she said.

The sloping street became more crowded the further down they went. Street peddlers rubbed elbows with merchants who had brought wagons in from the inland villages and would not go out again until winter had come and gone, hawkers with their trays called to the passersby, Falmen in embroidered cloaks brushed past farm families in heavy fleece coats. Many people had fled here from villages further from the coast. Min saw no point to it—they had leaped from the possibility of a visit from the Seanchan to the certainty of Seanchan all around them—but she had heard what the Seanchan did when they first came to a village, and she could not blame the villagers too much for fearing another appearance. Everyone bowed when Seanchan walked past or a curtained palanquin was carried by up the steep street.

Min was glad to see Nynaeve and Elayne knew about the bowing. Bare-chested bearers paid no more mind to the people who bent themselves than did arrogant, armored soldiers, but failure to bow would surely catch their eyes.

They talked a little as they moved down the street, and she was surprised at first to learn they had been in the town only a few days less than Egwene and herself. After a moment, though, she decided it was no wonder they had not met earlier, not with the crowds in the streets. She had been reluctant to spend time further from Egwene than was necessary; there was always the fear that she would go for her allowed visit and find Egwene gone. *And now she will be. Unless Nynaeve can think of something.*

The smell of salt and pitch grew heavy in the air, and gulls cried, wheeling overhead. Sailors appeared in the throng, many still barefoot despite the cold.

The inn had been hastily renamed The Three Plum Blossoms, but part of the word “Watcher” still showed through the slapdash paint work on the sign. Despite the crowds outside, the common room was little more than half full; prices were too high for many people to afford time sitting over ale. Roaring fires on hearths at either end of the room warmed it, and the fat innkeeper was in his shirtsleeves. He eyed the three women, frowning, and Min thought it was her Seanchan dress that stopped him from telling them to leave. Nynaeve and Elayne, in their farm women’s coats, certainly did not look as if they had money to spend.

The man she was looking for was alone at a table in a corner, in his accustomed place, muttering into his wine. “Do you have time to talk, Captain Domon?” she said.

He looked up, brushing a hand across his beard when he saw she was not alone. She still thought his bare upper lip looked odd with the beard. “So you do bring friends to drink up my coin, do you? Well, that Seanchan lord bought my cargo, so coin I have. Sit.” Elayne jumped as he suddenly bellowed, “Innkeeper! Mulled wine here!”

“It’s all right,” Min told her, taking a place on the end of one of the benches at the table. “He only looks and sounds like a bear.” Elayne sat down on the other end, looking doubtful.

“A bear, do I be?” Domon laughed. “Maybe I do. But what of you, girl? Have you given over thought of leaving? That dress do look Seanchan to me.”

“Never!” Min said fiercely, but the appearance of a serving girl with the steaming, spiced wine made her fall silent.

Domon was just as wary. He waited until the girl had gone with his coins before saying, “Fortune prick me, girl, I mean no offense. Most people only want to go on with their lives, whether their lords be Seanchan or any other.”

Nynaeve leaned her forearms on the table. “We also want to go on with our lives, Captain, but without any Seanchan. I understand you intend to sail soon.”

“I would sail today, if I could,” Domon said glumly. “Every two or three days that Turak do send for me to tell him tales of the old things I have seen. Do I look a gleeman to you? I did think I could spin a tale or two and be on my way, but now I think when I no entertain him any longer, it be an even wager whether he do let me go or have my head cut off. The man do look soft, but he be as hard as iron, and as coldhearted.”

“Can your ship avoid the Seanchan?” Nynaeve asked.

“Fortune prick me, could I make it out of the harbor without a *damane* rips *Spray* to splinters, I can. If I do no let a Seanchan ship with a *damane* come too close once I do make the sea. There be shoal waters all along this coast, and *Spray* do have a shallow draft. I can take her into waters those lumbering Seanchan hulks can no risk. They must be wary of the winds close inshore this time of year, and once I do have *Spray*—”

Nynaeve cut him off. “Then we will take passage with you, Captain. There will be four of us, and I will expect you to be ready to sail as soon as we are aboard.”

Domon scrubbed a finger across his upper lip and peered into his wine. “Well, as to that, there still do be the matter of getting out of the harbor, you see. These *damane*—”

“What if I tell you you will sail with something better than *damane*?” Nynaeve said softly. Min’s eyes widened as she realized what Nynaeve intended.

Almost under her breath, Elayne murmured, “And you tell me to be careful.”

Domon had eyes only for Nynaeve, and they were wary eyes. “What do you mean?” he whispered.

Nynaeve opened her coat to fumble at the back of her neck, finally pulling out a leather cord that had been tucked inside her dress. Two gold rings hung on the cord. Min gasped when she saw one—it was the heavy man’s ring she had seen when she read Nynaeve in the street—but she knew it was the other, slighter and made for a woman’s slender finger, that made Domon’s eyes bulge. A serpent biting its own tail.

“You know what this means,” Nynaeve said, starting to slip the Serpent ring from the cord, but Domon closed his hand over it.

“Put it away.” His eyes darted uneasily; no one was looking at them that Min could see, but he looked as if he thought everyone was staring.

“That ring do be dangerous. If it be seen. . . .”

“As long as you know what it means,” Nynaeve said with a calm that made Min envious. She pulled the cord from Domon’s hand and retied it around her neck.

“I know,” he said hoarsely. “I do know what it means. Maybe there do be a chance if you. . . . Four, you say? This girl who do like to listen to my tongue wag, she do be one of the four, I take it. And you, and. . . .” He frowned at Elayne. “Surely this child is no—no one like you.”

Elayne straightened angrily, but Nynaeve put a hand on her arm and smiled soothingly at Domon. “She travels with me, Captain. You might be surprised by what we can do even before we earn the right to a ring. When we sail, you will have three on your ship who can fight *damane* if need be.”

“Three,” he breathed. “There do be a chance. Maybe. . . .” His face brightened for a moment, but as he looked at them, it grew serious again. “I should take you to *Spray* right now and cast off, but Fortune prick me if I can no tell you what you face here if you stay, and maybe even if you go with me. Listen to me, and mark what I do say.” He took another cautious look around, and still lowered his voice and chose his words carefully. “I did see a—a woman who wore a ring like that taken by the Seanchan. A pretty, slender little woman she was, with a big War—a big man with her who did look as if he did know how to use his sword. One of them must have been careless, for the Seanchan did have an ambush laid for them. The big man put six, seven soldiers on the ground before he did die himself. The —the woman. . . . Six *damane* they did put around her, stepping out of the alleys of a sudden. I did think she would . . . do something—you know what I mean—but. . . . I know nothing of these things. One moment she did look as if she would destroy them all, then a look of horror did come on her face, and she did scream.”

“They cut her off from the True Source.” Elayne’s face was white.

“No matter,” Nynaeve said calmly. “We will not allow the same to be done to us.”

“Aye, mayhap it will be as you say. But I will remember it until I die. Ryma, help me. That is what she did scream. And one of the *damane* did fall down crying, and they did put one of those collars on the neck of the . . . woman, and I . . . I did run.” He shrugged, and rubbed his nose, and peered into his wine. “I have seen three women taken, and I have no stomach for it. I would leave my aged grandmother standing on the dock to sail from here, but I did have to tell you."

"Egwene said they have two prisoners," Min said slowly. "Ryma, a Yellow, and she didn't know who the other is." Nynaeve gave her a sharp look, and she fell silent, blushing. From the look on Domon's face, it had not furthered their cause any to tell him the Seanchan held two Aes Sedai, not just one.

Yet abruptly he stared at Nynaeve and took a long gulp of wine. "Do that be why you are here? To free . . . those two? You did say there would be three of you."

"You know what you need to know," Nynaeve told him briskly. "You must be ready to sail on the instant anytime in the next two or three days. Will you do it, or will you remain here to see if they will cut off your head after all? There are other ships, Captain, and I mean to have passage assured on one of them today."

Min held her breath; under the table, her fingers were knotted.

Finally, Domon nodded. "I will be ready."

When they returned to the street, Min was surprised to see Nynaeve sag against the front of the inn as soon as the door closed. "Are you ill, Nynaeve?" she asked anxiously.

Nynaeve drew a long breath and stood up straight, tugging at her coat. "With some people," she said, "you have to be certain. If you show them one glimmer of doubt, they'll sweep you off in some direction you don't want to go. Light, but I was afraid he was going to say no. Come, we have plans yet to make. There are still one or two small problems to work out."

"I hope you don't mind fish, Min," Elayne said.

One or two small problems? Min thought as she followed them. She hoped very much that Nynaeve was not just being certain again.

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CHAPTER

44

Five Will Ride Forth

Perrin eyed the villagers warily, self-consciously hitching at a too-short cloak, embroidered on the chest and with some holes in it not even patched, but none of them gave him a second glance despite his strange mix of clothes and the axe on his hip. Hurin had a coat with blue spirals across the chest under his cloak, and Mat wore a pair of baggy trousers that made bunches where they were stuffed into his boots. That had been all they had been able to find that would fit back in the abandoned village. Perrin wondered if this one would be abandoned soon. Half the stone houses were empty, and in front of the inn, up the dirt street from them, three ox carts, loaded too heavily in great mounds and everything covered with roped canvas, stood with families gathered around them.

As he watched them, huddling together and saying their goodbyes to those who were staying, at least for the time being, Perrin decided it was not lack of interest in strangers on the villagers' part; they were carefully avoiding looking at him and the others. These people had learned not to show curiosity about strangers, even strangers who were obviously not Seanchan. Strangers might be dangerous these days on Toman Head. They had encountered the same studious indifference in other villages. There were more towns here within a few leagues of the coast, every one holding itself independent. At any rate, they had until the Seanchan came.

"I say it's time to go get the horses," Mat said, "before they decide to start asking questions. There has to be a first time for it."

Hurin was staring at a big, blackened circle of ground that marred the brown grass of the village green. It had a weathered look, but no one had done anything to erase it. "Maybe six or eight months ago," he muttered, "and it still stinks. The whole Village Council and their families. Why would they do a thing like that?"

“Who knows why they do anything?” Mat muttered. “Seanchan don’t seem to need a reason for killing people. None I can figure out, anyway.”

Perrin tried not to look at the charred patch. “Hurin, are you sure about Fain? Hurin?” It had been hard to make the sniffer look at anything else since they entered the village. “Hurin!”

“What? Oh. Fain. Yes.” Hurin’s nostrils flared, and right away he wrinkled his nose. “There’s no mistaking that, even old as it is. Makes a Myrddraal smell like roses. He passed through here all right, but I think he was alone. No Trollocs, anyway, and if he had any Darkfriends with him, they hadn’t been up to much lately.”

There was some sort of agitation up by the inn, people shouting and pointing. Not at Perrin and the other two, but at something Perrin could not see in the low hills east of the village.

“Can we get the horses now?” Mat said. “That could be Seanchan.”

Perrin nodded, and they broke into a run for where they had tied their horses behind an abandoned house. As Mat and Hurin disappeared around the corner of the house, Perrin looked back toward the inn and stopped in astonishment. The Children of the Light were riding into town, a long column of them.

He leaped after the others. “Whitecloaks!”

They wasted only an instant staring at him in disbelief before they were scrambling into their saddles. Keeping houses between them and the main street of the village, the three galloped out of the village westward, watching over their shoulders for pursuit. Ingtar had told them to avoid anything that might slow them down, and Whitecloaks asking questions would certainly do that, even if they could manage answers that satisfied. Perrin kept an even closer watch than the other two; he had his own reasons for not wanting to meet Whitecloaks. *The axe in my hands. Light, what I wouldn’t give to change that.*

The lightly wooded hills soon hid the village, and Perrin began to think maybe there was nothing chasing them after all. He reined in and motioned the other two to stop. When they did, eyeing him questioningly, he listened. His ears were sharper than they once had been, but he heard no sounds of hoofbeats.

Reluctantly, he reached out with his mind in search of wolves. Almost immediately he found them, a small pack lying up for the day in the hills above the village they had just left. There were moments of astonishment so strong he almost thought it was his own; these wolves had heard rumors, but they had not really believed there were two-legs who could talk to their kind. He sweated through the minutes it took to get past introducing himself—he gave the image of Young Bull in spite of himself, and added his own smell, according to the custom among wolves; wolves were great ones for formalities on first meetings—but finally he managed to get his question through. They really had no interest in any two-legs who could not talk to them, but at last they glided down to take a look, unseen by the dull eyes of the two-legs.

After a time, images came back to him, what the wolves saw. White-cloaked men on horses crowding around the village, riding among the houses, riding around it, but none leaving. Especially not westward. The wolves said all they smelled moving west was himself and two other two-legs with three of the hard-footed tall ones.

Perrin let go the contact with the wolves gratefully. He was aware of Hurin and Mat looking at him.

“They aren’t following,” he said.

“How can you be sure?” Mat demanded.

“I am!” he snapped, then more softly, “I just am.”

Mat opened his mouth and closed it again, and finally said, “Well, if they aren’t coming after us, I say we go back to Ingtar and get on Fain’s trail. That dagger isn’t coming any closer just standing here.”

“We can’t pick it up again this close to that village,” Hurin said. “Not without risking running into Whitecloaks. I don’t think Lord Ingtar would appreciate that, and not Verin Sedai, neither.”

Perrin nodded. “We’ll follow it on a few miles, anyway. But keep a close lookout. We can’t be too far from Falme, now. It won’t do any good to avoid the Whitecloaks and ride right into a Seanchan patrol.”

As they started out again, he could not help wondering what Whitecloaks were doing there.

Geofram Bornhald peered down the village street, sitting his saddle while the legion spread through the small town and surrounded it. There had been something about the heavy-shouldered man who had dashed out of sight, something that tickled his memory. *Yes, of course. The lad who claimed to be a blacksmith. What was his name?*

Byar pulled up in front of him, hand on heart. “The village is secured, my Lord Captain.”

Villagers in heavy sheepskin coats milled uneasily as white-cloaked soldiers herded them together near the overloaded carts in front of the inn. Crying children clung to their mothers’ skirts, but no one looked defiant. Dull eyes stared out of the adult faces, waiting passively for whatever was going to happen. For that much, Bornhald was grateful. He had no real desire to make an example of any of these people, and no wish at all to waste time.

Dismounting, he tossed his reins to one of the Children. “See that the men are fed, Byar. Put the prisoners in the inn with as much food and water as they can carry, then nail all the doors and shutters closed. Make them think I am leaving some men to stand guard, yes?”

Byar touched his heart again and wheeled his horse to shout orders. The herding began anew, into the flat-roofed inn, while other Children ransacked houses searching for hammers and nails.

Watching the sullen faces that filed past him, Bornhald thought it should be two or three days before any of them found enough courage to break out of the inn and find there were no guards. Two or three days was all he needed, but he did not intend to risk alerting the Seanchan to his presence now.

Leaving enough men behind to make the Questioners believe his entire legion was still scattered across Almoth Plain, he had brought more than a thousand of the Children nearly the length of Toman Head without giving alarm, so far as he knew. Three skirmishes with Seanchan patrols had ended quickly. The Seanchan had grown used to facing already defeated rabble; the Children of the Light had been a deadly surprise. Yet the Seanchan knew how to fight like the Dark One’s hordes, and he could not help remembering the one skirmish that had cost him better than fifty men. He was still not sure which of the two arrow-riddled women he had stared at afterwards had been the Aes Sedai.

“Byar!” One of Bornhald’s men handed him water in a pottery cup from one of the carts; it was icy in his throat.

The gaunt-faced man swung down from his saddle. “Yes, my Lord Captain?”

“When I engage the enemy, Byar,” Bornhald said slowly, “you will not take part. You will watch from a distance, and you will carry word to my son of what happens."

"But my Lord Captain—!"

"That is my order, Child Byar!" he snapped. "You will obey, yes?"

Byar's back stiffened, and he stared straight ahead. "As you command, my Lord Captain."

Bornhald studied him for a moment. The man would do as he was told, but it would be better to give him another reason than letting Dain know how his father had died. It was not as if he did not have knowledge that was urgently needed in Amador. Since that skirmish with the Aes Sedai—*Was it one of them, or both? Thirty Seanchan soldiers, good fighters, and two women cost me twice the casualties they did.*—since then, he no longer expected to live to leave Toman Head. In the small chance the Seanchan did not see to it, very likely the Questioners would.

"When you have found my son—he should be with Lord Captain Eamon Valda near Tar Valon—and told him, you will ride to Amador, and report to the Lord Captain Commander. To Pedron Niall personally, Child Byar. You will tell him what we have learned of the Seanchan; I will write it out for you. Be sure he understands that we can no longer count on the Tar Valon witches being content with manipulating events from the shadows. If they fight openly for the Seanchan, we will surely face them elsewhere." He hesitated. That last was the most important of all. They had to know under the Dome of Truth that for all their vaunted oaths, Aes Sedai would march into battle. It gave him a sinking feeling, a world where Aes Sedai wielded the Power in battle; he was not sure that he would regret leaving it. But there was one more message he wanted carried to Amador. "And, Byar . . . tell Pedron Niall how we were used by the Questioners."

"As you command, my Lord Captain," Byar said, but Bornhald sighed at the expression on his face. The man did not understand. To Byar, orders were to be obeyed whether they came from the Lord Captain or the Questioners, whatever they were.

"I will write that out for you to hand to Pedron Niall as well," he said. He was not sure how much good it would do in any case. A thought came to him, and he frowned at the inn, where some of his men were loudly hammering nails through shutters and doors. "Perrin," he muttered. "That was his name. Perrin, from the Two Rivers."

"The Darkfriend, my Lord Captain?"

"Perhaps, Byar." He was not entirely certain, himself, but surely a man who seemed to have wolves fight for him could be nothing else. Certainly, this Perrin had killed two of the Children. "I thought I saw him when we rode in, but I do not remember anyone among the prisoners who looked like a blacksmith."

"Their blacksmith left a month ago, my Lord Captain. Some of them were complaining that they'd have been gone before we came if they had not had to mend their cartwheels themselves. Do you believe it was the man Perrin, my Lord Captain?"

"Whoever it was, he is not accounted for, no? And he may carry word of us to the Seanchan."

"A Darkfriend would surely do so, my Lord Captain."

Bornhald gulped the last of the water and tossed the cup aside. "There will be no meal for the men here, Byar. I will not let these Seanchan catch me napping, whether it is Perrin of the Two Rivers or someone else who warns them. Mount the legion, Child Byar!"

Far above their heads, a huge, winged shape circled, unnoticed.

In the clearing amid the hilltop thicket where they had made their camp, Rand worked the forms with his sword. He wanted to keep from thinking. He had had his chances to search with Hurin for Fain's trail; they all had, in twos and threes so they would not attract attention, and they had all found nothing so far. Now they waited for Mat and Perrin to come back with the sniffer; they should have been back hours ago.

Loial was reading, of course, and there was no telling if his ear-twitching was over his book or the scouting party's lateness, but Uno and most of the Shienaran soldiers sat tensely, oiling their swords, or kept watch through the trees as if they expected Seanchan to appear any moment. Only Verin appeared unconcerned. The Aes Sedai sat on a log beside their small fire, murmuring to herself and writing in the dirt with a long stick; every so often she would shake her head and scrub it all out with her foot and start over again. All the horses were saddled and ready to go, the Shienarans' animals each tied to a lance driven into the ground.

"Heron Wading in the Rushes," Ingtar said. He sat with his back against a tree, sliding a sharpening stone along his sword and watching Rand. "You should not be bothering with that one. It leaves you completely open."

For an instant Rand balanced on the ball of one foot, sword held reversed in both hands over his head, then shifted smoothly to the other foot. “Lan says it’s good for developing balance.” It was not easy keeping his balance. In the void it often seemed he could maintain his equilibrium atop a rolling boulder, but he did not dare assume the void. He wanted to too much to trust himself.

“What you practice too often, you use without thinking. You will put your sword in the other man with that, if you’re quick, but not before he has his through your ribs. You are practically inviting him. I don’t think I could see a man face me so open and not put my sword in him, even knowing he might strike home at me if I did.”

“It’s only for balance, Ingtar.” Rand wavered on one foot, and had to put the other down to keep from falling. He slammed the blade into its scabbard and picked up the gray cloak that had been his disguise. It was moth-eaten, and ragged around the bottom, but lined with thick fleece, and the wind was picking up, cold and out of the west. “I wish they’d come back.”

As if his wish had been a signal, Uno spoke up with quiet urgency. “Bloody horsemen coming, my Lord.” Scabbards rattled as men who did not already have their blades out bared them. Some leaped into their saddles, snatching up lances.

The tension faded as Hurin led the others into the clearing at a trot, and came again as he spoke. “We found the trail, Lord Ingtar.”

“We followed it almost to Falme,” Mat said as he dismounted. A flush in his pale cheeks seemed a mocking of health; the skin was tight over his skull. The Shienarans gathered around, as excited as he was. “It’s just Fain, but there isn’t anywhere else he could be going. He must have the dagger.”

“We found Whitecloaks, too,” Perrin said, swinging down from his saddle. “Hundreds of them.”

“Whitecloaks?” Ingtar exclaimed, frowning. “Here? Well, if they do not trouble us, we will not trouble them. Perhaps if the Seanchan are occupied with them, it will help us reach the Horn.” His eyes fell on Verin, still seated by the fire. “I suppose you will tell me I should have listened to you, Aes Sedai. The man did go to Falme.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” Verin said placidly. “With *ta’veren*, what happens is what was meant to happen. It may be the Pattern demanded these extra days. The Pattern puts everything in its place precisely, and when we try to alter it, especially if *ta'veren* are involved, the weaving changes to put us back into the Pattern as we were meant to be." There was an uneasy silence that she did not seem to notice; she sketched on idly with the stick. "Now, however, I think perhaps we should make plans. The Pattern has brought us to Falme at last. The Horn of Valere has been taken to Falme."

Ingtar squatted across the fire from her. "When enough people say the same thing, I tend to believe it, and the local people say the Seanchan do not seem to care who comes or goes in Falme. I will take Hurin and a few others into the town. Once he follows Fain's trail to the Horn . . . well, then we shall see what we shall see."

With her foot, Verin scrubbed out a wheel she had drawn in the dirt. In its place she drew two short lines that touched at one end. "Ingtar and Hurin. And Mat, as he can sense the dagger if he comes close enough. You do want to go, don't you, Mat?"

Mat appeared torn, but he gave a jerky nod. "I have to, don't I? I have to find that dagger."

A third line made a bird track. Verin looked sideways at Rand.

"I'll go," he said. "That is why I came." An odd light appeared in the Aes Sedai's eyes, a knowing glimmer that made him uneasy. "To help Mat find the dagger," he said sharply, "and Ingtar find the Horn." *And Fain,* he added to himself. *I have to find Fain if it isn't already too late.*

Verin scratched a fourth line, turning the bird track to a lopsided star. "And who else?" she said softly. She held the stick poised.

"Me," Perrin said, a hair before Loial chimed in with, "I think I would like to go, too," and Uno and the other Shienarans all began clamoring to join.

"Perrin spoke first," Verin said, as if that settled it. She added a fifth line and drew a circle around all five. The hair on Rand's neck stirred; it was the same wheel she had rubbed out in the first place. "Five ride forth," she murmured.

"I really would like to see Falme," Loial said. "I've never seen the Aryth Ocean. Besides, I can carry the chest, if the Horn is still in it."

"You'd better include me at least, my Lord," Uno said. "You and Lord Rand will need another sword at your backs if those bloody Seanchan try to stop you." The rest of the soldiers rumbled the same sentiment.

“Do not be silly,” Verin said sharply. Her stare silenced them all. “All of you cannot go. No matter how uncaring the Seanchan are about strangers, they will surely take notice of twenty soldiers, and you look like nothing else even without armor. And one or two of you will make no difference. Five is few enough to enter without attracting attention, and it is fitting that three of them should be the three *ta’veren* among us. No, Loial, you must stay behind, too. There are no Ogier on Toman Head. You would attract as many eyes as all the rest put together.”

“What about you?” Rand asked.

Verin shook her head. “You forget the *damane*.” Her mouth twisted around the word in distaste. “The only way I could help you would be if I channeled the Power, and that would be no help at all if I brought those down on you. Even if they were not close enough to see, one might well feel a woman—or a man, for that matter—channeling, if care was not taken to keep the Power channeled small.” She did not look at Rand; to him, she seemed ostentatious in not doing so, and Mat and Perrin were suddenly intent on their own feet.

“A man,” Ingtar snorted. “Verin Sedai, why add problems? We have enough already without supposing men channeling. But it would be well if you were there. If we have need of you—”

“No, you five must go alone.” Her foot scrubbed across the wheel drawn in the dirt, partially obliterating it. She studied each of them in turn, intent and frowning. “Five will ride forth.”

For a moment it seemed that Ingtar would ask again, but meeting her level gaze, he shrugged and turned to Hurin. “How long to reach Falme?”

The sniffer scratched his head. “If we left now and rode through the night, we could be there by sunrise tomorrow morning.”

“Then that is what we will do. I’ll waste no more time. All of you saddle your horses. Uno, I want you to bring the others along behind us, but keep out of sight, and do not let anyone. . . .”

Rand peered at the sketched wheel as Ingtar went on with his instructions. It was a broken wheel, now, with only four spokes. For some reason that made him shiver. He realized Verin was watching him, dark eyes bright and intent like a bird’s. It took an effort to pull his gaze away and begin getting his things together.

You’re letting fancies take you, he told himself irritably. *She can’t do anything if she isn’t there.*

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CHAPTER

45

Blademaster

The rising sun pushed its crimson edge above the horizon and sent long shadows down the cobblestone streets of Falme toward the harbor. A sea breeze bent the smoke of breakfast cook fires inland from the chimneys. Only the early risers were already out of doors, their breath making steam in the morning cold. Compared to the crowds that would fill the streets in another hour, the town seemed nearly empty.

Sitting on an upended barrel in front of a still-closed ironmonger’s shop, Nynaeve warmed her hands under her arms and surveyed her army. Min sat on a doorstep across the way, swathed in her Seanchan cloak and eating a wrinkled plum, and Elayne in her fleece coat huddled at the edge of an alley just down the street from her. A large sack, pilfered from the docks, lay neatly folded beside Min. *My army,* Nynaeve thought grimly. *But there isn’t anybody else.*

She caught sight of a *sul’dam* and a *damane* climbing the street, a yellow-haired woman wearing the bracelet and a dark woman the collar, both yawning sleepily. The few Falmen sharing the street with them averted their eyes and gave them a wide berth. As far as she could see down toward the harbor, there was not another Seanchan. She did not turn her head the other way. Instead, she stretched and shrugged as if working cold shoulders before settling back as she had been.

Min tossed her half-eaten plum aside, glanced casually up the street, and leaned back on the doorpost. The way was clear there, too, or she would have put her hands on her knees. Min had started rubbing her hands nervously, and Nynaeve realized that Elayne was now bouncing eagerly on her toes.

If they give us away, I’ll thump both their heads. But she knew if they were discovered, it would be the Seanchan who would say what happened to all three of them. She was all too aware that she had no real notion of whether what she planned would work or not. It could easily be her own failure that would give them away. Once again she resolved that if anything went wrong, she would somehow pull attention to herself while Min and Elayne escaped. She had told them to run if anything went wrong, and let them think she would run, too. What she would do then, she did not know. *Except I won't let them take me alive. Please, Light, not that.*

Sul'dam and *damane* came up the street until they were bracketed by the three waiting women. A dozen Falmen walked wide of the linked pair.

Nynaeve gathered all of her anger. Leashed Ones and Leash Holders. They had put their filthy collar on Egwene's neck, and they would put it on hers, and Elayne's, if they could. She had made Min tell her how *sul'dam* enforced their will. She was sure Min had kept some back, the worst, but what she told was enough to heat Nynaeve to white-hot fury. In an instant a white blossom on a black, thorny branch had opened to light, to *saidar*, and the One Power filled her. She knew there was a glow around her, for those who could see it. The pale-skinned *sul'dam* gave a start, and the dark *damane*'s mouth fell open, but Nynaeve gave them no chance. It was only a trickle of the Power that she channeled, but she cracked it, a whip snapping a dust mote out of the air.

The silver collar sprang open and clattered to the cobblestones. Nynaeve heaved a sigh of relief even as she leaped to her feet.

The *sul'dam* stared at the fallen collar as if at a poisonous snake. The *damane* put a shaking hand to her throat, but before the woman in the lightning-marked dress had time to move, the *damane* turned and punched her in the face; the *sul'dam*'s knees buckled, and she almost fell.

"Good for you!" Elayne shouted. She was already running forward, too, and so was Min.

Before any of them reached the two women, the *damane* took one startled look around, then ran as hard as she could.

"We won't hurt you!" Elayne called after her. "We are friends!"

"Be quiet!" Nynaeve hissed. She produced a handful of rags from her pocket and ruthlessly stuffed them into the gaping mouth of the still-staggering *sul'dam*. Min hastily shook out the sack in a cloud of dust and plunged it over the *sul'dam*'s head, shrouding the woman to the waist. "We are already attracting too much attention."

It was true, and yet not entirely true. The four of them stood in a rapidly emptying street, but the people who had decided to be elsewhere were avoiding looking at them. Nynaeve had been counting on that—people doing their best to ignore anything that had to do with Seanchan—to gain them a few moments. They would talk eventually, but in whispers; it might take hours for the Seanchan to learn anything had happened.

The hooded woman began to struggle, making rag-muffled shouts from the sack, but Nynaeve and Min threw their arms around her and wrestled her toward a nearby alley. The leash and collar trailed across the cobblestones behind them, clinking.

“Pick it up,” Nynaeve snapped at Elayne. “It won’t bite you!”

Elayne took a deep breath, then gathered the silver metal gingerly, as if she feared it very well might. Nynaeve felt some sympathy, but not much; everything rested on each of them doing as they had planned.

The *sul’dam* kicked and tried to throw herself free, but between them, Nynaeve and Min forced her along, down the alley into another, slightly wider passage behind houses, to yet another alley and at last into a rough wooden shed that had apparently once housed two horses, by the stalls. Few could afford to keep horses since the Seanchan came, and in a day of Nynaeve’s watching, no one had gone near it. The interior had a musty dustiness that spoke of abandonment. As soon as they were inside, Elayne dropped the silver leash and wiped her hands on some straw.

Nynaeve channeled another trickle, and the bracelet fell to the dirt floor. The *sul’dam* squalled and hurled herself about.

“Ready?” Nynaeve asked. The other two nodded, and they yanked the sacking off their prisoner.

The *sul’dam* wheezed, blue eyes teary from dust, but her red face was red as much from anger as from the sack. She darted for the door, but they caught her in the first step. She was not weak, yet they were three, and when they were done the *sul’dam* was stripped to her shift and lying in one of the stalls, bound hand and foot with stout cord, with another piece of cord to keep her from forcing the gag out.

Soothing a puffy lip, Min eyed the lightning-paneled dress and soft boots they had laid out. “It might fit you, Nynaeve. It won’t fit Elayne or me.” Elayne was picking straw out of her hair.

“I can see that. You were never a choice anyway, not really. They know you too well.” Nynaeve hurriedly removed her own clothes. She tossed them aside and donned the *sul’dam*’s dress. Min helped with the buttons.

Nynaeve wiggled her toes in the boots; they were a little tight. The dress was tight, too, across the bosom, and loose elsewhere. The hem hung almost to the ground, lower than *sul'dam* wore them, but the fit would have been even worse on any of the others. Snatching up the bracelet, she took a deep breath and closed it around her left wrist. The ends merged, and it seemed solid. It did not feel like anything except a bracelet. She had been afraid that it would.

"Get the dress, Elayne." They had dyed a pair of dresses—one of hers and one of Elayne's—to the gray *damane* were, or as close as they could manage, and hidden them here. Elayne did not move except to stare at the open collar and lick her lips. "Elayne, you have to wear it. Too many of them have seen Min for her to do it. I would have worn it, if this dress had fit you instead." She thought she would have gone mad if she had had to wear the collar; that was why she could not make her voice sharp with Elayne now.

"I know." Elayne sighed. "I just wish I knew more of what it does to you." She drew her red-gold hair out of the way. "Min, help me, please." Min began undoing the buttons down the back of her dress.

Nynaeve managed to pick up the silver collar without flinching. "There is one way to find out." With only a moment of hesitation, she bent and snapped it around the neck of the *sul'dam. She deserves it if anyone does*, she told herself firmly. "She might be able to tell us something useful, anyway." The blue-eyed woman glanced at the leash trailing from her neck to Nynaeve's wrist, then glared up at her contemptuously.

"It doesn't work that way," Min said, but Nynaeve barely heard.

She was . . . aware . . . of the other woman, aware of what she was feeling, cord digging into her ankles and into her wrists behind her back, the rank fish taste of the rags in her mouth, straw pricking her through the thin cloth of her shift. It was not as if she, Nynaeve, felt these things, but in her head was a lump of sensations that she knew belonged to the *sul'dam.*

She swallowed, trying to ignore them—they would not go away—and addressed the bound woman. "I won't hurt you if you answer my questions truthfully. We aren't Seanchan. But if you lie to me. . . ." She lifted the leash threateningly.

The woman's shoulders shook, and her mouth curled around the gag in a sneer. It took Nynaeve a moment to realize the *sul'dam* was laughing.

Her mouth tightened, but then a thought came to her. That bundle of sensation inside her head seemed to be everything physical that the other woman felt. Experimentally, she tried adding to it.

Eyes suddenly bulging out of her head, the *sul'dam* gave a cry that the gag only partially stopped. Fanning her hands behind her as if trying to ward off something, she humped through the straw in a vain effort to escape.

Nynaeve gaped, and hastily rid herself of the extra feelings she had added. The *sul'dam* sagged, weeping.

"What. . . . What did you . . . do to her?" Elayne asked faintly. Min only stared, her mouth hanging open.

Nynaeve answered gruffly. "The same thing Sheriam did to you when you threw a cup at Marith." *Light, but this is a filthy thing.*

Elayne gulped loudly. "Oh."

"But an *a'dam* isn't supposed to work that way," Min said. "They always claimed it won't work on any woman who cannot channel."

"I do not care how it is supposed to work, so long as it does." Nynaeve seized the silver metal leash right where it joined the collar, and pulled the woman up enough to look her in the eyes. Frightened eyes, she saw. "You listen to me, and listen well. I want answers, and if I don't get them, I'll make you think I have had the hide off you." Stark terror rolled across the woman's face, and Nynaeve's stomach heaved as she suddenly realized the *sul'dam* had taken her literally. *If she thinks I can, it's because she knows. That is what these leashes are for.* She took firm hold of herself to stop from clawing the bracelet off her wrist. Instead, she hardened her face. "Are you ready to answer me? Or do you need more convincing?"

The frantic head-shaking was answer enough. When Nynaeve removed the gag, the woman only paused to swallow once before babbling, "I will not report you. I swear it. Only take this from my neck. I have gold. Take it. I swear, I will never tell anyone."

"Be quiet," Nynaeve snapped, and the woman shut her mouth immediately. "What is your name?"

"Seta. Please. I will answer you, but please take—it—off! If anyone sees it on me. . . ." Seta's eyes rolled down to stare at the leash, then squeezed shut. "Please?" she whispered.

Nynaeve realized something. She could never make Elayne wear that collar.

“Best we get on with it,” Elayne said firmly. She was down to her shift, too, now. “Give me a moment to put this other dress on, and—”

“Put your own clothes back on,” Nynaeve said.

“Someone has to pretend to be a *damane,*” Elayne said, “or we will never reach Egwene. That dress fits you, and it cannot be Min. That leaves me.”

“I said put your clothes on. We have somebody to be our Leashed One.” Nynaeve tugged at the leash that held Seta, and the *sul’dam* gasped.

“No! No, please! If anyone sees me—” She cut off at Nynaeve’s cold stare.

“As far as I am concerned, you are worse than a murderer, worse than a Darkfriend. I can’t think of anything worse than you. The fact that I have to wear this thing on my wrist, to be the same as you for even an hour, sickens me. So if you think there is anything I’ll balk at doing to you, think again. You don’t want to be seen? Good. Neither do we. No one really looks at a *damane*, though. As long as you keep your head down the way a Leashed One is supposed to, no one will even notice you. But you had better do the best you can to make sure the rest of us aren’t noticed, either. If we are, you surely will be seen, and if that is not enough to hold you, I promise you I’ll make you curse the first kiss your mother ever gave your father. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes,” Seta said faintly. “I swear it.”

Nynaeve had to remove the bracelet in order for them to slide Elayne’s gray-dyed dress down the leash and over Seta’s head. It did not fit the woman well, being loose at the bosom and tight across the hips, but Nynaeve’s would have been as bad, and too short besides. Nynaeve hoped people really did not look at *damane.* She put the bracelet back on reluctantly.

Elayne gathered up Nynaeve’s clothes, wrapped the other dyed dress around them, and made a bundle, a bundle for a woman in farm clothes to be carrying as she followed a *sul’dam* and a *damane.* “Gawyn will eat his heart out when he hears about this,” she said, and laughed. It sounded forced.

Nynaeve looked at her closely, then at Min. It was time for the dangerous part. “Are you ready?”

Elayne’s smile faded. “I am ready.”

“Ready,” Min said curtly.

“Where are you . . . we . . . going?” Seta said, quickly adding, “If I may ask?”

“Into the lions’ den,” Elayne told her.

“To dance with the Dark One,” Min said.

Nynaeve sighed and shook her head. “What they are trying to say is, we are going where all the *damane* are kept, and we intend to free one of them.”

Seta was still gaping in astonishment when they hustled her out of the shed.

Bayle Domon watched the rising sun from the deck of his ship. The docks were already beginning to bustle, though the streets leading up from the harbor stood largely empty. A gull perched on a piling stared at him; gulls had pitiless eyes.

“Are you sure about this, Captain?” Yarin asked. “If the Seanchan wonder what we’re all doing aboard—”

“You just make certain there do be an axe near every mooring line,” Domon said curtly. “And, Yarin? Do any man try to cut a line before those women are aboard, I will split his skull.”

“What if they don’t come, Captain? What if it’s Seanchan soldiers instead?”

“Settle your bowels, man! If soldiers come, I will make a run for the harbor mouth, and the Light have mercy on us all. But until soldiers do come, I mean to wait for those women. Now go look as if you are no doing anything.”

Domon turned back to peering up into the town, toward where the *damane* were held. His fingers drummed a nervous tattoo on the railing.

The breeze from the sea brought the smell of breakfast cook fires to Rand’s nose, and tried to flap at his moth-eaten cloak, but he held it closed with one hand as Red neared the town. There had not been a coat to fit him in the clothes they had found, and he thought it best to keep the fine silver embroidery on his sleeves and the herons on his collar hidden. The Seanchan attitude toward conquered people carrying weapons might not extend to those with heron-mark swords, either.

The first shadows of morning stretched out ahead of him. He could just see Hurin riding in among the wagon yards and horse lots. Only one or two men moved among the lines of merchant wagons, and they wore the long aprons of wheelwrights or blacksmiths. Ingtar, the first in, was already out of sight. Perrin and Mat followed behind Rand at spaced intervals. He did not look back to check on them. There was not supposed to be anything to connect them; five men coming into Falme at an early hour, but not together.

The horse lots surrounded him, horses already crowding the fences, waiting to be fed. Hurin put his head out from between two stables, their doors still closed and barred, saw Rand and motioned to him before ducking back. Rand turned the bay stallion that way.

Hurin stood holding his horse by the reins. He had on one of the long vests instead of his coat, and despite the heavy cloak that hid his short sword and sword-breaker, he shivered with the cold. “Lord Ingtar’s back there,” he said, nodding down the narrow passage. “He says we’ll leave the horses here and go the rest of the way on foot.” As Rand dismounted, the sniffer added, “Fain went right down that street, Lord Rand. I can almost smell it from here.”

Rand led Red down the way to where Ingtar had already tied his own horse behind the stable. The Shienaran did not look very much a lord in a dirty fleece coat with holes worn through the leather in several places, and his sword looked odd belted over it. His eyes had a feverish intensity.

Tying Red alongside Ingtar’s stallion, Rand hesitated over his saddlebags. He had not been able to leave the banner behind. He did not think any of the soldiers would have gone into the bags, but he could not say the same for Verin, nor predict what she would do if she found the banner. Still, it made him uneasy to have it with him. He decided to leave the saddlebags tied behind his saddle.

Mat joined them, and a few moments later Hurin came with Perrin. Mat wore baggy trousers stuffed into the tops of his boots, and Perrin his too-short cloak. Rand thought they all looked like villainous beggars, but they had all passed largely unnoticed in the villages.

“Now,” Ingtar said. “Let us see what we see.”

They strolled out to the dirt street as if they had no particular destination in mind, talking among themselves, and ambled past the wagon yards onto sloping cobblestone streets. Rand was not sure what he himself said, much less anyone else. Ingtar’s plan had been for them to look like any other group of men walking together, but there were all too few people out-of-doors. Five men made a crowd on those cold morning streets.

They walked in a bunch, but it was Hurin who led them, sniffing the air and turning up this street and down that. The rest turned when he did, as if that was what they had intended all along. “He’s crisscrossed this town,” Hurin muttered, grimacing. “His smell is everywhere, and it stinks so, it’s hard to tell old from new. At least I know he’s still here. Some of it cannot be older than a day or two, I’m sure. I am sure,” he added less doubtfully.

A few more people began to appear, here a fruit peddler setting his wares on tables, there a fellow hurrying along with a big roll of parchments under his arm and a sketch-board slung across his back, a knife-sharpener oiling the shaft of his grinding wheel on its barrow. Two women walked by, headed the other way, one with downcast eyes and a silver collar around her neck, the other, in a dress worked with lightning bolts, holding a coiled silver leash.

Rand’s breath caught; it was an effort not to look back at them.

“Was that . . . ?” Mat’s eyes were open wide, staring out of the hollows of his eye sockets. “Was that a *damane?*”

“That is the way they were described,” Ingtar said curtly. “Hurin, are we going to walk every street in this Shadow-cursed town?”

“He’s been everywhere, Lord Ingtar,” Hurin said. “His stench is everywhere.” They had come into an area where the stone houses were three and four stories high, as big as inns.

They rounded a corner, and Rand was taken aback by the sight of a score of Seanchan soldiers standing guard in front of a big house on one side of the street—and by the sight of two women in lightning-marked dresses talking on the doorsteps of another across from it. A banner flapped in the wind over the house the soldiers protected; a golden hawk clutching lightning bolts. Nothing marked out the house where the women talked except themselves. The officer’s armor was resplendent in red and black and gold, his helmet gilded and painted to look like a spider’s head. Then Rand saw the two big, leathery-skinned shapes crouched among the soldiers and missed a step.

Grolm. There was no mistaking those wedge-shaped heads with their three eyes. *They can’t be.* Perhaps he was really asleep, and this was all a nightmare. *Maybe we haven’t even left for Falme, yet.*

The others stared at the beasts as they walked past the guarded house.

“What in the name of the Light are they?” Mat asked.

Hurin’s eyes seemed as big as his face. “Lord Rand, they’re. . . . Those are. . . .”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rand said. After a moment, Hurin nodded.

“We are here for the Horn,” Ingtar said, “not to stare at Seanchan monsters. Concentrate on finding Fain, Hurin.”

The soldiers barely glanced at them. The street ran straight down to the round harbor. Rand could see ships anchored down there; tall, square-looking ships with high masts, small in that distance.

“He’s been here a lot.” Hurin scrubbed at his nose with the back of his hand. “The street stinks of layer on layer on layer of him. I think he might have been here as late as yesterday, Lord Ingtar. Maybe last night.”

Mat suddenly clutched his coat with both hands. “It’s in there,” he whispered. He turned around and walked backwards, peering at the tall house with the banner. “The dagger is in there. I didn’t even notice it before, because of those—those things, but I can feel it.”

Perrin poked a finger in his ribs. “Well, stop that before they start wondering why you’re goggling at them like a fool.”

Rand glanced over his shoulder. The officer was looking after them.

Mat turned back around sullenly. “Are we just going to keep on walking? It’s in there, I tell you.”

“The Horn is what we are after,” Ingtar growled. “I mean to find Fain and make him tell me where it is.” He did not slow down.

Mat said nothing, but his entire face was a plea.

I have to find Fain, too, Rand thought. *I have to.* But when he looked at Mat’s face, he said, “Ingtar, if the dagger is in that house, Fain likely is, too. I can’t see him letting the dagger or the Horn, either one, far out of his sight.”

Ingtar stopped. After a moment, he said, “It could be, but we will never know from out here.”

“We could watch for him to come out,” Rand said. “If he comes out at this time of the morning, then he spent the night there. And I’ll wager where he sleeps is where the Horn is. If he does come out, we can be back to Verin by midday and have a plan made before nightfall.”

“I do not mean to wait for Verin,” Ingtar said, “and neither will I wait for night. I’ve waited too long already. I mean to have the Horn in my hands before the sun sets again.”

“But we don’t know, Ingtar.”

“I know the dagger is in there,” Mat said.

“And Hurin says Fain was here last night.” Ingtar overrode Hurin’s attempts to qualify that. “It is the first time you have been willing to say anything closer than a day or two. We are going to take back the Horn now. Now!”

“How?” Rand said. The officer was no longer watching them, but there were still at least twenty soldiers in front of the building. And a pair of *grolm. This is madness. There can’t be* grolm *here.* Thinking it did not make the beasts disappear, though.

“There seem to be gardens behind all these houses,” Ingtar said, looking around thoughtfully. “If one of those alleys runs by a garden wall. . . . Sometimes men are so busy guarding their front, they neglect their back. Come.” He headed straight for the nearest narrow passage between two of the tall houses. Hurin and Mat trotted right after him.

Rand exchanged looks with Perrin—his curly-haired friend gave a resigned shrug—and they followed, too.

The alley was barely wider than their shoulders, but it ran between high garden walls until it crossed another alley big enough for a pushbarrow or small cart. That was cobblestoned, too, but only the backs of buildings looked down on it, shuttered windows and expanses of stone, and the high back walls of gardens overtopped by nearly leafless branches.

Ingtar led them along that alley until they were opposite the waving banner. Taking his steel-backed gauntlets from under his coat, he put them on and leaped up to catch the top of the wall, then pulled himself up enough to peek over. He reported in a low monotone. “Trees. Flower beds. Walks. There isn’t a soul to be—Wait! A guard. One man. He isn’t even wearing his helmet. Count to fifty, then follow me.” He swung a boot to the top of the wall and rolled over inside, disappearing before Rand could say a word.

Mat began to count slowly. Rand held his breath. Perrin fingered his axe, and Hurin gripped the hilts of his weapons.

“. . . fifty.” Hurin scrambled up and over the wall before the word was well out of Mat’s mouth. Perrin went right beside him.

Rand thought Mat might need some help—he looked so pale and drawn—but he gave no sign of it as he scrambled up. The stone wall provided plenty of handholds, and moments later Rand was crouched on the inside with Mat and Perrin and Hurin.

The garden was in the grip of deep autumn, flower beds empty except for a few evergreen shrubs, tree branches nearly bare. The wind that rippled the banner stirred dust across the flagstone walks. For a moment Rand could not find Ingtar. Then he saw the Shienaran, flat against the back wall of the house, motioning them on with sword in hand.

Rand ran in a crouch, more conscious of the windows blankly peering down from the house than of his friends running beside him. It was a relief to press himself against the house beside Ingtar.

Mat kept muttering to himself, “It’s in there. I can feel it.”

“Where is the guard?” Rand whispered.

“Dead,” Ingtar said. “The man was overconfident. He never even tried to raise a cry. I hid his body under one of those bushes.”

Rand stared at him. *The* Seanchan *was overconfident?* The only thing that kept him from going back right then was Mat’s anguished murmurs.

“We are almost there.” Ingtar sounded as if he were speaking to himself, too. “Almost there. Come.”

Rand drew his sword as they started up the back steps. He was aware of Hurin unlimbering his short-bladed sword and notched sword-breaker, and Perrin reluctantly drawing his axe from the loop on his belt.

The hallway inside was narrow. A half-open door to their right smelled like a kitchen. Several people were moving about in that room; there was an indistinguishable sound of voices, and occasionally the soft clatter of a pot lid.

Ingtar motioned Mat to lead, and they crept by the door. Rand watched the narrowing opening until they were around the next corner.

A slender young woman with dark hair came out of a door ahead of them, carrying a tray with one cup. They all froze. She turned the other way without looking in their direction. Rand’s eyes widened. Her long white robe was all but transparent. She vanished around another corner.

“Did you see that?” Mat said hoarsely. “You could see right through—”

Ingtar clapped a hand over Mat’s mouth and whispered, “Keep your mind on why we are here. Now find it. Find the Horn for me.”

Mat pointed to a narrow set of winding stairs. They climbed a flight, and he led them toward the front of the house. The furnishings in the hallways were sparse, and seemed all curves. Here and there a tapestry hung on a wall, or a folding screen stood against it, each painted with a few birds on branches, or a flower or two. A river flowed across one screen, but aside from rippling water and narrow strips of riverbank, the rest of it was blank.

All around them Rand could hear the sounds of people stirring, slippers scuffing on the floor, soft murmurs of speech. He did not see anyone, but he could imagine it all too well, someone stepping into the hall to see five slinking men with weapons in their hands, shouting an alarm. . . .

“In there,” Mat whispered, pointing to a big pair of sliding doors ahead, carved handholds their only ornamentation. “At least, the dagger is.”

Ingtar looked at Hurin; the sniffer slid the doors open, and Ingtar leaped through with his sword ready. There was no one there. Rand and the others hurried inside, and Hurin quickly closed the doors behind them.

Painted screens hid all the walls and any other doors, and veiled the light coming through windows that had to overlook the street. At one end of the big room stood a tall, circular cabinet. At the other was a small table, the lone chair on the carpet turned to face it. Rand heard Ingtar gasp, but he only felt like heaving a sigh of relief. The curling golden Horn of Valere sat on a stand on the table. Below it, the ruby in the hilt of the ornate dagger caught the light.

Mat darted to the table, snatching Horn and dagger. “We have it,” he crowed, shaking the dagger in his fist. “We have both of them.”

“Not so loud,” Perrin said with a wince. “We don’t have them out of here, yet.” His hands were busy on the haft of his axe; they seemed to want to be holding something else.

“The Horn of Valere.” There was sheer awe in Ingtar’s voice. He touched the Horn hesitantly, tracing a finger along the silver script inlaid around the bell and mouthing the translation, then pulled his hand back with a shiver of excitement. “It is. By the Light, it is! I am saved.”

Hurin was moving the screens that hid the windows. He shoved the last out of his way and peered into the street below. “Those soldiers are all still there, looking like they’ve took root.” He shuddered. “Those . . . things, too.”

Rand went to join him. The two beasts were *grolm;* there was no denying it. “How did they. . . .” As he lifted his eyes from the street, words died. He was looking over a wall into the garden of the big house across the street. He could see where further walls had been torn down, joining other gardens to it. Women sat on benches there, or strolled along the walks, always in pairs. Women linked, neck to wrist, by silver leashes. One of the women with a collar around her neck looked up. He was too far to make out her face clearly, but for an instant it seemed that their eyes met, and he knew. The blood drained from his face. “Egwene,” he breathed.

“What are you talking about?” Mat said. “Egwene is safe in Tar Valon. I wish I were.”

“She’s here,” Rand said. The two women were turning, walking toward one of the buildings on the far side of the joined gardens. “She is there, right across the street. Oh, Light, she’s wearing one of those collars!”

“Are you sure?” Perrin said. He came to peer from the window. “I don’t see her, Rand. And—and I could recognize her if I did, even at this distance.”

“I am sure,” Rand said. The two women disappeared into one of the houses that faced the next street over. His stomach was twisted into a knot. *She is supposed to be safe. She’s supposed to be in the White Tower.* “I have to get her out. The rest of you—”

“So!” The slurring voice was as soft as the sound of the doors sliding in their tracks. “You are not who I expected.”

For a brief moment, Rand stared. The tall man with the shaven head who had stepped into the room wore a long, trailing blue robe, and his fingernails were so long that Rand wondered if he could handle anything. The two men standing obsequiously behind him had only half their dark hair shaved, the rest hanging in a dark braid down each man’s right cheek. One of them cradled a sheathed sword in his arms.

It was only a moment he had for staring, then screens toppled to reveal, at either end of the room, a doorway crowded with four or five Seanchan soldiers, bareheaded but armored, and swords in hand.

“You are in the presence of the High Lord Turak,” the man who carried the sword began, staring at Rand and the others angrily, but a brief motion of a finger with a blue-lacquered nail cut him short. The other servant stepped forward with a bow and began undoing Turak’s robe.

“When one of my guards was found dead,” the shaven-headed man said calmly, “I suspected the man who calls himself Fain. I have been suspicious of him since Huan died so mysteriously, and he has always wanted that dagger.” He held out his arms for the servant to remove his robe. Despite his soft, almost-singing voice, hard muscles roped his arms and smooth chest, which was bare to a blue sash holding wide, white trousers that seemed made of hundreds of pleats. He sounded uninterested, and indifferent to the blades in their hands. “And now to find strangers with not only the dagger, but the Horn. It will please me to kill one or two of you for disturbing my morning. Those who survive will tell me of who you are and why you came.” He stretched out a hand without looking—the man with the scabbarded sword laid the hilt in the hand—and drew the heavy, curved blade. “I would not have the Horn damaged.”

Turak gave no other signal, but one of the soldiers stalked into the room and reached for the Horn. Rand did not know whether he should laugh, or not. The man wore armor, but his arrogant face seemed as oblivious to their weapons as Turak was.

Mat put an end to it. As the Seanchan reached out his hand, Mat slashed it with the ruby-hilted dagger. With a curse, the soldier leaped back, looking surprised. And then he screamed. It chilled the room, held everyone where they stood in astonishment. The trembling hand he held up in front of his face was turning black, darkness creeping outwards from the bleeding gash that crossed his palm. He opened his mouth wide and howled, clawing at his arm, then his shoulder. Kicking, jerking, he toppled to the floor, thrashing on the silken carpet, shrieking as his face grew black and his dark eyes bulged like overripe plums, until a dark, swollen tongue gagged him. He twitched, choking raggedly, heels drumming, and did not move again. Every bit of his exposed flesh was black as putrid pitch and looked ready to burst at a touch.

Mat licked his lips and swallowed; his grip shifted uneasily on the dagger. Even Turak stared, openmouthed.

“You see,” Ingtar said softly, “we are no easy meat.” Suddenly he leaped over the corpse, toward the soldiers still goggling at what was left of the man who had stood at their shoulders only moments before. “Shinowa!” he cried. “Follow me!” Hurin leaped after him, and the soldiers fell back before them, the sounds of steel on steel rising.

The Seanchan at the other end of the room started forward as Ingtar moved, but then they were falling back, too, before Mat’s thrusting dagger even more than from the axe Perrin swung with wordless snarls.

In the space of heartbeats, Rand stood alone, facing Turak, who held his blade upright before him. His moment of shock was gone. His eyes were sharp on Rand’s face; the black and swollen body of one of his soldiers might as well not have existed. It did not seem to exist for the two servants, either, any more than Rand and his sword existed, or the sounds of fighting, fading now from the rooms to either side out into the house. The servants had begun calmly folding Turak's robe as soon as the High Lord took his sword, and had not looked up even for the dead soldier's shrieks; now they knelt beside the door and watched with impassive eyes.

"I suspected it might come to you and me." Turak spun his blade easily, a full circle one way, then the other, his long-nailed fingers moving delicately on the hilt. His fingernails did not seem to hamper him at all. "You are young. Let us see what is required to earn the heron on this side of the ocean."

Suddenly Rand saw. Standing tall on Turak's blade was a heron. With the little training he had, he was face-to-face with a real blademaster. Hastily he tossed the fleece-lined cloak aside, ridding himself of weight and encumbrance. Turak waited.

Rand desperately wanted to seek the void. It was plain he would need every shred of ability he could muster, and even then his chances of leaving the room alive would be small. He had to leave alive. Egwene was almost close enough for him to shout to her, and he had to free her, somehow. But *saidin* waited in the void. The thought made his heart leap with eagerness at the same time that it turned his stomach. But just as close as Egwene were those other women. *Damane.* If he touched *saidin,* and if he could not stop himself channeling, they would know, Verin had told him. Know and wonder. So many, so close. He might survive Turak only to die facing *damane,* and he could not die before Egwene was free. Rand raised his blade.

Turak glided toward him on silent feet. Blade rang on blade like hammer on anvil.

From the first it was clear to Rand that the man was testing him, pushing only hard enough to see what he could do, then pushing a little harder, then just a little harder still. It was quick wrists and quick feet that kept Rand alive as much as skill. Without the void, he was always half a heartbeat behind. The tip of Turak's heavy sword made a stinging trench just under his left eye. A flap of coat sleeve hung away from his shoulder, the darker for being wet. Under a neat slash beneath his right arm, precise as a tailor's cut, he could feel warm dampness spreading down his ribs.

There was disappointment on the High Lord's face. He stepped back with a gesture of disgust. "Where did you find that blade, boy? Or do they here truly award the heron to those no more skilled than you? No matter. Make your peace. It is time to die.” He came on again.

The void enveloped Rand. *Saidin* flowed toward him, glowing with the promise of the One Power, but he ignored it. It was no more difficult than ignoring a barbed thorn twisting in his flesh. He refused to be filled with the Power, refused to be one with the male half of the True Source. He was one with the sword in his hands, one with the floor beneath his feet, one with the walls. One with Turak.

He recognized the forms the High Lord used; they were a little different from what he had been taught, but not enough. The Swallow Takes Flight met Parting the Silk. Moon on the Water met The Wood Grouse Dances. Ribbon in the Air met Stones Falling From the Cliff. They moved about the room as in a dance, and their music was steel against steel.

Disappointment and disgust faded from Turak’s dark eyes, replaced by surprise, then concentration. Sweat appeared on the High Lord’s face as he pressed Rand harder. Lightning of Three Prongs met Leaf on the Breeze.

Rand’s thoughts floated outside the void, apart from himself, hardly noticed. It was not enough. He faced a blade-master, and with the void and every ounce of his skill he was barely managing to hold his own. Barely. He had to end it before Turak finally did. *Saidin? No! Sometimes it is necessary to Sheathe the Sword in your own flesh.* But that would not help Egwene, either. He had to end it now. Now.

Turak’s eyes widened as Rand glided forward. So far he had only defended; now he attacked, all out. The Boar Rushes Down the Mountain. Every movement of his blade was an attempt to reach the High Lord; now all Turak could do was retreat and defend, down the length of the room, almost to the door.

In an instant, while Turak still tried to face the Boar, Rand charged. The River Undercuts the Bank. He dropped to one knee, blade slashing across. He did not need Turak’s gasp, or the feel of resistance to his cut to know. He heard two thumps and turned his head, knowing what he would see. He looked down the length of his blade, wet and red, to where the High Lord lay, sword tumbled from his limp hand, a dark dampness staining the birds woven in the carpet under his body. Turak’s eyes were still open, but already filmed with death.

The void shook. He had faced Trollocs before, faced Shadowspawn. Never before had he confronted a human being with a sword except in practice or bluff. *I just killed a man.* The void shook, and *saidin* tried to fill him.

Desperately he clawed free, breathing hard as he looked around. He gave a start when he saw the two servants still kneeling beside the door. He had forgotten them, and now he did not know what to do about them. Neither man appeared armed, yet all they had to do was shout. . . .

They never looked at him, or at each other. Instead, they stared silently at the High Lord's body. They produced daggers from under their robes, and he tightened his grip on the sword, but each man placed the point to his own breast. "From birth to death," they intoned in unison, "I serve the Blood." And plunged the daggers into their own hearts. They folded forward almost peacefully, heads to the floor as if bowing deeply to their lord.

Rand stared at them in disbelief. *Mad,* he thought. *Maybe I will go mad, but they already were.*

He was getting to his feet shakily when Ingtar and the others came running back. They all bore nicks and cuts; the leather of Ingtar's coat was stained in more than one place. Mat still had the Horn and his dagger, its blade darker than the ruby in its hilt. Perrin's axe was red, too, and he looked as if he might be sick at any moment.

"You dealt with them?" Ingtar said, looking at the bodies. "Then we're done, if no alarm is given. Those fools never cried for help, not once."

"I will see if the guards heard anything," Hurin said, and darted for the window.

Mat shook his head. "Rand, these people are crazy. I know I've said that before, but these people really are. Those servants. . . ." Rand held his breath, wondering if they had all killed themselves. Mat said, "Whenever they saw us fighting, they fell on their knees, put their faces to the floor, and wrapped their arms around their heads. They never moved, or cried out; never tried to help the soldiers, or give an alarm. They're still there, as far as I know."

"I would not count on them staying on their knees," Ingtar said dryly. "We are leaving now, as fast as we can run."

"You go," Rand said. "Egwene—"

"You fool!" Ingtar snapped. "We have what we came for. The Horn of Valere. The hope of salvation. What can one girl count, even if you love her, alongside the Horn, and what it stands for?"

“The Dark One can have the Horn for all I care! What does finding the Horn count if I abandon Egwene to this? If I did that, the Horn couldn’t save me. The Creator couldn’t save me. I would damn myself.”

Ingtar stared at him, his face unreadable. “You mean that exactly, don’t you?”

“Something’s happening out here,” Hurin said urgently. “A man just came running up, and they’re all milling like fish in a bucket. Wait. The officer is coming inside!”

“Go!” Ingtar said. He tried to take the Horn, but Mat was already running. Rand hesitated, but Ingtar grabbed his arm and pulled him into the hall. The others were streaming after Mat; Perrin only gave Rand one pained look before he went. “You cannot save the girl if you stand here and die!”

He ran with them. Part of him hated himself for running, but another part whispered, *I’ll come back. I’ll free her somehow.*

By the time they reached the bottom of the narrow, winding staircase, he could hear a man’s deep voice raised in the front part of the house, angrily demanding that someone stand up and speak. A serving girl in her nearly transparent robe knelt at the bottom of the stairs, and a gray-haired woman all in white wool, with a long floury apron, knelt by the kitchen door. They were both exactly as Mat had described, faces to the floor and arms wrapped around their heads, and they did not stir a hair as Rand and the others hurried by. He was relieved to see the motions of breathing.

They crossed the garden at a dead run, climbing over the back wall rapidly. Ingtar cursed when Mat tossed the Horn of Valere ahead of him, and tried again to take it when he dropped outside, but Mat snatched it up with a quick, “It isn’t even scratched,” and scampered up the alley.

More shouts rose from the house they had just left; a woman screamed, and someone began tolling a gong.

I will come back for her. Somehow. Rand sped after the others as fast as he could.

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CHAPTER

46

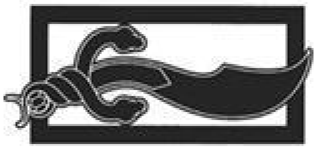

To Come Out of the Shadow

Nynaeve and the others heard distant shouts as they approached the buildings where the *damane* were housed. The crowds were beginning to pick up, and there was a nervousness to the people in the street, an extra quickness to their step, an extra wariness in the way they glanced past Nynaeve, in her lightning-paneled dress, and the woman she held by a silver leash.

Shifting her bundle nervously, Elayne peered toward the noise of shouts, one street over, where the golden hawk clutching lightning rippled in the wind. “What is happening?”

“Nothing to do with us,” Nynaeve said firmly.

“You hope,” Min added. “And so do I.” She increased her pace, hurrying up the steps ahead of the others, and disappeared inside the tall stone house.

Nynaeve shortened her grip on the leash. “Remember, Seta, you want us to make it through this safely as much as we do.”

“I do,” the Seanchan woman said fervently. She kept her chin on her chest, to hide her face. “I will cause you no trouble, I swear.”

As they turned up the gray stone steps, a *sul’dam* and a *damane* appeared at the head of the stairs, coming down as they went up. After one glance to make sure the woman in the collar was not Egwene, Nynaeve did not look at them again. She used the *a’dam* to keep Seta close by her side, so if the *damane* sensed the ability to channel in one of them, she would think it was Seta. She felt sweat trickling down her spine, though, until she realized they were paying her no more attention than she gave them. All they saw was a dress with lightning panels and a gray dress, the women wearing them linked by the silver length of an *a’dam.* Just another Leash Holder with a Leashed One, and a local girl hurrying along behind with a bundle belonging to the *sul’dam.*

Nynaeve pushed open the door, and they went in.

Whatever the excitement beneath Turak’s banner, it did not extend here, not yet. There were only women moving about in the entry hall, all easily placed by their dress. Three gray-dressed *damane,* with *sul’dam* wearing the bracelets. Two women in dresses paneled with forked lightning stood talking, and three crossed the hall alone. Four dressed like Min, in plain dark woolens, hurried on their way with trays.

Min stood waiting down the entry hall when they went in; she glanced at them once, then started deeper into the house. Nynaeve guided Seta down the hall after Min, with Elayne scurrying along in their wake. No one gave them a second glance, it seemed to Nynaeve, but she thought the trickle of sweat down her backbone might become a river soon. She kept Seta moving quickly so no one would have a chance for a good look—or worse, a question. With her eyes fixed on her toes, Seta needed so little urging that Nynaeve thought she would have been running if not for the physical restraint of the leash.

Near the back of the house, Min took a narrow stairs that spiraled upwards. Nynaeve pushed Seta up it ahead of her, all the way to the fourth floor. The ceilings were low, there, the halls empty and silent except for the soft sounds of weeping. Weeping seemed to fit the air of the chilly halls.

“This place . . .” Elayne began, then shook her head. “It feels. . . .”

“Yes, it does,” Nynaeve said grimly. She glared at Seta, who kept her face down. A pallor of fear made the Seanchan woman’s skin paler than it was normally.

Wordlessly, Min opened a door and went in, and they followed. The room beyond had been divided into smaller rooms by roughly made wooden walls, with a narrow hallway running to a window. Nynaeve crowded after Min as she hurried to the last door on the right and pushed in.

A slender, dark-haired girl in gray sat at a small table with her head resting on folded arms, but even before she looked up, Nynaeve knew it was Egwene. A ribbon of shining metal ran from the silver collar around Egwene’s neck to a bracelet hanging on a peg on the wall. Her eyes widened at the sight of them, her mouth working silently. As Elayne closed the door, Egwene gave a sudden giggle, and pressed her hands to her mouth to stifle it. The tiny room was more than crowded with all of them in it.

“I know I’m not dreaming,” she said in a quivering voice, “because if I was dreaming, you’d be Rand and Galad on tall stallions. I have been dreaming. I thought Rand was here. I couldn't see him, but I thought. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"If you'd rather wait for them . . ." Min said dryly.

"Oh, no. No, you are all beautiful, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Where did you come from? How did you do it? That dress, Nynaeve, and the *a'dam*, and who is. . . ." She gave an abrupt squeak. "That's Seta. How . . . ?" Her voice hardened so that Nynaeve barely recognized it. "I'd like to put *her* in a pot of boiling water." Seta had her eyes squeezed shut, and her hands clutched her skirts; she was trembling.

"What have they done to you?" Elayne exclaimed. "What could they do to make you want something like that?"

Egwene never took her eyes off the Seanchan woman. "I'd like to make her feel it. That's what she did to me, made me feel like I was neck deep in. . . ." She shuddered. "You do not know what it is like wearing one of these, Elayne. You don't know what they can do to you. I can never decide whether Seta is worse than Renna, but they're all hateful."

"I think I know," Nynaeve said quietly. She could feel the sweat soaking Seta's skin, the cold tremors that shook her limbs. The yellow-haired Seanchan was terrified. It was all she could do not to make Seta's terrors come true then and there.

"Can you take this off of me?" Egwene asked, touching the collar. "You must be able to if you could put that one on—"

Nynaeve channeled, a pinpoint trickle. The collar on Egwene's neck provided anger enough, and if it had not, Seta's fear, the knowledge of how deserved it truly was, and her own knowledge of what she wanted to do to the woman, would have done it. The collar sprang open and fell away from Egwene's throat. With an expression of wonder, Egwene touched her neck.

"Put on my dress and coat," Nynaeve told her. Elayne was already unbundling the clothes on the bed. "We will walk out of here, and no one will even notice you." She considered holding her contact with *saidar*—she was certainly angry enough, and it felt so wonderful—but, reluctantly, she let it go. This was the one place in Falme where there was no chance of a *sul'dam* and *damane* coming to investigate if they sensed someone channeling, but they would certainly do so if a *damane* saw a woman she thought was a *sul'dam* with the glow of channeling around her. "I don't know why you aren't gone already. Alone here, even if you could not figure out how to get that thing off you, you could have just picked it up and run."

As Min and Elayne hurriedly helped her change into Nynaeve's old dress, Egwene explained about moving the bracelet from where a *sul'dam* left it, and how channeling made her sick unless a *sul'dam* wore the bracelet. Just that morning she had discovered how the collar could be opened without the Power—and found that touching the catch with the intention of opening it made her hand knot into uselessness. She could touch it as much as she wanted so long as she did not think of undoing the catch; the merest hint of that, though, and. . . .

Nynaeve felt sick herself. The bracelet on her wrist made her sick. It was too horrible. She wanted it off her wrist before she learned more about *a'dam*, before she perhaps learned something that would make her feel soiled forever for having worn it.

Unfastening the silver cuff, she pulled it loose, snapped it closed, and hung it on one of the pegs. "Don't think that means you can shout for help now." She shook a fist under Seta's nose. "I can still make you wish you were never born if you open your mouth, and I do not need that bloody . . . thing."

"You—you do not mean to leave me here with it," Seta said in a whisper. "You cannot. Tie me. Gag me so I cannot give an alarm. Please!"

Egwene gave a mirthless laugh. "Leave it on her. She won't call for help even without a gag. You had better hope whoever finds you will remove the *a'dam* and keep your little secret, Seta. Your dirty secret, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about?" Elayne said.

"I have thought about it a great deal," Egwene said. "Thinking was all I could do when they left me alone up here. *Sul'dam* claim they develop an affinity after a few years. Most of them can tell when a woman is channeling whether they're leashed to her or not. I wasn't sure, but Seta proves it."

"Proves what?" Elayne demanded, and then her eyes widened in sudden realization, but Egwene went on.

"Nynaeve, *a'dam* only work on women who can channel. Don't you see? *Sul'dam* can channel the same as *damane*." Seta groaned through her teeth, shaking her head in violent denial. "A *sul'dam* would die before admitting she could channel, even if she knew, and they never train the ability, so they cannot do anything with it, but they can channel."

"I told you," Min said. "That collar shouldn't have worked on her." She was doing up the last buttons down Egwene's back. "Any woman who couldn't channel would be able to beat you silly while you tried to control her with it."

"How can that be?" Nynaeve said. "I thought the Seanchan put leashes on any woman who can channel."

"All of those they find," Egwene told her. "But those they can find are like you, and me, and Elayne. We were born with it, ready to channel whether anyone taught us or not. But what about Seanchan girls who aren't born with the ability, but who could be taught? Not just any woman can become a—a Leash Holder. Renna thought she was being friendly telling me about it. It is apparently a feastday in Seanchan villages when the *sul'dam* come to test the girls. They want to find any like you and me, and leash them, but they let all the others put on a bracelet to see if they can feel what the poor woman in the collar feels. Those who can are taken away to be trained as *sul'dam.* They are the women who could be taught."

Seta was moaning under her breath. "No. No. No." Over and over again.

"I know she is horrible," Elayne said, "but I feel as if I should help her somehow. She could be one of our sisters, only the Seanchan have twisted it all."

Nynaeve opened her mouth to say they had better worry about helping themselves, and the door opened.

"What is going on here?" Renna demanded, stepping into the room. "An audience?" She stared at Nynaeve, hands on hips. "I never gave permission for anyone else to link with my pet, Tuli. I do not even know who you—" Her eyes fell on Egwene—Egwene wearing Nynaeve's dress instead of *damane* gray. Egwene with no collar around her throat—and her eyes grew as big as saucers. She never had a chance to yell.

Before anyone else could move, Egwene snatched the pitcher from her washstand and smashed it into Renna's midriff. The pitcher shattered, and the *sul'dam* lost all her breath in a gurgling gasp and doubled over. As she fell, Egwene leaped on her with a snarl, shoving her flat, grabbing for the collar she had worn where it still lay on the floor, snapping it around the other woman's neck. With one jerk on the silver leash, Egwene pulled the bracelet from the peg and fitted it to her own wrist. Her lips were pulled back from her teeth, her eyes fixed on Renna's face with a terrible concentration. Kneeling on the *sul'dam*'s shoulders, she pressed both hands over the woman's mouth. Renna gave a tremendous convulsion, and her eyes bulged in her face; hoarse sounds came from her throat, screams held back by Egwene's hands; her heels drummed on the floor.

"Stop it, Egwene!" Nynaeve grabbed Egwene's shoulders, pulling her off of the other woman. "Egwene, stop it! That isn't what you want!" Renna lay gray-faced and panting, staring wildly at the ceiling.

Suddenly Egwene threw herself against Nynaeve, sobbing raggedly at her breast. "She hurt me, Nynaeve. She hurt me. They all did. They hurt me, and hurt me, until I did what they wanted. I hate them. I hate them for hurting me, and I hate them because I couldn't stop them from making me do what they wanted."

"I know," Nynaeve said gently. She smoothed Egwene's hair. "It is all right to hate them, Egwene. It is. They deserve it. But it isn't all right to let them make you like they are."

Seta's hands were pressed to her face. Renna touched the collar at her throat disbelievingly, with a shaking hand.

Egwene straightened, brushing her tears away quickly. "I'm not. I am not like them." She almost clawed the bracelet off of her wrist and threw it down. "I'm not. But I wish I could kill them."

"They deserve it." Min was staring grimly at the two *sul'dam.*

"Rand would kill someone who did a thing like that," Elayne said. She seemed to be steeling herself. "I am sure he would."

"Perhaps they do," Nynaeve said, "and perhaps he would. But men often mistake revenge and killing for justice. They seldom have the stomach for justice." She had often sat in judgment with the Women's Circle. Sometimes men came before them, thinking women might give them a better hearing than the men of the Village Council, but men always thought they could sway the decision with eloquence, or pleas for mercy. The Women's Circle gave mercy where it was deserved, but justice always, and it was the Wisdom who pronounced it. She picked up the bracelet Egwene had discarded and closed it. "I would free every woman here, if I could, and destroy every last one of these. But since I cannot. . . ." She slipped the bracelet over the same peg that held the other one, then addressed herself to the *sul'dam. Not Leash Holders any longer*, she told herself. "Perhaps, if you are very quiet, you will be left alone here long enough to manage to remove the collars. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and it may be that you've done enough good to counterbalance the evil you have done, enough that you will be allowed to remove them. If not, you will be found, eventually. And I think whoever finds you will ask a great many questions before they remove those collars. I think perhaps you will learn at first hand the life you have given to other women. That is justice," she added, to the others.

Renna wore a fixed stare of horror. Seta's shoulders shook as she sobbed into her hands. Nynaeve hardened her heart—*It is justice,* she told herself. *It is*—and herded the others out of the room.

No one paid any more attention to them going out than they had coming in. Nynaeve supposed she had the *sul'dam* dress to thank for that, but she could not wait to change into something else. Anything else. The dirtiest rag would feel cleaner on her skin.

The girls were silent, walking close behind her, until they were out on the cobblestone street again. She did not know if it was what she had done or the fear that someone might stop them. She scowled. Would they have felt better if she had let them work themselves up to cutting the women's throats?

"Horses," Egwene said. "We will need horses. I know the stable where they took Bela, but I don't think we can get to her."

"We have to leave Bela here," Nynaeve told her. "We are leaving by ship."

"Where is everybody?" Min said, and suddenly Nynaeve realized the street was empty.

The crowds were gone, not a sign of them to be seen; every shop and window along the street were shuttered tight. But up the street from the harbor came a formation of Seanchan soldiers, a hundred or more in ordered ranks, with an officer at their head in his painted armor. They were still halfway down the street from the women, but they marched with a grim, implacable step, and it seemed to Nynaeve that every eye was fixed on her. *That's ridiculous. I can't see their eyes inside those helmets, and if anybody had given an alarm, it would be behind us.* She stopped anyway.

"There are more behind us," Min murmured. Nynaeve could hear those boots, now. "I don't know which will reach us first."

Nynaeve took a deep breath. "They are nothing to do with us." She looked beyond the approaching soldiers, to the harbor, filled with tall, boxy

Seanchan ships. She could not make out *Spray;* she prayed it was still there, and ready. “We will walk right past them.” *Light, I hope we can.*

“What if they want you to join them, Nynaeve?” Elayne asked. “You are wearing that dress. If they start asking questions. . . .”

“I will not go back,” Egwene said grimly. “I’ll die first. Let me show them what they’ve taught me.” To Nynaeve’s eye, a golden nimbus suddenly seemed to surround her.

“No!” she said, but it was too late.

With a roar like thunder, the street under the first ranks of Seanchan erupted, dirt and cobblestones and armored men thrown aside like spray from a fountain. Still glowing, Egwene spun to stare up the street, and the thunderous roar was repeated. Dirt rained down on the women. Shouting Seanchan soldiers scattered in good order to shelter in alleys and behind stoops. In moments they were all out of sight, except for those who lay around the two large holes marring the street. Some of those stirred feebly, and moans drifted along the street.

Nynaeve threw up her hands, trying to look in both directions at once. “You fool! We are trying *not* to attract attention!” There was no hope of that now. She only hoped they could manage to work their way around the soldiers to the harbor through the alleys. *The* damane *must know, too, now. They could not have missed that.*

“I won’t go back to that collar,” Egwene said fiercely. “I won’t!”

“Look out!” Min shouted.

With a shrill whine, a fireball as big as a horse arched into the air over the rooftops and began to fall. Directly toward them.

“Run!” Nynaeve shouted, and threw herself into a dive toward the nearest alleyway, between two shuttered shops.

She landed awkwardly on her stomach with a grunt, losing half her breath, as the fireball struck. Hot wind washed over her down the narrow passage. Gulping air, she rolled onto her back and stared back into the street.

The cobblestones where they had been standing were chipped and cracked and blackened in a circle ten paces across. Elayne was crouched just inside another alley on the other side of the street. Of Min and Egwene, there was no sign. Nynaeve clapped a hand to her mouth in horror.

Elayne seemed to understand what she was thinking. The Daughter-Heir shook her head violently and pointed down the street. They had gone that way.

Nynaeve heaved a sigh of relief that immediately turned to a growl. *Fool girl! We could have gotten by them!* There was no time for recriminations, though. She scooted to the corner and peered cautiously around the edge of the building.

A head-sized fireball flashed down the street toward her. She leaped back just before it exploded against the corner where her own head had been, showering her with stone chips.

Anger had her awash in the One Power before she was aware of it. Lightning flashed out of the sky, striking somewhere up the street with a crash near the origin of the fireball. Another jagged bolt split the sky, and then she was running down the alley. Behind her, lightning lanced the mouth of the alley.

If Domon doesn't have that ship waiting, I'll. . . . Light, let us all reach it safely.

Bayle Domon jerked erect as lightning streaked across the slate-gray sky, striking somewhere in the town, then again. *There do no be enough clouds for that!*

Something rumbled loudly up in the town, and a ball of fire smashed into a rooftop just above the docks, throwing splintered slates in wide arcs. The docks had emptied themselves of people a while back, except for a few Seanchan; they ran wildly, now, drawing swords and shouting. A man appeared from one of the warehouses with a *grolm* at his side, running to keep up with the beast's long leaps as they vanished into one of the streets leading up from the water.

One of Domon's crewmen jumped for an axe and swung it high over a mooring cable.

In two strides, Domon seized the upraised axe with one hand and the man's throat with the other. "*Spray* do stay till *I* do say sail, Aedwin Cole!"

"They're going mad, Captain!" Yarin shouted. An explosion sent echoes rumbling across the harbor, sending the gulls into screaming circles, and lightning flickered again, crashing to earth inside Falme. "The *damane* will kill us all! Let us go while they're busy killing one another. They will never notice us till we are gone!"

"I did give my word," Domon said. He wrenched the axe from Cole's hand and threw it clattering onto the deck. "I did give my word." *Hurry,* *woman*, he thought, *Aes Sedai or whatever you be. Hurry!*

Geofram Bornhald eyed the lightning flashing over Falme and dismissed it from his mind. Some huge flying creature—one of the Seanchan monsters, no doubt—flew wildly to escape the bolts. If there was a storm, it would hinder the Seanchan as much as it did him. Nearly treeless hills, a few topped by sparse thickets, still hid the town from him, and him from it.

His thousand men lay spread out to either side of him, one long, mounted rank rippling along the hollows between hills. The cold wind tossed their white cloaks and flapped the banner at Bornhald's side, the wavy-rayed golden sun of the Children of the Light.

"Go now, Byar," he commanded. The gaunt-faced man hesitated, and Bornhald put a snap into his voice. "I said, go, Child Byar!"

Byar touched hand to heart and bowed. "As you command, my Lord Captain." He turned his horse away, every line of him shouting reluctance.

Bornhald put Byar out of his mind. He had done what he could, there. He raised his voice. "The legion will advance at a walk!"

With a creak of saddles the long line of white-cloaked men moved slowly toward Falme.

Rand peered around the corner at the approaching Seanchan, then ducked back into the narrow alley between two stables with a grimace. They would be there soon. There was blood crusted on his cheek. The cuts he had from Turak burned, but there was nothing to be done for them now. Lightning flashed across the sky again; he felt the rumble of its plummet through his boots. *What in the name of the Light is happening?*

"Close?" Ingtar said. "The Horn of Valere must be saved, Rand." Despite the Seanchan, despite the lightning and strange explosions down in the town proper, he seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts. Mat and Perrin and Hurin were down at the other end of the alley, watching another Seanchan patrol. The place where they had left the horses was close, now, if they could only reach it.

"She's in trouble," Rand muttered. Egwene. There was an odd feeling in his head, as if pieces of his life were in danger. Egwene was one piece, one thread of the cord that made his life, but there were others, and he could feel them threatened. Down there, in Falme. And if any of those threads was destroyed, his life would never be complete, the way it was meant to be. He did not understand it, but the feeling was sure and certain.

“One man could hold fifty here,” Ingtar said. The two stables stood close together, with barely room for the pair of them to stand side by side between them. “One man holding fifty at a narrow passage. Not a bad way to die. Songs have been made about less.”

“There’s no need for that,” Rand said. “I hope.” A rooftop in the town exploded. *How am I going to get back in here? I have to reach her. Reach them?* Shaking his head, he peeked around the corner again. The Seanchan were closer, still coming.

“I never knew what he was going to do,” Ingtar said softly, as if talking to himself. He had his sword out, testing the edge with his thumb. “A pale little man you didn’t seem to really notice even when you were looking at him. Take him inside Fal Dara, I was told, inside the fortress. I did not want to, but I had to do it. You understand? I had to. I never knew what he intended until he shot that arrow. I still don’t know if it was meant for the Amyrlin, or for you.”

Rand felt a chill. He stared at Ingtar. “What are you saying?” he whispered.

Studying his blade, Ingtar did not seem to hear. “Humankind is being swept away everywhere. Nations fail and vanish. Darkfriends are everywhere, and none of these southlanders seem to notice or care. We fight to hold the Borderlands, to keep them safe in their houses, and every year, despite all we can do, the Blight advances. And these southlanders think Trollocs are myths, and Myrddraal a gleeman’s tale.” He frowned and shook his head. “It seemed the only way. We would be destroyed for nothing, defending people who do not even know, or care. It seemed logical. Why should we be destroyed for them, when we could make our own peace? Better the Shadow, I thought, than useless oblivion, like Caralain, or Hardan, or. . . . It seemed so logical, then.”

Rand grabbed Ingtar’s lapels. “You aren’t making any sense.” *He can’t mean what he’s saying. He can’t.* “Say it plain, whatever you mean. You are talking crazy!”

For the first time Ingtar looked at Rand. His eyes shone with unshed tears. “You are a better man than I. Shepherd or lord, a better man. The prophecy says, ‘Let who sounds me think not of glory, but only salvation.’ It was my salvation I was thinking of. I would sound the Horn, and lead the heroes of the Ages against Shayol Ghul. Surely that would have been enough to save me. No man can walk so long in the Shadow that he cannot come again to the Light. That is what they say. Surely that would have been enough to wash away what I have been, and done."

"Oh, Light, Ingtar." Rand released his hold on the other man and sagged back against the stable wall. "I think. . . . I think wanting to is enough. I think all you have to do is stop being . . . one of them." Ingtar flinched as if Rand had said it out loud. Darkfriend.

"Rand, when Verin brought us here with the Portal Stone, I—I lived other lives. Sometimes I held the Horn, but I never sounded it. I tried to escape what I'd become, but I never did. Always there was something else required of me, always something worse than the last, until I was. . . . You were ready to give it up to save a friend. Think not of glory. Oh, Light, help me."

Rand did not know what to say. It was as if Egwene had told him she had murdered children. Too horrible to be believed. Too horrible for anyone to admit to unless it was true. Too horrible.

After a time, Ingtar spoke again, firmly. "There has to be a price, Rand. There is always a price. Perhaps I can pay it here."

"Ingtar, I—"

"It is every man's right, Rand, to choose when to Sheathe the Sword. Even one like me."

Before Rand could say anything, Hurin came running down the alley. "The patrol turned aside," he said hurriedly, "down into the town. They seem to be gathering down there. Mat and Perrin went on." He took a quick look down the street and pulled back. "We'd better do the same, Lord Ingtar, Lord Rand. Those bug-headed Seanchan are almost here."

"Go, Rand," Ingtar said. He turned to face the street and did not look at Rand or Hurin again. "Take the Horn where it belongs. I always knew the Amyrlin should have given you the charge. But all I ever wanted was to keep Shienar whole, to keep us from being swept away and forgotten."

"I know, Ingtar." Rand drew a deep breath. "The Light shine on you, Lord Ingtar of House Shinowa, and may you shelter in the palm of the Creator's hand." He touched Ingtar's shoulder. "The last embrace of the mother welcome you home." Hurin gasped.

"Thank you," Ingtar said softly. A tension seemed to go out of him. For the first time since the night of the Trolloc raid on Fal Dara, he stood as he had when Rand first saw him, confident and relaxed. Content.

Rand turned and found Hurin staring at him, staring at both of them. “It is time for us to go.”

“But Lord Ingtar—”

“—does what he has to,” Rand said sharply. “But we go.” Hurin nodded, and Rand trotted after him. Rand could hear the steady tread of the Seanchan’s boots, now. He did not look back.

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CHAPTER

47

The Grave Is No Bar to My Call

Mat and Perrin were mounted by the time Rand and Hurin reached them. Far behind him, Rand heard Ingtar's voice rise. "The Light, and Shinowa!" The clash of steel joined the roar of other voices.

"Where's Ingtar?" Mat shouted. "What's going on?" He had the Horn of Valere lashed to the high pommel of his saddle as if it were just any horn, but the dagger was in his belt, the ruby-tipped hilt cupped protectively in a pale hand that seemed made of nothing but bone and sinew.

"He's dying," Rand said harshly as he swung onto Red's back.

"Then we have to help him," Perrin said. "Mat can take the Horn and the dagger on to—"

"He is doing it so we can all get away," Rand said. *For that, too.* "We will all take the Horn to Verin, and then you can help her take it wherever she says it belongs."

"What do you mean?" Perrin asked. Rand dug his heels into the bay's flanks, and Red leaped away toward the hills beyond the town.

"The Light, and Shinowa!" Ingtar's shout soared after him, sounding triumphant, and lightning crashed across the sky in answer.

Rand whipped Red with his reins, then lay against the stallion's neck as the bay laid out in a dead run, mane and tail streaming. He wished he did not feel as if he were running away from Ingtar's cry, running from what he was supposed to do. *Ingtar, a Darkfriend. I don't care. He was still my friend.* The bay's gallop could not take him away from his own thoughts. *Death is lighter than a feather, duty heavier than a mountain. So many duties. Egwene. The Horn. Fain. Mat and his dagger. Why can't there just be one at a time? I have to take care of all of them. Oh, Light, Egwene!*

He reined in so suddenly that Red slid to a halt, sitting back on his haunches. They were in a scanty copse of bare-branched trees atop one of the hills overlooking Falme. The others galloped up behind him.

“What do you mean?” Perrin demanded. “*We* can help Verin take the Horn where it’s supposed to go? Where are *you* going to be?”

“Maybe he’s going mad already,” Mat said. “He wouldn’t want to stay with us if he was going mad. Would you, Rand?”

“You three take the Horn to Verin,” Rand said. *Egwene. So many threads, in so much danger. So many duties.* “You do not need me.”

Mat caressed the dagger’s hilt. “That’s all very well, but what about you? Burn me, you can’t be going mad yet. You can’t!” Hurin gaped at them, not understanding half of it.

“I’m going back,” Rand said. “I should never have left.” Somehow, that did not sound exactly right in his own ears; it did not feel right inside his head. “I have to go back. Now.” That sounded better. “Egwene is still there, remember. With one of those collars around her neck.”

“Are you sure?” Mat said. “I never saw her. Aaaah! If you say she is there, then she’s there. We’ll all take the Horn to Verin, and then we will all go back for her. You don’t think I would leave her there, do you?”

Rand shook his head. *Threads. Duties.* He felt as if he were about to explode like a firework. *Light, what’s happening to me?* “Mat, Verin must take you and that dagger to Tar Valon, so you can finally be free of it. You don’t have any time to waste.”

“Saving Egwene isn’t wasting time!” But Mat’s hand had tightened on the dagger till it shook.

“We aren’t any of us going back,” Perrin said. “Not yet. Look.” He pointed back toward Falme.

The wagon yards and horse lots were turning black with Seanchan soldiers, thousands of them rank on rank, with troops of cavalry riding scaled beasts as well as armored men on horses, colorful gonfanons marking the officers. *Grolm* dotted the ranks, and other strange creatures, almost but not quite like monstrous birds and lizards, and great things like nothing he could describe, with gray, wrinkled skin and huge tusks. At intervals along the lines stood *sul’dam* and *damane* by the score. Rand wondered if Egwene were one of them. In the town behind the soldiers, a rooftop still exploded now and again, and lightning still streaked the sky. Two flying beasts, with leathery wings twenty spans tip to tip, soared high overhead, keeping well away from where the bright bolts danced.

“All that for us?” Mat said incredulously. “Who do they think we are?”

An answer came to Rand, but he shoved it away before it had a chance to form completely.

"We aren't going the other way either, Lord Rand," Hurin said. "Whitecloaks. Hundreds of them."

Rand wheeled his horse to look where the sniffer was pointing. A long, white-cloaked line rippled slowly toward them across the hills.

"Lord Rand," Hurin muttered, "if that lot lays an eye on the Horn of Valere, we'll never get it close to an Aes Sedai. We'll never get close to it again ourselves."

"Maybe that's why the Seanchan are gathering," Mat said hopefully. "Because of the Whitecloaks. Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with us at all."

"Whether it does or not," Perrin said dryly, "there is going to be a battle here in a few minutes."

"Either side could kill us," Hurin said, "even if they never see the Horn. If they do. . . ."

Rand could not manage to think about the Whitecloaks, or the Seanchan. *I have to go back. Have to.* He was staring at the Horn of Valere, he realized. They all were. The curled, golden Horn hung at Mat's pommel, the focus of every eye.

"It has to be there at the Last Battle," Mat said, licking his lips. "Nothing says it can't be used before then." He pulled the Horn free of its lashings and looked at them anxiously. "Nothing says it can't."

No one else said anything. Rand did not think he could speak; his own thoughts were too urgent to allow room for speech. *Have to go back. Have to go back.* The longer he looked at the Horn, the more urgent his thoughts became. *Have to. Have to.*

Mat's hand shook as he raised the Horn of Valere to his lips.

It was a clear note, golden as the Horn was golden. The trees around them seemed to resonate with it, and the ground under their feet, the sky overhead. That one long sound encompassed everything.

Out of nowhere, a fog began to rise. First thin wisps hanging in the air, then thicker billows, and thicker, until it blanketed the land like clouds.

Geofram Bornhald stiffened in his saddle as a sound filled the air, so sweet he wanted to laugh, so mournful he wanted to cry. It seemed to come from every direction at once. A mist began to rise, growing even as he watched.

The Seanchan. They are trying something. They know we are here.

It was too soon, the town too far, but he drew his sword—a clatter of scabbards ran down the rank of his half legion—and called, “The legion will advance at a trot.”

The fog covered everything, now, but he knew Falme was still there, ahead. The pace of the horses picked up; he could not see them, but he could hear.

Abruptly the ground ahead flew up with a roar, showering him with dirt and pebbles. From the white blindness to his right he heard another roar, and men and horses screamed, then from his left, and again. Again. Thunder and screams, hidden by the fog.

“The legion will charge!” His horse leaped forward as he dug in his heels, and he heard the roar as the legion, as much of it as still lived, followed.

Thunder and screams, wrapped in whiteness.

His last thought was regret. Byar would not be able to tell his son Dain how he had died.

Rand could not see the trees around them any longer. Mat had lowered the Horn, eyes wide with awe, but the sound of it still rang in Rand’s ears. The fog hid everything in rolling waves as white as the finest bleached wool, yet Rand could see. He could see, but it was mad. Falme floated somewhere beneath him, its landward border black with the Seanchan ranks, lightning ripping its streets. Falme hung over his head. There Whitecloaks charged and died as the earth opened in fire beneath their horses’ hooves. There men ran about the decks of tall, square ships in the harbor, and on one ship, a familiar ship, fearful men waited. He could even recognize the face of the captain. Bayle Domon. He clutched his head with both hands. The trees were hidden, but he could still see each of the others clearly. Hurin anxious. Mat muttering, fearful. Perrin looking as if he knew this was meant to be. The fog roiled up all around them.

Hurin gasped. “Lord Rand!” There was no need for him to point.

Down the billowing fog, as if it were the side of a mountain, rode shapes on horses. At first the dense mists hid more than that, but slowly they came closer, and it was Rand’s turn to gasp. He knew them. Men, not all in armor, and women. Their clothes and their weapons came from every Age, but he knew them all.

Rogosh Eagle-eye, a fatherly looking man with white hair and eyes so sharp as to make his name merely a hint. Gaidal Cain, a swarthy man with the hilts of his two swords sticking above his broad shoulders. Golden-haired Birgitte, with her gleaming silver bow and quiver bristling with silver arrows. More. He knew their faces, knew their names. But he heard a hundred names when he looked at each face, some so different he did not recognize them as names at all, though he knew they were. Michael instead of Mikel. Patrick instead of Paedrig. Oscar instead of Otarin.

He knew the man who rode at their head, too. Tall and hook-nosed, with dark, deep-set eyes, his great sword Justice at his side. Artur Hawkwing.

Mat gaped at them as they reined in before him and the others. “Is this . . . ? Is this all of you?” They were little more than a hundred, Rand saw, and realized that somehow he had known that they would be. Hurin’s mouth hung open; his eyes bulged almost out of his head.

“It takes more than bravery to bind a man to the Horn.” Artur Hawkwing’s voice was deep and carrying, a voice used to giving commands.

“Or a woman,” Birgitte said sharply.

“Or a woman,” Hawkwing agreed. “Only a few are bound to the Wheel, spun out again and again to work the will of the Wheel in the Pattern of the Ages. You could tell him, Lews Therin, could you but remember when you wore flesh.” He was looking at Rand.

Rand shook his head, but he would not waste time with denials. “Invaders have come, men who call themselves Seanchan, who use chained Aes Sedai in battle. They must be driven back into the sea. And—and there is a girl. Egwene al’Vere. A novice from the White Tower. The Seanchan have her prisoner. You must help me free her.”

To his surprise, several of the small host behind Artur Hawkwing chuckled, and Birgitte, testing her bowstring, laughed. “You always choose women who cause you trouble, Lews Therin.” It had a fond sound, as between old friends.

“My name is Rand al’Thor,” he snapped. “You have to hurry. There isn’t much time.”

“Time?” Birgitte said, smiling. “We have all of time.” Gaidal Cain dropped his reins and, guiding his horse with his knees, drew a sword in either hand. All along the small band of heroes there was an unsheathing of swords, an unlimbering of bows, a hefting of spears and axes.

Justice shone like a mirror in Artur Hawkwing’s gauntleted fist. “I have fought by your side times beyond number, Lews Therin, and faced you as many more. The Wheel spins us out for its purposes, not ours, to serve the Pattern. I know you, if you do not know yourself. We will drive these invaders out for you.” His warhorse pranced, and he looked around, frowning. “Something is wrong here. Something holds me.” Suddenly he turned his sharp-eyed gaze on Rand. “You are here. Have you the banner?” A murmur ran through those behind him.

“Yes.” Rand tore open the straps of his saddlebags and pulled out the Dragon’s banner. It filled his hands and hung almost to his stallion’s knees. The murmur among the heroes rose.

“The Pattern weaves itself around our necks like halters,” Artur Hawkwing said. “You are here. The banner is here. The weave of this moment is set. We have come to the Horn, but we must follow the banner. And the Dragon.” Hurin made a faint sound as if his throat had seized.

“Burn me,” Mat breathed. “It’s true. Burn me!”

Perrin hesitated only an instant before swinging down off his horse and striding into the mist. There came a chopping sound, and when he returned, he carried a straight length of sapling shorn of its branches. “Give it to me, Rand,” he said gravely. “If they need it. . . . Give it to me.”

Hastily, Rand helped him tie the banner to the pole. When Perrin remounted, pole in hand, a current of air seemed to ripple the pale length of the banner, so the serpentine Dragon appeared to move, alive. The wind did not touch the heavy fog, only the banner.

“You stay here,” Rand told Hurin. “When it’s over. . . . You will be safe, here.”

Hurin drew his short sword, holding it as if it might actually be of some use from horseback. “Begging your pardon, Lord Rand, but I think not. I don’t understand the tenth part of what I’ve heard . . . or what I’m seeing”—his voice dropped to a mutter before picking up again—“but I’ve come this far, and I think I’ll go the rest of the way.”

Artur Hawkwing clapped the sniffer on the shoulder. “Sometimes the Wheel adds to our number, friend. Perhaps you will find yourself among us, one day.” Hurin sat up as if he had been offered a crown. Hawkwing bowed formally from his saddle to Rand. “With your permission . . . Lord Rand. Trumpeter, will you give us music on the Horn? Fitting that the Horn of Valere should sing us into battle. Bannerman, will you advance?”

Mat sounded the Horn again, long and high—the mists rang with it—and Perrin heeled his horse forward. Rand drew the heron-mark blade and rode between them.

He could see nothing but thick billows of white, but somehow he could still see what he had before, too. Falme, where someone used the Power in the streets, and the harbor, and the Seanchan host, and the dying Whitecloaks, all of it beneath him, all of him hanging above, all of it just as it had been. It seemed as if no time at all had passed since the Horn was first blown, as though time had paused while the heroes answered the call and now resumed counting.

The wild cries Mat wrung from the Horn echoed in the fog, and the drumming of hooves as the horses picked up speed. Rand charged into the mists, wondering if he knew where he was headed. The clouds thickened, hiding the far ends of the rank of heroes galloping to either side of him, obscuring more and more, till he could see only Mat and Perrin and Hurin clearly. Hurin crouched low in his saddle, wide-eyed, urging his horse on. Mat sounding the Horn, and laughing between. Perrin, his yellow eyes glowing, the Dragon’s banner streaming behind him. Then they were gone, too, and Rand rode on alone, as it seemed.

In a way, he could still see them, but now it was the way he could see Falme, and the Seanchan. He could not tell where they were, or where he was. He tightened his grip on his sword, peered into the mists ahead. He charged alone through the fog, and somehow he knew that was how it was meant to be.

Suddenly Ba’alzamon was before him in the mists, throwing his arms wide.

Red reared wildly, hurling Rand from his saddle. Rand clung to his sword desperately as he soared. It was not a hard landing. In fact, he thought with a sense of wonder that it was very much like landing on . . . nothing at all. One instant he was sailing through the mists, and the next he was not.

When he climbed to his feet, his horse was gone, but Ba’alzamon was still there, striding toward him with a long, black-charred staff in his hands.

They were alone, only they and the rolling fog. Behind Ba'alzamon was shadow. The mist was not dark behind him; this blackness excluded the white fog.

Rand was aware of the other things, too. Artur Hawkwing and the other heroes meeting the Seanchan in dense fog. Perrin, with the banner, swinging his axe more to fend off those who tried to reach him than harm them. Mat, still blowing wild notes on the Horn of Valere. Hurin down from his saddle, fighting with short sword and sword-breaker in the way he knew. It seemed as if the Seanchan numbers would overwhelm them in one rush, yet it was the dark-armored Seanchan who fell back.

Rand went forward to meet Ba'alzamon. Reluctantly, he assumed the void, reached for the True Source, was filled with the One Power. There was no other way. Perhaps he had no chance against the Dark One, but whatever chance he did have lay in the Power. It soaked into his limbs, seemed to suffuse everything about him, his clothes, his sword. He felt as if he should be glowing like the sun. It thrilled him; it made him want to vomit.

"Get out of my way," he grated. "I am not here for you!"

"The girl?" Ba'alzamon laughed. His mouth turned to flame. His burns were all but healed, leaving only a few pink scars that were already fading. He looked like a handsome man of middle years. Except for his mouth, and his eyes. "Which one, Lews Therin? You will not have anyone to help you this time. You are mine, or you are dead. In which case, you are mine anyway."

"Liar!" Rand snarled. He struck at Ba'alzamon, but the staff of charred wood turned his blade in a shower of sparks. "Father of Lies!"

"Fool! Did those other fools you summoned not tell you who you are?" The fires of Ba'alzamon's face roared with laughter.

Even floating in emptiness, Rand felt a chill. *Would they have lied? I don't* want *to be the Dragon Reborn.* He firmed his grip on his sword. Parting the Silk, but Ba'alzamon beat every cut aside; sparks flew as from a blacksmith's forge and hammer. "I have business in Falme, and none with you. Never with you," Rand said. *I have to hold his attention until they can free Egwene.* In that odd way, he could see the battle rage among the fog-shrouded wagon yards and horse lots.

"You pitiful wretch. You have sounded the Horn of Valere. You are linked to it, now. Do you think the worms of the White Tower will ever release you, now? They will put chains around your neck so heavy you will never cut them."

Rand was so surprised he felt it inside the void. *He doesn't know everything. He doesn't know!* He was sure it must show on his face. To cover it, he rushed at Ba'alzamon. Hummingbird Kisses the Honeyrose. The Moon on the Water. The Swallow Rides the Air. Lightning arched between sword and staff. Coruscating glitter showered the fog. Yet Ba'alzamon fell back, his eyes blazing in furious furnaces.

At the edge of his awareness, Rand saw the Seanchan falling back in the streets of Falme, fighting desperately. *Damane* tore the earth with the One Power, but it could not harm Artur Hawkwing, nor the other heroes of the Horn.

"Will you remain a slug beneath a rock?" Ba'alzamon snarled. The darkness behind him boiled and stirred. "You kill yourself while we stand here. The Power rages in you. It burns you. It is killing you! I alone in all the world can teach you how to control it. Serve me, and live. Serve me, or die!"

"Never!" *Have to hold him long enough. Hurry, Hawkwing. Hurry!* He launched himself at Ba'alzamon again. The Dove Takes Flight. The Falling Leaf.

This time it was he who was driven back. Dimly, he saw the Seanchan fighting their way back in among the stables. He redoubled his efforts. The Kingfisher Takes a Silverback. The Seanchan gave way to a charge, Artur Hawkwing and Perrin side by side in the van. Bundling Straw. Ba'alzamon caught his blow in a fountain like crimson fireflies, and he had to leap away before the staff split his head; the wind of the blow ruffled his hair. The Seanchan surged forward. Striking the Spark. Sparks flew like hail, Ba'alzamon jumped from his stroke, and the Seanchan were driven back to the cobblestone streets.

Rand wanted to howl aloud. Suddenly he knew that the two battles were linked. When he advanced, the heroes called by the Horn drove the Seanchan back; when he fell back, the Seanchan rose up.

"They will not save you," Ba'alzamon said. "Those who might save you will be carried far across the Aryth Ocean. If ever you see them again, they will be collared slaves, and they will destroy you for their new masters."

Egwene. I can't let them do that to her.

Ba’alzamon’s voice rode over his thoughts. “You have only one salvation, Rand al’Thor. Lews Therin Kinslayer. I am your only salvation. Serve me, and I will give you the world. Resist, and I will destroy you as I have so often before. But this time I will destroy you to your very soul, destroy you utterly and forever.”

I have won again, Lews Therin. The thought was beyond the void, yet it took an effort to ignore it, not to think of all the lives where he had heard it. He shifted his sword, and Ba’alzamon readied his staff.

For the first time Rand realized that Ba’alzamon acted as if the heron-mark blade could harm him. *Steel can’t hurt the Dark One.* But Ba’alzamon watched the sword warily. Rand was one with the sword. He could feel every particle of it, tiny bits a thousand times too small to be seen with the eye. And he could feel the Power that suffused him running into the sword, as well, threading through the intricate matrices wrought by Aes Sedai during the War of Power.

It was another voice he heard then. Lan’s voice. *There will come a time when you want something more than you want life.* Ingtar’s voice. *It is every man’s right to choose when to Sheathe the Sword.* The picture formed of Egwene, collared, living her life as a *damane. Threads of my life in danger. Egwene. If Hawkwing gets into Falme, he can save her.* Before he knew it, he had taken the first position of Heron Wading in the Rushes, balanced on one foot, sword raised high, open and defenseless. *Death is lighter than a feather, duty heavier than a mountain.*

Ba’alzamon stared at him. “Why are you grinning like an idiot, fool? Do you not know I can destroy you utterly?”

Rand felt a calmness beyond that of the void. “I will never serve you, Father of Lies. In a thousand lives, I never have. I know that. I’m sure of it. Come. It is time to die.”

Ba’alzamon’s eyes widened; for an instant they were furnaces that put sweat on Rand’s face. The blackness behind Ba’alzamon boiled up around him, and his face hardened. “Then die, worm!” He struck with the staff, as with a spear.

Rand screamed as he felt it pierce his side, burning like a white-hot poker. The void trembled, but he held on with the last of his strength, and drove the heron-mark blade into Ba’alzamon’s heart. Ba’alzamon screamed, and the dark behind him screamed. The world exploded in fire.

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CHAPTER

48

First Claiming

Min struggled up the cobblestone street, pushing through crowds that stood white-faced and staring, those who were not screaming hysterically. A few ran, seemingly without any idea of where they were running, but most moved like poorly handled puppets, more afraid to go than to stay. She searched the faces, hoping to find Egwene, or Elayne, or Nynaeve, but all she saw were Falmen. And there was something drawing her on, as surely as if she had a string tied to her.

Once she turned to look back. Seanchan ships burned in the harbor, and she could see more in flames off the harbor mouth. Many squarish vessels were already small against the setting sun, sailing west as fast as *damane* could make the winds drive them, and one small ship was beating away from the harbor, tilting to catch a wind to take it along the coast. *Spray*. She did not blame Bayle Domon for not waiting longer, not after what she had seen; she thought it a wonder he had remained so long.

There was one Seanchan vessel in the harbor not burning, though its towers were black from fires already extinguished. As the tall ship crept toward the harbor mouth, a figure on horseback suddenly appeared around the cliffs skirting the harbor. Riding across the water. Min's mouth fell open. Silver glittered as the figure raised a bow; a streak of silver lanced to the boxy ship, a gleaming line connecting bow and ship. With a roar she could hear even at that distance, fire engulfed the foretower anew, and sailors rushed about the deck.

Min blinked, and when she looked again, the mounted figure was gone. The ship still slowly made way toward the ocean, the crew fighting the flames.

She gave herself a shake and started to climb the street again. She had seen too much that day for someone riding a horse across water to be more than a momentary distraction. *Even if it really was Birgitte and her bow. And Artur Hawkwing. I* did *see him. I* did.

In front of one of the tall stone buildings, she stopped uncertainly, ignoring the people who brushed past her as if stunned. It was in there, somewhere, that she had to go. She rushed up the stairs and pushed open the door.

No one tried to stop her. As far as she could tell, there was no one in the house. Most of Falme was out in the streets, trying to decide whether they had all gone mad together. She went on through the house, into the garden behind, and there he was.

Rand lay sprawled on his back under an oak, face pale and eyes closed, left hand gripping a hilt that ended in a foot of blade that appeared to have been melted at the end. His chest rose and fell too slowly, and not with the regular rhythm of someone breathing normally.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she went to see what she could do for him. First was to get rid of that stub of a blade; he could hurt himself, or her, if he started thrashing. She pried his hand open, and winced when the hilt stuck to his palm. She tossed it aside with a grimace. The heron on the hilt had branded itself into his hand. But it was obvious to her that that was not what had him lying there unconscious. *How did he come by that? Nynaeve can put a salve on it later.*

A hasty examination showed that most of his cuts and bruises were not new—at least, the blood had had time to dry in a crust, and the bruises had started to turn yellow at the edges—but there was a hole burned through his coat on the left side. Opening his coat, she pulled up his shirt. Breath whistled through her teeth. There was a wound burned into his side, but it had cauterized itself. What shook her was the feel of his flesh. It had a touch of ice in it; he made the air seem warm.

Grabbing his shoulders, she began to drag him toward the house. He hung limp, a dead weight. “Great lummox,” she grunted. “You couldn’t be short, and light, could you? You have to have all that leg and shoulder. I ought to let you lie out here.”

But she struggled up the steps, careful not to bump him any more than she could avoid, and pulled him inside. Leaving him just within the door, she knuckled the small of her back, muttering to herself about the Pattern, and made a hasty search. There was a small bedroom in the back of the house, perhaps a servant’s room, with a bed piled high with blankets, and logs already laid on the hearth. In moments, she had the blankets thrown back and the fire lit, as well as a lamp on the bedside table. Then she went back for Rand.

It was no small task getting him to the room, or up onto the bed, but she managed it with only a little hard breathing, and covered him up. After a moment, she stuck a hand under the blankets; she winced and shook her head. The sheets were icy cold; he had no body warmth for the blankets to hold. With a put-upon sigh, she wriggled under the covers beside him. Finally, she put his head on her arm. His eyes were still closed, his breathing ragged, but she thought he would be dead by the time she came back if she left to find Nynaeve. *He needs an Aes Sedai*, she thought. *All I can do is try to give him a little warmth.*

For a time she studied his face. It was only his face she saw; she could never read anyone who was not conscious. "I like older men," she told him. "I like men with education, and wit. I have no interest in farms, or sheep, or shepherds. Especially boy shepherds." With a sigh, she smoothed back the hair from his face; he had silky hair. "But then, you aren't a shepherd, are you? Not anymore. Light, why did the Pattern have to catch me up with you? Why couldn't I have something safe and simple, like being shipwrecked with no food and a dozen hungry Aielmen?"

There was a sound in the hall, and she raised her head as the door opened. Egwene stood there, staring at them by the light of the fire and the lamp. "Oh," was all she said.

Min's cheeks colored. *Why am I behaving like I've done something wrong? Fool!* "I . . . I'm keeping him warm. He is unconscious, and he's as cold as ice."

Egwene did not come any further into the room. "I—I felt him pulling at me. Needing me. Elayne felt it, too. I thought it must be something to do with—with what he is, but Nynaeve didn't feel anything." She drew a deep, unsteady breath. "Elayne and Nynaeve are getting the horses. We found Bela. The Seanchan left most of their horses behind. Nynaeve says we should go as soon as we can, and—and. . . . Min, you know what he is, don't you, now?"

"I know." Min wanted to take her arm from under Rand's head, but she could not make herself move. "I think I do, anyway. Whatever he is, he is hurt. I can do nothing for him except keep him warm. Maybe Nynaeve can."

"Min, you know . . . you do know that he cannot marry. He isn't . . . safe . . . for any of us, Min."

"Speak for yourself," Min said. She pulled Rand's face against her breast. "It's like Elayne said. You tossed him aside for the White Tower. What should you care if I pick him up?"

Egwene looked at her for what seemed a long time. Not at Rand, not at all, only at her. She felt her face growing hotter and wanted to look away, but she could not.

"I will bring Nynaeve," Egwene said finally, and walked out of the room with her back straight and her head high.

Min wanted to call out, to go after her, but she lay there as if frozen. Frustrated tears stung her eyes. *It's what has to be. I know it. I read it in all of them. Light, I don't want to be part of this.* "It's all your fault," she told Rand's still shape. "No, it isn't. But you will pay for it, I think. We're all caught like flies in a spiderweb. What if I told her there's another woman yet to come, one she doesn't even know? For that matter, what would you think of that, my fine Lord Shepherd? You aren't bad-looking at all, but. . . . Light, I don't even know if I am the one you'll choose. I don't know if I want you to choose me. Or will you try to dandle all three of us on your knee? It may not be your fault, Rand al'Thor, but it isn't fair."

"Not Rand al'Thor," said a musical voice from the door. "Lews Therin Telamon. The Dragon Reborn."

Min stared. She was the most beautiful woman Min had ever seen, with pale, smooth skin, and long, black hair, and eyes as dark as night. Her dress was a white that would make snow seem dingy, belted in silver. All her jewelry was silver. Min felt herself bristle. "What do you mean? Who are you?"

The woman came to stand over the bed—her movements were so graceful, Min felt a stab of envy, though she had never before envied any woman anything—and smoothed Rand's hair as if Min were not there. "He doesn't believe yet, I think. He knows, but he does not believe. I have guided his steps, pushed him, pulled him, enticed him. He was always stubborn, but this time I will shape him. Ishamael thinks he controls events, but I do." Her finger brushed Rand's forehead as if drawing a mark; Min thought uneasily that it looked like the Dragon's Fang. Rand stirred, murmuring, the first sound or movement he had made since she found him.

“Who are you?” Min demanded. The woman looked at her, only looked, but she found herself shrinking back into the pillows, clutching Rand to her fiercely.

“I am called Lanfear, girl.”

Min’s mouth was abruptly so dry she could not have spoken if her life depended on it. *One of the Forsaken! No! Light, no!* All she could do was shake her head. The denial made Lanfear smile.

“Lews Therin was and is mine, girl. Tend him well for me until I come for him.” And she was gone.

Min gaped. One moment she was there, then she was gone. Min discovered she was hugging Rand’s unconscious form tightly. She wished she did not feel as if she wanted him to protect her.

Gaunt face set with grim purpose, Byar galloped with the sinking sun behind him and never looked back. He had seen all he needed to, all he could with that accursed fog. The legion was dead, Lord Captain Geofram Bornhald was dead, and there was only one explanation for that; Darkfriends had betrayed them, Darkfriends like that Perrin of the Two Rivers. That word he had to carry to Dain Bornhald, the Lord Captain’s son, with the Children of the Light watching Tar Valon. But he had worse to tell, and to none less than Pedron Niall himself. He had to tell what he had seen in the sky above Falme. He flogged his horse with his reins and never looked back.

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CHAPTER

49

What Was Meant to Be

Rand opened his eyes and found himself staring up at sunlight slanting through the branches of a leatherleaf, its broad, tough leaves still green despite the time of year. The wind stirring the leaves carried a hint of snow, come nightfall. He lay on his back, and he could feel blankets covering him under his hands. His coat and shirt seemed to be gone, but something was binding his chest, and his left side hurt. He turned his head, and Min was sitting there on the ground, watching him. He almost did not know her, wearing skirts. She smiled uncertainly.

"Min. It is you. Where did you come from? Where are we?" His memory came in flashes and patches. Old things he could remember, but the last few days seemed like bits of broken mirror, spinning through his mind, showing glimpses that were gone before he could see them clearly.

"From Falme," she said. "We're five days east of there, now, and you've been asleep all that time."

"Falme." More memory. Mat had blown the Horn of Valere. "Egwene! Is she . . . ? Did they free her?" He held his breath.

"I don't know what 'they' you mean, but she's free. We freed her ourselves."

"We? I don't understand." *She's free. At least she is—*

"Nynaeve, and Elayne, and me."

"Nynaeve? Elayne? How? You were *all* in Falme?" He struggled to sit up, but she pushed him back down easily and stayed there, hands on his shoulders, eyes intent on his face. "Where is she?"

"Gone." Min's face colored. "They're all gone. Egwene, and Nynaeve, and Mat, and Hurin, and Verin. Hurin didn't want to leave you, really. They're on their way to Tar Valon. Egwene and Nynaeve back to their training in the Tower, and Mat for whatever the Aes Sedai have to do about that dagger. They took the Horn of Valere with them. I can't believe I actually saw it."

"Gone," he muttered. "She didn't even wait till I woke up." The red in Min's cheeks deepened, and she sat back, staring at her lap.

He raised his hands to run them over his face, and stopped, staring at his palms in shock. There was a heron branded across his left palm, too, now, to match the one on his right, every line clean and true. *Once the heron to set his path; Twice the heron to name him true.* "No!"

"They are gone," she said. "Saying 'no' won't change it."

He shook his head. Something told him the pain in his side was important. He could not remember being injured, but it was important. He started to lift his blankets to look, but she slapped his hands away.

"You can't do any good with that. It isn't healed all the way, yet. Verin tried Healing, but she said it didn't work the way it should." She hesitated, nibbling her lip. "Moiraine says Nynaeve must have done something, or you wouldn't have lived till we carried you to Verin, but Nynaeve says she was too frightened to light a candle. There is . . . something wrong with your wound. You will have to wait for it to heal naturally." She seemed troubled.

"Moiraine is here?" He barked a bitter laugh. "When you said Verin was gone, I thought I was free of Aes Sedai again."

"I am here," Moiraine said. She appeared, all in blue and as serene as if she stood in the White Tower, strolling up to stand over him. Min was frowning at the Aes Sedai. Rand had the odd feeling that she meant to protect him from Moiraine.

"I wish you weren't here," he told the Aes Sedai. "As far as I am concerned, you can go back to wherever you've been hiding and stay there."

"I have not been hiding," Moiraine said calmly. "I have been doing what I could, here on Toman Head, and in Falme. It was little enough, though I learned much. I failed to rescue two of my sisters before the Seanchan herded them onto the ships with the Leashed Ones, but I did what I could."

"What you could. You sent Verin to shepherd me, but I'm no sheep, Moiraine. You said I could go where I wanted, and I mean to go where you are not."

“I did not send Verin.” Moiraine frowned. “She did that on her own. You are of interest to a great many people, Rand. Did Fain find you, or you him?”

The sudden change of topic took him by surprise. “Fain? No. A fine hero I make. I tried to rescue Egwene, and Min did it before me. Fain said he would hurt Emond’s Field if I didn’t face him, and I never laid eyes on him. Did he go with the Seanchan, too?”

Moiraine shook her head. “I do not know. I wish I did. But it is as well you did not find him, not until you know what he is, at least.”

“He’s a Darkfriend.”

“More than that. Worse than that. Padan Fain was the Dark One’s creature to the depths of his soul, but I believe that in Shadar Logoth he fell afoul of Mordeth, who was as vile in fighting the Shadow as ever the Shadow itself was. Mordeth tried to consume Fain’s soul, to have a human body again, but found a soul that had been touched directly by the Dark One, and what resulted. . . . What resulted was neither Padan Fain nor Mordeth, but something far more evil, a blend of the two. Fain—let us call him that—is more dangerous than you can believe. You might not have survived such a meeting, and if you had, you might have been worse than turned to the Shadow.”

“If he is alive, if he did not go with the Seanchan, I have to—” He cut off as she produced his heron-mark sword from under her cloak. The blade ended abruptly a foot from the hilt, as if it had been melted. Memory came crashing back. “I killed him,” he said softly. “This time I killed him.”

Moiraine put the ruined sword aside like the useless thing it now was, and wiped her hands together. “The Dark One is not slain so easily. The mere fact that he appeared in the sky above Falme is more than merely troubling. He should not be able to do that, if he is bound as we believe. And if he is not, why has he not destroyed us all?” Min stirred uneasily.

“In the sky?” Rand said in wonder.

“Both of you,” Moiraine said. “Your battle took place across the sky, in full view of every soul in Falme. Perhaps in other towns on Toman Head, too, if half what I hear is to be believed.”

“We—we saw it all,” Min said in a faint voice. She put a hand over one of Rand’s comfortingly.

Moiraine reached under her cloak again and came out with a rolled parchment, one of the large sheets such as the street artists in Falme used.

The chalks were a little smudged when she unfurled it, but the picture was still clear enough. A man whose face was a solid flame fought with a staff against another with a sword among clouds where lightning danced, and behind them rippled the Dragon banner. Rand's face was easily recognizable.

"How many have seen that?" he demanded. "Tear it up. Burn it."

The Aes Sedai let the parchment roll back up. "It would do no good, Rand. I bought that two days gone, in a village we passed through. There are hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, and the tale is being told everywhere of how the Dragon battled the Dark One in the skies above Falme."

Rand looked at Min. She nodded reluctantly, and squeezed his hand. She looked frightened, but she did not flinch away. *I wonder if that's why Egwene left. She was right to leave.*

"The Pattern weaves itself around you even more tightly," Moiraine said. "You need me now more than ever."

"I don't need you," he said harshly, "and I don't want you. I will not have anything to do with this." He remembered being called Lews Therin; not only by Ba'alzamon, but by Artur Hawkwing. "I won't. Light, the Dragon is supposed to Break the World again, to tear everything apart. I will not be the Dragon."

"You are what you are," Moiraine said. "Already you stir the world. The Black Ajah has revealed itself for the first time in two thousand years. Arad Doman and Tarabon were on the brink of war, and it will be worse when news of Falme reaches them. Cairhien is in civil war."

"I did nothing in Cairhien," he protested. "You can't blame that on me."

"Doing nothing was always a ploy in the Great Game," she said with a sigh, "and especially as they play it now. You were the spark, and Cairhien exploded like an Illuminator's firework. What do you think will happen when word of Falme reaches Arad Doman and Tarabon? There have always been men willing to proclaim for any man who called himself the Dragon, but they have never before had such signs as this. There is more. Here." She tossed a pouch on his chest.

He hesitated a moment before opening it. Within lay shards of what seemed to be black-and-white glazed pottery. He had seen their like before.

"Another seal on the Dark One's prison," he mumbled. Min gasped; her grip on his hand sought comfort, now, rather than offering it.

"Two," Moiraine said. "Three of the seven are broken now. The one I had, and two I found in the High Lord's dwelling in Falme. When all seven are broken, perhaps even before, the patch men put over the hole they drilled into the prison the Creator made will be torn asunder, and the Dark One will once more be able to put his hand through that hole and touch the world. And the only hope of the world is that the Dragon Reborn will be there to face him."

Min tried to stop Rand from throwing back the blankets, but he pushed her gently aside. "I need to walk." She helped him up, but with a great many sighs and grumbles about him making his wound worse. He discovered that his chest was wrapped round with bandages. Min draped one of the blankets about his shoulders like a cloak.

For a moment he stood staring down at the heron-mark sword, what was left of it, lying on the ground. *Tam's sword. My father's sword.* Reluctantly, more reluctantly than he had ever done anything in his life, he let go of the hope that he would discover Tam really was his father. It felt as if he were tearing his heart out. But it did not change the way he felt about Tam, and Emond's Field was the only home he had ever known. *Fain is the important thing. I have one duty left. Stopping him.*

The two women had to support him, one on either arm, down to where the campfires were already burning, not far from a road of hard-packed dirt. Loial was there, reading a book, *To Sail Beyond the Sunset,* and Perrin, staring into one of the fires. The Shienarans were making preparations for their evening meal. Lan sat under a tree sharpening his belt knife; the Warder gave Rand a careful look, then a nod.

There was something else, too. The Dragon banner rippled on the wind over the middle of the camp. Somewhere they had found a proper staff to replace Perrin's sapling.

Rand demanded, "What is that doing out where anybody who passes by can see it?"

"It is too late to hide, Rand," Moiraine said. "It was always too late for you to hide."

"You don't have to put up a sign saying 'here I am,' either. I'll never find Fain if somebody kills me because of that banner." He turned to Loial and Perrin. "I'm glad you stayed. I would have understood if you hadn't."

“Why would I not stay?” Loial said. “You are even more *ta’veren* than I believed, true, but you are still my friend. I hope you are still my friend.” His ears twitched uncertainly.

“I am,” Rand said. “For as long as it’s safe for you to be around me, and even after, too.” The Ogier’s grin nearly split his face in two.

“I’m staying as well,” Perrin said. There was a note of resignation, or acceptance, in his voice. “The Wheel weaves us tight in the Pattern, Rand. Who would have thought it, back in Emond’s Field?”

The Shienarans were gathering around. To Rand’s surprise, they all fell to their knees. Every one of them watched him.

“We would pledge ourselves to you,” Uno said. The others kneeling with him nodded.

“Your oaths are to Ingtar, and Lord Agelmar,” Rand protested. “Ingtar died well, Uno. He died so the rest of us could escape with the Horn.” There was no need to tell them or anyone else the rest. He hoped that Ingtar had found the Light again. “Tell Lord Agelmar that when you return to Fal Dara.”

“It is said,” the one-eyed man said carefully, “that when the Dragon is Reborn, he will break all oaths, shatter all ties. Nothing holds us, now. We would give our oaths to you.” He drew his sword and laid it before him, hilt toward Rand, and the rest of the Shienarans did the same.

“You battled the Dark One,” Masema said. Masema, who hated him. Masema, who looked at him as if seeing a vision of the Light. “I saw you, Lord Dragon. I saw. I am your man, to the death.” His dark eyes shone with fervor.

“You must choose, Rand,” Moiraine said. “The world will be broken whether you break it or not. Tarmon Gai’don will come, and that alone will tear the world apart. Will you still try to hide from what you are, and leave the world to face the Last Battle undefended? Choose.”

They were all watching him, all waiting. *Death is lighter than a feather, duty heavier than a mountain.* He made his decision.

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CHAPTER

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After

By ship and horse the stories spread, by merchant wagon and man on foot, told and retold, changing yet always alike at the heart, to Arad Doman and Tarabon and beyond, of signs and portents in the sky above Falme. And men proclaimed themselves for the Dragon, and other men struck them down and were struck down in turn.

Other tales spread, of a column that rode from the sinking sun across Almoth Plain. A hundred Bordermen, it was said. No, a thousand. No, a thousand heroes come back from the grave to answer the call of the Horn of Valere. Ten thousand. They had destroyed a legion of the Children of the Light entire. They had thrown Artur Hawkwing's returned armies back into the sea. They were Artur Hawkwing's armies returned. Toward the mountains they rode, toward the dawn.

Yet one thing every tale had the same. At their head rode a man whose face had been seen in the sky above Falme, and they rode under the banner of the Dragon Reborn.

And men cried out to the Creator, saying, O Light of the Heavens, Light of the World, let the Promised One be born of the mountain, according to the Prophecies, as he was in Ages past and will be in Ages to come. Let the Prince of the Morning sing to the land that green things will grow and the valleys give forth lambs. Let the arm of the Lord of the Dawn shelter us from the Dark, and the great sword of justice defend us. Let the Dragon ride again on the winds of time.

—from *Charal Drianaan te Calamon*, *The Cycle of the Dragon*,

Author unknown, the Fourth Age

The End

of the Second Book of
The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. Three systems of recording dates have been in general use since the Breaking of the World. The first recorded years After the Breaking (AB). Since the years of the Breaking and immediately after were years of almost total chaos, and since this calendar was adopted a good hundred years after the end of the Breaking, its starting point was arbitrarily assigned. At the end of the Trolloc Wars many records had been lost, so much so that there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar was therefore established, dating from the end of the Wars and celebrating the supposed freedom of the world from the Trolloc threat. This second calendar recorded each year as Free Year (FY). After the disruption, death, and destruction caused by the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar came into being. This calendar, of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

a'dam (AYE-dam): A device, consisting of a collar and a bracelet linked by a silvery metal leash, that may be used to control, against her will, any woman who can channel. The collar is worn by the *damane*, the bracelet by the *sul'dam*. *See also damane; sul'dam.*

Aes Sedai (EYEZ seh-DEYE): Wielders of the One Power. Since the Time of Madness, all surviving Aes Sedai are women. Widely distrusted and feared, even hated, they are blamed by many for the Breaking of the World, and are thought to meddle in the affairs of nations. At the same time, few rulers will be without an Aes Sedai advisor, even in lands where the existence of such a connection must be kept secret. *See also* Ajah; Amyrlin Seat; Time of Madness.

Agelmar; Lord Agelmar of House Jagad (AGH-el-mar; JAH-gad): Lord of Fal Dara. His sign is three running red foxes.

Age of Legends: The Age ended by the War of the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. A time when Aes Sedai performed wonders now only dreamed of. *See also* Wheel of Time; Breaking of the World; War of the Shadow.

Aiel (eye-EEL): The people of the Aiel Waste. Fierce and hardy. Also called Aielmen. They veil their faces before they kill, giving rise to the saying "acting like a black-veiled Aiel" to describe someone who is being violent. Deadly warriors with weapons or with nothing but their bare hands, they will not touch a sword. Their pipers play them into battle with the music of dances, and Aielmen call battle "the Dance." *See also* Aiel warrior societies; Aiel Waste.

Aiel warrior societies: Aiel warriors are all members of one of the warrior societies, such as the Stone Dogs, the Red Shields, or the Maidens of the Spear. Each society has its own customs, and sometimes specific duties. For example, Red Shields act as police. Stone Dogs often vow not to retreat once battle has been joined, and will die to the last man if necessary to fulfill this vow. The clans of the Aiel frequently fight among themselves, but members of the same society will not fight one another even if their clans are doing so. In this way, there are always lines of contact between the clans even when they are in open warfare. *See also* Aiel; Aiel Waste; *Far Dareis Mai*.

Aiel Waste: The harsh, rugged, and all-but-waterless land east of the Spine of the World. Few outsiders venture there, not only because water is almost impossible to find for one not born there, but because the Aiel consider themselves at war with all other peoples and do not welcome strangers.

Ajah (AH-jah): Societies among the Aes Sedai to which all Aes Sedai except the Amyrlin Seat belong. They are designated by colors: Blue, Red, White, Green, Brown, Yellow, and Gray. Each follows a specific philosophy of the use of the One Power and the purposes of the Aes Sedai. For example, the Red Ajah bends all its energies to finding men who are attempting to wield the Power and to gentling them. The Brown Ajah, on the other hand, forsakes involvement with the mundane world and dedicates itself to seeking knowledge. There are rumors (hotly denied, and never safely mentioned in front of any Aes Sedai) of a Black Ajah, dedicated to serving the Dark One.

Alanna Mosvani (ah-LAN-nah mos-VANH-nie): An Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah.

alantin (ah-LANH-tin): In the Old Tongue, "Brother;" short for *tia avende alantin*, "Brother to the Trees;" "Treebrother."

Alar (AYE-lahr): Eldest of the Elders of Stedding Tsofu.

Aldieb (ahl-DEEB): In the Old Tongue, "West Wind," the wind that brings the spring rains.

al'Meara, Nynaeve (ahl-MEER-ah, NIGH-neev): A woman from Emond's Field, in the Two Rivers district of Andor (AN-door).

al'Thor, Rand (ahl-THOR, RAND): A young man from Emond's Field, once a shepherd.

al'Vere, Egwene (ahl-VEER, eh-GWAIN): A young woman from Emond's Field.

Amalisa, Lady (ah-mah-LEE-sah): Shienaran of House Jagad; Lord Agelmar's sister.

Amyrlin Seat (AHM-ehr-lin SEAT): (1) The title of the leader of the Aes Sedai. Elected for life by the Hall of the Tower, the highest council of the Aes Sedai, which consists of three representatives (called Sitters) from each of the seven Ajahs. The Amyrlin Seat has, theoretically at least, almost supreme authority among the Aes Sedai, and ranks socially as the equal of a king or queen. A slightly less formal usage is simply the Amyrlin. (2) The throne upon which the leader of the Aes Sedai sits.

Anaiya (ah-NYE-yah): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah.

angreal (anh-gree-AHL): A very rare object that allows anyone capable of channeling the One Power to handle a greater amount of the Power than would be safely possible unaided. Remnants of the Age of Legends, the means of their making is no longer known. Few remain in existence. *See also* *sa'angreal*; *ter'angreal*.

Arad Doman (AH-rahd do-MAHN): A nation on the Aryth Ocean.

Arafel (AH-rah-fehl): One of the Borderlands.

Avendesora (AH-vehn-deh-SO-rah): In the Old Tongue, “the Tree of Life.” Mentioned in many stories and legends.

Aybara, Perrin (ay-BAHR-ah, PEHR-rihn): A young man from Emond’s Field, formerly a blacksmith’s apprentice.

Ba’alzamon (bah-AHL-zah-mon): In the Trolloc tongue, “Heart of the Dark.” Believed to be the Trolloc name for the Dark One. *See also* Dark One; Trollocs.

Barthanes, Lord, of House Damodred (bahr-THAN-nehs): Cairhienin lord, second only to the king in power. His personal sign is the Charging Boar. The sign of House Damodred is the Crown and Tree.

Bel Tine (BEHL TINE): Spring festival celebrating the end of winter, the first sprouting of crops, and the birth of the first lambs.

Betrayer of Hope: *See* Ishamael.

Birgitte (ber-GEET-teh): Golden-haired heroine of legend and a hundred gleemen’s tales, she had a silver bow and silver arrows, with which she never missed.

bittern (BIHT-tehrn): A musical instrument that may have six, nine, or twelve strings, and is held flat on the knees and played by plucking or strumming.

Blasted Lands: Desolated lands surrounding Shayol Ghul, beyond the Great Blight.

Blight, the: *See* Great Blight, the.

Borderlands, the: The nations bordering the Great Blight. Saldaea, Arafel, Kandor, and Shienar.

Bornhald, Geofram (BOHRN-hahld, JEHF-rahm): A Lord Captain of the Children of the Light.

Breaking of the World, the: During the Time of Madness, male Aes Sedai who had gone insane, and who could wield the One Power to a degree now unknown, changed the face of the earth. They caused great earthquakes, leveled old mountain ranges and raised new mountains, lifted dry land where seas had been and made the ocean rush in where dry land had been. Many parts of the world were completely depopulated, and the survivors were scattered like dust on the wind. This destruction is remembered in stories, legends, and history as the Breaking of the World. *See also* Time of Madness.

Byar, Jaret (BY-ahr, JAH-ret): An officer of the Children of the Light.

Caemlyn (KAYM-lihn): The capital city of Andor.

Cairhien (KEYE-ree-EHN): Both a nation along the Spine of the World and the capital city of that nation. The city was burned and looted during the Aiel War (976–978 NE). The sign of Cairhien is a many-rayed golden sun rising from the bottom of a field of sky blue.

Caralain (KAH-rah-layn): One of the nations wrung from Artur Hawkwing's empire during the War of the Hundred Years. It weakened thereafter, and the last traces vanished about 500 NE.

Cauthon, Mat (CAW-thon, MAT): A young man from the Two Rivers. Full name: Matrim (MAT-rihm) Cauthon.

channel: (verb) To control the flow of the One Power. *See also* One Power.

Children of the Light: A society holding strict ascetic beliefs, dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar (LOH-thayr MAHN-tee-LAHR) to proselytize against the increasing numbers of Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military organization, extremely rigid in their beliefs, and completely certain that only they know the truth and the right. They hate Aes Sedai, considering them, and any who support or befriend them, Darkfriends. They are known disparagingly as Whitecloaks. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white.

Chronicles, Keeper of the: Second in authority to the Amyrlin Seat among the Aes Sedai, she also acts as secretary to the Amyrlin. Chosen for life by the Hall of the Tower, and usually of the same Ajah as the Amyrlin. *See also* Amyrlin Seat; Ajah.

Corenne (koh-REEN-neh): In the Old Tongue, "Return," or "the Return."

Covenant of the Ten Nations: *A* union formed in the centuries after the Breaking of the World when nations were first recreated (circa 300 AB). Dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One. Broken apart by the Trolloc Wars. *See also* Trolloc Wars.

cuendillar (CWAIN-der-yar): Also known as heartstone. *See* heartstone.

Daes Dae'mar (DAH-ess day-MAR): The Great Game, also known as the Game of Houses. Name given the scheming, plots, and manipulations for advantage by the noble Houses. Great value is given to subtlety, to aiming at one thing while seeming to aim at another, and to achieving ends with the least visible effort.

Dai Shan (DYE SHAN): A title in the Borderlands meaning Diademed Battle Lord. *See also* Borderlands.

damane (dah-MAHN-ee): In the Old Tongue, "Leashed Ones." Women who can channel who are held prisoner by *a'dam* and used by the Seanchan for many purposes, chiefest of these being as weapons in battle. *See also* Seanchan; *a'dam; sul'dam*.

Damodred, Lord Galadedrid (DAHM-oh-drehd, gah-LAHD-eh-drihd): Half-brother to Elayne and Gawyn. His sign is a winged silver sword, point down.

Darkfriends: Those who follow the Dark One and believe they will gain great power and rewards, and even immortality, when he is freed from his prison.

Dark One: Most common name, used in every land, for Shai'tan. The source of evil, antithesis of the Creator. Imprisoned by the Creator at the moment of Creation in a prison at Shayol Ghul. An attempt to free him from that prison brought about the War of the Shadow, the tainting of *saidin*, the Breaking of the World, and the end of the Age of Legends.

Dark One, naming the: Saying the true name of the Dark One (Shai'tan) draws his attention, inevitably bringing ill fortune at best, disaster at worst. For that reason, many euphemisms are used, among them the Dark One, Father of Lies, Sightblinder, Lord of the Grave, Shepherd of the Night, Heartsbane, Heartfang, Grassburner, and Leafblighter. Someone who seems to be inviting ill fortune is often said to be "naming the Dark One."

Daughter-Heir: Title of the heir to the throne of Andor. The eldest daughter of the queen succeeds her mother on the throne.

Without a surviving daughter, the throne goes to the nearest female blood relation of the queen.

Daughter of the Night: *See* Lanfear.

Dome of Truth: Great audience hall of the Children of the Light, located in Amador (AH-mah-door), the capital of Amadicia (AH-mah-DEE-cee-ah). There is a King of Amadicia, but the Children rule in all but name. *See also* Children of the Light.

Do Miere A'vron (DOH me-EHR a-VRAWN): *See* Watchers Over the Waves.

Domon, Bayle (DOH-mon, BAIL): The captain of the *Spray*, who collects old things.

Draghkar (DRAGH-kahr): A creature of the Dark One, made originally by twisting human stock. A Draghkar appears to be a large man with bat-like wings, whose skin is too pale and whose eyes are too large. The Draghkar's song can draw its prey to it, suppressing the victim's will. There is a saying: "The kiss of the Draghkar is death." It does not bite, but its kiss will consume first the soul of its victim, and then its life.

Dragon, false: Occasionally men claim to be the Dragon Reborn, and sometimes one of them gains following enough to require an army to put it down. Some have begun wars that involved many nations. Over the centuries most of these have been men unable to channel the One Power, but a few could do so. All, however, either disappeared or were captured or killed without fulfilling any of the Prophecies concerning the Rebirth of the Dragon. These men are called false Dragons. Among those who could channel, the most powerful were Raolin Darksbane (335–36AB), Yurian Stonebow (circa 1300–1308 AB), Davian (FY 351), Guaire Amalasan (FY 939–43), and Logain (997 NE). *See also* Dragon Reborn.

Dragon, Prophecies of the: Little known and seldom spoken of, the Prophecies, given in *The Karaethon Cycle*, foretell that the Dark One will be freed again to touch the world. And that Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, Breaker of the World, will be reborn to fight Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle against the Shadow. *See also* Dragon, the.

Dragon, the: The name by which Lews Therin Telamon was known during the War of the Shadow. In the madness that overtook all male Aes Sedai, Lews Therin killed every living person who carried any of his blood, as well as everyone he loved, thus earning the name Kinslayer. *See also* Dragon Reborn; Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Dragon Reborn: According to prophecy and legend the Dragon will be born again at mankind's greatest hour of need to save the world. This is not something people look forward to, both because the Prophecies say the Dragon Reborn will bring a new Breaking to the world and because Lews Therin Kinslayer, the Dragon, is a name to make men shudder, even more than three thousand years after his death. *See also* Dragon, the; Dragon, false; Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Dragon's Fang, the: *A* stylized mark in the shape of a teardrop balanced on its point. Scrawled on a door or a house, it is an accusation of evil against the people inside, or an attempt to bring the Dark One's attention, and thus harm, to them.

Dreadlords: Those men and women who, able to channel the One Power, went over to the Shadow during the Trolloc Wars, acting as commanders of the Trolloc forces.

Elaida (eh-LY-da): An Aes Sedai of the Red Ajah who advises Queen Morgase of Andor. She sometimes has the Foretelling. *See also* Foretelling.

Elayne (ee-LAIN): Queen Morgase's daughter, the Daughter-Heir to the Throne of Andor. Her sign is a golden lily.

Fain, Padan (FAIN, PAHD-ahn): A man imprisoned as a Darkfriend in Fal Dara keep.

Far Dareis Mai (FAHR DAH-rize MY): Literally "Maidens of the Spear." A warrior society of the Aiel, which, unlike any of the others, admits women and only women. A Maiden may not marry and remain in the society, nor may she fight while carrying a child. Any child born to a Maiden is given to another woman to raise, in such a way that no one knows who the child's mother was. ("You may belong to no man, nor may any man belong to you, nor any child. The spear is your lover, your child, and your life.") These children are treasured, for it is prophesied that a child born of a Maiden will unite the clans and return the Aiel to the greatness they knew during the Age of Legends. *See also* Aiel; Aiel warrior societies.

Five Powers, the: There are threads to the One Power, and each person who can channel can usually grasp some threads better than others. These threads are named according to the sorts of things that can be done using them—Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit—and are called the Five Powers. Any wielder of the Power will have a greater degree of strength with one, or possibly two, of these, and lesser strength in the others. Some few may have great strength with three, but since the Age of Legends no one has had great strength with all five. Even then this was extremely rare. The degree of strength can vary greatly between individuals, so that some who can channel are much stronger than others. Performing certain acts with the One Power requires ability in one or more of the Five Powers. For example, starting or controlling a fire requires Fire, and affecting the weather requires Air and Water, while Healing requires Water and Spirit. While Spirit was found equally in men and in women, great ability with Earth and/or Fire was found much more often among men; with Water and/or Air among women. There were exceptions, but it was so often so that Earth and Fire came to be regarded as male Powers, Air and Water as female. Generally, no ability is considered stronger than any other, though there is a saying among Aes Sedai: "There is no rock so strong that water and wind cannot wear it away, no fire so fierce that water cannot quench it or wind snuff it out." It should be noted this saying came into use long after the last male Aes Sedai was dead. Any equivalent saying among male Aes Sedai is long lost.

Flame of Tar Valon: The symbol of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, and the Aes Sedai. A stylized representation of a flame; a white teardrop with the point upward.

Forsaken, the: Name given to thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai ever known, who went over to the Dark One during the War of the Shadow in return for the promise of immortality.

According to both legend and fragmentary records, they were imprisoned along with the Dark One when his prison was resealed. Their names are still used to frighten children.

Gaidin (GYE-deen): Literally, "Brother to Battles." A title used by Aes Sedai for the Warders. *See also* Warder.

Galad (gah-LAHD): *See* Damodred, Lord Galadedrid.

Galldrian su Riatin Rie (GAHL-dree-ahn soo REYE-ah-tin REE): Literally, Galldrian of House Riatin, King. King of Cairhien. *See also* Cairhien.

Game of Houses, the: *See Daes Dae'mar.*

Gawyn (GAH-wihn): Queen Morgase's son, and Elayne's brother. His sign is a white boar.

gentling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a male who can channel from the One Power. This is necessary because any man who learns to channel will go insane from the taint on *saidin* and will almost certainly do horrible things with the Power in his madness. A man who has been gentled can still sense the True Source, but he cannot touch it. Whatever madness has come before gentling is arrested by the act of gentling, but not cured by it, and if it is done soon enough death can be averted. *See also* One Power, the; stilling.

gleeman: A traveling storyteller, musician, juggler, tumbler, and all-around entertainer. Known by their trademark cloaks of many-colored patches, they perform mainly in the villages and smaller towns.

Goaban (GO-ah-banh): One of the nations wrung from Artur Hawkwing's empire during the War of the Hundred Years. It weakened, and faded away approximately 500 NE. *See also* Artur Hawkwing; War of the Hundred Years.

Great Blight, the: A region in the far north, entirely corrupted by the Dark One. A haunt of Trollocs, Myrddraal, and other creatures of the Shadow.

Great Game, the: *See Daes Dae'mar.*

Great Hunt of the Horn, The: *A* cycle of stories concerning the legendary search for the Horn of Valere, in the years between the end of the Trolloc Wars and the beginning of the War of the

Hundred Years. If told in its entirety, the cycle would take many days.

Great Lord of the Dark: The name by which Darkfriends refer to the Dark One, claiming that to use his true name would be blasphemous.

Great Serpent: A symbol for time and eternity, ancient before the Age of Legends began, consisting of a serpent eating its own tail. A ring in the shape of the Great Serpent is awarded to women who have been raised to the Accepted among the Aes Sedai.

Hailene (heye-LEE-neh): In the Old Tongue, "Those Who Come Before," or "Forerunners."

Halfman: *See* Myrddraal.

Hardan: One of the nations wrung from Artur Hawkwing's empire, now long forgotten. It lay between Cairhien and Shienar.

Hawkwing, Artur: A legendary king (ruled FY 943–994) who united all the lands west of the Spine of the World. He even sent armies across the Aryth Ocean (FY 992), but all contact with these was lost at his death, which set off the War of the Hundred Years. His sign was a golden hawk in flight. *See also* War of the Hundred Years.

heartstone: An indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any force used in an attempt to break it is absorbed, making heartstone stronger. *See also* cuendillar.

hide: A unit of area for measuring land, equal to 100 paces by 100 paces.

Horn of Valere (vah-LEER): The legendary object of the Great Hunt of the Horn. The Horn supposedly can call back dead heroes from the grave to fight against the Shadow.

Hundred Companions, the: One hundred male Aes Sedai, among the most powerful of the Age of Legends, who, led by Lews Therin Telamon, launched the final stroke that ended the War of the Shadow by sealing the Dark One back into his prison. The Dark One's counterstroke tainted *saidin*; the Hundred Companions went mad and began the Breaking of the World. *See also* Time of Madness; Breaking of the World; True Source; One Power.

Hurin (HEW-rhin): A Shienaran who has the ability to smell where violence has been done, and to follow the scent of those who did it. Called a “sniffer,” he serves the King’s justice in Fal Dara, in Shienar.

Illian (IHL-lee-ahn): A great port on the Sea of Storms, capital city of the nation of the same name.

Ingtar, Lord, of House Shinowa (IHNG-tahr); (shih-NOH-wah): A Shienaran warrior. His sign is the Gray Owl.

Ishamael (ih-SHAH-may-EHL): In the Old Tongue, “Betrayer of Hope.” One of the Forsaken. Name given to the leader of the Aes Sedai who went over to the Dark One in the War of the Shadow. It is said that even he forgot his true name. *See also* Forsaken.

Karaethon Cycle, The (ka-REE-ah-thon): *See* Dragon, Prophecies of the.

kith: Close friends and acquaintances.

Laman (LAY-mahn): A king of Cairhien, of House Damodred, who lost his throne and life in the Aiel War.

Lan; al’Lan Mandragoran (AHL-LAN man-DRAG-or-an): A Warder, bonded to Moiraine. Uncrowned King of Malkier, Dai Shan, and the last surviving Malkieri lord. *See also* Warder; Moiraine; Malkier; Dai Shan.

Lanfear (LAN-fear): In the Old Tongue, “Daughter of the Night.” One of the Forsaken, perhaps the most powerful next to Ishamael. Unlike the other Forsaken, she chose this name herself. She is said to have been in love with Lews Therin Telamon. *See also* Forsaken; Dragon, the.

league: *See* Length, units of.

Leane (lee-AHN-eh): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah, and Keeper of the Chronicles. *See also* Ajah; Chronicles, Keeper of the.

Leashed Ones: *See* *damane*.

Length, units of: 10 inches = 3 hands = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Lews Therin Telamon; Lews Therin Kinslayer: *See* Dragon, the.

Liandrin (lee-AHN-drihn): An Aes Sedai of the Red Ajah, from Tarabon.

Logain (loh-GAYN): A false Dragon, gentled by the Aes Sedai.

Loial (LOY-ahl): An Ogier from Stedding Shangtai.

Luc; Lord Luc of House Mantear (LUKE; MAN-tee-ahr): Tigraine's brother. His disappearance in the Great Blight (971 NE) is believed to be connected to Tigraine's later disappearance. His sign was an acorn.

Luthair: See Mondwin, Luthair Paendrag.

Malkier (mahl-KEER): A nation, once one of the Borderlands, now consumed by the Blight. The sign of Malkier was a golden crane in flight.

Manetheren (mahn-EHTH-ehr-ehn): One of the Ten Nations that made the Second Covenant, and also the capital city of that nation. Both city and nation were utterly destroyed in the Trolloc Wars.

marath'damane (MAH-rahth'dah-MAHN-ee): In the Old Tongue, "Those Who Must Be Leashed." Term used by the Seanchan for women who can channel, but who have not yet been captured and collared. *See also* *damane*; *a'dam*; Seanchan.

Masema (mah-SEE-mah): A Shienaran soldier who hates Aiel.

mashiara (mah-shee-AH-rah): In the Old Tongue, "beloved," but meaning a love that is lost beyond redeeming.

Merrilin, Thom (MER-rih-lihn, TOM): A gleeman.

mile: *See* Length, units of.

Min (MIN): A young woman with the ability to read the auras she sometimes sees surrounding people.

Moiraine (mwah-RAIN): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah.

Mondwin, Luthair Paendrag (LEW-thair PAY-ehn-DRAG MON-dwihn): Son of Artur Hawkwing, he commanded the armies Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean. His banner was a golden, spread-winged hawk clutching lightning bolts. *See also* Hawkwing, Artur.

Mordeth (MOOR-death): Councilor who turned the city of Aridhol to use Darkfriends' ways against the Darkfriends, thus bringing its destruction and earning it a new name, Shadar Logoth ("Where the Shadow Waits"). Only one thing survives in Shadar Logoth beside the hate that killed it, and that is Mordeth himself, bound in the ruins for two thousand years, waiting for someone to come whose soul he can consume and so take on new flesh.

Morgase (moor-GAYZ): Queen of Andor, High Seat of House Trakand (TRAHK-ahnd).

Myrddraal (MUHRD-draal): Creatures of the Dark One, commanders of the Trollocs. Twisted offspring of Trollocs in which the human stock used to create the Trollocs has resurfaced, but tainted by the evil that made the Trollocs. Physically they are like men except they have no eyes, but can see like eagles in light or dark. They have certain powers stemming from the Dark One, including the ability to cause paralyzing fear with a look and the ability to vanish wherever there are shadows. One of their few known weaknesses is that they are reluctant to cross running water. In different lands they are known by many names, among them Halfmen, the Eyeless, Shadowmen, Lurks, and Fades.

Niall, Pedron (NEYE-awl, PAY-drohn): Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light. *See also* Children of the Light.

Nisura, Lady (nih-SOO-rah): A Shienaran noblewoman, and one of the Lady Amalisa's attendants.

One Power, the: The power drawn from the True Source. The vast majority of people are completely unable to learn to channel the One Power. A very small number can be taught to channel, and an even tinier number have the ability inborn. For these few there is no need to be taught; they will touch the True Source and channel the Power whether they want to or not, perhaps without even realizing what they are doing. This inborn ability usually manifests itself in late adolescence or early adulthood. If control is not taught, or self-learned (extremely difficult, with a success rate of only one in four), death is certain. Since the Time of Madness, no man has been able to channel the

Power without eventually going completely, horribly mad, and then, even if he has learned some control, dying from a wasting sickness that causes the sufferer to rot alive, a sickness caused, as is the madness, by the Dark One's taint on *saidin*. For a woman the death that comes without control of the Power is less horrible, but it is death just the same. Aes Sedai search for girls with the inborn ability as much to save their lives as to increase Aes Sedai numbers, and for men with it in order to stop the terrible things they inevitably do with the Power in their madness. *See also* channel; Time of Madness; True Source.

Pattern of an Age: The Wheel of Time weaves the threads of human lives into the Pattern of an Age, often called simply the Pattern, which forms the substance of reality for that Age. *See also ta'veren.*

Powers, the Five: *See* Five Powers.

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. Their avowed purposes are to discover the truth in disputations and to uncover Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is by torture; their normal attitude that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. The Questioners refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light, the Hand that digs out truth, and at times act as if they were entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the Questioners is the High Inquisitor, who sits on the Council of the Anointed. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd's crook.

Ragan (rah-GAHN): A Shienaran warrior.

Red Shields: *See* Aiel warrior societies.

Renna (REEN-nah): A Seanchan woman; *a sul'dam. See also* Seanchan; *sul'dam*.

Rhyagelle (rheye-ah-GEHL): In the Old Tongue, "Those Who Come Home," or "Homecomers."

sa'angreal (SAH-ahn-GREE-ahl): Any one of a number of objects that allow an individual to channel much more of the One Power than would otherwise be possible or safe. A *sa'angreal* is like unto, but much more powerful than, an *angreal.* The amount of the Power that can be wielded with a *sa'angreal* compares to the amount of the Power that can be handled with an *angreal* as the Power wielded with the aid of an *angreal* does to the amount of the Power that can be handled unaided. Remnants of the Age of Legends, the means of making *sa'angreal* is no longer known. Only a handful remain, far fewer even than *angreal.*

saidar (sah-ih-DAHR): ***saidin*** (sah-ih-DEEN): *See* True Source.

Saldaea (sahl-DAY-ee-ah): One of the Borderlands.

Sanche, Siuan (SAHN-chay, swahn): An Aes Sedai formerly of the Blue Ajah. Raised to the Amyrlin Seat 988 NE. The Amyrlin Seat is of all Ajahs, and of none.

Sea Folk: More properly, the Atha'an Miere (a-tha-AHN mee-AIR), the People of the Sea. Inhabitants of islands in the Aryth (AH-rihth) Ocean and the Sea of Storms, they spend little time on those islands, living most of their lives on their ships. Most seaborne trade is carried by the Sea Folk's ships.

Seanchan (SHAWN-CHAN): (1) Descendants of the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean, who have returned to reclaim the lands of their forefathers. (2) The land from which the Seanchan come. *See also Hailene; Corenne; Rhyagelle.*

Seandar (shawn-DAHR): Capital city of Seanchan, where the Empress sits on the Crystal Throne in the Court of the Nine Moons.

Selene (seh-LEEN): A woman met on the journey to Cairhien.

Seta (SEE-tah): A Seanchan woman; a *sul'dam*. *See also* Seanchan; *sul'dam*.

Shadar Logoth (SHAH-dahr LOH-goth): A city abandoned and shunned since the Trolloc Wars. It is tainted ground, and not a pebble of it is safe. *See also* Mordeth.

Shai'tan (SHAY-ih-TAN): *See* Dark One.

Shayol Ghul (SHAY-ol GHOOL): A mountain in the Blasted Lands, the site of the Dark One's prison.

Sheriam (SHEER-ee-ahm): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. The Mistress of Novices in the White Tower.

Shienar (shy-NAHR): One of the Borderlands. The sign of Shienar is a stooping black hawk.

shoufa (SHOO-fah): A garment of the Aiel, a cloth, usually the color of sand or rock, that wraps around the head and neck, leaving only the face bare.

span: *See* Length, units of.

Spine of the World, the: *A* towering mountain range, with only a few passes, which separates the Aiel Waste from the lands to the west.

stedding (STEHD-ding): An Ogier (OH-geer) homeland. Many *stedding* have been abandoned since the Breaking of the World. They are shielded in some way, no longer understood, so that within them no Aes Sedai can channel the One Power, nor even sense that the True Source exists. Attempts to wield the One Power from outside a *stedding* have no effect inside a *stedding* boundary. No Trolloc will enter a *stedding* unless driven, and even a Myrddraal will do so only at the greatest need and then with the greatest reluctance and distaste. Even Darkfriends, if truly dedicated, feel uncomfortable within a *stedding*.

stilling: the act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a woman who can channel from the One Power. A woman who has been stilled can sense the True Source, but she cannot touch it. *See also* One Power, the; gentling.

Stone Dogs: *See* Aiel warrior societies.

sul'dam (SUHL-DAHM): A woman who has passed the tests to show that she can wear the bracelet of an *a'dam* and thus control a *damane. See also a'dam; damane.*

Sunday: A feastday and festival in midsummer, celebrated in many parts of the world.

sung wood: *See* Treesinger.

Suroth, High Lady (SUE-roth): A Seanchan noblewoman of high degree.

Tai'shar (TIE-SHAHR): In the Old Tongue, "True blood of."

ta'maral'ailen (tah-MAHR-ahl-EYE-lehn): In the Old Tongue, "Web of Destiny." A great change in the Pattern of an

Age, centered around one or more people who are *ta'veren*. *See also* Pattern of an Age; *ta'veren*.

Tanreall, Artur Paendrag (tahn-REE-ahl, AHR-tuhr PAY-ehn-DRAG): *See* Hawkwing, Artur.

Tarmon Gai'don (TAHR-mohn GAY-dohn): The Last Battle. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the; Horn of Valere.

Tar Valon (TAHR VAH-lon): A city on an island in the River Erinin. The center of Aes Sedai power, and location of the White Tower.

ta'veren (tah-VEER-ehn): A person around whom the Wheel of Time weaves all surrounding life-threads, perhaps *all* life-threads, to form a Web of Destiny. *See also* Pattern of an Age.

Tear (TEER): A great seaport on the Sea of Storms.

Telamon, Lews Therin (TEHL-ah-mon, LOOZ THEH-rihn): *See* Dragon, the.

ter'angreal (TEER-ahn-GREE-ahl): Any one of a number of remnants of the Age of Legends that use the One Power. Unlike *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, each *ter'angreal* was made to do a particular thing. For example, one makes oaths taken within it binding. Some are used by Aes Sedai, but their original purposes are largely unknown. Some will kill or destroy the ability to channel of any woman who uses them. *See also angreal; sa'angreal.*

tia avende alantin (TEE-ah ah-VEN-day ah-LANH-tin): "Brother to the Trees."

Tia mi aven Moridin isainde vadin: In the Old Tongue, "The grave is no bar to my call." Inscription on the Horn of Valere. *See also* Horn of Valere.

Tigraine (tee-GRAIN): As Daughter-Heir of Andor, she married Taringail Damodred and bore his son Galadedrid. Her disappearance in 972 NE, shortly after her brother Luc vanished in the Blight, led to the struggle in Andor called the Succession, and caused the events in Cairhien that eventually brought on the Aiel War. Her sign was a woman's hand gripping a thorny rose stem with a white blossom.

Time of Madness: The years after the Dark One's counterstroke tainted the male half of the True Source, when male

Aes Sedai went mad and Broke the World. The exact duration of this period is unknown, but it is believed to have lasted nearly one hundred years. It ended completely only with the death of the last male Aes Sedai. *See also* Hundred Companions; True Source; One Power; Breaking of the World.

Tinkers: *See* Tuatha'an.

Traveling People: *See* Tuatha'an.

Tree, the: *See Avendesora.*

Treekillers: An Aiel name for the Cairhienin, always said in tones of horror and disgust.

Treesinger: An Ogier who has the ability to sing to trees (called "treesong"), either healing them, or helping them to grow and flower, or making things from the wood without damaging the tree. Objects made in this manner are called "sung wood" and are highly prized. Few Ogier remain who are Treesingers; the Talent seems to be dying out.

treesong: *See* Treesinger.

Trollocs (TRAHL-lohks): Creatures of the Dark One, created during the War of the Shadow. Huge in stature, they are a twisted blend of animal and human stock. Vicious by nature, they kill for the pure pleasure of killing. Deceitful in the extreme, they cannot be trusted unless coerced by fear. They are divided into tribe-like bands, among them the Dha'vol, the Ko'bal, and the Dhai'mon.

Trolloc Wars: A series of wars, beginning about 1000 AB and lasting more than three hundred years, during which Trolloc armies ravaged the world. Eventually the Trollocs were slain or driven back into the Great Blight, but some nations ceased to exist, while others were almost depopulated. All records of the time are fragmentary. *See also* Covenant of the Ten Nations.

True Source: The driving force of the universe, which turns the Wheel of Time. It is divided into a male half (*saidin*) and a female half (*saidar*), which work at the same time with and against each other. Only a man can draw on *saidin*, only a woman on *saidar.* Since the beginning of the Time of Madness, *saidin* has been tainted by the Dark One's touch. *See also* One Power.

Tuatha'an (too-AH-thah-AHN): A wandering folk, also known as the Tinkers and as the Traveling People, who live in brightly painted wagons and follow a totally pacifist philosophy called the Way of the Leaf. Things mended by Tinkers are often better than new. They are among the few who can cross the Aiel Waste unmolested, for the Aiel strictly avoid all contact with them.

Turak, High Lord of House Aladon (TOO-rak; AL-ah-dohn): A Seanchan of high degree, commander of the *Hailene*. *See also* Seanchan; *Hailene*.

Verin (VEHR-ihn): An Aes Sedai of the Brown Ajah.

Warder: A warrior bonded to an Aes Sedai. The bonding is a thing of the One Power, and by it he gains such gifts as quick healing, the ability to go long periods without food, water, or rest, and the ability to sense the taint of the Dark One at a distance. So long as a Warder lives, the Aes Sedai to whom he is bonded knows he is alive however far away he is, and when he dies she will know the moment and manner of his death. While most Ajahs believe an Aes Sedai may have one Warder bonded to her at a time, the Red Ajah refuses to bond any Warders at all, while the Green Ajah believe an Aes Sedai may bond as many Warders as she wishes. Ethically the Warder must accede to the bonding; but it has been known to be done involuntarily. What the Aes Sedai gain from the bonding is a closely held secret. *See also* Aes Sedai.

War of Power: *See* War of the Shadow.

War of the Hundred Years: A series of overlapping wars among constantly shifting alliances, precipitated by the death of Artur Hawkwing and the resulting struggle for his empire. It lasted from FY 994 to FY 1117. The war depopulated large parts of the lands between the Aryth Ocean and the Aiel Waste, from the Sea of Storms to the Great Blight. So great was the destruction that only fragmentary records of the time remain. The empire of Artur Hawkwing was pulled apart in the wars, and the nations of the present day were formed. *See also* Hawkwing, Artur.

War of the Shadow: Also known as the War of Power, it ended the Age of Legends. It began shortly after the attempt to free the Dark One, and soon involved the whole world. In a world where even the memory of war had been forgotten, every facet of war was rediscovered, often twisted by the Dark One's touch on the world, and the One Power was used as a weapon. The war was ended by the resealing of the Dark One into his prison. *See also* Hundred Companions, the; Dragon, the.

Watchers Over the Waves: A group who believe that the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean will one day return, and so keep watch from the town of Falme (FAHL-may) on Toman Head.

Web of Destiny: *See ta'maral'ailen*.

Weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Wheel of Time, the: Time is a wheel with seven spokes, each spoke an Age. As the Wheel turns, the Ages come and go, each leaving memories that fade to legend, then to myth, and are forgotten by the time that Age comes again. The Pattern of an Age is slightly different each time an Age comes, and each time it is subject to greater change, but each time it is the same Age.

Whitecloaks: *See* Children of the Light.

White Tower: The palace of the Amyrlin Seat in Tar Valon, and the place where Aes Sedai are trained.

Wisdom: In villages, a woman chosen by the Women's Circle for her knowledge of such things as healing, and foretelling the weather, as well as for common good sense. A position of great responsibility and authority, both actual and implied. She is generally considered the equal of the mayor, just as the Women's Circle is the equal of the Village Council. Unlike the mayor, the Wisdom is chosen for life, and it is very rare for a Wisdom to be removed from office before her death. Depending on the land, she may instead have another title, such as Guide, Healer, Wise Woman, or Reader.

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Viet nam ese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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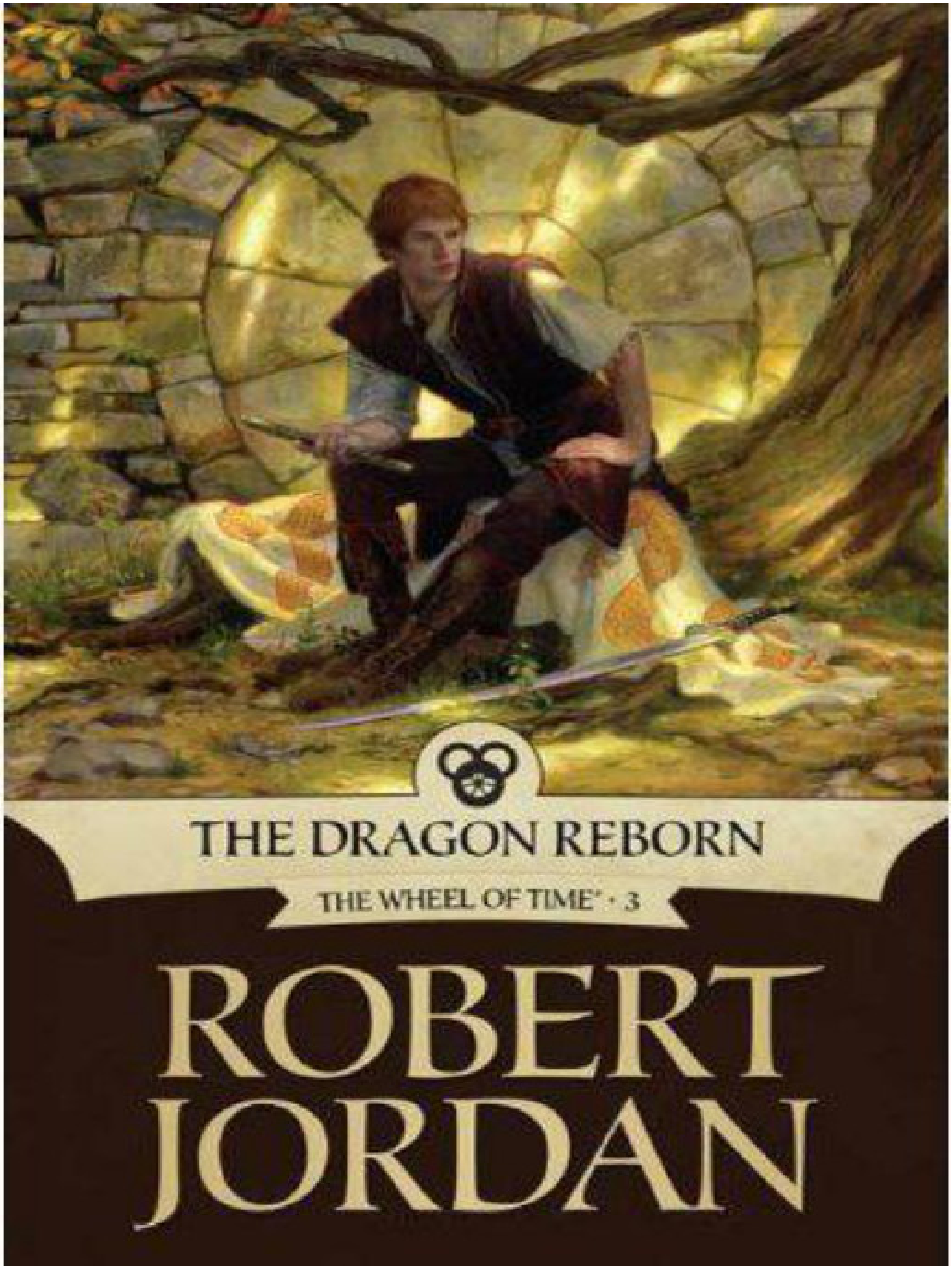

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ROBERT JORDAN

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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Dedicated to
James Oliver Rigney, Sr.
(1920–1988)
He taught me always to follow the dream,
and when I caught it, to live it.

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And his paths shall be many, and who shall know his name, for he shall be born among us many times, in many guises, as he has been and ever will be, time without end. His coming shall be like the sharp edge of the plow, turning our lives in furrows from out of the places where we lie in our silence. The breaker of bonds; the forger of chains. The maker of futures; the unshaper of destiny.

—from *Commentaries on the Prophecies of the Dragon*,
by Jurith Dorine, Right Hand to the
Queen of Almoren, 742 AB, the Third Age

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PROLOGUE

Fortress of the Light

Pedron Niall’s aged gaze wandered about his private audience chamber, but dark eyes hazed with thought saw nothing. Tattered wall hangings, once battle banners of the enemies of his youth, faded into dark wood paneling laid over stone walls, thick even here in the heart of the Fortress of the Light. The single chair in the room—heavy, high-backed, and almost a throne—was as invisible to him as the few scattered tables that completed the furnishings. Even the white-cloaked man kneeling with barely restrained eagerness on the great sunburst set in the wide planks of the floor had vanished from Niall’s mind for the moment, though few would have dismissed him so lightly.

Jaret Byar had been given time to wash before being brought to Niall, but both his helmet and his breastplate were dulled from travel and battered from use. Dark, deep-set eyes shone with a feverish, urgent light in a face that seemed to have had every spare scrap of flesh boiled away. He wore no sword—none was allowed in Niall’s presence—but he seemed poised on the edge of violence, like a hound awaiting the loosing of the leash.

Twin fires on long hearths at either end of the room held off the late winter cold. It was a plain, soldier’s room, really, everything well made but nothing extravagant—except for the sunburst. Furnishings came to the audience chamber of the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light with the man who rose to the office; the flaring sun of coin gold had been worn smooth by generations of petitioners, replaced and worn smooth again. Gold enough to buy any estate in Amadicia, and the patent of nobility to go with it. For ten years Niall had walked across that gold and never thought of it twice, any more than he thought of the sunburst embroidered across the chest of his white tunic. Gold held little interest for Pedron Niall.

Eventually his eyes went back to the table next to him, covered with maps and scattered letters and reports. Three loosely rolled drawings lay among the jumble. He took one up reluctantly. It did not matter which; all depicted the same scene, though by different hands.

Niall's skin was as thin as scraped parchment, drawn tight by age over a body that seemed all bone and sinew, but there was nothing of frailty about him. No man held Niall's office before his hair was white, nor did any man softer than the stones of the Dome of Truth. Still, he was suddenly aware of the tendon-ridged back of the hand holding the drawing, aware of the need for haste. Time was growing short. *His* time was growing short. It had to be enough. He had to make it enough.

He made himself unroll the thick parchment halfway, just enough to see the face that interested him. The chalks were a little smudged from travel in saddlebags, but the face was clear. A gray-eyed youth with reddish hair. He looked tall, but it was hard to say for certain. Aside from the hair and the eyes, he could have been set down in any town without exciting comment.

"This . . . this *boy* has proclaimed himself the Dragon Reborn?" Niall muttered.

The Dragon. The name made him feel the chills of winter and age. The name borne by Lews Therin Telamon when he doomed every man who could channel the One Power, then or ever after, to insanity and death, himself among them. It was more than three thousand years since Aes Sedai pride and the War of the Shadow had brought an end to the Age of Legends. Three thousand years, but prophecy and legend helped men remember—the heart of it, at least, if the details were gone. Lews Therin Kinslayer. The man who had begun the Breaking of the World, when madmen who could tap the power that drove the universe leveled mountains and sank ancient lands beneath the seas, when the whole face of the earth had been changed and all who survived fled like beasts before a wildfire. It had not ended until the last male Aes Sedai lay dead, and a scattered human race could begin trying to rebuild from the rubble—where even rubble remained. It was burned into memory by the stories mothers told children. And prophecy said the Dragon would be born again.

Niall had not really meant it for a question, but Byar took it for one. "Yes, my Lord Captain Commander, he has. It is a worse madness than any false Dragon I've ever heard of. Thousands have declared for him already. Tarabon and Arad Doman are in civil war, as well as at war with each other. There is fighting all across Almoth Plain and Toman Head, Taraboner against Domani against Darkfriends crying for the Dragon—or there was fighting until winter chilled most of it. I've never seen it spread so quickly, my Lord Captain Commander. Like throwing a lantern into a hay barn. The snow may have damped it down, but come spring, the flames will burst out hotter than before."

Niall cut him off with a raised finger. Twice already Niall had let him tell his story through, his voice burning with anger and hate. Parts of it Niall knew from other sources, and in some areas he knew more than Byar, but each time he heard it, it goaded him anew. "Geofram Bornhald and a thousand of the Children dead. And Aes Sedai did it. You have no doubts, Child Byar?"

"None, my Lord Captain Commander. After a skirmish on the way to Falme, I saw two of the Tar Valon witches. They cost us more than fifty dead before we stuck them full of arrows."

"You are *sure*—sure they were Aes Sedai?"

"The ground erupted under our feet." Byar's voice was firm and full of belief. He had little imagination, did Jaret Byar; death was part of a soldier's life, however it came. "Lightnings struck our ranks out of a clear sky. My Lord Captain Commander, what else could they have been?"

Niall nodded grimly. There had been no male Aes Sedai since the Breaking of the World, but the women who still claimed that title were bad enough. They prated of their Three Oaths: to speak no word that was not true, to make no weapon for one man to kill another, to use the One Power as a weapon only against Darkfriends or Shadowspawn. But now they had showed those oaths for the lies they were. He had always known no one could want the power they wielded except to challenge the Creator, and that meant to serve the Dark One.

"And you know nothing of those who took Falme and killed half of one of my legions?"

"Lord Captain Bornhald said they called themselves Seanchan, my Lord Captain Commander," Byar said stolidly. "He said they were Darkfriends. And his charge broke them, even if they killed him." His voice gained intensity. "There were many refugees from the city. Everyone I spoke to agreed the strangers had broken and fled. Lord Captain Bornhald did that."

Niall sighed softly. They were almost the same words Byar had used the first two times about the army that had seemingly come out of nowhere to take Falme. *A good soldier*, Niall thought, *so Geofram Bornhald always said, but not a man to think for himself.*

“My Lord Captain Commander,” Byar said suddenly, “Lord Captain Bornhald *did* command me to stand aside from the battle. I was to watch, and report to you. And tell his son, Lord Dain, how he died.”

“Yes, yes,” Niall said impatiently. For a moment he studied Byar’s hollow-cheeked face, then added, “No one doubts your honesty or courage. It is exactly the sort of thing Geofram Bornhald would do, facing a battle in which he feared his entire command might die.” *And not the sort of thing you have imagination enough to think up.*

There was nothing more to learn from the man. “You have done well, Child Byar. You have my leave to carry word of Geofram Bornhald’s death to his son. Dain Bornhald is with Eamon Valda—near Tar Valon at last report. You may join them.”

“Thank you, my Lord Captain Commander. Thank you.” Byar rose to his feet and bowed deeply. Yet as he straightened, he hesitated. “My Lord Captain Commander, we *were* betrayed.” Hatred gave his voice a saw-toothed edge.

“By this one Darkfriend you spoke of, Child Byar?” He could not keep an edge out of his own voice. A year’s planning lay in ruins amid the corpses of a thousand of the Children, and Byar wanted to talk only of this one man. “This young blacksmith you’ve only seen twice, this Perrin from the Two Rivers?”

“Yes, my Lord Captain Commander. I do not know how, but I know he is to blame. I know it.”

“I will see what can be done about him, Child Byar.” Byar opened his mouth again, but Niall raised a thin hand to forestall him. “You may leave me now.” The gaunt-faced man had no choice but to bow again and leave.

As the door closed behind him, Niall lowered himself into his high-backed chair. What had brought on Byar’s hatred of this Perrin? There were far too many Darkfriends to waste energy on hating any particular one. Too many Darkfriends, high and low, hiding behind glib tongues and open smiles, serving the Dark One. Still, one more name added to the lists would do no harm.

He shifted on the hard chair, trying to find comfort for his old bones. Not for the first time he thought vaguely that perhaps a cushion would not be too much luxury. And not for the first time, he pushed the thought away. The world tumbled toward chaos, and he had no time to give in to age.

He let all the signs that foretold disaster swirl through his mind. War gripped Tarabon and Arad Doman, civil war ripped at Cairhien, and war fever was rising in Tear and Illian, old enemies as they were. Perhaps these wars meant nothing in themselves—men fought wars—but they usually came one at a time. And aside from the false Dragon somewhere on Almoth Plain, another tore at Saldaea, and a third plagued Tear. Three at once. *They must all be false Dragons. They* must *be!*

A dozen small things besides, some perhaps only baseless rumors, but taken together with the rest. . . . Sightings of Aiel reported as far west as Murandy, and Kandor. Only two or three in one place, but one or a thousand, Aiel had come out of the Waste just once in all the years since the Breaking. Only in the Aiel War had they ever left that desolate wilderness. The Atha’an Miere, the Sea Folk, were said to be ignoring trade to seek signs and portents—of what, exactly, they did not say—sailing with ships half full or even empty. Illian had called the Great Hunt of the Horn for the first time in almost four hundred years, had sent out the Hunters to seek the fabled Horn of Valere, which prophecy said would summon dead heroes from the grave to fight in Tarmon Gai’don, the Last Battle against the Shadow. Rumor said the Ogier, always so reclusive that most common people thought them only legend, had called meetings between their far-flung *stedding.*

Most telling of all, to Niall, the Aes Sedai had apparently come into the open. It was said they had sent some of their sisters to Saldaea to confront the false Dragon Mazrim Taim. Rare as it was in men, Taim could channel the One Power. That was a thing to fear and despise in itself, and few thought a man like that could be defeated except with the aid of Aes Sedai. Better to allow Aes Sedai help than to face the inevitable horrors when he went mad, as such men inevitably did. But Tar Valon had apparently sent other Aes Sedai to support the other false Dragon at Falme. Nothing else fit the facts.

The pattern chilled the marrow in his bones. Chaos multiplied; what was unheard of, happening again and again. The whole world seemed to be milling, stirring near the boil. It was clear to him. The Last Battle really was coming.

All his plans were destroyed, the plans that would have secured his name among the Children of the Light for a hundred generations. But turmoil meant opportunity, and he had new plans, with new objectives. If he could keep the strength and will to carry them out. *Light, let me hold on to life long enough.*

A deferential tap on the door brought him out of his dark thoughts. “Come!” he snapped.

A servant in coat and breeches of white-and-gold bowed his way in. Eyes to the floor, he announced that Jaichim Carridin, Anointed of the Light, Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light, came at the command of the Lord Captain Commander. Carridin appeared on the man’s heels, not waiting for Niall to speak. Niall gestured the servant to leave.

Before the door was fully closed again, Carridin dropped to one knee with a flourish of his snowy cloak. Behind the sunburst on the cloak’s breast lay the scarlet shepherd’s crook of the Hand of the Light, called the Questioners by many, though seldom to their faces. “As you have commanded my presence, my Lord Captain Commander,” he said in a strong voice, “so have I returned from Tarabon.”

Niall examined him for a moment. Carridin was tall, well into his middle years, with a touch of gray in his hair, yet fit and hard. His dark, deep-set eyes had a knowing look about them, as always. And he did not blink under the silent study of the Lord Captain Commander. Few men had consciences so clear or nerves so steady. Carridin knelt there, waiting as calmly as if it were an everyday matter to be ordered curtly to leave his command and return to Amador without delay, no reasons given. But then, it was said Jaichim Carridin could outwait a stone.

“Rise, Child Carridin.” As the other man straightened, Niall added, “I have had disturbing news from Falme.”

Carridin straightened the folds of his cloak as he answered. His voice rode the edge of suitable respect, almost as if he spoke to an equal rather than to the man he had sworn to obey to the death. “My Lord Captain Commander refers to the news brought by Child Jaret Byar, late second to Lord Captain Bornhald.”

The corner of Niall’s left eye fluttered, an old presage of anger. Supposedly only three men knew Byar was in Amador, and none besides Niall knew from where he came. “Do not be too clever, Carridin. Your desire to know everything may one day lead you into the hands of your own Questioners.”

Carridin showed no reaction beyond a slight tightening of his mouth at the name. “My Lord Captain Commander, the Hand seeks out truth everywhere, to serve the Light.”

To serve the Light. Not to serve the Children of the Light. All the Children served the Light, but Pedron Niall often wondered if the Questioners really considered themselves part of the Children at all. “And what truth do you have for me about what occurred in Falme?”

“Darkfriends, my Lord Captain Commander.”

“Darkfriends?” Niall’s chuckle held no amusement. “A few weeks gone I was receiving reports from you that Geofram Bornhald was a servant of the Dark One because he moved soldiers onto Toman Head against your orders.” His voice became dangerously soft. “Do you now mean me to believe that Bornhald, as a Darkfriend, led a thousand of the Children to their deaths fighting other Darkfriends?”

“Whether or not he was a Darkfriend will never be known,” Carridin said blandly, “since he died before he could be put to the question. The Shadow’s plots are murky, and often seem mad to those who walk in the Light. But that those who seized Falme were Darkfriends, I have no doubt. Darkfriends and Aes Sedai, in support of a false Dragon. It was the One Power that destroyed Bornhald and his men, of that I am sure, my Lord Captain Commander, just as it destroyed the armies that Tarabon and Arad Doman sent against the Darkfriends in Falme.”

“And what of the stories that those who took Falme came from across the Aryth Ocean?”

Carridin shook his head. “My Lord Captain Commander, the people are full of rumors. Some claim they were the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the ocean a thousand years ago, come back to claim the land. Why, some even claim to have seen Hawkwing himself in Falme. And half the heroes of legend besides. The west is boiling from Tarabon to Saldaea, and a hundred new rumors bubble to the surface every day, each more outrageous than the last. These so-called Seanchan were no more than another rabble of Darkfriends gathered to support a false Dragon, only this time with open Aes Sedai support.”

“What proof have you?” Niall made his voice sound as if he doubted the point. “You have prisoners?”

“No, my Lord Captain Commander. As Child Byar no doubt told you, Bornhald managed to hurt them badly enough that they dispersed. And certainly no one we’ve questioned would admit to supporting a false Dragon. As for proof . . . it lies in two parts. If my Lord Captain Commander will permit me?”

Niall gestured impatiently.

“The first part is negative. Few ships have tried to cross the Aryth Ocean, and most never returned. Those that did, turned back before they ran out of food and water. Even the Sea Folk will not cross the Aryth, and they sail wherever there is trade, even to the lands beyond the Aiel Waste. My Lord Captain Commander, if there *are* any lands across the ocean, they are too far to reach, the ocean too wide. To carry an army across it would be as impossible as flying.”

“Perhaps,” Niall said slowly. “It is certainly indicative. What is your second part?”

“My Lord Captain Commander, many of those we questioned spoke of monsters fighting for the Darkfriends, and held to their claims even under the last degree of the question. What could they be but Trollocs and other Shadowspawn, in some way brought down from the Blight?” Carridin spread his hands as if that were conclusive. “Most people think Trollocs are only travelers’ tales and lies, and most of the rest think they were all killed in the Trolloc Wars. What other name would they put to a Trolloc but monster?”

“Yes. Yes, you may be right, Child Carridin. May be, I say.” He would not give Carridin the satisfaction of knowing he agreed. *Let him work awhile.* “But what of him?” He indicated the rolled drawings. If he knew Carridin, the Inquisitor had copies in his own chambers. “How dangerous is he? Can he channel the One Power?”

The Inquisitor merely shrugged. “Perhaps he can channel, perhaps not. Aes Sedai could no doubt make people believe a cat could channel, if they wanted to. As to how dangerous he is. . . . Any false Dragon is dangerous until he is put down, and one with Tar Valon openly behind him is ten times dangerous. But he is less dangerous now than he will be in half a year, unchecked. The captives I questioned had never seen him, had no idea where he is now. His forces are fragmented. I doubt there are more than two hundred gathered in any one place. The Taraboners or the Domani, either one, could sweep them away if they weren’t so busy fighting each other.”

“Even a false Dragon,” Niall said dryly, “is not enough to make them forget four hundred years of squabbling over possession of Almoth Plain. As if either of them ever had the strength to hold it.” Carridin’s face did not change, and Niall wondered how he could keep so calm. *You will not be calm much longer, Questioner.*

“It is of no import, my Lord Captain Commander. Winter keeps them all in their camps, except for scattered skirmishes and raids. When the weather warms enough for troops to move. . . . Bornhald took only half his legion to their deaths on Toman Head. With the other half, I will hunt this false Dragon to his death. A corpse is not dangerous to anyone.”

“And if you face what it seems Bornhald faced? Aes Sedai channeling the Power to kill?”

“Their witchery doesn’t protect them from arrows, or a knife in the dark. They die as quickly as anyone else.” Carridin smiled. “I promise you, I will be successful before summer.”

Niall nodded. The man was confident, now. Sure the dangerous questions would already have come, if they were coming. *You should have remembered, Carridin, I was accounted a fine tactician.* “Why,” he said quietly, “did you not take your own forces to Falme? With Darkfriends on Toman Head, an army of them holding Falme, why did you try to stop Bornhald?”

Carridin blinked, but his voice remained steady. “At first they were only rumors, my Lord Captain Commander. Rumors so wild, no one could believe. By the time I learned the truth, Bornhald had joined battle. He was dead, and the Darkfriends scattered. Besides, my task was to bring the Light to Almoth Plain. I could not disobey my orders to chase after rumors.”

“Your task?” Niall said, his voice rising as he stood. Carridin topped him by a head, but the Inquisitor stepped back. “Your task? Your task was to seize Almoth Plain! An empty bucket that no one holds except by words and claims, and all you had to do was fill it. The nation of Almoth would have lived again, ruled by the Children of the Light, with no need to pay lip service to a fool of a king. Amadicia and Almoth, a vise gripping Tarabon. In five years we would have held sway there as much as here in Amadicia. And you made a dog’s dinner of it!”

The smile went at last. “My Lord Captain Commander,” Carridin protested. “How could I foresee what happened? Yet another false Dragon. Tarabon and Arad Doman finally going to war after so long merely growling at each other. And Aes Sedai revealing their true selves after three thousand years of dissembling! Even with that, though, all is not lost. I can find and destroy this false Dragon before his followers unite. And once the Taraboners and Domani have weakened themselves, they can be cleared from the plain without—"

"No!" Niall snapped. "Your plans are done with, Carridin. Perhaps I should hand you over to your own Questioners right now. The High Inquisitor would not object. He is gnashing his teeth to find someone to blame for what happened. He would never put forward one of his own, but I doubt he'd quibble if I named you. A few days under the question, and you would confess to anything. Name yourself Darkfriend, even. You would go under the headsman's axe inside a week."

There was sweat beading on Carridin's forehead. "My Lord Captain Commander. . . ." He stopped to swallow. "My Lord Captain Commander seems to be saying there is another way. If he will but speak it, I am sworn to obey."

Now, Niall thought. *Now to toss the dice.* Prickles ran across his skin, as if he were in battle and had suddenly realized that every man for a hundred paces around him was an enemy. Lord Captain Commanders did not go to the headsman, but more than one had been known to die suddenly and unexpectedly, swiftly mourned and swiftly replaced by men with less dangerous ideas.

"Child Carridin," he said firmly, "you will make certain that this false Dragon does not die. And if any Aes Sedai come to oppose rather than support him, you will make use of your 'knives in the dark.' "

The Inquisitor's jaw dropped. Yet he recovered quickly, eyeing Niall in a speculative fashion. "To kill Aes Sedai is a duty, but. . . . To allow a false Dragon to roam free? That . . . that would be . . . treason. And blasphemy."

Niall drew a deep breath. He could sense the unseen knives waiting in the shadows. But he was committed, now. "It is no treason to do what must be done. And even blasphemy can be tolerated for a cause." Those two sentences alone were enough to kill him. "Do you know how to unite people behind you, Child Carridin? The quickest way? No? Loose a lion—a rabid lion—in the streets. And when panic grips the people, once it has turned their bowels to water, calmly tell them you will deal with it. Then you kill it, and order them to hang the carcass up where everyone can see. Before they have time to think, you give another order, and it will be obeyed. And if you continue to give orders, they will continue to obey, for you will be the one who saved them, and who better to lead?"

Carridin moved his head uncertainly. "Do you mean to . . . take it all, my Lord Captain Commander? Not just Almoth Plain, but Tarabon and Arad Doman as well?"

"What I mean is for me to know. It is for you to obey as you are sworn to do. I expect to hear of messengers on fast horses leaving for the plain by tonight. I am certain you know how to word the orders so no one suspects what they should not. If you must harry someone, let it be the Taraboners and Domani. It would not do to have them kill my lion. No, under the Light, we shall force peace between them."

"As my Lord Captain Commander commands," Carridin said smoothly. "I hear and obey." Too smoothly.

Niall smiled a cold smile. "In case your oath is not strong enough, know this. If this false Dragon dies before I command his death, or if he is taken by the Tar Valon witches, you will be found one morning with a dagger in your heart. And should any . . . accident . . . befall me—even if I should die of old age—you will not survive me the month."

"My Lord Captain Commander, I have sworn to obey—"

"So you have." Niall cut him off. "See that you remember it. Now, go!"

"As my Lord Captain Commander commands." This time Carridin's voice was not so steady.

The door closed behind the Inquisitor. Niall rubbed his hands together. He felt cold. The dice were spinning, with no way of telling what pips would show when they stopped. The Last Battle truly was coming. Not the Tarmon Gai'don of legend, with the Dark One breaking free to be faced by the Dragon Reborn. Not that, he was sure. The Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends might have made a hole in the Dark One's prison at Shayol Ghul, but Lews Therin Kinslayer and his Hundred Companions had sealed it up again. The counterstroke had tainted the male half of the True Source forever and driven them mad, and so begun the Breaking, but one of those ancient Aes Sedai could do what ten of the Tar Valon witches of today could not. The seals they had made would hold.

Pedron Niall was a man of cold logic, and he had reasoned out how Tarmon Gai'don would be. Bestial Trolloc hordes rolling south out of the Great Blight as they had in the Trolloc Wars, two thousand years before, with the Myrddraal—the Halfmen—leading, and perhaps even new human Dreadlords from among the Darkfriends. Humankind, split into nations squabbling among themselves, could not stand against that. But he, Pedron Niall, would unite humankind behind the banners of the Children of the Light. There would be new legends, to tell how Pedron Niall had fought Tarmon Gai'don, and won.

"First," he murmured, "loose a rabid lion in the streets."

"A rabid lion?"

Niall spun on his heel as a bony little man with a huge beak of a nose slipped from behind one of the hanging banners. There was just a glimpse of a panel swinging shut as the banner fell back against the wall.

"I showed you that passage, Ordeith," Niall snapped, "so you could come when I summoned you without half the fortress knowing, not so you could listen to my private conversation."

Ordeith made a smooth bow as he crossed the room. "Listen, Great Lord? I would never do such a thing. I only just arrived and could not avoid hearing your final words. No more than that." He wore a half-mocking smile, but it never left his face that Niall had ever seen, even when the fellow had no reason to know anyone was watching.

A month before, in the dead of winter, the gangly little man had arrived in Amadicia, ragged and half-frozen, and somehow managed to talk his way through all the layers of guards to Pedron Niall himself. He seemed to know things about events on Toman Head that were not in Carridin's voluminous if obscure reports, or in Byar's tale, or in any other report or rumor that had come to Niall. His name was a lie, of course. In the Old Tongue, Ordeith meant "wormwood." When Niall challenged him on it, though, all he said was, "Who we were is lost to all men, and life is bitter." But he was clever. It had been he who helped Niall see the pattern emerging in events.

Ordeith moved to the table and took up one of the drawings. As he unrolled it enough to reveal the young man's face, his smile deepened to nearly a grimace.

Niall was still irritated that the man had come unsummoned. "You find a false Dragon funny, Ordeith. Or does he frighten you?"

"A false Dragon?" Ordeith said softly. "Yes. Yes, of course, it must be. Who else could it be." And he barked a shrill laugh that grated on Niall's nerves. Sometimes Niall thought Ordeith was at least half-mad.

But he is clever, mad or not. “What do you mean, Ordeith? You sound as if you know him.”

Ordeith gave a start, as though he had forgotten the Lord Captain Commander was there. “Know him? Oh, yes, I know him. His name is Rand al’Thor. He comes from the Two Rivers, in the backcountry of Andor, and he is a Darkfriend so deep in the Shadow it would make your soul cringe to know the half.”

“The Two Rivers,” Niall mused. “Someone else mentioned another Darkfriend from there, another youth. Strange to think of Darkfriends coming from a place like that. But truly they are everywhere.”

“Another, Great Lord?” Ordeith said. “From the Two Rivers? Would that be Matrim Cauthon or Perrin Aybara? They are of an age with him, and close behind in evil.”

“His name was given as Perrin,” Niall said, frowning. “Three of them, you say? Nothing comes out of the Two Rivers but wool and tabac. I doubt if there is another place men live that is more isolated from the rest of the world.”

“In a city, Darkfriends must hide their nature to one extent or another. They must associate with others, with strangers come from other places and leaving to take word of what they have seen. But in quiet villages, cut off from the world, where few outsiders ever go. . . . What better places for all to be Darkfriends?”

“How is it you know the names of three Darkfriends, Ordeith? Three Darkfriends from the far end of forever. You keep too many secrets, Wormwood, and pull more surprises from your sleeve than a gleeman.”

“How can any man tell *all* that he knows, Great Lord,” the little man said smoothly. “It would be only prattle, until it becomes useful. I will tell you this, Great Lord. This Rand al’Thor, this Dragon, has deep roots in the Two Rivers.”

“False Dragon!” Niall said sharply, and the other man bowed.

“Of course, Great Lord. I misspoke myself.”

Suddenly Niall became aware of the drawing crumpled and torn in Ordeith’s hands. Even while the man’s face remained smooth except for that sardonic smile, his hands twitched convulsively around the parchment.

“Stop that!” Niall commanded. He snatched the drawing away from Ordeith and smoothed it as best he could. “I do not have so many likenesses of this man that I can allow them to be destroyed.” Much of the drawing was only a smudge, and a rip ran across the young man’s breast, but miraculously the face was untouched.

“Forgive me, Great Lord.” Ordeith made a deep bow, his smile never slipping. “I hate Darkfriends.”

Niall studied the face in chalks. *Rand al’Thor, of the Two Rivers.* “Perhaps I must make plans for the Two Rivers. When the snows clear. Perhaps.”

“As the Great Lord wishes,” Ordeith said blandly.

The grimace on Carridin’s face as he strode through the halls of the Fortress made other men avoid him, though in truth few sought the company of Questioners. Servants, hurrying about their tasks, tried to fade into the stone walls, and even men with golden knots of rank on their white cloaks took side corridors when they saw his face.

He flung open the door to his rooms and slammed it behind him, feeling none of the usual satisfaction at the fine carpets from Tarabon and Tear in lush reds and golds and blues, the beveled mirrors from Illian, the gold-leaf work on the long, intricately carved table in the middle of the floor. A master craftsman from Lugard had worked nearly a year on that. This time he barely saw it.

“Sharbon!” For once his body servant did not appear. The man was supposed to be readying the rooms. “The Light burn you, Sharbon! Where are you?”

A movement caught the corner of his eye, and he turned ready to shrivel Sharbon with his curses. The curses themselves shriveled as a Myrddraal took another step toward him with the sinuous grace of a serpent.

It was a man in form, no larger than most, but there the resemblance ended. Dead black clothes and cloak, hardly seeming to stir as it moved, made its maggot-white skin appear ever paler. And it had no eyes. That eyeless gaze filled Carridin with fear, as it had filled thousands before.

“Wha. . . .” Carridin stopped to work moisture back into his mouth, to try bringing his voice back down to its normal register. “What are you doing here?” It still sounded shrill.

The Halfman’s bloodless lips quirked in a smile. “Where there is shadow, there may I go.” Its voice sounded like a snake rustling through dead leaves. “I like to keep a watch on all those who serve me.”

"I ser. . . ."

It was no use. With an effort Carridin jerked his eyes away from that smooth expanse of pale, pasty face and turned his back. A shiver ran down his spine, having his back to a Myrddraal. Everything was sharp in the mirror on the wall in front of him. Everything but the Halfman. The Myrddraal was an indistinct blur. Hardly soothing to look at, but better than meeting that stare. A little strength returned to Carridin's voice.

"I serve the. . . ." He cut off, suddenly aware of where he was. In the heart of the Fortress of the Light. The rumor of a whisper of the words he was about to say would have him given to the Hand of the Light. The lowest of the Children would strike him down on the spot if he heard. He was alone except for the Myrddraal, and perhaps Sharbon—*Where is that cursed man?* It would be good to have someone to share the Halfman's stare, even if the other would have to be disposed of afterwards—but still he lowered his voice. "I serve the Great Lord of the Dark, as you do. We both serve."

"If you wish to see it so." The Myrddraal laughed, a sound that made Carridin's bones shiver. "Still, I will know why you are here instead of on Almoth Plain."

"I . . . I was commanded here by word of the Lord Captain Commander."

The Myrddraal grated, "Your Lord Captain Commander's words are dung! You were commanded to find the human called Rand al'Thor and kill him. That before all else. Above all else! Why are you not obeying?"

Carridin took a deep breath. That gaze on his back felt like a knife blade grating along his spine. "Things . . . have changed. Some matters are not as much in my control as they were." A harsh, scraping noise jerked his head around.

The Myrddraal was drawing a hand across the tabletop, and thin tendrils of wood curled away from its fingernails. "Nothing has changed, human. You forswore your oaths to the Light and swore new oaths, and *those* oaths you will obey."

Carridin started at the gouges marring the polished wood and swallowed hard. "I don't understand. Why is it suddenly so important to kill him? I thought the Great Lord of the Dark meant to use him."

"You question me? I should take your tongue. It is not your part to question. Or to understand. It is your part to obey! You will give dogs lessons in obedience. Do you understand *that*? Heel, dog, and obey your master."

Anger wormed its way through the fear, and Carridin's hand groped at his side, but his sword was not there. It lay in the next room now, where he had left it on going to attend Pedron Niall.

The Myrddraal moved faster than a striking viper. Carridin opened his mouth to scream as its hand closed on his wrist in a crushing grip; bones grated together, sending jolts of agony up his arm. The scream never left his mouth, though, for the Halfman's other hand gripped his chin and forced his jaws shut. His heels rose up, and then his toes left the floor. Grunting and gurgling, he dangled in the Myrddraal's grasp.

"Hear me, human. You will find this youth and kill him as quickly as possible. Do not think you can dissemble. There are others of your *children* who will tell me if you turn aside in your purpose. But I will give you this to encourage you. If this Rand al'Thor is not dead in a month, I will take one of your blood. A son, a daughter, a sister, an uncle. You will not know who until the chosen has died screaming. If he lives another month, I will take another. And then another, and another. And when there is no one of your blood living except yourself, if he still lives, I will take you to Shayol Ghul itself." It smiled. "You will be years in the dying, human. Do you understand me, now?"

Carridin made a sound, half groan, half whimper. He thought his neck was going to break.

With a snarl, the Myrddraal hurled him across the room. Carridin slammed against the far wall and slid to the rug, stunned. Facedown, he lay fighting for breath.

"Do you understand me, human?"

"I . . . I hear and obey," Carridin managed into the carpet. There was no answer.

He turned his head, wincing at the pain in his neck. The room was empty except for him. Halfmen rode shadows like horses, so the legends said, and when they turned sideways, they disappeared. No wall could keep them out. Carridin wanted to weep. He levered himself up, cursing the jolt of pain from his wrist.

The door opened, and Sharbon hurried in, a plump man with a basket in his arms. He stopped to stare at Carridin. "Master, are you all right? Forgive me for not being here, master, but I went to buy fruits for your—"

With his good hand Carridin struck the basket from Sharbon’s hands, sending withered winter apples rolling across the carpets, and backhanded the man across the face.

“Forgive me, master,” Sharbon whispered.

“Fetch me paper and pen and ink,” Carridin snarled. “Hurry, fool! I must send orders.” *But which? Which?* As Sharbon scurried to obey, Carridin stared at the gouges in the tabletop and shivered.

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CHAPTER 1

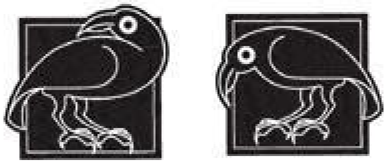

Waiting

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the Mountains of Mist. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

Down long valleys the wind swept, valleys blue with morning mist hanging in the air, some forested with evergreens, some bare where grasses and wildflowers would soon spring up. It howled across half-buried ruins and broken monuments, all as forgotten as those who had built them. It moaned in the passes, weatherworn cuts between peaks capped with snow that never melted. Thick clouds clung to the mountaintops so that snow and white billows seemed one.

In the lowlands winter was going or gone, yet here in the heights it held awhile, quilting the mountainsides with broad, white patches. Only evergreens clung to leaf or needle; all other branches stood bare, brown or gray against the rock and not yet quickened ground. There was no sound but the crisp rush of wind over snow and stone. The land seemed to be waiting. Waiting for something to burst.

Sitting his horse just inside a thicket of leatherleaf and pine, Perrin Aybara shivered and tugged his fur-lined cloak closer, as close as he could with a longbow in one hand and a great, half-moon axe at his belt. It was a good axe of cold steel; Perrin had pumped the bellows the day master Luhhan had made it. The wind jerked at his cloak, pulling the hood back from his shaggy curls, and cut through his coat; he wiggled his toes in his boots for warmth and shifted on his high-cantled saddle, but his mind was not really on the cold. Eyeing his five companions, he wondered if they, too, felt it. Not the waiting they had been sent there for, but something more.

Stepper, his horse, shifted and tossed his head. He had named the dun stallion for his quick feet, but now Stepper seemed to feel his rider's irritation and impatience. *I am tired of all this waiting, all this sitting while Moiraine holds us as tight as tongs. Burn the Aes Sedai! When will it end?*

He sniffed the wind without thinking. The smell of horse predominated, and of men and men's sweat. A rabbit had gone through those trees not long since, fear powering its run, but the fox on its trail had not killed there. He realized what he was doing, and stopped it. *You'd think I would get a stuffed nose with all this wind.* He almost wished he did have one. *And I wouldn't let Moiraine do anything about it, either.*

Something tickled the back of his mind. He refused to acknowledge it. He did not mention his feeling to his companions.

The other five men sat their saddles, short horsebows at the ready, eyes searching the sky above as well as the thinly treed slopes below. They seemed unperturbed by the wind flaring their cloaks out like banners. A two-handed sword hilt stuck up above each man's shoulder through a slit in his cloak. The sight of their bare heads, shaven except for topknots, made Perrin feel colder. For them, this weather was already well into spring. All softness had been hammered out of them at a harder forge than he had ever known. They were Shienarans, from the Borderlands up along the Great Blight, where Trolloc raids could come in any night, and even a merchant or a farmer might well have to take up sword or bow. And these men were no farmers, but soldiers almost from birth.

He sometimes wondered at the way they deferred to him and followed his lead. It was as if they thought he had some special right, some knowledge hidden from them. *Or maybe it's just my friends*, he thought wryly. They were not as tall as he, nor as big—years as a blacksmith's apprentice had given him arms and shoulders to make two of most men's—but he had begun shaving every day to stop their jokes about his youth. Friendly jokes, but still jokes. He would not have them start again because he spoke of a feeling.

With a start, Perrin reminded himself that he was supposed to be keeping watch, too. Checking the arrow nocked to his longbow, he peered down the valley running off to the west, widening as it fell away, the ground streaked with broad, twisted ribbons of snow, remnants of winter. Most of the scattered trees down there still clawed the sky with stark winter branches, but enough evergreens—pine and leatherleaf, fir and mountain holly, even a few towering greenwoods—stood on the slopes and the valley floor to give cover for anyone who knew how to use it. But no one would be there without a special purpose. The mines were all far to the south or even further north; most people thought there was ill luck in the Mountains of Mist, and few entered them who could avoid it. Perrin's eyes glittered like burnished gold.

The tickling became an itch. *No!*

He could push the itch aside, but the expectation would not go. As if he teetered on a brink. As if everything teetered. He wondered whether something unpleasant lay in the mountains around them. There was a way to know, perhaps. In places like this, where men seldom came, there were almost always wolves. He crushed the thought before it had a chance to firm. *Better to wonder. Better than that.* Their numbers were not many, but they had scouts. If there was anything out there, the outriders would find it. *This is my forge; I'll tend it, and let them tend theirs.*

He could see further than the others, so he was first to spot the rider coming from the direction of Tarabon. Even to him the rider was only a spot of bright colors on horseback winding its way through the trees in the distance, now seen, now hidden. A piebald horse, he thought. *And not before time!* He opened his mouth to announce her—it would be a woman; each rider before had been—when Masema suddenly muttered, "Raven!" like a curse.

Perrin jerked his head up. A big black bird was quartering over the treetops no more than a hundred paces away. Its quarry might have been carrion dead in the snow or some small animal, yet Perrin could not take the chance. It did not seem to have seen them, but the oncoming rider would soon be in its sight. Even as he spotted the raven, his bow came up, and he drew—fletchings to cheek, to ear—and loosed, all in one smooth motion. He was dimly aware of the slap of bowstrings beside him, but his attention was all on the black bird.

Of a sudden it cartwheeled in a shower of midnight feathers as his arrow found it, and tumbled from the sky as two more arrows streaked through the place where it had been. Bows half-drawn, the other Shienarans searched the sky to see if it had a companion.

“Does it have to report,” Perrin asked softly, “or does . . . *he* . . . see what it sees?” He had not meant anyone to hear, but Ragan, the youngest of the Shienarans, less than ten years his elder, answered as he fitted another arrow to his short bow.

“It has to report. To a Halfman, usually.” In the Borderlands there was a bounty on ravens; no one there ever dared assume any raven was just a bird. “Light, if Heartsbane saw what the ravens saw, we would all have been dead before we reached the mountains.” Ragan’s voice was easy; it was a matter of every day to a Shienaran soldier.

Perrin shivered, not from the cold, and in the back of his head something snarled a challenge to the death. Heartsbane. Different names in different lands—Soulsbane and Heartfang, Lord of the Grave and Lord of the Twilight—and everywhere Father of Lies and the Dark One, all to avoid giving him his true name and drawing his attention. The Dark One often used ravens and crows, rats in the cities. Perrin drew another broadhead arrow from the quiver on his hip that balanced the axe on the other side.

“That may be as big as a club,” Ragan said admiringly, with a glance at Perrin’s bow, “but it can shoot. I would hate to see what it could do to a man in armor.” The Shienarans wore only light mail, now, under their plain coats, but usually they fought in armor, man and horse alike.

“Too long for horseback,” Masema sneered. The triangular scar on his dark cheek twisted his contemptuous grin even more. “A good breastplate will stop even a pile arrow except at close range, and if your first shot fails, the man you’re shooting at will carve your guts out.”

“That is just it, Masema.” Ragan relaxed a bit as the sky remained empty. The raven must have been alone. “With this Two Rivers bow, I’ll wager you don’t have to be so close.” Masema opened his mouth.

“You two stop flapping your bloody tongues!” Uno snapped. With a long scar down the left side of his face and that eye gone, his features were hard, even for a Shienaran. He had acquired a painted eyepatch on their way into the mountains during the autumn; a permanently frowning eye in a fiery red did nothing to make his stare easier to face. “If you can’t keep your bloody minds on the bloody task at hand, I’ll see if extra flaming guard duty tonight will bloody settle you.” Ragan and Masema subsided under his stare. He gave them a last scowl that faded as he turned to Perrin. “Do you see anything yet?” His tone was a little gruffer than he might have used with a commander put over him by the King of Shienar, or the Lord of

Fal Dara, yet there was something in it of readiness to do whatever Perrin suggested.

The Shienarans knew how far he could see, but they seemed to take it as a matter of course, that and the color of his eyes, as well. They did not know everything, not by half, but they accepted him as he was. As they thought he was. They seemed to accept everything and anything. The world was changing, they said. Everything spun on the wheels of chance and change. If a man had eyes a color no man's eyes had ever been, what did it matter, now?

"She's coming," Perrin said. "You should just see her now. There." He pointed, and Uno strained forward, his one real eye squinting, then finally nodded doubtfully.

"There's bloody something moving down there." Some of the others nodded and murmured, too. Uno glared at them, and they went back to studying the sky and the mountains.

Suddenly Perrin realized what the bright colors on the distant rider meant. A vivid green skirt peeking out beneath a bright red cloak. "She's one of the Traveling People," he said, startled. No one else he had ever heard of dressed in such brilliant colors and odd combinations, not by choice.

The women they had sometimes met and guided even deeper into the mountains included every sort: a beggar woman in rags struggling afoot through a snowstorm; a merchant by herself leading a string of laden packhorses; a lady in silks and fine furs, with red-tasseled reins on her palfrey and gold worked on her saddle. The beggar departed with a purse of silver—more than Perrin thought they could afford to give, until the lady left an even fatter purse of gold. Women from every station in life, all alone, from Tarabon, and Ghealdan, and even Amadicia. But he had never expected to see one of the Tuatha'an.

"A bloody Tinker?" Uno exclaimed. The others echoed his surprise.

Ragan's topknot waved as he shook his head. "A Tinker wouldn't be mixed in this. Either she's not a Tinker, or she is not the one we are supposed to meet."

"Tinkers," Masema growled. "Useless cowards."

Uno's eye narrowed until it looked like the pritchel hole of an anvil; with the red painted eye on his patch, it gave him a villainous look. "Cowards, Masema?" he said softly. "If you were a woman, would you have the flaming nerve to ride up here, alone and bloody unarmed?” There was no doubt she would be unarmed if she was of the Tuatha’an. Masema kept his mouth shut, but the scar on his cheek stood out tight and pale.

“Burn me, if I would,” Ragan said. “And burn me if you would either, Masema.” Masema hitched at his cloak and ostentatiously searched the sky.

Uno snorted. “The Light send that flaming carrion eater was flaming alone,” he muttered.

Slowly the shaggy brown-and-white mare meandered closer, picking a way along the clear ground between broad snowbanks. Once the brightly clad woman stopped to peer at something on the ground, then tugged the cowl of her cloak further over her head and heeled her mount forward in a slow walk. *The raven*, Perrin thought. *Stop looking at that bird and come on, woman. Maybe you’ve brought the word that finally takes us out of here. If Moiraine means to let us leave before spring. Burn her!* For a moment he was not sure whether he meant the Aes Sedai, or the Tinker woman who seemed to be taking her own time.

If she kept on as she was, the woman would pass a good thirty paces to one side of the thicket. With her eyes fixed on where her piebald stepped, she gave no sign that she had seen them among the trees.

Perrin nudged the stallion’s flanks with his heels, and the dun leaped ahead, sending up sprays of snow with his hooves. Behind him, Uno quietly gave the command, “Forward!”

Stepper was halfway to her before she seemed to become aware of them, and then she jerked her mare to a halt with a start. She watched as they formed an arc centered on her. Embroidery of eye-wrenching blue, in the pattern called a Tairen maze, made her red cloak even more garish. She was not young—gray showed thick in her hair where it was not hidden by her cowl—but her face had few lines, other than the disapproving frown she ran over their weapons. If she was alarmed at meeting armed men in the heart of mountain wilderness, though, she gave no sign. Her hands rested easily on the high pommel of her worn but well-kept saddle. And she did not smell afraid.

Stop that! Perrin told himself. He made his voice soft so as not to frighten her. “My name is Perrin, good mistress. If you need help, I will do what I can. If not, go with the Light. But unless the Tuatha’an have changed their ways, you are far from your wagons.”

She studied them a moment more before speaking. There was a gentleness in her dark eyes, not surprising in one of the Traveling People. “I seek an . . . a woman.”

The skip was small, but it was there. She sought not any woman, but an Aes Sedai. “Does she have a name, good mistress?” Perrin asked. He had done this too many times in the last few months to need her reply, but iron was spoiled for want of care.

“She is called. . . . Sometimes, she is called Moiraine. My name is Leya.”

Perrin nodded. “We will take you to her, Mistress Leya. We have warm fires, and with luck something hot to eat.” But he did not lift his reins immediately. “How did you find us?” He had asked before, each time Moiraine sent him out to wait at a spot she named, for a woman she knew would come. The answer would be the same as it always was, but he had to ask.

Leya shrugged and answered hesitantly. “I . . . knew that if I came this way, someone would find me and take me to her. I . . . just . . . knew. I have news for her.”

Perrin did not ask what news. The women gave the information they brought only to Moiraine.

And the Aes Sedai tells us what she chooses. He thought. Aes Sedai never lied, but it was said that the truth an Aes Sedai told you was not always the truth you thought it was. *Too late for qualms, now. Isn’t it?*

“This way, Mistress Leya,” he said, gesturing up the mountain. The Shienarans, with Uno at their head, fell in behind Perrin and Leya as they began to climb. The Borderlanders still studied the sky as much as the land, and the last two kept a special watch on their backtrail.

For a time they rode in silence except for the sounds the horses’ hooves made, sometimes crunching through old snowcrust, sometimes sending rocks clattering as they crossed bare stretches. Now and again Leya cast glances at Perrin, at his bow, his axe, his face, but she did not speak. He shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny, and avoided looking at her. He always tried to give strangers as little chance to notice his eyes as he could manage.

Finally he said, “I was surprised to see one of the Traveling People, believing as you do.”

"It is possible to oppose evil without doing violence." Her voice held the simplicity of someone stating an obvious truth.

Perrin grunted sourly, then immediately muttered an apology. "Would it were as you say, Mistress Leya."

"Violence harms the doer as much as the victim," Leya said placidly. "That is why we flee those who harm us, to save them from harm to themselves as much for our own safety. If we do violence to oppose evil, soon we would be no different from what we struggle against. It is with the strength of our belief that we fight the Shadow."

Perrin could not help snorting. "Mistress, I hope you never have to face Trollocs with the strength of your belief. The strength of their swords will cut you down where you stand."

"It is better to die than to—" she began, but anger made him speak right over her. Anger that she just would not see. Anger that she really would die rather than harm anyone, no matter how evil.

"If you run, they will hunt you, and kill you, and eat your corpse. Or they might not wait till it *is* a corpse. Either way, you are dead, and it's evil that has won. And there are men just as cruel. Darkfriends and others. More others than I would have believed even a year ago. Let the White-cloaks decide you Tinkers don't walk in the Light and see how many of you the strength of your belief can keep alive."

She gave him a penetrating look. "And yet you are not happy with your weapons."

How did she know that? He shook his head irritably, shaggy hair swaying. "The Creator made the world," he muttered, "not I. I must live the best I can in the world the way it is."

"So sad for one so young," she said softly. "Why so sad?"

"I should be watching, not talking," he said curtly. "You won't thank me if I get you lost." He heeled Stepper forward enough to cut off any further conversation, but he could feel her looking at him. *Sad? I'm not sad, just. . . . Light, I don't know. There ought to be a better way, that's all.* The itching tickle came again at the back of his head, but absorbed in ignoring Leya's eyes on his back, he ignored that, too.

Over the slope of the mountain and down they rode, across a forested valley with a broad stream running cold along its bottom, knee-deep on the horses. In the distance, the side of a mountain had been carved into the semblance of two towering forms. A man and a woman, Perrin thought they might be, though wind and rain had long since made that uncertain. Even Moiraine claimed to be unsure who they were supposed to be, or when the granite had been cut.

Pricklebacks and small trout darted away from the horses’ hooves, silver flashes in the clear water. A deer raised its head from browsing, hesitated as the party rode up out of the stream, then bounded off into the trees, and a large mountain cat, gray striped and spotted with black, seemed to rise out of the ground, frustrated in its stalk. It eyed the horses a moment, and with a lash of its tail vanished after the deer. But there was little life visible in the mountains yet. Only a handful of birds perched on limbs or pecked at the ground where the snow had melted. More would return to the heights in a few weeks, but not yet. They saw no other ravens.

It was late afternoon by the time Perrin led them between two steep-sloped mountains, snowy peaks as ever wrapped in cloud, and turned up a smaller stream that splashed downward over gray stones in a series of tiny waterfalls. A bird called in the trees, and another answered it from ahead.

Perrin smiled. Bluefinch calls. A Borderland bird. No one rode this way without being seen. He rubbed his nose, and did not look at the tree the first “bird” had called from.

Their path narrowed as they rode up through scrubby leatherleaf and a few gnarled mountain oaks. The ground level enough to ride beside the stream became barely wider than a man on horseback, and the stream itself no more than a tall man could step across.

Perrin heard Leya behind him, murmuring to herself. When he looked over his shoulder, she was casting worried glances up the steep slopes to either side. Scattered trees perched precariously above them. It appeared impossible they would not fall. The Shienarans rode easily, at last beginning to relax.

Abruptly a deep, oval bowl between the mountains opened out before them, its sides steep but not nearly so precipitous as the narrow passage. The stream rose from a small spring at its far end. Perrin’s sharp eyes picked out a man with the topknot of a Shienaran, up in the limbs of an oak to his left. Had a redwinged jay called instead of a bluefinch, he would not have been alone, and the way in would not have been so easy. A handful of men could hold that passage against an army. If an army came, a handful would have to.

Among the trees around the bowl stood log huts, not readily visible, so that those gathered around the cook fires at the bottom of the bowl seemed at first to be without shelter. There were fewer than a dozen in sight. And not many more out of sight, Perrin knew. Most of them looked around at the sound of horses, and some waved. The bowl seemed filled with the smells of men and horses, of cooking and burning wood. A long white banner hung limply from a tall pole near them. One form, at least half again as tall as anyone else, sat on a log engrossed in a book that was small in his huge hands. That one's attention never wavered, even when the only other person without a topknot shouted, "So you found her, did you? I thought you'd be gone the night, this time." It was a young woman's voice, but she wore a boy's coat and breeches and had her hair cut short.

A burst of wind swirled into the bowl, making cloaks flap and rippling the banner out to its full length. For a moment the creature on it seemed to ride the wind. A four-legged serpent scaled in gold and scarlet, golden maned like a lion, and its feet each tipped with five golden claws. A banner of legend. A banner most men would not know if they saw it, but would fear when they learned its name.

Perrin waved a hand that took it all in as he led the way down into the bowl. "Welcome to the camp of the Dragon Reborn, Leya."

* * *

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CHAPTER

2

Saidin

Face expressionless, the Tuatha’an woman stared at the banner as it drooped again, then turned her attention to those around the fire. Especially the one reading, the one half again as tall as Perrin and twice as big. “You have an Ogier with you. I would not have thought. . . .”She shook her head. “Where is Moiraine Sedai?” It seemed the Dragon banner might as well not exist as far as she was concerned.

Perrin gestured toward the rough hut that stood furthest up the slope, at the far end of the bowl. With walls and sloping roof of unpeeled logs, it was the largest, though not very big at that. Perhaps just barely large enough to be called a cabin rather than a hut. “That one is hers. Hers and Lan’s. He is her Warder. When you have had something hot to drink—”

“No. I must speak to Moiraine.”

He was not surprised. All the women who came insisted on speaking to Moiraine immediately, and alone. The news that Moiraine chose to share with the rest of them did not always seem very important, but the women held the intensity of a hunter stalking the last rabbit in the world for his starving family. The half-frozen old beggar woman had refused blankets and a plate of hot stew and tramped up to Moiraine’s hut, barefoot in still-falling snow.

Leya slid from her saddle and handed the reins up to Perrin. “Will you see that she is fed?” She patted the piebald mare’s nose. “Piesa is not used to carrying me over such rugged country.”

“Fodder is scarce, still,” Perrin told her, “but she’ll have what we can give her.”

Leya nodded, and went hurrying away up the slope without another word, holding her bright green skirts up, the blue-embroidered red cloak swaying behind her.

Perrin swung down from his saddle, exchanging a few words with the men who came from the fires to take the horses. He gave his bow to the one who took Stepper. No, except for one raven, they had seen nothing but the mountains and the Tuatha'an woman. Yes, the raven was dead. No, she had told them nothing of what was happening outside the mountains. No, he had no idea whether they would be leaving soon.

Or ever, he added to himself. Moiraine had kept them there all winter. The Shienarans did not think she gave the orders, not here, but Perrin knew that Aes Sedai somehow always seemed to get their way. Especially Moiraine.

Once the horses were led away to the rude log stable, the riders went to warm themselves. Perrin tossed his cloak back over his shoulders and held his hands out to the flames gratefully. The big kettle, Baerlon work by the look of it, gave off smells that had been making his mouth water for some time already. Someone had been lucky hunting today, it seemed, and lumpy roots circled another fire close by, giving off an aroma faintly like turnips as they roasted. He wrinkled his nose and concentrated on the stew. More and more he wanted meat above anything else.

The woman in men's clothes was peering toward Leya, who was just disappearing into Moiraine's hut.

"What do you see, Min?" he asked.

She came to stand beside him, her dark eyes troubled. He did not understand why she insisted on breeches instead of skirts. Perhaps it was because he knew her, but he could not see how anyone could look at her and see a too-handsome youth instead of a pretty young woman.

"The Tinker woman is going to die," she said softly, eyeing the others near the fires. None was close enough to hear.

He was still, thinking of Leya's gentle face. *Ah, Light! Tinkers never harm anyone!* He felt cold despite the warmth of the fire. *Burn me, I wish I'd never asked.* Even the few Aes Sedai who knew of it did not understand what Min did. Sometimes she saw images and auras surrounding people, and sometimes she even knew what they meant.

Masuto came to stir the stew with a long wood spoon. The Shienaran eyed them, then laid a finger alongside his long nose and grinned widely before he left.

"Blood and ashes!" Min muttered. "He's probably decided we are sweethearts murmuring to each other by the fire."

"Are you sure?" Perrin asked. She raised her eyebrows at him, and he hastily added, "About Leya."

“Is that her name? I wish I didn’t know. It always makes it worse, knowing and not being able to. . . . Perrin, I saw her own face floating over her shoulder, covered in blood, eyes staring. It’s never any clearer than that.” She shivered and rubbed her hands together briskly. “Light, but I wish I saw more happy things. All the happy things seem to have gone away.”

He opened his mouth to suggest warning Leya, then closed it again. There was never any doubt about what Min saw and knew, for good or bad. If she was certain, it happened.

“Blood on her face,” he muttered. “Does that mean she’ll die by violence?” He winced that he said it so easily. *But what can I do? If I tell Leya, if I make her believe somehow, she’ll live her last days in fear, and it will change nothing.*

Min gave a short nod.

If she’s going to die by violence, it could mean an attack on the camp. But there were scouts out every day, and guards set day and night. And Moiraine had the camp warded, so she said; no creature of the Dark One would see it unless he walked right into it. He thought of the wolves. *No!* The scouts would find anyone or anything trying to approach the camp. “It’s a long way back to her people,” he said half to himself. “Tinkers wouldn’t have brought their wagons any further than the foothills. Anything could happen between here and there.”

Min nodded sadly. “And there aren’t enough of us to spare even one guard for her. Even if it would do any good.”

She had told him; she had tried warning people about bad things when, at six or seven, she had first realized not everyone could see what she saw. She would not say more, but he had the impression that her warnings had only made matters worse, when they were believed at all. It took some doing to believe in Min’s viewings until you had proof.

“When?” he said. The word was cold in his ears, and hard as tool steel. *I can’t do anything about Leya, but maybe I can figure out whether we’re going to be attacked.*

As soon as the word was out of his mouth, she threw up her hands. She kept her voice down, though. “It isn’t like that. I can never tell *when* something is going to happen. I only know it will, if I even know what I see means. You don’t understand. The seeing doesn’t come when I want it to, and neither does knowing. It just happens, and sometimes I know. Something. A little bit. It just happens.” He tried to get a soothing word in, but she was letting it all out in a flood he could not stem. “I can see things around a man one day and not the next, or the other way ’round. Most of the time, I don’t see anything around anyone. Aes Sedai always have images around them, of course, and Warders, though it’s always harder to say what it means with them than with anyone else.” She gave Perrin a searching look, half squinting. “A few others always do, too.”

“Don’t tell me what you see when you look at me,” he said harshly, then shrugged his heavy shoulders. Even as a child he had been bigger than most of the others, and he had quickly learned how easy it was to hurt people by accident when you were bigger than they. It had made him cautious and careful, and regretful of his anger when he let it show. “I am sorry, Min. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. I did not mean to hurt you.”

She gave him a surprised look. “You didn’t hurt me. Blessed few people *want* to know what I see. The Light knows, I would not, if it were someone else who could do it.” Even the Aes Sedai had never heard of anyone else who had her gift. “Gift” was how they saw it, even if she did not.

“It’s just that I wish there were something I could do about Leya. I couldn’t stand it the way you do, knowing and not able to do anything.”

“Strange,” she said softly, “how you seem to care so much about the Tuatha’an. They are utterly peaceful, and I always see violence around—”

He turned his head away, and she cut off abruptly.

“Tuatha’an?” came a rumbling voice, like a huge bumblebee. “What about the Tuatha’an?” The Ogier came to join them at the fire, marking his place in his book with a finger the size of a large sausage. A thin streamer of tabac smoke rose from the pipe in his other hand. His high-necked coat of dark brown wool buttoned up to the neck, and flared at the knee over turned-down boot tops. Perrin stood hardly as high as his chest.

Loial’s face had frightened more than one person, with his nose broad enough almost to be called a snout and his too-wide mouth. His eyes were the size of saucers, with thick eyebrows that dangled like mustaches almost to his cheeks, and his ears poked up through long hair in tufted points. Some who had never seen an Ogier took him for a Trolloc, though Trollocs were as much legend to most of them as Ogier.

Loial’s wide smile wavered and his eyes blinked as he became aware of having interrupted them. Perrin wondered how anyone could be frightened of the Ogier for long. *Yet some of the old stories call them fierce,* *and implacable as enemies.* He could not believe it. Ogier were enemies to no one.

Min told Loial of Leya's arrival, but not of what she had seen. She was usually closemouthed about those seeings, especially when they were bad. Instead, she added, "You should know how I feel, Loial, suddenly caught up by Aes Sedai and these Two Rivers folk."

Loial made a noncommittal sound, but Min seemed to take it for agreement.

"Yes," she said emphatically. "There I was, living my life in Baerlon as I liked it, when suddenly I was grabbed up by the scruff of the neck and jerked off to the Light knows where. Well, I might as well have been. My life has not been my own since I met Moiraine. And these Two Rivers farmboys." She rolled her eyes at Perrin, a wry twist to her mouth. "All I wanted was to live as I pleased, fall in love with a man I chose. . . ." Her cheeks reddened suddenly, and she cleared her throat. "I mean to say, what is wrong with wanting to live your life without all this upheaval?"

"Ta'veren," Loial began. Perrin waved at him to stop, but the Ogier could seldom be slowed, much less stopped, when one of his enthusiasms had him in its grip. He was accounted extremely hasty, by the Ogier way of looking at things. Loial pushed his book into a coat pocket and went on, gesturing with his pipe. "All of us, all of our lives, affect the lives of others, Min. As the Wheel of Time weaves us into the Pattern, the life-thread of each of us pulls and tugs at the life-threads around us. *Ta'veren* are the same, only much, much more so. They tug at the entire Pattern—for a time, at least—forcing it to shape around them. The closer you are to them, the more you are affected personally. It's said that if you were in the same room with Artur Hawkwing, you could feel the Pattern rearranging itself. I don't know how true that is, but I've read that it was. But it doesn't only work one way. *Ta'veren* themselves are woven to a tighter line than the rest of us, with fewer choices."

Perrin grimaced. *Bloody few of the ones that matter.*

Min tossed her head. "I just wish they didn't have to be so . . . so bloody *ta'veren* all the time. *Ta'veren* tugging on one side, and Aes Sedai meddling on the other. What chance does a woman have?"

Loial shrugged. "Very little, I suppose, as long as she stays close to *ta'veren.*"

"As if I had a choice," Min growled.

“It was your good fortune—or misfortune, if you see it that way—to fall in with not one, but three *ta’veren.* Rand, Mat, and Perrin. I myself count it very good fortune, and would even if they weren’t my friends. I think I might even. . . .” The Ogier looked at them, suddenly shy, his ears twitching. “Promise you will not laugh? I think I might write a book about it. I have been taking notes.”

Min smiled, a friendly smile, and Loial’s ears pricked back up again. “That’s wonderful,” she told him. “But some of us feel as if we’re being danced about like puppets by these *ta’veren.*”

“I didn’t ask for it,” Perrin burst out. “I did not ask for it.”

She ignored him. “Is that what happened to you, Loial? Is that why you travel with Moiraine? I know you Ogier almost never leave your *stedding.* Did one of these *ta’veren* tug you along with him?”

Loial became engrossed in a study of his pipe. “I just wanted to see the groves the Ogier planted,” he muttered. “Just to see the groves.” He glanced at Perrin as if asking for help, but Perrin only grinned.

Let’s see how the shoe nails onto your hoof. He did not know all of it, but he did know Loial had run away. He was ninety years old, but not yet old enough by Ogier standards to leave the *stedding*—going Outside, they called it—without the permission of the Elders. Ogier lived a very long time, as humans saw things. Loial said the Elders would not be best pleased when they put their hands on him again. He seemed intent on putting that moment off as long as possible.

There was a stir among the Shienarans, men getting to their feet. Rand was coming out of Moiraine’s hut.

Even at that distance Perrin could make him out clearly, a young man with reddish hair and gray eyes. He was of an age with Perrin, and would stand half a head taller if they were side by side, though Rand was more slender, if still broad across the shoulders. Embroidered golden thorns ran up the sleeves of his high-collared, red coat, and on the breast of his dark cloak stood the same creature as on the banner, the four-legged serpent with the golden mane. Rand and he had grown up together as friends. *Are we still friends? Can we be? Now?*

The Shienarans bowed as one, heads held up but hands to knees. “Lord Dragon,” Uno called, “we stand ready. Honor to serve.”

Uno, who could hardly say a sentence without a curse, spoke now with the deepest respect. The others echoed him. “Honor to serve.” Masema, who saw ill in everything, and whose eyes now shone with utter devotion; Ragan; all of them, awaiting a command if it were Rand's pleasure to give one.

From the slope Rand stared down at them a moment, then turned and disappeared into the trees.

"He has been arguing with Moiraine again," Min said quietly. "All day, this time."

Perrin was not surprised, yet he still felt a small shock. Arguing with an Aes Sedai. All the childhood tales came back to him. Aes Sedai, who made thrones and nations dance to their hidden strings. Aes Sedai, whose gift always had a hook in it, whose price was always smaller than you could believe, yet always turned out to be greater than you could imagine. Aes Sedai, whose anger could break the ground and summon lightning. Some of the stories were untrue, he knew now. And at the same time, they did not tell the half.

"I had better go to him," he said. "After they argue, he always needs someone to talk to." And aside from Moiraine and Lan, there were only the three of them—Min, Loial, and him—who did not stare at Rand as if he stood above kings. And of the three only Perrin knew him from before.

He strode up the slope, pausing only to glance at the closed door of Moiraine's hut. Leya would be in there, and Lan. The Warder seldom let himself get far from the Aes Sedai's side.

Rand's much smaller hut was a little lower down, well hidden in the trees, away from all the rest. He had tried living down among the other men, but their constant awe drove him off. He kept to himself, now. Too much to himself, to Perrin's thinking. But he knew Rand was not headed to his hut now.

Perrin hurried on to where one side of the bowl-shaped valley suddenly became sheer cliff, fifty paces high and smooth except for tough brush clinging tenaciously here and there. He knew exactly where a crack in the gray rock wall lay, an opening hardly wider than his shoulders. With only a ribbon of late-afternoon light overhead, it was like walking down a tunnel.

Half a mile the crack ran, abruptly opening out into a narrow vale, less than a mile long, its floor covered with rocks and boulders, and even the steep slopes were thickly forested with tall leatherleaf and pine and fir. Long shadows stretched away from the sun sitting on the mountaintops. The walls of this place were unbroken save for the crack, and as steep as if a giant axe had buried itself in the mountains. It could be even more easily defended by a few than the bowl, but it had neither stream nor spring. No one went there. Except Rand, after he argued with Moiraine.

Rand stood not far from the entrance, leaning against the rough trunk of a leatherleaf, staring at the palms of his hands. Perrin knew that on each there was a heron, branded into the flesh. Rand did not move when Perrin's boot scraped on stone.

Suddenly Rand began to recite softly, never looking up from his hands.

"Twice and twice shall he be marked,
twice to live, and twice to die.
Once the heron, to set his path.
Twice the heron, to name him true.
Once the Dragon, for remembrance lost.
Twice the Dragon, for the price he must pay."

With a shudder he tucked his hands under his arms. "But no Dragons, yet." He chuckled roughly. "Not yet."

For a moment Perrin simply looked at him. A man who could channel the One Power. A man doomed to go mad from the taint on *saidin*, the male half of the True Source, and certain to destroy everything around him in his madness. A man—a thing!—everyone was taught to loathe and fear from childhood. Only . . . it was hard to stop seeing the boy he had grown up with. *How do you just* stop *being somebody's friend?* Perrin chose a small boulder with a flat top, and sat, waiting.

After a while Rand turned his head to look at him. "Do you think Mat is all right? He looked so sick, the last I saw him."

"He must be all right by now." *He should be in Tar Valon, by now. They'll Heal him, there. And Nynaeve and Egwene will keep him out of trouble.* Egwene and Nynaeve, Rand and Mat and Perrin. All five from Emond's Field in the Two Rivers. Few people had come into the Two Rivers from outside, except for occasional peddlers, and merchants once a year to buy wool and tabac. Almost no one had ever left. Until the Wheel chose out its *ta'veren*, and five simple country folk could stay where they were no longer. Could be what they had been no longer.

Rand nodded and was silent.

“Lately,” Perrin said, “I find myself wishing I was still a blacksmith. Do you. . . . Do you wish you were still just a shepherd?”

“Duty,” Rand muttered. “Death is lighter than a feather, duty heavier than a mountain. That’s what they say in Shienar. ‘The Dark One is stirring. The Last Battle is coming. And the Dragon Reborn has to face the Dark One in the Last Battle, or the Shadow will cover everything. The Wheel of Time broken. Every Age remade in the Dark One’s image.’ There’s only me.” He began to laugh mirthlessly, his shoulders shaking. “I have the duty, because there isn’t anybody else, now is there?”

Perrin shifted uneasily. The laughter had a raw edge that made his skin crawl. “I understand you were arguing with Moiraine again. The same thing?”

Rand drew a deep, ragged breath. “Don’t we always argue about the same thing? They’re down there, on Almoth Plain, and the Light alone knows where else. Hundreds of them. Thousands. They declared for the Dragon Reborn because I raised that banner. Because I let myself be called the Dragon. Because I could see no other choice. And they’re dying. Fighting, searching, and praying for the man who is supposed to lead them. Dying. And I sit here safe in the mountains all winter. I . . . I owe them . . . something.”

“You think I like it?” Perrin swung his head in irritation.

“You take whatever she says to you,” Rand grated. “You never stand up to her.”

“Much good it has done you, standing up to her. You have argued all winter, and we have sat here like lumps all winter.”

“Because she is right.” Rand laughed again, that chilling laugh. “The Light burn me, she is right. They are all split up into little groups all over the plain, all across Tarabon and Arad Doman. If I join any one of them, the Whitecloaks and the Domani army and the Taraboners will be on top of them like a duck on a beetle.”

Perrin almost laughed himself, in confusion. “If you agree with her, why in the Light do you argue all the time?”

“Because I have to do something. Or I’ll . . . I’ll—burst like a rotted melon!”

“Do what? If you listen to what she says—”

Rand gave him no chance to say they would sit there forever. “Moiraine says! Moiraine says!” Rand jerked erect, squeezing his head between his hands. “Moiraine has something to say about everything! Moiraine says I mustn’t go to the men who are dying in my name. Moiraine says I’ll know what to do next because the Pattern will force me to it. Moiraine says! But she never says how I’ll know. Oh, no! She doesn’t know that.” His hands fell to his sides, and he turned toward Perrin, head tilted and eyes narrowed. “Sometimes I feel as if Moiraine is putting me through my paces like a fancy Tairen stallion doing his steps. Do you ever feel that?”

Perrin scrubbed a hand through his shaggy hair. “I. . . . Whatever is pushing us, or pulling us, I know who the enemy is, Rand.”

“Ba’alzamon,” Rand said softly. An ancient name for the Dark One. In the Trolloc tongue, it meant Heart of the Dark. “And I must face him, Perrin.” His eyes closed in a grimace, half smile, half pain. “Light help me, half the time I want it to happen now, to be over and done with, and the other half. . . . How many times can I manage to. . . . Light, it pulls at me so. What if I can’t. . . . What if I. . . .” The ground trembled.

“Rand?” Perrin said worriedly.

Rand shivered; despite the chill, there was sweat on his face. His eyes were still shut tight. “Oh, Light,” he groaned, “it pulls so.”

Suddenly the ground heaved beneath Perrin, and the valley echoed with a vast rumble. It seemed as if the ground was jerked out from under his feet. He fell—or the earth leaped up to meet him. The valley shook as though a vast hand had reached down from the sky to wrench it out of the land. He clung to the ground while it tried to bounce him like a ball. Pebbles in front of his eyes leaped and tumbled, and dust rose in waves.

“Rand!” His bellow was lost in the grumbling roar.

Rand stood with his head thrown back, his eyes still shut tight. He did not seem to feel the thrashing of the ground that had him now at one angle, now at another. His balance never shifted, no matter how he was tossed. Perrin could not be certain, being shaken as he was, but he thought Rand wore a sad smile. The trees flailed about, and the leatherleaf suddenly cracked in two, the greater part of its trunk crashing down not three paces from Rand. He noticed it no more than he noticed any of the rest.

Perrin struggled to fill his lungs. “Rand! For the love of the Light, Rand! Stop it!”

As abruptly as it had begun, it was done. A weakened branch cracked off of a stunted oak with a loud snap. Perrin got to his feet slowly, coughing. Dust hung in the air, sparkling motes in the rays of the setting sun.

Rand was staring at nothing, now, chest heaving as if he had run ten miles. This had never happened before, nor anything remotely like it.

“Rand,” Perrin said carefully, “what—?”

Rand still seemed to be looking into a far distance. “It is always there. Calling to me. Pulling at me. *Saidin.* The male half of the True Source. Sometimes I can’t stop myself from reaching out for it.” He made a motion of plucking something out of the air, and transferred his stare to his closed fist. “I can feel the taint even before I touch it. The Dark One’s taint, like a thin coat of vileness trying to hide the Light. It turns my stomach, but I cannot help myself. I cannot! Only sometimes, I reach out, and it’s like trying to catch air.” His empty hand sprang open, and he gave a bitter laugh. “What if that happens when the Last Battle comes? What if I reach out and catch nothing?”

“Well, you caught something that time,” Perrin said hoarsely. “What were you doing?”

Rand looked around as if seeing things for the first time. The fallen leatherleaf, and the broken branches. There was, Perrin realized, surprisingly little damage. He had expected gaping rents in the earth. The wall of trees looked almost whole.

“I did not mean to do this. It was as if I tried to open a tap, and instead pulled the whole tap out of the barrel. It . . . filled me. I had to send it somewhere before it burned me up, but I . . . I did not mean this.”

Perrin shook his head. *What use to tell him to try not to do it again? He barely knows more about what he’s doing than I do.* He contented himself with, “There are enough who want you dead—and the rest of us—without you doing the job for them.” Rand did not seem to be listening. “We had best get on back to the camp. It will be dark soon, and I don’t know about you, but I am hungry.”

“What? Oh. You go on, Perrin. I will be along. I want to be alone again a while.”

Perrin hesitated, then turned reluctantly toward the crack in the valley wall. He stopped when Rand spoke again.

“Do you have dreams when you sleep? Good dreams?”

“Sometimes,” Perrin said warily. “I don’t remember much of what I dream.” He had learned to set guards on his dreaming.

“They’re always there, dreams,” Rand said, so softly Perrin barely heard. “Maybe they tell us things. True things.” He fell silent, brooding.

“Supper’s waiting,” Perrin said, but Rand was deep in his own thoughts. Finally Perrin turned and left him standing there.

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CHAPTER 3

News from the Plain

Darkness shrouded part of the crack, for in one place the tremors had collapsed a part of the wall against the other side, high up. He stared up at the blackness warily before hurrying underneath, but the slab of stone seemed to be solidly wedged in place. The itch had returned to the back of his head, stronger than before. *No, burn me! No!* It went away.

When he came out above the camp, the bowl was filled with odd shadows from the sinking sun. Moiraine was standing outside her hut, peering up at the crack. He stopped short. She was a slender, dark-haired woman no taller than his shoulder, and pretty, with the ageless quality of all Aes Sedai who had worked with the One Power for a time. He could not put any age at all to her, with her face too smooth for many years and her dark eyes too wise for youth. Her dress of deep blue silk was disarrayed and dusty, and wisps stuck out in her usually well-ordered hair. A smudge of dust lay across her face.

He dropped his eyes. She knew about him—she and Lan alone, of those in the camp—and he did not like the knowing in her face when she looked into his eyes. Yellow eyes. Someday, perhaps, he could bring himself to ask her what she knew. An Aes Sedai must know more of it than he did. But this was not the time. There never seemed to be a time. “He. . . . He didn’t mean. . . . It was an accident.”

“An accident,” she said in a flat voice, then shook her head and vanished back inside the hut. The door banged shut a little loudly.

Perrin drew a deep breath and continued on down toward the cook fires. There would be another argument between Rand and the Aes Sedai, in the morning if not tonight.

Half a dozen trees lay toppled on the slopes of the bowl, roots ripped out of the earth in arcs of soil. A trail of scrapes and churned ground led down to the streamside and a boulder that had not been there before. One of the huts up the opposite slope had collapsed in the tremors, and most of the

Shienarans were gathered around it, rebuilding it. Loial was with them. The Ogier could pick up a log it would take four men to lift. Uno’s curses occasionally drifted down.

Min stood by the fires, stirring a kettle with a disgruntled expression. There was a small bruise on her cheek, and a faint smell of burned stew hung in the air. “I hate cooking,” she announced, and peered doubtfully into the kettle. “If something goes wrong with it, it isn’t my fault. Rand spilled half of it on the fire with his. . . . What right does he have to bounce us around like sacks of grain?” She rubbed the seat of her breeches and winced. “When I get my hands on him, I’ll thump him so he never forgets.” She waved the wooden spoon at Perrin as if she intended to start the thumping with him.

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Only if you count bruises,” Min said grimly. “They were upset, all right, at first. Then they saw Moiraine staring off toward Rand’s hidey-hole, and decided it was his work. If the *Dragon* wants to shake the mountain down on our heads, then the *Dragon* must have a good reason for it. If he decided to make them take off their skins and dance in their bones, they would think it all right.” She snorted and rapped the spoon on the edge of the kettle.

He looked back toward Moiraine’s hut. If Leya had been hurt—if she were dead—the Aes Sedai would not simply have gone back inside. The sense of waiting was still there. *Whatever it is, it hasn’t happened yet.* “Min, maybe you had better go. First thing in the morning. I have some silver I can let you have, and I’m sure Moiraine would give you enough to take passage with a merchant’s train out of Ghealdan. You could be back in Baerlon before you know it.”

She looked at him until he began to wonder if he had said something wrong. Finally, she said, “That is very sweet of you, Perrin. But, no.”

“I thought you wanted to go. You’re always carrying on about having to stay here.”

“I knew an old Illianer woman; once,” she said slowly. “When she was young, her mother arranged a marriage for her with a man she had never even met. They do that down in Illian, sometimes. She said she spent the first five years raging against him, and the next five scheming to make his life miserable without his knowing who was to blame. It was only years later, she said, when he died, that she realized he really had been the love of her life."

"I don't see what that has to do with this."

Her look said he obviously was not trying to understand, and her voice became overly patient. "Just because fate has chosen something for you instead of you choosing it for yourself doesn't mean it has to be bad. Even if it's something you are sure you would never have chosen in a hundred years. 'Better ten days of love than years of regretting,' " she quoted.

"I understand that even less," he told her. "You don't have to stay if you don't want to."

She hung the spoon on a tall forked stick stuck in the ground, then surprised him by rising on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "You are a very nice man, Perrin Aybara. Even if you don't understand anything."

Perrin blinked at her uncertainly. He wished that he could be certain Rand was in his right mind, or that Mat were there. He was never sure of his ground with girls, but Rand always seemed to know his way. So did Mat; most of the girls back home in Emond's Field had sniffed that Mat would never grow up, but he had seemed to have a way with them.

"What about you, Perrin? Don't you ever want to go home?"

"All the time," he said fervently. "But I . . . I do not think I can. Not yet." He looked off toward Rand's vale. *We are tied together, it seems, aren't we, Rand?* "Maybe not ever." He thought he had said that too softly for her to hear, but the look she gave him was full of sympathy. And agreement.

His ears caught faint footsteps behind him, and he looked back up toward Moiraine's hut. Two shapes were making their way down through the deepening twilight, one a woman, slender and graceful even on the rough, slanting ground. The man, head and shoulders taller than his companion, turned off toward where the Shienarans were working. Even to Perrin's eyes he was indistinct, sometimes seeming to vanish altogether, then reappear in midstride, parts of him fading into the night and fading back as the wind gusted. Only a Warder's shifting cloak could do that, which made the larger figure Lan, just as the smaller was certainly Moiraine.

Well behind them, another shape, even dimmer, slipped between the trees. *Rand*, Perrin thought, *going back to his hut. Another night when he won't eat because he can't stand the way everybody looks at him.*

“You must have eyes in the back of your head,” Min said, frowning toward the approaching woman. “Or else the sharpest ears I have ever heard of. Is that Moiraine?”

Careless. He had grown so used to the Shienarans knowing how well he could see—in daylight at least; they did not know about the night—that he was beginning to slip about other things. *Carelessness might kill me yet.*

“Is the Tuatha’an woman all right?” Min asked as Moiraine came to the fire.

“She is resting.” The Aes Sedai’s low voice had its usual musical quality, as if speaking were halfway to singing, and her hair and clothes were back in perfect order again. She rubbed her hands over the fire. There was a golden ring on her left hand, a serpent biting its own tail. The Great Serpent, an even older symbol for eternity than the Wheel of Time. Every woman trained in Tar Valon wore such a ring.

For a moment Moiraine’s gaze rested on Perrin, and seemed to penetrate too deeply. “She fell and split her scalp when Rand. . . .” Her mouth tightened, but in the next instant her face was utter calm again. “I Healed her, and she is sleeping. There is always a good deal of blood with even a minor scalp wound, but it was not serious. Did you see anything about her, Min?”

Min looked uncertain. “I saw. . . . I thought I saw her death. Her own face, all over blood. I was sure I knew what it meant, but if she split her scalp. . . . Are you sure she is all right?” It was a measure of her discomfort that she asked. An Aes Sedai did not Heal and leave anything wrong that could be Healed. And Moiraine’s Talents were particularly strong in that area.

Min sounded so troubled that Perrin was surprised for a moment. Then he nodded to himself. She did not really like doing what she did, but it was a part of her; she thought she knew how it worked, or some of it, at least. If she was wrong, it would almost be like finding out she did not know how to use her own hands.

Moiraine considered her for a moment, serene and dispassionate. “You have never been wrong in any reading for me, not one about which I had any way of knowing. Perhaps this is the first time.”

“When I know, I know,” Min whispered obstinately. “Light help me, I do.”

“Or perhaps it is yet to come. She has a long way yet to travel, to return to her wagons, and she must ride through unsettled lands.”

The Aes Sedai’s voice was a cool song, uncaring. Perrin made an involuntary sound in his throat. *Light, did I sound like that? I won’t let a death matter that little to me.*

As if he had spoken aloud, Moiraine looked at him. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, Perrin. I told you long ago that we were in a war. We cannot stop just because some of us may die. Any of us may die before it is done. Leya’s weapons may not be the same as yours, but she knew that when she became part of it.”

Perrin dropped his eyes. *That’s as may be, Aes Sedai, but I will never accept it the way you do.*

Lan joined them across the fire, with Uno and Loial. The flames cast flickering shadows across the Warder’s face, making it seem more carved from stone even than it normally did, all hard planes and angles. His cloak was not much easier to look at in the firelight. Sometimes it seemed only a dark gray cloak, or black, but the gray and black appeared to crawl and change if you looked too closely, shades and shadows sliding across it, soaking into it. Other times, it looked as if Lan had somehow made a hole in the night and pulled darkness ’round his shoulders. Not at all an easy thing to watch, and not made any easier by the man who wore it.

Lan was tall and hard, broad-shouldered, with blue eyes like frozen mountain lakes, and he moved with a deadly grace that made the sword on his hip seem a part of him. It was not that he seemed merely capable of violence and death; this man had tamed violence and death and kept them in his pocket, ready to be loosed in a heartbeat, or embraced, should Moiraine give the word. Beside Lan, even Uno appeared less dangerous. There was a touch of gray in the Warder’s long hair, held back by a woven leather cord around his forehead, but younger men stepped back from confronting Lan—if they were wise.

“Mistress Leya has the usual news from Almoth Plain,” Moiraine said. “Everyone fighting everyone else. Villages burned. People fleeing in every direction. And Hunters have appeared on the plain, searching for the Horn of Valere.” Perrin shifted—the Horn was where no Hunter on Almoth Plain would find it; where he hoped no Hunter ever would find it—and she gave him a cool look before continuing. She did not like any of them to speak of the Horn. Except when she chose to, of course.

“She brought different news, as well. The Whitecloaks have perhaps five thousand men on Almoth Plain.”

Uno grunted. “That’s flamin’—uh, pardon, Aes Sedai. That must be half their strength. They’ve never committed so much to one place before.”

“Then I suppose all those who declared for Rand are dead or scattered,” Perrin muttered. “Or they soon will be. You were right, Moiraine.” He did not like the thought of Whitecloaks. He did not like the Children of the Light at all.

“That is what is odd,” Moiraine said. “Or the first part of it. The Children have announced that their purpose is to bring peace, which is not unusual for them. What *is* unusual is that while they are trying to force the Taraboners and the Domani back across their respective borders, they have not moved in any force against those who have declared for the Dragon.”

Min gave an exclamation of surprise. “Is she certain? That does not sound like any Whitecloaks I ever heard of.”

“There can’t be many blood—uh—many Tinkers left on the plain,” Uno said. His voice creaked from the strain of watching his language in front of an Aes Sedai. His real eye matched the frown of the painted one. “They don’t like to stay where there’s any kind of trouble, especially fighting. There can’t be enough of them to see everywhere.”

“There are enough for my purposes,” Moiraine said firmly. “Most have gone, but some few remained because I asked them to. And Leya is quite certain. Oh, the Children have snapped up some of the Dragonsworn, where there were only a handful gathered. But though they proclaim they will bring down this *false* Dragon, though they have a thousand men supposedly doing nothing but hunting him, they avoid contact with any party of as many as fifty Dragonsworn. Not openly, you understand, but there is always some delay, something that allows those they chase to slip away.”

“Then Rand can go down to them as he wants.” Loial blinked uncertainly at the Aes Sedai. The whole camp knew of her arguments with Rand. “The Wheel weaves a way for him.”

Uno and Lan opened their mouths at the same time, but the Shienaran gave way with a small bow. “More likely,” the Warder said, “it is some Whitecloak plot, though the Light burn me if I can see what it is. But when the Whitecloaks give me a gift, I search for the poisoned needle hidden in it.” Uno nodded grimly. “Besides which,” Lan added, “the Domani and the

Taraboners are still trying as hard to kill the Dragonsworn as they are to kill each other."

"And there is another thing," Moiraine said. "Three young men have died in villages Mistress Leya's wagons passed near." Perrin noticed a flicker of Lan's eyelid; for the Warder, it was as much a sign of surprise as a shout from another man. Lan had not expected her to tell this. Moiraine went on. "One died by poison, two by the knife. Each in circumstances where no one should have been able to come close unseen, but that is how it happened." She peered into the flames. "All three young men were taller than most, and had light-colored eyes. Light eyes are uncommon on Almoth Plain, but I think it is very unlucky right now to be a tall young man with light eyes there."

"How?" Perrin asked. "How could they be killed if no one could get close to them?"

"The Dark One has killers you don't notice until it is too late," Lan said quietly.

Uno gave a shiver. "The Soulless. I never heard of one south of the Borderlands before."

"Enough of such talk," Moiraine said firmly.

Perrin had questions—*What in the Light are the Soulless? Are they like a Trolloc, or a Fade? What?*—but he left them unasked. When Moiraine decided enough had been said about something, she would not talk of it anymore. And when she shut her mouth, you could not pry Lan's open with an iron bar. The Shienarans followed her lead, too. No one wanted to anger an Aes Sedai.

"Light!" Min muttered, uneasily eyeing the deepening darkness around them. "You don't *notice* them? Light!"

"So nothing has changed," Perrin said glumly. "Not really. We cannot go down to the plain, and the Dark One wants us dead."

"Everything changes," Moiraine said calmly, "and the Pattern takes it all in. We must ride on the Pattern, not on the changes of a moment." She looked at them each in turn, then said, "Uno, are you certain your scouts missed nothing suspicious? Even something small?"

"The Lord Dragon's Rebirth has loosed the bonds of certainty, Moiraine Sedai, and there is never certainty if you fight Myrddraal, but I will stake my life that the scouts did as good a job as any Warder." It was one of the longest speeches Perrin had ever heard out of Uno without any curses. There was sweat on the man's forehead from the effort.

"We all may," Moiraine said. "What Rand did might as well have been a fire on the mountaintop for any Myrddraal within ten miles."

"Maybe . . ." Min began hesitantly. "Maybe you ought to set wards that will keep them out." Lan gave her a hard stare. He sometimes questioned Moiraine's decisions himself, though he seldom did so where anyone could overhear, but he did not approve of others doing the same. Min frowned right back at him. "Well, Myrddraal and Trollocs are bad enough, but at least I can see them. I don't like the idea that one of these . . . these Soulless might sneak in here and slit my throat before I even noticed him."

"The wards I set will hide us from the Soulless as well as from any other Shadowspawn," Moiraine said. "When you are weak, as we are, the best choice is often to hide. If there *is* a Halfman close enough to have. . . . Well, to set wards that would kill them if they tried to enter camp is beyond my abilities, and even if I could, such a warding would only pen us here. Since it is not possible to set two kinds of warding at once, I leave the scouts and the guards—and Lan—to defend us, and use the one warding that may do some good."

"I could make a circuit around the camp," Lan said. "If there is anything out there that the scouts missed, I will find it." It was not a boast, just a statement of fact. Uno even nodded agreement.

Moiraine shook her head. "If you are needed tonight, my Gaidin, it will be here." Her gaze rose toward the dark mountains around them. "There is a feeling in the air."

"Waiting." The word left Perrin's tongue before he could stop it. When Moiraine looked at him—into him—he wished he had it back.

"Yes," she said. "Waiting. Make sure your guards are especially alert tonight, Uno." There was no need to suggest that the men sleep with their weapons close at hand; Shienarans always did that. "Sleep well," she added to them all, as if there were any chance of that now, and started back for her hut. Lan stayed long enough to spoon up three dishes of stew, then hurried after her, quickly swallowed by the night.

Perrin's eyes shone golden as they followed the Warder through the darkness. "Sleep well," he muttered. The smell of cooked meat suddenly made him queasy. "I have the third watch, Uno?" The Shienaran nodded.

“Then I will try to take her advice.” Others were coming to the fires, and murmurs of conversation followed him up the slope.

He had a hut to himself, a small thing of logs barely tall enough to stand in, the chinks filled with dried mud. A rough bed, padded with pine boughs beneath a blanket, took up nearly half of it. Whoever had unsaddled his horse had also propped his bow just inside the door. He hung up his belt, with axe and quiver, on a peg, then stripped down to his smallclothes, shivering. The nights were cold still, but cold kept him from sleeping too deeply. In deep sleep, dreams came that he could not shake off.

For a time, with a single blanket over him, he lay staring at the log roof, shivering. Then sleep came, and with it, dreams.

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CHAPTER 4

Shadows Sleeping

Cold filled the common room of the inn despite the fire blazing on the long, stone hearth. Perrin rubbed his hands before the flames, but he could get no warmth in them. There was an odd comfort in the cold, though, as if it were a shield. A shield against what, he could not think. Something murmured in the back of his mind, a dim sound only vaguely heard, scratching to get in.

"So you will give it up, then. It is the best thing for you. Come. Sit, and we will talk."

Perrin turned to look at the speaker. The round tables scattered about the room were empty except for the lone man seated in a corner, in the shadows. The rest of the room seemed in some way hazy, almost an impression rather than a place, especially anything he was not looking at directly. He glanced back at the fire; it burned on a brick hearth, now. Somehow, none of it bothered him. *It should.* But he could not have said why.

The man beckoned, and Perrin walked closer to his table. A square table. The tables were square. Frowning, he reached out to finger the tabletop, but pulled his hand back. There were no lamps in that corner of the room, and despite the light elsewhere, the man and his table were almost hidden, nearly blended with the dimness.

Perrin had a feeling that he knew the man, but it was as vague as what he saw out of the corner of his eye. The fellow was in his middle years, handsome and too well dressed for a country inn, in dark, nearly black, velvets with white lace falls at his collar and cuffs. He sat stiffly, sometimes pressing a hand to his chest, as if moving hurt him. His dark eyes were fixed on Perrin's face; they appeared like glistening points in the shadows.

"Give up what?" Perrin asked.

"That, of course." The man nodded to the axe at Perrin's waist. He sounded surprised, as if it were a conversation they had had before, an old argument taken up again.

Perrin had not realized the axe was there, had not felt the weight of it pulling at his belt. He ran a hand over the half-moon blade and the thick spike that balanced it. The steel felt—solid. More solid than anything else there. Maybe even more solid than he was himself. He kept his hand there, to hold onto something real.

“I have thought of it,” he said, “but I do not think I can. Not yet.” *Not yet?* The inn seemed to flicker, and the murmur sounded again in his head. *No!* The murmur faded.

“No?” The man smiled, a cold smile. “You are a blacksmith, boy. And a good one, from what I hear. Your hands were made for a hammer, not an axe. Made to make things, not to kill. Go back to that before it is too late.”

Perrin found himself nodding. “Yes. But I’m *ta’veren*.” He had never said that out loud before. *But he knows it already.* He was sure of that, though he could not say why.

For an instant the man’s smile became a grimace, but then it returned in more strength than before. A cold strength. “There are ways to change things, boy. Ways to avoid even fate. Sit, and we will talk of them.” The shadows appeared to shift and thicken, to reach out.

Perrin took a step back, keeping well in the light. “I don’t think so.”

“At least have a drink with me. To years past and years to come. Here, you will see things more clearly after.” The cup the man pushed across the table had not been there a moment before. It shone bright silver, and dark, blood-red wine filled it to the brim.

Perrin peered at the man’s face. Even to his sharp eyes, the shadows seemed to shroud the other man’s features like a Warder’s cloak. Darkness molded the man like a caress. There was something about the man’s eyes, something he thought he could remember if he tried hard enough. The murmur returned.

“No,” he said. He spoke to the soft sound inside his head, but when the man’s mouth tightened in anger, a flash of rage suppressed as soon as begun, he decided it would do for the wine as well. “I am not thirsty.”

He turned and started for the door. The fireplace was rounded river stones; a few long tables lined by benches filled the room. He suddenly wanted to be outside, anywhere away from this man.

“You will not have many chances,” the man said behind him in a hard voice. “Three threads woven together share one another’s doom. When one is cut, all are. Fate can kill you, if it does not do worse."

Perrin felt a sudden heat against his back, rising then fading just as quickly, as if the doors of a huge smelting furnace had swung open and closed again. Startled, he turned back to the room. It was empty.

Only a dream, he thought, shivering from the cold, and with that everything shifted.

He stared into the mirror, a part of him not comprehending what he saw, another part accepting. A gilded helmet, worked like a lion's head, sat on his head as if it belonged there. Gold leaf covered his ornately hammered breastplate, and gold-work embellished the plate and mail on his arms and legs. Only the axe at his side was plain. A voice—his own—whispered in his mind that he would take it over any other weapon, had carried it a thousand times, in a hundred battles. *No!* He wanted to take it off, throw it away. *I can't!* There was a sound in his head, louder than a murmur, almost at the level of understanding.

"A man destined for glory."

He spun away from the mirror and found himself staring at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He noticed nothing else about the room, cared to see nothing but her. Her eyes were pools of midnight, her skin creamy pale and surely softer, more smooth than her dress of white silk. When she moved toward him, his mouth went dry. He realized that every other woman he had ever seen was clumsy and ill-shaped. He shivered, and wondered why he felt cold.

"A man should grasp his destiny with both hands," she said, smiling. It was almost enough to warm him, that smile. She was tall, less than a hand short of being able to look him in the eyes. Silver combs held hair darker than a raven's wing. A broad belt of silver links banded a waist he could have encircled with his hands.

"Yes," he whispered. Inside him, startlement fought with acceptance. He had no use for glory. But when she said it, he wanted nothing else. "I mean. . . ." The murmuring sound dug at his skull. "No!" It was gone, and for a moment, so was acceptance. Almost. He put a hand to his head, touched the golden helmet, took it off. "I . . . I don't think I want this. It is not mine."

"Don't want it?" She laughed. "What man with blood in his veins would not want glory? As much glory as if you had sounded the Horn of Valere."

"I don't," he said, though a piece of him shouted that he lied. The Horn of Valere. *The Horn rang out, and the wild charge began. Death rode at his shoulder, and yet she waited ahead, too. His lover. His destroyer.* "No! I am a blacksmith."

Her smile was pitying. "Such a little thing to want. You must not listen to those who would try to turn you from your destiny. They would demean you, debase you. Destroy you. Fighting fate can only bring pain. Why choose pain, when you can have glory? When your name can be remembered alongside all the heroes of legend?"

"I am no hero."

"You don't know the half of what you are. Of what you can be. Come, share a cup with me, to destiny and glory." There was a shining silver cup in her hand, filled with blood-red wine. "Drink."

He stared at the cup, frowning. There was something . . . familiar about it. A growling chewed at his brain. "No!" He fought away from it, refusing to listen. "No!"

She held out the golden cup to him. "Drink."

Golden? I thought the cup was. . . . It was. . . . The rest of the thought would not come. But in his confusion the sound came again, inside, gnawing, demanding to be heard. "No," he said. "No!" He looked at the golden helmet in his hands and threw it aside. "I am a blacksmith. I am. . . ." The sound within his head fought him, struggling toward being heard. He wrapped his arms around his head to shut it out, and only shut it in. "I—am—a—man!" he shouted.

Darkness enfolded him, but her voice followed, whispering. "The night is always there, and dreams come to all men. Especially you, my wildling. And I will always be in your dreams."

Stillness.

He lowered his arms. He was back in his own coat and breeches again, sturdy and well made, if plain. Suitable garb for a blacksmith, or any country man. Yet he barely noticed them.

He stood on a low-railed bridge of stone, arching from one wide, flat-topped stone spire to another, spires that rose from depths too far for even his eyes to penetrate. The light would have been dim to any other eyes, and he could not make out from where it came. It just was. Everywhere he looked, left and right, up or down, were more bridges, more spires, and railless ramps. There seemed no end to them, no pattern. Worse, some of those ramps climbed to spire tops that had to be directly above the ones they had left. Splashing water echoed, the sound seeming to come from everywhere at once. He shivered with cold.

Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he caught a motion, and without thinking, he crouched behind the stone railing. There was danger in being seen. He did not know why, but he knew it was true. He just knew.

Cautiously peering over the top of the rail, he sought what he had seen moving. A flash of white flickered on a distant ramp. A woman, he was sure, though he could not quite make her out. A woman in a white dress, hurrying somewhere.

On a bridge slightly below him, and much closer than the ramp where the woman had been, a man suddenly appeared, tall and dark and slender, the silver in his black hair giving him a distinguished look, his dark green coat thickly embroidered with golden leaves. Gold-work covered his belt and pouch, and gems sparkled on his dagger sheath, and golden fringe encircled his boot tops. Where had he come from?

Another man started across the bridge from the other side, his appearance as sudden as the first man’s. Black stripes ran down the puffy sleeves of his red coat, and pale lace hung thick at his collar and cuffs. His boots were so worked with silver that it was hard to see the leather. He was shorter than the man he went to meet, more stocky, with close-cropped hair as white as his lace. Age did not make him frail, though. He strode with the same arrogant strength the other man showed.

The two of them approached each other warily. *Like two horse traders who know the other fellow has a spavined mare to sell*, Perrin thought.

The men began to talk. Perrin strained his ears, but he could not hear so much as a murmur above the splashing echoes. Frowns, and glares, and sharp motions as if half on the point of striking. They did not trust one another. He thought they might even hate each other.

He glanced up, searching for the woman, but she was gone. When he looked back down, another man had joined the first two. And somehow, from somewhere, Perrin knew him with the vagueness of an old memory. A handsome man in his middle years, wearing nearly black velvet and white lace. *An inn*, Perrin thought. *And something before that. Something. . . .* Something a long time ago, it seemed. But the memory would not come.

The first two men stood side by side, now, made uncomfortable allies by the presence of the newcomer. He shouted at them and shook his fist, while they shifted uneasily, refusing to meet his glares. If the two hated each other, they feared him more.

His eyes, Perrin thought. *What is strange about his eyes?*

The tall, dark man began to argue back, slowly at first, then with increasing fervor. The white-haired man joined in, and suddenly their temporary alliance broke. All three shouted at once, each at both of the others in turn. Abruptly the man in dark velvets threw his arms wide, as if demanding an end to it. And an expanding ball of fire enveloped them, hid them, spreading out and out.

Perrin threw his arms around his head and dropped behind the stone railing, huddling there as wind buffeted him and tore at his clothes, a wind as hot as fire. A wind that was fire. Even with his eyes shut, he could see it, flame billowing across everything, flame blowing through everything. The fiery gale roared through him, too; he could feel it, burning, tugging, trying to consume him and scatter the ashes. He yelled, trying to hang onto himself, knowing it was not enough.

And between one heartbeat and the next, the wind was gone. There was no diminishing. One instant a storm of flame pummeled him; the next, utter stillness. The echoes of falling water were the only sound.

Slowly, Perrin sat up, examining himself. His clothes were unsinged and whole, his exposed skin unburned. Only the memory of heat made him believe it had happened. A memory in the mind alone; his body felt no memory of it.

Cautiously he peeked over the railing. Only a few paces of half-melted footing at either end remained of the bridge where the men had been standing. Of them, there was no sign.

A prickling in the hair on the back of his neck made him look up. On a ramp above him and to the right, a shaggy gray wolf stood looking at him.

“No!” He scrambled to his feet and ran. “This is a dream! A nightmare! I want to wake up!” He ran, and his vision blurred. The blurs shifted. A buzzing filled his ears, then faded, and as it went, the shimmering in his eyes steadied.

He shivered with the cold and knew this for a dream, certain and sure, from the first moment. He was dimly aware of some shadowy memory of dreams preceding this, but this one he knew. He had been in this place before, on previous nights, and if he understood nothing of it, he still knew it for a dream. For once, knowing changed nothing.

Huge columns of polished redstone surrounded the open space where he stood, beneath a domed ceiling fifty paces or more above his head. He and another man as big could not have encircled one of those columns with their arms. The floor was paved with great slabs of pale gray stone, hard yet worn by countless generations of feet.

And centered beneath the dome was the reason why all those feet had come to this chamber. A sword, hanging hilt down in the air, apparently without support, seemingly where anyone could reach out and take it. It revolved slowly, as if some breath of air caught it. Yet it was not really a sword. It seemed made of glass, or perhaps crystal, blade and hilt and crossguard, catching such light as there was and shattering it into a thousand glitters and flashes.

He walked toward it and put out his hand, as he had done each time before. He clearly remembered doing it. The hilt hung there in front of his face, within easy reach. A foot from the shining sword, his hand splayed out against empty air as if it had touched stone. As he had known it would. He pushed harder, but he might as well have been shoving against a wall. The sword turned and sparkled, a foot away and as far out of reach as if on the other side of an ocean.

Callandor. He was not certain whether the whisper came inside his head or out; it seemed to echo ’round the columns, as soft as the wind, everywhere at once, insistent. *Callandor. Who wields me wields destiny. Take me, and begin the final journey.*

He took a step back, suddenly frightened. That whisper had never come before. Four times before he had had this dream—he could remember that even now; four nights, one after the other—and this was the first time anything had changed in it.

The Twisted Ones come.

It was a different whisper, from a source he knew, and he jumped as if a Myrddraal had touched him. A wolf stood there among the columns, a mountain wolf, almost waist-high and shaggy white and gray. It stared at him intently with eyes as yellow as his own.

The Twisted Ones come.

“No,” Perrin rasped. “No! I will not let you in! I—will—not!”

He clawed his way awake and sat up in his hut, shaking with fear and cold and anger. “I will not,” he whispered hoarsely.

The Twisted Ones come.

The thought was clear in his head, but the thought was not his own.

The Twisted Ones come, brother.

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CHAPTER 5

Nightmares Walking

Leaping from his bed, Perrin snatched his axe and ran outside, barefoot and wearing nothing but thin linen, heedless of the cold. The moon bathed the clouds with pale white. More than enough light for his eyes, more than enough to see the shapes slipping through the trees from all sides, shapes almost as big as Loial, but with faces distorted by muzzles and beaks, half-human heads wearing horns and feathered crests, stealthy forms stalking on hooves or paws as often as booted feet.

He opened his mouth to shout warning, and suddenly the door of Moiraine’s hut burst open and Lan dashed out, sword in hand and shouting, “Trollocs! Wake, for your lives! Trollocs!” Shouts answered him as men began to tumble from their huts, garbed for sleep, which for most meant not at all, but with swords ready. With a bestial roar, the Trollocs rushed forward to be met with steel and cries of “Shienar!” and “The Dragon Reborn!”

Lan was fully clothed—Perrin would have bet the Warder had not slept—and he flung himself among the Trollocs as if his wool were armor. He seemed to dance from one to another, man and sword flowing like water or wind, and where the Warder danced, Trollocs screamed and died.

Moiraine was out in the night as well, dancing her own dance among the Trollocs. Her only apparent weapon was a switch, but where she slashed a Trolloc, a line of flame grew on its flesh. Her free hand threw fiery balls summoned from thin air, and Trollocs howled as flames consumed them, thrashing on the ground.

An entire tree burst into flame from root to crown, then another, and another. Trollocs shrieked at the sudden light, but they did not stop swinging their spiked axes and swords curved like scythes.

Abruptly Perrin saw Leya step hesitantly out of Moiraine’s cabin, halfway around the bowl from him, and all thought of anything else left him. The Tuatha’an woman pressed her back against the log wall, a hand to her throat. The light from the burning trees showed him the pain and horror, the loathing on her face as she watched the carnage.

“Hide!” Perrin shouted at her. “Get back inside and hide!” The swelling roar of fighting and dying swallowed his words. He ran toward her. “Hide, Leya! For the love of the Light, hide!”

A Trolloc loomed up over him, a cruelly hooked beak where its mouth and nose should have been. Black mail and spikes covered it from shoulders to knees, and it moved on a hawk’s talons as it swung one of those strangely curved swords. It smelled of sweat and dirt and blood.

Perrin crouched under the slash, shouting wordlessly as he struck out with his axe. He knew he should have been afraid, but urgency suppressed fear. All that mattered was that he had to reach Leya, had to get her to safety, and the Trolloc was in the way.

The Trolloc fell, roaring and kicking; Perrin did not know where he had hit it, or if it were dying or merely hurt. He leaped over it, where it lay thrashing, and ran scrambling up the slope.

Burning trees cast lurid shadows across the small valley. A flickering shadow beside Moiraine’s hut suddenly resolved into a Trolloc, goat-snouted and horned. Gripping a wildly spiked axe with both hands, it seemed on the point of rushing down into the fray when its eyes fell on Leya.

“No!” Perrin shouted. “Light, no!” Rocks skittered away under his bare feet; he did not feel the bruises. The Trolloc’s axe rose. “Leyaaaaaaaa!”

At the last instant the Trolloc spun, axe flashing toward Perrin. He threw himself down, yelling as steel scored his back. Desperately he flung out a hand, caught a goat hoof, and pulled with all his strength. The Trolloc’s feet came out from under it, and it fell with a crash, but as it slid down the slope, it seized Perrin in hands big enough to make two of his, pulling him along to roll over and over. The stink of it filled his nostrils, goat-stench and sour man-sweat. Massive arms snaked around his chest, squeezing the air out; his ribs creaked on the point of breaking. The Trolloc’s axe was gone in the fall, but blunt goat-teeth sank into Perrin’s shoulder, powerful jaws chewing. He groaned as pain jolted down his left arm. His lungs labored for breath, and blackness crept in on the edges of his vision, but dimly he was aware that his other arm was free, that somehow he had held on to his own axe. He held it short on the handle, like a hammer, with the spike foremost. With a roar that took the last of his air, he drove the spike into the Trolloc's temple. Soundlessly it convulsed, limbs flinging wide, hurling him away. By instinct alone his hand tightened on the axe, ripping it loose as the Trolloc slid further down the slope, still twitching.

For a moment Perrin lay there, fighting for breath. The gash across his back burned, and he felt the wetness of blood. His shoulder protested as he pushed himself up. "Leya?"

She was still there, huddled in front of the hut, not more than ten paces upslope. And watching him with such a look on her face that he could barely meet her eyes.

"Don't pity me!" he growled at her. "Don't you—!"

The Myrddraal's leap from the roof of the hut seemed to take too long, and its dead black cloak hung during the slow fall as if the Halfman were standing on the ground already. Its eyeless gaze was fixed on Perrin. It smelled like death.

Cold seeped through Perrin's arms and legs as the Myrddraal stared at him. His chest felt like a lump of ice. "Leya," he whispered. It was all he could do not to run. "Leya, please hide. Please."

The Halfman started toward him, slowly, confident that fear held him in a snare. It moved like a snake, unlimbering a sword so black only the burning trees made it visible. "Cut one leg of the tripod," it said softly, "and all fall down." Its voice sounded like dry-rotted leather crumbling.

Suddenly Leya moved, throwing herself forward, attempting to wrap her arms around the Myrddraal's legs. It gave an almost casual backwards swing of its dark sword, never even looking around, and she crumpled.

Tears started in the corners of Perrin's eyes. *I should have helped her . . . saved her. I should have done . . . something!* But so long as the Myrddraal stared at him with its eyeless gaze, it was an effort even to think.

We come, brother. We come, Young Bull.

The words inside his mind made his head ring like a struck bell; the reverberations shivered through him. With the words came the wolves, scores of them, flooding into his mind as he was aware of them flooding into the bowl-shaped valley. Mountain wolves almost as tall as a man's waist, all white and gray, coming out of the night at the run, aware of the two-legs' surprise as they darted in to take on the Twisted Ones. Wolves filled him till he could barely remember being a man. His eyes gathered the light, shining golden yellow. And the Halfman stopped its advance as if suddenly uncertain.

"Fade," Perrin said roughly, but then a different name came to him, from the wolves. Trollocs, the Twisted Ones, made during the War of the Shadow from melding men and animals, were bad enough, but the Myrddraal—. "Neverborn!" Young Bull spat. Lip curling back in a snarl, he threw himself at the Myrddraal.

It moved like a viper, sinuous and deadly, black sword quick as lightning, but he was Young Bull. That was what the wolves called him. Young Bull, with horns of steel that he wielded with his hands. He was one with the wolves. He was a wolf, and any wolf would die a hundred times over to see one of the Neverborn go down. The Fade fell back before him, its darting blade now trying to deflect his slashes.

Hamstring and throat, that was how wolves killed. Young Bull suddenly threw himself to one side and dropped to a knee, axe slicing across the back of the Halfman's knee. It screamed—a bone-burrowing sound to raise his hair at any other time—and fell, catching itself with one hand. The Halfman—the Neverborn—still held its sword firmly, but before it could set itself, Young Bull's axe struck again. Half severed, the Myrddraal's head flopped over to hang down its back; yet still leaning there on one hand, the Neverborn slashed wildly with its sword. Neverborn were always long in dying.

From the wolves as much as his own eyes Young Bull received impressions of Trollocs thrashing on the ground, shrieking, untouched by wolf or man. Those would have been linked to this Myrddraal, and would die when it did—if no one killed them first.

The urge to rush down the slope and join his brothers, join in killing the Twisted Ones, in hunting the remaining Neverborn, was strong, but a buried fragment that was still man remembered. *Leya.*

He dropped his axe and turned her over gently. Blood covered her face, and her eyes stared up at him, glazed with death. An accusing stare, it seemed to him. "I tried," he told her. "I tried to save you." Her stare did not change. "What else could I have done? It would have killed you if I hadn't killed it!"

Come, Young Bull. Come kill the Twisted Ones.

Wolf rolled over him, enveloped him. Letting Leya back down, Perrin took up his axe, blade gleaming wetly. His eyes shone as he raced down the rocky slope. He was Young Bull.

Trees scattered around the bowl-shaped valley burned like torches; a tall pine flared into flame as Young Bull joined the battle. The night air flashed actinic blue, like sheet lightning, as Lan engaged another Myrddraal, ancient Aes Sedai–made steel meeting black steel wrought in Thakan’dar, in the shadow of Shayol Ghul. Loial wielded a quarterstaff the size of a fence rail, the whirling timber marking a space no Trolloc entered without falling. Men fought desperately in the dancing shadows, but Young Bull—Perrin—noted in a distant way that too many of the Shienaran two-legs were down.

The brothers and sisters fought in small packs of three or four, dodging scythe-like swords and spiked axes, darting in with slashing teeth to sever hamstrings, lunging to bite out throats as their prey fell. There was no honor in the way they fought, no glory, no mercy. They had not come for battle, but to kill. Young Bull joined one of the small packs, the blade of his axe serving for teeth.

He no longer thought of the greater battle. There was only the Trolloc he and the wolves—the brothers—cut off from the rest and brought down. Then there would be another, and another, and another, until none were left. None here, none anywhere. He felt the urge to hurl the axe aside and use his teeth, to run on all fours as his brothers did. Run through the high mountain passes. Run belly-deep in powdery snow pursuing deer. Run, with the cold wind ruffling his fur. He snarled with his brothers, and Trollocs howled with fear at his yellow-eyed gaze even more than they did at the other wolves.

Abruptly he realized there were no more Trollocs standing anywhere in the bowl, though he could feel his brothers pursuing others as they fled. A pack of seven had a different prey, somewhere out there in the darkness. One of the Neverborn ran for its hard-footed four-legs—its horse, a distant part of him said—and his brothers followed, noses filled with its scent, its essence of death. Inside his head, he was with them, seeing with their eyes. As they closed in, the Neverborn turned, cursing, black blade and black-clad Neverborn like part of the night. But night was where his brothers and sisters hunted.

Young Bull snarled as the first brother died, its death pain lancing him, yet the others closed in and more brothers and sisters died, but snapping jaws dragged the Neverborn down. It fought back with its own teeth now, ripping out throats, slashing with fingernails that sliced skin and flesh like the hard claws the two-legs carried, but brothers savaged it even as they died. Finally a lone sister heaved herself out of the still-twitching pile and staggered to one side. Morning Mist, she was called, but as with all their names, it was more than that: a frosty morning with the bite of snows yet to come already in the air, and the mist curling thick across the valley, swirling with the sharp breeze that carried the promise of good hunting. Raising her head, Morning Mist howled to the cloud-hidden moon, mourning her dead.

Young Bull threw back his head and howled with her, mourned with her.

When he lowered his head, Min was staring at him. "Are you all right, Perrin?" she asked hesitantly. There was a bruise on her cheek, and a sleeve half torn from her coat. She had a cudgel in one hand and a dagger in the other, and there was blood and hair on both.

They were all staring at him, he saw, all those who were still on their feet. Loial, leaning wearily on his tall staff. Shienarans, who had been carrying their fallen down to where Moiraine crouched over one of their number with Lan standing at her side. Even the Aes Sedai was looking his way. The burning trees, like huge torches, cast a wavering light. Dead Trollocs lay everywhere. There were more Shienarans down than standing, and the bodies of his brothers were scattered among them. So many. . . .

Perrin realized he wanted to howl again. Frantically he walled himself off from contact with the wolves. Images seeped through, emotions, as he tried to stop them. Finally, though, he could no longer feel them, feel their pain, or their anger, or the desire to hunt the Twisted Ones, or to run. . . . He gave himself a shake. The wound on his back burned like fire, and his torn shoulder felt as if it had been hammered on an anvil. His bare feet, scraped and bruised, throbbed with his pain. The smell of blood was everywhere. The smell of Trollocs, and death.

"I. . . . I'm all right, Min."

"You fought well, blacksmith," Lan said. The Warder raised his still-bloody sword above his head. *"Tai'shar Manetheren! Tai'shar Andor!"* True Blood of Manetheren. True Blood of Andor.

The Shienarans still standing—so few—lifted their blades and joined him. *"Tai'shar Manetheren! Tai'shar Andor!"*

Loial nodded. *"Ta'veren,"* he added.

Perrin lowered his eyes in embarrassment. Lan had saved him from the questions he did not want to answer, but had given him an honor he did not deserve. The others did not understand. He wondered what they would say if they knew the truth. Min moved closer, and he muttered, “Leya’s dead. I couldn’t. . . . I almost reached her in time.”

“It wouldn’t have made any difference,” she said softly. “You know that.” She leaned to look at his back, and winced. “Moiraine will take care of that for you. She’s Healing those she can.”

Perrin nodded. His back felt sticky with drying blood all the way to his waist, but despite the pain he hardly noticed it. *Light, I almost didn’t come back that time. I can’t let that happen again. I won’t. Never again!*

But when he was with the wolves, it was all so different. He did not have to worry about strangers being afraid of him just because he was big, then. There was no one thinking he was slow-witted just because he tried to be careful. Wolves knew each other even if they had never met before, and with them he was just another wolf.

No! His hands tightened on the haft of his axe. *No!* He gave a start as Masema suddenly spoke up.

“It was a sign,” the Shienaran said, turning in a circle to address everyone. There was blood on his arms and his chest—he had fought in nothing but his breeches—and he moved with a limp, but the light in his eyes was as fervent as it had ever been. More fervent. “A sign to confirm our faith. Even wolves came to fight for the Dragon Reborn. In the Last Battle, the Lord Dragon will summon even the beasts of the forest to fight at our sides. It is a sign for us to go forth. Only Darkfriends will fail to join us.” Two of the Shienarans nodded.

“You shut your bloody mouth, Masema!” Uno snapped. He seemed untouched, but then Uno had been fighting Trollocs since before Perrin was born. Yet he sagged with weariness; only the painted eye on his eyepatch seemed fresh. “We’ll flaming go forth when the Lord Dragon bloody well tells us, and not before! You sheep-headed farmers flaming remember that!” The one-eyed man looked at the growing row of men being tended by Moiraine—few were able to as much as sit up, even after she was done with them—and shook his head. “At least we’ll have plenty of flaming wolf hides to keep the wounded warm.”

“No!” The Shienarans seemed surprised at the vehemence in Perrin’s voice. “They fought for us, and we’ll bury them with our dead.”

Uno frowned, and opened his mouth as if to argue, but Perrin fixed him with a steady, yellow-eyed stare. It was the Shienaran who dropped his gaze first, and nodded.

Perrin cleared his throat, embarrassed all over again as Uno gave orders for the Shienarans who were fit to gather the dead wolves. Min was squinting at him the way she did when she saw things. “Where’s Rand?” he asked her.

“Out there in the dark,” she said, nodding upslope without taking her eyes off him. “He will not talk to anyone. He just sits there, snapping at anyone who comes near him.”

“He will talk to me,” Perrin said. She followed him, protesting all the while that he ought to wait until Moiraine had seen to his injuries. *Light, what does she see when she looks at me? I don’t want to know.*

Rand was seated on the ground just beyond the light of the burning trees, with his back against the trunk of a stunted oak. Staring at nothing, he had his arms wrapped around himself, hands under his red coat, as if feeling the cold. He did not appear to notice their approach. Min sat down beside him, but he did not move even when she laid a hand on his arm. Even here Perrin smelled blood, and not only his own.

“Rand,” Perrin began, but Rand cut him off.

“Do you know what I did during the fight?” Still staring into the distance, Rand addressed the night. “Nothing! Nothing useful. At first, when I reached out for the True Source, I couldn’t touch it, couldn’t grasp it. It kept sliding away. Then, when I finally had hold of it, I was going to burn them all, burn all the Trollocs and Fades. And all I could do was set fire to some trees.” He shook with silent laughter, then stopped with a pained grimace. “*Saidin* filled me till I thought I’d explode like fireworks. I had to channel it somewhere, get rid of it before it burned me up, and I found myself thinking about pulling the mountain down and burying the Trollocs. I almost tried. That was my fight. Not against the Trollocs. Against myself. To keep from burying us all under the mountain.”

Min gave Perrin a pained look, as if asking for help.

“We . . . dealt with them, Rand,” Perrin said. He shivered, thinking of all the wounded men down below. And the dead. *Better that than the mountain down on top of us.* “We didn’t need you.”

Rand’s head fell back against the tree and his eyes closed. “I felt them coming,” he said, nearly whispering. “I didn’t know what it was, though. They feel like the taint on *saidin*. And *saidin* is always there, calling to me, singing to me. By the time I knew the difference, Lan was already shouting his warning. If I could only control it, I could have given warning before they were even close. But half the time when I actually manage to touch *saidin*, I don't know what I am doing at all. The flow of it just sweeps me along. I could have given warning, though."

Perrin shifted his bruised feet uncomfortably. "We had warning enough." He knew he sounded as if he were trying to convince himself. *I could have given warning, too, if I'd talked with the wolves. They knew there were Trollocs and Fades in the mountains. They were trying to tell me.* But he wondered: If he did not keep the wolves out of his mind, might he not be running with them now? There had been a man, Elyas Machera, who also could talk to wolves. Elyas ran with the wolves all the time, yet seemed able to remember he was a man. But he had never told Perrin how he did it, and Perrin had not seen him in a long time.

The crunch of boots on rock announced two people coming, and a swirl of air carried their scents to Perrin. He was careful not to speak names, though, until Lan and Moiraine were close enough for even ordinary eyes to make them out.

The Warder had a hand under the Aes Sedai's arm, as if trying to support her without letting her know it. Moiraine's eyes were haggard, and she carried a small, age-dark ivory carving of a woman in one hand. Perrin knew it for an *angreal*, a remnant from the Age of Legends that allowed an Aes Sedai to safely channel more of the Power than she could alone. It was a measure of her tiredness that she was using it for Healing.

Min got to her feet to help Moiraine, but the Aes Sedai motioned her away. "Everyone else is seen to," she told Min. "When I am done here, I can rest." She shook off Lan as well, and a look of concentration appeared on her face as she traced a cool hand across Perrin's bleeding shoulder, then along the wound on his back. Her touch made his skin tingle. "This is not too bad," she said. "The bruising of your shoulder goes deep, but the gashes are shallow. Brace yourself. This will not hurt, but. . . ."

He had never found it easy being near someone he knew was channeling the One Power, and still less if it actually involved him. Yet there had been one or two of those times, and he thought he had some idea what the channeling entailed, but those Healings had been minor, simply washing away tiredness when Moiraine could not afford to have him weary. They had been nothing like this.

The Aes Sedai's eyes suddenly seemed to be seeing inside him, seeing through him. He gasped and almost dropped his axe. He could feel the skin on his back crawling, muscles writhing as they knit back together. His shoulder quivered uncontrollably, and everything blurred. Cold seared him to the bone, then deeper still. He had the impression of moving, falling, flying; he could not tell which, but he felt as if he were rushing—somewhere, somehow—at great speed, forever. After an eternity the world came into focus again. Moiraine was stepping back, half staggering until Lan caught her arm.

Gaping, Perrin looked down at his shoulder. The gashes and bruises were gone; not so much as a twinge remained. He twisted carefully, but the pain in his back had vanished as well. And his feet no longer hurt; he did not need to look to know all the bruises and scrapes were gone. His stomach rumbled loudly.

"You should eat as soon as you can," Moiraine told him. "A good bit of the strength for that came from you. You need to replace it."

Hunger—and images of food—were already filling Perrin's head. Blood rare beef, and venison, and mutton, and. . . . With an effort he made himself stop thinking of meat. He would find some of those roots that smelled like turnips when they were roasted. His stomach growled in protest.

"There's barely even a scar, blacksmith," Lan said behind him.

"Most of the wolves who were hurt made their own way to the forest," Moiraine said, knuckling her back and stretching, "but I Healed those I could find." Perrin gave her a sharp look, yet she seemed to be just making conversation. "Perhaps they came for their own reasons, yet we would likely all be dead without them." Perrin shifted uneasily and dropped his eyes.

The Aes Sedai reached toward the bruise on Min's cheek, but Min stepped back, saying, "I'm not really hurt, and you're tired. I've had worse falling over my own feet."

Moiraine smiled and let her hand fall. Lan took her arm; she swayed in his grip. "Very well. And what of you, Rand? Did you take any hurt? Even a nick from a Myrddraal's blade can be deadly, and some Trolloc blades are almost as bad."

Perrin noticed something for the first time. "Rand, your coat is wet."

Rand pulled his right hand from under his coat, a hand covered in blood. “Not a Myrddraal,” he said absently, peering at his hand. “Not even a Trolloc. The wound I took at Falme broke open.”

Moiraine hissed and jerked her arm free from Lan, half fell to her knees beside Rand. Pulling back the side of his coat, she studied his wound. Perrin could not see it, for her head was in the way, but the smell of blood was stronger, now. Moiraine’s hands moved, and Rand grimaced in pain. “ ‘The blood of the Dragon Reborn on the rocks of Shayol Ghul will free mankind from the Shadow.’ Isn’t that what the Prophecies of the Dragon say?”

“Who told you that?” Moiraine said sharply.

“If you could get me to Shayol Ghul now,” Rand said drowsily, “by Waygate or Portal Stone, there could be an end to it. No more dying. No more dreams. No more.”

“If it were as simple as that,” Moiraine said grimly, “I would, one way or another, but not all in *The Karaethon Cycle* can be taken at its face. For every thing it says straight out, there are ten that could mean a hundred different things. Do not think you know anything at all of what *must* be, even if someone has told you the whole of the Prophecies.” She paused, as if gathering strength. Her grip tightened on the *angreal*, and her free hand slid along Rand’s side as if it were not covered in blood. “Brace yourself.”

Suddenly Rand’s eyes opened wide, and he sat straight up, gasping and staring and shivering. Perrin had thought, when she Healed him, that it went on forever, but in moments she was easing Rand back against the oak.

“I have . . . done as much as I can,” she said faintly. “As much as I can. You must be careful. It could break open again if. . . .” As her voice trailed off, she fell.

Rand caught her, but Lan was there in an instant to scoop her up. As the Warder did so, a look passed across his face, a look as close to tenderness as Perrin ever expected to see from Lan.

“Exhausted,” the Warder said. “She has cared for everyone else, but there’s no one to take her fatigue. I will put her to bed.”

“There’s Rand,” Min said slowly, but the Warder shook his head.

“It isn’t that I do not think you would try, sheepherder,” he said, “but you know so little you might as soon kill her as help her.”

“That’s right,” Rand said bitterly. “I’m not to be trusted. Lews Therin Kinslayer killed everyone close to him. Maybe I’ll do the same before I am done.”

“Pull yourself together, sheepherder,” Lan said harshly. “The whole world rides on your shoulders. Remember you’re a man, and do what needs to be done.”

Rand looked up at the Warder, and surprisingly, all of his bitterness seemed to be gone. “I will fight the best I can,” he said. “Because there’s no one else, and it has to be done, and the duty is mine. I’ll fight, but I do not have to like what I’ve become.” He closed his eyes as if going to sleep. “I will fight. Dreams. . . .”

Lan stared down at him a moment, then nodded. He raised his head to look across Moiraine at Perrin and Min. “Get him to his bed, then see to some sleep yourselves. We have plans to make, and the Light alone knows what happens next.”

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CHAPTER 6

The Hunt Begins

Perrin did not expect to sleep, but a stomach stuffed with cold stew—his resolve about the roots had lasted until the smells of supper's leftovers hit his nose—and bone weariness pulled him down on his bed. If he dreamed, he did not remember. He awoke to Lan shaking his shoulders, dawn through the open door turning the Warder to a shadow haloed with light.

"Rand is gone," was all Lan said before he left at a run, but it was more than enough.

Perrin dragged himself up yawning and dressed quickly in the early chill. Outside, only a handful of Shienarans were in sight, using their horses to drag Trolloc bodies into the woods, and most of those moved as if they should be in a sickbed. A body took time to build back the strength that being Healed took.

Perrin's stomach muttered at him, and his nose tested the breeze in the hope that someone had already started cooking. He was ready to eat those turnip-like roots, raw if need be. There were only the lingering stench of slain Myrddraal, the smells of dead Trollocs and men, alive and dead, of horses and the trees. And dead wolves.

Moiraine's hut, high on the other side of the bowl, seemed a center of activity. Min hurried inside, and moments later Masema came out, then Uno. At a trot the one-eyed man vanished into the trees, toward the sheer rock wall beyond the hut, while the other Shienaran limped down the slope.

Perrin started toward the hut. As he splashed across the shallow stream, he met Masema. The Shienaran's face was haggard, the scar on his cheek prominent, and his eyes even more sunken than usual. In the middle of the stream, he raised his head suddenly and caught Perrin's coat sleeve.

"You're from his village," Masema said hoarsely. "You must know. Why did the Lord Dragon abandon us? What sin did we commit?"

“Sin? What are you talking about? Whyever Rand went, it was nothing you did or didn’t do.” Masema did not appear satisfied; he kept his grip on Perrin’s sleeve, peering into his face as if there were answers there. Icy water began to seep into Perrin’s left boot. “Masema,” he said carefully, “whatever the Lord Dragon did, it was according to his plan. The Lord Dragon would not abandon us.” *Or would he? If I were in his place, would I?*

Masema nodded slowly. “Yes. Yes, I see that, now. He has gone out alone to spread the word of his coming. We must spread the word, too. Yes.” He limped on across the stream, muttering to himself.

Squelching at every other step, Perrin climbed to Moiraine’s hut and knocked. There was no answer. He hesitated a moment, then went in.

The outer room, where Lan slept, was as stark and simple as Perrin’s own hut, with a rough bed built against one wall, a few pegs for hanging possessions, and a single shelf. Not much light entered through the open door, and the only other illumination came from crude lamps on the shelf, slivers of oily fat-wood wedged into cracks in pieces of rock. They gave off thin streamers of smoke that made a layer of haze under the roof. Perrin’s nose wrinkled at the smell.

The low roof was only a little higher than his head. Loial’s head actually brushed it, even seated as he was on one end of Lan’s bed, with his knees drawn up to make himself small. The Ogier’s tufted ears twitched uneasily. Min sat cross-legged on the dirt floor beside the door that led to Moiraine’s room, while the Aes Sedai paced back and forth in thought. Dark thoughts, they must have been. Three paces each way was all she had, but she made vigorous use of the space, the calm on her face belied by the quickness of her step.

“I think Masema is going crazy,” Perrin said.

Min sniffed. “With him, how can you tell?”

Moiraine rounded on him, a tightness to her mouth. Her voice was soft. Too soft. “Is Masema the most important thing in your mind this morning, Perrin Aybara?”

“No. I’d like to know when Rand left, and why. Did anyone see him go? Does anyone know where he went?” He made himself meet her look with one just as level and firm. It was not easy. He loomed over her, but she was Aes Sedai. “Is this of your making, Moiraine? Did you rein him in until he was so impatient he’d go anywhere, do anything, just to stop sitting still?” Loial’s ears went stiff, and he motioned a surreptitious warning with one thick-fingered hand.

Moiraine studied Perrin with her head tilted to one side, and it was all he could do not to drop his eyes. “This is none of my doing,” she said. “He left sometime during the night. When and how and why, I yet hope to learn.”

Loial’s shoulders heaved in a quiet sigh of relief. Quiet for an Ogier, it sounded like steam rushing out from quenching red-hot iron. “Never anger an Aes Sedai,” he said in a whisper obviously meant just for himself, but audible to everyone. “ ‘Better to embrace the sun than to anger an Aes Sedai.’ ”

Min reached up enough to hand Perrin a folded piece of paper. “Loial went to see him after we got him to bed last night, and Rand asked to borrow pen and paper and ink.”

The Ogier’s ears jerked, and he frowned worriedly until his long eyebrows hung down on his cheeks. “I did not know what he was planning. I didn’t.”

“We know that,” Min said. “No one is accusing you of anything, Loial.”

Moiraine frowned at the paper, but she did not try to stop Perrin from reading. It was in Rand’s hand.

> *What I do, I do because there is no other way. He is hunting me again, and this time one of us has to die, I think. There is no need for those around me to die, also. Too many have died for me already. I do not want to die either, and will not, if I can manage it. There are lies in dreams, and death, but dreams hold truth, too.*

That was all, with no signature. There was no need for Perrin to wonder who Rand meant by “he.” For Rand, for all of them, there could be only one. Ba’alzamon.

“He left that tucked under the door there,” Min said in a tight voice. “He took some old clothes the Shienarans had hanging out to dry, and his flute, and a horse. Nothing else but a little food, as far as we can tell. None of the guards saw him go, and last night they would have seen a mouse creeping.”

“And would it have done any good if they had?” Moiraine said calmly. “Would any of them have stopped the *Lord Dragon*, or even challenged him? Some of them—Masema for one—would slit their own throats if the *Lord Dragon* told them to.”

It was Perrin’s turn to study her. “Did you expect anything else? They swore to follow him. Light, Moiraine, he’d never have named himself Dragon if not for you. What did you expect of them?” She did not speak, and he went on more quietly. “Do you believe, Moiraine? That he’s really the Dragon Reborn? Or do you just think he’s someone you can use before the One Power kills him or drives him mad?”

“Go easy, Perrin,” Loial said. “Not so angry.”

“I’ll go easy when she answers me. Well, Moiraine?”

“He is what he is,” she said sharply.

“You said the Pattern would force him to the right path eventually. Is that what this is, or is he just trying to get away from you?” For a moment he thought he had gone too far—her dark eyes sparkled with anger—but he refused to back down. “Well?”

Moiraine took a deep breath. “This may well be what the Pattern has chosen, yet I did not mean for him to go off alone. For all his power, he is as defenseless as a babe in many ways, and as ignorant of the world. He channels, but he has no control over whether or not the One Power comes when he reaches for it and almost as little over what he does with it if it does come. The power itself will kill him before he has a chance to go mad if he does not learn that control. There is so much he must learn, yet. He wants to run before he has learned to walk.”

“You split hairs and lay false trails, Moiraine.” Perrin snorted. “If he is what you say he is, did it never occur to you that he might know what he has to do better than you?”

“He is what he is,” she repeated firmly, “but I must keep him alive if he is to do anything. He will fulfill no prophecies dead, and even if he manages to avoid Darkfriends and Shadowspawn, there are a thousand other hands ready to slay him. All it will take is a hint of the hundredth part of what he is. Yet if that were all he might face, I would not worry half so much as I do. There are the Forsaken to be accounted for.”

Perrin gave a start; from the corner, Loial moaned. “ ‘The Dark One and all the Forsaken are bound in Shayol Ghul,’ ” Perrin began by rote, but she gave him no time to finish.

“The seals are weakening, Perrin. Some are broken, though the world does not know that. Must not know that. The Father of Lies is not free. Yet.

But as the seals weaken, more and more, which of the Forsaken may be loosed already? Lanfear? Sammael? Asmodean, or Be'lal, or Ravhin? Ishamael himself, the Betrayer of Hope? They were thirteen altogether, Perrin, and bound in the sealing, not in the prison that holds the Dark One. Thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends, the weakest of them stronger than the ten strongest Aes Sedai living today, the most ignorant with all the knowledge of the Age of Legends. And every man and woman of them gave up the Light and dedicated their souls to the Shadow. What if they are free, and out there waiting for him? I will not let them have him."

Perrin shivered, partly from the icy iron in her last words, and partly from thought of the Forsaken. He did not want to think of even one of the Forsaken loose in the world. His mother had frightened him with those names when he was little. *Ishamael comes for boys who do not tell their mothers the truth. Lanfear waits in the night for boys who do not go to bed when they are supposed to.* Being older did not help, not when he knew now they were all real. Not when Moiraine said they might be free.

"Bound in Shayol Ghul," he whispered, and wished he still believed it. Troubled, he studied Rand's letter again. "Dreams. He was talking about dreams yesterday, too."

Moiraine stepped closer, and peered up into his face. "Dreams?" Lan and Uno came in, but she waved them to silence. The small room was more than crowded now, with five people in it besides the Ogier. "What dreams have *you* had the last few days, Perrin?" She ignored his protest that there was nothing wrong with his dreams. "Tell me," she insisted. "What dream have you had that was not ordinary? Tell me." Her gaze seized him like smithy tongs, willing him to speak.

He looked at the others—they were all watching him fixedly, even Min—then hesitantly told of the one dream that seemed unusual to him, the dream that came every night. The dream of the sword he could not touch. He did not mention the wolf that had appeared in the last.

"Callandor," Lan breathed when he was done. Rock-hard face or no, he looked stunned.

"Yes," Moiraine said, "but we must be absolutely certain. Speak to the others." As Lan hurried out, she turned to Uno. "And what of your dreams? Did you dream of a sword, too?"

The Shienaran shifted his feet. The red eye painted on his patch stared straight at Moiraine, but his real eye blinked and wavered. “I dream about flam—uh, about swords all the time, Moiraine Sedai,” he said stiffly. “I suppose I’ve dreamed about a sword the last few nights. I don’t remember my dreams the way Lord Perrin here does.”

Moiraine said, “Loial?”

“My dreams are always the same, Moiraine Sedai. The groves, and the Great Trees, and the *stedding*. We Ogier always dream of the *stedding* when we are away from them.”

The Aes Sedai turned back to Perrin.

“It was just a dream,” he said. “Nothing but a dream.”

“I doubt it,” she said. “You describe the hall called the Heart of the Stone, in the fortress called the Stone of Tear, as if you had stood in it. And the shining sword is *Callandor*, the Sword That Is Not a Sword, the Sword That Cannot Be Touched.”

Loial sat up straight, bumping his head on the roof. He did not seem to notice. “The Prophecies of the Dragon say the Stone of Tear will never fall till *Callandor* is wielded by the Dragon’s hand. The fall of the Stone of Tear will be one of the greatest signs of the Dragon’s Rebirth. If Rand holds *Callandor*, the whole world must acknowledge him as the Dragon.”

“Perhaps.” The word floated from the Aes Sedai’s lips like a shard of ice on still water.

“Perhaps?” Perrin said. “Perhaps? I thought that was the final sign, the last thing to fulfill your Prophecies.”

“Neither the first nor the last,” Moiraine said. “*Callandor* will be but one fulfillment of *The Karaethon Cycle*, as his birth on the slopes of Dragonmount was the first. He has yet to break the nations, or shatter the world. Even scholars who have studied the Prophecies for their entire lives do not know how to interpret them all. What does it mean that he ‘shall slay his people with the sword of peace, and destroy them with the leaf’? What does it meant that he ‘shall bind the nine moons to serve him’? Yet these are given equal weight with *Callandor* in the *Cycle*. There are others. What ‘wounds of madness and cutting of hope’ has he healed? What chains has he broken, and who put into chains? And some are so obscure that he may already have fulfilled them, although I am not aware of it. But, no. *Callandor* is far from the end of it.”

Perrin shrugged uneasily. He knew only bits and pieces of the Prophecies; he had liked hearing them even less since Rand had let Moiraine put that banner in his hands. No, it had been before that, even. Since a journey by Portal Stone had convinced him his life was bound to Rand's.

Moiraine was continuing. "If you think he has simply to put out his hand, Loial son of Arent son of Halan, you are a fool, as is he if he thinks it. Even if he lives to reach Tear, he may never attain the Stone.

"Tairens have no love for the One Power, and less for any man claiming to be the Dragon. Channeling is outlawed, and Aes Sedai are tolerated at best, so long as they do not channel. Telling the Prophecies of the Dragon, or even possessing a copy of them, is enough to put you in prison, in Tear. And no one enters the Stone of Tear without permission of the High Lords; none but the High Lords themselves enter the Heart of the Stone. He is not ready for this. Not ready."

Perrin grunted softly. The Stone would never fall till the Dragon Reborn held *Callandor. How in the Light is he supposed to reach it—inside a bloody fortress!—before the fortress falls? It is madness!*

"Why are we just sitting here?" Min burst out. "If Rand is going to Tear, why aren't we following him? He could be killed, or . . . or. . . . Why are we sitting here?"

Moiraine put a hand on Min's head. "Because I must be sure," she said gently. "It is not comfortable being chosen by the Wheel, to be great or to be near greatness. The chosen of the Wheel can only take what comes."

"I am tired of taking what comes." Min scrubbed a hand across her eyes. Perrin thought he saw tears. "Rand could be dying while we wait." Moiraine smoothed Min's hair; there was a look almost of pity on the Aes Sedai's face.

Perrin sat down on the end of Lan's bed opposite Loial. The smell of people was thick in the room—people and worry and fear; Loial smelled of books and trees as well as worry. It felt like a trap, with the walls around them, and all so close. The burning slivers stank. "How can my dream tell where Rand is going?" he asked. "It was my dream."

"Those who can channel the One Power," Moiraine said quietly, "those who are particularly strong in Spirit, can sometimes force their dreams on others." She did not stop her soothing of Min. "Especially on those who are—susceptible. I do not believe Rand did it on purpose, but the dreams of those touching the True Source can be powerful. For one as strong as he, they could possibly seize an entire village, or perhaps even a city. He knows little of what he does, and even less of how to control it."

"Then why didn't you have it, too?" he demanded. "Or Lan." Uno stared straight ahead, looking as if he would rather be anywhere else, and Loial's ears wilted. Perrin was too tired and too hungry to care whether he showed proper respect for an Aes Sedai. And too angry, as well, he realized. "Why?"

Moiraine answered calmly. "Aes Sedai learn to shield their dreams. I do it without thinking, when I sleep. Warders are given something much the same in the bonding. The Gaidin could not do what they must if the Shadow could steal into their dreams. We are all vulnerable when we sleep, and the Shadow is strong in the night."

"There's always something new from you," Perrin growled. "Can't you tell us what to expect once in a while, instead of explaining after it happens?" Uno looked as though he was trying to think of a reason to leave.

Moiraine gave Perrin a flat look. "You want me to share a lifetime of knowledge with you in a single afternoon? Or even a single year? I will tell you this. Be wary of dreams, Perrin Aybara. Be very wary of dreams."

He pulled his eyes away from hers. "I am," he murmured. "I am."

After that, silence, and no one seemed to want to break it. Min sat staring at her crossed ankles, but apparently taking some comfort from Moiraine's presence. Uno stood against the wall, not looking at anyone. Loial forgot himself enough to pull a book from his coat pocket and try to read in the dim light. The wait was long, and far from easy for Perrin. *It's not the Shadow in my dreams I'm afraid of. It's wolves. I will not let them in. I won't!*

Lan returned, and Moiraine straightened eagerly. The Warder answered the question in her eyes. "Half of them remember dreaming of swords the last four nights running. Some remember a place with great columns, and five say the sword was crystal, or glass. Masema says he saw Rand holding it last night."

"That one would," Moiraine said. She rubbed her hands together briskly; she seemed suddenly full of energy. "Now I *am* certain. Though I still wish I knew how he left here unseen. If he has rediscovered some Talent from the Age of Legends. . . ."

Lan looked at Uno, and the one-eyed man shrugged in dismay. “I bloody forgot, with all this flaming talk about bloo—” He cleared his throat, shooting a glance at Moiraine. She looked back expectantly, and he went on. “I mean . . . uh . . . that is, I followed the Lord Dragon’s tracks. There’s another way into that closed valley, now. The . . . the earthquake brought down the far wall. It’s a hard climb, but you can get a horse up it. I found more tracks at the top, and there’s an easy way from there around the mountain.” He let out a long breath when he was done.

“Good,” Moiraine said. “At least he has not rediscovered how to fly, or make himself invisible, or something else out of legend. We must follow him without delay. Uno, I will give you enough gold to take you and the others as far as Jehannah, and the name of someone there who will see that you get more. The Ghealdanin are wary of strangers, but if you keep to yourselves, they should not trouble you. Wait there until I send word.”

“But we will go with you,” he protested. “We have all sworn to follow the Dragon Reborn. I do not see how the few of us can take a fortress that has never fallen, but with the Lord Dragon’s aid, we will do what must be done.”

“So we are ‘the People of the Dragon,’ now.” Perrin laughed mirthlessly. “ ‘The Stone of Tear will never fall till the People of the Dragon come.’ Have you given us a new name, Moiraine?”

“Watch your tongue, blacksmith,” Lan growled, all ice and stone.

Moiraine gave them both sharp looks, and they fell silent. “Forgive me, Uno,” she said, “but we must travel quickly if we are to have a hope of overtaking him. You are the only Shienaran fit enough for a hard ride, and we cannot afford the days the others will need to regain full strength. I will send for you when I can.”

Uno grimaced, but he bowed in acquiescence. At her dismissal, he squared his shoulders and left to tell the others.

“Well, I am going along, whatever you say,” Min put in firmly.

“You are going to Tar Valon,” Moiraine told her.

“I am no such thing!”

The Aes Sedai went on smoothly as if the other woman had not spoken. “The Amyrlin Seat must be told what has happened, and I cannot count on finding one I can trust who has messenger pigeons. Or that the Amyrlin will see any message I send by pigeon. It is a long journey, and hard. I would not send you alone if there were anyone to send with you, but

I will see you have money, and letters to those who might help you on your way. You must ride quickly, though. When your horse tires, buy another—or steal one, if you must—but ride quickly.”

“Let Uno take your message. He’s fit; you said so. I am going after Rand.”

“Uno has his duties, Min. And do you think a man could simply walk up to the gates of the White Tower and demand an audience with the Amyrlin Seat? Even a king would be made to wait days if he arrived unannounced, and I fear any of the Shienarans would be left kicking their heels for weeks, if not forever. Not to mention that something so unusual would be known to everyone in Tar Valon before the first sunset. Few women seek audiences with the Amyrlin herself, but it does happen, and it should occasion no great comment. No one must learn even as much as that the Amyrlin Seat has received a message from me. Her life—and ours—could depend on it. You are the one who must go.”

Min sat there opening and closing her mouth, obviously searching for another argument, but Moiraine had already gone on. “Lan, I very much fear we will find more evidence of his passing than I would like, but I will rely on your tracking.” The Warder nodded. “Perrin? Loial? Will you come with me after Rand?” From her place against the wall, Min gave an indignant squawk, but the Aes Sedai ignored it.

“I will come,” Loial said quickly. “Rand is my friend. And I will admit it; I would not miss anything. For my book, you see.”

Perrin was slower to answer. Rand was his friend, whatever he had become in the forging. And there was that near certainty of their futures being linked, though he would have avoided that part of it if he could. “It has to be done, doesn’t it?” he said finally. “I will come.”

“Good.” Moiraine rubbed her hands together again, with the air of someone settling to work. “You must all ready yourselves at once. Rand has hours on us. I mean to be well along his trail before midday.”

Slender as she was, the force of her presence herded all of them but Lan toward the door, Loial walking stooped over until he was through the doorway. Perrin thought of a goodwife herding geese.

Once outside, Min hung back for a moment to address Lan with a too-sweet smile. “And is there any message you want carried? To Nynaeve, perhaps?”

The Warder blinked as if caught off guard, like a horse on three legs. “Does everyone know—?” He regained his balance almost immediately. “If there is anything else she needs to hear from me, I will tell her myself.” He closed the door nearly in her face.

“Men!” Min muttered at the door. “Too blind to see what a stone could see, and too stubborn to be trusted to think for themselves.”

Perrin inhaled deeply. Faint smells of death still hung in the valley air, but it was better than the closeness inside. Some better.

“Clean air,” Loial sighed. “The smoke was beginning to bother me a little.”

They started down the slope together. Beside the stream below, the Shienarans who could stand were gathered around Uno. From his gestures the one-eyed man was making up for lost time with his cursing.

“How did you two become privileged?” Min demanded abruptly. “She *asked* you. She didn’t do me the courtesy of asking.”

Loial shook his head. “I think she asked because she knew what we would answer, Min. Moiraine seems able to read Perrin and me; she knows what we’ll do. But you are a closed book to her.”

Min appeared only a little mollified. She looked up at them, Perrin head and shoulders taller on one side and Loial towering even higher on the other. “Much good it does me. I am still going where she wants as easily as you two little lambs. You were doing well for a while, Perrin. Standing up to her like she’d sold you a coat and the seams were popping open.”

“I did stand up to her, didn’t I,” Perrin said wonderingly. He had not really realized he had done that. “It was not so bad as I’d have thought it would be.”

“You were lucky,” Loial rumbled. “ ‘To anger an Aes Sedai is to put your head in a hornet’s nest.’ ”

“Loial,” Min said, “I need to speak to Perrin. Alone. Would you mind?”

“Oh. Of course not.” He lengthened his stride to its normal span and quickly moved ahead of them, pulling his pipe and tabac pouch from a coat pocket.

Perrin eyed her warily. She was biting her lip, as if considering what to say. “Do you ever see things about him?” he asked, nodding after the Ogier.

She shook her head. “I think it only works with humans. But I’ve seen things around you that you ought to know about.”

"I've told you—"

"Don't be more thickheaded than you have to be, Perrin. Back there, right after you said you'd go. They were not there before. They must have to do with this journey. Or at least with you deciding to go."

After a moment he said reluctantly, "What did you see?"

"An Aielman in a cage," she said promptly. "A Tuatha'an with a sword. A falcon and a hawk, perching on your shoulders. Both female, I think. And all the rest, of course. What is always there. Darkness swirling 'round you, and—"

"None of that!" he said quickly. When he was sure she had stopped, he scratched his head, thinking. None of it made any sense to him. "Do you have any idea what it all means? The new things, I mean."

"No, but they're important. The things I see always are. Turning points in people's lives, or what's fated. It's always important." She hesitated for a moment, glancing at him. "One more thing," she said slowly. "If you meet a woman—the most beautiful woman you've ever seen—run!"

Perrin blinked. "You saw a beautiful woman? Why should I run from a beautiful woman?"

"Can't you just take advice?" she said irritably. She kicked at a stone and watched it roll down the slope.

Perrin did not like jumping to conclusions—it was one of the reasons some people thought him slow-witted—but he totaled up a number of things Min had said in the last few days and came to a startling conclusion. He stopped dead, hunting for words. "Uh . . . Min, you know I like you. I like you, but. . . . Uh . . . you sort of remind me of my sisters. I mean, you. . . ." The flow stumbled to a halt as she raised her head to look at him, eyebrows arched. She wore a small smile.

"Why, Perrin, you must know that I love you." She stood there, watching his mouth work, then spoke slowly and carefully. "Like a brother, you great wooden-headed lummox! The arrogance of men never ceases to amaze me. You all think everything has to do with you, and every woman has to desire you."

Perrin felt his face growing hot. "I never. . . . I didn't. . . ." He cleared his throat. "What did you see about a woman?"

"Just take my advice," she said, and started down toward the stream again, walking fast. "If you forget all the rest," she called over her shoulder, "heed that!"

He frowned after her—for once his thoughts seemed to arrange themselves quickly—then caught up in two strides. “It’s Rand, isn’t it?”

She made a sound in her throat and gave him a sidelong look. She did not slow down, though. “Maybe you aren’t so boneheaded after all,” she muttered. After a moment she added, as if to herself, “I’m bound to him as surely as a stave is bound to the barrel. But I can’t see if he’ll ever love me in return. And I am not the only one.”

“Does Egwene know?” he asked. Rand and Egwene had been all but promised since childhood. Everything but kneeling in front of the Women’s Circle of the village to speak the betrothal. He was not sure how far they had drifted from that, if at all.

“She knows,” Min said curtly. “Much good it does either of us.”

“What about Rand? Does he know?”

“Oh, of course,” she said bitterly. “I told him, didn’t I? ‘Rand, I did a viewing of you, and it seems I have to fall in love with you. I have to share you, too, and I don’t much like that, but there it is.’ You’re a wooden-headed wonder after all, Perrin Aybara.” She dashed a hand across her eyes angrily. “If I could be with him, I know I could help. Somehow. Light, if he dies, I don’t know if I can stand it.”

Perrin shrugged uncomfortably. “Listen, Min. I’ll do what I can to help him.” *However much that is.* “I promise you that. It really is best for you to go to Tar Valon. You’ll be safe there.”

“Safe?” She tasted the word as if wondering what it meant. “You think Tar Valon is safe?”

“If there’s no safety in Tar Valon, there’s no safety anywhere.”

She sniffed loudly, and in silence they went to join those preparing to leave.

* * *

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CHAPTER 7

The Way Out of the Mountains

The way down out of the mountains was hard, but the lower they went, the less Perrin needed his fur-lined cloak. Hour by hour, they rode out of the tailings of winter and into the first days of spring. The last remnants of snow vanished, and grasses and wildflowers—white maiden's hope and pink jump up—began to cover the high meadows they crossed. Trees appeared more often, with more leaves, and grasslarks and robins sang in the branches. And there were wolves. Never in sight—not even Lan mentioned seeing one—but Perrin knew. He kept his mind firmly closed to them, yet now and again a feather-light tickle at the back of his mind reminded him they were there.

Lan spent most of his time scouting their path on his black warhorse, Mandarb, following Rand's tracks as the rest of them followed the signs the Warder left for them. An arrow of stones laid out on the ground, or one lightly scratched in the rock wall of a forking pass. Turn this way. Cross that saddlepass. Take this switchback, this deer trail, this way through the trees and down along a narrow stream, even though there is nothing to indicate anyone has ever gone that way before. Nothing but Lan's signs. A tuft of grass or weeds tied one way to say bear left, another for bear right. A bent branch. A pile of pebbles for a rough climb ahead, two leaves caught on a thorn for a steep descent. The Warder had a hundred signs, it seemed to Perrin, and Moiraine knew them all. Lan rarely came back except when they made camp, to confer with Moiraine quietly, away from the fire. When the sun rose, most often he was hours gone already.

Moiraine was always first into the saddle after him, while the eastern sky was just turning pink. The Aes Sedai would not have climbed down from Aldieb, her white mare, until full dark or later, except that Lan refused to track further once the light began to fail.

"We'll go even slower if a horse breaks a leg," the Warder would tell Moiraine when she complained.

Her reply was always very much the same. “If you cannot move any faster than this, perhaps I should send you off to Myrelle before you get any older. Well, perhaps that can wait, but you must move us faster.”

She half sounded as if the threat were irritated truth, half as if she were making a joke. There was something of a threat in it, or maybe a warning, Perrin was sure, from the way Lan’s mouth tightened even when she smiled afterwards and reached up to pat his shoulder soothingly.

“Who is Myrelle?” Perrin asked suspiciously, the first time it happened. Loial shook his head, murmuring something about unpleasant things happening to those who pried into Aes Sedai affairs. The Ogier’s hairy-fetlocked horse was as tall and heavy as a Dhurran stallion, but with Loial’s long legs dangling to either side, the animal looked undersized, like a large pony.

Moiraine gave an amused, secretive smile. “Just a Green sister. Someone to whom Lan must one day deliver a package for safekeeping.”

“No day soon,” Lan said, and surprisingly, there was open anger in his voice. “Never, if I can help it. You will outlive me long, Moiraine Aes Sedai!”

She has too many secrets, Perrin thought, but asked no more about a subject that could crack the Warder’s iron self-control.

The Aes Sedai had a blanket-wrapped bundle tied behind her saddle: the Dragon banner. Perrin was uneasy about having it with them, but Moiraine had neither asked his opinion nor listened when he offered it. Not that anyone was likely to recognize it if he saw it, yet he hoped she was as good at keeping secrets from other people as she was at keeping them from him.

In the beginning, at least, it was a boring journey. One cloud-capped mountain was very much like another, one pass little different from the next. Supper was usually rabbit, dropped by stones from Perrin’s sling. He did not have so many arrows as to risk shooting at rabbits in that rocky country. Breakfast was cold rabbit, more often than not, and the midday meal the same, eaten in the saddle.

Sometimes when they camped near a stream and there was still light enough to see, he and Loial caught mountain trout, lying on their bellies, hands elbow-deep in the cold water, tickling the green-backed fish out from under the rock ledges where they hid. Loial’s fingers, big as they were, were even more deft at it than Perrin’s.

Once, three days after setting out, Moiraine joined them, stretching herself out on the streamside and undoing rows of pearl buttons to roll up her sleeves as she asked how the thing was done. Perrin exchanged surprised looks with Loial. The Ogier shrugged.

"It is not that hard, really," Perrin told her. "Just bring your hand up from behind the fish, and underneath, as if you're trying to tickle its belly. Then you pull it out. It takes practice, though. You might not catch anything the first few times you try."

"I tried for days before I ever caught anything," Loial added. He was already easing his huge hands into the water, careful to keep his shadow from scaring the fish.

"As difficult as that?" Moiraine murmured. Her hands slipped into the water—and a moment later came out with a splash, holding a fat trout that thrashed the surface. She laughed with delight as she tossed it up onto the bank.

Perrin blinked at the big fish flopping in the fading sunlight. It must have weighed at least five pounds. "You were very lucky," he said. "Trout that size don't often shelter under a ledge this small. We'll have to move upstream a bit. It will be dark before any of them settle under this ledge again."

"Is that so?" Moiraine said. "You two go ahead. I think I will just try here again."

Perrin hesitated a moment before moving up the bank to another overhang. She was up to something, but he could not imagine what. That troubled him. Belly down, and careful not to let his shadow fall on the water, he peered over the edge. Half a dozen slender shapes hung suspended in the water, barely moving a fin to hold their places. All of them together would not weigh as much as Moiraine's fish, he decided with a sigh. If they were lucky, he and Loial might take two apiece, but the shadows of trees on the far bank already stretched across the water. Whatever they caught now would be it, and Loial's appetite was big enough by itself to swallow those four and most of the bigger fish, too. Loial's hands were already easing up behind one of the trout.

Before Perrin could even slide his hands into the water, Moiraine gave a shout. "Three should be enough, I think. The last two are bigger than the first."

Perrin gave Loial a startled look. "She can't have!"

The Ogier straightened, sending the small trout scattering. “She is Aes Sedai,” he said simply.

Sure enough, when they returned to Moiraine, three big trout lay on the bank. She was already buttoning her sleeves up again.

Perrin thought about reminding her that whoever took the fish was supposed to clean them, too, but just at that moment she caught his eye. There was no particular expression on her smooth face, but her dark eyes did not waver, and they appeared to know what he was going to say, and to have dismissed it out of hand already. When she turned away, it seemed somehow too late to say anything.

Muttering to himself, Perrin pulled out his beltknife and set to the gutting and heading. “All of a sudden she’s forgotten about sharing the chores, it seems. I suppose she’ll want us to do the cooking, as well, and the cleaning up after.”

“No doubt she will,” Loial said without pausing over the fish he was working on. “She is Aes Sedai.”

“I seem to remember hearing that somewhere.” Perrin’s knife ripped into the fish. “The Shienarans might have been willing to run around fetching and carrying for her, but there are only four of us now. We should keep on turn and turn about. It’s only fair.”

Loial gave a great snort of laughter. “I doubt she sees it that way. First she had to put up with Rand arguing with her all the time, and now you’re ready to take over for him. As a rule, Aes Sedai do not let anyone argue with them. I expect she means to have us back in the habit of doing what she says by the time we reach the first village.”

“A good habit to be in,” Lan said, throwing back his cloak. In the fading light he had appeared out of nowhere.

Perrin nearly fell over from surprise, and Loial’s ears went stiff with shock. Neither of them had heard the Warder’s step.

“A habit you should never have lost,” Lan added, then strode off toward Moiraine and the horses. His boots barely made a sound, even on that rocky ground, and once he was a few paces away the cloak hanging down his back gave him the uneasy appearance of a disembodied head and arms drifting up from the stream.

“We need her to find Rand,” Perrin said softly, “but I am not going to let her shape my life anymore.” He went back to his cleaning vigorously.

He meant to keep that promise—he really did—but during the days that followed, in some way he did not quite understand, he found that he and Loial were doing the cooking, and the cleaning up, and any other little chore that Moiraine thought of. He even discovered that somehow or other he had taken over tending Aldieb every night, unsaddling the mare and rubbing her down while Moiraine settled herself, apparently deep in thought.

Loial gave in to it as inevitable, but not Perrin. He tried refusing, resisting, but it was hard to resist when she made a reasonable suggestion, and a small one at that. Only there was always another suggestion behind it, as reasonable and small as the first, and then another. The simple force of her presence, the strength of her gaze, made it difficult to protest. Her dark eyes would catch his at the moment he opened his mouth. A lift of her eyebrow to suggest he was being rude, a surprised widening of her eyes that he could object to so small a request, a level stare that held in it everything that was Aes Sedai, all these things could make him hesitate, and once he hesitated there was never any recovering lost ground. He accused her of using the One Power on him, though he did not really think that was it, and she told him not to be a fool. He began to feel like a piece of iron trying to stop a smith from hammering it into a scythe.

The Mountains of Mist gave way abruptly to the forested foothills of Ghealdan, to land that seemed all up and down, but never very high. Deer, which in the mountains had often watched them warily, as if uncertain what a man was, began to bound away, white tails flickering, at the first sight of the horses. Even Perrin now caught only the faintest glimpses of the gray-striped mountain cats that seemed to fade away like smoke. They were coming into the lands of men.

Lan stopped wearing his color-shifting cloak and began riding back to the rest of them more often, telling them what lay ahead. In many places the trees had all been cut down. Soon, fields encircled by rough stone walls and farmers plowing ’round the sides of hills were common sights, if not exactly frequent, along with lines of people moving across the plowed ground, sowing seed from sacks slung from their shoulders. Scattered farmhouses and barns of gray stone sat on hilltops and ridges.

The wolves should not have been there. Wolves avoided places where men were, but Perrin could still sense them, an unseen screen and escort ringing the mounted party. Impatience filled him; impatience to reach a village or a town, any place where there were enough men to make the wolves go away.

A day after sighting the first field, just as the sun touched the horizon behind them, they came to the village of Jarra, not far north of the border with Amadicia.

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CHAPTER 8

Jarra

Gray stone houses with slate roofs lay clustered along the few narrow streets of Jarra, clinging to a hillside above a little stream spanned by a low wooden bridge. The muddy streets were empty, and so was the sloping village green, except for one man sweeping the steps of the village's only inn, standing beside its stone stable; but it looked as if there had been a good many people on the green not long before. Half a dozen arches, woven of green branches and dotted with such few flowers as could be found this early in the year, stood in a circle in the middle of the grass. The ground had a trampled look, and there were other signs of a gathering; a woman's red scarf lying tangled at the foot of one of the arches, a child's knitted cap, a pewter pitcher tumbled on its side, a few half-eaten scraps of food.

The aromas of sweet wine and spiced cakes clung about the green, mixed in with smoke from dozens of chimneys and evening meals cooking. For an instant Perrin's nose caught another odor, one he could not identify, a faint trail that raised the hair on the back of his neck with its vileness. Then it was gone. But he was sure something had passed that way, something—wrong. He scrubbed at his nose as if to rub away the memory of it. *That can't be Rand. Light, even if he* has *gone mad, that can't be him. Can it?*

A painted sign hung above the inn door, a man standing on one foot with his arms thrown in the air: Harilin's Leap. As they drew rein in front of the square stone building, the sweeper straightened, yawning fiercely. He gave a start at Perrin's eyes, but his own already protruding eyes went wide when they fell on Loial. With his wide mouth and no chin to speak of, he looked something like a frog. There was an old smell of sour wine about him—to Perrin, at least. The fellow had certainly been part of the celebration.

The man gave himself a shake, and turned it into a bow with one hand resting on the double row of wooden buttons running down his coat. His eyes flickered from one to another of them, popping even more every time they rested on Loial. “Welcome, good mistress, and the Light illumine your way. Welcome, good masters. You wish food, rooms, baths? All to be had, here at the Leap. Master Harod, the innkeeper, keeps a good house. I am called Simion. If you wish anything, ask for Simion, and he will get it for you.” He yawned again, covering his mouth in embarrassment and bowing to hide it. “I beg your pardon, good mistress. You have come far? Have you word of the Great Hunt? The Hunt for the Horn of Valere? Or the false Dragon? It’s said there’s a false Dragon in Tarabon. Or maybe Arad Doman.”

“We have not come that far,” Lan said, swinging down from his saddle. “No doubt you know more than I.” They all began dismounting.

“You have had a wedding here?” Moiraine said.

“A wedding, good mistress? Why, we’ve had a lifetime of weddings. A plague of them. All in the last two days. There isn’t a woman old enough to speak the betrothal remains unmarried, not in the whole village, not for a mile in any direction. Why, even Widow Jorath dragged old Banas through the arches, and they’d both sworn they’d never marry again. It was like a whirlwind just snatched everybody up. Rilith, the weaver’s daughter, she started it, asking Jon the blacksmith to marry her, and him old enough to be her father and more. The old fool just took off his apron and said yes, and she demanded the arches be put up right then and there. Wouldn’t hear of a proper wait, and all the other women sided with her. Since then we’ve had marriages day and night. Why, nobody’s had any sleep at all hardly.”

“That’s very interesting,” Perrin said when Simion paused to yawn again, “but have you seen a young—”

“It is very interesting,” Moiraine said, cutting him off, “and I would hear more of it later, perhaps. For now, we would like rooms, and a meal.” Lan made a small gesture toward Perrin, down low, as if telling him to hold his tongue.

“Of course, good mistress. A meal. Rooms.” Simion hesitated, eyeing Loial. “We’ll have to push two beds together for—” He leaned closer to Moiraine and dropped his voice. “Pardon, good mistress, but—uh—what exactly—is he? Meaning no disrespect,” he added hastily.

He had not spoken softly enough, for Loial’s ears twitched irritably. “I am an Ogier! What did you think I was? A Trolloc?”

Simion took a step back at the booming voice. “Trolloc, good—uh—master? Why, I’m a grown man. I don’t believe in children’s tales. Uh, did you say Ogier? Why, Ogier are childr—I mean . . . that is. . . .” In desperation, he turned to bellow toward the stable next to the inn. “Nico! Patrim! Visitors! Come see to their horses!” After a moment two boys with hay in their hair tumbled out of the stable, yawning and rubbing their eyes. Simion gestured to the steps, bowing, as the boys gathered reins.

Perrin slung his saddlebags and blanketroll over his shoulder and carried his bow as he followed Moiraine and Lan inside, with Simion bowing and bobbing ahead of them. Loial had to duck low under the lintel, and the ceiling inside only cleared his head by a foot. He kept rumbling to himself about not understanding why so few humans remembered the Ogier. His voice was like distant thunder. Even Perrin, right in front of him, could only understand half of his words.

The inn smelled of ale and wine, cheese and weariness, and the aroma of roasting mutton drifted from somewhere in the back. The few men in the common room sagged over their mugs as if they would really like to lie down on the benches and go to sleep. One plump serving woman was drawing a mug of ale from one of the barrels at the end of the room. The innkeeper himself, in a long white apron, sat on a tall stool in the corner, leaning against the wall. As the newcomers entered, he lifted his head, bleary-eyed. His jaw dropped at the sight of Loial.

“Visitors, Master Harod,” Simion announced. “They want rooms. Master Harod? He’s an Ogier, Master Harod.” The serving woman turned and saw Loial, and dropped the mug with a clatter. None of the weary men at the tables even looked up. One had put his head down on the table and was snoring.

Loial’s ears twitched violently.

Master Harod got to his feet slowly, eyes fastened on Loial, smoothing his apron all the while. “At least he isn’t a Whitecloak,” he said at last, then gave a start as if surprised he had spoken aloud. “That is to say, welcome, good mistress. Good masters. Forgive my lack of manners. I can only plead tiredness, good mistress.” He darted another glance at Loial, and mouthed “Ogier?” with a look of disbelief.

Loial opened his mouth, but Moiraine forestalled him. “As your man said, good innkeeper, I wish rooms for my party for the night, and a meal.”

“Oh! Of course, good mistress. Of course. Simion, show these good people to my best rooms, so they can put down their belongings. I’ll have a fine meal laid out for you when you return, good mistress. A fine meal.”

“If it pleases you to follow me, good mistress,” Simion said. “Good masters.” He bowed the way to stairs at one side of the common room.

Behind them, one of the men at the tables suddenly exclaimed, “What in the name of the Light is that?” Master Harod began explaining about Ogier, making it sound as if he were quite familiar with them. Most of what Perrin heard before they left the voices behind was wrong. Loial’s ears twitched without stop.

On the second floor, the Ogier’s head came near to brushing along the ceiling. The narrow corridor was growing dark, with only the sharp light of sunset through a window next to the door at the far end.

“Candles in the rooms, good mistress,” Simion said. “I should have brought a lamp, but my head is still spinning from all those weddings. I’ll send someone up to light the fire, if you wish. And you’ll want wash water, of course.” He pushed open a door. “Our best room, good mistress. We don’t have many—not many strangers, you see—but this is our best.”

“I’ll take the one next to it,” Lan said. He had Moiraine’s blanketroll and saddlebags on his shoulder as well as his own, and the bundle containing the Dragon banner, too.

“Oh, good master, that’s not a very good room at all. Narrow bed. Cramped. Meant for a servant, I suspect, as if we’d ever have anybody here who had a servant. Begging your pardon, good mistress.”

“I will take it anyway,” Lan said firmly.

“Simion,” Moiraine said, “does Master Harod dislike the Children of the Light?”

“Well, he does, good mistress. He didn’t, but he does. It isn’t good policy, disliking the Children, not so close to the border as we are. They come through Jarra all the time, like there wasn’t any border at all. But there was trouble, yesterday. A fistful of trouble. And with the weddings going on, and all.”

“What happened, Simion?”

The man looked at her sharply before answering. Perrin did not think anyone else saw how sharply, in the dimness. “There was about twenty of them, come day before yesterday. No trouble then. But yesterday. . . . Why, three of them up and announced they weren’t Children of the Light anymore. They took off their cloaks and just rode away.”

Lan grunted. “Whitecloaks swear for life. What did their commander do?”

“Why, he would have done something, you can be sure, good master, but another of them announced he was off to find the Horn of Valere. Anyway, still another said they should be hunting the Dragon. That one said he was going to Almoth Plain when he left. Then some of them started saying things to women in the streets, things they shouldn’t have, and grabbing at them. The women were screaming, and Children yelling at the ones bothering the women. I never saw such commotion.”

“Didn’t any of you try to stop them?” Perrin said.

“Good master, you carry that axe like you know how to use it, but it isn’t so easy to face up to men with swords and armor and all, when all you know how to use is a broom or a hoe. The rest of the Whitecloaks, those as hadn’t gone off, put an end to it. Almost came to drawing swords. And that wasn’t the worst. Two more just went mad—if the others weren’t. Those two started raving that Jarra was full of Darkfriends. They tried to burn the village down—said they would!—beginning with the Leap. You can see the burn marks out back, where they got it started. Fought the other Whitecloaks when they tried to stop them. The Whitecloaks that were left, they helped us put it out, tied those two up tight, and rode out of here, back toward Amadicia. Good riddance, I say, and if they never come back, it’ll be too soon.”

“Rough behavior,” Lan said, “even for Whitecloaks.”

Simion bobbed his head in agreement. “As you say, good master. They never acted like that before. Swagger around, yes. Look at you like you were dirt, and poke their noses in where they hadn’t any business. But they never caused trouble before. Not like that, anyway.”

“They are gone now,” Moiraine said, “and troubles with them. I am sure we will pass a quiet night.”

Perrin kept his mouth shut, but he was not quiet inside. *All these weddings and Whitecloaks are all very well, but I’d sooner know if Rand stopped here, and which way he went when he left. That smell couldn’t have been him.*

He let Simion guide him on down the hall to another room, with two beds and a washstand, a pair of stools and not much else. Loial stooped to put his head through the doorway. Only a little light came in by the narrow windows. The beds were big enough, with blankets and comforters folded at the foot, but the mattresses looked lumpy. Simion fumbled on the mantel above the fireplace until he found a candle, and a tinderbox to get it alight.

“I’ll see about getting some beds put together for you, good—uh—Ogier. Yes, just a moment, now.” He showed no sign of hurry to be about it, though, fussing with the candlestick as if he had to place it just right. Perrin thought he looked uneasy.

Well, I’d be more than uneasy if Whitecloaks had been acting like that in Emond’s Field. “Simion, has another stranger passed through here in the last day or two? A young man, tall, with gray eyes and reddish hair? He might have played the flute for a meal or a bed.”

“I remember him, good master,” Simion said, still shifting the candlestick. “Came yesterday morning, early. Looked hungry, he did. He played the flute for all the weddings, yesterday. Good-looking young fellow. Some of the women eyed him, at first, but. . . .” He paused, looking at Perrin sideways. “Is he a friend of yours, good master?”

“I know him,” Perrin said. “Why?”

Simion hesitated. “No reason, good master. He was an odd fellow, that’s all. He talked to himself, sometimes, and sometimes he laughed when nobody had said anything. Slept in this very room, last night, or part of it. Woke us all in the middle of the night, yelling. It was just a nightmare, but he wouldn’t stay any longer. Master Harod didn’t make much effort to talk him into it, after all that noise.” Simion paused again. “He said something strange when he left.”

“What?” Perrin demanded.

“He said somebody was after him. He said. . . .” The chinless man swallowed and went on more slowly. “Said they’d kill him if he didn’t go. ‘One of us has to die, and I mean it to be him.’ His very words.”

“He did not mean us,” Loial rumbled. “We are his friends.”

“Of course, good—uh—good Ogier. Of course, he didn’t mean you. I—uh—I don’t mean to say anything about a friend of yours, but I—uh—I think he’s sick. In the head, you know.”

“We will take care of him,” Perrin said. “That’s why we’re following him. Which way did he go?”

“I knew it,” Simion said, bouncing on his toes. “I knew she could help as soon as I saw you. Which way? East, good master. East, like the Dark One himself was on his heels. Do you think she’ll help me? Help my brother, that is? Noam’s bad sick, and Mother Roon says she can’t do anything.”

Perrin kept his face expressionless, and bought a little time to think by propping his bow in the corner and setting his blanketroll and saddlebags on one of the beds. The problem was that thinking did not help much. He looked at Loial, but found no help there; consternation had the Ogier's ears drooping and his long eyebrows hanging down on his cheeks. "What makes you think she can help your brother?" *Stupid question! The right question is, what does he mean to do about it?*

"Why, I traveled to Jehannah, once, good master, and I saw two . . . two women like her. I couldn't mistake her after that." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It's said *they* can raise the dead, good master."

"Who else knows this?" Perrin asked sharply, and at the same time Loial said, "If your brother is dead, there is nothing anyone can do."

The frog-faced man looked from one to the other of them anxiously, and his words came in a babble. "No one knows but me, good master. Noam isn't dead, good Ogier, only sick. I swear nobody else could recognize her. Even Master Harod's never been more than twenty miles from here in his life. He's so bad sick. I'd ask her myself, only my knees'd be shaking so hard she couldn't hear me talk. What if she took offense and called down lightning on me? And what if I'd been wrong? It isn't the kind of thing you accuse a woman of without. . . . I mean . . . uh. . . ." He raised his hands, half in pleading, half as if to defend himself.

"I can make no promises," Perrin said, "but I'll speak to her. Loial, why don't you keep Simion company till I've spoken to Moiraine?"

"Of course," the Ogier boomed. Simion gave a start when Loial's hand swallowed his shoulder. "He will show me my room, and we will talk. Tell me, Simion, what do you know of trees?"

"T-t-trees, g-good Ogier?"

Perrin did not wait any longer. He hurried back down the dark hall and knocked on Moiraine's door, barely waiting for her peremptory "Come!" before pushing in.

Half a dozen candles showed that the Leap's best room was none too good, though the one bed had four tall posts supporting a canopy, and the mattress looked less full of lumps than Perrin's. There was a scrap of carpet on the floor, and two cushioned chairs instead of stools. Other than that, it looked no different from his room. Moiraine and Lan stood in front of the cold hearth as if they had been discussing something, and the Aes Sedai did not look pleased at being interrupted. The Warder's face was as imperturbable as a carving.

"Rand's been here, all right," Perrin started off. "That fellow Simion remembers him." Moiraine hissed through her teeth.

"You were told to keep your mouth shut," Lan growled.

Perrin squared his feet to face the Warder. That was easier than facing Moiraine's glare. "How could we find out whether he had been here without asking questions? Tell me that. He left last night, if you are interested, heading east. And he was carrying on about somebody following him, trying to kill him."

"East." Moiraine nodded. The utter calm of her voice was at odds with her disapproving eyes. "That is good to know, though it had to be so if he is going to Tear. But I was fairly certain he had been here even before I heard about the Whitecloaks, and they made it a certainty. Rand is almost surely right about one thing, Perrin. I cannot believe we are the only ones trying to find him. And if they find out about us, they may well try to stop us. We have enough to contend with trying to catch up to Rand without that. You must learn to hold your tongue until I tell you to speak."

"The Whitecloaks?" Perrin said incredulously. *Hold my tongue? Burn me, if I will!* "How could they tell you—? Rand's madness. It is *catching*?"

"Not his madness," Moiraine said, "if he is far enough gone yet to be called mad. Perrin, he is more strongly *ta'veren* than anyone since the Age of Legends. Yesterday, in this village, the Pattern . . . moved, shaped itself around him like clay shaped on a mold. The weddings, the Whitecloaks, these were enough to say Rand had been here, for anyone who knew to listen."

Perrin drew a long breath. "And this is what we'll find everywhere he's been? Light, if there are Shadowspawn after him, they can track him as easily as we can."

"Perhaps," Moiraine said. "Perhaps not. No one knows anything about *ta'veren* as strong as Rand." For just a moment she sounded vexed at not knowing. "Artur Hawkwing was the most strongly *ta'veren* of whom any writings remain. And Hawkwing was in no way as strong as Rand."

"It is said," Lan put in, "that there were times when people in the same room with Hawkwing spoke truth when they meant to lie, made decisions they had not even known they were contemplating. Times when every toss of the dice, every turn of the cards, went his way. But only times."

“You mean you don’t know,” Perrin said. “He could leave a trail of weddings and Whitecloaks gone mad all the way to Tear.”

“I mean I know as much as there is to know,” Moiraine said sharply. Her dark-eyed gaze chastised Perrin like a whip. “The Pattern weaves finely around *ta’veren*, and others can follow the shape of those threads if they know where to look. Be careful your tongue does not unravel more than you can know.”

In spite of himself Perrin hunched his shoulders as if she were delivering real blows. “Well, you had better be glad I opened my mouth this time. Simion knows you’re Aes Sedai. He wants you to Heal his brother Noam of some sickness. If I hadn’t talked to him, he would never have worked up nerve enough to ask, but he might have started talking among his friends.”

Lan caught Moiraine’s eye, and for a moment they stared at one another. The Warder had the air about him of a wolf about to leap. Finally, Moiraine shook her head. “No,” she said.

“As you wish. It is your decision.” Lan sounded as if he thought she had made the wrong one, but the tension left him.

Perrin stared at them. “You were thinking of. . . . Simion couldn’t tell anyone if he were dead, could he?”

“He will not die by my actions,” Moiraine said. “But I cannot, and will not, promise that it will always be so. We must find Rand, and I will not fail in that. Is that spoken plainly enough for you?” Caught in her gaze, Perrin could make no answer. She nodded as if his silence were answer enough. “Now take me to Simion.”

The door to Loial’s room stood open, spilling a pool of candlelight into the hall. The two beds inside had been pushed together, and Loial and Simion were seated on the edge of one. The chinless man was staring up at Loial with his mouth open and an expression of wonder on his face.

“Oh, yes, the *stedding* are wonderful,” Loial was saying. “There is such peace there, under the Great Trees. You humans may have your wars and strife, but nothing ever troubles the *stedding*. We tend the trees and live in harmony. . . .” He trailed off when he saw Moiraine, with Lan and Perrin behind her.

Simion scrambled to his feet, bowing and backing away until he came up against the far wall. “Uh . . . good mistress. . . . Uh . . . uh. . . .” Even then, he continued bobbing like a toy on a string.

“Show me to your brother,” Moiraine commanded, “and I will do what I can. Perrin, you will come, too, since this good man spoke to you first.” Lan lifted an eyebrow, and she shook her head. “If we all go, we might attract attention. Perrin can give me what protection I need.”

Lan nodded reluctantly, then gave Perrin a hard look. “See that you do, blacksmith. If any harm befalls her. . . .” His cold blue eyes finished the promise.

Simion snatched one of the candles and scurried into the hallway, still bowing so the candlelight made their shadows dance. “This way—uh—good mistress. This way.”

Beyond the door at the end of the hall, outside stairs led down to a cramped alleyway, between inn and stable. Night shrank the candle to a flickering pinpoint. The half moon was up in a star-flecked sky, giving more than enough light for Perrin’s eyes. He wondered when Moiraine would tell Simion he did not have to keep bowing, but she never did. The Aes Sedai glided along, clutching her skirts to keep them out of the mud, as though the dark passage were a palace hall and she a queen. The air was already cooling; nights still carried echoes of winter.

“This way.” Simion led them back to a small shed behind the stable and hurriedly unbarred the door. “This way.” Simion pointed. “There, good mistress. There. My brother. Noam.”

The far end of the shed had been barred off with slats of wood; hastily, by the rough look of it. A stout iron lock in a hasp held shut a crude door of wooden slats. Behind those bars, a man lay sprawled on his stomach on the straw-covered floor. He was barefoot, his shirt and breeches ripped as if he had torn at them without knowing how to take them off. There was an odor of unwashed flesh that Perrin thought even Simion and Moiraine must smell.

Noam lifted his head and stared at them silently, without expression. There was nothing at all about him to suggest he was Simion’s brother—he had a chin, for one thing, and he was a big man, with heavy shoulders—but that was not what staggered Perrin. Noam stared at them with burnished golden eyes.

“He’d been talking crazy almost a year, good mistress, saying he could . . . could talk with wolves. And his eyes. . . .” Simion darted a glance at Perrin. “Well, he’d talk about it when he’d drunk too much. Everybody laughed at him. Then a month or so ago, he didn't come to town. I went out to see what was the matter, and I found him—like this."

Cautiously, unwillingly, Perrin reached out toward Noam as he would have toward a wolf. *Running through the woods with the cold wind in his nose. Quick dash from cover, teeth snapping at hamstrings. Taste of blood, rich on the tongue. Kill.* Perrin jerked back as he would have from a fire, sealed himself off. They were not thoughts at all, really, just a chaotic jumble of desires and images, part memory, part yearning. But there was more wolf there than anything else. He put a hand to the wall to steady himself; his knees felt weak. *Light help me!*

Moiraine put a hand on the lock.

"Master Harod has the key, good mistress. I don't know if he'll—"

She gave a tug, and the lock sprang open. Simion gaped at her. She lifted the lock free of the hasp, and the chinless man turned to Perrin.

"Is that safe, good master? He's my brother, but he bit Mother Roon when she tried to help, and he . . . he killed a cow. With his teeth," he finished faintly.

"Moiraine," Perrin said, "the man is dangerous."

"All men are dangerous," she replied in a cool voice. "Now be quiet." She opened the door and went in. Perrin held his breath.

At her first step, Noam's lips peeled back from his teeth, and he began to growl, a rumble that deepened till his whole body quivered. Moiraine ignored it. Still growling, Noam wriggled backwards in the straw as she came closer to him, until he had backed himself into a corner. Or she had backed him.

Slowly, calmly, the Aes Sedai knelt and took his head between her hands. Noam's growl heightened to a snarl, then tailed off in a whimper before Perrin could move. For a long moment Moiraine held Noam's head, then just as calmly released it and rose. Perrin's throat tightened as she turned her back on Noam and walked out of the cage, but the man only stared after her. She pushed the slatted door to, slipped the lock back through the hasp, not bothering to snap it shut—and Noam hurled himself snarling against the wooden bars. He bit at them, and battered them with his shoulders, tried to force his head between them, all the while snarling and snapping.

Moiraine brushed straw from her skirt with a steady hand and no expression.

“You do take chances,” Perrin breathed. She looked at him—a steady, knowing gaze—and he dropped his eyes. His yellow eyes.

Simion was staring at his brother. “Can you help him, good mistress?” he asked hoarsely.

“I am sorry, Simion,” she said.

“Can’t you do anything, good mistress? Something? One of those”—his voice fell to a whisper—“Aes Sedai things?”

“Healing is not a simple matter, Simion, and it comes from within as much as from the Healer. There is nothing here that remembers being Noam, nothing that remembers being a man. There are no maps remaining to show him the path back, and nothing left to take that path. Noam is gone, Simion.”

“He—he just used to talk funny, good mistress, when he’d had too much to drink. He just. . . .” Simion scrubbed a hand across his eyes and blinked. “Thank you, good mistress. I know you’d have done something if you could.” She put a hand on his shoulder, murmured comforting words, and then she was gone from the shed.

Perrin knew he should follow her, but the man—what had once been a man—snapping at the wooden bars, held him. He took a quick step and surprised himself by removing the dangling lock from the hasp. The lock was a good one, the work of a master smith.

“Good master?”

Perrin stared at the lock in his hand, at the man behind in the cage. Noam had stopped biting at the slats; he stared back at Perrin warily, panting. Some of his teeth had broken off jaggedly.

“You can leave him in here forever,” Perrin said, “but I—I don’t think he’ll ever get any better.”

“If he gets out, good master, he’ll die!”

“He will die in here or out there, Simion. Out there, at least he’ll be free, and as happy as he can be. He is not your brother anymore, but you’re the one who has to decide. You can leave him in here for people to stare at, leave him to stare at the bars of his cage until he pines away. You cannot cage a wolf, Simion, not and expect it to be happy. Or live long.”

“Yes,” Simion said slowly. “Yes, I see.” He hesitated, then nodded, and jerked his head toward the shed door.

That was all the answer Perrin needed. He swung back the slatted door and stood aside.

For a moment Noam stared at the opening. Abruptly he darted out of the cage, running on all fours, but with surprising agility. Out of the cage, out of the shed, and into the night. *The Light help us both*, Perrin thought.

“I suppose it’s better for him to be free.” Simion gave himself a shake. “But I don’t know what Master Harod will say when he finds that door standing open and Noam gone.”

Perrin shut the cage door; the big lock made a sharp click as he refastened it. “Let him puzzle that out.”

Simion barked a quick laugh, abruptly cut off. “He’ll make something out of it. They all will. Some of them say Noam turned into a wolf—fur and all!—when he bit Mother Roon. It’s not true, but they say it.”

Shivering, Perrin leaned his head against the cage door. *He may not have fur, but he’s a wolf. He’s wolf, not man. Light, help me.*

“We didn’t keep him here always,” Simion said suddenly. “He was at Mother Roon’s house, but she and I got Master Harod to move him here after the Whitecloaks came. They always have a list of names, Darkfriends they’re looking for. It was Noam’s eyes, you see. One of the names the Whitecloaks had was a fellow named Perrin Aybara, a blacksmith. They said he has yellow eyes, and runs with wolves. You can see why I didn’t want them to know about Noam.”

Perrin turned his head enough to look at Simion over his shoulder. “Do you think this Perrin Aybara is a Darkfriend?”

“A Darkfriend wouldn’t care if my brother died in a cage. I suppose she found you soon after it happened. In time to help. I wish she’d come to Jarra a few months ago.”

Perrin was ashamed that he had ever compared the man to a frog. “And I wish she could have done something for him.” *Burn me, I wish she could.* Suddenly it burst on him that the whole village must know about Noam. About his eyes. “Simion, would you bring me something to eat in my room?” Master Harod and the rest might have been too taken with staring at Loial to notice his eyes before, but they surely would if he ate in the common room.

“Of course. And in the morning, too. You don’t have to come down until you are ready to get on your horse.”

“You are a good man, Simion. A good man.” Simion looked so pleased that Perrin felt ashamed all over again.

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CHAPTER 9

Wolf Dreams

Perrin returned to his room by the back way, and after a time Simion came up with a covered tray. The cloth did not hold in the smells of roasted mutton, sweetbeans, turnips, and freshly baked bread, but Perrin lay on his bed, staring at the whitewashed ceiling, until the aromas grew cold. Images of Noam ran through his head over and over again. Noam chewing at the wooden slats. Noam running off into the darkness. He tried to think of lock-making, of the careful quenching and shaping of the steel, but it did not work.

Ignoring the tray, he rose and made his way down the hall to Moiraine's room. She answered his rap on the door with, "Come in, Perrin."

For an instant all the old stories about Aes Sedai stirred again, but he pushed them aside and opened the door.

Moiraine was alone—for which he was grateful—sitting with an ink bottle balanced on her knee, writing in a small, leather-bound book. She corked the bottle and wiped the steel nib of her pen on a small scrap of parchment without looking at him. There was a fire in the fireplace.

"I have been expecting you for some time," she said. "I have not spoken about this before because it was obvious you did not want me to. After tonight, though. . . . What do you want to know?"

"Is that what I can expect?" he asked. "To end like that?"

"Perhaps."

He waited for more, but she only put pen and ink away in their small case of polished rosewood and blew on her writing to dry it. "Is that all? Moiraine, don't give me slippery Aes Sedai answers. If you know something, tell me. Please."

"I know very little, Perrin. While searching for other answers among the books and manuscripts two friends keep for their researches, I found a copied fragment of a book from the Age of Legends. It spoke of . . .

situations like yours. That may be the only copy anywhere in the world, and it did not tell me much.”

“What *did* it tell you? Anything at all is more than I know now. Burn me, I’ve been worrying about Rand going mad, but I never thought I had to worry about myself!”

“Perrin, even in the Age of Legends, they knew little of this. Whoever wrote it seemed uncertain whether it was truth or legend. And I only saw a fragment, remember. She said that some who talked to wolves lost themselves, that what was human was swallowed up by wolf. Some. Whether she meant one in ten, or five, or nine, I do not know.”

“I can shut them out. I don’t know how I do it, but I can refuse to listen to them. I can refuse to hear them. Will that help?”

“It may.” She studied him, seeming to choose her words carefully. “Mostly, she wrote of dreams. Dreams can be dangerous for you, Perrin.”

“You said that once before. What do you mean?”

“According to her, wolves live partly in this world, and partly in a world of dreams.”

“A world of dreams?” he said disbelievingly.

Moiraine gave him a sharp look. “That is what I said, and that is what she wrote. The way wolves talk to one another, the way they talk to you, is in some way connected to this world of dreams. I do not claim to understand how.” She paused, frowning slightly. “From what I have read of Aes Sedai who had the Talent called Dreaming, Dreamers sometimes spoke of encountering wolves in their dreams, even wolves that acted as guides. I fear you must learn to be as careful sleeping as waking, if you intend to avoid wolves. If that is what you decide to do.”

“If that is what I decide? Moiraine, I will not end up like Noam. I won’t!”

She eyed him quizzically, shaking her head slowly. “You speak as if you can make all your own choices, Perrin. You are *ta’veren*, remember.” He turned his back on her, staring at the night-dark windows, but she continued: “Perhaps, knowing what Rand is, knowing how strongly *ta’veren* he is, I have paid too little attention to the other two *ta’veren* I found with him. Three *ta’veren* in the same village, all born within weeks of one another? That is unheard of. Perhaps you—and Mat—have larger purposes in the Pattern than you, or I, thought.”

“I do not want any *purpose* in the Pattern,” Perrin muttered. “I surely can’t have one if I forget I am a man. Will you help me, Moiraine?” It was hard to say that. *What if it means her using the One Power? Would I rather forget I’m a man?* “Help me keep from—losing myself?”

“If I can keep you whole, I will. I promise you that, Perrin. But I will not endanger the struggle against the Shadow. You must know that, too.”

When he turned to look at her, she was regarding him unblinkingly. *And if your struggle means putting me in my grave tomorrow, will you do that, too?* He was icily sure that she would. “What have you not told me?”

“Do not presume too far, Perrin,” she said coldly. “Do not press me further than I think proper.”

He hesitated before asking the next question. “Can you do for me what you did for Lan? Can you shield my dreams?”

“I already have a Warder, Perrin.” Her lips quirked almost into a smile. “And one is all I will have. I am of the Blue Ajah, not the Green.”

“You know what I mean. I don’t want to be a Warder.” *Light, bound to an Aes Sedai the rest of my life? That’s as bad as the wolves.*

“It would not aid you, Perrin. The shielding is for dreams from the outside. The danger in your dreams is within you.” She opened the small book again. “You should sleep,” she said in dismissal. “Be wary of your dreams, but you must sleep sometime.” She turned a page, and he left.

Back in his own room, he eased the hold he kept on himself, eased it just a trifle, let his senses spread. The wolves were out there still, beyond the edges of the village, ringing Jarra. Almost immediately he snapped back to rigid self-control. “What I need is a city,” he muttered. That would keep them at bay. *After I find Rand. After I finish whatever has to be finished with him.* He was not sure how sorry he was that Moiraine could not shield him. The One Power or the wolves; that was a choice no man should have to make.

He left the fire laid on the hearthstone unlit, and threw open both windows. Cold night air rushed in. Tossing blankets and comforter on the floor, he lay down fully clothed on the lumpy bed, not bothering to try to find a comfortable position. His last thought before sleep came was that if anything would keep him from deep sleep and dangerous dreams, that mattress would.

He was in a long hallway, its high stone ceiling and walls glistening with damp and streaked by odd shadows. They lay in contorted strips, stopping as abruptly as they began, too dark for the light between them. He had no idea where the light came from.

"No," he said, then louder, "No! This is a dream. I need to wake up. Wake up!"

The hallway did not change.

Danger. It was a wolf's thought, faint and distant.

"I will wake up. I will!" He pounded a fist against the wall. It hurt, but he did not wake. He thought one of the sinuous shadows shifted away from his blow.

Run, brother. Run.

"Hopper?" he said wonderingly. He was sure he knew the wolf whose thoughts he heard. Hopper, who had envied the eagles. "Hopper is dead!"

Run!

Perrin lurched into a run, one hand holding his axe to keep the haft from banging against his leg. He had no idea where he was running, or why, but the urgency of Hopper's sending could not be ignored. *Hopper's dead,* he thought. *He's dead!* But Perrin ran.

Other hallways crossed the one he ran along, at odd angles, sometimes descending, sometimes climbing. None looked any different from the passage he was in, though. Damp stone walls unbroken by doors, and strips of darkness.

As he came on one of those crossing halls, he skidded to a halt. A man stood there, blinking at him uncertainly, in strangely cut coat and breeches, the coat flaring over his hips as the bottoms of the breeches flared over his boots. Both were bright yellow, and his boots were only a little paler.

"This is more than I can stand," the man said, to himself, not Perrin. He had an odd accent, quick and sharp. "Not only do I dream of peasants, now, but foreign peasants, from those clothes. Begone from my dreams, fellow!"

"Who are you?" Perrin asked. The man's eyebrows rose as if he were offended.

The strips of shadow around them writhed. One detached from the ceiling at one end and drifted down to touch the strange man's head. It appeared to tangle in his hair. The man's eyes widened, and everything seemed to happen at once. The shadow jerked back to the ceiling, ten feet overhead, trailing something pale. Wet drops splattered Perrin's face. A bone-rattling shriek shattered the air.

Frozen, Perrin stared at the bloody shape wearing the man's clothes, screaming and thrashing on the floor. Unbidden, his eyes rose to the pale thing like an empty sack that dangled from the ceiling. Part of it was already absorbed by the black strip, but he had no trouble recognizing a human skin, apparently whole and unbroken.

The shadows around him danced in agitation, and Perrin ran, pursued by dying screams. Ripples ran along the shadow strips, pacing him.

"Change, burn you!" he shouted. "I know it's a dream! Light burn you, change!"

Colorful tapestries hung along the walls between tall golden stands holding dozens of candles that illuminated white floor tiles and a ceiling painted with fluffy clouds and fanciful birds in flight. Nothing moved but the flickering candle flames along the length of that hall, stretching as far as he could see, or in the pointed arches of white stone that occasionally broke the walls.

Danger. The sending was even fainter than before. And more urgent, if that were possible.

Axe in hand, Perrin started warily down the hall, muttering to himself. "Wake up. Wake up, Perrin. If you know it's a dream, it changes or you wake up. Wake up, burn you!" The hallway stayed as solid as any he had ever walked.

He came abreast of the first of the pointed white archways. It let into a huge room, apparently windowless, but furnished as ornately as any palace, the furniture all carved and gilded and inlaid with ivory. A woman stood in the middle of the room, frowning at a tattered manuscript lying open on a table. A black-haired, black-eyed, beautiful woman clothed in white and silver.

Even as he recognized her, she lifted her head and looked straight at him. Her eyes widened, in shock, in anger. "You! What are you doing here? How did you—? You'll ruin things you could not begin to imagine!"

Abruptly the space seemed to flatten, as if he were suddenly staring at a picture of a room. The flat image appeared to turn sideways, become only a bright vertical line down the middle of blackness. The line flashed white, and was gone, leaving only the dark, blacker than black.

Just in front of Perrin's boots, the floor tiles came to an abrupt end. As he watched, the white edges dissolved into the black like sand washed away by water. He stepped back hastily.

Run.

Perrin turned, and Hopper was there, a big gray wolf, grizzled and scarred. "You are dead. I saw you die. I *felt* you die!" A sending flooded Perrin's mind.

Run now! You must not be here now. Danger. Great danger. Worse than all the Neverborn. You must go. Go now! Now!

"How?" Perrin shouted. "I want to go, but how?"

Go! Teeth bared, Hopper leaped for Perrin's throat.

With a strangled cry, Perrin sat up on the bed, hands going to his throat to hold in lifeblood. They met unbroken skin. He swallowed with relief, but the next moment his fingers touched a damp spot.

Almost falling in his haste, he scrambled off the bed, stumbled to the washstand and seized the pitcher, splashed water everywhere as he filled the basin. The water turned pink as he washed his face. Pink with the blood of that strangely dressed man.

More dark spots dotted his coat and breeches. He tore them off and tossed them into the furthest corner. He meant to leave them there. Simion could burn them.

A gust of wind whipped in the open window. Shivering in shirt and smallclothes, he sat on the floor and leaned back against the bed. *This should be uncomfortable enough.* Sourness tinged his thoughts, and worry, and fear. And determination. *I won't give in to this. I won't!*

He was still shivering when sleep finally came, a shallow half sleep filled with vague awareness of the room around him and thoughts of the cold. But the bad dreams that came were better than some others.

Rand huddled under the trees in the night, watching the heavy-shouldered black dog come nearer his hiding place. His side ached, the wound Moiraine could not quite Heal, but he ignored it. The moon gave barely enough light for him to make out the dog, waist-high, with its thick neck and massive head, and its teeth that seemed to shine like wet silver in the night. It sniffed the air and trotted toward him.

Closer, he thought. *Come closer. No warning for your master this time. Closer. That's it.* The dog was only ten paces away, now, a deep growl rumbling in its chest as it suddenly bounded forward. Straight at Rand.

The Power filled him. Something leaped from his outstretched hands; he was not sure what it was. A bar of white light, solid as steel. Liquid fire. For an instant, in the middle of that something, the dog seemed to become transparent, and then it was gone.

The white light faded except for the afterimage burned across Rand's vision. He sagged against the nearest tree trunk, the bark rough on his face. Relief and silent laughter shook him. *It worked. Light save me, it worked this time.* It had not always. There had been other dogs this night.

The One Power pulsed in him, and his stomach twisted with the Dark One's taint on *saidin*, wanted to empty itself. Sweat beaded on his face despite the cold night wind, and his mouth tasted full of sickness. He wanted to lie down and die. He wanted Nynaeve to give him some of her medicines, or Moiraine to Heal him, or. . . . Something, anything, to stop the sick feeling that was suffocating him.

But *saidin* flooded him with life, too, life and energy and awareness larded through the illness. Life without *saidin* was a pale copy. Anything else was a wan imitation.

But they can find me if I hold on. Track me, find me. I have to reach Tear. I'll find out there. If I am the Dragon, there'll be an end to it. And if I am not. . . . If it's all a lie, there will be an end to that, too. An end.

Reluctantly, with infinite slowness, he severed contact with *saidin*, gave up its embrace as if giving up life's breath. The night seemed drab. The shadows lost their infinite sharp shadings and washed together.

In the distance, to the west, a dog howled, a shivering cry in the silent night.

Rand's head came up. He peered in that direction as though he could see the dog if he tried hard enough.

A second dog answered the first, then another, and two more together, all spread out somewhere west of him.

"Hunt me," Rand snarled. "Hunt me if you will. I'm no easy meat. No more!"

Pushing himself away from the tree, he waded a shallow, icy stream, then settled into a steady trot eastward. Cold water filled his boots, and his side hurt, but he ignored both. The night was quiet again behind him, but he ignored that, too. *Hunt me. I can hunt, too. I am no easy meat.*

* * *

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CHAPTER 10

Secrets

Ignoring her companions for a moment, Egwene al'Vere stood in her stirrups hoping for a glimpse of Tar Valon in the distance, but all she could see was something indistinct, gleaming white in the morning sunlight. It had to be the city on the island, though. The lone, broken-topped mountain called Dragonmount, rising out of the rolling plain, had first appeared on the horizon late the afternoon before, and that lay just this side of the River Erinin from Tar Valon. It was a landmark, that mountain—one jagged fang sticking up out of rolling flatlands—easily seen for many miles, easy to avoid, as all did, even those who went to Tar Valon.

Dragonmount was where Lews Therin Kinslayer had died, so it was said; and other words had been spoken of the mountain, prophecy and warning. Rich reasons to stay away from its black slopes.

She had reason not to stay away, and more than one. Only in Tar Valon could she find the training she needed, the training she had to have. *I will never be collared again!* She pushed the thought away, but it came back turned end about. *I will never lose my freedom again!* In Tar Valon, Anaiya would resume testing her dreams; the Aes Sedai would have to, though she had found no real evidence that Egwene was a Dreamer, as Anaiya suspected. Egwene's dreams had been troubling since leaving Almoth Plain. Aside from dreams of the Seanchan—and those still made her wake sweating—she dreamed more and more of Rand. Rand running. Running toward something, but running away from something, too.

She peered harder toward Tar Valon. Anaiya would be there. *And Galad, too, perhaps.* She blushed in spite of herself, and banished him from her mind entirely. *Think about the weather. Think about anything else. Light, but it feels warm.*

This early in the year, with winter only yesterday's memory, white still capped Dragonmount, but here below, the snows were melted. Early shoots poked through the matted brown of last year's grasses, and where trees topped a low hill here and there, the first red of new growth was showing. After a winter spent traveling, sometimes trapped in village or camp for days by storms, sometimes covering less ground between sunrise and sunset, with snowdrifts belly-deep on the horses, than she could have walked by noon in better weather, it was good to see signs of spring.

Sweeping her thick wool cloak back out of her way, Egwene let herself drop down in the high-cantled saddle, and smoothed her skirts in a gesture of impatience. Her dark eyes filled with distaste. She had worn the dress, divided for riding by her own skill with a needle, for far too long, but the only other she had was even more grubby. And the same color, the dark gray of the Leashed Ones. The choice all those weeks ago, on beginning their ride to Tar Valon, had been dark gray or nothing.

"I swear I will never wear gray again, Bela," she told her shaggy mount, patting the mare's neck. *Not that I'll have much choice once we're back in the White Tower*, she thought. In the Tower, all novices wore white.

"Are you talking to yourself again?" Nynaeve asked, pulling her bay gelding closer. The two women were of a height as well as dressed alike, but the difference in their horses put the former Wisdom of Emond's Field a head taller. Nynaeve frowned now, and tugged at the thick braid of dark hair hanging over her shoulder, the way she did when worried or troubled, or sometimes when she was preparing to be particularly stubborn even for her. A Great Serpent ring on her finger marked her as one of the Accepted, not yet Aes Sedai, but a long step closer than Egwene. "Better you should be keeping watch."

Egwene held her tongue on the retort that she had been watching for Tar Valon. *Did she think I was standing in my stirrups because I do not like my saddle?* Nynaeve seemed to forget too often that she was not the Wisdom of Emond's Field any longer, and Egwene was no longer a child. *But she wears the ring and I do not—yet!—and for her, that means nothing has changed!*

"Do you wonder how Moiraine is treating Lan?" she asked sweetly, and had a moment of pleasure at the sharp jerk Nynaeve gave her braid. The pleasure faded quickly, though. Wounding remarks did not come naturally to her, and she knew Nynaeve's emotions concerning the Warder were like skeins of yarn after a kitten had gotten into the knitting basket. But Lan was no kitten, and Nynaeve would have to do something about the man before his stubborn-stupid nobility made her mad enough to kill him.

They were six altogether, all plainly dressed enough not to stand out in the villages and small towns they had encountered, yet perhaps as odd a party as had crossed the Caralain Grass anytime recently, four of them women, and one of the men in a litter slung between two horses. The litter horses carried light packs, as well, with supplies for the long stretches between villages the way they had come.

Six people, Egwene thought, *and how many secrets?* They all shared more than one, secrets that would have to be kept, perhaps, even in the White Tower. *Life was simpler back home.*

"Nynaeve, do you think Rand is all right? And Perrin?" she added hastily. She could not afford to pretend any longer that one day she would marry Rand; pretending would be all it was, now. She did not like that—she was not entirely reconciled to it—but she knew it.

"Your dreams? Have they been troubling you again?" Nynaeve sounded concerned, but Egwene was in no mood to accept sympathy.

She made her voice sound as everyday as she could manage. "From the rumors we heard, I can't tell what might be going on. They have everything I know about so twisted, so wrong."

"Everything has been wrong since Moiraine came into our lives," Nynaeve said brusquely. "Perrin and Rand. . . ." She hesitated, grimacing. Egwene thought Nynaeve believed everything that Rand had become was Moiraine's doing. "They will have to take care of themselves for now. I'm afraid we have something to worry about ourselves. Something is not right. I can . . . feel it."

"Do you know what?" Egwene asked.

"It feels almost like a storm." Nynaeve's dark eyes studied the morning sky, clear and blue, with only a few scattered white clouds, and she shook her head again. "Like a storm coming." Nynaeve had always been able to foretell the weather. Listening to the wind, it was called, and the Wisdom of every village was expected to do it, though many really could not. Yet since leaving Emond's Field, Nynaeve's ability had grown, or changed. The storms she felt sometimes had to do with men rather than wind, now.

Egwene bit her underlip, thinking. They could not afford to be stopped or slowed, not after coming so far, not so close to Tar Valon. For Mat's sake, and for reasons that her mind might tell her were more important than the life of one village youth, one childhood friend, but that her heart could not rate so high. She looked at the others, wondering if any of them had noticed something.

Verin Sedai, short and plump and all in shades of brown, rode apparently lost in thought, the hood of her cloak pulled forward till it all but hid her face, in the lead but letting her horse amble at its own pace. She was of the Brown Ajah, and the Brown sisters usually cared more for seeking out knowledge than for anything in the world around them. Egwene was not so sure of Verin's detachment, though. Verin had put herself hip-deep in the affairs of the world by being with them.

Elayne, of an age with Egwene and also a novice, but golden-haired and blue-eyed where Egwene was dark, rode back beside the litter where Mat lay unconscious. In the same gray as Egwene and Nynaeve, she was watching him with the worry they all felt. Mat had not roused in three days, now. The lean, long-haired man riding on the other side of the litter seemed to be trying to look everywhere without anyone noticing, and the lines of his face had deepened in concentration.

"Hurin," Egwene said, and Nynaeve nodded. They slowed to let the litter catch up to them. Verin ambled on ahead.

"Do you sense something, Hurin?" Nynaeve asked. Elayne lifted her eyes, suddenly intent, from Mat's litter.

With the three of them looking at him, the lean man shifted in his saddle and rubbed the side of his long nose. "Trouble," he said, curt and reluctant at the same time. "I think maybe . . . trouble."

A thief-taker for the King of Shienar, he did not wear a Shienaran warrior's topknot, yet the short sword and notched sword-breaker at his belt were worn with use. Years of experience seemed to have given him some talent at sniffing out wrongdoers, especially those who had done violence.

Twice on the journey he had advised them to leave a village after being there less than an hour. The first time, they had all refused, saying they were too tired, but before the night was done the innkeeper and two other men of the village had tried to murder them in their beds. They were only simple thieves, not Darkfriends, just greedy for the horses and whatever they had in their saddlebags and bundles. But the rest of the village knew of it, and apparently considered strangers fair gleanings. They had been forced to flee a mob waving axe handles and pitchforks. The second time, Verin ordered them to ride on as soon as Hurin spoke.

But the thief-taker was always wary when talking to any of his companions. Except Mat, back when Mat could talk; the two of them had joked and played at dice, when the women were not too close at hand. Egwene thought he might be uneasy at being alone, for all practical purposes, with an Aes Sedai and three women in training for sisterhood. Some men found facing a fight easier than facing Aes Sedai.

“What kind of trouble?” Elayne said.

She spoke easily, but with such a clear note of expecting to be answered, immediately and in detail, that Hurin opened his mouth. “I smell—” He cut himself short and blinked as if surprised, eyes darting from one woman to another. “Just a feeling,” he said finally. “A . . . a hunch. I’ve seen some tracks, yesterday, and today. A lot of horses. Twenty or thirty going this way, twenty or thirty that. It makes me wonder. That’s all. A feeling. But I say it’s trouble.”

Tracks? Egwene had not noticed them. Nynaeve said sharply, “I did not see anything worrisome in them.” Nynaeve prided herself on being as good a tracker as any man. “They were days old. What makes you think they are trouble?”

“I just think they are,” Hurin said slowly, as if he wanted to say more. He dropped his eyes, rubbing at his nose and inhaling deeply. “It’s been a long time since we saw a village,” he muttered. “Who knows what news from Falme has come before us? We might not find so good a welcome as we expect. I’m thinking these men could be brigands, killers. We should be wary, I’m thinking. If Mat was on his feet, I’d scout ahead, but maybe it’s best I don’t leave you alone.”

Nynaeve’s eyebrows lifted. “Do you believe we cannot look after ourselves?”

“The One Power won’t do you much good if somebody kills you before you can use it,” Hurin said, addressing the tall pommel of his saddle. “Begging your pardon, but I think I. . . . I’ll just ride up with Verin Sedai for a time.” He dug in his heels and galloped forward before any of them could speak again.

“Now that is a surprise,” Elayne said as Hurin slowed a little distance from the Brown sister. Verin did not seem to notice him any more than she noticed anything else, and he appeared content to leave it so. “He has been staying as far from Verin as he could ever since we left Toman Head. He always looks at her as if he's afraid of what she might say."

"Respecting Aes Sedai doesn't mean he is not afraid of them," Nynaeve said, then added, reluctantly, "Of us."

"If he thinks there might be trouble, we ought to send him out scouting." Egwene took a deep breath and gave the other two women as level a look as she could manage. "If there is trouble, we can defend ourselves better than he could with a hundred soldiers to help him."

"He doesn't know that," Nynaeve said flatly, "and I am not about to tell him. Or anyone else."

"I can imagine what Verin would have to say about it." Elayne sounded anxious. "I wish I had some idea how much she does know. Egwene, I don't know if my mother could help me if the Amyrlin found out, much less help the pair of you. Or even whether she would try." Elayne's mother was Queen of Andor. "She was only able to learn a little of the Power before she left the White Tower, for all she has lived as if she had been raised to full sister."

"We cannot hope to rely on Morgase," Nynaeve said. "She is in Caemlyn, and we will be in Tar Valon. No, we may be in enough trouble already for going off as we did, no matter what we've brought back. It will be best if we stay low, behave humbly, and do nothing to attract more attention than we already have."

Another time, Egwene would have laughed at the idea of Nynaeve pretending to be humble. Even Elayne managed a better job of it. But at present she did not feel like laughing. "And if Hurin is right? If we are attacked? He cannot defend us against twenty or thirty men, and we might be dead if we wait for Verin to do something. You said you sense a storm, Nynaeve."

"You do?" Elayne said. Red-gold curls swung as she shook her head. "Verin will not like it if we. . . ." She trailed off. "Whatever Verin likes or doesn't like, we may have to."

"I will do what must be done," Nynaeve said sharply, "if there is anything to be done, and you two will run, if need be. The White Tower may be all abuzz with your potential, but don't think they will not still you both if the Amyrlin Seat or the Hall of the Tower decides it is necessary."

Elayne swallowed hard. "If they would still us for it," she said in a faint voice, "they would still you, too. We should all run together; or act together. Hurin has been right before. If we want to live to be in trouble in the Tower, we may have to . . . to do what we must."

Egwene shivered. Stilled. Cut off from *saidar*, the female half of the True Source. Few Aes Sedai had ever incurred that penalty, yet there were deeds for which the Tower demanded stilling. Novices were required to learn the names of every Aes Sedai who had ever been stilled, and their crimes.

She could always feel the Source there, now, just out of sight, like the sun at noon over her shoulder. If she often caught nothing when she tried to touch *saidar*, she still wanted to touch it. The more she touched it, the more she wanted to, all the time, no matter what Sheriam Sedai, the Mistress of Novices, said about the dangers of growing too fond of the feel of the One Power. To be cut off from it; still able to sense *saidar*, but never to touch it again. . . .

Neither of the others seemed to want to talk, either.

To cover her shaking, she bent from her saddle to the gently swaying litter. Mat's blankets had become disarrayed, exposing a curved dagger in a golden sheath clutched in one hand, a ruby the size of a pigeon's egg capping the hilt. Careful not to touch the dagger, she eased the blankets back over his hand. He was only a few years older than she, but gaunt cheeks and sallow skin had aged him. His chest barely moved as he breathed hoarsely. A lumpy leather sack lay at his feet. She shifted the blanket to cover that, too. *We have to get Mat to the Tower*, she thought. *And the sack.*

Nynaeve leaned down as well, and felt Mat's forehead. "His fever is worse." She sounded worried. "If only I had some worrynot root or feverbane."

"Perhaps if Verin tried Healing again," Elayne said.

Nynaeve shook her head. She smoothed Mat's hair back and sighed, then straightened before speaking. "She says it is all she can do to keep him alive, now, and I believe her. I—I tried Healing last night myself, but nothing happened."

Elayne gasped. "Sheriam Sedai says we mustn't try to Heal until we've been guided step by step a hundred times."

"You could have killed him," Egwene said sharply.

Nynaeve sniffed loudly. "I was Healing before I ever thought of going to Tar Valon, even if I didn't know I was. But it seems I need my medicines to make it work for me. If I only had some feverbane. I do not think he has much time left. Hours, maybe.”

Egwene thought she sounded almost as unhappy about knowing, about how she knew, as she did about Mat. She wondered again why Nynaeve had chosen to go to Tar Valon for training at all. She had learned to channel unknowingly, even if she could not always control the act, and had passed the crisis that killed three out of four women who learned without Aes Sedai guidance. Nynaeve said she wanted to learn more, but often she was as reluctant about it as a child being dosed with sheepstongue root.

“We will have him in the White Tower soon,” Egwene said. “They can Heal him there. The Amyrlin will take care of him. She will take care of everything.” She did not look at where Mat’s blanket covered the sack at his feet. The other two women were studiously not looking at it, either. There were some secrets they would all be relieved to shed.

“Riders,” Nynaeve said suddenly, but Egwene had already seen them. Two dozen men appearing over a low rise ahead, white cloaks flapping as they galloped, angling toward them.

“Children of the Light,” Elayne said, like a curse. “I think we have found your storm, and Hurin’s trouble.”

Verin had pulled up, a hand on Hurin’s arm to stop him drawing his sword. Egwene touched the lead litter horse to stop it just behind the plump Aes Sedai.

“Let me do all the talking, children,” the Aes Sedai said placidly, pushing her cowl back to reveal gray in her hair. Egwene was not sure how old Verin was; she thought old enough to be a grandmother, but the gray streaks were the Aes Sedai’s only signs of age. “And whatever you do, do not allow them to make you angry.”

Verin’s face was as calm as her voice, but Egwene thought she saw the Aes Sedai measuring the distance to Tar Valon. The tops of the towers were visible now, and a high bridge arching over the river to the island, tall enough for the trading ships that plied the river to sail beneath.

Close enough to see, Egwene thought, *but too far to do any good.*

For a moment she was sure the oncoming Whitecloaks meant to charge them, but their leader raised a hand and they abruptly drew rein a scant forty paces off, scattering dust and dirt ahead of them.

Nynaeve muttered angrily under her breath, and Elayne sat straight and full of pride, appearing likely to berate the Whitecloaks for ill manners.

Hurin still had a grip on his sword hilt; he looked ready to put himself between the women and the Whitecloaks no matter what Verin said. Verin mildly waved a hand in front of her face to dispel the dust. The white-cloaked riders spread out in an arc, blocking the way firmly.

Their breastplates and conical helmets shone from polishing, and even the mail on their arms gleamed brightly. Each man had the flaring, golden sun on his breast. Some fitted arrows to bows, which they did not raise, but held ready. Their leader was a young man, yet he wore two golden knots of rank beneath the sunburst on his cloak.

"Two Tar Valon witches, unless I miss my guess, yes?" he said with a tight smile that pinched his narrow face. Arrogance brightened his eyes, as if he knew some truth others were too stupid to see. "And two nits, and a pair of lapdogs, one sick and one old." Hurin bristled, but Verin's hand restrained him. "Where do you come from?" the Whitecloak demanded.

"We come from the west," Verin said placidly. "Move out of our way, and let us continue. The Children of the Light have no authority here."

"The Children have authority wherever the Light is, witch, and where the Light is not, we bring it. Answer my questions! Or must I take you to our camp and let the Questioners ask?"

Mat could not afford any more delay in reaching help in the White Tower. And more importantly—Egwene winced to think of it that way—more importantly, they could not let the contents of that sack fall into Whitecloak hands.

"I have answered you," Verin said, still calm, "and more politely than you deserve. Do you really believe you can stop us?" Some of the Whitecloaks raised their bows as if she had uttered a threat, but she went on, her voice never rising. "In some lands you may hold sway by your threats, but not here, in sight of Tar Valon. Can you truly believe that in this place, you will be allowed to carry off Aes Sedai?"

The officer shifted uneasily in his saddle, as though suddenly doubting whether he could back up his words. Then he glanced back at his men—either to remind himself of their support or because he had remembered they were watching—and with that he took himself in hand. "I have no fear of your Darkfriend ways, witch. Answer me, or answer the Questioners." He did not sound as forceful as he had.

Verin opened her mouth as if for idle conversation, but before she could speak, Elayne jumped in, voice ringing with command. "I am Elayne, Daughter-Heir of Andor. If you do not move aside at once, you will have Queen Morgase to answer to, Whitecloak!" Verin hissed with vexation.

The Whitecloak looked taken aback for an instant, but then he laughed. "You think it so, yes? Perhaps you will discover Morgase no longer has so much love for witches, girl. If I take you from them and return you to her side, she will thank me for it. Lord Captain Eamon Valda would like very much to speak to you, Daughter-Heir of Andor." He raised a hand, whether to gesture or signal his men, Egwene could not say. Some of the Whitecloaks gathered their reins.

There's no more time to wait, Egwene thought. *I will not be chained again!* She opened herself to the One Power. It was a simple exercise, and after long practice, it went much more swiftly than the first time she had tried. In a heartbeat her mind emptied of everything, everything but a single rosebud, floating in emptiness. She was the rosebud, opening to the light, opening to *saidar,* the female half of the True Source. The Power flooded her, threatening to sweep her away. It was like being filled with light, with the Light, like being one with the Light, a glorious ecstasy. She fought to keep from being overwhelmed, and focused on the ground in front of the Whitecloak officer's horse. A small patch of ground; she did not want to kill anyone. *You will not take me!*

The man's hand was still going up. With a roar the ground in front of him erupted in a narrow fountain of dirt and rocks higher than his head. Screaming, his horse reared, and he rolled out of his saddle like a sack.

Before he hit the ground, Egwene shifted her focus closer to the other Whitecloaks, and the ground threw up another small explosion. Bela danced sideways, but she controlled the mare with reins and knees without even thinking of it. Wrapped inside emptiness, she was still surprised at a third eruption, not of her making, and a fourth. Distantly, she was aware of Nynaeve and Elayne, both enveloped in the glow that said they, too, had embraced *saidar*, had been embraced by it. That aura would not be visible to any but another woman who could channel, but the results were visible to all. Explosions harried the Whitecloaks on every side, showering them with dirt, shaking them with noise, sending their horses plunging wildly.

Hurin stared around him, mouth open and obviously as frightened as the Whitecloaks, as he tried to keep the litter horses and his own mount from bolting. Verin was wide-eyed with astonishment and anger. Her mouth worked furiously, but whatever she might be saying was lost in the thunder.

And then the Whitecloaks were running away, some dropping their bows in panic, galloping as if the Dark One himself were at their backs. All but the young officer, who was picking himself up off the ground. Shoulders hunched, he stared at Verin, the whites of his eyes showing all the way ’round. Dust stained his fine white cloak, and his face, but he did not seem to notice. “Kill me, then, witch,” he said shakily. “Go ahead. Kill me, as you killed my father!”

The Aes Sedai ignored him. Her attention was all on her companions. As if they, too, had forgotten their officer, the fleeing Whitecloaks vanished over the same rise where they had first appeared, all in a body and none looking back. The officer’s horse ran with them.

Under Verin’s furious gaze, Egwene let go of *saidar*, slowly, unwillingly. It was always hard, letting go. Even more slowly, the glow around Nynaeve vanished. Nynaeve was frowning hard at the pinch-faced Whitecloak before them, as if he might still be capable of some sort of trickery. Elayne looked shocked by what she had done.

“What you have done,” Verin began, then stopped to take a deep breath. Her stare took in all three of the younger women. “What you have done is an abomination. An abomination! An Aes Sedai does not use the Power as a weapon except against Shadowspawn, or in the last extreme to defend her life. The Three Oaths—”

“They were ready to kill us,” Nynaeve broke in heatedly. “Kill us, or carry us off to be tortured. He was giving the order.”

“It . . . it was not really using the Power as a weapon, Verin Sedai.” Elayne held her chin high, but her voice shook. “We did not hurt anyone, or even try to hurt anyone. Surely—”

“Do not split hairs with me!” Verin snapped. “When you become full Aes Sedai—if you ever become full Aes Sedai!—you will be bound to obey the Three Oaths, but even novices are expected to do their best to live as if already bound.”

“What about him?” Nynaeve gestured to the Whitecloak officer, still standing there and looking stunned. Her face was as tight as a drum; she seemed almost as angry as the Aes Sedai. “He was about to take us prisoner. Mat will die if he doesn’t reach the Tower soon, and . . . and. . . .”

Egwene knew what Nynaeve was struggling not to say aloud. *And we can’t let that sack fall into any hands but the Amyrlin’s.*

Verin regarded the Whitecloak wearily. “He was only trying to bully us, child. He knew very well he could not make us go where we did not want, not without more trouble than he was willing to accept. Not here, not in sight of Tar Valon. I could have talked us past him, with a little time and a little patience. Oh, he might well have tried to kill us if he could have done it from hiding, but no Whitecloak with the brains of a goat will try harming an Aes Sedai who knows he is there. See what you have done! What stories will those men tell, and what harm will it do?”

The officer’s face had reddened when she mentioned hiding. “It is no cowardice not to charge the powers that Broke the World,” he burst out. “You witches want to Break the World again, in the service of the Dark One!” Verin shook her head in tired disbelief.

Egwene wished she could mend some of the damage she had done. “I am very sorry for what I did,” she told the officer. She was glad she was not bound to speak no word that was not true, as full Aes Sedai were, because what she had said was only half true at best. “I should not have, and I apologize. I am sure Verin Sedai will Heal your bruises.” He stepped back as if she had offered to have him skinned alive, and Verin sniffed loudly. “We have come a long way,” Egwene went on, “all the way from Toman Head, and if I weren’t so tired, I would never have—”

“Be quiet, girl!” Verin shouted at the same time the Whitecloak snarled, “Toman Head? Falme! You were at Falme!” He stumbled back another step and half drew his sword. From the look on his face, Egwene did not know whether he meant to attack, or to defend himself. Hurin moved his horse closer to the Whitecloak, a hand on his sword-breaker, but the narrow-faced man went on in a rant, spittle flying with his fury. “My father died at Falme! Byar told me! You witches killed him for your false Dragon! I’ll see you dead for it! I will see you burn!”

“Impetuous children,” Verin sighed. “Almost as bad as boys for letting your mouths run away with you. Go with the Light, my son,” she told the Whitecloak.

Without another word, she guided them around the man, but his shouts followed after. “My name is Dain Bornhald! Remember it, Darkfriends! I will make you fear my name! Remember my name!”

As Bornhald’s shouts faded behind them, they rode in silence for a time. Finally, Egwene said to no one in particular, “I was only trying to make things better.”

“Better!” Verin muttered. “You must learn there is a time to speak all of the truth, and a time to govern your tongue. The least of the lessons you must learn, but important, if you mean to live long enough to wear the shawl of a full sister. Did it never occur to you that word of Falme might have come ahead of us?”

“Why should it have occurred to her?” Nynaeve asked. “No one we’ve met before this had heard more than rumors, if that, and we have outrun even rumor in the last month.”

“And all word has to come along the same roads we used?” Verin replied. “We have moved slowly. Rumor takes wing along a hundred paths. Always plan for the worst, child; that way, all your surprises will be pleasant ones.”

“What did he mean about my mother?” Elayne said suddenly. “He must have been lying. She would never turn against Tar Valon.”

“The Queens of Andor have always been friends to Tar Valon, but all things change.” Verin’s face was calm again, yet there was a tightness in her voice. She turned in her saddle to look over them, the three young women, Hurin, Mat in the litter. “The world is strange, and all things change.” They capped the ridge; a village was in sight ahead of them now, yellow tile roofs clustered around the great bridge that led to Tar Valon. “Now you must truly be on your guard,” Verin told them. “Now the real danger begins.”

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CHAPTER 11

Tar Valon

The small village of Darein had lain beside the River Erinin almost as long as Tar Valon had occupied its island. Darein's small, red and brown brick houses and shops, its stone-paved streets, gave a feel of permanence, but the village had been burned in the Trolloc Wars, sacked when Artur Hawkwing's armies besieged Tar Valon, looted more than once during the War of the Hundred Years, and put to the torch again in the Aiel War, not quite twenty years before. An unquiet history for a little village, but Darein's place, at the foot of one of the bridges leading out to Tar Valon, ensured it would always be rebuilt, however many times it was destroyed. So long as Tar Valon stood, at least.

At first it seemed to Egwene that Darein was expecting war again. A square of pikemen marched along the streets, ranks and files bristling like a carding comb, followed by bowmen in flat, rimmed helmets, with filled quivers riding at their hips and bows slanted across their chests. A squadron of armored horsemen, faces hidden behind the steel bars of their helmets, gave way to Verin and her party at a wave of their officer's gauntleted hand. All wore the White Flame of Tar Valon, like a snowy teardrop, on their breasts.

Yet townspeople went about their business with apparent unconcern, the market throng dividing around the soldiers as if marching men were obstructions they were long used to. A few men and women carrying trays of fruit kept pace with the soldiers, trying to interest them in wrinkled apples and pears pulled from winter cellars, but aside from those few, shopkeepers and hawkers alike paid the soldiers no mind. Verin seemingly ignored them, too, as she led Egwene and the others through the village to the great bridge, arching over half a mile or more of water like lace woven from stone.

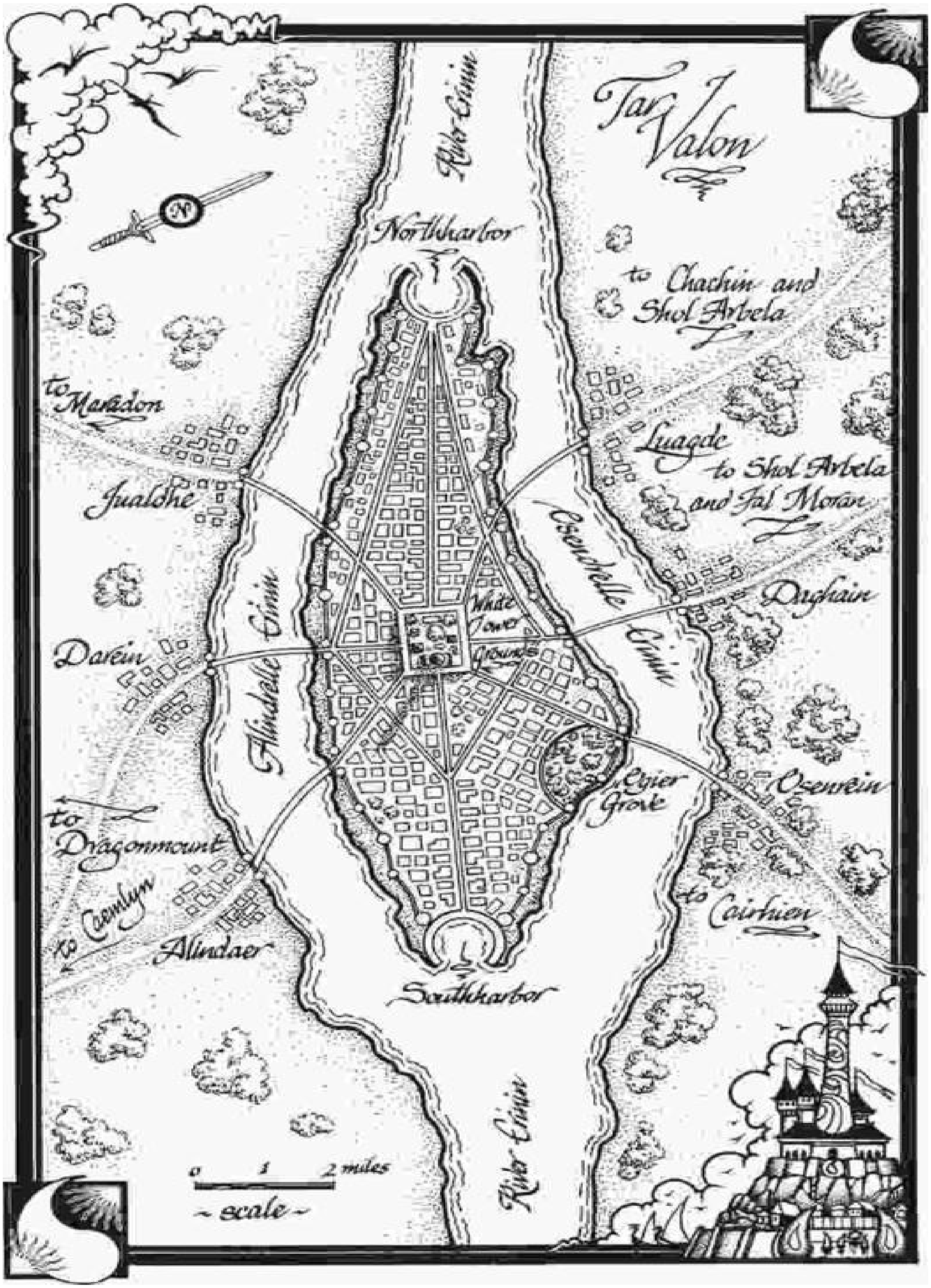
Tar Valon
River Erinin
Northharbor
to Chachin and Shol Arbela
to Maradon
Luagde
to Shol Arbela and Fal Moran
Jualdhe
Osenrelle Erinin
Daghain
White Tower Grounds
Darein
Alindrelle Erinin
Ogier Grove
Osenrein
to Dragonmount
to Caemlyn
to Cairhien
Alindaer
Southharbor
River Erinin
0 1 2 miles
~ scale ~

At the foot of the bridge more soldiers stood guard, a dozen pikemen and half that many archers, checking everyone who wanted to cross. Their officer, a balding man with his helmet hanging on his sword hilt, looked harassed by the waiting line of people afoot and on horseback, people with carts drawn by oxen or horses or the owner. The line was only a hundred paces long, but every time one was let onto the bridge, another joined the far end. Just the same, the balding man seemed to be taking his time about making sure each one had a right to enter Tar Valon before he let them go.

He opened his mouth angrily when Verin led her party to the head of the line, then caught a good look at her face and hurriedly stuffed his helmet onto his head. No one who really knew them needed a Great Serpent ring to identify Aes Sedai. “Good morrow to you, Aes Sedai,” he said, bowing with a hand to his heart. “Good morrow. Go right across, if it please you.”

Verin reined in beside him. A murmur rose from the waiting line, but no one voiced a complaint aloud. “Trouble from the Whitecloaks, guardsman?”

Why are we stopping? Egwene wondered urgently. “Has she forgotten about Mat?”

“Not really, Aes Sedai,” the officer said. “No fighting. They tried to move into Eldone Market, the other side of the river, but we showed them better. The Amyrlin means to make sure they don’t try again.”

“Verin Sedai,” Egwene began carefully, “Mat—”

“In a moment, child,” the Aes Sedai said, sounding only halfway absentminded. “I have not forgotten him.” Her attention went right back to the officer. “And the outlying villages?”

The man shrugged uncomfortably. “We can’t keep the Whitecloaks out, Aes Sedai, but they move off when our patrols ride in. They seem to be trying to goad us.” Verin nodded, and would have ridden on, but the officer spoke again. “Pardon, Aes Sedai, but you’ve obviously come from a distance. Have you any news? Fresh rumors come upriver with every trading vessel. They say there’s a new false Dragon out west somewhere. Why, they even say he has Artur Hawkwing’s armies, back from the dead, following him, and that he killed a lot of Whitecloaks and destroyed a city—Falme, they call it—in Tarabon, some say.”

“They say Aes Sedai helped him!” a man’s voice shouted from the waiting line. Hurin breathed deeply, and shifted himself as if he expected violence.

Egwene looked ’round, but there was no sign of whoever had shouted. Everyone appeared to be concerned only with waiting, patiently or impatiently, for his turn to cross. Things had changed, and not for the better. When she had left Tar Valon, any man who spoke against Aes Sedai would have been lucky to escape with a punch in the nose from whoever overheard. Red in the face, the officer was glaring down the line.

“Rumors are seldom true,” Verin told him. “I can tell you that Falme still stands. It isn’t even in Tarabon, guardsman. Listen less to rumor, and more to the

Amyrlin Seat. The Light shine on you.” She lifted her reins, and he bowed as she led the others past him.

The bridge struck Egwene with wonder, as the bridges of Tar Valon always did. The openwork walls looked intricate enough to tax the best craftswoman at her lace-frame. It hardly seemed that such could have been done with stone, or that it could stand even its own weight. The river rolled, strong and steady, fifty paces or more below, and for all that half mile the bridge flowed unsupported from riverbank to island.

Even more wondrous, in its own way, was the feeling that the bridge was taking her home. More wondrous, and shocking. *Emond’s Field is my home.* But it was in Tar Valon that she would learn what she must to keep her alive, to keep her free. It was in Tar Valon that she would learn—must learn—why her dreams disturbed her so, and why they sometimes seemed to have meanings she could not puzzle out. Tar Valon was where her life was tied, now. If she ever returned to Emond’s Field—the “if” hurt, but she had to be honest—if she returned, it would be to visit, to see her parents. She had already gone beyond being an innkeeper’s daughter. Those bonds would not hold her again, either, not because she hated them, but because she had outgrown them.

The bridge was only the beginning. It arched straight to the walls that surrounded the island, high walls of gleaming white, silver-streaked stone, whose tops looked down on the bridge’s height. At intervals, guard towers interrupted the walls, of the same white stone, their massive footings washed by the river. But above the walls and beyond rose the true towers of Tar Valon, the towers of story, pointed spires and flutes and spirals, some connected by airy bridges a good hundred paces or more above the ground. And still only the beginning.

There were no guards on the bronze-clad gates, and they stood wide enough for twenty abreast to ride through, opening onto one of the broad avenues that crisscrossed the island. Spring might barely have come, but the air already smelled of flowers and perfumes and spices.

The city took Egwene’s breath as if she had never seen it before. Every square and street crossing had its fountain, or its monument or statue, some atop great columns as high as towers, but it was the city itself that dazzled the eye. What was plain in form might have so many ornaments and carvings that it seemed an ornament itself, or, lacking decoration, used its form alone for grandeur. Great buildings and small, in stone of every color, looking like shells, or waves, or wind-sculpted cliffs, flowing and fanciful, captured from nature or the flights of men’s minds. The dwellings, the inns, the very stables—even the most insignificant buildings in Tar Valon had been made for beauty. Ogier stonemasons had built most of the city in the long years after the Breaking of the World, and they maintained it had been their finest work.

Men and women of every nation thronged the streets. They were dark of skin, and pale, and everything in between, their garments in bright colors and patterns, or drab, but decked with fringes and braids and shining buttons, or stark and severe; showing more skin than Egwene thought proper, or revealing nothing but eyes and fingertips. Sedan chairs and litters wove through the crowds, the trotting bearers crying "Give way!" Closed carriages inched along, liveried coachmen shouting "Hiya!" and "Ho!" as if they believed they might achieve more than a walk. Street musicians played flute or harp or pipes, sometimes accompanying a juggler or an acrobat, always with a cap set out for coins. Wandering hawkers cried their wares, and shopkeepers standing in front of their shops shouted the excellence of their goods. A hum filled the city like the song of a thing alive.

Verin had pulled her cowl back up, hiding her face. No one seemed to be paying them any mind in these crowds, Egwene thought. Not even Mat in his horse litter drew a second glance, though some folk did edge away from it as they hurried past. People sometimes brought their sick to the White Tower for Healing, and whatever he had might be catching.

Egwene rode up beside Verin and leaned close. "Do you really expect trouble now? We are in the city. We are almost there." The White Tower stood in plain sight now, the great building gleaming broad and tall above the rooftops.

"I always expect trouble," Verin replied placidly, "and so should you. In the Tower most of all. You must all of you be more careful than ever, now. Your . . . tricks"—her mouth tightened for an instant before serenity returned—"frightened away the Whitecloaks, but inside the Tower they may well bring you death or stilling."

"I would not do that in the Tower," Egwene protested. "None of us would." Nynaeve and Elayne had joined them, leaving Hurin to mind the litter horses. They nodded, Elayne fervently, and Nynaeve, it seemed to Egwene, as if she had reservations.

"You should not do it ever again, child. You must not! Ever!" Verin eyed them sideways 'round the edge of her cowl, and shook her head. "And I truly hope you have learned the folly of speaking when you should be silent." Elayne's face went crimson, and Egwene's cheeks grew hot. "Once we enter the Tower grounds, hold your tongues and accept whatever happens. *Whatever* happens! You know nothing of what awaits us in the Tower, and if you did, you would not know how to handle it. So be silent."

"I will do as you say, Verin Sedai," Egwene said, and Elayne echoed her. Nynaeve sniffed. The Aes Sedai stared at her, and she nodded reluctantly.

The street opened into a vast square, centered in the city, and in the middle of the square stood the White Tower, shining in the sun, rising until it seemed to touch the sky from a palace of domes and delicate spires and other shapes surrounded by the Tower grounds. There were surprisingly few people in the square. No one intruded on the Tower unless he had business there, Egwene reminded herself uneasily.

Hurin led the horse litter forward as they entered the square. “Verin Sedai, I must leave you now.” He eyed the Tower once, then managed not to look at it again, though it was hard to look at anything else. Hurin came from a land where Aes Sedai were respected, but it was one thing to respect them and quite another to be surrounded by them.

“You have been a great help on our journey, Hurin,” Verin told him, “and a long journey it has been. There will be a place in the Tower for you to rest before you travel on.”

Hurin shook his head emphatically. “I cannot waste a day, Verin Sedai. Not another hour. I must return to Shienar, to tell King Easar, and Lord Agelmar, the truth of what happened at Falme. I must tell them about—” He cut off abruptly and looked around. There was no one close enough to overhear, but he still lowered his voice and said only, “About Rand. That the Dragon is Reborn. There must be trading ships heading upriver, and I mean to be on the next to sail.”

“Go in the Light, then, Hurin of Shienar,” Verin said.

“The Light illumine all of you,” he replied, gathering his reins. Yet he hesitated a moment, then added, “If you need me—ever—send word to Fal Dara, and I’ll find a way to come.” Clearing his throat as if embarrassed, he turned his horse and trotted away, heading beyond the Tower. All too soon he was lost to sight.

Nynaeve gave an exasperated shake of her head. “Men! They always say to send for them if you need them, but when you do need one, you need him right then.”

“No man can help where we are going now,” Verin said dryly. “Remember. Be silent.”

Egwene felt a sense of loss with Hurin’s going. He would barely talk to any of them, except Mat, and Verin was right. He was only a man, and helpless as a babe when it came to facing whatever might await them in the Tower. Yet his leaving made their number one less, and she could never help thinking that a man with a sword was useful to have around. And he had been a link to Rand, and Perrin. *I have my own troubles to worry about.* Rand and Perrin would have to make do with Moiraine to look after them. *And Min will certainly look after Rand*, she thought with a flash of jealousy that she tried to suppress. She almost succeeded.

With a sigh, she took up the lead of the horse litter. Mat lay bundled to his chin; his breathing was a dry rasp. *Soon*, she thought. *You’ll be Healed soon, now.*

And we'll find out what's waiting for us. She wished Verin would stop trying to frighten them. She wished she did not think Verin had reason to frighten them.

Verin took them around the Tower grounds to a small side gate that stood open, with two guards. Pausing, the Aes Sedai pushed back her cowl and leaned from her saddle to speak softly to one of the men. He gave a start, and a surprised look at Egwene and the others. With a quick, "As you command, Aes Sedai," he took off into the grounds at a run. Verin was already riding through the gates as he spoke. She rode as if there were no hurry.

Egwene followed with the litter, exchanging glances with Nynaeve and Elayne, wondering what Verin had told the man.

A gray stone guardhouse stood just inside the gate, shaped like a six-pointed star lying on its side. A small knot of guards lounged in the doorway; they left off talking and bowed as Verin rode past.

This part of the Tower grounds could have been some lord's park, with trees and pruned shrubs and wide graveled paths. Other buildings were visible through the trees, and the Tower itself loomed over everything.

The path led them to a stableyard among the trees, where grooms in leather vests came running to take their horses. At the Aes Sedai's direction, some of the grooms unfastened the litter and set it gently off to one side. As the horses were led away into the stable, Verin took the leather sack from Mat's feet and tucked it carelessly under one arm.

Nynaeve paused in knuckling her back and frowned at the Aes Sedai. "You said he has hours, perhaps. Are you just going to—"

Verin held up a hand, but whether it was the gesture that stopped Nynaeve or the crunch of feet approaching on gravel, Egwene could not say.

In a moment Sheriam Sedai appeared, followed by three of the Accepted, their white dresses ringed at the hem with the colors of all seven Ajahs from Blue to Red, and two husky men in rough, laborer's coats. The Mistress of Novices was a slightly plump woman, with the high cheekbones that were common in Saldaea. Flame-red hair and clear, tilted green eyes made her smooth Aes Sedai features striking. She eyed Egwene and the others calmly, but her mouth was tight.

"So you have brought back our three runaways, Verin. With everything that happened, I could almost wish you had not."

"We did not—" Egwene began, but Verin cut her off with a sharp, "BE SILENT!" Verin stared at her—at each of the three of them—as if the intensity of her look could hold their mouths shut.

Egwene was sure that, for her part, it could. She had never seen Verin angry before. Nynaeve crossed her arms beneath her breasts and muttered under her breath, but she said nothing. The three Accepted behind Sheriam kept their silence, of course, but Egwene thought she could see their ears grow from listening.

When she was certain Egwene and the others would remain still, Verin turned back to Sheriam. “The boy must be taken somewhere away from everyone. He is ill, dangerously so. Dangerous to others as well as to himself.”

“I was told you had a litter to be carried.” Sheriam motioned the two men to the litter, spoke a quiet word to one, and as quickly as that Mat was whisked away.

Egwene opened her mouth to say he needed help now, but at Verin’s stare, quick and furious, she closed it again. Nynaeve was tugging her braid nearly hard enough to pull it out of her head.

“I suppose,” Verin said, “that the whole Tower knows we have returned by now?”

“Those who do not know,” Sheriam told her, “will know before much longer. Comings and goings have become the first topic of conversation and gossip. Even before Falme, and far ahead of the war in Cairhien. Did you think to keep it secret?”

Verin gathered the leather sack in both arms. “I must see the Amyrlin. Immediately.”

“And what of these three?”

Verin considered Egwene and her friends, frowning. “They must be closely held until the Amyrlin wishes to see them. If she does wish to. Closely held, mind. Their own rooms will do, I think. No need for cells. Not a word to anyone.”

Verin was still speaking to Sheriam, but Egwene knew the last had been meant as a reminder to her and the others. Nynaeve’s brows were drawn down, and she jerked at her braid as if she wanted to hit something. Elayne’s blue eyes were open wide, and her face was even paler than usual. Egwene was not sure which feelings she shared, anger or fear or worry. Some of all three, she thought.

With a last, searching glance at her three traveling companions, Verin hurried off, clutching the sack to her chest, cloak flapping behind her. Sheriam put her fists on her hips and studied Egwene and the other two. For a moment Egwene felt a lessening of tension. The Mistress of Novices always kept a steady temper and a sympathetic sense of humor even when she was giving you extra chores for breaking the rules.

But Sheriam’s voice was grim when she spoke. “Not a word, Verin Sedai said, and not a word shall it be. If one of you speaks—except to answer an Aes Sedai, of course—I’ll make you wish you had nothing but a switching and a few hours scrubbing floors to worry about. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Aes Sedai,” Egwene said, and heard the other two say the same, although Nynaeve pronounced the words like a challenge.

Sheriam made a disgusted sound in her throat, almost a growl. “Fewer girls now come to the Tower to be trained than once did, but they still come. Most leave never having learned to sense the True Source, much less touch it. A few learn enough not to harm themselves before they go. A bare handful can aspire to be raised to the Accepted, and fewer still to wear the shawl. It is a hard life, a hard discipline, yet every novice fights to hold on, to attain the ring and the shawl. Even when they are so afraid they cry themselves to sleep every night, they struggle to hold on. And you three, who have more ability born in you than I ever hoped to see in my lifetime, left the Tower without permission, ran away not even half-trained, like irresponsible children, stayed away for months. And now you ride back in as if nothing has happened, as if you can take up your training again on the morrow.” She let out a long breath as if she might explode otherwise. “Faolain!”

The three Accepted jumped as if they had been caught eavesdropping, and one, a dark, curly-haired woman, stepped forward. They were all young women, but still older than Nynaeve. Nynaeve’s rapid Acceptance had been extraordinary. In the normal course of things, it took years as a novice to earn the Great Serpent rings they wore, and would take years more before they could hope to be raised to full Aes Sedai.

“Take them to their rooms,” Sheriam commanded, “and keep them there. They may have bread, cold broth, and water until the Amyrlin Seat says otherwise. And if one of them speaks even a word, you may take her to the kitchens and set her to scrubbing pots.” She whirled and stalked away, even her back expressing anger.

Faolain eyed Egwene and the others with almost a hopeful air, especially Nynaeve, who wore a glower like a mask. Faolain’s round face held no love for those who broke the rules so extravagantly, and less for one like Nynaeve, a wilder who had earned her ring without ever being a novice, who had channeled power before she ever entered Tar Valon. When it became obvious that Nynaeve meant to keep her anger to herself, Faolain shrugged. “When the Amyrlin sends for you, you’ll probably be stilled.”

“Give over, Faolain,” another of the Accepted said. The oldest of the three, she had a willowy neck and coppery skin, and a graceful way of moving. “I will take you,” she told Nynaeve. “I am called Theodrin, and I, too, am a wilder. I will hold you to Sheriam Sedai’s order, but I will not bait you. Come.”

Nynaeve gave Egwene and Elayne a worried look, then sighed and let Theodrin lead her away.

“Wilders,” Faolain muttered. On her tongue, it sounded like a curse. She turned her stare to Egwene.

The third Accepted, a pretty, apple-cheeked young woman, stationed herself beside Elayne. Her mouth was turned up at the corners as if she liked to smile, but the stern look she gave Elayne said she would brook no nonsense now.

Egwene returned Faolain’s stare with as much calm as she could manage, and, she hoped, a measure of the haughty, silent contempt that Elayne had adopted. *Red Ajah*, she thought. *This one will definitely choose the Reds.* But it was hard not to think of her own troubles. *Light, what are they going to do to us*? She meant the Aes Sedai, the Tower, not these women.

“Well, come along,” Faolain snapped. “It’s bad enough I have to stand guard on your door without standing here all day. Come along.”

Taking a deep breath, Egwene gripped Elayne’s hand and followed. *Light, let them be Healing Mat.*

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CHAPTER 12

The Amyrlin Seat

Siuan Sanche paced the length of her study, pausing now and again to glance, with a blue-eyed gaze that had made rulers stammer, at a carved nightwood box on a long table centered in the room. She hoped she would not have to use any of the carefully drawn documents within it. They had been prepared and sealed in secret, by her own hand, to cover a dozen possible eventualities. She had laid a warding on the box so that if any hand but hers opened it, the contents would flash to ash in an instant; very likely the box itself would burst into flame.

“And burn the thieving fisher-bird, whoever she might be, so she never forgets it, I hope,” she muttered. For the hundredth time since being told that Verin had returned, she readjusted her stole on her shoulders without realizing what she was doing. It hung below her waist, broad and striped with the colors of the seven Ajahs. The Amyrlin Seat was of all Ajahs and of none, no matter from which she had been raised.

The room was ornate, for it had belonged to generations of women who had worn the stole. The tall fireplace and broad, cold hearth were all carved golden marble from Kandor, and the diamond-shaped floor tiles, polished redstone from the Mountains of Mist. The walls were panels of some pale striped wood, hard as iron and carved in fantastic beasts and birds of unbelievable plumage, panels brought from the lands beyond the Aiel Waste by the Sea Folk before Artur Hawkwing was born. Tall, arched windows, open now to let in the new, green smells, let onto a balcony overlooking her small private garden, where she seldom had time to walk.

All that grandeur was in stark contrast to the furnishings Siuan Sanche had brought to the room. The one table and the stout chair behind it were plain, if well polished with age and beeswax, as was the only other chair in the room. That stood off to one side, close enough to be drawn up if she wished a visitor to sit. A small Tairen rug lay in front of the table, woven in simple patterns of blue and brown and gold. A single drawing, tiny fishing boats among reeds, hung above the fireplace. Half a dozen stands held open books about the floor. That was all. Even the lamps would not have been out of place in a farmer’s house.

Siuan Sanche had been born poor in Tear, and had worked on her father’s fishing boat, one just like the boats in the drawing, in the delta called the Fingers of the Dragon, before ever she dreamed of coming to Tar Valon. Even the nearly ten years since she had been raised to the Seat had not made her comfortable with too much luxury. Her bedchamber was more simple still.

Ten years with the stole, she thought. *Nearly twenty since I decided to sail these dangerous waters. And if I slip now, I’ll wish I were back hauling nets.*

She spun at a sound. Another Aes Sedai had slipped into the room, a copper-skinned woman with dark hair cut short. She caught herself in time to keep her voice steady and say only what was expected. “Yes, Leane?”

The Keeper of the Chronicles bowed, just as deeply as she would had others been present. The tall Aes Sedai, as tall as most men, was second only to the Amyrlin in the White Tower, and though Siuan had known her since they were novices together, sometimes Leane’s insistence on upholding the dignity of the Amyrlin Seat was enough to make Siuan want to scream.

“Verin is here, Mother, asking leave to speak with you. I have told her you are busy, but she asks—”

“Not too busy to speak to her,” Siuan said. Too quickly, she knew, but she did not care. “Send her in. There’s no need for you to remain, Leane. I will speak to her alone.”

A twitch of her eyebrows was the Keeper’s only sign of surprise. The Amyrlin seldom saw anyone, even a queen, without the Keeper present. But the Amyrlin was the Amyrlin. Leane bowed her way out, and in moments Verin took her place, kneeling to kiss the Great Serpent ring on Siuan’s finger. The Brown sister had a good-sized leather sack under her arm.

“Thank you for seeing me, Mother,” Verin said as she straightened. “I have urgent news from Falme. And more. I scarcely know where to begin.”

“Begin where you will,” Siuan said. “These rooms are warded, in case anyone thinks to use childhood tricks of eavesdropping.” Verin’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, and the Amyrlin added, “Much has changed since you left. Speak.”

“Most importantly, then, Rand al’Thor has proclaimed himself the Dragon Reborn.”

Siuan felt a tightness loosen in her chest. “I hoped it was he,” she said softly. “I have had reports from women who could only tell what they had heard, and rumors by the score come with every trader’s boat and merchant’s wagon, but I could not be sure.” She took a deep breath. “Yet I think I can name the day it happened. Did you know the two false Dragons no longer trouble the world?”

“I had not heard, Mother. That is good news.”

“Yes. Mazrim Taim is in the hands of our sisters in Saldaea, and the poor fellow in Haddon Mirk, the Light have pity on his soul, was taken by the Tairens and executed on the spot. No one even seems to know what his name was. Both were taken on the same day and, according to rumor, under the same circumstances. They were in battle, and winning, when suddenly a great light flashed in the sky, and a vision appeared, just for an instant. There are a dozen different versions of what it was, but in both cases the result was exactly the same. The false Dragon’s horse reared up and threw him. He was knocked unconscious, and his followers cried out that he was dead, and fled the field, and he was taken. Some of my reports speak of visions in the sky at Falme. I’ll wager a gold mark to a week-old delta perch that was the instant Rand al’Thor proclaimed himself.”

“The true Dragon has been Reborn,” Verin said almost to herself, “and so the Pattern has no room for false Dragons anymore. We have loosed the Dragon Reborn on the world. The Light have mercy on us.”

The Amyrlin shook her head irritably. “We have done what must be done.” *And if even the newest novice learns of it, I will be stilled before the next sunrise, if I’m not torn to pieces first. Me, and Moiraine, and Verin, and likely anyone thought to be a friend of ours, as well.* It was not easy to carry on so great a conspiracy when only three women knew of it, when even a close friend would betray them and consider it a duty well done. *Light, but I wish I could be sure they would not be right to do it.* “At least he is safely in Moiraine’s hands. She will guide him, and do what must be done. What else have you to tell me, Daughter?”

For answer, Verin placed the leather sack on the table and took out a curled, gold horn, with silver script inlaid around its flaring bell mouth. She laid the horn on the table, then looked to the Amyrlin with quiet expectation.

Siuan did not have to be close enough to read the script to know what it said. *Tia mi aven Moridin isainde vadin.* "The grave is no bar to my call." "The Horn of Valere?" she gasped. "You brought that all the way here, across hundreds of leagues, with the Hunters looking everywhere for it? Light, woman, it was to be left with Rand al'Thor."

"I know, Mother," Verin said calmly, "but the Hunters all expect to find the Horn in some great adventure, not in a sack with four women escorting a sick youth. And it would do Rand no good."

"What do you mean? He is to fight Tarmon Gai'don. The Horn is to summon dead heroes from the grave to fight in the Last Battle. Has Moiraine once again made some new plan without consulting me?"

"This is none of Moiraine's doing, Mother. We plan, but the Wheel weaves the Pattern as it wills. Rand was not first to sound the Horn. Matrim Cauthon did that. And Mat now lies below, dying of his ties to the Shadar Logoth dagger. Unless he can be Healed here."

Siuan shivered. Shadar Logoth, that dead city so tainted that even Trollocs feared to enter, and with reason. By chance, a dagger from that place had come into young Mat's hands, twisting and tainting him with the evil that had killed the city long ago. Killing him. *By chance? Or by the Pattern? He is* ta'veren, *too, after all. But . . .* Mat *sounded the Horn.* Then —

"So long as Mat lives," Verin went on, "the Horn of Valere is no more than a horn to anyone else. If he dies, of course, another can sound it and forge a new link between man and Horn." Her gaze was steady and untroubled by what she seemed to be suggesting.

"Many will die before we are done, Daughter." *And who else could I use to sound it again? I'll not take the risk of trying to return it to Moiraine, now. One of the Gaidin, perhaps. Perhaps.* "The Pattern has yet to make his fate clear."

"Yes, Mother. And the Horn?"

"For the moment," the Amyrlin said finally, "we will find some place to hide this where no one but we two know. I will consider what to do after that."

Verin nodded. "As you say, Mother. Of course, a few hours will make one decision for you."

"Is that all you have for me?" Siuan snapped. "If it is, I have those three runaways to deal with."

“There is the matter of the Seanchan, Mother.”

“What of them? All my reports say they have fled back across the ocean, or to wherever they came from.”

“It seems so, Mother. But I fear we may have to deal with them again.” Verin pulled a small leather notebook from behind her belt and began leafing through it. “They spoke of themselves as the Forerunners, or Those Who Come Before, and talked of the Return, and of reclaiming this land as theirs. I’ve taken notes on everything I heard of them. Only from those who actually saw them, of course, or had dealings with them.”

“Verin, you are worrying about a lionfish out in the Sea of Storms, while here and now the silverpike are chewing our nets to shreds.”

The Brown sister continued turning pages. “An apt metaphor, Mother, the lionfish. Once I saw a large shark that a lionfish had chased into the shallows, where it died.” She tapped one page with a finger. “Yes. This is the worst. Mother, the Seanchan use the One Power in battle. They use it as a weapon.”

Siuan clasped her hands tightly at her waist. The reports the pigeons had brought spoke of that, too. Most had only secondhand knowledge, but a few women wrote of seeing for themselves. The Power used as a weapon. Even dry ink on paper carried an edge of hysteria when they wrote of that. “That is already causing us trouble, Verin, and will cause more as the stories spread, and grow with the spreading. But I can do nothing about that. I am told these people are gone, Daughter. Do you have any evidence otherwise?”

“Well, no, Mother, but—”

“Until you do, let us deal with getting the silverpike out of our nets before they start chewing holes in the boat, too.”

With reluctance, Verin closed the notebook and tucked it back behind her belt. “As you say, Mother. If I might ask, what do you intend to do to Nynaeve and the other two girls?”

The Amyrlin hesitated, considering. “Before I am done with them, they will wish they could go down to the river and sell themselves for fishbait.” It was the simple truth, but it could be taken in more than one way. “Now. Seat yourself, and tell me everything those three have said and done in the time they were with you. Everything.”

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CHAPTER 13

Punishments

Lying on her narrow bed, Egwene frowned up at the flickering shadows cast on the ceiling by her single lamp. She wished she could form some plan of action, or reason out what to expect next. Nothing came. The shadows had more pattern than her thoughts. She could hardly even make herself worry about Mat, yet the shame she felt at that was small, crushed by the walls around her.

It was a stark, windowless room, like all those in the novices' quarters, small and square and painted white, with pegs on one wall for hanging her belongings, the bed built against a second, and a tiny shelf on a third, where in other days she had kept a few books borrowed from the Tower library. A washstand and a three-legged stool completed the furnishings. The floorboards were almost white from scrubbing. She had done that task, on hands and knees, every day she had lived there, in addition to her other chores and lessons. Novices lived simply, whether they were innkeepers' daughters or the Daughter-Heir of Andor.

She wore the plain white dress of a novice again—even her belt and pouch were white—but she felt no joy at having rid herself of the hated gray. Her room had become too much of a prison cell. *What if they mean to keep me here. In this room. Like a cell. Like a collar and. . . .*

She glanced at the door—the dark Accepted would still be standing guard on the other side, she knew—and rolled close to the white plastered wall. Just above the mattress was a small hole, almost invisible unless you knew where to look, drilled through into the next room by novices long ago. Egwene kept her voice to a whisper.

"Elayne?" There was no answer. "Elayne? Are you asleep?"

"How could I sleep?" came Elayne's reply, a reedy whisper through the hole. "I thought we might be in some trouble, but I did not expect this. Egwene, what are they going to do to us?"

Egwene had no answer, and her guesses were not of the sort she wanted to voice aloud. She did not even want to think of them. “I actually thought we might be heroes, Elayne. We brought back the Horn of Valere safely. We discovered Liandrin is Black Ajah.” Her voice skipped on that. Aes Sedai had always denied the existence of a Black Ajah, an Ajah that served the Dark One, and were known to become angry with anyone who even suggested it was real. *But we know it’s real.* “We should be heroes, Elayne.”

“ ‘Should and would build no bridges,’ ” Elayne said. “Light, I used to hate it when Mother said that to me, but it’s true. Verin said we mustn’t speak of the Horn, or Liandrin, to anyone but her or the Amyrlin Seat. I do not think any of this will work out the way we thought. It is not fair. We’ve been through so much; you’ve been through so much. It just is not fair.”

“Verin says. Moiraine says. I know why people think Aes Sedai are puppetmasters. I can almost feel the strings on my arms and legs. Whatever they do, it will be what they decide is good for the White Tower, not what is good or fair for us.”

“But you still want to be Aes Sedai. Don’t you?”

Egwene hesitated, but there was never any real question as to her answer. “Yes,” she said. “I still do. It is the only way we will ever be safe. But I will tell you this. I’ll not let myself be stilled.” That was a new thought, voiced as soon as it came to her, but she realized she did not want to take it back. *Give up touching the True Source?* She could sense it there, even now, the glow just over her shoulder, the shining just out of sight. She resisted the desire to reach out to it. *Give up being filled with the One Power, feeling more alive than I ever have before? I won’t!* “Not without a fight.”

There was a long silence from the other side of the wall. “How could you stop it? You may be as strong as any of them, now, but neither one of us knows enough yet to stop even one Aes Sedai from shielding us from the Source, and there are dozens of them here.”

Egwene considered. Finally she said, “I could run away. Really run away, this time.”

“They would come after us, Egwene. I’m sure they would. Once you show any ability at all, they don’t let you go until you’ve learned enough not to kill yourself. Or just die from it.”

"I am not a simple village girl anymore. I have seen something of the world. I can keep out of Aes Sedai hands if I want to." She was trying to convince herself as much as Elayne. *And what if I don't know enough, yet? Enough about the world, enough about the Power? What if just channeling can still kill me?* She refused to think of that. *So much I have to learn yet. I won't let them stop me.*

"My mother might protect us," Elayne said, "if what that Whitecloak said is true. I never thought I would hope something like that was the truth. But if it isn't, Mother is just as likely to send us both back in chains. Will you teach me how to live in a village?"

Egwene blinked at the wall. "You will come with me? If it comes to that, I mean?"

There was another long silence, then a faint whisper. "I do not want to be stilled, Egwene. I will not be. I will not be!"

The door swung open, crashing against the wall, and Egwene sat up with a start. She heard the bang of a door from the other side of the wall. Faolain stepped into Egwene's room, smiling as her eyes went to the tiny hole. Similar holes joined most of the novice rooms; any woman who had been a novice knew of them.

"Whispering with your friend, eh?" the curly-haired Accepted said with surprising warmth. "Well, it grows lonely, waiting by yourself. Did you have a nice chat?"

Egwene opened her mouth, then closed it again hastily. She could answer Aes Sedai, Sheriam had said. No one else. She regarded the Accepted with a level expression and waited.

The false sympathy slid off Faolain's face like water running off a roof. "On your feet. The Amyrlin's not to be kept waiting by the likes of you. You are lucky I did not come in in time to hear you. Move!"

Novices were supposed to obey the Accepted almost as quickly as they obeyed Aes Sedai, but Egwene got to her feet slowly, and took as much time as she dared in smoothing her dress. She gave Faolain a small curtsy and a tiny smile. The scowl that rolled across the Accepted's face made Egwene's smile grow before she remembered to rein it in; there was no point in pushing Faolain too far. Holding herself straight, pretending her knees were not shaking, she preceded the Accepted out of the room.

Elayne was already waiting outside with the apple-cheeked Accepted, looking fiercely determined to be brave. Somehow, she managed to give the impression that the Accepted was a handmaid carrying her gloves. Egwene hoped that she herself was doing half so well.

The railed galleries of the novices’ quarters rose tier on tier above, in a hollow column, and fell as many below, to the Novices’ Court. There were no other women in sight. Even if every novice in the Tower had been there, though, less than a quarter of the rooms would have been filled. The four of them walked ’round the empty galleries and down the spiraling ramps in silence; none could bear to have the sounds of voices emphasize the emptiness.

Egwene had never before been into the part of the Tower where the Amyrlin had her rooms. The corridors there were wide enough for a wagon to pass down easily, and taller than they were wide. Colorful tapestries hung on the walls, tapestries in a dozen styles, of floral designs and forest scenes, of heroic deeds and intricate patterns, some so old they looked as if they might break if handled. Their shoes made loud clicks on diamond-shaped floor tiles that repeated the colors of the seven Ajahs.

There were few other women in evidence—an Aes Sedai now and then, sweeping majestically along with no time to notice Accepted or novices; five or six Accepted hurrying self-importantly about their tasks or studies; a sprinkling of serving women with trays, or mops, or armfuls of sheets or towels; a few novices moving on errands even more quickly than the servants.

Nynaeve and her slim-necked escort, Theodrin, joined them. Neither spoke. Nynaeve wore an Accepted’s dress, now, white with the seven colored bands at the hem, but her belt and pouch were her own. She gave Egwene and Elayne each a reassuring smile and a hug—Egwene was so relieved to see another friendly face that she returned the hug with barely a thought that Nynaeve was behaving as if she were comforting children—but as they walked on, Nynaeve gave her thick braid a sharp tug from time to time, too.

Very few men came into that part of the Tower, and Egwene saw only two: Warders walking side by side in conversation, one with his sword on his hip, the other with his on his back. One was short and slender, even slight, the other almost as wide as he was tall, yet both moved with a dangerous grace. The color-shifting Warder cloaks made them queasy-making to watch for long, parts of them sometimes seeming to fade into the walls beyond. She saw Nynaeve looking at them, and shook her head. *She* *has to do something about Lan. If any of us can do anything about anyone after today.*

The antechamber of the Amyrlin Seat's study was grand enough for any palace, though the chairs scattered about for those who might wait were plain, but Egwene had eyes only for Leane Sedai. The Keeper wore her narrow stole of office, blue to show she had been raised from the Blue Ajah, and her face could have been carved from smooth, brownish stone. There was no one else there.

"Did they give any trouble?" The Keeper's clipped way of talking gave no hint now of either anger or sympathy.

"No, Aes Sedai," Theodrin and the apple-cheeked Accepted said together.

"This one had to be pulled by the scruff of her neck, Aes Sedai," Faolain said, indicating Egwene. The Accepted sounded indignant. "She balks as if she has forgotten what the discipline of the White Tower is."

"To lead," Leane said, "is neither to push nor to pull. Go to Marris Sedai, Faolain, and ask her to allow you to contemplate on this while raking the paths in the Spring Garden." She dismissed Faolain and the other two Accepted, and they dropped deep curtsies. From the depth of hers, Faolain shot a furious look at Egwene.

The Keeper paid no attention to the Accepted's leaving. Instead, she studied the remaining women, tapping a forefinger against her lips, till Egwene had the feeling they had all been measured to the inch and weighed to the ounce. Nynaeve's eyes took on a dangerous sparkle, and she had a tight grip on her braid.

Finally Leane raised a hand toward the doors to the Amyrlin's study. The Great Serpent bit its own tail, a pace across, on the dark wood of each. "Enter," she said.

Nynaeve stepped forward promptly and opened one of the doors. That was enough to get Egwene moving. Elayne held her hand tightly, and she gripped Elayne's just as hard. Leane followed them in and took a place to one side, halfway between the three of them and the table in the center of the room.

The Amyrlin Seat sat behind the table, examining papers. She did not look up. Once Nynaeve opened her mouth, but closed it again, at a sharp look from the Keeper. The three of them stood in a line in front of the Amyrlin's table and waited. Egwene tried not to fidget. Long minutes went by—it seemed like hours—before the Amyrlin raised her head, but when those blue eyes fixed them each in turn, Egwene decided she could have waited longer. The Amyrlin's gaze was like two icicles boring into her heart. The room was cool, but a trickle of sweat began to run down her back.

"So!" the Amyrlin said finally. "Our runaways return."

"We did not run away, Mother." Nynaeve was obviously straining for calm, but her voice shook with emotion. Anger, Egwene knew. That strong will was all too often accompanied by anger. "Liandrin told us we were to go with her, and—" The loud crack of the Amyrlin's hand slapping the table cut her off.

"Do not invoke Liandrin's name here, child!" the Amyrlin snapped. Leane watched them with a stern serenity.

"Mother, Liandrin is Black Ajah," Elayne burst out.

"That is known, child. Suspected, at least, and as good as known. Liandrin left the Tower some months ago, and twelve other—*women*—went with her. None has been seen since. Before they left, they tried to break into the storeroom where the *angreal* and *sa'angreal* are kept, and did manage to enter that where the smaller *ter'angreal* are stored. They stole a number of those, including several we do not know the use of."

Nynaeve stared at the Amyrlin in horror, and Elayne suddenly rubbed her arms as if she were cold. Egwene knew she was shivering, too. Many times she had imagined returning to confront Liandrin and accuse her, to see her condemned to some punishment—except that she had never managed to imagine any punishment strong enough to suit that doll-faced Aes Sedai's crimes. She had even pictured returning to find Liandrin already fled—in terror of her return, it was usually. But she had never imagined anything like this. If Liandrin and the others—she had not really wanted to believe there were others—had stolen those remnants of the Age of Legends, there was no telling what they could do with them. *Thank the Light they did not get any sa'angreal*, she thought. The other was bad enough.

Sa'angreal were like *angreal*, allowing an Aes Sedai to channel more of the Power than she safely could unaided, but far more powerful than *angreal*, and rare. *Ter'angreal* were something different. Existing in greater numbers than either *angreal* or *sa'angreal*, though still not common, they used the One Power rather than helping to channel it, and no one truly understood them. Many would work only for someone who could channel, needing the actual channeling of the Power, while others did what they did for anyone. Where all the *angreal* and *sa'angreal* Egwene had ever heard of were small, *ter'angreal* could seemingly be any size. Each had apparently been made for a specific purpose by those Aes Sedai of three thousand years ago, to do a certain thing, and Aes Sedai since had died trying to learn what; died, or had the ability to channel burned out of them. There were sisters of the Brown Ajah who had made *ter'angreal* their life's study.

Some were in use, if likely not for the purposes they had been made. The stout white rod that the Accepted held while taking the Three Oaths on being raised to Aes Sedai was a *ter'angreal*, binding them to the oaths as surely as if they had been bred in the bone. Another *ter'angreal* was the site of the final test before a novice was raised to the Accepted. There were others, including many no one could make work at all, and many others that seemed to have no practical use.

Why did they take things no one knows how to use? Egwene wondered. *Or maybe the Black Ajah* does *know.* That possibility made her stomach churn. That might be as bad as *sa'angreal* in Darkfriend hands.

"Theft," the Amyrlin went on in tones as cold as her eyes, "was the least of what they did. Three sisters died that night, as well as two Warders, seven guards, and nine of the servants. Murder, done to hide their thieving and their flight. It may not be proof that they were—*Black Ajah*"—the words grated from her mouth—"but I cannot believe otherwise. When there are fish heads and blood in the water, you don't need to see the silverpike to know they are there."

"Then why are we being treated as criminals?" Nynaeve demanded. "We were tricked by a woman of the—of the Black Ajah. That should be enough to clear us of any wrongdoing."

The Amyrlin barked a mirthless laugh. "You think so, do you, child? It may be your salvation that no one in the Tower but Verin, Leane, and I even suspects you had anything to do with Liandrin. If that were known, much less the little demonstration you put on for the Whitecloaks—no need to look so surprised; Verin told me everything—if it were known you had gone off with Liandrin, the Hall might very well vote for stilling the three of you before you could take a breath."

"That is not fair!" Nynaeve said. Leane stirred, but Nynaeve went on. "It is not right! It—!"

The Amyrlin stood up. That was all, but it cut Nynaeve short.

Egwene thought she was wise to keep quiet. She had always believed Nynaeve was as strong, as strong-willed, as anyone could be. Until she met the woman wearing the striped stole. *Please keep your temper, Nynaeve. We might as well be children—babes—facing our mother, and this Mother can do far worse than beat us.*

It seemed to her a way out was being offered in what the Amyrlin had said, but she was not sure what way. “Mother, forgive me for speaking, but what do you intend to do to us?”

“Do to you, child? I intend to punish you and Elayne for leaving the Tower without permission, and Nynaeve for leaving the city without permission. First, you will each be called to Sheriam Sedai’s study, where I’ve told her to switch you till you wish you had a cushion to sit on for the next week. I have already had this announced to the novices and the Accepted.”

Egwene blinked in surprise. Elayne gave an audible grunt, stiffened her back, and muttered something under her breath. Nynaeve was the only one who seemed to take it without shock. Punishment, whether extra labors or something else, was always between the Mistress of Novices and whoever was called to her. Those were usually novices, but included the Accepted who stepped far enough beyond the bounds. *Sheriam* always *keeps it between you and her*, Egwene thought bleakly. *She* can’t *have told everyone. But better than being imprisoned. Better than being stilled.*

“The announcement is part of the punishment, of course,” the Amyrlin went on, as if she had read Egwene’s mind. “I have also had it announced that you are all three assigned to the kitchens, to work with the scullions, until further notice. And I have let it be whispered about that ‘further notice’ might just mean the rest of your natural lives. Do I hear objections to any of this?”

“No, Mother,” Egwene said quickly. Nynaeve would hate scrubbing pots even more than the other. *It could be worse, Nynaeve. Light, it could be so much worse.* Nynaeve’s nostrils had flared, but she gave her head a tight shake.

“And you, Elayne?” the Amyrlin said. “The Daughter-Heir of Andor is used to gentler treatment.”

“I want to be Aes Sedai, Mother,” Elayne said in a firm voice.

The Amyrlin fingered a paper in front of her on the table and seemed to study it for a moment. When she raised her head, her smile was not at all pleasant. “If any of you had been silly enough to answer otherwise, I had something to add to your tally that would have had you cursing your mother for ever letting your father steal that first kiss. Letting yourselves be winkled out of the Tower like thoughtless children. Even an infant would never have fallen into that trap. I will teach you to think before you act, or else I’ll use you to chink cracks in the water gates!”

Egwene found herself offering silent thanks. A prickle ran over her skin as the Amyrlin continued.

“Now, as to what else I intend to do with you. It seems you have all increased your ability to channel remarkably since you left the Tower. You have learned much. Including some things,” she added sharply, “that I intend to see you unlearn!”

Nynaeve surprised Egwene by saying, “I know we have done . . . things . . . we should not have, Mother. I assure you, we will do our best to live as if we had taken the Three Oaths.”

The Amyrlin grunted. “See that you do,” she said dryly. “If I could, I’d put the Oath Rod in your hands tonight, but as that is reserved for being raised to Aes Sedai, I must trust to your good sense—if you have any—to keep you whole. As it is, you, Egwene, and you, Elayne, are to be raised to the Accepted.”

Elayne gasped, and Egwene stammered a shocked, “Thank you, Mother.” Leane shifted where she stood. Egwene did not think the Keeper looked best pleased. Not surprised—she had obviously known it was coming—but not pleased, either.

“Do not thank me. Your abilities have gone too far for you to remain novices. Some will think you should not have the ring, not after what you’ve done, but the sight of you up to your elbows in greasy pots should mute the criticism. And lest *you* start thinking it’s some sort of reward, remember that the first few weeks as one of the Accepted are used to pick the rotting fish out of the basket of good ones. Your worst day as a novice will seem a fond dream compared to the least of your studies over the next weeks. I suspect that some of the sisters who teach you will make your trials even worse than they strictly must be, but I don’t believe you will complain. Will you?”

I can learn, Egwene thought. *Choose my own studies. I can learn about the dreams, learn now to . . .*

The Amyrlin's smile cut off her train of thought. That smile said nothing the sisters could do to them would be worse than it needed to be, if it left them alive. Nynaeve's face was a mixture of deep sympathy and horrified remembrance of her own first weeks as one of the Accepted. The combination was enough to make Egwene swallow hard. "No, Mother," she said faintly. Elayne's reply was a hoarse whisper.

"Then that's done. Your mother was not at all pleased by your disappearance, Elayne."

"She knows?" Elayne squeaked.

Leane sniffed, and the Amyrlin arched an eyebrow, saying, "I could hardly keep it from her. You missed her by less than a month, which may be as well for you. You might not have survived that meeting. She was mad enough to chew through an oar, at you, at me, at the White Tower."

"I can imagine, Mother," Elayne said faintly.

"I don't think you can, child. You may have ended a tradition that began before there *was* an Andor. A custom stronger than most laws. Morgase refused to take Elaida back with her. For the first time ever, the Queen of Andor does not have an Aes Sedai advisor. She demanded your immediate return to Caemlyn as soon as you were found. I convinced her it would be safer for you to train here a little longer. She was ready to remove your two brothers from their training with the Warders, too. They talked their way out of that themselves. I still do not know how."

Elayne seemed to be looking inward, perhaps seeing Morgase in all her anger. She shivered. "Gawyn is my brother," she said absently. "Galad is not."

"Do not be childish," the Amyrlin told her. "Sharing the same father makes Galad your brother, too, whether or not you like him. I will not allow childishness out of you, girl. A measure of stupidity can be tolerated in a novice; it is not allowed in one of the Accepted."

"Yes, Mother," Elayne said glumly.

"The Queen left a letter for you with Sheriam. Aside from giving you the rough side of her tongue, I believe she states her intention of bringing you home as soon as it is safe for you. She is sure that in a few more months at most you will be able to channel without risking killing yourself."

"But I want to learn, Mother." The iron had returned to Elayne's voice. "I want to be Aes Sedai."

The Amyrlin's smile was even grimmer than her last. "As well that you do, child, because I have no intention of letting Morgase have you. You have the potential to be stronger than any Aes Sedai in a thousand years, and I will not let you go until you achieve the shawl as well as the ring. Not if I have to grind you into sausage to do it. *I will not let you go.* Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mother." Elayne sounded uneasy, and Egwene did not blame her. Caught between Morgase and the White Tower like a towel between two dogs, caught between the Queen of Andor and the Amyrlin Seat. If Egwene had ever envied Elayne her wealth and the throne she would one day occupy, at that moment she surely did not.

The Amyrlin said briskly, "Leane, take Elayne down to Sheriam's study. I have a few words yet to say to these other two. Words I do not think they will enjoy hearing."

Egwene exchanged startled looks with Nynaeve; for a moment, worry dissolved the tension between them. *What does she have to say to us and not to Elayne?* she wondered. *I do not care, so long as she does not try to stop me learning. But why not Elayne, too?*

Elayne grimaced at the mention of the Mistress of Novices's study, but she drew herself up as Leane came to her side. "As you command, Mother," she said formally, lowering herself in a perfect curtsy, skirts sweeping wide, "so shall I obey." She followed Leane out with her head held high.

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CHAPTER 14

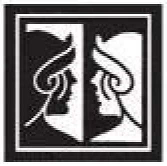

The Bite of the Thorns

The Amyrlin Seat did not speak at once—she walked to the tall, arched windows and looked out across the balcony at the garden below, hands clasped tightly behind her. Minutes went by before she spoke, still with her back to the two of them.

“I have kept the worst of it from getting out, but how long will that last? The servants do not know of the stolen *ter’angreal*, and they do not connect the deaths with Liandrin and the others leaving. It was not easy to manage that, gossip being what it is. They believe the deaths were the work of Darkfriends. And so they were. Rumors are reaching the city, too. That Darkfriends got into the Tower, that they did murder. There was no way to stop that. It does our reputation no good, but at least it is better than the truth. At least none outside the Tower, and few inside, know Aes Sedai were killed. Darkfriends in the White Tower. Faugh! I’ve spent my life denying that. I will not let them be here. I will hook them, and gut them, and hang them out in the sun to dry.”

Nynaeve gave Egwene an uncertain look—half as uncertain as Egwene felt—then took a deep breath. “Mother, are we to be punished more? Beyond what you’ve already sentenced us to?”

The Amyrlin looked over her shoulder at them; her eyes were lost in shadow. “Punished more? You might well say that. Some will say I’ve given you a gift, raising you. Now feel the real bite of that rose’s thorns.” She strode briskly back to her chair and sat down, then seemed to lose her urgency again. Or to gain uncertainty.

To see the Amyrlin look uncertain made Egwene’s stomach clench. The Amyrlin Seat was always sure, always serenely centered on her path. The Amyrlin was strength personified. For all her own raw power, the woman on the other side of the table had the knowledge and experience to wind her around a spindle. To see her suddenly wavering—like a girl who knew she had to dive head first into a pond without any idea of how deep it was or whether there were rocks or mud on the bottom—to see that, chilled Egwene right to her core. *What does she mean, the real bite of the thorns? Light, what does she mean to do to us?*

Fingering a carved black box on the table in front of her, the Amyrlin peered at it as if looking at something beyond. "It is a question of who I can trust," she said softly. "I should be able to trust Leane and Sheriam, at least. But do I dare? Verin?" Her shoulders shook with a quick, silent laugh. "I already trust Verin with more than my life, but how far can I take it? Moiraine?" She was silent for a moment. "I have always believed I could trust Moiraine."

Egwene shifted uneasily. How much did the Amyrlin know? It was not the kind of thing she could ask, not of the Amyrlin Seat. *Do you know that a young man from my village, a man I used to think I'd marry one day, is the Dragon Reborn? Do you know two of your Aes Sedai are helping him?* At least she was sure the Amyrlin did not know she had dreamed of him last night, running from Moiraine. She thought she was sure. She kept silent.

"What are you talking about?" Nynaeve demanded. The Amyrlin looked up at her, and she moderated her tone as she added, "Forgive me, Mother, but are we to be punished more? I do not understand this talk of trust. If you want my opinion, Moiraine is not to be trusted."

"That is your opinion, is it?" the Amyrlin said. "A year out of your village, and you think you know enough of the world to choose which Aes Sedai to trust, and which not? A master sailor who's barely learned to hoist a sail!"

"She did not mean anything, Mother," Egwene said, but she knew Nynaeve meant exactly what she had said. She shot a warning glance at Nynaeve. Nynaeve gave her braid a sharp tug, but she kept her mouth shut.

"Well, who is to say," the Amyrlin mused. "Trust is as slippery as a basket of eels, sometimes. The point is, you two are what I have to work with, thin reeds though you may be."

Nynaeve's mouth tightened, though her voice stayed level. "Thin reeds, Mother?"

The Amyrlin went on as if she had not spoken. "Liandrin tried to stuff you headfirst into a weir, and it may well be she left because she learned you were returning, and could unmask her, so I have to believe you aren't—Black Ajah. I would rather eat scales and entrails," she muttered, "but I suppose I'll have to get used to saying that name."

Egwene gaped in shock—*Black Ajah? Us? Light!*—but Nynaeve barked, “We certainly are not! How dare you say such a thing? How dare you even suggest it?”

“If you doubt me, child, go ahead!” the Amyrlin said in a hard voice. “You may have an Aes Sedai’s power sometimes, but you are not yet Aes Sedai, not by miles. Well? Speak, if you have more to say. I promise to leave you weeping for forgiveness! ‘Thin reed’? I’ll break you like a reed! I’ve no patience left.”

Nynaeve’s mouth worked. Finally, though, she gave herself a shake, and drew a calming breath. When she spoke her voice still had an edge, but a small one. “Forgive me, Mother. But you should not—We are not—We would not do such a thing.”

With a compressed smile, the Amyrlin leaned back in her chair. “So you can keep your temper, when you want to. I had to know that.” Egwene wondered how much of it had been a test; there was a tightness around the Amyrlin’s eyes that suggested her patience might well be exhausted. “I wish I could have found a way to raise you to the shawl, Daughter. Verin says you are already as strong as any woman in the Tower.”

“The shawl!” Nynaeve gasped. “Aes Sedai? Me?”

The Amyrlin gestured slightly as if tossing something away, but she looked regretful to lose it. “No point wishing for what can’t be. I could hardly raise you to full sister and send you to scrub pots at the same time. And Verin also says you still cannot channel consciously unless you are furious. I was ready to sever you from the True Source if you even looked like embracing *saidar.* The final tests for the shawl require you to channel while maintaining utter calm under pressure. Extreme pressure. Even I cannot—and would not—set that requirement aside.”

Nynaeve seemed stunned. She was staring at the Amyrlin with her mouth hanging open.

“I don’t understand, Mother,” Egwene said after a moment.

“I suppose you don’t, at that. You are the only two in the Tower I can be absolutely sure are not Black Ajah.” The Amyrlin’s mouth still twisted around those words. “Liandrin and her twelve went, but did all of them go? Or did they leave some of their number behind, like a stub in shallow water that you don’t see till it puts a hole in your boat? It may be I’ll not find that out until it is too late, but I will not let Liandrin and the others get away with what they did. Not the theft, and especially not the murders. No one kills my people and walks away unscathed. And I'll not let thirteen trained Aes Sedai serve the Shadow. I mean to find them, and still them!"

"I don't see what that has to do with us," Nynaeve said slowly. She did not look as if she liked what she was thinking.

"Just this, child. You two are to be my hounds, hunting the Black Ajah. No one will believe it of you, not a pair of half-trained Accepted I humiliated publicly."

"That is crazy!" Nynaeve's eyes had opened wide by the time the Amyrlin reached the words "Black Ajah," and her knuckles were white from her grip on her braid. She bit her words off and spat them: "They are all full Aes Sedai. Egwene hasn't even been raised to Accepted yet, and you know I cannot channel enough to light a candle unless I am angry, not of my own free will. What chance would we have?"

Egwene nodded agreement. Her tongue had stuck to the roof of her mouth. *Hunt the Black Ajah? I'd rather hunt a bear with a switch! She's just trying to scare us, to punish us more. She has to be!* If that was what the Amyrlin was trying, she was succeeding all too well.

The Amyrlin was nodding, too. "Every word you say is true. But each of you is more than a match for Liandrin in sheer power, and she is the strongest of them. Yet they are trained, and you are not, and you, Nynaeve, do have limitations, as yet. But when you don't have an oar, child, any plank will do to paddle the boat ashore."

"But I would be useless," Egwene blurted. Her voice came out as a squeak, but she was too afraid to be ashamed. *She means it! Oh, Light, she means it! Liandrin gave me to the Seanchan, and now she wants me to hunt* thirteen *like her?* "My studies, my lessons, working in the kitchens. Anaiya Sedai will surely want to continue testing me to see if I am a Dreamer. I'll barely have time left over to sleep and eat. How can I hunt anything?"

"You will have to find the time," the Amyrlin said, cool and serene once more, as if hunting the Black Ajah were no more than sweeping a floor. "As one of the Accepted, you choose your own studies, within limits, and the times for them. And the rules are a little easier for Accepted. A little easier. They must be found, child."

Egwene looked to Nynaeve, but what Nynaeve said was, "Why is Elayne not part of this? It can't be because you think she is Black Ajah. Is it because she is Daughter-Heir of Andor?"

"A full net on the first cast, child. I would make her one of you if I could, but at the moment Morgase gives me enough problems as it is. When I have her combed and curried and prodded back on the proper path, perhaps Elayne will join you. Perhaps then."

"Then leave Egwene out, too," Nynaeve said. "She is barely old enough to be a woman. I will do your hunting for you." Egwene made a sound of protest—I am *a woman!*—but the Amyrlin spoke before her.

"I am not setting you out as bait, child. If I had a hundred of you, I would still not be happy, but there are only you two, so two I will have."

"Nynaeve," Egwene said, "I do not understand you. Do you mean you want to do this?"

"It isn't that I want to," Nynaeve said wearily, "but I'd rather hunt them than sit wondering if the Aes Sedai teaching me is really a Darkfriend. And whatever they are up to, I do not want to wait until they're ready to find out what it is."

The decision Egwene came to twisted her stomach. "Then I will do it, too. I don't want to sit wondering and waiting any more than you do." Nynaeve opened her mouth, and Egwene felt a flash of anger; it was such a relief after fear. "And don't you dare say I'm too young again. At least I can channel when I want to. Most of the time. I am not a little girl anymore, Nynaeve."

Nynaeve stood there, jerking on her braid and not saying a word. Finally the stiffness drained out of her. "You are not, are you? I have said myself you are a woman, but I suppose I did not really believe it, inside. Girl, I—No, woman. Woman, I hope you realize you've climbed into a pickling cauldron with me, and the fire may be lit."

"I know it." Egwene was proud that her voice hardly shook at all.

The Amyrlin smiled as if pleased, but there was something in her blue eyes that made Egwene suspect she had known what their decisions would be all along. For an instant, she felt those puppeteer's strings on her arms and legs again.

"Verin. . . ." The Amyrlin hesitated, then muttered half to herself. "If I must trust someone, it might as well be her. She knows as much as I already, and maybe more." Her voice strengthened. "Verin will give you all that is known of Liandrin and the others, and also a list of the *ter'angreal* that were taken, and what they will do. Those that we know. As for any of the Black Ajah still in the Tower. . . . Listen, watch, and be careful of your questions. Be like mice. If you have even a suspicion, report it to me. I will keep an eye on you myself. No one will think that strange, given what you're being punished for. You can make your reports when I look in on you. Remember, they have killed before. They could easily kill again."

"That's all very well," Nynaeve said, "but we will still be Accepted, and it is Aes Sedai we're after. Any full sister can tell us to go about our business, or send us off to do her laundry, and we will have no choice but to obey. There are places Accepted are not supposed to go, things we're not supposed to do. Light, if we were sure a sister was Black Ajah, she could tell the guards to lock us in our rooms and keep us there, and they would do it. They certainly would not take the word of an Accepted over that of an Aes Sedai."

"For the most part," the Amyrlin said, "you must work within the limitations of the Accepted. The idea is for no one to suspect you. But. . . ."She opened the black box on her table, hesitated and looked at the other two women as if still unsure she wanted to do this, then took out a number of stiff, folded papers. Sorting through them carefully, she hesitated again, then chose out two. The remainder she shoved back into the box, and handed those two to Egwene and Nynaeve. "Keep these well hidden. They are for an emergency only."

Egwene unfolded her thick paper. It held writing in a neat, round hand, and was sealed at the bottom with the White Flame of Tar Valon.

> *What the bearer does is done at my order and by my authority. Obey, and keep silent, at my command.*
>
> *Siuan Sanche*
> *Watcher of the Seals*
> *Flame of Tar Valon*
> *The Amyrlin Seat*

"I could do anything with this," Nynaeve said in a wondering voice. "Order the guards to march. Command the Warders." She gave a little laugh. "I could make a Warder dance, with this."

"Until I found out about it," the Amyrlin agreed dryly. "Unless you had a very convincing reason, I'd make you wish Liandrin had caught you."

"I didn't mean to do any of that," Nynaeve said hastily. "I just meant that it gives more authority than I had imagined."

“You may need every shred of it. But just you remember, child. A Darkfriend won’t heed that any more than a Whitecloak would. They would both likely kill you just for having it. If that paper is a shield . . . well, paper shields are flimsy, and this one may have a target painted on it.”

“Yes, Mother,” Egwene and Nynaeve said together. Egwene folded her paper up and tucked it into her belt pouch, resolving not to take it out again unless she absolutely had to. *And how will I know when that is?*

“What about Mat?” Nynaeve asked. “He’s very sick, Mother, and he does not have much time left.”

“I will send word to you,” the Amyrlin said curtly.

“But, Mother—”

“I will send word to you! Now, off with you, children. The hope of the Tower rests in your hands. Go to your rooms and get some rest. Remember, you have appointments with Sheriam, and with the pots.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 15

The Gray Man

Outside the Amyrlin Seat’s study, Egwene and Nynaeve found the corridors empty except for an occasional serving woman, hurrying about her duties on soft-slippered feet. Egwene was grateful for their presence. The halls suddenly seemed like caverns, for all the tapestries and stonework. Dangerous caverns.

Nynaeve strode along purposefully, tugging at her braid fitfully again, and Egwene hurried to keep up. She did not want to be left alone.

“If the Black Ajah *is* still here, Nynaeve, and if they even suspect what we’re doing. . . . I hope you didn’t mean what you said about acting as if we are already bound by the Three Oaths. I don’t intend to let them kill me, not if I can stop it by channeling.”

“If any of them are still here, Egwene, they will know what we are doing as soon as they see us.” Despite what she was saying, Nynaeve sounded preoccupied. “Or at least they will see us as a threat, and that’s much the same thing as far as what they will do.”

“How will they see us as a threat? Nobody is threatened by someone they can order about. Nobody is threatened by someone who has to scrub pots and turn the spits three times a day. That’s why the Amyrlin is putting us to work in the kitchens. Part of the reason, anyway.”

“Perhaps the Amyrlin did not think it through,” Nynaeve said absently. “Or perhaps she did, and means something different for us than what she claims. Think, Egwene. Liandrin would not have tried to put us out of the way unless she thought we were a threat to her. I can’t imagine how, or to what, but I cannot see how it could have changed, either. If there are any Black Ajah still here, they will surely see us the same way, whether they suspect what we’re doing or not.”

Egwene swallowed. “I hadn’t thought of that. Light, I wish I were invisible. Nynaeve, if they are still after us, I will risk being stilled before I let Darkfriends kill me, or maybe worse. And I won't believe you will let them take you, either, no matter what you told the Amyrlin."

"I meant it." For a moment Nynaeve seemed to rouse from her thoughts. Her steps slowed. A pale-haired novice carrying a tray rushed past. "I meant every word, Egwene." Nynaeve went on when the novice was out of hearing. "There are other ways to defend ourselves. If there were not, Aes Sedai would be killed every time they left the Tower. We just have to reason those ways out, and use them."

"I know several ways already, and so do you."

"They are dangerous." Egwene opened her mouth to say they were only dangerous to whoever attacked her, but Nynaeve plowed on over her. "You can come to like them too much. When I let out all my anger at those Whitecloaks this morning. . . . It felt too good. It is too dangerous." She shivered and quickened her pace again, and Egwene had to step lively to catch up.

"You sound like Sheriam. You never have before. You have pushed every limit they've put on you. Why would you accept limits now, when we might have to ignore them to stay alive?"

"What good if it ends with us being put out of the Tower? Stilled or not, what good then?" Nynaeve's voice dropped as if she were speaking to herself. "I can do it. I must, if I'm to stay here long enough to learn, and I must learn if I'm to—" Suddenly she seemed to realize she was speaking aloud. She shot a hard look at Egwene, and her voice firmed. "Let me think. Please, be quiet and let me think."

Egwene held her tongue, but inside she bubbled with unasked questions. What special reason did Nynaeve have for wanting to learn more of what the White Tower could teach? What was it she wanted to do? Why was Nynaeve keeping it secret from her? *Secrets. We've learned to keep too many secrets since coming to the Tower. The Amyrlin is keeping secrets from us, too. Light, what is she going to do about Mat?*

Nynaeve accompanied her all the way back to the novices' quarters, not turning aside to the Accepted's quarters. The galleries were still empty, and they met no one as they climbed the spiraling ramps.

As they came up on Elayne's room, Nynaeve stopped, knocked once, and immediately opened the door and put her head inside. Then she was letting the white door swing shut and striding toward the next, Egwene's room. "She isn't here yet," she said. "I need to talk to both of you."

Egwene caught her shoulders and pulled her to an abrupt halt. “What—?” Something tugged at her hair, stung her ear. A black blur streaked in front of her face to clang against the wall, and in the next breath Nynaeve was bearing her to the gallery floor, behind the railing.

Wide-eyed and sprawling, Egwene stared at what lay on the stone in front of her door, where it had fallen. A bolt from a crossbow. A few dark strands from her hair were tangled in the four heavy prongs, meant for punching through armor. She raised a trembling hand to touch her ear, to touch the tiniest nick, damp with a bead of blood. *If I had not stopped just then. . . . If I hadn’t. . . .* The quarrel would have gone right through her head, and would probably have killed Nynaeve, too. “Blood and ashes!” she gasped. “Blood and bloody ashes!”

“Watch your language,” Nynaeve admonished, but her heart was not in it. She lay peering between the white stone balusters toward the far side of the galleries. A glow surrounded her, to Egwene’s eyes. She had embraced *saidar.*

Hastily, Egwene tried to reach out for the One Power, too, but at first haste defeated her. Haste, and images that kept intruding on the emptiness, images of her head being ripped apart like a rotten melon by a heavy quarrel that went on to bury itself in Nynaeve. She took a deep breath and tried again, and finally the rose floated in nothingness, opened to the True Source, and the Power filled her.

She rolled onto her stomach to peer through the railing beside Nynaeve. “Do you see anything? Do you see him? I’ll put a lightning bolt through him!” She could feel it building, pressing on her to loose it. “It *is* a man, isn’t it?” She could not imagine a man coming into the novices’ quarters, but it was impossible to picture a woman carrying a crossbow through the Tower.

“I don’t know.” Quiet anger filled Nynaeve’s voice; her anger was always at its worst when she grew quiet with it. “I thought I saw—Yes! There!” Egwene felt the Power pulse in the other woman, and then Nynaeve was unhurriedly getting to her feet, brushing at her dress as if there were nothing more to worry about.

Egwene stared at her. “What? What did you do? Nynaeve?”

“ ‘Of the Five Powers,’ ” Nynaeve said in a lecturing tone, faintly mocking, “ ‘Air, sometimes called Wind, is thought by many to be of the least use. This is far from true.’ ” She finished with a tight laugh. “I told you there were other ways to defend ourselves. I used Air, to hold him with air. If it is a he; I could not see him clearly. A trick the Amyrlin showed me once, though I doubt she expected me to see how it was done. Well, are you going to lie there all day?”

Egwene scrambled up to hurry after her around the gallery. Before long a man did come into sight around the curve, dressed in plain brown breeches and coat. He stood facing the other way, balanced on the ball of one foot, with the other hanging in midair as if he had been caught in the middle of running. The man would feel as if he were buried in thick jelly, yet it was nothing but air stiffened around him. Egwene remembered the Amyrlin’s trick, too, but she did not think she could duplicate it. Nynaeve only had to see a thing done once to know how to do it herself. When she could manage to channel at all, of course.

They came closer, and Egwene’s melding with the Power vanished in shock. The hilt of a dagger stood out from the man’s chest. His face sagged, and death had already filmed his half-closed eyes. He crumpled to the gallery floor as Nynaeve loosed the trap that had held him.

He was an average-appearing man, of average height and average build, with features so ordinary Egwene did not think she would have noticed him in a group of three. She only studied him a moment, though, before realizing that something was missing. A crossbow.

She gave a start and looked about wildly. “There had to be another one, Nynaeve. Somebody took the crossbow. And somebody stabbed him. He could be out there ready to shoot at us again.”

“Calm yourself,” Nynaeve said, but she peered both ways along the gallery, jerking at her braid. “Just be calm, and we will figure out what to —” Her words cut off at the sound of steps on the ramp leading up to their level.

Egwene’s heart pounded, seemingly in her throat. Eyes fastened on the head of the ramp, she desperately strove to touch *saidar* again, but for her that required calm, and her heartbeats shattered calm.

Sheriam Sedai stopped at the top of the ramp, frowning at what she saw. “What in the name of the Light has happened here?” She hurried forward, her serenity gone for once.

“We found him,” Nynaeve said as the Mistress of Novices knelt beside the corpse.

Sheriam put a hand to the man’s chest, and jerked it back twice as fast, hissing. Steeling herself visibly, she touched him again, and maintained the Touch longer. “Dead,” she muttered. “As dead as it is possible to be, and more.” When she straightened, she pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped her fingers. “You found him? Here? Like this?”

Egwene nodded, sure that if she spoke, Sheriam would hear the lie in her voice.

“We did,” Nynaeve said firmly.

Sheriam shook her head. “A man—a dead man, at that!—in the novices’ quarters would be scandal enough, but this . . . !”

“What makes him different?” Nynaeve asked. “And how could he be *more* than dead?”

Sheriam took a deep breath, and gave them each a searching look. “He is one of the Soulless. A Gray Man.” Absently, she wiped her fingers again, her eyes going back to the body. Worried eyes.

“The Soulless?” Egwene said, a tremor in her voice, at the same time that Nynaeve said, “A Gray Man?”

Sheriam glanced at them, a look as penetrating as it was brief. “Not a part of your studies, yet, but you seem to have gone beyond the rules in a great many ways. And considering you found this. . . .” She gestured to the corpse. “The Soulless, the Gray Men, give up their souls to serve the Dark One as assassins. They are not really alive, after that. Not quite dead, but not truly alive. And despite the name, some Gray Men are women. A very few. Even among Darkfriends, only a handful of women are stupid enough to make that sacrifice. You can look right at them and hardly notice them, until it is too late. He was as much as dead while he walked. Now, only my eyes tell me that what is lying there ever lived at all.” She gave them another long look. “No Gray Man has dared enter Tar Valon since the Trolloc Wars.”

“What will you do?” Egwene asked. Sheriam’s brows rose, and she quickly added, “If I may ask, Sheriam Sedai.”

The Aes Sedai hesitated. “I suppose you may, since you had the bad luck to find him. It will be up to the Amyrlin Seat, but with everything that has happened, I believe she will want to keep this as quiet as is possible. We do not need more rumors. You will speak of this to none but me, or to the Amyrlin, should she mention it first.”

“Yes, Aes Sedai,” Egwene said fervently. Nynaeve’s voice was cooler.

Sheriam appeared to take their obedience for granted. She gave no sign of having heard them. Her attention was all on the dead man. The Gray Man. The Soulless. “There will be no hiding the fact that a man was killed here.” The glow of the One Power suddenly surrounded her, and just as abruptly, a long, low dome covered the body on the floor, grayish and so opaque that it was hard to see there was a body under it. “But this will keep anyone else from touching him who can discover his nature. I must have this removed before the novices come back.”

Her tilted green eyes regarded them as if she had just remembered their presence. “You two go, now. To your room, I think, Nynaeve. Considering what you are already facing, if it became known you were involved in this, even on the edge of it. . . . Go.”

Egwene curtsied, and tugged at Nynaeve’s sleeve, but Nynaeve said, “Why did you come up here, Sheriam Sedai?”

For a moment Sheriam looked startled, but on the instant she frowned. Fists on her hips, she regarded Nynaeve with all the firmness of her office. “Does the Mistress of Novices now need an excuse for coming to the novices’ quarters, Accepted?” she said softly. “Do Accepted now question Aes Sedai? The Amyrlin means to make something of you two, but whether she does or not, I will teach you manners, at least. Now, the pair of you, go, before I haul you both down to my study, and not for the appointment the Amyrlin Seat has already set for you.”

A sudden thought came to Egwene. “Forgive me, Sheriam Sedai,” she said quickly, “but I must fetch my cloak. I feel cold.” She rushed away, around the gallery before the Aes Sedai could speak.

If Sheriam found that crossbow bolt in front of her door, there would be too many questions. No pretending they had only found the man, that he had no connection to her, then. But when she reached the door to her room, the heavy bolt was gone. Only the jagged chip in the stone beside the door said it had ever been there.

Egwene’s skin crawled. *How could anyone take it without one of us seeing. . . . Another Gray Man!* She had embraced *saidar* before she knew it, only the sweet flow of the Power inside her telling her what she had done. Even so, it was one of the hardest things she had ever done, opening that door and going into her room. There was no one there. She snatched the white cloak off its peg and ran out, anyway, and she did not release *saidar* until she was halfway back to the others.

Something more had passed between the women while she was gone. Nynaeve was attempting to appear meek, and succeeding only in looking as if she had a sour stomach. Sheriam had her fists on her hips and was tapping her foot irritably, and the stare she was giving Nynaeve, like green millstones ready to start grinding barley flour, took in Egwene equally.

"Forgive me, Sheriam Sedai," she said hastily, dropping a curtsy and settling her cloak on her shoulders at the same time. "This . . . finding a dead man—a . . . a Gray Man!—it made me cold. If we may go now?"

At Sheriam's tight nod of dismissal, Nynaeve made a bare curtsy. Egwene seized her arm and hustled her away.

"Are you trying to *make* more trouble for us?" she demanded when they were two levels down. And safely out of earshot of Sheriam, she hoped. "What else did you say to her, to make her glare like that? More questions, I suppose? I hope you learned something worth making her mad at us."

"She would not say anything," Nynaeve muttered. "We must ask questions if we are to do any good, Egwene. We will have to take a few chances, or we'll never learn anything."

Egwene sighed. "Well, be a little more circumspect." From the set of Nynaeve's face, the other woman had no intention of going easy or avoiding risks. Egwene sighed again. "The crossbow bolt was gone, Nynaeve. It must have been another Gray Man who took it."

"So that is why you. . . . Light!" Nynaeve frowned and gave a sharp tug to her braid.

After a time Egwene said, "What was that she did to cover the . . . the body?" She did not want to think of it as a Gray Man; that reminded her there was another one out there. She did not want to think of anything at all, right then.

"Air," Nynaeve replied. "She used Air. A neat trick, and I think I see how to make something useful with it."

The use of the One Power was divided into the Five Powers: Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit. Different Talents required different combinations of the Five Powers. "I don't understand some of the ways the Five Powers are combined. Take Healing. I can see why it requires Spirit, and maybe Air, but why Water?"

Nynaeve rounded on her. "What are you babbling about? Have you forgotten what we're doing?" She looked around. They had reached the

Accepted’s quarters, a stack of galleries lower than the novices’ quarters, surrounding a garden rather than a court. There was no one in sight except for another Accepted, hurrying along on another level, but she lowered her voice. “Have you forgotten the Black Ajah?”

“I am trying to forget it,” Egwene said fiercely. “For a little while, anyway. I am trying to forget that we just left a dead man. I’m trying to forget that he almost killed me, and that he has a companion who might try it again.” She touched her ear; the drop of blood had dried, but the nick still hurt. “We are lucky we aren’t both dead right now.”

Nynaeve’s face softened, but when she spoke her voice held something of the time when she had been the Wisdom of Emond’s Field, saying words that had to be said for someone’s own good. “Remember that body, Egwene. Remember that he tried to kill you. Kill us. Remember the Black Ajah. Remember them all the time. Because if you forget, just once, the next time, it may be you lying dead.”

“I know,” Egwene sighed. “But I do not have to like it.”

“Did you notice what Sheriam did not mention?”

“No. What?”

“She never wondered who stabbed him. Now, come on. My room is just down here, and you can put your feet up while we talk.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 16

Hunters Three

Nynaeve's room was considerably larger than the novice rooms. She had a real bed, not one built into the wall, two ladder-back armchairs instead of a stool, and a wardrobe for her clothes. The furnishings were all plain, suitable for a middling successful farmer's house, but compared to the novices, the Accepted lived in luxury. There was even a small rug, woven with scrolls of yellow and red on blue. The room was not empty when Egwene and Nynaeve entered.

Elayne stood in front of the fireplace, arms crossed beneath her breasts and eyes red at least partly from anger. Two tall young men sprawled in the chairs, all arms and legs. One, with his dark green coat undone to show a snowy shirt, shared Elayne's blue eyes and red-gold hair, and his grinning face marked him plainly as her brother. The other, Nynaeve's age and with his gray coat neatly buttoned, was slender and dark of hair and eye. He rose, all sure confidence and lithely muscled grace, when Egwene and Nynaeve came in. He was, Egwene thought not for the first time, the most handsome man she had ever seen. His name was Galad.

"It is good to see you again," he said, taking her hand. "I have worried much over you. We have worried much."

Her pulse quickened, and she took back her hand before he should feel it. "Thank you, Galad," she murmured. *Light, but he's beautiful.* She told herself to stop thinking that way. It was not easy. She found herself smoothing her dress, wishing he were seeing her in silk instead of this plain white wool, perhaps even one of those Domani dresses Min had told her of, the ones that clung and seemed so thin you thought they must be transparent even though they were not. She flushed furiously and banished the image from her mind, willed him to look away from her face. It did not help that half the women in the Tower, from scullery maids to Aes Sedai themselves, looked at him as if they had the same thoughts. It did not help that his smile seemed for her alone. In fact, his smile made it worse. *Light, if he even suspected what I was thinking, I'd die!*

The golden-haired young man leaned forward in his chair. "The question is, where have you been? Elayne dodges my questions as if she has a pocket full of figs and doesn't want me to have any."

"I have told you, Gawyn," Elayne said in a tight voice, "it is none of your affair. I came here," she added to Nynaeve, "because I did not want to be alone. They saw me, and followed. They would not take no for an answer."

"Wouldn't they," Nynaeve said flatly.

"But it is our affair, sister," Galad said. "Your safety is very much our affair." He looked at Egwene, and she felt her heart jump. "The safety of all of you is very important to me. To us."

"I am not your sister," Elayne snapped.

"If you want company," Gawyn told Elayne with a smile, "we can do as well as any. And after what we went through just to be here, we deserve some explanation of where you've been. I would rather let Galad thump me all over the practice yard all day than face Mother again for a single minute. I'd rather have Coulin mad at me." Coulin was Master of Arms, and kept a tight discipline among the young men who came to train at the White Tower whether they aspired to become Warders or just to learn from them.

"Deny the connection if you will," Galad told Elayne gravely, "but it is still there. And Mother put your safety in our hands."

Gawyn grimaced. "She'll have our hides, Elayne, if anything happens to you. We had to talk fast, or she'd have hauled us back home with her. I have never heard of a queen sending her own sons to the headsman, but Mother sounded ready to make an exception if we don't bring you home safely."

"I am sure," Elayne said, "that your fast talk was all for me. None of it was meant to let you stay here studying with the Warders." Gawyn's face reddened.

"Your safety was our first concern." Galad sounded as if he meant it, and Egwene was sure he did. "We managed to convince Mother that if you did return here, you would need someone to look after you."

"Look after me!" Elayne exclaimed, but Galad went on smoothly.

"The White Tower has become a dangerous place. There have been deaths—murders—with no real explanations. Even some Aes Sedai have been killed, though they have tried to keep that quiet. And I have heard rumors of the Black Ajah, spoken in the Tower itself. By Mother's command, when it is safe for you to leave your training, we are to return you to Caemlyn."

For answer, Elayne lifted her chin and half turned away from him.

Gawyn ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Light, Nynaeve, Galad and I are not villains. All we want to do is help. We would do it anyway, but Mother commanded it, so there's no chance of you talking us out of it."

"Morgase's commands carry no weight in Tar Valon," Nynaeve said in a level voice. "As for your offer of help, I will remember it. Should we need help, you will be among the first to hear of it. For now, I wish you to leave." She gestured pointedly to the door, but he ignored her.

"That is all very well, but Mother will want to know Elayne has come back. And why she ran off without a word, and what she was doing these months. Light, Elayne! The whole Tower was in a turmoil. Mother was half-crazed with fear. I thought she'd tear the Tower down with her bare hands." Elayne's face took on a measure of guilt, and Gawyn pressed his advantage. "You owe her that much, Elayne. You owe me that much. Burn me, you're being as stubborn as stone. You've been gone for months, and all I know about it is that you've run afoul of Sheriam. And the only reasons I know that much are because you've been crying and you won't sit down." Elayne's indignant stare said he had squandered whatever momentary advantage he might have had.

"Enough," Nynaeve said. Galad and Gawyn opened their mouths. She raised her voice. "I said enough!" She glared at them until it was clear their silence would hold, then went on. "Elayne *owes* the two of you nothing. Since she chooses to tell you nothing, that is that. Now, this is my room, not the common room of an inn, and I want you out of it."

"But, Elayne—" Gawyn began at the same time that Galad said, "We only want—"

Nynaeve spoke loudly enough to drown them out. "I doubt you asked permission to enter the Accepted's quarters." They stared at her, looking surprised. "I thought not. You will be out of my room, out of my sight, before I count three, or I will write a note to the Master of Arms about this. Coulin Gaidin has a much stronger arm than Sheriam Sedai, and you may be assured that I will be there to see he makes a proper job of it."

“Nynaeve, you wouldn’t—” Gawyn began worriedly, but Galad motioned him to silence and stepped closer to Nynaeve.

Her face kept its stern expression, but she unconsciously smoothed the front of her dress as he smiled down at her. Egwene was not surprised. She did not think she had met a woman outside the Red Ajah who would not be affected by Galad’s smile.

“I apologize, Nynaeve, for our forcing ourselves on you unwanted,” he said smoothly. “We will go, of course. But remember that we are here if you need us. And whatever caused you to run away, we can help with that, as well.”

Nynaeve returned his smile. “One,” she said.

Galad blinked, his smile fading. Calmly, he turned to Egwene. Gawyn got up and started for the door. “Egwene,” Galad said, “you know that you, especially, can call on me at any time, for anything. I hope you know that.”

“Two,” Nynaeve said.

Galad gave her an irritated look. “We will talk again,” he told Egwene, bowing over her hand. With a last smile, he took an unhurried step toward the door.

“Thrrrrrrrrr”—Gawyn darted through the door, and even Galad’s graceful stride quickened markedly—“ree,” Nynaeve finished as the door banged shut behind them.

Elayne clapped her hands delightedly. “Oh, well done,” she said. “Very well done. I did not even know men were forbidden the Accepted’s quarters, too.”

“They aren’t,” Nynaeve said dryly, “but those louts did not know it, either.” Elayne clapped her hands again and laughed. “I’d have let them just leave,” Nynaeve added, “if Galad had not made such a show of taking his time about it. That young man has too fair a face for his own good.” Egwene almost laughed at that; Galad was no more than a year younger that Nynaeve, if that, and Nynaeve was straightening her dress again.

“Galad!” Elayne sniffed. “He’ll bother us again, and I do not know whether your trick will work more than once. He does what he sees as right no matter who it hurts, even himself.”

“Then I will think of something else,” Nynaeve said. “We can’t afford to have them looking over our shoulders all the time. Elayne, if you wish, I can make a salve that will soothe you.”

Elayne shook her head, then lay down across the bed with her chin in her hands. “If Sheriam found out, we would no doubt both have yet another visit to her study to look forward to. You have not said very much, Egwene. Cat caught your tongue?” Her expression became grimmer. “Or perhaps Galad has?”

Egwene blushed in spite of herself. “I simply did not choose to argue with them,” she said in as dignified a tone as she could manage.

“Of course,” Elayne said grudgingly. “I will admit that Galad is good-looking. But he is horrid, too. He *always* does right, as he sees it I know that does not sound horrid, but it is. He has never disobeyed Mother, not in the smallest thing that I know of. He will not tell a lie, even a small one, or break a rule. If he turns you in for breaking one, there isn’t the slightest spite in it—he seems sad you could not live up to his standards, if anything—but that doesn’t change the fact that he *will* turn you in.”

“That sounds—uncomfortable,” Egwene said carefully, “but not horrid. I cannot imagine Galad doing anything horrid.”

Elayne shook her head, as if in disbelief that Egwene found it so hard to see what was clear to her. “If you want to pay attention to someone, try Gawyn. He is nice enough—most of the time—and he’s besotted with you.”

“Gawyn! He has never looked at me twice.”

“Of course not, you fool, the way you stare at Galad until your eyes look ready to fall out of your face.” Egwene’s cheeks felt hot, but she was afraid it might well be true. “Galad saved his life when Gawyn was a child,” Elayne went on. “Gawyn will never admit he is interested in a woman if Galad is interested in her, but I have heard him talk about you, and I know. He never could hide things from me.”

“That is nice to know,” Egwene said, then laughed at Elayne’s grin. “Perhaps I can get him to say some of those things to me instead of you.”

“You could choose Green Ajah, you know. Green sisters sometimes marry. Gawyn truly is besotted, and you would be good for him. Besides, I would like to have you for a sister.”

“If you two are finished with girlish chatter,” Nynaeve cut in, “there are important matters to talk about.”

“Yes,” Elayne said, “such as what the Amyrlin Seat had to say to you after I left.”

“I would rather not talk about that,” Egwene said awkwardly. She did not like lying to Elayne. “She did not say anything that was pleasant.”

Elayne gave a sniff of disbelief. “Most people think I get off easier than the others because I am Daughter-Heir of Andor. The truth is that if anything, I catch it harder than the rest because I’m Daughter-Heir. Neither of you did anything I did not, and if the Amyrlin had harsh words for you, she would have twice as harsh for me. Now, what did she say?”

“You must keep this just between us three,” Nynaeve said. “The Black Ajah—”

“Nynaeve!” Egwene exclaimed. “The Amyrlin said Elayne was to be left out of it!”

“The Black Ajah!” Elayne almost shouted, scrambling up to kneel in the middle of the bed. “You cannot leave me out after telling me this much. I won’t be left out.”

“I never meant for you to be,” Nynaeve assured her. Egwene could only stare at her in amazement. “Egwene, it was you and I who Liandrin saw as a threat. It was you and I who were just nearly killed—”

“Nearly killed?” Elayne whispered.

“—perhaps because we are still a threat, and perhaps because they already know that we were closeted alone with the Amyrlin, and even what she told us. We need someone with us who they do not know about, and if she isn’t known to the Amyrlin, either, so much the better. I am not sure we can trust the Amyrlin much further than the Black Ajah. She means to use us for her own ends. I mean to see she doesn’t use us up. Can you understand that?”

Egwene nodded reluctantly. Just the same, she said, “It will be dangerous, Elayne, as dangerous as anything we faced in Falme. Maybe more so. You do not have to be part of it, this time.”

“I know that,” Elayne said quietly. She paused, then went on. “When Andor goes to war, the First Prince of the Sword commands the army, but the Queen rides with them, too. Seven hundred years ago, at the Battle of Cuallin Dhen, the Andormen were being routed when Queen Modrellein rode, alone and unarmed, carrying the Lion banner into the midst of the Tairen army. The Andormen rallied and attacked once more, to save her, and won the battle. That is the kind of courage expected of the Queen of Andor. If I have not learned to control my fear yet, I must before I take my mother’s place on the Lion Throne.” Suddenly her somber mood vanished in a giggle. “Besides, do you think I would pass up an adventure so I could scrub pots?”

“You will do that anyway,” Nynaeve told her, “and hope that everyone thinks that is all you are doing. Now listen carefully.”

Elayne listened, and her mouth slowly dropped open as Nynaeve unfolded what the Amyrlin Seat had told them, and the task she had laid on them, and the attempt on their lives. She shivered over the Gray Man, and read the document the Amyrlin had given Nynaeve with a look of wonder, then returned it, murmuring, “I wish I could have that when I face Mother next.” By the time Nynaeve finished, though, her face was a picture of indignation.

“Why, that’s like being told to go up in the hills and find lions, only you do not know whether there are any lions, but if there are, they may be hunting you, and they may be disguised as bushes. Oh, and if you find any lions, try not to let them eat you before you can tell where they are.”

“If you are afraid,” Nynaeve said, “you can still stand aside. It will be too late, once you’ve begun.”

Elayne tossed her head back. “Of course I am afraid. I am not a fool. But not afraid enough to quit before I have even started.”

“There is something else, too,” Nynaeve said. “I am afraid the Amyrlin may mean to let Mat die.”

“But an Aes Sedai is supposed to Heal anyone who asks.” The Daughter-Heir seemed caught between indignation and disbelief. “Why would she let Mat die? I cannot believe it! I will not!”

“Nor can I!” Egwene gasped. *She could not have meant that! The Amyrlin* couldn’t *let him die!* “All the way here Verin said that the Amyrlin would see he was Healed.”

Nynaeve shook her head. “Verin said the Amyrlin would ‘see to him.’ That is not the same thing. And the Amyrlin avoided saying yes or no when I asked her. Maybe she has not made her mind up.”

“But *why*?” Elayne asked.

“Because the White Tower does what it does for its own reasons.” Nynaeve’s voice made Egwene shiver. “I do not know why. Whether they help Mat live or let him die depends on what serves their ends. None of the Three Oaths says they have to Heal him. Mat is just a tool, in the Amyrlin’s eyes. So are we. She will use us to hunt the Black Ajah, but if you break a tool so it cannot be fixed, you don’t weep over it. You just get another one. Both of you had best remember that.”

“What are we going to do about him?” Egwene asked. “What can we do?”

Nynaeve went to her wardrobe and rummaged in the back of it. When she came out, she had a striped cloth bag of herbs. “With my medicines—and luck—perhaps I can Heal him myself.”

“Verin could not,” Elayne said. “Moiraine and Verin together could not, and Moiraine had an *angreal*. Nynaeve, if you draw too much of the One Power, you could burn yourself to a cinder. Or just still yourself, if you are lucky. If you can call that luck.”

Nynaeve shrugged. “They keep telling me I have the potential to be the most powerful Aes Sedai in a thousand years. Perhaps it is time to find out whether they are right.” She gave a tug to her braid.

It was plain that however brave Nynaeve’s words, she was afraid. *But she won’t let Mat die even if it means risking death herself.* “They keep saying we’re all three so powerful—or will be. Maybe, if we all try together, we can divide the flow among us.”

“We have never tried working together,” Nynaeve said slowly. “I am not sure I know how to combine our abilities. Trying could be almost as dangerous as drawing too much of the Power.”

“Oh, if we are going to do it,” Elayne said, climbing off the bed, “let’s do it. The longer we talk of it, the more frightened I will become. Mat is in the guest rooms. I do not know which one, but Sheriam told me that much.”

As if to put period to her words, the door banged open, and an Aes Sedai entered as though it were her room, and they the interlopers.

Egwene made her curtsy deep, to hide the dismay on her face.

* * *

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CHAPTER 17

The Red Sister

Elaida was a handsome woman rather than beautiful, and the sternness on her face added maturity to her ageless Aes Sedai features. She did not look old, yet Egwene could never imagine Elaida as having been young. Except for the most formal occasions, few Aes Sedai wore the vine-embroidered shawl with the white teardrop Flame of Tar Valon large on the wearer’s back, but Elaida wore hers, the long red fringe announcing her Ajah. Red slashed her dress of cream-colored silk, too, and red slippers peeked under the edge of her skirts as she moved into the room. Her dark eyes watched them as a bird’s eyes watched worms.

“So all of you are together. Somehow, that does not surprise me.” Her voice made no more pretense than her bearing did; she was a woman of power, and ready to wield it if she decided it was necessary, a woman who knew more than those she spoke to. It was much the same for a queen as for a novice.

“Forgive me, Elaida Sedai,” Nynaeve said, dropping another curtsy, “but I was about to go out. I have much to catch up in my studies. If you will forgive—”

“Your studies can wait,” Elaida said. “They have waited long enough already, after all.” She plucked the cloth bag out of Nynaeve’s hands and undid the strings, but after one glance inside she tossed it on the floor. “Herbs. You are not a village Wisdom any longer, child. Trying to hold on to the past will only hold you back.”

“Elaida Sedai,” Elayne said, “I—”

“Be silent, novice.” Elaida’s voice was cold and soft, as silk wrapped around steel is soft. “You may have broken a bond between Tar Valon and Caemlyn that has lasted a thousand years. You will speak when spoken to.” Elayne’s eyes examined the floor in front of her toes. Spots of color burned in her cheeks. Guilt, or anger? Egwene was not sure.

Ignoring them all, Elaida sat down in one of the chairs, carefully arranging her skirts. She made no gesture for the rest of them to sit. Nynaeve's face tightened, and she began giving sharp little tugs to her braid. Egwene hoped she would keep her temper well enough not to take the other chair without permission.

When Elaida had settled herself to her own satisfaction, she studied them for a time in silence, her face unreadable. At last she said, "Did you know that we have the Black Ajah among us?"

Egwene exchanged startled glances with Nynaeve and Elayne.

"We were told," Nynaeve said cautiously. "Elaida Sedai," she added after a pause.

Elaida arched an eyebrow. "Yes. I thought that you might know of it." Egwene gave a start at her tone, implying so much more than it said, and Nynaeve opened her mouth angrily, but the Aes Sedai's flat stare stilled tongues. "The two of you," Elaida went on in a casual tone, "vanish, taking with you the Daughter-Heir of Andor—the girl who *may* become Queen of Andor one day, if I do not strip off her hide and sell it to a glove maker—vanish without permission, without a word, without a trace."

"I was not carried off," Elayne said to the floor. "I went of my own will."

"Will you obey me, child?" A glow surrounded Elaida. The Aes Sedai's glare was fixed on Elayne. "Must I teach you, here and now?"

Elayne raised her head, and there was no mistaking what was in her face. Anger. For a long moment she met Elaida's stare.

Egwene's fingernails dug into her palms. It was maddening. She, or Elayne, or Nynaeve, could destroy Elaida where she sat. If they caught Elaida by surprise, at least; she was fully trained, after all. *And if we do anything but take whatever she wants to feed us, we throw away everything. Don't throw it away now, Elayne.*

Elayne's head dropped. "Forgive me, Elaida Sedai," she mumbled. "I—forgot myself."

The glow winked out of existence, and Elaida sniffed audibly. "You have learned bad habits, wherever these two took you. You cannot afford bad habits, child. You will be the first Queen of Andor ever to be Aes Sedai. The first queen anywhere to be Aes Sedai in over a thousand years. You will be one of the strongest of us since the Breaking of the World, perhaps strong enough to be the first ruler since the Breaking to openly tell the world she is Aes Sedai. Do not risk all of that, child, because you can still lose it all. I have invested too much time to see that. Do you understand me?"

"I think so, Elaida Sedai," Elayne said. She sounded as if she did not understand at all. No more did Egwene.

Elaida abandoned the subject. "You may be in grave danger. All three of you. You disappear and return, and in the interval, Liandrin and her . . . companions leave us. There will inevitably be comparisons. We are sure Liandrin and those who went with her are Darkfriends. Black Ajah. I would not see the same charge leveled at Elayne, and to protect her, it seems I must protect all of you. Tell me why you ran away, and what you have been doing these months, and I will do what I can for you." Her eyes fastened on Egwene like grappling hooks.

Egwene floundered for an answer that the Aes Sedai would accept. It was said that Elaida could hear a lie, sometimes. "It . . . it was Mat. He is very sick." She tried to choose her words carefully, to say nothing that was not true, yet give an impression far from truth. *Aes Sedai do it all the time.* "We went to. . . . We brought him back to be Healed. If we hadn't, he would die. The Amyrlin is going to Heal him." *I hope.* She made herself continue to meet the Red Aes Sedai's gaze, willed herself not to shift her feet guiltily. From Elaida's face, there was no way to tell whether she believed a word.

"That is enough, Egwene," Nynaeve said. Elaida's penetrating look shifted to her, but she gave no sign of being affected by it. She met the Aes Sedai's eyes without blinking. "Forgive me for interrupting, Elaida Sedai," she said smoothly, "but the Amyrlin Seat said our transgressions were to be put behind us and forgotten. As part of making a new beginning, we are not even to speak of them. The Amyrlin said it should be as if they never happened."

"She said that, did she?" Still nothing in Elaida's voice or on her face told whether she believed or not. "Interesting. You can hardly forget entirely when your punishment has been announced to the entire Tower. Unprecedented, that. Unheard of, for less than stilling. I can see why you are eager to put it all behind you. I understand you are to be raised to the Accepted, Elayne. And Egwene. That is hardly punishment."

Elayne glanced at the Aes Sedai as though for permission to speak. "The Mother said we were ready," she said. A touch of defiance entered her voice. “I have learned, Elaida Sedai, and grown. She would not have named me to be raised if I had not.”

“Learned,” Elaida said musingly. “And grown. Perhaps you have.” There was no hint in her tone whether she thought this was good. Her gaze shifted back to Egwene and Nynaeve, searching. “You returned with this Mat, a youth from your village. There was another young man from your village. Rand al’Thor.”

Egwene felt as if an icy hand had suddenly gripped her stomach.

“I hope he is well,” Nynaeve said levelly, but her hand was a fist gripping her braid. “We have not seen him in some time.”

“An interesting young man.” Elaida studied them as she spoke. “I met him only once, but I found him—most interesting. I believe he must be *ta’veren.* Yes. The answers to many questions may rest in him. This Emond’s Field of yours must be an unusual place to produce the two of you. And Rand al’Thor.”

“It is just a village,” Nynaeve said. “Just a village like any other.”

“Yes. Of course.” Elaida smiled, a cold quirk of her lips that twisted Egwene’s stomach. “Tell me about him. The Amyrlin has not commanded you to be silent about him also, has she?”

Nynaeve gave her braid a tug. Elayne studied the carpet as if something important were hidden in it, and Egwene racked her brain for an answer. *She can hear lies, they say. Light, if she can really hear a lie. . . .* The moment stretched on, until finally Nynaeve opened her mouth.

At that instant the door opened again. Sheriam regarded the room with a measure of surprise. “It is well I find you here, Elayne. I want all three of you. I had not expected you, Elaida.”

Elaida stood, arranging her shawl. “We are all curious about these girls. Why they ran away. What adventures they had while gone. They say the Mother has commanded them not to speak of it.”

“As well not to,” Sheriam said. “They are to be punished, and that should be an end to it. I have always felt that when punishment is done, the fault that caused it should be erased.”

For a long moment the two Aes Sedai stood looking at each other, no expression on either smooth face. Then Elaida said, “Of course. Perhaps I will speak to them another time. About other matters.” The look she gave to the three women in white seemed to Egwene to carry a warning, and then she was slipping past Sheriam.

Holding the door open, the Mistress of Novices watched the other Aes Sedai go down the gallery. Her face was still unreadable.

Egwene let out a long breath, and heard echoes from Nynaeve and Elayne.

“She threatened me,” Elayne said incredulously, and half to herself. “She threatened me with stilling, if I don’t stop being—*willful*!”

“You mistook her,” Sheriam said. “If being willful were a stilling offense, the list of the stilled would have more names on it than you could learn. Few meek women ever achieve the ring and the shawl. That is not to say, of course, that you must not learn to act meekly when it is required.”

“Yes, Sheriam Sedai,” they all three said almost as one, and Sheriam smiled.

“You see? You can give the appearance of meekness, at least. And you will have plenty of opportunity to practice before you earn your way back into the Amyrlin’s good graces. And mine. Mine will be harder to achieve.”

“Yes, Sheriam Sedai,” Egwene said, but this time only Elayne spoke with her.

Nynaeve said, “What of . . . the body, Sheriam Sedai? The . . . the Soulless? Have you discovered who killed him? Or why he entered the Tower?”

Sheriam’s mouth tightened. “You take one step forward, Nynaeve, and then a step back. Since from Elayne’s lack of surprise, you have obviously told her of it—*after I told you not to speak of the matter!*—then there are exactly seven people in the Tower who know a man was killed today in the novices’ quarters, and two of them are men who know no more than that. Except that they are to keep their mouths shut. If an order from the Mistress of Novices carries no weight with you—and if that is so, I will correct you—perhaps you will obey one from the Amyrlin Seat. You are to speak of this to no one except the Mother or me. The Amyrlin will not have more rumors piled on those we must already contend with. Do I make myself clear?”

The firmness of her voice produced a chorus of “Yes, Sheriam Sedai”—but Nynaeve refused to stop at that. “Seven, you said, Sheriam Sedai. Plus whoever killed him. And maybe they had help getting into the Tower.”

“That is no concern of yours.” Sheriam’s level gaze included them all. “I will ask whatever questions must be asked about this man. You will forget you know anything at all about a dead man. If I discover you are doing anything else. . . . Well, there are worse things than scrubbing pots to occupy your attention. And I will not accept any excuses. Do I hear any more questions?”

“No, Sheriam Sedai.” This time, Nynaeve joined in, to Egwene’s relief. Not that she felt very much relief. Sheriam’s watchful eye would make it doubly hard to carry out a search for the Black Ajah. For a moment she felt like laughing hysterically. *If the Black Ajah doesn’t catch us, Sheriam will.* The urge to laugh vanished. *If Sheriam isn’t Black Ajah herself.* She wished she could make that thought go away.

Sheriam nodded. “Very well, then. You will come with me.”

“To where?” Nynaeve asked, and added, “Sheriam Sedai,” only an instant before the Aes Sedai’s eyes narrowed.

“Have you forgotten,” Sheriam said in a tight voice, “that in the Tower, Healing is always done in the presence of those who bring their sick to us?”

Egwene thought that the Mistress of Novices’s stock of patience with them was about used up, but before she could stop herself, she burst out, “Then she *is* going to Heal him!”

“The Amyrlin Seat herself, among others, will see to him.” Sheriam’s face held no more expression than her voice. “Did you have reason to doubt it?” Egwene could only shake her head. “Then you waste your friend’s life standing here. The Amyrlin Seat is not to be kept waiting.” Yet despite her words, Egwene had the feeling the Aes Sedai was in no hurry at all.

* * *

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CHAPTER 18

Healing

Lamps on iron wall brackets lit the passages deep beneath the Tower, where Sheriam took them. The few doors they passed were shut tight, some locked, some so cunningly worked that they remained unseen until Egwene was right on top of them. Dark openings marked most of the crossing hallways, while down others she could only see the dim glow of distant lights spaced far apart. She saw no other people. These were not places even Aes Sedai often came. The air was neither cool nor warm, but she shivered anyway, and at the same time felt sweat trickling down her back.

It was down here, in the depths of the White Tower, that novices went through their last test before being raised to Accepted. Or put out of the Tower, if they failed. Down here, Accepted took the Three Oaths after passing their final test. No one, she realized, had ever told her what happened to an Accepted who failed. Down here, somewhere, was the room where the Tower's few *angreal* and *sa'angreal* were kept, and the places where the *ter'angreal* were stored. The Black Ajah had struck at those storerooms. And if some of the Black Ajah were lying in wait in one of those dark side corridors, if Sheriam were leading them not to Mat, but to. . . .

She gave a squeak when the Aes Sedai stopped suddenly, then colored when the others looked at her curiously. "I was thinking about the Black Ajah," she said weakly.

"Do not think of it," Sheriam said, and for once she sounded like the Sheriam of old, kindly if firm. "The Black Ajah will not be your worry for years to come. You have what the rest of us do not: time before you must deal with it. Much time, yet. When we enter, stay against the wall and keep silent. You are allowed here as a benevolence, to attend, not to distract or interfere." She opened a door covered in gray metal worked to look like stone.

The square room within was spacious, its pale stone walls bare. The only furnishing was a long stone table draped with a white cloth, in the middle of the room. Mat lay on that table, fully clothed save for coat and boots, eyes closed and face so gaunt that Egwene wanted to cry. His labored breathing made a hoarse whistle. The Shadar Logoth dagger hung sheathed at his belt, the ruby capping its hilt seeming to gather light, so it glowed like some fierce red eye despite the illumination of a dozen lamps, magnified by the pale walls and white-tiled floor.

The Amyrlin Seat stood at Mat's head, and Leane at his feet. Four Aes Sedai stood down one side of the table, and three down the other. Sheriam joined the three. One of them was Verin. Egwene recognized Serafelle, another Brown sister, and Alanna Mosvani, of the Green Ajah, and Anaiya, of the Blue, which was Moiraine's Ajah.

Alanna and Anaiya had each taught her some of her lessons in opening herself to the True Source, in how to surrender to *saidar* in order to control it. And between her first arrival in the White Tower and her departure, Anaiya must have tested her fifty times to see if she was a Dreamer. The tests had shown nothing one way or the other, but plain-faced, kindly Anaiya, with that warm smile that was her only beauty, had kept calling her back for more tests, as implacable as a boulder rolling downhill.

The rest were unknown to her, except for one cool-eyed woman she thought was a White. The Amyrlin and the Keeper wore their stoles, of course, but none of the others had anything to mark them out except Great Serpent rings and ageless Aes Sedai faces. None of them acknowledged the presence of Egwene and the other two by so much as a glance.

Despite the outward calm of the women around the table, Egwene thought she saw signs of uncertainty. A tightness to Anaiya's mouth. A slight frown on Alanna's darkly beautiful face. The cool-eyed woman kept smoothing her pale blue dress over her thighs without seeming to realize what she was doing.

An Aes Sedai Egwene did not know set a plain, polished wooden box, long and narrow, on the table and opened it. From its nest in the red silk lining, the Amyrlin took out a white, fluted wand the length of her forearm. It could have been bone, or ivory, but was neither. No one alive knew what it was made of.

Egwene had never seen the wand before, but she recognized it from a lecture Anaiya had given the novices. One of the few *sa'angreal*, and perhaps the most powerful, that the Tower possessed. *Sa'angreal* had no power of their own, of course—they were merely devices for focusing and magnifying what an Aes Sedai could channel—but with that wand, a strong Aes Sedai might be able to crumple the walls of Tar Valon.

Egwene clutched Nynaeve's hand on one side and Elayne's on the other. *Light! They're not sure they can Heal him, even with a* sa'angreal—*with* that sa'angreal*! What chance would* we *have had? We'd probably have killed him, and ourselves, too. Light!*

"I will meld the flows," the Amyrlin said. "Be careful. The Power needed to break the bond with the dagger and Heal its damage is very close to what could kill him. I will focus. Attend." She held the wand straight out in front of her in both hands, above Mat's face. Still unconscious, he shook his head and tightened a fist on the dagger's hilt, muttering something that sounded like a denial.

A glow appeared around each Aes Sedai, that soft, white light that only a woman who could channel could see. Slowly the lights spread, until that which seemed to emanate from one woman touched that which came from the woman beside her, merged with it, till there was only one light, a light that, to Egwene's eyes, diminished the lamps to nothing. And in that brightness was a stronger light still. A bar of bone-white fire. The *sa'angreal.*

Egwene fought the urge to open herself to *saidar* and add her flow to the tide. It was a pull so strong she was about to be jerked off her feet. Elayne tightened her hold on her hand. Nynaeve took a step toward the table, then stopped with an angry shake of her head. *Light*, Egwene thought, *I could do it.* But she did not know what it was she could do. *Light, it's so strong. It's so—wonderful.* Elayne's hand was trembling.

On the table, Mat thrashed in the middle of the glow, jerking this way, then that, muttering incomprehensibly. But he did not loosen his hold on the dagger, and his eyes remained closed. Slowly, ever so slowly, he began to arch his back, muscles straining till he shook. Still he fought and bucked, until finally only his heels and his shoulders touched the table. His hand on the dagger sprang open and, quivering, crept back from the hilt; was forced, fighting, from the hilt. His lips skinned away from his teeth in a snarl, a grimace of pain, and his breath came in forced grunts.

"They are killing him," Egwene whispered. "The Amyrlin is killing him! We have to do something."

Just as softly, Nynaeve said, “If we stop them—if we could stop them—he’ll die. I do not think I could handle half that much of the Power.” She paused as if she had just heard her own words—that she could channel half of what ten full Aes Sedai did with a *sa’angreal*—and her voice grew even fainter. “Light help me, I want to.”

She fell silent abruptly. Did she mean that she wanted to help Mat, or that she wanted to channel that flow of Power? Egwene could feel that urge in herself, like a song that compelled her to dance.

“We must trust them,” Nynaeve said in an intense whisper, finally. “He has no other chance.”

Suddenly Mat shouted, loud and strong. *“Muad’drin tia dar allende caba’drin rhadiem!”* Arched and struggling, eyes squeezed shut, he bellowed the words clearly. *“Los Valdar Cuebiyari! Los! Carai an Caldazar! Al Caldazar!”*

Egwene frowned. She had learned enough to recognize the Old Tongue, if not to understand more than a few words. *Carai an Caldazar! Al Caldazar!* “For the honor of the Red Eagle! For the Red Eagle!” Ancient battle cries of Manetheren, a nation that had vanished during the Trolloc Wars. A nation that had stood where the Two Rivers was now. That much, she knew; but in some way it seemed for a moment that she should understand the rest, too, as if the meaning were just out of sight, and all she had to do was turn her head to know.

With a loud pop of tearing leather, the golden-sheathed dagger rose from Mat’s belt, hung a foot above his straining body. The ruby glittered, seemed to send off crimson sparks, as if it, too, fought the Healing.

Mat’s eyes opened, and he glared at the women standing around him. *“Mia ayende, Aes Sedai! Caballein misain ye! Inde muagdhe Aes Sedai misain ye! Mia ayende!”* And he began to scream, a roar of rage that went on and on, till Egwene wondered that he had breath left in him.

Hurriedly Anaiya bent to lift a dark metal box from under the table, moving as if it were heavy. When she set it beside Mat and opened the lid, only a small space was revealed within sides at least two inches thick. Anaiya bent again for a set of tongs such as a goodwife might use in her kitchen, and grasped the floating dagger in them as carefully as if it were a poisonous snake.

Mat’s scream grew frantic. The ruby shone furiously, flashing blood-red.

The Aes Sedai thrust the dagger into the box and snapped the lid down, letting out a loud sigh as it clicked shut. “A filthy thing,” she said.

As soon as the dagger was hidden, Mat’s shriek cut off, and he collapsed as if muscle and bone had turned to water. An instant later the glow surrounding Aes Sedai and table winked out.

“Done,” the Amyrlin said hoarsely, as if she had been the one screaming. “It is done.”

Some of the Aes Sedai sagged visibly, and sweat beaded on more than one brow. Anaiya pulled a plain linen handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped her face openly. The cool-eyed White dabbed almost surreptitiously at her cheeks with a bit of Lugard lace.

“Fascinating,” Verin said. “That the Old Blood could flow so strongly in anyone today.” She and Serafelle put their heads together, talking softly, but with many gestures.

“Is he Healed?” Nynaeve said. “Will he . . . live?”

Mat lay as if sleeping, but his face still had that hollow-cheeked gauntness. Egwene had never heard of a Healing that did not cure *everything. Unless just separating him from the dagger took* all *of the Power they used. Light!*

“Brendas,” the Amyrlin said, “will you see that he is taken back to his room?”

“As you command, Mother,” the cool-eyed woman said, her curtsy as emotionless as she herself seemed. When she left to summon bearers, several of the other Aes Sedai left, too, including Anaiya. Verin and Serafelle followed, still talking to one another too quietly for Egwene to make out what they said.

“Is Mat all right?” Nynaeve demanded. Sheriam raised her eyebrows.

The Amyrlin Seat turned toward them. “He is as well as he can be,” she said coldly. “Only time will tell. Carrying something with Shadar Logoth’s taint for so long . . . who knows what effect it will have on him? Perhaps none, perhaps much. We will see. But the bond with the dagger is broken. Now he needs rest, and as much food as can be gotten into him. He should live.”

“What was that he was shouting, Mother?” Elayne asked, then hastily added, “If I may ask.”

“He was ordering soldiers.” The Amyrlin gave the young man lying on the table a quizzical look. He had not moved since collapsing, but Egwene thought his breathing seemed easier, the rise and fall of his chest more rhythmic. “In a battle two thousand years gone, I would say. The Old Blood comes again.”

“It was not all about a battle,” Nynaeve said. “I heard him say Aes Sedai. That was no battle. Mother,” she added belatedly.

For a moment the Amyrlin seemed to consider, perhaps what to say, perhaps whether to say anything. “For a time,” she said finally, “I believe the past and the present were one. He was there, and he was here, and he knew who we were. He commanded us to release him.” She paused again. “ ‘I am a free man, Aes Sedai. I am no Aes Sedai meat.’ That is what he said.”

Leane sniffed loudly, and some of the other Aes Sedai muttered angrily under their breath.

“But, Mother,” Egwene said, “he could not have meant it as it sounds. Manetheren was allied with Tar Valon.”

“Manetheren was an ally, child,” the Amyrlin told her, “but who can know the heart of a man? Not even he himself, I suspect. A man is the easiest animal to put on a leash, and the hardest to keep leashed. Even when he chooses it himself.”

“Mother,” Sheriam said, “it is late. The cooks will be waiting for these helpers.”

“Mother,” Egwene asked anxiously, “could we not stay with Mat? If he may still die. . . .”

The Amyrlin’s look was level, her face without expression. “You have chores to do, child.”

It was not scrubbing pots she meant. Egwene was sure of that. “Yes, Mother.” She curtsied, her skirts brushing Nynaeve’s and Elayne’s as they made theirs. One last time she looked at Mat, then followed Sheriam out. Mat had still not moved.

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CHAPTER 19

Awakening

Mat opened his eyes slowly and stared up at the white plaster ceiling, wondering where he was and how he had come there. An intricate fringe of gilded leaves bordered the ceiling, and the mattress under his back felt plumped full of feathers. Somewhere rich, then. Somewhere with money. But his head was empty of the where and the how, and a lot more besides.

He had been dreaming, and bits of those dreams still tumbled together with memories in his head. He could not separate one from the other. Wild flights and fights, strange people from across the ocean, Ways and Portal Stones and pieces of other lives, things right out of a gleeman’s tales, these had to be dreams. At least, he thought they must be. But Loial was no dream, and he was an Ogier. Chunks of conversations drifted around in his thoughts, talks with his father, with friends, with Moiraine, and a beautiful woman, and a ship captain, and a well-dressed man who spoke to him like a father giving sage advice. Those were probably real. But it was all bits and fragments. Drifting.

“Muad’drin tia dar allende caba’drin rhadiem,” he murmured. The words were only sounds, yet they sparked—something.

The packed lines of spearmen stretched a mile or more to either side below him, dotted with the pennants and banners of towns and cities and minor Houses. The river secured his flank on the left, the bogs and mires on the right. From the hillside he watched the spearmen struggle against the mass of Trollocs trying to break through, ten times the humans’ number. Spears pierced black Trolloc mail, and spiked axes carved bloody gaps in the human ranks. Screams and bellows harried the air. The sun burned hot overhead in a cloudless sky, and shimmers of heat rose above the battle line. Arrows still rained down from the enemy, slaying Trolloc and human alike. He had called his archers back, but the Dreadlords did not care so long as they broke his line. On the ridge behind him, the Heart Guard awaited his command, horses stamping impatiently. Armor on men and *horses alike shone silver in the sunlight; neither men nor animals could stand the heat much longer.*

They must win here or die. He was known as a gambler; it was time to toss the dice. In a voice that carried over the tumult below, he gave the order as he swung up into his saddle. "Footmen prepare to pass cavalry forward!" His bannerman rode close beside him, the Red Eagle banner flapping over his head, as the command was repeated up and down the line.

Below, the spearmen suddenly moved, sidestepping with good discipline, narrowing their formations, opening wide gaps between. Gaps into which the Trollocs poured, roaring bestial cries, like a black, oozing tide of death.

He drew his sword, raised it high. "Forward the Heart Guard!" He dug his heels in, and his mount leaped down the slope. Behind him, hooves thundered in the charge. "Forward!" He was first to strike into the Trollocs, his sword rising and falling, his bannerman close behind. "For the honor of the Red Eagle!" The Heart Guard pounded into the gaps between the spearmen, smashing the tide, hurling it back. "The Red Eagle!" Half-human faces snarled at him, oddly curved swords sought him, but he cut his way ever deeper. Win or die. "Manetheren!"

Mat's hand trembled as he raised it to his forehead. *"Los Valdar Cuebiyari,"* he muttered. He was almost sure he knew what it meant—"Forward the Heart Guard," or maybe "The Heart Guard will advance"—but that could not be. Moiraine had told him a few words of the Old Tongue, and those were all he knew of it. The rest might as well be magpie chatter.

"Crazy," he said roughly. "It probably isn't even the Old Tongue at all. Just gibberish. That Aes Sedai is crazy. It was only a dream."

Aes Sedai. Moiraine. He suddenly became aware of his too-thin wrist and bony hand, and looked at them. He had been sick. Something to do with a dagger. A dagger with a ruby in the hilt, and a long-dead, tainted city called Shadar Logoth. It was all foggy and distant, and made no real sense, but he knew it was no dream. Egwene and Nynaeve had been taking him to Tar Valon to be Healed. He remembered that much.

He tried to sit up, and fell back, as weak as a newborn lamb. Laboriously, he pulled himself up and shoved the single woolen blanket aside. His clothes were gone, perhaps into the vine-carved wardrobe standing against the wall. For the moment he did not care about clothes. He struggled to his feet, tottered across the flowered carpet to cling to a high-backed armchair, and lurched from the chair to the table, gilded scrolls on its legs and edges.

Beeswax candles, four to each tall stand and small mirrors behind the flames, lit the room brightly. A larger mirror on the wall above the highly polished washstand threw his reflection back at him, gaunt and wasted, cheeks hollow and dark eyes sunken, hair sweat-matted, bent like an old man and wavering like pasture grass in a breeze. He made himself stand straight, but it was not much improvement.

A large, covered tray sat on the table in front of his hands, and his nose caught the smells of food. He twitched aside the cloth, revealing two large silver pitchers and dishes of thin green porcelain. He had heard that the Sea Folk charged its weight in silver for that porcelain. He had expected beef tea, or sweetbreads, the kinds of things invalids had pushed on them. Instead, one plate held slices of a beef roast piled thickly, with brown mustard and horseradish. On others there were roasted potatoes, sweetbeans with onions, cabbage, and butterpeas. Pickles, and a wedge of yellow cheese. Thick slices of crusty bread, and a dish of butter. One pitcher was filled with milk and still beaded with condensation on the outside, the other with what smelled like spiced wine. There was enough of everything for four men. His mouth watered, and his stomach growled at him.

First I find out where I am. But he rolled up a slice of beef and dipped it in the mustard before pushing himself away from the table toward the three tall, narrow windows.

Wooden shutters carved in lacy patterns covered them, but through the holes he could see that it was night outside. Lights from other windows made dots in the blackness. For a moment he sagged against the white stone windowsill in frustration, but then he began to think.

You can turn the worst that comes to your advantage if you only think, his father always said, and certainly Abell Cauthon was the best horse trader in the Two Rivers. When it seemed somebody had taken advantage of Mat’s father, it always turned out they had gotten the greasy end of the stick. Not that Abell Cauthon ever did anything dishonest, but even Taren Ferry folk never got the best of him, and everybody knew how close to the bone they cut. All because he thought about things from every side that there was.

Tar Valon. It had to be Tar Valon. This room belonged in a palace. The flowered Domani carpet alone probably cost as much as a farm. More, he did not think he was sick any longer, and from what he had been told, Tar Valon was his only chance to get well. He had never actually felt sick, not that he remembered, not even when Verin—another name swam out of the haze—had told someone nearby that he was dying. Now he felt weak as a babe and hungry as a starving wolf, but somehow, he was sure the Healing had been done. *I feel—whole and well, that's all. I've been Healed.* He grimaced at the shutters.

Healed. That meant they had used the One Power on him. The notion sent goose bumps marching across his skin, but he had known it would be done. "Better than dying," he told himself. Some of the stories he had heard about Aes Sedai came back. "It has to be better than dying. Even Nynaeve thought I was going to die. Anyway, it's done, and worrying about it now won't help anything." He realized he had finished the slice of beef and was licking its juice from his fingers.

Unsteadily, he made his way back to the table. There was a stool underneath. He pulled it out and sat down. Not bothering with knife or fork, he made another roll of beef. How could he turn being in Tar Valon—*In the White Tower. It has to be*—to his advantage?

Tar Valon meant Aes Sedai. That was certainly no reason to stay even an hour. Exactly the opposite. What he remembered of his time with Moiraine, and later with Verin, was not much to go on. He could not recall either of them doing anything really terrible, but then he could not recall a great deal of that time at all. Anyway, whatever Aes Sedai did, they did for their own reasons.

"And those aren't always the reasons you think they are," he mumbled around a mouthful of potato, then swallowed. "An Aes Sedai never lies, but the truth an Aes Sedai tells you isn't always the truth you think it is. That's one thing I have to remember: I can't be sure about them even when I think I know." It was not a cheering conclusion. He filled his mouth with butterpeas.

Thinking about Aes Sedai made him remember a little about them. The seven Ajahs: Blue, Red, Brown, Green, Yellow, White, and Gray. The Reds were the worst. *Except for that Black Ajah they all claim doesn't exist.* But the Red Ajah should be no threat to him. They were only interested in men who could channel.

Rand. Burn me, how could I forget that? Where is he? Is he all right? He sighed regretfully, and spread butter on a piece of still-warm bread. *I* *wonder if he’s gone mad yet.*

Even if he knew the answers, he could do nothing to help Rand. He was not sure he would if he could. Rand could channel, and Mat had grown up with stories of men channeling, stories to frighten children. Stories that frightened adults, too, because some of them were all too true. Discovering what Rand could do had been like finding out his best friend tortured small animals and killed babies. Once you finally made yourself believe it, it was hard to call him a friend any longer.

“I have to look out for myself,” he said angrily. He upended the wine pitcher over his silver cup and was surprised to find it empty. He filled the cup with milk, instead. “Egwene and Nynaeve want to be Aes Sedai.” He had not really remembered that until he said it aloud. “Rand is following Moiraine around and calling himself the Dragon Reborn. The Light knows what Perrin is up to. He’s been acting crazy ever since his eyes turned funny. I have to look out for myself.” *Burn me, I have to! I’m the last one of us who’s still sane. There’s only me.*

Tar Valon. Well, it was supposed to be the wealthiest city in the world, and it was the center of trade between the Borderlands and the south, the center of Aes Sedai power. He did not think he could get an Aes Sedai to gamble with him. Or trust the fall of the dice or the turn of the cards if he did. But there had to be merchants, and others with silver and gold. The city itself would be worth a few days. He knew he had traveled far since leaving the Two Rivers, but aside from a few vague memories of Caemlyn and Cairhien, he could remember nothing of any great cities. He had always wanted to see a great city.

“But not one full of Aes Sedai,” he muttered sourly, scraping up the last of the butterpeas. He gulped them down and went back for another helping of beef.

Idly, he wondered if the Aes Sedai might let him have the ruby from the Shadar Logoth dagger. He remembered the dagger in only the fuzziest way, but even that was like remembering a terrible injury. His insides knotted up, and sharp pain dug at his temples. Yet the ruby was clear in his mind, as big as his thumbnail, dark as a drop of blood, glittering like some crimson eye. Surely he had more claim to it than they did, and it had to be worth as much as a dozen farms back home.

They’ll probably say it is tainted, too. And likely it was. Still he spun a little fancy of trading the ruby to some of the Coplins for their best land.

Most of that family—troublemakers from the cradle, where they were not thieves and liars as well—deserved whatever happened to them and more. But he really did not believe the Aes Sedai would give it back to him, did not relish the notion of carrying it as far as Emond's Field if they did. And the thought of owning the largest farm in the Two Rivers was no longer as exciting as it once had been. Once that had been his biggest ambition, that, and to be known as his father's equal as a horse trader. Now it seemed such a small thing to want. A cramped thing, with the whole wide world just waiting out there.

First off, he decided, he would find Egwene and Nynaeve. *Maybe they've come to their senses. Maybe they've given up this foolishness about becoming Aes Sedai.* He did not think they would have, but he could not go without seeing them. He would go; that was sure. A visit with them, a day to see the city, perhaps a game with the dice to pad out his purse, and then he would be off for somewhere where there were no Aes Sedai. Before he returned home—*I will go home one day. One day, I will*—he meant to see something of the world, and without any Aes Sedai making him dance to her tune.

Rummaging around the tray for something more to eat, he was shocked to realize nothing was left but smears and a few crumbs of bread and cheese. The pitchers were both empty. He squinted down at his stomach in wonder. He should have been stuffed to the ears with all that in him, but he felt as if he had hardly eaten at all. He scraped the last bits of cheese together between thumb and forefinger. Halfway to his mouth, his hand froze.

I blew the Horn of Valere. Softly he whistled a bit of tune, then cut it short when the words came to him:

I'm down at the bottom of the well.
It's night, and the rain is coming down.
The sides are falling in,
and there's no rope to climb.
I'm down at the bottom of the well.

"There had better be a bloody rope to climb," he whispered. He let the cheese crumbs fall on the tray. For the moment he felt sick again. Determinedly he tried to think, tried to penetrate the fog that shrouded everything in his head.

Verin had been bringing the Horn to Tar Valon, but he could not remember if she knew he was the one who had blown it. She had never said anything to make him think so. He was sure of that. He thought he was. *So what if she does know? What if they all do? Unless Verin did something with it I don't know about, they have the Horn. They don't need me.* But who could say what Aes Sedai thought they needed?

"If they ask," he said grimly, "I never even touched it. If they know. . . . If they know, I'll . . . I'll handle that when it comes. Burn me, they can't want anything from me. They can't!"

A soft knock on the door brought him swaying to his feet, ready to run. If there had been any place to run to, and if he could have managed more than three steps. But there was not, and he could not.

The door opened.

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CHAPTER 20

Visitations

The woman who came in, dressed all in white silk and silver, shut the door behind her and leaned back against it to study him with the darkest eyes Mat had ever seen. She was so beautiful he almost forgot to breathe, with hair as black as night held by a finely woven silver band, and as graceful in repose as another woman would be dancing. He halfway thought that he knew her, but he rejected the idea out of hand. No man could ever forget a woman like her.

“You may be passable, I suppose, once you fill out again,” she said, “but for now, perhaps you could put on something.”

For an instant Mat continued to stare at her; then suddenly he realized he was standing there naked. Face scarlet, he shambled to the bed, pulled the blanket around himself like a cloak, and more fell than sat down on the edge of the mattress. “I’m sorry for . . . I mean, I . . . that is, I didn’t expect . . . I . . . I . . .” He drew a deep breath. “I apologize for your finding me this way.”

He could still feel the heat in his cheeks. For a moment he wished that Rand, whatever he had become, or even Perrin were there to advise him. They always seemed to get on well with women. Even girls who knew that Rand was all but promised to Egwene used to stare at him, and they seemed to think Perrin’s slow ways were gentle and attractive. However hard he tried, he always managed to make a fool of himself in front of girls. As he had just done.

“I would not have visited you in this way, Mat, except that I was here in the . . . in the White Tower—” She smiled as if the name amused her —“for another purpose, and I wanted to see all of you.” Mat’s face reddened again, and he tugged the blanket around him tighter, but she seemed not to have been teasing him. More graceful than a swan, she glided to the table. “You are hungry. That’s to be expected, the way they do things.

Make sure you eat all they give you. You will be surprised at how quickly you put weight back and regain strength."

"Pardon," Mat said diffidently, "but do I know you? Meaning no offense, but you seem . . . familiar." She looked at him until he began to shift uneasily. A woman like her would expect to be remembered.

"You may have seen me," she said finally. "Somewhere. Call me Selene." Her head tilted slightly; she appeared to be waiting for him to recognize the name.

It tugged at the edges of memory. He thought he must have heard it before, but he could not say when or where. "Are you an Aes Sedai, Selene?"

"No." The word was soft but surprisingly emphatic.

For the first time, he studied her, able now to see more than her beauty. She was almost as tall as he was, slender and, he suspected from the way she moved, strong. He was not sure of her age—a year or two older than he, or maybe as much as ten—but her cheeks were smooth. Her necklace of smooth white stones and woven silver matched her wide belt, but she did not wear a Great Serpent ring. The absence should not have surprised him—no Aes Sedai would ever say right out that she was not—yet it did. There was an air about her—a self-confidence, a surety in her own power to match any queen's, and something more—that he associated with Aes Sedai.

"You aren't by any chance a novice, are you?" He had heard that novices wore white, but he could not really believe it of her. *She makes Elayne look like a cringer.* Elayne. Another name drifting into his head.

"Hardly that," Selene said with a wry twist to her mouth. "Let us just say that I am someone whose interests coincide with yours. These . . . Aes Sedai mean to use you, but you will like it, in the main, I think. And accept it. There is no need to convince you to seek out glory."

"Use me?" The memory returned to him of thinking that, but about Rand, that the Aes Sedai meant to use Rand, not him. *They've no bloody use for me. Light, they can't have!* "What do you mean? I'm no one important. I am no use to anyone but myself. What kind of glory?"

"I knew that would pull you. You, above all."

Her smile made his head spin. He scrubbed a hand through his hair. The blanket slipped, and he caught it hastily before it could fall. "Now listen, they are not interested in me." *What about me sounding the Horn?* "I am just a farmer.” *Maybe they think I’m tied to Rand in some way. No, Verin said. . . .* He was not sure what Verin had said, or Moiraine, but he thought most Aes Sedai knew nothing at all about Rand. He wanted to keep it that way, at least until he was a long way gone. “Just a simple country man. I only want to see a little of the world and go back to my da’s farm.” *What does she mean, glory?*

Selene shook her head as if she had heard his thoughts. “You are more important than you yet know. Certainly more important than these so-called Aes Sedai know. You *can* have glory, if you know enough not to trust them.”

“You certainly sound as if you don’t trust them.” *So-called?* A thought came to him, but he could not manage to say it. “Are you a . . . ? Are you . . . ?” It was not the kind of thing you accused someone of.

“A Darkfriend?” Selene said mockingly. She sounded amused, not angered. She sounded contemptuous. “One of those pathetic followers of Ba’alzamon who think he will give them immortality and power? I follow no one. There is one man I could stand beside, but I do not follow.”

Mat laughed nervously. “Of course not.” *Blood and ashes, a Darkfriend wouldn’t name herself Darkfriend. Probably has a poisoned knife, if she is.* He had a vague memory of a woman dressed as one nobly born, a Darkfriend with a deadly dagger in her slender hand. “That wasn’t what I meant at all. You look. . . . You look like a queen. That’s what I meant. Are you a Lady?”

“Mat, Mat, you must learn to trust me. Oh, I will use you, too—you have too suspicious a nature, especially since carrying that dagger, for me to deny it—but my use will gain you wealth, and power, and glory. I will not compel you. I have always believed men perform better if convinced rather than forced. These Aes Sedai do not even realize how important you are, and he will try to dissuade or kill you, but I can give you what you desire.”

“He?” Mat said sharply. *Kill me? Light, it’s Rand they were after, not me. How does she know about the dagger? I suppose the whole Tower knows.* “Who wants to kill me?”

Selene’s mouth tightened as if she had said too much. “You know what you want, Mat, and I know it every bit as well as you. You must choose who you will trust to gain it for you. I admit I will use you. These Aes Sedai will never do that. I will lead you to wealth and glory. They will keep you tied to a leash until you die.”

“You say a lot,” Mat said, “but how do I know any of it is true? How do I know I can trust you any more than I can them?”

“By listening to what they tell you, and what they do not. Will they tell you your father came to Tar Valon?”

“My da was here?”

“A man named Abell Cauthon, and another named Tam al’Thor. They made nuisances of themselves until they gained an audience, I have heard, wanting to know where you and your friends were. And Siuan Sanche sent them back to the Two Rivers with empty hands, not even letting them know you were alive. Will they tell you that, unless you ask? Perhaps not even then, for you might try to run away back home.”

“My da thinks I am dead?” Mat said slowly.

“He can be told you live. I can see to it. Think on who to trust, Mat Cauthon. Will they tell you that even now Rand al’Thor is trying to escape, and the one called Moiraine is hunting him? Will they tell you that the Black Ajah infests their precious White Tower? Will they even tell you how they mean to use you?”

“Rand is trying to escape? But—” Maybe she knew Rand had proclaimed himself the Dragon Reborn, and maybe she did not, but he would not tell her. *The Black Ajah! Blood and bloody ashes!* “Who are you, Selene? If you’re not Aes Sedai, what are you?”

Her smile hid secrets. “Just remember that there is another choice. You need not be a puppet for the White Tower or prey for Ba’alzamon’s Darkfriends. The world is more complex than you can imagine. Do as these Aes Sedai wish for the present, but remember your choices. Will you do that?”

“I don’t see that I have much choice at all,” he said glumly. “I suppose I will.”

Selene’s look sharpened. Friendliness sloughed off her voice like an old snake skin. “Suppose? I did not come to you like this, talk in this way, for suppose, Matrim Cauthon.” She stretched out a slim hand.

Her hand was empty, and she stood halfway across the room, but he leaned back, away from her hand, as if she were right on top of him with a dagger. He did not know why, really, except that there was a threat in her eyes, and he was sure it was real. His skin began to tingle, and his headache returned.

Suddenly tingle and pain vanished together, and Selene's head whipped around as if listening to something beyond the walls. A tiny frown appeared on her face, and she lowered her hand. The frown vanished. "We will talk again, Mat. I have much to say to you. Remember your choices. Remember that there are many hands that would kill you. I alone guarantee you life, and all you seek, if you do as I say." She slipped out of the door as silently and gracefully as she had entered.

Mat let out a long breath. Sweat ran down his face. *Who in the Light is she?* A Darkfriend, perhaps. Except that she had sounded as contemptuous of Ba'alzamon as she was of Aes Sedai. Darkfriends spoke of Ba'alzamon the way anyone else might speak of the Creator. And she had not asked him to conceal her visit from the Aes Sedai.

Right, he thought sourly. *Pardon me, Aes Sedai, but this woman came to see me. She wasn't Aes Sedai, but I think maybe she started to use the One Power on me, and she said she wasn't a Darkfriend, but she did say you mean to use me, and the Black Ajah's in your Tower. Oh, and she said I'm important. I don't know how. You don't mind if I leave now, do you?*

Going was beginning to be a better idea by the minute. He slid awkwardly off the bed and made his way unsteadily to the wardrobe, still clutching his blanket around him. His boots were on the floor inside, and his cloak hung from a peg, under his belt, with pouch and sheathed belt knife. It was just a country knife, with a stout blade, but it could do as much as any fine dagger. The rest of his clothes—two sturdy wool coats, three pairs of breeches, half a dozen linen shirts and smallclothes—had been brushed or washed as required, and neatly folded on the shelves that took up one side of the wardrobe. He felt the pouch hanging from the belt, but it was empty. Its contents lay jumbled on a shelf with what had been emptied from his pockets.

He brushed aside a redhawk's feather, a smooth, striped rock he had liked the colors of, his razor, and his bone-handled pocketknife, and freed his wash-leather purse from some coils of spare bowstring. When he tugged it open, he found his memory had been all too good in this instance.

"Two silver marks and a handful of copper," he muttered. "I won't get far on that." Once it would have seemed a small fortune to him, but that had been before he left Emond's Field.

He stooped to peer back into the shelf. *Where are they?* He began to be afraid the Aes Sedai might have thrown them out, the way his mother would if she had ever found them. *Where* . . . ? He felt a surge of relief. Way in the back, behind his tinderbox and ball of twine for snares and the like, were his two leather dice cups.

They rattled as he pulled them out, but he still popped off the tight-fitting round caps. Everything was as it should be. Five dice carved with symbols, for crowns, and five marked with spots. The spotted dice would do for a number of games, but more men seemed to play crowns than anything else. With these, his two marks would become enough to take him far away from Tar Valon. *Away from Aes Sedai and Selene, both.*

A peremptory knock was followed immediately by the door opening. He whirled around. The Amyrlin Seat and the Keeper of the Chronicles were entering. He would have recognized them even without the Amyrlin's broad, striped stole, and the Keeper's narrower blue stole. He had seen them once and only once, a long way from Tar Valon, but he could not forget the two most powerful women among the Aes Sedai.

The Amyrlin's eyebrows rose at the sight of him standing there with the blanket hanging from his shoulders and his purse and dice cups in his hands. "I don't think you will need those for a while yet, my son," she said dryly. "Put them up and get back to bed before you fall on your face."

He hesitated, his back stiffening, but his knees chose that moment to wobble, and the two Aes Sedai were looking at him, dark eyes and blue alike appearing to read his every rebellious thought. He did as he was told, holding the blanket around him with both hands. He lay down straight as a board, not sure what else he could do.

"How are you feeling?" the Amyrlin asked briskly as she put a hand on his head. Goose bumps covered his skin. Had she done something with the One Power, or was it being touched by an Aes Sedai that made him feel a chill?

"I'm fine," he told her. "Why, I am ready to be on my way. Just let me say goodbye to Egwene and Nynaeve, and I'll be out of your hair. I mean, I will go . . . uh, Mother." Moiraine and Verin had not seemed to care much how he talked, but this was the Amyrlin Seat, after all.

"Nonsense," the Amyrlin said. She pulled the high-backed chair around, closer to the bed, and sat, addressing Leane. "Men always seem to refuse to admit they are sick until they're sick enough to make twice as much work for women. Then they claim they're well too soon, with the same result."

The Keeper glanced at Mat and nodded. “Yes, Mother, yet this one cannot claim he is well when he can barely stand up. At least he has eaten everything on his tray.”

“I’d be surprised if he had left enough crumbs to interest a finch. And still hungry, unless I miss my guess.”

“I could have someone bring him a pie, Mother. Or some cakes.”

“No, I think he has had as much as he can hold for now. If he brings it all back up, it won’t do him any good.”

Mat scowled. It seemed to him that when you got sick, you became invisible to women unless they were actually talking to you. And then they took at least ten years off your age. Nynaeve, his mother, his sisters, the Amyrlin Seat, they all did it.

“I’m not hungry at all,” he announced. “I am fine. If you will let me put my clothes on, I’ll show you how well I am. I will be out of here before you know it.” They were both looking at him, now. He cleared his throat. “Uh . . . Mother.”

The Amyrlin snorted. “You’ve eaten a meal for five, and you will eat three or four like it every day for days yet, or else you will starve to death. You’ve just been Healed from a link to the evil that killed every man, woman, and child in Aridhol, and no less strong for near two thousand years waiting for you to pick it up. It was killing you just as surely as it killed them. That is not like having a fish spine stuck in your thumb, boy. We very nearly killed you ourselves trying to save you.”

“I am not hungry,” he maintained. His stomach growled loudly to give him the lie.

“I read you aright the first time I saw you,” the Amyrlin said. “I knew right then you’d bolt like a startled fisher-bird if you ever thought someone was trying to hold you. As well I took precautions.”

He eyed them warily. “Precautions?” They looked back, all serenity. He felt as if their eyes were pinning him to the bed.

“Your name and description are on their way to the bridge guards,” the Amyrlin said, “and the dockmasters. I’ll not try to hold you inside the Tower, but you will not leave Tar Valon until you are well. Should you try to hide in the city, hunger will drive you back here eventually, or if it doesn’t, we will find you before you starve.”

“Why do you want to keep me here so badly?” he demanded. He heard Selene’s voice. *They want to use you.* “Why should you care whether I starve or not? I can feed myself.”

The Amyrlin gave a small laugh with little amusement in it. “With two silver marks and a handful of copper, my son? Your dice would need to be very lucky indeed to buy all the food you’ll need in the next few days. We do not Heal people, then let them waste our efforts by dying while they still need care. In addition to which, you may yet need more Healing.”

“More? You said you had Healed me. Why should I need more?”

“My son, you carried that dagger for months. I believe we dug every trace of it out of you, but if we missed even the smallest speck, it could still be fatal. And who knows what effect your having it in your possession so long may have? Half a year from now, a year, and you may wish you had an Aes Sedai to hand to Heal you again.”

“You want me to stay here a year?” he said incredulously, and loudly. Leane shifted her feet and eyed him sharply, but the Amyrlin’s calm features were unruffled.

“Perhaps not so long as that, my son. Long enough to be certain, though. Surely you want as much. Would you set sail in a boat when you didn’t know whether the caulking would hold, or whether a plank might be rotten?”

“I never had much to do with boats,” Mat muttered. It might be true. Aes Sedai never lied, but there were too many mights and mays in it for him. “I’ve been gone from home a long time, Mother. My da and my mother probably think I am dead.”

“If you wish to write a letter to them, I will see that it is carried to Emond’s Field.”

Mat waited for more, but no more came. “Thank you, Mother.” He essayed a small laugh. “I’m half surprised my da did not come looking for me. He’s the kind of man who would.” He was not sure, but he thought there was a small hesitation before the Amyrlin answered.

“He did come. Leane spoke to him.”

The Keeper took it up immediately. “We did not know where you were then, Mat. I told him so, and he left before the heavy snows. I gave him some gold to make the journey home easier.”

“No doubt,” the Amyrlin said, “he will be pleased to hear from you. And your mother will, certainly. Give me the letter when you have written it, and I will see to it.”

They had told him, but he had had to ask. *And they didn't mention Rand's da. Maybe because they didn't think I would care, and maybe because. . . . Burn me, I don't know. Who can tell with Aes Sedai?* "I was traveling with a friend, Mother. Rand al'Thor. You remember him. Do you know if he is all right? I'll bet his da is worried, too."

"As far as I know," the Amyrlin said smoothly, "the boy is well enough, but who can say? I have seen him only once, the time I saw you, in Fal Dara." She turned to the Keeper. "Perhaps he could do with a small piece of pie, Leane. And something for his throat, if he is going to do all this talking. Will you see that it is brought to him?"

The tall Aes Sedai left with a murmured, "As you command, Mother."

When the Amyrlin turned back to Mat, she was smiling, but her eyes were blue ice. "There are things it would be dangerous for you to talk about, perhaps even in front of Leane. A flapping tongue has killed more men than sudden storms ever did."

"Dangerous, Mother?" His mouth felt suddenly parched, but he resisted the urge to lick his lips. *Light, how much does she know about Rand? If only Moiraine didn't keep so many secrets.* "Mother, I don't know anything dangerous. I can hardly remember half of what I do know."

"Do you remember the Horn?"

"What horn is that, Mother?"

She was on her feet and looming over him so fast he hardly saw her move. "You play games with me, boy, and I will make you weep for your mother to come running. I have no time for games, and neither do you. Now, do—you—remember?"

Clutching the blanket tightly around him, he had to swallow before he could say, "I remember, Mother."

She seemed to relax, just a little, and Mat shrugged his shoulders queasily. He felt as if he had just been allowed to lift them off a chopping block.

"Good. That is good, Mat." She sat back down slowly, studying him. "Do you know that you are linked to the Horn?" He mouthed the word "linked" silently, shocked, and she nodded. "I did not think you knew. You were first to blow the Horn of Valere after it was found. For you, it will summon dead heroes back from the grave. For anyone else, it is only a horn—so long as you live."

He took a deep breath. “So long as I live,” he said in a dull voice, and the Amyrlin nodded. “You could have let me die.” She nodded again. “Then you could have had anyone you want blow it, and it would have worked for them.” Another nod. “Blood and ashes! You mean me to blow it for you. When the Last Battle comes, you mean me to call heroes back from the grave to fight the Dark One for you. Blood and bloody ashes!”

She put an elbow on the arm of the chair and propped her chin on her hand. Her eyes never left him. “Would you prefer the alternative?”

He frowned, then remembered what the alternative was. If someone else had to sound the Horn. . . . “You want me to blow the Horn? Then I’ll blow the Horn. I never said I would not, did I?”

The Amyrlin gave an exasperated sigh. “You remind me of my uncle Huan. No one could ever pin him down. He liked to gamble, too, and he’d much rather have fun than work. He died pulling children out of a burning house. He wouldn’t stop going back as long as there was one left inside. Are you like him, Mat? Will you be there when the flames are high?”

He could not meet her eyes. He studied his fingers as they plucked irritably at his blanket. “I’m no hero. I do what I have to do, but I am no hero.”

“Most of those we call heroes only did what they had to do. I suppose it will have to be enough. For now. You must not speak to anyone but me of the Horn, my son. Or of your link to it.”

For now? he thought. *It’s all you are going to bloody get, now or ever.* “I don’t mean to bloody tell everybo—” She arched an eyebrow, and he made his voice smooth again. “I do not want to tell anyone. I wish nobody knew. Why do you want to keep it such a secret? Don’t you trust your Aes Sedai?”

For a long moment he thought he had gone too far. Her face hardened, and her look could have carved axe handles.

“If I could make it so that only you and I knew,” she said coldly, “I would. The more people know a thing, the more the knowledge spreads, even with the best will. Most of the world believes the Horn of Valere is only legend, and those who know better believe one of the Hunters has yet to find it. But Shayol Ghul knows it has been found, and that means at least some Darkfriends know.

But they do not know where it is, and, if the Light shines on us, they do not know you sounded it. Do you really want Darkfriends coming after you? Halfmen, or other Shadowspawn? They want the Horn. You must know that. It will work as well for the Shadow as for the Light. But if it is to work for them, they must take you, or kill you. Do you want to risk that?”

Mat wished he had another blanket, and maybe a goose-down comforter. The room suddenly felt very cold. “Are you telling me Darkfriends could come after me here? I thought the White Tower could keep Darkfriends out.” He remembered what Selene had said about the Black Ajah, and wondered what the Amyrlin would say to that.

“A good reason to stay, wouldn’t you say?” She got to her feet, smoothing her skirts. “Rest, my son. Soon you will feel much better. Rest.” She closed the door softly behind her.

For a long time Mat lay staring up at the ceiling. He barely noticed when a serving woman came with his piece of pie and another pitcher of milk, taking the tray of empty dishes when she went. His stomach rumbled loudly at the warm smell of apples and spices, but he paid that no mind, either. The Amyrlin thought she held him like a sheep in a pen. And Selene. . . . *Who in the Light is she? What does she want?* Selene had been right about some things; but the Amyrlin had told him she meant to use him, and how. In a way. There were too many holes in what she had said to suit him, too many holes she could slip something deadly through. The Amyrlin wanted something, and Selene wanted something, and he was the rope they were tugging between them. He thought he would rather face Trollocs than be caught between those two.

There had to be a way out of Tar Valon, a way out of both their grasps. Once he was beyond the river, he could keep out of Aes Sedai hands, and Selene’s, and Darkfriends’, too. He was sure of it. There had to be a way. All he had to do was think about it from every angle.

The pie grew cold on the table.

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CHAPTER 21

A World of Dreams

Egwene scrubbed her hands with a hand towel as she hurried down the dimly lit corridor. She had washed them twice, but they still felt greasy. She had not thought there could be so many pots in the world. And today had been bake day, so buckets of ashes had had to be hauled from the ovens. And the hearths cleaned. And the tables rubbed bone-white with fine sand, and the floors scrubbed on hands and knees. Ash and grease stained her white dress. Her back ached, and she wanted to be in her bed, but Verin had come to the kitchens, supposedly for a meal to eat in her rooms, and whispered a summons to her in passing.

Verin had her quarters above the library, in corridors used only by a few other Brown sisters. There was a dusty air to the halls there, as if the women who lived along them were too busy with other things to bother having the servants clean very often, and the passages took odd turns and twists, sometimes dipping or rising unexpectedly. The tapestries were few, their colorful weavings dulled, apparently cleaned as seldom as everything else here. Many of the lamps were unlit, plunging much of the hall into gloom. Egwene thought she had it to herself, except for a flash of white ahead, perhaps a novice or a servant scurrying about some task. Her shoes, clicking on bare black and white floor tiles, made echoes. It was not a comforting place for one thinking of the Black Ajah.

She found what Verin had told her to look for. A dark paneled door at the top of a rise, beside a dusty tapestry of a king on horse back receiving the surrender of another king. Verin had named the pair of them—men dead hundreds of years before Artur Hawkwing was born; Verin always seemed to know such things—but Egwene could not remember their names, or the long-vanished countries they had ruled. It was the only wall hanging she had seen that matched Verin’s description, though.

Minus the sound of her own footsteps, the hallway seemed even emptier than before, and more threatening. She rapped on the door, and entered hurriedly on the heels of an absentminded “Who is it? Come in.”

One step into the room, she stopped and stared. Shelves lined the walls, except for one door that must lead to inner rooms and except for where maps hung, often in layers, and what seemed to be charts of the night sky. She recognized the names of some constellations—the Plowman and the Haywain, the Archer and the Five Sisters—but others were unfamiliar. Books and papers and scrolls covered nearly every flat surface, with all sorts of odd things interspersed among the piles, and sometimes on top of them. Strange shapes of glass or metal, spheres and tubes interlinked, and circles held inside circles, stood among bones and skulls of every shape and description. What appeared to be a stuffed brown owl, not much bigger than Egwene’s hand, stood on what seemed to be a bleached white lizard’s skull, but could not be, for the skull was longer than her arm and had crooked teeth as big as her fingers. Candlesticks had been stuck about in a haphazard fashion, giving good light here and shadows there, although seeming in danger of setting fire to papers in some places. The owl blinked at her, and she jumped.

“Ah, yes,” Verin said. She was seated behind a table as cluttered as everything else in the room, a torn page held carefully in her hands. “It is you. Yes.” She noticed Egwene’s sideways glance at the owl, and said absently, “He keeps down mice. They chew paper.” Her gesture took in the entire room, and reminded her of the page she held. “Fascinating, this. Rosel of Essam claimed more than a hundred pages survived the Breaking, and she should have known, since she wrote barely two hundred years afterwards, but only this one piece still exists, so far as I know. Perhaps only this very copy. Rosel wrote that it held secrets the world could not face, and she would not speak of them plainly. I have read this page a thousand times, trying to decipher what she meant.”

The tiny owl blinked at Egwene again. She tried not to look at it. “What does it say, Verin Sedai?”

Verin blinked, very much as the owl had. “What does it say? It is a direct translation, mind, and reads almost like a bard reciting in High Chant. Listen. ‘Heart of the Dark. Ba’alzamon. Name hidden within name shrouded by name. Secret buried within secret cloaked by secret. Betrayer of Hope. Ishamael betrays all hope. Truth burns and sears. Hope fails before truth. A lie is our shield. Who can stand against the Heart of the Dark? Who can face the Betrayer of Hope? Soul of shadow, Soul of the Shadow, he is —' " She stopped with a sigh. "It ends there. What do you make of it?"

"I don't know," Egwene said. "I do not like it."

"Well, why should you, child? Like it, or understand it? I have studied it nearly forty years, and I do neither." Verin carefully placed the page inside a silk-lined folder of stiff leather, then casually stuffed the folder into a stack of papers. "But you did not come for that." She rummaged across the table, muttering to herself, several times barely catching a pile of books or manuscripts before it toppled. Finally she came up with a handful of pages covered in a thin, spidery hand and tied with nubby string. "Here, child. Everything that is known about Liandrin and the women who went with her. Names, ages, Ajahs, where they were born. Everything I could find in the records. Even how they performed in their studies. What we know of the *ter'angreal* they took, too, which isn't much. Only descriptions, for the most part. I do not know whether any of this will help. I saw nothing of any use in this."

"Perhaps one of us will see something." A sudden wave of suspicion took Egwene by surprise. *If she didn't leave something out.* The Amyrlin seemed to trust Verin only because she had to. What if Verin was Black Ajah herself? She gave herself a shake. She had traveled all the way from Toman Head to Tar Valon with Verin, and she refused to believe this plump scholar could be a Darkfriend. "I trust you, Verin Sedai." *Can I, really?*

The Aes Sedai blinked at her again, then dismissed whatever thought had come to her with a shake of her head. "That list I gave you may be important, or it may be so much waste of paper, but it isn't the only reason I summoned you." She started moving things on the table, making some shaky stacks taller to clear a space. "I understand from Anaiya that you might become a Dreamer. The last was Corianin Nedeal, four hundred and seventy-three years ago, and from what I can make of the records, she barely deserved the name. It would be quite interesting, if you do."

"She tested me, Verin Sedai, but she couldn't be sure that any of my dreams foretold the future."

"That is only part of what a Dreamer does, child. Perhaps the least part. Anaiya believes in bringing girls along too slowly, in my opinion. Look here." With one finger, Verin drew a number of parallel lines across the area she had cleared, lines clear in dust atop the old beeswax. "Let these represent worlds that might exist if different choices had been made, if major turning points in the Pattern had gone another way.”

“The worlds reached by the Portal Stones,” Egwene said, to show she had listened to Verin’s lectures on the journey from Toman Head. What could this possibly have to do with whether or not she was a Dreamer?

“Very good. But the Pattern may be even more complex than that, child. The Wheel weaves our lives to make the Pattern of an Age, but the Ages themselves are woven into the Age Lace, the Great Pattern. Who can know if this is even the tenth part of the weaving, though? Some in the Age of Legends apparently believe that there were still other worlds—even harder to reach than the worlds of the Portal Stones, if that can be believed—lying like this.” She drew more lines, cross-hatching the first set. For a moment she stared at them. “The warp and the woof of the weave. Perhaps the Wheel of Time weaves a still greater Pattern from worlds.” Straightening, she dusted her hands. “Well, that is neither here nor there. In all of these worlds, whatever their other variations, a few things are constant. One is that the Dark One is imprisoned in all of them.”

In spite of herself, Egwene stepped closer to peer at the lines Verin had drawn. “In all of them? How can that be? Are you saying there is a Father of Lies for each world?” The thought of so many Dark Ones made her shiver.

“No, child. There is one Creator, who exists everywhere at once for all of these worlds. In the same way, there is only one Dark One, who also exists in all of these worlds at once. If he is freed from the prison the Creator made in one world, he is freed on all. So long as he is kept prisoner in one, he remains imprisoned on all.”

“That does not seem to make sense,” Egwene protested.

“Paradox, child. The Dark One is the embodiment of paradox and chaos, the destroyer of reason and logic, the breaker of balance, the unmaker of order.”

The owl suddenly took flight on silent wings, landing atop a large white skull on a shelf behind the Aes Sedai. It peered down at the two women, blinking. Egwene had noticed the skull when she came in, with its curled horns and snout, and vaguely wondered what sort of ram had so big a head. Now she took in the roundness of it, the high forehead. Not a ram’s skull. A Trolloc.

She drew a shuddering breath. “Verin Sedai, what does this have to do with being a Dreamer? The Dark One is bound in Shayol Ghul, and I do not want to even think of him escaping.” *But the seals on his prison are weakening. Even novices know that, now.*

“Do with being a Dreamer? Why, nothing, child. Except that we must all confront the Dark One in one way or another. He is prisoned now, but the Pattern did not bring Rand al’Thor into the world for no purpose. The Dragon Reborn will face the Lord of the Grave; that much is sure. If Rand survives that long, of course. The Dark One will try to distort the Pattern, if he can. Well, we have gone rather far afield, haven’t we?”

“Forgive me, Verin Sedai, but if this”—Egwene indicated the lines drawn in the dust—“has nothing to do with being a Dreamer, why are you telling me about it?”

Verin stared at her as if she were deliberately being dense. “Nothing? Of course it has something to do with it, child. The point is that there is a third constant besides the Creator and the Dark One. There is a world that lies *within* each of these others, inside all of them at the same time. Or perhaps surrounding them. Writers in the Age of Legends called it *Tel’aran’rhiod*, “the Unseen World.” Perhaps “the World of Dreams” is a better translation. Many people—ordinary folk who could not think of channeling—sometimes glimpse *Tel’aran’rhiod* in their dreams, and even catch glimmers of these other worlds through it. Think of some of the peculiar things you have seen in your dreams. But a Dreamer, child—a true Dreamer—can enter *Tel’aran’rhiod*.”

Egwene tried to swallow, but a lump in her throat stopped her. *Enter it?* “I . . . I don’t think I am a Dreamer, Verin Sedai. Anaiya Sedai’s tests—”

Verin cut her off. “—prove nothing one way or the other. And Anaiya still believes that you may very well be one.”

“I suppose I will learn whether I am or not eventually,” Egwene mumbled. *Light, I want to be, don’t I? I want to learn! I want it all.*

“You have no time to wait, child. The Amyrlin has entrusted a great task to you and Nynaeve. You must reach out for any tool you might be able to use.” Verin dug a red wooden box from under the welter on her table. The box was large enough to hold sheets of paper, but when the Aes Sedai opened the lid a crack, all she pulled out was a ring carved from stone, all flecks and stripes of blue and brown and red, and too large to be a finger ring. “Here, child.”

Egwene shifted the papers to take it, and her eyes widened in surprise. The ring certainly looked like stone, but it felt harder than steel and heavier than lead. And the circle of it was twisted. If she ran a finger along one edge, it would go around twice, inside as well as out; it only had one edge. She moved her finger along that edge twice, just to convince herself.

“Corianin Nedeal,” Verin said, “had that *ter’angreal* in her possession for most of her life. You will keep it, now.”

Egwene almost dropped the ring. *A* ter’angreal*? I am to keep a* ter’angreal?

Verin seemed not to notice her shock. “According to her, it eases the passage to *Tel’aran’rhiod*. She claimed it would work for those without Talent as well as for Aes Sedai, so long as you are touching it when you sleep. There are dangers, of course. *Tel’aran’rhiod* is not like other dreams. What happens there is real; you are actually there instead of just glimpsing it.” She pushed back the sleeve of her dress, revealing a faded scar the length of her forearm. “I tried it myself, once, some years ago. Anaiya’s Healing did not work as well as it should have. Remember that.” The Aes Sedai let her sleeve cover the scar again.

“I will be careful, Verin Sedai.” *Real? My dreams are bad enough as they are. I want no dreams that leave scars! I’ll put it in a sack and stick it in a dark corner and leave it there. I’ll—* But she wanted to learn. She wanted to be Aes Sedai, and no Aes Sedai had been a Dreamer in nearly five hundred years. “I’ll be very careful.” She slipped the ring into her pouch and tugged the drawstrings tight, then picked up the papers Verin had given her.

“Remember to keep it hidden, child. No novice, or even an Accepted, should have a thing like that in her possession. But it may prove useful to you. Keep it hidden.”

“Yes, Verin Sedai.” Remembering Verin’s scar, she almost wished another Aes Sedai would come along and take it from her right then.

“Good, child. Now, off with you. It grows late, and you must be up early to help with breakfast. Sleep well.”

Verin sat looking at the door for a time after it closed behind Egwene. The owl hooted softly behind her. Pulling the red box to her, she opened the lid all the way and frowned at what nearly filled the space.

Page upon page, covered with a precise hand, the black ink barely faded after nearly five hundred years. Corianin Nedeal’s notes, everything she had learned in fifty years of studying that peculiar *ter’angreal*. A secretive woman, Corianin. She had kept by far the greater part of her knowledge from everyone, trusting it only to these pages. Only chance and a habit of rummaging through old papers in the library had led Verin to them. As far as she could discover, no Aes Sedai besides herself knew of the *ter’angreal*; Corianin had managed to erase its existence from the records.

Once again she considered burning the manuscript, just as she had considered giving it to Egwene. But destroying knowledge, any knowledge, was anathema to her. And for the other. . . . *No. It is best by far to leave things as they are. What will happen, will happen.* She let the lid drop shut. *Now where did I put that page?*

Frowning, she began to search the stacks of books and papers for the leather folder. Egwene was already out of her mind.

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CHAPTER 22

The Price of the Ring

Egwene had only gone a short distance from Verin’s rooms when Sheriam met her. The Mistress of Novices wore a preoccupied frown.

“If someone hadn’t remembered Verin speaking to you, I might not have found you.” The Aes Sedai sounded mildly irritated. “Come along, child. You are holding everything up! What are those papers?”

Egwene clutched them a little tighter. She tried to make her voice both meek and respectful. “Verin Sedai thinks I should study them, Aes Sedai.” What would she do if Sheriam asked to see them? What excuse could she give for refusing, what explanation for pages telling all about thirteen women of the Black Ajah and the *ter’angreal* they had stolen?

But Sheriam seemed to have dismissed the papers from her mind as soon as she asked. “Never mind that. You are wanted, and everyone is waiting.” She took Egwene’s arm and forced her to walk faster.

“Wanted, Sheriam Sedai? Waiting for what?”

Sheriam shook her head with exasperation. “Did you forget that you are to be raised to the Accepted? When you come to my study tomorrow, you will be wearing the ring, though I doubt it will soothe you very much.”

Egwene tried to stop short, but the Aes Sedai hurried her on, taking a narrow set of stairs that curled down through the library walls. “Tonight? Already? But I am half-asleep, Aes Sedai, and dirty, and. . . . I thought I would have days yet. To get ready. To prepare.”

“The hour waits on no woman,” Sheriam said. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, *when* the Wheel wills. Besides, how would you prepare? You already know the things you must. More than your friend Nynaeve did.” She pushed Egwene through a tiny door at the foot of the stairs and hurried her across another hall to a ramp curving down and down.

“I listened to the lectures,” Egwene protested, “and I remember them, but . . . can’t I have a night’s sleep first?” The winding ramp seemed to have no end.

“The Amyrlin Seat decided there was no point in waiting.” Sheriam gave Egwene a sidelong smile. “Her exact words were, ‘Once you decide to gut a fish, there’s no use waiting till it rots.’ Elayne has already been through the arches by this time, and the Amyrlin means you to go through tonight as well. Not that I can see the point of such a hurry,” she added, half to herself, “but when the Amyrlin commands, we obey.”

Egwene let herself be pulled down the ramp in silence, a knot forming in her belly. Nynaeve had been far from forthcoming about what had happened when she was raised to the Accepted. She would not speak of it at all, except for a grimaced ‘I hate Aes Sedai!’ Egwene was trembling by the time the ramp finally ended at a broad hallway, far below the Tower in the rock of the island.

The hall was plain and undecorated, the pale rock through which it had been hewn smoothed but left otherwise untouched, and there was only one set of dark wooden doors, as tall and wide as fortress gates and as plain, although of smoothly finished and finely fitted planks, at the very end. Those great doors were so well balanced, though, that Sheriam easily pushed one open, and pulled Egwene through after her, into a great, domed chamber.

“Not before time!” Elaida snapped. She stood to one side in her red-fringed shawl, beside a table on which sat three large silver chalices.

Lamps on tall stands illumined the chamber, and what sat centered under the dome. Three rounded, silver arches, just tall enough to walk under, sitting on a thick silver ring with their ends touching where they joined it. An Aes Sedai sat cross-legged on the bare rock before each of the spots where arches joined ring, all three wearing their shawls. Alanna was the sister of the Green Ajah, but she did not know the Yellow sister, or the White.

Surrounded by the glow of *saidar* embraced, the three Aes Sedai stared fixedly at the arches, and within the silver structure an answering glow flickered and grew. That structure was a *ter’angreal*, and whatever it had been made for in the Age of Legends, now novices passed through it to become Accepted. Inside it, Egwene would have to face her fears. Three times. The white light within the arches no longer flickered; it stayed within them as if confined, but it filled the space, made it opaque.

“Be easy, Elaida,” Sheriam said calmly. “We will be done soon.” She turned to Egwene. “Novices are given three chances at this. You may refuse twice to enter, but at the third refusal, you are sent away from the Tower forever. That is how it is done usually, and you certainly have the right to refuse, but I do not think the Amyrlin Seat will be pleased with you if you do."

"She should not be given this chance." There was iron in Elaida's voice, and her face was scarcely softer. "I do not care what her potential is. She should be put out of the Tower. Or failing that, set to scrubbing floors for the next ten years."

Sheriam gave the Red sister a sharp look. "You were not so adamant about Elayne. You demanded to be part of this, Elaida—perhaps because of Elayne—and you will do your part for this girl as well, as you are supposed to, or you will leave and I will find another."

The two Aes Sedai stared at one another until Egwene would not have been surprised to see the glow of the One Power surround them. Finally Elaida gave a toss of her head and sniffed loudly.

"If it must be done, let us do it. Give the miserable girl her chance to refuse and be done with it. It is late."

"I won't refuse." Egwene's voice quavered, but she steadied it and held her head high. "I want to go on."

"Good," Sheriam said. "Good. Now I will tell you two things no woman hears until she stands where you do. Once you begin, you must go on to the end. Refuse at any point, and you will be put out of the Tower just as if you had refused to begin for the third time. Second. To seek, to strive, is to know danger." She sounded as if she had said this many times. There was a light of sympathy in her eyes, but her face was almost as stern as Elaida's. The sympathy frightened Egwene more than the sternness. "Some women have entered, and never come out. When the *ter'angreal* was allowed to grow quiet, they—were—not—there. And they were never seen again. If you will survive, you must be steadfast. Falter, fail, and. . . ."Sheriam's face drove the unspoken words home; Egwene shivered. "This is your last chance. Refuse now, and it counts only as the first. You may still try twice more. If you accept now, there is no turning back. It is no shame to refuse. I could not do it, my first time. Choose."

They never came out? Egwene swallowed hard. *I want to be Aes Sedai. And first I have to become Accepted.* "I accept."

Sheriam nodded. "Then ready yourself."

Egwene blinked, then remembered. She had to enter unclothed. She bent to set down the tied bundle of papers Verin had given her—and hesitated. If she left them there, Sheriam or Elaida either one could go through them while she was inside the *ter'angreal*. They could find that smaller *ter'angreal* in her pouch. If she refused to go on, she could hide them away, perhaps leave them with Nynaeve. Her breath caught. *I cannot refuse now. I've already begun.*

"Have you already chosen to refuse, child?" Sheriam asked, frowning. "Knowing what that will mean, now?"

"No, Aes Sedai," Egwene said quickly. Hastily she undressed and folded her clothes, then set them on top of the pouch and the papers. It would have to do.

Beside the *ter'angreal*, Alanna suddenly spoke. "There is some sort of—resonance." She never took her eyes from the arches. "An echo, almost. I do not know from where."

"Is there a problem?" Sheriam asked sharply. She sounded surprised, too. "I will not send a woman in there if there is any problem."

Egwene looked yearningly at her piled clothes. *Please, yes, Light, a problem. Something that will let me hide those papers without refusing to enter.*

"No," Alanna said. "It is like having a biteme buzz 'round your head when you're trying to think, but it does not interfere. I would not have mentioned it, only it has never happened before that I ever heard." She shook her head. "It is gone now."

"Perhaps," Elaida said dryly, "others thought such a small thing was not worth mentioning."

"Let us go on." Sheriam's tone would not put up with any more distractions. "Come."

With a last glance at her clothes and the hidden papers, Egwene followed her toward the arches. The stone felt like ice under her bare feet.

"Whom do you bring with you, Sister?" Elaida intoned.

Continuing her measured pace, Sheriam replied, "One who comes as a candidate for Acceptance, Sister." The three Aes Sedai around the *ter'angreal* did not move.

"Is she ready?"

"She is ready to leave behind what she was, and, passing through her fears, gain Acceptance."

“Does she know her fears?”

“She has never faced them, but now is willing.”

“Then let her face what she fears.” Even in its formality, there was a note of satisfaction in Elaida’s voice.

“The first time,” Sheriam said, “is for what was. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.”

Egwene took a deep breath and stepped forward, through the arch and into the glow. Light swallowed her whole.

“Jaim Dawtry dropped by. There’s odd news down from Baerlon with the peddler.”

Egwene raised her head from the cradle she was rocking. Rand was standing in the doorway. For an instant her head spun. She looked from Rand—*my husband*—to the child in the cradle—*my daughter*—and back again, in wonder.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

It was not her own thought, but a disembodied voice that could have been inside her head or out, male or female, yet emotionless and unknowable. Somehow, it did not seem strange to her.

The moment of wonder passed, and the only thing to wonder about was why she had thought anything seemed out of round. Of course Rand was her husband—her handsome, loving husband—and Joiya was her daughter—the most beautiful, sweetest little girl in the Two Rivers. Tam, Rand’s father, was out with the sheep, supposedly so Rand could work on the barn but really so he could have more time to play with Joiya. This afternoon Egwene’s mother and father would come out from the village. And probably Nynaeve, to see if motherhood was interfering with Egwene’s studies to replace Nynaeve as Wisdom one day.

“What kind of news?” she asked. She took up rocking the cradle again, and Rand came over to grin down at the tiny child wrapped in swaddling clothes. Egwene laughed softly to herself. He was so taken with his daughter that he did not hear what people said to him half the time. “Rand? What kind of news? Rand?”

“What?” His grin faded. “Strange news. War. There’s some big war, taking up most of the world, so Jaim claims.” That was strange news; word of wars seldom reached the Two Rivers till the wars were long done. “He says everybody is fighting some folk called the Shawkin, or the Sanchan, or something like that. I never heard of them."

Egwene knew—she thought she knew—Whatever it was, was gone.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "It's nothing to upset us here, my heart. Wars never touch the Two Rivers. We are too far from everywhere for anyone to care."

"I'm not upset. Did Jaim say anything else?"

"Nothing you can believe. He sounded like a Coplin. He said the peddler told him these people use Aes Sedai in battle, but then he claimed they offer a thousand gold marks to anyone who turns an Aes Sedai over to them. And they kill anybody who hides one. It makes no sense. Well, it's nothing to trouble us. It is all a long way from here."

Aes Sedai. Egwene touched her head. *The way back comes but once. Be steadfast.*

She noticed Rand had a hand to his own head. "The headaches?" she asked.

He nodded, his eyes suddenly tight. "That powder Nynaeve gave me doesn't seem to be working the last few days."

She hesitated. These headaches of his worried her. They grew worse every time they came, now. And worst of all was something she had not noticed at first, something she almost wished she never had noticed. When Rand's head hurt, strange things happened soon after. Lightning out of a clear sky, smashing to bits that huge oak stump he had been working two days to root out where he and Tam were clearing new field. Storms that Nynaeve did not hear coming when she listened to the wind. Wildfires in the forest. And the deeper his pain grew, the worse what followed. No one else had connected these things to Rand, not even Nynaeve, and Egwene was grateful for that. She did not want to think about what it might mean.

That is plain stupid foolish, she told herself. *I must know if I am going to help him.* Because she had a secret of her own, one that frightened her even as she tried to puzzle out what it meant. Nynaeve was teaching her the herbs, teaching Egwene to follow her as Wisdom, one day. Nynaeve's cures often worked in near miraculous fashion, wounds healed with barely a scar, sick folk brought back from the edge of the grave. But three times now, Egwene had cured someone Nynaeve had given up for dead. Three times she had sat to hold a hand through the last hour, and seen the person get up from a deathbed. Nynaeve had questioned her closely on what she had done, what herbs she had used, in what blending. Thus far, she had not found the courage to admit that she had done nothing. *I must have done something. Once might be chance, but three times. . . . I have to figure it out. I have to learn.* That set off a buzz in her head, as though the words were echoing inside her skull. *If I could do something for them, I can help my husband.*

"Let me try, Rand," she said. And as she stood, through the open door, she saw a silver arch standing in front of the house, an arch filled with white light. *The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.* She took two steps toward the door before she could stop herself.

She halted, looked back at Joiya gurgling in her cradle, at Rand still pressing hand to his head and looking at her as if wondering where she was going. "No," she said. "No, this is what I want. This is what I want! Why can't I have this, too?" She did not understand her own words. Of course, this was what she wanted, and she had it.

"What is it you want, Egwene?" Rand asked. "If it's anything I can get, you know I will. If I can't get it, I'll make it."

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

She took another step, into the doorway. The silver arch beckoned her. Something waited on the other side. Something she wanted more than anything else in the world. Something she had to do.

"Egwene, I—"

There was a thump behind her. She looked over her shoulder to see Rand on his knees, bowed and head cradled in his hands. The pain had never hit him so hard. *What will come after this?*

"Ah, Light!" he panted. "Light! Hurts! Light, it hurts worse than ever! Egwene?"

Be steadfast.

It was waiting. Something she had to do. Had to. She took a step. It was hard, harder than anything she had ever done in her life. Outside, toward the arch. Behind her, Joiya was laughing.

"Egwene? Egwene, I can't—" He cut off with a loud groan.

Steadfast.

She stiffened her back and kept walking, but she could not keep the tears from rolling down her cheeks. Rand's groans built to a scream, drowning Joiya's laughter. From the corner of her eye, Egwene saw Tam coming, running as hard as he could.

He can't help, she thought, and tears became wracking sobs. *There is nothing he can do. But I could. I could.*

She stepped into the light, and was consumed.

Trembling and sobbing, Egwene stepped out of the arch, the same by which she had entered, memory cascading back with Sheriam's face confronting her. Cold clear water washed away her tears as Elaida slowly emptied a silver chalice over her head. Her weeping went on; she did not think it would ever end.

"You are washed clean," Elaida pronounced, "of what sin you may have done, and of those done against you. You are washed clean of what crime you may have committed, and of those committed against you. You come to us washed clean and pure, in heart and soul."

Light, Egwene thought as the water ran down her body, *let it be so. Can water wash away what I did?* "Her name was Joiya," she told Sheriam between sobs. "Joiya. Nothing can be worth what I just . . . what I. . . ."

"There is a price to become Aes Sedai," Sheriam replied, but the sympathy was back in her eyes, stronger than before. "There is always a price."

"Was it real? Did I dream it?" Weeping swallowed what she wanted to say. *Did I leave him to die? Did I leave my baby?*

Sheriam put an arm around her shoulders, began guiding her around the circle of arches. "Every woman I have ever watched come out of there has asked that question. The answer is, no one knows. It has been speculated that perhaps some of those who do not come back chose to stay because they found a happier place, and lived out their lives there." Her voice hardened. "If it is real, and they stayed from choice, then I hope the lives they live are far from happy. I have no sympathy for any who run from their responsibilities." The edge on her tone softened slightly. "Myself, I believe it is not real. But the danger is. Remember that." She stopped in front of the next glow-filled arch. "Are you ready?"

Shifting her feet, Egwene nodded, and Sheriam took her arm away.

"The second time is for what is. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast."

Egwene trembled. *Whatever happens, it cannot be worse than the last. It cannot be.* She stepped into the glow.

She stared down at her dress, blue silk sewn with pearls, all dusty and torn. Her head came up, and she took in the ruins of a great palace around her. The Royal Palace of Andor, in Caemlyn. She knew that, and wanted to scream.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

The world was not the way she wanted it, no way that she could think of without wanting to cry, but all her tears had been cried away long ago, and the world was as it was. Ruin was what she expected to see.

Careless of making more rips in her dress but as careful of sound as a mouse, she climbed one of the piles of rubble and peered into the curving streets of the Inner City. As far as she could see in every direction lay ruin and desolation, buildings that looked as if they had been torn apart by madmen, thick plumes of smoke rising from the fires still burning. There were people in the streets, bands of armed men prowling, searching. And Trollocs. The men shied away from the Trollocs, and the Trollocs snarled at them and laughed, harsh guttural laughter. But they knew each other, worked together.

A Myrddraal came striding down the street, its black cloak swaying gently with its steps even when the wind gusted to drive dust and rubbish past it. Men and Trollocs alike cowered under its eyeless stare. “Hunt!” Its voice sounded like something long dead crumbling. “Do not stand there shivering! Find him!”

Egwene slipped back down the pile of jumbled stones as silently as she could.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

She stopped, afraid the whisper had come from Shadowspawn. In some way, though, she was sure it had not. Glancing back over her shoulder, half fearful of seeing the Myrddraal standing where she had just been, she hurried onward and into the ruined palace, climbing over fallen timbers, squeezing between heavy blocks of collapsed masonry as she made her way. Once she stepped on a woman’s arm, sticking out from under a mound of plaster and bricks that had been an interior wall and perhaps part of the floor above. She noticed the arm as little as she noticed the Great Serpent ring on one finger. She had trained herself not to see the dead buried in the refuse heap Trollocs and Darkfriends had made of Caemlyn. She could do nothing for the dead.

Forcing her way through a narrow gap where part of the ceiling had fallen, she found herself in a room half buried under what had stood above it. Rand lay with a heavy beam pinning him across the waist, his legs hidden beneath the stone blocks that filled half the room. Dust and sweat coated his face. He opened his eyes when she came near him.

"You came back." He forced the words out in a hoarse rasp. "I was afraid—No matter. You have to help me."

She sank wearily to the floor. "I could lift that beam easily with Air, but as soon as it moves, everything else will come down on top of you. On top of both of us. I cannot manage all of it, Rand."

His laugh was bitter and painful, and cut off almost as soon as it began. Fresh sweat glistened on his face, and he spoke with an effort. "I could shift the beam myself. You know that. I could shift that and the stones above, all of them. But I have to let go of myself to do it, and I can't trust that. I cannot trust—" He stopped, wheezing for breath.

"I do not understand," she said slowly. "Let go of yourself? What can't you trust?" *The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.* She rubbed her hands roughly over her ears.

"The madness, Egwene. I am—actually—holding it—at bay." His gasping laugh made her skin prickle. "But it takes everything I have just to do that. If I let go, even a little, even for an instant, the madness will have me. I won't care what I do then. You have to help me."

"How, Rand! I've tried everything I know. Tell me how, and I will do it."

His hand flopped out, fell just short of a dagger lying in the dust bare-bladed. "The dagger," he whispered. His hand made a painful journey back to his chest. "Here. In the heart. Kill me."

She stared at him, at the dagger, as if they were both poisonous serpents. "No! Rand, I will not. I cannot! How could you ask such a thing?"

Slowly his hand crept back toward the dagger. His fingers came short again. He strained, moaning, brushed it with a fingertip. Before he could try again, she kicked it away from him. He collapsed with a sob.

"Tell me why," she demanded. "Why would you ask me to—to murder you? I will Heal you, I will do anything to get you out of there, but I cannot kill you. Why?"

"They can turn me, Egwene." His breathing was so tortured, she wished she could weep. "If they take me—the Myrddraal—the Dreadlords

—they can turn me to the Shadow. If madness has me, I cannot fight them. I won't know what they are doing till it is too late. If there is even a spark of life left when they find me, they can still do it. Please, Egwene. For the love of the Light. Kill me."

"I—I can't, Rand. Light help me, I cannot!"

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

She looked over her shoulder, and a silver arch filled with white light took up most of the open space among the rubble.

"Egwene, help me."

Be steadfast.

She stood and took a step toward the arch. It was right there in front of her. One more step, and. . . .

"Please, Egwene. Help me. I can't reach it. For the love of the Light, Egwene, help me!"

"I cannot kill you," she whispered.

"I can't. Forgive me." She stepped forward.

"HELP ME, EGWENE!"

Light burned her to ash.

Staggering, she stepped out of the arch, neither noticing her nakedness nor caring. A shudder ran through her, and she covered her mouth with both hands. "I couldn't, Rand," she whispered. "I couldn't. Please forgive me." *Light help him. Please, Light help Rand.*

Cold water poured over her head.

"You are washed clean of false pride," Elaida intoned. "You are washed clean of false ambition. You come to us washed clean, in heart and soul."

As the Red sister turned away, Sheriam gently took Egwene's shoulders and guided her toward the last arch. "One more, child. One more, and it is done."

"He said they could turn him to the Shadow," Egwene mumbled. "He said the Myrddraal and the Dreadlords could force him."

Sheriam missed a step, and looked around quickly. Elaida was almost back to the table. The Aes Sedai surrounding the *ter'angreal* stared at it, seeming lost to anything else. "An unpleasant thing to talk of, child," Sheriam said finally, and softly. "Come. One more."

"Can they?" Egwene insisted.

“Custom,” Sheriam said, “is not to speak of what happens within the *ter’angreal*. A woman’s fears are her own.”

“Can they?”

Sheriam sighed, glanced at the other Aes Sedai again, then dropped her voice to a whisper and spoke swiftly. “This is something known only to a few, child, even in the Tower. You should not learn it now, if ever, but I will tell you. There is—a weakness in being able to channel. That we learn to open ourselves to the True Source means that we can be—opened to other things.” Egwene shuddered. “Calm yourself, child. It is not so easily done. It is a thing not done, so far as I know—Light send it has not been done!—since the Trolloc Wars. It took thirteen Dreadlords—Darkfriends who could channel—weaving the flows through thirteen Myrddraal. You see? Not easily done. There are no Dreadlords today. This is a secret of the Tower, child. If others knew, we could never convince them they were safe. Only one who can channel can be turned in this way. The weakness of our strength. Everyone else is as safe as a fortress; only their own deeds and will can turn them to the Shadow.”

“Thirteen,” Egwene said in a tiny voice. “The same number who left the Tower. Liandrin, and twelve more.”

Sheriam’s face hardened. “That is nothing for you to dwell on. You will forget it.” Her voice climbed to a normal volume. “The third time is for what will be. The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.”

Egwene stared at the glowing arch, stared at some far distance beyond it. *Liandrin and twelve others. Thirteen Darkfriends who can channel. Light help us all.* She stepped into the light. It filled her. It shone through her. It burned her to the bone, seared her to the soul. She flashed incandescent in the light. *Light help me!* There was nothing but the light. And the pain.

Egwene stared into the standing mirror, and was not sure whether she was more surprised by the ageless smoothness of her face or the striped stole that hung around her neck. The stole of the Amyrlin Seat.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

Thirteen.

She swayed, caught at the mirror and almost toppled it and herself to the blue-tiled floor of her dressing chamber. *Something is wrong,* she thought. The wrongness had nothing to do with her sudden dizziness, or at least that was not what felt wrong. It was something else. But she had no idea what.

There was an Aes Sedai at her elbow, a woman with Sheriam's high cheekbones but dark hair and concerned brown eyes, and the hand-wide stole of the Keeper on her shoulders. Not Sheriam, though. Egwene had never seen her before; she was sure she knew her as well as she knew herself. Haltingly, she put a name to the woman. Beldeine.

"Are you ill, Mother?"

Her stole is green. That means she was raised from the Green Ajah. The Keeper always comes from the same Ajah as the Amyrlin she serves. Which means if I'm the Amyrlin—if?—then I was Green Ajah, too. That thought shook her. Not that she had been Green Ajah, but that she had to reason it out. *Light, something is wrong with me.*

The way back will come bu. . . . The voice in her head trailed away to finish in a buzz.

Thirteen Darkfriends.

"I am well, Beldeine," Egwene said. The name felt strange on her tongue; it felt as if she had been saying it for years. "We mustn't keep them waiting." *Keep who waiting?* She did not know, except that she felt infinitely sad about ending that wait, endlessly reluctant.

"They will be growing impatient, Mother." There was a hesitation in Beldeine's voice, as if she felt the same reluctance as Egwene, but for a different reason. Unless Egwene missed her guess, behind that outer calm, Beldeine was terrified.

"In that case, we had best be about it."

Beldeine nodded, then took a deep breath before crossing the carpet to where her staff of office, topped with the snowdrop White Flame of Tar Valon, stood propped beside the door. "I suppose we must, Mother." She took up the staff and opened the door for Egwene, then hurried ahead so that they made a procession of two, Keeper of the Chronicles leading the Amyrlin Seat.

Egwene noticed little of the corridors they took. All her attention was directed inward. *What is the matter with me? Why can't I remember? Why is so much of what I . . . almost remember wrong?* She touched the seven-striped stole on her shoulders. *Why am I half sure I'm still a novice?*

The way back will come but on—This time it ended abruptly.

Thirteen of the Black Ajah.

She stumbled at that. It was a frightening thought, but it chilled her to the marrow beyond fear. It felt—personal. She wanted to scream, to run and hide. She felt as if they were after her. *Nonsense. The Black Ajah has been destroyed.* That seemed an odd thought, too. Part of her remembered something called the Great Purge. Part of her was sure no such thing had happened.

Eyes fixed ahead, Beldeine had not noticed her stumble. Egwene had to lengthen her stride to catch up. *This woman is scared to her toenails. What in the Light is she taking me to?*

Beldeine stopped before tall, paired doors, their dark wood each inlaid with a large silver Flame of Tar Valon. She wiped her hands on her dress, as if they were suddenly sweaty, before opening one door and leading Egwene up a straight ramp of the same silver-streaked white stone that made Tar Valon's walls. Even here it seemed to shine.

The ramp let into a large, circular room under a domed ceiling at least thirty paces high. A raised platform ran around the outer edge of the room, fronted by steps except where this ramp and two others came out, spaced equally around the circle. The Flame of Tar Valon lay centered in the floor, surrounded by widening spirals of color, the colors of the seven Ajahs. At the opposite side of the room from where the ramp entered, a high-backed chair stood, heavy and ornately carved in vines and leaves, painted in the colors of all the Ajahs.

Beldeine rapped her staff sharply on the floor. There was a tremor in her voice. "She comes. The Watcher of the Seals. The Flame of Tar Valon. The Amyrlin Seat. She comes."

With a rustle of skirts, shawled women on the platform got up from their chairs. Twenty-one chairs in groupings of three, each triad painted and cushioned in the same color as the fringe on the shawls of the women who stood before them.

The Hall of the Tower, Egwene thought as she crossed the floor to her chair. The Amyrlin Seat's chair. *That's all it is. The Hall of the Tower, and the Sitters for the Ajahs. I've been here thousands of times.* But she could not remember one of them. *What am I doing in the Hall of the Tower? Light, they'll skin me alive when they see. . . .* She was not sure what it was they would see, only that she prayed they did not.

The way back will come but—

The way back will—

The way—

The Black Ajah waits. That, at least, was whole. It came from everywhere. Why did no one else seem to hear it?

Settling in the chair of the Amyrlin Seat—the chair that was also the Amyrlin Seat—she realized she had no idea what to do next. The other Aes Sedai had seated themselves when she did, all but Beldeine, who stood beside her with the staff, swallowing nervously. They all seemed to be waiting on her.

"Begin," she said finally.

It seemed to be enough. One of the Red Sitters stood. Egwene was shocked to recognize Elaida. At the same time she knew that Elaida was foremost of the Sitters for the Red, and her own bitterest enemy. The look on Elaida's face as she stared across the chamber made Egwene shiver inside. It was stern and cold—and triumphant. It promised things best not thought of.

"Bring him in," Elaida said loudly.

From one of the ramps—not the one Egwene had entered by—came the crunch of boots on stone. People appeared. A dozen Aes Sedai surrounding three men, two of them burly guards with the white teardrops of the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests, tugging the chains in which the third stumbled as if dazed.

Egwene jerked forward in her chair. The chained man was Rand. Eyes half-closed, head sagging, he seemed nearly asleep, moving only as the chains directed.

"This man," Elaida proclaimed, "has named himself the Dragon Reborn." There was a buzz of distaste, not as if the listeners were surprised, but as though it were not something they wanted to hear. "This man has channeled the One Power." The buzz was louder now, disgusted and tinged with fear. "There is only one penalty for this, known and recognized in every nation, but pronounced only here, in Tar Valon, in the Hall of the Tower. I call on the Amyrlin Seat to pronounce the sentence of gentling on this man."

Elaida's eyes glittered at Egwene. *Rand. What do I do? Light, what do I do?*

"Why do you hesitate?" Elaida demanded. "The sentence has been set down for three thousand years. Why do you hesitate, Egwene al'Vere?"

One of the Green Sitters was on her feet, anger bright through her calm. “Shame, Elaida! Show respect for the Amyrlin Seat! Show respect for the Mother!”

“Respect,” Elaida answered coldly, “can be lost as well as won. Well, Egwene? Can it be you show your weakness, your unfitness for your office, at last? Can it be you will not pronounce sentence on this man?”

Rand tried to lift his head and failed.

Egwene struggled to her feet, head spinning, trying to remember she was the Amyrlin Seat with the power to command all these women, screaming that she was a novice, that she did not belong here, that something was dreadfully wrong. “No,” she said shakily. “No, I cannot! I will not—”

“She betrays herself!” Elaida’s shout drowned out Egwene’s attempt to speak. “She condemns herself out of her own mouth! Take her!”

As Egwene opened her mouth, Beldeine moved beside her. Then the Keeper’s staff struck her head.

Blackness.

First there was pain in her head. There was something hard under her back, and cold. Next came the voices. Murmurs.

“Is she still unconscious?” It was a rasp, a file on bone.

“Do not worry,” a woman said from far, far away. She sounded uneasy, afraid, and trying not to show either. “She will be dealt with before she knows what is happening to her. Then she is ours, to do with as we will. Perhaps we will give her to you for sport.”

“After you make your own use of her.”

“Of course.”

The distant voices moved further away.

Her hand brushed against her leg, touched bare, pebbly flesh. She opened her eyes a crack. She was naked, bruised, lying on a rough wooden table, in what seemed to be a disused storeroom. Splinters stuck her back. There was a metallic taste of blood in her mouth.

A cluster of Aes Sedai stood to one side of the room, talking among themselves, voices low yet urgent. The pain in her head made thinking difficult, but it seemed important to count them. Thirteen.

Another group, black-cloaked and hooded men, joined the Aes Sedai, who seemed caught between cowering and trying to dominate with their presence. One of the men turned his head to look toward the table. The dead white face within the hood had no eyes.

Egwene had no need to count the Myrddraal. She knew. Thirteen Myrddraal, and thirteen Aes Sedai. Without another thought, she screamed in pure terror. Yet even in the midst of fear that tried to split her bones, she reached out for the True Source, clawed desperately for *saidar.*

"She's awake!"

"She cannot be! Not yet!"

"Shield her! Quickly! Quickly! Cut her off from the Source!"

"It's too late! She is too strong!"

"Seize her! Hurry!"

Hands reached for her arms and legs. Pasty pale hands like slugs under rocks, ordered by minds behind pale, eyeless faces. If those hands touched her flesh, she knew she would go mad. The Power filled her.

Flames burst from Myrddraal skin, ripping through black cloth as if they were solid daggers of fire. Shrieking Halfmen crisped and burned like oiled paper. Fist-sized chunks of stone tore themselves free of the walls and whizzed across the room, producing shrieks and grunts as they thudded into flesh. The air stirred, shifted, howled into a whirlwind.

Slowly, painfully, Egwene pushed herself off the table. The wind whipped her hair and made her stagger, but she continued to drive it as she stumbled toward the door. An Aes Sedai loomed in front of her, a woman bruised and bleeding, surrounded by the glow of the Power. A woman with death in her dark eyes.

Egwene's mind put a name to the face. Gyldan. Elaida's closest confidante, always whispering together in corners, closeting themselves in the night. Egwene's mouth tightened. Disdaining stones and wind, she balled up her fist and punched Gyldan between the eyes as hard as she could. The Red sister—the *Black* sister—crumpled as if her bones had melted.

Rubbing her knuckles, Egwene staggered out into the hall. *Thank you, Perrin,* she thought, *for showing me how to do that. But you didn't tell me how much it hurts when you do.*

Shoving the door shut against the wind, she channeled. Stones around the doorway shivered, cracked, settled against the wood. It would not hold them for long, but anything that slowed pursuit for even a minute was worth doing. Minutes might mean life. Gathering her strength, she forced herself to break into a run. It wobbled, but at least it was a run.

She must find some clothes, she decided. A woman clothed had more authority than the same woman naked, and she was going to need every bit of authority. They would look for her first in her rooms, but she had a spare dress and shoes in her study—and another stole—and that lay not far off.

It was unnerving, trotting through empty hallways. The White Tower no longer held the numbers it once had, but there was usually someone about. The loudest sound was the slap of her bare soles on the tiles.

She hurried through the antechamber of her study to the inner room, and at last she found someone. Beldeine was sitting on the floor, head in her hands, weeping.

Egwene stopped warily, as Beldeine raised reddened eyes to meet hers. No glow of *saidar* surrounded the Keeper, but Egwene was still cautious. And confident. She could not see her own glow, of course, but the power—the Power—surging through her was enough. Especially when added to her secret.

Beldeine scrubbed a hand across tearstained cheeks. “I had to. You must understand. I had to. They. . . . They. . . .” She took a deep, shuddering breath; it all came out in a rush. “Three nights ago they took me while I slept and stilled me.” Her voice rose to a near shriek. “They *stilled* me! I cannot channel any longer!”

“Light,” Egwene breathed. The rush of *saidar* cushioned her against the shock. “The Light help and comfort you, my daughter. Why didn’t you tell me? I would have. . . .” She let it trail away, knowing there was nothing she could do.

“What would you have done? What? Nothing! There’s nothing you can do. But they said they could give it back to me, with the power of . . . the power of the Dark One.” Her eyes squeezed shut, leaking tears. “They hurt me, Mother, and they made me. . . . Oh, Light, they hurt me! Elaida told me they would make me whole again, make me able to channel again, if I obeyed. That’s why I. . . . I had to!”

“So Elaida *is* Black Ajah,” Egwene said grimly. A narrow wardrobe stood against the wall, and in it hung a green silk dress, kept for when she had no time to return to her rooms. A striped stole hung beside the dress. She began to dress herself, quickly. “What have they done with Rand?

Where have they taken him? Answer me, Beldeine! Where is Rand al'Thor?"

Beldeine huddled, lips trembling, eyes turned bleakly inward, but finally she roused herself enough to say, "The Traitor's Court, Mother. They took him to the Traitor's Court."

Shivers assaulted Egwene. Shivers of fear. Shivers of rage. Elaida had not waited, not even an hour. The Traitor's Court was used for only three purposes: executions, the stilling of an Aes Sedai, or the gentling of a man who could channel. But all of the three took an order from the Amyrlin Seat. *So who wears the stole out there?* Elaida, she was sure. *But how could she make them accept her so quickly, with me not tried, not sentenced? There cannot be another Amyrlin until I've been stripped of stole and staff. And they'll not find that easy to do. Light! Rand!* She started for the door.

"What can you do, Mother?" Beldeine cried. "What can you do?" It was not clear whether she meant for Rand or for herself.

"More than anyone suspects," Egwene said. "I never held the Oath Rod, Beldeine." Beldeine's gasp followed her from the room.

Egwene's memory still played hide-and-seek with her. She knew no woman could achieve the shawl and the ring without pledging the Three Oaths with the Oath Rod firmly in hand, the *ter'angreal* sealing her to keep those oaths as if they had been engraved on her bones at birth. No woman became Aes Sedai without being bound to them. Yet she knew that somehow, in some fashion she could not begin to dredge up, she had done just that.

Her shoes clicked swiftly as she ran. At least she knew now why the halls were empty. Every Aes Sedai, except perhaps those she had left in the storeroom, every Accepted, every novice, even all the servants, would be gathered in the Traitor's Court, according to custom, to watch the will of Tar Valon made fact.

And the Warders would be ringing the courtyard against the possibility that someone might try to free the man to be gentled. The remnants of Guaire Amalasan's armies had attempted it, at the end of what some called the War of the Second Dragon, just before Artur Hawkwing's rise had given Tar Valon other things to worry it, and so had Raolin Darksbane's followers, long years earlier. Whether Rand had any followers or not, she could not remember, but Warders remembered such things, and guarded against them.

If Elaida, or another, truly did wear the stole of the Amyrlin, the Warders might well not admit her to the Traitor's Court. She knew she could force a way in. It would need to be done quickly; there was no point if Rand was gentled while she was still wrapping Warders in Air. Even Warders would break if she loosed the lightnings on them, and balefire, and broke the ground under their feet. *Balefire?* she wondered. But it would also do no good if she broke Tar Valon's power to save Rand. She had to save both.

Well short of the ways that led to the Traitor's Court, she turned aside and climbed, up stairs and ramps that grew narrower and tighter the higher she went, until she thrust open a trapdoor and climbed out onto a sloping tower top, a roof of nearly white tiles. From there, she could see across other roofs, past other towers, into the broad open well of the Traitor's Court.

The court was crowded except for a cleared space in the middle. People filled the windows overlooking it, crowded the balconies and even the rooftops, but she could make out the lone man, small at that distance, swaying in his chains in the center of the cleared space. Rand. Twelve Aes Sedai surrounded him, and another—who Egwene knew had to be wearing a seven-striped stole, even though she could not distinguish it—stood before Rand. *Elaida.* The words she must be saying crept into Egwene's head.

This man, abandoned of the Light, has touched saidin, *the male half of the True Source. Thus do we hold him. Most abominably has this man channeled the One Power, knowing that* saidin *is tainted by the Dark One, tainted for men's pride, tainted for men's sin. Thus do we chain him.*

Forcefully, Egwene pushed the rest of it out of her thoughts. *Thirteen Aes Sedai. Twelve sisters and the Amyrlin, the traditional number for gentling. The same number as for. . . .* She rid herself of that, too. She had no time for anything but what she was there to do. If she could only manage to reason out how.

At that distance, she thought she could manage to lift him with Air. Pick him right out of the circle of Aes Sedai and float him straight to her. Maybe. Even if she could find the strength, even if she did not drop him to his death halfway, it would be a slow process, with him a helpless target for archers, and the glow of *saidar* pointing out her own position for any Aes Sedai who looked. Any Myrddraal, for that matter.

“Light,” she muttered, “there’s no other way short of starting a war inside the White Tower. And I may do that anyway.” She gathered the Power, separated skeins, directed flows.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

It had been so long since she last heard those words that she gave a start, slipped on the smooth tiles, barely caught herself short of the edge. The ground lay a hundred paces down. She looked over her shoulder.

There on the tower top, tilted to sit flat against the sloping tiles, was a silver arch filled with a glowing light. The arch flickered and wavered; streaks of angry red and yellow darted through the white light.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

The archway thinned to transparency, grew solid again.

Frantic, Egwene gazed toward the Traitor’s Court. There had to be time. There had to be. All she needed was a few minutes, perhaps ten, and luck.

Voices bored into her head, not the disembodied, unknowable voice that warned her to be steadfast, but women’s voices she almost believed she knew.

—can’t hold much longer. If she does not come out now—

Hold! Hold, burn you, or I’ll gut you all like sturgeons!

—going wild, Mother! We can’t—

The voices faded to a drone, the drone to silence, but the unknowable spoke again.

The way back will come but once. Be steadfast.

There is a price to be Aes Sedai.

The Black Ajah waits.

With a scream of rage, of loss, Egwene threw herself at the arch as it shimmered like a heat haze. She almost wished she would miss and plunge to her death.

Light plucked her apart fiber by fiber, sliced the fibers to hairs, split the hairs to wisps of nothing. All drifted apart on the light. Forever.

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CHAPTER 23

Sealed

Light pulled her apart fiber by fiber, sliced the fibers to hairs that drifted apart, burning. Drifting and burning, forever. Forever.

Egwene stepped out of the silver arch cold and stiff with anger. She wanted the iciness of anger to counter the searing of memory. Her body remembered burning, but other memories scored and scorched more deeply. Anger cold as death.

“Is that all there is for me?” she demanded. “To abandon him again and again. To betray him, fail him, again and again? Is that what there is for me?”

Suddenly she realized that all was not as it should be. The Amyrlin was there now, as Egwene had been taught she would be, and a shawled sister from each Ajah, but they all stared at her worriedly. Two Aes Sedai now sat at each place around the *ter’angreal*, sweat running down their faces. The *ter’angreal* hummed, almost vibrated, and violent streaks of color tore the white light inside the arches.

The glow of *saidar* briefly enveloped Sheriam as she put a hand on Egwene’s head, sending a new chill through her. “She is well.” The Mistress of Novices sounded relieved. “She is unharmed.” As if she had not expected it.

Tension seemed to go out of the other Aes Sedai facing Egwene. Elaida let out a long breath, then hurried away for the last chalice. Only the Aes Sedai around the *ter’angreal* did not relax. The hum had lessened, and the light began the flickering that signaled the *ter’angreal* was settling toward quiescence, but those Aes Sedai looked as if they were fighting it every inch of the way.

“What . . . ? What happened?” Egwene asked.

“Be silent,” Sheriam said, but gently. “For now, be silent. You are well—that is the main thing—and we must complete the ceremony.” Elaida came, close to running, and handed the final silver chalice to the Amyrlin.

Egwene hesitated only a moment before kneeling. *What happened?*

The Amyrlin emptied the chalice slowly over Egwene's head. "You are washed clean of Egwene al'Vere from Emond's Field. You are washed clean of all ties that bind you to the world. You come to us washed clean, in heart and soul. You are Egwene al'Vere, Accepted of the White Tower." The last drop splashed onto Egwene's hair. "You are sealed to us, now."

The last words seemed to have a special meaning, just between Egwene and the Amyrlin. The Amyrlin thrust the chalice at one of the other Aes Sedai and produced a gold ring in the shape of a serpent biting its own tail. Despite herself, Egwene trembled as she raised her left hand, trembled again as the Amyrlin slipped the Great Serpent ring onto the third finger. When she became Aes Sedai, she could wear the ring on the finger she chose, or not at all if it was necessary to hide who she was, but the Accepted wore it there.

Unsmiling, the Amyrlin pulled her to her feet. "Welcome, Daughter," she said, kissing her cheek. Egwene was surprised to feel a thrill. Not child, but daughter. Always before she had been child. The Amyrlin kissed her other cheek. "Welcome."

Stepping back, the Amyrlin regarded her critically, but spoke to Sheriam. "Get her dry and into some clothes, then be certain she is well. Certain, you understand."

"I am certain, Mother." Sheriam sounded surprised. "You saw me delve her."

The Amyrlin grunted, and her eyes shifted to the *ter'angreal*. "I mean to know what went wrong tonight." She strode away in the direction of her glare, skirts swaying purposefully. Most of the other Aes Sedai joined her around the *ter'angreal*, now only a silver structure of arches on a ring.

"The Mother is worried about you," Sheriam said as she drew Egwene to one side, to where there was a thick towel for her hair, and another for the rest of her.

"How much reason did she have?" Egwene asked. *The Amyrlin wants nothing to happen to her hound till the deer is pulled down.*

Sheriam did not answer. She merely frowned slightly, then waited until Egwene was dry before handing her a white dress banded at the bottom with seven rings.

She slipped into that dress with a flash of disappointment. She was one of the Accepted, with the ring on her finger and the bands on her dress. *Why don't I feel any different?*

Elaida came over, her arms filled with Egwene's novice dress and shoes, her belt and pouch. And the papers Verin had given her. In Elaida's hands.

Egwene made herself wait for the Aes Sedai to hand the bundle to her rather than snatch them away. "Thank you, Aes Sedai." She tried to eye the papers surreptitiously; she could not tell if they had been disturbed. The string was still tied. *How would I know if she's read all of them*? Squeezing her pouch under cover of the novice dress, she felt the peculiar ring, the *ter'angreal,* inside. *At least that's still here. Light, she could have taken that, and I don't know that I would have minded. Yes, I would. I think I would.*

Elaida's face was as cold as her voice. "I did not want you to be brought forward tonight. Not because I feared what happened; no one could foresee that. But because of what you are. A wilder." Egwene tried to protest, but Elaida kept on, as implacable as a mountain glacier. "Oh, I know you learned to channel under Aes Sedai teaching, but you are still a wilder. A wilder in spirit, a wilder in ways. You have vast potential, else you would never have survived in there tonight, but potential changes nothing. I do not believe you will ever be part of the White Tower, not in the way the rest of us are, no matter on which finger you wear your ring. It would have been better for you had you settled for learning enough to stay alive, and gone back to your sleepy village. Far better." Turning on her heel, she stalked away, out of the chamber.

If she isn't Black Ajah, Egwene thought sourly, *she's the next thing to it.* Aloud, she muttered to Sheriam, "You could have said something. You could have helped me."

"I would have helped a novice, child," Sheriam replied calmly, and Egwene winced. She was back to "child" again. "I try to protect novices where they need it, since they cannot protect themselves. You are Accepted, now. It is time for you to learn to protect yourself."

Egwene studied Sheriam's eyes, wondering if she had imagined an emphasis on that last sentence. Sheriam had had as much opportunity as Elaida to read the list of names, to decide that Egwene was mixed in with the Black Ajah. *Light, you're becoming suspicious of everybody. Better that* *than dead, or captured by thirteen of them and. . . .* Hastily, she stopped that line of thought; she did not want it in her head. “Sheriam, what did happen tonight?” she asked. “And don’t put me off.” Sheriam’s eyebrows rose almost to her scalp, it seemed, and she hastily amended her question. “Sheriam Sedai, I mean. Forgive me, Sheriam Sedai.”

“Remember you aren’t Aes Sedai yet, child.” Despite the steel in her voice, a smile touched Sheriam’s lips, yet it vanished as she went on. “I do not know what happened. Except that I very much fear you almost died.”

“Who knows what happens to those who do not come out of a *ter’angreal*?” Alanna said as she joined them. The Green sister was known for her temper and her sense of humor, and some said she could flash from one to the other and back again before you could blink, but the look she gave Egwene was almost diffident. “Child, I should have stopped this when I had the chance, when I first noticed that—reverberation. It came back. That is what happened. It came back a thousandfold. Ten thousand. The *ter’angreal* almost seemed to be trying to shut off the flow from *saidar*—or melt itself through the floor. You have my apologies, though words are not enough. Not for what almost happened to you. I say this, and by the First Oath you know it is true. To show my feelings, I will ask the Mother to let me share your time in the kitchens. And, yes, your visit to Sheriam, too. Had I done as I should, you would not have been in danger of your life, and I will atone for it.”

Sheriam’s laugh was scandalized. “She will never allow that, Alanna. A sister in the kitchens, much less. . . . It is unheard of. It’s impossible! You did what you believed right. There is no fault to you.”

“It was not your fault, Alanna Sedai,” Egwene said. *Why is Alanna doing this? Unless maybe to convince me she* didn’t *have anything to do with whatever went wrong. And maybe so she can keep an eye on me all the time.* It was that image, a proud Aes Sedai up to her elbows in greasy pots three times a day just to watch someone, that convinced her she was letting her imagination run away with her. But it was also unthinkable that Alanna should do as she said she would. In any case, the Green sister certainly had had no chance to see the list of names while tending the *ter’angreal. But if Nynaeve is right, she wouldn’t need to see those names to want to kill me if she is Black Ajah. Stop that!* “Really, it wasn’t.”

“Had I done as I should,” Alanna maintained, “it would never have happened. The only time I have ever seen anything like it was once years ago when we tried to use a *ter'angreal* in the same room with another that may have been in some way related to it. It is extremely rare to find two such as that. The pair of them melted, and every sister within a hundred paces had such a headache for a week that she couldn't channel a spark. What's the matter, child?"

Egwene's hand had tightened around her pouch till the twisted stone ring impressed itself on her palm through the thick cloth. Was it warm? *Light, I did it myself.* "Nothing, Alanna Sedai. Aes Sedai, you did nothing wrong. You have no reason to share my punishments. None at all. None!"

"A bit vehement," Sheriam observed, "but true." Alanna only shook her head.

"Aes Sedai," Egwene said slowly, "what does it mean to be Green Ajah?" Sheriam's eyes opened wider with amusement, and Alanna grinned openly.

"Just with the ring on your finger," the Green sister said, "and already trying to decide which Ajah to choose? First, you must love men. I don't mean be in love with them, but love them. Not like a Blue, who merely likes men, so long as they share her causes and do not get in her way. And certainly not like a Red, who despises them as if every one of them were responsible for the Breaking." Alviarin, the White sister who had come with the Amyrlin, gave them a cool look and moved on. "And not like a White," Alanna said with a laugh, "who has no room in her life for any passions at all."

"That was not what I meant, Alanna Sedai. I want to know what it *means* to be a Green sister." She was not sure Alanna would understand, because she was not certain she herself understood what she wanted to know, but Alanna nodded slowly as if she did.

"Browns seek knowledge, Blues meddle in causes, and Whites consider the questions of truth with implacable logic. We all do some of it all, of course. But to be a Green means to stand ready." A note of pride entered Alanna's voice. "In the Trolloc Wars, we were often called the Battle Ajah. All Aes Sedai helped where and when they could, but the Green Ajah alone was always with the armies, in almost every battle. We were the counter to the Dreadlords. The Battle Ajah. And now we stand ready, for the Trollocs to come south again, for Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle. We will be there. That is what it means to be a Green."

“Thank you, Aes Sedai,” Egwene said. *That is what I was? Or what I will be? Light, I wish I knew if it was real, if it had anything at all to do with here and now.*

The Amyrlin joined them, and they swept deep curtsies to her. “Are you well, Daughter?” she asked Egwene. Her eyes flicked to the corner of the papers sticking out from under the novice dress in Egwene’s hands, then back to Egwene’s face immediately. “I will know the why of what occurred tonight before I am done.”

Egwene’s cheeks reddened. “I am well, Mother.”

Alanna surprised her by asking the Amyrlin just what she had said she would.

“I never heard of such a thing,” the Amyrlin barked. “The owner doesn’t muck out with the bilge boys even if he has run the boat on a mud-flat.” She glanced at Egwene, and worry tightened her eyes. And anger. “I share your concern, Alanna. Whatever this child has done, it did not deserve that. Very well. If it will assuage your feelings, you may visit Sheriam. But it is to be strictly between you two. I’ll not have Aes Sedai held up to ridicule, even inside the Tower.”

Egwene opened her mouth to confess all and let them take the ring—*I don’t want the bloody thing, really*—but Alanna forestalled her.

“And the other, Mother?”

“Do not be ridiculous, Daughter.” The Amyrlin was angry, and sounded more so by the word. “You’d be a laughingstock inside the day, except for those who decided you were mad. And don’t think it would not follow you. Tales like that have a way of traveling. You would find stories told of the *scullion Aes Sedai* from Tear to Maradon. And that would reflect on every sister. No. If you need to rid yourself of some feeling of guilt and cannot handle it as a grown woman would, very well. I have told you that you may visit Sheriam. Accompany her tonight when you leave here. That will give you the rest of the night to decide if it was of any help. And tomorrow you can start finding out what went wrong here tonight!”

“Yes, Mother.” Alanna’s voice was perfectly neutral.

The desire to confess had died in Egwene. Alanna had shown only one brief flash of disappointment, when she realized the Amyrlin would not allow her to join Egwene in the kitchens. *She doesn’t want to be punished any more than any sensible person does. She did want an excuse to be in my* *company. Light, she couldn't have deliberately caused the* ter'angreal *to go wild; I did that. Can she be Black Ajah?*

Wrapped in thought, Egwene heard a throat cleared, then again, more roughly. Her eyes focused. The Amyrlin was staring right into her, and when she spoke, she bit off each word.

"Since you seem to be asleep standing up, child, I suggest you go to bed." For one instant her glance flashed to the nearly concealed papers in Egwene's hands. "You have much work to do tomorrow, and for many days thereafter." Her eyes held Egwene's a moment longer, and then she was striding away before any of them could curtsy.

Sheriam rounded on Alanna as soon as the Amyrlin was out of earshot. The Green Aes Sedai glowered and took it in silence. "You *are* mad, Alanna! A fool, and doubly a fool if you think I will go lightly on you just because we were novices together. Are you taken by the Dragon, to—?" Suddenly Sheriam became aware of Egwene, and the target of her anger shifted. "Did I not hear the Amyrlin Seat order you to your bed, Accepted? If you breathe a word of this, you will wish I had buried you in a field to manure the ground. And I will see you in my study in the morning, when the bell rings First and not one breath later. Now, go!"

Egwene went, her head spinning. *Is there anybody I can trust? The Amyrlin? She sent us off chasing thirteen of the Black Ajah and forgot to mention that thirteen is just the number needed to turn a woman who can channel to the Shadow against her will. Who can I trust?*

She did not want to be alone, could not stand the thought of it, and so she hurried to the Accepted's quarters, thinking that tomorrow she would be moving there herself, and immediately after knocking pushed open Nynaeve's door. She could trust her with anything. Her and Elayne.

But Nynaeve was seated in one of the two chairs, with Elayne's head buried in her lap. Elayne's shoulders shook to the sound of weeping, the softer weeping that comes after no energy is left for deeper sobs but the emotion still burns. Dampness shone on Nynaeve's cheeks, too. The Great Serpent gleaming on her hand, smoothing Elayne's hair, matched the ring on the hand Elayne used to clutch at Nynaeve's skirt.

Elayne lifted a face red and swollen from long crying, sniffing through her sobs when she saw Egwene. "I could not be that awful, Egwene. I just couldn't!"

The accident with the *ter'angreal*, Egwene's fear that someone might have read the papers Verin had given her, her suspicions of everyone in that chamber, all these had been terrible, but they had buffered her in a rough, ungentle way from what had happened inside the *ter'angreal*. They had come from outside; the other was inside. Elayne's words stripped the buffer away, and what was inside hit Egwene as if the ceiling had collapsed. Rand her husband, and Joiya her baby. Rand pinned and begging her to kill him. Rand chained to be gentled.

Before she was aware of moving, she was on her knees beside Elayne, all the tears that should have fallen earlier coming out in a flood. "I couldn't help him, Nynaeve," she sobbed. "I just left him there."

Nynaeve flinched as if struck, but the next moment her arms were around both Egwene and Elayne, hugging them, rocking them. "Hush," she crooned softly. "It eases with time. It eases, a little. One day we will make them pay our price. Hush. Hush."

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CHAPTER 24

Scouting and Discoveries

Sunlight through the carved shutters, creeping across the bed, woke Mat. For a moment, he only lay there, frowning. He had not reasoned out any plan for escaping from Tar Valon before sleep had overtaken him, but neither had he given up. Too much memory still lay covered with fog, but he would not give up.

Two serving women came bustling with hot water and a tray heavy with food, laughing and telling him how much better he looked already, and how soon he would be back on his feet if he did what the Aes Sedai told him. He answered them curtly, trying not to sound bitter. *Let them think I mean to go along.* His stomach rumbled at the smells from the tray.

When they left, he tossed aside his blanket and hopped out of bed, pausing only to stuff half a slice of ham into his mouth before pouring out water to wash and shave. Staring into the mirror above the washstand, he paused in lathering his face. He did look better.

His cheeks were still hollow, but not quite as hollow as they had been. The dark circles had vanished from under his eyes, which no longer seemed set so deep in his head. It was as if every bite he had eaten the night before had gone into putting meat on his bones. He even felt stronger.

“At this rate,” he muttered, “I will be gone before they know it.” But he was still surprised when, after shaving, he sat down and consumed every scrap of ham, turnip, and pear on the tray.

He was sure they expected him to climb back into bed once he had eaten, but instead, he dressed. Stamping his feet to settle them in his boots, he eyed his spare clothes and decided to leave them, for now. *I have to know what I’m doing, first. And if I have to leave them*. . . . He tucked the dice cups into his pouch. With those, he could get all the clothes he needed.

Opening the door, he peeked out. More doors paneled in pale, golden wood lined the hall, with colorful tapestries between, and a runner of blue carpet ran down the white-tiled floor. But there was no one out there. No guard. He tossed his cloak over one shoulder and hurried out. Now to find a way outside.

It took some little wandering, down stairs and along corridors and across open courts, before he found what he wanted, a doorway to the outside, and he saw people before then: serving women and white-clad novices hurrying about their chores, the novices running even harder than the servants; a handful of roughly dressed male servants carrying large chests and other heavy loads; Accepted in their banded dresses. Even a few Aes Sedai.

The Aes Sedai did not seem to notice him as they strode along, intent on whatever purpose, or else they gave him no more than a passing glance. His were country clothes, but well made; he did not look a vagabond, and the serving men showed that men were allowed in this part of the Tower. He suspected they might take him for another servant, and that was just as well with him, so long as no one asked him to lift anything.

He did feel some regret that none of the women he saw was Egwene or Nynaeve, or even Elayne. *She's a pretty one, even if she does have her nose in the air half the time. And she could tell me how to find Egwene and the Wisdom. I cannot go without saying goodbye. Light, I don't suppose one of them would turn me in, just because they are becoming Aes Sedai themselves? Burn me, for a fool! They'd never do that. Anyway, I will risk it.*

But once out-of-doors, under a bright morning sky with only a few drifting white clouds, he put the women from his mind for the time. He was looking across a wide, flagstoned yard with a plain stone fountain in the middle and a barracks on the other side that was made of gray stone. It looked almost like a huge boulder among the few trees growing out of rimmed holes in the flagstones close by. Guardsmen in their shirtsleeves sat in front of the long, low building, tending weapons and armor and harness. Guardsmen were what he wanted, now.

He sauntered across the yard and watched the soldiers as if he had nothing better to do. As they worked they talked and laughed among themselves like men after the harvest. Now and again one of them looked curiously at Mat as he strolled among them, but none challenged his right to be there. From time to time he asked a casual question. And finally he got the answer he sought.

“Bridge guard?” said a stocky, dark-haired man no more than five years older than Mat. His words had a heavy Illianer accent. Young he might have been, but a thin white scar crossed his left cheek, and the hands oiling his sword moved with familiarity and competence. He squinted up at Mat before returning to his task. “I do be on the bridge guard, and back there again this even. Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering what conditions were like on the other side of the river.” *I might as well find that out, too.* “Good for traveling? It can’t be muddy, unless you have had more rain than I know about.”

“Which side of the river?” the guardsman asked placidly. His eyes did not lift from the oiled rag he was running along his blade.

“Uh . . . east. The east side.”

“No mud. Whitecloaks.” The man leaned to one side to spit, but his voice did not change. “Whitecloaks do be poking their noses into every village for ten miles. They have no hurt anyone yet, but them just being there do upset the folk. Fortune prick me if I do no think they wish to provoke us, for they do look as if they would attack if they could. No good for anyone who do want to travel.”

“What about west, then?”

“The same.” The guardsman raised his eyes to Mat’s. “But you will no be crossing, lad, east or west. Your name do be Matrim Cauthon, or Fortune abandon me. Last night a sister, herself in person, did come to the bridge where I did stand guard. She did drill your features at us till each could speak them back to her. A guest, she did say, and no to be harmed. But no to be allowed out of the city, either, if you must be tied hand and foot to keep you from it.” His eyes narrowed. “Is it that you did steal something from them?” he asked doubtfully. “You do no have the look of those the sisters do guest.”

“I didn’t steal anything!” Mat said indignantly. *Burn me, I didn’t even get a chance to work around to it easy. They must* all *know me.* “I’m no thief!”

“No, it is no that I do see in your face. No thievery. But you do have the look of the fellow who did try to sell me the Horn of Valere three days gone. So he did claim it did be, all bent and battered as it did be. Do you have a Horn of Valere to sell? Or mayhap it do be the Dragon’s sword?”

Mat gave a jump at the mention of the Horn, but he managed to keep his voice level. “I was sick.” Others of the guardsmen were looking at him now. *Light, they'll all know I am not supposed to leave, now.* He forced a laugh. "The sisters Healed me." Some of the guardsmen frowned at him. Perhaps they thought other men should show more respect than to call the Aes Sedai sisters. "I guess the Aes Sedai don't want me to go before I have all my strength back." He tried willing the men, all of those watching him now, to accept that. *Just a man who was Healed. Nothing more. No reason to trouble yourself about him any further.*

The Illianer nodded. "You do have the look of sickness in your face, too. Perhaps that do be the reason. But never did I hear of so much effort to keep one sick man in the city."

"That's the reason," Mat said firmly. They were all still looking at him. "Well, I need to be going. They said I have to take walks. Lots of long walks. To build up strength, you know."

He felt their eyes following him as he left, and he scowled. He had simply meant to find out how well his description had been passed around. If only the officers among the bridge guards had had it, he might have been able to slip by. He had always been good at slipping into places unseen. And out. It was a talent you developed when your mother always suspected you were up to some mischief and you had two sisters to tell on you. *And now I've made sure half a barracks full of guardsmen will know me. Blood and bloody ashes!*

Much of the Tower grounds were gardens full of trees, leatherleaf and paperbark and elms, and he soon found himself walking along a wide, twisting graveled path. It could have led through countryside, if not for the towers visible over the treetops. And the white bulk of the Tower itself, behind him but pressing on him as if he carried it on his shoulders. If there were ways out of the Tower grounds that were not watched, this seemed the place to find them. If they existed.

A girl in novice white appeared ahead on the path, striding purposefully toward him. Wrapped in her own thoughts, she did not see him at first. When she came close enough for him to make out her big, dark eyes and the way her hair was braided, he grinned suddenly. He knew this girl—memory drifting up from shrouded depths—though he would never have expected to find her here. He had never expected to see her again at all. He grinned to himself. *Good luck to balance bad.* As he remembered, she had quite an eye for the boys.

“Else,” he called to her. “Else Grinwell. You remember me, don’t you? Mat Cauthon. A friend and I visited your father’s farm. Remember? Have you decided to become Aes Sedai, then?”

She stopped short, staring at him. “What are you doing up and out?” she said coldly.

“You know about that, do you?” He moved closer to her, but she stepped back, keeping her distance. He stopped. “It’s not catching. I was Healed, Else.” Those large, dark eyes seemed more knowing than he remembered, and not nearly so warm, but he supposed studying to be an Aes Sedai could do that. “What is the matter, Else? You look like you don’t know me.”

“I know you,” she said. Her manner was not as he remembered, either; he thought she could give Elayne lessons now. “I have . . . work to be about. Let me by.”

He grimaced. The path was broad enough for six to walk abreast without crowding. “I told you it isn’t catching.”

“Let me by!”

Muttering to himself, he stepped to one edge of the gravel. She went past him along the other side, watching to make sure he did not come closer. Once by, she quickened her steps, glancing over her shoulder at him until she was out of sight around a bend.

Wanted to make sure I didn’t follow her, he thought sourly. *First the guardsmen, and now Else. My luck is not in, today.*

He started off again, and soon heard a ferocious clatter from one side ahead, like dozens of sticks being beat together. Curious, he turned off toward it, into the trees.

A little way brought him to a large expanse of bare ground, the earth beaten hard, at least fifty paces across and nearly twice as long. At intervals around it under the trees stood wooden stands holding quarterstaffs, and practice swords made of strips of wood bound loosely together, and a few real swords and axes and spears.

Spaced across the open ground, pairs of men, most stripped to the waist, flailed at each other with more practice swords. Some moved so smoothly it almost seemed they danced with one another, flowing from stance to stance, stroke to counterstroke in continuous motion. There was nothing quickly apparent aside from skill to mark them from the others, but Mat was sure he was watching Warders.

Those who did not move so smoothly were all younger, each pair under the watchful eyes of an older man who seemed to radiate a dangerous grace even standing still. *Warders and students*, Mat decided.

He was not the only audience. Not ten paces from him, half a dozen women with ageless Aes Sedai faces and as many more in the banded white dresses of the Accepted stood watching one pair of students, bare to the waist and slick with sweat, under the guidance of a Warder shaped much like a block of stone. The Warder used a short-stemmed pipe in one hand, trailing tabac smoke, to direct his pupils.

Sitting down cross-legged under a leatherleaf, Mat rooted three large pebbles out of the ground and began to juggle them idly. He did not feel weak, exactly, but it was good to sit. If there was a way out of the Tower grounds, it would not go away while he took a short rest.

Before he had been there five minutes he knew who it was the Aes Sedai and Accepted were watching. One of the blocky Warder's pupils was a tall, lithe young man who moved like a cat. *And almost as pretty as a girl*, Mat thought wryly. Every woman was staring at the tall fellow with sparkling eyes, even the Aes Sedai.

The tall man handled his practice sword almost as deftly as the Warders, now and then earning an approving gravelly comment from his teacher. It was not that his opponent, a youth more Mat's age, with red-gold hair, was unskilled. Far from it, as much as Mat could see, though he had never claimed to know anything about swords. The golden-haired man met every lightning attack, turning it away before the bound strips could strike him, and even launched an occasional attack of his own. But the handsome fellow countered those attacks and flowed back into his own in the space of a heartbeat.

Mat shifted the pebbles to one hand, but kept them spinning in the air. He did not think he would care to face either of them. Certainly not with a sword.

“Break!” The Warder's voice sounded like rocks emptying out of a bucket. Chests heaving, the two men let their practice swords fall to their sides. Sweat matted their hair. “You can rest till I finish my pipe. But rest fast; I am almost in the dottle.”

Now that they had stopped dancing about, Mat got a good look at the youth with the red-gold hair and let the pebbles drop. *Burn me, I'll bet my whole purse that's Elayne's brother. And the other one's Galad, or I'll eat* *my boots.* On the journey from Toman Head it had seemed half of Elayne's conversation had been of Gawyn's virtues and Galad's vices. Oh, Gawyn had some vices according to Elayne, but they were small; to Mat they sounded like the sort of things no one but a sister would consider vices at all. As for Galad, once Elayne was pinned down, he sounded like what every mother said she wanted her son to be. Mat did not think he wanted to spend much time in Galad's company. Egwene blushed whenever Galad was mentioned, though she seemed to think no one noticed.

A ripple seemed to pass through the watching women when Gawyn and Galad stopped, and they appeared on the point of stepping forward almost as one. But Gawyn caught sight of Mat, said something quietly to Galad, and the two of them walked by the women. The Aes Sedai and Accepted turned to follow with their eyes. Mat scrambled to his feet as the pair approached.

"You are Mat Cauthon, are you not?" Gawyn said with a grin. "I was sure I recognized you from Egwene's description. And Elayne's. I understand you were sick. Are you better now?"

"I'm fine," Mat said. He wondered if he was supposed to call Gawyn "my Lord" or something of the sort. He had refused to call Elayne "my Lady"—not that she had demanded it, actually—and he decided he would not do her brother better.

"Did you come to the practice yard to learn the sword?" Galad asked.

Mat shook his head. "I was only out walking. I don't know much about swords. I think I'll put my trust in a good bow, or a good quarterstaff. I know how to use those."

"If you spend much time around Nynaeve," Galad said, "you'll need bow, quarterstaff, *and* sword to protect yourself. And I don't know whether that would be enough."

Gawyn looked at him wonderingly. "Galad, you just very nearly made a joke."

"I do have a sense of humor, Gawyn," Galad said with a frown. "You only think I do not because I do not care to mock people."

With a shake of his head, Gawyn turned back to Mat. "You should learn something of the sword. Everyone can do with that sort of knowledge these days. Your friend—Rand al'Thor—carried a most unusual sword. What do you hear of him?"

“I haven’t seen Rand in a long time,” Mat said quickly. Just for a moment, when he had mentioned Rand, Gawyn’s look had gained intensity. *Light, does* he *know about Rand? He couldn’t. If he did, he’d be denouncing me for a Darkfriend just for being Rand’s friend. But he knows something.* “Swords aren’t the be-all and end-all, you know. I could do fairly well against either of you, I think, if you had a sword and I had my quarterstaff.”

Gawyn’s cough was obviously meant to swallow a laugh. Much too politely, he said, “You must be very good.” Galad’s face was frankly disbelieving.

Perhaps it was that they both clearly thought he was making a wild boast. Perhaps it was because he had mishandled questioning the guardsman. Perhaps it was because Else, who had such an eye for the boys, wanted nothing to do with him, and all those women were staring at Galad like cats watching a jug of cream. Aes Sedai and Accepted or not, they were still women. All these explanations ran through Mat’s head, but he rejected them angrily, especially the last. He was going to do it because it would be fun. And it might earn some coin. His luck would not even have to be back.

“I will wager,” he said, “two silver marks to two from each of you that I can beat both of you at once, just the way I said. You can’t have fairer odds than that. There are two of you, and one of me, so two to one are fair odds.” He almost laughed aloud at the consternation on their faces.

“Mat,” Gawyn said, “there’s no need to make wagers. You have been sick. Perhaps we will try this some time when you are stronger.”

“It would be far from a fair wager,” Galad said. “I’ll not take your wager, now or later. You are from the same village as Egwene, are you not? I . . . I would not have her angry with me.”

“What does she have to do with it? Thump me once with one of your swords, and I will hand over a silver mark to each of you. If I thump you till you quit, you give me two each. Don’t you think you can do it?”

“This is ridiculous,” Galad said. “You would have no chance against one trained swordsman, let alone two. I’ll not take such advantage.”

“Do you think that?” asked a gravel voice. The blocky Warder joined them, thick black eyebrows pulled down in a scowl. “You think you two are good enough with your swords to take a boy with a stick?”

“It would not be fair, Hammar Gaidin,” Galad said.

“He has been sick,” Gawyn added. “There is no need for this.”

“To the yard,” Hammar grated with a jerk of his head back over his shoulder. Galad and Gawyn gave Mat regretful looks, then obeyed. The Warder eyed Mat up and down doubtfully. “Are you sure you’re up to this, lad? Now I take a close look at you, you ought to be in a sickbed.”

“I am already out of one,” Mat said, “and I’m up to it. I have to be. I don’t want to lose my two marks.”

Hammar’s heavy brows rose in surprise. “You mean to hold to that wager, lad?”

“I need the money.” Mat laughed.

His laughter cut off abruptly as he turned toward the nearest stand that held quarterstaffs and his knees almost buckled. He stiffened them so quickly he thought anyone who noticed would think he had just stumbled. At the stand he took his time choosing out a staff, nearly two inches thick and almost a foot taller than he was. *I have to win this. I opened my fool mouth, and now I have to win. I can’t afford to lose those two marks. Without those to build on, it will take forever to win the money I need.*

When he turned back, the quarterstaff in both hands before him, Gawyn and Galad were already waiting out where they had been practicing. *I have to win.* “Luck,” he muttered. “Time to toss the dice.”

Hammar gave him an odd look. “You speak the Old Tongue, lad?”

Mat stared back at him for a moment, not speaking. He felt cold to the bone. With an effort, he made his feet start out onto the practice yard. “Remember the wager,” he said loudly. “Two silver marks from each of you against two from me.”

A buzz rose from the Accepted as they realized what was happening. The Aes Sedai watched in silence. Disapproving silence.

Gawyn and Galad split apart, one to either side of him, keeping their distance, neither with his sword more than half-raised.

“No wager,” Gawyn said. “There’s no wager.”

At the same time, Galad said, “I’ll not take your money like this.”

“I mean to take yours,” Mat said.

“Done!” Hammar roared. “If they have not the nerve to cover your wager, lad, I’ll pay the score myself.”

“Very well,” Gawyn said. “If you insist on it—done!”

Galad hesitated a moment more before growling, “Done, then. Let us put an end to this farce.”

The moment's warning was all Mat needed. As Galad rushed at him, he slid his hands along the quarterstaff and pivoted. The end of the staff thudded into the tall man's ribs, bringing a grunt and a stumble. Mat let the staff bounce off Galad and spun, carrying it on around just as Gawyn came within range. The staff dipped, darted under Gawyn's practice sword, and clipped his ankle out from under him. As Gawyn fell, Mat completed the spin in time to catch Galad across his upraised wrist, sending his practice sword flying. As if his wrist did not pain him at all, Galad threw himself into a smooth, rolling dive and came up with his sword in both hands.

Ignoring him for the moment, Mat half turned, twisting his wrists to whip the length of the staff back beside him. Gawyn, just starting to rise, took the blow on the side of his head with a loud thump only partly softened by the padding of hair. He went down in a heap.

Mat was only vaguely aware of an Aes Sedai rushing out to tend Elayne's fallen brother. *I hope he's all right. He should be. I've hit myself harder than that falling off a fence.* He still had Galad to deal with, and from the way Galad was poised on the balls of his feet, sword raised precisely, he had begun to take Mat seriously.

Mat's legs chose that moment to tremble. *Light, I can't weaken now.* But he could feel it creeping back in, the wobbly feeling, the hunger as if he had not eaten for days. *If I wait for him to come to me, I'll fall on my face.* It was hard to keep his knees straight as he started forward. *Luck, stay with me.*

From the first blow, he knew that luck, or skill, or whatever had brought him this far, was still there. Galad managed to turn that one with a sharp clack, and the next, and the next, and the next, but strain stiffened his face. That smooth swordsman, almost as good as the Warders, fought with every ounce of his skill to keep Mat's staff from him. He did not attack; it was all he could do to defend. He moved continually to the side, trying not to be forced back, and Mat pressed him, staff a blur. And Galad stepped back, stepped back again, wooden blade a thin shield against the quarterstaff.

Hunger gnawed at Mat as if he had swallowed weasels. Sweat rolled down into his eyes, and his strength began to fade as if it leached out with the sweat. *Not yet. I can't fall yet. I have to win. Now.* With a roar, he threw all his reserves into one last surge.

The quarterstaff flickered past Galad's sword and in quick succession struck knee, wrist, and ribs and finally thrust into Galad's stomach like a spear. With a groan, Galad folded over, fighting not to fall. The staff quivered in Mat's hands, on the point of a final crushing thrust to the throat. Galad sank to the ground.

Mat almost dropped the quarterstaff when he realized what he had been about to do. *Win, not kill. Light, what was I thinking?* Reflexively he grounded the butt of the staff, and as soon he did, he had to clutch at it to hold himself erect. Hunger hollowed him like a knife reaming marrow from a bone. Suddenly he realized that not only the Aes Sedai and Accepted were watching. All practice, all learning, had stopped. Warders and students alike stood watching him.

Hammar moved to stand beside Galad, still groaning on the ground and trying to push himself up. The Warder raised his voice to shout, "Who was the greatest blademaster of all time?"

From the throats of dozens of students came a massed bellow. "Jearom, Gaidin!"

"Yes!" Hammar shouted, turning to make sure all heard. "During his lifetime, Jearom fought over ten thousand times, in battle and single combat. He was defeated once. By a farmer with a quarterstaff! Remember that. Remember what you just saw." He lowered his eyes to Galad, and lowered his voice as well. "If you cannot get up by now, lad, it is finished." He raised a hand, and the Aes Sedai and Accepted rushed to surround Galad.

Mat slid down the staff to his knees. None of the Aes Sedai even glanced his way. One of the Accepted did, a plump girl he might have liked to ask for a dance if she were not going to be an Aes Sedai. She frowned at him, sniffed, and turned back to peering at what the Aes Sedai were doing around Galad.

Gawyn was on his feet, Mat noted with relief. He pulled himself up as Gawyn came over. *Mustn't let them know. I'll never get out of here if they decide to nurse me from sunup to sunup.* Blood darkened the red-gold hair on the side of Gawyn's head, but there was neither cut nor bruise apparent.

He pushed two silver marks into Mat's hand with a dry "I think I will listen next time." He noticed Mat's glance, touched his head. "They Healed it, but it was not bad. Elayne has given me worse more than once. You are good with that."

"Not as good as my da. He's won the quarterstaff at Bel Tine every year as long as I can remember, except once or twice when Rand's da did." That interested look came back into Gawyn's eyes, and Mat wished he had never mentioned Tam al'Thor. The Aes Sedai and the Accepted were all still clustered around Galad. "I . . . I must have hurt him badly. I did not mean to do that."

Gawyn glanced that way—there was nothing to be seen but two rings of women's backs, Accepted's white dresses making the outer ring as they peered over the shoulders of crouching Aes Sedai—and laughed. "You did not kill him—I heard him groaning—so he should be on his feet by now, but they are not going to let this chance pass, now they have their hands on him. Light, four of them are Green Ajah!" Mat gave him a confused look—*Green Ajah? What does that have to do with anything?*—and Gawyn shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Just rest assured that the worst Galad has to worry about is finding himself Warder to a Green Aes Sedai before his head clears." He laughed. "No, they would not do that. But I will wager you those two marks of mine in your hand that some of them wish they could."

"Not your marks," Mat said, shoving them in his coat pocket, "mine." The explanation had made little sense to him. Except that Galad was well. All he knew of what passed between Warders and Aes Sedai were the pieces he remembered of Lan and Moiraine, and there was nothing there like what Gawyn seemed to be suggesting. "Do you think they'd mind if I collected my wager from him?"

"They very likely would," Hammar said dryly as he joined them. "You are not very popular with those particular Aes Sedai right now." He snorted. "You'd think even Green Aes Sedai would be better than girls just loose from their mother's apron strings. He isn't *that* good-looking."

"He is not," Mat agreed.

Gawyn grinned at both of them, until Hammar glared at him. "Here," the Warder said, pushing two more silver coins into Mat's hand. "I will collect from Galad later. Where are you from, lad?"

"Manetheren." Mat froze when he heard the name come out of his mouth. "I mean, I'm from the Two Rivers. I have heard too many old stories." They just looked at him without saying anything. "I. . . . I think I will go back and see if I can find something to eat." Not even the Midmorning bell had rung yet, but they nodded as if it made sense.

He kept the quarterstaff—no one had told him to put it back—and walked slowly until the trees hid him from the practice yard. When they did, he leaned on the staff as though it were the only thing holding him up. He was not sure it was not.

He thought that if he parted his coat, he would see a hole where his stomach should have been, a hole growing larger as it pulled the rest of him in. But he hardly thought of hunger. He kept hearing voices in his head. *You speak the Old Tongue, lad? Manetheren.* It made him shiver. *Light help me, I keep digging myself deeper. I have to get out of here. But how?* He hobbled back toward the Tower proper like an old, old man. *How?*

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CHAPTER 25

Questions

Egwene lay across Nynaeve's bed, chin in her hands, watching Nynaeve pace back and forth. Elayne sprawled in front of the fireplace, which was still full of the ashes of last night's fire. Yet again Elayne was studying the list of names Verin had produced, patiently reading every word one more time. The other pages, the list of *ter'angreal,* sat on the table; after one shocked reading they had not discussed that one further, though they had talked of everything else. And argued, too.

Egwene stifled a yawn. It was only the middle of the morning, but none of them had gotten much sleep. They had had to be up early. For the kitchens, and breakfast. For other things that she refused to think about. The little sleep she herself had managed had been filled with unpleasant dreams. *Maybe Anaiya could help me understand them, those that need understanding, but. . . . But what if she is Black Ajah?* After staring at every woman in that chamber last night, wondering which was Black Ajah, she was finding trust for anyone but her two companions hard to come by. But she did wish she had some way of interpreting those dreams.

The nightmares about what had happened inside the *ter'angreal* last night were easy enough to understand, though they had made her wake up weeping. She had dreamed of the Seanchan, too, of women in dresses with lightning bolts woven on their breasts, collaring a long line of women who wore Great Serpent rings, forcing them to call lightning against the White Tower. That had started her awake in a cold sweat, but that had to be just a nightmare, too. And the dream about Whitecloaks binding her father's hands. A nightmare brought on by homesickness, she supposed. But the others. . . .

She glanced at the other two women again. Elayne was still reading. Nynaeve still paced with that steady tread.

There had been a dream of Rand, reaching for a sword that seemed to be made of crystal, never seeing the fine net dropping over him. And one of him kneeling in a chamber where a parched wind blew dust across the floor, and creatures like the one on the Dragon banner, but much smaller, floated on that wind, and settled into his skin. There had been a dream of him walking down into a great hole in a black mountain, a hole filled with a reddish glare as from vast fires below, and even a dream of him confronting Seanchan.

About that last, she was uncertain, but she knew the others had to mean something. Back when she had been sure she could trust Anaiya, back before she had left the Tower, before she learned the reality of the Black Ajah, a little cautious questioning of the Aes Sedai—done, oh, so carefully, so Anaiya would think it no more than the curiosity she showed about other things—had revealed that a Dreamer's dreams about *ta'veren* were almost always significant, and the more strongly *ta'veren,* the more "almost always" became "certainly."

But Mat and Perrin were *ta'veren,* too, and she had also dreamed of them. Odd dreams, even more difficult to understand than the dreams of Rand. Perrin with a falcon on his shoulder, and Perrin with a hawk. Only the hawk held a leash in her talons—Egwene was somehow convinced both hawk and falcon were female—and the hawk was trying to fasten it around Perrin's neck. That made her shiver even now; she did not like dreams about leashes. And that dream of Perrin—with a beard!—leading a huge pack of wolves that stretched as far as the eye could see. Those about Mat had been even nastier. Mat, placing his own left eye on a balance scale. Mat, hanging by his neck from a tree limb. There had been a dream of Mat and Seanchan, too, but she was willing to dismiss that as a nightmare. It had to have been just a nightmare. Just like the one about Mat speaking the Old Tongue. That had to come from what she had heard during his Healing.

She sighed, and the sigh turned into another yawn. She and the others had gone to his room after breakfast to see how he was, but he had not been there.

He is probably well enough to go dancing. Light, now I will probably dream about him dancing with Seanchan! No more dreams, she told herself firmly. *Not now. I will think about them when I am not so tired.* She thought of the kitchens, of the midday meal soon to come, and then supper, and breakfast again tomorrow, and pots and cleaning and scrubbing going on forever. *If I am ever not tired again.* Shifting her position on the bed, she looked at her friends again. Elayne still had her eyes on the list of names.

Nynaeve's steps had slowed. *Any moment now, Nynaeve will say it again. Any moment.*

Nynaeve came to a halt, staring down at Elayne. "Put those away. We have been over them twenty times, and there isn't a word that helps. Verin gave us rubbish. The question is, was it all she had, or did she give us rubbish on purpose?"

As expected. Maybe half an hour till she says it again. Egwene frowned down at her hands, glad she could not see them clearly. The Great Serpent ring looked—out of place—on hands all wrinkled from long immersion in hot, soapy water.

"Knowing their names helps," Elayne said, still reading. "Knowing what they look like helps."

"You know very well what I mean," Nynaeve snapped.

Egwene sighed and folded her arms in front of her, rested her chin on them. When she had come out of Sheriam's study that morning, with the sun still not even a glint on the horizon, Nynaeve had been waiting with a candle in the cold, dark hall. She had not been seeing very clearly, but she was sure Nynaeve had looked ready to chew stone. And knowing chewing stones would not change anything in the next few minutes. That was why she was so irritable. *She's as touchy about her pride as any man I ever met. But she should not take it out on Elayne and me. Light, if Elayne can stand it, she should be able to. She isn't the Wisdom anymore.*

Elayne hardly appeared to notice whether Nynaeve was irritable or not. She frowned into the distance thoughtfully. "Liandrin was the only Red. All the other Ajahs lost two each."

"Oh, do be quiet, child," Nynaeve said.

Elayne wiggled her left hand to display her Great Serpent ring, gave Nynaeve a meaningful look, and went right on. "No two were born in the same city, and no more than two in any one country. Amico Nagoyin was the youngest, some fifteen years older than Egwene and I. Joiya Byir could be our great-grandmother's great-grandmother."

Egwene did not like it that one of the Black Ajah shared her daughter's name. *Fool girl! People sometimes have the same name, and you never had a daughter. It wasn't real!*

"And what does that tell us?" Nynaeve's voice was too calm; she was ready to explode like a wagon full of fireworks. "What secrets have you found in it that I missed? I am getting old and blind, after all!"

“It tells us it is all too neat,” Elayne said calmly. “What chance that thirteen women chosen solely because they were Darkfriends would be so neatly arrayed across age, across nations, across Ajahs? Shouldn’t there be perhaps three Reds, or four born in Cairhien, or just two the same age, if it was all chance? They had women to choose from or they could not have chosen so random a pattern. There are still Black Ajah in the Tower, or elsewhere we don’t know about. It must mean that.”

Nynaeve gave her braid one ferocious tug. “Light! I think you may be right. You did find secrets I couldn’t. Light, I was hoping they all went with Liandrin.”

“We do not even know that she is their leader,” Elayne said. “She could have been ordered to . . . to *dispose* of us.” Her mouth twisted. “I am afraid I can only think of one reason for them to go to such lengths to spread everything out so, to avoid any pattern except a lack of pattern. I think it means there *is* a pattern of some kind to the Black Ajah.”

“If there’s a pattern,” Nynaeve said firmly, “we will find it. Elayne, if watching your mother run her court taught you to think like this, I’m glad you watched closely.” Elayne’s answering smile made a dimple in her cheek.

Egwene eyed the older woman carefully. It seemed Nynaeve was finally ready to stop being a bear with a sore tooth. She raised her head. “Unless they want us to think they’re hiding a pattern, so we will waste our time hunting for it when there isn’t one. I am not saying there isn’t; I am only saying we do not know yet. Let’s look for it, but I think we ought to look at other things, too, don’t you?”

“So you finally decided to rouse,” Nynaeve said. “I thought you had gone to sleep.” But she was still smiling.

“She is right,” Elayne said disgustedly. “I have built a bridge out of straw. Worse than straw. Wishes. Maybe you are right, too, Nynaeve. What use is this—this rubbish?” She snatched one paper out of the stack in front of her. “Rianna has black hair with a white streak above her left ear. If I am close enough to see that, it’s closer than I want to be.” She grabbed another page. “Chesmal Emry is one of the most talented Healers anyone has seen in years. Light, could you imagine being Healed by one of the Black Ajah?” A third sheet. “Marillin Gemalphin is fond of cats and goes out of her way to help injured animals. Cats! Paah!” She scrabbled all the pages together, crumpling them in her fists. “It *is* useless rubbish.”

Nynaeve knelt beside her and gently pried her hands from around the papers. "Perhaps, and perhaps not." She smoothed the pages carefully on her breast. "You found in them something for us to look for. Perhaps we will find more, if we are persistent. And there is the other list." Both her eyes and Elayne's darted to Egwene, brown and blue alike frowning worriedly.

Egwene avoided looking at the table where the other sheets lay. She did not want to think about them, but she could not avoid it. The list of *ter'angreal* had etched itself into her mind.

Item. A rod of clear crystal, smooth and perfectly clear, one foot long and one inch in diameter. Use unknown. Last study made by Corianin Nedeal. Item. A figurine of an unclothed woman in alabaster, one hand tall. Use unknown. Last study made by Corianin Nedeal. Item. A disc, apparently of simple iron yet untouched by rust, three inches in diameter, finely engraved on both sides with a tight spiral. Use unknown. Last study made by Corianin Nedeal. Item. Too many items, and more than half the "use unknowns" last studied by Corianin Nedeal. Thirteen of them, to be exact.

Egwene shivered. *It's getting so I do not even like to think of that number.*

The knowns on the list were fewer, not all of any apparent real use, but hardly more comforting, as she saw it. A wooden carving of a hedgehog, no bigger than the last joint of a man's thumb. Such a simple thing, and surely harmless. Any woman who tried to channel through it went to sleep. Half a day of peaceful, dreamless sleep, but it was too close not to make her skin crawl. Three more had to do with sleep in some way. It was almost a relief to read of a fluted rod of black stone, a full pace in length, that produced balefire, with the notation DANGEROUS AND ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTROL writ so strong in Verin's hand that it tore the paper in two places. Egwene still had no idea what balefire was, but though it surely sounded dangerous if anything ever did, it just as surely had nothing to do Corianin Nedeal or dreams.

Nynaeve carried the smoothed-out pages to the table and set them down. She hesitated before spreading the others out and running her finger down one page, then the next. "Here's one Mat would enjoy," she said in a voice much too light and airy. "Item. A carved cluster of six spotted dice, joined at the corners, less than two inches across. Use unknown, save that channeling through it seems to suspend chance in some way, or twist it." She began to read aloud. " 'Tossed coins presented the same face every time, and in one test landed balanced on edge one hundred times in a row. One thousand tosses of the dice produced five crowns one thousand times.' " She gave a forced laugh. "Mat would love that."

Egwene sighed and got to her feet, walked stiffly to the fireplace. Elayne scrambled up, watching as silently as Nynaeve. Pushing her sleeve as far up her arm as it would go, Egwene reached carefully up the chimney. Her fingers touched wool on the smoke shelf, and she pulled out a wadded, singed stocking with a hard lump in the toe. She brushed a smear of soot from her arm, then took the stocking to the table and shook it out. The twisted ring of striped, flecked stone spun across the tabletop and fell flat atop a page of the *ter'angreal* list. For a few moments they just stared at it.

"Perhaps," Nynaeve said finally, "Verin simply missed the fact that so many of them were last studied by Corianin." She did not sound as if she really believed it.

Elayne nodded, but doubtfully. "I saw her walking in the rain once, soaking wet, and took a cloak to her. She was so wrapped up in whatever she was thinking, I do not believe she knew it was raining until I put the cloak around her shoulders. She could have missed it."

"Maybe," Egwene said. "If she did not, she had to know I'd notice as soon as I read the list. I do not know. Sometimes I think Verin notices more than she lets on. I just do not know."

"So there's Verin to suspect," Elayne sighed. "If she is Black Ajah, then they know exactly what we are doing. And Alanna." She gave Egwene an uncertain, sidelong look.

Egwene had told them everything. Except what happened inside the *ter'angreal* during her testing; she could not bring herself to talk about that, any more than Nynaeve or Elayne could tell of their testings. Everything that happened in the testing chamber, what Sheriam had said about the terrible weakness conferred by the ability to channel, every word Verin had said, whether it seemed important or not. The one part they had had trouble accepting was Alanna; Aes Sedai just did not do things like that. No one in her right mind did anything like that, but Aes Sedai least of all.

Egwene glowered at them, almost hearing them say it. "Aes Sedai are not supposed to lie, either, but Verin and the Mother seem awfully close with what they tell us. There are not *supposed* to be Black Ajah."

"I like Alanna." Nynaeve tugged her braid, then shrugged. "Oh, very well. Perha—That is, she did behave oddly."

"Thank you," Egwene said, and Nynaeve gave her an acknowledging nod as if she had heard no sarcasm.

"In any case, the Amyrlin knows of it, and she can keep an eye on Alanna far more easily than we can."

"What about Elaida and Sheriam?" Egwene asked.

"I have never been able to like Elaida," Elayne said, "but I cannot truly believe she is Black Ajah. And Sheriam? It's impossible."

Nynaeve snorted. "It should be impossible for any of them. When we do find them, there is nothing says they'll all be women we do not like. But I don't mean to put suspicion—not this kind of suspicion!—on any woman. We need more to go on than that they might have seen something they shouldn't." Egwene nodded agreement as quickly as Elayne, and Nynaeve went on: "We will tell the Amyrlin that much, and put no more weight to it than it deserves. If she ever looks in on us as she said she would. If you are with us when she comes, Elayne, remember she does not know about you."

"I am not likely to forget it," Elayne said fervently. "But we should have some other way to get word to her. My mother would have planned it better."

"Not if she could not trust her messengers," Nynaeve said. "We will wait. Unless you two think one of us should have a talk with Verin? No one would think that remarkable."

Elayne hesitated, then gave her head a small shake. Egwene was quicker and more vigorous with hers; slip of the mind or not, Verin had left out too much to be trusted.

"Good." Nynaeve sounded more than satisfied. "I am just as pleased we cannot talk to the Amyrlin when we choose. This way we make our own decisions, act when and as we decide, without her directing our every step." Her hand ran down the pages listing stolen *ter'angreal* as if she were reading it again, then closed on the striped stone ring. "And the first decision concerns this. It's the first thing we have seen that has any real connection to Liandrin and the others." She frowned at the ring, then took a deep breath. "I am going to sleep with it tonight."

Egwene did not hesitate before taking the ring out of Nynaeve's hand. She wanted to hesitate—she wanted to keep her hands by her sides—but she did not, and she was pleased. "I am the one they say might be a

Dreamer. I do not know whether that gives me any advantage, but Verin said it's dangerous using this. Whichever of us uses it, she needs any advantage she can find."

Nynaeve gripped her braid and opened her mouth as if to protest. When she finally spoke, though, it was to say, "Are you sure, Egwene? We do not even know if you *are* a Dreamer, and I can channel more strongly than you. I still think I—" Egwene cut her off.

"You can channel more strongly if you are angry. Can you be sure you'll be angry in a dream? Will you have time to become angry before you need to channel? Light, we don't even know that anyone can channel in a dream. If one of us has to do it—and you are right; it is the only connection we have—it should be me. Maybe I really am a Dreamer. Besides, Verin did give it to me."

Nynaeve looked as if she wanted to argue, but at last she gave a grudging nod. "Very well. But Elayne and I will be there. I do not know what we can do, but if anything goes wrong, perhaps we can wake you up, or. . . . We will be there." Elayne nodded, too.

Now that she had their agreement, Egwene felt a queasiness in the pit of her stomach. *I talked them into it. I wish I did not want them to talk me out of it.* She became aware of a woman standing in the doorway, a woman in novice white, with her hair in long braids.

"Did no one ever teach you to knock, Else?" Nynaeve said.

Egwene hid the stone ring inside her fist. She had the strangest feeling that Else had been staring at it.

"I have a message for you," Else said calmly. Her eyes studied the table, with all the papers scattered on it, then the three women around it. "From the Amyrlin."

Egwene exchanged wondering looks with Nynaeve and Elayne.

"Well, what is it?" Nynaeve demanded.

Else arched an eyebrow in amusement. "The belongings left behind by Liandrin and the others were put in the third storeroom on the right from the main stairs in the second basement under the library." She glanced at the papers on the table again and left, neither hurrying nor moving slowly.

Egwene felt as if she could not breathe. *We're afraid to trust anybody, and the Amyrlin decides to trust Else Grinwell of all women?*

"That fool girl cannot be trusted not to blab to anyone who'll listen!" Nynaeve started for the door.

Egwene grabbed up her skirts and darted past her at a run. Her shoes skidded on the tiles of the gallery, but she caught a glimpse of white vanishing down the nearest ramp and dashed after it. *She must be running, too, to be so far ahead already. Why is she running?* The flash of white was already disappearing down another ramp. Egwene followed.

A woman turned to face her at the foot of the ramp, and Egwene stopped in confusion. Whoever she was, this was certainly not Else. All in silver and white silk, she sparked feelings Egwene had never had before. She was taller, more beautiful by far, and the look in her black eyes made Egwene feel small, scrawny, and none too clean. *She can probably channel more of the Power than I can, too. Light, she is probably smarter than all three of us put together on top of it. It isn't fair for one woman to*—Abruptly she realized the way her thoughts were going. Her cheeks reddened, and she gave herself a shake. She had never felt—less—than any other woman before, and she was not about to start now.

"Bold," the woman said. "You are bold to go running about so, alone, where so many murders have been done." She sounded almost pleased.

Egwene drew herself up and straightened her dress hurriedly, hoping the other woman would not notice, knowing she did, wishing the woman had not seen her running like a child. *Stop that!* "Pardon, but I am looking for a novice who came this way, I think. She has large, dark eyes and dark hair in braids. She's plump, and pretty in a way. Did you see which way she went?"

The tall woman looked her up and down in an amused way. Egwene could not be sure, but she thought the woman might have glanced a moment at the clenched fist by her side, where she still held the stone ring. "I do not think you will catch up to her. I saw her, and she was running quite fast. I suspect she is far away from here by now."

"Aes Sedai," Egwene began, but she was given no chance to ask which way Else had gone. Something that might have been anger, or annoyance, flashed through those black eyes.

"I have taken up enough time with you for now. I have more important matters to see to. Leave me." She gestured back the way Egwene had come.

So strong was the command in her voice that Egwene turned and was three steps up the ramp before she realized what she was doing. Bristling, she spun back. *Aes Sedai or no, I*—

The gallery was empty.

Frowning, she dismissed the nearest doors—no one lived in those rooms, except possibly mice—and ran down the ramp, peered both ways, followed the curve of the gallery with her eyes all the way around. She even peered over the rail, down into the small Garden of the Accepted, and studied the other galleries, higher as well as lower. She saw two Accepted in their banded dresses, one Faolain and the other a woman she knew by sight if not name. But there was no woman in silver and white anywhere.

* * *

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CHAPTER 26

Behind a Lock

Shaking her head, Egwene walked back to the doors she had dismissed. *She had to go somewhere.* Inside the first, the few furnishings were shapeless mounds under dusty cloths, and the air seemed stale, as if the door had not been opened in some time. She grimaced; there *were* mouse tracks in the dust on the floor. But no others. Two more doors, opened hastily, showed the same thing. It was no surprise. There were many more empty rooms than occupied in the Accepted's galleries.

When she pulled her head out of the third room, Nynaeve and Elayne were coming down the ramp behind her with no particular haste.

"Is she hiding?" Nynaeve asked in surprise. "In there?"

"I lost her." Egwene peered both ways along the curving gallery again. *Where did she go?* She did not mean Else.

"If I had thought Else could outrun you," Elayne said with a smile, "I'd have chased her, too, but she has always looked too plump for running to me." Her smile was worried, though.

"We will have to find her later," Nynaeve said, "and make sure she knows to keep her mouth shut. How could the Amyrlin trust that girl?"

"I thought I was right on top of her," Egwene said slowly, "but it was someone else. Nynaeve, I turned my back for a moment, and she was gone. Not Else—I never even saw her!—the woman I thought was Else at first. She was just—gone, and I don't know where."

Elayne's breath caught. "One of the Soulless?" She looked around hastily, but the gallery was still empty except for the three of them.

"Not her," Egwene said firmly. "She—" *I am not going to tell them she made me feel six years old, with a torn dress, a dirty face, and a runny nose.* "She was no Gray Man. She was tall and striking, with black eyes and black hair. You'd notice her in a crowd of a thousand. I have never seen her before, but I think she is Aes Sedai. She must be."

Nynaeve waited, as though for more, then said impatiently, "If you see her again, point her out to me. If you think there's cause. We've no time to stand here talking. I mean to see what is in that storeroom before Else has a chance to tell the wrong person about it. Maybe they were careless. Let's not give them a chance to correct it, if they were."

As she fell in beside Nynaeve, with Elayne on the other side, Egwene realized she still had the stone ring—*Corianin Nedeal's* ter'angreal—clutched in her fist. Reluctantly, she tucked it into her pouch and pulled the drawstrings tight. *As long as I don't go to sleep with the bloody—But that's what I am planning, isn't it?*

But that was for tonight, and no use worrying about it now. As they made their way through the Tower, she kept an eye out for the woman in silver and white. She was not sure why she was relieved not to see her. *I am a grown woman, and quite capable, thank you.* Still, she was just as glad that no one they encountered looked even remotely like her. The more she thought of the woman, the more she felt there was something—wrong—about her. *Light, I am starting to see the Black Ajah under my bed. Only, maybe they* are *under the bed.*

The library stood a little apart from the tall, thick shaft of the White Tower proper, its pale stone heavily streaked with blue, and it looked much like crashing waves frozen at their climax. Those waves loomed as large as a palace in the morning light, and Egwene knew they certainly contained as many rooms as one, but all those rooms—those below the odd corridors in the upper levels, where Verin had her chambers—were filled with shelves, and the shelves filled with books, manuscripts, papers, scrolls, maps, and charts, collected from every nation over the course of three thousand years. Not even the great libraries in Tear and Cairhien held so many.

The librarians—Brown sisters all—guarded those shelves, and guarded the doors as closely, to make sure not a scrap of paper left unless they knew who took it and why. But it was not to one of the guarded entrances that Nynaeve led Egwene and Elayne.

Around the foundations of the library, lying flat to the ground in the shade of tall pecan trees, were other doors, both large and small. Laborers sometimes needed access to the storerooms beneath, and the librarians did not approve of sweating men tracking through their preserve. Nynaeve pulled up one of those, no bigger than the front door of a farmhouse, and motioned the others down a steep flight of stairs descending into darkness. When she let it down behind them, all light vanished.

Egwene opened herself to *saidar*—it came so smoothly that she barely realized what she was doing—and channeled a trickle of the Power that flooded through her. For a moment the mere feel of that rush surging within her threatened to overwhelm other sensations. A small ball of bluish-white light appeared, balanced in the air above her hand. She took a deep breath and reminded herself of why she was walking stiffly. It was a link to the rest of the world. The feel of her linen shift against her skin returned, of woolen stockings, and her dress. With a small pang of regret, she banished the desire to pull in more, to let *saidar* absorb her.

Elayne made a glowing sphere for herself at the same time, and the pair provided more light than two lanterns would have. “It feels so—wonderful, doesn’t it?” she murmured.

“Be careful,” Egwene said.

“I am.” Elayne sighed. “It just feels. . . . I will be careful.”

“This way,” Nynaeve told them sharply and brushed by to lead them down. She did not go too far ahead. She was not angry, and had to use the light the other two provided.

The dusty side corridor by which they had entered, lined with wooden doors set in gray stone walls, took nearly a hundred paces to reach the much wider main hall that ran the length of the library. Their lights showed footprints overlaying footprints in the dust, most from the large boots men would wear and most themselves faded by dust. The ceiling was higher here, and some of the doors nearly large enough for a barn. The main stairs at the end, half the width of the hall, were where large things were brought down. Another flight beside them led deeper. Nynaeve took it without a pause.

Egwene followed quickly. The bluish light washed out Elayne’s face, but Egwene thought it still looked paler than it should. *We could scream our lungs out down here, and no one would hear a whimper.*

She felt a lightning bolt form, or the potential for one, and nearly stumbled. She had never before channeled two flows at once; it did not seem difficult at all.

The main hall of the second basement was much like the first level, wide and dusty but with a lower ceiling. Nynaeve hurried to the third door on the right and stopped.

The door was not large, but its rough wooden planks somehow gave an impression of thickness. A round iron lock hung from a length of stout chain that was drawn tight through two thick staples, one in the door, the other cemented into the wall. Lock and chain alike had the look of newness; there was almost no dust on them.

"A lock!" Nynaeve jerked at it; the chain had no give, and neither did the lock. "Did either of you see a lock anywhere else?" She pulled it again, then flung it against the door hard enough to bounce. The bang echoed down the hall. "I did not see one other locked door!" She pounded a fist on the rough wood. "Not one!"

"Calm yourself," Elayne said. "There is no need to throw a tantrum. I could open the lock myself, if I could see how the inside of it works. We will open it some way."

"I do not want to calm myself," Nynaeve snapped. "I want to be furious! I want . . . !"

Letting the rest of the tirade fade from her awareness, Egwene touched the chain. She had learned more things than how to make lightning bolts since leaving Tar Valon. One was an affinity for metal. That came from Earth, one of the Five Powers few women had much strength in—the other was Fire—but she had it, and she could feel the chain, feel *inside* the chain, feel the tiniest bits of the cold metal, the patterns they made. The Power within her quivered in time to the vibrations of those patterns.

"Move out of my way, Egwene."

She looked around and saw Nynaeve wrapped in the glow of *saidar* and holding a prybar so close in color to the blue-white of the light that it was nearly invisible. Nynaeve frowned at the chain, muttered something about leverage, and the prybar was suddenly twice as long.

"Move, Egwene."

Egwene moved.

Thrusting the end of the prybar through the chain, Nynaeve braced it, then heaved with all her strength. The chain snapped like thread, Nynaeve gasped and stumbled halfway across the hall in surprise, and the prybar clattered to the floor. Straightening, Nynaeve stared from the bar to the chain in amazement. The prybar vanished.

"I think I did something to the chain," Egwene said. *And I wish I knew what.*

"You could have said something," Nynaeve muttered. She pulled the rest of the chain from the staples and threw open the door. "Well? Are you going to stand there all day?"

The dusty room inside was perhaps ten paces square, but it held only a heap of large bags made of heavy brown cloth, each stuffed full, tagged, and sealed with the Flame of Tar Valon. Egwene did not have to count them to know there were thirteen.

She moved her ball of light to the wall and fastened it there; she was not certain how she did it, but when she took her hand away, the light remained. *I keep learning how to do things without knowing what they are*, she thought nervously.

Elayne frowned at her as if considering, then hung her light on the wall, too. Watching, Egwene thought she saw what it was she had done. *She learned it from me, but I just learned it from her.* She shivered.

Nynaeve went straight to tumbling the bags apart and reading the tags. "Rianna. Joiya Byir. These are what we are after." She examined the seal on one bag, then broke the wax and unwound the binding cords. "At least we know no one's been here before us."

Egwene chose a bag and broke the seal without reading the name on the tag. She did not really want to know whose possessions she was searching. When she upended them onto the dusty floor, they proved to be mainly old clothes and shoes, with a few ripped and crumpled papers of the sort that might hide under the wardrobe of a woman who was not too assiduous in seeing her rooms cleaned. "I don't see anything useful here. A cloak that would not do for rags. A torn half of a map of some city. Tear, it says in the corner. Three stockings that need darning." She stuck her finger through the hole in a velvet slipper that had no mate and waggled it at the others. "This one left no clues behind."

"Amico did not leave anything, either," Elayne said glumly, tossing clothes aside with both hands. "It might as well be rags. Wait, here's a book. Whoever bundled these up must have been in a hurry to toss in a book. *Customs and Ceremonies of the Tairen Court.* The cover is torn off, but the librarians will want it anyway." The librarians certainly would. No one threw away books, no matter how badly damaged.

"Tear," Nynaeve said in a flat voice. Kneeling amid the clutter from the bag she was searching, she retrieved a scrap of paper she had already thrown away. “A list of trading ships on the Erinin, with the dates they sailed from Tar Valon and the dates they were expected to arrive in Tear.”

“It could be coincidence,” Egwene said slowly.

“Perhaps,” Nynaeve said. She folded the paper and tucked it up her sleeve, then broke the seal on another bag.

When they finally finished, every bag searched twice and discarded rubbish heaped around the edges of the room, Egwene sat down on one of the empty bags, so engrossed that she barely noticed her own wince. Drawing up her knees, she studied the little collection they had made, all laid in a row.

“It is too much,” Elayne said. “There is too much of it.”

“Too much,” Nynaeve agreed.

There was a second book, a tattered, leather-bound volume entitled *Observations on a Visit to Tear*, with half its pages falling out. Caught in the lining of a badly torn cloak in Chesmal Emry’s bag, where it might have slipped through a rip in one of the pockets of the cloak, had been another list of trading vessels. It said no more than the names, but they were all on the other list, too, and according to that, those vessels all had sailed in the early morning after the night Liandrin and the others left the Tower. There was a hastily sketched plan of some large building, with one room faintly noted as “Heart of the Stone,” and a page with the names of five inns, the word “Tear” heading the page badly smudged but barely readable. There was. . . .

“There’s something from everyone,” Egwene muttered. “Every one of them left something pointing to a journey to Tear. How could anyone miss seeing it, if they looked? Why did the Amyrlin say nothing of this?”

“The Amyrlin,” Nynaeve said bitterly, “keeps her own counsel, and what matter if we burn for it!” She drew a deep breath, and sneezed from the dust they had stirred up. “What worries me is that I am looking at bait.”

“Bait?” Egwene said. But she saw it as soon as she spoke.

Nynaeve nodded. “Bait. A trap. Or maybe a diversion. But trap or diversion, it’s so obvious no one could be taken in by it.”

“Unless they do not care whether whoever found this saw the trap or not.” Uncertainty tinged Elayne’s voice. “Or perhaps they meant it to be so obvious that whoever found it would dismiss Tear immediately.”

Egwene wished she could not believe that the Black Ajah could be as sure of themselves as that. She realized she was gripping her pouch in her fingers, running her thumb along the twisted curve of the stone ring inside. “Perhaps they meant to taunt whoever found it,” she said softly. “Perhaps they thought whoever found this would rush headlong after them, in anger and pride.” *Did they know* we *would find it? Do they see us that way?*

“Burn me!” Nynaeve growled. It was a shock; Nynaeve never used such language.

For a time they simply stared in silence at the array.

“What do we do now?” Elayne asked finally.

Egwene squeezed the ring hard. Dreaming was closely linked to Foretelling; the future, and events in other places, could appear in a Dreamer’s dreams. “Maybe we will know after tonight.”

Nynaeve looked at her, silent and expressionless, then chose out a dark skirt that seemed not to have too many holes and rips, and began bundling in it the things they had found. “For now,” she said, “we will take this back to my room and hide it. I think we just have time, if we don’t want to be late to the kitchens.”

Late, Egwene thought. The longer she held the ring through her pouch, the greater the urgency she felt. *We’re already a step behind, but maybe we won’t be too late.*

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CHAPTER 27

Tel'aran'rhiod

The room Egwene had been given, on the same gallery with Nynaeve and Elayne, was little different from Nynaeve's. Her bed was a trifle wider, her table a little smaller. Her bit of rug had flowers instead of scrolls. That was all. After the novices' quarters, it seemed like a room in a palace, but when the three of them gathered there late that night, Egwene wished she were back on the novice galleries, with no ring on her finger and no bands on her dress. The others looked as nervous as she felt.

They had worked in the kitchens for two more meals, and in between tried to puzzle out the meaning of what they had found in the storeroom. Was it a trap, or an attempt to divert the search? Did the Amyrlin know of the things, and if she did, why had she not mentioned them? Talking provided no answers, and the Amyrlin never appeared so they could ask her.

Verin had come into the kitchens after the midday meal, blinking as if she were not sure why she was there. When she saw Egwene and the other two on their knees among the cauldrons and kettles, she looked surprised for a moment, then walked over and asked, loud enough for anyone to hear, "Have you found anything?"

Elayne, with her head and shoulders inside a huge soup kettle, banged her head on the rim backing out. Her blue eyes seemed to take up her entire face.

"Nothing but grease and sweat, Aes Sedai," Nynaeve said. The tug she gave her braid left a smear of greasy soap suds on her dark hair, and she grimaced.

Verin nodded as if that were the answer she had been seeking. "Well, keep looking." She peered around the kitchen again, frowning as though puzzled to find herself there, and left.

Alanna came to the kitchens after midday, too, collecting a bowl of big green gooseberries and a pitcher of wine, and Elaida, then Sheriam, appeared after supper, and Anaiya, too.

Alanna had asked Egwene if she wanted to know more of the Green Ajah, inquired when they were going to get on with their studies. Just because the Accepted chose their own lessons and pace did not mean they were not supposed to do any at all. The first few weeks would be bad, of course, but they had to choose, or the choosing would be done for them.

Elaida merely stood for a time, stern-faced and staring at them, hands on her hips, and Sheriam did the same in almost the identical pose. Anaiya stood the same way, but her look was more concerned. Until she saw them glancing at her. Then her face became a match for Elaida's and Sheriam's before her.

None of those visits meant anything that Egwene could see. The Mistress of Novices certainly had reason to check on them, as well as on the novices working in the kitchens, and Elaida had reason to keep an eye on the Daughter-Heir of Andor. Egwene tried not to think of the Aes Sedai's interest in Rand. As for Alanna, she was not the only Aes Sedai who came for a tray to take back to her rooms rather than eat with the others. Half the sisters in the Tower were too busy for meals, too busy to take the time to summon a servant to fetch a tray. And Anaiya . . . ? Anaiya could well be concerned for her Dreamer. Not that she would do anything to ease a punishment set by the Amyrlin Seat herself. That could have been Anaiya's reason for coming. It could have been.

Hanging her dress in the wardrobe, Egwene told herself once again that even Verin's slip could have been perfectly ordinary; the Brown sister was often absentminded. *If it was a slip.* Sitting on the edge of her bed, she pulled up her shift and began rolling down her stockings. She was almost beginning to dislike white as much as she did gray.

Nynaeve stood in front of the fireplace with Egwene's pouch in one hand, tugging her braid. Elayne sat by the table, making nervous conversation.

"Green Ajah," the golden-haired woman said for what Egwene thought must be the twentieth time since midday. "I might choose Green Ajah myself, Egwene. Then I can have three or four Warders, perhaps marry one of them. Who better for Prince Consort of Andor than a Warder? Unless it is. . . ." She trailed off, blushing.

Egwene felt a pang of jealousy she thought she had put down long ago, and sympathy mixed with it. *Light, how can I be jealous when I cannot look at Galad without shivering and feeling as if I am melting, both at the same* *time? Rand* was *mine, but no more. I wish I could give him to you, Elayne, but he is not for either of us, I think. It may be all well and good for the Daughter-Heir to marry a commoner, as long as he's an Andorman, but not to marry the Dragon Reborn.* She let the stockings fall on the floor, telling herself there were more important things to worry about tonight than neatness. "I am ready, Nynaeve."

Nynaeve handed her the pouch, and a long, thin strip of leather. "Perhaps it will work for more than one at once. I could . . . go with you, perhaps."

Emptying the stone ring onto her palm, Egwene threaded the leather strip through it, then tied it around her neck. The stripes and flecks of blue and brown and red seemed more vivid against the white of her shift. "And leave Elayne to watch over the both of us alone? When the Black Ajah may know us?"

"I can do it," Elayne said stoutly. "Or let me go with you, and Nynaeve can keep guard. She is the strongest of us, when she's angry, and if there is need for a guard, you can be sure she will be."

Egwene shook her head. "What if it won't work for two? What if two of us trying makes it not work at all? We would not even know till we woke up, and then we've wasted the night. We cannot waste even one if we are to catch up. We're too far behind them already." They were valid reasons, and she believed them, but there was another, closer to her heart. "Besides, I'll feel better knowing both of you are watching over me, in case. . . ."

She did not want to say it. In case someone came while she was asleep. The Gray Men. The Black Ajah. Any one of the things that had turned the White Tower from a place of safety to a dark woods full of pits and snares. Something coming in while she lay there helpless. Their faces showed they understood.

As she stretched herself out on the bed and plumped a feather pillow behind her head, Elayne moved the chairs, one to either side of the bed. Nynaeve snuffed the candles one by one, then, in the dark, sat in one of the chairs. Elayne took the other.

Egwene closed her eyes and tried to think sleepy thoughts, but she was too conscious of the thing lying between her breasts. Far more conscious than of any soreness remaining from her visit to Sheriam's study. The ring seemed to weigh as much as a brick, now, and thoughts of home and quiet pools of water all slid apart with remembrance of it. Of *Tel'aran'rhiod.* The Unseen World. The World of Dreams. Waiting just the other side of sleep.

Nynaeve began to hum softly. Egwene recognized a nameless, wordless tune her mother used to hum to her when she was little. When she was lying in bed, in her own room, with a fluffy pillow, and warm blankets, and the mingled smells of rose oil and baking from her mother, and. . . . *Rand, are you all right? Perrin? Who was she?* Sleep came.

She stood among rolling hills quilted with wildflowers and dotted with small thickets of leafy trees in the hollows and on the crests. Butterflies floated above the blossoms, wings flashing yellow and blue and green, and two larks sang to each other nearby. Just enough fluffy white clouds drifted in a soft blue sky, and the breeze held that delicate balance between cool and warm that came only a few special days in spring. It was a day too perfect to be anything but a dream.

She looked at her dress, and laughed delightedly. Exactly her favorite shade of sky-blue silk, slashed with white in the skirt—that changed to green as she frowned momentarily—sewn with rows of tiny pearls down the sleeves and across the bosom. She stuck out a foot just to peek at the toe of a velvet slipper. The only jarring note was the twisted ring of multicolored stone hanging around her neck on a leather cord.

She took the ring in her hand and gasped. It felt as light as a feather. If she tossed it up, she was sure it would drift away like thistledown. Somehow, she did not feel afraid of it any longer. She tucked it inside the neck of her dress to get it out of the way.

"So this is Verin's *Tel'aran'rhiod,*" she said. "Corianin Nedeal's World of Dreams. It does not look dangerous to me." But Verin had said it was. Black Ajah or not, Egwene did not see how any Aes Sedai could tell a lie right out. *She could be mistaken.* But she did not believe Verin was.

Just to see if she could, she opened herself to the One Power. *Saidar* filled her. Even here, it was present. She channeled the flow lightly, delicately, directed it into the breeze, swirling butterflies into fluttering spirals of color, into circles linked with circles.

Abruptly she let it go. The butterflies settled back, unconcerned by their brief adventure. Myrddraal and some other Shadowspawn could sense someone channeling. Looking around, she could not imagine such things in that place, but just because she could not imagine them did not mean they were not there. And the Black Ajah had all those *ter'angreal* studied by Corianin Nedeal. It was a sickening reminder of why she was there.

"At least I know I can channel," she muttered. "I'm not learning anything standing here. Perhaps if I look around. . . ." She took a step . . .

. . . and was standing in the dank, dark hallway of an inn. She was an innkeeper's daughter; she was sure it was an inn. There was not a sound, and all the doors along the hall were shut tight. Just as she wondered who was behind the plain wooden door in front of her, it swung silently open.

The room within was bare, and cold wind moaned through open windows, stirring old ash on the hearth. A big dog lay curled up on the floor, shaggy tail across its nose, between the door and a thick pillar of rough-cut, black stone that stood in the middle of the floor. A large, shaggy-haired young man sat leaning back against the pillar in only his smallclothes, head lolling as if asleep. A massive black chain ran around the pillar and across his chest, the ends gripped in his clenched hands. Asleep or not, his heavy muscles strained to hold that chain tight, to prison himself against the pillar.

"Perrin?" she said wonderingly. She stepped into the room. "Perrin, what's the matter with you? Perrin!" The dog uncurled itself and stood.

It was not a dog, but a wolf, all black and gray, lips curling back from glistening white teeth, yellow eyes regarding her as they might have a mouse. A mouse it meant to eat.

Egwene stepped back hastily into the hall in spite of herself. "Perrin! Wake up! There's a wolf!" Verin had said what happened here was real, and showed the scar to prove it. The wolf's teeth looked as big as knives. "Perrin, wake up! Tell it I'm a friend!" She embraced *saidar.* The wolf stalked nearer.

Perrin's head came up; his eyes opened drowsily. Two sets of yellow eyes regarded her. The wolf gathered himself. "Hopper," Perrin shouted, "no! Egwene!"

The door swung shut before her face, and total darkness enveloped her.

She could not see, but she felt sweat beading on her forehead. Not from heat. *Light, where am I? I don't like this place. I want to wake up!*

A whirring sound, and she jumped before she recognized a cricket. A frog gave a bass croak in the darkness, and a chorus answered it. As her eyes adapted, she dimly made out trees all around her. Clouds blanketed the stars, and the moon was a thin sliver.

Off to her right through the woods was another glow, flickering. A campfire.

She considered a moment before moving. Wanting to wake up had not been enough to take her way from *Tel'aran'rhiod*, and she still had not found out anything useful. And she had not been hurt in any way. *So far*, she thought, shivering. But she had no idea who—or what—was at that campfire. *It could be Myrddraal. Besides, I'm not dressed for running around in the forest.* It was the last thought that decided her; she prided herself on knowing when she was being foolish.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered up her silken skirts and crept closer. She might not have Nynaeve's skill at woodcraft, but she knew enough to avoid stepping on dead twigs. At last she peered carefully around the trunk of an old oak at the campfire.

The only one there was a tall young man, sitting and staring into the flames. Rand. Those flames did not burn wood. They did not burn anything that she could see. The fire danced above a bare patch of ground. She did not think they even scorched the soil.

Before she could move, Rand raised his head. She was surprised to see he was smoking a pipe, a thin ribbon of tabac smoke lifting from the bowl. He looked tired, so very tired.

"Who's out there?" he demanded loudly. "You've rustled enough leaves to wake the dead, so you might as well show yourself."

Egwene's lips compressed, but she stepped out. *I did not!* "It's me, Rand. Do not be afraid. It is a dream. I must be in your dreams."

He was on his feet so suddenly that she stopped dead. He seemed in some way larger than she remembered. And a touch dangerous. Perhaps more than a touch. His blue-gray eyes seemed to burn like frozen fire.

"Do you think I don't know it is a dream?" he sneered. "I know that makes it no less real." He stared angrily out into the darkness as if looking for someone. "How long will you try?" he shouted at the night. "How many faces will you send? My mother, my father, now her! Pretty girls won't tempt me with a kiss, not even one I know! I deny you, Father of Lies! I deny you!"

"Rand," she said uncertainly. "It's Egwene. I am Egwene."

There was a sword in his hands, suddenly, out of nowhere. Its blade was worked out of a single flame, slightly curved and graven with a heron. "My mother gave me honeycake," he said in a tight voice, "with the smell of poison rank on it. My father had a knife for my ribs. She—she offered kisses, and more.” Sweat slicked his face; his stare seemed enough to set her afire. “What do you bring?”

“You are going to listen to me, Rand al’Thor, if I have to sit on you.” She gathered *saidar*, channeled the flows to make the air hold him in a net.

The sword spun in his hands, roaring like an open furnace.

She grunted and staggered; it felt as if a rope stretched too tight had broken and snapped back into her.

Rand laughed. “I learn, you see. When it works. . . .” He grimaced and started toward her. “I could stand any face but that one. Not her face, burn you!” The sword flashed out.

Egwene fled.

She was not sure what it was she did, or how, but she found herself back among the rolling hills under a sunny sky, with larks singing and butterflies playing. She drew a deep, shuddering breath.

I’ve learned. . . . What? That the Dark One is still after Rand? I knew that already. That maybe the Dark One wants to kill him? That’s different. Unless maybe he’s gone mad already, and does not know what he is saying. Light, why couldn’t I help him? Oh, Light, Rand!

She took another long breath to calm herself. “The only way to help him is to gentle him,” she muttered. “As well go ahead and kill him.” Her stomach twisted and knotted. “I’ll never do that. Never!”

A redbird had perched on a cloudberry bush nearby, crest lifting as it tilted its head to watch her cautiously. She addressed the bird. “Well, I am not helping anything standing here talking to myself, am I? Or talking to you, either.”

The redbird took wing as she stepped toward the bush. It was still a flash of crimson as she took the next step, vanished into a thicket as she took a third.

She stopped and fished the stone ring on its cord out of the front of her dress. Why was it not changing? Everything had changed so fast up till now that she could hardly catch her breath. Why not now? Unless there was some answer right here? She looked around uncertainly. The wildflowers taunted her, and the larksong mocked her. This place seemed too much of her own making.

Determined, she tightened her hand around the *ter’angreal*. “Take me where I need to be.” She shut her eyes and concentrated on the ring. It was stone, after all; Earth should give her some feeling for it. “Do it. Take me where I need to be.” Once again she embraced *saidar*, fed a trickle of the One Power into the ring. She knew it did not need any flow of Power directed at it to work, and she did not try to do anything to it. Only to give it more of the Power to use. “Take me to where I can find an answer. I need to know what the Black Ajah wants. Take me to the answer.”

“Well, you’ve found your way at last, child. All sorts of answers here.”

Egwene’s eyes snapped open. She stood in a great hall, its vast domed ceiling supported by a forest of massive redstone columns. And hanging in midair was a sword of crystal, gleaming and sparkling as it slowly revolved. She was not certain, but she thought it might be the sword Rand had been reaching for in that dream. That other dream. This all felt so real, she had to keep reminding herself it was a dream, too.

An old woman stepped out of the shadows of the column, bent and hobbling with a stick. Ugly did not begin to describe her. She had a bony, pointed chin, an even bonier, sharper nose, and it seemed there were more warts growing hairs on her face than there was face.

“Who are you?” Egwene said. The only people she had seen so far in *Tel’aran’rhiod* were those she already knew, but she did not think she could have forgotten this poor old woman.

“Just poor old Silvie, my Lady,” the old woman cackled. At the same time she managed a stoop that might have been meant for a curtsy, or possibly a cringe. “You know poor old Silvie, my Lady. Served your family faithfully all these years. Does this old face still frighten you? Don’t let it, my Lady. It serves me, when I need it, as good as a prettier.”

“Of course, it does,” Egwene said. “It’s a strong face. A good face.” She hoped the woman believed it. Whoever this Silvie was, she seemed to think she knew Egwene. Perhaps she knew answers, too. “Silvie, you said something about finding answers here.”

“Oh, you’ve come to the right place for answers, my Lady. The Heart of the Stone is full of answers. And secrets. The High Lords would not be pleased to see us here, my Lady. Oh, no. None but the High Lords enter here. And servants, of course.” She gave a sly, screeching laugh. “The High Lords don’t sweep and mop. But who sees a servant?”

“What kind of secrets?”

But Silvie was hobbling toward the crystal sword. “Plots,” she said as if to herself. “All of them pretending to serve the Great Lord, and all the while plotting and planning to regain what they lost. Each one thinking he or she is the only one plotting. Ishamael is a fool!”

“What?” Egwene said sharply. “What did you say about Ishamael?”

The old woman turned to present a crooked, ingratiating smile. “Just a thing poor folks say, my Lady. It turns the Forsaken’s power, calling them fools. Makes you feel good, and safe. Even the Shadow can’t take being called a fool. Try it, my Lady. Say, Ba’alzamon is a fool!”

Egwene’s lips twitched on the edge of a smile. “Ba’alzamon is a fool! You are right, Silvie.” It actually did feel good, laughing at the Dark One. The old woman chuckled. The sword revolved just beyond her shoulder. “Silvie, what is that?”

“*Callandor*, my Lady. You know that, don’t you? The Sword That Cannot Be Touched.” Abruptly she swung her stick behind her; a foot from the sword, the stick stopped with a dull *thwack* and bounded back. Silvie grinned wider. “The Sword That Is Not a Sword, though there’s precious few knows what it is. But none can touch it save one. They saw to that, who put it here. The Dragon Reborn will hold *Callandor* one day, and prove to the world he’s the Dragon by doing it. The first proof, anyway. Lews Therin come back for all the world to see, and grovel before. Ah, the High Lords don’t like having it here. They like nothing to do with the Power. They’d rid themselves of it, if they could. If they could. I suppose there’s others would take it, if they could. What wouldn’t one of the Forsaken give, to hold *Callandor*?”

Egwene stared at the sparkling sword. If the Prophecies of the Dragon were true, if Rand was the Dragon as Moiraine claimed, he would wield it one day, though from the rest of what she knew of the Prophecies concerning *Callandor*, she could not see how it could ever come to be. *But if there’s a way to take it, maybe the Black Ajah knows how. If they know it, I can figure it out.*

Cautiously, she reached out with the Power, probing at whatever held and shielded the sword. Her probe touched—something—and stopped. She could sense which of the Five Powers had been used here. Air, and Fire, and Spirit. She could trace the intricate weave made by *saidar*, set with a strength that amazed her. There were gaps in that weave, spaces where her probe should slide through. When she tried, it was like fighting the strongest part of the weave head on. It hit her then, what she was trying to force a way through, and she let her probe vanish. Half that wall had been woven using *saidar*; the other half, the part she could not sense or touch, had been made with *saidin*. That was not it, exactly—the wall was all of one piece—but it was close enough. *A stone wall stops a blind woman as surely as one who can see it.*

Footsteps echoed in the distance. Boots.

Egwene could not tell how many there were, or from which direction they were coming, but Silvie gave a start and immediately stared off among the columns. “He’s coming to stare at it again,” she muttered. “Awake or asleep, he wants. . . .” She seemed to remember Egwene, and put on a worried smile. “You must leave, now, my Lady. He mustn’t find you here, or even know you’ve been.”

Egwene was already backing in among the columns, and Silvie followed, flapping her hands and waving her stick. “I am going, Silvie. I just have to remember the way.” She fingered the stone ring. “Take me back to the hills.” Nothing happened. She channeled a hairlike flow to the ring. “Take me back to the hills.” The redstone columns still surrounded her. The boots were closer, close enough not to be swallowed in their own echoes anymore.

“You don’t know the way out,” Sylvie said flatly, then went on in a near whisper, ingratiating and mocking at once, an old retainer who felt she could take liberties. “Oh, my Lady, this is a dangerous place to come into, if you don’t know the way out. Come, let poor old Silvie take you out. Poor old Silvie will tuck you safe in your bed, my Lady.” She wrapped both arms around Egwene, urging her further from the sword. Not that Egwene needed much urging. The boots had stopped; he—whoever he was—was probably gazing at *Callandor.*

“Just show me the way,” Egwene whispered back. “Or tell me. There’s no need to push.” The old woman’s fingers had somehow gotten tangled around the stone ring. “Don’t touch that, Silvie.”

“Safe in your bed.”

Pain annihilated the world.

With a throat-wrenching shriek, Egwene sat up in the dark, sweat rolling down her face. For a moment she had no idea where she was, and did not care. “Oh, Light,” she moaned, “that hurt. Oh, Light, that hurt!” She ran her hands over herself, sure her skin must be scored or wealed to make such a burning, but she could not find a mark.

“We are here,” Nynaeve’s voice said from the darkness. “We’re here, Egwene.”

Egwene threw herself toward the voice and wrapped her arms around Nynaeve’s neck in sheer relief. “Oh, Light, I’m back. Light, I’m back.”

“Elayne,” Nynaeve said.

In a few moments one of the candles was giving a small light. Elayne paused with the candle in hand and the spill she had lit with flint and steel in the other. Then she smiled, and every candle in the room burst into flame. She stopped at the washstand and came back to the bed with a cool, damp cloth to wash Egwene’s face.

“Was it bad?” she asked worriedly. “You never stirred. You never mumbled. We did not know whether to wake you or not.”

Hurriedly, Egwene fumbled the leather cord from around her neck and hurled it and the stone ring across the room. “Next time,” she panted, “we decide on a time, and you wake me after it. Wake me if you have to stick my head in a basin of water!” She had not realized that she had decided there would be a next time. *Would you put your head in a bear’s mouth just to show you weren’t afraid? Would you do it twice just because you’d done it once and didn’t die?*

Yet it was more than a matter of proving to herself that she was not afraid. She was afraid, and knew it. But so long as the Black Ajah had those *ter’angreal* Corianin had studied, she would have to keep going back. She was sure the answer to why they wanted them lay in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. If she could find answers about the Black Ajah there—perhaps other answers, too, if half what she had been told about Dreaming were true—she had to go back. “But not tonight,” she said softly. “Not yet.”

“What happened?” Nynaeve asked. “What did you . . . dream?”

Egwene lay back on the bed and told them. Of it all, the only thing she left out was about Perrin talking to the wolf. She left the wolf out altogether. She felt a little guilty about keeping secrets from Elayne and Nynaeve, but it was Perrin’s secret to tell, when and if he chose, not hers. The rest she gave them word for word, describing everything. When she was done, she felt emptied.

“Aside from being tired,” Elayne said, “did he look hurt? Egwene, I cannot believe he would ever hurt you. I cannot believe he would.”

“Rand,” Nynaeve said dryly, “will have to look after himself awhile longer.” Elayne blushed; she looked pretty doing it. Egwene realized that

Elayne looked pretty doing anything, even crying, or scrubbing pots. *"Callandor,"* Nynaeve continued. "The Heart of the Stone. That was marked on the plan. I think we know where the Black Ajah is."

Elayne had regained her poise. "It does not change the trap," she said. "If it is not a diversion, it is a trap."

Nynaeve smiled grimly. "The best way to catch whoever set a trap is to spring it and wait for him to come. Or her, in this instance."

"You mean go to Tear?" Egwene said, and Nynaeve nodded.

"The Amyrlin has cut us loose, it seems. We make our own decisions, remember? At least we know the Black Ajah is in Tear, and we know who to look for there. Here, all we can do is sit and stew in our own suspicions of everybody, wonder if there is another Gray Man out there. I would rather be the hound than the rabbit."

"I have to write to my mother," Elayne said. When she saw the looks they gave her, her voice became defensive. "I have already vanished once without her knowing where I was. If I do it again. . . . You do not know Mother's temper. She could send Gareth Bryne and the whole army against Tar Valon. Or hunting after us."

"You could stay here," Egwene said.

"No. I will not let you two go alone. And I won't stay here wondering if the sister teaching me is a Darkfriend, or if the next Gray Man will come after me." She gave a small laugh. "I will not work in the kitchens while you two are off adventuring, either. I just have to tell my mother than I am out of the Tower on the Amyrlin's orders, so she won't become furious if she hears rumors. I do not have to tell her where we are going, or why."

"You surely had better not," Nynaeve said. "She very likely would come after you if she knew about the Black Ajah. For that matter, you can't know how many hands your letter will pass through before it reaches her, or what eyes might read it. Best not to say anything you don't mind anyone knowing."

"That's another thing." Elayne sighed. "The Amyrlin does not know I am one of you. I have to find some way to send it with no chance of her seeing it."

"I will have to think on that." Nynaeve's brows furrowed. "Perhaps once we're on our way. You could leave it at Aringill on the way downriver, if we have time to find someone there going to Caemlyn. A sight of one of those papers the Amyrlin gave us might convince somebody. We will have to hope they work on ship captains, too, unless one of you has more coin than I have." Elayne shook her head dolefully.

Egwene did not even bother. What money they had possessed had all gone on the journey from Toman Head, except for a few coppers each. "When. . . ." She had to stop and clear her throat. "When do we leave? Tonight?"

Nynaeve looked as if she were considering it for a moment, but then she shook her head. "You need sleep, after. . . ." Her gesture took in the stone ring lying where it had bounced off the wall. "We will give the Amyrlin one more chance to seek us out. When we finish with breakfast, you both pack what you want to take, but keep it light. We have to leave the Tower without anyone noticing, remember. If the Amyrlin doesn't reach us by midday, I mean to be on a trading ship, shoving that paper down the captain's throat if need be, before Prime sounds. How does that sound to you two?"

"It sounds excellent," Elayne said firmly, and Egwene said, "Tonight or tomorrow, the sooner the better, as far as I can see." She wished she sounded as confident as Elayne.

"Then we had best get some sleep."

"Nynaeve," Egwene said in a small voice, "I. . . . I don't want to be alone tonight." It pained her to make that admission.

"I don't, either," Elayne said. "I keep thinking about the Soulless. I do not know why, but they frighten me even more than the Black Ajah."

"I suppose," Nynaeve said slowly, "I don't really want to be alone, myself." She eyed the bed where Egwene lay. "That looks big enough for three, if everybody keeps her elbows to herself."

Later, when they were shifting about trying to find a way to lie that did not feel so crowded, Nynaeve suddenly laughed.

"What is it?" Egwene asked. "You are not that ticklish."

"I just thought of someone who'd be happy to carry Elayne's letter for her. Happy to leave Tar Valon, too. In fact, I'd bet on it."

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CHAPTER 28

A Way Out

Clad only in his breeches, Mat was just finishing a snack after breakfast—some ham, three apples, bread, and butter—when the door of his room opened, and Nynaeve, Egwene, and Elayne filed in, all smiling at him brightly. He got up for a shirt, then stubbornly sat down again. They could at least have knocked. In any case, it was good to see their faces. At first, it was.

"Well, you do look better," Egwene said.

"As if you had had a month of good food and rest," Elayne said.

Nynaeve pressed a hand to his forehead. He flinched before he recalled that she had done much the same for at least five years, back home. *She was just the Wisdom then*, he thought. *She wasn't wearing that ring.*

She had noticed his flinch. She gave him a tight smile. "You look ready to be up and about, to me. Are you tired of being cooped up, yet? You never could stand two days in a row indoors."

He eyed the last apple core reluctantly, then dropped it back on the plate. Almost, he started to lick the juice off his fingers, but they were all three looking at him. And still smiling. He realized he was trying to decide which of them was prettiest, and could not. Had they been anybody but who—and what—they were, he would have asked any and all of them to dance a jig or a reel. He had danced with Egwene often enough, back home, and even once with Nynaeve, but that seemed a long time ago.

" 'One pretty woman means fun at the dance. Two pretty women mean trouble in the house. Three pretty women mean run for the hills.' " He gave Nynaeve an even tighter smile than her own. "My da used to say that. You're up to something, Nynaeve. You are all smiling like cats staring at a finch caught in a thornbush, and I think I am the finch."

The smiles flickered and vanished. He noticed their hands and wondered why they all looked as if they had been washing dishes. The Daughter-Heir of Andor surely never washed a dish, and he had as hard a time imagining Nynaeve at it, even knowing she had done her own back in Emond's Field. They all three wore Great Serpent rings, now. That was new. And not a particularly pleasant surprise. *Light, it had to happen sometime. It's none of my business, and that is all there is to it. None of my business. It just isn't.*

Egwene shook her head, but it seemed as much for the other two women as for him. "I told you we should ask him straight out. He's stubborn as any mule when he wants to be, and tricksome as a cat. You are, Mat. You know it, so stop frowning."

He put his grin back quickly.

"Hush, Egwene," Nynaeve said. "Mat, just because we want to ask you a favor does not mean we don't care how you feel. We do care, and you know that, unless you're being even more wool-headed than usual. Are you well? You look remarkably well compared to how I last saw you. It really does look more like a month than two days."

"I'm ready to run ten miles and dance a jig at the end of it." His stomach growled, reminding him how long it was to midday yet, but he ignored it, and hoped they had not noticed. He almost did feel as if he had had a month of rest and food. And had had one meal in the last day. "What favor?" he asked suspiciously. Nynaeve did not ask favors, in his recollection; Nynaeve told people what to do and expected to see it done.

"I want you to carry a letter for me," Elayne said before Nynaeve could speak. "To my mother, in Caemlyn." She smiled, making a dimple in her cheek. "I would appreciate it so very much, Mat." The morning light through the windows seemed to pick out highlights in her hair.

I wonder if she likes to dance. He pushed the thought right out of his head. "That does not sound too very hard, but it's a long trip. What do I get out of it?" From the look on her face, he did not think that dimple had failed her very often.

She drew herself up, slim and proud. He could almost see a throne behind her. "Are you a loyal subject of Andor? Do you not wish to serve the Lion Throne, and your Daughter-Heir?"

Mat snickered.

"I told you that would not work either," Egwene said. "Not with him."

Elayne had a wry twist to her mouth. "I thought it worth a try. It always works on the Guards, in Caemlyn. You said if I smiled—" She cut off short, very obviously not looking at him.

What did you say, Egwene, he thought, furious. *That I'm a fool for any girl who smiles at me?* He kept his outward calm, though, and managed to maintain his grin.

"I wish asking were enough," Egwene said, "but you do not do favors, do you, Mat? Have you ever done anything without being coaxed, wheedled, or bullied?"

He only smiled at her. "I will dance with both of you, Egwene, but I won't run errands." For an instant he thought she was going to stick out her tongue at him.

"If we can go back to what we planned in the first place," Nynaeve said in a too-calm voice. The other two nodded, and she turned her attentions on him. For the first time since coming in, she looked like the Wisdom of old, with a stare that could pin you in your tracks and her braid ready to lash like a cat's tail.

"You are even ruder than I remembered, Matrim Cauthon. With you sick so long—and Egwene, and Elayne, and I taking care of you like a babe in swaddling—I had almost forgotten. Even so, I would think you'd have a little gratitude in you. You've talked about seeing the world, seeing great cities. Well, what better city than Caemlyn? Do what you want, show your gratitude, and help someone all at the same time." She produced a folded parchment from inside her cloak and set it on the table. It was sealed with a lily, in golden yellow wax. "You cannot ask for more than that."

He eyed the paper regretfully. He barely remembered passing through Caemlyn, once, with Rand. It was a shame to stop them now, but he thought it best. *If you want the fun of the jig, you have to pay the harper sooner or later.* And the way Nynaeve was now, the longer he kept from paying, the worse it would be. "Nynaeve, I can't."

"What do you mean, you cannot? Are you a fly on the wall, or a man? A chance to do a favor for the Daughter-Heir of Andor, to see Caemlyn, to meet Queen Morgase herself in all probability, and you cannot? I really do not know what more you could possibly want. Don't you skitter away like grease on a griddle this time, Matrim Cauthon! Or has your heart changed so you like seeing these all around you?" She waved her left hand in his face, practically hitting him in the nose with her ring.

"Please, Mat?" Elayne said, and Egwene was staring at him as if he had grown horns like a Trolloc.

He squirmed on his chair. “It is not that I don’t want to. I cannot! The Amyrlin’s made it so I can’t get off the bloo—the island. Change that, and I will carry your letter in my teeth, Elayne.”

Looks passed between them. He sometimes wondered if women could read each other’s minds. They certainly seemed to read his when he least wanted it. But this time, whatever they had decided silently among themselves, they had not read his thoughts.

“Explain,” Nynaeve said curtly. “Why would the Amyrlin want to keep you here?”

He shrugged, and looked her straight in the eye, and gave her his best rueful grin. “It’s because I was sick. Because it went on so long. She said she would not let me go until she was sure I wouldn’t go off somewhere and die. Not that I’m going to, of course. Die, I mean.”

Nynaeve frowned, and jerked her braid, and suddenly took his head between her hands; a chill ran through him. *Light, the Power!* Before the thought was done, she had released him.

“What . . . ? What did you do to me, Nynaeve?”

“Not a tenth part of what you deserve, in all likelihood,” she said. “You are as healthy as a bull. Weaker than you look, but healthy.”

“I told you I was,” he said uneasily. He tried to get his grin back. “Nynaeve, she looked like you. The Amyrlin, I mean. Managing to loom even if she is a foot too short for it, and bullying. . . .” The way her eyebrows climbed, he decided that was not a road to go down any further. As long as he kept them away from the Horn. He wondered if they knew. “Well. Anyway, I think they want to keep me here because of that dagger. I mean, until they figure out exactly how it did what it did. You know how Aes Sedai are.” He gave a small laugh. They all just looked at him. *Maybe I shouldn’t have said that. Burn me! They want to be bloody Aes Sedai. Burn me, I’m going on too long. I wish Nynaeve would stop staring at me like that. Keep it short.* “The Amyrlin made it so I cannot cross a bridge or board a ship without an order from her. You see? It’s not that I do not want to help. I just can’t.”

“But you will if we can get you out of Tar Valon?” Nynaeve said intently.

“You get me out of Tar Valon, and I’ll carry Elayne to her mother on my back.”

Elayne's eyebrows went up, this time, and Egwene shook her head, mouthing his name with a sharp look in her eyes. Women had no sense of humor, sometimes.

Nynaeve motioned the two of them to follow her to the windows, where they turned their backs to him and talked so softly he could catch only a murmur. He thought he heard Egwene say something about only needing one if they stayed together. Watching, he wondered if they really thought they could get around the Amyrlin's order. *If they can do that, I will carry their bloody letter. I really will carry it in my teeth.*

Without thinking, he picked up an apple core and bit off the end. One chew, and he hastily spit the mouthful of bitter seeds back onto the plate.

When they came back to the table, Egwene handed him a thick, folded paper. He eyed them suspiciously before opening it out. As he read, he began humming to himself without knowing it.

> *What the bearer does is done at my order and by my authority. Obey, and keep silent, at my command.*
>
> *Siuan Sanche*
> *Watcher of the Seals*
> *Flame of Tar Valon*
> *The Amyrlin Seat*

And sealed at the bottom with the Flame of Tar Valon in a circle of white wax as hard as stone.

He realized he was humming "A Pocket Full of Gold" and stopped. "Is this real? You didn't . . . ? How did you get this?"

"She did not forge it, if that is what you mean," Elayne said.

"Never you mind how we got it," Nynaeve said. "It is real. That is all that need concern you. I would not show it around, were I you, or the Amyrlin will take it back, but it will get you past the guards and onto a ship. You said you'd take the letter, if we did that."

"You can consider it in Morgase's hands right now." He did not want to stop reading the paper, but he folded it back up anyway, and laid it on top of Elayne's letter. "You wouldn't happen to have a little coin to go with this, would you? Some silver? A gold mark or two? I have almost enough for my passage, but I hear things are growing expensive downriver."

Nynaeve shook her head. "Don't you have money? You gambled with Hurin almost every night until you grew too sick to hold the dice. Why should things be more expensive downriver?”

“We gambled for coppers, Nynaeve, and he would not even do that after a while. It doesn’t matter. I will manage. Don’t you listen to what people say? There’s civil war in Cairhien, and I hear it is bad in Tear, too. I’ve heard a room at an inn in Aringill costs more than a good horse back home.”

“We have been busy,” she said sharply, and exchanged worried looks with Egwene and Elayne that set him wondering again.

“It doesn’t matter. I can make out.” There had to be gaming in the inns near the docks. A night with the dice would put him aboard a ship in the morning with a full purse.

“Just you deliver that letter to Queen Morgase, Mat,” Nynaeve said. “And do not let anyone know you have it.”

“I’ll take it to her. I said I would, didn’t I? You would think I didn’t keep my promises.” The looks he got from Nynaeve and Egwene reminded him of a few he had not kept. “I will do it. Blood and—I will do it!”

They stayed awhile longer, talking of home for the most part. Egwene and Elayne sat on the bed, and Nynaeve took the armchair, while he kept his stool. Talk of Emond’s Field made him homesick, and it seemed to make Nynaeve and Egwene sad, as if they were speaking of something they would never see again. He was sure their eyes moistened, but when he tried to change the subject, they brought it back again, to people they knew, to the festivals of Bel Tine and Sunday, to harvest dances and picnic gatherings for the shearing.

Elayne talked to him of Caemlyn, of what to expect at the Royal Palace and who to speak to, and a little of the city. Sometimes she held herself in a way that made him all but see a crown on her head. A man would have to be a fool to let himself get involved with a woman like her. When they rose to leave, he was sorry to see them go.

He stood, suddenly feeling awkward. “Look, you have done me a favor here.” He touched the Amyrlin’s paper, on the table. “A big favor. I know you’re all going to be Aes Sedai”—he stumbled a little on that—“and you will be a queen one day, Elayne, but if you ever need help, if there is ever anything I can do, I will come. You can count on it. Did I say something funny?”

Elayne had a hand over her mouth, and Egwene was struggling openly with a laugh. “No, Mat,” Nynaeve said smoothly, but her lips twitched.

"Just something I have observed about men."

"You would have to be a woman to understand," Elayne said.

"Journey well and safely, Mat," Egwene said. "And remember, if a woman does need a hero, she needs him today, not tomorrow." The laughter bubbled out of her.

He stared at the door closing behind them. Women, he decided for at least the hundredth time, were odd.

Then his eye fell on Elayne's letter, and the folded paper lying atop it. The Amyrlin's blessed, not-to-be-understood, but welcome-as-a-fire-in-winter paper. He danced a little caper in the middle of the flowered carpet. Caemlyn to see, and a queen to meet. *Your own words will free me of you, Amyrlin. And get me away from Selene, too.*

"You'll never catch me," he laughed, and meant it for both of them. "You'll never catch Mat Cauthon."

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CHAPTER 29

A Trap to Spring

In a corner the spit dog was lying at its ease. Glaring at it, Nynaeve mopped sweat from her forehead with her hand and leaned her back into doing the work he should have done. *I'd not have put it past them to shove me in his wicker wheel instead of letting me turn this Light-forsaken handle! Aes Sedai! Burn them all!* It was a measure of her upset that she used such language, and another that she did not even notice she had done it. She did not think the fire in the long, gray stone fireplace would seem any hotter if she crawled into it. She was sure the brindle dog was grinning at her.

Elayne was skimming grease out of the dripping pan under the roasts with a long-handled wooden spoon, while Egwene used its twin to baste the meat. The great kitchen went on about its midday routine around them. Even the novices had grown so used to seeing Accepted there that they hardly even glanced at the three women. Not that the cooks allowed the novices to dawdle for gawking. Work built character, so the Aes Sedai said, and the cooks saw to it that the novices built strong character. And the three Accepted, too.

Laras, the Mistress of the Kitchens—she was really the chief cook, but so many had used the other for so long that it might as well have been her title—came over to examine the roasts. And the women sweating over them. She was more than merely stout, with layers of chins, and a spotless white apron that could have made three novice dresses. She carried her own long-handled wooden spoon like a scepter. It was not for stirring, that spoon. It was for directing those under her, and smacking those who were not building character quickly enough to suit her. She studied the roasts, sniffed disparagingly, and turned her frown on the three Accepted.

Nynaeve met Laras' look with a level look of her own and kept turning the spit. The massive woman's face never altered. Nynaeve had tried smiling, but that did nothing to change Laras' expression. Stopping work to speak to her, quite civilly, had been a disaster. It was bad enough being bullied and chivied by Aes Sedai. She had to put up with that, however much it rankled and burned, if she was to learn how to use her abilities. Not that she liked what she could do—it was one thing to know Aes Sedai were not Darkfriends for channeling the Power, but quite another to know she herself could channel—yet she had to learn if she was to get back at Moiraine; hating Moiraine for what she had done to Egwene and the other Emond's Fielders, pulling their lives apart and manipulating them all for Aes Sedai purposes, was nearly all that kept her going. But to be treated as a lazy, none-too-bright child by this Laras, to be forced to curtsy and scurry for this woman she could have put in her place with a few well-chosen words back home—that made her grind her teeth almost as much as did the thought of Moiraine. *Maybe if I just do not look at her. . . . No! I will be burned if I'll drop my eyes before this . . . this cow!*

Laras sniffed more loudly and walked away. She rolled from side to side as she crossed the freshly mopped gray tiles.

Still bending with spoon and greasepot, Elayne glowered after her. "If that woman strikes me but once more, I shall have Gareth Bryne arrest her and—"

"Be quiet," Egwene whispered. She did not stop basting the roasts, and she never looked at Elayne. "She has ears like a—"

Laras turned back as if she had indeed heard, her frown deepening, and her mouth opened wide. Before a sound emerged, the Amyrlin Seat entered the kitchen like a whirlwind. Even the striped stole on her shoulders seemed to bristle. For once, Leane was nowhere to be seen.

At last, Nynaeve thought grimly. *And not beforetime, either!*

But the Amyrlin did not glance her way. The Amyrlin did not say a word to anyone. Running her hand across a tabletop scrubbed bone-white, she looked at her fingers and grimaced as if at filth. Laras was at her side in an instant, all smiles, but the Amyrlin's flat stare made her swallow them in silence.

The Amyrlin stalked about the kitchen. She stared at the women slicing oatcake. She glared at the women peeling vegetables. She sneered into the soup kettles, then at the women tending them; the women became engrossed in studying the surface of the soup. Her frown set the girls carrying plates and bowls out to the dining hall to a run. Her glower put the novices darting like mice sighting a cat. By the time she had made her way half around the kitchen, every woman there was working twice as fast as she had been. By the time she completed her circuit, Laras was the only one even daring to glance at her.

The Amyrlin stopped in front of the roasting spit, fists on her hips, and looked at Laras. She only looked, expressionless, blue eyes cold and hard.

The large woman gulped, and her chins wobbled as she smoothed her apron. The Amyrlin did not blink. Laras' eyes dropped, and she shifted heavily from foot to foot. "If the Mother will pardon me," she said in a faint voice. Making something that might have been meant for a curtsy, she rushed away, so forgetting herself that she joined the women at one of the soup kettles and began stirring with her own spoon.

Nynaeve smiled, keeping her head down to hide it. Egwene and Elayne kept working, too, but they also kept glancing at the Amyrlin, standing with her back to them not two paces away.

The Amyrlin was spreading her stare across the entire kitchen from where she stood. "If they are this easily cowed," she muttered softly, "perhaps they really have been getting away with too much for too long."

Easily cowed indeed, Nynaeve thought. *Pitiful excuses for women. All she did was look at them!* The Amyrlin glanced over a stole-covered shoulder, caught her eye for an instant. Suddenly Nynaeve realized she was turning the spit faster. She told herself she had to pretend to be cowed like everyone else.

The Amyrlin's gaze fell on Elayne, and abruptly she spoke, nearly loud enough to rattle the copper pots and pans hanging on the walls. "There are some words I will not tolerate in a young woman's mouth, Elayne of House Trakand. If you let them in, I will see them scrubbed out!" Everyone in the kitchen jumped.

Elayne looked confused, and indignation crept across Egwene's face.

Nynaeve shook her head, small frantic shakes. *No, girl! Hold your tongue! Don't you see what she is doing?*

But Egwene did open her mouth, with a respectful if determined, "Mother, she did not—"

"Silence!" The Amyrlin's roar produced another ripple of jumps. "Laras! Can you find something to teach two girls to speak when they should and say what they should, *Mistress* of the Kitchens? Can you manage that?"

Laras came waddling faster than Nynaeve had ever seen the woman move before, darting at Elayne and Egwene to seize an ear of each, all the while repeating, “Yes, Mother. Immediately, Mother. As you command, Mother.” She hurried the two young women out of the kitchen as if eager to escape the Amyrlin’s stare.

The Amyrlin was now close enough to Nynaeve to touch her, but still looking over the kitchen. A young cook, turning with a mixing bowl in her hands, chanced to catch the Amyrlin’s eye. She gave a great squeak as she scuttled away across the floor.

“I did not mean for Egwene to be caught in that.” The Amyrlin barely moved her lips. It looked as if she were muttering to herself, and from the expression on her face, no one in the kitchen wanted to hear what she was saying. Nynaeve could just make out the words. “But perhaps it will teach her to think before she speaks.”

Nynaeve turned the spit and kept her head down, trying to look as if she were also muttering under her breath if anyone looked. “I thought you were going to keep a close eye on us, Mother. So we could report what we find.”

“If I come stare at you every day, Daughter, some would grow suspicious.” The Amyrlin kept up her study of the kitchen. Most of the women seemed to be avoiding even looking in her direction for fear of incurring her wrath. “I planned to have you brought to my study after the midday meal. To scold you for not choosing your studies, so I implied to Leane. But there is news that could not wait. Sheriam found another Gray Man. A woman. Dead as last week’s fish, and not a mark on her. She was laid out as if resting, right in the middle of Sheriam’s bed. Not very pleasant for Sheriam.”

Nynaeve stiffened, and the spit halted for a moment before she put it back to revolving. “Sheriam had a chance to see the lists Verin gave to Egwene. So did Elaida. I make no accusations, but they had the chance. And Egwene said Alanna . . . behaved oddly, too.”

“She told you of that, did she? Alanna is Arafellin. They have strange ideas about honor and debts in Arafel.” She shrugged dismissively, but said, “I suppose I can keep an eye on her. Have you learned anything useful yet, child?”

“Some,” Nynaeve muttered grimly. *What about keeping an eye on Sheriam? Maybe she didn’t just find that Gray Man. The Amyrlin could* *watch Elaida, too, for that matter. So Alanna really did. . . .* “I do not understand why you trust Else Grinwell, but your message was helpful.”

In short, quick sentences, Nynaeve told of the things they had found in the storeroom under the library, making it seem only she and Egwene had gone, and added the conclusions they had reached concerning them. She did not mention Egwene’s dream—or whatever it had been; Egwene insisted it had been real—of *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Nor did she speak of the *ter’angreal* Verin had given Egwene. She could not make herself entirely trust the woman wearing the seven-striped stole—or any woman who could wear the shawl, for that matter—and it seemed best to keep some things in reserve.

When she was done, the Amyrlin was silent so long that Nynaeve began to think the woman had not heard. She was about to repeat herself, a little louder, when the Amyrlin finally spoke, still hardly moving her lips.

“I sent no message, Daughter. The things Liandrin and the others left were searched thoroughly, and burned after nothing was found. No one would use Black Ajah leavings. As for Else Grinwell. . . . I remember the girl. She could have learned, had she applied herself, but all she wanted was to smile at the men at the Warders’ practice yard. Else Grinwell was put on a trading vessel and sent back to her mother ten days ago.”

Nynaeve tried to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat. The Amyrlin’s words made her think of bullies taunting smaller children. The bullies were always so contemptuous of the littler children, always so sure the small ones were too stupid to realize what was happening, that they made little effort to disguise their snares. That the Black Ajah was so contemptuous of her made her blood boil. That they could set this snare filled her stomach with ice. *Light, if Else was sent away. . . . Light, anybody I talk to could be Liandrin, or any of the others. Light!*

The spit had stopped. Hastily she started jt turning once more. No one seemed to have noticed, though. They were all still doing their best not to look at the Amyrlin.

“And what do you mean to do about this . . . so-obvious trap?” the Amyrlin said softly, still staring over the kitchen, away from Nynaeve. “Do you mean to fall into this one, too?”

Nynaeve’s face reddened. “I know this trap for a trap. Mother. And the best way to catch whoever set a trap is to spring it and wait for him—or her—to come.” It sounded weaker than it had when she had said it to Egwene and Elayne, after what the Amyrlin had just told her, but she still meant it.

"Perhaps so, child. Perhaps it is the way to find them. If they do not come and find you held tightly in their net." She gave a vexed sigh. "I will put gold in your room for the journey. And I will let it be whispered about that I have sent you out to a farm to hoe cabbages. Will Elayne be going with you?"

Nynaeve forgot herself enough to stare at the Amyrlin, then hurriedly put her eyes back on her hands. Her knuckles were white on the spit handle. "You scheming old. . . . Why all the pretense, if you knew? Your sly plots have had us squirming nearly as much as the Black Ajah has. Why?" The Amyrlin's face had tightened, enough to make her force a more respectful tone. "If I may ask, Mother."

The Amyrlin snorted. "Putting Morgase back on the proper path whether she wants to go or not will be hard enough without her thinking I've sent her daughter to sea in a leaky skiff. This way I can say straight out that it was none of my doing. It may be a bit hard on Elayne, when she finally has to face her mother, but I have three hounds, now, not two. I told you I'd have a hundred if I could." She adjusted her stole on her shoulders. "This has gone on long enough. If I stay this close to you, it may be noticed. Have you anything more to tell me? Or to ask? Make it quick, Daughter."

"What is *Callandor*, Mother?" Nynaeve asked.

This time it was the Amyrlin who forgot herself, half turning toward Nynaeve before jerking herself back. "They cannot be allowed to have that." Her whisper was barely audible, as if meant for her own ears alone. "They cannot possibly take it, but. . . ." She took a deep breath, and her soft words firmed enough to be clear to Nynaeve, if to no one two paces further away. "No more than a dozen women in the Tower know what *Callandor* is, and perhaps as many outside. The High Lords of Tear know, but they never speak of it except when a Lord of the Land is told on being raised. The Sword That Cannot Be Touched is a *sa'angreal*, girl. Only two more powerful were ever made, and thank the Light, neither of those was ever used. With *Callandor* in your hands, child, you could level a city at one blow. If you die keeping that out of the Black Ajah's hands—you, and Egwene, and Elayne, all three—you'll have done a service to the whole world, and cheap at the price."

"How could they take it?" Nynaeve asked. "I thought only the Dragon Reborn could touch *Callandor*."

The Amyrlin gave her a sideways look sharp enough to carve the roasts on the spit. “They could be after something else,” she said after a moment. “They stole *ter’angreal* here. The Stone of Tear holds nearly as many *ter’angreal* as the Tower.”

“I thought the High Lords hated anything to do with the One Power,” Nynaeve whispered incredulously.

“Oh, they do hate it, child. Hate it, and fear it. When they find a Tairen girl who can channel, they bundle her onto a ship for Tar Valon before the day is done, with hardly time to speak goodbyes to her family.” The Amyrlin’s murmur was bitter with memory. “Yet they hold one of the most powerful focuses of the Power the world has ever seen, inside their precious Stone. It is my belief that is why they have collected so many *ter’angreal*—and indeed, anything to do with the Power—over the years, as if by doing so they can diminish the existence of the thing they cannot rid themselves of, the thing that reminds them of their own doom every time they enter the Heart of the Stone. Their fortress that has broken a hundred armies will fall as one of the signs the Dragon is Reborn. Not even the only sign; just one. How that must rankle their proud hearts. Their downfall will not even be the one great sign of the world’s change. They cannot even ignore it by staying out of the Heart. That is where Lords of the Land are raised to High Lords, and where they must perform what they call the Rite of the Guarding four times a year, claiming that they guard the whole world against the Dragon by holding *Callandor.* It must bite at their souls like a bellyful of live silverpike, and no more than they deserve.” She gave herself a shake, as if realizing she had said far more than she had intended. “Is that all, child?”

“Yes, Mother,” Nynaeve said. *Light, it always comes back to Rand, doesn’t it? Always back to the Dragon Reborn.* It was still an effort to think of him that way. “That’s all.”

The Amyrlin shifted her stole again, frowning at the frenzied scurry in the kitchen. “I’ll have to set this aright. I needed to speak to you without delay, but Laras is a good woman, and she manages the kitchen and the larders well.”

Nynaeve sniffed, and addressed her hands on the spit handle. “Laras is a sour lump of lard, and too handy with that spoon by half.” She thought she had muttered it under her breath, but she heard the Amyrlin chuckle wryly.

"You are a fine judge of character, child. You must have done well as the Wisdom of your village. It was Laras who went to Sheriam and demanded to know how long you three are to be kept to the dirtiest and hardest work, without a turn at lighter. She said she would not be a party to breaking any woman's health or spirit, no matter what I said. A fine judge of character, child."

Laras came back into the kitchen doorway then, hesitating to enter her own domain. The Amyrlin went to meet her, smiles replacing her frowns and stares.

"It all looks very well to me, Laras." The Amyrlin's words came loud enough for the entire kitchen to hear. "I see nothing out of place, and everything as it should be. You are to be commended. I think I will make Mistress of the Kitchens a formal title."

The stout woman's face fluttered from uneasiness to shock to beaming pleasure. By the time the Amyrlin swept out of the kitchen, Laras was all smiles. Her frown returned, though, as she looked from the Amyrlin's departing back to her workers. The kitchen seemed to leap into motion. Laras' grim stare settled on Nynaeve.

Turning the spit again, Nynaeve tried smiling at the big woman.

Laras' frown deepened, and she began tapping her spoon on her thigh, apparently forgetting that for once it had been used for its intended purpose. It left smears of soup on the white of her apron.

I will smile at her if if kills me, Nynaeve thought, though she had to grit her teeth to do it.

Egwene and Elayne appeared, twisting their faces and scrubbing their mouths with their sleeves. At a stare from Laras, they dashed to the spit and resumed their labors.

"Soap," Elayne muttered thickly, "tastes horrid!"

Egwene trembled as she spooned juice from the dripping pan over the roasts. "Nynaeve, if you tell me the Amyrlin told us to stay here, I will scream. I might run away for real."

"We leave after the washing up is done," she told them, "just as quickly as we can fetch our belongings from our rooms." She wished she could share the eagerness that flashed in their eyes. *Light send we aren't walking into a trap we can't get out of. Light send it so.*

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CHAPTER 30

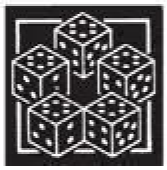

The First Toss

After Nynaeve and the others left him, Mat spent most of the day in his room, except for one brief excursion. He was planning. And eating. He ate nearly everything the serving women brought him, and asked for more. They were more than happy to oblige. It was bread and cheese and fruit he asked for, and he piled winter-wrinkled apples and pears, wedges of cheese and loaves of bread inside the wardrobe, leaving empty trays for them to take away.

At midday he had to endure a visit from an Aes Sedai—Anaiya, he seemed to remember her name was. She put her hands on his head and sent cold chills through him. It was the One Power, he decided, not simply being touched by an Aes Sedai. She was a plain woman despite her smooth cheeks and Aes Sedai serenity.

“You seem much better,” she told him, smiling. Her smile made him think of his mother. “Even hungrier than I expected, so I hear, but better. I am informed you are trying to eat the larders bare. Believe me when I say we will see you have all the food you need. You do not have to worry that we’ll let you miss a meal before you are fully well again.”

He gave the grin he used on his mother when he especially wanted her to believe him. “I know you won’t. And I do feel better. I thought I might see some of the city this afternoon. If you have no objections, of course. Maybe visit an inn tonight. There’s nothing like a night of common-room talk to pick one’s spirits up.”

He thought her lips twitched on the edge of a bigger smile. “No one will try to stop you, Mat. But do not try to leave the city. It will only upset the guards, and bring you nothing but a trip back here under escort.”

“I would not do that, Aes Sedai. The Amyrlin Seat said I’d starve to death in a few days if I left.”

She nodded as if she did not believe a word he said. “Of course.” As she turned from him, her eyes fell on the quarterstaff he had brought from the practice yard, propped in the corner of the room. “You do not need to protect yourself from us, Mat. You are as safe here as you could be anywhere. Almost certainly safer.”

“Oh, I know that, Aes Sedai. I do.” After she left he frowned at the door, wondering if he had managed to convince her of anything.

It was more evening than afternoon when he left the room for what he hoped was the final time. The sky was purpling, and the setting sun painted clouds to the west in shades of red. Once he had his cloak around him, and the big leather scrip he had found on his one earlier foray dangling from his shoulder and bulging with the bread and cheese and fruit he had squirreled away, one look in the mirror told him there was no hiding what he intended. He tied the rest of his clothes up in a roll with the blanket from the bed and slung that across his shoulders, too. The quarterstaff did for a walking staff. He left nothing behind. His coat pockets held all his smaller belongings, and his belt pouch held the most important. The Amyrlin Seat’s paper. Elayne’s letter. And his dice cups.

He saw Aes Sedai as he made his way out of the Tower, and some of them noticed him, though most merely flickered an eyebrow, and none spoke to him. Anaiya was one. She gave him an amused smile and a rueful shake of her head. He returned a shrug and the guiltiest grin he could manage, and she went silently on, still shaking her head. The guards at the Tower gates simply looked at him.

It was not until he was across the big square and into the streets of the city that relief finally surged up in him. And triumph. *If you can’t hide what you are going to do, do it so everybody thinks you are a fool. Then they stand around waiting to see you fall on your face. Those Aes Sedai will be waiting for the guards to bring me back. When I do not return by morning, then they’ll start a search. Not too frantic at first, because they’ll think I have gone to ground somewhere in the city. By the time they realize I haven’t, this rabbit will be a long way downriver from the hounds.*

With as light a heart as he could remember having in years, or so it seemed, he began to hum “We’re Over the Border Again,” heading toward the harbor where vessels would be sailing down to Tear and all the villages along the Erinin between. He would not be going so far as that, of course. Aringill, where he would take to land again for the rest of the trip to Caemlyn, was only halfway downriver.

I'll deliver your bloody letter. The nerve of her, thinking I'd say I would, then not. I will deliver the bloody thing if it kills me.

Twilight was beginning to cover Tar Valon, but there was still enough light to grace the fantastical buildings, and the oddly shaped towers connected by high bridges spanning open air over hundred-pace drops. People yet filled the streets, in so many different kinds of clothing that he thought every nation must be represented. Along the major avenues, pairs of lamplighters used their ladders to light lanterns atop tall poles. But in the part of Tar Valon he sought, the only light was what spilled from windows.

Ogier had built the great buildings and towers of Tar Valon, but other, newer parts had grown under the hands of men. Newer meaning two thousand years in some cases. Down near South harbor, men's hands had tried to match, if not duplicate, the fanciful Ogier work. Inns where ships' crews caroused bore enough stonework for palaces. Statues in niches and cupolas on rooftops, ornately worked cornices and intricately carved friezes, all decorated chandlers' shops and merchant houses. Bridges arched across the streets here, too, but the streets were cobblestone, not great paving blocks, and many of the bridges were wood instead of stone, sometimes as low as the second stories of the buildings they joined, and never higher than four.

The dark streets hummed with as much life as any in Tar Valon. Traders off their vessels and those who bought what the vessels carried, people who traveled the River Erinin and people who worked it, all filled the taverns and the common rooms of the inns, in company with those who sought the money such folk carried, by fair means or murky. Raucous music filled the streets from bittern and flute, harp and hammered dulcimer. The first inn Mat entered had three dice games in progress, men crouched in circles near the common-room walls and shouting the wins and losses.

He only meant to gamble an hour or so before finding a ship, just long enough to add a few coins to his purse, but he won. He had always won more than he lost, as far as he could remember, and there had been times with Hurin, and in Shienar, when six or eight tosses in a row won for him. Tonight, every toss won. Every toss.

From the looks some of the men gave him, he was glad he had left his own dice in his pouch. Those looks made him decide to move on. With surprise he realized that he had nearly thirty silver marks in his purse now, but he had not won so much from any one man that they would not all be glad to see him go.

Except for one dark sailor with tight curls—one of the Sea Folk, someone had said, though Mat wondered what one of the Atha'an Miere was doing so far from the sea—who followed him down the darkened street, arguing for a chance to make good his losses. He wanted to reach the docks—thirty silver marks was more than enough—but the sailor argued on, and he had only used half his hour, so he gave in, and with the man entered the next tavern they passed.

He won again, and it was as if a fever gripped him. He won every throw. From tavern to inn to tavern he went, never staying long enough to anger anyone with the amount of his winnings. And he still won every toss. He exchanged silver for gold with a money changer. He played at crowns, and fives, and maiden's ruin. He played games with five dice, and with four, and three, and even only two. He played games he did not know before he squatted in the circle, or took a place at the table. And he won. Somewhere during the night, the dark sailor—Raab, he had said his name was—staggered away, exhausted but with a full purse; he had decided to put his wagers on Mat. Mat visited another money changer—or perhaps two; the fever seemed to cloud his brain as badly as his memories of the past were clouded—and made his way to another game. Winning.

And so he found himself, he did not know how many hours later, in a tavern filled with tabac smoke—The Tremalking Splice, he thought it was called—staring down at five dice, each showing a deeply carved crown. Most of the patrons here seemed interested only in drinking as much as they could, but the rattle of dice and shouts of players from another game in the far corner were almost submerged by a woman singing to a quick tune from a hammered dulcimer.

"I'll dance with a girl with eyes of brown,
or a girl with eyes of green,
I'll dance with a girl with any color eyes,
but yours are the prettiest I've seen.
I'll kiss a girl with hair of black,
or a girl with hair of gold,
I'll kiss a girl with any color hair,
but it's you I want to hold."

The singer had named the song as “What He Said to Me.” Mat remembered the tune as “Will You Dance With Me,” with different words, but at that moment all he could think of were those dice.

“The king again,” one of the men squatting with Mat muttered. It was the fifth time in a row Mat had thrown the king.

He had won the bet of a gold mark, not even caring by this time that his Andoran mark outweighed the other man’s Illianer coin, but he scooped the dice into the leather cup, rattled it hard, and spun them across the floor again. Five crowns. *Light, it can’t be. Nobody ever threw the king six times running. Nobody.*

“The Dark One’s own luck,” another man growled. He was a bulky fellow, his dark hair tied at the nape of his neck with a black ribbon, with heavy shoulders, scars on his face, and a nose that had been broken more than once.

Mat was scarcely aware of moving before he had the bulky man by the collar, hauling him to his feet, slamming him back against the wall. “Don’t you say that!” he snarled. “Don’t you ever say that!” The man blinked down at him in astonishment; he was a full head taller than Mat.

“Just a saying,” somebody behind him was muttering. “Light, it’s just a saying.”

Mat released his grip on the scar-faced man’s coat and backed away. “I. . . . I . . . I don’t like anybody saying things like that about me. I’m no Darkfriend!” *Burn me, not the Dark One’s luck. Not that! Oh, Light, did that bloody dagger really do something to me?*

“Nobody said you was,” the broken-nosed man muttered. He seemed to be getting over his surprise, and trying to decide whether to be angry.

Gathering his belongings from where he had piled them behind him, Mat walked out of the tavern, leaving the coins where they lay. It was not that he was afraid of the big man. He had forgotten the man, and the coins, too. All he wanted was to be outside, in fresh air, where he could think.

In the street, he leaned against the wall of the tavern not far from the door, breathing the coolness in. The dark streets of Southharbor were all but empty, now. Music and laughter still floated from the inns and taverns, but few people made their way through the night. Holding the quarterstaff upright in front of him with both hands, he lowered his head to his fists and tried to think at the puzzle from every side.

He knew he was lucky. He could remember always being lucky. But somehow, his memories from Emond's Field did not show him as lucky as he had been since leaving. Certainly he had gotten away with a great deal, but he could remember also being caught in pranks he had been sure would succeed. His mother had always seemed to know what he was up to, and Nynaeve able to see through whatever defenses he put up. But it was not just since leaving the Two Rivers that he had become lucky. The luck had come once he took the dagger from Shadar Logoth. He remembered playing at dice back home with a sharp-eyed, skinny man who worked for a merchant come down from Baerlon to buy tabac. He remembered the strapping his father had given him, too, on learning Mat owed the man a silver mark and four pence.

"But I'm free of the bloody dagger," he mumbled. "Those bloody Aes Sedai said I was." He wondered how much he had won tonight.

When he dug into his coat pockets, he found them filled with loose coins, crowns and marks, both silver and gold that glittered and glinted in the light from nearby windows. He had two purses now, it seemed, and both fat. He undid the strings, and found more gold. And still more stuffed into his belt pouch between and around and on top of his dice cups, crumpling Elayne's letter and the Amyrlin's paper. He had a memory of tossing silver pence to serving girls because they had pretty smiles or pretty eyes or pretty ankles, and because silver pence were not worth keeping.

Not worth keeping? Maybe they weren't. Light, I'm rich! I am bloody rich! Maybe it was something the Aes Sedai did. Something they did Healing me. By accident, maybe. That could be it. Better that the other. Those bloody Aes Sedai must have done it to me.

A big man moved out from the tavern, the door already swinging shut to cut off the light that might have shown his face.

Mat pressed his back close against the wall, stuffed the purses back into his coat, and firmed his grip on the quarterstaff. Wherever his luck tonight had come from, he did not mean to lose all that gold to a footpad.

The man turned toward him, peered, then gave a start. "C-cool night," he said drunkenly. He staggered closer, and Mat saw that most of his size was fat. "I have to. . . . I have to. . . ." Stumbling, the fat man moved on up the street, talking to himself disjointedly.

"Fool!" Mat muttered, but he was not sure whether he meant it for the fat man or for himself. "Time to find a ship to take me away from here." He squinted at the black sky, trying to estimate how long till dawn. Two, maybe three hours, he thought. “Past time.” His stomach growled at him; he dimly recalled eating in some of the inns, but he did not remember what. The fever of the dice had had him by the throat. A hand pushed into the scrip found only crumbs. “Way past time. Or one of them will come pick me up with her fingers and stick me in her pouch.” He pushed away from the wall and started for the docks, where the ships would be.

At first he thought the faint sounds behind him were echoes of his boots on the cobblestones. Then he realized someone was following him. And trying to be stealthy. *Well,* these *are footpads, for sure.*

Hefting the quarterstaff, he briefly considered turning to confront them. But it was dark, and the footing on cobblestones uncertain, and he had no idea how many there were. *Just because you did well against Gawyn and Galad doesn’t make you a bloody hero out of a story.*

He turned down a narrower, twisting side street, trying to walk on tiptoe and move quickly at the same time. Every window was dark here, and most shuttered. He was almost to the end when he saw movement ahead, two men peering into the side street from where it let out onto another. And he heard slow footsteps behind him, soft scrapes of boot leather on stone.

In an instant he ducked into the shadowy corner where one building stuck out further than the next. It seemed the best he could do for the moment. Gripping the quarterstaff nervously, he waited.

A man appeared from back the way he had come, crouching as he eased himself ahead one slow step at a time, and then another man. Each carried a knife in his hand and moved as if stalking.

Mat tensed. If they came just a few steps closer before they noticed him hiding in the deeper shadows of the corner, he could take them by surprise. He wished his stomach would stop fluttering. Those knives were a great deal shorter than the practice swords, but they were steel, not wood.

One of the men squinted toward the far end of the narrow street and suddenly straightened, shouting, “Didn’t he come your way, then?”

“I have seen nothing but the shadows,” came the answer in a heavy accent. “I wish to be out of this. There are the strange things moving this night.”

Not four paces from Mat, the two men exchanged looks, sheathed their knives, and trotted back the way they had come.

He let out a long, slow breath. *Luck. Burn me if it's not good for more than dice.*

He could no longer see the men at the mouth of the street, but he knew they were still out on the next street somewhere. And more behind him the other way.

One of the buildings he was crouched against stood only a single story high here, and the roof looked flat enough. And a white stone frieze carved in huge grape leaves ran up the joining of the two buildings.

Easing his quarterstaff up till one end rested on the edge of the roof, he gave it a hard shove. It landed with a clatter on the roof tiles. Not waiting to see if anyone had heard, he scrambled up the frieze, the big leaves giving easy toeholds even for a man in boots. In seconds he had the staff back in hand and was trotting across the roof, trusting to luck for his footing.

Three more times he climbed, each time gaining one story. The slightly sloping, tiled roofs ran some distance at that level, and there was a breeze at that height, prickling the hair on the back of his neck with its chill and almost making him think he was being followed. *Stop that, fool! They're three streets away by now, looking for somebody else with a fat purse, and bad luck to them.*

His boots slipped on the tiles, and he decided it might be a good idea to think about getting back down into the street himself. Cautiously, he moved to the edge of the roof and peered down. An empty street lay a good forty feet or more below him, with three taverns and an inn spilling light and music onto the cobblestones. But off to his right was a stone bridge running from the top floor of his building to the one on the other side.

The bridge looked awfully narrow, running through darkness untouched by the tavern lights, arcing over a long fall to hard cobblestones, but he tossed the quarterstaff down and made himself follow before he could think about it too much. His boots thumped onto the bridge, and he let himself roll the way he had as a boy falling out of a tree. He fetched up against the waist-high railing.

"Bad habits pay off in the long run," he told himself as he got to his feet and picked up the staff.

The window at the other end of the bridge was tightly shuttered and lightless. He did not think whoever lived in there would appreciate a stranger appearing in the middle of the night. He could see lots of stonework, but if there was as much as a fingerhold in reach of the bridge, the night hid it. *Well, stranger or no stranger, inside I go.*

He turned from the railing and suddenly became aware of a man sharing the bridge with him. A man with a dagger in his hand.

Mat grabbed at the hand as the knife darted toward his throat. He barely caught the fellow's wrist with his fingers, and then the quarterstaff between them tangled itself in his legs, tripping him to fall back against the railing, to fall half over it pulling the other man on top of him. Balanced there on the small of his back, teetering with his assailant's bared teeth in his face, he was as aware of the long drop under his head as he was of the blade catching faint moonlight as it edged toward his throat. His finger grip on the man's wrist was slipping, and his other hand was caught with the quarterstaff between their bodies. Only seconds had passed since he first saw the man, and in seconds more, he was going die with a knife in his throat.

"Time to toss the dice," he said. He thought the other man looked confused for an instant, but an instant was all he had. With a heave of his legs, Mat flipped them both off into the empty air.

For a stretched-out moment he seemed to have no weight. Air whistled past his ears and ruffled his hair. He thought he heard the other man scream, or start to. The impact knocked all the air out of his lungs and made silver-black flecks dance across his blurring vision.

When he could breathe again—and see—he realized he was lying on top of the man who had attacked him, his fall cushioned by the other's body. "Luck," he whispered. Slowly he climbed to his feet, cursing the bruise the quarterstaff had put across his ribs.

He expected the other man to be dead—not many could survive a thirty-foot fall to cobblestones with another's weight on top of him—but what he had not expected was to see the fellow's dagger driven to the hilt into his own heart. Such an ordinary-looking man to have tried to kill him. Mat did not think he would even have noticed him in a crowded room.

"You had bad luck, fellow," he told the corpse shakily.

Suddenly, everything that had happened rushed back in on him. The footpads in the twisting street. The scramble over the rooftops. This fellow. The fall. His eyes rose to the bridge overhead, and a fit of trembling hit him. *I must have been crazy. A little adventure is one thing, but Rogosh Eagle-eye wouldn't ask for this.*

He realized he was standing over a dead man with a dagger in his chest, just waiting for someone to come along and run shouting for city guards with the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests. The Amyrlin’s paper might get him away from them, but maybe not before she found out. He could still end up back in the White Tower, without that paper, and possibly not even allowed outside the Tower grounds.

He knew he should be on his way to the docks right then, and on the first vessel sailing if it was a rotten tub full of old fish, but his knees were shaking hard enough in reaction that he could hardly walk. What he wanted was to sit down for just a minute. Just a minute to steady his knees, and then he was headed for the docks.

The taverns were closer, but he started toward the inn. The common room of an inn was a friendly place, where a man could rest a minute and not worry about who might be sneaking up behind him. Enough light came out through the windows for him to make out the sign. A woman with her hair in braids, holding what he thought was an olive branch, and the words “The Woman of Tanchico.”

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CHAPTER 31

The Woman of Tanchico

The common room of the inn was brightly lit, the tables not near a quarter full so late. A few white-aproned serving women with mugs of ale or wine passed among the men, and a low murmur of talk ran under the sound of a harp being strummed and plucked. The patrons, some with pipes clenched in their teeth and one pair hunched over a stones board, had the look of ship's officers and minor merchants from the smaller houses, their coats well cut and of fine wool, but with none of the gold or silver or embroidery that richer men might have had. And for once there was no clack and rattle of dice to be heard. Fires blazed on the long hearths at the ends of the room, but even without those there would have been a warm feeling about the place.

The harper stood on a tabletop, reciting "Mara and the Three Foolish Kings," to the music of his harp. His instrument, all worked in gold and silver, was fit for a palace. Mat knew him. He had saved Mat's life, once.

The harper was a lean man who would have been tall except for a stoop, and he moved with a limp when he shifted his footing on the tabletop. Even here inside, he wore his cloak, all covered with fluttering patches in a hundred colors. He always wanted everyone to know he was a gleeman. His long mustaches and bushy eyebrows were as snow-white as the thick hair on his head, and his blue eyes held a look of sorrow as he recited. The look was as unexpected as the man. Mat had never known Thom Merrilin to be a sorrowful man.

He took a table, setting his things on the floor by his stool, and ordered two mugs. The pretty young serving girl's big brown eyes twinkled at him.

"Two, young master? You do not look such a hard-drinking man as that." Her voice held a mischievous edge of laughter.

After rummaging a bit, he brought out two silver pennies from his pocket. One more than paid for the wine, but he slipped her another for her eyes. “My friend will be joining me.”

He knew Thom had seen him. The old gleeman had nearly stopped the story dead when Mat came in. That was new, too. Few things startled Thom enough for him to let it show, and nothing short of Trollocs had ever made him stop a story in the middle that Mat knew. When the girl brought the wine and his coppers in change, he let the pewter mugs sit and listened to the end of the story.

“ ‘It was as we have said it should be,’ said King Madel, trying to untangle a fish from his long beard.” Thom’s voice seemed almost to echo inside a great hall, not an ordinary common room. His plucked harp sounded the three kings’ final foolishness. “ ‘It was as we said it would be,’ announced Orander. And, feet slipping in the mud, he sat down with a great splash. ‘It was as we said it must be,’ proclaimed Kadar as he searched, up to his elbows in the river, for his crown. ‘The woman knows not whereof she speaks. She is the fool!’ Madel and Orander agreed with him loudly. And with that, Mara had had enough. ‘I’ve given them all the chances they deserve and more,’ she murmured to herself. Slipping Kadar’s crown into her bag with the first two, she climbed back onto her cart, clucked to her mare, and drove straight back to her village. And when Mara had told them all that happened, the people of Heape would have no king at all.” He strummed the major theme of the kings’ foolishness once more, this time sliding to a crescendo that sounded even more like laughter, made a sweeping bow, and nearly fell off the table.

Men laughed and stamped their feet, though likely every one of them had heard the story many times before, and called for more. The story of Mara was always well received, except perhaps by kings.

Thom nearly fell again climbing down from the table, and he was more unsteady in his walk than a somewhat stiff leg could account for as he came to where Mat was sitting. Casually putting his harp on the table, he dropped onto a stool in front of the second mug and gave Mat a flat stare. His eyes had always been sharp as awls, but they seemed to be having trouble focusing.

“Common,” he muttered. His voice was still deep, but it no longer seemed to reverberate. “The tale is a hundred times better in Plain Chant, and a thousand in High, but they want Common.” Without another word, he buried his face in his wine.

Mat could not recall ever seeing Thom finish playing that harp without immediately putting it away in its hard leather case. He had never seen him the worse for drink. It was a relief to hear the gleeman complaining about his listeners; Thom never thought their standards were as high as his. At least something of him had not changed.

The serving girl was back, with no twinkle in her eyes. “Oh, Thom,” she said softly, then rounded on Mat. “If I’d known he was the friend you awaited, I’d not have brought you wine for him if you gave a hundred silver pence.”

“I did not know he was drunk,” Mat protested.

But her attention was back on Thom, her voice gentle again. “Thom, you need some rest. They’ll keep you telling stories all night and all day, if you let them.”

Another woman appeared on Thom’s other side, lifting her apron off over her head. She was older than the first, but no less pretty. The two might have been sisters. “A beautiful story, I’ve always thought, Thom, and you tell it beautifully. Come, I’ve slipped a warming pan into your bed, and you can tell me all about the court in Caemlyn.”

Thom peered into the mug as if surprised to find it empty, then blew out his long mustaches and looked from one woman to the other. “Pretty Mada. Pretty Saal. Did I ever tell you that two pretty women have loved me in my life? That is more than most men can claim.”

“You’ve told us all about it, Thom,” the older woman said sadly. The younger glared at Mat as if this were all his fault.

“Two,” Thom murmured. “Morgase had a temper, but I thought I could ignore that, so it ended with her wanting to kill me. Dena, I killed. As good as. Not much difference. Two chances I’ve had, more than most, and I threw them both away.”

“I will take care of him,” Mat said. Mada and Saal were both glaring at him, now. He gave them his best smile, but it did not work. His stomach muttered loudly. “Don’t I smell chicken roasting? Bring me three or four.” The two women blinked and exchanged startled looks when he added, “Do you want something to eat, too, Thom?”

“I could do with more of this fine Andoran wine.” The gleeman raised his cup hopefully.

“No more wine for you tonight, Thom.” The older woman would have taken his cup if he had let her.

Almost on top of the first woman, the younger said, in a mixture of firmness and pleading, “You’ll have some chicken, Thom. It is very good.”

Neither would leave until the gleeman agreed to eat something, and when they did go, they gave Mat such a combination of stares and sniffs that he could only shake his head. *Burn me, you would think I was encouraging him to drink more! Women! But pretty eyes on the pair of them.*

“Rand said you were alive,” he told Thom when Mada and Saal were out of hearing. “Moiraine always said she thought you were. But I heard you were in Cairhien, and meaning to go on to Tear.”

“Rand is still well, then?” Thom’s eyes sharpened to almost the keenness Mat remembered. “I am not sure I expected that. Moiraine is still with him, is she? A fine-looking woman. A fine woman, if she were not Aes Sedai. Meddle with that sort, and you get more than your fingers burned.”

“Why wouldn’t you expect Rand to be all right?” Mat asked carefully. “Do you know of something that could harm him?”

“Know? I don’t know anything, boy. I suspect more than is healthy for me, but I know nothing.”

Mat abandoned that line of talk. *No use firming his suspicions. No use letting him know I know more than’s healthy myself.*

The older woman—Thom called her Mada—came back with three chickens with crisp, brown skins, giving the white-haired man a worried look, and Mat a warning one, before she left. Mat ripped off a leg and set to as he talked. Thom frowned into his cup and never looked at the birds.

“Why are you here in Tar Valon, Thom? It’s the last place I’d have expected to see you, the way you feel about Aes Sedai. I heard you were coining money in Cairhien.”

“Cairhien,” the old gleeman muttered, the sharpness fading from his eyes again. “Such trouble it causes killing a man, even when he deserves killing.” He made a flourish with one hand and was holding a knife. Thom always had knives secreted about him. Drunk he might have been, but he held the blade steady enough. “Kill a man who needs killing, and sometimes others pay for it. The question is, was it worth doing anyway? There’s always a balance, you know. Good and evil. Light and Shadow. We would not be human if there wasn’t a balance.”

“Put that away,” Mat growled around a mouthful. “I don’t want to talk about killing.” *Light, that fellow is still lying right out there in the street.*

Burn me, I ought to be on a ship by now. “I just asked why you’re in Tar Valon. If you had to leave Cairhien because you killed someone, I do not want to know about it. Blood and ashes, if you can’t pull your wits out of the wine enough to talk straight, I’ll leave now.”

With a sour look, Thom made the knife disappear. “Why am I in Tar Valon? I’m here because it is the worst place I could be, except maybe Caemlyn. It’s what I deserve, boy. Some of the Red Ajah still remember me. I saw Elaida in the street the other day. If she knew I was here, she would peel my hide off in strips, and then she would stop being pleasant.”

“I never knew you to feel sorry for yourself,” Mat said disgustedly. “Do you mean to drown yourself in wine?”

“What do you know of it, boy?” Thom snarled. “Put a few years on you, see something of life, maybe love a woman or two, and then you’ll know. Perhaps you will, if you have the brains to learn. Aaaah! You want to know why I’m in Tar Valon? Why are you in Tar Valon? I remember you shivering when you found out Moiraine was Aes Sedai. You nearly soiled yourself every time anybody even mentioned the Power. What are you doing in Tar Valon, with Aes Sedai on every side?”

“I am leaving Tar Valon. That’s what I am doing here. Leaving!” Mat grimaced. The gleeman had saved his life, and maybe more. A Fade had been involved. That was why Thom’s right leg did not work as well as it should. *There could not be enough wine on a ship to keep him this drunk.* “I am going to Caemlyn, Thom. If you need to risk your fool life for some reason, why not come with me?”

“Caemlyn?” Thom said musingly.

“Caemlyn, Thom. Elaida will likely be going back there sooner or later, so you’d have her to worry about. And from what I remember, if Morgase puts her hands on you, you will wish Elaida had you.”

“Caemlyn. Yes. Caemlyn would fit my mood like a glove.” The gleeman glanced at the chicken platter and gave a start. “What did you do, boy? Stuff them up your sleeve?” There was nothing left of the three birds but bones and carcasses with only a few strips of flesh remaining.

“Sometimes I get hungry,” Mat muttered. It was an effort not to lick his fingers. “Are you coming with me, or not?”

“Oh, I will come, boy.” As Thom pushed himself to his feet, he did not seem as unsteady as he had been. “You wait here—and try not to eat the table—while I get my things and say some goodbyes." He limped away, not staggering once.

Mat drank a little of his wine and stripped off a few shreds that were left on the chicken carcasses, wondering if he had time to order another, but Thom was back quickly. His harp and flute in their dark leather cases hung on his back with a tied blanketroll. He carried a plain walking staff as tall as he was. The two serving women followed on either side. Mat decided they were sisters. Identical big brown eyes looked up at the gleeman with identical expressions. Thom was kissing first Saal, then Mada, and patting cheeks as he headed for the door, jerking his head for Mat to follow. He was outside before Mat could finish collecting his own belongings and pick up his quarterstaff.

The younger of the two women, Saal, stopped Mat as he reached the door. "Whatever you said to him, I forgive you for the wine, even if it is taking him away. I've not seen him this alive in weeks." She pressed something into his hand, and when he glanced at it, his eyes widened in confusion. She had given him a silver Tar Valon mark. "For whatever it was you said. Besides, whoever is feeding you is not doing a good job of it, but you still have pretty eyes." She laughed at the expression on his face.

Mat was laughing, too, in spite of himself, as he went out into the street, rolling the silver coin across the backs of his fingers. *So I have pretty eyes, do I?* His laughter shut off like the last drip from a wine barrel: Thom was there, but not the corpse. The windows of the taverns down the street put enough light across the cobblestones for him to be sure of it. The city guard would not have carried a dead man away without asking questions, at those taverns and at The Woman of Tanchico, too.

"What are you staring at, boy?" Thom asked. "No Trollocs in those shadows."

"Footpads," Mat muttered. "I was thinking about footpads."

"No street thieves or strong-arms in Tar Valon, either, boy. When the guards take a footpad—not that many try that game here; the word spreads—but when they do, they haul him to the Tower, and whatever it is the Aes Sedai do to him, the fellow leaves Tar Valon the next day as wide-eyed as a goosed girl. I understand they're even harder on women caught thieving. No, the only way you'll have your money stolen here is somebody selling you polished brass for gold or using shaved dice. There are no footpads."

Mat turned on his heel and strode past Thom, heading toward the docks, quarterstaff thumping off the cobblestones as if he could push himself ahead faster. “We’re going to be on the first ship sailing, whatever it is. The first, Thom.”

Thom’s stick clicked hurriedly after him. “Slow down, boy. What’s your hurry? There are plenty of ships, sailing day and night. Slow down. There aren’t any footpads.”

“The first bloody ship, Thom! If it’s sinking, we’ll be on it!” *If they weren’t footpads, what were they? They had to be thieves. What else could they be?*

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CHAPTER 32

The First Ship

Southharbor itself, the great Ogier-made basin, was huge and round, surrounded by high walls of the same silver-streaked white stone as the rest of Tar Valon. One long wharf, most of it roofed, ran all the way around, except where the wide water gates stood open to give access to the river. Vessels of every size lined the wharf, most moored by the stern, and despite the hour dockmen in coarse, sleeveless shirts hurried about loading and unloading bales and chests, crates and barrels, with ropes and booms, or on their backs. Lamps hanging from the roof beams lit the wharfs and made a band of light around the black water in the middle of the harbor. Small open boats scuttled through the darkness, the square lanterns atop their tall sternposts making it seem as if fireflies skittered across the harbor. They were small only compared to the ships, though; some had as many as six pairs of long oars.

When Mat led a still-muttering Thom under an arch of polished redstone and down broad steps to the wharf, crewmen on one three-masted ship were unfastening the mooring lines not twenty paces away. The vessel was larger than most Mat could see, between fifteen and twenty spans from sharp bow to squared stern, with a flat, railed deck almost level with the wharf. The important thing was that it was casting off. *The first ship that sails.*

A gray-haired man came up the wharf: three lines of hemp rope sewn down the sleeves of his dark coat marked him as a dockmaster. His wide shoulders suggested that he might have begun as a dockman hauling rope instead of wearing it. He glanced casually in Mat's direction, and stopped, surprise on his leathery face. "Your bundles say what you're planning, lad, but you might as well forget it. The sister showed me a drawing of you. You'll board no ship in Southharbor, lad. Go back up those stairs so I don't have to tell a man off to watch you."

"What under the Light . . . ?" Thom murmured.

“That’s all changed,” Mat said firmly. The ship was casting off the last mooring line; the furled triangular sails still made thick, pale bundles on the long, slanted booms, but men were readying the sweeps. He pulled the Amyrlin’s paper out of his pouch and thrust it in the dockmaster’s face. “As you can see, I’m on the business of the Tower, at the order of the Amyrlin Seat herself. And I have to leave on that very vessel there.”

The dockmaster read the words, then read them again. “I never saw such a thing in my life. Why would the Tower say you couldn’t go, then give you . . . *that*?”

“Ask the Amyrlin, if you want,” Mat told him in a weary voice that said he did not think anyone could possibly be stupid enough to do that, “but she’ll have my hide, and yours, if I do not sail on that ship.”

“You’ll never make it,” the dockmaster said, but he was already cupping his hands to his mouth. “Aboard the *Gray Gull* there! Stop! The Light burn you, stop!”

The shirtless fellow at the tiller looked back, then spoke to a tall companion in a dark coat with puffy sleeves. The tall man never took his eyes off the crewmen just dipping the sweeps into the water. “Give way together,” he called, and sweepblades curled up froth.

“I’ll make it,” Mat snapped. *The first ship I said, and the first ship I meant!* “Come on, Thom!”

Without waiting to see if the gleeman followed, he ran down the wharf, dodging around men and barrows stacked with cargo. The gap between the *Gray Gull*’s stern and the wharf widened as the sweeps bit deeper. Hefting his quarterstaff, he hurled it ahead of him toward the ship like a spear, took one more step, and jumped as hard as he could.

The dark water passing beneath his feet looked icy, but in a heartbeat he had cleared the ship’s rail and was rolling across the deck. As he scrambled to his feet, he heard a grunt and a curse behind him.

Thom Merrilin hoisted himself up on the railing with another curse, and climbed over onto the deck. “I lost my stick,” he muttered. “I’ll want another.” Rubbing his right leg, he peered down at the still widening strip of water behind the vessel and shivered. “I had a bath today already.” The shirtless steersman stared wide-eyed from him to Mat and back again, clutching the tiller as if wondering whether he could use it to defend himself from madmen.

The tall man seemed nearly as stunned. His pale blue eyes bulged, and his mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. His dark beard, cut to a point, seemed to quiver with rage, and his narrow face grew purple. "By the Stone!" he bellowed finally. "What is the meaning of this? I've no room on this vessel for as much as a ship's cat, and I'd not take vagabonds who leap onto my decks if I did. Sanor! Vasa! Heave this rubbish over the side!" Two extremely large men, barefoot and stripped to the waist, straightened from coiling lines and started toward the stern. The men at the sweeps continued their work, bending to lift the blades, taking three long steps along the deck, then straightening and walking backwards, hauling the ship ahead on their blades.

Mat waved the Amyrlin's paper toward the bearded man—the captain, he supposed—with one hand, and fished a gold crown out of his pouch with the other, taking care even in his haste that the fellow saw there were more where that came from. Tossing the heavy coin to the man, he spoke quickly, still waving the paper. "For the inconvenience of our boarding as we did, Captain. More to come for passage. On business of the White Tower. Personal command of the Amyrlin Seat. Imperative we sail immediately. To Aringill, in Andor. Utmost urgency. The blessings of the White Tower on all who aid us; the Tower's wrath on any who impede us."

Certain the man had seen the Flame of Tar Valon seal by that time—and little more, Mat hoped—he folded the paper again and thrust it back out of sight. Eyeing the two big men uneasily as they came up on either side of the captain—*Burn me, they both have arms like Perrin's!*—he wished he had his quarterstaff in hand. He could see it lying where it had landed, further down the deck. He tried to look sure and confident, the sort of man others had better not trifle with, a man with the power of the White Tower behind him. *A long way behind me, I hope.*

The captain looked at Mat doubtfully, and even more so at Thom in his gleeman's cloak and none too steady afoot, but he motioned Sanor and Vasa to stop where they were. "I would not anger the Tower. Burn my soul, for the time being the river trade takes me from Tear to this den of. . . . I come too often to anger . . . anyone." A tight smile appeared on his face. "But I spoke the truth. By the Stone, I did! Six cabins I have for passengers, and all full. You can sleep on deck and eat with the crew for another gold crown. Each."

“That is ridiculous!” Thom snapped. “I don’t care what the war has done downriver, that is ridiculous!” The two large sailors shifted their bare feet.

“It is the price,” the captain said firmly. “I do not want to anger anyone, but I’d as soon not have any business you can be on aboard my vessel. Like letting a man pay you so he can coat you with hot tar, mixing in *that* business. You pay the price, or you go over the side, and the Amyrlin Seat herself can dry you off. And I’ll keep this for the trouble you’ve given me, thank you.” He stuffed the gold crown Mat has tossed him into a pocket of his puffy-sleeved coat.

“How much for one of the cabins?” Mat asked. “To ourselves. You can put whoever is in it now with someone else.” He did not want to sleep out in the cold night. *And if you don’t overwhelm a fellow like this, he’ll steal your breeches and say he is doing you a favor.* His stomach rumbled loudly. “And we eat what you eat, not with the crew. And plenty of it!”

“Mat,” Thom said, “I’m the one who is supposed to be drunk here.” He turned to the captain, flourishing his patch-covered cloak as well as he could with blanketroll and instrument cases hung about him. “As you may have noticed, Captain, I am a gleeman.” Even in the open air, his voice suddenly seemed to echo. “For the price of our passages, I would be more than glad to entertain your passengers and your crew—”

“My crew is aboard to work, gleeman, not be entertained.” The captain stroked his pointed beard; his pale eyes priced Mat’s plain coat to the copper. “So you want a cabin, do you?” He barked a laugh. “And my meals? Well, you can have my cabin and my meals. For five gold crowns from each of you! Andoran weight!” Those were the heaviest. He began to laugh so hard his words came out in wheezes. Flanking him, Sanor and Vasa grinned wide grins. “For ten crowns, you can take my cabin, and my meals, and I’ll move in with the passengers and eat with the crew. Burn my soul, I will! By the Stone, I swear it! For ten gold crowns. . . .” Laughter choked off anything else.

He was still laughing and gasping for breath and wiping tears from his eyes when Mat pulled out one of his two purses, but laughter stopped by the time Mat had counted five crowns into his hands. The captain blinked in disbelief; the two big crewmen looked poleaxed.

“Andoran weight, you said?” Mat asked. It was hard to judge without scales, but he laid seven more on the pile. Two actually were Andoran, and he thought the others made up the weight. *Close enough, for this fellow.* After a moment, he added another two gold Tairen crowns. “For whoever you’ll be pushing out of the cabin they paid for.” He did not think the passengers would see a copper of it, but it sometimes paid to appear generous. “Unless you mean to share with them? No, of course not. They ought to have something for having to crowd in with others. There’s no need for you to eat with your crew, Captain. You are welcome to share Thom’s meals and mine in your cabin.” Thom stared at him as hard as the others did.

“Are you . . . ?” The bearded man’s voice was a hoarse whisper. “Are you . . . by any chance . . . a young lord in disguise?”

“I am no lord.” Mat laughed. He had reason to laugh. The *Gray Gull* was well out into the darkness of the harbor, now, with the wharf a band of light pointing up the black gap, not far ahead now, where the water gates let out onto the river. The sweeps drove the vessel toward that gap quickly. Men were already swinging the long, slanting booms around preparatory to unlashing the sails. And with gold in his hands, the captain no longer seemed ready to throw anyone overboard. “If you don’t mind, Captain, could we see our cabin? Your cabin, I mean. It’s late, and I for one want a few hours’ sleep.” His stomach spoke to him. “And supper!”

As the vessel put its bow into the blackness, the bearded man himself led the way down a ladder to a short, narrow passage lined with doors set close together. While the captain cleared his things from his cabin—it ran the width of the stern, with its bed and all of its furnishings built into the walls except two chairs and a few chests—and saw that Mat and Thom were settled, Mat learned a great deal, beginning with the fact that the man would not be pushing any passengers out of their quarters. He had too much respect for the coin they had paid, if not for them, to allow that. The captain would take his first’s cabin, and that officer would take the second’s bed, pushing each lower man down till the deckmaster would end sleeping up in the bow with the crew.

Mat did not think that information could be very useful, but he listened to everything the man said. It was always best to know not only where you were going, but who you were dealing with, or they might just take your coat and boots and leave you to walk home through the rain in bare feet.

The captain was a Tairen named Huan Mallia, and he spoke with great volubility once he had worked out Mat and Thom to his own satisfaction.

He was not nobly born, he said, not him, but he would not have anyone think he was a fool. A young man with more gold than any young man should have by right might be a thief, if everyone did not know thieves never escaped Tar Valon with their haul. A young man dressed like a farmboy but with the air and confidence of the lord he denied being—"By the Stone, I'll not say you are, if you say you are not." Mallia winked and chuckled and tugged the point of his beard. A young man carrying a paper bearing the Amyrlin Seat's seal and bound for Andor. There was no secret that Queen Morgase had visited Tar Valon, though her reason certainly was. It was obvious to Mallia something was afoot between Caemlyn and Tar Valon. And Mat and Thom were messengers—for Morgase, he thought, by Mat's accent. Anything he could do to help in so great an enterprise would be his pleasure, not that he meant to poke where he was not wanted.

Mat exchanged startled looks with Thom, who was stowing his instrument cases under a table built out from one wall. The room had two small windows on either side, and a pair of lamps in jointed brackets for light. "That's nonsense," Mat said.

"Of course," Mallia replied. He straightened from pulling clothes out of a chest at the foot of the bed and smiled. "Of course." A cupboard in the wall seemed to hold charts of the river he would need. "I'll say no more."

But he did mean to poke, though he attempted to disguise it, and he rambled while he tried to pry. Mat listened, and answered the questions with grunts or shrugs or a word or two, while Thom said less than that. The gleeman kept shaking his head while unburdening himself of his possessions.

Mallia had been a river man all his life, though he dreamed of sailing on the sea. He hardly spoke of a country beside Tear without contempt; Andor was the only one to escape, and the praise he finally managed was grudging despite his obvious efforts. "Good horses in Andor, I've heard. Not bad. Not as good as Tairen stock, but good enough. You make good steel, and iron goods, bronze and copper—I've traded for them often enough, though you charge a weighty price—but then you have those mines in the Mountains of Mist. Gold mines, too. We have to earn our gold, in Tear."

Mayene received his greatest contempt. "Even less a country than Murandy is. One city and a few leagues of land. They underprice the oil from our good Tairen olives just because their ships know how to find the oilfish shoals. They've no right to be a country at all."

He hated Illian. "One day we'll loot Illian bare, tear down every town and village, and sow their filthy ground with salt." Mallia's beard almost bristled with outrage at how filthy the Illian land was. "Even their olives are putrid! One day we'll carry every last Illianer pig off in chains! That is what the High Lord Samon says."

Mat wondered what the man thought Tear would do with all those people if they actually fulfilled this scheme. The Illianers would have to be fed, and they would surely do no work in chains. It made no sense to him, but Mallia's eyes shone when he spoke of it.

Only fools let themselves be ruled by a king or a queen, by one man or woman. "Except Queen Morgase, of course," he put in hastily. "She is a fine woman, so I've heard. Beautiful, I'm told." All those fools bowing to one fool. The High Lords ruled Tear together, reaching decisions in concert, and that was how things should be. The High Lords knew what was right and good and true. Especially the High Lord Samon. No man could go wrong obeying the High Lords. Especially the High Lord Samon.

Beyond kings and queens, beyond even Illian, lay a bigger hatred Mallia attempted to keep hidden, but he talked so much in trying to find out what they were up to, and grew so carried away by the sound of his own voice, that he let more slip than he intended.

They must travel a great deal, serving a great Queen like Morgase. They must have seen many lands. He dreamed of the sea because then he could see lands he had only heard of, because then he could find the Mayener oilfish shoals, could out-trade the Sea Folk and the filthy Illianers. And the sea was far from Tar Valon. They must understand that, forced as they were to travel among odd places and people, places and people they could not have stomached if they were not serving Queen Morgase.

"I never liked docking there, never knowing who might be using the Power." He almost spat the last word. Since he had heard the High Lord Samon speak, though. . . . "Burn my soul, it makes me feel like hullworms are burrowing into my belly just looking at their White Tower, now, knowing what they plan."

The High Lord Samon said the Aes Sedai meant to rule the world. Samon said they meant to crush every nation, put their foot on every man's throat. Samon said Tear could no longer hold the Power out of its own lands and believe that was enough. Samon said Tear had its rightful day of glory coming, but Tar Valon stood between Tear and glory.

“There’s no hope for it. Sooner or later they will have to be hunted down and killed, every last Aes Sedai. The High Lord Samon says the others might be saved—the young ones, the novices, the Accepted—if they’re brought to the Stone, but the rest must be eradicated. That’s what the High Lord Samon says. The White Tower must be destroyed.”

For a moment Mallia stood in the middle of his cabin, arms full of clothes and books and rolled charts, hair almost brushing the deck beams overhead, staring at nothing with pale blue eyes while the White Tower tumbled into ruin. Then he gave a start as if realizing what he had just said. His pointed beard waggled uncertainly.

“That is . . . that’s what he says. I . . . I think that may be going too far, myself. The High Lord Samon. . . . He speaks so that he carries a man beyond his own beliefs. If Caemlyn can make covenants with the Tower, why, so can Tear.” He shivered and did not seem to know it. “That is what I say.”

“As you say,” Mat told him, and felt mischief bubble inside. “I think your suggestion is the right one, Captain. But don’t stop with a few Accepted, though. Ask a dozen Aes Sedai to come, or two. Think what the Stone of Tear would be like with two dozen Aes Sedai in it.”

Mallia shuddered. “I will send a man for my money chest,” he said stiffly, and stalked out.

Mat frowned at the closed door. “I think I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I don’t know why you might think that,” Thom said dryly. “Next you could try telling the Lord Captain Commander of the Whitecloaks he should marry the Amyrlin Seat.” His brows drew down, like white caterpillars. “High Lord Samon. I never heard of any High Lord Samon.”

It was Mat’s turn to be dry. “Well, even you cannot know everything about all the kings and queens and nobles there are, Thom. One or two might just have escaped your notice.”

“I know the names of the kings and queens, boy, and the names of all the High Lords of Tear, too. I suppose they could have raised a Lord of the Land, but I’d think I would have heard of the old High Lord dying. If you had settled for booting some poor fellows out of their cabin instead of taking the captain’s, we’d each have a bed to ourselves, narrow and hard as it might be. Now we have to share Mallia's. I hope you don't snore, boy. I cannot abide snoring."

Mat ground his teeth. As he recalled, Thom had a snore like a woodrasp working on an oak knot. He had forgotten that.

It was one of the two large men—Sanor or Vasa; he did not give his name—who came to pull the captain's iron-bound money chest from under the bed. He never said a word, only made sketchy bows, and frowned at them when he thought they were not looking, and left.

Mat was beginning to wonder if the luck that had been with him all night had deserted him at last. He was going to have to put up with Thom's snoring, and truth to tell, it might not have been the best luck in the world to jump onto this particular ship waving a paper signed by the Amyrlin Seat and sealed with the Flame of Tar Valon. On impulse he pulled out one of his cylindrical leather dice cups, popped off the tight-fitting lid, and upended the dice onto the table.

They were spotted dice, and five single pips stared up at him. The Dark One's Eyes, that was called in some games. It was a losing toss in those, a winning in other games. *But what game am I playing?* He scooped the dice up, tossed them again. Five pips. Another toss, and again the Dark One's Eyes winked at him.

"If you used those dice to win all that gold," Thom said quietly, "no wonder you had to leave by the first ship sailing." He had stripped down to his shirt, and had that half over his head when he spoke. His knees were knobby and his legs seemed all sinew and stringy muscle, the right a little shrunken. "Boy, a twelve-year-old girl would cut your heart out if she knew you were using dice like that against her."

"It isn't the dice," Mat muttered. "It's the luck." *Aes Sedai luck? Or the Dark One's luck?* He pushed the dice back into the cup and capped it.

"I suppose," Thom said, climbing into the bed, "you aren't going to tell me where all that gold came from, then."

"I won it. Tonight. With their dice."

"Uh-huh. And I suppose you're not going to explain that paper you were waving around—I saw the seal, boy!—or all that talk about White Tower business, or why the dockmaster had your description from an Aes Sedai, either."

"I am carrying a letter to Morgase for Elayne, Thom," Mat said a good deal more patiently than he felt. "Nynaeve gave me the paper. I don't know where she got it."

"Well, if you are not going to tell me, I am going to sleep. Blow out the lamps, will you?" Thom rolled on his side and pulled a pillow over his head.

Even after Mat had stripped off down to his smallclothes and crawled under the blankets—after blowing out the lamps—he could not sleep, though Mallia had done well by himself with a good feather mattress. He had been right about Thom's snoring, and that pillow muffled nothing. It sounded as if Thom were cutting wood cross-grain with a rusty saw. And he could not stop thinking. How *had* Nynaeve and Egwene, and Elayne, gotten that paper from the Amyrlin? They had to be involved with the Amyrlin Seat herself—in some plot, one of those White Tower machinations—but now that he thought about it, they had to be holding something back from the Amyrlin, too.

" 'Please carry a letter to my mother, Mat,' " he said softly, in a high-pitched, mocking voice. "Fool! The Amyrlin would have sent a Warder with any letter from the Daughter-Heir to the Queen. Blind fool, wanting to get out of the Tower so bad I couldn't see it." Thom's snore seemed to trumpet agreement.

Most of all, though, he thought about luck, and footpads.

The first bump of something against the stern barely registered on him. He paid no attention to a thump and scuffle from the deck overhead, or the tread of boots. The vessel itself made enough noises, and there had to be someone on deck for the ship to make its way downriver. But stealthy footsteps in the passageway leading to his door merged with thoughts of footpads and made his ears prick up.

He nudged Thom in the ribs with an elbow. "Wake up," he said softly. "There's somebody outside in the hall." He was already easing himself off the bed, hoping the cabin floor—*Deck, floor, whatever it bloody is!*—would not creak under his feet. Thom grunted, smacked his lips, and resumed snoring.

There was no time to worry about Thom. The footsteps were right outside. Taking up his quarterstaff, Mat placed himself in front of the door and waited.

The door swung open slowly, and two cloaked men, one behind the other, were faintly outlined by dim moonlight through the hatch at the top of the ladder they had crept down. The moonlight was enough to glint off bare knife blades. Both men gasped; they obviously had not expected to find anyone waiting for them.

Mat thrust with the quarterstaff, catching the first man hard right under where his ribs joined together. He heard his father's voice as he struck. *It's a killing blow, Mat. Don't ever use it unless it's your life.* But those knives made it for his life; there was no room in the cabin for swinging a staff.

Even as the man made a choking sound and folded toward the deck, fighting vainly for breath, Mat stepped forward and drove the end of the quarterstaff over him into the second man's throat with a loud crunch. That fellow dropped his knife to clutch at his throat, and fell on top of his companion, both of them scraping their boots across the deck, death rattles already sounding in their throats.

Mat stood there, staring down at them. *Two men. No, burn me, three! I don't think I ever hurt another human being before, and now I've killed three men in one night. Light!*

Silence filled the dark passageway, and he heard the thump of boots on the deck overhead. The crewmen all went barefoot.

Trying not to think about what he was doing, Mat ripped the cloak from one of the dead men and settled it around his shoulders, hiding the pale linen of his smallclothes. On bare feet he padded down the passage and climbed the ladder, barely sticking his eyes above the hatch coping.

Pale moonlight reflected off the taut sails, but night still covered the deck with shadows, and there was no sound except the rush of water along the vessel's sides. Only one man at the tiller, the hood of his cloak pulled up against the chill, seemed to be on deck. The man shifted, and boot leather scuffed on the deck planks.

Holding the quarterstaff low and hoping it would not be noticed, Mat climbed on up. "He's dead," he muttered in a low, rough whisper.

"I hope he squealed when you cut his throat." The heavily accented voice was one Mat remembered calling from the mouth of a twisting street in Tar Valon. "This boy, he causes us too much of the trouble, Wait! Who are you?"

Mat swung the staff with all his strength. The thick wood smashed into the man's head, the hood of his cloak only partly muffling a sound like a melon hitting the floor.

The man fell across the tiller, shoving it over, and the vessel lurched, staggering Mat. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a shape rising out of the shadows by the railing, and the gleam of a blade, and he knew he would never get his staff around before it struck home. Something else that shone streaked through the night and merged with the dim shape with a dull *thunk*. The rising motion became a fall, and a man sprawled almost at Mat's feet.

A babble of voices rose belowdecks as the ship swung again, the tiller shifting with the first man's weight.

Thom limped from the hatch in cloak and smallclothes, raising the shutter on a bull's-eye lantern. "You were lucky, boy. One of those below had this lantern. Could have set the ship on fire, lying there." The light showed a knife hilt sticking up from the chest of a man with dead, staring eyes. Mat had never seen him before; he was sure he would have remembered someone with that many scars on his face. Thom kicked a dagger away from the dead man's outflung hand, then bent to retrieve his own knife, wiping the blade on the corpse's cloak. "Very lucky, boy. Very lucky indeed."

There was a rope tied to the stern rail. Thom stepped over to it, shining the light down astern, and Mat joined him. At the other end of the rope was one of the small boats from Southharbor, its square lantern extinguished. Two more men stood among the pulled-in oars.

"The Great Lord take me, it's him!" one of them gasped. The other darted forward to work frantically at the knot holding the rope.

"You want to kill these two as well?" Thom asked, his voice booming as it did when he performed.

"No, Thom," Mat said quietly. "No."

The men in the boat must have heard the question and not the answer, for they abandoned the attempt to free their boat and leaped over the side with great splashes. The sound of them thrashing away across the river was loud.

"Fools," Thom muttered. "The river narrows somewhat after Tar Valon, but it must still be half a mile or more wide here. They'll never make it in the dark."

"By the Stone!" came a shout from the hatch. "What happens here? There are dead men in the passageway! What's Vasa doing lying on the tiller? He'll run us onto a mudbank!" Naked save for linen underbreeches, Mallia dashed to the tiller, hauling the dead man off roughly as he pulled the long lever to put the course straight again. "That isn't Vasa! Burn my soul, who are all these dead men?" Others were clambering on deck now, barefoot crewmen and frightened passengers wrapped in cloaks and blankets.

Shielding his actions with his body, Thom slipped his knife under the rope and severed it in one stroke. The small boat began falling back into the darkness. “River brigands, Captain,” he said. “Young Mat and I have saved your vessel from river brigands. They might have cut everyone’s throat if not for us. Perhaps you should reconsider your passage fee.”

“Brigands!” Mallia exclaimed. “There are plenty of those down around Cairhien, but I never heard of it this far north!” The huddled passengers began to mutter about brigands and having their throats cut.

Mat walked stiffly to the hatch. Behind him, he heard Mallia. “He’s a cold one. I never heard that Andor employed assassins, but burn my soul, he is a cold one.”

Mat stumbled down the ladder, stepped over the two bodies in the passage, and slammed the door of the captain’s cabin behind him. He made it halfway to the bed before the shaking hit him, and then all he could do was sink down on his knees. *Light, what game am I playing in? I have to know the game if I’m going to win. Light, what game?*

Playing “Rose of the Morning” softly on his flute, Rand peered into his campfire, where a rabbit was roasting on a stick slanting over the flames. A night wind made the flames flicker; he barely noticed the smell of the rabbit, though a vagrant thought did come that he needed to find more salt in the next village or town. “Rose of the Morning” was one of the tunes he had played at those weddings.

How many days ago was that? Were there really so many, or did I imagine it? Every woman in the village deciding to marry at once? What was its name? Am I going mad already?

Sweat beaded on his face, but he played on, barely loud enough to be heard, staring into the fire. Moiraine had told him he was *ta’veren.* Everyone said he was *ta’veren.* Maybe he really was. People like that—changed—things around them. A *ta’veren* might have *caused* all those weddings. But that was too close to something he did not want to think about.

They say I’m the Dragon Reborn, too. They all say it. The living say it, and the dead. That doesn’t make it true. I had to let them proclaim me. Duty. I had no choice, but that does not make it true.

He could not seem to stop playing that one tune. It made him think of Egwene. He had thought once that he would marry Egwene. A long time ago, that seemed. That was gone, now. She had come in his dreams, though. *It might have been her. Her face. It was her face.*

Only, there had been so many faces, faces he knew. Tam, and his mother, and Mat, and Perrin. All trying to kill him. It had not really been them, of course. Only their faces, on Shadowspawn. He thought it had not really been them. Even in his dreams it seemed the Shadowspawn walked. Were they only dreams? Some dreams were real, he knew. And others were only dreams, nightmares, or hopes. But how to tell the difference? Min had walked his dreams one night—and tried to plant a knife in his back. He was still surprised at how much that had pained him. He had been careless, let her come close, let down his guard. Around Min, he had not felt any need to be on his guard in so long, despite the things she saw when she looked at him. Being with her had been like having balm soothed into his wounds.

And then she tried to kill me! The music rose to a discordant screech, but he pulled it back to softness. *Not her. Shadowspawn with her face. Least of them all would Min hurt me.* He could not understand why he thought that, but he was sure it was true.

So many faces in his dreams. Selene had come, cool and mysterious and so lovely his mouth went dry just thinking of her, offering him glory as she had—so long ago, it seemed—but now it was the sword she said he had to take. And with the sword would come Selene. *Callandor.* That was always in his dreams. Always. And taunting faces. Hands, pushing Egwene, and Nynaeve, and Elayne into cages, snaring them in nets, hurting them. Why should he weep more for Elayne than for the other two?

His head spun. His head hurt as much as his side, and sweat rolled down his face, and he softly played “Rose of the Morning” through the night, fearing to sleep. Fearing to dream.

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CHAPTER 33

Within the Weave

From his saddle, Perrin frowned down at the flat stone half hidden in weeds by the roadside. This road of hard-packed dirt, already called the Lugard Road now they were near the Manetherendrelle and the border of Murandy, had been paved once, long in the past, so Moiraine had said two days earlier, and bits of paving stone still worked their way to the surface from time to time. This one had an odd marking on it.

If dogs had been able to make footprints on stone, he would have said it was the print of a large hound. There were no hound’s footprints in any of the bare ground he could see, where softer dirt on the verge might take one, and no smell of any dog’s trail. Just a faint trace in the air of something burned, almost the sulphurous smell left by setting off fireworks. There was a town ahead, where the road struck the river; maybe some children had sneaked out here with some of the Illuminators’ handiwork.

A long way yet for children to sneak. But he had seen farms. It could have been farm children. *Whatever it is, it has nothing to do with that marking. Horses don’t fly, and dogs don’t make footprints on stone. I’m getting too tired to think straight.*

Yawning, he dug his heels into Stepper’s ribs, and the dun broke into a gallop after the others. Moiraine had been pushing them hard since leaving Jarra, and there was no waiting for anyone who stopped for even a moment. When the Aes Sedai put her mind on something, she was as hard as cold hammered iron. Loial had given up reading as he rode six days earlier, after looking up to find himself left a mile behind and everyone else almost out of sight over the next hill.

Perrin slowed Stepper alongside the Ogier’s big horse, behind Moiraine’s white mare, and yawned again. Lan was up ahead somewhere, scouting. The sun behind them stood no more than an hour above the treetops, but the Warder had said they would reach a town called Remen, on the Manetherendrelle, before dark. Perrin was not sure he wanted to see what awaited them there. He did not know what it might be, but the days since Jarra had made him wary.

“I don’t see why you can’t sleep,” Loial told him. “I am so tired by the time she lets us halt for the night, I fall asleep before I can lie down.”

Perrin only shook his head. There was no way to explain to Loial that he did not dare sleep soundly, that even his lightest sleep was full of troubled dreams. Like that odd one with Egwene and Hopper in it. *Well, no wonder I dream about her. Light, I wonder how she is. Safe in the Tower by now, and learning how to be Aes Sedai. Verin will look after her, and after Mat, too.* He did not think anyone needed to look after Nynaeve; around Nynaeve, to his mind, other people needed someone to look after them.

He did not want to think about Hopper. He was succeeding in keeping live wolves out of his head, although at the price of feeling as if he had been hammered-and-drawn by a hasty hand; he did not want to think a dead wolf might be creeping in. He shook himself and forced his eyes wide open. Not even Hopper.

There had been more reasons than bad dreams not to sleep well. They had found other signs left by Rand’s passage. Between Jarra and the River Boern there had been none Perrin could see, but when they crossed the Boern by a stone bridge arching from one fifty-foot river cliff to another, they had left behind a town called Sidon all in ashes. Every building. Only a few stone walls and chimneys still stood among the ruins.

Bedraggled townspeople said a lantern dropped in a barn had started it, and then the fire seemed to run wild, and everything went wrong. Half the buckets that could be found had holes in them. Every last burning wall had fallen outward instead of in, setting houses to either side alight. Flaming timbers from the inn had somehow tumbled as far as the main well in the square, so no one could draw more water from it to fight the fires, and houses had fallen right on top of three other wells. Even the wind had seemed to shift, fanning the flames in every direction.

There had been no need to ask Moiraine if Rand’s presence had caused it; her face, like cold iron, was answer enough. The Pattern shaped itself around Rand, and chance ran wild.

Beyond Sidon they had ridden through four small towns where only Lan’s tracking told them Rand was still ahead. Rand was afoot, now, and had been for some time. They had found his horse back beyond Jarra, dead, looking as if it had been mauled by wolves, or dogs run wild. It had been hard for Perrin not to reach out, then, especially when Moiraine looked up from the horse to frown at him. Luckily, Lan had found the tracks of Rand's boots, running from where the dead horse lay. One boot heel had a three-cornered gouge from a rock; it made his prints plain. But afoot or mounted, he seemed to be staying ahead of them.

In the four villages after Sidon, the biggest excitement anyone could remember was seeing Loial ride in, and discovering that he was an Ogier, for real and for true. They were so caught up with that, that they barely even noticed Perrin's eyes, and when they did. . . . Well, if Ogier were real, then men could very well have any color eyes at all.

But after those came a little place named Willar, and it was celebrating. The spring on the village common was flowing again, after a year of hauling water a mile from a stream when all efforts at digging wells had failed and half the people had moved away. Willar would not die after all. Three more untouched villages had been followed in quick succession, all in one day, by Samaha, where every well in town had gone dry just the night before, and people were muttering about the Dark One; then Tallan, where all the old arguments the village had ever known had bubbled to the surface like overflowing cesspits a morning earlier, and it had taken three murders to shock everyone back to his senses; and finally Fyall, where the crops this spring looked to be the poorest anyone could remember, but the Mayor, digging a new privy behind his house, had found rotted leather sacks full of gold, so none would go hungry. No one in Fyall recognized the fat coins, with a woman's face on one side and an eagle on the other; Moiraine said they had been minted in Manetheren.

Perrin had finally asked her about it, as they sat around their campfire one night. "After Jarra, I thought. . . . They were all so happy, with their weddings. Even the Whitecloaks were only made to look like fools. Fyall was all right—Rand couldn't have had anything to do with their crops; they were failing before he ever came, and that gold was surely good, with their need—but all this other. . . . That town burning, and the wells failing, and. . . . That is evil, Moiraine. I can't believe Rand is evil. The Pattern may be shaping itself around him, but how can the Pattern be that evil? It makes no sense, and things have to make sense. If you make a tool with no sense to it, it's wasted metal. The Pattern wouldn't make waste."

Lan gave him a wry look, and vanished into the darkness to make a circuit around their campsite. Loial, already stretched out in his blankets, lifted his head to listen, ears pricking forward.

Moiraine was silent for a time, warming her hands. Finally she spoke while staring into the flames. “The Creator is good, Perrin. The Father of Lies is evil. The Pattern of Age, the Age Lace itself, is neither. The Pattern is what is. The Wheel of Time weaves all lives into the Pattern, all actions. A pattern that is all one color is no pattern. For the Pattern of an Age, good and ill are the warp and the woof.”

Even riding through late-afternoon sunshine three days later, Perrin felt the chill he had had on first hearing her say those words. He wanted to believe the Pattern was good. He wanted to believe that when men did evil things, they were going against the Pattern, distorting it. To him the Pattern was a fine and intricate creation made by a master smith. That it mixed pot metal and worse in with good steel with never a care was a cold thought.

“I care,” he muttered softly. “Light, I do care.” Moiraine glanced back at him, and he fell silent. He was not sure what the Aes Sedai cared about, beyond Rand.

A few minutes later Lan appeared from ahead and swung his black war horse in beside Moiraine’s mare. “Remen lies just over the next hill,” he said. “They have had an eventful day or two, it seems.”

Loial’s ears twitched once. “Rand?”

The Warder shook his head. “I do not know. Perhaps Moiraine can say, when she sees.” The Aes Sedai gave him a searching look, then heeled her white mare to a quicker step.

They topped the hill, and Remen lay spread out below them, hard against the river. The Manetherendrelle stretched more than half a mile wide here, and there was no bridge, though two crowded, barge like ferries crept across, propelled by long oars, and one nearly empty was returning. Three more shared long stone docks with nearly a dozen river traders’ vessels, some with one mast, some with two. A few bulky gray stone warehouses separated the docks from the town itself, where the buildings seemed mostly of stone, as well, though roofed in tiles of every color from yellow to red to purple, and the streets ran every which way around a central square.

Moiraine pulled up the deep hood of her cloak to hide her face before they rode down.

As usual, the people in the streets stared at Loial, but this time Perrin heard awed murmurs of “Ogier.” Loial sat straighter in his saddle than he had in some time, and his ears stood straight, and a smile just curled the ends of his wide mouth. He was obviously trying not to let on that he was pleased, but he looked like a cat having its ears scratched.

Remen looked like any of a dozen towns to Perrin—it was full of man-made aromas and man smell; with a strong smell of the river, of course—and he was wondering what Lan could have meant when the hair on the back of his neck stirred as he scented something—wrong. As soon as his nose took it in, it was gone like a horse hair dropped onto hot coals, but he remembered it. He had smelled the same smell at Jarra, and it had vanished the same way, then. It was not a Twisted One or a Neverborn—*Trolloc, burn me, not a Twisted One! Not a Neverborn! A Myrddraal, a Fade, a Halfman, anything but a Neverborn!*—not a Trolloc or a Fade, yet the stench had been every bit as sharp, every bit as vile. But whatever gave off that scent left no lasting trail, it seemed.

They rode into the town square. One of the big paving blocks had been pried up, right in the middle of the square, so a gibbet could be erected. A single thick timber rose out of the dirt, supporting a braced crosspiece from which hung an iron cage, the bottom of it four paces high. A tall man dressed all in grays and browns sat in the cage, holding his knees under his chin. He had no room to do otherwise. Three small boys were pitching stones at him. The man looked straight ahead, not flinching when a stone made it between the bars. More than one trickle of blood stained his face. The townspeople walking by paid no more mind to what the boys were doing than the man did, though every last one of them looked at the cage, most of them with approval, and some with fear.

Moiraine made a sound in her throat that might have been disgust.

“There is more,” Lan said. “Come. I’ve already arranged rooms at an inn. I think you will find it interesting.”

Perrin looked back over his shoulder at the caged man as he rode after them. There was something familiar about the man, but he could not place it.

“They shouldn’t do that.” Loial’s rumble sounded halfway to a snarl. “The children, I mean. The grown-ups should stop them.”

“They should,” Perrin agreed, barely paying attention. *Why is he familiar?*

The sign over the door of the inn Lan led them to, nearer the river, read Wayland’s Forge, which Perrin took for a good omen, though there seemed to be nothing of the smithy about the place except the leather-aproned man with a hammer painted on the sign. It was a large, purple-roofed, three-story building of squared and polished gray stones, with large windows and scroll-carved doors, and it had a prosperous look. Stablemen came running to take the horses, bowing even more deeply after Lan tossed them coins.

Inside, Perrin stared at the people. The men and women at the tables were all dressed in their feastday clothes, it seemed to him, with more embroidered coats, more lace on dresses, more colored ribbons and fringed scarves, than he had seen in a long time. Only four men sitting at one table wore plain coats, and they were the only ones who did not look up expectantly when Perrin and the others walked in. The four men kept on talking softly. He could make out a little of what they were saying, about the virtues of ice peppers over furs as cargo and what the troubles in Saldaea might have done to prices. Captains of trading ships, he decided. The others seemed to be local folk. Even the serving women appeared to be wearing their best, their long aprons covering embroidered dresses with bits of lace at the neck.

The kitchen was working heavily; he could smell mutton, lamb, chicken, and beef, as well as some sort of vegetables. And a spicy cake that made him forget meat for a moment.

The innkeeper himself met them just inside, a plump, bald-headed man with shining brown eyes in a smooth pink face, bowing and dry-washing his hands. If he had not come to them, Perrin would never have taken him for the landlord, for instead of the expected white apron, he wore a coat like everyone else, all white-and-green embroidery on stout blue wool that had the man sweating with its weight.

Why are they all wearing clothes for festival? Perrin wondered.

“Ah, Master Andra,” the innkeeper said, addressing Lan. “And an Ogier, just as you said. Not that I doubted, of course. Not with all that’s happened, and never your word, master. Why not an Ogier? Ah, friend Ogier, to be having you in the house gives me more pleasure than you can be knowing. ’Tis a fine thing, and a fitting cap to it all. Ah, and mistress. . . .” His eyes took in the deep blue silk of her dress and the rich wool of her cloak, dusty from travel but still fine. “Forgive me, Lady, please.” His bow bent him like a horseshoe. “Master Andra did not make your station clear, Lady. I meant no disrespect. You are even more welcome than friend Ogier here, of course, Lady. Please, take no offense at Gainor Furlan's poor tongue."

"I take none." Moiraine's voice calmly accepted the title Furlan gave her. It was far from the first time the Aes Sedai had gone under another name, or pretended to be something she was not. It was not the first Perrin had heard Lan name himself Andra, either. The deep hood still hid Moiraine's smooth Aes Sedai features, and she held her cloak around her with one hand as if taken with a chill. Not the hand on which she wore her Great Serpent ring. "You have had strange occurrences in the town, innkeeper, so I understand. Nothing to trouble travelers, I trust."

"Ah, Lady, you might be calling them strange indeed. Your own radiant presence is more than enough to honor this humble house, Lady, and bringing an Ogier with you, but we have Hunters in Remen, too. Right here in Wayland's Forge, they are. Hunters for the Horn of Valere, set out from Illian for adventure. And adventure they found, Lady, here in Remen, or just a mile or two upriver, fighting wild Aielmen, of all things. Can you imagine black-veiled Aiel savages in Altara, Lady?"

Aiel. Now Perrin knew what was familiar about the man in the cage. He had seen an Aiel, once, one of those fierce, nearly legendary denizens of the harsh land called the Waste. The man had looked a good deal like Rand, taller than most, with gray eyes and reddish hair, and he had been dressed like the man in the cage, all in browns and grays that would fade into rock or brush, with soft boots laced to his knees. Perrin could almost hear Min's voice again. *An Aielman in a cage. A turning point in your life, or something important that will happen.*

"Why do you have . . . ?" He stopped to clear his throat so he would not sound so hoarse. "How did an Aiel come to be caged in your town square?"

"Ah, young master, that is a story to. . . ." Furlan trailed off, eyeing him up and down, taking in his plain country clothes and the longbow in his hands, pausing over the axe at his belt opposite his quiver. The plump man gave a start when his study reached Perrin's face, as if, with a Lady and an Ogier present, he had just now noticed Perrin's yellow eyes. "He would be your servant, Master Andra?" he asked cautiously.

"Answer him," was all Lan said.

"Ah. Ah, of course, Master Andra. But here's who can tell it better than myself. 'Tis Lord Orban, himself. 'Tis he we have gathered to hear."

A dark-haired, youngish man in a red coat, with a bandage wound around his temples, was making his way down the stairs at the side of the common room using padded crutches, the left leg of his breeches cut away so more bandages could strap his calf from ankle to knee. The townspeople murmured as if seeing something wondrous. The ship captains went on with their quiet talking; they had come ’round to furs. Furlan might have thought the man in the red coat could tell the story better, but he went ahead himself. “Lord Orban and Lord Gann faced twenty wild Aielmen with only ten retainers. Ah, fierce was the fighting and hard, with many wounds given and received. Six good retainers died, and every man took hurts, Lord Orban and Lord Gann worst of all, but every Aiel they slew, save those who fled, and one they took prisoner. ’Tis that one you see out there in the square, where he’ll not be troubling the countryside anymore with his savage ways, no more than the dead ones will.”

“You have had trouble from Aiel in this district?” Moiraine asked.

Perrin was wondering the same thing, with no little consternation. If some people still occasionally used “black-veiled Aiel” as a term for someone violent, it was testimony to the impression the Aiel War had left, but that was twenty years in the past, now, and the Aiel had never come out of the Waste before or since. *But I saw one this side of the Spine of the World, and now I’ve seen two.*

The innkeeper rubbed at his bald head. “Ah. Ah, no, Lady, not exactly. But we would have had, you can be sure, with twenty savages loose. Why, everyone remembers how they killed and looted and burned their way across Cairhien. Men from this very village marched to the Battle of the Shining Walls, when the nations gathered to throw them back. I myself suffered from a twisted back at the time and so could not go, but I remember well, as we all do. How they came here, so far from their own land, or why, I do not know, but Lord Orban and Lord Gann saved us from them.” There was a murmur of agreement from the folk in feastday clothes.

Orban himself came stumping across the common room, not seeming to see anyone but the innkeeper. Perrin could smell stale wine before he was even close. “Where’s that old woman taken herself off to with her herbs, Furlan?” Orban demanded roughly. “Gann’s wounds are paining him, and my head feels about to split open.”

Furlan almost bent his head to the floor. “Ah, Mother Leich will be back in the morning, Lord Orban. A birthing, Lord. But she said she’d stitched and poulticed your wounds, and Lord Gann's, so there'd be no worrying. Ah, Lord Orban, I'm sure she'll be seeing to you first thing on the morrow."

The bandaged man muttered something under his breath—under his breath to any ears but Perrin's—about waiting on a farmwife "throwing her litter" and something else about being "sewn up like a sack of meal." He shifted sullen, angry eyes, and for the first time appeared to see the newcomers. Perrin, he dismissed immediately, which did not surprise Perrin at all. His eyes widened a little at Loial—*He's seen Ogier*, Perrin thought, *but he never thought to see one here*—narrowed a bit at Lan—*He knows a fighting man when he sees one, and he does not like seeing one*—and brightened as he stooped to peer inside Moiraine's hood, though he was not close enough to see her face.

Perrin decided not to think anything at all about that, not concerning an Aes Sedai, and he hoped neither Moiraine nor Lan thought anything of it, either. A light in the Warder's eyes told him he had missed on that hope, at least.

"Twelve of you fought twenty Aiel?" Lan asked in a flat voice.

Orban straightened, wincing. In an elaborately casual tone, he said, "Aye, you must expect things such as that when you seek the Horn of Valere. It was not the first such encounter for Gann and me, nor will it be the last before we find the Horn. If the Light shines on us." He sounded as if the Light could not possibly do anything else. "Not all our fights have been with Aiel, of course, but there are always those who would stop Hunters, if they could. Gann and I, we do not stop easily." Another approving murmur came from the townspeople. Orban stood a little straighter.

"You lost six, and took one prisoner." From Lan's voice, it was not clear if that was a good exchange or a poor one.

"Aye," Orban said, "we slew the rest, save those who ran. No doubt they're hiding their dead now; I've heard they do that. The Whitecloaks are out searching for them, but they'll never find them."

"There are Whitecloaks here?" Perrin asked sharply.

Orban glanced at him, and dismissed him once more. The man addressed Lan again. "Whitecloaks always put their noses in where they are not wanted or needed. Incompetent louts, all of them. Aye, they'll ride all over the countryside for days, but I doubt they'll find as much as their own shadows."

"I suppose they won't," Lan said.

The bandaged man frowned as if unsure exactly what Lan meant, then rounded on the innkeeper again. "You find that old woman, hear! My head is splitting." With a last glance at Lan, he hobbled away, climbing back up the stairs one at a time, followed by murmurs of admiration for a Hunter of the Horn who had slain Aielmen.

"This is an eventful town." Loial's deep voice drew every eye to him. Except for the ship captains, who seemed to be discussing rope, as near as Perrin could make out. "Everywhere I go, you humans are doing things, hurrying and scurrying, having things happen to you. How can you stand so much excitement?"

"Ah, friend Ogier," Furlan said, " 'tis the way of us humans to want excitement. How much I regret not being able to march to the Shining Walls. Why, let me tell you—"

"Our rooms." Moiraine did not raise her voice, but her words cut the innkeeper short like a sharp knife. "Andra did arrange rooms, did he not?"

"Ah, Lady, forgive me. Yes, Master Andra did indeed hire rooms. Forgive me, please. 'Tis all the excitement, makes my head empty itself. Please forgive me, Lady. This way, if you please. If you'll please to follow me." Bowing and scraping, apologizing and babbling without pause, Furlan led them up the stairs.

At the top, Perrin paused to look back. He heard the murmurs of "Lady" and "Ogier" down there, could feel all those eyes, but it seemed to him that he felt one pair of eyes in particular, someone staring not at Moiraine and Loial, but at him.

He picked her out immediately. For one thing, she stood apart from the others, and for another she was the only woman in the room not wearing at least a little lace. Her dark gray, almost black, dress was as plain as the ship captains' clothes, with wide sleeves and narrow skirts, and never a frill or stitch of fancy-work. The dress was divided for riding, he saw when she moved, and she wore soft boots that peeked out under the hem. She was young—no older than he was, perhaps—and tall for a woman, with black hair to her shoulders. A nose that just missed being too large and too bold, a generous mouth, high cheekbones, and dark, slightly tilted eyes. He could not quite decide whether she was beautiful or not.

As soon as he looked down, she turned to address one of the serving women and did not glance at the stairs again, but he was sure he had been right. She had been staring at him.

* * *

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CHAPTER 34

A Different Dance

Furlan burbled on as he showed them to their rooms, though Perrin did not really listen. He was too busy wondering if the black-haired girl knew what yellow eyes meant. *Burn me, she* was *looking at me.* Then he heard the innkeeper say the words “proclaiming the Dragon in Ghealdan,” and he thought his ears would go to sharp points like Loial’s.

Moiraine stopped dead in the doorway to her room. “There is another false Dragon, innkeeper? In Ghealdan?” The hood of her cloak still hid her face, but she sounded shaken to her toes. Even listening for the man’s reply, Perrin could not help staring at her; he smelled something close to fear.

“Ah, Lady, never you fear. ’Tis a hundred leagues to Ghealdan, and none will trouble you here, not with Master Andra about, and Lord Orban and Lord Gann. Why—”

“Answer her!” Lan said harshly. “Is there a false Dragon in Ghealdan?”

“Ah. Ah, no, Master Andra, not precisely. I said there’s a man proclaiming the Dragon in Ghealdan, so we heard a few days gone. Preaching his coming, you might say. Talking about that fellow over in Tarabon we’ve heard about. Though some do say ’tis Arad Doman, not Tarabon. A long way from here, in any case. Why, any other day, I expect we’d talk more of that than anything else, except maybe the wild tales about Hawkwing’s army come back—” Lan’s cold eyes might as well have been knife blades from the way Furlan swallowed and scrubbed his hands faster. “I only know what I hear, Master Andra. ’Tis said the fellow has a stare can pin you where you stand, and he talks all sorts of rubbish about the Dragon coming to save us, and we all have to follow, and even the beasts will fight for the Dragon. I don’t know whether they’ve arrested him yet or not. ’Tis likely; the Ghealdanin would not put up long with that kind of talk.”

Masema, Perrin thought wonderingly. *It’s bloody Masema.*

"You are right, innkeeper," Lan said. "This fellow isn't likely to trouble us here. I knew a fellow once who liked to make wild speeches. You remember him, Lady Alys, don't you? Masema?"

Moiraine gave a start. "Masema. Yes. Of course. I had put him out of my mind." Her voice firmed. "When next I see Masema, he will wish someone had peeled his hide to make boots." She slammed the door behind her so hard that the crash echoed down the hallway.

"Keep a quiet!" came a muffled shout from the far end. "My head is splitting!"

"Ah." Furlan washed his hands in one direction, then rubbed them in the other. "Ah. Forgive me, Master Andra, but Lady Alys is a fierce-sounding woman."

"Only with those who displease her," Lan said blandly. "Her bite is far worse than her bark."

"Ah. Ah. Ah. Your rooms are this way. Ah, friend Ogier, when Master Andra told me you were coming, I had an old Ogier bed brought from the attic where it has been gathering dust these three hundred years or more. Why, 'tis. . . ."

Perrin let the words wash over him, hearing them no more than a river rock hears the water. The black-haired young woman worried him. And the caged Aiel.

Once in his own room—a small one in the back; Lan had done nothing to disabuse the innkeeper of the notion that Perrin was a servant—he moved mechanically, still wrapped in thought. He unstrung his bow and propped it in the corner—keeping it strung too long ruined bow and string alike—set down his blanketroll and saddlebags beside the wash-stand and threw his cloak across them. He hung his belts with quiver and axe from pegs on the wall, and nearly lay down on the bed before a jaw-cracking yawn reminded him how dangerous that might be. The bed was narrow, and the mattress appeared to be all lumps; it looked more inviting than any bed he could remember. He sat on the three-legged stool, instead, and thought. Always he liked to think things through.

After a time, Loial rapped on the door and put his head in. The Ogier's ears practically quivered with excitement, and his grin very nearly split his broad face in two. "Perrin, you will not believe it! My bed is sung wood! Why, it must be well over a thousand years old. No Treesinger has sung a piece so large in at least that long. I myself would not care to try it, and I have the talent more strongly than most, now. Well, to be truthful, there are not many of us with the talent at all, anymore. But I *am* among the best of those who can sing wood."

"That is very interesting," Perrin said. *An Aiel in a cage. That is what Min said. Why was that girl staring at me?*

"I thought it was." Loial sounded a little put out that he did not share the Ogier's excitement, but all Perrin wanted to do was think. "Supper is ready below, Perrin. They have prepared their finest in case the Hunters want anything, but we can have some."

"You go on, Loial. I'm not hungry." The smells of cooking meat floating up from the kitchen did not interest him. He hardly noticed Loial going.

Hands on his knees, yawning now and again, he tried to work it out. It seemed like one of those puzzles Master Luhhan made, the metal pieces appearing to be linked inextricably. But there was always a trick to make the iron loops and whirls come apart, and there had to be here, too.

The girl had been looking at him. His eyes might explain that, except that the innkeeper had ignored them, and no one else had even noticed. They had an Ogier to look at, and Hunters of the Horn in the house, and a Lady visiting, and an Aiel caged in the square. Nothing as small as the color of a man's eyes could seize their attention; nothing about a servant could compete with the rest. *So why did she pick me to stare at?*

And the Aiel in the cage. What Min saw was always important. But how? What was he supposed to do? *I could have stopped those children throwing rocks. I should have.* It was no use telling himself the adults would certainly have told him to go on about his business, that he was a stranger in Remen and the Aiel was none of his concern. *I should have tried.*

No answers came to him, so he went back to the beginning and patiently worked through it once more, then again, and again. Still he found nothing except regret for what he had not done.

It came to him after a time that night had finally fallen. The room was dark except for a little moonlight through the lone window. He thought about the tallow candle and the tinderbox he had seen on the mantel over the narrow fireplace, but there was more than enough light for his eyes. *I have to do something, don't I?*

He buckled on his axe, then paused. He had done it without thinking; wearing the thing had become as natural as breathing. He did not like that.

But he left the belt around his waist, and went out.

Light from the stairs made the hallway seem almost bright after his room. Talk and laughter drifted up from the common room, and cooking smells from the kitchen. He strode toward the front of the inn, to Moiraine's room, knocked once, and went in. And stopped, his face burning.

Moiraine pulled the pale blue robe that hung from her shoulders around herself. "You wish something?" she asked coolly. She had a silver-backed hairbrush in one hand, and her dark hair, spilling down her neck in dark waves, glistened as if she had been brushing it. Her room was far finer than his, with polished wooden paneling on the walls and silver-chased lamps and a warm fire on the wide brick hearth. The air smelled of rose-scented soap.

"I. . . . I thought Lan was here," he managed to get out. "You two always have your heads together, and I thought he'd. . . . I thought. . . ."

"What do you want, Perrin?"

He took a deep breath. "Is this Rand's doing? I know Lan followed him here, and it all seems odd—the Hunters, and Aiel—but did he do it?"

"I do not think so. I will know more when Lan tells me what he discovers tonight. With luck, what he finds will help with the choice I must make."

"A choice?"

"Rand could have crossed the river and be on his way to Tear cross-country. Or he could have taken ship downriver to Illian, meaning to board another there for Tear. The journey is leagues longer that way, but days faster."

"I don't think we are going to catch him, Moiraine. I don't know how he's doing it, but even afoot he is staying ahead of us. If Lan is right, he is still half a day ahead."

"I could almost suspect he had learned to Travel," Moiraine said with a small frown, "except that if he had, he would have gone straight to Tear. No, he has the blood of long walkers and strong runners in him. But we may take the river anyway. If I cannot catch him, I will be in Tear close behind him. Or waiting for him."

Perrin shifted his feet uneasily; there was cold promise in her voice. "You told me once that you could sense a Darkfriend, one who was far gone into the Shadow, at least. Lan, too. Have you sensed anything like that here?"

She gave a loud sniff and turned back to a tall standing mirror with finely made silver-work set in the legs. Holding her robe closed with one hand, she ran the brush through her hair with the other. “Very few humans are so far gone as that, Perrin, even among the worst Darkfriends.” The brush halted in midstroke. “Why do you ask?”

“There was a girl down in the common room staring at me. Not at you and Loial, like everybody else. At me.”

The brush resumed motion, and a smile briefly touched Moiraine’s lips. “You sometimes forget, Perrin, that you are a good-looking young man. Some girls admire a pair of shoulders.” He grunted and shuffled his feet. “Was there something else, Perrin?”

“Uh . . . no.” She could not help with Min’s viewing, not beyond telling him what he already knew, that it was important. And he did not want to tell her what Min had seen. Or that Min had seen anything, for that matter.

Back out in the hall with the door closed, he leaned against the wall for a moment. *Light, just walking in on her like that, and her. . . .* She was a pretty woman. *And likely old enough to be my mother, or more.* He thought Mat would probably have asked her down to the common room to dance. *No, he wouldn’t. Even Mat isn’t fool enough to try charming an Aes Sedai.* Moiraine did dance. He had danced with her once himself. And nearly fallen over his own feet with every other step. *Stop thinking about her like a village girl just because you saw. . . . She’s bloody Aes Sedai! You have that Aiel to worry about.* He gave himself a shake and went downstairs.

The common room was full as it could be, with every chair taken, and stools and benches brought in, and those who had nowhere to sit standing along the walls. He did not see the black-haired girl, and no one else looked at him twice as he hurriedly crossed the room.

Orban occupied a table to himself, his bandaged leg propped up on a chair with a cushion, with a soft slipper on that foot, a silver goblet in his hand, the serving women keeping it filled with wine. “Aye,” he was saying to the whole room, “we knew the Aiel for fierce fighters, Gann and I, but there was no time to hesitate. I drew my sword, and dug my heels into Lion’s ribs. . . .”

Perrin gave a start before he realized the man meant his horse was named Lion. *Wouldn’t put it past him to say he was riding a lion.* He felt a little ashamed; just because he did not like the man was no reason to suppose the Hunter would take his boasting that far. He hurried on outside without looking back.

The street in front of the inn was as crowded as inside, with people who could not find a place in the common room peering in through the windows, and twice as many huddling around the doors to listen to Orban's tale. No one glanced at Perrin twice, though his passage brought muttered complaints from those jostled a little further from the door.

Everyone who was out in the night must have been at the inn, for he saw no one as he walked to the square. Sometimes the shadow of a person moved across a lighted window, but that was all. He had the feel of being watched, though, and looked around uneasily. Nothing but night-cloaked streets dotted with glowing windows. Around the square, most of the windows were dark except a few on upper floors.

The gibbet stood as he remembered, the man—the Aiel—still in the cage, hanging higher than he could reach. The Aiel seemed to be awake—at least his head was up—but he never looked down at Perrin. The stones the children had been throwing were scattered beneath the cage.

The cage hung from a thick rope tied to a ring on one of the upper bars and running through a heavy pulley on the crosspiece down to a pair of stubs, waist-high from the bottom of the upright on either side. The excess rope lay in a careless tangle of coils at the foot of the gibbet.

Perrin looked around again, searching the dark square. He still had the feel of being watched, but he still saw nothing. He listened, and heard nothing. He smelled chimney smoke and cooking from the houses, and man-sweat and old blood from the man in the cage. There was no fear scent from him.

His weight, and then there's the cage, he thought as he moved closer to the gibbet. He did not know when he had decided to do this, or even if he really had decided, but he knew he was going to do it.

Hooking a leg around the heavy upright, he heaved on the rope, hoisting the cage enough to gain a little slack. The way the rope jerked told him the man in the cage had finally moved, but he was in too much of a hurry to stop and tell him what he was doing. The slack let him unwind the rope from around the stubs. Still bracing himself with his leg around the upright, he quickly lowered the cage hand over hand to the paving blocks.

The Aiel was looking at him now, studying him silently. Perrin said nothing. When he got a good look at the cage, his mouth tightened. If a thing was made, even a thing like this, it should be made well. The entire front of the cage was a door, on rude hinges made by a hasty hand, held by a good iron lock on a chain as badly wrought as the cage. He fumbled the chain around until he found the worst link, then jammed the thick spike on his axe through it. A sharp twist of his wrist forced the link open. In seconds he separated the chain, rattled it free, and swung open the front of the cage.

The Aiel sat there, knees yet under his chin, staring at him.

"Well?" Perrin whispered hoarsely. "I opened it, but I'm not going to bloody carry you." He looked hastily around the night-dark square. Still nothing moved, but he still had the feel of eyes watching.

"You are strong, wetlander." The Aiel did not move beyond working his shoulders. "It took three men to hoist me up there. And now you bring me down. Why?"

"I don't like seeing people in cages," Perrin whispered. He wanted to go. The cage was open, and those eyes were watching. But the Aiel was not moving. *If you do a thing, do it right.* "Will you get out of there before somebody comes?"

The Aiel grasped the frontmost overhead bar of the cage, heaved himself out and to his feet in one motion, then half hung there, supporting himself with his grip on the bar. He would have been nearly a head taller than Perrin, standing straight. He glanced at Perrin's eyes—Perrin knew how they must shine, burnished gold in the moonlight—but he did not mention them. "I have been in there since yesterday, wetlander." He sounded like Lan. Not that their voices or accents were anything alike, but the Aiel had that same unruffled coolness, that same calm sureness. "It will take a moment for my legs to work. I am Gaul, of the Imran sept of the Shaarad Aiel, wetlander. I am *Shae'en M'taal*, a Stone Dog. My water is yours."

"Well, I am Perrin Aybara. Of the Two Rivers. I'm a blacksmith." The man was out of the cage; he could go now. Only, if anyone came along before Gaul could walk, he would be right back into the cage unless they killed him, and either way would waste Perrin's work. "If I had thought, I'd have brought a waterbottle, or a skin. Why do you call me 'wetlander'?"

Gaul gestured toward the river; even Perrin's eyes could not be sure in the moonlight, but he thought the Aiel looked uneasy for the first time. "Three days ago, I watched a girl sporting in a huge pool of water. It must have been twenty paces across. She . . . pulled herself out into it." He made an awkward swimming gesture with one hand. “A brave girl. Crossing these . . . rivers . . . has nearly unmanned me. I never thought there could be such a thing as too much water, but I never thought there was so much water in the world as you wetlanders have.”

Perrin shook his head. He knew the Aiel Waste held little water—it was one of the few things he knew about the Waste or the Aiel—but he had not thought it could be scarce enough to cause this reaction. “You’re a long way from home, Gaul. Why are you here?”

“We search,” Gaul said slowly. “We look for He Who Comes With the Dawn.”

Perrin had heard that name before, under circumstances that made him sure who it meant. *Light, it always comes back to Rand. I am tied to him like a mean horse for shoeing.* “You are looking in the wrong direction, Gaul. I’m looking for him, too, and he is on his way to Tear.”

“Tear?” The Aiel sounded surprised. “Why . . . ? But it must be. Prophecy says when the Stone of Tear falls, we will leave the Three-fold Land at last.” That was the Aiel name for the Waste. “It says we will be changed, and find again what was ours, and was lost.”

“That may be. I don’t know your prophecies, Gaul. Are you about ready to leave? Somebody could come any minute.”

“It is too late to run,” Gaul said, and a deep voice shouted, “The savage is lose!” Ten or a dozen white-cloaked men came running across the square, drawing swords, their conical helmets shining in the moonlight. Children of the Light.

As if he had all the time in the world, Gaul calmly lifted a dark cloth from his shoulders and wrapped it around his head, finishing with a thick black veil that hid his face except for his eyes. “Do you like to dance, Perrin Aybara?” he asked. With that, he darted away from the cage. Straight at the oncoming Whitecloaks.

For an instant they were caught by surprise, but an instant was apparently all the Aiel needed. He kicked the sword out of the grip of the first to reach him, then his stiffened hand struck like a dagger at the Whitecloak’s throat, and he slid around the soldier as he fell. The next man’s arm made a loud snap as Gaul broke it. He pushed that man under the feet of a third, and kicked a fourth in the face. It *was* like a dance, from one to the next without stopping or slowing, though the tripped fellow was climbing back to his feet, and the one with the broken arm had shifted his sword. Gaul danced on in the midst of them.

Perrin had only an amazed moment himself, for not all the Whitecloaks had put their attentions on the Aiel. Barely in time, he gripped the axe haft with both hands to block a sword thrust, swung . . . and wanted to cry out as the half-moon blade tore the man's throat. But he had no time for crying out, none for regrets; more Whitecloaks followed before the first fell. He hated the gaping wounds the axe made, hated the way it chopped through mail to rend flesh beneath, split helmet and skull with almost equal ease. He hated it all. But he did not want to die.

Time seemed to compress and stretch out, both at once. His body felt as if he fought for hours, and breath rasped raw in his throat. Men seemed to move as though floating through jelly. They seemed to leap in an instant from where they started to where they fell. Sweat rolled down his face, yet he felt as cold as quenching water. He fought for his life, and he could not have said whether it lasted seconds or all night.

When he finally stood, panting and nearly stunned, looking at a dozen white-cloaked men lying on the paving blocks of the square, the moon appeared not to have moved at all. Some of the men groaned; others lay silent and still. Gaul stood among them, still veiled, still empty-handed. Most of the men down were his work. Perrin wished they all were, and felt ashamed. The smell of blood and death was sharp and bitter.

"You do not dance the spears badly, Perrin Aybara."

Head spinning, Perrin muttered, "I don't see how twelve men fought twenty of you and won, even if two of them are Hunters."

"Is that what they say?" Gaul laughed softly. "Sarien and I were careless, being so long in these soft lands, and the wind was from the wrong direction, so we smelled nothing. We walked into them before we knew it. Well, Sarien is dead, and I was caged like a fool, so perhaps we paid enough. It is time for running now, wetlander. Tear; I will remember it." At last he lowered the black veil. "May you always find water and shade, Perrin Aybara." Turning, he ran into the night.

Perrin started to run, too, then realized he had a bloody axe in his hands. Hastily he wiped the curved blade on a dead man's cloak. *He's dead, burn me, and there's blood on it already.* He made himself put the haft back through the loop on his belt before he broke into a trot.

At his second step he saw her, a slim shape at the edge of the square, in dark, narrow skirts. She turned to run; he could see they were divided for riding. She darted back into the street and vanished.

Lan met him before he reached the place where she had been standing. The Warder took in the cage sitting empty beneath the gibbet, the shadowed white mounds that caught the moonlight, and he tossed his head as if he were about to erupt. In a voice as tight and hard as a new wheel rim, he said, “Is this your work, blacksmith? The Light burn me! Is there anyone who can connect it to you?”

“A girl,” Perrin said. “I think she saw. I don’t want you to hurt her, Lan! Plenty of others could have seen, too. There are lighted windows all around.”

The Warder grabbed Perrin’s coat sleeve and gave him a push toward the inn. “I saw a girl running, but I thought. . . . No matter. You dig the Ogier out and haul him down to the stable. After this, we need to get our horses to the docks as quickly as possible. The Light alone knows if there is a ship sailing tonight, or what I’ll have to pay to hire one if there isn’t. Don’t ask questions, blacksmith! Do it! Run!”

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CHAPTER 35

The Falcon

The Warder’s long legs outdistanced Perrin’s, and by the time he pushed through the throng outside the inn doors, Lan was already striding up the stairs, not seeming in any particular hurry. Perrin made himself walk as slowly. From the doorway behind him came grumbles about people pushing ahead of other people.

“Again?” Orban was saying, holding his silver cup up to be refilled. “Aye, very well. They lay in ambush close beside the road we traveled, and an ambush I did not expect so close to Remen. Screaming, they rushed upon us from the crowding brush. In a breath they were in our midst, their spears stabbing, slaying two of my best men and one of Gann’s immediately. Aye, I knew Aiel when I saw them, and. . . .”

Perrin hurried up the stairs. *Well, Orban knows them now.*

Voices came from behind Moiraine’s door. He did not want to hear what she had to say about this. He hurried past to stick his head into Loial’s room.

The Ogier bed was a low, massive thing, twice as long and half as wide as any human bed Perrin had ever seen. It took up much of the room, and that was as large and as fine as Moiraine’s. Perrin vaguely remembered Loial saying something about it being sung wood, and at any other time he might have stopped to admire those flowing curves that made it seem as if the bed had somehow grown where it stood. Ogier really must have stopped in Remen at some time in the past, for the innkeeper had also found a wooden armchair that fit Loial, and filled it with cushions. The Ogier was comfortably sitting on them in his shirt and breeches, idly scratching a bare ankle with a toenail as he wrote in a large, cloth-bound book on an arm of the chair.

“We’re leaving!” Perrin said.

Loial gave a jump, nearly upsetting his ink bottle and almost dropping the book. “Leaving? We only just arrived,” he rumbled.

“Yes, leaving. Meet us at the stable as quickly as you can. And don’t let anyone see you go. I think there’s a back stair that runs down by the kitchen.” The smell of food at his end of the hall had been too strong for there not to be.

The Ogier gave one regretful look at the bed, then started tugging on his high boots. “But why?”

“The Whitecloaks,” Perrin said. “I’ll tell you more later.” He ducked back out before Loial could ask any more.

He had not unpacked. Once he had belted on his quiver, slung his cloak around him, tossed blanketroll and saddlebags on his shoulder, and picked up his bow, there was no sign he had ever been there. Not a wrinkle in the folded blankets at the foot of the bed, not a splash of water in the cracked basin on the washstand. Even the tallow candle still had a fresh wick, he realized. *I must have known I would not be staying. I don’t seem to leave any mark behind me, of late.*

As he has suspected, a narrow stair at the back led down to a hall that ran out past the kitchen. He peered cautiously into the kitchen. A spit dog trotted in his big wicker wheel, turning a long spit that held a haunch of lamb, a large piece of beef, five chickens, and a goose. Fragrant steam rose from a soup cauldron hanging from a sturdy crane over a second hearth. But there was not a cook to be seen, nor any living soul except the dog. Thankful for Orban’s lies, he hurried on into the night.

The stable was a large structure of the same stone as the inn, though only the stone faces around the big doors had been polished. A single lantern hanging from a stallpost gave a dim light. Stepper and the other horses stood in stalls near the doors; Loial’s big mount nearly filled his. The smell of hay and horses was familiar and comforting. Perrin was the first to arrive.

There was only one stableman on duty, a narrow-faced fellow in a dirty shirt, with lanky gray hair, who demanded to know who Perrin was to order four horses saddled, and who was his master, and what he was doing all bundled up to travel in the middle of the night, and did Master Furlan know he was sneaking off like this, and what did he have hidden in those saddlebags, and what was wrong with his eyes, was he sick?

A coin flipped through the air from behind Perrin, glinting gold in the lantern light. The stableman snagged it with one hand and bit it.

“Saddle them,” Lan said. His voice was soft, as cold iron is soft, and the stableman bobbed a bow and scurried to make the horses ready.

Moiraine and Loial came into the stable just as they could take up their reins, and then they were all leading their horses behind Lan, off down a street that ran behind the stable toward the river. The soft clop of the horses’ hooves on the paving blocks attracted only a slat-ribbed dog that barked once and ran away as they went by.

“This brings back memories, doesn’t it, Perrin?” Loial said, quietly for him.

“Keep your voice down,” Perrin whispered. “What memories?”

“Why, it is like old times.” The Ogier had managed to mute his voice; he sounded like a bumblebee only the size of a dog instead of a horse. “Sneaking away in the night, with enemies behind us, and maybe enemies ahead, and danger in the air, and the cold tang of adventure.”

Perrin frowned at Loial over Stepper’s saddle. It was easy enough; his eyes cleared the saddle, and Loial stood head and shoulders and chest above it on the other side. “What are you talking about? I believe you are coming to like danger! Loial, you must be crazy!”

“I am only fixing the mood in my head,” Loial said, sounding formal. Or perhaps defensive. “For my book. I have to put it all in. I believe I am coming to like it. Adventuring. Of course, I am.” His ears gave two violent twitches. “I have to like it if I wish to write of it.”

Perrin shook his head.

At the stone wharves the barge like ferries lay snugged for the night, still and dark, as did most of the ships. Lantern lights and people moved around on the dock alongside a two-masted vessel, though, and on the deck as well. The main smells were tar and rope, with strong hints of fish, though something back in the nearest warehouse gave off sharp, spicy aromas that the others nearly submerged.

Lan located the captain, a short, slight man with an odd way of holding his head tilted to one side while he listened. The bargaining was over soon enough, and booms and sling rigged to hoist the horses aboard. Perrin kept a close eye on the horses, talking to them; horses had little tolerance for the unusual, such as being lifted into the air, but even the Warder’s stallion seemed soothed by his murmurs.

Lan gave gold to the captain, and silver to two sailors who ran barefoot to a warehouse for sacks of oats. More crewmen tethered the horses between the masts in a sort of small pen made of rope, all the while muttering about the mess they would have to clean. Perrin did not think anyone was supposed to overhear, but his ears caught the words. The men were just not used to horses.

In short order the *Snow Goose* was ready to sail, only a little ahead of what the captain—his name was Jaim Adarra—had intended. Lan led Moiraine below as the lines were cast off, and Loial followed yawning. Perrin stayed at the railing near the bow, though the Ogier's every yawn had summoned one of his own. He wondered if the *Snow Goose* could outrun wolves down the river, outrun dreams. Men began readying the sweeps to push the vessel away from the wharf.

As the last line was tossed ashore and seized by a dockman, a girl in narrow, divided skirts burst out of the shadows between two warehouses, a bundle in her arms and a dark cloak streaming behind her. She leaped onto the deck just as the men at the sweeps began pushing off.

Adarra bustled from his place by the tiller, but she calmly set down her bundle and said briskly, "I will take passage downriver . . . oh . . . say, as far as he is going." She nodded toward Perrin without looking at him. "I've no objections to sleeping on deck. Cold and wet do not bother me."

A few minutes of bargaining followed. She passed over three silver marks, frowned at the coppers she got back, then stuffed them into her purse and came forward to stand beside Perrin.

She had an herbal scent to her, light and fresh and clean. Those dark, tilted eyes regarded him over high cheekbones, then turned to look back toward shore. She was about his own age, he decided; he could not decide if her nose fit her face, or dominated it. *You* are *a fool, Perrin Aybara. Why care what she looks like?*

The gap to the wharf was a good twenty paces, now; the sweeps dug in, cutting white furrows in black water. For a moment he considered tossing her over the side.

"Well," she said after a moment, "I never expected my travels to take me back to Illian so soon as this." Her voice was high, and she had a flat way of speaking, but it was not unpleasant. "You *are* going to Illian, are you not?" He tightened his mouth. "Don't sulk," she said. "You left quite a mess back there, you and that Aielman between you. The uproar was just beginning when I left."

"You did not tell them?" he said in surprise.

“The townsfolk think the Aielman chewed through the chain, or broke it with his bare hands. They had not decided which when I left.” She made a sound suspiciously like a giggle. “Orban was quite loud in his disgust that his wounds would keep him from hunting down the Aielman personally.”

Perrin snorted. “If he ever sees an Aiel again, he’ll bloody soil himself.” He cleared his throat and muttered, “Sorry.”

“I do not know about that,” she said, as if his remark had been nothing out of the way. “I saw him in Jehannah during the winter. He fought four men together, killed two and made the other two yield. Of course, he started the fight, so that takes something away from it, but they knew what they were doing. He did not pick a fight with men who could not defend themselves. Still, he is a fool. He has these peculiar ideas about the Great Blackwood. What some call the Forest of Shadows. Have you ever heard of it?”

He eyed her sideways. She spoke of fighting and killing as calmly as another woman might speak of baking. He had never heard of any Great Blackwood, but the Forest of Shadows lay just south of the Two Rivers. “Are you following me? You were staring at me, back at the inn. Why? And why didn’t you tell them what you saw?”

“An Ogier,” she said, staring at the river, “is obviously an Ogier, and the others were not much more difficult to figure out. I managed a much better look inside *Lady Alys*’s hood than Orban did, and her face makes that stone-faced fellow a Warder. The Light burn me if I’d want that one angry with me. Does he always look like that, or did he eat a rock for his last meal? Anyway, that left only you. I do not like things I cannot account for.”

Once again he considered tossing her over the side. Seriously, this time. But Remen was now only a blotch of light well behind them in the darkness, and no telling how far it was to shore.

She seemed to take his silence as an urging to go on. “So there I have an”—she looked around, then dropped her voice, though the closest crewman was working a sweep ten feet away—“an Aes Sedai, a Warder, an Ogier—and you. A countryman, by first look at you.” Her tilted eyes rose to study his yellow ones intently—he refused to look away—and she smiled. “Only you free a caged Aielman, hold a long talk with him, then help him chop a dozen Whitecloaks into sausage. I assume you do this regularly; you certainly looked as if it were nothing out of the ordinary for you. I scent something strange in a party of travelers such as yours, and strange trails are what Hunters look for."

He blinked; there was no mistaking that emphasis. "A Hunter? You? You cannot be a Hunter. You're a girl."

Her smile became so innocent that he almost walked away from her. She stepped back, made a flourish with each hand, and was holding two knives as neatly as old Thom Merrilin could have done it. One of the men at the sweeps made a choking sound, and two others stumbled; sweeps thrashed and tangled, and the *Snow Goose* lurched a little before the captain's shouts set things right. By that time, the black-haired girl had made the knives disappear again.

"Nimble fingers and nimble wits will take you a good deal further than a sword and muscles. Sharp eyes help, as well, but fortunately, I have these things."

"And modesty, as well," Perrin murmured. She did not seem to notice.

"I took the oath and received the blessing in the Great Square of Tammaz, in Illian. Perhaps I *was* the youngest, but in that crowd, with all the trumpets and drums and cymbals and shouting. . . . A six-year-old could have taken the oath, and none would have noticed. There were over a thousand of us, perhaps two, and every one with an idea of where to find the Horn of Valere. I have mine—it still may be the right one—but no Hunter can afford to pass up a strange trail. The Horn will certainly lie at the end of a strange trail, and I have never seen one any stranger than the trail you four make. Where are you bound? Illian? Somewhere else?"

"What was your idea?" he asked. "About where the Horn is?" *Safe in Tar Valon, I hope, and the Light send I never see it again.* "You think it's in Ghealdan?"

She frowned at him—he had the feeling she did not give up a scent once she had raised it, but he was ready to offer her as many side trails as she would take—then said, "Have you ever heard of Manetheren?"

He nearly choked. "I have heard of it," he said cautiously.

"Every queen of Manetheren was an Aes Sedai, and the king the Warder bound to her. I can't imagine a place like that, but that is what the books say. It was a large land—most of Andor and Ghealdan and more besides—but the capital, the city itself, was in the Mountains of Mist. That is where I think the Horn is. Unless you four lead me to it."

His hackles stirred. She was lecturing him as if he were an untaught village lout. “You’ll not find the Horn or Manetheren. The city was destroyed during the Trolloc Wars, when the last queen drew too much of the One Power to destroy the Dreadlords who had killed her husband.” Moiraine had told him the names of that king and queen, but he did not remember them.

“Not in Manetheren, farmboy,” she said calmly, “though a land such as that would make a good hiding place. But there were other nations, other cities, in the Mountains of Mist, so old that not even Aes Sedai remember them. And think of all those stories about it being bad luck to enter the mountains. What better place for the Horn to be hidden than in one of those forgotten cities.”

“I have heard stories of something being hidden in the mountains.” Would she believe him? He had never been good at lying. “The stories did not say what, but it’s supposed to be the greatest treasure in the world, so maybe it is the Horn. But the Mountains of Mist stretch for hundreds of leagues. If you are going to find it, you should not waste time following us. You’ll need it all to find the Horn before Orban and Gann.”

“I told you, those two have some strange idea the Horn is hidden in the Great Blackwood.” She smiled up at him. Her mouth was not too big at all, when she smiled. “And I told you a Hunter has to follow strange trails. You are lucky Orban and Gann were injured fighting all those Aielmen, or they might well be aboard, too. At least I will not get in your way, or try to take over, or pick a fight with the Warder.”

He growled disgustedly. “We are just travelers on our way to Illian, girl. What is your name? If I have to share this ship with you for days yet, I can’t keep calling you girl.”

“I call myself Mandarb.” He could not stop the guffaw that burst out of him. Those tilted eyes regarded him with heat. “I will teach you something, farmboy.” Her voice remained level. Barely. “In the Old Tongue, Mandarb means ‘blade.’ It is a name worthy of a Hunter of the Horn!”

He managed to get his laughter under control, and hardly wheezed at all as he pointed to the rope pen between the masts. “You see that black stallion? His name is Mandarb.”

The heat went out of her eyes, and spots of color bloomed on her cheeks. “Oh. I was born Zarine Bashere, but Zarine is no name for a Hunter. In the stories, Hunters have names like Rogosh Eagle-eye.”

She looked so crestfallen that he hastened to say, “I like the name Zarine. It suits you.” The heat flashed back into her eyes, and for a moment he thought she was about to produce one of her knives again. “It is late, Zarine. I want some sleep.”

He turned his back to start for the hatch that led belowdeck, prickles running across his shoulders. Crewmen still padded up the deck and back, working the sweeps. *Fool. A girl would not stick a knife in me. Not with all these people watching. Would she?* Just as he reached the hatch, she called to him.

“Farmboy! Perhaps I will call myself Faile. My father used to call me that, when I was little. It means ‘falcon.’ ”

He stiffened and almost missed the first step of the ladder. *Coincidence.* He made himself go down without looking back toward her. *It has to be.* The passageway was dark, but enough moonlight filtered down behind him for him to make his way. Someone was snoring loudly in one of the cabins. *Min, why did you have to go seeing things?*

* * *

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CHAPTER 36

Daughter of the Night

Realizing that he had no way of knowing which cabin was supposed to be his, he put his head into several. They were dark, and all of them had two men asleep in the narrow beds built against each side, all but one, which held Loial, sitting on the floor between the beds—and barely fitting—scribbling in his cloth-bound book of notes by the light of a gimballed lantern. The Ogier wanted to talk about the events of the day, but Perrin, jaws creaking with the effort of holding his yawns in, thought the ship must have run far enough downriver by now to make it safe to sleep. Safe to dream. Even if they tried, wolves could not long keep pace with the sweeps and the current.

Finally he found a windowless cabin with no one in it at all, which suited him just as well. He wanted to be alone. *A coincidence in the name, that's all,* he thought as he lit the lantern mounted on the wall. *Anyway, her real name is Zarine.* But the girl with the high cheekbones and dark, tilted eyes was not uppermost in his thoughts. He put his bow and other belongings on one cramped bed, tossed his cloak over them, and sat on the other to tug off his boots.

Elyas Machera had found a way to live with what he was, a man somehow linked with wolves, and he had not gone mad. Thinking back, Perrin was sure Elyas had been living that way for years before he ever met the man. *He wants to be that way. He accepts it, anyway.* That was no solution. Perrin did not want to live that way, did not want to accept. *But if you have the bar stock to make a knife, you accept it and make a knife, even if you'd like a woodaxe. No! My life is more than iron to be hammered into shape.*

Cautiously, he reached out with his mind, feeling for wolves, and found—nothing. Oh, there was a dim impression of wolves somewhere in the distance, but it faded even as he touched it. For the first time in so long, he was alone. Blessedly alone.

Blowing out the lantern, he lay down, for the first time in days. *How in the Light will Loial manage in one of these?* Those all but sleepless nights rolled over him, exhaustion slacking his muscles. It came to him that he had managed to put the Aiel out of his head. And the Whitecloaks. *Light-forsaken axe! Burn me, I wish I had never seen it,* was his last thought before sleep.

Thick gray fog surrounded him, dense enough low down that he could not see his own boots, and so heavy on every side that he could not make out anything ten paces away. There was surely nothing nearer. Anything at all might lie within it. The mist did not feel right; there was no dampness to it. He put a hand to his belt, seeking the comfort of knowing he could defend himself, and gave a start. His axe was not there.

Something moved in the fog, a swirling in the grayness. Something coming his way.

He tensed, wondering if it was better to run or stand and fight with his bare hands, wondering if there was anything to fight.

The billowing furrow boring through the fog resolved itself into a wolf, its shaggy form almost one with the heavy mist.

Hopper?

The wolf hesitated, then came to stand beside him. It was Hopper—he was certain—but something about the wolf's stance, something in the yellow eyes that looked up briefly to meet his, demanded silence, in mind as well as body. Those eyes demanded that he follow, too.

He laid a hand on the wolf's back, and as he did, Hopper started forward. He let himself be led. The fur under his hand was thick and shaggy. It felt real.

The fog began to thicken, until only his hand told him Hopper was still there, until a glance down did not even show him his own chest. Just gray mist. He might as well have been wrapped in new-sheared wool for all he could see. It struck him that he had heard nothing, either. Not even the sound of his own footsteps. He wiggled his toes, and was relieved to feel the boots on his feet.

The gray became darker, and he and the wolf walked through pitch-blackness. He could not see his hand when he touched his nose. He could not see his nose, for that matter. He tried closing his eyes for a moment, and could not tell any difference. There was still no sound. His hand felt the rough hair of Hopper’s back, but he was not sure he could feel anything under his boots.

Suddenly Hopper stopped, forcing him to halt, too. He looked around . . . and snapped his eyes shut. He could tell a difference, now. And feel something, too, a queasy twisting of his stomach. He made himself open his eyes and look down.

What he saw could not have been there, not unless he and Hopper were standing in midair. He could see nothing of the wolf or himself, as if neither had bodies at all—that thought nearly tied his stomach into knots—but below him, as clear as if lit by a thousand lamps, stretched a vast array of mirrors, seemingly hanging in blackness though as level as if they stood on a vast floor. They stretched as far as he could see in every direction, but right beneath his feet, there was a clear space. And people in it. Suddenly he could hear their voices as well as if he had been standing among them.

“Great Lord,” one of the men muttered, “where is this place?” He looked around once, flinching at his image cast back at him many thousandfold, and held his eyes forward after that. The others huddled around him seemed even more afraid. “I was asleep in Tar Valon, Great Lord. I *am* asleep in Tar Valon! Where is this place? Have I gone mad?”

Some of the men around him wore ornate coats full of embroidery, others plainer garb, while some seemed to be naked, or in their smallclothes.

“I, too, sleep,” a naked man nearly screamed. “In Tear. I remember lying down with my wife!”

“And I do sleep in Illian,” a man in red and gold said, sounding shaken. “I know that I do sleep, but that cannot be. I know that I do dream, but that does be impossible. Where does this be, Great Lord? Are you really come to me?”

The dark-haired man who faced them was garbed in black, with silver lace at his throat and wrists. Now and again he put a hand to his chest, as if it hurt him. There was light everywhere down there, coming from nowhere, but this man below Perrin seemed cloaked in shadow. Darkness rolled around him, caressed him.

“Silence!” The black-clothed man did not speak loudly, but he had no need to. For the space of that word, he had raised his head; his eyes and mouth were holes boring into a raging forge-fire, all flame and fiery glow.

Perrin knew him, then. Ba’alzamon. He was staring down at Ba’alzamon himself. Fear struck through him like hammered spikes. He would have run, but he could not feel his feet.

Hopper shifted. He felt the thick fur under his hand and gripped it hard. Something real. Something more real, he hoped, than what he saw. But he knew that both were real.

The men huddling together cowered.

“You have been given tasks,” Ba’alzamon said. “Some of these tasks you have carried out. At others, you have failed.” Now and again his eyes and mouth vanished in flame again, and the mirrors flashed with reflected fire. “Those who have been marked for death must die. Those who have been marked for taking must bow to me. To fail the Great Lord of the Dark cannot be forgiven.” Fire shone through his eyes, and the darkness around him roiled and spun. “You.” His finger pointed out the man who had spoken of Tar Valon, a fellow dressed like a merchant, in plainly cut clothes of the finest cloth. The others shied away from him as if he had blackbile fever, leaving him to cower alone. “You allowed the boy to escape Tar Valon.”

The man screamed, and began to quiver like a file struck against an anvil. He seemed to become less solid, and his scream thinned with him.

“You all dream,” Ba’alzamon said, “but what happens in this dream is real.” The shrieking man was only a bundle of mist shaped like a man, his scream far distant, and then even the mist was gone. “I fear he will never wake.” He laughed, and his mouth roared flame. “The rest of you will not fail me again. Begone! Wake, and obey!” The other men vanished.

For a moment Ba’alzamon stood alone, then suddenly there was a woman with him, clad all in white and silver.

Shock hit Perrin. He could never forget a woman so beautiful. She was the woman from his dream, the one who had urged him to glory.

An ornate silver throne appeared behind her, and she sat, carefully arranging her silken skirts. “You make free use of my domain,” she said.

“Your domain?” Ba’alzamon said. “You claim it yours, then? Do you no longer serve the Great Lord of the Dark?” The darkness around him thickened for an instant, seemed to boil.

“I serve,” she said quickly. “I have served the Lord of the Twilight long. Long did I lie imprisoned for my service, in an endless, dreamless sleep. Only Gray Men and Myrddraal are denied dreams. Even Trollocs can dream. Dreams were always mine, to use and walk. Now I am free again, and I will use what is mine."

"What is yours," Ba'alzamon said. The blackness swirling 'round him seemed mirthful. "You always thought yourself greater than you were, Lanfear."

The name cut at Perrin like a newly honed knife. One of the Forsaken had been in his dreams. Moiraine had been right. Some of them were free.

The woman in white was on her feet, the throne gone. "I am as great as I am. What have your plans come to? Three thousand years and more of whispering in ears and pulling the strings of throned puppets like an Aes Sedai!" Her voice invested the name with all scorn. "Three thousand years, and yet Lews Therin walks the world again, and these Aes Sedai all but have him leashed. Can you control him? Can you turn him? He was mine before ever that straw-haired chit Ilyena saw him! He will be mine again!"

"Do you serve yourself now, Lanfear?" Ba'alzamon's voice was soft, but flame raged continuously in his eyes and mouth. "Have you abandoned your oaths to the Great Lord of the Dark?" For an instant the darkness nearly obliterated him, only the glowing fires showing through. "They are not so easily broken as the oaths to the Light you forsook, proclaiming your new master in the very Hall of the Servants. Your master claims you forever, Lanfear. Will you serve, or do you choose an eternity of pain, of endless dying without release?"

"I serve." Despite her words, she stood tall and defiant. "I serve the Great Lord of the Dark and none other. Forever!"

The vast array of mirror began to vanish as if black waves rolled in over it, ever closer to the center. The tide rolled over Ba'alzamon and Lanfear. There was only blackness.

Perrin felt Hopper move, and he was more than glad to follow, guided only by the feel of fur under his hand. It was not until he was moving that he realized he could. He tried to puzzle out what he had seen, without any success. Ba'alzamon and Lanfear. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. For some reason, Lanfear frightened him more than Ba'alzamon did. Perhaps because she had been in his dreams in the mountains. *Light! One of the Forsaken in my dreams! Light!* And unless he had missed something, she had defied the Dark One. He had been told and taught that the Shadow could have no power over you if you denied it; but how could a Darkfriend

—not just a Darkfriend; one of the Forsaken!—defy the Shadow? *I must be mad, like Simion's brother. These dreams have driven me mad!*

Slowly the blackness became fog again, and the fog gradually thinned until he walked out of it with Hopper onto a grassy hillside bright with daylight. Birds began to sing from a thicket at the foot of the hill. He looked back. A hilly plain dotted with clumps of trees stretched to the horizon. There was no sign of fog anywhere. The big, grizzled wolf stood watching him.

"What was that?" he demanded, struggling in his mind to turn the question to thoughts the wolf could understand. "Why did you show it to me? What was it?"

Emotions and images flooded his thoughts, and his mind put words to them. *What you must see. Be careful, Young Bull. This place is dangerous. Be wary as a cub hunting porcupine.* That came as something closer to Small Thorny Back, but his mind named the animal the way he knew it as a man. *You are too young, too new.*

"Was it real?"

All is real, what is seen, and what is not seen. That seemed to be all the answer Hopper was going to give.

"Hopper, how are you here? I saw you die. I felt you die!"

All are here. All brothers and sisters that are, all that were, all that will be. Perrin knew that wolves did not smile, not the way humans did, but for an instant he had the impression that Hopper was grinning. *Here, I soar like the eagle.* The wolf gathered himself and leaped, up into the air. Up and up it carried him, until he dwindled to a speck in the sky, and a last thought came. *To soar.*

Perrin stared after him with his mouth hanging open. *He did it.* His eyes burned suddenly, and he cleared his throat and scrubbed at his nose. *I will be crying like a girl, next.* Without thinking, he looked around to see if anyone had seen him, and that quickly everything changed.

He was standing on a rise, with shadowy, indistinct dips and swells all around him. They seemed to fade into the distance too soon. Rand stood below him. Rand, and a ragged circle of Myrddraal and men and women his eyes seemed to slide right past. Dogs howled somewhere in the distance, and Perrin knew they were hunting something. Myrddraal scent and the stink of burned sulphur filled the air. Perrin's hackles rose.

The circle of Myrddraal and people came closer to Rand, all walking as if asleep. And Rand began to kill them. Balls of fire flew from his hands and consumed two. Lightning flashed from above to shrivel others. Bars of light like white-hot steel flew from his fists to more. And the survivors continued to walk slowly closer, as if none of them saw what was happening. One by one they died, until none were left, and Rand sank down on his knees, panting. Perrin was not sure whether he was laughing or crying; it seemed to be some of each.

Shapes appeared over the rises, more people coming, more Myrddraal, all intent on Rand.

Perrin cupped his hands to his mouth. “Rand! Rand, there are more coming!”

Rand looked up at him from his crouch, snarling, sweat slicking his face.

“Rand, they’re—!”

“Burn you!” Rand howled.

Light burned Perrin’s eyes, and pain seared everything.

Groaning, he rolled into a ball on the narrow bed, the light still burning behind his eyelids. His chest hurt. He raised a hand to it and winced when he felt a burn under his shirt, a spot no bigger than a silver penny.

Bit by bit he forced his knotted muscles to let him straighten his legs and lie flat in the dark cabin. *Moiraine. I have to tell Moiraine this time. Just have to wait till the pain goes away.*

But as the pain began to fade, exhaustion took him. He barely had a thought that he must get up before sleep pulled him down again.

When he opened his eyes again, he lay staring at the beams overhead. Light at the top and bottom of the door told him morning had come. He put a hand to his chest to convince himself he had imagined it, imagined it so well that he had actually felt a burn. . . .

His fingers found the burn. *I didn’t imagine it, then.* He had dim memories of a few other dreams, fading even as he recalled them. Ordinary dreams. He even felt as if he had had a good night’s sleep. *And could use another one right now.* But it meant he could sleep. *As long as there are no wolves around, anyway.*

He remembered making a decision in that brief waking after the dream with Hopper, and after a moment he decided it had been a good one.

It took knocking on five doors and being cursed at twice—the inhabitants of two cabins had gone on deck—before he found Moiraine. She was fully dressed, but sitting on one of the narrow beds cross-legged, reading in her book of notes by lantern light. Back near the beginning, he saw, notes that must have been made even before she had come to Emond's Field. Lan's things were neatly placed on the other bed.

"I had a dream," he told her, and proceeded to tell her of it. All of it. He even pulled up his shirt to show her the small circle on his chest, red, with wavy red lines radiating from it. He had kept things from her before, and he suspected he would again, but this might be too important to hold back. The pin was the smallest part of a pair of scissors, and the easiest made, but without it, the scissors cut no cloth. When he was done, he stood there waiting.

She had watched him without expression, except that those dark eyes had examined every word as it came out of his mouth, weighed it, measured it, held it up to the light. Now she sat the same way, only it was he who was examined, weighed, and held up to the light.

"Well, is it important?" he demanded finally. "I think it was one of those wolf dreams you told me about—I'm sure it was; it must have been!—but that doesn't make what I saw real. Only, you said maybe some of the Forsaken are free, and he called her Lanfear, and. . . . Is it important, or am I standing here making a fool out of myself?"

"There are women," she said slowly, "who would do their best to gentle you if they heard what I just did." His lungs seemed to freeze; he could not breathe. "I am not accusing you of being able to channel," she went on, and the ice inside him melted, "or even of being able to learn. An attempt at gentling would not harm you, beyond the rough treatment the Red Ajah would give you before they realized their error. Such men are so rare, even the Reds with all their hunting have not found more than three in the last ten years. Before the outbreak of false Dragons, at least. What I am trying to make clear to you is that I do not think you will suddenly begin wielding the Power. You do not have to be afraid of that."

"Well, thank you very much for that," he said bitterly. "You did not have to scare me to death just so you could tell me there was no need to be frightened!"

"Oh, you do have reason to be frightened. Or at least careful, as the wolf suggested. Red sisters, or others, might kill you before they discovered there was nothing to gentle in you.”

“Light! Light burn me!” He stared at her with a frown. “You’re trying to lead me around by the nose, Moiraine, but I am no calf, and there’s no ring in my nose. The Red Ajah or any other would not think of gentling unless there was something real in what I dreamed. Does it mean the Forsaken are loose?”

“I told you before that they might be. Some of them. Your . . . dreams are nothing I expected, Perrin. Dreamers have written of wolves, but I did not expect this.”

“Well, I think it was real. I think I saw something that really happened, something I wasn’t supposed to see.” *What you must see.* “I think Lanfear is loose at the very least. What are you going to do?”

“I am going to Illian. And then I will go to Tear, and hope to reach it before Rand. We had need to leave Remen too quickly for Lan to learn whether he crossed the river or went down it. We should know before we reach Illian, though. We will find sign if he has gone this way.” She glanced at her book as if she wanted to resume her reading.

“Is that all you are going to do? With Lanfear loose, and the Light alone knows how many of the others?”

“Do not question me,” she said coldly. “You do not know which questions to ask, and you would comprehend less than half the answers if I gave them. Which I will not.”

He shifted his feet under her gaze until it became clear she would say no more on the matter. His shirt rubbed painfully at the burn on his chest. It did not seem a bad hurt—*Not for being struck by lightning it doesn’t!*—but how he had come by it was another matter. “Uh. . . . Will you Heal this?”

“Are you no longer uneasy about the One Power being used on you, then, Perrin? No, I will not Heal it. It is not serious, and it will remind you of the need to be careful.” Careful about pressing her, he knew, as well as about dreams or letting others know of them. “If there is nothing else, Perrin?”

He started for the door, then stopped. “There is one thing. If you knew a woman’s name was Zarine, would you think it meant anything about her?”

“Why under the Light do you ask this question?”

“A girl,” he said awkwardly. “A young woman. I met her last night. She’s one of the other passengers.” He would let her discover for herself that Zarine knew she was Aes Sedai. And seemed to think following them would lead her to the Horn of Valere. He would not keep back anything he thought was important, but if Moiraine could be secretive, so could he.

“Zarine. It is a Saldaean name. No woman would name her daughter that unless she expected her to be a great beauty. And a heartbreaker. One to lie on cushions in palaces, surrounded by servants and suitors.” She smiled, briefly but with great amusement. “Perhaps you have another reason to be careful, Perrin, if there is a Zarine as a passenger with us.”

“I intend to be careful,” he told her. At least he knew why Zarine did not like her name. Hardly fitting for a Hunter of the Horn. *As long as she doesn’t call herself “falcon.”*

When he went on deck, Lan was there, looking over Mandarb. And Zarine was sitting on a coil of rope near the railing, sharpening one of her knives and watching him. The big, triangular sails were set and taut, and the *Snow Goose* flew downriver.

Zarine’s eyes followed Perrin as he walked by her to stand in the bow. The water curled to either side of the prow like earth turning around a good plow. He wondered about dreams and Aielmen, Min’s viewings and falcons. His chest hurt. Life had *never* been as tangled as this.

Rand sat up out of his exhausted sleep, gasping, the cloak he had used as a blanket falling away. His side ached, the old wound from Falme throbbing. His fire had burned down to coals with only a few wavering flames, but it was still enough to make the shadows move. *That was Perrin. It was! It was* him, *not a dream. Somehow. I almost killed him! Light, I have to be careful!*

Shivering, he picked up a length of oak branch and started to shove it into the coals. The trees were scattered in these Murandian hills, still close to the Manetherendrelle, but he had found just enough fallen branches for his fire, the wood just old enough to be properly cured but not rotten. Before the wood touched the coals, he stopped. There were horses coming, ten or a dozen of them, walking slowly. *I have to be careful. I cannot make another mistake.*

The horses swung toward his failing fire, entered the dim light, and stopped. The shadows obscured their riders, but most seemed to be rough-faced men wearing round helmets and long leather jerkins sewn all over with metal discs like fish scales. One was a woman with graying hair and a no-nonsense look on her face. Her dark dress was plain wool, but the finest weave, and adorned with a silver pin in the shape of a lion. A merchant, she seemed to him; he had seen her sort among those who came to buy tabac and wool in the Two Rivers. A merchant and her guards.

I have to be careful, he thought as he stood. *No mistakes.*

"You have chosen a good campsite, young man," she said. "I have often used it on my way to Remen. There is a small spring nearby. I trust you have no objection to my sharing it?" Her guards were already dismounting, hitching at their sword belts and loosening saddle girths.

"None," Rand told her. *Careful.* Two steps brought him close enough, and he leaped into the air, spinning—Thistledown Floats on the Whirlwind—heron-mark blade carved from fire coming into his hands to take her head off before surprise could even form on her face. *She was the most dangerous.*

He alighted as the woman's head rolled from the crupper of her horse. The guards yelled and clawed for their swords, screamed as they realized his blade burned. He danced among them in the forms Lan had taught him, and knew he could have killed all ten with ordinary steel, but the blade he wielded was part of him. The last man fell, and it had been so like practicing the forms that he had already begun the sheathing called Folding the Fan before he remembered he wore no scabbard and this blade would have turned it to ash at a touch if he had.

Letting the sword vanish, he turned to examine the horses. Most had run away, but some not far, and the woman's tall gelding stood with rolling eyes, whickering uneasily. Her headless corpse, lying on the ground, had maintained its grip on the reins, and held the animal's head down.

Rand pulled them free, pausing only to gather his few belongings before swinging into the saddle. *I have to be careful*, he thought as he looked over the dead. *No mistakes.*

The Power still filled him, the flow from *saidin* sweeter than honey, ranker than rotted meat. Abruptly he channeled—not really understanding what it was he did, or how, only that it seemed right; and it worked, lifting the corpses. He set them in a line, facing him, kneeling, faces in the dirt. For those who had faces left. Kneeling to him.

"If I *am* the Dragon Reborn," he told them, "that is the way it is supposed to be, isn't it?" Letting go of *saidin* was hard, but he did it. *If I* *hold it too much, how will I keep the madness away?* He laughed bitterly. *Or is it too late for that?*

Frowning, he peered at the line. He had been sure there were only ten men, but eleven men knelt in that line, one of them without armor of any sort but with a dagger still gripped in his hand.

"You chose the wrong company," Rand told that man.

Wheeling the gelding, he dug in his heels and set the animal to a dead gallop into the night. It was a long way to Tear, yet, but he meant to get there by the straightest way, if he had to kill horses or steal them. *I will put an end to it. The taunting. The baiting. I will end it! Callandor.* It called to him.

* * *

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CHAPTER 37

Fires in Cairhien

Egwene returned a graceful nod to the respectful bow of the ship’s crewman who padded past her, barefoot, on his way to pull a rope that already seemed taut, possibly shifting a trifle the way one of the big square sails set. As he trotted back toward where the round-faced captain stood by the tillerman, he bowed again, and she nodded once more before returning her attentions to the forested Cairhien shore, separated from the *Blue Crane* by less than twenty spans of water.

A village was sliding past, or what had been a village once. Half the houses were only smoldering piles of rubble with chimneys sticking starkly out of the ruins. On the other houses, doors swung with the wind, and pieces of furniture, bits of clothing and house ware littered the dirt street, tumbled about as if thrown. Nothing living moved in the village except for one half-starved dog that ignored the passing ship as it trotted out of sight behind the toppled walls of what appeared to have been an inn. She could never see such a sight without a queasiness settling in her belly, but she tried to maintain the dispassionate serenity she thought an Aes Sedai might have. It did not help much. Beyond the village, a thick plume of smoke was rising into the sky. Three or four miles off, she estimated.

This was not the first such plume of smoke she had seen since the Erinin began to flow along the border of Cairhien, nor the first such village. At least this time there were no bodies in sight. Captain Ellisor sometimes had to sail close to the Cairhienin shore because of mudflats—he said they shifted in this part of the river—but however close he came, she had not seen a single living person.

The village and the smoke plume slipped away behind the ship, but already another column of smoke was coming into view ahead, further from the river. The forest was thinning, ash and leatherleaf and black elder giving way to willow and whitewood and wateroak, and some she did not recognize.

The wind caught her cloak, but she let it stream, feeling the cold cleanness of the air, feeling the freedom of wearing brown instead of any sort of white, though it had not been her first choice. Yet dress and cloak were of the best wool, well cut and well sewn.

Another sailor trotted by, bowing as he went. She vowed to learn at least some of what it was they were doing; she did not like feeling ignorant. Wearing her Great Serpent ring on her right hand made for a good deal of bowing with a captain and crew born mainly in Tar Valon.

She had won that argument with Nynaeve, though Nynaeve had been sure she herself was the only one of the three of them old enough for people to believe she was Aes Sedai. But Nynaeve had been wrong. Egwene was ready to admit that both she and Elayne had received startled looks on boarding the *Blue Crane* that afternoon at Southharbor, and Captain Ellisor's eyebrows had climbed almost to where his hair would have begun had he had any, but he had been all smiles and bows.

"An honor, Aes Sedai. Three Aes Sedai to travel on my vessel? An honor indeed. I promise you a quick journey as far as you wish. And no trouble with Cairhienin brigands. I no longer put in on that side of the river. Unless you wish it, of course, Aes Sedai. Andoran soldiers do hold a few towns on the Cairhienin side. An honor, Aes Sedai."

His eyebrows had shot up again when they asked for just one cabin among them—not even Nynaeve wanted to be alone at night if she did not have to be. Each could have a cabin to herself at no extra charge, he told them; he had no other passengers, his cargo was aboard, and if Aes Sedai had urgent business downriver, he would not wait even an hour for anyone else who might want passage. They said again that one cabin would be sufficient.

He was startled, and it had been plain from his face that he did not understand, but Chin Ellisor, born and bred in Tar Valon, was not one to question Aes Sedai once they made their intentions clear. If two of them seemed very young, well, some Aes Sedai were young.

The abandoned ruins vanished behind Egwene. The column of smoke drew closer, and there was a hint of another much further still from the riverbank. The forest was turning to low, grassy hills dotted with thickets. Trees that made flowers in the spring had them, tiny white blossoms on snowberry and bright red sugarberry. One tree she did not know was covered in round white flowers bigger than her two hands together.

Occasionally a climbing wild-rose put swaths of yellow or white through branches thick with the green of leaves and the red of new growth. It was all too sharp a contrast to the ashes and rubble to be entirely pleasant.

Egwene wished she had an Aes Sedai to question herself right then. One she could trust. Brushing her pouch with her fingers, she could barely feel the twisted stone ring of the *ter'angreal* inside.

She had tried it every night but two since leaving Tar Valon, and it had not worked the same way twice. Oh, she always found herself in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, but the only thing she saw that might have been any use was the Heart of the Stone again, each time without Silvie to tell her things. There was certainly nothing about the Black Ajah.

Her own dreams, without the *ter'angreal*, had been filled with images that seemed almost like glimpses of the Unseen World. Rand holding a sword that blazed like the sun, till she could hardly see that it was a sword, could hardly make out that it was him at all. Rand threatened in a dozen ways, none of them the least bit real. In one dream he had been on a huge stones board, the black and white stones as big as boulders, and him dodging the monstrous hands that moved them and seemed to try to crush him under them. It could have meant something. It very probably did, but beyond the fact that Rand was in danger from someone, or two someones—she thought that much was clear—beyond that, she simply did not know. *I cannot help him, now. I have my own duty. I don't even know where he is, except that it is probably five hundred leagues from here.*

She had dreamed of Perrin with a wolf, and with a falcon, and a hawk—and the falcon and the hawk fighting—of Perrin running from someone deadly, and Perrin stepping willingly over the edge of a towering cliff while saying, “It must be done. I must learn to fly before I reach the bottom.” There had been one dream of an Aiel, and she thought that had to do with Perrin, too, but she was not sure. And a dream of Min, springing a steel trap but somehow walking through it without so much as seeing it. There had been dreams of Mat, too. Of Mat with dice spinning 'round him—she felt she knew where that one came from—of Mat being followed by a man who was not there—she still did not understand that; there was a man following, or maybe more than one, but in some way there was no one there—of Mat riding desperately toward something unseen in the distance that he had to reach, and Mat with a woman who seemed to be tossing fireworks about.

An Illuminator, she assumed, but that made no more sense than anything else.

She had had so many dreams that she was beginning to doubt them all. Maybe it had to do with using the *ter'angreal* so often, or maybe with just carrying it. Maybe she was finally learning what a Dreamer did. Frantic dreams, hectic dreams. Men and women breaking out of a cage, then putting on crowns. A woman playing with puppets, and another dream where the strings on puppets led to the hands of larger puppets, and their strings led to still greater puppets, on and on until the last strings vanished into unimaginable heights. Kings dying, queens weeping, battles raging. Whitecloaks ravaging the Two Rivers. She had even dreamed of the Seanchan again. More than once. Those she shut away in a dark corner; she would not let herself think of them. Her mother and father, every night.

She was certain what that meant, at least, or thought she was. *It means I'm off hunting the Black Ajah, and I do not know what my dreams mean or how to make the fool* ter'angreal *do what it should, and I'm frightened, and. . . . And homesick.* For an instant she thought how good it would be to have her mother send her up to bed knowing everything would be better in the morning. *Only mother can't solve my problems for me anymore, and father can't promise to chase away monsters and make me believe it. I have to do it myself now.*

How far in the past all that was, now. She did not want it back, not really, but it had been a warm time, and it seemed so long ago. It would be wonderful just to see them again, to hear their voices. *When I wear this ring on the finger I choose by right.*

She had finally let Nynaeve and Elayne each try sleeping one night with the stone ring—surprised at how reluctant she had been to let it out of her own hands—and they had awakened to speak of what was surely *Tel'aran'rhiod*, but neither had seen more than a glimpse of the Heart of the Stone, nothing that was of any use.

The thick column of smoke now lay abreast of the *Blue Crane*. Perhaps five or six miles from the river, she thought. The other was only a smudge on the horizon. It could almost have been a cloud, but she was sure it was not. Small thickets grew tight along the riverbank in some places, and between them the grass came right down to the water except where an undercut bank had fallen in.

Elayne came on deck and joined her at the rail, the wind whipping her dark cloak as well. She wore sturdy wool, too. That had been one argument Nynaeve won. Their clothes. Egwene had maintained that Aes Sedai always wore the best, even when they traveled—she had been thinking of the silks she wore in *Tel'aran'rhiod*—but Nynaeve pointed out that even with as much gold as the Amyrlin had left in the back of her wardrobe, and it was a fat purse, they still had no idea how much things would cost downriver. The servants said Mat had been right about the civil war in Cairhien, and what it had done to prices. To Egwene's surprise, Elayne had pointed out that Brown sisters wore wool more often than silk. Elayne had been so eager to be away from the kitchen, Egwene thought, she would have worn rags.

I wonder how Mat is doing? No doubt trying to dice with the captain for whatever ship he's traveling on.

"Terrible," Elayne murmured. "It is so terrible."

"What is?" Egwene said absently. *I hope he isn't showing that paper we gave him around too freely.*

Elayne gave her a startled look, and then a frown. "That!" She gestured toward the distant smoke. "How can you ignore it?"

"I can ignore it because I do not want to think of what the people are going through, because I cannot do anything about it, and because we have to reach Tear. Because what we're hunting is in Tear." She was surprised at her own vehemence. *I* can't *do anything about it. And the Black Ajah* is *in Tear.*

The more she thought of it, the more certain she became that they would have to find a way into the Heart of the Stone. Perhaps no one but the High Lords of Tear were allowed into it, but she was becoming convinced that the key to springing the Black Ajah's trap and thwarting them lay in the Heart of the Stone.

"I know all of that, Egwene, but it does not stop me feeling for the Cairhienin."

"I have heard lectures about the wars Andor fought with Cairhien," Egwene said dryly. "Bennae Sedai says you and Cairhien have fought more often than any two nations except Tear and Illian."

The other woman gave her a sidelong look. Elayne had never gotten used to Egwene's refusal to admit she was Andoran herself. At least, lines on maps said the Two Rivers was part of Andor, and Elayne believed the maps.

“We have fought wars against them, Egwene, but since the damage they suffered in the Aiel War, Andor has sold them nearly as much grain as Tear has. The trade has stopped, now. With every Cairhienin House fighting every other for the Sun Throne, who would buy the grain, or see it distributed to the people? If the fighting is as bad as what we’ve seen on the banks. . . . Well. You cannot feed a people for twenty years and feel nothing for them when they must be starving.”

“A Gray Man,” Egwene said, and Elayne jumped, trying to look in every direction at once. The glow of *saidar* surrounded her.

“Where?”

Egwene took a slower look around the decks, but to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. Captain Ellisor still stood in the stern, by the shirtless man holding the long tiller. Another sailor was up in the very bow, scanning the waters ahead for signs of submerged mudbanks, and two more padded about the deck, now and again adjusting a rope to the sails. The rest of the crew were all below. One of the pair stopped to check the lashings on the rowboat tied upside down on the deck; she waited for him to go on before speaking.

“Fool!” she muttered softly. “Me, Elayne, not you, so don’t glower at me like that.” She continued in a whisper. “A Gray Man is after Mat, Elayne. That must be what that dream meant, but I never saw it. I *am* a fool!”

The glow around Elayne vanished. “Do not be so hard on yourself,” she whispered back. “Perhaps it does mean that, but I did not see it, and neither did Nynaeve.” She paused; red-gold curls swung as she shook her head. “But it doesn’t make sense, Egwene. Why would a Gray Man be after Mat? There is nothing in my letter to my mother that could harm us in the slightest.”

“I do not know why.” Egwene frowned. “There has to be a reason. I am sure that is what that dream means.”

“Even if you are right, Egwene, there is nothing you can do about it.”

“I know that,” Egwene said bitterly. She did not even know whether he was ahead of them or behind. Ahead, she suspected; Mat would have left without any delay. “Either way,” she muttered to herself, “it does no good. I finally know what one of my dreams means, and it doesn’t help a hemstitch worth!”

“But if you know one meaning,” Elayne told her, “perhaps now you will know others. If we sit down and talk them over, perhaps—”

The *Blue Crane* gave a shuddering lurch, throwing Elayne to the deck and Egwene on top of her. When Egwene struggled to her feet, the shoreline no longer slid by. The vessel had halted, with the bow raised and the deck canted to one side. The sails flapped noisily in the wind.

Chin Ellisor pushed himself to his feet and ran for the bow, leaving the tillerman to rise on his own. “You blind worm of a farmer!” he roared toward the man in the bow, who was clinging to the rail to keep from falling the rest of the way over. “You dirt-grubbing get of a goat! Haven’t you been on the river long enough yet to recognize how the water ruffles over a mudflat?” He seized the man on the rail by the shoulders and pulled him back onto the deck, but only to shove him out of the way so he could peer down over the bow himself. “If you’ve put a hole in my hull, I will use your guts for caulking!”

The other crewmen were clambering to their feet, now, and more came scrambling up from below. They all ran to cluster around the captain.

Nynaeve appeared at the head of the ladder that led down to the passenger cabins, still straightening her skirts. With a sharp tug at her braid, she frowned at the knot of men in the bow, then strode to Egwene and Elayne. “He ran us onto something, did he? After all his talk of knowing the river as well as he knows his wife. The woman probably never receives as much as a smile from him.” She jerked the thick braid again and went forward, pushing her way through the sailors to reach the captain. They were all intent on the water below.

There was no point in joining her. *He will have us off faster if he’s left to it.* Nynaeve was probably telling him how to do the work. Elayne seemed to feel the same way, from the rueful shake of the head she gave as she watched the captain and crewmen all turn their attention respectfully from whatever was under the bow to Nynaeve.

A ripple of agitation ran through the men, and grew stronger. For a moment the captain’s hands could be seen, waving in protest over the other men’s heads, and then Nynaeve was striding away from them—they made way, bowing now—with Ellisor hurrying beside her and mopping his round face with a large red handkerchief. His anxious voice became audible as they drew near.

“. . . a good fifteen miles to the next village on the Andor side, Aes Sedai, and at least five or six miles downriver on the Cairhien side! Andoran soldiers hold it, it is true, but they do not hold the miles from here to there!” He wiped at his face as if he were dripping sweat.

“A sunken ship,” Nynaeve told the the other two women. “The work of river brigands, the captain thinks. He means to try backing off it with the sweeps, but he does not seem to think that will work.”

“We were running fast when we hit, Aes Sedai. I wanted to make good speed for you.” Ellisor rubbed even harder at his face. He was afraid the Aes Sedai would blame him, Egwene realized. “We are stuck hard. But I do not think we are taking water, Aes Sedai. There is no need to worry. Another ship will be along. Two sets of sweeps will surely get us free. There is no need for you to be put ashore, Aes Sedai. I do swear it, by the Light.”

“You were thinking of leaving the ship?” Egwene asked. “Do you think that is wise?”

“Of course, it’s—!” Nynaeve stopped and frowned at her. Egwene returned the frown with a level stare. Nynaeve went on in a calmer tone, if still a tight one. “The captain says it may be an hour before another ship comes along. One with enough sweeps to make a difference. Or a day. Or two, maybe. I do not think we can afford to waste a day or two waiting. We can be in this village—what did you call it, Captain? Jurene?—we can walk to Jurene in two hours or less. If Captain Ellisor frees his vessel as quickly as he hopes, we can reboard then. He says he will stop to see if we are there. If he does not get free, though, we can take ship from Jurene. We may even find a vessel waiting. The captain says traders do stop there, because of the Andoran soldiers.” She drew a deep breath, but her voice grew tighter. “Have I explained my reasoning fully enough? Do you need more?”

“It is clear to me,” Elayne put in quickly before Egwene could speak. “And it sounds a good idea. You think it is a good idea, too, don’t you, Egwene?”

Egwene gave a grudging nod. “I suppose it is.”

“But, Aes Sedai,” Ellisor protested, “at least go to the Andor bank. The war, Aes Sedai. Brigands, and every sort of ruffian, and the soldiers not much better. The very wreck under our bow shows the sort of men they are.”

“We have not seen a living soul on the Cairhien side,” Nynaeve said, “and in any case, we are far from defenseless, Captain. And I will not walk fifteen miles when I can walk six.”

“Of course, Aes Sedai.” Ellisor really was sweating, now. “I did not mean to suggest. . . . Of course you are not defenseless, Aes Sedai. I did not mean to suggest it.” He wiped his face furiously, but it still glistened.

Nynaeve opened her mouth, glanced at Egwene, and seemed to change what she had intended to say. “I am going below for my things,” she told the air halfway between Egwene and Elayne, then turned on Ellisor. “Captain, make your rowboat ready.” He bowed and scurried away even before she turned for the hatch, and was shouting for men to put the boat over the side before she was below.

“If one of you says ‘up,’ ” Elayne murmured, “the other says ‘down.’ If you do not stop it, we may not reach Tear.”

“We will reach Tear,” Egwene said. “And sooner once Nynaeve realizes she is not the Wisdom any longer. We are all”—she did not say Accepted; there were two many men hurrying about—“on the same level, now.” Elayne sighed.

In short order the rowboat had ferried them ashore, and they were standing on the bank with walking staffs in hand, their belongings in bundles on their backs, and hung about them in pouches and scripts. Rolling grassland and scattered copses surrounded them, though the hills were forested a few miles in from the river. The sweeps on the *Blue Crane* were cutting up froth, but failing to budge the vessel. Egwene turned and started south without another glance. And before Nynaeve could take the lead.

When the others caught up to her, Elayne gave her a reproving look. Nynaeve walked staring straight ahead. Elayne told Nynaeve what Egwene had said about Mat and a Gray Man, but the older woman listened in silence and only said, “He’ll have to look after himself,” without pausing in her stride. After a time, the Daughter-Heir gave up trying to make the other two talk, and they all walked in silence.

Clumps of trees close along the riverbank soon hid the *Blue Crane*, thick growths of wateroak and willow. They did not go through the copses, small as they were, for anything at all might be hiding in the shadows under their branches. A few low bushes grew scattered between the thickets here close to the river, but they were too sparse to hide a child much less a brigand, and they were widely spaced.

“If we do see brigands,” Egwene announced, “I am going to defend myself. There is no Amyrlin looking over our shoulders here.”

Nynaeve’s mouth thinned. “If need be,” she told the air in front of her, “we can frighten off any brigands the way we did those Whitecloaks. If we can find no other way.”

“I wish you would not talk of brigands,” Elayne said. “I would like to reach this village without—”

A figure in brown and gray rose from behind a bush standing by itself almost in front of them.

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CHAPTER 38

Maidens of the Spear

Egwene embraced *saidar* before the scream was well out of her mouth, and she saw the glow around Elayne, too. For an instant she wondered if Ellisor had heard their screams and would send help; the *Blue Crane* could not be more than a mile upriver. Then she was dismissing the need for help, already weaving flows of Air and Fire into lightning. She could almost still hear their yelling.

Nynaeve was simply standing there with her arms crossed beneath her breasts and a firm expression on her face, but Egwene was not sure whether that was because she was not angry enough to touch the True Source, or because she had already seen what Egwene was just now seeing. The person facing them was a woman no older than Egwene herself, if somewhat taller.

She did not let go of *saidar*. Men were sometimes silly enough to think a woman was harmless merely because she was a woman; Egwene had no such illusions. In a corner of her mind she noted that Elayne was no longer surrounded by the glow. The Daughter-Heir must still harbor foolish notions. *She was never a Seanchan prisoner.*

Egwene did not think many men would be stupid enough to think the woman in front of them was not dangerous, even though her hands were empty and she wore no visible weapon. Blue-green eyes and reddish hair cut short except for a narrow tail that hung to her shoulders; soft, laced knee-boots and close-fitting coat and breeches all in the shades of earth and rock. Such coloring and clothing had been described to her once; this woman was Aiel.

Looking at her, Egwene felt a sudden odd affinity for the woman. She could not understand it. *She looks like Rand's cousin, that's why.* Yet even that feeling—almost of kinship—could not stifle her curiosity. *What under the Light are Aiel doing here? They never leave the Waste; not since the Aiel War.* She had heard all of her life how deadly Aiel were—these

Maidens of the Spear no less than the members of the male warrior societies—but she felt no particular fear and, indeed, some irritation at having been afraid. With *saidar* feeding the One Power into her, she had no need to fear anyone. *Except maybe a fully trained sister,* she admitted. *But certainly not one woman, even if she* is *Aiel.*

“My name is Aviendha,” the Aiel woman said, “of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel.” Her face was as flat and expressionless as her voice. “I am *Far Dareis Mai,* a Maiden of the Spear.” She paused a moment, studying them. “You have not the look in your faces, but we saw the rings. In your lands, you have women much like our Wise Ones, the women called Aes Sedai. Are you women of the White Tower, or not?”

For a moment Egwene did feel unease. *We?* She looked around them carefully, but saw no one behind any bush within twenty paces.

If there were others, they had to be in the next thicket, more than two hundred paces ahead, or in the last one, twice that distance behind. Too far to threaten. *Unless they have bows.* But they would have to be good with them. Back home, in the competitions at Bel Tine and Sunday, only the best bowmen shot at any distance much beyond two hundred paces.

But she still felt better knowing she could hurl a lightning bolt at anyone who tried such a shot.

“We are women of the White Tower,” Nynaeve said calmly. She was very obvious in not looking around for other Aiel. Even Elayne was peering about. “Whether you would consider any of us wise is another matter,” Nynaeve went on. “What do you want of us?”

Aviendha smiled. She was really quite lovely, Egwene realized; the grim expression had masked it. “You talk as the Wise Ones do. To the point, and small suffering of fools.” Her smile faded, but her voice remained calm. “One of us lies gravely hurt, perhaps dying. The Wise Ones often heal those who would surely die without them, and I have heard Aes Sedai can do more. Will you aid her?”

Egwene almost shook her head in confusion. *A friend of hers is dying? She sounds as if she is asking if we’ll lend her a cup of barley flour!*

“I will help her if I can,” Nynaeve said slowly. “I cannot make promises, Aviendha. She may die despite anything I can do.”

“Death comes for us all,” the Aiel said. “We can only choose how to face it when it comes. I will take you to her.”

Two women in Aiel garb stood up no more than ten paces away, one out of a little fold in the ground that Egwene would not have supposed could hide a dog, and the other in grass that reached only halfway to her knees. They lowered their black veils as they stood—that gave her another jolt; she was sure Elayne had told her the Aiel only hid their faces when they might have to do killing—and settled the cloth that had wrapped their heads about their shoulders. One had the same reddish hair as Aviendha, with gray eyes, the other dark blue eyes and hair like fire. Neither was any older than Egwene or Elayne, and both looked ready to use the short spears in their hands.

The woman with fiery hair handed Aviendha weapons; a long, heavy-bladed knife to belt at her waist, and a bristling quiver for the other side; a dark, curved bow that had the dull shine of horn, in a case to fasten on her back; and four short spears with long points to grip in her left hand along with a small, round hide buckler. Aviendha wore them as naturally as a woman in Emond's Field would wear a scarf, just as her companions did. "Come," she said, and started for the thicket they had already passed.

Egwene finally released *saidar.* She suspected all three of the Aiel could stab her with those spears before she could do anything about it, if that was what they wanted, but though they were wary, she did not think they would. *And what if Nynaeve can't Heal their friend? I wish she would ask before she makes these decisions that involve all of us!*

As they headed for the trees, the Aiel scanned the land around them as if they expected the empty landscape to hold enemies as adept at hiding as themselves. Aviendha strode ahead, and Nynaeve kept up with her.

"I am Elayne of House Trakand," Egwene's friend said as if making conversation, "Daughter-Heir to Morgase, Queen of Andor."

Egwene stumbled. *Light, is she mad? I know Andor fought them in the Aiel War. It might be twenty years, but they say Aiel have long memories.*

But the flame-haired Aiel closest to her only said, "I am Bain, of the Black Rock sept of the Shaarad Aiel."

"I am Chiad," the shorter, blonder woman on her other side said, "of the Stones River sept of the Goshien Aiel."

Bain and Chiad glanced at Egwene; their expressions did not change, but she had the feeling they thought she was showing bad manners.

"I am Egwene al'Vere," she told them. They seemed to expect more, so she added, "Daughter of Marin al'Vere, of Emond's Field, in the Two

Rivers.” That seemed to satisfy them, in a way, but she would have bet they understood it no more than she did all these septs and clans. *It must mean families, in some way.*

“You are first-sisters?” Bain seemed to be taking in all three of them.

Egwene thought they must mean sisters as it was used for Aes Sedai, and said “Yes,” just as Elayne said “No.”

Chiad and Bain exchanged a very quick look that suggested they were talking to women who might not be completely whole in their minds.

“First-sister,” Elayne told Egwene as if she were lecturing, “means women who have the same mother. Second-sister means their mothers are sisters.” She turned her words to the Aiel. “We neither of us know a great deal of your people. I ask you to excuse our ignorance. I sometimes think of Egwene as a first-sister, but we are not blood kin.”

“Then why do you not speak the words before your Wise Ones?” Chiad asked. “Bain and I became first-sisters.”

Egwene blinked. “How can you *become* first-sisters? Either you have the same mother, or you do not. I do not mean to offend. Most of what I know about the Maidens of the Spear comes from the little Elayne has told me. I know you fight in battle and don’t care for men, but no more than that.” Elayne nodded; the way she had described the Maidens to Egwene had sounded much like a cross between female Warders and the Red Ajah.

That look flashed back across the Aiel’s faces, as if they were not certain how much sense Egwene and Elayne had.

“We do not care for men?” Chiad murmured as if puzzled.

Bain knotted her brow in thought. “What you say comes near truth, yet misses it completely. When we wed the spear, we pledge to be bound to no man or child. Some do give up the spear, for a man or a child”—her expression said she herself did not understand this—“but once given up, the spear cannot be taken back.”

“Or if she is chosen to go to Rhuidean,” Chiad put in. “A Wise One cannot be wedded to the spear.”

Bain looked at her as if she had announced the sky was blue, or that rain fell from clouds. The glance she gave Egwene and Elayne said perhaps they did not know these things. “Yes, that is true. Though some try to struggle against it.”

“Yes, they do.” Chiad sounded as though she and Bain were sharing something between them.

"But I have gone far from the trail of my explanation," Bain went on. "The Maidens do not dance the spears with one another even when our clans do, but the Shaarad Aiel and the Goshien Aiel have held blood feud between them over four hundred years, so Chiad and I felt our wedding pledge was not enough. We went to speak the words before the Wise Ones of our clans—she risking her life in my hold, and I in hers—to bond us as first-sisters. As is proper for first-sisters who are Maidens, we guard each other's backs, and neither will let a man come to her without the other. I would not say we do not care for men." Chiad nodded, with just the hint of a smile. "Have I made the truth clear to you, Egwene?"

"Yes," Egwene said faintly. She glanced at Elayne and saw the bewilderment in her blue eyes she knew must be in her own. *Not Red Ajah. Green, maybe. A cross between Warders and Green Ajah, and I do not understand another thing out of that.* "The truth is quite clear to me, now, Bain. Thank you."

"If the two of you feel you are first-sisters," Chiad said, "you should go to your Wise Ones and speak the words. But you are Wise Ones, though young. I do not know how it would be done in that case."

Egwene did not know whether to laugh or blush. She kept having an image of her and Elayne sharing the same man. *No, that is only for first-sisters who are Maidens of the Spear. Isn't it?* Elayne did have spots of color in her cheeks, and Egwene was sure she was thinking of Rand. *But we do not share him, Elayne. We can neither of us have him.*

Elayne cleared her throat. "I do not think there is a need for that, Chiad. Egwene and I already guard each other's backs."

"How can that be?" Chiad asked slowly. "You are not wedded to the spear. And you are Wise Ones. Who would lift a hand against a Wise One? This confuses me. What need have you for guarding of backs?"

Egwene was spared having to come up with an answer by their arrival at the copse. There were two more Aiel under the trees, deep into the thicket, but next to the river. Jolien, of the Salt Flat sept of the Nakai Aiel, a blue-eyed woman with red-gold hair nearly the color of Elayne's, was watching over Dailin, of Aviendha's sept and clan. Sweat matted Dailin's hair, making it a darker red, and she only opened her gray eyes once, when they first came near, then closed them again. Her coat and shirt lay beside her, and red stained the bandages wrapped around her middle.

“She took a sword,” Aviendha said. “Some of those fools that the oath-breaking treekillers call soldiers thought we were another handful of the bandits who infest this land. We had to kill them to convince them otherwise, but Dailin. . . . Can you heal her, Aes Sedai?”

Nynaeve went to her knees beside the injured woman and lifted the bandages enough to peer under them. She winced at what she saw. “Have you moved her since she was hurt? There is scabbing, but it has been broken.”

“She wanted to die near water,” Aviendha said. She glanced once at the river, then quickly away again. Egwene thought she might have shivered, too.

“Fools!” Nynaeve began rummaging in her pouch of herbs. “You could have killed her moving her with an injury like that. She wanted to die near water!” she said disgustedly. “Just because you carry weapons like men doesn’t mean you have to think like them.” She pulled a deep wooden cup out of the bag and pushed it at Chiad. “Fill that. I need water to mix these so she can drink them.”

Chiad and Bain stepped to the river’s edge and returned together. Their faces never changed, but Egwene thought they had almost expected the river to reach up and grab them.

“If we had not brought her here to the . . . river, Aes Sedai,” Aviendha said, “we would never have found you, and she would have died anyway.”

Nynaeve snorted and began sifting powdered herbs into the cup of water, muttering to herself. “Corenroot helps make blood, and dogwort for knitting flesh, and healall, of course, and. . . .” Her mutters trailed off into whispers too low to hear. Aviendha was frowning at her.

“The Wise Ones use herbs, Aes Sedai, but I had not heard that Aes Sedai used them.”

“I use what I use!” Nynaeve snapped and went back to sorting through her powders and whispering to herself.

“She truly does sound like a Wise One,” Chiad told Bain softly, and the other woman gave a tight nod.

Dailin was the only Aiel without her weapons in hand, and they all looked ready to use them in a heartbeat. *Nynaeve surely isn’t soothing anyone*, Egwene thought. *Get them talking about something. Anything. Nobody feels like fighting if they’re talking of something peaceful.*

“Do not be offended,” she said carefully, “but I notice you are all uneasy about the river. It does not grow violent unless there is a storm. You could swim in it if you wanted, though the current is strong away from the banks.” Elayne shook her head.

The Aiel looked blank; Aviendha said, “I saw a man—a Shienaran—do this swimming . . . once.”

“I don’t understand,” Egwene said. “I know there isn’t much water in the Waste, but you said you were ‘Stones River sept,’ Jolien. Surely you have swum in the Stones River?” Elayne looked at her as if she were mad.

“Swim,” Jolien said awkwardly. “It means . . . to get in the water? All that water? With nothing to hold on to.” She shuddered. “Aes Sedai, before I crossed the Dragonwall, I had never seen flowing water I could not step across. The Stones River. . . . Some claim it had water in it once, but that is only boasting. There are only the stones. The oldest records of the Wise Ones and the clan chief say there was never anything but stones since the first day our sept broke off from the High Plain sept and claimed that land. Swim!” She gripped her spears as if to fight the very word. Chiad and Bain moved a pace further from the riverbank.

Egwene sighed. And colored when she met Elayne’s eye. *Well, I am not a Daughter-Heir, to know all these things. I will learn them, though.* As she looked around at the Aiel women, she realized that far from soothing them, she had put them even more on edge. *If they try anything, I will hold them with Air.* She had no idea whether she could seize four people at once, but she opened herself to *saidar,* wove the flows in Air and held them ready. The Power pulsed in her with eagerness to be used. No glow surrounded Elayne, and she wondered why. Elayne looked right at her and shook her head.

“I would never harm an Aes Sedai,” Aviendha said abruptly. “I would have you know that. Whether Dailin lives or dies, it makes no difference in that. I would never use this”—she lifted one short spear a trifle—“against any woman. And you are Aes Sedai.” Egwene had the sudden feeling that the woman was trying to soothe *them.*

“I knew that,” Elayne said, as if talking to Aviendha, but her eyes told Egwene the words were for her. “No one knows much of your people, but I was taught that Aiel never harm women unless they are—what did you call it?—wedded to the spear.”

Bain seemed to think Elayne was failing to see truth clearly again. “That is not exactly the way of it, Elayne. If a woman not wedded came at me with weapons, I would drub her until she knew better of it. A man. . . . A man might think a woman of your lands was wedded if she bore weapons; I do not know. Men can be strange.”

“Of course,” Elayne said. “But so long as we do not attack you with weapons, you will not try to harm us.” All four Aiel looked shocked, and she gave Egwene a quick significant look.

Egwene held on to *saidar* anyway. Just because Elayne had been taught something did not mean it was true, even if the Aiel said the same thing. And *saidar* felt . . . good in her.

Nynaeve lifted up Dailin’s head and began pouring her mixture into the woman’s mouth. “Drink,” she said firmly. “I know it tastes bad, but drink it all.” Dailin swallowed, choked, and swallowed again.

“Not even then, Aes Sedai,” Aviendha told Elayne. She kept her eyes on Dailin and Nynaeve, though. “It is said that once, before the Breaking of the World, we served the Aes Sedai, though no story says how. We failed in that service. Perhaps that is the sin that sent us to the Three-fold Land; I do not know. No one knows what the sin was, except maybe the Wise Ones, or the clan chiefs, and they do not say. It is said if we fail the Aes Sedai again, they will destroy us.”

“Drink it all,” Nynaeve muttered. “Swords! Swords and muscles and no brains!”

“*We* are not going to destroy you,” Elayne said firmly, and Aviendha nodded.

“As you say, Aes Sedai. But the old stories are all clear on one point. We must never fight Aes Sedai. If you bring your lightnings and your balefire against me, I will dance with them, but I will not harm you.”

“Stabbing people,” Nynaeve growled. She lowered Dailin’s head, and laid a hand on the woman’s brow. Dailin’s eyes had closed again. “Stabbing women!” Aviendha shifted her feet and frowned again, and she was not alone among the Aiel.

“Balefire,” Egwene said. “Aviendha, what is balefire?”

The Aiel woman turned her frown on her. “Do you not know, Aes Sedai? In the old stories, Aes Sedai wielded it. The stories make it a fearsome thing, but I know no more. It is said we have forgotten much that we once knew.”

“Perhaps the White Tower has forgotten much, too,” Egwene said. *I knew of it in that . . . dream, or whatever it was. It was as real as* Tel’aran’rhiod. *I’d gamble with Mat on that.*

“No right!” Nynaeve snapped. “No one has a right to tear bodies so! It is not right!”

“Is she angry?” Aviendha asked uneasily. Chiad and Bain and Jolien exchanged worried looks.

“It is all right,” Elayne said.

“It is better than all right,” Egwene added. “She *is* getting angry, and it is much better than all right.”

The glow of *saidar* surrounded Nynaeve suddenly—Egwene leaned forward, trying to see, and so did Elayne—and Dailin started up with a scream, eyes wide open. In an instant, Nynaeve was easing her back down, and the glow faded. Dailin’s eyes slid shut, and she lay there panting.

I saw it, Egwene thought. *I . . . think I did.* She was not sure she had even been able to make out all the many flows, much less the way Nynaeve had woven them together. What Nynaeve had done in those few seconds had seemed like weaving four carpets at once while blindfolded.

Nynaeve used the bloody bandages to wipe Dailin’s stomach, smearing away bright red new blood and black crusts of dried old. There was no wound, no scar, only healthy skin considerably paler than Dailin’s face.

With a grimace, Nynaeve took the bloody cloths, stood up, and threw them into the river. “Wash the rest of that off of her,” she said, “and put some clothes back on her. She’s cold. And be ready to feed her. She will be hungry.” She knelt by the water to wash her hands.

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CHAPTER 39

Threads in the Pattern

Jolien put an unsteady hand to where the wound had been in Dailin’s middle; when she touched smooth skin, she gasped as if she had not believed her own eyes.

Nynaeve straightened, drying her hands on her cloak. Egwene had to admit that good wool did better for a towel than silk or velvet. “I said wash her and get some clothes on her,” Nynaeve snapped.

“Yes, Wise One,” Jolien said quickly, and she, Chiad, and Bain all leaped to obey.

A short laugh burst from Aviendha, a laugh almost at the edge of tears. “I have heard that a Wise One in the Jagged Spire sept is said to be able to do this, and one in the Four Holes sept, but I always thought it was boasting.” She drew a deep breath, regaining her composure. “Aes Sedai, I owe you a debt. My water is yours, and the shade of my septhold will welcome you. Dailin is my second-sister.” She saw Nynaeve’s uncomprehending look and added, “She is my mother’s sister’s daughter. Close blood, Aes Sedai. I owe a blood debt.”

“If I have any blood to spill,” Nynaeve said dryly, “I will spill it myself. If you wish to repay me, tell me if there is a ship at Jurene. The next village south of here?”

“The village where the soldiers fly the White Lion banner?” Aviendha said. “There was a ship there when I scouted yesterday. The old stories mention ships, but it was strange to see one.”

“The Light send it is still there.” Nynaeve began putting away her folded papers of powdered herbs. “I have done what I can for the girl, Aviendha, and we must go on. All that she needs now is food and rest. And try not to let people stick swords in her.”

“What comes, comes, Aes Sedai,” the Aiel woman replied.

“Aviendha,” Egwene said, “feeling as you do about rivers, how do you cross them? I am sure there is at least one river nearly as big as the Erinin between here and the Waste."

"The Alguenya," Elayne said. "Unless you went around it."

"You have many rivers, but some have things called bridges where we had need to cross, and others we could wade. For the rest, Jolien remembered that wood floats." She slapped the trunk of a tall whitewood. "These are big, but they float as well as a branch. We found dead ones and made ourselves a . . . ship . . . a little ship, of two or three lashed together to cross the big river." She said it matter-of-factly.

Egwene stared in wonder. If she were as afraid of something as the Aiel obviously were of rivers, could she make herself face it the way they did? She did not think so. *What about the Black Ajah,* a small voice asked. *Have you stopped being afraid of them? That is different,* she told it. *There's no bravery in that. I either hunt them, or else I sit like a rabbit waiting for a hawk.* She quoted the old saying to herself. *"It is better to be the hammer than the nail."*

"We had best be on our way," Nynaeve said.

"In a moment," Elayne told her. "Aviendha, why have you come all this way and put up with such hardship?"

Aviendha shook her head disgustedly. "We have not come far at all; we were among the last to set out. The Wise Ones nipped at me like wild dogs circling a calf, saying I had other duties." Suddenly she grinned, gesturing to the other Aiel. "These stayed back to taunt me in my misery, so they said, but I do not think the Wise Ones would have let me go if they had not been there to companion me."

"We seek the one foretold," Bain said. She was holding a sleeping Dailin so Chiad could slip a shirt of brown linen onto her. "He Who Comes With the Dawn."

"He will lead us out of the Three-fold Land," Chiad added. "The prophecies say he was born of *Far Dareis Mai*."

Elayne looked startled. "I thought you said the Maidens of the Spear were not allowed to have children. I am sure I was taught that." Bain and Chiad exchanged those looks again, as if Elayne had come near truth and yet missed it once more.

"If a Maiden bears a child," Aviendha explained carefully, "she gives the child to the Wise Ones of her sept, and they pass the child to another woman in such a way that none knows whose child it is." She, too, sounded as if she were explaining that stone is hard. “Every woman wants to foster such a child in the hope she may raise He Who Comes With the Dawn.”

“Or she may give up the spear and wed the man,” Chiad said, and Bain added, “There are sometimes reasons one must give up the spear.”

Aviendha gave them a level look, but continued as if they had not spoken. “Except that now the Wise Ones say he is to be found here, beyond the Dragonwall. ‘Blood of our blood mixed with the old blood, raised by an ancient blood not ours.’ I do not understand it, but the Wise Ones spoke in such a way as to leave no doubts.” She paused, obviously choosing her words. “You have asked many questions, Aes Sedai. I wish to ask one. You must understand that we look for omens and signs. Why do three Aes Sedai walk a land where the only hand without a knife in it is a hand too weak with hunger to grasp the hilt? Where do you go?”

“Tear,” Nynaeve said briskly, “unless we stay here talking until the Heart of the Stone crumbles to dust.” Elayne began adjusting the cord of her bundle and the strap of her scrip for walking, and after a moment Egwene did the same.

The Aiel women were looking at one another, Jolien frozen in the act of closing Dailin’s gray-brown coat. “Tear?” Aviendha said in a cautious tone. “Three Aes Sedai walking through a troubled land on their way to Tear. This is a strange thing. Why do you go to Tear, Aes Sedai?”

Egwene glanced at Nynaeve. *Light, a moment ago they were laughing, and now they’re as tense as they ever were.*

“We hunt some evil women,” Nynaeve said carefully. “Dark friends.”

“Shadowrunners.” Jolien twisted her mouth around the word as if she had bitten into a rotten apple.

“Shadowrunners in Tear,” Bain said, and as if part of the same sentence Chiad added, “And three Aes Sedai seeking the Heart of the Stone.”

“I did not say we were going to the Heart of the Stone,” Nynaeve said sharply. “I merely said I did not want to stay here till it falls to dust. Egwene, Elayne, are you ready?” She started out of the thicket without waiting for an answer, walking staff thumping the ground and long strides carrying her south.

Egwene and Elayne made hasty goodbyes before following after her. The four Aiel on their feet stood watching them go.

When the two of them were a little way beyond the trees, Egwene said, “My heart almost stopped when you named yourself. Weren’t you afraid they might try to kill you, or to take you prisoner? The Aiel War was not *that* long ago, and whatever they said about not harming women who don’t carry spears, they looked ready enough to use those spears on anything, to me.”

Elayne shook her head ruefully. “I have just learned how much I do not know about the Aiel, but I was taught that they do not think of the Aiel War as a war at all. From the way they behaved toward me, I think maybe that much of what I learned is truth. Or maybe it was because they think I am Aes Sedai.”

“I know they are strange, Elayne, but *no* one can call three years of battles anything but a war. I do not care how much they fight among themselves, a war is a war.”

“Not to them. Thousands of Aiel crossed the Spine of the World, but apparently they saw themselves more like thief-takers, or headsmen, come after King Laman of Cairhien for the crime of cutting down *Avendoraldera*. To the Aiel, it was not a war; it was an execution.”

Avendoraldera, according to one of Verin’s lectures, had been an offshoot of the Tree of Life itself, brought to Cairhien some five hundred years ago as an unprecedented offer of peace from the Aiel, given along with the right to cross the Waste, a right otherwise given to none but peddlers, gleemen, and the Tuatha’an. Much of Cairhien’s wealth had been built on the trade in ivory and perfumes and spices and, most of all, silk, from the lands beyond the Waste. Not even Verin had any idea of how the Aiel had come by a sapling of *Avendesora*—for one thing, the old books were clear that it made no seed; for another, no one knew where the Tree of Life was, except for a few stories that were clearly wrong, but surely the Tree of Life could have nothing to do with the Aiel—or of why the Aiel had called the Cairhienin the Watersharers, or insisted their trains of merchant wagons fly a banner bearing the trefoil leaf of *Avendesora*.

Egwene supposed, grudgingly, that she could understand why they had started a war—even if they did not think it was one—after King Laman cut down their gift to make a throne unlike any other in the world. Laman’s Sin, she had heard it called. According to Verin, not only had Cairhien’s trade across the Waste ended with the war, but those Cairhienin who ventured into the Waste now vanished. Verin claimed they were said to be “sold as animals” in the lands beyond the Waste, but not even she understood how a man or a woman could be sold.

“Egwene,” Elayne said, “you know who He Who Comes With the Dawn must be, don’t you?”

Staring at Nynaeve’s back still well ahead of them, Egwene shook her head—*Does she mean to race us to Jurene?*—then almost stopped walking. “You do not mean—?”

Elayne nodded. “I think so. I do not know much of the Prophecies of the Dragon, but I have heard a few lines. One I remember is, ‘On the slopes of Dragonmount shall he be born, born of a maiden wedded to no man.’ Egwene, Rand does look like an Aiel. Well, he looks like the pictures I have seen of Tigraine, too, but she vanished before he was born, and I hardly think she could have been his mother anyway. I think Rand’s mother was a Maiden of the Spear.”

Egwene frowned in thought as she hurried along, running everything she knew of Rand’s birth through her head. He had been raised by Tam al’Thor after Kari al’Thor died, but if what Moiraine said was true, they could not be his real mother and father. Nynaeve had sometimes seemed to know some secret about Rand’s birth. *But I will bet I couldn’t pry it out of her with a fork!*

They caught up to Nynaeve, Egwene glowering as she thought, Nynaeve staring straight ahead toward Jurene and that ship, and Elayne frowning at the pair of them as if they were two children sulking over who should have the larger piece of cake.

After a time of silent strides, Elayne said, “You handled that very well, Nynaeve. The Healing, and the rest, too. I do not think they ever doubted you were Aes Sedai. Or that we all were, because of the way you bore yourself.”

“You did do a good job,” Egwene said after a minute. “That was the first time I have ever really watched what is done during a Healing. It makes making lightning look like mixing oatcake.”

A surprised smile appeared on Nynaeve’s face. “Thank you,” she murmured, and reached over to give Egwene’s hair a little tug the way she had when Egwene was a little girl.

I am not a little girl any longer. The moment passed as quickly as it had come, and they went on in silence once more. Elayne sighed loudly.

They covered another mile, or a little more, swiftly, despite swinging in from the river to go around the thickets along the bank. Nynaeve insisted on staying well clear of the trees. Egwene thought it was silly to think more Aiel would be hiding in the copses, but the swing inland did not add much distance to what they had to cover; none of the growths were very big.

Elayne watched the trees, though, and she was the one who suddenly screamed, “Look out!”

Egwene jerked her head around; men were stepping out from among the trees, slings whirling ’round their heads. She reached for *saidar*, and something struck her head, and darkness drank everything.

Egwene could feel herself swaying, feel something moving under her. Her head seemed to be nothing but pain. She tried to raise a hand to her temples, but something dug into her wrists, and her hands did not move.

“—better than lying there all day waiting for dark,” a man’s rough voice said. “Who knows if another ship would come by close in? And I don’t trust that boat. It leaks.”

“You do better hope Adden does believe you did see those rings before you did decide,” another man said. “He does want fat cargoes, not women, I think.” the first man muttered something coarse about what Adden could do with his leaky boat, and the cargoes, too.

Her eyes opened. Silver-flecked spots danced across her vision; she thought she might be going to throw up on the ground swaying past under her head. She was tied across the back of a horse, her wrists and ankles joined by a rope running under its belly, her hair hanging down.

It was still daylight. She craned her neck to look around. So many rough-dressed men on horses surrounded her that she could not see whether Nynaeve and Elayne had been captured, as well. Some of the men wore bits of armor—a battered helmet, or a dented breastplate, or a jerkin sewn all over with metal scales—but most wore only coats that had not been cleaned in months, if ever. From the smell, the men had not cleaned themselves in months, either. They all wore swords, at their waists or on their backs.

Rage hit her, and fear, but most of all white-hot anger. *I won’t be a prisoner. I won’t be bound! I won’t!* She reached for *saidar* and the pain nearly lifted the top of her head; she barely stifled a moan.

The horse paused for a moment of shouts and the creak of rusty hinges, then went ahead a little further, and the men began to dismount. As they moved apart, she could see something of where they were. A log palisade surrounded them, built atop a large, round earthen mound, and men with bows stood guard on a wooden walk built just high enough for them to see over the rough-hewn ends of the logs. One low, windowless log house seemed to be built into the mounded dirt under the wall. There was no other structure beyond a few lean-to sheds. Aside from the men and horses that had just entered, the rest of the open space was filled with cook fires, and tethered horses, and more unwashed men. There must have been at least a hundred. Caged goats and pigs and chickens filled the air with squeals and grunts and clucks that blended with coarse shouts and laughter to make a din that pierced her head.

Her eyes found Nynaeve and Elayne, bound head down across saddleless horses as she was. Neither seemed to be stirring; the very end of Nynaeve's braid dragged across the dirt as her horse stirred. A small hope faded; that one of them might be free, to help whoever was held escape. *Light, I cannot stand to be a prisoner again. Not again.* Gingerly, she tried reaching for *saidar* again. The pain was not so bad this time—merely as if someone had dropped a rock on her head—but it shattered the emptiness before she could even think of a rose.

"One of them's awake!" a man's panicked voice shouted.

Egwene tried to hang limp and look unthreatening. *How in the Light could I look threatening tied up like a sack of meal! Burn me, I have to buy time. I have to!* "I will not harm you," she told the sweaty-faced fellow who came running toward her. Or she tried to tell him. She was not sure how much she had actually said before something crashed into her head again and darkness rolled over her in a wave of nausea.

Waking was easier the next time. Her head still hurt, but not as much as it had, though her thoughts did seem to spin dizzily. *At least my stomach isn't. . . . Light, I'd better not think of that.* There was a taste of sour wine and something bitter in her mouth. Strips of lamplight showed through horizontal cracks in a crudely made wall, but she lay in darkness, on her back. On dirt, she thought. The door did not seem to fit well either, but it looked all too sturdy.

She pushed herself to her hands and knees, and was surprised to find she was not tied in any way. Except for that one wall of unpeeled logs, the others all seemed to be of rough stone. The light through the cracks was enough to show her Nynaeve and Elayne lying sprawled on the dirt. There was blood on the Daughter-Heir’s face. Neither of them moved except for the rise and fall of their chests as they breathed. Egwene hesitated between trying to wake them immediately and seeing what lay on the other side of that wall. *Just a peek,* she told herself. *I might as well see what we have guarding us before I wake them.*

She told herself it was not because she was afraid she might be unable to waken them. As she put her eye to one of the cracks near the door, she thought of the blood on Elayne’s face and tried to remember exactly what it was Nynaeve had done for Dailin.

The next room was large—it had to be all the rest of the log building she had seen—and windowless, but brightly lit with gold and silver lamps hanging from spikes driven into the walls and the logs that made the high ceiling. There was no fireplace. On the packed dirt floor farmhouse tables and chairs mingled with chests covered in gilt-work and inlaid with ivory. A carpet woven in peacocks lay beside a huge canopied bed, piled deep with filthy blankets and comforters, with elaborately carved and gilded posts.

A dozen men stood or sat around the room, but all eyes were on one large, fair-haired man who might have been handsome if his face were cleaner. He stood staring down at the top of a table with fluted legs and gilded scrollwork, one hand on his sword hilt, a finger of the other pushing something she could not make out in small circles on the tabletop.

The outer door opened, revealing night outside, and a lanky man with his left ear gone came in. “He has no come, yet,” he said roughly. He was missing two fingers on his left hand, too. “I do no like dealing with that kind.”

The big, fair-haired man paid him no mind, only kept moving whatever it was on the table. “Three Aes Sedai,” he murmured, then laughed. “Good prices for Aes Sedai, if you have the belly to deal with the right buyer. If you’re ready to risk having your belly ripped out through your mouth should you try selling him a pig in a sack. Not so safe as slitting the crew’s throats on a trader’s ship, eh, Coke? Not so easy, wouldn’t you say?”

There was a nervous stir among the other men, and the one addressed, a stocky fellow with shifty eyes, leaned forward anxiously. “They *are* Aes Sedai, Adden.” She recognized that voice; the man who had made the coarse suggestions. “They must be, Adden. The rings prove it, I tell you!”

Adden picked up something from the table, a small circle that glinted gold in the lamplight.

Egwene gasped and felt at her fingers. *They took my ring!*

"I do no like it," muttered the lanky man with the missing ear. "Aes Sedai. Any one of them could kill us all. Fortune prick me! You do be a stone-carved fool, Coke, and I ought to carve your throat. What if one of them do wake before he does come?"

"They'll not wake for hours." That was a fat man with a hoarse voice and a gap-toothed sneer. "My granny taught me of that stuff we fed them. They'll sleep till sunrise, and he'll come long afore then."

Egwene worked her mouth around the sour wine taste and the bitterness. *Whatever it was, your granny lied to you. She should have strangled you in your cradle!* Before this "he" came, this man who thought he could buy Aes Sedai—*like a bloody Seanchan!*—she would have Nynaeve and Elayne on their feet. She crawled to Nynaeve.

As near as she could tell, Nynaeve seemed to be sleeping, so she began with the simple expedient of shaking her. To her surprise, Nynaeve's eyes shot open.

"Wha—?"

She got a hand over Nynaeve's mouth in time to stop the word. "We are being held prisoner," she whispered. "There are a dozen men on the other side of that wall, and more outside. A great many more. They gave us something to make us sleep, but it wasn't very successful. Do you remember, yet?"

Nynaeve pulled Egwene's hand aside. "I remember." Her voice was soft and grim. She grimaced and twisted her mouth, then suddenly barked a nearly silent laugh. "Sleepwell root. The fools gave us sleepwell root mixed in wine. Wine near gone to vinegar, it tastes like. Quick, do you remember anything of what I taught you? What does sleepwell root do?"

"It clears headaches so you can sleep," Egwene said just as softly. And nearly as grimly, until she heard what she was saying. "It makes you a little drowsy, but that is all." The fat man had not listened well to what his granny told him. "All they did was help clear the pain of being hit in the head."

"Exactly," Nynaeve said. "And once we wake Elayne, we'll give them a thanking they won't forget." She rose, only to crouch beside the golden-haired woman.

"I think I saw more than a hundred of them outside when they brought us in," Egwene whispered to Nynaeve's back. "I am sure you won't mind if I use the Power as a weapon this time. And someone is apparently coming to *buy* us. I mean to do something to that fellow that will make him walk in the Light till the day he dies!" Nynaeve was still crouched over Elayne, but neither of them was moving. "What is the matter?"

"She is hurt badly, Egwene. I think her skull is broken, and she is barely breathing. Egwene, she is dying as surely as Dailin was."

"Can't you do something?" Egwene tried to remember all the flows Nynaeve had woven to Heal the Aiel woman, but she could recall no more than every third thread. "You have to!"

"They took my herbs," Nynaeve muttered fiercely, her voice trembling. "I can't! Not without the herbs!" Egwene was shocked to realize Nynaeve was on the point of tears. "Burn them all, I can't do it without—!" Suddenly she seized Elayne's shoulders as if she meant to lift the unconscious woman and shake her. "Burn you, girl," she rasped, "I did not bring you all this way to die! I should have left you scrubbing pots! I should have tied you up in a sack for Mat to carry to your mother! I will not let you die on me! Do you hear me? I won't allow it!" *Saidar* suddenly shone around her, and Elayne's eyes and mouth opened wide together.

Egwene got her hands over Elayne's mouth just in time to muffle any sound, she thought, but as she touched her, the eddies of Nynaeve's Healing caught her like a straw on the edge of a whirl pool. Cold froze her to the bone, meeting heat that seared outward as if it meant to crisp her flesh; the world vanished in a sensation of rushing, falling, flying, spinning.

When it finally ended, she was breathing hard and staring down at Elayne, who stared back over the hands she still had pressed over her woman's mouth. The last of Egwene's headache was gone. Even the backwash of what Nynaeve had done had apparently been enough for that. The murmur of voices from the other room was no louder; if Elayne had made any noise—or if she had—Adden and the others had not noticed.

Nynaeve was on her hands and knees, head down and shaking. "Light!" she muttered. "Doing it that way . . . was like peeling off . . . my own skin. Oh, Light!" She peered at Elayne. "How do you feel, girl?" Egwene pulled her hands away.

"Tired," Elayne murmured. "And hungry. Where are we? There were some men with slings. . . ."

Hastily Egwene told her what had happened. Elayne's face began to darken a long way before she was done.

"And now," Nynaeve added in a voice like iron, "we are going to show these louts what it means to meddle with us." *Saidar* shone around her once more.

Elayne was unsteady getting to her feet, but the glow surrounded her, as well. Egwene reached out to the True Source almost gleefully.

When they looked through the cracks again, to see exactly what they had to deal with, there were three Myrddraal in the room.

Dead-black garb hanging unnaturally still, they stood by the table, and every man but Adden had moved as far from them as he could, till they all had their backs against the walls and their eyes on the dirt floor. Across the table from the Myrddraal, Adden faced those eyeless stares, but sweat made runnels in the dirt on his face.

The Fade picked up a ring from the table. Egwene saw now that it was a much heavier circle of gold than the Great Serpent rings.

Face pressed against the crack between two logs, Nynaeve gasped softly and fumbled at the neck of her dress.

"Three *Aes Sedai*," the Halfman hissed, its amusement sounding like dead things powdering to dust, "and one carried this." The ring made a heavy thud as the Myrddraal tossed it back on the table.

"They are the ones I seek," another of them rasped. "You will be well rewarded, human."

"We must take them by surprise," Nynaeve said softly. "What kind of lock holds this door?"

Egwene could just see the lock on the outside of the door, an iron thing on a chain heavy enough to hold an enraged bull. "Be ready," she said.

She thinned one flow of Earth to finer than a hair, hoping the Halfmen could not sense so small a channeling, and wove it into the iron chain, into the tiniest bits of it.

One of the Myrddraal lifted its head. Another leaned across the table toward Adden. "I itch, human. Are you sure they sleep?" Adden swallowed hard and nodded his head.

The third Myrddraal turned to stare at the door to the room where Egwene and the others crouched.

The chain fell to the floor, the Myrddraal staring at it snarled, and the outer door swung open, black-veiled death flowing in from the night.

The room erupted in screams and shouts as men clawed for their swords to fight stabbing Aiel spears. The Myrddraal drew blades blacker than their garb and fought for their lives, too. Egwene had once seen six cats all fighting each other; this was that a hundredfold. And yet in seconds, silence reigned. Or almost silence.

Every human not wearing a black veil lay dead with a spear through him; one pinned Adden to the wall. Two Aiel lay still, as well, amid the jumble of overturned furniture and dead. The three Myrddraal stood back-to-back in the center of the room, black swords in their hands. One was clutching his side as if wounded, though he gave no other sign of it. Another had a long gash down its pale face; it did not bleed. Around them circled the five veiled Aiel still alive, crouching. From outside came screams and clashes of metal that said more Aiel still fought in the night, but in the room was a softer sound.

As they circled, the Aiel drummed their spears against their small hide bucklers. *Thrum-thrum-THRUM-thrum . . . thrum-thrum-THRUMthrum . . . thrum-thrum-THRUM-thrum.* The Myrddraal turned with them, and their eyeless faces seemed uncertain, uneasy that the fear their gaze struck into every human heart did not seem to touch these.

“Dance with me, Shadowman,” one of the Aiel called suddenly, tauntingly. He sounded like a young man.

“Dance with me, Eyeless.” That was a woman.

“Dance with me.”

“Dance with me.”

“I think,” Nynaeve said, straightening, “that it is time.” She threw open the door, and the three women wrapped in the glow of *saidar* stepped out.

It seemed as though, for the Myrddraal, the Aiel had ceased to exist, and for the Aiel, the Myrddraal. The Aiel stared at Egwene and the others above their veils as if not quite sure what they were seeing; she heard one of the women gasp loudly. The Myrddraal’s eyeless stare was different. Egwene could almost feel the Halfmen’s knowledge of their own deaths in it; Halfmen knew women embracing the True Source when they saw them. She was sure she could feel a desire for her death, too, if theirs could buy hers, and an even stronger desire to strip the soul out of her flesh and make both playthings for the Shadow, a desire to. . . .

She had just stepped into the room, yet it seemed she had been meeting that stare for hours. “I’ll take no more of this,” she growled, and unleashed a flow of Fire.

Flames burst out of all three Myrddraal, sprouting in every direction, and they shrieked like splintered bones jamming a meat-grinder. Yet she had forgotten she was not alone, that Elayne and Nynaeve were with her. Even as the flames consumed the Halfmen, the very air seemed suddenly to push them together in midair, crushing them into a ball of fire and blackness that grew smaller and smaller. Their screams dug at Egwene’s spine, and *something* shot out from Nynaeve’s hands—a thin bar of white light that made noonday sun seem dark, a bar of fire that made molten metal seem cold, connecting her hands to the Myrddraal. And they ceased to exist as if they had never been. Nynaeve gave a startled jump, and the glow around her vanished.

“What . . . what was that?” Elayne asked.

Nynaeve shook her head; she looked as stunned as Elayne sounded. “I don’t know. I . . . I was so angry, so afraid, at what they wanted to. . . . I do not know what it was.”

Balefire, Egwene thought. She did not know how she knew, but she was certain of it. Reluctantly, she made herself release *saidar*; made it release her. She did not know which was harder. *And I did not see a thing of what she did!*

The Aiel unveiled themselves, then. A trifle hastily, Egwene thought, as if to tell her and the other two they were no longer ready to fight. Three of the Aiel were male, one an older man with more than touches of gray in his dark red hair. They were tall, these Aielmen, and young or old, they had that calm sureness in their eyes, that dangerous grace of motion Egwene associated with Warders; death rode on their shoulders, and they knew it was there and were not afraid. One of the women was Aviendha. The screams and shouts outside were dying away.

Nynaeve started toward the fallen Aiel.

“There is no need, Aes Sedai,” the older man said. “They took Shadowman steel.”

Nynaeve still bent to check each, pulling their veils away so she could peel back eyelids and feel throats for a pulse. When she straightened from the second, her face was white. It was Dailin. “Burn you! Burn you!” It was not clear whether she meant Dailin, or the man with gray in his hair, or Aviendha, or all Aiel. “I did not Heal her so she could die like this!”

“Death comes to us all,” Aviendha began, but when Nynaeve rounded on her, she fell silent. The Aiel exchanged glances, as if not certain whether Nynaeve might do to them what had been done to the Myrddraal. It was not fear in their eyes, only awareness.

“Shadowman steel kills,” Aviendha said, “it does not wound.” The older man looked at her, a slight surprise in his eyes—Egwene decided that, like Lan, for this man that flicker of the eyelids was the equivalent of another man’s open astonishment—and Aviendha said, “They know little of some things, Rhuarc.”

“I am sorry,” Elayne said in a clear voice, “that we interrupted your . . . dance. Perhaps we should not have interfered.”

Egwene gave her a startled look, then saw what she was doing. *Put them at ease, and give Nynaeve a chance to cool down.* “You were handling things quite well,” she said. “Perhaps we offended by putting our noses in.”

The graying man—Rhuarc—gave a deep chuckle. “Aes Sedai, I for one am glad of . . . whatever it was you did.” For a moment he looked not entirely sure of that, but in the next he had his good temper back. He had a good smile, and a strong, square face; he was handsome, if a little old. “We could have killed them, but three Shadowmen. . . . They would have killed two or three of us, certainly, perhaps all, and I cannot say we would have finished them all. For the young, death is an enemy they wish to try their strength against. For those of us a little older, she is an old friend, an old lover, but one we are not eager to meet again soon.”

Nynaeve seemed to relax with his speech, as if meeting an Aiel who did not seem anxious to die had leached the tension out of her. “I should thank you,” she said, “and I do. I will admit I am surprised to see you, though. Aviendha, did you expect to find us here? How?”

“I followed you.” The Aiel woman seemed unembarrassed. “To see what you would do. I saw the men take you, but I was too far back to help. I was sure you must see me if I came too close, so I stayed a hundred paces behind. By the time I saw you could not help yourselves, it was too late to try alone.”

“I am sure you did what you could,” Egwene said faintly. *She was just a hundred paces behind us? Light, the brigands never saw anything.*

Aviendha took her words as urging to tell more. “I knew where Coram must be, and he knew where Dhael and Luaine were, and they knew. . . .” She paused, frowning at the older man. “I did not expect to find any clan chief, much less my own, among those who came. Who leads the Taardad Aiel, Rhuarc, with you here?”

Rhuarc shrugged as if it were of no account. “The sept chiefs will take their turns, and try to decide if they truly wish to go to Rhuidean when I die. I would not have come, except that Amys and Bair and Melaine and Seana stalked me like ridgecats after a wild goat. The dreams said I must go. They asked if I truly wanted to die old and fat in a bed.”

Aviendha laughed as if at a great joke. “I have heard it said that a man caught between his wife and a Wise One often wishes for a dozen old enemies to fight instead. A man caught between a wife and three Wise Ones, and the wife a Wise One herself, must consider trying to slay Sightblinder.”

“The thought came to me.” He frowned down at something on the floor; three Great Serpent rings, Egwene saw, and a much heavier golden ring made for a man’s large finger. “It still does. All things must change, but I would not be a part of that change if I could set myself aside from it. Three Aes Sedai, traveling to Tear.” The other Aiel glanced at one another as if they did not want Egwene and her companions to notice.

“You spoke of dreams,” Egwene said. “Do your Wise Ones know what their dreams mean?”

“Some do. If you would know more than that, you must speak to them. Perhaps they will tell an Aes Sedai. They do not tell men, except what the dreams say we must do.” He sounded tired, suddenly. “And that is usually what we would avoid, if we could.”

He stooped to pick up the man’s ring. On it, a crane flew above a lance and crown; Egwene knew it now. She had seen it often before, dangling about Nynaeve’s neck on a leather cord. Nynaeve stepped on the other rings to snatch it out of his hand; her face was flushed, with anger and too many other emotions for Egwene to read. Rhuarc made no move to take it back, but went on in the same weary tone.

“And one of them carries a ring I have heard of as a boy. The ring of Malkieri kings. They rode with the Shienarans against the Aiel in my father’s time. They were good in the dance of the spears. But Malkier fell to the Blight. It is said only a child king survived, and he courts the death that took his land as other men court beautiful women. Truly, this is a strange thing, Aes Sedai. Of all the strange sights I thought I might see when Melaine harried me out of my own hold and over the Dragonwall, none has been so strange as this. The path you set me is one I never thought my feet would follow."

"I set no paths for you," Nynaeve said sharply. "All I want is to continue my journey. These men had horses. We will take three of them and be on our way."

"In the night, Aes Sedai?" Rhuarc said. "Is your journey so urgent that you would travel these dangerous lands in the dark?"

Nynaeve struggled visibly before saying, "No." In a firmer tone she added, "But I mean to leave with the sunrise."

The Aiel carried the dead outside the palisade, but neither Egwene nor her companions wanted to use the filthy bed Adden had slept in. They picked up their rings and slept under the sky in their cloaks and the blankets the Aiel gave them.

When dawn pearled the sky to the east, the Aiel produced a breakfast of tough, dried meat—Egwene hesitated over that until Aviendha told her it was goat—flatbread that was almost as difficult to chew as the stringy meat, and a blue-veined white cheese that had a tart taste and was hard enough to make Elayne murmur that the Aiel must practice by chewing rocks. But the Daughter-Heir ate as much as Egwene and Nynaeve together. The Aiel turned the horses loose—they did not ride unless they had to, Aviendha explained, sounding as if she herself would as soon run on blistered feet—after choosing out the three best for Egwene and the others. They were all tall and nearly as big as warhorses, with proud necks and fierce eyes. A black stallion for Nynaeve, a roan mare for Elayne, and a gray mare for Egwene.

She chose to call the gray Mist, in the hope that a gentle name might soothe her, and indeed, Mist did seem to step lightly as they rode south, just as the sun lifted a red rim above the horizon.

The Aiel accompanied them afoot, all those who had survived the fight. Three more had died aside from the two the Myrddraal killed. They were nineteen, altogether, now. They loped along easily alongside the horses. At first, Egwene tried holding Mist to a slow walk, but the Aiel thought this very funny.

"I will race you ten miles," Aviendha said, "and we shall see who wins, your horse or I."

"I will race you twenty!" Rhuarc called, laughing.

Egwene thought they might actually be serious, and when she and the others let their horses walk at a quicker pace, the Aiel certainly showed no sign of falling back.

When the thatched rooftops of Jurene came in sight, Rhuarc said, “Fare you well, Aes Sedai. May you always find water and shade. Perhaps we will meet again before the change comes.” He sounded grim. As the Aiel curved away to the south, Aviendha and Chiad and Bain each raised a hand in farewell. They did not seem to be slowing down now that they no longer ran with the horses; if anything, they ran a little faster. Egwene had a suspicion they meant to maintain that pace until they reached wherever it was they were going.

“What did he mean by that?” she asked. “ ‘Perhaps we will meet again before the change’?” Elayne shook her head.

“It does not matter what he meant,” Nynaeve said. “I am just as glad they came last night, but I am glad to have them gone, too. I hope there is a ship here.”

Jurene itself was a small place, all wooden houses and none more than a single story, but the White Lion banner of Andor flew over it on a tall staff, and fifty of the Queen’s Guards held it, in red coats with long white collars beneath shining breastplates. They had been placed there, their captain said, to make a safe haven for refugees who wished to flee to Andor, but fewer such came every day. Most went to villages further downriver, now, nearer Aringill. It was a good thing the three women had come when they did, as he expected to receive orders returning his company to Andor any day. The few inhabitants of Jurene would likely go with them, leaving what remained for brigands and the Cairhienin soldiers of warring Houses.

Elayne kept her face hidden in the hood of her sturdy wool cloak, but none of the soldiers seemed to associate the girl with red-gold hair with their Daughter-Heir. Some asked her to stay; Egwene was not sure whether Elayne was pleased or shocked. She herself told the men who asked her that she had no time for them. It was nice, in an odd way, to be asked; she certainly had no wish to kiss any of these fellows, but it was pleasant to be reminded that some men, at least, thought she was as pretty as Elayne. Nynaeve slapped one man’s face. That almost made Egwene laugh, and Elayne smiled openly; Egwene thought Nynaeve had been pinched, and despite the glare on her face, she did not look entirely displeased, either.

They were not wearing their rings. It had not taken much effort on Nynaeve’s part to convince them that one place they did not want to be taken for Aes Sedai was Tear, especially if the Black Ajah was there. Egwene had hers in her pouch with the stone *ter’angreal*; she touched it often to remind herself they were still there. Nynaeve wore hers on the cord that held Lan’s heavy ring between her breasts.

There was a ship in Jurene, tied to the single stone dock sticking into the Erinin. Not the ship Aviendha had seen, it seemed, but still a ship. Egwene was dismayed when she saw it. Twice as wide as the *Blue Crane*, the *Darter* belied its name with a bluff bow as round as its captain.

That worthy fellow blinked at Nynaeve and scratched his ear when she asked if his vessel was fast. “Fast? I am full of fancy wood from Shienar and rugs from Kandor. What need to be fast with a cargo like that? Prices only go up. Yes, I suppose there are faster ships behind me, but they’ll not put in here. I would not have stopped myself if I hadn’t found worms in the meat. Fool notion that they’d have meat to sell in Cairhien. The *Blue Crane*? Aye, I saw Ellisor hung up on something upriver this morning. He’ll not get off soon, I’m thinking. That’s what a fast ship brings you.”

Nynave paid their fares—and twice as much again for the horses—with such a look on her face that neither Egwene nor Elayne spoke to her until long after the *Darter* had wallowed away from Jurene.

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CHAPTER 40

A Hero in the Night

Leaning on the rail, Mat watched the walled town of Aringill come closer as the sweeps worked the *Gray Gull* in toward the long, tarred-timber docks. Protected by high stone wing-walls that thrust out into the river, those docks swarmed with people, and more were leaving the ships of various sizes that lay tied all along them. Some of the people pushed barrows, or pulled sledges or tall-wheeled carts, all piled high with furniture and chests lashed in place, but most carried bundles on their backs, if that. Not everyone bustled. Many men and women huddled together uncertainly, and children clung crying to their legs. Soldiers in red coats and shiny breastplates kept trying to make them move off the docks into the town, but most seemed too frightened to move.

Mat turned and shaded his eyes to peer at the river they were leaving. The Erinin was busier here than he had seen it south of Tar Valon, with nearly a dozen vessels under way in sight, ranging from a long, sharp-prowed splinter darting upriver against the current, pushed by two triangular sails, to a wide, bluff-bowed ship with square sails, still wallowing along well to the north.

Nearly half the ships he could see had nothing to do with the river trade, though. Two broad-beamed craft with empty decks were lumbering across the river, toward a smaller town on the far bank, while three others labored back toward Aringill, their decks packed with people like barrels of fish. The setting sun, still its own height above the horizon, shadowed a banner flying over that other town. That shore was Cairhien, but he did not need to see the banner to know it was the White Lion of Andor. There had been talk enough in the few Andoran villages where the *Gray Gull* had stopped briefly.

He shook his head. Politics did not interest him. *As long as they don't try telling me again I'm an Andorman just because of some map. Burn me,* *they might even try to make me fight in their bloody army, if this Cairhien business spreads. Following orders. Light!* With a shiver, he turned back to Aringill. Barefoot men on the *Gray Gull* were readying ropes to toss to others on the docks.

Captain Mallia was eyeing him from back by the tiller. The fellow had never given up his efforts to ingratiate himself with them, his attempts to learn what their important mission was. Mat had finally shown him the sealed letter and told him that he was carrying it from the Daughter-Heir to the Queen. A personal message from a daughter to her mother; no more. Mallia had only seemed to hear the words "Queen Morgase."

Mat grinned to himself. A deep coat pocket held two purses fatter than when he had boarded the vessel; he had enough loose coin to more than fill another two. His luck had not been quite so good as on that first, strange night when the dice and everything else had seemed to go crazy, but still it was good enough. After the third night, Mallia had given up trying to show his friendliness by gambling, but his money chest was already lighter by then. It would be lighter still after Aringill. Mallia had need to restock his food—Mat glanced at the people milling on the docks—if he could, here, at any price.

The grin faded as his thoughts went back to the letter. A little work with a hot knife blade, and the golden lily seal had been lifted. He had found nothing: Elayne was studying hard and making progress and eager to learn. She was a dutiful daughter, and the Amyrlin Seat had punished her for running away and told her never to speak of it again, so her mother would understand why she could not say more. She said she had been raised to the Accepted, and was that not wonderful, so soon, and she was being trusted with greater duties now, and would have to leave Tar Valon for just a short time on the service of the Amyrlin herself. Her mother was not to worry.

It was all very well for her to tell Morgase not to worry. It was him she had landed in the soup kettle. This silly letter had to be the reason those men had come after him, but even Thom had been able to make nothing of it, though he muttered about "ciphers" and "codes" and "the Game of Houses."

Mat had the letter safe in the lining of his coat, now, its seal replaced, and he was willing to bet no one would ever know. If someone wanted it badly enough to kill him for it, they might try again. *I told you I'd deliver it,* *Nynaeve, and I bloody will, no matter who tries to stop me.* Even so, he would have words to say the next time he saw those three irritating women—*If I ever do. Light, I never thought of that*—words he did not think they would enjoy hearing.

As the crewmen hurled their lines onto the dock, Thom came on deck, his instrument cases on his back and his bundle in one hand. Even with a limp he strutted to the rail, giving the tail of his cloak little flourishes to make the colored patches flutter, and blowing out his long, white mustaches importantly.

"Nobody is watching, Thom," Mat said. "I don't think they would even see a gleeman unless he had food in his hands."

Thom stared at the docks. "Light! I had heard it was bad, but I did not expect this! Poor fools. Half of them look as if they are starving. It may cost us one of your purses for a room tonight. And the other for a meal, if you intend to keep on the way you've been going. Nearly made me ill to watch you. You try eating that way where those people down there can see you, and you may have your brains battered out."

Mat only smiled at him.

Mallia came stumping down the deck, tugging the point of his beard, as the *Gray Gull* was warped into her berth. Crewmen ran to set a gangplank, and Sanor stood guard on it, heavy arms folded across his chest, in case the throng on the docks tried to board. None of them did.

"So you will be leaving me here," Mallia told Mat. The captain's smile was not as ready as it might have been. "Are you certain there is nothing I can do to help further? Burn my soul, I never saw such a rabble! Those soldiers ought to clear the docks—with the sword, if need be!—so decent traders can do business. Perhaps Sanor can make a path through this scum to your inn for you."

So you'll know where we are staying? Not bloody likely. "I had thought of eating before I went ashore, and maybe a game of dice to pass the time." Mallia's face went white. "But I think I would like a steady floor under me for my next meal. So we will leave you now, Captain. It has been an enjoyable voyage."

While relief still battled consternation on the captain's face, Mat picked up his things from the deck and, using the quarterstaff as a walking stick, made his way to the gangplank with Thom. Mallia followed as far as the head of the plank, murmuring regrets at their departure that jumped from real to insincere and back again. Mat was certain the man hated losing a chance to ingratiate himself with his High Lord Samon by learning details of a pact between Andor and Tar Valon.

As Mat and the gleeman pushed through the crowds, Thom muttered, “I know the man is far from likable, but why do you have to keep taunting him? Wasn’t it enough that you ate every scrap of what he thought would feed him all the way to Tear?”

“I have not been eating it all for nearly two days.” The hunger had simply been gone one morning, to his great relief. It had been as if Tar Valon had loosed its last hold on him. “I’ve been throwing most of it over the side, and a hard job it was making sure nobody saw.” Among these drawn faces, many of them children’s, it did not seem so funny anymore. “Mallia deserved taunting. What about that ship, yesterday? The one that was stuck on a mudbank or something. He could have stopped to help, but he would not go near it however much they shouted.” There was a woman with long, dark hair ahead who might have been pretty if she had not looked so bone weary, peering into the face of every man who passed her as if looking for someone; a boy little taller than her waist and two girls shorter clung to her, all crying. “All that talk about river brigands and traps. It didn’t look like any trap to me.”

Thom dodged around a high-wheeled cart—a cage holding two squealing pigs was lashed atop the canvas-covered mound—and nearly tripped over a sledge being pulled, by a man and a woman. “And you go out of your way to help people, do you? Strange how that has escaped my eye.”

“I’ll help anyone who can pay,” Mat said firmly. “Only fools in stories do something for nothing.”

The two girls sobbed into their mother’s skirts while the boy fought his tears. The woman’s deep-set eyes rested on Mat for a moment, studying his face, before drifting on; they looked as if she wished she could weep, too. On impulse he dug a fistful of loose coins out of his pocket without looking to see what they were and pressed them into her hand. She gave a start of surprise, stared at the gold and silver in her hand with incomprehension that quickly turned to a smile, and opened her mouth, tears of gratitude filling her eyes.

“Buy them something to eat,” he said quickly, and hurried on before she could speak. He noticed Thom looking at him. “What are you gawking at? Coin comes easily as long as I can find somebody who likes to dice.”

Thom nodded slowly, but Mat was not sure he had gotten his point across. *Bloody children's crying was getting on my nerves, that's all. Fool gleeman will probably expect me to give gold away to every waif that comes along, now. Fool!* For an uncomfortable moment, he was not certain whether the last had been meant for Thom or himself.

Taking himself in hand, he avoided looking at any face long enough to really see it until he found the one he wanted, at the foot of the dock. The helmetless soldier in red coat and breastplate, urging people into the town, had the grizzled look of a squadman, an experienced leader of ten or so. Squinting into the setting sun, he reminded Mat of Uno, though he had both his eyes. He looked almost as tired as the people he was chivying. "Move along," he was shouting in a hoarse voice. "You can't bloody stay here. Move along. Into the town with you."

Mat stationed himself squarely in front of the soldier and put on a smile. "Your pardon, Captain, but can you tell me where I might find a decent inn? And a stable with good horses to sell. We have a long way to go, come morning."

The soldier eyed him up and down, examined Thom and his gleeman's cloak, then shifted back to Mat. "Captain, is it? Well, boy, you'll have the Dark One's own luck if you find a stable to sleep in. Most of this lot are sleeping under hedges. And if you find a horse that hasn't been slaughtered for cooking, you'll likely have to fight the man who owns it to make him sell."

"Eating horse!" Thom muttered disgustedly. "Has it really become that bad on this side of the river? Isn't the Queen sending food?"

"It is bad, gleeman." The soldier looked as if he wanted to spit. "They're crossing over faster than the mills can grind flour, or wagons carry foodstuffs from the farms. Well, it will not last much longer. The order has come down. Tomorrow, we stop letting anyone across, and if they try, we send them back." He scowled at the people milling on the dock as if it were all their fault, then brought the same hard look to bear on Mat. "You are taking up space, traveler. Move along." His voice rose to a shout again, directed at everyone within hearing. "Move along! You cannot bloody stay here! Move along!"

Mat and Thom joined the thin stream of people, carts, and sledges flowing toward the gates in the town wall, and into Aringill.

The main streets were paved with flat gray stones, but they were crowded with so many people that it was difficult to see the stones under your own boots. Most appeared to be moving aimlessly, with nowhere to go, and those who had given up squatted dejectedly along the sides of the street, the lucky ones with bundled belongings in front of them or some cherished possession clutched in their arms. Mat saw three men holding clocks, and a dozen or more with silver goblets or platters. The women held children to their breasts, mainly. A babble filled the air, a low, wordless hum of worry. He pushed through the crowd with a frown on his face, searching for the sign that would mark an inn. The buildings were every sort, wood and brick and stone all cheek by jowl, with roofs of tile, or slate, or thatch.

"It does not sound like Morgase," Thom said after a time, half to himself. His bushy eyebrows were pulled down like a white arrow pointing to his nose.

"What does not sound like her?" Mat asked absently.

"Stopping the crossings. Sending people back. She always had a temper like lightning, but she always had a soft heart, too, for anyone poor or hungry." He shook his head.

Mat saw a sign, then—The Riverman, it said, and showed a barefoot, shirtless fellow doing a jig—and turned that way, forcing an angle across the flow with the quarterstaff. "Well, it had to be her. Who else could it be? Forget Morgase, Thom. We've a long way to Caemlyn, yet. First let us see how much gold it takes to buy a bed for the night."

The common room of The Riverman looked as crowded as the street outside, and when the innkeeper heard what Mat wanted, he laughed till his chins shook. "I am sleeping four to a bed, now. If my own mother came to me, I could not give her a blanket by the fire."

"As you must have noticed," Thom said, his voice taking on that echoing quality, "I am a gleeman. Surely you can find at least pallets in a corner in return for me entertaining your patrons with stories and juggling, eating of fire, and sleight of hand." The innkeeper laughed in his face.

As Mat pulled him back into the street, Thom growled in his normal voice, "You never gave me a chance to ask after his stable. Surely I could have gotten us a place in the hayloft, at least."

"I have slept in enough stables and barns since leaving Emond's Field," Mat told him, "and under enough bushes, too. I want a bed."

But at the next four inns he found, the innkeeper gave him the same answer as the first; the last two almost threw him out bodily when he offered to dice for a bed. And when the owner of the fifth told him he could not give a pallet to the Queen herself—this at a place called The Good Queen—he sighed and asked, “What about your stable, then? Surely we can bed down in the hayloft for a price.”

“My stable is for horses,” the round-faced man said, “not that many are left in the city.” He had been polishing a silver cup; now he opened one door of a shallow cupboard standing on top of a deep, drawered chest and placed it inside with others; none of them matched. A tooled-leather dice cup sat atop the chest, just beyond the arc of the cupboard’s doors. “I do not put people in there to frighten the horses, and perhaps make off with them. Those who pay me for stabling their animals want them well tended, and I’ve two of my own in there, besides. There are no beds in my stable for you.”

Mat eyed the dice cup thoughtfully. He pulled a gold Andoran crown out of his pocket and set it atop the chest. The next coin was a silver Tar Valon mark, then a gold one, and a gold Tairen crown. The innkeeper looked at the coins and licked his plump lips. Mat added two silver Illianer marks and another gold Andoran crown, and looked at the round-faced man. The innkeeper hesitated. Mat reached for the coins. The innkeeper’s hand reached them first.

“Perhaps just the two of you would not disturb the horses too greatly.”

Mat smiled at him. “Speaking of horses, what price for those two of yours? With saddles and bridles, of course.”

“I will not sell my horses,” the man said, clutching the coins to his chest.

Mat picked up the dice cup and rattled it. “Twice as much again against the horses, saddles, and bridles.” He shook his coat pocket to make the loose coins rattle, too, to show he had more to cover the wager. “My one toss against the best of your two.” He almost laughed as greed lit the innkeeper’s entire face.

When Mat walked into the stable, the first thing he did was check along the half-dozen stalls with horses in them for a pair of brown geldings. They were nondescript animals, but they were his. They needed currying badly, but otherwise they seemed in good condition, especially considering that all the stablemen but one had run off. The innkeeper had been extremely disparaging of their complaints that they could no longer live on what he paid them, and he seemed to think it a crime that the one man who remained had actually had the audacity to say he was going home to bed just because he was tired from doing three men's work.

"Five sixes," Thom muttered behind him. The looks he cast around the stable did not seem as enthralled as they might, seeing that he had suggested it in the first place. Dust motes shone in the last light of the setting sun coming through the big doors, and the ropes used to hoist hay bales hung like vines from pulleys in the roof beams. The hayloft was dim in the gloom above. "When he threw four sixes and a five on his second toss, he thought you'd lost for sure, and so did I. You have not been winning every toss of late."

"I win enough." Mat was just as relieved not to be winning every throw. Luck was one thing, but remembering that night still sent shivers down his back. Still, for one moment as he shook that dice cup, he had all but known what the pips would be. As he tossed the quarterstaff up into the loft, thunder crashed in the sky. He scrambled up the ladder, calling back to Thom. "This was a good idea. I'd think you would be happy to be in out of the rain tonight."

Most of the hay was in bales stacked against the outer walls, but there was more than enough loose for him to make a bed with his cloak over it. Thom appeared at the top of the ladder as he was pulling two loaves of bread and a wedge of green-veined cheese from his leather scrip. The innkeeper—his name was Jeral Florry—had parted with the food for merely enough coin to have bought one of those horses in more peaceful days. They ate while rain began drumming on the roof, washing the food down with water from their waterbottles—Florry had had no wine at any price—and when they were done, Thom dug out his tinderbox and thumbed his long-stemmed pipe full of tabac and settled back for a smoke.

Mat was lying on his back, staring at the shadowed roof and wondering if the rain would break before morning—he wanted that letter out of his hands as quickly as possible—when he heard an axle creak into the stable. Rolling to the edge of the loft, he peered down. There was enough dusk left for him to see.

A slender woman was straightening from the shafts of the high-wheeled cart she had just dragged in out of the rain, pulling off her cloak and muttering to herself as she shook the wet from it. Her hair was plaited in a multitude of small braids, and her silk dress—he thought it was a pale green—was elaborately embroidered across her breasts. The dress had been fine, once, but now it was tattered and stained. She knuckled her back, still talking to herself in a low voice, and hurried to the stable doors to peer out into the rain. Just as hurriedly, she ducked out to pull the big doors shut, enclosing the stable in darkness. There was a rustling below, a clink and a slosh, and suddenly a small flare of light bloomed into a lantern in her hands. She looked around, found a hook on a stall post, hung the lantern, and went to dig under the roped canvas covering her cart.

“She did that quickly,” Thom said softly around his pipe. “She could have set fire to the stable striking flint and steel in the dark like that.”

The woman came out with the end of a loaf of bread, which she gnawed as if it were hard and her hunger did not care.

“Is there any of that cheese left?” Mat whispered. Thom shook his head.

The woman began sniffing at the air, and Mat realized she probably smelled Thom’s tabac smoke. He was about to stand and announce their presence when one of the stable doors opened again.

The woman crouched, ready to run, as four men walked in out of the rain, doffing their wet cloaks to reveal pale coats with wide sleeves and embroidery across the chest, and baggy breeches embroidered down the legs. Their clothes might be fancy, but they were all big men, and their faces were grim.

“So, Aludra,” a man in a yellow coat said, “you did not run so fast as you thought to, eh?” He had a strange accent, to Mat’s ear.

“Tammuz,” the woman said as if it were a curse. “It is not enough that you cause me to be cast out of the Guild with your blundering, you great ox-brain you, but now you chase after me as well.” She had the same odd way of speaking as the man. “Do you think that I am glad to see you?”

The one called Tammuz laughed. “You are a very large fool, Aludra, which I always knew. Had you merely gone away, you could have lived a long life in some quiet place. But you could not forget the secrets in your head, eh? Did you believe we would not hear that you try to earn your way making what it is the right of the Guild alone to make?” Suddenly there was a knife in his hand. “It will be a great pleasure to cut your throat, Aludra.”

Mat was not even aware that he had stood up until one of the doubled ropes dangling from the ceiling was in his hands and he had launched himself out of the loft. *Burn me for a bloody fool!*

He only had time for that one frantic thought, and then he was plowing through the cloaked men, sending them toppling like pins in a game of bowls. The ropes slipped through his hands, and he fell, tumbling across the straw-covered floor himself, coins spilling from his pockets, to end up against a stall. When he scrambled to his feet, the four men were already rising, too. And they all had knives in their hands, now. *Light-blind fool! Burn me! Burn me!*

“Mat!”

He looked up, and Thom tossed his quarterstaff down to him. He snagged it out of the air just in time to knock the blade out of Tammuz’s fist and thump him a sharp crack on the side of the head. The man crumpled, but the other three were right behind, and for a hectic moment Mat had all he could do with a whirling staff to keep knife blades away from him, rapping knees and ankles and ribs until he could land a good blow on a head. When the last man fell, he stared at them a moment, then raised his glare to the woman. “Did you have to choose this stable to be murdered in?”

She slipped a slim-bladed dagger back into a sheath at her belt. “I would have helped you, but I feared that you might mistake me for one of these great buffoons if I came near with steel in my hand. And I chose this stable because the rain is wet and so am I, and no one was watching this place.”

She was older than he had thought, at least ten or fifteen years older than he, but pretty still, with large, dark eyes and a small, full mouth that seemed on the point of a pout. *Or getting ready for a kiss.* He gave a small laugh and leaned on his staff. “Well, what is done is done. I suppose you were not trying to bring us trouble.”

Thom was climbing down from the loft, awkwardly because of his leg, and Aludra looked from him to Mat. The gleeman had put his cloak back on; he seldom let anyone see him without it, especially for the first time. “This is like a story,” she said. “I am rescued by a gleeman and a young hero”—she frowned at the men sprawled on the stable floor—“from these whose mothers were pigs!”

“Why did they want to kill you?” Mat asked. “He said something about secrets.”

“The secrets,” Thom said in very nearly his performing voice, “of making fireworks, unless I miss my guess. You are an Illuminator, are you not?” He made a courtly bow with an elaborate swirl of his cloak. “I am Thom Merrilin, a gleeman, as you have seen.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “And this is Mat, a young man with a knack for finding trouble.”

“I was an Illuminator,” Aludra said stiffly, “but this great pig Tammuz, he ruined a performance for the King of Cairhien, and nearly he destroyed the chapter house, too. But me, I was Mistress of the Chapter House, so it was me that the Guild held responsible.” Her voice became defensive. “I do not tell the secrets of the Guild, no matter what that Tammuz says, but I will not let myself starve while I can make fireworks. I am no more in the Guild, so the laws of the Guild, they do not apply to me now.”

“Galldrian,” Thom said, sounding almost as wooden as she had. “Well, he is a dead king now, and he’ll see no more fireworks.”

“The Guild,” she said, sounding tired, “they all but blame me for this war in Cairhien, as if that one night of disaster, it made Galldrian die.” Thom grimaced. “It seems I can no longer remain here,” she went on. “Tammuz and these other oxen, they will wake soon. Perhaps this time they will tell the soldiers that I stole what I have made.” She eyed Thom and then Mat, frowning in thought, and seemed to reach a decision. “I must reward you, but I have no money. However, I have something that is perhaps as good as gold. Maybe better. We shall see what you think.”

Mat exchanged glances with Thom as she went to root under the canvas covering her cart. *I’ll help anyone who can pay.* He thought a speculative light had appeared in Thom’s blue eyes.

Aludra separated one bundle from a number like it, a short roll of heavy, oiled cloth almost as fat as her arms would go around. Setting it down on the straw, she undid the binding cords and unrolled the cloth across the floor. Four rows of pockets ran along the length of it, the pockets in each row larger than those in the one before. Each pocket held a wax-coated cylinder of paper just large enough for its end, trailing a dark cord, to stick out.

“Fireworks,” Thom said. “I knew it. Aludra, you must not do this. You can sell those for enough to live ten days or more at a good inn, and eat well every day. Well, anywhere but here in Aringill.”

Kneeling beside the long strip of oiled cloth, she sniffed at him. “Be quiet, you old one you.” She made it sound not unkindly. “I am not allowed to show gratitude? You think I would give you this if I had no more for selling? Attend me closely."

Mat squatted beside her, fascinated. He had seen fireworks twice in his life. Peddlers had brought them to Emond's Field, at great expense to the Village Council. When he was ten, he had tried to cut one open to see what was inside, and had caused an uproar. Bran al'Vere, the Mayor, had cuffed him; Doral Barran, who had been the Wisdom then, had switched him; and his father had strapped him when he got home. Nobody in the village would talk to him for a month, except for Rand and Perrin, and they mostly told him what a fool he had been. He reached out to touch one of the cylinders. Aludra slapped his hand away.

"Attend me first, I say! These smallest, they will make a loud bang, but no more." They were the size of his little finger. "These next, they make a bang and a bright light. The next, they make the bang, and the light, and many sparkles. The last"—these were fatter than his thumb—"make all of those things, but the sparkles, they are many colors. Almost like a nightflower, but not up in the sky."

Nightflower? Mat thought.

"You must be especially careful of these. You see, the fuse, it is very long." She saw his blank look, and waggled one of the long, dark cords at him. "This, this!"

"Where you put the fire," he muttered. "I know that." Thom made a sound in his throat and stroked his mustaches with a knuckle as if covering a smile.

Aludra grunted. "Where you put the fire. Yes. Do not stay close to any of them, but these largest, you run away from when you light the fuse. You comprehend me?" She briskly rolled up the long cloth. "You may sell these if you wish, or use them. Remember, you must never put this close to fire. Fire will make them all explode. So many as this at once, it could destroy a house, maybe." She hesitated over retying the cords, then added, "And there is one last thing, which you may have heard. Do not cut open any of these, as some great fools do to see what is inside. Sometimes when what is inside touches air, it will explode without the need of fire. You can lose fingers, or even a hand."

"I've heard that," Mat said dryly.

She frowned at him as if wondering whether he meant to do it anyway, then finally pushed the rolled bundle toward him. "Here. I must go now, before these sons of goats awaken.” Glancing at the still open door, and the rain falling in the night beyond, she sighed. “Perhaps I will find somewhere else dry. I think I will go toward Lugard, tomorrow. These pigs, they will expect me to go to Caemlyn, yes?”

It was even further to Lugard than to Caemlyn, and Mat suddenly remembered that hard end of bread. And she had said she had no money. The fireworks would buy no meals until she found someone who could afford them. She had never even looked at the gold and silver that had spilled from his pockets when he fell; it glittered and sparkled among the straw in the lantern light. *Ah, Light, I cannot let her go hungry, I suppose.* He scooped up as much as he could reach quickly.

“Uh . . . Aludra? I have plenty, you can see. I thought perhaps. . . .” He held out the coins toward her. “I can always win more.”

She paused with her cloak half around her shoulders, then smiled at Thom as she swept it the rest of the way on. “He is young yet, eh?”

“He is young,” Thom agreed. “And not half so bad as he would like to think himself. Sometimes he is not.”

Mat glowered at both of them and lowered his hand.

Lifting the shafts of her cart, Aludra got it turned around and started for the door, giving Tammuz a kick in the ribs as she passed. He groaned groggily.

“I would like to know something, Aludra,” Thom said. “How did you light that lantern so quickly in the dark?”

Stopping short of the door, she smiled over her shoulder at him. “You wish me to tell you all of my secrets? I am grateful, but I am not in love. That secret, not even the Guild knows, for it is my discovery alone. I will tell you this much. When I know how to make it work properly, and work only when I want it to, sticks will make my fortune for me.” Throwing her weight against the shafts, she pulled the cart into the rain, and the night swallowed her.

“Sticks?” Mat said. He wondered if she might not be a little strange in the head.

Tammuz groaned again.

“Best we do the same as she, boy,” Thom said. “Else it’s a choice between slitting four throats and maybe spending the next few days explaining ourselves to the Queen’s Guards. These look the sort who’d set them on us out of spite. And they have enough to be spiteful for, I suppose.”

One of Tammuz's companions twitched as if coming to, and muttered something incomprehensible.

By the time they had gathered everything and saddled the horses, Tammuz was up on his hands and knees with his head hanging, and the others were stirring and groaning, too.

Swinging into his saddle, Mat stared at the rain outside the open door, falling harder than ever. "A bloody hero," he said. "Thom, if I ever look like acting the hero again, you kick me."

"And what would you have done differently?"

Mat scowled at him, then pulled up his hood and spread the tail of his cloak over the fat roll tied behind the high cantle of his saddle. Even with oiled cloth, a little more protection from the rain could not hurt. "Just kick me!" He booted his horse in the ribs and galloped into the rainy night.

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CHAPTER 41

A Hunter's Oath

As the *Snow Goose* moved toward the long stone docks of Illian, sails furled and propelled by its sweeps, Perrin stood near the stern watching great numbers of long-legged birds wading in the tall marsh grass that all but encircled the great harbor. He recognized the small white cranes, and could guess at their much larger blue brothers, but many of the crested birds—red-feathered or rosy, some with flat bills broader than a duck's—he did not know at all. A dozen sorts of gulls swooped and soared above the harbor itself, and a black bird with a long, sharp beak skimmed just above the water, its underbeak cutting a furrow. Ships three and four times as long as the *Snow Goose* lay anchored across the expanse of the harbor, waiting their turns at the docks, or for the tides to shift so they could sail beyond the long breakwater. Small fishing boats worked close to the marsh, and in the creeks winding through it, two or three men in each dragging nets on long poles swung out from either side of the boat.

The wind carried a sharp scent of salt, and did little to break the heat. The sun stood well over halfway down to the horizon, but it seemed like noon. The air felt damp; it was the only way he could think of it. Damp. His nose caught the smell of fresh fish from the boats, of old fish and mud from the marsh, and the sour stink of a large tanning yard that lay on a treeless island in the marsh grass.

Captain Adarra muttered something softly behind him, the tiller creaked, and the *Snow Goose* changed its course a trifle. Barefoot men at the sweeps moved as if not wanting to make a sound. Perrin did not glance at them beyond a flicker of his eye.

He peered at the tannery, instead, watching men scrape hides stretched on rows of wooden frames, and other men lift hides out of huge, sunken vats with long sticks. Sometimes they stacked the hides on barrows, wheeling them into the long, low building at the edge of the yard; sometimes the hides went back into the vats, with an addition of liquids poured from large stone crocks. They probably made more leather in a day than was made in Emond's Field in months, and he could see another tannery on another island beyond the first.

It was not that he had any real interest in ships or fishing boats or tanning yards, or even very much in the birds—though he did wonder what those pale red ones could be fishing for with their flat bills, and some of them looked good to eat unless he watched himself—but anything at all was better than watching the scene behind him on the deck of the *Snow Goose.* The axe at his belt was no defense against that. *A stone wall wouldn't be defense enough,* he thought.

Moiraine had been neither pleased nor displeased to discover that Zarine—*I'll not call her Faile, whatever she wants to name herself! She is no falcon!*—knew she was Aes Sedai, though she had been perhaps a little upset with him for not telling her. *A little upset. She called me a fool, but that was all. Then.* Moiraine did not seem to care one way or another about Zarine being a Hunter of the Horn. But once she learned the girl thought they would lead her to the Horn of Valere, once she learned he had known that, too, and not told her—Zarine had been more than forthcoming about both subjects with Moiraine, to his mind—then her cold dark stare had taken on a quality that made him feel as if he had been packed in a barrel of snow in the dead of winter. The Aes Sedai said nothing, but she stared too often and too hard for any comfort.

He looked over his shoulder and quickly returned to studying the shoreline. Zarine was sitting cross-legged on the deck near the horses tethered between the masts, her bundle and dark cloak beside her, her narrow, divided skirts neatly arrayed, pretending to study the rooftops and towers of the oncoming city. Moiraine was studying Illian, too, from just ahead of the men working the sweeps, but now and then she shot a hard look at the girl from under the deep hood of her fine gray wool cloak. *How can she stand wearing that?* His own coat was unbuttoned and his shirt unlaced at the neck.

Zarine met each Aes Sedai look with a smile, but every time Moiraine turned away, she swallowed and wiped her forehead.

Perrin rather admired her for managing that smile when Moiraine was watching. It was a good deal more than he could do. He had never seen the Aes Sedai truly lose her temper, but he himself was at the point of wishing she would shout, or rage, or anything but stare at him. *Light, maybe not* anything! Maybe the stare was bearable.

Lan sat further toward the bow than Moiraine—his color-shifting cloak was still in the saddlebags at his feet—outwardly absorbed in examining his sword blade, but making little effort to hide his amusement. Sometimes his lips appeared to quirk very close to a smile. Perrin was not certain; at times he thought it was only a shadow. Shadows could make a hammer seem to smile. Each woman obviously thought she was the object of that amusement, but the Warder did not appear to mind the tight-lipped frowns he received from both of them.

A few days earlier Perrin had heard Moiraine ask Lan, in a voice like ice, whether he saw something to laugh at. “I would never laugh at you, Moiraine Sedai,” he had replied calmly, “but if you truly intend to send me to Myrelle, I must become used to smiling. I hear that Myrelle tells her Warders jokes. Gaidin must smile at their bond holder’s quips; you have often given me quips to laugh at, have you not? Perhaps you would rather I stay with you after all.” She had given him a look that would have nailed any other man to the mast, but the Warder never blinked. Lan made cold steel seem like tin.

The crew had taken to padding about their work in utter silence when Moiraine and Zarine were on deck together. Captain Adarra held his head tilted, and looked as if he were listening for something he did not want to hear. He passed his orders in whispers, instead of the shouts he had used at first. Everyone knew Moiraine was Aes Sedai, now, and everyone knew she was displeased. Perrin had let himself get into one shouting match with Zarine, and he was not sure which of them had said the words “Aes Sedai,” but the whole crew knew. *Bloody woman!* He was uncertain whether he meant Moiraine or Zarine. *If she is the falcon, what is the hawk supposed to be? Am I going to be stuck with* two *women like her? Light! No! She is not a falcon, and that is an end to it!* The only good thing he could find in all this was that with an angry Aes Sedai to worry about, none of the crew looked twice at his eyes.

Loial was nowhere in sight, at the moment. The Ogier stayed in his stifling cabin whenever Moiraine and Zarine were topside together—working on his notes, he said. He only came on deck at night, to smoke his pipe. Perrin did not see how he could take the heat; even Moiraine and Zarine were better than being belowdecks.

He sighed and kept his eyes on Illian. The city the ship was approaching was large—as big as Cairhien or Caemlyn, the only two great cities he had ever seen—and it reared out of a huge marsh that stretched for miles like a plain of waving grass. Illian had no walls at all, but it seemed to be all towers and palaces. The buildings were all pale stone, except for some that appeared covered with white plaster, but the stone was white and gray and reddish and even faint shades of green. Rooftops of tile sparkled under the sun with a hundred different hues. The long docks held many ships, most dwarfing the *Snow Goose*, and bustled with the loading and unloading of cargo. There were shipyards at the far end of the city, where great ships stood in every stage from skeletons of thick wooden ribs to nearly ready to slide into the harbor.

Perhaps Illian was large enough to keep wolves at bay. They surely would not hunt in those marshes. The *Snow Goose* had outrun the wolves that had followed him from the mountains. He reached out for them gingerly, now, and felt—nothing. A curiously empty feeling, given that it was what he wanted. His dreams had been his own—for the most part—since that first night. Moiraine had asked about them in a cold voice, and he had told the truth. Twice he had found himself in that odd sort of wolf dream, and both times Hopper had appeared, chasing him away, telling him he was too young yet, too new. What Moiraine made of that, he had no idea; she told him nothing, except to say he had best be wary.

“That’s as well by me,” he growled. He was almost becoming used to Hopper being dead but not dead, in the wolf dreams, at least. Behind him, he heard Captain Adarra scuff his boots on the deck and mutter something, startled that anyone would speak aloud.

Lines were hurled ashore from the ship. While they were still being made fast to stone posts along the docks, the slightly built captain leaped into motion, whispering fiercely to his crew. He had booms rigged to lift the horses onto the wharf almost as quickly as the gangplank was laid in place. Lan’s black war horse kicked and nearly broke the boom hoisting him. Loial’s huge, hairy-fetlocked mount needed two.

“An honor,” Adarra whispered to Moiraine with a bow as she stepped onto the wide plank leading to the dock. “An honor to have served you, Aes Sedai.” She strode ashore without looking at him, her face hidden in her deep hood.

Loial did not appear until everyone else was on the dock, and the horses, too. The Ogier came thumping up the gangplank trying to don his long coat while carrying his big saddlebags and striped blanketroll, and his cloak over one arm. "I did not know we had arrived," he rumbled breathlessly. "I was rereading my. . . ." He trailed off with a glance at Moiraine. She appeared to be absorbed in watching Lan saddle Aldieb, but the Ogier's ears flickered like a nervous cat's.

His notes, Perrin thought. *One of these days I have to see what he is saying about all this.* Something tickled the back of his neck, and he jumped a foot before he realized he was smelling a clean, herbal scent through the spices and tar and stinks of the docks.

Zarine wiggled her fingers, smiling at them. "If I can do that with just a brush of my fingers, farmboy, I wonder how high you would jump if I—?"

He was growing a little tired of considering looks from those dark, tilted eyes. *She may be pretty, but she looks at me the way I'd look at a tool I'd never seen before, trying to puzzle out how it was made, and what it is supposed to be used for.*

"Zarine." Moiraine's voice was cool but unruffled.

"I am called Faile," Zarine said firmly, and for a moment, with her bold nose, she did look like a falcon.

"Zarine," Moiraine said firmly, "it is time for our ways to part. You will find better Hunting elsewhere, and safer."

"I think not," Zarine said just as firmly. "A Hunter must follow the trail she sees, and no Hunter would ignore the trail you four leave. And I am Faile." She spoiled it a bit by swallowing, but she did not blink as she met Moiraine's eyes.

"Are you certain?" Moiraine said softly. "Are you sure you will not change your mind . . . Falcon?"

"I will not. There is nothing you or your stone-faced Warder can do to stop me." Zarine hesitated, then added slowly, as if she had decided to be entirely truthful, "At least, there is nothing that you will do that can stop me. I know a little of Aes Sedai; I know, for all the stories, that there are things you will not do. And I do not believe stone-face would do what he must to make me give over."

"Are you sure enough of that to risk it?" Lan spoke quietly, and his face did not change, but Zarine swallowed again.

“There is no need to threaten her, Lan,” Perrin said. He was surprised to realize he was glaring at the Warder.

Moiraine’s glance silenced him and the Warder both. “You believe you know what an Aes Sedai will not do, do you?” she said more softly than before. Her smile was not pleasant. “If you wish to go with us, this is what you must do.” Lan’s eyelids flickered in surprise; the two women stared at each other like falcon and mouse, but Zarine was not the falcon, now. “You will swear by your Hunter’s oath to do as I say, to heed me, and not to leave us. Once you know more than you should of what we do, I will not allow you to fall into the wrong hands. Know that for truth, girl. You will swear to act as one of us, and do nothing that will endanger our purpose. You will ask no questions of where we go or why: you will be satisfied with what I choose to tell you. All of this you will swear, or you will remain here in Illian. And you will not leave this marsh until I return to release you, if it takes the rest of your life. That *I* swear.”

Zarine turned her head uneasily, watching Moiraine out of one eye. “I may accompany you if I swear?” The Aes Sedai nodded. “I will be one of you, the same as Loial or stone-face. But I can ask no questions. Are they allowed to ask questions?” Moiraine’s face lost a little of its patience. Zarine stood up straighter and held her head high. “Very well, then. I swear, by the oath I took as a Hunter. If I break one, I will have broken both. I swear it!”

“Done,” Moiraine said, touching the younger woman’s forehead; Zarine shivered. “Since you brought her to us, Perrin, she is your responsibility.”

“Mine!” he yelped.

“I am no one’s responsibility but my own!” Zarine nearly shouted.

The Aes Sedai went serenely on as if they had never opened their mouths. “It seems you have found Min’s falcon, *ta’veren*. I have tried to discourage her, but it appears she will perch on your shoulder whatever I do. The Pattern weaves a future for you, it seems. Yet remember this. If I must, I will snip your thread from the Pattern. And if the girl endangers what must be, you will share her fate.”

“I did not ask for her to come along!” Perrin protested. Moiraine calmly mounted Aldieb, adjusting her cloak over the white mare’s saddle. “I did not ask for her!” Loial shrugged at him and silently mouthed something. No doubt a saying about the dangers of angering Aes Sedai.

“You are *ta’veren*?” Zarine said disbelievingly. Her gaze ran over his sturdy country clothes and settled on his yellow eyes. “Well, perhaps. Whatever you are, she threatens you as easily as she does me. Who is Min? What does she mean, I will perch on your shoulder?” Her face tightened. “If you try making me your responsibility, I will carve your ears. Do you hear me?”

Grimacing, he slipped his unstrung bow under the saddle girths along Stepper’s flank, and climbed into the saddle. Restive after days on the ship, the dun lived up to his name until Perrin calmed him with a firm hand on the reins and pats to his neck.

“None of that deserves an answer,” he growled. *Min bloody told her! Burn you, Min! Burn you, too, Moiraine! And Zarine!* He could never remember Rand or Mat being bullied by women on every side. Or himself, before leaving Emond’s Field. Nynaeve had been the only one. And Mistress Luhhan, of course; she ran him and Master Luhhan both, everywhere but in the smithy. And Egwene had had a way about her, though mostly with Rand. Mistress al’Vere, Egwene’s mother, always had a smile, but things seemed to end up being done as she wanted, too. And the Women’s Circle had looked over everybody’s shoulder.

Grumbling to himself, he reached down and took Zarine by an arm; she gave a squawk and nearly dropped her bundle as he hoisted her up behind his saddle. Those divided skirts of hers made it easy for her to straddle Stepper. “Moiraine will have to buy you a horse,” he muttered. “You cannot walk the whole way.”

“You are strong, blacksmith,” Zarine said, rubbing her arm, “but I am not a piece of iron.” She shifted around, stuffing her bundle and her cloak between them. “I can buy my own horse, if I need one. The whole way where?”

Lan was already riding off the dock into the city, with Moiraine and Loial behind him. The Ogier looked back at Perrin.

“No questions, remember? And my name is Perrin, Zarine. Not ‘big man,’ or ‘blacksmith,’ or anything else. Perrin. Perrin Aybara.”

“And mine is Faile, shaggy-hair.”

With something close to a snarl, he booted Stepper after the others. Zarine had to throw her arms around his waist to keep from being tossed over the dun’s crupper. He thought she was laughing.

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CHAPTER 42

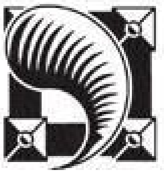

Easing the Badger

The hubbub of the city quickly submerged Zarine’s laughter—if that was what it was—beneath all the clamor that Perrin remembered from Caemlyn and Cairhien. The sounds were different here, slower, and pitched differently, but they were the same, too. Boots and wheels and hooves on rough, uneven paving stones, cart and wagon axles squealing, music and song and laughter drifting from inns and taverns. Voices. A hum of voices like putting his head into a giant beehive. A great city, living.

From down a side street he heard the clang of hammer on anvil, and shifted his shoulders unconsciously. He missed the hammer and tongs in his hands, the white-hot metal giving off sparks as his blows shaped it. The smithy sounds faded behind, buried under the rumble of carts and wagons, and the babble of shopkeepers and people in the streets. Under all the smells of people and horses, cooking and baking, and a hundred scents he had found peculiar to cities lay the smell of marsh and salt water.

He was surprised the first time they came to a bridge inside the city—a low arch of stone over a waterway no more than thirty paces across—but by the third such bridge, he realized that Illian was crisscrossed by as many canals as streets, with men poling laden barges as often as plying whips to move heavy wagons. Sedan chairs wove through the crowds in the streets, and occasionally the lacquered coach of some wealthy merchant or a noble, with crest or House sign painted large on the doors. Many of the men wore peculiar beards that left their upper lip bare, while the women seemed to favor hats with wide brims and attached scarves that they wound around their necks.

Once they crossed a great square, many hides in extent, surrounded by huge columns of white marble at least fifteen spans tall and two spans thick, supporting nothing but a wreath of carved olive branches at the top of each. A huge, white palace stood at either end of the square, each all columned walks and airy balconies, slender towers and purple roofs. Each reflected the other exactly, at first glance, but then Perrin realized that one was just a fraction smaller in each dimension, its towers perhaps less than a pace shorter.

“The King’s Palace,” Zarine said against his back, “and the Great Hall of the Council. It is said the first King of Illian said the Council of Nine could have any palace they wished, just as long as they did not try to build one larger than his. So the Council copied the King’s palace exactly, but two feet smaller in every measurement. That has been the way of Illian ever since. The King and the Council of Nine duel with each other, and the Assemblage struggles with both, and so while they carry on their battles, the people live much as they wish, with none to look over their shoulders too much. It is not a bad way to live, if you must be tied to one city. You would also like to know, I think, blacksmith, that this is the Square of Tammaz, where I took the Hunter’s Oath. I think I will end up teaching you so much, no one will notice the hay in your hair.”

Perrin held his tongue with an effort, resolving not to stare so openly again.

No one seemed to take Loial as anything much out of the ordinary. A few people looked at him twice, and some small children scampered along in their wake for a time, but it appeared that Ogier were not unknown in Illian. None of the folk seemed to notice the heat or the damp, either.

For once, Loial did not appear pleased with the people’s acceptance. His long eyebrows drooped down on his cheeks, and his ears had wilted, though Perrin was not sure that was not just the air. His own shirt clung to him with a mixture of sweat and the damp air.

“Are you afraid you’ll find other Ogier here, Loial?” he asked. He felt Zarine stir against his back and cursed his tongue. He meant to let the woman know even less than Moiraine apparently meant to tell her. That way, perhaps, she would grow bored enough to leave. *If Moiraine will let her go, now. Burn me, I don’t want any bloody falcon perched on my shoulder, even if she is pretty.*

Loial nodded. “Our stonemasons sometimes come here.” He spoke in a whisper not only for an Ogier, but for anyone. Even Perrin could barely hear. “From Stedding Shangtai, I mean. It was masons from our *stedding* who built part of Illian—the Palace of the Assemblage, the Great Hall of the Council, some of the others—and they always send to us when repairs need to be done. Perrin, if there are Ogier here, they will make me go back to the *stedding*. I should have thought of it before now. This place makes me uneasy, Perrin." His ears shifted nervously.

Perrin moved Stepper closer and reached up to pat Loial's shoulder. It was a long reach, above his head. Conscious of Zarine at his back, he chose his words carefully. "Loial, I do not believe Moiraine would let them take you. You have been with us a long time, and she seems to want you with us. She will not let them take you, Loial." *Why not?* he wondered suddenly. *She keeps me because she thinks I may be important to Rand, and maybe because she doesn't want me telling what I know to anyone. Maybe that's why she wants him to stay.*

"Of course, she would not," Loial said in a slightly stronger voice, and his ears perked up. "I am very useful, after all. She may need to travel the Ways again, and she could not without me." Zarine shifted against Perrin's back, and he shook his head, trying to catch Loial's eye. But Loial was not looking. He seemed to have just heard what he had said, and the tufts on his ears had fallen a little. "I do hope it's not that, Perrin." The Ogier looked at the city around them, and his ears went all the way back down. "I do not like this place, Perrin."

Moiraine rode closer to Lan and spoke softly, but Perrin managed to catch her words. "Something is wrong in this city." The Warder nodded.

Perrin felt an itch between his shoulders. The Aes Sedai had sounded grim. *First Loial, and now her. What don't I see?* The sun shone down on the sparkling roof tiles, made reflections from pale stone walls. Those buildings looked as if they might be cool, inside. The buildings were clean and bright, and so were the people. The people.

At first he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Men and women moving about their business, purposeful, but slower than he was used to further north. He thought it might be the heat, and the bright sun. Then he spotted a baker's lad trotting down the street with a big tray of fresh loaves balanced on his head; the young fellow wore a grimace on his face that was nearly a snarl. A woman in front of a weaver's shop looked as if she might bite the man holding up the bright-colored bolts for her inspection. A juggler on a corner ground his teeth and stared at the folk who tossed coins into the cap lying in front of him as if he hated them. Not everyone looked so, but it seemed to him that at least one face in five wore anger and hatred. And he did not think they were even aware of it.

“What is the matter?” Zarine asked. “You are tensing. It is like holding on to a rock.”

“Something is wrong,” he told her. “I do not know what, but something is wrong.” Loial nodded sadly, and murmured about how they would make him go back.

The buildings around them began to change as they rode, crossing more bridges as they crossed Illian to its other side. The pale stone was as often undressed as polished, now. The towers and palaces vanished, to be replaced by inns and warehouses. Many of the men in the streets, and some of the women, had an oddly rolling gait; they all had the bare feet he associated with sailors. The smells of pitch and hemp were strong in the air, and the scent of wood, both freshly cut and cured, with sour mud overlying both. The canals’ odors changed, too, making his nose wrinkle. *Chamber pots,* he thought. *Chamber pots and old privies.* It made him feel queasy.

“The Bridge of Flowers,” Lan announced as they crossed yet another low bridge. He inhaled deeply. “And now we are in the Perfumed Quarter. The Illianers are a poetic people.”

Zarine stifled a laugh against Perrin’s back.

As if he were suddenly impatient with the slow pace of Illian, the Warder led them quickly through the streets to an inn, two stories of rough, green-veined stone topped with pale green tiles. Evening was coming on, the light growing softer as the sun settled. It gave a little relief from the heat, but not much. Boys seated on mounting blocks in front of the inn hopped up to take their horses. One black-haired lad about ten asked Loial if he were an Ogier, and when Loial said he was, the boy said, “I did think you did be,” with a self-satisfied nod. He led Loial’s big horse away, tossing the copper Loial had given him into the air and catching it.

Perrin frowned up at the inn sign for a moment before following the others in. A white-striped badger danced on its hind legs with a man carrying what seemed to be a silver shovel. Easing the Badger, it read. *It must be some story I never heard.*

The common room had sawdust on the floor, and tabac smoke filled the air. It also smelled of wine, and fish cooking in the kitchen, and a heavy, flowered perfume. The exposed beams of the high ceiling were rough-hewn and age-dark. This early in the evening, no more than a quarter of the stools and benches were filled, by men in workmen’s plain coats and vests, some with the bare feet of sailors. All of them sat clustered as close as they could manage around one table where a pretty, dark-eyed girl, the wearer of the perfume, sang to the strumming of a twelve-string bittern and danced on the tabletop with swirls of her skirt. Her loose, white blouse had an extremely low neck. Perrin recognized the tune—“The Dancing Lass”—but the words the girl sang were different from what he knew.

> *“A Lugard girl, she came to town, to see what she could see.*
> *With a wink of her eye, and a smile on her lip,*
> *she snagged a boy or three, or three.*
> *With an ankle slim, and skin so pale,*
> *she caught the owner of a ship, a ship.*
> *With a soft little sigh, and a gay little laugh,*
> *she made her way so free. So free.”*

She launched into another verse, and when Perrin realized what she was singing, his face grew hot. He had thought nothing could shock him after seeing Tinker girls dance, but that had only hinted at things. This girl was singing them right out.

Zarine was nodding in time to the music and grinning. Her grin widened when she looked at him. “Why, farmboy, I do not think I ever knew a man your age who could still blush.”

He glared at her and barely stopped himself from saying something he knew would be stupid. *This bloody woman has me jumping before I can think. Light, I’ll wager she thinks I never even kissed a girl!* He tried not to listen to any more of what the girl was singing. If he could not get the red out of his face, Zarine was sure to make more of it.

A flash of startlement had passed across the face of the proprietress when they entered. A large, round woman with her hair in a thick roll at the back of her neck and a smell of strong soap about her, she suppressed her surprise quickly, though, and hurried to Moiraine.

“Mistress Mari,” she said, “I did never think to see you here today.” She hesitated, eyeing Perrin and Zarine, glanced once at Loial, but not in the searching way she looked at them. Her eyes actually brightened at the sight of the Ogier, but her real attention was all on “Mistress Mari.” She lowered her voice, “Have my pigeons no arrived safely?” Lan, she seemed to accept as a part of Moiraine.

“I am sure they have, Nieda,” Moiraine said. “I have been away, but I am sure Adine has noted down everything you reported.” She eyed the girl singing on the table with no outward disapproval, nor any other expression. “The Badger was considerably quieter when last I was here.”

“Aye, Mistress Mari, it did be that. But the louts have no gotten over the winter yet, it does seem. I have no had a fight in the Badger in ten years, till the tail of this winter gone.” She nodded toward the one man not sitting near the singer, a fellow even bigger than Perrin, standing against the wall with his thick arms folded, tapping his foot to the music. “Even Bili did have a hard time keeping them down, so I did hire the girl to take their minds from anger. From some place in Altara, she does come.” She tilted her head, listening for a moment. “A fair voice, but I did sing it better—aye, and dance better, too—when I did be her age.”

Perrin gaped at the thought of this huge woman capering on a table, singing that song—a bit of it came through; “I’ll wear no shift at all. At all”—until Zarine fisted him hard in the short ribs. He grunted.

Nieda looked his way. “I’ll mix you some honey and sulphur, lad, for that throat. You’ll no want to take a chill before the weather warms, no with a pretty girl like that one on your arm.”

Moiraine gave him a look that said he was interfering with her. “Strange that you should suffer fights,” she said. “I well remember how your nephew stops such. Has something occurred to make people more irritable?”

Nieda mused for a moment. “Perhaps. It do be hard to say. The young lordlings do always come down to the docks for the wenching and carousing they can no get away with where the air does smell fresher. Perhaps they do come more often, now, since the hard of the winter. Perhaps. And others do snap at each other more, too. It did be a hard winter. That does make men angrier, and women as well. All that rain, and cold. Why, I did wake two mornings to find ice in my washbasin. No so hard as the last winter, of course, but that did be a winter for a thousand years. Almost enough to make me believe those travelers’ tales of frozen water falling from the sky.” She giggled to show how little she believed that. It was an odd sound from such a large woman.

Perrin shook his head. *She doesn’t believe in snow?* But if she thought this weather was cool, he could believe it of her.

Moiraine bent her head in thought, her hood shadowing her face.

The girl on the table was beginning a new verse, and Perrin found himself listening in spite of himself. He had never heard of any woman doing anything remotely like what the girl was singing about, but it did sound interesting. He noticed Zarine watching him listen, and tried to pretend he had not been.

“What has occurred out of the ordinary in Illian of late?” Moiraine said finally.

“I do suppose you could call Lord Brend’s ascension to the Council of Nine unusual,” Nieda said. “Fortune prick me, I can no remember ever hearing his name before the winter, but he did come to the city—from somewhere near the Murandian border, it be rumored—and did be raised inside a week. It do be said he be a good man, and strongest of the Nine—they all do follow his lead, it be said, though he be newest and unknown—but sometimes I do have strange dreams of him.”

Moiraine had opened her mouth—to tell Nieda she had meant in the last few nights, Perrin was sure—but she hesitated, and instead said, “What sort of strange dreams, Nieda?”

“Oh, foolishness, Mistress Mari. Just foolishness. You do truly wish to hear it? Dreams of Lord Brend in strange places, and walking bridges hanging in air. All fogged, these dreams do be, but near every night they do come. Did you ever hear of such? Foolishness, Fortune prick me! Yet, it do be odd. Bili does say he does dream the same dreams. I do think he does hear my dreams and copy them. Bili do be none too bright, sometimes, I do think.”

“You may do him an injustice,” Moiraine breathed.

Perrin stared at her dark hood. She had sounded shaken, even more shaken than when she thought a new false Dragon had risen in Ghealdan. He could not smell fear, but. . . . Moiraine was frightened. It was a far more terrifying thought than Moiraine angry. He could imagine her angry; he could not begin to conceive of her afraid.

“How I do maunder on,” Nieda said, patting the rolled hair at the back of her neck. “As if my foolish dreams do be important.” She giggled again. A quick giggle; this was not as foolish as believing in snow. “You do sound tired, Mistress Mari. I will show you to your rooms. And then a good meal of fresh-caught red-stripe.”

Red-stripe? A fish, he thought it must be; he could smell fish cooking.

“Rooms,” Moiraine said. “Yes. We will take rooms. The meal can wait. Ships. Nieda, what ships sail for Tear? Early on the morrow. I have that which I must do tonight.” Lan glanced at her, frowning.

"For Tear, Mistress Mari?" Nieda laughed. "Why, none for Tear. The Nine did forbid any ship to sail for Tear a month gone now, nor any from Tear to call here, though I do think the Sea Folk pay it no mind. But there do be no Sea Folk ship in the harbor. It do be odd, that. The order of the Nine, I do mean, and the King silent on it, when he does always raise his voice if they but take a step without his lead. Or perhaps it be no that, exactly. All talk do be of war with Tear, but the boatmen and wagoneers who do carry supplies to the army do say the soldiers do all look north, to Murandy."

"The paths of the Shadow are tangled," Moiraine said in a tight voice. "We will do what we must. The rooms, Nieda. And then we will eat that meal."

Perrin's room was more comfortable than he expected, given the look of the rest of the Badger. The bed was wide, the mattress soft. The door was made of tilted slats, and when he opened the windows, a breeze crossed the room carrying the smells of the harbor. And something of the canals, too, but at least it was cooling. He hung his cloak on a peg along with his quiver and axe, and propped his bow in the corner. Everything else he left in the saddlebags and blanketroll. The night might not be restful.

If Moiraine had sounded afraid before, it had been nothing to when she said that something must be done tonight. For an instant then, fear scent had steamed from her as from a woman announcing that she was going to stick her hand in a hornets' nest and crush them with her bare fingers. *What in the Light is she up to? If Moiraine is frightened, I should be terrified.*

He was not, he realized. Not terrified, or even frightened. He felt . . . excited. Ready for something to happen, almost eager. Determined. He recognized the feelings. They were what wolves felt just before they fought. *Burn me, I'd rather be afraid!*

He was first back down to the common except for Loial. Nieda had arranged a large table for them, with ladder-back chairs instead of benches. She had even found a chair big enough for Loial. The girl across the room was singing a song about a rich merchant who, having just lost his team of horses in an improbable way, had for some reason decided to pull his carriage himself. The men listening around her roared with laughter. The windows showed darkness coming on more quickly than he had expected; the air smelled as if it might be making up to rain.

“This inn has an Ogier room,” Loial said as Perrin sat down. “Apparently, every inn in Illian has one, in hopes of gaining Ogier custom when the stonemasons come. Nieda claims it is lucky, having an Ogier under the roof. I cannot think they get many. The masons always stay together when they go Outside to work. Humans are so hasty, and the Elders are always afraid tempers will flare and someone will put a long handle on his axe.” He eyed the men around the singer as if he suspected them of it. His ears were drooping again.

The rich merchant was in the process of losing his carriage, to more laughter. “Did you find out whether any Ogier from Stedding Shangtai are in Illian?”

“There were, but Nieda said they left during the winter. She said they had not finished their work. I do not understand it. The masons would not have left work undone unless they were not paid, and Nieda said it was not that. One morning, they were just gone, though someone saw them walking down the Maredo Causeway in the night. Perrin, I do not like this city. I do not know why, but it makes me . . . uneasy.”

“Ogier,” Moiraine said, “are sensitive to some things.” She still had her face hidden, but Nieda had apparently sent someone to buy her a light cloak of dark blue linen. The fear smell was gone from her, but her voice sounded under tight control. Lan held her chair for her; his eyes looked worried.

Zarine was the last down, running her fingers through just-washed hair. The herbal scent was stronger around her than before. She stared at the platter Nieda placed on the table and muttered under her breath. “I hate fish.”

The stout woman had brought all the food on a small cart with shelves; it was dusty in places, as if it had been hastily brought out from the storeroom in Moiraine’s honor. The dishes were Sea Folk porcelain, too, if chipped.

“Eat,” Moiraine said, looking straight at Zarine. “Remember that any meal can be your last. You chose to travel with us, so tonight you will eat fish. Tomorrow, you may die.”

Perrin did not recognize the nearly round white fish with red stripes, but they smelled good. He lifted two onto his plate with the serving fork, and grinned at Zarine around a mouthful. They tasted good, too, lightly spiced. *Eat your nasty fish, falcon,* he thought. He also thought that Zarine looked as if she might bite him.

"Do you wish me to stop the girl singing, Mistress Mari?" Nieda asked. She was setting bowls of peas and some sort of stiff yellow mush on the table. "So you can eat in quiet?"

Staring at her plate, Moiraine did not seem to hear.

Lan listened a moment—the merchant had already lost, in succession, his carriage, his cloak, his boots, his gold, and the rest of his clothes, and was now reduced to wrestling a pig for its dinner—and shook his head. "She will not bother us." He looked close to smiling for a moment, before he glanced at Moiraine. Then the worry returned to his eyes.

"What is wrong?" Zarine said. She was ignoring the fish. "I know something is. I have not see that much expression on you, stone-face, since I met you."

"No questions!" Moiraine said sharply. "You will know what I tell you and no more!"

"What *will* you tell me?" Zarine demanded.

The Aes Sedai smiled. "Eat your fish."

The meal went on in near silence after that, except for the songs drifting across the room. There was one about a rich man whose wife and daughters made a fool of him time and again without ever deflating his self-importance, another that concerned a young woman who decided to take a walk without any clothes, and one that told of a blacksmith who managed to shoe himself instead of the horse. Zarine nearly choked laughing at that one, forgot herself enough to take a bite of fish, and suddenly grimaced as if she had put mud in her mouth.

I won't laugh at her, Perrin told himself. *However foolish she looks, I'll show her what manners are.* "They taste good, don't they," he said. Zarine gave him a bitter look, and Moiraine a frown for interrupting her thoughts, and that was all the talk there was.

Nieda was clearing away the dishes and setting an array of cheeses on the table when a stink of something vile lifted the hackles on the back of Perrin's neck. It was a smell of something that should not be, and he had smelled it twice before. He peered about the common room uneasily.

The girl still sang to the knot of listeners, some men were strolling across the floor from the door, and Bili still leaned on the wall tapping his foot to the sounds of the bittern. Nieda patted her rolled hair, gave the room a quick glance, and turned to push the cart away.

He looked at his companions. Loial, unsurprisingly, had pulled a book from his coat pocket and seemed to have forgotten where he was. Zarine, absently rolling a piece of white cheese into a ball, was eyeing first Perrin, then Moiraine, then him again, while trying to pretend she was not. It was Lan and Moiraine he was really interested in, though. They could sense a Myrddraal, or a Trolloc, or any Shadowspawn, before it came closer than a few hundred paces, but the Aes Sedai was staring distantly at the table in front of her, and the Warder was cutting a chunk of yellow cheese and watching her. Yet the smell of wrongness was there, as at Jarra and the edge of Remen, and this time it was not going away. It seemed to be coming from something within the common room.

He studied the room again. Bili against the wall, some men crossing the floor, the girl singing on the table, all the laughing men sitting around her. *Men crossing the floor?* He frowned at them. Six men with ordinary faces, walking toward where he was sitting. Very ordinary faces. He was just starting to reinspect the men listening to the girl when suddenly it came to him that the stink of wrongness was rolling from the six. Abruptly they had daggers in their hands, as if they had realized he had seen them.

“They have knives!” he roared, and threw the cheese platter at them.

The common erupted into confusion, men shouting, the singer screaming, Nieda shouting for Bili, everything happening at once. Lan leaped to his feet, and a ball of fire darted from Moiraine’s hand, and Loial snatched up his chair like a club, and Zarine danced to one side, cursing. She had a knife in her hand, too, but Perrin was too busy to notice much of what anyone else did. Those men seemed to be looking straight at him, and his axe was hanging from a peg up in his room.

Seizing a chair, he ripped off a thick chair leg that ran up to make one side of the ladder-back, hurled the rest of the chair at the men, and set about him with his long bludgeon. They were trying to reach him with their naked steel, as if Lan and the others were only obstacles in their way. It was a tight tangle where all he could manage was to knock blades away from him, and his wilder swings threatened Lan and Loial and Zarine as much as any of his six attackers. From the corner of his eye he saw Moiraine standing to one side, frustration on her face; they were all so mixed together that she could do nothing without endangering friend as well as foe. None of the knife wielders as much as glanced at her; she was not between them and Perrin.

Panting, he managed to crack one of the ordinary-looking men across the head so hard that he heard bone splinter, and abruptly realized they were all down. It all seemed to him to have gone on for a quarter of a hour or more, but he saw that Bili was just halting, his large hands working as he stared at the six men sprawled dead on the floor. Bili had not even had time to reach the fight before it was done.

Lan wore a face even grimmer than usual; he began searching the bodies, thoroughly, but with a quickness that spoke of distaste. Loial still had his chair raised to swing; he gave a start and set it down with an embarrassed grin. Moiraine was staring at Perrin, and so was Zarine as she retrieved her knife from the chest of one of the dead men. That stench of wrongness was gone, as if it had died with them.

“Gray Men,” the Aes Sedai said softly, “and after you.”

“Gray Men?” Nieda laughed, both loud and nervously. “Why, Mistress Mari, next you’ll say you do believe in boggles and bugbears and Fetches, and Old Grim riding with the black dogs in the Wild Hunt.” Some of the men who had been listening to the songs laughed, too, though they looked as uneasily at Moiraine as at the dead men. The singer stared at Moiraine, as well, her eyes wide. Perrin remembered that one ball of fire, before everything grew too jumbled. One of the Gray Men had a somewhat charred look about him, and gave off a sickly sweet burned smell.

Moiraine turned from Perrin to the stout woman. “A man may walk in the Shadow,” the Aes Sedai said calmly, “without being Shadowspawn.”

“Oh, aye, Darkfriends.” Nieda put her hands on generous hips and frowned at the corpses. Lan had finished his searching; he glanced at Moiraine and shook his head as if he had not really expected to find anything. “More likely thieves, though I did never hear of thieves bold enough to come right into an inn. I did never have even one killing in the Badger before. Bili! Clear these out, into a canal, and put down fresh sawdust. The back way, mind. I do no want the Watch putting their long noses into the Badger.” Bili nodded as if eager to be useful after failing to take a hand earlier. He grabbed a dead man by the belt in either hand and carried them back toward the kitchen.

“Aes Sedai?” the dark-eyed singer said. “I did not mean to offend with my common songs.” She was covering the exposed part of her bosom, which was most of it, with her hands. “I can sing others, if you would so like.”

“Sing whatever you wish, girl,” Moiraine told her. “The White Tower is not so isolated from the world as you seem to think, and I have heard rougher songs than you would sing.” Even so, she did not look pleased that the common now knew she was Aes Sedai. She glanced at Lan, gathered the linen cloak around her, and started for the door.

The Warder moved quickly to intercept her, and they spoke quietly in front of the door, but Perrin could hear as well as if they whispered right next to him.

“Do you mean to go without me?” Lan said. “I pledged to keep you whole, Moiraine, when I took your bond.”

“You have always known there were some dangers you are not equipped to handle, my Gaidin. I must go alone.”

“Moiraine—”

She cut him off. “Heed me, Lan. Should I fail, you will know it, and you will be compelled to return to the White Tower. I would not change that even if I had time. I do not mean you to die in a vain attempt to avenge me. Take Perrin with you. It seems the Shadow has made his importance in the Pattern known to me, if not clear. I was a fool. Rand is so strongly *ta’veren* that I ignored what it must mean that he had two others close by him. With Perrin and Mat, the Amyrlin may still be able to affect the course of events. With Rand loose, she will have to. Tell her what has happened, my Gaidin.”

“You speak as if you are already dead,” Lan said roughly.

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and the Shadow darkens the world. Heed me, Lan, and obey, as you swore to.” With that, she was gone.

* * *

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CHAPTER 43

Shadowbrothers

The dark-eyed girl climbed back on her table and started singing again, in an unsteady voice. The tune was one Perrin knew as “Mistress Aynora’s Rooster,” and though the words were different once more, to his disappointment—and embarrassment that he was disappointed—it actually was about a rooster. Mistress Luhhan herself would not have disapproved. *Light, I’m getting as bad as Mat.*

None of the listeners complained; some of the men did look a bit disgruntled, but they seemed to be as anxious about what Moiraine might approve as the singer was. No one wished to offend an Aes Sedai, even with her gone. Bili came back and hoisted two more Gray Men; a few of the men listening to the song glanced at the corpses and shook their heads. One of them spat on the sawdust.

Lan came to stand in front of Perrin. “How did you know them, blacksmith?” he asked quietly. “Their taint of evil is not strong enough for Moiraine or me to sense. Gray Men have walked past a hundred guards without being noticed, and Warders among them.”

Very conscious of Zarine’s eyes on him, Perrin tried to make his voice even softer than Lan’s. “I . . . I smelled them. I’ve smelled them before, at Jarra and at Remen, but it always vanished. They were gone before we got there, both times.” He was not sure whether Zarine had overheard or not; she was leaning forward trying to listen, and trying to appear not to at the same time.

“Following Rand, then. Following you, now, blacksmith.” The Warder gave no visible sign of surprise. He raised his voice to a more normal level. “I am going to look around outside, blacksmith. Your eyes might see something I miss.” Perrin nodded; it was a measure of the Warder’s worry that he asked for help. “Ogier, your folk see better than most, too.”

“Oh, ah,” Loial said. “Well, I suppose I could take a look, too.” His big, round eyes rolled sideways toward the two Gray Men still on the floor.

“I would not think any more of them were out there. Would you?”

“What are we looking for, stone-face?” Zarine said.

Lan eyed her a moment, then shook his head as if he had decided not to say something. “Whatever we find, girl. I will know it when I see it.”

Perrin thought about going upstairs for his axe, but the Warder made for the door, and he was not wearing his sword. *He hardly needs it,* Perrin thought grumpily. *He is almost as dangerous without it as with*. He held on to the chair leg as he followed. It was a relief to see that Zarine still had her knife in her hand.

Thick black clouds were roiling overhead. The street was as dark as late twilight, and empty of people who had apparently not waited to be caught in the rain. One fellow was running across a bridge down the street; he was the only person Perrin saw in any direction. The wind was picking up, blowing a rag along the uneven paving stones; another, caught under the edge of one of the mounting blocks, flapped with a small snapping sound. Thunder grumbled and rolled.

Perrin wrinkled his nose. There was a smell of fireworks on that wind. *No, not fireworks, exactly*. It was a burned sulphur sort of smell. Almost.

Zarine tapped the chair leg in his hands with her knife blade. “You really are strong, big man. You tore that chair apart as if it were made of twigs.”

Perrin grunted. He realized he was standing straighter, and deliberately made himself slouch. *Fool girl!* Zarine laughed softly, and suddenly he did not know whether to straighten or stay as he was. *Fool!* This time he meant it for himself. *You’re supposed to be looking. For what?* He did not see anything but the street, did not smell anything but the almost burned sulphur scent. And Zarine, of course.

Loial appeared to be wondering what it was he was looking for, too. He scratched a tufted ear, peered one way down the street, then the other, then scratched the other ear. Then he stared up at the roof of the inn.

Lan appeared from the alleyway beside the inn and moved out into the street, eyes studying the darker shadows along the buildings.

“Maybe he missed seeing something,” Perrin muttered, though he found it hard to believe, and turned toward the alley. *I am supposed to be looking, so I’ll look. Maybe he did miss something.*

Lan had stopped a little way down the street, staring at the paving stones in front of his feet. The Warder started back toward the inn, walking quickly, but peering at the street ahead of him as if following something. Whatever it was led straight to one of the mounting blocks, almost beside the inn door. He stopped there, staring at the top of the gray stone block.

Perrin decided to abandon going down the alley—it stank as much as the canals in this part of Illian, for one thing—and walked over to Lan, instead. He saw what the Warder was staring at right away. Pressed into the top of the stone mounting block were two prints, as if a huge hound had rested its forepaws there. The smell that was almost burned sulphur was strongest here. *Dogs don't make footprints in stone. Light, they don't!* He could make out the trail Lan had followed, too. The hound had trotted up the street as far as the mounting block, then turned and gone back the way it had come. Leaving tracks in the stone as if they had been a plowed field. *They just don't!*

"Darkhound," Lan said, and Zarine gasped. Loial moaned softly. For an Ogier. "A Darkhound leaves no mark on dirt, blacksmith, not even on mud, but stone is another matter. There hasn't been a Darkhound seen south of the Mountains of Dhoom since the Trolloc Wars. This one was hunting for something, I'd say. And now that it has found it, it has gone to tell its master."

Me? Perrin thought. *Gray Men and Darkhounds hunting me? This is crazy!*

"Are you telling me Nieda was right?" Zarine demanded in a shaky voice. "Old Grim is really riding with the Wild Hunt? Light! I always thought it was just a story."

"Don't be a complete fool, girl," Lan said harshly. "If the Dark One were free, we'd all be worse than dead by now." He peered off down the street, the way the tracks went. "But Darkhounds are real enough. Almost as dangerous as Myrddraal, and harder to kill."

"Now you bring Fetches into it," Zarine muttered. "Gray Men. Fetches. Darkhounds. You had better lead me to the Horn of Valere, farmboy. What other surprises do you have waiting for me?"

"No questions," Lan told her. "You still know little enough that Moiraine will release you from your oath, if you swear not to follow. I'll take that oath myself, and you can go now. You would be wise to give it."

"You will not frighten me away, stone-face," Zarine said. "I do not frighten easily." But she sounded frightened. And smelled it, too.

“I have a question,” Perrin said, “and I want an answer. You didn’t sense this Darkhound, Lan, and neither did Moiraine. Why not?”

The Warder was silent for a time. “The answer to that, blacksmith,” he said grimly at last, “may be more than you or I, either one, want to know. I hope the answer does not kill us all. You three get what sleep you can. I doubt we will stay the night in Illian, and I fear we have hard riding ahead.”

“What are you going to do?” Perrin asked.

“I am going after Moiraine. To tell her about the Darkhound. She can’t be angry with me for following for that, not when she would not know it was there until it took her throat.”

The first big drops of rain splatted on the paving stones as they went back inside. Bili had removed the last of the dead Gray Men and was sweeping up the sawdust where they had bled. The dark-eyed girl was singing a sad song about a boy leaving his love. Mistress Luhhan would have enjoyed it greatly.

Lan ran ahead of them, across the common room and up the stairs, and by the time Perrin reached the second floor, the Warder was already starting back down, buckling his sword belt on, color-shifting cloak hanging over his arm as if he hardly cared who saw it.

“If he is wearing that in a city. . . .” Loial’s shaggy hair almost brushed the ceiling as he shook his head. “I do not know if I can sleep, but I will try. Dreams will be more pleasant than staying awake.”

Not always, Loial, Perrin thought as the Ogier went on down the hall.

Zarine seemed to want to stay with him, but he told her to go to sleep and firmly shut the slatted door in her face. He stared at his own bed reluctantly as he stripped down to his underbreeches.

“I have to find out,” he sighed, and crawled onto the bed. Rain drummed down outside, and thunder boomed. The breeze across his bed carried some of the rain’s coolness, but he did not think he would need any of the blankets at the foot of the mattress. His last thought before sleep claimed him was that he had forgotten to light a candle again, though the room was dark. *Careless. Mustn’t be careless. Carelessness ruins the work.*

Dreams tumbled through his head. Darkhounds chasing him; he never saw them, but he could hear their howling. Fades, and Gray Men. A tall, slender man flashed into them again and again, in richly embroidered coat and boots with gold fringe; most of the time he held what seemed to be a sword, shining like the sun, and laughed triumphantly. Sometimes the man sat on a throne, and kings and queens groveled before him. These felt strange, as if they were not really his dreams at all.

Then the dreams changed, and he knew he was in the wolf dream he sought. This time he had hoped for it.

He stood atop a high, flat-topped stone spire, the wind ruffling his hair, bringing a thousand dry scents and a faint hint of water hidden in the far distance. For an instant he thought he had the form of a wolf, and fumbled at his own body to make sure what he saw was really him. He wore his own coat and breeches and boots; he held his bow, and his quiver hung at his side. The axe was not there.

“Hopper! Hopper, where are you?” The wolf did not come.

Rugged mountains surrounded him, and other tall spires separated by arid flats and jumbled ridges, and sometimes a large plateau rising with sheer sides. Things grew, but nothing lush. Tough, short grass. Bushes wiry and covered with thorn, and other things that even seemed to have thorns on their fat leaves. Scattered, stunted trees, twisted by the wind. Yet wolves could find hunting even in this land.

As he peered at this rough land, a circle of darkness suddenly blanked out a part of the mountains; he could not have said whether the darkness was right in front of his face or halfway to the mountains, but he seemed to be seeing through it, and beyond. Mat, rattling a dice cup. His opponent stared at Mat with eyes of fire. Mat did not seem to see the man, but Perrin knew him.

“Mat!” he shouted. “It’s Ba’alzamon! Light, Mat, you’re dicing with Ba’alzamon!”

Mat made his toss, and as the dice spun, the vision faded, and the dark place was dry mountains again.

“Hopper!” Perrin turned slowly, looking in every direction. He even looked up in the sky—*He can fly, now*—where clouds promised a rain the ground far below the spire top would drink up as soon as it fell. “Hopper!”

A darkness formed among the clouds, a hole into somewhere else. Egwene and Nynaeve and Elayne stood looking at a huge metal cage, with a raised door held on a heavy spring. They stepped in and reached up together to loose the catch. The barred door snapped down behind them. A woman with her hair all in braids laughed at them, and another woman all in white laughed at her. The hole in the sky closed, and there were only clouds.

"Hopper, where are you?" he called. "I need you! Hopper!"

And the grizzled wolf was there, alighting on the spire top as if he had leaped from somewhere higher.

Dangerous. You have been warned, Young Bull. Too young. Too new yet.

"I need to know, Hopper. You said there were things I must see. I need to see more, know more." He hesitated, thinking of Mat, of Egwene and Nynaeve and Elayne. "The strange things I see here. Are they real?" Hopper's sending seemed slow, as if it were so simple the wolf could not understand the need to explain it, or how to. Finally, though, something came.

What is real is not real. What is not real is real. Flesh is a dream, and dreams have flesh.

"That doesn't tell me anything, Hopper. I do not understand." The wolf looked at him, as if he had said he did not understand that water was wet. "You said I had to see something, and you showed me Ba'alzamon, and Lanfear."

Heartfang. Moonhunter.

"Why did you show me, Hopper? Why did I have to see them?"

The Last Hunt comes. Sadness filled the sending, and a sense of inevitability. *What will be must be.*

"I do not understand! The Last Hunt? What Last Hunt? Hopper, Gray Men came to kill me tonight."

The Notdead hunt you?

"Yes! Gray Men! After me! And a Darkhound was right outside the inn! I want to know why they're after me."

Shadowbrothers! Hopper crouched, looking to either side as if he almost expected an attack. *Long since we have seen the Shadowbrothers. You must go, Young Bull. Great danger! Flee the Shadowbrothers!*

"Why are they after me, Hopper? You do know. I know you do!"

Flee, Young Bull. Hopper leaped, forepaws hitting Perrin's chest, knocking him back, over the edge. *Flee the Shadowbrothers.*

The wind rushed in his ears as he fell. Hopper and the edge of the spire top dwindled above him. "Why, Hopper?" he shouted. "I have to know why!"

The Last Hunt comes.

He was going to hit. He knew it. The ground below rushed up at him, and he tensed against the crushing impact that. . . .

He started awake, staring at the candle flickering on the small table beside the bed. Lightning flashes lit the window, and thunder rattled it. “What did he mean, the Last Hunt?” he mumbled. *I did not light any candle.*

“You talk to yourself. And thrash in your sleep.”

He jumped, and cursed himself for not having noticed the herbal scent in the air. Zarine sat on a stool at the edge of the candlelight, elbow on her knee, chin on her fist, watching him.

“You are *ta’veren*,” she said as if ticking off a point. “Stone-face thinks those odd eyes of yours can see things his can’t. Gray Men want to kill you. You travel with an Aes Sedai, a Warder, and an Ogier. You free caged Aiel and kill Whitecloaks. Who are you, farmboy, the Dragon Reborn?” Her voice said that was the most ridiculous thing she could think of, but he still shifted uneasily. “Whoever you are, big man,” she added, “you could do with a little more hair on your chest.”

He twisted around, cursing, and scrabbled one of the blankets over him to his neck. *Light, she keeps making me jump like a frog on a hot rock*. Zarine’s face was at the edge of shadows. He could not see her clearly except when lightning shone through the window, the harsh illumination casting its own shadows across her strong nose and high cheekbones. Suddenly he remembered Min saying he should run from a beautiful woman. Once he had recognized Lanfear in that wolf dream, he had thought Min must mean her—he did not think it was possible for a woman to be any more beautiful than Lanfear—but she was just in a dream. Zarine was sitting there staring at him with those dark, tilted eyes, considering, weighing.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded. “What do you want? Who are you?”

She threw back her head and laughed. “I am Faile, farmboy, a Hunter of the Horn. Who do you think I am, the woman of your dreams? Why did you jump that way? You would think I had goosed you.”

Before he could find words, the door crashed back against the wall, and Moiraine stood in the doorway, her face as pale and grim as death.

“Your wolf dreams tell as truly as a Dreamer’s, Perrin. The Forsaken *are* loose, and one of them rules in Illian.”

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CHAPTER 44

Hunted

Perrin climbed off the bed and started dressing, not caring whether Zarine was watching or not. He knew what he intended to do, but he asked Moiraine anyway. “Do we leave?”

“Unless you want to make closer acquaintance with Sammael,” she said dryly. Thunder crashed overhead as if to punctuate her sentence, and lightning flashed. The Aes Sedai barely glanced at Zarine.

Stuffing his shirttail into his breeches, he suddenly wished he had his coat and cloak on. Naming which one of the Forsaken it was made the room seem cold. *Ba’alzamon isn’t bad enough; we have to have the Forsaken loose, too. Light, does it even matter if we find Rand, now? Is it too late?* But he kept dressing, stamping his feet into his boots. It was that or give up, and Two Rivers folk were not known for giving up.

“Sammael?” Zarine said faintly. “One of the Forsaken rules . . . ? Light!”

“Do you still wish to follow?” Moiraine said softly. “I would not make you stay here, not now, but I will give you one last chance to swear to go another way than I.”

Zarine hesitated, and Perrin paused with his coat half on. Surely no one would choose to go with people who had incurred the wrath of one of the Forsaken. Not now that she knew something of what they faced. *Not unless she has a very good reason*. For that matter, anyone who heard one of the Forsaken was loose should already be running for a Sea Folk ship and asking passage to the other side of the Aiel Waste, not sitting there thinking.

“No,” Zarine said finally, and he began to relax. “No, I will not swear to go another way. Whether you lead me to the Horn of Valere or not, not even whoever does find the Horn will have a story such as this. I think this story will be told for the ages, Aes Sedai, and I will be part of it.”

“No!” Perrin snapped. “That is not good enough. What do you want?”

“I have no time for this bickering,” Moiraine broke in. “Any moment *Lord Brend* may learn that one of his Darkhounds is dead. You can be sure he will know that means a Warder, and he will come looking for the Gaidin’s Aes Sedai. Do you mean to sit here until he discovers where you are? Move, you foolish children! Move!” She vanished down the hall before he could open his mouth.

Zarine did not wait, either, running from the room without her candle. Perrin hastily gathered his things and dashed for the back stairs still buckling his axe belt around his waist. He caught up to Loial going down, the Ogier trying to stuff a wood-bound book into his saddlebags and put on his cloak at the same time. Perrin gave him a hand with the cloak while they both ran down the stairs, and Zarine caught the pair of them before they could dash out into the pouring rain.

Perrin hunched his shoulders against the wet and ran for the stable across the storm-darkened yard without waiting to pull up the hood of his cloak. *She has to have a reason. Being in a bloody story isn’t reason enough for any but a madwoman!* The rain soaked his shaggy curls, laying them flat around his head, before he darted through the stable door.

Moiraine was there before them, in an oiled cloak still beaded with rain, and Nieda holding a lantern for Lan to finish saddling the horses. There was an extra, a bay gelding with an even stronger nose than Zarine’s.

“I will send pigeons every day,” the stout woman was saying. “No one will suspect me. Fortune prick me! Even Whitecloaks do speak well of me.”

“Listen to me, woman!” Moiraine snapped. “This is not a Whitecloak or a Darkfriend I speak of. You will flee this city, and make anyone you care for flee with you. For a dozen years you have obeyed me. Obey me now!” Nieda nodded, but reluctantly, and Moiraine growled with exasperation.

“The bay is yours, girl,” Lan said to Zarine. “Get on his back. If you do not know how to ride, you must learn by doing, or take my offer.”

Putting one hand on the high pommel, she vaulted easily into the saddle. “I was on a horse once, stone-face, now that I think of it.” She twisted around to tie her bundle behind her.

“What did you mean, Moiraine?” Perrin demanded as he tossed his saddlebag across Stepper’s back. “You said he would find out where I am. He knows. The Gray Men!” Nieda giggled, and he wondered irritably how much she really knew or believed among the things she said she did not believe in.

“Sammael did not send the Gray Men.” Moiraine mounted Aldieb with a cool, straight-backed precision, almost as if there were no hurry. “The Darkhound was his, however. I believe it followed my trail. He would not have sent both. Someone wants you, but I do not think Sammael even knows you exist. Yet.” Perrin stopped with one foot in the stirrup, staring at her, but she seemed more concerned with patting her mare’s arching neck than with the questions on his face.

“As well I went after you,” Lan said, and the Aes Sedai sniffed loudly.

“I could wish you were a woman, Gaidin. I would send you to the Tower as a novice to learn to obey!” He raised an eyebrow and touched the hilt of his sword, then swung into his saddle, and she sighed. “Perhaps it is as well you are disobedient. Sometimes it is well. Besides, I do not think Sheriam and Siuan Sanche together could teach you obedience.”

“I do not understand,” Perrin said. *I seem to be saying that a great deal, and I’m tired of it. I want some answers I* can *understand.* He pulled himself the rest of the way up so Moiraine would not be looking down at him; she had enough advantage without that. “If he did not send the Gray Men, who did? If a Myrddraal, or another Forsaken. . . .” He stopped to swallow. *ANOTHER Forsaken! Light!* “If somebody else sent them, why did they not tell him? They’re all Darkfriends, aren’t they? And why me, Moiraine? Why me? Rand is the bloody Dragon Reborn!”

He heard the gasps from Zarine and Nieda, and only then realized what he had said. Moiraine’s stare seemed to skin him like the sharpest steel. *Hasty bloody tongue. When did I stop thinking before I speak?* It seemed to him it had happened when he first felt Zarine’s eyes watching him. She was watching him now, with her mouth hanging open.

“You are sealed to us, now,” Moiraine told the bold-faced woman. “There is no turning back for you. Ever.” Zarine looked as if she wanted to say something and was afraid to, but the Aes Sedai had already turned her attention elsewhere. “Nieda, flee Illian tonight. In this hour! And hold your tongue even better than you have held it all these years. There are those who would cut it out for what you could say, before I could even find you.” Her hard tone left doubts as to exactly how she meant that, and Nieda nodded vigorously as if she had heard it both ways.

“As for you, Perrin.” The white mare moved closer, and he leaned back from the Aes Sedai despite all he could do. “There are many threads woven in the Pattern, and some are as black as the Shadow itself. Take care one of them does not strangle you.” Her heels touched Aldieb’s flanks, and the mare darted into the rain, Mandarb following close behind.

Burn you, Moiraine, Perrin thought as he rode after them. *Sometimes I do not know which side you are on*. He glanced at Zarine, riding beside him as if she had been born in a saddle. *And whose side are you on?*

Rain kept people off the streets and canals, so no visible eyes watched them go, but it made the footing uncertain for the horses on the uneven paving stones. By the time they reached the Maredo Causeway, a wide road of packed dirt stretching north through the marsh, the downpour had begun to slacken. Thunder still boomed, but the lightning flashed far behind them, perhaps out to sea.

Perrin felt a bit of luck was coming their way. The rain had stayed long enough to hide their departure, but now it seemed they would have a clear night for riding. He said as much, but Lan shook his head.

“Darkhounds like clear, moonlit nights best, blacksmith, rain the least. A good thunderstorm can keep them away completely.” As if his words had bidden it, the rain faded to a faint drizzle. Perrin heard Loial groan behind him.

Causeway and marsh ended together, some two miles or so from the city, but the road kept on, slowly bearing a little eastward. Cloud-dark evening faded into night, and the misting rain continued. Moiraine and Lan kept a steady, ground-eating pace. The horses’ hooves splashed through puddles on the hard-packed dirt. The moon shone through gaps in the clouds. Low hills began to rise around them, and trees to appear more and more often. Perrin thought there must be forest ahead, but he was not sure how he liked the idea. Woods could hide them from pursuit; woods could let pursuit come close before they saw.

A thin howl rose far behind them. For a moment he thought it was a wolf; he surprised himself by nearly reaching out to the wolf before he could stop. The cry came again, and he knew it was no wolf. Others answered it, all miles behind, eerie wails holding blood and death, cries that spoke of nightmares. To his surprise, Lan and Moiraine slowed, the Aes Sedai studying the hills around them in the night.

“They are a long way,” he said. “They’ll not catch us if we keep on.”

"The Darkhounds?" Zarine muttered. "Those are the Darkhounds? Are you sure it isn't the Wild Hunt, Aes Sedai?"

"But it is," Moiraine replied. "It is."

"You can never outrun the Darkhounds, blacksmith," Lan said, "not on the fastest horse. Always, you must face them and defeat them, or they will pull you down."

"I could have stayed in the *stedding*, you know," Loial said. "My mother would have had me married by now, but it would not have been a bad life. Plenty of books. I did not have to come Outside."

"There," Moiraine said, pointing to a tall, treeless mound well off to their right. There were no trees that Perrin could see for two hundred paces or more around it, either, and they were still sparse beyond that. "We must see them coming to have a chance."

The Darkhounds' dire cries rose again, closer, yet still far.

Lan quickened Mandarb's pace a little, now that Moiraine had chosen their ground. As they climbed, the horses' hooves clattered on rocks half-buried in the dirt and slicked by the drizzle. To Perrin's eyes, most of them had too many squared corners to be natural. At the top, they dismounted around what seemed to be a low, rounded boulder. The moon appeared through a gap in the clouds, and he found himself looking at a weathered stone face two paces long. A woman's face, he thought from the length of the hair. The rain made her seem to be weeping.

Moiraine dismounted and stood looking off in the direction of the howls. She was a shadowed, hooded shape, rain catching moonlight as it rolled down her oiled cloak.

Loial led his horse over to peer at the carving, then bent closer and felt the features. "I think she was an Ogier," he said at last. "But this is not an old *stedding*; I would feel it. We all would. And we would be safe from Shadowspawn."

"What are you two staring at?" Zarine squinted at the rock. "What is it? Her? Who?"

"Many nations have risen and fallen since the Breaking," Moiraine said without turning, "some leaving no more than names on a yellowed page, or lines on a tattered map. Will we leave as much behind?" The blood-drenched howls rose again, still closer. Perrin tried to calculate their pace, and thought Lan had been right; the horses could not have outrun them, after all. They would not have long to wait.

“Ogier,” Lan said, “you and the girl hold the horses.” Zarine protested, but he rode straight over to her. “Your knives will not do much good here, girl.” His sword blade gleamed in the moonlight as he drew it. “Even this is a last resort. It sounds like ten out there, not one. Your work is to keep the horses from running when they smell the Darkhounds. Even Mandarb does not like that smell.”

If the Warder’s sword was no good, then neither was the axe. Perrin felt something near to relief at that, even if they were Shadowspawn; he would not have to use the axe. He drew the length of his unstrung bow from under Stepper’s saddle girths. “Maybe this will do some good.”

“Try if you wish, blacksmith,” Lan said. “They do not die easily. Perhaps you will kill one.”

Perrin drew a fresh bowstring from his pouch, trying to shield it from the soft rain. The beeswax coating was thin, and not much protection against prolonged damp. Setting the bow slantwise between his legs, he bent it easily, fixing the loops of the bowstring into the horn nocks at the ends of the bow. When he straightened, he could see the Darkhounds.

They ran like horses at a gallop, and as he caught sight of them, they gathered speed. They were only ten large shapes running in the night, sweeping through the scattered trees, yet he pulled a broadhead arrow from his quiver, nocked it but did not draw. He had been far from the best bowman in Emond’s Field, but among the younger men, only Rand had been better.

At three hundred paces he would shoot, he decided. *Fool! You’d have a hard time hitting a target standing still at that distance. But if I wait, the way they are moving. . . .* Stepping up beside Moiraine, he raised his bow—*I just have to imagine that moving shadow is a big dog*—drew the goose-feather fletchings to his ear, and loosed. He was sure the shaft merged with the nearest shadow, but the only result was a snarl. *It is not going to work. They’re coming too fast!* He was already drawing another arrow. *Why aren’t you doing something, Moiraine?* He could see their eyes, shining like silver, their teeth gleaming like burnished steel. Black as the night itself and as big as small ponies, they sped toward him, silent now, seeking the kill. The wind carried a stink near to burned sulphur; the horses whickered fearfully, even Lan’s warhorse. *Burn you, Aes Sedai, do something!* He loosed again; the frontmost Darkhound faltered and came on. *They can die!* He shot once more, and the lead Darkhound tumbled, staggered to its feet, then fell, yet even as it did he knew a moment of despair. One down, and the other nine had covered two thirds of the distance already; they seemed to be running even faster, like shadows flowing across the ground. *One more arrow. Time for one more, maybe, and then it's the axe. Burn you, Aes Sedai!* He drew again.

"Now," Moiraine said as his arrow left the bow. The air between her hands caught fire and streaked toward the Darkhounds, vanquishing night. The horses squealed and leaped against being held.

Perrin threw an arm across his eyes to shield them from a white-hot glare like burning, heat like a forge cracking open; sudden noon flared in the darkness, and was gone. When he uncovered his eyes, spots flickered across his vision, and the faint, fading image of that line of fire. Where the Darkhounds had been was nothing but night-covered ground and the soft rain; the only shadows that moved were cast by clouds crossing the moon.

I thought she'd throw fire at them, or call lightning, but this. . . . "What was that?" he asked hoarsely.

Moiraine was peering off toward Illian again, as if she could see through all those miles of darkness. "Perhaps he did not see," she said, almost to herself. "It is far, and if he was not watching, perhaps he did not notice."

"Who?" Zarine demanded. "Sammael?" Her voice shook a little. "You said he was in Illian. How could he see anything here? What did you do?"

"Something forbidden," Moiraine said coolly. "Forbidden by vows almost as strong as the Three Oaths." She took Aldieb's reins from the girl, and patted the mare's neck, calming her. "Something not used in nearly two thousand years. Something I might be stilled just for knowing."

"Perhaps . . . ?" Loial's voice was a faint boom. "Perhaps we should be going? There could be more."

"I think not," the Aes Sedai said, mounting. "He would not loose two packs at once, even if he has two; they would turn on each other instead of their prey. And I think we are not his main quarry, or he would have come himself. We were . . . an annoyance, I think"—her tone was calm, but it was clear she did not like being regarded so lightly—"and perhaps a little something extra to slip into his gamebag, if we were not too much trouble. Still, there is small good in remaining any nearer him than we must."

"Rand?" Perrin asked. He could almost feel Zarine leaning forward to listen. "If we are not what he hunts, is it Rand?"

“Perhaps,” Moiraine said. “Or perhaps Mat. Remember that he is *ta’veren* also, and he blew the Horn of Valere.”

Zarine made a strangled sound. “He *blew* it? Someone has *found* it already?”

The Aes Sedai ignored her, leaning out of her saddle to stare closely into Perrin’s eyes, dark gleaming into burnished gold. “Once again events outpace me. I do not like that. And neither should you. If events outrun me, they may well trample you, and the rest of the world with you.”

“We have many leagues to Tear yet,” Lan said. “The Ogier’s suggestion is a good one.” He was already in his saddle.

After a moment Moiraine straightened and touched the mare’s ribs with her heels. She was halfway down the side of the mound before he could get his bow unstrung and take Stepper’s reins from Loial. *Burn you, Moiraine! I’ll find some answers somewhere!*

Leaning back against a fallen log, Mat enjoyed the warmth of the campfire—the rains had drifted south three days earlier, but he still felt damp—yet right at that moment, he was hardly aware of the dancing flames. He peered thoughtfully at the small, wax-covered cylinder in his hand. Thom was engrossed in tuning his harp, muttering to himself of rain and wet, never glancing Mat’s way. Crickets chirped in the dark thicket around them. Caught between villages by sunset, they had chosen this copse away from the road. Two nights they had tried to buy a room for the night; twice a farmer had loosed his dogs on them.

Mat unsheathed his belt knife, and hesitated. *Luck. It only explodes sometimes, she said. Luck.* As carefully as he could, he slit along the length of the tube. It *was* a tube, and of paper, as he had thought—he had found bits of paper on the ground after fireworks were set off, back home—layers of paper, but all that filled the inside was something that looked like dirt, or maybe tiny gray-black pebbles and dust. He stirred them on his palm with one finger. *How in the Light could pebbles explode?*

“The Light burn me!” Thom roared. He thrust his harp into its case as if to protect it from what was in Mat’s hand. “Are you trying to kill us, boy? Haven’t you ever heard those things explode ten times as hard for air as for fire? Fireworks are the next thing to Aes Sedai work, boy.”

“Maybe,” Mat said, “but Aludra did not look like any Aes Sedai to me. I used to think that about Master al’Vere’s clock—that it had to be Aes

Sedai work—but once I got the back of the cabinet open, I saw it was full of little pieces of metal.” He shifted uncomfortably at the memory. Mistress al’Vere had been the first to reach him that time, with the Wisdom and his father and the Mayor all right behind her, and none believing he just meant to look. *I could have put them all back together*. “I think Perrin could make one, if he saw those little wheels and springs and I don’t know what all.”

“You would be surprised, boy,” Thom said dryly. “Even a bad clockmaker is a fairly rich man, and they earn it. But a clock does not explode in your face!”

“Neither did this. Well, it is useless, now.” He tossed the handful of paper and little pebbles into the fire to a screech from Thom; the pebbles sparked and made tiny flashes, and there was a smell of acrid smoke.

“You *are* trying to kill us.” Thom’s voice was unsteady, and it rose in intensity and pitch as he spoke. “If I decide I want to die, I will go to the Royal Palace when we reach Caemlyn, and I’ll pinch Morgase!” His long mustaches flailed. “Do not do that again!”

“It did not explode,” Mat said, frowning at the fire. He fished into the oiled-cloth roll on the other side of the log and pulled out a firework of the next larger size. “I wonder why there was no bang.”

“I do not care why there was no bang! Do not do it again!”

Mat glanced at him and laughed. “Stop shaking, Thom. There’s no need to be afraid. I know what is inside them, now. At least, I know what it looks like, but. . . . Don’t say it. I will not be cutting any more open, Thom. It is more fun to set them off, anyway.”

“I am not afraid, you mud-footed swineherd,” Thom said with elaborate dignity. “I am shaking with rage because I’m traveling with a goat-brained lout who might kill the pair of us because he cannot think past his own—”

“Ho, the fire!”

Mat exchanged glances with Thom as horses’ hooves approached. It was late for anyone honest to be traveling. But the Queen’s Guards kept the roads safe this close to Caemlyn, and the four who rode into the firelight certainly did not look like robbers. One was a woman. The men all wore long cloaks and seemed to be her retainers, while she was pretty and blue-eyed, in gold necklace and a gray silk dress and a velvet cloak with a wide hood. The men dismounted. One held her reins and another her stirrup, and she smiled at Mat, doffing her gloves as she came near the fire.

“I fear we are caught out late, young master,” she said, “and I would trouble you for directions to an inn, if you know one.”

He grinned and started to rise. He had made it as far as a crouch when he heard one of the men mutter something, and another produced a crossbow from under his cloak, already drawn, with a clip holding the bolt.

“Kill him, fool!” the woman shouted, and Mat tossed the firework into the flames and threw himself toward his quarterstaff. There was a loud bang and a flash of light—“Aes Sedai!” a man cried. “Fireworks, fool!” the woman shouted—and he rolled to his feet with the staff in his hand to see the crossbow bolt sticking out of the fallen log almost where he had been sitting, and the crossbowman falling with the hilt of one of Thom’s knives adorning his chest.

It was all he had time to see, for the other two men darted past the fire at him, drawing swords. One of them suddenly stumbled to his knees, dropping his sword to claw at the knife in his back as he fell facedown. The last man did not see his companion fall; he obviously expected to be one of a pair, dividing their opponent’s attention, as he thrust his blade at Mat’s middle. Feeling almost contemptuous, Mat cracked the fellow’s wrist with one end of his staff, sending the sword flying, and cracked his forehead with the other. The man’s eyes rolled up in his head as he collapsed.

From the corner of his eye, Mat saw the woman walking toward him, and he stuck a finger at her like a knife. “Fine clothes you wear for a thief, woman! You sit down till I decide what to do with you, or I’ll—”

She looked as surprised as Mat at the knife that suddenly bloomed in her throat, a red flower of spreading blood. He took a half step as if to catch her as she fell, knowing it was no good. Her long cloak settled over her, covering everything but her face, and the hilt of Thom’s knife.

“Burn you,” Mat muttered. “Burn you, Thom Merrilin! A woman! Light, we could have tied her up, given her to the Queen’s Guards tomorrow in Caemlyn. Light, I might even have let her go. She’d rob nobody without these three, and the only one that lives will be days before he can see straight and months before he can hold a sword. Burn you, Thom, there was no need to kill her!”

The gleeman limped to where the woman lay, and kicked back her cloak. The dagger had half fallen from her hand, its blade as wide as Mat’s thumb and two hands long. “Would you rather I had waited till she nested that in your ribs, boy?" He retrieved his own knife, wiping the blade on her cloak.

Mat realized he was humming "She Wore a Mask That Hid Her Face," and stopped it. He bent down and hid hers with the hood of her cloak. "Best we move on," he said quietly. "I do not want to have to explain this if a patrol of the Guards happens by."

"With her in those clothes?" Thom said. "I should say not! They must have robbed a merchant's wife, or some noblewoman's carriage." His voice became gentler. "If we're going, boy, you had best see to saddling your horse."

Mat gave a start and pulled his eyes from the dead woman. "Yes, I had better, hadn't I?" He did not look at her again.

He had no such compunction about the men. As far as he was concerned, a man who decided to rob and kill deserved what he got when he lost the game. He did not dwell on them, but neither did he jerk his eyes away if they fell on one of the robbers. It was after he had saddled his gelding and tied his things on behind, while he was kicking dirt onto the fire, that he found himself looking at the man who had shot the crossbow. There was something familiar about those features, about the way the smothering fire made shadows across them. *Luck,* he told himself. *Always the luck.*

"The crossbowman was a good swimmer, Thom," he said as he climbed into the saddle.

"What foolery are you talking, now?" The gleeman was on his horse, too, and far more concerned with how his instrument cases rode behind his saddle than he was with the dead. "How could you know whether he could even swim at all?"

"He made it ashore from a small boat in the middle of the Erinin in the middle of the night. I guess that used up all his luck." He checked the lashings on the roll of fireworks again. *If that fool thought one of these was Aes Sedai, I wonder what he'd have thought if they* all *went off.*

"Are you sure, boy? The chances of it being the same man. . . . Why, even you wouldn't lay a wager against those odds."

"I am sure, Thom." *Elayne, I will wring your neck when I put my hands on you. And Egwene's and Nynaeve's, too.* "And I am sure I intend to have this bloody letter out of my hands an hour after we reach Caemlyn."

“I tell you, there is nothing in that letter, boy. I played *Daes Dae’mar* when I was younger than you, and I can recognize a code or a cipher even when I don’t know what it says.”

“Well, I never played your Great Game, Thom, your bloody Game of Houses, but I know when someone is chasing me, and they’d not be chasing this hard or this far for the gold in my pockets, not for less than a chest full of gold. It has to be the letter.” *Burn me, pretty girls always get me in trouble*. “Do you feel like sleeping tonight, after this?”

“With the sleep of an innocent babe, boy. But if you want to ride, I’ll ride.”

The face of a pretty woman floated into Mat’s head, with a dagger in her throat. *You had no luck, pretty woman.* “Then let’s ride!” he said savagely.

* * *

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CHAPTER 45

Caemlyn

Mat had vague memories of Caemlyn, but when they approached it in the early hours after sunrise, it seemed as if he had never been there before. They had not been alone on the road since first light, and other riders surrounded them now, and trains of merchants' wagons and folk afoot, all streaming toward the great city.

Built on rising hills, it was surely as large as Tar Valon, and outside the huge walls—a fifty-foot height of pale, grayish stone streaked with white and silver sparkling in the sun, spaced with tall, round towers with the Lion Banner of Andor waving atop them, white on red—outside those walls, it seemed as if another great city had been placed, wrapping around the walled city, all red brick and gray stone and white plastered walls, inns pushed in on houses of three and four stories so fine they must belong to wealthy merchants, shops with goods displayed on tables under awnings crowding against wide, windowless warehouses. Open markets under red and purple roof tiles lined the road on both sides, men and women already crying their wares, bargaining at the top of their voices, while penned calves and sheep and goats and pigs, caged geese and chickens and ducks, added to the din. He seemed to remember thinking Caemlyn was too noisy when he was here before; now it sounded like a heartbeat, pumping wealth.

The road led to arched gates twenty feet high, standing open under the watchful eye of red-coated Queen's Guards in their shining breastplates—they eyed Thom and him no more than anyone else, not even the quarterstaff slanted across his saddle in front of him; all they cared was that people keep moving, it seemed—and then they were within. Slender towers here rose even taller than those along the walls, and gleaming domes shone white and gold above streets teeming with people. Just inside the gates the road split into two parallel streets, separated by a wide strip of grass and trees. The hills of the city rose like steps toward a peak, which was surrounded by another wall, shining as white as Tar Valon's, with still more domes and towers within. That was the Inner City, Mat recalled, and atop those highest hills stood the Royal Palace.

"No point waiting," he told Thom. "I'll take the letter straight on." He looked at the sedan chairs and carriages making their way through the crowds, the shops with all their goods displayed. "A man could earn some gold in this city, Thom, once he found a game of dice, or cards." He was not quite so lucky at cards as at dice, but few except nobles and the wealthy played those games anyway. *Now that's who I should find a game with.*

Thom yawned at him and hitched at his gleeman's cloak as if it were a blanket. "We have ridden all night, boy. Let's at least find something to eat, first. The Queen's Blessing has good meals." He yawned again. "And good beds."

"I remember that," Mat said slowly. He did, in a way. The innkeeper was a fat man with graying hair, Master Gill. Moiraine had caught up to Rand and him there, when he had thought they were finally free of her. *She's off playing her game with Rand, now. Nothing to do with me. Not anymore*. "I will meet you there, Thom. I said I'd have this letter out of my hands an hour after I arrived, and I mean to. You go on."

Thom nodded and turned his horse aside, calling over his shoulder through a yawn. "Do not become lost, boy. It's a big city, Caemlyn."

And a rich one. Mat heeled his mount on up the crowded street. *Lost! I can find my bloody way*. The sickness appeared to have erased parts of his memory. He could look at an inn, its upper floors sticking out over the ground floor all the way around and its sign creaking in the breeze, and remember seeing it before, yet not recall another thing he could see from that spot. A hundred paces of street might abruptly spark in his memory, while the parts before and after remained as mysterious as dice still in the cup.

Even with the holes in his memory he was sure he had never been to the Inner City or the Royal Palace—*I couldn't forget that!*—yet he did not need to remember the way. The streets of the New City—he remembered that name suddenly; it was the part of Caemlyn less than two thousand years old—ran every which way, but the main boulevards all led to the Inner City. The Guards at the gates made no effort to stop anyone.

Within those white walls were buildings that could almost have fit in Tar Valon. The curving streets topped hills to reveal thin towers, their tiled walls sparkling with a hundred colors in the sunlight, or to look down on parks laid out in patterns made to be viewed from above, or to show sweeping vistas across the entire city to the rolling plains and forests beyond. It did not really matter which streets he took here. They all spiraled in on what he sought, the Royal Palace of Andor.

In no time, he found himself crossing the huge oval plaza before the Palace, riding toward its tall, gilded gates. The pure white Palace of Andor would certainly not have been out of place among Tar Valon's wonders, with its slender towers and golden domes shining in the sun, its high balconies and intricate stonework. The gold leaf on one of those domes could have kept him in luxury for a year.

There were fewer people in the plaza than elsewhere, as if it were reserved for great occasions. A dozen of the Guards stood before the closed gates, bows slanted, all at exactly the same angle, across their gleaming breastplates, faces hidden by the steel bars of their burnished helmets' face-guards. A heavyset officer, with his red cloak thrown back to reveal a knot of gold braid on his shoulder, was walking up and down the line, eyeing each man as if he thought he might find rust or dust.

Mat drew rein and put on a smile. "Good morning to you, Captain."

The officer turned, staring at him through the bars of his face-guard with deep, beady eyes, like a pudgy rat in a cage. The man was older than he had expected—surely old enough to have more than one knot of rank—and fat rather than stocky. "What do you want, farmer?" he demanded roughly.

Mat drew a breath. *Make it good. Impress this fool so he doesn't keep me waiting all day. I don't want to have to flash the Amyrlin's paper around to keep from kicking my heels*. "I come from Tar Valon, from the White Tower, bearing a letter from—"

"*You* come from Tar Valon, farmer?" The fat officer's stomach shook as he laughed, but then his laughter cut off as if severed with a knife, and he glared. "We want no letters from Tar Valon, rogue, *if* you have such a thing! Our good Queen—may the Light illumine her!—will take no word from the White Tower until the Daughter-Heir is returned to her. I never heard of any messenger from the Tower wearing a countryman's coat and breeches. It is plain to me you are up to some trick, perhaps thinking you'll find a few coins if you come claiming to carry letters, but you will be lucky if you don't end in a prison cell! If you do come from Tar Valon, go back and tell the Tower to return the Daughter-Heir before we come and take her! If you're a trickster after silver, get out of my sight before I have you beaten within an inch of your life! Either way, you half-wit looby, be gone!"

Mat had been trying to edge a word in from the beginning of the man's speech. He said quickly, "The letter is from her, man. It is from—"

"Did I not tell you to be gone, ruffian?" the fat man bellowed. His face was growing nearly as red as his coat. "Take yourself out of my sight, you gutter scum! If you are not gone by the time I count ten, I will arrest you for littering the plaza with your presence! One! Two!"

"Can you count so high, you fat fool?" Mat snapped. "I tell you, Elayne sent—"

"Guards!" The officer's face was purple now. "Seize this man for a Darkfriend!"

Mat hesitated a moment, sure no one could take such a charge seriously, but the red-coated Guards dashed toward him, all dozen men in breastplates and helmets, and he wheeled his horse and galloped ahead of them, followed by the fat man's shouts. The gelding was no racer, but it outdistanced men afoot easily enough. People dodged out of his way along the curving streets, shaking fists after him and shouting as many curses as the officer had.

Fool, he thought, meaning the fat officer, then added another for himself. *All I had to do was say her bloody name in the beginning. "Elayne, the Daughter-Heir of Andor, sends this letter to her mother, Queen Morgase." Light, who could have thought they'd think that way about Tar Valon*. From what he remembered of his last visit, Aes Sedai and the White Tower had been close behind Queen Morgase in the Guards' affections. *Burn her, Elayne could have told me*. Reluctantly, he added, *I could have asked questions, too.*

Before he reached the arched gates that let out into the New City, he slowed to a walk. He did not think the Guards from the Palace could still be chasing him, and there was no point in attracting the eyes of those at the gate by galloping through, but they looked at him no more now than when he had first entered.

As he rode under the broad arch, he smiled and almost turned back. He had suddenly remembered something, and had an idea that appealed to him a good deal more than walking through the Palace gates. Even if that fat officer had not been watching the gates, he thought he would like it better.

He became lost twice while searching for The Queen's Blessing, but at last he found the sign with a man kneeling before a woman with red-gold hair and a crown of golden roses, her hand on his head. It was a broad stone building of three stories, with tall windows even up under the red roof tiles. He rode around back to the stableyard, where a horse-faced fellow, in a leather vest that could hardly be any tougher than his skin, took his horse's reins. He thought he remembered the fellow. *Yes. Ramey.*

"It has been a long time, Ramey." Mat tossed him a silver mark. "You remember me, don't you?"

"Can't say as I . . ." Ramey began, then caught the shine of silver where he had expected copper; he coughed, and his short nod turned into something that combined a knuckled forehead with a jerky bow. "Why, of course I do, young master. Forgive me. Slipped my mind. Mind no good for people. Good for horses. I know horses, I do. A fine animal, young master. I'll take good care of him, you can be sure." He delivered it all quickly, with no room for Mat to say a word, then hurried the gelding into the stable before he might have to come up with Mat's name.

With a sour grimace, Mat put the fat roll of fireworks under his arm and shouldered the rest of his belongings. *Fellow couldn't tell me from Hawkwing's toenails*. A bulky, muscular man was sitting on an upturned barrel beside the door to the kitchen, gently scratching the ear of a black-and-white cat crouched on his knee. The man studied Mat with heavy-lidded eyes, especially the quarterstaff across his shoulder, but he never stopped his scratching. Mat thought he remembered him, but he could not bring up a name. He said nothing as he went through the door, and neither did the man. *No reason they should remember me. Probably have bloody Aes Sedai coming for people every day.*

In the kitchen, two undercooks and three scullions were darting between stoves and roasting spits under the direction of a round woman with her hair in a bun and a long wooden spoon that she used to point out what she wanted done. Mat was sure he remembered the round woman. *Coline, and what a name for a woman that wide, but everybody called her Cook.*

"Well, Cook," he announced, "I am back, and not a year since I left."

She peered at him a moment, then nodded. "I remember you." He began to grin. "You were with that young prince, weren't you?" she went on. "The one who looked so like Tigraine, the Light illumine her memory.

You're his serving man, aren't you? Is he coming back, then, the young prince?"

"No," he said curtly. *A prince! Light!* "I do not think he will be anytime soon, and I don't think you would like it if he did." She protested, saying what a fine, handsome young man the prince was—*Burn me, is there a woman anywhere who doesn't moon over Rand and make calf-eyes if you mention his bloody name? She'd bloody scream if she knew what he is doing now*—but he refused to let her get it out. "Is Master Gill about? And Thom Merrilin?"

"In the library," she said with a tight sniff. "You tell Basel Gill when you see him that I said those drains need cleaning. Today, mind." She caught sight of something one of the undercooks was doing to a beef roast and waddled over to her. "Not so much, child. You will make the meat too sweet if you put so much arrath on it." She seemed to have forgotten Mat already.

He shook his head as he went in search of this library he could not remember. He could not remember that Coline was married to Master Gill, either, but if he had ever heard a goodwife send instructions to her husband, that had been it. A pretty serving girl with big eyes giggled and directed him down a hall beside the common room.

When he stepped into the library, he stopped and stared. There had to be more than three hundred books on the shelves built on the walls, and more lying on the tables; he had never seen so many books in one place in his life. He noticed a leather-bound copy of *The Travels of Jain Farstrider* on a table near the door. He had always meant to read that—Rand and Perrin had always been telling him things out of it—but he never did seem to get around to reading the books he meant to read.

Pink-faced Basel Gill and Thom Merrilin were seated at one of the tables, facing each other across a stones board, pipes in their teeth trailing thin blue streamers of tabac smoke. A calico cat sat on the table beside a wooden dice cup, her tail curled over her feet, watching them play. The gleeman's cloak was nowhere in sight, so Mat supposed he had already gotten a room.

"You're done sooner than I expected, boy," Thom said around his pipestem. He tugged one long, white mustache as he considered where to place his next stone on the board's cross-hatchings. "Basel, you remember Mat Cauthon."

“I remember,” the fat innkeeper said, peering at the board. “Sickly, the last time you were here, I recall. I hope you are better now, lad.”

“I am better,” Mat said. “Is that all you remember? That I was sick?”

Master Gill winced at Thom’s move and took his pipe out of his mouth. “Considering who you left with, lad, and considering the way things are now, maybe it’s best I remember no more than that.”

“Aes Sedai not in such good odor now, are they?” Mat set his things in one big armchair, the quarterstaff propped against the back, and himself in another with one leg swinging over the arm. “The Guards at the Palace seemed to think the White Tower had stolen Elayne.” Thom eyed the roll of fireworks uneasily, looked at his smoking pipe, and muttered to himself before going back to his study of the board.

“Hardly that,” Gill said, “but the whole city knows she disappeared from the Tower. Thom says she’s returned, but we’ve heard none of that here. Perhaps Morgase knows, but everyone down to a stableboy is stepping lightly so she doesn’t snap off his head. Lord Gaebril has kept her from actually sending anyone to the headsman, but I’d not say she would not do it. And he has certainly not soothed her temper toward Tar Valon. If anything, I think he has made it worse.”

“Morgase has a new advisor,” Thom said in a dry voice. “Gareth Bryne did not like him, so Bryne has been retired to his estate to watch his sheep grow wool. Basel, are you going to place a stone or not?”

“In a moment, Thom. In a moment. I want to set it right.” Gill clamped his teeth around his pipestem and frowned at the board, puffing up smoke.

“So the Queen has an advisor who doesn’t like Tar Valon,” Mat said. “Well, that explains the way the Guards acted when I said I came from there.”

“If you told them that,” Gill said, “you might be lucky you escaped without any broken bones. If it was any of the new men, at least. Gaebril has replaced half the Guards in Caemlyn with men of his choosing, and that is no mean feat considering how short a time he has been here. Some say Morgase may marry him.” He started to put a stone on the board, then took it back with a shake of his head. “Times change. People change. Too much change for me. I suppose I am growing old.”

“You seem to mean us both to grow old before you place a stone,” Thom muttered. The cat stretched and slinked across the table for him to stroke her back. “Talking all day will not let you find a good move. Why don’t you just admit defeat, Basel?”

“I never admit defeat,” Gill said stoutly. “I’ll beat you yet, Thom.” He set a white stone on the intersection of two lines. “You will see.” Thom snorted.

From what Mat could see of the board, he did not think Gill had much chance. “I will just have to avoid the Guards and put Elayne’s letter right into Morgase’s hands.” *Especially if they’re all like that fat fool. Light, I wonder if he’s told them all I’m a Darkfriend?*

“You did not deliver it?” Thom barked. “I thought you were anxious to be rid of the thing.”

“You have a letter from the Daughter-Heir?” Gill exclaimed. “Thom, why did you not tell me?”

“I am sorry, Basel,” the gleeman muttered. He glared at Mat from under those bushy eyebrows and blew out his mustaches. “The boy thinks someone is out to kill him over it, so I thought I’d let him say what he wanted and no more. Seems he does not care any longer.”

“What kind of letter?” Gill asked. “Is she coming home? And Lord Gawyn? I hope they are. I’ve actually heard talk of war with Tar Valon, as if anyone could be fool enough to go to war with Aes Sedai. If you ask me, it is all one with those mad rumors we’ve heard about Aes Sedai supporting a false Dragon somewhere in the west, and using the Power as a weapon. Not that I can see why that would make anyone want to go to war with them; just the opposite.”

“Are you married to Coline?” Mat asked, and Master Gill gave a start.

“The Light preserve me from that! You would think the inn was hers now. If she was my wife . . . ! What does that have to do with the Daughter-Heir’s letter?”

“Nothing,” Mat said, “but you went on so long, I thought you must have forgotten your own questions.” Gill made a choking sound, and Thom barked a laugh. Mat hurried on before the innkeeper could speak. “The letter is sealed; Elayne did not tell me what it says.” Thom was eyeing him sideways and stroking his mustaches. *Does he think I’ll admit we opened the thing?* “But I don’t think she is coming home. She means to be Aes Sedai, if you ask me.” He told them about his attempt to deliver the letter, smoothing over a few edges they had no need to know about.

"The new men," Gill said. "That officer sounds it, at least. I'll wager on it. No better than brigands, most of them, except the ones with a sly eye. You wait until this afternoon, lad, when the Guards on the gate will have changed. Say the Daughter-Heir's name right out, and just in case the new fellow is one of Gaebril's men, too, duck your head a little. A knuckle to your forehead, and you'll have no trouble."

"Burn me if I will. I pull wool and scratch gravel for nobody. Not to Morgase herself. This time, I'll not go near the Guards at all." *I would just as soon not know what word that fat fellow has spread*. They stared at him as if he were mad.

"How under the Light," Gill said, "do you mean to enter the Royal Palace without passing the Guards?" His eyes widened as if he were remembering something. "Light, you don't mean to. . . . Lad, you'd need the Dark One's own luck to escape with your life!"

"What are you going on about now, Basel? Mat, what fool thing do you intend to try?"

"I am lucky, Master Gill," Mat said. "You just have a good meal waiting when I come back." As he stood, he picked up the dice cup and spun the dice out beside the stones board for luck. The calico cat leaped down, hissing at him with her back arched. The five spotted dice came to rest, each showing a single pip. *The Dark One's Eyes.*

"That's the best toss or the worst," Gill said. "It depends on the game you are playing, doesn't it. Lad, I think you mean to play a dangerous game. Why don't you take that cup out into the common room and lose a few coppers? You look to me like a fellow who might like a little gamble. I will see the letter gets to the Palace safely."

"Coline wants you to clean the drains," Mat told him, and turned to Thom while the innkeeper was still blinking and muttering to himself. "It doesn't seem to make any odds whether I get an arrow in me trying to deliver that letter or a knife in my back waiting. It's six up, and a half dozen down. Just you have that meal waiting, Thom." He tossed a gold mark on the table in front of Gill. "Have my things put in a room, innkeeper. If it takes more coin, you will have it. Be careful of the big roll; it frightens Thom something awful."

As he stalked out, he heard Gill say to Thom, "I always thought that lad was a rascal. How does he come by gold?"

I always win, that’s how, he thought grimly. *I just have to win once more, and I’m done with Elayne, and that’s the last of the White Tower for me. Just once more.*

* * *

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CHAPTER 46

A Message Out of the Shadow

Even as he returned to the Inner City on foot, Mat was far from certain that what he intended would actually work. It would, if what he had been told was true, but it was the truth of that he was not sure of. He avoided the oval plaza in front of the Palace, but wandered around the sides of the huge structure and its grounds, along streets that curved with the contours of the hills. The golden domes of the Palace glittered, mockingly out of reach. He had made his way almost all the way around, nearly back to the plaza, when he saw it. A steep slope thick with low flowers, rising from the street to a white wall of rough stone. Several leafy tree limbs stuck over the top of the wall, and he could see the tops of others beyond, in a garden of the Royal Palace.

A wall made to look like a cliff, he thought, *and a garden on the other side. Maybe Rand was telling the truth.*

A casual look both ways showed him he had the curving street to himself for the moment. He would have to hurry; the curves did not allow him to see very far; someone could come along any moment. He scrambled up the slope on all fours, careless of how his boots ripped holes in the banks of red and white blossoms. The rough stone of the wall gave plenty of fingerholds, and ridges and knobs provided toeholds even for a man in boots.

Careless of them to make it so easy, he thought as he climbed. For a moment the climbing took him back home with Rand and Perrin, to a journey they had made beyond the Sand Hills, into the edge of the Mountains of Mist. When they returned to Emond’s Field, they had all caught the fury from everyone who could lay hands on them—him worst of all; everyone assumed it had been his idea—but for three days they had climbed the cliffs, and slept under the sky, and eaten eggs filched from redcrests’ nests, and plump, gray-winged grouse fetched with an arrow, or a stone from a sling, and rabbits caught with snares, all the while laughing about how they were not afraid of the mountains' bad luck and how they might find a treasure. He had brought home an odd rock from that expedition, with the skull of a good-sized fish somehow pressed into it, and a long, white tail feather dropped by a snow eagle, and a piece of white stone as big as his hand that looked almost as if it had been carved into a man's ear. He thought it looked like an ear, even if Rand and Perrin did not, and Tam al'Thor had said it might be.

His fingers slipped out of a shallow groove, his balance shifted and he lost the toehold under his left foot. With a gasp, he barely caught hold of the top of the wall, and pulled himself up the rest of the way. For a moment he lay there, breathing hard. It would not have been that long a fall, but enough to break his head. *Fool, letting my mind wander like that. Nearly killed myself on those cliffs that way. That was all a long time ago*. His mother had likely thrown all those things out already, anyway. With one last look each way to make sure no one had seen him—the curving length of street below was still empty—he dropped inside the Palace grounds.

It was a large garden, with flagstoned walks through expanses of grass among the trees, and grapevines thick on arbors over the walks. And everywhere, flowers. White blossoms covering the pear trees, and white and pink dotting the apple trees. Roses in every color, and bright golden sunburst, and purple Emond's Glory, and many he could not identify. Some he was not sure could be real. One had odd blossoms in scarlet and gold that looked almost like birds, and another seemed no different from a sunflower except that its yellow flowers were two feet and more across and stood on stalks as tall as an Ogier.

Boots crunched on flagstone, and he crouched low behind a bush against the wall as two guardsmen marched past, their long, white collars hanging over their breastplates. They never glanced his way, and he grinned to himself. *Luck. With just a little luck, they'll never see me till I hand the bloody thing to Morgase.*

He slipped through the garden like a shadow, as if stalking rabbits, freezing by a bush or hard against a tree trunk when he heard boots. Two more pairs of soldiers strode by along the paths, the second close enough for him to have taken two steps and goosed them. As they vanished among the flowers and trees, he plucked a deep red starblaze and stuck the wavy-petaled flower in his hair with a grin. This was as much fun as stealing applecakes at Sunday, and easier. Women always kept a sharp watch on their baking; the fool soldiers never took their eyes off the flagstones.

It was not long before he found himself against the white wall of the Palace itself, and began sliding along it behind a row of flowering white roses on slatted frames, searching for a door. There were plenty of wide, arched windows just over his head, but he thought it might be a bit harder to explain being found climbing in through a window than walking down a hall. Two more soldiers appeared, and he froze; they would pass within three paces of him. He could hear voices from the window over his head, two men, just loud enough for him to make out the words.

"—on their way to Tear, Great Master." The man sounded frightened and obsequious.

"Let them ruin his plans, if they can." This voice was deeper and stronger, a man used to command. "It will serve him right if three untrained girls can foil him. He was always a fool, and he is still a fool. Is there any word of the boy? He is the one who can destroy us all."

"No, Great Master. He has vanished. But, Great Master, one of the girls is Morgase's nit."

Mat half turned, then caught himself. The soldiers were coming closer; they did not appear to have seen his start through the thickly woven rose stems. *Move, you fools! Get by so I can see who this man bloody is!* He had lost some of the conversation.

"—has been far too impatient since regaining his freedom," the deep voice was saying. "He never realized the best plans take time to mature. He wants the world in a day, and *Callandor* besides. The Great Lord take him! He may seize the girl and try to make some use of her. And that might strain my own plans."

"As you say, Great Master. Shall I order her brought out of Tear?"

"No. The fool would take it as a move against him, if he knew. And who can say what he chooses to watch aside from the sword? See that she dies quietly, Comar. Let her death attract no notice at all." His laughter was a rich rumble. "Those ignorant slatterns in their Tower will have a difficult time producing her after this disappearance. This may all be just as well. Let it be done quickly. Quickly, before he has time to take her himself."

The two soldiers were almost abreast of him; Mat tried to will their feet to move faster.

“Great Master,” the other man said uncertainly, “that may be difficult. We know she is on her way to Tear, but the vessel she traveled on was found at Aringill, and all three of them had left it earlier. We do not know whether she has taken another ship, or is riding south. And it may not be easy to find her once she reaches Tear, Great Master. Perhaps if you—”

“Are there none but fools in the world, now?” the deep voice said harshly. “Do you think I could move in Tear without him knowing? I do not mean to fight him, not now, not yet. Bring me the girl’s head, Comar. Bring me all three heads, or you will pray for me to take yours!”

“Yes, Great Master. It shall be as you say. Yes. Yes.”

The soldiers crunched past, never looking to either side. Mat only waited for their backs to pass before leaping up to catch the broad stone windowsill and pull himself high enough to see through the window.

He barely noticed the fringed Tarabon carpet on the floor, worth a fat purse of silver. One of the broad, carved doors was swinging shut. A tall man, with wide shoulders and a deep chest straining the green silk of his silver-embroidered coat, was staring at the door with dark blue eyes. His black beard was close cut, with a streak of white over his chin. All in all, he looked a hard man, and one used to giving orders.

“Yes, Great Master,” he said suddenly, and Mat almost lost his grip on the sill. He had thought this must be the man with the deep voice, but it was the cringing voice he heard. Not cringing now, but still the same. “It shall be as you say, Great Master,” the man said bitterly. “I will cut the three wenches’ heads off myself. As soon as I can find them!” He strode through the door, and Mat let himself back down.

For a moment he crouched there behind the rose frames. Someone in the Palace wanted Elayne dead, and had thrown in Egwene and Nynaeve as afterthoughts. *What under the Light are they doing, going to Tear?* It had to be them.

He pulled the Daughter-Heir’s letter out of the lining of his coat and frowned at it. Maybe, with this in his hand, Morgase would believe him. He could describe one of the men. But the time for skulking was past; the big fellow could be off to Tear before he even found Morgase, and whatever she did then, there was no guarantee it could stop him.

Taking a deep breath, Mat wiggled between two of the rose frames at the cost of only a few pricks and snags from the thorns, and started down the flagstone path after the soldiers. He held Elayne’s letter out in front of him so the golden lily seal was plainly visible, and went over in his mind exactly what he meant to say. When he had been sneaking about, guardsmen kept popping up like mushrooms after rain, but now he walked almost the length of the garden without seeing even one. He passed several doors. It would not be so good to enter the Palace without permission—the Guards might do nasty things first and listen after—but he was beginning to think about going through a door when it opened and a helmetless young officer with one golden knot on his shoulder strode out.

The man's hand immediately went to his sword hilt, and he had a foot of steel bared before Mat could push the letter toward him. "Elayne, the Daughter-Heir, sends this letter to her mother, Queen Morgase, Captain." He held the letter so the lily seal was prominent.

The officer's dark eyes flickered to either side, as if searching for other people, without really ever leaving Mat. "How did you come into this garden?" He did not draw his sword further, but he did not sheath it, either. "Elber is on the main gates. He's a fool, but he would never let anyone wander loose into the Palace."

"A fat man with eyes like a rat?" Mat cursed his tongue, but the officer gave a sharp nod; he almost smiled, too, but it did not seem to lessen his vigilance, or his suspicion. "He grew angry when he learned I had come from Tar Valon, and he wouldn't even give me a chance to show the letter or mention the Daughter-Heir's name. He said he would arrest me if I did not go, so I climbed the wall. I promised I would deliver this to Queen Morgase herself, you see, Captain. I promised it, and I always keep my promises. You see the seal?"

"That bloody garden wall again," the officer muttered. "It should be built three times so high." He eyed Mat. "Guardsman-lieutenant, not captain. I am Guardsman-lieutenant Tallanvor. I recognize the Daughter-Heir's seal." His sword finally slid all the way back into the sheath. He stretched out a hand; not his sword hand. "Give me the letter, and I will take it to the Queen. After I show you out. Some would not be so gentle at finding you walking about loose."

"I promised to put it in her hands myself," Mat said. *Light, I never thought they might not let me give it to her*. "I did promise. To the Daughter-Heir."

Mat hardly realized Tallanvor's hand was moving before the officer's sword was resting against his neck. "I will take you to the Queen, countryman," Tallanvor said softly. "But know that I can take your head before you blink if you so much as think of harming her."

Mat put on his best grin. That slightly curved blade felt sharp on the side of his neck. "I am a loyal Andorman," he said, "and a faithful subject of the Queen, the Light illumine her. Why, if I had been here during the winter, I'd have followed Lord Gaebril for sure."

Tallanvor gave him a tight-mouthed stare, then finally took his sword away. Mat swallowed and stopped himself from touching his throat to see if he had been cut.

"Take the flower out of your hair," Tallanvor said as he sheathed his blade. "Do you think you came here courting?"

Mat snatched the starblaze blossom out of his hair and followed the officer. *Bloody fool, putting a flower in my hair. I have to stop playing the fool, now.*

It was not so much following, really, for Tallanvor kept an eye on him even while he led the way. The result was an odd sort of procession, with the officer to one side of him and ahead, but half turned in case Mat tried anything. For his part, Mat attempted to look as innocent as a babe splashing in his bathwater.

The colorful tapestries on the walls had earned their weavers silver, and so had the rugs on the white tile floors, even here in the halls. Gold and silver stood everywhere, plates and platters, bowls and cups, on chests and low cabinets of polished wood, as fine as anything he had seen in the Tower. Servants darted everywhere, in red livery with white collars and cuffs and the White Lion of Andor on their breasts. He found himself wondering if Morgase played at dice. *Wool-headed thought. Queens don't toss dice. But when I give her this letter and tell her somebody in her Palace means to kill Elayne, I'll wager she gives me a fat purse.* He indulged himself in a small fancy of being made a lord; surely the man who revealed a plot to murder the Daughter-Heir could expect some such reward.

Tallanvor led him down so many corridors and across so many courtyards that he was beginning to wonder if he could find his way out again without help, when suddenly one of the courts had more than servants in it. A columned walk surrounded the court, with a round pool in the middle with white and yellow fish swimming beneath lily pads and floating white water lilies. Men in colorful coats embroidered in gold or silver, women with wide dresses worked even more elaborately, stood attendance on a woman with red-gold hair who sat on the raised rim of the pool, trailing her fingers in the water and staring sadly at the fish that rose to her fingertips in hopes of food. A Great Serpent ring encircled the third finger of her left hand. A tall, dark man stood at her shoulder, the red silk of his coat almost hidden by the gold leaves and scrolls worked on it, but it was the woman who held Mat's eye.

He did not need the wreath of finely made golden roses in her hair, or the stole hanging over her dress of white slashed with red, the red length of the stole embroidered with the Lions of Andor, to know he was looking at Morgase, by the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Trakand. She had Elayne's face and beauty, but it was what Elayne would have when she had ripened. Every other woman in the courtyard faded into the background by her very presence.

I'd dance a jig with her, and steal a kiss in the moonlight, too, no matter how old she is. He shook himself. *Remember exactly who she is!*

Tallanvor went to one knee, a fist pressed to the white stone of the courtyard. "My Queen, I bring a messenger who bears a letter from the Lady Elayne."

Mat eyed the man's posture, then contented himself with a deep bow. "From the Daughter-Heir . . . uh . . . my Queen." He held out the letter as he bowed, so the golden yellow wax of the seal was visible. *Once she reads it, and knows Elayne is all right, I will tell her*. Morgase turned her deep blue eyes on him. *Light! As soon as she's in a good mood.*

"You bring a letter from my scapegrace child?" Her voice was cold, but with an edge that spoke of heat ready to rise. "That must mean she is alive, at least! Where is she?"

"In Tar Valon, my Queen," he managed to get out. *Light, wouldn't I like to see a staring match between her and the Amyrlin*. On second thought, he decided he would rather not. "At least, she was when I left."

Morgase waved a hand impatiently, and Tallanvor rose to take the letter from Mat and hand it to her. For a moment she frowned at the lily seal, then broke it with a sharp twist of her wrists. She murmured to herself as she read, shaking her head at every other line. "She can say no more, can she?" she muttered. "We shall see whether she holds to that. . . ."Abruptly her face brightened. "Gaebril, she has been raised to the Accepted. Less than a year in the Tower, and raised already." The smile went as suddenly as it had come, and her mouth tightened. "When I put my hands on the wretched child, she will wish she were still a novice."

Light, Mat thought, *will nothing put her in a good mood?* He decided he was just going to have to say it out, but he wished she did not look as if she meant to cut someone's head off. "My Queen, by chance I overheard—"

"Be silent, boy," the dark man in the gold-encrusted coat said calmly. He was a handsome man, almost as good-looking as Galad and nearly as youthful-seeming, despite the white streaking his temples, but built on a bigger scale, with more than Rand's height and very nearly Perrin's shoulders. "We will hear what you have to say in a moment." He reached over Morgase's shoulder and plucked the letter out of her hand. Her glare turned on him—Mat could see her temper heating—but the dark man laid a strong hand on her shoulder, never taking his eyes off what he was reading, and Morgase's anger melted. "It seems she has left the Tower again," he said. "On the service of the Amyrlin Seat. The woman oversteps herself again, Morgase."

Mat had no trouble holding his tongue. *Luck*. It was stuck to the roof of his mouth. *Sometimes I don't know if it's good or bad*. The dark man was the owner of the deep voice, the "Great Master" who wanted Elayne's head. *She called him Gaebril. Her advisor wants to murder Elayne? Light!* And Morgase was staring up at him like an adoring dog with her master's hand on her shoulder.

Gaebril turned nearly black eyes on Mat. The man had a forceful gaze, and a look of knowing. "What can you tell us of this, boy?"

"Nothing . . . uh . . . my Lord." Mat cleared his throat; the man's stare was worse than the Amyrlin's. "I went to Tar Valon to see my sister. She's a novice. Else Grinwell. I'm Thom Grinwell, my Lord. The Lady Elayne learned I was meaning to see Caemlyn on my way back home—I'm from Comfrey, my Lord; a little village north of Baerlon; I'd never seen any place bigger than Baerlon before I went to Tar Valon—and she—the Lady Elayne, I mean—gave me that letter to bring." He thought Morgase had glanced at him when he said he came from north of Baerlon, but he knew there was a village called Comfrey there; he remembered hearing it mentioned.

Gaebril nodded, but he said, "Do you know where Elayne was going, boy? Or on what business? Speak the truth, and you have nothing to fear.

Lie, and you will be put to the question.”

Mat did not have to pretend a worried frown. “My Lord, I only saw the Daughter-Heir the once. She gave me the letter—and a gold mark!—and told me to bring it to the Queen. I know no more of what is in it than I’ve heard here.” Gaebril appeared to consider it, with no sign on that dark face of whether he believed a word or not.

“No, Gaebril,” Morgase said suddenly. “Too many have been put to the question. I can see the need as you have shown it to me, but not for this. Not a boy who only brought a letter whose contents he does not know.”

“As my Queen commands, so shall it be,” the dark man said. The tone was respectful, but he touched her cheek in a way that made color come to her face and her lips part as if she expected a kiss.

Morgase drew an unsteady breath. “Tell me, Thom Grinwell, did my daughter look well when you saw her?”

“Yes, my Queen. She smiled, and laughed, and showed a saucy tongue—I mean. . . .”

Morgase laughed softly at the look on his face. “Do not be afraid, young man. Elayne does have a saucy tongue, far too often for her own good. I am happy she is well.” Those blue eyes studied him deeply. “A young man who has left his small village often finds it difficult to return to it. I think you will travel far before you see Comfrey again. Perhaps you will even return to Tar Valon. If you do, and if you see my daughter, tell her that what is said in anger is often repented. I will not remove her from the White Tower before time. Tell her that I often think of my own time there, and miss the quiet talks with Sheriam in her study. Tell her that I said that, Thom Grinwell.”

Mat shrugged uncomfortably. “Yes, my Queen. But . . . uh . . . I do not mean to go to Tar Valon again. Once in any man’s life is enough. My da needs me to help work the farm. My sisters will be stuck with the milking, with me gone.”

Gaebril laughed, a deep rumble of amusement. “Are you anxious then to milk cows, boy? Perhaps you should see something of the world before it changes. Here!” He produced a purse and tossed it; Mat felt coins through the wash-leather when he caught it. “If Elayne can give you a gold mark for carrying her letter, I will give you ten for bringing it safely. See the world before you go back to your cows.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Mat lifted the purse and managed a weak grin. “Thank you, my Lord.”

But the dark man had already waved him away and turned to Morgase with his fists on his hips. “I think the time has come, Morgase, to lance that festering sore on the border of Andor. By your marriage to Taringail Damodred, you have a claim to the Sun Throne. The Queen’s Guards can make that claim as strong as any. Perhaps I can even aid them, in some small way. Hear me.”

Tallanvor touched Mat on the arm, and they backed away, bowing. Mat did not think anyone noticed. Gaebril was still speaking, and every lord and lady seemed to hang on his words. Morgase was frowning as she listened, yet she nodded as much as any other.

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CHAPTER 47

To Race the Shadow

From the small courtyard with its pool of fish, Tallanvor led Mat swiftly to the great court at the front of the Palace, behind the tall, gilded gates gleaming in the sun. It would be midday, soon. Mat felt an urge to be gone, a need to hurry. It was hard keeping his pace to the young officer's. Someone might wonder, if he started running, and maybe—just maybe—things had really been the way they seemed back there. Maybe Gaebril really did not suspect that he knew. *Maybe*. He remembered those nearly black eyes, seizing and holding like a pair of pitchfork tines through his head. *Light, maybe*. He forced himself to walk as if he had all the time in the world—*Just a haybrain country lout staring at the rugs and the gold. Just a mudfoot who'd never think anyone might put a knife in his back*—until Tallanvor let him through a sallyport in one of the gates, and followed him out.

The fat officer with the rat's eyes was still there with the Guards, and when he saw Mat his face went red again. Before he could open his mouth, though, Tallanvor spoke. "He has delivered a letter to the Queen from the Daughter-Heir. Be glad, Elber, that neither Morgase nor Gaebril knows you tried to keep it from them. Lord Gaebril was most interested in the Lady Elayne's missive."

Elber's face went from red to as white as his collar. He glared once at Mat, and scuttled back along the line of guardsmen, his beady eyes peering through the bars of their face-guards as if to determine whether any of them had seen his fear.

"Thank you," Mat told Tallanvor, and meant it. He had forgotten all about the fat man until he was staring him in the face again. "Fare you well, Tallanvor."

He started across the oval plaza, trying not to walk too fast, and was surprised when Tallanvor walked along. *Light, is he Gaebril's man, or Morgase's?* He was just beginning to feel an itch between his shoulder blades, as if a knife might be about to go in—*He doesn't know, burn me! Gaebril doesn't suspect I know!*—when the young officer finally spoke.

"Did you spend long in Tar Valon? In the White Tower? Long enough to learn anything of it?"

"I was only there three days," Mat said cautiously. He would have made the time less—if he could have delivered the letter without admitting ever being in Tar Valon, he would have—but he did not think the man would believe he had gone all that way to see his sister and left the same day. *What under the Light is* he *after?* "I learned what I saw in that time. Nothing of any importance. They did not guide me around and tell me things. I was only there to see Else."

"You must have heard something, man. Who is Sheriam? Does talking to her in her study mean anything?"

Mat shook his head vigorously to keep relief from showing on his face. "I don't know who she is," he said truthfully. Perhaps he had heard Egwene, or perhaps Nynaeve, mention the name. An Aes Sedai, maybe? "Why should it mean anything?"

"I do not know," Tallanvor said softly. "There is too much I do not know. Sometimes I think she is trying to say something. . . ." He gave Mat a sharp look. "*Are* you a loyal Andorman, Thom Grinwell?"

"Of course I am." *Light, if I say that much more often, I may start believing it*. "What about you? Do you serve Morgase and Gaebril loyally?"

Tallanvor gave him a look as hard as the dice's mercy. "I serve Morgase, Thom Grinwell. Her, I serve to the death. Fare you well!" He turned and strode back toward the Palace with a hand gripping his sword hilt.

Watching him go, Mat muttered to himself. "I will wager this"—he gave Gaebril's wash-leather purse a toss—"that Gaebril says the same." Whatever games they played in the Palace, he wanted no place in any of them. And he meant to make sure Egwene and the others were out of them, too. *Fool women! Now I have to keep their bacon from burning instead of looking after my own!* He did not start to run until the streets hid him from the Palace.

When he came dashing into The Queen's Blessing, nothing very much had changed in the library. Thom and the innkeeper still sat over the stones board—a different game, he saw from the positions of the stones, but no better for Gill—and the calico cat was back on the table, washing herself. A tray holding their unlit pipes and the remains of a meal for two sat near the cat, and his belongings were gone from the armchair. Each man had a wine cup at his elbow.

"I will be leaving, Master Gill," he said. "You can keep the coin and take a meal out of it. I'll stay long enough to eat, but then I am on the road to Tear."

"What is your hurry, boy?" Thom seemed to be watching the cat more than the board. "We only just arrived here."

"You delivered the Lady Elayne's letter, then?" the innkeeper said eagerly. "And kept your skin whole, it seems. Did you really climb over that wall like the other young man? No, that does not matter. Did the letter soothe Morgase? Do we still have to keep tiptoeing on eggs, man?"

"I suppose it soothed her," Mat said. "I think it did." He hesitated a moment, bouncing Gaebril's purse on his hand. It made a clinking sound. He had not looked to see if it really held ten gold marks; the weight was about right. "Master Gill, what can you tell me of Gaebril? Aside from the fact that he does not like Aes Sedai. You said he had not been in Caemlyn long?"

"Why do you want to know about him?" Thom asked. "Basel, are you going to place a stone or not?" The innkeeper sighed and stuck a black stone on the board, and the gleeman shook his head.

"Well, lad," Gill said, "there is not much to tell. He came out of the west during the winter. Somewhere out your way, I think. Maybe it was the Two Rivers. I've heard the mountains mentioned."

"We have no lords in the Two Rivers," Mat said. "Maybe there are some up around Baerlon. I do not know."

"That could be it, lad. I had never even heard of him before, but I do not keep up with the country lords. Came while Morgase was still in Tar Valon, he did, and half the city was afraid the Tower was going to make her disappear, too. The other half did not want her back. The riots started up again, the way they did last year at the tail of winter."

Mat shook his head. "I do not care about politics, Master Gill. It's Gaebril I want to know about." Thom frowned at him, and began cleaning the dottle from his long-stemmed pipe with a straw.

"It is Gaebril I am telling you about, lad," Gill said. "During the riots, he made himself leader of the faction supporting Morgase—got himself wounded in the fighting, I hear—and by the time she returned, he had it all suppressed. Gareth Bryne didn't like Gaebril's methods—he can be a very hard man—but Morgase was so pleased to find order restored that she named him to the post Elaida used to hold."

The innkeeper stopped. Mat waited for him to go on, but he did not. Thom thumbed his pipe full of tabac and walked over to light a spill at a small lamp kept for the purpose on the mantel above the fireplace.

"What else?" Mat asked. "The man has to have a reason for what he does. If he marries Morgase, would he be king when she dies? If Elayne were dead, too, I mean?"

Thom choked lighting his pipe, and Gill laughed. "Andor has a queen, lad. Always a queen. If Morgase and Elayne both died—the Light send it not so!—then Morgase's nearest female relative would take the throne. At least there's no question of who that is this time—a cousin, the Lady Dyelin—not like the Succession, after Tigraine vanished. It took two years before Morgase sat on the Lion Throne, then. Dyelin could keep Gaebril as her advisor, or marry him to cement the line—though she would not likely do that unless Morgase had had a child by him—but he would be the Prince Consort even then. No more than that. Thank the Light, Morgase is a young woman, yet. And Elayne is healthy. Light! The letter did not say she is ill, did it?"

"She is well." *For now, at least.* "Isn't there anything else you can tell me about him? You do not seem to like him. Why?"

The innkeeper frowned in thought, and scratched his chin, and shook his head. "I suppose I would not like him marrying Morgase, but I do not truly know why. He's said to be a fine man; the nobles all look to him. I do not like most of the men he's brought into the Guards. Too much has changed since he came, but I cannot lay it all at his door. There just seem to be too many people muttering in corners since he came. You would think we were all Cairhienin, the way they were before this civil war, all plotting and trying to find advantage. I keep having bad dreams since Gaebril came, and I am not the only one. Fool thing to worry about, dreams. It is probably only worry about Elayne, and what Morgase means to do concerning the White Tower, and people acting like Cairhienin. I just do not know. Why are you asking all these questions about Lord Gaebril?"

"Because he wants to kill Elayne," Mat said, "and Egwene and Nynaeve with her." There was nothing useful in what Gill had told him that he could see. *Burn me, I don't have to know why he wants them dead. I just* *have to stop it*. Both men were staring at him again. As if he were mad. Again.

"Are you coming down sick again?" Gill said suspiciously. "I remember you staring crossways at everyone the last time. It's either that, or else you think this is some sort of prank. You have the look of a prankster to me. If that is it, it's a nasty one!"

Mat grimaced. "It is no bloody prank. I overheard him telling some man called Comar to cut Elayne's head off. And Egwene's and Nynaeve's while he was about it. A big man, with a white stripe in his beard."

"That does sound like Lord Comar," Gill said slowly. "He was a fine soldier, but it is said he left the Guard over some matter of weighted dice. Not that anyone says it to his face; Comar was one of the best blades in the Guards. You really mean it, don't you?"

"I think he does, Basel," Thom said. "I very much think he does."

"The Light shine on us! What did Morgase say? You did tell her, didn't you? The Light burn you, you did tell her!"

"Of course, I did," Mat said bitterly. "With Gaebril standing right there, and her gazing at him like a lovesick lapdog! I said, 'I may be a simple village man who just climbed over your wall half an hour past, but I already happen to know your trusted advisor there, the one you seem to be in love with, intends to murder your daughter.' Light, man, she'd have cut *my* head off!"

"She might have at that." Thom stared into the elaborate carvings on the bowl of his pipe and tugged one mustache. "Her temper was ever as sudden as lightning, and twice as dangerous."

"You know it better than most, Thom," Gill said absently. Staring at nothing, he scrubbed both hands through his graying hair. "There has to be something I can do. I haven't held a sword since the Aiel War, but. . . . Well, that would do no good. Get myself killed and do nothing by it. But I must do something!"

"Rumor." Thom rubbed the side of his nose; he seemed to be studying the stones board and talking to himself. "No one can keep rumors from reaching Morgase's ears, and if she hears it strongly enough, she will start to wonder. Rumor is the voice of the people, and the voice of the people often speaks truth. Morgase knows that. There is not a man alive I would back against her in the Game. Love or no love, once Morgase starts examining Gaebril closely, he'll not be able to hide as much as his childhood scars from her. And if she learns he means harm to Elayne"—he placed a stone on the board; it seemed an odd placement at first glance, but Mat saw that in three more moves, a third of Gill's stones would be trapped—"Lord Gaebril will have a most elaborate funeral."

"You and your Game of Houses," Gill muttered. "Still, it might work." A sudden smile appeared on his face. "I even know who to tell to start it. All I need do is mention to Gilda that I dreamed it, and in three days she'll have told serving girls in half the New City that it is a fact. She is the greatest gossip the Creator ever made."

"Just be certain it cannot be traced back to you, Basel."

"No fear of that, Thom. Why a week ago, a man told me one of my own bad dreams as a thing he'd heard from somebody who'd had it from someone else. Gilda must have eavesdropped on me telling it to Coline, but when I asked, he gave me a string of names that led all the way to the other side of Caemlyn and vanished. Why, I actually went over there and found the last man, just out of curiosity to see how many mouths had passed it, and he claimed it was his very own dream. No fear, Thom."

Mat did not really care what they did with their rumors—no rumors would help Egwene or the others—but one thing puzzled him. "Thom, you seem to be taking this all very calmly. I thought Morgase was the great love of your life."

The gleeman stared into the bowl of his pipe again. "Mat, a very wise woman once told me that time would heal my wounds, that time smoothed everything over. I didn't believe her. Only she was right."

"You mean you do not love Morgase anymore."

"Boy, it has been fifteen years since I left Caemlyn a half step ahead of the headsman's axe, with the ink of Morgase's signature still wet on the warrant. Sitting here listening to Basel natter on"—Gill protested, and Thom raised his voice—"natter on, I say, about Morgase and Gaebril, and how they might marry, I realized the passion faded a long time gone. Oh, I suppose I am still fond of her, perhaps I even love her a little, but it is not a grand passion anymore."

"And here I half thought you'd go running up to the Palace to warn her." He laughed, and was surprised when Thom joined him.

"I am not so big a fool as that, boy. Any fool knows men and women think differently at times, but the biggest difference is this. Men forget, but never forgive; women forgive, but never forget. Morgase might kiss my cheek and give me a cup of wine and say how she has missed me. And then she might just let the Guards haul me off to prison and the headsman. No. Morgase is one of the most capable women I've ever known, and that is saying something. I could almost pity Gaebril once she learns what he is up to. Tear, you say? Is there any chance of you waiting until tomorrow to leave? I could use a night's sleep."

"I mean to be as far toward Tear as I can before nightfall." Mat blinked. "Do you mean to come with me? I thought you meant to stay here."

"Did you not just hear me say I had decided *not* to have my head cut off? Tear sounds a safer place to me than Caemlyn, and suddenly that does not seem so bad. Besides, I like those girls." A knife appeared in his hand and was as suddenly gone again. "I'd not like anything to happen to them. But if you mean to reach Tear quickly, it's Aringill you want. A fast boat will have us there days sooner than horses, even if we rode them to death. And I don't say it just because my bottom has already taken on the shape of a saddle."

"Aringill, then. As long as it's fast."

"Well," Gill said, "I suppose if you are leaving, lad, I had better see about getting you that meal." He pushed back his chair and started for the door.

"Hold this for me, Master Gill," Mat said, and tossed him the wash-leather purse.

"What's this, lad? Coin?"

"Stakes. Gaebril doesn't know it, but he and I have a wager." The cat jumped down as Mat picked up the wooden dice cup and spun the dice out on the table. Five sixes. "And I always win."

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CHAPTER 48

Following the Craft

As the *Darter* wallowed toward the docks of Tear, on the west bank of the River Erinin, Egwene did not see anything of the oncoming city. Slumped head down at the rail, she stared down at the waters of the Erinin rolling past the ship's fat hull, and the frontmost sweep on her side as it swung into her vision and back again, cutting white furrows in the river. It made her queasy, but she knew raising her head would only make the sickness worse. Looking at the shore would only make the slow, corkscrew motion of the *Darter* more apparent.

The vessel had moved in that twisting roll ever since Jurene. She did not care how it had sailed before then; she found herself wishing the *Darter* had sunk before reaching Jurene. She wished they had made the captain put in at Aringill so they could find another ship. She wished they had never gone near a ship. She wished a great many things, most of them just to take her mind off where she was.

The twisting was less now, under sweeps, than it had been under sail, but it had gone on too many days now for the change to make much difference to her. Her stomach seemed to be sloshing about inside her like milk in a stone jug. She gulped and tried to forget that image.

They had not done much in the way of planning on the *Darter*, she and Elayne and Nynaeve. Nynaeve could seldom go ten minutes without vomiting, and seeing that always made Egwene lose whatever food she had managed to get down. The increasing warmth as they went further downriver did not help. Nynaeve was below now, no doubt with Elayne holding a basin for her again.

Oh, Light, no! Don't think about that! Green fields. Meadows. Light, meadows do not heave like that. Hummingbirds. No, not hummingbirds! Larks. Larks singing.

"Mistress Joslyn? Mistress Joslyn!"

It took her a moment to recognize the name she had chosen to give Captain Canin, and the captain's voice. She raised her head slowly and fixed her eyes on his long face.

"We are docking, Mistress Joslyn. You've kept saying how eager you were to be ashore. Well, we're there." His voice did not hide his eagerness to be rid of his three passengers, two of whom did little more than sick up, as he called it, and moan all night.

Barefoot, shirtless sailors were tossing lines to men on the stone dock that thrust out into the river; the dockmen seemed to be wearing long leather vests in place of shirts. The sweeps had already been drawn in, except for a pair fending the ship off from coming against the dock too hard. The flat stones of the dock were wet; the air had a feel of rain not long gone, and that was a little soothing. The twisting motion had ceased some time since, she realized, but her stomach remembered. The sun was falling toward the west. She tried not to think of supper.

"Very good, Captain Canin," she said with all the dignity she could summon. *He'd not sound like that if I were wearing my ring, not even if I were sick on his boots*. She shuddered at the picture in her mind.

Her Great Serpent ring and the twisted ring of the *ter'angreal* hung on a leather cord about her neck, now. The stone ring felt cool against her skin—almost enough to counteract the damp warmth of the air—but aside from that, she had found that the more she used the *ter'angreal*, the more she wanted to touch it, without pouch or cloth between it and her.

Tel'aran'rhiod still showed her little of immediate use. Sometimes there had been glimpses of Rand, or Mat, or Perrin, and more in her own dreams without the *ter'angreal*, but nothing of which she could make any sense. The Seanchan, who she refused to think about. Nightmares of a White-cloak putting Master Luhhan in the middle of a huge, toothed trap for bait. Why should Perrin have a falcon on his shoulder, and what was important about him choosing between that axe he wore now and a blacksmith's hammer? What did it mean that Mat was dicing with the Dark One, and why did he keep shouting, "I am coming!" and why did she think in the dream that he was shouting at her? And Rand. He had been sneaking through utter darkness toward *Callandor*, while all around him six men and five women walked, some hunting him and some ignoring him, some trying to guide him toward the shining crystal sword and some trying to stop him from reaching it, appearing not to know where he was, or only to see him in flashes. One of the men had eyes of flame, and he wanted Rand dead with a desperation she could nearly taste. She thought she knew him. Ba'alzamon. But who were the others? Rand in that dry, dusty chamber again, with those small creatures settling into his skin. Rand confronting a horde of Seanchan. Rand confronting her, and the women with her, and one of *them* was a Seanchan. It was all too confusing. She had to stop thinking about Rand and the others and put her mind to what was right ahead of her. *What is the Black Ajah up to? Why don't I dream something about them? Light, why can't I learn to make it do what I want?*

"Have the horses put ashore, Captain," she told Canin. "I will tell Mistress Maryim and Mistress Caryla." That was Nynaeve—Maryim—and Elayne—Caryla.

"I have sent a man to tell them, Mistress Joslyn. And your animals will be on the dock as soon as my men can rig a boom."

He sounded very pleased to be rid of them. She thought about telling him not to hurry, but rejected it immediately. The *Darter*'s corkscrewing might have stopped, but she wanted dry land under her feet again. Now. Still, she stopped to pat Mist's nose and let the gray mare nuzzle her palm, to let Canin see she was in no great rush.

Nynaeve and Elayne appeared at the ladder from the cabins, laden with their bundles and saddlebags, and Elayne almost as laden with Nynaeve. When Nynaeve saw Egwene watching, she pushed herself away from the Daughter-Heir and walked unaided the rest of the way to where men were setting a narrow gangplank to the dock. Two crewmen came to fasten a wide canvas sling under Mist's belly, and Egwene hurried below for her own things. When she came back up, her mare was already on the dock and Elayne's roan dangled in the canvas sling halfway there.

For a moment after her feet were on the dock, all she felt was relief. This would not pitch and roll. Then she began to look at this city whose reaching had caused them such pains.

Stone warehouses backed the long docks themselves, and there seemed to be a great many ships, large and small, alongside the docks or anchored in the river. Hastily she avoided looking at the ships. Tear had been built on flat land, with barely a bump. Down muddy dirt streets between the warehouses, she could see houses and inns and taverns of wood and stone. Their roofs of slate or tile had oddly sharp corners, and some rose to a point. Beyond these, she could make out a high wall of dark gray stone, and behind it the tops of towers with balconies high around them and white-domed palaces. The domes had a squared shape to them, and the tower tops looked pointed, like some of the roofs outside the wall. All in all, Tear was easily as big as Caemlyn or Tar Valon, and if not so beautiful as either, it was still one of the great cities. Yet she found it hard to look at anything but the Stone of Tear.

She had heard of it in stories, heard that it was the greatest fortress in the world and the oldest, the first built after the Breaking of the World, yet nothing had prepared her for this sight. At first she thought it was a huge, gray stone hill or a small, barren mountain covering hundreds of hides, its length stretching from the Erinin west through the wall and into the city. Even after she saw the huge banner flapping from its greatest height—three white crescent moons slanting across a field half red, half gold; a banner waving at least three hundred paces above the river, yet large enough to be clearly seen at that height—even after she made out battlements and towers, it was difficult to believe the Stone of Tear had been built rather than carved out of a mountain already there.

“Made with the Power,” Elayne murmured. She was staring at the Stone, too. “Flows of Earth woven to draw stone from the ground, Air to bring it from every corner of the world, and Earth and Fire to make it all in one piece, without seam or joint or mortar. Atuan Sedai says the Tower could not do it, today. Strange, given how the High Lords feel concerning the Power now.”

“I think,” Nynaeve said softly, eyeing the dockmen moving around them, “that given that very thing, we should not mention certain other things aloud.” Elayne appeared torn between indignation—she had spoken very softly—and agreement; the Daughter-Heir agreed with Nynaeve too often and too readily to suit Egwene.

Only when Nynaeve is right, she admitted to herself grudgingly. A woman who wore the ring, or was even associated with Tar Valon, would be watched here. The barefoot, leather-vested dockmen were not paying the three of them any mind as they hurried about, carrying bales or crates on their backs as often as on barrows. A strong odor of fish hung in the air; the next three docks had dozens of small fishing boats clustered around them, just like those in the drawing in the Amyrlin’s study. Shirtless men and barefoot women were hoisting baskets of fish out of the boats, mounds of silver and bronze and green, and colors she had never suspected fish might be, such as bright red, and deep blue, and brilliant yellow, some with stripes or splotches of white and other colors.

She lowered her voice for Elayne's ear alone. "She is right, Caryla. Remember why you are Caryla." She did not want Nynaeve to hear such admissions. Her face did not change when she heard, but Egwene could feel satisfaction radiating from her like heat from a cook stove.

Nynaeve's black stallion was just being lowered to the dock; sailors had already carried their tack off the ship and simply dumped it on the wet stones of the dock. Nynaeve glanced at the horses and opened her mouth—Egwene was sure it was to tell them to saddle their animals—then closed it again, tight-lipped, as if it had cost her an effort. She gave her braid one hard tug. Before the sling was well out of the way, Nynaeve tossed the blue-striped saddle blanket across the black's back and hoisted her high-cantled saddle atop it. She did not even look at the other two women.

Egwene was not anxious to ride at that moment—the motion of a horse might be too close to the motion of the *Darter* for her stomach—but another look at those muddy streets convinced her. Her shoes were sturdy, but she would not enjoy having to clean mud off them, or having to hold her skirts up as she walked, either. She saddled Mist quickly and climbed onto her back, settling her skirts, before she could decide the mud might not be so bad after all. A little needlework on the *Darter*—Elayne had done it all, this time; the Daughter-Heir sewed a very fine stitch—had divided all their dresses nicely for riding astride.

Nynaeve's face paled for a moment when she swung into her saddle and the stallion decided to frisk. She kept a tight-mouthed grip on herself and a firm hand on her reins and soon had him under control. By the time they had ridden slowly past the warehouses, she could speak. "We need to locate Liandrin and the others without them learning we are asking after them. They surely know we are coming—that someone is, at least—but I would like them not to know we are here until it is too late for them." She drew a deep breath. "I confess I have not thought of any way to do this. Yet. Do either of you have any suggestions?"

"A thief-taker," Elayne said without hesitation. Nynaeve frowned at her.

"You mean like Hurin?" Egwene said. "But Hurin was in the service of his king. Wouldn't any thief-taker here serve the High Lords?"

Elayne nodded, and for a moment Egwene envied the Daughter-Heir her stomach. “Yes, they would. But thief-takers are not like the Queen’s Guards, or the Tairen Defenders of the Stone. They serve the ruler, but people who have been robbed sometimes pay them to retrieve what was stolen. And they also sometimes take money to find people. At least, they do in Caemlyn. I cannot think it is different here in Tear.”

“Then we take rooms at an inn,” Egwene said, “and ask the innkeeper to find us a thief-taker.”

“Not an inn,” Nynaeve said as firmly as she guided the stallion; she never seemed to let the animal get out of her control. After a moment she moderated her tone a little. “Liandrin, at least, knows us, and we have to assume the others do, too. They will surely be watching the inns for whoever followed the trail they sprinkled behind them. I mean to spring their trap in their faces, but not with us inside. We’ll not stay at an inn.”

Egwene refused to give her the satisfaction of asking.

“Where then?” Elayne’s brow furrowed. “If I made myself known—and could make anyone believe it, in these clothes and with no escort—we would be welcomed by most of the noble Houses, and very likely in the Stone itself—there are good relations between Caemlyn and Tear—but there would be no keeping it quiet. The entire city would know before nightfall. I cannot think of anywhere else except an inn, Nynaeve. Unless you mean to go out to a farm in the country, but we will never find them from the country.”

Nynaeve glanced at Egwene. “I will know when I see it. Let me look.”

Elayne’s frown swept from Nynaeve to Egwene and back again. “ ‘Do not cut off your ears because you do not like your earrings,’ ” she muttered.

Egwene put her attention firmly on the street they were riding along. *I will be burned if I’ll let her think I am even wondering!*

There were not a great many people out, not compared to the streets of Tar Valon. Perhaps the thick mud in the street discouraged them. Carts and wagons lurched past, most pulled by oxen with wide horns, the carter or wagoneer walking alongside with a long goad of some pale, ridged wood. No carriages or sedan chairs used these streets. The odor of fish hung in the air here, too, and no few of the men who hurried past carried huge baskets full of fish on their backs. The shops did not look prosperous; none displayed wares outside, and Egwene seldom saw anyone go in. The shops had signs—the tailor’s needle and bolt of cloth, the cutler’s knife and scissors, the weaver’s loom, and the like—but the paint on most of them was peeling. The few inns had signs in as bad a state, and looked no busier. The small houses crowded between inns and shops often had tiles or slates missing from their roofs. This part of Tear, at least, was poor. And from what she saw on the faces, few of the people here cared to try any longer. They were moving, working, but most of them had given up. Few as much as glanced at three women riding where everyone else walked.

The men wore baggy breeches, usually tied at the ankle. Only a handful wore coats, long, dark garments that fit arms and chest tightly, then became looser below the waist. There were more men in low shoes than in boots, but most went barefoot in the mud. A good many wore no coat or shirt at all, and had their breeches held up by a broad sash, sometimes colored and often dirty. Some had wide, conical straw hats on their heads, and a few, cloth caps that sagged down one side of the face. The women’s dresses had high necks, right up to their chins, and hems that stopped at the ankle. Many had short aprons in pale colors, sometimes two or three, each smaller than the one beneath it, and most wore the same straw hats as the men, but dyed to complement the aprons.

It was on a woman that she first saw how those who wore shoes dealt with the mud. The woman had small wooden platforms tied to the soles of her shoes, lifting them two hands out of the mud; she walked along as if her feet were planted firmly on the ground. Egwene saw others wearing the platforms after that, men as well as women. Some of the women went barefoot, but not as many as the men.

She was wondering which shop might sell those platforms, when Nynaeve suddenly turned her black down an alleyway between a long, narrow two-story house and a stone-walled potter’s shop. Egwene exchanged glances with Elayne—the Daughter-Heir shrugged—and then they followed. Egwene did not know where Nynaeve was going or why—and she meant to have words with her about it—but she did not mean to become separated, either.

The alley suddenly let into a small yard behind the house, fenced in by the buildings around it. Nynaeve had already dismounted and tied her reins to a fig tree, where the stallion could not reach the green things sprouting in a vegetable patch that took up half the yard. A line of stones had been laid to make a path to the back door. Nynaeve strode to the door and knocked.

“What is it?” Egwene demanded in spite of herself. “Why are we stopping here?”

“Did you not see the herbs in the front windows?” Nynaeve knocked again.

“Herbs?” Elayne said.

“A Wisdom,” Egwene told her as she got down from her saddle and tied Mist alongside the black. *Gaidin is no good name for a horse. Does she think I don’t know who she means it for?* “Nynaeve has found herself a Wisdom, or Seeker, or whatever they call her here.”

A woman opened the door just enough to look out suspiciously. At first Egwene thought she was stout, but then the woman opened the door the rest of the way. She was certainly well padded, but the way she moved spoke of muscle underneath. She looked as strong as Mistress Luhhan, and some in Emond’s Field claimed Alsbet Luhhan was almost as strong as her husband. It was not true, but it was not far wrong.

“How can I help you?” the woman said in an accent like the Amyrlin’s. Her gray hair was arranged in thick curls that hung down the sides of her head, and her three aprons were in shades of green, each slightly darker than the one below, but even the topmost pale. “Which one of you needs me?”

“I do,” Nynaeve said. “I need something for a queasy stomach. And perhaps one of my companions does, too. That is, if we’ve come to the right place?”

“You’re not Tairen,” the woman said. “I should have known that by your clothes, before you spoke. I’m called Mother Guenna. I am called a Wise Woman, too, but I’m old enough not to trust that to caulk a seam. You come, and I will give you something for your stomach.”

It was a neat kitchen, though not large, with copper pots hanging on the wall, and dried herbs and sausages from the ceiling. Several tall cupboards of pale wood had doors carved with some sort of tall grass. The table had been scrubbed almost white, and the backs of the chairs were carved with flowers. A pot of fishy-smelling soup was simmering atop the stone stove, and a kettle with a spout, just beginning to steam. There was no fire on the stone hearth, for which Egwene was more than grateful; the stove added enough to the heat, though Mother Guenna seemed not to notice it at all. Dishes lined the mantel, and more were stacked neatly on shelves to either side. The floor looked as if it had just been swept.

Mother Guenna closed the door after them, and as she was crossing the kitchen to her cupboards, Nynaeve said, “Which tea will you give me? Chainleaf? Or bluewort?”

“I would if I had any of either.” Mother Guenna rooted in the shelves a moment and came out with a stone jar. “Since I’ve had no time to glean of late, I will give you a brew of marshwhite leaves.”

“I am not familiar with that,” Nynaeve said slowly.

“It works as well as chainleaf, but it has a bite to the taste some don’t care for.” The big woman sprinkled dried and broken leaves into a blue teapot and carried it over to the fireplace to add hot water. “Do you follow the craft, then? Sit.” She gestured to the table with a hand holding two blue-glazed cups she had taken from the mantel. “Sit, and we’ll talk. Which one of you has the other stomach?”

“I am fine,” Egwene said casually as she took a chair. “Are you queasy, Caryla?” The Daughter-Heir shook her head with perhaps a touch of exasperation.

“No matter.” The gray-haired woman poured out a cup of dark liquid for Nynaeve, then sat across the table from her. “I made enough for two, but marshwhite tea keeps longer than salted fish. It works better the longer it sits, too, but it also grows more bitter. Makes a race between how much you need your stomach settled and what your tongue can stand. Drink, girl.” After a moment, she filled the second cup and took a sip. “You see? It will not hurt you.”

Nynaeve raised her own cup, making a small sound of displeasure at the first taste. When she lowered the cup again, though, her face was smooth. “It is just a little bitter perhaps. Tell me, Mother Guenna, will we have to put up with this rain and mud much longer?”

The older woman frowned, parceling displeasure among the three of them before she settled on Nynaeve. “I am not a Sea Folk Windfinder, girl,” she said quietly. “If I could tell the weather, I’d sooner stick live silverpike down my dress than admit it. The Defenders take that sort of thing for next to Aes Sedai work. Now, do you follow the craft or not? You look as if you have been traveling. What is good for fatigue?” she barked suddenly.

“Flatwort tea,” Nynaeve said calmly, “or andilay root. Since you ask questions, what would you do to ease birthing?”

Mother Guenna snorted. “Apply warm towels, child, and perhaps give her a little whitefennel if it was an especially hard birth. A woman needs no more than that, and a soothing hand. Can’t you think of a question any country farmwife could not answer? What do you give for pains in the heart? The killing kind.”

“Powdered gheandin blossom on the tongue,” Nynaeve said crisply. “If a woman has biting pains in her belly and spits up blood, what do you do?”

They settled down as if testing each other, tossing questions and answers back and forth faster and faster. Sometimes the questioning lagged a moment when one spoke of a plant the other knew only by another name, but they picked up speed again, arguing the merits of tinctures against teas, salves against poultices, and when one was better than another. Slowly, all the quick questions began shifting toward the herbs and roots one knew that the other did not, digging for knowledge. Egwene began to grow irritable listening.

“After you give him the boneknit,” Mother Guenna was saying, “you wrap the broken limb in toweling soaked in water where you’ve boiled blue goatflowers—only the blue, mind!”—Nynaeve nodded impatiently—“and as hot as he can stand it. One part blue goatflowers to ten of water, no weaker. Replace the towels as soon as they stop steaming, and keep it up all day. The bone will knit twice as fast as with boneknit alone, and twice as strong.”

“I will remember that,” Nynaeve said. “You mentioned using sheepstongue root for eye pain. I’ve never heard—”

Egwene could stand it no longer. “Maryim,” she broke in, “do you really believe you’ll ever need to know these things again? You are not a Wisdom any longer, or have you forgotten?”

“I have not forgotten anything,” Nynaeve said sharply. “I remember a time when you were as eager to learn new things as I am.”

“Mother Guenna,” Elayne said blandly, “what do you do for two women who cannot stop arguing?”

The gray-haired woman pursed her lips and frowned at the table. “Usually, men or women, I tell them to stay away from each other. That is the best thing, and the easiest.”

“Usually?” Elayne said. “What if there is a reason they cannot stay apart. Say they are sisters.”

“I do have a way to make an arguer stop,” the big woman said slowly. “It is not something I urge anyone to try, but some do come to me.” Egwene thought there was a suspicion of a smile at the corners of her mouth. “I charge a silver mark each for women. Two for men, because men make more fuss. There are some will buy anything, if it costs enough."

"But what is the cure?" Elayne asked.

"I tell them they have to bring the other one here with them, the one they argue with. Both expect me to quiet the other's tongue." Despite herself, Egwene was listening. She noticed Nynaeve seemed to be paying sharp attention, as well. "When they have paid me," Mother Guenna continued, flexing one hefty arm, "I take them out back and stick their heads in my rain barrel till they agree to stop their arguing."

Elayne burst out laughing.

"I think I may have done something very like that myself," Nynaeve said in a voice that was much too light. Egwene hoped her own expression looked nothing like Nynaeve's.

"I'd not be surprised if you have." Mother Guenna was grinning openly now. "I tell them the next time I hear they've been arguing, I will do it for free, but I'll use the river. It is remarkable how often the cure works, for men especially. And it is remarkable what it has done for my reputation. For some reason, none of the people I cure this way ever tells anyone else the details, so someone asks for the cure every few months. If you've been fool enough to eat mudfish, you do not go around telling people. I trust none of you have any wish to spend a silver mark."

"I think not," Egwene said, and glared at Elayne when she went off in peals of laughter again.

"Good," the gray-haired woman said. "Those I cure of arguing have a tendency to avoid me like stingweed caught in their nets, unless they actually take sick, and I am enjoying your company. Most of those who come at present want something to take away bad dreams, and they grow sour when I have nothing to give them." For a moment she slipped into a frown, rubbing her temples. "It is good to see three faces that do not look as if there is nothing left but to jump over the side and drown. If you are staying long in Tear, you must come see me again. The girl called you Maryim? I am Ailhuin. The next time, we'll talk over some good Sea Folk tea instead of something that curdles your tongue. Light, but I hate the taste of marshwhite; mudfish would taste sweeter. In fact, if you have time to stay now, I'll brew a pot of Tremalking black. Not long till supper, either. It's just bread and soup and cheese, but you are welcome."

“That would be very nice, Ailhuin,” Nynaeve said. “Actually. . . . Ailhuin, if you have a spare bedroom, I’d like to hire it for the three of us.”

The big woman looked at each of them without saying anything. Getting to her feet, she tucked the pot of marshwhite tea away in the herb cupboard, then fetched a red teapot and a pouch from another. Only when she had brewed a pot of Tremalking black, put four clean cups and a bowl of honeycomb on the table along with pewter spoons, and reclaimed her chair did she speak.

“I’ve three empty bedrooms upstairs, now my daughters are all married. My husband, the Light shine on him, was lost in a storm in the Fingers of the Dragon near twenty years ago. There need be no talk of hiring, if I decide to let you have the rooms. If, Maryim.” Stirring honey into her tea, she studied them again.

“What will make you decide?” Nynaeve asked quietly.

Ailhuin continued to stir, as if she had forgotten to drink. “Three young women, riding fine horses. I don’t know much about horses, but those look as fine as what the lords and ladies ride, to me. You, Maryim, know enough of the craft that you ought to have hung herbs in your window already, or should be choosing where to do it. I’ve never heard of a woman practicing the craft too far from where she was born, but by your tongue, you are a long way.” She glanced at Elayne. “Not many places with hair that color. Andor, I’d say, by your speech. Fool men are always talking about finding a yellow-haired Andor girl. What I want to know is why? Running away from something? Or running after something? Only, you don’t look like thieves to me, and I never heard of three women chasing after a man together. So tell me why, and if I like it, the rooms are yours. If you want to pay something, you buy a bit of meat now and then. Meat is dear since the trade up to Cairhien fell away. But first the why, Maryim.”

“We are chasing after something, Ailhuin,” Nynaeve said. “Or rather, after some people.” Egwene schooled herself to stillness and hoped she was doing as well as Elayne, who was sipping her tea as if she were listening to talk about dresses. Egwene did not believe Ailhuin Guenna’s dark eyes missed a great deal. “They stole some things, Ailhuin,” Nynaeve went on. “From my mother. And they did murder. We are here to see justice done.”

“Burn my soul,” the large woman said, “have you no menfolk? Men are not good for much beyond heavy hauling and getting in the way, most of the time—and kissing and such—but if there’s a battle to be fought or a thief to catch, I say let them do it. Andor is as civilized as Tear. You are not Aiel."

"There was no one else but us," Nynaeve said. "Those who might have come in our place were killed."

The three murdered Aes Sedai, Egwene thought. *They could not have been Black Ajah. But if they had not been killed, the Amyrlin would not have been able to trust them. She's trying to keep to the bloody Three Oaths, but she is skirting it close.*

"Aaah," Ailhuin said sadly. "They killed your men? Brothers, or husbands, or fathers?" Spots of color bloomed in Nynaeve's cheeks, and the older woman mistook the emotion. "No, don't tell me, girl. I'll not pull up old grief. Let it lie on the bottom till it melts away. There, there, you calm yourself." It was an effort for Egwene not to growl with disgust.

"I must tell you this," Nynaeve said in a stiff voice. The red still colored her face. "These murderers and thieves are Darkfriends. They are women, but they are as dangerous as any swordsman, Ailhuin. If you wondered why we did not seek an inn, that is why. They may know we follow, and they may be watching for us."

Ailhuin waved it all away with a sniff. "Of the four most dangerous folk I know, two are women who never carry as much as a knife, and only one of the men is a swordsman. As for Darkfriends. . . . Maryim, when you are as old as I, you'll learn that false Dragons are dangerous, lionfish are dangerous, sharks are dangerous, and sudden storms out of the south; but Darkfriends are fools. Filthy fools, but fools. The Dark One is locked up where the Creator put him, and no Fetches or fangfish to scare children will get him out. Fools don't frighten me unless they're working the boat I'm riding. I suppose you don't have any proof you could take to the Defenders of the Stone? It would be just your word against theirs?"

What is a "Fetch"? Egwene wondered. *Or a "fangfish," for that matter.*

"We will have proof when we find them," Nynaeve said. "They will have the things they stole, and we can describe them. They are old things, and of little value to anyone but us, and our friends."

"You would be surprised what old things can be worth," Ailhuin said dryly. "Old Leuese Mulan pulled up three heartstone bowls and a cup in his nets last year, down in the Fingers of the Dragon. Now, instead of a fishing smack, he owns a ship trading up the river. Old fool did not even know what he had till I told him. Very likely there's more right where those came from, but Leuese couldn't even remember the exact spot. I do not know how he ever managed to get a fish into his net. Half the fishing boats in Tear were down there for months afterwards, dragging for *cuendillar*, not grunts or flatfish, and some had lords saying where to pull the nets. That's what old things can be worth, if they are old enough. Now, I've decided you do need a man in this, and I know just the one."

"Who?" Nynaeve said quickly. "If you mean a lord, one of the High Lords, remember we have no proof to offer till we find them."

Ailhuin laughed until she wheezed. "Girl, nobody from the Maule knows a High Lord, or any kind of lord. Mudfish don't school with silversides. I will bring you the dangerous man I know who isn't a swordsman, and the more dangerous of the two, at that. Juilin Sandar is a thief-catcher. The best of them. I do not know how it is in Andor, but here a thief-catcher will work for you or me as soon as for a lord or a merchant, and charge less at that. Juilin can find these women for you if they *can* be found, and bring your things back without you having to go near these Darkfriends."

Nynaeve agreed as if she were still not entirely sure, and Ailhuin tied those platforms to her shoes—clogs, she called them—and hurried out. Egwene watched her go, through one of the kitchen windows, past the horses and around the corner up the alley.

"You are learning how to be Aes Sedai, *Maryim*," she said as she turned from the window. "You manipulate people as well as Moiraine." Nynaeve's face went white.

Elayne stalked across the floor and slapped Egwene's face. Egwene was so shocked she could only stare. "You go too far," the golden-haired woman said sharply. "Too far. We must live together, or we will surely die together! Did you give Ailhuin your true name? Nynaeve told her what we could, that we seek Darkfriends, and that was risk enough, linking us with Darkfriends. She told her they were dangerous, murderers. Would you have had her say they are Black Ajah? In Tear? Would you risk everything on whether Ailhuin would keep *that* to herself?"

Egwene rubbed her cheek gingerly. Elayne had a strong arm. "I do not have to like doing it."

"I know," Elayne sighed. "Neither do I. But we *do* have to."

Egwene turned back to peering through the window at the horses. *I know we do. But I do not have to like it.*

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CHAPTER 49

A Storm in Tear

Egwene finally returned to the table and her tea. She thought perhaps Elayne was right, that she had gone too far, but she could not bring herself to apologize, and they sat in silence.

When Ailhuin returned, she had a man with her, a lean fellow in his middle years who looked as if he had been carved from aged wood. Juilin Sandar took off his clogs by the door and hung his flat, conical straw hat on a peg. A sword-breaker, much like Hurin's but with short slots to either side of the long one, hung from a belt over his brown coat, and he carried a staff exactly as tall as he was, but not much thicker than his thumb and made of that pale wood, like ridged joints, that the ox-drivers used for their goads. His short-cut black hair lay flat on his head, and his quick, dark eyes seemed to note and record every detail of the room. And of everyone in it. Egwene would have bet he examined Nynaeve twice, and to her, at least, Nynaeve's lack of reaction was blatant; it was obvious she knew it, too.

Ailhuin motioned him to a place at the table, where he turned back the cuffs of his coat sleeves, bowed to each of them in turn, and sat with his staff propped against his shoulder, not speaking until the gray-haired woman had made a fresh pot of tea and everyone had sipped from their cups.

"Mother Guenna has told me of your problem," he said quietly as he set his cup down. "I will help you if I can, but the High Lords may have their own business to put me to, soon."

The big woman snorted. "Juilin, when did you begin haggling like a shopkeeper trying to charge silk prices for linen? Do not claim you know when the High Lords will summon you before they do."

"I won't claim it," Sandar told her with a smile, "but I know when I've seen men on the rooftops in the night. Just out of the corner of my eye—they can hide like pipefish in reeds—but I have seen the movement. No one has reported a theft yet, but there are thieves working inside the walls, and you can buy your supper with that. Mark me. Before another week, I'll be summoned to the Stone because a band of thieves is breaking into merchants' houses, or even lords' manors. The Defenders may guard the streets, but when thieves need tracking they send for a thief-catcher, and me before any other. I am not trying to drive up my price, but whatever I do for these pretty women, I must do soon."

"I believe he speaks the truth," Ailhuin said reluctantly. "He'll tell you the moon is green and water white if he thinks it will bring him a kiss, but he lies less than most men about other things. He may be the most honest man ever born in the Maule." Elayne put a hand over her mouth, and Egwene struggled not to laugh. Nynaeve sat unmoved and obviously impatient.

Sandar grimaced at the gray-haired woman, then apparently decided to ignore what she had said. He smiled at Nynaeve. "I will admit that I'm curious about these thieves. I've known women thieves, and bands of thieves, but I never heard of a band of women thieves before. And I owe Mother Guenna favors." His eyes seemed to record Nynaeve all over again.

"What do you charge?" she asked sharply.

"To recover stolen goods," he said briskly, "I ask the tenth part of the value of what I recover. For finding someone, I ask a silver mark for each person. Mother Guenna says the things stolen have little value except to you, mistress, so I suggest you take that choice." He smiled again; he had very white teeth. "I would not take money from you at all, except that the brotherhood would frown on it, but I will take as little as I can. A copper or two, no more."

"I know a thief-taker," Elayne told him. "From Shienar. A very *respectful* man. He carries a sword as well as a sword-breaker. Why do you not?"

Sandar looked startled for a moment, and then upset with himself for being startled. He had not caught her hint, or else had decided to ignore it. "You are not Tairen. I have heard of Shienar, mistress, tales of Trollocs, and every man a warrior." His smile said these were tales for children.

"True stories," Egwene said. "Or true enough. I have been to Shienar."

He blinked at her, and went on. "I am not a lord, nor a wealthy merchant, nor even a soldier. The Defenders do not trouble foreigners much for carrying swords—unless they mean to stay long, of course—but I would be thrust into a cell under the Stone. There are laws, mistress." His hand rubbed along his staff, as if unconsciously. “I do as well as may be, without a sword.” He focused his smile on Nynaeve once more. “Now, if you will describe these things—”

He stopped as she set her purse on the edge of the table and counted out thirteen silver marks. Egwene thought she had chosen the lightest coins; most were Tairen, only one Andoran. The Amyrlin had given them a great deal of gold, but even that would not last forever.

Nynaeve looked into the purse thoughtfully before tightening the strings and putting it back into her pouch. “There are thirteen women for you to find, Master Sandar, with as much silver again when you do. Find them, and we will recover our property ourselves.”

“I will do that myself for less than this,” he protested. “And there’s no need for extra rewards. I charge what I charge. Have no fear I’ll take a bribe.”

“There is no fear of that,” Ailhuin agreed. “I said he is honest. Just do not believe him if he says he loves you.” Sandar glared at her.

“I pay the coin, Master Sandar,” Nynaeve said firmly, “so I choose what I am buying. Will you find these women, and no more?” She waited for him to nod, reluctantly, before going on. “They may be together, or not. The first is a Taraboner. She is a little taller than I, with dark eyes and pale, honey-colored hair that she wears in many small braids after the Tarabon fashion. Some men might think her pretty, but she would not consider it a compliment. She has a mean, sulky mouth. The second is Kandori. She has long black hair with a white streak above her left ear, and. . . .”

She gave no names, and Sandar asked for none. Names were so easily changed. His smile was gone now that the business was at hand. Thirteen women she described as he listened intently, and when she was done, Egwene was sure he could have recited them back word for word.

“Mother Guenna may have told you this,” Nynaeve finished, “but I will repeat it. These women are more dangerous than you can believe. Over a dozen have died at their hands already, that I know of, and I would not be surprised if that was only a drop of the blood on their hands.” Sandar and Ailhuin both blinked at that. “If they discover you are asking after them, you will die. If they take you, they will make you tell where we are, and Mother Guenna will probably die with us.” The gray-haired woman looked disbelieving. “Believe it!” Nynaeve’s stare demanded agreement. “Believe it, or I’ll take back the silver and find another with more brains!”

“When I was young,” Sandar said, voice serious, “a cutpurse put her knife in my ribs because I thought a pretty young girl wouldn’t be as quick to stab as a man. I do not make that mistake anymore. I will behave as if these women are all Aes Sedai, and Black Ajah.” Egwene almost choked, and he gave her a rueful grin as he scooped the coins into his own purse and stuck it behind his sash. “I did not mean to frighten you, mistress. There are no Aes Sedai in Tear. It may take a few days, unless they are together. Thirteen women together will be easy to find; apart, they will be harder. But either way, I will find them. And I will not frighten them away before you learn where they are.”

When he had donned his straw hat and clogs and departed by the back door, Elayne said, “I hope he is not overconfident. Ailhuin, I heard what he said but. . . . He does understand that they are dangerous, does he not?”

“He has never been a fool except for a pair of eyes or a pretty ankle,” the gray-haired woman said, “and that is a failing of every man. He is the best thief-catcher in Tear. Have no worry. He will find these Darkfriends of yours.”

“It will rain again before morning.” Nynaeve shivered, despite the warmth of the room. “I feel a storm gathering.” Ailhuin only shook her head and set about filling bowls with fish soup for supper.

After they ate and cleaned up, Nynaeve and Ailhuin sat at the table talking of herbs and cures. Elayne worked on a small patch of embroidery she had begun on the shoulder of her cloak, tiny blue and white flowers, then read in a copy of *The Essays of Willim of Maneches* that Ailhuin had on her small shelf of books. Egwene tried reading, but neither the essays, nor *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*, nor the humorous tales of Aleria Elffin could hold her interest for more than a few pages. She fingered the stone *ter’angreal* through the bosom of her dress. *Where are they? What do they want in the Heart? None but the Dragon—none but Rand—can touch* Callandor, *so what do they want? What? What?*

As night deepened, Ailhuin showed them each to a bedroom on the second floor, but after she had gone to her own, they gathered in Egwene’s by the light of a single lamp. Egwene had already undressed to her shift; the cord hung ’round her neck with the two rings. The striped stone felt far heavier than the gold. This was what they had done every night since leaving Tar Valon, with the sole exception of that night with the Aiel.

“Wake me after an hour,” she told them.

Elayne frowned. “So short, this time?”

“Do you feel uneasy?” Nynaeve said. “Perhaps you are using it too often.”

“We would still be in Tar Valon scrubbing pots and hoping to find a Black sister before a Gray Man found us if I had not,” Egwene said sharply. *Light, Elayne’s right. I am snapping like a sulky child.* She took a deep breath. “Perhaps I *am* uneasy. Maybe it is because we are so close to the Heart of the Stone, now. So close to *Callandor.* So close to the trap, whatever it is.”

“Be careful,” Elayne said, and Nynaeve said, more quietly, “Be very careful, Egwene. Please.” She was tugging her braid in short jerks.

As Egwene lay down on the low-posted bed, with them on stools to either side, thunder rolled across the sky. Sleep came slowly.

It was the rolling hills again, as always at first, flowers and butterflies under spring sunshine, soft breezes and birds singing. She wore green silk, this time, with golden birds embroidered over her breasts, and green velvet slippers. The *ter’angreal* seemed light enough to drift up out of her dress except for the weight of the Great Serpent ring holding it down.

By simple trial and error she had learned a little of the rules of *Tel’aran’rhiod*—even this World of Dreams, this Unseen World, had its rules, if odd ones; she was sure she did not know a tenth of them—and one way to make herself go where she wanted. Closing her eyes, she emptied her mind as she would have to embrace *saidar.* It was not as easy, because the rosebud kept trying to form, and she kept sensing the True Source, kept aching to embrace it, but she had to fill the emptiness with something else. She pictured the Heart of the Stone, as she had seen it in these dreams, formed it in every detail, perfect within the void. The huge, polished redstone columns. The age-worn stones of the floor. The dome, far overhead. The crystal sword, untouchable, slowly revolving hilt-down in midair. When it was so real she was sure she could reach out and touch it, she opened her eyes, and she was there, in the Heart of the Stone. Or the Heart of the Stone as it existed in *Tel’aran’rhiod.*

The columns were there, and *Callandor*. And around the sparkling sword, almost as dim and insubstantial as shadows, thirteen women sat cross-legged, staring at *Callandor* as it revolved. Honey-haired Liandrin turned her head, looking straight at Egwene with those big, dark eyes, and her rosebud mouth smiled.

Gasping, Egwene sat up in bed so fast she almost fell off the side.

“What is the matter?” Elayne demanded. “What happened? You look frightened.”

“You only just closed your eyes,” Nynaeve said softly. “This is the first time since the very beginning that you’ve come back without us waking you. Something did happen, didn’t it?” She tugged her braid sharply. “Are you all right?”

How did I get back? Egwene wondered. *Light, I do not even know what I did*. She knew she was only trying to put off what she had to say. Unfastening the cord around her neck, she held the Great Serpent ring and the larger, twisted *ter’angreal* on her palm. “They are waiting for us,” she said finally. There was no need to say who. “And I think they know we are in Tear.”

Outside, the storm broke over the city.

Rain drumming on the deck over his head, Mat stared at the stones board on the table between him and Thom, but he could not really concentrate on the game, even with an Andoran silver mark riding on the outcome. Thunder crashed, and lightning flashed in the small windows. Four lamps lit the captain’s cabin of the *Swift*. *Bloody ship may be as sleek as the bird, but it’s still taking too bloody long*. The vessel gave a small jolt, then another; the motion seemed to change. *He had better not run us into the bloody mud! If he is not making the best time he can wring out of this buttertub, I will stuff that gold down his throat!* Yawning—he had not slept well since leaving Caemlyn; he could not stop worrying enough to sleep well—yawning, he set a white stone on the intersection of two lines; in three moves, he would capture nearly a fifth of Thom’s black stones.

“You could be a good player, boy,” the gleeman said around his pipe, placing his next stone, “if you put your mind to it.” His tabac smelled like leaves and nuts.

Mat reached for another stone from the pile at his elbow, then blinked and let it lie. In the same three moves, Thom’s stones would surround over a third of his. He had not seen it coming, and he could see no escape. “Do you ever lose a game? Have you ever lost a game?”

Thom removed his pipe and knuckled his mustaches. “Not in a long while. Morgase used to beat me about half the time. It is said good commanders of soldiers and good players of the Great Game are good at stones, as well. She is the one, and I’ve no doubt she could command a battle, too.”

“Wouldn’t you rather dice some more? Stones take too much time.”

“I like a chance to win more than one toss in nine or ten,” the white-haired man said dryly.

Mat bounded to his feet as the door banged open to admit Captain Derne. The square-faced man whipped his cloak from his shoulders, shaking the rain off and muttering curses to himself. “The Light sear my bones, I do not know why I ever let you hire *Swift*. You, demanding more flaming speed in the blackest night or the heaviest rain. More speed. Always more bloody speed! Could have run on a bloody mudflat a hundred times over by now!”

“You wanted the gold,” Mat said harshly. “You said this heap of old boards was fast, Derne. When do we reach Tear?”

The captain smiled a tight smile. “We are tying off to the dock, now. And burn me for a bloody farmer if I carry anything that can flaming talk ever again! Now, where is the rest of my gold?”

Mat hurried to one of the small windows and peered out. In the harsh glare of lightning flashes he could see a wet stone dock, if not much else. He fished the second purse of gold from his pocket and tossed it to Derne. *Whoever heard of a riverman who didn’t dice!* “About time,” he growled. *Light send I’m not too late.*

He had stuffed all of his spare clothes and his blankets into the leather scrip, and he hung that on one side of him and the roll of fireworks on the other, from the cord he tied to it. His cloak covered it all, but gapped a little in the front. Better he got wet than the fireworks. He could dry out and be as good as new; a test with a bucket had shown fireworks could not. *I guess Rand’s da was right.* Mat had always thought the Village Council would not set them off in the rain because they made a better show on clear nights.

“Aren’t you about ready to sell those things?” Thom was settling his gleeman’s cloak on his shoulders. It covered his leather-cased harp and flute, but his bundle of clothes and blankets he slung on his back outside the patch-covered cloak.

“Not until I figure out how they work, Thom. Besides, think what fun it will be when I set them all off.”

The gleeman shuddered. “As long as you don’t do it all at once, boy. As long as you don’t throw them in the fireplace at supper. I’d not put it past you, the way you’ve been behaving with them. You’re lucky the captain here did not throw us off the ship two days ago.”

“He wouldn’t.” Mat laughed. “Not while that purse was in the offing. Eh, Derne?”

Derne was tossing the purse of gold in his hand. “I have not asked before this, but you’ve given me the gold, now, and you’ll not take it back. What is this all about? All this flaming speed.”

“A wager, Derne.” Yawning, Mat picked up his quarterstaff, ready to go. “A wager.”

“A wager!” Derne stared at the heavy purse. The other just like it was locked in his money chest. “There must be a flaming kingdom riding on it!”

“More than that,” Mat said.

Rain bucketed down on the deck so hard that he could not see the gangplank except when lightning crackled above the city; the roar of the downpour barely let him hear himself think. He could see lights in windows up a street, though. There would be inns, up there. The captain had not come on deck to see them ashore, and none of the crew had stayed out in the rain, either. Mat and Thom made their way to the stone dock alone.

Mat cursed when his boots sank into the mud of the street, but there was nothing for it, so he kept on, striding along as fast as he could with his boots and the butt of his staff sticking at every step. The air smelled of fish, rank even with the rain. “We’ll find an inn,” he said, loudly, so he could be heard, “and then I will go out looking.”

“In this weather?” Thom shouted back. Rain was rolling down his face, but he was more interested in keeping his instruments covered than his face.

“Comar could have left Caemlyn before us. If he had a good horse instead of the crowbaits we were riding, he could have set out downriver from Aringill maybe a full day ahead of us, and I don’t know how much of that we caught up with that idiot Derne.”

“It was a quick passage,” Thom allowed. “*Swift* deserves its name.”

“Be that as it may, Thom, rain or no rain, I have to find him before he finds Egwene and Nynaeve, and Elayne.”

“A few more hours won’t make much difference, boy. There are hundreds of inns in a city the size of Tear. There may be hundreds more outside the walls, some of them little places with no more than a dozen rooms to let, so tiny you could walk right by them and never know they were there.” The gleeman hitched the hood of his cloak up more, muttering to himself. “It will take weeks to search them all. But it will take Comar the same weeks. We can spend the night in out of the rain. You can wager whatever coin you have left that Comar won’t be out in it.”

Mat shook his head. *A tiny inn with a dozen rooms*. Before he left Emond’s Field, the biggest building he had ever seen was the Winespring Inn. He doubted if Bran al’Vere had any more than a dozen rooms to let. Egwene had lived with her parents and her sisters in the rooms at the front of the second floor. *Burn me, sometimes I think we should never any of us have left Emond’s Field*. But Rand surely had had to, and Egwene would probably have died if she had not gone to Tar Valon. *Now she might die because she did go*. He did not think he could settle for the farm again; the cows and the sheep certainly would not play dice. But Perrin still had a chance to go home. *Go home, Perrin,* he found himself thinking. *Go home while you still can*. He gave himself a shake. *Fool! Why would he want to?* He thought of bed, but pushed it away. *Not yet*.

Lightning streaked across the sky, three jagged bolts together, casting a stark light over a narrow house that seemed to have bunches of herbs hanging in the windows, and a shop, shut up tight, but a potter’s from the sign with its bowls and plates. Yawning, he hunched his shoulders against the driving rain and tried to pull his boots out of the clinging mud more quickly.

“I think I can forget about this part of the city, Thom,” he shouted. “All this mud, and that stink of fish. Can you see Nynaeve or Egwene—or Elayne!—choosing to stay here? Women like things neat and tidy, Thom, and smelling good.”

“May be, boy,” Thom muttered, then coughed. “You would be surprised what women will put up with. But it may be.”

Holding his cloak to keep the roll of fireworks covered, Mat lengthened his stride. “Come on, Thom. I want to find Comar or the girls tonight, one or the other.”

Thom limped after him, coughing now and again.

They strode through the wide gates in the city—unguarded, in the rain—and Mat was relieved to feel paving stones under his feet again. And not more than fifty paces up the street was an inn, the windows of the common room spilling light onto the street, music drifting out into the night. Even Thom covered that last fifty paces through the rain quickly, limp or no limp.

The White Crescent had a landlord whose girth made his long blue coat fit snugly below the waist as well as above, unlike those of most of the men in the low-backed chairs at the tables. Mat thought the landlord's baggy breeches, tied at the ankle above low shoes, had to be big enough for two ordinary men to fit inside, one in each leg. The serving women wore dark, high-necked dresses and short white aprons. There was a fellow playing a hammered dulcimer between the two stone fireplaces. Thom eyed the fellow critically and shook his head. The rotund innkeeper, Cavan Lopar by name, was more than glad to give them rooms. He frowned at their muddy boots, but silver from Mat's pocket—the gold was running low—and Thom's patch-covered cloak smoothed his fat forehead. When Thom said he would perform for a small fee some nights, Lopar's chins waggled with pleasure. Of a big man with a white streak in his beard, he knew nothing, nor of three women meeting the descriptions Mat gave. Mat left everything but his cloak and his quarterstaff in his room, barely looking to see that it had a bed—sleep was enticing, but he refused to let himself think of it—then wolfed down a spicy fish stew and rushed back out into the rain. He was surprised that Thom came with him.

"I thought you wanted to be in where it's dry, Thom."

The gleeman patted the flute case he still had under his cloak. The rest of his things were up in his room. "People talk to a gleeman, boy. I may learn something you would not. I'd not like to see those girls harmed any more than you."

There was another inn a hundred paces down the rain-filled street on the other side, and another two hundred beyond that, and then more. Mat took them as he came to them, ducking in long enough for Thom to flourish his cloak and tell a story, then let someone buy him a cup of wine afterwards while Mat asked around after a tall man with a white streak in his close-cut black beard and three women. He won a few coins at dice, but he learned nothing, and neither did Thom. He was just glad the gleeman seemed to be taking only a few sips of wine at each inn; Thom had been close to abstemious on the boat, but Mat had not been certain he would not dive back into the wine once they reached Tear. By the time they had visited two dozen common rooms, Mat felt as if his eyelids had weights. The rain had lessened a bit, but it still fell steadily in big drops, and as the rain fell off the wind had freshened. The sky had the dark gray look of coming dawn.

“Boy,” Thom muttered, “if we don’t go back to The White Crescent, I am going to go to sleep here in the rain.” He stopped to cough. “Do you realize you’ve marched right past three inns? Light, I am so tired I can’t think. Do you have a scheme of where to go that you have not told me?”

Mat stared blearily up the street at a tall man in a cloak hurrying around a corner. *Light, I* am *tired. Rand is five hundred leagues from here, playing at being the bloody Dragon*. “What? Three inns?” They were standing almost in front of another, The Golden Cup according to the sign creaking in the wind. It looked nothing like a dice cup, but he decided to give it a try anyway. “One more, Thom. If we don’t find them here, we’ll go back and go to bed.” Bed sounded better than a dice game with a hundred gold marks riding on the toss, but he made himself go in.

Two steps into the common room Mat saw him. The big man wore a green coat with blue stripes down puffy sleeves, but it was Comar, close-cut black beard with a white streak over his chin and all. He sat in one of the strangely low-backed chairs, at a table on the far side of the room, rattling a leather dice cup and smiling at the man across from him. That fellow wore a long coat and baggy breeches, and he was not smiling. He stared at the coins on the table as if wishing he had them back in his purse. Another dice cup sat at Comar’s elbow.

Comar upended the leather cup in his hand, and began laughing almost before the dice stopped spinning. “Who is next?” he called loudly, pulling the wager to his side of the table. There was already a considerable pile of silver in front of him. He scooped the dice into the cup and rattled them. “Surely someone else wants to try his luck?” It seemed that no one did, but he kept rattling the cup and laughing.

The innkeeper was easy to pick out, though they did not seem to wear aprons in Tear. His coat was the same shade of deep blue as that of every other innkeeper Mat had spoken to. A plump man, though little more than half the size of Lopar and with half that fellow’s number of chins, he was sitting at a table by himself, polishing a pewter mug furiously and glaring across the room toward Comar, though not when Comar was looking. Some of the other men gave the bearded man sidelong frowns, too. But not when he was looking.

Mat suppressed his first urge, which was to rush over to Comar, drub him over the head with his quarterstaff, and demand to know where Egwene and the others were. Something was wrong here. Comar was the first man he had seen wearing a sword, but the way the men looked at him was more than fear of a swordsman. Even the serving woman who brought Comar a fresh cup of wine—and was pinched for her trouble—had a nervous laugh for him.

Look at it from every side, Mat thought wearily. *Half the trouble I get into is from not doing that. I have to think*. Tiredness seemed to have stuffed his head with wool. He motioned to Thom, and they strolled over to the innkeeper, who eyed them suspiciously when they sat down. "Who is the man with the stripe in his beard?" Mat asked.

"Not from the city, are you?" the innkeeper said. "He is a foreigner, too. I've never seen him before tonight, but I know what he is. Some outlander who has come here and made his fortune in trade. A merchant rich enough to wear a sword. That is no reason for him to treat us like this."

"If you have never seen him before," Mat said, "how do you know he is a merchant?"

The innkeeper looked at him as if he were stupid. "His coat, man, and his sword. He cannot be a lord or a soldier if he's from off, so he has to be a rich merchant." He shook his head for the stupidity of foreigners. "They come to our places, to look down their noses at us, and fondle the girls under our very eyes, but he has no call to do this. If I go to the Maule, I don't gamble for some fisherman's coins. If I go to the Tavar, I do not dice with the farmers come to sell their crops." His polishing gained in ferocity. "Such luck, the man has. It must be how he made his fortune."

"He wins, does he?" Yawning, Mat wondered how he would do dicing with another man who had luck.

"Sometimes he loses," the innkeeper muttered, "when the stake is a few silver pennies. Sometimes. But let it reach a silver mark. . . . No less than a dozen times tonight, I have seen him win at Crowns with three crowns and two roses. And half again as often, at Top, it has been three sixes and two fives. He tosses nothing but sixes at Threes, and three sixes and a five every throw at Compass. If he has such luck, I say the Light shine on him, and well to him, but let him use it with other merchants, as is proper. How can a man have such luck?”

“Weighted dice,” Thom said, then coughed. “When he wants to be sure of winning, he uses dice that always show the same face. He is smart enough not to have made it the highest toss—folk become suspicious if you always throw the king”—he raised an eyebrow at Mat—“just one that’s all but impossible to beat, but he cannot change that they always show the same face.”

“I have heard of such,” the innkeeper said slowly. “Illianers use them, I hear.” Then he shook his head. “But both men use the same cup and dice. It cannot be.”

“Bring me two dice cups,” Thom said, “and two sets of dice. Crowns or spots, it makes no difference, so long as they are the same.”

The innkeeper frowned at him, but left—prudently taking the pewter cup with him—and came back with two leather cups. Thom rolled the five bone cubes from one onto the table in front of Mat. Whether with spots or symbols, every set of dice Mat had ever seen had been either bone or wood. These had spots. He picked them up, frowning at Thom. “Am I supposed to see something?”

Thom dumped the dice from the other cup into his hand, then, almost too quickly to follow, dropped them back in and twisted the cup over to rest upside down on the table before the dice could fall out. He kept his hand on top of the cup. “Put a mark on each of them, boy. Something small, but something you’ll know for your mark.”

Mat found himself exchanging puzzled glances with the innkeeper. Then they both looked at the cup upside down under Thom’s hand. He knew Thom was up to something tricky—gleemen were always doing things that were impossible, like eating fire and pulling silk out of the air—but he did not see how Thom could do anything with him watching close. He unsheathed his belt knife and made a small scratch on each die, right across the circle of six spots.

“All right,” he said, setting them back on the table. “Show me your trick.”

Thom reached over and picked up the dice, then set them down again a foot away. “Look for your marks, boy.”

Mat frowned. Thom’s hand was still on the upended leather cup; the gleeman had not moved it or taken Mat’s dice anywhere near it. He picked up the dice . . . and blinked. There was not a scratch on them. The innkeeper gasped.

Thom turned his free hand over, revealing five dice. “Your marks are on these. That is what Comar is doing. It is a child’s trick, simple, though I’d never have thought he had the fingers for it.”

“I do not think I want to play dice with you after all,” Mat said slowly. The innkeeper was staring at the dice, but not as if he saw any solution. “Call the Watch, or whatever you call it here,” Mat told him. “Have him arrested.” *He’ll kill nobody in a prison cell. Yet what if they are already dead?* He tried not to listen, but the thought persisted. *Then I’ll see him dead, and Gaebril, whatever it takes! But they aren’t, burn me! They can’t be!*

The innkeeper was shaking his head. “Me? Me, denounce a merchant to the Defenders? They would not even look at his dice. He could say one word, and I would be in chains working the channeldredges in the Fingers of the Dragon. He could cut me down where I stood, and the Defenders would say I had earned it. Perhaps he will go away after a while.”

Mat gave him a wry grimace. “If I expose him, will that be good enough? Will you call the Watch, or the Defenders or whoever, then?”

“You do not understand. You are a foreigner. Even if he is from off, he is a wealthy man, important.”

“Wait here,” Mat told Thom. “I do not mean to let him reach Egwene and the others, whatever it takes.” He yawned as he scraped back his chair.

“Wait, boy,” Thom called after him, soft yet urgent. The gleeman pushed himself up out of his chair. “Burn you, you don’t know what you’re putting your foot into!”

Mat waved for him to stay there and walked over to Comar. No one else had taken up the bearded man’s challenge, and he eyed Mat with interest as Mat leaned his quarterstaff against the table and sat down.

Comar studied Mat’s coat and grinned nastily. “You want to wager coppers, farmer? I do not waste my time with—” He cut off as Mat set an Andoran gold crown on the table and yawned at him, making no effort to cover his mouth. “You say little, farmer, though your manners could use improving, but gold has a voice of its own and no need of manners.” He shook the leather cup in his hand and spilled the dice out. He was chuckling before they came to rest, showing three crowns and two roses. “You’ll not beat that, farmer. Perhaps you have more gold hidden in those rags that you want to lose? What did you do? Rob your master?"

He reached for the dice, but Mat scooped them up ahead of him. Comar glared, but let him have the cup. If both tosses were the same, they would throw again until one man won. Mat smiled as he rattled the dice. He did not mean to give Comar a chance to change them. If they threw the same toss three or four times in a row—exactly the same, every time—even these Defenders would listen. The whole common room would see; they would have to back his word.

He spilled the dice onto the tabletop. They bounced oddly. He felt—something—shifting. It was as if his luck had gone wild. The room seemed to be writhing around him, tugging at the dice with threads. For some reason he wanted to look at the door, but he kept his eyes on the dice. They came to rest. Five crowns. Comar's eyes looked ready to pop out of his head.

"You lose," Mat said softly. If his luck was in to this extent, perhaps it was time to push it. A voice in the back of his head told him to think, but he was too tired to listen. "I think your luck is about used up, Comar. If you've harmed those girls, it's all gone."

"I have not even found . . ." Comar began, still staring at the dice, then jerked his head up. His face had gone white. "How do you know my name?"

He had not found them, yet. *Luck, sweet luck, stay with me*. "Go back to Caemlyn, Comar. Tell Gaebril you could not find them. Tell him they are dead. Tell him anything, but leave Tear tonight. If I see you again, I'll kill you."

"Who are you?" the big man said unsteadily. "Who—?" The next instant his sword was out and he was on his feet.

Mat shoved the table at him, overturning it, and grabbed for his quarterstaff. He had forgotten how big Comar was. The bearded man pushed the table right back at him. Mat fell over with his chair, holding a bare grasp on his staff, as Comar heaved the table out of the way and stabbed at him. Mat threw his feet against the man's middle to stop his rush, swung the staff awkwardly, just enough to deflect the sword. But the blow knocked the staff from his fingers, and he found himself gripping Comar's wrist, instead, with the man's blade a hand from his face. With a grunt he rolled backwards, heaving as hard as he could with his legs. Comar's eyes widened as he sailed over Mat to crash onto a table, face up. Mat scrambled for his staff, but when he had it, Comar had not moved.

The big man lay with his hips and legs sprawled across the top of the table, the rest of him hanging down with his head on the floor. The men who had been sitting at the table were on their feet a safe distance away, wringing their hands and eyeing each other nervously. A low, worried buzz filled the common room, not the noise Mat expected.

Comar's sword lay within easy reach of his hand. But he did not move. He stared at Mat, though, as Mat kicked the sword away and went to one knee beside him. *Light! I think his back is broken!* "I told you you should have gone, Comar. Your luck is all used up."

"Fool," the big man breathed. "Do you . . . think I . . . was the only . . . one hunting them? They won't . . . live till. . . ." His eyes stared at Mat, and his mouth was open, but he said no more. Nor ever would again.

Mat met the glazing stare, trying to will more words out of the dead man. *Who else, burn you? Who? Where are they? My luck. Burn me, what happened to my luck?* He became aware of the innkeeper pulling frantically at his arm.

"You must go. You must. Before the Defenders come. I will show them the dice. I will tell them it was an outlander, but a tall man. With red-colored hair, and gray eyes. No one will suffer. A man I dreamed of last night. No one real. No one will contradict me. He took coin from everyone with his dice. But you must go. You must!" Everyone else in the room was studiously looking another way.

Mat let himself be hauled away from the dead man and pushed outside. Thom was already waiting in the rain. He seized Mat's arm and limped down the street hurriedly, pulling Mat stumbling behind him. Mat's hood hung down his back; the rain soaked his hair and poured down his face, down his neck, but he did not notice. The gleeman kept looking over his shoulder, searching the street beyond Mat.

"Are you asleep, boy? You did not look asleep back there. Come on, boy. The Defenders will arrest any outlander within two streets, no matter what description that innkeeper gives."

"It's the luck," Mat mumbled. "I've figured it out. The dice. My luck works best when things are . . . random. Like dice. Not much good for cards. No good at stones. Too much pattern. It has to be random. Even finding Comar. I'd stopped visiting every inn. I walked into that one by chance. Thom, if I am going to find Egwene and the others in time, I have to look without any pattern."

"What are you talking about? The man is dead. If he already killed them. . . . Well, you've avenged them. If he hasn't, you saved them. Now will you bloody walk faster? The Defenders won't be long coming, and they are not so gentle as the Queen's Guards."

Mat shook his arm free and picked up his pace unsteadily, dragging the quarterstaff. "He let it slip that he hadn't located them, yet. But he said he was not the only one. Thom, I believe him. I was looking him in the eye, and he was telling the truth. I still have to find them, Thom. And now I don't even know who is after them. I have to find them."

Stifling a huge yawn with his fist, Thom pulled Mat's hood up against the rain. "Not tonight, boy. I need sleep, and so do you."

Wet. My hair's dripping in my face. His head seemed fuzzy. With a need for sleep, he realized after a moment. And he realized how tired he was, if he had to think just to know it. "All right, Thom. But I am going to look again as soon as it's light." Thom nodded and coughed, and they made their way back to The White Crescent through the rain.

Dawn was not long in coming, but Mat rousted himself out of bed, and he and Thom set off trying to search every inn inside the walls of Tear. Mat let himself wander wherever the mood and the next turning took him, not looking for inns at all, and tossing a coin to decide whether to go in. For three days and nights he did this, and for three days and nights it rained without stopping, sometimes thundering, sometimes quiet, but always pouring down.

Thom's cough grew worse, so he had to stop playing the flute and telling stories, and he would not carry his harp out in that weather; he insisted on going along, however, and men still talked to a gleeman. Mat's luck with the dice seemed even better since he had begun this random wander, though he never stayed in one inn or tavern long enough to win more than a few coins. Neither of them heard anything useful. Rumors of war with Illian. Rumors of invading Mayene. Rumors of invasion from Andor, of the Sea Folk shutting off trade, of Artur Hawkwing's armies returning from the dead. Rumors the Dragon was coming. The men Mat gambled with were as gloomy about one rumor as the next; they seemed to him to hunt for the darkest rumors they could find and half believe them all.

But he heard not a whisper that might lead him to Egwene and the others. Not one innkeeper had seen women matching their descriptions.

He began to have bad dreams, no doubt from all his worrying. Egwene and Nynaeve and Elayne, and some fellow with close-cropped white hair, wearing a coat with puffy, striped sleeves like Comar’s, laughing and weaving a net around them. Only sometimes it was Moiraine he was weaving the net for, and sometimes he held a crystal sword instead, a sword that blazed like the sun as soon as he touched it. Sometimes it was Rand who held the sword. For some reason, he dreamed of Rand a good deal.

Mat was sure it was all because he was not getting enough sleep, not eating except when he happened to remember, but he would not stop. He had a wager to win, he told himself, and he meant to win this one if it killed him.

* * *

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CHAPTER 50

The Hammer

The afternoon sun was hot as the ferry docked in Tear; puddles stood on the steaming stones of the dock, and the air seemed almost as damp to Perrin as Illian's had. The air smelled of pitch and wood and rope—he could see shipyards further south along the river—of spices and iron and barley, of perfumes and wines and a hundred different aromas he could not single out from the melange, most coming from the warehouses behind the docks. When the wind swirled momentarily out of the north, he caught the scents of fish, too, but those faded as the wind swung back. No smells of anything to hunt. His mind reached out to feel for wolves before he realized what he was doing and snapped his guards shut. He had done that too often of late. There had been no wolves, of course. Not in a city like this. He wished it did not feel so—alone.

As soon as the ramp at the end of the barge was lowered, he led Stepper up to the dock after Moiraine and Lan. The huge shape of the Stone of Tear lay off to their left, shadowed so that it looked like a mountain despite the great banner at its highest point. He did not want to look at the Stone, but it seemed impossible to look at the city without seeing it. *Is he here yet? Light, if he has already tried to get into* that, *he could be dead already*. And then it would all be for nothing.

"What are we meant to find here?" Zarine asked behind him. She had not stopped asking questions; she just did not ask them of the Aes Sedai or the Warder. "Illian showed us Gray Men and the Wild Hunt. What does Tear hold that—that someone wants to keep you from so badly?"

Perrin glanced around; none of the dockmen shuttling cargo about seemed to have heard. He was sure he would have smelled fear if they had. He bit back the sharp remark that hung on the end of his tongue. She had a quicker tongue, and a sharper.

"I wish you did not sound so eager," Loial rumbled. "You seem to think it will all be as easy as Illian, Faile."

“Easy?” Zarine muttered. “Easy! Loial, we were nearly killed twice in one night. Illian was enough for a Hunter’s song in itself. What makes you call it easy?”

Perrin grimaced. He wished Loial had not decided to call Zarine by that name she had chosen; it was a constant reminder that Moiraine thought she was Min’s falcon. And it did nothing to stop Perrin wondering if she was the beautiful woman Min had warned him against, too. *At least I’ve not run up against the hawk. Or a Tuatha’an with a sword! Now that would the strangest of all, or I am a wool merchant!*

“Stop asking questions, Zarine,” he said as he swung up into Stepper’s saddle. “You will find out why we are here when Moiraine decides to tell you.” He tried not to look at the Stone.

She turned those dark, tilted eyes on him. “I do not think you know why, blacksmith. I think that is why you will not tell me, because you cannot. Admit it, farmboy.”

With a small sigh, he rode off the docks after Moiraine and Lan. Zarine did not dig at Loial in that cutting way when the Ogier refused to answer her questions. He thought she must be trying to browbeat him into using that name. He would not.

Moiraine had tied the oiled cloak behind her saddle, atop the innocuous-looking bundle that held the Dragon banner, and despite the heat had donned the blue linen cloak from Illian. Its deep, wide hood hid her face. Her Great Serpent ring was on a cord around her neck. Tear, she had said, did not forbid the presence of Aes Sedai, only channeling, but the Defenders of the Stone kept a close eye on any woman who wore the ring. She did not want to be watched on this visit to Tear.

Lan had stuffed his color-shifting cloak into his saddlebags two days earlier, when it had become apparent that whoever had sent the Darkhounds—*Sammael,* Perrin thought with a shiver, and tried not to think of the name at all—whoever had sent them had not sent any more pursuit. The Warder had made no concessions to the heat of Illian, and he made none to the lesser heat of Tear. His gray-green coat was buttoned up all the way.

Perrin wore his coat half undone, and the neck of his shirt untied. Tear might be a little cooler than Illian, but it was still as hot as summer in the Two Rivers, and as always after rain, the dampness of the air made the heat seem worse. His axe belt hung looped around the tall pommel of his saddle. It was handy there, if he needed it, and he felt better not wearing it.

He was surprised at the mud in the first streets they rode along. Only villages and smaller towns had dirt streets, that he had seen, and Tear was one of the great cities. But the people did not seem to mind, many going barefoot. A woman walking on little wooden platforms caught his attention for a time, and he wondered why they did not all wear them. Those baggy breeches on the men looked as if they might be cooler than the snug ones he wore, but he was sure he would feel a fool if he tried them. He made a picture in his head of himself wearing those breeches and one of those round straw hats, and chuckled at it.

“What do you find funny, Perrin?” Loial asked. His ears were drooping till their tufts were hidden in his hair, and he looked at the people in the street worriedly. “These folk look . . . defeated, Perrin. They did not look this way when I was here last. Even people who let their grove be cut down do not deserve to look like this.”

As Perrin began to study faces instead of just looking at everything at once, he saw that Loial was right. Something had gone out of too many of those faces. Hope, maybe. Curiosity. They barely glanced at the party riding by, except to get out of the way of the horses. The Ogier, mounted on an animal as big as a draft horse, might as well have been Lan, or Perrin.

The streets changed, gaining wide stone paving, after they passed inside the gates of the high, gray city wall, past the hard, dark eyes of soldiers in breastplates over red coats with wide sleeves ending in narrow white cuffs, and rimmed, round helmets with a ridge over the top. Instead of the baggy breeches other men wore, theirs were tight, and tucked into knee-high boots. The soldiers frowned at Lan’s sword and fingered their own, stared sharply at Perrin’s axe and his bow, but in a way, despite their frowns and sharp looks, there was something beaten in their faces, too, as if nothing were really worth the effort any longer.

The buildings were larger and taller inside the walls, though most were made no differently from those outside. The roofs looked a bit odd to Perrin, especially those that came to points, but he had seen so many different kinds of roof since leaving home that he only wondered what kind of nails they used with their tiles. In some places, the people did not use nails on their roof tiles at all.

Palaces and great buildings stood among the smaller and more ordinary, seemingly placed haphazardly; a structure of towers and squarish, white domes, surrounded on all sides by wide streets, might have shops and inns and houses on the other sides of those streets. A huge hall fronted by squared columns of marble four paces on a side, with fifty steps to climb to reach bronze doors five spans high, had a bakery one side and a tailor on the other.

More men wore coats and breeches like the soldiers' here, though in brighter colors and without armor, and some even wore swords. None of them went barefoot, not even those in baggy breeches. The women's dresses were often longer, their necklines lower to bare shoulders and even bosom, the cloth as likely to be silk as wool. The Sea Folk traded a good deal of silk through Tear. As many sedan chairs and carriages drawn by teams of horses moved through the streets as ox-carts and wagons. Yet too many of the faces had that same look of having given up.

The inn Lan chose, the Star, had a weaver's shop on one side and a smithy on the other, with narrow alleyways between. The smithy was of undressed gray stone, the weaver's and the inn of wood, though the Star stood four stories tall and had small windows in its roof as well. The rattle of looms was hard-pressed to compete with the clang of the smith's hammer. They handed their horses over to stablemen, to be taken around back, and went inside the inn. There were fish smells from the kitchen, baking and perhaps stewing, and the scent of roast mutton. The men in the common room all wore the tight coats and loose breeches; Perrin did not think richer men—somehow he was sure the men in colorful coats with puffy sleeves and the bare-shouldered women in bright silk were all rich, or nobles—those folk would not put up with the noise. Perhaps that was why Lan had chosen it.

"How are we supposed to sleep with this racketing?" Zarine muttered.

"No questions?" he said with a smile. For a moment he thought she was going to stick out her tongue at him.

The innkeeper was a round-faced, balding man in a long, deep blue coat and those loose breeches, who bowed over hands clasped across his stout belly. His face had that look, a weary resignation. "The Light shine on you, mistresses, and welcome," he sighed. "The Light shine on you, masters, and welcome." He gave a small start at Perrin's yellow eyes, then passed wearily on to Loial. "The Light shine on you, friend Ogier, and welcome. It is a year or more since I have seen one of your kind in Tear. Some work or other at the Stone. They stayed in the Stone, of course, but I saw them in the street one day." He finished with another sigh, seemingly unable to summon any curiosity as to why another Ogier had come to Tear, or why any of them had come, for that matter.

The balding man, whose name was Jurah Haret, showed them to their rooms himself. Apparently Moiraine's silk dress and the way she kept her face hidden, taken with Lan's hard face and sword, made them a lady and her guard in his eyes, and so worthy of his personal attention. Perrin he obviously took as some kind of retainer, and Zarine he was plainly unsure of—to her visible disgust—and Loial was, after all, an Ogier. He called men to push beds together for Loial, and offered Moiraine a private room for her meals if she wished. She accepted graciously.

They kept together through it all, making a small procession through the upper halls until Haret bowed and sighed his way out of their presence, leaving them all where they had begun, outside Moiraine's room. The walls were white plaster, and Loial's head brushed the hall ceiling.

"Odious fellow," Zarine muttered, brushing furiously at the dust on her narrow skirts with both hands. "I believe he took me for your handmaid, Aes Sedai. I will not stand for that!"

"Watch your tongue," Lan said softly. "If you use that name where folk can hear, you will regret it, girl." She looked as if she were going to argue, but his icy blue eyes stilled her tongue this time, if it did not cool her glare.

Moiraine ignored them. Staring off at nothing, she worked her cloak in her hands almost as if wiping them. Unaware what she was doing, in Perrin's opinion.

"How do we go about finding Rand?" he asked, but she did not appear to hear him. "Moiraine?"

"Remain close to the inn," she said after a moment. "Tear can be a dangerous city for those who do not know its ways. The Pattern can be torn, here." That last was soft, as if to herself. In a stronger voice she said, "Lan, let us see what we can discover without attracting attention. The rest of you, stay close to the inn!"

" 'Stay close to the inn,' " Zarine mimicked as the Aes Sedai and the Warder disappeared down the stairs. But she said it quietly enough that they would not hear. "This Rand. He is the one you called the. . . ." If she looked like a falcon right then, it was a very uneasy falcon. "And we are in Tear, where the Heart of the Stone holds. . . . And the Prophecies say. . . . The Light burn me, *ta'veren*, is this a story I want to be in?"

“It is not a story, Zarine.” For a moment Perrin felt almost as hopeless as the innkeeper had sounded. “The Wheel weaves us into the Pattern. You chose to tangle your thread with ours; it’s too late to untangle it, now.”

“Light!” she growled. “Now you sound like *her*!”

He left her there with Loial and went to put his things in his room—it had a low bed, comfortable but small, as city people seemed to think befitted a servant, a washstand, a stool, and a few pegs on the cracked plaster wall—and when he came out, they were both gone. The ring of hammer on anvil called to him.

So much in Tear looked odd that it was a relief to walk into the smithy. The ground floor was all one large room with no back wall except for two long doors that stood open on a yard for shoeing horses and oxen, complete with an ox sling. Hammers stood in their stands, tongs of various kinds and sizes hung on the exposed joists of the walls, buttresses and hoof knives and other farrier’s tools lay neatly arranged on wooden benches with chisels and beak irons and swages and all the implements of the blacksmith’s craft. Bins held lengths of iron and steel in various thicknesses. Five grinding wheels of different roughness stood about the hard dirt floor, six anvils, and three stone-sided forges with their bellows, though only one held glowing coals. Quenching barrels stood ready to hand.

The smith was plying his hammer on yellow-hot iron gripped in heavy tongs. He wore baggy breeches and had pale blue eyes, but the long leather vest over his bare chest and apron were not much different from those Perrin and Master Luhhan had worn back in Emond’s Field, and his thick arms and shoulders spoke of years working metal. His dark hair had almost the same amount of gray that Perrin remembered in Master Luhhan’s. More vests and aprons hung on the wall, as if the man had apprentices, but they were not in evidence now. The forge-fire smelled like home. The hot iron smelled like home.

The smith turned to thrust the piece he was working back into the coals, and Perrin stepped over to work the bellows for him. The man glanced at him, but said nothing. Perrin pulled the bellows handle up and down with slow, steady, even strokes, keeping the coals at the right heat. The smith went back to working the hot iron, on the rounded horn of the anvil, this time. Perrin thought he might be making a barrel scrape. The hammer rang with sharp, quick blows.

The man spoke without looking up from his work. “Apprentice?” was all he said.

“Yes,” Perrin replied just as simply.

The smith worked on for a time. It *was* a barrel scrape, for cleaning the insides of wooden barrels. Now and again he eyed Perrin consideringly. Setting his hammer down, just for a moment, the smith picked up a short length of thick, square stock and pushed it into Perrin’s hand, then picked up his hammer again and resumed work. “See what you can do with that,” he said.

Without even thinking about it, Perrin stepped over to an anvil on the other side of the forge and tapped the stock against its edge. It made a nice ring. The steel had not been left long enough in the slowfurnace to pick up a great deal of carbon from the coal. He pushed it into the hot coals for almost its entire length, tasted the two water barrels to see which had been salted—the third was olive oil—then took off his coat and shirt and chose a leather vest that would fit his chest. Most of these Tairen fellows were not as large as he, but he found one that would do. Finding an apron was easier.

When he turned around, he saw the smith, still with his head down over his work, nodding and smiling to himself. But just because he knew his way around a smithy did not mean he had any skill at smithing. That was yet to be shown.

When he came back to the anvil with two hammers, a set of long-handled flat-tongs, and a sharp-topped hardy, the steel bar had heated to a dark red except for a small bit of what he had left out of the coals. He worked the bellows, watching the color of the metal lighten, until it reached a yellow just short of white. Then he pulled it out with the tongs, laid it on the anvil, and picked up the heavier of the two hammers. About ten pounds, he estimated, and with a longer handle than most people, who did not know metal working, thought was necessary. He held it near the end; hot metal gave off sparks, sometimes, and he had seen the scars on the hands of the smith from up at Roundhill, a careless fellow.

He did not want to make anything elaborate or fancy. Simple things seemed best at the moment. He began by rounding the edges of the bar, then hammered the middle out into a broad blade, almost as thick as the original at the butt, but a good hand and a half long. From time to time he returned the metal to the coals, to keep it at the pale yellow, and after a time he shifted to the lighter hammer, half the weight of the first. The piece beyond the blade, he thinned down, then bent it over the anvil horn in a curve down beside the blade. A wooden handle could be fixed onto that, eventually. Setting the sharp-chisel hardy in the anvil's hardy-hole, he laid the glowing metal atop it. One sharp blow of the hammer cut off the tool he had made. Or almost made. It would be a chamfer knife, for smoothing and leveling the tops of barrel staves after they were hopped together, among other things. When he was done. The other man's barrel scrape had made him think of it.

As soon as he had made the hot-cut, he tossed the glowing metal into the salted quenching barrel. Unsalted gave a harder quench, for the hardest metal, while the oil gave the softest, for good knives. And swords, he had heard, but he had never had any part in making anything like that.

When the metal had cooled enough, to a dull gray, he removed it from the water and took it to the grinding wheels. A little slow work with the footpedals ground a polish onto the blade. Carefully, he heated the blade portion again. This time the colors deepened, to straw, to bronze. When the bronze color began to run up the blade in waves, he set it aside to cool. The final edge could be sharpened then. Quenching again would destroy the tempering he had just done.

"A very neat bit of work," the smith said. "No wasted motion. You looking for work? My apprentices just walked away, all three of them, the worthless fools, and I've plenty you could do."

Perrin shook his head. "I do not know how long I will be in Tear. I'd like to work a little longer, if you do not mind. It has been a long time, and I miss it. Maybe I could do some of the work your apprentices would have done."

The smith snorted loudly. "You're a deal better than any of those louts, moping around and staring, muttering about their nightmares. As if everyone doesn't have nightmares, sometimes. Yes, you can work here, as long as you want. Light, I've orders for a dozen drawknives and three cooper's adzes, and a carpenter down the street needs a mortise hammer, and. . . . Too much to list it. Start with the drawknives, and we will see how far we get before night."

Perrin lost himself in the work, for a time forgetting everything but the heat of the metal, the ring of his hammer, and the smell of the forge, but there came a time when he looked up and found the smith—Dermid Ajala, he had said his name was—taking off his vest, and the shoeing yard dark.

All the light came from the forge and a pair of lamps. And Zarine was sitting on an anvil by one of the cold forges, watching him.

“So you really are a blacksmith, blacksmith,” she said.

“He is that, mistress,” Ajala said. “Apprentice, he says, but the work he did today amounts to his master’s piece as far as I am concerned. Fine stroking, and better than steady.” Perrin shifted his feet at the compliments, and the smith grinned at him. Zarine stared at both of them with a lack of comprehension.

Perrin went to replace the vest and apron on their peg, but once he had them off, he was suddenly conscious of Zarine’s eyes on his back. It was if she were touching him; for a moment, the herbal scent of her seemed overwhelming. He quickly pulled his shirt over his head, stuffed it raggedly into his breeches, and jerked on his coat. When he turned around, Zarine wore one of those small, secretive smiles that had always made him nervous.

“Is this what you mean to do, then?” she asked. “Did you come all this way to be a blacksmith again?” Ajala paused in the act of pulling the yard doors closed and listened.

Perrin picked up the heavy hammer he had used, a ten-pound head with a handle as long as his forearm. It felt good in his hands. It felt right. The smith had glanced at his eyes once and never even blinked; it was the work that was important, the skill with metal, not the color of a man’s eyes. “No,” he said sadly. “One day, I hope. But not yet.” He started to hang the hammer back on the wall.

“Take it.” Ajala cleared his throat. “I do not usually give away good hammers, but. . . . The work you’ve done today is worth more than the price of that hammer by far, and maybe it will help you to that ‘one day.’ Man, if I have ever seen anyone made to hold a smith’s hammer, it is you. So take it. Keep it.”

Perrin closed his hand around the haft. It did feel right. “Thank you,” he said. “I cannot say what this means to me.”

“Just remember the ‘one day,’ man. Just you remember it.”

As they left, Zarine looked up at him and said, “Do you have any idea how strange men are, blacksmith? No. I did not think you did.” She darted ahead, leaving him holding the hammer in one hand and scratching his head with the other.

No one in the common room looked at him twice, a golden-eyed man carrying a smith's hammer. He went up to his room, remembering for once to light a tallow candle. His quiver and the axe hung from the same peg on the plaster wall. He hefted the axe in one hand, the hammer in the other. By weight of metal, the axe, with its half-moon blade and thick spike, was a good five or six pounds lighter than the hammer, but it felt ten times heavier. Replacing the axe in the loop on its belt, he set the hammer on the floor beneath the peg, handle against the wall. Axe haft and hammer haft almost touched, two pieces of wood equally thick. Two pieces of metal, near enough the same weight. For a long time he sat on the stool staring at them. He was still staring when Lan put his head into the room.

"Come, blacksmith. We have things to talk over."

"I *am* a blacksmith," Perrin said, and the Warder frowned at him.

"Don't go winter-crazy on me now, blacksmith. If you cannot carry your weight any longer, you may drag us all down the mountain."

"I'll carry my weight," Perrin growled. "I will do what has to be done. What do you want?"

"You, blacksmith. Don't you listen? Come on, farmboy."

That name that Zarine so often called him pulled him to his feet angrily, now, but Lan was already turning away. Perrin hurried into the hall and followed him toward the front of the inn, meaning to tell the Warder he had had enough of this "blacksmith" and "farmboy," his name was Perrin Aybara. The Warder ducked into the inn's only private dining room, overlooking the street.

Perrin followed him. "Now listen, *Warder*, I—"

"You listen, Perrin," Moiraine said. "Be quiet and listen." Her face was smooth, but her eyes looked as grim as her voice sounded.

Perrin had not realized anyone was in the room except for himself and the Warder, standing with one arm up on the mantel of the unlit fireplace. Moiraine sat at the table in the middle of the floor, a simple piece, of black oak. None of the other chairs with their high, carved backs were occupied. Zarine was leaning against the wall at the other end of the room from Lan, scowling, and Loial had chosen to sit on the floor since none of the chairs really fit him.

"I'm glad you decided to join us, farmboy," Zarine said sarcastically. "Moiraine would not say anything till you came. She just looks at us as if she is deciding which of us is going to die. I—"

“Be quiet,” Moiraine told her sharply. “One of the Forsaken is in Tear. The High Lord Samon is Be’lal.” Perrin shivered.

Loial squeezed his eyes shut and groaned. “I could have remained in the *stedding*. I would probably have been very happy, married, whoever my mother chose. She is a fine woman, my mother, and she would not give me to a bad wife.” His ears seemed to have hidden themselves completely in his shaggy hair.

“You can go back to Stedding Shangtai,” Moiraine said. “Leave now, if you wish. I will not stop you.”

Loial opened one eye. “I can go?”

“If you wish,” she said.

“Oh.” He opened the other eye, and scratched his cheek with blunt fingers the size of sausages. “I suppose. . . . I suppose . . . if I have a choice . . . that I will stay with all of you. I have taken a great many notes, but not nearly enough to complete my book, and I would not like to leave Perrin, and Rand—”

Moiraine cut him off in a cold voice. “Good, Loial. I am glad that you are staying. I will be glad to use any knowledge you have. But until this is done, I have no time to listen to your complaints!”

“I suppose,” Zarine said in an unsteady voice, “that there is no chance of me leaving?” She looked at Moiraine, and shivered. “I thought not. Blacksmith, if I live through this, I will make you pay.”

Perrin stared at her. *Me! The fool woman thinks it my fault? Did I ask her to come?* He opened his mouth, saw the look in Moiraine’s eyes, and closed it again quickly. After a moment he said, “Is he after Rand? To stop him, or kill him?”

“I think not,” she said quietly. Her voice was like cold steel. “I fear he means to let Rand enter the Heart of the Stone and take *Callandor*, then take it away from him. I fear he means to kill the Dragon Reborn with the very weapon that is meant to herald him.”

“Do we run again?” Zarine said. “Like Illian? I never thought to run, but I never thought to find the Forsaken when I took the Hunter’s oath.”

“This time,” Moiraine said, “we do not run. We dare not run. Worlds and time rest on Rand, on the Dragon Reborn. This time, we fight.”

Perrin took a chair uneasily. “Moiraine, you are saying a lot of things right out that you told us we must not even think about. You *do* have this room warded against listening, don’t you?” When she shook her head, he gripped the edge of the table hard enough to make the dark oak creak.

“I do not speak of a Myrddraal, Perrin. No one knows the strength of the Forsaken, except that Ishamael and Lanfear were the strongest, but the weakest of them could sense any warding I might set from a mile or more away. And rip all of us to shreds in seconds. Possibly without stirring from where he stood.”

“You’re saying he can tie you in knots,” Perrin muttered. “Light! What are we supposed to do? How can we do anything?”

“Even the Forsaken cannot stand up to balefire,” she said. He wondered if that was what she had used on the Darkhounds; it still made him uneasy, what he had seen, and what she had said then. “I have learned things in the last year, Perrin. I am . . . more dangerous than when I came to Emond’s Field. If I can come close enough to Be’lal, I can destroy him. But if he sees me first, he can destroy us all, long before I have a chance.” She turned her attention to Loial. “What can you tell me of Be’lal?”

Perrin blinked in confusion. *Loial?*

“Why are you asking him?” Zarine burst out angrily. “First you tell the blacksmith you mean us to fight one of the Forsaken!—who can kill us all before we can even think!—and now you ask Loial about him?” Loial murmured urgently, that name she used—“Faile! Faile!”—but she did not even slow. “I thought Aes Sedai knew everything. Light, at least I am smart enough not to say I will fight someone unless I know everything I can of him! You. . . .” She trailed off under Moiraine’s stare, muttering.

“Ogier,” the Aes Sedai said coolly, “have long memories, girl. It has been well over a hundred generations since the Breaking for humans, but less than thirty for Ogier. We still learn things from their stories that we did not know. Now tell me, Loial. What do you know of Be’lal. And briefly, for once. I want your long memory, not your long wind.”

Loial cleared his throat, a sound much like firewood tumbling down a chute. “Be’lal.” His ears flickered out of his hair like hummingbird wings, then snapped down again. “I do not know what can be in the stories about him you do not already know. He is not much mentioned, except in the razing of the Hall of the Servants just before Lews Therin Kinslayer and the Hundred Companions sealed him up with the Dark One. Jalanda son of Aried son of Coiam wrote that he was called the Envious, that he forsook the Light because he envied Lews Therin, and that he envied Ishamael and

Lanfear, too. In *A Study of the War of the Shadow*, Moilin daughter of Hamada daughter of Juendan called Be'lal the Netweaver, but I do not know why. She mentioned him playing a game of stones with Lews Therin and winning, and that he always boasted of it." He glanced at Moiraine and rumbled, "I am trying to be brief. I do not know anything important about him. Several writers say Be'lal and Sammael were both leaders in the fight against the Dark One before they forsook the Light, and both were masters of the sword. That is truly all I know. He may be mentioned in other books, other stories, but I have not read them. Be'lal is just not spoken of very often. I am sorry I could not tell you anything useful."

"Perhaps you have," Moiraine told him. "I did not know of the name, the Netweaver. Or that he envied the Dragon as well as his companions in the Shadow. That strengthens my belief that he wants *Callandor*. That must be the reason he has chosen to make himself a High Lord of Tear. And the Netweaver—a name for a schemer, a patient and cunning planner. You have done well, Loial." For a moment the Ogier's wide mouth curved up in a pleased smile, but then it curved down again.

"I will not pretend I am not afraid," Zarine said suddenly. "Only a fool would not be afraid of the Forsaken. But I swore I would be one of you, and I will. That is all that I wanted to say."

Perrin shook his head. *She* must *be crazy. I could wish I were not one of this party. I could wish I were back home working Master Luhhan's forge*. Aloud, he said, "If he is inside the Stone, if he is waiting there for Rand, we must go inside to reach him. How do we do that? Everyone keeps saying no one enters the Stone without the permission of the High Lords, and looking at it, I don't see any way but through the gates."

"You do not go in," Lan said. "Moiraine and I will be the only ones to enter. The more who go, the harder it will be. Whatever way in I find, I cannot believe it will be easy even for only two."

"Gaidin," Moiraine began in a firm voice, but the Warder cut her off with one just as firm.

"We go together, Moiraine. I will not stand aside this time." After a moment she nodded. Perrin thought he saw Lan relax. "The rest of you had better get some sleep," the Warder went on. "I have to be out studying the Stone." He paused. "There is a thing that your news drove out of my head, Moiraine. A small thing, and I cannot see what it might mean. There are Aiel in Tear."

“Aiel!” Loial exclaimed. “Impossible! The entire city would be in a panic if one Aiel came through the gates.”

“I did not say they were walking the streets, Ogier. The rooftops and chimneys of the city make as good hiding as the Waste. I saw no less than three, though apparently no one else in Tear has seen any of them. And if I saw three, you can be sure there are many times that I did not see.”

“It means nothing to me,” Moiraine said slowly. “Perrin, why are you frowning in that way?”

He had not known that he was frowning. “I was thinking about that Aiel in Remen. He said that when the Stone falls, the Aiel will leave the Three-fold Land. That’s the Waste, isn’t it? He said it was a prophecy.”

“I have read every word of the Prophecies of the Dragon,” Moiraine said softly, “in every translation, and there is no mention of the Aiel. We stagger blindly while Be’lal weaves his nets, and the Wheel weaves the Pattern around us. But are the Aiel the Wheel’s weaving, or Be’lal’s? Lan, you must find me the way into the Stone quickly. Us. Find us a way in quickly.”

“As you command, Aes Sedai,” he said, but his tone was more warm than formal. He vanished through the door. Moiraine frowned at the table, eyes clouded in thought.

Zarine came over to look down at Perrin, her head tilted to one side. “And what are you going to do, blacksmith? It seems they mean us to wait and watch while they go adventuring. Not that I will complain.”

He doubted that last. “First,” he told her, “I am going to have something to eat. And then I am going to think about a hammer.” *And try to puzzle out how I feel about you. Falcon*.

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CHAPTER 51

Bait for the Net

From the corner of her eye, Nynaeve thought she glimpsed a tall man with reddish hair, in a swirling brown cloak, well down the sunlit street, but as she turned to peer from under the wide brim of the blue straw hat Ailhuin had given her, an ox-drawn wagon was already lumbering between them. When it lurched on, the man was nowhere to be seen. She was almost certain that had been a wooden flute case on his back, and his clothes were certainly not Tairen. *It couldn't be Rand. Just because I keep dreaming about him does not mean he is going to come all the way from Almoth Plain*.

One of the barefoot men hurrying past, with the sickle-shaped tails of a dozen large fish sticking up from the basket on his back, suddenly tripped, catapulting silver-scaled fish over his head as he fell. He landed on hands and knees in the mud, staring at the fish that had come out of his basket. Every one of the long, sleek shapes stood upright, stuck nose down in the mud, forming a neat circle. Even a few passersby gaped at that. Slowly the man got to his feet, apparently unaware of the mud on him. Unslinging his basket, he began gathering the fish back into it, shaking his head and muttering to himself.

Nynaeve blinked, but her business was with this cow-faced brigand, facing her in the doorway of his shop with bloody cuts of meat hanging from hooks behind him. She gave her braid a tug and fixed the fellow with her eye.

"Very well," she said sharply, "I will take it, but if this is what you charge for so poor a cut, you'll not have more business from me."

He shrugged placidly as he took her coins, then wrapped the fatty mutton roast in a cloth she produced from the basket on her arm. She glared at him as she put the wrapped meat into the basket, but that did not affect him.

She whirled to stalk away—and nearly fell. She was still not used to these clogs; they kept sticking in the mud, and she could not see how the folk who wore them managed. She hoped this sunshine dried the ground soon, but she had a feeling that the mud was more or less permanent in the Maule.

Stepping gingerly, she started back toward Ailhuin's house, muttering under her breath. The prices were outrageous for everything, the quality inevitably poor, and almost no one seemed to care, not the people buying or those selling. It was a relief to pass a woman shouting at a shopkeeper, waving a bruised reddish-yellow fruit—Nynaeve did not know what; they had a good many fruits and vegetables she had never heard of, here—in each hand and calling for everyone to see what refuse the man sold, but the shopkeeper only stared at her wearily, not even bothering to argue back.

There was some excuse for the prices, she knew—Elayne had explained all about the grain being eaten by rats in the granaries because no one in Cairhien could buy, and how big the Cairhienin grain trade had become since the Aiel War—but nothing excused the way everyone seemed ready to lie down and die. She had seen hail ruin food crops in the Two Rivers, and grasshoppers eat them and blacktongue kill the sheep and redspot wither the tabac so there was nothing to sell when the merchants came down from Baerlon. She could remember two years in a row when there had been little to eat except turnip soup and old barley, and hunters had been lucky to bring home a scrawny rabbit, but Two Rivers folk picked themselves up when they were knocked down and went back to work. These people had had only one bad year, and their fisheries and their other trade seemed to be flourishing. She had no patience with them. The trouble was, she knew she should have a little patience. They were odd people with odd ways, and things she took for cringing, they seemed to see as a matter of course, even Ailhuin and Sandar. She should be able to summon up just a little patience.

If for them, why not for Egwene? She put that aside. The child behaved wretchedly, snapping at the most obvious suggestions, objecting to the most sensible things. Even when it was plain what they should do, Egwene wanted to be convinced. Nynaeve was not used to having to convince people, especially not people she had changed swaddling clothes for. The fact that she was only a matter of seven years older than Egwene was of no account.

It is all those bad dreams, she told herself. *I cannot understand what they mean, and now Elayne and I are having them, too, and I do not know what that means either, and Sandar won't say anything except that he is still looking, and I am so frustrated I . . . I could just spit!* She jerked her braid so hard it hurt. At least she had been able to convince Egwene not to use the *ter'angreal* again, to put the thing back in her pouch instead of wearing it next to her skin always. If the Black Ajah was in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. . . . She did not want to think about that possibility. *We* will *find them!*

"I will bring them down," she muttered. "Trying to sell me like a sheep! Hunting me like an animal! I am the hunter this time, not the rabbit! That Moiraine! If she had never come to Emond's Field, I could have taught Egwene enough. And Rand. . . . I could have . . . I could have done something." That she knew neither was true did not help; it made it worse. She hated Moiraine almost as much as she hated Liandrin and the Black Ajah, maybe as much as she hated the Seanchan.

She rounded a corner, and Juilin Sandar had to leap out of her way to keep from being trampled. Even used to them as he was, he nearly tripped over his own clogs, only his staff saving him from falling on his face in the mud. That pale, ridged wood was called bamboo, she had learned, and it was stronger than it looked.

"Mistress—uh—Mistress Maryim," Sandar said, regaining his balance. "I was . . . looking for you." He flashed her a nervous smile. "Are you angry? Why are you frowning at me that way?"

She smoothed her forehead. "I was not frowning at you, Master Sandar. The butcher. . . . It does not matter. Why are you looking for me?" Her breath caught. "Have you found them?"

He looked around as if he suspected the passersby of trying to listen. "Yes. Yes, you must come back with me. The others are waiting. The others. And Mother Guenna."

"Why are you so nervous? You did not let them discover your interest?" she said sharply. "What has frightened you?"

"No! No, mistress. I—I did not reveal myself." His eyes darted again, and he stepped closer, his voice dropping to a breathy, urgent whisper. "These women you seek, they are in the Stone! Guests of a High Lord! The High Lord Samon! Why did you call them thieves? The High Lord Samon!" he almost squeaked. There was sweat on his face.

Inside the Stone! With a High Lord! Light, how do we reach them now? She suppressed her impatience with an effort. “Be easy,” she said soothingly. “Be at ease, Master Sandar. We can explain everything to your satisfaction.” *I hope we can. Light, if he goes running to the Stone to tell this High Lord we are searching for them. . . .* “Come with me to Mother Guenna’s house. Joslyn, Caryla, and I will explain it all to you. Truly. Come.”

He gave a short, uneasy nod, and walked alongside her, keeping his pace to what she could manage with the clogs. He looked as if he wanted to run.

At the Wise Woman’s house, she hurried around to the back. No one ever used the front door, that she had seen, not even Mother Guenna herself. The horses were tied to a bamboo hitching rail, now—well away from Ailhuin’s new figs as well as her vegetables—with their saddles and bridles stored inside. For once she did not stop to pat Gaidin’s nose and tell him he was a good boy, and more sensible than his namesake. Sandar halted to scrape mud from his clogs with the butt of his staff, but she hurried inside.

Ailhuin Guenna was sitting in one of her high-backed chairs pulled out into the room, her arms at her sides. The gray-haired woman’s eyes were bulging with anger and fear, and she struggled furiously without moving a muscle. Nynaeve did not need to sense the subtle weaving of Air to know what had happened. *Light, they’ve found us! Burn you, Sandar!*

Rage flooded her, washed away the walls inside that usually kept her from the Power, and as the basket fell from her hands, she was a white blossom on a blackthorn bush, opening to embrace *saidar*, opening. . . . It was as if she had run into another wall, a wall of clear glass; she could feel the True Source, but the wall stopped everything except the ache to be filled with the One Power.

The basket hit the floor, and as it bounced, the door behind her opened and Liandrin stepped in, followed by a black-haired woman with a white streak above her left ear. They wore long, colorful silk dresses cut to bare their shoulders, and the glow of *saidar* surrounded them.

Liandrin smoothed her red dress and smiled with that pouting rosebud mouth. Her doll’s face was filled with amusement. “You see, do you not, wilder,” she began, “you have no—”

Nynaeve hit her in the mouth as hard as she could. *Light, I have to get away*. She backhanded Rianna so hard the black-haired woman fell on her silk-covered rump with a grunt. *They must have the others, but if I can make it out the door, if I can get far enough away they can't shield me, I can do something*. She pushed Liandrin hard, shoving her away from the door. *Just let me escape their shielding, and I'll*. . . .

Blows hit her from every side, like fists and sticks, pummeling her. Neither Liandrin, blood trickling from a corner of her now-grim mouth, nor Rianna, her hair as disarrayed as her green dress, lifted a hand. Nynaeve could feel the flows of Air weaving about her as well as she could feel the blows themselves. She still struggled to reach the door, but she realized that she was on her knees, now, and the unseen blows would not stop, invisible sticks and fists striking at her back and her stomach, her head and her hips, her shoulders, her breasts, her legs, her head. Groaning, she fell onto her side and curled into a ball, trying to protect herself. *Oh, Light, I tried. Egwene! Elayne! I tried! I will not cry out! Burn you, you can beat me to death, but I won't cry!*

The blows stopped, but Nynaeve could not stop quivering. She felt bruised and battered from crown to toe.

Liandrin crouched beside her, arms around her knees, silk rustling against silk. She had wiped the blood away from her mouth. Her dark eyes were hard, and there was no amusement on her face now. "Perhaps you are too stupid to know when you are defeated, wilder. You fought almost as wildly as that other foolish girl, that Egwene. She almost went mad. You must all learn to submit. You *will* learn to submit."

Nynaeve shivered and reached for *saidar* again. It was not that she had any real hope, but she had to do something. Forcing through her pain, she reached out . . . and struck that invisible shield. Liandrin did have amusement back in her eyes, now, the grim mirth of a nasty child who pulls the wings off flies.

"We have no use for this one, at least," Rianna said, standing beside Ailhuin. "I will stop her heart." Ailhuin's eyes nearly came out of her head.

"No!" Liandrin's short, honey-colored braids swung as her head snapped around. "Always you kill too quickly, and only the Great Lord can make use of the dead." She smiled at the woman held to the chair by invisible bonds. "You saw the soldiers who came with us, old woman. You know who waits for us in the Stone. The High Lord Samon, he will not be pleased if you speak of what happened inside your house today. If you hold your tongue, you will live, perhaps to serve him again one day. If you speak, you will serve only the Great Lord of the Dark, from beyond the grave. Which do you choose?”

Suddenly Ailhuin could move her head. She shook her gray curls, working her mouth. “I. . . . I will hold my tongue,” she said dejectedly, then gave Nynaeve an embarrassed, shamed look. “If I speak, what good will it do? A High Lord could have my head by raising an eyebrow. What good can I do you, girl? What good?”

“It is all right,” Nynaeve said wearily. *Who could she tell? All she could do is die*. “I know you would help if you could.” Rianna threw back her head and laughed. Ailhuin slumped, released completely, but she only sat there, staring at her hands in her lap.

Between them, Liandrin and Rianna pulled Nynaeve to her feet and pushed her toward the front of the house. “You give us any trouble,” the black-haired woman said in a hard voice, “and I will make you peel off your own skin and dance in your bones.”

Nynaeve almost laughed. *What trouble could I give?* She was shielded from the True Source. Her bruises ached so much she could barely stand. Anything she might do, they could handle like a child’s tantrum. *But my bruises will heal, burn you, and you’ll make a slip yet! And when you do*. . . .

There were others in the front room of the house. Two big soldiers in rimmed, round helmets and shiny breastplates over those puffy-sleeved red coats. The two men had sweat on their faces, and their dark eyes rolled as if they were as afraid as she. Amico Nagoyin was there, slender and pretty with her long neck and pale skin, looking as innocent as a girl gathering flowers. Joiya Byir had a friendly face despite that smooth-cheeked calm of a woman who had worked long with the Power, almost a grandmother’s face in its welcoming appearance, though her age had put no touch of gray in her dark hair, any more than it had wrinkled her skin. Her gray eyes looked more like those of the stepmother in the stories, the one who murdered the children of her husband’s first wife. Both women shone with the Power.

Elayne stood between the two Black sisters, with a bruised eye and a swollen cheek and a split lip, one sleeve of her dress torn halfway off. “I am sorry, Nynaeve,” she said thickly, as if her jaw hurt. “We never saw them until it was too late.”

Egwene lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, her face swollen with bruises, almost unrecognizable. As Nynaeve and her escort came in, one of the big soldiers hoisted Egwene over his shoulder. She dangled there as limply as a half-empty barley sack.

"What did you do to her?" Nynaeve demanded. "Burn you, what—!" Something unseen struck her across the mouth hard enough to make her eyes go blank for a moment.

"Now, now," Joiya Byir said with a smile that her eyes belied. "I will not stand for demands, or bad language." She sounded like a grandmother, too. "You speak when you are spoken to."

"I told you the girl, she would not stop fighting, yes?" Liandrin said. "Let it be a lesson to you. If you try to cause any trouble, you will be treated no more gently."

Nynaeve ached to do something for Egwene, but she let herself be pushed out into the street. She made them push her; it was a small way of fighting back, refusing to cooperate, but it was all she had at the moment.

There were few people in the muddy street, as if everyone had decided it was much better to be somewhere else, and those few scurried by on the other side without a glance at the shiny, black-lacquered coach standing behind a team of six matched whites with tall white plumes on their bridles. A coachman dressed like the soldiers, but without armor or sword, sat on the seat, and another opened the door as they appeared from the house. Before he did, Nynaeve saw the sigil painted there. A silver-gauntleted fist clutching jagged lightning bolts.

She supposed it was High Lord Samon's sign—*A Darkfriend, he must be, if he deals with the Black Ajah. The Light burn him!*—but she was more interested in the man who dropped to his knees in the mud at their appearance. "Burn you, Sandar, why—?" She jumped as something that felt like a stick of wood struck her across the shoulders.

Joiya Byir smiled chidingly and waggled a finger. "You will be respectful, child. Or you might lose that tongue."

Liandrin laughed. Tangling a hand in Sandar's black hair, she wrenched his head back. He stared up at her with the eyes of a faithful hound—or of a cur expecting a kick. "Do not be too hard on this man." She even made "man" sound like "dog." "He had to be . . . persuaded . . . to serve. But I am very good at persuading, no?" She laughed again.

Sandar turned a confused stare on Nynaeve. “I had to do it, Mistress Maryim. I . . . had to.” Liandrin twisted his hair, and his eyes went back to her, the anxious hound’s once more.

Light! Nynaeve thought. *What did they do to him? What are they going to do to us?*

She and Elayne were bundled roughly into the coach, with Egwene slumped between them, her head lolling, and Liandrin and Rianna climbed in and took the seat facing forward. The glow of *saidar* still surrounded them. Where the others went, Nynaeve did not much care at that moment. She wanted to reach Egwene, to touch her, to comfort her hurts, but she could not move a muscle below her neck except to writhe. Flows of Air bound the three of them like layers of tightly wrapped blankets. The coach lurched into motion, swaying hard in the mud despite its leather springs.

“If you have hurt her. . . .” *Light, I can see they’ve hurt her. Why don’t I say what I mean?* But it was almost as hard to force the words out as it would have been to lift a hand. “If you have killed her, I won’t rest till you are all hunted down like wild dogs.”

Rianna glared, but Liandrin only sniffed. “Do not be a complete fool, wilder. You are wanted alive. Dead bait will catch nothing.”

Bait? For what? For who? “You are the fool, Liandrin! Do you think we are here alone? Only three of us, and not even full Aes Sedai? We are bait, Liandrin. And you have walked into the trap like a fat grouse.”

“Do not tell her that!” Elayne said sharply, and Nynaeve blinked before she realized Elayne was helping her fabrication. “If you let your anger get the best of you, you will tell them what they must not hear. They must take us inside the Stone. They must—”

“Be quiet!” Nynaeve snapped. “You are letting *your* tongue run away with you!” Elayne managed to look abashed behind her bruises. *Let them chew on that,* Nynaeve thought.

But Liandrin only smiled. “Once your time as bait is done, you will tell us everything. You will want to. They say you will be very strong one day, but I will make sure you will always obey me, even before the Great Master Be’lal works his plans for you. He is sending for Myrddraal. Thirteen of them.” Those rosebud lips laughed the final words.

Nynaeve felt her stomach twist. One of the Forsaken! Her brain numbed with shock. *The Dark One and all the Forsaken are bound in Shayol Ghul, bound by the Creator in the moment of creation*. But the catechism did not help; she knew too well how much of it was false. Then the rest of it came home to her. Thirteen Myrddraal. And thirteen sisters of the Black Ajah. She heard Elayne screaming before she realized she was screaming herself, jerking uselessly in those invisible bonds of Air. It was impossible to say which was louder, their despairing screams, or the laughter from Liandrin and Rianna.

* * *

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CHAPTER 52

In Search of a Remedy

Slumped on the stool in the gleeman’s room, Mat grimaced as Thom coughed again. *How are we going to keep looking if he’s so bloody sick he can’t walk?* He was ashamed as soon as he thought it. Thom had been as assiduous in searching as he had, pushing himself day and night, when he had to know he was coming down sick. Mat had been so absorbed in his hunt that he had paid too little attention to Thom’s coughing. The change from constant rain to steamy heat had not helped it.

“Come on, Thom,” he said. “Lopar says there’s a Wise Woman not far. That is what they call a Wisdom here—a Wise Woman. Wouldn’t Nynaeve like that!”

“I do not need . . . any foul-tasting . . . concoctions . . . poured down my throat, boy.” Thom stuffed a fist through his mustaches in a vain attempt to stop his hacking. “You go ahead looking. Just give me . . . a few hours . . . on my bed . . . and I’ll join you.” The wracking wheezes doubled him over till his head was almost on his knees.

“So I am supposed to do all the work while you take your ease?” Mat said lightly. “How can I find anything without you? You learn most of what we hear.” That was not exactly true; men talked as freely over dice as they did while buying a gleeman a cup of wine. More freely than they did with a gleeman hacking so hard they feared contagion. But he was beginning to think that Thom’s cough was not going to go away by itself. *If the old goat dies on me, who will I play stones with?* he told himself roughly. “Anyway, your bloody coughing keeps me awake even in the next room.”

Ignoring the white-haired man’s protests, he pulled Thom to his feet. He was shocked at how much of the gleeman’s weight he had to support. Despite the damp heat, Thom insisted on his patch-covered cloak. Mat had his own coat unbuttoned completely and all three ties of his shirt undone, but he let the old goat have his way. No one in the common room even looked up as he half carried Thom out into the muggy afternoon.

The innkeeper had given simple directions, but when they reached the gate, and faced the mud of the Maule, Mat almost turned back to ask after another Wise Woman. There had to be more than one in a city this size. Thom's wheezing decided him. With a grimace Mat stepped off into the mud, half carrying the gleeman.

He had thought from the directions that they must have passed the Wise Woman's house on their way up from the dock that first night, and when he saw the long, narrow house with bunches of herbs hanging in the windows, right next to a potter's shop, he remembered it. Lopar had said something about going to the back door, but he had had enough of mud.

And the stink of fish, he thought, frowning at the barefoot men squelching by with their baskets on their backs. There were tracks of horses in the street, too, just beginning to be obliterated by feet and ox-carts. Horses pulling a wagon, or maybe a carriage. He had seen nothing but oxen drawing carts or wagons either one in Tear—the nobles and the merchants were proud of their fine stock, and never let one be put to anything like work—but he had not seen any carriages since leaving the walled city, either.

Dismissing horses and wheel tracks from his mind, he took Thom to the front door and knocked. After a time he knocked again. Then again.

He was on the point of giving up and returning to The White Crescent despite Thom coughing on his shoulder when he heard shuffling footsteps inside.

The door opened barely more than a crack, and a stout, gray-haired woman peered out. "What do you want?" she asked in a tired voice.

Mat put on his best grin. *Light, but I am getting sick myself at all these people who sound like there's no bloody hope.* "Mother Guenna? My name is Mat Cauthon. Cavan Lopar told me you might do something for my friend's cough. I can pay well."

She studied them a moment, seemed to listen to Thom's wheezes, then sighed. "I suppose I can still do that, at least. You might as well come in." She swung the door open and was already plodding toward the back of the house before Mat moved.

Her accent sounded so much like the Amyrlin's that he shivered, but he followed, all but carrying Thom.

“I don’t . . . need this,” the gleeman wheezed. “Bloody mixtures . . . always taste like . . . dung!”

“Shut up, Thom.”

Leading them all the way to the kitchen, the stout woman rummaged in one of the cupboards, taking out small stone pots and packets of herbs while muttering to herself.

Mat sat Thom down in one of the high-backed chairs, and glanced through the nearest window. There were three good horses tied out back; he was surprised the Wise Woman had more than one, or any for that matter. He had not seen anyone in Tear riding except nobles and the wealthy, and these animals looked as if they had cost more than a little silver. *Horses again. I don’t care about bloody horses now!*

Mother Guenna brewed some sort of strong tea with a rank smell and forced it down Thom’s throat, holding his nose when he tried to complain. Mat decided she had less fat on her than he had thought, from the way she held the gleeman’s head steady in the crook of one arm while she poured the black liquid into him no matter how hard he tried to stop her.

When she took the cup away, Thom coughed and scrubbed at his mouth with equal vigor. “Gaaah! Woman . . . I don’t know . . . whether you . . . mean to drown me . . . or kill me . . . with the taste! You ought . . . to be a bloody . . . blacksmith!”

“You will take the same twice a day till that hacking is gone,” she said firmly. “And I have a salve that you’ll rub on your chest every night.” Some of the weariness left her voice as she confronted the gleeman, fists on her broad hips. “That salve stinks as bad as this tea tastes, but you will rub it on—thoroughly!—or I’ll drag you upstairs like a scrawny carp in a net and tie you to a bed with that cloak of yours! I never had a gleeman come to me before, and I’ll not let the first one that does cough himself to death.”

Thom glowered and blew out his mustaches with a cough, but he seemed to take her threat seriously. At least, he did not say anything, but he looked as if he meant to throw her tea and her salve right back at her.

The more this Mother Guenna talked, the more she sounded like the Amyrlin to Mat. From the sour look on Thom’s face, and the steady stare on hers, he decided he had better smooth matters over a little before the gleeman refused to take her medicines. And she decided to make him. “I knew a woman once who talked like you,” he said. “All fish and nets and things. Sounded like you, too. The same accent, I mean. I suppose she's Tairen."

"Perhaps." The gray-haired woman suddenly sounded tired again, and she kept staring at the floor. "I knew some girls with the sound of your speech on their tongues, too. Two of them had it, anyway." She sighed heavily.

Mat felt his scalp prickle. *My luck can't be this good*. But he would not bet a copper on two other women with Two Rivers accents just happening to be in Tear. "Three girls? Young women? Named Egwene, and Nynaeve, and Elayne? That one has hair like the sun, and blue eyes."

She frowned at him. "Those were not the names they gave," she said slowly, "yet I suspected they did not give me their true names. But they had their reasons, I thought. One of them was a pretty girl with bright blue eyes and red-gold hair to her shoulders." She described Nynaeve with her braid to her waist and Egwene with her big, dark eyes and ready smile, too. Three pretty women as different from one another as they could be. "I see they are the ones you know," she finished. "I am sorry, boy."

"Why are you sorry? I have been trying to find them for days!" *Light, I walked right past this place the first night! Right past them! I wanted random. What could be more random than where a ship docks on a rainy night, and where you happen to look in a bloody lightning flash? Burn me! Burn me!* "Tell me where they are, Mother Guenna."

The gray-haired woman stared wearily at the stove where her spouted kettle was steaming. Her mouth worked, but she said nothing.

"Where are they?" Mat demanded. "It is important! They are in danger if I don't find them."

"You do not understand," she said softly. "You are an outlander. The High Lords. . . ."

"I do not care about any—" Mat blinked, and looked at Thom. The gleeman seemed to be frowning, but he was coughing so hard, Mat could not be sure. "What do the High Lords have to do with my friends?"

"You just do not—"

"Don't tell me I do not understand! I will pay for the information!"

Mother Guenna glared at him. "I do not take money for . . . !" She grimaced fiercely. "You ask me to tell you things I have been told not to speak of. Do you know what will happen to me if I do and you breathe my name? I will lose my tongue, to begin. Then I will lose other parts before the High Lords have what is left of me hung up to scream its last hours as a reminder to others to obey. And it will do those young women no good, not my telling or my dying!"

"I promise I will never mention your name to anyone. I swear it." *And I'll keep that oath, old woman, if you only tell me where they bloody are!* "Please? They are in danger."

She studied him for a long time; before she was done he had the feeling she knew every detail of him. "On that oath, I will tell you. I . . . liked them. But you can do nothing. You are too late, Matrim Cauthon. Too late by nearly three hours. They have been taken to the Stone. The High Lord Samon sent for them." She shook her head in worried puzzlement. "He sent . . . women who . . . could channel. I hold nothing against Aes Sedai myself, but that is against the law. The law the High Lords made. If they break every other law, they would not break that one. Why would a High Lord send Aes Sedai on his errands? Why would he want those girls at all?"

Mat almost burst out laughing. "Aes Sedai? Mother Guenna, you had my heart in my throat, and maybe my liver, too. If Aes Sedai came for them, there is nothing to worry about. All three of them are going to be Aes Sedai themselves. Not that I like it much, but that's what they—" His grin faded at the heavy way she shook her head.

"Boy, those girls fought like lionfish in a net. Whether they mean to be Aes Sedai or not, those who took them treated them like bilge pumpings. Friends do not give bruises like that."

He felt his face twisting. *Aes Sedai hurt them? What in the Light? The bloody Stone. It makes the Palace in Caemlyn look like walking into a barnyard! Burn me! I stood right out there in the rain and stared at this house! Burn me for a bloody Light-blinded fool!*

"If you break your hand," Mother Guenna said, "I will splint and poultice it, but if you damage my wall, I will strip your hide like a redfish!"

He blinked, then looked at his fist, at scraped knuckles. He did not even remember punching the wall.

The broad woman took his hand in a strong grip, but the fingers she used to probe were surprisingly gentle. "Nothing broken," she grunted after a while. Her eyes were just as gentle as she studied his face. "It seems you care for them. One of them, at least, I suppose it is. I am sorry, Mat Cauthon."

"Don't be," he told her. "At least I know where they are, now. All I have to do is get them out." He fished out his last two Andoran gold crowns and pressed them into her hand. "For Thom's medicines, and for letting me know about the girls." On impulse, he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and a grin. "And that's for me."

Startled, she touched her cheek, not seeming to know whether to look at the coins or at him. "Get them out, you say. Just like that. Out of the Stone." Abruptly she stabbed him in the ribs with a finger as hard as a tree stub. "You remind me of my husband, Mat Cauthon. He was a headstrong fool who would sail into the teeth of a gale and laugh, too. I could almost think you'll manage it." Suddenly she saw his muddy boots, apparently for the first time. "It took me six months to teach him not to track mud into my house. If you do get those girls out, whichever of them you have your eye on will have a hard time training you to make you fit to be let inside."

"You are the only woman who could do that," he said with a grin that broadened at her glare. *Get them out. That's all I have to do. Bring them right out of the Stone of bloody Tear*. Thom coughed again. *He isn't going into the Stone like that. Only, how do I stop him?* "Mother Guenna, can I leave my friend here? I think he is too sick to go back to the inn."

"What?" Thom barked. He tried to push himself out of the chair, coughing so he could hardly speak. "I am no . . . such thing, boy! You think . . . walking into the Stone . . . will be like . . . walking into your mother's kitchen? You think you . . . would make it . . . as far as the gates . . . without me?" He hung on the back of the chair, his wheezing and hacking keeping him from rising more than halfway to his feet.

Mother Guenna put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back down as easily as a child. The gleeman gave her a startled look. "I will take care of him, Mat Cauthon," she said.

"No!" Thom shouted. "You cannot . . . do this to me! You can't . . . leave me . . . with this old. . . ." Only her hand on his shoulder kept him from doubling over.

Mat grinned at the white-haired man. "I have enjoyed knowing you, Thom."

As he hurried out into the street, he found himself wondering why he had said that. *He isn't going to bloody die. That woman will keep him alive if she has to drag him kicking and screaming out of his grave by his mustaches. Yes, but who is going to keep me alive?*

Ahead of him, the Stone of Tear loomed over the city, impregnable, a fortress besieged a hundred times, a stone on which a hundred armies had broken their teeth. And he had to get inside, somehow.

And bring out three women. Somehow. With a laugh that made even the sullen folk in the street look at him, he headed back for The White Crescent, uncaring of mud or the damp heat. He could feel the dice tumbling inside his head.

* * *

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CHAPTER 53

A Flow of the Spirit

Perrin shrugged into his coat as he walked back toward the Star through the evening shadows. A good tiredness soaked through his arms and shoulders; along with more common work, Master Ajala had had him make a large piece of ornamental work, all elaborate curves and scrolls, to go on some country lord's new gate. He had enjoyed making something so pretty.

"I thought his eyes would come out of his face, blacksmith, when you said you would not make that thing if it was for a High Lord."

He glanced sideways at Zarine, walking beside him, the shadows masking her face. Even for his eyes, the shadows were there, just fainter than they would have been for another's. They emphasized her high cheekbones, softened the strong curve of her nose. He just could not make up his mind about her. Even if Moiraine and Lan still insisted they stay close to the inn, he wished she could find something else to do besides watch him work. For some reason, he had found himself growing awkward whenever he thought of her tilted eyes on him. More than once he had fumbled with his hammer till Master Ajala frowned at him wonderingly. Girls had always been able to make him feel awkward especially when they smiled at him, but Zarine did not have to smile. Only look. He wondered again if she was the beautiful woman Min had warned him against. *Better if she is the falcon*. That thought surprised him so much that he stumbled.

"I did not want anything I make to get into the hands of one of the Forsaken." His eyes glowed golden as he looked at her. "If it was for a High Lord, how could I tell where it might end?" She shivered. "I did not mean to frighten you, Fai—Zarine."

She smiled broadly, no doubt thinking he could not see her. "You will fall yet, farmboy. Have you ever thought of wearing a beard?"

It is bad enough she's always mocking me, but half the time I do not even understand her!

As they reached the front door of the inn, Moiraine and Lan met them, coming the other way. Moiraine wore that linen cloak with the wide, deep hood that hid her face. Light from the common-room windows made yellow pools on the paving stones. Two or three carriages rumbled past, and there were perhaps a dozen people in sight, hurrying home for their suppers, but for the most part, shadows populated the street. The weaver’s shop was closed tight. The silence was deafening.

“Rand is in Tear.” The Aes Sedai’s cool voice issued from the depths of her hood as from a cavern.

“Are you sure?” Perrin asked. “I have not heard of anything strange happening. No weddings, or wells drying up.” He saw Zarine frown in confusion. Moiraine had not been forthcoming with her, and neither had he. Keeping Loial’s tongue silent had been more difficult.

“Don’t you listen to rumors, blacksmith?” the Warder said. “There have been marriages, as many in the last four days as in half a year before. And as many murders as in a whole year. A child fell from a tower balcony today. A hundred paces onto stone paving. She got up and ran to her mother without a bruise. The First of Mayene, a ‘guest’ in the Stone since before the winter, announced today that she will submit to the will of the High Lords, after saying yesterday she would see Mayene and all its ships burn before one Tairen country lord set foot in the city. They had not brought themselves to torture her, and that young woman has a will like iron, so you tell me if you think it might be Rand’s doing. Blacksmith, from top to bottom, Tear bubbles like a cauldron.”

“These things were not needed to tell me,” Moiraine said. “Perrin, did you dream of Rand last night?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “He was in the Heart of the Stone, holding that sword”—he felt Zarine shift beside him—“but I have been worrying about that so much it is no wonder I dream of it. I had nothing but nightmares last night.”

“A tall man?” Zarine said. “With reddish hair and gray eyes? Holding something that shines so brightly it hurts your eyes? In a place that is all great redstone columns? Blacksmith, tell me that was not your dream.”

“You see,” Moiraine said. “I have heard this dream spoken of a hundred times today. They all speak of nightmares—Be’lal apparently does not care to shield his dreams—but that one above all else.” She laughed suddenly, like low, cool chimes. “People say he is the Dragon Reborn. They say he is coming. They whisper it fearfully in corners, but they say it.”

“And what of Be’lal?” Perrin asked.

Moiraine’s reply was cold-drawn steel. “I will deal with him tonight.” There was no fear scent from her.

“*We* will deal with him tonight,” Lan told her.

“Yes, my Gaidin. We will deal with him.”

“And what do we do? Sit here and wait? I had enough waiting to last me a lifetime in the mountains, Moiraine.”

“You and Loial—and Zarine—will go to Tar Valon,” she told him. “Until this is done. It will be the safest place for you.”

“Where is the Ogier?” Lan said. “I want all three of you on your way north as soon as possible.”

“Upstairs, I suppose,” Perrin said. “In his room, or maybe the dining room. There are lights in the windows up there. He is always working on those notes of his. I suppose he will have plenty to say in his book about us running away.” He was surprised at the bitterness in his voice. *Light, fool, do you want to face one of the Forsaken? No. No, but I am tired of running. I remember not running, once. I remember fighting back, and it was better. Even if I thought I was going to die, it was better*.

“I will find him,” Zarine announced. “I have no shame in admitting I will be glad enough to run from this fight. Men fight when they should run, and fools fight when they should run. But I had no need to say it twice.” She strode ahead of them, her narrow, divided skirts making small whisking noises as they entered the inn.

Perrin glanced around the common room as they followed her toward the stairs in the back. There were fewer men at the tables than he expected. Some sat alone, with dull eyes, but where two or three sat together they talked in frightened whispers his ears could barely catch. Even so, he heard “Dragon” three times.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he heard another soft sound, a thump as of something falling in the private dining room. He peered that way along the hall. “Zarine?” There was no answer. He felt the hair on the back of his neck shift, and padded that way. “Zarine?” He pushed open the door. “Faile!”

She was lying on the floor near the table. As he started to rush into the room, Moiraine’s commanding shout halted him.

“Stop, you fool! Stop, for your life!” She came along the hallway slowly, head turning as if she were listening for something, or searching for something. Lan followed with his hand on his sword—and a look in his eye as if he already knew steel would do no good. She came abreast of the door and stopped. “Move back, Perrin. Move back!”

In agony he stared at Zarine. At Faile. She lay there as if lifeless. Finally he made himself step back from the door, leaving it open, standing where he could see her. She looked as if she were dead. He could not see her chest stir. He wanted to howl. Frowning, he worked his hand, the one he had used to push the door into the room, opening and closing his fingers. It tingled sharply, as if he had struck his elbow. “Aren’t you going to do anything, Moiraine? If you will not, I am going to her.”

“Stand still or you will go nowhere,” she said calmly. “What is that by her right hand? As if it dropped from her grip when she fell. I cannot make it out.”

He glared at her, then peered into the room. “A hedgehog. It looks like a hedgehog carved out of wood. Moiraine, tell me what is going on! What has happened? Tell me!”

“A hedgehog,” she murmured. “A hedgehog. Be silent, Perrin. I must think. I felt it trigger. I can sense the residues of the flows woven to set it. Spirit. Pure Spirit, and nothing else. Almost nothing uses pure flows of Spirit! Why does that hedgehog make me think of Spirit?”

“You felt what trigger, Moiraine? What was set? A trap?”

“Yes, a trap,” she said, irritation making tiny cracks in her cool serenity. “A trap meant for me. I would have been first into that room if Zarine had not rushed ahead. Lan and I would surely have gone there to plan and wait for supper. I will not wait on supper now. Be quiet, if you wish me to help the girl at all. Lan! Bring me that innkeeper!” The Warder flowed away down the stairs.

Moiraine paced up and down in the hall, sometimes stopping to peer through the door from the depths of her hood. Perrin could see no sign that Zarine lived. Her breast did not stir. He tried listening for her heartbeat, but even for his ears it was impossible.

When Lan returned, shoving a frightened Jurah Haret ahead of him by the scruff of his fat neck, the Aes Sedai rounded on the balding man. “You promised to keep this room for me, Master Haret.” Her voice was as hard, as precise, as a skinning knife. “To allow not even a serving woman to enter to clean unless I was present. Who did you let enter it, Master Haret? Tell me!"

Haret shook like a bowl of pudding. "O-only the t-two Ladies, mistress. T-they w-wished to leave a surprise for you. I swear, mistress. T-they showed it t-to me. A little h-hedgehog. T-they said you w-would be surprised."

"I was surprised, innkeeper," she said softly. "Leave me! And if you whisper a word of this, even in your sleep, I will pull this inn down and leave only a hole in the ground."

"Y-yes, mistress," he whispered. "I swear it! I do swear!

"Go!"

The innkeeper fell to his knees in his haste to reach the stairs, and went scrambling down with thumps that suggested he fell more than once as he ran.

"He knows I am here," Moiraine told the Warder, "and he has found someone of the Black Ajah to set his trap, yet perhaps he thinks I am caught in it. It was a tiny flash of the Power, but perhaps he is strong enough to have sensed it."

"Then he will not suspect we are coming," Lan said quietly. He almost smiled.

Perrin stared at them, his teeth bared. "What about her?" he demanded. "What was done to her, Moiraine? Is she alive? I cannot see her breathe!"

"She is alive," Moiraine said slowly. "I cannot, I dare not, go close enough to her to tell much beyond that, but she is alive. She . . . sleeps, in a way. As a bear sleeps in the winter. Her heart beats so slowly you could count minutes between. Her breathing is the same. She sleeps." Even from within that hood, he could feel her eyes on him. "I fear she is not there, Perrin. Not in her body any longer."

"What do you mean she is not in her body? Light! You don't mean they . . . took her soul. Like the Gray Men!" Moiraine shook her head, and he drew a relieved breath. His chest hurt as if he had not breathed since she last spoke. "Then where is she, Moiraine?"

"I do not know," she said. "I have a suspicion, but I do not know."

"A suspicion, a hint, anything! Burn me, where?" Lan shifted at the roughness in his voice, but he knew he would try to break the Warder like iron over a hardy if the man tried to stop him. "Where?"

“I know very little, Perrin.” Moiraine’s voice was like cold, unfeeling music. “I have remembered the little I know of what connects a carved hedgehog with Spirit. The carving is a *ter’angreal* last studied by Corianin Nedeal, the last Dreamer the Tower had. The Talent called Dreaming is a thing of Spirit, Perrin. It is not a thing I have ever studied; my Talents lie in other ways. I believe that Zarine has been trapped inside a dream, perhaps even the World of Dreams, *Tel’aran’rhiod*. All that is her is inside that dream. All. A Dreamer sends only a part of herself. If Zarine does not return soon, her body will die. Perhaps she will live on in the dream. I do not know.”

“There is too much you don’t know,” Perrin muttered. He peered into the room and wanted to cry. Zarine looked so small, lying there, so helpless. *Faile. I swear I will only call you Faile, ever again*. “Why don’t you do something!”

“The trap has been sprung, Perrin, but it is a trap that will still catch anyone who steps into that room. I would not reach her side before it took me. And I have work I must do tonight.”

“Burn you, Aes Sedai! Burn your work! This World of Dreams? Is it like the wolf dreams? You said these Dreamers sometimes saw wolves.”

“I have told you what I can,” she said sharply. “It is time for you to go. Lan and I must be on our way to the Stone. There can be no waiting, now.”

“No.” He said it quietly, but when Moiraine opened her mouth, he raised his voice. “No! I will not leave her!”

The Aes Sedai took a deep breath. “Very well, Perrin.” Her voice was ice; calm, smooth, cold. “Remain if you wish. Perhaps you will survive this night. Lan!”

She and the Warder strode down the hall to their rooms. In moments they returned, Lan wearing his color-changing cloak, and vanished down the stairs without another word to him.

He stared through the open door at Faile. *I have to do something. If it* is *like the wolf dreams*. . . .

“Perrin,” came Loial’s deep rumble, “what is this about Faile?” The Ogier came striding down the hall in his shirtsleeves, ink on his fingers and a pen in his hand. “Lan told me I had to go, and then he said something about Faile, in a trap. What did he mean?”

Distractedly, Perrin told him what Moiraine had said. *It might work. It might. It has to!* He was surprised when Loial growled.

“No! Perrin, it is not right! Faile was so free. It is not right to trap her!”

Perrin peered up at Loial’s face, and suddenly remembered the old stories that claimed Ogier were implacable enemies. Loial’s ears had laid back along the sides of his head, and his broad face was as hard as an anvil.

“Loial, I am going to try to help Faile. But I will be helpless myself while I do. Will you guard my back?”

Loial raised those huge hands that held books so carefully, and his thick fingers curled as if to crush stone. “None will pass me while I live, Perrin. Not Myrddraal or the Dark One himself.” He said it like a simple statement of fact.

Perrin nodded, and looked through the door again. *It has to work. I don’t care if Min warned me against her or not!* With a snarl he leaped toward Faile, stretching out his hand. He thought he touched her ankle before he was gone.

Whether this dream of the trap was *Tel’aran’rhiod* or not, Perrin did not know, but he knew it for the wolf dream. Rolling, grassy hills surrounded him, and scattered thickets. He saw deer browsing at the edges of the trees, and a herd of some sort of running animal bounding across the grass, like brown-striped deer, but with long, straight horns. The smells on the wind told him they were good to eat, and other scents spoke of more good hunting all around him. This was the wolf dream.

He was wearing the blacksmith’s long leather vest, he realized, with his arms bare. And there was a weight at his side. He touched the axe belt, but it was not the axe hanging from its loop. He ran his fingers over the head of the heavy smith’s hammer. It felt right.

Hopper alighted in front of him.

Again you come, like a fool. The sending was of a cub sticking its nose into a hollow tree trunk to lap honey despite the bees stinging its muzzle and eyes. *The danger is greater than ever, Young Bull. Evil things walk the dream. The brothers and sisters avoid the mountains of stone the two-legs pile up, and almost fear to dream to one another. You must go!*

“No,” Perrin said. “Faile is here, somewhere, trapped. I have to find her, Hopper. I have to!” He felt a shifting inside him, something changing. He looked down at his curly-haired legs, his wide paws. He was an even larger wolf than Hopper.

You are here too strongly! Every sending carried shock. *You will die, Young Bull!*

If I do not free the falcon, I do not care, brother.

Then we hunt, brother.

Noses to the wind, the two wolves ran across the plain, seeking the falcon.

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CHAPTER 54

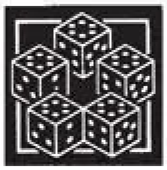

Into the Stone

The rooftops of Tear were no place for a sensible man to be in the night, Mat decided as he peered into the moon shadows. A little more than fifty paces of broad street, or perhaps narrow plaza, separated the Stone from his tiled roof, itself three stories above the paving stones. *But when was I ever sensible? The only people I ever met who were sensible all the time were so boring that watching them could put you to sleep*. Whether the thing was a street or a plaza, he had followed it all the way around the Stone since nightfall; the only place it did not go was on the river side, where the Erinin ran right along the foot of the fortress, and nothing interrupted it except the city wall. That wall was only two houses to his right. So far, the top of the wall seemed the best path to the Stone, but not one he would be overjoyed to take.

Picking up his quarterstaff and a small, wire-handled tin box, he moved carefully to a brick chimney a little nearer the wall. The roll of fireworks—what had been the roll of fireworks before he worked on it back in his room—shifted on his back. It was more of a bundle, now, all jammed together as tight as he could make it, but still too big for carrying around rooftops in the dark. Earlier, a slip of his foot because of the thing had sent a roof tile skittering over the edge, and roused the man sleeping in a room below to bellow “thief!” and send him running. He hitched the bundle back into position without thinking about it, and crouched in the shadows of the chimney. After a moment he set the tin box down; the wire handle was beginning to grow uncomfortably warm.

It felt a little safer, studying the Stone from the shadows, but not much more encouraging. The city wall was not nearly as thick as those he had seen in other places, in Caemlyn or Tar Valon, no more than a pace wide, supported by great stone buttresses cloaked in darkness, now. A pace was more than sufficient width for walking, of course, except that the fall to either side was nearly ten spans. Through the dark, to hard pavement. *But* *some of these bloody houses back right up against it, I can make it to the top easily enough, and it bloody runs straight to the bloody Stone!*

It did that, but that was no particular comfort. The sides of the Stone looked like cliffs. Eyeing the height again, he told himself he should be able to climb it. *Of course, I can. Just like those cliffs in the Mountains of Mist*. Over a hundred paces straight up before there was a battlement. There must be arrowslits lower down, but he could not make them out in the night. And he could not squeeze through an arrowslit. *A hundred bloody paces. Maybe a hundred and twenty. Burn me, even Rand would not try to climb that*. But it was the one way in he had found. Every gate he had seen had been shut tight and looked strong enough to stop a herd of bulls, not to mention the dozen or so soldiers guarding very nearly every last one, in helmets and breastplates, and swords at their belts.

Suddenly he blinked, and squinted at the side of the Stone. There *was* some fool climbing it, just visible as a moving shadow in the moonlight, and over halfway up already, with a drop of seventy paces to the pavement under his feet. *Fool, is he? Well, I'm as big a one, because I am going up, too. Burn me, he'll probably raise an alarm in there and get me caught*. He could not see the climber anymore. *Who in the Light is he? What does it matter who he is? Burn me, but this is a bloody way to win a wager. I'm going to want a kiss from all of them, even Nynaeve!*

He shifted to peer toward the wall, trying to choose his spot to climb, and suddenly there was steel across his throat. Without thinking, he knocked it away and swept the man's feet out from under him with his staff. Someone else kicked his own feet away and he fell almost on top of the man he had knocked down. He rolled off onto the roof tiles, loosing the bundle of fireworks—*If that falls into the street, I'll break their necks!*—staff whirling; he felt it strike flesh, and a second time, heard grunts. Then there were two blades at his throat.

He froze, arms outflung. The points of short spears, dull so they hardly caught the faint light of the moon at all, pressed into his flesh just short of bringing blood. His eyes followed them up to the faces of whoever was holding them, but their heads were shrouded, their faces veiled in black except for their eyes, staring at him. *Burn me, I have to run into real thieves! What happened to my luck?*

He put on a grin, with plenty of teeth so they could see it in the moonlight. "I do not mean to trouble you in your work, so if you let me go my way, I'll let you go yours and say nothing." The veiled men did not move, and neither did their spears. "I want no more outcry than you. I'll not betray you." They stood like statues, staring down at him. *Burn me, I do not have time for this. Time to toss the dice*. For a chilling moment he thought the words in his head had been strange. He tightened his grip on the quarterstaff, lying out to one side of him—and almost cried out when someone stepped hard on his wrist.

He rolled his eyes to see who. *Burn me for a fool, I forgot the one I fell on*. But he saw another shape moving behind the one standing on his wrist, and decided maybe it was as well he had not managed to bring the staff into use after all.

It was a soft boot, laced to the knee, that rested on his arm. It tugged at his memory. Something about a man met in mountains. He eyed the night-cloaked shape the rest of the way up, trying to make out the cut and colors of his clothes—they seemed all shadow, colors that blended with the darkness too well to see them clearly—past a long-bladed knife at the fellow's waist, right up to the dark veil across his face. A black-veiled face. Black-veiled.

Aiel! Burn me, what are bloody Aiel doing here! He had a sinking feeling in his stomach as he remembered hearing that Aiel veiled themselves when they killed.

"Yes," said a man's voice, "we are Aiel." Mat gave a start; he had not realized he had spoken aloud.

"You dance well for one caught by surprise," a young woman's voice said. He thought she was the one standing on his wrist. "Perhaps another day I will have time to dance with you properly."

He started to smile—*If she wants to dance, they can't be going to kill me, at least!*—then frowned instead. He seemed to remember Aiel sometimes meant something different when they said that.

The spears were pulled back, and hands hauled him to his feet. He shook them away and brushed himself off as if he were standing in a common room instead of on a night-cloaked rooftop with four Aiel. It always paid to let the other man know you had a steady nerve. The Aiel had quivers at their waists as well as knives, and more of those short spears on their backs with cased bows, the long spear points sticking up above their shoulders. He heard himself humming "I'm Down at the Bottom of the Well," and stopped it.

“What do you do here?” the man’s voice asked. With the veils, Mat was not entirely sure which one had spoken; the voice sounded older, confident, used to command. He thought he could pick out the woman, at least; she was the only one shorter than he, and that not by much. The others all stood a head taller than he or more. *Bloody Aiel,* he thought. “We have watched you for some little time,” the older man went on, “watched you watch the Stone. You have studied it from every side. Why?”

“I could ask the same of all of you,” another voice said. Mat was the only one who gave a start as a man in baggy breeches stepped out of the shadows. The fellow appeared to be shoeless, for better footing on the tiles. “I expected to find thieves, not Aiel,” the man went on, “but do not think your numbers frighten me.” A slim staff no taller than his head made a blur and a hum as he whirled it. “My name is Juilin Sandar, and I am a thief-catcher, and I would know why you are on the rooftops, staring at the Stone.”

Mat shook his head. *How many bloody people are on the roofs tonight?* All that was needed was for Thom to appear and play his harp, or someone to come looking for an inn. *A bloody thief-taker!* He wondered why the Aiel were just standing there.

“You stalk well, for a city man,” the older man’s voice said. “But why do you follow us? We have stolen nothing. Why have you looked so often at the Stone tonight yourself?”

Even in the moonlight this Sandar’s surprise was evident. He gave a start, opened his mouth—and closed it again as four more Aiel rose out of the dimness behind him. With a sigh, he leaned on his slender staff. “It seems I am caught myself,” he muttered. “It seems *I* must answer *your* questions.” He peered toward the Stone, then shook his head. “I . . . did a thing today that . . . troubles me.” He sounded almost as though he were talking to himself, trying to puzzle it out. “Part of me says it was right, what I did, that I must obey. Surely, it seemed right when I did it. But a small voice tells me I . . . betrayed something. I am certain this voice is wrong, and it is very small, but it will not stop.” He stopped then himself, shaking his head again.

One of the Aiel nodded, and spoke with the older man’s voice. “I am Rhuarc, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel, and once I was *Aethan Dor*, a Red Shield. Sometimes the Red Shields do as your thief-catchers do. I say this so you will understand that I know what it is you do, and the kind of man you must be. I mean no harm to you, Juilin Sandar of the thief-catchers, nor to the people of your city, but you will not be suffered to raise the armcry. If you will keep silence, you will live; if not, not."

"You mean no harm to the city," Sandar said slowly. "Why are you here, then?"

"The Stone." Rhuarc's tone made it plain that was all he meant to say.

After a moment Sandar nodded, and muttered, "I could almost wish you had the power to harm the Stone, Rhuarc. I will hold my tongue."

Rhuarc turned his veiled face to Mat. "And you, nameless youngling? Will you tell me now why you watch the Stone so closely?"

"I just wanted a walk in the moonlight," Mat said lightly. The young woman put her spearpoint to his throat again; he tried not to swallow. *Well, maybe I can tell them something of it*. He must not let them know he was shaken; if you let the other fellow know that, you lost whatever edge you might have. Very carefully, with two fingers, he moved her steel away from him. It seemed to him that she laughed softly. "Some friends of mine are inside the Stone," he said, trying to sound casual. "Prisoners. I mean to bring them out."

"Alone, nameless one?" Rhuarc said.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be anyone else," Mat said dryly. "Unless you care to help? You seem interested in the Stone yourself. If you mean to go into it, perhaps we could go together. It is a tight roll of the dice any way you look at it, but my luck runs good." *So far, anyway. I've run into black-veiled Aiel and they have not cut my throat; luck cannot get much better than that. Burn me, it would not be bad to have a few Aiel along with me in there*. "You could do worse than betting on my luck."

"We are not here for prisoners, gambler," Rhuarc said.

"It is time, Rhuarc." Mat could not tell from which of the Aiel that came, but Rhuarc nodded.

"Yes, Gaul." He looked from Mat to Sandar and back. "Do not give the armcry." He turned away, and in two steps he had blended into the night.

Mat gave a start. The other Aiel were gone, too, leaving him alone with the thief-taker. *Unless they left somebody to watch us. Burn me, how could I tell if they did?* "I hope you don't mean to try stopping me, either," he told Sandar as he slung the bundle of fireworks on his back again and picked up his quarterstaff. "I mean to go inside, by you or through you, one way or the other.” He went over to the chimney to pick up the tin box; the wire handle was more than warm, now.

“These friends of yours,” Sandar said. “They are three women?”

Mat frowned at him, wishing there was enough light to show the man’s face clearly. The fellow’s voice sounded odd. “What do you know of them?”

“I know they are inside the Stone. And I know a small gate near the river where a thief-catcher can gain entrance with a prisoner, to take him to the cells. The cells where they must be. If you will trust me, gambler, I can take us that far. What happens after that is up to chance. Perhaps your luck will bring us out again alive.”

“I have always been lucky,” Mat said slowly. *Do I feel lucky enough to trust him?* He did not much like the idea of pretending to be a prisoner; it seemed too easy for pretense to become reality. But it seemed no bigger risk than trying to climb three hundred feet or more straight up in the dark.

He glanced toward the city wall, and stared. Shadows flowed along it; dim shapes trotting. Aiel, he was sure. There must have been over a hundred. They vanished, but now he could make out shadows moving on the cliff face that was the sheer side of the Stone of Tear. So much for going up that way. That one fellow earlier might have made it inside without raising an alarm—Rhuarc’s armcry—but a hundred or more Aiel would have to be like sounding bells. They might make a diversion, though. If they caused a commotion somewhere up there, inside the Stone, then whoever was guarding the cells might not pay as much attention to a thief-taker bringing a thief.

I might as well add a little to the confusion. I worked hard enough on it. “Very well, thief-taker. Just don’t decide I am a real prisoner at the last minute. We can start for your gate as soon as I stir the anthill a bit.” He thought Sandar frowned, but he did not mean to tell the man more than he had to.

Sandar followed him across the rooftops, climbing to higher levels as easily as he did. The last roof was only a little lower than the top of the wall and ran right up to it, a matter of pulling himself up rather than climbing.

“What are you doing?” Sandar whispered.

“Wait here for me.”

With the tin box dangling from one hand by its wire handle and his quarterstaff held horizontally in front of him, Mat took a deep breath and started toward the Stone. He tried not to think of how far it was to the pavement below. *Light, the bloody thing is three feet wide! I could walk it with a bloody blindfold, in my sleep!* Three feet wide, in the dark, and better than fifty feet to the pavement. He tried not to think about Sandar not being there when he came back, either. He was all but committed to this fool notion of pretending to be a thief caught by the man, but it seemed all too probable that he would return to the roof to find Sandar gone, maybe bringing more men to make him a prisoner in truth. *Don't think about it. Just do the job at hand. At least I'll finally see what it is like*.

As he had suspected, there was an arrowslit in the wall of the Stone right at the end of the wall, a deep wedge cut into the rock holding a tall, narrow opening for an archer to shoot through. If the Stone were attacked, the soldiers inside would want some way to stop any trying to follow this path. The slit was dark, now. There did not appear to be anyone watching. That was something he had tried not to think about, too.

Quickly he set down the tin box at his feet, balanced his quarterstaff across the wall right against the side of the Stone, and unslung the bundle from his back. Hurriedly he wedged it into the slit, forcing it in as far as he could; he wanted as much of the noise to be inside as he could manage. Pulling aside a corner of the oiled cloth cover revealed knotted fuses. After a little thinking, back in his room, he had cut the longer fuses to match the shortest, using the pieces to help tie all the fuses together. It seemed they should all go off at once, and a bang-and-flash like that should be enough to pull everyone who was not completely deaf.

The lid of the tin box was hot enough that he had to blow on his fingers twice before he could pry it off—he wished he had whatever Aludra's trick had been, lighting that lantern so easily—to expose the dark bit of charcoal inside, lying on a bed of sand. The wire handle came off to make tongs, and a little blowing had the coal glowing red again. He touched the hot coal to the knotted fuses, let tongs and coal fall over the side of the wall as the fuses hissed into flame, snatched up his quarterstaff and darted back along the wall.

This is crazy, he thought as he ran. *I don't care how big a bang it makes. I could break my fool neck doing thi—!*

The roar behind him was louder than anything he had ever heard in his life; a monstrous fist punched him in the back, knocking all the wind out of him even before he landed, sprawled on his belly on the wall top, barely holding on to his staff as it swung over the edge. For a moment he lay there, trying to make his lungs work again, trying not to think how he *must* have used up all his luck this time by not falling off the wall. His ears rang like all the bells in Tar Valon.

Pushing himself up carefully, he looked back toward the Stone. A cloud of smoke hung around the arrowslit. Behind the smoke, the shadowed shape of the arrowslit itself seemed different. Larger. He did not understand how or why, but it did seem larger.

He only thought for a moment. At one end of the wall Sandar might be waiting, might be intending to take him into the Stone as a pretend prisoner—or might be hurrying back with soldiers. At the other end of the wall, there might be a way inside without any chance of Sandar betraying him. He darted back the way he had just come, no longer worrying about the darkness or the drop to either side.

The arrowslit *was* larger, most of the thinner stone at the middle simply gone, leaving a rough hole as if someone had hammered at it with a sledge for hours. A hole just big enough for a man. *How in the Light?* There was no time for wondering.

He pushed through the jagged opening, coughing at the acrid smoke, jumped to the floor inside, and had run a dozen steps before Defenders of the Stone appeared, at least ten of them, all shouting in confusion. Most wore only their shirts, and none had helmet or breastplate. Some carried lanterns. Some held bared swords.

Fool! he shouted inside his head. *This is why you set the bloody things off in the first place! Light-blinded fool!*

He had no time to make it back out onto the wall. Quarterstaff spinning, he threw himself at the soldiers before they had a chance to do more than see he was there, hurled himself into them, smashing at heads, swords, knees, whatever he could reach, knowing they were too many for him to handle alone, knowing that his fool toss of the dice had cost Egwene and the others whatever chance he might have had.

Suddenly Sandar was there beside him, in the light of lanterns dropped by men clawing for their swords, his slender staff whirling even faster than Mat's quarterstaff. Caught between two staffmen, taken by surprise, the soldiers went down like pins in a game of bowls.

Sandar stared at the fallen men, shaking his head. "Defenders of the Stone. I have attacked Defenders! They will have my head for—! What was it that you did, gambler? That flash of light, and thunder, breaking stone. Did you call lightning?" His voice fell to a whisper. "Have I joined myself to a man who can channel?"

"Fireworks," Mat said curtly. His ears were still ringing, but he could hear more boots coming, running boots thudding on stone. "The cells, man! Show me the way to the cells before any more get here!"

Sandar shook himself. "This way!" He dashed down a side hall, away from the oncoming boots. "We must hurry! They will kill us if they find us!" Somewhere above, gongs began to sound an alarm, and more thundered echoes through the Stone.

I'm coming, Mat thought as he ran after the thief-taker. *I'll get you out or die! I promise it!*

The alarm gongs sent echoes crashing through the Stone, but Rand paid no more attention to them than he had to the roar that had come before, like muffled thunder from somewhere below. His side ached; the old wound burned, strained almost to tearing by the climb up the side of the fortress. He gave the pain no heed, either. A crooked smile was fixed on his face, a smile of anticipation and dread he could not have wiped away if he had wanted to. It was close, now. What he had dreamed of. *Callandor*.

I will finish it at last. One way or another, it will be done with. The dreams, finished. The baiting, and the taunting, and the hunting. I'll finish it all!

Laughing to himself, he hurried through the dark corridors of the Stone of Tear.

Egwene put a hand to her face, wincing. Her mouth had a bitter taste, and she was thirsty. *Rand? What? Why was I dreaming about Mat again, all mixed with Rand, and shouting that he was coming? What?*

She opened her eyes, stared at the gray stone walls, one smoky rush torch casting flickering shadows, and screamed as she remembered it all. "No! I will not be chained again! I won't be collared! No!"

Nynaeve and Elayne were beside her in an instant, their bruised faces too worried and fearful for the soothing sounds they made to be believed. But just the fact that they were there was enough to still her screams. She was not alone. A prisoner, but not alone. And not collared.

She tried to sit up, and they helped her. They had to help her; she ached in every muscle. She could remember every unseen blow during the frenzy that had all but driven her mad when she realized. . . . *I will not think about that. I have to think about how we are to escape*. She slid backwards until she could lean against a wall. Her pains fought with weariness; that struggle when she had refused to give in had taken every last scrap of her strength, and the bruises seemed to sap even more.

The cell was absolutely empty except for the three of them and the torch. The floor was bare, and cold, and hard. The door of rough planks, splintered as if countless futile fingers had clawed at it, was the only break in the walls. Messages had been scratched in the stone, most by unsteady hands. The Light have mercy and let me die, one read. She blanked that out of her head.

"Are we still shielded?" she mumbled. Even talking hurt. Even as Elayne nodded, she realized she had not had to ask. The swollen cheek on the golden-haired woman, her split lip and black eye, were answer enough, even if her own pains had not been. If Nynaeve had been able to reach the True Source, they surely would have been Healed.

"I have tried," Nynaeve said despairingly. "I have tried, and tried, and tried." She gave her braid a sharp tug, anger seeping through despite the hopeless fear in her voice. "One of them is sitting outside. Amico, that milk-faced chit, if they have not changed since we were thrown in here. I suppose one is enough to maintain the shielding once it has been woven." She barked a bitter laugh. "For all the pains they took—and gave!—to take us, you would think we were of no importance at all. It has been hours since they slammed that door behind us, and no one has come to ask a question, or look, or even bring a drop of water. Perhaps they mean to leave us here until we die of thirst."

"Bait." Elayne's voice quavered, though she was obviously trying to sound unafraid. And failing miserably. "Liandrin said we are bait."

"Bait for what?" Nynaeve asked shakily. "Bait for who? If I am bait, I'd like to shove myself down their throats till they choke on me!"

"Rand." Egwene stopped to swallow; even a drop of water would be welcome. "I dreamed about Rand, and *Callandor*. I think he is coming here." *But why did I dream of Mat? And Perrin? It was a wolf, but I am sure it was him*. "Do not be so afraid," she said, trying to sound confident.

“We will escape them somehow. If we could better the Seanchan, we can best Liandrin.”

Nynaeve and Elayne exchanged looks over her. Nynaeve said, “Liandrin said thirteen Myrddraal are coming, Egwene.”

She found herself staring at that message scratched on the stone wall again: The Light have mercy and let me die. Her hands clenched into fists. Her jaws cramped with the effort of not screaming those words. *Better to die. Better death than being turned to the Shadow, made to serve the Dark One!*

She realized that one of her hands had tightened around the pouch at her belt. She could feel the two rings inside, the small circle of the Great Serpent and the larger, twisted stone ring.

“They did not take the *ter’angreal*,” she said wonderingly. She fumbled it out of her pouch. It lay heavily on her palm, all stripes and flecks of color, a ring with only one edge.

“We were not even important enough to search,” Elayne sighed. “Egwene, are you certain Rand is coming here? I would much rather free myself than wait for the chance of him, but if there is anyone who can defeat Liandrin and the rest of them, it must be him. The Dragon Reborn is meant to wield *Callandor*. He *must* be able to defeat them.”

“Not if we pull him into a cage after us,” Nynaeve muttered. “Not if they have a trap set he does not see. Why are you staring at that ring, Egwene? *Tel’aran’rhiod* will not help us now. Not unless you can dream a way out of here.”

“Perhaps I can,” she said slowly. “I could channel in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Their shielding won’t stop me reaching it. All I need do is sleep, not channel. And I am surely weary enough to sleep.”

Elayne frowned, wincing as it pulled her bruises. “I will take any chance, but how can you channel even in a dream, cut off from the True Source? And if you can, how can it help us here?”

“I do not know, Elayne. Just because I am shielded here does not mean I am shielded in the World of Dreams. It is at least worth a try.”

“Perhaps,” Nynaeve said worriedly. “I will take any chance, too, but you saw Liandrin and the others the last time you used that ring. And you said they saw you, too. What if they are there again?”

“I hope they are,” Egwene said grimly. “I hope they are.”

Clutching the *ter'angreal* in her hand, she closed her eyes. She could feel Elayne smoothing her hair, hear her murmuring softly. Nynaeve began to hum that wordless lullaby from her childhood; for once, she felt no anger at it at all. The soft sounds and touches soothed her, let her surrender to her weariness, let sleep come.

She wore blue silk this time, but she barely noticed more than that. Soft breezes caressed her unbruised face, and sent the butterflies swirling above the wildflowers. Her thirst was gone, her aches. She reached out to embrace *saidar* and was filled with the One Power. Even the triumph she felt at succeeding was small beside the surging of the Power through her.

Reluctantly she made herself release it, closed her eyes, and filled the emptiness with a perfect image of the Heart of the Stone. That was the one place in the Stone she could picture aside from her cell, and how to distinguish one featureless cubicle from another? When she opened her eyes, she was there. But she was not alone.

The form of Joiya Byir stood before *Callandor*, her shape so insubstantial that the surging light of the sword shone through her. The crystal sword no longer merely glittered with refracted light. In pulses it glowed, as if some light inside it were being uncovered, then covered and uncovered again. The Black sister started with surprise and spun to face Egwene. "How? You are shielded! Your Dreaming is at an end!"

Before the first words were out of the woman's mouth, Egwene reached for *saidar* again, wove the complicated flow of Spirit as she remembered it being used against her, and cut Joiya Byir off from the Source. The Darkfriend's eyes widened, those cruel eyes so incongruous in that beautiful, kindly face, but Egwene was already weaving Air. The other woman's form might seem like mist, but the bonds held it. It seemed to Egwene that there was no effort involved in holding both flows in their weaving. There was sweat on Joiya Byir's forehead as she walked closer.

"You have a *ter'angreal*!" Fear was plain on the woman's face, but her voice fought to hide it. "That must be it. A *ter'angreal* that escaped us, and one that does not require channeling. Do you think it will do you any good, girl? Whatever you do here, it cannot affect what happens in the real world. *Tel'aran'rhiod* is a dream! When I wake, I will take your *ter'angreal* from you myself. Be careful what you do, lest I have reason to be angry when I come to your cell."

Egwene smiled at her. “Are you certain you will wake, Darkfriend? If your *ter’angreal* requires channeling, why did you not wake as soon as I shielded you? Perhaps you cannot wake so long as you are shielded here.” Her smile faded away; the effort of smiling at this woman was more than she could bear. “A woman once showed me a scar she received in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, Darkfriend. What happens here *is* still real when you wake.”

The sweat rolled down the Black sister’s smooth, ageless face, now. Egwene wondered if she thought she was about to die. She almost wished she were cruel enough to do that. Most of the unseen blows she had received had come from this woman, like a pounding of fists, for no reason more than that she had kept trying to crawl away, no reason more than that she had refused to give up.

“A woman who can give such beatings,” she said, “should have no objections to a milder one.” She wove another flow of Air quickly; Joiya Byir’s dark eyes bulged in disbelief as the first blow landed across her hips. Egwene saw how to adjust the weaving so she did not have to maintain it. “You will remember this, and feel it, when you waken. When I allow you to waken. Remember this, too. If you ever even try to beat me again, I will return you here and leave you for the rest of your life!” The Black sister’s eyes stared hate at her, but there was a suggestion of tears in them, too.

Egwene felt a moment of shame. Not at what she was doing to Joiya—the woman deserved every blow, if not for her own beating, then for the deaths in the Tower—not that, not really, but because she had spent time on her own revenge while Nynaeve and Elayne were sitting in a cell hoping against hope that she might be able to rescue them.

She tied off and set the flows of her weavings before she knew she had done it, then paused to study what she had done. Three separate weavings, and not only had it been no trouble to hold them all at once, but now she had done something so they would maintain themselves. She thought she could remember how, too. And it might be useful.

After a moment, she unraveled one of the weavings, and the Darkfriend sobbed as much from relief as from pain. “I am not like you,” Egwene said. “This is the second time I have done something like this, and I do not like it. I am going to have to learn to cut throats instead.” From the Black sister’s face, she thought Egwene meant to start learning with her.

Making a disgusted sound, Egwene left her standing there, trapped and shielded, and hurried into the forest of polished redstone columns. There had to be a way down to the cells somewhere.

The stone corridor fell silent as the final dying scream was cut off by Young Bull's jaws closing on the two-legs's throat, crushing it. The blood was bitter on his tongue.

He knew this was the Stone of Tear, though he could not say how he knew. The two-legs lying around him, one kicking his last with Hopper's teeth buried in his throat, had smelled rank with fear as they fought. They had smelled confused. He did not think they had known where they were—they certainly did not belong in the wolf dream—but they had been set to keep him from that tall door ahead, with its iron lock. To guard it, at least. They had seemed startled to see wolves. He thought they had been startled at being there themselves.

He wiped his mouth, then stared at his hand with a momentary lack of comprehension. He was a man again. He was Perrin. Back in his own body, in the blacksmith's vest, with the heavy hammer at his side.

We must hurry, Young Bull. There is something evil near.

Perrin pulled the hammer from his belt as he strode to the door. "Faile must be here." One sharp blow shattered the lock. He kicked open the door.

The room was empty except for a long stone block in the middle of the floor. Faile lay on that block as if sleeping, her black hair spread out like a fan, her body so wrapped in chains that it took him a moment to realize she was unclothed. Every chain was held to the stone by a thick bolt.

He was hardly aware of crossing the space until his hand touched her face, tracing her cheekbone with a finger.

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "I kept dreaming you would come, blacksmith."

"I will have you free in a moment, Faile." He raised his hammer, smashed one of the bolts as if it were wood.

"I was sure of it. Perrin."

As his name faded from her tongue, she faded, too. With a clatter, the chains dropped to the stone where she had been.

"No!" he cried. "I found her!"

The dream is not like the world of flesh, Young Bull. Here, the same hunt can have many endings.

He did not turn to look at Hopper. He knew his teeth were bared in a snarl. Again he raised the hammer, brought it down with all his strength against the chains that had held Faile. The stone block cracked in two under his blow; the Stone itself rang like a stuck bell.

“Then I will hunt again,” he growled.

Hammer in hand, Perrin strode out of the room with Hopper beside him. The Stone was a place of men. And men, he knew, were crueler hunters than ever wolves were.

Alarm gongs somewhere above sent sonorous clangs down the corridor, not quite drowning out the ring of metal on metal and the shouts of fighting men rather closer. The Aiel and the Defenders, Mat suspected. Tall, golden lamp stands, each with four golden lamps, lined the hall where Mat was, and silk tapestries of battle scenes hung on the polished stone walls. There were even silk carpets on the floor, dark red on dark blue, woven in the Tairen maze. For once, Mat was too busy to put a price on anything.

This bloody fellow is good, he thought as he managed to sweep a sword thrust away from him, but the blow he aimed at the man’s head with the other end of the staff had to turn into another block of that darting blade. *I wonder if he is one of these bloody High Lords?* He almost managed a solid blow at a knee, but his opponent sprang back, his straight blade raised on guard.

The blue-eyed man certainly wore the puffy-sleeved coat, yellow with thread-of-gold stripes, but it was all undone, his shirt only half tucked into his breeches, and his feet bare. His short-cropped, dark hair was tousled, like that of a man roused hastily from sleep, but he did not fight like it. Five minutes ago he had come darting out from one of the tall, carved doors that lined this hall, a scabbardless sword in his hands, and Mat was only grateful the fellow had appeared in front of them and not behind. He was not the first man dressed so that Mat had faced already, but he was surely the best.

“Can you make it past me, thief-catcher?” Mat called, careful not to take his eyes off the man waiting for him with blade poised to strike. Sandar had insisted irritably on “thief-catcher,” not “thief-taker,” though Mat could not see any difference.

“I cannot,” Sandar called from behind him. “If you move to let me by, you will lose room to swing that oar you call a staff, and he will spit you like a grunt.”

Like a what? “Well, think of something, Tairen. This ragamuffin is grating my nerves.”

The man in the gold-striped coat sneered. “You will be honored to die on the blade of the High Lord Darlin, peasant, if I allow it so.” It was the first time he had deigned to speak. “Instead, I think I will have the pair of you hung by the heels, and watch while the skin is stripped from your bodies—”

“I do not think I’d like that,” Mat said.

The High Lord’s face reddened with indignation at being interrupted, but Mat gave him no time for any outraged comment. Quarterstaff whirling in a tight double-loop weave, so quick the staff blurred at the ends, he leaped forward. It was all a snarling Darlin could do to keep the staff from him. For the moment. Mat knew he could not keep this up very long, and if he was lucky then, it would all go back to to the strike and counterstrike. If he was lucky. But he had no intention of counting on luck this time. As soon as the High Lord had a moment to set himself in a pattern of defense, Mat altered his attack in midwhirl. The end of the staff Darlin had been expecting at his head dipped instead to sweep his legs out from under him. The other end did strike at his head then, as he fell, a sharp crack that rolled his eyes back up in his head.

Panting, Mat leaned on his staff over the unconscious High Lord. *Burn me, if I have to fight one or two more like this, I’ll bloody well fall over from exhaustion! The stories do not tell you being a hero is such hard work! Nynaeve always did find a way to make me work*.

Sandar came to stand beside him, frowning down at the crumpled High Lord. “He does not look so mighty lying there,” he said wonderingly. “He does not look so much greater than me.”

Mat gave a start and peered down the hall, where a man had just gone trotting across along a joining corridor. *Burn me, if I did not know it was crazy, I would swear that was Rand!*

“Sandar, you find that—” he began, swinging his staff up onto his shoulder, and cut off when it thudded into something.

Spinning, he found himself facing another half-dressed High Lord, this one with his sword on the floor, his knees buckling, and both hands to his head where Mat’s staff had split his scalp. Hastily, Mat poked him hard in the stomach with the butt of the staff to bring his hands down, then gave him another thump on the head to put him down in a heap on top of his sword.

“Luck, Sandar,” he muttered. “You cannot beat bloody luck. Now, why don’t you find this bloody private way the High Lords take down to the cells?” Sandar had insisted there was such a stairway, and using it would avoid having to run through most of the Stone. Mat did not think he liked men so eager to watch people put to the question that they wanted a quick route to the prisoners from their apartments.

“Just be glad you *were* so lucky,” Sandar said unsteadily, “or this one would have killed us both before we saw him. I know the door is here somewhere. Are you coming? Or do you mean to wait for another High Lord to appear?”

“Lead on.” Mat stepped over the unconscious High Lord. “I am no bloody hero.”

Trotting, he followed the thief-catcher, who peered at the tall doors they passed, muttering that he knew it was here somewhere.

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CHAPTER 55

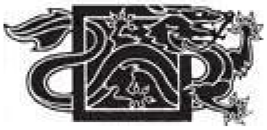

What Is Written in Prophecy

Rand entered the chamber slowly, walking among the great polished redstone columns he remembered from his dreams. Silence filled the shadows, yet something called to him. And something flashed ahead, a momentary light throwing back shadow, a beacon. He stepped out beneath a great dome, and saw what he sought. *Callandor*, hanging hilt down in midair, waiting for no hand but that of the Dragon Reborn. As it revolved, it broke what little light there was into splinters, and now and then it flared as if with a light of its own. Calling him. Waiting for him.

If I am the Dragon Reborn. If I am not just some half-mad man cursed with the ability to channel, a puppet dancing for Moiraine and the White Tower.

“Take it, Lews Therin. Take it, Kinslayer.”

He spun to face the voice. The tall man with close-cropped white hair who stepped from the shadows among the columns was familiar to him. Rand had no idea who he was, this fellow in a red silk coat with black stripes down its puffy sleeves and black breeches tucked into elaborately silver-worked boots. He did not know the man, but he had seen him in his dreams. “You put them in a cage,” he said. “Egwene, and Nynaeve, and Elayne. In my dreams. You kept putting them in a cage, and hurting them.”

The man made a dismissive gesture of his hand. “They are less than nothing. Perhaps one day, when they have been trained, but not now. I confess surprise that you cared enough to make them useful. But you were ever a fool, ever ready to follow your heart before power. You came too soon, Lews Therin. Now you must do what you are not yet ready for, or else die. Die, knowing you have left these women you care for in my hands.” He seemed to be waiting for something, expectant. “I mean to use them more, Kinslayer. They will serve me, serve my power. And that will hurt them far more than anything they have suffered before.”

Behind Rand, *Callandor* flashed, throwing one pulse of warmth against his back. “Who are you?”

“You do not remember me, do you?” The white-haired man laughed suddenly. “I do not remember you, either, looking this way. A country lad with a flute case on his back. Did Ishamael speak the truth? He was ever one to lie when it gained him an inch or a second. Do you remember nothing, Lews Therin?”

“A name!” Rand demanded. “What is your name?”

“Call me Be’lal.” The Forsaken scowled when Rand did not react to the name. “Take it!” Be’lal snapped, throwing a hand toward the sword behind Rand. “Once we rode to war side by side, and for that I give you a chance. A bare chance, but a chance to save yourself, a chance to save those three I mean to make my pets. Take the sword, *countryman*. Perhaps it will be enough to help you survive me.”

Rand laughed. “Do you believe you can frighten me so easily, Forsaken? Ba’alzamon himself has hunted me. Do you think I will cower now for you? Grovel before a Forsaken when I have denied the Dark One to his face?”

“Is that what you think?” Be’lal said softly. “Truly, you know nothing.” Suddenly there was a sword in his hands, a sword with a blade carved from black fire. “Take it! Take *Callandor*! Three thousand years, while I lay imprisoned, it has waited there. For you. One of the most powerful *sa’angreal* we ever made. Take it, and defend yourself, if you can!”

He moved toward Rand as if to drive him back toward *Callandor*, but Rand raised his own hands—*saidin* filled him; sweet rushing flow of the Power; stomach-wrenching vileness of the taint—and he held a sword wrought from red flame, a sword with a heron-mark on its fiery blade. He stepped into the forms Lan had taught him till he flowed from one to the next as if in a dance. Parting the Silk. Water Flows Downhill. Wind and Rain. Blade of black fire met blade of red in showers of sparks, roars like white-hot metal shattering.

Rand came back smoothly into a guard stance, trying not to let his sudden uncertainty show. A heron stood on the black blade, too, a bird so dark as to be nearly invisible. Once he had faced a man with a heron-mark blade of steel, and barely survived. He knew that he himself had no real right to the blademaster’s mark; it had been on the sword his father had given him, and when he thought of a sword in his hands, he thought of that sword. Once he had embraced death, as the Warder had taught, but this time, he knew, his death would be final. Be'lal was better than he with the sword. Stronger. Faster. A true blademaster.

The Forsaken laughed, amused, swinging his blade in quick flourishes to either side of him; the black fire roared as if swift passage through the air quickened it. “You were a greater swordsman, once, Lews Therin,” he said mockingly. “Do you remember when we took that tame sport called swords and learned to kill with it, as the old volumes said men once had? Do you remember even one of those desperate battles, even one of our dire defeats? Of course not. You remember nothing, do you? This time you have not learned enough. This time, Lews Therin, I will kill you.” Be'lal's mockery deepened. “Perhaps if you take *Callandor*, you might extend your life a little longer. A little longer.”

He came forward slowly, almost as if to give Rand time to do just that, turn and race to *Callandor*, to the Sword That Cannot Be Touched, to take it. But the doubts were still strong in Rand. *Callandor* could only be touched by the Dragon Reborn. He had allowed them to proclaim him so for a hundred reasons that seemed to leave him no choice at the time. But was he truly the Dragon Reborn? If he raced to touch *Callandor* in truth, not in a dream, would his hand meet an invisible wall while Be'lal cut him down from behind?

He met the Forsaken with the sword he knew, the blade of fire wrought with *saidin*. And was driven back. The Falling Leaf met Watered Silk. The Cat Dances on the Wall met the Boar Rushes Downhill. The River Undercuts the Bank nearly lost him his head, and he had to throw himself inelegantly to one side with black flame brushing his hair, rolling to his feet to confront the Stone Falls From the Mountain. Methodically, deliberately, Be'lal drove him back in a spiral that slowly tightened on *Callandor*.

Shouts echoed among the columns, screams, the clash of steel, but Rand barely heard. He and Be'lal were no longer alone in the Heart of the Stone. Men in breastplates and rimmed helmets fought with swords against shadowy, veiled shapes that darted among the columns with short spears stabbing. Some of the soldiers formed a rank; arrows flashing out of the dimness took them in the throat, the face, and they died in their line. Rand hardly noticed the fighting, even when men fell dead within paces of him. His own fight was too desperate; it took all of his concentration. Wet warmth trickled down his side. The old wound was breaking open.

He stumbled suddenly, not seeing the dead man at his feet until he was lying on his back atop his flute case on the stone floor.

Be’lal raised his blade of black fire, snarling. “Take it! Take *Callandor* and defend yourself! Take it, or I will kill you now! If you will not take it, I will slay you!”

“No!”

Even Be’lal gave a start at the command in that woman’s voice. The Forsaken stepped back out of the arc of Rand’s sword and turned his head to frown at Moiraine as she came striding through the battle, her eyes fixed on him, ignoring the screaming deaths around her. “I thought you were neatly out of the way, woman. No matter. You are only an annoyance. A stinging fly. A biteme. I will cage you with the others, and teach you to serve the Shadow with your puny powers,” he finished with a contemptuous laugh, and raised his free hand.

Moiraine had not stopped or slowed while he spoke. She was no more than thirty paces from him when he moved his hand, and she raised both of hers as well.

There was an instant of surprise on the Forsaken’s face, and he had time to scream “No!” Then a bar of white fire hotter than the sun shot from the Aes Sedai’s hands, a glaring rod that banished all shadows. Before it, Be’lal became a shape of shimmering motes, specks dancing in the light for less than a heartbeat, flecks consumed before his cry faded.

There was silence in the chamber as that bar of light vanished, silence except for the moans of the wounded. The fighting had stopped dead, veiled men and men in breastplates alike standing as if stunned.

“He was right concerning one thing,” Moiraine said, as coolly serene as if she were standing in a meadow. “You must take *Callandor*. He meant to slay you for it, but it is your birthright. Better by far that you knew more before your hand held that hilt, yet you have come to the point now, and there is no further time for learning. Take it, Rand.”

Whips of black lightning curled around her; she screamed as they lifted her, hurled her to slide along the floor like a sack until she came up against one of the columns.

Rand stared up at where the lightning had come from. There was a deeper shadow up there, near the top of the columns, a blackness that made all other shadows look like noonday, and from it, two eyes of fire stared back at him.

Slowly the shadow descended, resolving into Ba'alzamon, clothed in dead black, like a Myrddraal's black. Yet even that was not so dark as the shadow that clung to him. He hung in the air, two spans above the floor, glaring at Rand with a rage as fierce as his eyes. "Twice in this life I have offered you the chance to serve me living." Flames leaped in his mouth as he spoke, and every word roared like a furnace. "Twice you have refused, and wounded me. Now you will serve the Lord of the Grave in death. Die, Lews Therin Kinslayer. Die, Rand al'Thor. It is time for you to die! I take your soul!"

As Ba'alzamon put forth his hand, Rand pushed himself up, threw himself desperately toward *Callandor*, still glittering and flashing in midair. He did not know whether he could reach it, or touch it if he did, but he was sure it was his only chance.

Ba'alzamon's blow struck him as he leapt, struck inside him, a ripping and crumpling, tearing something loose, trying to pull a part of him away. Rand screamed. He felt as if he were collapsing like an empty sack, as if he were being turned inside out. The pain in his side, the wound taken at Falme, was almost welcome, something to hang on to, a reminder of life. His hand closed convulsively. On *Callandor*'s hilt.

The One Power surged through him, a torrent greater than he could believe, from *saidin* into the sword. The crystal blade shone brighter than even Moiraine's fire had. It was impossible to look at, impossible any longer to see that it was a sword, only that light blazed in his fist. He fought the flow, wrestled with the implacable tide that threatened to carry him, all that was really him, into the sword with it. For a heartbeat that took centuries he hung, wavering, balanced on the brink of being scoured away like sand before a flash flood. With infinite slowness the balance firmed. It was still as though he stood barefoot on a razor's edge above a bottomless drop, yet something told him this was the best that could be expected. To channel this much of the Power, he must dance on that sharpness as he had danced the forms of the sword.

He turned to face Ba'alzamon. The tearing within him had ceased as soon as his hand touched *Callandor*. Only an instant had passed, yet it seemed to have lasted forever. "You will not take my soul," he shouted. "This time, I mean to finish it once and for all! I mean to finish it now!"

Ba'alzamon fled, man and shadow vanishing.

For a moment Rand stared, frowning. There had been a sense of—folding—as Ba'alzamon left. A twisting, as if Ba'alzamon had in some way *bent* what was. Ignoring the men staring at him, ignoring Moiraine crumpled at the column base, Rand reached out, through *Callandor*, and twisted reality to make a door to somewhere else. He did not know to where, except that it was where Ba'alzamon had gone.

"I am the hunter now," he said, and stepped through.

The stone shook under Egwene's feet. The Stone shook; it rang. She caught her balance and stopped, listening. There was no more sound, no other tremor. Whatever had happened, it was over. She hurried on. A door of iron bars stood in her way, with a lock as big as her head. She channeled Earth before she reached it, and when she pushed against the bars, the lock tore in half.

She walked quickly across the chamber beyond it, trying not to look at the things hanging on the walls. Whips and iron pincers were the most innocuous. With a small shudder she pushed open a smaller iron gate and entered a corridor lined with rough wooden doors, rush torches burning at intervals in iron brackets; she felt almost as much relief at leaving those things behind as she did at finding what she sought. *But which cell?*

The wooden doors opened easily. Some were unlocked, and the locks on the others lasted no longer than that larger lock had earlier. But every cell was empty. *Of course. No one would dream themselves in this place. Any prisoner who managed to reach Tel'aran'rhiod would dream of a pleasanter place*.

For a moment she felt something close to despair. She had wanted to believe that finding the right cell would make a difference. Even finding it could be impossible, though. This first corridor stretched on and on, and others joined it.

Suddenly she saw something flicker just ahead of her. A shape even less substantial than Joiya Byir had been. It had been a woman, though. She was sure of that. A woman seated on a bench beside one of the cell doors. The image flickered into being again, and was gone. There was no mistaking that slender neck and the pale, innocent-appearing face with its eyelids fluttering on the edge of sleep. Amico Nagoyin was drifting toward sleep, dreaming of her guard duties. And apparently toying drowsily with one of the stolen *ter'angreal*. Egwene could understand that; it had been a great effort to stop using the one Verin had given her, even for a few days.

She knew it was possible to cut a woman off from the True Source even if she had already embraced *saidar*, but severing a weave already established had to be much harder than damming the flow before it began. She set the patterns of the weaving, readied them, making the threads of Spirit much stronger, this time, thicker and heavier, a denser weave with a cutting edge like a knife.

The wavering shape of the Darkfriend appeared again, and Egwene struck out with the flows of Air and Spirit. For an instant something seemed to resist the weaving of Spirit, and she forced it with all of her might. It slid into place.

Amico Nagoyin screamed. It was a thin sound, barely heard, as faint as she herself was, and she seemed almost like a shadow of what Joiya Byir had been. Yet the bonds woven of Air held her; she did not vanish again. Terror twisted the Darkfriend's lovely face; she seemed to be babbling, but her shouts were whispers too soft for Egwene to understand.

Tying and setting the weaves around the Black sister, Egwene turned her attentions to the cell door. Impatiently, she let Earth flood into the iron lock. It fell away in black dust, in a mist that dissolved completely before it struck the floor. She swung open the door, and was not surprised to find the cell empty except for one burning rush torch.

But Amico is bound, and the door is open.

For a moment she thought of what to do next. Then she stepped out of the dream . . .

. . . and woke to all her bruises and aches and thirst, to the wall of the cell against her back, staring at the tightly shut cell door. *Of course. What happens to living things there is real when they wake. What I did to stone or iron or wood has no effect in the waking world*.

Nynaeve and Elayne were still kneeling beside her.

"Whoever is out there," Nynaeve said, "screamed a few moments ago, but nothing else has happened. Did you find a way out?"

"We should be able to walk out," Egwene said. "Help me to my feet, and I will get rid of the lock. Amico will not trouble us. That scream was her."

Elayne shook her head. “I have been trying to embrace *saidar* ever since you left. It is different, now, but I am still cut off.”

Egwene formed the emptiness inside her, became the rosebud opening to *saidar*. The invisible wall was still there. It shimmered now. There were moments when she almost thought she could feel the True Source beginning to fill her with the Power. Almost. The shield wavered in and out of existence too fast for her to detect. It might as well have still been solid.

She stared at the other two women. “I bound her. I shielded her. She is a living thing, not lifeless iron. She *must* be shielded still.”

“*Some*thing has happened to the shield set on us,” Elayne said, “but Amico is still managing to hold it.”

Egwene let her head sag back against the wall. “I will have to try again.”

“Are you strong enough?” Elayne grimaced. “To be blunt, you sound even weaker than you did before. This try took something out of you, Egwene.”

“I am strong enough there.” She did feel more weary, less strong, but it was their only chance that she could see. She said as much, and their faces said they agreed with her, however reluctantly.

“Can you go to sleep again so soon?” Nynaeve asked finally.

“Sing to me.” Egwene managed a smile. “Like when I was a little girl. Please?” Holding Nynaeve’s hand with one of hers, the stone ring clasped in the other, she closed her eyes and tried to find sleep in the wordless humming tune.

The wide door of iron bars stood open, and the room beyond seemed empty of life, but Mat entered cautiously. Sandar was still out in the hall, trying to peer both ways at once, certain that a High Lord, or maybe a hundred Defenders or so, would appear at any moment.

There were no men in the room now—and by the looks of the half-eaten meals on a long table, they had left hurriedly; no doubt because of the fighting above—and from the looks of the things on the walls, he was just as glad he did not have to meet any of them. Whips in different sizes and lengths, different thicknesses, with different numbers of tails. Pincers, and tongs, and clamps, and irons. Things that looked like metal boots, and gauntlets, and helmets, with great screws all over them as if to tighten them down. Things he could not even begin to guess the use of. If he had met the men who used these things, he thought he would surely have checked that *they* were dead before he walked away.

“Sandar!” he hissed. “Are you going to stay out there all bloody night!” He hurried to the inner door—barred like the outer, but smaller—without waiting for an answer, and went through.

The hall beyond was lined by rough wooden doors, and lit by the same rush torches as the room he had just left. No more than twenty paces from him, a woman sat on a bench beside one of the doors, leaning back against the wall in a curiously stiff fashion. She turned her head slowly toward him at the sound of his boots grating on the stone. A pretty young woman. He wondered why she did not move more than her head, and why even that moved as if she were half-asleep.

Was she a prisoner? *Out in the hall? But nobody with a face like that could be one of the people who uses the things on those walls*. She did look almost asleep, with her eyes only partly open. And the suffering on that lovely face surely made her one of the tortured, not a torturer.

“Stop!” Sandar shouted behind him. “She is Aes Sedai! She is one of those who took the women you seek!”

Mat froze in the middle of a step, staring at the woman. He remembered Moiraine hurling balls of fire. He wondered if he could deflect a ball of fire with his quarterstaff. He wondered if his luck extended to outrunning Aes Sedai.

“Help me,” she said faintly. Her eyes still looked nearly asleep, but the pleading in her voice was fully awake. “Help me. Please!”

Mat blinked. She still had not moved a muscle below her neck. Cautiously, he stepped closer, waving to Sandar to stop his groaning about her being Aes Sedai. She moved her head to follow him. No more than that.

A large iron key hung at her belt. For a moment he hesitated. Aes Sedai, Sandar said. *Why doesn’t she move?* Swallowing, he eased the key free as carefully as if he were trying to take a piece of meat from a wolf’s jaws. She rolled her eyes toward the door beside her and made a sound like a cat that had just seen a huge dog come snarling into the room and knew there was no way out.

He did not understand it, but as long as she did not try to stop him opening that door, he did not care why she just sat there like a stuffed scarecrow. On the other hand, he wondered if there was something on the other side worth being afraid of. *If she is one of those who took Egwene and* *the others, it stands to reason she's guarding them*. Tears leaked from the woman's eyes. *Only she looks like it's a bloody Halfman in there*. But there was only one way to find out. Propping his staff against the wall, he turned the key in the lock and flung open the door, ready to run if need be.

Nynaeve and Elayne were kneeling on the floor with Egwene apparently asleep between them. He gasped at the sight of Egwene's swollen face, and changed his mind about her sleeping. The other two women turned toward him as he opened the door—they were almost as battered as Egwene; *Burn me! Burn me!*—looked at him, and gaped.

"Matrim Cauthon," Nynaeve said, sounding shocked, "what under the Light are *you* doing here?"

"I came to bloody rescue you," he said. "Burn me if I expected to be greeted as if I had come to steal a pie. You can tell me why you look as if you'd been fighting bears later, if you want. If Egwene cannot walk, I'll carry her on my back. There are Aiel all over the Stone, or near enough, and either they are killing the bloody Defenders or the bloody Defenders are killing them, but whichever way it is, we had better get out of here while we bloody well can. *If* we can!"

"Mind your language," Nynaeve told him, and Elayne gave him one of those disapproving stares women were so good at. Neither one seemed to have her full attention in it, though. They began shaking Egwene as if she were not covered with more bruises than he had ever seen in his life.

Egwene's eyelids fluttered open, and she groaned. "Why did you wake me? I must understand it. If I loose the bonds on her, she will wake and I'll never catch her again. But if I do not, she cannot go all the way to sleep, and—" Her eyes fell on him and widened. "Matrim Cauthon, what under the Light are *you* doing here?"

"You tell her," he told Nynaeve. "I am too busy trying to rescue you to watch my langu—" They were all staring beyond him, glaring as if they wished they had knives in their hands.

He spun, but all he saw was Juilin Sandar, looking as if he had swallowed a rotten plum whole.

"They have cause," he told Mat. "I. . . . I betrayed them. But I had to."That was addressed past Mat to the women. "The one with many honey-colored braids spoke to me, and I. . . . I had to do it." For a long moment the three continued to stare.

“Liandrin has vile tricks, Master Sandar,” Nynaeve said finally. “Perhaps you are not entirely to blame. We can apportion guilt later.”

“If that is all cleared up,” Mat said, “could we go now?” It was as clear as mud to him, but he was more interested in leaving right then.

The three women limped after him into the hall, but they stopped around the woman on the bench. She rolled her eyes at them and whimpered. “Please. I will come back to the Light. I will swear to obey you. With the Oath Rod in my hands I will swear. Please do not—”

Mat jumped as Nynaeve suddenly reared back and swung a fist, knocking the woman completely off the bench. She lay there, her eyes closed all the way finally, but even lying on her side she was still in exactly the same position she had been in on the bench.

“It is gone,” Elayne said excitedly.

Egwene bent to rummage in the unconscious woman’s pouch, transferring something Mat could not make out to her own. “Yes. It feels wonderful. Something changed about her when you hit her, Nynaeve. I do not know what, but I felt it.”

Elayne nodded. “I felt it, too.”

“I would like to change every last thing about her,” Nynaeve said grimly. She took Egwene’s head in her hands; Egwene rose onto her toes, gasping. When Nynaeve took her hands away to put them on Elayne, Egwene’s bruises were gone. Elayne’s vanished as quickly.

“Blood and bloody ashes!” Mat growled. “What do you mean hitting a woman who was just sitting there? I don’t think she could even move!” They all three turned to look at him, and he made a strangled sound as the air seemed to turn to thick jelly around him. He lifted into the air, until his boots dangled a good pace above the floor. *Oh, burn me, the Power! Here I was afraid that Aes Sedai would use the bloody Power on me, and now the bloody women I’m rescuing do it! Burn me!*

“You do not understand anything, Matrim Cauthon,” Egwene said in a tight voice.

“Until you do understand,” Nynaeve said in an even tighter, “I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself.”

Elayne contented herself with a glare that made him think of his mother going out to cut a switch.

For some reason he found himself giving them the grin that had so often sent his mother after that switch. *Burn me, if they can do this, I don’t* *see how anybody ever locked them in that cell in the first place!* “What I understand is that I got you out of something you couldn’t get yourselves out of, and you all have as much gratitude as a bloody Taren Ferry man with a toothache!”

“You are right,” Nynaeve said, and his boots suddenly hit the floor so hard his teeth jarred. But he could move again. “As much as it pains me to say it, Mat, you are right.”

He was tempted to answer something sarcastic, but there was barely enough apology in her voice as it was. “Now can we go? With the fighting going on, Sandar thinks he and I can take you out by a small gate near the river.”

“I am not leaving just yet, Mat,” Nynaeve said. “I mean to find Liandrin and skin her,” Egwene said, sounding almost as if she meant it literally.

“All I want to do,” Elayne said, “is pound Joiya Byir till she squeals, but I will settle for any of them.”

“Are you all deaf?” he growled. “There is a battle going on out there! I came here to rescue you, and I mean to rescue you.” Egwene patted his cheek as she walked by him, and so did Elayne. Nynaeve merely sniffed. He stared after them with his mouth hanging open. “Why didn’t you say something?” he growled at the thief-catcher.

“I saw what speaking earned you,” Sandar said simply. “I am no fool.”

“Well, I am not staying in the middle of a battle!” he shouted at the women. They were just disappearing through the small, barred door. “I am leaving, do you hear?” They did not even look back. *Probably get themselves killed out there! Somebody will stick a sword in them while they’re looking the other way!* With a snarl, he put his quarterstaff across his shoulder and started after. “Are you going to stand there?” he called to the thief-catcher. “I did not come this far to let them die now!”

Sandar caught up to him in the room with the whips. The three women were already gone, but Mat had a feeling they would not be too hard to find. *Just find the men bloody hanging in midair! Bloody women!* He quickened his pace to a trot.

Perrin strode down the halls of the Stone grimly, searching for some sign of Faile. He had rescued her twice more, now, breaking her out of an iron cage once, much like the one that had held the Aiel in Remen, and once breaking open a steel chest with a falcon worked on its side. Both times she had melted into air after saying his name. Hopper trotted by his side, sniffing the air. As sharp as Perrin's nose was, the wolf's was sharper; it had been Hopper who led them to the chest.

Perrin wondered whether he was ever going to free her in truth. There had not been any sign in a long time, it seemed. The halls of the Stone were empty, lamps burning, tapestries and weapons hanging on the walls, but nothing moved except himself and Hopper. *Except I think that was Rand*. It had only been a glimpse, a man running as if chasing someone. *It could not be him. It couldn't, but I think it was*.

Hopper quickened his steps suddenly, heading for another set of tall doors, these clad in bronze. Perrin tried to match the pace, stumbled, and fell to his knees, throwing out a hand to catch himself short of dropping on his face. Weakness washed through him as if all his muscles had gone to water. Even after the feeling receded, it took some of his strength with it. It was an effort to struggle to his feet. Hopper had turned to look at him.

You are here too strongly, Young Bull. The flesh weakens. You do not care to hold on to it enough. Soon flesh and dream will die together.

"Find her," Perrin said. "That is all I ask. Find Faile."

Yellow eyes met yellow eyes. The wolf turned and trotted to the doors. *Beyond here, Young Bull*.

Perrin reached the doors and pushed. They did not budge. There seemed to be no way to open them, no handles, nothing to grip. There was a tiny pattern worked into the metal, so fine his eyes almost did not see it. Falcons. Thousands of tiny falcons.

She has to be here. I do not think I can last much longer. With a shout, he swung his hammer against the bronze. It rang like a great gong. Again he struck, and the peal deepened. A third blow, and the bronze doors shattered like glass.

Within, a hundred paces from the broken doors, a circle of light surrounded a falcon chained to a perch. Darkness filled all the rest of that vast chamber, darkness and faint rustlings as of hundreds of wings.

He took a step into the room, and a falcon stooped out of the murk, talons scoring his face as it passed. He threw an arm across his eyes—talons tore at his forearm—and staggered toward the perch. Again and again the birds came, falcons diving, striking him, tearing him, but he lumbered on with blood pouring down his arms and shoulders, that one arm protecting the eyes he had fixed on the falcon on the perch. He had lost the hammer; he did not know where, but he knew that if he went back to search, he would die before he found it.

As he reached the perch, the slicing talons drove him to his knees. He peered up under his arm at the falcon on the perch, and she stared back with dark, unblinking eyes. The chain that held her leg was fastened to the perch with a tiny lock shaped like a hedgehog. He seized the chain with both hands, careless of the other falcons that now became a whirlwind of cutting talons around him, and with his last strength snapped it. Pain and the falcons brought darkness.

He opened his eyes to stinging agony, as if his face and arms and shoulders had been sliced with a thousand knives. It did not matter. Faile was kneeling over him, those dark, tilted eyes filled with worry, wiping his face with a cloth already soaked in his blood.

"My poor Perrin," she said softly. "My poor blacksmith. You are hurt so badly."

With an effort that cost more pain, he turned his head. This was the private dining room in the Star, and near one leg of the table lay a wooden carving of a hedgehog, broken in half. "Faile," he whispered to her. "My falcon."

Rand was still in the Heart of the Stone, but it was different. There were no men fighting here, no dead men, no one at all but himself. Abruptly the sound of a great gong rang through the Stone, then again, and the very stones beneath his feet resonated. A third time the booming came, but cut off abruptly, as if the gong had shattered. All was still.

Where is this place? he wondered. *More important, where is Ba'alzamon?*

As if to answer him, a blazing shaft like the one Moiraine had made shot out of the shadows among the columns, straight toward his chest. His wrist twisted the sword instinctively; it was instinct as much as anything else that made him loose flows from *saidin* into *Callandor*, a flood of the Power that made the sword blaze brighter even than that bar streaking at him. His uncertain balance between existence and destruction wavered. Surely that torrent would consume him.

The shaft of light struck the blade of *Callandor*—and parted on its edge, forking to stream past on either side. He felt his coat singe from its near passage, smelled the wool beginning to burn. Behind him, the two prongs of frozen fire, of liquid light, struck huge redstone columns; where they struck, stone ceased to exist, and the burning bars bored through to other columns, severing those instantaneously as well. The Heart of the Stone rumbled as columns fell and shattered in clouds of dust, sprays of stone fragments. What fell into the light, however, simply—was not, anymore.

A snarl of rage came from the shadows, and the blazing shaft of pure white heat vanished.

Rand swung *Callandor* as if he were striking at something in front of him. The white light obscuring the blade extended, blazed ahead, and sheared through the redstone column that hid the snarl. The polished stone sliced like silk. The severed column trembled; part of it tore loose and dropped from the ceiling, smashing into huge, jagged chunks on the floor. As the rumbling faded, he heard beyond it the sound of boots on stone. Running.

Callandor at the ready, Rand hurried after Ba’alzamon.

The tall archway leading out of the Heart collapsed as he reached it, the entire wall falling in clouds of dust and rock as if to bury him, but he threw the Power at it, and all became dust floating in the air. He ran on. He was not sure what he had done, or how, but he had no time to think on it. He ran after Ba’alzamon’s retreating footsteps, echoing down the halls of the Stone.

Myrddraal and Trollocs leaped out of thin air, huge bestial shapes and eyeless faces distorted with a rage to kill, in hundreds, so they jammed the hall before him and behind, scythe like swords and blades of deadly black steel seeking his blood. Without knowing how, he turned them to vapor that parted before him—and vanished. The air around him suddenly became choking soot, clogging his nostrils, shutting off breath, but he made it fresh air again, a cool mist. Flames leaped from the floor beneath his feet, spurted from the walls, the ceiling, furious jets that flashed tapestries and rugs, tables and chests to wisps of ash, flung ornaments and lamps ahead of them as drops of molten, burning gold; he smashed the fires flat, hardened them into a red glaze on the rock.

The stones around him faded almost to mist; the Stone faded. Reality trembled; he could feel it unraveling, feel himself unraveling. He was being pushed out of the here, into some other place where nothing existed at all. *Callandor* blazed in his hands like the sun till he thought it would melt. He thought he himself would melt from the surge of the One Power through him, the flood that he somehow directed into sealing up the hole that had opened around him, into holding himself on the side of existence. The Stone became solid again.

He could not even begin to imagine what it was that he did. The One Power raged inside him till he barely knew himself, till he barely was himself, till what was himself almost did not exist. His precarious stability teetered. To either side lay the endless fall, obliteration by the Power that coursed through him into the sword. Only in the dance along the razor's sharp edge was there even an uncertain safety. *Callandor* shone in his fist until it seemed he carried the sun. Dimly within him, fluttering like a candle flame in a storm, was the surety that holding *Callandor*, he could do anything. Anything.

Through endless corridors he ran, dancing along the razor, chasing the one who would slay him, the one he must slay. There could be no other end, this time. This time one of them *must* die! That Ba'alzamon knew it as well was clear. Always he fled, always staying ahead of sight so that only the sounds of his flight drew Rand on, but even fleeing he turned this Stone of Tear that was not the Stone of Tear against Rand, and Rand fought back with instinct and guesses and chance, fought and ran down that knife edge in perfect balance with the Power, the tool and weapon that would consume him utterly if he faltered.

Water filled the halls from top to bottom, thick and black as the bottom of the sea, choking off breath. He made it air again, unknowingly, and ran on, and suddenly the air gained weight until it seemed every inch of his skin supported a mountain, squeezing in from all directions. In the instant before he was crushed to nothingness he chose tides out of the flood of Power raging through him—he did not know how or which or why; it was too fast for thought or knowing—and the pressure vanished. He pursued Ba'alzamon, and the very air was abruptly solid rock encasing him, then molten stone, then nothing at all to fill his lungs. The ground beneath his boots pulled at him as if every pound suddenly weighed a thousand, then all weight vanished so that a step left him spinning in midair. Unseen maws gaped to rip his mind from his body, to tear away his soul. He sprang each trap and ran on; what Ba'alzamon twisted to destroy him, he made right without being aware of how. Vaguely he knew that in some way he had brought things back into natural balance, forced them into line with his own dance down that impossibly thin divide between existence and nothingness, but that knowledge was distant. All his awareness lay in the pursuit, the hunt, the death that must end it.

And then he was in the Heart of the Stone again, stalking through the rubbled gap that had been a wall. Some of the columns hung like broken teeth, now. And Ba'alzamon backed away from him, eyes burning, shadow cloaking him. Black lines like steel wires seemed to run off from Ba'alzamon into the darkness mounding around him, vanishing into unimaginable heights and distances within that blackness.

"I will not be undone!" Ba'alzamon cried. His mouth was fire; his shriek echoed among the columns. "I cannot be defeated! Aid me!" Some of the darkness shrouding him drifted into his hands, formed into a ball so black it seemed to soak up even the light of *Callandor*. Sudden triumph blazed in the flames of his eyes.

"You are destroyed!" Rand shouted. *Callandor* spun in his hands. Its light roiled the darkness, severed the steel-black lines around Ba'alzamon, and Ba'alzamon convulsed. As if there were two of him he seemed to dwindle and grow larger at the same time. "You are undone!" Rand plunged the shining blade into Ba'alzamon's chest.

Ba'alzamon screamed, and the fires of his face flared wildly. "Fool!" he howled. "The Great Lord of the Dark can never be defeated!"

Rand pulled *Callandor*'s blade free as Ba'alzamon's body sagged and began to fall, the shadow around him vanishing.

And suddenly Rand was in another Heart of the Stone, surrounded by columns still whole, and fighting men screaming and dying, veiled men and men in breastplates and helmets. Moiraine still lay crumpled at the base of a redstone column. And at Rand's feet lay the body of a man, sprawled on its back with a hole burned through the chest. He might have been a handsome man in his middle years, except that where his eyes and mouth should have been were only pits from which rose tendrils of black smoke.

I have done it, he thought. *I have killed Ba'alzamon, killed Shai'tan! I have won the Last Battle! Light, I AM the Dragon Reborn! The breaker of* *nations, the Breaker of the World. No! I will END the breaking, end the killing! I will MAKE it end!*

He raised *Callandor* above his head. Silver lightning crackled from the blade, jagged streaks arching toward the great dome above. “Stop!” he shouted. The fighting ceased; men stared at him in wonder, over black veils, from beneath the rims of round helmets. “I am Rand al’Thor!” he called, so his voice rang through the chamber. “I am the Dragon Reborn!” *Callandor* shone in his grasp.

One by one, veiled men and helmeted, they knelt to him, crying, “The Dragon is Reborn! The Dragon is Reborn!”

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CHAPTER 56

People of the Dragon

Throughout the city of Tear people woke with the dawn, speaking of the dreams they had had, dreams of the Dragon battling Ba'alzamon in the Heart of the Stone, and when their eyes rose to the great fortress of the Stone, they beheld a banner waving from its greatest height. Across a field of white flowed a sinuous form like a great serpent scaled in scarlet and gold, but with a golden lion's mane and four legs, each tipped with five golden claws. Men came, stunned and frightened, from the Stone to speak in hushed tones of what had happened in the night, and men and women thronged the streets, weeping as they shouted the fulfillment of Prophecy.

"The Dragon!" they shouted. "Al'Thor! The Dragon! Al'Thor!"

Peering through an arrowslit high on the side of the Stone, Mat shook his head as he listened to the chorus rising out of the city in waves. *Well, maybe he is*. He was still having a hard enough time coming to grips with Rand really being there.

Everyone in the Stone seemed to agree with the people below, or if they did not, they were not letting on. He had seen Rand just once since the night before, striding along a hall with *Callandor* in his hand, surrounded by a dozen veiled Aiel and trailing a cloud of Tairens, a knot of Defenders of the Stone and most of the few surviving High Lords. The High Lords, at least, seemed to think Rand would need them to help him rule the world; the Aiel kept everyone back with sharp looks, though, and spears if need be. They surely believed Rand was the Dragon, though they called him He Who Comes With the Dawn. There were nearly two hundred Aiel in the Stone. They had lost a third of their numbers in the fight, but they had killed or captured ten times as many Defenders.

As he turned from the arrowslit, his eyes brushed across Rhuarc. There was a tall stand at one end of the room, carved and polished upright wheels of some pale, dark-striped wood with shelves slung between them so all of the shelves would stay flat as the wheels were revolved. Each shelf held a large book, bound in gold, covers set with sparkling gems. The Aiel had one of the books open and was reading. Some sort of essays, Mat thought. *Who would have thought an Aiel would read books? Who'd have thought an Aiel could bloody read?*

Rhuarc glanced in his direction, all cold blue eyes and level stare. Mat looked away hastily, before the Aiel could read his thoughts on his face. *At least he is not veiled, thank the Light! Burn me, that Aviendha nearly took my head off when I asked her if she could do any dances without spears*. Bain and Chiad presented another problem. They were certainly pretty and more than friendly, but he could not manage to talk to one without the other. The male Aiel seemed to think his efforts to get one of them alone were funny, and for that matter, so did Bain and Chiad. *Women are odd, but Aiel women make odd seem normal!*

The great table in the middle of the room, ornately carved and gilded on edges and thick legs, had been meant for gatherings of the High Lords. Moiraine sat in one of the throne like chairs, with the Crescent Banner of Tear worked into its towering back in gilt and polished carnelian and pearlshell. Egwene, Nynaeve, and Elayne sat close by her.

“I still cannot believe Perrin is here in Tear,” Nynaeve was saying. “Are you sure he is all right?”

Mat shook his head. He would have expected Perrin to have been up in the Stone last night; the blacksmith had always been braver than anyone with good sense.

“He was well when I left him.” Moiraine's voice was serene. “Whether he still is, I do not know. His . . . companion is in some considerable danger, and he may have put himself into it, also.”

“His companion?” Egwene said sharply. “Wha—Who is Perrin's companion?”

“What sort of danger?” Nynaeve demanded.

“Nothing that need concern you,” the Aes Sedai said calmly. “I will go and see to her as I may, shortly. I have delayed only to show you this, which I found among the *ter'angreal* and other things of the Power the High Lords collected over the years.” She took something from her pouch and laid it on the table before her. It was a disc the size of a man's hand, seemingly made of two teardrops fitted together, one black as pitch, the other white as snow.

Mat seemed to remember seeing others like it. Ancient, like this one, but broken, where this was whole. Three of them, he had seen; not all together, but all in pieces. But that could not be; he remembered that they were made of *cuendillar*, unbreakable by any power, even the One Power.

"One of the seven seals Lews Therin Kinslayer and the Hundred Companions put on the Dark One's prison when they resealed it," Elayne said, nodding as if confirming her own memory.

"More precisely," Moiraine told her, "a focus point for one of the seals. But in essence, you are correct. During the Breaking of the World they were scattered and hidden for safety; since the Trolloc Wars they have been lost in truth." She sniffed. "I begin to sound like Verin."

Egwene shook her head. "I suppose I should have expected to find that here. Twice before Rand faced Ba'alzamon, and both times at least one of the seals was present."

"And this time unbroken," Nynaeve said. "For the first time, the seal is unbroken. As if that mattered, now."

"You think it does not?" Moiraine's voice was dangerous in its quiet, and the other women frowned at her.

Mat rolled his eyes. They kept talking about unimportant things. He did not much like standing not twenty feet from that disc now that he knew what it was, no matter the value of *cuendillar*, but. . . . "Your pardon?" he said.

They all turned to stare at him as if he were interrupting something important. *Burn me! Break them out of a prison cell, save their lives half a dozen times between them before the night is done, and they glower as hard as the bloody Aes Sedai! Well, they did not thank me then, either, did they? You'd have thought I was sticking my nose in where it wasn't wanted then, too, instead of keeping some bloody Defender from putting a sword through one of them*. Aloud, he said mildly, "You do not mind if I ask a question, do you? You have all been talking this Aes Sedai . . . uh . . . business, and no one has bothered to tell me anything."

"Mat?" Nynaeve said warningly, tugging her braid, but Moiraine said, in a calm only just touched with impatience, "What is it that you wish to know?"

"I want to know how all of this can be." He meant to keep his tone soft, but despite himself he picked up intensity as he went along. "The Stone of Tear has fallen! The Prophecies said that would never happen till the People of the Dragon came. Does that mean *we* are the bloody People of the Dragon? You, me, Lan, and a few hundred bloody Aiel?" He had seen the Warder during the night; there had not seemed to be much edge between Lan and the Aiel as to who was the more deadly. As Rhuarc straightened to stare at him, he hastily added, "Uh, sorry, Rhuarc. Slip of the tongue."

"Perhaps," Moiraine said slowly. "I came to stop Be'lal from killing Rand. I did not expect to see the Stone of Tear fall. Perhaps we are. Prophecies are fulfilled as they are meant to be, not as we think they should be."

Be'lal. Mat shivered. He had heard that name last night, and he did not like it any more in daylight. If he had known one of the Forsaken was loose—and inside the Stone—he would never have gone near the place. He glanced at Egwene, and Nynaeve, and Elayne. *Well, I'd have come in like a bloody mouse, anyway, not thumping people left and right!* Sandar had gone scurrying out of the Stone at daybreak; to take the news to Mother Guenna, he claimed, but Mat thought it was just to escape those stares from the three women, who looked as if they had not yet quite decided what to do about him.

Rhuarc cleared his throat. "When a man wishes to become a clan chief, he must go to Rhuidean, in the lands of the Jenn Aiel, the clan that is not." He spoke slowly and frowned often at the red-fringed silk carpet under his soft boots, a man trying to explain what he did not want to explain at all. "Women who wish to become Wise Ones also make this journey, but their marking, if they *are* marked, is kept secret among themselves. The men who are chosen at Rhuidean, those who survive, return marked on the left arm. So."

He pushed back the sleeves of his coat and shirt together to reveal his left forearm, the skin much paler than that of his hands and face. Etched into the skin as if part of it, wrapped twice around, marched the same gold-and-scarlet form as rippled on the banner above the Stone.

The Aiel let his sleeve fall with a sigh. "It is a name not spoken except among the clan chiefs and the Wise Ones. We are. . . ." He cleared his throat again, unable to say it here.

"The Aiel are the People of the Dragon." Moiraine spoke quietly, but she sounded as close to startlement as Mat could remember ever hearing her. "That I did not know."

“Then it really is all done,” Mat said, “just as the Prophecies said. We can all go on our way with no more worries.” *The Amyrlin won’t need me to blow that bloody Horn now!*

“How can you say that?” Egwene demanded. “Don’t you understand the Forsaken are loose?”

“Not to mention the Black Ajah,” Nynaeve added grimly. “We took only Amico and Joiya here. Eleven escaped—and I would like to know how!—and the Light alone knows how many others there are we do not know.”

“Yes,” Elayne said in a tone just as hard. “I may not be up to facing one of the Forsaken, but I mean to take pieces out of Liandrin’s hide!”

“Of course,” Mat said smoothly. “Of course.” *Are they crazy? They want to chase after the Black Ajah* and *the Forsaken?* “I only meant the hardest part is done. The Stone has fallen to the People of the Dragon, Rand has *Callandor*, and Shai’tan is dead.” Moiraine’s stare was so hard that he thought the Stone shook for a moment.

“Be quiet, you fool!” the Aes Sedai said in a voice like a knife. “Do you want to call his attention to you, naming the Dark One?”

“But he’s dead!” Mat protested. “Rand killed him. I saw the body!” *And a fine stink that was, too. I never thought anything could rot that fast.*

“You saw ‘the body,’ ” Moiraine said with a twist to her mouth. “A man’s body. Not the Dark One, Mat.”

He looked at Egwene and the other two women; they appeared as confused as he. Rhuarc looked to be thinking of a battle he had thought was won and now learned had not even been fought. “Then who was it?” Mat demanded. “Moiraine, my memory has holes big enough for a wagon and team, but I remember Ba’alzamon being in my dreams. I remember! Burn me, I do not see how I can ever forget! And I recognized what was left of that face.”

“You recognized Ba’alzamon,” Moiraine said. “Or rather, the man who called himself Ba’alzamon. The Dark One yet lives, imprisoned at Shayol Ghul, and the Shadow yet lies across the Pattern.”

“The Light illumine and protect us,” Elayne murmured in a faint voice. “I thought. . . . I thought the Forsaken were the worst we had to worry about, now.”

“Are you sure, Moiraine?” Nynaeve said. “Rand was certain—*is* certain—that he killed the Dark One. You seem to be saying Ba’alzamon was not the Dark One at all. I don’t understand! How can you be so sure? And if he was not the Dark One, who was he?”

“I can be sure for the simplest of reasons, Nynaeve. However fast decay took it, that was a man’s body. Can you believe that if the Dark One were killed he would leave a human body? The man Rand killed *was* a man. Perhaps he was the first of the Forsaken freed, or perhaps he was never entirely bound. We may never know which.”

“I . . . may know who he was.” Egwene paused with an uncertain frown. “At least, I may have a clue. Verin showed me a page from an old book that mentioned Ba’alzamon and Ishamael together. It was almost High Chant and very nearly incomprehensible, but I remember something about ‘a name hidden behind a name.’ Maybe Ba’alzamon was Ishamael.”

“Perhaps,” Moiraine said. “Perhaps it was Ishamael. But if it was, at least nine of the thirteen still live. Lanfear, and Sammael, and Ravhin, and. . . . Paah! Even knowing that some of those nine at least are free is not the most important thing.” She laid a hand atop the black-and-white disc on the table. “Three of the seals are broken. Only four still hold. Only those four seals stand between the Dark One and the world, and it may be that even with those whole he can touch the world after a fashion. Whatever battle we won here—battle or skirmish—it is far from the last.”

Mat watched their faces firm—Egwene’s and Nynaeve’s and Elayne’s; slowly, reluctantly, but determinedly, too—and shook his head. *Bloody women! They’re all ready to go on with this, go on chasing the Black Ajah, trying to fight the Forsaken and the bloody Dark One. Well, they needn’t think I am going to come pull them out of the soup pot again. They just needn’t think it, that’s all!*

One of the tall, paired doors pushed open while he was trying to think of something to say, and a tall young woman of regal bearing entered the room, wearing a coronet with a golden hawk in flight above her brows. Her black hair swept to pale shoulders, and her dress of the finest red silk left those shoulders bare, along with a considerable expanse of what Mat noted as an admirable bosom. For a moment she studied Rhuarc interestedly with large, dark eyes; then she turned them on the women at the table, coolly imperious. Mat she appeared to ignore completely.

“I am not used to being given messages to carry,” she announced, flourishing a folded parchment in one slim hand.

“And who are you, child?” Moiraine asked.

The young woman drew herself up even more, which Mat would have thought was impossible. “I am Berelain, First of Mayene.” She tossed the parchment down on the table in front of Moiraine with a haughty gesture and turned back to the door.

“A moment, child,” Moiraine said, unfolding the parchment. “Who gave this to you? And why did you bring it, if you are so unused to carrying messages?”

“I . . . do not know.” Berelain stood facing the door; she sounded puzzled. “She was . . . impressive.” She gave herself a shake and seemed to recover her opinion of herself. For a moment she studied Rhuarc with a small smile. “You are the leader of these Aielmen? Your fighting disturbed my sleep. Perhaps I will ask you to dine with me. One day quite soon.” She looked over her shoulder at Moiraine. “I am told the Dragon Reborn has taken the Stone. Inform the Lord Dragon that the First of Mayene will dine with him tonight.” And she marched out of the room; Mat could think of no other way to describe that stately, one-woman procession.

“I would like to have *her* in the Tower as novice.” Egwene and Elayne said it almost like echoes, then shared a tight smile.

“Listen to this,” Moiraine said. “ ‘Lews Therin was mine, he is mine, and he will be mine, forever. I give him into your charge, to keep for me until I come.’ It is signed ‘Lanfear.’ ” The Aes Sedai turned that cool gaze on Mat. “And you thought it was done? You are *ta’veren*, Mat, a thread more crucial to the Pattern than most, and the sounder of the Horn of Valere. Nothing is done for you, yet.”

They were all looking at him. Nynaeve sadly, Egwene as though she had never seen him before, Elayne as if she expected him to change into someone else. Rhuarc had a certain respect in his eyes, though Mat would just as soon have done without it, all things considered.

“Well, of course,” he told them. *Burn me!* “I understand.” *I wonder how soon Thom will be fit to travel? Time to run. Maybe Perrin will come with us*. “You can count on me.”

From outside, the cries still rose, unceasing. “The Dragon! Al’Thor! The Dragon! Al’Thor! The Dragon! Al’Thor! The Dragon!”

And it was written that no hand but his should wield the Sword held in the Stone, but he did draw it out, like fire in his hand, and his glory did burn the world. Thus did it begin. Thus do we sing his Rebirth. Thus do we sing the beginning.

—from *Do’in Toldara te,*
Songs of the Last Age,
Quarto Nine: The Legend
of the Dragon.
Composed by Boanne,
Songmistress
at Taralan, the Fourth
Age.

The End
of the Third Book of
The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. Three systems of recording dates have been in general use since the Breaking of the World. The first recorded years After the Breaking (AB). Since the years of the Breaking and immediately after were years of almost total chaos, and since this calendar was adopted a good hundred years after the end of the Breaking, its starting point was arbitrarily assigned. At the end of the Trolloc Wars many records had been lost, so much so that there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar was therefore established, dating from the end of the Wars and celebrating the supposed freedom of the world from the Trolloc threat. This second calendar recorded each year as Free Year (FY). After the disruption, death, and destruction caused by the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar came into being. This calendar, of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Accepted, the: Young women in training to be Aes Sedai who have reached a certain level of power and passed certain tests. It normally takes five to ten years to be raised from novice to the Accepted. Accepted are somewhat less confined by rules than novices, and are allowed to choose their own areas of study, within limits. An Accepted has the right to wear a Great Serpent ring, but only on the third finger of her left hand. When an Accepted is raised to Aes Sedai, she chooses her Ajah, gains the right to wear the shawl, and may wear the ring on any finger or not at all if circumstances warrant.

Aes Sedai (EYEZ seh-DEYE): Wielders of the One Power. Since the Time of Madness, all surviving Aes Sedai are women. Widely distrusted and feared, even hated, they are blamed by many for the Breaking of the World, and are thought to meddle in the affairs of nations. At the same time, few rulers will be without an Aes Sedai advisor, even in lands where the existence of such a connection must be kept secret. After some years of channeling the One Power, Aes Sedai take on an ageless quality, so that an Aes Sedai who is old enough to be a grandmother may show no signs of age except perhaps a few gray hairs. ***See also*** Ajah; Amyrlin Seat; Time of Madness.

Age of Legends: The Age ended by the War of the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. A time when Aes Sedai performed wonders now only dreamed of. ***See also*** Wheel of Time; Breaking of the World; War of the Shadow.

Aiel (eye-EEL): The people of the Aiel Waste. Fierce and hardy. Also called Aielmen. They veil their faces before they kill, giving rise to the saying "acting like a black-veiled Aiel" to describe someone who is being violent. Deadly warriors with any weapon or with nothing but their bare hands, they will not touch a sword. Their pipers play them into battle with the music of dances, and Aielmen call battle "the dance," and "the dance of spears." ***See also*** Aiel warrior societies; Aiel Waste.

Aiel War, the: (976–78 NE) When King Laman of Cairhien cut down Avendoraldera, several clans of the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World. They looted and burned the capital city of Cairhien as well as many other cities and towns, and the conflict extended into Andor and Tear. The conventional view is that the Aiel were finally defeated at the Battle of the Shining Walls, before Tar Valon, but in fact, Laman was killed in that battle, and having done what they had come for, the Aiel recrossed the Spine. ***See also*** *Avendoraldera*; Cairhien.

Aiel warrior societies: Aiel warriors are all members of one of the warrior societies, such as the Stone Dogs (*Shae'en M'taal*), the Red Shields (*Aethan Dor*), or the Maidens of the Spear (*Far Dareis Mai*). Each society has its own customs, and sometimes specific duties. For example, Red Shields act as police. Stone Dogs often vow not to retreat once battle has been joined, and will die to the last man if necessary to fulfill this vow. The clans of the Aiel—among them the Goshien, Reyn, Shaarad, and Taardad Aiel—frequently fight among themselves, but members of the same society will not fight each other even if their clans are doing so. In this way, there are always lines of contact between the clans even when they are in open warfare. ***See also*** Aiel; Aiel Waste; *Far Dareis Mai*.

Aiel Waste: The harsh, rugged, and all-but-waterless land east of the Spine of the World. Called the Three-fold Land by the Aiel. Few outsiders go there, not only because water is almost impossible to find for one not born there, but because the Aiel consider themselves at war with all other peoples and do not welcome strangers. Only peddlers, gleemen, and the Tuatha'an are allowed safe entry, and contact even with them is limited. No maps of the Waste itself are known to exist.

Ajah (AH-jah): Societies among the Aes Sedai to which all Aes Sedai except the Amyrlin Seat belong. They are designated by colors: Blue, Red, White, Green, Brown, Yellow, and Gray. Each follows a specific philosophy of the use of the One Power and the purposes of the Aes Sedai. For example, the Red Ajah bends all its energies to finding men who are attempting to wield the Power, and to gentling them. The Brown Ajah, on the other hand, forsakes involvement with the mundane world and dedicates itself to seeking knowledge, while the White Ajah, largely eschewing both the world and the value of worldly knowledge, devotes itself to questions of philosophy and truth. The Green Ajah (called the Battle Ajah during the Trolloc Wars) holds itself ready to counter any new Dreadlords when Tarmon Gai'don comes. There are rumors of a Black Ajah, dedicated to serving the Dark One.

Alanna Mosvani (ah-LAN-nah mos-VANH-nie): An Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah.

al'Meara, Nynaeve (al-MEER-ah, NIGH-neev): A woman once the Wisdom of Emond's Field, in the Two Rivers district of Andor (AN-door). Now one of the Accepted.

al'Thor, Rand (al-THOR, RAND): A young man from Emond's Field who is *ta'veren*. Once a shepherd. Now proclaimed as the Dragon Reborn.

al'Vere, Egwene (ahl-VEER, eh-GWAIN): A young woman from Emond's Field. Now in training to be Aes Sedai.

Amalasan, Guaire (ahm-ah-LAH-sin, Gware): *See* War of the Second Dragon.

Amyrlin Seat (AHM-ehr-lin SEAT): (1) Leader of the Aes Sedai. Elected for life by the Hall of the Tower, the highest council of the Aes Sedai, which consists of three representatives (called Sitters, as in “a Sitter for the Green”) from each of the seven Ajahs. The Amyrlin Seat has, theoretically at least, almost supreme authority among the Aes Sedai, and ranks socially as the equal of a king or queen. A slightly less formal usage is simply the Amyrlin. (2) The throne on which the leader of the Aes Sedai sits.

Anaiya (ah-NYE-yah): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah.

angreal (anh-gree-AHL): Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow anyone capable of channeling the One Power to handle a greater amount of the Power than could safely be channeled unaided. Their making is no longer known. Few remain in existence. ***See also*** *sa’angreal; ter’angreal*.

Artur Hawkwing: *See* Hawkwing, Artur.

Assemblage, the: A body in Illian, chosen by and from the merchants and shipowners, that is supposed to advise both the King and the Council of Nine, but historically has contended with them for power.

Atha’an Miere (ah-thah-AHN mee-EHR): *See* Sea Folk.

Avendesora (AH-vehn-deh-SO-rah): In the Old Tongue, “the Tree of Life.” Mentioned in many stories and legends.

Avendoraldera (AH-ven-doh-ral-DEH-rah): A tree grown in the city of Cairhien from a sapling of *Avendesora*. This sapling was a gift from the Aiel in 566 NE, despite the fact that no record shows any connection whatsoever between the Aiel and *Avendesora*. ***See also*** Aiel War.

Aviendha (Ah-vee-EHN-dah): A woman of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel; a *Far Dareis Mai*, a Maiden of the Spear.

Aybara, Perrin (ay-BAHR-ah, PEHR-rihn): A young man from Emond’s Field, formerly a blacksmith’s apprentice.

Ba’alzamon (bah-AHL-zah-mon): In the Trolloc tongue, “Heart of the Dark.” Believed to be the Trolloc name for the Dark One. ***See also*** Dark One; Trollocs.

Bashere, Zarine (bah-SHEER, zah-REEN): A young woman from Saldaea who is a Hunter of the Horn. She wishes to be called Faile (fah-EEL), which, in the Old Tongue, means “falcon.”

Be’lal (beh-LAAL): One of the Forsaken.

Bel Tine (BEHL TINE): Spring festival celebrating the end of winter, the first sprouting of crops, and the birth of the first lambs.

Betrayer of Hope: *See* Ishamael.

biteme (BITE-me): A small, almost invisible biting insect.

bittern (BlHT-tehrn): A musical instrument that may have six, nine, or twelve strings, and is held flat on the knees and played by plucking or strumming.

Blight, the: *See* Great Blight, the.

Borderlands, the: The nations bordering the Great Blight: Saldaea, Arafel, Kandor, and Shienar.

Bornhald, Dain (BOHRN-hahld, DAY-ihn): An officer of the Children of the Light, son of Lord Captain Geofraim Bornhald, who died at Falme, on Toman Head.

Breaking of the World, the: During the Time of Madness, male Aes Sedai who had gone insane, and who could wield the One Power to a degree now unknown, changed the face of the earth. They caused great earthquakes, leveled old mountain ranges and raised new mountains, lifted dry land where seas had been and made the ocean rush in where dry land had been. Many parts of the world were completely depopulated, and the survivors were scattered like dust on the wind. This destruction is remembered in stories, legends, and history as the Breaking of the World. ***See also*** Time of Madness; Hundred Companions, the.

Byar, Jaret (BY-ahr, JAH-ret): An officer of the Children of the Light.

Caemlyn (KAYM-lihn): The capital city of Andor.

Cairhien (KEYE-ree-EHN): Both a nation along the Spine of the World and the capital city of that nation. The city was burned and looted during the Aiel War, as were many other towns and villages. The consequent abandonment of farmland near the Spine of the World made necessary the importation of great quantities of grain. The assassination of King Galldrian (998 NE) has resulted in a civil war among the noble Houses for succession to the Sun Throne, in the disruption of grain shipments, and in famine. The sign of Cairhien is a many-rayed golden sun rising from the bottom of a field of sky blue.

Callandor (CAH-lahn-DOOR): The Sword That Is Not a Sword, the Sword That Cannot Be Touched. A crystal sword held in the Stone of Tear, in the chamber called the Heart of the Stone. No hand can touch it except that of the Dragon Reborn. According to the Prophecies of the Dragon, one of the major signs of the Dragon's Rebirth and the approach of Tarmon Gai'don will be that the Dragon Reborn has taken *Callandor*.

Cauthon, Mat (CAW-thon, MAT): A young man from Emond's Field in the Two Rivers. Full name: Matrim (MAT-trim) Cauthon.

channel: (verb) To control the flow of the One Power. ***See also*** One Power.

Children of the Light: A society holding strict ascetic beliefs, dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar (LOH-thayr MAHN-tee-LAHR) to proselytize against an increase in the numbers of Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military organization. They are extremely rigid in their beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. They hate Aes Sedai, considering them, and any who support or befriend them, Darkfriends. They are known disparagingly as Whitecloaks. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white. ***See also*** Questioners.

Chronicles, Keeper of the: Second in authority to the Amyrlin Seat among the Aes Sedai, she also acts as secretary to the Amyrlin. Chosen for life by the Hall of the Tower, and usually of the same Ajah as the Amyrlin. ***See also*** Amyrlin Seat; Ajah.

Council of Nine: In Illian, a council of nine Lords who are supposed to advise the King, but who historically contend with him for power. Both the King and the Nine often must contend with the Assemblage, as well.

cuendillar (CWAIN-deh-yar): *See* heartstone.

Daes Dae'mar (DAH-ess day-MAR): The Great Game, also known as the Game of Houses. Name given the scheming, plots, and manipulations for advantage by the noble Houses. Great value is given to subtlety, to aiming at one thing while seeming to aim at another, and to achieving ends with the least visible effort.

Damodred, Lord Galadedrid (DAHM-oh-drehd, gah-LAHD-eh-drihd): Half brother to Elayne and Gawyn. His sign is a winged silver sword, point down.

Darkfriends: Those who follow the Dark One and believe they will gain great power and rewards, and even immortality, when he is freed from his prison.

Darkhounds: *See* Wild Hunt.

Dark One: Most common name, used in every land, for Shai'tan. The source of evil, antithesis of the Creator. Imprisoned by the Creator in Shayol Ghul at the moment of Creation. The attempt to free him from that prison brought about the War of the Shadow, the tainting of *saidin*, the Breaking of the World, and the end of the Age of Legends.

Dark One, naming the: Saying the true name of the Dark One (Shai'tan) draws his attention, inevitably bringing ill fortune at best, disaster at worst. For that reason, many euphemisms are used, among them the Dark One, Father of Lies, Sightblinder, Lord of the Grave, Shepherd of the Night, Hearstbane, Soulsbane, Heartfang, Old Grim, Grassburner, and Leafblighter. Darkfriends call him the Great Lord of the Dark. Someone who seems to be inviting ill fortune is often said to be "naming the Dark One."

Daughter-Heir: Title of the heir to the throne of Andor. The eldest daughter of the Queen succeeds her mother on the throne.

Without a surviving daughter, the throne goes to the nearest female blood relation of the Queen.

Daughter of the Night: *See* Lanfear.

Dragon, false: Occasionally men claim to be the Dragon Reborn, and sometimes one of these men gains following enough to require an army to put it down. Some have begun wars that involved many nations. Over the centuries most of these have been men unable to channel the One Power, but a few could do so. All, however, either disappeared or were captured or killed without fulfilling any of the Prophecies concerning the Rebirth of the Dragon. These men are called false Dragons. Among those who could channel, the most powerful were Raolin Darksbane (335–36 AB), Yurian Stonebow (circa 1300–1308 AB), Davian (FY 351), Guaire Amalasan (FY 939–43), and Logain (997 NE). ***See also*** Dragon Reborn.

Dragon, Prophecies of the: Little known and seldom spoken of, the Prophecies, given in *The Karaethon Cycle*, foretell that the Dark One will be freed again to touch the world. And that Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, Breaker of the World, will be reborn to fight Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle against the Shadow. ***See also*** Dragon, the.

Dragon, the: The name by which Lews Therin Telamon was known during the War of the Shadow. In the madness that overtook all male Aes Sedai, Lews Therin killed every living person who carried any of his blood, as well as everyone he loved, thus earning the name Kinslayer. ***See also*** Dragon Reborn; Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Dragon Reborn: According to prophecy and legend the Dragon will be born again at mankind's greatest hour of need to save the world. This is not something people look forward to, both because the Prophecies say the Dragon Reborn will bring a new Breaking to the world and because Lews Therin Kinslayer, the Dragon, is a name to make men shudder, even more than three thousand years after his death. ***See also*** Dragon, the; Dragon, false; Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Dreadlords: Men and women able to channel the One Power, who went over to the Shadow during the Trolloc Wars, acting as commanders of the Trolloc forces. Occasionally confused with the Forsaken by the less well educated.

Dreamer: *See* Talents.

Elaida (eh-LY-da): An Aes Sedai of the Red Ajah. Former advisor to Queen Morgase of Andor. She sometimes has the Foretelling.

Elayne of House Trakand (trah-KAND): Queen Morgase's daughter, the Daughter-Heir to the throne of Andor. Now in training to be Aes Sedai. Her sign is a golden lily.

Far Dareis Mai (FAHR DAH-rize MY): Literally "Maidens of the Spear." A warrior society of the Aiel, which, unlike any of the others, admits women and only women. A Maiden may not marry and remain in the society, nor may she fight while carrying a child. Any child born to a Maiden is given to another woman to raise, in such a way that no one knows who the child's mother was. ("You may belong to no man, nor may any man belong to you, nor any child. The spear is your lover, your child, and your life.") These children are treasured, for it is prophesied that a child born of a Maiden will unite the clans and return the Aiel to the greatness they knew during the Age of Legends. ***See also*** Aiel; Aiel warrior societies.

Fetches: *See* Myrddraal.

Five Powers, the: There are threads to the One Power, and anyone who can channel can usually grasp some threads better than others. These threads are named according to the sorts of things that can be done using them—Earth, Air (sometimes called Wind), Fire, Water, and Spirit—and are called the Five Powers. Any wielder of the Power will have a greater degree of strength with one, or possibly two, of these, and lesser strength in the others. Some few may have great strength with three, but since the Age of Legends no one has had great strength with all five. Even then this was extremely rare. The degree of strength can vary greatly between individuals. Performing certain acts with the One Power requires the ability to weave flows in one or more of the Five Powers. For example, starting or controlling a fire requires Fire, and affecting the weather requires Air and Water, while Healing requires Air, Water and Spirit. While Spirit was found equally in men and in women, great ability with Earth and/or Fire was found much more often among men; with Water and/or Air among women. There were exceptions, but it was so often so that Earth and Fire came to be regarded as male Powers, Air and Water as female. Generally, no ability is considered stronger than any other, though there is a saying among Aes Sedai: “There is no rock so strong that water and wind cannot wear it away, no fire so fierce that water cannot quench it or wind snuff it out.” It should be noted that any equivalent saying among male Aes Sedai is long lost.

Flame of Tar Valon: Symbol of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, and the Aes Sedai. A stylized representation of a flame; a white teardrop with the point upward.

Forsaken, the: Name given to thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends, which made them among the most powerful ever known, who went over to the Dark One during the War of the Shadow in return for the promise of immortality. According to both legend and fragmentary records, they were imprisoned along with the Dark One when his prison was resealed. Their names—among them Lanfear, Be’lal, Sammael, Asmodean, Rahvin, and Ishamael—are still used to frighten children.

Fortress of the Light: The great fortress of the Children of the Light, located in Amador (AH-mah-door), the capital of Amadicia (AH-mah-DEE-cee-ah). There is a King of Amadicia, but the Children rule in all but name. ***See also*** Children of the Light.

Gaidin (GYE-deen): Literally “Brother to Battles.” A title used by Aes Sedai for the Warders. ***See also*** Warder.

Galad (gah-LAHD): *See* Damodred, Lord Galadedrid.

Game of Houses, the: *See Daes Dae’mar*.

Gaul (GAHWL): An Aiel of the Imran sept of the Shaarad, a *Shae’en M’taal*, a Stone Dog.

Gawyn (GAH-wihn) **of House Trakand** (trah-KAND): Queen Morgase’s son, and Elayne’s brother, who will be First

Prince of the Sword when Elayne ascends to the throne. His sign is a white boar.

gentling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a male who can channel from the One Power. This is necessary because any man who learns to channel will go insane from the taint on *saidin* and will almost certainly do horrible things with the Power in his madness. A man who has been gentled can still sense the True Source, but he cannot touch it. Whatever madness has come before gentling is arrested by the act of gentling, but not cured by it, and if it is done soon enough death can be averted. ***See also*** One Power, the; stilling.

gleeman: A traveling storyteller, musician, juggler, tumbler, and all-around entertainer. Known by their trademark cloaks of many-colored patches, gleemen perform mainly in the villages and smaller towns.

Gray Man: Someone who has voluntarily surrendered his or her soul in order to become an assassin serving the Shadow. Gray Men are so ordinary in appearance that the eye can slide right past without noticing them. The vast majority of Gray Men are indeed men, but a small number are women.

Great Blight, the: A region in the far north, entirely corrupted by the Dark One. A haunt of Trollocs, Myrddraal, and other creatures of the Shadow.

Great Game, the: *See Daes Dae'mar*.

Great Hunt of the Horn, The: A cycle of stories concerning the legendary search for the Horn of Valere, in the years between the end of the Trolloc Wars and the beginning of the War of the Hundred Years. If told in its entirety, the cycle would take many days. ***See also*** Horn of Valere.

Great Lord of the Dark: The name by which Darkfriends refer to the Dark One, claiming that to use his true name would be blasphemous.

Great Serpent: A symbol for time and eternity, ancient before the Age of Legends began, consisting of a serpent eating its own tail. A ring in the shape of the Great Serpent is awarded to women who have been raised to the Accepted among the Aes Sedai.

Grim, Old: *See* Dark One; Wild Hunt.

Halfman: *See* Myrddraal.

Hawkwing, Artur: A legendary king (ruled FY 943–94) who united all the lands west of the Spine of the World. He even sent armies across the Aryth Ocean (FY 992), but all contact with these was lost at his death, which set off the War of the Hundred Years. His sign was a golden hawk in flight. ***See also*** War of the Hundred Years.

Heart of the Stone: *See Callandor*.

heartstone: An indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any force used in an attempt to break it is absorbed, making heartstone stronger. Another name for *cuendillar*.

hide: A unit of area for measuring land, equal to 100 paces by 100 paces.

High Lords of Tear: Acting as a council, the High Lords are the rulers of the nation of Tear, which has neither king nor queen. Their numbers are not fixed, and have varied over the years from as many as twenty to as few as six. Not to be confused with the Lords of the Land, who are lesser Tairen lords.

Hopper: A wolf.

Horn of Valere (vah-LEER): The legendary object of the Great Hunt of the Horn. The Horn supposedly can call back dead heroes from the grave to fight against the Shadow.

Hundred Companions, the: One hundred male Aes Sedai, among the most powerful of the Age of Legends, who, led by Lews Therin Telamon, launched the final stroke that ended the War of the Shadow by sealing the Dark One back into his prison. The Dark One's counterstroke tainted *saidin*; the Hundred Companions went mad and began the Breaking of the World. ***See also*** Time of Madness; Breaking of the World; True Source; One Power.

Illian (IHL-lee-an): A great port on the Sea of Storms, capital city of the nation of the same name.

Illuminators, Guild of: A society that holds the secret of making fireworks. It guards this secret very closely, even to murder. The Guild gains its name from the grand displays, called Illuminations, that it provides for rulers and sometimes for great lords. Lesser fireworks are sold for use by others, but with dire warnings of the disaster that can result from attempting to learn what is inside them. The Guild chapter house is in Tanchico, the capital of Tarabon. The Guild established one other chapter house in Cairhien, but it is no longer active.

Ishamael (ih-SHAH-may-EHL): In the Old Tongue, “Betrayer of Hope.” One of the Forsaken. Name given to the leader of the Aes Sedai who went over to the Dark One in the War of the Shadow. It is said that even he forgot his true name. ***See also*** Forsaken.

Karaethon Cycle, The (ka-REE-ah-thon): *See* Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Laman (LAY-mahn): A king of Cairhien, of House Damodred, who lost his throne in the Aiel War. ***See also*** Aiel War; *Avendoraldera*.

Lan (LAN); al’Lan Mandragoran (AHL-LAN man-DRAG-or-an): A Warder, bonded to Moiraine. Uncrowned King of Malkier, Dai Shan, and the last surviving Malkieri lord. ***See also*** Warder; Moiraine; Malkier.

Lanfear (LAN-fear): In the Old Tongue, “Daughter of the Night.” One of the Forsaken, perhaps the most powerful next to Ishamael. Unlike the other Forsaken, she chose this name herself. She is said to have been in love with Lews Therin Telamon, and to have hated his wife, Ilyena. ***See also*** Forsaken; Dragon, the.

league: *See* length, units of.

Leane (lee-AHN-eh): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah, and Keeper of the Chronicles. ***See also*** Ajah; Chronicles, Keeper of the.

length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Lews Therin Telamon; Lews Therin Kinslayer: *See* Dragon, the.

Liandrin (lee-AHN-drihn): An Aes Sedai formerly of the Red Ajah, from Tarabon. Now known to be of the Black Ajah.

Light, Children of the: *See* Children of the Light.

Loial (LOY-ahl) **son of Arent son of Halan**: An Ogier from Stedding Shangtai.

Malkier (mahl-KEER): A nation, once one of the Borderlands, now consumed by the Blight. The sign of Malkier was a golden crane in flight.

Manetheren (mahn-EHTH-ehr-ehn): One of the Ten Nations that made the Second Covenant. Also the capital city of that nation. Both city and nation were utterly destroyed in the Trolloc Wars.

Masema (mah-SEE-mah): A Shienaran soldier who hates Aiel.

Mayene (may-EHN): City-state on the Sea of Storms that derives its wealth and its independence from knowledge of where to find the oilfish shoals, which rival in economic importance the olive groves of Tear, Illian, and Tarabon. Oilfish and olives provide nearly all lamp oil. The current ruler of Mayene is Berelain, the First of Mayene. The Rulers of Mayene claim to be descendants of Artur Hawkwing. The sign of Mayene is a golden hawk in flight.

Merrilin, Thom (MER-rih-lihn, TOM): A gleeman, and once the lover of Queen Morgase.

mile: *See* length, units of.

Min (MIN): A young woman with the ability to read things about people in the auras and images she sometimes sees surrounding them.

Moiraine (mwah-RAIN): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. Born in House Damodred, though not in line of succession to the throne, she was raised in the Royal Palace in Cairhien.

Morgase (moor-GAYZ): By the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High

Seat of House Trakand. Her sign is three golden keys. The sign of House Trakand is a silver keystone.

Myrddraal (MUHRD-draal): Creatures of the Dark One, commanders of the Trollocs. Twisted offspring of Trollocs in which the human stock used to create the Trollocs has resurfaced, but tainted by the evil that made the Trollocs. They have no eyes, but can see like eagles in light or dark. They have certain powers stemming from the Dark One, including the ability to cause paralyzing fear with a look and the ability to vanish wherever there are shadows. They have few known weaknesses, but one of these is that they are reluctant to cross running water. In different lands they are known by many names, among them Halfman, the Eyeless, Shadowman, Lurk, Fetch, and Fade.

Nedeal, Corianin: *See* Talents.

Niall, Pedron (NEYE-awl, PAY-drohn): Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light. ***See also*** Children of the Light.

Oaths, Three: The oaths taken by an Accepted who is being raised to Aes Sedai. Spoken while holding the Oath Rod, a *ter'angreal* that makes oaths binding. They are: (1) To speak no word that is not true. (2) To make no weapon with which one man may kill another. (3) Never to use the One Power as a weapon except against Shadowspawn, or in the last extreme of defense of her own life, or that of her Warder or another Aes Sedai. These oaths were not always required, but various events before and since the Breaking caused them to be necessary. The second oath was the first adopted, in reaction to the War of the Power. The first oath, while held to the letter, is often circumvented by careful speaking. It is believed that the last two are inviolable.

Ogier (OH-gehr): (1) A non-human race, characterized by great height (ten feet is average for adult males), broad, almost snout like noses, and long, tufted ears. They live in areas called *stedding*. Their separation from these *stedding* after the Breaking of the World (a time called the Exile by Ogier) resulted in what is called the Longing; an Ogier who is too long out of the *stedding*, sickens and dies. Widely known as wondrous stonemasons who built the great human cities after the Breaking, they consider stonework simply something learned during the Exile and not as important as tending the trees of the *stedding,* especially the towering Great Trees. Except for stonework, they rarely leave their *stedding* and typically have little contact with humankind. Knowledge of them among humans is sparse, and many believe Ogier to be only legends. Although believed to be a pacific people and extremely slow to anger, some old stories say they fought alongside humans in the Trolloc Wars, and call them implacable enemies. By and large, they are extremely fond of knowledge, and their books and stories often contain information lost to humans. A typical Ogier lifespan is at least three to four times that of a human. (2) Any individual of that non-human race. ***See also*** Breaking of the World; *stedding;* Treesinger.

Old Grim: *See* Dark One.

Old Tongue: The language spoken during the Age of Legends. It is generally expected that nobles and the educated will have learned to speak this, but most know only a few words.

One Power, the: The power drawn from the True Source. The vast majority of people are completely unable to learn to channel the One Power. A very small number can be taught to channel, and an even tinier number have the ability inborn. For these few there is no need to be taught; they will touch the True Source and channel the Power whether they want to or not, perhaps without even realizing what they are doing. This inborn ability usually manifests itself in late adolescence or early adulthood. If control is not taught, or self-learned (extremely difficult, with a success rate of only one in four), death is certain. Since the Time of Madness, no man has been able to channel the Power without eventually going completely, horribly mad, and then, even if he has learned some control, dying from a wasting sickness that causes the sufferer to rot alive, a sickness caused, as is the madness, by the Dark One’s taint on *saidin*. For a woman the death that comes without control of the Power is less horrible, but it is death just the same. Aes Sedai search for girls with the inborn ability as much to save their lives as to increase Aes Sedai numbers, and for men with it in order to stop the terrible things they inevitably do with the Power in their madness. ***See also*** Aes Sedai; channel; Five Powers; Time of Madness; True Source.

Ordeith (OHR-deeth): In the Old Tongue, “Wormwood.” Name taken by a man who advises the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light.

Pattern of an Age: The Wheel of Time weaves the threads of human lives into the Pattern of an Age, often called simply the Pattern, which forms the substance of reality for that Age. ***See also*** *ta’veren*.

Powers, the Five: *See* Five Powers, the.

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. Their avowed purposes are to discover the truth in disputations and uncover Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is torture; their normal manner that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. The Questioners refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light, the Hand that digs out truth, and at times act as if they were entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the Questioners is the High Inquisitor, who sits on the Council of the Anointed. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd’s crook.

Red Shields: *See* Aiel warrior societies.

Rhuarc (RHOURK): An Aiel, clan chief of the Taardad Aiel.

Rogosh Eagle-eye: A legendary hero mentioned in a number of old stories.

sa’angreal (SAH-ahn-GREE-ahl): Any one of a number of objects that allow an individual to channel much more of the One Power than would otherwise be possible or safe. A *sa’angreal* is like unto, but much more powerful than, an *angreal*. The amount of the Power that can be wielded with a *sa’angreal* compares to the amount of the Power that can be handled with an *angreal* as the power wielded with the aid of an *angreal* does to the amount of the Power that can be handled unaided. Remnants of the Age of Legends, their making is no longer known. Only a handful remain, far fewer even than *angreal*.

saidar (sah-ih-DAHR); ***saidin*** (sah-ih-DEEN): *See* True Source.

Sea Folk: More properly, the Atha'an Miere (ah-thah-AHN mee-AIR), the People of the Sea. Inhabitants of islands in the Aryth (AH-rihth) Ocean and the Sea of Storms, they spend little time on those islands, living most of their lives on their ships. Most seaborne trade is carried by the Sea Folk's ships.

Seanchan (SHAWN-CHAN): (1) Descendants of the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean. (2) The land from which the Seanchan come.

Selene (seh-LEEN): A name used by the Forsaken called Lanfear.

Servants, Hall of the: In the Age of Legends, the great meeting hall of the Aes Sedai.

Shadar Logoth (SHAH-dahr LOH-goth): A city abandoned and shunned since the Trolloc Wars. It is tainted ground, and not a pebble of it is safe.

Shai'tan (SHAY-ih-TAN): *See* Dark One.

Shayol Ghul (SHAY-ol GHOOL): A mountain in the Blasted Lands, the site of the Dark One's prison.

Sheriam (SHEER-ee-ahm): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. The Mistress of Novices in the White Tower.

Siuan Sanche (SWAHN SAHN-chay): The daughter of a Tairen fisherman, she was, according to Tairen law, put on a ship to Tar Valon before the second sunset after it was discovered that she had the potential to channel. Formerly of the Blue Ajah. Raised to the Amyrlin Seat in 988 NE.

Soulless: *See* Gray Man.

span: *See* length, units of.

Spine of the World, the: A towering mountain range, with only a few passes, which separates the Aiel Waste from the lands to the west.

stedding (STEHD-ding): An Ogier (OH-geer) homeland. Many *stedding* have been abandoned since the Breaking of the

World. They are shielded in some way, no longer understood, so that within them no Aes Sedai can channel the One Power, nor even sense that the True Source exists. Attempts to wield the One Power from outside a *stedding* have no effect inside a *stedding* boundary. No Trolloc will enter a *stedding* unless driven, and even a Myrddraal will do so only at the greatest need and then with the greatest reluctance and distaste. Even Darkfriends, if truly dedicated, feel uncomfortable within a *stedding*.

stilling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a woman who can channel from the One Power. A woman who has been stilled can sense the True Source, but she cannot touch it. So seldom has it been done that novices are required to learn the names and crimes of all women who have suffered it.

Stone Dogs: *See* Aiel warrior societies.

Stone of Tear: A great fortress in the city of Tear, said to have been made soon after the Breaking of the World, and to have been made using the One Power. It has been besieged or attacked countless times, but never successfully. The Stone is mentioned twice in the Prophecies of the Dragon. Once they say the Stone will never fall until the People of the Dragon come. In another place, they say the Stone will never fall until the Dragon’s hand wields the Sword That Cannot Be Touched, *Callandor*. Some believe that these Prophecies account for the antipathy of the High Lords to the One Power, and for the Tairen law that forbids channeling. Despite this antipathy, the Stone contains a collection of *an’greal* and *ter’angreal* rivaling that of the White Tower, a collection which was gathered, some say, in an attempt to diminish the glare of possessing *Callandor*.

Sunday: A feastday and festival in midsummer, widely celebrated in many parts of the world.

sung wood: *See* Treesinger.

Talents: Abilities in the use of the One Power in specific areas. The best known of these, of course, is Healing. Some, such as Traveling, the ability to shift oneself from one place to another without crossing the intervening space, have been lost. Others such as Foretelling (the ability to foretell future events, but in a general way) are now found only rarely if at all. Another Talent long thought lost is Dreaming, which involves, among other things, interpreting the Dreamer’s dreams to foretell future events in more specific fashion than Foretelling does. Some Dreamers had the ability to enter *Tel’aran’rhiod*, the World of Dreams, and (it is said) even other people’s dreams. The last known Dreamer was Corianin Nedeal, who died in 526 NE.

ta’maral’ailen (tah-MAHR-ahl-EYE-lehn): In the Old Tongue, “Web of Destiny.” A great change in the Pattern of an Age, centered around one or more people who are *ta’veren*. ***See also*** Pattern of an Age; *ta’veren*.

Tanreall, Artur Paendrag (tahn-REE-ahl, AHR-tuhr PAY-ehn-DRAG): *See* Hawkwing, Artur.

Tarmon Gai’don (TAHR-mohn GAY-dohn): The Last Battle. ***See also*** Dragon, Prophecies of the; Horn of Valere.

ta’veren (tah-VEER-ehn): A person around whom the Wheel of Time weaves all surrounding life-threads, perhaps ALL life-threads, to form a Web of Destiny. ***See also*** Pattern of an Age.

Tear (TEER): A nation on the Sea of Storms. Also the capital city of that nation, a great seaport. The banner of Tear is three white crescent moons slanting across a field half red, half gold. ***See also*** Stone of Tear.

Telamon, Lews Therin (TEHL-ah-mon, LOOZ THEH-rihn): *See* Dragon, the.

Tel’aran’rhiod (tel-AYE-rahn-rhee-ODD): In the Old Tongue, “the Unseen World,” or “the World of Dreams.” A world glimpsed in dreams which was believed by the ancients to permeate and surround all other possible worlds. Unlike other dreams, what happens to living things in the World of Dreams is real; a wound taken there will still be there on awakening, and one who dies there does not wake at all.

ter’angreal (TEER-ahn-GREE-ahl): Any one of a number of remnants of the Age of Legends that use the One Power. Unlike *angreal* and *sa’angreal*, each *ter’angreal* was made to do a particular thing. For example, one makes oaths taken with it binding. Some *ter’angreal* are used by Aes Sedai, but the original purposes of many others are largely unknown. Some will kill or destroy the ability to channel of any woman who uses them. ***See also*** *angreal; sa'angreal*.

Tigraine (tee-GRAIN): As Daughter-Heir of Andor, she married Taringail Damodred and bore his son Galadedrid. Her disappearance in 972 NE, shortly after her brother Luc vanished in the Blight, led to the struggle in Andor called the Succession, and caused the events in Cairhien that eventually brought on the Aiel War. Her sign was a woman's hand gripping a thorny rose stem with a white blossom.

Time of Madness: The years after the Dark One's counterstroke tainted the male half of the True Source, when male Aes Sedai went mad and Broke the world. The exact duration of this period is unknown, but it is believed to have lasted nearly one hundred years. It ended completely only with the death of the last male Aes Sedai. ***See also*** Hundred Companions; True Source; One Power.

Traveling People: *See* Tuatha'an.

Travels of Jain Farstrider, The: A very well-known book of travel stories and observations by a noted Malkieri writer and traveler. The book was first printed in 968 NE and has been reprinted continuously ever since. Jain Farstrider disappeared shortly after the Aiel War and is generally believed to be dead.

Treekillers: An Aiel name for the Cairhienin, always said in tones of horror and disgust.

Treesinger: An Ogier who has the ability to sing to trees (called "treesong"), either healing them, or helping them to grow and flower, or making things from the wood without damaging the tree. Objects made in this manner are called "sung wood" and are highly prized. Few Ogier remain who are Treesingers; the ability seems to be dying out.

Trollocs (TRAHL-lohks): Creatures of the Dark One, created during the War of the Shadow. Huge of stature, they are a twisted blend of animal and human stock. They are divided into tribe like bands, among them the Dha'vol, the Ko'bal, and the Dhai'mon. Vicious by nature, they kill for the pure pleasure of killing. Deceitful in the extreme, they cannot be trusted unless coerced by fear.

Trolloc Wars: A series of wars, beginning about 1000 AB and lasting more than three hundred years, during which Trolloc armies ravaged the world. Eventually the Trollocs were driven back into the Great Blight, but some nations ceased to exist, and others that survived were almost depopulated. All records of the time are fragmentary.

True Source: The driving force of the universe, which turns the Wheel of Time. It is divided into a male half (*saidin*) and a female half (*saidar*), which work at the same time with and against each other. Only a man can draw on *saidin*, only a woman on *saidar*. Since the beginning of the Time of Madness, *saidin* has been tainted by the Dark One's touch. ***See also*** One Power.

Tuatha'an (too-AH-thah-AHN): A wandering folk, also known as the Tinkers and as the Traveling People, who live in brightly painted wagons and follow a totally pacifist philosophy called the Way of the Leaf. Things mended by Tinkers are often better than new. They are among the few who can cross the Aiel Waste unmolested, for the Aiel strictly avoid all contact with them.

Verin Mathwin (VEHR-ihn MAH-thwihn): An Aes Sedai of the Brown Ajah.

Warder: A warrior bonded to an Aes Sedai. The bonding is a thing of the One Power, and by it he gains such gifts as quick healing, the ability to go long periods without food, water, or rest, and the ability to sense the taint of the Dark One at a distance. So long as a Warder lives, the Aes Sedai to whom he is bonded knows he is alive however far away he is, and when he dies she will know the moment and manner of his death. While most Ajahs believe an Aes Sedai may have one Warder bonded to her at a time, the Red Ajah refuse to bond any Warders at all, while the Green Ajah believe an Aes Sedai may bond as many Warders as she wishes. Ethically the Warder must accede to the bonding voluntarily, but it has been known to be done against the Warder's will. What the Aes Sedai gain from the bonding is a closely held secret. ***See also*** Aes Sedai.

War of Power: *See* War of the Shadow.

War of the Hundred Years: A series of overlapping wars among constantly shifting alliances, precipitated by the death of Artur Hawkwing and the resulting struggle for his empire. It lasted from FY 994 to FY 1117. The War of the Hundred Years depopulated large parts of the lands between the Aryth Ocean and the Aiel Waste, from the Sea of Storms to the Great Blight. So great was the destruction that only fragmentary records of the time remain. The empire of Artur Hawkwing was pulled apart in the wars, and the nations of the present day were formed. ***See also*** Hawkwing, Artur.

War of the Second Dragon: The war fought (FY 939–43) against the false Dragon Guaire Amalasan. During this war a young king named Artur Tanreall Paendrag, later known as Artur Hawkwing, rose to overwhelming prominence.

War of the Shadow: Also known as the War of Power, this war ended the Age of Legends. It began shortly after the attempt to free the Dark One, and soon involved the whole world. In a world where war had been forgotten, even the memory of it, every facet of war was rediscovered, often twisted by the Dark One's touch on the world, and the One Power was used as a weapon. The war was ended by the resealing of the Dark One into his prison. ***See also*** Hundred Companions, the; Dragon, the.

weight, units of: 10 ounces = 41 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Wheel of Time, the: Time is a wheel with seven spokes, each spoke an Age. As the Wheel turns, the Ages come and go, each leaving memories that fade to legend, then to myth, and are forgotten by the time that Age comes again. The Pattern of an Age is slightly different each time an Age comes, and each time it is subject to greater change.

Whitecloaks: *See* Children of the Light.

wilder: A woman who has learned to channel the One Power on her own, surviving the crisis as only one in four does. Such women usually build barriers against knowing what it is they are doing, but if these can be broken down, wilders are among the most powerful of channelers. The term is often used in derogatory fashion.

Wild Hunt: It is believed by many that the Dark One (often called Grim, or Old Grim, in Tear, Illian, Murandy, Altara, and Ghealdan) rides out in the night with the “black dogs,” or the Darkhounds, hunting souls. This is the Wild Hunt. Rain can keep the Darkhounds out of the night, but once they are on the trail, they must be confronted and defeated or the victim’s death is inevitable. It is believed that merely seeing the Wild Hunt pass means imminent death, either for the viewer or for someone dear to the viewer.

Wisdom: In villages, a woman chosen by the Women’s Circle for her knowledge of such things as healing, and foretelling the weather, as well as for common good sense. A position of great responsibility and authority, both actual and implied. She is generally considered the equal of the Mayor, and in some villages his superior. Unlike the Mayor, she is chosen for life, and it is very rare for a Wisdom to be removed from office before her death. Almost traditionally in conflict with the Mayor. Depending on the land, she may instead have another title, such as Guide, Healer, Wise Woman, Seeker, or Wise One.

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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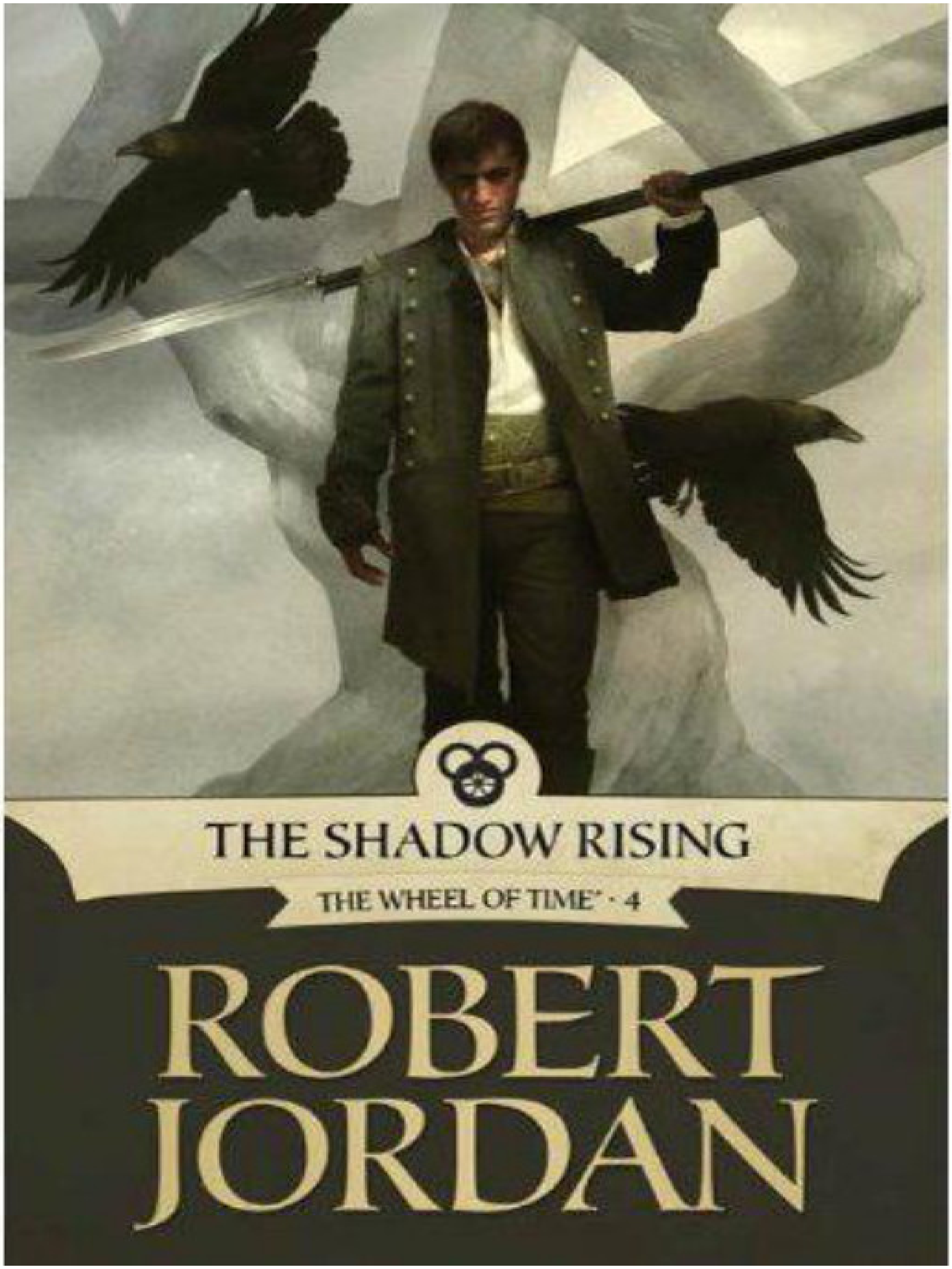
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Dedicated to
Robert Marks
Writer, teacher, scholar, philosopher, friend and inspiration.

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The Shadow shall rise across the world, and darken every land, even to the smallest corner, and there shall be neither Light nor safety. And he who shall be born of the Dawn, born of the Maiden, according to Prophecy, he shall stretch forth his hands to catch the Shadow, and the world shall scream in the pain of salvation. All Glory be to the Creator, and to the Light, and to he who shall be born again. May the Light save us from him.

—from *Commentaries on the Karaethon Cycle*
Sereine dar Shamelle Motara
Counsel-Sister to Comaelle,
High Queen of Jaramide
(circa 325 AB, the Third Age)

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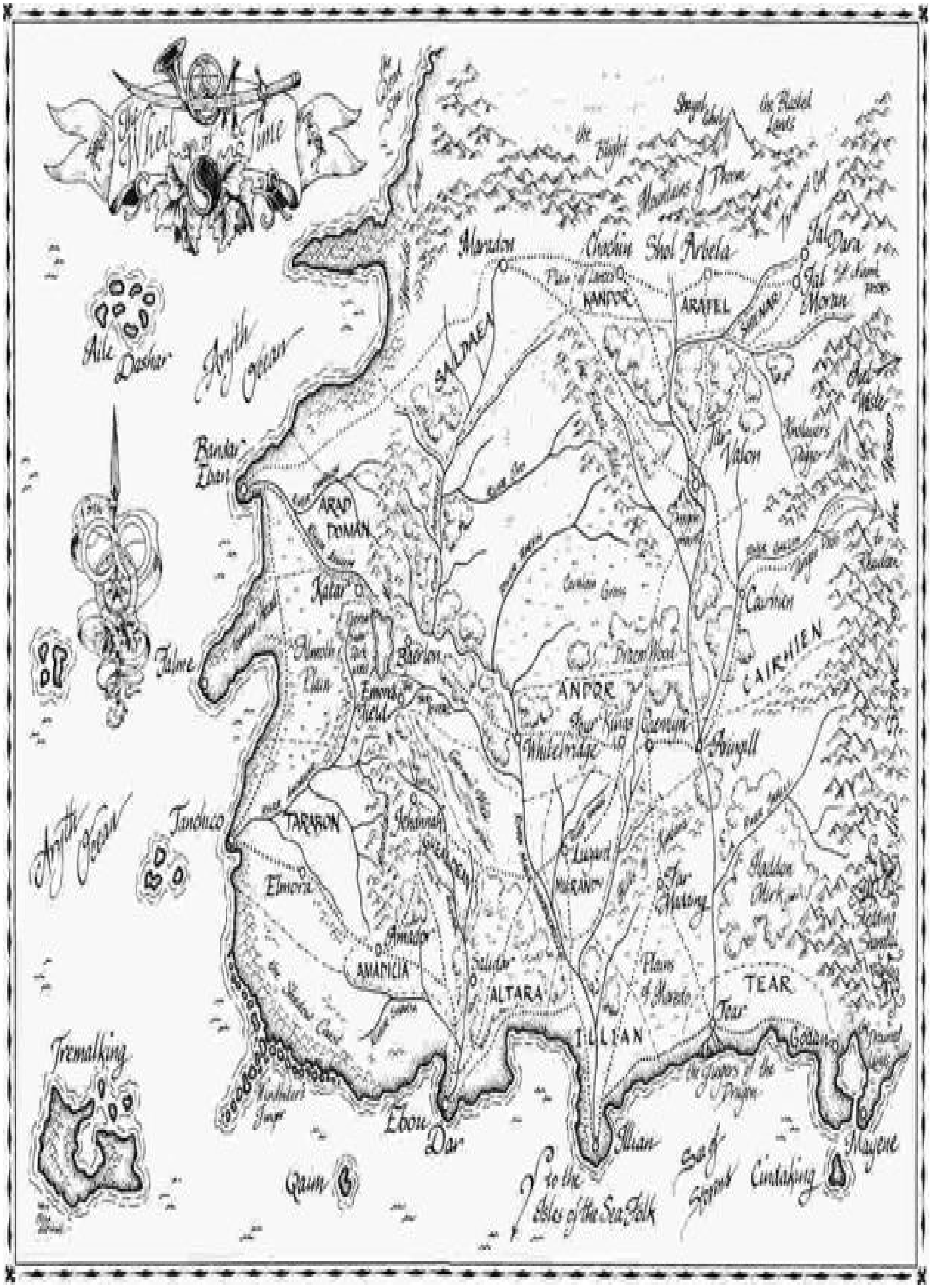
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CHAPTER
1

Seeds of Shadow

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose on the great plain called the Caralain Grass. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

North and east the wind blew beneath early morning sun, over endless miles of rolling grass and far-scattered thickets, across the swift-flowing River Luan, past the broken-topped fang of Dragonmount, mountain of legend towering above the slow swells of the rolling plain, looming so high that clouds wreathed it less than halfway to the smoking peak. Dragonmount, where the Dragon had died—and with him, some said, the Age of Legends—where prophecy said he would be born again. Or had been. North and east, across the villages of Jualdhe and Darein and Alindaer, where bridges like stone lacework arched out to the Shining Walls, the great white walls of what many called the greatest city in the world. Tar Valon. A city just touched by the reaching shadow of Dragonmount each evening.

Within those walls Ogier-made buildings well over two thousand years old seemed to grow out of the ground rather than having been built, or to be the work of wind and water rather than that of even the fabled hands of Ogier stone-masons. Some suggested birds taking flight, or huge shells from distant seas. Soaring towers, flared or fluted or spiraled, stood connected by bridges hundreds of feet in the air, often without rails. Only those long in Tar Valon could avoid gaping like country folk who had never been off the farm.

Greatest of those towers, the White Tower dominated the city, gleaming like polished bone in the sun. *The Wheel of Time turns around Tar Valon*, so people said in the city, *and Tar Valon turns around the Tower*. The first sight travelers had of Tar Valon, before their horses came in view of the bridges, before their river boat captains sighted the island, was the Tower reflecting the sun like a beacon. Small wonder then that the great square surrounding the walled Tower grounds seemed smaller than it was under the massive Tower's gaze, the people in it dwindling to insects. Yet the White Tower could have been the smallest in Tar Valon, the fact that it was the heart of Aes Sedai power would still have overawed the island city.

Despite their numbers, the crowd did not come close to filling the square. Along the edges people jostled each other in a milling mass, all going about their day's business, but closer to the Tower grounds there were ever fewer people, until a band of bare paving stones at least fifty paces wide bordered the tall white walls. Aes Sedai were respected and more in Tar Valon, of course, and the Amyrlin Seat ruled the city as she ruled the Aes Sedai, but few wanted to be closer to Aes Sedai power than they had to. There was a difference between being proud of a grand fireplace in your hall and walking into the flames.

A very few did go closer, to the broad stairs that led up to the Tower itself, to the intricately carved doors wide enough for a dozen people abreast. Those doors stood open, welcoming. There were always some people in need of aid or an answer they thought only Aes Sedai could give, and they came from far as often as near, from Arafel and Ghealdan, from Saldaea and Illian. Many would find help or guidance inside, though often not what they had expected or hoped for.

Min kept the wide hood of her cloak pulled up, shadowing her face in its depths. In spite of the warmth of the day, the garment was light enough not to attract comment, not on a woman so obviously shy. And a good many people were shy when they went to the Tower. There was nothing about her to attract notice. Her dark hair was longer than when she was last in the Tower, though still not quite to her shoulders, and her dress, plain blue except for narrow bands of white Jaerecruz lace at neck and wrists, would have suited the daughter of a well-to-do farmer, wearing her feastday best to the Tower just like the other women approaching the wide stairs. Min hoped she looked the same, at least. She had to stop herself from staring at them to see if they walked or held themselves differently. *I can do it*, she told herself. She had certainly not come all this way to turn back now. The dress was a good disguise. Those who remembered her in the Tower remembered a young woman with close-cropped hair, always in a boy's coat and breeches, never in a dress. It had to be a good disguise. She had no choice about what she was doing. Not really.

Her stomach fluttered the closer she came to the Tower, and she tightened her grip on the bundle clutched to her breast. Her usual clothes were in there, and her good boots, and all her possessions except the horse she had left at an inn not far from the square. With luck, she would be back on the gelding in a few hours, riding for the Ostrein Bridge and the road south.

She was not really looking forward to climbing onto a horse again so soon, not after weeks in the saddle with never a day's pause, but she longed to leave this place. She had never seen the White Tower as hospitable, and right now it seemed nearly as awful as the Dark One's prison at Shayol Ghul. Shivering, she wished she had not thought of the Dark One. *I wonder if Moiraine thinks I came just because she asked me? The Light help me, acting like a fool girl. Doing fool things because of a fool man!*

She mounted the stairs uneasily—each was deep enough to take two strides for her to reach the next—and unlike most of the others, she did not pause for an awed stare up the pale height of the Tower. She wanted this over.

Inside, archways almost surrounded the large, round entry hall, but the petitioners huddled in the middle of the chamber, shuffling together beneath a flat-domed ceiling. The pale stone floor had been worn and polished by countless nervous feet over the centuries. No one thought of anything except where they were, and why. A farmer and his wife in rough woolens, clutching each other's callused hands, rubbed shoulders with a merchant in velvet-slashed silks, a maid at her heels clutching a small worked-silver casket, no doubt her mistress's gift for the Tower. Elsewhere, the merchant would have stared down her nose at farm folk who brushed so close, and they might well have knuckled their foreheads and backed away apologizing. Not now. Not here.

There were few men among the petitioners, which was no surprise to Min. Most men were nervous around Aes Sedai. Everyone knew it had been male Aes Sedai, when there still had been male Aes Sedai, who were responsible for the Breaking of the World. Three thousand years had not dimmed that memory, even if time had altered many of the details. Children were still frightened by tales of men who could channel the One Power, men doomed to go mad from the Dark One's taint on *saidin*, the male half of the True Source. Worst was the story of Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, Lews Therin Kinslayer, who had begun the Breaking. For that matter, the stories frightened adults, too. Prophecy said the Dragon would be born again in mankind's greatest hour of need, to fight the Dark One in Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle, but that made little difference in how most people looked at any connection between men and the Power. Any Aes Sedai would hunt down a man who could channel, now; of the seven Ajahs, the Red did little else.

Of course, none of that had anything to do with seeking help from Aes Sedai, yet few men felt easy about being linked in any way to Aes Sedai and the Power. Few, that is, except Warders, but each Warder was bonded to an Aes Sedai; Warders could hardly be taken for the general run of men. There was a saying: "A man will cut off his own hand to get rid of a splinter before asking help from Aes Sedai." Women meant it as a comment on men's stubborn foolishness, but Min had heard some men say the loss of a hand might be the better decision.

She wondered what these people would do if they knew what she knew. Run screaming, perhaps. And if they knew her reason for being here, she might not survive to be taken up by the Tower guards and thrown into a cell. She did have friends in the Tower, but none with power or influence. If her purpose was discovered, it was much less likely that they could help her than that she would pull them to the gallows or the headsman behind her. That was saying she lived to be tried, of course; more likely her mouth would be stopped permanently long before a trial.

She told herself to stop thinking like that. *I'll make it in, and I'll make it out. The Light burn Rand al'Thor for getting me into this!*

Three or four Accepted, women Min's age or perhaps a little older, were circulating through the round room, speaking softly to the petitioners. Their white dresses had no decoration except for seven bands of color at the hem, one band for each Ajah. Now and again a novice, a still younger woman or girl all in white, came to lead someone deeper into the Tower. The petitioners always followed the novices with an odd mix of excited eagerness and foot-dragging reluctance.

Min’s grip tightened on her bundle as one of the Accepted stopped in front of her. “The Light illumine you,” the curly-haired woman said perfunctorily. “I am called Faolain. How may the Tower help you?”

Faolain’s dark, round face held the patience of someone doing a tedious job when she would rather be doing something else. Studying, probably, from what Min knew of the Accepted. Learning to be Aes Sedai. Most important, however, was the lack of recognition in the Accepted’s eyes; the two of them had met when Min was in the Tower before, though only briefly.

Just the same, Min lowered her face in assumed diffidence. It was not unnatural; a good many country folk did not really understand the great step up from Accepted to full Aes Sedai. Shielding her features behind the edge of her cloak, she looked away from Faolain.

“I have a question I must ask the Amyrlin Seat,” she began, then cut off abruptly as three Aes Sedai stopped to look into the entry hall, two from one archway and one from another.

Accepted and novices curtsied when their rounds took them close to one of the Aes Sedai, but otherwise went on about their tasks, perhaps a trifle more briskly. That was all. Not so for the petitioners. They seemed to catch their breaths all together. Away from the White Tower, away from Tar Valon, they might simply have thought the Aes Sedai three women whose ages they could not guess, three women in the flush of their prime, yet with more maturity than their smooth cheeks suggested. In the Tower, though, there was no question. A woman who had worked very long with the One Power was not touched by time in the same way as other women. In the Tower, no one needed to see a golden Great Serpent ring to know an Aes Sedai.

A ripple of curtsies spread through the huddle, and jerky bows from the few men. Two or three people even fell to their knees. The rich merchant looked frightened; the farm couple at her side stared at legends come to life. How to deal with Aes Sedai was a matter of hearsay for most; it was unlikely that any here, except those who actually lived in Tar Valon, had seen an Aes Sedai before, and probably not even the Tar Valoners had been this close.

But it was not the Aes Sedai themselves that halted Min’s tongue. Sometimes, not often, she saw things when she looked at people, images and auras that usually flared and were gone in moments. Occasionally she knew what they meant. It happened rarely, the knowing—much more rarely than the seeing, even—but when she knew, she was always right.

Unlike most others, Aes Sedai—and their Warders—always had images and auras, sometimes so many dancing and shifting that they made Min dizzy. The numbers made no difference in interpreting them, though; she knew what they meant for Aes Sedai as seldom as for anyone else. But this time she knew more than she wanted to, and it made her shiver.

A slender woman with black hair falling to her waist, the only one of the three she recognized—her name was Ananda; she was Yellow Ajah—wore a sickly brown halo, shriveled and split by rotting fissures that fell in and widened as they decayed. The small, fair-haired Aes Sedai beside Ananda was Green Ajah, by her green-fringed shawl. The White Flame of Tar Valon on it showed for a moment when she turned her back. And on her shoulder, as if nestled among the grape vines and flowering apple branches worked on her shawl, sat a human skull. A small woman's skull, picked clean and sun-bleached. The third, a plumply pretty woman halfway around the room, wore no shawl; most Aes Sedai did not except for ceremony. The lift of her chin and the set of her shoulders spoke of strength and pride. She seemed to be casting cool blue eyes on the petitioners through a tattered curtain of blood, crimson streamers running down her face.

Blood and skull and halo faded away in the dance of images around the three, came and faded again. The petitioners stared in awe, seeing only three women who could touch the True Source and channel the One Power. No one but Min saw the rest. No one but Min knew those three women were going to die. All on the same day.

"The Amyrlin cannot see everyone," Faolain said with poorly hidden impatience. "Her next public audience is not for ten days. Tell me what you want, and I will arrange for you to see the sister who can best help you."

Min's eye flew to the bundle in her arms and stayed there, partly so she would not have to see again what she had already seen. *All* three *of them! Light!* What chance was there that three Aes Sedai would die on the same day? But she knew. She knew.

"I have the right to speak to the Amyrlin Seat. In person." It was a right seldom demanded—who would dare?—but it existed. "Any woman has that right, and I ask it."

"Do you think the Amyrlin Seat herself can see everyone who comes to the White Tower? Surely another Aes Sedai can help you." Faolain gave heavy weight to the titles as if to overpower Min. “Now tell me what your question is about. And give me your name, so the novice will know who to come for.”

“My name is . . . Elmindreda.” Min winced in spite of herself. She had always hated the name, but the Amyrlin was one of the few people living who had ever heard it. If only she remembered. “I have the right to speak to the Amyrlin. And my question is for her alone. I have the right.”

The Accepted arched an eyebrow. “Elmindreda?” Her mouth twitched toward an amused smile. “And you claim your rights. Very well. I will send word to the Keeper of the Chronicles that you wish to see the Amyrlin Seat personally, Elmindreda.”

Min wanted to slap the woman for the way she emphasized “Elmindreda,” but instead she forced out a murmured “Thank you.”

“Do not thank me yet. No doubt it will be hours before the Keeper finds time to reply, and it will certainly be that you can ask your question at the Mother’s next public audience. Wait with patience. Elmindreda.” She gave Min a tight smile, almost a smirk, as she turned away.

Grinding her teeth, Min took her bundle to stand against the wall between two of the archways, where she tried to blend into the pale stonework. *Trust no one, and avoid notice until you reach the Amyrlin,* Moiraine had told her. Moiraine was one Aes Sedai she did trust. Most of the time. It was good advice in any case. All she had to do was reach the Amyrlin, and it would be over. She could don her own clothes again, see her friends, and leave. No more need for hiding.

She was relieved to see that the Aes Sedai had gone. Three Aes Sedai dying on one day. It was impossible; that was the only word. Yet it was going to happen. Nothing she said or did could change it—when she knew what an image meant, it happened—but she had to tell the Amyrlin about this. It might even be as important as the news she brought from Moiraine, though that was hard to believe.

Another Accepted came to replace one already there, and to Min’s eyes bars floated in front of her apple-cheeked face, like a cage. Sheriam, the Mistress of Novices, looked into the hall—after one glance, Min kept her gaze on the stone under her feet; Sheriam knew her all too well—and the red-haired Aes Sedai’s face seemed battered and bruised. It was only the viewing, of course, but Min still had to bite her lip to stifle a gasp. Sheriam, with her calm authority and sureness, was as indestructible as the Tower. Surely nothing could harm Sheriam. But something was going to.

An Aes Sedai unknown to Min, wearing the shawl of the Brown Ajah, accompanied a stout woman in finely woven red wool to the doors. The stout woman walked as lightly as a girl, face shining, almost laughing with pleasure. The Brown sister was smiling, too, but her aura faded like a guttering candle flame.

Death. Wounds, captivity, and death. To Min it might as well have been printed on a page.

She set her eyes on her feet. She did not want to see any more. *Let her remember*, she thought. She had not felt desperation at any time on her long ride from the Mountains of Mist, not even on the two occasions when someone tried to steal her horse, but she felt it now. *Light, let her remember that bloody name*.

“Mistress Elmindreda?”

Min gave a start. The black-haired novice who stood before her was barely old enough to be away from home, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, though she made a great effort at dignity. “Yes? I am. . . . That is my name.”

“I am Sahra. If you will come with me”—Sahra’s piping voice took on a note of wonder—“the Amyrlin Seat will see you in her study now.”

Min gave a sigh of relief and followed eagerly.

Her cloak’s deep hood still hid her face, but it did not stop her seeing, and the more she saw, the more she grew eager to reach the Amyrlin. Few people walked the broad corridors that spiraled upward with their brightly colored floor tiles, and their wall hangings and golden lampstands—the Tower had been built to hold far greater numbers than it did now—but nearly everyone she saw as she climbed higher wore an image or aura that spoke to her of violence and danger.

Warders hurried by with barely a glance for the two women, men who moved like hunting wolves, their swords only an afterthought to their deadliness, but they seemed to have bloody faces, or gaping wounds. Swords and spears danced about their heads, threatening. Their auras flashed wildly, flickered on the knife edge of death. She saw dead men walking, knew they would die on the same day as the Aes Sedai in the entry hall, or at most a day later. Even some of the servants, men and women with the Flame of Tar Valon on their breasts, hurrying about their work, bore signs of violence. An Aes Sedai glimpsed down a side hallway appeared to have chains in the air around her, and another, crossing the corridor ahead of Min and her guide, seemed for most of those few strides to wear a silver collar around her neck. Min's breath caught at that; she wanted to scream.

"It can all be overwhelming to someone who's never seen it before," Sahra said, trying and failing to sound as if the Tower were as ordinary to her now as her home village. "But you are safe here. The Amyrlin Seat will make things right." Her voice squeaked when she mentioned the Amyrlin.

"Light, let her do just that," Min muttered. The novice gave her a smile that was meant to be soothing.

By the time they reached the hall outside the Amyrlin's study, Min's stomach was churning and she was treading almost on Sahra's heels. Only the need to pretend that she was a stranger had kept her from running ahead long since.

One of the doors to the Amyrlin's chambers opened, and a young man with red-gold hair came stalking out, nearly striding into Min and her escort. Tall and straight and strong in his blue coat thickly embroidered with gold on sleeves and collar, Gawyn of House Trakand, son of Queen Morgase of Andor, looked every inch the proud young lord. A furious young lord. There was no time to drop her head; he was staring down into her hood, right into her face.

His eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed to slits of blue ice. "So you are back. Do you know where my sister and Egwene have gone?"

"They are not here?" Min forgot everything in a rising flood of panic. Before she knew what she was doing she had seized his sleeves, peering up at him urgently, and forced him back a step. "Gawyn, they started for the Tower months ago! Elayne and Egwene, and Nynaeve, too. With Verin Sedai and. . . . Gawyn, I . . . I. . . ."

"Calm yourself," he said, gently undoing her grip on his coat. "Light! I didn't mean to frighten you so. They arrived safely. And would not say a word of where they had been, or why. Not to me. I suppose there's scant hope you will?" She thought she kept her face straight, but he took one look and said, "I thought not. This place has more secrets than. . . . They've vanished again. And Nynaeve, too." Nynaeve was almost an offhand addition; she might be one of Min's friends, but she meant nothing to him. His voice began to roughen once more, growing tighter by the second. "Again without a word. Not a word! Supposedly they're on a farm somewhere as penance for running away, but I cannot find out where. The Amyrlin won't give me a straight answer."

Min flinched; for a moment, streaks of dried blood had made his face a grim mask. It was like a double hammer blow. Her friends were gone—it had eased her coming to the Tower, knowing they were here—and Gawyn was going to be wounded on the day the Aes Sedai died.

Despite all she had seen since entering the Tower, despite her fear, none of it had really touched her personally until now. Disaster striking the Tower would spread far from Tar Valon, yet she was not of the Tower and never could be. But Gawyn was someone she knew, someone she liked, and he was going to be hurt more than the blood told, hurt somehow deeper than wounds to his flesh. It hit her that if catastrophe seized the Tower, not only distant Aes Sedai would be harmed, women she could never feel close to, but her friends as well. They *were* of the Tower.

In a way she was glad Egwene and the others were not there, glad she could not look at them and perhaps see signs of death. Yet she wanted to look, to be sure, to look at her friends and see nothing, or see that they would live. Where in the Light were they? Why had they gone? Knowing those three, she thought it possible that if Gawyn did not know where they were, it was because they did not want him to know. It could be that.

Suddenly she remembered where she was and why, and that she was not alone with Gawyn. Sahra seemed to have forgotten she was taking Min to the Amyrlin; she seemed to have forgotten everything but the young lord, making calf-eyes that he was not noticing. Even so, there was no use pretending any longer to be a stranger to the Tower. She was at the Amyrlin's door; nothing could stop her now.

"Gawyn, I don't know where they are, but if they are doing penance on a farm, they're probably all sweat, and mud to their hips, and you are the last one they will want to see them." She was not much easier about their absence than Gawyn was, in truth. Too much had happened, too much was happening, too much with ties to them, and to her. But it was not impossible they had been sent off for punishment. "You won't help them by making the Amyrlin angry."

"I don't know that they *are* on a farm. Or even alive. Why all this hiding and sidestepping if they're just pulling weeds? If anything happens to my sister. . . . Or to Egwene. . . ." He frowned at the toes of his boots. "I am supposed to look after Elayne. How can I protect her when I don't know where she is?"

Min sighed. "Do you think she needs looking after? Either of them?" But if the Amyrlin had sent them somewhere, maybe they did. The Amyrlin was capable of sending a woman into a bear's den with nothing but a switch if it suited her purposes. And she would expect the woman to come back with a bearskin, or the bear on a leash, as instructed. But telling Gawyn that would only inflame his temper and his worries. "Gawyn, they have pledged to the Tower. They won't thank you for meddling."

"I know Elayne isn't a child," he said patiently, "even if she does bounce back and forth between running off like one and playing at being Aes Sedai. But she *is* my sister, and beyond that, she is Daughter-Heir of Andor. She'll be queen, after Mother. Andor needs her whole and safe to take the throne, not another Succession."

Playing at being Aes Sedai? Apparently he did not realize the extent of his sister's talent. The Daughter-Heirs of Andor had been sent to the Tower to train for as long as there had been an Andor, but Elayne was the first to have enough talent to be raised to Aes Sedai, and a powerful Aes Sedai at that. Very likely he also did not know Egwene was just as strong.

"So you will protect her whether she wants it or not?" She said it in a flat voice meant to let him know he was making a mistake, but he missed the warning and nodded agreement.

"That has been my duty since the day she was born. My blood shed before hers; my life given before hers. I took that oath when I could barely see over the side of her cradle; Gareth Bryne had to explain to me what it meant. I won't break it now. Andor needs her more than it needs me."

He spoke with a calm certainty, an acceptance of something natural and right, that sent chills through her. She had always thought of him as boyish, laughing and teasing, but now he was something alien. She thought the Creator must have been tired when it came time to make men; sometimes they hardly seemed human. "And Egwene? What oath did you take about her?"

His face did not change, but he shifted his feet warily. "I'm concerned about Egwene, of course. And Nynaeve. What happens to Elayne's companions might happen to Elayne. I assume they're still together; when they *were* here, I seldom saw one without the others."

"My mother always told me to marry a poor liar, and you qualify. Except that I think someone else has first claim."

"Some things are meant to be," he said quietly, "and some never can. Galad is heartsick because Egwene is gone." Galad was his half-brother, the pair of them sent to Tar Valon to train under the Warders. That was another Andoran tradition. Galadedrid Damodred was a man who took doing the right thing to the point of a fault, as Min saw it, but Gawyn could see no wrong in him. And he would not speak his feelings for a woman Galad had set his heart on.

She wanted to shake him, shake some sense into him, but there was no time now. Not with the Amyrlin waiting, not with what she had to tell the Amyrlin waiting. Certainly not with Sahra standing there, calf-eyes or no calf-eyes. "Gawyn, I am summoned to the Amyrlin. Where can I find you, when she is done with me?"

"I will be in the practice yard. The only time I can stop worrying is when I am working the sword with Hammar." Hammar was a blademaster, and the Warder who taught the sword. "Most days I'm there until the sun sets."

"Good, then. I will come as soon as I can. And try to watch what you say. If you make the Amyrlin angry with you, Elayne and Egwene might share in it."

"That I cannot promise," he said firmly. "Something is wrong in the world. Civil war in Cairhien. The same and worse in Tarabon and Arad Doman. False Dragons. Troubles and rumors of troubles everywhere. I don't say the Tower is behind it, but even here things are not what they should be. Or what they seem. Elayne and Egwene vanishing isn't the whole of it. Still, they are the part that concerns me. I *will* find out where they are. And if they have been hurt. . . . If they are dead. . . ."

He scowled, and for an instant his face was that bloody mask again. More: a sword floated above his head, and a banner waved behind it. The long-hilted sword, like those most Warders used, had a heron engraved on its slightly curved blade, symbol of a blademaster, and Min could not say whether it belonged to Gawyn or threatened him. The banner bore Gawyn's sigil of the charging White Boar, but on a field of green rather than the red of Andor. Both sword and banner faded with the blood.

"Be careful, Gawyn." She meant it two ways. Careful of what he said, and careful in a way she could not explain, even to herself. "You must be very careful.”

His eyes searched her face as if he had heard some of her deeper meaning. “I . . . will try,” he said finally. He put on a grin, almost the grin she remembered, but the effort was plain. “I suppose I had better get myself back to the practice yard if I expect to keep up with Galad. I managed two out of five against Hammar this morning, but Galad actually won three, the last time he bothered to come to the yard.” Suddenly he appeared to really see her for the first time, and his grin became genuine. “You ought to wear dresses more often. It’s pretty on you. Remember, I will be there till sunset.”

As he strode away with something very close to the dangerous grace of a Warder, Min realized she was smoothing the dress over her hip and stopped immediately. *The Light burn all men!*

Sahra exhaled as if she had been holding her breath. “He is very good-looking, isn’t he?” she said dreamily. “Not as good-looking as Lord Galad, of course. And you really know him.” It was half a question, but only half.

Min echoed the novice’s sigh. The girl would talk with her friends in the novices’ quarters. The son of a queen was a natural topic, especially when he was handsome and had an air about him like the hero in a gleeman’s tale. A strange woman only made for more interesting speculation. Still, there was nothing to be done about it. At any rate, it could hardly cause any harm now.

“The Amyrlin Seat must be wondering why we haven’t come,” she said.

Sahra came to herself with a wide-eyed start and a loud gulp. Seizing Min’s sleeve with one hand, she jumped to open one of the doors, pulling Min behind her. The moment they were inside, the novice curtsied hastily and burst out in panic, “I’ve brought her, Leane Sedai. Mistress Elmindreda? The Amyrlin Seat wants to see her?”

The tall, coppery-skinned woman in the anteroom wore the hand-wide stole of the Keeper of the Chronicles, blue to show she had been raised from the Blue Ajah. Fists on hips, she waited for the girl to finish, then dismissed her with a clipped “Took you long enough, child. Back to your chores, now.” Sahra bobbed another curtsy and scurried out as quickly as she had entered.

Min stood with her eyes on the floor, her hood still pulled up around her face. Blundering in front of Sahra had been bad enough—though at least the novice did not know her name—but Leane knew her better than anyone in the Tower except the Amyrlin. Min was sure it could make no difference now, but after what had happened in the hallway, she meant to hold to Moiraine's instructions until she was alone with the Amyrlin.

This time her precautions did no good. Leane took two steps, pushed back the hood, and grunted as if she had been poked in the stomach. Min raised her head and stared back defiantly, trying to pretend she had not been attempting to sneak past. Straight, dark hair only a little longer than her own framed the Keeper's face; the Aes Sedai's expression was a blend of surprise and displeasure at being surprised.

"So you are Elmindreda, are you?" Leane said briskly. She was always brisk. "I must say you look it more in that dress than in your usual . . . garb."

"Just Min, Leane Sedai, if you please." Min managed to keep her face straight, but it was difficult not to glare. The Keeper's voice had held too much amusement. If her mother had had to name her after someone in a story, why did it have to be a woman who seemed to spend most of her time sighing at men, when she was not inspiring them to compose songs about her eyes, or her smile?

"Very well. Min. I'll not ask where you've been, nor why you've come back in a dress, apparently wanting to ask a question of the Amyrlin. Not now, at least." Her face said she meant to ask later, though, and get answers. "I suppose the Mother knows who Elmindreda is? Of course. I should have known that when she said to send you straight in, and alone. The Light alone knows why she puts up with you." She broke off with a concerned frown. "What is the matter, girl? Are you ill?"

Min carefully blanked her face. "No. No, I am all right." For a moment the Keeper had been looking through a transparent mask of her own face, a screaming mask. "May I go in now, Leane Sedai?"

Leane studied her a moment longer, then jerked her head toward the inner chamber. "In with you." Min's leap to obey would have satisfied the hardest taskmistress.

The Amyrlin Seat's study had been occupied by many grand and powerful women over the centuries, and reminders of the fact filled the room, from the tall fireplace all of golden marble from Kandor, cold now, to the paneled walls of pale, oddly striped wood, iron hard yet carved in wondrous beasts and wildly feathered birds. Those panels had been brought from the mysterious lands beyond the Aiel Waste well over a thousand years ago, and the fireplace was more than twice as old. The polished redstone of the floor had come from the Mountains of Mist. High arched windows let onto a balcony. The iridescent stone framing the windows shone like pearls, and had been salvaged from the remains of a city sunk into the Sea of Storms by the Breaking of the World; no one had ever seen its like.

The current occupant, Siuan Sanche, had been born a fisherman's daughter in Tear, though, and the furnishings she had chosen were simple, if well made and well polished. She sat in a stout chair behind a large table plain enough to have served a farmhouse. The only other chair in the room, just as plain and usually set off to one side, now stood in front of the table atop a small Tairen rug, simple in blue and brown and gold. Half a dozen books rested open on tall reading stands about the floor. That was all of it. A drawing hung above the fireplace: tiny fishing boats working among reeds in the Fingers of the Dragon, just as her father's boat had.

At first glance, despite her smooth Aes Sedai features, Siuan Sanche herself looked as simple as her furnishings. She herself was sturdy, and handsome rather than beautiful, and the only bit of ostentation in her clothing was the broad stole of the Amyrlin Seat she wore, with one colored stripe for each of the seven Ajahs. Her age was indeterminate, as with any Aes Sedai; not even a hint of gray showed in her dark hair. But her sharp blue eyes brooked no nonsense, and her firm jaw spoke of the determination of the youngest woman ever to be chosen Amyrlin Seat. For over ten years Siuan Sanche had been able to summon rulers, and the powerful, and they had come, even if they hated the White Tower and feared Aes Sedai.

As the Amyrlin strode around in front of the table, Min set down her bundle and began an awkward curtsy, muttering irritably under her breath at having to do so. Not that she wanted to be disrespectful—that did not even occur to one facing a woman like Siuan Sanche—but the bow she usually would have made seemed foolish in a dress, and she had only a rough idea of how to curtsy.

Halfway down, with her skirts already spread, she froze like a crouching toad. Siuan Sanche was standing there as regal as any queen, and for a moment she was also lying on the floor, naked. Aside from her being in only her skin, there was something odd about the image, but it vanished before Min could say what. It was as strong a viewing as she had ever seen, and she had no idea what it meant.

“Seeing things again, are you?” the Amyrlin said. “Well, I can certainly make use of that ability of yours. I could have used it all the months you were gone. But we’ll not talk of that. What’s done is done. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.” She smiled a tight smile. “But if you do it again, I’ll have your hide for gloves. Stand up, girl. Leane forces enough ceremony on me in a month to last any sensible woman a year. I don’t have time for it. Not these days. Now, what did you just see?”

Min straightened slowly. It was a relief to be back with someone who knew of her talent, even if it was the Amyrlin Seat herself. She did not have to hide what she saw from the Amyrlin. Far from it. “You were. . . . You weren’t wearing any clothes. I . . . I don’t know what it means, Mother.”

Siuan barked a short, mirthless laugh. “No doubt that I’ll take a lover. But I have no time for that, either. There’s no time for winking at the men when you’re busy bailing the boat.”

“Maybe,” Min said slowly. It could have meant that, though she doubted it. “I just do not know. But, Mother, I’ve been seeing things ever since I walked into the Tower. Something bad is going to happen, something terrible.”

She started with the Aes Sedai in the entry hall and told everything she had seen, as well as what everything meant, when she was sure. She held back what Gawyn had said, though, or most of it; it was no use telling him not to anger the Amyrlin if she did it for him. The rest she laid out as starkly as she had seen it. Some of her fear came out as she dredged it all up, seeing it all again; her voice shook before she was done.

The Amyrlin’s expression never changed. “So you spoke with young Gawyn,” she said when Min finished. “Well, I think I can convince him to keep quiet. And if I remember Sahra correctly, the girl could do with some time working in the country. She’ll spread no gossip hoeing a vegetable patch.”

“I don’t understand,” Min said. “Why should Gawyn keep quiet? About what? I told him nothing. And Sahra . . . ? Mother, perhaps I didn’t make myself clear. Aes Sedai and Warders are going to die. It has to mean a battle. And unless you send a lot of Aes Sedai and Warders off somewhere—and servants, too; I saw servants dead and injured, too—unless you do that, that battle will be here! In Tar Valon!”

“Did you see that?” the Amyrlin demanded. “A battle? Do you know, with your . . . your talent, or are you guessing?”

“What else could it be? At least four Aes Sedai are as good as dead. Mother, I’ve only laid eyes on nine of you since coming back, and four are going to die! And the Warders. . . . What else could it be?”

“More things than I like to think of,” Siuan said grimly. “When? How long before this . . . *thing* . . . occurs?”

Min shook her head. “I do not know. Most of it will happen in the space of a day, maybe two, but that could be tomorrow or a year from now. Or ten.”

“Let us pray for ten. If it comes tomorrow, there isn’t much I can do to stop it.”

Min grimaced. Only two Aes Sedai besides Siuan Sanche knew of what she could do: Moiraine, and Verin Mathwin, who had tried to study her talent. None of them knew how it worked any more than she did, except that it had nothing to do with the Power. Perhaps that was why only Moiraine seemed able to accept the fact that when she knew what a viewing meant, it happened.

“Maybe it’s the Whitecloaks, Mother. They were everywhere in Alindaer when I crossed the bridge.” She did not believe the Children of the Light had anything to do with what was coming, but she was reluctant to say what she believed. Believed, not knew; yet that was bad enough.

But the Amyrlin had begun shaking her head before she finished. “They would try something if they could, I’ve no doubt—they would love to strike at the Tower—but Eamon Valda won’t move openly without orders from the Lord Captain Commander, and Pedron Niall will not strike unless he thinks we’re injured. He knows our strength too well to be foolish. For a thousand years the Whitecloaks have been like that. Silverpike in the reeds, waiting for a hint of Aes Sedai blood in the water. But we’ve showed them none yet, nor will we, if I can help it.”

“Yet if Valda did try something on his own—”

Siuan cut her off. “He has no more than five hundred men close to Tar Valon, girl. He sent the rest away weeks ago, to cause trouble elsewhere. The Shining Walls held off the Aiel. And Artur Hawkwing, too. Valda will never break into Tar Valon unless the city is already falling apart from the inside.” Her voice did not change as she went on. “You very much want me to believe the trouble will come from the Whitecloaks. Why?” There was no gentleness in her eyes.

“Because *I* want to believe it,” Min muttered. She licked her lips and spoke the words she did not want to say. “The silver collar I saw on that one Aes Sedai. Mother, it looked. . . . It looked like one of the collars the . . . the Seanchan use to . . . to control women who can channel.” Her voice dwindled as Siuan’s mouth twisted with distaste.

“Filthy things,” the Amyrlin growled. “As well most people don’t believe a quarter of what they hear about the Seanchan. But there’s more chance of it being the Whitecloaks. If the Seanchan land again, anywhere, I will know it in days by pigeon, and it is a long way from the sea to Tar Valon. If they do reappear, I will have plenty of warning. No, I fear what you see is something far worse than the Seanchan. I fear it can only be the Black Ajah. Only a handful of us know about them, and I don’t relish what will happen when the knowledge becomes common, but they are the greatest immediate threat to the Tower.”

Min realized she was clutching her skirt so hard that her hands hurt; her mouth was dry as dust. The White Tower had always coldly denied the existence of a hidden Ajah, dedicated to the Dark One. The surest way to anger an Aes Sedai was merely to mention such a thing. For the Amyrlin Seat herself to give the Black Ajah reality so casually made Min’s spine turn to ice.

As if she had said nothing out of the ordinary, the Amyrlin went on. “But you didn’t come all this way just to do your viewings. What word from Moiraine? I know everything from Arad Doman to Tarabon is in chaos, to say the least.” That was saying the least, indeed; men supporting the Dragon Reborn were fighting those opposing him, and had turned both countries to civil war while they still fought each other for control of Almoth Plain. Siuan’s tone dismissed all that as a detail. “But I’ve heard nothing of Rand al’Thor for months. He is the focus of everything. Where is he? What does Moiraine have him doing? Sit, girl. Sit.” She gestured to the chair in front of the table.

Min approached the chair on wobbly legs and half fell into it. *The Black Ajah! Oh, Light!* Aes Sedai were supposed to stand for the Light. Even if she did not really trust them, there was always that. Aes Sedai, and all the power of the Aes Sedai, stood for the Light and against the Shadow.

Only now it was not true any longer. She hardly heard herself say, “He’s on his way to Tear.”

“Tear! It’s *Callandor*, then. Moiraine means him to take the Sword That Cannot Be Touched out of the Stone of Tear. I swear I’ll hang her in the sun to dry! I will make her wish she were a novice again! He cannot be ready for that yet!”

“It was not. . . .” Min stopped to clear her throat. “It was not Moiraine’s doing. Rand left in the middle of the night, by himself. The others followed, and Moiraine sent me to tell you. They could be in Tear by now. For all I know, he could have *Callandor* by now.”

“Burn him!” Siuan barked. “By now, he could be dead! I wish he had never heard a word of the Prophecies of the Dragon. If I could keep him from hearing another, I would.”

“But doesn’t he have to fulfill the Prophecies? I don’t understand.”

The Amyrlin leaned back against her table wearily. “As though anyone even understands most of them! The Prophecies aren’t what makes him the Dragon Reborn; all that takes is for him to admit it, and he must have if he is going for *Callandor*. The Prophecies are meant to announce to the world who he is, to prepare him for what is coming, to prepare the world for it. If Moiraine can keep some control over him, she will guide him to the Prophecies we can be sure of—when he is ready to face them!—and for the rest, we trust that what he does is enough. We hope. For all I know, he has already fulfilled Prophecies none of us understands. The Light send it’s enough.”

“So you do mean to control him. He said you’d try to use him, but this is the first I’ve heard you admit it.” Min felt cold inside. Angry, she added, “You haven’t done such a good job of it so far, you and Moiraine.”

Siuan’s tiredness seemed to slide from her shoulders. She straightened and stood looking down at Min. “You had best hope we can. Did you think we could just let him run about loose? Headstrong and stubborn, untrained, unprepared, maybe going mad already. Do you think we could trust to the Pattern, to his *destiny*, to keep him alive, like some story? This isn’t a story, he isn’t some invincible hero, and if his thread is snipped out of the Pattern, the Wheel of Time won’t notice his going, and the Creator will produce no miracles to save us. If Moiraine cannot reef his sails, he very well may get himself killed, and where are we then? Where is the world? The Dark One’s prison is failing. He *will* touch the world again; it is only a matter of time. If

Rand al'Thor is not there to face him in the Last Battle, if the headstrong young fool gets himself killed first, the world is doomed. The War of the Power all over again, with no Lews Therin and his Hundred Companions. Then fire and shadow, forever." She stopped suddenly, peering at Min's face. "So that's the way the wind sets, is it? You and Rand. I did not expect this."

Min shook her head vigorously, felt her cheeks coloring. "Of course not! I was . . . It's the Last Battle. And the Dark One. Light, just thinking about the Dark One loose ought to be enough to freeze a Warder's marrow. And the Black Ajah—"

"Don't try to dissemble," the Amyrlin said sharply. "Do you think this is the first time I ever saw a woman afraid for her man's life? You might as well admit it."

Min squirmed on her chair. Siuan's eyes dug at her, knowing and impatient. "All right," she muttered finally, "I'll tell you all of it, and much good it does either of us. The first time I ever saw Rand, I saw three women's faces, and one of them was mine. I've never seen anything about myself before or since, but I knew what it meant. I was going to fall in love with him. All three of us were."

"Three. The other two. Who are they?"

Min gave her a bitter smile. "The faces were blurred; I don't know who they are."

"Nothing to say that he would love you in return?"

"Nothing! He has never looked at me twice. I think he sees me as . . . as a *sister*. So don't think you can use me as leash on him, because it will not work!"

"Yet you do love him."

"I don't have any choice." Min tried to make her voice less sullen. "I tried treating it as a joke, but I can't laugh anymore. You may not believe me, but when I know what it means, it happens."

The Amyrlin tapped a finger against her lips and looked at Min consideringly.

That look worried Min. She had not meant to make such a show of herself, nor to tell as much as she had. She had not told everything, but she knew she should have learned by now not to give an Aes Sedai a lever, even if she did not see how it could be used. Aes Sedai were skilled at finding ways. "Mother, I've delivered Moiraine's message, and I've told everything

I know of what my viewings meant. There’s no reason now I can’t put on my own clothes and go.”

“Go where?”

“Tear.” After talking with Gawyn, trying to make sure he did not do something foolish. She wished she dared ask where Egwene and the other two were, but if the Amyrlin would not tell Elayne’s brother, there was small chance she would tell Min. And Siuan Sanche still had that weighing look in her eyes. “Or wherever Rand is. I may be a fool, but I’m not the first woman to be a fool over a man.”

“The first to be a fool over the Dragon Reborn. It will be dangerous, being close to Rand al’Thor once the world finds out who he is, what he is. And if he now wields *Callandor*, the world will learn soon enough. Half will want to kill him anyway, as if by killing him they can stop the Last Battle, stop the Dark One from breaking free. A good many will die, close to him. It might be better for you to stay here.”

The Amyrlin sounded sympathetic, but Min did not believe it. She did not believe Siuan Sanche was capable of sympathy. “I’ll take the risk; maybe I can help him. With what I see. It isn’t even as if the Tower would be that much safer, not so long as there is one Red sister here. They’ll see a man who can channel and forget the Last Battle, and the Prophecies of the Dragon.”

“So will many others,” Siuan broke in calmly. “Old ways of thinking are hard to shed, for Aes Sedai as for anyone else.”

Min gave her a puzzled look. She seemed to be taking Min’s side of the thing now. “It is no secret I am friends with Egwene and Nynaeve, and no secret they’re from the same village as Rand. For the Red Ajah, that will be connection enough. When the Tower finds out what he is, I would probably be arrested before the day is out. So will Egwene and Nynaeve, if you don’t have them hidden away somewhere.”

“Then you mustn’t be recognized. You catch no fish if they see the net. I suggest you forget your coat and breeches for a time.” The Amyrlin smiled like a cat smiling at a mouse.

“What fish do you expect to catch with me?” Min asked in a faint voice. She thought she knew, and hoped desperately she was wrong.

Her hope did not stop the Amyrlin from saying, “The Black Ajah. Thirteen of them fled, but I fear some remain. I cannot be sure who I can trust; for a while I was afraid to trust anyone. You are no Darkfriend, I know, and your particular talent may just be some help. At the very least, you'll be another trustworthy pair of eyes."

"You've been planning this since I walked in, haven't you? That's why you want to keep Gawyn and Sahra quiet." Anger built up inside Min like steam in a kettle. The woman said frog and expected people to jump. That they usually did just made it worse. She was no frog, no dancing puppet. "Is this what you did to Egwene and Elayne and Nynaeve? Send them off after the Black Ajah? I wouldn't put it past you!"

"You tend your own nets, child, and let those girls tend theirs. As far as you are concerned, they are working penance on a farm. Do I make myself plain?"

That unwavering stare made Min shift on her chair. It was easy to defy the Amyrlin—until she started staring at you with those sharp, cold blue eyes. "Yes, Mother." The meekness of her reply rankled, but a glance at the Amyrlin convinced her to let it lie. She plucked at the fine wool of her dress. "I suppose it won't kill me to wear this a little longer." Suddenly Siuan looked amused; Min felt her hackles rising.

"I fear that won't be enough. Min in a dress is still Min in a dress to anyone who looks close. You cannot always wear a cloak with the hood up. No, you must change everything that can be changed. For one thing, you will continue to go by Elmindreda. It is your name, after all." Min winced. "Your hair is almost as long as Leane's, long enough to put in curls. For the rest. . . . I never had any use for rouge and powder and paints, but Leane remembers the use of them."

Min's eyes had grown wider by the word since the mention of curls. "Oh, no," she gasped.

"No one will take you for Min who wears breeches once Leane makes you into a perfect Elmindreda."

"Oh, NO!"

"As to why you are staying in the Tower—a reason suitable for a fluttery young woman who looks and acts nothing at all like Min." The Amyrlin frowned thoughtfully, ignoring Min's efforts to break in. "Yes. I will let it be put about that Mistress Elmindreda managed to encourage two suitors to the point that she has to take shelter from them in the tower until she can decide between them. A few women still claim sanctuary each year, and sometimes for reasons as silly." Her face hardened, and her eyes sharpened. "If you're still thinking of Tear, think again. Consider whether you can be of more help to Rand there, or here. If the Black Ajah brings the Tower down, or worse, gains control, he loses even the little help I can give. So. Are you a woman, or a lovesick girl?"

Trapped. Min could see it as plainly as a shackle, on her leg. "Do you always get your way with people, Mother?"

The Amyrlin's smile was even colder this time. "Usually, child. Usually."

Shifting her red-fringed shawl, Elaida stared thoughtfully at the door to the Amyrlin's study, through which the two young women had just vanished. The novice came back out almost immediately, took one look at Elaida's face, and bleated like a frightened sheep. Elaida thought she recognized her, though she could not bring the girl's name to mind. She had more important uses for her time than teaching wretched children.

"Your name?"

"Sahra, Elaida Sedai." The girl's reply was a breathless squeak. Elaida might have no interest in novices, but the novices knew her, and her reputation.

She remembered the girl now. A daydreamer with moderate ability who would never be of any real power. It was doubtful she knew anything more than Elaida had already seen and heard—or remembered much more than Gawyn's smile, for that matter. A fool. Elaida flicked a dismissive hand.

The girl dropped a curtsy so deep her face almost touched the floor tiles, then fled at a dead run.

Elaida did not see her go. The Red sister had turned away, already forgetting the novice. As she swept down the corridor, not a line marred her smooth features, but her thoughts boiled furiously. She did not even notice the servants, the novices and Accepted, who scrambled out of her way, curtsying as she passed. Once she almost walked over a Brown sister with her nose in a sheaf of notes. The plump Brown jumped back with a startled squawk that Elaida did not hear.

Dress or no dress, she knew the young woman who had gone in to see the Amyrlin. Min, who had spent so much time with the Amyrlin on her first visit to the Tower, though for no reason anyone knew. Min, who was such close friends with Elayne, Egwene, and Nynaeve. The Amyrlin was hiding the whereabouts of those three. Elaida was sure of it. All reports that they were serving penance on a farm had come at third or fourth hand from Siuan Sanche, more than enough distance to hide any twisting of words to avoid an outright lie. Not to mention the fact that all Elaida's considerable efforts to find this farm had yielded nothing.

"The Light burn her!" For a moment open anger painted her face. She was not sure whether she meant Siuan Sanche or the Daughter-Heir. Either would serve. A slender Accepted heard her, glanced at her face, and went as white as her own dress; Elaida strode by without seeing her.

Apart from everything else, it infuriated her that she could not find Elayne. Elaida had the Foretelling sometimes, the ability to foresee future events. If it came seldom and faintly, that was still more than any Aes Sedai had had since Gitara Moroso, dead now twenty years. The very first thing Elaida had ever Foretold, while still an Accepted—and had known enough even then to keep to herself—was that the Royal line of Andor would be the key to defeating the Dark One in the Last Battle. She had attached herself to Morgase as soon as it was clear Morgase would succeed to the throne, had built her influence year by patient year. And now all her effort, all her sacrifice—she might have been Amyrlin herself had she not concentrated all her energies on Andor—might be for naught because Elayne had disappeared.

With an effort she forced her thoughts back to what was important now. Egwene and Nynaeve came from the same village as that strange young man, Rand al'Thor. And Min knew him as well, however much she had tried to hide the fact. Rand al'Thor lay at the heart of it.

Elaida had only seen him once, supposedly a shepherd from the Two Rivers, in Andor, but looking every inch the Aielman. The Foretelling had come to her at the sight of him. He was *ta'veren*, one of those rare individuals who, instead of being woven into the Pattern as the Wheel of Time chose, forced the Pattern to shape itself around them, for a time at least. And Elaida had seen chaos swirling around him, division and strife for Andor, perhaps for even more of the world. But Andor must be kept whole, whatever else happened; that first Foretelling had convinced her of that.

There were more threads, enough to snare Siuan in her own web. If the rumors were to be believed, there were three *ta'veren,* not just one. All three from the same village, this Emond's Field, and all three near the same age, odd enough to occasion a good deal of talk in the Tower. And on Siuan's journey to Shienar, near a year ago now, she had seen them, even talked with them. Rand al'Thor. Perrin Aybara. Matrim Cauthon. It was said to be mere happenstance. Just fortuitous chance. So it was said. Those who said it did not know what Elaida knew.

When Elaida saw the young al'Thor man, it had been Moiraine who spirited him away. Moiraine who had accompanied him, and the other two *ta'veren*, in Shienar. Moiraine Damodred, who had been Siuan Sanche's closest friend when they were novices together. Had Elaida been one to make wagers, she would have wagered that no one else in the Tower remembered that friendship. On the day they were raised Aes Sedai, at the end of the Aiel War, Siuan and Moiraine had walked away from one another and afterward behaved almost like strangers. But Elaida had been one of the Accepted over those two novices, had taught their lessons and chastised them for slacking at chores, and she remembered. She could hardly believe that their plot could stretch back so far—al'Thor could not have been born much before that—yet it was the last link to tie them all together. For her, it was enough.

Whatever Siuan was up to, she had to be stopped. Turmoil and chaos multiplied on every side. The Dark One was sure to break free—the very thought made Elaida shiver and wrap her shawl around her more tightly—and the Tower had to be aloof from mundane struggles to face that. The Tower had to be free to pull the strings to make the nations stand together, free of the troubles Rand al'Thor would bring. Somehow, he had to be stopped from destroying Andor.

She had told no one what she knew of al'Thor. She meant to deal with him quietly, if possible. The Hall of the Tower already spoke of watching, even guiding, these *ta'veren*; they would never agree to dispose of them, of the one in particular, as he must be disposed of. For the good of the Tower. For the good of the world.

She made a sound in her throat, close to a growl. Siuan had always been headstrong, even as a novice, had always thought much of herself for a poor fisherman's daughter, but how could she be fool enough to mix the Tower in this without telling the Hall? She knew what was coming as well as anyone. The only way it could be worse was if. . . .

Abruptly Elaida stopped, staring at nothing. Could it be that this al'Thor could channel? Or one of the others? Most likely it would be al'Thor. No. Surely not. Not even Siuan would touch one of those. She could not. “Who knows what that woman could do?” she muttered. “She was never fit to be the Amyrlin Seat.”

“Talking to yourself, Elaida? I know you Reds never have friends outside your own Ajah, but surely you have friends to talk to inside it.”

Elaida turned her head to regard Alviarin. The swan-necked Aes Sedai stared back with the insufferable coolness that was a hallmark of the White Ajah. There was no love lost between Red and White; they had stood on opposite sides in the Hall of the Tower for a thousand years. White stood with Blue, and Siuan had been a Blue. But Whites prided themselves on dispassionate logic.

“Walk with me,” Elaida said. Alviarin hesitated before falling in beside her.

At first the White sister arched a disparaging eyebrow at what Elaida had to say concerning Siuan, but before the end she was frowning in concentration. “You have no proof of anything . . . improper,” she said when Elaida finally fell silent.

“Not yet,” Elaida said firmly. She permitted herself a tight smile when Alviarin nodded. It was a beginning. One way or another, Siuan would be stopped before she could destroy the Tower.

Well hidden in a stand of tall leatherleaf above the north bank of the River Taren, Dain Bornhald tossed back his white cloak, with its flaring golden sun on the breast, and raised the stiff leather tube of a looking glass to his eye. A cloud of tiny bitemes buzzed around his face, but he ignored them. In the village of Taren Ferry, across the river, tall stone houses stood on high foundations against the floods that came every spring. Villagers hung out of windows or waited on stoops to stare at the thirty white-cloaked riders sitting their horses in burnished plate-and-mail. A delegation of village men and women were meeting with the horsemen. Rather, they were listening to Jaret Byar, from what Bornhald could see, which was much the best.

Bornhald could almost hear his father’s voice. *Let them think there is a chance, and some fool will try to take it. Then there’s killing to do, and another fool will try to avenge the first, so there’s more killing. Put the fear of the Light into them from the first, let them know no one will be harmed if they do as they’re told, and you’ll have no trouble.*

His jaw tightened at the thought of his father, dead now. He was going to do something about that, and soon. He was sure only Byar knew why he had leaped to accept this command, aimed at an all-but-forgotten district in the hinterlands of Andor, and Byar would hold his tongue. Byar had been as dedicated to Dain's father as a hound, and he had transferred all that loyalty to Dain. Bornhald had had no hesitation in naming Byar second under him when Eamon Valda gave him the command.

Byar turned his horse and rode back onto the ferry. Immediately the ferrymen cast off and began hauling the barge across by means of a heavy rope slung over the swiftly flowing water. Byar glanced at the men at the rope; they eyed him nervously as they tramped the length of the barge, then trotted back to take up the cable again. It all looked good.

"Lord Bornhald?"

Bornhald lowered the looking glass and turned his head. The hard-faced man who had appeared at his shoulder stood rigid, staring straight ahead from under a conical helmet. Even after the hard journey from Tar Valon—and Bornhald had pressed every mile—his armor shone as brightly as his snowy cloak with its golden sunburst.

"Yes, Child Ivon?"

"Hundredman Farran sent me, my Lord. It's the Tinkers. Ordeith was talking to three of them, my Lord, and now none of the three can be found."

"Blood and ashes!" Bornhald spun on his bootheel and strode back into the trees, Ivon at his heels.

Out of sight of the river, white-cloaked horsemen clogged the spaces between leatherleafs and pines, lances held with casual familiarity or bows laid across their pommels. The horses stamped their hooves impatiently and flicked their tails. The riders waited more stolidly; this would not be their first river crossing into strange territory, and this time no one would be trying to stop them.

In a large clearing beyond the mounted men stood a caravan of the Tuatha'an, the Traveling People. Tinkers. Nearly a hundred horse-drawn wagons, like small, boxy houses on wheels, made an eye-jarring blend of colors, red and green and yellow and every hue imaginable in combinations only a Tinker's eye could like. The people themselves wore clothes that made their wagons look dull. They sat on the ground in a large cluster, eyeing the mounted men with an oddly calm unease; the thin crying of a child was swiftly comforted by its mother. Nearby, dead mastiffs made a mound already buzzing with flies. Tinkers would not raise a hand even to defend themselves, and the dogs had been mostly show, but Bornhald had not been willing to take a chance.

Six men were all he had thought necessary to watch Tinkers. Even with stiff faces, they looked embarrassed. None glanced at the seventh man sitting a horse near the wagons, a bony little man with a big nose, in a dark gray coat that looked too big for him despite the fineness of its cut. Farran, a bearded boulder of a man yet light on his feet for all his height and width, stood glaring at all seven equally. The hundredman pressed a gauntleted hand to his heart in salute but left all talking to Bornhald.

"A word with you, Master Ordeith," Bornhald said quietly. The bony man cocked his head, looking at Bornhald for a long moment before dismounting. Farran growled, but Bornhald kept his voice low. "Three of the Tinkers cannot be found, Master Ordeith. Did you perhaps put your own suggestion into practice?" The first words out of Ordeith's mouth when he saw the Tinkers had been "Kill them. They're of no use." Bornhald had killed his share of men, but he had never matched the casualness with which the little man had spoken.

Ordeith rubbed a finger along the side of his large nose. "Now, why would I be killing them? And after you ripped me so for just suggesting it." His Lugarder accent was heavy today; it came and went without him seeming to notice, another thing about the man that disturbed Bornhald.

"Then you allowed them to escape, yes?"

"Well, as to that, I did take a few of them off where I could see what they knew. Undisturbed, you see."

"What they knew? What under the Light could Tinkers know of use to us?"

"There's no way of telling until you ask, now is there?" Ordeith said. "I didn't hurt any of them much, and I told them to get themselves back to the wagons. Who would be thinking they'd have the nerve to run away with so many of your men about?"

Bornhald realized he was grinding his teeth. His orders had been to make the best time possible to meet this odd fellow, who would have more orders for him. Bornhald liked none of it, though both sets of orders bore the seal and signature of Pedron Niall, Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light.

Too much had been left unsaid, including Ordeith's exact status. The little man was there to advise Bornhald, and Bornhald was to cooperate with Ordeith. Whether Ordeith was under his command had been left vague, and he did not like the strong implication that he should heed the fellow's advice. Even the reason for sending so many of the Children into this backwater had been vague. To root out Darkfriends, of course, and spread the Light; that went without saying. But close to half a legion on Andoran soil without permission—the order risked much if word of it reached the Queen in Caemlyn. Too much to be balanced by the few answers Bornhald had been given.

It all came back to Ordeith. Bornhald did not understand how the Lord Captain Commander could trust this man, with his sly grins and his black moods and his haughty stares so you could never be sure what kind of man you were talking to. Not to mention his accent changing in the middle of a sentence. The fifty Children who had accompanied Ordeith were as sullen and frowning a lot as Bornhald had ever seen. He thought Ordeith must have picked them himself to have so many sour scowls, and it said something of the man that he would choose that sort. Even his name, Ordeith, meant "wormwood" in the Old Tongue. Still, Bornhald had his own reasons for wanting to be where he was. He would cooperate with the man, since he had to. But only as much as he had to.

"Master Ordeith," he said in a carefully level tone, "this ferry is the only way in or out of the Two Rivers district." That was not quite the truth. According to the map he had, there was no way across the Taren except here, and the upper reaches of the Manetherendrelle, bordering the region on the south, had no fords. To the east lay bogs and swamps. Even so, there must be a way out westward, across the Mountains of Mist, though his map stopped at the edge of the range. At best, however, it would be a hard crossing that many of his men might not survive, and he did not intend to let Ordeith know of even that small chance. "When it is time to leave, if I find Andoran soldiers holding this bank, you will ride with the first to cross. You will find it interesting to see at close hand the difficulty of forcing a way across a river this wide, yes?"

"This is your first command, is it not?" Ordeith's voice held a hint of mockery. "This may be part of Andor on the map, but Caemlyn has not sent a tax collector this far west in generations. Even if those three talk, who will believe three Tinkers? If you think the danger is too great, remember whose seal is on your orders."

Farran glanced at Bornhald, half reached for his sword. Bornhald shook his head slightly, and Farran let his hand fall. "I mean to cross the river, Master Ordeith. I will cross if the next word I hear is that Gareth Bryne and the Queen's Guards will be here by sundown."

"Of course," Ordeith said, suddenly soothing. "There will be as much glory here as at Tar Valon, I assure you." His deep, dark eyes took a glazed look, stared at something in the distance. "There are things in Tar Valon I want, too."

Bornhald shook his head. *And I must cooperate with him*.

Jaret Byar drew up and swung down from his saddle beside Farran. As tall as the hundredman, Byar was a long-faced man with dark, deep-set eyes. He looked as if every ounce of fat had been boiled off of him. "The village is secured, my Lord. Lucellin is making certain no one slips off. They nearly soiled themselves when I mentioned Darkfriends. None in their village, they say. The folk further south are the Darkfriend kind, though, they say."

"Further south, is it?" Bornhald said briskly. "We shall see. Put three hundreds across the river, Byar. Farran's first. The rest to follow after the Tinkers cross. And make sure no more of them get away, yes?"

"We will scour the Two Rivers," Ordeith broke in. His narrow face was twisted; saliva bubbled at his lips. "We will flog them, and flay them, and sear their souls! I promised him! He'll come to me, now! He will come!"

Bornhald nodded for Byar and Farran to carry out his commands. *A madman*, he thought. *The Lord Captain Commander has tied me to a madman. But at least I will find my path to Perrin of the Two Rivers. Whatever it takes, I will avenge my father!*

From a colonnaded terrace on a hilltop, the High Lady Suroth looked across the wide, lopsided bowl of Cantorin Harbor. The shaven sides of her scalp left a wide crest of black hair that fell down her back. Her hands rested lightly on a smooth stone balustrade as white as her pristine gown with its hundreds of pleats. There was a faint rhythmic clicking as she unconsciously drummed her fingers with their inch-long nails, the first two on each hand lacquered blue.

A slight breeze blew off of the Aryth Ocean, carrying more than a hint of salt in its coolness. Two young women kneeling against the wall behind the High Lady held white-plumed fans ready if the breeze should fail. Two more women and four young men completed the line of crouching figures waiting to serve. Barefoot, all eight wore sheer robes, to please the High Lady's aesthetic senses with the clean lines of their limbs and the grace of their motions. At the moment Suroth truly did not see the servants, no more than one saw furniture.

She saw the six Deathwatch Guards at either end of the colonnade, though, stiff as statues with their black-tasseled spears and black-lacquered shields. They symbolized her triumph, and her danger. The Deathwatch Guard served only the Empress and her chosen representatives, and they would kill or die with equal fervor, whichever was necessary. There was a saying: "On the heights, the paths are paved with daggers."

Her fingernails clicked on the stone balustrade. How thin was the razor's edge she walked.

Vessels of the Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk, filled the inner harbor behind the seawall, even the largest looking too narrow for their length. Cut rigging made their yards and booms slant at crazy angles. Their decks were empty, their crews ashore and under guard, as were any in these islands who had the skill to sail the open sea. Great, bluff-bowed Seanchan ships by the score lay in the outer harbor, and anchored off the harbor mouth. One, its ribbed sails bellied with wind, escorted a swarm of small fishing boats back toward the island port. If the smaller craft scattered, some of them might escape, but the Seanchan ship carried a *damane*, and one demonstration of a *damane*'s power had quelled any such thoughts. The charred, shattered hulk of the Sea Folk ship still lay on a mudflat near the harbor mouth.

How long she would manage to keep Sea Folk elsewhere—and the accursed mainlanders—from learning that she held these islands, Suroth did not know. *It will be long enough*, she told herself. *It must be long enough*.

She had worked something of a miracle in rallying most of the Seanchan forces after the debacle the High Lord Turak had led them to. All but a handful of the vessels that had escaped from Falme lay under her control, and no one questioned her right to command the *Hailene*, the Forerunners. If her miracle held, no one on the mainland suspected they were here. Waiting to take back the lands the Empress had sent them to reclaim, waiting to achieve the *Corenne*, the Return. Her agents already scouted the way. There would be no need to return to the Court of the Nine Moons and apologize to the Empress for a failure not even hers.

The thought of having to apologize to the Empress sent a tremor through her. Such an apology was always humiliating, and usually painful, but what made her shiver was the chance of being denied death at the end, of being forced to continue as if nothing had occurred while everyone, common as well as the Blood, knew her degradation. A handsome young serving man sprang to her side, bearing a pale green robe worked in brilliantly plumaged birds-of-delight. She held her arms out for the garment and noticed him no more than a clod of dirt beside her velvet slipper.

To escape that apology, she must retake what had been lost a thousand years ago. And to do that, she must deal with this man who, her mainland agents told her, claimed to be the Dragon Reborn. *If I cannot find a way to deal with him, the displeasure of the Empress will be the least of my worries*.

Turning smoothly, she entered the long room fronting the terrace, its outer wall all doors and tall windows to catch the breezes. The pale wood of the walls, smooth and glistening like satin, pleased Suroth, but she had removed the furnishings of the old owner, the former Atha’an Miere governor of Cantorin, and replaced them with a few tall screens, most painted with birds or flowers. Two were different. One showed a great spotted cat of the Sen T’jore, as large as a pony, the other a black mountain eagle, crest erect like a pale crown and snowy-tipped wings spread to their full seven feet. Such screens were considered vulgar, but Suroth liked animals. Unable to bring her menagerie with her across the Aryth Ocean, she had had the screens made to depict her two favorites. She had never taken kindly to being balked in anything.

Three women awaited her as she had left them, two kneeling, one lying prostrate on the bare, polished floor, patterned in inlays of light and dark wood. The kneeling women wore the dark blue dresses of *sul’dam*, red panels embroidered with forked silver lightning on the breast and on the sides of their skirts. One of the two, Alwhin, a sharp-faced, blue-eyed woman with a perpetual glower, had the left side of her head shaved. The rest of her hair hung to her shoulder in a light brown braid.

Suroth’s mouth tightened momentarily at the sight of Alwhin. No *sul’dam* had ever before been raised to the *so’jhin*, the hereditary upper servants of the Blood, much less to a Voice of the Blood. Yet there had been reasons in Alwhin's case. Alwhin knew too much.

Still, it was to the woman lying facedown, all in plain dark gray, that Suroth directed her attention. A wide collar of silvery metal encircled the woman's neck, connected by a shining leash to a bracelet of the same material on the wrist of the second *sul'dam*, Taisa. By means of leash and collar, the *a'dam*, Taisa could control the gray-clad woman. And she had to be controlled. She was *damane*, a woman who could channel, and thus too dangerous to be allowed to run loose. Memories of the Armies of the Night were still strong in Seanchan a thousand years after their destruction.

Suroth's eyes flickered uneasily to the two *sul'dam*. She no longer trusted any *sul'dam*, and yet she had no choice but to trust them. No one else could control the *damane*, and without the *damane*. . . . The very concept was unthinkable. The power of Seanchan, the very power of the Crystal Throne, was built on controlled *damane*. There were too many things about which Suroth had no choice to suit her. Such as Alwhin, who watched as if she had been *so'jhin* all of her life. No. As if she were of the Blood itself, and knelt because she chose to.

"Pura." The *damane* had had another name when she was one of the hated Aes Sedai, before falling into Seanchan hands, but Suroth neither knew what it had been nor cared. The gray-clad woman tensed, but did not raise her head; her training had been particularly harsh. "I will ask again, Pura. How does the White Tower control this man who calls himself the Dragon Reborn?"

The *damane* moved her head a fraction, enough to shoot a frightened look at Taisa. If her answer was displeasing, the *sul'dam* could make her feel pain without raising a finger, by means of the *a'dam*. "The Tower would not try to control a false Dragon, High Lady," Pura said breathily. "They would capture him, and gentle him."

Taisa looked an indignant question at the High Lady. The answer had avoided Suroth's query, had perhaps even implied that one of the Blood had spoken untruth. Suroth gave a slight shake of her head, the merest sideways motion—she had no wish to wait while the *damane* recovered from punishment—and Taisa bowed her head in acquiescence.

"Once again, Pura, what do you know of Aes Sedai . . ." Suroth's mouth twisted at being defiled with that name; Alwhin gave a grunt of distaste ". . . Aes Sedai aiding this man? I warn you. Our soldiers fought women of the Tower, women channeling the Power, at Falme, so do not attempt to deny it.”

“Pura. . . . Pura does not know, High Lady.” There was urgency in the *damane*’s voice, and uncertainty; she darted another wide-eyed glance at Taisa. It was clear that she wanted desperately to be believed. “Perhaps. . . . Perhaps the Amyrlin, or the Hall of the Tower. . . . No, they would not. Pura does not know, High Lady.”

“The man can channel,” Suroth said curtly. The woman on the floor moaned, though she had heard the same words from Suroth before. Saying it again made Suroth’s stomach knot, but she allowed nothing to show on her face. Little of what had happened at Falme had been the work of women channeling; *damane* could sense that, and the *sul’dam* wearing the bracelet always knew what her *damane* felt. That meant it had to have been the work of the man. It also meant he was incredibly powerful. So powerful that Suroth had once or twice found herself wondering, growing queasy, whether he might really be the Dragon Reborn. *That cannot be*, she told herself firmly. In any case, it made no difference to her plans. “It is impossible to believe that even the White Tower would allow such a man to walk free. How do they control him?”

The *damane* lay there silently, face to the floor, shoulders shaking, weeping.

“Answer the High Lady!” Taisa said sharply. Taisa did not move, but Pura gasped, flinching as if struck across the hips. A blow delivered through the *a’dam*.

“P-Pura does not kn-know.” The *damane* stretched out a hesitant hand as though to touch Suroth’s foot. “Please. Pura has learned to obey. Pura speaks only the truth. Please do not punish Pura.”

Suroth stepped back smoothly, letting none of her irritation show. That she should be forced to move by a *damane*. That she could almost be touched by one who could channel. She felt a need to bathe, as if the touch had actually landed.

Taisa’s dark eyes bulged in outrage at the *damane*’s effrontery; her cheeks were scarlet with shame that this should happen while she wore the woman’s bracelet. She seemed torn between prostrating herself beside the *damane* to beg forgiveness and punishing the woman then and there. Alwhin stared a thin-lipped contempt, every line of her face saying that such things did not happen when she wore a bracelet.

Suroth raised one finger a fraction, making a small gesture every *so'jhin* knew from childhood, a simple dismissal.

Alwhin hesitated before interpreting it, then tried to cover her slip by rounding harshly on Taisa. “Take this . . . creature from the presence of the High Lady Suroth. And when you have punished her, go to Surela and tell her that you control your charges as if you had never worn the bracelet before. Tell her that you are to be—”

Suroth shut Alwhin's voice from her mind. None of that had been her command except the dismissal, but quarrels between *sul'dam* were beneath her notice. She wished she knew whether Pura was managing to hide something. Her agents reported claims that the women of the White Tower could not lie. It had not been possible to force Pura to tell even a simple lie, to say that a white scarf was black, yet that was not enough to be conclusive. Some might accept the tears of the *damane*, her protests of inability whatever the *sul'dam* did, but none who did would have risen to lead the Return. Pura might have some reservoir of will left, might be clever enough to try using the belief that she was incapable of lying. None of the women collared on the mainland were fully obedient, trustworthy, not like the *damane* brought from Seanchan. None of them truly accepted what they were, as Seanchan *damane* did. Who could say what secrets might hide in one who had called herself Aes Sedai?

Not for the first time Suroth wished she had the other Aes Sedai who had been captured on Toman Head. With two to question, there would have been a better chance to catch lies and evasions. It was a useless wish. The other could be dead, drowned at sea, or on display at the Court of the Nine Moons. Some of the ships Suroth had failed to gather in must have managed the journey back across the ocean, and one might well have carried the woman.

She herself had sent a ship carrying carefully crafted reports, nearly half a year ago now, as soon as she had solidified her control of the Forerunners, with a captain and crew from families that had served hers since Luthair Paendrag had proclaimed himself Emperor, nearly a thousand years ago. Dispatching the ship had been a gamble, for the Empress might send back someone to take Suroth's place. Not sending the vessel would have been a greater, though; only utter and crushing victory could have saved her then. Perhaps not even that. So the Empress knew of Falme, knew of Turak's disaster and Suroth's intention to go on. But what did she think of that knowledge, and what was she doing about it? That was a greater concern than any *damane*, whatever she had been before collaring.

Yet the Empress did not know everything. The worst could not be entrusted to any messenger, no matter how loyal. It would ony be passed from Suroth's lips directly to the ear of the Empress, and Suroth had taken pains to keep it so. Only four still lived who knew the secret, and two of those would never speak of it to anyone, not of their own volition. *Only three deaths can hold it more tightly*.

Suroth did not realize she had murmured the last aloud until Alwhin said, "And yet the High Lady needs all three alive." The woman had a properly humble suppleness to her stance, even to the trick of downcast eyes that still managed to watch for any sign from Suroth. Her voice was humble, too. "Who can say, High Lady, what the Empress—may she live forever!—might do if she learned of an attempt to keep such knowledge from her?"

Instead of answering, Suroth made the tiny dismissing gesture once more. Again Alwhin hesitated—this time it had to be simple reluctance to leave; the woman rose above herself!—before bowing deeply and backing out of Suroth's presence.

With an effort Suroth found calmness. The *sul'dam* and the other two were a problem she could not solve now, but patience was a necessity for the Blood. Those who lacked it were likely to end in the Tower of Ravens.

On the terrace, kneeling servants leaned forward a hair in readiness as she appeared again. The soldiers maintained their watch to see she was undisturbed. Suroth took up her place before the balustrade, this time staring out to sea, toward the mainland hundreds of miles to the east.

To be the one who successfully led the Forerunners, who began the Return, would bring much honor. Perhaps even adoption into the family of the Empress, though that was an honor not without complications. To also be the one who captured this Dragon, whether false or real, along with the means of controlling his incredible power. . . .

But if—when I take him, do I give him to the Empress? That is the question.

Her long nails began to click again on the wide stone rail.

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CHAPTER 2

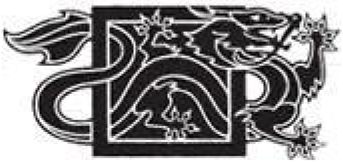

Whirlpools in the Pattern

Inland the hot night wind blew, north across the vast delta called the Fingers of the Dragon, a winding maze of waterways broad and narrow, some choked with knifegrass. Vast plains of reeds separated clusters of low islands forested with spider-rooted trees seen nowhere else. Eventually the delta gave way to its source, the River Erinin, the river’s great width spotted with the lights of small boats lantern-fishing. Boats and lights bobbed wildly, sudden and unexpected, and some older men muttered of evil things passing in the night. Young men laughed, but they hauled the nets more vigorously, too, eager to be home and out of the dark. The stories said evil could not cross your threshold unless you invited it in. That was what the stories said. But out in the darkness. . . .

The last tang of salt had vanished by the time the wind reached the great city of Tear, hard by the river, where tile-roofed inns and shops shouldered against tall, towered palaces gleaming in the moonlight. Yet no place was half so tall as the massive bulk, almost a mountain, that stretched from city’s heart to water’s edge. The Stone of Tear, fortress of legend, the oldest stronghold of mankind, erected in the last days of the Breaking of the World. While nations and empires rose and fell, were replaced and fell anew, the Stone stood. It was the rock on which armies had broken spears and swords and hearts for three thousand years. And in all that time it had never fallen to invading arms. Until now.

The streets of the city, the taverns and inns, were all but empty in the muggy darkness, people keeping cautiously within their own walls. Who held the Stone was lord of Tear, city and nation. That was the way it had always been, and the people of Tear accepted it always. By daylight they would cheer their new lord with enthusiasm as they had cheered the old; by night they huddled together, shivering despite the heat when the wind howled across their rooftops like a thousand keening mourners. Strange new hopes danced in their heads, hopes none in Tear had dared for a hundred generations, hopes mixed with fears as old as the Breaking.

The wind lashed the long, white banner catching the moon above the Stone as if trying to rip it away. Along its length marched a sinuous figure like a legged serpent, golden-maned like a lion, scaled in scarlet and gold, seeming to ride the wind. Banner of prophecy, hoped for and dreaded. Banner of the Dragon. The Dragon Reborn. Harbinger of the world's salvation, and herald of a new Breaking to come. As if outraged at such defiance, the wind dashed itself against the hard walls of the Stone. The Dragon banner floated, unheeding in the night, awaiting greater storms.

In a room more than halfway up the Stone's southern face, Perrin sat on the chest at the foot of his canopied bed and watched the dark-haired young woman pacing up and down. There was a trace of wariness in his golden eyes. Usually Faile bantered with him, maybe poked a little gentle fun at his deliberate ways; tonight she had not said ten words since coming through the door. He could smell the rose petals that had been folded into her clothes after cleaning, and the scent that was just her. And in the hint of clean perspiration, he smelled nervousness. Faile almost never showed nerves. Wondering why she did now set an itch between his shoulders that had nothing to do with the night's heat. Her narrow, divided skirts made a soft *whisk-whisk-whisk* with her strides.

He scratched his two-week growth of beard irritably. It was even curlier than the hair on his head. It was also hot. For the hundredth time he thought of shaving.

"It suits you," Faile said suddenly, stopping in her tracks.

Uncomfortably, he shrugged shoulders heavy from long hours working at a forge. She did that sometimes, seemed to know what he was thinking. "It itches," he muttered, and wished he had spoken more forcefully. It was his beard; he could shave it off any time he wanted.

She studied him, her head tilted to one side. Her bold nose and high cheekbones made it seem a fierce study, a contrast to the soft voice in which she said, "It looks right on you."

Perrin sighed, and shrugged again. She had not asked him to keep the beard, and she would not. Yet he knew he was going to put off shaving again. He wondered how his friend Mat would handle this situation. Probably with a pinch and a kiss and some remark that made her laugh until he brought her around to his way of thinking. But Perrin knew he did not have Mat’s way with the girls. Mat would never find himself sweating behind a beard just because a woman thought he should have hair on his face. Unless, maybe, the woman was Faile. Perrin suspected that her father must deeply regret her leaving home, and not just because she was his daughter. He was the biggest fur trader in Saldaea, so she claimed, and Perrin could see her getting the price she wanted every time.

“Something is troubling you, Faile, and it isn’t my beard. What is it?”

Her expression became guarded. She looked everywhere but at him, making a contemptuous survey of the room’s furnishings.

Carvings of leopards and lions, stooping hawks and hunting scenes decorated everything from the tall wardrobe and bedposts as thick as his leg to the padded bench in front of the cold marble fireplace. Some of the animals had garnet eyes.

He had tried to convince the majhere that he wanted a simple room, but she did not seem to understand. Not that she was stupid or slow. The majhere commanded an army of servants greater in numbers than the Defenders of the Stone; whoever commanded the Stone, whoever held its walls, she saw to the day-to-day matters that let everything function. But she looked at the world through Tairen eyes. Despite his clothes, he must be more than the young countryman he seemed, because commoners were never housed in the Stone—save for Defenders and servants, of course. Beyond that, he was one of Rand’s party, a friend or a follower or in any case close to the Dragon Reborn in some way. To the majhere, that set him on a level with a Lord of the Land at the very least, if not a High Lord. She had been scandalized enough at putting him in here, without even a sitting room; he thought she might have fainted if he had insisted on an even plainer chamber. If there were such things short of the servants’ quarters, or the Defenders’. At least nothing here was gilded except the candlesticks.

Faile’s opinions, though, were not his. “You should have better than this. You deserve it. You can wager your last copper that Mat has better.”

“Mat likes gaudy things,” he said simply.

“You do not stand up for yourself.”

He did not comment. It was not his rooms that made her smell of unease, any more than his beard.

After a moment, she said, “The Lord Dragon seems to have lost interest in you. All his time is taken by the High Lords, now.”

The itch between his shoulders worsened; he knew what was troubling her now. He tried to make his voice light. “The Lord Dragon? You sound like a Tairen. His name is Rand.”

“He’s your friend, Perrin Aybara, not mine. If a man like that has friends.” She drew a deep breath and went on in a more moderate tone. “I have been thinking about leaving the Stone. Leaving Tear. I don’t think Moiraine would try to stop me. News of . . . of Rand has been leaving the city for two weeks, now. She can’t think to keep him secret any longer.”

He only just stopped another sigh. “I don’t think she will, either. If anything, I think she considers you a complication. She will probably give you money to see you on your way.”

Planting fists on hips, she moved to stare down at him. “Is that all you have to say?”

“What do you want me to say? That I want you to stay?” The anger in his own voice startled him. He was angry with himself, not her. Angry because he had not seen this coming, angry because he could not see how to deal with it. He liked being able to think things through. It was easy to hurt people without meaning to when you were hasty. He’d done that now. Her dark eyes were large with shock. He tried to smooth his words. “I do want you to stay, Faile, but maybe you should leave. I know you’re no coward, but the Dragon Reborn, the Forsaken. . . .” Not that anywhere was really safe—not for long, not now—yet there were safer places than the Stone. For a while, anyway. Not that he was stupid enough to put it to her that way.

But she did not appear to care how he put it. “Stay? The Light illumine me! Anything is better than sitting here like a boulder, but. . . .” She knelt gracefully in front of him, resting her hands on his knees. “Perrin. I do not like wondering when one of the Forsaken is going to walk around the corner in front of me, and I do not like wondering when the Dragon Reborn is going to kill us all. He did it back in the Breaking, after all. Killed everyone close to him.”

“Rand isn’t Lews Therin Kinslayer,” Perrin protested. “I mean, he *is* the Dragon Reborn, but he isn’t . . . he wouldn’t. . . .” He trailed off, not knowing how to finish. Rand was Lews Therin Telamon reborn; that was what being the Dragon Reborn meant. But did it mean Rand was doomed to Lews Therin’s fate? Not just going mad—any man who channeled had that fate in front of him, and then a rotting death—but killing everyone who cared for him?

“I have been talking to Bain and Chiad, Perrin.”

That was no surprise. She spent considerable time with the Aiel women. The friendship made some trouble for her, but she seemed to like the Aiel women as much as she despised the Stone’s Tairen noblewomen. But he saw no connection to what they were talking about, and he said so.

“They say Moiraine sometimes asks where you are. Or Mat. Don’t you see? She would not have to do that if she could watch you with the Power.”

“Watch me with the Power?” he said faintly. He had never even considered that.

“She cannot. Come with me, Perrin. We can be twenty miles across the river before she misses us.”

“I can’t,” he said miserably. He tried diverting her with a kiss, but she leaped to her feet and backed away so fast he nearly fell on his face. There was no point going after her. She had her arms crossed beneath her breasts like a barrier.

“Don’t tell me you are that afraid of her. I know she is Aes Sedai, and she has all of you dancing when she twitches the strings. Perhaps she has the . . . Rand . . . so tied he cannot get loose, and the Light knows Egwene and Elayne, and even Nynaeve, don’t want to, but you can break her cords if you try.”

“It has nothing to do with Moiraine. It’s what I have to do. I—”

She cut him short. “Don’t you dare hand me any of that hairy-chested drivel about a man having to do his duty. I know duty as well as you, and you have no duty here. You may be *ta’veren*, even if I don’t see it, but he is the Dragon Reborn, not you.”

“Will you listen?” he shouted, glaring, and she jumped. He had never shouted at her before, not like that. She raised her chin and shifted her shoulders, but she did not say anything. He went on. “I think I am part of Rand’s destiny, somehow. Mat, too. I think he can’t do what he has to unless we do our part, as well. That is the duty. How can I walk away if it might mean Rand will fail?”

“Might?” There was a hint of demand in her voice, but only a hint. He wondered if he could make himself shout at her more often. “Did Moiraine tell you this, Perrin? You should know by now to listen closely to what an Aes Sedai says.”

“I worked it out for myself. I think *ta’veren* are pulled toward each other. Or maybe Rand pulls us, Mat and me both. He’s supposed to be the strongest *ta'veren* since Artur Hawkwing, maybe since the Breaking. Mat won't even admit he's *ta'veren*, but however he tries to get away, he always ends up drawn back to Rand. Loial says he has never heard of three *ta'veren*, all the same age and all from the same place."

Faile sniffed loudly. "Loial does not know everything. He isn't very old for an Ogier."

"He's past ninety," Perrin said defensively, and she gave him a tight smile. For an Ogier, ninety years was not much older than Perrin. Or maybe younger. He did not know much about Ogier. In any case, Loial had read more books than Perrin had ever seen or even heard of; sometimes he thought Loial had read every book ever printed. "And he knows more than you or I do. He believes maybe I have the right of it. And so does Moiraine. No, I haven't asked her, but why else does she keep a watch on me? Did you think she wanted me to make her a kitchen knife?"

She was silent for a moment, and when she spoke it was in sympathetic tones. "Poor Perrin. I left Saldaea to find adventure, and now that I'm in the heart of one, the greatest since the Breaking, all I want is to go somewhere else. You just want to be a blacksmith, and you're going to end up in the stories whether you want it or not."

He looked away, though the scent of her still filled his head. He did not think he was likely to have any stories told about him, not unless his secret spread a long way beyond the few who knew already. Faile thought she knew everything about him, but she was wrong.

An axe and a hammer leaned against the wall opposite him, each plain and functional, with a haft as long as his forearm. The axe was a wicked half-moon blade balanced by a thick spike, meant for violence. With the hammer he could make things, had made things, at a forge. The hammerhead weighed more than twice as much as the axe blade, but it was the axe that felt heavier by far every time he picked it up. With the axe, he had. . . . He scowled, not wanting to think about that. She was right. All he wanted was to be a blacksmith, to go home, and see his family again, and work at the smithy. But it was not to be; he knew that.

He got to his feet long enough to pick up the hammer, then sat back down. There was something comforting in holding it. "Master Luhhan always says you can't walk away from what has to be done." He hurried on, realizing that was a little too close to what she had called hairy-chested drivel. “He’s the blacksmith back home, the man I was apprenticed to. I’ve told you about him.”

To his surprise, she did not take the opportunity to point out his near echo. In fact, she said nothing, only looked at him, waiting for something. After a moment it came to him.

“Are you leaving, then?” he asked.

She stood up, brushing her skirt. For a long moment she kept silent, as if deciding on her answer. “I do not know,” she said finally. “This is a fine mess you’ve put me in.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“Well, if you don’t know, I am certainly not going to tell you.”

Scratching his beard again, he stared at the hammer in his other hand. Mat would probably know exactly what she meant. Or even old Thom Merrilin. The white-haired gleeman claimed no one understood women, but when he came out of his tiny room in the belly of the Stone he soon had half a dozen girls young enough to be his granddaughters sighing and listening to him play the harp and tell of grand adventure and romance. Faile was the only woman Perrin wanted, but sometimes he felt like a fish trying to understand a bird.

He knew she wanted him to ask. He knew that much. She might or might not tell him, but he was supposed to ask. Stubbornly he kept his mouth shut. This time he meant to wait her out.

Outside in the darkness, a cock crowed.

Faile shivered and hugged herself. “My nurse used to say that meant a death coming. Not that I believe it, of course.”

He opened his mouth to agree it was foolishness, though he shivered, too, but his head whipped around at a grating sound and a thump. The axe had toppled to the floor. He only had time to frown, wondering what could have made it fall, when it shifted again, untouched, then leaped straight for him.

He swung the hammer without thought. Metal ringing on metal drowned Faile’s scream; the axe flew across the room, bounced off the far wall, and darted back at him, blade first. He thought every hair on his body was trying to stand on end.

As the axe sped by her, Faile lunged forward and grabbed the haft with both hands. It twisted in her grip, slashing toward her wide-eyed face. Barely in time Perrin leaped up, dropping the hammer to seize the axe, just keeping the half-moon blade from her flesh. He thought he would die if the axe—his axe—harmed her. He jerked it away from her so hard that the heavy spike nearly stabbed him in the chest. It would have been a fair trade, to stop the axe from hurting her, but with a sinking feeling he began to think it might not be possible.

The weapon thrashed like a thing alive, a thing with a malevolent will. It wanted Perrin—he knew that as if it had shouted at him—but it fought with cunning. When he pulled the axe away from Faile, it used his own movement to hack at him; when he forced it from himself, it tried to reach her, as if it knew that would make him stop pushing. No matter how hard he held the haft, it spun in his hands, threatening with spike or curved blade. Already his hands ached from the effort, and his thick arms strained, muscles tight. Sweat rolled down his face. He was not sure how much longer it would be before the axe fought free of his grip. This was all madness, pure madness, with no time to think.

"Get out," he muttered through gritted teeth. "Get out of the room, Faile!"

Her face was bloodless pale, but she shook her head and wrestled with the axe. "No! I will not leave you!"

"It will kill both of us!"

She shook her head again.

Growling in his throat, he let go of the axe with one hand—his arm quivered with holding the thing one-handed; the twisting haft burned his palm—and thrust Faile away. She yelped as he wrestled her to the door. Ignoring her shouts and her fists pounding at him, he held her against the wall with a shoulder until he could pull the door open and shove her into the hallway.

Slamming the door behind her, he put his back against it, sliding the latch home with his hip as he seized the axe with both hands again. The heavy blade, gleaming and sharp, trembled within inches of his face. Laboriously, he pushed it out to arm's length. Faile's muted shouts penetrated the thick door, and he could feel her beating on it, but he was barely conscious of her. His yellow eyes seemed to shine, as if they reflected every scrap of light in the room.

"Just you and me, now," he snarled at the axe. "Blood and ashes, how I hate you!" Inside, a part of him came close to hysterical laughter. *Rand is* *the one who's supposed to go mad, and here I am, talking to an axe! Rand! Burn him!*

Teeth bared with effort, he forced the axe back a full step from the door. The weapon vibrated, fighting to reach flesh; he could almost taste its thirst for his blood. With a roar he suddenly pulled the curved blade toward him, threw himself back. Had the axe truly been alive, he was sure he would have heard a cry of triumph as it flashed toward his head. At the last instant, he twisted, driving the axe past himself. With a heavy *thunk* the blade buried itself in the door.

He felt the life—he could not think what else to call it—go out of the imprisoned weapon. Slowly, he took his hands away. The axe stayed where it was, only steel and wood again. The door seemed a good place to leave it for now, though. He wiped sweat from his face with a shaking hand. *Madness. Madness walks wherever Rand is*.

Abruptly he realized he could no longer hear Faile's shouts, or her pounding. Throwing back the latch, he hastily pulled the door open. A gleaming arc of steel stuck through the thick wood on the outside, shining in the light of wide-spaced lamps along the tapestry-hung hallway.

Faile stood there, hands raised, frozen in the act of beating on the door. Eyes wide and wondering, she touched the tip of her nose. "Another inch," she said faintly, "and. . . ."

With a sudden start, she flung herself on him, hugging him fiercely, raining kisses on his neck and beard between incoherent murmurs. Just as quickly, she pushed back, running anxious hands over his chest and arms. "Are you hurt? Are you injured? Did it . . . ?"

"I'm all right," he told her. "But are you? I did not mean to frighten you."

She peered up at him. "Truly? You are not hurt in any way?"

"Completely unhurt. I—" Her full-armed slap made his head ring like hammer on anvil.

"You great hairy lummox! I thought you were dead! I was afraid it had killed you! I thought—!" She cut off as he caught her second slap in mid-swing.

"Please don't do that again," he said quietly. The smarting imprint of her hand burned on his cheek, and he thought his jaw would ache the rest of the night.

He gripped her wrist as gently as he would have a bird, but though she struggled to pull free, his hand did not budge an inch. Compared to swinging a hammer all day at the forge, holding her was no effort at all, even after his fight against the axe. Abruptly she seemed to decide to ignore his grip and stared him in the eye; neither dark nor golden eyes blinked. "I could have helped you. You had no right—"

"I had every right," he said firmly. "You could not have helped. If you had stayed, we'd both be dead. I couldn't have fought—not the way I had to—and kept you safe, too." She opened her mouth, but he raised his voice and went on. "I know you hate the word. I'll try my best not to treat you like porcelain, but if you ask me to watch you die, I will tie you like a lamb for market and send you off to Mistress Luhhan. She won't stand for any such nonsense."

Tonguing a tooth and wondering if it was loose, he almost wished he could see Faile trying to ride roughshod over Alsbet Luhhan. The blacksmith's wife kept her husband in line with scarcely more effort than she needed for her house. Even Nynaeve had been careful of her sharp tongue around Mistress Luhhan. The tooth still held tight, he decided.

Faile laughed suddenly, a low, throaty laugh. "You would, too, wouldn't you? Don't think you would not dance with the Dark One if you tried, though."

Perrin was so startled he let go of her. He could not see any real difference between what he had just said and what he had said before, but the one had made her blaze up, while this she took . . . fondly. Not that he was certain the threat to kill him was entirely a joke. Faile carried knives hidden about her person, and she knew how to use them.

She rubbed her wrist ostentatiously and muttered something under her breath. He caught the words "hairy ox," and promised himself he would shave every last whisker of that fool beard. He would.

Aloud, she said, "The axe. That was him, wasn't it? The Dragon Reborn, trying to kill us."

"It must have been Rand." He emphasized the name. He did not like thinking of Rand the other way. He preferred remembering the Rand he had grown up with in Emond's Field. "Not trying to kill us, though. Not him."

She gave him a wry smile, more a grimace. "If he was not trying, I hope he never does."

“I don’t know what he was doing. But I mean to tell him to stop it, and right now.”

“I don’t know why I care for a man who worries so about his own safety,” she murmured.

He frowned at her quizzically, wondering what she meant, but she only tucked her arm through his. He was still wondering as they started off through the Stone. The axe he left where it was; stuck in the door, it would not harm anyone.

Teeth clamped on a long-stemmed pipe, Mat opened his coat a bit more and tried to concentrate on the cards lying facedown in front of him, and on the coins spilled in the middle of the table. He had had the bright red coat made to an Andoran pattern, of the best wool, with golden embroidery scrolling around the cuffs and long collar, but day by day he was reminded how much farther south Tear lay than Andor. Sweat ran down his face, and plastered the shirt to his back.

None of his companions around the table appeared to notice the heat at all, despite coats that looked even heavier than his, with fat, swollen sleeves, all padded silks and brocades and satin stripes. Two men in red-and-gold livery kept the gamblers’ silver cups full of wine and proffered shining silver trays of olives and cheeses and nuts. The heat did not seem to affect the servants, either, though now and again one of them yawned behind his hand when he thought no one was looking. The night was not young.

Mat refrained from lifting his cards to check them again. They would not have changed. Three rulers, the highest cards in three of the five suits, were already good enough to win most hands.

He would have been more comfortable dicing; there was seldom a deck of cards to be found in the places he usually gambled, where silver changed hands in fifty different dice games, but these young Tairen lordlings would rather wear rags than play at dice. Peasants tossed dice, though they were careful not to say so in his hearing. It was not his temper they feared, but who they thought his friends were. This game called chop was what they played, hour after hour, night after night, using cards hand-painted and lacquered by a man in the city who had been made well-to-do by these fellows and others like them. Only women or horses could draw them away, but neither for long.

Still, he had picked up the game quickly enough, and if his luck was not as good as it was with dice, it would do. A fat purse lay beside his cards, and another even fatter rested in his pocket. A fortune, he would have thought once, back in Emond's Field, enough to live the rest of his life in luxury. His ideas of luxury had changed since leaving the Two Rivers. The young lords kept their coin in careless, shining piles, but some old habits he had no intention of changing. In the taverns and inns it was sometimes necessary to depart quickly. Especially if his luck was really with him.

When he had enough to keep himself as he wanted, he would leave the Stone just as quickly. Before Moiraine knew what he was thinking. He would have been days gone by now, if he had had his way. It was just that there was gold to be had here. One night at this table could earn him more than a week of dicing in taverns. If only his luck would catch.

He put on a small frown and puffed worriedly at his pipe, to look unsure whether his cards were good enough to go on with. Two of the young lords had pipes in their teeth, too, but silver-worked, with amber bits. In the hot, still air, their perfumed tabac smelled like a fire in a lady's dressing chamber. Not that Mat had ever been in a lady's dressing chamber. An illness that nearly killed him had left his memory as full of holes as the best lace, yet he was sure he would have remembered that. *Not even the Dark One would be mean enough to make me forget that*.

"Sea Folk ship docked today," Reimon muttered around his pipe. The broad-shouldered young lord's beard was oiled and trimmed to a neat point. That was the latest fashion among the younger lords, and Reimon chased the latest fashion as assiduously as he chased women. Which was only a little less diligently than he gambled. He tossed a silver crown onto the pile in the middle of the table for another card. "A raker. Fastest ships there are, rakers, so they say. Outrun the wind, they say. I would like to see that. Burn my soul, but I would." He did not bother to look at the card he was dealt; he never did until he had a full five.

The plump, pink-cheeked man between Reimon and Mat gave an amused chuckle. "You want to see the ship, Reimon? You mean the girls, do you not? The women. Exotic Sea Folk beauties, with their rings and baubles and swaying walks, eh?" He put in a crown and took his card, grimacing when he peeked at it. That meant nothing; going by his face, Edorion's cards were always low and mismatched. He won more than he lost, though. "Well, perhaps my luck will be better with the Sea Folk girls."

The dealer, tall and slender on Mat’s other side, with a pointed beard even more darkly luxuriant than Reimon’s, laid a finger alongside his nose. “You think to be lucky with those, Edorion? The way they keep to themselves, you’ll be lucky to catch a whiff of their perfume.” He made a wafting gesture, inhaling deeply with a sigh, and the other lordlings laughed, even Edorion.

A plain-faced youth named Estean laughed loudest of all, scrubbing a hand through lank hair that kept falling over his forehead. Replace his fine yellow coat with drab wool, and he could have passed for a farmer, instead of the son of a High Lord with the richest estates in Tear and in his own right the wealthiest man at the table. He had also drunk much more wine than any of the others.

Swaying across the man next to him, a foppish fellow named Baran who always seemed to be looking down his sharp nose, Estean poked the dealer with a none too steady finger. Baran leaned back, twisting his mouth around his pipestem as if he feared Estean might throw up.

“That’s good, Carlomin,” Estean gurgled. “You think so too, don’t you, Baran? Edorion won’t get a sniff. If he wants to try his luck . . . take a gamble . . . he ought to go after the Aiel wenches, like Mat, here. All those spears and knives. Burn my soul. Like asking a lion to dance.” Dead silence dropped around the table. Estean laughed on alone, then blinked and scrubbed fingers through his hair again. “What’s the matter? Did I say something? Oh! Oh, yes. Them.”

Mat barely stopped a scowl. The fool had to bring up the Aiel. The only worse subject would have been Aes Sedai; they would almost rather have Aiel walking the corridors, staring down any Tairen who got in their way, than even one Aes Sedai, and these men thought they had four, at least. He fingered an Andoran silver crown from his purse on the table and pushed it into the pot. Carlomin dealt out the card slowly.

Mat lifted it carefully with a thumbnail, and did not let himself so much as blink. The Ruler of Cups, a High Lord of Tear. The rulers in a deck varied according to the land where the cards were made, with the nation’s own ruler always as Ruler of Cups, the highest suit. These cards were old. He had already seen new decks with Rand’s face or something like it on the Ruler of Cups, complete with the Dragon banner. Rand the ruler of Tear; that still seemed ludicrous enough to make him want to pinch himself. Rand was a shepherd, a good fellow to have fun with when he was not going all over-serious and responsible. Rand the Dragon Reborn, now; that told him he was a stone fool to be sitting there, where Moiraine could put her hand on him whenever she wanted, waiting to see what Rand would do next. Maybe Thom Merrilin would go with him. Or Perrin. Only, Thom seemed to be settling into the Stone as if he never meant to leave, and Perrin was not going anywhere unless Faile crooked a finger. Well, Mat was ready to travel alone, if need be.

Yet there was silver in the middle of the table and gold in front of the lordlings, and if he was dealt the fifth ruler, there was no hand in chop could beat him. Not that he really needed it. Suddenly he could feel luck tickling his mind. Not tingling as it did with the dice, of course, but he was already certain no one was going to beat four rulers. The Tairens had been betting wildly all night, the price of ten farms crossing the table on the quickest hands.

But Carlomin was staring at the deck of cards in his hand instead of buying his fourth, and Baran was puffing his pipe furiously and stacking the coins in front of him as if ready to stuff them into his pockets. Reimon wore a scowl behind his beard, and Edorion was frowning at his nails. Only Estean appeared unaffected; he grinned uncertainly around the table, perhaps already forgetting what he had said. They usually managed to put some sort of good face on the situation if the Aiel came up, but the hour was late, and the wine had flowed freely.

Mat scoured his mind for a way to keep them and their gold from walking away from his cards. One glance at their faces was enough to tell him that simply changing the subject would not be enough. But there was another way. If he made them laugh at the Aiel. . . . *Is it worth making them laugh at me, too?* Chewing his pipestem, he tried to think of something else.

Baran picked up a stack of gold in each hand and moved to stick them in his pockets.

“I might just try these Sea Folk women,” Mat said quickly, taking his pipe to gesture with. “Odd things happen when you chase Aiel girls. Very odd. Like the game they call Maidens’ Kiss.” He had their attention, but Baran had not put down the coins, and Carlomin still showed no sign of buying a card.

Estean gave a drunken guffaw. “Kiss you with steel in your ribs, I suppose. Maidens of the Spear, you see. Steel. Spear in your ribs. Burn my soul.” No one else laughed. But they were listening.

“Not quite.” Mat managed a grin. *Burn me, I’ve told this much. I might as well tell the rest*. “Rhuarc said if I wanted to get along with the Maidens, I should ask them how to play Maidens’ Kiss. He said that was the best way to get to know them.” It still sounded like one of the kissing games back home, like Kiss the Daisies. He had never considered the Aiel clan chief a man to play tricks. He would be warier the next time. He made an effort to improve the grin. “So I went along to Bain and . . .” Reimon frowned impatiently. None of them knew any Aiel’s name but Rhuarc, and none of them wanted to. Mat dropped the names and hurried on “. . . went along dumb as a bull-goose fool, and asked them to show me.” He should have suspected something from the wide smiles that had bloomed on their faces. Like cats who had been asked to dance by a mouse. “Before I knew what was happening, I had a fistful of spears around my neck like a collar. I could have shaved myself with one sneeze.”

The others around the table exploded in laughter, from Reimon’s wheezing to Estean’s wine-soaked bray.

Mat left them to it. He could almost feel the spearpoints again, pricking if he so much as twitched a finger. Bain, laughing all the while, had told him she had never heard of a man actually asking to play Maidens’ Kiss.

Carlomin stroked his beard and spoke into Mat’s hesitation. “You cannot stop there. Go on. When was this? Two nights ago, I’ll wager. When you didn’t come for the game, and no one knew where you were.”

“I was playing stones with Thom Merrilin that night,” Mat said quickly. “This was days ago.” He was glad he could lie with a straight face. “They each took a kiss. That’s all. If she thought it was a good kiss, they eased up with the spears. If not, they pushed a little harder; to encourage, you might say. That was all. I’ll tell you this; I got nicked less than I do shaving.”

He stuck his pipe back between his teeth. If they wanted to know more, they could go ask to play the game themselves. He almost hoped some of them were fool enough. *Bloody Aiel women and their bloody spears*. He had not made it to his own bed until daybreak.

“It would be more than enough for me,” Carlomin said dryly. “The Light burn my soul if it would not.” He tossed a silver crown into the center of the table and dealt himself another card. “Maidens’ Kiss.” He shook with mirth, and another ripple of laughter ran around the table.

Baran bought his fifth card, and Estean fumbled a coin from the heap scattered in front of him, peering at it to see what it was. They would not stop now.

“Savages,” Baran muttered around his pipe. “Ignorant savages. That is all they are, burn my soul. Live in caves, out in the Waste. In caves! No one but a savage could live in the Waste.”

Reimon nodded. “At least they serve the Lord Dragon. I would take a hundred Defenders and clean them out of the Stone, if not for that.” Baran and Carlomin growled fierce agreement.

It was no effort for Mat to keep his face straight. He had heard much the same before. Boasting was easy when no one expected you to carry through. A hundred Defenders? Even if Rand stood aside for some reason, the few hundred Aiel holding the Stone could probably keep it against any army Tear could raise. Not that they seemed to want the Stone, really. Mat suspected they were only there because Rand was. He did not think any of these lordlings had figured that out—they tried to ignore the Aiel as much as possible—but he doubted it would make them feel any better.

“Mat.” Estean fanned his cards out in one hand, rearranging them as if he could not decide what order they were meant to go in. “Mat, you will speak to the Lord Dragon, won’t you?”

“About what?” Mat asked cautiously. Too many of these Tairens knew he and Rand had grown up together to suit him, and they seemed to think he was arm in arm with Rand whenever he was out of their sight. None of them would have gone near his own brother if he could channel. He did not know why they thought him a bigger fool.

“Didn’t I say?” The plain-faced man squinted at his cards and scratched his head, then brightened. “Oh, yes. His proclamation, Mat. The Lord Dragon’s. His last one. Where he said commoners had the right to call lords before a magistrate. Who ever heard of a lord being summoned to a magistrate? And for peasants!”

Mat’s hand tightened on his purse until the coins inside grated together. “It would be a shame,” he said quietly, “if you were tried and judged just for having your way with a fisherman’s daughter whatever she wanted, or for having some farmer beaten for splashing mud on your cloak.”

The others shifted uneasily, catching his mood, but Estean nodded, head bobbing so it seemed about to fall off. “Exactly. Though it wouldn’t come to that, of course. A lord being tried before a magistrate? Of course not. Not really.” He laughed drunkenly at his cards. “No fishermen’s daughters. Smell of fish, you see, however you have them washed. A plump farm girl is best.”

Mat told himself he was there to gamble. He told himself to ignore the fool’s blather, reminded himself of how much gold he could take out of Estean’s purse. His tongue did not listen, though. “Who knows what it might come to? Hangings, maybe.”

Edorion gave him a sidelong look, guarded and uneasy. “Do we have to talk about . . . about commoners, Estean? What about old Astoril’s daughters? Have you decided which you’ll marry yet?”

“What? Oh. Oh, I’ll flip a coin, I suppose.” Estean frowned at his cards, shifted one, and frowned again. “Medore has two or three pretty maids. Perhaps Medore.”

Mat took a long drink from his silver winecup to keep from hitting the man in his farmer’s face. He was still on his first cup; the two servants had given up trying to add more. If he hit Estean, none of them would lift a hand to stop him. Not even Estean. Because he was the Lord Dragon’s friend. He wished he was in a tavern somewhere out in the city, where some dockman might question his luck and only a quick tongue, or quick feet, or quick hands would see him leave with a whole skin. Now that *was* a fool thought.

Edorion glanced at Mat again, measuring his mood. “I heard a rumor today. I hear the Lord Dragon is taking us to war with Illian.”

Mat gagged on his wine. “War?” he spluttered.

“War,” Reimon agreed happily around his pipestem.

“Are you certain?” Carlomin said, and Baran added, “I’ve heard no rumors.”

“I heard it just today, from three or four tongues.” Edorion seemed to be absorbed in his cards. “Who can say how true it is?”

“It must be true,” Reimon said. “With the Lord Dragon to lead us, holding *Callandor*, we’ll not even have to fight. He will scatter their armies, and we will march straight into Illian. Too bad, in a way. Burn my soul if it isn’t. I would like a chance to match swords with the Illianers.”

“You’ll get no chance with the Lord Dragon leading,” Baran said. “They will fall on their knees as soon as they see the Dragon banner.”

“And if they do not,” Carlomin added with a laugh, “the Lord Dragon will blast them with lightning where they stand.”

“Illian first,” Reimon said. “And then . . . then we’ll conquer the world for the Lord Dragon. You tell him I said so, Mat. The whole world.”

Mat shook his head. A month gone, they would have been horrified by even the idea of a man who could channel, a man doomed to go mad and die horribly. Now they were ready to follow Rand into battle, and trust his power to win for them. Trust the Power, though it was not likely they would put it that way. Yet he supposed they had to find something to hang on to. The invincible Stone was in the hands of the Aiel. The Dragon Reborn was in his chambers a hundred feet above their heads, and *Callandor* was with him. Three thousand years of Tairen belief and history lay in ruins, and the world had been turned on its head. He wondered whether he had handled it any better; his own world had gone all askew in little more than a year. He rolled a gold Tairen crown across the backs of his fingers. However well he had done, he would not go back.

“When will we march, Mat?” Baran asked.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “I don’t think Rand would start a war.” Unless he had gone mad already. That hardly bore thinking about.

The others looked as if he had assured them the sun would not come up tomorrow.

“We are all loyal to the Lord Dragon, of course.” Edorion frowned at his cards. “Out in the countryside, though. . . . I hear that some of the High Lords, a few, have been trying to raise an army to take back the Stone.” Suddenly no one was looking at Mat, though Estean still seemed to be trying to make out his cards. “When the Lord Dragon takes us to war, of course, it will all melt away. In any case, we are loyal, here in the Stone. The High Lords, too, I am certain. It is only the few out in the countryside.”

Their loyalty would not outlast their fear of the Dragon Reborn. For a moment Mat felt as though he were planning to abandon Rand in a pit of vipers. Then he remembered what Rand was. It was more like abandoning a weasel in a henyard. Rand had been a friend. The Dragon Reborn, though. . . . Who could be a friend to the Dragon Reborn? *I’m not abandoning anybody. He could probably pull the Stone down on their heads, if he* *wanted to. On my head, too*. He told himself again that it was time to be gone.

“No fishermen’s daughters,” Estean mumbled. “You will speak to the Lord Dragon?”

“It is your turn, Mat,” Carlomin said anxiously. He looked half afraid, though what he feared—that Estean would anger Mat again, or that the talk might go back to loyalty—was impossible to say. “Will you buy the fifth card, or stack?”

Mat realized he had not been paying attention. Everyone but himself and Carlomin had five cards, though Reimon had neatly stacked his facedown beside the pot to show that he was out. Mat hesitated, pretending to think, then sighed and tossed another coin toward the pile.

As the silver crown bounced end over end, he suddenly felt luck grow from trickles to a flood. Every ping of silver against wooden tabletop rang clear in his head; he could have called face or sigil and known how the coin would land on any bounce. Just as he knew what his next card would be before Carlomin laid it in front of him.

Sliding his cards together on the table, he fanned them in one hand. The Ruler of Flames stared at him alongside the other four, the Amyrlin Seat balancing a flame on her palm, though she looked nothing like Siuan Sanche. However the Tairens felt about Aes Sedai, they acknowledged the power of Tar Valon, even if Flames was the lowest suit.

What were the odds of being dealt all five? His luck was best with random things, like dice, but perhaps a little more was beginning to rub off on cards. “The Light burn my bones to ash if it is not so,” he muttered. Or that was what he meant to say.

“There,” Estean all but shouted. “You cannot deny it this time. That was the Old Tongue. Something about burning, and bones.” He grinned around the table. “My tutor would be proud. I ought to send him a gift. If I can find out where he went.”

Nobles were supposed to be able to speak the Old Tongue, though in reality few knew more than Estean seemed to. The young lords set to arguing over exactly what Mat had said. They seemed to think it had been a comment on the heat.

Goose bumps pebbled Mat’s skin as he tried to recall the words that had just come out of his mouth. A string of gibberish, yet it almost seemed he should understand. *Burn Moiraine! If she’d left me alone, I wouldn’t* *have holes in my memory big enough for a wagon and team, and I wouldn't be spouting . . . whatever it bloody is!* He would also be milking his father's cows instead of walking the world with a pocketful of gold, but he managed to ignore that part of it.

"Are you here to gamble," he said harshly, "or babble like old women over their knitting!"

"To gamble," Baran said curtly. "Three crowns, gold!" He tossed the coins onto the pot.

"And three more besides." Estean hiccoughed and added six golden crowns to the pile.

Suppressing a grin, Mat forgot about the Old Tongue. It was easy enough; he did not want to think about it. Besides, if they were starting this strongly, he might win enough on this hand to leave in the morning. *And if he's crazy enough to start a war, I'll leave if I have to walk*.

Outside in the darkness, a cock crowed. Mat shifted uneasily and told himself not to be foolish. No one was going to die.

His eyes dropped to his cards—and blinked. The Amyrlin's flame had been replaced by a knife. While he was telling himself he was tired and seeing things, she plunged the tiny blade into the back of his hand.

With a hoarse yell, he flung the cards away and hurled himself backward, overturning his chair, kicking the table with both feet as he fell. The air seemed to thicken like honey. Everything moved as if time had slowed, but at the same time everything seemed to happen at once. Other cries echoed his, hollow shouts reverberating inside a cavern. He and the chair drifted back and down; the table floated upward.

The Ruler of Flames hung in the air, growing larger, staring at him with a cruel smile. Now close to life-size, she started to step out of the card; she was still a painted shape, with no depth, but she reached for him with her blade, red with his blood as if it had already been driven into his heart. Beside her the Ruler of Cups began to grow, the Tairen High Lord drawing his sword.

Mat floated, yet somehow he managed to reach the dagger in his left sleeve and hurl it in the same motion, straight for the Amyrlin's heart. If this thing had a heart. The second knife came into his left hand smoothly and left more smoothly. The two blades drifted through the air like thistledown. He wanted to scream, but that first yell of shock and outrage still filled his mouth. The Ruler of Rods was expanding beside the first two cards, the

Queen of Andor gripping the rod like a bludgeon, her red-gold hair framing a madwoman's snarl.

He was still falling, still yelling that drawn-out yell. The Amyrlin was free of her card, the High Lord striding out with his sword. The flat shapes moved almost as slowly as he. Almost. He had proof the steel in their hands could cut, and no doubt the rod could crack a skull. His skull.

His thrown daggers moved as if sinking in jelly. He was sure the cock had crowed for him. Whatever his father said, the omen had been real. But he would not give up and die. Somehow he had two more daggers out from under his coat, one in either hand. Struggling to twist in midair, to get his feet under him, he threw one knife at the golden-haired figure with the bludgeon. The other he held on to as he tried to turn himself, to land ready to face. . . .

The world lurched back into normal motion, and he landed awkwardly on his side, hard enough to drive the wind out of him. Desperately he struggled to his feet, drawing another knife from under his coat. You could not carry too many, Thom claimed. Neither was needed.

For a moment he thought cards and figures had vanished. Or maybe he had imagined it all. Maybe he was the one going mad. Then he saw the cards, back to ordinary size, pinned to one of the dark wood panels by his still quivering knives. He took a deep, ragged breath.

The table lay on its side, coins still spinning across the floor where lordlings and servants crouched among scattered cards. They gaped at Mat and his knives, those in his hands and those in the wall, with equally wide eyes. Estean snatched a silver pitcher that had somehow escaped being overturned and began pouring wine down his throat, the excess spilling over his chin and down his chest.

"Just because you do not have the cards to win," Edorion said hoarsely, "there is no need to—" He cut off with a shudder.

"You saw it, too." Mat slipped the knives back into their sheaths. A thin trickle of blood ran down the back of his hand from the tiny wound. "Don't pretend you went blind!"

"I saw nothing," Reimon said woodenly. "Nothing!" He began crawling across the floor, gathering up gold and silver, concentrating on the coins as if they were the most important thing in the world. The others were doing the same, except Estean, who scrambled about checking the fallen pitchers for any that still held wine. One of the servants had his face hidden in his hands; the other, eyes closed, was apparently praying in a low, breathless whine.

With a muttered oath, Mat strode to where his knives pinned the three cards to the panel. They were only playing cards again, just stiff paper with the clear lacquer cracked. But the figure of the Amyrlin still held a dagger instead of a flame. He tasted blood and realized he was sucking the cut in the back of his hand.

Hastily he wrenched his knives free, tearing each card in half before tucking the blade away. After a moment, he hunted through the cards littering the floor until he found the rulers of Coins and Winds, and tore them across, too. He felt a little foolish—it was over and done with; the cards were just cards again—but he could not help it.

None of the young lords crawling about on hands and knees tried to stop him. They scrambled out of his way, not even glancing at him. There would be no more gambling tonight, and maybe not for some nights to come. At least, not with him. Whatever had happened, it had been aimed at him, clearly. Even more clearly, it had to have been done with the One Power. They wanted no part of that.

“Burn you, Rand!” he muttered under his breath. “If you have to go mad, leave me out of it!” His pipe lay in two pieces, the stem bitten through cleanly. Angrily he grabbed his purse from the floor and stalked out of the room.

In his darkened bedchamber Rand tossed uneasily on a bed wide enough for five people. He was dreaming.

Through a shadowy forest Moiraine was prodding him with a sharp stick toward where the Amyrlin Seat waited, sitting on a stump with a rope halter for his neck in her hands. Dim shapes moved half-seen through the trees, stalking, hunting him; here a dagger blade flashed in the failing light, over there he caught a glimpse of ropes ready for binding. Slender and not as tall as his shoulder, Moiraine wore an expression he had never seen on her face. Fear. Sweating, she prodded harder, trying to hurry him to the Amyrlin’s halter. Darkfriends and the Forsaken in the shadows, the White Tower’s leash ahead and Moiraine behind. Dodging Moiraine’s stick, he fled.

“It is too late for that,” she called after him, but he had to get back. Back.

Muttering, he thrashed on the bed, then was still, breathing more easily for a moment.

He was in the Waterwood back home, sunlight slanting through the trees to sparkle on the pond in front of him. There was green moss on the rocks at this end of the pond, and thirty paces away at the other end a small arc of wildflowers. This was where, as a child, he had learned to swim.

“You should have a swim now.”

He spun around with a start. Min stood there, grinning at him in her boy’s coat and breeches, and next to her, Elayne, with her red-golden curls, in a green silk gown fit for her mother’s palace.

It was Min who had spoken, but Elayne added, “The water looks inviting, Rand. No one will bother us here.”

“I don’t know,” he began slowly. Min cut him off by twining her fingers behind his neck and pulling herself up on tiptoe to kiss him.

She repeated Elayne’s words in a soft murmur. “No one will bother us here.” She stepped back and doffed her coat, then attacked the laces of her shirt.

Rand stared, the more so when he realized Elayne’s gown was lying on the mossy ground. The Daughter-Heir was bending, arms crossed, gathering up the hem of her shift.

“What are you doing?” he demanded in a strangled voice.

“Getting ready to go swimming with you,” Min replied.

Elayne flashed him a smile, and hoisted the shift over her head.

He turned his back hastily, though half wanting not to. And found himself staring at Egwene, her big, dark eyes looking back at him sadly. Without a word she turned and vanished into the trees.

“Wait!” he shouted after her. “I can explain.”

He began to run; he had to find her. But as he reached the edge of trees, Min’s voice stopped him.

“Don’t go, Rand.”

She and Elayne were in the water already, only their heads showing as they swam lazily in the middle of the pond.

“Come back,” Elayne called, lifting a slim arm to beckon. “Do you not deserve what you want for a change?”

He shifted his feet, wanting to move but unable to decide which way. What he wanted. The words sounded strange. What did he want? He raised a hand to his face, to wipe away what felt like sweat. Festering flesh almost obliterated the heron branded on his palm; white bone showed through red-edged gaps.

With a jerk, he came awake, lying there shivering in the dark heat. Sweat soaked his smallclothes, and the linen sheets beneath his back. His side burned, where an old wound had never healed properly. He traced the rough scar, a circle nearly an inch across, still tender after all this time. Even Moiraine's Aes Sedai Healing could not mend it completely. *But I'm not rotting yet. And I'm not mad, either. Not yet*. Not yet. That said it all. He wanted to laugh, and wondered if that meant he was a little mad already.

Dreaming about Min and Elayne, dreaming of them like that. . . . Well, it was not madness, but it was surely foolishness. Neither one of them had ever looked at him in that way when he was awake. Egwene he had been all but promised to since they were both children. The betrothal words had never been spoken in front of the Women's Circle, but everyone in and around Emond's Field knew they would marry one day.

That one day would never come, of course; not now, not with the fate that lay ahead of a man who channeled. Egwene must have realized that, too. She must have. She was all wrapped up in becoming Aes Sedai. Still, women were odd; she might think she could be an Aes Sedai and marry him anyway, channeling or no channeling. How could he tell her that he did not want to marry her anymore, that he loved her like a sister? But there would not be any need to tell her, he was sure. He could hide behind what he was. She had to understand that. What man could ask a woman to marry him when he knew he had only a few years, if he was lucky, before he went insane, before he began to rot alive? He shivered despite the heat.

I need sleep. The High Lords would be back in the morning, maneuvering for his favor. For the Dragon Reborn's favor. *Maybe I won't dream, this time*. He started to roll over, searching for a dry place on the sheets—and froze, listening to small rustlings in the darkness. He was not alone.

The Sword That Is Not a Sword lay across the room, beyond his reach, on a thronelike stand the High Lords had given him, no doubt in the hopes he would keep *Callandor* out of their sight. *Someone wanting to steal* Callandor. A second thought came. *Or to kill the Dragon Reborn*. He did not need Thom's whispered warnings to know that the High Lord's professions of undying loyalty were only words of necessity.

He emptied himself of thought and emotions, assuming the Void; that much came without effort. Floating in the cold emptiness within himself, thought and emotion outside, he reached for the True Source. This time he touched it easily, which was not always the case.

Saidin filled him like a torrent of white heat and light, exalting him with life, sickening him with the foulness of the Dark One's taint, like a skim of sewage floating on pure, sweet water. The torrent threatened to wash him away, burn him up, engulf him.

Fighting the flood, he mastered it by bare effort of will and rolled from the bed, channeling the Power as he landed on his feet in the stance to begin the sword-form called Apple Blossoms in the Wind. His enemies could not be many or they would have made more noise; the gently named form was meant for use against more than one opponent.

As his feet hit the carpet, a sword was in his hands, with a long hilt and a slightly curved blade sharp on only one edge. It looked to have been wrought from flame yet it did not feel even warm. The figure of a heron stood black against the yellow-red of the blade. In the same instant every candle and gilded lamp burst alight, small mirrors behind them swelling the illumination. Larger mirrors on the walls and two stand-mirrors reflected it further, until he could have read comfortably anywhere in the large room.

Callandor sat undisturbed, a sword seemingly of glass, hilt and blade, on a stand as tall as a man and just as wide, the wood ornately carved and gilded and set with precious stones. The furnishings, too, were all gilded and begemmed, bed and chairs and benches, wardrobes and chests and washstand. The pitcher and bowl were golden Sea Folk porcelain, as thin as leaves. The broad Tarabon carpet, in scrolls of scarlet and gold and blue, could have fed an entire village for months. Almost every flat surface held more delicate Sea Folk porcelain, or else goblets and bowls and ornaments of gold worked with silver, and silver chased with gold. On the broad marble mantel over the fireplace, two silver wolves with ruby eyes tried to pull down a golden stag a good three feet tall. Draperies of scarlet silk embroidered with eagles in thread-of-gold hung at the narrow windows, stirring slightly in a failing wind. Books lay wherever there was room, leather-bound, wood-bound, some tattered and still dusty from the deepest shelves of the Stone's library.

Now, where he had thought to see assassins, or thieves, one beautiful young woman stood hesitant and surprised in the middle of the carpet, black hair falling in shining waves to her shoulders. Her thin, white silk robe emphasized more than it hid. Berelain, ruler of the city-state of Mayene, was the last person he had expected.

After one wide-eyed start, she made a deep, graceful curtsy that drew her garments tight. “I am unarmed, my Lord Dragon. I submit myself to your search, if you doubt me.” Her smile suddenly made him uncomfortably aware that he wore nothing but his smallclothes.

I’ll be burned if she makes me scramble around trying to cover myself. The thought floated beyond the Void. *I didn’t ask her to walk in on me. To* sneak *in*! Anger and embarrassment drifted along the borders of emptiness too, but his face reddened all the same; dimly he was aware of it, aware of the knowledge deepening the flush in his cheeks. So coldly calm within the Void; outside. . . . He could feel each individual droplet of sweat sliding down his chest and back. It took a real effort of stubborn will to stand there under her eyes. *Search her? The Light help me!*

Relaxing his stance, he let the sword vanish but held the narrow flow connecting him to *saidin*. It was like drinking from a hole in a dike when the whole long mound of earth wanted to give way, the water sweet as honeyed wine and sickening as a rivulet through a midden.

He did not know much of this woman, except that she walked through the Stone as if it were her palace in Mayene. Thom said the First of Mayene asked questions constantly, of everyone. Questions about Rand. Which might have been natural, given what he was, but they made him no easier in his mind. And she had not returned to Mayene. That was not natural. She had been held captive in all but name for months, until his arrival, cut off from her throne and the ruling of her small nation. Most people would have taken the first opportunity to get away from a man who could channel.

“What are you doing here?” He knew he sounded harsh, and did not care. “There were Aiel guarding that door when I went to sleep. How did you come past them?”

Berelain’s lips curved up a trifle more; to Rand it seemed the room had gotten suddenly even hotter. “They passed me through immediately, when I said I had been summoned by the Lord Dragon.”

“Summoned? I didn’t summon anybody.” *Stop this,* he told himself. *She’s a queen, or the next thing to it. You know as much about the ways of queens as you do about flying*. He tried to make himself be civil, only he did not know what to call the First of Mayene. “My Lady . . .” That would have to do. “. . . why would I summon you at this time of night?”

She gave a low, rich laugh, deep in her throat; even wrapped in emotionless emptiness it seemed to tickle his skin, make the hairs stir on his arms and legs. Suddenly he took in her clinging garb as if for the first time, and felt himself go red all over again. *She can’t mean. . . . Can she? Light, I’ve never said two words to her before*.

“Perhaps I wish to talk, my Lord Dragon.” She let the pale robe fall to the floor, revealing an even thinner white silk garment he could only call a nightgown. It left her smooth shoulders completely bare, and exposed a considerable expanse of pale bosom. He found himself wondering distantly what held it up. It was difficult not to stare. “You are a long way from your home, like me. The nights especially seem lonely.”

“Tomorrow, I will be happy to talk with you.”

“But during the day, people surround you. Petitioners. High Lords. Aiel.” She gave a shiver; he told himself he really ought to look away, but he could as easily have stopped breathing. He had never before been so aware of his own reactions when wrapped in the Void. “The Aiel frighten me, and I do not like Tairen lords of any sort.”

About the Tairens he could believe her, but he did not think anything frightened this woman. *Burn me, she’s in a strange man’s bedchamber in the middle of the night, only half-dressed, and I’m the one who’s jumpy as a cat in a dog run, Void or no*. It was time to put an end to things before they went too far.

“It would be better if you return to your own bedchamber, my Lady.” Part of him wanted to tell her to put on a cloak, too. A thick cloak. Part of him did. “It . . . it is really too late for talking. Tomorrow. In daylight.”

She gave him a slanted, quizzical look. “Have you absorbed stuffy Tairen ways already, my Lord Dragon? Or is this reticence something from your Two Rivers? We are not so . . . formal . . . in Mayene.”

“My Lady. . . .” He tried to sound formal; if she did not like formality, that was what he wanted. “I am promised to Egwene al’Vere, my Lady.”

“You mean the Aes Sedai, my Lord Dragon? If she really is Aes Sedai. She is quite young—perhaps too young—to wear the ring and the shawl.” Berelain spoke as if Egwene were a child, though she herself could not be more than a year older than Rand, if that, and he had only a little over two years on Egwene. “My Lord Dragon, I do not mean to come between you.

Marry her, if she is Green Ajah. I would never aspire to wed the Dragon Reborn himself. Forgive me if I overstep myself, but I told you we are not so . . . formal in Mayene. May I call you Rand?"

Rand surprised himself by sighing regretfully. There had been a glint in her eye, a slight shift of expression, gone quickly, when she mentioned marrying the Dragon Reborn. If she had not considered it before, she had now. The Dragon Reborn, not Rand al'Thor; the man of prophecy, not the shepherd from the Two Rivers. He was not shocked, exactly; some girls back home mooned over whoever proved himself fastest or strongest in the games at Bel Tine and Sunday, and now and again a woman set her eyes on the man with the richest fields or the largest flocks. It would have been good to think she wanted Rand al'Thor. "It is time for you to go, my Lady," he said quietly.

She stepped closer. "I can feel your eyes on me, Rand." Her voice was smoky heat. "I am no village girl tied to her mother's apron, and I know you want—"

"Do you think I'm made of stone, woman?" She jumped at his roar, but the next instant she was crossing the carpet, reaching for him, her eyes dark pools that could pull a man into their depths.

"Your arms look as strong as stone. If you think you must be harsh with me, then be harsh, so long as you hold me." Her hands touched his face; sparks seemed to leap from her fingers.

Without thinking he channeled the flows still linked to him, and suddenly she was staggering back, eyes wide with startlement, as if a wall of air pushed her. It was air, he realized; he did things without knowing what he was doing more often than he did know. At least, once done, he could usually remember how to do them again.

The unseen, moving wall scraped ripples along the carpet, sweeping along Berelain's discarded robe, a boot he had tossed aside undressing, and a red leather footstool supporting an open volume of Eban Vandes's *The History of the Stone of Tear*, pushing them along as it forced her almost to the wall, fenced her in. Safely away from him. He tied off the flow—that was all he could think to call what he did—and no longer needed to maintain the shield himself. For a moment he studied what he had done, until he was sure he could repeat it. It looked useful, especially the tying off.

Dark eyes still wide, Berelain felt along the confines of her invisible prison with trembling hands. Her face was almost as white as her skimpy silk shift. Footstool, boot and book lay at her feet, jumbled with the robe.

“Much as I regret it,” he told her, “we will not speak again, except in public, my Lady.” He really did regret it. Whatever her motives, she was beautiful. *Burn me*, *I* am *a fool!* He was not sure how he meant that—for thinking of her beauty, or for sending her away. “In fact, it is best you arrange your journey back to Mayene as soon as possible. I promise you that Tear will not trouble Mayene again. You have my word.” It was a promise good only for his lifetime, perhaps only as long as he stood in the Stone, but he had to offer her something. A bandage for wounded pride, a gift to take her mind off being afraid.

But her fear was already under control, on the outside, at least. Honesty and openness filled her face, all efforts at allure gone. “Forgive me. I have handled this badly. I did not mean to offend. In my country, a woman may speak her mind to a man freely, or he to her. Rand, you must know that you are a handsome man, tall and strong. I would be the one made of stone, if I did not see it, and admire. Please do not send me away from you. I will beg it, if you wish.” She knelt smoothly, like a dance. Her expression still said she was being open, confessing everything, but on the other hand, in kneeling she had managed to tug her already precarious gown down until it looked in real danger of falling off. “Please, Rand?”

Even sheltered in emptiness as he was, he gaped at her, and it had nothing to do with her beauty or her near undress. Well, only partly. If the Defenders of the Stone had been half as determined as this woman, half as steadfast in purpose, ten thousand Aiel could never have taken the Stone.

“I am flattered, my Lady,” he said diplomatically. “Believe me, I am. But it would not be fair to you. I cannot give you what you deserve.” *And let her make of that what she will*.

Outside in the darkness, a cock crowed.

To Rand’s surprise, Berelain suddenly stared past him, eyes as big as teacups. Her mouth dropped open, and her slim throat corded with a scream that would not come. He spun, the yellow-red sword flashing back into his hands.

Across the room, one of the stand-mirrors threw his reflection back at him, a tall young man with reddish hair and gray eyes, wearing only white linen smallclothes and holding a sword carved from fire. The reflection stepped out onto the carpet, raising its sword.

I have *gone mad*. Thought drifted on the borders of the Void. *No! She saw it. It’s real!*

Movement to his left caught the corner of his eye. He twisted before he could think, sword sweeping up in The Moon Rises Over Water. The blade slashed through the shape—his shape—climbing out of a mirror on the wall. The form wavered, broke up like dust motes floating on air, vanished. Rand’s reflection appeared in the mirror again, but even as it did, it put hands on the mirror frame. He was aware of movement in mirrors all around the room.

Desperately, he stabbed at the mirror. Silvered glass shattered, yet it seemed that the image shattered first. He thought he heard a distant scream inside his head, his own voice screaming, fading. Even as shards of mirror fell, he lashed out with the One Power. Every mirror in the room exploded silently, fountaining glass across the carpet. The dying scream in his head echoed again and again, sending shivers down his back. It was his voice; he could hardly believe it was not himself who made the sounds.

He spun back to face the one that had gotten out, just in time to meet its attack, Unfolding the Fan to counter Stones Falling Down the Mountain. The figure leaped back, and suddenly Rand realized it was not alone. As quickly as he had smashed the mirrors, two more reflections had escaped. Now they stood facing him, three duplicates of himself down to the puckered round scar on his side, all staring at him, faces twisted with hatred and contempt, with a strange hunger. Only their eyes seemed empty, lifeless. Before he could take a breath, they rushed at him.

Rand stepped sideways, pieces of broken mirror slicing his feet, ever sideways, from stance to stance and form to form, trying to face only one at a time. He used everything Lan, Moiraine’s Warder, had taught him of the sword in their daily practice.

Had the three fought together, had they supported one another, he would have died in the first minute, but each fought him alone, as if the others did not exist. Even so, he could not stop their blades entirely; in minutes blood ran down the side of his face, his chest, his arms. The old wound tore open, adding its flow to stain his smallclothes with red. They had his skill as well as his face, and they were three to his one. Chairs and tables toppled; priceless Sea Folk porcelain shattered on the carpet.

He felt his strength ebbing. None of his cuts was major by itself, except the old wound, but all together. . . . He never thought of calling for help from the Aiel outside his door. The thick walls would stifle even a death scream. Whatever was done, he must do alone. He fought wrapped in the cold emotionlessness of the Void, but fear scraped at its boundaries like wind-lashed branches scratching a window in the night.

His blade slipped past its opponent to slash across a face just below the eyes—he could not help wincing; it was his face—its owner sliding back just far enough to avoid a killing cut. Blood welled from the gash, veiling mouth and chin in dark crimson, but the ruined face did not change expression, and its empty eyes never flickered. It wanted him dead the way a starving man wanted food.

Can anything kill them? All three bled from the wounds he had managed to inflict, but bleeding did not seem to slow them as he knew it was slowing him. They tried to avoid his sword, but did not appear to realize they had been hurt. *If they have been*, he thought grimly. *Light, if they bleed, they can be hurt! They must!*

He needed a respite, a moment to catch his breath, to gather himself. Suddenly he leaped away from them, onto the bed, rolling across its width. He sensed rather than saw blades slashing the sheets, barely missing his flesh. Staggering, he landed on his feet, caught at a small table to steady himself. The shining, gold-worked silver bowl on the table wobbled. One of his doubles had climbed onto the torn bed, kicking goose feathers as it padded across warily, sword at the ready. The other two came slowly around, still ignoring each other, intent only on him. Their eyes glistened like glass.

Rand shuddered as pain stabbed his hand on the table. An image of himself, no more than six inches tall, drew back its small sword. Instinctively, he grabbed the figure before it could stab again. It writhed in his grip, baring teeth at him. He became aware of small movements all around the room, of small reflections by the score stepping out of polished silver. His hand began to numb, to grow cold, as if the thing were sucking the warmth out of his flesh. The heat of *saidin* swelled inside him; a rushing filled his head, and the heat flowed into his icy hand.

Suddenly the small figure burst like a bubble, and he felt something flow into him—from the bursting—some little portion of his lost strength. He jerked as tiny jolts of vitality seemed to pelt him.

When he raised his head—wondering why he was not dead—the small reflections he had half-glimpsed were gone. The three larger stood wavering, as if his gain in strength had been their loss. Yet as he looked up, they steadied on their feet and came on, if more cautiously.

He backed away, thinking furiously, sword threatening first one and then another. If he continued to fight them as he had been, they would kill him sooner or later. He knew that as surely as he knew he was bleeding. But something linked the reflections. Absorbing the small one—the far-off thought made him queasy, but that was what it had been—had not only brought the others with it, it had also affected the bigger, for a moment at least. If he could do the same to one of them, it might destroy all three.

Even thinking of absorbing them made him vaguely aware of wanting to empty his stomach, but he did not know another way. *I don't know this way. How did I do it? Light, what did I do?* He had to grapple with one of them, to touch it at least; he was somehow sure of that. But if he tried to get that close, he would have three blades through him in as many heartbeats. *Reflections. How much are they still reflections?*

Hoping he was not being a fool—if he was, he might well be a dead one—he let his sword vanish. He was ready to bring it back on the instant, but when his carved-fire blade winked out of existence, the others' did, too. For a moment, confusion painted three copies of his face, one a bloody ruin. But before he could seize one of them, they leaped for him, all four crashing to the floor in a tangle of grappling limbs, rolling across the glass-littered carpet.

Cold soaked into Rand. Numbness crept along his limbs, through his bones, until he barely felt the shards of mirror, the slivers of porcelain grinding into his flesh. Something close to panic flickered across the emptiness surrounding him. He might have made a fatal mistake. They were larger than the one he had absorbed, and they were drawing more heat from him. And not only heat. As he grew colder, the glassy gray eyes staring into his took on life. With chill certainty he knew that if he died, that would not end the struggle. The three would turn on one another until only one remained, and that one would have his life, his memories, would *be* him.

Stubbornly he fought, struggling harder the weaker he became. He pulled on *saidin*, trying to fill himself with its heat. Even the stomach-turning taint was welcome, for the more of it he felt, the more *saidin* suffused him. If his stomach could rebel, then he was still alive, and if he lived, he could fight. *But how? How? What did I do before? Saidin* raged through him till it seemed that if he survived his attackers, he would only be consumed by the Power. *How did I do it?* All he could do was pull at *saidin*, and try . . . reach . . . strain. . . .

One of the three vanished—Rand felt it slide into him; it was as if he had fallen from a height, flat onto stony ground—and then the other two together. The impact flung him onto his back, where he lay staring up at the worked plaster ceiling with its gilded bosses, lay luxuriating in the fact that he was still breathing.

The Power still swelled in every crevice of his being. He wanted to spew up every meal he had ever eaten. He felt so alive that, by comparison, life not soaked in *saidin* was living a shadow. He could smell the beeswax of the candles, and the oil in the lamps. He could feel every fiber of the carpet against his back. He could feel every gash in his flesh, every cut, every nick, every bruise. But he held on to *saidin*.

One of the Forsaken had tried to kill him. Or all of them had. It must have been that, unless the Dark One was free already, in which case he did not think he would have faced anything as easy or as simple as this. So he held his link to the True Source. *Unless I did it myself. Can I hate what I am enough to try to kill myself? Without even knowing it? Light, I have to learn to control it. I have to!*

Painfully, he pushed himself up. Leaving bloody footprints on the carpet, he limped to the stand where *Callandor* rested. Blood from hundreds of cuts covered him. He lifted the sword, and its glassy length glowed with the Power flowing into it. The Sword That Is Not a Sword. That blade, apparently glass, would cut as well as the finest steel, yet *Callandor* truly was not a sword, but instead a remnant of the Age of Legends, a *sa'angreal*. With the aid of one of the relatively few *angreal* known to have survived the War of the Shadow and Breaking of the World, it was possible to channel flows of the One Power that would have burned the channeler to ash without it. With one of the even rarer *sa'angreal*, the flows could be increased as much over those possible with an *angreal* as an *angreal* increased them over channeling naked. And *Callandor*, usable only by a man, linked to the Dragon Reborn through three thousand years of legend and prophecy, was one of the most powerful *sa'angreal* ever made. Holding *Callandor* in his hands, he could level a city's walls at a blow. Holding

Callandor in his hands, he could face even one of the Forsaken. *It was them. It must have been.*

Abruptly he realized he had not heard a sound from Berelain. Half fearing to see her dead, he turned.

Still kneeling, she flinched. She had donned her robe again, and hugged it around her like steel armor, or stone walls. Face as white as snow, she licked her lips. “Which one are . . . ?” She swallowed and began again. “Which one . . . ?” She could not finish it.

“I am the only one there is,” he said gently. “The one you were treating as if we were betrothed.” He meant it to soothe her, perhaps make her smile—surely a woman as strong as she had shown herself to be could smile, even facing a blood-drenched man—but she bent forward, pressing her face to the floor.

“I apologize humbly for having most grievously offended you, Lord Dragon.” Her breathy voice did sound humble, and frightened. Completely unlike herself. “I beg you to forget my offense, and forgive. I will not bother you again. I swear it, my Lord Dragon. On my mother’s name and under the Light, I swear it.”

He loosed the knotted flow; the invisible wall confining her became a momentary stir that ruffled her robe. “There is nothing to forgive,” he said wearily. He felt very tired. “Go as you wish.”

She straightened hesitantly, stretched out a hand, and gave a relieved gasp when it encountered nothing. Gathering the skirts of her robe, she began to pick her way across the glass-littered carpet, shards grating under her velvet slippers. Short of the door, she stopped, facing him with an obvious effort. Her eyes could not quite meet his. “I will send the Aiel in to you, if you wish. I could send for one of the Aes Sedai to tend your wounds.”

She would as soon be in a room with a Myrddraal, now, or the Dark One himself, but she’s no milksop. “Thank you,” he said quietly, “but no. I would appreciate it if you told no one what happened here. Not yet. I will do what needs to be done.” *It* had *to be the Forsaken*.

“As my Lord Dragon commands.” She gave him a tight curtsy and hurried out, perhaps afraid he might change his mind about letting her go.

“As soon the Dark One himself,” he murmured as the door closed behind her.

Limping to the foot of the bed, he lowered himself into the chest there and laid *Callandor* across his knees, bloody hands resting on the glowing blade. With that in his hands, even one of the Forsaken would fear him. In a moment he would send for Moiraine to Heal his wounds. In a moment he would speak to the Aiel outside, and become the Dragon Reborn again. But for now, he only wanted to sit, and remember a shepherd named Rand al’Thor.

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CHAPTER 3

Reflection

Despite the hour, a good many people were hurrying through the Stone’s wide corridors, a steady trickle of men and women in the black and gold of Stone servants or the livery of one High Lord or another. Now and again a Defender or two appeared, bareheaded and unarmed, some with their coats undone. The servants bowed or curtsied to Perrin and Faile if they came close, then hurried on with hardly a pause. Most of the soldiers gave a start on seeing them. Some bowed stiffly, hand to heart, but one and all quickened their steps as if eager to be away.

Only one lamp in three or four was lit. In the dim stretches between their tall stands, shadows blurred the hanging tapestries and obscured the occasional chest against the wall. For any eyes but Perrin’s, they did. His eyes glowed like burnished gold in those murky lengths of hall. He walked quickly from lamp to lamp and kept his gaze down unless he was in full light. Most people in the Stone knew about his strangely colored eyes, one way or another. None of them mentioned it, of course. Even Faile seemed to assume the color was part of his association with an Aes Sedai, something that simply was, to be accepted but never explained. Even so, a prickling always ran across his back whenever he realized that a stranger had seen his eyes shining in the dark. When they held their tongues, the silence only emphasized his apartness.

“I wish they wouldn’t look at me like that,” he muttered as a grizzled Defender twice his age came close to running once he had passed. “As though they are afraid of me. They haven’t before; not this way. Why aren’t all these people in bed?” A woman carrying a mop and a bucket bobbed a curtsy and scurried by with her head down.

Her arm twined through his, Faile glanced at him. “I would say the guards are not supposed to be in this part of the Stone unless they are on duty. A good time to cuddle a maid on a lord’s chair, and maybe pretend they are the lord and lady, while lord and lady are asleep. They are probably worried that you might report them. And servants do most of their work at night. Who would want them underfoot, sweeping and dusting and polishing, in daylight?”

Perrin nodded doubtfully. He supposed she would know about such things from her father’s house. A successful merchant likely had servants, and guards for his wagons. At least these folk were not out of their beds because what had happened to him had happened to them, too. If that were the case, they would be out of the Stone altogether, and likely still running. But why had he been a target, singled out, as it seemed? He was not looking forward to confronting Rand, but he had to know. Faile had to stretch her stride to keep up with him.

For all its splendor, all the gold and fine carving and inlays, the interior of the Stone had been designed for war as much as its exterior had been. Murderholes dotted the ceiling wherever corridors crossed. Never-used arrowslits peeked into the halls at places where they might cover an entire hallway. He and Faile climbed narrow, curving staircase after narrow, curving staircase, all built into the walls or else enclosed, with more arrowslits looking down on the corridor below. None of this design had hampered the Aiel, of course, the first enemy ever to get beyond the outer wall.

As they trotted up one of the winding stairs—Perrin did not realize they were trotting, though he would have been moving faster if not for Faile on his arm—he caught a whiff of old sweat and a hint of sickly-sweet perfume, but they registered only in the back of his brain. He was caught up in what he was going to say to Rand. *Why did you try to kill me? Are you going mad already?* There was no easy way to ask, and he did not expect easy answers.

Stepping out into a shadowed corridor nearly at the top of the Stone, he found himself staring at the backs of a High Lord and two of the nobleman’s personal guards. Only the Defenders were allowed to wear armor inside the Stone, but these three had swords at their hips. That was not unusual, of course, but their presence here, on this floor, in the shadows, staring intently at the bright light at the far end of the hall, that was not usual at all. That light came from the anteroom in front of the chambers Rand had been given. Or taken. Or maybe been pushed into by Moiraine.

Perrin and Faile had made no effort to be quiet in climbing the stairs, but the three men were so intent in their watching that none of them noticed the new arrivals at first. Then one of the blue-coated bodyguards twisted his head as if working a cramp in his neck; his mouth dropped open when he saw them. Biting off an oath, the fellow whirled to face Perrin, baring a good hand of his swordblade. The other was only a heartbeat slower. Both stood tensed, ready, but their eyes shifted uneasily, sliding off Perrin's. They gave off a sour smell of fear. So did the High Lord, though he had his fear tightly reined.

The High Lord Torean, white streaking his dark, pointed beard, moved languidly, as if at a ball. Pulling a too sweetly scented handkerchief from his sleeve, he dabbed at a knobby nose that appeared not at all large when compared with his ears. A fine silk coat with red satin cuffs only exaggerated the plainness of his face. He eyed Perrin's shirtsleeves and dabbed his nose again before inclining his head slightly. "The Light illumine you," he said politely. His glance touched Perrin's yellow stare and flinched away, though his expression did not change. "You are well, I trust?" Perhaps too politely.

Perrin did not really care for the man's tone, but the way Torean looked Faile up and down, with a sort of casual interest, clenched his fists. He managed to keep his voice level, though. "The Light illumine you, High Lord Torean. I am glad to see you helping keep watch over the Lord Dragon. Some men in your place might resent him being here."

Torean's thin eyebrows twitched. "Prophecy has been fulfilled, and Tear has fulfilled its place in that prophecy. Perhaps the Dragon Reborn will lead Tear to a still greater destiny. What man could resent that? But it is late. A good night to you." He eyed Faile again, pursing his lips, and walked off down the hall just a bit too briskly, away from the anteroom's lights. His bodyguards heeled him like well-trained dogs.

"There was no need for you to be uncivil," Faile said in a tight voice when the High Lord was out of hearing. "You sounded as if your tongue were frozen iron. If you do intend to remain here, you had better learn to get on with the lords."

"He was looking at you as if he wanted to dandle you on his knee. And I do not mean like a father."

She sniffed dismissively. "He is not the first man ever to look at me. If he found the nerve to try more, I could put him in his place with a frown and a glance. I do not need you to speak for me, Perrin Aybara.” Still, she did not sound entirely displeased.

Scratching his beard, he peered after Torean, watching the High Lord and his guards vanish around a distant corner. He wondered how the Tairen lords managed without sweating to death. “Did you notice, Faile? His heel-hounds did not take their hands off their swords until he was ten paces clear of us.”

She frowned at him, then down the hall after the three, and nodded slowly. “You’re right. But I do not understand. They do not bow and scrape the way they do for *him*, but everyone walks as warily around you and Mat as they do around the Aes Sedai.”

“Maybe being a friend of the Dragon Reborn isn’t as much protection as it used to be.”

She did not suggest leaving again, not in words, but her eyes were full of it. He was more successful in ignoring the unspoken suggestion than he had been with the spoken.

Before they reached the end of the hallway, Berelain came hurrying out of the bright lights of the anteroom, clutching a thin white robe tightly around her with both arms. If the First of Mayene had been walking any faster, she would have been running.

To show Faile he could be as civil as she could possibly wish, Perrin swept a bow that he wagered even Mat could not have bettered. By contrast, Faile’s curtsy was the barest nod of her head, the merest bending of a knee. He hardly noticed. As Berelain rushed past them without a glance, the smell of fear, rank and raw as a festering wound, made his nostrils twitch. Beside this, Torean’s fear was nothing. This was mad panic tied with a frayed rope. He straightened slowly, staring after her.

“Filling your eyes?” Faile asked softly.

Intent on Berelain, wondering what had driven her so near the brink, he spoke without thinking. “She smelled of—”

Far down the corridor, Torean suddenly stepped out of a side hallway to seize Berelain’s arm. He was talking a torrent, but Perrin could not make out more than a handful of scattered words, something about her overstepping herself in her pride, and something else that seemed to be Torean offering her his protection. Her reply was short, sharp, and even more inaudible, delivered with lifted chin. Pulling herself free roughly, the First of Mayene walked away, back straight and seemingly more in command of herself. On the point of following, Torean saw Perrin watching. Dabbing at his nose with his handkerchief, the High Lord vanished back into the crossing corridor.

"I do not care if she smelled of the Essence of Dawn," Faile said darkly. "That one is not interested in hunting a bear, however fine his hide would look stretched on a wall. She hunts the sun."

He frowned at her. "The sun? A bear? What are you talking about?"

"You go on by yourself. I think I will go to my bed after all."

"If that's what you want," he said slowly, "but I thought you were as eager to find out what happened as I am."

"I think not. I'll not pretend I am eager to meet the . . . Rand . . . not after avoiding it until now. And now I am especially not eager. No doubt the two of you will have a fine talk without me. Especially if there's wine."

"You don't make any sense," he muttered, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "If you want to go to bed, then fine, but I wish you would say something I understand."

For a long moment she studied his face, then suddenly bit her lip. He thought she was trying not to laugh. "Oh, Perrin, sometimes I believe it is your innocence I enjoy most of all." Sure enough, traces of laughter silvered her voice. "You go on to . . . to your friend and tell me of it in the morning. As much as you want to." She pulled his head down to brush his lips with a kiss and, as quick as the kiss, ran back down the hallway.

Shaking his head, he watched until she turned in to the stairs with no sign of Torean. Sometimes it was as if she spoke another language. He headed toward the lights.

The anteroom was a round chamber fifty paces or more across. A hundred gilded lamps hung on golden chains from its high ceiling. Polished redstone columns made an inner ring, and the floor appeared to be one huge slab of black marble, streaked with gold. It had been the anteroom of the king's chambers, in the days when Tear had kings, before Artur Hawk-wing put everything from the Spine of the World to the Aryth Ocean under one king. The Tairen kings had not returned when Hawkwing's empire collapsed, and for a thousand years the only inhabitants of these apartments had been mice tracking through dust. No High Lord had ever had enough power to dare claim them for his own.

A ring of fifty Defenders stood rigidly in the middle of the room, breastplates and rimmed helmets gleaming, spears all slanted at exactly the same angle. Facing every direction as they did, they were supposed to keep all intruders from the current lord of the Stone. Their commander, a captain distinguished by two short white plumes on his helmet, held himself only a trifle less stiffly. He posed with one hand on his sword hilt and the other on his hip, self-important with his duty. They all smelled of fear and uncertainty, like men who lived under a crumbling cliff and had almost managed to convince themselves it would never fall. Or at least not tonight. Not in the next hour.

Perrin walked on by them, his bootheels making echoes. The officer started toward him, then hesitated when Perrin did not stop to be challenged. He knew who Perrin was, of course; at least, he knew as much as any Tairen knew. Traveling companion of Aes Sedai, friend of the Lord Dragon. Not a man to be interfered with by a mere officer of the Defenders of the Stone. There was his apparent task of guarding the Lord Dragon's rest, of course, but though he probably did not admit it even to himself, the officer had to know that he and his brave show of polished armor were simply that. The real guards were those Perrin met when he strode beyond the columns and approached the doors to Rand's chambers.

They had been sitting so still behind the columns that they seemed to fade into the stone, though their coats and breeches—in shades of gray and brown, made to hide them in the Waste—stood out here as soon as they moved. Six Maidens of the Spear, Aiel women who had chosen a warrior's life over the hearth, flowed between him and the doors on soft, laced boots that reached their knees. They were tall for women, the tallest barely a hand shorter than he, sun-darkened, with short-cropped hair, yellow or red or something in between. Two held curved horn bows with arrows nocked, if not drawn. The others carried small hide bucklers and three or four short spears each—short, but with spearheads long enough to stick through a man's body with inches to spare.

"I do not think I can let you go in," a woman with flame-colored hair said, smiling slightly to take the sting out of the words. Aiel did not go about grinning as much as other folk, or show a great deal of any outward emotion for that matter. "I think he does not want to see anyone tonight."

"I am going in, Bain." Ignoring her spears, he took her by the upper arms. That was when it became impossible to ignore the spears, since she had managed to get a spearpoint hard against the side of his throat. For that matter, a somewhat blonder woman named Chiad suddenly had one of her spears at the other side, as if the two were intended to meet somewhere in the middle of his neck. The other women only watched, confident that Bain and Chiad could handle whatever had to be done. Still, he did his best. “I don’t have time to argue with you. Not that you listen to people who argue with you, as I remember. I am going in.” As gently as he could, he picked Bain up and set her out of his way.

Chiad’s spear only needed her to breathe on it to draw blood, but after one startled widening of dark blue eyes, Bain abruptly took hers away and grinned. “Would you like to learn a game called Maidens’ Kiss, Perrin? You might play well, I think. At the very least you would learn something.” One of the others laughed aloud. Chiad’s spearpoint left his neck.

He took a deep breath, hoping they would not notice it was his first since the spears touched him. They had not veiled their faces—their *shoufa* lay coiled around their necks like dark scarves—but he did not know if Aiel had to do so before they killed, only that veiling meant they were ready to.

“Another time, perhaps,” he said politely. They were all grinning as if Bain had said something amusing, and his not understanding was part of the humor. Thom was right. A man could go crazy trying to understand women, of any nation and any station in life; that was what Thom said.

As he reached for a door handle in the shape of a rearing golden lion, Bain added, “On your head be it. He has already chased out what most men would consider better company by far than you.”

Of course, he thought, pulling open the door, *Berelain. She was coming from here. Tonight, everything is revolving around—*

The First of Mayene vanished from his thoughts as he got a look into the room. Broken mirrors hung on the walls and broken glass covered the floor, along with shards of shattered porcelain and feathers from the slashed mattress. Open books lay tumbled among overturned chairs and benches. And Rand was sitting at the foot of his bed, slumped against one of the bedposts with eyes closed and hands limp atop *Callandor*, which lay across his knees. He looked as if he had taken a bath in blood.

“Get Moiraine!” Perrin snapped at the Aiel women. Was Rand still alive? If he was, he needed Aes Sedai Healing to stay that way. “Tell her to hurry!” He heard a gasp behind him, then soft boots running.

Rand lifted his head. His face was a smeared mask. “Shut the door.”

“Moiraine will be here soon, Rand. Rest easy. She will—”

“Shut the door, Perrin.”

Murmuring among themselves, the Aiel women frowned, but moved back. Perrin pulled the door to, cutting off a questioning shout from the white-plumed officer.

Glass crunched under his boots as he crossed the carpet to Rand. Tearing a strip from a wildly sliced linen sheet, he wadded it against the wound in Rand's side. Rand's hands tightened on the transparent sword at the pressure, then relaxed. Blood soaked through almost immediately. Cuts and gashes covered him from the soles of his feet to his head; slivers of glass glittered in many of them. Perrin rolled his shoulders helplessly. He did not know what more to do, other than wait for Moiraine.

"What under the Light did you try to do, Rand? You look as though you tried to skin yourself. And you nearly killed me, as well." For a moment he thought Rand was not going to answer.

"Not me," Rand said finally, in a near whisper. "One of the Forsaken."

Perrin tried to relax muscles he did not remember tensing. The effort was only partly successful. He had mentioned the Forsaken to Faile, not exactly casually, but by and large he had been trying not to think of what the Forsaken might do when they found out where Rand was. If one of them could bring down the Dragon Reborn, he or she would stand high above the others when the Dark One broke free. The Dark One free, and the Last Battle lost before it was fought.

"Are you sure?" he said, just as quietly.

"It had to be, Perrin. It had to be."

"If one of them came after me as well as you . . . ? Where's Mat, Rand? If he was alive, and went through what I did, he'd be thinking what I did. That it was you. He'd be here by now to bless you out."

"Or on a horse and halfway to the city gates." Rand struggled to sit erect. Drying blood smears cracked, and fresh trickles started on his chest and shoulders. "If he is dead, Perrin, you had best get as far from me as you can. I think you and Loial are right about that." He paused, studying Perrin. "You and Mat must wish I had never been born. Or at least that you'd never seen me."

There was no point in going to check; if anything had happened to Mat, it was over and done now. And he had a feeling that his makeshift bandage pressed against Rand's side might be what would keep him alive long enough for Moiraine to get there. "You don't seem to care if he *has* gone off. Burn me, he’s important, too. What are you going to do if he’s gone? Or dead, the Light send it not so.”

“What they least expect.” Rand’s eyes looked like morning mist covering the dawn, blue-gray with a feverish glow seeping through. His voice had a knife edge. “That is what I have to do in any case. What *everyone* least expects.”

Perrin took a slow breath. Rand had a right to taut nerves. It was not a sign of incipient madness. He had to stop watching for signs of madness. Those signs would come soon enough, and watching would do nothing but keep his stomach tied in knots. “What’s that?” he asked quietly.

Rand closed his eyes. “I only know I have to catch them by surprise. Catch everyone by surprise,” he muttered fiercely.

One of the doors opened to admit a tall Aielman, his dark red hair touched with gray. Behind him the Tairen officer’s plumes bobbed as he argued with the Maidens; he was still arguing when Bain pushed the door shut.

Rhuarc surveyed the room with sharp blue eyes, as if he suspected enemies hiding behind a drape or an overturned chair. The clan chief of the Taardad Aiel had no visible weapon except the heavy-bladed knife at his waist, but he carried authority and confidence like weapons, quietly, yet as surely as if they were sheathed alongside the knife. And his *shoufa* hung about his shoulders; no one who knew the slightest about Aiel took one for less than dangerous when he wore the means to veil his face.

“That Tairen fool outside sent word to his commander that something had happened in here,” Rhuarc said, “and rumors are already sprouting like corpse moss in a deep cave. Everything from the White Tower trying to kill you to the Last Battle fought here in this room.” Perrin opened his mouth; Rhuarc raised a forestalling hand. “I happened to meet Berelain, looking as if she had been told the day she would die, and she told me the truth of it. And it does look to be the truth, though I doubted her.”

“I sent for Moiraine,” Perrin said. Rhuarc nodded. Of course, the Maidens would have told him everything they knew.

Rand gave a painful bark of a laugh. “I told her to keep quiet. It seems the Lord Dragon doesn’t rule Mayene.” He sounded more wryly amused than anything else.

“I have daughters older than that young woman,” Rhuarc said. “I do not believe she will tell anyone else. I think she would like to forget everything that happened tonight."

"And I would like to know what happened," Moiraine said, gliding into the room. Slight and slender as she was, Rhuarc towered over her as much as the man who followed her in—Lan, her Warder—but it was the Aes Sedai who dominated the room. She must have run to come so fast, but she was calm as a frozen lake now. It took a great deal to ruffle Moiraine's serenity. Her blue silk gown had a high lace neck and sleeves slashed with darker velvet, but the heat and humidity did not appear to touch her. A small blue stone, suspended on her forehead from a fine golden chain in her dark hair, flashed in the light, emphasizing the absence of the slightest sheen of sweat.

As always when they met, Lan's and Rhuarc's icy blue stares nearly struck sparks. A braided leather cord held Lan's dark hair, gray-streaked at the temples. His face looked to have been carved from rock, all hard planes and angles, and his sword rode his hip like part of his body. Perrin was not sure which of the two men was more deadly, but he thought a mouse could starve on the difference.

The Warder's eyes swung to Rand. "I thought you were old enough to shave without someone to guide your hand."

Rhuarc smiled, a slight smile but the first Perrin had ever seen from him in Lan's presence. "He is young yet. He will learn."

Lan glanced back at the Aielman, then returned the smile, just as slightly.

Moiraine gave the two men a brief, withering look. She did not seem to pick her way as she crossed the carpet, but she stepped so lightly, holding her skirts up, that not one shard of glass crunched under her slippers. Her eyes swept around the room; taking in the smallest details, Perrin was sure. For a moment she studied him—he did not meet her gaze; she knew too much about him for comfort—but she bore down on Rand like a silent, silken avalanche, icy and inexorable.

Perrin dropped his hand and moved out of her way. The wadded cloth stayed against Rand's side, held by congealing blood. From head to foot the blood was beginning to dry in black streaks and smears. The slivers of glass in his skin glittered in the lamplight. Moiraine touched the blood-caked cloth with her fingertips, then took her hand back as though changing her mind about looking underneath. Perrin wondered how the Aes Sedai could look at Rand without wincing, but her smooth face did not change. She smelled faintly of rose-scented soap.

“At least you are alive.” Her voice was musical, a chill, angry music at the moment. “What happened can wait. Try to touch the True Source.”

“Why?” Rand asked in a wary voice. “I cannot Heal myself, even if I knew how to Heal. No one can. I know that much.”

For the space of a breath Moiraine seemed on the point of an outburst, strange as that would have been, but in another breath she was once again layered in calm so deep that surely nothing could crack it. “Only some of the strength for Healing comes from the Healer. The Power can replace what comes from the Healed. Without it, you will spend tomorrow flat on your back and perhaps the next day as well. Now, draw on the Power, if you can, but do nothing with it. Simply hold it. Use this, if you must.” She did not have to bend far to touch *Callandor*.

Rand moved the sword from under her hand. “Simply hold it, you say.” He sounded about to laugh out loud. “Very well.”

Nothing happened that Perrin could see, not that he expected to. Rand sat there like the survivor of a lost battle, looking at Moiraine. She hardly blinked. Twice she scrubbed her fingers against her palms as if unaware.

After a time Rand sighed. “I cannot even reach the Void. I can’t seem to concentrate.” A quick grin cracked the blood drying on his face. “I do not understand why.” A thick red thread snaked its way down past his left eye.

“Then I will do it as I always have,” Moiraine said, and took Rand’s head in her hands, careless of the blood that ran over her fingers.

Rand lurched to his feet with a roaring gasp, as if all the breath were being squeezed from his lungs, back arching so his head nearly tore free of her grasp. One arm flung wide, fingers spread and bending back so far it seemed they must break; the other hand clamped down on *Callandor*’s hilt, the muscles of that arm knotting visibly into cramps. He shook like cloth caught in a windstorm. Dark flakes of dried blood fell, and bits of glass tinkled onto the chest and floor, forced out of cuts closing up and knitting themselves together.

Perrin shivered as if that windstorm roared around him. He had seen Healing done before, that and more, greater and worse, but he could never be complacent about seeing the Power used, about knowing it was being used, not even for this. Tales of Aes Sedai, told by merchants’ guards and drivers, had embedded themselves in his mind long years before he met

Moiraine. Rhuarc smelled sharply uneasy. Only Lan took it as a matter of course. Lan and Moiraine.

Almost as soon as it began, it was done. Moiraine took her hands away, and Rand slumped, catching the bedpost to hold himself on his feet. It was difficult to say whether he clutched the bedpost or *Callandor* more tenaciously. When Moiraine tried to take the sword to replace it on the ornate stand against the wall, he drew it away from her firmly, even roughly.

Her mouth tightened momentarily, but she contented herself with pulling the wad of cloth from his side, using it to scrub away some of the surrounding smears. The old wound was a tender scar again. The other injuries were simply gone. The mostly dried blood that still covered him could have come from someone else.

Moiraine frowned. “It still does not respond,” she murmured, half to herself. “It will not heal completely.”

“That is the one that will kill me, isn’t it?” he asked her softly, then quoted, “ ‘His blood on the rocks of Shayol Ghul, washing away the Shadow, sacrifice for man’s salvation.’ ”

“You read too much,” she said sharply, “and understand too little.”

“Do you understand more? If you do, then tell me.”

“He is only trying to find his way,” Lan said suddenly. “No man likes to run forward blindly when he knows there is a cliff somewhere ahead.”

Perrin gave a twitch of surprise. Lan almost never disagreed with Moiraine, or at least not where anyone could overhear. He and Rand had been spending a good deal of time together, though, practicing the sword.

Moiraine’s dark eyes flashed, but what she said was “He needs to be in bed. Will you ask that washwater be brought, and another bedchamber prepared? This one needs a thorough cleaning and a new mattress.” Lan nodded and put his head into the anteroom for a moment, speaking quietly.

“I will sleep here, Moiraine.” Letting go of the bedpost, Rand pushed himself erect, grounding *Callandor*’s point on the littered carpet and resting both hands on the hilt. If he leaned a little on the sword, it did not show much. “I won’t be chased any more. Not even out of a bed.”

“*Tai’shar Manetheren*,” Lan murmured.

This time even Rhuarc looked startled, but if Moiraine heard the Warder compliment Rand, she gave no sign of it. She was staring at Rand, her face smooth but thunderheads in her eyes. Rand wore a quizzical little smile, as if wondering what she would try next.

Perrin edged toward the doors. If Rand and the Aes Sedai were going to match wills, he would just as soon be elsewhere. Lan did not appear to care; it was hard to tell with that stance of his, somehow standing with his back straight and slouching at the same time. He could have been bored enough to sleep where he stood or ready to draw his sword; his manner suggested either, or both. Rhuarc stood much the same, but he was eyeing the doors, too.

"Stay where you are!" Moiraine did not look away from Rand, and her outflung finger pointed halfway between Perrin and Rhuarc, but Perrin's feet stopped just the same. Rhuarc shrugged and folded his arms.

"Stubborn," Moiraine muttered. This time the word was for Rand. "Very well. If you mean to stand there until you drop, you can use the time before you fall on your face to tell me what occurred here. I cannot teach you, but if you tell me perhaps I can see what you did wrong. A small chance, but perhaps I can." Her voice sharpened. "You must learn to control it, and I do not mean just because of things like this. If you do not learn to control the Power, it will kill you. You know that. I have told you often enough. You must teach yourself. You must find it within yourself."

"I did nothing except survive," he said in a dry voice. She opened her mouth, but he went on. "Do you think I could channel and not know it? I didn't do it in my sleep. This happened awake." He wavered, and caught himself on the sword.

"Even you could not channel anything but Spirit asleep," Moiraine said coolly, "and this was never done with Spirit. I was about to ask what *did* happen."

Perrin felt his hackles rising as Rand told his story. The axe had been bad enough, but at least the axe was something solid, something real. To have your own reflection jump out of mirrors at you. . . . Unconsciously he shifted his feet, trying not to stand on any fragments of glass.

Soon after he began speaking, Rand glanced behind him at the chest, a quick look, as if he did not want it observed. After a moment the slivers of silvered glass that were scattered across the lid of the chest stirred and slid off onto the carpet as though pushed by an unseen broom. Rand exchanged looks with Moiraine, then sat down slowly and went on. Perrin was not sure which of them had cleared the chest top. There was no mention of Berelain in the tale.

"It must have been one of the Forsaken," Rand finished at last. "Maybe Sammael. You said he's in Illian. Unless one of them is here in Tear. Could Sammael reach the Stone from Illian?"

"Not even if *he* held *Callandor,*" Moiraine told him. "There are limits. Sammael is only a man, not the Dark One."

Only a man? Not a very good description, Perrin thought. A man who could channel, but who somehow had not gone mad; at least, not yet, not that anyone knew. A man perhaps as strong as Rand, but where Rand was trying to learn, Sammael knew every trick of his talents already. A man who had spent three thousand years trapped in the Dark One's prison, a man who had gone over to the Shadow of his own choice. No. "Only a man" did not begin to describe Sammael, or any of the Forsaken, male or female.

"Then one of them is here. In the city." Rand put his head down on his wrists, but jerked himself erect immediately, glaring at those in the room. "I'll not be chased again. I'll be the hound, first. I will find him—or her—and I will—"

"Not one of the Forsaken," Moiraine cut in. "I think not. This was too simple. And too complex."

Rand spoke calmly. "No riddles, Moiraine. If not the Forsaken, who? Or what?"

The Aes Sedai's face could have done for an anvil, yet she hesitated, feeling her way. There was no telling whether she was unsure of the answer or deciding how much to reveal.

"As the seals holding the Dark One's prison weaken," she said after a time, "it may be inevitable that a . . . miasma . . . will escape even while he is still held. Like bubbles rising from the things rotting on the bottom of a pond. But these bubbles will drift through the Pattern until they attach to a thread and burst."

"Light!" It slipped out before Perrin could stop it. Moiraine's eyes turned to him. "You mean what happened to . . . to Rand is going to start happening to everybody?"

"Not to everyone. Not yet, at least. In the beginning I think there will only be a few bubbles, slipping through cracks the Dark One can reach through. Later, who can say? And just as *ta'veren* bend the other threads in the Pattern around them, I think perhaps *ta'veren* will tend to attract these bubbles more powerfully than others do." Her eyes said she knew Rand was not the only one to have had a waking nightmare. A brief touch of a smile, there and gone almost before he saw it, said he could keep silent if he wished to hold it secret from others. But she knew. "Yet in the months to come—the years, should we be lucky enough to have that long—I fear a good many people will see things to give them white hairs, if they survive."

"Mat," Rand said. "Do you know if he . . . ? Is he . . . ?"

"I will know soon enough," Moiraine replied calmly. "What is done cannot be undone, but we can hope." Whatever her tone, though, she smelled ill at ease until Rhuarc spoke.

"He is well. Or was. I saw him on my way here."

"Going where?" Moiraine said with an edge in her voice.

"He looked to be heading for the servants' quarters," the Aielman told her. He knew that the three were *ta'veren*, if not as much else as he thought he did, and he knew Mat well enough to add, "Not the stables, Aes Sedai. The other way, toward the river. And there are no boats at the Stone's docks." He did not stumble over words like "boat" and "dock" the way most of the Aiel did, although in the Waste such things existed only in stories.

She nodded as if she had expected nothing else. Perrin shook his head; she was so used to hiding her real thoughts, she seemed to veil them out of habit.

Suddenly one of the doors opened and Bain and Chiad slipped in, without their spears. Bain was carrying a large white bowl and a fat pitcher with steam rising from the top. Chiad had towels folded under her arm.

"Why are *you* bringing this?" Moiraine demanded.

Chiad shrugged. "She would not come in."

Rand barked a laugh. "Even the servants know enough to stay clear of me. Put it anywhere."

"Your time is running out, Rand," Moiraine said. "The Tairens are becoming used to you, after a fashion, and no one fears what is familiar as much as what is strange. How many weeks, or days, before someone tries to put an arrow in your back or poison in your food? How long before one of the Forsaken strikes, or another bubble comes sliding along the Pattern?"

"Don't try to harry me, Moiraine." He was blood filthy, half naked, more than half leaning on *Callandor* to stay sitting up, but he managed to fill those words with quiet command. "I will not run for you, either."

“Choose your way soon,” she said. “And this time, inform me what you mean to do. My knowledge cannot aid you if you refuse to accept my help.”

“Your help?” Rand said wearily. “I’ll take your help. But I will decide, not you.” He looked at Perrin as if trying to tell him something without words, something he did not want the others to hear. Perrin had not a clue what it was. After a moment Rand sighed; his head sank a little. “I want to sleep. All of you, go away. Please. We will talk tomorrow.” His eyes flickered to Perrin again, underscoring the words for him.

Moiraine crossed the room to Bain and Chiad, and the two Aiel women leaned close so she could speak for their ears alone. Perrin heard only a buzz, and wondered if she was using the Power to stop him eavesdropping. She knew the keenness of his hearing. He was sure of it when Bain whispered back and he still could not make out anything. The Aes Sedai had done nothing about his sense of smell, though. The Aiel women looked at Rand as they listened, and they smelled wary. Not afraid, but as if Rand were a large animal that would be dangerous if they misstepped.

The Aes Sedai turned back to Rand. “We *will* talk tomorrow. You cannot sit like a partridge waiting for a hunter’s net.” She was moving for the door before Rand could reply. Lan looked at Rand as if about to say something, but followed her without speaking.

“Rand?” Perrin said.

“We do what we have to.” Rand did not look up from the clear hilt between his hands. “We all do what we have to.” He smelled afraid.

Perrin nodded and followed Rhuarc out of the room. Moiraine and Lan were nowhere in sight. The Tairen officer was staring at the doors from ten paces off, trying to pretend the distance was his choice and had nothing to do with the four Aiel women watching him. The other two Maidens were still in the bedchamber, Perrin realized. He heard voices from the room.

“Go away,” Rand said tiredly. “Just put that down and go away.”

“If you can stand up,” Chiad said cheerfully, “we will. Only stand.”

There was the sound of water splashing into a bowl. “We have tended to wounded before,” Bain said in soothing tones. “And I used to wash my brothers when they were little.”

Rhuarc pushed the door shut, cutting off the rest.

“You do not treat him the way the Tairens do,” Perrin said quietly. “No bowing and scraping. I don’t think I have heard one of you call him Lord

Dragon.”

“The Dragon Reborn is a wetlander prophecy,” Rhuarc said. “Ours is He Who Comes With the Dawn.”

“I thought they were the same. Else why did you come to the Stone? Burn me, Rhuarc, you Aiel are the People of the Dragon, just as the Prophecies say. You’ve as good as admitted it, even if you won’t say it out loud.”

Rhuarc ignored the last part. “In your Prophecies of the Dragon, the fall of the Stone and the taking of *Callandor* proclaim that the Dragon has been Reborn. Our prophecy says only that the Stone must fall before He Who Comes With the Dawn appears to take us back to what was ours. They may be one man, but I doubt even the Wise Ones could say for sure. If Rand is the one, there are things he must do yet to prove it.”

“What?” Perrin demanded.

“If he is the one, he will know, and do them. If he does not, then our search still goes on.”

Something unreadable in the Aielman’s voice pricked Perrin’s ears. “And if he isn’t the one you search for? What then, Rhuarc?”

“Sleep well and safely, Perrin.” Rhuarc’s soft boots made no sound on the black marble as he walked away.

The Tairen officer was still staring past the Maidens, smelling of fear, failing to mask the anger and hatred on his face. If the Aiel decided Rand was not He Who Comes With the Dawn. . . . Perrin studied the Tairen officer’s face and thought of the Maidens not being there, of the Stone empty of Aiel, and he shivered. He had to make sure Faile decided to leave. That was all there was for it. She had to decide to go, and without him.

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CHAPTER 4

Strings

Thom Merrilin sprinkled sand across what he had written to blot the ink, then carefully poured the sand back into its jar and flipped the lid shut. Riffling through the papers scattered in rough piles across the table—six tallow candles made fire a real danger, but he needed the light—he selected a crumpled sheet marred by an inkblot. Carefully he compared it with what he had written, then stroked a long white mustache with a thumb in satisfaction and permitted himself a leathery-faced smile. The High Lord Carleon himself would have thought it was his own hand.

Be wary. Your husband suspects.

Only those words, and no signature. Now if he could arrange for the High Lord Tedosian to find it where his wife, the Lady Alteima, might carelessly have left it. . . .

A knock sounded at the door, and he jumped. No one came to see him at this time of the night.

“A moment,” he called, hastily stuffing pens and inkpots and selected papers into a battered writing chest. “A moment while I put on a shirt.”

Locking the chest, he shoved it under the table where it might escape casual notice and ran an eye over his small, windowless room to see if he had left anything out that should not be seen. Hoops and balls for juggling littered his narrow, unmade bed, and lay among his shaving things on a single shelf with fire wands and small items for sleight of hand. His gleeman’s cloak, covered with loose patches in a hundred colors, hung from a peg on the wall along with his spare clothes and the hard leather cases holding his harp and flute. A woman’s diaphanous red silk scarf was tied around the strap of the harp case, but it could have belonged to anyone.

He was not sure he remembered who had tied it there; he tried to pay no more attention to one woman than any other, and all of it lighthearted and laughing. Make them laugh, even make them sigh, but avoid entanglements, that was his motto; he had no time for those. That was what he told himself.

“I’m coming.” He limped to the door irritably. Once he had drawn *oohs* and *aahs* from people who could hardly believe, even while they watched, that a rawboned, white-haired old man could do backsprings and handstands and flips, limber and quick as a boy. The limp had put an end to that, and he hated it. The leg ached worse when he was tired. He jerked open the door, and blinked in surprise. “Well. Come in, Mat. I thought you would be hard at work lightening lordlings’ purses.”

“They didn’t want to gamble any more tonight,” Mat said sourly, dropping onto the three-legged stool that served as a second chair. His coat was undone and his hair disheveled. His brown eyes darted around, never resting on one spot long, but their usual twinkle, suggesting that the lad saw something funny where no one else did, was missing tonight.

Thom frowned at him, considering. Mat never stepped across this threshold without a quip about the shabby room. He accepted Thom’s explanation that his sleeping beside the servants’ quarters would help people forget that he had arrived in the shadow of Aes Sedai, but Mat seldom let a chance for a joke pass. If he realized that the room also assured that no one could think of Thom having any connection to the Dragon Reborn, Mat, being Mat, probably thought that a reasonable wish. It had taken Thom all of two sentences, delivered in haste during a rare moment when no one was looking, to make Rand see the real point. Everyone listened to a gleeman, everyone watched him, but no one really saw him or remembered who he talked to, as long as he was only a gleeman, with his hedgerow entertainments fit for country folk and servants, and perhaps to amuse the ladies. That was how Tairens saw it. It was not as if he were a bard, after all.

What was bothering the boy to bring him down here at this hour? Probably one or another of the young women, and some old enough to know better, who had let themselves be caught by Mat’s mischievous grin. Still, he would pretend it was one of Mat’s usual visits until the lad said otherwise.

“I’ll get the stones board. It is late, but we have time for one game.” He could not resist adding, “Would you care for a wager on it?” He would not have tossed dice with Mat for a copper, but stones was another matter;

he thought there was too much order and pattern in stones for Mat’s strange luck.

“What? Oh. No. It’s too late for games. Thom, did . . . ? Did anything . . . happen down here?”

Leaning the stones board against a table leg, Thom dug his tabac pouch and long-stemmed pipe out of the litter remaining on the table. “Such as what?” he asked, thumbing the bowl full. He had time to stick a twist of paper in the flame of one of the candles, puff the pipe alight and blow out the spill before Mat answered.

“Such as Rand going insane, that’s what. No, you’d not have had to ask if it had.”

A prickling made Thom shift his shoulders, but he blew a blue-gray streamer of smoke as calmly as he could and took his chair, stretching his gimpy leg out in front of him. “What happened?”

Mat drew a deep breath, then let everything out in a rush. “The playing cards tried to kill me. The Amyrlin, and the High Lord, and. . . . I didn’t dream it, Thom. That’s why those puffed-up jackdaws don’t want to gamble anymore. They’re afraid it will happen again. Thom, I’m thinking of leaving Tear.”

The prickling felt as if he had blackwasp nettles stuffed down his back. Why had he not left Tear himself long since? Much the wisest thing. Hundreds of villages lay out there, waiting for a gleeman to entertain and amaze them. And each with an inn or two full of wine to drown memories. But if he did, Rand would have no one except Moiraine to keep the High Lords from maneuvering him into corners, and maybe cutting his throat. She could do it, of course. Using different methods than his. He thought she could. She was Cairhienin, which meant she had probably taken in the Game of Houses with her mother’s milk. And she would tie another string to Rand for the White Tower while she was about it. Mesh him in an Aes Sedai net so strong he would never escape. But if the boy was going mad already. . . .

Fool, Thom called himself. A pure fool to stay mixed in this because of something fifteen years in the past. Staying would not change that; what was done was done. He had to see Rand face-to-face, no matter what he had told him about keeping clear. Perhaps no one would think it too odd if a gleeman asked to perform a song for the Lord Dragon, a song especially composed. He knew a deservedly obscure Kandori tune, praising some unnamed lord for his greatness and courage in grandiose terms that never quite managed to name deeds or places. It had probably been bought by some lord who had no deeds worth naming. Well, it would serve him now. Unless Moiraine decided it was strange. That would be as bad as the High Lords taking notice. *I am a fool! I should be out of here tonight!*

He was roiling inside, his stomach churning acid, but he had spent long years learning to keep his face straight before ever he put on a gleeman's cloak. He puffed three smoke rings, one inside the other, and said, "You have been thinking of leaving Tear since the day you walked into the Stone."

Perched on the edge of the stool, Mat shot him an angry look. "And I mean to. I do. Why not come with me, Thom? There are towns where they think the Dragon Reborn hasn't drawn a breath yet, where nobody's given a thought to the bloody Prophecies of the bloody Dragon in years, if ever. Places where they think the Dark One is a grandmother's tale, and Trollocs are travelers' wild stories, and Myrddraal ride shadows to scare children. You could play your harp and tell your stories, and I could find a game of dice. We could live like lords, traveling as we want, staying where we want, with no one trying to kill us."

That hit too close for comfort. Well, he was a fool and there it was; he just had to make the best of it. "If you really mean to go, why haven't you?"

"Moiraine watches me," Mat said bitterly. "And when she isn't, she has somebody else doing it."

"I know. Aes Sedai don't like to let someone go once they lay hands on them." It was more than that, he was sure, more than what was openly known, certainly, but Mat denied any such thing, and no one else who knew was talking either, if anyone besides Moiraine did know. It hardly mattered. He liked Mat—he even owed him, in a fashion—but Mat and his troubles were a street-corner raree compared to Rand. "But I cannot believe she really has someone watching you all the time."

"As good as. She's always asking people where I am, what I'm doing. It gets back to me. Do you know anybody who won't tell an Aes Sedai what she wants to know? I don't. As good as being watched."

"You could avoid eyes if you put your mind to it. I've never seen anyone as good at sneaking about as you. I mean that as a compliment."

"Something always comes up," Mat muttered. "There's so much gold to be had here. And there's a big-eyed girl in the kitchens who likes a little kiss and tickle, and one of the maids has hair like silk, to her waist, and the roundest. . . .” He trailed off as if he had suddenly realized how foolish he sounded.

“Have you considered that maybe it’s because—”

“If you mention *ta’veren*, Thom, I’m leaving.”

Thom changed what he had been going to say. “—that maybe it’s because Rand is your friend and you don’t want to desert him?”

“Desert him!” The boy jumped up, kicking over the stool. “Thom, he is the bloody Dragon Reborn! At least, that’s what he and Moiraine say. Maybe he is. He can channel, and he has that bloody sword that looks like glass. Prophecies! I don’t know. But I know I would have to be as crazy as these Tairens to stay.” He paused. “You don’t think. . . . You don’t think Moiraine is keeping me here, do you? With the Power?”

“I do not believe she can,” Thom said slowly. He knew a good bit about Aes Sedai, enough to have some idea how much he did not know, and he thought he was right on this.

Mat raked his fingers through his hair. “Thom, I think about leaving all the time, but. . . . I get these strange feelings. Almost as if something was going to happen. Something. . . . Momentous; that’s the word. It’s like knowing there’ll be fireworks for Sunday, only I don’t know what it is I’m expecting. Whenever I think too much about leaving, it happens. And suddenly I’ve found some reason to stay another day. Always just one more bloody day. Doesn’t that sound like Aes Sedai work to you?”

Thom swallowed the word *ta’veren* and took his pipe from between his teeth to peer into the smoldering tabac. He did not know much about *ta’veren*, but then no one did except the Aes Sedai, or maybe some of the Ogier. “I was never much good at helping people with their problems.” *And worse with my own*, he thought. “With an Aes Sedai close to hand, I’d advise most people to ask her for help.” *Advice I’d not take myself*.

“Ask Moiraine!”

“I suppose that is out of the question in this case. But Nynaeve was your Wisdom back in Emond’s Field. Village Wisdoms are used to answering people’s questions, helping with their problems.”

Mat gave a raucous snort of laughter. “And put up with one of her lectures about drinking and gambling and . . . ? Thom, she acts like I’m ten years old. Sometimes I think she believes I’ll marry a nice girl and settle down on my father’s farm.”

“Some men would not find it an objectionable life,” Thom said quietly.

“Well, I would. I want more than cows and sheep and tabac for the rest of my life. I want—” Mat shook his head. “All these holes in memory. Sometimes I think if I could just fill them in, I’d know. . . . Burn me, I don’t know what I’d know, but I know I want to know it. That’s a twisty riddle, isn’t it?”

“I’m not certain even an Aes Sedai can help with that. A gleeman surely can’t.”

“I said no Aes Sedai!”

Thom sighed. “Calm yourself, boy. I was not suggesting it.”

“I *am* leaving. As soon as I can fetch my things and find a horse. Not a minute longer.”

“In the middle of the night? The morning will do.” He refrained from adding, *If you really do leave*. “Sit down. Relax. We’ll play a game of stones. I have a jar of wine here, somewhere.”

Mat hesitated, glancing at the door. Finally he jerked his coat straight. “The morning will do.” He sounded uncertain, but he picked up the overturned stool and set it beside the table. “But no wine for me,” he added as he sat down. “Strange enough things happen when my head is clear. I want to know the difference.”

Thom was thoughtful as he put the board and the bags of stones on the table. Just that easily the lad was diverted. Pulled along by an even stronger *ta’veren* named Rand al’Thor, was how Thom saw it. It occurred to him to wonder if he was caught in the same way. His life had certainly not been headed toward the Stone of Tear and this room when he first met Rand, but since then it had been twitched about like a kite string. If he decided to leave, say if Rand really had gone mad, would he find reasons to keep putting it off?

“What is this, Thom?” Mat’s boot had encountered the writing case under the table. “Is it all right if I move it out of my way?”

“Of course. Go right ahead.” He winced inside as Mat shoved the case aside roughly with his foot. He hoped he had corked all the ink bottles tightly. “Choose,” he said, holding out his fists.

Mat tapped the left, and Thom opened it to reveal a smooth black stone, flat and round. The boy chortled at having the first go and placed the stone on the crosshatched board. No one seeing the eagerness in his eyes would have suspected that only moments before he had been twice as eager to go. A greatness he refused to recognize clinging to his back, and an Aes Sedai intent on keeping him for one of her pets. The lad was well and truly caught.

If he was caught, too, Thom decided, it would be worth it to help one man, at least, keep free of Aes Sedai. Worth it, to make a payment on that fifteen-year-old debt.

Suddenly and strangely content, he set a white stone. “Did I ever tell you,” he said around his pipestem, “about the wager I once made with a Domani woman? She had eyes that could drink a man’s soul, and an odd-looking red bird she had bought off a Sea Folk ship. She claimed it could tell the future. This bird had a fat yellow beak nearly as long as its body, and it. . . .”

* * *

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CHAPTER 5

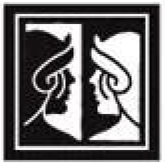

Questioners

“They should be back by now.” Egwene fluttered the painted silk fan vigorously, glad the nights were at least a little cooler than the days. Tairen women carried the fans all the time—the nobles, at least, and the wealthy—but as far as she could see they did no good at all except when the sun was down, and not much then. Even the lamps, great golden, mirrored things on silvered wall brackets, seemed to add to the heat. “What can be keeping them?” An hour, Moiraine had promised them, for the first time in days, and then she had left without explanation after a bare five minutes. “Did she give any hint of why they wanted her, Aviendha? Or who wanted her, for that matter?”

Seated cross-legged on the floor beside the door, large green eyes startling in her dark tanned face, the Aiel woman shrugged. In coat and breeches and soft boots, *shoufa* looped about her neck, she appeared unarmed. “Careen whispered her message to Moiraine Sedai. It would not have been proper to listen. I am sorry, Aes Sedai.”

Guiltily, Egwene fingered the Great Serpent ring on her right hand, the golden serpent biting its own tail. As an Accepted, she should have been wearing it on the third finger of her left hand, but letting the High Lords believe that they had four full Aes Sedai inside the Stone kept them on their best manners, or what passed for manners among Tairen nobles. Moiraine did not lie, of course; she never said they were more than Accepted. But she never said they *were* Accepted, either, and let everyone think what they wanted to think, believe what they thought they saw. Moiraine could not lie, but she could make truth dance a fine jig.

It was not the first time Egwene and the others had pretended to full sisterhood since leaving the Tower, but more and more she felt uncomfortable deceiving Aviendha. She liked the Aiel woman, thought they could be friends if they could ever come to know one another; but that hardly seemed possible as long as Aviendha thought Egwene was Aes Sedai. The Aiel woman was there only at Moiraine's order, issued for unspoken purposes of her own. Egwene suspected it was to give them an Aiel bodyguard, as if they had not learned to protect themselves. Still, even if she and Aviendha did become friends, she could not tell her the truth. The best way to keep a secret was to make sure no one knew who did not absolutely have to know. Another point Moiraine had made. Sometimes Egwene found herself wishing the Aes Sedai could be wrong, glaring wrong, just once. In a way that would not mean disaster, of course. That was the rub.

"Tanchico," Nynaeve muttered. Her dark, wrist-thick braid hung down her back to her waist as she stared out of one of the narrow windows, casements swung out in the hope of catching a night breeze. On the broad River Erinin below bobbed the lanterns of a few fishing boats that had not ventured downriver, but Egwene doubted she saw them. "There is nothing for it but to go to Tanchico, it seems." Nynaeve gave an unconscious hitch to her green dress, with its wide neck that bared her shoulders; she did that a good deal. She would have denied wearing the dress for Lan, Moiraine's Warder—she would have if Egwene had dared make the suggestion—but green, blue and white seemed to be Lan's favorite colors on women, and every dress that was not green, blue or white had vanished from Nynaeve's wardrobe. "Nothing for it." She did not sound happy.

Egwene caught herself giving an upward tug to her own dress. They felt odd, these dresses that just clung to the shoulders. On the other hand, she did not believe she could bear to be more covered. Light as it was, the pale red linen felt like wool. She wished she could bring herself to wear the filmy gowns Berelain wore. Not that they were suitable for public eyes, but they certainly did appear to be cool.

Stop fretting over comfort, she told herself sternly. *Keep your mind on the business at hand*. "Perhaps," she said aloud. "Myself, I am not convinced."

A long, narrow table, polished till it glistened, ran down the middle of the room. A tall chair stood at the end near Egwene, lightly carved and touched here and there with gilt, quite plain for Tear, while the sidechairs had progressively lower backs, until those at the far end seemed little more than benches. Egwene had no idea what purpose the Tairens had put the room to. She and the others used it for questioning two prisoners taken when the Stone fell.

She could not force herself to go into the dungeons, though Rand had ordered all of the implements that had decorated the guardroom walls melted or burned. Neither Nynaeve nor Elayne had been eager to return, either. Besides, this brightly lit room, with its clean-swept green tile floor and its wall panels carved with the Three Crescents of Tear, was a sharp contrast to the grim, gray stone of the cells, all dim and dank and dirty. That had to have some softening effect on the two women in prisoners' rough-woven woolens.

Only that drab brown dress, however, would have told most people that Joiya Byir, standing beyond the table with her back turned, was a prisoner at all. She had been Gray Ajah, and had lost none of the Grays' cool self-possession on shifting her allegiance to the Black. Every line of her proclaimed that she stared rigidly at the far wall of her own choice, and for no other reason. Only a woman who could channel would have seen the thumb-thick flows of Air that held Joiya's arms to her sides and lashed her ankles together. A cage woven of Air kept her eyes straight ahead. Even her ears were stopped up, so she could not hear what anyone said until they wanted her to.

Once again Egwene checked the shield woven from Spirit that blocked Joiya from touching the True Source. It held, as she knew it must. She herself had woven all the flows around Joiya and tied them to maintain themselves, but she could not be easy in the same room with a Darkfriend who had the ability to channel, even if it was blocked. Worse than just a Dark-friend. Black Ajah. Murder was the least of Joiya's crimes. She should have been bowed down under her weight of broken oaths, blasted lives and blighted souls.

Joiya's fellow prisoner, her sister in the Black Ajah, lacked her strength. Standing stoop-shouldered at the far end of the table, head down, Amico Nagoyin seemed to sink in on herself under Egwene's gaze. There was no need to shield her. Amico had been stilled during her capture. Still able to sense the True Source, she would never again touch it, never again channel. The desire to, the need to, would remain, as sharp as the need to breathe, and her loss would be there for as long as she lived, *saidar* forever out of reach. Egwene wished she could find in herself even a shred of pity. But she did not wish for it very hard.

Amico murmured something at the tabletop.

“What?” Nynaeve demanded. “Speak up.”

Amico raised her face humbly on its slender neck. She was still a beautiful woman, with large, dark eyes, but there was something different about her that Egwene could not quite put her finger on. Not the fear that made her clutch her coarse prisoner’s dress with both hands. Something else.

Swallowing, Amico said, “You should go to Tanchico.”

“You’ve told us that twenty times,” Nynaeve said roughly. “Fifty times. Tell us something new. Name names we do not already know. Who still in the White Tower is Black Ajah?”

“I do not know. You must believe me.” Amico sounded tired, utterly beaten. Not at all the way she had sounded when they were the prisoners and she the gaoler. “Before we left the Tower, I knew only Liandrin, Chesmal and Rianna. No one knew more than two or three others, I think. Except Liandrin. I have told you everything I know.”

“Then you are remarkably ignorant for a woman who expected to rule part of the world when the Dark One breaks free,” Egwene said dryly, snapping her fan shut for emphasis. It still stunned her, how easily she could say that now. Her stomach still clenched, and icy fingers still crawled her spine, but she no longer wanted to scream, or run weeping. It was possible to become used to anything.

“I overheard Liandrin that once, talking to Temaile,” Amico said wearily, starting a tale she had told them many times. In the first days of her captivity she had tried to improve her story, but the more she elaborated the more she had tangled herself in her own lies. Now she almost always told it the same way, word for word. “If you could have seen Liandrin’s face when she saw me. . . . She would have murdered me on the spot had she thought I had heard anything. And Temaile likes to hurt people. She enjoys it. I only heard a little before they saw me. Liandrin said there was something in Tanchico, something dangerous to . . . to him.” She meant Rand. She could not say his name, and a mention of the Dragon Reborn was enough to send her into tears. “Liandrin said it was dangerous to whoever used it, too. Almost as dangerous as to . . . him. That is why she had not already gone after it. And she said being able to channel would not protect him. She said, ‘When we find it, his filthy ability will bind him for us.’ ” Sweat ran down her face, but she shivered almost uncontrollably.

Not a word had changed.

Egwene opened her mouth, but Nynaeve spoke first. “I’ve heard enough of this. Let us see if the other has anything new to say.”

Egwene glared at her, and Nynaeve stared back just as hard, neither blinking. *Sometimes she thinks she’s still the Wisdom,* Egwene thought grimly, *and I’m still the village girl to teach about herbs. She had better realize things are different now*. Nynaeve was strong in the Power, stronger than Egwene, but only when she could actually manage to channel; unless angry, Nynaeve could not channel at all.

Elayne usually smoothed things over when it came to this, as it did more often than it should. By the time Egwene thought of smoothing matters herself, she had almost always dug in her heels and flared back, and trying to be soothing then would only be backing down. That was how Nynaeve would see it, she was sure. She could not remember Nynaeve ever making any move to back down, so why should she? This time Elayne was not there; Moiraine had summoned the Daughter-Heir with a word and a gesture to follow the Maiden who had come for the Aes Sedai. Without her, the tension stretched, each of the Accepted waiting for the other to blink first. Aviendha barely breathed; she kept herself strictly out of their confrontations. No doubt she considered it simple wisdom to stand clear.

Strangely, it was Amico who broke the impasse this time, though likely all she meant to do was demonstrate her cooperation. She turned to face the far wall, waiting patiently to be bound.

The foolishness of it struck Egwene suddenly. She was the only woman in the room who could channel—unless Nynaeve grew angry, or Joiya’s shield failed; she tested the weave of Spirit again without thinking—and she indulged in a staring match while Amico waited to accept her bonds. At another time she might have laughed at herself aloud. Instead, she opened herself to *saidar*, that never-seen, ever-felt glowing warmth that seemed always to be just beyond the corner of her eye. The One Power filled her, like joyous life itself redoubled, and she wove the flows around Amico.

Nynaeve merely grunted; it was doubtful she was mad enough to sense what Egwene was doing—she could not, without her temper up—yet she could see Amico stiffen as the flows of Air touched her, then slump, half supported by the flows, as if to show how little she was resisting.

Aviendha shuddered, the way she had taken to doing whenever she knew the Power was being channeled near her.

Egwene wove blocks for Amico's ears—questioning them one at a time did little good if they could hear each other's stories—and turned to Joiya. She shifted her fan from hand to hand so she could wipe them on her dress, and stopped with a grimace of distaste. Her sweaty palms had nothing to do with the temperature.

"Her face," Aviendha said abruptly. And surprisingly; she almost never spoke unless addressed by Moiraine or one of the others. "Amico's face. She does not have the look she did, as if the years had passed her by. Not as much as she did. Is that because she was . . . because she was stilled?" she finished in a breathless rush. She had picked up a few habits being so much around them. No woman of the Tower could speak of stilling without a chill.

Egwene moved down the table, to where she could see Amico's face from the side and yet stay out of Joiya's vision. Joiya's eyes always turned her stomach to a lump of ice.

Aviendha was right; that was the difference she herself had noticed and not understood. Amico looked young, perhaps younger than her years, but it was not quite the agelessness of Aes Sedai who had worked years with the One Power. "You have sharp eyes, Aviendha, but I don't know if this has anything to do with stilling. It must, though, I suppose. I don't know what else could cause it."

She realized that did not sound very much like an Aes Sedai, who generally spoke as if they knew everything; when an Aes Sedai said she did not know, she usually managed to make her denial appear to cloak volumes of knowledge. While she was racking her brain for something properly portentous, Nynaeve came to her rescue.

"Relatively few Aes Sedai have ever been burned out, Aviendha, and far fewer stilled."

"Burned out" was what it was called when it happened by accident; officially, stilling resulted from trial and sentence. Egwene could not see the point of it, really; it was like having two words for falling down the stairs, depending on whether you tripped or were pushed. For that, most Aes Sedai seemed to see it the same, except when teaching novices or Accepted. Three words, actually. Men were "gentled," must be gentled, before they went mad. Only now there was Rand, and the Tower did not dare gentle him.

Nynaeve had put on a lecturing tone, no doubt trying to sound Aes Sedai. She was doing an imitation of Sheriam before a class, Egwene realized, hands clasped at her waist, smiling slightly as if it were all so simple when you applied yourself.

“Stilling is not a thing anyone would choose to study, you understand,” Nynaeve continued. “It is generally accepted to be irreversible. What makes a woman able to channel cannot be replaced once it is removed, any more than a hand that has been cut off can be Healed back into existence.” At least, no one had ever been able to Heal stilling. There had been attempts. What Nynaeve said was generally true, yet some sisters of the Brown Ajah would study almost anything if given the chance, and some Yellow sisters, the best Healers, would try to learn to Heal anything. But even a hint of success at Healing a woman who had been stilled was nonexistent. “Aside from that one hard fact, little is known. Women who are stilled seldom live more than a few years. They seem to stop wanting to live; they give up. As I said, it is an unpleasant subject.”

Aviendha shifted uncomfortably. “I only thought that might be it,” she said in a low voice.

Egwene thought it might be, too. She resolved to ask Moiraine. If she ever saw her without Aviendha there as well. It seemed to her that their deceit got in the way almost as much as it helped.

“Let us see if Joiya still tells the same tale, too.” Even so, she had to take herself in hand before she could unravel the flows of Air woven around the Darkfriend.

Joiya must have been stiff from standing so still for so long, but she turned smoothly to face them. The sweat beading her forehead could not diminish her dignity and presence, any more than her drab, rough dress lessened the sense of her being there by choice. She was a handsome woman with something motherly about her face despite its ageless smoothness, something comforting. But the dark eyes set in that face made a hawk’s look kind. She smiled at them, a smile that never reached those eyes. “The Light illumine you. May the hand of the Creator shelter you.”

“I will not hear that out of you.” Nynaeve’s voice was quiet and calm, but she tossed her braid over her shoulder and gripped the end in her fist, the way she did when angry or uneasy. Egwene did not think she was uneasy; Joiya did not seem to make Nynaeve’s skin crawl as she did Egwene’s.

“I have repented my sins,” Joiya said smoothly. “The Dragon is Reborn, and he holds *Callandor*. The Prophecies are fulfilled. The Dark One must fail. I can see that, now. My repentance is real. No one can walk so long in the Shadow that she cannot come again to the Light.”

Nynaeve’s face had grown darker by the word. Egwene was sure she was furious enough to channel now, but if she did it would probably be to strangle Joiya. Egwene did not believe Joiya’s repentance any more than Nynaeve, of course, but the woman’s information might be real. Joiya was quite capable of a cold decision to go over to what she believed would be the winning side. Or she might only be buying time, lying in hope of rescue.

Lies should not have been possible for an Aes Sedai, even one who had lost all right to the name, not outright lies. The very first of the Three Oaths, taken with the Oath Rod in hand, should have seen to that. But whatever oaths to the Dark One were sworn on joining the Black Ajah, they seemed to sever all Three Oaths.

Well. The Amyrlin had sent them out to hunt the Black Ajah, to hunt Liandrin and the other twelve who had done murder and fled the Tower. And all they had to go on now was what these two could, or would, tell them.

“Give us your tale again,” Egwene commanded. “Use different words, this time. I am tired of listening to memorized stories.” If she was lying, there was more chance she would trip herself up telling it differently. “We will hear you out.” That was for Nynaeve’s benefit; she gave a loud sniff, then a curt nod.

Joiya shrugged. “As you wish. Let me see. Different words. The false Dragon, Mazrim Taim, who was captured in Saldaea, can channel with incredible strength. Perhaps as much as Rand al’Thor, or nearly so, if the reports can be believed. Before he can be brought to Tar Valon and gentled, Liandrin means to break him free. He will be proclaimed as the Dragon Reborn, his name given as Rand al’Thor, and then he will be set to destruction on such a scale as the world has not seen since the War of the Hundred Years.”

“That is impossible,” Nynaeve broke in. “The Pattern will not accept a false Dragon, not now that Rand has proclaimed himself.”

Egwene sighed. They had had this out before, but Nynaeve always argued the point. She was not sure Nynaeve really believed that Rand was the Dragon Reborn, no matter what she said, no matter the Prophecies and

Callandor and the fall of the Stone. Nynaeve was just enough older than he to have looked after him when he was a child, just as she had after Egwene. He was an Emond's Fielder, and Nynaeve still saw her first duty as protecting the people of Emond's Field.

"Is that what Moiraine told you?" Joiya asked with a touch of contempt. "Moiraine has spent little time in the Tower since she was raised, and not much more with her sisters anywhere. I suppose she knows the workings of village life, perhaps even something of the politics between nations, but she does claim certainty about matters learned only through study and discussion with those who know. Still, she might be correct. Mazrim Taim might well find it impossible to proclaim himself. But if others do it for him, is there a difference that matters?"

Egwene wished Moiraine would come back. The woman would not speak so confidently if Moiraine were there. Joiya knew very well that she and Nynaeve were only Accepted. It made a difference.

"Go on," Egwene said, almost as harshly as Nynaeve. "And remember, different words."

"Of course," Joiya replied, as though responding to a gracious invitation, but her eyes glittered like chips of black glass. "You can see the obvious result. Rand al'Thor will be blamed for the depredations of . . . Rand al'Thor. Even proof that they are not the same man may well be dismissed. After all, who can say what tricks the Dragon Reborn can play? Perhaps put himself in two places at once. Even the sort who have always rallied to a false Dragon will hesitate in the face of the indiscriminate slaughter and worse laid at his feet. Those who do not shrink at such butchery will seek out the Rand al'Thor who seems to revel in blood. The nations will unite as they did in the Aiel War . . ." She gave Aviendha an apologetic smile, incongruous beneath those merciless eyes. ". . . but no doubt much more quickly. Even the Dragon Reborn cannot stand against that, not forever. He will be crushed before the Last Battle even begins, by the very ones he was meant to save. The Dark One will break free, the day of Tarmon Gai'don will come, and the Shadow will cover the earth and remake the Pattern for all time. That is Liandrin's plan." There was not a hint of satisfaction in her voice, but no horror, either.

It was a plausible story, more plausible than Amico's tale of a few eavesdropped sentences, but Egwene believed Amico and not Joiya. Perhaps because she wanted to. A vague threat in Tanchico was easier to face than this fully fleshed plan to turn every hand against Rand. *No*, she thought. *Joiya* is *lying. I am sure she is*. Yet they could not afford to ignore either story. But they could not chase after both, not with any hope of success.

The door banged open, and Moiraine strode in, with Elayne following. The Daughter-Heir was frowning at the floor in front of her toes, lost in dark thoughts, but Moiraine. . . . For once the Aes Sedai's serenity had vanished; fury painted her face.

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CHAPTER
6

Doorways

“Rand al’Thor,” Moiraine told the air in a low, tight voice, “is a mule-headed, stone-willed fool of a . . . a . . . a man!”

Elayne lifted her chin angrily. Her childhood nurse, Lini, used to say you could weave silk from pig bristles before you could make a man anything but a man. But that was no excuse for Rand.

“We breed them that way in the Two Rivers.” Nynaeve was suddenly all half-suppressed smiles and satisfaction. She seldom hid her dislike of the Aes Sedai half as well as she thought she did. “Two Rivers women never have any trouble with them.” From the startled look Egwene gave her, that was a lie big enough to warrant having her mouth washed out.

Moiraine’s brows drew down as if she were about to reply to Nynaeve in harder kind. Elayne stirred, but she could not find anything to say that would head off argument. Rand kept dancing through her head. He had no right! But what right did she have?

Egwene spoke instead. “What did he do, Moiraine?”

The Aes Sedai’s eyes swung to Egwene, a stare so hard that the younger woman stepped back and snapped her fan open, nervously fluttering it at her face. But Moiraine’s gaze settled on Joiya and Amico, the one watching her warily, the other bound and unaware of anything but the far wall.

Elayne gave a small start at realizing Joiya was not bound. Hastily she checked the shield blocking the woman from the True Source. She hoped none of the others had noticed her jump; Joiya frightened her nearly to death, but Egwene and Nynaeve were no more scared of the woman than Moiraine was. Sometimes it was difficult being as brave as the Daughter-Heir of Andor should be; she often found herself wishing she could manage as well as those two.

“The guards,” Moiraine muttered as if to herself. “I saw them in the corridor still, and never thought.” She smoothed her dress, composing herself with an obvious effort. Elayne did not believe she had ever seen Moiraine so out of herself as tonight. But then, the Aes Sedai had cause. *No more than I do. Or do I?* She found herself trying not to meet Egwene’s eyes.

Had it been Egwene or Nynaeve or Elayne who was off balance, Joiya would surely have said something, subtle and of two meanings, calculated to upset them a little more. If they had been alone, at least. With Moiraine, she only watched uneasily, silently.

Moiraine walked the length of the table, her calm restored. Joiya was nearly a head the taller, but had she also been dressed in silks, there would have been no doubt which was in command of the situation. Joiya did not quite draw back, but her hands tightened on her skirts for a moment before she could master them.

“I have made arrangements,” Moiraine said quietly. “In four days you will be taken upriver by ship, to Tar Valon and the Tower. There they are not so gentle as we have been. If you have not found the truth so far, find it before you reach Southharbor, or you will assuredly go to the gallows in the Traitors’ Court. I will not speak to you again unless you send word that you have something new to tell. And I do not want to hear a word from you—not one word—unless it *is* new. Believe me, it will save you pain in Tar Valon. Aviendha, will you tell the captain to bring in two of his men?” Elayne blinked as the Aiel woman unfolded herself and vanished through the doorway; sometimes Aviendha could be so still she seemed not to be there.

Joiya’s face worked as if she wanted to speak, but Moiraine stared up at her, and finally the Darkfriend turned her eyes away. They glittered like a raven’s, full of black murder, but she held her tongue.

To Elayne’s eyes a golden-white glow suddenly surrounded Moiraine, the glow of a woman embracing *saidar*. Only another woman trained to channel could have seen it. The flows holding Amico unraveled more quickly than Elayne could have managed. She was stronger than Moiraine, potentially, at least. In the Tower, the women teaching her had been almost unbelieving at her potential, and at Egwene’s and Nynaeve’s. Nynaeve was the strongest of them all—when she could manage to channel. But Moiraine had the experience. What they were still learning to do, Moiraine could do half asleep. Yet there were some things Elayne could do, and the other two, that the Aes Sedai could not. It was a small satisfaction in the face of how easily Moiraine cowed Joiya.

Freed, able to hear, Amico turned and became aware of Moiraine for the first time. With a squeak, she dropped a curtsy as deep as any new novice. Joiya was glaring at the door, avoiding anyone's gaze. Nynaeve, arms crossed and knuckles white from gripping her braid, was giving Moiraine a stare almost as murderous as Joiya's. Egwene fingered her skirt and glowered at Joiya; Elayne frowned, wishing she were as brave as Egwene, wishing she did not feel she was betraying her friend. Into that walked the captain with two more Defenders in black and gold on his heels. Aviendha was not with them; it seemed she had taken her opportunity to escape Aes Sedai.

The grizzled officer, two short white plumes on his rimmed helmet, shied as his eyes met Joiya's, though she did not even seem to see him. His gaze skittered from woman to woman uncertainly. The mood of the room was trouble, and a wise man did not want any part of trouble among this sort of women. The two soldiers clutched their tall spears to their sides almost as if they feared they might have to defend themselves. Perhaps they did fear it.

"You will take these two back to their cells," Moiraine told the officer curtly. "Repeat your instructions. I want no mistakes."

"Yes, Ae—" The captain's throat seemed to seize. He gulped a breath. "Yes, my Lady," he said, watching her anxiously to see if that would do. When she only continued to look at him, waiting, he gave an audible sigh of relief. "The prisoners are to talk to no one except myself, not even each other. Twenty men in the guardroom and two outside each cell at all times, four if a cell door has to be opened for any reason. I myself will watch their food prepared and take it to them. All as you have commanded, my Lady." A hint of question tinged his voice. A hundred rumors floated through the Stone concerning the prisoners, and why two women needed to be guarded so heavily. And there were whispered stories about the Aes Sedai, each darker than the last.

"Very good," Moiraine said. "Take them."

It was not clear who was more eager to leave the room, the prisoners or the guards. Even Joiya stepped quickly, as if she could not bear keeping silent near Moiraine for another moment.

Elayne was certain she had kept her face calm since entering the room, but Egwene came to her, put an arm around her. “What is the matter, Elayne? You look about to cry.”

The concern in her voice made Elayne feel like bursting into tears. *Light*! she thought. *I will not be that silly. I will not! “A weeping woman is a bucket with no bottom.”* Lini had been full of sayings like that.

“Three times—” Nynaeve burst out at Moiraine, “only three!—you have consented to help us question them. This time you vanish before we begin, and now you calmly announce you are sending them off to Tar Valon! If you will not help, at least do not interfere!”

“Do not presume on the Amyrlin’s authority too far,” Moiraine said coolly. “She may have set you to chase Liandrin, but you are still only Accepted, and woefully ignorant, whatever letters you carry. Or did you mean to keep questioning them forever before reaching a decision? You Two Rivers people seem to work at avoiding decisions that must be made.” Nynaeve opened and closed her mouth, eyes bulging, as if wondering which accusation to answer first, but Moiraine turned to Egwene and Elayne. “Pull yourself together, Elayne. How you can carry out the Amyrlin’s orders if you think every land has the customs you were born to, I do not know. And I do not know why you are so upset. Do not let your feelings hurt others.”

“What do you mean?” Egwene said. “What customs? What are you talking about?”

“Berelain was in Rand’s chambers,” Elayne said in a small voice before she could stop herself. Her eyes flickered guiltily toward Egwene. Surely she had kept her own feelings hidden.

Moiraine gave her a reproachful look and sighed. “I would have spared you this if I could, Egwene. If Elayne had not let her disgust with Berelain overcome her sense. The customs of Mayene are not those either of you were born to. Egwene, I know what you feel for Rand, but you must realize by now that nothing can come of it. He belongs to the Pattern, and to history.”

Seemingly ignoring the Aes Sedai, Egwene peered into Elayne’s eyes. Elayne wanted to look away, and could not. Suddenly Egwene leaned closer, whispering behind a cupped hand. “I love him. Like a brother. And you like a sister. I wish you well of him.”

Elayne’s eyes widened, a smile spreading slowly across her face. She answered Egwene’s hug with a fierce hug of her own. “Thank you,” she murmured softly. “I love you too, sister. Oh, thank you.”

“She got it wrong,” Egwene said half to herself, a delighted grin blooming on her face. “Have you ever been in love, Moiraine?”

What a startling question. Elayne could not imagine the Aes Sedai in love. Moiraine was Blue Ajah, and it was said Blue sisters gave all their passions to causes.

The slender woman was not at all taken aback. For a long moment she looked levelly at the pair of them, each with an arm around the other. Finally she said, “I could wager I know the face of the man I will marry better than either of you knows that of your future husband.”

Egwene gaped in surprise.

“Who?” Elayne gasped.

The Aes Sedai appeared regretful of having spoken. “Perhaps I only meant we share an ignorance. Do not read too much into a few words.” She looked at Nynaeve consideringly. “Should I ever choose a man—should, I say—it will not be Lan. That much I will say.”

That was a sop to Nynaeve, but Nynaeve did not seem to like hearing it. Nynaeve had what Lini would have called “a hard patch to hoe,” loving not just a Warder but a man who tried to deny returning her love. Fool man that he was, he talked of the war against the Shadow he could not stop fighting and could never win, of refusing to dress Nynaeve in widow’s clothes for her wedding feast. Silly things of that sort. Elayne did not see how Nynaeve put up with it. She was not a very patient woman.

“If you are finished chatting about men,” Nynaeve said acidly, as though to prove just that, “perhaps we can go back to what is important?” Gripping her braid hard, she picked up speed and force as she went along, like a waterwheel with the gears disengaged. “How are we to decide whether Joiya is lying, or Amico, if you send them away? Or whether they both are? Or neither? I don’t relish dithering here, Moiraine, no matter what you think, but I have walked into too many traps to want to walk into another. And I don’t want to run after Jak-o’-the-Wisps, either. I . . . we . . . are the ones the Amyrlin sent after Liandrin and her cronies. Since you don’t seem to think they are important enough to spare more than a moment to help us, the least you can do is not crack our ankles with a broom!”

She seemed about to rip that braid free and try to strangle the Aes Sedai with it, and Moiraine wore a dangerously cool crystalline calm that suggested she might be ready to teach again the lesson on holding her tongue that she had taught Joiya. It was, Elayne decided, time for her to stop moping. She did not know how she had fallen into the role of peacemaker among these women—sometimes she wanted to take them all by the scruff of the neck and shake them—but her mother always said no good decision was ever made in anger. "You might add to your list of what you want to know," she said, "why were we summoned to Rand? That is where Careen took us. He is all right, now, of course. Moiraine Healed him." She could not repress a shudder, thinking of her brief glimpse inside his chamber, but the diversion worked a charm.

"Healed!" Nynaeve gasped. "What happened to him?"

"He almost died," the Aes Sedai said, as calmly as if she were saying he had a pot of tea.

Elayne felt Egwene tremble as they listened to Moiraine's dispassionate report, but perhaps some of the trembling was her own. Bubbles of evil drifting through the Pattern. Reflections leaping out of mirrors. Rand a mass of blood and wounds. Almost as an afterthought, Moiraine added that she was sure Perrin and Mat had experienced something of the same, but escaped unharmed. The woman must have ice instead of blood. *No, she was heated enough about Rand's stubbornness. And she wasn't cold when she spoke of marrying, however much she pretended to be*. But now she could have been discussing whether a bolt of silk was the right color for a dress.

"And these . . . these *things* will keep on?" Egwene said when Moiraine finished. "Is there nothing you can do to stop it? Or that Rand can do?"

The small blue stone dangling from Moiraine's hair swung as she shook her head. "Not until he learns to control his abilities. Perhaps not then. I do not know if even he will be strong enough to push the miasma away from himself. At the least, though, he will be better able to defend himself."

"Can't you do something to help him?" Nynaeve demanded. "You are the one of us who is supposed to know everything, or pretends to. Can't you teach him? Some part of it, anyway? And don't quote proverbs about birds teaching fish to fly."

"You would know better," Moiraine replied, "if you had taken the advantage of your studies that you should have. You should know better. You want to know how to use the Power, Nynaeve, but you do not care to learn *about* the Power. *Saidin* is not *saidar*. The flows are different, the ways of weaving are different. The bird has a better chance."

This time Egwene took a turn at diffusing tension. "What is Rand being stubborn about, now?" Nynaeve opened her mouth, and she added, "He can be stubborn as a stone, sometimes." Nynaeve shut her mouth with a snap; they all knew how true that was.

Moiraine eyed them, considering. At times, Elayne was not sure how much the Aes Sedai trusted them. Or anyone. "He must move," the Aes Sedai said at last. "Instead, he sits here, and the Tairens already begin to lose their fear of him. He sits here, and the longer he sits, doing nothing, the more the Forsaken will see his inaction as a sign of weakness. The Pattern moves and flows; only the dead are still. He must act, or he will die. From a crossbow bolt in his back, or poison in his food, or the Forsaken banding together to rip his soul from his body. He must act or die." Elayne winced at each danger on her list; that they were real only made it worse.

"And you know what he must do, don't you?" Nynaeve said tightly. "You have this action planned."

Moiraine nodded. "Would you rather he go haring off alone once more? I dare not risk it. This time he might be dead, or worse, before I find him."

That was true enough. Rand hardly knew what he was doing. And Elayne was sure Moiraine had no wish to lose the little guidance she still gave him. The little he allowed her to give.

"Will you share your plan for him with us?" Egwene demanded. She was certainly not helping soothe the air now.

"Yes, do," Elayne said, surprising herself with a cool echo of Egwene's tone. Confrontation was not her way when it could be avoided; her mother always said it was better to guide people than try to hammer them into line.

If their manner irritated Moiraine, she gave no sign of it. "As long as you understand that you must keep it to yourselves. A plan revealed is a plan doomed to fail. Yes, I see you do understand."

Elayne certainly did; the plan was dangerous, and Moiraine was not sure it would work.

"Sammael is in Illian," the Aes Sedai went on. "The Tairens are always as ripe for war with Illian as the other way around. They have been killing each other off and on for a thousand years, and they speak of their chance for it as other men speak of the next feastday. I doubt even knowing of

Sammael's presence would change that, not with the Dragon Reborn to lead them. Tear will follow Rand eagerly enough in that enterprise, and if he brings Sammael down, he—"

"Light!" Nynaeve exclaimed. "You not only want him to start a war, you want him to seek out one of the Forsaken! No wonder he is being stubborn. He is not a fool, for a man."

"He must face the Dark One in the end," Moiraine said calmly. "Do you truly think he can avoid the Forsaken now? As for war, there are wars enough without him, and every one worse than useless."

"Any war is useless," Elayne began, then faltered as comprehension suddenly filled her. Sadness and regret had to show on her face, too, but certainly comprehension. Her mother had lectured her often on how a nation was led as well as how it was governed, two very different things, but both necessary. And sometimes things had to be done for both that were worse than unpleasant, although the price of not doing them was worse still.

Moiraine gave her sympathetic look. "It is not always pleasant, is it? Your mother began when you were just old enough to understand, I suppose, teaching you what you will need to rule after her." Moiraine had grown up in the Royal Palace in Cairhien, not destined to reign, but related to the ruling family and no doubt overhearing the same lectures. "Yet sometimes it seems ignorance would be better, to be a farm woman knowing nothing beyond the boundaries of her fields."

"More riddles?" Nynaeve said contemptuously. "War used to be something I heard about from peddlers, something far away that I didn't really understand. I know what it is, now. Men killing men. Men behaving like animals, reduced to animals. Villages burned, farms and fields burned. Hunger, disease and death, for the innocent as the guilty. What makes this war of yours better, Moiraine? What makes it cleaner?"

"Elayne?" Moiraine said quietly.

She shook her head—she did not want to be the one to explain this—but she was not sure even her mother sitting on the Lion Throne could have kept silent under Moiraine's compelling, dark-eyed stare. "War will come whether Rand begins it or not," she said reluctantly. Egwene stepped back a pace, staring at her in disbelief no sharper than that on Nynaeve's face; the incredulity faded from both women as she continued. "The Forsaken will not stand idly and wait. Sammael cannot be the only one to have seized a nation's reins, just the lone one we know. They will come after Rand eventually, in their own persons perhaps, but certainly with whatever armies they command. And the nations that are free of the Forsaken? How many will cry glory to the Dragon banner and follow him to Tarmon Gai'don, and how many will convince themselves the fall of the Stone is a lie and Rand only another false Dragon who must be put down, a false Dragon perhaps strong enough to threaten them if they do not move against him first? One way or another, war *will* come." She cut off sharply. There was more to it, but she could not, would not, tell them that part.

Moiraine was not so reticent. "Very good," she said, nodding, "yet incomplete." The look she gave Elayne said she knew Elayne had left out what she had on purpose. Hands folded calmly at her waist, she addressed Nynaeve and Egwene. "Nothing makes this war better, or cleaner. Except that it will cement the Tairens to him, and the Illianers will end up following him just as the Tairens do now. How could they not, once the Dragon banner flies over Illian? Just the news of his victory might decide the wars in Tarabon and Arad Doman in his favor; there are wars *ended* for you.

"In one stroke he will make himself so strong in terms of men and swords that only a coalition of every remaining nation from here to the Blight can defeat him, and with the same blow he shows the Forsaken that he is not a plump partridge on a limb for the netting. That will make them wary, and buy him time to learn to use his strength. He must move first, be the hammer, not the nail." The Aes Sedai grimaced slightly, a hint of her earlier anger marring her calm. "He *must* move first. And what does he do? He reads. Reads himself into deeper trouble."

Nynaeve looked shaken, as if she could see all the battles and death; Egwene's dark eyes were large with horrified understanding. Their faces made Elayne shiver. One had watched Rand grow up, the other had grown up with him. And now they saw him starting wars. Not the Dragon Reborn, but Rand al'Thor.

Egwene struggled visibly, latching onto the smallest part, the most inconsequential, of what Moiraine had said. "How can reading put him in trouble?"

"He has decided to find out for himself what the Prophecies of the Dragon say." Moiraine's face remained cool and smooth, but suddenly she sounded almost as tired as Elayne felt. "They may have been proscribed in Tear, but the Chief Librarian had nine different translations in a locked chest. Rand has them all, now. I pointed out the verse that applies here, and he quoted it to me, from an old Kandori translation.

“ ‘Power of the Shadow made human flesh,
wakened to turmoil, strife and ruin.
The Reborn One, marked and bleeding,
dances the sword in dreams and mist,
chains the Shadowsworn to his will,
from the city, lost and forsaken,
leads the spears to war once more,
breaks the spears and makes them see,
truth long hidden in the ancient dream.’ ”

She grimaced. “It applies to this as well as it does to anything. Illian under Sammael is surely a forsaken city. Lead the Tairen spears to war, chain Sammael, and he has fulfilled the verse. The ancient dream of the Dragon Reborn. But he will not see it. He even has a copy in the Old Tongue, as if he understood two words. He runs after shadows, and Sammael, or Rahvin, or Lanfear may have him by the throat before I can convince him of his mistake.”

“He is desperate.” Nynaeve’s gentle tone was not for Moiraine, Elayne was sure, but for Rand. “Desperate and trying to find his way.”

“So am I desperate,” Moiraine said firmly. “I have dedicated my life to finding him, and I will not let him fail if I can prevent it. I am almost desperate enough to—” She broke off, pursing her lips. “Let it be enough that I will do what I must.”

“But it isn’t enough,” Egwene said sharply. “What is it you’ll do?”

“You have other matters to concern you,” the Aes Sedai said. “The Black Ajah—”

“No!’ Elayne’s voice was knife-edged and commanding, her knuckles a hard white where she gripped her soft blue skirts. “You keep many secrets, Moiraine, but tell us this. What do you mean to do to him?” An image flashed in her mind of seizing Moiraine and shaking the truth out of her if need be.

“Do to him? Nothing. Oh, very well. There is no reason you should not know. You have seen what the Tairens call the Great Holding?”

Oddly for a people that feared the Power so, the Tairens held in the Stone a collection of objects connected to the Power second only to that in the White Tower. Elayne, for one, thought it was because they had been forced to guard *Callandor* so long, whether they wanted or not. Even the Sword That Is Not a Sword might seem less than what it was when it was one among many. But the Tairens had never been able to make themselves display their prizes. The Great Holding was kept in a filthy series of crowded rooms buried even deeper than the dungeons. When Elayne had first seen them the locks on the doors had long since rusted shut, where the doors had not simply collapsed from dry rot.

“We spent an entire day down there,” Nynaeve said. “To see if Liandrin and her *friends* took anything. I don’t think they did. Everything was buried in dust and mold. It will take ten riverboats to transport all of it to the Tower. Perhaps they can make some sense of it there; I surely could not.” The temptation to prod Moiraine was apparently too great to avoid, for she added, “You would know all this if you had given us a little more of your time.”

Moiraine took no notice. She seemed to be looking inward, examining her own thoughts, and she spoke almost to herself. “There is one particular *ter’angreal* in the Holding, a thing like a redstone doorframe, subtly twisted to the eye. If I cannot make him reach *some* decision, I may have to step through.” The small blue stone on her forehead trembled, sparkling. Apparently she was not eager to take that step.

At the mention of *ter’angreal*, Egwene instinctively touched the bodice of her dress. She had sewn a small pocket there herself, to hide the stone ring it now held. That ring was a *ter’angreal*, powerful in its way if small, and Elayne was one of only three women who knew she had it. Moiraine was not one of the three.

They were strange things, *ter’angreal*, fragments of the Age of Legends like *angreal* and *sa’angreal*, if more numerous. *Ter’angreal* used the One Power instead of magnifying it. Each had apparently been made to do one thing and one thing alone, but though some were used now, no one was sure if those uses were anything like what they had been made for. The Oath Rod, on which a woman took the Three Oaths on being raised Aes Sedai, was a *ter’angreal* that made those oaths a part of her flesh and bone. The last test a novice took on being raised to Accepted was inside another *ter’angreal* that ferreted out her most heartfelt fears and made them seem real—or perhaps took her to a place where they *were* real. Odd things could happen with *ter'angreal*. Aes Sedai had been burned out or killed, or had simply vanished, in studying them. And in using them.

"I saw that doorway," Elayne said. "In the last room at the end of the hall. My lamp went out, and I fell three times before I made it to the door." A slight flush of embarrassment reddened her cheeks. "I was afraid to channel in there, even to relight the lamp. Much of it looks rubbish, to me—I think the Tairens simply grabbed anything that anyone hinted might be connected to the Power—but I thought if I channeled, I might accidentally empower something that wasn't rubbish, and who knows what it might do."

"And if you had stumbled in the dark and fallen through the twisted doorway?" Moiraine said wryly. "That needs no channeling, only to step through."

"To what purpose?" Nynaeve asked.

"To gain answers. Three answers, each true, about past, present or future."

Elayne's first thought was for the children's tale, *Bili Under the Hill*, but only because of the three answers. A second thought came on its heels, and not to her alone. She spoke while Nynaeve and Egwene were still opening their mouths. "Moiraine, this solves our problem. We can ask whether Joiya or Amico is telling the truth. We can ask where Liandrin and the others are. The names of the Black Ajah still in the Tower—"

"We can ask what this thing is that is dangerous to Rand," Egwene put in, and Nynaeve added, "Why haven't you told us of this before? Why have you let us go on listening to the same tales day after day when we could have settled it all by now?"

The Aes Sedai winced and threw up her hands. "You three rush in blindly where Lan and a hundred Warders would tread warily. Why do you think I have not stepped through? Days ago I could have asked what Rand must do to survive and triumph, how he can defeat the Forsaken and the Dark One, how he can learn to control the Power and hold off madness long enough to do what he must." She waited, hands on hips, while it sank in. None of them spoke. "There are rules," she went on, "and dangers. No one may step through more than once. Only once. You may ask three questions, but you must ask all three and hear the answers before you may leave. Frivolous questions are punished, it seems, but it also seems what may be serious for one can be frivolous coming from another. Most importantly, questions touching the Shadow have dire consequences.

“If you asked about the Black Ajah, you might be returned dead, or come out a gibbering madwoman, if you came out at all. As for Rand. . . . I am not certain it is possible to ask a question about the Dragon Reborn that does not touch the Shadow in some way. You see? Sometimes there are reasons for caution.”

“How do you know all this?” Nynaeve demanded. Planting fists on hips she confronted the Aes Sedai. “The High Lords surely never let Aes Sedai study anything in the Holding. From the filth down there, none of it has seen sunlight in a hundred years or more.”

“More, I should think,” Moiraine told her calmly. “They ceased their collecting nearly three hundred years gone. It was just before they stopped completely that they acquired this *ter’angreal*. Up until then it was the possession of the Firsts of Mayene, who used its answers to help keep Mayene out of Tear’s grasp. And they allowed Aes Sedai to study it. In secret, of course; Mayene has never dared anger Tear too openly.”

“If it was so important to Mayene,” Nynaeve said suspiciously, “why is it here, in the Stone?”

“Because Firsts have made bad decisions as well as good in trying to keep Mayene free of Tear. Three hundred years ago the High Lords were planning to build a fleet to follow Mayener ships and find the oilfish shoals. Halvar, the then First, raised the price of Mayener lamp oil well above that of oil from Tear’s olives, and to further convince the High Lords that Mayene would always put its own interests behind those of Tear, made them a gift of the *ter’angreal*. He had already used it, so it was no further good to him, and he was almost as young as Berelain is now, apparently with a long reign ahead of him and many years of needing Tairen goodwill.”

“He was a fool,” Elayne muttered. “My mother would never make such a mistake.”

“Perhaps not,” Moiraine said. “But then, Andor is not a small nation cornered by a much larger and stronger. Halvar *was* a fool as it turned out—the High Lords had him assassinated the very next year—but his foolishness does present me with an opportunity, if I need it. A dangerous one, yet better than none.”

Nynaeve muttered to herself, perhaps disappointed that the Aes Sedai had not tripped herself up.

“It leaves the rest of us right where we were.” Egwene sighed. “Not knowing who is lying, or whether they both are.”

“Question them again, if you wish,” Moiraine said. “You have until they are put on the ship, though I very much doubt either will change her tale now. My advice is to concentrate on Tanchico. If Joiya speaks truly, it will take Aes Sedai and Warders to guard Mazrim Taim, not just the three of you. I sent a warning to the Amyrlin by pigeon when I first heard Joiya’s story. In fact, I sent three pigeons, to make sure one reaches the Tower.”

“So kind of you to keep us informed,” Elayne murmured coolly. The woman did go her own way. Just because they were only pretending to be full Aes Sedai was no reason for Moiraine to keep them in the dark. The Amyrlin had sent *them* out to hunt the Black Ajah.

Moiraine inclined her head briefly, as if accepting the thanks for real. “You are welcome. Remember that you are the hounds the Amyrlin set after the Black Ajah.” Her slight smile at Elayne’s start said she knew exactly what Elayne had been thinking. “The decision on where to course must be yours. You have pointed that out to me, as well,” she added drily. “I trust it will prove an easier decision than mine. And I trust you will sleep well, what sleep is left before daybreak. A good night to you.”

“That woman . . .” Elayne muttered when the door had closed behind the Aes Sedai. “Sometimes I could almost strangle her.” She dropped into one of the chairs at the table and sat frowning at her hands in her lap.

Nynaeve gave a grunt that might have been agreement as she went to a narrow table against the wall where silver goblets and spice jars stood next to two pitchers. One pitcher, full of wine, rested in a gleaming bowl of now mostly melted ice, brought all the way from the Spine of the World packed in chests of sawdust. Ice in the summer to chill a High Lord’s drink; Elayne could barely imagine such a thing.

“A cool drink before bed will do us all good,” Nynaeve said, busying herself with wine and water and spices.

Elayne lifted her head as Egwene took a seat next to her. “Did you mean what you said, Egwene? About Rand?” Egwene nodded, and Elayne sighed. “Do you remember what Min used to say, all her jokes about sharing him? I sometimes wondered if that was a viewing she did not tell us about. I thought she meant we both loved him, and she knew it. But you had the right to him, and I didn’t know what to do. I still don’t. Egwene, he loves you.”

“He will just have to be put straight,” Egwene said firmly. “When I marry, it will be because I want to, not just because a man expects me to love him. I will be gentle with him, Elayne, but before I am done, he will know he is free. Whether he wants to be or not. My mother says men are different from us. She says we want to be in love, but only with the one we want; a man needs to be in love, but he will love the first woman to tie a string to his heart.”

“That is all very well,” Elayne said in a tight voice, “but Berelain was in his chambers.”

Egwene sniffed. “Whatever she intends, Berelain won’t keep her mind on one man long enough to make him love her. Two days ago she was casting eyes at Rhuarc. In two more, she’ll be smiling at someone else. She is like Else Grinwell. You remember her? The novice who spent all her time out at the practice yards fluttering her eyelashes at the Warders?”

“She was not just fluttering her eyelashes, in his bedchamber at this hour. She was wearing even less than usual, if that is possible!”

“Do you mean to let her have him, then?”

“No!” Elayne said it very fiercely, and she meant it, but in the next breath she was full of despair. “Oh, Egwene, I do not know what to do. I love him. I want to marry him. Light! What will mother say? I would rather spend a night in Joiya’s cell than listen to the lectures mother will give me.” Andoran nobles, even in royal families, married commoners often enough that it hardly occasioned comment—in Andor, at least—but Rand was not exactly the usual run of commoner. Her mother was quite capable of actually sending Lini to drag her home by her ear.

“Morgase can hardly say much if Mat is to be believed,” Egwene said comfortingly. “Or even half believed. This Lord Gaebril your mother is mooning after hardly sounds the choice of a woman thinking with her head.”

“I am sure Mat exaggerated,” Elayne replied primly. Her mother was too shrewd to make herself a fool over any man. If Lord Gaebril—she had never even heard of him before Mat spoke his name—if this fellow dreamed he could gain power through Morgase, she would give him a rude awakening.

Nynaeve brought three goblets of spiced wine to the table, beads of condensation running down their shining sides, and small green-and-gold woven straw mats to put them on so the damp would not mar the table’s polish. “So,” she said, taking a chair, “you’ve discovered you are in love with Rand, Elayne, and Egwene has discovered she isn’t.”

The two younger women gaped at her, one dark, the other fair, yet a near mirror image of astonishment.

“I have eyes,” Nynaeve said complacently. “And ears, when you don’t take the trouble to whisper.” She sipped at her wine, and her voice grew cold when she continued. “What do you mean to do about it? If that chit Berelain has her claws into him, it will not be easy to pry them loose. Are you sure you want to go to the effort? You know what he is. You know what lies ahead of him, even setting the Prophecies aside. Madness. Death. How long does he have? A year? Two? Or will it begin before summer’s end? He is a man who can channel.” She bit off each word in tones of iron. “Remember what you were taught. Remember what he is.”

Elayne held her head high and met Nynaeve stare for stare. “It does not matter. Perhaps it should, but it doesn’t. Perhaps I am being foolish. I do not care. I cannot change my heart to order, Nynaeve.”

Suddenly Nynaeve smiled. “I had to be sure,” she said warmly. “You must be sure. It isn’t easy loving any man, but loving this man will be harder yet.” Her smile faded as she went on. “My first question still has to be answered. What do you mean to do about it? Berelain may look soft—she certainly makes men see her so!—but I do not think she is. She will fight for what she wants. And she’s the kind to hold hard to something she doesn’t particularly want, just because someone else does want it.”

“I would like to stuff her in a barrel,” Egwene said, gripping her goblet as if it were the First’s throat, “and ship her back to Mayene. In the bottom of the hold.”

Nynaeve’s braid swung as she shook her head. “All very well, but try to offer advice that helps. If you cannot, keep silent and let her decide what she must do.” Egwene stared at her, and she added, “Rand is Elayne’s to deal with, now, not yours. You have stepped aside, remember.”

The remark should have made Elayne smile, but it did not. “This was all supposed to be different.” She sighed. “I thought I would meet a man, learn to know him over months or years, and slowly I would come to realize I loved him. That is the way I always thought it would be. I hardly know Rand. I’ve talked with him no more than half a dozen times in the space of a year. But I knew I loved him five minutes after I first set eyes on him.” Now that *was* foolish. Only, it was true, and she did not care if it was foolish. She would tell her mother the same to her face, and Lini. Well, perhaps not Lini. Lini had drastic ways of dealing with foolishness, and she seemed to think Elayne had not aged beyond ten. “As matters stand, though, I don’t even have the right to be angry with him. Or Berelain.” But she was. *I would like to slap his face till his ears ring for a year! I’d like to switch her all the way to the ship that takes her back to Mayene!* Only, she did *not* have the right, and that made it all the worse. Infuriatingly, a plaintive tone touched her voice. “What can I do? He has never looked at me twice.”

“In the Two Rivers,” Egwene said slowly, “if a woman wants a man to know she is interested in him, she puts flowers in his hair at Bel Time or Sunday. Or she might embroider a feastday shirt for him any time. Or make a point of asking him to dance and no one else.” Elayne gave her an incredulous look, and she hastened to add, “I am not suggesting you embroider a shirt, but there are ways to let him know how you feel.”

“Mayeners believe in speaking out.” Elayne’s voice held a brittle edge. “Perhaps that is the best way. Just tell him right out. At least he’ll know how I feel, then. At least I’ll have some right to—”

She snatched her spiced wine and tilted her head back, drinking. Speak out? Like some *Mayener* hussy! Setting the empty goblet back on the small mat, she drew a deep breath and murmured, “What *will* Mother say?”

“What’s more important,” Nynaeve said gently, “is what you will do when we have to leave here. Whether it’s Tanchico, or the Tower, or somewhere else, we will have to go. What will you do when you’ve just told him you love him, and you must leave him behind? If he asks you to stay with him? If you want to?”

“I will go.” There was no hesitation in Elayne’s reply, but a touch of asperity. The other woman should not have had to ask. “If I must accept him being the Dragon Reborn, he must accept that I am what I am, that I have duties. I want to be Aes Sedai, Nynaeve. It isn’t some idle amusement. Neither is the work we three have to do. Could you really think I would abandon you and Egwene?”

Egwene hurried to assure her that the thought had never crossed her mind; Nynaeve did the same, but slowly enough to give herself the lie.

Elayne looked from one to the other of them. “In truth, I feared you might tell me I was foolish, fretting over a thing like this when we have the Black Ajah to worry about.”

A slight flicker of Egwene’s eyes said the thought had occurred to her, but Nynaeve said, “Rand is not the only one who might die next year, or next month, We might, too. Times are not what they were, and we cannot be, either. If you sit and wish for what you want, you may not see it this side of the grave.”

It was a chilling sort of reassurance, but Elayne nodded. She was *not* being silly. If only the Black Ajah could be settled so easily. She pressed her empty silver goblet to her forehead for the coolness. What were they to do?

* * *

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CHAPTER 7

Playing with Fire

With the sun barely above the horizon the next morning, Egwene presented herself at the doors to Rand’s chambers, followed by a foot-dragging Elayne. The Daughter-Heir wore a long-sleeved dress of pale blue silk, cut in the Tairen fashion, and pulled low after some little discussion. A necklace of sapphires like a deep morning sky, and another strand woven into her red-gold curls, showed up the blue of her eyes. Despite the damp warmth, Egwene wore a plain, deep red scarf, as large as a shawl, around her shoulders. Aviendha had supplied the scarf, and the sapphires too. Surprisingly, the Aiel woman had a tidy store of such things somehow.

For all she had known they were there, Egwene gave a start when the Aiel guards glided to their feet with startling suddenness. Elayne let out a small gasp, but quickly eyed them with that regal bearing she managed so well. It seemed to have no effect on these sun-dark men. The six were *Shae’en M’taal*, Stone Dogs, and appeared relaxed for Aiel, meaning they seemed to be looking everywhere, seemed ready to move in any direction.

Egwene drew herself up in imitation of Elayne—she did wish she could do that as well as the Daughter-Heir—and announced, “I . . . we . . . want to see how the Lord Dragon’s wounds are.”

Her remark was plainly foolish, if they knew much about Healing, but that likelihood was small; few people did, and Aiel probably less than most. She had not intended to give any reason for being there—it was enough that they thought her Aes Sedai—but when the Aiel appeared almost to spring out of the black marble floor, it suddenly seemed a good idea. Not that they were making any move to stop Elayne and her, of course. But these men were all so tall, so stone-faced, and they carried those short spears and horn bows as if using them would be as natural as breathing, and as easy. With those light-colored eyes regarding her so intently, it was all too easy to remember stories of black-veiled Aiel, without mercy or pity, of the Aiel

War and the men like these who had destroyed every army sent against them until the last, who had only turned back to the Waste after fighting the allied nations to a standstill during three blood-soaked days and nights before Tar Valon itself. She very nearly embraced *saidar*.

Gaul, the Stone Dogs' leader, nodded, looking down at Elayne and her with a touch of respect. He was a handsome man, in a rugged way, a little older than Nynaeve, with eyes as green and clear as polished gems and long eyelashes so dark they seemed to outline his eyes in black. "They may be troubling him. He is in a foul mood this morning." Gaul grinned, just a quick flash of white teeth, in understanding of a temper when wounded. "He has chased off a group of these High Lords already, and threw one of them out himself. What was his name?"

"Torean," another, even taller man replied. He had an arrow nocked, the short, curved bow held almost casually. His gray eyes rested on the two women for an instant, then went back to searching among the anteroom's columns.

"Torean," Gaul agreed. "I thought he would slide as far as those pretty carvings . . ." He pointed a spear to the ring of stiff-standing Defenders. ". . . but he came short by three paces. I lost a good Tairen hanging, all hawks in gold thread, to Mangin." The taller man gave a brief, contented smile.

Egwene blinked at the image of Rand physically pitching a High Lord across the floor. He had never been violent; far from it. How much had he changed? She had been too busy with Joiya and Amico, and he too busy with Moiraine or Lan or the High Lords, to do more than speak in passing, a few words about home here and there, about how the Bel Tine festival might have gone this year and what Sunday would be like. It had all been so brief. How much had he changed?

"We have to see him," Elayne said, a slight tremor in her voice.

Gaul made a bow, grounding the point of one spear on the black marble. "Of course, Aes Sedai."

It was with some trepidation that Egwene entered Rand's chambers, and Elayne's face spoke volumes of the effort those few steps took.

No evidence of last night's horror remained, unless it was the absence of mirrors; lighter patches marked the wall panels where those hanging there had been taken away. Not that the room came anywhere near neatness; books lay everywhere, on everything, some lying open as if abandoned in the middle of a page, and the bed was still unmade. The crimson draperies were pulled open on all the windows, facing westward toward the river that was Tear's heartvein, and *Callandor* sparkled like polished crystal on a huge gilded stand of surpassing gaudiness. Egwene thought the stand the ugliest thing she had ever seen decorating a room—until she glimpsed the silver wolves savaging a golden stag on the mantel above the fireplace. Scant breezes off the river kept the room surprisingly cool compared to the rest of the Stone.

Rand sat in his shirtsleeves, sprawled in a chair with one leg over the arm and a leather-bound book propped against his knee. At the sound of their footsteps, he snapped the book shut and dropped it among the others on the scroll-worked carpet, bounding to his feet ready to fight. The scowl on his face faded as he took in who they were.

For the first time in the Stone, Egwene looked for changes in him and found them. How many months before then since she had seen him last? Enough for his face to have grown harder, for the openness that had once been there to fade. He moved differently, too, a little like Lan, a little like the Aiel. With his height and his reddish hair, and eyes that seemed now blue, now gray, as the light took them, he looked all too much like an Aielman, too much for comfort. But had he changed inside?

"I thought you were . . . someone else," he mumbled, sharing out embarrassed glances between them. That was the Rand she knew, even to the flush that rose in his cheeks every time he looked at her or Elayne, either one. "Some . . . people want things I can't give. Things I *will* not give." Suspicion grew on his face with shocking suddenness, and his tone hardened. "What do *you* want? Did Moiraine send you? Are you supposed to convince me to do what she wants?"

"Don't be a goose," Egwene said sharply before she thought. "I do not want you to start a war!"

Elayne added in pleading tones, "We came to . . . to help you, if we can." That was one of their reasons, and the easiest to bring up, they had decided over breakfast.

"You know about her plans for . . ." he began roughly, then made a sudden shift. "Help me? How? That is what Moiraine says."

Egwene sternly folded her arms beneath her breasts, holding the scarf tight, in the way Nynaeve used to address the Village Council when she meant to have her way no matter how stubborn they were. It was too late to start over; the only thing was to go on as she had begun. “I told you not to be a fool, Rand al’Thor. You may have Tairens bowing to your boots, but I remember when Nynaeve switched your bottom for letting Mat talk you into stealing a jar of apple brandy.” Elayne kept her face carefully composed. Too carefully; it was plain to Egwene that she wanted to laugh out loud.

Rand did not notice, of course. Men never did. He grinned at Egwene, close to laughing himself. “We had just turned thirteen. She found us asleep behind your father’s stable, and our heads hurt so much we didn’t even feel her switch.” That was not at all the way Egwene recalled it. “Not like when you threw that bowl at her head. Remember? She’d dosed you with dogweed tea because you had been moping about for a week, and as soon as you tasted it, you hit her with her best bowl. Light, did you squeal! When was that? Two years ago come this—”

“We are not here to talk over old times,” Egwene said, shifting the scarf irritably. It was thin wool, but still far too hot. Really, he did have the habit of remembering the most unfortunate things.

He grinned as if he knew what she was thinking, and went on in better humor. “You are here to help me, you say. With what? I don’t suppose you know how to make a High Lord keep his word when I’m not staring over his shoulder. Or how to stop unwanted dreams? I could surely use help with —” Eyes darting to Elayne and back to her, he made another abrupt shift. “What about the Old Tongue? Did you learn any of that in the White Tower?” Without waiting for an answer he began rooting through the volumes scattered across the carpet. There were more on the chairs, among the tumbled bedclothes. “I have a copy here . . . somewhere . . . of. . . .”

“Rand.” Egwene raised her voice. “Rand, I cannot read the Old Tongue.” She shot a look at Elayne, warning her not to admit to any such knowledge. They had not come to translate the Prophecies of the Dragon for him. The sapphires in the Daughter-Heir’s hair swayed as she nodded agreement. “We had other things to learn.”

He straightened from the books with a sigh. “It was too much to hope.” For a moment he seemed on the point of saying more, but stared at his boots. Egwene wondered how he managed to deal with the High Lords in all their arrogance if she and Elayne put him so out of countenance.

“We came to help you with channeling,” she told him. “With the Power.” What Moiraine claimed was supposed to be true; a woman could not teach a man to channel any more than she could teach him how to bear a child. Egwene was not so sure. She had felt something woven from *saidin,* once. Or rather, she had felt nothing, something blocking her own flows as surely as stone dammed water. But she had learned as much outside the Tower as within; surely in her knowledge there was something she could teach him, some guidance she could offer.

"If we can," Elayne added.

Suspicion flashed across his face again. It was unnerving how his mood changed so quickly. "I have more chance of reading the Old Tongue than you do of. . . . Are you sure this isn't Moiraine's doing? Did she send you here? Thinks she can convince me by some roundabout way, does she? Some twisty Aes Sedai plot I'll not see the point of until I am mired in it?" He grunted sourly and pulled a dark green coat from the floor behind one of the chairs, shrugging into it hastily. "I agreed to meet some more of the High Lords this morning. If I don't keep an eye on them, they just find ways to get around what I want. They'll learn sooner or later. I rule Tear, now. Me. The Dragon Reborn. I will teach them. You will have to excuse me."

Egwene wanted to shake him. He ruled Tear? Well, perhaps he did, if it came to that, but she remembered a boy with a lamb nestled inside his coat, proud as a rooster because he had driven off the wolf that tried to take it. He was a shepherd, not a king, and even if he had call to give himself airs, it was no good to him that he did.

She was about to tell him as much, but before she could Elayne spoke up fiercely. "No one sent us. No one. We came because . . . because we care for you. Perhaps it will not work, but you can try. If I . . . if we care enough to try, you can try, too. Is it so unimportant to you that you cannot spare us an hour? For you life?"

He stopped buttoning up his coat, staring at the Daughter-Heir so intently that for a moment Egwene thought he had forgotten she was there. With a shiver he pulled his eyes away. Glancing at Egwene, he shifted his feet and frowned at the floor. "I will try," he muttered. "It'll do no good, but I will. . . . What do you want me to do?"

Egwene drew a deep breath. She had not thought convincing him would be this easy; he had always been like a boulder buried in mud when he decided to dig his heels in, which he did far too often.

“Look at me,” she said, embracing *saidar*. She let the Power fill her as completely as it ever had, more completely, accepting every drop she could hold; it was as if light suffused every particle of her, as if the Light itself filled every cranny. Life seemed to burst inside her like fireworks. She had never before let this much in. It was a shock to realize she was not quivering; surely she could not bear this glorious sweetness. She wanted to revel in it, to dance and sing, to simply lie back and let it roll through her, over her. She made herself speak. “What do you see? What do you feel? Look at me, Rand!”

He lifted his head slowly, still frowning. “I see you. What am I supposed to see? Are you touching the Source? Egwene, Moiraine has channeled around me a hundred times, and I never saw anything. Except what she did. It doesn’t work that way. Even I know that much.”

“I am stronger than Moiraine,” she told him firmly. “She would be whimpering on the floor, or insensible, if she tried to hold as much as I hold now.” It was true, though she had never before rated the Aes Sedai’s ability so closely.

It cried out to be used, this Power pulsing through her stronger than heartblood. With this much, she could do things Moiraine could not dream of doing. The wound in Rand’s side that Moiraine could never Heal completely. She did not know Healing—it was considerably more complex than anything she had ever done—but she had watched Nynaeve Heal, and perhaps, with this great pool of the Power filling her, she could see something of how that could be Healed. Not to do it, of course; only to see.

Carefully she spun out hair-fine flows of Air and Water and Spirit, the Powers used for Healing, and felt for his old injury. One touch, and she recoiled, shivering, snatching back her weaving; her stomach churned as if every meal she had ever eaten wanted to come up. It seemed that all the darkness in the world rested there in Rand’s side, all the world’s evil in a festering sore only lightly covered by tender scar tissue. A thing like that would soak up Healing flows like drops of water on dry sand. How could he bear the pain? Why was he not weeping?

From first thought to action had taken only a moment. Shaken, and desperately hiding it, she went on without a pause. “You are as strong as I. I know it; you must be. Feel, Rand. What do you feel?” *Light, what can Heal that? Can anything?*

"I don't feel anything," he muttered, shifting his feet. "Goose bumps. And no wonder. It's not that I don't trust you, Egwene, but I cannot help being nervous when a woman is channeling around me. I am sorry."

She did not bother explaining to him the difference between channeling and merely embracing the True Source. There was so much he did not know, even compared to her own scant knowledge. He was a blind man trying to work a loom by touch, with no idea of colors or what the threads, or even the loom, looked like.

With an effort she released *saidar*, and it was an effort. Part of her wanted to cry at the loss. "I am not touching the Source now, Rand." She stepped closer and peered up at him. "Do you still feel goose bumps?"

"No. But that's just because you told me." He gave an abrupt shrug of his shoulders. "You see? I started thinking about it, and I have them again."

Egwene smiled triumphantly. She did not need to look around at Elayne to confirm what she had already sensed, what they had agreed upon earlier for this point. "You can sense a woman embracing the Source, Rand. Elayne is doing just that right now." He squinted at the Daughter-Heir. "It doesn't matter what you see or don't see. You felt it. We have that much. Let's see what else we can find. Rand, embrace the Source. Embrace *saidin*." The words came out hoarsely. They had agreed on this, too, she and Elayne. He was Rand, not a monster from the stories, and they had agreed on it, but still, asking a man to. . . . The wonder was that she had gotten the words out at all. "Do you see anything?" she asked Elayne. "Or feel anything?"

Rand still doled out glances between them, in between staring at the floor and sometimes blushing. Why *was* he so out of countenance? Studying him fixedly, the Daughter-Heir shook her head. "He could just be standing there for all I can tell. Are you sure he is doing anything?"

"He can be stubborn, but he isn't foolish. At least, he isn't foolish most of the time."

"Well, stubborn or foolish or something else, I feel nothing at all."

Egwene frowned at him. "You said you would do as we asked, Rand. Are you? If you felt something, so should I, and I do not—" She broke off with a stifled yelp. *Something* had pinched her bottom. Rand's lips twitched, clearly fighting a grin. "That," she told him crisply, "was not nice."

He tried to keep his face innocent, but the grin slipped. “You said you wanted to feel something, and I just thought—” His sudden roar made Egwene jump. Clapping a hand to his left buttock, he hobbled in a pained circle. “Blood and ashes, Egwene! There was no need to—” He fell off into deeper, inaudible mutters Egwene was just as glad she did not understand.

She took the opportunity to flap the scarf for a little air, and shared a small smile with Elayne. The glow faded around the Daughter-Heir. They both came close to giggling as they rubbed themselves surreptitiously. That should show him. About a hundred for one, Egwene estimated.

Turning back to Rand, she put on her sternest face. “I would have expected something like that from Mat. I thought you, at least, had grown up. We came here to help you, if we can. Try to cooperate. Do something with the Power, something that isn’t childish. Perhaps we will be able to sense that.”

Hunched, he glared at them. “Do something,” he muttered. “You had no call to—I’ll limp for—You want me to do something?”

Suddenly she lifted into the air, and Elayne, too; they stared at each other, wide-eyed, as they floated a pace above the carpet. There was nothing holding them, no flows Egwene could feel or see. Nothing. Her mouth tightened. He had no right to do this. No right at all, and it was time he learned it. The same sort of shield of Spirit that cut Joiya off from the Source would stop him, too; Aes Sedai used it on the rare men they found who could channel.

She opened herself to *saidar*—and her stomach sank. *Saidar* was there—she could feel its warmth and light—but between her and the True Source stood something, nothing, an absence that shut her away from the Source like a stone wall. She felt hollow inside, until panic welled up to fill her. A man was channeling, and she was caught in it. He was Rand, of course, but dangling there like a basket, helpless, all she could think of was a man channeling, and the taint on *saidin*. She tried to shout at him, but all that came out was a croak.

“You want me to do something?” Rand growled. A pair of small tables flexed their legs awkwardly, the wood creaking, and began to stumble about in a stiff parody of dance, gilt flaking off and falling. “Do you like this?” Fire flared up in the fireplace, filling the hearth from side to side, burning on stone bare of ashes. “Or this?” The tall stag and wolves above the fireplace began to soften and slump. Thin streams of gold and silver flowed out from the mass, fining down to shining threads, snaking, weaving themselves into a narrow sheet of metallic cloth; the length of glittering fabric hung in the air as it grew, its far end still linked to the slowly melting statuette on the stone mantel. “Do something,” Rand said. “Do something! Do you have any idea what it is like to touch *saidin*, to hold it? Do you? I can feel the madness waiting. Seeping into me!”

Abruptly the capering tables burst into flame like torches, dancing still; books spun into the air, pages fluttering; the mattress on the bed erupted, showering feathers across the room like snow. Feathers falling onto the burning tables filled the room with their sharp, sooty stink.

For a moment Rand stared wildly at the blazing tables. Then whatever was holding Egwene and Elayne vanished, along with the shield; their heels thumped onto the carpet in the same instant the flames went out as if sucked into the wood they had been consuming. The blaze in the fireplace winked out, as well, and the books fell to the floor in a worse jumble than before. The length of gold-and-silver cloth dropped, too, along with strands of rough-melted metal, no longer liquid or even hot. Only three largish lumps, two silver and one gold, remained on the mantel, cold and unrecognizable.

Egwene had staggered into Elayne as they landed. They clutched each other for support, but Egwene felt the other woman doing exactly what she was doing, embracing *saidar* as quickly as she could. In moments she had a shield ready to throw around Rand if he even appeared to be channeling, but he stood stunned, staring at the charred tables with feathers still drifting down around him, flecking his coat.

He did not seem to be a danger, now, but the room was certainly a mess. She wove tiny flows of Air to pull all the floating feathers together, and those already on the carpet, as well. As an afterthought, she added those on his coat. The rest of it he could have the majhere straighten, or see to himself.

Rand flinched as the feathers floated past him to alight on the tattered ruins of the mattress. It did nothing for the smell, burned feathers and burned wood, but at least the room was neater, and the open windows and faint breezes were already lessening the stench.

“The majhere may not want to give me another,” he said with a strained laugh. “A mattress a day is probably more than she is willing to. . . .”He avoided looking at her or Elayne. “I’m sorry. I did not mean to. . . . Sometimes it runs wild. Sometimes there’s nothing there when I reach for it, and sometimes it does things I don't. . . . I'm sorry. Perhaps you had better go. I seem to say that a lot." He blushed again and cleared his throat. "I am not touching the Source, but maybe you had best go."

"We are not done yet," Egwene said gently. More gently than she felt—she wanted to box his ears; the idea of picking her up like that, shielding her—and Elayne—but he was on the ragged edge. Of what, she did not know, and she did not want to find out, not now, not here. With so many exclaiming over their strength—everyone said she and Elayne would be among the strongest Aes Sedai, if not the strongest, in a thousand years or more—she had assumed they were as strong as he. Near to it, at least. She had just been rudely disabused. Perhaps Nynaeve could come close, if she was angry enough, but Egwene knew she herself could never have done what he just had, split her flows that many ways, worked that many things at once. Working two flows at once was far more than twice as hard as working one of the same magnitude, and working three much more than twice again working two. He had to have been weaving a dozen. He did not even look tired, yet exertion with the Power took energy. She very much feared he could handle her and Elayne both like kittens. Kittens he might decide to drown, if he went mad.

But she would not, could not, just walk away. That would be the same as quitting, and she was not made that way. She meant to do what she had come there for—all of it—and he was not going to chase her off short of it. Not him or anything else.

Elayne's blue eyes were filled with determination, and the moment Egwene fell silent she added in a much firmer voice, "And we will not go until we are. You said you would try. You must try."

"I did say that, didn't I?" he murmured after a time. "At least we can sit down."

Not looking at the blackened tables or the band of metallic cloth lying crumpled on the carpet, he led them, limping slightly, to high-backed chairs near the windows. They had to move books from the red silk cushions in order to sit; Egwene's chair held Volume Twelve of *The Treasures of the Stone of Tear*, a dusty, wood-bound book entitled *Travels in the Aiel Waste, with Various Observations on the Savage Inhabitants*, and a thick, tattered leather volume called *Dealings with the Territory of Mayene, 500 to 750 of the New Era*. Elayne had a bigger stack to move, but Rand hurriedly took them from her along with those from his chair and put them all on the floor, where the pile promptly fell over. Egwene laid hers neatly beside them.

"What do you want me to do now?" He sat on the edge of his seat, hands on his knees. "I promise I won't do anything but what you ask this time."

Egwene bit her tongue to keep from telling him that promise came a bit late. Perhaps she had been a little vague in what she had asked for, but that was no excuse. Still, that was something to be dealt with another time. She realized she was thinking of him as just Rand again, but he looked as if he had just splashed mud on her best dress and was worried she would not believe it an accident. Yet she had not let go of *saidar*, and neither had Elayne. There was no need to be foolish. "This time," she said, "we just want you to talk. How do you embrace the Source? Just tell us. Take it step by step, slowly."

"More like wrestling than embracing." He grunted. "Step by step? Well, first I imagine a flame, and then I push everything into it. Hate, fear, nervousness. Everything. When they're all consumed, there's an emptiness, a void, inside my head. I am in the middle of it, but I'm a part of whatever I am concentrating on, too."

"That sounds familiar," Egwene said. "I've heard your father talk about a trick of concentration he uses to win the archery competitions. What he calls the Flame and the Void."

Rand nodded; sadly, it seemed. She thought he must be missing home, and his father. "Tam taught it to me first. And Lan uses it, too, with the sword. Selene—someone I met once—called it the Oneness. A good many people seem to know about it, whatever they call it. But I found out for myself that when I was inside the void, I could feel *saidin*, like a light just beyond the corner of my eye in the emptiness. There's nothing but me and that light. Emotion, even thought, is outside. I used to have to take it bit by bit, but it all comes at once, now. Most of it does, anyway. Most of the time."

"Emptiness," Elayne said with a shiver. "No emotion. That doesn't sound very much like what we do."

"Yes, it does," Egwene insisted eagerly. "Rand, we just do it a little differently, that's all. I imagine myself to be a flower, a rosebud, imagine it until I *am* the rosebud. That is like your void, in a way. The rosebud's petals open out to the light of *saidar*, and I let it fill me, all light and warmth and life and wonder. I surrender to it, and by surrendering, I control it. That was the hardest part to learn, really; how to master *saidar* by submitting, but it seems so natural now that I do not even think about it. That is the key to it, Rand. I am sure. You must learn to surrender—" He was shaking his head vigorously.

"That's nothing like what I do," he protested. "Let it fill me? I have to reach out and take hold of *saidin*. Sometimes there's still nothing there when I do, nothing I can touch, but if I didn't reach for it, I could stand there forever and nothing would happen. It fills me all right, once I take hold, but surrender to it?" He raked his fingers through his hair. "Egwene, if I surrendered—even for a minute—*saidin* would consume me. It's like a river of molten metal, an ocean of fire, all the light of the sun gathered in one spot. I must fight it to make it do what I want, fight it to keep from being eaten up."

He sighed. "I know what you mean about life filling you, though, even with the taint turning my stomach. Colors are sharper, smells clearer. Everything is more real, somehow. I don't want to let go, once I have it, even while it's trying to swallow me. But the rest. . . . Face the facts, Egwene. The Tower is right about this. Accept it for the truth, because it is."

She shook her head. "I will accept it when it is proved to me." She did not sound as sure as she wanted to, not as sure she had been. What he told sounded like some twisted half-reflection of what she did, similarities only emphasizing differences. Yet there were similarities. She would not give up. "Can you tell the flows apart? Air, Water, Spirit, Earth, Fire?"

"Sometimes," he said slowly. "Not usually. I just take what I need to do what I want. Fumble for it, mostly. It's very strange. Sometimes I need to do a thing, and I do it, but only afterward do I know what it was I did, or how. It's almost like remembering something I've forgotten. But I can remember how to do it again. Most of the time."

"Yet you do remember how," she insisted. "How did you set fire to those tables?" She wanted to ask him how he had made them dance—she thought she saw a way, with Air and Water—but she wanted to start with something simple; lighting a candle and putting it out were things a novice could do.

Rand's face took on a pained expression. "I don't know." He sounded embarrassed. "When I want fire, for a lamp or a fireplace, I just make it, but I do not know *how*. I don't really need to think to do things with fire."

That almost stood to reason. Of the Five Powers, Fire and Earth had been strongest in men in the Age of Legends, and Air and Water in women; Spirit had been shared equally. Egwene hardly had to think to use Air or Water, once she had learned to do a thing in the first place. But the thought did not further their purpose.

This time it was Elayne who pressed him. "Do you know how you extinguished them? You seemed to think before they went out."

"That I do remember, because I don't believe I have ever done it before. I took in the heat from the tables and spread it into the stone of the fireplace; a fireplace wouldn't even notice that much heat."

Elayne gasped, unconsciously cradling her left arm for a moment, and Egwene winced in sympathy. She remembered when that arm had been a mass of blisters because the Daughter-Heir had done what Rand had just described, and with just the lamp in her room. Sheriam had threatened to let the blisters heal by themselves; she had not done it, but she had threatened. It was one of the warnings novices were given; never draw heat in. A flame could be extinguished using Air or Water, but using Fire to pull the heat away meant disaster with a flame of any size. It was not a matter of strength, so Sheriam had said; heat once taken in could not be gotten rid of, not by the strongest woman ever to come out of the White Tower. Women had actually burst into flame themselves that way. Women had burst into flame. Egwene drew a ragged breath.

"What's the matter?" Rand asked.

"I think you just proved the difference to me." She sighed.

"Oh. Does that mean you're ready to give up?"

"No!" She tried to make her voice softer. She was not angry with him. Exactly. She was not sure who she was angry with. "Maybe my teachers were right, but there has to be a way. Some way. Only I cannot think of one, right now."

"You tried," he said simply. "I thank you for that. It is not your fault it did not work."

"There must be a way," Egwene muttered, and Elayne murmured, "We will find it. We will."

"Of course you will," he said with a forced cheerfulness. "But not today." He hesitated. "I suppose you'll be going, then." He sounded half-regretful, half-glad. "I do need to tell the High Lords a few things about taxes this morning. They seem to think they can take as much from a farmer in a poor year as a good without beggaring him. And I suppose you have to get back to questioning those Darkfriends." He frowned.

He had not said anything, but Egwene was sure he would like to keep them as far from the Black Ajah as possible. She was a little surprised he had not already tried to make them return to the Tower. Perhaps he knew that she and Nynaeve would put a flea in his ear the size of a horse if he tried.

"We do," she said firmly. "But not right away. Rand . . ." The time had come to bring up her second reason for being there, but it was even more difficult than she had expected. This was going to hurt him; those sad, wary eyes convinced her it would. But it had to be done. She snugged the scarf around her; it enveloped her from shoulders to waist. "Rand, I cannot marry you."

"I know," he said.

She blinked. He was not taking it as hard as she expected. She told herself that was good. "I do not mean to hurt you—really, I don't—but I do not want to marry you."

"I understand, Egwene. I know what I am. No woman could—"

"You wool-brained idiot!" she snapped. "This had nothing to do with you channeling. I do not love you! At least, not in the way to want to marry you."

Rand's jaw dropped. "You don't . . . love me?" He sounded as surprised as he looked. And hurt, too.

"Please try to understand," she said in a gentler voice. "People change, Rand. Feelings change. When people are apart, sometimes they grow apart. I love you as I would a brother, perhaps more than a brother, but not to marry. Can you understand that?"

He managed a rueful grin. "I really am a fool. I didn't really believe you might change, too. Egwene, I do not want to marry you, either. I did not want to change, I didn't try to, but it happened. If you knew how much this means to me. Not having to pretend. Not being afraid I'll hurt you. I never wanted to do that, Egwene. Never to hurt you."

She very nearly smiled. He was putting on such a brave face; he was actually quite close to convincing. "I am glad you are taking it so well," she told him in a soft voice. "I did not want to hurt you, either. And now I really must go." Rising from her chair, she bent to brush a kiss across his cheek. "You will find someone else."

“Of course,” he said, getting to his feet, the lie loud in his voice.

“You will.”

She slipped out with a sense of satisfaction and hurried across the anteroom, letting *saidar* go as she took the scarf from her shoulders. The thing was abominably hot.

He was ready for Elayne to pick up like a lost puppy if she handled him the way they had discussed. She thought Elayne would manage him nicely, now and later. For as much later as they had. Something had to be done about his control. She was willing to admit that what she had been told was right—no woman could teach him; fish and birds—but that was not the same as giving up. Something had to be done, so a way had to be found. That horrible wound and the madness were problems for later, but they would be dealt with eventually. Somehow. Everyone said Two Rivers men were stubborn, but they could not match Two Rivers women.

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CHAPTER 8

Hard Heads

Elayne was not certain Rand realized she was still in the room, the way he stared after Egwene with a half-bewildered expression. Now and again he shook his head as if arguing with himself, or trying to straighten his mind. She was content to wait him out. Anything that put off the moment a while longer. She concentrated on maintaining an outward composure, back straight and head high, hands folded in her lap, a calmness on her face that could have rivaled Moiraine's best. Butterflies the size of hedgehogs frolicked in her stomach.

It was not fear of him channeling. She had let go of *saidar* as soon as Egwene stood to leave. She wanted to trust him, and she had to. It was what she wanted to happen that had her trembling inside. She had to concentrate not to finger her necklace or fiddle with the strand of sapphires in her hair. Was her perfume too heavy? No. Egwene said he liked the smell of roses. The dress. She wanted to tug it up, but. . . .

He turned—the slight limp in his step tightened her lips thoughtfully—saw her sitting in her chair, and gave a start, eyes widening with what seemed very close to panic. She was glad to see it; the effort of keeping her own face serene had leaped tenfold as soon as his eyes touched her. Those eyes were blue now, like a misty morning sky.

He recovered on the instant and made a quite unnecessary bow, wiping his hands once nervously on his coat. "I did not realize you were still—" Flushing, he cut off; forgetting her presence might be taken as an insult. "I mean . . . I didn't . . . that is, I. . . ." He took a deep breath and began again. "I am not as much of a fool as I sound, my Lady. It isn't every day someone tells you they don't love you, my Lady."

She put on a tone of mock severity. "If you call me that again, I shall call you my Lord Dragon. And curtsy. Even the Queen of Andor might curtsy to you, and I am only Daughter-Heir."

“Light! Don’t do that.” He seemed uneasy out of all proportion to the threat.

“I will not, Rand,” she said in a more serious voice, “if you call me by my name. Elayne. Say it.”

“Elayne.” He spoke awkwardly, yet, delightfully, as if he were savoring the name, too.

“Good.” It was absurd to be so pleased; all he had done was say her name, after all. There was something she had to know before she could go on. “Did it hurt you very much?” That could be taken two ways, she realized. “What Egwene told you, I mean.”

“No. Yes. Some. I don’t know. Fair is fair, after all.” His small grin took some of the edge off of his wariness. “I sound a fool again, don’t I?”

“No. Not to me.”

“I told her the pure truth, but I don’t think she believed me. I suppose I did not want to believe it of her, either. Not really. If that isn’t foolish, I don’t know what is.”

“If you tell me one more time that you are a fool, I may begin to believe it.” *He won’t try to hold on to her; I won’t have to deal with that*. Her voice was calm, with a light enough tone to let him know she did not really mean what she said. “I saw a Cairhienin lord’s fool, once, a man in a funny striped coat, too big for him and sewn with bells. You would look silly wearing bells.”

“I suppose I would,” he said ruefully. “I will remember that.” His slow grin was wider this time, warming his whole face.

The butterflies’ wings flogged her for haste, but she occupied herself with straightening her skirts. She had to go slowly, carefully. *If I don’t, he’ll think I am just a foolish girl. And he will be right*. The butterflies in her belly were beating kettle drums, now.

“Would you like a flower?” he asked suddenly, and she blinked in confusion.

“A flower?”

“Yes.” Striding to the bed, he scooped up a double handful of feathers from the tattered mattress and held them out to her. “I made one for the majhere last night. You’d have thought I had given her the Stone. But yours will be much prettier,” he added hastily. “Much prettier. I promise.”

“Rand, I—”

"I will be careful. It takes only a trickle of the Power. Just a thread, and I will be very careful."

Trust. She had to trust him. It was a small surprise to realize that she did. "I would like that, Rand."

For long moments he stared at the fluffy mound in his hands, a slow frown on his face. Abruptly he let the feathers fall, dusting his hands. "Flowers," he said. "That's no fit gift for you." Her heart went out to him; clearly he had tried to embrace *saidin* and failed. Masking disappointment in action, he limped hurriedly to the metallic cloth and began gathering it over his arm. "Now this is a proper gift for the Daughter-Heir of Andor. You could have a seamstress make. . . ." He floundered over what a seamstress might make from a four-pace length of gold-and-silver cloth, less than two feet wide.

"I am sure a seamstress will have many ideas," she told him diplomatically. Pulling a handkerchief from her sleeve, she knelt for a moment to collect the feathers he had dropped into the square of pale blue silk.

"The maids will take care of that," he said as she tucked the small bundle securely into her belt pouch.

"Well, this bit is done." How could he understand that she would keep the feathers because he had wanted them to be a flower? He shifted his feet, holding the glittering folds as if he did not know what to do with them. "The majhere must have seamstresses," she told him. "I will give that to one of them." He brightened, smiling; she saw no reason to tell him she meant it as a gift. Those thundering butterflies would not let her hold back any longer. "Rand, do you . . . like me?"

"Like you?" he frowned. "Of course, I like you. I like you very much."

Did he have to look as if he did not understand at all? "I am fond of you, Rand." She was startled that she said it so calmly; her stomach seemed to be trying to writhe up into her throat, and her hands and feet felt like ice. "More than fond." That was enough; she was not going to make a fool of herself. *He has to say more than "like," first*. She almost giggled hysterically. *I will keep control of myself. I will not let him see me behave like a moon-eyed girl. I will not*.

"I am fond of you," he said slowly.

"I am not usually so forward." No; that might make him think of Berelain. There was red in his cheeks; he *was* thinking of Berelain. Burn him! Her voice came as smooth as silk. “Soon I will have to go, Rand. To leave Tear. I may not see you again for months.” *Or ever,* a tiny voice cried in her head. She refused to listen. “I could not go without letting you know how I feel. And I am . . . very fond of you.”

“Elayne, I *am* fond of you. I feel. . . . I want. . . .” The scarlet spots on his cheeks grew. “Elayne, I don’t know what to say, how to. . . .”

Suddenly it was her face that was flaming. He must think she was trying to force him into saying more. *Aren’t you*? the small voice mocked, which only made her cheeks hotter. “Rand, I am not asking for. . . .” Light! How to say it? “I only wanted you to know how I feel. That is all.” Berelain would not have let it go at that. Berelain would have been wrapped around him by now. Telling herself she would not let that half-dressed snip better her, she moved closer to him, took the glittering cloth from his arm, and dropped it on the carpet. For some reason he seemed taller than he ever had before. “Rand. . . . Rand, I want you to kiss me.” There. It was out.

“Kiss you?” he said as if he had never heard of kissing before. “Elayne, I don’t want to promise more than. . . . I mean, it isn’t as if we were betrothed. Not that I am suggesting we should be. It’s just that. . . . I *am* fond of you, Elayne. More than fond. I just do not want you to think I. . . .”

She had to laugh at him, with all his confused earnestness. “I do not know how things are done in the Two Rivers, but in Caemlyn you don’t wait until you are betrothed before kissing a girl. And it does not mean you must become betrothed, either. But perhaps you do not know how—” His arms went around her almost roughly, and his lips came down on hers. Her head spun; her toes tried to curl up in her slippers. Some time later—she was not certain how long—she realized she was leaning against his chest, knees trembling, trying to gulp air.

“Forgive me for interrupting you,” he said. She was glad to hear a touch of breathlessness in his voice. “I am just a backward shepherd from the Two Rivers.”

“You are uncouth,” she murmured against his shirt, “and you did not shave this morning, but I would not say you are backward.”

“Elayne, I—”

She put a hand over his mouth. “I do not want to hear anything from you that you do not mean with your whole heart,” she said firmly. “Not now, or ever.”

He nodded, not as if he understood why, but at least as if he understood that she meant what she said. Straightening her hair—the strand of sapphires was tangled beyond mending without a mirror—she stepped out of his encircling arms, not without reluctance; it would be all too easy to remain there, and she had already been more forward than she had ever dreamed of before. Speaking up like that; asking for a kiss. Asking! She was not Berelain.

Berelain. Perhaps Min had had a viewing. What Min saw, happened, but she would not share him with Berelain. Perhaps she needed to do a bit more plain speaking. Obliquely plain, at least. "I expect you will not lack for company after I go. Just remember that some women see a man with their hearts, while others see no more than a bauble to wear, no different than a necklace or a bracelet. Remember that I will come back, and I am one who sees with her heart." He looked confused, at first, then a little alarmed. She had said too much, too fast. She had to divert him. "Do you know what you have not said to me? You have not tried to frighten me away by telling me how dangerous you are. Don't try now. It is too late."

"I did not think of it." Another thought came to him, though, and his eyes crinkled with suspicion. "Did you and Egwene scheme this up between you?"

She managed to combine wide-eyed innocence with mild outrage. "How could you even consider such a thing? Do you imagine we would hand you around between us like a package? You think a good deal of yourself. There is such a thing as being overproud." He did look confused, now. Quite satisfactory. "Are you sorry for what you did to us, Rand?"

"I did not mean to frighten you," he said hesitantly. "Egwene made me angry; she's always been able to without half trying. That's no excuse, I know. I said I was sorry, and I am. Look what it got me. Burned tables and another mattress ruined."

"And for . . . the pinch?"

His face reddened again, but he faced her firmly even so. "No. No, I am not sorry for that. The two of you, talking over my head, as if I were a lump of wood with no ears. You deserved as much, both of you, and I won't say different."

For a moment she considered him. He rubbed his arms through his coat sleeves as she momentarily embraced *saidar*. She did not know Healing to any degree, but she had learned bits and pieces on the edge of it.

Channeling, she soothed away the hurt she had given him for the pinch. His eyes widened in surprise, and he shifted on his feet as if testing the absence of pain. “For being honest,” she told him simply.

There was a rap at the door, and Gaul looked in. At first the Aielman had his head down, but after a quick glance at them he raised it. Color flooded Elayne’s face as she realized he had suspected that he might be interrupting something he should not see. She very nearly embraced *saidar* again and taught him a lesson.

“The Tairens are here,” Gaul said. “The High Lords you were expecting.”

“I will go, then,” she told Rand. “You must tell them about—taxes, was it not? Think on what I have said.” She did not say “think of me,” but she was sure the effect would be the same.

He reached out as if to stop her, but she slipped away from him. She had no intention of putting on a display in front of Gaul. The man was Aiel, but what must he think of her, wearing perfume and sapphires at that hour of the morning? It required real effort not to pull the neckline of her dress up higher.

The High Lords entered as she reached the door, a cluster of graying men in pointed beards and colorful, ornate coats with puffy sleeves. They crowded out of her way with reluctant bows, their bland faces and polite murmurs not hiding their relief that she was leaving.

She glanced back once from the doorway. A tall, broad-shouldered young man in a plain green coat among the High Lords in their silks and satin stripes, Rand looked like a stork among peacocks, yet there was something about him, a presence that said he commanded there by right. The Tairens recognized it, bending their stiff necks reluctantly. He thought probably they bowed just because he was the Dragon Reborn, and perhaps they thought so, too. But she had seen men, like Gareth Bryne, the Captain-Commander of her mother’s Guards, who could have dominated a room in rags, with no title and no one knowing their name. Rand might not know it, but he was such a man. He had not been when she first saw him, but he was now. She pulled the door shut behind her.

The Aiel around the entrance glanced at her, and the captain commanding the ring of Defenders in the middle of the anteroom stared uneasily, but she barely noticed them. It was done. Or at least it was begun. Four days she had before Joiya and Amico were put on that ship, four days at most to twine herself so firmly into Rand's thoughts that he had no room for Berelain. Or if not that, firmly enough that she stayed inside his head until she had the chance to do more. She had never thought she might do a thing like this, stalk a man like a huntress stalking a wild boar. The butterflies were still gamboling in her stomach. At least she had not let him see how nervous she was. And it occurred to her that she had not once thought of what her mother would say. With that, the flutterings vanished. She did not care what her mother said. Morgase had to accept her daughter as a woman; that was all there was to it.

The Aiel bowed as she moved away, and she acknowledged them with a gracious nod that would have done Morgase proud. Even the Tairen captain looked at her as if he could see her new serenity. She did not think she would be troubled by butterflies again. For the Black Ajah perhaps, but not for Rand.

Ignoring the High Lords in their anxious semicircle, Rand watched the door close behind Elayne with wonder in his eyes. Dreams coming true, even only this much, made him uneasy. A swim in the Waterwood was one thing, but he would never have believed a dream where she came to him like this. She had been so cool and collected, while he was tripping over his own tongue. And Egwene, giving his own thoughts back to him and only concerned she might hurt him. Why was it women could go to pieces or fly into a rage at the smallest thing, yet never flicker an eyelash at what left you gaping?

"My Lord Dragon?" Sunamon murmured even more diffidently than usual. Word of this morning must have spread through the Stone already; that first lot had nearly run on their way out, and it was doubtful Torean would show his face, or his filthy suggestions, anywhere Rand was.

Sunamon essayed an ingratiating smile, then smothered it, drywashing his plump hands, when Rand only looked at him. The rest pretended they did not see the burned tables, or the shattered mattress and scattered books, or the half-melted lumps over the fireplace that had been the stag and wolves. High Lords were good at seeing only what they wanted to see. Carleon and Tedosian, false self-effacement in every line of their thick bodies, surely never realized there was anything suspicious in never looking at one another. But then, Rand might never have noticed if not for Thom's note, found in the pocket of a coat just back from being brushed.

“The Lord Dragon wished to see us?” Sunamon managed.

Could Egwene and Elayne have worked it up between them? Of course not. Women did not do things like that any more than men. Did they? It had to be coincidence. Elayne heard that he was free and decided to speak. That was it. “Taxes,” he barked. The Tairens did not move, but they gave the impression of stepping back. How he hated dealing with these men; he wanted to dive back into the books.

“It is a bad precedent, my Lord Dragon, lowering taxes,” a lean, gray-haired man said in an oily voice. Meilan was tall for a Tairen, only a hand shorter than Rand, and hard as any Defender. He held himself in a stoop in Rand’s presence; his dark eyes showed how he hated it. But he had hated it when Rand told them to stop crouching around him, too. None of them straightened, but Meilan especially had not liked being reminded of what he did. “The peasants have always paid easily, but if we lower their taxes, when the day comes that we raise them back to where they now are, the fools will complain as bitterly as if we had doubled the present levy. There might well be riots when that day comes, my Lord Dragon.”

Rand strode across the room to stand before *Callandor*; the crystal sword glittered, outshining the gilt and gemstones surrounding it. A reminder of who he was, of the power he could wield. Egwene. It was foolish to feel hurt because she said she no longer loved him. Why should he expect her to have feelings for him that he did not have for her? Yet it did hurt. A relief, but not a pleasant one. “You will have riots if you drive men off their farms.” Three books stood in a stack almost by Meilan’s feet. *The Treasures of the Stone of Tear, Travels in the Waste,* and *Dealings with the Territory of Mayene*. The keys lay in those, and in the various translations of *The Karaethon Cycle*, if he could only find them and fit them to the proper locks. He pushed his mind back to the High Lords. “Do you think they will watch their families starve and do nothing?”

“The Defenders of the Stone have put down riots before, my Lord Dragon,” Sunamon said soothingly. “Our own guards can keep peace in the countryside. The peasants will not disturb you, I give you my assurance.”

“There are too many farmers as it is.” Carleon flinched at Rand’s glare. “It is the civil war in Cairhien, my Lord Dragon,” he explained hurriedly. “The Cairhienin can buy no grain, and the granaries are bursting. This year’s harvest will go to waste as it is. And next year . . . ? Burn my soul, my Lord Dragon, but what we need is for some of those peasants to stop their eternal digging and planting." He seemed to realize he had said too much, though he clearly did not understand why. Rand wondered whether he had any idea how food got to his table. Did he see anything but gold, and power?

"What will you do when Cairhien is buying grain again?" Rand said coolly. "For that matter, is Cairhien the only land that needs grain?" Why *had* Elayne spoken up like that? What *did* she expect of him? Fond, she said. Women could play games with words like Aes Sedai. Did she mean she loved him? No, that was plain foolishness. Overproud to a degree.

"My Lord Dragon," Meilan said, half subservient, half as if explaining something to a child, "if the civil wars stopped today, Cairhien still could not buy more than a few bargeloads for two, even three years. We have always sold our grain to Cairhien."

Always—for the twenty years since the Aiel War. They were so bound up in what they had *always* done that they could not see what was so simple. Or would not see it. When the cabbages sprouted like weeds around Emond's Field, it was a near certainty that bad rain or whiteworm had struck Deven Ride or Watch Hill. When Watch Hill had too many turnips, Emond's Field would have a shortage, or Deven Ride.

"Offer it in Illian," he told them. What did Elayne expect? "Or Altara." He did like her, but he liked Min as much. Or thought he did. It was impossible to sort out his feelings for either of them. "You have ships for the sea as well as riverboats and barges, and if you don't have enough, hire them from Mayene." He liked both women, but beyond that. . . . He had spent very nearly his whole life mooning after Egwene; he was not about to dive into that again until he was sure. Sure of something. Sure. If *Dealings with the Territory of Mayene* was to be believed. . . . *Stop this*, he told himself. *Keep your mind on these weasels, or they'll find cracks to slip through, and bite you on the way*. "Pay with grain; I'm sure the First will be amenable, for a good price. And maybe a signed agreement, a treaty. . . ." That was a good word; the sort they used. ". . . pledging to leave Mayene alone in return for ships." He owed her that.

"We trade little with Illian, my Lord Dragon. They are vultures, and scum." Tedosian sounded scandalized, and so did Meilan when he said, "We have always dealt with Mayene from strength, my Lord Dragon. Never with bent knee."

Rand took a deep breath. The High Lords tensed. It always came to this. He always tried to reason with them, and it always failed. Thom said the High Lords had heads as hard as the Stone, and he was right. *What do I feel for her? Dreaming about her. She's certainly pretty*. He was not sure if he meant Elayne or Min. *Stop this! A kiss means no more than a kiss. Stop it!* Putting women firmly out of his head, he set himself to telling these stone-brained fools what they were going to do. "First, you will cut taxes on farmers by three-quarters, and on everyone else by half. Don't argue! Just do it! Second, you go to Berelain and ask—ask!—her price for hiring. . . ."

The High Lords listened with false smiles and grinding teeth, but they listened.

* * *

Egwene was considering Joiya and Amico when Mat fell in beside her, just walking down the hallway as if he merely happened to be going the same way. He was frowning to himself, and his hair needed brushing, as if he had been scrubbing his fingers through it. Once or twice he glanced at her but did not speak. The servants they passed bowed or curtsied, and so did the occasional High Lords and Ladies, if with markedly less enthusiasm. Mat's lip-curling stares at the nobles would have brought trouble if she had not been there, friend of the Lord. Dragon or not.

This silence was not like him, not like the Mat she knew. Except for his fine red coat—wrinkled as if he had slept in it—he seemed no different than the old Mat, yet they were surely all different now. His quiet was unsettling. "Is last night troubling you?" she asked at last.

He missed a step. "You know about that? Well, you would, wouldn't you. Doesn't bother me. Wasn't much to it. Over and done with now, anyway."

She pretended to believe him. "Nynaeve and I do not see much of you." That was a rank understatement.

"I have been busy," he muttered with an uncomfortable shrug, looking everywhere but at her again.

"Dicing?" she asked dismissively.

"Cards." A plump maid, curtsying with her arms full of folded towels, glanced at Egwene and, apparently thinking she was not looking, winked at Mat. He grinned at her. "I've been busy playing cards."

Egwene's eyebrows rose sharply. That woman had to be ten years older than Nynaeve. "I see. It must use up a great deal of time. Playing cards. Too much to spare a few moments for old friends."

"The last time I spared you a moment, you and Nynaeve tied me up with the Power like a pig for market so you could rummage through my room. Friends don't steal from friends." He grimaced. "Besides, you're always with that Elayne, with her nose in the air. Or Moiraine. I do not like —" Clearing his throat, he shot her a sideways glance. "I don't like taking up your time. You are busy, from what I hear. Questioning Darkfriends. Doing all sorts of important things, I should imagine. You know these Tairens think you are Aes Sedai, don't you?"

She shook her head ruefully. It was Aes Sedai he did not like. However much of the world Mat saw, nothing would ever change him. "It is not stealing to take back what was supposed to be a loan," she told him.

"I don't remember you saying anything about a loan. Aaah, what use do I have for a letter from the Amyrlin? Just get me in trouble. You could have asked, though."

She refrained from pointing out that they had asked. She wanted neither an argument nor a sulky departure. He would not call it that, of course. This time she would let him get away with his version. "Well, I am glad you are still willing to talk to me. Was there a special reason for it today?"

He shoved his fingers through his hair and muttered to himself. What he needed was his mother to haul him off by his ear for a long talking to. Egwene counseled herself to patience. She could be patient when she wanted to. She would not say a word before he did, if she burst for it.

The corridor opened into a railed colonnade of white marble, looking down on one of the Stone's few gardens. Large white blossoms covered a few small, waxy-leafed trees and gave a scent even sweeter than the banks of red and yellow roses. A sullen breeze failed to stir the hangings on the inner wall, but it did cut the morning's growing damp warmth. Mat took a seat on the wide balustrade with his back against a column and one foot up in front of him. Peering down into the garden, he finally said, "I . . . need some advice."

He wanted advice from *her*? She goggled at him. "Whatever I can do to help," she said faintly. He turned his head to her, and she did her best to assume something like Aes Sedai calm. "What do you want advice about?"

"I don't know."

It was a ten-pace drop to the garden. Besides, there were men down there weeding among the roses. If she pushed him over, he might land on one. A gardener, not a rosebush. “How am I supposed to advise you, then?” she asked in a thin voice.

“I am . . . trying to decide what to do.” He looked embarrassed; he had a right to, in her opinion.

“I hope you are not thinking of trying to leave. You know how important you are. You cannot run away from it, Mat.”

“You think I don’t know that? I don’t think I could leave if Moiraine told me I could. Believe me, Egwene, I am not going anywhere. I just want to know what’s going to happen.” He gave a rough shake of his head, and his voice grew tighter. “What comes next? What’s in these holes in my memory? There are chunks of my life that aren’t even there; they don’t exist, as if they never happened! Why do I find myself spouting gibberish? People say it’s the Old Tongue, but it’s goose gabble to me. I want to know, Egwene. I have to know, before I go as crazy as Rand.”

“Rand is not crazy,” she said automatically. So Mat was not trying to run away. That was a pleasant surprise; he had not seemed to believe in responsibility. But there was pain and worry in his voice. Mat never worried, or never let anyone see it if he did. “I do not know the answers, Mat,” she said gently. “Perhaps Moiraine—”

“No!” He was on his feet in a bound. “No Aes Sedai! I mean. . . . You’re different. I know you, and you aren’t. . . . Didn’t they teach you anything in the Tower, some trick or other, something that would serve?”

“Oh, Mat, I am sorry. I am so sorry.”

His laugh reminded her of their childhood. Just so he had always laughed when his grandest expectations went astray. “Ah, well, I guess it does not matter. It’d still be the Tower, if at second hand. No offense to you.” Just so he had moaned over a splinter in his finger and treated a broken leg as if it were nothing at all.

“There might be a way,” she said slowly. “If Moiraine says it is all right. She might.”

“Moiraine! Haven’t you heard a word I said? The last thing I want is Moiraine meddling. What way?”

Mat had always been rash. But he wanted no more than she did, to know. If only he showed a little sense and caution for once. A passing Tairen noblewoman with dark braids coiled about her head, shoulders bare above yellow linen, bent her knee slightly, looking at them with no expression; she walked on quickly, with a stiff back. Egwene watched her until she was well beyond earshot, and they were alone. Unless the gardeners, thirty feet below, counted. Mat was staring at her expectantly.

In the end, she told him of the *ter'angreal*, the twisted doorway that held answers on its other side. It was the dangers she emphasized, the consequences of foolish questions, or those touching the Shadow, the dangers even Aes Sedai might not know. She was more than flattered that he had come to her, but he had to show a little sense. “You must remember this, Mat. Frivolous questions can get you killed, so if you do use it, you will have to be serious for a change. And you mustn't ask any questions that touch the Shadow.”

He had listened with greater and greater incredulity. When she was done, he exclaimed, “Three questions? You go in like Bili, I suppose, spend a night and come out ten years later with a purse that's always full of gold and a—”

“For once in your life, Matrim Cauthon,” she snapped, “do not talk like a fool. You know very well *ter'angreal* are not stories. It's the dangers you have to be aware of. Maybe the answers you seek are inside this one, but you must not try it before Moiraine says you can. You must promise me that, or I promise you I will take you to her like a trout on a string. You know I can.”

He gave a loud snort. “I'd be a fool if I did try it, no matter what Moiraine says. Walk into a bloody *ter'angreal*? It's less I want to do with the bloody Power, not more. You can blot it right out of your mind.”

“It is the only chance I know, Mat.”

“Not for me, it isn't,” he said firmly. “No chance at all is better than that.”

Despite his tone, she wanted to put an arm around him. Only he would likely make some joke at her expense, and try to goose her. He had been incorrigible from the day he was born. But he had come to her for help. “I'm sorry, Mat. What will you do?”

“Oh, play cards, I suppose. If anyone will play with me. Play stones with Thom. Dice in the taverns. I can still go as far as the city, at least.” His gaze strayed toward a passing maidservant, a slender, dark-eyed girl, near his own age. “I'll find something to take up time.”

Her hand itched to slap him, but instead she said cautiously, “Mat, you really aren’t thinking of leaving, are you?”

“Would you tell Moiraine, if I was?” He put up his hands to forestall her. “Well, there’s no need. I told you I wouldn’t. I’ll not pretend I’d not like to, but I won’t. Is that good enough for you?” A pensive frown crept onto his face. “Egwene, do you ever wish you were back home? That none of this had ever happened?”

It was a startling question, coming from him, but she knew her answer. “No. Even with everything, no. Do you?”

“I would be a fool then, wouldn’t I?” he laughed. “It’s cities I like, and this one will do for now. This one will do. Egwene, you won’t tell Moiraine about this, will you? About me asking for advice and all?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” she asked suspiciously. He was Mat, after all.

He gave an embarrassed hitch of his shoulders. “I’ve been keeping wider of her than I have of. . . . Anyway, I’ve been staying clear, especially when she wants to root around in my head. She might think I’m weakening. You won’t tell her, will you?”

“I won’t,” she said, “if you promise me you will not go near that *ter’angreal* without asking her permission. I shouldn’t even have told you about it.”

“I promise.” He grinned. “I won’t go near that thing unless my life depends on it. I swear.” He finished with mock solemnity.

Egwene shook her head. However much everything else changed, Mat just never would.

* * *

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CHAPTER 9

Decisions

Three days passed with heat and damp that seemed to sap even the Tairens’ strength. The city slowed to a lethargic walk, the Stone to a crawl. Servants worked nearly in their sleep; the majhere tore her coiled braids in frustration, but even she could not find the energy to rap knuckles or flick ears with a hard finger. Defenders of the Stone slumped at their posts like half-melted candles, and the officers showed more interest in chilled wine than in making their rounds. The High Lords kept largely to their apartments, sleeping through the hottest part of the day, and a few left the Stone entirely for the relative cool of estates far to the east, on the slopes of the Spine of the World. Oddly, only the outlanders, who felt the heat worst of all, pushed on with their lives as hard as ever, if not harder. For them, the heavy heat did not weigh nearly as much as did the hours rushing by.

Mat quickly discovered that he had been right about the young lords who saw the playing cards try to kill him. Not only did they avoid him, they spread the word among their friends, often garbled; no one in the Stone who had two pieces of silver in hand would say more than hasty excuses while backing away. The rumors spread beyond the lordlings. More than one serving woman who had enjoyed a cuddle now declined, too, and two said uneasily that they had heard it was dangerous to be alone with him. Perrin appeared all wrapped up in his own worries, and Thom seemed to vanish by sleight of hand; Mat had no idea what occupied the gleeman, but he was seldom to be found, day or night. Moiraine, the one person Mat wished would ignore him, instead seemed to be there whenever he turned around; she was just passing by, or crossing the corridor in the distance, but her eyes met his every last time, looking as if she knew what he was thinking and what he wanted, knew how she was going to make him do exactly what she wanted instead. None of it made any difference in one respect; he still managed to find excuses to put off leaving for another day. As he saw it, he had not *promised* Egwene he would stay. But he did.

Once, he carried a lamp down into the belly of the Stone, to the so-called Great Holding, as far as the dry-rotted door at the far end of the narrow hallway. A few minutes of peering into the shadowy interior at dim shapes covered with dusty canvas, roughly stacked crates and barrels, their flat ends used as shelves for jumbles of figurines and carvings and peculiar things of crystal and glass and metal—a few minutes of that, and he hurried away, muttering, "I'd have to be the biggest bloody fool in the whole bloody world!"

Nothing kept him from going into the city, though, and there was no chance at all of meeting Moiraine in the dockside taverns of the Maule, the port district, or the inns in the Chalm, where the warehouses were, dimly lit, cramped, often dirty places of cheap wine, bad ale, occasional fights and unending dice games. The stakes in the dice games were small, compared to what he had grown used to, but that was not why he always found himself back in the Stone after a few hours. He tried not to think about what always drew him back, near to Rand.

Perrin sometimes saw Mat in the waterfront taverns, drinking too much cheap wine, dicing as if he did not care whether he won or lost, once flashing a knife when a burly shipman pressed him on how often he did win. It was not like Mat to be so irritable, but Perrin avoided him instead of trying to find out what was troubling him. Perrin was not there for wine or dice, and the men who thought of fighting changed their minds after a good look at his shoulders—and his eyes. He bought bad ale, though, for sailors in wide leather trousers and for under-merchants with thin silver chains across their coat fronts, for any man who looked to be from a distant land. It was rumor he hunted, word of something that might draw Faile away from Tear. Away from him.

He was sure if he found an adventure for her, something that smacked of a chance at putting her name in the stories, she would go. She pretended to understand why he had to stay, but occasionally she still hinted that she wanted to leave and hoped he would go with her. He was certain the right bait would pull her, without him.

Most rumors she would know for outdated twistings of the truth, just as he did. The war that burned along the Aryth Ocean was said to be the work of a people no one had ever heard of before called the Sawchin, or something like it—he heard many variations from many tellers—a strange folk who might be Artur Hawkwing's armies come back after a thousand years. One fellow, a Taraboner in a round, red hat and a mustache as thick as a bull's horns, solemnly informed him that Hawkwing himself led these people, his legendary sword Justice in hand. There were rumors that the fabled Horn of Valere, meant to call dead heroes from the grave to fight in the Last Battle, had been found. In Ghealdan, riots had broken out all over the country; Illian was suffering from outbreaks of mass madness; in Cairhien, famine was slowing the killing; someplace in the Borderlands, Trolloc raids were on the increase. Perrin could not send Faile into any of that, not even to get her away from Tear.

Reports of trouble in Saldaea seemed promising—her own home must be attractive to her, and he had heard that Mazrim Taim, the false Dragon, was safely in Aes Sedai hands—but no one knew what sort of trouble. Making something up would do no good; whatever he found, she would surely ask her own questions before chasing after it. Besides, any turmoil in Saldaea might easily be as bad as the other things he heard.

He could not tell her where he was spending his time, either, because she would inevitably ask why. She knew he was not Mat, to enjoy lolling about taverns. He had never been good at lying, so he put her off as best he could, and she began to give him long, silent, slanted looks. All he could do was redouble his efforts to find a tale to lure her away. He had to send her away from him before he got her killed. He had to.

Egwene and Nynaeve spent more hours with Joiya and Amico, to no avail. Their stories never wavered. Over Nynaeve's protests, Egwene even tried telling each of them what the other had said, to see if anything joggled loose. Amico stared at them, whining that she had never heard any such plan. But it might be true, she added. It might. She sweated with eagerness to please. Joiya coolly told them to go to Tanchico if they wished. "It is an uncomfortable city now, I hear," she said smoothly, raven eyes glittering. "The King holds little more than the city itself, and I understand the Panarch has ceased keeping civil order. Strong arms and quick knives rule Tanchico. But go, if it pleases you."

No word came from Tar Valon, nothing to say if the Amyrlin was dealing with the possible threat to free Mazrim Taim. There had been plenty of time for a message to come, by quick riverboat or a man changing horses, since Moiraine had sent the pigeons—provided she had sent them.

Egwene and Nynaeve argued about that; Nynaeve admitted the Aes Sedai could not lie, but she tried to find some twist in Moiraine's words. Moiraine did not seem to fret over the lack of response from the Amyrlin, though it was hard to tell through her crystal calm.

Egwene did fret over it, and over whether Tanchico was a false trail, or a real one, or a trap. The Stone's library held books about Tarabon and Tanchico, but though she read until her eyes ached she found no clue to anything dangerous to Rand. Heat and worry did nothing for her temper; she was sometimes as snappish as Nynaeve.

Some things were going well, of course. Mat was still in the Stone; obviously he really was growing up and learning about responsibility. She regretted failing him, but she was not certain any woman in the Tower could have done more. She understood his thirst to know, because she thirsted, too, although for other knowledge, for the things she could only learn in the Tower, the things she might discover that no one else had known how to do before, the lost things she might relearn.

Aviendha began to visit with Egwene, apparently of her own choice. If the woman was wary at first, well, she was Aiel, after all, and she did think Egwene was full Aes Sedai. Still, her company was enjoyable, although Egwene sometimes thought she saw unasked questions in her eyes. If Aviendha kept her reserve, it soon became apparent that she had a quick wit, and a sense of humor akin to Egwene's; they sometimes ended up giggling together like girls. Aiel ways were nothing Egwene was used to, though, such as Aviendha's discomfort at sitting in a chair, and her shock at finding Egwene in her bath, a silver-plated tub the majhere had had brought up. Not shock at walking in on her naked—in fact, when she saw that Egwene was uncomfortable, she peeled off her own clothes and sat down on the floor to talk—but at seeing Egwene sitting chest-deep in water. It was dirtying so much water that made her eyes pop. For another thing, Aviendha refused to understand why she and Elayne had not done something drastic to Berelain, since they wanted her out of the way. It was all but forbidden for a warrior to kill a woman not wed to the spear, but since neither Elayne nor Berelain were Maidens of the Spear, it was apparently quite all right in Aviendha's view for Elayne to challenge the First of Mayene to fight with knives, or failing that with fists and feet. Knives were best, as she saw it. Berelain looked the sort of woman who could be beaten several times without giving up. Best simply to challenge and kill her. Or Egwene could do it for her, as friend and near-sister.

Even with that, it was a pleasure to have someone to talk and laugh with. Elayne was occupied most of the time, of course, and Nynaeve, seeming to feel the rush of time as keenly as Egwene, gave her free moments over to moonlit walks on the battlements with Lan and to preparing foods the Warder liked with her own hands, not to mention curses that sometimes drove the cooks from the kitchen; Nynaeve did not know very much about cooking. If not for Aviendha, Egwene was not sure what she would have done in the muggy hours between questionings of the Darkfriends: sweated, undoubtedly, and worried that she might have to do something that gave her nightmares thinking of it.

By agreement, Elayne was never present at those questionings; one more set of ears listening would make no difference. Instead, whenever Rand had a moment to spare, the Daughter-Heir just happened to be close by, to talk, or simply walk holding his arm, even if it was only from a meeting with some High Lords to a room where others waited, or to a lightning inspection of the Defenders' quarters. She became quite good at finding secluded corners where the two of them could pause, alone. Of course, he always had Aiel trailing after him, but she soon cared as little for what they thought as for what her mother would. She even entered a sort of conspiracy with the Maidens of the Spear; they seemed to know every hidden nook in the Stone, and they let her know whenever Rand was alone. They seemed to think the game great sport.

The surprise was that he asked her about the governing of nations and listened to what she said. That, she wished her mother could see. More than once Morgase had laughed, half-despairingly, and told her she had to learn to concentrate. Which crafts to protect and how, and which not and why, might be dry decisions, but as important as how to care for the sick. It might be fun to guide a stubborn lord or merchant into doing what he did not want to while thinking it was his own idea, it might be warming to feed the hungry, but if the hungry were to be fed it was necessary to decide how many clerks and drivers and wagons were needed. Others might arrange it, but then you would never know until it was too late whether they had made a mistake. He listened to her, and often took her advice. She thought she could have loved him for those two things alone. Berelain was not setting foot outside her chambers; Rand had begun smiling as soon as he saw her; nothing could be finer about the world. Unless the days could stop passing.

Three short days, slipping away like water through her fingers. Joiya and Amico would be sent north and the reason for staying in Tear would vanish; it would be time for her and Egwene and Nynaeve to leave, too. She would go, when that time came; she had never considered not. Knowing that made her proud of behaving like a woman, not a girl; knowing it made her want to cry.

And Rand? He met with High Lords in his chambers and issued orders. He startled them by appearing at secret gatherings of three or four that Thom had ferreted out, just to reiterate some point from his last commands. They smiled and bowed and sweated and wondered how much he knew. A use had to be found for their energy before one of them decided that if Rand could not be manipulated, he must be killed. Whatever it took to divert them, he would not start a war. If he had to confront Sammael, so be it; but he would not start a war.

Forming his plan of action occupied most of his time not given over to hounding the High Lords. Bits and pieces came from the books he had the librarians bring to his rooms by armloads, and from his talks with Elayne. Her advice was certainly useful with the High Lords; he could see them hastily reassessing him when he displayed knowledge of things they themselves only half-knew. She stopped him when he wanted to give her the credit.

“A wise ruler takes advice,” she told him, smiling, “but should never be seen to take it. Let them think you know more than you do. It will not harm them, and it will help you.” She seemed pleased he had suggested it, though.

He was not entirely sure that he was not still putting off some decision, at least, because of her. Three days of planning, of trying to puzzle out what was still missing. Something was. He could not react to the Forsaken; he had to make them react to him. Three days, and on the fourth she would go—back to Tar Valon, he hoped—but once he moved, he suspected even their brief moments together would end. Three days of stolen kisses, when he could forget he was anything but a man with his arms around a woman. He knew it for a foolish reason, if true. He was relieved she did not seem to want more than his company, but in those moments alone he could forget decisions, forget the fate awaiting the Dragon Reborn. More than once he considered asking her to stay, but it would not be fair to raise her expectations when he had no idea what he wanted from her beyond her presence. If she had any expectations, of course. Much better just to think of them as a man and a young woman walking out together on a feastday evening. That became easier; sometimes he forgot she was the Daughter-Heir, and he a shepherd. But he wished she were not going. Three days. He had to decide. He had to move. In a direction no one expected.

The sun slid slowly toward the horizon on the evening of the third day. The half-drawn draperies of Rand's bedchamber lessened the reddish yellow glare. *Callandor* glittered on its ornate stand like the purest crystal.

Rand stared at Meilan and Sunamon, then tossed the thick bundle of large vellum sheets at them. A treaty, all neatly scribed, lacking only signatures and seals. It hit Meilan in the chest, and he caught it by reflex; he bowed as if honored, but his tight smile revealed clenched teeth.

Sunamon shifted from foot to foot, dry-washing his hands. "All is as you said, my Lord Dragon," he said anxiously. "Grain for ships—"

"And two thousand Tairen levies," Rand cut him off. " 'To see to proper distribution of the grain and protect Tairen interests.' " His voice was like ice, but his stomach seemed to be boiling; he nearly shook with the desire to pound at these fools with his fists. "Two thousand men. Under the command of Torean!"

"The High Lord Torean has an interest in affairs with Mayene, my Lord Dragon," Meilan said smoothly.

"He has an interest in forcing his attentions on a woman who won't look at him!" Rand shouted. "Grain for ships, I said! No soldiers. And certainly no bloody Torean! Have you even spoken to Berelain?"

They blinked at him as if they did not understand the words. It was too much. He snatched at *saidin*; the vellum in Meilan's arms erupted into flame. With a yell, Meilan hurled the fiery bundle into the bare fireplace and hurriedly brushed at sparks and scorch marks on his red silk coat. Sunamon stared at the burning sheets, which were crackling and turning black, with his mouth hanging open.

"You will go to Berelain," he told them, surprised at how calm his voice was. "By tomorrow midday you will have offered her the treaty I want, or by sunset tomorrow I'll hang both of you. If I have to hang High Lords every day, two by two, I will. I will send every last one of you to the gallows if you won't obey me. Now, get out of my sight."

The quiet tone seemed to affect them more than his shouting had. Even Meilan looked uneasy as they backed away, bowing at every other step, murmuring protestations of undying loyalty and everlasting obedience. They sickened him.

“Get out!” he roared, and they abandoned dignity, almost fighting with one another to pull the doors open. They ran. One of the Aiel guards put his head in for a moment, to see that Rand was all right, before drawing the door shut.

Rand trembled openly. They disgusted him almost as much as he disgusted himself. Threatening to hang men because they did not do as he told them. Worse, meaning it. He could remember when he did not have a temper, or, at least, when he rarely had, and had managed to keep it on a short rein.

He crossed the room to where *Callandor* sparkled with the light streaming in between the draperies. The blade looked like the finest glass, absolutely clear; it felt like steel to his fingers, sharp as a razor. He had come close to reaching for it, to deal with Meilan and Sunamon. Whether to use it as a sword or for its real purpose, he did not know. Either possibility horrified him. *I am not mad yet. Only angry. Light, so angry!*

Tomorrow. The Darkfriends would be put on a ship, tomorrow. Elayne would be leaving. And Egwene and Nynaeve, of course. Back to Tar Valon, he prayed; Black Ajah or no Black Ajah, the White Tower had to be as safe a place as there was now. Tomorrow. No more excuses to put off what he had to do. Not after tomorrow.

He turned his hands over, looking at the heron branded into each palm. He had examined them so often that he could have sketched every line perfectly from memory. The Prophecies foretold them.

Twice and twice shall he be marked,
twice to live, and twice to die.
Once the heron to set his path.
Twice the heron, to name him true.
Once the Dragon, for remembrance lost.
Twice the Dragon, for the price he must pay.

But if the herons “named him true,” what need for Dragons? For that matter, what was a Dragon? The only Dragon he had ever heard of was Lews Therin Telamon. Lews Therin Kinslayer had been the Dragon; the Dragon was the Kinslayer. Except now there was himself. But he could not be marked with himself. Perhaps the figure on the banner was a Dragon; not even Aes Sedai seemed to know what that creature was.

“You are changed from when I last saw you. Stronger. Harder.”

He spun, gaping at the young woman standing by the door, fair of skin and dark of hair and eye. Tall, dressed all in white and silver, she arched an eyebrow at the half-melted lumps of gold and silver over the fireplace. He had left them there to remind him what could happen when he acted without thinking, when he lost control. Much good it had done.

“Selene,” he gasped, hurrying to her. “Where did you come from? How did you get here? I thought you must still be in Cairhien, or. . . .” Looking down at her, he did not want to say he feared she might be dead, or a starving refugee.

A woven silver belt glittered around her narrow waist; silver combs worked with stars and crescent moons shone in hair that fell to her shoulders like waterfalls of night. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Elayne and Egwene were only pretty beside her. For some reason, though, she did not affect him the way she had; perhaps it was the long months since he had last seen her, in a Cairhien not yet racked by civil war.

“I go where I wish to be.” She frowned at his face. “You have been marked, but no matter. You were mine, and you are mine. Any other is no more than a caretaker whose time has passed. I will lay claim to what is mine openly, now.”

He stared at her. Marked? Did she mean his hands? And what did she mean, he was hers? “Selene,” he said gently, “we had pleasant days together—and hard days; I’ll never forget your courage, or your help—but there was never more between us than companionship. We traveled together, but that was the end of it. You will stay here in the Stone, in the best apartments, and when peace returns to Cairhien, I will see that your estates there are returned to you, if I can.”

“You *have* been marked.” She smiled wryly. “Estates in Cairhien? I may have had estates in those lands, once. The land has changed so much that nothing is as it was. Selene is only a name I sometimes use, Lews Therin. The name I made my own is Lanfear."

Rand barked a shallow laugh. "A poor joke, Selene. I'd as soon make jests about the Dark One as one of the Forsaken. And my name is Rand."

"We call ourselves the Chosen," she said calmly. "Chosen to rule the world forever. We *will* live forever. You can, also."

He frowned at her worriedly. She actually thought she was. . . . Her travails in reaching Tear must have unhinged her. But she did not look mad. She was calm, cool, certain. Without thinking, he found himself reaching for *saidin*. He reached for it—and struck a wall he could not see or feel, except that it kept him from the Source. "You can't be." She smiled. "Light," he breathed. "You *are* one of them."

Slowly, he backed away. If he reached *Callandor*, at least he would have a weapon. Perhaps it could not work as a *sa'angreal*, but it would do for a sword. Could he use a sword against a woman, against Selene? No, against Lanfear, against one of the Forsaken.

His back came up hard against something, and he looked around to see what it was. There was nothing there. A wall of nothing, with his back pressed against it. *Callandor* glittered not three paces away—on the other side. He thumped a fist against the barrier in frustration; it was as unyielding as rock.

"I cannot trust you fully, Lews Therin. Not yet." She came closer, and he considered simply seizing her. He was bigger and stronger by far—and blocked as he was, she could wrap him up with the Power like a kitten tangled in a ball of string. "Not with that, certainly," she added, grimacing at *Callandor*. "There are only two more powerful that a man can use. One at least, I know, still exists. No, Lews Therin. I will not trust you yet with that."

"Stop calling me that," he growled. "My name is Rand. Rand al'Thor."

"You are Lews Therin Telamon. Oh, physically, nothing is the same except your height, but I would know who is behind those eyes even if I'd found you in your cradle." She laughed suddenly. "How much easier everything would be if I had found you then. If I had been free to. . . ." Laughter faded into an angry stare. "Do you wish to see my true appearance? You can't remember that, either, can you?"

He tried to say no, but his tongue would not work. Once he had seen two of the Forsaken together, Aginor and Balthamel, the first two loosed, after three thousand years trapped just beneath the seal on the Dark One's prison. The one had been more withered than anything could be and still live; the other hid his face behind a mask, hid every bit of his flesh as though he could not bear to see it or have it seen.

The air rippled around Lanfear, and she changed. She was—older than he, certainly, but older was not the right word. More mature. Riper. Even more beautiful, if that was possible. A lush blossom in full flower compared to a bud. Even knowing what she was, she made his mouth go dry, his throat tighten.

Her dark eyes examined his face, full of confidence yet with a hint of questioning, as if wondering what he saw. Whatever she perceived seemed to satisfy her. She smiled again. "I was buried deeply, in a dreamless sleep where time did not flow. The turnings of the Wheel passed me by. Now you see me as I am, and I have you in my hands." She drew a fingernail along his jaw hard enough to make him flinch. "The time for games and subterfuge is past, Lews Therin. Long past."

His stomach lurched. "Do you mean to kill me, then? The Light burn you, I—"

"Kill you?" she spat incredulously. "Kill you! I mean to have you, forever. You were mine long before that pale-haired milksop stole you. Before she ever saw you. You loved me!"

"And you loved power!" For a moment he felt dazed. The words sounded true—he knew they were true—but where had they come from?

Selene—Lanfear—seemed as startled as he, but she recovered quickly. "You've learned much—you have done much I'd not have believed you could, unaided—but you are still fumbling your way through a maze in the dark, and your ignorance may kill you. Some of the others fear you too much to wait. Sammael, Rahvin, Moghedien. Others, perhaps, but those of a certainty. They will come after you. They will not try to turn your heart. They will come at you by stealth, destroy you while you sleep. Because of their fear. But there are those who could teach you, show you what you once knew. None would dare oppose you then."

"Teach me? You want me to let one of the Forsaken teach me?" One of the Forsaken. A male Forsaken. A man who had been Aes Sedai in the Age of Legends, who knew the ways of channeling, knew how to avoid the pitfalls, knew—As much had been offered him before. "No! Even if it was offered, I'd refuse, and why should it be? I oppose them—and you! I hate everything you've done, everything you stand for." *Fool!* he thought. *Trapped here, and I spout defiance like some idiot in a story who never suspects he might make his captor angry enough to do something about it.* But he could not force himself to take the words back. Stubbornly, he plowed ahead and made it worse. "I'll destroy you, if I can. You, and the Dark One, and every last Forsaken!"

A dangerous gleam flashed in her eyes and was gone. "Do you know why some of us fear you? Do you have any idea? Because they are afraid the Great Lord of the Dark will give you a place above them."

Rand surprised himself by managing a laugh. "Great Lord of the Dark? Can't you say his true name, either? Surely you don't fear to attract his attention, as decent people do. Or do you?"

"It would be blasphemy," she said simply. "They are right to be afraid, Sammael and the rest. The Great Lord does want you. He wants to exalt you above all other men. He told me."

"That's ridiculous! The Dark One is still bound in Shayol Ghul, or I would be fighting Tarmon Gai'don right now. And if he knows I exist, he'd want me dead. I mean to fight him."

"Oh, he knows. The Great Lord knows more than you would suspect. It *is* possible to talk with him. Go to Shayol Ghul, into the Pit of Doom, and you can . . . hear him. You can . . . bathe in his presence." A different light shone on her face, now. Ecstasy. She breathed through parted lips, and for a moment seemed to stare at something distant and wondrous. "Words cannot even begin to describe it. You must experience it to know. You must." She was seeing his face again, with eyes large and dark and insistent. "Kneel to the Great Lord, and he will set you above all others. He will leave you free to reign as you will, so long as you bend knee to him only once. To acknowledge him. No more than that. He told me this. Asmodean will teach you to wield the Power without it killing you, teach what you can do with it. Let me help you. We can destroy the others. The Great Lord will not care. We can destroy all of them, even Asmodean, once he has taught you all you need to know. You and I can rule the world together under the Great Lord, forever." Her voice dropped to a whisper, equal parts eagerness and fear. "Two great *sa'angreal* were made just before the end, one that you can use, one that I can. Far greater than that sword. Their power is beyond imagining. With those, we could challenge even . . . the Great Lord himself. Even the Creator!"

"You are mad," he said raggedly. "The Father of Lies says he will leave me free? I was born to fight him. That is why I am here, to fulfill the Prophecies. I'll fight him, and all of you, until the Last Battle! Until my last breath!"

"You do not have to. Prophecy is no more than the sign of what people hope for. Fulfilling the Prophecies will only bind you to a path leading to Tarmon Gai'don and your death. Moghedien or Sammael can destroy your body. The Great Lord of the Dark can destroy your soul. An end utter and complete. You will never be born again no matter how long the Wheel of Time turns!"

"No!"

For what seemed a long time she studied him; he could almost see the scales weighing alternatives. "I could take you with me," she said finally. "I could have you turned to the Great Lord whatever you want or believe. There are ways."

She paused, perhaps to see if her words had had any effect. Sweat rolled down his back, but he kept his face straight. He would have to do something, whether he had a chance or not. A second attempt to reach *saidin* battered vainly against that invisible barrier. He let his eyes wander as if he were thinking. *Callandor* was behind him, as far out of reach as the other side of the Aryth Ocean. His belt knife lay on a table by the bed, together with a half-made fox he had been carving. The shapeless lumps of metal mocking him from above the fireplace, a drably clad man slipping in at the doors with a knife in his hand, the books lying everywhere. He turned back to Lanfear, tensing.

"You were always stubborn," she muttered. "I won't take you, this time. I want you to come to me of your own will. And I will have it. What is the matter? You're frowning."

A man slipping in at the doors with a knife; his eyes had slid past the fellow almost without seeing. Instinctively he pushed Lanfear out of the way and reached for the True Source; the shield blocking him vanished as he touched it, and his sword was in his hands like a red-gold flame. The man rushed at him, knife held low and point up for a killing stroke. Even then it was difficult to keep his eyes on the fellow, but Rand pivoted smoothly, and The Wind Blows Over the Wall took off the hand holding the knife and finished by driving through his assailant's heart. For an instant he stared into dull eyes—lifeless while that heart still pumped—then pulled his blade free.

“A Gray Man.” Rand took what felt like his first breath in hours. The corpse at his feet was messy, bleeding onto the scroll-worked carpet, but there was no difficulty in fixing an eye on him now. It was always that way with the Shadow’s assassins; when they were noticed, it was usually too late. “This makes no sense. You could have killed me easily. Why distract me for a Gray Man to sneak up on me?”

Lanfear was watching him warily. “I make no use of the Soulless. I told you there are . . . differences among the Chosen. It seems I was a day late in my judgment, but there is still time for you to come with me. To learn. To live. That sword,” she all but sneered. “You do not do the tenth part of what you can. Come with me, and learn. Or do you mean to try to kill me, now? I loosed you to defend yourself.”

Her voice, her stance, said she expected an attack, or at the very least was ready to counter it, but that was not what stopped him, any more than her loosing the bonds in the first place. She was one of the Forsaken; she had served evil so long she made a Black sister look like a newborn babe. Yet he saw a woman. He called himself nine kinds of fool, but he could not do it. Maybe if she tried to kill him. Maybe. But all she did was stand there, watching, waiting. No doubt ready to do things with the Power he did not even know were possible, if he attempted to hold her. He had managed to block Elayne and Egwene, but that had been one of those things he did without thinking, the way of it buried somewhere in his head. He could only remember that he had done it, not how. At least he had a firm grip on *saidin*; she would not surprise him that way again. The stomach-wrenching taint was nothing; *saidin* was life, perhaps in more ways than one.

A sudden thought boiled up in his head like a hot spring. The Aiel. Even a Gray Man should have found it impossible to sneak through doors watched by half a dozen Aiel.

“What did you do to them?” His voice grated as he backed toward the doors, keeping his eyes on her. If she used the Power, maybe he would have some warning. “What did you do to the Aiel outside?”

“Nothing,” she replied coolly. “Do not go out there. This may be only a testing to see how vulnerable you are, but even a testing may kill you if you are a fool.”

He flung open the left-hand door onto a scene of madness.

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CHAPTER 10

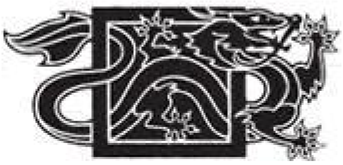

The Stone Stands

Dead Aielmen lay at Rand’s feet, tangled with the bodies of three very ordinary men in very ordinary coats and breeches. Ordinary-looking men, except that six Aiel, the entire guard, had been slain, some obviously before they knew what was happening, and each of those ordinary men had at least two Aiel spears through him.

That was not the half of it, though. As soon as he pulled the door open, a roar of battle had washed over him: shouting, howling, steel clashing on steel among the redstone columns. The Defenders in the anteroom were fighting for their lives beneath the gilded lamps, against bulky, black-mailed shapes head-and-shoulders taller than they, shapes like huge men, but with heads and faces distorted by horns or feathers, by muzzle or beak where mouth and nose should be. Trollocs. They strode on paws or hooves as often as on booted feet, cutting men down with oddly spiked axes and hooked spears and scythelike swords that curved the wrong way. And with them, a Myrddraal, like a sleek-moving man with maggot-white skin in black armor, like death made bloodless flesh.

Somewhere in the Stone an alarm gong sounded, then stopped with lethal suddenness. Another took it up, and another, in brazen tolls.

The Defenders fought, and they still outnumbered the Trollocs, but there were more men down than Trollocs. Even as Rand’s eyes found them, the Myrddraal tore off half the Tairen captain’s face with one bare hand while the other drove a dead black blade through a Defender’s throat, slipping Defenders’ spear thrusts like a snake. The Defenders faced what they had thought were only travelers’ tales to frighten children; their nerve was frayed to snapping. One man who had lost his rimmed helmet threw down his spear and tried to flee, only to have his head split like a melon by a Trolloc’s massive axe. Yet another man looked at the Myrddraal and fled screaming. The Myrddraal darted sinuously to intercept. In a moment the humans would all be running.

"Fade!" Rand shouted. "Try me, Fade!" The Myrddraal stopped as if it had never moved, its pale, eyeless face turning to him. Fear rippled through Rand at that stare, sliding over the bubble of cold calm that encased him when he held *saidin*; in the Borderlands they said, "The look of the Eyeless is fear." Once he had believed Fades rode shadows like horses and disappeared when they turned sideways. Those old beliefs were not so very far wrong.

The Myrddraal flowed toward him, and Rand leaped the dead men in front of the doorway to meet it, his boots skidding on bloody black marble as he landed. "Rally to the Stone!" he shouted as he leaped. "The Stone stands!" Those were the battle cries he had heard on the night the Stone had not stood.

He thought he heard a vexed shout of "Fool!" from the room he had left, but he had no time for Lanfear or what she might do. That skid very nearly cost him his life; his red-gold blade barely turned the Myrddraal's black one as he fought for balance. "Rally to the Stone! The Stone stands!" He had to keep the Defenders together, or face the Myrddraal and twenty Trollocs alone. "The Stone stands!"

"The Stone stands!" he heard someone echo him, then another. "The Stone stands!"

The Fade moved as fluidly as a serpent, the snakelike illusion heightened by the overlapping plates of black armor down its chest. Yet not even a blacklance ever struck so quickly. For a time it was all Rand could do to keep its blade from his own unarmored flesh. That black metal could make wounds that festered, almost as hard to Heal as the one that ached in his side now. Each time dark steel forged in Thakan'dar, below the slopes of Shayol Ghul, met red-gold Power-wrought blade, light flashed like sheet lightning in the room, a sharp bluish white that hurt the eyes. "You will die this time," the Myrddraal rasped at him in a voice like the crumbling of dead leaves. "I will give your flesh to the Trollocs and take your women for my own."

Rand fought as coldly as he ever had, and as desperately. The Fade knew the use of a sword. Then an instant came when he could strike a blow squarely at the sword itself, not merely divert it. With a hiss as of ice falling on molten metal the red-gold blade sheared through the black. His next blow took that eyeless head from its shoulders; the shock of hacking through bone shivered up his arms. Inky blood fountained from the stump of its neck. The thing did not fall, though. Thrashing blindly with its broken sword, the headless figure stumbled about, striking randomly at the air.

As the Fade's head fell to roll across the floor, the remaining Trollocs fell, too, shrieking, kicking, tearing at their heads with coarse-haired hands. It was a weakness of Myrddraal and Trollocs. Even Myrddraal did not trust Trollocs, so they often linked with them in some way Rand did not understand; it apparently ensured the Trollocs' loyalty, but those linked to a Myrddraal did not survive its death long.

The Defenders still standing, fewer than two dozen, did not wait. In twos and threes they stabbed each Trolloc repeatedly with their spears until it stopped moving. Some of them had the Myrddraal down, but it flailed wildly no matter how much they stabbed. As the Trollocs fell silent, a few surviving human wounded could be heard moaning, weeping. There were still more men littering the floor than Shadowspawn. The black marble was slick with blood, almost invisible against the dark stone.

"Leave it," Rand told the Defenders trying to finish the Myrddraal. "It's dead already. Fades just don't want to admit they're dead." Lan had told him that, what seemed a long time ago; he had had proof of it before this. "See to the injured."

Peering at the headless, thrashing shape, its torso a tatter of gaping wounds, they shivered and moved back, muttering about Lurks. That was what they called Fades in Tear, in tales meant for children. Some began to hunt among the downed humans for any still alive, pulling aside those who could not stand, helping those who could to their feet. All too many were left where they lay. Hasty bandages ripped from a man's own bloody shirt were the only comfort that could be offered now.

They did not look so pretty as they had, these Tairens. Their no longer gleaming breast-and backplates bore dents and scuffs; blood-soaked slashes marred once fine black-and-gold coats and breeches. Some had no helmets, and more than one leaned on his spear as if it were the only thing holding him on his feet. Perhaps it was. They breathed heavily, wild expressions on their faces, that blend of stark terror and blind numbness that afflicts men in battle. They stared at Rand uncertainly—fleeting, fearful stares—as if he might have called these creatures out of the Blight himself.

“Wipe those spearpoints,” he told them. “A Fade’s blood will etch steel like acid if it’s left on long enough.” Most moved slowly to obey, hesitantly using what was available, the coatsleeves of their own dead.

The sounds of more fighting drifted through the corridors, distant shouts, the muted clash of metal. They had obeyed him twice; it was time to see if they would do more. Turning his back on them, he started across the anteroom, toward the sounds of battle. “Follow me,” he ordered. He raised his fire-wrought blade to remind them of who he was, hoping the reminder did not bring a spear in his back. It had to be risked. “The Stone stands! For the Stone!”

For a moment his own hollow footsteps were the only sound in the columned chamber; then boots began to follow. “For the Stone!” a man shouted, and another, “For the Stone and the Lord Dragon!” Others took it up. “For the Stone and the Lord Dragon!” Quickening to a trot, Rand led his bloodied army of twenty-three deeper into the Stone.

Where was Lanfear, and what part had she played in this? He had little time for wondering. Dead men spotted the halls of the Stone in pools of their own blood, one here and farther on two or three more, Defenders, servants, Aiel. Women, too, linen-gowned noble and wool-clad servant alike struck down as they fled. Trollocs did not care whom they killed; they took pleasure in it. Myrddraal were worse; Halfmen gloried in pain and death.

A little deeper in, the Stone of Tear boiled. Knots of Trollocs rampaged through the halls, sometimes with a Myrddraal leading, sometimes alone, battling Aiel or Defenders, cutting down the unarmed, hunting for more to kill. Rand led his small force at any Shadowspawn they found, his sword slicing coarse flesh and black mail with equal ease. Only the Aiel faced a Fade without flinching. The Aiel and Rand. He passed up Trollocs to reach Fades; sometimes the Myrddraal took a dozen or two Trollocs with it in dying, sometimes none.

Some of his Defenders fell and did not rise, but Aiel joined them, nearly doubling their number. Groups of men broke off in furious battles that drifted away in shouts and clatter like a forge gone mad. Other men fell in behind Rand, broke away, were replaced, till none of those who had started with him remained. Sometimes he fought alone, or ran down a hallway, empty save for himself and the dead, following the sounds of distant combat.

Once, with two Defenders, in a colonnade looking down into a long chamber with many doorways, he saw Moiraine and Lan, surrounded by Trollocs. The Aes Sedai stood, head high like some storied queen of battles, and bestial shapes burst into flame around her—but only to be replaced by more, dashing in through this door or that, six or eight at a time. Lan's sword accounted for those who escaped Moiraine's fire. The Warder had blood on both sides of his face, yet he flowed through the forms as coolly as if practicing before a mirror. Then a wolf-snouted Trolloc thrust a Tairen spear toward Moiraine's back. Lan whirled as though he had eyes in the back of his head, taking off the Trolloc's leg at the knee. The Trolloc fell, howling, yet still managed to thrust spearpoint at Lan just as another clubbed the Warder awkwardly with the flat of its axe, buckling his knees.

Rand could do nothing, for at that moment five Trollocs fell upon him and his two companions, all snouts and boars' tusks and rams' horns, pushing the humans out of the colonnade by the sheer weight of their rush. Five Trollocs should have been able to kill three men without much difficulty, except that one of the men was Rand, with a sword that treated their mail like cloth. One of the Defenders died, and the other vanished chasing after a wounded Trolloc, the lone survivor of the five. When Rand hurried back to the colonnade, there was a smell of burned meat from the chamber below, and great burned bodies on its floor, but no sign of Moiraine or Lan.

That was the way of the contest for the Stone. Or the contest for Rand's life. Battles sprang up and drifted away from where they began, or died when one side fell. Not only did men fight Trollocs and Myrddraal. Men fought men; there were Darkfriends siding with the Shadowspawn, roughly dressed fellows who looked like former soldiers and tavern brawlers. They seemed as fearful of the Trollocs as the Tairens did, but they killed as indiscriminately, where they could. Twice Rand actually saw Trollocs battling Trollocs. He could only assume the Myrddraal had lost control of them and their bloodlust had taken over. If they wanted to slay each other, he left them to it.

Then, alone once more and seeking, he trotted 'round a corner and right into three Trollocs, each twice as wide as he and nearly half again as tall. One of them, with an eagle's hooked beak thrusting out of an otherwise human face, was hacking an arm from the corpse of a Tairen noblewoman while the other two watched eagerly, licking their snouts. Trollocs ate anything, so long as it was meat. It was an even chance whether he was more surprised or they were, but he was the first to recover.

The one with the eagle's beak went down, mail and belly alike opened across. The sword-form called Lizard in the Thornbush should have done for the other two, but that first fallen Trolloc, thrashing still, half-kicked his foot out from under him, and he staggered, his blade only scoring a slice along his target's mail, right into the path of the second Trolloc as it fell, wolf's muzzle snapping at nothing. It crushed him to the stone tiles beneath its bulk, trapping sword arm and sword alike. The one still standing raised its spiked axe, coming as close to a smile as a boar's snout and tusks would allow. Rand struggled to move, to breathe.

A scythe-curved sword split the boar's snout to the neck.

Wrenching its blade free, a fourth Trolloc bared goat teeth at him in a snarl, ears twitching beside its horns. Then it darted away, sharp hooves clicking on the floor tiles.

Rand heaved himself out from under the dead weight of the Trolloc, half-stunned. *A Trolloc saved me. A Trolloc?* Trolloc blood was all over him, thick and dark. Far down the hallway, in the opposite direction from where the goat-horned Trolloc had fled, blue-white flashed as two Myrddraal moved into view. Fighting each other, in an almost boneless blur of continuous motion. One forced the other into a crossing corridor, and the flashing light faded from sight. *I'm mad. That's what it is. I am mad, and this is all some crazed dream.*

"You risk everything, rushing about wildly with that . . . that sword."

Rand turned to face Lanfear. She had put on the appearance of a girl again, no older than he, perhaps younger. She lifted her white skirts to step over the Tairen lady's torn body; for all the emotion on her face, it might as well have been a log.

"You build a hut of twigs," she went on, "when you could have marble palaces for the snap of your fingers. You could have had their lives and such souls as Trollocs possess with little effort, and instead they nearly killed you. You must learn. Join with me."

"Was this your doing?" he demanded. "That Trolloc, saving me? Those Myrddraal? Was it?"

She considered him a moment before giving a slight, regretful shake of her head. "If I take credit, you will expect it again, and that could be deadly.

None of the others is really certain where I stand, and I like it that way. You can expect no open aid from me."

"Expect your aid?" he growled. "You want me to turn to the Shadow. You can't make me forget what you are with soft words." He channeled, and she slammed against a wall hanging hard enough to make her grunt. He held her there, spread-eagled over a woven hunting scene, feet off the floor and snowy gown spread out and flattened. How had he blocked Egwene and Elayne? He had to remember.

Suddenly he flew across the hallway to crash into the wall opposite Lanfear, pressed there like an insect by *something* that barely allowed him to breathe.

Lanfear appeared to have no trouble breathing. "Whatever you can do, Lews Therin, I can do. And better." Pinned against the wall as she was, she seemed unperturbed. The din of fighting surged up somewhere nearby, then faded as the battle moved away. "You half-use the smallest fraction of what you are capable of, and walk away from what would allow you to crush all who come against you. Where is *Callandor*, Lews Therin? Still up in your bedchamber like some useless ornament? Do you think yours is the only hand that can wield it, now that you have drawn it free? If Sammael is here, he will take it, and use it against you. Even Moghedien would take it to deny you its use; she could gain much by trading it to any male Chosen."

He struggled against whatever held him; nothing moved but his head, flung from side to side. *Callandor* in the hands of a male Forsaken. The thought drove him half-mad with fear and frustration. He channeled, tried to pry at what held him, but there might as well have been nothing to pry. And then abruptly it was gone; he lurched away from the wall, still fighting, before he realized he was free. And from nothing he had done.

He looked at Lanfear. She still hung there, as complacently as if taking the air on a streamside. She was trying to lull him, to gull him into softening toward her. He hesitated over the flows holding her. If he tied them off and left her, she might tear half the Stone down trying to get free—if a passing Trolloc did not kill her, thinking she was one of the Stone's folk. That should not have troubled him—not the death of a Forsaken—but the thought of leaving a woman, or anyone, helpless for Trollocs repelled him. A glance at her unruffled composure rid him of that thought. No one, nothing, in the Stone would harm her as long as she could channel. If he could find Moiraine to block her. . . .

Once more Lanfear took the decision from him. The impact of severed flows jolted him, and she dropped lightly to the floor. He stared as she stepped away from the wall, calmly brushing her skirts. “You can’t do that,” he gasped foolishly, and she smiled.

“I do not have to see a flow to unravel it, if I know what it is and where. You see, you have much to learn. I like you like this. You were always too stiff-necked and sure of yourself for comfort. It was always better when you were a bit uncertain of your footing. Are you forgetting *Callandor*, then?”

Still he hesitated. One of the Forsaken stood there. And there was absolutely nothing he could do. Turning, he ran for *Callandor*. Her laughter seemed to follow him.

This time he did not turn aside to fight Trollocs or Myrddraal, did not slow his wild climb through the Stone unless they got in his way. Then his sword carved of fire sliced a way through for him. He saw Perrin and Faile, he with axe in hand, she guarding his back with her knives; the Trollocs seemed as reluctant to face Perrin’s yellow-eyed stare as his axe blade. Rand left them behind without a second look. If one of the Forsaken took *Callandor*, none of them would live to see the sun rise.

Breathless, he scrambled through the columned anteroom, leaping the dead still lying there, Defenders and Trollocs alike, in his haste to reach *Callandor*. He flung open both doors. The Sword That Is Not a Sword sat on its gilded and gem-set stand, shining with the light of the setting sun. Waiting for him.

Now that he had it in sight, safe, he was almost loath to touch it. Once, he had used *Callandor* as it was truly meant to be used. Only once. He knew what awaited him when he took it up again, used it to draw on the True Source far beyond what any human could hold unaided. Letting go the red-gold blade seemed more than he could do; when it vanished, he almost called it back.

Feet dragging, he skirted the corpse of the Gray Man and put his hands slowly on *Callandor*’s hilt. It was cold, like crystal long in the dark, but it did not feel so smooth that it would slip in the hand.

Something made him look up. A Fade stood in the doorway, hesitating, its pale-faced, eyeless gaze on *Callandor*.

Rand pulled at *saidin*. Through *Callandor*. The Sword That Is Not a Sword blazed in his hands, as if he held noonday. The Power filled him, hammering down like solid thunder. The taint rushed through him in a flood of blackness. Molten rock pulsed along his veins; the cold inside him could have frozen the sun. He had to use it, or burst like a rotted melon.

The Myrddraal turned to flee, and suddenly black clothes and armor crumpled to the floor, leaving oily motes floating in the air.

Rand was not even aware he had channeled until it was done; he could not have said what he had done if his life had depended upon it. But nothing could threaten his life while he held *Callandor*. The Power throbbed in him like the heartbeat of the world. With *Callandor* in his hands, he could do anything. The Power hammered at him, a hammer to crack mountains. A channeled thread whisked the Myrddraal's drifting remains out into the anteroom, and its clothes and armor, too; a trickled flow incinerated both. He strode out to hunt those who had come hunting him.

Some of them had come as far the anteroom. Another Fade and a huddle of cowering Trollocs stood before the columns at the far side staring at ash that sifted out of the air, the last fragments of the Myrddraal and all its garb. At the sight of Rand with *Callandor* flaring in his hands, the Trollocs howled like beasts. The Fade stood paralyzed with shock. Rand gave them no chance to run. Maintaining his deliberate pace toward them, he channeled, and flames roared from the bare, black marble beneath the Shadowspawn, so hot that he flung up a hand against it. By the time he reached them, the flames were gone; nothing remained but dull circles on the marble.

Back down into the Stone he went, and every Trolloc, every Myrddraal he saw died wreathed in fire. He burned them fighting Aiel or Tairens, and killing servants trying to defend themselves with spears or swords snatched from the dead. He burned them as they ran, whether stalking more victims or fleeing him. He began to move faster, trotting, then running, past the wounded, often lying untended, past the dead. It was not enough; he could not move fast enough. While he killed Trollocs in handfuls, others still slew, if only to escape.

Suddenly he stopped, surrounded by the dead, in a wide hallway. He had to do something—something more. The Power slid along his bones, pure essence of fire. Something more. The Power froze his marrow. Something to kill them all; all of them at once. The taint on *saidin* rolled over him, a mountain of rotting filth threatening to bury his soul. Raising

Callandor, he drew on the Source, drew on it till it seemed he must scream screams of frozen flame. He had to kill them all.

Just beneath the ceiling, right above his head, air slowly began to revolve, spinning faster, milling in streaks of red and black and silver. It roiled and collapsed inward, boiling harder, whining as it whirled and grew smaller still.

Sweat rolled down Rand's face as he stared up at it. He had no idea what it was, only that racing flows he could not begin to count connected him to the mass. It had mass; a weight growing greater while the *thing* fell inward on itself. *Callandor* flared brighter and brighter, too brilliant to look at; he closed his eyes, and the light seemed to burn through his eyelids. The Power raced through him, a raging torrent that threatened to carry all that was him into the spinning. He had to let go. He had to. He forced his eyes open, and it was like looking at all the thunderstorms in the world compressed to the size of a Trolloc's head. He had to . . . had to . . . had to. . . .

Now. The thought floated like cackling laughter on the rim of his awareness. He severed the flows rushing out of him, leaving the thing still whirling, whining like a drill on bone. *Now*.

And the lightnings came, flashing out along the ceiling left and right like silver streams. A Myrddraal stepped out of a side corridor, and before it could take a second step half a dozen flaring streaks stabbed down, blasting it apart. The other streams flowed on, fanning down every branching of the corridor, replaced by more and more erupting every second.

Rand had not a clue to what he had made, or how it worked. He could only stand there, quivering with the Power that filled him with the need to use it. Even if it destroyed him. He could feel Trollocs and Myrddraal dying, feel the lightnings strike and kill. He could kill them everywhere, everywhere in the world. He knew it. With *Callandor* he could do anything. And he knew trying would kill him just as surely.

The lightnings faded and died with the last Shadowspawn; the spinning mass imploded with a loud clap of inrushing air. But *Callandor* still shone like the sun; he shook with the Power.

Moiraine was there, a dozen paces away, staring at him. Her dress was neat, every fold of blue silk in place, but wisps of her hair were disarrayed. She looked tired—and shocked. "How . . . ? What you have done, I would not have believed possible." Lan appeared, half-trotting up the hall, sword in hand, face bloodied, coat torn. Without taking her eyes from Rand, Moiraine flung out a hand, halting the Warder short of her. Well short of Rand. As if he were too dangerous for even Lan to approach. "Are you . . . well, Rand?"

Rand pulled his gaze away from her, and it fell on the body of a dark-haired girl, little more than a child. She lay sprawled on her back, eyes wide and fixed on the ceiling, blood blackening the bosom of her dress. Sadly, he bent to brush strands of hair from her face. *Light, she is only a child. I was too late. Why didn't I do it sooner? A child!*

"I will see that someone takes care of her, Rand," Moiraine said gently. "You cannot help her now."

His hand shook so hard on *Callandor* that he could barely hold on. "With this, I can do anything." His voice was harsh in his own ears. "Anything!"

"Rand!" Moiraine said urgently.

He would not listen. The Power was in him. *Callandor* blazed, and he *was* the Power. He channeled, directing flows into the child's body, searching, trying, fumbling; she lurched to her feet, arms and legs unnaturally rigid and jerky.

"Rand, you cannot do this. Not this!"

Breathe. She has to breathe. The girl's chest rose and fell. *Heart. Has to beat*. Blood already thick and dark oozed from the wound in her chest. *Live. Live, burn you! I didn't mean to be too late*. Her eyes stared at him, filmed. Lifeless. Tears trickled unheeded down his cheeks. "She has to live! Heal her, Moiraine. I don't know how. Heal her!"

"Death cannot be Healed, Rand. You are not the Creator."

Staring into those dead eyes, Rand slowly withdrew the flows. The body fell stiffly. The body. He threw back his head and howled, as wild as any Trolloc. Braided fire sizzled into walls and ceiling as he lashed out in frustration and pain.

Sagging, he released *saidin*, pushed it away; it was like pushing away a boulder, like pushing away life. Strength drained out of him with the Power. The taint remained, though, a stain weighing him down with darkness. He had to ground *Callandor* on the floor tiles and lean on it to stay on his feet.

"The others." It was hard to speak; his throat hurt. "Elayne, Perrin, the rest? Was I too late for them, too?"

“You were not too late,” Moiraine said calmly. But she had come no closer, and Lan looked ready to dart between her and Rand. “You must not —”

“Are they still alive?” Rand shouted.

“They are,” she assured him.

He nodded in weary relief. He tried not to look at the girl’s body. Three days waiting, so he could enjoy a few stolen kisses. If he had moved three days ago. . . . But he had learned things in those three days, things he might be able to use if he could put them together. If. Not too late for his friends, at least. Not too late for them. “How did the Trollocs get in? I don’t think they climbed the walls like Aiel, not with the sun still up. Is it still up?” He shook his head to dispel some of the fog. “No matter. The Trollocs. How?”

Lan was the one who answered. “Eight large grain barges tied up at the Stone’s docks late this afternoon. Apparently no one thought to question why laden grain barges would be coming *down*river”—his voice was heavy with contempt—“or why they’d dock at the Stone, or why the crews left the hatches shut until nearly sunfall. Also, a train of wagons arrived—about two hours ago, now—thirty of them, supposedly bringing some lord or other’s things from the country for his return to the Stone. When the canvas was thrown back, they were packed with Halfmen and Trollocs, too. If they came in any other way, I don’t know of it, yet.”

Rand nodded again, and the effort buckled his knees. Suddenly Lan was there, pulling Rand’s arm over his shoulder to hold him up. Moiraine took his face in her hands. A chill rippled through him, not the blasting cold of full Healing, but a chill that pushed weariness out as it passed. Most of the weariness. A seed remained, as if he had worked a day hoeing tabac. He moved away from the support he no longer needed. Lan watched him warily, to see if he could really stand alone, or perhaps because the Warder was not certain how dangerous he was, how sane.

“I left some apurpose,” Moiraine told him. “You need to sleep tonight.”

Sleep. There was too much to do to sleep. But he gave another nod. He did not want her shadowing him. Yet what he said was “Lanfear was here. This was not her doing. She said so, and I believe her. You don’t seem surprised, Moiraine.” Would Lanfear’s offer surprise her? Would anything? “Lanfear was here, and I talked with her. She didn’t try to kill me, and I didn’t try to kill her. And you are not surprised.”

“I doubt you could kill her. Yet.” Her glance at *Callandor* was the merest flicker of dark eyes. “Not unaided. And I doubt she will try to kill you. Yet. We know little of any of the Forsaken, and least of all Lanfear, but we do know she loved Lews Therin Telamon. To say you are safe from her is certainly too strong—there is a good deal she can do to harm you short of murder—but I do not think she will try to kill as long as she thinks she might win Lews Therin back again.”

Lanfear wanted him. The Daughter of the Night, used by mothers who only half-believed in her to frighten children. She certainly frightened him. It was nearly enough to make him laugh. He had always felt guilty for looking at any woman besides Egwene, and Egwene did not want him, but the Daughter-Heir of Andor wanted to kiss him, at least, and one of the Forsaken claimed to love him. Nearly enough for laughter, but not quite. Lanfear seemed jealous of Elayne; that pale-haired milksop, she had called her. Madness. All madness.

“Tomorrow.” He started away from them.

“Tomorrow?” Moiraine said.

“Tomorrow, I will tell you what I am going to do.” Some of it, he would. The thought of Moiraine’s face if he told her everything made him want to laugh. If he knew everything himself, yet. Lanfear had given him almost the last piece, without knowing it. One more step, tonight. The hand holding *Callandor* by his side trembled. With that, he could do anything. *I am not mad yet. Not mad enough for that.* “Tomorrow. A good night to us all, the Light willing.” Tomorrow he would begin to unleash another kind of lightning. Another lightning that might save him. Or kill him. He was not mad yet.

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CHAPTER 11

What Lies Hidden

Clad in her shift, Egwene drew a deep breath and left the stone ring lying beside an open book on her bedside table. All flecked and striped in brown and red and blue, it was slightly too large for a finger ring, and shaped wrong, flattened and twisted so that a fingertip run along the edge would circle both inside and out before coming back to where it had started. There *was* only one edge, impossible though that seemed. She was not leaving the ring there because she might fail without it, because she wanted to fail. She had to try without the ring sooner or later, or she could never do more than dabble her toes where she dreamed of swimming. It might as well be now. That was the reason. It was.

The thick leather-bound book was *A Journey to Tarabon*, written by Eurian Romavni, from Kandor—fifty-three years ago, according to the date the author gave in the first line, but little of any consequence would have changed in Tanchico in that short a time. Besides, it was the only volume she had found with useful drawings. Most of the books only had portraits of kings, or fanciful renderings of battles by men who had not seen them.

Darkness filled both windows, but the lamps gave more than adequate light. One tall beeswax candle burned in a gilded candlestick on the bedside table. She had gone to fetch that herself; this was no night to be sending a maid for a candle. Most of the servants were tending the wounded or weeping over loved ones, or being tended themselves. There had been too many for Healing any but those who would have died without it.

Elayne and Nynaeve waited with high-backed chairs pulled to either side of the wide bed with its tall, swallow-carved posts; they tried to hide their anxiety with differing degrees of success. Elayne managed a passably stately calm, and only spoiled it by frowning and chewing her underlip when she thought Egwene was not looking. Nynaeve was all brisk confidence, the sort that made you feel comforted when she tucked you into a sickbed, but Egwene recognized the set of her eyes; they said Nynaeve was afraid.

Aviendha sat cross-legged beside the door, her browns and grays standing out sharply against the deep blue of the carpet. This time the Aiel woman had her long-bladed knife at one side of her belt, a bristling quiver at the other, and four short spears across her knees. Her round, hide buckler lay close at hand, atop a horn bow in a worked leather case with straps that could hold it on her back. After tonight, Egwene could not fault her for going armed. She still wanted to hold a lightning bolt ready to fling herself.

Light, what was *that Rand did? Burn him, he frightened me almost as badly as the Fades did. Maybe worse. It isn't fair he can do something like that and I can't even see the flows*.

She climbed onto the bed and took the leatherbound book on her knees, frowning at an engraved map of Tanchico. Little of any use was marked, really. A dozen fortresses, surrounding the harbor, guarding the city on its three hilly peninsulas, the Verana to the east, the Maseta in the center, and the Calpene nearest the sea. Useless. Several large squares, some open areas that seemed to be parks, and a number of monuments to rulers long since dust. All useless. A few palaces, and things that seemed strange. The Great Circle, for instance, on the Calpene. On the map it was just a ring, but Master Romavni described it as a huge gathering place that could hold thousands to watch horse races or displays of fireworks by the Illuminators. There was also a King's Circle, on the Maseta and larger than the Great Circle, and a Panarch's Circle, on the Verana, just a little smaller. The Chapter House of the Guild of Illuminators was marked as well. They were all useless. The text certainly had nothing of use.

"Are you certain you want to try this without the ring?" Nynaeve asked quietly.

"Certain," Egwene replied as calmly as she could. Her stomach was leaping as badly as it had when she saw that first Trolloc tonight, holding that poor woman by the hair and slitting her throat like a rabbit's. The woman had screamed like a rabbit, too. Killing the Trolloc had done her no good; the woman was as dead as the Trolloc. Only her shrill scream would not go away. "If it doesn't work, I can always try again with the ring." She leaned over to mark the candle with a thumbnail. "Wake me when it burns down to there. Light, but I wish we had a clock."

Elayne laughed at her, a lighthearted trill, and it very nearly sounded unforced. “A clock in a bedchamber? My mother has a dozen clocks, but I never heard of a clock in a bedchamber.”

“Well, my father has one clock,” Egwene grumbled, “the only one in the whole village, and I wish I had it here. Do you think it will burn that far in an hour? I don’t want to sleep longer than that. You must wake me as soon as the flame reaches that mark. As soon as!”

“We will,” Elayne said soothingly. “I promise it.”

“The stone ring,” Aviendha said suddenly. “Since you are not using it, Egwene, could not someone—one of us—use it to go with you?”

“No,” Egwene muttered. *Light, I wish they could all come with me.* “Thank you for the thought, though.”

“Can only you use it, Egwene?” the Aiel woman asked.

“Any of us might,” Nynaeve replied, “even you, Aviendha. A woman needn’t be able to channel, only sleep with it touching her skin. A man might be able to, for all we know. But we do not know *Tel’aran’rhiod* as well as Egwene, or the rules of it.”

Aviendha nodded. “I see. A woman can make mistakes where she does not know the ways, and her mistakes can kill others as well as herself.”

“Exactly,” Nynaeve said. “The World of Dreams is a dangerous place. That much we do know.”

“But Egwene will be careful,” Elayne added, speaking to Aviendha but obviously meaning it for Egwene’s ears. “She promised. She will look around—carefully!—and no more.”

Egwene concentrated on the map. Careful. If she had not guarded her twisted stone ring so jealously—she thought of it as hers; the Hall of the Tower might not agree, but they did not know she had it—if she had been willing to let Elayne or Nynaeve use it more than once or twice, they might know enough to come with her now. Yet it was not regret that made her avoid looking at the other women. She did not want them to see the fear in her eyes.

Tel’aran’rhiod. The Unseen World. The World of Dreams. Not the dreams of ordinary people, though sometimes they touched *Tel’aran’rhiod* briefly, in dreams that seemed as true as life. Because they were. In the Unseen World, what happened was real, in a strange way. Nothing that happened there affected what was—a door opened in the World of Dreams would still be shut in the real world; a tree cut down there still stood here—

yet a woman could be killed there, or stilled. “Strange” barely began to describe it. In the Unseen World the whole world lay open, and maybe other worlds, too; any place was attainable. Or at least, its reflection in the World of Dreams was. The weave of the Pattern could be read there—past, present and future—by one who knew how. By a Dreamer. There had not been a Dreamer in the White Tower since Corianin Nedeal, nearly five hundred years earlier.

Four hundred and seventy-three years, to be exact, Egwene thought. *Or is it four hundred seventy-four now? When did Corianin die?* If Egwene had had a chance to finish novice training in the Tower, to study there as an Accepted, perhaps she would know. There was so much she might have known, then.

A list lay in Egwene’s pouch of the *ter’angreal*, most small enough to slip into a pocket, that had been stolen by the Black Ajah when they fled the Tower. They all three had a copy. Thirteen of those stolen *ter’angreal* had “no known use” written alongside, and “last studied by Corianin Nedeal.” But if Corianin Sedai had truly not discovered their uses, Egwene was sure of one of them. They gave entrance to *Tel’aran’rhiod*; not as easily as the stone ring, perhaps, and perhaps not without channeling, but they did it.

Two they had recovered from Joiya and Amico: an iron disc, three inches across, scribed on both sides with a tight spiral, and a plaque no longer than her hand, apparently clear amber yet hard enough to scratch steel, with a sleeping woman somehow carved into the middle of it. Amico had spoken freely of them, and so had Joiya, after a session alone in her cell with Moiraine that had left the Darkfriend pale-faced and almost civil. Channel a flow of Spirit into either *ter’angreal*, and it would take you into sleep and then into *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Elayne had tried both of them briefly, and they worked, though all she saw was the inside of the Stone, and Morgase’s Royal Palace in Caemlyn.

Egwene had not wanted her to try, however fleeting the visit, but not from jealousy. She had not been able to argue very effectively, though, for she had been afraid Elayne and Nynaeve would hear what was in her voice.

Two recovered meant eleven still with the Black Ajah. That was the point Egwene had tried to make. Eleven *ter’angreal* that could take a woman to *Tel’aran’rhiod*, all in the hands of Black sisters. When Elayne made her short journeys into the Unseen World, she could have found the Black Ajah waiting for her, or walked into them before she knew they were there. The thought made Egwene's stomach writhe. They could be waiting for her now. Not likely; not on purpose—how would they know she was coming?—but they could be there when she stepped through. One she could face, unless she was caught by surprise, and she did not mean to allow that. But if they did surprise her? Two or three of them together? Liandrin and Rianna, Chesmal Emry and Jeane Caide and all the rest at once?

Frowning at the map, she made her hands loosen their white-knuckled grip. Tonight had given everything urgency. If Shadowspawn could attack the Stone, if one of the Forsaken could suddenly appear in their midst, she could not give in to fear. They had to know what to do. They had to have something besides Amico's vague tale. Something. If only she could learn where Mazrim Taim was in his caged journey to Tar Valon, or if she could somehow slip into the Amyrlin's dreams and speak to her. Perhaps those things were possible for a Dreamer. If they were, she did not know how. Tanchico was what she had to work with.

"I must go alone, Aviendha. I must." She thought her voice was calm and steady, but Elayne patted her shoulder.

Egwene did not know why she was scrutinizing the map. She already had it fixed in her head, everything in relation to everything else. Whatever existed in this world existed in the World of Dreams, and sometimes more besides, of course. She had her destination chosen. She thumbed through the book to the only engraving showing the inside of a building named on the map, the Panarch's Palace. It would do no good to find herself in a chamber if she had no idea where it was in the city. None of it might do any good in any case. She put that out of her mind. She had to believe there was some chance.

The engraving showed a large room with a high ceiling. A rope strung along waist-high posts would keep anyone from going too close to the things displayed on stands and in open-fronted cabinets along the walls. Most of those displays were indistinct, but not what stood at the far end of the room. The artist had taken pains to show the massive skeleton standing there as if the rest of the creature had that moment disappeared. It had four thick-boned legs, but otherwise resembled no animal Egwene had ever seen. For one thing, it had to stand at least two spans high, well over twice her height. The rounded skull, set low on the shoulders like a bull's, looked big enough for a child to climb inside, and in the picture it seemed to have four eye sockets. The skeleton marked the room off from any other; there was no mistaking it for anything but itself. Whatever it was. If Eurian Romavni had known, he had not named it in these pages.

"What is a panarch, anyway?" she asked, laying the book aside. She had studied the picture a dozen times. "All of these writers seem to think you know already."

"The Panarch of Tanchico is the equal of the king in authority," Elayne recited. "She is responsible for collecting taxes, customs and duties; he for spending them properly. She controls the Civil Watch and the courts, except for the High Court, which is the king's. The army is his, of course, except for the Panarch's Legion. She—"

"I didn't really want to know." Egwene sighed. It had only been something to say, another few moments to delay what she was going to do. The candle was burning down; she was wasting precious minutes. She knew how to step out of the dream when she wanted, how to wake herself, but time passed differently in the World of Dreams, and it was easy to lose track. "As soon as it reaches the mark," she said, and Elayne and Nynaeve murmured reassurances.

Settling back on her feather pillows, at first she only stared at the ceiling, painted with blue sky and clouds and swooping swallows. She did not see them.

Her dreams had been bad enough lately, most of them. Rand was in them, of course. Rand as tall as a mountain, walking through cities, crushing buildings beneath his feet, with screaming people like ants fleeing from him. Rand in chains, and it was he who was screaming. Rand building a wall with him on one side and her on the other, her and Elayne and others she could not make out. "It has to be done," he was saying as he piled up stones. "I'll not let you stop me now." These were not the only nightmares. She had dreamed of Aiel fighting each other, killing each other, even throwing away their weapons and running as if they had gone mad. Mat wrestling with a Seanchan woman who tied an invisible leash to him. A wolf—she was sure it was Perrin, though—fighting a man whose face kept changing. Galad wrapping himself in white as though putting on his own shroud, and Gawyn with his eyes full of pain and hatred. Her mother weeping. They were the sharp dreams, the ones she knew meant something. They were hideous, and she did not know what any of them meant. How could she presume to think she could find any meanings or clues in

Tel'aran'rhiod? But there was no other choice. No other choice but ignorance, and she could not choose that.

Despite her anxiety, going to sleep was no problem; she was exhausted. It was just a matter of closing her eyes and taking deep, regular breaths. She fixed in her thoughts the room in the Panarch's Palace and the huge skeleton. Deep, regular breaths. She could remember how using the stone ring felt, the step into *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Deep—regular—breaths.

Egwene stepped back with a gasp, one hand to her throat. This close, the skeleton seemed even larger than she had thought, the bones bleached dull and dry. She stood right in front of it, inside the rope. A white rope, as thick as her wrist and apparently silk. She had no doubt this was *Tel'aran'rhiod*. The detail was as fine as reality, even for things half-seen from the corner of her eye. That she could even be aware of the differences between this and an ordinary dream told her where she was. Besides, it felt . . . right.

She opened herself to *saidar*. A nick on the finger in the World of Dreams would still be there on waking; there would be no waking from a killing stroke with the Power, or even from a sword, or a club. She did not intend to be vulnerable for an instant.

Instead of her shift, she wore something very much like Aviendha's Aiel garb, but in red brocaded silk; even her soft boots, laced to the knee, were supple red leather, suitable for gloves, with gold stitching and laces. She laughed softly to herself. Clothes in *Tel'aran'rhiod* were what you wanted them to be. Apparently part of her mind wanted to be ready to move quickly, while another part wanted to be ready for a ball. It would not do. The red faded to grays and browns; the coat and breeches and boots became exact copies of the Maidens'. No better, really, not in a city. Abruptly she was in a copy of the dresses Faile always wore, dark, with narrow divided skirts, long sleeves and a high snug bodice. *Foolish to worry about it. No one is going to see me except in their dreams, and few ordinary dreams reach here. It would make no difference if I were naked*.

For a moment she *was* naked. Her face colored with embarrassment; there was no one there to see her bare as in her bath, before she hastily brought the dark dress back, but she should have remembered how stray thoughts could affect things here, especially when you had embraced the Power. Elayne and Nynaeve thought she was so knowledgeable. She knew a few of the rules of the Unseen World, and knew there were a hundred, a thousand more of which she was ignorant. Somehow, she had to learn them, if she was to be the Tower's first Dreamer since Corianin.

She took a closer look at the huge skull. She had grown up in a country village, and she knew what animal bones looked like. Not four eye sockets after all. Two seemed to be for tusks of some kind instead, on either side of where its nose had been. Some sort of monstrous boar, perhaps, though it looked like no pig skull she had ever seen. It had a feel of age, though; great age.

With the Power in her, she could sense things like that, here. The usual enhancement of senses was with her, of course. She could feel tiny cracks in the gilded plaster bosses covering the ceiling fifty feet up, and the smooth polish of the white stone floor. Infinitesimal cracks, invisible to the eye, spread across the floorstones as well.

The chamber was huge, perhaps two hundred paces long and nearly half as wide, with rows of thin white columns, and that white rope running all the way around except where there were doorways, with double-pointed arches. More ropes encircled polished wooden stands and cabinets holding other exhibits out in the floor. Up under the ceiling, an elaborate pattern of tiny carvings pierced the walls, letting in plenty of light. Apparently she had dreamed herself into a Tanchico where it was day.

"A grand display of artifacts of Ages long past, of the Age of Legends and Ages before, open to all, even the common folk, three days in the month and on feastdays," Eurian Romavni had written. He had spoken in glowing terms of the priceless display of *cuendillar* figures, six of them, in a glass-sided case in the center of the hall, always watched by four of the Panarch's personal guards when people were allowed in, and had gone on for two pages about the bones of fabulous beasts "never seen alive by the eyes of man." Egwene could see some of those. On one side of the room was the skeleton of something that looked a little like a bear, if a bear had two front teeth as long as her forearm, and opposite it on the other side were the bones of some slender, four-footed beast with a neck so long the skull was half as high as the ceiling. There were more, spaced down the chamber's walls, just as fantastic. All of them felt old enough to make the Stone of Tear seem new-built. Ducking under the rope barrier, she walked down the chamber slowly, staring.

A weathered stone figurine of a woman, seemingly unclothed but wrapped in hair that fell to her ankles, was outwardly no different from the others sharing its case, each not much bigger than her hand. But it gave an impression of soft warmth that she recognized. It was an *angreal*, she was sure; she wondered why the Tower had not managed to get it away from the Panarch. A finely jointed collar and two bracelets of dull black metal, on a stand by themselves, made her shiver; she felt darkness and pain associated with them—old, old pain, and sharp. A silvery thing in another cabinet, like a three-pointed star inside a circle, was made of no substance she knew; it was softer than metal, scratched and gouged, yet even older than any of the ancient bones. From ten paces she could sense pride and vanity.

One thing actually seemed familiar, though she could not say why. Tucked into a corner of one of the cabinets, as if whoever put it there had been uncertain that it was worthy of display, lay the upper half of a broken figure carved from some shiny white stone, a woman holding a crystal sphere in one upraised hand, her face calm and dignified and full of wise authority. Whole, she would have been perhaps a foot tall. But why did she appear so familiar? She almost seemed to call to Egwene to pick her up.

Not until Egwene's fingers closed on the broken statuette did she realize she had climbed over the rope. *Foolish, when I don't know what it is,* she thought, but it was already too late.

As her hand grasped it, the Power surged within her, into the half-figure then back into her, into the figure and back, in and back. The crystal sphere flickered in fitful, lurid flashes, and needles stabbed her brain with each flash. With a sob of agony, she loosed her hold and clasped both hands to her head.

The crystal sphere shattered as the figure hit the floor and broke into pieces, and the needles vanished, leaving only dull memories of the pain and a queasiness that wobbled her knees. She squeezed her eyes shut so she could not see the room heaving. The figure had to be a *ter'angreal*, but why had it hurt her like that when she only touched it? Perhaps because it was broken; perhaps, broken, it could not do what it was meant for. She did not even want to think of what it might have been made for; testing *ter'angreal* was dangerous. At least it must be broken beyond danger now. Here, at least. *Why did it seem to call me?*

Nausea faded, and she opened her eyes. The figure was back on the shelf, as whole as it had been when she first saw it. Strange things happened in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, but that was stranger than she wanted to see. And this was not what she had come for. First she had to find her way out of the Panarch's Palace. Climbing back over the rope, she hurried out of the chamber, trying not to run.

The palace was empty of life, of course. Human life, at least. Colorful fish swam in large fountains that splashed merrily in the courtyards surrounded by delicately columned walks and balconies screened by stonework like intricately carved lace. Lily pads floated on the waters, and white flowers as big as dinner plates. In the World of Dreams, a place was as it was in the so-called real world. Except for people. Elaborate golden lamps stood in the hallways, wicks uncharred, but she could smell the perfumed oil in them. Her feet raised no hint of dust from the bright carpets that surely could never have been beaten, not here.

Once she did see another person walking ahead of her, a man in gilded, ornately worked plate-and-mail armor, a pointed golden helmet crested with white egret plumes under his arm. "Aeldra?" he called, smiling. "Aeldra, come look at me. I am named the Lord Captain of the Panarch's Legion. Aeldra?" He walked on another pace, still calling, and suddenly was not there. Not a Dreamer. Not even someone using a *ter'angreal* like her stone ring or Amico's iron disc. Only a man whose dream had touched a place he was not aware of, with dangers he did not know. People who died unexpectedly in their sleep had often dreamed their way into *Tel'aran'rhiod* and in truth had died there. He was well out of it, back into an ordinary dream.

The candle was burning down beside that bed back in Tear. Her time in *Tel'aran'rhiod* was burning away.

Hastening her steps, she came to tall, carved doors leading outside, to wide white stairs and a huge empty square. Tanchico spread out in every direction across steep hills, white buildings upon white buildings shining in the sun, hundreds of thin towers and almost as many pointed domes, some gilded. The Panarch's Circle, a tall round wall of white stone, stood in plain sight not half a mile away and a little lower than the palace. The Panarch's Palace rose atop one of the loftiest hills. At the top of the deep stairs, she was high enough to see water glinting to the west, inlets separating her from more hilly fingers where the rest of the city lay. Tanchico was larger than Tear, perhaps larger than Caemlyn.

So much to search, and she did not even know for what. For something that signified the presence of the Black Ajah, or something that indicated some sort of danger to Rand, if either existed here. Had she been a real Dreamer, trained in the use of her talent, she would surely have known what to look for, how to interpret what she saw. But no one remained who could teach her. Aiel Wise Ones supposedly knew how to decipher dreams. Aviendha had been so reluctant to talk about the Wise Ones that Egwene had not asked any of the other Aiel. Perhaps a Wise One could teach her. If she could find one.

She took a step toward the square, and suddenly she was somewhere else.

Great stone spires rose around her in a heat that sucked the moisture out of her breath. The sun seemed to bake right through her dress, and the breeze blowing in her face seemed to come from a stove. Stunted trees dotted a landscape almost bare of other growth, except for a few patches of tough grass and some prickly plants she did not recognize. She recognized the lion, however, even if she had never seen one in the flesh. It lay in a crevice in the rocks not twenty paces away, black-tufted tail switching idly, looking not at her but at something another hundred strides on. The large boar covered in coarse hair was rooting and snuffling at the base of a thorny bush, never noticing the Aiel woman creeping up on it with a spear ready to thrust. Garbed like the Aiel in the Stone, she had her *shoufa* around her head but her face uncovered.

The Waste, Egwene thought incredulously. *I've jumped into the Aiel Waste! When will I learn to watch what I think here?*

The Aiel woman froze. Her eyes were on Egwene now, not the boar. If it was a boar; it did not seem to be shaped exactly right.

Egwene was sure the woman was not a Wise One. Not dressed like a Maiden, from what Egwene had been told, a Maiden of the Spear who wanted to become a Wise One had to “give up the spear.” This had to be just an Aiel woman who had dreamed herself into *Tel'aran'rhiod*, like that fellow in the palace. He would have seen her, too, if he had ever turned around. Egwene closed her eyes and concentrated on her one clear image of Tanchico, that huge skeleton in the great hall.

When she opened them again, she was staring at the massive bones. They had been wired together, she noticed this time. Quite cleverly, so that the wires hardly showed at all. The half-figurine with its crystal sphere was still on its shelf. She did not go near it, any more than the black collar and bracelets that felt of so much pain and suffering. The *angreal*, the stone woman, was a temptation. *What are you going to do with it? Light, you're here to look, to search! Nothing more than that. Get on with it, woman!*

This time she quickly found her way back to the square. Time passed differently here; Elayne and Nynaeve could be waking her up any moment, and she still had not even begun. There might be no more minutes to waste. She had to be careful of what she thought from here on. No more thinking about the Wise Ones. Even the admonition made everything lurch around her. *Keep your mind on what you are doing,* she told herself firmly.

She set out through the empty city, walking fast, sometimes trotting. Winding, stone-paved streets slanted up and down, curving every which way, all empty, except for green-backed pigeons and pale gray gulls that rose in thunderclaps of wings when she came close. Why birds and not people? Flies buzzed by, and she could see roaches and beetles scurrying along in the shadows. A pack of lean dogs, all different colors, loped across the street far ahead of her. Why dogs?

She pulled herself back to why she was there. What would be a sign of the Black Ajah? Or of this danger to Rand, if it existed? Most of the white buildings were plastered, the plaster chipped and cracked, often showing weathered wood or pale brown brick beneath. Only the towers and the larger structures—palaces, she supposed—were stone, if still white. Even the stone had tiny fissures, though, most of it; cracks too minute for the eye to catch, but she could feel them with the Power in her, spiderwebbing domes and towers. Perhaps that meant something. Perhaps it meant Tanchico was a city not looked after by its inhabitants. As likely that as anything else.

She jumped as a shrieking man suddenly plummeted out of the sky in front of her. She only had time to register baggy white trousers and thick mustaches covered by a transparent veil before he vanished, only a pace above the pavement. Had he struck, here in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, he would have been found dead in his bed.

He probably has as much to do with anything as the roaches, she told herself.

Perhaps something inside the buildings. It was a small chance, a wild hope, but she was desperate enough to try anything. Almost anything. Time.

How much time did she have left? She began running from doorway to doorway, putting her head into shops and inns and houses.

Tables and benches stood in common rooms awaiting customers, as neatly arranged as the dully gleaming pewter mugs and plates on their shelves. The shops were as tidy as if the shopkeeper had just opened for the morning, yet while a tailor’s tables held bolts of cloth, and a cutler’s knives and scissors, the ceiling hooks hung empty in a butcher’s shop and the shelves stood bare. A finger run along anywhere picked up no dust at all; everything was clean enough to suit her mother.

In the narrower streets there were homes, small simple white-plastered buildings with flat roofs and no windows onto the street, ready for families to walk in and sit on benches before cold fireplaces or around narrow tables with carved legs where a goodwife’s best bowl or platter was given pride of place. Clothes hung on pegs, pots hung from ceilings, handtools lay on benches, waiting.

On a hunch she retraced her steps once, just to see, back a dozen doors, and peered a second time into what was some woman’s home in the real world. It was almost the way it had been. Almost. The red-striped bowl that had been on the table was now a narrow blue vase; one of the benches, on it a broken harness and the tools for mending it, that had been near the fireplace now sat by the door holding a darning basket and a child’s embroidered dress.

Why did it change? she wondered. *But for that matter, why should it stay the same? Light, I don’t know anything!*

There was a stable across the street, the white plaster showing large patches of brick. She trotted to it and pulled open one of the big doors. Straw covered the dirt floor, just as in every stable she had ever seen, but the stalls stood empty. No horses. Why? Something rustled in the straw, and she realized the stalls were not empty after all. Rats. Dozens of them, staring at her boldly, noses testing the air for her scent. None of the rats ran, or even shied away; they behaved as if they had more right there than she. In spite of herself she stepped back. *Pigeons and gulls and dogs, flies and rats. Maybe a Wise One would know why*.

As suddenly as that she was back in the Waste.

With a scream she fell flat on her back as the hairy boarlike creature darted straight for her, looking as large as a small pony. Not a pig, she saw as it leaped nimbly over her; the snout was too sharp and full of keen teeth, and it had four toes on each foot. The thought was calm, but she shuddered as the beast scampered away through the rocks. It was big enough to have trampled her, breaking bones and worse; those teeth could have ripped and torn as well as any wolf's. She would have awakened with the wounds. If she had waked at all.

The gritty rock under her back was a blistering stovetop. She scrambled to her feet, angry with herself. If she could not keep her mind on what she was doing, she would accomplish nothing. Tanchico was where she was supposed to be; she had to concentrate on that. Nothing else.

She stopped brushing at her skirts when she saw the Aiel woman watching her with sharp blue eyes from ten paces off. The woman was Aviendha's age, no older than herself, but the wisps of hair that stuck out from under her *shoufa* were so pale as to be almost white. The spear in her hands was ready to be cast, and at that distance she was not likely to miss.

The Aiel were said to be more than rough with those who entered the Waste without permission. Egwene knew she could wrap woman and spear in Air, hold them safely, but would the flows keep long enough when she began to fade? Or would they just anger the woman enough to make her cast her spear the moment she was able, perhaps before Egwene was truly gone? Much good it would do to take herself back to Tanchico with an Aiel spear through her. If she tied the flows, that would leave the woman trapped in *Tel'aran'rhiod* until they were unraveled, helpless if that lion or the boarlike creature returned.

No. She simply needed the woman to lower her spear, just long enough to feel safe closing her eyes, to take herself back to Tanchico. Back to what she was supposed to be doing. She had no more time for these flights of fancy. She was not entirely sure someone who had only dreamed themselves into *Tel'aran'rhiod* could harm her the way other things there could, but she was not going to risk finding out with an Aiel spear-point. The Aiel woman should vanish in a few moments. Something to put her off balance until then.

Changing her clothes was easy; as soon as the thought came, Egwene was wearing the same browns and grays as the woman. “I mean you no harm,” she said, outwardly calm.

The woman did not lower her weapon. Instead, she frowned and said, “You have no right to wear *cadin'sor*, girl.” And Egwene found herself standing there in her skin, the sun burning her from overhead, the ground searing her bare feet.

For a moment she gaped in disbelief, dancing from foot to foot. She had not thought it possible to change things about someone else. So many possibilities, so many rules, that she did not know. Hurriedly she thought herself back into stout shoes and the dark dress with its divided skirts and at the same time made the Aiel woman’s garments vanish. She had to draw on *saidar* to do it; the woman must have been concentrating on keeping Egwene naked. She had a flow ready to seize the spear if the other woman made to throw it.

It was the Aiel woman’s turn to look shocked. She let the spear fall to her side, too, and Egwene seized the moment to shut her eyes and take herself back to Tanchico, back to the skeleton of that huge boar. Or whatever it was. She barely gave it a second glance this time. She was growing tired of things that looked like boars and were not. *How did she* do *that? No! It’s wondering about how and why that keeps pulling me off the path. This time I’ll stick to it*.

She did hesitate, though. Just as she had closed her eyes it had seemed she saw another woman, beyond the Aiel woman, watching them both. A golden-haired woman holding a silver bow. *You are letting wild fancies take you, now. You’ve been listening to too many of Thom Merrilin’s stories*. Birgitte was long dead; she could not come again until the Horn of Valere called her back from the grave. Dead women, even heroes of legend, surely could not dream themselves into *Tel’aran’rhiod*.

It was only a moment’s pause, though. Shutting off futile speculation, she ran back to the square. How much time did she have left? The whole city to search, and time slipping away, and she as ignorant as when she started. If only she had some idea of what to look for. Or where. Running did not seem to tire her here in the World of Dreams, but run as hard as she might, she would never cover the entire city before Elayne and Nynaeve woke her. She did not want to have to come back.

A woman appeared suddenly among the flock of pigeons that had gathered in the square. Her gown was pale green, thin and draped closely enough to have satisfied Berelain, her dark hair was in dozens of narrow braids, and her face was covered to the eyes by a transparent veil like the one the falling man had worn. The pigeons soared up, and so did the woman gliding over the nearest rooftops with them before abruptly winking out of existence.

Egwene smiled. She dreamed of flying like a bird all the time, and this was a dream, after all. She leaped into the air, and kept going up, toward the roofs. She wobbled as she thought how ridiculous this was—Flying? People did not fly!—then steadied again as she forced herself to be confident. She was doing it, and that was all there was to it. This was a dream, and she was flying. The wind rushed in her face, and she wanted to laugh giddily.

She skimmed across the Panarch's Circle, where rows of stone benches slanted down from the high wall to a broad field of packed dirt in the center. Imagine so many people gathered, and to watch a fireworks display by the Guild of Illuminators themselves. Back home fireworks were a rare treat. She could remember the handful of times in her life Emond's Field had had them, with the grown-ups as excited as the children.

She sailed over rooftops like a falcon, over palaces and mansions, humble dwellings and shops, warehouses and stables. She slid by domes topped with golden spires and bronze weathervanes, by towers ringed with lacy stone balconies. Carts and wagons dotted wagonyards, waiting. Ships crowded the great harbor and the fingers of water between the city's peninsulas; they lined the docks. Everything seemed in a poor state of repair, from the carts to the ships, but nothing she saw pointed to the Black Ajah. As far as she knew.

She considered trying to envision Liandrin—she knew that doll's face all too well, with its multitude of blond braids, its self-satisfied brown eyes, and its smirking rosebud mouth—picture her in the hopes she might be drawn to where the Black sister was. But if it worked, she might find Liandrin in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, too, and maybe others of them. She was not ready for that.

It suddenly occurred to her that if any of the Black Ajah were in Tanchico, in the Tanchico of *Tel'aran'rhiod*, she was flaunting herself for them. Any eye looking at the sky would notice a woman flying, one who did not vanish after a few moments. Her smooth flight staggered, and she swooped down below roof level, floating along the streets more slowly than before but still faster than a horse could run. She might be rushing toward them, but she could not make herself stop and wait for them.

Fool! she called herself furiously. *Fool! They could know I'm here now. They could be laying a trap already*. She considered stepping out of the dream, back to her bed in Tear, but she had found nothing. If there was anything to find.

A tall woman was suddenly standing in the street ahead of her, slim in a bulky brown skirt and loose white blouse, with a brown shawl around her shoulders and a folded scarf around her forehead to hold white hair that spilled to her waist. Despite her plain clothes she wore a great many necklaces and bracelets of gold or ivory or both. Fists planted on her hips, she stared straight at Egwene, frowning.

Another fool woman who's dreamed herself where she has no right to be and doesn't believe what she's seeing, Egwene thought. She had the description of every woman who had gone with Liandrin, and this woman certainly matched none of them. But the woman did not vanish again; she stood there as Egwene approached swiftly. *Why doesn't she go? Why . . . ? Oh, Light! She's really . . . !* She snatched for the flows to weave lightning, to tangle the woman in Air, fumbling in startled haste.

"Put your feet on the ground, girl," the woman barked. "I had enough trouble finding you again without you flying off like some bird when I do."

Abruptly Egwene stopped flying. Her feet thumped hard on the pavement, and she staggered. It was the Aiel woman's voice, but this was an older woman. Not as old as Egwene had thought at first—in fact, she looked much younger than her white hair suggested—but with the voice, and those sharp blue eyes, she was sure it was the same woman. "You're . . . different," she said.

"You can be what you wish to be, here." The woman sounded embarrassed, but only a little. "At times I like to remember. . . . That is not important. You are from the White Tower? It has been long since they had a dreamwalker. Very long. I am Amys, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel."

"You are a Wise One? You are! And you know dreams, you know *Tel'aran'rhiod!* You can. . . . My name is Egwene. Egwene al'Vere. I. . . ." She took a deep breath; Amys did not look a woman to lie to. "I am Aes Sedai. Of the Green Ajah."

Amys's expression did not change, really. A slight crinkling of her eyes, perhaps in skepticism. Egwene hardly looked old enough to be full Aes Sedai. What she said, though, was "I meant to leave you standing in your skin until you asked for some proper clothes. Putting on *cadin'sor* that way, as though you were. . . . You surprised me, pulling free as you did, turning my own spear on me. But you are still untaught, are you not, however strong. Else you would not have popped into the middle of my hunt that way, where you obviously did not wish to be. And this flying about? Did you come to *Tel'aran'rhiod—Tel'aran'rhiod*!—to stare at this city, wherever it is?"

"It's Tanchico," Egwene said faintly. *She didn't know*. But then how had Amys followed her, or found her? It was obvious she knew more of the World of Dreams than Egwene did, by far. "You can help me. I am trying to find women of the Black Ajah, Darkfriends. I think they are here, and I have to find them if they are."

"It truly exists, then." Amys almost whispered it. "An Ajah of Shadowrunners in the White Tower." She shook her head. "You are like a girl just wedded to the spear who thinks now she can wrestle men and leap mountains. For her it means a few bruises and a valuable lesson in humility. For you, here, it could mean death." Amys eyed the white buildings around them and grimaced. "Tanchico? In . . . Tarabon? This city is dying, eating itself. There is a darkness here, an evil. Worse than men can make. Or women." She looked at Egwene pointedly. "You cannot see it, or feel it, can you? And you want to hunt Shadowrunners in *Tel'aran'rhiod*."

"Evil?" Egwene said quickly. "That could be them. Are you sure? If I told you what they look like, could you be certain it was them? I can describe them. I can describe one to her last braid."

"A child," Amys muttered, "demanding a silver bracelet from her father this minute when she knows nothing of trading or the making of bracelets. You have much to learn. Far more than I can begin to teach you, now. Come to the Three-fold Land. I will have the word spread through the clans that an Aes Sedai called Egwene al'Vere is to be brought to me at Cold Rocks Hold. Give your name and show your Great Serpent ring, and you will have safe running. I am not there now, but I will return from Rhuidean before you can arrive."

"Please, you must help me. I need to know if they are here. I have to know."

"But I cannot tell you. I do not know them, or this place, this Tanchico. You must come to me. What you do is dangerous, far more dangerous than you know. You must—Where are you going? Stay!"

Something seemed to snatch at Egwene, pulling her into darkness.

Amys’s voice followed her, hollow and dwindling. “You must come to me and learn. You must. . . .

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CHAPTER 12

Tanchico or the Tower

Elayne drew a ragged, relieved breath as Egwene finally stirred and opened her eyes. At the foot of the bed, Aviendha's features lost their tinge of frustration and anxiety, and she flashed a quick smile that Egwene returned. The candle had burned past the mark minutes ago; it seemed an hour.

"You would not wake up," Elayne said unsteadily. "I shook you and shook you, but you would not wake." She gave a small laugh. "Oh, Egwene, you even frightened Aviendha."

Egwene put a hand on her arm and squeezed reassuringly. "I am back, now." She sounded tired, and she had sweated her shift through. "I suppose I had reason to stay a little longer than we planned. I will be more careful next time. I promise."

Nynaeve returned the pitcher of water to the washstand vigorously, sloshing some out. She had been on the point of throwing it in Egwene's sleeping face. Her features were composed, but the pitcher rattled the washbowl, and she let the spilled water drip to the carpet. "Was it something you found? Or was it . . . ? Egwene, if the World of Dreams can hold on to you in some way, maybe it is too dangerous until you learn more. Maybe the more often you go, the harder it is to come back. Maybe. . . . I don't know. But I do know we cannot risk letting you become lost." She crossed her arms under her breasts, ready for an argument.

"I know," Egwene said, very close to meekly. Elayne's eyebrows shot up; Egwene was never meek with Nynaeve. Anything but.

Egwene struggled off the bed, refusing Elayne's help, and made her way to the washstand to bathe her face and arms in the relatively cool water. Elayne found a dry shift in the wardrobe while Egwene pulled off her sodden one.

“I met a Wise One, a woman named Amys.” Egwene’s voice was muffled until her head popped out of the top of the new shift. “She said I should come to her, to learn about *Tel’aran’rhiod*. At some place in the Waste called Cold Rocks Hold.”

Elayne had caught a flicker of Aviendha’s eye at the mention of the Wise One’s name. “Do you know her? Amys?”

The Aiel woman’s nod could only be described as reluctant. “A Wise One. A dreamwalker. Amys was *Far Dareis Mai* until she gave up the spear to go to Rhuidean.”

“A Maiden!” Egwene exclaimed. “So that’s why she. . . . No matter. She said she is at Rhuidean, now. Do you know where this Cold Rocks Hold is, Aviendha?”

“Of course. Cold Rocks is Rhuarc’s hold. Rhuarc is Amys’s husband. I visit there, sometimes. I used to. My sister-mother, Lian, is sister-wife to Amys.”

Elayne exchanged confused glances with Egwene and Nynaeve. Once Elayne had thought she knew a good bit about Aiel, all learned from her teachers in Caemlyn, but she had discovered since meeting Aviendha how little she did know. Customs and relationships all were a maze. First-sisters meant having the same mother; except that it was possible for friends to *become* first-sisters by making a pledge before Wise Ones. Second-sisters meant your mothers were sisters; if your fathers were brothers, you were father-sisters, and not considered as closely related as second-sisters. After that, it truly grew bewildering.

“What does ‘sister-wife’ mean?” she asked hesitantly.

“That you have the same husband.” Aviendha frowned at the way Egwene gasped and Nynaeve’s eyes opened as wide as they would go. Elayne had been half-expecting the answer, but she still found herself fussing with skirts that were perfectly straight. “This is not your custom?” the Aiel woman asked.

“No,” Egwene said faintly. “No, it is not.”

“But you and Elayne care for one another as first-sisters. What would you have done had one of you been unwilling to step aside for Rand al’Thor? Fight over him? Let a man damage the ties between you? Would it not have been better if you both had married him, then?”

Elayne looked at Egwene. The thought of. . . . Could she have done such a thing? Even with Egwene? She knew her cheeks were red. Egwene merely looked startled.

“But I wanted to step aside,” Egwene said.

Elayne knew the remark was as much for her as for Aviendha, but the thought would not go away. Had Min had a viewing? What would she do if Min had? *If it’s Berelain, I will strangle her, and him too! If it has to be someone, why couldn’t it be Egwene? Light, what am I thinking?* She knew she was becoming flustered, and to cover it, she made her voice light. “You sound as if the man has no choice in the matter.”

“He can say no,” Aviendha said as if it were obvious, “but if he wishes to marry one, he must marry both when they ask. Please take no offense, but I was shocked when I learned that in your lands a man can ask a woman to marry him. A man should make his interest known, then wait for the woman to speak. Of course, some women lead a man to see where his interest lies, but the right of the question is hers. I do not really know very much of these things. I have wanted to be *Far Dareis Mai* since I was a child. All I want in life is the spear and my spear-sisters,” she finished quite fiercely.

“No one is going to try to make you marry,” Egwene said soothingly. Aviendha gave her a startled look.

Nynaeve cleared her throat loudly. Elayne wondered if she had been thinking about Lan; there were certainly hard spots of color in her cheeks. “I suppose, Egwene,” Nynaeve said in a slightly too energetic voice, “that you did not find what you were looking for, or you would have said something by now.”

“I found nothing,” Egwene replied regretfully. “But Amys said. . . . Aviendha, what sort of woman is Amys?”

The Aiel woman had taken up a study of the carpet. “Amys is hard as the mountains and pitiless as the sun,” she said without looking up. “She is a dreamwalker. She can teach you. Once she lays her hands on you, she will drag you by the hair toward what she wants. Rhuarc is the only one who can stand up to her. Even the other Wise Ones step carefully when Amys speaks. But she can teach you.”

Egwene shook her head. “I meant would being in a strange place unsettle her, make her nervous? Being in a city? Would she see things that weren’t there?”

Aviendha’s laugh was a short, sharp sound. “Nervous? Waking to find a lion in her bed would not make Amys nervous. She was a Maiden, Egwene, and she has grown no softer, you can be sure of it."

"What did this woman see?" Nynaeve asked.

"It wasn't something she saw, exactly," Egwene said slowly. "I *think* not seeing. She said Tanchico had an evil in it. Worse than men could make, she said. That could be the Black Ajah. Don't argue with me, Nynaeve," she added in a firmer voice. "Dreams have to be interpreted. It very well could be."

Nynaeve had begun frowning as soon as Egwene mentioned evil in Tanchico, and her frown turned to a heated glare when Egwene told her not to argue. Sometimes Elayne wanted to shake both women. She stepped in quickly, before the older woman could erupt. "It very well could be, Egwene. You did find something. More than Nynaeve or I thought you could. Didn't she, Nynaeve? Don't you think so?"

"It could be," Nynaeve said grudgingly.

"It could be." Egwene did not sound happy about it. She took a deep breath. "Nynaeve is right. I have to learn what I'm doing. If I knew what I should, I would not have had to be told about the evil. If I knew what I should, I could have found the very room Liandrin is staying in, wherever she is. Amys can teach me. That is why. . . . That is why I have to go to her."

"Go to her?" Nynaeve sounded appalled. "Into the Waste?"

"Aviendha can take me right to this Cold Rocks Hold." Egwene's look, half-defiant, half-anxious, darted between Elayne and Nynaeve. "If I was certain they were in Tanchico, I wouldn't let you go alone. If you decide to. But with Amys to help me, maybe I can find out where they are. Maybe I can. . . . That is just it; I do not even know what I'll be able to do, only that I am certain it will be far more than I can now. It isn't as if I will be abandoning you. You can take the ring with you. You know the Stone well enough to come back here in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. I can come to you in Tanchico. Whatever I learn from Amys, I can teach you. Please say you understand. I can learn so much from Amys, and then I can use it to help you. It will be as if all three of us had been trained by her. A dreamwalker; a woman who *knows*! Liandrin and the rest of them will be like children; they won't know a quarter of what we do." She chewed her lip, one pensive bite. "You don't believe I am running out on you, do you? If you do, I won't go."

"Of course you must go," Elayne told her. "I will miss you, but no one promised us we could stay together until this was done."

“But the two of you . . . going alone . . . I should go with you. If they really are in Tanchico, I should be with you.”

“Nonsense,” Nynaeve said briskly. “Training is what you need. That will do us far more good in the long run than your company to Tanchico. It isn’t even as if we know any of them are in Tanchico. If they are, Elayne and I will do very well together, but we could arrive and find that this evil is no more than the war after all. The Light knows, war should be evil enough for anyone. We may be back in the Tower before you are. You must be careful in the Waste,” she added in a practical tone. “It is a dangerous place. Aviendha, you will look after her?”

Before the Aiel woman could open her mouth, there was a knock at the door, followed immediately by Moiraine. The Aes Sedai took them in with one sweeping look that weighed, measured and considered them and what they had been doing, all without the twitch of an eyelid to suggest her conclusions. “Joiya and Amico are dead,” she announced.

“Was that the reason for the attack, then?” Nynaeve said. “All that to kill them? Or perhaps to kill them if they could not be freed. I’ve been sure Joiya was so confident because she expected rescue. She must have been lying after all. I never trusted her repentance.”

“Not the main purpose, perhaps,” Moiraine replied. “The captain very wisely kept his men to their posts in the dungeons during the attack. They never saw a single Trolloc or Myrddraal. But they found the pair dead, after. Each with her throat rather messily cut. After her tongue had been nailed to her cell door.” She might as well have been speaking of having a dress mended.

Elayne’s stomach heaved leadenly at the detached description. “I would not have wanted that for them. Not like that. The Light illumine their souls.”

“They sold their souls to the Shadow long ago,” Egwene said roughly. She had both hands pressed to her stomach, though. “How. . . . How was it done? Gray Men?”

“I doubt even Gray Men could have managed that,” Moiraine said dryly. “The Shadow has resources beyond what we know, it seems.”

“Yes.” Egwene smoothed her dress, and her voice. “If there was no attempt at rescue, it must mean they were both telling the truth. They were killed because they talked.”

"Or to stop them from it," Nynaeve added grimly. "We can hope they do not know that those two told us anything. Perhaps Joiya did repent, but I'll not believe it."

Elayne swallowed, thinking of being in a cell, having your face pressed to the door so your tongue could be pulled out and. . . . She shivered, but made herself say, "They might have been killed simply to punish them for being captured." She left out her thought that the killing might have been to make them believe whatever Joiya and Amico had said; they had enough doubts about what to do as it was. "Three possibilities, and only one says the Black Ajah knows they revealed a word. Since all three are equal, the chances are that they do not know."

Egwene and Nynaeve looked shocked. "To *punish* them?" Nynaeve said incredulously.

They were both tougher than she in many ways—she admired them for it—but they had not grown up watching the maneuverings at court in Caemlyn, hearing tales of the cruel way Cairhienin and Tairens played the Games of Houses.

"I think the Black Ajah might be less than gentle with failure of any kind," she told them. "I can imagine Liandrin ordering it. Joiya surely could have done it easily." Moiraine eyed her briefly, a reassessing look.

"Liandrin," Egwene said, her tone absolutely flat. "Yes, I can imagine Liandrin or Joiya giving that command."

"You did not have much longer to question them in any case," Moiraine said. "They would have been shipbound by midday tomorrow." A hint of anger touched her voice; Elayne realized Moiraine must see the Black sisters' deaths as an escape from justice. "I hope you reach some decision soon. Tanchico or the Tower."

Elayne met Nynaeve's eyes and gave a slight nod.

Nynaeve nodded back, more assertively, before turning to the Aes Sedai. "Elayne and I will be going to Tanchico as soon as we can find a ship. A fast ship, I hope. Egwene and Aviendha will be going to Cold Rocks Hold, in the Aiel Waste." She gave no reasons, and Moiraine's eyebrows rose.

"Jolien can take her," Aviendha said into the momentary silence. She avoided looking at Egwene. "Or Sefela, or Bain and Chiad. I . . . I have a thought to go with Elayne and Nynaeve. If there is war in this Tanchico, they have need of a sister to watch their backs."

“If that is what you want, Aviendha,” Egwene said slowly.

She looked surprised and hurt, but no more surprised than Elayne. She had thought the two of them were becoming friends. “I am glad you want to help us, Aviendha, but you should be the one to take Egwene to Cold Rocks Hold.”

“She is going neither to Tanchico nor Cold Rocks Hold,” Moiraine said, taking a letter from her pouch and unfolding the pages. “This was placed in my hand an hour gone. The young Aielman who brought it told me it was given to him a month ago, before any of us reached Tear, yet it is addressed to me by name, at the Stone of Tear.” She glanced at the last sheet. “Aviendha, do you know Amys, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel; Bair, of the Haido sept of the Shaarad Aiel; Melaine, of the Jhirad sept of the Goshien Aiel; and Seana, of the Black Cliff sept of the Nakai Aiel? They signed it.”

“They are all Wise Ones, Aes Sedai. All dreamwalkers.” Aviendha’s stance had shifted to wariness, though she did not seem aware of it. She looked ready to fight or flee.

“Dreamwalkers,” Moiraine mused. “Perhaps that explains it. I have heard of dreamwalkers.” She turned to the second page of the letter. “Here is what they say about you. What they said perhaps before you had even decided to come to Tear. ‘There is among the Maidens of the Spear in the Stone of Tear a willful girl called Aviendha, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel. She must now come to us. There can be no more waiting or excuses. We will await her on the slopes of Chaendaer, above Rhuidean.’ There is more about you, but mainly telling me that I must see you come to them without delay. They issue commands like the Amyrlin, these Wise Ones of yours.” She made a vexed sound, which brought Elayne to wonder if the Wise Ones had tried issuing commands to the Aes Sedai, too. Not very likely. And unlikely to be successful if tried. Still, something about that letter irritated the Aes Sedai.

“I am *Far Dareis Mai*,” Aviendha said angrily. “I do not go running like a child when someone calls my name. I will go to Tanchico if I wish.”

Elayne pursed her lips thoughtfully. This was something new from the Aiel woman. Not the anger—she had seen Aviendha angry before, if not quite to this degree—but the undertone. She could call it nothing but sulkiness. That seemed as unlikely as Lan being sulky, but there it was.

Egwene heard it, too. She patted Aviendha's arm. "It's all right. If you want to go to Tanchico, I'll be pleased that you are protecting Elayne and Nynaeve." Aviendha gave her a truly miserable look.

Moiraine shook her head, only slightly, but still deliberate. "I showed this to Rhuarc." Aviendha opened her mouth, her face irate, but the Aes Sedai raised her voice and went on smoothly. "As the letter asks me to. Only the part concerning you, of course. He seems quite determined that you will do as the letter asks. As it orders. I think it wisest to do as Rhuarc and the Wise Ones wish, Aviendha. Do you not agree?"

Aviendha stared around the room wildly, as at a trap. "I am *Far Dareis Mai*," she muttered, and strode for the door without another word.

Egwene took a step, half-raising a hand to stop her, then let it fall as the door banged shut. "What do they want with her?" she demanded of Moiraine. "You always know more than you let on. What are you holding back this time?"

"Whatever the Wise Ones' reason," Moiraine said coolly, "it is surely a matter between Aviendha and them. If she wished you to know, she would have told you."

"You cannot stop trying to maneuver people," Nynaeve said bitterly. "You're maneuvering Aviendha into something now, aren't you?"

"Not I. The Wise Ones. And Rhuarc." Moiraine folded the letter, returning it to her belt pouch with a touch of acerbity in her manner. "She can always say no to him. A clan chief is not the same as a king, as I understand Aiel ways."

"Can she?" Elayne asked. Rhuarc reminded her of Gareth Bryne. The Captain-General of her mother's Royal Guards had seldom put his foot down, but when he did, not even Morgase could bring him around, short of a royal command. There would be no command from the throne this time—not that Morgase had ever issued one to Gareth Bryne when he had decided he was right, now that Elayne thought of it—and without one, she expected that Aviendha was going to the slopes of Chaendaer, above Rhuidean. "At least she can journey with you, Egwene. Amys can hardly meet you at Cold Rocks Hold if she plans to wait for Aviendha at Rhuidean. You can go to Amys together."

"But I do not want her to," Egwene said sadly. "Not if she doesn't want to."

“Whatever anyone wants,” Nynaeve said, “we have work to do. You will need many things for a trip into the Waste, Egwene. Lan will tell me what. And Elayne and I must make preparations to sail for Tanchico. I suppose we can find a ship tomorrow, but that means deciding what to pack tonight.”

“There is a ship of the Atha’an Miere at the docks in the Maule,” Moiraine told them. “A raker. There are no ships faster. You did want a fast ship.” Nynaeve gave a grudging nod.

“Moiraine,” Elayne said, “what is Rand going to do now? After this attack. . . . Will he start the war you want?”

“I do not want a war,” the Aes Sedai replied. “I want what will see him alive to fight Tarmon Gai’don. He says he will tell us all what he means to do tomorrow.” The smallest frown creased her smooth forehead. “Tomorrow, we will all know more than we do tonight.” Her departure was abrupt.

Tomorrow, Elayne thought. *What will he do when I tell him? What will he say? He has to understand*. Determinedly, she joined the other two to discuss their preparations.

* * *

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CHAPTER 13

Rumors

The tavern’s business rocked along like any in the Maule, a wagon-load of geese and crockery careering downhill through the night. The babble of voices fought with the musicians’ offerings on three assorted drums, two hammered dulcimers, and a bulbous semseer that produced whining trills. The serving maids in dark, ankle-length dresses with necks up to the chin and short white aprons hustled between crowded tables, holding clusters of pottery mugs overhead so they could squeeze through. Barefoot leather-vested dockmen mixed with fellows in coats tight to the waist and bare-chested men with broad, colorful sashes to hold up their baggy breeches. So close to the docks, vestments of outlanders were everywhere among the crowd; high collars from the north and long collars from the west, silver chains on coats and bells on vests, knee-high boots and thigh-high boots, necklaces or earrings on men, lace on coats or shirts. One man with wide shoulders and a big belly had a forked yellow beard, and another had smeared something on his mustaches to make them glisten in the lamplight and curl up on either side of his narrow face. Dice rolled and tumbled in three corners of the room and on a number of tabletops, silver changing hands briskly to shouts and laughter.

Mat sat alone with his back to the wall where he could see all the doors, though mostly he peered into a still untouched mug of dark wine. He did not go near the dice games, and he never glanced at the serving girls’ ankles. With the tavern so crowded, men occasionally thought to share his table, but a good look at his face made them sheer away and crowd onto a bench elsewhere.

Dipping a finger in his wine, he sketched aimlessly on the tabletop. These fools had no idea what had happened in the Stone tonight. He had heard a few Tairens mention some kind of trouble, quick words that trailed off into nervous laughter. They did not know and did not want to. He almost wished he did not know himself. No, he wished he had a better idea of what had happened. The images kept flashing in his head, flashing through the holes in his memory, making no real sense.

The din of fighting somewhere in the distance echoed down the corridor, dulled by the wall hangings. He retrieved his knife from the Gray Man's corpse with a shaking hand. A Gray Man, and hunting him. It had to have been after him. Gray Men did not wander about killing at random; they had targets as surely as an arrow. He turned to run, and there was a Myraddraal striding toward him like a black snake on legs, its pasty-faced, eyeless stare sending shivers into his bones. At thirty paces he hurled the knife straight at where an eye should have been; at that distance he could hit a knothole no larger than an eye four times in five.

The Fade's black sword blurred as it knocked the dagger away, almost casually; it did not even break stride. "Time to die, Hornsounder." Its voice was a red adder's dry hiss, warning of death.

Mat backed away. He had a knife in either hand, now, though he did not remember drawing them. Not that knives would be much good against a sword, but running meant that black blade in his back as sure as five sixes beat four threes. He wished he had a good quarterstaff. Or a bow; he would like to see this thing try to deflect a shaft from a Two Rivers longbow. He wished he were somewhere else. He was going to die, here.

Suddenly a dozen Trollocs roared out of a side hallway, piling onto the Fade in a frenzy of chopping axes and stabbing swords. Mat stared in amazed disbelief. The Halfman fought like a black-armored whirlwind. More than half the Trollocs were dead or dying before the Fade lay in a twitching heap; one arm flexed and thrashed like a dying snake three paces away from the body, still with that black sword in its fist.

A ram-horned Trolloc peered toward Mat, snout lifted to sniff the air. It snarled at him, then whined and began licking a long gash that had laid open mail and hairy forearm. The others finished cutting the throats of their wounded, and one barked a few harsh, guttural words. Without another glance at Mat, they turned and trotted away, hooves and boots making hollow sounds on the stone floor.

Away from him. Mat shivered. Trollocs to the rescue. What had Rand gotten him into now? He saw what he had drawn with the wine—an open door—and scrubbed it out angrily. He had to get away from here. He had to.

And he could also feel that urge in the back of his head, that it was time to go back to the Stone. He pushed it away angrily, but it kept buzzing at him.

He caught a snatch of talk from the table to his right, where the lean-faced fellow with the curling mustaches was holding forth in a heavy Lugarder accent. “Now this Dragon of yours is a great man no doubt, I’ll not be denying it, but he’s not a patch on Logain. Why, Logain had all of Ghealdan at war, and half of Amadicia and Altara, as well. He made the earth swallow whole towns that resisted him, he did. Buildings, people and all entire. And the one up in Saldaea, Maseem? Why, they say he made the sun stand still till he defeated the Lord of Bashere’s army. ’Tis a fact, they do say.”

Mat shook his head. The Stone fallen and *Callandor* in Rand’s hand, and this idiot still thought he was another false Dragon. He had sketched that doorway again. Rubbing a hand through it, he grabbed up the mug of wine, then stopped with it halfway to his mouth. Through the commotion his ear had picked out a familiar name spoken at a nearby table. Scraping back his bench, he made his way to that table, mug in hand.

The people around it were the sort of odd mixture made in taverns in the Maule. Two barefoot sailors wearing oiled coats over bare chests, one with a thick gold chain close around his neck. A once fat man with sagging jowls, in a dark Cairhienin coat with slashes of red and gold and green across his chest which might have indicated that he was a noble, though one sleeve was torn at the shoulder; a good many Cairhienin refugees had come down far in the world. A gray-haired woman all in subdued dark blue, with a hard face and a sharp eye and heavy gold rings on her fingers. And the speaker, the fork-bearded fellow, with a ruby the size of a pigeon’s egg in his ear. The three silver chains looped across the straining chest of his dark, reddish coat named him a Kandori master merchant. They had a guild for merchants in Kandor.

The talk ceased and all eyes swung to Mat when he stopped at their table. “I heard you mention the Two Rivers.”

Forkbeard ran a quick eye over him, the unbrushed hair, the tight expression on his face and the wine in his fist, the gleaming black boots, the green coat with its gold scrollwork, open to the waist to reveal a snowy linen shirt, but both coat and shirt heavily wrinkled. In short, the very image of a young noble sporting himself among the commoners. “I did, my Lord,” he said heartily. “I was saying there’ll be no tabac out of there this year, I’ll wager. I have twenty casks of the finest Two Rivers leaf, though, than which there is none finer. Fetch an excellent price later in the year. If my Lord wishes a cask for his own stock . . .” He tugged one point of his yellow beard and laid a finger alongside his nose. “. . . I am certain I could manage to—”

“You’ll wager that, will you?” Mat said softly, cutting him short. “Why would there be no tabac out of the Two Rivers?”

“Why, the Whitecloaks, my Lord. The Children of the Light.”

“What about Whitecloaks?”

The master merchant peered around the table for help; there was a dangerous note in that quiet tone. The sailors looked as if they would leave if they dared. The Cairhienin was glaring at Mat, sitting up too straight and smoothing his worn coat as he swayed; the empty mug in front of him was obviously not his first. The gray-haired woman had her mug to her mouth, her sharp eyes watching Mat over the rim in a calculating way.

Managing a seated bow, the merchant put on an ingratiating tone. “The rumor is, my Lord, that the Whitecloaks have gone into the Two Rivers. Hunting the Dragon Reborn, it’s said. Though of course, that cannot be, since the Lord Dragon is here in Tear.” He eyed Mat to see how that had been taken; Mat’s face did not change. “These rumors can run very wild, my Lord. Perhaps it’s only wind in a bucket. The same rumor claims the Whitecloaks are after some Darkfriend with yellow eyes, too. Did you ever hear of a man with yellow eyes, my Lord? No more have I. Wind in a bucket.”

Mat set his mug on the table and leaned closer to the man. “Who else are they hunting? According to this rumor. The Dragon Reborn. A man with yellow eyes. Who else?”

Beads of sweat formed on the merchant’s face. “No one, my Lord. No one that I heard. Only rumor, my Lord. Straws in the wind; no more. A puff of smoke, soon vanished. If I might have the honor of presenting my Lord a cask of Two Rivers tabac? A gesture of appreciation . . . the honor of . . . to express my. . . .”

Mat tossed an Andoran gold crown onto the table. “Buy your drink on me till that runs out.”

As he turned away he heard mutters from the table. “I thought he’d cut my throat. You know these lordlings when they’re full of wine.” That from the fork-bearded merchant. “An odd young man,” the woman said.

“Dangerous. Do not try your ploys on that kind, Paetram.” “I do not think he is a lord at all,” another man said petulantly. The Cairhienin, Mat supposed. His lip curled. A lord? He would not be a lord if it was offered to him. *Whitecloaks in the Two Rivers. Light! Light help us!*

Plowing his way to the door, he pulled a pair of wooden clogs from the pile against the wall. He had no idea whether they were the ones he had worn in—they all looked alike—and did not care. They fit his boots.

It had started raining outside, a light fall that made the darkness that much deeper. Turning up his collar, he splashed along the muddy streets of the Maule in an awkward trot, past blaring taverns and well-lit inns and dark-windowed houses. When mud gave way to paving stones at the wall marking the inner city, he kicked the clogs off and left them lying as he ran on. The Defenders guarding the nearest gate into the Stone let him pass without a word; they knew who he was. He ran all the way to Perrin’s room and flung open the door, barely noticing the splintered split in the wood. Perrin’s saddlebags lay on the bed, and Perrin was stuffing shirts and stockings into them. There was only one candle lit, but he did not seem to notice the gloom.

“You’ve heard, then,” Mat said.

Perrin went on with what he was doing. “About home? Yes. I went down to sniff out a rumor for Faile. After tonight, more than ever, I have to get her. . . .” The growl, deep in his throat, made Mat’s hackles rise; it sounded like an angry wolf. “No matter. I heard. Maybe this will do as well.”

As well as what? Mat wondered. “You believe it?”

For a moment Perrin looked up; his eyes gathered the light of the candle, shining a burnished golden yellow. “There doesn’t seem to be much doubt, to me. It’s all too close to the truth.”

Mat shifted uncomfortably. “Does Rand know?” Perrin only nodded and went back to his packing. “Well, what does he say?”

Perrin paused, staring at the folded cloak in his hands. “He started muttering to himself. ‘He said he’d do it. He said he would. I should have believed him.’ Like that. It made no sense. Then he grabbed me by the collar and said he had to do ‘what they don’t expect.’ He wanted to me to understand, but I’m not certain he does himself. He didn’t seem to care whether I leave or stay. No, I take that back. I think he was relieved I’m leaving.”

“Boil it down, and he’s not going to do anything,” Mat said. “Light, with *Callandor* he could blast a thousand Whitecloaks! You saw what he did to those bloody Trollocs. You’re going, are you? Back to the Two Rivers? Alone?”

“Unless you are coming, too.” Perrin stuffed the cloak into the saddlebags. “Are you?”

Instead of answering, Mat paced back and forth, his face in half-light and shadow by turns. His mother and father were in Emond’s Field, and his sisters. Whitecloaks had no reason to hurt them. If he went home, he had the feeling he would never leave again, that his mother would marry him off before he could sit down. But if he did not go, if the Whitecloaks harmed them. . . . All it took was rumor, for Whitecloaks, so he had heard. But why should there be any rumor about them? Even the Coplins, liars and troublemakers to a man, liked his father. Everyone liked Abell Cauthon.

“You don’t have to,” Perrin said quietly. “Nothing I heard mentioned you. Only Rand, and me.”

“Burn me, I will g—” He could not say it. Thinking of going was easy enough, but saying he would? His throat tightened up to strangle the words. “Is it easy for you, Perrin? Going, I mean? Don’t you . . . feel anything? Trying to hold you back? Telling you reasons you shouldn’t go?”

“A hundred of them, Mat, but I know it comes down to Rand, and *ta’veren*. You won’t admit that, will you? A hundred reasons to stay, but the one reason to go outweighs them. The Whitecloaks are in the Two Rivers, and they’ll hurt people trying to find me. I can stop it, if I go.”

“Why should the Whitecloaks want you enough to hurt anybody? Light, if they go asking for somebody with yellow eyes, nobody in Emond’s Field will know who they’re talking about! And how can you stop anything? One more pair of hands won’t do much good. Aaah! The Whitecloaks have bitten a mouthful of leather if they think they can push Two Rivers folk around.”

“They know my name,” Perrin said softly. His gaze swung to where his axe hung on the wall, the belt tied around the haft and the wall hook. Or maybe it was his hammer he was staring at, standing propped against the wall beneath the axe; Mat could not be sure. “They can find my family. As for why, they have their reasons, Mat. Just as I have mine. Who can say who has the better?”

“Burn me, Perrin. Burn me! I want to g-g—See? I can’t even say it, now. Like my head knows I’ll do it if I say it. I can’t even get it out in my mind!”

“Different paths. We’ve been sent down different paths before.”

“Different paths be bloodied,” Mat grunted. “I’ve had all I want of Rand, and Aes Sedai, shoving me down their bloody paths. I want to go where I want for a change, do what I want!” He turned for the door, but Perrin’s voice halted him.

“I hope your path is a happy one, Mat. The Light send you pretty girls and fools who want to gamble.”

“Oh, burn me, Perrin. The Light send you what you want, too.”

“I expect it will.” He did not sound happy at the prospect.

“Will you tell my da I’m all right? And my mother? She always did worry. And look after my sisters. They used to spy on me and tell Mother everything, but I wouldn’t want anything to happen to them.”

“I promise, Mat.”

Closing the door behind him, Mat wandered down the hallways aimlessly. His sisters. Eldrin and Bodewhin had always been ready to run shouting “Mama, Mat’s in trouble again, Mat’s doing what he shouldn’t, Mama.” Especially Bode. They would be sixteen and seventeen, now. Probably thinking of marriage before too much longer, already with some dull farmer picked out whether the fellow knew it or not. Had he really been gone so long? It did not seem so, sometimes. Sometimes he felt as if he had left Emond’s Field just a week or two past. Other times it seemed years gone, only dimly remembered at all. He could remember Eldrin and Bode smirking when he had been switched, but their faces were no longer sharp. His own sisters’ faces. These bloody holes in his memory, like holes in his life.

He saw Berelain coming toward him and grinned in spite of himself. For all her airs, she was a fine figure of a woman. That clinging white silk was thin enough for a handkerchief, not to mention being scooped low enough at the top to expose a considerable amount of excellent pale bosom.

He swept her his best bow, elegant and formal. “A good evening to you, my Lady.” She started to sweep by without a glance, and he straightened angrily. “Are you deaf as well as blind, woman? I’m not a carpet to walk over, and I distinctly heard myself speak. If I pinch your bottom, you can slap my face, but until I do, I expect a civil word for a civil word!”

The First stopped dead, eyeing him in that way women had. She could have sewn him a shirt and told his weight, not to mention when he had his last bath, from that look. Then she turned away, murmuring something to herself. All he caught was “too much like me.”

He stared after her in amazement. Not a word to him! That face, that walk, and her nose so far in the air it was a wonder her feet touched the ground. That was what he got, speaking to the likes of Berelain and Elayne. Nobles who thought you were dirt unless you had a palace and bloodlines back to Artur Hawkwing. Well, he knew a plump cook’s helper—just plump enough—who did not think he was dirt. Dara had a way of nibbling his ears that. . . .

His thoughts stopped dead in their tracks. He had been considering seeing whether Dara was awake and up for a cuddle. He had even considered flirting with Berelain. Berelain! And the last words he had said to Perrin. *Look after my sisters*. As if he had already decided, already knew what to do. Only he had not. He would not, not so easily, just sliding into it. There was a way, perhaps.

Digging a gold coin from his pocket, he flipped it into the air and snatched it onto the back of his other hand. A Tar Valon mark, he saw for the first time, and he was staring at the Flame of Tar Valon, stylized like a teardrop. “Burn all Aes Sedai!” he announced loudly. “And burn Rand al’Thor for getting me into this!”

A black-and-gold liveried servant stopped in midstride, staring at him worriedly. The man’s silver tray was piled high with rolled bandages and jars of ointment. As soon as he realized Mat had seen him, he gave a jump.

Mat tossed the gold mark onto the man’s tray. “From the biggest fool in the world. Mind you spend it well, on women and wine.”

“Th-thank you, my Lord,” the man stammered as if stunned.

Mat left him standing there. *The biggest fool in the world. Aren’t I just!*

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CHAPTER

14

Customs of Mayene

Perrin shook his head as the door closed behind Mat. Mat would as soon hit himself on the head with a hammer as go back to the Two Rivers. Not unless he must. Perrin wished there was some way he could avoid going home, too. But there was no way; it was a fact as hard as iron and less forgiving. The difference between Mat and himself was that he was willing to accept that, even when he did not want to.

Easing his shirt off made him grunt, careful as he could be. A large bruise, already faded to browns and yellows, stained his entire left shoulder. A Trolloc had slipped past his axe, and only Faile's quick work with a knife had kept it from being more than it was. The shoulder made washing painful, but at least there was no worry about cold water in Tear.

He was packed and ready, only a change of clothes for the morning remaining out of his saddlebags. As soon as the sun rose, he would go find Loial. No point in bothering the Ogier tonight. He was probably already abed, where Perrin meant to be shortly. Faile was the only problem he had not figured out how to deal with. Even staying in Tear would be better for her than going with him.

The door opened, surprising him. Perfume wafted in to him as soon as the door cracked; it made him think of climbing flowers on a hot summer night. A tantalizing scent, not heavy, not to anyone but him, but nothing Faile would wear. Still, he was even more surprised when Berelain stepped into his room.

Holding the edge of the door, she blinked, making him realize how dim the light must be for her. "You are going somewhere?" she said hesitantly. With the light of the hallway's lamps behind her, it was difficult not to stare.

"Yes, my Lady." He bowed; not smoothly, but as well as he could. Faile could give all the sharp sniffs she wanted, but he saw no reason not to be polite. “In the morning.”

“So am I.” She closed the door and crossed her arms beneath her breasts. He looked away, watching her from the corner of his eye, so she would not think he was goggling. She went on without noticing his reaction. The single candle flame was reflected in her dark eyes. “After tonight. . . . Tomorrow I will leave by carriage for Godan, and from there take ship for Mayene. I should have gone days ago, but I thought there must be some way to work matters out. Only, there wasn’t, of course. I should have seen that sooner. Tonight convinced me. The way he. . . . All that lightning, flowing down the halls. I will leave tomorrow.”

“My Lady,” Perrin said in confusion, “why are you telling me?”

The way she tossed her head reminded him of a mare he had sometimes shoed in Emond’s Field; that mare would try to take a bite out of you. “So you can tell the Lord Dragon, of course.”

That made no more sense to him. “You can tell him yourself,” he said with more than a little exasperation. “I’ve no time for carrying messages before I go.”

“I . . . do not think he would wish to see me.”

Any man would want to see her, and she was beautiful to look at; she knew both things. He thought she had started to say something else. Could she have been that frightened by what had happened that night in Rand’s bedchamber? Or the attack and the way Rand had ended it? Perhaps, but this was not a woman to frighten easily, not from the cool way she was eyeing him. “Give your message to a servant. I doubt I’ll see Rand again. Not before I leave. Any servant will take a note to him.”

“It would come better from you, a friend of the Lord—”

“Give it to a servant. Or one of the Aiel.”

“You will not do as I ask?” she asked incredulously.

“No. Haven’t you been listening to me?”

She tossed her head again, but there was a difference this time, though he could not have said what. Studying him thoughtfully, she murmured half to herself, “Such striking eyes.”

“What?” Suddenly he realized he was standing there naked to the waist. Her intense scrutiny abruptly seemed like the study of a horse before purchase. Next thing, she would be feeling his ankles and inspecting his teeth. He snatched the shirt meant for morning from the bed and pulled it over his head. “Give your message to a servant. I want to go to bed now. I mean to be up early. Before sunrise.”

“Where are you going tomorrow?”

“Home. The Two Rivers. It is late. If you are leaving tomorrow, too, I suppose you want to get some sleep. I know I’m tired.” He yawned as widely as he could.

She still made no move toward the door. “You are a blacksmith? I have need of a blacksmith in Mayene. Making ornamental ironwork. A short stay before returning to the Two Rivers? You would find Mayene . . . entertaining.”

“I am going home,” he told her firmly, “and you are going back to your own rooms.”

Her small shrug made him look away again hastily. “Perhaps another day. I always get what I want in the end. And I think I want . . .” She paused, eyeing him up and down. “. . . ornamental ironwork. For the windows of my bedchamber.” She smiled so innocently that he felt alarm gongs sounding his head.

The door opened again, and Faile came in. “Perrin, I went into the city looking for you, and I heard a rumor—” She stopped stock still, her eyes hard on Berelain.

The First ignored her. Stepping close to Perrin, she ran a hand up his arm, across his shoulder. For an instant he thought she meant to try pulling his head down for a kiss—she certainly lifted her face as if for one—but she only trailed her hand along the side of his neck in a quick caress and stepped back. It was over and done before he could move to stop her. “Remember,” she said softly, as if they were alone, “I always get what I want.” And she swept past Faile and out of the room.

He waited for an explosion from Faile, but she glanced at his stuffed saddlebags on the bed and said, “I see you’ve heard the rumor already. It *is* only a rumor, Perrin.”

“Yellow eyes make it more than that.” She should have been erupting like a bundle of dry twigs tossed on a fire. Why was she so cool? “Very well. Moiraine is the next problem, then. Will she try to stop you?”

“Not if she doesn’t know. If she tries, I will go anyway. I have family and friends, Faile; I won’t leave them to Whitecloaks. But I hope to keep it from her until I am well out of the city.” Even her eyes were calm, like dark pools in the forest. It made his hackles rise.

"But it had to take weeks for that rumor to reach Tear, and it will take weeks more to ride to the Two Rivers. The Whitecloaks could be gone by then. Well, I have been wanting you to leave here. I should not complain. I just want you to know what to expect."

"It won't take weeks by the Ways," he told her. "Two days, maybe three." Two days. He supposed there was no means to make it faster.

"You are as mad as Rand al'Thor," she said disbelievingly. Dropping on the foot of his bed, she folded her legs crosswise and addressed him in a voice suitable for lecturing children. "Go into the Ways, and you come out hopelessly mad. If you come out at all, which it is most likely you will not. The Ways are tainted, Perrin. They have been dark for—what?—three hundred years? Four hundred? Ask Loial. He could tell you. It was Ogiers built the Ways, or grew them, or whatever it was. Not even they use the Ways. Why, even if you managed to make it through them unscathed, the Light alone knows where you would come out."

"I have traveled them, Faile." And a frightening trip it had been, too. "Loial can guide me. He can read the guideposts; that's how we went before. He will do it for me again when he knows how important it is." Loial was eager to be away from Tear, too; he seemed to be afraid that his mother knew where he was. Perrin was sure he would help.

"Well," she said, rubbing her hands together briskly. "Well, I wanted adventure, and this is certainly it. Leaving the Stone of Tear and the Dragon Reborn, traveling the Ways to fight Whitecloaks. I wonder whether we can persuade Thom Merrilin to come along. If we cannot have a bard, a gleeman will do. He could compose the story, and you and I the heart of it. No Dragon Reborn or Aes Sedai about to swallow up the tale. When do we leave? In the morning?"

He took a deep breath to steady his voice. "I will be going alone, Faile. Just Loial and me."

"We will need a packhorse," she said as if he had not spoken. "Two, I think. The Ways are dark. We will need lanterns, and plenty of oil. Your Two Rivers people. Farmers? Will they fight Whitecloaks?"

"Faile, I said—"

"I heard what you said," she snapped. Shadows gave her a dangerous look, with her tilted eyes and high cheekbones. "I heard, and it makes no sense. What if these farmers won't fight? Or don't know how? Who is going to teach them? You? Alone?"

“I will do what has to be done,” he said patiently. “Without you.”

She bounced to her feet so fast he thought she was coming for his throat. “Do you think Berelain will go with you? Will she guard your back? Or perhaps you prefer her to sit on your lap and squeal? Tuck your shirt in, you hairy oaf! Does it have to be so dark in here? Berelain likes dim light, does she? Much good she will do you against the Children of the Light!”

Perrin opened his mouth to protest, and changed what he had been going to say. “She looks a pleasant armful, Berelain. What man wouldn’t want her on his lap?” The hurt on her face banded his chest with iron, but he made himself go on. “When I am done at home, I may go to Mayene. She asked me to come, and I might.”

Faile said not a word. She stared at him with a face like stone, then whirled and ran out, slamming the door behind her with a crash.

In spite of himself he started to follow, then stopped with his hands gripping the doorframe till his fingers hurt. Staring at the splintered gash his axe had made in the door, he found himself telling it what he could not tell her. “I killed Whitecloaks. They would have killed me if I hadn’t, but they still call it murder. I’m going home to die, Faile. That’s the only way I can stop them hurting my people. Let them hang me. I cannot let you see that. I can’t. You might even try to stop it, and then they’d. . . .”

His head dropped against the door. She would not be sorry to see the last of him now; that was what was important. She would go find her adventure somewhere else, safe from Whitecloaks and *ta’veren* and bubbles of evil. That was all that was important. He wished he did not want to howl with grief.

Faile strode through the halls at a near run, oblivious of who she passed or who had to scramble out of her way. Perrin. Berelain. Perrin. Berelain. *He wants a milk-faced vixen who runs about half-naked, does he? He doesn’t know what he wants. Hairy lummox! Wooden-headed buffoon! Blacksmith! And that sneaking sow, Berelain. That prancing she-goat!*

She did not realize where she was going until she saw Berelain ahead of her, gliding along in that dress that left nothing to the imagination, swaying along as if that walk of hers was not deliberately calculated to make male eyes pop. Before Faile knew what she was doing, she had darted ahead of Berelain and turned to face her where two corridors met.

“Perrin Aybara belongs to me,” she snapped. “You keep your hands and your smiles away from him!” She flushed to her hairline when she heard what she had said. She had promised herself she would never do this, never fight over a man like a farmgirl rolling in the dirt at harvest.

Berelain arched a cool eyebrow. “Belongs to you? Strange, I saw no collar on him. You serving girls—or are you a farmer’s daughter?—you have the most peculiar ideas.”

“Serving girl? Serving girl! I am—” Faile bit her tongue to stop the furious words. The First of Mayene, indeed. There were estates in Saldaea larger than Mayene. She would not last a week in the courts of Saldaea. Could she recite poetry while hawking? Could she ride in the hunt all day, then play the cittern at night while discussing how to counter Trolloc raids? She thought she knew men, did she? Did she know the language of fans? Could she tell a man to come or go or stay, and a hundred things more, all with the twist of a wrist and the placement of a lace fan? *Light shine on me, what am I thinking? I swore I would never even hold a fan again!* But there were other Saldaean customs. She was surprised to see the knife in her hand; she had been taught not to draw a knife unless she meant to use it. “Farm girls in Saldaea have a way of dealing with women who poach others’ men. If you do not swear to forget Perrin Aybara, I will shave your head as bald as an egg. Perhaps the boys who tend the chickens will pant after you, then!”

She was not sure exactly how Berelain gripped her wrist, but suddenly she was flying through the air. The floor crashing into her back drove all the air from her lungs.

Berelain stood smiling, tapping the blade of Faile’s knife on her palm. “A custom of Mayene. The Tairens do like to use assassins, and the guards cannot always be close at hand. I despise being attacked, farmgirl, so this is what I will do. I will take the blacksmith away from you and keep him as a pet for as long as he amuses me. Ogier’s oath on it, farmgirl. He is quite ravishing, really—those shoulders, those arms; not to mention those eyes of his—and if he is a bit uncultured, I can have that remedied. My courtiers can teach him how to dress, and rid him of that awful beard. Wherever he goes, I will find him and make him mine. You can have him when I am finished. If he still wants you, of course.”

Finally managing to draw a breath, Faile struggled to her feet, pulling a second knife. “I will drag you to him, after I cut off those clothes you are almost wearing, and make you tell him you are nothing but a sow!” *Light help me, I* am *behaving like a farmgirl, and talking like one!* The worst part was that she meant it.

Berelain set herself warily. She meant to use her hands, obviously, not the knife. She held it like a fan. Faile advanced on the balls of her feet.

Suddenly Rhuarc was there between them, towering over them, snatching the knives away before either woman was really aware of him. “Have you not seen enough blood already tonight?” he said coldly. “Of all those I thought I might find breaking the peace, the two of you would be the last named.”

Faile gaped at him. With no warning, she pivoted, driving her fist toward Rhuarc’s short ribs. The toughest man would feel it there.

He seemed to move without looking at her, caught her hand, forced her arm straight to her side, twisted. Abruptly she was standing very straight and hoping he did not push her arm right up out of her shoulder.

As if nothing had happened, he addressed Berelain. “You will go to your room, and you will not come out until the sun is above the horizon. I will see that no breakfast is brought to you. A little hunger will remind you that there is a time and place for fighting.”

Berelain drew herself up indignantly. “I am the First of Mayene. I will not be ordered about like—”

“You will go to your rooms. Now,” Rhuarc told her flatly. Faile wondered if she could kick him; she must have tensed, because as soon as she thought of it, he increased the pressure on her wrist, and she was up on her tiptoes. “If you do not,” he went on to Berelain, “we will repeat our first talk together, you and I. Right here.”

Berelain’s face went white and red by turns. “Very well,” she said stiffly. “If you insist, I will perhaps—”

“I did not propose a discussion. If I can still see you when I have counted three. . . . One.”

With a gasp, Berelain hiked her skirts and ran. She even managed to sway doing that.

Faile stared after her in amazement. It was almost worth having her arm nearly disjointed. Rhuarc was watching Berelain go, too, a small appreciative smile on his lips.

“Do you mean to hold me all night?” she demanded. He released her—and tucked her knives into his belt. “Those are mine!”

“Forfeit,” he said. “Berelain’s punishment for fighting was to have you see her sent to bed like a willful child. Yours is to lose these knives you prize. I know you have others. If you argue, I might take those, too. I will not have the peace broken.”

She glared at him, but she suspected he meant just what he said. Those knives had been made for her by a man who knew what he was doing; the balance was just right. “What ‘first talk’ did you have with her? Why did she run like that?”

“That is between her and me. You will not go near her again, Faile. I do not believe she started this; that one’s weapons are not knives. If either of you makes trouble again, I will put both of you to carrying offal. Some of the Tairens thought they could keep on fighting their duels after I had declared peace on this place, but the smell of the refuse carts soon taught them their mistake. Be sure you do not have to learn it the same way.”

She waited until he had gone before nursing her shoulder. He reminded her of her father. Not that her father had ever twisted her arm, but he had small patience with those who made trouble, whatever their position, and no one ever caught him by surprise. She wondered if she could bait Berelain into something, just to see the First of Mayene sweating among the refuse carts. But Rhuarc had said both of them. Her father meant what he said, too. Berelain. Something Berelain had said was tickling the back of her mind. Ogier’s oath. That was it. An Ogier never broke an oath. To say “Ogier oathbreaker” was like saying “brave coward,” or “wise fool.”

She could not help laughing aloud. “You will take him from me, you silly peahen? By the time you see him again, if you ever do, he’ll be mine once more.” Chuckling to herself, and occasionally rubbing her shoulder, she walked on with a light heart.

* * *

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CHAPTER 15

Into the Doorway

Holding the glass-mantled lamp high, Mat peered down the narrow corridor, deep in the belly of the Stone. *Not unless my life depended on it. That’s what I promised. Well, burn me if it doesn’t!* Before doubt could seize him again, he hurried on, past doors dry-rotted and hanging aslant, past others only shreds of wood clinging to rusted hinges. The floor had been swept recently, but the air still smelled of old dust and mold. Something skittered in the darkness, and he had a knife out before he realized it was just a rat, running from him, no doubt running toward some escape hole it knew.

“Show me the way out,” he whispered after it, “and I’ll come with you.” *Why am I whispering? There’s nobody down here to hear me*. It seemed a place for quiet, though. He could feel the whole weight of the Stone over his head, pressing down.

The last door, she had said. That one hung askew, too. He kicked it open, and it fell apart. The room was littered with dim shapes, with crates and barrels and things stacked high against the walls and out into the floor. Dust, too. *The Great Hold! It looks like the basement of an abandoned farmhouse, only worse*. He was surprised that Egwene and Nynaeve had not dusted and tidied while they were down here. Women were always dusting and straightening, even things that did not need it. Footprints crisscrossed the floor, some of them from boots, but no doubt they had had men to shift the heavier items about for them. Nynaeve liked finding ways to make a man work; likely she had deliberately hunted out some fellows enjoying themselves.

What he sought stood out among the jumble. A tall redstone doorframe, looming oddly in the shadows cast by his lamp. When he came closer, it still looked odd. Twisted, somehow. His eye did not want to follow it around; the corners did not join right. The tall hollow rectangle seemed likely to fall over at a breath, but when he gave it an experimental push, it stood steady. He pushed a bit harder, not sure he did not want to heave the thing over, and that side of it scraped through the dust. Goose bumps ran down his arms. There might as well have been a wire fastened to the top, suspending it from the ceiling. He held the lamp up to see. There was no wire. *At least it won't topple while I'm inside. Light, I am going inside, aren't I?*

A clutter of figurines and small things wrapped in rotting cloth occupied the top of a tall, upended barrel near him. He pushed the jumble to one side so he could set the lamp there, and studied the doorway. The *ter'angreal*. If Egwene knew what she was talking about. She probably did; no doubt she had learned all sorts of strange things in the Tower, however much she denied. *She would deny things, wouldn't she now. Learning to be Aes Sedai. She didn't deny this though, now did she?* If he squinted, it just looked like a stone doorframe, dully polished and the duller for dust. Just a plain doorframe. Well, not entirely plain. Three sinuous lines carved deep in the stone ran down each upright from top to bottom. He had seen fancier on farmhouses. He would probably step through and find himself still in this dusty room.

Won't know till I try, will I? Luck! Taking a deep breath—and coughing from the dust—he put his foot through.

He seemed to be stepping through a sheet of brilliant white light, infinitely bright, infinitely thick. For a moment that lasted forever, he was blind; a roaring filled his ears, all the sounds of the world gathered together at once. For just the length of one measureless step.

Stumbling another pace, he stared around in amazement. The *ter'angreal* was still there, but this was certainly not where he had started. The twisted stone doorframe stood in the center of a round hall with a ceiling so high it was lost in shadows, surrounded by strange spiraled yellow columns snaking up into the gloom, like huge vines twining 'round poles that had been taken away. A soft light came from glowing spheres atop coiled stands of some white metal. Not silver; the shine was too dull for that. And no hint of what made the glow; it did not look like flame; the spheres simply shone. The floor tiles spiraled out in white and yellow stripes from the *ter'angreal*. There was a heavy scent in the air, sharp and dry and not particularly pleasant. He almost turned around and went back on the spot.

"A long time."

He jumped, a knife coming into his hand, and peered among the columns for the source of the breathy voice that pronounced those words so harshly.

"A long time, yet the seekers come again for answers. The questioners come once more." A shape moved, back among the columns; a man, Mat thought. "Good. You have brought no lamps, no torches, as the agreement was, and is, and ever will be. You have no iron? No instruments of music?"

The figure stepped out, tall, barefoot, arms and legs and body wound about in layers of yellow cloth, and Mat was suddenly not so sure if it was a man. Or human. It looked human, at first glance, though perhaps too graceful, but it seemed far too thin for its height, with a narrow, elongated face. Its skin, and even its straight black hair, caught the pale light in a way that reminded him of a snake's scales. And those eyes, the pupils just black, vertical slits. No, not human.

"Iron. Instruments of music. You have none?"

Mat wondered what it thought the knife was; it certainly did not seem concerned over it. Well, the blade was good steel, not iron. "No. No iron, and no instruments of—Why—?" He cut off sharply. Three questions, Egwene had said. He was not about to waste one on "iron" or "instruments of music." *Why should he care if I have a dozen musicians in my pocket and a smithy on my back?* "I have come here for true answers. If you are not the one to give them, take me to who can."

The man—it was male at least, Mat decided—smiled slightly. He did not show any teeth. "According to the agreement. Come." He beckoned with one long-fingered hand. "Follow."

Mat made the knife disappear up his sleeve. "Lead, and I will follow." *Just you keep ahead of me and in plain sight. This place makes my skin crawl.*

There was not a straight line to be seen anywhere except for the floor itself, as he trailed the strange man. Even the ceiling was always arched, and the walls bowed out. The halls were continuously curved, the doorways rounded, the windows perfect circles. Tilework made spirals and sinuous lines, and what seemed to be bronze metalwork set in the ceiling at intervals was all complicated scrolls. There were no pictures of anything, no wall hangings or paintings. Only patterns, and always curves.

He saw no one except his silent guide; he could have believed the place empty except for the two of them. From somewhere he had a dim memory of walking halls that had not known a human foot in hundreds of years, and this felt the same. Yet sometimes he caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye. Only, however quickly he turned, there was never anyone there. He pretended to rub his forearms, checking the knives up his coatsleeves for reassurance.

What he saw through those round windows was even worse. Tall wispy trees with only a drooping umbrella of branches at the top, and others like huge fans of lacy leaves, a tangle of growth equal to the heart of any briar-choked thicket, all under a dim, overcast light, though there did not seem to be a cloud in the sky. There were always windows, always along just one side of the curving corridor, but sometimes the side changed, and what surely should have been looking into courtyard or rooms instead gave out into that forest. He never caught as much as a glimpse of any other part of this palace, or whatever it was, through those windows, or any other building, except. . . .

Through one circular window he saw three tall silvery spires, curving in toward each other so their points all aimed at the same spot. They were not visible from the next window, three paces away, but a few minutes later, after he and his guide had rounded enough curves that he had to be looking in another direction, he saw them again. He tried telling himself these were three different spires, but between them and him was one of those fan-shaped trees with a dangling broken branch, a tree that had been in the same spot the first time. After his third sight of the spires and the strange tree with the broken branch, this time ten paces farther on but on the other side of the hallway, he tried to stop looking at what lay outside at all.

The walk seemed interminable.

“When—? Are—?” Mat ground his teeth. Three questions. It was hard to learn anything without asking questions. “I hope you are taking me to those who can answer my questions. Burn my bones, I do. For my sake and yours, the Light know it true.”

“Here,” the peculiar, yellow-wrapped fellow said, gesturing with one of those thin hands to a rounded doorway twice as large as any Mat had seen before. His strange eyes studied Mat intently. His mouth gaped open, and he inhaled, long and slow. Mat frowned at him, and the stranger gave a writhing hitch of his shoulders. “Here your answers may be found. Enter. Enter and ask.”

Mat drew a deep breath of his own, then grimaced and scrubbed at his nose. That sharp, heavy smell was a rank nuisance. He took a hesitant step toward the tall doorway, and looked around for his guide again. The fellow was gone. *Light! I don’t know why anything in this place surprises me now. Well, I will be burned if I’ll turn back now*. Trying not to think of whether he could find the *ter’angreal* again on his own, he went in.

It was another round room, with spiraling floor tiles in red and white under a domed ceiling. It had no columns, or furnishings of any kind, except for three thick, coiled pedestals around the heart of the floor’s spirals. Mat could see no way to reach the top of them except by climbing the twists, yet a man like his guide sat cross-legged atop each, only wrapped in layers of red. Not all men, he decided at a second look; two of those long faces with the odd eyes had a definite feminine cast. They stared at him, intense penetrating stares, and breathed deeply, almost panting. He wondered if he made them nervous in some way. *Not much bloody chance of that. But they’re certainly getting under my coat*.

“It has been long,” the woman on the right said.

“Very long,” the woman on the left added.

The man nodded. “Yet they come again.”

All three had the breathy voice of the guide—almost indistinguishable from it, in fact—and the harsh way of pronouncing words. They spoke in unison, and the words might as well have come from one mouth. “Enter and ask, according to the agreement of old.”

If Mat had thought his skin crawled before, now he was sure it was writhing. He made himself go closer. Carefully—careful to say nothing that even sounded like a question—he laid the situation before them. The Whitecloaks, certainly in his home village, surely hunting friends of his, maybe hunting him. One of his friends going to face the Whitecloaks, another not. His family, not likely in danger, but with the bloody Children of the bloody Light around. . . . A *ta’veren* pulling at him so he could hardly move. He saw no reason to give names, or mention that Rand was the Dragon Reborn. His first question—and the other two, for that matter—he had worked out before going down to the Great Hold. “Should I go home to help my people?” he asked finally.

Three sets of slitted eyes lifted from him—reluctantly, it seemed—and studied the air above his head. Finally the woman on the left said, “You must go to Rhuidean.”

As soon as she spoke their eyes all dropped to him again, and they leaned forward, breathing deeply again, but at that moment a bell tolled, a sonorous brazen sound that rolled through the room. They swayed upright, staring at one another, then at the air over Mat’s head again.

“He is another,” the woman on the left whispered. “The strain. The strain.”

“The savor,” the man said. “It has been long.”

“There is yet time,” the other woman told them. She sounded calm—they all did—but there was a sharpness to her voice when she turned back to Mat. “Ask. Ask.”

Mat glared up at them furiously. *Rhuidean? Light!* That was somewhere out in the Waste, the Light and the Aiel knew where. That was about as much as he knew. In the Waste! Anger drove questions about how to get away from Aes Sedai and how to recover the lost parts of his memory right out his head. “Rhuidean!” he barked. “The Light burn my bones to ash if I want to go Rhuidean! And my blood on the ground if I will! Why should I? You are not answering my questions. You are supposed to answer, not hand me riddles!”

“If you do not go to Rhuidean,” the woman on the right said, “you will die.”

The bell tolled again, louder this time; Mat felt its tremor through his boots. The looks the three shared were plainly anxious. He opened his mouth, but they were only concerned with each other.

“The strain,” one of the women said hurriedly. “It is too great.”

“The savor of him,” the other woman said on her heels. “It has been so very long.”

Before she was done the man spoke. “The strain is too great. Too great. Ask. Ask!”

“Burn your soul for a craven heart,” Mat growled, “I will that! Why will I die if I do not go to Rhuidean? I very likely will die if I try. It makes no—”

The man cut him off and spoke hurriedly. “You will have sidestepped the thread of fate, left your fate to drift on the winds of time, and you will be killed by those who do not want that fate fulfilled. Now, go. You must go! Quickly!"

The yellow-clad guide was suddenly there at Mat's side, tugging at his sleeve with those too-long hands.

Mat shook him off. "No! I will not go! You have led me from the questions I wanted to ask and given me senseless answers. You will not leave it there. What fate are you talking about? I will have one clear answer out of you, at least!"

A third time the bell sounded mournfully, and the entire room trembled.

"Go!" the man shouted. "You have had your answers. You must go before it is too late!"

Abruptly a dozen of the yellow-clad men were around Mat, seeming to appear out of the air, trying to pull him toward the door. He fought with fists, elbows, knees. "What fate? Burn your hearts, what fate?" It was the room itself that pealed, the walls and floor quivering, nearly taking Mat and his attackers off their feet. "What fate?"

The three were on their feet atop the pedestals, and he could not tell which shrieked which answer.

"To marry the Daughter of the Nine Moons!"

"To die and live again, and live once more a part of what was!"

"To give up half the light of the world to save the world!"

Together they howled like steam escaping under pressure. "Go to Rhuidean, son of battles! Go to Rhuidean, trickster! Go, gambler! Go!"

Mat's assailants snatched him into the air by his arms and legs and ran, holding him over their heads. "Unhand me, you white-livered sons of goats!" he shouted, struggling. "Burn your eyes! The Shadow take your souls, loose me! I will have your guts for a saddle girth!" But writhe and curse as he would, those long fingers gripped like iron.

Twice more the bell tolled, or the palace did. Everything shook as in an earthquake; the walls rang with deafening reverberations, each louder than the last. Mat's captors stumbled on, nearly falling but never stopping their pell-mell race. He did not even see where they were taking him until they suddenly stopped short, heaving him into the air. Then he saw the twisted doorway, the *ter'angreal*, as he flew toward it.

White light blinded him; the roar filled his head till it drove thought away.

He fell heavily onto a dusty floor in dim light and rolled up against the barrel holding his lamp in the Great Hold. The barrel rocked, packets and figurines toppling to the floor in a crash of breaking stone and ivory and porcelain. Bounding to his feet, he threw himself back at the stone doorframe. “Burn you, you can’t throw me—!”

He hurtled through—and stumbled against the crates and barrels on the other side. Without a pause, he turned and leaped at it again. With the same result. This time he caught himself on the barrel holding his lamp, which nearly fell onto the already shattered things littering the floor under his boots. He grabbed it in time, burning his hand, and fumbled it back to a steadier perch.

Burn me if I want to be down here in the dark, he thought, sucking his fingers. *Light, the way my luck is running, it probably would have started a fire and I’d have burned to death!*

He glared at the *ter’angreal*. Why was it not working? Maybe the folk on the other side had shut it off somehow. He understood practically nothing of what had happened. That bell, and their panic. You would have thought they were afraid the roof would come down on their heads. Come to think of it, it very nearly had. And Rhuidean, and all the rest of it. The Waste was bad enough, but they said he was fated to marry somebody called the Daughter of the Nine Moons. Marry! And to a noblewoman, by the sound of it. He would sooner marry a pig than a noblewoman. And that business about dying and living again. *Nice of them to add the last bit!* If some black-veiled Aielman killed him on the way to Rhuidean, he would find out how true it was. It was all nonsense, and he did not believe a word of it. Only. . . . The bloody doorway *had* taken him somewhere, and they had only wanted to answer three questions, just the way Egwene had said.

“I won’t marry any bloody noblewoman!” he told the *ter’angreal*. “I’ll marry when I’m too old to have any fun, that’s what! Rhuidean my bloody—!”

A boot appeared, backing out of the twisted stone doorway, followed by the rest of Rand, with that fiery sword in his hands. The blade vanished as he stepped clear, and he heaved a sigh of relief. Even in the dim light, Mat could see he was troubled, though. He gave a start when he saw Mat. “Just poking around, Mat? Or did you go through, too?”

Mat eyed him warily for a moment. At least that sword was gone. He did not seem to be channeling—though how was anybody to tell?—and he did not look particularly like a madman. In fact, he looked very much as Mat remembered. He had to remind himself they were not back home any longer, and Rand was *not* what he remembered. "Oh, I went through, all right. A bunch of bloody liars, if you ask me! What are they? Made me think of snakes."

"Not liars, I think." Rand sounded as if he wished they were. "No, not that. They were afraid of me, right from the first. And when that tolling started. . . . The sword kept them back; they wouldn't even look at it. Shied away. Hid their eyes. Did you get your answers?"

"Nothing that makes sense," Mat muttered. "What about you?"

Suddenly Moiraine appeared from the *ter'angreal,* seeming to step gracefully out of thin air, flowing out. She would be a fine one to dance with if she were not Aes Sedai. Her mouth tightened at the sight of them.

"You! You were both in there. That is why . . . !" She made a vexed hiss. "One of you would have been bad enough, but two *ta'veren* at once—you might have torn the connection entirely and been trapped there. Wretched boys playing with things you do not know the danger of. Perrin! Is Perrin in there, too? Did he share your . . . *exploit*?"

"The last I saw of Perrin," Mat said, "he was getting ready to go bed." Maybe Perrin would give him the lie by being the next to step out of the thing, but he might as well deflect the Aes Sedai's anger if he could. No need for Perrin to face it, too. *Maybe he'll make it clear of her, at least, if he gets away before she knows what he's doing. Bloody woman! I'll wager* she *was noble born*.

That Moraine was angry there was no doubt. The blood had drained out of her cheeks, and her eyes were dark augers boring into Rand. "At least you escaped with your lives. Who told you of this? Which one of them? I will make her wish I had peeled off her hide like a glove."

"A book told me," Rand said calmly. He sat down back on the edge of a crate that creaked alarmingly under his weight and crossed his arms. All very cool; Mat wished he could emulate it. "A pair of books, in fact. *Treasures of the Stone* and *Dealings with the Territory of Mayene*. Surprising what you can dig out of books if you read long enough, isn't it?"

"And you?" She shifted that drilling gaze to Mat. "Did you read it in a book, too? You?"

"I do read sometimes," he said dryly. He would not have been averse to a little hide-peeling for Egwene and Nynaeve after what they had done to make him tell where he had hidden the Amyrlin's letter—tying him up with the Power was bad enough, but the rest!—yet it was more fun to tweak Moiraine's nose. "*Treasures. Dealings*. Lots of things in books." Luckily, she did not insist that he repeat the titles; he had not paid attention once Rand brought up books.

Instead she swung back to Rand. "And your answers?"

"Are mine," Rand replied, then frowned. "It wasn't easy, though. They brought a . . . woman . . . to interpret, but she talked like an old book. I could hardly understand some of the words. I never considered they might speak another language."

"The Old Tongue," Moiraine told him. "They use the Old Tongue—a rather harsh dialect of it—for their dealings with men. And you, Mat? Was your interpreter easily understood?"

He had to work moisture back into his mouth. "The Old Tongue? Is that what it was? They didn't give me one. In fact, I never got to ask any questions. That bell started shaking the walls down, and they hustled me out like I was tracking cow manure on the rugs." She was still staring, her eyes still digging into his head. She knew about the Old Tongue slipping out of him, sometimes. "I . . . almost understood a word here and there, but not to know it. You and Rand got answers. What do they get out of it? The snakes with legs. We aren't going upstairs to find ten years gone, are we, like Bili in the story?"

"Sensations," Moiraine replied with a grimace. "Sensations, emotions, experiences. They rummage through them; you can feel them doing it, making your skin crawl. Perhaps they feed on them in some manner. The Aes Sedai who studied this *ter'angreal* when it was in Mayene wrote of a strong desire to bathe afterward. I certainly intend to."

"But their answers are true?" Rand said as she started to turn away. "You are sure of it? The books implied as much, but can they really give true answers about the future?"

"The answers are true," Moiraine said slowly, "so long as they are in regard to your own future. That much is certain." She watched Rand, and himself, weighing the effect of her words. "As to how, though, there is only speculation. That world is . . . folded . . . in strange ways. I cannot be clearer. It may be that that allows them to read the thread of a human life, read the various ways it may yet be woven into the Pattern. Or perhaps it is a talent of the people. The answers are often obscure, however. If you need help working out what yours mean, I offer my services.” Her eyes flickered from one of them to the other, and Mat nearly swore. She did not believe him about no answers. Unless it was simply general Aes Sedai suspicion.

Rand gave her a slow smile. “And will you tell me what you asked, and what they answered?”

For answer, she returned a level, searching look, then started for the door. A small ball of light, as bright as a lantern, was suddenly floating ahead of her, illuminating her way.

Mat knew he should leave it alone, now. Just let her go and hope she forgot he had ever been down here. But a knot of anger still burned inside him. All those ridiculous things they had said. Well, maybe they were true, if Moiraine said so, but he wanted to grab those fellows by the collar, or whatever passed for a collar in those wrappings, and make them explain a few things.

“Why can’t you go there twice, Moiraine?” he called after her. “Why not?” He very nearly asked why they worried about iron and musical instruments, too, and bit his tongue. He could not know about those if he had not understood what they were saying.

She paused at the door to the hall, and it was impossible to see if she was looking at the *ter’angreal* or at Rand. “If I knew everything, Matrim, I would not need to ask questions.” She peered into the room a moment longer—she *was* staring at Rand—then glided away without another word.

For a time Mat and Rand looked at each other in silence.

“*Did* you find out what you wanted?” Rand asked finally.

“Did you?”

A bright flame leaped into existence, balanced above Rand’s palm. Not the smooth glowing sphere of the Aes Sedai, but a rough blaze like a torch. As Rand moved to leave, Mat added another question. “Are you really going to just let the Whitecloaks do whatever they want back home? You know they’re heading for Emond’s Field. If they are not there already. Yellow eyes, the bloody Dragon Reborn. It’s too much, otherwise.”

“Perrin will do . . . what he has to do to save Emond’s Field,” Rand replied in a pained voice. “And I must do what I have to, or more than Emond’s Field will fall, and to worse than Whitecloaks.”

Mat stood watching the light of that flame fade away down the hall, until he remembered where he was. Then he snatched up his lamp and hurried out. *Rhuidean! Light, what am I going to do?*

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CHAPTER 16

Leavetakings

Lying on sweat-soaked sheets, staring at the ceiling, Perrin realized that the darkness was turning to gray. Soon the sun would be edging above the horizon. Morning. A time for new hopes; a time to be up and doing. New hopes. He almost laughed. How long had he been awake? An hour or more, surely, this time. Scratching his curly beard, he winced. His bruised shoulder had stiffened, and he sat up slowly; sweat popped out on his face as he worked the arm. He kept at it methodically, though, suppressing groans and now and again biting back a curse, until he could move the arm freely, if not comfortably.

Such sleep as he had managed had been broken and fitful. When he was awake he had seen Faile's face, her dark eyes accusing him, the hurt he had put there making him cringe inside. When he slept, he dreamed of mounting a gallows, and Faile watching, or worse, trying to stop it, trying to fight Whitecloaks with their lances and swords, and he was screaming while they fitted the noose around his neck, screaming because the Whitecloaks were killing Faile. Sometimes she watched them hang him with a smile of angry satisfaction. Small wonder such dreams wakened him with a jerk. Once he had dreamed of wolves running out of the forest to save both Faile and him—only to be spitted on Whitecloak lances, shot down by their arrows. It had not been a restful night. Washing and dressing as hurriedly as he could, he left the room as if hoping to leave memories of his dreams behind.

Little outward evidence remained of the night's attack, here a sword-slashed tapestry, there a chest with a corner splintered by an axe or a lighter patch on the stone-tiled floor where a bloodstained rug had been removed. The majhere had her liveried army of servants out in force, though many wore bandages, sweeping, mopping, clearing away and replacing. She limped about leaning on a stick, a broad woman with her gray hair pushed up like a round cap by the dressing wound around her head, calling her orders in a firm voice, with the clear intention of removing every sign of the Stone's second violation. She saw Perrin and gave him an infinitesimal curtsy. Even the High Lords did not get much more from her, even when she was well. Despite all the cleaning and scrubbing, under the smell of waxes and polishes and cleaning fluids Perrin could still catch the faint scent of blood, sharply metallic human blood, fetid Trolloc blood, acrid Myrddraal blood with its stink that burned his nostrils. He would be glad to be away from here.

The door to Loial's room was a span across and more than two spans high, with an overlarge door handle in the shape of entwined vines level with Perrin's head. The Stone had a number of rarely used Ogier guest rooms; the Stone of Tear predated even the age of great Ogier stoneworks, but it was a point of prestige to use Ogier stonemasons, at least from time to time. Perrin knocked and at the call of "Come in," in a voice like a slow avalanche, lifted the handle and complied.

The room was on a scale with the door in every dimension, yet Loial, standing in the middle of the leaf-patterned carpet in his shirtsleeves, a long pipe in his teeth, reduced it all to seemingly normal size. The Ogier stood taller than a Trolloc in his wide-toed, thigh-high boots, if not so broad as one. His dark green coat, buttoned to the waist, then flaring to his boot tops like a kilt over baggy trousers, no longer looked odd to Perrin, but one look was enough to tell this was not an ordinary man in an ordinary room. The Ogier's nose was so broad as to seem a snout, and eyebrows like long mustaches dangled beside eyes the size of teacups. Tufted ears poked up through shaggy black hair that hung nearly to his shoulders. When he grinned around his pipestem at the sight of Perrin, it split his face in half.

"Good morning, Perrin," he rumbled, removing the pipe. "You slept well? Not easy, after such a night as that. Myself, I have been up half the night, writing down what happened." He had a pen in his other hand, and ink stains on his sausage-thick fingers.

Books lay everywhere, on Ogier-sized chairs and the huge bed and the table that stood as high as Perrin's chest. That was no surprise, but what was a little startling was the flowers. Flowers of every sort, in every color. Vases of flowers, baskets of them, posies tied with ribbon or even string, great woven banks of flowers standing about like lengths of garden wall. Perrin had certainly never seen the like inside a room. Their scent filled the air. Yet what really caught his eye was the swollen knot on Loial's head, the size of a man's fist, and the heavy limp in Loial's walk. If Loial had been hurt too badly to travel. . . . He felt ashamed at thinking of it that way—the Ogier was a friend—but he had to.

"You were injured, Loial? Moiraine could Heal you. I'm sure she will."

"Oh, I can get around with no trouble. And there were so many who truly needed her help. I would not want to bother her. It certainly is not enough to hamper me in my work." Loial glanced at the table where a large cloth-bound book—large for Perrin, but it would fit in one of the Ogier's coat pockets—lay open beside an uncorked ink bottle. "I hope I wrote it all down correctly. I did not see very much last night until it was done."

"Loial," Faile said, standing up from behind one of the banks of flowers with a book in her hands, "is a hero."

Perrin jumped; the flowers had masked her scent completely. Loial made shushing noises, his ears twitching with embarrassment, and waved his big hands at her, but she went on, her voice cool but her eyes hot on Perrin's face.

"He gathered as many children as he could—and some of their mothers—into a large room, and held the door alone against Trollocs and Myrddraal through the entire fight. These flowers are from the women of the Stone, tokens to honor his steadfast courage, his faithfulness." She made "steadfast" and "faithfulness" crack like whips.

Perrin managed not to flinch, but only just. What he had done was right, but he could not expect her to see it. Even if she knew why, she would not see it. *It was the right thing. It was*. He only wished he felt better about the entire matter. It was hardly fair that he could be right and still feel in the wrong.

"It was nothing." Loial's ears twitched wildly. "It is just that the children could not defend themselves. That's all. Not a hero. No."

"Nonsense." Faile marked her place in the book with a finger and moved closer to the Ogier. She did not come up to his chest. "There is not a woman in the Stone who would not marry you, if you were human, and some would anyway. Loial well named, for your nature is loyalty. Any woman could love that."

The Ogier's ears went stiff with shock, and Perrin grinned. She had obviously been feeding Loial honey and butter all morning in hope the

Ogier would agree to take her along no matter what Perrin wanted, but in trying to prick him she had just fed Loial a stone without knowing it. “Have you heard from your mother, Loial?” he asked.

“No.” Loial managed to sound relieved and worried at the same time. “But I saw Laefar in the city yesterday. He was as surprised to see me as I to see him; we are not a common sight in Tear. He came from Stedding Shangtai to negotiate repairs on some Ogier stonework in one of the palaces. I have no doubt the first words out of his mouth when he returns to the *stedding* will be ‘Loial is in Tear.’ ”

“That is worrying,” Perrin said, and Loial nodded dejectedly.

“Laefar says the Elders have named me a runaway and my mother has promised to have me married and settled. She even has someone chosen. Laefar did not know who. At least, he said he did not. He thinks such things are funny. She could be here in a month’s time.”

Faile’s face was a picture of confusion that almost made Perrin grin again. She thought she knew so much more than he did about the world—well, she did, in truth—but she did not know Loial. Stedding Shangtai was Loial’s home, in the Spine of the World, and since he was barely past ninety, he was not old enough to have left on his own. Ogier lived a very long time; by their standards, Loial was no older than Perrin, maybe younger. But Loial had gone anyway, to see the world, and his greatest fear was that his mother would find him and drag back to the *stedding* to marry, never to leave again.

While Faile was trying to figure out what was going on, Perrin stepped into the silence. “I need to go back to the Two Rivers, Loial. Your mother won’t find you there.”

“Yes. That is true.” The Ogier gave an uncomfortable shrug. “But my book. Rand’s story. And yours, and Mat’s. I have so many notes already, but. . . .” He moved around behind the table, peering down at the open book, the pages filled with his neat script. “I will be the one to write the true story of the Dragon Reborn, Perrin. The only book by someone who traveled with him, who actually saw it unfold. *The Dragon Reborn*, by Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, of Stedding Shangtai.” Frowning, he bent over the book, dipping his pen in the ink bottle. “That is not quite right. It was more—”

Perrin put a hand on the page where Loial was going to write. “You’ll write no book if your mother finds you. Not about Rand, at least. And I need you, Loial."

"Need, Perrin? I do not understand."

"There are Whitecloaks in the Two Rivers. Hunting me."

"Hunting you? But why?" Loial looked almost as confused as Faile had. Faile, on the other hand, had donned a complacent smugness that was worrisome. Perrin went on anyway.

"The reasons don't matter. The fact is that they are. They may hurt people, my family, looking for me. Knowing Whitecloaks, they will. I can stop it, if I can get there quickly, but it must be quickly. The Light only knows what they've done already. I need you to take me there, Loial, by the Ways. You told me once there was a Waygate here, and I know there was one at Manetheren. It must still be there, in the mountains above Emond's Field. Nothing can destroy a Waygate, you said. I need you, Loial."

"Well, of course I will help," Loial said. "The Ways." He exhaled noisily, and his ears wilted a bit. "I want to write of adventures, not have them. But I suppose one more time will not hurt. The Light send it so," he finished fervently.

Faile cleared her throat delicately. "Are you not forgetting something, Loial? You promised to take me into the Ways whenever I asked, and before you took anyone else."

"I did promise you a look at a Waygate," Loial said, "and what it is like inside. You can have that when Perrin and I go. You could come with us, I suppose, but the Ways are not traveled lightly, Faile. I would not enter them myself if Perrin did not have need."

"Faile will not be coming," Perrin said firmly. "Just you and me, Loial."

Ignoring him, Faile smiled up at Loial as if he were teasing her. "You promised more than a look, Loial. To take me wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted, and before anyone else. You swore to it."

"I did," Loial protested, "but only because you refused to believe I would show you. You said you would not believe unless I swore. I will do as I promised, but surely you do not want to step ahead of Perrin's need."

"You swore," Faile said calmly. "By your mother, and your mother's mother, and your mother's mother's mother."

"Yes, I did, Faile, but Perrin—"

"You swore, Loial. Do you mean to break your oath?"

The Ogier looked like misery stacked on misery. His shoulders slumped and his ears drooped, the corners of his wide mouth turned down and the ends of his long eyebrows draggled onto his cheeks.

“She tricked you, Loial.” Perrin wondered if they could hear his teeth grinding. “She deliberately tricked you.”

Red stained Faile’s cheeks, but she still had the nerve to say, “Only because I had to, Loial. Only because a fool man thinks he can order my life to suit himself. I’d not have done it, otherwise. You must believe that.”

“Doesn’t it make any difference that she tricked you?” Perrin demanded, and Loial shook his massive head sadly.

“Ogier *keep* their word,” Faile said. “And Loial is going to take me to the Two Rivers. Or to the Waygate at Manetheren, at least. I have a wish to see the Two Rivers.”

Loial stood up straight, “But that means I can help Perrin after all. Faile, why did you drag this out? Even Laefar would not think this funny.” There was a touch of anger in his voice; it took a good bit to make an Ogier angry.

“If he asks,” she said determinedly. “That was part of it, Loial. No one but you and me, unless they asked me. He has to ask me.”

“No,” Perrin told her while Loial was still opening his mouth. “No, I won’t ask. I will ride to Emond’s Field first. I’ll walk! So you might as well give up this foolishness. Tricking Loial. Trying to force yourself in where . . . where you aren’t wanted.”

Her calm dropped away in anger. “And by the time you reach there, Loial and I will have done for the Whitecloaks. It will all be over. Ask, you anvil-headed blacksmith. Just ask and you can come with us.”

Perrin took hold of himself. There was no way to argue her around to his way of thinking, but he would not ask. She was right—he would need weeks to reach the Two Rivers on his horse; they could be there in two days, perhaps, through the Ways—but he would not ask. *Not after she tricked Loial and tried to bully me!* “Then I’ll travel the Ways to Manetheren alone. I’ll follow you two. If I stay far enough back not to be part of your party, I won’t be breaking Loial’s oath. You can’t stop me following.”

“That is dangerous, Perrin,” Loial said worriedly. “The Ways are dark. If you miss a turning, or take the wrong bridge by accident, you could be lost forever. Or until *Machin Shin* catches you. Ask her, Perrin. She said you can come if you do. Ask her."

The Ogier's deep voice trembled speaking the name of *Machin Shin*, and a shiver ran down Perrin's back, too. *Machin Shin*. The Black Wind. Not even Aes Sedai knew whether it was Shadowspawn or something that had grown out of the Ways' corruption. *Machin Shin* was why traveling the Ways meant risking death; that was what Aes Sedai said. The Black Wind ate souls; that Perrin knew for truth. But he kept his voice steady and his face straight. *I'll be burned if I let her think I am weakening*. "I can't, Loial. Or anyway, I won't."

Loial grimaced. "Faile, it will be dangerous for him, trying to follow us. Please relent and let him—" She cut him off sharply.

"No. If he is too stiff-necked to ask, why should I? Why should I even care if he does get lost?" She turned to Perrin. "You can travel close to us. As close as you need to, so long as it's plain you are following. You will trail after me like a puppy until you ask. Why won't you just ask?"

"Stubborn humans," the Ogier muttered. "Hasty and stubborn, even when haste lands you in a hornet nest."

"I would like to leave today, Loial," Perrin said, not looking at Faile.

"Best to go quickly," Loial agreed with a regretful look at the book on the table. "I can tidy my notes on the journey, I suppose. The Light knows what I will miss, being away from Rand."

"Did you hear me, Perrin?" Faile demanded.

"I will get my horse and a few supplies, Loial. We can be on our way by midmorning."

"Burn you, Perrin Aybara, answer me!"

Loial eyed her worriedly. "Perrin, are you certain you could not—"

"No," Perrin interrupted gently. "She is muleheaded, and she likes playing tricks. I won't dance so she can laugh." He ignored the sound coming from deep in Faile's throat, like a cat staring at a strange dog and ready to attack. "I will let you know as soon as I am ready." He started for the door, and she called after him furiously.

" 'When' is my decision, Perrin Aybara. Mine and Loial's. Do you hear me? You had better be ready in two hours, or we'll leave you behind. You can meet us at the Dragonwall Gate stable, if you're coming. Do you hear me?"

He sensed her moving and shut the door behind him just as something thumped into it heavily. A book, he thought. Loial would give her fits about that. Better to hit Loial on the head than harm one of his books.

For a moment he leaned against the door, despairing. All he had done, all he had gone through, making her hate him, and she was going to be there to see him die anyway. The best thing he could say was that she might enjoy it now. *Stubborn, muleheaded woman!*

When he turned to go, one of the Aiel was approaching, a tall man with reddish hair and green eyes who could have been Rand's older cousin, or a young uncle. He knew the man, and liked him, if only because Gaul had never given even a flicker of notice to his yellow eyes. "May you find shade this morning, Perrin. The majhere told me you had come this way, though I think she itched to put a broom in my hands. As hard as a Wise One, that woman."

"May you find shade this morning, Gaul. Women are all hardheaded, if you ask me."

"Perhaps so, if you do not know how to get 'round them. I hear you are journeying to the Two Rivers."

"Light!" Perrin growled before the Aiel could say more. "Does the whole Stone know?" If Moiraine knew—

Gaul shook his head. "Rand al'Thor took me aside and spoke to me, asking me to tell no one. I think he spoke to others, too, but I do not know how many will want to go with you. We have been on this side of the Dragonwall for a long time, and many ache for the Three-fold Land."

"Come with me?" Perrin felt stunned. If he had Aiel with him. . . . There were possibilities he had not dared consider before. "Rand asked you to come with me? To the Two Rivers?"

Gaul shook his head again. "He said only that you were going, and that there were men who might try to kill you. I mean to accompany you, though, if you will have me."

"Will I?" Perrin almost laughed. "I will that. We will be into the Ways in a few hours."

"The Ways?" Gaul's expression did not change, but he blinked.

"Does that make a difference?"

"Death comes for all men, Perrin." It was hardly a comforting answer.

“I cannot believe Rand is that cruel,” Egwene said, and Nynaeve added, “At least he did not try to stop you.” Seated on Nynaeve’s bed, they were finishing the division of the gold Moiraine had provided. Four fat purses apiece to be carried in pockets sewn under Elayne’s and Nynaeve’s skirts, and another each, not so large as to attract unwanted attention, to carry at the belt. Egwene had taken a lesser amount, there being less use for gold in the Waste.

Elayne frowned at the two neatly tied bundles and the leather scrip lying beside the door. They held all of her clothes and other things. Cased knife and fork, hairbrush and comb, needles, pins, thread, thimble, scissors. A tinder box and a second knife, smaller than the one at her belt. Soap and bath powder and. . . . It was ridiculous to go over the list again. Egwene’s stone ring was snug in her pouch. She was ready to go. There was nothing to hold her back.

“No, he did not.” Elayne was proud of how calm and collected she sounded. *He seemed almost relieved! Relieved! And I had to give him that letter, laying my heart open like a stone-blind fool. At least he won’t open it until I am gone*. She jumped at the touch of Nynaeve’s hand on her shoulder.

“Did you want him to ask you to stay? You know what your answer would have been. You do, don’t you?”

Elayne compressed her lips. “Of course I do. But he did not have to look happy about it.” She had not meant to say that.

Nynaeve gave her an understanding look. “Men are difficult at the best.”

“I still cannot believe he would be so . . . so . . .” Egwene began in an angry mutter. Elayne never learned what she meant to say, for at that moment the door crashed open so hard that it bounced off the wall.

Elayne embraced *saidar* before she had stopped flinching, then felt a moment of embarrassment when the rebounding door slapped hard against Lan’s outstretched hand. A moment more, and she decided to hold on to the Source a while longer. The Warder filled the doorway with his broad shoulders, his face a thunderhead; if his blue eyes could really have given off the thunderbolts they threatened, they would have blasted Nynaeve. The glow of *saidar* surrounded Egwene, too, and did not fade.

Lan did not appear to see anyone but Nynaeve. “You let me believe you were returning to Tar Valon,” he rasped at her.

“You may have believed it,” she said calmly, “but I never said it.”

“Never said it? Never said it! You spoke of leaving today, and always linked your leaving with those Darkfriends being sent to Tar Valon. Always! What did you mean me to think?”

“But I never said—”

“Light, woman!” he roared. “Do not bandy words with me!”

Elayne exchanged worried looks with Egwene. This man had an iron self-control, but he was at a breaking point now. Nynaeve was one who often let her emotions rage, yet she faced him coolly, head high and eyes serene, hands still on her green silk skirts.

Lan took hold of himself with an obvious effort. He appeared as stone-faced as ever, as much in control of himself—and Elayne was sure it was all on the surface. “I’d not have known where you were off to if I had not heard that you had ordered a carriage. To take you to a ship bound for Tanchico. I do not know why the Amyrlin allowed you to leave the Tower in the first place, or why Moiraine involved you in questioning Black sisters, but you three are Accepted. Accepted, not Aes Sedai. Tanchico now is no place for anyone except a full Aes Sedai with a Warder to watch her back. I’ll not let you go into that!”

“So,” Nynaeve said lightly. “You question Moiraine’s decisions, and those of the Amyrlin Seat as well. Perhaps I’ve misunderstood Warders all along. I thought you swore to accept and obey, among other things. Lan, I do understand your concern, and I am grateful—more than grateful—but we all have tasks to perform. We are going; you must resign yourself to the fact.”

“Why? For the love of the Light, at least tell me why! Tanchico!”

“If Moiraine has not told you,” Nynaeve said gently, “perhaps she has her reasons. We must do our tasks, as you must do yours.”

Lan trembled—actually trembled!—and clamped his jaw shut angrily. When he spoke, he was strangely hesitant. “You will need someone to help you in Tanchico. Someone to keep a Taraboner street thief from slipping a knife into your back for your purse. Tanchico was that sort of city before the war began, and everything I’ve heard says it is worse now. I could . . . I could protect you, Nynaeve.”

Elayne’s eyebrows shot up. He could not be suggesting. . . . He just could not be.

Nynaeve gave no sign that he had said anything out of the ordinary. “Your place is with Moiraine.”

“Moiraine.” Sweat beaded on the Warder’s hard face, and he struggled with the words. “I can . . . I must . . . Nynaeve, I . . . I. . . .”

“You *will* remain with Moiraine,” Nynaeve said sharply, “until she releases you from your bond. You will do as I say.” Pulling a carefully folded paper from her pouch, she thrust it into his hands. He frowned, read, then blinked and read again.

Elayne knew what it said.

> What the bearer does is done at my order and by my authority. Obey, and keep silent, at my command.
>
> *Siuan Sanche*
> *Watcher of the Seals*
> *Flame of Tar Valon*
> *The Amyrlin Seat*

The other like it rested in Egwene’s pouch, though none of them were sure what good it would do where she was going.

“But this allows you to do anything you please,” Lan protested. “You can speak in the Amyrlin’s name. Why would she give this to an Accepted?”

“Ask no questions I cannot answer,” Nynaeve said, then added with a hint of a grin, “Just count yourself lucky I do not tell you to dance for me.”

Elayne suppressed a smile of her own. Egwene made a choking sound of swallowed laughter. It was what Nynaeve had said when the Amyrlin first handed them the letters. *With this I could make a Warder dance*. Neither of them had had any doubt which Warder she had meant.

“Do you not? You dispose of me very neatly. My bond, and my oaths. This letter.” Lan had a dangerous gleam in his eye, which Nynaeve seemed not to notice as she took back the letter and replaced it in the pouch on her belt.

“You are very full of yourself, al’Lan Mandragoran. We do as we must, as you will.”

“Full of myself, Nynaeve al’Meara? *I* am full of myself?” Lan moved so quickly toward Nynaeve that Elayne very nearly wrapped him in flows of Air before she could think. One moment Nynaeve was standing there, with just time to gape at the tall man sweeping toward her; the next her shoes were dangling a foot off the floor and she was being quite thoroughly kissed. At first she kicked his shins and hammered him with her fists and made sounds of frantic, furious protest, but her kicks slowed and stopped, and then she was holding on to his shoulders and not protesting at all.

Egwene dropped her eyes with embarrassment, but Elayne watched interestedly. Was that how she had looked when Rand. . . . *No! I will not think about him*. She wondered if there was time to write him another letter, taking back everything she had said in the first, letting him know she was not to be trifled with. But did she want to?

After a while Lan set Nynaeve back on her feet. She swayed a bit as she straightened her dress and patted her hair furiously. “You have no right . . .” she began in a breathless voice, then stopped to swallow. “I will not be *manhandled* in that fashion for the whole world to see. I will not!”

“Not the whole world,” he replied. “But if they can see, they can hear as well. You have made a place in my heart where I thought there was no room for anything else. You have made flowers grow where I cultivated dust and stones. Remember this, on this journey you insist on making. If you die, I will not survive you long.” He gave Nynaeve one of his rare smiles. If it did not exactly soften his face, at least it made it less hard. “And remember also, I am not always so easily commanded, even with letters from the Amyrlin.” He made an elegant bow; for a moment Elayne thought he actually meant to kneel and kiss Nynaeve’s Great Serpent ring. “As you command,” he murmured, “so do I obey.” It was difficult to tell whether he meant to be mocking or not.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Nynaeve sank onto the edge of her bed as if letting her knees give way at last. She stared at the door with a pensive frown.

“ ‘Poke the meekest dog too often,’ ” Elayne quoted, “ ‘and he will bite.’ Not that Lan is very meek.” She got a sharp look and a sniff from Nynaeve.

“He is insufferable,” Egwene said. “Sometimes he is. Nynaeve, why did you do that? He was ready to go with you. I know you want nothing more than to break him free of Moiraine. Do not try to deny it.”

Nynaeve did not try. Instead she fussed with her dress, and smoothed the coverlet on the bed. “Not like that,” she said finally. “I mean him to be mine. All of him. I will not have him remembering a broken oath to Moiraine. I will not have that between us. For him, as well as myself.”

“But will it be any different if you bring him to ask Moiraine to release him from his bond?” Egwene asked. “Lan is the kind of man who would see it as much the same thing. All that leaves is to somehow make her let him go of her own accord. How can you manage that?”

“I do not know.” Nynaeve firmed her voice. “Yet what must be done, can be done. There is always a way. That is for another time. Work to be done, and we sit here fretting over men. Are you sure you have everything you need for the Waste, Egwene?”

“Aviendha is readying everything,” Egwene said. “She still seems unhappy, but she says we can reach Rhuidean in little more than a month, if we are lucky. You will be in Tanchico by then.”

“Perhaps sooner,” Elayne told her, “if what they say about Sea Folk rakers is true. You will be careful, Egwene? Even with Aviendha for a guide, the Waste cannot be safe.”

“I will. You be careful. Both of you. Tanchico is not much safer than the Waste now.”

Abruptly they were all hugging one another, repeating cautions to take care, making sure they all remembered the schedule for meeting in *Tel’aran’rhiod*’s Stone.

Elayne wiped tears from her cheeks. “As well Lan left.” She laughed tremulously. “He would think we were all being foolish.”

“No, he would not,” Nynaeve said, pulling up her skirts to settle a purse of gold into its pocket. “He may be a man, but he is not a complete dolt.”

There had to be time between here and the carriage to locate paper and pen, Elayne decided. She would find time. Nynaeve had the right of it. Men needed a firm hand. Rand would find he could not get away from her so easily. And he would not find it easy to worm his way back into her good graces.

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CHAPTER 17

Deceptions

Favoring his stiff right leg, Thom bowed with a flourish of his gleeman’s cloak that set the colorful patches fluttering. His eyes felt grainy, but he made himself speak lightly. “A good morning to you.” Straightening, he knuckled his long white mustaches grandly.

The black-and-gold-clad servants looked surprised. The two muscular lads straightened from the gold-studded red lacquer chest, with a shattered lid, that they had been about to lift, and the three women stilled their mops in front of them. The hallway was empty along here except for them, and any excuse to break their labor was good, especially at this hour. They looked as tired as Thom felt, with slumping shoulders and dark circles under their eyes.

“A good morning to you, gleeman,” the oldest of the women said. A bit plump and plain-faced, perhaps, she had a nice smile, weary as she was. “Can we help you?”

Thom produced four colored balls from a capacious coatsleeve and began to juggle. “I am just going about trying to raise spirits. A gleeman must do what he can.” He would have used more than four, but he was fatigued enough to make even that many an exercise in concentration. How long since he had nearly dropped a fifth ball? Two hours? He stifled a yawn, turned it into a reassuring smile. “A terrible night, and spirits need lifting.”

“The Lord Dragon saved us,” one of the younger women said. She was pretty and slim, but with a predatory gleam in her dark, shadowed eyes that warned him to temper his smile. Of course, she might be useful if she was both greedy and honest, meaning that she would stay bought once he paid her. It was always good to find another set of hands to place a note, a tongue that would tell him what was heard and say what he wanted where he wanted. *Old fool! You have enough hands and ears, so stop thinking of a* *fine bosom and remember the look in her eye!* The interesting thing was that she sounded as if she meant what she said, and one of the young fellows nodded agreement to her words.

"Yes," Thom said. "I wonder which High Lord had charge of the docks yesterday?" He nearly fumbled the balls in irritation at himself. Bringing it right out like that. He was too tired; he should be in his bed. He should have been there hours ago.

"The docks are the Defenders' responsibility," the oldest woman told him. "You'd not know that, of course. The High Lords would not concern themselves."

Thom knew it very well. "Is that so? Well, I am not Tairen, of course." He changed the balls from a simple circle to a double loop; it looked more difficult than it was, and the girl with the predatory look clapped her hands. Now that he was into it, he might as well go on. After this, though, he would call it a night. A night? The sun was rising already. "Still, it is a shame no one asked why those barges were at the docks. With their hatches down, hiding all those Trollocs. Not that I am saying anyone knew the Trollocs were there." The double loop wobbled, and he quickly went back to a circle. Light, he was exhausted. "You'd think one of the High Lords would have asked, though."

The two young men frowned thoughtfully at one another, and Thom smiled to himself. Another seed planted, just that easily, if clumsily as well. Another rumor started, whatever they knew for a fact about who had charge of the docks. And rumors spread—a rumor like this would not stop short of the city—so it was another small wedge of suspicion driven between commoners and nobles. Who would the commoners turn to, except the man they knew the nobles hated? The man who had saved the Stone from Shadowspawn. Rand al'Thor. The Lord Dragon.

It was time to leave what he had sown. If the roots had taken hold here, nothing he said now could pull them loose, and he had scattered other seeds this night. But it would not do for anyone to discover he was the one doing the planting. "They fought bravely last night, the High Lords did. Why, I saw. . . ." He trailed off as the women leaped to their mopping and the men grabbed up the chest and hurried away.

"I can find work for gleemen, too," the majhere's voice said behind him. "Idle hands are idle hands."

He turned gracefully, considering his leg, and swept her a deep bow. The top of her head was below his shoulder, but she probably weighed half again what he did. She had a face like an anvil—not improved by the bandage around her temples—an extra chin, and deep-set eyes like chips of black flint. “A good morning to you, gracious lady. A small token of this fresh, new day.”

He gestured with a flurry of hands and tucked a golden yellow sunburst blossom, only a little bedraggled for its time up his sleeve, into the gray hair above her bandage. She snatched the flower right out again, of course, and eyed it suspiciously, but that was just as he wanted. He put three limping strides into her moment of hesitation, and when she shouted something after him, he neither listened nor slowed.

Horrible woman, he thought. *If we had turned her loose on the Trollocs, she’d have had them all sweeping and mopping*.

He yawned behind a hand, jaws creaking. He was too old for this. He was tired, and his knee was a knot of pain. Nights with no sleep, battles, plotting. Too old. He should be living quietly on a farm somewhere. With chickens. Farms always had chickens. And sheep. They must not be difficult to look after; shepherds seemed to loll about and play the pipes all the time. He would play the harp, of course, not pipes. Or his flute; weather was not good for the harp. And there would be a town nearby, with an inn where he could amaze the patrons in the common room. He flourished his cloak as he passed two servants. The only point in wearing it in this heat was to let people know he was a gleeman. They perked up at the sight of him, of course, hoping he might pause to entertain for a moment. Most gratifying. Yes, a farm had its virtues. A quiet place. No people to bother him. As long as there was a town close by.

Pushing open the door to his room, he stopped in his tracks. Moiraine straightened as if she had a perfect right to be going through the papers scattered on his table and calmly arranged her skirts as she sat on the stool. Now there was a beautiful woman, with every grace a man could want, including laughing at his quips. *Fool! Old fool! She’s Aes Sedai, and you’re too tired to think straight*.

“A good morning to you, Moiraine Sedai,” he said, hanging his cloak on a peg. He avoided looking at his writing case, still sitting under the table where he had left it. No point in letting her know it was important. Probably no point in checking after she went, for that matter; she could have channeled the lock open and closed again, and he would never be able to tell. Weary as he was, he could not even remember whether he had left anything incriminating in the case. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Everything he could see in the room was right where it belonged. He did not think he could have been foolish enough to leave anything out. Doors in the servants' quarters had no locks or latches. "I would offer you a refreshing drink, but I fear I have nothing but water."

"I am not thirsty," she said in a pleasant, melodious voice. She leaned forward, and the room was small enough for her to place a hand on his right knee. A chill tingle rippled through him. "I wish a good Healer had been near when this happened. It is too late now, I regret."

"A dozen Healers would not have been enough," he told her. "A Halfman did it."

"I know."

What else does she know? he wondered. Turning to pull his lone chair out from behind the table, he bit back an oath. He felt as if he had had a good night's sleep, and the pain was gone from his knee. His limp remained, but the joint was more limber than it had been since he was injured. *The woman didn't even ask if I wanted it. Burn me, what is she after?* He refused to flex the leg. If she would not ask, he would not acknowledge her gift.

"An interesting day, yesterday," she said as he sat down.

"I'd not call Trollocs and Halfmen interesting," he said dryly.

"I did not mean them. Earlier. The High Lord Carleon dead in a hunting accident. His good friend Tedosian apparently mistook him for a boar. Or perhaps a deer."

"I hadn't heard." He kept his voice calm. Even if she had found the note, she could not have traced it to him. Carleon himself would have thought it by his own hand. He did not think she could have, but he reminded himself again that she was Aes Sedai. As if he needed any reminding, with that smooth pretty face across from him, those serene dark eyes watching him full of all his secrets. "The servants' quarters are full of gossip, but I seldom listen."

"Do you not?" she murmured mildly. "Then you will not have heard that Tedosian fell ill not an hour after returning to the Stone, directly after his wife gave him a goblet of wine to wash away the dust of the hunt. It is said he wept when he learned that she means to tend him herself, and feed him with her own hands. No doubt tears of joy at her love. I hear she has vowed not to leave his side until he can rise again. Or until he dies."

She knew. How, he could not say, but she knew. But why was she revealing it to him? "A tragedy," he said, matching her bland tone. "Rand will need all the loyal High Lords he can find, I suppose."

"Carleon and Tedosian were hardly loyal. Even to each other, it seems. They led the faction that want to kill Rand and try to forget he ever lived."

"Do you say so? I pay little attention to such things. The works of the mighty are not for a simple gleeman."

Her smile was just short of laughter, but she spoke as if reading from a page. "Thomdril Merrilin. Called the Gray Fox, once, by some who knew him, or knew of him. Courtbard at the Royal Palace of Andor in Caemlyn. Morgase's lover for a time, after Taringail died. Fortunate for Morgase, Taringail's death. I do not suppose she ever learned he meant her to die and himself to be Andor's first king. But we were speaking of Thom Merrilin, a man who, it was said, could play the Game of Houses in his sleep. It is a shame that such a man calls himself a simple gleeman. But such arrogance to keep the same name."

Thom masked his shock with an effort. How much did she know? Too much if she knew not another word. But she was not the only one with knowledge. "Speaking of names," he said levelly, "it is remarkable how much can be puzzled out from a name. Moiraine Damodred. The Lady Moiraine of House Damodred, in Cairhien. Taringail's youngest half-sister. King Laman's niece. And Aes Sedai, let us not forget. An Aes Sedai aiding the Dragon Reborn since before she could have known that he was more than just another poor fool who could channel. An Aes Sedai with connections high in the White Tower, I would say, else she'd not risk what she has. Someone in the Hall of the Tower? More than one, I'd say; it would have to be. News of that would shake the world. But why should there be trouble? Perhaps it's best to leave an old gleeman tucked away in his hole in the servants' quarters. Just an old gleeman playing his harp and telling his tales. Tales that harm no one."

If he had managed to stagger her even a fraction, she did not show it. "Speculation without facts is always dangerous," she said calmly. "I do not use my House name, by choice. House Damodred had a deservedly unpleasant reputation before Laman cut down *Avendoraldera* and lost the throne and his life for it. Since the Aiel War, it has grown worse, also deservedly."

Would nothing shake the woman? "What do you want of me?" he demanded irritably.

She did not as much as blink. "Elayne and Nynaeve take ship for Tanchico today. A dangerous city, Tanchico. Your knowledge and skills might keep them alive."

So that was it. She wanted to separate him from Rand, leave the boy naked to her manipulations. "As you say, Tanchico is dangerous now, but then it always was. I wish the young women well, yet I've no wish to stick my head into a vipers' nest. I am too old for that sort of thing. I have been thinking of taking up farming. A quiet life. Safe."

"A quiet life would kill you, I think." Sounding distinctly amused, she busied herself rearranging the folds of her skirt with small, slender hands. He had the impression she was hiding a smile. "Tanchico will not, however. I guarantee that, and by the First Oath, you know it for truth."

He frowned at her despite his best efforts to keep his face straight. She had said it, and she could not lie, yet how could she know? He was sure she could not Foretell; he was certain he had heard her disavow the Talent. But she had said it. *Burn the woman!* "Why should I go to Tanchico?" She could do without titles.

"To protect Elayne? Morgase's daughter?"

"I have not seen Morgase in fifteen years. Elayne was an infant when I left Caemlyn."

She hesitated, but when she spoke her voice was unrelentingly firm. "And your reason for leaving Andor? A nephew named Owyn, I believe. One of those poor fools you spoke of who can channel. The Red sisters were supposed to bring him to Tar Valon, as any such man is, but instead they gentled him on the spot and abandoned him to the . . . mercies of his neighbors."

Thom knocked his chair over standing up, then had to hold on to the table because his knees were shaking. Owyn had not lived long after being gentled, driven from his home by supposed friends who could not bear to let even a man who could no longer channel live among them. Nothing Thom did could stop Owyn not wanting to live, or stop his young wife from following him to the grave inside the month.

“Why . . . ?” He cleared his throat roughly, tried to make his voice less husky. “Why are you telling me this?”

There was sympathy on Moiraine’s face. And could it be regret? Surely not. Not from an Aes Sedai. The sympathy had to be false as well. “I would not have done, had you been willing to go simply to help Elayne and Nynaeve.”

“Why, burn you! Why?”

“If you go with Elayne and Nynaeve, I will tell you the names of those Red sisters when I see you next, as well as the name of the one who gave them their orders. They did not act on their own. And I *will* see you again. You will survive Tarabon.”

He drew an uneven breath. “What good will their names do me?” he asked in a flat voice. “Aes Sedai names, wrapped in all the power of the White Tower.”

“A skilled and dangerous player of the Game of Houses might find a use for them,” she replied quietly. “They should not have done what they did. They should not have been excused for it.”

“Will you leave me, please?”

“I will teach you that not all Aes Sedai are like those Reds, Thom. You must learn that.”

“Please?”

He stood leaning on the table until she was gone, unwilling to let her see him sink awkwardly to his knees, see the tears trickling down his weathered face. *Oh, Light, Owyn*. He had buried it all as deeply as he could. *I couldn’t get there in time. I was too busy. Too busy with the bloody Game of Houses*. He scrubbed at his face testily. Moiraine could play the Game with the best. Wrenching him around this way, tugging every string he had thought perfectly hidden. Owyn, Elayne. Morgase’s daughter. Only fondness remained for Morgase, perhaps a little more than that, but it was hard to walk away from a child you had bounced on your knee. *That girl in Tanchico? That city would eat her alive even without a war. It must be a pit of rabid wolves, now. And Moiraine will give me the names*. All he had to do was leave Rand in Aes Sedai hands. Just as he had left Owyn. She had him like a snake in a cleft stick, damned however he writhed. *Burn the woman!*

Looping the embroidery basket's handle over her arm, Min gathered her skirts with her other hand and strolled out of the dining hall after breakfast in a gliding pace, her back straight. She could have balanced a full goblet of wine on her head without spilling a drop. Partly that was because she could not take a proper stride in her dress, all pale blue silk with a snug bodice and sleeves and a full skirt that would drag its embroidered hem on the ground if she did not hold it up. It was also partly because she was sure she could feel Laras's eyes on her.

A glance back proved her right. The Mistress of the Kitchens, a winecask on legs, was beaming after her approvingly from the dining hall doorway. Who would have thought the woman had been a beauty in her youth, or would have a place in her heart for pretty, flirtatious girls? "Lively," she called them. Who would have suspected she would decide to take "Elmindreda" under her stout wing? It was hardly a comfortable position. Laras kept a protective eye on Min, an eye that seemed to find her anywhere in the Tower grounds. Min smiled back and patted her hair, now a round black cap of curls. *Burn the woman! Doesn't she have something to cook, or some scullion to yell at?*

Laras waved to her, and she waved in return. She could not afford to offend someone who watched her so closely, not when she had no idea how many mistakes she might be making. Laras knew every trick of "lively" women, and expected to teach Min any she did not already know.

One real mistake, Min reflected as she took a seat on a marble bench beneath a tall willow, had been the embroidery. Not from Laras's point of view, but her own. Pulling her embroidery hoop from the basket, she ruefully examined yesterday's work, a number of lopsided yellow oxeyes and something she had meant to be a pale yellow rosebud, though no one would know unless she told them. With a sigh, she set to picking the stitches out. Leane was right, she supposed; a woman could sit for hours with an embroidery hoop, watching everyone and everything, and nobody thought it strange. It would have helped, though, if she had any skill at all.

At least it was a perfect morning for being out-of-doors. A golden sun had just cleared the horizon in a sky where the few fluffy white clouds seemed arrayed to emphasize the perfection. A light breeze caught the scent of roses and ruffled tall calma bushes with their big red or white blossoms. Soon enough the gravel-covered paths near the tree would be full of people on one errand or another, everyone from Aes Sedai to stablemen. A perfect morning, and a perfect place from which to watch unobserved. Perhaps today she would have a useful viewing.

"Elmindreda?"

Min jumped, and stuck her pricked finger in her mouth. Twisting 'round on the bench, she prepared to assail Gawyn for sneaking up on her, but the words froze in her throat. Galad was with him. Taller than Gawyn, with long legs, he moved with a dancer's grace and a lean, sinewy strength. His hands were long, too, elegant yet strong. And his face. . . . He was, quite simply, the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

"Stop sucking your finger," Gawyn said with a grin. "We know you are a pretty little girl; you do not need to prove it to us."

Blushing, she hastily pulled her hand down, and barely restrained herself from a furious glare that would not have been at all in keeping with Elmindreda. He had needed no threats or commands from the Amyrlin to keep her secret, only her asking, but he did take any opportunity to tease that presented itself.

"It is not right to mock, Gawyn," Galad said. "He did not mean to offend, Mistress Elmindreda. Your pardon, but can it be we have met before? When you frowned at Gawyn so fiercely just then, I almost thought I knew you."

Min dropped her eyes demurely. "Oh, I could never forget meeting *you*, my Lord Galad," she said in her best foolish-girl voice. The simpering tone, and anger at her own slip, sent a tide of heat to her hairline, improving her disguise.

She did not look anything like herself, and the dress and the hair were only a part of it. Leane had acquired creams and powders and an incredible assortment of mysterious scented things in the city and drilled her until she could have used them in her sleep. She had cheekbones, now, and more color in her lips than nature had put there. A dark cream lining her eyelids and a fine powder that emphasized her lashes made her eyes seem larger. Not at all like herself. Some of the novices had told her admiringly how beautiful she was, and even a few Aes Sedai had called her "a very pretty child." She hated it. The dress was quite pretty, she admitted, but she hated the rest of it. Yet there was no point in donning a disguise if she did not keep it up.

"I am sure you would remember," Gawyn said dryly. "I did not mean to interrupt you at your embroidery—swallows, are they? *Yellow* swallows?” Min thrust the hoop back into the basket. “But I wanted to ask you to comment on this.” He pushed a small, leather-bound book, old and tattered, into her hands, and suddenly his voice was serious. “Tell my brother this is nonsense. Perhaps he will listen to you.”

She examined the book. *The Way of the Light*, by Lothair Mantelar. Opening it, she read at random. “Therefore abjure all pleasure, for goodness is a pure abstract, a perfect crystalline ideal which is obscured by base emotion. Pamper not the flesh. Flesh is weak but spirit is strong; flesh is useless where spirit is strong. Right thought is drowned in sensation, and right action hindered by passions. Take all joy from rightness, and rightness only.” It seemed to be dry nonsense.

Min smiled at Gawyn, and even managed a titter. “So many words. I fear I know little of books, my Lord Gawyn. I always mean to read one—I do.” She sighed. “But there is so little time. Why, just fixing my hair properly takes hours. Do you think it is pretty?” The outraged startlement on his face nearly made her laugh, but she changed it to a giggle. It was a pleasure to turn the tables on him for a change; she would have to see if she could do it more often. There were possibilities in this disguise she had not considered. This stay in the Tower had turned out to be all boredom and irritation. She deserved *some* amusement.

“Lothair Mantelar,” Gawyn said in a tight voice, “founded the Whitecloaks. The Whitecloaks!”

“He was a great man,” Galad said firmly. “A philosopher of noble ideals. If the Children of the Light have sometimes been . . . excessive . . . since his day, it does not change that.”

“Oh, my. Whitecloaks,” Min said breathlessly, and added a little shudder. “They are such rough men, I hear. I cannot imagine a Whitecloak dancing. Do you think there is any chance of a dance here? Aes Sedai do not seem to care for dancing either, and I do so love to dance.” The frustration in Gawyn’s eyes was delightful.

“I do not think so,” Galad said, taking the book from her. “Aes Sedai are too busy with . . . with their own affairs. If I hear of a suitable dance in the city, I will escort you, if you wish it. You need have no fear of being annoyed by those two louts.” He smiled at her, unconscious of what he was doing, and she suddenly found herself breathless in truth. Men should not be allowed smiles like that.

It actually took her a moment to remember what two louts he was talking about. The two men who had supposedly asked for Elmindreda's hand in marriage, nearly fighting each other because she could not make up her mind, pressing her to the point of seeking sanctuary in the Tower because she could not stop encouraging them both. Just the entire excuse for her being there. *It's this dress*, she told herself. *I could think straight if I had on my proper clothes*.

"I've noticed the Amyrlin speaks to you every day," Gawyn said suddenly. "Has she mentioned our sister Elayne? Or Egwene al'Vere? Has she said anything of where they are?"

Min wished she could black his eye. He did not know why she was pretending to be someone else, of course, but he had agreed to help her be accepted as Elmindreda, and now he was linking her to women too many in the Tower knew were friends of Min. "Oh, the Amyrlin Seat is such a wonderful woman," she said sweetly, baring her teeth in a smile. "She always asks how I am passing the time, and compliments my dress. I suppose she hopes I'll make a decision soon between Darvan and Goemal, but I just cannot." She widened her eyes, hoping it made her look helpless and confused. "They are both so sweet. Who did you say? Your sister, my Lord Gawyn? The Daughter-Heir herself? I do not think I've ever heard the Amyrlin Seat mention her. What was the other name?" She could hear Gawyn grinding his teeth.

"We should not bother Mistress Elmindreda with that," Galad said. "It is our problem, Gawyn. It is up to us to find the lie and deal with it."

She barely heard him, because suddenly she was staring at a big man with long dark hair curling around slumped shoulders, wandering aimlessly down one of the graveled paths through the trees, under the watchful eyes of an Accepted. She had seen Logain before, a sad-faced, once-hearty man, always with an Accepted for companion. The woman was meant to keep him from killing himself as much as to prevent his escape; despite his size, he truly did not seem up to anything of the latter sort. But she had never before seen a flaring halo around his head, radiant in gold and blue. It was only there for a moment, but that was enough.

Logain had proclaimed himself the Dragon Reborn, had been captured and gentled. Whatever glory he might have had as a false Dragon was far behind him now. All that remained for him was the despair of the gentled, like a man who had been robbed of sight and hearing and taste, wanting to die, waiting for the death that inevitably came to such men in a few years. He glanced at her, perhaps not seeing her; his eyes looked hopelessly inward. So why had he worn a halo that shouted of glory and power to come? This was something she had to tell the Amyrlin.

“Poor fellow,” Gawyn muttered. “I cannot help pitying him. Light, it would be a mercy to let him end it. Why do they make him keep on living?”

“He deserves no pity,” Galad pronounced. “Have you forgotten what he was, what he did? How many thousands died before he was taken? How many towns were burned? Let him live on as a warning to others.”

Gawyn nodded, but reluctantly. “Yet men followed him. Some of those towns were burned after they declared for him.”

“I have to go,” Min said, getting to her feet, and Galad was instantly all solicitude.

“Forgive us, Mistress Elmindreda. We did not mean to frighten you. Logain cannot harm you. I give you my assurance.”

“I . . . Yes, he’s made me feel faint. Do excuse me. I really must go lie down.”

Gawyn looked extremely skeptical, but he scooped up her basket before she could touch it. “Let me see you part of the way, at least,” he said, his voice oozing false concern. “This basket must be too heavy for you, dizzy as you are. I’d not want you to swoon.”

She wanted to snatch the basket and hit him with it, but that was not how Elmindreda would react. “Oh, thank you, my Lord Gawyn. You are so kind. So kind. No, no, my Lord Galad. Do not let me encumber both of you. Do sit down here and read your book. Do say you will. I just could not bear it, otherwise.” She even fluttered her eyelashes.

Somehow she managed to ensconce Galad on the marble bench and get away, though with Gawyn right beside her. Her skirts were an irritant; she wanted to pull them up to her knees and run, but Elmindreda would never run, and never expose so much of her legs except when dancing. Laras had lectured her severely on that very point; one time running, and she would nearly destroy the image of Elmindreda completely. And Gawyn . . . !

“Give me that basket, you muscle-brained cretin,” she snarled as soon as they were out of Galad’s sight, and pulled it away from him before he could comply. “What do you mean by asking me about Elayne and Egwene in front of him? Elmindreda never met them. Elmindreda does not care about them. Elmindreda doesn’t want to be mentioned in the same sentence with them! Can’t you understand that?”

“No,” he said. “Not since you won’t explain. But I am sorry.” There was hardly enough repentance in his voice to suit her. “It is just that I am worried. Where are they? This news coming upriver about a false Dragon in Tear makes me no easier in my mind. They are out there, somewhere, the Light knows where, and I keep asking myself, what if they are in the middle of the sort of bonfire Logain made out of Ghealdan?”

“What if he isn’t a false Dragon?” she asked cautiously.

“You mean because the stories in the streets say he’s taken the Stone of Tear? Rumor has a way of magnifying events. I will believe that when I see it, and in any case, it will take more to convince me. Even the Stone could fall. Light, I don’t really believe Elayne and Egwene are in Tear, but the not knowing eats at my belly like acid. If she is hurt. . . .”

Min did not know which “she” he meant, and suspected he did not either. In spite of his teasing, her heart went out to him, but there was nothing she could do. “If you could only do as I say and—”

“I know. Trust the Amyrlin. Trust!” He exhaled a long breath. “Do you know Galad has been drinking in the taverns with Whitecloaks? Anyone can cross the bridges if they come in peace, even Children of the bloody Light.”

“Galad?” she said incredulously. “In taverns? Drinking?”

“No more than a cup or two, I’m sure. He would not unbend more than that, not for his own nameday.” Gawyn frowned as if unsure whether that might be a criticism of Galad. “The point is that he is talking with Whitecloaks. And now this book. According to the inscription, Eamon Valda himself gave it to him. ‘In the hope you will find the way.’ Valda, Min. The man commanding the Whitecloaks on the other side of the bridges. Not knowing is eating Galad up, too. Listening to Whitecloaks. If anything happens to our sister, or to Egwene . . .” He shook his head. “Do you know where they are, Min? Would you tell me if you did? Why are you hiding?”

“Because I drove two men mad with my beauty and cannot make up my mind,” she told him acidly.

He gave a bitter half-laugh, then masked it with a grin. “Well, that at least I can believe.” He chuckled, and stroked under her chin with a finger. “You are a very pretty girl, Elmindreda. A pretty, clever little girl.”

She doubled a fist and tried to punch him in the eye, but he danced back, and she stumbled over her skirts and nearly fell. “You bloody ox of a thimble-brained man!” she growled.

“Such grace of movement, Elmindreda,” he laughed. “Such a dulcet voice, as a nightingale, or a cooing dove of the evening. What man would not grow starry-eyed at the sight of Elmindreda?” The mirth slid away, and he faced her soberly. “If you learn anything, please tell me. Please? I will beg on my knees, Min.”

“I will tell you,” she said. *If I can. If it’s safe for them. Light, but I hate this place. Why can’t I just go back to Rand?*

She left Gawyn there and entered the Tower proper by herself, keeping an eye out for Aes Sedai or Accepted who might question why she was above the ground floor and where she was going. The news of Logain was too important to wait until the Amyrlin encountered her, seemingly by accident, some time in the late afternoon as usual. At least, that was what she told herself. Impatience threatened to pop out through her skin.

She only saw a few Aes Sedai, turning a corner ahead of her or entering a room in the distance, which was all to the good. No one simply dropped in on the Amyrlin Seat. The handful of servants she passed, all bustling about their work, did not question her, of course, or even look at her twice except to drop quick curties almost without pausing.

Pushing open the door to the Amyrlin’s study, she had a simpering tale ready in case anyone was with Leane, but the antechamber was empty. She hurried to the inner door and put her head in. The Amyrlin and the Keeper were seated on either side of Siuan’s table, which was littered with small strips of thin paper. Their heads swiveled toward her sharply, a stare like four nails.

“What are you doing here?” the Amyrlin snapped. “You are supposed to be a silly girl claiming sanctuary, not a friend of my childhood. There is to be no contact between us except the most casual, in passing. If necessary, I’ll name Laras to watch over you like a nurse over a child. She would enjoy that, I think, but I doubt you would.”

Min shivered at the thought. Suddenly Logain did not seem so urgent; it was hardly likely he could achieve any glory in the next few days. He was not really why she had come, though, only an excuse, and she would not turn back now. Closing the door behind her, she stammered out what she had seen and what it meant. She still felt uncomfortable doing so in front of Leane.

Siuan shook her head wearily. “Another thing to worry about. Starvation in Cairhien. A sister missing in Tarabon. Trolloc raids increasing in the Borderlands again. This fool who calls himself the Prophet, stirring up riots in Ghealdan. He’s apparently preaching that the Dragon has been Reborn as a Shienaran lord,” she said incredulously. “Even the small things are bad. The war in Arad Doman has stopped trade from Saldaea, and the pinch is making unrest in Maradon. Tenobia may even be forced off the throne by it. The only good news I have heard is that the Blight has retreated for some reason. Two miles or more of green beyond the border-stones, without a hint of corruption or pestilence, all the way from Saldaea to Shienar. The first time in memory it has done that. But I suppose good news has to be balanced by bad. When a boat has one leak it is sure to have others. I only wish it was a balance. Leane, have the watch on Logain increased. I can’t see what trouble he could cause now, but I do not want to find out.” She turned those piercing blue eyes on Min. “Why did you come flapping up here with this like a startled gull? Logain could have waited. The man is hardly likely to find power and glory before sunset.”

The near echo of her own thoughts made Min shift uncomfortably. “I know,” she said. Leane’s eyebrows rose warningly, and she added a hasty, “Mother.” The Keeper nodded approvingly.

“That does not tell me why, child,” Siuan said.

Min steeled herself. “Mother, nothing I’ve viewed since the first day has been very important. I certainly have not seen anything that points to the Black Ajah.” That name still gave her a chill. “I’ve told you everything I know about whatever disaster you Aes Sedai are going to face, and the rest of it is just useless.” She had to stop and swallow, with that penetrating gaze on her. “Mother, there is no reason I should not go. There’s reason I should. Perhaps Rand could make real use of what I can do. If he *has* taken the Stone. . . . Mother, he may need me.” *At least I need him, burn me for a fool!*

The Keeper shuddered openly at the mention of Rand’s name. Siuan, on the other hand, snorted loudly. “Your viewings have been very useful. It’s important to know about Logain. You found the groom who was stealing before suspicion could land on anyone else. And that fire-haired novice who was going to get herself with child . . . ! Sheriam cut that short

—the girl won’t even think of men until she’s finished her training—but we’d not have known until it was too late, without you. No, you cannot go. Sooner or later your viewings will draw me a chart to the Black Ajah, and until they do, they still more than pay their passage.”

Min sighed, and not only because the Amyrlin meant to hold on to her. The last time she had seen that redheaded novice, the girl had been sneaking off to a wooded part of the grounds with a muscular guard. They would be married, maybe before the end of summer; Min had known that as soon as she saw them together, though the Tower never let a novice leave until the Tower was ready, even one who could not go any further in her training. There was a farm in that pair’s future, and a swarm of children, but it was pointless to tell the Amyrlin that.

“Could you at least let Gawyn and Galad know that Egwene and their sister are all right, Mother?” Asking irked her, and her tone of voice did, too. A child denied a slice of cake begging for a cookie instead. “At least tell them something besides that ridiculous tale about doing penance on a farm.”

“I have told you that is none of your concern. Do not make me tell you again.”

“They don’t believe it any more than I do,” Min got out before the Amyrlin’s dry smile quieted her. It was not an amused smile.

“So you suggest I change where they are supposed to be? After letting everyone think them on a farm? Do you suppose that might raise a few eyebrows? Everyone but those boys accepts it. And you. Well, Coulin Gaidin will just have to work them that much harder. Sore muscles and enough sweat will take most men’s minds off other troubles. Women’s minds, too. You ask many more questions, and I’ll see what a few days scrubbing pots will do for you. Better to lose your services for two or three days than have you poking your nose where it does not belong.”

“You don’t even know if they are in trouble, do you? Or Moiraine.” It was not Moiraine she meant.

“Girl,” Leane said warningly, but Min was not to be stopped now.

“Why haven’t we heard? Rumors reached here two days ago. Two days! Why doesn’t one of those slips on your desk contain a message from her? Doesn’t she have pigeons? I thought you Aes Sedai had people with messenger pigeons everywhere. If there isn’t one in Tear, there should be. A man on horseback could have reached Tar Valon before now. Why—?”

The flat crack of Siuan's palm on the table cut her off. "You obey remarkably well," she said wryly. "Child, until we hear something to the contrary, assume the young man is well. Pray that he is." Leane shivered again. "There's a saying in the Maule, child," the Amyrlin went on. " 'Do not trouble trouble till trouble troubles you.' Mark it well, child."

There was a timid knock at the door.

The Amyrlin and the Keeper exchanged glances; then two sets of eyes shifted to Min. Her presence was a problem. There was certainly nowhere to hide; even the balcony was clearly visible from the room in its entirety.

"A reason for you to be here," Siuan muttered, "that doesn't make you any more than the fool girl you're supposed to be. Leane, stand ready at the door." She and the Keeper were on their feet together, Siuan coming around the table while Leane moved to the door. "Take Leane's seat, girl. Move your feet, child; move your feet. Now look sulky. Not angry, sulky! Stick your lower lip out and stare at the floor. I may make you wear ribbons in your hair, huge red bows. That's it. Leane." The Amyrlin put her fists on her hips and raised her voice. "And if you ever walk in on me unannounced again, child, I will. . . ."

Leane pulled the door open to reveal a dark novice who flinched at Siuan's continuing tirade, then dropped a deep curtsy. "Messages for the Amyrlin, Aes Sedai," the girl squeaked. "Two pigeons arrived at the loft." She was one of those who had told Min she was beautiful, and she tried to stare past the Keeper with wide eyes.

"This does not concern you, child," Leane said briskly, taking the tiny cylinders of bone out of the girl's hand. "Back to the loft with you." Before the novice finished rising, Leane shut the door, then leaned against it with a sigh. "I have jumped at every unexpected sound since you told me. . . ."Straightening, she came back to the table. "Two more messages, Mother. Shall I . . . ?"

"Yes. Open them," the Amyrlin said. "No doubt Morgase has decided to invade Cairhien after all. Or Trollocs have overrun the Borderlands. It would be of a piece with everything else." Min kept her seat; Siuan had sounded all too realistic with some of those threats.

Leane examined the red wax seal on the end of one of the small cylinders, no larger than her own finger joint, then broke it open with a thumbnail when she was satisfied it had not been tampered with. The rolled paper inside she extracted with a slim ivory pick. "Nearly as bad as

Trollocs, Mother," she said almost as soon as she began reading. "Mazrim Taim has escaped."

"Light!" Siuan barked. "How?"

"This only says he was taken away by stealth in the night, Mother. Two sisters are dead."

"The Light illumine their souls. But we've little time to mourn the dead while the likes of Taim are alive and ungentled. Where, Leane?"

"Denhuir, Mother. A village east of the Black Hills on the Maradon Road, above the headwaters of the Antaeo and the Luan."

"It had to be some of his followers. Fools. Why won't they know when they are beaten? Choose out a dozen reliable sisters, Leane. . . ." The Amyrlin grimaced. "Reliable," she muttered. "If I knew who was more reliable than a silverpike, I'd not have the problems I do. Do the best you can, Leane. A dozen sisters. And five hundred of the guards. No, a full thousand."

"Mother," the Keeper said worriedly. "The White cloaks—"

"—would not try to cross the bridges if I left them unwatched entirely. They would be afraid of a trap. There is no telling what is going on up there, Leane. I want whoever I send to be ready for anything. And Leane . . . Mazrim Taim is to be gentled as soon as he is taken again."

Leane's eyes opened wide with shock. "The law."

"I know the law as well as you, but I will not risk having him freed again ungentled. I'll not risk another Guaire Amalasan, not on top of every thing else."

"Yes, Mother," Leane said faintly.

The Amyrlin picked up the second bone cylinder and snapped it in two with a sharp crack to get the message out. "Good news at last," she breathed, a smile blooming on her face. "Good news. 'The sling has been used. The shepherd holds the sword.' "

"Rand?" Min asked, and Siuan nodded.

"Of course, girl. The Stone has fallen. Rand al'Thor, the shepherd, has *Callandor*. Now I can move. Leane, I want the Hall of the Tower convened this afternoon. No, this morning."

"I don't understand," Min said. "You knew the rumors were about Rand. Why are you calling the Hall now? What can you do that you could not before?"

Siuan laughed like a girl. “What I can do now is tell them right out that I have received word from an Aes Sedai that the Stone of Tear has fallen and a man has drawn *Callandor*. Prophecy fulfilled. Enough of it for my purpose, at least. The Dragon is Reborn. They’ll flinch, they’ll argue, but none can oppose my pronouncement that the Tower must guide this man. At last I can involve myself with him openly. Openly for the most part.”

“Are we doing the right thing, Mother?” Leane said abruptly. “I know. . . . If he has *Callandor*, he must be the Dragon Reborn, but he can channel, Mother. A man who can channel. I only saw him once, but even then there was something strange about him. Something more than being *ta’veren*. Mother, is he so very different from Taim when it comes down to it?”

“The difference is that he *is* the Dragon Reborn, daughter,” the Amyrlin said quietly. “Taim is a wolf, and maybe rabid. Rand al’Thor is the wolfhound we will use to defeat the Shadow. Keep his name to yourself, Leane. Best not to reveal too much too soon.”

“As you say, Mother,” the Keeper said, but she still sounded uneasy.

“Off with you now. I want the Hall assembled in an hour.” Siuan thoughtfully watched the taller woman go. “There may be more resistance than I would wish,” she said when the door clicked shut.

Min looked at her sharply. “You don’t mean. . . .”

“Oh, nothing serious, child. Not as long as they don’t know how long I have been involved with the al’Thor boy.” She looked at the slip of paper again, then dropped it onto the table. “I could wish Moiraine had told me more.”

“Why didn’t she say more? And why have we not heard from her before this?”

“More questions with you. That one you must ask Moiraine. She has always gone her own way. Ask Moiraine, child.”

* * *

Sahra Covenry worked the hoe in desultory fashion, frowning at the tiny sprouts of threadleaf and hensfoot poking up in the rows of cabbages and beets. It was not that Mistress Elward was a harsh taskmistress—she was no more stern than Sahra’s mother, and certainly easier that Sheriam—but Sahra had not gone to the White Tower to end up back on a farm hoeing vegetables with the sun barely up. Her white novice dresses were packed away; she wore brown wool her mother might have sewn, the skirt tied up to her knees to keep it out of the dirt. It was all so unfair. She had not done anything.

Wriggling her bare toes in the turned soil, she glared at a stubborn hensfoot and channeled, meaning to burn it out of the ground. Sparks flashed around the leafy sprout, and it wilted. Hurriedly she sliced the thing out of the dirt and her mind. If there was any fairness in the world, Lord Galad would come to the farm while out hunting.

Leaning on the hoe, she lost herself in a daydream of Healing Galad's injuries, received in a fall from his horse—not his fault, of course; he was a wonderful horseman—and him lifting her up in front of him on his saddle, declaring he would be her Warder—she would be Green Ajah, of course—and. . . .

"Sahra Covenry?"

Sahra jumped at the sharp voice, but it was not Mistress Elward. She curtsied as best she could, with her skirts gathered up. "The day's greeting, Aes Sedai. Have you come to take me back to the Tower?"

The Aes Sedai moved closer, not caring that her skirts dragged through the dirt of the vegetable patch. Despite the summer warmth of the morning, she wore a cloak, the hood pulled up to shadow her face. "Just before you left the Tower, you took a woman to the Amyrlin Seat. A woman calling herself Elmindreda."

"Yes, Aes Sedai," Sahra said, a slight question in her voice. She did not like the way the Aes Sedai had said that, as if she had left the Tower for good.

"Tell me everything that you heard or saw, girl, from the moment you took the woman in charge. Everything."

"But I heard nothing, Aes Sedai. The Keeper sent me away as soon as—" Pain racked her, digging her toes into the dirt, arching her back; the spasm lasted only moments, but it seemed eternal. Struggling for breath, she realized her cheek was pressed to the ground, and her still trembling fingers dug into the soil. She did not remember falling. She could see Mistress Elward's laundry basket lying on its side near the stone farmhouse, damp linens spilled out in a heap. Dazed, she thought that that was odd; Moria Elward would never leave her washing lying like that.

"Everything, girl," the Aes Sedai said coldly. She was standing over Sahra now, making no move to help her. She had hurt her; it was not supposed to be that way. “Every person this Elmindreda spoke to, every word she said, every nuance and expression.”

“She spoke to Lord Gawyn, Aes Sedai,” Sahra sobbed into the earth. “That is all I know, Aes Sedai. All.” She began to weep in earnest, sure that was not enough to satisfy this woman. She was right. She did not stop screaming for a long time, and when the Aes Sedai left there was not a sound around the farmhouse except for the chickens, not even breathing.

* * *

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CHAPTER

18

Into the Ways

Buttoning up his coat, Perrin paused, looking at the axe, still secured on the wall as he had left it since drawing it out of the door. He did not like the idea of carrying the weapon again, but he untied the belt from the peg and buckled it around his waist anyway. The hammer he tied to his already stuffed saddlebags. Draping saddlebags and blanket roll over his shoulder, he gathered a filled quiver and his unstrung longbow from the corner.

The rising sun poured heat and light through the narrow windows. The rumpled bed was the only proof that anyone had stayed here. Already the room had lost the feel of him; it even seemed to smell empty, despite his own scent on the sheets. He never stayed anywhere long enough to make that feel cling past his readiness to leave. Never long enough to put down roots, make it any kind of home. *Well, I'm going home now*.

Turning his back on the already unoccupied room, he went out.

Gaul rose easily from where he had been squatting against the wall beneath a tapestry of men on horseback hunting lions. He bore all of his weapons, with two leather water bottles, and a rolled blanket and a small cookpot were strapped beside the worked-leather bow case on his back. He was alone.

“The others?” Perrin asked, and Gaul shook his head.

“Too long away from the Three-fold Land. I warned you of that, Perrin. These lands of yours are too wet; the air is like breathing water. There are too many people, too close together. They have seen more than they want of strange places.”

“I understand,” Perrin said, though what he understood was that there would be no rescue after all, no company of Aiel to drive the Whitecloaks out of the Two Rivers. He kept his disappointment inside. It was sharp after thinking he had escaped his fate, but he could not say he had not prepared himself for the alternative. No point in crying when the iron split; you just reforged it. “Did you have any trouble doing what I asked?”

“None. I told one Tairen to take each thing you want to the Dragonwall Gate stable and tell no one of it; they will have seen one another there, but they will think the things are for me, and they will keep silent. The Dragonwall Gate. You would think the Spine of the World was just over the horizon, instead of a hundred leagues or more off.” The Aiel hesitated. “The girl and the Ogier make no secret of their preparations, Perrin. She has been trying to find the gleeman, and telling everyone she means to travel the Ways.”

Scratching his beard, Perrin breathed heavily, close to a growl. “If she gives me away to Moiraine, I vow she’ll not sit down for a week.”

“She is very handy with those knives,” Gaul said in a neutral tone.

“Not handy enough. Not if she’s given me away.” Perrin hesitated. No company of Aiel. The gallows still waited. “Gaul, if anything happens to me, if I give you the word, take Faile away. She might not want to go, but take her anyway. See her safely out of the Two Rivers. Will you promise me that?”

“I will do what I can, Perrin. For the blood debt I owe you, I will.” Gaul sounded doubtful, but Perrin did not think Faile’s knives would be enough to stop him.

They took back passages as much as possible, and narrow stairs meant to carry servants unobtrusively. Perrin thought it too bad the Tairens had not given servants their own corridors, as well. Still, they saw few people even in the broad hallways with their gilded lamp stands and ornate hangings, and no nobles at all.

He commented on the absence, and Gaul said, “Rand al’Thor has called them to the Heart of the Stone.”

Perrin only grunted, but he hoped Moiraine had been among those summoned. He wondered whether this was Rand’s way of helping him escape her. Whatever the reason, he was glad enough to take advantage of it.

They stepped out of the last cramped stairway onto the ground floor of the Stone, where cavernous hallways as wide as roads led to all the outer gates. There were no wall hangings here. Black iron lamps in iron brackets high on the walls lit the windowless passages, and the floor was paved with broad, rough stones able to stand long wear from horses’ shod hooves.

Perrin picked his pace up to a trot. The stables lay just in sight ahead down the great tunnel, the wide Dragonwall Gate itself standing open beyond and only a handful of Defenders for guard. Moiraine could not intercept them now, not without the Dark One's own luck.

The stable's open doorway was an arch fifteen paces across. Perrin took one step inside and stopped.

The air was heavy with the smell of straw and hay, underlaid with grain and oats, leather and horse manure. Stalls filled with fine Tairen horses, prized everywhere, lined the walls, with more in rows across the wide floor. Dozens of grooms were at work, currying and combing, mucking out, mending tack. Without pausing, one or another sometimes glanced at where Faile and Loial stood, booted and ready for travel. And beside them, Bain and Chiad, accoutered like Gaul with weapons and blankets, water bottles and cooking pot.

"Are they why you only said you would try?" Perrin asked quietly.

Gaul shrugged. "I will do what I can, but they will take her side. Chiad is Goshien."

"Her clan makes a difference?"

"Her clan and mine have blood feud, Perrin, and I am no spear-sister to her. But perhaps the water oaths will hold her. I will not dance spears with her unless she offers."

Perrin shook his head. A strange people. What were water oaths? What he said, though, was "Why are they with her?"

"Bain says they wish to see more of your lands, but I think it is the argument between you and Faile which fascinates them. They like her, and when they heard of this journey, they decided to go with her instead of you."

"Well, as long as they keep her out of trouble." He was surprised when Gaul threw back his head and laughed. It made him scratch his beard worriedly.

Loial came toward them, long eyebrows sagging anxiously. His coat pockets bulged, as was usual when he was traveling, mainly with the angular shapes of books. At least his limp seemed better. "Faile is becoming impatient, Perrin. I think she might insist on leaving any minute. Please hurry. You could not even find the Waygate without me. Not that you should try, certainly. You humans make me leap about so I can hardly find my own head. Please hurry."

“I will not leave him,” Faile called. “Not even if he is yet too stubborn and foolish to ask a simple favor. Should that be the case, he may still follow me like a lost puppy. I promise to scratch his ears and take care of him.” The Aiel women doubled over laughing.

Gaul leaped straight up suddenly, kicking higher, two paces or more above the floor, while twirling one of his spears. “We will follow like stalking ridgecats,” he shouted, “like hunting wolves.” He landed easily, lightly. Loial stared at him in amazement.

Bain, on the other hand, lazily combed her short, fiery hair with her fingers. “I have a fine wolfskin with my bedding in the hold,” she told Chiad in a bored voice. “Wolves are easily taken.”

A growl rose in Perrin’s throat, pulling both women’s eyes to him. For a moment Bain looked on the point of saying something more, but she frowned at his yellow stare and held her peace, not afraid, but suddenly wary.

“This puppy is not well housebroken yet,” Faile confided to the Aiel women.

Perrin refused to look at her. Instead he went to the stall that held his dun stallion, as tall as any of the Tairen animals but heavier in shoulder and haunch. Waving away a groom, he bridled Stepper and led him out himself. The grooms had walked the horse, of course, but he had been confined enough to frisk in the quick steps that had made Perrin give him his name. Perrin soothed him with the sure confidence of a man who had shoed many horses. It was no trouble at all putting his high-cantled saddle on and lashing his saddlebags and blanket roll behind.

Gaul watched with no expression. He would not ride a horse unless he had to, and then not a step farther than absolutely necessary. None of the Aiel would. Perrin did not understand why. Pride, perhaps, in their ability to run for long distances. The Aiel made it seem more than that, but he suspected none of them could have explained.

The packhorse had to be readied too, of course, but that was quickly done, since everything Gaul had ordered was waiting in a neat pile. Food and waterskins. Oats and grain for the horses. None of that would be available in the Ways. A few other things, like hobbles, some horse medicines just in case, spare tinderbox and such. Most of the space in the wicker hampers went for leather bottles like those the Aiel used for water, only larger and filled with lamp oil. Once the lanterns, on long poles, were strapped atop the rest, it was done.

Thrusting his unstrung bow under the saddle girth, he swung up into Stepper's saddle with the pack animal's lead in hand. And then had to wait, seething.

Loial was already mounted, on a huge, hairy-fetlocked horse, taller than any other in the stable by hands yet reduced nearly to pony size by the Ogier's long legs hanging down. There had been a time when the Ogier was almost as unwilling a rider as the Aiel, but he was at home on a horse now. It was Faile who took her time, examining her mount almost as if she had never seen the glossy black mare before, though Perrin knew she had put the horse through her paces before buying, soon after they came to the Stone. The horse, Swallow by name, was a fine animal of Tairen breeding, with slender ankles and an arched neck, a prancer with the look of speed and endurance both, though shod too lightly for Perrin's taste. Those shoes would not last. It was all another effort to put him in his place, whatever she thought that was.

When Faile finally mounted, in her narrow divided skirts, she reined closer to Perrin. She rode well, woman and horse moving as one. "Why can you not ask, Perrin?" she said softly. "You tried to keep me away from where I belong, so now you have to ask. Can such a simple thing be so difficult?"

The Stone rang like a monstrous bell, the stable floor leaping, the ceiling quivering on the point of coming down. Stepper leaped, too, screaming, head flailing; it was all Perrin could do to keep his seat. Grooms scrambled off the floor where they had fallen and ran desperately to quiet horses rearing, shrieking, attempting to climb out of their stalls. Loial clung to the neck of his huge mount, but Faile sat Swallow surely as the mare danced and squealed wildly.

Rand. Perrin knew it was him. The pull of *ta'veren* dragged at him, two whirlpools in a stream drawing one another. Coughing in the falling dust, he shook his head as hard as he could, straining not to dismount and run back up into the Stone. "We ride!" he shouted while tremors still shook the fortress. "We ride now, Loial! Now!"

Faile seemed to see no more point to delay; she heeled her mare out of the stable beside Loial's taller horse, their two pack animals pulled along, all galloping before they reached the Dragonwall Gate. The Defenders took one look and scattered, some still on hands and knees; it was their duty to keep people out of the Stone, and they had no orders to keep these in. Not that they would necessarily have been able to think straight enough to do so if they had had orders, not with the tremors just subsiding and the Stone still groaning above them.

Perrin was right behind with his own packhorse, wishing the Ogier's animal could run faster, wishing he could leave Loial's lumbering mount behind and outrun the suction trying to draw him back, that pull of *ta'veren* to *ta'veren*. They galloped together through the streets of Tear, toward the rising sun, barely slowing to avoid carts and carriages. Men in tight coats and women with layered aprons, still shaken by the upheaval, stared at them, dazed, sometimes barely leaping out of the way.

At the walls of the inner city paving stones gave way to dirt, shoes and coats to bare feet and bare chests above baggy breeches held up by broad sashes. The folk here dodged no less assiduously, though, for Perrin would not let Stepper slow until they had galloped past the city's outer wall, past the simple stone houses and shops that clustered outside the city proper, into a countryside of scattered farms and thickets and beyond the pull of *ta'veren*. Only then, breathing almost as hard as his lathered horse, he reined Stepper to a walk.

Loial's ears were stiff with shock. Faile licked her lips and stared from the Ogier to Perrin, white-faced. "What happened? Was that . . . him?"

"I don't know," Perrin lied. *I have to go, Rand. You know that. You looked me in the face when I told you, and said I had to do what I thought I must.*

"Where are Bain and Chiad?" Faile said. "It will take them an hour to catch up now. I wish they would ride. I offered to buy them horses, and they looked offended. Well, we need to walk the horses anyway after that, to let them cool down."

Perrin held back from telling her she did not know as much of Aiel as she thought she did. He could see the city walls behind them, and the Stone rearing above like a mountain. He could even make out the sinuous shape on the banner waving over the fortress, and the displaced birds swirling about; neither of the others could have. It was no difficulty at all to see three people running toward them in long, ground-eating strides, their flowing ease belying the pace. He did not think he could have run that fast, not for long, but the Aiel had to have maintained their speed from the Stone to be this close behind.

“We’ll not have to wait that long,” he said.

Faile frowned back toward the city. “Is that them? Are you certain?” Abruptly the frown shifted to him for a moment, daring him to answer. Asking him had been too much like admitting he was part of her party, of course. “He is very boastful of his eyesight,” she told Loial, “but his memory is not very good. At times I think he would forget to light a candle at night if I did not remind him. I expect he’s seen some poor family running from what they think is an earthquake, don’t you?”

Loial shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, sighing heavily, and muttered something about humans that Perrin doubted was complimentary. Faile did not notice, of course.

Not too many minutes later, Faile stared at Perrin as the three Aiel drew close enough for her to make out, but she said nothing. In this mood, she was not about to admit he had been right about anything, not if he said the sky was blue. The Aiel were not even breathing hard when they slowed to a halt beside the horses.

“It is too bad it was not a longer run.” Bain shared a smile with Chiad, and both gave Gaul a sly look.

“Else we could have run this Stone Dog into the ground,” Chiad said as if finishing the other woman’s sentence. “That is why Stone Dogs take their vows not to retreat. Stone bones and stone heads make them too heavy to run.”

Gaul took no offense, though Perrin noticed he stood where he could keep an eye on Chiad. “Do you know why Maidens are so often used as scouts, Perrin? Because they can run so far. And that comes from being afraid some man might want to marry them. A Maiden will run a hundred miles to avoid that.”

“Very wise of them,” Faile said tartly. “Do you need to rest?” she asked the Aiel women, and looked surprised when they denied it. She turned to Loial anyway. “Are you ready to go on? Good. Find me this Waygate, Loial. We have stayed here too long. If you let a stray puppy stay close to you, it begins to think you will take care of it, and that will never do.”

“Faile,” Loial protested, “are you not carrying this too far?”

“I will carry it as far as I must, Loial. The Waygate?”

Ears sagging, Loial puffed out a heavy breath and turned his horse eastward again. Perrin let him and Faile get a dozen paces ahead before he and Gaul followed. He must play by her rules, but he would play them at least as well as she.

The farms, cramped little places with rough stone houses Perrin would not have used to shelter animals, grew more scattered the farther east they rode, and the thickets smaller, until there were neither farms nor thickets, only a rolling, hilly grassland. Grass as far as the eye could see, unbroken except for patches of bush here and there on a hill.

Horses dotted the green slopes, too, in clumps of a dozen or herds of a hundred, the famed Tairen stock. Large or small, each gathering of horses was under the eyes of a shoeless boy or two, mounted bareback. The boys carried long-handled whips that they used to keep the horses together, or turn them, cracking the whips expertly to turn a stray without ever coming close to the animal's hide. They kept their charges clear of the strangers, moving them back if necessary, but they watched the passage of this odd company—two humans and an Ogier mounted, plus three of the fierce Aiel that stories said had taken the Stone—with the bold curiosity of the young.

It was all a pleasing sight to Perrin. He liked horses. Part of the reason he had asked to be apprenticed to Master Luhhan had been the chance to work with horses, not that there were so many as this in Emond's Field, nor so fine.

Not so Loial. The Ogier began muttering to himself, louder the farther they rode across the grassy hills, until at last he burst out in a deep bass rumble. "Gone! All gone, and for what? Grass. Once this was an Ogier grove. We did no great works here, not to compare with Manetheren, or the city you call Caemlyn, but enough that a grove was planted. Trees of every kind, from every land and place. The Great Trees, towering a hundred spans into the sky. All tended devotedly, to remind my people of the *stedding* they had left to build things for men. Men think it is the stonework we prize, but that is a trifling thing, learned during the Long Exile, after the Breaking. It is the trees we love. Men thought Manetheren my people's greatest triumph, but we knew it to be the grove there. Gone, now. Like this. Gone, and it will not come again."

Loial stared at the hills, bare save for grass and horses, with a hard face, his ears drawn back tight to his head. He smelled of . . . fury. Peaceful, most stories called Ogier, almost as pacific as the Traveling People, but some, a few, named them implacable enemies. Perrin had only seen Loial angry once before. Perhaps he had been angry last night, defending those children. Looking at Loial's face, an old saying came back to him. "To anger the Ogier and pull the mountains down on your head." Everyone took its meaning as to try to do something that was impossible. Perrin thought maybe the meaning had changed with the years. Maybe in the beginning, it had been "Anger the Ogier, and you pull the mountains down on your head." Difficult to do, but deadly if accomplished. He did not think he would ever want Loial—gentle, fumbling Loial with his broad nose always in a book—to become angry with him.

It was Loial who took the lead once they reached the site of the vanished Ogier grove, bending their path a little southward. There were no landmarks, but he was sure of his direction, surer with every pace of the horses. Ogier could feel a Waygate, sense it somehow, find it as certainly as a bee could find the hive. When Loial finally dismounted, the grass was little more than knee-high on him. There was only a thick clump of brush to be seen, taller than most, leafy shrubs as tall as the Ogier. He ripped it all away almost regretfully, stacking it to one side. "Perhaps the boys with the horses can use it for firewood when it dries."

And there was the Waygate.

Rearing against the side of the hill, it appeared more a length of gray wall than a gate, and the wall of a palace at that, thickly carved in leaves and vines so finely done that they seemed almost as alive as the bushes had been. Three thousand years at least it had stood there, but not a trace of weathering marred its surface. Those leaves could have rippled with the next breeze.

For a moment they all stared at it silently, until Loial took a deep breath and put his hand on the one leaf that was different from any other on the Waygate. The trefoil leaf of *Avendesora*, the fabled Tree of Life. Until the moment his huge hand touched it, it seemed as much a part of the carving as all the rest, but it came away easily.

Faile gasped loudly, and even the Aiel murmured. The air was full of the smell of unease; there was no saying who it came from. All of them, perhaps.

The stone leaves did seem to stir from an unfelt breeze now; they took a tinge of green, of life. Slowly a split appeared down the middle, and the halves of the Waygate opened out, revealing not the hill behind, but a dull shimmering that faintly reflected their images.

“Once, it is said,” Loial murmured, “the Waygates shone like mirrors, and those who walked the Ways walked through the sun and the sky. Gone, now. Like this grove.”

Hastily pulling one of the filled pole-lanterns from his packhorse, Perrin got it alight. “It is too hot out here,” he said. “A little shade would be good.” He booted Stepper toward the Waygate. He thought he heard Faile gasp again.

The dun stallion balked, approaching his own dim reflection, but Perrin heeled him onward. Slowly, he remembered. It should be done slowly. The horse’s nose touched its image hesitantly, then merged in as though walking into a mirror. Perrin moved closer to himself, touched. . . . Icy cold slid along his skin, enveloping him hair by hair; time stretched out.

The cold vanished like a pricked bubble, and he was in the midst of endless blackness, the light of his pole-lantern a crushed pool around him. Stepper and the packhorse whickered nervously.

Gaul stepped through calmly and began preparing another lantern. Behind him was what seemed like a sheet of smoked glass. The others were visible out there, Loial getting back on his horse, Faile gathering her reins, all of them creeping, barely moving. Time was different inside the Ways.

“Faile is upset with you,” Gaul said once he had his lantern alight. It did not add much illumination. The darkness drank in light, swallowed it. “She seems to think you have broken some sort of agreement. Bain and Chiad. . . . Do not let them get you alone. They mean to teach you a lesson, for Faile’s sake, and you will not sit on that animal so easily if they manage what they plan.”

“I agreed to nothing, Gaul. I do what she’s forced me to do through trickery. We will have to follow Loial as she wants soon enough, but I mean to take the lead for as long as I can.” He pointed to a thick white line under Stepper’s hooves. Broken and heavily pitted, it led off ahead, vanishing in the blackness only a few feet away. “That leads to the first guidepost. We will need to wait there for Loial to read it and decide which bridge to take, but Faile can follow us that far.”

“Bridge,” Gaul murmured thoughtfully. “I know that word. There is water in here?”

“No. It isn’t exactly that kind of bridge. They look the same, sort of, but. . . . Maybe Loial can explain it.”

The Aielman scratched his head. “Do you know what you are doing, Perrin?”

“No,” Perrin admitted, “but there’s no reason for Faile to know that.”

Gaul laughed. “It is fun to be so young, is it not, Perrin?”

Frowning, uncertain whether the man was laughing at him, Perrin heeled Stepper on, drawing the packhorse behind. The lantern light would not be visible at all in here twenty or thirty paces from its edge. He wanted to be completely out of sight before Faile came through. Let her think he had decided to go on without her. If she worried for a few minutes, until she found him at the guidepost, it was the least she deserved.

* * *

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CHAPTER 19

The Wavedancer

With the golden sun barely over the horizon, the shiny black-lacquered carriage rocked to a halt at the foot of the wharf behind a team of four matched grays, and the lanky dark-haired driver in his black-and-gold striped coat leaped down to open the door. No sigil adorned the door panel, of course; Tairen nobles gave aid to Aes Sedai only under duress, no matter how effusive the smiles, and none wanted their names or houses linked to the Tower.

Elayne got down gratefully without waiting for Nynaeve, straightening her blue linen summer traveling cloak; the streets of the Maule were rutted by carts and wagons, and the carriage's leather springs had not been very good. A breeze slanting across the Erinin actually seemed cool after the heat of the Stone. She had intended to show no effects of the rough ride, but once upright she could not help knuckling the small of her back. *At least last night's rain still holds the dust down*, she thought. She suspected that they had been given a carriage without curtains on purpose.

North and south of her, more docks like wide stone fingers stretched into the river. The air smelled of tar and rope, fish and spices and olive oil, of nameless things rotting in the stagnant water between the piers and peculiar long yellow-green fruits in huge bunches heaped in front of the stone warehouse behind her. Despite the early hour, men wearing leather vests on shirtless shoulders scurried about, toting large bundles on bent backs or pushing handcarts piled with barrels or crates. None spared her more than a passing sullen glance, dark eyes falling quickly, forelock touched grudgingly; most did not raise their heads at all. She was sad to see it.

These Tairen nobles had handled their people badly. Mishandled them was more like it. In Andor she could have expected cheerful smiles and a respectful word of greeting, freely given by straight-backed men who knew their worth as well as hers. It was almost enough to make her regret leaving. She had been raised to lead and one day govern a proud people, and she felt the urge to teach these folk dignity. But that was Rand's job, not hers. *And if he doesn't do it properly, I* will *give him a piece of my mind. A bigger piece*. At least he had begun, by following her advice. And she had to admit he knew how to treat his people. It would be interesting to see what he had done by the time she returned. *If there's a point to coming back.*

A dozen ships were clearly visible from where she stood, and more beyond, but one, moored across the end of the dock she faced, sharp bow upriver, filled her eyes. The Sea Folk raker was easily a hundred paces long, half again as large as the next vessel in sight, with three great towering masts amidships, and one shorter on the raised deck at the stern. She had been on ships before, but never one so big, and never on one going to sea. Just the name of the ship's owners spoke of distant lands and strange ports. The Atha'an Miere. The Sea Folk. Stories meant to be exotic always contained the Sea Folk, unless they were about the Aiel.

Nynaeve climbed out of the carriage behind her, tying a green traveling cloak at her neck and grumbling to herself and to the driver. "Tumbled about like a hen in a windstorm! Thumped like a dusty rug! How did you manage to find every last rut and hole between here and the Stone, goodman? That took true skill. A pity none of it goes into handling horses." He tried to hand her down, his narrow face sullen, but she refused his aid.

Sighing, Elayne doubled the number of silver pennies she was taking from her purse. "Thank you for bringing us safely and swiftly." She smiled as she pressed the coins into his hand. "We told you to go fast, and you did as we asked. The streets are not your fault, and you did an excellent job under poor conditions."

Without looking at the coins, the fellow gave her a deep bow, a grateful look, and a murmured "Thank you, my Lady," as much for the words as the money, she was sure. She had found that a kind word and a little praise were usually received as well as silver was, if not better. Though the silver itself was seldom unappreciated, to be sure.

"The Light send you a safe journey, my Lady," he added. The merest flicker of his eyes toward Nynaeve said that wish was for Elayne alone. Nynaeve had to learn how to make allowances and give consideration; truly she did.

When the driver had handed their bundles and belongings out of the carriage, turned his team and started away, Nynaeve said grudgingly, “I shouldn’t have snapped at the man, I suppose. A bird could not make an easy way over those streets. Not in a carriage, at any rate. But after bouncing about all the way here, I feel as if I’d been on horseback a week.”

“It isn’t his fault you have a sore . . . back,” Elayne said, with a smile to take away any sting, as she took up her things.

Nynaeve barked a wry laugh. “I said that, didn’t I? You will not expect me to go running after him to apologize, I hope. That handful of silver you gave him should soothe any wounds short of mortal. You really must learn to be more careful with money, Elayne. We do not have the Realm of Andor’s resources for our own use. A family could live comfortably for a month on what you hand out to everyone who does the work they’ve been paid to do for you.” Elayne gave her a quietly indignant look—Nynaeve always seemed to think they should live worse than servants unless there was reason not to, instead of the other way around, as made sense—but the older woman did not appear to notice the expression that always put Royal Guardsmen on their toes. Instead, Nynaeve hoisted her bundles and sturdy cloth bags and turned down the dock. “At least this ship will be a smoother ride than that. I do hope smooth. Shall we go aboard?”

As they picked their way down the pier, between working men and stacked barrels and carts full of goods, Elayne said, “Nynaeve, the Sea Folk can be touchy until they know you, or so I was taught. Do you think you might try to be a little . . . ?”

“A little what?”

“Tactful, Nynaeve.” Elayne skipped a step as someone spat on the dock in front of her. There was no telling which fellow had done it; when she looked around they all had their heads down and were hard at work. Mishandling by the High Lords or no, she would have said a few quietly sharp words that the culprit would not have soon forgotten if she could have found him. “You might try to be a little tactful for once.”

“Of course.” Nynaeve started up the raker’s rope-railed gangway. “As long as they do not bounce me about.”

Elayne’s first thought on reaching the deck was that the raker appeared very narrow for its length; she did not know a great deal about ships, in truth, but to her it seemed a huge splinter. *Oh, Light, this thing will toss worse than the carriage, however big it is.* Her second was for the crew.

She had heard stories about the Atha’an Miere, but had never seen one before. Even the stories told little, really. A secretive people who kept to themselves, almost as mysterious as the Aiel. Only the lands beyond the Waste could possibly be more strange, and all anyone knew of them was that the Sea Folk brought ivory and silk from there.

These Atha’an Miere were dark, barefoot and bare-chested men, all cleanly shaven, with straight black hair and tattooed hands, moving with the sureness of those who knew their tasks well enough to do them with half a mind but were putting their whole minds to it. There was a rolling grace to their movements, as though, with the ship still, they yet felt the motions of the sea. Most wore gold or silver chains around their necks, and rings in their ears, sometimes two or three in each, and some with polished stones.

There were women among the crew, too, as many as the men, hauling ropes and coiling lines right with the men, with the same tattooed hands, in the same baggy breeches of some dark, oiled cloth, held by colorful narrow sashes and hanging open at the ankle. But the women wore loose colorful blouses, too, all brilliant reds and blues and greens, and they had at least as many chains and earrings as the men. Including, Elayne noticed with a small shock, two or three women with rings in one side of their noses.

The grace of the women outshone even that of the men, and put Elayne in mind of some stories she had heard as a child by listening where she was not supposed to. Women of the Atha’an Miere were, in those tales, the epitome of alluring beauty and temptation, pursued by all men. The women on this ship were no more beautiful than any others, really, but watching them move, she could believe those tales.

Two of the women, on the raised deck at the stern, were obviously not ordinary crew. They were barefoot, too, and their garb of the same cut, but one was clothed entirely in brocaded blue silks, the other in green. The older of the pair, the one in green, wore four small gold rings in each ear and one in the left side of her nose, all worked so they sparkled in the morning sunlight. A fine chain ran from her tiny nose ring to one earring, supporting a row of tiny dangling gold medallions, and one of the chains around her neck held a pierced golden box, like ornate gold lace, that she lifted to sniff from time to time. The other woman, the taller, had only six earrings in total, and fewer medallions. The pierced box she sniffed at was just as finely wrought gold, though. Exotic, indeed. Elayne winced just thinking about the nose rings. And that chain!

Something odd about the sterndeck itself caught her eye, but at first she could not tell what. Then she saw. There was no tiller for the rudder. Some sort of spoked wheel stood behind the women, lashed down so it could not turn, but no tiller. *How do they steer?* The smallest riverboat she had seen had had a tiller. There had been tillers on all the others ships lining the nearby docks. More and more mysterious, these Sea Folk.

"Remember what Moiraine told you," she cautioned as they approached the sterndeck. That had not been much; even Aes Sedai knew little about the Atha'an Miere. Moiraine had imparted the proper phrasings, though; the things that had to be said for good manners. "And remember tact," she added in a firm whisper.

"I will remember," Nynaeve replied sharply. "I can be tactful." Elayne truly hoped she would.

The two Sea Folk women waited for them at the top of the stairs—ladder, Elayne remembered, even when they were stairs. She did not understand why ships had to have different names for common things. A floor was a floor, in a barn or an inn or a palace. Why not on a ship? A cloud of perfume surrounded the two, a slightly musky scent, wafting from the lacy gold boxes. The tattoos on their hands were stars and seabirds surrounded by the curls and whirls of stylized waves.

Nynaeve inclined her head. "I am Nynaeve al'Meara, Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. I seek the Sailmistress of this vessel, and passage, if it pleases the Light. This is my companion and friend, Elayne Trakand, also Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. The Light illumine you and your vessel, and send the winds to speed you." That was almost exactly the way Moiraine had instructed them to speak. Not about Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah—Moiraine had seemed resigned to that more than anything else, and amused at their choice of ajah—but the rest.

The older woman, with gray touches in her black hair and fine wrinkles at the corners of her large brown eyes, inclined her head just as formally. Nevertheless, she seemed to be taking them in from head to foot, especially the Great Serpent ring each wore on her right hand. "I am Coine din Jubai Wild Winds, Sailmistress of *Wavedancer*. This is Jorin din Jubai White Wing, my sister of the blood and Windfinder of *Wavedancer*. There may be passage available, if it pleases the Light. The Light illumine you, and see you safe to your journey's end."

It was a surprise that the two were sisters. Elayne could see the resemblance, but Jorin looked much younger. She wished the Windfinder were the one they had to deal with; both women had the same reserve, but something about the Windfinder reminded her of Aviendha. It was absurd, of course. These women were no taller than she herself, their coloring could not have been more different from the Aiel woman's, and the only weapon either had in sight was the stout knife tucked in her sash, looking very workmanlike despite carvings and gold-wire inlays on the handle. But Elayne could not help feeling some similarity, between Jorin and Aviendha, anyway.

"Let us talk then, Sailmistress, if it pleases you," Nynaeve said, following Moiraine's formula, "of sailings and ports, and the gift of passage." The Sea Folk did not charge for passage, according to Moiraine; it was a gift, which just coincidentally would be exchanged for a gift of equal value.

Coine glanced away, then, astern toward the Stone and the white banner rippling over it. "We will talk in my cabin, Aes Sedai, if it pleases you." She motioned toward an open hatch behind that strange wheel. "The welcome of my ship to you, and the grace of the Light be upon you until you leave his decks."

Another narrow ladder—staircase—led down into a neat room, larger and taller than Elayne had expected from her experiences on smaller vessels, with windows across the stern and gimbaled lamps on the walls. Almost everything seemed to have been built into the room except for a few lacquered chests of various sizes. The bed was large and low, right under the sternwindows, and a narrow table surrounded by armchairs stood across the middle of the room.

There was very little clutter. Rolled charts lay on the table, a few ivory carvings of strange animals stood on railed shelves, and half a dozen bare-bladed swords of different shapes, some that Elayne had never seen before, rested on hooks on the walls. An oddly worked square brass gong hung from a beam over the bed, while right before the sternwindows, as if in a place of honor, a helmet sat on a featureless wooden head carved for the purpose, a helmet like the head of some monstrous insect, lacquered in red and green, with a narrow white plume to either side, one broken.

The helmet Elayne recognized. "Seanchan," she gasped before thinking. Nynaeve gave her a vexed look, and deservedly; they had agreed it would make more sense, and ring more true, if Nynaeve, as the older, took the lead and did most of the talking.

Coine and Jorin exchanged unreadable glances. “You know of them?” the Sailmistress said. “Of course. One must expect Aes Sedai to know these things. This far east we hear a score of stories, the truest less than half-true.”

Elayne knew she should leave it at that, but curiosity tickled her tongue. “How did you come by the helmet? If I may ask.”

“*Wavedancer* encountered a Seanchan ship last year,” Coine replied. “They wished to take him, but I did not wish to give him up.” She shrugged slightly. “I have the helmet to remind me, and the sea took the Seanchan, the Light be merciful to all who sail. I will not go close to a vessel with ribbed sails again.”

“You were lucky,” Nynaeve said curtly. “The Seanchan hold captive women who can channel, and make them channel as a weapon. If they had had one on that ship, you would be regretting ever having seen it.”

Elayne grimaced at her, though it was too late. She could not tell whether the Sea Folk women were offended by Nynaeve’s tone. The pair kept the same neutral expressions, but Elayne was beginning to realize they did not show very much on their faces, not to strangers, anyway.

“Let us speak of passage,” Coine said. “If it pleases the Light, we may call where you wish to go. All things are possible, in the Light. Let us sit.”

The chairs around the table did not slide back; they and the table were fastened to the floor—deck. Instead the arms swung out like gates and latched in place once you had sat. The arrangement seemed to bear out Elayne’s dire predictions of heaving and pitching. She did very well with it herself, of course, but too much rolling on a riverboat set Nynaeve’s stomach jumping. It must be worse on the ocean than on a river, however fierce the wind, and the worse Nynaeve’s stomach, the worse her temper. Nynaeve sicking up and in a bad choler at the same time: there were few things more dreadful, in Elayne’s experience.

She and Nynaeve were placed together on one side of the table, with the Sailmistress and the Windfinder at the ends. At first it seemed strange, until she realized they would both look at whichever of the two was talking, allowing the other to watch them unobserved. *Do they always deal with passengers this way, or is it because we’re Aes Sedai? Well, because they* *think we are.* It was a caution that everything might not be as simple as they hoped with these people. She hoped Nynaeve was taking notice.

Elayne had not seen any order passed, but a slender young woman with only one ring in each ear appeared, bearing a tray with a square white brass-handled teapot and large handleless cups, not of Sea Folk porcelain as might have been expected, but thick pottery. Less likely to be broken in heavy weather, she decided bleakly. It was the young woman who took her attention, though, and nearly brought a gasp. She was bare to the waist, just like the men above. Elayne hid her shock very well, she thought, but Nynaeve sniffed loudly.

The Sailmistress waited until the girl had poured tea brewed to blackness, then said, “Have we sailed, Dorele, when I did not see? Is there no land in sight?”

The slender woman blushed furiously. “There is land, Sailmistress.” It was a miserable whisper.

Coine nodded. “Until there is no land in sight, and has been none for one full day, you will work at cleaning the bilges, where garments are a hindrance. You may leave.”

“Yes, Sailmistress,” the girl said, even more woefully. She turned away, undoing her red sash dejectedly as she went through the door at the far end of the room.

“Share this tea, if it please you,” the Sailmistress said, “that we may talk in peace.” She sipped at her own and continued while Elayne and Nynaeve were tasting theirs. “I ask that you forgive any offense, Aes Sedai. This is Dorele’s first voyage except between the islands. The young often forget the ways of the shorebound. I will punish her further, if you are affronted.”

“There is no need,” Elayne said hastily, taking the excuse to set her cup down. The tea was even stronger than it looked, very hot, unsweetened and quite bitter. “Truly, we were not offended. There are different ways among different peoples.” *The Light send not too many more as different as that! Light, what if they don’t wear any clothes at all once they get out to sea? Light!* “Only a fool takes offense at customs different from her own.”

Nynaeve gave her a level look, bland enough for the Aes Sedai they were pretending to be, and took a deep swallow from her cup. All she said was “Please think no more of it.” It was not possible to tell if she meant it for Elayne or the Sea Folk women.

“Then we will speak of passage, if it pleases you,” Coine said. “To what port do you wish to sail?”

“Tanchico,” Nynaeve said, a bit more briskly than she should have. “I know you may not mean to sail there, but we need to go quickly, as quickly as only a raker can, and without stopping, if that is possible. I offer this small gift, for the inconvenience.” She took a paper from her belt pouch and unfolded it, pushing it down the table to the Sailmistress.

Moiraine had given that to them, and another like it, letters-of-rights. Each allowed the bearer to draw up to three thousand gold crowns from bankers and moneylenders in various cities, though it was not likely any of those men and women knew it was White Tower money they held. Elayne had goggled at the amount—Nynaeve had gaped openly—but Moiraine said it might be needed to make the Sailmistress forsake her intended ports of call.

Coine touched the letter-of-rights with one finger, read. “A vast sum for the gift of passage,” she murmured, “even counting that you ask me to alter my sailing plans. I am more surprised now than before. You know that we very seldom carry Aes Sedai on our ships. Very seldom. Of all who ask passage, only Aes Sedai may be refused, and almost always are, as from the first day of the first sailing. Aes Sedai know this, and so almost never ask.” She was looking into her teacup, not at them, but Elayne glanced the other way and caught the Windfinder studying their hands lying on the table. No, their rings.

Moiraine had not said anything about this. She had pointed out the raker as the swiftest ship available and encouraged them to make use of it. Then again, she had given them these letters-of-rights, very likely sufficient to buy a fleet of ships like this one. Well, several ships, at the least. *Because she knew it would take that much to bribe them to carry us?* But why had she kept secrets? A foolish question; Moiraine always kept secrets. But why waste their time?

“Do you mean to refuse us passage?” Nynaeve had abandoned tact for bluntness. “If you do not carry Aes Sedai, why did you bring us down here? Why not tell us up above and be done with it?”

The Sailmistress unlatched one arm of her chair, rose and went to peer out of the sternwindows at the Stone. Her earrings and the medallions across her left cheek glittered in the light of the rising sun. “He can wield the One Power, so I have heard, and he holds the Sword That Cannot Be

Touched. The Aiel have come over the Dragonwall to his call; I have seen several in the streets, and it is said they fill the Stone. The Stone of Tear has fallen, and war breaks over the nations of the land. Those who once ruled have returned, and been driven back for the first time. Prophecy is being fulfilled."

Nynaeve looked as confounded as Elayne felt at this change of subject. "The Prophecies of the Dragon?" Elayne said after a moment. "Yes, they are being fulfilled. He is the Dragon Reborn, Sailmistress." *He's a stubborn man who hides his feelings so deeply I cannot find them, that is what he is!*

Coine turned. "Not the Prophecies of the Dragon, Aes Sedai. The Jendai Prophecy, the prophecy of the Coramoor. Not the one you wait for and dread; the one we seek, herald of a new Age. At the Breaking of the World our ancestors fled to the safety of the sea while the land heaved and broke as storm waves do. It is said they knew nothing of the ships they took to flee, but the Light was with them, and they survived. They did not see the land again until it was still once more, and by then, much had changed. All—everything—the world—drifted on the water and the wind. It was in the years after that the Jendai Prophecy was first spoken. We must wander the waters until the Coramoor returns, and serve him at his coming:

"We are bound to the sea; the salt water courses in our veins. Most of us set no foot on the land except to await another ship, another sailing. Strong men weep when they must serve ashore. Women ashore go onto a ship to bear their children—into a rowboat if no more is at hand—for we must be born on the water, as we must die on it, and be given to it in death.

"The Prophecy is being fulfilled. He is the Coramoor. Aes Sedai serve him. You are proof of that, that you are here in this city. That is in the Prophecy as well. 'The White Tower shall be broken by his name, and Aes Sedai shall kneel to wash his feet and dry them with their hair.' "

"You will have a long wait if you expect to see me wash any man's feet," Nynaeve said wryly. "What does this have to do with our passage? Will you take us, or not?"

Elayne cringed, but the Sailmistress came back just as directly. "Why do you wish to journey to Tanchico? It is an unpleasant port of call now. I docked there last winter. Shorefolk nearly swarmed my vessel seeking passage out, to anywhere. They did not care, so long as it was away from Tanchico. I cannot believe conditions are any better now."

“Do you always question your passengers so?” Nynaeve said. “I’ve offered you enough to buy a village. Two villages! If you want more, name your price.”

“Not a price,” Elayne hissed in her ear. “A gift!”

If Coine was offended, or even had heard, she gave no sign. “Why?”

Nynaeve took a tight grip on her braid, but Elayne laid a hand on her arm. They had planned to keep a few secrets themselves, but surely they had learned enough since sitting down to alter any plan. There was a time for secrecy and a time for truth. “We hunt the Black Ajah, Sailmistress. We believe some of them are in Tanchico.” She met Nynaeve’s angry stare calmly. “We must find them, else they may harm . . . the Dragon Reborn. The Coramoor.”

“The Light see us safe to docking,” the Windfinder breathed. It was the first time she had spoken, and Elayne stared at her in surprise. Jorin was frowning, and not looking at anyone, but she spoke to the Sailmistress. “We can take them, my sister. We must.” Coine nodded.

Elayne exchanged looks with Nynaeve and saw her own questions mirrored in the other woman’s eyes. Why was it the Windfinder who decided? Why not the Sailmistress? She was the captain, whatever her title. At least they were going to get passage after all. *For how much?* Elayne wondered. *How large a ‘gift’?* She wished Nynaeve had not revealed that they had more than was in that one letter-of-rights. *And she accuses me of tossing gold about.*

The door opened and a heavy-shouldered gray-haired man in loose green silk breeches and sash came in, ruffling through a sheaf of papers. Four gold rings decorated each ear, and three heavy gold chains hung at his neck, including one with a perfume box. A long puckered scar down his cheek, and two curved knives tucked in his sash, gave him something of a dangerous air. He was fastening a peculiar wire framework over his ears to hold clear lenses in front of his eyes. The Sea Folk made the best looking glasses and burning lenses and the like, of course, somewhere on their islands, but Elayne had never seen anything like this device. He peered through the lenses at the papers and began talking without looking up.

“Coine, this fool is willing to trade me five hundred snowfox pelts from Kandor for those three small barrels of Two Rivers tabac I got in Ebou Dar. Five hundred! He can have them here by midday.” His eyes rose, and he gave a start. “Forgive me, my wife. I did not know you had guests. The Light be with you all.”

“By midday, my husband,” Coine said, “I will be falling downriver. By nightfall I will be at sea.”

He stiffened. “Am I still Cargomaster, wife, or has my place been taken while I did not see?”

“You are Cargomaster, husband, but the trading must stop now and preparations begin for getting under way. We sail for Tanchico.”

“Tanchico!” The papers crumpled in his fist, and he brought himself under control with an effort. “Wife—No! Sailmistress, you told me our next port was Mayene, and then eastward to Shara. I have traded with that in mind. Shara, Sailmistress, not Tarabon. What I have in my holds will bring little in Tanchico. Perhaps nothing! May I ask why my trade is to be ruined and *Wavedancer* impoverished?”

Coine hesitated, but when she spoke her voice was still formal. “I am Sailmistress, my husband. *Wavedancer* sails when and where I say. It must be enough, for now.”

“As you say, Sailmistress,” he rasped, “so it is.” He touched his heart—Elayne thought Coine flinched—and padded out with his back stiff as one of the ship’s masts.

“I must make this up to him,” Coine murmured softly, staring at the door. “Of course, it is pleasant making up with him. Usually. He saluted me like a deckboy, sister.”

“We regret being a cause of trouble, Sailmistress,” Elayne said carefully. “And we regret having witnessed this. If we have caused any embarrassment, to anyone, please accept our apologies.”

“Embarrassment?” Coine sounded startled. “Aes Sedai, I am Sailmistress. I doubt your presence embarrassed Toram, and I would not apologize to him for that if it did. Trade is his, but I am Sailmistress. I must make up to him—and it will not be easy, since I must keep the reason secret still—because he is right, and I could not think quickly enough to give him a reason beyond what I would give a raw hand. That scar on his face he earned clearing the Seanchan from *Wavedancer*’s decks. He has older scars earned defending my ship, and I have only to put out my hand to have gold placed in it because of his trading. It is the things I cannot tell him I must make up to him, because he deserves to know.”

"I do not understand," Nynaeve said. "We would ask you to keep the Black Ajah secret . . ."—she shot a hard look at Elayne, one that promised hard words once they were alone; Elayne intended a few words of her own, about the meaning of tact—". . . but surely three thousand crowns is reason enough to take us to Tanchico."

"I must keep you secret, Aes Sedai. What you are, and why you travel. Many among my crew consider Aes Sedai bad luck. If they knew they not only carried Aes Sedai, but toward a port where other Aes Sedai may serve the Father of Storms. . . . The grace of the Light shone on us that none was close enough to hear me call you so above. Will it offend if I ask you to keep below as much as possible, and not to wear your rings when on deck?"

For answer, Nynaeve plucked her Great Serpent ring off and dropped it into her pouch. Elayne did the same, a bit more reluctantly; she rather enjoyed having people see her ring. Not quite trusting Nynaeve's remaining store of diplomacy at this point, she spoke up before the other woman could. "Sailmistress, we have offered you a gift of passage, if it pleases you. If it does not, may I ask what would?"

Coine came back to the table to look at the letter-of-rights again, then pushed it back to Nynaeve. "I do this for the Coramoor. I will see you safe ashore where you wish, if it pleases the Light. It shall be done." She touched the fingers of her right hand to her lips. "It is agreed, under the Light."

Jorin made a strangled sound. "My sister, has a Cargomaster ever mutinied against his Sailmistress?"

Coine gave her a flat-eyed stare. "I will put in the gift of passage from my own chest. And if Toram ever hears of it, my sister, I will put you in the bilges with Dorele. For ballast, perhaps."

That the two Sea Folk women had dropped formality was confirmed when the Windfinder laughed aloud. "And then your next port would be in Chachin, my sister, or Caemlyn, for you could not find the water without me."

The Sailmistress addressed Elayne and Nynaeve regretfully. "Properly, Aes Sedai, since you serve the Coramoor, I should honor you as I would Sailmistress and Windfinder of another ship. We should bathe together and drink honeyed wine and tell each other stories to make ourselves laugh and weep. But I must make ready to sail, and—"

Wavedancer rose like his name, leaping, pounding against the dock. Elayne whipped back and forth in her chair, wondering as it continued whether this was really better than being thrown to the deck.

Then, finally, it was over, the leaps slowing, growing smaller. Coine scrambled to her feet and raced for the ladder, Jorin at her heels, already shouting orders to look for damage to the hull.

* * *

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CHAPTER 20

Winds Rising

Elayne struggled to open the latch on an arm of her chair and darted after them, almost colliding with Nynaeve at the ladder. The ship still rocked, if not as violently as before. Uncertain whether they were sinking, she pushed Nynaeve ahead of her, prodding her to climb faster.

On the deck the crew dashed about, checking the rigging or peering over the side to inspect the hull, shouting about earthquakes. The same shouts were rising from the dockmen, too, but Elayne knew better, despite the tumbled things on the piers and the ships yet pitching at their moorings.

She stared toward the Stone. The huge fortress was still except for masses of startled birds swirling about and that pale banner waving, almost lazily, in an isolated breeze. No sign that anything had ever touched the mountainous mass. That had been Rand, though. She was sure of it.

She turned to find Nynaeve looking at her, and for a long moment their eyes met. “A fine pickling, if he’s damaged the ship,” Elayne said finally. “How are we supposed to get to Tanchico if he goes tossing all the ships about?” *Light, he has to be all right. I can do nothing if he isn’t. He is all right. He is.*

Nynaeve touched her arm reassuringly. “No doubt that second letter of yours touched a nerve. Men always overreact when they let their emotions go; it’s the price for holding them in the way they do. He may be the Dragon Reborn, but he must learn, man to woman, that—What are *they* doing here?”

“They” were two men standing amid the bustling Sea Folk on the deck. One was Thom Merrilin, in his gleeman’s cloak, with leather-cased harp and flute on his back and a bundle lying at his feet beside a battered wooden box with a lock. The other was a lean handsome Tairen in his middle years, a hard, dark man wearing a flat conical straw hat and one of those commoner’s coats that fit snugly to the waist, then flared like a short skirt. A notched sword-breaker hung at a belt worn over his coat, and he leaned on a pale staff of nobbly, jointed wood exactly his own height and no thicker than his thumb. A square-tied parcel dangled by a loop from his shoulder. Elayne knew him: his name was Juilin Sandar.

It was obvious the two men were strangers despite standing almost side by side; they held themselves with stiff reticence. Their attentions were directed the same way, though, split between following the Sailmistress's progress toward the stern-deck and peering at Elayne and Nynaeve, plainly uncertain and masking it behind a brisk show of confidence. Thom grinned and stroked his long white mustaches and nodded every time he looked up at the two of them; Sandar made solemn, self-assured bows.

"He is not damaged," Coine said, climbing the ladder. "I can sail within the hour, if it pleases you. Well within, if a Tairen pilot can be found. I will sail without him, if not, though it means never returning to Tear." She followed their gaze to the two men. "They ask passage, the gleeman to Tanchico, and the thief-catcher to wherever you travel. I cannot refuse them, and yet. . . ." Her dark eyes came back to Elayne and Nynaeve. "I will do so, if you ask it." Reluctance to break custom battled in her voice with. . . . Desire to help them? To serve the Coramoor? "The thief-catcher is a good man, even considering that he is shorebound. No offense to you, under the Light. The gleeman I do not know, yet a gleeman can enliven a voyage and lighten tired hours."

"You know Master Sandar?" Nynaeve said.

"Twice he has found those who pilfered from us, and found them quickly. Another shoreman would have taken longer so he might ask more for the work. It is obvious that you know him, as well. Do you wish me to refuse passage?" Her reluctance was still there.

"Let us see why they are here first," Nynaeve said in a flat voice that did not bode well for either man.

"Perhaps I should do the talking," Elayne suggested, gently but firmly. "That way, you can watch to see if they are hiding anything." She did not say that that way Nynaeve's temper would not get the better of her, but the wry smile the other woman gave her said she had heard it anyway.

"Very well, Elayne. I will watch them. Perhaps you might study how I keep calm. You know how you are when you become overwrought."

Elayne had to laugh.

The two men straightened as she and Nynaeve approached. Around them the crew bustled, swarming into the rigging, hauling ropes, lashing some things down and unlashing others, to orders relayed from the Sailmistress. They moved around the four shorepeople with barely a glance.

Elayne frowned at Thom Merrilin thoughtfully. She was sure she had never seen the gleeman before his appearance in the Stone, yet even then she had been struck by something familiar about him. Not that that was likely. Gleemen were village performers, in the main; her mother had certainly never had one at the palace in Caemlyn. The only gleemen Elayne could remember seeing had been in the villages near her mother's country estates, and this white-haired hawk of a man had surely never been there.

She decided to speak to the thief-catcher first. He insisted on that, she remembered; what was a thief-taker elsewhere was a thief-catcher in Tear, and the distinction seemed important to him.

"Master Sandar," she said gravely. "You may not remember us. I am Elayne Trakand, and this is my friend, Nynaeve al'Meara. I understand that you wish to travel to the same destination as we. Might I ask why? The last time we saw you, you had not served us very well."

The man did not blink at the suggestion he might not remember them. His eyes flickered across their hands, noting the absence of rings. Those dark eyes noted everything, and recorded it indelibly. "I do remember, Mistress Trakand, and well. But, if you will forgive me, the *last* time I served you was in the company of Mat Cauthon, when we pulled you both out of the water before the silverpike could get you."

Nynaeve harrumphed, but not loudly. It had been a cell, not the water, and the Black Ajah, not silverpike. Nynaeve in particular did not like being reminded that they had needed help that time. Of course, they would not have been in that cell without Juilin Sandar. No, that was not entirely fair. True, but not completely fair.

"That is all very well," Elayne said briskly, "but you still haven't said why you want to go to Tanchico."

He drew a deep breath and eyed Nynaeve warily. Elayne was not sure that she liked him being more careful of the other woman than of her. "I was rousted out of my house no more than half an hour gone," he said carefully, "by a man you know, I think. A tall, stone-faced man calling himself Lan." Nynaeve's eyebrows rose slightly. "He came on behalf of another man you know. A . . . shepherd, I was told. I was given a great quantity of gold and told to accompany you. Both of you. I was told that if you do not return safely from this journey. . . . Shall we just say it would be better to drown myself than come back? Lan was emphatic, and the . . . shepherd no less so in his message. The Sailmistress tells me I cannot have passage unless you agree. I am not without certain skills that can be useful." The staff whirled in his hands, a whistling blur, and was still. His fingers touched the sword-breaker on his hip, like a short sword but unsharpened, its slots meant to catch a blade.

"Men will find ways to get 'round what you tell them to do," Nynaeve murmured, sounding not unpleased.

Elayne only frowned vexedly. Rand had sent him? He must not have read the second letter before he did. *Burn him! Why does he leap about so? No time to send another letter, and it would probably only confuse him more if I did. And make me look a bigger fool. Burn him!*

"And you, Master Merrilin?" Nynaeve said. "Did the shepherd send a gleeman after us, too? Or the other man? To keep us amused with your juggling and fire-eating, perhaps."

Thom had been scrutinizing Sandar closely, but he shifted his attentions smoothly and made an elegant bow, only spoiling it with a too-elaborate flourish of that patch-covered cloak. "Not the shepherd, Mistress al'Meara. A lady of our mutual acquaintance asked—*asked*—me to accompany you. The lady who found you and the shepherd in Emond's Field."

"Why?" Nynaeve said suspiciously.

"I, too, have useful skills," Thom told her with a glance at the thief-catcher. "Other than juggling, that is. And I have been to Tanchico several times. I know the city well. I can tell you where to find a good inn, and what districts are dangerous in daylight as well as after dark, and who must be bribed so the Civil Watch does not take too close an interest in your doings. They are keen on watching outlanders. I can help you with a good many things."

That familiarity tickled at Elayne's mind again. Before she realized what she was doing, she reached up and tugged at one of his long white mustaches. He gave a start, and she clapped both hands to her mouth, flushing crimson. "Forgive me. I . . . I seemed to remember doing that before. I mean. . . . I *am* sorry." *Light, why did I do that? He must think me an imbecile.*

“I . . . would remember,” he said, very stiffly.

She hoped he was not affronted. It was hard to tell from his expression. Men could be offended when they should be amused, and amused when they should be offended. If they were going to be traveling together. . . . That was the first time she realized that she had decided they could come. “Nynaeve?” she said.

The other woman understood the unspoken question, of course. She studied the two men thoroughly, then nodded. “They may come. As long as they agree to do as they are told. I’ll not have some wool-brained man going his own way and endangering us.”

“As you command, Mistress al’Meara,” Sandar said immediately, with a bow, but Thom said, “A gleeman is a free soul, Nynaeve, but I can promise I will not endanger you. Far from it.”

“As you are told,” Nynaeve said pointedly. “Your word on it, or you will watch this ship sail from the dock.”

“The Atha’an Miere do not refuse passage to anyone, Nynaeve.”

“Do you think not? Was the thief-taker”—Sandar winced—“the only one told he needed our permission? As you are told, *Master* Merrilin.”

Thom tossed his white head like a fractious horse and breathed heavily, but finally he nodded. “My word on it, *Mistress* al’Meara.”

“Very well then,” Nynaeve said in a bracing voice. “It is settled. You two find the Sailmistress now, and tell her I said to find the pair of you a cubbyhole somewhere if she can, out of our way. Off with you, now. Quickly.”

Sandar bowed again and left; Thom quivered visibly before joining him, stiff-backed.

“Are you not being too hard on them?” Elayne said as soon as they were out of earshot. That was not far, with all the hurly-burly on deck. “We do have to travel together, after all. ‘Smooth words make smooth companions.’ ”

“Best to begin as we mean to go on. Elayne, Thom Merrilin knows very well we are not full Aes Sedai.” She lowered her voice and glanced around as she said it. None of the crew was even looking at them, except for the Sailmistress, back near the sterndeck where she was listening to the tall gleeman and the thief-catcher. “Men talk—they always do—so Sandar will know it soon enough, as well. They’d present no trouble to Aes Sedai, but two Accepted . . . ? Given half a chance, they would both be doing things they thought for the best no matter what we said. I do not mean to give them even that half-chance."

"Perhaps you are right. Do you think they know why we are going to Tanchico?"

Nynaeve sniffed. "No, or they'd not be so sanguine, I think. And I would rather not tell them until we must." She gave Elayne a meaningful look; there was no need for her to say she would not have told the Sailmistress, either, had it been left to her. "Here is a saying for you. 'Borrow trouble, and you repay tenfold.' "

"You speak as if you don't trust them, Nynaeve." She would have said the other woman was behaving like Moiraine, but Nynaeve would not appreciate the comparison.

"Can we? Juilin Sandar betrayed us once before. Yes, yes, I know no man could have avoided it, but there it is just the same. And Liandrin and the others know his face. We will have to put him in different clothes. Perhaps make him let his hair grow longer. Perhaps a mustache, like that thing infesting the gleeman's face. It might do."

"And Thom Merrilin?" Elayne asked. "I think we can trust him. I don't know why, but I do."

"He admitted being sent by Moiraine," Nynaeve said wearily. "What has he not admitted, though? What did she tell him that he hasn't told us? Is he meant to help us, or something else? Moiraine plays her own game so often, I trust her this much more than I do Liandrin." She held her thumb and forefinger half an inch apart. "She will use us—you and me both—use us up, if it helps Rand. Or rather, if it helps whatever she has planned for Rand. She would leash him for a lapdog if she could."

"Moiraine knows what has to be done, Nynaeve." For once she was reluctant to admit that. What Moiraine knew had to be done might well speed Rand on his way toward Tarmon Gai'don that much faster. On his way toward death, perhaps. Rand balanced against the world. It was silly—foolish and childish—that those scales should tremble so evenly for her. Yet she did not dare make them swing, even in her mind, because she was not sure which way she would send them. "She knows it better than he does," she said, making her voice firm. "Better than we."

"Perhaps." Nynaeve sighed. "But I do not have to like it."

Ropes were cast off at the bow, where triangular sails suddenly broke out, and *Wavedancer* heeled away from the dock. More sails appeared, great white squares and triangles, the sternlines were cast off, and the ship curled out into the river in a great arc through the anchored ships awaiting their turn at the docks, a smooth curve that ended heading south, downriver. The Sea Folk handled their ship as a master horseman would a fine steed. That peculiar spoked wheel worked the rudder, somehow, as one of the bare-chested crewmen turned it. A man, Elayne was relieved to see. Sailmistress and Windfinder stood to one side of the wheel, Coine issuing occasional orders, sometimes after a murmured consultation with her sister. Toram watched for a time, with a face that might have been carved from a deck plank, then stalked below.

There was a Tairen on the sterndeck, a plump, dejected-looking man in a dull yellow coat with puffy gray sleeves, rubbing his hands nervously. He had been hustled aboard just as the gangway was being hauled up, a pilot who was supposed to guide *Wavedancer* downriver; according to Tairen law, no ship could pass through the Fingers of the Dragon without a Tairen pilot aboard. His dejection certainly came from doing nothing, for if he gave any directions, the Sea Folk paid them no heed.

Muttering about seeing what their cabin was like, Nynaeve went downstairs—below—but Elayne was enjoying the breeze across the deck and the feel of starting out. To travel, to see places she had not seen before, was a joy in itself. She had never expected to, not like this. The Daughter-Heir of Andor might make a few state visits, and she would make more once she succeeded to the throne, but they would be bounded about with ceremony and propriety. Not like this at all. Barefoot Sea Folk and a ship headed to sea.

The riverbank slid by quite quickly as the sun climbed, an occasional cluster of huddled stone farmhouses and barns, bleak and lonely, appearing and vanishing behind. No villages, though. Tear would not allow the smallest village on the river between the city and the sea, for even the tiniest might one day become competition for the capital. The High Lords controlled the size of villages and towns throughout the country with a buildings tax that grew heavier the more buildings there were. Elayne was sure they would never have allowed Godan to thrive, on the Bay of Remara, if not for the supposed necessity of a strong presence overlooking Mayene. In a way it was a relief to be leaving such foolish people behind. If only she did not have to leave one foolish man behind as well.

The number of fishing boats, most small and all surrounded by clouds of hopeful gulls and fisher-birds, increased the farther south *Wavedancer* went, especially once the vessel entered the maze of waterways called the Fingers of the Dragon. Often the birds overhead and the long poles that held the nets were all that was visible besides plains of reeds and knifegrass rippling in the breezes, dotted with low islands where odd, twisted trees grew with spidery tangles of roots exposed to the air. Many boats worked right in the reeds, though not with nets. Once Elayne saw some of them close to clear water, men and women dropping hooked lines into the watery growth and pulling up wriggling, dark-striped fish as long as a man's arm.

The Tairen pilot began to pace anxiously once they were in the delta, with the sun overhead, turning up his nose at an offered bowl of thick spicy fish stew and bread. Elayne ate hers hungrily, wiping her pottery bowl with the last scrap of bread, though she shared his unease. Passages broad and narrow ran in every direction. Some ended abruptly, in plain sight, against a wall of reeds. There was no way to tell which of the others might not vanish just as suddenly around the next bend. Coine did not slow *Wavedancer*, regardless, or hesitate at choosing a way. Obviously she knew the channels to take, or the Windfinder did, but the pilot still muttered to himself as if he expected to run aground any moment.

It was late afternoon when the river mouth suddenly appeared ahead, and the endless stretch of the Sea of Storms beyond. The Sea Folk did something with the sails, and the ship shuddered softly to a dead halt. It was only then that Elayne noticed a large rowboat skittering like a many-legged waterbug out from an island where a few forlorn stone buildings stood around the base of a tall narrow tower where men stood small at the top beneath the banner of Tear, three white crescents on a field of red and gold. The pilot took the purse Coine proffered without a word and scrambled down a rope ladder to the boat. As soon as he was aboard, the sails were swung about again, and *Wavedancer* breasted the first rollers of open sea, rising slightly, slicing through. Sea Folk scampered through the rigging, setting more sails, as the ship sped south and west, away from the land.

When the last thin strip of land dropped below the horizon, the Sea Folk women doffed their blouses. All of them, even the Sailmistress and the Windfinder. Elayne did not know where to look. All those women walking about half-dressed and completely unconcerned by the men all around them. Juilin Sandar seemed to be having as hard a time as she was, alternating between staring at the women wide-eyed and staring at his feet until he finally all but ran below. Elayne would not let herself be routed that way. She opted for staring over the side at the sea, instead.

Different customs, she reminded herself. *As long they don't expect me to do the same.* The very thought nearly made her laugh hysterically. Somehow, the Black Ajah was easier to contemplate than that. Different customs. *Light!*

The sky grew purple, with a dull golden sun on the horizon. Scores of dolphins escorted the vessel, rolling and arching alongside, and farther out some sort of sparkling silver-blue fish rose above the surface in schools, gliding on outstretched fins a span across for fifty paces or more before plunging back into the swelling gray-green water. Elayne watched in amazement for a dozen flights before they did not appear again.

But the dolphins, great sleek shapes, were wondrous enough, a guard of honor taking *Wavedancer* back where he belonged. Those she recognized from descriptions in books; it was said if they found you drowning, they would push you to shore. She was not sure she believed it, but it was a pretty story. She followed them along the side of the ship, to the bow, where they frolicked in the bow wave, rolling on their sides to look up at her without losing an inch.

She was almost in the narrowest point of the bow before she realized Thom Merrilin was there before her, smiling down at the dolphins a bit sadly, his cloak catching the wind like the cloud of sails above. He had rid himself of his belongings. He did seem familiar; truly he did. “Are you not happy, Master Merrilin?”

He glanced at her sideways. “Please, call me Thom, my Lady.”

“Thom, then. But not my Lady. I am only Mistress Trakand here.”

“As you say, Mistress Trakand,” he said with a hint of a smile.

“How can you look at these dolphins and be unhappy, Thom?”

“They are free,” he murmured, in such a tone that she was not sure he was answering her. “They have no decisions to make, no prices to pay. Not a worry in the world, except finding fish to eat. And sharks, I suppose. And lionfish. And likely a hundred more things I don't know. Perhaps it is not such an enviable life at that.”

“Do you envy them?” He did not answer, but that was the wrong question anyway. She needed to make him smile again. No, laugh. For some reason she was sure if she could make him laugh, she would remember where she had seen him before. She chose another topic, one that should be nearer his heart. “Do you mean to compose the epic of Rand, Thom?” Epics were for bards, not gleemen, but there could be no harm in a little flattery. “The epic of the Dragon Reborn. Loial means to write a book, you know.”

“Perhaps I will, Mistress Trakand. Perhaps. But neither my composing nor the Ogier’s book will make much difference in the long run. Our stories will not survive, in the long run. When the next Age comes—” He grimaced, and tugged one of his mustaches. “Come to think of it, that may be no more than a year or two off. How is the end of an Age marked? It cannot always be a cataclysm on the order of the Breaking. But then, if the Prophecies are to be believed, this one will be. That is the trouble with prophecy. The original is always in the Old Tongue, and maybe High Chant as well: if you don’t know what a thing means beforehand, there’s no way to puzzle it out. Does it mean what it says, or is it a flowery way of saying something entirely different?”

“You were talking of your epic,” she said, trying to guide him back, but he shook his shaggy white head.

“I was talking of change. My epic, if I compose it—and Loial’s book—will be no more than seed, if we are both lucky. Those who know the truth will die, and their grandchildren’s grandchildren will remember something different. And *their* grandchildren’s grandchildren something else again. Two dozen generations, and you may be the hero of it, not Rand.”

“Me?” she laughed.

“Or maybe Mat, or Lan. Or even myself.” He grinned at her, warming his weathered face. “Thom Merrilin. Not a gleeman—but what? Who can say? Not eating fire, but breathing it. Hurling it about like an Aes Sedai.” He flourished his cloak. “Thom Merrilin, the mysterious hero, toppling mountains and raising up kings.” The grin became a rich belly laugh. “Rand al’Thor may be lucky if the next Age remembers his name correctly.”

She was right; it was not just a feeling. That face, that mirth-filled laugh; she did remember them. But from where? She had to keep him talking. “Does it always happen that way? I do not think anyone doubts, say, that Artur Hawkwing conquered an empire. The whole world, or near enough.”

"Hawkwing, young Mistress? He made an empire, all right, but do you think he did everything the books and stories and epics say he did? The way they say he did it? Killed the hundred best men of an opposing army, one by one? The two armies just stood there while one of the generals—a king—fought a hundred duels?"

"The books say he did."

"There isn't time between sunrise and sunset for one man to fight a hundred duels, girl." She almost stopped him short—*girl*? She was Daughter-Heir of Andor, not *girl*—but he had the bit in his teeth. "And that is only a thousand years back. Go back further, back to the oldest tales I know, from the Age before the Age of Legends. Did Mosk and Merk really fight with spears of fire, and were they even giants? Was Elsbet really queen of the whole world, and was Anla really her sister? Was Anla truly the Wise Counselor, or was it someone else? As well ask what sort of animal ivory comes from, or what kind of plant grows silk. Unless that comes from an animal, too."

"I do not know about those other questions," Elayne said a bit stiffly; being called girl still rankled, "but you could ask the Sea Folk about ivory and silk."

He laughed again—as she had hoped, though it still did no more than drive home the certainty that she knew him—but instead of calling her foolish, as she half-expected and was prepared for, he said, "Practical and to the point, just like your mother. Both feet on the earth and few flights of fancy."

She lifted her chin a little, made her face cooler. She might be passing herself off as simple Mistress Trakand, but this was something else. He was an amiable old man, and she did want to reason out the puzzle of him, but he was a gleeman after all, and he should not speak of a queen in such familiar tones. Oddly, infuriatingly, he appeared amused. Amused!

"The Atha'an Miere do not know, either," he said. "They see no more of the lands beyond the Aiel Waste than a few miles around the handful of harbors where they are permitted to land. Those places are walled high, and the walls guarded so they cannot even climb up to see what is on the other side. If one of their ships makes landfall anywhere else—or any ship not theirs; only the Sea Folk are allowed to come there—that ship and its crew are never seen again. And that is almost as much as I can tell you after more years of asking than I like to think of. The Atha'an Miere keep their secrets, but I do not believe they know much to keep here. From what I have been able to learn, the Cairhienin were treated the same, when they still had the right to travel the Silk Path across the Waste. Cairhienin traders never saw anything but one walled town, and those who wandered from it vanished."

Elayne found herself studying him much as she had the dolphins. What kind of man was this? Twice now he might have laughed at her—he *had* been amused just then, as much as she hated to admit it—but instead he talked to her as seriously as. . . . Well, as father to daughter. "You might find a few answers on this ship, Thom. They were bound east until we convinced the Sailmistress to take us to Tanchico. To Shara, the Cargomaster said, east of Mayene; that must mean beyond the Waste."

He stared at her for a moment. "Shara, you say? I have never heard any such name before. Is Shara city or nation or both? Perhaps I will learn a little more."

What did I say? she wondered. *I said something to make him think. Light! I told him we convinced Coine to change her plans.* It could not make any difference, but she scolded herself severely. A careless word to this nice old man might do no harm, but the same might kill her in Tanchico, and Nynaeve, too, not to mention the thief-catcher and Thom himself. If he was such a nice old man. "Thom, why did you come with us? Just because Moiraine asked?"

His shoulders shook; she realized he was laughing at himself. "As to that, who can say? Aes Sedai asking favors are not easily resisted. Perhaps it was the prospect of your pleasant company for the voyage. Or perhaps I decided Rand is old enough to look after himself for a while."

He laughed out loud, and she had to laugh with him. The idea of this white-haired old fellow looking after Rand. The feeling that she could trust him came back, stronger than ever, as he looked at her. Not because he could laugh at himself, or not only that. She could not have given a reason beyond the fact that, looking up into those blue eyes, she could not make herself believe this man would ever do anything to harm her.

The urge to pull one of his mustaches again was almost overwhelming, but she schooled her hands to stillness. She was not a child, after all. A child. She opened her mouth—and suddenly everything went out of her head.

"Please excuse me, Thom," she said hurriedly. "I must. . . . Excuse me." She started toward the stern quickly, not waiting for a reply. He probably thought the ship's motion had upset her stomach. *Wavedancer* was pitching more rapidly, moving faster through the great sea swells as the wind freshened.

Two men stood at the wheel on the sterndeck, the muscle of both needed to hold the vessel on course. The Sailmistress was not on deck, but the Windfinder was, standing at the rail beyond the wheelmen, bare to the waist like the men, studying the sky where billowing clouds rolled more fiercely than the ocean. For once it was not Jorin's state of dress—or undress—that bothered Elayne. The glow of a woman embracing *saidar* surrounded her, clearly visible despite the lurid light. That was what she had felt, what had drawn her. A woman channeling.

Elayne stopped short of the sterndeck to study what she was doing. The flows of Air and Water the Windfinder handled were cable-thick, yet her weaving was intricate, almost delicate, and it reached as far as the eye could see across the waters, a web drawn across the sky. The wind rose higher, higher; the wheelmen strained, and *Wavedancer* flew through the sea. The weaving stopped, the glow of *saidar* vanished, and Jorin slumped at the rail, leaning on her hands.

Elayne climbed the ladder quietly, yet the Sea Folk woman spoke in a soft voice without turning her head as soon as she was near enough to hear. "In the middle as I worked, I thought that you were watching me. I could not stop then; there might have been a storm even *Wavedancer* could not survive. The Sea of Storms is well named; it will throw up bad winds enough without my help. I meant not to do this at all, but Coine said we must go quickly. For you, and for the Coramoor." She raised her eyes to peer at the sky. "This wind will hold until morning, if it pleases the Light."

"This is why the Sea Folk do not carry Aes Sedai?" Elayne said, taking a place beside her at the rail. "So the Tower won't learn Windfinders can channel. That is why it was your decision to let us aboard, not your sister's. Jorin, the Tower will not try to stop you. There is no law in the Tower to stop any woman channeling, even if she is not Aes Sedai."

"Your White Tower will interfere. It will try to reach onto our ships, where we are free of the land and landsmen. It will try to tie us to itself, binding us away from the sea." She sighed heavily. "The wave that has passed cannot be called back."

Elayne wished she could tell her it was not so, but the Tower did seek out women and girls who could learn to channel, both to bolster the numbers of Aes Sedai, dwindling now compared to what they once had been, and because of the danger of learning unguided. In truth, a woman who could be taught to touch the True Source usually found herself in the Tower whatever she wanted, at least until she was trained enough not to kill herself or others by accident.

After a moment Jorin went on. “It is not all of us. Only some. We send a few girls to Tar Valon so Aes Sedai will not come looking among us. No ship will carry Aes Sedai whose Windfinder can weave the winds. When you first named yourselves, I thought you must know me, but you did not speak, and you asked passage, and I hoped perhaps you were not Aes Sedai despite your rings. A foolish hope. I could feel the strength of you both. And now the White Tower will know.”

“I cannot promise to keep your secret, but I will do what I can.” The woman deserved more. “Jorin, I swear by the honor of House Trakand of Andor that I will do my best to keep your secret from any who would harm you or your people, and that if I must reveal it to anyone, I will do all in my ability to protect your people from interference. House Trakand is not without influence, even in the Tower.” *And I will make mother use it, if need be. Somehow.*

“If it pleases the Light,” Jorin said fatalistically, “all will be well. All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well, if it pleases the Light.”

“There was a *damane* on that Seanchan ship, wasn’t there?” The Windfinder gave her a quizzical look. “One of the captive women who can channel.”

“You see deeply for one so young. That is why I first thought you might not be Aes Sedai, because you are so young; I have daughters older than you, I think. I did not know she was a captive; that makes me wish we could have saved her. *Wavedancer* outran the Seanchan vessel easily at first—we had heard of the Seanchan and their vessels with ribbed sails, that they demanded strange oaths and punished those who would not give them—but then the—*damane*?—broke two of his masts, and they boarded him with swords. I managed to start fires on the Seanchan vessel—weaving Fire is difficult for me beyond lighting a lamp, but it pleased the Light to make it enough—and Toram led the crew to fight the Seanchan back to their own decks. We cut loose the boarding hooks, and their ship drifted away, burning. They were too occupied with trying to save him to bother us as we limped away. I regretted seeing him burn and sink, then; he was a fine ship, I think, for heavy seas. Now I regret it because we might have saved the woman, the *damane*. Even if she damaged him, perhaps she would not have, free. The Light illumine her soul, and the waters take her peacefully."

Telling the story had saddened her. She needed to be distracted. "Jorin, why do the Atha'an Miere call ships 'he'? Everyone else I've ever met calls them 'she.' I don't suppose it makes any difference, but why?"

"The men will give you a different answer," the Windfinder said, smiling, "speaking of strength and grandness and the like as men will, but this is the truth. A ship is alive, and he is like a man, with a true man's heart." She rubbed the rail fondly, as if stroking something alive, something that could feel her caress. "Treat him well and care for him properly, and he will fight for you against the worst sea. He will fight to keep you alive even after the sea has long since given him his own deathstroke. Neglect him, though, ignore the small warnings he gives of danger, and he will drown you in a flat sea beneath a cloudless sky."

Elayne hoped Rand was not as fickle as that. *Then why does he hop about, glad to see me go one minute and sending Juilin Sandar after me the next?* She told herself to stop thinking about him. He was a long way away. There was nothing to be done about him now.

She glanced over her shoulder toward the bow. Thom was gone. She was sure she had found the key to his puzzle, just before she had felt the Windfinder channeling. Something to do with his smile. It was gone, whatever it was. Well, she meant to find it again before they reached Tanchico, if she had to sit on him. But he would still be there in the morning. "Jorin, how long before we reach Tanchico? I have been told rakers are the fastest ships in the world, but how fast?"

"To Tanchico? To serve the Coramoor, we will not stop at any port between. Perhaps ten days, if I can weave the winds well enough, if it pleases the Light that I find the proper currents. Perhaps as few as seven or eight, with the grace of the Light."

"Ten days?" Elayne gasped. "It cannot be possible." She had seen maps, after all.

The other woman's smile was half pride, half indulgence. "As you yourself said, the fastest ships in the world. The next quickest take half again as long over any stretch, and most more than twice as long. Coasting craft that hug the shore and anchor in the shallows each night . . .” She sniffed contemptuously. “. . . require ten times as much.”

“Jorin, would you teach me to do what you were just doing?”

The Windfinder stared, her dark eyes wide and shining in the fading light. “Teach you? But you are Aes Sedai.”

“Jorin, I have never woven a flow half as thick as those you were handling. And the scope of it! I am astounded, Jorin.”

The Windfinder stared a moment more, no longer in amazement, but as if trying to fix Elayne’s face in her mind. Finally she kissed the fingers of her right hand and pressed them to Elayne’s lips. “If it pleases the Light, we both shall learn.”

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CHAPTER 21

Into the Heart

Tairen nobility filled the great vaulted chamber with its huge polished redstone columns, ten feet thick, rising into shadowed heights above golden lamps hanging on golden chains. The High Lords and Ladies were arrayed in a thick hollow circle under the great dome at the chamber's heart with the lesser nobles ranked behind, row on row back into the forest of columns, all in their best velvets and silks and laces, wide sleeves and ruffed collars and peaked hats, all murmuring uneasily so the towering ceiling echoed the sounds of nervous geese. Only the High Lords themselves had ever before been bidden to this place, called the Heart of the Stone, and they had come only four times a year, at the twin demands of law and custom. They came now, all who were not out in the countryside somewhere, at the summons of their new lord, the maker of law and breaker of custom.

The packed crowd gave way before Moiraine as soon as they saw who she was, so she and Egwene moved in a pocket of open space. Lan's absence irritated Moiraine. It was not like the man to vanish when she might need him; his way usually was to watch over her as if she could not fend for herself without a guardian. Had she not been able to feel the bond linking them and known he could not be very far from the Stone, she might have worried.

He fought the strings Nynaeve was tying to him as hard as he had ever fought Trollocs in the Blight, but much as he might deny it, that young woman had bound him as tightly as she herself did, though in other ways. He might as well try tearing steel with his hands as those ties. She was not jealous, exactly, but Lan had been her sword arm, her shield and companion for too many years for her to give him up lightly. *I have done what had to be done, there. She will have him if I die, and not before. Where is the man? What is he doing?*

One red-gowned lace-ruffed woman, a horse-faced Lady of the Land called Leitha, drew her skirts away a bit too assiduously, and Moiraine looked at her. Merely looked, without slowing her step, but the woman shuddered and dropped her eyes. Moiraine nodded to herself. She could accept that these people hated Aes Sedai, but she would not endure open rudeness on top of veiled slights. Besides, the rest shied back another step after seeing Leitha faced down.

“Are you certain he said nothing of what he means to announce?” she asked quietly. In this gabble, no one three paces away could have made out a word. The Tairens kept about that distance now. She did not like being overheard.

“Nothing,” Egwene said just as softly. She sounded as irritated as Moiraine felt.

“There have been rumors.”

“Rumors? What sort of rumors?”

The girl was not that good at controlling her face and voice; clearly she had not heard the tales, of doings in the Two Rivers. Betting that Rand had not, though, might be putting her horse at a ten-foot fence. “You should bring him to confide in you. He needs an attentive ear. It will help him, to talk out his troubles with someone he can trust.” Egwene gave her a sidelong glance. She was becoming too sophisticated for such simple methods. Still, Moiraine had spoken unadorned truth—the boy did need someone to listen and by listening lighten his burdens—and it might work.

“He will not confide in anyone, Moiraine. He hides his pains, and hopes he can deal with them before anyone notices.” Anger flashed across Egwene’s face. “The wool-brained mule!”

Moiraine felt a momentary sympathy. The girl could not be expected to accept Rand’s strolling about arm in arm with Elayne, kissing in corners where they thought themselves unseen. And Egwene did not know the half, yet. Commiseration did not last. There was too much of importance to deal with for the girl to be fretting over what she could not have in any case.

Elayne and Nynaeve should be aboard the raker by now, out of the way. Their voyage might eventually tell her if her suspicions about the Wind-finders were correct. That was a minor point, though. At worst the pair had enough gold to buy a ship and hire a crew—which might be necessary given the rumors of Tanchico—with enough left for the bribes so often necessary with Taraboner officials. Thom Merrilin’s room was empty, and her informants had reported him muttering about Tanchico on his way out of the Stone; he would see they got a good crew and found the right officials. The purported plan with Mazrim Taim was much the more likely of the two, but her messages to the Amyrlin should have taken care of that. The two young women could handle the much less likely eventuality of a mysterious danger hidden in Tanchico, and they were out of her hair and away from Rand. She only regretted that Egwene had refused to go with them. Tar Valon would have been best for all three, but Tanchico would do.

"Speaking of wool-brained, do you mean to continue with this plan to go into the Waste?"

"I do," the girl said firmly. She needed to be back in the Tower, training her strength. *What was Siuan thinking of? She will probably give me one of those sayings about boats and fish, when I can ask her.*

At least Egwene would be out of the way, too, and the Aiel girl would look after her. Perhaps the Wise Ones really could teach her something of Dreaming. That had been the most astounding letter from them, not that she could afford to heed most of it. Egwene's journey into the Waste might be useful in the long run.

The last line of Tairens gave way, making a little hollow, and she and Egwene faced the open area under the vast dome. The nobles' ill ease was most evident here; many studied their feet like sulky children, and others stared at nothing, looking at anything but where they were. Here was where *Callandor* had been kept before Rand took it. Here beneath this dome, untouched by any hand for more than three thousand years, untouchable by any hand but that of the Dragon Reborn. untouchable by any hand but that of the Dragon Reborn. Tairens did not like admitting that the Heart of the Stone existed.

"Poor woman," Egwene murmured.

Moiraine followed the girl's gaze. The High Lady Alteima, already gowned and ruffed and capped in shimmering white as Tairen widows were though her husband still lingered, was perhaps the most composed of all the nobles. She was a slender, lovely woman, made more so by her small sad smile, with large brown eyes and long black hair hanging halfway to her waist. A tall woman, though Moiraine admitted she did tend to judge such things by her own height, and rather too full-bosomed. Cairhienin were not a tall people, and she had been considered short even among them.

“Yes, a poor woman,” she said, but she did not mean it for sympathy. It was good to see Egwene had not yet grown sophisticated enough to see beneath the surface all the time. The girl was already far less malleable than she should have been for years yet. She needed to be shaped before she was hardened.

Thom had missed, with Alteima. Or perhaps he had not wanted to see; he seemed to have a strange reluctance to move against women. The High Lady Alteima was far more dangerous than her husband or her lover, both of whom she had manipulated without either knowing it. Perhaps more dangerous than anyone else in Tear, man or woman. She would find others to use soon enough. It was Alteima’s style to remain in the background and pull strings. Something would have to be done about her.

Moiraine shifted her gaze along the rows of High Lords and Ladies, until she found Estanda, in brocaded yellow silks with a large ivory lace ruff and a tiny matching cap. A certain sternness marred the beauty of her face, and the occasional glances she gave Alteima were iron hard. Feelings between the two went beyond mere rivalry; had they been men, one would have shed the other’s blood in a duel years since. If that antagonism could be sharpened, Alteima would be too busy to make trouble for Rand.

For an instant she regretted sending Thom away. She did not like having to waste her time with these petty affairs. But he had too much influence with Rand; the boy had to depend on her counsel. Hers, and hers alone. The Light knew he was difficult enough without interference. Thom had been settling the boy down to rule Tear when he needed to be moving on to greater things. But that was dealt with for now. The problem of bringing Thom Merrilin to heel could be managed later. Rand was the dilemma now. What did he mean to announce?

“Where is he? He has learned the first art of kings, it seems. Making people wait.”

She did not realize she had spoken aloud until Egwene gave her a startled look. She smoothed the irritation from her face immediately. Rand would appear eventually, and she would learn what he meant to do. Learn along with everyone else. She nearly ground her teeth. That blind fool of a boy, running headlong through the night with never a care for cliffs, never thinking he could carry the world over as well as himself. If only she could keep him from rushing back to save his village. He would want to, but he could not afford to do so now. Perhaps he did not know; it could be hoped.

Mat stood across from them, uncombed and slouching with his hands in the pockets of his high-collared green coat. It was half-unbuttoned, as usual, and his boots were scuffed, in sharp contrast to the precise elegance around him. He shifted nervously as he saw her looking at him, then gave one of his rudely defiant grins. At least he was here, under her eye. Mat Cauthon was an exhausting young man to keep track of, avoiding her spies with ease; he never gave any sign that he knew they were there, but her eyes-and-ears reported that he seemed to slide out of sight whenever they got too close.

"I think he sleeps in his coats," Egwene said disapprovingly. "On purpose. I wonder where Perrin is." She went on tiptoes, trying to search over the heads of the assemblage. "I don't see him."

Frowning, Moiraine scanned the crowd, not that she could make out much beyond the front row. Lan could have been back among the columns. She would not strain, though, or jump up on her toes like an anxious child. Lan was due a talking-to he would not soon forget when she laid hands on him. With Nynaeve tugging at him one way and *ta'veren*—Rand, at least—seemingly pulling another, she sometimes wondered how well their bond still held. At least his time with Rand was useful; it gave her another string to the young man.

"Perhaps he is with Faile," Egwene said. "He won't have run away, Moiraine. Perrin has a strong sense of duty."

Almost as strong as a Warder's, Moiraine knew, which was why she did not keep eyes-and-ears on him as she tried to with Mat. "Faile has been trying to talk him into leaving, girl." Quite possibly he was with her; he usually was. "Do not look so surprised. They often talk—and argue—where they can be overheard."

"I am not surprised you know," Egwene said dryly, "only that Faile would try to talk him out of what he knows he has to do."

"Perhaps she does not believe it as he does." Moiraine had not believed it herself, at first, had not seen it. Three *ta'veren*, all the same age, coming out of one village; she must have been blind not to realize they had to be connected. Everything had become much more complicated with that knowledge. Like trying to juggle three of Thom's colored balls one-handed and blindfolded; she had seen Thom do that, but she would not want to try. There was no guide to how they were connected, or what they were supposed to do; the Prophecies never mentioned companions.

“I like her,” Egwene said. “She is good for him, just what he needs. And she cares for him deeply.”

“I suppose she does.” If Faile became too troublesome, Moiraine would have to have a talk with her, about the secrets Faile had been keeping from Perrin. Or have one of her eyes-and-ears do it. That should settle her down.

“You say it as if you don’t believe it. They love each other, Moiraine. Can’t you see that? Can’t you even recognize a human emotion when you see one?”

Moiraine gave her a firm look, one that settled her on her heels in a satisfactory manner. The girl knew so little and thought she knew so much. Moiraine was about to tell her so in withering fashion when startled, even fearful, gasps rose from among the Tairens.

The crowd gave way hurriedly, more than eagerly, those in front ruthlessly forcing those behind farther back, opening a wide passage to the space beneath the dome. Rand strode down that corridor, looking straight ahead, imperious in a red coat embroidered with golden scrolls up his sleeves, cradling *Callandor* in his right arm like a scepter. It was not only he that made the Tairens give way, though. Behind him came perhaps a hundred Aiel, spears and arrow-nocked bows in hand, *shoufa* wrapped around their heads, black veils hiding everything but their eyes. Moiraine thought she recognized Rhuarc at the front, just behind Rand, but only by the way he moved. They were anonymous. Ready for killing. Plainly, whatever he meant to say, Rand intended to quell any resistance before it had a chance to coalesce.

The Aiel halted, but Rand kept on until he stood centered under the dome, then ran his eye around the gathering. He seemed surprised, and perhaps upset, at the sight of Egwene, but he gave Moiraine an infuriating smile, and Mat one that made the pair of them look like boys when Mat returned it. The Tairens were white-faced, not knowing whether to stare at Rand and *Callandor* or the veiled Aiel; either could be death in their midst.

“The High Lord Sunamon,” Rand said suddenly, and loudly, making that plump fellow jump, “has guaranteed me a treaty with Mayene, strictly following lines I gave him. He has guaranteed this with his life.” He laughed as if he had made a joke, and most of the nobles laughed with him. Not Sunamon, who looked distinctly ill. “If he fails,” Rand announced, “he has agreed to be hanged, and he will be obliged.” The laughter stopped.

Sunamon’s face took on a sickly tinge of green. Egwene gave Moiraine a troubled glance; she was gripping her skirt with both hands. Moiraine only waited; he had not brought every noble within ten miles together to tell them of a treaty or threaten a fat fool. She made her hands let go of her own skirts.

Rand turned in a circle, weighing the faces he saw. “Because of this treaty, ships will soon be available to carry Tairen grain west, to find new markets.” There were a few appreciative murmurs at that, quickly stifled. “But there is more. The armies of Tear are to march.”

A cheer rose, tumultuous shouts ringing from the ceilings. Men capered, even the High Lords, and shook their fists over their heads, and tossed up peaked velvet hats. Women, smiling as rapturously as the men, bestowed kisses on the cheeks of those who would go to war, and delicately sniffed the tiny porcelain bottles of smelling salts no Tairen noblewoman would be without, pretending to be made faint by the news. “Illian shall fall!” someone cried, and hundreds of voices seized it like thunder. “Illian shall fall! Illian shall fall! Illian shall fall!”

Moiraine saw Egwene’s lips moving, the words crushed beneath the jubilation. She could read them, though. “No, Rand. Please, no. Please don’t.” On the far side of Rand, Mat was frowning in disapproving silence. They and she were the only ones not celebrating, aside from the ever-watchful Aiel and Rand himself. Rand’s smile was twisted contemptuously, and never touched his eyes. There was fresh sweat on his face. She met his sardonic stare and waited. There would be more, and not, she suspected, to her liking.

Rand raised his left hand. Slowly quiet fell, those in front anxiously shushing those behind. He waited for absolute silence. “The armies will move north, into Cairhien. The High Lord Meilan will command, and under him, the High Lords Gueyam, Aracome, Hearne, Maraconn and Simaan. The armies will be generously financed by the High Lord Torean, the wealthiest of you, who will accompany the armies to see that his money is spent wisely.”

Dead silence greeted this pronouncement. No one moved, though plain-faced Torean seemed to be having trouble standing.

Moiraine had to give Rand a mental bow for his choices. Sending those seven out of Tear neatly eviscerated the seven most dangerous plots against him, and none of those men trusted each other enough to scheme among themselves. Thom Merrilin had given him good advice; obviously her spies had missed some of the notes he had had slipped into Rand's pockets. But the rest? It was madness. He could not have had this for an answer on the other side of that *ter'angreal*. It was not possible, surely.

Meilan obviously agreed with her, if not for the same reasons. He stepped forward hesitantly, a lean hard man but so frightened that the whites of his eyes showed all the way around. "My Lord Dragon. . . ." He stopped, swallowed, and began again in a marginally stronger voice. "My Lord Dragon, intervening in a civil war is stepping into a bog. A dozen factions contend for the Sun Throne, with as many shifting alliances, each one betrayed every day. Besides that, bandits infest Cairhien as fleas on a wild boar. Starving peasants have stripped the land bare. I am reliably informed that they eat bark and leaves. My Lord Dragon, 'a quagmire' barely begins to describe—"

Rand cut him off. "You do not want to extend Tear's sway all the way to Kinslayer's Dagger, Meilan? That is all right. I know who I mean to sit on the Sun Throne. You do not go to conquer, Meilan, but to restore order, and peace. And to feed the hungry. There is more grain in the granaries now than Tear could sell, and the farmers will harvest as much more this year, unless you disobey me. Wagons will carry it north behind the armies, and those *peasants* . . . those *peasants* will not have to eat bark any longer, my *Lord* Meilan." The tall High Lord opened his mouth again, and Rand swung *Callandor* down, grounding its crystal point in front of him. "You have a question, Meilan?" Shaking his head, Meilan backed into the crowd as though trying to hide.

"I knew he would not start a war," Egwene said fiercely. "I knew it."

"You think there will be less killing in this?" Moiraine muttered. What was the boy up to? At least he was not running off to save his village while the Forsaken had their way with the rest of the world. "The corpses will be piled as high, girl. You will not know the difference between this and a war."

Attacking Illian and Sammael would have gained him time even if it grew into a stalemate. Time to learn his power, and perhaps to bring down one of his strongest enemies, to cow the rest. What did he gain by this? Peace for the land of her birth, starving Cairhienin fed; she would have applauded another time. It was laudably humane—and utterly senseless, now. Useless bloodshed, rather than confronting an enemy who would destroy him given the slightest opening. Why? Lanfear. What had Lanfear said to him? What had she done? The possibilities chilled Moiraine's heart. Rand would take closer watching than ever now. She would not allow him to turn to the Shadow.

"Ah, yes," Rand said as if just remembering something. "Soldiers don't know much about feeding hungry people, do they? For that, I think a kind, woman's heart is needed. My Lady Alteima, I regret intruding on your grief, but will you undertake to oversee distributing the food? You will have a nation to feed."

And power to gain, Moiraine thought. This was his first slip. Aside from deciding on Cairhien over Illian, of course. Alteima would certainly return to Tear on an equal footing with Meilan or Gueyam, ready for more plotting. She would have Rand assassinated before that, if he was not careful. Perhaps an accident could be arranged in Cairhien.

Alteima swept a graceful curtsy, spreading her full white skirts, only a touch of her surprise showing. "As my Lord Dragon commands, so do I obey. It will please me greatly to serve the Lord Dragon."

"I was sure it would," Rand said wryly. "As much as you love your husband, you'll not want him with you in Cairhien. Conditions will be hard, for a sick man. I took the liberty of having him moved to the High Lady Estanda's apartments. She will care for him while you are away, and send him to meet you in Cairhien when he is well." Estanda smiled, a tight smile of triumph. Alteima's eyes rolled back in her head, and she crumpled in a heap.

Moiraine shook her head slightly. He truly was harder than he had been. More dangerous. Egwene started toward the fallen woman, but Moiraine put a hand on her arm. "I think she was only overcome by emotion. I can recognize it, you see. The ladies are tending her." Several of them had clustered around, patting Alteima's wrists and passing smelling salts under her nose. She coughed and opened her eyes, and looked ready to faint again when she saw Estanda standing over her.

"Rand just did something very clever, I think," Egwene said in a flat voice. "And very cruel. He has a right to look ashamed."

Rand did look it at that, grimacing at the floorstones under his boots. Perhaps he was not as hard as he was trying to be.

"Not undeserved, however," Moiraine observed. The girl showed promise, picking up on what she did not understand. But she still needed to learn to control her emotions, to see what had to be done as well as she saw what she wished could be done. “Let us hope he is finished with being clever for today.”

Very few in the great chamber understood exactly what had happened, only that Alteima’s fainting had upset the Lord Dragon. A few in the back raised shouts of “Cairhien shall fall!” but the cry did not take hold.

“With you to lead us, my Lord Dragon, we shall conquer the world!” a lumpy-faced young man shouted, half-supporting Torean. Estean, Torean’s eldest son; the lumpy-faced resemblance was clear, though the father was still mumbling to himself.

Jerking his head up, Rand appeared startled. Or perhaps angry. “I will not be with you. I am . . . going away for a time.” That certainly brought silence again. Every eye was on him, but his attentions were all on *Callandor.* The crowd flinched as he lifted the crystal blade before his face. Sweat rolled down his face, much more sweat than before. “The Stone held *Callandor* before I came. The Stone should hold it again, until I return.”

Suddenly the transparent sword blazed in his hands. Whirling it hilt uppermost, he drove it down. Into the stone floor. Bluish lightning arced wildly toward the dome above. The stone rumbled loudly, and the Stone shook, dancing, heaving screaming people from their feet.

Moiraine pushed Egwene off of her while tremors still reverberated through the chamber, and scrambled erect. What *had* he done? And why? Going away? It was the worst of all her nightmares.

The Aiel had already regained their feet. Everyone else lay stunned or huddled on hands and knees. Except for Rand. He was on one knee, both hands holding *Callandor*’s hilt, with the blade driven halfway into the floorstones. The sword was clear crystal again. Sweat glistened on his face. He pried his hands away one finger at a time, held them cupped around the hilt yet not touching it. For a moment Moiraine thought he was going to take hold of it again, but instead he forced himself to his feet. He did have to force himself; she was certain of it.

“Look at this while I am gone.” His voice was lighter, more the way it had been when she first found him in his village, but no less sure or firm than it had been moments before. “Look at it, and remember me. Remember I will come back for it. If anyone wants to take my place, all they have to do is pull it out.” He waggled a finger at them, grinning almost mischievously. “But remember the price of failure.”

Turning on his heel, he marched out of the chamber, the Aiel falling in behind him. Staring at the sword rising out of the floor of the Heart, the Tairens got to their feet more slowly. Most looked ready to run, but too frightened to.

"That man!" Egwene grumbled, dusting off her green linen dress. "Is he mad?" She clapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh, Moiraine, he isn't, is he? Is he? Not yet."

"The Light send he is not," Moiraine muttered. She could not take her eyes from the sword any more than the Tairens could. The Light take the boy. Why could he not have remained the amenable youngling she had found in Emond's Field? She made herself start after Rand. "But I will find out."

Half-running, they caught up quickly in a broad, tapestry-lined hallway. The Aiel, veils hanging loose now but easily raised if needed, moved aside without slowing. They glanced at her, and at Egwene, hard faces unchanging but eyes touched by the wariness Aiel always had around Aes Sedai.

How they could be uneasy at her while calmly following Rand, she did not understand. Learning more than fragments about them was difficult. They answered questions freely—about anything that was of no interest to her. Her informants and her own eavesdropping overheard nothing, and her network of eyes-and-ears would no longer try. Not since one woman had been left bound and gagged, hanging by her ankles from battlements and staring wild-eyed at the four-hundred-foot drop beneath her, and not since the man who had simply disappeared. The man was just gone; the woman, refusing to go higher than the ground floor, had been a constant reminder until Moiraine sent her into the country.

Rand did not slow down any more than the Aiel when she and Egwene fell in on either side of him. His glance was wary, too, but in a different way, and touched with exasperated anger. "I thought you were gone," he said to Egwene. "I thought you went with Elayne and Nynaeve. You should have. Even Tanchico is. . . . Why did you stay?"

"I won't be staying much longer," Egwene said. "I am going to the Waste with Aviendha, to Rhuidean, to study with the Wise Ones."

He missed a step as the girl mentioned the Waste, glancing at her uncertainly, then strode on. He seemed composed now, too much so, a boiling teakettle with the lid strapped down and the spout plugged. "Do you remember swimming in the Waterwood?" he said quietly. "I used to float on my back in a pool and think the hardest thing I'd ever have to do was plow a field, unless maybe it was shearing sheep. Shearing from sunup till bedtime, hardly stopping to eat until the clip was in."

"Spinning," Egwene said. "I hated it worse than scrubbing floors. Twisting the threads makes your fingers so sore."

"Why did you do it?" Moiraine demanded before they could go on with this childhood reminiscing.

He gave her a sidelong look, and a smile mocking enough to belong to Mat. "Could I really have hung her, for trying to kill a man who was plotting to kill me? Would there be more justice in that than in what I did?" The grin slid from his face. "Is there justice in anything I do? Sunamon will hang if he fails. Because I said so. He'll deserve it after the way he's tried to take advantage, with never a care if his own people starved, but he'll not go to the gallows for that. He will hang because I said he would. Because I said it."

Egwene laid a hand on his arm, but Moiraine would not allow him to sidestep. "You know that is not what I mean."

He nodded; this time his smile had a frightening, rictus quality. "*Callandor.* With that in my hands, I can do anything. Anything. I know I can do anything. But now, it's a weight off my shoulders. You don't understand, do you?" She did not, though it nettled her that he saw it. She kept silent, and he went on. "Perhaps it will help if you know it comes from the Prophecies.

"Into the heart he thrusts his sword,
into the heart, to hold their hearts.
Who draws it out shall follow after,
What hand can grasp that fearful blade?

"You see? Straight from the Prophecies."

"You forget one thing," she told him tightly. "You drew *Callandor* in fulfillment of prophecy. The safeguards that held it awaiting you for three thousand years and more are gone. It is the Sword That Cannot Be Touched no longer. I could channel it free myself. Worse, any of the Forsaken could. What if Lanfear returns? She could use *Callandor* no more than I, but she could take it." He did not react to the name. Because he did not fear her—in which case he was a fool—or for another reason? "If Sammael or Rahvin or any male Forsaken puts his hand on *Callandor*, he can wield it as well as you. Think of facing the power you give up so casually. Think of that power in the hands of the Shadow."

"I almost hope they'll try." A threatening light shone in his eyes; they seemed gray storm clouds. "There is a surprise awaiting anyone who tries to channel *Callandor* out of the Stone, Moiraine. Do not think of taking it to the Tower for safekeeping; I could not make the trap pick and choose. The Power is all it needs to spring and reset, ready to trap again. I am not giving *Callandor* up forever. Just until I. . . ." He took a deep breath. "*Callandor* will stay there until I come back for it. By being there, reminding them of who I am and what I am, it makes sure I can come back without an army. A haven of sorts, with the likes of Alteima and Sunamon to welcome me home. If Alteima survives the justice her husband and Estanda will mete out, and Sunamon survives mine. Light, what a wretched tangle."

He could not make it selective, or would not? She was determined not to underrate what he might be capable of. *Callandor* belonged in the Tower, if he would not wield it as he should, in the Tower till he would wield it. "Just until" what? He had been intending to say something other than "until I come back." But what?

"And where are you going? Or do you mean to keep it a mystery?" She was quietly vowing not to let him escape again, to turn him somehow if he meant to go running off to the Two Rivers, when he surprised her.

"Not a mystery, Moiraine. Not from you and Egwene, anyway." He looked at Egwene and said one word. "Rhuidean."

Wide-eyed, the girl appeared as astounded as if she had never heard the name before. For that matter, Moiraine felt scarcely less. There was a murmur among the Aiel, but when she glanced back they were striding along with no expression whatsoever. She wished she could make them leave, but they would not go at her command, and she would not ask Rand to send them away. It would not help her with him to ask favors, especially when he might well refuse.

"You are not an Aiel clan chief, Rand," she said firmly, "and have no need to be one. Your struggle is on this side of the Dragonwall. Unless. . . . Does this come from your answers in the *ter'angreal*? Cairhien, and *Callandor*, and Rhuidean? I told you those answers can be cryptic. You could be misunderstanding them, and that could prove fatal. To more than you."

“You must trust me, Moiraine. As I have so often had to trust you.” His face might as well have belonged to an Aiel for all she could read in it. “I will trust you for now. Just do not wait to seek my guidance until it is too late.” *I will not let you go to the Shadow. I have worked too long to allow that. Whatever it takes.*

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CHAPTER 22

Out of the Stone

It was a strange procession Rand led out of the Stone and eastward, with white clouds shading the midday sun and a breath of air stirring across the city. By his order there had been no announcement, no proclamation, but slowly word spread of *something*: citizens stopped whatever they were doing and ran for vantage points. The Aiel were marching through the city, marching out of the city. People who had not seen them come in the night, who had only half-believed they were in the Stone at all, increasingly lined the streets along the route, filled the windows, even climbed onto slate rooftops, straddling roof peaks and upturned corners. Murmurs ran as they counted the Aiel. These few hundred could never have taken the Stone. The Dragon banner still flew above the fortress. There must yet be thousands of Aiel in there. And the Lord Dragon.

Rand rode easily in his shirtsleeves, sure none of the onlookers could take him for anyone out of the ordinary. An outlander, rich enough to ride—and on a superb dappled stallion, best of the Tairen bloodstock—a rich man traveling in the oddest of odd company, but surely just another man for that. Not even the leader of this strange company; that title was surely assigned to Lan or Moiraine despite the fact that they rode some little distance behind him, directly ahead of the Aiel. The soft awed susurration that accompanied his passing certainly rose for the Aiel, not him. These Tairen folk might even take him for a groom, riding his master's horse. Well, no, not that; not out in front as he was. It was a fine day, anyway. Not sweltering, merely warm. No one expected him to mete out justice, or rule a nation. He could simply enjoy riding in anonymity, enjoy the rare breeze. For a time he could forget the feel of his heron-branded palms on the reins. *For a little longer anyway*, he thought. *A little longer.*

"Rand," Egwene said, "do you really think it was right to let the Aiel take all those things?" He looked around as she heeled her gray mare, Mist, up beside him. From somewhere she had gotten a dark green dress with narrow divided skirts, and a green velvet band held her hair at the nape of her neck.

Moiraine and Lan still hung back half a dozen strides, she on her white mare in a full-skirted blue silk riding dress slashed with green, her dark hair caught in a golden net, he astride his great black warhorse, in a color-shifting Warder's cloak that probably brought as many *oohs* and *aahs* as the Aiel. When the breeze stirred the cloak, shades of green and brown and gray rippled across it; when it hung still it somehow seemed to fade into whatever was beyond it, so the eye appeared to be seeing *through* parts of Lan and his mount. It was not comfortable to look at.

Mat was there, too, slumped in his saddle and looking resigned, trying to keep apart from the Warder and Aes Sedai. He had chosen a nondescript brown gelding, an animal he called Pips; it took a good eye to notice the deep chest and strong withers that promised blunt-nosed Pips could likely match Rand's stallion or Lan's for speed and endurance. Mat's decision to come had been a surprise; Rand still did not know why. Friendship, maybe, and then again, maybe not. Mat could be odd in what he did and why.

"Didn't your friend Aviendha explain to you about 'the fifth'?" he asked.

"She mentioned something, but. . . . Rand, you don't think she . . . *took* . . . things, too?"

Behind Moiraine and Lan, behind Mat, behind Rhuarc at their head, the Aiel walked in long lines to either side of loaded pack mules, rank on rank four abreast. When Aiel took one of the holds of an enemy clan in the Waste, by custom—or maybe law; Rand did not understand it exactly—they carried away one-fifth of all it contained, excepting only food. They had seen no reason not to treat the Stone the same. Not that the mules held more than the barest fraction of a fraction of a fifth of the Stone's treasures. Rhuarc said greed had killed more men than steel. The wickerwork pack hampers, topped with rolled carpets and wall hangings, were lightly laden. Ahead lay an eventual hard crossing of the Spine of the World, and then a far harder trek across the Waste.

When do I tell them? he wondered. *Soon, now; it has to be soon.* Moiraine would doubtless think it daring, a bold stroke; she might even approve. Maybe. She thought she knew his whole plan, now, and made no bones of disapproving that; no doubt she wanted it over and done as soon as possible. But the Aiel. . . . *What if they refuse? Well, if they refuse, they refuse. I have to do it.* As for the fifth. . . . He did not think it would have been possible to stop the Aiel from taking it even had he wanted to, and he had not; they had earned their rewards, and he had no care to help Tairen lords keep what they had wrung from their people over generations.

"I saw her showing Rhuarc a silver bowl," he said aloud. "From the way her sack clinked when she stuffed the bowl in, there was more silver in there. Or maybe gold. Do you disapprove?"

"No." She drew the word out slowly, with a touch of doubt, but then her voice firmed. "I just hadn't thought of her. . . . The Tairens would not have stopped at a fifth if the positions had been reversed. They'd have carted away whatever wasn't part of the stonework, and stolen all the carts to haul it. Just because a people's ways are different doesn't mean they are wrong, Rand. You should know that."

He laughed softly. This was almost like old times, he ready to explain why and how she was wrong, and she snatching his position and tossing his own unvoiced explanation at him. His stallion danced a few steps, catching his mood. He patted the dapple's arched neck. A good day.

"That's a fine horse," she said. "What have you named him?"

"Jeade'en," he said cautiously, losing some of his good spirits. He was a little ashamed of the name, of his reasons for choosing it. One of his favorite books had always been *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*, and that great traveler had named his horse Jeade'en—True Finder, in the Old Tongue—because the animal had always been able to find the way home. It would have been nice to think Jeade'en might carry him home one day. Nice, but not likely, and he did not want anyone suspecting the cause for the name. Boyish fancies had no place in his life now. There was not much room for anything but what he had to do.

"A fine name," she said absently. He knew she had read the book, too, and half-expected her to recognize the name, but she seemed to be mulling over something else, chewing her lower lip pensively.

He was content with silence. The last dregs of the city gave way to country and pitiful scattered farms. Not even a Congar or a Coplin, Two River folk notorious for laziness among other things, would keep a place as run-down and ramshackle as these rough stone houses, walls slanting as if about to topple over on the chickens scratching in the dirt. Sagging barns leaned against laurels or spicewoods. Roofs of cracked and broken slates all looked as if they leaked. Goats bleated disconsolately in stone pens that might have been thrown together hastily that morning. Barefoot men and women hoed stoop-shouldered in unfenced fields, not looking up even when the large party was passing. Redbeaks and thrushes warbling in the small thickets were not enough to lighten the feel of oppressive gloom.

I have to do something about this. I. . . . No, not now. First things first. I've done what I could for them in a few weeks. I can't do anything more now. He tried not to look at the tumbledown farms. Were the olive groves in the south as bad? The people who worked those did not even own the land; it all belonged to High Lords. *No. The breeze. Nice, the way it cuts the heat. I can enjoy it a bit longer. I have to tell them, soon now.*

"Rand," Egwene said abruptly, "I want to talk to you." Something serious by her expression; those big dark eyes, fixed on him, held a light reminiscent of Nynaeve's when she was about to lecture. "I want to talk about Elayne."

"What about her?" he asked warily. He touched his pouch, where two letters crinkled against a small hard object. If they had not both been in the same elegantly flowing hand, he would not have believed they came from the same woman. And after all that kissing and snuggling. The High Lords were easier to understand than women.

"Why did you let her go in that way?"

Puzzled, he stared at her. "She wanted to go. I'd have had to tie her up to stop her. Besides, she'll be safer in Tanchico than near me—or Mat—if we are going to attract bubbles of evil the way Moiraine says. You would be, too."

"That isn't what I mean at all. Of course she wanted to go. And you had no right to stop her. But why didn't you tell her you wished she would stay?"

"She wanted to go," he repeated, and grew more confused when she rolled her eyes as if he were speaking gibberish. If he had no right to stop Elayne, and she wanted to go, why was he supposed to try to talk her out of it? Especially when she was safer gone.

Moiraine spoke, right behind him. "Are you ready to tell me the next secret? It has been clear you were keeping something from me. At the least I might be able to tell you if you are leading us over a cliff."

Rand sighed. He had not heard her and Lan closing up on him. And Mat as well, although still holding a distance between himself and the Aes

Sedai. Mat's face was a study, doubt and reluctance and grim determination all running across it by turns, especially when he glanced at Moiraine. He never looked at her directly, only from the edge of his eye.

"Are you sure you want to come, Mat?" Rand asked.

Mat shrugged and affected a grin, not a very confident one. "Who could pass up a chance to see bloody Rhuidean?" Egwene raised her eyebrows at him. "Oh, pardon my language, *Aes Sedai.* I've heard you say as bad, and for less cause, I'll wager." Egwene stared at him indignantly, but spots of color in her cheeks said he had scored a hit.

"Be glad Mat *is* here," Moiraine said to Rand, her voice cool, and not pleased. "You made a grave error letting Perrin run off, hiding his going from me. The world rests on your shoulders, but they must both support you or you will fall, and the world with you." Mat flinched, and Rand thought he very nearly turned his gelding and rode away on the spot.

"I know my duty," he told her. *And I know my fate*, he thought, but he did not say that aloud; he was not asking sympathy. "One of us had to go back, Moiraine, and Perrin wanted to. You're willing to let anything go to save the world. I . . . I do what I have to." The Warder nodded, though he said nothing; Lan would not disagree with Moiraine in front of others.

"And the next secret?" she said insistently. She would not give up until she had ferreted it out, and he had no reason to keep it secret any longer. Not this part of it.

"Portal Stones," he said simply. "If we are lucky."

"Oh, Light!" Mat groaned. "Bloody flaming Light! Don't grimace at me, Egwene! Lucky? Isn't once enough, Rand? You almost killed us, remember? No, worse than killed. I would rather ride back to one of those farms and ask for a job slopping pigs the rest of my life."

"You can go your own way if you want, Mat," Rand told him. Moiraine's calm face was a mask over fury, but he ignored the icy stare that tried to still his tongue. Even Lan looked disapproving, for all his hard face did not change very much; the Warder believed in duty before anything else. Rand would do his duty, but his friends. . . . He did not like making people do things; he would not do it to his friends. That much he could avoid, surely. "You've no reason to come to the Waste."

"Oh, yes I do. At least. . . . Oh, burn me! I've one life to give away, don't I? Why not like this?" Mat laughed nervously, and a bit wildly. "Bloody Portal Stones! Light!"

Rand frowned; he was the one they all said was supposed to go mad, but Mat was the one who seemed on the edge of it now.

Egwene blinked at Mat worriedly, but it was Rand she leaned toward. “Rand, Verin Sedai told me a little about Portal Stones. She told me about the . . . journey you took. Do you really mean to do this?”

“It’s what I have to do, Egwene.” He had to move quickly, and there was no quicker way than Portal Stones. Remnants of an Age older than the Age of Legends; even Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends had not understood them, it seemed. But there was no quicker way. If it worked the way he hoped.

Moiraine had listened to the exchange patiently. Especially to Mat’s part of it, though Rand could not see why. Now she said, “Verin also told me of your journey using Portal Stones. That was only a few people and horses, not hundreds, and if you did not almost kill everyone as Mat says, it yet sounded an experience no one would wish to repeat. Nor did it turn out as you expected. It also required a great deal of the Power; almost enough to kill you at least, Verin said. Even if you leave most of the Aiel behind, do you dare risk the attempt?”

“I have to,” he said, feeling at his belt pouch, at the small hard shape behind the letters, but she went right on as if he had not spoken.

“Are you even certain there *is* a Portal Stone in the Waste? Verin certainly knows more of them than I, but I have never heard of one. If there is, will it place us any closer to Rhuidean than we are right now?”

“Some six hundred or so years ago,” he told her, “a peddler tried to get a look at Rhuidean.” Another time it would have been a pleasure to be able to lecture her for a change. Not today. There was too much he did not know. “This fellow apparently didn’t see anything of it; he claimed to have seen a golden city up in the clouds, drifting over the mountains.”

“There are no cities in the Waste,” Lan said, “in the clouds or on the ground. I’ve fought the Aiel. They have no cities.”

Egwene nodded. “Aviendha told me she had never seen a city until she left the Waste.”

“Maybe so,” Rand said. “But the peddler also saw something sticking out of the side of one of those mountains. A Portal Stone. He described it perfectly. There isn’t anything else like a Portal Stone. When I described one to the chief librarian in the Stone . . .” Without naming what he was after, he did not add. “. . . he recognized it, even if he didn’t know what it was, enough to show me four on an old map of Tear—”

“Four?” Moiraine sounded startled. “All in Tear? Portal Stones are not so common as that.”

“Four,” Rand said definitely. The bony old librarian had been certain, even digging out a tattered yellowed manuscript telling of efforts to move the “unknown artifacts of an earlier Age” to the Great Holding. Every attempt had failed, and the Tairens had finally given up. That was confirmation to Rand; Portal Stones resisted being moved. “One lies not an hour’s ride from where we are,” he continued. “The Aiel allowed the peddler to leave, since he was a peddler. With one of his mules and as much water as he could carry on his back. Somehow he made it as far as a *stedding* in the Spine of the World, where he met a man named Soran Milo, who was writing a book called *The Killers of the Black Veil*. The librarian brought me a battered copy when I asked for books on the Aiel. Milo apparently based it all on Aiel who came to trade at the *stedding*, and he got almost everything wrong anyway, according to Rhuarc, but a Portal Stone can’t be anything but a Portal Stone.” He had examined other maps and manuscripts, dozens of them, supposedly studying Tear and its history, learning the land; *no* one could have had a clue what he intended before a few minutes ago.

Moiraine sniffed, and her white mare, Aldieb, frisked a few steps, picking up her irritation. “A supposed story told by a supposed peddler who claimed to have seen a golden city floating in the clouds. Has Rhuarc seen this Portal Stone? He has actually been to Rhiudean. Even if this peddler did go into the Waste, and did see a Portal Stone, it could have been anywhere. A man telling a story usually tries to better what really happened. A city floating in the clouds?”

“How do you know it doesn’t?” he said. Rhuarc had been willing to laugh at all the wrong things Milo had written about Aiel, but he had not been very forthcoming about Rhuidean. No, more than that; or less, rather. The Aielman had refused even to comment on the parts of the book supposedly about Rhuidean. Rhuidean, in the lands of the Jenn Aiel, the clan which is not; that was almost the extent of what Rhuarc would say about it. Rhuidean was not to be spoken of.

The Aes Sedai was not best pleased with his flippant remark, but he did not care. She had kept too many secrets herself, made him follow her on blind trust too often. Let it be her turn. She had to learn that he was not a puppet. *I'll take her advice when I think it's right, but I won't dance on Tar Valon's strings again.* He would die on his own terms.

Egwene moved her gray horse closer, riding almost knee-to-knee with him. "Rand, do you really mean to risk our lives on a . . . a chance? Rhuarc did not tell you anything, did he? When I ask Aviendha about Rhuidean, she shuts up tight as a hickory nut." Mat looked sick.

Rand kept his face still, not letting his flash of shame show. He had not meant to frighten his friends. "There is a Portal Stone there," he maintained. He rubbed the hard shape in his pouch again. This had to work.

The librarian's maps had been old, but in a way that was a help. The grasslands they rode now had been forest when those maps were drawn, but few trees remained, far-scattered scraggly copses of white oak and pine and maidenhair, tall solitary trees he did not recognize, with gnarled spindly trunks. He could make out the shape of the land easily, hills shrouded mainly in high grass now.

On the maps two tall bent ridges, one close behind the other, had pointed to the cluster of round hills where the Portal Stone was. If the maps had been well made. If the librarian really had recognized his description, and the green diamond mark actually meant ancient ruins as he claimed. *Why would he lie? I'm getting too suspicious. No, I have to be suspicious. As trusting as a viper, and as cold.* He did not like it, though.

To the north he could just make out hills with no trees at all, speckled with moving shapes that must be horses. The High Lords' herds, grazing across the site of the old Ogier grove. He hoped Perrin and Loial had gotten away safely. *Help them, Perrin,* he thought. *Help them somehow, because I can't.*

The Ogier grove meant the folded ridges must be close, and soon he spotted them a little to the south, like two arrows one inside the other, a few trees along the top making a thin line against the sky. Beyond, low round hills like grass-covered bubbles ran into one another. More hills than on the old map. Too many, for all the patch encompassed less than a square mile. If they did not correspond to the map, which one held the Portal Stone on its side?

"The Aiel have numbers," Lan said quietly, "and sharp eyes."

With a nod of gratitude, Rand reined Jeade'en in, falling back to put the problem before Rhuarc. He only described the Portal Stone, not saying what it was; there would be time enough for that when it was found. He was good at keeping secrets now. Rhuarc probably had no idea what a Portal Stone was, anyway. Few did except for Aes Sedai. He had not known until someone told him.

Striding along beside the dapple stallion, the Aielman frowned slightly—as much as a worried grimace from most other men—then nodded. “We can find this thing.” He raised his voice. *“Aethan Dor! Far Aldazar Din! Duadhe Mahdi’in! Far Dareis Mai! Seia Doon! Sha’mad Conde!”*

As he called out, members of the named warrior societies trotted forward, until a good quarter of the Aiel clustered around him and Rand. Red Shields. Brothers of the Eagle. Water Seekers. Maidens of the Spear. Black Eyes. Thunder Walkers.

Rand picked out Egwene’s friend, Aviendha, a tall, pretty woman with a haughty unsmiling stare. Maidens had guarded his door, but he did not think he had seen her before the Aiel gathered to leave the Stone. She looked back at him, proud as a green-eyed hawk, then tossed her head and turned her attention to the clan chief.

Well, I wanted to be ordinary again, he thought, a touch ruefully. The Aiel certainly gave him that. They offered even the clan chief only a respectful hearing, without any of the elaborate deference a lord would exact, and obedience that seemed between equals. He could hardly expect more for himself.

Rhuarc gave instructions in few words, and the listening Aiel fanned out ahead into the patch of hills, running easily, some veiling themselves just in case. The rest waited, standing or squatting beside the loaded pack mules.

They represented almost every clan—except the Jenn Aiel, of course; Rand could not get it straight whether the Jenn really existed or not, since the way the Aiel mentioned them, which they seldom did, it could be either way—including some clans that had blood feuds, and others that often fought each other. He had learned that much about them. Not for the first time, he wondered what had held them together so far. Was it just their prophecies of the Stone falling, and the search for He Who Comes With the Dawn?

“More than that,” Rhuarc said, and Rand realized he had spoken his thoughts aloud. “Prophecy brought us over the Dragonwall, and the name that is not spoken drew us to the Stone of Tear.” The name he meant was

"People of the Dragon," a secret name for the Aiel; only clan chiefs and Wise Ones knew or used it, apparently seldom and only with each other. "For the rest? No one may shed the blood of another of the same society, of course, yet mixing Shaarad with Goshien, Taardad and Nakai with Shaido. . . . Even I might have danced the spears with the Shaido, if the Wise Ones had not made everyone who crossed the Dragonwall swear water oath to treat any Aiel as of the same society on this side of the mountains. Even sneaking Shaido. . . ." He shrugged slightly. "You see? It is not easy, even for me."

"These Shaido are enemies of yours?" Rand fumbled the name; in the Stone, the Aiel had gone by societies, not clans.

"We have avoided blood feud," Rhuarc said, "but Taardad and Shaido have never been friendly; the septs sometimes raid each other, steal goats or cattle. But the oaths have held with us all against three blood feuds and a dozen old hatreds between clans or septs. It helps now that we journey toward Rhuidean, even if some will leave us before. None may shed the blood of one traveling to or from Rhuidean." The Aielman looked up at Rand, face completely expressionless. "It may be that soon no one of us will shed another's blood." It was impossible to say whether he found the prospect pleasing.

An ululating cry came from one of the Maidens, standing atop a hill and waving her arms over her head.

"They have found your stone column, it seems," Rhuarc said.

Gathering her reins, Moiraine gave Rand a level look as he rode past her, eagerly heeling Jeade'en to a gallop. Egwene reined her mare near to Mat, leaning from her saddle with a hand on the high pommel of his to engage him in close conversation. She seemed to be trying to make him tell her something, or admit something, and from the vehemence of Mat's gestures, he was either innocent as a babe or lying in his teeth.

Flinging himself out of the saddle, Rand hurriedly climbed up the gentle slope to examine what the Maiden—it was Aviendha—had found half-buried in the ground and obscured by long grass. A weathered gray stone column, at least three spans long and a pace thick. Strange symbols covered every exposed inch, each surrounded by a narrow line of markings he thought were writing. Even if he could have read the language—if it was one—the script—if that was what it was—had long since worn to illegibility. The symbols he could make out a little better. Some of them; many might as well have been the marks of rain and wind.

Pulling grass by the handful so he could see better, he glanced at Aviendha. She had dropped her *shoufa* around her shoulders, baring short reddish hair, and was watching him with a flat, hard expression. “You don’t like me,” he said. “Why?” There was one symbol he had to find, the only one he knew.

“Like you?” she said. “You may be He Who Comes With the Dawn, a man of destiny. Who can like or dislike such? Besides, you walk free, a wetlander despite your face, yet going to Rhuidean for honor, while I. . . .”

“While you what?” he asked when she stopped. He searched his way slowly upslope. Where was it? Two parallel wavy lines crossed at an angle by an odd squiggle. *Light, if it’s buried, it’ll take us hours to turn this over.* Abruptly he laughed. Not hours. He could channel and lift the thing out of the ground, or Moiraine could, or Egwene. A Portal Stone might resist being moved, but surely they could move it that much. Channeling would not help him find the wavy lines, though. Only feeling his way along the stone would do that.

Instead of answering, the Aiel woman squatted easily with her short spears across her knees. “You have treated Elayne badly. I would not care, but Elayne is near sister to Egwene, who is my friend. Yet Egwene likes you still, so for her sake I will try.”

Still searching the thick column, he shook his head. Elayne again. Sometimes he thought women all belonged to a guild, the way craftsmen in cities did. Put a foot wrong with one, and the next ten you met knew of it, and disapproved.

His fingers stopped, returned to the bit he had just examined. It was weathered almost beyond making out, but he was sure it was the wavy lines. They represented a Portal Stone on Toman Head, not in the Waste, but they located what had been the base of the thing when it stood upright. Symbols at the top represented worlds; those at the bottom, Portal Stones. With a symbol from the top and one from the bottom, he could supposedly travel to a given Portal Stone in a given world. With just one from the bottom, he knew he could reach a Portal Stone in this world. The Portal Stone near Rhuidean, for instance. If he knew the symbol for it. Now was when he needed luck, needed that *ta’veren* tugging at chance to favor him.

A hand reached over his shoulder, and Rhuarc said in a reluctant voice, “These two are used for Rhuidean in old writings. Long ago, even the name was not written.” He traced two triangles, each surrounding what appeared to be forked lightnings, one pointing left, one right.

“Do you know what this is?” Rand asked. The Aielman looked away. “Burn me, Rhuarc, I have to know. I know you don’t want to talk of it, but you have to tell me. Tell me, Rhuarc. Have you ever seen its like before?”

The other man took a deep breath before answering. “I have seen its like.” Each word came as if dragged. “When a man goes to Rhuidean, Wise Ones and clansmen wait on the slopes of Chaendaer near a stone like this.” Aviendha stood up and walked away stiffly; Rhuarc glanced after her, frowning. “I know no more of it, Rand al’Thor. May I never know shade if I do.”

Rand traced the unreadable script surrounding the triangles. Which one? Only one would take him where he wanted to go. The second might land him on the other side of the world, or the bottom of the ocean.

The rest of the Aiel had gathered at the foot of the hill with their pack mules. Moiraine and the others dismounted and climbed the easy slope, leading their horses. Mat had Jeade’en as well as his own brown gelding, keeping the stallion well away from Lan’s Mandarb. The two stallions eyed one another fiercely now that they had no riders.

“You truly don’t know what you are doing, do you?” Egwene protested. “Moiraine, stop him. We can ride to Rhuidean. Why are you letting him go on with this? Why don’t you say something?”

“What would you suggest I do?” the Aes Sedai said dryly. “I can hardly drag him away by his ear. We may be about to see how useful Dreaming really is.”

“Dreaming?” Egwene said sharply. “What does Dreaming have to do with this?”

“Will you two be quiet?” Rand made himself sound patient. “I am trying to decide.” Egwene stared at him indignantly; Moiraine showed no emotion at all, but she watched intently.

“Do we have to do it this way?” Mat said. “What do you have against riding?” Rand only looked at him, and he shrugged uncomfortably. “Oh, burn me. If you’re trying to decide. . . .” Taking both horses’ reins in one hand, he dug a coin from his pocket, a gold Tar Valon mark, and sighed. “It would be the same coin, wouldn’t it.” He rolled the coin across the backs of his fingers. “I’m . . . lucky sometimes, Rand. Let my luck choose. Head, the one that points to your right; flame, the other. What do you say?”

“This is the most ridiculous,” Egwene began, but Moiraine silenced her with a touch on the arm.

Rand nodded. “Why not?” Egwene muttered something; all he caught were “men” and “boys,” but it did not sound a compliment.

The coin spun into the air off Mat’s thumb, gleaming dully in the sun. At its peak, Mat snatched it back and slapped it down on the back of his other hand, then hesitated. “It’s a bloody thing to be trusting to the toss of a coin, Rand.”

Rand laid his palm on one of the symbols without looking. “This one,” he said. “You chose this one.”

Mat peeked at the coin and blinked. “You’re right. How did you know?”

“It has to work for me sooner or later.” None of them understood—he could see that—but it did not matter. Lifting his hand, he looked at what he and Mat had picked. The triangle pointed left. The sun had slid down from its apex. He had to do this right. A mistake, and they could lose time, not gain it. That had to be the worst outcome. It had to be.

Standing, he dug into his pouch and pulled out the small hard object, a carving of shiny dark green stone that fit easily into his hand, a round-faced round-bodied man sitting cross-legged with a sword across his knees. He rubbed a thumb over the figure’s bald head. “Gather everyone close. Everyone. Rhuarc, have them bring those pack animals up here. Everyone has to be as close to me as possible.”

“Why?” the Aielman asked.

“We’re going to Rhuidean.” Rand bounced the carving on his palm and bent to pat the Portal Stone. “To Rhuidean. Right now.”

Rhuarc gave him a long flat look, then straightened, already calling to the other Aiel.

Moiraine took a step closer up the grassy slope. “What is that?” she asked curiously.

“An *angreal,*” Rand said, turning it in his hand. “One that works for men. I found it in the Great Holding when I was hunting that doorway. It was the sword that made me pick it up, and then I knew. If you are wondering how I mean to channel enough of the Power to take us all—Aiel, pack mules, everybody and everything—this is it.”

“Rand,” Egwene said anxiously, “I am sure you think you are doing what is best, but are you certain? Are you certain that *angreal* is strong enough? I can’t even be sure it *is* one. I believe you if you say it is, but *angreal* vary, Rand. At least, those that women can use do. Some are more potent than others, and size or shape is no guide.”

“Of course I’m certain,” he lied. There had been no way to test it, not for this purpose, not without letting half of Tear know he was up to something, but he thought it would do. Just. And as small as it was, no one would know it was gone from the Stone unless they decided to inventory the Holding. Not likely, that.

“You leave *Callandor* behind and bring this,” Moiraine murmured. “You seem to have considerable knowledge of using Portal Stones. More than I would have thought.”

“Verin told me a good bit,” he said. Verin had, but it had been Lanfear who first explained them to him. He had known her as Selene, then, but he did not intend explaining that to Moiraine any more than he would tell her of the woman’s offer of help. The Aes Sedai had taken the news of Lanfear’s appearance too calmly, even for her. And she had that weighing look in her eyes, as if she had him on balance scales in her mind.

“Take a care, Rand al’Thor,” she said in that icy, musical voice. “Any *ta’veren* shapes the Pattern to one degree or another, but a *ta’veren* such as you might rip the Age Lace for all of time.”

He wished he knew what she was thinking. He wished he knew what *she* was planning.

The Aiel climbed the hill with their pack mules, covering the slope as they crowded close around him and the Portal Stone, crowding in shoulder to shoulder on everyone but Moiraine and Egwene. Those two they left a little space. Rhuarc nodded at him as if saying, It is done, it is in your hands now.

Hefting the shiny green *angreal*, he thought of telling the Aiel to leave the animals, but there was the question of whether they would, and he wanted to arrive with all of them, with all feeling he had done well by them. Goodwill might be in short supply in the Waste. They watched him with imperturbable faces. Some had veiled themselves, though. Mat, nervously rolling that Tar Valon mark across the backs of his fingers over and over, and Egwene, sweat beading on her face, were the only ones who seemed anxious. There was no point in waiting any longer. He had to move faster than anyone thought he could.

He wrapped himself in the Void and reached out for the True Source, that sickly flickering light that was always there, just over his shoulder. The Power filled him, breath of life, wind to uproot oaks, summer wind sweetened with flowers, foul waftings from a midden heap. Floating in emptiness, he fixed the lightning-laced triangle before him and reached through the *angreal*, drew deeply at the raging torrent of *saidin*. He had to carry them all. It had to work. Holding that symbol, he pulled at the One Power, pulled it into him until he was sure he would burst. Pulled more. More.

The world seemed to wink out of existence.

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CHAPTER 23

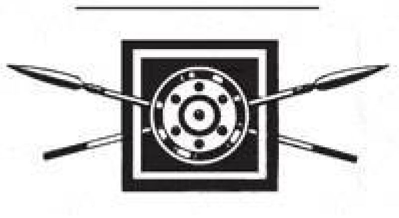

Beyond the Stone

Egwene stumbled, flinging her arms around Mist’s neck as the ground tilted under her feet. All about her, Aiel contended with braying, sliding pack mules on a steep rocky slope where nothing grew. Heat remembered from *Tel’aran’rhiod* hammered her. The air shimmered before her eyes: the ground burned her feet through the soles of her shoes. Her skin prickled painfully for a moment, then sweat gushed from every pore. It only dampened her dress, and the sweat seemed to evaporate immediately.

The struggling mules and tall Aiel nearly hid the surroundings from her, but she saw a bit in flashes between them. A thick gray stone column angled out of the ground not three paces from her, scoured by windblown sand until there was no telling whether it had ever been twin to the Portal Stone in Tear. Rugged slab-sided mountains that looked carved by a mad giant’s axe broiled beneath a blazing sun in a cloudless sky. Yet in the center of the long, barren valley far below, a mass of dense fog hung, billowing like clouds; that scalding sun should surely have burned it off in moments, but the fog rolled untouched. And out of that roiling gray stuck the tops of towers, some spired, some ending abruptly as though the masons still worked.

“He was right,” she murmured to herself. “A city in clouds.”

Clutching his gelding’s bridle, Mat was staring around wide-eyed. “We made it!” He laughed at her. “We made it, Egwene, and without any. . . . Burn me, we made it!” He tugged open his shirt laces at the neck. “Light, it’s hot. Burn me for true!”

Abruptly she realized Rand was on his knees, head down, supporting himself with one hand on the ground. Pulling her mare behind her, she pushed through the milling Aiel to him just as Lan helped him to his feet. Moiraine was already there, studying Rand with apparent calm—and the slight tightness at the corners of her mouth that meant she would like to box his ears.

“I did it,” Rand panted, looking around. The Warder was all that was holding him upright; his face was drained and drawn, like a man on his deathbed.

“You came close,” Moiraine said coolly. Very coolly. “The *angreal* was not sufficient to the task. You must not do this again. If you take chances, they must be reasoned and for a strong purpose. They must be.”

“I don’t take chances, Moiraine. Mat’s the fellow for chances.” Rand forced his right hand open; the *angreal*, the fat little man, had driven the point of its sword into his flesh, right into the branded heron. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I did need one a little stronger. A little bit, maybe. . . .” He gave a huffing laugh. “It worked, Moiraine. That is what’s important. I’ve outrun them all. It worked.”

“That is what matters,” Lan said, nodding.

Egwene made a vexed *tsk.* Men. One almost killed himself, then tried to make a joke of it, and another told him he had done the right thing. Did they never grow up?

“The fatigue of channeling is not like other tiredness,” Moiraine said. “I cannot rid you of it completely, not when you have channeled as much as you did, but I will do what I can. Perhaps what remains will remind you to be more careful in future.” She *was* angry; there was a definite hint of satisfaction in her voice.

The glow of *saidar* surrounded the Aes Sedai as she reached up to take Rand’s head in her hands. A shuddering gasp burst out of him, and he shivered uncontrollably, then jerked back from her, pulling free of Lan as well.

“Ask, Moiraine,” Rand said coldly, stuffing the *angreal* into his belt pouch. “Ask, first. I’m not your pet dog that you can do whatever you want to whenever you want.” He scrubbed his hands together to rub away the tiny trickle of blood.

Egwene made that vexed sound again. Childish, and ungrateful to boot. He could stand by himself now, though his eyes still looked weary, and she did not have to see his palm to know the tiny puncture was gone as if it had never been. Purely ungrateful. Surprisingly, Lan did not call him down for speaking to Moiraine in that fashion.

It came to her that the Aiel had gone absolutely still now that they had the mules quieted. They stared outward warily, not toward the valley and the fog-shrouded city that must be Rhuidean, but at two camps, one to either side of them perhaps half a mile away. The two clusters of dozens upon dozens of low, open-sided tents, one twice as large as the other, clung to the mountain slope and very nearly disappeared against it, but the gray-brown Aiel in each camp were clearly visible, short spears and arrow-nocked horn bows in hand, veiling themselves if they were not already. They seemed poised on the balls of their feet, ready to attack.

“The peace of Rhuidean,” a woman’s voice called from upslope, and Egwene could feel the tension leaving the Aiel surrounding her. Those among the tents began lowering their veils, though they still watched cautiously.

There was a third, much smaller encampment farther up the mountain, she realized, a few of the low tents on a small level patch. Four women were walking down from that camp, sedate and dignified in dark bulky skirts and loose white blouses, with brown or gray shawls around their shoulders despite heat that was beginning to make Egwene feel light-headed, and many necklaces and bracelets of ivory and gold. Two had white hair, one hair the color of the sun, flowing down their backs to the waist and held back from their faces by folded kerchiefs tied around the forehead.

Egwene recognized one of the white-haired women: Amys, the Wise One she had met in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Again she was struck by the contrast between Amys’s sun-darkened features and her snowy hair; the Wise One just did not look old enough. The second white-haired woman had a creased grandmotherly face, and one of the others, with gray-streaked dark hair, seemed almost as old. She was sure all four were Wise Ones, very likely the same who had signed that letter to Moiraine.

The Aiel women stopped ten paces upslope from the gathering around the Portal Stone, and the grandmotherly woman spread her open hands, speaking in an aged yet powerful voice. “The peace of Rhuidean be on you. Who comes to Chaendaer may return to their holds in peace. There shall be no blood on the ground.”

With that the Aiel from Tear began to separate, quickly apportioning the pack animals and the contents of the hampers. They were not dividing by societies now; Egwene saw Maidens going with several groups, some of which immediately began making their way around the mountain, avoiding each other and the camps, peace of Rhuidean or no. Others strode toward one or the other large cluster of tents, where finally weapons were being put down.

Not everyone had been sure of the peace of Rhuidean. Lan released the hilt of his still-sheathed sword, although Egwene had not seen him put his hands on it, and Mat hastily slipped a pair of knives back into his sleeves. Rand stood with his thumbs tucked behind his belt, but there was clear relief in his eyes.

Egwene looked for Aviendha, to ask a few questions before she approached Amys. Surely the Aiel woman would be a little more forthcoming about the Wise Ones here, in her own land. She spotted the Maiden, carrying a large clinking jute sack, and two rolled wall hangings over her shoulder, as she started briskly for one of the big encampments.

“You will stay, Aviendha,” the Wise One with gray streaks in her hair said loudly. Aviendha stopped in her tracks, not looking at anyone.

Egwene started to go to her, but Moiraine murmured, “Best not to interfere. I doubt she will want sympathy, or see anything else if you offer it.”

Egwene nodded in spite of herself. Aviendha did look as if she wanted to be left alone. What did the Wise Ones want with her? Had she broken some rule, some law?

She herself would not have minded some more company. She felt very exposed standing there with no Aiel around her, and all those among the tents watching. The Aiel who had come from the Stone had been courteous even when not exactly friendly; the watchers looked neither. It was a temptation to embrace *saidar.* Only Moiraine, serene and cool as ever despite perspiration on her face, and Lan, as unperturbed as the rocks around them, kept her from it. They would know if there was danger. As long as they accepted the situation, she would. But she did wish those Aiel would stop staring.

Rhuarc climbed the slope with a smile. “I am come back, Amys, though not by the way you expected, I will wager.”

“I knew you would be here today, shade of my heart.” She reached up to touch his cheek, letting her brown shawl fall down onto her arms. “My sister-wife sends her heart to you.”

“That’s what you meant about Dreaming,” Egwene said softly to Moiraine. Lan was the only other close enough to hear. “That’s why you were willing to let Rand try to bring us here by Portal Stone. They knew about it, and told you in that letter. No, that doesn't make sense. If they had mentioned a Portal Stone, you wouldn't have tried talking him out of it. They knew we'd be here, though."

Moiraine nodded without taking her eyes from the Wise Ones. "They wrote that they would meet us here, on Chaendaer, today. I thought it . . . unlikely . . . until Rand mentioned the Stones. When he was sure—certain beyond my dissuading—that one existed here. . . . Let us just say it suddenly seemed *very* likely we would reach Chaendaer today."

Egwene took a deep breath of hot air. So that was one of the things Dreamers could do. She could not wait to start learning. She wanted to go after Rhuarc and introduce herself to Amys—reintroduce herself—but Rhuarc and Amys were looking into one another's eyes in a way that excluded intruders.

A man had come out from each of the camps, one tall and broad-shouldered, flame-haired and still short of his middle years, the other older and darker, no less tall but more slender. They stopped a few paces to either side of Rhuarc and the Wise Ones. The older, leathery-faced man carried no visible weapon except his heavy-bladed belt knife, but the other carried spears and hide buckler, and held his head high with a fiercely prideful scowl directed at Rhuarc.

Rhuarc ignored him, turning to the older man. "I see you, Heirn. Has one of the sept chiefs decided I am already dead? Who seeks to take my place?"

"I see you, Rhuarc. No one of the Taardad has entered Rhuidean, or seeks to. Amys said she would come meet you here today, and these other Wise Ones traveled with her. I brought these men of the Jindo sept to see they arrived safely."

Rhuarc nodded solemnly. Egwene had the feeling something important had just been said, or hinted at. The Wise Ones did not look at the fiery-haired man, and neither did Rhuarc or Heirn, but from the color rising in the fellow's cheeks, they might as well have been staring at him. She glanced at Moiraine and got a tiny shake of the head; the Aes Sedai did not understand either.

Lan leaned down between them, speaking quietly. "A Wise One can go anywhere safely, into any hold regardless of clan. I think not even blood feud touches a Wise One. This Heirn came to protect Rhuarc from whoever the other camp is, but it would not be honorable to say it." Moiraine lifted one eyebrow a trifle, and he added, "I don't know much of them, but I fought them often before I met you. You have never asked me about them."

"I will remedy that," the Aes Sedai said dryly.

Turning back to the Wise Ones and the three men made Egwene's head swim. Lan pushed an unstoppered leather water bottle into her hands, and she tilted her head back to drink gratefully. The water was lukewarm and smelled of leather, but in the heat it tasted fresh from the spring. She offered the half-empty bottle to Moiraine, who drank sparingly and handed it back. Egwene was glad to gulp down the rest, closing her eyes; water splashed over her head, and she opened them again quickly. Lan was emptying another water bottle over her, and Moiraine's hair already dripped.

"This heat can kill if you are not used to it," the Warder explained as he wet down a pair of plain white linen scarves pulled from his coat. At his instructions, she and Moiraine tied the soaked cloths around their foreheads. Rand and Mat were doing the same. Lan left his own head unprotected to the sun; nothing seemed to faze the man.

The silence between Rhuarc and the Aielmen with him had stretched out, but the clan chief finally turned to the flame-haired man. "Do the Shaido lack a clan chief, then, Couladin?"

"Suladric is dead," the man answered. "Muradin has entered Rhuidean. Should he fail, I will enter."

"You have not asked, Couladin," the grandmotherly Wise One said in that reedy yet strong voice. "Should Muradin fail, ask then. We are four, enough to say yes or no."

"It is my right, Bair," Couladin said angrily. He had the look of a man not used to being balked.

"It is your right to ask," the thin-voiced woman replied. "It is ours to answer. I do not think you will be allowed to enter, whatever happens to Muradin. You are flawed within, Couladin." She shifted her gray shawl, rewrapping it around her angular shoulders in a way that suggested she had said more than she considered necessary.

The flame-haired man's face grew red. "My first-brother will return marked as clan chief, and we will lead the Shaido to great honor! We mean to—!" He snapped his mouth shut, almost quivering.

Egwene thought she would keep an eye on him if he remained anywhere close to her. He reminded her of the Congars and the Coplins back home, full of boasts and trouble. She had certainly never before seen any Aiel display so much raw emotion.

Amys seemed to have dismissed him already. “There is one who came with you, Rhuarc,” she said. Egwene expected the woman to speak to her, but Amys’s eyes swept straight to Rand. Moiraine was obviously not surprised. Egwene wondered what had been in that letter from these four Wise Ones that the Aes Sedai had not revealed.

Rand looked taken aback for a moment, hesitating, but then he strode up the slope to stand near Rhuarc at eye level to the women. Sweat plastered his white shirt to his body and made darker patches on his breeches. With a twisted white cloth tied around his head, he certainly did not look so grand as he had in the Heart of the Stone. He made an odd bow, left foot advanced, left hand on knee, right hand outstretched palm upward.

“By the right of blood,” he said, “I ask leave to enter Rhuidean, for the honor of our ancestors and the memory of what was.”

Amys blinked in evident surprise, and Bair murmured, “An ancient form, but the question has been asked. I answer yes.”

“I also answer yes, Bair,” Amys said. “Seana?”

“This man is no Aiel,” Couladin broke in angrily. Egwene suspected he was very nearly always angry. “It is death for him to be on this ground! Why has Rhuarc brought him? Why—?”

“Do you wish to be a Wise One, Couladin?” Bair asked, a frown deepening the creases on her face. “Put on a dress and come to me, and I will see if you can be trained. Until then, be silent when Wise Ones speak!”

“My mother was Aiel,” Rand said in a strained voice.

Egwene stared at him. Kari al’Thor had died while Egwene was barely out of her cradle, but if Tam’s wife had been Aiel, Egwene would certainly have heard of it. She glanced at Moiraine; the Aes Sedai was watching, smooth-faced, calm. Rand did look a great deal like the Aielmen, with his height and gray-blue eyes and reddish hair, but this was ridiculous.

“Not your mother,” Amys said slowly. “Your father.” Egwene shook her head. This approached madness. Rand opened his mouth, but Amys did not let him speak. “Seana, how do you say?”

“Yes,” the woman with gray-streaked hair said. “Melaine?”

The last of the four, a handsome woman with golden-red hair, no more than ten or fifteen years older than Egwene, hesitated. “It must be done,” she said finally, and unwillingly. “I answer yes.”

“You have been answered,” Amys told Rand. “You may go into Rhuidean, and—” She cut off as Mat scrambled up to copy Rand’s bow awkwardly.

“I also ask to enter Rhuidean,” he said shakily.

The four Wise Ones stared at him. Rand’s head whipped around in surprise. Egwene thought no one could be more shocked than she was, but Couladin proved her wrong. Lifting one of his spears with a snarl, he stabbed at Mat’s chest.

The glow of *saidar* surrounded Amys and Melaine, and flows of Air lifted the fiery-haired man and flung him back a dozen paces.

Egwene stared, wide-eyed. They could channel. At least, two of them could. Suddenly Amys’s youthfully smooth features beneath that white hair leaped out at her for what they were, something very close to Aes Sedai agelessness. Moiraine was absolutely still. Egwene could almost hear her thoughts buzzing, though. This was plainly as much of a surprise to the Aes Sedai as to herself.

Couladin scrambled to his feet in a crouch. “You accept this outlander as one of us,” he rasped, pointing at Rand with the spear he had attempted to use on Mat. “If you say it, then so be it. He is still a soft wetlander, and Rhuidean will kill him.” The spear swung to Mat, who was trying to slip a knife back up his sleeve without being noticed. “But he—it is death for him to be here, and sacrilege for him to even *ask* to enter Rhuidean. None but those of the blood may enter. None!”

“Go back to your tents, Couladin,” Melaine said coldly. “And you, Heirn. And you, as well, Rhuarc. This is business of Wise Ones, and none of men save those who have asked. Go!” Rhuarc and Heirn nodded and walked away toward the smaller set of tents, talking together. Couladin glared at Rand and Mat, and at the Wise Ones, before jerking around and stalking off toward the larger camp.

The Wise Ones exchanged glances. Troubled glances, Egwene would have said, though they were almost as good as Aes Sedai at keeping their faces blank when they wanted to.

“It is not permitted,” Amys said finally. “Young man, you do not know what you have done. Go back with the others.” Her eyes brushed across Egwene and Moiraine and Lan, standing alone now with the horses near the wind-scoured Portal Stone. Egwene could not find any recognition for her in that glance.

"I can't." Mat sounded desperate. "I've come this far, but this doesn't count, does it? I have to go to Rhuidean."

"It is not permitted," Melaine said sharply, her long red-gold hair swinging as she shook her head. "You have no Aiel blood in your veins."

Rand had been studying Mat all this time. "He comes with me," he said suddenly. "You gave me permission, and he can come with me whether you say he can or not." He stared back at the Wise Ones, not defiantly, merely determined, set in his mind. Egwene knew him like this; he would not back down whatever they said.

"It is not permitted," Melaine said firmly, addressing her sisters. She pulled her shawl up to cover her head. "The law is clear. No woman may go to Rhuidean more than twice, no man more than once, and none at all save they have the blood of Aiel."

Seana shook her head. "Much is changing, Melaine. The old ways. . . ."

"If he is the one," Bair said, "the Time of Change is upon us. Aes Sedai stand on Chaendaer, and *Aan'allein* with his shifting cloak. Can we hold to the old ways still? Knowing how much is to change?"

"We cannot hold," Amys said. "All stands on the edge of change, now. Melaine?" The golden-haired woman looked at the mountains around them, and the fog-shrouded city below, then sighed and nodded. "It is done," Amys said, turning to Rand and Mat. "You," she began, then paused. "By what name do you call yourself?"

"Rand al'Thor."

"Mat. Mat Cauthon."

Amys nodded. "You, Rand al'Thor, must go into the heart of Rhuidean, to the very center. If you wish to go with him, Mat Cauthon, so be it, but know that most men who enter Rhuidean's heart do not come back, and some return mad. You may carry neither food nor water, in remembrance of our wanderings after the Breaking. You must go to Rhuidean unarmed, save with your hands and your own heart, to honor the Jenn. If you have weapons, place them on the ground before us. They will be here for you when you return. If you return."

Rand unsheathed his belt knife and laid it at Amys's feet, then after a moment added the green stone carving of the round little man. "That is the best I can do," he said.

Mat began with his belt knife and kept right on, pulling knives from his sleeves and under his coat, even one from down the back of his neck, fashioning a pile that seemed to impress even the Aiel women. He made as if to stop, looked at the women, then took two more from each boot top. “I forgot them,” he said with a grin and shrug. The Wise Ones’ unblinking looks wiped his grin away.

“They are pledged to Rhuidean,” Amys said formally, looking over the men’s heads, and the other three responded together, “Rhuidean belongs to the dead.”

“They may not speak to the living until they return,” she intoned, and again the others answered. “The dead do not speak to the living.”

“We do not see them, until they stand among the living once more.” Amys drew her shawl across her eyes, and one by one the other three did the same. Faces hidden, they spoke in unison. “Begone from among the living, and do not haunt us with memories of what is lost. Speak not of what the dead see.” Silent then, they stood there, holding their shawls up, waiting.

Rand and Mat looked at one another. Egwene wanted to go to them, to speak to them—they wore the fixed too-steady faces of men who did not want anyone to know they were uneasy or afraid—but that might break the ceremony.

Finally Mat barked a laugh. “Well, I suppose the dead can talk to each other, at least. I wonder if this counts for. . . . No matter. Do you suppose it’s all right if we ride?”

“I don’t think so,” Rand said. “I think we have to walk.”

“Oh, burn my aching feet. We might as well get on with it then. It’ll take half the afternoon just to get there. If we’re lucky.”

Rand gave Egwene a reassuring smile as they started down the mountain, as if to convince her there was no danger, nothing untoward. Mat’s grin was the sort he wore when doing something particularly foolish, like trying to dance on the peak of a roof.

“You aren’t going to do anything . . . *crazy* . . . are you?” Mat said. “I mean to come back alive.”

“So do I,” Rand replied. “So do I.”

They passed from hearing, growing smaller and smaller as they descended. When they had dwindled to tiny shapes, barely distinguishable as people, the Wise Ones lowered their shawls.

Straightening her dress, and wishing she were not so sweaty, Egwene climbed the short distance to them leading Mist. “Amys? I am Egwene al’Vere. You said I should—”

Amys cut her off with a raised hand, and looked to where Lan was leading Mandarb and Pips and Jeade’en, behind Moiraine and Aldieb. “This is women’s business, now, *Aan’allein.* You must stand aside. Go to the tents. Rhuarc will offer you water and shade.”

Lan waited for Moiraine’s slight nod before bowing and walking off in the direction Rhuarc had gone. The shifting cloak hanging down his back sometimes gave him the appearance of a disembodied head and arms floating across the ground ahead of the three horses.

“Why do you call him that?” Moiraine asked when he was out of earshot. “One Man. Do you know him?”

“We know of him, Aes Sedai.” Amys made the title sound an address between equals. “The last of the Malkieri. The man who will not give up his war against the Shadow though his nation is long destroyed by it. There is much honor in him. I knew from the dream that if you came, it was almost certain *Aan’allein* would as well, but I did not know he obeyed you.”

“He is my Warder,” Moiraine said simply.

Egwene thought the Aes Sedai was troubled despite her tone, and she knew why. *Almost* certain Lan would come with Moiraine? Lan always followed Moiraine; he would follow her into the Pit of Doom without blinking. Nearly as interesting to Egwene was *“if you came.”* Had the Wise Ones known they were coming or not? Perhaps interpreting the Dream was not as straightforward as she hoped. She was about to ask, when Bair spoke.

“Aviendha? Come here.”

Aviendha had been squatting disconsolately off to one side, arms wrapped around her knees, staring at the ground. She stood slowly. If Egwene had not known better, she would have thought the other woman was afraid. Aviendha’s feet dragged as she climbed to where the Wise Ones stood and set her bag and rolled wall hangings at her feet.

“It is time,” Bair said, not ungently. Still, there was no compromise in her pale blue eyes. “You have run with the spears as long as you can. Longer than you should have.”

Aviendha flung up her head defiantly. “I am a Maiden of the Spear. I do not want to be a Wise One. I will not be!”

The Wise Ones' faces hardened. Egwene was reminded of the Women's Circle back home confronting a woman who was heading off into some foolishness.

"You have already been treated more gently than it was in my day," Amys said in a voice like stone. "I, too, refused when called. My spear sisters broke my spears before my eyes. They took me to Bair and Coedelin bound hand and foot and wearing only my skin."

"And a pretty little doll tucked under your arm," Bair said dryly, "to remind you how childish you were. As I remember, you ran away nine times in the first month."

Amys nodded grimly. "And was made to blubber like a child for each of them. I only ran away five times the second month. I thought I was as strong and hard as a woman could be. I was not smart, though; it took me half a year to learn you were stronger and harder than I could ever be, Bair. Eventually I learned my duty, my obligation to the people. As you will, Aviendha. Such as you and I, we have that obligation. You are not a child. It is time to put away dolls—and spears—and become the woman you are meant to be."

Abruptly, Egwene knew why she had felt such a kinship with Aviendha from the first, knew why Amys and the others meant her to be a Wise One. Aviendha could channel. Like herself, like Elayne and Nynaeve—and Moiraine, for that matter—she was one of those rare women who not only could be taught to channel, but who had the ability born in her, so she would touch the True Source eventually whether she knew what she was doing or not. Moiraine's face was still, calm, but Egwene saw confirmation in her eyes. The Aes Sedai had surely known from the first time she came within arm's reach of the Aiel woman. Egwene realized she could feel that same kinship with Amys and Melaine. Not with Bair or Seana, though. Only the first two could channel; she was sure of it. And now she could sense the same in Moiraine. It was the first time she had ever felt that. The Aes Sedai was a distant woman.

Some of the Wise Ones, at least, apparently saw more in Moiraine's face. "You meant to take her to your White Tower," Bair said, "to make her one of you. She is Aiel, Aes Sedai."

"She can be very strong if she is trained properly," Moiraine replied. "As strong as Egwene will be. In the Tower, she can reach that strength."

“We can teach her as well, Aes Sedai.” Melaine’s voice was smooth enough, but contempt tinged her unwavering green-eyed stare. “Better. I have spoken with Aes Sedai. You coddle women in the Tower. The Three-fold Land is no place for coddling. Aviendha will learn what she can do while you would still have her playing games.”

Egwene gave Aviendha a concerned look; the other woman was staring at her feet, defiance gone. If they thought training in the Tower was *coddling*. . . . She had been worked harder and disciplined more strictly as a novice than ever before in her life. She felt a true pang of sympathy for the Aiel woman.

Amys held out her hands, and Aviendha reluctantly laid her spears and buckler in them, flinching when the Wise One threw them aside to clatter on the ground. Slowly Aviendha slid her cased bow from her back and surrendered it, unbuckled the belt holding her quiver and sheathed knife. Amys took each offering and tossed it away like rubbish; Aviendha gave a little jerk each time. A tear trembled at the corner of one blue-green eye.

“Do you have to treat her this way?” Egwene demanded angrily. Amys and the others turned flat stares on her, but she was not about to be intimidated. “You are treating things she cares about as trash.”

“She must see them as trash,” Seana said. “When she returns—if she returns—she will burn them and scatter the ashes. The metal she will give to a smith to make simple things. Not weapons. Not even a carving knife. Buckles, or pots, or puzzles for children. Things she will give away with her own hands when they are made.”

“The Three-fold Land is not soft, Aes Sedai,” Bair said. “Soft things die, here.”

“The *cadin’sor*, Aviendha.” Amys gestured to the discarded weapons. “Your new clothes will await your return.”

Mechanically, Aviendha stripped, tossing coat and breeches, soft boots, everything onto the pile. Naked, she stood without wriggling a toe, though Egwene thought her own feet would blister through her shoes. She remembered watching as the clothes she had worn to the White Tower were burned, a severing of ties to an earlier life, but it had not been like this. Not this stark.

When Aviendha started to add the sack and the wall hangings to the pile, Seana took them from her. “These you can have back. If you return. If not, they will go to your family, for remembrance.”

Aviendha nodded. She did not seem afraid. Reluctant, angry, even sullen, but not afraid.

"In Rhuidean," Amys said, "you will find three rings, arranged so." She drew three lines in the air, joining together in the middle. "Step through any one. You will see your future laid before you, again and again, in variation. They will not guide you wholly, as is best, for they will fade together as do stories heard long ago, yet you will remember enough to know some things that must be, for you, despised as they may be, and some that must not, cherished hopes that they are. This is the beginning of being called wise. Some women never return from the rings; perhaps they could not face the future. Some who survive the rings do not survive their second trip to Rhuidean, to the heart. You are not giving up a hard and dangerous life for a softer, but for a harder and more dangerous."

A *ter'angreal*. Amys was describing a *ter'angreal*. What kind of place was this Rhuidean? Egwene found herself wanting to go down there herself, to find out. That was foolish. She was not here to take unnecessary risks with *ter'angreal* she knew nothing about.

Melaine cupped Aviendha's chin and turned the younger woman's face to her. "You have the strength," she said with quiet conviction. "A strong mind and a strong heart are your weapons now, but you hold them as surely as you ever held a spear. Remember them, use them, and they will see you through anything."

Egwene was surprised. Of the four, she would have picked the sun-haired woman last to show compassion.

Aviendha nodded, and even managed a smile. "I will beat those men to Rhuidean. They cannot run."

Each Wise One in turn kissed her lightly on each cheek, murmuring, "Come back to us."

Catching Aviendha's hand, Egwene squeezed it and got a squeeze in return. Then the Aiel woman was running down the mountainside in leaps. It seemed she might well catch up to Rand and Mat. Egwene watched her go worriedly. This was something like being raised to Accepted, it seemed, but without any novice training first, without anyone to give small comfort afterward. What would it have been like to be raised Accepted on her first day in the Tower? She thought she might have gone mad. Nynaeve had been raised so, because of her strength; she thought at least some of

Nynaeve's distaste for Aes Sedai came from what she had experienced then. *Come back to us*, she thought. *Be steadfast.*

When Aviendha passed out of sight, Egwene sighed and turned back to the Wise Ones. She had her own purpose here, and holding back from it would help no one. "Amys, in *Tel'aran'rhiod* you told me I should come to you to learn. I have."

"Haste," the white-haired woman said. "We have been hasty, because Aviendha struggled so long against her *toh,* because we feared the Shaido might don veils, even here, if we did not send Rand al'Thor into Rhuidean before they could think."

"You believe they'd have tried to kill him?" Egwene said. "But he's the one you sent people over the Dragonwall to find. He Who Comes With the Dawn."

Bair shifted her shawl. "Perhaps he is. We shall see. If he lives."

"He has his mother's eyes," Amys said, "and much of her in his face as well as something of his father, but Couladin could see only his clothes, and his horse. The other Shaido would have as well, and perhaps the Taardad, too. Outlanders are not allowed on this ground, and now there are five of you. No, four; Rand al'Thor is no outlander, wherever he was raised. But we have already allowed one to enter Rhuidean, which is also forbidden. Change comes like an avalanche whether we want it or not."

"It must come," Bair said, not sounding happy. "The Pattern plants us where it will."

"You knew Rand's parents?" Egwene asked cautiously. Whatever they said, she still thought of Tam and Kari al'Thor as Rand's parents.

"That is his story," Amys said, "if he wants to hear it." By the firmness of her mouth, she would not say another word on the subject.

"Come," Bair said. "There is no need for haste, now. Come. We offer you water and shade."

Egwene's knees nearly buckled at the mention of shade. The once-sopping kerchief around her forehead was almost dry; the top of her head felt baked, and the rest of her scarcely less. Moiraine seemed just as grateful to follow the Wise Ones up to one of the small clusters of low, open-sided tents.

A tall man in sandals and hooded white robes took their horses' reins. His Aiel face looked odd in the deep soft cowl, with downcast eyes.

“Give the animals water,” Bair said before ducking into the low, unwalled tent, and the man bowed to her back, touching his forehead.

Egwene hesitated over letting the man lead Mist away. He seemed confident, but what would an Aiel know of horses? Still, she did not think he would harm them, and it did look wonderfully darker inside the tent. It was, and delightfully cool compared to outside.

The roof of the tent rose to a peak around a hole, but even under that there was barely room to stand. As if to make up for the drab colors the Aiel wore, large gold-tasseled red cushions lay scattered over brightly colored carpets layered thickly enough to pad the hard ground beneath. Egwene and Moiraine imitated the Wise Ones, sinking to the carpet and leaning on one elbow on a cushion. They were all in a circle, nearly close enough to touch the next woman.

Bair struck a small brass gong, and two young women entered with silver trays, bending gracefully, robed in white, with deep cowls and downturned eyes, like the man who had taken the horses. Kneeling in the middle of the tent, one filled a small silver cup with wine for each of the women reclining on a cushion, and the other poured larger cups of water. Without a word, they backed out bowing, leaving the gleaming trays and pitchers, beaded with condensation.

“Here is water and shade,” Bair said, lifting her water, “freely given. Let there be no constraints between us. All here are welcome, as first-sisters are welcome.”

“Let there be no constraints,” Amys and the other two murmured. After one sip of water, the Aiel women named themselves formally. Bair, of the Haido sept of the Shaarad Aiel. Amys, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel. Melaine, of the Jhirad sept of the Goshien Aiel. Seana, of the Black Cliff sept of the Nakai Aiel.

Egwene and Moiraine followed the ritual, though Moiraine’s mouth tightened when Egwene called herself an Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah.

As if the sharing of water and names had broken down a wall, the mood in the tent changed palpably. Smiles from the Aiel women, a subtle relaxation, and said formalities were done.

Egwene was more grateful for the water than for the wine. It might be cooler in the tent than outside, but just breathing still dried her throat. At Amys’s gesture she eagerly poured a second cup.

The people in white had been a surprise. It was foolish, but she realized she had been thinking that except for the Wise Ones Aiel were all like Rhuarc and Aviendha, warriors. Of course they had blacksmiths and weavers and other craftsmen; they must. Why not servants? Only, Aviendha had been disdainful of the servants in the Stone, not letting them do anything for her that she could avoid. These people with their humble demeanor did not act like Aiel at all. She did not recall seeing any white in the two large camps. “Is it only Wise Ones who have servants?” she asked.

Melaine choked on her wine. “Servants?” she gasped. “They are *gai’shain*, not servants.” She sounded as if that should explain everything.

Moiraine frowned slightly over her winecup. “*Gai’shain?* How does that translate? ‘Those sworn to peace in battle’?”

“They are simply *gai’shain*,” Amys said. She seemed to realize they did not understand. “Forgive me, but do you know of *ji’e’toh*?”

“Honor and obligation,” Moiraine replied promptly. “Or perhaps honor and duty.”

“Those are the words, yes. But the meaning. We live by *ji’e’toh*, Aes Sedai.”

“Do not try to tell them all, Amys,” Bair cautioned. “I once spent a month trying to explain *ji’e’toh* to a wetlander, and at the end she had more questions than at the beginning.”

Amys nodded. “I will stay to the core. If you wish it explained, Moiraine.”

Egwene would as soon have begun talk of Dreaming, and training, but to her irritation, the Aes Sedai said, “Yes, if you will.”

With a nod to Moiraine, Amys began. “I will follow the line of *gai’shain* simply. In the dance of spears, the most *ji*, honor, is earned by touching an armed enemy without killing, or harming in any way.”

“The most honor because it is so difficult,” Seana said, bluish gray eyes crinkling wryly, “and thus so seldom done.”

“The smallest honor comes from killing,” Amys continued. “A child or a fool can kill. In between is the taking of a captive. I pare it down, you see. There are many degrees. *Gai’shain* are captives taken so, though a warrior who has been touched may sometimes demand to be taken *gai’shain* to reduce his enemy’s honor and his own loss.”

“Maidens of the Spear and Stone Dogs especially are known for this,” Seana put in, bringing a sharp look from Amys.

"Do I tell this, or do you? To continue. Some may not be taken *gai'shain,* of course. A Wise One, a blacksmith, a child, a woman with child or one who has a child under the age of ten. A *gai'shain* has *toh* to his or her captor. For *gai'shain,* this is to serve one year and a day, obeying humbly, touching no weapon, doing no violence."

Egwene was interested in spite of herself. "Don't they try to escape? I certainly would." *I'll never let anyone make me a prisoner again!*

The Wise Ones looked shocked. "It has happened," Seana said stiffly, "but there is no honor in it. A *gai'shain* who ran away would be returned by his or her sept to begin the year and a day anew. The loss of honor is so great that a first-brother or first-sister might go as *gai'shain* as well to discharge the sept's *toh.* More than one, if they feel the loss of *ji* is great."

Moiraine seemed to be taking it all in calmly, sipping her water, but it was all Egwene could do not to shake her head. The Aiel were insane; that was all there was to it. It got worse.

"Some *gai'shain* now make an arrogance of humbleness," Melaine said disapprovingly. "They think they earn honor by it, taking obedience and meekness to the point of mockery. This is a new thing and foolish. It has no part in *ji'e'toh.*"

Bair laughed, a startling rich sound compared to her reedy voice. "There have always been fools. When I was a girl, and the Shaarad and the Tomanelle were stealing each other's cattle and goats every night, Chenda, the roofmistress of Mainde Cut, was pushed aside by a young Haido Water Seeker during a raid. She came to Bent Valley and demanded the boy make her *gai'shain*; she would not allow him to gain the honor of having touched her because *she had a carving knife in her hands when he did.* A carving knife! It was a weapon, she claimed, as if she were a Maiden. The boy had no choice but to do as she demanded, for all the laughter when he did. One does not send a roofmistress barefoot back to her hold. Before the year and a day was done, the Haido sept and the Jenda sept exchanged spears, and the boy soon found himself married to Chenda's eldest daughter. With his second-mother still *gai'shain* to him. He tried to give her to his wife as part of his bride gift, and both women claimed he was trying to rob them of honor. He nearly had to take his own wife as *gai'shain.* It came close to raiding between Haido and Jenda again before the *toh* was discharged." The Aiel women almost fell over laughing, Amys and Melaine wiping their eyes.

Egwene understood little of the story—certainly not why it was funny—but she managed a polite laugh.

Moiraine set her water aside for the small silver cup of wine. “I have heard men speak of fighting the Aiel, but I have never heard of this before. Certainly not of an Aiel surrendering because he was touched.”

“It is not surrender,” Amys said pointedly. “It is *ji’e’toh.*”

“No one would ask to be made *gai’shain* to a wetlander,” Melaine said. “Outlanders do not know of *ji’e’toh.*”

The Aiel women exchanged looks. They were uncomfortable. *Why*? Egwene wondered. *Oh.* To the Aiel, not to know *ji’e’toh* must be like not knowing manners, or not being honorable. “There are honorable men and women among us,” Egwene said. “Most of us. We know right from wrong.”

“Of course you do,” Bair murmured in a tone that said that was not the same thing at all.

“You sent a letter to me in Tear,” Moiraine said, “before I ever reached there. You said a great many things, some of which have proven true. Including that I would—must—meet you here today; you very nearly commanded me to be here. Yet earlier you said *if* I came. How much of what you wrote did you know to be true?”

Amys sighed and set aside her cup of wine, but it was Bair who spoke. “Much is uncertain, even to a dreamwalker. Amys and Melaine are the best of us, and even they do not see all that is, or all that can be.”

“The present is much clearer than the future even in *Tel’aran’rhiod,*” the sun-haired Wise One said. “What *is* happening or beginning is more easily seen than what *will* happen, or *may.* We did not see Egwene or Mat Cauthon at all. It was no more than an even chance that the young man who calls himself Rand al’Thor would come. If he did not, it was certain that he would die, and the Aiel too. Yet he has come, and if he survives Rhuidean, some of the Aiel at least will survive. This we know. If you had not come, he would have died. If *Aan’allein* had not come, you would have died. If you do not go through the rings—” She cut off as if she had bitten her tongue.

Egwene leaned forward intently. Moiraine had to enter Rhuidean? But the Aes Sedai appeared to give no notice, and Seana spoke up quickly to cover Melaine’s slip.

“There is no one set path to the future. The Pattern makes the finest lace look coarse woven sacking, or tangled string. In *Tel’aran’rhiod* it is possible to see some ways the future may be woven. No more than that."

Moiraine took a sip of wine. "The Old Tongue is often difficult to translate." Egwene stared at her. The Old Tongue? What about the rings, the *ter'angreal*? But Moiraine went blithely on. "*Tel'aran'rhiod* means the World of Dreams, or perhaps the Unseen World. Neither is really exact; it is more complex than that. *Aan'allein.* One Man, but also The Man Who Is an Entire People, and two or three other ways to translate it as well. And the words we have taken for common use, and never think of their meanings in the Old Tongue. Warders are called 'Gaidin,' which was 'brothers to battle.' Aes Sedai meant 'servant of all.' And 'Aiel.' 'Dedicated,' in the Old Tongue. Stronger than that; it implies an oath written into your bones. I have often wondered what the Aiel are dedicated to." The Wise Ones' faces had gone to iron, but Moiraine continued. "And 'Jenn Aiel.' 'The true dedicated,' but again stronger. Perhaps 'the only true dedicated.' The only true Aiel?" She looked at them questioningly, just as if they did not suddenly have eyes of stone. None of them spoke.

What was Moiraine doing? Egwene did not intend to allow the Aes Sedai to ruin her chances of learning whatever the Wise Ones could teach her. "Amys, could we talk of Dreaming now?"

"Tonight will be time enough," Amys said.

"But—"

"Tonight, Egwene. You may be Aes Sedai, but you must become a pupil again. You cannot even go to sleep when you wish yet, or sleep lightly enough to tell what you see before you wake. When the sun begins to set, I will begin to teach you."

Ducking her head, Egwene peered under the edge of the tent roof. From that deep shade, the light outside glared piercingly through heat shimmers in the air; the sun stood no more than halfway to the mountaintops.

Abruptly Moiraine rose to her knees; reaching behind her, she began undoing her dress. "I presume that I must go as Aviendha did," she said, not as a question.

Bair gave Melaine a hard stare that the younger woman met only for a moment before dropping her eyes. Seana said in a resigned voice, "You should not have been told. It is done, now. Change. One not of the blood has gone to Rhuidean, and now another."

Moiraine paused. "Does that make a difference, that I have been told?"

“Perhaps a great difference,” Bair said reluctantly, “perhaps none. We often guide, but we do not tell. When we saw you go to the rings, each time it was you who brought up going, who demanded the right though you have none of the blood. Now one of us has mentioned it first. Already there are changes from anything we saw. Who can say what they are?”

“And what did you see if I do not go?”

Bair’s wrinkled face was expressionless, but sympathy touched her pale blue eyes. “We have told too much already, Moiraine. What a dreamwalker sees is what is likely to happen, not what surely will. Those who move with too much knowledge of the future inevitably find disaster, whether from complacency at what they think must come or in their efforts to change it.”

“It is the mercy of the rings that the memories fade,” Amys said. “A woman knows some things—a few—that will happen; others she will not recognize until the decision is upon her, if then. Life is uncertainty and struggle, choice and change; one who knew how her life was woven into the Pattern as well as she knew how a thread was laid into a carpet would have the life of an animal. If she did not go mad. Humankind is made for uncertainty, struggle, choice and change.”

Moiraine listened with no outward show of impatience, though Egwene suspected it was there; the Aes Sedai was used to lecturing, not being lectured. She was silent while Egwene helped her out of her dress, not speaking until she crouched naked at the edge of the carpets, peering down the mountainside toward the fog-shrouded city in the valley. Then she said, “Do not let Lan follow me. He will try, if he sees me.”

“It will be as it will be,” Bair replied. Her thin voice sounded cold and final.

After a moment, Moiraine gave a grudging nod and slipped out of the tent into the blazing sunlight. She began to run immediately, barefoot down the scorching slope.

Egwene grimaced. Rand and Mat, Aviendha, now Moiraine, all going into Rhuidean. “Will she . . . survive? If you dreamed of this, you must know.”

“There are some places one cannot enter in *Tel’aran’rhiod,*” Seana said. “Rhuidean. Ogier *stedding.* A few others. What happens there is shielded from a dreamwalker’s eyes.”

That was not an answer—they could have seen whether she came out of Rhuidean—but it was obviously all she was going to get. “Very well. Should I go, too?” She did not relish the thought of experiencing the rings; it would be like being raised to Accepted again. But if everyone else was going. . . .

“Do not be foolish,” Amys said vigorously.

“We saw nothing of this for you,” Bair added in a milder tone. “We did not see you at all.”

“And I would not say yes if you asked,” Amys went on. “Four are required for permission, and I would say no. You are here to learn to dreamwalk.”

“In that case,” Egwene said, settling back on her cushion, “teach me. There must be something you can begin with before tonight.”

Melaine frowned at her, but Bair chuckled dryly. “She is as eager and impatient as you were once you decided to learn, Amys.”

Amys nodded. “I hope she can keep her eagerness and lose the impatience, for her sake. Hear me, Egwene. Though it will be hard, you must forget that you are Aes Sedai if you are to learn. You must listen, remember, and do as you are told. Above all, you must not enter *Tel’aran’rhiod* again until one of us says you may. Can you accept this?”

It would not be hard to forget she was Aes Sedai when she was not. For the rest, it sounded ominously like becoming a novice again. “I can accept it.” She hoped she did not sound doubtful.

“Good,” Bair said. “I will now tell you about dreamwalking and *Tel’aran’rhiod*, in a very general way. When I am done, you will repeat back to me what I have said. If you fail to touch all points, you will scrub the pots in place of the *gai’shain* tonight. If your memory is so poor that you cannot repeat what I say after a second hearing. . . . Well, we will discuss that when it happens. Attend.

“Almost anyone can touch *Tel’aran’rhiod*, but few can truly enter it. Of all the Wise Ones, we four alone can dreamwalk, and your Tower has not produced a dreamwalker in nearly five hundred years. It is not a thing of the One Power, though Aes Sedai believe it is. I cannot channel, nor can Seana, yet we dreamwalk as well as Amys or Melaine. Many people brush the World of Dreams in their sleep. Because they only brush against it, they wake with aches or pains where they should have broken bones or mortal hurts. A dreamwalker enters the dream fully, therefore her injuries are real on waking. For one who is fully in the dream, dreamwalker or not, death there is death here. To enter the dream too completely, though, is to lose touch with the flesh; there is no way back, and the flesh dies. It is said that once there were those who could enter the dream in the flesh, and no longer be in this world at all. This was an evil thing, for they did evil; it must never be attempted, even if you believe it possible for you, for each time you will lose some part of what makes you human. You must learn to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod* when you wish, to the degree you wish. You must learn to find what you need to find and read what you see, to enter the dreams of another close by in order to aid healing, to recognize those who are in the dream fully enough to harm you, to. . . ."

Egwene listened intently. It fascinated her, hinting at things she had never suspected were possible, but beyond that she had no intention of ending up scrubbing pots. It did not seem fair, somehow. Whatever Rand and Mat and the others faced in Rhuidean, they were not going to be sent off to scrub pots. *And I* agreed *to it!* It just was not fair. But then, she doubted they could get any more out of Rhuidean than she would from these women.

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CHAPTER 24

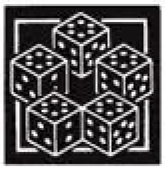

Rhuidean

The smooth pebble in Mat’s mouth was not making moisture anymore, and had not been for some time. Spitting it out, he squatted beside Rand and stared at the billowing gray wall maybe thirty paces in front of them. Fog. He hoped at least it was cooler in there than out here. And some water would be appreciated. His lips were cracking. He pulled the scarf from around his head and wiped his face, but there was not much sweat to dampen the cloth. Not much sweat remained in him to come out. A place to sit down. His feet felt like cooked sausages inside his boots; he felt pretty well cooked all over, for that matter. The fog stretched left and right better than a mile and bulked over his head like a towering cliff. A cliff of thick mist in the middle of a barren blistered valley. There had to be water in there.

Why doesn’t it burn off? He did not like that part of it. Fooling with the Power had brought him here, and now it seemed he had to fool with it again. *Light, I want free of the Power and Aes Sedai. Burn me, I do!* Anything not to think of stepping into that fog, for just a minute more. “That *was* Egwene’s Aiel friend I saw running,” he croaked. Running! In this heat. Just thinking of it made his feet hurt worse. “Aviendha. Whatever her name is.”

“If you say so,” Rand said, studying the fog. He sounded as if he had a mouthful of dust, his face was sunburned, and he wavered unsteadily in his crouch. “But what would she be doing down here? And *naked*?”

Mat let it go. Rand had not seen her—he had hardly taken his eyes off the roiling mist since starting down the mountain—and he did not believe Mat had seen her either. Running like a madwoman and keeping wide of the two of them. Heading for this strange fog, it had seemed to him. Rand appeared no more eager to step into that than he was. He wondered whether he looked as bad as Rand did. Touching his cheek, he winced. He expected he did.

"Are we going to stay out here all night? This valley is pretty deep. It'll be dark down here in another couple of hours. Might be cooler then, but I don't think I would like to meet whatever runs around this place in the night. Lions, probably. I've heard there are lions in the Waste."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Mat? You heard what the Wise Ones said. You can die in there, or go mad. You can make it back to the tents. You left waterbottles and a waterbag on Pips's saddle."

He wished Rand had not reminded him. Best not to think about water. "Burn me, no, I don't want to. I *have* to. What about you? Isn't being the bloody Dragon Reborn enough for you? Do you have to be a flaming Aiel clan chief, too? Why are you here?"

"I have to be, Mat. I have to be." Resignation came through the parch in his voice, but something else, too. A hint of eagerness. The man really was mad; he *wanted* to do this.

"Rand, maybe that's the answer they give everybody. Those snake people, I mean. Go to Rhuidean. Maybe we don't have to be here at all." He did not believe it, but with that fog staring him in the face. . . .

Rand turned his head to look at him, not speaking. Finally he said, "They never mentioned Rhuidean to me, Mat."

"Oh, burn me," he muttered. Somehow or other he meant to find a way back through that twisted doorway in Tear. Absently he pulled the gold Tar Valon mark from his coat pocket, rolled it across the backs of his fingers and thrust it back. Those snaky folk were going to give him a few more answers whether they wanted to or not. Somehow.

Without another word, Rand rose and started toward the fog in an unsteady stride, his eyes fixed straight ahead. Mat hurried after him. *Burn me. Burn me. I do* not *want to do this.*

Rand plunged right into the dense mist, but Mat hesitated a moment before following. It had to be the Power maintaining the fog, after all, with its edge boiling so but never advancing or retreating an inch. The bloody Power, and no bloody choice. That first step was a blessed relief, cool and damp; he opened his mouth to let the mist moisten his tongue. Three steps more and he began to worry. Beyond the tip of his nose was only featureless gray. He could not make out even a shadow that could be Rand.

“Rand?” The sound might as well not have come from his mouth; the murk seemed to swallow it before it reached his own ears. He was not even sure of his direction anymore, and he could always remember his way. Anything might be ahead of him. Or under his feet. He could not see his feet; the fog shrouded him completely below the waist. He picked up his pace regardless. And suddenly stepped out beside Rand into a peculiar shadowless light.

The fog made an enormous hollow dome hiding the sky, its bubbling inner surface glowing in a pale sharp blue. Rhuidean was not nearly so big as Tear or Caemlyn, but the empty streets were broad as any he had ever seen, with wide strips of bare dirt down their centers as if trees had grown there once, and great fountains with statues. Huge buildings flanked the streets, odd flat-sided palaces of marble and crystal and cut glass, ascending hundreds of feet in steps or sheer walls. There was not a small building to be seen, nothing that might have been a simple tavern or an inn or a stable. Only immense palaces, with gleaming columns fifty feet thick climbing a hundred paces in red or white or blue, and grand towers, fluted and spiraled, some piercing the glowing clouds above.

For all its grandeur, the city had never been finished. Many of those tremendous structures ended in the sawteeth of abandoned construction. Colored glass made images in some huge windows: serenely majestic men and women thirty feet tall or more, sunrises and starry night skies; others gaped emptily. Unfinished and long deserted. No water splashed in any fountain. Silence covered the city as completely as the dome of fog. The air was cooler than outside, but just as arid. Dust grated under foot on pale smooth paving stones.

Mat trotted to the nearest fountain anyway, just on the off chance, and leaned on the waist-high white rim. Three unclothed women, twice as tall as he and supporting an odd wide-mouthed fish over their heads, peered down into a wide dusty basin no dryer than his mouth.

“Of course,” Rand said behind him. “I should have thought of this before.”

Mat looked over his shoulder. “Thought of what?” Rand was staring at the fountain, shaking with silent laughter. “Get hold of yourself, Rand. You didn’t go crazy in the last minute. You should have thought of what?”

A hollow gurgling whipped Mat’s eyes back to the fountain. Abruptly water gushed out of the fish’s mouth, a stream as thick as his leg. He scrambled into the basin and ran to stand under the downpour, head back and mouth open. Cold sweet water, cold enough to make him shiver, sweeter than wine. It soaked his hair, his coat, his breeches. He drank until he thought he would drown, finally staggering over to lean panting against a woman's stone leg.

Rand was still standing there staring at the fountain, face red and lips cracked, laughing softly. "No water, Mat. They said we couldn't bring water, but they did not say anything about what was already here."

"Rand? Aren't you going to drink?"

Rand gave a start, then stepped into the now ankle-deep basin and splashed across to stand where Mat had been, drinking in the same way, eyes closed and face tilted up to let the water pour over him.

Mat watched worriedly. Not mad, exactly; not yet. But how long would Rand have stood there laughing while thirst turned his throat to stone if he had not spoken? Mat left him there and climbed out of the fountain. Some of the water drenching his clothes had seeped down into his boots. He ignored the squish he made at every step; he was not sure he could get his boots back on if he pulled them off. Besides, it felt good.

Peering at the city, he wondered what he was doing there. Those people had said he would die, otherwise, but was just being in Rhuidean enough? *Do I have to do something? What?*

The empty streets and half-finished palaces were shadowless in the pale azure light. A prickling grew between his shoulder blades. All those empty windows looking down on him, all those gap-toothed lines of forsaken stonework. Anything could be hiding in there, and in a place like this, anything could be. . . . *Any bloody thing at all.* He wished he still had his boot knives, at least. But those women, those Wise Ones, had stared at him as if they knew he was holding out on them. And they had channeled, one or all of them. It was not wise to step on the wrong side of women who could channel if you could avoid it. *Burn me, if I could get shut of Aes Sedai, I'd never ask for another thing. Well, not for a good long while, anyway. Light, I wonder if anything is hiding in here.*

"The heart has to be that way, Mat." Rand was climbing out of the basin, dripping wet.

"The heart?"

"The Wise Ones said I had to go to the heart. They must mean the center of the city." Rand looked back at the fountain and suddenly the flow dwindled to a trickle, then ceased. “There’s an ocean of good water down there. Deep. So deep I nearly didn’t find it. If I could bring it up. . . . No need to waste it, though. We can get another good drink when it’s time to leave.”

Mat shifted his feet uncomfortably. *Fool! Where did you think it came from? Of course he bloody channeled. Did you think it just started flowing again after the Light knows how long?* “Center of the city. Of course. Lead on.”

They kept to the middle of the wide street, walking along the edge of the bare strips of dirt, past more dry fountains, some with only the stone basin and a marble base where the statues should have been. Nothing was broken in the city, only . . . incomplete. The palaces loomed to either side like cliffs. There had to be things inside. Furniture, maybe, if it had not rotted. Maybe gold. Knives. Knives would not rust away in this dry air no matter how long they had been there.

There could be a bloody Myrddraal in there for all you know. Light, why did I have to think of that? If only he had thought to bring a quarterstaff with him when he left the Stone. Maybe he could have convinced the Wise Ones it was a walking staff. No use thinking of it, now. A tree would do, if he had a way to cut a good branch and trim it. If, again. He wondered whether whoever built this city had managed to grow any trees. He had worked on his father’s farm too long not to know good dirt when he saw it. These long ribbons of exposed soil were poor, no good for growing anything besides weeds, and not many of those. None, now.

After they had walked a mile, the street suddenly ended at a great plaza, perhaps as far across as they had walked and surrounded by those palaces of marble and crystal. Startlingly, a tree stood in the huge square, a good hundred feet tall and spreading its thick, leafy limbs over a hide of dusty white paving stones, near what appeared to be concentric rings of clear, glittering glass columns, thin as needles compared to their height, nearly as much as the tree’s. He would have wondered how a tree could grow here, without sunlight, if he had not been too busy staring at the astounding jumble filling the rest of the square.

A clear lane led from each street Mat could see, straight to the columned rings, but in the spaces between, statues stood haphazardly, life-sized down to half that, in stone or crystal or metal, set right down on the pavement. All among them were. . . . He did not know what to call them, at first. A flat silvery ring, ten feet across and thin as a blade. A tapering crystal plinth a pace tall that might have held one of the smaller statues. A shiny black metal spire, narrow as a spear and no longer, yet standing on end as if rooted. Hundreds of things, maybe thousands, in every shape imaginable, every material imaginable, dotting the huge plaza with no more than a dozen feet between any two.

It was the black metal spear, so unnaturally erect, that suddenly told him what they must be. *Ter'angreal.* Some sort of things to do with the Power, anyway. Some of them had to be. That twisted stone doorway in the Stone's Great Holding had resisted falling over, too.

He was ready to turn around and go back right then, but Rand continued on, barely looking at what lined his way. Once Rand paused, staring down at two figurines that hardly seemed to deserve a place with the other things. Two statuettes maybe a foot tall, a man and a woman, each holding a crystal sphere aloft in one hand. He half-bent as if to touch them, but straightened so quickly it could almost have been Mat's imagination.

After a minute, Mat followed, hurrying to catch up. The closer they came to the scintillating rings of columns, the more he tensed. Those things all around them had to do with the Power, and so did the columns. He just knew it. Those impossibly tall thin shafts sparkled in the bluish light, dazzling the eye. *All they said was I had to come here. Well, I'm here. They didn't say anything about the bloody Power.*

Rand stopped so suddenly that Mat went three strides nearer the columned rings before realizing it. Rand was staring at the tree, Mat saw. The tree. Mat found himself moving toward it as if drawn. No tree had those trefoil leaves. No tree but one; a tree of legend.

"*Avendesora*," Rand said softly. "The Tree of Life. It's here."

Under the spreading branches, Mat leaped to catch one of those leaves; his outstretched fingers fell a good pace short of the lowest. He satisfied himself with walking deeper beneath that leafy roof and leaning back against the thick bole. After a moment he slid down to sit against it. The old stories were true. He felt. . . . Contentment. Peace. Well-being. Even his feet did not bother him much.

Rand sat down cross-legged nearby. "I can believe the stories. Ghoetam, sitting beneath *Avendesora* for forty years to gain wisdom. Right now, I can believe."

Mat let his head fall back against the trunk. “I don’t know that I’d trust birds to bring me food, though. You’d have to get up sometime.” *But an hour or so would not be bad. Even all day.* “It doesn’t make sense anyway. What kind of food could birds bring in here? What birds?”

“Maybe Rhuidean wasn’t always like this, Mat. Maybe. . . . I don’t know. Maybe *Avendesora* was somewhere else, then.”

“Somewhere else,” Mat murmured. “I would not mind being somewhere else.” *It feels . . . good . . . though.*

“Somewhere else?” Rand twisted around to look at the tall thin columns, shining so close. “Duty is heavier than a mountain,” he sighed.

That was part of a saying he had picked up in the Borderlands. “Death is lighter than a feather, duty heavier than a mountain.” It sounded like pure foolishness to Mat, but Rand was getting up. Mat copied him reluctantly. “What do you think we’ll find in there?”

“I think I have to go on alone from here,” Rand said slowly.

“What do you mean?” Mat demanded. “I’ve come this far, haven’t I? I am not going to turn tail now.” *Wouldn’t I just like to, though!*

“It isn’t that, Mat. If you go in there, you come out a clan chief, or you die. Or come out mad. I don’t believe there’s any other choice. Unless maybe the Wise Ones go in there.”

Mat hesitated. *To die and live again.* That was what they had said. He had no intention of trying to be an Aiel clan chief, though; the Aiel would probably stick spears through him. “We’ll leave it to luck,” he said, pulling the Tar Valon mark from his pocket. “Getting to be my lucky coin. Flame, I go in with you; head, I stay out.” He flipped the gold coin quickly, before Rand could object.

Somehow he missed grabbing it; the mark careened off his fingertips, clinked to the pavement, bounced twice. . . . And landed on edge.

He glared at Rand accusingly. “Do you do this sort of thing on purpose? Can’t you control it?”

“No.” The coin fell over, showing an ageless woman’s face surrounded by stars. “It looks like you stay out here, Mat.”

“Did you just . . . ?” He wished Rand would not channel around him. “Oh, burn me, if you want me to stay out here, I’ll stay.” Snatching the coin up, he stuffed it back into his pocket. “Listen, you go in, do whatever it is you have to, and get back out. I want to leave this place, and I am not going to stand here forever twiddling my thumbs waiting for you. And you needn't think I'll come in after you, either, so you had best be careful."

"I wouldn't think that of you, Mat," Rand said.

Mat stared at him suspiciously. What was he grinning at? "So long as you understand I won't. Aaah, go on and be a bloody Aiel chief. You have the face for it."

"Don't come in there, Mat. Whatever happens, don't." He waited until Mat nodded before turning away.

Mat stood, watching him walk in among the glittering columns. In the shifting dazzle he seemed to vanish almost immediately. *A trick of the eye*, Mat told himself. That was all it was. *A bloody trick of the eye.*

He started around the array, keeping well back, peering in in an effort to spot Rand again. "You look out what you're bloody doing," he shouted. "You leave me alone in the Waste with Moiraine and the bloody Aiel, and I'll strangle you, Dragon Reborn or no!" After a minute, he added, "I'm not coming in there after you if you get yourself in trouble! You hear me?" There was no answer. *If he's not out of there in an hour*. . . . "He's mad just going in there," he muttered. "Well, I'll not be the one to pull his bacon off the coals. He's the one who can channel. If he's put his head in a hornets' nest, he can bloody channel his way out of it." *I'll give him an hour.* And then he would leave, whether Rand was back or not. Just turn around and leave. Just go. That was what he would do. He would.

The way those thin shafts of glass caught the bluish light, refracting and reflecting, merely looking too hard was enough to give him a headache. He turned away, wandering back the way he had come, uneasily eyeing the *ter'angreal*—or whatever they were—filling the plaza. What was he doing there? Why?

Suddenly he stopped dead, staring at one of those strange objects. A large doorframe of polished redstone, twisted in some way he could not quite catch so his eye seemed to slip trying to follow it around. Slowly he made his way to it, between glittering faceted spires as tall as his head and low golden frames filled with what appeared to be sheets of glass, barely noticing them, never taking his eyes off the doorway.

It was the same. The same polished redstone, the same size, the same eye-wrenching corners. Along each upright ran three lines of triangles, points down. Had the one in Tear had those? He could not remember; he had not been trying to remember all the details last time. It *was* the same; it had to be. Maybe he could not step through the other again, but this one . . . ? Another chance to get at those snake people, make them answer a few more questions.

Squinting against the glitters, he peered back toward the columns. An hour, he had given Rand. In an hour, he could be through this thing and back with time to spare. Maybe it would not even work for him, since he had used its twin. *They* are *the same.* Then again, maybe it would. It just meant rubbing up against the Power one more time.

"Light," he muttered. "*Ter'angreal.* Portal Stones. Rhuidean. What difference can one more time make?"

He stepped through. Through a wall of blinding white light, through a roar so vast it annihilated sound.

Blinking, he looked around and bit back the vilest oath he knew. Wherever this was, it was not where he had gone before.

The twisted doorway stood in the middle of a huge chamber that appeared to be star-shaped, as near as he could make out through a forest of thick columns, each deeply fluted with eight ridges, the sharp edges yellow and glowing softly for light. Glossy black except for the glowing bits, they rose from a dull white floor into murky gloom far overhead where even the yellow stripes faded away. The columns and floor almost looked to be glass, but when he bent to rub a hand across the floor, it felt like stone. Dusty stone. He wiped his hand on his coat. The air had a musty smell, and his own footprints were the only marks in the dust. No one had been here in a very long time.

Disappointed, he turned back to the *ter'angreal.*

"A very long time."

Mat spun back, snatching at his coatsleeve for a knife that was lying back on the mountainside. The man standing among the columns looked nothing at all like the snaky folk. He made Mat regret giving up those last blades to the Wise Ones.

The fellow was tall, taller than an Aiel, and sinewy, but with shoulders too wide for his narrow waist, and skin as white as the finest paper. Pale leather straps studded with silver crisscrossed his arms and bare chest, and a black kilt hung to his knees. His eyes were too big and almost colorless, set deep in a narrow-jawed face. His short-cut, palely reddish hair stood up like a brush, and his ears, lying flat against his head, had a hint of a point at the top. He leaned toward Mat, inhaling, opening his mouth to pull in more air, flashing sharp teeth. The impression he gave was of a fox about to leap on a cornered chicken.

“A very long time,” he said, straightening. His voice was rough, almost a growl. “Do you abide by the treaties and agreements? Do you carry iron, or instruments of music, or devices for making light?”

“I have none of those things,” Mat replied slowly. This was not the same place, but this fellow asked the same questions. And he behaved the same, with all that smelling. *Rummaging through my bloody experiences, is he? Well, let him. Maybe he’ll jog some loose so I can remember them, too.* He wondered if he was speaking the Old Tongue again. It was uncomfortable, not knowing, not being able to tell. “If you can take me to where I can get a few questions answered, lead the way. If not, I will be going, with apologies for bothering you.”

“No!” Those big colorless eyes blinked in agitation. “You must not go. Come. I will take you where you may find what you need. Come.” He backed away, gesturing with both hands. “Come.”

Glancing at the *ter’angreal*, Mat followed. He wished the man had not grinned at him just then. Maybe he meant to be reassuring, but those teeth. . . . Mat decided he would never give up *all* of his knives again, not for Wise Ones or the Amyrlin Seat herself.

The large five-sided doorway looked more like a tunnel mouth, for the corridor beyond was exactly the same size and shape, with those softly glowing yellow strips running along the bends, edging floor and ceiling. It seemed to stretch ahead forever, fading into a murky distance, broken at intervals by more of the great five-sided doorways. The kilted man did not turn to lead until they were both in the hallway, and even then he kept glancing over a wide shoulder as if to make certain Mat was still there. The air was no longer musty; instead it held a faint hint of something unpleasant, something tickling familiarity but not strong enough to recognize.

At the first of the doorways, Mat glanced through in passing, and sighed. Beyond star-shaped black columns, a twisted redstone doorway stood on a dull glassy white floor where dust showed the marks of one set of boots coming from the *ter’angreal*, led toward the corridor by the prints of narrow bare feet. He looked over his shoulder. Instead of ending fifty paces back in another chamber like this, the hallway ran back as far as he could see, a mirror image of what lay ahead. His guide gave him a sharp-toothed smile; the fellow looked hungry.

He knew he should have expected something of the sort after what he had seen on the other side of the doorway in the Stone. Those spires moving from where they should be to where they could not, logically. If spires, why not rooms? *I should have stayed out there waiting for Rand, is what I should have done. I should have done a lot of things.* At least he would have no trouble finding the *ter'angreal* again, if all of the doorways ahead were the same.

He peered into the next and saw black columns, the redstone *ter'angreal*, his footprints and his guide's in the dust. When the narrow-jawed man looked over his shoulder again, Mat gave him a toothy grin. "Never think you have caught a babe in your snare. If you try to cheat me, I will have your hide for a saddlecloth."

The fellow started, pale eyes widening, then shrugged and adjusted the silver-studded straps across his chest; his mocking smile seemed tailored to draw attention to what he was doing. Suddenly Mat found himself wondering where that pale leather came from. Surely not. . . . *Oh, Light, I think it is.* He managed to stop himself from swallowing, but only just. "Lead, you son of a goat. Your hide is not worth silver studding. Take me where I want to go."

With a snarl, the man hurried on, stiff-backed. Mat did not care if the fellow was offended. He did wish he had just one knife, though. *I'll be burned if I'll let some fox-faced goat-brain make a harness out of* my *hide.*

There was no way of telling how long they walked. The corridor never changed, with its bent walls and its glowing yellow strips. Every doorway showed the identical chamber, *ter'angreal*, footprints and all. The sameness made time slip into formlessness. Mat worried about how long he had been there. Surely longer than the hour he had given himself. His clothes were only damp now; his boots no longer made squishing noises. But he walked, staring at his guide's back, and walked.

Suddenly the corridor ended ahead in another doorway. Mat blinked. He could have sworn that a moment before the hall had stretched on as far as he could see. But he had been watching the sharp-toothed fellow more than what lay ahead. He looked back, and nearly swore. The corridor ran back until the glowing yellow strips seemed to come together in a point. And there was not an opening to be seen anywhere along it.

When he turned, he was alone in front of the big five-sided doorway. *Burn me, I wish they wouldn't do that.* Taking a deep breath, he walked through.

It was another white-floored star-shaped chamber, not so large as the one—or ones—with columns. An eight-pointed star with a glassy black pedestal standing in each point, like a two-span slice out of one of those columns. Glowing yellow strips ran up the sharp edges of room and pedestals. The unpleasant smell was stronger here; he recognized it now. The smell of a wild animal's lair. He hardly noticed it, though, because the chamber was empty except for him.

Turning slowly, he frowned at the pedestals. Surely someone should be up on them, whoever was supposed to answer his questions. He was being cheated. If he could come here, he should be able to get answers.

Suddenly he spun in a circle, searching not the pedestals but the smooth gray walls. The doorway was gone; there was no way out.

Yet before he completed a second turn there was someone standing on each pedestal, people like his guide, but dressed differently. Four were men, the others women, their stiff hair rising in a crest before spilling down their backs. All wore long white skirts that hid their feet. The women had on white blouses that fell below their hips, with high lace necks and pale ruffles at their wrists. The men wore even more straps than the guide, wider and studded with gold. Each harness supported a pair of bare-bladed knives on the wearer's chest. Bronze blades, Mat judged from the color, but he would have given all the gold in his possession for just one of them.

"Speak," one of the women said in that growling voice. "By the ancient treaty, here is agreement made. What is your need? Speak."

Mat hesitated. That was not what the snaky people had said. They were all staring at him like foxes staring at dinner. "Who is the Daughter of the Nine Moons and why do I have to marry her?" He hoped they would count that as one question.

No one answered. None of them spoke. They just continued to stare at him with those big pale eyes.

"You are supposed to answer," he said. Silence. "Burn your bones to ash, answer me! Who is the Daughter of the Nine Moons and why do I have to marry her? How will I die and live again? What does it mean that I have to give up half the light of the world? Those are my three questions. Say something!"

Dead silence. He could hear himself breathing, hear the blood throbbing in his ears.

“I have no intention of marrying. And I have no intention of dying, either, whether I am supposed to live again or not. I walk around with holes in my memory, holes in my life, and you stare at me like idiots. If I had my way, I would want those holes filled, but at least answers to my questions might fill some in my future. You have to answer—!”

“Done,” one of the men growled, and Mat blinked.

Done? What was done? What did he mean? “Burn your eyes,” he muttered. “Burn your souls! You are as bad as Aes Sedai. Well, I want a way to be free of Aes Sedai and the Power, and I want to be away from you and back to Rhuidean, if you will not answer me. Open up a door, and let me—”

“Done,” another man said, and one of the women echoed, “Done.”

Mat scanned the walls, then glared, turning to take them all in, standing up there on their pedestals staring down at him. “Done? What is done? I see no door. You lying goat-fathered—”

“Fool,” a woman said in a whispered growl, and others repeated it. Fool. Fool. Fool.

“Wise to ask leavetaking, when you set no price, no terms.”

“Yet fool not to first agree on price.”

“We will set the price.”

They spoke so quickly he could not tell which said what.

“What was asked will be given.”

“The price will be paid.”

“Burn you,” he shouted, “what are you talking—”

Utter darkness closed around him. There was something around his throat. He could not breathe. Air. He could not. . . .

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CHAPTER 25

The Road to the Spear

Not hesitating at the first row of columns, Rand made himself walk in among them. There could be no turning back now, no looking back. *Light, what is supposed to happen in here? What does it really do?*

Clear as the finest glass, perhaps a foot thick and standing three paces or more apart, the columns were a forest of dazzling light filled with cascading ripples and glares and odd rainbows. The air was cooler here, enough to make him wish he had a coat, but the same gritty dust covered the smooth white stone under his boots. Not a breeze stirred, yet something made each hair on his body shift, even under his shirt.

Ahead and to the right he could just see another man, in the grays and browns of Aiel, stiff and statue-still in the changing lights. That must be Muradin, Couladin's brother. Stiff and still; *something* was happening. Strangely, considering the brilliance, Rand could make out the Aiel's face clearly. Eyes wide and staring, face tight, mouth quivering on the brink of a snarl. Whatever he was seeing, he did not like it. But Muradin had survived that far, at least. If he could do it, Rand could. The man was six or seven paces ahead of him at best. Wondering why he and Mat had not seen Muradin go in, he took another step.

* * *

He rode behind a set of eyes, feeling but not controlling a body. The owner of those eyes crouched easily among boulders on a barren mountain-side, beneath a sun-blasted sky, peering down at strange half-made stone structures—*No!* Less *than half-made. That's Rhuidean, but without any fog, and only just begun*—peering down contemptuously. He was Mandein, young for a sept chief at forty. Separateness faded; acceptance came. He was Mandein.

"You must agree," Sealdre said, but for the moment he ignored her.

The Jenn had made things to draw up water and spill it into great stone basins. He had fought battles over less water than one of those tanks held, with people walking by as though water was of no consequence. A strange forest of glass rose in the center of all their activity, glittering in the sun, and near it the tallest tree he had ever seen, at least three spans high. Their stone structures looked as if each was meant to contain an entire hold, an entire sept, when done. Madness. This Rhuidean could not be defended. Not that anyone would attack the Jenn, of course. Most avoided the Jenn as they avoided the accursed Lost Ones, who wandered searching for the songs they claimed would bring back lost days.

A procession snaked out of Rhuidean toward the mountain, a few dozen Jenn and two palanquins, each carried by eight men. There was enough wood in each of those palanquins for a dozen chief's chairs. He had heard there were still Aes Sedai among the Jenn.

"You must agree to whatever they ask, husband," Sealdre said.

He looked at her then, wanting for a moment to run his hands through her long golden hair, seeing the laughing girl who had laid the bridal wreath at his feet and asked him to marry her. She was serious now, though, intent and worried. "Will the others come?" he asked.

"Some. Most. I have talked to my sisters in the dream, and we have all dreamed the same dream. The chiefs who do not come, and those who do not agree. . . . Their septs will die, Mandein. Within three generations they will be dust, and their holds and cattle belong to other septs. Their names will be lost."

He did not like her talking to the Wise Ones of other septs, even in dreams. But the Wise Ones dreamed true. When they knew, it was true. "Stay here," he told her. "If I do not return, help our sons and daughters to hold the sept together."

She touched his cheek. "I will, shade of my life. But remember. You must agree."

Mandein motioned, and a hundred veiled shapes followed him down the slope, ghosting from boulder to boulder, bows and spears ready, grays and browns blending with the barren land, vanishing even to his eyes. They were all men; he had left all the women of the sept who carried the spear with the men around Sealdre. If anything went wrong and she decided on something senseless to save him, the men would probably follow her in it; the women would see her back to the hold whatever she wanted, to protect the hold and the sept. He hoped they would. Sometimes they could be fiercer than any man, and more foolish.

The procession from Rhuidean had stopped on the cracked clay flat by the time he reached the lower slope. He motioned his men to ground and went on alone, lowering his veil. He was aware of other men moving out from the mountain to his right and left, coming across the baked ground from other directions. How many? Fifty? Maybe a hundred? Some faces he had expected to see were missing. Sealdre was right as usual; some had not listened to their Wise Ones' dream. There were faces he had never seen before, and faces of men he had tried to kill, men who had tried to kill him. At least none were veiled. Killing in front of a Jenn was almost as bad as killing a Jenn. He hoped the others remembered that. Treachery from one, and the veils would be donned; the warriors each chief had brought would come down from the mountains, and this dry clay would be muddied with blood. He half-expected to feel a spear through his ribs any moment.

Even trying to watch a hundred possible sources of death, it was hard not to stare at the Aes Sedai as the bearers lowered their ornately carved chairs to the ground. Women with hair so white it almost seemed transparent. Ageless faces with skin that looked as if the wind might tear it. He had heard the years did not touch Aes Sedai. How old must these two be? What had they seen? Could they remember when his greatfather Comran first found Ogier *stedding* in the Dragonwall and began to trade with them? Or maybe even when Comran's greatfather Rhodric led the Aiel to kill the men in iron shirts who had crossed the Dragonwall? The Aes Sedai turned their eyes on him—sharp blue and dark dark brown, the first dark eyes he had ever seen—and seemed to see inside his skull, inside his thoughts. He knew himself chosen out, and did not know why. With an effort he pulled away from those twin gazes, which knew him better than he knew himself.

A gaunt white-haired man, tall if stooped, came forward from the Jenn flanked by two graying women who might have been sisters, with the same deep-set green eyes and the same way of tilting their heads when they looked at anything. The rest of the Jenn stared uneasily at the earth rather than at the Aiel, but not these three.

"I am Dermon," the man said in a deep strong voice, his blue-eyed scrutiny as steady as any Aiel's. "These are Mordaine and Narisse." He gestured to the women beside him in turn. “We speak for Rhuidean, and the Jenn Aiel.”

A stir ran through the men around Mandein. Most of them liked the Jenn claiming to be Aiel no better than he did. “Why have you called us here?” he demanded, though it burned his tongue to admit being summoned.

Instead of answering, Dermon said, “Why do you not carry a sword?” That brought angry mutters.

“It is forbidden,” Mandein growled. “Even Jenn should know that.” He lifted his spears, touched the knife at his waist, the bow on his back. “These are weapons enough for a warrior.” The mutters became approving, including some from men who had sworn to kill him. They still would, given the chance, but they approved of what he had said. And they seemed content to let him talk, with those Aes Sedai watching.

“You do not know why,” Mordaine said, and Narisse added, “There is too much you do not know. Yet you must know.”

“What do you want?” Mandein demanded.

“You.” Dermon ran his eyes across the Aiel, making that one word fit them all. “Whoever would lead among you must come to Rhuidean and learn where we came from, and why you do not carry swords. Who cannot learn, will not live.”

“Your Wise Ones have spoken to you,” Mordaine said, “or you would not be here. You know the cost to those who refuse.”

Charendin pushed his way to the front, alternately glaring at Mandein and the Jenn. Mandein had put that long puckered scar down his face; they had nearly killed each other three times. “Just come to you?” Charendin said. “Whichever of us comes to you will lead the Aiel?”

“No.” The word came thin as a whisper, but strong enough to fill every ear. It came from the dark-eyed Aes Sedai sitting in her carved chair with a blanket across her legs as if she felt cold under the broiling sun. “That one will come later,” she said. “The stone that never falls will fall to announce his coming. Of the blood, but not raised by the blood, he will come from Rhuidean at dawn, and tie you together with bonds you cannot break. He will take you back, and he will destroy you.”

Some of the sept chiefs moved as if to leave, but none took more than a few steps. Each had listened to the Wise One of his sept. *Agree, or we will be destroyed as if we never were. Agree, or we will destroy ourselves.*

“This is some trick,” Charendin shouted. Under Aes Sedai stares he lowered his voice, but it held anger yet. “You mean to gain control of the septs. Aiel bend knee to no man or woman.” He jerked his head, avoiding the Aes Sedai’s eyes. “To no one,” he muttered.

“We seek no control,” Narisse told them.

“Our days dwindle,” Mordaine said. “A day will come when the Jenn are no more, and only you will remain to remember the Aiel. You must remain, or all is for nothing, and lost.”

The flatness of her voice, the calm sureness, silenced Charendin, but Mandein had one more question. “Why? If you know your doom, why do this?” He gestured toward the structures rising in the distance.

“It is our purpose,” Dermon replied calmly. “For long years we searched for this place, and now we prepare it, if not for the purpose we once thought. We do what we must, and keep faith.”

Mandein studied the man’s face. There was no fear in it. “You are Aiel,” he said, and when some of the other chiefs gasped, he raised his voice. “I will go to the Jenn Aiel.”

“You may not come to Rhuidean armed,” Dermon said.

Mandein laughed aloud at the temerity of the man. Asking an Aiel to go unarmed. Shedding his weapons, he stepped forward. “Take me to Rhuidean, Aiel. I will match your courage.”

Rand blinked in the flickering lights. He had *been* Mandein; he could still feel contempt for the Jenn fading into admiration. Were the Jenn Aiel, or were they not? They had looked the same, tall, with light-colored eyes in sun-darkened faces, dressed in the same clothes except for lacking veils. But there had not been a weapon among them save for simple belt knives, suitable for work. There was no such thing as an Aiel without weapons.

He was farther into the columns than a single step could account for, and closer to Muradin than he had been. The Aiel’s fixed stare had become a dire frown.

Gritty dust crunched under Rand’s boots as he stepped forward.

His name was Rhodric, and he was nearly twenty. The sun was a golden blister in the sky, but he kept his veil up and his eyes alert. His spears were ready—one in his right hand, three held with his small bullhide buckler—and he was ready. Jeordam was down on the brown grass flat to the south of the hills, where most of the bushes were puny and withered. The old man's hair was white, like that thing called snow the old ones talked of, but his eyes were sharp, and watching the welldiggers haul up filled water-bags would not occupy all of his attention.

Mountains rose to the north and east, the northern range tall and sharp and white-tipped but dwarfed by the eastern monsters. Those looked as if the world was trying to touch the heavens, and perhaps did. Maybe that white was snow? He would not find out. Faced with this, the Jenn must decide to turn east. They had trailed north along that mountainous wall for long months, painfully dragging their wagons behind them, trying to deny the Aiel that followed them. At least there had been water when they crossed a river, even if not much. It had been years since Rhodric had seen a river he could not wade across; most were only cracked dry clay away from the mountains. He hoped the rains would come again, and make things green once more. He remembered when the world was green.

He heard the horses before he saw them, three men riding across the brown hills in long leather shirts sewn all over with metal discs, two with lances. He knew the one on the lead, Garam, son of the chief of the town just out of sight back the way they came and not much older than himself. They were blind, these townsmen. They did not see the Aiel who stirred after they passed, then settled back to near invisibility in the sere land. Rhodric lowered his veil; there would be no killing unless the riders began it. He did not regret it—not exactly—but he could not make himself trust men who lived in houses and towns. There had been too many battles with that kind. The stories said it had always been so.

Garam drew rein, raising his right hand in salute. He was a slight dark-eyed man, like his two followers, but all three looked tough and competent. "Ho, Rhodric. Have your people finished filling their waterskins, yet?"

"I see you, Garam." He kept his voice level and expressionless. It made him uneasy, seeing men on horses, even more so than their carrying swords. The Aiel had pack animals, but there was something unnatural about sitting atop a horse. A man's legs were good enough. "We are close. Does your father withdraw his permission for us to take water on his lands?" No other town had ever given permission before. Water had to be fought for if men were near, just like everything else, and if there was water, then men were near. It would not be easy to take these three by himself. He shifted his feet in readiness to dance, and likely die.

“He does not,” Garam said. He had not even noticed Rhodric’s shift. “We have a strong spring in the town, and my father says that when you go, we will have the new wells you have dug until we go ourselves. But your grandfather seemed to want to know if the others started to move, and they have.” He leaned an elbow on the front of his saddle. “Tell me, Rhodric, are they truly the same people as yourselves?”

“They are the Jenn Aiel; we, the Aiel. We are the same, yet not. I cannot explain it further, Garam.” He did not really understand it himself.

“Which way do they move?” Jeordam asked.

Rhodric bowed to his greatfather calmly; he had heard a footfall, the sound of a soft boot, and had known it for an Aiel’s. The townsmen had not noticed Jeordam’s approach, though, and they jerked their reins in surprise. Only Garam’s unflung hand stopped the other two from lowering their lances. Rhodric and his greatfather waited.

“East,” Garam said when he had his horse under control again. “Across the Spine of the World.” He gestured to the mountains that stabbed the sky.

Rhodric winced, but Jeordam said coolly, “What lies on the other side?”

“The end of the world, for all I know,” Garam replied. “I am not sure there is a way across.” He hesitated. “The Jenn have Aes Sedai with them. Dozens, I have heard. Does it not make you uneasy traveling close to Aes Sedai? I have heard the world was different once, but they destroyed it.”

The Aes Sedai made Rhodric very nervous, though he kept his face blank. They were only four, not dozens, but enough to make him remember stories that the Aiel had failed the Aes Sedai in some way that no one knew. The Aes Sedai must know; they had seldom left the Jenn’s wagons in the year since their arrival, but when they did, they looked at the Aiel with sad eyes. Rhodric was not the only one who tried to avoid them.

“We guard the Jenn,” Jeordam said. “It is they who travel with Aes Sedai.”

Garam nodded as if that made a difference, then leaned forward again, lowering his voice. “My father has an Aes Sedai advisor, though he tries to keep it from the town. She says we must leave these hills and move east. She says the dry rivers will run again, and we will build a great city beside one. She says many things. I hear the Aes Sedai plan to build a city—they have found Ogier to build it for them. Ogier!” He shook his head, pulling himself from legends back to reality. “Do you think they mean to rule the world once more? The Aes Sedai? I think we should kill them before they can destroy us again.”

“You must do as you think best.” Jeordam’s voice gave no hint of his own thoughts. “I must ready my people to cross those mountains.”

The dark-haired man straightened in his saddle, plainly disappointed. Rhodric suspected he had wanted Aiel help in killing Aes Sedai. “The Spine of the World,” Garam said brusquely. “It has another name. Some call it the Dragonwall.”

“A fitting name,” Jeordam replied.

Rhodric stared at the towering mountains in the distance. A fitting name for Aiel. Their own secret name, told to no one, was People of the Dragon. He did not know why, only that it was not spoken aloud except when you received your spears. What lay beyond this Dragonwall? At least there would be people to fight. There always were. In the whole world there were only Aiel, Jenn and enemies. Only that. Aiel, Jenn and enemies.

Rand drew a deep breath that rasped as if he had not breathed for hours. Eye-splitting rings of light ran up the columns around him. The words still echoed in his mind. Aiel, Jenn, and enemies; that was the world. They had not been in the Waste, certainly. He had seen—lived—a time before the Aiel came to their Three-fold Land.

He was nearer still to Muradin. The Aiel’s eyes shifted uneasily, and he seemed to struggle against taking another step.

Rand moved forward.

Squatting easily on the white-cloaked hillside, Jeordam ignored the cold as he watched five people tramp toward him. Three cloaked men, two women in bulky dresses, making hard work of the snow. Winter should have been over long since, according to the old ones, but then they told stories of the seasons changing from what they had always been. They claimed the earth used to shake, too, and mountains rose or sank like the water in a summer pond when you threw a rock in. Jeordam did not believe it. He was eighteen, born in the tents, and this was the only life he had ever known. The snow, the tents, and the duty to protect.

He lowered his veil and stood slowly, leaning on his long spear so as not to frighten the wagon folk, but they stopped abruptly anyway, staring at the spear, at the bow slung across his back and the quiver at his waist. None appeared any older than himself. “You have need of us, Jenn?” he called.

“You name us that to mock us,” a tall, sharp-nosed fellow shouted back, “but it is true. We *are* the only true Aiel. You have given up the Way.”

“That is a lie!” Jeordam snapped. “I have never held a sword!” He drew a deep breath to calm himself. He had not been put out here to grow angry with Jenn. “If you are lost, your wagons are that way.” He pointed southward with his spear.

One woman placed a hand on sharp-nose’s arm and spoke quietly. The others nodded, and finally sharp-nose did, too, if reluctantly. She was pretty, with yellow wisps of hair escaping the dark shawl wrapped around her head. Facing Jeordam, she said, “We are not lost.” She peered at him suddenly, seeming to see him for the first time, and tightened her shawl around her.

He nodded; he had not thought they were. The Jenn usually managed to avoid anyone from the tents even when they needed help. The few who did not came only in desperation, for the help they could not find elsewhere. “Follow me.”

It was a mile across the hills to his father’s tents, low shapes partially covered by the last snowfall, clinging to the slopes. His own people watched the new arrivals cautiously, but did not stop what they were doing, whether cooking or tending weapons or tossing snowballs with a child. He was proud of his sept, nearly two hundred people, largest of the ten camps scattered north of the wagons. The Jenn did not seem much impressed, though. It irritated him that there were so many more Jenn than Aiel.

Lewin came out of his tent, a tall, graying man with a hard face; Lewin never smiled, they said, and Jeordam had certainly never seen it. Maybe he had before Jeordam’s mother died of a fever, but Jeordam did not believe it.

The yellow-haired woman—her name was Morin—told a story much as Jeordam had expected. The Jenn had traded with a village, a place with a log wall, and then men from the village had come in the night, taking back what had been traded for, taking more. The Jenn always thought they could trust people who lived in houses, always thought the Way would protect them. The dead were listed—fathers, a mother, first-brothers. The captives—first-sisters, a sister-mother, a daughter. That last surprised Jeordam; it was Morin who spoke bitterly of a five-year-old daughter carried off to be raised by some other woman. Studying her more closely, he mentally added a few years to her age.

“We will bring them back,” Lewin promised. He took a bundle of spears handed to him and thrust them point-down into the ground. “You may stay with us if you wish, so long as you are willing to defend yourselves and the rest of us. If you stay, you will never be allowed back among the wagons.” The sharp-nosed fellow turned at that and hurried back the way they had come. Lewin went on; it was seldom that only one left at this point. “Those who wish to come with us to this village, take a spear. But remember, if you take the spear to use against men, you will have to stay with us.” His voice and eyes were stone. “You will be dead as far the Jenn are concerned.”

One of the remaining men hesitated, but each finally pulled a spear from the ground. So did Morin. Jeordam gaped at her, and even Lewin blinked.

“You do not have to take a spear just to stay,” Lewin told her, “or for us to bring back your people. Taking the spear means a willingness to fight, not just to defend yourself. You can put it down; there is no shame.”

“They have my daughter,” Morin said.

To Jeordam’s shock, Lewin barely paused before nodding. “There is a first time for all things. For all things. So be it.” He began tapping men on the shoulder, walking through the camps, naming them to visit this log-walled village. Jeordam was the first tapped; his father had always chosen him first since the day he was old enough to carry a spear. He would have had it no other way.

Morin was having problems with the spear, the haft tangling in her long skirts.

“You do not have to go,” Jeordam told her. “No woman ever has before. We will bring your daughter to you.”

“I mean to bring Kirin out of there myself,” she said fiercely. “You will not stop me.” A stubborn woman.

“In that case, you must dress like this.” He gestured to his own gray-brown coat and breeches. “You cannot walk cross-country in the night in a dress.” He took the spear away from her before she could react. “The spear is not easily learned.” The two men who had come with her, awkwardly receiving instruction and nearly falling over their own feet, were proof of that. He found a hatchet and chopped a pace from the spear shaft, leaving four feet, counting nearly a foot of steel point. “Stab with it. No more than that. Just stab. The haft is used for blocking, too, but I will find you something to use as a shield in your other hand.”

She looked at him strangely. “How old are you?” she asked, even more oddly. He told her, and she only nodded thoughtfully.

After a moment, he said, “Is one of those men your husband?” They were still tripping over their spears.

“My husband mourns Kirin already. He cares more for the trees than his own daughter.”

“The trees?”

“The Trees of Life.” When he still looked at her blankly, she shook her head. “Three little trees planted in barrels. They care for them almost as well as they do for themselves. When they find a place of safety, they mean to plant them; they say the old days will return, then. They. I said they. Very well. I am not Jenn anymore.” She hefted the shortened spear. “This is my husband now.” Eyeing him closely, she asked, “If someone stole your child, would you talk of the Way of the Leaf and suffering sent to test us?” He shook his head, and she said, “I thought not. You will make a fine father. Teach me to use this spear.”

An odd woman, but pretty. He took the spear back and began to show her, working out what he was doing while he did. With the short haft, it was quick and agile.

Morin was watching him with that strange smile, but the spear had caught him up. “I saw your face in the dream,” she said softly, but he did not really hear. With a spear like this, he could be quicker than a man with a sword. In his mind’s eye he could see the Aiel defeating all the men with swords. No one would stand against them. No one.

Lights flashed through the glass columns, half-blinding Rand. Muradin was only a pace or two ahead, staring straight in front of him, teeth bared, snarling silently. The columns were taking them back, into the time-lost history of the Aiel. Rand’s feet moved of their own accord. Forward. And back in time.

Lewin adjusted the dustveil across his face and peered down into the small camp where the coals of a dying fire still glowed beneath an iron cookpot. The wind brought him a smell of half-burned stew. Mounds of blankets surrounded the coals in the moonlight. There were no horses in sight. He wished he had brought some water, but only the children were allowed water except with meals. He vaguely remembered a time when there had been more water, when the days were not so hot and dusty and the wind had not blown all the time. Night was only a small relief, trading a dull, fiery red sun for cold. He wrapped himself tighter in the cape of wild goat-skins he used for a blanket.

His companions scrambled closer, bundled as he was, kicking rocks and muttering until he was sure they would wake the men below. He did not complain; he was no more used to this than they. Dustveils hid their faces, but he could make out who was who. Luca, with his shoulders half again as wide as anyone else's; he liked to play tricks. Gearan, lanky as a stork and the best runner among the wagons. Charlin and Alijha, alike as reflections except for Charlin's habit of tilting his head when he was worried, as he was now; their sister Colline was down in that camp. And Maigran, Lewin's sister.

When the girls' gathering bags were found on ground torn by a struggle, everyone else was ready to mourn and go on as they had done so many times before. Even Lewin's greatfather. If Adan had known what the five of them planned, he would have stopped them. All Adan did now was mutter about keeping faith with the Aes Sedai Lewin had never seen, that and try to keep the Aiel alive. The Aiel as a people, but not any one given Aiel. Not even Maigran.

"They are four," Lewin whispered. "The girls are this side of the fire. I will wake them—quietly—and we will sneak them away while the men sleep." His friends looked at each other, nodded. He supposed they should have made a plan before this, but all they had been able to think of was coming to get the girls, and how to leave the wagons without being seen. He had not been certain they could follow these men, or find them before they reached the village they came from, a collection of rough huts where the Aiel had been driven away with stones and sticks. There would be nothing to be done if the takers got that far.

"What if they do wake?" Gearan asked.

"I will not leave Colline," Charlin snapped, right on top of his brother's quieter "We are taking them back, Gearan."

"We are," Lewin agreed. Luca poked Gearan's ribs, and Gearan nodded.

Making their way down in the darkness was no easy task. Drought-dried twigs snapped under their feet; rocks and pebbles showered down the dry slope ahead of them. The harder Lewin tried to move silently, the more noise he seemed to make. Luca fell into a thornbush that cracked loudly, but managed to extract himself with no more than heavy breathing. Charlin slipped, and slid halfway to the bottom. But nothing moved below.

Short of the camp Lewin paused, exchanging anxious looks with his friends, then tiptoed in. His own breath sounded thunderous in his ears, as loud as the snores coming from one of the four large mounds. He froze as the rough snorts stopped and one of the mounds heaved. It settled, the snoring began again, and Lewin let himself breathe.

Carefully he crouched beside one of the smaller heaps and flipped aside a rough woolen blanket stiff with dirt. Maigran stared up at him, face bruised and swollen, her dress torn to little better than rags. He clapped a hand over her mouth to keep her from crying out, but she only continued to stare blankly, not even blinking.

“I am going to carve you like a pig, boy.” One of the larger mounds tumbled aside, and a wild-bearded man in filthy clothes got to his feet, the long knife in his hand glittering dully in the moonlight, picking up the red glow of the coals. He kicked the mounds to either side of him, producing grunts and stirrings. “Just like a pig. Can you squeal, boy, or do you people just run?”

“Run,” Lewin said, but his sister only stared dully. Frantic, he seized her shoulders, pulled to try starting her toward where the others were waiting. “Run!” She came out of the blankets stiffly, almost a dead weight. Colline was awake—he could hear her whimpering—but she seemed to be drawing her dirty blankets around her even more tightly, trying to hide in them. Maigran stood there, staring at nothing, seeing nothing.

“Seems you cannot even do that.” Grinning, the man was coming around the fire, his knife held low. The others were sitting up in their blankets now, laughing, watching the fun.

Lewin did not know what to do. He could not leave his sister. All he could do was die. Maybe that would give Maigran a chance to run. “Run, Maigran! Please run!” She did not move. She did not even seem to hear him. What had they done to her?

The bearded man came closer, taking his time, chuckling, enjoying his slow advance.

“Noooooooooooooo!” Charlin came hurtling out of the night, throwing his arms around the man with the knife, carrying him to the ground. The other men bounded to their feet. One, his head shaved and shining in the pale light, raised a sword to slash at Charlin.

Lewin was not sure exactly how it happened. Somehow he had the heavy kettle by its iron handle, swinging; it struck the shaved head with a loud crunch. The man collapsed as if his bones had melted. Off balance, Lewin stumbled trying to avoid the fire, and fell beside it, losing the cookpot. A dark man with his hair in braids lifted another sword, ready to skewer him. He scrambled away on his back like a spider, eyes on the sword’s sharp point, hands searching frenziedly for something to fend the man off, a stick, anything. His palm fell on rounded wood. He jerked it around, pushed it at the snarling man. The man’s dark eyes widened, the sword dropped from his grasp; blood poured from his mouth. Not a stick. A spear.

Lewin’s hands sprang away from the haft as soon as he realized what it was. Too late. He crawled backward to avoid the man as he fell, stared at him, trembling. A dead man. A man he had killed. The wind felt very cold.

After a time it came to him to wonder why one of the others had not killed him. He was surprised to see the rest of his friends there around the coals. Gearan and Luca and Alijha, all panting and wild-eyed above their dustveils. Colline still emitted soft sniffling sobs from beneath her blankets, and Maigran still stood staring. Charlin was huddled on his knees, holding himself. And the four men, the villagers. . . . Lewin stared from one motionless bloody shape to another.

“We . . . killed them.” Luca’s voice shook. “We. . . . Mercy of the Light, be with us now.”

Lewin crawled to Charlin and touched his shoulder. “Are you hurt?”

Charlin fell over. Red wetness slicked his hands, gripping the hilt of the knife driven into his belly. “It hurts, Lewin,” he whispered. He shuddered once, and the light went out of his eyes.

“What are we going to do?” Gearan asked. “Charlin is dead, and we. . . . Light, what have we done? What do we do?”

“We will take the girls back to the wagons.” Lewin could not pull his eyes away from Charlin’s glazed stare. “We will do that.”

They gathered up everything that was useful, the cookpot and the knives, mainly. Metal things were hard to come by. “We might as well,” Alijha said roughly. “They certainly stole it from someone just like us.”

When Alijha started to pick up one of the swords, though, Lewin stopped him. “No, Alijha. That is a weapon, made to kill people. It has no other use.” Alijha said nothing, only ran his eyes over the four dead bodies, looked at the spears Luca was winding with blankets to carry Charlin’s body on. Lewin refused to look at the villagers. “A spear can put food in the pots, Alijha. A sword cannot. It is forbidden by the Way.”

Alijha was still silent, but Lewin thought he sneered behind his dustveil. Yet when they finally started away into the night, the swords remained by the dying coals and the dead men.

It was a long walk back through the darkness, carrying the makeshift stretcher bearing Charlin, the wind sometimes gusting to raise choking clouds of dust. Maigran stumbled along, staring straight ahead; she did not know where she was, or who they were. Colline seemed half-terrified, even of her own brother, jumping if anyone touched her. This was not how Lewin had imagined their return. In his mind the girls had been laughing, happy to return to the wagons; they had all been laughing. Not carrying Charlin’s corpse. Not hushed by the memory of what they had done.

The lights of the cook fires came into view, and then the wagons, harnesses already spread for men to take their places at sunrise. No one left the shelter of the wagons after dark, so it surprised Lewin to see three shapes come hurrying toward them. Adan’s white hair stood out in the night. The other two were Nerrine, Colline’s mother, and Saralin, his and Maigran’s. Lewin lowered his dustveil with foreboding.

The women rushed to their daughters with comforting arms and soft murmurs. Colline sank into her mother’s embrace with a welcoming sigh; Maigran hardly appeared to notice Saralin who looked close to tears at the bruises on her daughter’s face.

Adan frowned at the young men, permanent creases of worry deepening in his face. “In the name of the Light, what happened? When we found you were gone, too. . . .” He trailed off when he saw the stretcher holding Charlin. “What happened?” he asked again, as if dreading the answer.

Lewin opened his mouth slowly, but Maigran spoke first.

“They killed them.” She was staring at something in the distance, her voice as simple as a child’s. “The bad men hurt us. They. . . . Then Lewin came and killed them.”

"You must not say things like that, child," Saralin said soothingly. "You—" She stopped, peering into her daughter's eyes, then turned to stare uncertainly at Lewin. "Is it . . . ? Is it true?"

"We had to," Alijha said in a pained voice. "They tried to kill us. They did kill Charlin."

Adan stepped back. "You . . . killed? Killed *men?* What of the Covenant? We harm no one. No one! There is no reason good enough to justify killing another human being. None!"

"They took Maigran, greatfather," Lewin said. "They took Maigran and Colline, and hurt them. They—"

"There is no reason!" Adan roared, shaking with rage. "We must accept what comes. Our sufferings are sent to test our faithfulness. We accept and endure! We do not murder! You have not strayed from the Way, you have abandoned it. You are Da'shain no longer. You are corrupt, and I will not have the Aiel corrupted by you. Leave us, strangers. Killers! You are not welcome in the wagons of the Aiel." He turned his back and strode away as if they no longer existed. Saralin and Nerrine started after him, guiding the girls.

"Mother?" Lewin said, and flinched when she looked back at him with cold eyes. "Mother, please—"

"Who are you that addresses me so? Hide your face from me, stranger. I had a son, once, with a face like that. I do not wish to see it on a killer." And she led Maigran after the others.

"I am still Aiel," Lewin shouted, but they did not look back. He thought he heard Luca crying. The wind rose, picking up dust, and he veiled his face. "I am Aiel!"

Wildly darting lights bored into Rand's eyes. The pain of Lewin's loss still clung to him, and his mind tumbled furiously. Lewin had not carried a weapon. He had not known how to use a weapon. Killing terrified him. It did not make sense.

He was almost abreast of Muradin now, but the man was not aware of him. Muradin's snarl was a rictus; sweat beaded on his face; he quivered as though wanting to run.

Rand's feet took him forward, and back.

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CHAPTER 26

The Dedicated

Forward, and back.

Adan lay in the sandy hollow clutching his dead son's weeping children, shielding their eyes against his ragged coat. Tears rolled down his face, too, but silently, as he peered cautiously over the edge. At five and six, Maigran and Lewin deserved the right to cry; Adan was surprised he had any tears left, himself.

Some of the wagons were burning. The dead lay where they had fallen. The horses had already been driven off, except for those still hitched to a few wagons that had been emptied onto the ground. For once he took no notice of the crated things the Aes Sedai had given into Aiel charge, toppled carelessly into the dirt. It was not the first time he had seen that, or dead Aiel, but this time he could not care. The men with the swords and spears and bows, the men who had done the killing, were loading those empty wagons. With women. He watched Rhea, his daughter, shoved up into a wagon box with the others, crowded together like animals by laughing killers. The last of his children. Elwin dead of hunger at ten, Sorelle at twenty of fever her dreams told her was coming, and Jaren, who threw himself off a cliff a year ago, at nineteen, when he found he could channel. Marind, this morning.

He wanted to scream. He wanted to rush out there and stop them from taking his last child. Stop them, somehow. And if he did rush out? They would kill him, and take Rhea anyway. They might well kill the children, too. Some of those bodies sprawled in their own blood were small.

Maigran clutched at him as if she sensed he might leave her, and Lewin stiffened as if he wanted to hold tighter but thought himself too old. Adan smoothed their hair and kept their faces pressed against his chest. He made himself watch, though, until the wagons wheeled away surrounded by whooping riders, after the horses that were already almost out of sight toward the smoking mountains that lined the horizon.

Only then did he stand up, prying the children loose. “Wait here for me,” he told them. “Wait until I come back.” Clinging to each other, they stared at him with tear-stained white faces, nodded uncertainly.

He walked out to one of the bodies, rolled her over gently. Siedre could have been asleep, her face just the way it appeared beside him when he woke each morning. It always surprised him to notice gray in her red-gold hair; she was his love, his life, and ever young and new to him. He tried not to look at the blood soaking the front of her dress or the gaping wound below her breasts.

“What do you mean to do now, Adan? Tell us that! What?”

He brushed Siedre’s hair from her face—she liked to be neat—and stood, turning slowly to confront the knot of angry, frightened men. Sulwin was the leader, a tall man with deep-set eyes. He had let his hair grow, Sulwin had, as if to hide being Aiel. A number of men had. It had made no difference, to these last raiders or those who had come before.

“I mean to bury our dead and go on, Sulwin.” His eyes drifted back to Siedre. “What else is there?”

“Go on, Adan? How can we go on? There are no horses. There is almost no water, no food. All we have left are wagons full of things the Aes Sedai will never come for. What are they, Adan? What are they that we should give our lives to haul them across the world, afraid to touch them even? We cannot go on as before!”

“We can!” Adan shouted. “We will! We have legs; we have backs. We will drag the wagons, if need be. We will be faithful to our duty!” He was startled to see his own brandished fist. A fist. His hand trembled as he unclenched it and put it down by side.

Sulwin stepped back, then held his ground with his companions. “No, Adan. We are supposed to find a place of safety, and some of us mean to do that. My greatfather used to tell me stories he heard as a boy, stories of when we lived in safety and people came to hear us sing. We mean to find a place where we can be safe, and sing again.”

“Sing?” Adan scoffed. “I have heard those old stories, too, that Aiel singing was a wondrous thing, but you know those old songs no more than I do. The songs are gone, and the old days are gone. We will not give up our duty to the Aes Sedai to chase after what is lost forever.”

“Some of us will, Adan.” The others behind Sulwin nodded. “We mean to find that safe place. And the songs, too. We will!”

A crash whipped Adan’s head around. More of Sulwin’s cronies were unloading one of the wagons, and a large flat crate had fallen, half breaking open to reveal what looked like a polished doorframe of dark red stone. Other wagons were being emptied, too, and by more than Sulwin’s friends. At least a quarter of the people he saw were hard at work clearing wagons of everything but food or water.

“Do not try to stop us,” Sulwin cautioned.

Adan made his fist loosen again. “You are not Aiel,” he said. “You betray everything. Whatever you are, you are no longer Aiel!”

“We keep the Way of the Leaf as well as you, Adan.”

“Go!” Adan shouted. “Go! You are not Aiel! You are lost! Lost! I do not want to look at you! Go!” Sulwin and the others stumbled in their haste to get away from him.

His heart sank lower as he surveyed the wagons, and the dead lying among the litter. So many dead, so many wounded moaning as they were tended. Sulwin and his lost ones were taking some care in their unloading. The men with the swords had broken open crates until they realized there was no gold inside, no food. Food was more precious than gold. Adan studied the stone doorframe, tumbled piles of stone figurines, odd shapes in crystal standing among the potted chora cuttings Sulwin’s folk had no use for. Was there a use for any of it? Was this what they were being faithful for? If it was, then so be it. Some could be saved. There was no way to tell what Aes Sedai might consider most important, but some could be saved.

He saw Maigran and Lewin clutching their mother’s skirts. He was glad Saralin was alive to look after them; his last son, her husband, the children’s father, had died from the very first arrow that morning. Some could be saved. He would save the Aiel, whatever it took.

Kneeling, he gathered Siedre in his arms. “We are still faithful, Aes Sedai,” he whispered. “How long must we be faithful?” Putting his head down on his wife’s breast, he wept.

* * *

Tears stung Rand’s eyes; silently, he mouthed, *“Siedre.”* The Way of the Leaf? That was no Aiel belief. He could not think clearly; he could hardly think at all. The lights spun faster and faster. Beside him, Muradin’s mouth was open in a soundless howl; the Aiel's eyes bulged as if witnessing the death of everything. They stepped forward together.

Jonai stood at the edge of the cliff staring out westward over the sun-sparkled water. A hundred leagues in that direction lay Comelle. Had lain Comelle. Comelle had clung to the mountains overlooking the sea. A hundred leagues west, where the sea now ran. If Alnora were still alive, perhaps it would have been easier to take. Without her dreams, he scarcely knew where to go or what to do. Without her, he hardly cared to live. He felt every gray hair as he turned to trudge back to the wagons, waiting a mile away. Fewer wagons, now, and showing wear. Fewer people, too, a handful of thousands where there had been tens. But too many for the remaining wagons. No one rode now save children too small to walk.

Adan met him at the first wagon, a tall young man, his blue eyes too wary. Jonai always expected to see Willim if he looked around quickly enough. But Willim had been sent away, of course, years ago, when he began to channel no matter how hard he tried to stop. The world had too many men channeling, still; they had to send away boys who showed the signs. They had to. But he wished he had his children back. When had Esole died? So little to be laid in a hastily dug hole, wasted with sickness there was no Aes Sedai to Heal.

"There are Ogier, father," Adan said excitedly. Jonai suspected his son had always thought his stories of the Ogier were just that, stories. "They came from the north."

It was a bedraggled band Adan led him to, no more than fifty in number, hollow-cheeked, sad-eyed, tufted ears drooping. He had become accustomed to his own people's drawn faces and worn, patched clothing, but seeing the same on Ogier shocked him. Yet he had people to care for, and duties to discharge for the Aes Sedai. How long since he had seen an Aes Sedai? Just after Alnora died. Too late for Alnora. The woman had Healed the sick who still lived, taken some of the *sa'angreal*, and gone on her way, laughing bitterly when he asked her where there was a place of safety. Her dress had been patched, and worn at the hem. He was not sure she had been sane. She claimed one of the Forsaken was only partly trapped, or maybe not at all; Ishamael still touched the world, she said. She had to be as mad as the remaining male Aes Sedai.

He pulled his mind back to the Ogier as they stood, unsteady on their great legs. His thoughts wandered too much since Alnora's death. They had bread and bowls in their hands. He was shocked to feel a prick of anger that someone had shared their meager stock of food. How many of his people could eat on what fifty Ogier could consume? No. To share was the way. To give freely. A hundred people? Two hundred?

"You have chora cuttings," one of the Ogier said. His thick fingers gently brushed the trefoil leaves of the two potted plants tied to the side of a wagon.

"Some," Adan said curtly. "They die, but the old folk keep new cuttings before they do." He had no time for trees. He had a people to look after. "How bad is it in the north?"

"Bad," an Ogier woman replied. "The Blighted Lands have grown southward, and there are Myrddraal and Trollocs."

"I thought they were all dead." Not north, then. They could not turn north. South? The Sea of Jeren lay ten days south. Or did it, any longer? He was tired. So tired.

"You have come from the east?" another Ogier asked. He wiped his bowl with a heel of bread and gulped it down. "How is it to the east?"

"Bad," Jonai replied. "Perhaps not so bad for you, though. Ten—no, twelve days ago, some people took a third of our horses before we could escape. We had to abandon wagons." That pained him. Wagons left behind, and what was in them. The things the Aes Sedai had placed in Aiel charge, abandoned. That it was not the first time only made it worse. "Almost everyone we meet takes things, whatever they want. Perhaps they will not be so with Ogier, though."

"Perhaps," an Ogier woman said as if she did not believe it. Jonai was not certain he did either; there was no safe place. "Do you know where any of the *stedding* are?"

Jonai stared at her. "No. No, I do not. But surely you can find the *stedding*."

"We have run so far, so long," an Ogier back in the huddle said, and another added in a mournful rumble, "The land has changed so much."

"I think we must find a *stedding* soon or die," the first Ogier woman said. "I feel a . . . longing . . . in my bones. We must find a *stedding*. We must."

“I cannot help you,” Jonai said sadly. He felt a tightness in his chest. The land changed beyond knowing, changing still so the plain traveled last year might be mountains this. The Blighted Lands growing. Myrddraal and Trollocs still alive. People stealing, people with faces like animals, people who did not recognize Da’shain or know them. He could barely breathe. The Ogier, lost. The Aiel, lost. Everything lost. The tightness broke in pain, and he sank to his knees, doubled over, clutching his chest. A fist held his heart, squeezing.

Adan knelt beside him worriedly. “Father, what is it? What is the matter? What can I do?”

Jonai managed to sieze his son’s frayed collar and pull his face close. “Take—the people—south.” He had to force the words out between spasms that seemed to be ripping his heart out.

“Father, you are the one who—”

“Listen. Listen! Take them—south. Take—the Aiel—to safety. Keep—the Covenant. Guard—what the Aes Sedai—gave us—until they—come for it. The Way—of the Leaf. You must—” He had tried. Solinda Sedai must understand that. He had tried. Alnora.

Alnora. The name faded, the pain in Rand’s chest loosened. No sense. It made no sense. How could these people be Aiel?

The columns flashed in blinding pulses. The air stirred, swirling.

Beside him, Muradin’s mouth stretched wide in an effort to scream. The Aiel clawed at his veil, clawed at his face, leaving deep bloody scratches.

Forward.

Jonai hurried down the empty streets, trying not to look at shattered buildings and dead chora trees. All dead. At least the last of the long abandoned jo-cars had been hauled away. Aftershocks still troubled the ground beneath his feet. He wore his work clothes, his cadin’sor, of course, though the work he had been given was nothing he had been trained for. He was sixty-three, in the prime of life, not yet old enough for gray hairs, but he felt a tired old man.

No one questioned his entering the Hall of the Servants; there was no one at the great columned entrance to question anyone, or give greeting. Plenty of people darted about inside, arms filled with papers or boxes, eyes anxious, but none so much as looked at him. There was a feel of panic about them, and it grew by increments every time the ground shook. Distressed, he crossed the anteroom and trotted up the broad stairs. Mud stained the silvery white elstone. No one could spare time. Perhaps no one cared.

There was no need to knock at the door he sought. Not one of the great gilded doors to an ingathering hall, but a door plain and unobtrusive. He slipped in quietly, though, and was glad he had. Half a dozen Aes Sedai stood around the long table, arguing, apparently not noticing when the building trembled. They were all women.

He shivered, wondering if men would ever stand in a meeting such as this again. When he saw what was on the table, the shiver became a shudder. A crystal sword—perhaps an object of the Power, perhaps only an ornament; he had no way of telling—held down the Dragon banner of Lews Therin Kinslayer, spread out like a tablecloth and spilling onto the floor. His heart clenched. What was that doing here? Why had it not been destroyed, and memory of the cursed man as well?

"What good is your Foretelling," Oselle was almost shouting, "if you cannot tell us when?" Her long black hair swayed as she shook with anger. "The world rests on this! The future! The Wheel itself!"

Dark-eyed Deindre faced her with a more usual calm. "I am not the Creator. I can only tell you what I Foretell."

"Peace, sisters." Solinda was the calmest of them all, her old-fashioned streith gown only a pale blue mist. The sun-red hair falling to her waist was nearly the color of his own. His greatfather had served her as a young man, but she looked younger than he; she was Aes Sedai. "The time for contention among ourselves is past. Jaric and Haindar will both be here by tomorrow."

"Which means we cannot afford mistakes, Solinda."

"We must know. . . ."

"Is there any chance of . . . ?"

Jonai stopped listening. They would see him when they were ready. He was not the only one in the room besides the Aes Sedai. Someshta sat against the wall near the door, a great shape seemingly woven of vines and leaves, his head a little above Jonai's even so. A fissure of withered brown and charred black ran up the Nym's face and furrowed the green grass of his hair, and when he looked at Jonai, his hazelnut eyes seemed troubled.

When Jonai nodded to him, he fingered the rift and frowned. “Do I know you?” he said softly.

“I am your friend,” Jonai replied sadly. He had not seen Someshta in years, but he had heard of this. Most of the Nym were dead, he had heard. “You rode me on your shoulders when I was a child. Do you remember nothing of it?”

“Singing,” Someshta said. “Was there singing? So much is gone. The Aes Sedai say some will return. You are a Child of the Dragon, are you not?”

Jonai winced. That name had caused trouble, no less for not being true. But how many citizens now believed the Da’shain Aiel had once served the Dragon and no other Aes Sedai?

“Jonai?”

He turned at the sound of Solinda’s voice, went to one knee as she approached. The others were still arguing, but more quietly.

“All is in readiness, Jonai?” she said.

“All, Aes Sedai. Solinda Sedai. . . .” He hesitated, took a deep breath. “Solinda Sedai, some of us wish to remain. We can serve, still.”

“Do you know what happened to the Aiel at Tzora?” He nodded, and she sighed, reaching out to smooth his short hair as if he were a child. “Of course you do. You Da’shain have more courage than. . . . Ten thousand Aiel linking arms and singing, trying to remind a madman of who they were and who he had been, trying to turn him with their bodies and a song. Jaric Mondoran killed them. He stood there, staring as though at a puzzle, killing them, and they kept closing their lines and singing. I am told he listened to the last Aiel for almost an hour before destroying him. And then Tzora burned, one huge flame consuming stone and metal and flesh. There is a sheet of glass where the second greatest city in the world once stood.”

“Many people had time to flee, Aes Sedai. The Da’shain earned them time to flee. We are not afraid.”

Her hand tightened painfully in his hair. “The citizens have already fled Paaran Disen, Jonai. Besides, the Da’shain yet have a part yet to play, if Deindre could only see far enough to say what. In any case, I mean to save something here, and that something is you.”

“As you say,” he said reluctantly. “We will care for what you have given into our charge until you want them again.”

“Of course. The things we gave you.” She smiled at him and loosened her grip, smoothing his hair once more before folding her hands. “You will carry the . . . things . . . to safety, Jonai. Keep moving, always moving, until you find a place of safety, where no one can harm you.”

“As you say, Aes Sedai.”

“What of Coumin, Jonai? Has he calmed?”

He did not know any way but to tell her; he would rather have bitten his tongue out. “My father is hiding somewhere in the city. He tried to talk us into . . . resisting. He would not listen, Aes Sedai. He would not listen. He found an old shocklance somewhere, and. . . .” He could not go on. He expected her to be angry, but her eyes glistened with tears.

“Keep the Covenant, Jonai. If the Da’shain lose everything else, see they keep the Way of the Leaf. Promise me.”

“Of course, Aes Sedai,” he said, shocked. The Covenant was the Aiel, and the Aiel were the Covenant; to abandon the Way would be to abandon what they were. Coumin was an aberration. He had been strange since he was a boy, it was said, hardly Aiel at all, though no one knew why.

“Go now, Jonai. I want you far from Paaren Disen by tomorrow. And remember—keep moving. Keep the Aiel safe.”

He bowed where he knelt, but she was already being drawn back into the argument.

“Can we trust Kodam and his fellows, Solinda?”

“We must, Oselle. They are young and inexperienced, but barely touched by the taint, and. . . . And we have no choice.”

“Then we will do what we must. The sword must wait. Someshta, we have a task for the last of the Nym, if you will do it. We have asked too much of you; now we must ask more.”

Jonai bowed his way out formally as the Nym rose, his head brushing the ceiling. Already immersed in their plans, they were not looking at him, but he did them this last honor anyway. He did not think he would ever see them again.

He ran from the Hall of the Servants, all the way out of the city to where the great gathering waited. Thousands of wagons in ten lines stretching nearly two leagues, wagons loaded with food and water barrels, wagons loaded with the crated things the Aes Sedai had given into Aiel charge, *angreal* and *sa’angreal* and *ter’angreal*, all the things that had to be kept from the hands of men going mad while they wielded the One Power.

Once there would have been other ways to carry them, jo-cars and jumpers, hoverflies and huge sho-wings. Now painfully assembled horses and wagons had to suffice. Among the wagons stood the people, enough to populate a city but perhaps all the Aiel left alive in the world.

A hundred came to meet him, men and women, the representatives demanding word of whether the Aes Sedai had granted leave for some to stay. "No," he told them. Some frowned reluctantly, and he added, "We must obey. We are Da'shain Aiel, and we obey the Aes Sedai."

They dispersed back to their wagons slowly, and he thought he heard Coumin's name mentioned, but he could not let it trouble him. He hurried to his own wagon, at the head of one of the center lines. The horses were all nervous with the ground shaking at intervals.

His sons were already up on the seat—Willim, fifteen, with the reins, and Adan, ten, beside him, both grinning with nervous excitement. Little Esole lay playing with a doll on top of the canvas tied over their possessions—and, more important, their charges from the Aes Sedai. There was no room for any to ride but the young and the very old. A dozen rooted chora cuttings in clay pots sat behind the wagon seat, to be planted when they found a place of safety. A foolish thing to carry, perhaps, but no wagon was without its potted cuttings. Something from a time long gone; symbol of a better time to come. People needed hope, and symbols.

Alnora waited beside the team, glossy black hair tumbling about her shoulders and reminding him of the first time he saw her as a girl. But worry had etched lines around her eyes now.

He managed a smile for her, hiding the worry in his own heart. "All will be well, wife of my heart." She did not answer, and he added, "Have you dreamed?"

"Of no time soon," she murmured. "All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." Smiling tremulously, she touched his cheek. "With you I know it will be so, husband of my heart."

Jonai waved his arms over his head, and the signal rippled down the lines. Slowly the wagons began to move, the Aiel leaving Paaren Disen.

Rand shook his head. Too much. Memories crowding together. The air seemed filled with sheet lightning. The wind swirled gritty dust into dancing whirlwinds. Muradin had clawed deep furrows in his face; he was digging at his eyes now. Forward.

Coumin knelt at the edge of the plowed ground in his working clothes, plain brownish gray coat and breeches and soft laced boots, in a line with others like him that surrounded the field, ten men of the Da’shain Aiel at twice stretched-arm’s length and then an Ogier, all the way around. He could see the next field, lined the same way, beyond the soldiers with their shocklances sitting atop armored jo-cars. A hoverfly buzzed overhead in its patrol, a deadly black metal wasp containing two men. He was sixteen, and the women had decided his voice was finally deep enough to join in the seed singing.

The soldiers fascinated him, men and Ogier, the way a colorful poisonous snake might. They *killed.* His father’s greatfather, Charn, claimed there had been no soldiers once, but Coumin did not believe it. If there were no soldiers, who would stop the Nightriders and the Trollocs from coming to kill everyone? Of course, Charn claimed there had not been any Myrddraal or Trollocs then, either. No Forsaken, no Shadowwrought. He had many stories he claimed were from a time before soldiers and Nightriders and Trollocs, when he said the Dark Lord of the Grave had been bound away, and no one knew his name, or the word “war.” Coumin could not imagine such a world; the war had been old when he was born.

He enjoyed Charn’s stories even if he could not make himself believe, but some earned the old man frowns and scoldings. Like when he claimed to have served one of the Forsaken, once. Not just any Forsaken, but Lanfear herself. As well say he had served Ishamael. If Charn had to make up stories, Coumin wished he could say he had served Lews Therin, the great leader himself. Of course, everyone would ask why he was not serving the Dragon now, but that would be better than the way things were. Coumin did not like the way citizens looked at Charn when he said that Lanfear had not always been evil.

A stir at the end of the field told him one of the Nym was approaching. The great form, head and shoulders and chest taller than any Ogier, stepped out onto the seeded ground, and Coumin did not have to see to know he left footprints filled with sprouting things. It was Someshta, surrounded by clouds of butterflies, white and yellow and blue. Excited murmurs rose from the townspeople and the folk whose fields these were, gathered to watch. Each field would have its Nym, now.

Coumin wondered if he could ask Someshta about Charn’s stories. He had spoken to him once, and Someshta was old enough to know if Charn was telling the truth; the Nym were older than anyone. Some said the Nym never died, not so long as plants grew. But this was no time to be thinking of questioning a Nym.

The Ogier began it, as was fitting, standing to sing, great bass rumbles like the earth singing. The Aiel rose, men’s voices lifting in their own song, even the deepest at a higher pitch than the Ogier’s. Yet the songs braided together, and Someshta took those threads and wove them into his dance, gliding across the field in swooping strides, arms wide, butterflies swirling about him, landing on his spread fingertips.

Coumin could hear the seed singing around the other fields, hear the women clapping to urge the men on, their rhythm the heartbeat of new life, but it was a distant knowledge. The song caught him up, and he almost felt that it was himself, not the sounds he made, that Someshta wove into the soil and around the seeds. Seeds no longer, though. Zemai sprouts covered the field, taller wherever the Nym’s foot had trod. No blight would touch those plants, nor any insect; seed sung, they would eventually grow twice as high as a man and fill the town’s grainbarns. This was what he had been born for, this song and the other seed songs. He did not regret the fact that the Aes Sedai had passed him over at ten, saying he lacked the spark. To have been trained as Aes Sedai would have been wondrous, but surely no more so than this moment.

The song faded slowly, the Aiel guiding its end. Someshta danced a few steps more after the last voices ceased, and it seemed the song still hung faintly in the air for as long as he moved. Then he stopped, and it was done.

Coumin was surprised to see that the townspeople were gone, but he had no time to wonder where they had gone or why. The women were coming, laughing, to congratulate the men. He was one of the men now, not a boy any longer, though the women alternated between kissing him on the lips and reaching up to ruffle his short red hair.

It was then that he saw the soldier, only a few steps away, watching them. He had left his shocklance and fancloth battle cape somewhere, but he still wore his helmet, like some monstrous insect’s head, its mandibles hiding his face though his black shockvisor was raised. As if realizing he still stood out, the soldier pulled off the helmet, revealing a dark young man no more than four or five years older than Coumin. The soldier’s unblinking brown eyes met his, and Coumin shivered. The face was only four or five years older, but those eyes. . . . The soldier would have been chosen to begin his training at ten, too. Coumin was glad Aiel were spared that choosing.

One of the Ogier, Tomada, came over, tufted ears slanted forward inquisitively. “Do you have news, warman? I saw excitement among the jo-cars while we sang.”

The soldier hesitated. “I suppose I can tell you, though it is not confirmed. We have a report that Lews Therin led the Companions on a strike at Shayol Ghul this morning at dawn. Something is disrupting communications, but the report is the Bore has been sealed, with most of the Forsaken on the other side. Maybe all of them.”

“Then it is over.” Tomada breathed. “Over at last, the Light be praised.”

“Yes.” The soldier looked around, suddenly seeming lost. “I . . . suppose it is. I suppose. . . .” He peered at his hands, then let them fall to his sides again. He sounded weary. “The local folk could not wait to begin celebrating. If the news is true, it might go on for days. I wonder if . . . ? No, they will not want soldiers joining them. Will you?”

“For tonight, perhaps,” Tomada said. “But we have three more towns to visit before our circuit is done.”

“Of course. You still have work to do. You have that.” The soldier looked around again. “There are still Trollocs. Even if the Forsaken are gone, there are still Trollocs. And Nightriders.” Nodding to himself, he started back toward the jo-cars.

Tomada did not appear excited at all, of course, but Coumin felt as stunned as the young soldier. The war was over? What would the world be like without war? Suddenly he had to talk to Charn.

Sounds of merrymaking rolled out to meet him before he reached the town—laughing, singing. The bells in the town-hall tower began ringing exuberantly. Townspeople danced in the streets, men and women and children. Coumin dodged between them, searching. Charn had elected to stay at one of the inns where the Aiel were putting up instead of coming to the singing—even the Aes Sedai could no longer do much for the aches in his aged knees—but surely he would be out for this.

Abruptly something struck Coumin in the mouth and his legs buckled; he was pushing himself to his knees before he realized he was down. A hand put to his mouth came away bloody. He looked up to find an angry-faced townsman standing over him, nursing a fist. “Why did you do that?” he asked.

The townsman spat at him. “The Forsaken are dead. Dead, do you hear? Lanfear will not protect you anymore. We will root out all of you who served the Forsaken while pretending to be on our side, and treat the lot of you as we treated that crazy old man.”

A woman was tugging at the man’s arm. “Come away, Toma. Come away, and hold your foolish tongue! Do you want the Ogier to come for you?” Suddenly wary, the man let her pull him away into the crowd.

Struggling to his feet, Coumin began to run, heedless of the blood oozing down his chin.

The inn was empty, silent. Not even the innkeeper was there, or the cook, or her helpers. Coumin ran through the building shouting, “Charn? Charn? Charn? *Charn?*”

Out back, maybe. Charn liked to sit under the spiceapple trees behind the inn, and tell his stories of the days when he was young.

Coumin ran out the back door, and tripped, falling on his face. It was an empty boot that had caught his toe. One of Charn’s red dress boots that he wore all the time, now that he no longer joined in the singing. Something made Coumin look up.

Charn’s white-haired body hung from a rope pulled over the ridgepole, one foot bare where he had kicked his boot off, the fingers of one hand caught at his neck where he had tried to pull the rope free.

“Why?” Coumin said. “We are Da’shain. Why?” There was no one to answer. Clutching the boot to his chest, he knelt there, staring up at Charn, as the noise of revelry washed over him.

Rand quivered. The light from the columns was a shimmering blue haze that seemed solid, that seemed to claw the nerves out of his skin. The wind howled, one vast whirlwind sucking inward. Muradin had managed to veil himself; bloody sockets stared blindly above the black veil. The Aiel was chewing, and bloody froth dripped onto his chest. Forward.

Charn made his way down the side of the wide, crowded street beneath the spreading chora trees, their trefoil leaves spreading peace and contentment in the shadows of silvery buildings that touched the sky. A city without choras would seem bleak as wilderness. Jo-cars hummed quietly down the street, and a great white sho-wing darted across the sky, carrying citizens to Comelle or Tzora or somewhere. He seldom used the sho-wings, himself—if he needed to go very far, an Aes Sedai usually Traveled with him—but tonight he would, to M'jinn. Today was his twenty-fifth naming day, and tonight he intended to accept Nalla's latest offer of marriage. He wondered if she would be surprised; he had been putting her off for a year, not wanting to settle down. It would mean changing his service to Zorelle Sedai, whom Nalla served, but Mierin Sedai had already given her blessing.

He rounded a corner and just had time to see a dark, wide-shouldered man with a fashionably narrow beard before the man's shoulder sent him crashing to his back, head bouncing on the walkway so he saw spots. Dazed, he lay there.

"Watch where you are going," the bearded man said irritably, adjusting his sleeveless red coat and flicking the lace at his wrists. His black hair, hanging to his shoulders, was gathered in back. That was the latest fashion, too, as near as anyone who had not sworn to the Covenant would come to imitating Aiel.

The pale-haired woman with him laid a hand on his arm, her dress of shimmery white streith becoming more opaque with her sudden embarrassment. "Jom, look at his hair. He is Aiel, Jom."

Feeling his head to see if it was cracked, Charn's fingers brushed through short-cut, reddish-gold hair. He gave the longer tail at his nape a tug in lieu of shaking his head. A bruise, he thought, but no more.

"So he is." The man's annoyance vanished in consternation. "Forgive me, Da'shain. I am the one who should be watching where he walks. Let me help you up." He was already suiting his words, hoisting Charn to his feet. "Are you all right? Let me call a jumper to take you where you are going."

"I am not hurt, citizen," Charn said mildly. "Truly, it was my fault." It had been, hurrying like that. He could have injured the man. "Did I harm you? Please, forgive me."

The man opened his mouth to protest—citizens always did; they seemed to think Aiel were made of spinglass—but before he could speak, the ground rippled under their feet. The air rippled, too, in spreading waves.

The man looked about uncertainly, pulling his stylish fancloth cloak around himself and his lady so their heads seemed to float disembodied. “What is it, Da’shain?”

Others who had seen Charn’s hair were gathering around him anxiously asking the same questions, but he ignored them, not even thinking of whether he was being rude. He actually began to push through the crowd, his eyes fixed on the Sharom; the white sphere, a thousand feet in diameter, floated as high above the blue and silver domes of the Collam Daan.

Mierin had said today was the day. She said she had found a new source for the One Power. Female Aes Sedai and male would be able to tap the same source, not separate halves. What men and women could do united would be even greater now that there would be no differences. And today she and Beidomon would tap it for the first time—the last time men and women would work together wielding a different Power. Today.

What seemed a tiny chip of white spun away from the Sharom in a jet of black fire; it descended, deceptively slow, insignificant. Then a hundred gouts spurted everywhere around the huge white sphere. The Sharom broke apart like an egg and began to drift down, falling, an obsidian inferno. Darkness spread across the sky, swallowing the sun in unnatural night, as if the light of those flames was blackness. People were screaming, screaming everywhere.

With the first spurt of fire, Charn broke into a run toward the Collam Daan, but he knew he was too late. He was sworn to serve Aes Sedai, and he was too late. Tears rolled down his face as he ran.

Blinking to dispel the spots fluttering across his vision, Rand squeezed his head with both hands. The image still drifted through his head, that huge sphere, burning black, falling. *Did I really see the hole being drilled into the Dark One’s prison? Did I?* He stood at the edge of the glass columns, staring out at *Avendesora. A chora tree. A city is a wilderness without choras. And now there’s only one.* The columns sparkled in the blue glow from the dome of fog above, but once again the light seemed only brilliant reflections. There was no sign of Muradin; he did not think the Aiel had come out of the glass forest. Or ever would.

Suddenly something caught his eye, low in the branches of the Tree of Life. A shape swinging slowly. A man, hanging from a pole laid across two branches by a rope around his neck.

With a wordless roar, he ran for the tree, grabbing at *saidin*, the fiery sword coming into his hands as he leaped, slashing at the rope. He and Mat hit the dusty white paving stones with twin thuds. The pole jarred free and clattered down beside them; not a pole, but an odd black-hafted spear with a short sword blade in place of a spearpoint, slightly curved and single-edged. Rand would not have cared if it was made of gold and *cuendillar* set with sapphires and firedrops.

Letting sword and Power go, he ripped the rope away from Mat's neck and pressed an ear to his friend's chest. Nothing. Desperately, he tore open Mat's coat and shirt, breaking the leather cord that held a silver medallion on Mat's chest. He tossed the medallion aside, listened again. Nothing. No heartbeat. Dead. *No! He'd be all right if I hadn't let him follow me here. I can't let him be dead!*

As hard as he could he pounded his fist against Mat's chest, listened. Nothing. Again he hammered, listened. Yes. There. A faint heartbeat. It was. So faint, so slow. And slowing. But Mat *was* still alive despite the heavy purple welt around his neck. He might yet be kept alive.

Filling his lungs, Rand scrambled around to breathe into Mat's mouth as strongly as he could. Again. Again. Then he leaped astride Mat, seized the waist of his breeches and heaved upward, lifting his hips off the pavement. Up and down, three times, and then back to breathing into his mouth. He could have channeled; he might have been able to do something that way. The memory of that girl in the Stone stopped him. He wanted Mat to live. Live, not be a puppet moved by the Power. Once back in Emond's Field he had seen Master Luhhan revive a boy who had been found floating in the Winespring Water. So he breathed and heaved, breathed and heaved and prayed.

Abruptly Mat jerked, coughed. Rand knelt beside him as he put both hands to his throat and rolled onto his side, sucking air in an agonized rattle.

Mat touched the piece of rope with one hand and shivered. "Those flaming—sons—of goats," he muttered hoarsely. "They tried—to kill me."

"Who did?" Rand asked, looking around warily. Half-finished palaces around the great littered square stared back at him. Surely Rhuidean was empty except for the two of them. Unless Muradin was still alive, somewhere.

“The folk—on the other side—of that—twisted doorway.” Swallowing painfully, Mat sat up and took a deep unsteady breath. “There’s one here, too, Rand.” He still sounded as if his throat had been rasped.

“You could go through it? Did they answer questions?” That could be useful. He desperately needed more answers. A thousand questions, and too few answers.

“No answers,” Mat said huskily. “They cheat. And they tried to kill me.” He picked up the medallion, a silver foxhead that almost filled his palm, and after a moment stuffed it into his pocket with a grimace. “I got something out of them, at least.” Pulling the strange spear to him, he ran his fingers along the black shaft. A line of some strange cursive script ran its length, bracketed by a pair of birds inlaid in metal even darker than the wood. Ravens, Rand thought they were. Another pair were engraved on the blade. With a rough wry laugh, Mat levered himself to his feet, half-leaning on the spear, the sword blade beginning just level with his head. He did not bother to lace up his shirt or button his coat. “I’ll keep this, too. Their joke, but I will keep it.”

“A joke?”

Mat nodded. “What it says.

‘Thus is our treaty written; thus is agreement made.
Thought is the arrow of time; memory never fades.
What was asked is given. The price is paid.’

“A pretty joke, you see. I’ll slice them with their own wit if I ever get the chance. I’ll give them ‘thought and memory.’ ” He winced, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Light, but my head hurts. It’s spinning, like a thousand bits of dreams, and every one a needle. Do you think Moiraine will do something for it if I ask?”

“I am sure she will,” Rand replied slowly. Mat had to be hurting badly if he sought the Aes Sedai’s help. He looked at the dark spear shaft again. Most of the script was hidden by Mat’s hand, but not all. Whatever it was, he had no idea what it said. How had Mat? Rhuidean’s empty windows stared at him mockingly. We hide many secrets still, they seemed to say. More than you know. Worse than you know. “Let’s go back now, Mat. I don’t care if we have to cross the valley in the night. As you said, it will be cooler. I don’t want to stay in here any longer.”

“That sounds just fine to me,” Mat said, coughing. “As long as we can get another drink of water at that fountain.”

Rand kept his pace to Mat’s, which was slow at first, hobbling along using the odd spear as a walking staff. He paused once to look at the two figurines of a man and a woman holding crystal spheres, but he left them there. Not yet. Not for a long time yet, if he was lucky.

When they left the square behind, the unfinished palaces rearing along the street had a threatening look, their jagged tops like the walls of great fortresses. Rand embraced *saidin*, though he saw no real threat. But he felt it, as though murderous eyes were boring into his back. Rhuidean lay peaceful and empty, shadowless in the blue glow of its fog roof. The dust in the streets rippled in the wind. . . . The wind. There was no wind.

“Oh, burn me,” Mat muttered. “I think we’re in trouble, Rand. It’s what I get for staying around you. You always get me in trouble.”

The ripples came faster, sliding together to make thicker lines, quivering still.

“Can you walk faster?” Rand asked.

“Walk? Blood and ashes, I can run.” Slanting the spear across his chest, Mat suited his words with a lurching gallop.

Running alongside, Rand brought his sword back, uncertain of what he could do with it against shivering lines of dust, uncertain that there really was need. It was only dust. *No, it bloody isn’t. It’s one of those bubbles. The Dark One’s evil, drifting along the Pattern, seeking out bloody* ta’veren. *I know it is.*

All around them dust rippled and shivered ever thicker, bunching and gathering. Suddenly, right in front of them, a shape reared up in the basin of a dry fountain, a solid man shape, dark and featureless, with fingers like sharp claws. Silently it leaped at them.

Rand moved instinctively—the Moon Rises Over Water—and the blade of Power sliced through that dark figure. In a twinkling it was only a thick cloud of dust, drifting toward the pavement.

Others replaced it, though, black faceless shapes rushing in from all sides, no two alike, but all with reaching claws. Rand danced the forms among them, blade weaving intricate patterns in the air, leaving floating motes behind. Mat used his spear like a quarterstaff, a spinning blur, but bringing the sword blade into it as if he had always used the weapon. The creatures died—or at least returned to dust—but they were many, and quick. Blood poured down Rand's face, and the old wound in his side burned on the point of splitting open. Red spread across Mat's face, too, and down his chest. Too many, and too quick.

You do not do the tenth part of what you are capable of already. That was what Lanfear had told him. He laughed as he danced the forms. Learn from one of the Forsaken. He could do that, if not the way she intended. Yes, he could. He channeled, wove strands of the Power, and sent a whirlwind into the middle of each black shape. They exploded in clouds of dust that left him coughing. As far as he could see, dust settled from the air.

Hacking and panting, Mat leaned on his dark-shafted spear.

"Did you do that?" he wheezed, wiping blood away from his eyes. "About time. If you knew how, why didn't you bloody do it in the first place?"

Rand started to laugh again—*Because I didn't think of it. Because I* didn't *know how until I did it*—but it froze in his mouth. Dust drifted out of the air, and as it settled on the ground, it began to ripple. "Run," he said. "We have to get out of here. Run!"

Side by side they sped for the fog, slashing at any lines of dust that seemed to be thickening, kicking at them, anything to keep them from coalescing. Rand sent whirlwinds swirling wildly in every direction. Dispelled dust began shivering back together immediately, even before it reached the ground now. They kept running, into the fog and through, bursting out into dim, sharp-shadowed light.

Side aching, Rand spun, ready to try lightning, or fire, anything. Nothing came through the fog after them. Maybe the mist was a wall to those dark shapes. Maybe it held them in. Maybe. . . . He did not know. He did not really care, so long as the things could not follow.

"Burn me," Mat muttered hoarsely, "we were in there all night. It's nearly sunrise. I didn't think it was that long."

Rand stared at the sky. The sun had not topped the mountains yet; a painfully brilliant nimbus outlined the jagged peaks. Long shadows covered the valley floor. *He will come from Rhuidean at dawn, and tie you together with bonds you cannot break. He will take you back, and he will destroy you.*

“Let’s go back up the mountain,” he said quietly. “They will be waiting for us.” *For me.*

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CHAPTER 27

Within the Ways

The darkness of the Ways compressed the light of Perrin's pole-lantern to a sharp-edged pool around himself and Gaul. The creak of his saddle, the gritty click of hooves on stone, seemed to reach no further than light's rim. There was no smell to the air; nothing. The Aielman strode along beside Stepper easily, keeping an eye on the dimly seen lanternglow from Loial's party ahead. Perrin refused to call it Faile's. The Ways did not seem to bother Gaul, for all their reputation. Perrin himself could not help listening, as he had for nearly two days, or what passed for days in this lightless place. His ears would be first to catch the sound that meant they were all going to die or worse, the sound of wind rising where no wind ever blew. No wind but *Machin Shin*, the Black Wind that ate souls. He could not help thinking that traveling the Ways was slack-witted folly, but when need called, what was foolish changed.

The faint light ahead stopped, and he drew rein in the middle of what appeared to be an ancient stone bridge arching through utter blackness, ancient because of the breaks in the bridge walls, the pits and shallow ragged craters freckling the roadbed. Very likely it had stood close to three thousand years, but it seemed ready to fall, now. Maybe right now.

The packhorse crowded up behind Stepper: the animals whickered to each other and rolled their eyes uneasily at the surrounding dark. Perrin knew how the horses felt. A few more people for company would have lifted some of the endless night's weight. Still, he would not have gone any closer to the lanterns ahead even had he been alone. Not and risk a repeat of what happened back on that first Island, right after entering the Waygate in Tear. He scratched his curly beard irritably. He was not sure what he had expected, but not. . . .

The pole-lantern bobbed as he stepped down from his saddle and led Stepper and the packhorse to the Guiding, a tall slab of white stone covered *with cursive silver inlays vaguely reminiscent of vines and leaves, all pitted as if splashed with acid. He could not read it, of course—Loial had to do that; it was Ogier script—and after a moment he walked around it, studying the Island. It was the same as the others he had seen, with a chest-high wall of white stone, simple curves and rounds fitted in an intricate pattern. At intervals bridges pierced the wall, arching out into the darkness, and railless ramps running up or down with no means of support he could see. There were cracks everywhere, ragged pits and shallow craters, as though the stone were rotting. When the horses moved there was a grainy sound of stone flaking away beneath their hooves. Gaul peered into the dark with no visible nervousness, but then, he did not know what might be out there. Perrin did, too well.*

When Loial and the others arrived, Faile immediately hopped from her black mare and strode straight to Perrin, eyes intent on his face. He was already regretting making her worry, but she did not look worried at all. He could not have said what her expression was, besides fixed.

"Have you decided to talk to me instead of over my hea—?"

Her full-armed slap made spots dance in front of his eyes. "What did you mean," she practically spat, "charging in here like a wild boar? You have no regard. None!"

He took a slow, deep breath. "I asked you before not to do that." Her dark, tilted eyes widened as if he had said something infuriating. He was rubbing his cheek when her second slap caught him on the other side, nearly unhinging his jaw. The Aiel were watching interestedly, and Loial with his ears drooping.

"I told you not to do that," he growled. Her fist was not very big, but her sudden punch to his shortribs drove most of the air from his lungs, hunching him over sideways, and she drew back her fist again. With a snarl, he seized her by the scruff of her neck and. . . .

Well, it was her own fault. It was. He had asked her not to hit him, told her. Her own fault. He was surprised she had not tried to pull one of her knives, though; she seemed to carry as many as Mat.

She had been furious, of course. Furious with Loial for trying to intervene; she could take care of herself, thank you very much. Furious with Bain and Chiad for *not* intervening; she had been taken aback when they said they did not think she would want them to interfere in a fight she had picked. *When you choose the fight,* Bain had said, *you must take the* *consequences, win or lose.* But she did not seem even the tiniest bit angry with him any longer. That made him nervous. She had only stared at him, her dark eyes glistening with unshed tears, which made him feel guilty, which in turn made him angry. Why should he be guilty? Was he supposed to stand there and let her hit him to her heart's content? She had mounted Swallow and sat there, very stiff-backed, refusing to sit gingerly, staring at him with an unreadable expression. It made him very nervous. He almost wished she had pulled a knife. Almost.

"They are moving again," Gaul said.

Perrin jerked back to the present. The other light *was* moving. Now it paused. One of them had noticed his light was not following yet. Probably Loial. Faile might not mind if he got lost, and the two Aiel women had twice tried to talk him into walking off a little way with them. He had not needed the slight shake of Gaul's head to refuse. He heeled Stepper forward, leading the packhorse.

The Guiding here was more pocked than most he had seen, but he rode on past it with only a glance. The light of the other lanterns was already starting down one of the gently sloping ramps, and he followed with a sigh. He hated the ramps. Sided only by darkness, it began to curve, down and around, with nothing discernible beyond the squashed light of the lantern swaying above his head. Something told him that a fall over the edge would never end. Stepper and the packhorse kept to the middle without any urging, and even Gaul avoided the brink. Worse, when the ramp ended on another Island, there was no way to escape the conclusion that it lay directly beneath the one they had just left. He was glad to see Gaul glancing upward, glad he was not alone in wondering what held the Islands up and whether it was still sound.

Once more Loial and Faile's lanterns had stopped by the Guiding, so he reined up again, just off the ramp. This time they did not move on, though. After a few moments, Faile's voice called, "Perrin."

He exchanged looks with Gaul, and the Aiel shrugged. She had not spoken to Perrin since he. . . .

"Perrin, come here." Not peremptory, exactly, but not asking, either.

Bain and Chiad were squatting easily beside the Guiding, and Loial and Faile sat their horses close by, pole-lanterns in hand. The Ogier had their packhorses' lead line; his ear tufts twitched as he looked from Faile to Perrin and back again. She, on the other hand, seemed completely absorbed in adjusting her riding gloves, of soft green leather with golden falcons embroidered on their backs. She had changed her dress, too. The new one was cut in the same fashion, with a high neck and narrow divided skirts, but it was a dark green brocaded silk, and somehow it seemed to emphasize her bosom. Perrin had never seen the dress before.

“What do you want?” he asked warily.

She looked up as if surprised to see him, tilted her head thoughtfully, then smiled as though it had just occurred to her. “Oh, yes. I wanted to see if you could be taught to come when I call.” Her smiled deepened; it had to be because she had heard his teeth grinding. He scrubbed at his nose; there was a faint rank smell here.

Gaul chuckled softly. “As well try to understand the sun, Perrin. It simply is, and it is not to be understood. You cannot live without it, but it exacts a price. So with women.”

Bain leaned over to whisper in Chiad’s ear, and they both laughed. From the way they looked at Gaul and him, Perrin did not think he would like hearing what the women found so funny.

“It is not that at all,” Loial rumbled, ears shifting testily. He gave Faile an accusing look, which did not abash her at all; she smiled at him vaguely and went back to her gloves, snugging each finger all over again. “I am sorry, Perrin. She insisted on being the one to call you. This is why. We are there.” He pointed to the base of the Guiding, where a wide pit-broken white line ran off, not to bridge or ramp, but into the darkness. “The Waygate at Manetheren, Perrin.”

Perrin nodded, saying nothing. He was not about to suggest they follow the line, not and have Faile call him down for trying to take over. He rubbed his nose again absently; that almost imperceptible scent of rankness was irritating. He was not going to make even the most sensible suggestion. If she wanted to lead, let her. But she sat her saddle, fooling with her gloves, obviously waiting for him to speak so she could make some witty remark. She liked wittiness; he preferred saying what he meant. Irritably, he turned Stepper, meaning to go on without her or Loial. The line led to the Waygate, and he could pick out the *Avendesora* leaf that opened it himself.

Suddenly his ear caught a muffled click of hooves from the darkness, and the fetid smell slammed home in his mind. “Trollocs!” he shouted.

Gaul pivoted smoothly to slide a spear into the black-mailed chest of a wolf-snouted Trolloc dashing into the light with scythelike sword upraised;

in the same effortless motion the Aiel pulled his spearpoint free and sidestepped to let the huge shape fall. More came behind it, though, all goats-nouts and boar’s tusks, cruel beaks and twisted horns, with curved swords and spiked axes and hooked spears. The horses danced and screamed.

Holding his pole-lantern high—the thought of facing these things in the dark gave him cold sweat—Perrin clawed for a weapon, swung at a face distorted by a sharp-toothed snout. He was surprised to realize he had pulled the hammer free of its lashings on his saddlebags, but if it did not have the axe’s sharp edge, ten pounds of steel wielded by a blacksmith’s arm still sent the Trolloc staggering back shrieking and clutching a ruined face.

Loial dashed his pole-lantern against a goat-horned head, and the lantern broke; bathed in burning oil, the Trolloc ran howling into the dark. The Ogier flailed about him with the stout pole, a switch in his huge hands, but one that landed with sharp cracks of splintering bone. One of Faile’s knives blossomed in an all-too-human eye above a tusked snout. The Aiel danced the spears, having somehow found time to veil themselves. Perrin struck, and struck, and struck. A whirlwind of death that lasted. . . . A minute? Five? It seemed an hour. But suddenly the Trollocs were down, those not already dead kicking in their death throes.

Perrin sucked air into his lungs; his right arm felt as if the weight of the hammer might pull it off. There was a burning sensation on his face, a wetness trickling down his side, another on his leg, where Trolloc steel had gotten through. Each of the Aiel had at least one damp patch darkening their brown-and-gray clothes, and Loial wore a bloody gash down his thigh. Perrin’s eyes went right past them, seeking Faile. If she was hurt. . . . She sat atop her black mare, a knife in her hand ready to throw. She had actually managed to pull off her gloves and tuck them neatly behind her belt. He could not see a wound on her. In all the blood smell—human, Ogier, Trolloc—he could not have picked out hers if she were bleeding, but he knew her scent, and she did not have the pained smell of injury. Bright lights hurt Trolloc eyes; they did not adapt quickly. Very likely the only reason they were still alive and the Trollocs dead was that abrupt entry from darkness into light.

That was all the time they had, a moment’s respite, long enough to glance around, take breath. With a roar like a hundred pounds of bone falling into a huge meat grinder, a Fade leaped into the light, eyeless stare a stare of death, black sword flickering like lightning. The horses screamed, trying to bolt.

Gaul barely managed to turn that blade with his buckler, losing a slice from the side of it as if the layers of cured bullhide were only paper. He stabbed, eluded a thrust—barely—and stabbed again. Arrows sprouted in the Myrddraal's chest. Bain and Chiad had thrust their spears through the harness holding the cased bows on their backs and were using those curved horn bows. More arrows, pincushioning the Halfman's chest. Gaul's spear, darting, stabbing. One of Faile's knives suddenly stood out in that smooth maggot-white face. The Fade would not fall, would not stop trying to kill. Only the wildest dodging kept its sword from finding flesh.

Perrin bared his teeth in an unconscious snarl. He hated Trollocs as an enemy of his blood, but the Neverborn . . . ? It was worth dying to kill a Neverborn. *To put my teeth in its throat* . . . ! Careless of whether he blocked Bain and Chiad's arrows, he guided Stepper closer to the Neverborn's back, forcing the reluctant dun nearer with reins and knees. At the last instant, the creature spun away from Gaul, seemingly ignoring a spearpoint that thrust between its shoulders and came out below its throat, staring up at Perrin with the eyeless gaze that sent fear into every man's soul. Too late. Perrin's hammer fell, shattering head and eyeless gaze alike.

Even down and virtually headless, the Myrddraal still thrashed, lashing aimlessly with its Thakan'dar-wrought blade. Stepper danced back, whickering nervously, and suddenly Perrin felt as if he had been doused in icy water. That black steel made wounds even Aes Sedai found hard to Heal, and he had ridden in uncaring. *My teeth in its. . . . Light, I have to keep hold of myself. I have to!*

He could still hear smothered sounds from the darkness at the far end of the Island, the clatter of hoofed feet, the scrape of boots, harsh breathing and guttural murmurs. More Trollocs; how many he could not say. A pity they had not been linked to the Myrddraal, yet perhaps they might hesitate to attack without it to drive them. Trollocs were usually cowards in their way, preferring strong odds and easy kills. But even lacking a Myrddraal they could work themselves up to come again eventually.

"The Waygate," he said. "We have to get out before they decide what to do without that." He used the bloody hammer to gesture to the still flailing Fade. Faile reined Swallow around immediately, and he was so surprised, he blurted, “You aren’t going to argue?”

“Not when you speak sense,” she said briskly. “Not when you speak sense. Loial?”

The Ogier took the lead on his tall, hairy-fetlocked mount. Perrin backed Stepper after Faile and Loial, hammer in hand, the Aiel siding him, all with bows ready now. Shuffling hooves and boots followed in the blackness, and harsh mutters in a language too rough for human tongues. Back and back, with the mutters edging closer, working up courage.

Another sound floated to Perrin, like silk sighing across silk. It sent shivers along his bones. Louder, a distant giant’s exhalation, rising, falling, rising higher. “Hurry!” he shouted. “Hurry!”

“I am,” Loial barked. “I—That sound! Is it—? The Light illumine our souls, and the Creator’s hand shelter us! It’s opening. It is opening! I must be last. Out! Out! But not too—No, Faile!”

Perrin risked a glance over his shoulder. Twin gates of apparently living leaves were swinging open, revealing a smoked-glass view of mountainous country. Loial had dismounted to remove the *Avendesora* leaf to unlock the gate, and Faile had their pack animals’ leads and his huge mount’s reins. With a hasty shout of “Follow me! Quickly!” she booted Swallow’s ribs, and the Tairen mare sprang toward the opening.

“After her,” Perrin told the Aiel. “Hurry! You cannot fight this.” Wisely they hesitated only a heartbeat before peeling back, Gaul seizing the packhorse’s lead line. Stepper came abreast of Loial. “Can you lock it shut some way? Block it?” A frantic edge had entered the harsh mutterings; the Trollocs had recognized the sound too, now. *Machin Shin* was coming. Living meant getting out of the Ways.

“Yes,” Loial said. “Yes. But go. Go!”

Perrin reined Stepper back quickly toward the Gate, yet before he knew what he was doing he had thrown back his head and howled, defiance and challenge. *Foolish, foolish, foolish!* Still, he kept his eyes on that pitch dark and backed Stepper into the Waygate. An icy ripple slid across him hair by hair, and time stretched out. The jolt of leaving the Ways hit him, as if he had gone from a dead gallop to a stop in one step.

The Aiel were still turning to face the Waygate, spreading out across the slope with arrows nocked, among low bushes and stunted mountain trees, wind-twisted pine and fir and leatherleaf. Faile was just picking herself up from where she had tumbled from Swallow's saddle, the black mare nuzzling her. Galloping out of a Waygate was at least as bad as galloping in; she was lucky she had not broken her neck, and her horse's, too. Loial's tall horse and her packhorses were trembling as though hit between the eyes. Perrin opened his mouth, and she glared at him, daring him to make any comment at all, maybe a sympathetic one least of all. He grimaced wryly and wisely kept silent.

Abruptly Loial came hurtling out of the Waygate, leaping out of a dull silvery mirror with his own reflection growing behind him, and rolled across the ground. Almost on his heels, two Trollocs appeared, ram's horns and snout, eagle's beak and feathered crest, but before they were more than halfway out, the shimmering surface turned dead black, bubbling and bulging, clinging to them.

Voices whispered in Perrin's head, a thousand babbling mad voices clawing at the inside of his skull. *Bitter blood. Blood so bitter. Drink the blood and crack the bone. Crack the bone and suck the marrow. Bitter marrow, sweet the screams. Singing screams. Sing the screams. Tiny souls. Acrid souls. Gobble them down. So sweet the pain.* On and on.

Shrieking, howling, the Trollocs beat at the blackness boiling around them, clawed to pull free as it sucked them deeper, deeper, till only one hairy hand remained, clutching frantically, then only darkness, bulging outward, seeking. Slowly the Waygates appeared, sliding together, squeezing the blackness so it oozed back inside between them. The voices in Perrin's head finally stopped. Loial rushed forward quickly to place not one but two three-lobed leaves among the myriad leaves and vines. The Waygate became stone again, a section of stone wall, carved in intricate detail, standing alone on a sparsely wooded mountainside. Among the myriad leaves and vines was not one, but two *Avendesora* leaves. Loial had replaced the trefoil leaf from inside on the outside.

The Ogier heaved a deep, relieved sigh. "That is the best I can do. It can only be opened from this side now." He gave Perrin a look at once anxious and firm. "I could have locked it forever by not replacing the leaves, but I will not ruin a Waygate, Perrin. We grew the Ways and tended them. Perhaps they can be cleansed someday. I cannot ruin a Waygate."

"It will do," Perrin told him. Had the Trollocs been coming to this Waygate, or had it just been a chance encounter? In either case, it would do.

“Was that—?” Faile began unsteadily, then stopped to swallow. Even the Aiel looked shaken for once.

“Machin Shin,” Loial said. “The Black Wind. A creature of the Shadow, or a thing grown of the Ways’ own taint—no one knows. I pity the Trollocs. Even them.”

Perrin was not sure he did, not even dying like that. He had seen what Trollocs left when they got their hands on humans. Trollocs ate anything, so long as it was meat, and sometimes they liked to keep their meat alive while they butchered. He would not let himself pity Trollocs.

Stepper’s hooves crunched on gritty dirt as Perrin turned him to see where they were.

Cloud-capped mountains rose all around; it was the ever-present clouds that gave them their name, the Mountains of Mist. The air was cool at this altitude, even in summer, especially compared to Tear. The late-afternoon sun sat on the western peaks, glinting on streams running down to the river that coursed along the floor of the long valley below. The Manetherendrelle, it was called once it had traveled out of the mountains and much farther west and south, but Perrin had grown up calling the length of it that ran along the south edge of the Two Rivers the White River, an uncrossable stretch of rapids that churned its waters to froth. The Manetherendrelle. Waters of the Mountain Home.

Where bare rock showed in the valley below or on the surrounding slopes, it glittered like glass. Once a city had stood there, covering valley and mountains. Manetheren, city of soaring spires and splashing fountains, capital of a great nation of the same name, perhaps the most beautiful city in the world, according to old Ogier tales. Gone now without a trace, except for the all-but-indestructible Waygate that had stood in the Ogier grove. Burned to barren rock more than two thousand years ago, while the Trolloc Wars still raged, destroyed by the One Power after the death of its last king, Aemon al Caar al Thorin, in his last bloody battle against the Shadow. Aemon’s Field, men had named that place, where the village called Emond’s Field now stood.

Perrin shivered. That was long ago. Trollocs had come once since, on Winternight more than a year gone, the night before he and Rand and Mat were forced to flee in the darkness with Moiraine. That seemed long ago, too, now. It could not happen again, with the Waygate locked. *It’s Whitecloaks I have to worry about, not Trollocs.*

A pair of white-winged hawks wheeled above the far end of the valley. Perrin's eyes barely caught the streak of a rising arrow. One of the hawks cartwheeled and fell, and Perrin frowned. Why would anyone shoot a hawk up here in the mountains? Over a farm, if it was after the chickens or the geese, but up here? Why would anyone even be up here? Two Rivers people avoided the mountains.

The second hawk swooped on snowy wings toward where its mate had fallen, but suddenly it was climbing desperately. A black cloud of ravens burst from the trees, surrounding it in wild melee, and when they settled again, the hawk was gone.

Perrin made himself breathe. He had seen ravens, and other birds, attack a hawk that came too close to their nests before, but he could not make himself believe it that simple this time. The birds had burst up from about where the arrow had risen. Ravens. The Shadow used animals as spies, sometimes. Rats and others that fed on death, usually. Ravens, especially. He had sharp memories of running from sweeping lines of ravens that had hunted him as though they had intelligence.

"What are you staring at?" Faile asked, shading her eyes to peer down the valley. "Were those birds?"

"Just birds," he said. *Maybe they were. I can't frighten everybody until I'm sure. Not while they're still shaky from* Machin Shin.

He was still holding his bloody hammer, he realized, slick with black Myrddraal blood. His fingers found drying blood on his cheek, matting in his short beard. When he climbed down, his side and his leg burned. He found a shirt in his saddlebags to clean the hammer before the Fade's blood etched the metal. In a moment he would find out if there was anything to fear in these mountains. If it was more than men, the wolves would know.

Faile began unbuttoning his coat.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Tending your wounds," she snapped back. "I'll not have you bleeding to death on me. That would be just like you, to die and leave me the work of burying you. You have no consideration. Hold still."

"Thank you," he said quietly, and she looked surprised.

She made him strip off everything but his smallclothes, so she could wash his wounds, rub them with ointment fetched from her saddlebags. He could not see the cut on his face, of course, but it seemed small and shallow, if uncomfortably close to his eye. The slash across his left side was over a hand long, though, straight along a rib, and the hole a spear had made in his right thigh was deep. Faile had to put stitches in that, with needle and thread from her sewing kit. He took it stoically; she was the one who winced at every stitch. She muttered angrily under her breath the whole time she worked, especially while rubbing her dark stinging cream into his cheek, looking almost as if the hurts were hers, and his fault, yet she tied bandages around his ribs and his thigh with a gentle hand. It made a startling contrast, her soft touch and her furious grumbles. Purely confusing.

While he donned a clean shirt and a spare pair of breeches from his saddlebags, Faile stood fingering the slice in the side of his coat. Two inches to the right, and he would not have left that Island. Stamping his feet in his boots, he reached for his coat—and she flung it at him.

“You needn’t think I will sew that up for you. I’ve done all the sewing for you I mean to! Do you hear me, Perrin Aybara?”

“I didn’t ask—”

“You needn’t think it! That’s all!” She stalked away to help the Aiel tend each other and Loial. That was an odd group, the Ogier with his baggy breeches off, Gaul and Chiad eyeing each other like strange cats, Faile spreading her ointment and wrapping bandages and all the while shooting accusing glares at him. What was he supposed to have done now?

Perrin shook his head. Gaul was right, he decided; as well try to understand the sun.

Even knowing what he had to do now, he was reluctant, especially after what had happened in the Ways, with the Fade. Once he had seen a man who had forgotten he was human. The same could happen to him. *Fool. You only have to hold out a few more days. Just till you find the Whitecloaks.* And he had to know. Those ravens.

He sent his mind questing across the valley for the wolves. There were always wolves where men were not, and if they were close, he could talk with them. Wolves avoided men, ignored them as much as possible, but they hated Trollocs for unnatural things, and despised Myrddraal with a hatred too deep to hold. If Shadowspawn were in the Mountains of Mist, the wolves could tell him.

But he found no wolves. None. They should have been there, in this wilderness. He could see deer browsing down in the valley. Perhaps it was just that no wolves were close enough. They could talk over some distance, but even a mile was too far. Maybe it was less in mountains. That could be it.

His gaze swept across the cloud-capped peaks and settled on the valley’s far end, where the ravens had come from. Maybe he would find wolves tomorrow. He did not want to think of the alternatives.

* * *

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CHAPTER 28

To the Tower of Ghenjei

With night so near, they had no choice but to camp there on the mountain near the Waygate. In two camps. Faile insisted on it.

“That is done with,” Loial told her in a displeased rumble. “We are out of the Ways, and I have kept my oath. It is finished.” Faile put on one of her stubborn expressions, with chin up and fists on hips.

“Leave it alone, Loial,” Perrin said. “I’ll camp over there a bit.” Loial glanced at Faile, who had turned to the two Aiel women as soon as she heard Perrin agree, then shook his huge head and made as if to join Perrin and Gaul. Perrin motioned him back, with a small gesture he hoped none of the women noticed.

He made it a small bit, less than twenty paces. The Waygate might be locked, but there were still the ravens, and whatever they might presage. He wanted to be near if needed. If Faile complained, she could just complain. He was so set to ignore her protests that it irked him when she made none.

Disregarding twinges from his leg and side, he unsaddled Stepper and unloaded the packhorse, hobbled both animals and fitted them with nose bags with a few handfuls of barley and some oats. There was certainly no grazing up here. As to what there was, though. . . . He strung his bow and laid it across his quiver near the fire, slipped the axe free of its belt loop.

Gaul joined him in making a fire, and they had a meal of bread and cheese and dried beef, eaten in silence and washed down with water. The sun slid behind the mountains, silhouetting the peaks and painting the under-sides of the clouds red. Shadows blanketed the valley, and the air began to grow crisp.

Dusting crumbs from his hands, Perrin dug his good green wool cloak out of his saddlebags. Perhaps he had grown more accustomed to Tear’s heat than he had thought. The women were certainly not eating in silence around their shadow-shrouded fire; he could hear them laughing, and the bits of what they said that he picked up made his ears burn. Women would talk about anything; they had no restraint at all. Loial had moved as far away from them as he could and still be in the light, and was trying to bury himself in a book. They probably did not even realize they were embarrassing the Ogier; they probably thought they were talking quietly enough for Loial not to hear.

Muttering to himself, Perrin sat back down across the fire from Gaul. The Aiel seemed to be taking no notice of the chill. “Do you know any funny stories?”

“Funny stories? I cannot think of one, offhand.” Gaul’s eyes half-turned to the other fire, and the laughter. “I would if I could. The sun, remember?”

Perrin laughed noisily and made his voice loud enough to carry. “I do. Women!” The hilarity in the other camp faded for a moment before rising again. That should show them. Other people could laugh. Perrin stared glumly into the fire. His wounds ached.

After a moment, Gaul said, “This place begins to look more like the Three-fold Land than most of the wetlands. Too much water, still, and the trees are still too big and too many, but it is not so strange as the places called forests.”

The soil was poor here where Manetheren had died in fire, the widely scattered trees all stunted and thick-boled, odd wind-bent shapes, none as much as thirty feet high. Perrin thought it about as desolate a spot as he had ever seen.

“I wish I could see your Three-fold Land someday, Gaul.”

“Perhaps you will, when we are done here.”

“Perhaps.” Not much chance of it, of course. None, really. He could have told the Aielman that, but he did not want to talk of it now, or think of it.

“This is where Manetheren stood? You are of Manetheren’s blood?”

“This was Manetheren,” Perrin replied. “And I suppose I am.” It was hard to believe that the small villages and quiet farms of the Two Rivers held the last of Manetheren’s blood, but that was what Moiraine had said. The old blood runs strong in the Two Rivers, she had said. “That was a long time ago, Gaul. We are farmers, shepherds; not a great nation, not great warriors.”

Gaul smiled slightly. “If you say it. I have seen you dance the spears, and Rand al’Thor, and the one called Mat. But if you say it.”

Perrin shifted uncomfortably. How much had he changed since leaving home? Himself, and Rand, and Mat? Not his eyes, and the wolves, or Rand’s channeling; he did not mean that. How much of what was inside remained unchanged? Mat was the only one who still seemed to be just himself, only more so. “You know about Manetheren?”

“We know more of your world than you think. And less than we believed. Long before I crossed the Dragonwall I had read books brought by peddlers. I knew of ‘ships’ and ‘rivers’ and ‘forests,’ or thought I did.” Gaul made them sound like words in a strange tongue. “This is how I envisioned a ‘forest.’ ” He gestured at the sparse trees, dwarfed from the height they should have had. “To believe a thing is not to make it true. What of the Nightrunner, and Leafblighter’s get? Do you believe it just coincidence they came near this Waygate?”

“No.” Perrin sighed. “I saw ravens, down the valley. Maybe that’s all they were, but I don’t want to take the chance, not after the Trollocs.”

Gaul nodded. “They could have been Shadoweyes. If you plan for the worst, all surprises are pleasant.”

“I could do with a pleasant surprise.” Perrin felt for wolves again, and again found nothing. “I may be able to find out something tonight. Maybe. If anything happens here, you might have to kick me to wake me.” That sounded odd, he realized, but Gaul only nodded again. “Gaul, you’ve never mentioned my eyes, or even given them a second glance. None of the Aiel have.” He knew they were glowing golden now, in the firelight.

“The world is changing,” Gaul said quietly. “Rhuarc, and Jheran, my own clan chief—the Wise Ones, too—they tried to hide it, but they were uneasy when they sent us across the Dragonwall searching for He Who Comes With the Dawn. I think perhaps the change will not be what we have always believed. I do not know how it will be different, but it will be. The Creator put us in the Three-fold Land to shape us as well as to punish our sin, but for what have we been shaped?” He shook his head suddenly, ruefully. “Colinda, the Wise One of Hot Springs Hold, tells me I think too much for a Stone Dog, and Bair, the eldest Wise One of the Shaarad, threatens to send me to Rhuidean when Jheran dies whether I want to go or not. Beside all of that, Perrin, what does the color of a man’s eyes matter?”

“I wish everybody thought that way.” The merriment had finally stopped at the other fire. One of the Aiel women—Perrin could not tell which—was taking the first watch, her back to the light, and everyone else had settled down for sleep. It had been a tiring day. Sleep should be easy to find, and the dream he needed. He stretched out beside the fire, pulling his cloak around him. “Remember. Kick me awake, if need be.”

Sleep enfolded him while Gaul was still nodding, and the dream came at once.

It was daylight, and he stood alone near the Waygate, which looked like an elegantly carved length of wall, incongruous on the mountainside. Except for that there was no sign any human had ever set foot on that slope. The sky was bright and fine, and a soft breeze up the valley brought him the scent of deer and rabbits, quail and dove, a thousand distinct smells, of water and earth and trees. This was the wolf dream.

For a moment the sense of *being* a wolf rolled over him. He had paws, and. . . . *No!* He ran his hands over himself, relieved to find only his own body, in his own coat and cloak. And the wide belt that normally held his axe, but with the hammer haft thrust through the loop instead.

He frowned at that, and surprisingly, for a moment, the axe flickered there instead, insubstantial and misty. Abruptly it was the hammer again. Licking his lips, he hoped it stayed that way. The axe might be a better weapon, but he preferred the hammer. He could not remember anything like that happening before, something changing, but he knew little of this strange place. If it could be called a place. It was the wolf dream, and odd things happened there, surely as odd as in any ordinary dream.

As though thinking of the oddities triggered one of them, a patch of sky against the mountains darkened suddenly, became a window to somewhere else. Rand stood amid swirling stormwinds, laughing wildly, even madly, arms upraised, and on the winds rode small shapes, gold-and-scarlet, like the strange figure on the Dragon banner; hidden eyes watched Rand, and there was no telling whether he knew it. The odd “window” winked out, only to be replaced by another farther over, where Nynaeve and Elayne stalked cautiously through a demented landscape of twisted, shadowed buildings, hunting some dangerous beast. Perrin could not have said how he knew it was dangerous, but he did. That vanished, and another black blotch spread across the sky. Mat, standing where a road forked ahead of him. He flipped a coin, started down one branch, and suddenly was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and walking with a staff bearing a short sword blade. Another “window,” and Egwene and a woman with long white hair were staring at him in surprise while behind them the White Tower crumbled stone by stone. Then they were gone, too.

Perrin drew a deep breath. He had seen the like before, here in the wolf dream, and he thought the sightings were real in some way, or meant something. Whatever they were, the wolves never saw them. Moiraine had suggested that the wolf dream was the same as something called *Tel’aran’rhiod,* and then would say no more. He had overheard Egwene and Elayne speaking of dreams, once, but Egwene already knew too much about him and wolves, perhaps as much as Moiraine. It was not something he could talk about, not even with her.

There was one person he could have talked to. He wished he could find Elyas Machera, the man who had introduced him to the wolves. Elyas had to know about these things. When he thought of the man, it seemed for a moment he heard his own name whispered faintly in the wind, but when he listened, there was only the wind. It was a lonely sound. Here there was only himself.

“Hopper!” he called, and in his mind, *Hopper*! The wolf was dead, and yet not dead, here. The wolf dream was where wolves came when they died, to await being born again. It was more than that, to wolves; they seemed in some way to be aware of the dream even while awake. One was almost as real—maybe as real—as the other, to them. “Hopper!” *Hopper!* But Hopper did not come.

This was all useless. He was there for a reason, and he might as well get on with it. At best, getting down to where he had seen the ravens rise would take hours.

He took a step—the land around him blurred—and his foot came down near a narrow brook beneath stunted hemlock and mountain willow, with cloud-capped peaks towering above. For a moment he stared in amazement. He was at the far end of the valley from the Waygate. In fact, he was at the very spot he had been aiming for, the place where the ravens had come from, and the arrow that killed the first hawk. Such a thing had never happened to him before. Was he learning more of the wolf dream—Hopper had always said he was ignorant—or was it different this time?

He was more cautious with his next step, but it was only a step. There was no evidence of archer or ravens, no track, no feather, no scent. He was not sure what he had expected. There would be no sign unless they had been in the dream, too. But if he could find wolves in the dream, they could help him find their brothers and sisters in the waking world, and those wolves could tell him if there were Shadowspawn in the mountains. Perhaps if he were higher up they could hear him call.

Fixing his eye on the highest peak bordering the valley, just below the clouds, he stepped. The world blurred, and he was standing on the mountainside, with white billows not five spans overhead. In spite of himself, he laughed. This was fun. From here he could see the entire valley stretched out below.

“Hopper!” No answer.

He leaped to the next mountain, calling, and the next, and the next, eastward, toward the Two Rivers. Hopper did not answer. More troubling, Perrin did not sense any other wolves, either. There were always wolves in the wolf dream. Always.

From peak to peak he sped in blurred motion, calling, seeking. The mountains lay empty beneath him, except for deer and other game. Yet there were occasional signs of men. Ancient signs. Twice great carved figures took nearly an entire mountainside, and in another place strange angular letters two spans high had been incised across a cliff a shade too smooth and sheer. Weathering had worn away the figures’ faces, and eyes less sharp than his might have taken the letters themselves for the work of wind and rain. Mountains and cliffs gave way to the Sand Hills, great rolling mounds sparsely covered with tough grass and stubborn bushes, once the shore of a great sea before the Breaking. And suddenly he saw another man, atop a sandy hill.

The fellow was too distant to see clearly, just a tall, dark-haired man, but plainly not a Trolloc or anything of the sort, in a blue coat with a bow on his back, stooping over something on the ground hidden by the low brush. Yet there was something familiar about him.

The wind rose, and Perrin caught his smell faintly. A cold scent, that was the only way to describe it. Cold, and not really human. Suddenly his own bow was in his hand, an arrow nocked, and the weight of a filled quiver tugged at his belt.

The other man looked up, saw Perrin. For a heartbeat he hesitated, then turned and became a streak, slashing away across the hills.

Perrin leaped down to where he had stood, stared at what had occupied the fellow, and without thought pursued, leaving the half-skinned corpse of a wolf behind. A dead wolf in the wolf dream. It was unthinkable. What could kill a wolf here? Something evil.

His prey ran ahead of him in strides that covered miles, never more than barely in sight. Out of the hills and across the tangled Westwood with its wide-scattered farms, over cleared farmland, a quilt of hedged fields and small thickets, and past Watch Hill. It was odd to see the thatched village houses covering the hill with no people in the streets, and farmhouses standing as if abandoned. But he kept his eye on the man fleeing ahead of him. He had become so used to this pursuit that he felt no surprise when one leaping stride put him down on the south bank of the River Taren and the next amid barren hills without trees or grass. North and east he ran, over streams and roads and villages and rivers, intent only on the man ahead. The land grew flat and grassy, broken by scattered thickets, without any sign of man. Then something glittered ahead, sparkling in the sun, a tower of metal. His quarry sped straight for it, and vanished. Two leaps brought Perrin there as well.

Two hundred feet the tower rose, and forty thick, gleaming like burnished steel. It might as well have been a solid column of metal. Perrin walked around it twice without seeing any opening, not so much as a crack, not even a mark on that smooth, sheer wall. The smell hung here, though, that cold, inhuman stink. The trail ended here. The man—if man he was—had gone inside somehow. He only had to find the way to follow.

Stop! It was a raw flow of emotion that Perrin's mind put a word to. *Stop!*

He turned as a great gray wolf as tall as his waist, grizzled and scarred, alighted as if he had just leaped down from the sky. He might well have. Hopper had always envied eagles their ability to fly, and here, he could too. Yellow eyes met yellow eyes.

"Why should I stop, Hopper? He killed a wolf."

Men have killed wolves, and wolves men. Why does anger seize your throat like fire this time?

"I don't know," Perrin said slowly. "Maybe because it was here. I didn't know it was possible to kill a wolf here. I thought wolves were safe in the dream."

You chase Slayer, Young Bull. He is here in the flesh, and he can kill.

"In the flesh? You mean not just dreaming? How can he be here in the flesh?"

I do not know. It is a thing dimly remembered from long ago, come again as so much else. Things of the Shadow walk the dream, now. Creatures of Heartfang. There is no safety.

"Well, he's inside, now." Perrin studied the featureless metal tower. "If I can find how he got in, I can put an end to him."

Cub foolish, digging in a groundwasps' nest. This place is evil. All know this. And you would chase evil into evil. Slayer can kill.

Perrin paused. There was a sense of finality to the emotions his mind attached the word "kill" to. "Hopper, what happens to a wolf who dies in the dream?"

The wolf was silent for a time. *If we die here, we die forever, Young Bull. I do not know if the same is true for you, but I believe it is.*

"A dangerous place, archer. The Tower of Ghenjei is a bad place for humankind."

Perrin whirled, half-raising his bow before he saw the woman standing a few paces away, her golden hair in a thick braid to her waist, almost the way women wore it in the Two Rivers, but more intricately woven. Her clothes were oddly cut, a short white coat and voluminous trousers of some thin pale yellow material gathered at the ankles above short boots. Her dark cloak seemed to hide something that glinted silver at her side.

She shifted, and the metallic flicker vanished. "You have sharp eyes, archer. I thought that the first time I saw you."

How long had she been watching? It was embarrassing that she had sneaked up without him hearing. At the least Hopper should have warned him. The wolf was lying down in the knee-high grass, muzzle on his forepaws, watching him.

The woman seemed vaguely familiar, though Perrin was certain he would have remembered her had he ever seen her before. Who was she, to be in the wolf dream? Or was it Moiraine's *Tel'aran'rhiod,* too? "Are you Aes Sedai?"

"No, archer." She laughed. "I only came to warn you, despite the prescripts. Once entered, the Tower of Ghenjei is hard enough to leave in the world of men. Here it is all but impossible. You have a bannerman's courage, which some say cannot be told from foolhardiness."

Impossible to leave? The fellow—Slayer—surely had gone in. Why would he do that if he could not leave? "Hopper said it's dangerous, too. The Tower of Ghenjei? What is it?"

Her eyes widened, and she glanced at Hopper, who still lay stretched out on the grass ignoring her and watching Perrin. "You can talk to wolves? Now that is a thing long lost in legend. So that is how you are here. I should have known. The tower? It is a doorway, archer, to the realms of the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn." She said the names as if he should recognize them. When he looked at her blankly, she said, "Did you ever play the game called Snakes and Foxes?"

"All children do. At least, they do in the Two Rivers. But they give it up when they get old enough to realize there's no way to win."

"Except to break the rules," she said. " 'Courage to strengthen, fire to blind, music to daze, iron to bind.' "

"That's a line from the game. I don't understand. What does it have to do with this tower?"

"Those are the ways to win against the snakes and the foxes. The game is a remembrance of old dealings. It does not matter so long as you stay away from the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn. They are not evil the way the Shadow is evil, yet they are so different from humankind they might as well be. They are not to be trusted, archer. Stay clear of the Tower of Ghenjei. Avoid the World of Dreams, if you can. Dark things walk."

"Like the man I was chasing? Slayer."

"A good name for him. This Slayer is not old, archer, but his evil is ancient." She almost appeared to be leaning slightly on something invisible; perhaps that silver thing he had never quite seen. "I seem to be telling you a great deal. I do not understand why I spoke in the first place. Of course. Are you *ta'veren*, archer?"

"Who are you?" She seemed to know a lot about the tower, and the wolf dream. *But she was surprised I could talk to Hopper.* "I've met you before somewhere, I think."

"I have broken too many of the prescripts already, archer."

"Prescripts? What prescripts?" A shadow fell on the ground behind Hopper, and Perrin turned quickly, angry at being caught by surprise again. There was no one there. But he had seen it; the shadow of a man with the hilts of two swords rising above his shoulders. Something about that image teased his memory.

“He is right,” the woman said behind him. “I should not be talking to you.”

When he turned back, she was gone. As far as he could see were only grassland and scattered thickets. And the gleaming, silvery tower.

He frowned at Hopper, who finally lifted his head from his paws. “It’s a wonder you aren’t attacked by chipmunks,” Perrin muttered. “What did you make of her?”

Her? A she? Hopper stood, looking around. *Where?*

“I was talking to her. Right here. Just now.”

You made noises at the wind, Young Bull. There was no she here. None but you and I.

Perrin scratched his beard irritably. She had been there. He had not been talking to himself. “Strange things can happen here,” he told himself. “She agreed with you, Hopper. She told me to stay away from this tower.”

She is wise. There was an element of doubt in the thought; Hopper still did not believe there had been any “she.”

“I’ve come awfully far afield from what I intended,” Perrin muttered. He explained his need to find wolves in the Two Rivers, or the mountains above, explained about the ravens, and the Trollocs in the Ways.

When he was done, Hopper remained silent for a long time, his bushy tail held low and stiff. Finally. . . . *Avoid your old home, Young Bull.* The image Perrin’s mind called “home” was of the land marked by a wolfpack. *There are no wolves there now. Those who were and did not flee are dead. Slayer walks the dream there.*

“I have to go home, Hopper. I have to.”

Take care, Young Bull. The day of the Last Hunt draws near. We will run together in the Last Hunt.

“We will,” Perrin said sadly. It would be nice if he could come here when he died; he was half wolf already, it seemed sometimes. “I have to go now, Hopper.”

May you know good hunting, Young Bull, and shes to give you many cubs.

“Goodbye, Hopper.”

He opened his eyes to the dim light of dying coals on the mountainside. Gaul was squatting just beyond the edge of the light, watching the night. In the other camp, Faile was up, taking her turn at guard. The moon hung above the mountains, turning the clouds to pearly shadows. Perrin estimated he had been asleep two hours.

“I’ll keep guard awhile,” he said, tossing off his cloak. Gaul nodded and settled himself on the ground where he was. “Gaul?” The Aiel raised his head. “It may be worse in the Two Rivers than I thought.”

“Things often are,” Gaul replied quietly. “It is the way of life.” The Aielman calmly put his head down for sleep.

Slayer. Who was he? What was he? Shadowspawn at the Waygate, ravens in the Mountains of Mist, and this man called Slayer in the Two Rivers. It could not be coincidence, however much he wished it.

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CHAPTER 29

Homecoming

The journey into the Westwood that had taken him perhaps half a dozen strides or so in the wolf dream, out of the mountains and across the Sand Hills, lasted three long days on horses. The Aiel had no trouble keeping up afoot, but then the animals themselves could not manage much speed with the land mostly up and down as it was. Perrin’s wounds itched fiercely, healing; Faile’s ointment seemed to be working.

It was a quiet journey by and large, broken more often by the bark of a hunting fox or the echoing cry of a hawk than by anyone speaking. At least they saw no more ravens. More than once he thought Faile was about to bring her mare over close to him, about to say something, but each time she restrained herself. He was glad of it; he wanted to talk to her more than anything, but what if he found himself making up with her? He berated himself for wanting to. She had tricked Loial, tricked him. She was going to make everything worse, make it harder. He wished he could kiss her again. He wished she would decide she had had her fill of him and go. Why did she have to be so stubborn?

She and the two Aiel women kept to themselves, Bain and Chiad striding along on either side of Swallow when one or the other was not ranging ahead. Sometimes the three of them murmured softly among themselves, after which they avoided looking at him so pointedly that they might as well have thrown rocks. Loial rode with them at Perrin’s request, though the situation obviously upset him no end. Loial’s ears twitched as if he wished he had never heard of humans. Gaul seemed to find the entire thing vastly amusing; whenever Perrin looked at him, he wore an inward grin.

For himself, Perrin traveled wrapped in worry, and kept his strung bow across the tall pommel of his saddle. Did this man called Slayer rove the Two Rivers only in the wolf dream, or was he in the waking world, too?

Perrin suspected the latter, and that Slayer was the one who had shot the hawk for no reason. It was another complication he could do without, on top of the Children of the Light.

His family lived on a sprawling farm more than half a day beyond Emond's Field, almost to the Waterwood. His father and mother, his sisters, his baby brother. Paetram would be nine now, no doubt objecting more strenuously than ever to being called the baby, Deselle a plump twelve, and Adora sixteen, probably ready to braid her hair. Uncle Eward, his da's brother, and Aunt Magde, stout and looking nearly alike, and their children. Aunt Neain, who visited Uncle Carlin's grave every morning, and their children, and Great-Aunt Ealsin, who had never married, with her sharp nose and sharper eye for discovering what everyone for miles around was up to. Once apprenticed to Master Luhhan, he had seen them only on feastdays; the distance was too great for casual travel, and there had always been work to do. If the Whitecloaks hunted for Aybaras, they were easy to find. They were his responsibility, not this Slayer. He could only do so much. Protect his family, and Faile. That was first. Then came the village, and the wolves, and this Slayer last. One man could not manage everything.

The Westwood grew on stony soil broken by bramble-covered outcrops, a hard, thickly treed land with few farms or paths. He had wandered these heavy woods as a boy, alone or with Rand and Mat, hunting with bow or sling, setting snares for rabbits or simply roaming for the sake of roaming. Bushy-tailed squirrels chittering in the trees, speckled thrushes warbling on branches imitated by black-winged mockers, bluebacked quail bursting up out of the brush in front of the travelers—all spoke to him of home. The very smell of the dirt the horses' hooves turned was a recognition.

He could have headed straight for Emond's Field, but instead he angled more northward through the forest, finally crossing the wide, rough track called the Quarry Road as the sun slanted down toward the treetops. Why "quarry" no one in the Two Rivers knew, and it scarcely looked a road at all, only a weedy stretch that you did not even notice was bare of trees until you saw the overgrown ruts from generations of wagons and carts. Sometimes shards of old pavement worked their way to the surface. Perhaps it had led to a quarry for Manetheren.

The farm Perrin sought lay not far from the road, beyond rows of apple and pear trees where fruit was setting. He smelled the farm before he saw it.

The smell of char; not new, yet a full year would not soften that smell.

He reined in at the edge of the trees and sat staring before he made himself ride into what had been the al'Thor farm, the packhorse trailing behind his dun. Only the stone-walled sheep pen still stood, railed gate open and hanging by one hinge. The soot-blackened chimney cast a slanting shadow across the tumbled burned beams of the farmhouse. The barn and the tabac-curing shed were only ashes. Weeds choked the tabac field and the vegetable garden, and the garden had a trampled look; most of what was not sawleaf or feathertop lay broken and brown.

He did not even think of nocking an arrow. The fire was weeks old, the burned wood slicked and dulled by past rains. Chokevine needed nearly a month to grow that tall. It had even enveloped the plow and harrow lying beside the field; rust showed under the pale, narrow leaves.

The Aiel searched carefully, though, spears ready and eyes wary, quartering the ground and poking through the ashes. When Bain clambered out of the ruins of the house, she looked at Perrin and shook her head. At least Tam al'Thor had not died in there.

They know. They know, Rand. You should have come. It was very nearly more than he could do to stop from putting Stepper to a gallop, keeping him there all the way to his family's farm. Trying to, at least; even Stepper would fall dead before he ran that far. Maybe this was Trolloc work. If it was Trollocs, maybe his family was still working their farm, still safe. He drew a deep breath, but the char obliterated any other smell.

Gaul stopped beside him. "Whoever did this is long gone. They killed some of the sheep and scattered the rest. Someone came later to gather the flock and drive it off north. Two men, I think, but the tracks are too old to be sure."

"Is there any clue to who did it?" Gaul shook his head. It could have been Trollocs. Strange, to wish for a thing like that. And foolish. The Whitecloaks knew his name, and they knew Rand's as well, it seemed. *They know my name.* He looked at the ashes of the al'Thor farmhouse, and Stepper moved as the reins trembled in his hands.

Loial had dismounted at the edge of the fruit trees, but his head was still in the branches. Faile rode toward Perrin, studying his face, her mare stepping delicately. "Is this . . . ? Do you know the people who lived here?"

"Rand and his father."

“Oh. I thought it might be. . . .” The relief and sympathy in her voice were enough to finish the sentence. “Does your family live near?”

“No,” he said curtly, and she recoiled as if slapped. But she still watched him, waiting. What did he have to do to drive her away? More than he could bring himself to, if he had not managed it already.

The shadows were growing longer, the sun sitting on the treetops. He reined Stepper around, rudely turning his back on her. “Gaul, we will have to camp close by tonight. I want to start early in the morning.” He sneaked a glance over his shoulder; Faile was riding back to Loial, sitting stiff in her saddle. “In Emond’s Field, they will know. . . .” Where the Whitecloaks were, so he could turn himself in before they hurt his family. If his family was all right. If the farm where he had been born was not already like this. No. He had to be in time to stop that. “They’ll know how things are.”

“Early, then.” Gaul hesitated. “You will not drive her off. That one is almost *Far Dareis Mai*, and if a Maiden loves you, you cannot escape her however hard you run.”

“You let me worry about Faile.” He softened his voice; it was not Gaul he wanted to be rid of. “Very early. While Faile is still asleep.”

Both camps, beneath the apple trees, were quiet that night. Several times one or the other of the Aiel women stood, staring toward the small fire where he and Gaul sat, but an owl hooting and the horses stamping were the only sounds. Perrin could not sleep, and it was still an hour short of first light, with the full moon setting, when he and Gaul slipped away, the Aiel silent in his soft boots and the horses’ hooves making little more noise. Bain, or maybe Chiad, watched them go. He could not tell which, but she did not wake Faile, and he was grateful.

The sun had climbed well up by the time they came out of the Westwood a little below the village, amid cart tracks and paths, most bordered by hedges or low rough stone walls. Smoke made feathery gray plumes above farmhouse chimneys, goodwives doing the morning’s baking, by the smell. Men dotted the fields of tabac or barley, and boys watched flocks of black-faced sheep in the pastures. Some people took note of their passing, but Perrin kept Stepper at a fast walk and hoped none were close enough to recognize him or wonder at the strangeness of Gaul’s clothes, or his spears.

People would be out and about in Emond’s Field, too, so he circled around to the east, wide of the village, wide of the hard-packed dirt streets and thatched roofs clustered around the Green, where the Winespring itself gushed from a stone outcrop with enough force to knock a man down and gave birth to the Winespring Water. The damage he remembered from Winternight a year gone, the burned houses and charred roofs, were all rebuilt and repaired. The Trollocs might as well never have come back then. He prayed no one would have to live through that again. The Wine-spring Inn stood practically at the eastern end of Emond's Field, between the stout wooden Wagon Bridge across the rushing Winespring Water and a huge old stone foundation with a great oak growing up through the middle of it. Tables beneath the thick branches were where folk sat of a fine afternoon and watched the play at bowls. At this hour of the morning, the tables were empty, of course. There were only a few houses farther east. The inn itself was river rock on the first floor, with a whitewashed second story jutting out all the way around and a dozen chimneys rising above a glittering red tile roof, the only tile roof for miles.

Tying Stepper and the packhorse to a hitchpost near the kitchen door, Perrin glanced at the thatch-roofed stable. He could hear men working in there, probably Hu and Tad, mucking out the stalls where Master al'Vere kept the big Dhurran team he rented out for heavy hauling. There were sounds from the other side of the inn, too, the murmur of voices on the Green, geese honking, the rumble of a wagon. What was on the horses, he left; this would be a short stop. He motioned for Gaul to follow and hurried inside, carrying his bow, before either stableman could come out.

The kitchen was empty, both iron stoves and all but one fireplace cold, though the smell of baking still hung in the air. Bread and honeycakes. The inn seldom had guests except when merchants came down from Baerlon to buy wool or tabac, or a monthly peddler when snow had not made the road impassable, and the village folk who might come for a drink or a meal later in the day would all be hard at work at their own homes now. Someone might be there, though, so Perrin tiptoed along the short hallway leading from the kitchen to the common room and cracked the door to peek inside.

He had seen that square room a thousand times, with its fireplace of river stones stretching half the room's length, the lintel as high as a man's shoulder, Master al'Vere's polished tabac canister and prized clock sitting on the mantel. It all seemed smaller than it had, somehow. The tall-backed chairs in front of the fireplace were where the Village Council met. Brandelwyn al'Vere's books sat on a shelf opposite the fireplace—once, Perrin had been unable to imagine more books in one place than those few dozen mostly worn volumes—and casks of ale and wine lined another wall. Scratch, the inn's yellow cat, sprawled asleep as usual atop one.

Except for Bran al'Vere himself and his wife, Marin, in long white aprons, polishing the inn's silver and pewter at one of the tables, the common room stood empty. Master al'Vere was a wide, round man, with a sparse fringe of gray hair; Mistress al'Vere was slender and motherly, her thick, graying braid pulled over one shoulder. She smelled of baking, and under that of roses. Perrin remembered them as smiling people, but both looked intent now, and the Mayor wore a frown that surely had nothing to do with the silver cup in his hands.

"Master al'Vere?" He pushed open the door and went in. "Mistress al'Vere. It's Perrin."

They sprang to their feet, knocking their chairs over and making Scratch jump. Mistress al'Vere clapped her hands to her mouth; she and her husband gaped as much at him as they did at Gaul. It was enough to make Perrin shift his bow awkwardly from hand to hand. Especially when Bran hurried to one of the front windows—he moved with surprising lightness for a man of his bulk—and twitched the summer curtains aside to peer out, as though for more Aiel outside.

"Perrin?" Mistress al'Vere murmured disbelievingly. "It *is* you. I almost didn't know you, with that beard, and—Your cheek. Were you—? Is Egwene with you?"

Perrin touched the half-healed slash across his cheek self-consciously, wishing he had cleaned up, or at least left the bow and axe in the kitchen. He had not considered how his appearance might frighten them. "No. This has nothing to do with her. She is safe." Safer on her way back to Tar Valon, perhaps, than if still in Tear with Rand, but safe in either case. He supposed he had to give Egwene's mother something more than that bald statement. "Mistress al'Vere, Egwene is studying to be Aes Sedai. Nynaeve, too."

"I know," she said quietly, touching the pocket on her apron. "I have three letters from her in Tar Valon. From what she writes she sent more, and Nynaeve at least one, but only three of Egwene's have reached us. She tells something of her training, which I must say sounds very hard."

"It is what she wants." Three letters? Guilt made him shrug uncomfortably. He had not written a letter to anyone, not since the notes he had left for his family and Master Luhhan the night Moiraine took him away from Emond's Field. Not one.

"So it seems, though not what I had envisioned for her. It isn't something I can tell many people about, now is it? She says she's made friends, anyway, nice girls by the sound of them. Elayne, and Min. Do you know them?"

"We have met. I think you could call them nice girls." How much had Egwene told in those letters? Not much, evidently. Let Mistress al'Vere think what she would; he had no intention of worrying her over things she could do nothing about. What was past, was past. Egwene was safe enough now.

Abruptly realizing that Gaul was just standing there, he made hasty introductions. Bran blinked when Gaul was named Aiel, and frowned at his spears and the black veil hanging down his chest from his *shoufa*, but his wife merely said, "Be welcome to Emond's Field, Master Gaul, and to the Winespring Inn."

"May you always have water and shade, roofmistress," Gaul said formally, bowing to her. "I ask leave to defend your roof and hold."

She barely hesitated before replying as if that were exactly what she was used to hearing. "A gracious offer. But you must allow me to decide when it is needed."

"As you say, roofmistress. Your honor is mine." From under his coat, Gaul produced a gold saltcellar, a small bowl balanced on the back of a cunningly made lion, and extended it to her. "I offer this small guest gift to your roof."

Marin al'Vere made over it as she would have any gift, hardly showing her shock. Perrin doubted there was a piece to equal it in the whole Two Rivers, certainly not in gold. There was little enough gold coin in the Two Rivers, much less gold ornaments. He hoped she never found out it had been looted from the Stone of Tear; at least he would have wagered that it had.

"My boy," Bran said, "perhaps I should be saying 'welcome home,' but why did you return?"

"I heard about the Whitecloaks, sir," Perrin replied simply.

The Mayor and his wife shared somber looks, and Bran said, "Again, why did you return? You cannot stop anything, my boy, or change anything. Best that you go. If you don't have a horse, I will give you one. If you do, climb back in your saddle and ride north. I thought the Whitecloaks were guarding Taren Ferry. . . . Did they give you that decoration on your face?"

"No. It—"

"Then it doesn't matter. If you got past them coming in, you can get past to leave. Their main camp is up at Watch Hill, but their patrols can be anywhere. Do it, my boy."

"Don't wait, Perrin," Mistress al'Vere added quietly but firmly, in that voice that usually ended with people doing as she said. "Not even an hour. I'll make you a bundle to take with you. Some fresh bread and cheese, some ham and roast beef, pickles. You must go, Perrin."

"I cannot. You know they are after me, or you'd not want me to go." And they had not commented on his eyes, even to ask if he was ill. Mistress al'Vere had barely been surprised. They knew. "If I give myself up, I can stop some of it. I can keep my family—" He jumped as the hall door banged open to admit Faile, followed by Bain and Chiad.

Master al'Vere ran a hand over his bald head; even taking in the Aiel women's garb and obviously identifying them with Gaul, he only seemed a little bemused that they were women. Mainly he looked irritated at the intrusion. Scratch sat up to stare suspiciously at all these strangers. Perrin wondered whether the cat considered him one, as well. He wondered how they had found him, too, and where Loial was. Anything to avoid wondering how he was going to manage Faile now.

She gave him little time to ponder, planting herself in front of him with fists on hips. Somehow she managed that trick women had, making herself seem taller through pure quivering outrage. "Give yourself up? Give yourself up! Have you been planning this from the start? You have, haven't you? You utter idiot! Your brain has frozen solid, Perrin Aybara. It was nothing but muscle and hair to begin, but now it isn't even that. If Whitecloaks are hunting you, they will hang you if you surrender to them. Why should they want you?"

"Because I killed Whitecloaks." Looking down at her, he ignored Mistress al'Vere's gasp. "Those the night I met you, and two before that. They know about those two, Faile, and they think I'm a Darkfriend." She would learn that much soon enough. Brought to the point of it, he might have told her why, had they been alone. At least two Whitecloaks, Geofram Bornhald and Jaret Byar, suspected something of his connection with wolves. Not nearly all, but for them the little was enough. A man who ran with wolves had to be a Darkfriend. Maybe one or both was with the Whitecloaks here. “They believe it for true.”

“You are no more a Darkfriend than I,” she whispered harshly. “The sun could be a Darkfriend first.”

“It makes no difference, Faile. I have to do what I have to do.”

“You addle-brained lummox! You don’t *have* to do any such crackpate thing! You goose-brain! If you try it, I’ll hang you myself!”

“Perrin,” Mistress al’Vere said quietly, “would you introduce me to this young woman who thinks so highly of you?”

Faile’s face went bright red when she realized she had been ignoring Master and Mistress al’Vere, and she began making elaborate curtsies and offered flowery apologies. Bain and Chiad did as Gaul had, asking leave to defend Mistress al’Vere’s roof and giving her a small golden bowl worked in leaves and an ornate silver pepper mill bigger than Perrin’s two fists, topped by some fanciful creature half horse, half fish.

Bran al’Vere stared and frowned, rubbed his head and muttered to himself. Perrin caught the word “Aiel” more than once in an incredulous tone. The Mayor kept glancing at the windows, too. Not wondering about more Aiel; he had been surprised to learn Gaul was Aiel. Maybe he was worried about Whitecloaks.

Marin al’Vere, on the other hand, took it all in stride, treating Faile and Bain and Chiad the same as any other young women travelers who came to the inn, commiserating with them over how tiring travel was, complimenting Faile on her riding dress—dark blue silk, today—and telling the Aiel women how she admired the color and sheen of their hair. Perrin suspected that Bain and Chiad, at least, did not know quite what to make of her, but in short order, with a sort of calm motherly firmness, she had all three women settled at a table with damp towels to wipe journey dust from hands and faces, sipping tea she poured from a large red-striped pot he remembered well.

It might have been amusing seeing those fierce women—he certainly included Faile—suddenly eager to assure Mistress al’Vere that they were more than comfortable, was there nothing they could do to help, she was doing too much, all of them wide-eyed as children, with a child’s chance of resisting her. It would have been amusing if she had not included himself and Gaul, sweeping them just as firmly to the table, insisting on clean hands and clean faces before they got a cup of tea. Gaul wore a small grin the whole time; Aiel had a strange sense of humor.

Surprisingly, she never glanced at his bow or axe, or the Aiel's weapons. People seldom carried even a bow in the Two Rivers, and she always insisted such be set aside before anyone took a place at one of her tables. Always. But she just ignored them now.

Another surprise came when Bran placed a silver cup of apple brandy at Perrin's elbow, not the small tot that men usually drank at the inn, barely enough to cover the last joint of the thumb, but half-full. When he had left he would have been offered cider if not milk, or perhaps well-watered wine, a half-cup with a meal or a full one on a feastday. It was gratifying to be recognized as a grown man, but he only held it. He was used to wine now, but he seldom drank anything stronger.

"Perrin," the Mayor said as he took a chair beside his wife, "no one believes you a Darkfriend. No one with any sense. There is no reason for you to let yourself be hanged."

Faile nodded in fierce agreement, but Perrin ignored her. "I won't be turned aside, Master al'Vere. The Whitecloaks want me, and if they do not get me, they might turn to the next Aybara they can find. Whitecloaks don't need much to decide somebody is guilty. They are not pleasant people."

"We know," Mistress al'Vere said softly.

Her husband stared at his hands on the table. "Perrin, your family is gone."

"Gone? You mean the farm is burned already?" Perrin's fist tightened around the silver cup. "I hoped I was in time. I should have known better, I suppose. Too long before I heard. Maybe I can help my da and Uncle Eward rebuild. Who are they staying with? I want to see them first, at least."

Bran grimaced, and his wife stroked his shoulder comfortingly. But strangely her eyes stayed on Perrin, all sadness and comfort.

"They are dead, my boy," Bran said in a rush.

"Dead? No. They can't be—" Perrin frowned as wetness suddenly slopped over his hand, stared at the crumpled cup as though wondering where it had come from. "I am sorry. I didn't mean to—" He pulled at the flattened silver, trying to force it back out with his fingers. That would not work. Of course not. Very carefully, he put the ruined cup in the middle of the table. "I will replace it. I can—" He wiped his hand on his coat, and suddenly found he was caressing the axe hanging at his belt. Why was everyone looking at him so oddly? “Are you sure?” His voice sounded far away. “Adora and Deselle? Paet? My mother?”

“All of them,” Bran told him. “Your aunts and uncles, too, and your cousins. Everybody on the farm. I helped bury them, my boy. On that low hill, the one with the apple trees.”

Perrin stuck his thumb in his mouth. Fool thing to do, cutting himself on his own axe. “My mother likes apple blossoms. The Whitecloaks. Why would they—? Burn me, Paet was only nine. The girls. . . .” His voice was very flat. He thought he should have had some emotion in those words. Some emotion.

“It was Trollocs,” Mistress al’Vere said quickly. “They have come back, Perrin. Not the way they did when you went away, not attacking the village, but out in the countryside. Most farms without close neighbors have been abandoned. No one goes outside at night, even near to the village. It is the same down to Deven Ride and up to Watch Hill, maybe to Taren Ferry. The Whitecloaks, bad as they are, are our only real protection. They’ve saved two families that I know, when Trollocs attacked their farms.”

“I wished—I hoped—” He could not quite remember what it was he had wished. Something about Trollocs. He did not want to remember. The Whitecloaks protecting the Two Rivers? It was almost enough to make him laugh. “Rand’s father. Tam’s farm. Was that Trollocs, too?”

Mistress al’Vere opened her mouth, but Bran cut her off. “He deserves the truth, Marin. That was Whitecloaks, Perrin. That, and the Cauthon place.”

“Mat’s people too. Rand’s, and Mat’s, and mine.” Strange. He sounded as if he were talking about whether it might rain. “Are they dead, too?”

“No, my boy. No, Abell and Tam are hiding in the Westwood somewhere. And Mat’s mother and sisters. . . . They’re alive, too.”

“Hiding?”

“There is no need to go into that,” Mistress al’Vere said briskly. “Bran, bring him another cup of brandy. And you drink this one, Perrin.” Her husband sat where he was, but she only frowned at him and went on. “I would offer you a bed, but it isn’t safe. Some people are like as not to run off hunting for Lord Bornhald if they find out you are here. Eward Congar and Hari Coplin fawn after the Whitecloaks like heel-hounds, eager to please and name names, and Cenn Buie isn’t much better. And Wit Congar will carry tales, too, if Daise doesn't stop him. She is the Wisdom, now. Perrin, it is best for to go. Believe me."

Perrin shook his head slowly; it was too much to take in. Daise Congar the Wisdom? The woman was like a bull. Whitecloaks protecting Emond's Field. Hari and Eward and Wit cooperating. Not much more could be expected from Congars or Coplins, but Cenn Buie was on the Village Council. Lord Bornhald. So Geofram Bornhald was there. Faile was watching him, her eyes large and moist. Why should she be on the edge of tears?

"There is more, Brandelwyn al'Vere," Gaul said. "Your face says so."

"There is," Bran agreed. "No, Marin," he added firmly when she gave a small shake of her head. "He deserves the truth. The whole truth." She folded her hands with a sigh; Marin al'Vere very nearly always got her way—except when Bran's face was set, as now, with his eyebrows drawn down hard as a plow.

"What truth?" Perrin asked. His mother liked apple blossoms.

"First off, Padan Fain is with the Whitecloaks," Bran said. "He calls himself Ordeith now, and he won't answer to his own name at all, but it's him, stare down his nose as he will."

"He's a Darkfriend," Perrin said absently. Adora and Deselle always put apple blossoms in their hair in the spring. "Admitted from his own mouth. He brought the Trollocs, on Winternight." Paet liked to climb in the apple trees; he would throw apples at you from the branches if you did not watch him.

"Is he, now," the Mayor said grimly. "Now, that is interesting. He has some authority with the Whitecloaks. The first we heard they were here was after they burned Tam's farm. That was Fain's work; he led the Whitecloaks that did it. Tam feathered four or five of them with arrows before he made it to the woods, and he reached the Cauthon farm in the nick to stop them taking Abell. But they arrested Natti and the girls. And Haral Luhhan, and Alsbet, too. I think Fain might have hung them, except Lord Bornhald wouldn't allow it. Not that he let them go, either. They haven't been harmed, as far as I can discover, but they're being held in the White-cloak camp up at Watch Hill. For some reason, Fain has a hate for you, and Rand, and Mat. He's offered a hundred pieces of gold for anyone related to the three of you; two hundred for Tam or Abell. And Lord Bornhald seems to have some interest in you, especially. When a Whitecloak patrol comes here, he usually comes, too, and asks questions about you."

"Yes," Perrin said. "Of course. He would." Perrin of the Two Rivers, who ran with wolves. Darkfriend. Fain could have told them the rest. *Fain, with the Children of the Light?* It was a distant thought. Better than thinking about Trollocs, though. He grimaced at his hands, made them be still on the table. "They protect you from the Trollocs."

Marin al'Vere leaned toward him, frowning. "Perrin, we need the Whitecloaks. Yes, they burned Tam's farm, and Abell's, they've arrested people, and they stamp around as if they own everything they see, but Alsbet and Natti and the rest are unharmed, only held, and that can be straightened out somehow. The Dragon's Fang has been scrawled on a few doors, but nobody except the Congars and Coplins pay any mind, and they're likely the ones who did the scrawling. Tam and Abell can stay in hiding until the Whitecloaks go. They have to go sooner or later. But as long as there are Trollocs here, we do need them. Please understand. It isn't that we would not rather have you than them, but we need them and we don't want them to hang you."

"You call this being protected, roofmistress?" Bain said. "If you ask the lion to protect you from wolves, you have only chosen to end in one belly instead of another."

"Can you not protect yourselves?" Chiad added. "I have seen Perrin fight, and Mat Cauthon, and Rand al'Thor. They are the same blood as you."

Bran sighed heavily. "We are farmers, simple people. Lord Luc talks of organizing men to fight the Trollocs, but that means leaving your family unprotected while you go off with him, and no one much likes that idea."

Perrin was confused. Who was Lord Luc? He asked as much, and Mistress al'Vere answered.

"He came about the time the Whitecloaks did. He's a Hunter of the Horn. You know the story, *The Great Hunt of the Horn?* Lord Luc thinks the Horn of Valere is somewhere in the Mountains of Mist above the Two Rivers. But he gave over his hunt because of our problems. Lord Luc is a great gentleman, with the finest manners." Smoothing her hair, she gave an approving smile; Bran looked at her sideways and grunted sourly.

Hunters of the Horn. Trollocs. Whitecloaks. The Two Rivers hardly seemed the same place he had left. "Faile is a Hunter of the Horn, too. Do you know this Lord Luc, Faile?”

“I have had enough,” she announced. Perrin frowned as she stood and came around the table to him. Seizing his head, she pulled his face into her midriff. “Your mother is dead,” she said quietly. “Your father is dead. Your sisters are dead, and your brother. Your family is dead, and you cannot change it. Certainly not by dying yourself. Let yourself grieve. Don’t hold it inside where it can fester.”

He took her by the arms, meaning to move her, but for some reason his hands tightened till that grip was the only thing holding him up. It was only then that he realized he was crying, sobbing into her dress like a baby. What must she think of him? He opened his mouth to tell her he was all right, to apologize for breaking down, but what came out was, “I couldn’t get here any faster. I couldn’t—I—” He gritted his teeth to shut himself off.

“I know,” she murmured, stroking his hair for all the world as if he were a child. “I know.”

He wanted to stop, but the more she whispered understanding, the more he wept, as though her hands soft on his head were smoothing the tears out of him.

* * *

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CHAPTER 30

Beyond the Oak

With Faile holding his head beneath her breasts, Perrin lost track of how long he cried. Images of his family flashed in his thoughts, his father smiling as he showed him how to hold a bow, his mother singing while she spun wool, Adora and Deselle teasing him when he shaved the first time, Paet wide-eyed at a gleeman during Sunday long ago. Pictures of graves, cold and lonely in a row. He wept until there were no more tears in him. When he finally pulled back, the two of them were alone except for Scratch, washing himself atop the ale barrel. He was glad the others had not remained to watch him. Faile was bad enough. In a way he was glad she had stayed; he only wished she had not seen or heard.

Taking his hands in hers, Faile sat in the next chair. She was so beautiful, with her slightly tilted eyes, large and dark, and her high cheekbones. He did not know how he was going to be able to make up to her for the way he had treated her these last few days. No doubt she would find a means to make him pay for it.

“Have you given up the notion of surrendering to the Whitecloaks?” she asked. There was no hint in her voice that she had just watched him cry like a baby.

“It seems it wouldn’t do any good. They’ll be after Rand’s father, and Mat’s, whatever I do. My family. . . .” He quickly loosened his grip on her hands, but she smiled instead of wincing. “I have to get Master Luhhan and his wife free, if I can. And Mat’s mother and sisters; I promised him I would look after them. And do what I can about the Trollocs.” Maybe this Lord Luc had some ideas. At least the Waygate was blocked; no more would come through the Ways. He especially wanted to do something about the Trollocs. “I can’t manage any of that if I let them hang me.”

“I am very glad you see that,” she told him dryly. “Any more fool notions about sending me away?”

“No.” He braced himself for the storm, but she simply nodded as if the one word were what she expected and all she wanted. A small thing, nothing worth arguing over. She was going to make him pay large.

“We are five, Perrin, six if Loial is willing. And if we can find Tam al’Thor and Abell Cauthon. . . . Are they as good with a bow as you?”

“Better,” he said truthfully. “Much better.”

She gave him a slight, disbelieving nod. “That will make eight. A beginning. Maybe others will join us. And then there’s Lord Luc. He will probably want to take charge, but if he’s not a crackbrain, it won’t matter. Not everyone who took the Hunter’s Oath is sensible, though. I’ve met some who think they know everything, and are stubborn as mules besides.”

“I know.” She looked at him sharply, and he managed to keep the smile off his face. “That you’ve met some like that, I mean. I saw a pair of them once, remember.”

“Oh, them. Well, we can hope Lord Luc is not a boasting liar.” Her eyes became intent, and her grip tightened on his hands, not uncomfortably, but as though she was trying to add her strength to his. “You will want to visit your family’s farm, your home. I will come with you, if you will let me.”

“When I can, Faile.” Not now, though. Not yet. If he looked at those graves below the apple trees now. . . . It was strange. He had always taken his own strength for granted, and now it turned out that he was not strong at all. Well, he was done with weeping like a babe. It was past time to be doing something. “First things first. Finding Tam and Abell, I suppose.”

Master al’Vere put his head into the common room, and came the rest of the way when he saw them sitting apart. “There is an Ogier in the kitchen,” he told Perrin with a bemused look. “An Ogier. Drinking tea. The biggest cup looks. . . .” He held two fingers as though gripping a thimble. “Maybe Marin could pretend Aiel walk in here every day, but she nearly fainted when she saw this Loial. I gave her a double tot of brandy, and she tossed it down like water. Nearly coughed herself to death; she doesn’t take more than wine, usually. I think she’d have drunk another, if I’d given it to her.” He pursed his lips and affected an interest in a nonexistent spot on his long white apron. “Are you all right now, my boy?”

“I’m fine, sir,” Perrin said hastily. “Master al’Vere, we cannot remain here much longer. Someone might tell the Whitecloaks you sheltered me.”

"Oh, there are not many would do that. Not all the Coplins, and not some of the Congars, even." But he did not suggest they stay.

"Do you know where I can find Master al'Thor and Master Cauthon?"

"In the Westwood somewhere, usually," Bran said slowly. "That's all I know for sure. They move about." Locking his fingers over his broad belly, he tilted his gray-fringed head to one side. "You aren't leaving, are you? Well. I told Marin you would not, but she doesn't believe me. She thinks it best for you to go away—best for you—and like most women she's sure you will see things her way if she talks long enough."

"Why, Master al'Vere," Faile said sweetly, "I for one have always found men to be sensible creatures who only need to be shown the wisest path once to choose it."

The Mayor favored her with an amused smile. "You will be talking Perrin into going then, I take it? Marin's right; that is wisest, if he wants to avoid a noose. The only reason to stay is that sometimes a man can't run. No? Well, no doubt you know best." He ignored her sour look. "Come along, my boy. Let's tell Marin the good news. Set your teeth and hold on to your intentions, because she won't give up trying to shift you."

In the kitchen, Loial and the Aiel were cross-legged on the floor. There was certainly no chair in the inn big enough for the Ogier. He sat with an arm resting on the kitchen table, tall enough sitting to look Marin al'Vere in the eye. Bran had exaggerated the smallness of the cup in Loial's hands, though on second glance Perrin saw it was a white-glazed soup bowl.

Mistress al'Vere was still doing her best to pretend Aiel and Ogier were normal, bustling about with a tray of bread and cheese and pickles, making sure everyone ate, but her eyes did widen each time they landed on Loial, though he tried to put her at ease with compliments for her baking. His tufted ears twitched nervously whenever she looked at him, and she gave a little jump every time they did, then shook her head, the thick graying braid swaying vigorously. Given a few hours, they might send each other to bed with the shakes.

Loial heaved a deep bass sigh of relief at the sight of Perrin and set his cup—bowl—of tea on the table, but the next instant his broad face sagged sadly. "I am sorry to hear your loss, Perrin. I share your grief. Mistress al'Vere . . ." His ears twitched wildly even without looking at her, and she gave another start. ". . . has been telling me you will go, now there's nothing to keep you here. If you wish it, I will sing to the apple trees before we leave."

Bran and Marin exchanged startled looks, and the Mayor actually reamed at his ear with a finger.

"Thank you, Loial. I will appreciate that, when there's time. But I have work to do before I can go." Mistress al'Vere set the tray on the table with a sharp click and stared at him, but he kept on, laying out his plans, such as they were: Find Tam and Abell, and rescue the people the Whitecloaks held. He did not mention Trollocs, though he had vague plans there, too. Perhaps not so vague. He did not mean to leave while there was a Trolloc or Myrddraal alive in the Two Rivers. He fastened his thumbs behind his belt to keep from caressing his axe. "It won't be easy," he finished. "I will appreciate your company, but I will understand if you want to go. This isn't your fight, and you have seen enough trouble through staying close to Emond's Field folk. And you won't write much of your book here."

"Here or there, it is the same fight, I think," Loial replied. "The book can wait. Perhaps I will have a chapter about you."

"I said I would come with you," Gaul put in without being asked. "I did not mean until the journey grew hard. I owe you blood debt."

Bain and Chiad looked questioningly at Faile, and when she nodded, added their decisions to remain, too.

"Stubborn foolish," Mistress al'Vere said, "the lot of you. Very likely you will all end up on gallows, if you live that long. You know that, don't you?" When they only looked at her, she untied her apron and lifted it over her head. "Well, if you are foolish enough to stay, I suppose I had better show you where to hide."

Her husband looked surprised at her sudden surrender, but he recovered quickly. "I thought perhaps the old sickhouse, Marin. No one ever goes there now, and I think it still has most of its roof."

What was still called the new sickhouse, where people were taken to be tended if their illness was contagious, had stood east of the village, beyond Master Thane's mill, since Perrin was a small boy. The old one, in the Westwood, had been all but destroyed in a fierce windstorm back then. Perrin remembered it as half-covered by vines and briars, with birds roosting in what was left of the thatch and a badger's den under the back steps. It would be a good place to hide.

Mistress al’Vere gave Bran a sharp look, as though startled he had thought of it. “That will do, I suppose. For tonight, at least. That is where I will take them.”

“No need for you to do it, Marin. I can lead them easy enough, if Perrin doesn’t remember the way.”

“Sometimes you forget you’re the Mayor, Bran. You attract eyes; people wonder where you’re going and what you are up to. Why don’t you stay here, and if anyone drops by, see they go away thinking everything is just as it should be. There’s mutton stew in the kettle, and lentil soup that just needs heating. Now don’t mention the sickhouse to anyone, Bran. Best if no one even remembers it exists.”

“I am not a fool, Marin,” he said stiffly.

“I know you aren’t, dear.” She patted her husband’s cheek, but her fond look tightened as it shifted from Bran to the rest of them. “You do cause trouble,” she muttered before handing out instructions.

They were to travel in smaller parties so as not to attract attention. She would cross the village by herself and meet them in the woods on the other side. The Aiel assured her they could find the lightning-split oak she described, and slipped out by the back door. Perrin knew it, a huge tree, a mile beyond the edge of the village, that looked as if it had been cleft down the middle by an axe yet somehow continued to live and even flourish. He was sure he could go straight to the sickhouse itself with no trouble, but Mistress al’Vere insisted everyone meet at the oak.

“You go wandering about by yourself, Perrin, and the Light knows what you might stumble into.” She looked up at Loial—standing now, his shaggy hair brushing the ceiling beams—and sighed. “I do wish there was something we could do about your height, Master Loial. I know it is hot, but would you mind wearing your cloak, with the hood up? Even these days most people will soon convince themselves they didn’t see what they saw if it isn’t what they expect, but if they catch a glimpse of your face. . . . Not that you aren’t quite handsome, I’m sure, but you’ll never pass for Two Rivers folk.”

Loial’s smile split his face in two beneath his wide snout of a nose. “The day doesn’t seem too warm for a cloak at all, Mistress al’Vere.”

Fetching a light, knit shawl with blue fringe, she accompanied Perrin, Faile and Loial out to the stableyard to see them off, and for a moment it appeared all their efforts at secrecy were doomed. Cenn Buie, looking made from gnarled old roots, was examining the horses with beady eyes. Especially Loial's tall horse, as big as one of Bran's Dhurrans. Cenn scratched his head, staring at the great saddle on the big horse.

Those eyes widened when they caught sight of Loial, and Cenn's jaw flapped. "Tr—Tr—Trolloc!" he managed to get out at last.

"Don't be an old fool, Cenn Buie," Marin said firmly, stepping off to one side to pull the thatcher's attention with her. Perrin kept his head down, studying his bow, and did not move. "Would I be standing on my own back doorstep with a Trolloc?" She gave a contemptuous sniff. "Master Loial is an Ogier, as you would know if you weren't a cantankerous goose who would rather complain than look at what's under his nose. Passing through, and with no time to be bothered by the likes of you. You be on about your business and leave our guests some peace. You know very well that Corin Ayellin has been after you for months about the poor work you did on her roof."

Cenn mouthed the word "Ogier," silent and blinking. For a moment it seemed he might rouse himself in defense of his handiwork, but then his gaze shifted to Perrin and narrowed. "Him! It's him! They're after you, you young whelp, rapscallion, running off with Aes Sedai and becoming a Darkfriend. That was when we had Trollocs before. Now you're back, and so are they. You going to tell me that's coincidence? What's wrong with your eyes? You sick? You have some kind of sickness from off you've brought back to kill us all, as if Trollocs are not enough? The Children of the Light will settle you. See if they don't."

Perrin sensed Faile tensing, and hastily put a hand on her arm when he realized she was drawing a knife. What did she think she was doing? Cenn was an irascible old fool, but that was no reason for knives. She gave an exasperated toss of her head, but at least she left it at that.

"That is enough, Cenn," Marin said sharply. "You keep this to yourself. Or have you started running to the Whitecloaks with tales, like Hari and his brother Darl? I've my suspicions why the Whitecloaks came rummaging through Bran's books. They took six off with them, and lectured Bran under his own roof about blasphemy. Blasphemy, of all things! Because they didn't agree with what was in a book. You're lucky I don't make you replace those books for him. They burrowed through the whole inn like weasels. Hunting for more *blasphemous writings*, they said, as if anyone would hide a book. Tumbled all the mattresses from the beds, upset my linen closets. You are lucky I didn't come haul you back here to put it all to rights again."

Cenn drew in on himself a little more with each sentence, until he looked to be trying to pull his bony shoulders over his head. "I didn't tell them anything, Marin," he protested. "Just because a man mentions—That is, I just happened to say, just in passing—" He shook himself, still avoiding her eye but regaining some of his old manner. "I mean to take this up with the Council, Marin. Him, I mean." He pointed a gnarled finger at Perrin. "We're all in danger as long as he's here. If the Children find out you're sheltering him, they might blame the rest of us. Upset closets won't be in it, then."

"This is Women's Circle business." Marin rewrapped her shawl about her shoulders and moved to stand eye to eye with the thatcher. He was a little taller than she, but her sudden air of grave formality gave her the edge. He spluttered, but she rode right over his attempts to slide a word in. "Circle business, Cenn Buie. If you think it isn't—if you even dare think of calling me a liar—you go flapping your tongue. You breathe a word of Women's Circle business to anyone, including the Village Council . . ."

"The Circle has no right interfering in Council affairs," he shouted.

". . . and see if your wife doesn't have you sleeping in the barn. And eating what your milk cows leave. You think Council takes precedence over Circle? I'll send Daise Congar over to convince you different, if you need convincing."

Cenn flinched, as well he might. If Daise Congar was the Wisdom, she would probably force foul-tasting concoctions down his throat every day for the next year, and Cenn was too scrawny to stop her. Alsbet Luhhan was the only woman in Emond's Field larger than Daise, and Daise had a mean streak and a temper to go with it. Perrin could not imagine her as Wisdom; Nynaeve would probably have a fit when she found out who had replaced her. Nynaeve had always believed she used sweet reason, herself.

"No need to get nasty, Marin," Cenn muttered placatingly. "You want me to keep quiet, I'll keep quiet. But Women's Circle or no, you're risking bringing the Children down on all of us." Marin merely raised her eyebrows, and after a moment he slunk away, grumbling under his breath.

"Well done," Faile said when Cenn disappeared around the corner of the inn. "I think I need to take lessons from you. I am not half so good at handling Perrin as you are with Master al'Vere and that fellow." She smiled at Perrin to show she was joking. At least, he hoped that was what it meant.

"You have to know when to rein them short," the older woman replied absently, "and when there's nothing to do but give them their head. Letting them have their way when it isn't important makes it easier to check them when it is." She was frowning after Cenn, not really paying attention to what she was saying, except maybe when she added, "And some should be tied in the stall and left there."

Perrin leaped in hastily. Faile certainly did not need any advice of this sort. "Will he hold his tongue do you think, Mistress al'Vere?"

Hesitating, she said, "I believe he will. Cenn was born with a sore tooth that's only gotten worse as he ages, but he isn't like Hari Coplin or that lot." Still, she had hesitated.

"We had best be moving," he said. No one argued.

The sun was higher than he had expected, past its midday height already, which meant most people were indoors for their dinner. The few still out, mainly boys minding sheep or cows, were busy eating what they had brought with them wrapped up in a cloth, too absorbed in their food and too far from the cart paths to pay much mind to anyone passing. Still, Loial earned some stares despite the deep hood hiding his face. Even on Stepper Perrin came short of the Ogier's chest on his tall mount. To the people who saw them from a distance they must have looked like an adult with two children, all on ponies, leading packponies. Certainly not a usual sight, but Perrin hoped that was what they thought they saw. Talk would draw notice. He had to avoid that until he got Mistress Luhhan and the others free. If only Cenn kept his peace. He kept the hood of his own cloak up, too. That might also cause talk, but not as much as if anyone saw his beard and realized he was definitely not a child. At least the day was not particularly warm. It almost felt like spring, not summer, after Tear.

He had no trouble finding the split oak, the two halves leaning apart in a wide fork with the inner surface black and hardened like iron, the ground beneath the thick spreading branches clear. Merely crossing the village was much shorter than going around, so Mistress al'Vere was already waiting, shifting her shawl a trifle impatiently. The Aiel were there, too, squatting on the mulch of old oak leaves and squirrel-chewed acorn hulls, Gaul apart from the two women. The Maidens and Gaul watched each other almost as closely as the surrounding woods. Perrin had no doubt they had managed to reach this spot unobserved. He wished he had that ability; he could stalk fairly well in the woods, but the Aiel did not seem to care if it was forest or farmland or city. When they did not want to be seen, they found a way not to be seen.

Mistress al'Vere insisted they go the rest of the way afoot, claiming the way was too overgrown for riding. Perrin did not agree, but he dismounted anyway. No doubt it would not be comfortable leading folk on horseback while on foot. In any case, his head was full of plans. He needed a look at the Whitecloak camp up at Watch Hill before deciding how to rescue Mistress Luhhan and the others. And where were Tam and Abell hiding? Neither Bran nor Mistress al'Vere had said; perhaps they did not know. If Tam and Abell had not brought the prisoners out already, it was not an easy task. He had to do it somehow, though. Then he could turn his attention to Trollocs.

No one from the village had come this way in years, and the path had vanished, yet tall trees kept the undergrowth down to a large extent. The Aiel slipped along silently with everyone else, acceding to Mistress al'Vere's insistence that they all stay together. Loial murmured approvingly at great oaks or particularly tall fir trees and leatherleaf. Occasionally a mocker or redbreast sang in the trees, and once Perrin smelled a fox watching them pass.

Suddenly he caught man scent that had not been there a moment before, heard a faint rustle. The Aiel tensed, crouching with spears ready. Perrin reached to his quiver.

"Be at ease," Mistress al'Vere said urgently, motioning for weapons to be lowered. "Please, be at ease."

Abruptly there were two men standing ahead, one tall and dark and slender to the left, the other short, stocky and graying to the right. Both held bows with arrows nocked, ready to raise and draw, with quivers balancing the swords on their hips. Both wore cloaks that seemed to fade into the surrounding foliage.

"Warders!" Perrin exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell us there are Aes Sedai here, Mistress al'Vere? Master al'Vere never mentioned it either. Why?"

"Because he doesn't know," she said hurriedly. "I did not lie when I said this is Women's Circle business." She turned her attention to the two Warders, neither of whom had relaxed an inch. "Tomas, Ihvon, you know me. Put those bows down. You know I'd not bring anyone here if they meant harm."

"An Ogier," the gray-haired man said, "Aiel, a yellow-eyed man—the one the Whitecloaks seek, of course—and a fierce young woman with a knife." Perrin glanced at Faile; she held a blade ready to throw. He agreed with her this time. These might be Warders, but they showed no sign of lowering their bows yet; their faces might as well have been carved from anvils. The Aiel looked ready to begin dancing the spears without waiting to veil themselves. "A strange group, Mistress al'Vere," the older Warder went on. "We shall see. Ihvon?" The slender man nodded and melted into the undergrowth; Perrin could barely hear the fellow's going. Warders moved like death itself when they wanted to.

"What do you mean, Women's Circle business?" he demanded. "I know Whitecloaks would cause trouble if they knew about Aes Sedai, so you wouldn't want to tell Hari Coplin, but why keep it secret from the Mayor? And us?"

"Because we agreed to," Mistress al'Vere said irritably. The irritation seemed meant in equal parts for Perrin and the Warder still guarding them—there was no other word for it—with maybe a bit left over for the Aes Sedai. "They were at Watch Hill when the Whitecloaks came. No one there knew who they were except the Circle there, who passed them on to us to hide. From everyone, Perrin. It's the best way to keep a secret, if only a few know. Light preserve me, I know two women who have stopped sharing their husbands' beds for fear they might talk in their sleep. We agreed to keep it secret."

"Why did you decide to change that?" the gray-haired Warder asked in a hard voice.

"For what I consider good and sufficient reasons, Tomas." From the way she shifted her shawl, Perrin suspected she was hoping the Circle—and the Aes Sedai—thought so, too. Rumor had it the Circle could be even harder on each other than they were on the rest of the village. "Where better to hide you, Perrin, than with Aes Sedai? Surely you aren't afraid of them, not after leaving here with one. And. . . . You will find out soon enough. You just have to trust me."

"There are Aes Sedai and Aes Sedai," Perrin told her. But those he considered the worst, the Red Ajah, did not bond Warders; the Red Ajah did not like men very much at all. This Tomas had dark unwavering eyes. They might rush him, or better simply leave, but the Warder would surely put an arrow through the first one to do something he did not like, and Perrin was ready to bet the man had more shafts handy for easy nocking. The Aiel seemed to agree; they still looked ready to spring in any direction at any moment, but they looked as if they could stand where they were until the sun froze, too. Perrin patted Faile on the shoulder. “It will be all right,” he said.

“Of course it will,” she replied, smiling. She had put the knife away. “If Mistress al’Vere says it, I trust her.”

Perrin hoped she was right. He did not trust as many people as he once had. Not Aes Sedai. And maybe not even Marin al’Vere. But maybe these Aes Sedai would help him fight Trollocs. He would trust anyone who did that. But how far could he rely on Aes Sedai? They did what they did for their own reasons; the Two Rivers was home, to him, but to them it might be a stone on a stone’s board. Faile and Marin al’Vere appeared to be trusting, though, and the Aiel waited. For the moment, it seemed he had little choice.

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CHAPTER 31

Assurances

In a few minutes Ihvon returned. “You can go ahead, Mistress al’Vere” was all he said before he and Tomas both vanished into the brush again without so much as the rustle of a leaf.

“They are very good,” Gaul muttered, still staring around suspiciously.

“A child could hide in this,” Chiad told him, slapping a redberry branch. But she watched the undergrowth as closely as Gaul did.

None of the Aiel appeared eager to go on. Not reluctant, precisely, and certainly not afraid, but definitely not eager. One day Perrin hoped to figure out what it was Aiel did feel toward Aes Sedai. One day. He was not particularly enthusiastic himself, today.

“Let’s go meet these Aes Sedai of yours,” he told Mistress al’Vere gruffly.

The old sickhouse was even more ramshackle than he remembered, a sprawling single story that leaned drunkenly, half the rooms open to the sky, a forty-foot sourgum tree poking up from one. The forest closed in on every side. A thick net of vines and briars snaked up the walls, covered the remaining thatch with green; he thought they might be all that was holding the building up. The front door was cleared, though. He smelled horses, and a faint aroma of beans and ham, but oddly, no woodsmoke.

Tying their animals to low branches, they followed Mistress al’Vere inside, where vine-shrouded windows admitted only a dim light. The front room was large and bare of furnishings, with dirt in the corners and a few cobwebs that had escaped an obviously hasty cleaning. Four blanket rolls were laid out on the floor, with saddles and saddlebags and neatly tied bundles against the wall, and a small kettle on the stone hearth gave off the cooking smells despite the lack of any fire. A smaller kettle seemed to be water for tea, almost at the boil. Two Aes Sedai awaited them. Marin al'Vere curtsied hastily and launched into an anxious cascade of introductions and explanations.

Perrin leaned his chin against his bow. He recognized the Aes Sedai. Verin Mathwin, plump and square-faced, gray streaking her brown hair despite her smooth-cheeked Aes Sedai agelessness, was Brown Ajah, and like all Browns seemingly lost half the time in the search for knowledge, whether old and lost or new. But sometimes her dark eyes belied that vague dreamy expression, as now, looking past Marin at him sharp as tacks. She was one of two Aes Sedai besides Moiraine he was certain knew about Rand, and he suspected she knew more about himself than she let on. Her eyes took on that slight vagueness again as she listened to Marin, but for an instant they had weighed him on scales, factored him into her own plans. He would have to be very careful around her.

The other, a dark, slender woman in a deep green silk riding dress that contrasted sharply with Verin's plain brown, ink-stained at the cuffs, he had never met, and only seen once. Alanna Mosvani was Green Ajah, if he remembered correctly, a beautiful woman with long black hair and penetrating dark eyes. Those eyes sought him, too, while she listened to Marin. Something Egwene had said came back to him. *Some Aes Sedai who shouldn't know about Rand show too much interest in him. Elaida, for instance, and Alanna Mosvani. I don't think I trust either of them.* Perhaps it would be best to be guided by Egwene until he found out differently.

His ears perked up when Marin said, still apprehensive, "You were asking about him, Verin Sedai. Perrin, I mean. All three boys, but Perrin among them. It seemed the easiest way to keep him from getting himself killed was to bring him to you. There just wasn't any time to ask first. Do say you under—"

"It is quite all right, Mistress al'Vere," Verin interrupted in a soothing tone. "You did exactly the correct thing. Perrin is in the right hands, now. Also I will enjoy the chance to learn more about the Aiel, and it is always a pleasure to talk with an Ogier. I will pick your brain, Loial. I have found some fascinating things in Ogier books."

Loial gave her a pleased smile; anything to do with books seemed to please him. Gaul, on the other hand, exchanged guarded looks with Bain and Chiad.

"It is all right as long as you do not do it again," Alanna said firmly. "Unless. . . . You are alone?" she asked Perrin in a voice that required an answer, and right now. “Did the other two return as well?”

“Why are you here?” he demanded right back.

“Perrin!” Mistress al’Vere said sharply. “Mind your manners! You may have picked up some rough ways out in the world, but you can just lose them again now that you are home.”

“Do not trouble yourself,” Verin told her. “Perrin and I are old friends now. I understand him.” Her dark eyes glittered at him for a moment.

“We will take care of him.” Alanna’s cool words seemed open to interpretation.

Verin smiled and patted Marin’s shoulder. “You had better go on back to the village. We don’t want anyone wondering why you are walking in the woods.”

Mistress al’Vere nodded. Pausing by Perrin, she put a hand on his arm. “You know you have my sympathy,” she said gently. “Just remember that getting yourself killed won’t help anything. Do what the Aes Sedai tell you.” He mumbled something noncommittal, but it seemed to satisfy her.

When Mistress al’Vere had gone, Verin said, “You have our sympathy as well, Perrin. If there was anything we could have done, we would have.”

He did not want to think of his family now. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Perrin!” Faile managed to copy Mistress al’Vere’s tone almost exactly, but he paid it no mind.

“Why are you here? It seems awfully coincidental. Whitecloaks and Trollocs, and the two of you just happen to be here at the same time.”

“Not coincidental at all,” Verin replied. “Ah, the tea water is ready.” The water subsided from a boil as she began to bustle about, tossing a handful of leaves into the kettle, directing Faile to find metal cups in one of the bundles against the wall. Alanna, with her arms folded beneath her breasts, never took her eyes off Perrin, their heat conflicting with the coolness of her face. “Year by year,” Verin continued, “we find fewer and fewer girls who can be taught to channel. Sheriam believes we may have spent the last three thousand years culling the ability out of humankind by gentling every man who can channel we find. The proof of it, she says, is how very few men we do find. Why, even a hundred years ago the records say there were two or three a year, and five hundred years—”

Alanna harrumphed. “What else can we do, Verin? Let them go insane? Follow the Whites’ mad plan?”

"I think not," Verin replied calmly. "Even if we could find women willing to bear children by gentled men, there is no guarantee the children would be able to channel, or would be girls. I did suggest that if they wanted to increase the stock, Aes Sedai should be the ones to have the children; themselves, in fact, since they put it forward in the first place. Alviarin was not amused."

"She would not be," Alanna laughed. The sudden flash of delight, breaking her fiery, dark-eyed stare, was startling. "I wish I could have seen her face."

"Her expression was . . . interesting," the Brown sister said musingly. "Calm yourself, Perrin. I will give you the rest of your answer. Tea?"

Trying to wipe the glare from his face, somehow he found himself seated on the floor; his bow beside him and a metal cup full of strong tea in his hand. Everyone sat in a circle in the middle of the room. Alanna took up the explanation of their presence, perhaps to forestall the other Aes Sedai's tendency to ramble.

"Here in the Two Rivers, where I suspect no Aes Sedai had visited in a thousand years, Moiraine found two women who could not only be taught to channel, but who had the ability born in them, and heard of another who had died because she could not teach herself."

"Not to mention three *ta'veren,*" Verin murmured into her tea.

"Do you have any idea," Alanna went on, "how many towns and villages we usually must visit to find three girls with the ability inborn? The only wonder is that it took us so long to come hunting more. The old blood is very strong here in the Two Rivers. We were only in Watch Hill a week before the Children appeared, and were very careful not to reveal who we were to any but the Women's Circle there, yet even so we found four girls who can be trained, and one child I think has the ability inborn."

"It was difficult to be sure," Verin added. "She is only twelve. None have anywhere near the potential of Egwene or Nynaeve, but the number is still nothing less than remarkable. There might be another two or three just around Watch Hill. We have had no chance to examine girls here, or farther south. Taren Ferry was a disappointment, I must say. Too much interchange of bloodlines with the outside, I suppose."

Perrin had to admit it made sense. But it did not answer all his questions, or settle all his doubts. He shifted, stretching out his leg. The spear wound in his thigh hurt. "I don't understand why you are hiding here.

Whitecloaks arresting innocent people, and here you sit. Trollocs running all over the Two Rivers apparently, and here you sit." Loial muttered under his breath, a muted rumble. Perrin caught "angering Aes Sedai" and "hornet's nest," but he continued to hammer at them. "Why aren't you doing something? You're Aes Sedai! Burn me, why aren't you doing something?"

"Perrin!" Faile hissed before turning an apologetic smile to Verin and Alanna. "Please forgive him. Moiraine Sedai spoiled him. She has an easy manner, I suppose, and she let him get away with things. Please don't be angry with him. He will do better." She shot him a sharp look, indicating she meant that for his ears as much as theirs, or more. He gave her a piece of his glower. She had no right interfering in this.

"An easy manner?" Verin said, blinking. "Moiraine? I never noticed."

Alanna waved Faile to silence. "You certainly do not understand," the Aes Sedai told Perrin in a tight voice. "You do not understand the restrictions under which we labor. The Three Oaths are not merely words. I brought two Warders with me to this place." The Greens were the only Ajah to bond more than a single Warder apiece; a few, he had heard, even had three or four. "The Children caught Owein crossing an open field. I felt every arrow that struck him until he died. I felt him die. Had I been there, I could have defended him, and myself, with the Power. But I cannot use it for revenge. The Oaths do not permit it. The Children are very nearly as vile as men can be, short of Darkfriends, but they are not Darkfriends, and for that reason they are safe from the Power except in self-defense. Stretch that as far as we can, it will only stretch so far."

"As for Trollocs," Verin added, "we have done for a number of them, and two Myrddraal, but there are limits. Halfmen can sense channeling, after a fashion. If we manage to draw a hundred Trollocs down on ourselves, there is very little we can do except run."

Perrin scratched at his beard. He should have expected this, should have known. He had seen Moiraine face Trollocs, and he had some idea of what she could do and what not. He realized he had been thinking of how Rand had killed all the Trollocs in the Stone, only Rand was stronger than either of these Aes Sedai, probably stronger than both together. Well, whether they helped him or not, he still meant to finish every Trolloc in the Two Rivers. After he rescued Mat's family, and the Luhhans. If he thought about it carefully enough, he had to find a way. His thigh ached miserably.

“You are injured.” Setting her cup on the floor, Alanna came across to kneel beside him and take his head in her hands. A tingle ran through him. “Yes. I see. You did not do this to yourself shaving, it appears.”

“It was the Trollocs, Aes Sedai,” Bain said. “When we came out of the Ways in the mountains.” Chiad touched her arm, and she stopped.

“I locked the Waygate,” Loial added quickly. “No one will use it until it is opened from this side.”

“I thought that must be how they were coming,” Verin murmured, half to herself. “Moiraine did say they were using the Ways. Sooner or later that is going to present us with a real problem.”

Perrin wondered what she thought that was.

“The Ways,” Alanna said, still holding his head. “*Ta’veren!* Young heroes!” She made the words sound approving and close to a curse, both together.

“I am not a hero,” he told her stolidly. “The Ways were the fastest way to get here. That’s all.”

The Green sister went on as if he had not spoken. “I will never understand why the Amyrlin Seat let you three go your way. Elaida has been having fits over you three, and she is not the only one, just the most vehement. With the seals weakening and the Last Battle coming, the last thing we need is three *ta’veren* running about loose. I would have tied a string to each of you, even bonded you.” He tried to pull back, but she tightened her grip and smiled. “I am not so lost to custom yet as to bond a man against his will. Not quite yet.” He was not sure how far from it she was; the smile did not reach her eyes. She fingered the half-healed cut on his cheek. “This has gone too long since it was done. Even Healing will leave a scar now.”

“I don’t need to be pretty,” he muttered—just well enough to do what he had to—and Faile laughed aloud.

“Who told you that?” Faile said. Surprisingly, she shared a smile with Alanna.

Perrin frowned, wondering if they were making fun of him, but before he could say anything, the Healing hit him, like being turned to ice. All he could do was gasp. The few moments before Alanna released him seemed endless.

When he had his breath again, the Green sister had Bain’s flame-haired head between her hands, Verin was seeing to Gaul, and Chiad was testing her left arm, swinging it back and forth with a satisfied expression.

Faile took Alanna's place beside Perrin and stroked a finger across his cheek, along the scar beneath his eye. "A beauty mark," she said, smiling slightly.

"A what?"

"Oh, just something Domani women do. It was just an idle comment."

Despite her smile, or maybe because of it, he scowled suspiciously. She *was* making fun of him, only he did not understand how, exactly.

Ihvon slipped into the room, whispered in Alanna's ear, and vanished outside again at her whisper. He hardly made a sound even on the wooden floor. A few moments later the scrape of boots on the steps announced new arrivals.

Perrin sprang to his feet as Tam al'Thor and Abell Cauthon appeared in the doorway, bows in hand, with the rumpled clothes and gray-flecked two-day beards of men who had been sleeping rough. They had been hunting; four rabbits hung at Tam's belt, three at Abell's. It was obvious they were expecting the Aes Sedai, and visitors, too, but they stared in amazement at Loial, more than half again as tall as either of them, with his tufted ears and broad snout of a nose. A flicker of recognition crossed Tam's bluff, lined face at sight of the Aiel.

Tam's gaze only rested thoughtfully on them for a moment, though, before coming to rest on Perrin with a start almost as big as for Loial. He was a sturdy, deep-chested man despite hair that was nearly all gray, the sort it would take an earthquake to knock off his feet and more than that to fluster. "Perrin, lad!" he exclaimed. "Is Rand with you?"

"What about Mat?" Abell added eagerly. He had the look of an older, graying Mat, but with more serious eyes. A man not thickened much by age, with an agile step.

"They are well," Perrin told them. "In Tear." He caught Verin's glance from the corner of his eye; she knew very well what Tear meant for Rand. Alanna hardly seemed to be paying attention at all. "They would have come with me, but we didn't know how bad things are." That was true on both counts, he was sure. "Mat spends his time dicing—and winning—and kissing the girls. Rand. . . . Well, the last I saw of Rand, he was wearing a fancy coat and had a pretty golden-haired girl on his arm."

"That sounds like my Mat," Abell chuckled.

“Maybe it’s as well they didn’t come,” Tam said more slowly, “what with the Trollocs. And the Whitecloaks. . . .” He shrugged. “You know the Trollocs returned?” Perrin nodded. “Was that Aes Sedai right? Moiraine. Were they after you three lads, that Winternight? Did you ever find out why?”

The Brown sister gave Perrin a warning look. Alanna appeared absorbed in rummaging through her saddlebags, but he thought she was listening now. Neither was what made him hesitate, though. There was just no way to come out and tell Tam that his son could channel, that Rand was the Dragon Reborn. How could he tell a man something like that? Instead, he said, “You will have to ask Moiraine. Aes Sedai don’t tell you any more than they have to.”

“I have noticed,” Tam said dryly.

Both Aes Sedai were definitely listening, and making no secret of it now. Alanna arched an icy eyebrow at Tam, and Abell shifted his feet as if he thought Tam was pushing his luck, but it would take more than a stare to upset Tam.

“Can we talk outside?” Perrin asked the two men. “I want a breath of air.” He wanted to talk without Aes Sedai eavesdropping and watching, but he could hardly say so.

Tam and Abell were agreeable, and perhaps as eager to escape Verin and Alanna’s scrutiny as he, but first there was the matter of the rabbits, all of which they handed over to Alanna.

“We meant to keep two for ourselves,” Abell said, “but it seems you have more mouths to feed.”

“There is no need for this.” The Green sister sounded as though she had said as much often before.

“We like to pay for what we get,” Tam told her, sounding the same. “The Aes Sedai were kind enough to do a little Healing for us,” he added to Perrin, “and we want to stock up credit in case we need it again.”

Perrin nodded. He could understand not wanting to take a gift from Aes Sedai. “An Aes Sedai’s gift always has a hook in it,” the old saying went. Well, he knew the truth of that. But it did not really matter whether you took the gift or paid for it; Aes Sedai managed to set the hook anyway. Verin was watching him with a tiny smile, as if she knew what he was thinking.

As the three men started out, carrying their bows, Faile rose to follow. Perrin shook his head at her, and amazingly she sat back down. He wondered if she was ill.

After pausing so Tam and Abell could admire Stepper and Swallow, they strolled off a way under the trees. The sun slanted westward, lengthening shadows. The older men made a few jokes about his beard, but they never mentioned his eyes. Strangely, the omission did not bother him. He had more important worries than whether somebody thought his eyes peculiar.

Responding to Abell’s query as to whether “that thing” was any good for straining soup, he rubbed his beard and said mildly, “Faile likes it.”

“Oh-ho,” Tam chuckled. “That’s the girl, is it? A spirited look to her, lad. She’ll have you lying awake nights trying to tell up from down.”

“Only one way to handle that sort,” Abell said, nodding. “Let her think she’s running things. That way, when it’s important, and you say different, by the time she gets over the shock of it, you’ll have matters arranged as you want, and it will be too late for her to badger you about changing it.”

That seemed to Perrin a great deal like what Mistress al’Vere had told Faile about handling men. He wondered if Abell and Marin had ever compared notes. Not likely. Perhaps it was worth trying with Faile. Only, she seemed to have her own way in any case.

He glanced over his shoulder. The sickhouse was almost hidden by the trees. They had to be safe from the Aes Sedai’s ears. He listened carefully, drew a deep breath. A woodpecker drummed somewhere in the distance. There were squirrels in the leafy branches overhead, and a fox had passed this way not long ago with its kill, a rabbit. Aside from the three of them, there was no man scent, nothing to indicate a hidden Warder listening. Perhaps he was being too cautious, but good reasons or no, he could not get past the coincidence of both Aes Sedai being women he had met before, one a woman Egwene did not trust, the other a woman he was not sure he trusted.

“Do you stay here?” he asked. “With Verin and Alanna?”

“Hardly,” Abell replied. “How could a man sleep with Aes Sedai under the same roof? What there is of it.”

“We thought this would be a good place to hide,” Tam said, “but they were here before us. I think those Warders might have killed both of us if Marin and some others of the Women’s Circle hadn’t been here then, too.”

Abell grimaced. “I think it was the Aes Sedai finding out who we were that stopped it. Who our sons were, I mean. They show too much interest in you boys to suit me.” He hesitated, fingering his bow. “That Alanna let slip that you’re *ta’veren*. All three of you. I’ve heard Aes Sedai can’t lie.”

“I haven’t seen any signs of it in me,” Perrin said wryly. “Or Mat.”

Tam glanced at him when he did not mention Rand—he was going to have to learn to lie better, trying to keep his own secrets and everybody else’s, too—but what the older man said was, “Maybe you just don’t know what to look for. How is it you come to be traveling with an Ogier and three Aiel?”

“The last peddler I saw said there were Aiel this side of the Spine of the World,” Abell put in, “but I didn’t believe him. Said he’d heard there were Aiel in Murandy, of all places, or maybe Altara. He wasn’t too certain of exactly where, but a long way from the Waste.”

“None of that has anything to do with *ta’veren*,” Perrin said. “Loial is a friend, and he came to help me. Gaul is a friend, too, I suppose. Bain and Chiad came with Faile, not me. It’s all sort of complicated, but it just happened. Nothing to do with *ta’veren*.”

“Well, whatever the reason,” Abell said, “the Aes Sedai are interested in you lads. Tam and I traveled all the way to Tar Valon last year, to the White Tower, trying to find out where you were. We could hardly unearth one to admit she knew your names, but it was plain they were hiding something. The Keeper of the Chronicles had us on a boat heading downriver, our pockets stuffed with gold and our heads full of vague assurances, almost before we could make our bows. I don’t like the idea the Tower may be using Mat some way.”

Perrin wished he could tell Mat’s father nothing like that was going on, but he was not sure he was up to that big a lie with a straight face. Moiraine was not watching Mat because she liked his grin; Mat was tangled as deeply with the Tower as he himself, maybe deeper. The three of them were all tied tight, and the Tower held the strings.

A silence descended on them, until at last Tam said quietly, “Lad, about your family. I’ve sad news.”

“I know,” Perrin said quickly, and the hush fell again, with each staring at his own boots. Quiet was what was needed. A few moments to pull back from painful emotions and the embarrassment of having them plain on your face.

Wings fluttered, and Perrin looked up to see a large raven alighting in an oak fifty paces away, beady black eyes sharp on the three men. His hand darted for his quiver, but even as he drew fletchings to cheek, two arrows knocked the raven from its perch. Tam and Abell were already nocking anew, eyes scanning the trees and sky for more of the black birds. There was nothing.

Tam's shot had taken the raven in the head, which was no surprise and no accident. Perrin had not lied when he told Faile these two men were better than he with the bow. No one in the Two Rivers could match Tam's shooting.

"Filthy things," Abell muttered, putting a foot on the bird to pull his arrow free. Cleaning the arrow point in the dirt, he returned it to his quiver. "They're everywhere nowadays."

"The Aes Sedai told us about them," Tam said, "spying for the Fades, and we spread the word. The Women's Circle did, too. Nobody paid much mind until they started attacking sheep, though, pecking out eyes, killing some. The clip will be bad enough this year without that. Not that it matters much, I suppose. Between Whitecloaks and Trollocs, I doubt we'll see any merchants after our wool this year."

"Some fool has gone crazy over it," Abell added. "Maybe more than one. We've found all sorts of dead animals. Rabbits, deer, foxes, even a bear. Killed and left to rot. Most not even skinned. It's a man, or men, not Trollocs; I found boot prints. A big man, but too small for a Trolloc. A shame and a waste."

Slayer. Slayer here, and not just in the wolf dream. Slayer and Trollocs. The man in the dream had seemed familiar. Perrin scuffed dirt and leaves over the dead raven with his boot. There would be plenty of time for Trollocs later. A lifetime, if need be. "I promised Mat I'd look after Bode and Eldrin, Master Cauthon. How hard will it be to get them, and the others, free?"

"Hard," Abell sighed, his face sagging. Suddenly he looked his age and more. "Powerful hard. I got close enough to see Natti after they took her, walking outside the tent where they're holding everybody. I could see her—with a couple of hundred Whitecloaks between us. I got a little careless, and one of them put an arrow through me. If Tam hadn't hauled me back here to the Aes Sedai. . . ."

“It’s a good-sized camp,” Tam said, “right under Watch Hill. Seven or eight hundred men. Patrols, day and night, with the heaviest concentration from Watch Hill down to Emond’s Field. If they spread out more, it would make things easier for us, but except for a hundred men or so at Taren Ferry, they’ve just about given the rest of the Two Rivers over to the Trollocs. It’s bad down around Deven Ride, I hear. Another farm burned almost every night. The same between Watch Hill and the River Taren. Bringing Natti and the others out will be hard, and after, we’ll have to hope the Aes Sedai will let them stay here. That pair aren’t too pleased at anyone knowing where they are.”

“Surely someone will hide them,” Perrin protested. “You can’t tell me everyone’s turned their backs on you. They don’t really believe you’re Darkfriends?” Even as he said it, he was remembering Cenn Buie.

“No, not that,” Tam said, “except for a few fools. Plenty of folk will give us a meal, or a night in the barn, sometimes even a bed, but you have to understand they’re uneasy about helping people the Whitecloaks are chasing. It’s nothing to blame them for. Things are stone hard, and most men are trying to look after their own families the best they can. Asking someone to take in Natti and the girls, Haral and Alsbet. . . . Well, it might be asking too much.”

“I thought better of Two Rivers folk than that,” Perrin muttered.

Abell managed a weak smile. “Most people feel caught between two millstones, Perrin. They’re just hoping they aren’t ground to flour between Whitecloaks and Trollocs.”

“They should stop hoping and do something.” For a moment Perrin felt abashed. He had not been living here; he had no idea what it was like. But he was still right. As long as the people hid behind the Children of the Light, they would have to put up with whatever the Children wanted to do, whether taking books or arresting women and girls. “Tomorrow I’ll take a look at this Whitecloak camp. There has to be some way to free them. And once they are, we can turn our attention to Trollocs. A Warder once told me Trollocs call the Aiel Waste ‘the Dying Ground.’ I mean to make them give that name to the Two Rivers.”

“Perrin,” Tam began, then stopped, looking troubled.

Perrin knew his eyes caught the light, there in the shadows under the oak. His face felt carved from rock.

Tam sighed. “First we’ll see about Natti and the others. Then we can decide what to do about the Trollocs.”

“Don’t let it eat you inside, boy,” Abell said softly. “Hate can grow till it burns everything else out of you.”

“Nothing is eating me,” Perrin told them in a level voice. “I just mean to do what needs doing.” He ran a thumb along the edge of his axe. What needed doing.

* * *

Dain Bornhald held himself straight in his saddle as the hundred he had taken on patrol approached Watch Hill. Fewer than a hundred, now. Eleven saddles had cloak-wrapped bodies tied across them, and twenty-three more men nursed wounds. The Trollocs had laid a neat ambush; it might have succeeded against soldiers less well trained, less tough than the Children. What troubled him was that this was his third patrol to be attacked in force. Not a chance encounter, not happening on Trollocs killing and burning, but meeting a planned attack. And only patrols he led personally. The Trollocs tried to avoid the others. The fact presented worrisome questions, and the answers he came up with gave no solutions.

The sun was dropping. A few lights already appeared in the village that covered the hill from top to bottom with thatched roofs. The only tile roof stood at the crest, on the White Boar, the inn. Another evening he might have gone up there for a cup of wine, despite the nervous silence that closed in at the sight of a white cloak with a golden sunburst. He seldom drank, but he sometimes enjoyed being around people outside the Children; after a time they would forget his presence to some extent, and begin to laugh and talk among themselves again. On another evening. Tonight he wanted to be alone to think.

There was activity among the hundred or so colorful wagons gathered less than half a mile from the foot of the hill, men and women in even brighter hues than their wagons, examining horses and harness, loading things that had been lying about the camp for weeks. It seemed the Traveling People meant to live up to their name, probably at first light.

“Farran!” The thick-bodied hundredman heeled his horse closer, and Bornhald nodded toward the Tuatha’an caravan. “Inform the Seeker that if he wishes to move his people, they will move south.” His maps said there was no crossing of the Taren except at Taren Ferry, but he had begun learning how old they were as soon as he crossed the river. No one was leaving the Two Rivers to perhaps seal his command into a trap as long as he could stop it. “And Farran? There is no need to use boots or fists, yes? Words will suffice. This Raen has ears.”

“By your command, Lord Bornhald.” The hundredman sounded only a little disappointed. Touching gauntleted fist to heart, he wheeled away toward the Tuatha’an encampment. He would not like it, but he would obey. Despise the Traveling People as he might, he was a good soldier.

The sight of his own camp brought a moment of pride to Bornhald, the long neat rows of wedge-roofed white tents, the picket lines for the horses precisely arrayed. Even here in this Light-forsaken corner of the world, the Children maintained themselves, never allowing discipline to slack. It was Light-forsaken. The Trollocs proved that. If they burned farms, it only meant some folk here were pure. Some. The rest bowed, and said “yes, my Lord,” “as you wish, my Lord,” and stubbornly went their own way as soon as his back was turned. Besides which, they were hiding an Aes Sedai. The second day south of the Taren they had killed a Warder; the man’s color-shifting cloak had been sufficient proof. Bornhald hated Aes Sedai, meddling with the One Power as if Breaking the World once was not enough. They would do it again if they were not stopped. His momentary good mood faded like spring snow.

His eye sought out the tent where the prisoners were kept, except for a brief exercise period each day, one at a time. None would try running when it meant leaving the others behind. Not that running would get them more that a dozen paces—a guard stood at either end of the tent, and a dozen paces in any direction took in another twenty Children—but he wanted as little trouble as possible. Trouble sparked trouble. If rough treatment was needed with the prisoners, it might raise resentment in the village to a point where something had to be done about it. Byar was a fool. He—and others, Farran especially—wanted to put the prisoners to the question. Bornhald was not a Questioner, and he did not like to use their methods. Nor did he mean to let Farran anywhere near those girls, even if they were Darkfriends, as Ordeith claimed.

Darkfriends or no Darkfriends, he realized more and more that all he really wanted was one Darkfriend. More than the Trollocs, more than Aes Sedai, he wanted Perrin Aybara. He could hardly credit Byar’s tales of the man running with wolves, but Byar was clear enough that Aybara had led Bornhald’s father into a Darkfriend trap, led Geofram Bornhald to his death on Toman Head at the hands of the Seanchan Darkfriends and their Aes Sedai allies. Perhaps, if neither of the Luhhans talked soon, he might let Byar have his way with the blacksmith. Either the man would crack, or his wife would, watching. One of them would give him the means to find Perrin Aybara.

When he dismounted in front of his tent, Byar was there to meet him, stiff and gaunt as a scarecrow. Bornhald glanced distastefully toward a much smaller collection of tents apart from the rest. The wind was from that direction, and he could smell the other camp. They did not keep their picket lines clean, or themselves. “Ordeith is back, it seems, yes?”

“Yes, my Lord Bornhald.” Byar stopped, and Bornhald looked at him questioningly. “They report a skirmish with Trollocs to the south. Two dead. Six wounded, they claim.”

“And who are the dead?” Bornhald asked quietly.

“Child Joelin and Child Gomanes, my Lord Bornhald.” Byar’s hollow-cheeked expression never changed.

Bornhald drew off his steel-backed gauntlets slowly. The two he had sent off to accompany Ordeith, to see what he did on his forays south. Carefully, he did not raise his voice. “My compliments to Master Ordeith, Byar, and—No! No compliments. Tell him, in these words, that I will have his scrawny bones before me now. Tell him, Byar, and bring him if you must arrest him and those filthy wretches who disgrace the Children. Go.”

Bornhald held his anger until he was inside his tent, flap lowered, then swept maps and writing case from his camp table with a snarl. Ordeith must think him an imbecile. Twice he had sent men with the fellow, and twice they had been the only deaths in “a skirmish with Trollocs” that left no wounded to show among the rest. Always to the south. The man was obsessed with Emond’s Field. Well, he himself might have had his camp there, if not for. . . . No point to it now. He had the Luhhans here. They would give him Perrin Aybara, one way or another. Watch Hill was a much better site if he had to move to Taren Ferry quickly. Military considerations before personal.

For the thousandth time he wondered why the Lord Captain Commander had sent him here. The people seemed no different from those he had seen a hundred other places. Except that only the Taren Ferry folk showed any enthusiasm for rooting out their own Darkfriends. The rest stared with a sullen stubbornness when the Dragon’s Fang was scrawled on a door. A village always knew who its own undesirables were; they were always ready to cleanse themselves, with a little encouragement, and any Darkfriends were certain to be swept up with the others the people wanted gone. But not here. The black scrawl of a sharp fang on a door might as well be new whitewash for all of its real effect. And the Trollocs. Had Pedron Niall known the Trollocs would come when he wrote those orders? How could he have? But if not, why had he sent enough of the Children to put down a small rebellion? And why under the Light had the Lord Captain Commander burdened him with a murderous madman?

The tent flap swept aside, and Ordeith swaggered in. His fine gray coat was embroidered with silver, but stained heavily. His scrawny neck was dirty, too, jutting out of his collar and giving him the look of a turtle. “A good evening to you, my Lord Bornhald. A gracious good evening, and splendid.” The Lugard accent was heavy today.

“What happened to Child Joelin and Child Gomanes, Ordeith?”

“Such a terrible thing, my Lord. When we came on the Trollocs, Child Gomanes bravely—” Bornhald struck him across the face with his gauntlets. Staggering, the bony man put a hand to his split lip, examined the red on his fingers. The smile on his face no longer mocked. It looked viperish. “Are you forgetting who signed my commission now, lordling? Pedron Niall will be hanging you with your mother’s guts if I say a word, after he has the both of you skinned alive.”

“That is if you are alive to speak this word, yes?”

Ordeith snarled, crouching like some wild thing, spittle bubbling. Slowly he shook himself, slowly straightened. “We must work together.” The Lugarder accent was gone, replaced by a grander, more commanding tone. Bornhald preferred the taunting Lugarder voice to the slightly oily, barely veiled contempt in this one. “The Shadow lies all around us here. Not simply Trollocs and Myrddraal. They are the least of it. Three were spawned here, Darkfriends meant to shake the world, their breeding guided by the Dark One for a thousand years or more. Rand al’Thor. Mat Cauthon. Perrin Aybara. You know their names. In this place, forces are loosed that will harrow the world. Creatures of the Shadow walk the night, tainting men’s hearts, corrupting men’s dreams. Scourge this land. Scourge it, and they will come. Rand al’Thor. Mat Cauthon. Perrin Aybara.” He almost caressed the last name.

Bornhald drew ragged breath. He was not sure how Ordeith had discovered what he wanted here; one day the man had simply revealed his knowledge. "I covered over what you did at the Aybara farm—"

"Scourge them." There was a hint of madness in that grand voice, and sweat on Ordeith's brow. "Flay them, and the three will come."

Bornhald raised his voice. "Covered it over because I had to." There had been no choice. If the truth came out, he would have more than sullen stares to contend with. The last thing he needed was open rebellion on top of Trollocs. "But I will not condone the murder of Children. Do you hear me? What is it you do that you need to hide from the Children?"

"Do you doubt the Shadow will do whatever is needed to stop me?"

"What?"

"Do you doubt it?" Ordeith leaned forward intently. "You saw the Gray Men."

Bornhald hesitated. Fifty of the Children around him, in the middle of Watch Hill, and no one had noticed the pair with their daggers. He had looked right at them and not seen. Until Ordeith killed the pair. The scrawny little fellow had gained considerable standing with the men for that. Later Bornhald had buried the daggers deep. Those blades had looked to be steel, but a touch seared like molten metal. The first earth thrown on them in the pit had hissed and steamed. "You believe they were after you?"

"Oh, yes, my Lord Bornhald. After me. Whatever it takes to stop me. The Shadow itself wants to stop me."

"That still says nothing of murdered—"

"I must do what I do in secret." It was a whisper, almost a hiss. "The Shadow can enter men's minds to find me out, enter men's thoughts and dreams. Would you like to die in a dream? It can happen."

"You are . . . mad."

"Give me a free hand, and I will give you Perrin Aybara. That is what Pedron Niall's orders require. A free hand for me, and I will place Perrin Aybara in yours."

Bornhald was silent for a long time. "I do not want to look at you," he said finally. "Get out."

When Ordeith was gone, Bornhald shivered. What was the Lord Captain Commander up to with this man? But if it put Aybara in his grasp. . . . Tossing his gauntlets down, he began digging through his belongings. Somewhere he had a flask of brandy.

The man who called himself Ordeith, even sometimes thought of himself as Ordeith, slunk through the tents of the Children of the Light, watching the white-cloaked men with a wary eye. Useful tools, ignorant tools, but not to be trusted. Especially not Bornhald; that one might have to be disposed of, if he became too troublesome. Byar would be much more easily handled. But not yet. There were other matters more important. Some of the soldiers nodded respectfully as he passed. He showed them his teeth in what they took for a friendly smile. Tools, and fools.

His eyes skittered hungrily across the tent holding the prisoners. They could wait. For a while yet. A little while longer. They were only tidbits anyway. Bait. He should have restrained himself at the Aybara farm, but Con Aybara had laughed in his face, and Joslyn had called him a filthy-minded little fool for naming her son Darkfriend. Well, they had learned, screaming, burning. In spite of himself he giggled under his breath. Tidbits.

He could feel one of those he hated out there somewhere, south, toward Emond's Field. Which one? It did not matter. Rand al'Thor was the only really important one. He would have known if it was al'Thor. Rumor had not drawn him yet, but it would. Ordeith shivered with desire. It had to be so. More tales must be gotten past Bornhald's guards at Taren Ferry, more reports of the scouring of the Two Rivers, to drift to Rand al'Thor's ears and sear his brain. First al'Thor, then the Tower, for what they had taken from him. He would have all that was his by right.

Everything had been ticking along like a fine clock, even with Bornhald impeding, until this new one appeared with his Gray Men. Ordeith scrubbed bony fingers through greasy hair. Why could not his dreams at least be his own? He was a puppet no longer, danced about by Myrddraal and Forsaken, by the Dark One himself. He pulled the strings now. They could not stop him, could not kill him.

"Nothing can kill me," he muttered, scowling. "Not me. I have survived since the Trolloc Wars." Well, a part of him had. He laughed shrilly, hearing madness in the cackle, knowing it, not caring.

A young Whitecloak officer frowned at him. This time there was nothing of a smile in Ordeith's bared teeth, and the fuzzy-cheeked lad recoiled. Ordeith hurried on in a slinking shuffle.

Flies buzzed about his own tents, and sullen, suspicious eyes flinched away from his. The white cloaks were soiled here. But the swords were sharp, and obedience instant and unquestioning. Bornhald thought these men were still his. Pedron Niall believed it, too, believed Ordeith his tame creature. Fools.

Twitching aside his tent flap, Ordeith went in to examine his prisoner, stretched out between two pegs thick enough to hold a wagon team. Good steel chain quivered as he checked it, but he had calculated how much was needed, then doubled it. As well he had. One loop less, and those stout steel links would have broken.

With a sigh, he seated himself on the edge of his bed. The lamps were already lit, more than a dozen, leaving no shadow anywhere. The tent was as bright inside as noonday. “Have you thought over my proposal? Accept, and you walk free. Refuse. . . . I know how to hurt your sort. I can make you scream through endless dying. Forever dying, forever screaming.”

The chains hummed at a jerk; the stakes driven deep into the ground creaked. “Very well.” The Myrddraal’s voice was dried snakeskin crumbling. “I accept. Release me.”

Ordeith smiled. It thought him a fool. It would learn. They all would. “First, the matter of . . . shall we say, agreements and accord?” As he talked, the Myrddraal began to sweat.

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CHAPTER 32

Questions to Be Asked

"We should leave for Watch Hill soon," Verin announced the next morning, with sunrise just pearling the sky outside, "so don't dawdle." Perrin looked up from his cold porridge to meet a steady gaze; the Aes Sedai expected no arguments. After a moment, she added thoughtfully, "Do not think this means I will aid you in any foolishness. You are a tricksome young man. Try none of it with me."

Tam and Abell paused with spoons halfway to their mouths, exchanging surprised looks; clearly they had gone their own way and the Aes Sedai theirs before this. After a moment they resumed eating, although with pensive frowns. They left any objections unvoiced. Tomas, his Warder's cloak already packed away in his saddlebags, gave them—and Perrin—a hard-faced stare anyway, as if he anticipated arguments and meant to stamp them out. Warders did whatever was necessary for an Aes Sedai to do what she wanted.

She intended to meddle, of course—Aes Sedai always did—but having her where he could see her was surely better than leaving her behind his back. Avoiding Aes Sedai entanglements completely was all but impossible when they meant to dabble their fingers in; the only course was to try to use them while they used you, to watch and hope you could jump clear if they decided to stuff you headfirst, like a ferret, down a rabbithole. Sometimes the rabbithole turned out to be a badger's sett, which was hard on the ferret.

"You would be welcome, too," he told Alanna, but she gave him a frosty stare that stopped him in his tracks. She had disdained the porridge, and stood at one of the vine-shrouded windows, peering through the leafy screen.

He could not say whether she was pleased with his plans for a scout. Reading her seemed near to impossible. Aes Sedai were supposed to be cool serenity itself, and she was that, but Alanna tossed off flashes of fiery temper or unpredictable humor when least expected, like heat lightning, crackling then gone. Sometimes she looked at him so that if she had not been Aes Sedai he would have thought she was admiring him. Other times he might as well have been some complicated mechanism she meant to disassemble in order to puzzle out how it worked. Even Verin had the better of that; most of the time she was just plain unreadable. Unnerving, on occasion, but at least he did not have to wonder if she was going to know how to fit his pieces back together.

He wished he could make Faile stay there—that was not the same as leaving her behind, just keeping her safe from Whitecloaks—but she had that stubborn set to her jaw and a dangerous light in her tilted eyes. “I look forward to seeing some of your country. My father raises sheep.” Her tone was definite; she was not going to stay unless he tied her up.

For a moment he came close to considering it. But the danger from Whitecloaks should not be that great; he only intended to look, today. “I thought he was a merchant,” he said.

“He raises sheep, too.” Spots of crimson bloomed in her cheeks: maybe her father was a poor man and not a merchant at all. He did not know why she would pretend, but if that was what she wanted, he would not try to stop her. Embarrassed or not, however, she looked no less stubborn.

He remembered Master Cauthon’s method. “I don’t know how much you’ll see. Some farms may be shearing, I suppose. Probably no different from what your father does. I’ll be glad of your company in any case.” The startlement on her face when she realized he was not going to argue was almost worth the worry of her coming along. Maybe Abell had something.

Loial was another matter altogether.

“But I want to go,” the Ogier protested when told he could not. “I want to help, Perrin.”

“You will stand out, Master Loial,” Abell said, and Tam added, “We need to avoid attracting any more attention than we must.” Loial’s ears drooped dejectedly.

Perrin drew him aside, as far from the others as the room would allow. Loial’s shaggy hair brushed the roof beams until Perrin motioned him to lean down. Perrin smiled, just jollying him along. He hoped everyone else believed that.

"I want you to keep an eye on Alanna," he said in a near whisper. Loial gave a start, and he caught the Ogier's sleeve, still smiling like a fool. "Grin, Loial. We are not talking about anything important, right?" The Ogier managed an uncertain smile. It would have to do. "Aes Sedai do what they do for their own reasons, Loial." And that might be what you least expected, or not at all what you believed it was. "Who knows what she might take into her head? I've had surprises enough since coming home, and I don't want one of hers added to it. I don't expect you to stop her, only notice anything out of the ordinary."

"Thank you for that," Loial muttered wryly, ears jerking. "Do you not think it best to just let Aes Sedai do what they want?" That was easy for him to say; Aes Sedai could not channel inside an Ogier *stedding.* Perrin just looked at him, and after a moment, the Ogier sighed. "I suppose not. Oh, very well. I can never say being around you is not . . . interesting." Straightening, he rubbed a thick finger under his nose and told the others, "I suppose I would draw eyes at that. Well, it will give me a chance to work on my notes. I have done nothing on my book in days."

Verin and Alanna shared an unreadable look, then turned twin unblinking gazes on Perrin. There was simply no telling what either thought.

The pack animals had to be left behind, of course. Packhorses would surely occasion comment, speaking of long travel; no one in the Two Rivers traveled very far from home in the best of times. Alanna wore a slight, satisfied smile while watching them saddle their mounts, no doubt believing the animals and wicker hampers tied him to the old sickhouse, to her and Verin. She was in for a surprise, if it came to that. He had lived out of a saddlebag often enough since leaving home. For that matter, he had lived out of his belt pouch and coat pockets.

He straightened from tightening Stepper's saddle girth and gave a start. Verin was watching him with a knowing expression, not vague at all, as if she knew what he was thinking and was amused. It was bad enough when Faile did that sort of thing; from an Aes Sedai, it was a hundred times worse. The hammer lashed with his blanket roll and saddlebags seemed to puzzle her, though. He was glad there was something she did not seem to understand. On the other hand, he could have done without her being so intrigued. What could be fascinating to an Aes Sedai about a hammer?

With only the riding animals to prepare, it took no time at all to be ready to go. Verin had a nondescript brown gelding, as plain to the untrained eye as her garb, but its deep chest and strong rump suggested as much endurance as her Warder's ferocious-eyed gray, tall and sleek. Stepper snorted at the other stallion until Perrin patted the dun's neck. The gray was more disciplined—and just as ready to fight, if Tomas let it. The Warder controlled his animal with his knees as much as his reins, the two seeming almost one.

Master Cauthon watched Tomas's horse with interest—war-trained mounts were not much seen in these parts—but Verin's earned an approving nod at first glance. He was as good a judge of horseflesh as there was in the Two Rivers. No doubt he had chosen his and Master al'Thor's rough-coated animals, not so tall as the other horses, but sturdy, with gaits that spoke of good speed and staying power.

The three Aiel glided ahead as the party started north, with long strides that carried them out of sight quickly in the woods, early-morning shadows sharp and long in the brightness of sunrise. Now and then a flash of gray-and-brown was visible through the trees, probably on purpose, to let the others know they were there. Tam and Abell took the lead, bows across the tall pommels of their saddles, with Perrin and Faile behind, and Verin and Tomas bringing up the rear.

Perrin could have done without Verin's eyes on his back. He could feel them between his shoulder blades. He wondered if she knew about the wolves. Not a comfortable thought. Brown sisters supposedly knew things the other Ajahs did not, obscure things, old knowledge. Perhaps she knew how he could avoid losing himself, what was human in him, to the wolves. Short of finding Elyas Machera again, she might be his best chance. All he had to do was trust her. Whatever she knew she would likely use, certainly to help the White Tower, probably to help Rand. The only trouble was that helping Rand might not bring what he wanted now. Everything would have been so much simpler without any Aes Sedai.

Mostly they rode in silence except for the sounds of the forest, squirrels and woodpeckers and occasional birdsong. At one point Faile glanced back. "She will not harm you," she said, her soft tone clashing with the fierce light in her dark eyes.

Perrin blinked. She meant to protect him. Against Aes Sedai. He was never going to understand her, or know what to expect next. She was about as confusing as the Aes Sedai sometimes.

They broke out of the Westwood perhaps four or five miles north of Emond's Field, with the sun standing its own height above the trees to the east. Scattered copses, mainly leatherleaf and pine and oak, lay between them and the nearest hedged fields of barley and oats, tabac and tall grass for hay. Strangely there was no one in sight, no smoke rising from the farmhouse chimneys beyond the fields. Perrin knew the people who lived there, the al'Loras in two of the big houses, the Barsteres in the others. Hardworking folk. If there had been anyone in those houses, they would have been at their labors long since. Gaul waved from the edge of a thicket, then vanished into the trees.

Perrin heeled Stepper up beside Tam and Abell. “Shouldn't we stay under cover as long as we can? Six people on horses won't go unnoticed.” They kept their mounts at a steady walk.

“Not many to notice us, lad,” Master al'Thor replied, “as long as we stay away from the North Road. Most farms have been abandoned, close by to the woods. Anyway, nobody travels alone these days, not far from their own doorstep. Ten people together wouldn't be noticed twice nowadays, though mostly folk travel by wagon, if at all.”

“It'll take us most of daylight to reach Watch Hill as it is,” Master Cauthon said, “without trying to cover the distance through the woods. Would be a little faster along the road, but more chance of meeting Whitecloaks, too. More chance somebody might turn us in for the rewards.”

Tam nodded. “But we have friends up this way, too. We figure to stop at Jac al'Seen's farm about midday to breathe the horses and stretch our legs. We will make it to Watch Hill while there's still light enough to see.”

“There will be enough light,” Perrin said absently; there was always light enough for him. He twisted in his saddle to peer back at the farmhouses. Abandoned, but not burned, not ransacked that he could make out. Curtains hung at the windows still. Unbroken windows. Trollocs liked smashing things, and empty houses were an invitation. Weeds stood tall among the barley and oats, but the fields had not been trampled. “Have Trollocs attacked Emond's Field itself?”

“No, they have not,” Master Cauthon said in a thankful tone. “They'd have no easy time if they did, mind. People learned to keep a sharp eye out Winternight before last. There's a bow beside every door, and spears and the like. Besides, the Whitecloaks patrol down to Emond's Field every few days. Much as I hate to admit it, they do keep the Trollocs back.”

Perrin shook his head. “Do you have any idea how many Trollocs there are?”

“One’s too many,” Abell grunted.

“Maybe two hundred,” Tam said. “Maybe more. Probably more.” Master Cauthon looked surprised. “Think on it, Abell. I don’t know how many the Whitecloaks have killed, but the Warders claim they and the Aes Sedai have finished off nearly fifty, and two Fades. It hasn’t lessened the number of burnings we hear about. I think it has to be more, but you figure it out for yourself.” The other man nodded unhappily.

“Then why haven’t they attacked Emond’s Field?” Perrin asked. “If two or three hundred came in the night, they could likely burn the whole village and be gone before the Whitecloaks up at Watch Hill even heard about it. Still easier for them to hit Deven Ride. You said the Whitecloaks don’t go down that far.”

“Luck,” Abell muttered, but he sounded troubled. “That’s what it is. We’ve been lucky. What else could it be? What are you getting at, boy?”

“What he’s getting at,” Faile said, closing up beside them, “is that there must be a reason.” Swallow was enough taller than the Two Rivers horses to let her look Tam and Abell in the eye, and she made it a firm look. “I have seen the aftermath of Trolloc raids in Saldaea. They despoil what they do not burn, kill or carry off people and farm animals, whoever and whatever is not protected. Entire villages have disappeared in bad years. They seek wherever is weakest, wherever they can kill the most. My father—” She bit it off, drew a deep breath, and went on. “Perrin has seen what you should have.” She flashed him a proud smile. “If the Trollocs have not attacked your villages, they have a reason.”

“I have thought of that,” Tam said quietly, “but I can’t think why. Until we know, luck is as good an answer as any.”

“Perhaps,” Verin said, joining them, “it is a lure.” Tomas still hung back a little, dark eyes searching the country they rode through as relentlessly as any Aiel’s. The Warder was watching the sky, too; there was always the chance of a raven. Barely pausing, Verin’s gaze brushed across Perrin to the two older men. “News of continued trouble, news of Trollocs, will draw eyes to the Two Rivers. Andor will surely send soldiers, and perhaps other lands as well, for Trollocs this far south. That is if the Children are allowing any news out, of course. I surmise Queen Morgase’s

Guards would be little happier to find so many Whitecloaks than they would to find Trollocs.”

“War,” Abell muttered. “What we have is bad enough, but you are talking war.”

“It might be so,” Verin said complacently. “It might be.” Frowning in a preoccupied manner, she dug a steel-nibbed pen and a small cloth-bound book from her pouch, and opened a little leather case at her belt that held an ink bottle and sandshaker. Wiping the pen absentmindedly on her sleeve, she began jotting in the book despite the awkwardness of writing while riding. She seemed completely oblivious of any unease she might have caused. Perhaps she really was.

Master Cauthon kept murmuring “War,” wonderingly, under his breath, and Faile put a comforting hand on Perrin’s arm, her eyes sad.

Master al’Thor only grunted; he had been in a war, so Perrin had heard, though not where or how, exactly. Just somewhere outside the Two Rivers, where he had gone as a young man, returning years later with a wife and a child, Rand. Few Two Rivers folk ever left. Perrin doubted if any of them really knew what a war was, except by what they heard from peddlers, or merchants and their guards and wagon drivers. He knew, though. He had seen war, on Toman Head. Abell was right. What they had was bad enough, but it did not come near war.

He held his peace. Maybe Verin was right. And maybe she just wanted to stop them speculating. If Trollocs harrying the Two Rivers were bait for a trap, it had to be a trap for Rand, and the Aes Sedai had to know it. That was one of the problems with Aes Sedai; they could hand you “if”s and “might”s until you were sure they had told you flat out what they had only suggested. Well, if the Trollocs—or whoever sent them, rather; one of the Forsaken, maybe?—thought to trap Rand, they would have to settle for Perrin instead—a simple blacksmith instead of the Dragon Reborn—and he did not mean to walk into any traps.

They rode on silently through the morning. In this region farms were scattered, with sometimes a mile or more between. Every last one lay abandoned, fields choked with weeds, barn doors swinging in any errant breeze. Only one had been burned, and of that nothing stood except the chimneys, soot-black fingers rising from ashes. The people who had died there—Ayellins, cousins of those who lived in Emond’s Field—had been buried near the pear trees beyond the house. Those few who had been found. Abell had to be pressed to talk about it, and Tam would not. They seemed to think it would upset him. He knew what Trollocs ate. Anything that was meat. He stroked his axe absently until Faile took his hand. For some reason she was the one who seemed disturbed. He had thought she knew more of Trollocs than that.

The Aiel managed to stay out of sight even between copses, except when they wanted to be seen. When Tam began angling eastward, Gaul and the two Maidens shifted with them.

As Master Cauthon had predicted, the al'Seen farm came in sight with the sun still shy of its full height. There was not another farm in view, though a few widely separated gray plumes of chimney smoke rose both north and east. Why were they hanging on, isolated like this? If Trollocs came, their only hope was Whitecloaks chancing to be near at the same time.

While the rambling farmhouse was still small in the distance, Tam reined in and waved the Aiel to join them, suggesting they find a place to wait until the rest of them left the farm. "They won't talk about Abell or me," he said, "but you three will set tongues wagging with the best will in the world."

That was putting it mildly, with their odd clothes and their spears, and two of them women. A rabbit apiece dangled beside their quivers, though Perrin could not see how they had found time to hunt while keeping ahead of the horses. They seemed less tired than the horses, for that matter.

"Well enough," Gaul said. "I will find a place to eat my own meal, and watch for your going." He turned and loped away immediately. Bain and Chiad exchanged glances. After a moment Chiad shrugged, and they followed.

"Aren't they together?" Mat's father asked, scratching his head.

"It is a long story," Perrin said. It was better than telling him Chiad and Gaul might decide to kill each other over a feud. He hoped the water oath held. He had to remember to ask Gaul what a water oath was.

The al'Seen farm was just about as big as farms went in the Two Rivers, with three tall barns and five tabac curing sheds. The stone-walled cote, full of black-faced sheep, spread as wide as some pastures, and rail-fenced yards kept white-spotted milk cows separate from black beef cattle. Pigs grunted contentedly in their wallow, chickens wandered everywhere, and there were white geese on a good-sized pond.

The first odd thing Perrin noticed was the boys on the thatched roofs of the house and barns, eight or nine of them, with bows and quivers. They shouted down as soon as they saw the riders, and women hustled children inside before shading their eyes to see who was coming. Men gathered in the farmyard, some with bows, others with pitchforks and bushhooks held like weapons. Too many people. Far too many, even for a farm as big as this. He looked a question at Master al'Thor.

"Jac took in his cousin Wit's people," Tam explained, "because Wit's farm was too close to the Westwood. And Flann Lewin's people after their farm was attacked. Whitecloaks drove the Trollocs off before more than his barns were burned, but Flann decided it was time to go. Jac is a good man."

As they rode into the farmyard, and Tam and Abell were recognized, men and women crowded around with smiles and a babble of welcome while they dismounted. Seeing that, children burst out of the house, followed by the women who had been minding them and others, fresh from the kitchen, wiping hands on aprons. Every generation was represented, from white-haired Astelle al'Seen, bent-backed but using her stick to thump people out of her way more than to walk with, down to a swaddled infant in the arms of a more than stout young woman with a bright smile.

Perrin looked past the stout, smiling woman; then his head whipped back. When he had left the Two Rivers, Laila Dearn had been a slim girl who could dance any three boys into the ground. Only the smile and the eyes were the same. He shivered. There had been a time when he had dreamed of marrying Laila, and she had returned the feeling somewhat. The truth was, she had held on to it longer than he had. Luckily, she was too entranced with her baby and the even wider fellow by her side to pay much attention to him. Perrin recognized the man with her, too. Natley Lewin. So Laila was a Lewin now. Odd. Nat never could dance. Thanking the Light for his escape, Perrin looked around for Faile.

He found her idly flipping Swallow's reins while the mare nuzzled her shoulder. She was too busy smiling admiringly at Wil al'Seen, a cousin from Deven Ride way, to notice her horse, though, and Wil was smiling back. A good-looking boy, Wil. Well, he was a year older than Perrin, but too good-looking not to appear boyish. When Wil came down to Emond's Field for dances, the girls all used to stare at him and sigh. Just the way Faile was now. True, she was not sighing, but her smile was decidedly approving.

Perrin went over and put an arm around her, resting his other hand on his axe. “How are you, Wil?” he asked, smiling for all he was worth. No point in letting Faile think he was jealous. Not that he was.

“Fine, Perrin.” Wil’s eyes slid away from his and bounced off the axe, a sickly expression oozing over his face. “Just fine.” Avoiding looking at Faile again, he hurried off to join the crowd around Verin.

Faile looked up at Perrin, pursing her lips, then took his beard with one hand and gently shook his head. “Perrin, Perrin, Perrin,” she murmured softly.

He was not sure what she meant, but he thought it wiser not to ask. She looked as if she did not know herself whether she was angry or—could it possibly be amused? Best not to make her decide.

Wil was not the only one to look askance at his eyes, of course. It seemed that everyone, young or old, male or female, gave a start the first time they met his gaze. Old Mistress al’Seen poked him with her stick, and her dark old eyes widened in surprise when he grunted. Maybe she thought he was not real. Nobody said anything, though.

Soon enough the horses had been led off to one of the barns—Tomas took his gray himself; the animal did not appear to want anyone else to touch the reins—and everybody except the boys on the rooftops had crowded into the house, just about filling it. Adults lined the front room two deep, Lewins and al’Seens interspersed in no particular order or rank, children in their mothers’ arms or relegated to peering through the legs of grown-ups packing the doorways to peer in.

Strong tea and high-backed, rush-bottomed chairs were provided for the newcomers, though Verin and Faile got embroidered cushions. There was considerable excitement over Verin, and Tomas, and Faile. Murmurs filled the room like a gabble of geese, and everyone stared at those three as though they wore crowns, or might do tricks any moment. Strangers were always a curiosity in the Two Rivers. Tomas’s sword drew especial comment, in near whispers that Perrin heard easily. Swords were not common here, or had not been before the Whitecloaks came. Some thought Tomas was a Whitecloak, others a lord. One boy little more than waist-high mentioned Warders before his elders laughed him down.

As soon as the guests were settled, Jac al’Seen planted himself in front of the wide stone fireplace, a stocky, square-shouldered man with less hair than Master al’Vere, and that just as gray. A clock ticked on the mantel behind his head between two large silver goblets, evidence of his success as a farmer. The babble quieted when he raised a hand, though his cousin Wit, a near twin except for no hair at all, and Flann Lewin, a gnarled, gray-headed beanpole, both shushed their own folk anyway.

"Mistress Mathwin, Lady Faile," Jac said, bowing awkwardly to each, "You are welcome here, for as long as you wish. I have to caution you, though. You know the trouble we have in the countryside. Best for you if you go straightway to Emond's Field, or Watch Hill, and stay there. They are too big to be troubled. I would advise you to leave the Two Rivers altogether, but I understand the Children of the Light aren't letting anyone cross the Taren. I don't know why, but there it is."

"But there are so many fine stories in the country," Verin said, blinking mildly. "I would miss them all if I remained in a village." Without lying once, she managed to give the impression that she had come to the Two Rivers in search of old stories, the same as Moiraine had done, what seemed so long ago. Her Great Serpent ring lay in her belt pouch, though Perrin doubted that any of these people would know what it meant.

Elisa al'Seen smoothed her white apron and smiled gravely at Verin. Though her hair had less gray than her husband's, she looked older than Verin, her lined face motherly. Very likely she thought she was. "It is an honor to have a real scholar under our roof, yet Jac is right," she said firmly. "You truly are welcome to stay here, but when you leave, you must go immediately to a village. Traveling about isn't safe. The same goes for you, my Lady," she added to Faile. "Trollocs are not something two women should face with only a handful of men for protection."

"I will think on it," Faile said calmly. "I thank you for your consideration." She sipped her tea, as unconcerned as Verin, who had begun writing in her small book again, only looking up to smile at Elisa and murmur, "There are so many stories in the countryside." Faile accepted a butter cookie from a young al'Seen girl, who curtsied and blushed furiously, all the while staring at Faile in wide-eyed admiration.

Perrin grinned to himself. In her green riding silks, they all took Faile for nobly born, and he had to admit she carried it off beautifully. When she wanted to. The girl might not have been so admiring had she seen her in one of her tempers, when her tongue could flay the hide off a wagon driver.

Mistress al'Seen turned to her husband, shaking her head; Faile and Verin were not going to be convinced. Jac looked at Tomas. "Can you convince them?”

“I go where she tells me,” Tomas replied. Sitting there with a teacup in his hand, the Warder still seemed on the point of drawing his sword.

Master al’Seen sighed and shifted his attention. “Perrin, most of us have met you one time or another, down to Emond’s Field. We know you, after a fashion. At least, we knew you before you ran off last year. We’ve heard some troubling things, but I suppose Tam and Abell wouldn’t be with you if they were true.”

Flann’s wife, Adine, a plump woman with a self-contented eye, sniffed sharply. “I’ve heard some things about Tam and Abell, too. And about their boys, running off with Aes Sedai. With Aes Sedai! A dozen of them! You all remember how Emond’s Field was burned to the ground. The Light knows what they could have got up to. I heard tell they kidnapped the al’Vere girl.” Flann shook his head resignedly and gave Jac an apologetic look.

“If you believe that,” Wit said wryly, “you’ll believe anything. I talked to Marin al’Vere two weeks ago, and she said her girl went off on her own hook. And there was only one Aes Sedai.”

“What are you suggesting, Adine?” Elisa al’Seen put her fists on her hips. “Come out with it.” There was more than a hint of “I dare you” in her voice.

“I didn’t say I believed it,” Adine protested stoutly, “just that I heard it. There are questions to be asked. The Children didn’t latch on to those three by pulling names out of a cap.”

“If you listen for a change,” Elisa said firmly, “you might hear an answer or two.” Adine set herself to rearranging her skirts, but though she muttered to herself, she held her tongue otherwise.

“Does anyone else have anything to say?” Jac asked with barely concealed impatience. When no one spoke, he went on. “Perrin, no one here believes you a Darkfriend, any more than we believe Tam or Abell is.” He shot Adine a hard look, and Flann put a hand on his wife’s shoulder; she kept silent, but her lips writhed with what she did not say. Jac muttered to himself before continuing. “Even so, Perrin, I think we have a right to hear why the Whitecloaks are saying what they are. They accuse you and Mat Cauthon and Rand al’Thor of being Darkfriends. Why?”

Faile opened her mouth angrily, but Perrin waved her to silence. Her obedience surprised him so, he stared at her a moment before speaking. Maybe she *was* ill. “Whitecloaks don’t need much, Master al’Seen. If you don’t bow and scrape and walk wide of them, you must be a Darkfriend. If you don’t say what they want, think what they want, you must be a Darkfriend. I don’t know why they think Rand and Mat are.” That was the simple truth. If the Whitecloaks knew Rand was the Dragon Reborn, that would be enough for them, but there was no way they could know. Mat confused him entirely. It had to be Fain’s work. “Myself, I killed some of them.” For a wonder, the gasps that rounded the room did not make him cringe inside, and neither did the thought of what he had done. “They killed a friend of mine and would have killed me. I didn’t see my way clear to let them. That’s the short of it.”

“I can see where you wouldn’t,” Jac said slowly. Even with Trollocs about, Two Rivers people were not used to killing. Some years ago a woman had murdered her husband because she wanted another man to marry her; that was the last time anybody had died of violence in the Two Rivers that Perrin knew. Until the Trollocs.

“The Children of the Light,” Verin said, “are very good at one thing. Making people who have been neighbors all their lives suspicious of each other.” All the farm folk looked at her, some nodding after a moment.

“They have a man with them, I hear,” Perrin said. “Padan Fain. The peddler.”

“I’ve heard,” Jac said. “I hear he calls himself by some other name nowadays.”

Perrin nodded. “Ordeith. But Fain or Ordeith, he *is* a Darkfriend. He admitted as much, admitted to bringing the Trollocs on Winternight last year. And he rides with the Whitecloaks.”

“That’s very easy for you to claim,” Adine Lewin said sharply. “You can name anybody Darkfriend.”

“So who do you believe?” Tomas said. “Those who came a few weeks ago, arrested people you know, and burned their farms? Or a young man who grew up right here?”

“I am no Darkfriend, Master al’Seen,” Perrin said, “but if you want me to go, I will.”

“No,” Elisa said quickly, shooting her husband a meaningful glance. And Adine a freezing one that made her swallow what she had been about to say. “No. You are welcome to stay here as long as you like.” Jac hesitated, then nodded agreement. She came over and looked down at Perrin, resting her hands on his shoulders. “You have our sympathy,” she said softly. “Your father was a good man. Your mother was my friend, and a fine woman. I know she’d want you stay with us, Perrin. The Children seldom come this way, and if they do, the boys on the roof will give us plenty of warning to get you into the attic. You will be safe here.”

She meant it. She actually meant it. And when Perrin looked at Master al’Seen, he nodded again. “Thank you,” Perrin said, his throat tight. “But I have . . . things to do. Things I have to take care of.”

She sighed, patting him gently. “Of course. Just you be sure those things don’t get you . . . hurt. Well, at least I can send you off with a full belly.”

There were not enough tables in the house to seat everyone for the midday meal, so bowls of lamb stew were handed out with chunks of crusty bread and admonitions not to drip, and everyone ate where they sat or stood. Before they were done eating, a lanky boy with his wrists sticking out of his sleeves and a bow taller than he was came bounding in. Perrin thought he was Win Lewin, but he could not be sure; boys grew fast at that age. “It’s Lord Luc,” the skinny boy exclaimed excitedly. “Lord Luc is coming.”

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CHAPTER 33

A New Weave in the Pattern

The lord himself followed almost on the boy’s heels, a tall, broad-shouldered man in his middle years, with a hard, angular face and dark reddish hair white-winged at the temples. There was an arrogant cast to his dark blue eyes, and he certainly looked every inch a nobleman, in a finely cut green coat discreetly embroidered in golden scrolls down the sleeves and gauntlets worked in thread-of-gold. Gold-work wrapped his sword scabbard, as well, and banded the tops of his polished boots. Somehow he made the simple act of striding in through the doorway grand. Perrin despised him on sight.

All the al’Seens and Lewins rushed in a mass to greet the lord, men, women and children crowding around him with smiles and bows and curtsies, babbling all over one another about the honor of his presence, the great honor of a visit from a Hunter for the Horn. They seemed most excited about that. A lord under the same roof might be exciting, but one of those sworn to search for the legendary Horn of Valere—that was the stuff of stories. Perrin did not think he had ever seen Two Rivers folk fawn over anybody, but these came close.

This Lord Luc took it as clearly no more than his due, perhaps less. And tiresome to put up with, at that. The farm folk did not seem to see, or maybe they just did not recognize that slightly weary expression, the slightly condescending smile. Maybe they simply thought that was how lords behaved. True enough, a good many did, but it irked Perrin to watch these people—his people—put up with it.

As the hubbub began to diminish, Jac and Elisa presented their other guests—all but Tam and Abell, who had already met him—to Lord Luc of Chiendelna, saying that he was advising them in ways to defend themselves against the Trollocs, that he encouraged them to stand up to the Whitecloaks, stand up for themselves. Approving murmurs of agreement came from the rest of the room. If the Two Rivers had been choosing a king, Lord Luc would have had the al'Seens and Lewins behind him entire. He knew it, too. His apparent bored complacency did not last long, though.

At his first glimpse of Verin's smooth-cheeked face, Luc stiffened slightly, eyes flickering to her hands so quickly many would not have noticed. He very nearly dropped his embroidered gloves. Plump and plainly dressed, she might have been another farm wife, but clearly he knew an Aes Sedai's ageless face, when he saw one. He was not particularly happy to see one here. The corner of his left eye twitched as he listened to Mistress al'Seen name "Mistress Mathwin" "a scholar from outside."

Verin smiled at him as if half-asleep. "A pleasure," she murmured. "House Chiendelna. Where is that? It has a Borderland sound."

"Nothing so grand," Luc replied quickly, giving her a wary, fractional bow. "Murandy, actually. A minor house, but old." He seemed uneasy about taking his eyes from her for the rest of the introductions.

Tomas he barely glanced at. He had to know him for "Mistress Mathwin's" Warder, yet dismissed him out of hand as clearly as if he had shouted it. That was purely strange. However good Luc was with that sword, no one was good enough to dismiss a Warder. Arrogance. The fellow had enough for ten men. He proved it with Faile so far as Perrin was concerned.

The smile Luc offered her was certainly more than self-assured; it was also familiar and decidedly warm. In fact, it was too admiring and too warm by half. He took her hand in both of his to bow over, and peered into her eyes as if trying to see through the back of her head. For an instant Perrin thought she was about to look over at him, but instead she returned the lord's stare with a red-cheeked pretense to coolness and a slight bow of her head.

"I, too, am a Hunter for the Horn, my Lord," she said, sounding a touch breathless. "Do you think to find it here?"

Luc blinked and released her hand. "Perhaps, my Lady. Who can say where the Horn might be?" Faile looked a little surprised—maybe disappointed—at his sudden loss of interest.

Perrin kept his expression neutral. If she wanted to smile at Wil al'Seen and blush at fool lords, she could. She could make an idiot of herself any way she wanted, gawking at every man who came along. So Luc wanted to know where the Horn of Valere was? It was hidden away in the White Tower, that was where. He was tempted to tell the man, just to make him grind his teeth in frustration.

If Luc had been surprised to find out who his other fellows in the al'Seen house were, his reaction to Perrin was peculiar to say the least. He gave a start at the sight of Perrin's face; shock flashed in his eyes. It was all gone in a moment, masked behind lordly haughtiness, except for a wild fluttering at the corner of one eye. The trouble was, it made no sense. It was not his yellow eyes that took Luc aback; he was sure of that. More as if the fellow knew him, somehow, and was surprised to see him here, but he had never met this Luc before in his life. More than that, he would have bet that Luc was afraid of him. No sense at all.

"Lord Luc is the one who suggested the boys go up on the rooftops," Jac said. "No Trolloc will get close without those lads giving warning."

"How much warning?" Perrin said dryly. This was an example of the great Lord Luc's advice? "Trollocs see like cats in the dark. They'll be on top of you, kicking in the doors, before your boys raise a shout."

"We do what we can," Flann barked. "Stop trying to frighten us. There are children listening. Lord Luc at least offers helpful suggestions. He was at my place the day before the Trollocs came, seeing I had everybody placed properly. Blood and ashes! If not for him, the Trollocs would have killed us all."

Luc did not seem to hear the praise offered him. He was watching Perrin cautiously while fussing with his gauntlets, tucking them behind the golden wolf's-head buckle of his sword belt. Faile was watching him, too, with a slight frown. He ignored her.

"I thought it was Whitecloaks saved you, Master Lewin. I thought a Whitecloak patrol arrived in the nick of time and drove the Trollocs off."

"Well, they did." Flann scrubbed a hand through his gray hair. "But Lord Luc. . . . If the Whitecloaks hadn't come, we could have. . . . At least he doesn't try to frighten us," he muttered.

"So he doesn't frighten you," Perrin said. "Trollocs frighten me. And the Whitecloaks keep the Trollocs back for you. When they can."

"You want to credit the Whitecloaks?" Luc fixed Perrin with a cold stare, as if pouncing on a weakness. "Who do you think is responsible for the Dragon's Fang scribbled on people's doors? Oh, their hands never hold charcoal, but they are behind it. They stalk into these good people's homes, asking questions and demanding answers as if it were their own roof overhead. I say these people are their own masters, not dogs for the Whitecloaks to call to heel. Let them patrol the countryside—well and good—but meet them at the door and tell them whose land they are on. That is what I say. If you want to be a Whitecloak dog, be so, but do not begrudge these good people their freedom."

Perrin met Luc's eyes stare for stare. "I hold no affection for Whitecloaks. They want to hang me, or hadn't you heard?"

The tall lord blinked as though he had not, or maybe had forgotten in his eagerness to spring. "Exactly what is it you do propose, then?"

Perrin turned his back on the man and went to stand in front of the fireplace. He did not mean to argue with Luc. Let everyone listen. They were certainly all looking at him. He would say what he thought and be done with it. "You have to depend on the Whitecloaks, have to hope they'll keep the Trollocs down, hope they'll come in time if the Trollocs attack. Why? Because every man tries to hang on to his farm, if he can, or to stay as close to it as possible if he can't. You're in a hundred little clusters, like grapes ripe for picking. As long as you are, as long as you have to pray the Whitecloaks can keep the Trollocs from stomping you into wine, you've no choice but to let them ask any questions they want, demand any answers they want. You have to stand by and watch innocent people hauled off. Or does anyone here think Haral and Alsbet Luhhan are Darkfriends? Natti Cauthon? Bodewhin and Eldrin?" Abell's stare around the room dared anyone to hint at a yes, but there was no need. Even Adine Lewin's attention was on Perrin. Luc frowned at him between studying the reactions of the people crowding the room.

"I know they shouldn't have arrested Natti and Alsbet and all," Wit said, "but that's over." He rubbed a hand across his bald head, and gave Abell a troubled look. "Except for getting them to let everybody go, I mean. They haven't arrested anyone since that I've heard."

"You think that means it's done?" Perrin said. "Do you really think they'll be satisfied with the Cauthons and the Luhhans? With two farms burned? Which of you will be next? Maybe because you said the wrong thing, or just to make an example. It could be Whitecloaks putting a torch to this house instead of Trollocs. Or maybe it'll be the Dragon's Fang scrawled on your door some night. There are always folk who believe that kind of thing." A number of eyes darted to Adine, who shifted her feet and hunched her shoulders. "Even if all it means is having to tug your forelock to every

Whitecloak who comes along, do you want to live that way? Your children? You're at the mercy of the Trollocs, the mercy of the Whitecloaks, and the mercy of anybody with a grudge. As long as one has a hold on you, all three do. You're hiding in the cellar, hoping one rabid dog will protect you from another, hoping the rats don't sneak out in the dark and bite you."

Jac exchanged worried looks with Flann and Wit, with the other men in the room, then said slowly, "If you think we're doing wrong, what is it you suggest?"

Perrin was not expecting the question—he had been sure they would get angry—but he went right on telling them what he thought. "Gather your people. Gather your sheep and your cows, your chickens, everything. Gather them up and take them where they might be safe. Go to Emond's Field. Or Watch Hill, since it's closer, though that will put you right under the Whitecloaks' eyes. As long as it's twenty people here and fifty there, you are game for Trolloc taking. If there are hundreds of you together, you have a chance, and one that doesn't depend on bowing your necks for the Whitecloaks." That brought the explosion he expected.

"Abandon my farm completely!" Flann shouted right on top of Wit's "You're mad!" Words poured out on top of one another, from them, and from brothers and cousins.

"Go off to Emond's Field? I'm too far away to do more than check the fields every day right now!"

"The weeds will take everything!"

"I don't know how I'm going to harvest as it is!"

". . . if the rains come . . . !"

". . . trying to rebuild . . . !"

". . . tabac will rot . . . !"

". . . have to leave the clip . . . !"

Perrin's fist smacking the lintel of the fireplace cut them short. "I haven't seen a field trampled or fired, or a house or barn burned, unless there were people there. It's people the Trollocs come for. And if they burn it anyway? A new crop can be planted. Stone and mortar and wood can be rebuilt. Can you rebuild that?" He pointed at Laila's baby, and she clutched the child to her breast, glaring at him as though he had threatened the babe himself. The looks she gave her husband and Flann were frightened, though. An uneasy murmur rose.

"Leave," Jac muttered, shaking his head. "I don't know, Perrin."

“It is your choice, Master al’Seen. The land will still be here when you come back. Trollocs can’t carry that off. Think whether the same can be said for your family.”

The murmur grew to a buzz. A number of women were confronting their husbands, mostly those with a child or two in tow. None of the men seemed to be arguing.

“An interesting plan,” Luc said, studying Perrin. From his face there was no telling whether he approved of it. “I shall watch to see how it turns out. And now, Master al’Seen, I must be on my way. I only stopped to see how you were doing.” Jac and Elisa saw him to the door, but the others were too busy with their own discussions to pay much attention. Luc left tight-mouthed. Perrin had the feeling his departures were usually as grand as his arrivals.

Jac came straight from the door to Perrin. “It’s a bold plan you have. I will admit I’m not keen on abandoning my farm, but you talk sense. I don’t know what the Children will make of it, though. They seem a suspicious lot, to me. They might think we’re all plotting something against them if we gather together.”

“Let them think it,” Perrin said. “A village full of people can take Luc’s advice and tell them to be about their business elsewhere. Or do you think it’s better to stay vulnerable just to hold the Whitecloaks’ goodwill, such as it is?”

“No. No, I see your point. You’ve convinced me. And everybody else, too, it seems.”

It did appear to be true. The murmur of discussion was dying down, but only because everyone looked to be in agreement. Even Adine, who was marshaling her daughters with loud orders for packing immediately. She actually gave Perrin a grudgingly approving nod.

“When do you mean to go?” Perrin asked Jac.

“As soon as I can get everybody ready. We can make Jon Gaelin’s place on the North Road before sunset. I’ll tell Jon what you say, and everybody down to Emond’s Field. Better there than Watch Hill. If we mean to be out from under the Whitecloaks’ thumb as well as the Trollocs’, best not to sit under their noses.” Jac scratched his narrow fringe of hair with one finger. “Perrin, I don’t think the Children would actually hurt Natti Cauthon and the girls, or the Luhhans, but it worries me. If they do think we’re plotting, who’s to say?”

“I mean to get them free as soon as I can, Master al’Seen. And anybody else the Whitecloaks arrest, for that matter.”

“A bold plan,” Jac repeated. “Well, I had better get people moving if I’m going to have us to Jon’s by sundown. Go with the Light, Perrin.”

“A very bold plan,” Verin said, coming up as Master al’Seen hurried off calling orders for wagons to be hauled out and people to pack what they could carry. She studied Perrin interestedly, head tilted to one side, but no less so than Faile, at her side. Faile looked as though she had never seen him before.

“I don’t know why everybody keeps calling it that,” he said. “A plan, I mean. That Luc was talking nonsense. Defying Whitecloaks in the door. Boys on the roof to watch for Trollocs. A couple of open gates to disaster. All I did was point it out. They should have been doing this from the start. That man. . . .” He stopped himself from saying Luc irritated him. Not with Faile there. She might misunderstand.

“Of course,” Verin said smoothly. “I have not had the opportunity to see it work before this. Or perhaps I have and did not know it.”

“What are you talking about? See what work?”

“Perrin, when we arrived these people were ready to hold on here at all costs. You gave them good sense and strong emotion, but do you think the same from me would have shifted them, or from Tam, or Abell? Of any of us, you should know how stubborn Two Rivers people can be. You have altered the course events would have followed in the Two Rivers without you. With a few words spoken in . . . irritation? *Ta’veren* truly do pull other people’s lives into their own pattern. Fascinating. I do hope I have an opportunity to observe Rand again.”

“Whatever it is,” Perrin muttered, “it’s to the good. The more people together in one place, the safer.”

“Of course. Rand does have the sword, I take it?”

He frowned, but there was no reason not to tell her. She knew about Rand, and she knew what Tear had to mean. “He does.”

“Watch yourself with Alanna, Perrin.”

“What?” The Aes Sedai’s quick changes of topic were beginning to confuse him. Especially when she started telling him to do what he had already thought of, and thought to keep secret from her. “Why?”

Verin’s face did not change, but her dark eyes were suddenly bird bright and sharp. “There are many . . . designs in the White Tower. Not all are malignant, by far, but sometimes it is difficult to say until it is too late. And even the most benevolent often allow for a few threads snapped in the weaving, a few reeds broken and discarded in making a basket. A *ta'veren* would make a useful reed in any number of possible plans." Just as suddenly she was looking a little confused by the bustle around her, more at home in a book or her own thoughts than in the real world. "Oh, my. Master al'Seen is not wasting any time, is he? I'll just see if he can spare someone to fetch our horses."

Faile shivered as the Brown sister moved away. "Sometimes Aes Sedai make me . . . uneasy," she murmured.

"Uneasy?" Perrin said. "Most of the time they scare me half to death."

She laughed softly and began playing with a button on his coat, peering at it intently. "Perrin, I . . . have . . . been a fool."

"What do you mean?" She glanced up at him—she was about to twist the button right off—and he hastily added, "You are one of the least foolish people I know." He clamped his teeth shut before he could add "most of the time," and was glad he had when she smiled.

"That is very nice of you to say, but I was." She patted the coat button and began adjusting his coat—which it did not need—and smoothing his lapels—which they did not need. "You were so silly," she said, speaking too fast, "just because that young man looked at me—really, he is much too boyish; not at all like you—that I thought I would make you jealous—just a little—by pretending—just pretending—to be attracted to Lord Luc. I should not have done it. Will you forgive me?"

He tried to sort through the jumbled words. It was good she thought Wil was boyish—if he tried to grow a beard it would probably be straggly—but she had not mentioned the way she returned Wil's look. And if she had been pretending to be attracted to Luc, why had she blushed that way? "Of course I forgive you," he said. A dangerous light appeared in her eyes. "I mean, there's nothing to forgive." If anything, the light sparkled hotter. What did she want him to say? "Will you forgive me? When I was trying to chase you away, I said things I shouldn't have. Will you forgive me that?"

"You *said* some things that need forgiving?" she said sweetly, and he knew he was in trouble. "I cannot think what, but I will take it into consideration."

Into consideration? She sounded very much the noblewoman there; maybe her father worked for some lord, so she could study the way ladies talked. He had no idea what she meant. Whenever he found out would be too soon, he was certain.

It was a relief to climb back into Stepper’s saddle amid the confusion of wagon teams being hitched and people arguing over what they could or could not take and children chasing down chickens and geese and tying their feet for loading. Boys were already driving the cattle eastward, and others herding the sheep out of the cote.

Faile made no reference to what had been said inside. Indeed, she smiled at him, and compared the keeping of sheep here to in Saldaea, and when one of the girls brought her a bunch of small red flowers, heartsblush, she tried to thread some of them into his beard, laughing at his efforts to stop her. In short, she had him jumping out of his skin. He needed another talk with Master Cauthon.

“Go with the Light,” Master al’Seen told him again just as they were ready to ride out, “and look after the boys.”

Four of the young men had decided to go with them, on rough-coated horses not nearly as good as those Tam and Abell rode. Perrin was not sure why he was the one who was supposed to look after them. They were all older than he, if not by much. Wil al’Seen was one, with his cousin Ban, one of Jac’s sons, who had gotten all the nose in that family, and a pair of the Lewins, Tell and Dannil, who looked so much like Flann that they could have been his sons instead of his nephews. Perrin had tried to talk them out of it, especially when they all made it plain that they wanted to help rescue the Cauthons and the Luhhans from the Whitecloaks. They seemed to think it was a matter of riding into the Children’s camp and demanding everybody’s return. Casting down our defiance, Tell called it, which nearly made Perrin’s hair stand on end. Too many gleeman’s tales. Too much listening to fools like Luc. He suspected that Wil had another reason, though he tried to pretend Faile did not exist, but the others were bad enough.

No one else made any objections. Tam and Abell only seemed concerned that they all knew how to use the bows they carried and could stay on a horse, and Verin merely observed, making notes in her little book. Tomas looked amused, and Faile busied herself plaiting a crown from the heartsblush, which turned out to be for Perrin. Sighing, he draped the flowers across the pommel of his saddle. “I will take care of them the best I can, Master al’Seen,” he promised.

A mile from the al'Seen farm, he thought he might lose one or two right there, when Gaul and Bain and Chiad suddenly appeared out of a thicket, loping to join them. Lose them to Aiel spears. Wil and his friends took one look at the Aiel and hastily began nocking arrows; without breaking stride the Aiel had spears ready to cast and their faces veiled. It took some minutes to straighten out. Gaul and the two Maidens seemed to think it a huge joke when they understood, laughing uproariously, and that unsettled the Lewins and al'Seens as much as finding out that the three were Aiel, and two of them women. Wil essayed a smile at Bain and Chiad, and they exchanged looks and brief nods. Perrin did not know what was going on there, but he decided to let it alone unless Wil looked to get his throat cut. Time enough to stop it if one of the Aiel women actually took her knife out. Might teach Wil a thing or two about smiling.

He intended that they should push on to Watch Hill as quickly as they could, but a mile or so north of the al'Seen place he saw one of the farms that produced those scattered plumes of chimney smoke. Tam was keeping them far enough away that the people around the farmhouse were only shapes. Except to Perrin's eyes; he could see children in the yard. And Jac al'Seen was the nearest neighbor. Had been, until today. He hesitated, then reined Stepper toward the farm. Not that it was likely to do any good, but he had to try.

"What are you doing?" Tam asked, frowning.

"Giving them the same advice I gave Master al'Seen. It won't take a minute."

Tam nodded, and the others turned with him. Verin was studying Perrin thoughtfully. The Aiel peeled away short of the farm to wait to the north, Gaul running a little apart from the Maidens.

Perrin did not know the Torfinns nor they him, yet to his surprise, once the excitement of strangers was past, the staring at Tomas and Verin and Faile, they listened and began hitching horses to two wagons and a pair of high-wheeled carts before he and the others rode on.

Three more times he stopped when their route took them near to farmhouses, once at a cluster of five close together. It was always the same. The people protested they could not just leave their farms, but each time he left behind a bustle of packing and a gathering of farm animals.

Something else happened, too. He could not stop Wil and his cousin, or the Lewins, from talking with the young men on the farms. Their party grew by thirteen, Torfinns and al'Dais, Ahans and Marwins, armed with bows and riding an ill-matched assortment of ponies and plow horses, all eager to rescue the prisoners from the Whitecloaks.

It was not as smooth as that, of course. Wil and the others from the al'Seen farm thought it unfair that he warned the newcomers about the Aiel, spoiling the fun they hoped to have seeing them jump. They jumped more than enough to suit Perrin, and the way they peered at every bush, much less every stand of trees, made it clear that they thought there must be more Aiel about no matter what he said. At first Wil tried lording it over the Torfinns and the rest on the grounds that he had been the first to join Perrin—one of the first, at least, he admitted when Ban and the Lewins glared at him—while they were latecomers.

Perrin put an end to it by dividing them into two groups of about the same size and putting Dannil and Ban each in charge of one, though there was some grumbling over that, too, in the beginning. The al'Dais thought the leaders should be chosen according to age—Bili al'Dai being the eldest by a year—while others put forward Hu Marwin as the best tracker, and Jaim Torfinn as the best shot, while Kenley Ahan had been to Watch Hill often before the Whitecloaks came and would know his way around the village. They all seemed to think it a lark. Tell's phrase about casting defiance was repeated more than once.

Finally Perrin rounded on them in cold anger, forcing everyone to halt in the grass between two copses. "This is not a game, and it isn't a Bel Tine dance. You do what you're told, or else go back home. I don't know what use you are anyway, and I've no intention of getting killed because you think you know what you are doing. Now line up and shut up. You sound like the Women's Circle meeting in a wardrobe."

They did it, stringing themselves out in two columns behind Ban and Dannil. Wil and Bili wore disgruntled frowns, but they held whatever objections they had. Faile gave Perrin an approving nod, and so did Tomas. Verin watched it all with a smooth, unreadable face, no doubt thinking she was seeing a *ta'veren* at work. Perrin saw no need to tell her he had just tried to think of what a Shienaran he knew, a soldier named Uno, would have said, though no doubt Uno would have put it in harsher words.

Farms began to appear more frequently as they approached Watch Hill, coming in clumps closer together until they ran on continuously the way they did near Emond's Field, a patchwork of hedged or stone-walled fields separated by narrow lanes, footways and wagon paths. Even with their pauses at the four farms, there was still some daylight left, still men working their crops, and boys driving sheep and cattle in from pasture for the night. No one would be leaving their animals out these days.

Tam suggested Perrin cease warning people, and he reluctantly agreed. They would all head for Watch Hill here, alerting the Whitecloaks. Twenty-odd people riding together by the back ways attracted enough eyes, though most people appeared too busy to do more than glance. It would have to be done sooner or later, though, and the sooner the better. So long as people remained in the countryside, needing Whitecloak protection, then the Whitecloaks had a foothold in the Two Rivers they might not want to give up.

Perrin kept a sharp eye out for any sign of Whitecloak patrols, but except for one dust cloud over toward the North Road, heading south, he saw none. After a time Tam suggested they dismount and lead their horses. Afoot there was less chance of being spotted, and the hedges and even the low stone walls shielded them a little.

Tam and Abell knew a thicket that gave a good view of the Whitecloak camp, a tangle of oak and sourgum and leatherleaf that covered three or four hides little more than a mile south and west of Watch Hill over an open stretch of ground. They entered from the south, hurrying. Perrin hoped no one had seen them go in, no one to wonder why they did not come out and comment on it.

“Stay here,” he told Wil and the other young men while they were tying their horses to branches. “Keep your bows handy, and be ready to run if you hear a shout. But don’t move unless you hear me shout. And if anybody makes any noise, I’ll pound his head like an anvil. We’re here to look, not pull the Whitecloaks down on us by tramping around like blind bulls.” Fingering their bows nervously, they nodded. Perhaps it was beginning to dawn on them just what they were doing. The Children of the Light might not take kindly to finding Two Rivers folk riding about in an armed bunch.

“Were you ever a soldier?” Faile asked quizzically in a low voice. “Some of my father’s . . . guards talk that way.”

“I’m a blacksmith.” Perrin laughed. “I’ve just heard soldiers talk. It seems to work, though.” Even Wil and Bili were peering about uneasily and hardly daring to move.

Creeping from tree to tree, he and Faile followed Tam and Abell to where the Aiel were already crouching near the thicket's north edge. Verin was there, too, and Tomas, of course. The brush made a thin screen of leaves, enough to hide them but no hindrance to observation.

The Whitecloak encampment stretched out at the foot of Watch Hill like a village itself. Hundreds of men, some armored, moved among long, straight rows of white tents, with lines of horses, five deep, staked out to east and west. Animals being unsaddled and curried indicated patrols finishing their day, while a double column of maybe a hundred mounted men, pristine and precise, trailed off toward the Waterwood at a brisk walk, lances all at the same angle. At intervals around the encampment white-cloaked guards marched up and down, lances shouldered like spears, burnished helmets flashing in the sinking sun.

A rumble came to Perrin's ears. Well to the west twenty horsemen appeared, galloping from the direction of Emond's Field, hurrying toward the tents. From the direction he and the others had come. A few minutes slower, and they would have been seen for sure. A horn sounded, and men began moving to the cook fires.

Off to one side lay a much smaller camp, its tents set haphazardly. Some sagged against their guy ropes. Whoever stayed there, most were gone now. Only a few horses flicking their tails against flies along a short picket rope indicated that anyone was there at all. Not Whitecloaks. The Children of the Light were too rigidly tidy for that camp.

Between the thicket and the two sets of tents was an expanse of grass and wildflowers. Very likely the local farmers used to use it for pasture. Not now, however, It was fairly flat ground. Whitecloaks galloping like that patrol could cover it in a minute.

Abell directed Perrin's attention to the large camp. "You see that tent near the middle, with a man standing watch at either end? Can you make it out?" Perrin nodded. The low sun was slanting sharp shadows eastward, but he could see well enough. "That's where Natti and the girls are. And the Luhhans. I've seen them come out and go in. One at a time, and always with a guard, even to the latrines."

"We have tried to sneak in at night three times," Tam said, "but they keep a tight watch over the perimeter of the camp. We barely got away the last time."

It would be like trying to stick your hand into an anthill without being stung. Perrin sat down at the base of a tall leatherleaf with his bow across his knees. “I want to think on this awhile. Master al’Thor, will you settle Wil and that lot down? See none of them takes it into his head to run for home. Like as not they’d ride straight for the North Road, not thinking, and we’d have half a hundred of those Whitecloaks over here to investigate. If any of them thought to bring food, you could see they get something to eat. If we have to run, we may spend the rest of the night in the saddle.”

Abruptly he realized he was giving orders, but when he tried to apologize, Tam grinned and said, “Perrin, you took charge back at Jac’s place. This isn’t the first time I’ve followed a younger man who could see what had to be done.”

“You are doing good, Perrin,” Abell said before the two older men slipped back into the trees.

Perplexed, Perrin scratched his beard. He had taken charge? Now that he thought of it, neither Tam nor Abell had really made a decision since leaving the al’Seen farm, only offered suggestions and left it to him. Neither had called him “lad” since then, either.

“Interesting,” Verin said. She had her small book out. He wished he could have a chance to read what she had written.

“You going to caution me about being foolish again?” he said.

Instead of answering, she said in a meditative voice, “It will be even more interesting to see what you do next. I cannot say you are shifting the world on its foundations, as Rand al’Thor is, but the Two Rivers is surely moving. I wonder if you have a clue as to where you are moving it.”

“I mean to free the Luhhans and the Cauthons,” he told her angrily. “That’s all!” Except for the Trollocs. He let his head drop back against the bole of the leatherleaf and closed his eyes. “All I’m doing is what I have to do. The Two Rivers will stay right where it always has.”

“Of course,” Verin said.

He heard her moving away, her and Tomas, slipper and boots alike soft on ground strewn with last year’s leaves. He opened his eyes. Faile was staring after the pair, and not best pleased.

“She will not leave you alone,” she muttered. The plaited crown of heartsblush he had left on his saddle dangled from her hand.

“Aes Sedai never do,” he told her.

She turned on him with a challenging look. “I suppose you mean to try bringing them out tonight?”

It had to be done now. Because he had been passing his warning about, and folks knew who had told them. Maybe the Whitecloaks would not hurt their prisoners. Maybe. He trusted Whitecloak mercy as far as he could throw a horse. He glanced at Gaul, who nodded.

“Tam al’Thor and Abell Cauthon move well for wetlanders, but these Whitecloaks are too stiff to see everything that moves in the dark, I think. I think they expect their enemies to come in numbers, and where they can be seen.”

Chiad turned amused gray eyes on the Aielman. “Do you mean to move like wind then, Stone Dog? It will be diverting to see a Stone Dog try to move lightly. When my spear-sister and I have rescued the prisoners, perhaps we will go back for you, if you are too old to find your own way.” Bain touched her arm, and she looked at the flame-haired woman in surprise. After a moment, she flushed slightly under her tan. Both women shifted their eyes to Faile, who was still watching Perrin, her head up and her arms crossed now.

He took a long breath. If he told her he did not want her to come, Bain and Chiad almost certainly would not, either. They were still making a point of being with her, not him. Maybe Faile was, too. Perhaps he and Gaul could do it alone, but he could not see how to make her stay if she did not want to. Faile being Faile, she would just as likely sneak after them. “You will stay close to me,” he said firmly. “I want to rescue prisoners, not leave another behind.”

Laughing, she dropped down beside him, snuggling her shoulder under his arm. “Staying close to you sounds a fine idea.” She flipped the crown of red flowers onto his head, and Bain chuckled.

He rolled his eyes up; he could just see the edge of the thing hanging over his forehead. He must look a fool. He left it there, though.

The sun slid down as slowly as a bead in honey. Abell brought some bread and cheese—over half those would-be heroes had not brought anything to eat after all—and they ate and waited. Night came, lit by a moon already high but obscured by scurrying clouds. Perrin waited. Lights vanished in the Whitecloak camp, and in Watch Hill, too, leaving a sprinkling of glowing windows across the otherwise dark mound, and he gathered Tam and Faile and the Aiel around him. Everyone’s face was clear, to him. Verin stood close enough to listen. Abell and Tomas were with the other Two Rivers folk, keeping them quiet.

He felt a little odd giving instructions, so kept them simple. Tam was to have everyone ready to ride the moment Perrin returned with the prisoners. The Whitecloaks would be after them as soon as they discovered what was up, so a place to hide was needed. Tam knew one, an empty farmhouse in the edge of the Westwood.

"Try not to kill anybody, if you can manage it," Perrin cautioned the Aiel. "The Whitecloaks will be hot enough at losing their prisoners. They'll set the sun afire if they lose men, too." Gaul and the Maidens nodded as if they looked forward to it. Strange people. They vanished into the night.

"Have a care," Verin told him softly as he slung his bow across his back. "*Ta'veren* does not mean immortal."

"Tomas might be a help, you know."

"Do you think one more would make a difference?" she said musingly. "Besides, I have other uses for him."

Shaking his head, he moved out from the thicket, going to elbows and knees, almost flat to the ground, as soon as he was beyond the brush. Faile imitated him at his side. The grass and wildflowers stood high enough to screen them. He was glad she could not see his face. He was desperately afraid. Not for himself, but if anything happened to her. . . .

Like two more shifting moonshadows they crawled across the open ground, stopping at Perrin's signal about ten paces from where guards paced up and down, cloaks gleaming in the moonlight, a little way out from the first row of tents. Two came face-to-face almost in front of them, stomping to a halt.

"All is well with the night," one announced. "The Light illumine us, and protect us from the Shadow."

"All is well with the night," the other replied. "The Light illumine us, and protect us from the Shadow."

Turning on their heels, they marched away, looking neither left nor right.

Perrin let each take a dozen paces, then touched Faile's shoulder and rose, barely letting himself breathe. He could hardly hear her breathing, either. Almost tiptoeing, they hurried in among the tents, dropping low again as soon as they were past the first. Men snored inside, or muttered in their sleep. Except for that, the camp was silent. The tramp of the guards' boots was plainly audible. The smell of doused cook fires hung in the air, the scents of canvas and horses and men.

Silently he motioned for Faile to follow him. Tent ropes made snares for unwary feet in the darkness. They were clear to him, though, and he wove a path through for them.

He had the location of the prisoners' tent marked in his head, and he started toward it cautiously. Near the center of the camp. A long way there, and a long way back.

The crunch of boots on the ground and a grunt from Faile spun him around just in time to be knocked down by the rush of a big shape in a white cloak, a man as thick as Master Luhhan himself. Iron fingers dug into his throat as the two of them rolled. Perrin seized the man's chin with one hand, forcing his head back, trying to push him off. Prying at the grip on his throat, he pounded at the fellow's ribs with his fist, producing grunts and no other effect he could tell. Blood roared in his ears; his vision narrowed, black creeping in from the sides. He fumbled for his axe, but his fingers felt numb.

Suddenly the man jerked and collapsed atop him. Perrin pushed the limp form off himself and drew in deep lungfuls of sweet night air.

Faile tossed aside a chunk of firewood and rubbed the side of her head. "He did not think I was worth worrying about, beyond knocking down," she whispered.

"A fool," Perrin whispered back. "But a strong one." He was going to have the feel of those fingers at his neck for days. "Are you all right?"

"Of course. I am not a porcelain figurine."

He supposed she was not, at that.

Hastily dragging the unconscious man up against the side of a tent where he hoped no one would find him soon, he stripped off the fellow's white cloak and bound his hands and feet with spare bowstrings. A kerchief found in the fellow's pocket served for a gag. Not very clean, but that was his own fault. Lifting his bow over his head, Perrin settled the cloak around his shoulders. If anyone else saw them, maybe they would mistake him for one of their own. The cloak had a golden knot of rank beneath the flaring sunburst. An officer. Even better.

He walked between the tents openly now, and quickly. Hidden or not, that fellow could be found any moment and the alarm raised. Faile scudded along beside him like his shadow, scanning the camp for signs of life as alertly as he did. Shifting moonshadows obscured the spaces between the tents even for his eyes.

Approaching the prison tent, he slowed, so as not to excite the guards; a white-cloaked man stood at this end, and the gleaming lance point of another rose above the tent's peaked roof.

Suddenly that lance point vanished. There was no sound. It simply fell.

A heartbeat later, two patches of darkness abruptly became veiled Aiel, neither tall enough for Gaul. Before the guard could move, one of them leaped into the air, kicking him in the face. He staggered to his knees, and the other Maiden spun, adding her own kick. The guard dropped bonelessly. Crouching, the Maidens looked around, spears ready, to see if they had roused anyone.

At the sight of Perrin in a white cloak, they nearly went for him, until they saw Faile. One shook her head and whispered to the other, who appeared to laugh silently.

Perrin told himself he should not feel disgruntled, but first Faile saved him from being strangled, and now she saved him from a spear through his liver. For somebody who was supposedly leading a rescue, he was making a fine showing so far.

Tossing the tent flap aside, he put his head into the interior, which was even darker than outside. Master Luhhan lay asleep across the tent's entrance, with the women huddled together toward the back. Perrin put a hand over Haral Luhhan's mouth and, when his eyes popped open, laid a finger across his own lips. "Wake the others," Perrin said in a low voice. "Quietly. We are taking you out of here." Recognition dawned in Master Luhhan's eyes, and he nodded.

Backing out of the tent, Perrin stripped the cloak from the downed guard. The man was still breathing—hoarsely, and bubbling through a thoroughly broken nose—but being manhandled did not wake him. They had to hurry now. Gaul was there, with the cloak from the other guard. The three Aiel watched the other tents cautiously. Faile practically danced with impatience.

When Master Luhhan brought his wife and the other women out, all of them peering about nervously in the moonlight, Perrin hurriedly put one of the cloaks around the blacksmith. It was a poor fit—Haral Luhhan seemed to be made from tree trunks—but it had to do. The other went around Alsbet Luhhan. She was not so large as her husband, but still as big as most men.

Her round face looked surprised at first, but then she nodded; pulling the fallen guard's conical helmet from his head, she stuck it on her own, squashing it down atop her thick braid. The two guards they bound and gagged with strips of blanket and laid inside the tent.

Sneaking out again the way they had come in was impossible; Perrin had known that from the start. Even if Master and Mistress Luhhan could have moved quietly enough—which he doubted—Bode and Eldrin were clinging to each other in shocked disbelief at rescue. Only their mother's soft murmurs kept them from breaking into relieved tears already. He had planned for it. Horses were needed, both for a quick burst of speed away from the camp and to carry everyone afterward. There were horses at the picket lines.

The Aiel ghosting ahead, he followed behind with Faile and the Cauthons behind, Haral and Alsbet bringing up the rear. To a casual glance, at least, they looked to be like three Whitecloaks escorting four women.

The picketed horses were guarded, but only on the side away from the tents. After all, why guard them from the men who rode them? It certainly made Perrin's job easier. They simply walked up to the line of horses nearest the tents, each secured by a simple rope hackamore, and untied one apiece, except for the Aiel. The hardest part was getting Mistress Luhhan up barebacked; it took Perrin and Master Luhhan both, and she kept trying to push her skirts down to cover her knees. Natti and her girls scrambled up easily, and Faile, of course. The guards supposedly watching the horses continued their measured rounds, calling to each other about all being well with the night.

"When I give the word," Perrin began, and someone in the camp shouted, then again, more loudly; a horn sounded, and shouting men poured out of the tents. Whether they had found the prisoners gone, or the unconscious man who had attacked him, it made no difference. "Follow me!" Perrin cried, digging his heels into the dark gelding he had chosen. "Ride!"

It was a madcap rush, but he tried to keep an eye on everyone. Master Luhhan was almost as bad a rider as his wife, the pair of them bouncing around, nearly falling as their horses ran. Either Bode or Eldrin was screaming at the top of her lungs, from excitement or terror. Luckily the guards were not expecting trouble from inside the camp. One white-cloaked man peering into the darkness turned just in time to throw himself out of the way of the charging horses with a cry almost as shrill as the Cauthon girl's. More horns bayed behind them, and shouts with the definite sound of orders hammered the night, well before they reached the cover of the thicket. Not that it was much cover now.

Tam had everyone mounted, as Perrin had asked. Or ordered. He swung straight from the gelding to Stepper. Verin and Tomas were the only ones not all but jumping up and down in their saddles; their horses were the only ones not dancing with their riders' nervousness. Abell was trying to hug his wife and daughters all three at the same time, all of them laughing and crying. Master Luhhan was trying to shake every hand he could reach. Everybody except the Aiel, Verin and her Warder seemed to be offering everybody else congratulations, as though it were all done.

"Why, Perrin, it *is* you!" Mistress Luhhan exclaimed. Her round face looked peculiar under the helmet, sitting askew because of her braid. "What is that thing on your face, young man? I am more than grateful to you, but I will not have you at my table looking like a—"

"No time for that," he told her, ignoring the shock on her face. She was not a woman people cut off, but the Whitecloak horns were sounding something besides an alarm now, a short repetitive cry, sharp and insistent. An order of some kind. "Tam, Abell, take Master Luhhan and the women to that hiding place you know. Gaul, you go with them. And Faile." That would add Bain and Chiad. "And Hu and Jaim." That should be enough to be safe. "Move quietly. Quiet is better than speed, for a little while anyway. But go now."

Those he named wound off westward with no argument, though Mistress Luhhan, holding her horse's mane with both hands, gave him a very level look. It was the lack of argument from Faile that stunned him, enough that it took him a moment to realize he had called Master al'Thor and Master Cauthon by their first names.

Verin and Tomas had stayed behind, and he eyed her sharply. "Any chance of a little help from you?"

"Not the way you mean, perhaps," she replied calmly, as though the Whitecloak camp were not in turmoil just a mile off. "My reasons are no different today than yesterday. But I think it might rain in . . . oh . . . half an hour. Maybe less. Quite a downpour, I expect."

Half an hour. Perrin grunted and turned to the remaining Two Rivers lads. Practically quivering with the desire to run, they held their bows in white-knuckled grips. He hoped they had all remembered to bring spare bowstrings, at least, since it was going to rain. “We,” he told them, “are going to draw the Whitecloaks off so Mistress Cauthon and Mistress Luhhan and the rest can get away safely. We’ll take them south along the North Road until we can lose them in the rain. If anyone wants out, he had best ride now.” A few hands shifted on their reins, but they all sat their saddles looking at him. “All right, then. Shout like you’ve gone mad so they’ll hear us. Shout until we reach the road.”

Bellowing, he wheeled Stepper and galloped for the road. At first he was not really certain they would follow, but their wild howls drowned his roar and the thunder of their hooves. If the Whitecloaks did not hear that, they were deaf.

Not all of them stopped shouting when they reached the hard-packed dirt of the North Road and swung south at a dead run through the night. Some laughed and whooped. Perrin shrugged out of the white cloak and let it fall. The horns sounded again, a little fainter now.

“Perrin,” Wil called, leaning forward on the neck of his horse, “what do we do now? What do we do next?”

“We hunt Trollocs!” Perrin shouted over his shoulder. From the way the laughter redoubled, he did not think they believed him. But he could feel Verin’s eyes drilling into his back. She knew. Thunder in the night sky echoed the horses’ hooves.

* * *

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CHAPTER 34

He Who Comes with the Dawn

The dawn shadows shortened and paled as Rand and Mat jogged across the barren, still-dark valley floor, leaving fog-shrouded Rhuidean behind. The dry air hinted at heat to come, but the slight breeze actually felt cool to Rand, with no coat. That would not last; full blistering daylight would be on them soon enough. They hurried as best they could in the hope of beating it, but he did not think they would. Their best was not very fast.

Mat trotted in a pained shamble; a dark smear fanned across half his face, and his coat hung open, revealing his unlaced shirt stuck to his chest by more drying blood. Sometimes he gingerly touched the thick weal around his throat, nearly black now, growling under his breath, and he stumbled often, catching himself with the odd, black-hafted spear and clutching at his head. He did not complain, though, which was a bad sign. Mat was a great complainer at small discomforts; if he was silent now, it meant he was in real pain.

The old, half-healed wound in Rand’s side felt as though something were boring into it, and the gashes on his face and head burned, yet lumbering along, half-hunched over his aching side, he hardly thought of his own hurts. He was all too conscious of the sun rising behind him, and the Aiel waiting on the bare mountainside ahead. There was water and shade up there, and help for Mat. The rising sun behind, and the Aiel ahead. Dawn and the Aiel.

He Who Comes With the Dawn. That Aes Sedai he had seen, or dreamed he had seen, before Rhuidean—she had spoken as if she had the Foretelling. *He will bind you together. He will take you back, and destroy you.* Words delivered like prophecy. Destroy them. Prophecy said he would Break the World again. The idea horrified him. Perhaps he could escape that part, at least, but war, death and destruction already welled up in his footsteps. Tear was the first place in what seemed a very long time where he had not left chaos behind, men dying and villages burning.

He found himself wishing he could climb on Jeade'en and run as fast as the stallion could carry him. It was not the first time. *But I can't run,* he thought. *I have it to do because there isn't anybody else who can. I do it, or the Dark One wins.* A hard bargain, but the only one there was. *But why would I destroy the Aiel? How?*

That last thought chilled him. It was too much like accepting that he would, that he should. He did not want to harm the Aiel. "Light," he said harshly, "I don't want to destroy anybody." His mouth felt lined with dust again.

Mat glanced at him silently. A wary look.

I am not mad yet, Rand thought grimly.

Upslope the Aiel were stirring in the three camps. The cold fact was, he needed them. That was why he had begun to contemplate this, back when he first discovered that the Dragon Reborn and He Who Comes With the Dawn might well be one and the same. He needed people he could trust, people who followed from something besides fear of him, or greed for power. People who did not mean to use him for their own ends. He had done what was required, and now he would use them. Because he had to. He was not mad yet—he did not think he was—but many would think so before he was done.

Full, glaring sunlight overtook them before they began to scramble up Chaendaer, heat like a club. Rand climbed the uneven slope as fast as he could manage, with its dips and rises and rough outcrops; his throat had forgotten its last drink, and the sun dried his shirt as fast as sweat could moisten it. Mat needed no urging, either. There was water up there. Bair stood in front of the Wise One's low tents, a waterbag in her hands, glistening with condensation. Licking cracked lips, Rand was sure he could see the glisten.

"Where is he? What have you done to him?"

The roar stopped Rand in his tracks. The flame-haired man, Couladin, stood atop a thick thumb of granite jutting out from the mountain. Others of the Shaido clan clustered around its base, all looking at Rand and Mat. Some were veiled.

"Who are you talking about?" Rand called back. His voice croaked with thirst.

Couladin's eyes bulged in outrage. "Muradin, wetlander! He entered two days before you, yet you come out first. He could not fail where you survive! You must have murdered him!"

Rand thought he heard a shout from the Wise One's tents, but before he could even blink, Couladin uncoiled like a snake, casting a spear straight at him. Two more streaked behind it from the Aiel at the base of the granite thumb.

Instinctively Rand snatched for *saidin* and the flame-carved sword. The blade whirled in his hands—Whirlwind on the Mountain; aptly named—slicing a pair of spear shafts in two. Mat's spinning black spear just barely knocked the third aside.

"Proof!" Couladin howled. "They entered Rhuidean armed! It is forbidden! Look at the blood on them! They have murdered Muradin!" Even as he spoke he hurled another spear, and this time it was one of a dozen.

Rand flung himself aside, just conscious of Mat leaping the other way, yet even before they hit the ground the spears came together where Rand had been standing, bouncing off each other. Rolling to his feet, he found the spears all stuck into the stony ground. In a perfect circle surrounding the spot he had jumped from. For a moment even Couladin seemed stunned to stillness.

"Stop!" Bair shouted, running down into the motionless instant. Her long bulky skirt impeded her no more than her age; she bounded down the slope like a girl for all her white hair, and a girl in a fury at that. "The peace of Rhuidean, Couladin!" Her thin voice was an iron rod. "Twice you have tried to break it now. Once more, and you are outlawed! My word on it! You, and anyone else who lifts a hand!" She skidded to a halt in front of Rand, facing the Shaido with the water bag raised as if she meant to bludgeon them with it. "Let who doubts me, raise a weapon! That one will be deprived of shade according to the Agreement of Rhuidean, denied hold or stand or tent. His own sept will hunt him as a wild beast."

Some of the Shaido hastily unveiled their faces—some of them—but Couladin was not dissuaded. "They are armed, Bair! They went armed to Rhuidean! That is—!"

"Silence!" Bair shook a fist at him. "You dare speak of weapons? You who would break the Peace of Rhuidean, and kill with your face bare to the world? They took no weapon with them; I attest to it." Deliberately she turned her back, but the gaze she swept across Rand and Mat was hardly softer than what she had given Couladin. She grimaced at Mat's strange sword-bladed spear, muttering, "Did you find that in Rhuidean, boy?"

"I was given it, *old woman*," Mat growled back hoarsely. "I paid for it, and I mean to keep it."

She sniffed. "You both look as if you had rolled in knife-grass. What—? No, you can tell me later." Eyeing Rand's Power-wrought sword, she shivered. "Rid yourself of that. And show them the signs before that fool Couladin tries to whip them up again. With this temper on him, he would take his whole clan into outlawry without blinking. Quickly!"

For a moment he gaped at her. Signs? Then he remembered what Rhuarc had shown him once, the mark of a man who had survived Rhuidean. Letting the sword vanish, he unlaced his left shirt cuff and pushed the sleeve back to his elbow.

Around his forearm wound a shape like that on the Dragon banner, a sinuous golden-maned form scaled in scarlet and gold. He expected it, of course, but it was still a shock. The thing looked like a part of his skin, as though that nonexistent creature itself had settled into him. His arm felt no different, yet the scales sparkled in the sunlight like polished metal; it seemed if he touched that golden mane atop his wrist, he would surely feel each hair.

He thrust his arm into the air as soon as it was bare, high so Couladin and his people could see. Mutters rose among the Shaido, and Couladin snarled wordlessly. The numbers around the granite outcrop were swelling as more Shaido came running from their tents. Rhuarc stood with Heirn and his Jindo a little upslope; they watched the Shaido warily, and Rand with an air of expectation his uplifted arm did not lessen. Lan stood halfway between the two groups, hands resting on his sword hilt, face a thunderhead.

Just as Rand began to realize the Aiel wanted something more, Egwene and the other three Wise Women reached him, scrambling down the mountain. The Aiel women looked out of countenance at having to hurry and every bit as angry as Bair had been. Amys directed her glares at Couladin, while sun-haired Melaine stared blamingly at Rand. Seana just seemed ready to chew rocks. Egwene, with a scarf wrapped around her hair and spread over her shoulders, stared at Mat and him half in consternation and half as though she had expected never to see them again.

“Fool man,” Bair muttered. “*All* of the signs.” Tossing the waterbag to Mat, she seized Rand’s right arm and stripped back his sleeve, exposing a mirror twin of the creature on his left forearm. Her breath caught, then came out in a long sigh. She seemed balanced on a razor edge between relief and apprehension. There was no mistaking it; she had hoped for the second marking, yet it made her afraid. Amys and the other two Wise Women echoed her sign almost exactly. It was odd to see Aiel fearful.

Rand almost laughed. Not that he was amused. “Twice and twice shall he be marked.” That was what the Prophecies of the Dragon said. A heron branded into each palm, and now these. One of the peculiar creatures—Dragons, the Prophecy called them—was supposed to be “for remembrance lost.” Rhuidean had certainly supplied that, the lost history of the Aiel’s origins. And the other was for “the price he must pay.” *How soon must I pay it*? he wondered. *And how many have to pay with me?* Others always had to, even when he tried to pay alone.

Apprehensive or not, Bair did not pause before shoving that arm above his head, too, and proclaiming loudly, “Behold what has never been seen before. *A Car’a’carn* has been chosen, a chief of chiefs. Born of a Maiden, he has come with the dawn from Rhuidean, according to prophecy, to unite the Aiel! The fulfillment of prophecy has begun!”

The reactions of the other Aiel were nothing like what Rand envisioned. Couladin stared down at him, even more hatefully than before if that was possible, then leaped from the outcrop and stalked up the slope to vanish into the Shaido tents. The Shaido themselves began to disperse, glancing at Rand with unreadable faces before drifting back to their tents. Heirn and the warriors of the Jindo sept, hardly hesitating, did the same. In moments only Rhuarc remained, his eyes troubled. Lan went over to the clan chief; from his face, the Warder would just as soon not have seen Rand at all. Rand was not sure what he had expected, but surely something other than this.

“Burn me!” Mat muttered. He seemed to realize for the first time that he had the waterbag in his hands. Jerking the plug free, he held the hide bag high, letting nearly as much splash over his face as into his mouth. When he finally lowered it, he looked at the markings on Rand’s arms again and shook his head, repeating, “Burn me!” as he pushed the sloshing bag at him.

Rand stared at the Aiel in consternation, but he was more than glad to drink. The first gulps hurt his throat, it was so dry.

“What happened to you?” Egwene demanded. “Did Muradin attack you?”

“It is forbidden to speak of what occurs in Rhuidean,” Bair said sharply.

“Not Muradin,” Rand said. “Where’s Moiraine? I expected her to be the first to meet us.” He rubbed his face; black flakes of dried blood came off on his hand. “For once, I won’t care if she asks before she Heals me.”

“Me either,” Mat said hoarsely. He swayed, holding himself up with his spear, and pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead. “My brain is spinning.”

Egwene grimaced. “She is still in Rhuidean, I suppose. But if you have finally come out, maybe she will, as well. She left right after you. And Aviendha. You’ve all been gone so long.”

“Moiraine went to Rhuidean?” Rand said incredulously. “And *Aviendha*? Why did—?” Abruptly he registered what else she had said. “What do you mean, ‘so long’?”

“This is the seventh day,” she said. “The seventh day since you all went down into the valley.”

The waterbag fell from his hands. Seana snatched it up again before more than a little of its contents, so precious in the Waste, could trickle away down the stony slope. Rand barely noticed. Seven days. Anything could have happened in seven days. *They could be catching up to me, figuring out what I’m planning. I have to move. Fast. I have to keep ahead of them. I haven’t come this far to fail.*

They were all staring at him, even Rhuarc and Mat, concern writ large on their faces. And caution. No wonder in that. Who could say what he might do, or how sane he still was? Only Lan did not change his stony scowl.

“I told you that was Aviendha, Rand. Bare as she was born.” Mat’s voice had a painful rasp to it, and his legs looked none too steady.

“How long before Moiraine comes back?” Rand asked. If she had gone in at the same time, she should return soon.

“If she has not returned by the tenth day,” Bair replied, “she will not. No one has ever returned after ten days.”

Another three days, maybe. Three more days when he had already lost seven. *Let them come, now. I will not fail!* He barely kept a snarl from his face. “You can channel. One of you can, anyway. I saw how you flung Couladin about. Will you Heal Mat?”

Amys and Melaine exchanged looks he could only call rueful.

“Our paths have gone other ways,” Amys said regretfully. “There are Wise Ones who could do what you ask, after a fashion, but we are not among them.”

“What do you mean?” he snapped angrily. “You can channel like Aes Sedai. Why can’t you Heal like them? You did not want him to go to Rhuidean in the first place. Do you think you can let him die from it?”

“I’ll survive,” Mat said, but his eyes were tight with suffering.

Egwene put a hand on Rand’s arm. “Not all Aes Sedai can Heal very well,” she said in a soothing voice. “The best Healers are all Yellow Ajah. Sheriam, the Mistress of Novices, cannot Heal anything much more serious than a bruise or a small cut. No two women can have exactly the same Talents or skills.”

Her tone irritated him. He was not some pettish child to be smoothed down. He frowned at the Wise Ones. Could not or would not, Mat and he would have to wait for Moiraine. If she had not been killed by that bubble of evil, by those dust creatures. It must have dissipated by now; there had been an end to the one in Tear. *They wouldn’t have stopped her. She could channel her way through them. She knows what she’s doing; she doesn’t have to figure it out an inch at a time the way I do.* But then why was she not back? Why had she gone in the first place, and why had he not seen her? Foolish question. A hundred people could have been in Rhuidean without being seen. Too many questions, and no answers until she did return, he suspected. If then.

“There are herbs and ointments,” Seana said. “Come out of the sun, and we will tend your injuries.”

“Out of the sun,” Rand muttered. “Yes.” He was being boorish, but he did not care. Why had Moiraine gone into Rhuidean? He did not trust her to stop pushing him in the direction she thought best, and the Dark One take his opinions. If she was in there, could she have affected what he saw? Changed it some way? If she even suspected what he planned. . . .

He started toward the Jindo tents—Couladin’s people were not likely to offer him a resting place—but Amys turned him toward the flat farther up where the Wise Ones’ tents stood. “They might not be comfortable with you among them just yet," she said, Rhuarc, falling in beside her, nodded agreement.

Melaine glanced at Lan. "This is no business of yours, *Aan'allein.* You and Rhuarc take Matrim and—"

"No," Rand broke in. "I want them with me." Partly it was because he wanted answers from the clan chief, and partly it was sheer stubbornness. These Wise Ones were all set to guide him around on a leash, just like Moiraine. He was not about to put up with it. They looked at one another, then nodded as if acceding to a request. If they thought he would be a good boy because they gave him a sweet, they were mistaken. "I'd have thought you would be with Moiraine," he said to Lan, ignoring the Wise Ones and their nods.

A flash of embarrassment crossed the Warder's face. "The Wise Ones managed to hide her going until nearly sunset," he said stiffly. "Then they . . . convinced me following would serve no purpose. They said even if I did, I could not find her until she was already on her way out, and she would not need me, then. I am no longer certain I should have listened."

"Listened!" Melaine snorted. Her gold and ivory bracelets clattered as she adjusted her shawl irritably. "Trust a man to make himself sound reasonable. You would almost certainly have died, and very likely killed her, too."

"Melaine and I had to hold him down half the night before he would listen," Amys said. Her small smile was a touch amused, a touch wry.

Lan's face might as well have been carved from thunderclouds. Small wonder, if the Wise Ones had used the Power on him. What *was* Moiraine doing in there?

"Rhuarc," Rand said, "how am I supposed to unite the Aiel? They don't even want to look at me." He raised his bare forearms for a moment; the Dragons' scales glittered in the harsh sunlight. "These say I'm He Who Comes With the Dawn, but everybody practically melted away as soon as I showed the things."

"It is one thing to know prophecy will be fulfilled, eventually," the clan chief said slowly, "another to see that fulfillment begun before your eyes. It is said you will make the clans one people again, as long ago, but we have fought one another almost as long as we have fought the rest of the world. And there is more, for some of us."

He will bind you together, and destroy you. Rhuarc must have heard that, too. And the other clan chiefs, and the Wise Ones, if they also had entered that forest of shining glass columns. If Moiraine had not arranged a special vision for him. "Does everyone see the same things inside those columns, Rhuarc?"

"No!" Melaine snapped, eyes like green steel. "Be silent, or send *Aan'allein* and Matrim away. You must go, too, Egwene."

"It is not permitted," Amys said in a just slightly softer voice, "to speak of what occurs within Rhuidean except with those who have been there." A fraction softer, maybe. "Even then, few speak of it, and seldom."

"I mean to change what is permitted and what isn't," Rand told them levelly. "Become used to it." He caught Egwene muttering about him needing his ears boxed, and grinned at her. "Egwene can stay, too, since she asked so nicely." She stuck her tongue out at him, then blushed when she realized what she had done.

"Change," Rhuarc said. "You know he brings change, Amys. It is wondering what change, and how, that makes us like children alone in the dark. Since it must be, let it begin now. No two clan chiefs I have spoken with have seen through the exactly same eyes, Rand, or exactly the same things, until the sharing of water, and the meeting where the Agreement of Rhuidean was made. Whether it is the same for Wise Ones, I do not know, but I suspect it is. I think it is a matter of bloodlines. I believe I saw through the eyes of my ancestors, and you yours."

Amys and the other Wise Ones glowered in grimly sullen silence. Mat and Egwene wore equally confused stares. Lan alone seemed not to be listening at all; his eyes looked inward, no doubt in worry over Moiraine.

Rand felt a little strange himself. Seeing through his ancestors' eyes. He had known for some time that Tam al'Thor was not his real father, that he had been found as a newborn on the slopes of Dragonmount after the last major battle of the Aiel War. A newborn with his dead mother, a Maiden of the Spear. He had claimed Aiel blood in demanding admittance to Rhuidean, but the fact of it was just now being driven home. His ancestors. Aiel.

"Then you saw Rhuidean just begun building, too," he said. "And the two Aes Sedai. You . . . heard what the one of them said." *He will destroy you.*

"I heard." Rhuarc looked resigned, like a man who had learned his leg had to be cut off. "I know."

Rand changed the subject. "What was 'the sharing of water'?"

The clan chief's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "You did not recognize it? But then, I do not see why you should; you have not grown up with the histories. According the oldest stories, from the day the Breaking of the World began until the day we first entered the Three-fold Land, only one people did not attack us. One people allowed us water freely when it was needed. It took us long to discover who they were. That is done with, now. The pledge of peace was destroyed; the treekillers spat in our faces."

"Cairhien," Rand said. "You're talking about Cairhien, and *Avendoraldera*, and Laman cutting down the Tree."

"Laman is dead for his punishment," Rhuarc said in a flat voice. "The oathbreakers are done with." He looked at Rand sideways. "Some, such as Couladin, take it for proof we can trust no one who is not Aiel. That is a part of why he hates you. A part of it. He will take your face and blood for lies. Or claim he does."

Rand shook his head. Moiraine sometimes talked of the complexity of Age Lace, the Pattern of an Age, woven by the Wheel of Time from the thread of human lives. If the ancestors of the Cairhienin had not allowed the Aiel to have water three thousand years ago, then Cairhien would never have been given the right to use the Silk Path across the Waste, with a cutting from *Avendesora* for a pledge. No pledge, and King Laman would have had no Tree to cut down; there would have been no Aiel War; and he could not have been born on the side of Dragonmount to be carried off and raised in the Two Rivers. How many more points like that had there been, where a single decision one way or another affected the weave of the Pattern for thousands of years? A thousand times a thousand tiny branching points, a thousand times that many, all twitching the Pattern into a different design. He himself was a walking branching point, and maybe Mat and Perrin, too. What they did or did not do would send ripples ahead through the years, through the Ages.

He looked at Mat, hobbling up the slope with the aid of his spear, head down and eyes squinted in pain. *The Creator could not have been thinking, to set the future on the shoulders of three farmboys. I can't drop it. I have to carry the load, whatever the cost.*

At the Wise Ones' low, wall-less tents, the women ducked inside with murmurs about water and shade. They all but pulled Mat with them; as evidence of how his head and throat hurt, he not only obeyed, he did so silently.

Rand started to follow, but Lan laid a hand on his shoulder. "Did you see her in there?" the Warder asked.

"No, Lan. I'm sorry; I did not. She'll come out safe if anyone can."

Lan grunted and took his hand away. "Watch out for Couladin, Rand. I have seen his kind before. Ambition burns in his belly. He would sacrifice the world to achieve it."

"*Aan'allein* speaks the truth," Rhuarc said. "The Dragons on your arms will not matter if you are dead before the clan chiefs learn of them. I will make sure some of Heirn's Jindo are always near you until we reach Cold Rocks. Even then, Couladin will probably try to make trouble, and the Shaido, at least, will follow him. Perhaps others, too. The Prophecy of Rhuidean said you would be raised by those not of the blood, yet Couladin may not be the only one to see only a wetlander."

"I will try to watch my back," Rand said dryly. In the stories, when somebody fulfilled a prophecy, everyone cried "Behold!" or some such, and that was that except for dealing with the villains. Real life did not seem to work that way.

When they entered the tent, Mat was already seated on a gold-tasseled red cushion with his coat and shirt off. A woman in a cowled white robe had finished washing the blood from his face and was just beginning on his chest. Amys gripped a stone mortar between her knees, blending some ointment with a pestle, while Bair and Seana had their heads together over herbs brewing in a pot of hot water.

Melaine grimaced at Lan and Rhuarc then fixed Rand with cool green eyes. "Strip to the waist," she said curtly. "The cuts on your head do not seem too bad, but let me see what has you hunched over." She struck a small brass gong, and another white-robed woman ducked in at the back of the tent, a steaming silver basin in her hands and cloths over her arm.

Rand took a seat on a cushion, making himself sit up straight. "That's nothing to worry yourself about," he assured her. The second woman in white knelt gracefully by his side and, resisting his efforts to take the damp cloth she wrung out in the basin, began gently washing his face. He wondered who she was. She looked Aiel, but she certainly did not act it. Her gray eyes held a determined meekness.

“It is an old injury,” Egwene told the sun-haired Wise One. “Moiraine has never been able to Heal it properly.” The look she gave Rand said common courtesy should have made him tell as much. From the glances that passed among the Wise Ones, though, he thought she had said more than enough already. A wound Aes Sedai could not Heal; that was a puzzle to them. Moiraine seemed to know more about him than he knew about himself, and he had a hard time dealing with her. Maybe it would go easier with the Wise Ones if they had to guess about him.

Mat winced as Amys began rubbing her ointment into the slashes on his chest. If it felt anything like it smelled, Rand thought he had cause to wince. Bair shoved a silver cup at Mat. “Drink, *young man.* Timsin root and silverleaf will help your headaches if anything can.”

He did not hesitate before gulping it down; a shudder and a twisted face followed. “Tastes like the inside of my boots.” But he gave her a seated bow, formal enough for a Tairen except for his being shirtless, and only spoiled a bit by his sudden grin. “I thank you, Wise One. And I won’t ask if you added anything just to give it that . . . memorable . . . taste.” Bair and Seana’s soft laughter might have come because they had or because they had not, but it seemed that as usual Mat had found a way to get on the good of side of the women. Even Melaine gave him a brief smile.

“Rhuarc,” Rand said, “if Couladin thinks to make difficulties, I need to jump ahead of him. How do I go about telling the other clan chiefs? About me. About these.” He shifted his Dragon-twined arms. The white-robed woman at his side, cleaning the long gash in his hair now, deliberately avoided looking at them.

“There is no set formality,” Rhuarc said. “How could there be, for a thing that will happen only once? When there must be a meeting between clan chiefs, there are places where something like the Peace of Rhuidean holds. The closest to Cold Rocks, the closest to Rhuidean, is Alcair Dal. You could show proofs to the clan and sept chiefs there.”

“Al’cair Dal?” Mat said, giving it a subtly different sound. “The Golden Bowl?”

Rhuarc nodded. “A round canyon, though there is nothing golden about it. There is a ledge at one end, and a man who stands there can be heard by anyone in the canyon without raising his voice.”

Rand frowned at the Dragons on his forearms. He was not the only one to have been marked in some way in Rhuidean. Mat no longer spoke a few words of the Old Tongue now and then without knowing what he was saying. He understood, since Rhuidean, though he did not appear to realize it. Egwene was watching Mat. Thoughtfully. She had spent too much time with Aes Sedai.

"Rhuarc, can you send messengers out to the clan chiefs?" he said. "How long will it take to ask them all to Alcair Dal? What will it take to make sure they come?"

"Messengers will take weeks, and more weeks for everyone to gather." Rhuarc's gesture took in all four Wise Ones. "They can speak to every clan chief in his dreams in one night, to every sept chief. And every Wise One, to make sure no man takes it for just a dream."

"I appreciate your confidence that we can move mountains, shade of my heart," Amys said wryly, settling herself beside Rand with her ointment, "but that does not make it so. It would take several nights to do what you suggest, with little rest in them."

Rand caught her hand as she started to rub the sharp-smelling mixture on his cheek. "Will you do it?"

"Are you so eager to destroy us?" she demanded, then bit her lip vexedly as the white-cowled woman on Rand's other side started.

Melaine clapped her hands twice. "Leave us," she said sharply, and the women in white bowed their way out with their basins and cloths.

"You goad me like a needleburr next to the skin," Amys told Rand bitterly. "Whatever they are told, those women will talk now of what they should not know." She pulled her hand free, began rubbing in the ointment with perhaps more energy than was necessary. It stung worse than it smelled.

"I do not mean to goad you," Rand said, "but there is no time. The Forsaken are loose, Amys, and if they find out where I am, or what I plan. . . ." The Aiel women did not seem surprised. Had they known already? "Nine still live. Too many, and those that don't want to kill me think they can use me. I have no time. If I knew a way to bring all the clan chiefs here now, and make them accept me, I'd use it."

"What is it you plan?" Amys voice was as stony as her face.

"Will you ask—tell—the chiefs to come to Alcair Dal?"

For a long moment she met his stare. When she finally nodded, it was grudging.

Begrudged or not, some of the tension went out of him. There was no way to win back seven lost days, but perhaps he could avoid losing more. Moiraine, still in Rhuidean with Aviendha, held him here yet, though. He could not simply abandon her.

"You knew my mother," he said. Egwene leaned forward, as intent as he, and Mat shook his head.

Amys's hand paused on his face. "I knew her."

"Tell me about her. Please."

She shifted her attention to the slash above his ear; if a frown could have Healed, he would not have needed her ointment. Finally she said, "Shaiel's story, as I know it, begins when I was still *Far Dareis Mai*, more than a year before I gave up the spear. A number of us had ranged almost to the Dragonwall together. One day we saw a woman, a golden-haired young wetlander, in silks, with packhorses and a fine mare to ride. A man we would have killed, of course, but she had no weapon beyond a simple knife at her belt. Some wanted to run her back to the Dragonwall naked . . ." Egwene blinked; she seemed continually surprised at how hard the Aiel were. Amys continued without pause. ". . . yet she seemed to be searching determinedly for something. Curious, we followed, day by day, without letting her see. Her horses died, her food ran out, her water, but she did not turn back. She stumbled on afoot, until finally she fell and could not rise. We decided to give her water, and ask her story. She was near death, and it was a full day before she could speak."

"Her name was Shaiel?" Rand said when she hesitated. "Where was she from? Why did she come here?"

"Shaiel," Bair said, "was the name she took for herself. She never gave another in the time I knew her. In the Old Tongue it would mean the Woman Who Is Dedicated." Mat nodded agreement, not seeming to realize what he had done; Lan eyed him thoughtfully over a silver cup of water. "There was a bitterness in Shaiel, in the beginning," she finished.

Sitting back on her heels beside Rand, Amys nodded. "She spoke of a child abandoned, a son she loved. A husband she did not love. Where, she would not say. I do not think she ever forgave herself for leaving the child. She would tell little beyond what she had to. It was for us she had been searching, for Maidens of the Spear. An Aes Sedai called Gitara Moroso, who had the Foretelling, had told her that disaster would befall her land and her people, perhaps the world, unless she went to dwell among the Maidens of the Spear, telling no one of her going. She must become a Maiden, and she could not return to her own land until the Maidens had gone to Tar Valon.

She shook her head wonderingly. “You must understand how it sounded, then. The Maidens go to Tar Valon? No Aiel had crossed the Dragonwall since the day we first reached the Three-fold Land. It would be another four years before Laman’s crime brought us into the wetlands. And certainly no one not Aiel had ever become a Maiden of the Spear. Some of us thought her mad from the sun. But she had a stubborn will, and somehow we found ourselves agreeing to let her try.”

Gitara Moroso. An Aes Sedai with the Foretelling. Somewhere he had heard that name, but where? And he had a brother. A half-brother. Growing up, he had wondered what it would be like to have a brother or a sister. Who, and where? But Amys was going on.

“Almost every girl dreams of becoming a Maiden, and learns at least the rudiments of bow and spear, of fighting with hands and feet. Even so, those who take the final step and wed the spear discover they know nothing. It was harder for Shaiel. The bow she knew well, but she had never run as far as a mile, or lived on what she could find. A ten-year-old girl could beat her, and she did not even know what plants indicate water. Yet she persevered. In a year she had spoken her vows to the spear, become a Maiden, adopted into the Chumai sept of the Taardad.”

And eventually she had gone to Tar Valon with the Maidens, to die on the slopes of Dragonmount. Half an answer, and leaving new questions. If he could only have seen her face.

“You have something of her in your features,” Seana said as though reading his thoughts. She had settled herself cross-legged with a small silver cup of wine. “Less of Janduin.”

“Janduin? My father?”

“Yes,” Seana said. “He was clan chief of the Taardad, then, the youngest in memory. Yet he had a way to him, a power. People listened to him, and would follow him, even those not of his clan. He ended the blood feud between Taardad and Nakai after two hundred years, and made alliance not only with the Nakai, but the Reyn, and the Reyn were not far short of blood feud. He very nearly ended the feud between Shaarad and

Goshien, as well, and might have had Laman not cut down the Tree. Young as he was, it was he who led the Taardad and Nakai, the Reyn and Shaarad, to seek Laman's bloodprice."

Was. So he was dead now, too. Egwene wore sympathy on her face. Rand ignored it; he did not want sympathy. How could he feel loss, for people he had never known? Yet he did. "How did Janduin die?"

The Wise Ones exchanged hesitant glances. At last Amys said, "It was the beginning of the third year of the search for Laman when Shaiel found herself with child. By the laws, she should have returned to the Three-fold Land. A Maiden is forbidden to carry the spear while she carries a child. But Janduin could forbid her nothing; had she asked the moon on a necklace, he would have tried to give it to her. So she stayed, and in the last fight, before Tar Valon, she was lost, and the child was lost. Janduin could not forgive himself for not making her obey the law."

"He gave up his place as clan chief," Bair said. "No one had ever done that before. He was told it could not be done, but he simply walked away. He went north with the young men, to hunt Trollocs and Myrddraal in the Blight. It is a thing wild young men do, and Maidens with less sense than goats. Those who returned said he was killed by a man, though. They said Janduin claimed this man looked like Shaiel, and he would not raise his spear when the man ran him through."

Dead, then. Both dead. He would never lose his love for Tam, never stop thinking of him as father, but he wished he could have seen Janduin and Shaiel, just once.

Egwene tried to comfort him, of course, the way women did. There was no use trying to make her understand that what he had lost was something he had never had. For memories of parents he had Tam al'Thor's quiet laugh, and dimmer remembrance of Kari al'Thor's gentle hands. That was as much as any man could want or need. She seemed disappointed, even a little upset with him, and the Wise Ones appeared to share the feeling to one degree or another, from Bair's openly disapproving frown to Melaine's sniff and ostentatious shifting of her shawl. Women never understood. Rhuarc and Lan and Mat did; they left him alone, as he wanted.

For some reason he did not feel like eating when Melaine had food brought, so he went to lie at the edge of the tent, with one of the cushions under his elbow, where he could watch the slope, and the fog-shrouded city. The sun blasted the valley and the surrounding mountains, burning the shadows. The air that eddied into the tent seemed to come from an open oven.

After a time Mat came over, wearing a clean shirt. He sat beside Rand without speaking, peering into the valley below, the strange spear propped on his knee. Now and again he felt at the cursive script carved into the black haft.

"How is your head?" Rand asked, and Mat jumped.

"It . . . doesn't hurt anymore." He jerked his fingers away from the carving, folded his hands deliberately in his lap. "Not as much, anyway. Whatever that was they mixed up, it did the trick."

He fell silent again, and Rand let him. He did not want to talk, either. He could almost feel time passing, grains of sand in an hourglass dropping one by one, ever so slowly. But everything seemed to tremble, too, the sands ready to explode in a torrent. Foolish. He was just being affected by the shimmering heat haze rising from the mountain's bare rock. The clan chiefs could not reach Alcair Dal one day sooner if Moiraine appeared before him that instant. They were only a part anyway, and maybe the least important part. A little while later he noticed Lan squatting easily atop the same granite outcrop Couladin had used, paying no mind to the sun. The Warder was watching the valley, too. Another man who did not want to talk.

Rand refused a midday meal, too, though Egwene and the Wise Ones took turns trying to make him eat. They seemed to take his refusal calmly enough, but when he suggested returning to Rhuidean to look for Moiraine—and Aviendha, for that matter—Melaine exploded.

"You fool man! No man can go twice to Rhuidean. Even you would not come back alive! Oh, starve if you want to!" She threw half a round loaf of bread at his head. Mat caught it out of the air and calmly began eating.

"Why do you want me to live?" Rand asked her. "You know what that Aes Sedai said in front of Rhuidean. I will destroy you. Why aren't you plotting with Couladin to kill me?" Mat choked, and Egwene planted her fists on her hips, ready to lecture, but Rand kept his attention on Melaine. Instead of answering, she glared at him and left the tent.

It was Bair who spoke. "Everyone thinks they know the Prophecy of Rhuidean, but what they know is what Wise Ones and clan chiefs have told them for generations. Not lies, but not the whole truth. The truth might break the strongest man."

"What is the whole truth?" Rand insisted.

She glanced at Mat, then said, “In this case, the whole truth, the truth known only to Wise Ones and clan chiefs before this, is that you are our doom. Our doom, and our salvation. Without you, no one of our people will live beyond the Last Battle. Perhaps not even until the Last Battle. That is prophecy, and truth. With you. . . . ‘He shall spill out the blood of those who call themselves Aiel as water on sand, and he shall break them as dried twigs, yet the remnant of a remnant shall he save, and they shall live.’ A hard prophecy, but this has never been a gentle land.” She met his gaze without flinching. A hard land, and a hard woman.

He rolled back over and returned to watching the valley. The others left, except for Mat.

In the midafternoon he finally spotted a figure climbing the mountain, scrambling up wearily. Aviendha. Mat had been right; she *was* bare as she was born. And showing some effects of the sun, too, Aiel or not; it was only her hands and face that were sun-darkened, and the rest of her looked decidedly red. He was glad to see her. She disliked him, but only because she thought he had mistreated Elayne. The simplest of motives. Not for prophecy or doom, not for the Dragons on his arms or because he was the Dragon Reborn. For a simple human reason. He almost looked forward to those cool, challenging stares.

When she saw him, she froze, and there was nothing cool in her blue-green eyes. Her gaze made the sun seem cold; he should have been burned to ash on the spot.

“Uh . . . Rand?” Mat said quietly. “I don’t think I would turn my back on her if I were you.”

A tired sigh escaped him. Of course. If she had been into those glass columns, she knew. Bair, Melaine, the others—they had all had years to grow used to it. For Aviendha, it was a fresh wound with no scab. *No wonder she hates me now.*

The Wise Ones scurried out to meet Aviendha, hurrying her away into another tent. The next time Rand saw her she wore a bulky brown skirt and loose white blouse, with a shawl looped around her arms. She did not look very happy about the clothes. She saw him watching, and the fury on her face—the sheer animal rage—was enough to make him turn away.

Shadows were beginning to stretch to the far mountains by the time Moiraine appeared, falling and staggering back to her feet as she climbed, as sunburned as Aviendha. He was startled to see she had no clothes on either. Women were crazy, that was all.

Lan leaped from the stone outcrop and ran down to her. Scooping her into his arms, he ran back upslope, perhaps faster than he had descended, cursing and shouting for the Wise Ones by turns. Moiraine’s head lolled on his shoulder. The Wise Ones came out to take her, Melaine physically barring his way when he tried to follow them into the tent. Lan was left stalking up and down outside, pounding a fist into his hand.

Rand rolled onto his back and stared up at the low tent roof. Three days saved. He should have felt glad Moiraine and Aviendha were back and safe, but his relief was all for days saved. Time was everything. He had to be able to choose his own ground. Maybe he still could.

“What are you going to do now?” Mat asked.

“Something you should like. I am going to break the rules.”

“I meant are you going to get something to eat? Me, I’m hungry.”

In spite of himself, Rand laughed. Something to eat? He did not care if he ever ate again. Mat stared at him as if he were crazy, and that only made him laugh harder. Not crazy. For the first time *somebody* was going to learn what it meant that he was the Dragon Reborn. He was going to break the rules in a way *no one* expected.

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CHAPTER 35

Sharp Lessons

The Heart of the Stone in *Tel’aran’rhiod* was as Egwene remembered it in the real world, huge polished redstone columns rising to a distant ceiling, and, beneath the great central dome, *Callandor* driven into the pale floorstones. Only people were missing. The golden lamps were not lit, yet there was a sort of light, somehow dim and sharp at the same time, that seemed to come from everywhere at once, or nowhere. It was often like that, indoors in *Tel’aran’rhiod.*

What she did not expect was the woman standing beyond the glittering crystal sword and peering off into the pallid shadows among the columns. The way she was dressed startled Egwene. Bare feet, and wide trousers of brocaded yellow silk. Above a darker yellow sash, she was quite bare except for golden chains hanging around her neck. Tiny gold rings decorated her ears in sparkling rows, and most startling of all, another pierced her nose, with a thin, medallion-lined chain running from nose ring to one of the rings in her left ear.

“Elayne?” Egwene gasped, gathering her shawl around her as though she were the one with no blouse. She had garbed herself as a Wise One, this time, for no particular reason.

The Daughter-Heir leaped, and when she came down facing Egwene she was wearing a demure gown of pale green with a high, embroidered neck and long sleeves that dangled points over her hands. No earrings. No nose ring. “It is how the Sea Folk women dress at sea,” she said hurriedly, with a furious blush. “I wanted to see how it felt, and this seemed the best place. I couldn’t do it on the ship, after all.”

“How does it feel?” Egwene asked curiously.

“Cold, actually.” Elayne looked around at the surrounding columns. “And it makes you feel people are staring at you, even when there’s no one there.” Abruptly she laughed. “Poor Thom and Juilin. They do not know where to look most of the time. Half the crew are women.”

Studying the columns herself, Egwene shrugged uncomfortably. It did feel as if they were being watched. No doubt it was just because they were the only people in the Stone. No one who had access to *Tel’aran’rhiod* could expect to find anyone to watch, here. “Thom? Thom Merrilin? And Juilin Sandar? Are *they* with you?”

“Oh, Egwene, Rand sent them. Rand and Lan. Well, Moiraine sent Thom, actually, but Rand sent Master Sandar. To help us. Nynaeve is quite set up about it, about Lan, though of course she won’t let on.”

Egwene smothered a small smile. *Nynaeve* was set up? Elayne’s face was beaming, and her dress had changed again, to a *much* lower neckline, apparently without her realizing it. The *ter’angreal*, the twisted stone ring, helped the Daughter-Heir reach the World of Dreams as easily as Egwene did, but it did not confer control. That had to be learned. Stray thoughts—such as how she might like to look for Rand—could still alter things for Elayne.

“How is he?” Elayne’s voice was a strange blend of forced casualness and apprehension.

“Well,” Egwene said. “I think he is.” She made it a full report. The Portal Stones, and Rhuidean—as much as she knew from what she had heard; what she had managed to infer from talk of seeing through ancestors’ eyes—the strange creature from the Dragon banner marked on Rand’s forearms, Bair’s revelation that he was the Aiel’s doom, the summons of the clan chiefs to Alcair Dal. Amys and the other Wise Ones should be doing that even now; she fervently hoped they were. She even told the strange story of Rand’s true parents, in a shorter form. “I don’t know, though. He has been acting stranger than ever, since, and Mat hardly less. I don’t mean that he’s mad, but. . . . He is as hard as Rhuarc or Lan, in some ways at least; maybe harder. He’s planning something, I think—something he doesn’t mean anybody to know—and he is in a rush to get to it. It is worrying. Sometimes I have the feeling he doesn’t see people anymore, only pieces on a stones board.”

Elayne did not look worried, or not about that, at any rate. “He is what he is, Egwene. A king, or a general, cannot always afford to see people. When a ruler has to do what is right for a nation, there are times when some will be hurt by what is best for the whole. Rand *is* a king, Egwene, even if without a nation unless you count Tear, and if he won't do anything that will hurt anyone, he will end by hurting everyone."

Egwene sniffed. It might make sense, but she did not have to like it. People were people, and they had to be seen as people. "There is more. Some of the Wise Ones can channel. I don't know how many, but I suspect more than a few, to some degree. From what Amys tells me, they find every last woman who has the spark born in her." No Aiel women died trying to teach themselves to channel while not even knowing what they were trying to do; there was no such thing as a wilder among the Aiel. Men who learned they could channel faced a grimmer fate; they went north, to the Great Blight and maybe beyond, to the Blasted Lands and Shayol Ghul. "Going to kill the Dark One," they called it. None survived long enough to face madness. "Aviendha is one with the spark, it turns out. She'll be very strong, I think. Amys thinks so, too."

"Aviendha," Elayne said wonderingly. "Of course. I should have known. I felt the same kinship for Jorin on first sight that I did for her. And for you, for that matter."

"Jorin?"

Elayne grimaced. "I promised I would keep her secret, and the first chance I get, I let my tongue run wild. Well, I don't suppose you will harm her or her sisters. Jorin is Windfinder on *Wavedancer*, Egwene. She can channel, and so can some of the other Windfinders." She glanced at the columns around them, and her neckline was suddenly back up under her chin. She adjusted a dark lace shawl that had not been there a moment before, covering her hair and shadowing her face. "Egwene, you mustn't tell anyone. Jorin is afraid the Tower will try to force them to become Aes Sedai, or try to control them in some fashion. I promised I would do what I can not to let that happen."

"I won't tell," Egwene said slowly. Wise Ones and Windfinders. Women able to channel among both, and none who had taken the Three Oaths, bound by the Oath Rod. The Oaths were supposed to make people trust Aes Sedai, or at least not fear their power, but Aes Sedai still had to move in secret as often as not. Wise Ones—and Windfinders, she was willing to wager—had honored places in their societies. Without being bound to supposedly make them safe. It was something to think on.

"Nynaeve and I are ahead of schedule, too, Egwene. Jorin has been teaching me to work the weather—you would not believe the size of the flows of Air she can weave!—and between us, we’ve had *Wavedancer* moving as fast as he ever has, and that is *fast.* We should be in Tanchico in another three days, maybe two, according to Coine. She’s the Sailmistress, the captain. Ten days from Tear to Tanchico, perhaps. That is with stopping to talk with every Atha’an Miere ship we see. Egwene, the Sea Folk think Rand is their Coramoor.”

“They do?”

“Coine has some of what happened in Tear wrong—she assumes the Aes Sedai serve Rand now, for one thing; Nynaeve and I thought it best not to put her straight about that—but as soon as she tells another Sailmistress, they’re all ready to spread the word and serve Rand. I believe they will do anything he asks of them.”

“I wish the Aiel were so accepting,” Egwene sighed. “Rhuarc thinks some of them might refuse to acknowledge him, Rhuidean Dragons or no. One fellow, a man called Couladin, I’m sure would kill him in a minute given half a chance.”

Elayne took a step forward. “You will see that doesn’t happen.” It was not a question or a request. There was a sharp light in her blue eyes, and a bared dagger in her hand.

“I will do the best I can. Rhuarc is giving him bodyguards.”

Elayne seemed to see the dagger for the first time, and gave a start. The blade vanished. “You must teach me whatever Amys is teaching you, Egwene. It is disconcerting to have things appear and disappear, or suddenly realize I’m wearing different clothes. It just happens.”

“I will. When I have time.” She had been in *Tel’aran’rhiod* too long already. “Elayne, if I am not here when we are supposed to meet next, don’t worry. I will try, but I may not be able to come. Be sure to tell Nynaeve. If I do not come, check every night thereafter. I won’t be more than one or two late, I’m sure.”

“If you say so,” Elayne said doubtfully. “It will surely take weeks to find out if Liandrin and the others are in Tanchico or not. Thom seems to think the city will be very confused.” Her eyes went to *Callandor*, driven half its length into the floor. “Why did he do that, do you think?”

“He said it will hold the Tairens to him. As long as they know it’s there, they have to know he is coming back. Maybe he knows what he is talking about. I hope so.”

“Oh. I thought . . . perhaps he . . . was angry about . . . something.”

Egwene frowned at her. This sudden diffidence was not like Elayne at all. “Angry about what?”

“Oh, nothing. It was just a thought. Egwene, I gave him two letters before leaving Tear. Do you know how he took them?”

“No, I don’t. Did you say something you think might have angered him?”

“Of course not.” Elayne laughed gaily; it sounded forced. Her dress was suddenly dark wool, stout enough for a hard winter. “I would have to be a fool to write things to make him angry.” Her hair sprang up in all directions, like a crazed crown. She was not aware of it. “I am trying to make him love me, after all. Just trying to make him love me. Oh, why can’t men be simple? Why do they have to cause such difficulties? At least he’s away from Berelain.” The wool became silk again, cut even lower than before; her hair made shimmers on her shoulders to shame the gown’s sheen. She hesitated, nibbling her lower lip. “Egwene? If you find the chance, would you tell him I meant what I said in—Egwene? Egwene!”

Something snatched Egwene. The Heart of the Stone dwindled into blackness as if she were being hauled away by the scruff of her neck.

With a gasp, Egwene started awake, heart pounding, staring up the low roof of the night-darkened tent over her head. Only a little moonlight crept in at the open sides. She lay under her blankets—the Waste was as cold at night as it was hot during the day, and the brazier that exuded the sweetish smell of dried dung burning gave little warmth—beneath her blankets right where she had lain down to sleep. But what had pulled her back?

Abruptly she became aware of Amys, sitting cross-legged beside her, cloaked in shadows. The Wise One’s murk-shrouded face seemed as dark and forboding as the night.

“Did you do that, Amys?” she said angrily. “You have no right to just haul me about. I am Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah . . .” The lie came easily to her lips now. “. . . and you have no right—”

Amys cut her off with a grim voice. “Beyond the Dragonwall, in the White Tower, you are Aes Sedai. Here, you are an ignorant pupil, a fool child crawling through a den of vipers.”

“I know I said I would not go to *Tel’aran’rhiod* without you,” Egwene said, trying to sound reasonable, “but—”

Something seized her ankles, hauled her feet into the air; blankets tumbled away, her shift dropped to bunch in her armpits. Upside down, she hung with her face level with that of Amys. Furious, she opened herself to *saidar*—and found herself blocked.

"You wanted to go off alone," Amys hissed softly. "You were warned, but you had to go." Her eyes seemed to glow in the dark, brighter and brighter. "Never a care for what might be waiting. There are things in dreams to shatter the bravest heart." Around eyes like blue coals, her face melted, stretched. Scales sprouted where skin had been; her jaws thrust out, lined with sharp teeth. "Things to *eat* the bravest heart," she growled.

Screaming, Egwene battered vainly at the shield holding her from the True Source. She tried to beat at that horrible face, at the thing that could not be Amys, but something gripped her wrists, stretched her taut and quivering in midair. All she could do was shriek as those jaws closed around her face.

Screaming, Egwene sat up, clutching at her blankets. With an effort she managed to snap her mouth shut, but she could do nothing about the shudders that racked her. She was in the tent—or was she? There was Amys, cross-legged in the shadows, glowing with *saidar*—or was it she? Desperately, she opened herself to the Source, and nearly howled when she found the barrier again. Tossing the blankets aside, she scrambled across the layered rugs on hands and knees, scattered her neatly folded clothes with both hands. She had a belt knife. Where was it? Where? There!

"Sit down," Amys said acerbically, "before I dose you for vapors and fidgets. You will not like the taste."

Egwene twisted around on her knees, the short knife held in both hands; they would have trembled if not clutched together around the hilt. "Is it really you this time?"

"I am myself, now and also then. Sharp lessons are the best lessons. Do you mean to stab me?"

Hesitating, Egwene sheathed the knife. "You have no right to—"

"I have every right! You gave me your word. I did not know Aes Sedai could lie. If I am to teach you, I must know you will do as I say. I will not watch a pupil of mine cut her own throat!" Amys sighed; the glow around her vanished, and so did the barrier between Egwene and *saidar.* "I cannot shield you any longer. You are far stronger than I. In the One Power, you are. You very nearly battered down my shield. But if you cannot keep your word, I do not know that I want to instruct you.”

“I will keep my word, Amys. I promise I will. But I have to meet with my friends, in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* I promised them, too. Amys, they might need my help, my advice.” Amys’s face was not easy to make out in the darkness, but Egwene did not see any softening. “Please, Amys. You’ve taught me so much already. I think I could find them wherever they are, now. Please, don’t stop when there is so much yet for me to learn. Whatever you want me to do, I will.”

“Braid your hair,” Amys said in a flat tone.

“My hair?” Egwene said uncertainly. It would certainly be no inconvenience, but why? She wore it loose now, falling below her shoulders, yet it was not that long ago that she had almost burst with pride on the day the Women’s Circle back home had said she was old enough to put her hair in a braid like the one Nynaeve still wore. In the Two Rivers, a braid said you were old enough to be considered a woman.

“One over each ear.” Amys’s voice was still like a flat rock. “If you have no ribbon to twine in the braids, I will give you some. That is how little girls wear their hair among us. Girls too young to be held to their word. When you prove to me that you can keep yours, you can stop wearing it so. But if you lie to me again, I will make you cut your skirts off short, like little girls’ dresses, and find you a doll to carry. When you decide to behave as a woman, you will be treated as a woman. Agree to it, or I will teach you no more.”

“I will agree if you will accompany me when I must meet—”

“Agree, *Aes Sedai*! I do not bargain with children, or those who cannot keep their word. You will do as I say, accept what I choose to give, and no more. Or else go off and get yourself killed on your own. I—will—not—aid it!”

Egwene was glad of the dark; it hid her scowl. She *had* given her word, but this was all so unfair. No one was trying to hedge Rand around with silly rules. Well, perhaps he *was* different. She was not sure she wanted to trade Amys’s edicts for Couladin’s desiring to put a spear through her, in any case. Mat would certainly not put up with other people’s rules. Yet *ta’veren* or not, Mat had nothing to learn; all he had to do was be. Very likely he would refuse to learn anything given the chance, unless it had to do with gambling or raising food. She wanted to learn. Sometimes it seemed an unending thirst; however much she absorbed, she could not quench it. That still did not make it fair. *Only the way things are,* she thought ruefully.

“I agree,” she said. “I will do as you say, accept what you give, and no more.”

“Good.” After a long pause, as if waiting to see whether Egwene wanted to say more—she wisely held her tongue—Amys added, “I mean to be hard on you, Egwene, but not without purpose. That you think I have taught you much already only shows how little you knew to begin. You have a strong talent for the dream; very likely you will outstrip any of us by far, one day. But if you do not learn what I can teach you—what we four can all teach you—you will never develop that talent fully. It is most likely you will not live long enough to do so.”

“I will try, Amys.” She thought she managed a good approximation of meekness. Why did the woman not say what she wanted to hear? If Egwene could not go to *Tel’aran’rhiod* alone, then Amys had to come, too, when she next met Elayne. Or it might be Nynaeve, next time.

“Good. Do you have anything else to say?”

“No, Amys.”

The pause was longer this time; Egwene waited as patiently as she could, hands folded on her knees.

“So you can hold your demands inside when you wish,” Amys said at last, “even if it does make you twitch like a goat with the itch. Do I mistake the cause? I can give you an ointment. No? Very well. I will accompany you when you must meet your friends.”

“Thank you,” Egwene said primly. A goat with an itch indeed!

“In case you did not listen when I first told you, learning will be neither easy nor short. You think you have worked these last days. Prepare to give real time and effort now.”

“Amys, I will learn as much as you can teach me, and I will work as hard as you want, but between Rand and the Darkfriends. . . . Time to learn may turn out to be a luxury, and my purse empty.”

“I know,” Amys said wearily. “He troubles us already. Come. You have wasted enough time with your childishness. There is women’s business to be discussed. Come. The others are waiting.”

For the first time Egwene realized Moiraine's blankets were empty. She reached for her dress, but Amys said, "That will not be needed. We only go a short way. Throw a blanket around your shoulders and come. I have done a great deal of work for Rand al'Thor already, and I must do more when we are finished."

Shrugging a blanket around her doubtfully, Egwene followed the older woman into the night. It was *cold.* Skin turning to tight goose bumps, she hopped from bare foot to bare foot over stony ground that seemed little short of ice. After the heat of day, the night seemed as frigid as the heart of a Two Rivers winter. Her breath turned to thin mist in front of her mouth, absorbed immediately by the air. Cold or not, the air was still dry.

At the rear of the Wise Ones' camp stood a small tent she had not seen before, low like the others, but staked tightly down all around. To her surprise, Amys began stripping off her clothes, and motioned her to do the same. Clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering, she followed Amys's example slowly. When the Aiel woman had shed down to her skin, she stood there just as if the night were not freezing, taking deep breaths and flailing herself with her arms before finally ducking inside. Egwene darted after her with alacrity.

Damp heat hit her like a stick between the eyes. Sweat popped out of every pore.

Moiraine was already there, and the other Wise Ones, and Aviendha, all bare-skinned and sweating, sitting around a large iron kettle full to the brim with sooty stones. Kettle and stones alike radiated heat. The Aes Sedai looked mostly recovered from her ordeal, though there was a tightness around her eyes that had not been there before.

As Egwene was gingerly finding a place to sit—no layered rugs here; only rocky ground—Aviendha scooped a handful of water from a smaller kettle at her side and tossed it into the larger one. The water hissed to steam, leaving not even a damp spot on the stones. Aviendha had a sour look on her face. Egwene knew how she felt. Novices in the Tower were also given chores; she was not sure if she had hated scrubbing floors more than pots or the other way around. This task did not look nearly so onerous.

"We must discuss what to do about Rand al'Thor," Bair said when Amys was seated, too.

"Do about him?" Egwene said, alarmed. "He has the signs. He is the one you have been looking for."

“He is the one,” Melaine said grimly, brushing long strands of red-gold hair from her damp face. “We must try to see that as many of our people as possible survive his coming.”

“Just as importantly,” Seana said, “we must assure that he survives to fulfill the rest of the prophecy.” Melaine glared at her, and Seana added in a patient tone, “Else none of us will survive.”

“Rhuarc said he would set some of the Jindo for bodyguards,” Egwene said slowly. “Has he changed his mind?”

Amys shook her head. “He has not. Rand al’Thor sleeps in the Jindo tents, with a hundred men awake to see he wakes as well. But men often see things differently than we. Rhuarc will follow him, perhaps oppose him in decisions he thinks are wrong, but he will not try to guide him.”

“Do you think he needs guiding?” Moiraine arched an eyebrow at that, but Egwene ignored it. “He has done what he had to without guidance so far.”

“Rand al’Thor does not know our ways,” Amys replied. “There are a hundred mistakes he could make to turn a chief or clan against him, to make them see a wetlander instead of He Who Comes With the Dawn. My husband is a good man and a fine chief, but he is no peacetalker, trained to guide angry men to ground their spears. We must have someone close to Rand al’Thor who can whisper in his ear when he seems ready to step wrongly.” She motioned Aviendha to throw more water on the hot rocks; the younger woman complied with a sullen grace.

“And we must watch him,” Melaine put in sharply. “We must have some idea of what he means to do before he does it. The fulfillment of the Prophecy of Rhuidean has begun—it cannot be halted short of its end, one way or another—but I mean to see that as many of our people survive as is possible. How that can be managed depends on what Rand al’Thor intends.”

Bair leaned toward Egwene. She seemed to be all bone and sinew. “You have known him from childhood. Will he confide in you?”

“I doubt it,” Egwene told her. “He does not trust as he used to.” She avoided looking at Moiraine.

“Would she tell us if he did confide?” Melaine demanded. “I raise no anger here, but Egwene and Moiraine are Aes Sedai. What they seek may not be what we seek.”

"We served Aes Sedai once," Bair said simply. "We failed them then. Perhaps we are meant to serve again." Melaine flushed with obvious embarrassment.

Moiraine gave no sign that she saw, or that she had heard the woman's earlier words, for that matter. Except for that tightness around her eyes she looked as calm as ice. "I will help as I can," she said coolly, "but I have little influence with Rand. For the present, he weaves the Pattern to his own design."

"Then we must watch him closely and hope." Bair sighed. "Aviendha, you will meet Rand al'Thor when he wakes each day and do not leave him until he goes to his blankets at night. You will stay as close to him as the hair on his head. Your training must come as we can manage, I fear; it will be a burden on you, doing both things, but it cannot be avoided. If you talk to him—and especially listen—you should have no trouble remaining near him. Few men will send away a pretty young woman who listens to them. Perhaps he will let something slip."

Aviendha grew stiffer by the word. When Bair finished, she spat, "I will not!" Dead silence fell, and every eye swung to her, but she stared back defiantly.

"Will not?" Bair said softly. "Will not." She seemed to be tasting words strange in her mouth.

"Aviendha," Egwene said gently, "no one is asking you to betray Elayne, only to talk to him." If anything, the former Maiden of the Spear looked even more eager to find herself a weapon.

"Is this the discipline Maidens learn now?" Amys said sharply. "If it is, you will find we teach a harder. If there is some reason you cannot stay near to Rand al'Thor, speak it." Aviendha's defiance wilted a trifle, and she mumbled inaudibly. Amys's voice took on a knife edge. "I said, speak it!"

"I do not like him!" Aviendha burst out. "I hate him! Hate him!" Had Egwene not known better, she would have thought her close to tears. The words shocked her, though; surely Aviendha could not mean it.

"We are not asking you to love him, or take him to your bed," Seana said acidly. "We are *telling* you to *listen* to the man, and you will obey!"

"Childishness!" Amys snorted. "What kind of young women is the world producing now? Do *none* of you grow up?"

Bair and Melaine were even sharper, with the older woman threatening to tie Aviendha on Rand's horse in place of his saddle—she sounded as if she meant it precisely—and Melaine suggesting that instead of sleep Aviendha should perhaps spend the night digging holes and filling them in to clear her head. The threats were not intended to coerce her, Egwene realized; these women expected and intended to be obeyed. Any useless labor Aviendha earned herself would be for being stubborn. That stubbornness seemed to be shrinking, with four sets of Wise Ones' eyes boring at her—she settled into more of a defensive crouch, on her knees—but she was holding on.

Egwene leaned over to put a hand on Aviendha's shoulder. "You've told me we are near-sisters, and I think we are. Will you do it for me? Think of it as looking after him for Elayne. You like her, too, I know. You can tell him she says she meant what she said in her letters. He will like hearing that."

Aviendha's face spasmed. "I will do it," she said, slumping. "I will watch him for Elayne. For Elayne."

Amys shook herself. "Foolishness. You will watch him because we told you to, girl. If you think you have another reason, you will find you are painfully mistaken. More water. The steam is fading."

Aviendha hurled another handful onto the rocks as though hurling a spear. Egwene was glad to see her spirit returning, but she thought she would caution her when they were alone. Spirit was all very well, but there were some women—these four Wise Ones, for example, and Siuan Sanche—with whom it was common sense to keep a check on your spirit. You could shout at the Women's Circle all day, and you still ended up doing what they wanted anyway, wishing you had kept your mouth shut.

"Now that that is settled," Bair said, "let us enjoy the steam in silence while we can. There is much for some of us yet to do tonight, and for nights to come, if we are to bring a gathering to Alcair Dal for Rand al'Thor."

"Men always find ways to make work for women," Amys said. "Why should Rand al'Thor be different?"

Quiet settled over the tent except for the hiss when Aviendha tossed more water on the hot rocks. The Wise Ones sat with hands on knees, breathing deeply. It was really quite pleasant, even relaxing, the damp heat, the slick, cleansing feel of sweat on the skin. Egwene thought it was worth missing a little sleep.

Moiraine did not look relaxed, though. She stared at the steaming kettle as if seeing something else, far off.

“Was it bad?” Egwene said softly so as not to disturb the Wise Ones. “Rhuidean, I mean?” Aviendha looked up quickly, but said nothing.

“The memories fade,” Moiraine said, just as quietly. She did not look away from her distant vision, and her voice was almost chill enough to take away the heat in the air. “Most are already gone. Some, I knew already. Others. . . . The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and we are only the thread of the Pattern. I have given my life to finding the Dragon Reborn, finding Rand, and seeing him ready to face the Last Battle. I will see that done, whatever it requires. Nothing and no one can be more important than that.”

Shivering despite her sweat, Egwene closed her eyes. The Aes Sedai did not want comforting. She was a lump of ice, not a woman. Egwene settled herself to trying to recapture that pleasant feeling. She suspected such would be few and far between in the days to come.

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CHAPTER 36

Misdirections

The Aiel broke camp early and were away from Rhuidean while the not-yet-risen sun still sharply silhouetted the far mountains. In three parties they wound around Chaendaer, down onto rough flats broken by hills and tall stone spires and flat-topped buttes, gray and brown and every hue between, some streaked with long swirls in shades of red and ocher. Occasionally a great natural arch loomed as they moved north and west, or strange, huge slabs of rock balanced improbably, forever on the brink of falling. Every way Rand looked, jagged mountains reared in the distance. All the wreckage of the Breaking of the World seemed gathered here in the place called the Aiel Waste. Where the hard ground was not cracked clay, yellow or brown or something between, it was stony and stark, and everywhere split by dry gulleys and hollows. The scattered vegetation was sparse and low, thorny bushes and leafless things with spines; the few blossoms, white or red or yellow, were startling in their isolation. Occasionally stretches of tough grass covered the ground, and rarely, there was a stunted tree also likely to have thorns or spines. Compared to Chaendaer and the valley of Rhuidean, it almost looked lush. The air was so clear, the land so barren, it seemed Rand could see for miles and miles.

That air was no less dry, though, the heat no less relentless, with the sun a lump of molten gold high in a cloudless sky. Rand had wrapped a *shoufa* around his head in an effort to keep the sun off, and drank from the waterbag on Jeade'en's saddle frequently. Oddly, wearing his coat seemed to help; he did not sweat any less, but his shirt stayed damp beneath the red wool, cooling him somewhat. Mat used a strip of cloth to tie a large white kerchief atop his head, like some odd cap that hung down the back of his neck, and he kept shading his eyes against the glare. He carried the raven-marked sword-spear like a lance, the butt tucked into his stirrup.

Four hundred or so Jindo comprised their party; Rand and Mat rode at the front alongside Rhuarc and Heirn. The Aiel walked, of course, their tents and some of the booty from Tear on packmules and horses. A number of the Jindo Maidens fanned ahead as scouts, and Stone Dogs trailed behind as a rear guard, with the main column hedged by watchful eyes, ready spears, and bows with arrows nocked. Supposedly the Peace of Rhuidean extended until those who had gone to Chaendaer returned to their own holds, but as Rhuarc explained to Rand, mistakes had been known to happen, and apologies and blood-price did not bring the dead out of their graves. Rhuarc seemed to think a mistake especially likely this time, certainly in part because of the Shaido party.

The lands of the Shaido clan lay beyond those of the Jindo's Taardad, in the same direction from Chaendaer, and they parallelled the Jindo some quarter of a mile distant. According to Rhuarc, Couladin should have waited another day for his brother to return. That Rand had seen Muradin after he had plucked out his own eyes made no difference; ten days was the time allotted. To leave sooner was to abandon whoever had entered Rhuidean. Yet Couladin had set the Shaido to folding their tents as soon as he saw the Jindo pack animals being loaded. The Shaido moved along now with their own scouts and rear guard, seemingly ignoring the Jindo, but the space between never widened much beyond three hundred paces. It was usual to have witnesses from perhaps half a dozen of the larger septs when a man sought the marking of a clan chief, and Couladin's people outnumbered the Jindo by at least two to one. Rand suspected that the third party, halfway between Shaido and Taardad, was the reason the interval did not narrow suddenly and violently.

The Wise Ones walked just like all the other Aiel, including those strange, white-robed men and women Rhuarc called *gai'shain*, who led their packhorses. Not servants, exactly, but Rand was unsure he really understood Rhuarc's explanation about honor and obligation and captives; Heirn had been even more confusing, as though making an effort to explain why water was wet. Moiraine, Egwene and Lan rode with the Wise Ones, or at least the two women did. The Warder had his warhorse a little off on the side of the Shaido, watching them as closely as he did the rugged landscape. Sometimes Moiraine or Egwene or both got down to walk awhile, talking with the Wise Ones. Rand would have given his last penny to hear what they said. They looked in his direction often, quick glances that he was doubtless not supposed to notice. For some reason, Egwene was wearing her hair in two braids, plaited with lengths of red ribbon, like a bride's. He did not know why. He had commented on them before leaving Chaendaer—just mentioned them—and she nearly took his head off.

"Elayne is the woman for you."

He looked down at Aviendha in confusion. The challenging look was back in her blue-green eyes, but still layered atop stark dislike. She had been waiting outside the tent when he awoke that morning, and had not strayed more than three paces from him since. Clearly the Wise Ones had set her to spy, and clearly he was not supposed to realize it. She was pretty, and he was assumed to be fool enough not to see beyond that. No doubt that was the real reason she wore skirts now, and carried no weapon beyond a small beltknife. Women seemed to think men were simple-minded. Come to think of it, none of the other Aiel had commented at her change of clothing, but even Rhuarc avoided looking at her for too long. Probably they knew why she was there, or had some inkling of the Wise Ones' plan, and did not want to speak of it.

Rhuidean. He still did not know why she had gone; Rhuarc muttered about "women's business," plainly reluctant to discuss it around her. Considering the way she clung to Rand's side, that meant not discussing it at all. The clan chief was certainly listening now, and Heirn, and every Jindo in earshot. It was hard to tell with Aiel, sometimes, but he thought they looked amused. Mat was whistling softly, ostentatiously looking at anything but the two of them. Even so, this was the first time all day she had spoken to him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Her bulky skirts did not hinder her, walking along beside Jeade'en. No, not walking. Stalking. If she were a cat, she would be lashing her tail. "Elayne is a wetlander, your own kind." She tossed her head arrogantly. The short tail that Aiel warriors wore at the nape of the neck was missing. The folded scarf around her temples nearly enveloped her hair. "Exactly the woman for you. Is she not beautiful? Her back is straight, her limbs supple and strong, her lips like plump loveapples. Her hair is spun gold, her eyes blue sapphires. Her skin is smoother than the finest silk, her bosom fine and well-rounded. Her hips are—"

He cut her off frantically, his cheeks heating. "I know she's pretty. What are you doing?"

“I am describing her.” Aviendha frowned up at him. “Have you seen her in her bath? There is no need for me to describe her if you have seen—”

“I have *not* seen!” He wished he did not sound strangled. Rhuarc and the others *were* listening, faces too blank for anything but amusement. Mat rolled his eyes with an open, roguish grin.

The woman only shrugged and rearranged her shawl. “She should have arranged it. But I have seen her, and I will act as *her* near sister.” The emphasis seemed to say *his* “near sister” might have done the same; Aiel customs were strange, but this was mad! “Her hips—”

“Stop that!”

She gave him a sideways glare. “She is the woman for you. Elayne has laid her heart at your feet for a bridal wreath. Do you think there was anyone in the Stone of Tear who does not know?”

“I do not want to talk about Elayne,” he told her firmly. Certainly not if she meant to go on as she had begun. The thought made his face go hot again. The woman did not seem to care *what* she said, or who heard!

“You do well to blush, putting her aside when she has bared her heart to you.” Aviendha’s voice was hard and contemptuous. “Two letters she wrote, baring all as if she had stripped herself beneath your mother’s roof. You entice her into corners for kisses, then reject her. She meant every word of those letters, Rand al’Thor! Egwene told me so. She meant every word. What do you mean toward her, wetlander?”

Rand scrubbed a hand through his hair, and had to rearrange his *shoufa.* Elayne meant every word? In both letters? That was flat impossible. One contradicted the other nearly point for point! Suddenly he gave a start. *Egwene* had told her? About Elayne’s letters? Did women discuss these things among themselves? Did they plan out between them how best to confuse a man?

He found himself missing Min. Min had never made him look a fool. Well, not more than once or twice. And she had never insulted him. Well, she had called him “sheepherder” a few times. But he felt comfortable around her, warm, in a strange way. She never made him feel a complete idiot, like Elayne, and Aviendha.

His silence seemed to irritate the Aiel woman more, if such was possible. Muttering to herself, striding along as though she wanted to trample something, she adjusted and readjusted her shawl half a dozen times. Finally her grumbling faded away. Instead, she began staring at him. Like a vulture. He could not see how she did not trip and fall on her face.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he demanded.

"I am listening, Rand al'Thor, since you wish me to be silent." She smiled around gritted teeth. "Do you not enjoy having me listen to you?"

He glanced beyond her at Mat, who shook his head. There was just no understanding women. Rand tried to set himself to considering what lay ahead, but it was difficult with the woman's eyes on him. Pretty eyes, if they had not been full of spite, but he did wish she would look at something else.

Shading his eyes against the sun's glare, Mat did his best to avoid looking at Rand and the Aiel woman striding along between their horses. He could not understand why Rand put up with her. Aviendha was pretty enough, to be sure—more than just pretty, especially now she wore a semblance of proper clothes—but with a viper for a tongue and a temper to make Nynaeve look meek. He was just glad Rand was stuck with her and not him.

He pulled the kerchief from his head and wiped the sweat off of his face, then tied it back. The heat and the eternal sun in his eyes were beginning to get to him. Was there no such thing as shade in this whole land? Sweat stung his wounds. He had refused Healing the night before, when Moiraine wakened him after he had finally gotten to sleep. A few cuts were a small price to avoid having the Power used on you, and the Wise Ones' filthy-tasting tea had settled his headache. Well, after a fashion, anyway. What else ailed him, he did not think Moiraine could do anything about, and he had no intention of telling her until he understood it himself. If then. He did not even want to think of it.

Moiraine and the Wise Ones were watching him. Watching Rand actually, he supposed, but it felt the same. Surprisingly, the sun-haired one, Melaine, had climbed up on Aldieb behind the Aes Sedai, riding awkwardly and holding Moiraine around the waist as they talked. He had not known Aiel would ride at all. A very pretty woman, Melaine, with those fiery green eyes. Except, of course, that she could channel. A man would have to be an utter fool to tangle himself with one of those. Shifting in Pips's saddle, he reminded himself that it did not matter to him what Aiel did.

I've been to Rhuidean. I've done what those snake folk said I had to. And what did he have to show for it? *This bloody spear, a silver medallion, and. . . . I could go now. If I have any sense, I will.*

He could go. Try to find his own way out of the Waste—before he died of thirst or sunstroke. He could if Rand was not still pulling at him, holding him. The easiest manner of finding out was just to try leaving. Looking at the bleak landscape, he grimaced. A wind picked up—it felt as if it blew across an overheated cookstove—and small whirlwinds spun funnels of yellow dust across the cracked ground. Heat-haze made the distant mountains shimmer. Maybe it was best to stay around a while longer.

One of the Maidens who had been scouting ahead came trotting back and fell in beside Rhuarc, speaking for his ear alone. She flashed Mat a grin when she was done, and he busied himself picking a sharp burr out of Pips's mane. He remembered her all too well, a red-haired woman named Dorindha, about Egwene's age. Dorindha was one of those who had talked him into trying Maidens' Kiss. She had collected the first forfeit. It was not that he did not want to meet her eyes, certainly not that he could not; keeping your horse free of burrs and the like was important.

"Peddlers," Rhuarc announced when Dorindha sprinted off the way she had come. "Peddlers' wagons, heading in this direction." He did not sound pleased.

Mat brightened considerably, though. A peddler might be just the thing. If the fellow knew the way in, he knew the way out. He wondered if Rand suspected what he was thinking; the man had gone as blank-faced as any of the Aiel.

The Aiel picked up their pace a little—Couladin's people imitated the Jindo and the Wise Ones' party with hardly a hestitation; their own scouts had probably brought word, too—a quick enough step that the horses had to maintain a brisk walk. The sun did not bother the Aiel at all, not even the *gai'shain* in their white robes. They flowed over the broken ground.

Less than two miles brought the wagons in sight, a dozen and a half of them, strung out in a line. All showed the wear of hard travel, with spare wheels lashed everywhere. Despite a coat of yellow dust, the first two looked like white-painted boxes on wheels, or little houses, complete with wooden steps at the back and a metal stove-chimney sticking through the roof. The last three, drawn by twenty-mule hitches, appeared no more than huge barrels, also white, doubtless full of water. Those in between could have done for peddlers’ wagons in the Two Rivers, with high stout-spoked wheels and clanking clusters of pots and things in big net bags tied all along the tall round canvas covers.

The wagondrivers drew rein as soon as they spotted the Aiel, waiting for the columns to come to them. A heavy man in a pale gray coat and dark, wide-brimmed hat climbed down from the back of the lead wagon and stood watching, now and then taking off his flat-crowned hat to wipe his forehead with a large white handkerchief. If he was nervous, looking at maybe fifteen hundred Aiel sweeping toward him, Mat could not blame him. The strange thing was the expressions on the Aiel nearest Mat. Rhuarc, trotting ahead of Rand’s horse, looked grim, and Heirn wore a face that could break rocks.

“I don’t understand,” Mat said. “You look like you’re going to kill somebody.” That would certainly put paid to his hopes. “I thought there were three kinds of people you Aiel let come out here in the Waste; peddlers, gleemen, and the Traveling People.”

“Peddlers and gleemen are welcome,” Heirn replied curtly. If this was a welcome, Mat did not want to see Aiel being unwelcoming.

“What about the Traveling People?” he asked curiously. When Heirn kept silent, he added, “Tinkers? The Tuatha’an?” The sept chief’s face grew even harder before he turned his eyes back to the wagons. Aviendha shot Mat a look as if he were a fool.

Rand drew Jeade’en close to Pips. “I’d not mention Tinkers to the Aiel if I were you,” he said in a low voice. “They are . . . a touchy subject.”

“If you say so.” Why would *Tinkers* be a touchy subject? “Looks to me like they’re being touchy enough about this peddler. Peddler! I can remember merchants who came to Emond’s Field with fewer wagons.”

“He came into the Waste,” Rand chuckled. Jeade’en tossed his head and danced a few steps. “I wonder if he will leave it again?” Rand’s twisted grin did not reach his eyes. Sometimes Mat almost wished Rand would decide whether he was mad or not and get it over with. Almost.

Three hundred paces short of the wagons, Rhuarc signaled a halt, and he and Heirn went on alone. At least, that seemed to have been his intention, but Rand heeled his dapple stallion after them, and the inevitable bodyguard of a hundred Jindo followed. And Aviendha, of course, keeping close as though tied to Rand’s horse. Mat rode right with them. If Rhuarc sent this fellow packing, he did not mean to miss his chance to go along.

Couladin came trotting out from the Shaido. Alone. Perhaps he meant to do as Rhuarc and Heirn had intended, but Mat suspected the man was pointing out that he went alone where Rand needed a hundred guards. At first it seemed Moiraine was coming, too, but words passed between the Wise Ones and her, and they all stayed where they were. Watching, though. The Aes Sedai dismounted, playing with something small that sparkled, and Egwene and the Wise Ones clustered around her.

Despite his face mopping, the big, gray-coated fellow did not appear uneasy up close, although he jumped when Maidens suddenly rose out of the ground, encircling his wagons. The wagon drivers, hard-faced men with more than enough scars and broken noses to go around, looked ready to crawl under their seats; they were tough alley dogs compared to Aiel wolves. The peddler recovered right away. He was not fat for all his size; that heaviness was muscle. Rand and Mat on their horses earned his curious glances, but he singled out Rhuarc at once. His hooked beak of a nose and dark, tilted eyes gave his square swarthy face a predatory look not lessened when he put on a wide smile and swept his broad-brimmed hat off in a bow. “I am Hadnan Kadere,” he said, “peddler. I seek Cold Rocks Hold, good sirs, but I will trade with one and all. I have many fine—”

Rhuarc cut him off like an icy knife. “You head well away from Cold Rocks, or any hold. How is it you have come this far from the Dragonwall without acquiring a guide?”

“I do not really know, good sir.” Kadere did not lose his smile, but the corners of his mouth tightened a trifle. “I have traveled openly. This is my first visit to the Three-fold Land so far south. I thought perhaps here there are no guides.” Couladin snorted loudly, twirled one of his spears lazily. Kadere hunched his shoulders as if he felt steel sliding into his thick body already.

“There are always guides,” Rhuarc said coldly. “You have luck to have come so far without one. Luck that you are not dead, or walking back to the Dragonwall in your skin.” Kadere flashed an uneasy, toothy smile, and the clan chief went on. “Luck to meet us. Had you continued this way another day or two, you would have reached Rhuidean.”

The peddler’s face went gray. “I have heard. . . .” He stopped to swallow. “I did not know, good sirs. You must believe, I would not do such a thing deliberately. Nor by accident,” he added hastily. “The Light illumine my words for truth, good sirs, I would not!”

“That is well,” Rhuarc told him. “The penalties are severe. You may travel with me to Cold Rocks. It would not do for you to become lost again. The Three-fold Land can be a dangerous place for those who do not know it.”

Couladin’s head came up defiantly. “Why not with me?” he said in a sharp voice. “The Shaido are the more numerous here, Rhuarc. By custom, he travels with me.”

“Have you become a clan chief when I did not see?” The fire-haired Shaido flushed, but Rhuarc showed no hint of satisfaction, only went on in that level voice. “The peddler seeks Cold Rocks. He will journey with me. The Shaido with you may trade with him as we travel. The Taardad are not so starved for peddlers that we try to keep them to ourselves.”

Couladin’s face went even darker, yet he moderated his tone, even if it did creak with the effort. “I will camp near Cold Rocks, Rhuarc. He Who Comes With the Dawn concerns *all* Aiel, not only the Taardad. The Shaido will have their proper place. The Shaido, too, will follow He Who Comes With the Dawn.” He had not, Mat realized, acknowledged that that was Rand. Peering at the wagons, Rand did not seem to be listening.

Rhuarc was silent a moment. “The Shaido will be welcome guests in the lands of the Taardad, if they come to follow He Who Comes With the Dawn.” And that could be taken two ways, as well.

Kadere had been mopping his face all this time, likely seeing himself in the middle of a battle between Aiel. He punctuated Rhuarc’s invitation with a heavy sigh of relief. “Thank you, good sirs. Thank you.” Probably for not killing him. “Perhaps you would care to see what my wagons have to offer? Some special thing you might like?”

“Later,” Rhuarc said. “We will stop at Imre Stand for the night, and you may show your wares then.” Couladin was already striding away, having heard the name of Imre Stand, whatever that was. Kadere started to put his hat back on.

“A hat,” Mat said, reining Pips closer to the peddler. If he had to remain in the Waste a bit longer, at least he could keep that bloody sun out of his eyes. “I’ll give a gold mark for a hat like that.”

“Done!” called a woman’s huskily melodious voice.

Mat looked around, and gave a start. The only woman in sight beside Aviendha and the Maidens was walking up from the second wagon, but she certainly did not match that voice, one of the loveliest he had ever heard.

Rand frowned at her and shook his head, and he had cause. A foot shorter than Kadere, she must have weighed as much or more. Rolls of fat nearly hid her dark eyes, disguising whether they were tilted or not, but her nose was a hatchet that dwarfed the peddler's. In a dress of pale-cream silk stretched tight around her bulk, with a white lace shawl held above her head on elaborate ivory combs thrust into long, coarse black hair, she moved with incongruous lightness, almost like one of the Maidens.

"A good offer," she said in those musical tones. "I am Keille Shaogi, peddler." She snatched the hat away from Kadere and thrust it up at Mat. "Stout, good sir, and nearly new. You will need its like to survive the Three-fold Land. Here, a man can die . . ." Fat fingers made a whip-crack. ". . . like so." Her sudden laugh had the same throaty, caressing quality as her voice. "Or a woman. A gold mark, you said." When he hesitated, her half-buried eyes glittered raven black. "I seldom offer any man a bargain twice."

A peculiar woman to say the least. Kadere made no protest beyond the slightest grimace. If Keille was his partner, there was no doubt who was the senior. And if the hat kept Mat's head from broiling, it really was worth the price so far as he was concerned. She bit the Tairen mark he handed her before releasing the hat. For a wonder, it fit. And if it was no cooler under that wide brim, at least it was blessedly shady. The kerchief went into his coat pocket.

"Anything for the rest of you?" The stout woman ran her eye over the Aiel, murmuring, "What a pretty child" to Aviendha with a baring of teeth that might have been a smile. To Rand, she said sweetly, "And you, good sir?" That voice coming out of that face was truly jarring, especially when it took on this honeyed tone. "Something to shelter you from this desperate land?" Turning Jeade'en so he could peer at the wagon drivers, Rand only shook his head. With that *shoufa* around his face, he really did look like an Aiel.

"Tonight, Keille," Kadere said. "We open trade tonight, at a place called Imre Stand."

"Do we, now." For a long moment she peered at the Shaido column, and at the Wise Ones' party for a longer. Abruptly she turned for her own wagon, saying over her shoulder to the other peddler, "Then why are you keeping these good sirs standing here? Move, Kadere. Move." Rand stared after her, shaking his head again.

There was a gleeman back by her wagon. Mat blinked, thinking the heat had gotten to him, but the fellow did not vanish, a dark-haired man in his middle years wearing a patch-covered cloak. He watched the gathering apprehensively until Keille shoved him up the wagon's step ahead of her. Kadere looked at her white wagon with less expression than one of the Aiel before stalking off to his own. Truly an odd lot.

"Did you see the gleeman?" Mat asked Rand, who nodded vaguely, eyeing the line of wagons as if he had never seen a wagon before. Rhuarc and Heirn were already on their way back to the rest of the Jindo. The hundred surrounding Rand waited patiently, dividing their gaze between him and anything that might hide even a mouse. The drivers began gathering their reins, but Rand did not move. "Strange people these peddlers, wouldn't you say, Rand? But I suppose you have to be strange to come to the Waste. Look at us." That brought a grimace from Aviendha, but Rand seemed not to have heard. Mat wanted him to say something. Anything. This silence was unnerving. "Would you have thought escorting a peddler would be such an honor Rhuarc and Couladin would argue over it? Do you understand any of this *ji'e'toh*?"

"You *are* a fool," Aviendha muttered. "It had nothing to do with *ji'e'toh.* Couladin tries to behave as a clan chief. Rhuarc cannot allow that until—unless—he has gone to Rhuidean. The Shaido would steal bones from a dog—they would steal the bones *and* the dog—yet even they deserve a true chief. And because of Rand al'Thor we must allow a thousand of them to pitch their tents in our lands."

"His eyes," Rand said without looking away from the wagons. "A dangerous man."

Mat frowned at him. "Whose eyes? Couladin's?"

"Kadere's eyes. All that sweating, going white in the face. Yet his eyes never changed. You always have to watch the eyes. Not what he seems."

"Sure, Rand." Mat shifted in his saddle, half lifted his reins as if to ride on. Maybe silence had not been so bad. "You have to watch the eyes."

Rand changed his study to the tops of the nearest spires and buttes, twisting his head this way and that. "Time is the risk," he murmured. "Time sets snares. I have to avoid theirs while setting mine."

There was nothing up there that Mat could make out beyond an occasional scattering of brush and now and then a stunted tree. Aviendha frowned at the heights, then at Rand, adjusting her shawl. "Snares?" Mat said. *Light, let him give me an answer that isn’t crazy.* “Who’s setting snares?”

For a moment Rand looked at him as if he did not understand the question. The peddlers’ wagons were starting off with an escort of Maidens loping alongside, turning to follow the Jindo as they trotted past, mirrored by the Shaido. More Maidens sped ahead to scout. Only the Aiel around Rand stood still, though the Wise Ones’ party dawdled and watched, and from Egwene’s gestures, Mat thought she wanted to come check on them.

“You can’t see it, or feel it,” Rand said finally. Leaning a little toward Mat, he whispered loudly, as though pretending. “We ride with evil now, Mat. Watch yourself.” He wore that twisted grin again, as he watched the wagons lumber by.

“You think this Kadere is *evil*?”

“A dangerous man, Mat—the eyes always give it away—yet who can say? But what cause have I to worry, with Moiraine and the Wise Ones watching out for me? And we mustn’t forget Lanfear. Has any man ever been under so many watchful eyes?” Abruptly Rand straightened in his saddle. “It has begun,” he said quietly. “Wish that I have your luck, Mat. It has begun, and there is no turning back, now, however the blade falls.” Nodding to himself, he started his dapple after Rhuarc, Aviendha trotting alongside, the hundred Jindo following.

Mat was glad enough to follow too. Better than being left there, certainly. The sun burned high in a stark blue sky. There was a lot of traveling yet to be done before sunset. It had begun? What did he mean, it had begun? It had begun in Rhuidean; or better, in Emond’s Field on Winternight a year gone. “Riding with evil” and “no turning back”? And Lanfear? Rand was walking the razor’s edge, now. No doubt about it. There had to be a way out of the Waste before it was too late. From time to time Mat studied the peddlers’ wagons. Before it was too late. If it was not already.

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CHAPTER 37

Imre Stand

The sun still stood more than its own height above the jagged western horizon when Rhuarc said that Imre Stand, where he intended to stay for the night, lay only a mile or so ahead.

“Why are we stopping already?” Rand asked. “There are hours more daylight left.”

It was Aviendha, walking along on the other side of Jeade’en from the clan chief, who answered, in the scornful tone he had come to expect. “There is water at Imre Stand. It is best to camp near water when the chance presents itself.”

“And the peddlers’ wagons cannot go much farther,” Rhuarc added. “When the shadows lengthen, they must stop or begin breaking wheels and mules’ legs. I do not want to leave them behind. I cannot spare anyone to watch over them, and Couladin can.”

Rand twisted in his saddle. Flanked now by Jindo *Duadhe Mahdi’in*, Water Seekers, the wagons were making heavy going a few hundred paces off to the side, lurching along, raising a tall plume of yellow dust. Most gullies were too deep or too steep-walled, forcing the drivers to go around, so the train twisted like a drunken snake. Loud curses floated from the wavering line, most blaming the mules for it all. Kadere and Keille were still inside their white-painted wagons.

“No,” Rand said, “you don’t want to do that.” He laughed softly in spite of himself.

Mat was looking at him oddly from under the broad brim of his new hat. He smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way, but Mat’s expression did not change. *He’s going to have to take care of himself*, Rand thought. *Too much is riding on this.*

Speaking of taking care, he became aware of Aviendha studying him, her shawl wrapped around her head much like a *shoufa*. He straightened himself again. Moiraine might have told her off to nurse him, but he had the impression the woman was waiting to see him fall. Doubtless she would find that funny, Aiel humor being what it was. He would have liked to think she simply resented being stuffed into a dress and set to watch him, but the glitter in her eyes seemed too personal for that.

For once Moiraine and the Wise Ones were *not* watching him. Halfway between the Jindo and the Shaido, Moiraine and Egwene were walking with Amys and the others, all six women looking at something in the Aes Sedai's hands. It caught the light of the falling sun, sparkling like a gem; they certainly seemed as intent as any girl on a pretty. Lan rode back among the *gai'shain* and packhorses, as though they had sent him away.

The scene made Rand uneasy. He was used to being the center of attention for that lot. What had they found more interesting? Surely nothing he could be happy about, not with Moiraine, likely not with Amys or the others. They all had their plans for him. Egwene was the only one of them he really trusted. *Light, I hope I can still trust her.* The only one he could really trust was himself. *When the boar breaks cover, there's only you and your spear.* His laugh was a touch bitter this time.

"You find the Three-fold Land amusing, Rand al'Thor?" Aviendha's smile was the merest flash of white teeth. "Laugh while you can, wetlander. When this land begins to break you, it will be a fitting punishment for your treatment of Elayne."

Why would the woman not let up? "You didn't show any respect for the Dragon Reborn," he snapped, "but you could try finding a little for the *Car'a'carn.*"

Rhuarc chuckled. "A clan chief is not a wetlander king, Rand, nor is the *Car'a'carn.* There is respect—though women generally show as little as they can get away with—but anyone can speak to a chief." Even so, he sent a frown in the direction of the woman on the other side of Rand's horse. "Some do push the bounds of honor."

Aviendha must have known that last was meant for her ears; her face went stony. But she strode along without saying another word, fists clenched at her sides.

A pair of the scouting Maidens appeared, coming back at a dead run. They were plainly not together; one headed straight for the Shaido, the other for the Jindo. Rand recognized her, a yellow-haired woman named Adelin, handsome but hard-faced, with a scar making a fine white line across her sun-dark cheek. She was one of those who had been in the Stone, though older than most of the Maidens there, perhaps ten years more than he. The quick look she gave Aviendha before falling in beside Rhuarc, an equal blend of curiosity and sympathy, made Rand bristle. If Aviendha had agreed to do the Wise Ones' spying, she certainly did not deserve sympathy. His company was not so onerous as that. Him, Adelin ignored altogether.

"There is trouble at Imre Stand," she told Rhuarc, her speech quick and clipped. "There is no one to be seen. We have kept hidden and not gone close."

"Good," Rhuarc replied. "Inform the Wise Ones." Unconsciously hefting his spears, he dropped back to the main body of Jindo. Aviendha muttered to herself, plucking at her skirts, obviously wanting to join him.

"I think they already know," Mat said as Adelin sped toward the Wise Ones' party.

From the agitation among the women around Moiraine, Rand thought he was right. They all appeared to be talking at once. Egwene was shading her eyes, staring at either Adelin or him, her other hand to her mouth. How they knew had to be a question for later.

"What kind of trouble might it be?" he asked Aviendha. Still muttering to herself, she did not answer. "Aviendha? What kind of trouble?" Nothing. "Burn you, woman, you can answer a simple question! What kind of trouble?"

She flushed, but her reply came in a level tone. "It is most likely to be a raid, for goats or sheep; either could be herded at Imre for pasture, but most likely goats, because of the water. Probably it was the Chareen, the White Mountain sept or the Jarra. They are closest. Or it might be a sept from the Goshien. The Tomanelle are too far, I think."

"Will there be fighting?" He reached out for *saidin*; the sweet rush of the Power flooded him. The rancid taint oozed through him, and fresh sweat burst from every pore. "Aviendha?"

"No. Adelin would have said if the raiders were still there. The herd and the *gai'shain* are miles gone by now. We cannot recover the herd because we must accompany you."

He wondered why she did not mention recovering the captives, the *gai'shain*, but he did not wonder long. The effort of staying upright while holding on to *saidin*, of not folding up and being swept away, left little room for thought.

Rhuarc and the Jindo swept ahead at a run, already veiling their faces, and Rand followed more slowly. Aviendha shot him impatient frowns, but he kept Jeade'en to a brisk walk. He would not go galloping into someone else's trap. At least Mat was in no hurry; he hesitated, looking at the peddlers' wagons, before cantering Pips up. Rand never glanced at the wagons.

The Shaido fell behind, slowing until the Wise Ones began to move again. Of course. This was Tardaad land. Couladin would not care if someone raided here. Rand hoped the clan chiefs could be gathered at Alcair Dal quickly. How could he unite a people who seemed to fight each other all the time? The least of his worries, now.

When Imre Stand finally came in sight, it was something of a surprise. A few widely scattered clumps of long-haired white goats browsed on patches of tough grass and even the leaves of thorny bushes. At first he did not see the crude stone building set against the base of a tall butte; the rough stonework blended in perfectly, and several thornbushes had taken root on the dirt-covered roof. Not very big, it had arrowslits for windows and only one door that he could see. After a moment he spotted another building, no larger, tucked onto a ledge some twenty paces higher. A deep crevice ran up to the ledge and beyond from behind the stone house at the base; there was no other evident way to reach the ledge.

Rhuarc, standing openly four hundred or so paces from the butte with his veil lowered, was the only Jindo in sight. That did not mean the others were not there, of course. Rand reined in beside him and dismounted. The clan chief continued to study the stone buildings.

"The goats," Aviendha said, sounding troubled. "Raiders would not have left any goats behind. Most are gone, but it almost looks as if the herd has just been allowed to wander."

"For days," Rhuarc agreed, not taking his eyes from the buildings, "or more would remain. Why does no one come out? They should be able to see my face, and know me." He started forward, and made no objection when Rand joined him leading Jeade'en. Aviendha had one hand on her belt knife, and Mat, riding behind, carried that black-hafted spear as if he expected to need it.

The door was rough wood, pieced together from short, narrow planks. Some of the stout bracing was broken, hacked by axes. Rhuarc hesitated a moment before pushing it open. He hardly glanced inside before turning to run his eyes over the surrounding country.

Rand put his head in. There was no one there. The interior, light streaming in bars through the arrowslits, was all one room and plainly not a dwelling, just a place for herdsmen to shelter, and defend themselves if attacked. There were no furnishings, no tables or chairs. A raised open hearth stood beneath a sooty smoke hole in the roof. The wide crevice at the back had steps chiseled into the gray rock. The place had been ransacked. Bedding, blankets, pots, all lay scattered across the stone floor amid slashed cushions and pillows. Some liquid had been splashed over everything, the walls, even the ceiling, and had dried black.

When he realized what it was, he jerked back, the Power-wrought sword coming into his hands before he even thought. Blood. So much blood. There had been slaughter done here, as savage as anything he could imagine. Nothing moved out there except the goats.

Aviendha backed out as fast as she went in. “Who?” she demanded incredulously, her large blue-green eyes filled with outrage. “Who would do this? Where are the dead?”

“Trollocs,” Mat muttered. “It looks like Trolloc work to me.”

She snorted contemptuously. “Trollocs do not come into the Three-fold Land, wetlander. No more than a few miles below the Blight, at least, and then seldom. I have heard they call the Three-fold Land the Dying Ground. We hunt Trollocs, wetlander; they do not hunt us.”

Nothing moved. Rand let the sword go, pushed *saidin* away. It was hard. The sweetness of the Power was nearly enough to overcome the feel of filth from the taint, the sheer exhilaration almost enough to make him not care. Mat was right whatever Aviendha said, but this was old, the Trollocs gone. Trollocs in the Waste, at a place he had come to. He was not fool enough to think it coincidence. *But if they think I am, maybe they’ll grow careless.*

Rhuarc signaled the Jindo to come in—they seemed to rise out of the ground—and some time later the others appeared, the Shaido and the peddlers’ wagons and the Wise Ones’ party. Word spread quickly of what had been found, and among the Aiel, tension became palpable. They moved as if they expected momentary attack, perhaps from each other. Scouts fanned out in every direction. Unharnessing their mules, the wagon drivers looked around jerkily, and seemed ready to dive under their wagons at the first shout.

For a time all was a stirred hive of ants. Rhuarc made sure the peddlers lined their wagons up on the edge of the Jindo camp. Couladin glowered, since it meant any Shaido who wanted to trade had to go to the Jindo, but he did not argue. Perhaps even he could see that might lead to dancing the spears, now. The Shaido tents went up a scant quarter-mile away, with the Wise Ones, as usual, in between. The Wise Ones examined the inside of the building, and Moiraine and Lan did, as well, but if they reached any conclusions, they told no one.

The water at Imre Stand turned out to be a tiny spring at the back of the crevice, feeding a deep, roughly round pool—what Rhuarc called a tank—less than two paces across. Enough for herdsmen, enough for the Jindo to fill some of their waterskins. No Shaido went near; in Taardad land, the Jindo had first claim on water. It seemed the goats got their moisture purely from the thick leaves of the thorny bushes. Rhuarc assured Rand there would be much more water at the next night's stop.

Kadere produced a surprise while the wagon drivers were unhitching their teams and fetching buckets from the waterwagons. When he came out of his wagon, a dark-haired young woman accompanied him, in a red silk gown and red velvet slippers more suited to a palace than to the Waste. A filmy red scarf wound almost like *shoufa* and veil provided no protection from the sun, and certainly did nothing to hide a palely beautiful heart-shaped face. Clinging to the peddler's thick arm, she swayed enticingly as he took her to see the blood-splashed room; Moiraine and the others had gone off to where the *gai'shain* were erecting the Wise Ones' camp. When the pair came back out, the young woman shuddered delicately. Rand was sure it was pretense, just as he was sure she had asked to view that butcher's workroom. Her show of revulsion lasted all of two seconds, and then she was peering about interestedly at the Aiel.

It appeared that Rand himself was one of the sights she wanted to see. Kadere seemed ready to take her back to the wagon, but she guided him to Rand instead, the alluring smile on her full lips plain behind her diaphanous veil. "Hadnan has been telling me of you," she said in a smoky voice. She might have been hanging on the peddler, but her dark eyes traced Rand boldly. "You are the one the Aiel talk of. He Who Comes With the Dawn."

Keille and the gleeman came out of the second wagon and stood together at a distance, watching.

“It seems I am,” he said.

“Strange.” Her smile became wickedly mischievous. “I thought you would be handsomer.” Patting Kadere on the cheek, she sighed. “This dreadful heat is so wearing. Do not be too long.”

Kadere did not speak until she had climbed the steps back inside. His hat had been replaced by a long white scarf tied atop his head, the ends handing down his neck. “You must forgive Isendre, good sir. She is . . . too forward, sometimes.” His voice was mollifying, but his eyes belonged on a bird of prey. He hesitated, then went on. “I have heard other things. I have heard that you took *Callandor* out of the Heart of the Stone.”

The man’s eyed never changed. If he knew about *Callandor*, he knew Rand was the Dragon Reborn, knew he could wield the One Power. And his eyes never changed. A dangerous man. “I have heard it said,” Rand told him, “that you should believe nothing you hear, and only half of what you see.”

“A wise rule,” Kadere said after a moment. “Yet to achieve greatly, a man must believe something. Belief and knowledge pave the road to greatness. Knowledge is perhaps the most valuable of all. We all seek the coin of knowledge. Your pardon, good sir. Isendre is not a patient woman. Perhaps we will have another opportunity to talk.”

Before the man had taken three steps, Aviendha said in a low, hard voice, “You belong to Elayne, Rand al’Thor. Do you stare so at every woman who comes in front of your eyes, or only those who go half-naked? If I strip off my clothes, will you stare so at me? You belong to Elayne!”

He had forgotten she was there. “I don’t *belong* to anyone, Aviendha. Elayne? She cannot seem to make up her mind what she thinks.”

“Elayne laid her heart bare to you, Rand al’Thor. If she did not show you in the Stone of Tear, did her two letters not tell you what she feels? You are hers, and no other’s.”

Rand threw up his hands and stalked away from her. At least, he tried. She followed on his heels, a disapproving shadow in the sun’s glare.

Swords. The Aiel might have forgotten why they did not carry swords, but they had kept the contempt for them. Swords might make her leave him alone. Seeking out Lan in the Wise Ones’ camp, he asked the Warder to watch him work the forms. Bair was the only one of the four in view, and a scowl surely deepened the creases on her face. Egwene was not to be seen either. Moiraine wore calm like a mask, dark eyes cool; he could not say whether she approved.

He was not out to offend the Aiel, so he set up with Lan between the Wise Ones' tents and the Jindo's. He used one of the practice swords Lan carried in his baggage, a bundle of loosely tied lathes in place of a blade. The weight and balance were right, though, and he could forget himself in the dancelike flow from form to form, the practice sword alive in his hands, a part of him. Usually it was that way. Today the sun was a furnace in the sky baking out moisture and strength. Aviendha squatted off to one side, hugging her knees to her chest and staring at him.

Finally, panting, he let his arms drop.

"You lost concentration," Lan told him. "You must hold on to that even when your muscles turn to water. Lose it, and that is the day you die. And it will probably be a farmboy who has his hands on a sword for the first time who does it." His smile was sudden, odd on that stony face.

"Yes. Well, I'm not a farmboy any longer, am I?" They had gained an audience, if at a distance. Aiel lined the edge of both the Shaido and Jindo camps. Keille's cream-wrapped bulk stood out among the Jindo, the gleeman beside her in his cloak of colored patches. Which one did he choose? He did not want them to see him watching them. "How do Aiel fight, Lan?"

"Hard," the Warder said dryly. "They never lose concentration. Look here." With his sword he drew on the hard, cracked clay, a circle and arrows. "Aiel change tactics according to circumstances, but here is one they favor. They move in a column, divided into quarters. When they meet an enemy, the first quarter rushes in to pin them. The second and third sweep wide to either side, hitting the flanks and rear. The last quarter waits in reserve, often not even watching the battle, except for their leader. When a weakness opens—a hole, anything—the reserve strikes there. Finish!" His sword stabbed into a circle already pierced with arrows.

"How do you beat that?" Rand asked.

"With difficulty. When you make first contact—you'll not spot Aiel before they strike unless you are lucky—immediately send out horsemen to break up, or at least delay, their flanking attacks. If you keep most of your strength back and defeat the holding attack, then you can wheel on the others in turn and defeat them, too."

“Why do you want to learn how to fight Aiel?” Aviendha burst out. “Are you not He Who Comes With the Dawn, meant to bind us together and return us all to old glories? Besides, if you want to know how to fight Aiel, ask Aiel, not a wetlander. His way will not work.”

“It has worked well enough with Bordermen from time to time.” Rhuarc’s soft boots made very little sound on the hard ground. He had a waterskin under his arm. “Allowances are always made when someone suffers a disappointment, Aviendha, but there is a limit to sulking. You gave up the spear for your obligation to the people and the blood. One day no doubt you will be making a clan chief do what you want instead of what he wants, but if instead you are Wise One to the smallest hold of the smallest sept of the Taardad, the obligation remains, and it cannot be met by tantrums.”

A Wise One. Rand felt a fool. Of course that was why she had gone to Rhuidean. But he would never have thought Aviendha would choose to give up the spear. It certainly explained why she had been chosen to spy on him, though. Suddenly he found himself wondering if she could channel. It seemed Min had been the only woman in his life since that Winternight who could not.

Rhuarc tossed him the sloshing waterskin. The lukewarm water slid down his throat like chilled wine. He tried not to splash any over his face, not to waste it, but it was hard.

“I thought you might like to learn the spear,” Rhuarc said when Rand finally lowered the half-empty skin. For the first time Rand realized the clan chief was carrying only two spears, and a pair of bucklers. Not practice spears if there were any such, a foot of sharp steel tipped each.

Steel or wood, his muscles cried out for rest. His legs wanted him to sit down, and his head wanted to lie down. Keille and the gleeman were gone, but Aiel were still watching from both camps. They had seen him practicing with a despised sword, if a wooden one. They were his people. He did not know them, but they were his, in more senses than one. Aviendha was still watching him, too, glowering as though blaming him for Rhuarc having set her down. Not that she had anything to do with his decision, of course. The Jindo and Shaido were watching; that was it.

“That mountain can grow awfully heavy sometimes,” he sighed, taking a spear and buckler from Rhuarc. “When do you find a chance to put it down awhile?”

“When you die,” Lan said simply.

Forcing his legs to move—and trying to ignore Aviendha—Rand squared off with Rhuarc. He did not mean to die just yet. No, not for a long time yet.

Leaning against a tall wheel in the shade of one of the peddlers’ wagons, Mat glanced at the line of Jindo watching Rand. All he could see now was their backs. The man was a pure fool, leaping about in this heat. Any sensible man would find a bit of protection from the sun, something to drink. Shifting his seat in the shade, he peered into the mug of ale he had bought from one of the drivers and grimaced. Ale just did not taste right when it was as warm as soup. At least it was wet. The only other thing he had bought, aside from the hat, was a short-stemmed pipe with a silver-worked bowl, snuggled now in his coat pocket with his tabac pouch. Trading was not on his mind. Unless it was for passage out of the Waste, a commodity the peddlers’ wagons did not seem to be offering at the moment.

They were doing a steady business, if not for ale. The Aiel did not mind the temperature, but they seemed to think it too weak. Most were Jindo, but there was a steady stream of Shaido from the other camp. Couladin and Kadere had their heads together for a long time, though they came to no agreement, since Couladin left empty-handed. Kadere must not have liked losing the trade; he stared after Couladin with those hawk’s eyes, and a Jindo who wanted his attention had to speak three times before he was heard.

The Aiel did not show much in the way of coin, but the peddlers and their people were quick to accept silver bowls or gold figurines or fine wall hangings looted from Tear, and Aiel pouches produced raw nuggets of gold and silver that made Mat sit up. But an Aiel who lost at dice might well reach for his spears. He wondered where the mines were. Where one man could find gold, another could. It was probably a lot of work, though, mining gold. Taking a long drink of warm ale, he settled back against the wagon wheel.

What sold and what did not, and at what price, was interesting. The Aiel were no simple fools to hand over a gold saltcellar, say, for a bolt of cloth. They knew the value of things and bargained hard, though they had their own wants. Books went immediately; not everyone wanted them, but those who did took every last one the wagons held. Laces and velvets vanished as soon as they were brought out, for astonishing quantities of silver and gold, and ribbons for not much less, but the finest silks just lay there. Silk was cheaper in trade to the east, he overheard a Shaido tell Kadere. A heavy-set, broken-nosed driver tried to talk a Jindo Maiden into a carved ivory bracelet. She pulled one wider, thicker and more ornate from her pouch and offered to wrestle him for the pair. He hesitated before refusing, which showed Mat he was even dumber than he looked. Needles and pins were snapped up, but the pots, and most of the knives, earned sneers; Aiel smiths did better work. Everything changed hands, from vials of perfumes and bath salts to kegs of brandy. Wine and brandy fetched good prices. He was startled to hear Heirn ask for Two Rivers tabac. The peddlers had none.

One driver kept trying to interest the Aiel in a heavy, gold-worked crossbow with no success. The crossbow caught Mat's eye, all those inlaid gold lions with what seemed to be rubies for eyes. Small, but still rubies. Of course, a good Two Rivers longbow could shoot six arrows while a crossbowman was still cranking back the bowstring for his second shot. A longer range for a crossbow that size, though, by a hundred paces. With two men doing nothing but keeping a crossbow with bolt in place in the hands of each crossbowman, and stout pikemen to hold the cavalry off. . . .

Wincing, Mat let his head fall back against the spokes. It had happened again. He had to get out of the Waste away from Moiraine, away from any Aes Sedai. Maybe back home for a while. Maybe he could get there in time to help with this Whitecloak trouble. *Small chance of that, unless I use the bloody Ways, or another bloody Portal Stone.* That would not solve his problems anyway. For one thing, there were no answers in Emond's Field to what those snaky folk had meant about marrying the Daughter of the Nine Moons, or dying and living again. Or Rhuidean.

Through his coat he rubbed the silver foxhead medallion, hung around his neck again. The pupil of the fox's eye was a tiny circle split by a sinuous line, one side polished bright, the other shaded in some way. The ancient symbol of Aes Sedai, before the Breaking. The black-hafted spear, sword-blade point marked with two ravens, he took from where it was leaning beside him and laid it across his knees. More Aes Sedai work. Rhuidean had provided no answers, only more questions, and. . . .

Before Rhuidean his memory had been full of holes. Casting back in his mind then, he would be able to remember walking up to a door in the morning and leaving in the evening, but nothing between. Now there was something in between, filling all those holes. Waking dreams, or something very like. It was as if he could remember dances and battles and streets and cities, none of which he had ever really seen, none of which he was sure had ever existed, like a hundred pieces of memory from a hundred different men. Better to think of them as dreams, maybe—a little better—yet he was as sure in them as in any of his own remembrances. Battles numbered the most, and sometimes they crept up on him in a way, as with the crossbow. He would find himself looking at a piece of ground and planning how to set an ambush there, or defend against one, or how to set an army for battle. It was madness.

Without looking, he traced the flowing script carved into the black spear shaft. He could read it as easily as any book now, though it had taken him the whole trip back to Chaendaer to realize it. Rand had not said anything, but he suspected he had given himself away, there in Rhuidean. He knew the Old Tongue now, sifted whole out of those dreams. *Light, what did they do to me?*

“Sa souvraya niende misain ye,” he said aloud. “I am lost in my own mind.”

“A scholar, for this day and Age.”

Mat looked up to find the gleeman looking at him with dark, deep-set eyes. The fellow was taller than most, somewhere in his middle years and likely attractive to women, but with an oddly apprehensive way of holding his head cocked as if trying to look at you sideways.

“Just something I heard once,” Mat said. He had to be more careful. If Moiraine decided to pack him off to the White Tower for study, they would never let him out of there again. “You hear scraps of things and remember them. I know a few phrases.” That should cover any slips he was stupid enough to make.

“I am Jasin Natael. A gleeman.” Natael did not flourish his cloak the way Thom would; he could have been saying he was a carpenter or a wheelwright. “Do you mind if I join you?” Mat nodded to the ground next to him, and the gleeman folded his legs, tucking his cloak under to sit on. He seemed fascinated by the Jindo and Shaido milling around the wagons, most still carrying their spears and bucklers. “Aiel,” he murmured. “Not what I would have expected. I can still hardly credit it.”

“I’ve been with them for weeks now,” Mat said, “and I don’t know that I believe them myself. Odd people. If any of the Maidens ask you to play Maidens’ Kiss, my advice is to refuse. Politely.”

Natael frowned at him questioningly. “You lead an intriguing life, it seems.”

“What do you mean?” Mat asked cautiously.

“Surely you do not think it is a secret? Not many men travel in company with . . . an Aes Sedai. The woman Moiraine Damodred. And then there is Rand al’Thor. The Dragon Reborn. He Who Comes With the Dawn. Who can say how many prophecies he is supposed to fulfill? An unusual traveling companion, certainly.”

The Aiel had talked, of course. Anyone would. Still, it was a little unsettling to have a stranger calmly talk about Rand this way. “He suits well enough for now. If he interests you, talk to him. Myself, I’d just as soon not be reminded.”

“Perhaps I will. Later, perhaps. Let us talk of you. I understand you went into Rhuidean, where none save Aiel have gone in three thousand years. You got that there?” He reached for the spear on Mat’s knees, but let his hand fall when Mat drew it away slightly. “Very well. Tell me what you saw.”

“Why?”

“I am a gleeman, Matrim.” Natael had his head cocked to one side in that uneasy manner, but his voice held irritation at having to explain. He lifted a corner of his cloak with its colorful patches as though for proof. “You have seen what none have, save a handful of Aiel. What stories can I make with the sights your eyes have seen? I will even make you the hero, if you wish.”

Mat snorted. “I don’t want to be any bloody hero.”

Yet there was no reason to keep silent. Amys and that lot could chatter about not speaking of Rhuidean, but he was no Aiel. Besides, it might pay to have somebody with the peddlers who had a little goodwill toward him, somebody who could put in a word when it was needed.

He told the story from reaching the wall of fog to coming out, leaving out selected bits. He had no intention of telling anyone else about that twisted-doorway *ter’angreal*, and he would rather forget the dust gathering into creatures that tried to kill him. That strange city of huge palaces was surely enough, and *Avendesora.*

The Tree of Life Natael passed over quickly, but he took Mat through the rest again and again, asking more and more detail, from exactly what it felt like walking through that fog and how long it took to the color of the shadowless light inside, to descriptions of every last thing Mat could remember seeing in the great square in the heart of the city. Those Mat gave reluctantly; a slip, and he would find himself talking about *ter'angreal,* and who knew where that might lead? Even so he drained the last of the warm ale, and still talked until his throat was dry. It sounded rather dull the way he told it, as though he had just walked in and waited while Rand went off, then walked out again, but Natael seemed intent on digging out every last scrap. He did remind Mat of Thom then; sometimes Thom concentrated on you as though he meant to wring you dry.

"Is this what you are meant to be doing?"

Mat jumped in spite of himself at the sound of Keille's voice, hard under its mellifluous tones. The woman put him on edge, and now she looked ready to rip his heart out, and the gleeman's as well.

Natael scrambled to his feet. "This young man has just been telling me the most fascinating things about Rhuidean. You will not believe it."

"We are not here for Rhuidean." The words came out as sharp as her hatchet of a nose. At least she was only glaring at Natael now.

"I tell you—"

"You tell me nothing."

"Do not try to silence me!"

Ignoring Mat, they moved off down the wagons, arguing in low voices, gesticulating fiercely. Keille seemed to have been browbeaten into a grim silence by the time they disappeared into her wagon.

Mat shivered. He could not imagine sharing living quarters with that woman. It would be like sharing with a bear with a sore tooth. Isendre, now. . . . That face, those lips, that swaying walk. If he could get her away from Kadere, maybe she would find a young hero—the dust creatures could be ten feet tall, for her; he would give her every detail he could remember or invent—a handsome young hero more to her liking than a stuffy old peddler. It was worth thinking about.

The sun slid below the horizon, and small fires of thorny branches made pools of yellow light among the tents. The smells of cooking filled the camp; goat, roasting with dried peppers. Cold filled the camp, too, the cold of night in the Waste. It was as if the sun had taken all the heat with it. Mat had never expected he would wish for a stout cloak when he packed to leave the Stone. Maybe the peddlers had one. Maybe Natael would dice for his.

He ate at Rhuarc's fire with Heirn and Rand. And Aviendha, of course. The peddlers were there, and Natael close by Keille, and Isendre all but wrapped around Kadere. It might be harder separating Isendre from the hook-nosed man than he had hoped—or easier. Twined around the fellow or not, she had smoky eyes for Rand and no one else. You would have thought she already had his ears clipped, a sheep marked for its owner's flock. Neither Rand nor Kadere seemed to notice; the peddler hardly took his eyes off Rand. Aviendha noticed, and glared at Rand. At least the fire gave off some warmth.

When the roast goat was finished—and some sort of flecked yellow mush that was spicier than it looked—Rhuarc and Heirn filled short-stemmed pipes, and the clan chief asked Natael for a song.

The gleeman blinked. "Why, of course. Of course. Let me bring a harp." His cloak billowed on the dry, cold breeze as he vanished toward Keille's wagon.

The fellow certainly was different from Thom Merrilin. Thom hardly got out of bed without flute or harp or both. Mat thumbed his silver-worked pipe full of tabac, and was puffing contentedly by the time Natael returned and struck a pose suitable for a king. That was like Thom. With a strummed cord, the gleeman began.

"Soft, the winds, like springtime's fingers.
Soft, the rains, like heaven's tears.
Soft, the years roll by in gladness,
never hinting storms to come,
never hinting whirlwinds' ravage,
rain of steel and battle thunder,
war to tear the heart asunder."

It was "Midean's Ford." An old song; of Manetheren, oddly enough, and war before the Trolloc Wars. Natael did a fair job of it; nothing like Thom's sonorous recitals, of course, but the rolling words drew a crowd of Aiel thick around the edge of the fire's light. Villainous Aedomon led the

Saferi down on unsuspecting Manetheren, pillaging and burning, driving all before them until King Buiryn gathered Manetheren's strength, and the men of Manetheren met the Saferi at Midean's Ford, holding, though heavily outnumbered, through three days of unrelenting battle, while the river ran red and vultures blacked the sky. On the third day, numbers dwindling, hope fading, Buiryn and his men fought their way across the ford in a desperate sortie, driving deep into Aedomon's horde, seeking to turn the enemy back by killing Aedomon himself. But forces too great to overpower swept in around them, trapping them, driving them ever in on themselves. Surrounding their king and the Red Eagle banner, they fought on, refusing surrender even when their doom became clear.

Natael sang how their courage touched even Aedomon's heart, and how at last he allowed the remnant to go free, turning his army back to Safer in honor of them.

"Back across the blood-red water,
marching back with heads held high.
No surrender, arm or sword,
no surrender, heart or soul.
Honor be theirs, ever after,
honor all the Age shall know."

He plucked the final chord, and the Aiel whistled their approval, drumming spears on their hide bucklers, some raising ululating cries.

It had not been that way, of course. Mat could remember—*Light, I don't want to*! But it came anyway—he remembered counseling Buiryn not to accept the offer, being told in return that the smallest chance was better than none. Aedomon, glossy black beard hanging below the steel mesh that veiled his face, drew his spearmen back, waited until they were strung out and nearly to the ford before the hidden archers rose and the cavalry charged in. As for turning back to Safer. . . . Mat did not think so. His last memory at the ford was trying to keep his feet, waist-deep in the river with three arrows in him, but there was something later, a fragment. Seeing Aedomon, gray-bearded now, go down in a sharp fight in a forest, toppling from his rearing horse, the spear in his back put there by an unarmored, beardless boy. This was worse than the holes had been.

"You did not like the song?" Natael said.

It took Mat a moment to realize the man was speaking to Rand, not him. Rand rubbed his hands together, peering into the small fire, before answering. “I’m not certain how wise it is, depending on an enemy’s generosity. What do you think, Kadere?”

The peddler hesitated, glancing at the woman clinging to his arm. “I do not think of such things,” he said at last. “I think of profits, not battles.” Keille laughed coarsely. At least, until she saw Isendre’s smile, condescending to a woman who could make three of her; then her dark eyes glittered dangerously behind those rolls of fat.

Suddenly warning cries rose in the dark beyond the tents. Aiel snatched veils across their faces, and a moment later Trollocs poured in out of the night, snouted faces and horned heads, towering over the humans, howling and swinging scythe-curved swords, stabbing with hooked spears and barbed tridents, hacking with spiked axes. Myrddraal flowed with them, like deadly eyeless snakes. A heartbeat it took, but the Aiel fought as if they had had an hour’s warning, meeting the charge with their own flickering spears.

Mat was vaguely aware of Rand with that fiery sword suddenly in hand, but then he was sucked into the maelstrom himself, wielding his spear as spear and quarterstaff both, slash and thrust, haft whirling. For once he was glad of those dream memories; the way of this weapon seemed familiar, and he needed every scrap of skill he could find. It was all chaotic madness.

Trollocs rose up in front of him and went down to his spear, or an Aiel spear, or spun away into the confusion of shouts and howls and clanging steel. Myrddraal faced him, black blades meeting his raven-marked steel with flashes of blue light like sheet lightning, faced him and were gone in the tumult. Twice a short spear streaking by his head took Trollocs about to run him through the back. He thrust the short-sword blade into a Myrddraal’s chest and knew he was going to die when it did not fall, but grinned with those bloodless lips, eyeless stare shivering fear into his bones, and drew back its black sword. An instant later the Halfman jerked as Aiel arrows pincushioned it, jerked for the moment Mat needed to leap back from the thing as it fell still trying to stab at him, stab at anything.

A dozen times the spear’s iron-hard black haft barely deflected a Trolloc thrust. It was Aes Sedai work, and he was glad of it. The silver foxhead on his chest seemed to pulse with cold as if to remind him that it, too, bore the mark of Aes Sedai. Right then, he did not care; if it took Aes Sedai work to keep him alive, he was ready to follow Moiraine like a puppy.

He could not have said if it went on for minutes or hours, but suddenly there was not a Myrddraal or Trolloc still standing in sight, though cries and howls from the darkness spoke of pursuit. Dead and dying littered the ground, Aiel and Shadowspawn, the Halfmen still thrashing. Groans filled the air with pain. Suddenly he realized his muscles felt like water, and his lungs were afire. Panting, he slid down to his knees, leaning on his spear. Flames made bonfires of three of the peddlers' canvas-topped wagons, one with a driver pinned to the side by a Trolloc spear, and some of the tents were burning. Shouts from the direction of the Shaido camp, and glows too large for campfires, said they had been attacked, too.

Fiery sword still in hand, Rand came to where Mat knelt. "Are you all right?" Aviendha shadowed him. Somewhere she had found a spear and buckler, had tucked up a corner of her shawl to veil her face. Even in skirts she looked deadly.

"Oh, I am fine," Mat muttered, struggling to his feet. "Nothing like a little dance with Trollocs to ready you for sleep. Right, Aviendha?" Uncovering her face, she gave him a tight smile. The woman had probably *enjoyed* it. He was sweat all over; he thought it might freeze on him.

Moiraine and Egwene had appeared with two of the Wise Ones, Amys and Bair, circulating among the wounded. The convulsion of Healing followed the Aes Sedai, though sometimes she merely shook her head and moved on.

Rhuarc strode up with a grim face.

"Bad news?" Rand said quietly.

The clan chief grunted. "Aside from Trollocs here where they should not be, not by two hundred leagues or more? Perhaps. Some fifty Trollocs attacked the Wise Ones' camp. Enough to overwhelm it, had it not been for Moiraine Sedai and luck. However, it seems the Shaido were hit by fewer than struck us, though since they are the larger camp the reverse should have been true. I might almost think they were attacked only to keep them from coming to our aid. Not that that would be certain, with Shaido, but Trollocs and Nightrunners might not know that."

"And if they knew an Aes Sedai was with the Wise Ones," Rand said, "that attack could have been meant to keep her away, too. I bring enemies with me, Rhuarc. Remember that. Wherever I am, my enemies are never far."

Isendre poked her head out of the lead wagon. A moment later Kadere climbed down past her, and she ducked back inside, shutting the white-painted door behind him. He stood looking around at the carnage, the light of his burning wagons painting rippling shadows across his face. The group around Mat held his attention most. The wagons seemed to interest him not at all. Natael got down from Keille's wagon, too, speaking up the stairs to her still inside, his eyes on Mat and the others.

"Fools," Mat muttered, half to himself. "Hiding inside the wagons, as if that would make any difference to a Trolloc. They could all have roasted alive, easy as not."

"They are still alive," Rand said, and Mat realized he had seen them, too. "That is always important, Mat, who stays alive. It's like dice. You can't win if you can't play, and you can't play if you are dead. Who can say what game the peddlers play?" He laughed quietly, and the fiery sword vanished from his hands.

"I am going to get some sleep," Mat said, already turning away. "Wake me if the Trollocs show up again. Or better, let them kill me in my blankets. I am too tired to wake up again." Rand was definitely going over the edge. Maybe tonight would convince Keille and Kadere to turn back. If they did, he intended to be with them.

Rand let Moiraine look at him, muttering to herself, though he had taken no wound. With so many who had, she could not spare the strength to wash away his fatigue with the One Power.

"This was aimed at you," she told him, surrounded by the moans of the injured. The Trollocs were being dragged away into the night, by pack-horses and the peddlers' mules. The Aiel apparently intended to leave the Myrddraal where they lay until they stopped moving, to make sure they were really dead. The wind gusted up, like ice with no moisture in it.

"Was it?" he said. Her eyes glittered in the firelight before she turned back to the wounded.

Egwene came to him, too, but only to say in a low, fierce whisper, "Whatever you are doing to upset her, stop it!" The glance she shot past him at Aviendha left no doubt who she meant, and she went off to help Bair and

Amys before he could say he had done nothing. She looked ridiculous with those two braids twined with ribbons. The Aiel seemed to think so, too; some of them grinned at her back.

Stumbling, shivering, he sought his tent. He had never been this tired before. The sword had almost not come. He hoped that was the tiredness. Sometimes there was nothing there when he reached for the Source, and sometimes the Power would not do what he wanted, but almost from the first the sword had come practically without thought. Now of all times. . . . It had to be the tiredness.

Aviendha insisted on following him as far as the tent, and when he woke the next morning she was sitting outside cross-legged, though without the spear and buckler. Spy or not, he was glad to see her. At least he knew who and what she was, and what she felt for him.

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CHAPTER 38

Hidden Faces

The Garden of Silver Breezes was not a garden at all but a huge wineshop, much too large to be called a shop really, atop a hill centered on the Calpene, the westernmost of Tanchico’s three peninsulas below the Great Circle. A part of the name, at least, came from the breezes that wafted in where polished green-streaked marble columns and balustrades replaced one wall except on the topmost floor. Golden oiled-silk curtains could be lowered in case of rain. The hill fell away sharply on that side, and the tables along the balustrades gave a clear view, across white domes and spires, of the great harbor, crowded with more ships than ever. Tanchico needed everything, desperately, and there was gold to be made—until the gold and time ran out.

With its gilded lamps and ceilings inlaid with brass fretwork polished to a golden gleam, its serving women and men chosen for grace and beauty and discretion, the Garden of the Silver Breezes had been the most expensive wineshop in the city even before the troubles. Now it was outrageous. But those who dealt in huge sums still came, those who dealt in power and influence, or thought they did. In some ways there was less to deal in than before; in others, more.

Low walls surrounded each table, making islands dotted across the green and golden floor tiles. Each wall, pierced with lacy carving so no eavesdropper could listen unseen, stood just high enough to hide who met whom from the casual glances of passersby. Even so, patrons usually went masked, especially of late, and some had a bodyguard beside their table, also masked to avoid recognition if the patron was prudent. And tongueless, rumor said, for the most prudent. No guard was visibly armed; the proprietress of the Garden of Silver Breezes, a sleek woman of indeterminate age named Selindrin, allowed no weapons past the street now. Her rule was not broken, at least openly.

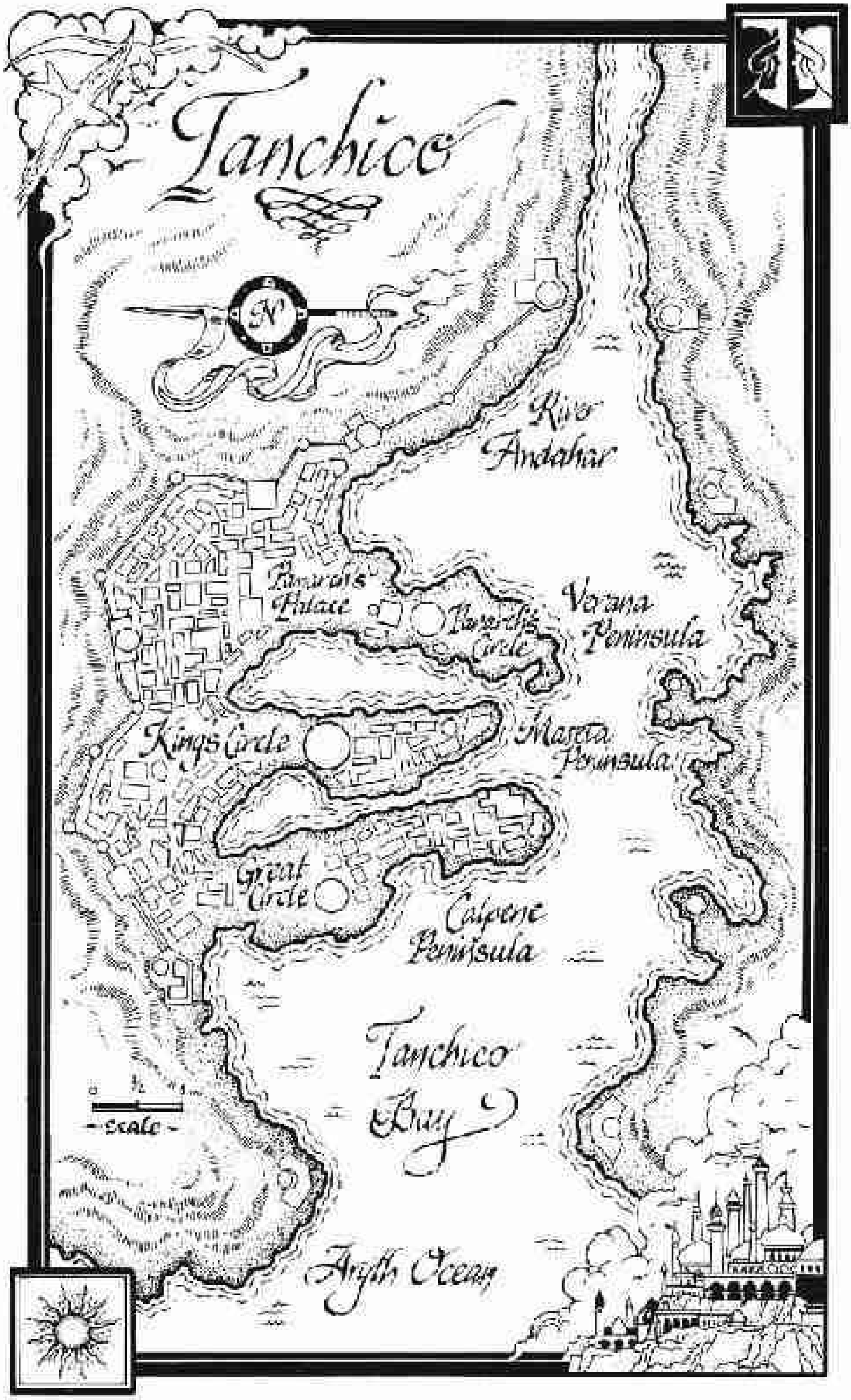
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Maseta Peninsula
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From her usual table against the balustrade, Egeanin watched the ships in the harbor, especially those under sail. They made her want to be back on a deck giving orders. She had never expected duty to bring her to this.

Unconsciously she adjusted the velvet mask that hid the upper half of her face; she felt ridiculous wearing the thing, but it was necessary to blend in to some extent. The mask—blue to match her high-necked silk gown—the gown itself, and her dark hair, grown down to her shoulders now, were as far as she could make herself go. Passing for a Taraboner was unnecessary—Tanchico bulged with refugees, a good many of them foreigners swept up in the troubles—and it was beyond her in any case. These people were animals; they had no discipline, no order.

Regretfully, she turned from the harbor to her table companion, a narrow-faced fellow with a weasel's greedy smile. Floran Gelb's frayed collar did not belong in the Garden of Silver Breezes, and he continually wiped his hands on his coat. She always met them here, the greasy little men she was forced to deal with. It was a reward for them, and a means of keeping them off balance.

"What do you have for me, Master Gelb?"

Wiping his hands again, he lifted a coarse jute bag onto the table and watched her anxiously. She held the bag down beside her before opening it. A silvery metal *a'dam* lay inside, a collar and bracelet connected by a leash cunningly worked and joined. She closed the bag and set it on the floor. This made three that Gelb had recovered, more than anyone else.

"Very good, Master Gelb." A small purse went across the table the other way; Gelb made it disappear under his coat as if it held the Empress's crown instead of a handful of silver. "And do you have anything else?"

"Those women. The ones you want me to look for?" She had grown used to the quick speech of these people, but she wished he would not lick his lips that way. It did not make him any harder to understand, but it was unsightly.

She very nearly told him she was not interested anymore. But this was a part of why she was in Tanchico, after all; maybe the whole reason, now. "What of them?" That she could even think of shirking her duty made her speak more harshly than she had intended, and Gelb flinched.

"I . . . I think I've found another one."

"You are sure? There have been . . . mistakes."

Mistakes was a gentle way to put it. Near a dozen women who came only vaguely near the descriptions had been nuisances she could ignore once she had seen them. But that noblewoman, a refugee from estates burned out by the war. Gelb had kidnapped the woman off the street, thinking to earn more for delivering her than for telling where she was. In his defense, the Lady Leilwin closely matched one of the women Egeanin sought, but she had told him they would not speak with any accent he recognized, certainly not a Taraboner accent. Egeanin had not wanted to kill the woman, yet even in Tanchico someone might have listened to her story. Leilwin had gone bound and gagged onto one of the courier boats in the dead of night; she was young and pretty, and someone would find a better use for her than slitting her throat. But Egeanin was not in Tanchico to find serving girls for the Blood.

“No mistakes, Mistress Elidar,” he said hastily, flashing that smile full of teeth. “Not this time. But . . . I need a little gold. To be sure. To get close enough. Four or five crowns?”

“I pay for results,” Egeanin told him firmly. “After your . . . mistakes, you are lucky that I pay you at all.”

Gelb licked his lips nervously. “You said. . . . Back in the beginning, you said you’d have a few coins for those as could do *special* sorts of work.” A muscle in his cheek twitched; his eyes darted as if someone might be listening at the lace-carved wall around three sides of the table, and his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “Stirring up trouble, as it were? I heard a rumor—from a fellow who’s bodyservant to Lord Brys—about the Assembly, and choosing the new Panarch. I think maybe it’s true. The man was drunk, and when he realized what he had said, he nearly fouled himself. Even if it isn’t, it would still rip Tanchico wide open.”

“Do you really believe there is any need to buy trouble in this city?” Tanchico was a rotting bellfruit ready to fall in the first wind. The whole of this wretched land was. For a moment she was tempted to buy his “rumor.” She was supposed to be a trader in whatever goods or information came along, and she had even sold some. But dealing with Gelb sickened her. And her own doubts frightened her. “That will be all, Master Gelb. You know how to make contact with me if you find another of these.” She touched the rough-woven sack.

Instead of rising, he sat staring, trying to see through her mask. “Where are you from, Mistress Elidar? The way you talk, all slurred out and soft-like—begging your pardon; no offense meant—I can't place you."

"That will be all, Gelb." Maybe it was the quarterdeck voice, or maybe the mask failed to hide her cold stare, but Gelb bounced to his feet, ducking bows and stammering apologies while he fumbled open the door in the lacework wall.

She sat there after he was gone, giving him time to leave the Garden of Silver Breezes. Someone would follow him outside, to make certain he did not wait to shadow her. All this skulking and hiding disgusted her; she almost wished something would destroy her disguise and give her an honest face-to-face fight.

A new ship was sweeping into the harbor below, a Sea Folk raker with its towering masts and clouds of sail. She had examined a captured raker, but she would have given almost anything to take one out, though she expected a Sea Folk crew would be necessary to wring the most from the vessel. The Atha'an Miere were stubborn about taking the oaths; it would not be as good if she had to buy a crew. Buy an entire crew! The amount of gold that came in by the courier boats for her to fling about was going to her head.

Taking up the jute bag, she started to rise, then sat back down hurriedly at the sight of a wide, thick-shouldered man leaving another table. Dark hair, long to his shoulders, and a beard that left his upper lip bare framed Bayle Domon's round face. He was not masked, of course; he ran a dozen coasting vessels in and out of Tanchico and apparently did not care who knew his whereabouts. Masked. She was not thinking straight. He would not recognize her in a mask. Still, she waited until he was gone before leaving her table. The man might have to be dealt with yet, if he became a danger.

Selindrin took the gold she proffered with a sleek smile and murmured wishes for Egeanin's continued patronage. Dark hair in dozens of narrow braids, the proprietress of the Garden of Silver Breezes wore clinging white silk, nearly thin enough for a serving girl, and one of those transparent veils that always made Egeanin want to ask Taraboners what dances they could perform. Shea dancers wore almost identical veils and little more. Still, Egeanin thought as she started toward the street, the woman had a sharp mind, else she could not maneuver through the shoals of Tanchico, catering to every faction while earning the enmity of none.

A reminder of that was the tall, white-cloaked man, gray at the temples but hard-faced and hard-eyed, who passed Egeanin and was greeted by Selindrin. Jaichim Carridin's cloak bore a golden sunburst on the breast, with three golden knots below and a crimson shepherd's crook behind. An Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light, a high officer in the Children of the Light. The very concept of the Children outraged Egeanin, a military body answerable only to itself. But Carridin and his few hundred soldiers had power of a sort in Tanchico, where any kind of authority seemed to be lacking most of the time. The Civil Watch no longer patrolled the streets, and the army—as much as was still loyal to the King—was too busy holding the fortresses around the city. Egeanin noted that Selindrin did not even glance at the sword on Carridin's hip. He definitely had power.

As soon as she stepped into the street her bearers came running with her chair from the cluster waiting for their patrons, and her bodyguards closed in around her with their spears. They were a mismatched lot, some in steel caps, three wearing leather shirts sewn with steel scales; rough-faced men, possibly deserters from the army, but aware that continued full bellies and silver to spend depended on her continued safety. Even the bearers carried stout knives, and cudgels stuck out of their sashes. No one who looked as though they had money dared appear out-of-doors unguarded. In any case, had she cared to risk it, it would only draw attention to her.

The guards forced a way through the crowds with no trouble. The throngs eddied and swirled in the narrow streets that wound through the city's hills, creating clear pockets around sedan chairs surrounded by bodyguards. There were very few carriages to be seen. Horses were becoming an extravagance.

Worn was the only fit description for the milling masses, worn and frenzied. Worn faces, worn clothes, and too-bright, frenzied eyes, desperate, hoping when they knew there was no hope. Many had surrendered, crouching against walls, huddled in doorways, clutching wives, husbands, children, not simply worn but ragged and blank-faced. Sometimes they roused enough to cry out to some passerby for a coin, a crust, anything.

Egeanin kept her eyes straight ahead, of necessity trusting the bodyguards to detect any danger. Meeting a beggar's eyes meant twenty of them jamming themselves hopefully around her chair. Tossing a coin meant a hundred crowding in, clamoring and weeping. She was already using part of the money the courier boats brought to support a soup kitchen, just as if she were one of the Blood. She shuddered to think what discovery of that over-stepping of her place would mean. As well put on a brocaded robe and shave her head.

All of this could be put aright once Tanchico fell, with everyone fed, everyone put in their proper place. And she could abandon dresses and things she had no experience or taste for, return to her ship. Tarabon, at least, and perhaps Arad Doman as well, were ready to crumble at a touch, like charred silk. Why was the High Lady Suroth holding back? Why?

Jaichim Carridin lounged in his chair, cloak spread over the carved arms, studying the Taraboner noblemen who occupied the private room's other chairs. They sat stiffly in their gold-embroidered coats, mouths tight below masks fancifully worked to resemble hawks' faces, and lions' and leopards'. He had more to worry him than they, but he managed a calm demeanor. It was two months since he had received word of a cousin found skinned alive in his own bedchamber, three since his youngest sister, Dealda, being carried off from her bridal feast by a Myrddraal. The family steward wrote disbelievingly, frantic with all the tragedy befalling House Carridin. Two months. He hoped Dealda had died quickly. It was said women did not cling to sanity long in Myrddraal hands. Two whole months. Anyone else but Jaichim Carridin would have been sweating blood.

Each man held a golden goblet of wine, but there were no servants present. Selindrin had served them before removing herself with an assurance that they would not be disturbed. There was, in fact, no one else on this, the highest floor of the Garden of Silver Breezes. Two men who had come with the nobles—members of the King's Life Guard, unless Carridin missed his guess—stood at the foot of the stairs to guarantee continued privacy.

Carridin sipped his wine. None of the Taraboners had touched theirs. "So," he said lightly, "King Andric wishes the Children of the Light to aid in restoring order in the city. We do not often let ourselves become involved in the internal affairs of nations." Not openly. "Certainly I cannot remember such a request. I do not know what the Lord Captain Commander will say." Pedron Niall would say to do what was needed and make sure the Taraboners knew that they owed a debt to the Children, make sure they paid it in full.

“There is no time for you to request instructions from Amador,” a man in a black-spotted leopard mask said urgently. None had offered names, but Carridin did not need them.

“What we ask is necessary,” another snapped, his thick mustache below a hawk mask giving him the look of a peculiar owl. “You must understand that we would not make this request unless it were necessary in the extreme. We must have unity, not more division, yes? There are many divisive elements, even within Tanchico. They must be suppressed if there is to be even the hope of imposing peace on the countryside.”

“The death of the Panarch has made matters most difficult,” the first fellow added.

Carridin raised an eyebrow questioningly. “Have you discovered yet who killed her?”

His own supposition was that Andric himself had had the deed done, in the belief that the Panarch favored one of the rebel claimants to the throne. The King may have been right, but he had discovered after calling what he could of the Assembly of Lords—a good many were with one or another of the rebel groups out in the country—that they were remarkably stubborn about ratifying his choice. Even had the Lady Amathera not been currently sharing Andric’s bed, election of King and Panarch was the only real power the Assembly had, and they did not seem to want to give it up. The difficulties over the Lady Amathera were not supposed to be known. Even the Assembly realized that that news might set off riots.

“One of the Dragonsworn madmen assuredly,” the owl-looking man said, giving his mustache a fierce tug. “No true Taraboner would harm the Panarch, yes?” He almost sounded as if he believed it.

“Of course,” Carridin said smoothly. He took another sip of wine. “If I am to secure the Panarch’s Palace for the ascension of the Lady Amathera, I must hear from the King himself. Otherwise, it might appear the Children of the Light were reaching for power in Tarabon, when all we seek is, as you say, an end to division, and peace under the Light.”

An older, square-jawed leopard, white streaking his dark yellow hair, spoke up in cold tones. “I have heard that Pedron Niall seeks unity against the Dragonsworn. Unity under himself, is it not?”

“The Lord Captain Commander seeks no dominion,” Carridin replied just as icily. “The Children serve the Light, as do all men of good will.”

“There can be no question,” the first leopard put in, “of Tarabon being subject in any way to Amador. No question!” Angry agreement rumbled from nearly every chair.

“Of course not,” Carridin said as though the thought had never crossed his mind. “If you wish my aid, I will give it—under the conditions I have stated. If you do not, there is always work for the Children. Service to the Light never ends, for the Shadow waits everywhere.”

“You will have sureties signed and sealed by the King,” a graying, lion-masked man said, the first words he had spoken. He was, of course, Andric himself, though Carridin was not supposed to know. The King could not meet with an Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light without causing talk any more than he could visit a wineshop, even the Garden of Silver Breezes.

Carridin nodded. “When they are in my hand, I will secure the Panarch’s Palace, and the Children will suppress any . . . divisive elements . . . who attempt to interfere with the investiture. Under the Light, I swear it.” Tension drained out of the Taraboners visibly; they upended their goblets as if trying to replace it with wine, even Andric.

So far as the people of Tarabon were concerned, the Children would have the blame for the inevitable killings, not the King, or the army of Tarabon. Once Amathera was invested with the Crown and Staff of the Tree, a few more of the Assembly might well join the rebels, but if the rest admitted they had not elected her the news would set Tanchico afire. As for any tales that came from those who fled—why, rebels would spread any sort of treasonous lie. And the King and Panarch of Tarabon would both dangle on strings Carridin could hand to Pedron Niall to do with as he pleased.

Not such a grand prize as it would have been when the King of Tarabon controlled more than a few hundred square miles around Tanchico, yet it might be grand again. With the aid of the Children—a legion or two would be needed at least; not just the five hundred men Carridin had—the Dragonsworn might yet be crushed, the various rebels defeated, even the war with Arad Doman successfully prosecuted. If either country still realized it was fighting the other. Arad Doman was in worse condition than Tarabon, so Carridin heard.

In truth, he hardly cared if Tarabon fell under the Children’s sway, or Tanchico, or any of it. There were motions to go through, things to do that he had always done, but it was difficult to think of anything except when his own throat would be cut. Perhaps he would long to have his throat cut. Two whole months since the last report.

He did not stay to drink with the Taraboners, but made his goodbyes, as shortly as he could. If they took offense, they needed him too much to show it. Selindrin saw him come down, and a stableboy was trotting his horse up to the front door when he reached the street. Tossing the boy a copper, he spurred the black gelding to a quick canter. The ragged folk in the twisty streets got out of his way, which was to the good; he was not sure he would notice if he trampled one of them. Not that it would be any loss. The city was full of beggars; he could hardly breathe without the stench of old, sour sweat and dirt. Tamrin ought to sweep them up and sweep them out; let the rebels in the country contend with them.

It was the country that held his mind, but not the rebels. They could be dealt with easily enough, after word began to spread that this one or that was a Darkfriend. And once he managed to turn a few of them over to the Hand of the Light, they would stand up before everyone and confess to worshipping the Dark One, eating children, anything and everything they were told. The rebels could not last long after that; the pretenders still in the field would wake to find themselves alone. But the Dragonsworn, the men and women who had actually declared for the Dragon Reborn, would not fall away for a charge of being Darkfriends. Most people already considered them so, swearing to follow a man who could channel.

It was the man they had sworn to follow who was the problem, the man whose name they did not even know. Rand al'Thor. Where was he? A hundred bands of Dragonsworn out there, at least two large enough to be called armies, fighting the King's army—such of it as still held allegiance to Andric—fighting the rebels—who were busy fighting each other as often as Andric or the Dragonsworn—yet Carridin had no clue to which band sheltered Rand al'Thor. He could be on Almoth Plain or in Arad Doman, where the situation was the same. If he was, Jaichim Carridin was a dead man in all likelihood.

At the palace on the Verana he had commandeered for the Children's headquarters, he tossed his reins to one of the white-cloaked guards and stalked inside without returning their salutes. The owner of this ornate mass of pale domes and lacy spires and shaded gardens had put forward a claim to the Throne of the Light, and no one complained at the occupation. Least of all the owner; what was left of his head still adorned a spike above the Traitors' Steps, on the Maseta.

For once Carridin barely glanced at fine Tarabon carpets, or furnishings worked with gold and ivory, or fountained courts where splashing water made a cool sound. Broad hallways with golden lamps and high ceilings covered in delicate gold-work scrolls interested him not at all. This palace could match the finest in Amadicia, if not the largest, yet foremost in his mind right then was the strong brandy in the room he had taken for a study.

He was halfway across a priceless carpet, all patterned blue and scarlet and gold, eyes fixed on the carved cabinet that held a silver flask of double-distilled brandy, when suddenly he realized he was not alone. A woman in a clinging, pale-red gown stood near the tall, narrow windows overlooking one of the tree-shaded gardens, her honey-colored hair in braids that brushed her shoulders. A misty scrap of veil did nothing to hide her face. Young and pretty, with a rosebud mouth and large brown eyes, she was no servant, not dressed like that.

"Who are you?" he demanded irritably. "How did you get in here? Leave at once, or I'll have you tossed into the street."

"Threats, Bors? You should be more welcoming to a guest, yes?"

That name jolted him to his heels. Before he thought, he had his sword out, lunging for her throat.

Something seized him—the air turned to crawling jelly—something forced him to his knees, encased him from the neck down. It tightened around his wrist until bones grated; his hand popped open, and his sword fell. The Power. She was using the One Power on him. A Tar Valon witch. And if she knew that name. . . .

"Do you remember," she said, coming closer, "a meeting where Ba'alzamon himself appeared, and showed us the faces of Matrim Cauthon, and Perrin Aybara, and Rand al'Thor?" She practically spat the names, especially the last; her eyes could have drilled holes in steel. "You see? I know who you are, yes? You pledged your soul to the Great Lord of the Dark, Bors." Her sudden laugh was a tinkling of bells.

Sweat popped out on his face. Not just a despised Tar Valon witch. Black Ajah. She was Black Ajah. He had thought it would be a Myrddraal that came for him. He had thought there was time yet. More time. Not yet. "I have tried to kill him," he babbled. "Rand al'Thor. I have tried! But I cannot find him. I cannot! I was told my family would be killed if I failed, one by one. I was promised I would be last! I have cousins, yet. Nephews. Nieces. I have another sister! You must give me more time!”

She stood there, watching him with those sharp brown eyes, smiling with that plump little mouth, listening to him spew out where Vanora could be found, where her bedchamber lay, how she liked to ride alone in the forest beyond Carmera. Perhaps if he shouted some of the guards would come. Perhaps they could kill her. He opened his mouth wider—and that thick invisible jelly oozed in, forcing his jaws apart until they creaked in his ears. Nostrils flaring, he sucked air in frantically. He could still breathe, but he could not scream. All that came out were muffled groans, like a woman wailing behind walls. He wanted to scream.

“You are very amusing,” the honey-haired woman said finally. “Jaichim. That is a good name for a dog, I think. Would you like to be my dog, Jaichim? If you are a very good dog, I may allow you to watch Rand al’Thor die one day, yes?”

It took a moment for what she was saying to sink in. If he was to see Rand al’Thor die, she was not. . . . She was not going to kill him, skin him alive, do the things his mind had conjured that would make flaying a release. Tears rolled down his face. Sobs of relief shook him, as much as he could shake, trapped as he was. That trap abruptly vanished, and he collapsed on hands and knees, still weeping. He could not stop.

The woman knelt beside him and tangled a hand in his hair, pulled his head up. “Now you will listen to me, yes? The death of Rand al’Thor is for the future, and you will see it only if you are a good dog. You are going to move your Whitecloaks to the Panarch’s Palace.”

“H-how do y-you know that?”

She shook his head from side to side, not gently. “A good dog does not question his mistress. I throw the stick; you fetch the stick. I say kill; you kill. Yes? Yes.” Her smile was just a flash of teeth. “There will be difficulty in taking the Palace? The Panarch’s Legion is there, a thousand men, sleeping in the hallways, the exhibition rooms, the courtyards. You do not have so many of your Whitecloaks.”

“They. . . .” He had to stop and swallow. “They will make no trouble. They will believe Amathera has been chosen by the Assembly. It is the Assembly that—”

“Do not bore me, Jaichim. I do not care if you kill the entire Assembly so long as you hold the Panarch’s Palace. When will you move?”

“It . . . it will take three or four days for Andric to deliver sureties.”

“Three or four days,” she murmured half to herself. “Very well. A little longer delay should cause no harm.” He was wondering what delay she meant when she cut away the little ground remaining under his feet. “You will keep control of the Palace, and you will send the Panarch’s fine soldiers away.”

“That is impossible,” he gasped, and she jerked his head back so hard he did not know if his neck would break or his scalp tear loose first. He did not dare resist. A thousand invisible needles pricked him, on his face, his chest, his back, arms, legs, everywhere. Invisible, but he was sure no less real for that.

“Impossible, Jaichim?” she said softly. “Impossible is a word I do not like to hear.”

The needles twisted deeper; he groaned, but he had to explain. What she wanted *was* impossible. He panted with haste. “Once Amathera is invested as Panarch, she will control the Legion. If I try to hold the Palace, she will turn them on me, and Andric will help her. There is no way I can hold against the Panarch’s Legion, and against whatever Andric can strip from the Ring forts.”

She studied him so long he began to sweat. He did not dare to flinch, hardly even to blink; those thousand biting little stabs did not allow it.

“The Panarch will be dealt with,” she said finally. The needles vanished, and she stood.

Carridin stood, too, trying to steady himself. Perhaps some bargain could be reached; the woman seemed willing to listen to reason now. His legs quivered with shock, but he made his voice as firm as he could. “Even if you can influence Amathera—”

She cut him off. “I told you not to question, Jaichim. A good dog obeys his mistress, yes? I promise you, if you do not you will beg me to find a Myrddraal to play with you. Do you understand me?”

“I understand,” he said leadenly. She continued to stare, and after a moment he did understand. “I will do as you say . . . mistress.” Her brief, approving smile made him flush. She moved toward the door, turning her back on him as if he really were a dog, and a toothless one. “What . . . ? What is your name?”

Her smile was sweet this time, and mocking. “Yes. A dog should know his mistress’s name. I am called Liandrin. But that name must never touch a dog’s lips. Should it, I will be most displeased with you.”

When the door closed behind her, he staggered to a high-backed chair inlaid with ivory and fell into it. The brandy he left where it was; the way his stomach was twisting, it would make him vomit. What interest could she possibly have in the Panarch’s Palace? A dangerous line of questioning, perhaps, but even if they served the same master he could not feel anything but revulsion for a Tar Valon witch.

She did not know as much as she thought. With the King’s sureties in hand, he could keep Tamrin and the army away from his throat with the threat of revelation, and Amathera, too. They could still rouse the mob, though. And the Lord Captain Commander might be more than disapproving of the entire affair, might believe he was reaching for personal power. Carridin dropped his head in his hands, envisioning Niall signing his death warrant. His own men would arrest him, and hang him. If he could arrange the death of the witch. . . . But she had promised to protect him from the Myrddraal. He wanted to weep again. She was not even here, yet she had him trapped as tightly as ever, steel jaws clamped on both legs and a noose snug around his neck.

There had to be a way out, but every way he looked there was only another trap.

Liandrin ghosted through the halls, easily avoiding servants and Whitecloaks. When she stepped out of a small back door into a narrow alley behind the palace, the tall young guard there stared at her with a blend of relief and unease. Her little trick of opening someone to her suggestions—just a whip-crack trickle of the Power—had not been needed with Carridin, but it had easily convinced this fool that she should be allowed in. Smiling, she motioned him to bend closer. The lanky lout grinned as if expecting a kiss, a grin that froze as her narrow blade went through his eye.

She leaped nimbly back as he fell, a boneless sack of flesh. He would not speak of her even by accident now. Not so much as a spot of blood stained her hand. She wished she had Chesmal’s skill at killing with the Power, or even Rianna’s lesser talent. Strange that the ability to kill with the Power, to stop a heart or boil blood in the veins, should be so closely linked to Healing. She herself could not Heal much more than scrapes or bruises; not that she had any interest in it.

Her sedan chair, red-lacquered and inlaid with ivory and gold, was waiting at the end of the alley, and with it her bodyguards, a dozen big men with faces like starving wolves. Once in the streets, they cleared a path through the crowds with ease, spears clubbing any not quick enough to move aside. They were all dedicated to the Great Lord of the Dark, of course, and if they did not know exactly who she was, they knew that other men had disappeared, men who failed to serve properly.

The house she and the others had taken, two sprawling stories of flat-roofed stone and white plaster on a hillside at the base of the Verana, Tanchico's easternmost peninsula, belonged to a merchant who had also sworn his oaths to the Great Lord. Liandrin would have preferred a palace—one day perhaps she would have the King's Palace on the Maseta; she had grown up staring enviously at the Lords' palaces, but why should she settle for one of them?—yet despite her preferences, it made sense to stay hidden awhile yet. There was no way the fools in Tar Valon could suspect they were in Tarabon, but the Tower was surely still hunting them, and Siuan Sanche's pets could be sniffing anywhere.

Gates gave onto a small courtyard, windowless except on the upper floor. Leaving the guards and bearers there, she hurried inside. The merchant had furnished a few servants; all sworn to the Great Lord, he assured them, but barely enough to provide for eleven women who rarely stirred outside. One, a sturdily handsome, dark-braided woman called Gyldin, was sweeping the entry hall's red and white tiles when Liandrin entered.

"Where are the others?" she demanded.

"In the front withdrawing room." Gyldin gestured to the double-arched doors to the right as though Liandrin might not know where that was.

Liandrin's mouth tightened. The woman did not curtsy; she used no titles of respect. True, she did not know who Liandrin really was, but Gyldin certainly knew she was high enough to give orders and be obeyed, to send that fat merchant bowing and scraping and bundling his family off to some hovel. "You are supposed to be cleaning, yes? Not standing about? Well, clean! There is dust everywhere. If I find a speck of the dust this evening, you cow you, I will have you beaten!" She clamped her teeth shut. She had copied the manner in which nobles and the wealthy spoke for so long that sometimes she forgot her father had sold fruit from a barrow, yet in one moment of anger the speech of a commoner rolled off her tongue. Too much stress. Too much waiting. With a last, snapped, "Work!" she pushed into the withdrawing room and slammed the door behind her.

The others were not *all* there, which irritated her even more, but enough. Round-faced Eldrith Jhondar, seated at a lapis-inlaid table beneath a hanging on one white-plastered wall, was making careful notes from a tattered manuscript; sometimes she absently cleaned the nib of her pen on the sleeve of her dark wool dress. Marillin Gemalphin sat beside one of the narrow windows, blue eyes dreamily staring out at the tiny fountain tinkling in a little courtyard, idly scratching the ears of a scrawny yellow cat and apparently unaware of the hairs it shed all over her green silk dress. She and Eldrith were both Browns, but if Marillin ever found out that Eldrith was the reason the stray cats she brought in continually disappeared, there would be trouble.

They had been Browns. Sometimes it was difficult to remember they no longer were, or that she herself was no longer a Red. So much of what had marked them clearly as members of their old Ajahs remained even now that they were openly pledged to the Black. Take the two former Greens. Coppery-skinned, swan-necked Jeaine Caide wore the thinnest, most clinging silk dresses she could find—white, today—and laughed that the gowns would have to do, since there was nothing available in Tarabon to catch a man's eye. Jeaine was from Arad Doman; Domani women were infamous for their scandalous clothes. Asne Zeramene, with her dark, tilted eyes and bold nose, looked almost demure in pale gray, plainly cut and high-necked, but Liandrin had heard her regret leaving her Warders behind more than once. And as for Rianna Andomeran. . . . Black hair with a stark white streak above her left ear framed a face with the cold, arrogant certainty only a White could assume.

"It is done," Liandrin announced. "Jaichim Carridin will move his Whitecloaks to the Panarch's Palace and hold it for us. He does not yet know we will have guests . . . of course." There were a few grimaces; changing Ajahs had certainly not altered anyone's feelings toward men who hated women who could channel. "There is an interesting thing. He believed I was there to kill him. For failing to kill Rand al'Thor."

"That makes no sense," Asne said, frowning. "We are to bind him, control him, not kill him." She laughed suddenly, soft and low, and leaned back in her chair. “If there *is* a way to control him, I would not mind binding him to me. He is a good-looking young man, from the little I saw.” Liandrin sniffed; she had no liking for men at all.

Rianna shook her head worriedly. “It makes troubling sense. Our orders from the Tower were clear, yet it is also clear that Carridin has others. I can only postulate dissension among the Forsaken.”

“The Forsaken,” Jeaine muttered, folding her arms tightly; thin white silk molded her breasts even more revealingly. “What good are promises that we will rule the world when the Great Lord returns if we are crushed between warring Forsaken first? Does anyone believe we could stand against any of them?”

“Balefire.” Asne looked around, dark tilted eyes challenging. “Balefire will destroy even one of the Forsaken. And we have the means to produce it.” One of the *ter’angreal* they had removed from the Tower, a fluted black rod a pace long, had that use. None of them knew why they had been ordered to take it, not even Liandrin herself. Too many of the *ter’angreal* were like that, taken because they had been told to, with no reasons given, but some orders had to be obeyed. Liandrin wished they had been able to secure even one *angreal.*

Jeaine gave a sharp sniff. “If any of us could control it. Or have you forgotten that the one test we dared nearly killed me? And burned a hole through both sides of the ship before I could stop it? Fine good it would have done us to drown before reaching Tanchico.”

“What need have we of balefire?” Liandrin said. “If we can control the Dragon Reborn, let the Forsaken think how they will deal with us.” Suddenly she became aware of another presence in the room. The woman Gyldin, wiping down a carved, low-backed chair in one corner. “What are you doing here, woman?”

“Cleaning.” The dark-braided woman straightened unconcernedly. “You told me to clean.”

Liandrin almost struck out with the Power. Almost. But Gyldin certainly did not know they were Aes Sedai. How much had the woman heard? Nothing of importance. “You will go to the cook,” she said in a cold fury, “and tell him he is to strap you. Very hard! And you are to have nothing to eat until the dust it is all gone.” Again. The woman had made her speak like a commoner again.

Marillin stood, nuzzling the yellow cat's nose with hers, and handed the creature to Gyldin. "See that he gets a dish of cream when the cook is done with you. And some of that nice lamb. Cut it small for him; he doesn't have many teeth left, poor thing." Gyldin looked at her, not blinking, and she added, "Is there something you don't understand?"

"I understand." Gyldin's mouth was tight. Perhaps she did finally understand; she was a servant, not their equal.

Liandrin waited a moment after she left, the cat cradled in her arms, then snatched open one of the doors. The entry hall was empty. Gyldin was not eavesdropping. She did not trust the woman. But then, she could not think of anyone she did trust.

"We must be concerned with what concerns us," she said tightly, closing the door. "Eldrith, have you found a new clue in those pages? Eldrith?"

The plump woman gave a start, then stared around at them, blinking. It was the first time she had raised her head from the battered yellow manuscript; she seemed surprised to see Liandrin. "What? Clue? Oh. No. It is difficult enough getting into the King's Library; if I extracted so much as a page, the librarians would know it immediately. But if I disposed of them, I would never find anything. That place is a maze. No, I found this in a bookseller's near the King's Palace. It is an interesting treatise on—"

Embracing *saidar*, Liandrin sent the pages showering across the floor. "Unless they are a treatise on the controlling of Rand al'Thor, let them be burned! What have you learned about what we seek?"

Eldrith blinked at the scattered papers. "Well, it is in the Panarch's Palace."

"You learned that two days ago."

"And it must be a *ter'angreal*. To control someone who can channel must require the Power, and since it is a specialized use that means a *ter'angreal*. We will find it in the exhibition room, or perhaps among the Panarch's collection."

"Something new, Eldrith." With an effort Liandrin made her voice less shrill. "Have you found anything that is new? Anything?"

The round-faced woman blinked uncertainly. "Actually. . . . No."

"It does not matter," Marillin said. "In a few days, once they have invested their precious Panarch, we can begin searching, and if we must inspect every candlestick, we will find it. We are on the brink, Liandrin. We will put Rand al'Thor on a leash and teach him to sit up and roll over."

"Oh, yes," Eldrith said, smiling happily. "On a leash."

Liandrin hoped it was so. She was tired of waiting, tired of hiding. Let the world know her. Let people bend knee as had been promised when she first forswore old oaths for new.

Egeanin knew she was not alone as soon as she stepped into her small house by the kitchen door, but she dropped her mask and the jute bag carelessly on the table and walked over to where a bucket of water stood beside the brick fireplace. As she bent to take the copper ladle, her right hand darted into a low hollow where two bricks had been removed behind the bucket; she spun erect, a small crossbow in her hand. No more than a foot long, it had little power or range, but she always kept it drawn, and the dark stain tipping the sharp steel bolt would kill in a heartbeat.

If the man leaning casually in the corner saw the crossbow, he gave no outward sign. He was pale-haired and blue-eyed, in his middle years, and good-looking if too slender for her taste. Clearly he had watched her cross the narrow yard through the iron-grilled window beside him. "Do you think that I threaten you?" he said after a moment.

She recognized the familiar accents of home, but she did not lower the crossbow. "Who are you?"

For answer he dipped two fingers carefully into his belt pouch—apparently he could see after all—and brought out something small and flat. She motioned him to lay it on the table and back up again.

Only after he was back in the corner did she move close enough to pick up what he had set there. Never taking her eyes or the crossbow away from him, she lifted it up where she could see. A small ivory plaque bordered in gold, engraved with a raven and a tower. The raven's eyes were black sapphires. A raven, symbol of the Imperial family; the Tower of Ravens, symbol of Imperial justice.

"Normally this would be enough," she told him, "but we are far from Seanchan, in a land where the bizzare is almost commonplace. What other proof can you offer?"

Smiling with silent amusement, he removed his coat, unlaced his shirt and stripped it off. On either shoulder was the tattoo of raven and tower.

Most Seekers for Truth bore the ravens as well as the tower, but not even someone who dared steal a Seeker's plaque would have himself marked so. To wear the ravens was to be the property of the Imperial family. There was an old story of a fool young lord and lady who had themselves tattooed while drunk, some three hundred years gone. When the then Empress learned of it, she had them brought to the Court of the Nine Moons and set to scrubbing floors. This fellow might be one of their descendants. The mark of the raven was forever.

"My apologies, Seeker," she said, setting the crossbow down. "Why are you here?" She did not ask a name; any he gave might or might not be his.

He left her holding the plaque while he re-dressed himself in a leisurely manner. A subtle reminder. She was a captain and he property, but he was also a Seeker, and under the law he could have her put to the question on his own authority. By law he had the right to send her out to buy the rope to bind her while he put her to the question right here, and he would expect her to return with it. Flight from a Seeker was a crime. Refusal to cooperate with a Seeker was a crime. She had never in her life considered any criminal act, no more than she had considered treason against the Crystal Throne. But if he asked the wrong questions, demanded the wrong answers. . . . The crossbow was still close to her hand, and Cantorin was far away. Wild thoughts. Dangerous thoughts.

"I serve the High Lady Suroth and the *Corenne*, for the Empress," he said. "I am checking on the progress of the agents the High Lady has placed in these lands."

Checking? What had to be checked, and by a Seeker? "I have heard nothing of this from the courier boats." His smile deepened, and she flushed. Of course the crews would not speak of a Seeker. Yet he answered while lacing up his shirt.

"The courier boats are not to be risked with my trips. I have taken passage on the vessels of a local smuggler, a man called Bayle Domon. His craft stop everywhere in Tarabon and Arad Doman and between."

"I have heard of him," she said calmly. "All goes well?"

"It does now. I am glad that you, at least, understood your instructions properly. Among the others, only the Seekers did. It is regrettable that there are not more Seekers with the *Hailene*." Settling his coat on his shoulders, he plucked the Seeker's plaque from her hand. "There has been some embarrassment over the return of *sul'dam* deserters. Such desertions must not become common knowledge. Much better that they simply vanish."

Only because she had a little time to think was she able to keep her face smooth. *Sul'dam* had been left behind in the debacle at Falme, she had been told. Possibly some had deserted. Her instruction, delivered by the High Lady Suroth herself, had been to return any who could be found, whether they wanted to return or not, and if that was not possible, dispose of them. The last had seemed only a final alternative. Until now.

"I regret that these lands do not know kaf," he said, taking a seat at the table. "Even in Cantorin, only the Blood still have kaf. Or it was so when I left. Perhaps supply ships have arrived from Seanchan since. Tea must do. Fix me tea."

She very nearly knocked him out of his chair. The man was property. And a Seeker. She brewed tea. And served it to him, standing beside his chair with the pot to keep his cup full. She was surprised he did not ask her to don a veil and dance on the table.

She was permitted to sit at last, after fetching pen and ink and paper, but only to sketch maps of Tanchico and its defenses, to draw every other city and town she knew the least thing about. She listed the various forces in the field, as much as she knew of their strength and loyalties, what she had deduced of their dispositions.

When she was done, he stuffed it all in his pocket, told her to send the contents of the jute sack by the next courier boat, and left with one of those amused smiles, saying he might check on her progress again in a few weeks.

She sat there for a long time after he was gone. Every map she had drawn, every list she had made, duplicated papers sent out by courier boats long since. Having her do it all again while he watched might have been a punishment for forcing him to show his tattoos. Deathwatch Guards flaunted their ravens; Seekers rarely did. It might have been that. At least he had not gone down to the basement before she arrived. Or had he? Had he just been waiting for her to speak?

The stout iron lock hung seemingly undisturbed on the door in the hall just beyond the kitchen, but it was said Seekers knew how to open locks without keys. Taking the key from her belt pouch, she unfastened the lock and went down the narrow steps.

One lamp on a shelf lit the dirt-floored basement. Just four brick walls, cleared of everything that might help an escape. A faint smell of the slop pail hung in the air. On the side opposite the lamp, a woman in a dirty dress sat despondently on a few rough woolen blankets. Her head lifted at the sound of Egeanin's steps, dark eyes fearful and pleading. She had been the first *sul'dam* Egeanin had found. The first, the only. Egeanin had all but stopped looking, after she found Bethamin. And Bethamin had been in this basement since, while courier boats came and went.

"Did anyone come down here?" Egeanin said.

"No. I heard footsteps overhead, but. . . . No." Bethamin stretched out her hands. "Please, Egeanin. This is all a mistake. You have known me for ten years. Take this thing off of me."

A silver collar encircled her neck, attached by a thick silver leash to a bracelet of the same metal that hung on a peg a few feet above her head. It had been almost an accident, putting it on her, simply a means of securing her for a few moments. And then she had managed to knock Egeanin down, trying a dashing for freedom.

"If you bring it to me, I will," Egeanin said angrily. She was angry with many things, not with Bethamin. "Bring the *a'dam* over here, and I will remove it."

Bethamin shivered, let her hands fall. "It is a mistake," she whispered. "A horrible mistake." But she made no move toward the bracelet. Her first attempted flight had left her writhing on the floor upstairs, wracked by nausea, and had left Egeanin stunned.

Sul'dam controlled *damane,* women who could channel, by means of *a'dam.* It was *damane* who could channel, not *sul'dam.* But an *a'dam* could only control a woman who could channel. No other woman, and not a man—young men with that ability were executed, of course—only a woman who could channel. A woman who had that ability and was collared could not move more than a few steps without her bracelet on the wrist of a *sul'dam* to complete the link.

Egeanin felt very tired climbing the stairs and locking the door again. She wanted some tea herself, but the little the Seeker had left was cold, and she did not feel like brewing more. Instead she sat down and pulled the *a'dam* out of the jute bag. To her it was only finely jointed silver; she could not use it, and it could not harm her unless somebody hit her with it.

Even linking herself with an *a'dam* that far, denying its ability to control her, was enough to send a shiver down her spine. Women who could channel were dangerous animals rather than people. It had been they who Broke the World. They must be controlled, or they would turn everyone into their property. That was what she had been taught, what had been taught in Seanchan for a thousand years. Strange that that seemed not to have happened here. No. That was a dangerous, foolish line of thought.

Tucking the *a'dam* back into the bag, she cleaned the tea things to settle her mind. She liked tidiness, and there was a small satisfaction in making the kitchen so. Before she realized it she was brewing a pot of tea for herself. She did not want to think about Bethamin, and that was dangerously foolish too. Settling herself back at the table, she stirred honey into a cup of tea as black as she could make it. Not kaf, but it would do.

Despite her denials, despite her pleas, Bethamin could channel. Could other *sul'dam*? Was that why the High Lady Suroth wanted those left behind at Falme killed? It was unthinkable. It was impossible. The yearly testings all across Seanchan found every girl who had the spark of channeling in her: each was struck from the rolls of citizens, struck from family records, taken away to become collared *damane*. The same testings found the girls who could learn to wear the bracelet of the *sul'dam*. No woman escaped being tested each year until she was old enough that she would have begun channeling if the spark was there. How could even one girl be taken for *sul'dam* when she was *damane*? Yet there Bethamin was in the basement, held by an *a'dam* as by an anchor.

One thing was certain. The possibilities here were potentially deadly. This involved the Blood, and Seekers. Maybe even the Crystal Throne. Would the High Lady Suroth dare keep knowledge of this sort from the Empress? A mere ship captain could die screaming for a misplaced frown in that company, or find herself property for a whim. She had to know more if she hoped to avoid the Death of Ten Thousand Tears. To begin with, that meant spreading more money to Gelb and other ferrety skulkers like him, finding more *sul'dam* and seeing if *a'dam* held them. Beyond that. . . . Beyond that she was sailing uncharted reefs with no linesman in the bow.

Touching the crossbow, still lying there with its lethal bolt, she realized that something else was certain. She was not going to let the Seekers kill her. Not just to help the High Lady Suroth keep a secret. Perhaps not for any reason. It was a thought shiveringly close to treason, but it would not go away.

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CHAPTER 39

A Cup of Wine

When Elayne came on deck with her things neatly bundled, the setting sun seemed to be just touching the water out beyond the mouth of Tanchico's harbor, and the final thick hawsers were being tied to snug *Wave-dancer* to a ship-lined dock, only one of many along this westernmost peninsula of the city. Some of the crew were furling the last sails. Beyond the long wharves the city rose on hills, shining white, domed and spired, with polished weather vanes glittering. Perhaps a mile north she could make out high, round walls; the Great Circle, if she remembered correctly.

Slinging her bundle on the same shoulder as her leather scrip, she went to join Nynaeve by the gangplank, with Coine and Jorin. It seemed almost odd to see the sisters fully dressed again, in bright brocaded silk blouses that matched their wide trousers. Earrings and even nose rings she had become used to, and the fine gold chain across each woman's dark cheek hardly made her wince at all now.

Thom and Juilin stood apart with their own bundles, looking a touch sullen. Nynaeve had been right. They had tried to second-guess, starting when the real purpose of this journey, or some of it, was revealed to them two days ago. Neither seemed to think two young women were competent—*competent!*—to seek the Black Ajah. A threat by Nynaeve to have them transferred to another Sea Folk ship, headed the other way, had nipped that in the bud. At least it had once Toram and a dozen crewmen gathered ready to shove them into a boat to be rowed across. Elayne gave them a searching look. Sullenness meant rebellion; they were going to have more trouble from these two.

"Where will you go now, Coine?" Nynaeve was asking as Elayne reached them.

"To Dantora, and the Aile Jafar," the Sailmistress replied, "and then on to Cantorin and the Aile Somera, spreading news of the Coramoor, if it pleases the Light. But I must allow Toram to trade here, or he will burst.”

Her husband was down on the docks now, without his strange wire-framed lens, bare-chested and be-ringed, talking earnestly with men in baggy white trousers and coats embroidered with scrollwork on the shoulders. Each Tanchican wore a dark, cylindrical cap, and a transparent veil across his face. The veils looked ridiculous, especially on the men with thick mustaches.

“The Light send you a safe voyage,” Nynaeve said, shifting her bundles on her back. “If we discover any danger here that might threaten you before you sail, we will send word.” Coine and her sister looked remarkably calm. Knowledge of the Black Ajah hardly fazed them; it was the Coramoor, Rand, who was important.

Jorin kissed her fingertips and pressed them to Elayne’s lips. “The Light willing, we shall meet again.”

“The Light willing,” Elayne responded, duplicating the Windfinder’s gesture. It still felt odd, but it was an honor, too, used only between close family members or lovers. She was going to miss the Sea Folk woman. She had learned a great deal, and taught a little, as well. Jorin could certainly weave Fire much better now.

When they reached the foot of the gangplank, Nynaeve heaved a sigh of relief. An oily potion Jorin produced had settled her stomach after two days at sea, but all the same she had been tight-eyed and tight-mouthed until Tanchico came in sight.

The two men bracketed them immediately, without any instructions, Juilin taking the lead with his bundle on his back and his pale, thumb-thick staff held in both hands, dark eyes alert. Thom brought up the rear, somehow managing a dangerous look despite his white hair and his limp and his gleeman’s cloak.

Nynaeve pursed her lips for a moment but said nothing, which Elayne thought wise. Before they had gone fifty paces down the long stone dock she had seen as many slitty-eyed, hungry-faced men studying them, and Tanchicans and others shifting crates and bales and sacks on the dock. She suspected any of them would have been willing to cut her throat in the hope that a silk dress meant money in her purse. They did not frighten her; she could handle any two or three of them, she was sure. But she and Nynaeve had their Great Serpent rings in their pouches, and it would be useless to pretend no connection with the White Tower if she channeled in front of a hundred men. Best if Juilin and Thom looked as fierce as they could. She would not have minded having ten more just like them.

Suddenly there was a roar from the deck of one of the smaller ships. “You! It do be you!” A wide, round-faced man in a green silk coat leaped onto the dock, ignoring Juilin’s raised staff to stare at her and Nynaeve. A beard with no mustache marked him as an Illianer, and so did his accent. He seemed vaguely familiar.

“Master Domon?” Nynaeve said after a moment, giving her braid a sharp tug. “Bayle Domon?”

He nodded. “Aye. I did never think to see you again. I . . . did wait as long as I could in Falme, but the time did come when I must sail or watch my ship burn.”

Elayne knew him now. He had agreed to carry them out of Falme, but chaos had seized that city before they could reach his vessel. That coat said he had done well since.

“A pleasure to see you again,” Nynaeve said coolly, “but if you will excuse us, we must find rooms in the city.”

“That will be hard. Tanchico do burst its caulking. I do know a place where my word may bring something, though. I could no remain longer in Falme, but I do feel I owe you some debt.” Domon paused, frowning with sudden unease. “Your being here. Will the same happen here as in Falme, then?”

“No, Master Domon,” Elayne said when Nynaeve hesitated. “Of course not. And we will be glad to accept your help.”

She half-expected some protest out of Nynaeve, yet the older woman only nodded thoughtfully and made introductions among the men. Thom’s cloak made Domon’s eyebrows rise—for an instant she almost thought it looked as though he recognized the gleeman—but Juilin’s Tairen garb brought a frown that was returned in kind. Neither man said anything, though; perhaps they could keep the animosity between Tear and Illian out of Tanchico. If they could not, she would have to speak firmly with them.

Domon talked of what had happened with him since Falme as he accompanied them down the dock, and he had indeed done well. “A dozen good coasting ships the Panarch’s taxmen do know about,” he laughed, “and four deepwater they do no.”

He could hardly have acquired so many honestly in so short a time. It shocked her to hear him speak so openly on a dock full of men.

“Aye, I do smuggle, and make such profits as I did never believe. A tenth the amount of the excise in the customs men’s pockets do turn their eyes and seal their mouths.”

Two Tanchicans in those veils and round hats strolled past, hands clasped behind their backs. Each wore a heavy brass key dangling from a thick chain about his neck; it had the look of a mark of office. They nodded to Domon in a familiar way. Thom looked amused, but Juilin glared at Domon and the two Tanchicans equally. As a thief-catcher he had a proper dislike of those who flouted the law.

“I do no believe it will last much longer though,” Domon said when the Tanchicans had passed. “Things do be even worse in Arad Doman than here, and it do be bad enough here. Perhaps the Lord Dragon does no Break the World yet, but he did break Arad Doman and Tarabon.”

Elayne wanted to say something sharp to him, but they had reached the foot of the dock, and she watched in silence while he hired sedan chairs and bearers, and a dozen men with stout staves and hard faces. Guards with swords and spears stood at the end of the dock, with the look of hired men, not soldiers. From across the wide street along the row of docks, hundreds of defeated, sunken faces stared at the guards. Sometimes eyes flickered toward the ships, but mainly they fixed on the men holding them back from those ships. Remembering what Coine had said about people here mobbing her vessel, desperate to buy passage anywhere away from Tanchico, Elayne shivered. When these hungry eyes looked at the ships, need burned in them. Elayne sat rigidly in her chair as it jounced through the crowds behind prodding staves, and tried not to look at anything. She did not want to see those faces. Where was their king? Why was he not taking care of them?

A sign above the gate of the white-plastered inn Domon took them to, below the Great Circle, proclaimed the Three Plum Court. The only court Elayne saw was the high-walled courtyard paved with flagstones in front of the inn, which was three square stories with no windows near the ground and the upper windows grilled with fanciful ironwork. Inside, men and women crowded the common room, most in Tanchican clothes, and the buzz of voices nearly drowned out the tune of a hammered dulcimer.

Nynaeve gasped at her first sight of the innkeeper, a pretty woman not much older than herself with brown eyes and pale honey braids, her veil not hiding a plump rosebud of a mouth. Elayne gave a start, too, but it was not Liandrin. The woman—her name was Rendra—obviously knew Domon well. With welcoming smiles for Elayne and Nynaeve, and making much over Thom being a gleeman, she gave them her last two rooms at what Elayne suspected might be less than the going rate. Elayne made sure she and Nynaeve got the one with the larger bed; she had shared a bed with Nynaeve before, and the woman was free with her elbows.

Rendra also provided supper in a private room, laid out by two veiled young serving men. Elayne found herself staring at a plate of a roast lamb with spiced apple jelly and some sort of long yellowish beans prepared with pinenuts. She could not touch it. All those hungry faces. Domon ate readily enough, him and his smuggling and his gold. Thom and Juilin showed no reticence either.

"Rendra," Nynaeve said quietly, "does anyone here help the poor? I can lay my hands on a good bit of gold if it would help."

"You could donate to Bayle's kitchen," the innkeeper replied, giving Domon a smile. "The man avoids all of the taxes, yet he taxes himself. For each crown he gives as the bribe, he gives two for the soup and the bread for the poor. He has even talked me into giving, and *I* pay my taxes."

"It do be less than the taxes," Domon muttered, hunching his shoulders defensively. "I do make a very healthy profit, Fortune prick me if I do no."

"It is good that you like to help people, Master Domon," Nynaeve said when Rendra and the servants had gone. Thom and Juilin both got up to see they really had gone. With a half-bow, Thom let Juilin open the door; the hall outside was empty. Nynaeve went right on. "We may need your help, too."

The Illianer's knife and fork paused in cutting a piece of lamb. "How?" he asked suspiciously.

"I do not know exactly, Master Domon. You have ships. You must have men. We may need ears and eyes. Some of the Black Ajah may very well be in Tanchico, and we must find them if they are." Nynaeve lifted a forkful of beans to her mouth as if she had said nothing out of the ordinary. She seemed to be telling everyone about the Black Ajah of late.

Domon gaped at her, then stared incredulously at Thom and Juilin as they settled back in their chairs. When they nodded, he pushed his plate aside and put his head down on his arms. He very nearly earned himself a thump from Nynaeve, if the way her mouth tightened was any indication, and Elayne would not have blamed her. Why should he need them to confirm her word?

Finally Domon roused himself. “It do be going to happen again. Falme all over. Maybe it do be time for me to pack up and go. If I do take the ships I have back to Illian, I will be a wealthy man there, too.”

“I doubt you’d find Illian congenial,” Nynaeve told him in a firm voice. “I understand that Sammael rules there now, if not openly. You might not enjoy your wealth under one of the Forsaken.” Domon’s eyes nearly came out of his head, but she went right on. “There are no safe places any longer. You can run like a rabbit, but you cannot hide. Is it not better to do what you can to fight back like a man?”

Nynaeve was being too hard; she always had to bully people. Elayne smiled and leaned over to put a hand on Domon’s arm. “We do not mean to browbeat you, Master Domon, but we truly may need your help. I know you for a brave man, else you would not have waited for us as long as you did at Falme. We will be most grateful.”

“You do this very well,” Domon muttered. “One with an ox driver’s stick, the other with a queen’s honey. Oh, very well. I will help as I can. But I will no promise to remain for another Falme.”

Thom and Juilin set in to question him closely about Tanchico as they ate. At least, Juilin did in a roundabout manner, suggesting questions to Thom about what districts thieves and cutpurses and burglars frequented, what wineshops they used, and who bought their stolen goods. The thief-catcher maintained that such people often knew more of what was going on in a city than the authorities did. He did not seem to want to talk to the Illianer directly, and Domon snorted every time he answered one of the Tairen’s questions put by Thom. He did not answer *until* they were put by Thom. Thom’s own questions made no sense, at least not coming from a gleeman. He asked of nobles and factions, of who was allied to whom and who opposed, of who had what stated aims, and what their actions brought about, and whether the results were different from what they supposedly wanted. Not the kind of questions she expected from him at all, even after all their conversations on *Wavedancer*. He had been willing enough to talk with her—he even seemed to enjoy it—but somehow every time she thought she might dig out something about his past, that was just when he managed to put her back up and send her stalking away. Domon answered Thom with more alacrity than he did Juilin. In either case, though, he seemed to know Tanchico very well, both its lords and officials and its dark underbelly; as he talked, it often sounded as if there were little difference.

Once the two men had wrung the smuggler dry, Nynaeve summoned Rendra to bring pen and ink and paper, and wrote out a list describing each of the Black sisters. Holding the sheets gingerly in one big hand, Domon frowned at them uneasily, as though they were the women themselves, but he promised to have such of his men as were in port keep their eyes open. When Nynaeve reminded him that they all should take extreme care, he laughed the way he would had she told him not to run himself through with a sword.

Juilin left on Domon's heels, twirling his pale staff and saying night was the best time to find thieves and people who lived off thieves. Nynaeve announced she was retiring to her room—*her* room—to lie down awhile. She looked a bit unsteady, and suddenly Elayne realized why. Nynaeve had become used to *Wavedancer*'s heaving; now she was having trouble with the ground *not* heaving. The woman's stomach was not a pleasant traveling companion.

She herself followed Thom down to the common room, where he had promised Rendra he would perform. For a wonder she found a bench at an empty table, and cool looks sufficed to ward off the men who suddenly seemed to want to sit there. Rendra brought her a silver cup of wine, and she sipped as she listened to Thom play his harp, singing love songs like "The First Rose of Summer" and "The Wind That Shakes the Willow," and funny songs like "Only One Boot" and "The Old Gray Goose." His listeners were appreciative, slapping the tables for applause. After a while Elayne slapped hers, too. She had not drunk more than half her wine, but a handsome young serving man smiled at her and filled it up. It was all strangely exciting. In her whole life she had not been in an inn's common room half a dozen times, and never to sip wine and be entertained like one of the common people.

Flourishing his cloak to set the multihued patches fluttering, Thom told stories—"Mara and the Three Foolish Kings," and several tales about Anla, the Wise Counselor—and recited a long stretch of *The Great Hunt of the Horn*, reciting it so that horses seemed to prance and trumpets blare in the common room, and men and women fought and loved and died. On into the night he sang and recited, only pausing now and then to wet his throat with a sip of wine as the patrons eagerly clamored for more. The woman who had been playing the dulcimer sat in a corner with her instrument on her knees and a sour expression on her face. People often tossed coins to Thom

—he had enlisted a small boy to gather them up—and it was unlikely they had produced as much for her music.

It all seemed to suit Thom, the harp, and especially the recital. Well, he was a gleeman, but it seemed more than that. Elayne could have sworn she had heard him recite *The Great Hunt* before, but in High Chant, not Plain. How could that be? He was just a simple old gleeman.

Finally, in the deep hours of the night, Thom bowed with a last sweeping flourish of his cloak and headed for the stairs amid great slapping of tables. Elayne slapped hers as vigorously as anyone.

Rising to follow, she slipped and sat back down hard, frowning at her silver winecup. It was full. Surely she had drunk a little. She felt dizzy for some reason. Yes. That sweet young man with those melting brown eyes had refilled her cup—how many times? Not that it mattered. She never drank more than one cup of wine. Never. It was being off *Wavedancer* and back on dry land. She was reacting like Nynaeve. That was all.

Getting carefully to her feet—and refusing the sweet young man's most solicitous offer of help—she managed to climb the stairs despite the way they swayed. Not stopping at the second floor, where her and Nynaeve's room was, she went up to the third and knocked on Thom's door. He opened it slowly, peering out suspiciously. He seemed to have a knife in his hand, and then it was gone. Strange. She seized one of his long white mustaches.

"I remember," she said. Her tongue did not seem to be working properly; the words sounded . . . fuzzy. "I was sitting on your knee, and I pulled your mustache . . ." She gave it a yank to demonstrate, and he winced. ". . . and my mother leaned over your shoulder and laughed at me."

"I think it best you go to your room," he said, trying to pry her hand free. "I think you need some sleep."

She refused to let go. In fact, she seemed to have pushed him back into his room. By his mustache. "My mother sat on your knee, too. I saw it. I remember."

"Sleep is the thing, Elayne. You will feel better in the morning." He managed to get her hand loose and tried ushering her to the door, but she slipped around him. The bed had no posts. If she had a bedpost to hold on to, perhaps the room would stop tilting back and forth.

"I want to know why Mother sat on your knee." He stepped back, and she realized she was reaching for his mustache again. "You're a gleeman.

My mother would not sit on a gleeman's knee."

"Go to bed, child."

"I am *not* a child!" She stamped her foot angrily, and almost fell. The floor was lower than it looked. "Not a child. You will tell me. Now!"

Thom sighed and shook his head. At last he said stiffly, "I was not always a gleeman. I was a bard, once. A Court-bard. In Caemlyn, as it happens. For Queen Morgase. You were a child. You are just remembering things wrong, that's all."

"You were her lover, weren't you?" The flinch of his eyes was enough. "You were! I always knew about Gareth Bryne. At least, I figured it out. But I always hoped she would marry him. Gareth Bryne, and you, and this Lord Gaebril Mat said she looks calf-eyes at now, and. . . . How many more? How many? What makes her any different from Berelain, tripping every man who catches her eye into her bed. She is no different—" Her vision shivered, and her head rang. It took her a moment to realize he had slapped her. *Slapped* her! She drew herself up, wishing he would not sway. "How dare you? I am Daughter-Heir of Andor, and I will not be—"

"You are a little girl with a skinful of wine throwing a temper tantrum," he snapped. "And if I ever hear you say anything like that about Morgase again, drunk or sober, I'll put you over my knee however you channel! Morgase is a fine woman, as good as any there is!"

"Is she?" Her voice quavered, and she realized she was crying. "Then why did she—? Why—?" Somehow she had her face buried against his coat, and he was smoothing her hair.

"Because it is lonely being a queen," he said softly. "Because most men attracted to a queen see power, not a woman. I saw a woman, and she knew it. I suppose Bryne saw the same in her, and this Gaebril, too. You have to understand, child. Everyone wants someone in their life, someone who cares for them, someone they can care for. Even a queen."

"Why did you go away?" she mumbled into his chest. "You made me laugh. I remember that. You made her laugh, too. And you rode me on your shoulder."

"A long story." He sighed painfully. "I will tell you another time. If you ask. With luck, you'll forget this by morning. It's time for you to go to bed, Elayne."

He guided her to the door, and she took the opportunity to tug at his mustache again. "Like that," she said with satisfaction. "I used to pull it just like that."

"Yes, you did. Can you make it downstairs by yourself?"

"Of course I can." She gave him her haughtiest stare, but he looked readier than ever to follow her into the hall. To prove there was no need, she walked—carefully—as far as the head of the stairs. He was still frowning at her worriedly from the doorway when she started down.

Luckily she did not stumble until she was out of his sight, but she did walk right by her door and had to come back. Something must have been wrong with that apple jelly; she knew she should not have eaten so much of it. Lini always said. . . . She could not remember what it was Lini said, but something about eating too many sweets.

There were two lamps burning in the room, one on the small round table by the bed and the other on the white-plastered mantel above the brick fireplace. Nynaeve lay stretched out on the bed atop the coverlet, fully dressed. With her elbows stuck out, Elayne noted.

She said the first thing that came into her head. "Rand must think I'm crazy, Thom is a bard, and Morgase isn't my mother after all." Nynaeve gave her the oddest look. "I am a little dizzy for some reason. A nice boy with sweet brown eyes offered to help me upstairs."

"I will wager he did," Nynaeve said, biting off each word. Rising, she came to put an arm around Elayne's shoulders. "Come over here a moment. There's something I think you should see." It appeared to be a bucket of extra water by the washstand. "Here. We'll both kneel down so you can look."

Elayne did, but there was nothing in the bucket but her own reflection in the water. She wondered why she was grinning that way. Then Nynaeve's hand went to the back of her neck, and her head was in the water.

Flailing her hands, she tried to straighten up, but Nynaeve's arm was like an iron bar. You were supposed to hold your breath under water. Elayne knew you were. She just could not remember how. All she could do was flail and gurgle and choke.

Nynaeve hauled her up, water streaming down her face, and she filled her lungs. "How dare—you," she gasped. "I am—the Daughter-Heir of—" She managed to get out one wail before her head went back in with a splash. Seizing the bucket with both hands and pushing did no good. Drumming her feet on the floor did no good. She was going to drown. Nynaeve was going to drown her.

After an Age she was back out in the air again. Sodden strands of hair hung all across her face. “I think,” she said in the steadiest voice she could find, “that I am going to sick up.”

Nynaeve got the big white-glazed basin down from the washstand just in time, and held Elayne’s head while she brought up everything she had ever eaten in her life. A year later—well, hours anyway; it seemed that long—Nynaeve was washing her face and wiping her mouth, bathing her hands and wrists. There was nothing solicitous in her voice, though.

“How could you do this? Whatever possessed you? I might expect a fool man to drink until he can’t stand, but you! And tonight.”

“I only had one cup,” Elayne muttered. Even with that young man refilling it, she could not have had more than two. Surely not.

“A cup the size of a pitcher.” Nynaeve sniffed, helping her to her feet. Hauling her, really. “Can you stay awake? I am going to look for Egwene, and I still don’t trust myself to get out of *Tel’aran’rhiod* without someone to wake me.”

Elayne blinked at her. They had looked for Egwene, unsuccessfully, every night since she had disappeared so abruptly out of that meeting in the Heart of the Stone. “Stay awake? Nynaeve, it is my turn to look, and better it’s me. You know you cannot channel unless you are angry, and. . . .” She realized the other woman was surrounded by the glow of *saidar.* And had been for some time, she thought. Her own head felt stuffed full of wool; thought had to burrow through. She could barely sense the True Source. “Maybe you had better go. I will stay awake.”

Nynaeve frowned at her, but finally nodded. Elayne tried to help undress her, but her fingers did not seem to work very well when it came to those little buttons. Grumping under her breath, Nynaeve managed on her own. In only her shift, she threaded the twisted stone ring onto the leather cord she wore hanging around her neck, alongside a man’s ring, heavy and golden. That was Lan’s ring; Nynaeve always wore it between her breasts.

Elayne pulled a low wooden stool over beside the bed while Nynaeve stretched out again. She did feel rather sleepy, but she would not fall asleep sitting on that. The problem seemed to be not falling on the floor. “I will judge an hour and wake you.”

Nynaeve nodded, then closed her eyes, both hands clutched around the two rings. After a time her breathing deepened.

The Heart of the Stone was quite empty. Peering into the dimness among the great columns, Nynaeve had circled *Callandor*, sparkling out of the floorstones, completely before she realized she was still in her shift, the leather cord dangling about her neck with the two rings. She frowned, and after a moment she was wearing a Two Rivers dress of good brown wool, and stout shoes. Elayne and Egwene both seemed to find this sort of thing easy, but it was not easy for her. There had been embarrassing moments in earlier visits to *Tel'aran'rhiod*, mostly after stray thoughts of Lan, but changing her garb deliberately took concentration. Just that—remembering—and her dress was silk, and as transparent as Rendra's veil. Berelain would have blushed. So did Nynaeve, thinking of Lan seeing her in it. It took an effort to bring the brown wool back.

Worse, her anger had faded—that fool girl; did she not realize what happened when you drank too much wine? Had she never been alone in a common room before? Well, possibly she had not—and the True Source might as well not exist so far as she was concerned. Perhaps it would not matter. Uneasy, she stared into the forest of huge redstone columns, turning in one spot. What had made Egwene leave here abruptly?

The Stone was silent, with a hollow emptiness. She could hear the blood rushing in her own ears. Yet the skin between her shoulder blades prickled as if someone were watching her.

"Egwene?" Her shout echoed in the silence among the columns. "Egwene?" Nothing.

Rubbing her hands on her skirt, she found she was holding a gnarled stick with a thick knob on the end. A fat lot of good that would do. But she tightened her grip on it. A sword might be more use—for an instant the stick flickered, half a sword—but she did not know how to use a sword. She laughed to herself ruefully. A cudgel was as good as a sword here; both practically useless. Channeling was the only real defense, that and running. Which left her only one choice at the moment.

She wanted to run now, with that feel of eyes on her, but she would not give up so quickly. Only what was she to do? Egwene was not here. She was somewhere in the Waste. Rhuidean, Elayne said. Wherever that was.

Between one step and the next she was suddenly on a mountainside, with a harsh sun rising over more jagged mountains beyond the valley below, baking the dry air. The Waste. She was in the Waste. For a moment the sun startled her, but the Waste was far enough east for sunrise there to still be night in Tanchico. In *Tel'aran'rhiod* it made no difference anyway. Sunlight or darkness there seemed to bear no relation to what was in the real world as far as she could determine.

Long, pale shadows still covered almost half the valley, but strangely a mass of fog billowed down there, not seeming to grow less for the sun beating on it. Great towers rose out of the fog, some appearing unfinished. A city. In the Waste?

Squinting, she could make out a person down in the valley, too. A man, though all she could see at this distance was someone who seemed to be wearing breeches and a bright blue coat. Certainly not an Aiel. He was walking along the edge of the fog, every now and again stopping to poke at it. She could not be sure, but she thought his hand stopped short each time. Maybe it was not fog at all.

"You must get away from here," a woman's voice said urgently. "If that one sees you, you are dead, or worse."

Nynaeve jumped, spinning with her club raised, nearly losing her footing on the slope.

The woman standing a little above her wore a short white coat and voluminous, pale yellow trousers gathered above short boots. Her cloak billowed on an arid gust of wind. It was her long golden hair, intricately braided, and the silver bow in her hands that made a name pop incredulously into Nynaeve's mouth.

"Birgitte?" Birgitte, hero of a hundred tales, and her silver bow with which she never missed. Birgitte, one of the dead heroes the Horn of Valere would call back from the grave to fight in the Last Battle. "It's impossible. Who are you?"

"There is no time, woman. You must go before he sees." In one smooth motion she pulled a silver arrow from the quiver at her waist, nocked it and drew fletching to ear. The silver arrowhead pointed straight at Nynaeve's heart. "Go!"

Nynaeve fled.

She was not sure how, but she was standing on the Green in Emond's Field, looking at the Winespring Inn with its chimneys and red tile roof. Thatched roofs surrounded the Green, where the Winespring gushed out of a stone outcrop. The sun stood high here, though the Two Rivers lay far west of the Waste. Yet despite a cloudless sky, a deep shadow lay across the village.

She had only a moment to wonder how they were doing without her. A flicker of movement caught her eye, a flash of silver and a woman ducking behind the corner of Ailys Candwin’s neat house beyond the Winespring Water. Birgitte.

Nynaeve did not hesitate. She ran for one of the footbridges across the narrow rushing stream. Her shoes pounded on the wooden planks. “Come back here,” she shouted. “You come back here and answer me! Who was that? You come back here, or I’ll hero you! I’ll thump you so you think you’ve had an adventure!”

Rounding the corner of Ailys’s house, she really only half-expected to see Birgitte. What she did not expect at all was a man in a dark coat trotting toward her less than a hundred paces down the hard-packed dirt street. Her breath caught. Lan. No, but he had the same shape to his face, the same eyes. Halting, he raised his bow and shot. At her. Screaming, she threw herself aside, trying to claw her way awake.

Elayne jumped to her feet, toppling the stool over backward, as Nynaeve screamed and sat up on the bed, eyes wide.

“What happened, Nynaeve? What happened?”

Nynaeve shuddered. “He looked like Lan. He looked like Lan, and he tried to kill me.” She put a trembling hand to her left arm, where a shallow slash oozed blood a few inches below her shoulder. “If I hadn’t jumped, it would have gone through my heart.”

Seating herself on the edge of the bed, Elayne examined the cut. “It is not bad. I’ll wash and bandage it for you.” She wished she knew how to Heal; trying without knowing might well make it worse. But it really was little more than a long nick. Not to mention that her head still seemed full of jelly. Quivering jelly. “It was not Lan. Calm yourself. Whoever it was, it was not Lan.”

“I know that,” Nynaeve said acidly. She recounted what had happened in much the same angry voice. The man who had shot at her in Emond’s Field, and the man in the Waste; she was not sure they were one and the same. Birgitte herself was incredible enough.

“Are you certain?” Elayne asked. “Birgitte?”

Nynaeve sighed. “The only thing I am certain of is that I did not find Egwene. And that I am not going back there tonight.” She pounded a fist on her thigh. “Where is she? What happened to her? If she met that fellow with the bow. . . . Oh, Light!”

Elayne had to think a minute; she wanted to sleep so badly, and her thoughts kept shimmering. “She said she might not be there when we are supposed to meet again. Maybe that is why she left so hurriedly. Whyever she can’t. . . . I mean. . . .” It did not seem to make a great deal of sense, but she could not get it out properly.

“I hope so,” Nynaeve said wearily. Looking at Elayne, she added, “We had better get you to bed. You look ready to fall over.”

Elayne was grateful to be helped out of her clothes. She did remember to bandage Nynaeve’s arm, but the bed looked so inviting she could hardly think of anything else. In the morning perhaps the room would have stopped its slow spin around the bed. Sleep came as soon as her head touched the pillow.

In the morning she wished she were dead.

With sunlight barely in the sky, the common room was empty except for Elayne. Head in her hands, she stared at a cup Nynaeve had set on the table before going off to find the innkeeper. Every time she breathed, she could smell it; her nose tried to clench. Her head felt. . . . It was not possible to describe how her head felt. Had someone offered to cut it off, she might have thanked him.

“Are you all right?”

She jerked at the sound of Thom’s voice and barely stifled a whimper. “I am quite all right, thank you.” Talking made her head throb. He fiddled with one of his mustaches uncertainly. “Your stories were wonderful last night, Thom. What I remember of them.” Somehow she managed a small, self-deprecating laugh. “I am afraid I don’t remember very much of anything except sitting there listening. I seem to have eaten some bad apple jelly.” She was not about to admit to drinking all that wine; she still had no idea how much. Or to making a fool of herself in his room. Above all, not that. He seemed to believe her, from the relieved way he took a chair.

Nynaeve appeared, handing her a damp cloth as she sat down. She also pushed the cup with its horrible brew closer. Elayne pressed the cloth to her forehead gratefully.

“Have either of you seen Master Sandar this morning?” the older woman asked.

"He did not sleep in our room," Thom replied. "Which I should be grateful for, considering the size of the bed."

As though the words had summoned him, Juilin came in through the front door, his face weary and his snug-fitting coat rumpled. There was a bruise beneath his left eye, and the short black hair that normally lay flat on his head looked rough-combed with his fingers, but he smiled as he joined them. "The thieves in this city are as numerous as minnows in reeds, and they will talk if you buy a cup of something. I have talked with two men who claim to have seen a woman with a white streak in her hair above the left ear. I think I believe one of them."

"So they are here," Elayne said, but Nynaeve shook her head.

"Perhaps. More than one woman can have a white streak in her hair."

"He could not say how old she was," Juilin said, hiding a yawn behind his hand. "No age at all, he claimed. He joked that maybe she was Aes Sedai."

"You go too fast," Nynaeve told him in a tight voice. "You do us no good if you bring them down on us."

Juilin flushed darkly. "I am careful. I have no wish for Liandrin to put her hands on me again. I do not ask questions; I talk. Sometimes of women I used to know. Two men bit on that white streak, and neither ever knew it was more than a scrap of idle talk over cheap ale. Tonight maybe another will swim into my net, only this time maybe it will be a fragile woman from Cairhien with very big blue eyes." That would be Temaile Kinderode. "Bit by bit, I will narrow where they have been seen, until I know where they are. I will find them for you."

"Or I will." Thom sounded as if he thought that much more likely. "Rather than thieves, would they not be meddling with nobles and politics? Some lord in this city will begin doing what he usually does not, and he will draw me to them."

The two men eyed one another. In another moment Elayne expected one of them to offer to wrestle. Men. First Juilin and Domon, now Juilin and Thom. Very likely Thom and Domon would get in a fistfight to complete it. Men. That was the only comment she could think of.

"Perhaps Elayne and I will succeed without either of you," Nynaeve said dryly. "We will begin looking ourselves, today." Her eyes barely shifted toward Elayne. "At least, I will. Elayne may need a little more rest to recover from . . . the voyage."

Setting the cloth down carefully, Elayne used both hands to pick up the cup in front of her. The thick, gray-green liquid tasted worse than it smelled. Shuddering, she made herself keep swallowing. When it hit her stomach, for an instant she felt like a cloak flapping in a high wind. “Two pairs of eyes can see better than one,” she told Nynaeve, setting the empty cup back down with a clink.

“A hundred pairs can see even better,” Juilin said hastily, “and if that Illianer eel truly sends his people out, we will have at least that many, what with the thieves and cutpurses.”

“I—*we*—will find these women for you if they can be found,” Thom said. “There is no need for you to stir from the inn. This city has a dangerous feel even if Liandrin is not here.”

“Besides which,” Juilin added, “if they are here, they know the two of you. They know your faces. Much better if you stay here at the inn, out of sight.”

Elayne stared at them in amazement. A moment gone they had been trying to stare each other down, and now they were shoulder to shoulder. Nynaeve had been right about them causing trouble. Well, the Daughter-Heir of Andor was not about to hide behind Master Juilin Sandar and Master Thom Merrilin. She opened her mouth to tell them so, but Nynaeve spoke first.

“You are right,” she said calmly. Elayne stared at her incredulously; Thom and Juilin looked surprised, and at the same time disgustingly satisfied. “They do know us,” Nynaeve went on. “I took care of that this morning, I think. Ah, here is Mistress Rendra with our breakfast.”

Thom and Juilin exchanged disconcerted frowns, but they could say nothing with the innkeeper smiling at them all through her veil.

“About what I asked you?” Nynaeve said to her as the woman placed a bowl of honeyed porridge in front of her.

“Ah, yes. It will be no problem to find the clothes to fit both of you. And the hair—you have such lovely hair; so long—it will be the work of no time to put it up.” She fingered her own deep golden braids.

Thom’s and Juilin’s faces made Elayne smile. They might have been ready for arguments; they had no defense against being ignored. Her head was actually feeling a little better; Nynaeve’s vile mixture seemed to be working. As Nynaeve and Rendra discussed costs and cut and fabric—Rendra wanted to duplicate her clinging dress, pale green today; Nynaeve was opposed, but seemed to be wavering—Elayne took a spoon of porridge to wash the taste from her mouth. It reminded her that she was hungry.

There was one problem none of them had mentioned yet, one that Thom and Juilin did not know. If the Black Ajah was in Tanchico, then so was whatever it was that endangered Rand. Something able to bind him with his own Power. Finding Liandrin and the others was not enough. They had to find that, too. Suddenly her newfound appetite was completely gone.

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CHAPTER 40

Hunter of Trollocs

Remnants of the early-morning rain still dripped from the leaves of the apple trees, and a purple finch hopped along a limb where fruit was forming that would not be harvested this year. The sun was well up, but hidden behind thick gray clouds. Seated cross-legged on the ground, Perrin unconsciously tested his bowstring; the tightly wrapped, waxed cords had a tendency to go slack in wet weather. The storm Verin had called up to hide them from pursuit the night of the rescue had surprised even her with its ferocity, and beating rains had come three more times in the six days since. He believed it was six days. He had not really thought since that night, only drifted as events took him, reacting to what presented itself. The flat of his axe blade dug into his side, but he hardly noticed.

Low, grassy mounds marked generations of Aybaras buried here. The oldest among the carved wooden headpieces, cracked and barely legible, bore dates nearly three hundred years old, over graves indistinguishable from undisturbed ground. It was the mounds smoothed by rains but barely covered by grass that stabbed him. Generations of Aybaras buried here, but surely never fourteen at one time. Aunt Neain over by Uncle Carlin’s older grave, with their two children beside her. Great Aunt Ealsin in the row with Uncle Eward and Aunt Magde and their three children, the long row with his mother and his father. Adora and Deselle and little Paet. A long row of mounds with bare, wet earth still showing through the grass. He counted the arrows remaining in his quiver by touch. Seventeen. Too many had been damaged, worth recovering only for the steel arrowheads. No time to make his own; he would have to see the fletcher in Emond’s Field soon. Buel Dowtry made good arrows, even better than Tam.

A faint rustle behind his back made him sniff the air. “What is it, Dannil?” he said without looking around.

There was a catch of breath, a moment of startled surprise, before Dannil Lewin said, “The Lady is here, Perrin.” None of them had gotten used to him knowing who was who before he saw them, or in the dark, but he no longer really cared what they found strange.

He frowned over his shoulder. Dannil looked leaner than he had; farmers could only feed so many at once, and food had been feast or famine as the hunting went. Mostly famine. “The Lady?”

“The Lady Faile. And Lord Luc, too. They came from Emond’s Field.”

Perrin rose smoothly, taking long strides that made Dannil hurry to keep up. He managed not to look at the house. The charred timbers and sooty chimneys that had been the house where he grew up. He did scan the trees for his lookouts, those nearest the farm. Close to the Waterwood as it was, the land held plenty of tall oak and hemlock, and good-sized ash and bay. Thick foliage hid the lads well—drab farm clothes made for good hiding—so even he had difficulty picking them out. He would have to talk with those farther out; they were supposed to see that no one came close without a warning. Even Faile and this Luc.

The camp, in a large thicket where he had once pretended to be in a far wilderness, was a rough place among the undergrowth, with blankets strung between trees to make shelters, and more scattered on the ground between the small cook fires. The branches dripped here, too. Most of the nearly fifty men in the camp, all young, were unshaven, either in imitation of Perrin or because it was unpleasant shaving in cold water. They were good hunters—he had sent home any who were not—but unaccustomed to more than a night or two outdoors at a time. And not used to what he had them doing, either.

Right then they were standing around gaping at Faile and Luc, and only four or five had longbow in hand. The rest of the bows lay with the bedding, and the quivers, too, more often than not. Luc stood idly flipping the reins of a tall black stallion, the very pose of indolent, red-coated arrogance, cold blue eyes ignoring the men around him. The man’s smell stood out among the others, cold and separate, too, almost as if he had nothing in common with the men around him, not even humanity.

Faile came hurrying to meet Perrin with a smile, her narrow divided skirts making a soft *whisk-whisk* as gray silk brushed silk. She smelled faintly of sweet herbal soap, and of herself. “Master Luhhan said we might find you here.”

He meant to demand what she was doing there, but found himself putting his arms around her and saying into her hair, “It’s good to see you. I have missed you.”

She pushed back enough to look up at him. “You look tired.”

He ignored that; he had no time to be tired. “You got everyone safely to Emond’s Field?”

“They are at the Winespring Inn.” She grinned suddenly. “Master al’Vere found an old halberd and says if the Whitecloaks want them, they will have to go through him. Everyone’s in the village now, Perrin. Verin and Alanna, the Warders. Pretending to be someone else, of course. And Loial. He certainly created a sensation. Even more than Bain and Chiad.” The grin faded into a frown. “He asked me to deliver a message to you. Alanna vanished twice without a word, once alone. Loial said Ihvon seemed surprised to find her gone. He said I wasn’t to let anyone else know.” She studied his face. “What does it mean, Perrin?”

“Nothing, maybe. Just that I can’t be sure I can trust her. Verin warned me against her, but can I trust Verin? You say Bain and Chiad are in Emond’s Field? I suppose that means he knows about them.” He jerked his head toward Luc. A few of the men had approached him, asking diffident questions, and he was answering with a condescending smile.

“They came with us,” she said slowly. “They are scouting around your camp now. I do not think they have a very high opinion of your sentries. Perrin, why don’t you want Luc to know about the Aiel?”

“I’ve talked to a number of people who were burned out.” Luc was too far to overhear, but he held his voice low. “Counting Flann Lewin’s place, Luc was at five on the day they were attacked, or the day before.”

“Perrin, the man’s an arrogant fool in some ways—I hear he’s hinted at a claim to one of the Borderland thrones, for all he told us he’s from Murandy—but you cannot really believe he is a Darkfriend. He gave some very good advice in Emond’s Field. When I said everyone was there, I meant everyone.” She shook her dark head wonderingly. “Hundreds and hundreds of people have come in from north and south, from every direction, with their cattle and their sheep, all talking of Perrin Goldeneyes’s warnings. Your little village is preparing to defend itself if need be, and Luc has been everywhere the last days.”

“Perrin who?” he gasped, wincing. Trying to change the subject, he said, “From the south? But this is as far south as I’ve gone. I haven’t talked to a farmer more than a mile below the Winespring Water."

Faile tugged at his beard with a laugh. "News spreads, my fine general. I think half of them expect you to form them into an army and chase the Trollocs all the way back to the Great Blight. There will be stories about you in the Two Rivers for the next thousand years. Perrin Goldeneyes, hunter of Trollocs."

"Light!" he muttered.

Hunter of Trollocs. There had been little so far to justify that. Two days after freeing Mistress Luhhan and the others, the day after Verin and Tomas rode on their own way, they had come on the still-smoking ruins of a farmhouse, he and the fifteen Two Rivers lads with him then. After burying what they found in the ashes, it was easy enough to follow the Trollocs, between Gaul's tracking and his own nose. The sharp fetid stink of the Trollocs had not had time to fade away, not to him. Some of the lads had grown hesitant when they realized he meant what he had said about hunting Trollocs. If they had had to go very far, he suspected most would have drifted away when no one was looking, but the trail led to a thicket no more than three miles off. The Trollocs had not bothered with sentries—they had no Myrddraal with them to overawe their laziness—and the Two Rivers men knew how to stalk silently. Thirty-two Trollocs died, many in their filthy blankets, pierced through with arrows before they could raise a howl, much less sword or axe. Dannil and Ban and the others had been ready to celebrate a great triumph—until they found what was in the Trollocs' big iron cookpot sitting in the ashes of the fire. Most dashed away to throw up, and more than one wept openly. Perrin dug the grave himself. Only one: there was no way to tell what had belonged to whom. Cold as he felt inside, he was not sure he could have stood it himself if there had been.

Late the next day no one hesitated when he picked up another fetid trail, though a few mutters wondered what he was following, until Gaul found the tracks of hooves and boots too big for men. Another thicket, close to the Waterwood, held forty-one Trollocs and a Fade, with sentries set, though most snored at their posts. It would have made no difference had they all been awake. Gaul killed those that were, sliding through the trees like a shadow, and the Two Rivers men were nearly thirty themselves by then. Besides, those who had not seen the cookpot had heard of it; they shouted as they shot, with a satisfaction not much less savage than the guttural Trolloc howls. The black-garbed Myrddraal had been last to die, a porcupine quilled with arrows. No one cared to recover a shaft from that, even after it finally stopped thrashing.

That evening the second rain came, hours of drenching downpour with a sky full of roiling black clouds and stabbing lightning. Perrin had not smelled Trolloc scent since, and the ground had been washed clean of tracks. Most of their time had been spent avoiding Whitecloak patrols, which everyone said were more numerous than in the past. The farmers Perrin had spoken to said the patrols seemed more interested in finding their prisoners again and those who had broken them free than in looking for Trollocs.

Quite a few of the men had gathered around Luc now. He was tall enough for his red-gold hair to show above their darker heads. He seemed to be talking, and they listening. And nodding.

“Let’s see what he has to say,” Perrin said grimly.

The Two Rivers men gave way before Faile and him with only a little prodding. They were all intent on the red-coated lord, who was indeed holding forth.

“. . . so the village is quite secure, now. Plenty of people gathered together to defend it. I must say I enjoy sleeping under a roof when I can. Mistress al’Vere, at the inn, provides a tasty meal. Her bread is among the best I have ever eaten. There truly is nothing like fresh-baked bread and fresh-churned butter, and putting your feet up of an evening with a fine mug of wine, or some of Master al’Vere’s good brown ale.”

“Lord Luc was saying we should go to Emond’s Field, Perrin,” Kenley Ahan said, scrubbing his reddened nose with the back of a grimy hand. He was not the only one who had been unable to wash as often as he would like, and not the only one coming down with a cold, either.

Luc smiled at Perrin much the way he would have at a dog he expected to see do a trick. “The village *is* quite secure, but there is always a need for more strong backs.”

“We are hunting Trollocs,” Perrin said coolly. “Not everyone has left their farms yet, and every band we find and kill means farms not burned and more people with a chance to reach safety.”

Wil al’Seen barked a laugh. He was not so pretty with a red puffy nose and a spotty, six-day growth of beard. “We’ve not *smelled* a Trolloc in days. Be reasonable, Perrin. Maybe we’ve killed them all already.” There were mutters of agreement.

“I do not mean to spread dissension.” Luc spread his hands guilelessly. “No doubt you have had many great successes beside those we have heard of. Hundreds of Trollocs killed, I expect. You may well have chased them all away. I can tell you, Emond’s Field is ready to give you all a hero’s welcome. The same must be true at Watch Hill for those who live up that way. Any Deven Riders?” Wil nodded, and Luc clapped him on the shoulder with a hollow good fellowship. “A hero’s welcome, without a doubt.”

“Anyone who wants to go home, can,” Perrin said in a level voice. Faile directed a warning frown at him; this was no way to be a general. But he did not want anyone with him who did not want to be there. He did not want to be a general, for that matter. “Myself, I don’t think the job is done yet, but it is your choice.”

No one took him up, though Wil at least looked ready to, but twenty more stared at the ground and scuffed their boots in last year’s leaves.

“Well,” Luc said casually, “if you have no Trollocs left to chase, perhaps it is time to turn your attentions to the Whitecloaks. They are not happy at you Two Rivers folk deciding to defend yourselves. And I understand they meant to hang the lot of you in particular, as outlaws, for stealing their prisoners.”

Anxious frowns passed between a good many of the Two Rivers lads.

It was then that Gaul came pushing through the crowd, followed close by Bain and Chiad. Not that the Aiel had to push, of course; the men cleared aside as soon as they realized who it was. Luc frowned at Gaul thoughtfully, perhaps disapprovingly; the Aielman stared back stony-faced. Wil and Dannil and the others brightened at sight of the Aiel; most still believed hundreds more were hiding somewhere in the thickets and forests. They never questioned why all those Aiel stayed hidden, and Perrin certainly never brought it up. If believing in a few hundred Aiel reinforcements helped them keep their courage, well and good.

“What did you find?” Perrin asked. Gaul had been gone since the day before; he could move as fast as a man on horseback, faster in woods, and he could see more.

“Trollocs,” Gaul replied as though reporting the presence of sheep, “moving up through this well-named Waterwood to the south. They number no more than thirty, and I believe they mean to make camp on the edge of the forest and strike tonight. There are men still holding to the soil to the south.” He gave a sudden, wolfish grin. “They did not see me. They will have no warning.”

Chiad leaned closer to Bain. “He moves well enough, for a Stone Dog,” she whispered loudly enough to be heard twenty feet off. “He makes little more noise than a lame bull.”

“Well, Wil?” Perrin said. “Do you want to go to Emond’s Field? You can shave, and maybe find a girl to kiss while these Trollocs have supper tonight.”

Wil flushed a dark red. “I will be wherever you are tonight, Aybara,” he said in a hard voice.

“Nobody means to go home if there are Trollocs still about, Perrin,” Kenley added.

Perrin looked around at the others, meeting only agreeing nods. “What of you, Luc? We would be pleased to have a lord and Hunter for the Horn with us. You could show us how it is done.”

Luc smiled fractionally, a gash on stone that never came close to those cold blue eyes. “I regret the defenses of Emond’s Field still need me. I must see to protecting your people, should the Trollocs come there in greater numbers than thirty. Or the Children of the Light. My Lady Faile?” He held out a hand to assist her in mounting, but she shook her head.

“I will remain with Perrin, Lord Luc.”

“A pity,” he murmured, shrugging as if to say there was no accounting for women’s taste. Tugging on his wolf-embroidered gauntlets, he swung into the black stallion’s saddle smoothly. “Good luck to you, Master Goldeneyes. I do hope you all have good luck.” With a half-bow to Faile, he whirled his tall horse showily and spurred him to a gallop that forced some of the men to leap out of his way.

Faile frowned at Perrin in a manner that suggested a lecture on rudeness when they were alone. He listened to Luc’s horse until he could hear it no more, then turned to Gaul. “Can we get ahead of the Trollocs? Be waiting somewhere before they reach wherever they mean to stop?”

“The distances are right if we start now,” Gaul said. “They are moving in a straight line, and not hurrying. There is a Nightrunner with them. It will be easier surprising them in their blankets than facing them awake.” He meant that the Two Rivers men might do better; there was no fear smell on him.

There was certainly fear smell on some of the others, yet no one suggested that a confrontation with Trollocs up and alert, and a Myrddraal to boot, might not be the best plan. They broke camp as soon as he gave the order, dousing the fires and scattering the ashes, gathering their few pots and mounting their ill-assorted horses and ponies. With the sentries in—Perrin reminded himself to have that word with them—they numbered nearly seventy. Surely enough to ambush thirty Trollocs. Ban al'Seen and Dannil each still led half—it seemed the way to keep arguments down—with Bili al'Dai and Kenley and others each heading ten or so. Wil, too; he was not too bad a fellow usually, when he could keep his mind off the girls.

Faile rode Swallow close beside Stepper as they started south with the Aiel running ahead. "You truly do not trust him at all," she said. "You think he is a Darkfriend."

"I trust you and my bow and my axe," he told her. Her face looked sad and pleased at the same time, but it was the simple truth.

For two hours Gaul led them south before turning into the Waterwood, a tangle of towering oak and pine and leatherleaf, bushy bay trees and cone-shaped redoil trees, tall round-topped ash and sweetberry and black willow, with thickets of vine-woven brush below. A thousand squirrels chittered on the branches, and thrushes and finches and redwings darted everywhere. Perrin smelled deer and rabbits, too, and foxes. Tiny streams abounded, and rush-bordered pools and ponds dotted the forest, often shaded but sometimes open, from less than ten paces across to a few almost fifty. The ground seemed sodden after all the rain it had received, squelching under the horses' hooves.

Between a large, willow-ringed pond and a narrow rivulet a pace wide, perhaps two miles into the wood, Gaul halted. Here the Trollocs would come if they continued as they had been. The three Aiel melted into the trees to make sure of that, and bring back warning of their approach.

Leaving Faile and a dozen men to watch the horses, Perrin spread the others out in a narrow curve, a cup into which the Trollocs should march. After making certain each man was well hidden and knew what he was to do, he placed himself at the bottom of the cup, beside an oak with a trunk thicker than he was tall.

Easing his axe in its belt loop, he nocked an arrow and waited. A light breeze blew in his face, swelling and falling. He should be able to smell the Trollocs long before they came in sight. They should be coming right at him. Touching the axe again, he waited. Minutes passed. An hour. More. How long before the Shadowspawn appeared? Much longer in this damp and bowstrings would need to be changed.

The birds vanished a moment before the squirrels went silent. Perrin drew a deep breath, and frowned. Nothing. On that breeze he should surely be able to smell Trollocs as soon as the animals sensed them.

A vagrant gust brought him the putrid stink, like centuries-old sweat and rot. Whirling, he shouted, “They’re behind us! Rally to me! Two Rivers to me!” Behind The horses. “Faile!”

Screams and shouts erupted from every side, howls and savage cries. A ram-horned Trolloc leaped into the open twenty paces away, raising a long curved bow. Perrin drew fletchings to ear and fired in one smooth motion, reaching for another shaft as soon as his arrow cleared bow. His broadhead point took the Trolloc between its eyes; it bellowed once as it fell. And its arrow, the size of a small spear, took Perrin in the side like a hammerblow.

Gasping with shock, he hunched over, dropping bow and fresh arrow alike. Pain spread out in sheets from the black-fletched shaft; it quivered when he drew breath, and every quiver shot out new pain.

Two more Trollocs leaped over their dead companion, wolf snout and goat horns, black-mailed shapes half again as tall as Perrin and twice as broad. Baying, they rushed at him, curved swords upraised.

Forcing himself upright, he gritted his teeth and snapped the thumb-thick arrow off short, pulled his axe free and rushed to meet them. Howling, he realized dimly. Howling with rage that filmed his eyes red. They towered over him, their armor all spikes at elbows and shoulders, but he swung his axe in a frenzy, as if trying to cut down a tree with every blow. For Adora. For Deselle. “My mother!” he screamed. “Burn you! My mother!”

Abruptly he realized he was hacking at bloody shapes on the ground. Growling, he made himself stop, shaking with the effort as much as with the pain in his side. There was less shouting now. Fewer screams. Was anyone left but him? “Rally to me! Two Rivers to me!”

“Two Rivers!” someone shouted frantically, off through the damp woods, and then another, “Two Rivers!”

Two. Only two. “Faile!” he cried. “Oh, Light, Faile!”

A flicker of black flowing through the trees announced a Myrddraal before he could see it clearly, snakelike black armor down its chest, inky cloak hanging undisturbed by its running. As it came closer, it slowed to a sinuous, assured walk; it knew he was hurt, knew him for easy meat. Its pale-faced, eyeless stare stabbed him with fear. “Faile?” it said mockingly. Its voice made the name sound like burned leather crumbling. “Your Faile—was delicious.”

Roaring, Perrin hurled himself at it. A black-bladed sword turned his first stroke. And his second. His third. The thing’s slug-white face became fixed with concentration, but it moved like a viper, like lightning. For the moment he had it on the defensive. For the moment. Blood trickled down his side; his side burned like a forge-fire. He could not keep this up. And when his strength failed, that sword would find his heart.

His foot slipped in the mud churned up beneath his boots, the Fade’s blade drew back—and a blurring sword half-severed the eyeless head, so it fell over on one shoulder in a fountain of black blood. Stabbing blindly, the Myrddraal staggered forward, stumbling, refusing to die completely, still instinctively trying to kill.

Perrin scrambled out of its path, but his attention was all for the man coolly wiping his blade with a fistful of leaves. Ihvon’s color-shifting cloak hung down his back. “Alanna sent me to find you. I almost didn’t, the way you have been moving, but seventy horses do leave tracks.” The dark, slender Warder seemed as composed as if he were lighting his pipe before a fireplace. “The Trollocs were not linked to that . . .” He indicated the Myrddraal with his sword; it had fallen, but still stabbed randomly. “. . . more’s the pity, but if you can gather your people together, they might not be willing to try you without one of the Faceless to goad them. I would estimate about a hundred, to begin. A few less, now. You have bloodied them some.” He began a calm survey of the shadows beneath the trees, only the blade in his hand indicating anything out of the ordinary.

For a bare moment Perrin gaped. Alanna wanted him? She had sent Ihvon? Just in time to save his life. Shaking himself, he raised his voice again. “Two Rivers to me! For the love of the Light, rally to me! Here! Rally! Here!”

This time he kept it up until familiar faces appeared, stumbling through the trees. Blood-streaked faces, often as not. Shocked, staring faces. Some men half-supported others, and some had lost their bows. The Aiel were among them, apparently unhurt except that Gaul limped slightly.

“They did not come as we expected” was all the Aielman said. The night was colder than we expected. There was more rain than we expected.

That was how he said it.

Faile seemed to materialize with the horses. With half the horses, including Stepper and Swallow, and nine of the twelve men he had left with her. A scrape marred one cheek, but she was alive. He tried to hug her, but she pushed his arms away, muttering angrily over the broken-off arrow even while she gently pulled his coat away from the thick shaft in an effort to examine where it had gone in.

Perrin studied the men around him. They had stopped coming now, yet there were faces missing. Kenley Ahan. Bili al'Dai. Teven Marwin. He made himself name the missing, made himself count them. Twenty-seven. Twenty-seven not there. "Did you bring all the wounded?" he asked dully. "Is anybody left out there?" Faile's hand trembled on his side; her expression as she frowned at his wound was a blend of worry and fury. She had a right to be angry. He should never have gotten her into this.

"Only the dead," Ban al'Seen said in a voice as leaden as his face.

Wil looked to be frowning at something just out of sight. "I saw Kenley," he said. "His head was in the crook of an oak, but the rest of him was down at the foot. I saw him. His cold won't bother him now." He sneezed, and looked startled.

Perrin sighed heavily, and wished he had not; pain shooting up his side clenched his teeth. Faile, a green-and-gold silk scarf wadded in her hand, was trying to pull his shirt out of his breeches. He pushed her hands away despite her scowl; there was no time for tending wounds now. "Wounded on the horses," he said when he could speak. "Ihvon, will they attack us?" The forest seemed too still. "Ihvon?" The Warder appeared, leading a dark gray gelding with a fierce eye. Perrin repeated his question.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. On their own, Trollocs kill whomever is easiest. Without a Halfman, they would probably rather find a farm than someone who might put arrows in them. Make sure everyone who can stand upright carries a bow with an arrow nocked even if they cannot draw it. They may decide the price is too high for the fun."

Perrin shivered. If the Trollocs did attack, they would have as much fun as a dance at Sunday. Ihvon and the Aiel were the only ones really ready to fight back. And Faile; her dark eyes shone with fury. He had to get her to safety.

The Warder did not offer his own horse for the wounded, which made sense. The animal was not likely to let anyone else on its back, and a war-trained horse with its master in the saddle would be a formidable weapon if the Trollocs came again. Perrin tried to put Faile up on Swallow, but she stopped him. “The wounded, you said,” she told him softly. “Remember?”

To his disgust, she insisted he ride Stepper. He expected the others to protest, after he had brought them to disaster, but no one did. There were just enough horses for those who could not walk, and those unable to walk far—grudgingly he admitted that he was one of the latter—so he ended up in his saddle. Half the other riders had to cling to theirs. He sat upright, gritting his teeth to do it.

Those who walked or stumbled, and some who rode, clutched their bows as if they meant salvation. Perrin carried one, too, and so did Faile, though he doubted she could even draw a Two Rivers longbow. It was appearance that counted now; illusion that might see them safe. Like Ihvon, alert as a coiled whip, the three Aiel looked unchanged as they glided ahead, spears stuck through the harness of the bow cases on their backs, horn bows in hand and ready. The rest, including himself, were a ragbag remnant, nothing like the band he had led here, so confident and full of his own pride. Yet illusion worked as well as reality. For the first mile through the tangle vagrant breezes brought him Trolloc stink, the scent of Trollocs shadowing, stalking. Then the stench slowly faded and vanished as the Trollocs fell behind, deluded by a mirage.

Faile walked beside Stepper, one hand on Perrin’s leg as though she meant to hold him up. Now and then she looked up at him, smiling encouragingly, but with worry creasing her forehead. He smiled back as best he could, trying to make her think he was all right. Twenty-seven. He could not stop the names from running through his head. Colly Garren and Jared Aydaer, Dael al’Taron and Ren Chandin. Twenty-seven Two Rivers folk he had killed with his stupidity. Twenty-seven.

They took the most direct route back out of the Waterwood, breaking clear sometime in the afternoon. It was hard to tell exactly how late with the sky still blanketed in gray and everything blandly shadowed. High-grass pasture dotted with trees stretched in front of them, and some scattered sheep, and a few farmhouses in the distance. No smoke rose from any of the chimneys; if there was anyone in those houses, something hot would have been cooking in the fireplace. The nearest rising smoke plume looked five miles off at least.

“We should find a farm for the night,” Ihvon said. “Some place under cover in case it rains again. A fire. Food.” He looked at the Two Rivers men and added, “Water and bandages.”

Perrin only nodded. The Warder was better than he at knowing the right thing to do. Old Bili Congar with his head full of ale was probably better. He just let Stepper follow Ihvon’s gray.

Before they had gone much beyond a mile, a faint thread of music caught Perrin’s ear, fiddles and flutes playing merry tunes. At first he thought he was dreaming, but then the others heard, too, exchanging incredulous looks, then relieved grins. Music meant people, and happy people by the sound, someone celebrating. That anyone might have something to celebrate was enough to pick their feet up somewhat.

* * *

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CHAPTER 41

Among the Tuatha’an

A gathering of wagons came in sight, a little off to the south, like small houses on wheels, tall wooden boxes painted and lacquered in violent shades of red and blue and green and yellow, all standing in a large, rough circle around a few broad-limbed oak trees. The music came from there. Perrin had heard there were Tinkers, Traveling People, in the Two Rivers, but he had not seen them until now. Hobbled horses cropped the long grass nearby.

“I will sleep elsewhere,” Gaul said stiffly when he saw Perrin meant to go to the wagons, and loped away without another word.

Bain and Chiad spoke softly yet urgently to Faile. Perrin caught enough to know they were trying to convince her to spend the night with them in some snug thicket and not with “the Lost Ones.” They sounded appalled at the idea of speaking to the Tinkers, much less eating or sleeping with them. Faile’s hand tightened on his leg as she refused, quietly, firmly. The two Maidens frowned at each other, blue eyes meeting gray with a deep measure of concern, but before the Traveling People’s wagons came much closer, they trotted away after Gaul. They seemed to have recovered some of their spirits, though. Perrin heard Chiad suggesting they induce Gaul to play some game called Maidens’ Kiss. They were both laughing as they passed out of his earshot.

Men and women were working in the camp, sewing, mending harness, cooking, washing clothes and children, levering a wagon up to replace a wheel. Other children ran playing, or danced to the tunes of half a dozen men playing fiddle or flute. From oldest to youngest, the Tinkers wore clothes even more colorful than their wagons, in eye-wrenching combinations that had to have been chosen blindly. No sane man would have worn anything near those hues, and not many women.

As the ragtag party approached the wagons, silence fell, people stopping where they were to watch with worried expressions, women clutching infants and children running to hide behind adults, peering around a leg or hiding their faces in skirts. A wiry man, gray-haired and short, stepped forward and bowed gravely, both hands pressed to his chest. He wore a bright blue, high-collared coat and baggy trousers of a green that almost seemed to glow tucked into kneeboots. “You are welcome to our fires. Do you know the song?”

For a moment, trying not to hunch around the arrow in him, Perrin could only stare. He knew this man, the Mahdi, or Seeker, of this band. *What chance?* he wondered. *Of all the Tinkers in the world, what chance it should be folk I know?* Coincidences made him uneasy; when the Pattern produced coincidence, the Wheel seemed to be forcing events. *I’m beginning to sound like a bloody Aes Sedai.* He could not manage the bow, but he remembered the ritual. “Your welcome warms my spirit, Raen, as your fires warm the flesh, but I do not know the song.” Faile and Ihvon gave him startled looks, but no more than did the Two Rivers men. Judging by the mutters he heard from Ban and Tell and others, he had just given them something else to talk about.

“Then we seek still,” the wiry man intoned. “As it was, so shall it be, if we but remember, seek, and find.” Grimacing, he surveyed the bloody faces confronting him, his eyes flinching away from the weapons. The Traveling People would not touch anything they considered a weapon. “You are welcome to our fires. There will be hot water, and bandages and poultices. You know my name,” he added, looking at Perrin searchingly. “Of course. Your eyes.”

Raen’s wife had come to his side as he spoke, a plump woman, gray-haired but smooth-cheeked, a head taller than her husband. Her red blouse and bright yellow skirt and green-fringed shawl jarred the eye, but she had a motherly manner. “Perrin Aybara!” she said. “I thought I knew your face. Is Elyas with you?”

Perrin shook his head. “I have not seen him in a long time, Ila.”

“He leads a life of violence,” Raen said sadly. “As you do. A violent life is stained even if long.”

“Do not try to bring him to the Way of the Leaf standing here, Raen,” Ila said briskly, but not unkindly. “He is hurt. They all are.”

“What am I thinking of?” Raen muttered. Raising his voice, he called, “Come, people. Come and help. They are hurt. Come and help.”

Men and women gathered quickly, murmuring their sympathy as they helped injured men down from their horses, guiding men toward their wagons, carrying them when necessary. Wil and a few of the others looked concerned over being separated, but Perrin was not. Violence was the farthest thing from the Tuatha’an. They would not raise a hand against anyone, even to defend their own lives.

Perrin found he had to accept Ihvon’s assistance to dismount. Climbing down sent jolts of pain radiating out from his side. “Raen,” he said, a touch breathless, “you shouldn’t be out here. We fought Trollocs not five miles from this spot. Take your people to Emond’s Field. They will be safe there.”

Raen hesitated—and seemed surprised at it—before shaking his head. “Even if I wished to, the people would not want it, Perrin. We try not to camp very close to even the smallest village, and not only because the villagers may falsely accuse us of stealing whatever they have lost or of trying to convince their children to find the Way. Where men have built ten houses together, there is the potential for violence. Since the Breaking the Tuatha’an have known this. Safety lies in our wagons, and in always moving, always seeking the song.” A plaintive expression came over his face. “Everywhere we hear news of violence, Perrin. Not just here in your Two Rivers. There is a feel in the world of change, of destruction. Surely we must find the song soon. Else I do not believe it will ever be.”

“You will find the song,” Perrin said quietly. Maybe they abhorred violence too much for a *ta’veren* to overcome; maybe even a *ta’veren* could not fight the Way of the Leaf. It had seemed attractive to him once, too. “I truly hope that you will.”

“What will be, will be,” Raen said. “All things die in their time. Perhaps even the song.” Ila put a comforting arm around her husband, though her eyes were as troubled as his.

“Come,” she said, trying to hide her ill ease, “we must get you inside. Men will talk if their coats are afire.” To Faile, she said, “You are quite beautiful, child. Perhaps you should beware of Perrin. I never see him but in the company of beautiful girls.” Faile gave Perrin a flat, considering look, then tried to gloss it over quickly.

He made it as far as Raen’s wagon—yellow trimmed in red, with red and yellow spokes in tall, red-rimmed wheels, and red and yellow trunks lashed to the outside, standing beside a cook fire in the middle of the camp—but when he put his foot on the first of the wooden steps at the back, his knees gave way. Ihvon and Raen more than half-carried him inside, followed hurriedly by Faile and Ila, and laid him on the bed built into the front of the wagon, with just room to get by to the sliding door leading to the driver's seat.

It truly was like a little house, even to pale pink curtains at the two small windows on either side. He lay there staring at the ceiling. Here, too, the Tinkers made use of their colors; the ceiling was lacquered sky blue, the high cabinets green and yellow. Faile unfastened his belt and took away his axe and quiver while Ila rummaged in one of the cabinets. Perrin could not seem to rouse any interest in what they were doing.

"Anyone can be surprised," Ihvon said. "Learn from it, but do not take it too much to heart. Not even Artur Hawkwing won every battle."

"Artur Hawkwing." Perrin tried to laugh, but it turned into a groan. "Yes," he managed. "I am certainly not Artur Hawkwing, am I?"

Ila frowned at the Warder—or at his sword, rather; she seemed to find that even worse than Perrin's axe—and came to the bed with a wad of folded bandages. Once she had pulled Perrin's shirt away from the arrow stub, she winced. "I do not think I am competent to remove this. It is bedded deep."

"Barbed," Ihvon said in a conversational tone. "Trollocs do not use bows very often, but when they do the arrows are barbed."

"Out," the plump woman said firmly, rounding on him. "And you as well, Raen. Tending the sick is no business of men. Why don't you go see if Moshea has that wheel on his wagon yet?"

"A good idea," Raen said. "We may want to move tomorrow. There has been hard traveling this last year," he confided to Perrin. "All the way to Cairhien, then back again to Ghealdan, then up into Andor. Tomorrow, I think."

When the red door shut behind him and Ihvon, Ila turned to Faile worriedly. "If it is barbed, I do not think I can remove it at all. I will try if I must, but if there is anyone nearby who knows more of such things. . . ."

"There is someone in Emond's Field," Faile assured her. "But is it safe to leave it in him until tomorrow?"

"Safer than me cutting, perhaps. I can mix something for him to drink for the pain, and blend a poultice against infection."

Glaring at the two women, Perrin said, “Hello? Do you remember me? I am right here. Stop trying to talk over my head.”

They looked at him for a moment.

“Keep him still,” Ila told Faile. “It is all right to let him talk, but do not allow him to move about. He may injure himself more.”

“I will see to it,” Faile replied.

Perrin gritted his teeth and did his best to help in getting his coat and shirt off, but they had to do most of the work. He felt as weak as the worst wrought iron, ready to bend to any pressure. Four inches of thumb-thick arrow stuck out almost atop his last rib, rising from a puckered gash thick with dried blood. They pushed his head down on a pillow, for some reason not wanting him to look at it. Faile washed the wound while Ila prepared her salve with a stone mortar and pestle—plain smooth gray stone, the first things he had seen in the Tinker camp that were not brightly colored. They mounded the salve around the arrow and wrapped him with bandages to hold it.

“Raen and I will sleep beneath the wagon tonight,” the Tuatha’an woman said at last, wiping her hands. Frowning at the arrow stub sticking up from his bandages, she shook her head. “Once I thought he might eventually find the Way of the Leaf. He was a gentle boy, I think.”

“The Way of the Leaf is not for everyone,” Faile said gently, but Ila shook her head again.

“It is for everyone,” she replied just as gently, and a touch sadly, “if they only knew it.”

She left then, and Faile sat on the edge of the bed blotting his face with a folded cloth. He seemed to be sweating a great deal for some reason.

“I blundered,” he said after a time. “No, that is too soft. I don’t know the right word.”

“You did not blunder,” she said firmly. “You did what seemed fitting at the time. It *was* fitting; I cannot imagine how they got behind us. Gaul is not one to make a mistake about where his enemies are. Ihvon was right, Perrin. Anyone can find circumstances that have changed when he did not know. You held everyone together. You brought us out.”

He shook his head hard and made his side hurt worse. “Ihvon brought us out. What I did was get twenty-seven men killed,” he said bitterly, trying to sit up to face her. “Some of them were my friends, Faile. And I got them killed.”

Faile threw her weight on his shoulders to push him back down. It was a measure of his weakness, how easily she held him. “There will be time enough for that in the morning,” she said firmly, peering down into his face, “when we have to put you back on your horse. Ihvon did *not* bring us out; I do not think he cared particularly if anyone but you and he did get out. Those men would have scattered in every direction if not for you, and then we’d all have been hunted down. They would not have held together for Ihvon, a stranger. As for your friends—” Sighing, she sat back down again. “Perrin, my father says a general can take care of the living or weep for the dead, but he cannot do both.”

“I am not a general, Faile. I am a fool of a blacksmith who thought he could use other people to help him get justice, or maybe revenge. I still want it, but I don’t want to use anyone else for it any longer.”

“Do you think the Trollocs will go away because you decide your motives are not pure enough?” The heat in her voice made him raise his head, but she pushed it back to the pillow almost roughly. “Are they any less vile? Do you need a purer reason to fight them than what they are? Another thing my father says. The worst sin a general can commit, worse than blundering, worse than losing, worse than anything, is to desert the men who depend on him.”

A tap came at the door, and a slender, handsome young Tinker in a red-and-green striped coat put his head in. He flashed a smile at Faile, all white teeth and oozing charm, before looking at Perrin. “Grandfather said it was you. I thought this was where Egwene said she came from.” He frowned suddenly, disapprovingly. “Your eyes. I see you have followed Elyas after all, to run with the wolves. I was sure you would never find the Way of the Leaf.”

Perrin knew him; Aram, Raen and Ila’s grandson. He did not like him; he smiled like Wil. “Go away, Aram. I am tired.”

“Is Egwene with you?”

“Egwene’s Aes Sedai now, Aram,” he growled, “and she would rip your heart out with the One Power if you asked her to dance. Go away!”

Aram blinked, and hastily shut the door. With himself outside.

Perrin let his head fall back. “He smiles too much,” he muttered. “I cannot abide a man who smiles too much.” Faile made a choking noise, and he looked at her suspiciously. She was biting her underlip.

“I have something in my throat,” she said in a strangled voice, getting up hastily. She hurried to the wide shelf below the foot of the bed where Ila had prepared her poultice and stood with her back to him, pouring water from a green-and-red pitcher into a blue-and-yellow mug. “Would you like something to drink, too? Ila left this powder, for the pain. It will help you sleep.”

“I don’t want any powder,” he said. “Faile, who is your father?”

Her back went very stiff. After a moment she turned with the mug in both hands and an unreadable look in her tilted eyes. Another minute passed before she said, “My father is Davram of House Bashere, Lord of Bashere, Tyr and Sidona, Guardian of the Blightborder, Defender of the Heartland, Marshal-General to Queen Tenobia of Saldaea. And her uncle.”

“Light! What was all that about him being a wood merchant, or a fur dealer? I seem to remember him dealing in ice peppers once, too.”

“It was not a lie,” she said sharply, then in a weaker voice, “Just not . . . the whole truth. My father’s estates do produce lumber and fine woods, and ice peppers, and furs, and more besides. And his stewards sell them for him, so he does trade in them. In a way.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell me? Hiding things. Lying. You’re a lady!” He frowned at her accusingly. He had not expected this. A small merchant for a father, a former soldier, maybe, but not this. “Light, what are you doing running around as a Hunter of the Horn? Don’t tell me the Lord of Bashere and all that just sent you off to find adventure.”

Still holding the cup, she came back to sit beside him. For some reason she seemed very intent on his face. “My two older brothers died, Perrin, one fighting Trollocs, the other in a fall from his horse hunting. That made me the eldest, and it meant I had to study account books and trading. While my younger brothers learned to be soldiers, while they were being readied for adventures, I had to learn how to manage the estates! It is the eldest’s duty. Duty! It is dull, dry and boring. Buried in paper and clerks.

“When Father took Maedin with him to the Blightborder—he’s two years younger than I—that was more than I could stand. Girls are not taught the sword, or war, in Saldaea, but father had named an old soldier from his first command as my footman, and Eran was always more than happy to teach me to use knives and fight with my hands. I think it amused him. In any case, when Father took Maedin with him, the news had arrived calling the Great Hunt of the Horn, so I . . . left. I wrote Mother a letter explaining, and I . . . left. And I reached Illian in time to take the oath of a Hunter. . . .” Picking up the cloth, she patted at the sweat on his face again. “You really should sleep if you can.”

“I suppose you are the Lady Bashere or some such?” he said. “How did you ever come to like a common blacksmith?”

“The word is ‘love,’ Perrin Aybara.” The firmness of her voice was at sharp odds with the gentle way that the cloth moved on his face. “And you are not such a common blacksmith, I think.” The cloth paused. “Perrin, what did that fellow mean about running with wolves? Raen mentioned this Elyas, too.”

For a moment he was frozen, unbreathing. Yet he had just berated her for keeping secrets from him. It was what he got for being hasty and angry. Swing a hammer in haste, and you usually hit your own thumb. He exhaled slowly, and told her. How he had met Elyas Machera and learned he could talk to wolves. How his eyes had changed color, grown sharper, and his hearing and his sense of smell, like a wolf’s. About the wolf dream. About what would happen to him, if he ever lost his hold on humanity. “It’s so easy. Sometimes, especially in the dream, I forget I’m a man, not a wolf. If one of these times I don’t remember quickly enough, if I lose hold, I’ll *be* a wolf. In my head, at least. A sort of half-wrong image of a wolf. There won’t be anything of *me* left.” He stopped, waiting for her to flinch, to move away.

“If your ears are really that sharp,” she said calmly, “I will have to watch what I say close to you.”

He caught her hand to stop her patting. “Did you hear anything I said? What will your father and mother think, Faile? A half-wolf blacksmith. You’re a lady! Light!”

“I heard every word. Father will approve. He has always said our family blood is growing too soft; not like it was in the old days. I know he thinks I am terribly soft.” She gave him a smile fierce enough for any wolf. “Of course, Mother always wanted me to marry a king who splits Trollocs in two with one stroke of his sword. I suppose your axe will suffice, but could you tell her you are the king of the wolves? I don’t think anyone will come forward to dispute your claim to that throne. In truth, the splitting of Trollocs will probably do for Mother, but I truly think she would like the other.”

“Light!” he said hoarsely. She sounded almost serious. No, she did sound serious. If she was even *half* serious, he was not sure the Trollocs might not be better than meeting her parents.

“Here,” she said, holding the mug of water to his lips. “You sound as though your throat is dry.”

Swallowing, he spluttered at the bitter taste. She had stirred in Ila’s powder! He tried to stop, but she filled his mouth, and it was a matter of swallow or choke. By the time he could push the mug away, she had emptied half of it into him. Why did medicine always taste so vile? He suspected women did it on purpose. He would have bet that whatever they took for themselves did not taste that way. “I told you I did not want any of that. Gaaah!”

“Did you? I must not have heard. But whether you did or not, you need sleep.” She stroked his curly hair. “Sleep, my Perrin.”

He tried to tell her he had indeed told her so, and she had heard it, but the words seemed to tangle around his tongue. His eyes wanted to slide shut. In fact, he could not keep them open. The last thing he heard was her soft murmurs.

“Sleep, my wolf king. Sleep.”

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CHAPTER 42

A Missing Leaf

Perrin stood near the Tuatha’an wagons under bright sunlight, alone, and there was no arrow in his side, no pain. Among the wagons firewood was stacked ready to be lit beneath iron cookpots hanging from tripods, and clothes hung from washlines; there were no people or horses. He wore neither coat nor shirt, but a blacksmith’s long leather vest that left his arms bare. It could have been any dream, perhaps, except that he was aware it was a dream. And he knew the feel of the wolf dream, the reality and solidity of it, from the long grass around his boots to the breeze out of the west that ruffled his curly hair, to the scattered ash and hemlock. The Tinkers’ gaudy wagons did not seem real, though; they had an air of insubstantiality, a feel that they might shimmer and be gone any moment. They never remained long in one place, Tinkers. No soil held them.

Wondering how much the land held him, he rested a hand on his axe—and looked down in surprise. The heavy blacksmith’s hammer hung in the loop on his belt, not the axe. He frowned; once he would have chosen that way, had even thought he had, but surely no more. The axe. He had chosen the axe. Hammerhead suddenly became half-moon blade and thick spike, flickered back to stout cylinder of cold steel, fluttered between. Finally it stopped, as his axe, and he exhaled slowly. That had never happened before. Here, he could change things as he wanted with ease, things about himself at least. “And I want the axe,” he said firmly. “The axe.”

Looking around, he could just see a farmhouse to the south, and deer browsing the barley field, surrounded by a rough stone wall. There was no feel of wolves, and he did not call Hopper. The wolf might or might not come, or even hear, but Slayer could well be out there somewhere. A bristling quiver abruptly tugged at his belt opposite the axe, and he had a stout longbow in his hand with a broadhead arrow nocked. A long leather bracer covered his left forearm. Nothing moved except those deer.

“Not likely I’ll wake soon,” he muttered to himself. Whatever that stuff was that Faile had fed him, it had taken him right off; he remembered it as clearly as if he had watched over her shoulder. “Fed it to me like I was a babe,” he growled. *Women!*

He took one of those long strides—the land blurred around him—and stepped into the farmyard. Two or three chickens scattered, running as if they had already gone feral. The rock-walled sheepfold stood empty, and both thatch-roofed barns were barred shut. Despite curtains still at the windows, the two-story farmhouse had the look of emptiness. If this was a true reflection of the waking world—and the wolf dream usually was, in an odd way—the people here had been gone for days. Faile was right; his warning had spread beyond the places he had gone.

“Faile,” he murmured wonderingly. Daughter of a lord. No, not just a lord. Three times a lord, a general, and uncle to a queen. “Light, that makes her a queen’s cousin!” And she loved a simple blacksmith. Women were wondrous strange.

Seeking to see how far the word had spread, he zigzagged more than halfway to Deven Ride, a mile or more at a stride, doubling back and crisscrossing his own path. Most farms he saw had that same emptiness; less than one in five showed signs of habitation, doors open and windows up, wash hung out on a line, dolls or hoops or carved wooden horses lying around a doorstep. The toys especially made his stomach clench. Even if they had not believed his warning, surely there were enough burned farms about to tell them the same, tumbled heaps of charred timbers, soot-black chimneys like stark, dead fingers.

Bending to replace a doll with a smiling glass face and a flower-embroidered dress—some woman had loved her daughter to do all that tiny needlework—he blinked. The same doll still sat on the fieldstone steps where he had picked it up. As he reached out, the one in his hand faded and vanished.

Flashes of black in the sky cut short his amazement. Ravens, twenty or thirty together, winging toward the Westwood. Toward the Mountains of Mist, where he had first seen Slayer. He watched coldly while the ravens dwindled to black specks and disappeared. Then he set off after them.

Long, racing strides carried him five miles each, the land a blur except in the moment between one step and the next, into the thick-treed, rocky Westwood, across the scrub-covered Sand Hills, into the cloud-capped mountains, where fir and pine and leatherleaf forested valleys and slopes, to the very valley where he had first seen the man Hopper called Slayer, to the mountainside where he had returned from Tear.

The Waygate stood there, closed, the *Avendesora* leaf seemingly just one among a myriad of intricately carved leaves and vines. Scattered trees, wizened and wind-sculpted, dotted the sparse soil among the glazed stone where Manetheren had been burned away. Sunlight sparkled on the waters of the Manetherendrelle below. A faint wind up the valley brought him the scent of deer, rabbits, foxes. Nothing moved that he could see.

On the point of leaving, he stopped. The *Avendesora* leaf. *One leaf.* Loial had locked the Waygate by placing both leaves on this side. He turned, and his hackles rose. The Waygate stood open, twin masses of living greenery stirring in the breeze, exposing that dull silvery surface; his reflection shimmered in it. *How*? he wondered. *Loial locked the bloody thing.*

Unaware of crossing the distance, suddenly he was right at the Waygate. There was no trefoil leaf among the verdant tangle on the inside of the two gates. Strange to think that at that moment, in the waking world, someone—or something—was passing through where he stood. Touching the dull surface, he grunted. It might as well have been a mirror; his hand slid across it as across the smoothest glass.

From the corner of his eye he caught the *Avendesora* leaf suddenly in its place on the inside, and leaped back just as the Waygate began swinging shut. Someone—or something—had come out, or gone in. *Out. It has to be out.* He wanted to doubt that it was more Trollocs, and Fades, coming into the Two Rivers. The gates merged, became stone carvings again.

A sense of being watched was all the warning he had. He jumped—a half-seen image of black streaking through where his chest had been; an arrow—jumped in one of those world-blurring stretches, landed on a far slope and jumped again, out of the valley of Manetheren into a stand of towering fir, and again. Running, he thought furiously, picturing the valley in his mind, and that brief glimpse of the arrow. It had come from *that* direction, at *that* angle when it reached him, so it had to have come from. . . .

A final bound took him back onto a slope above Manetheren's grave, crouching among meager, wind-slanted pines with bow ready to draw.

Below him, among the stunted trees and boulders, the arrow had been fired. Slayer had to be down there somewhere. He had to be down. . . .

Without thinking, Perrin leaped away, the mountains a smear of gray and brown and green.

“Almost,” he growled. Almost, he had duplicated his mistake in the Waterwood, thinking again an enemy would move to suit him, wait where he wanted.

This time he ran as hard as he could, only three flashing strides to the edge of the Sand Hills, hoping he had not been seen. This time he circled wide, coming back higher on that same mountainside, up where the air felt thin and cold and the few trees were thick-trunked bushes fifty paces or more apart, up above where a man might set himself to watch for another who meant to sneak up on the place that arrow had fired.

And there his quarry was, a hundred paces below, dark-haired and dark-coated, a tall man crouched beside a table-sized granite outcrop, his own half-drawn bow in hand, studying the slope farther down with eager patience. This was the first time Perrin had gotten a good look at him; a hundred paces was little distance for his eyes. This Slayer’s high-collared coat had a Borderland cut, and his face looked enough like Lan’s to be the Warder’s brother’s. Only Lan had no brothers—no living kin at all, that Perrin knew—and if he had had any, they would not have been here. A Borderlander, though. Maybe Shienaran, though his hair was long, not shaved to a topknot, and was held back by a braided leather cord just like Lan’s. He could not be Malkieri; Lan was the last living Malkieri.

Wherever he came from, Perrin felt no compunction at all in drawing his bow, broadhead point aimed at Slayer’s back. The man had tried to kill him from ambush. A downhill shot could be tricky.

Perhaps he had taken too long, or perhaps the fellow felt his cold gaze, but suddenly Slayer became a blur, streaking away east.

With a curse, Perrin pursued, three strides to the Sand Hills, another into the Westwood. Among the oaks and leatherleaf and underbrush, Slayer seemed to vanish.

Halting, Perrin listened. Silence. The squirrels and birds had gone still. He inhaled deeply. A small herd of deer had passed that way not long since. And a faint tinge of something, human but too cold for a man, too emotionless, a scent that tickled his mind with familiarity. Slayer was somewhere close. The air lay as still as the forest; no stir of breeze to tell him which way that scent came.

“A neat trick, Goldeneyes, locking the Waygate.”

Perrin tensed, ears straining. No telling from where in this dense growth that voice had come. Not so much as a leaf rustled.

“If you knew how many of the Shadowwrought died trying to get out of the Ways there, it would lift your heart. *Machin Shin* feasted at that gate, Goldeneyes. But not a good enough trick. You saw: the gate is open now.”

There, off to the right. Perrin slipped through the trees as silently as he had when he had hunted here.

“It was only a few hundred to begin, Goldeneyes. Just enough to keep those fool Whitecloaks off balance and see that the renegade died.” Slayer’s voice became angry. “The Shadow consume me if that man does not have more luck than the White Tower.” Abruptly he chuckled. “But you, Goldeneyes. Your presence was a surprise. There are those who want your head on a pike. Your precious Two Rivers will be harrowed from end to end, now, to root you out. What do you say to that, Goldeneyes?”

Perrin froze close beside the gnarled trunk of a great oak. Why was the man talking so much? Why was he talking at all? *He’s drawing me right to him.*

Putting his back against the oak’s thick bole, he studied the forest. No movement. Slayer *wanted* him to come nearer. No doubt into an ambush. And he wanted to find the man and rip his throat out. Yet it could easily be himself who died, and if that happened, no one would know the Waygate was open, and Trollocs coming by hundreds, maybe even thousands. He would not play Slayer’s game.

With a mirthless smile he stepped out of the wolf dream, telling himself to wake, and . . .

. . . Faile twined her arms around his neck and nipped his beard with small white teeth, while Tinkers’ fiddles sang some wild, heated tune around the campfires. *Ila’s powder. I can’t wake up!* Awareness that it was a dream faded. Laughing, he scooped Faile up in his arms and carried her into the shadows, where the grass was soft.

Waking was a slow process wrapped around the dull pain filling his side. Daylight streamed in at the small windows. Bright light. Morning. He tried to sit up, and fell back with a groan.

Faile sprang up from a low stool; her dark eyes looked as if she had not slept. “Lie still,” she said. “You did enough thrashing in your sleep. I have not kept you from rolling over and driving that thing the rest of the way through you just to watch you do it now you’re awake.” Ihvon stood leaning against the doorframe like a dark blade.

“Help me up,” Perrin said. Talking hurt, but so did breathing, and he had to talk. “I have to get to the mountains. To the Waygate.”

She put a hand to his forehead, frowning. “No fever,” she murmured. Then, more strongly, “You are going to Emond’s Field, where one of the Aes Sedai can Heal you. You are *not* going to kill yourself trying to ride into the mountains with an arrow in you. Do you hear me? If I hear one more word about mountains or Waygates, I will have Ila mix something that will put you back to sleep, and you will travel on a litter. I’m not certain you should not anyway.”

“The Trollocs, Faile! The Waygate is open again! I have to stop them!”

The woman did not even hesitate before shaking her head. “You can do nothing about it, the state you are in. It is Emond’s Field for you.”

“But—!”

“But me no buts, Perrin Aybara. Not another word on it.”

He ground his teeth. The worst was that she was right. If he could not rise from a bed alone, how could he stay in the saddle as far as Manetheren? “Emond’s Field,” he said graciously, but she still sniffed and muttered something about “pigheaded.” What did she want? *I* was *bloody gracious, burn her for stubborn!*

“So there will be more Trollocs,” Ihvon said musingly. He did not ask how Perrin knew. Then he shook his head as if dismissing Trollocs. “I will tell the others you are awake.” He slipped out, closing the door behind him.

“Am I the only one who sees the danger?” Perrin muttered.

“I see an arrow in you,” Faile said firmly.

The reminder gave him a twinge; he just stifled a groan. And she gave a satisfied nod. Satisfied!

He wanted to be up and on the way immediately; the sooner he was Healed, the sooner he could see to closing the Waygate again, permanently this time. Faile insisted on feeding him breakfast, a broth thick with mashed vegetables suitable for a toothless infant, one spoon at a time, with pauses to wipe his chin. She would not let him feed himself, and whenever he protested or asked her to go faster, she shoved the words back into his mouth with a spoonful of pap. She would not even let him wash his own face. By the time she got around to brushing his hair and combing his beard, he had settled on dignified silence.

“You are pretty when you sulk,” she said. And pinched his nose!

Ila, in green blouse and blue skirt this morning, climbed into the wagon with his coat and shirt, both cleaned and mended. To his irritation, he had to let the two women help him don them. He had to let them help him *sit up* to don them, the coat unbuttoned and the shirt not tucked in, but bunched around the arrow stub.

“Thank you, Ila,” he said, fingering the neat darns. “This is fine needlework.”

“It is,” she agreed. “Faile has a deft touch with a needle.”

Faile colored, and he grinned, thinking of how fiercely she had told him she would never mend his clothes. A glint in her eye held his tongue. Sometimes silence was the wiser course. “Thank you, Faile,” he said gravely instead. She blushed even redder.

Once they had him on his feet he reached the door easily enough, but he had to let the two women half-support him to climb down the wooden steps. At least the horses were saddled, and all the Two Rivers lads gathered, bows slung on their backs. With clean faces and clothes, and only a few bandages out where they showed.

A night with the Tuatha’an had obviously been good for their spirits, too, even those who still looked as though they could not walk a hundred paces. The haggardness that had been in their eyes yesterday was only a shadow now. Wil had each arm around a pretty, big-eyed Tinker girl, of course, and Ban al’Seen, with his nose and a bandage around his head making his dark hair stand up in a brush, held hands with another smiling shyly. Most of the others held bowls of thick vegetable stew and spoons, shoveling away.

“This is good, Perrin,” Dannil said, giving up his empty bowl to a Tinker woman. She gestured as if to ask the beanpole fellow whether he wanted more, and he shook his head, but said, “I don’t think I could ever get enough of it, do you?”

“I had my fill,” Perrin told him sourly. Mashed vegetables and broth.

“The Tinker girls danced last night,” Dannil’s brother Tell said, wide-eyed. “All the unmarried women, and some of the married! You should have seen it, Perrin.”

“I’ve seen Tinker women dance before, Tell.”

Apparently he had not kept his voice clear of what he had felt watching them, for Faile said dryly, “You’ve seen the tiganza, have you? Someday, if you are good, I may dance the sa’sara for you, and show you what a dance really is.” Ila gasped in recognition of the name, and Faile went even redder than she had inside.

Perrin pursed his lips. If this sa’sara set the heart pounding any harder than the Tinker women’s swaying, hip-rolling dance—the tiganza, was it?—he definitely would like to see Faile dance it. He carefully did not look at her.

Raen came, in the same bright green coat but trousers redder than any red Perrin had ever seen before. The combination made his head ache. “Twice you have visited our fires, Perrin, and for the second time you go without a farewell feast. You must come again soon so we can make up for it.”

Pushing away from Faile and Ila—he could stand by himself, at least—he put a hand on the wiry man’s shoulder. “Come with us, Raen. No one in Emond’s Field will harm you. At worst it’s safer than out here with the Trollocs.”

Raen hesitated, then shook himself, muttering, “I do not know how you can even make me consider such things.” Turning, he spoke loudly. “People, Perrin has asked us to come with him to his village, where we will be safe from Trollocs. Who wishes to go?” Shocked faces stared back at him. Some women gathered their children close, and the children hid in their skirts, as if the very idea frightened them. “You see, Perrin?” Raen said. “For us, safety lies in moving, not in villages. I assure you, we do not spend two nights in one place, and we will travel all day before stopping again.”

“That may not be enough, Raen.”

The Mahdi shrugged. “Your concern warms me, but we will be safe, if the Light wills it.”

“The Way of the Leaf is not only to do no violence,” Ila said gently, “but to accept what comes. The leaf falls in its proper time, uncomplaining. The Light will keep us safe for our time.”

Perrin wanted to argue with them, but behind all the warmth and compassion on their faces lay a stony firmness. He thought he would get

Bain and Chiad to don dresses and give up their spears—or Gaul to!—before he made these people budge an inch.

Raen shook Perrin's hand, and with that the Tinker women began hugging the Two Rivers lads, and Ihvon, too, and the Tinker men began shaking hands, all laughing and saying goodbyes and wishing everyone a safe journey, hoping they would come again. Almost all the men did. Aram stood off to one side, frowning to himself, hands thrust into his coat pockets. The last time Perrin met him he had seemed to have a sour streak, odd for a Tinker.

The men did not content themselves with shaking Faile's hand, but hugged her. Perrin kept his face smooth when some of the younger men became overly enthusiastic, only grinding his teeth a little; he managed to smile. No woman much younger than Ila hugged him. Somehow, even while Faile was letting some skinny, gaudy-coated Tinker fold his arms around her and try to squeeze her flat, she stood guard on him like a mastiff. Women without gray in their hair took one look at her face and chose someone else. Meanwhile Wil appeared to be kissing every woman in the camp. So was Ban, and his nose. Even Ihvon was enjoying himself, for that matter. It would serve Faile right if one of those fellows cracked a rib for her.

Finally the Tinkers moved back, except for Raen and Ila, opening a space around the Two Rivers folk. The wiry, gray-haired man bowed formally, hands to chest. "You came in peace. Depart now in peace. Always will our fires welcome you. The Way of the Leaf is peace."

"Peace be on you always," Perrin replied, "and on all the People." *Light, let it be so.* "I will find the song, or another will find the song, but the song will be sung, this year or in a year to come." He wondered if there ever had been a song, or if the Tuatha'an had begun their endless journey seeking something else. Elyas had told him they did not know what song, only that they would know it when they found it. *Let them find safety, at least. At least that.* "As it once was, so shall it be again, world without end."

"World without end," the Tuatha'an responded in a solemn murmur. "World and time without end."

A few final hugs and handshakes were handed 'round while Ihvon and Faile were helping Perrin up on Stepper. A few last kisses collected by Wil. And Ban. Ban! *And* his nose! Others, the badly wounded, were half-lifted onto their horses, with Tinkers waving as if to old neighbors off on a long journey.

Raen came to shake Perrin's hand. "Will you not reconsider?" Perrin asked. "I remember hearing you say once there was wickedness loose in the world. It's worse now, Raen, and here."

"Peace be on you, Perrin," Raen replied, smiling.

"And on you," he said sadly.

The Aiel did not appear until they were a mile north of the Tinker camp, Bain and Chiad looking to Faile before trotting ahead to their usual place. Perrin was not sure what they thought might have happened to her among Tuatha'an.

Gaul moved in beside Stepper, striding easily. The party was not moving very fast, with nearly half the men walking. He glanced at Ihvon measuringly, as usual, before turning to Perrin. "Your injury is well?"

His injury hurt like fury; every step his horse took jolted that arrowhead. "I feel fine," he said, not gritting his teeth. "Maybe we'll have a dance in Emond's Field tonight. And you? Did you pass a good night playing Maidens' Kiss?" Gaul stumbled and nearly fell on his face. "What is the matter?"

"Who did you hear suggest this game?" the Aielman said quietly, staring straight ahead.

"Chiad. Why?"

"Chiad," Gaul muttered. "The woman is Goshien. Goshien! I should take her back to Hot Springs as *gai'shain*." The words sounded angry, but not his odd tone. "Chiad."

"Will you tell me what is the matter?"

"A Myrddraal has less cunning than a woman," Gaul said in a flat voice, "and a Trolloc fights with more honor." After a moment he added, in a fierce undertone, "And a goat has more sense." Quickening his pace, he ran forward to join the two Maidens. He did not speak to them, as far as Perrin could make out, only slowed to walk alongside.

"Did you understand any of that?" Perrin asked Ihvon. The Warder shook his head.

Faile sniffed. "If he thinks to make trouble for them, they will hang him by his heels from a branch to cool off."

"Did you understand it?" Perrin asked her. She walked along, neither looking at him nor answering, which he took to mean she did not. "I think I might have to find Raen's camp again. It has been a long time since I saw the tiganza. It was . . . interesting."

She muttered something under her breath, but he caught it: "You could do with hanging by the heels yourself!"

He smiled down at the top of her head. "But I won't have to. You promised to dance this sa'sara for me." Her face went crimson. "Is it anything close to the tiganza? I mean, there is no point, otherwise."

"You muscle-brained oaf!" she snapped, glaring up at him. "Men have thrown their hearts and fortunes at the feet of women who danced the sa'sara. If Mother suspected I knew it—" Her teeth clicked shut as though she had said too much, and her head whipped back to face forward; scarlet mortification covered her from her dark hair down to the neck of her dress.

"Then there isn't any reason for you to dance it," he said quietly. "My heart and fortune, such as they are, already lie at your feet."

Faile missed a step, then laughed softly and pressed her cheek against his booted calf. "You are too clever for me," she murmured. "One day I will dance it for you, and boil the blood in your veins."

"You already do that," he said, and she laughed again. Pushing her arm behind his stirrup, she hugged his leg to her as she walked.

After a while even the thought of Faile dancing—he extrapolated from the Tinker dance; it must be something to top that—could not compete with the pain in his side. Every stride Stepper took was agony. He held himself upright. It seemed to hurt a fraction less that way. Besides, he did not want to spoil the lift the Tuatha'an had given everyone's spirits. The other men were sitting up straight in their saddles, too, even those who had been hunched over and clinging the day before. And Ban and Dannil and the others walked with heads up. He would not be the first to slump.

Wil began to whistle "Coming Home from Tarwin's Gap," and three or four more took it up. After a time, Ban began to sing in a clear, deep voice.

"My home is waiting there for me,
and the girl I left behind.
Of all the treasure that waits for me,
that's what I want to find.
Her eyes so merry, and her smile so sweet,
her hugs so warm, and her ankle neat,
her kisses hot, now there's a treat.

If there's a treasure greater, it lies not in my
mind."

More joined in on the second verse, until everyone sang, even Ihvon. And Faile. Not Perrin, of course; he had been told often enough that he sounded like a stepped-on frog, singing. Some even fell into step with the music.

"Oh, I have seen stark Tarwin's Gap,
and the Trollocs' raving horde.
I have stood 'fore the Halfman's charge,
and walked on death's cold borde.
But a winsome lass, she waits for me,
for a dance, and a kiss 'neath the apple tree.
. . ."

Perrin shook his head. A day before they had been ready to run and hide. Today they sang, about a battle so long ago that it had left no memory but this song in the Two Rivers. Perhaps they were becoming soldiers. They would have to, unless he managed to close that Waygate.

Farms began to appear more often, closer together, until they traveled along hard-packed dirt between fields bordered by hedges or low, rough stone walls. Abandoned farms. No one here clung to the land.

They came to the Old Road, which ran north from the White River, the Manetherendrelle, through Deven Ride to Emond's Field, and at last began to see sheep in the pastures, great clumps like a dozen men's flocks gathered together, with ten shepherds where there once would have been one, and half of them grown men. Bow-armed shepherds watched them pass, singing at the tops of their lungs, not knowing quite what to make of it.

Perrin did not know what to make of his first view of Emond's Field, and neither did the other Two Rivers men, from the way their singing faltered and died.

The trees, fences and hedges closest to the village were simply gone, cleared away. The westernmost houses of Emond's Field had once stood among the trees on the edge of the Westwood. The oaks and leatherleaf between the houses remained, but now the forest's brim stood five hundred paces away, a long bowshot, and axes rang loud as men pushed it back farther. Row on row of waist-high stakes, driven into the ground at an angle, surrounded the village a little out from the houses and presented a continuous hedge of sharpened points, except where the road ran in. At intervals behind the stakes men stood like sentries, some wearing bits of old armor or leather shirts sewn with rusty steel discs, a few in dented old steel caps, with boar spears, or halberds rooted out of attics, or bush hooks fitted to long poles. Other men, and boys, were up on some of the thatched roofs with bows; they stood when they saw Perrin and the others coming, and shouted to people below.

Beside the road behind the stakes stood a contraption of wood and thick, twisted rope, with a nearby pile of stones bigger than a man's head. Ihvon noticed Perrin frowning at it as they came closer. "Catapult," the Warder said. "Six, so far. Your carpenters knew what to do once Tomas and I showed them. The stakes will hold off charging Trollocs or Whitecloaks, either one." He might have been discussing the prospects for more rain.

"I told you your village was preparing to defend itself." Faile sounded fiercely proud, as though it were her village. "A hard people, for such a soft land. They could almost be Saldaean. Moiraine always said Manetheren's blood runs strong here still."

Perrin could only shake his head.

The hard-packed dirt streets were nearly crowded enough for a city, the gaps between houses filled with carts and wagons, and through open doors and unshuttered windows he could see more people. The crowd parted before Ihvon and the Aiel, and rustling whispers accompanied them along the street.

"It's Perrin Goldeneyes."

"Perrin Goldeneyes."

"Perrin Goldeneyes."

He wished they would not do that. These people knew him, some of them. What did they think they were doing? There was horse-faced Neysa Ayellin, who had paddled his ten-year-old backside that time Mat talked him into stealing one of her gooseberry pies. And there was pink-cheeked, big-eyed Cilia Cole, the first girl he had ever kissed and still pleasingly plump, and Pel Aydaer, with his pipe and his bald head, who had taught Perrin how to catch trout with his hands, and Daise Congar herself, a tall, wide woman who made Alsbet Luhhan seem soft, with her husband Wit, a scrawny man overshadowed as always by his wife. And they were all staring at him, and whispering to the people from off, who might not know who he was. When old Cenn Buie lifted a little boy up on his shoulder, pointing at Perrin and talking enthusiastically to the boy, Perrin groaned. They had all gone mad.

Townsfolk trailed after Perrin and the others, around them, in a parade that rode a swell of murmurs. Chickens scurried every which way under people’s feet. Bawling calves and pigs squealing in pens behind the houses competed with the noise of the humans. Sheep crowded the Green, and black-and-white milkcows cropped the grass in company with flocks of geese, gray and white.

And in the middle of the Green rose a tall pole, the red-bordered white banner at its peak rippling lazily, displaying a red wolf’s head. He looked at Faile, but she shook her head, as surprised as he.

“A symbol.”

Perrin had not heard Verin approach, though now he caught hushed whispers of “Aes Sedai” floating around her. Ihvon did not look surprised. People stared at her with awe-filled eyes.

“People need symbols,” Verin went on, resting a hand on Stepper’s shoulder. “When Alanna told a few of the villagers how much Trollocs fear wolves, everyone seemed to think this banner a grand idea. Don’t you, Perrin?” Was there a dryness in her voice then? Her dark eyes looked up at him, birdlike. A bird watching a worm?

“I wonder what Queen Morgase will think of that,” Faile said. “This is part of Andor. Queens seldom like strange banners being raised in their realms.”

“That’s nothing but lines on a map,” Perrin told her. It was good to be still; the throbbing from the arrowhead seemed to have abated somewhat. “I did not even know we were supposed to be part of Andor until I went to Caemlyn. I doubt many people here do.”

“Rulers have a tendency to believe maps, Perrin.” There was no doubt of the dryness in Faile’s tone. “When I was a child, there were parts of Saldaea that had not seen a taxman in five generations. Once Father could turn his attention from the Blight for a time, Tenobia made sure they knew who their queen was.”

“This is the Two Rivers,” he said, grinning, “not Saldaea.” They did sound very fierce, up there in Saldaea. As he turned back to Verin, the grin became a frown. “I thought you were . . . hiding . . . who you are.” He could not say which was more disturbing; Aes Sedai there in secret, or Aes Sedai in the open.

The Aes Sedai's hand hovered an inch from the broken-off arrow jutting from his side. Something tingled around the wound. "Oh, this is not good," she murmured. "Caught in the rib, and some infection in spite of that poultice. This needs Alanna, I think." She blinked and pulled her hand back; the tingle went, too. "What? Hiding? Oh. With what has been stirred up here now, we could hardly remain hidden. I suppose we could have . . . gone away. You wouldn't want that, would you?" There was that sharp, considering, birdlike stare again.

He hesitated, and finally sighed. "I suppose not."

"Oh, that is good to hear," she said with a smile.

"Why did you really come here, Verin?"

She did not seem to hear him. Or did not want to. "Now we need to see to that thing in you. And these other lads need to be looked after, too. Alanna and I will see to the worst, but. . . ."

The men with him were as stunned by what they found here as he was. Ban scratched his head at the banner, and a few just stared around in amazement. Most looked at Verin, though, wide-eyed and uneasy; they had surely heard the whispers of "Aes Sedai." Perrin was not escaping those looks entirely himself, he realized, talking to an Aes Sedai as though she were just any village woman.

Verin considered them right back, then suddenly, without seeming to look, reached behind her to snatch a girl of about ten or twelve out of the onlookers. The girl, her long dark hair caught up with blue ribbons, went rigid with shock. "You know Daise Congar, girl?" Verin said. "Well, you find her and tell her there are injured men who need a Wisdom's herbs. And tell her to jump. You tell her I'll have no patience with her airs. Do you have that? Off with you."

Perrin did not recognize the girl, but evidently she did know Daise, because she flinched at the message. But Verin was an Aes Sedai. After a moment of weighing—Daise Congar against an Aes Sedai—the girl scampered away into the crowd.

"And Alanna will take care of you," Verin said, peering up at him again.

He wished she did not sound as though there might be two meanings to that.

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CHAPTER 43

Care for the Living

Taking Stepper’s bridle, Verin led him to the Winespring Inn herself, the crowd melting back to let her through, then falling in after. Dannil and Ban and the others trailed along on horse and afoot, kin mingling with them now. Astounded as they were by the changes in Emond’s Field, the lads still showed their pride by striding even if they limped, or sitting up straighter in the saddle; they had faced Trollocs and come home. But women ran their hands over sons and nephews and grandsons, often biting back tears, and their low moans made a soft, pained murmur. Tight-eyed men tried to hide their worries behind proud smiles, clapping shoulders and exclaiming over newly begun beards, yet frequently their hugs just happened to turn into a shoulder to lean on. Sweethearts rushed in with kisses and loud cries, equal parts happiness and commiseration, and little brothers and sisters, uncertain, alternated between fits of weeping and clinging in wide-eyed wonder to a brother everyone seemed to be taking for a hero.

It was the other voices Perrin wished he could not hear.

“Where is Kenley?” Mistress Ahan was a handsome woman, with streaks of white in her nearly black braid, but she wore a fear-filled frown as she scanned faces and saw eyes flinch from hers. “Where’s my Kenley?”

“Bili!” old Hu al’Dai called uncertainly. “Has anyone seen Bili al’Dai?”

“. . . Hu . . . !”

“. . . Jared . . . !”

“. . . Tim . . . !”

“. . . Colly . . . !”

In front of the inn, Perrin fell out of the saddle in his need to escape those names, not even seeing whose hands caught him. “Get me inside!” he grated. “Inside!”

“. . . Teven . . . !”

“. . . Haral . . . !”

“. . . Had . . . !”

The door cut off the heart-lost wails, and the cries of Dael al’Taron’s mother for someone to tell her where her son was.

In a Trolloc cookpot, Perrin thought as he was lowered into a chair in the common room. *In a Trolloc’s belly, where I put him, Mistress al’Taron. Where I put him.* Faile had his head in her hands, peering into his face worriedly. *Care for the living*, he thought. *I’ll weep for the dead later. Later.*

“I am all right,” he told her. “I just got a little light-headed dismounting. I’ve never been a good rider.” She did not seem to believe him.

“Can’t you do something?” she demanded of Verin.

The Aes Sedai calmly shook her head. “I think better not, child. A pity neither of us is Yellow, but Alanna is still a much better Healer than I. My Talents lie in other directions. Ihvon will bring her. Wait with patience, child.”

The common room had been turned into an armory of sorts. Except in front of the fireplace, the walls were a solid mass of propped spears of every description, with the occasional halberd or bill mixed in, and some polearms with oddly shaped blades, many pitted and discolored where old rust had been scoured away. Even more surprisingly, a barrel near the foot of the stairs held swords all jumbled together, most without scabbards and no two alike. Every attic within five miles must have been turned out for relics dust-covered for generations. Perrin would not have suspected there were five swords in the whole Two Rivers. Before the Whitecloaks and Trollocs came, anyway.

Gaul took a place off to one side, near the stairs that led up to the inn’s rooms and the al’Veres’ living quarters, watching Perrin but plainly aware of Verin and every move she made. On the other side of the room, watching Faile and all else, the two Maidens cradled their spears in the crook of an elbow and took a hipshot stance that seemed at once casual and yet balanced on the toes. The three young fellows who had carried Perrin in shifted their feet by the door, staring at him and the Aes Sedai and the Aiel with equally wide eyes. That was all.

“The others,” Perrin said. “They need—”

“They will be taken care of,” Verin interrupted smoothly, seating herself at another table. “They will want to be with their families. Much better to have loved ones close."

Perrin felt a stab of pain—the graves below the apple trees flashed in his mind—but he pushed it down. *Take care of the living,* he reminded himself harshly. The Aes Sedai brought out her pen and ink and began making notes in that small book in a precise hand. He wondered whether she cared how many Two Rivers folk died, so long as he lived, to be used in the White Tower's plans for Rand.

Faile squeezed his hand, but it was to the Aes Sedai that she spoke. "Should we not take him up to a bed?"

"Not yet," Perrin told her irritably. Verin looked up and opened her mouth, and he repeated in a firmer voice, "Not yet." The Aes Sedai shrugged and went back to her note-taking. "Does anyone know where Loial is?"

"The Ogier?" one of the three by the door said. Dav Ayellin was stockier than Mat, but he had that same twinkle in his dark eyes. He had the same rumpled, uncombed look about him as Mat, too. In the old days, what little mischief Mat did not get up to, Dav did, though Mat usually led the way. "He's out with the men clearing back the Westwood. You'd think we were cutting down his brother every time we cut a tree, but he clears three to anybody else's one with that monstrous axe he had Master Luhhan make. If you want him, I saw Jaim Thane running to tell them you had come in. I'll bet they all come to get a look at you." Peering at the broken-off arrow, he winced and rubbed his own side in sympathy. "Does it hurt much?"

"It hurts enough," Perrin said curtly. Coming to get a look at him. *What am I, a gleeman?* "What about Luc? I don't want to see him, but is he here?"

"I'm afraid not." The second man, Elam Dowtry, rubbed his long nose. Incongruous with his farmer's wool coat and his cowlick, he wore a sword at his belt; the hilt had been freshly wrapped in rawhide and the leather scabbard flaked and peeling. "Lord Luc is off hunting the Horn of Valere, I think. Or maybe Trollocs."

Dav and Elam were Perrin's friends, or had been, companions in hunting and fishing, both his age near enough, but their thrilled grins made them seem younger. Either Mat or Rand could have passed for five years older at least. Maybe he could, too.

"I hope he comes back soon," Elam went on. "He has been showing me how to use a sword. Did you know he's a Hunter for the Horn? And a king, if he had his rights. Of Andor, I hear."

"Andor has queens," Perrin muttered absently, meeting Faile's gaze, "not kings."

"So he is not here," she said. Gaul shifted slightly; he looked ready to go hunting for Luc, his eyes blue ice. It would not have surprised Perrin to see Bain and Chiad veil themselves on the spot.

"No," Verin said vaguely, manifestly more intent on her notes than what she was saying. "Not that he hasn't been a help sometimes, but he does have a way of causing trouble when he is here. Yesterday, before anyone knew what he was doing, he led a delegation out to meet a Whitecloak patrol and told them Emond's Field was closed to them. He apparently told them not to come within ten miles. I cannot approve of Whitecloaks, but I do not suppose they took that very well. Not wise to antagonize them more than is strictly necessary." Frowning at what she had written, she rubbed her nose, seemingly unaware of leaving a smudge of ink.

Perrin did not much care how the Whitecloaks took anything. "Yesterday," he breathed. If Luc had come back to the village yesterday, it was not likely he could have had anything to do with Trollocs being where they were not expected. The more Perrin thought about how that ambush turned around, the more he thought the Trollocs must have been expecting them. And the more he wanted to blame Luc. "Wanting won't make a stone cheese," he muttered. "But he still smells like cheese to me."

Dav and the other two looked at each other doubtfully. Perrin supposed he must not seem to be making much sense.

"It was a bunch of Coplins, mainly," the third fellow said in a startlingly deep voice. "Darl and Hari and Dag and Ewal. And Wit Congar. Daise gave him a fit over it."

"I heard they all liked the Whitecloaks." Perrin thought the bass-voiced fellow seemed familiar. He was younger than Elam and Dav by two or three years yet an inch taller, lean-faced but with wide shoulders.

"They did." The fellow laughed. "You know them. They drift naturally toward anything that makes trouble for somebody else. Since Lord Luc has been talking, they're all for marching up to Watch Hill and telling the Whitecloaks to get out of the Two Rivers. Anyway, they're for somebody else marching up there. I think they mean to be well back in the pack."

If that face had been pudgy, and half a foot or more nearer the ground. . . . “Ewin Finngar!” Perrin exclaimed. It could not be; Ewin was a stout, squeaky little nuisance who tried to crowd in whenever the older fellows got together. This lad would be as big as he was, or bigger, by the time he stopped growing. “Is that you?”

Ewin nodded with a broad grin. “We’ve been hearing all about you, Perrin,” he said in that surprising bass, “fighting Trollocs, and having all kinds of adventures out in the world, so they say. I can still call you Perrin, can’t I?”

“Light, yes!” Perrin barked. He was more than tired of this Goldeneyes business.

“I wish I’d gone with you last year.” Dav rubbed his hands together eagerly. “Coming home with Aes Sedai, and Warders, and an Ogier.” He made them sound like trophies. “All I ever do is herd cows and milk cows, herd cows and milk cows. That and hoe, and chop wood. You’ve had all the luck.”

“What was it like?” Elam put in breathlessly. “Alanna Sedai said you’ve been all the way to the Great Blight, and I hear you’ve seen Caemlyn, and Tear. What’s a city like? Are they really ten times as big as Emond’s Field? Did you see a palace? Are there Darkfriends in the cities? Is the Blight really full of Trollocs and Fades and Warders?”

“Did a Trolloc give you that scar?” Voice like a bull or not, Ewin managed a sort of squeaky excitement. “I wish I had a scar. Did you see a queen? Or a king? I think I’d rather see a queen, but a king would be grand. What is the White Tower like? Is it as big as a palace?”

Faile smiled, amused, but Perrin blinked at the onslaught. Had they forgotten the Trollocs on Winternight, forgotten the Trollocs in the countryside right then? Elam clutched his sword hilt as if he wanted to be off for the Blight on the instant, and Dav was up on his toes, eyes gleaming, and Ewin looked ready to grab Perrin’s collar. Adventure? They were idiots. Yet there were hard times coming, harder than the Two Rivers had seen so far, he was afraid. It could not hurt if they had a little while longer before they learned the truth.

His side hurt, but he tried to answer. They seemed disappointed he had never seen the White Tower, or a king or a queen. He thought Berelain might suffice for a queen, but with Faile there he was not about to mention her. Some other things he shied away from: Falme, and the Eye of the

World, the Forsaken, *Callandor.* Dangerous subjects, those, leading inevitably to the Dragon Reborn. He could tell them a little of Caemlyn, though, and Tear, of the Borderlands and the Blight. It was odd what they accepted and what not. The corrupted landscape of the Blight, seeming to rot while you looked at it, they ate up, and top-knotted Shienaran soldiers, and Ogier *stedding* where Aes Sedai could not wield the Power and Fades were reluctant to enter. But the size of the Stone of Tear, or the immensity of cities. . . .

About his own supposed adventures, he said, “Mainly I’ve just tried to keep from having my head split open. That’s what adventures are, that and finding a place to sleep for the night, and something to eat. You go hungry a lot having adventures, and sleep cold or wet or both.”

They did not like that very much, or appear to believe it any more than they believed that the Stone was as big as a small mountain. He reminded himself that he had known as little of the world before he left the Two Rivers. It did not help much. He had never been this wide-eyed. Had he? The common room seemed to be hot. He would have taken his coat off, but moving seemed too much effort.

“What about Rand and Mat?” Ewin demanded. “If it’s all being hungry and getting rained on, why didn’t they come home, too?”

Tam and Abell had come in, Tam with a sword belted on over his coat and both men with bows—oddly, the sword looked right on Tam, farm coat or no—so he told it much as he had before, Mat gambling and carousing in taverns and chasing girls, and Rand in his fine coat with a pretty, yellow-haired girl on his arm. He made Elayne a lady, expecting they would never believe the Daughter-Heir of Andor, and was proved right when they expressed incredulity. Still, it all seemed satisfactory, the kind of thing they wanted to hear, and disbelief faded a bit when Elam pointed out that Faile was a lady and seemed to be dancing attendance on Perrin pretty sharp. That made Perrin grin; he wondered what they would say if he told them she was cousin to a queen.

Faile no longer appeared to be amused for some reason. She turned on them with a stare to match Elayne’s haughtiest, stiff-backed and frosty-faced. “You have badgered him enough. He is wounded. Off with you, now.”

For a wonder, they bowed clumsily—Dav made an awkward leg, looking a complete fool—and murmured hasty apologies—to her, not him!

—and turned to go. Their departure was delayed by the arrival of Loial, stooping through the doorway with his shaggy hair brushing the transom. They stared at the Ogier almost as if seeing him for the first time—then glanced at Faile and hurried on their way. That cold, lady's stare of hers did work.

When Loial straightened, his head came just short of the ceiling. His capacious coat pockets bore the usual squared bulges of books, but he carried a huge axe. Its haft stood as tall as he did, and its head, shaped like a wood-axe, was at least as big as Perrin's battle-axe. "You are hurt," he boomed as soon as his eyes fell on Perrin. "They told me you had returned, but they did not say you were hurt, or I would have come faster."

The axe gave Perrin a start. Among Ogier, "putting a long handle on your axe" meant being hasty, or angry—Ogier seemed to see the two as much the same thing for some reason. Loial did look angry, tufted ears drawing back, frowning so his dangling eyebrows hung down on his broad cheeks. At having to cut trees, no doubt. Perrin wanted to get him alone and find out if he had seen anything more concerning Alanna's doings. Or Verin's. He rubbed his face and was surprised to find it dry; he felt as if he should be sweating.

"He is also stubborn," Faile said, turning on Perrin with the same commanding look she had used on Dav and Elam and Ewin. "You should be in a bed. Where is Alanna, Verin? If she is to Heal him, where is she?"

"She will come." The Aes Sedai did not look up. She was back into her little book again, frowning thoughtfully, pen poised.

"He should still be in a bed!"

"I will have time for that later," Perrin said firmly. He smiled at her to soften it, but all that did was make her look worried and mutter "stubborn" under her breath. He could not ask Loial about the Aes Sedai in front of Verin, but there was something else at least as important. "Loial, the Waygate is unlocked, and Trollocs coming through. How can that be?"

The Ogier's brows sank even deeper, and his ears wilted. "My fault, Perrin," he rumbled mournfully. "I put both *Avendesora* leaves on the outside. That locked the Waygate on the inside, but from the outside, anyone could still open it. The Ways have been dark for long generations, yet we grew them. I could not bring myself to destroy the Gate. I am sorry, Perrin. It is all my fault."

"I did not believe a Waygate *could* be destroyed," Faile said.

"I did not mean destroy, exactly." Loial leaned on his long-handled axe. "A Waygate was destroyed once, less than five hundred years after the Breaking, according to Damelle, daughter of Ala daughter of Soferra, because the Gate was near a *stedding* that had fallen to the Blight. There are two or three Gates lost in the Blight as it is. But she wrote that it was very difficult, and required thirteen Aes Sedai working together with a *sa'angreal*. Another attempt she wrote of, by only nine, during the Trolloc Wars, damaged the Gate in such a way that the Aes Sedai were pulled into—" He cut off, ears wriggling with embarrassment, and knuckled his wide nose. Everyone was staring at him, even Verin and the Aiel. "I do let myself be carried away, sometimes. The Waygate. Yes. I cannot destroy it, but if I remove both *Avendesora* leaves completely, they will die." He grimaced at the thought. "The only means of opening the Gate again will be for the Elders to bring the Talisman of Growing. Though I suppose an Aes Sedai could cut a hole in it." This time he shuddered. Damaging a Waygate must have seemed like tearing up a book to him. A moment later, he was grim-faced once more. "I will go now."

"No!" Perrin said sharply. The arrowhead seemed to throb, but it did not really hurt anymore. He was talking too much; his throat was dry. "There are Trollocs up there, Loial. They can fit an Ogier into a cookpot as well as a human."

"But, Perrin, I—"

"No, Loial. How are you going to write your book if you go off and get yourself killed?"

Loial's ears twitched. "It is my responsibility, Perrin."

"The responsibility is mine," Perrin said gently. "You told me what you were doing with the Waygate, and I didn't suggest anything different. Besides, the way you jump every time your mother is mentioned, I don't want her coming after me. I will go, as soon as Alanna Heals this arrow out of me." He wiped his forehead, then frowned at his hand. Still no sweat. "Can I have a drink of water?"

Faile was there in an instant, her cool fingers where his hand had been. "He is burning up! Verin, we cannot wait for Alanna. You must—!"

"I am here," the dark Aes Sedai announced, appearing from the door at the back of the common room, Marin al'Vere and Alsbet Luhhan at her heels, and Ihvon right behind them. Perrin felt the tingle of the Power before Alanna's hand replaced Faile's, and she added in a cool, serene voice, “Carry him into the kitchen. The table there is large enough to lay him out. Quickly. There is not much time.”

Perrin’s head spun, and abruptly he realized Loial had leaned his axe beside the door and picked him up, cradling him in his arms. “The Waygate is mine, Loial.” *Light, I’m thirsty.* “My responsibility.”

The arrowhead truly did not seem to hurt as much as it had, but he ached all over. Loial was carrying him somewhere, bending through doorways. There was Mistress Luhhan, biting her lip, eyes squinched as if about to cry. He wondered why. She never cried. Mistress al’Vere looked worried, too.

“Mistress Luhhan,” he murmured, “Mother says I can come be apprenticed to Master Luhhan.” No. That was a long time ago. That was. . . . What was? He could not seem to remember.

He was lying on something hard, listening to Alanna speak. “. . . barbs are caught on bone as well as flesh, and the arrowhead has twisted. I must realign it with the first wound and pull it out. If the shock does not kill him, I can then Heal the damage I have done as well as the rest. There is no other way. He is near the brink now.” Nothing to do with him.

Faile smiled down at him tremulously, her face upside down. Had he really once thought her mouth was too wide? It was just right. He wanted to touch her cheek, but Mistress al’Vere and Mistress Luhhan were holding his wrists for some reason, leaning with all their weight. Someone was lying across his legs, too, and Loial’s big hands swallowed his shoulders, pressing them flat to the table. Table. Yes. The kitchen table.

“Bite down, my heart,” Faile said from far away. “It will hurt.”

He wanted to ask her what would hurt, but she was pressing a leather-wrapped stick into his mouth. He smelled the leather and the spicewood and her. Would she come hunting with him, running across the endless grassy plains after endless herds of deer? Icy cold shivered through him; vaguely he recognized the feel of the One Power. And then there was pain. He heard the stick snap between his teeth before blackness covered everything.

* * *

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CHAPTER 44

The Breaking Storm

Perrin opened his eyes slowly, staring up at the plain white plastered ceiling. It took a moment to realize he was in a four-posted bed, lying on a feather mattress with a blanket over him and a goose-down pillow under his head. A myriad of scents danced in his nose; the feathers and the wool of the blanket, a goose roasting, bread and honeycakes baking. One of the Winespring Inn’s rooms. With unmistakable bright morning light streaming in at the white-curtained windows. Morning. He fumbled at his side. Unbroken skin met his fingers, but he felt weaker than at any time since being shot. A small enough price, though, and a fair enough exchange. His throat felt parched, too.

When he moved, Faile leaped up from a chair beside the small stone fireplace, tossing aside a red blanket and stretching. She had changed to a darker narrow-skirted riding dress, and wrinkles in the gray silk said she had slept in that chair. “Alanna said you needed sleep,” she said. He reached toward the white pitcher on the small table beside the bed, and she hurriedly poured a cup of water and held it for him to drink. “You need to stay right here for another two or three days, until you have your strength back.”

The words sounded normal, except for an undercurrent he barely caught, a tightness at the corners of her eyes. “What is wrong?”

She replaced the cup carefully on the bedside table and smoothed her dress. “Nothing is wrong.” The taut underlying tone was even clearer.

“Faile, don’t lie to me.”

“I do not lie!” she snapped. “I will have some breakfast brought up to you, and you’re lucky I do that, calling me—”

“Faile.” He said her name as sternly as he could, and she hesitated, her most arrogant, chin-up glare changing to forehead-creasing worry and back again. He met her gaze straight on; she was not going to get away with any fine lady's haughty tricks with him.

At last, she sighed. "I suppose you have a right to know. But you are still staying in that bed until Alanna and I say you can get up. Loial and Gaul are gone."

"Gone?" He blinked in confusion. "What do you mean gone? They *left*?"

"In a way. The sentries saw them go, this morning at first light, trotting off into the Westwood together. None of them thought anything of it; certainly none tried to stop them, an Ogier and an Aiel. I heard of it less than an hour ago. They were talking about trees, Perrin. About how the Ogier sing to trees."

"Trees?" Perrin growled. "It's that bloody Waygate! Burn me, I told him not to. . . . They'll get themselves killed before they reach it!"

Throwing off the blanket, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, wobbling to his feet. He had nothing on, he realized, not even his smallclothes. But if they expected to keep him caged under a blanket, they were sadly mistaken. He could see everything folded neatly on the tall-backed chair by the door, with his boots beside it and his axe hanging by its belt from a peg on the wall. Stumbling to his clothes, he began dressing as quickly as he could.

"What are you doing?" Faile demanded. "You put yourself back in that bed!" One fist on her hip, she pointed commandingly, as if her finger could transport him there.

"They can't have gotten that far," he told her. "Not afoot. Gaul won't ride, and Loial always did claim he trusted his own feet more than any horse. I can catch them up on Stepper by midday latest." Pulling his shirt over his head, he left it hanging loose over his breeches and sat down—dropped, actually—to draw on his boots.

"You are mad, Perrin Aybara! What chance you can even find them in that forest?"

"I am not so bad at tracking, myself. I can find them." He smiled at her, but she was not having any.

"You can get yourself killed, you hairy fool! Look at you. You can hardly stand. You would fall out of the saddle before you had gone a mile!"

Hiding the effort involved, he stood and stamped his feet to settle them in his boots. Stepper would do all the work; he only needed to hold on.

“Nonsense. I’m strong as a horse. Stop trying to bully me.” Shrugging into his coat, he snatched up his axe and belt. Faile caught his arm as he opened the door, and was pulled along, vainly trying to haul him back.

“Sometimes you have the brains of a horse,” she panted. “Less! Perrin, you must listen to me. You must—”

The room lay only a few steps along the narrow hallway from the stairs leading down to the empty common room, and it was the stairs that betrayed him. When his knee bent to lower him that first step, it kept right on bending; he toppled forward, vainly trying to catch the banister, pulling a yelling Faile with him. Rolling over and over, they thumped down the stairs to come up with a final thud against the barrel at the bottom, Faile lying stretched full-length atop him. The barrel teetered and spun, rattling the swords inside, before settling with a final clank.

It took a moment for Perrin to gather enough breath to speak. “Are you all right?” he said anxiously. She was sprawled limply on his chest. He shook her gently. “Faile, are you—?”

Slowly she raised her head and brushed a few short strands of dark hair from her face, then stared at him intently. “Are *you* all right? Because if you are, I may very well do something violent to you.”

Perrin snorted; she was probably hurt less than he. Gingerly, he felt at where the arrow had been, but that was in no worse shape than the rest of him. Of course, the rest of him seemed bruised from head to toe. “Get off of me, Faile. I need to fetch Stepper.”

Instead, she seized his collar with both hands and leaned very close, until their noses almost touched. “Listen to me, Perrin,” she said urgently. “You—can—not—do—everything. If Loial and Gaul have gone to lock the Waygate, you must let them. Your place is here. Even if you were strong enough—and you are not! Do you hear me? You are not strong enough!—but even if you were, you must not go after them. You cannot do everything!”

“Why, whatever are you two doing?” Marin al’Vere said. Wiping her hands on her long white apron, she came from the back door of the common room. Her eyebrows looked to be trying to climb into her hair. “I expected Trollocs after all that racket, but not this.” She sounded half scandalized, and half amused.

What they looked like, Perrin realized, with Faile lying on him that way, their heads close together, was a couple playing kissing games. On the floor of the common room.

Faile’s cheeks reddened and she got up very quickly, dusting her dress. “He is as stubborn as a Trolloc, Mistress al’Vere. I told him he was too weak to rise. He must go back to his bed immediately. He has to learn he cannot do everything himself, especially when he cannot even walk down a flight of steps.”

“Oh, my dear,” Mistress al’Vere said, shaking her head, “that is quite the wrong way.” Leaning close to the younger woman, she whispered softly, but Perrin heard every word. “He was an easy little boy to manage most of the time, if you handled him properly, but when you tried to push him, he was as muley as any in the Two Rivers. Men don’t really change that much, only grow taller. If you go telling him what he *must* and *musn’t* do, he will surely lay his ears back and dig his heels in. Let me show you.” Marin turned a beaming smile on him, ignoring his glare. “Perrin, don’t you think one of my good goose-feather mattresses is better than that floor? I’ll bring you some of my kidney pie just as soon as we have you tucked in. You must be hungry, after no supper last night. Here. Why don’t let me help you up?”

Pushing their hands away, he stood on his own. Well, with the aid of the wall. He thought he might have sprained half the muscles in his body. Muley? He had never been muley in his life. “Mistress al’Vere, would you have Hu or Tad saddle Stepper?”

“When you’re better,” she said, trying to turn him toward the stairs. “Don’t you think you could do with just a little more rest?” Faile took his other arm.

“Trollocs!” The cry from outside came muffled through the walls, echoed by a dozen voices. “Trollocs! Trollocs!”

“That needn’t concern you today,” Mistress al’Vere said, firm and soothing at the same time. It made him want to grit his teeth. “The Aes Sedai will handle things nicely. In a day or two we’ll have you back on your feet. You will see.”

“My horse,” he said, trying to pull free. They had good holds on his coatsleeves; all he accomplished was swinging them back and forth. “For the love of the Light, will you stop tugging at me and let me get my horse? Let go of me.”

Looking at his face, Faile sighed and released his arm. “Mistress al’Vere, will you have his horse saddled and brought around?”

“But my dear, he really needs—”

"If you please, Mistress al'Vere," Faile said firmly. "And my horse, too." The two women looked at each other as if he did not exist. At last Mistress al'Vere nodded.

Perrin frowned at her back as she hurried across the common room and vanished toward the kitchen, and the stable. What had Faile said different from what he had? Turning his attention to her, he said, "Why did you change your mind?"

Tucking his shirt in for him, she muttered under her breath. Doubtless he was not supposed to hear well enough to understand. "I musn't say must, must I? When he is too stubborn to see straight, I must lead him with honey and smiles, must I?" She shot him a glare that surely had no honey in it, then abruptly changed to a smile so sweet he very nearly backed away. "My dear heart," she almost cooed, pulling his coat straight, "whatever is happening out there, I do hope you will stay in your saddle, and as far from Trollocs as you can. You really are not up to facing a Trolloc just yet, are you? Maybe tomorrow. Please remember you are a general, a leader, and every bit as much a symbol to your people as that banner out there. If you are up where people can see you, it will lift everyone's heart. And it is much easier to see what needs doing and give orders if you aren't in the fighting yourself." Picking his belt off the floor, she buckled it around his waist, settling the axe carefully on his hip. She also batted her eyes at him! "Please say you will do that. Please?"

She was right. He would not last two minutes against a Trolloc. More like two seconds against a Fade. And much as he hated to admit it, he would not last two miles in the saddle chasing after Loial and Gaul. *Fool Ogier. You're a writer, not a hero.* "All right," he said. A mischievous impulse seized him. The way she and Mistress al'Vere had been talking over his head, and batting her eyes as if he were a fool. "I can't refuse you anything when you smile so prettily."

"I *am* glad." Still smiling, she brushed at his coat, picking lint he could not see. "Because if you don't, and you manage to survive, I'll do to you what you did to me that first day in the Ways. I don't think you are strong enough yet to stop me." That smile beamed up into his face, all springtime and sweetness. "Do you understand me?"

He chuckled in spite of himself. "Sounds as if I had better let them kill me." She did not seem to think that was funny.

Hu and Tad, the lanky stablemen, led Stepper and Swallow around soon after they stepped outside. Everyone else seemed to be gathered at the far end of the village, beyond the Green, with its sheep and cows and geese, and that crimson-and-white wolfhead banner rippling on the morning breeze. As soon as he and Faile were up on their horses, the stablemen took off running that way, too, without a word.

Whatever was going on, it was clearly not an attack. He could see women and children in the crowd, and the shouts of “Trolloc” had died down to a murmur like an echo of the geese. He rode slowly, not wanting to waver in his saddle; Faile kept Swallow close, watching him. If she could change her mind once for no reason, she could again, and he did not want any arguments about whether he should be there.

The babbling crowd did appear to contain everyone in Emond’s Field, villagers and farmers alike, all jammed shoulder to shoulder, but they made way for him and Faile when they saw who he was. His name entered the murmurs, usually tagged with Goldeneyes. He picked up the word “Trollocs,” too, but in tones more wondering than frightened. From Stepper’s back he had a good view over their heads.

The knotted mass of people stretched all the way beyond the last houses to the hedge of sharpened stakes. The edge of the forest, nearly six hundred paces off across a field of stumps nearly level with the ground, was quiet and empty of men with axes. Those men made a sweaty, bare-chested ring in the crowd surrounding Alanna and Verin and two men. Jon Thane, the miller, was wiping a smear of blood from his ribs, lantern jaw on his chest so he could stare at what his hands were doing. Alanna straightened from the other man, a grizzle-haired fellow Perrin did not know, who leaped to his feet and danced a step as if not quite believing he could. He and the miller both looked at the Aes Sedai with awe.

The tangle around the Aes Sedai was too tight for anyone to shift aside for Stepper and Swallow, but there were smaller clear pockets around Ihvon and Tomas, off to either side on their warhorses. Folk did not want to come too near those fierce-eyed animals, both looking as though they only wanted an opportunity to bite or trample.

Perrin managed to reach Tomas without too much trouble. “What happened?”

“A Trolloc. Only one.” Despite the graying Warder’s conversational tone, his dark eyes did not rest on Perrin and Faile, but kept an almost equal watch on Verin and on the treeline. “They usually are not very smart, alone. Sly, but not smart. The timbering party drove it away before it did more than draw some blood.”

From out of the trees the two Aiel women appeared, running, heads *shoufa*-wrapped and veiled so he could not tell which was which. They slowed to snake between the sharp-pointed stakes, then slipped deftly through the crowd, people moving out of their way as much as possible in that press. By the time they reached Faile, they had unveiled, and she leaned down to listen.

“Perhaps five hundred Trollocs,” Bain told her, “probably no more than a mile or two behind us.” Her voice was level, but her dark blue eyes sparkled with eagerness. So did Chiad’s gray.

“As I expected,” Tomas said calmly. “That one likely wandered off from the larger body hoping to find a meal. The rest will be coming soon, I think.” The Maidens nodded.

Perrin gestured in consternation at the jam of people. “They shouldn’t be out here, then. Why haven’t you cleared them away?”

It was Ihvon, bringing his gray into the gathering, who answered. “Your people do not seem to want to listen to outsiders, not when they can watch Aes Sedai. I would suggest you see what you can do.”

Perrin was sure they could have imposed some sort of order had they really tried. Verin and Alanna surely could have. *So why did they wait and leave it to me, if they expected Trollocs?* It would have been easy to put it down to *ta’veren*—easy, and foolish. Ihvon and Tomas were not going to let Trollocs kill them—or Verin, or Alanna—while waiting for a *ta’veren* to tell them what to do. The Aes Sedai were maneuvering him, risking everyone, maybe even themselves. But to what possible end? He met Faile’s eyes, and she nodded slightly, as if she knew what he was thinking.

He had no time to try figuring it out now. Scanning the crowd, he spotted Bran al’Vere, putting his head together with Tam al’Thor and Abell Cauthon. The Mayor had a long spear on his shoulder and a dented old round steel cap on his head. A leather jerkin sewn all over with steel discs strained around his bulk.

All three men looked up when Perrin pushed Stepper through the crowd to them. “Bain says Trollocs are heading this way, and the Warders think we may be attacked soon.” He had to shout because of the incessant drone of voices. Some of the nearer folk heard and fell silent; quiet spread on ripples of “Trolloc” and “attack.”

Bran blinked. “Yes. It had to come, didn’t it? Yes, well, we know what to do.” He should have looked comic, with his jerkin ready to pop its seams and his steel cap wobbling when he nodded, but he only looked determined. Raising his voice, he announced, “Perrin says the Trollocs will be here soon. You all know your places. Hurry, now. Hurry.”

The crowd stirred and flowed, women herding children back toward the houses, men milling every which way. Confusion seemed to grow more rather than less.

“I’ll see to getting the shepherds in,” Abell told Perrin, and dove into the throng.

Cenn Buie pushed past in the moil, using a halberd to herd sour-faced Hari Coplin and Hari’s brother Darl and old Bili Congar, who staggered as if already full of ale this morning, which he probably was. Of the three, Bili carried his spear most as if he meant to use it. Cenn touched his forehead to Perrin in a sort of salute. A number of the men did. It made him uncomfortable. Dannil and the other lads were one thing, but these men were half again his age and more.

“You are doing fine,” Faile said.

“I wish I knew what Verin and Alanna were up to,” he muttered. “And I don’t mean right now.” Two of the catapults the Warders had had built stood at this end of the village, squarish things taller than a man, all heavy timbers and thick, twisted ropes. From their horses, Ihvon and Tomas were overseeing the stout wooden beams being winched down. The two Aes Sedai were more interested in the big fieldstones, fifteen or twenty pounds each, being loaded in cups on the end of those arms.

“They mean you to be a leader,” Faile replied quietly. “It is what you were born for, I think.”

Perrin snorted. He had been born to be a blacksmith. “I’d be a lot more comfortable if I knew why they wanted it.” The Aes Sedai were looking at him, Verin with head tilted, birdlike, Alanna with a franker stare and a small smile. Did they both want the same thing, and for the same reason? That was one of the troubles with Aes Sedai. There were always more questions than answers.

Order asserted itself with surprising quickness. Along this west end of the village a hundred men knelt on one knee right behind the bristle of stakes, uneasily fingering spears or halberds or some polearm made from a bush hook or scythe. Here and there one wore a helmet or some bit of armor. To their rear, twice as many formed two lines holding good Two Rivers longbows, each with a pair of quivers at his belt. Young boys came running from the houses with bundles of more arrows that the men drove point-down in the ground in front of their feet. Tam seemed to be in charge, dressing the ranks and speaking a few words to each man, but Bran marched along with him, offering his own encouragement. Perrin could not see that they needed him at all.

To his surprise, Dannil and Ban and all the other lads who had ridden with him came trotting out of the village to surround him and Faile, all with their bows. They looked odd, in a way. The Aes Sedai had apparently Healed the more seriously injured, leaving those less hurt for Daise's poultices and ointments, so fellows who had been barely clinging to a saddle yesterday walked along spritely now, while Dannil and Tell and others still limped or wore bandages. If he was surprised to see them, he was disgusted by what they brought. Leof Torfinn, the dressing wrapped around his head making a pale cap above his deep-set eyes, had his bow slung on his back and carried a tall staff with a smaller version of the red-bordered banner with its wolfhead.

"I think one of the Aes Sedai had it made," Leof said when Perrin asked where it came from. "Milli Ayellin brought it to Will's da, but Wil didn't want to carry it." Wil al'Seen hunched his shoulders a bit.

"I wouldn't want to carry it, either," Perrin said dryly. They all laughed as if he had made a joke, even Wil, after a minute.

The hedge of stakes looked fierce enough, but on the other hand, it seemed a pitiful thing to keep Trollocs out. Maybe it would, but he did not want Faile there if they made it through. When he looked at her, though, she had that look in her eyes again as if she knew what he was thinking. And did not like it. If he tried to send her back, she would argue and balk, refusing to see sense. Weak as he felt right then, she probably had a better chance of leading him back to the inn than he her. The way she was sitting her saddle so ferociously, *she* likely intended to defend *him*, if the Trollocs broke through. He would just have to keep a close eye on her; that was all there was to it.

Suddenly she smiled, and he scratched his beard. Maybe she *could* read his mind.

Time passed, the sun inching up, the day’s warmth building. Now and then a woman called from the houses to ask what was happening. Here and there men sat down, but Tam or Bran was on them before they had their legs folded, chivying them back into line. No more than a mile or two, Bain had said. She and Chiad were sitting near the stakes, playing some game that apparently involved flipping a knife into the foot of ground between them. Surely if the Trollocs were coming, they would have come by now. He was beginning to find it hard to sit up straight. Conscious of Faile’s watchful eyes, he kept his back stiff.

A horn blared, brazen and shrill.

“Trollocs!” half a dozen voices shouted, and bestial, blackmailed shapes flooded out of the Westwood, howling as they ran across the stumpy ground, waving scythe-curved swords and spiked axes, spears and tridents. Three Myrddraal rode behind them on black horses, darting back and forth as though driving the Trolloc charge before them. Their dead black cloaks hung motionless no matter how their mounts dashed or whirled. The horn sounded continuously in sharp, urging cries.

Twenty arrows leaped out as soon as the first Trolloc appeared, the strongest shot falling nearly a hundred paces short.

“Hold, you lack-witted sheep-brains!” Tam shouted. Bran jumped and gave him a startled look, no less incredulous than those coming from Tam’s friends and neighbors; some muttered about not standing still for that kind of talk, Trollocs or no Trollocs. Tam rode right over their protests, though. “You hold till I give the word, the way I showed you!” Then, as if hundreds of shrieking Trollocs were not galloping toward him, Tam turned calmly to Perrin. “At three hundred paces?”

Perrin nodded quickly. The man was asking him? Three hundred paces. How quickly could a Trolloc cover three hundred paces? He eased his axe in its loop. That horn wailed and wailed. The spearmen crouched behind the stakes as if forcing themselves not to edge back. The Aiel had veiled their faces.

Onward the screaming tide came, all horned heads and faces with snouts or beaks, each half again as tall as a man, each shrieking for blood. Five hundred paces. Four hundred. Some were stretching out in front. They ran as fast as horses. Had the Aiel been right? Could there be only five hundred? It looked like thousands.

“Ready!” Tam called, and two hundred bows were raised. The young men with Perrin hurriedly formed up in front of him in imitation of their elders, ranking themselves with that fool banner.

Three hundred paces. Perrin could see those misshapen faces, contorted with rage and frenzy, as clearly as if they were right on top of him.

“Loose!” Tam shouted. Bowstrings slapped like one huge whip-crack. With twin crashes of beam against leather-padded beam, the catapults fired.

Broadhead arrows rained down into the Trollocs. Monstrous shapes fell, but some rose and staggered on, harried by the Fades. That horn wove into their guttural bellowing, sounding forward for the kill. The catapults’ stones fell among them—and exploded in fire and shards, ripping open holes in the mass. Perrin was not the only one to jump; so that was what the Aes Sedai had been doing with the catapults. He wondered wildly what would happen if they dropped one of those stones loading it into the cup.

Another flight of arrows leaped out, and another, another, and again and again, and more stones from the catapults, if at a slower pace. Fiery explosions tore at the Trollocs. Broadhead points hailed down on them. And they came on, shrieking, howling, falling and dying, but always running forward. They were close now, close enough that the bowmen spread out, no longer firing in flights but choosing their targets. Men screamed their own rage, screamed in the face of death as they shot.

And then there were no more Trollocs standing. Only one Fade, bristling with arrows yet still staggering blindly. The shrill shrieks of a Myrddraal’s thrashing horse competed with the moaning bellows of downed and dying Trollocs. The horn had fallen silent at last. Here and there across the stump-filled field, a Trolloc heaved and fell back. Under it all, Perrin could hear men panting as if they had run ten miles. His own heart seemed to be pounding out of his chest.

Suddenly someone raised a loud huzzah, and with that men began capering and shouting euphorically, waving bows or whatever they had over their heads, tossing caps in the air. Women rushed out from the houses, laughing and cheering, and children, all celebrating and dancing with the men. Some came running to grab Perrin’s hand and shake it.

“You’ve led us to a great victory, my boy.” Bran laughed up at him. He had his steel cap perched on the back of his head. “I suppose I shouldn’t call you that, now. A great victory, Perrin.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he protested. “I just sat on my horse. You did it.” Bran listened no more than any of the others. Embarrassed, Perrin sat up straight, pretending to survey the field, and after a while they left him alone.

Tam had not joined in the celebrating; he stood close behind the stakes, studying the Trollocs. The Warders were not laughing, either. Black-mailed shapes littered the field among the low stumps. There could be five hundred of them. Maybe less. Some, a few, might have made it back to the trees. None lay closer than fifty paces from the pointed hedge. Perrin found the other two Fades, writhing on the ground. That accounted for all three. They would admit they were dead eventually.

The Two Rivers folk raised a thunderous cheer, for him. “Perrin Goldeneyes! Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!”

“They had to know,” he muttered. Faile looked at him questioningly. “The Halfmen had to know this wouldn’t work. Look out there. Even I can see it, now; they must have from the start. If this was all they had, why did they try? And if there are more Trollocs out there, why didn’t they all come? Twice as many, and we’d have had to fight them at the stakes. Twice that, and they might have broken through to the village.”

“You’ve a good natural eye,” Tomas said, reining in beside them. “This was a test. To see if you would break at the sight of a charge, perhaps to see how quickly you could react, or how your defenses are organized, or maybe something I’ve not thought of, but still a test. Now they see.” He pointed to the sky, where a lone raven winged over the field. A natural raven would have lighted to feast among the dead. The bird completed a last circle and peeled off toward the forest. “The next attack will not come right away. I saw two or three Trollocs reach the forest, so word of this will spread. The Halfmen will have to make them remember they’re more afraid of Myrddraal than of dying. That attack will come, however, and it will certainly be stronger than this. How strong depends on how many the Faceless have brought through the Ways.”

Perrin grimaced. “Light! What if there are ten thousand of them?”

“Not likely,” Verin said, walking up to pat Tomas’s mount on the neck. The warhorse allowed her touch as meekly as a pony. “At least, not yet. Not even a Forsaken could move a large party through the Ways safely, I think. One man alone risks death or madness between the Closest Waygates, but . . . say . . . a thousand men, or a thousand Trollocs, would very likely draw *Machin Shin* within minutes, a monstrous wasp to a bowl of honey. It is much more probable that they travel no more than ten or twenty together, fifty at most, and the groups spaced out. Of course, the questions remain of how many groups they are bringing, and how much time they allow to elapse between. And they would lose some anyway. It might be that Shadowspawn attract *Machin Shin* less than humankind, but. . . . Hmmm. Fascinating thought. I wonder. . . ." Patting Tomas on the leg much in the manner she had patted his horse, she turned away, already lost in study. The Warder heeled his horse after her.

"If you ride even one step near the Westwood," Faile said calmly, "I will haul you back to the inn by your ear and stuff you into that bed myself."

"I wasn't thinking of it," Perrin lied, turning Stepper so his back was to the woods. One man and an Ogier might escape notice, make it to the mountains safely. They might. The Waygate had to be locked permanently if Emond's Field was to have any chance. "You talked me out of it, remember?" Another man might find them, knowing they were there. Three sets of eyes could keep sharper watch than two, especially when one set was his, and he was certainly not doing anything here. His clothes stuffed with straw and set on Stepper could do as much.

Suddenly, above the shouting and carrying on around him, he heard sharper shouts, a clamor from the south, near the Old Road.

"He said they wouldn't come again soon!" he growled, and dug his heels into Stepper's flanks.

* * *

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CHAPTER 45

The Tinker’s Sword

Galloping through the village with Faile at his heels, Perrin found the men on the south side in a cluster, peering out over the cleared fields and muttering, some with bows half-drawn. Two wagons blocked the gap the Old Road made in the sharp stakes. The nearest low stone fence still standing, bordering a field of tabac, lay five hundred paces off, with nothing between taller than barley stubble; the ground short of it sprouted arrows like weeds. Smoke curled up in the far distance, a dozen or more thick black plumes, some wide enough to be fields burning.

Cenn Buie was there, and Hari and Darl Coplin. Bili Congar had an arm around the shoulders of his cousin Wit, Daise’s bony husband, who looked as if he wished Bili would not breathe on him. None smelled of fear, only excitement. And Bili of ale. At least ten men at once tried to tell him what had happened; some were louder than others.

“The Trollocs tried us here, as well,” Hari Coplin shouted, “but we showed them, didn’t we?” There were murmurs of agreement, but just as many or more eyed each other doubtfully and shifted their feet.

“We’ve some heroes here, too,” Darl said in a loud, rough voice. “Your lot up at the wood aren’t the only ones.” A bigger man than his brother, he had that same weasel-narrow Coplin face, the same tight mouth as if he had just bitten a green persimmon. When he thought Perrin was not looking, he shot him a spiteful look. It did not necessarily mean he really wished he had been up facing the Westwood; Darl and Hari and most of their relatives usually found a way to see themselves being cheated, whatever the situation.

“This calls for a drink!” old Bili announced, then scowled in disappointment when no one echoed him.

A head lifted above the distant wall and hurriedly ducked back down, but not before Perrin saw a brilliant yellow coat. “Not Trollocs,” he growled disgustedly. “Tinkers! You were shooting at Tuatha’an. Get those wagons out of the way.” Standing in his stirrups, he cupped hands to his mouth. “You can come on!” he shouted. “It is all right! No one will hurt you! I said move those wagons,” he snapped at the men standing around staring at him. Taking Tinkers for Trollocs! “And go fetch your arrows; you’ll have real need for them sooner or later.” Slowly some moved to obey, and he shouted again, “No one will harm you! It is all right! Come on!” The wagons rolled to either side with the creak of axles that needed grease.

A few brightly garbed Tuatha’an climbed over the fence, then a few more, and started toward the village in a hesitant, footsore half-run, seeming almost as afraid of what lay ahead as whatever lay behind. They huddled together at the sight of men dashing out from the village, balancing on the edge of turning back even when the Two Rivers folk trotted by, looking at them curiously, to begin pulling arrows out of the dirt. Yet they did stumble on.

Perrin’s insides turned to ice. Twenty men and women, perhaps, some carrying small children, and a handful of older children running, too, their dazzling colors all torn and stained with dirt. And some with blood, he saw as they came closer. That was all. Out of how many in the caravan? There was Raen, at least, shuffling as though half-dazed and being guided by Ila, one side of her face a dark, swollen bruise. At least they had survived.

Short of the opening, the Tuatha’an stopped, staring uncertainly at the sharp stakes and the mass of armed men. Some of the children clutched their elders and hid their faces. They smelled of fear, of terror. Faile jumped down and ran to them, but though Ila hugged her, she did not take another step nearer. The older woman seemed to be drawing comfort from the younger.

“We won’t hurt you,” Perrin said. *I should have made them come. The Light burn me, I should have made them!* “You are welcome to our fires.”

“Tinkers.” Hari’s mouth twisted scornfully. “What do we want with a bunch of thieving Tinkers? Take everything that isn’t nailed down.”

Darl open his mouth, to support Hari no doubt, but before he could speak someone in the crowd shouted, “So do you, Hari! And you’ll take the nails, too!” Sparse laughter snapped Darl’s jaws shut. Not many laughed, though, and those that did eyed the bedraggled Tuatha’an and looked down in discomfort.

"Hari is right!" Daise Congar called, bulling through, pushing men out of her path. "Tinkers steal, and not just things! They steal children!" Shoving her way to Cenn Buie, she shook a finger as thick as Cenn's thumb under his nose. He backed away as much as he could in the press; she overtopped him by a head and outweighed him by half. "You are supposed to be on the Village Council, but if you don't want to listen to the Wisdom, I'll bring the Women's Circle into this, and we will take care of it." Some of the men nodded, muttering.

Cenn scratched his thinning hair, eyeing the Wisdom sideways. "Aaah . . . well . . . Perrin," he said slowly in that scratchy voice, "the Tinkers do have a reputation, you know, and—" He cut off, jumping back as Perrin whirled Stepper to face the Two Rivers folk.

A good many scattered before the dun, but Perrin did not care. "We'll not turn anyone away," he said in a tight voice. "No one! Or do you mean to send children off for the Trollocs?" One of the Tuatha'an children began to cry, a sharp wailing, and he wished he had not said that, but Cenn's face went red as a beet, and even Daise looked abashed.

"Of course we'll take them in," the thatcher said gruffly. He rounded on Daise, all puffed up like a banty rooster ready to fight a mastiff. "And if you want to bring the Women's Circle into it, the Village Council will sit the whole lot of you down sharp! You see if we don't!"

"You always were an old fool, Cenn Buie," Daise snorted. "Do you think we'd let you send children back out there for Trollocs?" Cenn's jaw worked furiously, but before he could get a word out Daise put a hand on his narrow chest and thrust him aside. Donning a smile, she strode out to the Tuatha'an and put a comforting arm around Ila. "You just come along with me, and I'll see you all get hot baths and somewhere to rest. Every house is crowded, but we'll find places for everyone. Come."

Marin al'Vere came hurrying through the crowd, and Alsbet Luhhan, Natti Cauthon and Neysa Ayellin and more women, taking up children or putting arms around Tuatha'an women, urging them along, scolding the Two Rivers men to make way. Not that anybody was balking, now; it just took a little time for so many to jostle back and open a path.

Faile gave Perrin an admiring look, but he shook his head. This was not *ta'veren* work; Two Rivers people might need the right way pointed out to them sometimes, but they could see it when it was. Even Hari Coplin, watching the Tinkers brought in, did not look as sour as he had. Well, not quite as sour. There was no use expecting miracles.

Shambling by, Raen looked up at Perrin dully. “The Way of the Leaf *is* the right way. All things die in their appointed time, and. . . .” He trailed off as if he could not remember what he had been going to say.

“They came last night,” Ila said, mumbling because of her swollen face. Her eyes were almost as glazed as her husband’s. “The dogs might have helped us escape, but the Children killed all the dogs, and. . . . There was nothing we could do.” Behind her, Aram shivered in his yellow-striped coat, staring at all the armed men. Most of the Tinker children were crying now.

Perrin frowned at the smoke rising to the south. Twisting in his saddle, he could make out more to the north and east. Even if most of those represented houses already abandoned, the Trollocs had had a busy night. How many would it take to fire that many farms, even running between and taking no more time than needed to toss a torch into an empty house or unwatched field? Maybe as many as they had killed today. What did that say about Trolloc numbers already in the Two Rivers? It did not seem possible one band had done it all, burning all those houses and destroying the Traveling People’s caravan, too.

Eyes falling on the Tuatha’an being led away, he felt a stab of embarrassment. They had seen kith and kin killed last night, and here he was coldly considering numbers. He could hear some of the Two Rivers men muttering, trying to decide which smoke represented whose farm. To all of these people those fires meant real losses, lives to be rebuilt if they could, not just numbers. He was useless here. Now, while Faile was caught up in helping see to the Tinkers, was the time for him to be off after Loial and Gaul.

Master Luhhan, in his blacksmith’s vest and long leather apron, caught Stepper’s bridle. “Perrin, you have to help me. The Warders want me to make parts for more of those catapults, but I’ve twenty men clamoring for me to repair bits of armor their grandfathers’ fool grandfathers bought from some fool merchants’ guards.”

“I would like to give you a hand,” Perrin said, “but I have something else that needs doing. I’d likely be rusty, anyway. I haven’t had much work at a forge the last year.”

"Light, I didn't mean that. Not for you to work a hammer." The blacksmith sounded shocked. "Every time I send one of those goose-brains off with a bee in his ear, he's back ten minutes later with a new argument. I cannot get any work done. They'll listen to you."

Perrin doubted it, not if they would not listen to Master Luhhan. Aside from being on the Village Council, Haral Luhhan was big enough to pick up nearly any man in the Two Rivers and toss him out bodily if need be. But he went along to the makeshift forge Master Luhhan had set up beneath a hastily built, open-sided shed near the Green. Six men clustered around the anvils salvaged from the smithy the Whitecloaks had burned, and another idly pumping the big leather bellows until the blacksmith chased him away from the long handles with a shout. To Perrin's surprise they did listen when he told them to go, with no speech to bend them 'round a *ta'veren*'s will, just a plain statement that Master Luhhan was busy. Surely the blacksmith could have done as much himself, but he shook Perrin's hand and thanked him profusely before setting to work.

Bending down from Stepper's saddle, Perrin caught one of the men by the shoulder, a bald-headed farmer named Get Eldin, and asked him to stay and warn off anyone else who tried to bother Master Luhhan. Get must have been three times his age, but the leathery, wrinkle-faced man just nodded and took up a station near where Haral had his hammer ringing on hot iron. Now he could be off, before Faile turned up.

Before he could as much as turn Stepper, Bran appeared, spear on his shoulder and steel cap under one stout arm. "Perrin, there has to be a faster way to bring the shepherds and herdsmen in if we're attacked again. Even sending the fastest runners in the village, Abell couldn't get half of them back here before those Trollocs came out of the wood."

That was easy to solve, a matter of remembering an old bugle, tarnished nearly black, that Cenn Buie had hanging on his wall, and settling on a signal of three long blasts that the farthest shepherd could hear. It did bring up signals for other things, of course, such as sending everyone to their places if an attack was expected. Which led to how to know when an attack was expected. Bain and Chiad and the Warders turned out to be more than amenable to scouting, but four were hardly enough, so good woodsmen and trackers had to be found, and provided with horses so they could reach Emond's Field ahead of any Trollocs they spotted.

After that, Buel Dowtry had to be settled down. The white-haired old fletcher, with a nose nearly as sharp as a broadhead point, knew very well that most farmers usually made their own arrows, but he was adamantly opposed to anyone helping him here in the village, as if he could keep every quiver filled by himself. Perrin was not sure how he smoothed Buel's ruffled temper, but somehow he left the man happily teaching a knot of boys to tie and glue goose-feather fletchings.

Eward Candwin, the stout cooper, had a different problem. With so many folks needing water, he had more buckets and barrels to make than he could hoop in weeks, alone. It did not take long to find him hands he trusted to chamfer staves at least, but more people came with questions and problems they seemed to think only Perrin had the answers for, from where to burn the bodies of the dead Trollocs to whether it was safe to return to their farms to save what they could. That last he answered with a firm no whenever it was asked—and it was asked more often than any other, by men and women frowning at the smoke rising in the countryside—but most of the time he simply inquired what the questioner thought was a good solution and told him to do that. It was seldom he really had to come up with an answer; people knew what to do, they just had this fool notion they had to ask him.

Dannil and Ban and the others found him and insisted on riding about at his heels with that banner, as if the big one over the Green was not bad enough, until he sent them off to guard the men who had gone back to felling trees along the Westwood. It seemed that Tam had told them some tale about something called the Companions, in Illian, soldiers who rode with the general of an Illianer army and were thrown in wherever the battle was hottest. Tam, of all people! At least they took the banner with them. Perrin felt a right fool with that thing trailing after him.

In the middle of the morning, Luc rode in, all golden-haired arrogance, nodding slightly to acknowledge a few cheers, though why anyone wanted to cheer him seemed a mystery. He brought a trophy that he pulled out of a leather bag and had set on a spear at the edge of the Green for everyone to gawk at. A Myrddraal's eyeless head. The fellow was modest enough, in a condescending sort of way, but he did let slip that he had killed the Fade when he ran into a band of Trollocs. An admiring train took him around to see the scene of the battle here—they were calling it that—where horses were dragging Trollocs off to great pyres already sending up pillars of oily black smoke. Luc was properly admiring in turn, making only one or two criticisms of how Perrin had disposed his men; that was how the Two Rivers folk told it, with Perrin lining everybody up and giving orders he certainly never had.

To Perrin, Luc gave a patronizing smile of approval. “You did very well, my boy. You were lucky, of course, but there is such a thing as the luck of the beginner, is there not.”

When he went off to his room in the Winespring Inn, Perrin had the head taken down and buried. Not a thing people should be staring at, especially the children.

The questions continued as the day wore on, until he suddenly realized the sun stood straight overhead, he had had nothing to eat, and his stomach was talking to him in no uncertain terms. “Mistress al’Caar,” he said wearily to the long-faced woman at his stirrup, “I suppose the children can play anywhere, so long as somebody watches to make sure they don’t go beyond the last houses. Light, woman, you know that. You certainly know children better than I do! If you don’t, how have you managed to raise four of your own?” Her youngest was six years older than he was!

Nela al’Caar frowned and tossed her head, gray-streaked braid swinging. For a moment he thought she was going to snap his nose off, talking that way to her. He almost wished she would, for a change from everybody wanting to know what he thought should be done. “Of course I know children,” she said. “I just want to make sure it’s done the way you want. That’s what we’ll do, then.”

Sighing, he only waited for her to turn away before reining Stepper around toward the Winespring Inn. Two or three voices called to him, but he refused to listen. What he wanted done. What was wrong with these people? Two Rivers folk did not follow this way. Certainly not Emond’s Fielders. They wanted a say in everything. Arguments in front of the Village Council, arguments among the Council, had to come to blows before they occasioned comment. And if the Women’s Circle thought they kept their own affairs more circumspect, there was not a man who did not know the meaning of tight-jawed women stalking about with their braids all but bristling like angry cats’ tails.

What I want? he thought angrily. *What I want is something to eat, someplace where no one is jabbering in my ear.* Stepping down in front of the inn, he staggered, and thought he could add a bed to that short list. Only midday, with Stepper doing all the work, and he already felt bone-weary. Maybe Faile had been right after all. Maybe going after Loial and Gaul really was a bad idea.

When he walked into the common room, Mistress al'Vere took one look at him and all but pushed him into a chair with a motherly smile. "You can just give over handing out orders for a while," she told him firmly. "Emond's Field can very well survive an hour by itself while you put some food inside you." She bustled away before he could say Emond's Field could very well survive by itself without him at all.

The room was almost empty. Natti Cauthon sat at one table, rolling bandages and adding them to the pile in front of her, but she also managed to keep an eye on her daughters, across the room, though both were old enough to be wearing their hair in a braid. The reason was plain enough. Bode and Eldrin sat on either side of Aram, coaxing the Tinker to eat. Feeding him, actually, and wiping his chin, too. From the way they were grinning at the fellow, Perrin was surprised Natti was not at the table with them, braids or no. The fellow was good-looking, he supposed; maybe handsomer than Wil al'Seen. Bode and Eldrin certainly seemed to think so. For his part, Aram smiled back occasionally—they were plumply pretty girls; he would have to be blind not to see it, and Perrin did not think Aram was ever blind to a pretty girl—but he hardly swallowed without running a wide-eyed gaze over the spears and polearms against the walls. For a Tuatha'an, it had to be a horrible sight.

"Mistress al'Vere said you had finally gotten tired of your saddle," Faile said, popping in through the door to the kitchen. Startlingly, she wore a long white apron like Marin's; her sleeves were pushed up above her elbows, and she had flour on her hands. As if just realizing it, she whipped the apron off, wiping her hands hastily, and laid it across the back of a chair. "I have never baked anything before," she said, shoving her sleeves down as she joined him. "It is rather fun kneading dough. I might like to do it again someday."

"If you don't bake," he said, "where are we going to get bread? I don't intend to spend my whole life traveling, buying meals or eating what I can snare or fetch with bow or sling."

She smiled as if he had said something very pleasing, though he could not for the life of him see what. "The cook will bake, of course. One of her helpers, really, I suppose, but the cook will oversee it."

"The cook," he mumbled, shaking his head. "Or one of her helpers. Of course. Why didn't I think of that?"

"What is the matter, Perrin? You look worried. I don't think the defenses could be any sounder without a fortress wall."

"It isn't that. Faile, this Perrin Goldeneyes business is getting out of hand. I do not know who they think I am, but they keep asking me what to do, asking if it's all right, when they already know what has to be done, when they could figure it out with two minutes' thought."

For a long moment she studied his face, those dark, tilted eyes thoughtful, then said, "How many years has it been since the Queen of Andor ruled here in fact?"

"The Queen of Andor? I don't really know. A hundred years, maybe. Two hundred. What does that have to do with anything?"

"These people do not remember how to deal with a queen—or a king. They are trying to puzzle it out. You must be patient with them."

"A king?" he said weakly. He let his head drop down onto his arms on the table. "Oh, Light!"

Laughing softly, Faile ruffled his hair. "Well, perhaps not that. I doubt very much that Morgase would approve. A leader, at least. But she would very definitely approve a man who brought lands back to her that her throne has not controlled in a hundred years or more. She would surely make that man a lord. Perrin of House Aybara, Lord of the Two Rivers. It has a good sound."

"We do not need any lords in the Two Rivers," he growled at the oak tabletop. "Or kings, or queens. We are free men!"

"Free men can have a need to follow someone, too," she said gently. "Most men want to believe in something larger than themselves, something wider than their own fields. That is why there are nations, Perrin, and peoples. Even Raen and Ila see themselves as part of something more than their own caravan. They have lost their wagons and most of their family and friends, but other Tuatha'an still seek the song, and they will again, too, because they belong to more than a few wagons."

"Who owns these?" Aram asked suddenly.

Perrin raised his head. The young Tinker was on his feet, staring uneasily at the spears lining the walls. "They belong to anybody who wants one, Aram. Nobody is going to hurt you with any of them, believe me." He was not sure if Aram did believe, not the way he began walking slowly around the room with his hands stuffed into his pockets, eyeing spears and halberds sideways.

Perrin was more than grateful to dig in when Marin brought him a plate of sliced roast goose, with turnips and peas and good crusty bread. At least, he would have dug in, if Faile had not tucked a flower-embroidered napkin under his chin and snatched the knife and fork out of his hands. She seemed to find it amusing to feed him the way Bode and Eldrin had been feeding Aram. The Cauthon girls giggled at him, and Natti and Marin wore little smiles, too. Perrin did not see what was so funny. He was willing to indulge Faile, though, even if he could have fed himself more easily. She kept making him stretch his neck to take what she had on the fork.

Aram's slow wandering took him around the room three times before he stopped at the foot of the stairs, staring at the barrel of ill-assorted swords. Then he reached out and pulled a sword from the cluster, hefting it awkwardly. The leather-wrapped hilt was long enough for both of his hands. "Can I use this one?" he asked.

Perrin nearly choked.

Alanna appeared at the head of the stairs, with Ila; the Tuatha'an woman looked weary, but the bruise was gone from her face. ". . . best thing is sleep," the Aes Sedai was saying. "It is shock to his mind that troubles him most, and I cannot Heal that."

Ila's eyes fell on her grandson, on what he held, and she screamed as if that blade had gone into her flesh. "No, Aram! Nooooo!" She almost fell in her haste to get down the stairs and flung herself on Aram, trying to pull his hands from the sword. "No, Aram," she panted breathlessly. "You must not. Put it down. The Way of the Leaf. You must not! The Way of the Leaf! Please, Aram! Please!"

Aram danced with her, fending her off clumsily, trying to hold the sword away from her. "Why not?" he shouted angrily. "They killed Mother! I saw them! I might have saved her, if I had had a sword. I could have saved her!"

The words sliced at Perrin's chest. A Tinker with a sword seemed an unnatural thing, almost enough to make his hackles stand, but those words. . . . His mother. "Leave him alone," he said, more roughly than he intended. "Any man has a right to defend himself, to defend his. . . . He has a right."

Aram pushed the sword toward Perrin. "Will you teach me how to use it?"

"I don't know how," Perrin told him. "You can find someone, though."

Tears rolled down Ila's contorted face. "The Trollocs took my daughter," she sobbed, her entire body shaking, "and all my grandchildren but one, and now you take him. He is Lost, because of you, Perrin Aybara. You have become a wolf in your heart, and now you will make him one, too." Turning, she stumbled back up the steps, still racked with sobs.

"I could have saved her!" Aram called after her. "Grandmother! I could have saved her!" She never looked back, and when she vanished around the corner, he slumped against the banister, weeping. "I could have saved her, grandmother. I could have. . . ."

Perrin realized Bode was crying, too, with her face in her hands, and the other women were frowning at him as though he had done something wrong. No, not all of them. Alanna studied him from the head of the stairs with that unreadable Aes Sedai calm, and Faile's face was nearly as blank.

Wiping his mouth, he tossed the napkin on the table and got up. There was still time to tell Aram to put the sword back, to go ask Ila's pardon. Time to tell him . . . what? That maybe next time he would not be there to watch his loved ones die? That maybe he could just come back to find their graves?

He put a hand on Aram's shoulder, and the man flinched, hunching around the sword as if expecting him to take it. The Tinker's scent carried a wash of emotions, fear and hate and bone-deep sadness. Lost, Ila had called him. His eyes looked lost. "Wash your face, Aram. Then go find Tam al'Thor. Say I ask him to teach you the sword."

Slowly the other man raised his face. "Thank you," he stammered, scrubbing at the tears on his cheeks with his sleeve. "Thank you. I will never forget this. Never. I swear it." Suddenly he hoisted the sword to kiss the straight blade; the hilt had a brass wolfhead for a pommel. "I swear. Is that not how it is done?"

"I suppose it is," Perrin said sadly, wondering why he should feel sad. The Way of the Leaf was a fine belief, like a dream of peace, but like the dream it could not last where there was violence. He did not know of a place without that. A dream for some other man, some other time. Some other Age perhaps. "Go on, Aram. You have a lot to learn, and there may not be much time." Still bubbling thanks, the Tinker did not wait to wash his tears away, but ran straight out of the inn, carrying the sword upright before him in both hands.

Conscious of Eldrin’s scowl and Marin’s fists on her hips and Natti’s frown, not to mention Bode’s weeping, Perrin walked back to his chair. Alanna had gone from her place at the top of the stairs. Faile watched him pick up his knife and fork. “You disapprove?” he said quietly. “A man has a right to defend himself, Faile. Even Aram. No one can make him follow the Way of the Leaf if he doesn’t want to.”

“I do not like to see you in pain,” she said very softly.

His knife paused in cutting a piece of goose. Pain? That dream was not for him. “I am just tired,” he told her, and smiled. He did not think she believed him.

Before he had time to take a second mouthful, Bran stuck his head in at the front door. He wore his round steel cap again. “Riders coming from the north, Perrin. A lot of riders. I think it must be the White-cloaks.”

Faile darted away as Perrin rose, and by the time he was outside on Stepper, with the Mayor muttering to himself about what he meant to say to the Whitecloaks, she came riding her black mare around the side of the inn. More people were running north than stayed at their tasks. Perrin was in no particular hurry. The Children of the Light might well be there to arrest him. They probably were. He did not mean to go along in chains, but he was not anxious to ask people to fight Whitecloaks for him. He followed behind Bran, joining the stream of men and women and children crossing the Wagon Bridge across the Winespring Water, Stepper’s and Swallow’s hooves clattering on the thick planks. A few tall willows grew here along the water. The bridge was where the North Road began, then ran to Watch Hill and beyond. Some of the distant smoke plumes had thinned to wisps as fires burned themselves out.

Where the road left the village, he found a pair of wagons blocking the road and men gathered behind pointed, slanting stakes with their bows and spears and such, smelling of excitement, murmuring to each other and all jammed together to watch what was coming down the road: a long double column of white-cloaked horsemen trailing a cloud of dust, conical helmets and burnished plate-and-mail shining in the afternoon sun, steel-tipped lances all at the same angle. At their head rode a youngish man, stiff-backed and stern-faced, who looked vaguely familiar to Perrin. With the arrival of the Mayor, the murmurs hushed expectantly. Or maybe it was Perrin’s arrival that quieted them.

Two hundred paces or so from the stakes, the stern-faced man raised a hand, and the column halted with sharp orders echoing down the files. He came on with just half a dozen Whitecloaks for company, running his eyes over the wagons and sharp stakes and the men behind. His manner would have named him a man of importance even without the knots of rank beneath the flaring sunburst on his cloak.

Luc had appeared from somewhere, resplendent on his shiny black stallion in rich red wool and golden embroidery. Perhaps it was natural enough that the Whitecloak officer chose to address himself to Luc, though his dark eyes continued to probe. “I am Dain Bornhald,” he announced, reining in, “Captain of the Children of the Light. You have done this for us? I have heard that Emond’s Field is closed to the Children, yes? Truly a village of the Shadow if it is closed to the Children of the Light.”

Dain Bornhald, not Geofram. A son, perhaps. Not that it made any difference. Perrin supposed one would try to arrest him as soon as another. Sure enough, Bornhald’s gaze swept past him, then jerked back. A convulsion seemed to seize the man; one gauntleted hand darted to his sword, his lips peeled back in a silent snarl, and for a moment Perrin was sure the man was about to charge, fling his horse onto the spiky barrier, to reach him. The man looked as if he bore Perrin a personal hatred. Up close, that hard face had a touch of slackness to it, a shine in those eyes that Perrin was used to seeing in Bili Congar’s. He thought he could smell brandy fumes.

The hollow-cheeked man beside Bornhald was more than familiar. Perrin would never forget those deep-set eyes, like dark burning coals. Tall and gaunt and hard as an anvil, Jaret Byar truly did look at him with hate. Whether or not Bornhald was a zealot, Byar surely was.

Luc apparently had the sense not to try usurping Bran’s place—indeed, he appeared intent on examining the white-cloaked column as the dust settled, revealing more Children stretching up the road—to Perrin’s disgust, though Bran looked to him—to the blacksmith’s apprentice—waited for his nod before answering. He was the *Mayor*! Bornhald and Byar plainly took note of the silent exchange.

“Emond’s Field is not precisely closed to you,” Bran said, standing up straight with his spear propped out to one side. “We have decided to defend ourselves, and have this very morning. If you want to see our work, look there.” He pointed toward the smoke rising from the Trollocs’ pyres. A sickly-sweet smell of burning flesh drifted in the air, but no one except Perrin seemed to notice.

“You have killed a few Trollocs?” Bornhald said contemptuously. “Your luck and skill amaze me.”

“More than a few!” somebody called out of the Two Rivers crowd. “Hundreds!”

“We had a battle!” another voice cried, and dozens more shouted angrily on top of one another.

“We fought them and won!”

“Where were you?”

“We can defend ourselves without any Whitecloaks!”

“The Two Rivers!”

“The Two Rivers and Perrin Goldeneyes!”

“Goldeneyes!”

“Goldeneyes!”

Leof, who should have been over guarding the woodsmen, started waving that crimson wolfhead banner.

Bornhald’s hot-eyed hate took them all in, but Byar danced his bay gelding forward with a snarl. “Do you farmers think you know battle?” he roared. “Last night one of your villages was all but wiped out by Trollocs! Wait until they come at you in numbers, and you will wish your mother had never kissed your father!” He fell silent at a weary gesture from Bornhald, a fierce-trained dog obeying his master, but his words had quieted the Two Rivers people.

“Which village?” Bran’s voice was dignified and troubled both. “We all know people in Watch Hill, and Deven Ride.”

“Watch Hill has not been troubled,” Bornhald replied, “and I know nothing of Deven Ride. This morning a rider brought me word that Taren Ferry hardly exists any longer. If you have friends there, many people did escape across the river. Across the river.” His face tightened momentarily. “I myself lost nearly fifty good soldiers.”

The news produced a few queasy murmurs; no one liked to hear that sort of thing, but on the other hand, no one here knew anyone in Taren Ferry. Likely none of them had ever been that far.

Luc pushed his horse forward, the stallion snapping at Stepper. Perrin reined his own mount tightly before the two began fighting, but Luc appeared not to notice or care. “Taren Ferry?” he said in a flat voice. “Trollocs attacked Taren Ferry last night?”

Bornhald shrugged. “I said it, did I not? It seems that the Trollocs have at last decided to raid the villages. How providential that you here were warned in time to prepare these fine defenses.” His stare ran over the pointed hedge and the men behind it before settling on Perrin.

“Was the man called Ordeith at Taren Ferry last night?” Luc asked.

Perrin stared at him. He had not known Luc even knew of Padan Fain, or the name he used now. But people did talk, especially when someone they knew as a peddler came back with authority among White-cloaks.

Bornhald’s reaction was as strange as the question. His eyes glittered a hate as strong as he had shown for Perrin, but his face went pale, and he scrubbed at slack lips with the back of his hand as though he had forgotten he wore steel-backed gauntlets. “You know Ordeith?” he said, leaning toward Luc in his saddle.

It was Luc’s turn to shrug casually. “I have seen him here and there since coming to the Two Rivers. A disreputable-looking man, and those who follow him no less. The sort who might have been careless enough to allow a Trolloc attack to succeed. Was he there? If so, one can hope he died for his folly. If not, one hopes you have him here with you, close under your eye.”

“I do not know where he is,” Bornhald snapped. “Or care! I did not come here to talk of Ordeith!” His horse pranced nervously as Bornhald flung out a hand, pointing at Perrin. “I arrest you as a Darkfriend. You will be taken to Amador, and there tried under the Dome of Truth.”

Byar stared at his Captain in disbelief. Behind the barrier separating the Whitecloaks from the Two Rivers men, angry mutters rose, spears and bills were hefted, bows raised. The farther Whitecloaks began spreading out in a gleaming line under shouted orders from a fellow as big in his armor as Master Luhhan, sliding lances into holders along their saddles, unlimbering short horse bows. At that range they could do little more than cover the escape of Bornhald and the men with him, if they did indeed manage an escape, but Bornhald appeared oblivious of any danger, and of anything at all save Perrin.

“There will be no arrests,” Bran said sharply. “We have decided that. No more arrests without proof of some crime, and proof *we* believe. You’ll never show me anything to convince me Perrin is a Darkfriend, so you might as well put your hand down."

"He betrayed my father to his death at Falme," Bornhald shouted. Rage shook him. "Betrayed him to Darkfriends and Tar Valon witches who murdered a thousand of the Children with the One Power!" Byar nodded vigorously.

Some of the Two Rivers folk shifted uncertainly; word had spread of what Verin and Alanna had done that morning, and the deeds had grown in spreading. Whatever they thought about Perrin, a hundred tales of Aes Sedai, almost all wrong, made for easy belief in Aes Sedai destroying a thousand Whitecloaks. And if they believed that, they might come to believe the rest.

"I betrayed no one," Perrin said in a loud voice, so everyone could hear. "If your father died at Falme, those who killed him are called the Seanchan. I don't know whether they are Darkfriends, but I do know they use the One Power in battle."

"Liar!" Spittle flew from Bornhald's lips. "The Seanchan are a tale concocted by the White Tower to hide their foul lies! You are a Darkfriend!"

Bran shook his head wonderingly, pushing his steel cap over to one side so he could scratch his fringe of gray hair. "I don't know anything about these—Seanchan?—about these Seanchan. What I do know is that Perrin is no Darkfriend, and you are not arresting anybody."

The situation was growing more dangerous by the minute, Perrin realized. Byar saw it and tugged at Bornhald's arm, whispering to him, but the Whitecloak captain would not, or perhaps could not, back away now that he had Perrin in front of his eyes. Bran and the Two Rivers men had their heels planted, too; they might not be willing to let the Whitecloaks take him even if he confessed to everything Bornhald claimed. Unless someone tossed some water fast, everything was going to explode like a fistful of dry straw tossed on a forge-fire.

He hated having to think quickly. Loial had the right of it. Hasty thinking led to people being hurt. But he thought he saw a way here. "Are you willing to hold off my arrest, Bornhald? Until the Trollocs are done with? I won't be going anywhere before then."

"Why should I hold off?" The man was blind with hate. If he went on, a good many men were going to die, including him most likely, and he could not see. There was no use pointing it out.

“Haven’t you noticed all the farms burning this morning?” Perrin said instead. He made a sweeping gesture that took in all the dwindling plumes of smoke. “Look around. You said it yourself. The Trollocs aren’t content with raiding a farm or two each night anymore. They’re up to raiding villages. If you try to make it back to Watch Hill, you may not get there. You were lucky to come this far. But if you stay here, in Emond’s Field . . .” Bran rounded on him, and other men shouted loud noes; Faile rode close and seized his arm, but he ignored all of them. “. . . you will know where I am, and your soldiers will be welcome to help our defenses.”

“Are you sure about this, Perrin?” Bran said, grabbing Stepper’s stirrup, while from the other side Faile said urgently, “No, Perrin! It is too great a risk. You must not—I mean . . . please don’t—Oh, the Light burn me to bloody ash! You *must* not do this!”

“I won’t have men fighting men if I can stop it,” he told them firmly. “We are not going to do the Trollocs’ work for them.”

Faile practically flung his arm away. Scowling at Bornhald, she produced a sharpening stone from her pouch and a knife from somewhere, and began honing the blade with a silk-soft *whisk-whisk.*

“Hari Coplin won’t know what to think, now,” Bran said wryly. Straightening his round helmet, he turned back to the Whitecloaks and planted his spear butt. “You have heard his terms. Now hear mine. If you come into Emond’s Field, you arrest no one without the say-so of the Village Council, which you will not get, so you arrest no one. You don’t go into anybody’s house unless you are asked. You make no trouble, and you share in the defense where and when you’re asked. And I don’t want to so much as *smell* a Dragon’s Fang! Will you agree? If not, you can ride back as you came.” Byar stared at the round man as if a sheep had reared up on its hind legs and offered to wrestle.

Bornhald never took his eyes off Perrin. “Done,” he said at last. “Until the Trolloc threat is gone, done!” Wrenching his horse around, he galloped back toward the line of his men, snowy cloak billowing behind him.

As the Mayor ordered the wagons rolled aside, Perrin realized that Luc was looking at him. The fellow sat slumped easily in his saddle, a languorous hand on his sword hilt, blue eyes amused.

“I thought you would object,” Perrin said, “the way I hear you’ve been talking people up against the Whitecloaks.”

Luc spread his hands smoothly. “If these people want Whitecloaks among them, let them have Whitecloaks. But you should be careful, young Goldeneyes. I know something of taking an enemy into your bosom. His blade goes in quicker when he is close.” With a laugh, he pushed his stallion off through the crowd, back into the village.

“He is right,” Faile said, still stropping her knife on the stone. “Perhaps this Bornhald will keep his word not to arrest you, but what is to stop one of his men from putting a blade in your back? You should not have done this.”

“I had to,” he told her. “Better than doing the Trollocs’ work.”

The Whitecloaks were beginning to ride in, Bornhald and Byar at their head. Those two glared at him with unabated hatred, and the others, riding by in pairs. . . . Cold, hard eyes in cold, hard faces swung to regard him as they passed. They did not hate, but they saw a Darkfriend when they saw him. And Byar, at least, was capable of anything.

He had had to do it, but he thought maybe it would not be such a bad idea to let Dannil and Ban and the others follow him around the way they wanted to. He was not going to be able to sleep easy without somebody guarding his door. Guards. Like some fool lord. At least Faile would be happy. If only he could make them lose that banner somewhere.

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CHAPTER 46

Veils

The crowds were thick in the confined winding streets of the Calpene near the Great Circle; the smoke of countless cook fires rising above the high white walls gave the reason. Sour smells of smoke and cooking and long unwashed sweat hung heavy in the humid morning air with the crying of children and the vague murmurs that always clung to large masses of people, together enough to muffle the shrill caws of the gulls sailing overhead. The shops in this area had long since locked the iron grilles over their doors for good.

Disgusted, Egeanin threaded her way through the throng afoot. It was dreadful that order had broken down enough for penniless refugees to take over the circles, sleeping among the stone benches. It was as bad as their rulers letting them starve. Her heart should have been gladdened—this dispirited rabble could never resist the *Corenne*, and then proper order would be restored—but she hated looking at it.

Most of the ragged people around her seemed too apathetic to wonder at a woman in their midst in a clean, well-tended blue riding dress, silk if plainly cut. Men and women in once fine garb, soiled and wrinkled now, speckled the crowd, so perhaps she did not stand out enough for contrast. The few who seemed to wonder whether her clothes meant coins in her purse were dissuaded by the competent way she carried her stout staff, as tall as she was. Guards and chair and bearers had had to be left behind today. Floran Gelb would surely have realized he was being followed by that array. At least this dress with its divided skirts gave her a little freedom of movement.

Keeping the weasely little man in sight was easy even in this mass of people, despite having to dodge oxcarts or the occasional wagon, hauled by sweating bare-chested men more often than animals. Gelb and seven or eight companions, burly rough-faced men all, shoved through in a knot, an eddy of curses following them. Those fellows angered her. Gelb meant to try kidnapping again. He had found three women since she sent him the gold he had asked for, none more than casually resembling any on her list, and had whined over every one she rejected. She should never have paid him for that first woman he snatched off the street. Greed and the memory of gold had apparently washed out the hide-flaying tongue-lashing she had given him along with the purse.

Shouts from behind pulled her head around and tightened her hands on the staff. A small space had opened up, as it always did around trouble. A bellowing man in a torn, once-fine yellow coat was on his knees in the street, clutching his right arm where it bent the wrong way. Huddling over him protectively, a weeping woman in a tattered green gown was crying at a veiled fellow already melting into the crowd. “He only asked for a coin! He only asked!” The crowd swirled in around them again.

Grimacing, Egeanin turned back. And stopped with an oath that drew a few startled glances. Gelb and his fellows had vanished. Pushing her way to a small stone fountain where water gushed from the mouth of a bronze fish on the side of a flat-roofed wineshop, she roughly displaced two of the women filling pots and leaped up onto the coping, ignoring their indignant curses. From there she could see over the heads of the crowd. Cramped streets ran off in every direction, twisting around the hills. Bends and white-plastered buildings cut her view to less than a hundred paces at best, but Gelb could not have gone farther than that in those few moments.

Abruptly she found him, hiding in a deep doorway thirty paces on, but up on his toes to peer down the street. The others were easy enough to locate then, leaning against buildings to either side of the street, trying not to be noticed. They were not the only ones lining the walls, but where the rest huddled dispiritedly, their scared, broken-nosed faces held expectation.

So it was to be here, their abduction. Certainly no one would interfere, any more than people had when that fellow’s arm was broken. But who? If Gelb had finally found someone on the list, she could go away and wait for him to sell her the woman, wait her chance to see if an *a’dam* truly could hold other *sul’dam* besides Bethamin. However, she did not mean to face again the choice between slitting some unfortunate woman’s throat and sending her off to be sold.

There were plenty of women climbing up the street toward Gelb, most in those transparent veils, their hair braided. Without a second glance

Egeanin ruled out two in sedan chairs, with bodyguards marching alongside; Gelb's street toughs would not tangle with near their own number, nor face swords with their fists. Whoever they were after would have no more than two or three men for company if that, and none armed. That seemed to include all the other women in her view, whether in rags or drab country dresses or the more clinging styles Taraboner women favored.

Suddenly two of those women, talking together as they rounded a far bend, seized Egeanin's eye. With their hair in slender braids and transparent veils across their faces, they appeared to be Taraboners, but they were out of place here. Those thin, scandalously draped dresses, one green, the other blue, were silk, not linen or finespun wool. Women clothed like that rode in sedan chairs; they did not walk, especially not here. And they did not carry barrel staves on their shoulders like clubs.

Dismissing the one with red-gold hair, she studied the other. Her dark braids were unusually long, nearly to her waist. At this distance, the woman looked very much like a *sul'dam* named Surine. Not Surine, though. This woman would have come no higher than Surine's chin.

Muttering under her breath, Egeanin jumped down and began pushing through the jostling mass between her and Gelb. With luck she could reach him in time to call him off. The fool. The greedy, weasel-brained fool!

"We should have hired chairs, Nynaeve," Elayne said again, wondering for the hundredth time how Taraboner women talked without catching the veils in their mouths. Spitting it out, she added, "We are going to have to use these things."

A weedy-faced fellow stopped drifting toward them through the crowd when Nynaeve hefted her barrel stave threateningly. "That is what they are for." Her glare might have encouraged the man's loss of interest. She fumbled at the dark braids hanging over her shoulders and made a disgusted sound; Elayne did not know when she would become used to not having that one thick braid to tug. "And feet are for walking. How could we look or ask questions being carried around like pigs to sale? I would feel a complete fool in one of those idiot chairs. In any case, I'd rather trust to my own wits than men I do not know."

Elayne was sure Bayle Domon could have provided trustworthy men. The Sea Folk certainly would have; she wished *Wavedancer* had not sailed, but the Sailmistress and her sister had been eager to spread word of the

Coramoor to Dantora and Cantorin. Twenty bodyguards would have suited her very well.

She sensed as much as felt something brushing the purse at her belt; clutching at the purse with one hand, she spun around, raising her own stave. The throng flowing by spread a little around her, people barely glancing her way as they elbowed one another, but there was no sign of the would-be cutpurse. At least she could still feel the coins inside. She had taken to wearing her Great Serpent ring and the twisted stone *ter'angreal* on a cord around her neck in imitation of Nynaeve after the first time she had nearly lost a purse. In their five days in Tanchico she *had* lost three. Twenty guards would be just about right. And a carriage. With curtains at the windows.

Resuming the slow climb up the street beside Nynaeve, she said, “Then we should not be wearing these dresses. I can remember a time when you stuffed me into a farmgirl's dress.”

“They make a good disguise,” Nynaeve replied curtly. “We blend in.”

Elayne gave a small sniff. As if plainer dresses would not have blended even better. Nynaeve would not admit she had come to enjoy wearing silks and pretty dresses. Elayne simply wished she had not taken it so far. True, everyone took them for Taraboners—until they spoke, at least—but even with a lace-trimmed neck right up under her chin, this close-draped green silk at least *felt* more revealing than anything she had ever worn before. Certainly anything she had ever worn in public. Nynaeve, on the other hand, strode along the cramped street as if no one was looking at them at all. Well, maybe no one was—not because of how their dresses fit, anyway—but it surely seemed they were.

Their shifts would have been almost as decent. Cheeks heating, she tried to stop thinking of how the silk molded itself to her. *Stop that! It is perfectly decent. It is!*

“Didn't this Amys tell you anything that might help us?”

“I told you what she said.” Elayne sighed. Nynaeve had kept her up until the small hours talking about the Aiel Wise One who had been with Egwene in *Tel'aran'rhiod* last night, and then started in again before they sat down to breakfast. Egwene, with her hair in two braids for some reason and shooting sullen frowns at the Wise One, had said almost nothing beyond that Rand was well and Aviendha was looking after him. White-haired Amys had done all the talking, a stern lecture on the dangers of the

World of Dreams that had nearly made Elayne feel as if she were ten again, and Lini, her old nurse, had caught her sneaking out of bed to steal candies, followed by cautions about concentration and controlling what she thought if she must enter *Tel'aran'rhiod*. How could you control what you thought? "I truly did think Perrin was with Rand and Mat." That had been the biggest surprise, after Amys's appearance. Egwene apparently had thought he was with Nynaeve and her.

"He and that girl have probably gone somewhere he can be a blacksmith in peace," Nynaeve said, but Elayne shook her head.

"I do not think so." She had strong suspicions about Faile, and if they were even half right, Faile would not settle for being a blacksmith's wife. She spat out the veil once more. Idiotic thing.

"Well, wherever he is," Nynaeve said, fumbling with her braids again, "I hope he is safe and well, but he is not here, and he cannot help us. Did you even *ask* Amys if she knew any way to use *Tel'aran'rhiod* to—?"

A bulky, balding man in a worn brown coat shoved through the crowd and tried to throw thick arms around her. She whipped the barrel stave from her shoulder and gave him a crack across his broad face that sent him staggering back, clutching a nose that had surely been broken for at least the second time.

Elayne was still gathering breath for a startled scream when a second man, just as big and with a thick mustache, pushed her aside to reach for Nynaeve. She forgot about being afraid. Her jaw tightened furiously, and just as his hands touched the other woman, she brought her own stave down on top of his head with every bit of strength she could muster. The fellow's legs folded, and he toppled on his face in a most satisfactory fashion.

The crowd scattered back, no one wanting to be caught up in someone else's trouble. Certainly no one offered to help. And they needed it, Elayne realized. The man Nynaeve had hit was still on his feet, mouth twisted in a snarl, licking away the blood that ran down from his nose, flexing thick hands as if he wanted to squeeze a throat. Worse, he was not alone. Seven more men were fanning out with him to cut off any escape, all but one as large as he, with scarred faces and hands that looked as if they had been hammered on stone for years. A scrawny, narrow-cheeked fellow, grinning like a nervous fox, kept panting, "Don't let her get away. She's gold, I tell you. Gold!"

They knew who she was. This was no try for a purse; they meant to dispose of Nynaeve and abduct the Daughter-Heir of Andor. She felt Nynaeve embracing *saidar*—if this had not made her angry enough to channel, nothing ever would—and opened herself to the True Source as well. The One Power rushed into her, a sweet flood filling her from toes to hair. A few woven flows of Air from either of them could deal with these ruffians.

But she did not channel, and neither did Nynaeve. Together they could drub these fellows as their mothers should have. Yet they did not dare, unless there was no other choice.

If one of the Black Ajah was close enough to see, they had already betrayed themselves with the glow of *saidar*. Channeling enough for those few flows of Air could betray them to a Black sister on another street a hundred paces or more away, depending on her strength and sensitivity. That was most of what they themselves had been doing the last five days, walking through the city trying to sense a woman channeling, hoping the feeling would draw them to Liandrin and the others.

The crowd itself had to be considered, too. A few people still went by to either side, brushing tight against the walls. The rest milled about, beginning to find other ways to go. Only a handful acknowledged the two women in danger with as much as shamefully averted eyes. But if they saw big men flung about by nothing visible . . . ?

Aes Sedai and the One Power itself were not in particularly good odor in Tanchico at the moment, not with old rumors from Falme still floating about and newer tales claiming that the White Tower supported the Dragonsworn in the countryside. Those people might run if they saw the Power wielded. Or they might turn into a mob. Even if she and Nynaeve managed to avoid being torn limb from limb where they stood—which she was not certain they could—there was no way to cover it up after. The Black Ajah would hear of Aes Sedai in Tanchico before the sun set.

Setting herself back-to-back with Nynaeve, Elayne gripped her stave tightly. She felt like laughing hysterically. If Nynaeve even mentioned going out alone again—*walking*—she would see who liked having her head dunked in a bucket of water. At least none of these louts looked eager to be the first to have his head cracked like the fellow lying still on the paving stones.

“Go on,” the narrow-faced man urged, waving his hands forward. “Go on! It’s only two women!” He made no move to rush in himself, though. “Go on, I say. We just need the one. She’s gold, I tell you.”

Suddenly there was a loud *thunk*, and one of the ruffians staggered to his knees, clutching groggily at a split scalp, and a dark-haired, stern-faced woman in a blue riding dress flung herself past him, twisted sharply to backhand another fellow in the mouth with her fist, knocked his legs out from under him with a staff, then kicked him in the head as he fell.

That there was help at all was startling, much less the source, but Elayne was of no mind to pick and choose. Nynaeve left her back with a wordless roar, and she dashed out shouting, “Forward the White Lion!” to belabor the nearest lout as hard and fast as she could. Flinging his arms up to defend himself, he looked shocked out of his wits. “Forward the White Lion!” she shouted again, the battle cry of Andor, and he turned tail and ran.

Laughing in spite of herself, she whirled about seeking another to drub. Only two had not yet fled or fallen. That first broken-nosed fellow turned to run, and Nynaeve gave him a final full-armed thwack across the backside. The stern-faced woman somehow tangled the other’s arm and shoulder with her staff, pulling him close and up on his toes at the same time; he would have overtopped her by a head flat-footed and he weighed twice what she did, but she coolly slammed the heel of her free hand up into his chin three times in rapid succession. His eyes rolled up in his head, but as he sagged, Elayne saw the narrow-faced man picking himself up off the street; his nose dripped blood and his eyes looked half-glazed, yet he pulled a knife from his belt and lunged at the woman’s back.

Without thinking, Elayne channeled. A fist of Air hurled the man and his knife into a backflip. The stern-faced woman spun, but he was already scrambling away on all fours until he could get his feet under him and burrow into the crowd farther up the street. People had stopped to watch the odd battle, though none had raised a hand to help except the dark-haired woman. She herself was staring from Elayne to Nynaeve uncertainly. Elayne wondered whether she had noticed the scrawny fellow being knocked down apparently by nothing.

“I give you my thanks,” Nynaeve said a touch breathlessly as she approached the woman, straightening her veil. “I think we should leave here. I know the Civil Watch doesn’t come out in the streets much, but I’d not like to explain this if they do happen by. Our inn is not far. Will you join us? A cup of tea is the least we can offer someone who actually lifts a hand to help someone in this Light-forsaken city. My name is Nynaeve al'Meara, and this is Elayne Trakand."

The woman hesitated visibly. She *had* noticed. "I. . . . I would . . . like that. Yes. I would." She had a slurred way of speaking, difficult to understand, but somehow vaguely familiar. She was quite a lovely woman, really, seeming even fairer than she was because of her dark hair, worn almost to the shoulder. A bit too hard to be called a beauty. Her blue eyes had a strong look, as if she were used to giving orders. A merchant, perhaps, in that dress. "I am called Egeanin."

Egeanin showed no hesitation in leaving with them down the nearest side street. The crowds were already gathering around the fallen men. Elayne expected those fellows would wake to find themselves stripped of anything of value, even clothes and boots. She wished she knew how they had discovered her identity, but there was no way to bring one along to find out. They were *definitely* going to have bodyguards from now on, no matter what Nynaeve said.

Egeanin might not have been hesitant, but she was uneasy. Elayne could see it in her eyes as they wove through the crowd. "You saw, didn't you?" she asked. The woman missed a step, all the confirmation Elayne needed, and she added hurriedly, "We won't harm you. Certainly not after you came to our rescue." Again she had to spit out her veil. Nynaeve did not seem to have that problem. "You needn't frown at me, Nynaeve. She saw what I did."

"I know that," Nynaeve said dryly. "And it was the right thing to do. But we are not snug in your mother's palace tucked away from prying ears." Her gesture took in the people around them. Between Egeanin's staff and their staves, most were giving them a wide berth. To Egeanin she said, "The larger part of any rumors you may have heard are not true. Few of them are. You need not be afraid of us, but you can understand there are matters we do not care to speak of here."

"Afraid of you?" Egeanin looked startled. "I had not thought I should be. I will keep silent until you wish to speak." She was as good as her word; they walked on in silence through the murmurs of the crowd all the way back down the peninsula to the Three Plum Court. All this walking was making Elayne's feet ache.

A handful of men and women sat in the common room despite the early hour, nursing their wine or ale. The woman with her hammered dulcimer was being accompanied by a thin man playing a flute that sounded as reedy as he was. Juilin sat at a table near the door, smoking a short-stemmed pipe. He had not returned from his nightly foray when they left. Elayne was glad to see that for once he did not have a new bruise or cut; what he called the underside of Tanchico seemed even rougher than the face the city presented to the world. His one concession to Tanchican dress had been to replace his flat straw hat with one of those dark conical felt caps, which he wore perched on the back of his head.

“I have found them,” he said, popping up from his bench and snatching off his cap, before he saw they were not alone. He gave Egeanin a hooded look and a small bow; she returned it with an inclination of her head and a look just as guarded.

“You’ve found them?” Nynaeve exclaimed. “Are you sure? Speak, man. Have you swallowed your tongue?” And her with her warnings about talking in front of other people.

“I should have said I found where they were.” He did not look at Egeanin again, but he chose his words carefully. “The woman with the white stripe in her hair led me to a house where she was staying with a number of other women, though few were ever seen outside. The locals thought they were rich escapees from the countryside. Little remains now save a few scraps of food in the pantry—even the servants are gone—but from one thing and another I would say they left late yesterday or early last night. I doubt they have any fear of the night in Tanchico.”

Nynaeve had a fistful of her narrow braids in a white-knuckled grip. “You went inside?” she said in a very level voice. Elayne thought she was an inch from raising the stave dangling at her side.

Juilin seemed to think so, too. Eyeing the stave, he said, “You know very well I take no risks with them. An empty house has a look about it, a feel, no matter how big. You cannot chase thieves as long as I have without learning to see as they do.”

“And if you had triggered a trap?” Nynaeve almost hissed the words. “Does your grand talent for *feeling* things extend to traps?” Juilin’s dark face went a little gray; he wet his lips as if to explain or defend himself, but she cut him off. “We will talk of this later, *Master* Sandar.” Her eyes shifted slightly toward Egeanin; finally she had remembered there were other ears there to hear. “Tell Rendra we will take tea in the Falling Blossoms Room.”

“Chamber of Falling Blossoms,” Elayne corrected softly, and Nynaeve shot her a look. Juilin’s news had left the older woman in a bad humor.

He bowed deeply with his hands spread. “As you command, Mistress al’Meara, so I obey from the heart,” he said wryly, then stuck his dark cap back on top of his head and stalked off, his back eloquently indignant. It must be uncomfortable to find yourself taking orders from someone with whom you had once tried to flirt.

“Fool man!” Nynaeve growled. “We should have left both of them on the dock in Tear.”

“He is your servant?” Egeanin said slowly.

“Yes,” Nynaeve snapped, just as Elayne said, “No.”

They looked at each other, Nynaeve still frowning.

“Perhaps he is, in a way,” Elayne sighed, right on top of Nynaeve’s muttered, “I suppose he is not, at that.”

“I . . . see,” Egeanin said.

Rendra came bustling between the tables with a smile on her rosebud lips behind her veil. Elayne wished she did not look so much like Liandrin. “Ah. You are so pretty this morning. Your dresses, they are magnificent. Beautiful.” As if the honey-haired woman had not had as much to do with choosing the fabric and cut as they. Her own was red enough for a Tinker and definitely not suitable for public. “But you have been foolish again, yes? That is why the fine Juilin, he wears the large scowl. You should not worry him so.” A twinkle in her big brown eyes said Juilin had found someone for his flirting. “Come. You will take your tea in the cool and the privacy, and if you must go out again, you will allow me to provide the bearers and the guards, yes? The pretty Elayne would not have lost so many purses if you were properly guarded. But we will not talk of such things now. Your tea, it is nearly prepared. Come.” It had to be a learned skill, that was how Elayne saw it; you must have to learn how to talk without eating your veil.

The Chamber of Falling Blossoms, located down a short corridor off the common room, was a small, windowless room with a low table and carved chairs with red seat cushions. Nynaeve and Elayne took their meals there—with Thom or Juilin or both, when Nynaeve was not in a taking at them. The plastered brick walls, painted with a veritable grove of plum trees and a namesake shower of flowers, were thick enough to preclude any eavesdropping. Elayne practically tore her veil off and tossed the filmy scrap on the table before sitting; even Taraboner women did not try to eat or drink wearing the things. Nynaeve merely unfastened hers from her hair on one side.

Rendra kept up her chatter while they were being served, her topics bouncing from a new seamstress who could sew them dresses in the newest style from the thinnest imaginable silk—she suggested Egeanin try the woman, getting a level look for reply; it did not faze her even a trifle—to why they should listen to Juilin since the city was just too dangerous for a woman to go out alone now even in daylight, to a scented soap that would put the finest sheen on their hair. Elayne sometimes wondered how the woman ran such a successful inn when she seemed to think of nothing but her hair and her clothes. That she did was obvious; it was the how that puzzled Elayne. Of course, she did wear pretty clothes; just not entirely *suitable.* The servant who brought the tea and blue porcelain cups and tiny cakes on a tray was the slender, dark-eyed young man who had kept filling Elayne's winecup on that very embarrassing night. And had tried again more than once, though she had privately vowed never again to drink more than a single cup. A handsome man, but she gave him her coolest stare, so that he hurried from the room gladly.

Egeanin watched quietly until Rendra left, too. "You are not what I expected," she said then, balancing her cup on her fingertips in an odd way. "The innkeeper babbles of frivolities as if you were her sisters and as foolish as she, and you allow it. The dark man—he is a servant of sorts, I think—mocks you. That serving boy stares with open hunger in his eyes, and you allow it. You are . . . Aes Sedai, are you not?" Without waiting for an answer, she shifted her sharp blue eyes to Elayne. "And you are of the. . . . You are nobly born. Nynaeve spoke of your mother's palace."

"Such things do not count for very much in the White Tower," Elayne told her ruefully, hastily brushing cake crumbs from her chin. It was very spicy cake; almost sharp. "If a queen went there to learn, she would have to scrub floors like any other novice and jump when she was told."

Egeanin nodded slowly. "So that is how you rule. By ruling the rulers. Do . . . many . . . queens go to be trained so?"

"None that I know of." Elayne laughed. "Though it is our tradition in Andor for the Daughter-Heir to go. A good many noblewomen go, really, though they usually do not want it known and most leave having failed to even sense the True Source. It was only an example."

"You are also of the . . . a noble?" Egeanin asked, and Nynaeve snorted.

"My mother was a farmwife, and my father herded sheep and farmed tabac. Few where I come from can make do without wool and tabac both to sell. What of your parents, Egeanin?"

"My father was a soldier, my mother the . . . an officer on a ship." For a moment she sipped her unsweetened tea, studying them. "You are searching for someone," she said at last. "For these women the dark man spoke of. I do some small trade in information, among other things. I have sources who tell me things. Perhaps I can help. I would not charge, except to ask you to tell me more of Aes Sedai."

"You have helped too much already," Elayne said hastily, remembering Nynaeve telling almost everything to Bayle Domon. "I *am* grateful, but we could not accept more." Letting this woman know about the Black Ajah and letting her become involved without knowing were equally out of the question. "Truly we could not."

Caught with her mouth half-open, Nynaeve glared at her. "I was about to say the same," she said in a flat voice, then went on more brightly. "Our gratitude certainly extends to answering questions, Egeanin. As much as we can." She surely meant there were a good many questions for which they had no answers, but Egeanin took it differently.

"Of course. I will not pry into the secret affairs of your White Tower."

"You seem very interested in Aes Sedai," Elayne said. "I cannot sense the ability in you, but perhaps you can learn to channel."

Egeanin almost dropped her porcelain cup. "It . . . can be *learned*? I did not. . . . No. No, I do not want to . . . to learn."

Her agitation made Elayne sad. Even among people not fearful of Aes Sedai, too many still feared anything to do with the One Power. "What *do* you want to know, Egeanin?"

Before the woman could speak, a rap at the door was followed by Thom, in the rich brown cloak he had taken to wearing when he went out. It certainly attracted less notice than the gleeman's patch-covered garment. In fact, it made him appear quite dignified, with that mane of white hair, though he should brush it more. Imagining him younger, Elayne thought she could see what had first attracted her mother. That did not absolve him of leaving, of course. She smoothed her face before he could see her frown.

"I was told you were not alone," he said, giving Egeanin a guarded look almost identical to Juilin's; men were always suspicious of anyone they did not know. "But I thought you might like to hear that the Children of the Light surrounded the Panarch's Palace this morning. The streets are beginning to buzz over it. It seems the Lady Amathera is to be invested as Panarch tomorrow."

"Thom," Nynaeve said wearily, "unless this Amathera is really Liandrin, I do not care if she becomes Panarch, King, and Wisdom of the whole Two Rivers all rolled together."

"The interesting thing," Thom said, limping to the table, "is that rumor says the Assembly refused to choose Amathera. Refused. So why is she being invested? Things this odd are worth noting, Nynaeve."

As he started to lower himself into a chair, she said quietly, "We are having a private conversation, Thom. I am sure you will find the common room more congenial." She took a sip of tea, eyeing him over the cup in clear expectation of his departure.

Flushing, he levered himself back up without ever having actually sat, but he did not leave immediately. "Whether the Assembly has changed its mind or not, this will likely cause riots. The streets still believe Amathera has been rejected. If you must insist on going out, you cannot go alone." He was looking at Nynaeve, but Elayne had the impression that he almost put a hand on her shoulder. "Bayle Domon is mired in that little room down near the docks, tying up his affairs in case he has to run, but he has agreed to provide fifty picked men, tough fellows used to a brawl and handy with knife or sword."

Nynaeve opened her mouth, but Elayne cut her off. "We are grateful, Thom, to you and Master Domon both. Please tell him we accept his kind and generous offer." Meeting Nynaeve's flat stare, she added meaningfully, "I would not want to be kidnapped on the streets in broad daylight."

"No," Thom said. "We would not want that." Elayne thought she heard a half-said "child" at the end of that, and this time he did touch her shoulder, a swift brush of fingers. "Actually," he went on, "the men are already waiting in the street outside. I am trying to find a carriage; those chairs are too vulnerable." He seemed to know he had gone too far, bringing Domon's men before they agreed, not to mention this talk of a carriage without a hint of asking first, but he faced them like an old wolf at bay, bushy eyebrows drawn down. “I would . . . regret . . . personally, if anything happened to you. The carriage will be here as soon as I can find a team. If there is one to be found.”

Eyes wide, Nynaeve was obviously teetering on the edge of whether or not to give him an upbraiding he would never forget, and Elayne would not have minded adding a gentler admonishment. Somewhat gentler; child, indeed!

He took advantage of their hesitation to sweep a bow that would have graced any palace and departed while he had the chance.

Egeanin had set down her cup and was staring at them in consternation. Elayne supposed they had not given a very good appearance of being Aes Sedai, letting Thom bully them. “I must go,” the woman said, rising and taking her staff from against the wall.

“But you have not asked your questions,” Elayne protested. “We owe you answers to them, at the very least.”

“Another time,” Egeanin said after a moment. “If it is permitted, I will come another time. I need to learn about you. You are not what I expected.” They assured her she could come any time they were there and tried to convince her to stay long enough to finish her tea and cakes, but she was adamant that she had to leave now.

Turning from seeing the woman to the door, Nynaeve put her fists on her hips. “Kidnap you? If you have forgotten, Elayne, it was me those men tried to grab!”

“To take you out of the way so they could seize me,” Elayne said. “If you have forgotten, I *am* the Daughter-Heir of Andor. My mother would have made them wealthy to have me back.”

“Perhaps,” Nynaeve muttered doubtfully. “Well, at least they were nothing to do with Liandrin. That lot wouldn’t send a pack of louts to try stuffing us in a sack. Why do men always do things without asking? Does growing hair on their chests sap their brains?”

The sudden change did not confuse Elayne. “We do not have to worry about finding bodyguards, at any rate. You do agree they are necessary, even if Thom did overstep himself?”

“I suppose so.” Nynaeve had a remarkable dislike for admitting she was wrong. Thinking those men had been after *her*, for instance. “Elayne, do you realize we still have nothing except an empty house? If Juilin—or

Thom—slips and lets himself be found out. . . . We must find the Black sisters without them suspecting, or we will never have a chance of following them to whatever this thing is that's dangerous to Rand."

"I know," Elayne said patiently. "We *have* discussed it."

The older woman frowned at nothing. "We still have not a glimmer as to what it is, or where."

"I know."

"Even if we could bag Liandrin and the rest right this minute, we cannot leave it floating about out there, waiting for someone else to find."

"I know that, Nynaeve." Reminding herself to be patient, Elayne softened her tone. "We will find them. They must make some sort of slip, and between Thom's rumors, and Juilin's thieves, and Bayle Domon's sailors, we will learn of it."

Nynaeve's frown became thoughtful. "Did you notice Egeanin's eyes when Thom mentioned Domon?"

"No. Do you think she knows him? Why would she not say so?"

"I do not know," Nynaeve said vexedly. "Her face did not change, but her eyes. . . . She was startled. She knows him. I wonder what—" Someone tapped softly on the door. "Is everyone in Tanchico going to march in on us?" she growled, jerking it open.

Rendra gave a start at the look on Nynaeve's face, but her ever-present smile returned immediately. "Forgive me for disturbing you, but there is a woman below who asks for you. Not by name, but she describes you as you stand. She says that she believes she knows you. She is. . . ." That rosebud mouth tightened in a slight grimace. "I forgot to ask her name. This morning I am the witless goat. She is a well-dressed woman, not yet to her middle years. Not of Tarabon." She gave a little shiver. "A stern woman, I think. When first she saw me, she looked at me as my older sister did when we were children and she was thinking of tying my braids to the bush."

"Or have they found us first?" Nynaeve said softly.

Elayne embraced the True Source before she thought of it, and felt a shudder of relief that she could, that she had not been shielded unaware. If the woman below was Black Ajah. . . . But if she was, why announce herself? Even so, she wished the glow of *saidar* surrounded Nynaeve, too. If only the woman could channel without anger.

"Send her in," Nynaeve said, and Elayne realized she was very much aware of her lack, and afraid. As Rendra turned to go, Elayne began weaving flows of Air, thick as cables and ready to bind, flows of Spirit to shield another from the Source. If this woman so much as resembled one on their list, if she tried to channel a spark. . . .

The woman who stepped into the Chamber of Falling Blossoms, in a shimmering black silk gown of unfamiliar cut, was no one Elayne had ever seen before, and surely not on the list of the women who had gone with Liandrin. Dark hair spilling loose to her shoulders framed a sturdily handsome face with large, dark eyes and smooth cheeks, but not with Aes Sedai agelessness. Smiling, she closed the door behind her. “Forgive me, but I thought you were—” The glow of *saidar* surrounded her, and she. . . .

Elayne released the True Source. There was something very commanding in those dark eyes, in the halo around her, the pale radiance of the One Power. She was the most regal woman Elayne had ever seen. Elayne found herself hurriedly curtsying, flushing that she had considered. . . . What had she considered? So hard to think.

The woman studied them for a moment, then gave a satisfied nod and swept to the table, taking the carved chair at its head. “Come here where I can see you both more closely,” she said in a peremptory voice. “Come. Yes. That’s it.”

Elayne realized she was standing beside the table, looking down at the dark-eyed, glowing woman. She did hope that was all right. On the other side of the table Nynaeve had a tangle of her long, thin braids gripped in her fist, but she stared at the visitor with a foolishly rapt expression. It made Elayne want to giggle.

“About what I have come to expect,” the woman said. “Little more than girls, and obviously not close to half-trained. Strong, though; strong enough to be more than troublesome. Especially you.” She fixed Nynaeve with her eyes. “You might become something one day. But you’ve blocked yourself, haven’t you? We would have had that out of you though you howled for it.”

Nynaeve still had that tight hold on her braids, but her face went from a pleased, girlish smile at praise to shamed lip-trembling. “I am sorry I blocked myself,” she almost whimpered. “I’m afraid of it . . . all that power . . . the One Power . . . how can I—?”

“Be silent unless I ask a question,” the woman said firmly. “And do not start crying. You are joyful at seeing me, ecstatic. All you want is to please me and answer my questions truthfully.”

Nynaeve nodded vigorously, smiling even more rapturously than before. Elayne realized that she was, too. She was sure she could answer the questions first. Anything to please this woman.

"Now. Are you alone? Are there any other *Aes Sedai* with you?"

"No," Elayne said quickly in answer to the first question, and just as fast, to the second, "There are no Aes Sedai with us." Perhaps she should tell that they were not really Aes Sedai either. But she had not been asked that. Nynaeve glared at her, knuckles white on her braids, furious at being beaten to the answer.

"Why are you in this city?" the woman said.

"We are hunting Black sisters," Nynaeve burst out, shooting Elayne a triumphant look.

The handsome woman laughed. "So that is why I have not felt you channel before today. Wise of you to keep low when it is eleven to two. I have always followed that policy myself. Let other fools leap about in full view. They can be brought low by a spider hiding in the cracks, a spider they never see until it is too late. Tell me all you have discovered about these Black sisters, all you know of them."

Elayne spilled out everything, battling with Nynaeve to be first. It was not very much. Their descriptions, the *ter'angreal* they had stolen, the murders in the Tower and the fear of more Black sisters still there, aiding one of the Forsaken in Tear before the Stone fell, their flight here seeking something dangerous to Rand. "They were all staying in a house together," Elayne finished up, panting, "but they left last night."

"It seems you came very close," the woman said slowly. "Very close. *Ter'angreal*. Turn out your purses on the table, your pouches." They did, and she fingered quickly through coins and sewing kits and handkerchiefs and the like. "Do you have any *ter'angreal* in your rooms? *Angreal* or *sa'angreal*?"

Elayne was conscious of the twisted stone ring hanging between her breasts and the amber plaque dream *ter'angreal* secure in a pocket inside her skirt for safekeeping—Nynaeve had the iron disc *ter'angreal* in a pocket beneath her skirts; those things could not be left lying about—but that was not the question. "No," she said. They had none of those things in their room.

Pushing everything away, the woman leaned back, speaking half to herself. "Rand al'Thor. So that is his name now." Her face crumpled in a momentary grimace. “An arrogant man who stank of piety and goodness. Is he still the same? No, do not bother to answer that. An idle question. So Be’lal is dead. The other sounds like Ishamael, to me. All his pride at being only half-caught, whatever the price—there was less human left in him than any of us when I saw him again; I think he half-believed he was the Great Lord of the Dark—all his three thousand years of machinations, and it comes to an untaught boy hunting him down. My way is best. Softly, softly, in the shadows. Something to control a man who can channel. Yes, it would have to be that.” Her eyes turned sharp, studying them in turn. “Now. What to do with you.”

Elayne waited patiently. Nynaeve wore a silly smile, her lips parted expectantly; it looked especially foolish with the way she was gripping her braids.

“You are too strong to waste; you may be useful one day. I would love to see Rahvin’s eyes the day he meets you unblocked,” she told Nynaeve. “I would put you off this hunt of yours, if I could. A pity compulsion is so limited. Still, with the little you have learned, you are too far behind to catch up now. I suppose I must collect you later and see to your . . . retraining.” She stood, and suddenly Elayne’s entire body tingled. Her brain seemed to shiver; she was conscious of nothing but the woman’s voice, roaring in her ears from a great distance. “You will pick up your things from the table, and when you have replaced them where they belong, you will remember nothing of what happened here except that I came thinking you were friends I knew from the country. I was mistaken, I had a cup of tea, and I left.”

Elayne blinked and wondered why she was tying her purse back beside her belt pouch. Nynaeve was frowning at her own hands, adjusting her pouch.

“A nice woman,” Elayne said, rubbing her forehead. She had a headache coming on. “Did she give her name? I don’t remember.”

“Nice?” Nynaeve’s hand came up and gave a sharp tug to her braids; she stared as if it had moved of its own accord. “I . . . do not think she did.”

“What were we talking of when she came in?” Egeanin had just gone. What had it been?

“I remember what I was about to say.” Nynaeve’s voice firmed. “We must find the Black sisters without them suspecting, or we will never have a chance of following them to whatever this thing is that's dangerous to Rand."

"I know," Elayne said patiently. Had she said that already? Of course not. "We *have* discussed it."

At the arched gates leading from the inn's small courtyard, Egeanin paused, studying the hard-faced men who lounged, barefoot and often bare-chested, among the idlers on this side of the narrow street. They looked as if they could use the curved boarding swords hanging at their belts or thrust through their sashes, but none of those faces looked familiar. If any of them had been on Bayle Domon's ship when she took him and it to Falme, she did not remember. If any had been, it was to be hoped none connected a woman in a riding dress to the woman in armor who had captured their vessel.

Suddenly she realized her palms were damp. Aes Sedai. Women who could wield the Power, and not decently leashed. She had sat at the same table with them, talked with them. They were not at all what she had expected; she could not dig that thought out of her head. They could channel, therefore they were dangerous to proper order, therefore they must be safely leashed—and yet. . . . Not at all what she had been taught. It could be *learned.* Learned! As long as she could avoid Bayle Domon—he would surely recognize her—she should be able to return. She had to learn more. More than ever, she had to.

Wishing she had a hooded cloak, she took a firm grip on her staff and started up the street, threading her way into the passing throng. None of the sailors looked at her twice, and she watched them to be sure.

She did not see the pale-haired man in filthy Tanchican garb huddled against the front of a white-plastered wineshop on the other side of the street. His eyes, blue above a dingy veil and a thick mustache held in place with glue, followed her before sliding back to the Three Plum Court. Standing, he crossed the street, ignoring the disgusting way people brushed against him. Egeanin had nearly spotted him when he had forgotten himself enough to break that fool's arm. One of the Blood, as such things were reckoned in these lands, reduced to begging and without enough honor to open his veins. Disgusting. Perhaps he could learn more of what she was up to, in this inn, once they realized he had more coin than his clothes suggested.

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CHAPTER 47

The Truth of a Viewing

The papers scattered on Siuan Sanche's desk held little real interest for her, but she persevered. Others handled the day-to-day routine of the White Tower, of course, to leave the Amyrlin Seat free for important decisions, but her habit had always been to check one or two things at random each day, with no notice beforehand, and she would not break it now. She would not let herself be distracted by worries. Everything was sailing along according to plan. Shifting her striped stole, she dipped her pen carefully in the ink and ticked off another corrected total.

Today she was examining lists of kitchen purchases, and the mason's report on an addition to the library. The sheer number of petty peculations people thought they could slip by always amazed her. So did the number that escaped notice by the women who oversaw these matters. For instance, Laras seemed to think watching accounts was beneath her since her title had been changed officially from simple chief cook to Mistress of the Kitchens. Danelle, on the other hand, the young Brown sister who was supposed to be watching Master Jovarin, the mason, was most likely letting herself be distracted by the books the fellow kept finding for her. That was the only way to explain her failure to question the number of workmen Jovarin claimed to have hired, with the first shipments of stone from Kandor just arriving at Northharbor. He could rebuild the entire library with that many men. Danelle was simply too dreamy, even for a Brown. Perhaps a little time on a farm working penance would wake her. Laras would be more difficult to discipline; she was not Aes Sedai, so her authority with undercooks and scullions and potboys could be swamped all too easily. But perhaps she, too, could be sent for a "rest" in the country. That would. . . .

With a snort of disgust Siuan threw her pen down, grimacing at the blot it made on a page of neatly totaled columns. "Wasting my time deciding whether to send Laras out to pull weeds," she muttered. "The woman is too fat to bend over far enough!"

It was not Laras's weight that had her temper jumping, and she knew it; the woman was no heavier now than she had always been, or so it seemed, and it never interfered with her running the kitchens. There was no news. That was what had her flapping like a fisher-bird whose catch had been stolen. One message from Moiraine that the al'Thor boy had *Callandor*, then nothing in the weeks since, although rumors in the streets were already beginning to get his name right. Still nothing.

Lifting the hinged lid of the ornately carved blackwood box where she kept her most secret papers, she rummaged inside. A small warding woven around the box ensured no hand but hers could safely open it.

The first paper she pulled out was a report that the novice who had seen Min's arrival had vanished from the farm she had been sent to, and the woman who owned the farm, too. Hardly unheard of for a novice to run away, but the farmer leaving too was troublesome. Sahra would have to be found, certainly—she had not progressed far enough in her training to be let loose—but there was no real reason to keep the report in the box. It mentioned neither Min's name nor the reason the girl had been sent to hoe cabbages, but she put it back anyway. These were days to take care that might seem unreasonable at another time.

A description of a gathering in Ghealdan to listen to this man who called himself the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. Masema, it seemed his name was. Odd. That was a Shienaran name. Nearly ten thousand people had come to listen to him speak from a hillside, proclaiming the return of the Dragon, a speech followed by a battle with soldiers trying to disperse them. Aside from the fact that the soldiers apparently got the worst of it, the interesting thing was that this Masema knew Rand al'Thor's name. That definitely went back into the box.

A report that nothing had yet been found of Mazrim Taim. No reason for that to be in there. Another on worsening conditions in Arad Doman and Tarabon. Ships vanishing along the Aryth Ocean coast. Rumors of Tairen incursions into Cairhien. She was getting into the habit of putting everything in this box; none of that needed to be kept secret. Two sisters had vanished in Illian, and another in Caemlyn. She shivered, wondering where the Forsaken were. Too many of her agents had gone silent. There were lionfish out there, and she was swimming in darkness. There it was. The silk-thin slip of paper crackled as she unrolled it.

The sling has been used. The shepherd holds the sword.

The Hall of the Tower had voted as she had expected, unanimously and with no need for arm-twisting, much less invoking her authority. If a man had drawn *Callandor*, he must be the Dragon Reborn, and that man had to be guided by the White Tower. Three Sitters for three different Ajahs had proposed holding all plans close in the Hall before she even suggested it; the surprise had been that one was Elaida, but then the Reds would surely want the tightest hawsers possible kept on a man who could channel. The sole problem had been to stop a delegation from being sent to Tear to take him in hand, and that had not really been difficult, not when she was able to say that her news came from an Aes Sedai who had already managed to put herself close to the man.

But what was he doing now? Why had Moiraine not sent further word? Impatience hung so thick in the Hall now that she almost expected the air to sparkle. She kept a tight hold on her anger. *Burn the woman! Why hasn't she sent word?*

The door crashed open, and she straightened furiously as more than a dozen women strode into her study, led by Elaida. All wore their shawls, most red-fringed, but cool-faced Alviarin, a White, was at Elaida's side, and Joline Maza, a slender Green, and plump Shemerin of the Yellow came close behind with Danelle, her big blue eyes not dreamy at all. In fact, Siuan saw at least one woman from every Ajah except the Blue. Some looked nervous, but most wore grim determination, and Elaida's dark eyes held stern confidence, even triumph.

"What is the meaning of this?" Siuan snapped, slapping the blackwood box shut with a sharp crack. She bounced to her feet and strode around the desk. First Moiraine and now this! "If this is about *Tairen* matters, Elaida, you know better than to bring others into it. And you know better than to walk in here as if this were your mother's kitchen! Make your apologies and leave before I make you wish you were an ignorant novice again!"

Her cold rage should have sent them scurrying, but though a few shifted uneasily, none made a move toward the door. Little Danelle actually smirked at her. And Elaida calmly reached out and pulled the striped stole from Siuan's shoulders. "You will not need this any longer," she said. "You were never fit for it, Siuan."

Shock turned Siuan's tongue to stone. This was madness. This was impossible. In a rage she reached for *saidar*—and suffered her second shock. A barrier lay between her and the True Source, like a wall of thick glass. She stared at Elaida in disbelief.

As if to mock her, the radiance of *saidar* sprang up around Elaida. She stood helpless as the Red sister wove flows of Air around her from shoulders to waist, crushing her arms to her side. She could barely breathe. "You must be mad!" she rasped. "All of you! I'll have your hides for this! Release me!" No one answered; they almost seemed to ignore her.

Alviarin ruffled through the papers on the table, quickly yet unhurriedly. Joline and Danelle and others began tilting up the books on the reading stands, shaking them to see if anything fell out from between the pages. The White sister gave a small hiss of vexation at not finding what she sought on the table, then flipped open the lid of the blackwood box. Instantly the box flared in a ball of flame.

Alviarin leaped back with a cry, shaking a hand where blisters were already forming. "Warded," she muttered, as close to open anger as a White ever came. "So small that I never felt it until too late." Nothing remained of the box and its contents but a heap of gray ash atop a square charred into the tabletop.

Elaida's face showed no disappointment. "I promise you, Siuan, that you will tell me every word that burned, who it was meant for, and to what purpose."

"You must be taken by the Dragon!" Siuan snapped. "I will have your hide for this, Elaida. All of your hides! You will be lucky if the Hall of the Tower doesn't vote to still all of you!"

Elaida's tiny smile did not touch her eyes. "The Hall convened not an hour ago—enough Sitters to meet our laws—and by unanimous vote, as required, you are no longer Amyrlin. It is done, and we are here to see it enforced."

Siuan's stomach turned to ice, and a small voice in the back of her head shrieked, *What do they know? Light, how much do they know? Fool! Blind, fool woman!* She kept her face smooth, though. This was not the first hard corner she had ever been in. A fifteen-year-old girl with nothing but her bait knife, hauled into an alley by four hard-eyed louts with their bellies full of cheap wine—that had been harder to escape than this. So she told herself.

“Enough to meet the laws?” she sneered. “A bare minimum, heavy with your friends and those you can influence or bully.” That Elaida had been able to convince even a relatively small number of Sitters was enough to dry her throat, but she would not let it show. “When the full Hall meets, with all the Sitters, you’ll learn your mistake. Too late! There has never been a rebellion inside the Tower; a thousand years from now they’ll be using your fate to teach novices what happens to rebels.” Tendrils of doubt crept onto some of those faces; it seemed Elaida did not have as tight a grip on her conspirators as she thought. “It’s time to stop trying to hack a hole in the hull, and start bailing. Even you can still mitigate your offense, Elaida.”

Elaida waited with chill calm until she was done. Then her full-armed slap exploded across Siuan’s face; she staggered, silver-black flecks dancing in her vision.

“You are finished,” Elaida said. “Did you think I—we—would allow you to destroy the Tower? Bring her!”

Siuan stumbled as two of the Reds pushed her forward. Barely keeping her feet, she glared at them, but went as they directed. Who did she need to get word to? Whatever charges had been brought, she could counter them, given time. Even charges involving Rand; they could not fasten more than rumors to her, and she had played the Great Game too long to be beaten by rumors. Unless they had Min; Min could clothe rumors in truth. She ground her teeth. *Burn my soul, I’ll use this lot for fish bait!*

In the antechamber, she stumbled again, but not from pushing, this time. She had half-hoped that Leane had been away from her post, but the Keeper stood as Siuan did, arms stiffly at her sides, mouth working soundlessly, furiously, around a gag of Air. She had certainly sensed Leane being bound and never realized it; in the Tower, there was always the feel of women channeling.

Yet it was not the sight of Leane that made her miss her step, but the tall, slender gray-haired man stretched on the floor with a knife rising from his back. Alric had been her Warder for close to twenty years, never complaining when her path kept them in the Tower, never muttering when being the Amyrlin’s Warder sent him hundreds of leagues from her, a thing none of the Gaidin liked.

She cleared her throat, but her voice was still husky when she spoke. “I’ll have your hide salted and stretched in the sun for this, Elaida. I swear it!”

“Consider your own hide, Siuan,” Elaida said, moving closer to stare her in the eyes. “There is more to this than has been revealed so far. I know it. And you are going to tell me every last scrap of it. Every—last—scrap.” The sudden quiet in her voice was more frightening than all her hard stares had been. “I promise it, Siuan. Take her below!”

Clutching bolts of blue silk, Min strolled in through the North Gate near midday, her simper all ready for the guards with the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests, the girlish swirl of her green skirts that Elmindreda would give. She had actually begun before she realized there were no guards. The heavy iron-strapped door of the star-shaped guardhouse stood open; the guardhouse itself looked empty. It was impossible. No gate to the Tower grounds was ever unguarded. Halfway to the huge bone-white shaft of the Tower itself, a plume of smoke was rising above the trees. It seemed to be near the quarters for the young men who studied under the Warders. Maybe the fire had pulled the guards away.

Still feeling a little uneasy, she started down the unpaved path through the wooded part of the grounds, shifting the bolts of silk. She did not really want another dress, but how could she refuse when Laras pressed a purse of silver into her hands and told her to use it for this silk the stout woman had seen; she claimed it was just the color to set off “Elmindreda’s” complexion. Whether or not she wanted her complexion set off was less important than keeping Laras’s goodwill.

A rattle of swords reached her ears through the trees. The Warders must have their students practicing harder than usual.

It was all very irritating. Laras and her beauty hints, Gawyn and his jokes, Galad paying her compliments and never realizing what his face and smile did to a woman’s pulse. Was this how Rand wanted her? Would he actually *see* her, if she wore dresses and simpered at him like a brainless chit?

He has no right to expect it, she thought furiously. It was all his fault. She would not be there now, wearing a fool dress and smiling like an idiot, if not for him. *I wear coat and breeches, and that is that! Maybe I’ll wear a dress once in a while—maybe!—but not to make some man look at me! I* *wager he's staring at some Tairen woman with half her bosom exposed right this minute. I can wear a dress like that. Let's see what he thinks when he sees me in this blue silk. I'll have a neckline down to*—What was she thinking? The man had robbed her of her wits! The Amyrlin Seat was keeping her here, useless, and Rand al'Thor was addling her brain! *Burn him! Burn him for doing this to me!*

The clash of swords came again from the distance, and she stopped as a horde of young men burst out of the trees ahead of her carrying spears and bared blades, Gawyn at their head. She recognized others from among those who had come to study with the Warders. Shouts rose somewhere else in the grounds, a roar of angry men.

"Gawyn! What is happening?"

He whirled at the sound of her voice. Worry and fear filled his blue eyes, and his face was a mask of determination not to give in to them. "Min. What are you doing—? Get out of the grounds, Min. It is dangerous." A handful of the young men ran on, but most waited impatiently for him. It seemed to her that most of the Warders' students were there.

"Tell me what's happening, Gawyn!"

"The Amyrlin was deposed this morning. Leave, Min!"

The bolts of silk fell from her hands. "Deposed? It can't be! How? Why? In the name of the Light, why?"

"Gawyn!" one of the young men called, and others took it up, brandishing their weapons. "Gawyn! The White Boar! Gawyn!"

"I have no time," he told her urgently. "There's fighting everywhere. They say Hammar is trying to break Siuan Sanche free. I have to go to the Tower, Min. Leave! Please!"

He turned and set out at a run toward the Tower. The others followed, bristling with upraised weapons, some still shouting, "Gawyn! The White Boar! Gawyn! Forward the Younglings!"

Min stared after them. "You did not say what side you are on, Gawyn," she whispered.

The sounds of fighting were louder, clearer now that she was paying attention, and the shouts and yells, the clash of steel on steel, seemed to come from every direction. The clamor made her skin crawl and her knees shake; this could not be happening, not here. Gawyn was right. It would be much the safer thing, much the smarter, to leave the Tower grounds immediately. Only there was no telling when or if she would be allowed back, and she could not think of much good she could do outside.

"What good can I do inside?" she asked herself fiercely.

But she did not turn back toward the gate. Leaving the silk where it lay, she hurried into the trees, looking for a place to hide. She did not think anyone would spit "Elmindreda" like a goose—shivering, she wished she had not thought of it that way—but there was no use in taking foolish chances. Sooner or later the fighting had to die down, and by that time she needed to decide what to do next.

In the pitch blackness of the cell, Siuan opened her eyes, stirred, winced, and was still. Was it morning yet outside? The questioning had gone on for a long time. She tried to forget pain in the luxury of knowing she was still breathing. The rough stone beneath her scraped her welts and bruises, though, those on her back. Sweat stung all of them—she felt a solid mass of pain from knees to shoulders—and made her shiver in the cold air, besides. *They could have left me my shift, at least.* The air smelled of old dust and dried mold, of age. One of the deep cells. No one had been confined down here since Artur Hawkwing's time. Not since Bonwhin.

She grimaced into the dark; there was no forgetting. Clamping her teeth, she pushed up to a sitting position on the stone floor and felt around her for a wall to lean against. The stone blocks of the wall were cool against her back. *Small things*, she told herself. *Think of small things. Heat. Cold. I wonder when they'll bring me some water. If they will.*

She could not help feeling for her Great Serpent ring. It was no longer on her finger. Not that she expected it; she thought she remembered when they had ripped it off. Things had grown hazy after a time. Thankfully, blessedly hazy. But she remembered telling them everything, eventually. Almost everything. The triumph of holding back a scrap here, a bit there. In between howling answers, eager to answer if only they would stop, even for a little while, if only. . . . She wrapped her arms around herself to stop her shudders; it did not work very well. *I will remain calm. I am not dead. I must remember that above everything else. I am not dead.*

"Mother?" Leane's unsteady voice came out of the darkness. "Are you awake, Mother?"

"I'm awake," Siuan sighed. She had hoped they had released Leane, put her out of the city. Guilt stabbed her at feeling a bit of comfort from the presence of the other woman sharing her cell. “I am sorry I got you into this, daugh—” No. She had no right to call her that, now. “I am sorry, Leane.”

There was a long moment of silence. “Are you . . . all right, Mother?”

“Siuan, Leane. Just Siuan.” Despite herself she tried to embrace *saidar*. There was nothing there. Not for her. Only the emptiness inside. Never again. A lifetime of purpose, and now she was rudderless, adrift on a sea far darker than this cell. She scrubbed a tear from her cheek, angry at letting it fall. “I am not the Amyrlin Seat anymore, Leane.” Some of the anger crept into her voice. “I suppose Elaida will be raised in my place. If she hasn’t been already. I swear, one day I will feed that woman to the silverpike!”

Leane’s only answer was a long, despairing breath.

The grate of a key in the rusty iron lock brought Siuan’s head up; no one had thought to oil the works before throwing Leane and her in, and the corroded parts did not want to turn. Grimly she forced herself to her feet. “Up, Leane. Get up.” After a moment she heard the other woman complying, and muttering to herself between soft moans.

In a slightly louder voice, Leane said, “What good will it do?”

“At least they won’t find us huddling on the floor and weeping.” She tried to make her voice firm. “We can fight, Leane. As long as we are alive, we can fight.” *Oh, Light, they stilled me! They* stilled *me*!

Forcing her mind to blankness, she clenched her fists, and tried to dig her toes into the uneven stone floor. She wished the noise in her throat did not sound so much like a whimper.

Min set her bundles on the floor and tossed back her cloak so she could use both hands on the key. Twice as long as her hand, it was as rusty as the lock, just like the other keys on the big iron ring. The air was cold and damp, as though summer did not reach this far down.

“Hurry, child,” Laras muttered, holding the lantern for Min, peering both ways down the otherwise dark stone hall. It was hard to believe that the woman, with all her chins, had ever been a beauty, but Min surely thought her beautiful now.

Fighting the key, she shook her head. She had encountered Laras while sneaking back to her room for the plain gray riding dress she now wore, and for a few other things. Actually, she had found the massive woman looking for *her*, in a tizzy of worry about “Elmindreda,” exclaiming over how lucky

Min was to be safe and proposing to all but lock her in her room until the trouble was past to keep her so. She was still not sure how Laras had wormed her intentions out of her, and she still could not get over her shock when the woman reluctantly announced she would help. *A venturesome lass after her own heart indeed. Well, I hope she can—how did she put it?—keep me out of the pickling kettle.* The bloody key would *not* turn; she threw all of her weight into trying to twist it.

In truth, she was grateful to Laras in more ways than one. It was doubtful she could have readied everything by herself, or even found some of it, surely not this quickly. Besides which. . . . Besides which, when she ran into Laras, she had already begun telling herself she was a fool even to think of doing this, that she should be on a horse and off for Tear while she had the chance, before someone decided to add her head to those decorating the front of the Tower. Running away, she suspected, would have been the sort of thing she would never have been able to forget. That alone had made her grateful enough not to object in the slightest when Laras added some pretty dresses to what she herself had already packed. The rouges and powders could always be "lost" somewhere. *Why won't this bloody key turn? Maybe Laras can—*

The key shifted suddenly, twisted with a snap so loud that Min feared something had broken. But when she pushed at the rough wooden door, it opened. Snatching up the bundles, she stepped into the bare stone cell—and stopped in confusion.

The lantern light revealed two women clad only in dark bruises and red welts, shielding their eyes from the sudden light, but for a moment Min was not sure they were the right two. One was tall and coppery-skinned, the other shorter, sturdier, more fair. The faces looked right—almost right—and untouched by whatever had been done to them, so she should have been certain. But the agelessness that marked Aes Sedai seemed to have melted away; she would have had no hesitation at all in thinking these women were just six or seven years older than herself at most, and not Aes Sedai at all. Her face heated with embarrassment at the thought. She saw no images, no auras, around either; there were always images and auras around Aes Sedai. *Stop that*, she told herself.

"Where—?" one of the two began wonderingly, then paused to clear her throat. "How did you get those keys?" It was Siuan Sanche's voice.

“It is her.” Laras sounded disbelieving. She poked Min with a thick finger. “Hurry, child! I am too old and slow to be having adventures.”

Min gave her a startled look; the woman had *insisted* on coming; she would not be left out, she had said. Min wanted to ask Siuan why the pair of them suddenly looked so much younger, but there was no time for frivolous questions. *I’m too bloody used to being Elmindreda!*

Thrusting one of her bundles at each of the naked women, she spoke rapidly. “Clothes. Dress as quickly as you can. I don’t know how much time we have. I let the guard think I’d trade a few kisses for a chance to repay you for a grudge, and while he was distracted, Laras came up behind him and cracked him over the head with a rolling pin. I do not know how long he’ll sleep.” She leaned back through the door to peer worriedly down the hall toward the guardroom. “We had best hurry.”

Siuan had already undone her bundle and begun to put on the clothes it contained. Except for a linen shift, they were all plain woolens in shades of brown, suitable for farm women come to the White Tower to consult the Aes Sedai, though the skirts divided for riding were a little unusual. Laras had done most of the needlework; Min had mostly just stuck herself. Leane was also covering her nakedness, but she seemed more interested in the short-bladed knife hanging from her belt than in the clothes themselves.

Three plainly dressed women had a chance, at least, of leaving the Tower without attracting notice. A number of petitioners and people seeking help had been caught inside the Tower by the fighting; three more creeping out of hiding should be hustled into the street at worst. So long as they were not recognized. The other women’s faces might help, too. No one was likely to take a pair of young—young-seeming, at least—women for the Amyrlin Seat and the Keeper of the Chronicles. Former Amyrlin and former Keeper, she reminded herself.

“Only one guard?” Siuan said, wincing as she tugged on thick stockings. “Strange. They’d guard a cutpurse better than that.” Eyeing Laras, she pushed her feet into the sturdy shoes. “It is good to see some do not believe the charges against me. Whatever they are.”

The stout woman frowned and lowered her chins, giving herself a fourth. “I am loyal to the Tower,” she said sternly. “Such matters are not for me. I am only a cook. This foolish girl has had me remembering too much of being a foolish girl myself. I think—Seeing you—It is time for me to remember I am not a willowy girl any longer." She pushed the lantern into Min's hands.

Min caught her stout arm as she turned to go. "Laras, you won't give us away? Not now, after all you have done."

The woman's wide face split in a smile, half-reminiscent, half-rueful. "Oh, Elmindreda, you do remind me of me when I was your age. Foolish doings, and near to getting myself hanged, sometimes. I will not betray you, child, but I must live here. When Second is rung, I will send a girl with wine for the guard. If he has not wakened or been discovered by then, that will give you more than an hour." Turning to the other two women, she suddenly wore the hard scowl Min had seen directed at undercooks and the like. "You use that hour well, hear! They mean to stick you in the scullery, I understand, so they can haul you out for examples. I'd not care one way or the other—such matters are for Aes Sedai, not cooks; one Amyrlin is the same as another, to me—but if you get this child caught, you can expect me to be striping your hides from sunup to sundown whenever you're not head-down in greasy pots or cleaning slop jars! You will wish they had cut off your heads before I am done. And don't think they'll believe I helped. Everyone knows I keep to my kitchens. You mark me, and jump!" The smile popped back onto her face, and she pinched Min's cheek. "You hurry them along, child. Oh, I am going to miss dressing you. Such a pretty child." With a last vigorous pinch, she waddled out of the cell at a near trot.

Min rubbed her cheek irritably; she hated it when Laras did that. The woman was as strong as a horse. Near to *hanging*? What kind of "lively girl" had Laras been?

Gingerly pulling her dress over her head, Leane sniffed loudly. "To think she could speak to you in that manner, Mother!" Her face popped out at the top, scowling. "I am surprised she helped at all if she feels that way."

"But she did help," Min told her. "Remember that. And I think she'll keep her word not to give us away. I am sure of it." Leane sniffed again.

Siuan swung her cloak around her shoulders. "It makes a difference, Leane, that I have no more claim to that title. It makes a difference when tomorrow you and I might be two of her scullery girls." Leane clasped her hands to keep them from shaking and would not look at her. Siuan went on calmly, if in a dry tone. "I also suspect Laras will keep her word about . . . other things . . . so even if you don't care whether Elaida hangs us up like a pair of netted sharks for the world to see, I suggest you move yourself.

Myself, I hated greasy pots when I was a girl, and I don’t doubt I still would.”

Leane sullenly began doing up the laces of the country dress.

Siuan turned her attention to Min. “You may not be so eager to help us when I tell you we’ve both been . . . stilled.” Her voice did not shake, but it was stiff with the effort of saying the word, and her eyes looked pained, and lost. It was a shock to realize her calm was all on the surface. “Any one of the Accepted could tie the pair of us into a running sheepsfoot, Min. Most of the novices could.”

“I know,” Min said, careful to keep her tone clear of the smallest hint of sympathy. Sympathy now might break what self-control the other women had left, and she needed them in control of themselves. “It was announced at every square in the city, and posted wherever they could nail up a notice. But you are still alive.” Leane gave a bitter laugh, which she ignored. “We had best go. That guard might wake, or somebody check on him.”

“Lead, Min,” Siuan said. “We are in your hands.” After a moment Leane gave a short nod and hurriedly donned her cloak.

In the guardroom at the end of the dark hall, the lone guard lay stretched out, facedown on the dusty floor. The helmet that would have saved him a sore head sat on the rough plank table beside the single lantern that provided the room’s light. He seemed to be breathing all right. Min did not spare him more than a glance, though she hoped he was not badly hurt; he had not tried to press the advantage of her offer.

She hurried Siuan and Leane through the far door, all thick planks and wide iron straps, up the narrow, stone stairs. They had to keep moving. Passing for petitioners would not save them from questioning if they were seen coming from the cells.

They saw no more guards, nor anyone else, as they climbed out of the bowels of the Tower, but Min still found herself holding her breath until they reached the small door that let into the Tower proper. Cracking it just enough to poke her head through, she peeked both ways down the corridor.

Gilded lamp stands stood against frieze-banded walls of white marble. To the right two women moved swiftly out of sight without looking back. The sureness of their steps marked them Aes Sedai even if she could not see their faces; in the Tower, even a queen walked hesitantly. In the other direction half a dozen men stalked away, just as clearly Warders, with their wolfish grace and cloaks that faded into the surroundings.

She waited until the Warders were gone, too, before slipping through the doorway. “It’s clear. Come on. Keep your hoods up and your heads down. Act a little frightened.” For her part, it was no pretense. From the silent way the two women followed her, she did not think they needed to pretend either.

The halls of the Tower were seldom full, yet now they seemed empty. Occasionally someone appeared for a moment ahead of them, or down a side corridor, but whether Aes Sedai or Warder or servant, all were hurrying, too intent on their own affairs to notice anyone else. The Tower was silent, too.

Then they passed a crossing hallway where dark blotches of dried blood flecked the pale green floor tiles. Two larger patches stretched off in long smears, as if bodies had been dragged away.

Siuan stopped, staring. “What has happened?” she demanded. “Tell me, Min!” Leane gripped the hilt of her belt knife and peered around as if expecting an attack.

“Fighting,” Min said reluctantly. She had hoped the two women would be out of the Tower grounds, even out of the city, before learning of this. She herded them around the dark stains, prodded them on when they tried to look back. “It began yesterday, right after you were taken, and did not stop until maybe two hours ago. Not completely.”

“You mean the Gaidin?” Leane exclaimed. “Warders, fighting *each other*?”

“Warders, the guardsmen, everyone. It started when some men who came claiming to be masons—two or three hundred of them—tried to seize the Tower itself right after your arrest was announced.”

Siuan scowled. “Danelle! I should have realized there was more to it than not paying attention.” Her face twisted more, until Min thought she might begin crying. “Artur Hawkwing could not do it, but we did it ourselves.” Edge of tears or not, her voice was fierce. “The Light help us, we have broken the Tower.” Her long sigh seemed to empty her of breath, and anger, too. “I suppose,” she said sadly after a moment, “I should be glad that some of the Tower supported me, but I almost wish they had not.” Min tried to keep her face expressionless, but those sharp blue eyes seemed to interpret every flicker of an eyelash. “Or did they support me, Min?”

“Some did.” She had no intention of telling her how few, not yet. But she had to prevent Siuan thinking she still had partisans inside the Tower.

"Elaida didn't wait to find out if the Blue Ajah would stand for you or not. There isn't a Blue sister still in the Tower, not alive, I know that."

"Sheriam?" Leane asked anxiously. "Anaiya?"

"I don't know. There are not many Greens left, either. Not in the Tower. The other Ajahs split, one way and another. Most of the Reds are still here. As far as I know, everybody who opposed Elaida has either fled or else they are dead. Siuan. . . ." It seemed odd, calling her that—Leane muttered angrily under her breath—but calling her Mother would only be a mockery now. "Siuan, the charges posted against you claim you and Leane arranged Mazrim Taim's escape. Logain got away during the fighting, and they've blamed that on you, too. They don't quite name you Darkfriends—I suppose that would be too close to Black Ajah—but they do not miss by much. I think everyone is meant to understand, though."

"They won't even admit the truth," Siuan said softly, "that they mean to do exactly what they pulled me down for."

"Darkfriends?" Leane murmured in bewilderment. "They named us . . . ?"

"Why would they not?" Siuan breathed. "What would they not dare, when they dared so much?"

They hunched their shoulders in their cloaks and let Min lead them as she would. She just wished their faces did not look so hopeless.

As they drew nearer an outside door, she began to breathe more easily. She had horses hidden in a wooded part of the grounds, not far from one of the western gates. There was still the question of how easy it would be to actually ride out, but once they reached the horses she would feel the next thing to free. Surely the gate guards would not stop three women leaving. She kept telling herself that.

The door she sought appeared ahead—a small, plain-paneled door, letting onto a path not much used, just opposite where this hall met the broad corridor that ran all the way around the Tower—and Elaida's face caught her eye, sweeping down the outer corridor toward her.

Min's knees thudded onto the floor tiles, and she huddled, head down and face hidden by her hood, heart trying to pound through her ribs. *A petitioner, that's all I am. Just a simple woman, with nothing to do with what's happened. Oh, Light, please!* She raised her head just enough to peek under the edge of her hood, half-expecting to see a gloating Elaida staring down at her.

Elaida swept by without a glance in Min's direction, the broad, striped stole of the Amyrlin Seat around her shoulders. Alviarin followed, wearing the stole of the Keeper of the Chronicles, white for her Ajah. A dozen or more Aes Sedai passed at Alviarin's heels, mostly Reds, though Min saw two yellow-fringed shawls, a green one and a brown. Six Warders flanked the procession, hands on hilts and eyes wary. Those eyes swept across the three kneeling women and dismissed them.

They were all three kneeling, Min realized, and realized, too, that she had almost expected Siuan and Leane to launch themselves at Elaida's throat. Both women had lifted their heads just enough to watch the procession make its way on down the corridor.

"Very few women have been stilled," Siuan said, as if to herself, "and none have survived long, but it is said that one way to survive is to find something you want as much as you wanted to channel." That lost look was gone from her eyes. "At first I thought I wanted to gut Elaida and hang her in the sun to dry. Now I know I want nothing—nothing!—so much as the day I can tell that leech of a woman that she'll live a long life showing others what happens to anyone who claims I am a Darkfriend!"

"And Alviarin," Leane said in a tight voice. "And Alviarin!"

"I was afraid they'd sense me," Siuan went on, "but there is nothing for them to sense, now. An advantage to having been . . . stilled, it seems." Leane jerked her head angrily, and Siuan said, "We must use whatever advantages we can find. And be glad for them." The last sounded as if she were trying to convince herself.

The final Warder disappeared around the distant curve, and Min swallowed the lump in her throat. "We can talk of advantages later," she croaked, and stopped to swallow again. "Let us just go to the horses. That *has* to have been the worst."

Indeed, as they hurried out of the Tower into the noonday sun, it seemed the worst must have passed. A column of smoke rising toward a cloudless sky in the east of the Tower grounds was the only sign of old trouble. Groups of men moved in the distance, but none gave a second glance to the three women as they scurried past the library, which was built like towering waves frozen in stone. A footpath led deeper into the grounds and westward, into a wood of oaks and evergreens that could have stood far from any city. Min's steps lightened when she found the three saddled horses still tied where she and Laras had left them, in a small clearing surrounded by leatherleaf and paperbark.

Siuan went immediately to a stout, shaggy mare two hands shorter than the others. “A suitable mount for my present circumstances. And she looks more placid than the other two; I was never a good rider.” She stroked the mare’s nose, and the mare nuzzled into her palm. “What is her name, Min? Do you know?”

“Bela. She belongs to—”

“Her horse.” Gawyn stepped from behind a wide-trunked paperbark, one hand on the long hilt of his sword. The blood streaking his face made exactly the pattern Min had seen in her viewing, her first day back in Tar Valon. “I knew you must be up to something, Min, when I saw her horse.” His red-gold hair was matted with blood, his blue eyes half-dazed, but he walked toward them smoothly, a tall man with a catlike grace. A cat stalking mice.

“Gawyn,” Min began, “we—”

His sword was out of its scabbard, flicking back Siuan’s hood, sharp edge laid against the side of her throat, all faster than Min could follow. Siuan’s breath caught audibly, and she was still, looking up at him, outwardly as serene as though she yet wore the stole.

“Don’t, Gawyn!” Min gasped. “You must not!” She took a step toward him, but he flung up his free hand without looking at her, and she stopped. He was as tight as coiled steel, ready to burst out in any direction. She noticed Leane had shifted her cloak to hide one hand and prayed the woman was not fool enough to draw her belt knife.

Gawyn studied Siuan’s face, then slowly nodded. “It is you. I was not sure, but it is. This . . . disguise cannot—” He did not appear to move, but a sudden widening of Siuan’s eyes spoke of a keen edge pressing harder. “Where are my sister and Egwene? What have you done with them?” Most frightening to Min, with that blood-masked face and half-glazed eyes, with his body tensed almost to quivering and his hand upflung as if he had forgotten it, he never raised his voice or put any emotion into it. He only sounded tired, more tired than she had ever heard anyone sound in her life.

Siuan’s voice was nearly as neutral. “The last I heard from them, they were safe and well. I cannot say where they are, now. Would you rather they were here, in the middle of this feeding frenzy?”

“No Aes Sedai word games,” he said softly. “Tell me where they were, straight out, so I know you speak the truth.”

“Illian,” Siuan said without hesitation. “In the city itself. They are studying with an Aes Sedai named Mara Tomanes. They should still be there.”

“Not Tear,” he murmured. For a moment he appeared to think that over. Abruptly, he said, “They say you are a Darkfriend. Black Ajah, that would be, would it not?”

“If you really believe that,” Siuan said calmly, “then strike off my head.”

Min almost screamed as his knuckles whitened on his sword hilt. Slowly she reached out and rested her fingers against his outstretched wrist, careful not to make him think she meant to do anything more than touch. It was like resting her fingers on rock. “Gawyn, you know me. You can’t think I would help the Black Ajah.” His eyes never wavered from Siuan’s face, never blinked. “Gawyn, Elayne supports her and everything she’s done. Your own sister, Gawyn.” His flesh was still stone. “Egwene believes in her, too, Gawyn.” His wrist trembled under her fingers. “I swear it, Gawyn. Egwene believes.”

His eyes flickered to her, then back to Siuan. “Why shouldn’t I drag you back by the scruff of your neck? Give me a reason.”

Siuan met his stare with a good deal more calm than Min felt. “You could do it, and I suppose my struggles wouldn’t give you much more trouble than a kitten’s. Yesterday, I was one of the most powerful women in the world. Perhaps the most powerful. Kings and queens would come if I summoned them, even if they hated the Tower and all it stood for. Today, I’m afraid that I may have nothing to eat tonight, and that I’ll have to sleep under a bush. In the space of one day I’ve been reduced from the most powerful woman in the world to one hoping to find a farm where I might earn my keep in the fields. Whatever you think I have done, isn’t that a fitting punishment?”

“Perhaps,” he said after a moment. Min took a deep breath of relief as he resheathed his sword in a flowing motion. “But that is not why I will let you go. Elaida might take your head yet, and I cannot allow that. I want what you know to be there, if I need it.”

“Gawyn,” Min said, “come with us.” A Warder-trained swordsman might be useful in the days to come. “That way, you’d have her ready to hand to answer your questions." Siuan's gaze flickered to her, not really leaving Gawyn's face and not exactly indignant; she pressed on anyway. "Gawyn, Egwene and Elayne believe in her. Can't you believe, too?"

"Do not ask more than I can give," he said quietly. "I will take you to the nearest gate. You would never get out without me. That's all I can do, Min, and it is more than I should. Your arrest has been ordered; did you know that?" His eyes swung back to Siuan. "If anything happens to them," he said in that expressionless voice, "to Egwene or my sister, I will find you, wherever you hide, and I will make sure the same happens to you." Abruptly he stalked a dozen paces away and stood with his arms folded, head down as if he could not bear to look at them any longer.

Siuan half-raised a hand to her throat; a tiny line of red on the fair skin marked where his blade had rested. "I've been too long with the Power," she said, a trifle unsteadily. "I had forgotten what it is like to face someone who can pick you up and snap you like a thread." She peered at Leane then, as if seeing her for the first time, and touched her own face as though unsure what it looked like. "From what I have read it is supposed to take longer to fade, but perhaps Elaida's rough treatment had something to do with it. A disguise, he called it, and it may serve for one." She clambered awkwardly onto Bela's back, handling the reins as if the shaggy mare were a spirited stallion. "Another advantage, it seems, to being. . . . I have to learn to say it without flinching. I have been stilled." She said the words slowly and deliberately, then nodded. "There. If Leane is any guide, I've lost a good fifteen years, maybe more. I've known women who would pay any price for that. A third advantage." She glanced at Gawyn. He still had his back turned, but she lowered her voice anyway. "Along with a certain loosening of the tongue, shall we say? I had not thought of Mara in years. A friend of my girlhood."

"Will you age like the rest of us, now?" Min asked as she climbed into her saddle. Better than commenting on the lie. Better just to remember that she *could* lie now. Leane mounted the third mare with smooth skill and walked her in a circle, testing her step; she had surely been on a horse before.

Siuan shook her head. "I really don't know. No stilled woman has ever lived long enough to find out. I intend to."

"Do you mean to go," Gawyn asked harshly, "or sit there talking?" Without waiting for an answer, he strode off through the trees.

They heeled their mares after him, Siuan pulling her hood well forward to hide her face. Disguise or no, it seemed she was taking no chances. Leane was already shrouded as deeply in hers as she could be. After a moment, Min imitated them. Elaida wanted *her* arrested? That had to mean that she knew “Elmindreda” was Min. How long had the woman known? How long had Min been walking around thinking herself hidden while Elaida watched and smirked at her for a fool? It was a shivery thought.

As they caught up to Gawyn at a graveled path, twenty or more young men appeared, striding toward them, some perhaps a few years older than he, others little more than boys. Min suspected some of those last did not have to shave yet, at least not regularly. All carried swords at their belts or on their backs, though, and three or four had breastplates. More than one sported a bloody bandage, and most wore clothes spotted with blood. Each had the same unblinking stare as Gawyn. At the sight of him they stopped, clapping right fists to chests. Without slowing, Gawyn acknowledged the salute with a nod, and the young men fell in behind the women’s horses.

“The students?” Siuan murmured. “They also took part in the fighting?”

Min nodded, keeping her face expressionless. “They call themselves the Younglings.”

“A fitting name.” Siuan sighed.

“Some are no more than children,” Leane muttered.

Min was not about to tell them that Warders from the Blue and Green Ajahs had planned to free them before they were stilled, and might have succeeded if Gawyn had not roused the students, “children” too, and led them into the Tower to stop it. The fighting had been among the deadliest, student against teacher and no mercy, no quarter.

The tall, bronze-studded Alindrelle Gates stood open, but guarded heavily. Some guards wore the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests; others had workmen’s coats, and mismatched breastplates and helmets. Guardsmen, and fellows who had come disguised as masons. Both sorts looked hard and resourceful, used to their weapons, but they kept apart, eyeing each other distrustfully. A grizzled officer stood out from the Tower guardsmen with his arms folded and watched Gawyn and the others approach.

“Writing materials!” Gawyn snapped. “Quickly!”

“Well, you must be these Younglings I’ve heard of,” the grizzled man said. “A fine bunch of bloody young cockerels, but I’ve had orders to let no one leave the Tower grounds. Signed by the Amyrlin Seat herself. Who do you think you are to countermand that?”

Gawyn raised his head slowly. “I am Gawyn Trakand of Andor,” he said softly. “And I mean to see these women leave, or you dead.” The other Younglings moved up behind him, spreading out to face the guards with hands on swords, unblinking, perhaps not caring that they were outnumbered.

The grizzled man shifted uneasily, and one of the others muttered, “He’s the one they say killed Hammar and Coulin.”

After a moment, the officer jerked his head toward the guardhouse, and one of the guardsmen ran inside, returning with a lapdesk, a small red stick of sealing wax burning in a brass holder at one corner. Gawyn let the man hold the desk while he scribbled furiously.

“This will let you past the bridge guards,” he said, letting a pool of red wax drip beneath his signature. He pressed his signet ring into it firmly.

“You killed Coulin?” Siuan said in a cold tone fitting her former office. “And Hammar?”

Min’s heart sank. *Be quiet, Siuan! Remember who you are now, and be quiet!*

Gawyn spun to face the three women, his eyes like blue fire. “Yes,” he grated. “They were my friends, and I respected them, but they sided with . . . with Siuan Sanche, and I had to—” Abruptly he shoved the paper he had sealed into Min’s hand. “Go! Go, before I change my mind!” He slapped her mare, then darted to slap the other two as Min’s horse leaped through the open gates. “Go!”

Min let her horse cross the great plaza surrounding the Tower grounds at a quick trot, Siuan and Leane right behind her. The plaza was empty, and so were the streets beyond. The ring of their horses’ hooves on the paving stones echoed hollowly. Whoever had not already fled the city was hiding.

She studied Gawyn’s paper as they rode. The blob of red wax bore the imprint of a charging boar. “This just says we have permission to leave. We could use it to board a ship as well as at the bridges.” It seemed smart to be going a way no one knew, not even Gawyn. She did not really think he would change his mind, but he was brittle, ready to shatter at the wrong blow.

“That might be a good idea,” Leane said. “I always thought Galad was the more dangerous of those two, but I am no longer sure. Hammar, and Coulin. . . .” She shivered. “A ship would take us farther, faster than these horses can.”

Siuan shook her head. “Most of the Aes Sedai who fled will have crossed the bridges, for sure. That is the quickest way out of the city if someone might be chasing you, quicker than waiting while a ship’s crew casts off. I must stay close to Tar Valon if I’m to gather them in.”

“They won’t follow you,” Leane said in a monotone freighted with meaning. “You have no right to the stole any longer. Not even to the shawl or the ring.”

“I may no longer wear the stole,” Siuan replied just as flatly, “but I still know how to ready a crew for a storm. And since I cannot wear the stole, I must see they choose the right woman in my place. I’ll not let Elaida get away with calling herself the Amyrlin. It has to be someone strong in the Power, someone who sees things the right way.”

“Then you mean to go on aiding this . . . this *Dragon*!” Leane snapped.

“What else would you have me do? Curl up and die?”

Leane shuddered as if she had been struck in the face, and they rode in silence for a time. All of those fabulous buildings around them, like wind-sculpted cliffs and waves and great flights of birds, loomed frighteningly with no people in the streets save themselves, and one lone fellow who came darting around a corner up ahead, scuttling from doorway to doorway as if scouting their way for them. He did not lessen the emptiness, only emphasized it.

“What else can we do?” Leane said eventually. She rode slumped in her saddle now like a sack of grain. “I feel so . . . empty. Empty.”

“Find something to fill it up,” Siuan told her firmly. “Anything. Cook for the hungry, tend the sick, find a husband and raise a house ful of children. Me, I mean to see Elaida does not get away with this. I could almost forgive her, if she truly believed I had endangered the Tower. Almost, I could. Almost. But she has been filled with envy since the day I was raised Amyrlin instead of her. That drives her as much as anything else, and for that I mean to pull her down. That is what fills me, Leane. That, and the fact that Rand al’Thor must not fall into her hands.”

“Perhaps that will be enough.” The coppery-skinned woman sounded doubtful, but she straightened. The contrast between her obvious experience and Siuan's precarious seat on the shorter mare made her look as if she must be the leader. "But how can we even begin? We have three horses, the clothes on our backs, and whatever Min has in her purse. Hardly enough to challenge the Tower."

"I am glad you did not decide on a husband and home. We will find other—" Siuan grimaced. "We will find Aes Sedai who fled, find what we need. We may have more than you think, Leane. Min, what does that pass Gawyn gave us say? Does it mention three women? What? Quickly, girl."

Min glared at her back. Siuan had been peering at the darting man ahead, a large, dark-haired fellow, dressed well but plainly in somber browns. The woman sounded as if she were still Amyrlin. *Well, I wanted her to find her backbone, didn't I?*

Siuan turned to stare at her with those sharp blue eyes; somehow they seemed no less intimidating than before. " 'The bearers are authorized to depart Tar Valon on my authority,' " Min quoted hastily from memory. " 'Who impedes them will answer to me.' Signed—"

"I know his name," Siuan snapped. "Follow me." She heeled Bela's flanks, nearly losing her seat when the shaggy mare lumbered to a slow gallop. She hung on, though, bouncing awkwardly and drumming her heels for more speed.

Min exchanged one startled look with Leane, and they were both galloping after her. The man looked back at the sound of running hooves and began to run himself, but Siuan cut Bela in front of him; he bounced off the mare with a grunt. Min reached them just in time to hear Siuan say, "I did not think to meet you here, Logain."

Min gaped. It *was* him. Those despairing eyes and that once handsome face framed by dark hair curling to his broad shoulders were unmistakable. Just who they needed to find. A man the Tower wanted very likely as much as Siuan.

Logain slumped to his knees as though his fatigued legs would not hold him any longer. "I cannot harm anyone now," he said tiredly, staring at the paving stones beneath Bela's hooves. "I just wanted to get away, to die somewhere in peace. If you only knew what it was like to have lost. . . ." Leane sawed her reins angrily as he trailed off; he began again without noticing. "The bridges are all guarded. They will let no one across. They did not know me, but they would not let me cross. I have tried them all."

Abruptly he laughed, wearily, but as if it were very funny indeed. “I have tried them all.”

“I think,” Min said carefully, “we should be going. He probably wants to avoid those *who must be looking for him.*” Siuan shot her a look that almost made her rein her horse back, all icy eyes and hard chin. It would not have been dreadful if the woman had retained a little of the uncertainty she displayed previously.

Raising his head, the big man looked from one of them to the next, a slow frown forming. “You are not Aes Sedai. Who are you? What do you want of me?”

“I am the woman who can take you out of Tar Valon,” Siuan told him. “And perhaps give you a chance to strike back at the Red Ajah. You would like a chance to get back at those who captured you, wouldn’t you?”

A shudder passed through him. “What must I do?” he said slowly.

“Follow me,” she replied. “Follow me, and remember that I am the only one in the entire world who will give you your chance of revenge.”

From his knees he studied them with his head tilted, examining each face, then pushed himself to his feet, his eyes fixed on Siuan. “I am your man,” he said simply.

Leane’s face looked as incredulous as Min felt. What use under the Light could Siuan possibly have for a man of doubtful sanity who had once falsely proclaimed himself the Dragon Reborn? At the least he might turn on them to steal one of their horses! Eyeing the height of him, the breadth of his shoulders, Min thought they had better keep their belt knives handy. Suddenly, for a moment, that flaring halo of gold and blue shone about his head, speaking of glory to come as surely as it had the first time she had seen it. She shivered. Viewings. Images.

She glanced over her shoulder toward the Tower, the thick white shaft dominating the city, whole and straight, yet broken as surely as if it lay in ruins. For a moment she let herself think of the images she had glimpsed, just for a moment, flickering around Gawyn’s head. Gawyn kneeling at Egwene’s feet with his head bowed, and Gawyn breaking Egwene’s neck, first one then the other, as if either could be the future.

The things she saw were very rarely as clear in meaning as those two, and she had never before seen that fluttering back and forth, as though not even the viewing could tell which would be the true future. Worse, she had a feeling near to certainty that it was what she had done this day that had turned Gawyn toward those two possibilities.

Despite the sun, she shivered again. *What's done is done.* She glanced at the two Aes Sedai—former Aes Sedai—both now studying Logain as though he were a trained hound, ferocious, possibly dangerous, but useful. Siuan and Leane turned their horses toward the river, Logain striding between. Min followed more slowly. *Light, I hope it was worth it.*

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CHAPTER 48

An Offer Refused

"Is that the kind of woman you like?" Aviendha said contemptuously. Rand looked down at her, striding along at Jeade'en's stirrup in her heavy skirts, brown shawl doubled over her head. Big blue-green eyes flashed up at him from beneath her wide headscarf as if she wished she still had the spear the Wise Ones had scolded her for taking up during the Trolloc attack.

Sometimes it made him uncomfortable, her walking while he rode, but he had tried walking with her, and his feet were grateful for a horse. Occasionally—*very* occasionally—he had managed to get her to ride behind his saddle, by complaining that he was getting a crick in his neck talking to her. Riding a horse did not exactly violate custom, it turned out, yet contempt for not using your own legs to carry you kept her afoot most of the time. One laugh from any of the Aiel, especially a Maiden, even one looking the other way, was enough to have her off Jeade'en in a flash.

"She is soft, Rand al'Thor. Weak."

He glanced back over at the boxlike white wagon leading the peddlers' train in a crooked, lurching snake across the dusty, broken landscape, escorted by Jindo Maidens again today. Isendre was up with Kadere and the driver, seated on the heavyset peddler's lap, her chin on his shoulder while he held a small, blue silk parasol to shade her—and himself, too—from the harsh sun. Even in a white coat, Kadere continually mopped his dark face with a large handkerchief, more affected by the heat than she, in her sleek, clinging gown that matched the parasol. Rand was not close enough to be sure, but he thought her dark eyes were on him above the misty scarf wrapped about her face and head. She usually seemed to be watching him. Kadere did not appear to mind.

"I do not think Isendre is soft," he said quietly, adjusting the *shoufa* around his head; it did keep the broiling sun off after a fashion. He had resisted donning any more Aiel garb, no matter how much more suited to the climate than his red wool coat. Whatever his blood, whatever the marks on his forearms, he was not Aiel, and he would not pretend. Whatever he had to do, he could hang on to that scrap of decency. “No, I would not say that.”

On the driver’s seat of the second wagon, fat Keille and the gleeman, Natael, were arguing again. Natael had the reins, though he did not drive as well as the man who usually did the job. Sometimes they looked at Rand, too, quick glances before diving back into their quarrel. But then, everyone did. The long column of Jindo on the other side of him, the Wise Ones beyond them, with Moiraine and Egwene and Lan. Among the more distant, thicker line of Shaido he thought heads turned toward him, too. It did not surprise him now any more than it ever had. He was He Who Comes With the Dawn. Everyone wanted to know what he would do. They would find out soon enough.

“Soft,” Aviendha grunted. “Elayne is not soft. You belong to Elayne; you should not be caressing eyes with this milk-skinned wench.” She shook her head fiercely, muttering half to herself, “Our ways shock her. She could not accept them. Why should I care if she can? I want no part of this! It *cannot* be! If I could, I would take you *gai’shain* and give you to Elayne!”

“Why should Isendre accept Aiel ways?”

The wide-eyed look she gave him was so startled he almost laughed. Immediately she scowled as if he had done something infuriating. Aielwomen were surely no easier to understand than any others.

“You are certainly not soft, Aviendha.” She should take it for a compliment; the woman was as rough as a honing stone sometimes. “Explain to me about the roofmistress again. If Rhuarc is clan chief of the Taardad and chief of Cold Rocks Hold, how is it that the hold belongs to his wife and not him?”

She glowered at him a moment longer, lips working as she muttered under her breath, before answering. “Because she is *roofmistress*, you stoneheaded wetlander. A man cannot own a roof any more than he can own land! Sometimes you wetlanders sound like savages.”

“But if Lian is roofmistress of Cold Rocks because she is Rhuarc’s wife—”

“That is different! Will you never understand? A child understands!” Taking a deep breath, she adjusted the shawl around her face. She was a pretty woman, except for looking at him most of the time as if he had committed some crime against her. What it might be, he did not know. White-haired Bair, leathery-faced and as reluctant to speak of Rhuidean as ever, had finally, unwillingly told him that Aviendha had *not* visited the glass columns: she would not do that until she was ready to become a Wise One. So why did she hate him? It was a mystery he would have liked an answer to.

“I will attack it from another direction,” she grumbled at him. “When a woman is to marry, if she does not already own a roof, her family builds one for her. On her wedding day her new husband carries her away from her family across his shoulder, with his brothers holding off her sisters, but at the door he puts her down and asks her permission to enter. The roof is *hers*. She can. . . .”

These lectures had been the most pleasant thing in the eleven days and nights since the Trolloc attack. Not that she had been willing to talk at first, beyond one more tirade on his supposed ill-treatment of Elayne and later another embarrassing lecture meant to convince him Elayne was the perfect woman. Not until he mentioned to Egwene in passing that if Aviendha would not even speak to him, he wished she would at least stop staring at him. Within the hour a white-robed *gai’shain* man came for Aviendha.

Whatever the Wise Ones had to say to her, she returned in a quivering fury to demand—demand!—that he let her teach him about Aiel ways and customs. No doubt in hope he would reveal something of his plans by the questions he asked. After the viperish subtleties of Tear, the openness of the Wise Ones’ spying was refreshing. Still, it was doubtless wise to learn what he could, and talking with Aviendha could actually be enjoyable, especially on those occasions when she seemed to forget she despised him for whatever reason. Of course, whenever she realized they had begun to talk like two people instead of captor and captive, she did have a tendency to throw one of her white-hot outbursts, as though he had lured her into a trap.

Yet even with that their conversations were pleasurable, certainly by comparison with the rest of the journey. He was even beginning to find her tantrums amusing, though he was wise enough not to let her know. If she saw a man she hated, at least she was too wrapped up in that to see He Who Comes With the Dawn, or the Dragon Reborn. Just Rand al’Thor. At any rate, she knew what she thought of him. Not like Elayne, with one letter that made his ears grow hot and another written the same day that made him wonder if he had grown fangs and horns like a Trolloc.

Min was just about the only woman he had ever met who had not tangled his wits into a ball. But she was off in the Tower—safe there, at least—and that was one place he meant to avoid. Sometimes he thought life would be simpler if he could just forget women altogether. Now Aviendha had started creeping into his dreams, as if Min and Elayne were not bad enough. Women tied his emotions in knots, and he had to be clearheaded now. Clearheaded and cold.

He realized he was looking at Isendre again. She wriggled slender fingers at him past Kadere's ear; he was sure those full lips curved into a smile. *Oh, yes. Dangerous. I have to be cold and hard as steel. Sharp steel.*

Eleven days and nights into the twelfth, and nothing else had changed. Days and nights of odd rock formations and flat-topped stone spires and buttes thrusting up from a broken, blistered land crisscrossed by mountains seemingly stuck in at random. Days of baking sun and searing winds, nights of bone-shaking cold. Whatever grew seemed to have thorns or spines, or else a touch itched like fury. Some Aviendha said were poisonous; that list seemed longer than the one of those edible. The only water was in hidden springs and tanks, though she pointed out plants that meant a deep hole would fill with slow seepage, enough to keep one or two men alive, and others that could be chewed for a sour, watery pulp.

One night lions killed two of the Shaido packhorses, roaring in the darkness as they were driven from their prey to vanish into the gullies. A wagon driver disturbed a small brown snake as they were making camp the fourth evening. A two-step, Aviendha called it later, and it proved its name. The fellow screamed and tried to run for the wagons despite seeing Moiraine hurrying toward him; he fell on his face at his second stride, dead before the Aes Sedai could dismount from her white mare. Aviendha listed venomous snakes, spiders and lizards. Poisonous lizards! Once she found one for him, two feet long and thick, with yellow stripes running down its bronze scales. Casually pinning it under a soft-booted foot, she drove her knife into the thing's wide head, then held it up where he could see the clear, oily fluid oozing over sharp bony ridges in its mouth. A *gara*, she explained, could bite through a boot; it could also kill a bull. Others were worse, of course. The *gara* was slow, and not really dangerous unless you were stupid enough to step on it.

When she flung the huge lizard off of her blade, the yellow and bronze faded right into the cracked clay. Oh, yes. Just do not be stupid enough to step on it.

Moiraine divided her time between the Wise Ones and Rand, usually attempting, in that Aes Sedai way, to bully him into revealing his plans. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” she had told him just that morning, voice coolly calm, ageless face serene, but dark eyes hot as she stared at him over Aviendha’s head, “but a fool can strangle himself in the Pattern. Have a care you do not weave a noose for your neck.” She had acquired a pale cloak, almost *gai’shain* white, that shimmered in the sun, and beneath the wide hood she wore a damp, snowy scarf folded around her forehead.

“I make no nooses for my neck.” He laughed, and she wheeled Aldieb so quickly the mare nearly knocked Aviendha down, galloping back to the Wise Ones’ party, cloak streaming behind her.

“It is stupid to anger Aes Sedai,” Aviendha muttered, rubbing her shoulder. “I did not think you were a stupid man.”

“We will just have to see whether I am or not,” he told her, not feeling like laughing anymore. Stupid? There were some risks you had to take. “We will just have to see.”

Egwene rarely left the Wise Ones, walking with them as often as she rode Mist, sometimes taking one of them up behind her on the gray mare for a time. He had finally figured out that she was passing for full Aes Sedai again. Amys and Bair, Seana and Melaine, seemed to accept it as readily as the Tairens had, though not at all in the same way. At times one or another of them argued with her so loudly he could almost make out what they were shouting more than a hundred paces away. It was almost the manner they used with Aviendha, though her they seemed to bully rather than argue with, but then, sometimes they held what appeared to be rather heated discussions with Moiraine, too. Especially sun-haired Melaine.

The tenth morning Egwene had finally stopped wearing her hair in those two braids, though it was the oddest thing. The Wise Ones talked to her for the longest time, off by themselves, while the *gai’shain* were folding their tents and Rand was saddling Jeade’en. Had he not known her better, he might have thought Egwene’s head-down stance was an attempt at meekness, but that word could only be applied to her in comparison with Nynaeve. And maybe Moiraine. Suddenly Egwene clapped her hands, laughing and hugging each of the Wise Ones in turn before hurriedly unraveling the plaits.

When he asked Aviendha what was going on—she had been sitting outside his tent when he woke—she muttered sourly, “They have decided she has grown—” Cutting off abruptly, she gave him a level look, folding her arms, and went on in a cool voice, “It is Wise Ones’ business, Rand al’Thor. Ask them, if you wish, but be prepared to hear that it is no concern of yours.”

Egwene had grown what? Her hair? It made no sense. Aviendha would not say another word on the matter; instead she scraped a bit of grayish lichen from a rock and began describing how to poultice a wound with it. The woman was learning a Wise One’s ways too quickly to suit him. The Wise Ones themselves paid him little apparent attention; of course, they did not need to, with Aviendha perched on his shoulder in a manner of speaking.

The rest of the Aiel, the Jindo at any rate, became a bit less standoffish each day, perhaps a little less uneasy about what He Who Comes With the Dawn meant for them, but Aviendha was the only one who spoke to him at any length. Each evening Lan came to practice the sword, and Rhuarc to teach him the spears and the Aiel’s odd way of fighting with both hands and feet. The Warder knew something of that, and joined the practice sessions. Most others avoided Rand, especially the wagondrivers, who had learned he was the Dragon Reborn, a man who could channel; when he caught one of those rough-faced men looking at him, the fellow might as well have been staring at the Dark One. Not Kadere, though, or the glee-man.

Almost every morning as they started out, the peddler rode over on one of the mules from the wagons the Trollocs had burned, his face seeming even darker for the long white scarf tied about his head and hanging down his neck. With Rand he was all diffidence, but his cold, unchanging eyes made his hooked nose look an eagle’s beak in truth.

“My Lord Dragon,” he had begun the morning after the attack, then wiped sweat from his face with his ever-present handkerchief and shifted uncomfortably on the battered old saddle he had found somewhere for the mule. “If I may call you that?”

The charred wreckage of the three wagons was dwindling in the distance to the south, and with them the graves of two of Kadere’s men and a good many more Aiel. The Trollocs had been dragged from the camps and left for the scavengers, yipping, big-eared creatures—Rand did not know whether they were large foxes or small dogs; they looked like bits of each—

and vultures with red-tipped wings, some still circling in the sky as if fearful of landing in the melee among their fellows.

“Call me as you will,” Rand told him.

“My Lord Dragon. I have been thinking of what you said yesterday.” Kadere looked around as if he feared being overheard, though Aviendha was with the Wise Ones, and his own train of wagons, fifty paces or more away, held the nearest ears. He dropped his voice near a whisper anyway, and wiped his face nervously. His eyes never altered, though. “What you said about knowledge being valuable, paving the way to greatness. It is true.”

Rand looked at him for a long moment, not blinking, keeping his face blank. “You said that, not I,” he said finally.

“Well, perhaps I did. But it is true, is it not, my Lord Dragon?” Rand nodded, and the peddler went on, still whispering, eyes still shifting for eavesdroppers. “Yet there can be danger in knowledge. In giving more than receiving. A man who sells knowledge must have not only his price, but safeguards. Assurances and sureties against . . . repercussions. Would you not agree?”

“Do you have knowledge you want to . . . sell, Kadere?”

The heavyset man frowned at his train. Keille had dropped down to walk awhile despite the growing heat, her bulk sheathed in white and a white lace shawl on the ivory combs in her coarse dark hair. Every so often she glanced at the two men riding together, her expression unreadable at this distance. It still seemed odd, someone so large moving so lightly. Isendre had climbed out onto the driver’s seat of the first wagon and was watching more openly, hanging on to lean around the corner of the white-painted wagon as it swayed and lurched.

“That woman may be the death of me yet,” Kadere muttered. “Perhaps we can talk again later, my Lord Dragon, if it please you.” Booting the mule hard, he trotted to the lead wagon and swung himself onto the driver’s seat with surprising nimbleness, tying the mule’s reins to an iron ring at the corner of the big wagonbox. He and Isendre disappeared inside and did not emerge again until they stopped for the night.

He returned the next day, and other days when he saw that Rand was alone, always hinting at knowledge he might sell for the proper price, if the proper safeguards were set. Once he went so far as to say that anything—murder, treason, anything at all—could be forgiven in return for knowledge, and seemed increasingly nervous when Rand would not agree with him. Whatever he wanted to sell, he apparently wanted Rand's blanket protection for every misdeed he might ever have done.

"I don't know that I want to buy knowledge," Rand told him more than once. "There's always the question of price, isn't there? Some prices I might not want to pay."

Natael drew Rand aside that first evening, after the fires were lit and cooking smells began to drift among the low tents. The gleeman seemed almost as nervous as Kadere. "I have thought a good deal about you," he said, peering at Rand sideways, head tilted to one side. "You should have a grand epic to tell your tale. The Dragon Reborn. He Who Comes With the Dawn. Man of who knows how many prophecies, in this Age and others." He drew his cloak around him, the colorful patches fluttering in the breeze. Twilight was short in the Waste; night and cold came on quickly and together. "How do you feel about your prophesied destiny? I must know, if I am to compose this epic."

"Feel?" Rand looked around the camp, at the Jindo moving among the tents. How many of them would be dead before he was done? "Tired. I feel tired."

"Hardly a heroic emotion," Natael murmured. "But to be expected, given your destiny. The world riding on your shoulders, most people willing to kill you given the chance, the rest fools who think to use you, ride you to power and glory."

"Which are you, Natael?"

"I? I am a simple gleeman." The man lifted an edge of his patch-covered cloak as if for proof. "I would not take your place for all the world, not with the fate that accompanies it. Death or madness, or both. 'His blood on the rocks of Shayol Ghul. . . .' That is what *The Karaethon Cycle*, the Prophecies of the Dragon, says, is it not? That you must die to save fools who will heave a sigh of relief at your death. No, I would not accept that for all your power and more."

"Rand," Egwene said, stepping out of the deepening darkness with her pale cloak wrapped around her, the hood well up, "we have come to see how you have held up after your Healing, and a day in that heat." Moiraine was with her, face shrouded in the deep cowl of her white cloak, and Bair and Amys, Melaine and Seana, heads swathed in dark shawls, all watching him, calm and cold as the night. Even Egwene. She did not have the Aes Sedai agelessness yet, but she had Aes Sedai eyes.

He did not notice Aviendha at first, trailing behind the others. For a moment he thought he saw compassion on her face, but if it was there, it vanished as soon as she saw him looking. Imagination. He *was* tired.

“Another time,” Natael said, speaking to Rand but looking at the women in that peculiar sidelong manner. “We will talk another time.” With the slightest of bows he strode away.

“Does the future chafe you, Rand?” Moiraine said quietly when the gleeman was gone. “Prophecies speak in flowery, hidden language. They do not always mean what they seem to say.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” he told her. “I will do what I must. Remember that, Moiraine. I will do what I must.” She seemed satisfied; with Aes Sedai, it was hard to tell. She would not be satisfied when she learned everything.

Natael returned the next evening, and the next, and the next, always talking about the epic he would compose, but he displayed a morbid streak, digging for how Rand meant to face madness and death. His tale was meant to be a tragedy, it appeared. Rand certainly had no desire to root his fears out into the open; what was in his heart and head could remain buried there. Finally the gleeman seemed to tire of hearing him say “I will do what I must,” and stopped coming. It seemed that he did not want to compose his epic unless it could be full of pained emotion. The man looked frustrated when he stalked off for the last time, cloak fluttering furiously behind him.

The fellow was odd, but going by Thom Merrilin, so were all gleemen. Natael certainly demonstrated other gleeman’s traits. For instance, he certainly had a fine opinion of himself. Rand did not care whether the man called him by titles, but Natael addressed Rhuarc, and Moiraine, the few times he was around her, as if he was plainly their equal. That was Thom to perfection. And he gave up performing for the Jindo at all, beginning to spend most of every night at the Shaido camp. There were more of the Shaido, he explained to Rhuarc as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. A larger audience. None of the Jindo liked it, but there was nothing even Rhuarc could do. In the Three-fold Land, a gleeman was allowed anything short of murder without being called down for it.

Aviendha spent her nights among the Wise Ones, and sometimes walked with them for an hour or so during the day, all of them gathered around her, even Moiraine and Egwene. At first Rand thought they must be advising her on how to handle him, how to pull what they wanted to know out of his head. Then one day, with the sun molten overhead, a ball of fire as big as a horse suddenly burst into being ahead of the Wise Ones' party and went spinning and tumbling away, blazing a furrow across the sere land, until it finally dwindled and winked out.

Some of the wagon drivers pulled their startled, snorting teams to a halt and stood to watch, calling to each other in a blend of fear, confusion and coarse curses. Murmurs rippled through the Jindo, and they stared, as did the Shaido, but the two columns of Aiel kept moving with barely a pause. It was among the Wise Ones that real excitement was evident. The four of them clustered around Aviendha, all apparently talking at once, with considerable arm-waving. Moiraine and Egwene, leading their horses, tried to get in a word; even without hearing, Rand knew that Amys told them in no uncertain terms, shaking a furiously admonishing finger, to stay out of it.

Staring at the blackened gouge stretching arrow-straight for half a mile, Rand sat back down in his saddle. Teaching Aviendha to channel. Of course. That was what they were doing. He scrubbed sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand; the sun had nothing to do with it. When that fireball leaped out into existence, he had instinctively reached for the True Source. It had been like trying to dip water with a torn sieve. All his clawing at *saidin* might as well have been clawing at air. One day that could happen when he needed the Power desperately. He had to learn, too, and he had no teacher. He had to learn not just because the Power would kill him before he had to worry about going mad if he did not; he had to learn because he had to use it. Learn to use it; use it to learn. He began laughing so hard that some of the Jindo looked at him uneasily.

He would have enjoyed Mat's company any time during those eleven days and nights, but Mat never came near for more than a minute or two, the broad brim of his flat-crowned hat pulled down to shade his eyes, the black-hafted spear lying across the pommel of Pips's saddle, with its odd raven-marked, Power-wrought point, like a short, curving sword blade.

"If your face darkens from the sun any more, you *will* turn into an Aielman," he might say, laughing or, "Do you mean to spend the rest of your life here? There's a whole world the other side of the Dragonwall. Wine? Women? You remember these things?"

But Mat looked plainly uneasy, and he was even more reluctant than the Wise Ones to speak of Rhuidean, or what had happened to them there. His hand tightened on that black haft at the very mention of the fog-domed city, and he claimed not to remember anything of his journey through the *ter'angreal*—then proceeded to contradict himself by saying, "You stay out of that thing, Rand. It isn't like the one in the Stone at all. They cheat. Burn me, I wish I'd never seen it!"

The one time Rand mentioned the Old Tongue, he snapped, "Burn you, I don't know anything about the bloody Old Tongue!" and galloped straight back to the peddlers' wagons.

That was where Mat spent most of his time, dicing with the drivers—until they realized he won a very great deal more often than he lost, no matter whose dice he used—engaging Kadere or Natael in long talks at every opportunity, pursuing Isendre. It was clear what was on his mind from the first time he grinned at her and straightened his hat, the morning after the Trolloc attack. He spoke to her nearly every evening for as long as he could, and pricked himself so badly plucking white blossoms from a spiky-thorned bush that he could barely handle his reins for two days, though he refused to allow Moiraine to Heal him. Isendre did not precisely encourage him, but her slow, sultry smile was hardly calculated to drive him away, either. Kadere saw—and said not a word, though sometimes his eyes followed Mat like a vulture's. Others did comment.

Late one afternoon as the mules were being unhitched and the tents going up, and Rand was unsaddling Jeade'en, Mat was standing with Isendre in the meager shade of one of the canvas-topped wagons. Standing very close. Shaking his head, Rand watched as he wiped the dapple down. The sun burned low on the horizon, and tall spires stretched long shadows across the camp.

Isendre fiddled with her diaphanous scarf as if idly thinking of removing it, smiling, full lips half pouting, ready for a kiss. Encouraged, Mat grinned confidently and moved closer still. She dropped her hand, and slowly shook her head, but that inviting smile never faded. Neither of them heard Keille approach, so light on her feet despite her size.

"Is that what you want, good sir? Her?" The pair jumped apart at the sound of her mellifluous voice, and she laughed just as musically, just as oddly out of that face. "A bargain for you, Matrim Cauthon. A Tar Valon mark, and she is yours. A chit like that cannot be worth more than two, so it is a clear bargain."

Mat grimaced, looking as though he wished he were anywhere else but there.

Isendre, however, turned slowly to face Keille, a mountain cat facing a bear. "You go too far, old woman," she said softly, eyes hard above the veiling scarf. "I will put up with your tongue no longer. Have a care. Or perhaps you would like to remain here in the Waste."

Keille smiled broadly, yet mirth never touched the obsidian eyes glittering behind her fat cheeks. "Would *you*?"

Nodding decisively, Isendre said, "A Tar Valon mark." Her voice was iron. "I will see you have a Tar Valon mark when we leave you. I only wish I could see you trying to drink it." Turning her back, she strode to the lead wagon, not swaying seductively at all, and vanished inside.

Keille watched, round face unreadable, until the white door closed, then suddenly rounded on Mat, who was on the point of slipping away. "Few men have ever refused an offer from me once, much less twice. You should have a care I do not take it in mind to do something about it." Laughing, she reached up and pinched his cheek with thick fingers, hard enough to make him wince, then turned in Rand's direction. "Tell him, my Lord Dragon. I have a feeling you know something of the dangers of scorning a woman. That Aiel girl who follows you about, glaring. I hear you belong to another. Perhaps she feels scorned."

"I doubt it, Mistress," he said dryly. "Aviendha would plant a knife in my ribs if she believed I had thought of her that way."

The immense woman laughed uproariously. Mat flinched as she reached for him again, but all she did was pat the cheek she had pinched before. "You see, good sir? Scorn a woman's offer, and perhaps she thinks nothing of it, but perhaps"—she made a skewering motion—"the knife. A lesson any man can learn. Eh, my Lord Dragon?" Wheezing with laughter, she hurried off to check on the men tending the mules.

Rubbing his cheek, Mat muttered, "They're *all* crazy," before he, too, left. He did not abandon his pursuit of Isendre, though.

So it went, for eleven days and into the twelfth, across a barren, hard-baked land. Twice they saw other stands, small, rough stone buildings much like Imre Stand, sited for easy defense against the sheer side of spire or butte. One had three hundred sheep or more, and men who were as startled to learn of Rand as they were of Trollocs in the Three-fold Land. The other was empty; not raided, only not in use. Several times Rand spotted goats, or sheep, or pale, long-horned cattle in the distance. Aviendha said the herds belonged to nearby sept holds, but he saw no people, surely no structure that deserved the name hold.

The twelfth day, with the thick columns of Jindo and Shaido flanking the Wise Ones' party, and the peddlers' wagons lurching along with Keille and Natael arguing, and Isendre eyeing Rand from Kadere's lap.

". . . and that is how it is," Aviendha said, nodding to herself. "Surely you must understand about a roofmistress, now."

"Not really," Rand admitted. He realized that for some time he had just been listening to the sound of her voice, not to the words. "I'm sure it works just fine, though."

She growled at him. "When you marry," she said in a tight voice, "with the Dragons on your arms proving your blood, will you follow that blood, or will you demand to own everything but the dress your wife stands in, like some wetland savage?"

"That's not at all the way it is," he protested, "and any woman where I come from would brain a man who thought it was. Anyway, don't you think that ought to be settled between me and whoever I *do* decide to marry?" If anything, she scowled harder than before.

To his relief, Rhuarc came trotting back from the head of the Jindo. "We are there," the Aielman announced with a smile. "Cold Rocks Hold."

* * *

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CHAPTER 49

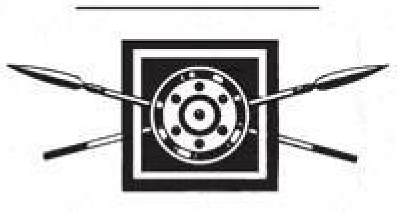

Cold Rocks Hold

Frowning, Rand looked around. A mile ahead stood a tight cluster of tall, sheer-sided buttes, or perhaps one huge butte broken by fissures. To his left the land ran off in patches of tough grass and leafless spiny plants, scattered thorny bushes and low trees, across arid hills and jagged gullies, past huge, rough stone columns to jagged mountains in the distance. To the right the land was the same, except the cracked yellowish clay lay flatter, the mountains closer. It could have been any piece of the Waste he had seen since leaving Chaendaer.

“Where?” he said.

Rhuarc glanced at Aviendha, who was looking at Rand as though he had lost his wits. “Come. Let your own eyes show you Cold Rocks.” Dropping his *shoufa* to his shoulders, the clan chief turned and loped bareheaded toward the fissured rock wall ahead.

The Shaido had already halted, milling about and beginning to set up their tents. Heirn and the Jindo fell in behind Rhuarc at a trot with their pack mules, uncovering their heads and shouting wordlessly, and the Maidens escorting the peddlers cried for the drivers to hasten their teams and follow the Jindo. One of the Wise Ones lifted her skirts to her knees and ran to join Rhuarc—Rand thought it was Amys, from the pale hair; surely Bair could not move that nimbly—but the rest of the Wise Ones’ party maintained its original pace. For a moment Moiraine looked as if she would break away, toward Rand, then hesitated, arguing with one of the other Wise Ones, hair still hidden by her shawl. Finally the Aes Sedai reined her white mare back beside Egwene’s gray and Lan’s black stallion, just ahead of the white-robed *gai’shain* who were tugging the pack animals along. They were heading the same way as Rhuarc and the others, though.

Rand leaned down to offer a hand to Aviendha. When she shook her head, he said, “If they are going to be making all that noise, I won’t be able to hear you down there. What if I make a wool-headed mistake because I can’t hear what you say?”

Muttering under her breath, she glanced at the Maidens around the peddlers’ wagons, then sighed and clasped his arm. He hoisted her up, ignoring her indignant squawk, and swung her onto Jeade’en behind the saddle. Whenever she tried to mount by herself, she came close to pulling him out of the saddle. He gave her a moment to settle her heavy skirts, though at best they bared her legs well above her soft, knee-high boots, then heeled the dapple to a canter. It was the first time Aviendha had ridden faster than a walk; she flung her arms around his waist and hung on.

“If you make me look the fool before my sisters, wetlander,” she snarled warningly against his back.

“Why would they think you a fool? I’ve seen Bair and Amys and the others ride behind Moiraine or Egwene sometimes to talk.”

After a moment, she said, “You accept changes more easily than I, Rand al’Thor.” He was not sure what to make of that.

When he brought Jeade’en up with Rhuarc and Heirn and Amys, a little ahead of the still shouting Jindo, he was surprised to see Couladin running easily alongside, flame-colored hair bare. Aviendha tugged Rand’s own *shoufa* down to his shoulders. “You must enter a hold with your face clear to be seen. I told you that. And make noise. We have been seen long since, and they will know who we are, but it is customary, to show you are not trying to take the hold by surprise.”

He nodded, but held his tongue. Neither Rhuarc nor any of the three with him were making a sound, and neither was Aviendha. Besides, the Jindo made enough clamor to be heard for miles.

Couladin’s head swung toward him. Contempt flashed across that sun-dark face, and something else. Hate and disdain Rand had come to expect, but amusement? What did Couladin find amusing?

“Fool Shaido,” Aviendha muttered at his back. Maybe she was right; maybe the amusement was for her riding. But Rand did not think so.

Mat galloped up trailing a cloud of yellowish brown dust, hat pulled low and spear resting upright on his stirrup iron like a lance. “What is this place, Rand?” he asked loudly, to be heard over the shouts. “All those women would say was ‘Move faster. Move faster.’ ” Rand told him, and he frowned at the towering rock face of the butte. “You could hold that thing for years, I suppose, with supplies, but it isn't a patch on the Stone, or the Tora Harad."

"The Tora what?" Rand said.

Mat rolled his shoulders before answering. "Just something I heard of, once." He stood in his stirrups to peer back over the heads of the Jindo toward the peddlers' train. "At least they're still with us. I wonder how long before they finish trading and go."

"Not before Alcair Dal. Rhuarc says there's a sort of fair whenever clan chiefs meet, even if it's only two or three. With all twelve coming, I don't think Kadere and Keille will want to miss it."

Mat did not look pleased at the news.

Rhuarc led the way straight to the widest fissure in the sheer stone wall, ten or twelve paces across at the broadest, and shadowed by the height of its sheer sides as it wove deeper and deeper, dark and even cool beneath a ribbon of sky. It felt odd to be in so much shade. The Aiels' wordless shouts swelled, magnified between the gray-brown walls; when they suddenly ceased, the silence, broken only by the clatter of mules' hooves and the creak of wagon wheels far behind, seemed very loud.

They rounded another curve, and the fissure opened abruptly into a wide canyon, long and almost straight. From every side, shrill ululating cries broke from hundreds of women's mouths. A thick crowd lined the way, women in bulky skirts, shawls wrapped about their heads, and men wearing grayish brown coats and breeches, the *cadin'sor*, and Maidens of the Spear, too, waving their arms in welcome, beating on pots or whatever could make a noise.

Rand gaped, and not just for the pandemonium. The canyon walls were green, in narrow terraces climbing halfway up both sides. Not all were really terraces, he realized. Small, flat-roofed houses of gray stone or yellow clay seemed to be stacked practically atop one another, in clusters with paths winding between, and every roof a garden of beans and squashes, peppers and melons and plants he did not know. Chickens ran loose, redder than those he knew, and some strange sort of fowl, larger and speckled gray. Children, most garbed like their elders, and white-robed *gai'shain* moved among the rows with big clay pitchers, apparently watering individual plants. The Aiel did not have cities, he had always been told, but this was certainly a fair-sized town at least, if as odd a one as he had ever seen. The din was too great for him to ask any of the questions that popped into his head—such as, what were those round fruits, too red and shiny for apples, growing on low, pale-leaved bushes, or those straight, broad-leafed stalks lined with long, fat, yellow-tasseled sprouts? He had been too long a farmer not to wonder.

Rhuarc and Heirn slowed, and so did Couladin, but only to a quick walk, thrusting their spears through the bow-case harnesses on their backs. Amys ran on ahead, laughing like a girl, while the men continued their steady advance along the crowd-lined canyon floor, the cries of the hold's women vibrating in the air and nearly overshadowing the clanging of pots. Rand followed, as Aviendha had told him to. Mat looked as if he wanted to turn around and ride right back out again.

At the far end of the canyon, the wall leaned inward, making a deep, dark pocket. The sun never reached to the back of it, so Aviendha had said, and the rocks there, always cool, gave the hold its name. In front of the shadows, Amys stood with another woman atop a wide gray boulder, its top smoothed for a platform.

The second woman, slender in her bulky skirts, scarf-bound yellow hair spilling below her waist and touched with white from her temples, appeared older than Amys though certainly more than handsome, with a few fine wrinkles at the corners of her gray eyes. She was dressed the same as Amys, a plain brown shawl over her shoulders, her necklaces and bracelets of gold and carved ivory no finer or richer, but this was Lian, the roofmistress of Cold Rocks Hold.

The wavering, high-pitched cries dwindled away to nothing as Rhuarc halted before the boulder, a step closer than Heirn and Couladin. "I ask leave enter your hold, roofmistress," he announced in a loud, carrying tone.

"You have my leave, clan chief," the yellow-haired woman replied formally, and just as loudly. Smiling, she added in a much warmer voice, "Shade of my heart, you will always have my leave."

"I give thanks, roofmistress of my heart." That did not sound particularly formal, either.

Heirn stepped forward. "Roofmistress, I ask leave to come beneath your roof."

"You have my leave, Heirn," Lian told the stocky man. "Beneath my roof, there is water and shade for you. The Jindo sept is always welcome here."

“I give thanks, roofmistress.” Heirn clapped Rhuarc on the shoulder and left to rejoin his people; Aiel ceremony was short, it seemed, and to the point.

Swaggering, Couladin joined Rhuarc. “I ask leave to enter your hold, roofmistress.”

Lian blinked, frowning at him. A murmur rose behind Rand, an astonished buzz from hundreds of throats. A sudden feel of danger hung in the air. Mat certainly felt it, too, fingering his spear and half-turning to see what the mass of Aiel was doing.

“What is the matter?” Rand asked quietly over his shoulder. “Why doesn’t she say something?”

“He asked as if he were a clan chief,” Aviendha whispered disbelievingly. “The man *is* a fool. He must be mad! If she refuses him, it will mean trouble with the Shaido, and she may, for such an insult. Not blood feud—he is not their clan chief, however swollen his head—but trouble.” Between one breath and the next her voice sharpened. “You did not listen, did you? You did not listen! She could have refused permission even to Rhuarc, and he would have had to leave. It would break the clan, but it is in her power. She can refuse even He Who Comes With the Dawn, Rand al’Thor. Women are not powerless among us, not like your wetlander women who must be queens or nobles or else dance for a man if they wish to eat!”

He shook his head slightly. Every time he was on the point of berating himself for how little he had learned about the Aiel, Aviendha reminded him how little she knew about anyone not Aiel. “Someday I would like to introduce you to the Women’s Circle in Emond’s Field. It will be . . . interesting . . . to hear you explain to them how powerless they are.” He felt her shifting against his back, trying to get a good look at his face, and carefully kept his expression smooth. “Maybe they’ll explain a few things to you, too.”

“You have my leave,” Lian began—Couladin smiled, swelling up where he stood—“to step beneath my roof. Water and shade will be found for you.” Soft gasps from hundreds of mouths made quite a loud sound.

The fire-haired man quivered as if struck, face red with rage. He did not seem to know what to do. He took a challenging step forward, staring up at Lian and Amys, clutching his own forearms as though to keep his hands from his spears, then whirled and strode back toward the gathering, glaring this way and that, daring anyone to speak. Finally he stopped not far from where he had begun, staring at Rand. Coals could not have been hotter than his blue eyes.

“As one friendless and alone,” Aviendha whispered. “She has welcomed him as a beggar. The gravest insult to him, and none to the Shaido.” Suddenly she fisted Rand so hard in the ribs that he grunted. “Move, wetlander. You hold such honor as I have left in your hands; all will know I have taught you! Move!”

Swinging a leg over, he slid from Jeade’en’s back and strode up beside Rhuarc. *I am not Aiel,* he thought. *I do not understand them, and I cannot let myself come to like them too much. I cannot.*

None of the other men had done so, but he bowed to Lian; that was how he had been brought up. “Roofmistress, I ask leave to come beneath your roof.” He heard Aviendha’s breath catch. He had been supposed to say the other thing, what Rhuarc had. The clan chief’s eyes narrowed worriedly, watching his wife, and Couladin’s flushed face twisted in a scornful smile. The soft murmurs from the crowd sounded puzzled.

The roofmistress stared at Rand even harder than she had at Couladin, taking him in from hair to boots and back again, the *shoufa* lying on the shoulders of a red coat that would surely never be worn by an Aiel. She looked questioningly at Amys, who nodded.

“Such modesty,” Lian said slowly, “is becoming in a man. Men seldom know where to find it.” Spreading her dark skirts, she curtsied, awkwardly—it was not a thing Aielwomen did—but still a curtsy, in return of his bow. “The *Car’a’carn* has leave to enter my hold. For the chief of chiefs, there is ever water and shade at Cold Rocks.”

Another great ululation rose from the women in the crowd, but whether for him or for the ceremony, Rand did not know. Couladin paused to stare implacable hatred at him, then stalked off, brushing roughly past Aviendha as she slid ungracefully from the dapple stallion. He melded quickly into the dispersing crowd.

Mat slowed in the act of dismounting to stare after the man. “Watch your back with that one, Rand,” he said quietly. “I mean it.”

“Everybody tells me that,” Rand said. The peddlers were already setting up to trade in the center of the canyon, and at the entrance, Moiraine and the rest of the Wise Ones’ company were arriving to a few shouts and the drumming of pots, but nothing like the cries that had welcomed Rhuarc.

"He isn't who I have to worry about." His dangers were not Aiel. *Moiraine to one side and Lanfear to the other. How could I have more danger than that?* It was nearly enough to make him laugh.

Amys and Lian had climbed down, and to Rand's surprise, Rhuarc put an arm around each of them. They were both tall, as most Aielwomen seemed to be, but neither came higher than the clan chief's shoulder. "You have met my wife Amys," he said to Rand. "Now you must meet my wife Lian."

Rand realized his mouth was hanging open and closed it quickly. After Aviendha had told him the roofmistress of Cold Rocks was Rhuarc's wife and named Lian, he was sure he had misunderstood back at Chaendaer, all that "shade of my heart" between the man and Amys. He had had other things on his mind then anyway. But this. . . .

"*Both* of them?" Mat spluttered. "Light! Two! Oh, burn me! He's the luckiest man in the world or the biggest fool since creation!"

"I had thought," Rhuarc said, frowning, "that Aviendha was teaching you our customs. She leaves out much, it appears."

Leaning to look around her husband—*their* husband—Lian raised an eyebrow at Amys, who said dryly, "She seemed ideal to tell him what he needs to know. Something to keep her from trying to run back to the Maidens whenever our backs were turned, too. Now it seems I must have a long talk with her in a quiet place. No doubt she has been teaching him Maiden handtalk, or how to milk a *gara*."

Flushing slightly, Aviendha tossed her head irritably; her dark reddish hair had grown over her ears, long enough to sway in a fringe below her head scarf. "There were more important matters to speak of than marriages. Anyway, the man does not listen."

"She has been a good teacher," Rand put in quickly. "I have learned a great deal about your customs, and the Three-fold Land, from her." Handtalk? "Any mistakes I make are mine, not hers." How did you milk a venomous two-foot lizard? Why? "She has been a good teacher, and I'd like to keep her as such, if that is all right." *Why in the Light did I say that?* The woman could be pleasant enough sometimes, when she forget herself, anyway; the rest of the time she was a burr under his coat. Yet at least he knew who the Wise Ones had set to watch him as long as she was there.

Amys studied him, those clear blue eyes as sharp as an Aes Sedai's. But then, she could channel; her face merely looked younger than it should, not ageless, but maybe she was as much Aes Sedai as an Aes Sedai. “That sounds a fine arrangement to me,” she said. Aviendha opened her mouth, all bristling indignation—and closed it again, sullenly, when the Wise One shifted that stare to her. Perhaps the woman had thought her time with him was done, now that they had reached Cold Rocks.

“You must be tired after your journey,” Lian said to Rand, her gray eyes motherly, “and hungry as well. Come.” Her warm smile included Mat, who was hanging back and beginning to look to the peddlers’ wagons. “Come beneath my roof.”

Fetching his saddlebags, Rand left Jeade’en to the care of a *gai’shain* woman, who took Pips as well. Mat gave the wagons a final stare before tossing his saddlebags over his shoulder and following.

Lian’s roof, her house, sat on the highest level on the west side, with the steep canyon wall rising a good hundred paces above. Dwelling of the clan chief and roofmistress or no, from the outside it appeared to be a modest rectangle of large yellow-clay bricks with narrow, glassless windows covered by plain white curtains, a vegetable garden on its flat roof and another in front on a small terrace separated from the house by a narrow path paved with flat gray stones. Big enough for two rooms, maybe. Except perhaps for the square bronze gong hanging beside the door, it looked much like the other structures Rand could see, and from that vantage point the entire length of the valley was laid out below him. A small, simple house. Inside, it was something else.

The brick part was one large room, floored with reddish brown tiles, but it was only part. Carved into the stone behind were more rooms, high-ceilinged and surprisingly cool, with wide, arched doorways and silver lamps giving off a scent that hinted of green places. Rand saw only one chair, tall-backed and lacquered red and gold, with a look of not much use; the chief’s chair, Aviendha called it. There was little more wood to be seen, beyond a few polished or lacquered boxes and chests, and low reading stands holding open books; the reader would need to lie on the floor. Intricately woven carpets covered the floors, and bright rugs in layers; he recognized some patterns from Tear and Cairhien and Andor, even Illian and Tarabon, while other designs were unfamiliar, broad jagged stripes and no two colors alike, or linked hollow squares in grays and browns and blacks. In sharp contrast to the harsh sameness outside this valley, there was vivid color everywhere, wall hangings he was sure had come from the other side of the Spine of the World—perhaps in the same way wall hangings had left the Stone of Tear—and cushions of all sizes and hues, often tasseled or fringed or both in silk of red or gold. Here and there, in niches carved into the walls, stood a thin porcelain vase or a silver bowl or an ivory carving, often of some strange animal or other. So these were the "caves" the Tairens spoke of. It could have had the garishness of Tear—or the Tinkers—but instead it seemed dignified, formal and informal at the same time.

With a small grin for Aviendha to show her he *had* listened, Rand pulled a guest gift for Lian from his saddlebags, a finely worked golden lion. It had been looted from Tear and bought from a Jindo Water Seeker, but if he was ruler of Tear, maybe it was like stealing from himself. After a moment of hesitation, Mat produced a gift, too, a Tairen necklace of silver flowers, no doubt from the same source originally, and no doubt intended for Isendre.

"Exquisite," Lian smiled, holding up the lion. "I have always had a taste for Tairen craftwork. Rhuarc brought me two pieces many years ago." In a voice suitable for a goodwife reminiscing over some particularly fine sugarberries, she said to her husband, "You took them from the tent of a High Lord just before Laman was beheaded, did you not? A pity you did not reach Andor. I have always wanted a piece of Andoran silver. This necklace is beautiful, too, Mat Cauthon."

Listening to her heap praise on both gifts, Rand masked his shock. For all her skirts and motherly eyes, she was as Aiel as any Maiden of the Spear.

By the time Lian finished, Moiraine and the other Wise Ones arrived with Lan and Egwene. The Warder's sword drew a single disapproving glance, but the roofmistress welcomed him warmly after Bair called him *Aan'allein.* Yet that was nothing to her greeting for Egwene and Moiraine.

"You honor my roof, Aes Sedai." The roofmistress's tone made it sound an understatement; she came very close to bowing to them. "It is said that we served Aes Sedai before the Breaking of the World and failed them, and for that failure were sent here to the Three-fold Land. Your presence says that perhaps our sin was not beyond forgiving." Of course. She had not been to Rhuidean; apparently the prohibition against speaking of what happened in Rhuidean with anyone who had not been there applied even between husband and wife. And between sister-wives, or whatever the relationship was between Amys and Lian.

Moiraine tried to give Lian a guest gift, too, tiny crystal-and-silver flasks of scent all the way from Arad Doman, but Lian spread her hands. “Your very presence is guest gift beyond value, Aes Sedai. To accept more would dishonor my roof, and me. I could not bear the shame.” She sounded entirely serious, and troubled that Moiraine might press the scent on her. It was an indication of the relative importance of the *Car’a’carn* and an Aes Sedai.

“As you wish,” Moiraine said, returning the flasks to her belt pouch. She was icily serene in blue silk, her pale cloak thrown back. “Your Threefold Land will surely see more Aes Sedai. We have never had reason to come, before.”

Amys did not look best pleased over that at all, and flame-haired Melaine stared at Moiraine like a green-eyed cat wondering if she should do something about a large dog that had wandered into her barnyard. Bair and Seana exchanged troubled glances, but nothing like the two who could channel.

A flurry of *gai’shain*—men and women alike graceful in cowled white robes, their downcast eyes seeming so strangely submissive in Aiel faces—took Moiraine and Egwene’s cloaks, brought damp towels for hands and faces, and tiny silver cups of water to be drunk formally, and finally a meal, served with silver bowls and trays fit for a palace yet eaten from pottery with a blue-striped glaze. Everyone ate lying on the floor, where white tiles had been set into the stone for a table, heads together, cushions under their chests, radiating out like spokes in a wheel while *gai’shain* slipped between to place dishes.

Mat struggled, shifting this way and that on his cushions, but Lan lounged as if he had always eaten that way, and Moiraine and Egwene looked almost as comfortable. No doubt they had had practice in the Wise Ones’ tents. Rand found it awkward, yet the food itself was peculiar enough to take most of his attention.

A dark, spicy stew of goat with chopped peppers was unfamiliar but hardly strange, and peas were peas anywhere, or squash. The same could not be said of the crumbly, coarse yellow bread, or long, bright red beans mixed in with the green, or a dish of bright yellow kernels and bits of pulpy red that Aviendha called *zemai* and *t’mat*, or a sweet, bulbous fruit with a tough greenish skin she said came from one of those leafless, spiny plants called *kardon.* It was all tasty, though.

He might have enjoyed the meal more if she had not lectured him on everything. Not sister-wives. That was left to Amys and Lian, lying on either side of Rhuarc and smiling at each other almost as much as at their husband. If they had both married him so as not to break up their friendship, it was plain they both loved him. Rand could not see Elayne and Min agreeing to such an agreement; he wondered why he had even thought of it. The sun must have cooked his brains.

But if Aviendha left that one explanation to others, she explained *every*thing else in tooth-grinding detail. Maybe she thought him an idiot for not knowing about sister-wives. Turned on her right side to face him, she smiled almost sweetly as she told him the spoon could be used for eating the stew or the *zemai* and *t'mat*, but her eyes shone with a light that said it was the Wise Ones being there that kept her from hurling a bowl of something at his head.

"I do not know what I've done to you," he said quietly. He was very conscious of Melaine on his other side, seeming engrossed in her own low conversation with Seana. Bair put in a word now and then, but he thought she was bending an ear his way, too. "But if you hate being my teacher so much, you do not have to be. It just popped out. I'm sure Rhuarc or the Wise Ones will find someone else." The Wise Ones certainly would, if he rid himself of this spy.

"You have done nothing to me . . ." She bared teeth at him; if it was meant to be a smile, it fell considerably short. ". . . and you never will. You may lie however is most comfortable for eating, and talk to those around you. Except for those of us who must instruct instead of sharing the meal, of course. It is considered polite to talk with those on both sides." From behind her, Mat looked at Rand and rolled his eyes, clearly relieved to be spared that. "Unless you are forced to face one in particular, as to teach him. Take food with your right hand—unless you must lean on that elbow—and. . . ."

It was torture, and she seemed to enjoy it. The Aiel seemed to set great store by the giving of gifts. Maybe if he gave her a gift. . . .

". . . all talk for a time when the meal is done, unless one of us must teach instead, and. . . ."

A bribe. It did not seem fair to have to bribe someone who was spying on him, but if she meant to go on even half like this, it would be worth it for a little peace.

When the meal was cleared away by *gai'shain*, and silver cups of dark wine brought, Bair fixed Aviendha with a grim eye across the white tiles, and she subsided sulkily. Egwene knelt up to reach over Mat and pat her, but it did not appear to help. At least she was quiet. Egwene gave him a tight look; either she knew what he was thinking or she considered Aviendha's sulks his fault.

Rhuarc dug out his short-stemmed pipe and tabac pouch, thumbing the bowl full then passing the leather pouch to Mat, who had produced his own silver-mounted pipe. "Some have taken news of you to heart, Rand al'Thor, and quickly it seems. Lian tells me word has come that Jheran, who is clan chief of the Shaarad Aiel, and Bael, of the Goshien, have already reached Alcair Dal. Erim, of the Chareen, is on his way." He allowed a slender young *gai'shain* woman to light his pipe with a burning twig. From the way she moved, with a different sort of grace than the other white-robed men and women, Rand suspected she had been a Maiden of the Spear not too long ago. He wondered how long she had to continue in her year and a day of service, meek and humble.

Mat grinned at the woman as she knelt to light his pipe; the green-eyed stare she gave him from the depths of her cowl was not meek at all, and wiped the grin right off his face. Irritably, he rolled onto his belly, a thin blue streamer rising from his pipe. It was too bad he did not see the satisfaction on her face, or see it wiped away in a blush by one glance from Amys; the green-eyed young woman scurried away looking shamed beyond belief. And Aviendha, who so hated having had to give up the spear, who still saw herself as spear-sister to a Maiden of whatever clan . . . ? She frowned at the departing *gai'shain* as Mistress al'Vere would have glared at someone who had spit on the floor. A strange people. Egwene was the only one Rand saw with any sympathy in her eyes at all.

"The Goshien and the Shaarad," he muttered at his wine. Rhuarc had told him each clan chief would bring a few warriors to the Golden Bowl, for honor, and each sept chief, as well. Added together, it meant perhaps a thousand from each clan. Twelve clans. Twelve thousand men and Maidens, eventually, all tied up in their strange honor and ready to dance the spears if a cat sneezed. Maybe more, because of the fair. He looked up. "They have a feud, don't they?" Rhuarc and Lan both nodded. "I know you said that something like the Peace of Rhuidean holds at Alcair Dal, Rhuarc, but I saw how far that Peace held Couladin and the Shaido. Maybe I had better go right away. If the Goshien and the Shaarad start fighting. . . . A thing like that could spread. I want *all* the Aiel behind me, Rhuarc."

"The Goshien are not Shaido," Melaine said sharply, shaking her red-gold mane like a lioness.

"Nor are the Shaarad." Bair's reedy voice was thinner than that of the younger woman, but no less definite. "Jheran and Bael may try to kill one another before they return to their holds, but not at Alcair Dal."

"None of which answers Rand al'Thor's question," Rhuarc said. "If you go to Alcair Dal before all of the chiefs arrive, those who have not come yet will lose honor. It is not a good way to announce that you are *Car'a'carn*, dishonoring men you will call to follow you. The Nakai have furthest to come. A month, and all will be at Alcair Dal."

"Less," Seana said with a brisk shake of her head. "I have walked Alsera's dreams twice, and she says Bruan means to run all the way from Shiagi Hold. Less than a month."

"A month before you leave, to be sure," Rhuarc told Rand. "Then three days to Alcair Dal. Perhaps four. All will be there then."

A month. He rubbed his chin. Too long. Too long, and no choice. In stories, things always happened as the hero planned, seemingly when he wanted them to happen. In real life it rarely occurred that way, even for a *ta'veren* with prophecy supposedly working for him. In real life it was scratch and hope, and luck if you found more than half a loaf where you needed a whole. Yet a part of his plan was following the path he had hoped for. The most dangerous part.

Moiraine, stretched out between Lan and Amys, sipped her wine lazily, eyes lidded as if sleepy. He did not believe it. She saw everything, heard everything. But he had nothing to say now that she should not hear. "How many will resist, Rhuarc? Or oppose me? You have hinted, but you've never said for sure."

"I cannot be sure in it," the clan chief replied around his pipestem. "When you show the Dragons, they will know you. There is no way to imitate the Dragons of Rhuidean." Had Moiraine's eyes flickered? "You are the one prophesied. I will support you, and Bruan certainly, and Dhearic, of the Reyn Aiel. The others . . . ? Sevanna, Suladric's wife, will bring the Shaido since the clan has no chief. She is young to be roofmistress of a hold, doubtless displeased she will have only one roof and not an entire hold when someone is chosen to replace Suladric. And Sevanna is as wily and untrustworthy as any Shaido ever born. But even if she makes no trouble, you know that Couladin will; he acts the clan chief, and some Shaido may follow him without his entering Rhuidean. Shaido are fools enough for that. Han, of the Tomanelle, may move in any direction. He is a prickly man, hard to know and difficult to deal with, and—"

He cut off as Lian murmured softly, "Is there any other kind?" Rand did not think the clan chief had been meant to hear. Amys hid a smile behind her hand; her sister-wife buried her face innocently in her winecup.

"As I was saying," Rhuarc said, frowning resignedly from one of his wives to the other, "it is not a thing I can be sure of. Most will follow you. Perhaps all. Perhaps even the Shaido. We have waited three thousand years for the man who bears two Dragons. When you show your arms, none will doubt you are the one sent to unite us." And break them; but he did not mention that. "The question is how they will decide to react." He tapped his teeth with his pipestem for a moment. "You will not change your mind and don the *cadin'sor*?"

"And show them what, Rhuarc? A pretend Aiel? As well dress Mat for Aiel." Mat choked on his pipe. "I will not pretend. I am what I am; they must take me as I am." Rand raised his fists, coatsleeves falling enough to uncover the golden-maned heads on the backs of his wrists. "These prove me. If they aren't enough, then nothing is."

"Where do you mean to 'lead the spears to war once more'?" Moiraine asked suddenly, and Mat choked again, snatching the pipe out of his mouth and staring at her. Her dark eyes were not lidded any longer.

Rand's fists tightened convulsively, till his knuckles cracked. Trying to be clever with her was dangerous; he should have learned that long since. She remembered every word that she heard, filed it away, sorted and examined until she knew just what it meant.

He got to his feet slowly. They were all watching him. Egwene frowned even more worriedly than Mat, but the Aiel just watched. Talk of war did not upset them. Rhuarc looked—ready. And Moiraine's face was all frozen calm.

"If you will excuse me," he said, "I am going to walk around awhile."

Aviendha rose to her knees, and Egwene stood, but neither followed him.

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CHAPTER 50

Traps

Outside, on the stone-paved path between the yellow brick house and the terraced vegetable garden, Rand stood staring down the canyon, not seeing much beyond afternoon shadows creeping across the canyon floor. If only he could trust Moiraine not to hand him to the Tower on a leash; he had no doubt she could do it, without using the Power once, if he gave her an inch. The woman could manipulate a bull through a mousehole without ever letting it know. He could use her. *Light, I'm as bad as she is. Use the Aiel. Use Moiraine. If only I could trust her.*

He headed toward the mouth of the canyon, slanting down whenever he found a footpath leading that way. They were all narrow, paved with small stones, some of the steeper carved in steps. Hammers ringing in several smithies echoed faintly. Not all of the buildings were houses. Through one open door he saw several women working looms, and another showed a silversmith putting up her small hammers and gouges, a third a man at a potter's wheel, his hands in the clay and the brick kilns hot behind him. Men and boys, except the youngest, all wore the *cadin'sor*, the coat and breeches in grays and browns, but there were often subtle differences between warriors and craftsmen, a smaller belt knife or none at all, perhaps a *shoufa* with no black veil attached. Yet watching a blacksmith heft a spear he had just given a foot-long point, Rand had no doubt the man could use the weapon as readily as make it.

The paths were not crowded, but there were plenty of people about. Children laughed, running and playing, the smaller girls almost as likely to be carrying pretend spears as dolls. *Gai'shain* carried tall clay jars of water on their heads, or weeded in the gardens, often under the direction of a child of ten or twelve. Men and women going about the tasks of their lives, not really that different from the things they might have done in Emond's Field, whether sweeping in front of a door or mending a wall. The children hardly gave him a glance, for all his red coat and thick-soled boots, and the *gai'shain* were so self-effacing it was difficult to say whether they noticed him or not. But craftsmen or fighters, men or women, the adults looked at him with an air of speculation, an edge of uncertain anticipation.

Very young boys ran barefoot in robes much like those of the *gai'shain*, but in the grayish-brown of the *cadin'sor*, not white. The youngest girls darted about on bare feet, too, in short dresses that sometimes failed to cover their knees. One thing about the girls caught his eye; up to perhaps twelve or so, they wore their hair in two braids, one over each ear, plaited with brightly colored ribbons. Just the way Egwene had worn hers. It had to be coincidence. Likely the reason she had stopped was that one of the Aiel women had told her that was how young Aiel girls wore their hair. A foolish thing to be thinking about anyway. Right now he had one woman to deal with. Aviendha.

On the canyon floor, the peddlers were doing a brisk trade with the Aiel crowding around the canvas-topped wagons. At least the drivers were, and Keille, a blue lace shawl on her ivory combs today, was bargaining hard in a loud voice. Kadere sat on an upturned barrel in the shade of his white wagon in a cream-colored coat, mopping his face, making no effort to sell anything. He eyed Rand and made as if to rise before sinking back. Isendre was nowhere to be seen, but to Rand's surprise, Natael was, his patch-covered cloak attracting a flock of following children, and some adults. Apparently the attraction of a new and larger audience had pulled him away from the Shaido. Or maybe Keille just did not want him out of her sight. Engrossed in her trading as she was, she found time to frown at the gleeman often.

Rand avoided the wagons. Questions asked of Aiel told him where the Jindo had gone, each to the roof of his or her society here at Cold Rocks. The Roof of the Maidens lay halfway up the still brightly lit east wall of the canyon, a garden-topped rectangle of grayish stone doubtless larger inside than it looked. Not that he saw the inside. A pair of Maidens squatting beside the door with spears and bucklers refused him entrance, amused and scandalized that a man wanted to enter, but one agreed to carry his request in.

A few minutes later the Jindo and Nine Valleys Maidens who had gone to the Stone came out. And all the other Maidens of Nine Valleys sept in Cold Rocks, too, crowding the path to either side and climbing up on the roof among the rows of vegetables to watch, grinning as if they expected entertainment. *Gai'shain*, male as well as female, followed to serve them small cups of dark-brewed tea; whatever rule kept men outside the Roof of the Maidens apparently did not apply to *gai'shain.*

After he had examined several offerings, Adelin, the yellow-haired Jindo woman with the thin scar on her cheek, produced a wide bracelet of ivory heavily carved with roses. He thought it should suit Aviendha; whoever made it had carefully shown thorns among the blossoms.

Adelin was tall even for an Aielwoman, only a hand too short to look him the eyes. When she heard why he wanted it—almost why; he just said it was a present for Aviendha's teachings, not a sop to soothe the woman's temper so he could stand to be near her—Adelin looked around at the other Maidens. They had all stopped grinning, their faces expressionless. "I will take no price for this, Rand al'Thor," she said, putting the bracelet in his hand.

"Is this wrong?" he asked. How would Aiel see it? "I don't want to dishonor Aviendha in any way."

"It will not dishonor her." She beckoned a *gai'shain* woman carrying pottery cups and pitcher on a silver tray. Pouring two cups, she handed one to him. "Remember honor," she said, sipping from his cup.

Aviendha had never mentioned anything like this. Uncertain, he took a sip of bitter tea and repeated, "Remember honor." It seemed the safest thing to say. To his surprise, she kissed him lightly on each cheek.

An older Maiden, gray-haired but still hard-faced, appeared in front of him. "Remember honor," she said, and sipped.

He had to repeat the ritual with every Maiden there, finally just touching the cup to his lips. Aiel ceremonies might be short and to the point, but when you had to repeat one with seventy-odd women, even sips could fill you up. Shadows were climbing the east side of the canyon by the time he escaped.

He found Aviendha near Lian's house, vigorously beating a blue-striped carpet hung on a line, more piled beside her in a heap of colors. Brushing sweat-damp strands of hair from her forehead, she stared at him expressionlessly when he handed her the bracelet and told her it was a gift in return for her teaching.

"I have given bracelets and necklaces to friends who did not carry the spear, Rand al'Thor, but I have never worn one." Her voice was perfectly flat. “Such things rattle and make noise to give you away when you must be silent. They catch when you must move quickly.”

“But you can wear it now that you are going to be a Wise One.”

“Yes.” She turned the ivory circle over as if unsure what to do with it, then abruptly thrust her hand through it and held her wrist up to stare at it. She could have been looking at a manacle.

“If you do not like it. . . . Aviendha, Adelin said it would not touch your honor. She even seemed to approve.” He mentioned the tea-sipping ceremony, and she squeezed her eyes shut and shuddered. “What is wrong?”

“They think you are trying to attract my interest.” He would not have believed her voice could be so flat. Her eyes held no emotion at all. “They have approved of you, as if I still carried the spear.”

“Light! Simple enough to set them straight. I don’t—” He cut off as her eyes blazed up.

“No! You accepted their approval, and now you would reject it? That *would* dishonor me! Do you think you are the first man to try to catch my eye? They must think as they think, now. It means nothing.” Grimacing, she gripped the woven carpetbeater with both hands. “Go away.” With a glance at the bracelet, she added, “You truly know nothing, do you? You know nothing. It is not your fault.” She seemed to be repeating something she had been told, or trying to convince herself. “I am sorry if I ruined your meal, Rand al’Thor. Please go. Amys says I must clean all of these rugs and carpets no matter how long it takes. It will take all night, if you stand here talking.” Turning her back to him, she thwacked the striped carpet violently, the ivory bracelet jumping on her wrist.

He did not know whether the apology sprang from his gift or an order from Amys—he suspected the latter—yet she actually sounded as if she meant it. She was certainly not pleased—judging by the sharp grunt of effort that accompanied every full-armed swing of the beater—but she had not looked hateful once. Upset, appalled, even furious, but not hateful. That was better than nothing. She might become civil eventually.

As he stepped into the brown-tiled entry chamber of Lian’s house, the Wise Ones were talking together, all four with shawls draped loosely over their elbows. They fell silent at his appearance.

“I will have you shown to your sleeping room,” Amys said. “The others have seen theirs.”

“Thank you.” He glanced back at the door, frowning slightly. “Amys, did you tell Aviendha to apologize to me for dinner?”

“No. Did she?” Her blue eyes looked thoughtful for a moment; he thought Bair almost smiled. “I would not have ordered her to, Rand al’Thor. A forced apology is no apology.”

“The girl was told only to dust carpets until she had sweated out some of her temper,” Bair said. “Anything more came from her.”

“And not in hopes of escaping her labors,” Seana added. “She must learn to control her anger. A Wise One must be in control of her emotions, not they in control of her.” With a slight smile, she glanced sideways at Melaine. The sun-haired woman compressed her lips and sniffed.

They were trying to convince him Aviendha was going to be wonderful company from now on. Did they really think he was blind? “You must know that I know. About her. That you set her to spy on me.”

“You do not know as much as you think,” Amys said, for all the world like an Aes Sedai with hidden meanings she did not intend to let him see.

Melaine shifted her shawl, eyeing him up and down in a considering manner. He knew a little about Aes Sedai; if she were Aes Sedai, she would be Green Ajah. “I admit,” she said, “that at first we thought you would not see beyond a pretty young woman, and you are handsome enough that she should have found your company more amusing than ours. We did not reckon with her tongue. Or other things.”

“Then why are you so eager for her to stay with me?” There was more heat in his voice than he wanted. “You can’t think I will reveal anything to her now that I don’t want you to know.”

“Why do you allow her to remain?” Amys asked calmly. “If you refused to accept her, how could we force her on you?”

“At least this way I know who the spy is.” Having Aviendha under his eye had to be better than wondering which of the Aiel were watching him. Without her, he would probably suspect that every casual comment from Rhuarc was an attempt to pry. Of course, there was no way to say it was not. Rhuarc was married to one of these women. Suddenly he was glad he had not confided more in the clan chief. And sad that he had thought of it. Why had he ever believed the Aiel would be simpler than Tairen High Lords? “I’m satisfied to leave her right where she is.”

“Then we are all satisfied,” Bair said.

He eyed the leathery-faced woman leerily. There had been a note of something in her voice, as if she knew more than he did. “She will not find out what you want.”

“What we want?” Melaine snapped; her long hair swung as she tossed her head. “The prophecy says ‘a remnant of a remnant shall be saved.’ What we want, Rand al’Thor, *Car’a’carn*, is to save as many of our people as we can. Whatever your blood, and your face, you have no feeling for us. I will make you know our blood for yours if I have to lay the—”

“I think,” Amys cut her off smoothly, “that he would like to see his sleeping room now. He looks tired.” She clapped her hands sharply, and a willowy *gai’shain* woman appeared. “Show this man to the room that has been prepared for him. Bring him whatever he needs.”

Leaving him standing there, the Wise Ones headed for the door, Bair and Seana looking daggers at Melaine, like members of the Women’s Circle eyeing someone they meant to call to account sharply. Melaine ignored them; as the door closed behind them she was muttering something that sounded like “talk sense into that fool girl.”

What girl? Aviendha? She was already doing what they wanted. Egwene maybe? He knew she was studying something with the Wise Ones. And what was Melaine willing to “lay” in order to make him “know their blood for his”? How could laying something make him decide he was Aiel? *Lay a trap, maybe? Fool! She wouldn’t say right out she means to lay a trap. What sorts of things do you lay? Hens lay eggs*, he thought, laughing softly. He was tired. Too tired for questions now, after twelve days in the saddle and part of a thirteenth, all of them oven-hot and dry; he did not want to think of how he would feel if he had walked that distance at the same pace. Aviendha must have steel legs. He wanted a bed.

The *gai’shain* was pretty, despite a thin scar slanting just above one pale blue eye into hair so light as to look almost silver. Another Maiden; only not for the moment. “If it pleases you to follow me?” she murmured, lowering her eyes.

The sleeping room was not a bedchamber, of course. Unsurprisingly, the “bed” consisted of a thick pallet unfolded atop layered, brightly colored rugs. The *gai’shain*—her name was Chion—looked shocked when he asked for wash water, but he was tired of sweat baths. He was willing to bet Moiraine and Egwene had not had to sit in a tent full of steam to get clean. Chion brought the water, though, hot in a large brown pitcher meant for watering the garden, and a big white bowl for a washbasin. He chased her out when she offered to wash him. Strange people, all of them!

The room was windowless, lit by silver lamps hanging from brackets on the walls, but he knew it could not yet be full dark outside when he finished washing. He did not care. Only two blankets lay on the pallet, neither particularly thick. No doubt a sign of Aiel hardiness. Remembering the cold nights in the tents, he dressed again except for his coat and boots before blowing out the lamps and crawling beneath the blankets in pitch darkness.

Tired as he was, he could not stop tossing and thinking. What did Melaine mean to lay? Why did the Wise Ones not care that he knew Aviendha was their spy? Aviendha. A pretty woman, if surlier than a mule with four stone-bruised hooves. His breathing slowed, his thoughts became misty. A month. Too long. No choice. Honor. Isendre smiling. Kadere watching. Trap. Lay a trap. Whose trap? Which trap? Traps. If only he could trust Moiraine. Perrin. Home. Perrin was probably swimming in. . . .

Eyes closed, Rand stroked through the water. Nicely cool. And so wet. It seemed that he had never before realized how good *wet* felt. Lifting his head, he looked around at the willows lining one end of the pond, the big oak at the other, stretching thick, shading limbs over the water. The Waterwood. It was good to be home. He had the feeling he had been away; where was not exactly clear, but not important, either. Up to Watch Hill. Yes. He had never been farther than that. Cool and wet. And alone.

Suddenly two bodies hurtled through the air, knees clutched to chest, landing with great splashes that blinded him. Shaking the water out of his eyes, he found Elayne and Min smiling at him from either side, just their heads showing above the pale green surface. Two strokes would take him to either woman. Away from the other. He could not love both of them. Love? Why had that popped into his head?

“You do not know who you love.”

He spun about in a swirl of water. Aviendha stood on the bank, in *cadin’sor* rather than skirt and blouse. Not glaring, though, just looking. “Come into the water,” he said. “I’ll teach you how to swim.”

Musical laughter pulled his head around to the opposite bank. The woman who stood there, palely naked, was the most beautiful he had ever seen, with big, dark eyes that made his head whirl. He thought he knew her.

"Should I allow you to be unfaithful to me, even in your dreams?" she said. Somehow he was aware without looking that Elayne and Min and Aviendha were not there anymore. This was beginning to feel very odd.

For a long moment she considered him, completely unconscious of her nudity. Slowly she posed on toetips, arms swept back, then dove cleanly into the pond. When her head popped above the surface, her shining black hair was not wet. That seemed surprising, for a moment. Then she had reached him—had she swum, or was she just *there*?—tangling arms and legs around him. The water was cool, her flesh hot.

"You cannot escape me," she murmured. Those dark eyes seemed far deeper than the pond. "I will make you enjoy this so you never forget, asleep or awake."

Asleep or . . . ? Everything shifted, blurred. She wrapped herself around him tighter, and the blur went away. Everything was as it had been. Rushes filled one end of the pond; leatherleaf and pine grew almost to the water's edge at the other.

"I know you," he said slowly. He thought he must, or why would he be letting her do this? "But I don't. . . . This is not right." He tried to pull her loose, but as fast as he pried an arm away, she had it back again.

"I ought to mark you." There was a fierce edge in her voice. "First that milk-hearted Ilyena, and now. . . . How many women do you hold in your thoughts?" Suddenly her small white teeth burrowed at his neck.

Bellowing, he hurled her away and slapped a hand to his neck. She had broken the skin; he was bleeding.

"Is this how you amuse yourself when I wonder where you have gone?" a man's voice said contemptuously. "Why should I hold to anything when you risk our plan this way?"

Abruptly the woman was on the bank, clothed in white, narrow waist belted in wide woven silver, silver stars and crescents in her midnight hair. The land rose slightly behind her to an ash grove on a mound. He did not remember seeing ash before. She was facing—a blur. A thick, gray, man-sized fuzzing of the air. This was all . . . wrong, somehow.

"Risk," she sneered. "You fear risk as much as Moghedien, don't you? You would creep about like the Spider herself. Had I not hauled you out of your hole, you'd still be hiding, and waiting to snatch a few scraps."

"If you cannot control your . . . appetites," the blur said in the man's voice, "why should I associate with you at all? If I must take risks, I want a greater reward than pulling strings on a puppet."

"What do you mean?" she said dangerously.

The blur shimmered; somehow Rand knew it for hesitation, uncertainty over having said too much. And then suddenly the blur was gone. The woman looked at him, still neck-deep in the pond; her mouth tightened with irritation, and she vanished.

He started awake and lay still, peering up into blackness. A dream. But an ordinary dream, or something else? Fumbling a hand from under the blankets, he felt the side of his neck, felt the tooth marks and the thin trickle of blood. Whatever kind of dream, she had been in it. Lanfear. He had not dreamed *her.* And that other; a man. A cold smile crept onto his face. *Traps all around. Traps for unwary feet. Have to watch where I step, now.* So many traps. Everybody was laying them.

Laughing softly, he twisted around to go back to sleep—and froze, holding his breath. He was not alone in the room. *Lanfear.*

Frantically he reached for the True Source. For an instant he feared fear itself might defeat him. Then he floated in the cold calm of the Void, filled with a raging river of the Power. He sprang to his feet, lashing out. The lamps burst alight.

Aviendha sat cross-legged by the door, mouth hanging open and green eyes bulging by turns at the lamps and the bonds, invisible to her, that wrapped her completely. Not even her head could move; he had expected someone standing, and the weave extended well above her. He released the flows of Air immediately.

She scrambled to her feet, nearly losing her shawl in her haste. "I. . . . I do not believe I will ever become used to. . . ." She gestured at the lamps. "From a man."

"You have seen me wield the Power before." Anger oozed across the surface of the Void surrounding him. Sneaking into his room in the dark. Frightening him half to death. She was lucky he had not hurt her, killed her by accident. "You had best grow used to it. I am He Who Comes With the Dawn whether you want to admit it or not."

"That is not part—"

"Why are you here?" he demanded coldly.

"The Wise Ones are taking turns watching over you from outside. They meant to continue watching from. . . ." She trailed off, her face reddening.

“From where?” She only stared at him, her face growing more and more crimson. “Aviendha, from wh—?” Dreamwalkers. Why had it never occurred to him? “From inside my dreams,” he said harshly. “How long have they been spying inside my head?”

She let out a long, heavy breath. “I was not supposed to let you know. If Bair finds out—Seana said it was too dangerous tonight. I do not understand it: I cannot enter the dream without one of them to help me. Something dangerous tonight is all I know. That is why they are taking turns at the door to this roof. They are all worried.”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“I do not know why I am here,” she muttered. “If you need protection. . . .” She glanced at her short belt knife, touched the hilt. The ivory bracelet seemed to irritate her; she folded her arms so it was tucked into her armpit. “I could not protect you very well with a knife this small, and Bair says if I pick up a spear again without someone actually attacking me, she will have my hide for a waterskin. I do not know why I should give up sleep to protect you at all. Because of you, I was beating rugs until less than a hour ago. By moonlight!”

“That wasn’t the question. How long—?” He cut off suddenly. There was a feel in the air, a sense of wrongness. Of evil. It could be imagination, residue from his dream. It could be.

Aviendha gasped as the flame-red sword appeared in his hands, its slightly curved blade marked with the heron. Lanfear had accused him of using only the tenth part of what he was capable of, yet most of that tenth came by guess and fumbling. He did not *know* even the tenth part of what he could do. But he knew the sword.

“Stay behind me.” He was just aware of her unsheathing her belt knife as he padded from the room in his stocking feet, soundless on the carpets. Oddly, the air was no cooler than when he had lain down. Perhaps those stone walls held what heat there was, for the farther out he went, the colder it grew.

Even the *gai’shain* must have sought their pallets by now. The halls and chambers stood silent and empty, most dimly illuminated by the scattered lamps still burning. Here where extinguished lamps meant pitch dark at noon, some lamps were always left lit. The feeling was still vague, but it would not go away. Evil.

He stopped suddenly, in the wide archway leading to the brown-tiled entry chamber. One silver lamp at each end of the room gave a pale light. In the middle of the floor a tall man stood with his head bowed over the woman wrapped in his black-cloaked arms, her head flung back and her white cowl fallen while he nuzzled at her throat. Chion's eyes were nearly closed, and she wore an ecstatic smile. A flush of embarrassment slid across the surface of the Void. Then the man raised his head.

Black eyes regarded Rand, too big in a pale, gaunt-cheeked face; a puckered, red-lipped mouth opened in a parody of a smile, showing sharp teeth. Chion crumpled to the floor as the cloak unfolded, spread into wide, batlike wings. The Draghkar stepped over her, white, white hands reaching for Rand, the long, slender fingers tipped with claws. Claws and teeth were not the danger, though. It was the Draghkar's kiss that killed, and worse.

Its crooning, hypnotic song clung tight around the Void. Those dark, leathery wings moved to enfold him as he stepped forward. One moment of startlement flashed in the huge black eyes before the Power-made sword clove the Draghkar's skull to the bridge of its nose.

A steel blade would have bound, but the blade woven of fire pulled free easily as the creature fell. For a moment, deep in the heart of the Void, Rand examined the thing at his feet. That song. Had he not been shielded from emotion by emptiness, kept dispassionate and distant, that song would have snared his mind. The Draghkar surely believed it had when he came to it so willingly.

Aviendha ran past him to half-kneel beside Chion and feel the *gai'shain*'s throat. "Dead," she said, thumbing the woman's eyelids the rest of the way shut. "Perhaps better for it. Draghkar eat the soul before they consume life. A Draghkar! Here!" She glared at him from her crouch. "Trollocs at Imre Stand, and now a Draghkar here. You bring ill times to the Three-fold—" With a cry, she threw herself flat across Chion as he leveled the sword.

A bar of solid fire shot over her from his blade to strike the chest of the Draghkar just filling the outer doorway. Bursting into flame, the Shadowspawn staggered back screaming, stumbling across the path, beating wings that dripped fire.

"Rouse everyone," Rand said calmly. Had Chion fought? How far had her honor held her? It would have made no difference. Draghkar died more easily than Myrddraal, but they were more dangerous in their own way. “If you know how to sound the alarm, do it.”

“The gong by the door—”

“I will do it. Wake them. There may be more than two.”

Nodding, she dashed back the way they had come, shouting, “Up spears! Wake and up spears!”

Rand stepped outside warily, sword ready, the Power filling him, thrilling him. Sickening him. He wanted to laugh, to vomit. The night was freezing, but he was barely aware of the cold.

The burning Draghkar was sprawled in the terrace garden, stinking of burning meat, adding the light of its low fire to the moon. A little way down the path Seana lay, long graying hair spread in a fan, staring at the sky with wide, unblinking eyes. Her belt knife lay beside her, but she had had no chance against a Draghkar.

Even as Rand snatched the leather-padded mallet hanging beside the square bronze gong, pandemonium erupted from the canyon mouth, human shouts and Trolloc howls, the clash of steel, screams. He sounded the gong hard, a sonorous toll that echoed down the canyon; almost immediately another gong sounded, then more, and from dozens of mouths the cry, “Up spears!”

Confused yells rose around the peddlers’ wagons below. Rectangles of light appeared, doors flung open on the two boxlike wagons, gleaming white in the moonlight. Someone was shouting angrily down there—a woman; he could not tell who.

Wings beat in the air above him. Snarling, Rand raised the fiery sword; the One Power burned in him, and fire roared from the blade. The stooping Draghkar exploded in a rain of burning chunks that fell into the darkness below.

“Here,” Rhuarc said. The clan chief’s eyes were hard above his black veil; fully dressed, he carried buckler and spears. Mat stood behind him, coatless and bareheaded, shirt half tucked in, blinking uncertainly and gripping his black-hafted spear with both hands.

Rand took the *shoufa* from Rhuarc, then let it drop. A bat-winged shape wheeled across the moon, then swooped low on the far side of the canyon, vanishing in the shadows. “They hunt for me. Let them see my face.” The Power surged in him; the sword in his hand flared till it seemed a small sun illumined him. “They can’t find me if they do not know where I am." Laughing, because they could not see the joke, he ran down toward the sound of battle.

Pulling his spear free of a boar-snouted Trolloc's chest, Mat crouched, eyes searching the moonlit darkness near the canyon mouth for another. *Burn Rand!* None of the shapes he saw moving were big enough to be a Trolloc. *Always dumping me into these bloody things!* Low moans came from the wounded. A shadowy form he thought was Moiraine knelt beside a downed Aiel. Those balls of fire she tossed about were impressive, almost as much as that sword of Rand's, spurting bars of flame. The thing still shone so a circle of light surrounded the man. *I should have stayed in my blankets is what I should have done. It's bloody cold, and this is nothing to do with me!* More Aiel were beginning to appear, women in skirts come to help with the injured. Some of those women carried spears; they might not do the fighting normally, but once the battle had reached into the hold they had not stood by and watched.

A Maiden stopped beside him, unveiling. He could not make out her face, all moonshadows. "You dance your spear well, gambler. Strange days when Trollocs come to Cold Rocks." She glanced at the shadowy shape he thought was Moiraine. "They might have forced a way in without the Aes Sedai."

"There weren't enough for that," he said without thinking. "They were meant to pull attention here." *So those Draghkar would have a free hand to reach Rand?*

"I think you are right," she said slowly. "Are you a battle leader among the wetlanders?"

He wished he had kept his mouth shut. "I read a book once," he muttered, turning away. *Bloody pieces of other men's bloody memories.* Maybe the peddlers would be ready to leave after this.

When he stopped by the wagons, though, neither Keille nor Kadere was anywhere to be seen. The drivers were all clumped together, hastily passing around jars of something that smelled like the good brandy they had been selling, muttering and as agitated as if the Trollocs had actually come within smelling distance of them. Isendre stood at the top of the steps to Kadere's wagon, frowning at nothing. Even with her brows furrowed she was beautiful behind that misty scarf. He was glad that at least his memories of women were his own.

“The Trollocs are done,” he told her, leaning on his spear so she would be sure to notice it. *No point risking having my skull split without getting a little good out of it.* No effort at all was needed to sound tired. “A hard fight, but you’re safe, now.”

She stared down at him, face expressionless, eyes glittering in the moonlight like dark, polished stone. Without a word she turned and went inside, slamming the door. Hard.

Mat expelled a long, disgusted breath and stalked away from the wagons. What did it take to impress the woman? Bed was what he wanted. Back in his blankets, and let Rand deal with Trollocs and bloody Draghkar. The man seemed to *enjoy* it. Laughing like that.

Rand was coming up the canyon now, the glow of that sword like lamplight around him in the night. Aviendha appeared, running to meet him with her skirts pulled up above her knees, then stopped. Letting her skirts fall, she smoothed them and fell in beside Rand, lifting her shawl around her head. He seemed not to see her, and her face was blank as stone. They deserved each other.

“Rand,” a hurrying shadow called with Moiraine’s voice, nearly as melodious as Keille’s, but a cool music. Rand turned, waiting, and she slowed before she could be seen clearly, entering the light regally enough for any palace. “Matters grow more dangerous, Rand. The attack at Imre Stand could have been aimed at the Aiel—not likely, yet it could have been—but tonight the Draghkar were surely aimed at you.”

“I know.” Just like that. As calm as she and even colder.

Moiraine’s lips compressed, and her hands were too still on her skirts; she was not best pleased. “Prophecy is most dangerous when you try to make it happen. Did you not learn that in Tear? The Pattern weaves itself around you, but when you try to weave it, even you cannot hold it. Force the Pattern too tight, and pressure builds. It can explode wildly in every direction. Who can say how long before it settles to focus on you again, or what will happen before it does?”

“As clear as most of your explanations,” Rand said dryly. “What do you want, Moiraine? It is late, and I am tired.”

“I want you to confide in me. Do you think you have already learned all there is to know, little more than a year out of your village?”

“No, I haven’t learned everything yet.” Now he sounded amused; sometimes Mat was not sure he was still as sane as he looked. “You want me to confide in you, Moiraine? All right. Your Three Oaths won't let you lie. Say plainly that whatever I tell you, you won't try to stop me, won't hinder me in any way. Say you won't try to use me for the Tower's ends. Say it plain and straight so I know it's true."

"I will do nothing to hinder you fulfilling your destiny. I have devoted my life to that. But I will not promise to watch while you lay your head on a chopping block."

"Not good enough, Moiraine. Not good enough. But if I could confide in you, I'd still not do it here. The night has ears." There were people moving all around in the darkness, but none close enough to hear. "Even dreams have ears." Aviendha tugged her shawl forward to shadow her face; even an Aiel could feel the cold, apparently.

Rhuarc stepped into the light, black veil hanging loose. "The Trollocs were only a diversion for the Draghkar, Rand al'Thor. Too few to be else. Draghkar meant for you, I think. Leafblighter does not want you to live."

"The danger grows," Moiraine said quietly.

The clan chief glanced at her before going on. "Moiraine Sedai is right. Since the Draghkar failed, I fear we can expect the Soulless next; what you call Gray Men. I want to put spears around you at all times. For some reason, the Maidens have volunteered for this task."

The cold *was* getting to Aviendha. Shoulders hunched, she had her hands shoved into her armpits as far they would go.

"If they wish it," Rand said. He sounded a touch uncomfortable under all that ice. Mat did not blame him; he would not have put himself in the Maidens' hands again for all the silk on Sea Folk ships.

"They will watch better than anyone else," Rhuarc said, "having asked for the task. I do not mean to leave it to them alone, however. I will have everyone on guard. I believe it will be the Soulless next time, but that does not mean it cannot be something else. Ten thousand Trollocs instead of a few hundred."

"What about the Shaido?" Mat wished he had not cracked his teeth when they all looked at him. Maybe they had not even realized he was there until then. Still, he might as well say it. "I know you don't like them, but if you think there's really any chance of a bigger attack, wouldn't it be better to have them in here than outside?"

Rhuarc grunted; from him, that equaled a curse from most men. "I would not bring near a thousand Shaido inside Cold Rocks if Grassburner were coming. I could not in any case. Couladin and the Shaido folded their tents at nightfall. We are well rid of them. I sent runners to make sure they leave Taardad land without taking a few goats or sheep with them."

That sword vanished from Rand's hand, the abrupt absence of its light like blindness. Mat squeezed his eyes shut to help them adapt, but when he opened them again, the moonlight still seemed dark.

"Which way did they go?" Rand asked.

"North," Rhuarc told him. "No doubt Couladin means to meet Sevanna on her way to Alcair Dal, to influence her against you. He may succeed. The only reason she laid her bridal wreath at Suladric's feet instead of his was that she meant to wed a clan chief. But I told you to expect trouble from her. Sevanna delights in causing trouble. It should not matter. If the Shaido will not follow you, they are small loss."

"I mean to go to Alcair Dal," Rand said firmly. "Now. I will apologize to any chief who feels dishonored by coming late, but I'll not let Couladin be there any longer before me than I can manage. He won't stop at turning Sevanna against me, Rhuarc. I cannot afford to hand him a month for it."

After a moment, Rhuarc said, "Perhaps you are right. You bring change, Rand al'Thor. At sunrise, then. I will choose out ten Red Shields for my honor, and the Maidens will provide yours."

"I mean to be leaving when first light hits the sky, Rhuarc. With every hand that can carry a spear or draw a bow."

"Custom—"

"There are no customs to cover me, Rhuarc." You could have cracked rocks with Rand's voice, or put a skim of ice on wine. "I have to make new customs." He laughed roughly. Aviendha looked shocked, and even Rhuarc blinked, taken aback. Only Moiraine was unaffected, with those considering eyes. "Someone had best let the peddlers know," Rand continued. "They won't want to miss the fair, but if they don't stop those fellows drinking they will be too drunk to handle reins. What of you, Mat? Are you coming?"

He certainly did not intend to let the peddlers get away from him, not his way out of the Waste. "Oh, I am right behind you, Rand." The worst of it was, it felt right saying that. *Bloody* ta'veren *tugging at me*! How had Perrin pulled free? *Light, I wish I was with him right now.* "I guess I am."

Shouldering his spear, he strode off up the canyon. There was still time to get a little sleep at least. Behind him he could hear Rand chuckling.

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CHAPTER
51

Revelations in Tanchico

Elayne fumbled with the two slim red-lacquered sticks, trying to set them properly in her fingers. *Sursa*, she reminded herself. *Not sticks; sursa. A fool way to eat, whatever they're called.*

On the other side of the table in the Chamber of Falling Blossoms, Egeanin frowned at her own sursa, one upright in each hand as if they really were sticks. Nynaeve held hers nestled in her hand the way Rendra had showed them, but so far she had managed to lift one sliver of meat and a few sliced peppers as far as her mouth; her eyes were tight with determination. A great many small white bowls covered the table, each filled with slices and tiny slivers of meat and vegetables, some in sauces dark or pale. Elayne thought it might take the rest of the day to finish this meal. She gave the honey-haired innkeeper a grateful smile when the woman leaned over her shoulder to position the sursa properly.

"Your land is at war with Arad Doman," Egeanin said, sounding almost angry. "Why do you serve the dishes of your enemy?"

Rendra shrugged, making a moue behind her veil; she wore the palest possible red today, and beads of the same color woven into her narrow braids made soft clicks when she moved her head. "It is the fashion, now. Four days ago the Garden of Silver Breezes began it, and now almost every patron asks for the Domani food. I think maybe it is that if we cannot conquer the Domani, at least we can conquer their food. Maybe in Bandar Eban they eat the lamb with the honey sauce and the glazed apples, yes? In four days more, perhaps it is something else. The fashion, it changes quickly now, and if someone whips up the mob against this. . . ." She shrugged again.

"Do you think there will be *more* riots?" Elayne asked. "Over what sort of food inns are serving?"

“The streets, they are restive,” Rendra said, spreading her hands fatalistically. “Who can say what will spark them again? The uproar the day before yesterday, it came from a rumor Maracru had declared for the Dragon Reborn, or maybe fallen to the Dragonsworn, or the rebels perhaps—how seems to have made little difference—but does the mob turn on the people from Maracru? No. They rampage through the streets, pulling people from the carriages, and then burn the Grand Hall of the Assembly. Perhaps the word comes that the army, it has won a battle—or lost one—and the mob rises against those who serve Domani food. Or maybe it burns warehouses on the Calpene docks. Who can say?”

“No proper order,” Egeanin muttered, thrusting the sursa firmly between the fingers of her right hand. From the expression on her face, they might have been daggers she was going to use to stab what was in the bowls. A bit of meat dropped out of Nynaeve’s sursa short of her lips; growling, she snatched it from her lap, dabbing at the cream-colored silk with her napkin.

“Aah, order.” Rendra laughed. “I remember order. Maybe it will come again one day, yes? Some thought the Panarch Amathera would put the Civil Watch back at their duties, but were I she, with the memory of the mob brawling outside my investiture. . . . The Children of the Light, they killed very many of the rioters. Perhaps this means there will not be another riot, but perhaps it means the next riot, it will be twice so big, or ten times. I think that I, too, would keep the Watch and the Children close around me. But this is no talk to disturb the meal.” Examining the table, she nodded to herself in approval, the beads in her thin plaits clicking. As she turned toward the door, she paused with a small smile. “It is the fashion to eat the Domani food with the sursa, and of course one does what is the fashion. But . . . there are none here to see save yourselves, yes? Should you perhaps wish the spoons and the forks, they are under the napkin.” She indicated the tray on the end of the table. “Enjoy.”

Nynaeve and Egeanin waited until the door closed behind the innkeeper, then grinned at each other and reached for the tray with decidedly unseemly haste. Elayne still managed to get her spoon and fork first; neither of the others had ever had to eat in the few minutes between a novice’s chores and lessons.

“It is tasty enough,” Egeanin said after her first mouthful, “when you can put any on your tongue.” Nynaeve laughed with her.

In the seven days since meeting the dark-haired woman with her sharp blue eyes and slow drawl, they had both come to like her. She was a refreshing change from Rendra's chatter about hair and clothes and complexions, or stares in the street from people who looked as if they would slit a throat for a copper. This was her fourth visit since that first meeting, and Elayne had enjoyed every one. Egeanin had a directness and an air of independence she admired. The woman might be only a small trader in whatever came her way, but she could challenge Gareth Bryne for saying what she meant and bowing to no one.

Still, Elayne wished the visits had not been so frequent. Or rather that she and Nynaeve had not been at the Three Plum Court so often for Egeanin to find. Almost constant riots since Amathera's investiture made moving about the city all but impossible, however, despite their coterie of Domon's tough sailors. Even Nynaeve had admitted as much after they had had to flee a shower of fist-sized stones. Thom still promised to find them a carriage and team, but she was not too certain how hard he was looking. He and Juilin both seemed insufferably pleased that she and Nynaeve were mired inside the inn. *They come back bruised or bleeding and don't want us to even stub a toe*, she thought wryly. Why did men always think it was right to keep you safer than they kept themselves? Why did they think their injuries mattered less than yours?

From the taste of the meat, she suspected Thom should look in the kitchens here if he wanted to find horses. The thought of eating horse made her stomach queasy. She chose a bowl containing only vegetables, bits of dark mushroom, red peppers and some sort of feathery green sprouts in a pale, tangy sauce.

"What shall we discuss today?" Nynaeve asked Egeanin. "You have asked almost every question I can think of." Nearly every one they knew how to answer at any rate. "If you want to learn any more about Aes Sedai, you'll have to go to the Tower as a novice."

Egeanin flinched unconsciously, as she did at any words linking the Power to her. For a moment she stirred the contents of one of the small bowls, frowning at it. "You have not made any real effort," she said slowly, "to keep secret from me that you are looking for someone. Women. If it does not intrude on your secrets, I would ask—" She cut off at a knock on the door.

Bayle Domon strode in without waiting, grim satisfaction warring with uneasiness on his round face. "I have found them," he began, then gave a start at the sight of Egeanin. "You!"

Shockingly, Egeanin knocked over her chair leaping up, and threw a fist at Domon's thick middle almost too fast to see. Somehow Domon caught her wrist in a big hand, twisted—there was a flurried instant where they seemed to be trying to hook each other's ankle with a foot; Egeanin attempted to strike him in the throat—then somehow, she was facedown on the floor, Domon's boot on her shoulder and her arm levered up hard against his knee. Despite that she snatched her belt knife free.

Elayne wove flows of Air around the pair before she even knew she had embraced *saidar*, freezing them where they were. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded in her best icy tone.

"How dare you, Master Domon?" Nynaeve's voice was equally cold. "Unhand her!" More warmly, worriedly, she added, "Egeanin, why did you try to hit him? I told you to release her, Domon!"

"He cannot, Nynaeve." Elayne did wish the other woman could at least see flows clearly without being angry. *She* did *try to hit him first.* "Egeanin, why?"

The dark-haired woman lay there with eyes shut and mouth tight; her knuckles stood out bloodless from her grip on the knife hilt.

Domon glared from Elayne to Nynaeve, his odd Illianer beard nearly bristling. His head was all that Elayne had left free to move. "The woman do be Seanchan!" he growled.

Elayne exchanged startled looks with Nynaeve. Egeanin? Seanchan? It was impossible. It must be impossible.

"Are you certain?" Nynaeve asked slowly, quietly. She sounded as stunned as Elayne felt.

"I will never forget her face," Domon replied firmly. "A ship captain. It did be she who did take me to Falme, me and my ship, captives to the Seanchan."

Egeanin made no effort to deny it, only lay there gripping her knife. Seanchan. *But I like her!*

Carefully, Elayne shifted the weave of flows until Egeanin's knife hand lay uncovered to the wrist. "Let go of it, Egeanin," she said, kneeling beside the woman. "Please." After a moment, Egeanin's hand fell open.

Elayne picked up the knife and backed away, loosing the flows completely. “Let her up, Master Domon.”

“She be Seanchan, Mistress,” he protested, “and hard as iron spikes.”

“Let her up.”

Muttering under his breath, he released Egeanin’s wrist, moving away from her quickly as if he expected she might come at him again. The dark-haired woman—the *Seanchan* woman—merely stood, though. She worked the shoulder he had wrenched, eyeing him thoughtfully, glanced at the door, then raised her head and waited with every outward appearance of calm. It was hard not to keep on admiring her.

“Seanchan,” Nynaeve growled. She clutched a fistful of her long braids, then gave her hand an odd stare and let go, but her brows were still furrowed and her eyes hard. “Seanchan! Worming your way into our friendship. I thought you had all gone back where you came from. Why are you here, Egeanin? Was our meeting really an accident? Why did you seek us out? Did you mean to lure us somewhere your filthy *sul’dam* could lock their leashes around our throats?” Egeanin’s blue eyes widened fractionally. “Oh, yes,” Nynaeve told her sharply. “We know about you Seanchan and your *sul’dam* and *damane*. We know more than you. You chain women who channel, but those you use to control them can channel too, Egeanin. For every woman who can channel that you’ve leashed like an animal, you walk by another ten or twenty every day without realizing it.”

“I know,” Egeanin said simply, and Nynaeve’s mouth fell open.

Elayne thought her own eyes were going to pop out of her head. “You know?” She took a breath and went on in something less like an incredulous squeal. “Egeanin, I think you are lying. I’ve not met many Seanchan before, and never for more than a few minutes, but I know someone who has. Seanchan don’t even hate women who channel. They think they are animals. You’d not take it so easily if you knew, or even believed.”

“Women who can wear the bracelet are women who can learn to channel,” Egeanin said. “I did not know it *could* be learned—I was taught a woman either could or could not—but when you told me that girls must be guided if they are not born with it, I reasoned it out. May I sit down?” So cool.

Elayne nodded, and Domon set Egeanin’s chair upright, standing behind it while she sat. Looking over her shoulder at him, the dark-haired woman said, “You were not so . . . difficult . . . an opponent the last time we met.”

“You did have twenty armored soldiers on my deck then, and a *damane* ready to break my ship apart with the Power. Just because I can hook a shark from a boat, I do no offer to wrestle it in the water.” Surprisingly, he grinned at her, rubbing his side where she must have gotten in a blow Elayne had not seen. “You are no so easy an opponent yourself as I did think you would be without your armor and sword.”

The woman’s world had to have been turned upside down by her own reasoning, but she was taking it matter-of-factly. Elayne could not imagine what would spin her own world topsy-turvy that way, but she hoped that if she ever found out she could face it with Egeanin’s calm reserve. *I have to stop liking her. She is Seanchan. They’d have collared me for a pet if they could. Light, how do you stop liking someone?*

Nynaeve appeared to be having no such difficulty. Planting her fists on the table, she leaned toward Egeanin so fiercely her braids dangled among the small bowls. “Why are you here in Tanchico? I thought you had all fled after Falme. And why have you tried to wriggle your way into our trust like some egg-eating snake? If you think you can collar us, think again!”

“That was never my intention,” Egeanin said stiffly. “All I ever wanted from you was to learn about Aes Sedai. I. . . .” For the first time she seemed hesitant, unsure of herself. Compressing her lips, she looked from Nynaeve to Elayne and shook her head. “You are not as I was taught. The Light be upon me, I . . . like you.”

“You like us.” Nynaeve made it sound a crime. “That answers none of my questions.”

Egeanin hesitated again, then held her head up, defying them to do their worst. “*Sul’dam* were left behind at Falme. Some deserted after the disaster. A few of us were sent to bring them back. I only found one, but I discovered that an *a’dam* would hold her.” Seeing Nynaeve’s fists tighten, she quickly added, “I let her go last night. I will pay dearly if that is ever discovered, but after talking with you, I could not. . . .” Grimacing, she shook her head. “That is why I stayed with you after Elayne revealed herself. I knew Bethamin was a *sul’dam*. To discover the *a’dam* held her, that she could. . . . I had to know, to understand, about women who could channel.” She took a deep breath. “What do you mean to do with me?” Her hands, folded on the table, did not tremble.

Nynaeve opened her mouth angrily, and closed it again slowly. Elayne knew her difficulty. Nynaeve might hate Egeanin now, but what *were* they to do with her? It was not clear she had committed any crime in Tanchico, and in any event the Civil Watch seemed interested in nothing beyond saving its own collective skin. She was Seanchan, she had used *sul'dam* and *damane*, but on the other hand, she claimed to have let this Bethamin go free. For what crime could they punish her? Asking questions they had answered freely? Making them like her?

"I'd like to stripe your hide till you glow like a sunset," Nynaeve growled. Abruptly her head swung toward Domon. "You found them? You said you found them. Where?" He shifted his feet, shooting a meaning look at the back of Egeanin's head, eyebrows rising in a question.

"I do not believe she is a Darkfriend," Elayne said when Nynaeve hesitated.

"I certainly am not!" Egeanin's stare was fierce-eyed and offended.

Folding her arms as if to keep from tugging her braids, Nynaeve glared at the woman, then shifted an accusatory frown to Domon, as though this entire mess were his fault. "There isn't anywhere to lock her," she said finally, "and Rendra would surely demand reasons. Go ahead, Master Domon."

He gave a last, doubtful look at Egeanin. "At the Panarch's Palace, one of my men did see two of the women on your list. The one with the cats, and the Saldaean woman."

"Are you certain?" Nynaeve said. "At the Panarch's Palace? I wish you had seen for yourself. More women than Marillin Gemalphin like cats. And Asne Zeramene is not the only woman from Saldaea, even in Tanchico."

"A narrow-faced blue-eyed woman with a wide nose feeding a dozen cats in this city where people do eat cats? In the company of another with that Saldaean nose and tilted eyes? That is no so common a pair, Mistress al'Meara."

"It is not," she agreed. "But the Panarch's Palace? Master Domon, in case you have forgotten, five hundred Whitecloaks guard that place, commanded by an Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light! Jaichim Carridin and his officers at least must know Aes Sedai on sight. Would they remain if they saw the Panarch sheltering Aes Sedai?" He opened his mouth, but Nynaeve's point was telling, and nothing came out.

“Master Domon,” Elayne said, “what was one of your men doing at the Panarch’s Palace?”

He tugged at his beard in an embarrassed way, and rubbed his bare upper lip with a wide finger. “You see, the Panarch Amathera do be known to like ice peppers, the white kind that be very hot, and whether or no she be amenable to gifts herself, the customs men will know who did give her one and be more amenable themselves.”

“Gifts?” Elayne said in her best reproving voice. “You were more honest on the docks, and called them bribes.” Surprisingly, Egeanin had twisted around in her chair to give him a disapproving look, too.

“Fortune prick me,” he muttered, “you did no ask me to give up my trade. And I would no if you did, no if you did bring my aged mother to ask. A man do have a right to his trade.” Egeanin snorted and righted herself.

“His bribes are not our problem, Elayne.” Nynaeve sounded exasperated. “I don’t care if he bribes the entire city and smuggles—” A rap at the door cut her off. With a cautioning look at the others, she snapped “You sit quiet” to Egeanin, and raised her voice. “Come.”

Juilin stuck his head into the room with that silly cylindrical cap on, frowning as usual at Domon. The gash on his dark cheek, the blood already dried, was not unusual either; the streets were rougher now by daylight than they had been by dark in the beginning. “May I speak to you alone, Mistress al’Meara?” he said when he saw Egeanin sitting at the table.

“Oh, come in,” Nynaeve told him sharply. “After what she’s heard already, it won’t matter if she hears a little more. Have you found them in the Panarch’s Palace, too?”

In the act of shutting the door, he shot an unreadable, tight-mouthed glance at Domon. The smuggler smiled, showing too many teeth. For a moment it seemed they might come to blows.

“So the Illianer is ahead of me,” Juilin muttered ruefully. Ignoring Domon, he addressed Nynaeve. “I told you the woman with the white stripe would lead me to them. That is a very distinctive thing. And I saw the Domani woman there, too. From a distance—I am not fool enough to wade into a school of silverpike—but I cannot believe there is another Domani woman besides Jeaine Caide in all of Tarabon.”

“You mean they *are* in the Panarch’s Palace?” Nynaeve exclaimed.

Juilin’s face did not change, but his dark eyes widened slightly, flickered toward Domon. “So he had no proof,” he murmured in a satisfied tone.

“I did have proof,” Domon avoided looking at the Tairen. “If you did no accept it before this fisherman did come, Mistress al’Meara, it be no fault of mine.”

Juilin drew himself up, but Elayne cut in before the thief-catcher could speak. “You both found them, and you both brought proof. Very likely neither would have been sufficient without the other. Now we know where they are because of you both.” If anything, they looked more disgruntled than before. Men could be absolutely silly at times.

“The Panarch’s Palace.” Nynaeve jerked a fistful of braids, then flung the long plaits over her shoulder with a toss of her head. “What they are after must be there. But if they have it, why are they still in Tanchico? The palace is huge. Maybe they haven’t found it yet. Not that that helps if we are out here while they are inside!”

Thom, as usual, entered without knocking, taking in everyone at one glance. “Mistress Egeanin,” he murmured, with an elegant bow his limp did nothing to diminish. “Nynaeve, if I could speak with you alone, I have important news.”

The fresh bruise on his leathery cheek made Elayne even angrier than the new tear in his good brown cloak. The man was too old to be braving the streets of Tanchico. Or any rough streets, for that matter. It was time she arranged a pension for him, and somewhere safe and comfortable to live. No more gleeman wanderings from village to village for him. She would see to it.

Nynaeve gave Thom a sharp look. “I’ve no time for that now. The Black sisters are in the Panarch’s Palace, and for all I know, Amathera is helping them search it from cellar to attic.”

“I found out less than an hour ago,” he said disbelievingly. “How did you . . . ?” He looked at Domon and Juilin, both still glowering like boys who had each wanted the whole cake.

It was obvious that he dismissed either as Nynaeve’s source of information. Elayne felt like grinning. He did so pride himself on knowing all the undercurrents, all the hidden doings. “The Tower has its ways, Thom,” she told him, cool and mysterious. “It is best not to inquire too closely into the methods of Aes Sedai.” He frowned, bushy white eyebrows drawing down uncertainly. Most satisfactory. She became aware of Juilin and Domon frowning at her, too, and suddenly it was all she could do not to blush. If they talked, she *would* look a fool. They would, eventually; men did. Best to bury it quickly and hope. “Thom, have you heard anything that might indicate whether Amathera is a Darkfriend?”

“Nothing.” He tugged one long mustache irritably. “Apparently she has not seen Andric since donning the Crown of the Tree. Maybe the troubles in the streets make travel between the King’s Palace and the Panarch’s too dangerous. Maybe she has simply realized that her power equals his now, and is no longer as compliant as before. Nothing to say what her allegiances are.” With a glance at the dark-haired woman in the chair, he added, “I am grateful for the aid Mistress Egeanin gave you with those robbers, but to now I have thought she was a casually met friend. May I ask who she is to be brought into this? I seem to recall you threatening to tie a knot in any careless tongues, Nynaeve.”

“She’s Seanchan,” Nynaeve told him. “Close your mouth before you swallow a moth, Thom, and sit down. We can eat while we try to figure out what to do.”

“In front of her?” Thom said. “Seanchan?” He had heard some of the story of Falme from Elayne—some of it—and he had certainly heard the rumors here; he studied Egeanin as if wondering where she hid her horns. Juilin seemed to be strangling, if his bulging eyes were any indication; he must have heard the Tanchican rumors, too.

“Do you suggest I ask Rendra to lock her in a storeroom?” Nynaeve asked calmly. “That *would* cause comment, wouldn’t it? I’m fairly certain three big, hairy men can protect Elayne and me if she pulls a Seanchan army out of her pouch. Sit, Thom, or else eat standing up, but stop staring. All of you, sit. I mean to eat before it grows cold.”

They did, Thom looking as ill-contented as Juilin and Domon. Sometimes Nynaeve’s bullying manner did seem to work. Perhaps Rand *would* respond to occasional bullying.

Putting Rand out of her mind, Elayne decided it was time to add something of worth. “I cannot see how the Black sisters can be in the Panarch’s Palace without Amathera’s knowledge,” she said, pulling her chair under her. “As I see it, that makes for three possibilities. One, Amathera is a Darkfriend. Two, she thinks they are Aes Sedai. And three, she is their prisoner.” For some reason, Thom’s approving nod made her feel warm inside. Silly. Even if he did know the Game of Houses, he was just a foolish bard who had thrown it all away to become a gleeman. “In any case, she will help them look for what they seek, but it seems to me that if she thinks they are Aes Sedai, we might be able to gain her help with the truth. And if she is a prisoner, we could gain it by freeing her. Even Liandrin and her companions could not hold on to the palace if the Panarch ordered it cleared, and that would give *us* a free hand to search."

"The problem is discovering whether she is ally, dupe or captive," Thom said, gesturing with his pair of sursa. He knew how to use the things perfectly!

Juilin shook his head. "The real problem is to reach her, whatever her situation. Jaichim Carridin has five hundred Whitecloaks around the palace like fisher-birds around the docks. The Panarch's Legion has nearly twice that, and the Civil Watch almost as many. Few of the ring forts are held half so well."

"We are not going to fight them," Nynaeve said dryly. "Stop thinking with the hair on your chest. This is a time for wits, not muscle. As I see it. . . ."

The discussion went on through the meal, continuing after the last small bowl was emptied. Egeanin even offered a few cogent comments after a while spent silently, not eating and not seeming to listen. She had a sharp mind, and Thom readily accepted any of her suggestions he agreed with, though he stubbornly rejected out of hand those he did not, just the way he treated everyone else. Even Domon, rather surprisingly, supported Egeanin when Nynaeve wanted her to keep quiet. "She do make sense, Mistress al'Meara. Only a fool do reject sense, wherever it do come from."

Unfortunately, knowing where the Black sisters were did little good without knowing whether or not Amathera was with them; that, or what they were after. In the end, almost two hours of discussion came to not much more than that and a few suggestions as to how to find out about Amathera. All of which, it seemed, were to be used by the men with their spiderweb of contacts crisscrossing Tanchico.

None of the fool men wanted to leave them alone with one of the Seanchan—until Nynaeve became angry enough to wrap them all three in flows of Air while they dithered before the door. "Do you not think," she said icily, surrounded by the glow of *saidar*, "that one of us might be able to do the same to her if she says boo?" She would not release any of them until they all nodded their heads, the only bits they could move.

“You keep a taut crew,” Egeanin said as soon as the door closed behind them.

“Be quiet, Seanchan!” Nynaeve folded her arms tightly; she seemed to have given up trying to pull at those braids when she was angry. “Sit down, and—be—quiet!”

It was frustrating waiting there, staring at the plum trees and falling blossoms painted on the windowless walls, pacing the floor or watching Nynaeve pace, while Thom and Juilin and Domon were out actually doing something. Yet it was worse when each man came back at intervals, to report another trail faded away to nothing, another thread snapped, hear what the others had learned, and hurry out again.

The first time Thom returned—with a second purple bruise, on the other cheek—Elayne said, “Wouldn’t you do better here, Thom, where you could hear whatever Juilin and Master Domon report? You could evaluate much better than Nynaeve or I.”

He shook his foolish shaggy white head while Nynaeve sniffed loudly enough to be heard in the hallway. “I’ve a lead to a house on the Verana, where Amathera supposedly went sneaking some nights before she was raised Panarch.” And he was gone before she could say another word.

When he next returned—limping distinctly more, reporting that the house was the home of Amathera’s old nurse—Elayne spoke in her firmest voice. “Thom, I want you to sit down. You will stay here. I will not have you getting yourself hurt.”

“Hurt?” he said. “Child, I never felt better in my life. Tell Juilin and Bayle there is supposedly a woman named Cerindra somewhere in this city who claims to know all sorts of dark secrets about Amathera.” And off he hobbled, cloak swirling behind him. He had another tear in that, too. Stubborn, stubborn, foolish old man.

Once a clamor penetrated the thick walls, brutal shouts and cries from the street. Rendra bustled into the room just when Elayne had decided to go down and see for herself what it was. “Some little trouble outside. Do not disturb yourself. Bayle Domon’s men, they keep it away from us, yes. I did not want you to worry.”

“A riot here?” Nynaeve said sharply. The immediate neighborhood of the inn had been one of the few calm areas in the city.

“Not to worry,” Rendra said soothingly. “Perhaps they want food. I will tell them where Bayle Domon’s soup kitchen is, and they will go away.”

The noise did die down after a while, and Rendra sent up some wine. Not until the serving man was leaving, with a sulky look on his face, did Elayne realize it was the young man with the beautiful brown eyes. The man had begun reacting to her coldest stares as if they were smiles. Did the fool think she had time to notice him now?

Waiting and pacing, pacing and waiting. Cerindra turned out to be a tirewoman dismissed for theft; not at all grateful for not being imprisoned, she would make any accusation against Amathera that was suggested to her. A fellow who claimed to have proof that Amathera was Aes Sedai and Black Ajah also claimed that the same documents proved King Andric the Dragon Reborn. The group of women whom Amathera used to meet in secret were friends Andric despised, and the shocking discovery that she financed several smuggling craft led nowhere. Almost every noble but the King himself had a finger in smuggling. Every trail ended that way. The worst Thom could discover was that Amathera had convinced two handsome young lords that each was the true love of her life and Andric only a means to an end. On the other hand, she had given audiences in the Panarch’s Palace to various lords, both alone and in company with various women recognizable as Liandrin and others on the list, and reportedly asked and accepted their advice for her decisions. Ally, or captive?

When Juilin came back, a good three hours after sunset, spinning a thumb-thick staff of ridged wood and muttering about some pale-haired fellow who had tried to rob him, Thom and Domon were already slumped disconsolately at the table with Egeanin.

“This will be Falme again,” Domon growled at the air. The stout cudgel he had acquired somewhere lay in front of him, and he wore a short sword at his belt now. “Aes Sedai. The Black Ajah. Meddling with the Panarch. If we do no find something tomorrow, I do mean to take myself out of Tanchico. The next day for certain, if my own sister do ask me to stay!”

“Tomorrow,” Thom said wearily, elbows on the table and chin on fists. “I am too tired to think straight any longer. I found myself listening to a laundryman from the Panarch’s Palace who claims he has heard Amathera singing bawdy songs, the sort you hear in the roughest taverns on the docks. I actually listened to him.”

“For me,” Juilin said, reversing a chair to straddle it, “I mean to look on tonight. I found a roofman who says the woman he keeps company with was another of Amathera’s tirewomen. According to him, Amathera discharged all of her tirewomen without warning the same evening she was invested Panarch. He will take me to talk with her after he finishes some business of his own at a merchant’s house.”

Nynaeve moved to the end of the table, fists on hips. “You will not be going anywhere tonight, Juilin. The three of you will be taking turns guarding our door.” The men protested volubly, of course, all together.

“I do have my own trade to keep up, and if I must spend my days asking questions for you. . . .”

“Mistress al’Meara, this woman is the first person I have found who’s actually seen Amathera since she was raised. . . .”

“Nynaeve, I’ll hardly be able to *find* a rumor tomorrow, much less trace it, if I spend the night playing at. . . .”

She let them argue themselves out. When they began to trail off, obviously thinking her convinced, she said, “Since we have nowhere else to keep the Seanchan woman, she will have to sleep with us. Elayne, will you ask Rendra to have a pallet made up? On the floor will do nicely.” Egeanin glanced at her, but said nothing.

The men were neatly boxed; either they refused flatly, and openly broke their word to do as Nynaeve said, or else argued on, sounding as if they were whining. They glowered and spluttered—and acquiesced.

Rendra was clearly surprised they requested only a pallet, but accepted the tale that Egeanin feared to risk the streets at night. She did look miffed when Thom seated himself in the hall beside their door. “Those fellows, they did not get inside however hard they tried. I told you the soup kitchen would take them away, yes? Guests at the Three Plum Court have no need for the bodyguards on their rooms.”

“I am sure not,” Elayne told her, gently trying to push her out with the door. “It’s just that Thom and the others do worry so. You know how men are.” Thom shot her a hawkish stare beneath those thick white eyebrows, but Rendra sniffed, agreeing that she did indeed know, and let Elayne shut the door.

Nynaeve immediately turned to Egeanin, who was spreading her pallet on the far side of the bed. “Take off your clothes, Seanchan. I want to be sure you don’t have another knife hidden away.”

Egeanin calmly stood and undressed down to her linen shift. Nynaeve searched through her dress thoroughly, then insisted on searching Egeanin as well, and none too gently. Finding nothing did not seem to soothe her.

"Hands behind your back, Seanchan. Elayne, bind her."

"Nynaeve, I don't think she—"

"Bind her with the Power, Elayne," Nynaeve said roughly, "or I'll cut strips from her dress and bind her hands and heels. You remember how she handled those fellows in the street. Probably her own hirelings. She could probably kill us in our sleep with her bare hands."

"Really, Nynaeve, with Thom outside—"

"She's Seanchan! Seanchan, Elayne!" She sounded as if she hated the dark-haired woman for a personal wrong, which made no sense. Egwene had been in their hands, but not Nynaeve. The set of her jaw said she meant to have her way, with the Power or with ropes if she could find them.

Egeanin had already placed her wrists together in the small of her back, compliant if not meek. Elayne wove a flow of Air around them and tied it off; at least it would be more comfortable than bindings cut out of her dress. Egeanin flexed her arms slightly, testing the bonds she could not see, and shivered. She could as easily have broken steel chains. Shrugging, she laid herself down awkwardly on the pallet and turned her back to them.

Nynaeve began undoing her own dress. "Let me have the ring, Elayne."

"Are you sure, Nynaeve?" She looked at Egeanin in a significant manner. The woman seemed to be paying no attention to them.

"She'll not go running to betray us tonight." Pausing to pull the dress over her head, Nynaeve sat on the edge of the bed in her thin silk Taraboner shift to roll down her stockings. "Tonight is the agreed night. Egwene will expect one of us, and it is my turn. She will be worried if neither of us appears."

Elayne fished the leather cord around her neck out of the bosom of her dress. The stone ring, all flecks and stripes in blue and brown and red, lay snuggled against the golden serpent eating its own tail. Unknotting the string long enough to hand the *ter'angreal* to Nynaeve, she retied and replaced it. Nynaeve strung the stone *ter'angreal* with her own Great Serpent ring and Lan's heavy gold ring, let them hang between her breasts.

"Give me an hour after you are certain I'm asleep," she said, stretching out atop the blue coverlet. "It should take no longer than that. And keep an eye on her."

"What can she do bound, Nynaeve?" Elayne hesitated before adding, "I don't think she would try to harm us if she were loose."

"Don't you dare!" Nynaeve raised her head to glare at Egeanin's back, then lay back on the pillows again. "An hour, Elayne." Closing her eyes, she wriggled to make herself more comfortable. "That should be more than enough," she murmured.

Hiding a yawn behind her hand, Elayne brought the low stool to the foot of the bed, where she could watch Nynaeve, and Egeanin, too, though that hardly seemed necessary. The woman lay huddled on her pallet with her knees up, hands securely fastened. It had been a strangely tiring day considering that they had never left the inn. Nynaeve was already muttering softly in her sleep. With her elbows jutting out.

Egeanin lifted her head and looked over her shoulder. "She hates me, I think."

"Go to sleep." Elayne stifled another yawn.

"You do not."

"Don't be too sure of yourself," she said firmly. "You are taking this very calmly. How can you be so calm?"

"Calm?" The other woman's hands moved involuntarily, twisting at her Air-woven bonds. "I am so terrified I could weep." She did not sound it. Yet it sounded the simple truth.

"We won't harm you, Egeanin." Whatever Nynaeve wanted, she would see to that. "Go to sleep." After a moment Egeanin's head lowered.

An hour. It was right not to worry Egwene needlessly, but she wished that hour could be spent on their problem instead of wandering uselessly in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. If they could not find out whether Amathera was prisoner or captive. . . . *Set that aside; I won't puzzle it out here.* Once they did find out, how could they get inside the palace with all those soldiers about, and the Civil Watch, not to mention Liandrin and the others?

Nynaeve had started snoring softly, a habit she denied even more heatedly than she did flinging her elbows about. Egeanin appeared to be taking the long, slow breaths of deep sleep. Yawning into the back of her hand, Elayne shifted on the hard wooden seat and began planning how to sneak into the Panarch's Palace.

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CHAPTER 52

Need

For a moment Nynaeve stood in the Heart of the Stone not seeing it, not thinking of *Tel'aran'rhiod* at all. Egeanin was Seanchan. One of those vile people who had put a collar on Egwene's neck and tried to put one on hers. Knowing it still made her feel hollow. Seanchan, and she had snaked her way into Nynaeve's affections. True friends had seemed so few and far between since leaving Emond's Field. To find a new one, then lose her in this way. . . .

"I hate her for that worst of all," she growled, folding her arms tightly. "She made me like her, and I cannot stop, and I hate her for it!" Said aloud, it made no sense at all. "I do not have to make sense." She laughed quietly, with a rueful shake of her head. "I am supposed to be Aes Sedai." But not to be wool-gathering like a fool girl.

Callandor sparkled, the crystal sword rising out of the floorstones beneath the great dome, and the massive redstone columns ran off in shadowed rows through that odd, dim light that came from everywhere. Easy to remember the feel of being watched, to imagine it again. If it had been imagination before. If it was now. Anything might be hiding back in there. A good stout stick appeared in her hands as she peered among the columns. Where was Egwene? Just like the girl to keep her waiting. All that murkiness. For all she knew, something could be about to jump out at—

"That is an odd dress, Nynaeve."

Just stifling a yelp, she spun around heavily, rattling metallically, heart thumping in her throat. Egwene stood on the other side of *Callandor* with two women in bulky skirts and dark shawls over white blouses, snowy hair held by folded scarves falling to their waists. Nynaeve swallowed, hoping none of them noticed, tried to make herself breathe normally again. Sneaking up on her that way!

One of the Aiel women she knew from Elayne’s description; Amys’s face was much too young for such hair, but apparently it had been almost silver even as a child. The other, thin and bony, had pale blue eyes in a leathery, wrinkled face. That must be Bair. The tougher of the two, in Nynaeve’s opinion now that she saw them, not that this Amys looked very—Odd dress? *I rattled?*

Staring down at herself, she gasped. Her dress looked vaguely like a Two Rivers garment; if Two Rivers women wore dresses fashioned from steel mail, with pieces of plate armor like those she had seen in Shienar. How did men run about and jump into saddles in these things? It dragged at her shoulders as if it weighed a hundred pounds. The good stick was metal now, and spiked at the end like a shiny steel sandburr. Without touching her head she knew she had on some sort of helmet. Blushing furiously, she concentrated, changed it all to good Two Rivers woolens and a walking staff. It felt good to have her hair back in one proper braid, hanging over her shoulder.

“Uncontrolled thoughts are troublesome when you walk the dream,” Bair said in a thin, strong voice. “You must learn to control them if you mean to continue.”

“I can control my thoughts very well, thank you,” Nynaeve said crisply. “I—” Bair’s voice was not all that was thin. The Two Wise Ones seemed . . . misty, almost, and Egwene, in a pale blue riding dress, was very nearly transparent. “What’s the matter with you? Why do you look that way?”

“You try entering *Tel’aran’rhiod* while half-asleep in a saddle,” Egwene said dryly. She seemed to flicker. “It is morning in the Three-fold Land, and we are on the move. I had to talk Amys into letting me come at all, but I was afraid you would be worried.”

“It is a difficult enough task without the horse,” Amys said, “sleeping shallowly when you wish to be awake. Egwene has not learned it entirely yet.”

“I will,” Egwene said with an irritated determination. She was always too hasty and stubborn in her desire to learn; if these Wise Ones did not hold on to the scruff of her neck she would very likely jump into all sorts of trouble.

Nynaeve stopped worrying about Egwene and trouble as the younger woman began to speak of Trollocs and Draghkar attacking Cold Rocks

Hold. Seana, a Wise One dreamwalker, among the dead. Rand hurrying the Taardad Aiel toward this Alcair Dal, apparently in violation of all custom, sending out runners to bring more septs. The boy was confiding his intentions to no one, the Aiel were jumpy, and Moiraine was ready to bite the heads off nails. Moiraine's frustration would have been some relief—she had hoped he could escape that woman's influence somehow—if Egwene had not frowned so worriedly.

"I don't know whether it is madness or design," Egwene finished. "I could almost bear it either way if I knew. Nynaeve, I'll admit it isn't prophecy, or Tarmon Gai'don, that makes me anxious right now. Maybe it is foolish, but I promised Elayne to look after him, and I do not know how."

Nynaeve walked around the crystal sword to put an arm around her. At least she felt solid, even if she did look a reflection in a foggy mirror. Rand's sanity. There was nothing she could do about that, no comfort she could offer. Egwene was the one there to see him. "The best you can do for Elayne is to tell him to read what she wrote. She worries about it sometimes; she won't talk, but I think she's afraid she said more than she should have. If he believes she is totally besotted, he's more likely to feel the same, which will not hurt her in the least. At least we have some good news in Tanchico. Some." When she explained, though, it barely seemed to justify "some."

"So you still don't know what it is they're after," Egwene said after she finished, "but even if you did, they are on top of it and still might find it first."

"Not if I can help it." Nynaeve fixed the two Wise Ones with a firm, level look. From what Elayne said of Amys's reluctance to give anything but warnings, she would need firmness to deal with them. The pair was so hazy a strong puff might blow them away like fog. "Elayne thinks you know all sorts of tricks with dreams. Is there any way I could get into Amathera's dreams to see if she is a Darkfriend?"

"Foolish girl." Bair's long hair swung as she shook her head. "If Aes Sedai, a foolish girl still. To step into another's dream is very dangerous unless she knows you and expects you. It is *her* dream, not as here. There, this Amathera will control all. Even you."

She had been sure that was the way. It was irritating to learn differently. And "foolish girl"?

"I am not a girl," she snapped. She wanted to yank her braid, but clenched a fist at her side instead; for some reason, pulling at her hair felt strangely uncomfortable of late. "I was Wisdom of Emond's Field before I . . . became Aes Sedai . . ." She hardly stumbled over the lie at all now. ". . . and I told women as old as you when to sit down and be quiet. If you know how to help me, say so instead of giving me *foolish* maunderings about what is dangerous. I know danger when I see it."

Abruptly she realized her single braid had split in two, one over each ear, red ribbons woven through to make tassels on the ends. Her skirt was so short it showed her knees, she wore a loose white blouse like the Wise Ones, and her shoes and stockings were gone. Where had *this* come from? She had surely never thought of wearing anything like it. Egwene put a hasty hand over her mouth. Was she aghast? Surely not smiling.

"Uncontrolled thoughts," Amys said, "can be very troublesome indeed, Nynaeve Sedai, until you learn." Despite her bland tone, her lips quirked in barely masked amusement.

Nynaeve kept her face smooth with an effort. They could not have had anything to do with it. *They can't have!* She struggled to change back, and it *was* a struggle, as though something held her as she was. Her cheeks grew hotter and hotter. Suddenly, just at the point when she was ready to break down and ask advice, or even help, her clothes and hair were as they had been. She wriggled her toes gratefully in good stout shoes. It *had* just been some odd, stray thought. In any case, she was not about to voice any suspicions; they looked far too amused as it was, even Egwene. *I am not here for some fool contest. I just won't dignify them.*

"If I cannot enter her dream, can I bring her into the World of Dreams? I need some way to talk to her."

"We would not teach you that if we knew how," Amys said, hitching her shawl angrily. "It is an evil thing you ask, Nynaeve Sedai."

"She would be as helpless here as you in her dream." Bair's thin voice sounded like an iron rod. "It has been handed down among dreamwalkers since the first that no one must ever be *brought* into the dream. It is said that that was the way of the Shadow in the last days of the Age of Legends."

Nynaeve shifted her feet under those hard stares; realizing she had an arm around Egwene, she held still. She was not about to let Egwene think they had made her uneasy. Not that they had. If she thought of being hauled before the Women's Circle before she was chosen Wisdom, it was nothing at all to do with the Wise Ones. Firmness was what was. . . . They stared at her. Hazy or not, these women could duel Siuan Sanche stare for stare. Especially Bair. Not that they intimidated her, but she could see the point of being reasonable. “Elayne and I need help. The Black Ajah is sitting on top of something that can harm Rand. If they find it before we do, they may be able to control him. We need to find it first. If there is anything you can do to help, anything you can tell me. . . . Anything at all.”

“Aes Sedai,” Amys said, “you can make a request for help sound a demand.” Nynaeve’s mouth tightened—demand? She had all but begged. Demand, indeed!—but the Aiel woman did not seem to notice. Or chose to ignore it. “Yet a danger to Rand al’Thor. . . . We cannot allow the Shadow to have that. There is a way.”

“Dangerous.” Bair shook her head vigorously. “This young woman knows less than Egwene did when she came to us. It is too dangerous for her.”

“Then maybe I could—” Egwene began, and the two cut her off as one.

“You are going to complete your training; you are too eager to go beyond what you know,” Bair said sharply at the same time Amys said, not the slightest bit softer, “You are not there in Tanchico, you do not know the place, and you cannot have Nynaeve’s need. She is the hunter.”

Under those iron eyes, Egwene subsided sulkily, and the two Wise Ones looked at each other. Finally Bair shrugged and lifted her shawl up around her face; clearly she washed her hands of the entire matter.

“It is dangerous,” Amys said. They made it sound as if breathing was dangerous in *Tel’aran’rhiod.*

“I—!” Nynaeve cut off as Amys’s eyes actually grew harder; she would not have thought it possible. Keeping a firm image of her clothes as they were—of course they had had nothing to do with that; it simply seemed wise to make sure her dress remained as it was—she changed what she had been going to say. “I will be careful.”

“It is not possible,” Amys told her flatly, “but I do not know another way. Need is the key. When there are too many people for the hold, the sept must divide, and the need is for water at the new hold. If no location with water is known, one of us may be called to find one. The key then is the need for a proper valley or canyon, not too far from the first, with water. Concentrating on that need will bring you near to what you want.

Concentrating on the need again will bring you closer. Each step brings you nearer, until at last you are not only in the valley, but standing beside where water is to be found. It may be harder for you, because you do not know exactly what you are seeking, though the depth of need may make up for it. And you know already in a rough fashion where it lies, in this palace.

“The danger is this, and you must be aware of it.” The Wise One leaned toward her intently, driving her words home with a tone as sharp as her gaze. “Each step is made blind, with eyes closed. You cannot know where you will be when you open your eyes. And finding the water does no good if you are standing in a den of vipers. The fangs of a mountain king kill as quickly in the dream as waking. I think these women Egwene speaks of will kill more quickly than the snake.”

“I did that,” Egwene exclaimed. Nynaeve felt her jump as the Aiel women’s eyes went to her. “Before I met you,” she said hastily. “Before we went to Tear.”

Need. Nynaeve felt warmer toward the Aiel women now that one of them had given her something she could use. “You must keep a close eye on Egwene,” she told them, hugging the younger woman to show she meant it fondly. “You are right, Bair. She will try to do more than she knows how. She has always been that way.” For some reason Bair arched a white eyebrow at *her.*

“I do not find her so,” Amys said in a dry voice. “She is a biddable student, now. Is that not so, Egwene?”

Egwene’s mouth set in a stubborn line. These Wise Ones did not know her well if they believed a Two Rivers woman would call herself biddable. On the other hand, she did not say anything. That was unexpected. As hard a lot as Aes Sedai, it appeared, these Aielwomen.

Her hour was slipping away, and impatience bubbled to try this method now; if Elayne woke her, it might take hours to get back to sleep. “In seven days,” she said, “one of us will meet you here again.”

Egwene nodded. “In seven days, Rand will have shown himself to the clan chiefs as He Who Comes With the Dawn, and the Aiel will all be behind him.” The Wise Ones’ eyes shifted slightly, and Amys adjusted her shawl; Egwene did not see it. “The Light knows what he means to do then.”

“In seven days,” Nynaeve said, “Elayne and I will have taken whatever Liandrin is hunting away from the lot of them.” Or else, very likely, the Black Ajah would have it. So the Wise Ones were not more certain the Aiel would follow Rand than Egwene was of his plans. No certainty anywhere. But no point in burdening Egwene with more doubts, either. “When one of us sees you next, we’ll have laid them by the heels and stuffed them all in sacks to cart to the Tower for trial.”

“Try to be careful, Nynaeve. I know you don’t know how to, but try anyway. Tell Elayne I said so, too. She isn’t as . . . bold . . . as you are, but she can come close.” Amys and Bair each laid a hand on Egwene’s shoulder, and they were gone.

Try to be careful? Fool girl. She was always careful. What had Egwene been about to say rather than bold? Nynaeve folded her arms tightly in lieu of pulling her braid. Maybe better she did not know.

She realized she had not told Egwene about Egeanin. Perhaps best not to stir up Egwene’s memories of her captivity. Nynaeve could remember all too well the other woman’s nightmares for weeks after she was freed, waking up screaming that she would not be chained. Much the best to let it lie. It was not as if Egwene need ever meet the Seanchan woman. *Burn that woman! Burn Egeanin to ash! Burn her!*

“This is not using my time wisely,” she said aloud. The words echoed through the tall columns. With the other women gone, they looked even more foreboding than before, more a hiding place for unseen watchers and things that jumped out at you. Time to be away.

First, though, she changed her hair to a tassel of long narrow braids, her dress to clinging folds of dark green silk. A transparent veil covered her mouth and nose, fluttering slightly when she breathed. With a grimace she added beads of green jade woven into the thin plaits. Should any of the Black sisters be using their stolen *ter’angreal* to enter the World of Dreams and see her in the Panarch’s Palace, they would think her only a Taraboner woman who had dreamed herself there in more ordinary fashion. Some knew her by sight, though. Lifting a handful of bead-strung braids, she smiled. Pale honey. She had not realized that was possible. *I wonder what I look like. Could they still know me?*

Suddenly a tall stand-mirror stood beside *Callandor.* In the glass, her big brown eyes widened in shock, her rosebud of a mouth fell open. She had Rendra’s face! Her features flickered back and forth, eyes and hair flashing darker then lighter; straining, she settled them as the innkeeper’s. No one would know her now. And Egwene thought she did not know how to be careful.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on Tanchico, on the Panarch's Palace, on need. Something dangerous to Rand, to the Dragon Reborn, need. . . . Around her, *Tel'aran'rhiod* shifted; she *felt* it, a sliding lurch, and opened her eyes eagerly to see what she had found.

It was a bedchamber, as big as any six at the Three Plum Court, the white plaster walls worked in painted friezes, golden lamps hanging from the ceiling by gilded chains. The tall posts of the bed spread carved limbs and leaves in a canopy above the mattresses. A woman well short of her middle years stood stiffly with her back to one of the posts at the foot of the bed; she was really quite lovely, in that pouty-mouthed way that Nynaeve herself had adopted. Atop her dark braids sat a crown of golden trefoil leaves among rubies and pearls with a moonstone larger than a goose egg, and around her neck hung a broad stole, dangling to her knees and embroidered along its length with trees. Aside from crown and stole she wore only a glistening coat of sweat.

Her tremulous eyes were fixed on the woman lying at her ease on a low couch. The second woman's back was to Nynaeve, as misty as Egwene had been earlier. She was short and slight, dark hair flowing loose to her shoulders, wide-skirted gown of pale yellow silk definitely not Taraboner. Nynaeve did not have to see her face to know it had large blue eyes and a foxlike shape, or see the bonds of Air holding the woman against the bedpost to know she was looking at Temaile Kinderode.

". . . learn so much when you use your dreams instead of wasting sleep," Temaile was saying with a Cairhienin accent, laughing. "Are you not enjoying yourself? What shall I teach you next? I know. 'I Have Loved a Thousand Sailor Men.' " She waggled an admonishing finger. "Be sure you learn all the words properly, Amathera. You know I would not want to—What are you gaping at?"

Abruptly Nynaeve realized the woman against the bedpost—Amathera? The Panarch?—was staring straight at her. Temaile shifted lazily as though to turn her head.

Nynaeve clamped her eyes shut. Need.

Shift.

Letting herself sag against the narrow column, Nynaeve gulped air as if she had run twenty miles, not even wondering where she was. Her heart pounded like a wild drum. Speak of landing in a vipers' den. Temaile Kinderode. The Black sister Amico had said enjoyed causing pain, enjoyed it enough to have made one of the Black Ajah comment. And her not able to channel a spark. She could have ended up decorating a bedpost beside Amathera. *Light*! She shivered, seeing it. *Calm yourself, woman! You are out of there, and even if Temaile saw you, she saw a honey-haired woman who vanished, just a Taraboner who dreamed herself into* Tel'aran'rhiod *for a moment.* Surely Temaile could not have been aware of her long enough to sense she could channel; even when she could not do it, the ability was there to be felt by one who shared it. Only a moment. Not long enough, with luck.

At least she knew Amathera's situation now. The woman was certainly no ally of Temaile. This method of searching had already repaid use. But not enough, not yet. Controlling her breathing as best she could, she looked around.

Rows of the thin white columns ran the length and breadth of a huge chamber nearly as wide as it was long, with smooth polished white floorstones below and gilded bosses on the ceiling high above. A thick rope of white silk ran all the way around the room on waist-high posts of dark polished wood, except where it would have blocked the doorways with double-pointed arches. Stands and open cabinets lined the walls, and the bones of peculiar beasts, with more display cases out in the floor, also roped off. The main exhibition hall of the palace, from Egwene's description. What she sought must be in this very chamber. Her next step would not be as blind as the first; there were certainly no vipers, no Temailes, here.

A handsome woman suddenly appeared beside a glass case with four carved legs out in the middle of the floor. She was no Taraboner, with her dark hair falling in waves to her shoulders, yet that was not what made Nynaeve gape. The woman's dress seemed to be mist, sometimes silvery and opaque, sometimes gray and so thin as to show her limbs and body clearly. From wherever she had dreamed herself here, she assuredly had a vivid imagination to conceive that! Even the scandalous Domani dresses she had heard of surely could not equal this.

The woman smiled at the glass case, then continued on up the hall, stopping on the far side to study something Nynaeve could not make out, something dark atop a white stone stand.

Frowning, Nynaeve released her grip on a fistful of honey-colored braids. The woman would disappear at any moment; few dreamed themselves into *Tel'aran'rhiod* for long. Of course, it did not matter if the woman saw her; she was certainly no one on their list of Black sisters. And yet she seemed somehow. . . . Nynaeve realized she had taken hold of a handful of braids again. The woman. . . . Of its own accord her hand pulled—hard—and she stared at it in amazement; her knuckles were white, her hand quivering. It was almost as if thinking of that woman. . . . Arm shaking, her hand tried to yank her hair out of her scalp. *Why under the Light?*

The mist-clad woman still stood in front of the distant white pedestal. Trembling spread from Nynaeve's arm into her shoulder. She had certainly never seen the woman before. And yet. . . . She tried to open her fingers; they only clamped down harder. Surely she never had. Shivering from head to toe, she hugged herself with the one arm she had free. Surely. . . . Her teeth wanted to chatter. The woman seemed. . . . She wanted to weep. The woman. . . .

Images burst into her head, exploding; she slumped against the column beside her as if they had physical force; her eyes bulged. She saw it again. The Chamber of Falling Blossoms, and that sturdily handsome woman surrounded by the glow of *saidar.* Herself and Elayne, babbling like children, fighting to be first to answer, pouring out everything they knew. How much had they told? It was difficult to bring out details, but she dimly remembered keeping some things back. Not because she wanted to; she would have told the woman anything, done anything she asked. Her face heated with shame, and anger. If she had managed to hide any scraps, it was only because she had been so—*eager*!—to answer the last question asked that she passed over earlier.

It makes no sense, a small voice said in the back of her head. *If she's a Black sister I don't know about, why did she not hand us over to Liandrin? She could have. We'd have gone with her like lambs.*

Cold rage would not let her listen. A Black sister had made her dance like a puppet and then told her to forget. Ordered her to forget. And she had! Well, now the woman would find out what it was like to face her ready and forewarned!

Before she could reach for the True Source, Birgitte was suddenly beside the next column in that short white coat and wide yellow trousers gathered at the ankle. Birgitte, or some woman dreaming she was Birgitte, with golden hair in an elaborate braid. A warning finger pressed against her lips, she pointed at Nynaeve, then urgently toward one of the double-arched doorways behind them. Bright blue eyes compelling, she vanished.

Nynaeve shook her head. Whoever the woman was, she had no time. Opening herself to *saidar*, she turned, filled to overflowing with the One Power and righteous wrath. The woman clothed in mist was gone. Gone! Because that golden-haired fool had distracted her! Perhaps that one was still about, waiting for her. Wrapped in the Power, she strode through the doorway the woman had indicated.

The golden-haired woman was waiting in a brightly carpeted hallway where unlit golden lamps gave off the scent of perfumed oil. She held a silver bow now, and a quiver of silver arrows hung at her waist.

"Who are you?" Nynaeve demanded furiously. She would give the woman a chance to explain herself. And then teach her a lesson she would not soon forget! "Are you the same fool who shot at me in the Waste, claiming she was Birgitte? I was about to teach a member of the Black Ajah manners when you let her get away!"

"I am Birgitte," the woman said, leaning on her bow. "At least, that is the name you would know. And the lesson might have been yours, here as surely as in the Three-fold Land. I remember the lives I have lived as if they were books well-read, the longer gone dimmer than the nearer, but I remember well when I fought at Lews Therin's side. I will never forget Moghedien's face, any more than I will forget the face of Asmodean, the man you almost disturbed at Rhuidean."

Asmodean? Moghedien? That woman was one of the Forsaken? A Forsaken in Tanchico. And one at Rhuidean, in the Waste! Egwene would certainly have said something if she knew. No way to warn her, not for seven days. Anger—and *saidar*—surged in her. "What are you doing here? I know that you all vanished after the Horn of Valere called you, but you are. . . ." She trailed off, a trifle flustered at what she had been about to say, but the other woman calmly finished for her.

"Dead? Those of us who are bound to the Wheel are not dead as others are dead. Where better for us to wait until the Wheel weaves us out in new lives than in the World of Dreams?" Birgitte laughed suddenly. "I begin to talk as if I were a philosopher. In almost every life I can remember I was born a simple girl who took up the bow. I am an archer, no more."

"You're the heroine of a hundred tales," Nynaeve said. "And I saw what your arrows did at Falme. Seanchan channeling did not touch you.

Birgitte, we face near a dozen of the Black Ajah. And one of the Forsaken as well, it seems. We could use your help.”

The other woman grimaced, embarrassed and regretful. “I cannot, Nynaeve. I cannot touch the world of flesh unless the Horn calls me again. Or else the Wheel weaves me out. If it did this moment, you would find only an infant mewling at her mother’s breast. As for Falme, the Horn had called us; we were not there as you were, in the flesh. That is why the Power could not touch us. Here, *all* is part of the dream, and the One Power could destroy me as easily as you. More easily. I told you; I am an archer, a sometime soldier, no more.” Her complex golden braid swung as she shook her head. “I do not know why I am explaining. I should not even be talking to you.”

“Why not? You’ve spoken to me before. And Egwene thought she saw you. That was you, wasn’t it?” Nynaeve frowned. “How do you know my name? Do you just *know* things?”

“I know what I see and hear. I have watched you, and listened, whenever I could find you. You and the other two women, and the young man with his wolves. According to the precepts, we may speak to none who know they are in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. And yet, evil walks the dream as well as the world of flesh; you who fight it attract me. Even knowing I can do almost nothing, I find myself wanting to help you. But I cannot. It violates the precepts, precepts which have held me for so many turns of the Wheel that in my oldest, faintest memories I know I had already lived a hundred times, or a thousand. Speaking to you violates precepts as strong as law.”

“It does,” said a harsh, male voice.

Nynaeve jumped and almost lashed out with the Power. The man was dark and strongly muscled, with the long hilts of two swords thrusting above his shoulders as he strode the few paces from where he had appeared to Birgitte. With what she had heard from Birgitte, the swords were enough to name him as Gaidal Cain, but where fair, golden-haired Birgitte was as beautiful as in the stories, he was definitely not. In fact, he was perhaps as ugly a man as Nynaeve had ever seen, his face wide and flat, his heavy nose too big, and his mouth a gash, far too broad. Birgitte smiled at him, though; her touch on his cheek held more than fondness. It was a surprise to see he was the shorter. Stocky and muscled as he was, powerful in his movements, he gave the impression of being taller than he was.

“We have almost always been linked,” Birgitte told Nynaeve without taking her eyes from Cain’s. “He is usually born well before me—so I know my time approaches again when I cannot find him—and I usually hate him at first sight in the flesh. But we nearly always end lovers or wed. A simple story, but I think we have spun it out in a thousand variations.”

Cain ignored Nynaeve as though she did not exist. “The precepts exist for a reason, Birgitte. Nothing but strife and trouble has ever come from breaking them.” His voice was indeed harsh, Nynaeve realized. Not at all like that of the man in the stories.

“Perhaps I cannot sit by while evil fights,” Birgitte said quietly. “Or perhaps I simply hunger for the flesh again. It has been long since we were born last. The Shadow rises again, Gaidal. It rises here. We must fight it. That is the reason we were bound to the Wheel.”

“When the Horn calls us, we will fight. When the Wheel weaves us, we will fight. Not until then!” He glowered at her. “Have you forgotten what Moghedien promised you when we followed Lews Therin? I saw her, Birgitte. She will know you here.”

Birgitte turned to Nynaeve. “I will aid you as I can, but do not expect too much. *Tel’aran’rhiod* is the whole of my world, and I can do less here than you.”

Nynaeve blinked; the dark, heavy man had not moved that she had seen, but he suddenly stood two paces away, drawing a honing stone along one of his swords with a soft, silky rasp. Plainly, as far as he was concerned, Birgitte was speaking to the air.

“What can you tell of Moghedien, Birgitte? I must know what I can, to face her.”

Leaning on her bow, Birgitte frowned thoughtfully. “Facing Moghedien is difficult, and not only because she is Forsaken. She hides and takes no risks. She attacks only where she sees weakness, and moves only in shadows. If she fears defeat, she will run; she is not one to fight to the last, even when doing so has the chance of victory. A chance is not enough for Moghedien. But do not take her lightly. She is a serpent coiled in high grass, waiting her own moment to strike, with less compassion than the snake. Especially here do not take her lightly. Lanfear always claimed *Tel’aran’rhiod* for her own, but Moghedien could do things here far beyond Lanfear, though she has not Lanfear’s strength in the world of flesh. I think she would not take the risk of confronting Lanfear.”

Nynaeve shivered, fear warring with the anger that let her contain the Power. Moghedien. Lanfear. This woman spoke so casually of the Forsaken. “Birgitte, what did Moghedien promise you?”

“She knew what I was, even though I did not. How, I do not know.” Birgitte glanced at Cain; he appeared absorbed in his sword, but she lowered her voice anyway. “She promised to make me weep alone for as long as the Wheel turns. She said it as a fact that simply had not happened yet.”

“And yet you are willing to help.”

“As I can, Nynaeve. Remember that I told you not to expect too much.” Once more she looked at the man sharpening his sword. “We will meet again, Nynaeve. If you are careful, and survive.” Hefting her silver bow, she went to put an arm around Cain’s shoulders and murmur in his ear. Whatever she said, Cain was laughing as they vanished.

Nynaeve shook her head. Careful. Everybody was telling her to be careful. A legendary hero who said she would help, only there was not much she could do. And one of the Forsaken in Tanchico.

The thought of Moghedien, of what the woman had done to her, strengthened her anger until the One Power pulsed in her like the sun. Abruptly she was back in the great hall where she had been standing before, almost hoping the woman had returned. But the hall was empty of life except for herself. Fury and the Power roared through her till she thought her skin would crisp and blacken. Moghedien, or any of the Black sisters, could sense her far more easily holding the Power than without, but she held it anyway. She almost wanted them to find her, so she could strike at them. Temaile was very likely still in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* If she went back up to that bedchamber, she could settle Temaile once and for all. She could settle Temaile—and warn the rest. It was enough to make her growl.

What had Moghedien been smiling at? Striding out to the case, a wide glass box atop a carved table, she peered in. Six mismatched figurines stood in a circle beneath the glass. A foot-tall nude woman balanced on the toes of one foot, dancing, all flowing lines, and a shepherd less than half as large, playing the pipes with his crook on his shoulder and a sheep at his feet, were as similar as any two. She had no doubt what had attracted the Forsaken’s smile, though.

In the center of the circle a red-lacquered wooden stand held a disc as big as a man’s hand, divided into halves by a sinuous line, one side gleaming whiter than snow, the other blacker than pitch. It was made of *cuendillar*, she knew; she had seen its like, and only seven had ever been made. One of the seals on the Dark One's prison; a focus for one of the locks that held him away from the world in Shayol Ghul. This was perhaps as important a discovery as whatever it was that threatened Rand. This had to be gotten away from the Black Ajah.

Suddenly she became aware of her reflection. The top of the case was the finest glass, without bubbles, and gave an image as clear as a mirror, if fainter. Dark green folds of silk draped her body so they showed every curve of breast and hip and thigh. Long honey braids full of jade beads framed a face with big brown eyes and a pouting mouth. The glow of *saidar* did not show, of course. Disguised so she did not even know herself, she walked about carrying a painted sign that screamed Aes Sedai.

"I *can* be careful," she muttered. Yet she held on a moment longer. The Power filling her was like life bubbling along her limbs, all the pleasures she had ever known seeping through her flesh. In the end, feeling foolish took enough edge from her anger to allow her to let go. Or maybe it dulled her anger to where she could no longer hold on.

Whatever the reason, it did not help her search. What she was after had to be somewhere in this huge hall among all these displays. Pulling her eyes away from what looked like the bones of a toothy lizard ten paces long, she closed them. Need. Danger to the Dragon Reborn, to Rand. Need.

Shift.

She was standing inside the white silk rope along the walls, the edge of a white stone pedestal touching her dress. What lay on top did not look very dangerous at first glance—a necklace and two bracelets of jointed black metal—but she could come no closer to anything than this. *Not without sitting on it,* she thought wryly.

She stretched her hand out to touch it—*Pain. Sorrow. Suffering*—and jerked it back, gasping, the raw emotions still echoing in her head. Even her faint doubts vanished. This was what the Black Ajah was hunting. And if it still sat on this pedestal in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, it sat there in the waking world, too. She had beaten them. This white stone pedestal.

Whirling around, she stared toward the glass case that held the *cuendillar* seal, located the place she had been standing where she first saw Moghedien. The woman had been looking at this pedestal, at the bracelets and collar. Moghedien had to know. But. . . .

Everything around her spun and blurred, fading.

"Wake up, Nynaeve," Elayne muttered, suppressing a yawn as she shook the sleeping woman's shoulders. "It has to be an hour by now. I want some sleep, too. Wake up, or I'll see how you like your head in a bucket of water."

Nynaeve's eyes popped open, staring up at her. "If she knows what it is, why hasn't she given it to them? If they know who *she* is, why does she have to look at it in *Tel'aran'rhiod*? Is she hiding from them, too?"

"What are you talking about?"

Braids tossing about as she wriggled up to sit with her back against the head of the bed, Nynaeve jerked her silk shift down. "I will tell you what I am talking about."

Elayne's mouth fell open as Nynaeve unfolded the tale of what her meeting with Egwene had become. Searching with need. Moghedien. Birgitte and Gaidal Cain. The black metal necklace and bracelets. Asmodean in the Waste. One of the seals on the Dark One's prison in the Panarch's Palace. Elayne sank down weakly onto the side of the mattress long before Nynaeve came to Temaile and the Panarch, thrown in almost as an afterthought. And changing her appearance, masquerading as Rendra. If Nynaeve's face had not been grimly serious, Elayne could have thought it one of Thom's wilder stories.

Egeanin, sitting up cross-legged in her linen shift, hands on knees, looked close to disbelieving. Elayne hoped Nynaeve did not start a row because she had loosed the woman's wrists.

Moghedien. That was the most horrifying part. One of the Forsaken in Tanchico. One of the Forsaken weaving the Power around the two of them, making them tell her everything. Elayne could not remember a bit of it. The thought was enough to press both her hands to a suddenly queasy stomach. "I don't know whether Moghedien"—*Light, could she really have just walked in and made us . . . ?*—"is hiding from Liandrin and the others, Nynaeve. It sounds like what Birgitte"—*Light*, Birgitte *giving her advice*!—"said of her."

"Whatever Moghedien is up to," Nynaeve said in a tight voice, "I mean to pick a bone clean with her." She slumped back against the flower-carved headboard. "In any case, we have to get the seal away from them as well as this necklace and bracelets."

Elayne shook her head. “How can jewelry be dangerous to Rand? Are you sure? Are they a *ter’angreal* of some sort? What did they look like exactly?”

“They looked like a necklace and bracelets,” Nynaeve snapped in exasperation. “Two jointed bracelets made of some black metal, and a wide necklace like a black collar. . . .” Her eyes darted to Egeanin, but no faster than Elayne’s.

Unperturbed, the dark-haired woman knelt up to sit on her heels. “I have never heard of an *a’dam* made for a man, or any like the one you describe. No one tries to control a man who can channel.”

“That is exactly what this is for,” Elayne said slowly. *Oh, Light, I suppose I was hoping it didn’t exist.* At least Nynaeve had found it first; at least they had a chance to stop it being used against Rand.

Nynaeve’s eyes narrowed as she took in Egeanin’s free hands, but she did not mention them. “Moghedien must be the only one who knows. It makes no sense, otherwise. If we can find a way into the palace, we can take the seal and the . . . whatever it is. And if we can bring Amathera out as well, Liandrin and her cronies will find the Panarch’s Legion and the Civil Watch, and maybe the Whitecloaks, closing in. They’ll not all be able to channel their way out of that! The problem is getting inside undetected.”

“I have had a few thoughts on that,” Elayne told her, “but I fear the men are going to give us difficulties over it.”

“You leave them to me,” Nynaeve snorted. “I—” A thumping clatter rose in the hall, a man shouted; as quickly as it began, silence fell once more. Thom was on watch out there.

Elayne darted to pull open the door, embracing *saidar* as she rushed out, but Nynaeve scrambled off the bed right behind her. Egeanin as well.

Thom was just picking himself up off the floor, a hand to his head. Juilin with his staff and Bayle Domon with his cudgel stood over a man with pale yellow hair lying facedown on the floor, unconscious.

Elayne hurried to Thom, trying gently to help him up. He gave her a grateful smile, but stubbornly pushed her hands away. “I am quite all right, child.” All right? A knot was rising on his temple! “The fellow was walking down the hall, when suddenly he kicked me in the head. After my purse, I suppose.” Just like that. Kicked in the head, and he was all right.

“He would have had it, too,” Juilin said, “if I had not come to see if Thom wanted a relief.”

"Did *I* not decide," Domon muttered. Their hostility seemed less focused for a change.

It took Elayne only a moment to realize why. Nynaeve and Egeanin were in the hall in their shifts. Juilin was eyeing them both in an approving manner that would have caused trouble if Rendra had seen it, though he was at least trying not to be obvious. Domon made no effort at all to hide his frank appraisal of Egeanin, crossing his arms and pursing his lips in disgusting fashion while looking her up and down.

The situation dawned on the other women quickly, but their reactions were quite different. Nynaeve, in her thin white silk, gave the thief-catcher a flat stare and strode stiffly into the room, poking a somewhat flushed face back around the side of the doorframe. Egeanin, whose linen shift was considerably longer and thicker than Nynaeve's—Egeanin, who had been cool serenity while being made prisoner, who fought like a Warder—Egeanin went wide-eyed and crimson-faced, gasping in horror. Elayne stared, amazed, as the Seanchan woman gave a mortified shriek and *leaped* back inside.

Doors flung open and down the hall heads popped out; they vanished instantly, to the bang of slamming doors, at the sight of a man stretched out on the floor and others standing over him. Heavy dragging noises suggested people blocking themselves in with beds or wardrobes.

Long moments later, Egeanin finally peeked out opposite Nynaeve, still scarlet to her hair. Elayne really did not understand. The woman was in her shift, true, but it covered her very nearly as well as Elayne's Taraboner dress did. Still, Juilin and Domon had no right to ogle. She fixed the pair with a stare that should have set them to rights immediately.

Unfortunately, Domon was too busy chuckling and rubbing his upper lip to notice. At least Juilin saw, even if he did sigh heavily the way men did when they considered themselves put upon unfairly. Avoiding her eyes, he bent to heave the pale-haired fellow onto his back. A handsome enough man, slender.

"I know this fellow," Juilin exclaimed. "This is the man who tried to rob me. Or so I thought," he added more slowly. "I do not believe in coincidence. Not unless the Dragon Reborn is in the city."

Elayne exchanged frowns with Nynaeve. Surely the stranger was not in the employ of Liandrin; the Black Ajah would not use men to sneak about the halls any more. . . . Any more than they would have hired street toughs. Elayne moved her gaze to Egeanin questioningly. Nynaeve's was more demanding.

"He is Seanchan," Egeanin said after a moment.

"A rescue attempt?" Nynaeve murmured dryly, but the other woman shook her head.

"I do not doubt he was looking for me, but not for rescue, I think. If he knows—or even suspects—that I let Bethamin go free, he would be wanting to . . . talk with me." Elayne suspected it was rather more than talk, confirmed when Egeanin added, "It might be best if you slit his throat. He may try to make trouble for you, too, if he thinks you are my friends, or if he discovers you are Aes Sedai." The big Illianer smuggler gave her a shocked look, and Juilin's jaw dropped almost to his chest. Thom, on the other hand, nodded in a disturbingly thoughtful fashion.

"We are not here to slit Seanchan throats," Nynaeve said as though that might change later. "Bayle, Juilin, put him out in the alley behind the inn. By the time he wakes, he'll be lucky to have his smallclothes. Thom, find Rendra and tell her we want strong tea in the Chamber of Falling Blossoms. And ask if she has any willowbark or acem; I will make you something for your head." The three men stared at her. "Well, move!" she snapped. "We have plans to make!" She barely gave Elayne time to get back inside before closing the door with a bang and beginning to pull her dress over her head. Egeanin scrambled into hers as though the men were still looking at her.

"The better way is to ignore them, Egeanin," Elayne said. It was odd to be advising someone older than Nynaeve, but however competent the Seanchan woman was in other ways, she clearly knew little about men. "It only encourages them, otherwise. I do not know why," she admitted, "but it does. You were quite decently covered. Really."

Egeanin's head pushed out at the top of her dress. "Decent? I am not a serving girl. I am no shea dancer!" Her scowl became a perplexed frown. "He is rather good-looking, though. I had not thought of him so before."

Wondering what a shea dancer was, Elayne went to help her with her buttons. "Rendra will have something to say to you if you allow Juilin to flirt with you."

The dark-haired woman gave her a startled look over her shoulder. "The thief-catcher? It was Bayle Domon I meant. A properly set-up man. But a smuggler," she sighed regretfully. "A lawbreaker."

Elayne supposed there was no accounting for tastes—Nynaeve certainly loved Lan, and he was much too stone-faced and intimidating—but Bayle Domon? The man was half as wide as he was tall, as thick as an Ogier!

“You chatter like Rendra, Elayne,” Nynaeve snapped. She was struggling to do up her dress, both hands behind her. “If you have finished blathering about men, perhaps you won’t mind skipping over the new seamstress you’ve no doubt found? We must make plans. If we wait until we’re with the men, they will try to take it over, and I am in no mood to waste time putting them in their place. Have you finished with her yet? I could use some help myself.”

Quickly fastening Egeanin’s last small button, Elayne went coolly to Nynaeve. She did *not* talk about men and dresses. Not *nearly* as much as Rendra. Holding her braids out of the way, Nynaeve gave her a frown when she tugged sharply at the other woman’s dress to do up the buttons. The close-spaced triple row up the back was necessary, not simply ornament. Nynaeve *would* let Rendra talk her into the most fashionably tight bodices. And then say *other* people spent all their time thinking about clothes. *She* certainly thought of other things. “I have been thinking how we can move inside the palace unnoticed, Nynaeve. We can be all but invisible.”

As she talked, Nynaeve’s frowns smoothed out. Nynaeve herself had conceived a way to enter the palace. When Egeanin made a few suggestions, Nynaeve’s mouth tightened, but the notions were sensible, and even Nynaeve could not reject them out of hand. By the time they were ready to go down to the Chamber of Falling Blossoms, they had a plan agreed upon, and no intention of letting the men change a whit of it. Moghedien, the Black Ajah, whoever were running things in the Panarch’s Palace, were going to lose their prizes before they knew what had happened.

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CHAPTER 53

The Price of a Departure

Only three candles and two lamps lit the common room of the Winespring Inn, since candles and oil both were in short supply. The spears and other weapons were gone from the walls; the barrel that had held old swords was empty. The lamps stood on two of the tables pushed together in front of the tall stone fireplace, where Marin al'Vere and Daise Congar and others of the Women's Circle were going over lists of the scanty food remaining in Emond's Field. Perrin tried not to listen.

At another table Faile's honing stone made a soft, steady *whisk-whisk* as she sharpened one of her knives. A bow lay in front of her, and a bristling quiver hung at her belt. She had turned out to be a fairly good shot, but he hoped she never discovered that it was a boy's bow; she could not draw a man's Two Rivers longbow, though she refused to admit it.

Shifting his axe so it would not dig into his side, he tried to put his mind back on what he was discussing with the men around the table with him. Not that all of them were keeping their own attention where it should be.

"They have lamps," Cenn muttered, "and we make do with tallow." The gnarled old man glared at the pair of candles in brass candlesticks.

"Give over, Cenn," Tam said wearily, pulling pipe and tabac pouch from behind his sword belt. "For once, give over."

"If we had to read or write," Abell said, his voice less patient than the words, "we'd have lamps." A bandage was wound around his temples.

As if to remind the thatcher that he was Mayor, Bran adjusted the silver medallion hanging on his wide chest, showing a pair of scales. "Keep your mind to the business at hand, Cenn. I'll have none of your wasting Perrin's time."

"I just think we should have lamps," Cenn complained. "Perrin would tell me if I was wasting his time."

Perrin sighed; the night tried to drag his eyelids down. He wished it were someone else's turn to represent the Village Council, Haral Luhhan or Jon Thane or Samel Crawe, or anybody but Cenn with his carping. But then, sometimes he wished one of these men would turn to him and say, *"This is business for the Mayor and the Council, young fellow. You go on back to the forge. We'll let you know what to do."* Instead they worried about wasting his time, deferred to him. Time. How many attacks had there been in the seven days since the first? He was not sure any longer.

The bandage on Abell's head irritated Perrin. The Aes Sedai only Healed the most serious wounds now; if a man could manage without, they let him. It was not that there were many badly wounded yet, but as Verin pointed out wryly, even as Aes Sedai only had so much strength; apparently their trick with the catapult stones took as much as Healing. For once he did not want to be reminded of limits to Aes Sedai strength. Not many badly wounded. Yet.

"How are the arrows holding out?" he asked. That was what he was supposed to be thinking about.

"Well enough," Tam said, puffing his pipe alight from one of the candles. "We still recover most of what we shoot, in daylight at least. They drag a lot of their dead away at night—fodder for the cookpots, I suppose—and we lose those." The other men were digging out their pipes, too, from pouches and coat pockets, Cenn muttering that he seemed to have forgotten his pouch. Grumbling, Bran passed his across, his bald pate gleaming in the candlelight.

Perrin rubbed at his forehead. What had he meant to ask next? The stakes. There was fighting at the stakes in most attacks now, especially at night. How many times had the Trollocs nearly broken through? Three? Four? "Does everyone have a spear or some sort of polearm now? What's left to make more?" Silence answered him, and he lowered his hand. The other men were staring at him.

"You asked that yesterday," Abell said gently. "And Haral told you then there isn't a scythe or pitchfork left in the village that hasn't been made into a weapon. We've more than we have hands for, in truth."

"Yes. Of course. It just slipped my mind." A snatch of conversation from the Women's Circle caught his ear.

". . . mustn't let the men know," Marin was saying softly, as if repeating a caution voiced before.

“Of course not,” Daise snorted, but not much louder. “If the fools find out the women are on half rations, they’ll insist on eating the same, and we can’t. . . .”

Perrin closed his eyes, tried to close his ears. Of course. The men did the fighting. The men had to keep their strength up. Simple. At least none of the women had had to fight yet. Except the two Aiel women, of course, and Faile, but she was smart enough to stay back when it came to pushing spears among the stakes. That was the reason he had found the bow for her. She had the heart of a leopard, and more courage than any two men.

“I think it is time you went to bed, Perrin,” Bran suggested. “You cannot go on like this, sleeping an hour here and an hour there.”

Scrubbing his beard vigorously, Perrin tried to look alert. “I’ll sleep later.” When it was over. “Are the men getting enough sleep? I’ve seen some sitting up when they should be—”

The front door banged open to admit skinny Dannil Lewin out of the night, bow in hand and all in a lather. He wore one of the swords from the barrel on his hip; Tam had been giving classes when he had the time, and sometimes one of the Warders did as well.

Before Dannil could open his mouth, Daise snapped, “Were you raised in a barn, Dannil Lewin?”

“You can certainly treat my door a little more gently.” Marin divided her meaning look between the lanky man and Daise, a reminder that it *was* her door.

Dannil ducked his head, clearing his throat. “Pardon, Mistress al’Vere,” he said hastily. “Pardon, Wisdom. Sorry to burst in, but I’ve a message for Perrin.” He hurried to the table of men as if afraid the women would stop him again. “The Whitecloaks brought in a man who wants to talk to you, Perrin. He won’t talk to anybody else. He’s hurt bad, Perrin. They only brought him to the edge of the village. I don’t think he could make it as far as the inn.”

Perrin pushed himself to his feet. “I’m coming.” Not another attack, at any rate. They were worst at night.

Faile snatched up her bow and joined him before he reached the door. And Aram stood up, hesitating, from the shadows on the foot of the stairs. Sometimes Perrin forgot the man was there, he kept so still. He looked odd with that sword strapped on his back atop his grimy, yellow-striped Tinker coat, his eyes so bright, hardly ever seeming to blink, and his face without expression. Neither Raen or Ila had spoken to their grandson since the day he picked up that sword. Nor to Perrin, either.

"If you're coming, come," he said gruffly, and Aram fell in at his heels. The man followed him like a hound whenever he was not pestering Tam or Ihvon or Tomas to teach him that sword. It was as if he had replaced his family and people with Perrin. Perrin would have done without the responsibility if he could, but there it was.

Moonlight shone down on thatched roofs. Few houses had a light in more than one window. Stillness clung to the village. Some thirty of the Companions stood guard outside the inn with their bows, as many wearing swords as could find them; everyone had adopted that name, and Perrin found himself using it, too, to his private disgust. The reason for guards on the inn, or wherever Perrin was, lay on the Green, no longer so crowded with sheep and cows. Campfires crowded above the Winespring, beyond where that fool wolfhead banner hung limp now, bright pools in the darkness surrounded by pale cloaks gleaming with the moon.

No one had wanted Whitecloaks in their homes, already crowded, and Bornhald did not want his soldiers split up in any case. The man seemed to think the village would turn on him and his men any moment; if they followed Perrin, they must be Darkfriends. Even Perrin's eyes could not make out faces around the fires, but he thought he could feel Bornhald's stare, waiting, hating.

Dannil readied ten Companions to escort Perrin, all young men who should have been laughing and carousing with him, all with bows ready to see him safe. Aram did not join them as Dannil led the way down the dark, dirt street; it was Perrin he was with and no one else. Faile kept hard by Perrin's side, dark eyes shining in the moonlight, scanning the surroundings as though *she* were his whole protection.

Where the Old Road entered Emond's Field the blocking wagons had been drawn aside to admit the Whitecloak patrol, twenty snowy-cloaked men with lances who sat their horses in burnished armor, no less impatient than their stamping mounts. They stood out in the night for any eye, and most Trollocs could see as well in darkness as Perrin, but the Whitecloaks insisted on their patrols. Sometimes their scouting had brought warnings, and maybe their harrassment kept the Trollocs a little off balance. It would have been good, though, if he had known what they were doing before it was done.

A cluster of villagers and farmers wearing bits of old armor and a few rusty helmets stood clustered around a man in a farmer's coat lying in the roadway. They gave way for Faile and him, and he went to one knee beside the man.

The odor of blood was strong; sweat glistened on the man's moon-shadowed face. A thumb-thick Trolloc arrow like a small spear was stuck through his chest. "Perrin—Goldeneyes," he muttered hoarsely, laboring for breath. "Must—get through—to Perrin—Goldeneyes."

"Has someone sent for one of the Aes Sedai?" Perrin demanded, lifting the man as gently as he could, cradling his head. He did not listen for the answer; he did not think this man would last till an Aes Sedai came. "I am Perrin."

"Goldeneyes? I—cannot see—very well." His wide, wild stare was right at Perrin's face; if he could see at all, the fellow must see his eyes shining golden in the dark.

"I am Perrin Goldeneyes," he said reluctantly.

The man seized his collar, pulling his face close with surprising strength. "We are—coming. Sent to—tell you. We are co—" His head fell back, eyes staring at nothing now.

"The Light be with his soul," Faile murmured, slinging her bow across her back.

After a moment Perrin pried the man's fingers loose. "Does anyone know him?" The Two Rivers men exchanged glances, shook their heads. Perrin looked up at the mounted Whitecloaks. "Did he say anything else while you were bringing him in? Where did you find him?"

Jaret Byar stared down at him, gaunt-faced and hollow-eyed, an image of death. The other Whitecloaks looked away, but Byar always made himself meet Perrin's yellow eyes, especially at night, when they glowed. Byar growled under his breath—Perrin heard "Shadowspawn!"—and booted his horse in the ribs. The patrol galloped into the village, as eager to be away from Perrin as from Trollocs. Aram stared after them, expressionless, one hand over his shoulder to finger his sword hilt.

"They said they found him three or four miles south." Dannil hesitated, then added, "They say the Trollocs are all scattered out in little bunches, Perrin. Maybe they're finally giving up."

Perrin laid the stranger back down. *We are coming.* "Keep a close watch. Maybe some family who tried to hold on to their farm is finally coming in." He did not believe anyone could have survived out there this long, but it might be so. "Don't shoot anybody by mistake." He staggered to his feet, and Faile put a hand on his arm.

"It is time you were in bed, Perrin. You have to sleep sometime."

He only looked at her. He should have made her stay in Tear. Somehow, he should have made her. If he had only thought well enough he could have.

One of the runners, a curly-haired boy about chest-high, slipped through the Two Rivers men to tug at Perrin's sleeve. Perrin did not know him; there were many families in from the countryside. "There's something moving in the Westwood, Lord Perrin. They sent me to tell you."

"Don't call me that," Perrin told him sharply. If he did not stop the children, the Companions were going to start using it, too. "Go tell them I will be there." The boy darted away.

"You belong in your bed," Faile said firmly. "Tomas can handle any attack very well."

"It isn't an attack, or the boy would have said so, and somebody would be sounding Cenn's bugle."

She hung on to his arm, trying to pull him toward the inn, and so she was dragged along when he started the opposite way. After a few futile minutes she gave up and pretended she had been merely holding his arm all along. But she muttered to herself. She still seemed to think that if she spoke softly enough he could not hear. She began with "foolish," "mule-headed," and "muscle-brained"; after that it escalated. It was quite a little procession, her muttering at him, Aram heeling him, Dannil and the ten Companions surrounding him like a guard of honor. If he had not been so tired, he would have felt a proper fool.

There were guards spaced in small clusters all along the sharp stake fence to watch the night, each with a boy for a runner. At the west end of the village the men on guard were all gathered up against the inside of the broad barrier, fingering spears and bows as they peered toward the Westwood. Even with the moonlight, the trees had to be blackness in their eyes.

Tomas's cloak seemed to make parts of him vanish in the night. Bain and Chiad were with him; for some reason the two Maidens had spent every night at this end of Emond's Field since Loial and Gaul left. "I'd not have bothered you," the Warder said to Perrin, "but there only seems to be one out there, and I thought you might be able to. . . ."

Perrin nodded. Everyone knew about his vision, especially in darkness. The Two Rivers people seemed to think it something special, something that marked him out an idiot hero. What the Warders thought, or the Aes Sedai, he had no idea. He was too tired to care tonight. Seven days, and how many attacks?

The edge of the Westwood lay five hundred paces away. Even to his eyes the trees ran together in shadows. Something moved. Something big enough to be a Trolloc. A big shape carrying. . . . The burden lifted an arm. A human. A tall shadow carrying a human.

"We will not shoot!" he shouted. He wanted to laugh; in fact, he realized he was laughing. "Come on! Come on, Loial!"

The dim shape lumbered forward faster than a man could run, resolving into the Ogier, speeding toward the village, carrying Gaul.

Two Rivers men shouted encouragement as if it were a race. "Run, Ogier! Run! Run!" Perhaps it was a race; more than one assault had come out of those woods.

Short of the stakes Loial slowed with a lurch; there was barely room for his thick legs to edge through the barrier sideways. Once on the village side, he let the Aielman down and sank to the ground, leaning back against the hedge, panting, tufted ears drooping wearily. Gaul limped on one leg until he could sit, too, with Bain and Chiad both fussing over his left thigh, where his breeches were ripped and black with dry blood. He only had two spears left, and his quiver gaped emptily. Loial's axe was gone, too.

"You fool Ogier," Perrin laughed fondly. "Going off like that. I ought to let Daise Congar switch you for a runaway. At least you're alive. At least you're back." His voice sank at that. Alive. And back in Emond's Field.

"We did it, Perrin," Loial panted, a tired drumlike boom. "Four days ago. We closed the Waygate. It will take the Elders or an Aes Sedai to open it again."

"He carried me most of the way from the mountains," Gaul said. "A Nightrunner and perhaps fifty Trollocs chased us the first three days, but Loial outran them." He was trying to push the Maidens away without much success.

"Lie still, Shaarad," Chiad snapped, "or I will say I have touched you armed and allow you to choose how your honor stands." Faile gave a delighted laugh. Perrin did not understand, but the remark reduced the imperturbable Aielman to splutters. He let the Maidens tend his leg.

“Are you all right, Loial?” Perrin asked. “Are you hurt?”

The Ogier pulled himself up with an obvious effort, swaying for a moment like a tree about to fall. His ears still hung limp. “No, I am not hurt, Perrin. Only tired. Do not worry yourself about me. A long time out of the *stedding.* Visits are not enough.” He shook his head as if his thoughts had wandered. His wide hand engulfed Perrin’s shoulder. “I will be fine after a little sleep.” He lowered his voice. For an Ogier, he did; it was still a huge bumblebee rumble. “It is very bad out there, Perrin. We followed the last bands down, for the most part. We locked the gate, but I think there must be several thousand Trollocs in the Two Rivers already, and maybe as many as fifty Myrddraal.”

“Not so,” Luc announced loudly. He had galloped up along the edge of the houses from the direction of the North Road. He reined his rearing black stallion to a flashy halt, forehooves pawing. “You are no doubt fine at singing to trees, Ogier, but fighting Trollocs is something different. I estimate less than a thousand now. A formidable force to be sure, but nothing these stout defenses and brave men cannot hold at bay. Another trophy for you, Lord Perrin Goldeneyes.” Laughing, he tossed a bulging cloth bag at Perrin. The bottom gleamed darkly wet in the moonlight.

Perrin caught it out of the air and hurled it well over the stakes despite its weight. Four or five Trolloc heads, no doubt, and perhaps a Myrddraal. The man brought in his trophies every night, still seeming to expect them to be put up for everyone to admire. A bunch of the Coplins and Congars had given him a feast the night he came in with a pair of Fades’ heads.

“Do I also know nothing of fighting?” Gaul demanded, struggling to his feet. “*I* say there are several thousand.”

Luc’s teeth showed white in a smile. “How many days have you spent in the Blight, Aiel? I have spent many.” Perhaps it was more snarl than smile. “Many. Believe what you wish, Goldeneyes. The endless days will bring what they bring, as they always have.” He pulled the stallion up on its hind legs again to whirl about, and galloped in among the houses and the trees that had once been the rim of the Westwood. The Two Rivers men shifted uneasily, peering after him or out into the night.

“He is wrong,” Loial said. “Gaul and I saw what we saw.” His face sagged wearily, broad mouth turned down and long eyebrows drooping on his cheeks. No wonder, if he had carried Gaul for three or four days.

“You have done a lot, Loial,” Perrin said, “you and Gaul both. A great thing. I am afraid your bedroom has half a dozen Tinkers in it now, but Mistress al’Vere will make you up a pallet. It is time for you to get some of that sleep you want.”

“And time for you as well, Perrin Aybara.” Scudding clouds made moonshadows play across Faile’s bold nose and high cheekbones. She was so beautiful. But her voice was firm enough for a wagon bed. “If you do not go now, I will have Loial carry you. You can hardly stand.”

Gaul was having trouble walking with his wounded leg. Bain supported him from one side. He tried to stop Chiad from taking the other, but she murmured something that sounded like “*gai’shain*” in a threatening way, and Bain laughed, and the Aielman allowed them both to help him, growling furiously to himself. Whatever the Maidens were going on about, it did have Gaul in a taking.

Tomas clapped Perrin on the shoulder. “Go, man. Everyone needs to sleep.” He himself sounded good for three more days without it.

Perrin nodded.

He let Faile guide him back to the Winespring Inn with Loial and the Aiel following, and Aram, and Dannil and the ten Companions encircling him. He was not sure when the others fell away, but somehow he and Faile were alone in his room on the second floor of the inn.

“Whole families are making do with no more space than this,” he muttered. A candle burned on the stone mantel over the small fireplace. Others did without, but Marin lit one here as soon as it turned dark so he would not have to be bothered. “I can sleep outside with Dannil and Ban and the others.”

“Do not be an idiot,” Faile said, making it sound affectionate. “If Alanna and Verin each has her own room, you should, too.”

He realized she had his coat off and was untying the laces of his shirt. “I am not too tired to undress myself.” He pushed her gently outside.

“You take everything off,” she ordered. “Everything, do you hear? You cannot sleep properly fully dressed, the way you seem to think.”

“I will,” he promised. When he had the door closed, he did tug off his boots before blowing out the candle and lying down. Marin would not like dirty boots on her coverlet.

Thousands, Gaul and Loial said. Yet how much could the two of them have seen, hiding on the way into the mountains, fleeing on the way back? Maybe one thousand at most, Luc claimed, but Perrin could not make himself trust the man for all the trophies he brought in. Scattered, according to the Whitecloaks. How close could they have come, armor and cloaks shining in the darkness like lanterns?

There was a way to see for himself, perhaps. He had avoided the wolf dream since his last visit; the desire to hunt down this Slayer rose up whenever he thought of going back, and his responsibilities lay here in Emond's Field. But now, perhaps. . . . Sleep rolled in while he was still considering.

He stood on the Green bathed by an afternoon sun low in the sky, a few white clouds drifting. There were no sheep or cattle around the tall pole where a breeze ruffled the red wolfhead banner, though a bluefly buzzed past his face. No people among the thatched houses. Small piles of dry wood atop ashes marked the Whitecloaks' fires; he had rarely seen anything burning in the wolf dream, only what was ready to burn or already charred. No ravens in the sky.

As he scanned for the birds, a patch of sky darkened, became a window to somewhere else. Egwene stood among a crowd of women, fear in her eyes; slowly the women knelt around her. Nynaeve was one of them, and he believed he saw Elayne's red-gold hair. That window faded and was replaced. Mat stood naked and bound, snarling; an odd spear with a black shaft had been thrust across his back behind his elbows, and a silver medallion, a foxhead, hung on his chest. Mat vanished, and it was Rand. Perrin thought it was Rand. He wore rags and a rough cloak, and a bandage covered his eyes. The third window disappeared; the sky was only sky, empty except for the clouds.

Perrin shivered. These wolf-dream visions never seemed to have any real connection to anything he knew. Maybe here, where things could change so easily, worry over his friends became something he could see. Whatever they were, he was wasting time fretting at them.

He was not surprised to find he wore a blacksmith's long leather vest and no shirt, but when he put a hand to his belt, he found the hammer, not his axe. Frowning, he concentrated on the long half-moon blade and thick spike. That was what he needed now. That was what he was now. The hammer changed slowly, as if resisting, but when the axe finally hung in the thick loop, it kept shining dangerously. Why did it fight him so? He knew what he wanted. A filled quiver appeared on his other hip, a longbow in his hand, a leather bracer on his left forearm.

Three land-blurring strides took him where the nearest Trolloc camps supposedly lay, three miles from the village. The last step landed him among nearly a dozen tall heaps of wood laid on old ashes amid trampled-down barley, the logs mixed with broken chairs and table legs and even a farmhouse door. Great black iron cauldrons stood ready to be hung over the laid cook fires. Empty cauldrons, of course, though he knew what would be cut up into them, what would be spitted on the thick iron rods stretched over some of the fires. How many Trollocs would these fires serve? There were no tents, and the blankets scattered about, filthy and stinking of old acrid Trolloc sweat, were no real guide; many Trollocs slept like animals, uncovered on the ground, even hollowing out a hole to lie in.

In smaller steps that covered no more than a hundred paces each, the land seeming only to haze, he circled Emond's Field, from farm to farm, pasture to barley field to rows of tabac, through scattered copses of trees, along cart tracks and footpaths, finding more and more clusters of waiting Trolloc fires as he slowly spiraled outward. Too many. Hundreds of fires. That had to mean several thousand Trollocs. Five thousand or ten or twice that—it would make little difference to Emond's Field if they all came at once.

Farther south the signs of Trollocs vanished. Signs of their immediate presence, at least. Few farmhouses or barns stood unburned. Scattered fields of charred stubble remained where barley or tabac had been torched; others had great swathes trampled through the crops. No reason for it but the joy of destruction; the people had been long gone when most of it was done. Once he lighted in the midst of large patches of ash, some charred wagon wheels still showing hints of bright color here and there. The site of the Tuatha'an caravan's destruction pained him even more than the farmhouses. The Way of the Leaf should have a chance. Somewhere. Not here. Not letting himself look, he leaped south a mile or more.

Eventually he came to Deven Ride, rows of thatch-roofed houses surrounding a green and a pond fed by a spring walled 'round with stone, the spillover splashing from cuts long since worn deeper than they had been made. The inn at the head of the green, the Goose and Pipe, was roofed with thatch, too, yet a little larger than the Winespring Inn, though Deven Ride surely had even fewer visitors than Emond’s Field. The village was certainly no bigger. Wagons and carts drawn close by every house spoke of farmers who had fled here with their families. Other wagons blocked the streets and the spaces between the houses all the way around the edge of the village. The precautions were not enough to have halted even one of the assaults made on Emond’s Field the last seven days.

In three circuits around the village Perrin found only half a dozen Trolloc camps. Enough to keep people in. Pen them until Emond’s Field was dealt with. Then the Trollocs could fall on Deven Ride at the Fades’ leisure. Perhaps he could find a way to get word to these villagers. If they fled south, they might find some way across the White River. Even trying to cross the trackless Forest of Shadows below the river was better than waiting to die.

The golden sun had not moved an inch. Time was different, here.

Running north as hard as he could, even Emond’s Field passed by in a blur. Watch Hill on its round prominence was bordered as Deven Ride had been with wagons and carts between the houses. A banner waved lazily in the breeze, on a tall pole in front of the White Boar on the hill’s crest. A red eagle flying across a field of blue. The Red Eagle had been the symbol of Manetheren. Perhaps Alanna or Verin had told ancient stories while they were in Watch Hill.

Here, too, he found only a few Trolloc camps, enough to pen the villagers. There was an easier way out from here than trying to cross the White, with its endless stretch of rapids.

On northward he ran, to Taren Ferry, on the bank of the Tarendrelle, which he had grown up calling the River Taren. Tall, narrow houses built on high stone foundations to escape the Taren’s yearly flooding when the snows melted in the Mountains of Mist. Nearly half those foundations supported only piles of ash and charred beams in that unchanging afternoon light. There were no wagons here, no signs of any defense. And no Trolloc camps that he could find. Perhaps no people remained here.

At the water’s edge stood a stout wooden dock, a heavy rope drooping as it arced across the swift-flowing river. The rope ran through iron rings on a flat-decked barge snugged against the dock. The ferry was still there, still usable.

A jump took him across the river, where wheel ruts scarred the bank and household objects lay about. Chairs and stand-mirrors, chests, even a few tables and a polished wardrobe with birds carved on the doors, all the things panicked people had tried to save, then abandoned to run faster. They would be spreading the word of what had happened here, what was happening in the Two Rivers. Some could have reached Baerlon by now, a hundred miles or more north, and surely the farms and villages between Baerlon and the river. Word spreading. In another month it might reach Caemyln, and Queen Morgase with her Queen's Guards and her power to raise armies. A month with luck. And as much to return, once Morgase believed. Too late for Emond's Field. Maybe too late for the whole Two Rivers.

Still, it hardly made sense that the Trollocs had let anyone escape. Or the Myrddraal at any rate; Trollocs did not seem to think much beyond the moment. He would have thought destroying the ferry would have been the Fades' first task. How could they be sure there were not enough soldiers at Baerlon to come down on them?

He bent to pick up a doll with a painted wooden face, and an arrow streaked through where his chest had been.

Springing out of his crouch he leaped up the bank, a blur streaking a hundred paces into the woods to crouch below a tall leatherleaf. Brush and flood-toppled trees woven with creepers covered the forest floor around him.

Slayer. Perrin had an arrow nocked, and wondered if he had drawn it from his quiver or simply thought it there. Slayer.

On the point of leaping away again, he paused. Slayer would know roughly where he was. Perrin had followed the man's blurring form easily enough; that elongated streak was clear if you were standing still. Twice now he had played the other's game and nearly lost. Let Slayer play his this time. He waited.

Ravens swooped above the treetops, searching and calling. No movement to give him away; not a twitch. Only his eyes moved, studying the forest around him. A vagrant puff of air brought him a cold smell, human yet not, and he smiled. No sound save the ravens, though; this Slayer stalked well. But he was not used to being hunted. What else did Slayer forget beside smells? He surely would not expect Perrin to remain where he had landed. Animals ran from the hunter; even wolves ran.

A hint of movement, and for an instant a face appeared above a fallen pine some fifty paces away. The slanting light illuminated it clearly. Dark hair and blue eyes, a face all hard planes and angles, so reminiscent of Lan's face. Except that in that brief glimpse Slayer licked his lips twice; his forehead was creased, and his eyes darted as they searched. Lan would not have let his worry show if he stood alone against a thousand Trollocs. Just an instant, and the face was gone again. The ravens darted and swirled above as if they shared Slayer's anxiety, fearing to come below the treetops.

Perrin waited and watched, motionless. Silence. Only the cold smell to say he was not alone with the ravens overhead.

Slayer's face appeared again, peering around a thick-boled oak off to his left. Thirty paces. Oaks killed most of what grew close to them; only a few mushrooms and weedy things sprouted from the leafy mulch beneath its limbs. Slowly the man emerged into the open, boots making no sound.

In one motion Perrin drew and fired. The ravens screamed warning, and Slayer spun to take the broadhead shaft in his chest, but not through the heart. The man howled, clutching the arrow with both hands; black feathers rained down as the ravens beat their wings in a frenzy. And Slayer faded, him and his cry together, growing misty, transparent, vanishing. The ravens' shrieks vanished as if severed with a knife; the arrow that had transfixed the man dropped to the ground. The ravens were gone, too.

With a second shaft half-drawn, Perrin exhaled slowly, let off his tension on the bowstring. Was that how you died here? Simply fading away, gone forever?

"At least I finished him," he muttered. And let himself be diverted in the process. Slayer was no part of why he had come to the wolf dream. At least the wolves were safe now. The wolves—and maybe a few others.

He stepped out of the dream . . .

. . . and woke staring at the ceiling, his shirt clinging sweatily. The moon gave a little light through the windows. There were fiddles playing somewhere in the village, a wild Tinker tune. They would not fight, but they had found a way to help, by keeping spirits up.

Slowly Perrin sat up, pulling on his boots in the pale-lit dark. How to do what he had to do? It would be difficult. He had to be cunning. Only, he was not sure he had ever been cunning in his life. Standing, he stamped his feet to settle them in.

Sudden shouts outside and a fading clatter of hooves made him stride to the nearest window and throw up the sash. The Companions were milling about below. “What’s going on down there?”

Thirty faces turned up to him, and Ban al’Seen yelled, “It was Lord Luc, Lord Perrin. He nearly rode down Wil and Tell. I don’t think he even saw them. He was all hunched over in his saddle like he was hurt, and spurring that stallion for all he was worth, Lord Perrin.”

Perrin tugged at his beard. Luc had certainly not been wounded earlier. Luc . . . and Slayer? It was impossible. Darkhaired Slayer looked like Lan’s brother or cousin; if Luc, with his red-gold hair, resembled anyone, maybe it was Rand a little. The two men could not have been more dissimilar. And yet. . . . That cold smell. They did not smell the same, but both had an icy, hardly human scent. His ears picked up the sound of wagons being hauled out of the way down at the Old Road, shouts for haste. Even if Ban and the Companions ran, they would not catch the man now. Hooves galloped south hard.

“Ban,” he called, “if Luc shows up again, he’s to be put under guard and kept there.” He paused long enough to add, “And don’t call me that!” before hauling the sash down with a bang.

Luc and Slayer; Slayer and Luc. How could they be the same? It *was* impossible. But then, less than two years gone he had not really believed in Trollocs or Fades. Time enough to worry about it if he ever laid hands on the man again. Now there was Watch Hill and Deven Ride and. . . . Some could be saved. Not everyone in the Two Rivers had to die.

On his way to the common room, he paused at the top of the stairs. Aram stood up from the bottom step, watching him, waiting to follow where he led. Gaul lay stretched out on a pallet near the fireplace with a bandage thick around his left thigh, apparently asleep. Faile and the Two Maidens sat cross-legged on the floor near him, talking softly. A much larger pallet lay on the far side of the room, but Loial sat on a bench with his legs stretched out so they would fit under one of the tables, nearly doubled over so he could scribble furiously with a pen by the light of a candle. No doubt he was recording what had happened on the journey to close the Waygate. And if Perrin knew Loial at all, the Ogier would have Gaul doing it all, whether he had or not. Loial did not seem to think anything he himself did was brave, or worth writing down. Except for them, the common room was empty. He could still hear those fiddles playing. He thought he recognized the tune. Not a Tinker song, now. “My Love Is a Wild Rose.”

Faile looked up at Perrin’s first step down, rising gracefully to meet him. Aram took his seat again when Perrin made no move toward the door.

“Your shirt is wet,” Faile said accusingly. “You slept in it, didn’t you? And your boots, I shouldn’t wonder. It has not been an hour since I left you. You march yourself back upstairs before you fall down.”

“Did you see Luc leave?” he said. Her mouth tightened, but sometimes ignoring her was the only way. She managed to win too often when he argued with her.

“He came running through here a few minutes ago and dashed out through the kitchen,” she said finally. Those were the words; her tone said she was not finished with him and bed.

“Did he seem to be . . . injured?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “He staggered, and he was clutching something to his chest under his coat. A bandage, maybe. Mistress Congar is in the kitchen, but from what I heard he all but ran over her. How did you know?”

“I dreamed it.” Her tilted eyes took on a dangerous light. She must not be thinking. She knew about the wolf dream; did she expect him to explain where Bain and Chiad could hear, not to mention Aram and Loial? Well, maybe not Loial; he was so absorbed in his notes he would not have noticed a flock of sheep herded into the common room. “Gaul?”

“Mistress Congar gave him something to make him sleep, and a poultice for his leg. When the Aes Sedai wake in the morning, one of them will Heal him, if they think it serious enough.”

“Come sit down, Faile. I want you to do something for me.” She eyed him suspiciously, but let him lead her to a chair. When they were seated, he leaned across the table, trying to make his voice serious, but not urgent. On no account urgent. “I want you to take a message to Caemlyn for me. On the way, you can let Watch Hill know how things are here. Actually, it might be best if they crossed the Taren until it’s all done.” That had sounded properly casual; just a bit thrown in on the spur of the moment. “I want you to ask Queen Morgase to send us some of the Queen’s Guards. I know it’s a dangerous thing I’m asking, but Bain and Chiad can get you to Taren Ferry safely, and the ferry is still there.” Chiad stood up, staring at him anxiously. Why was she anxious?

“You will not have to leave him,” Faile told her. After a moment the Aiel woman nodded and resumed her seat beside Gaul. Chiad and Gaul? They were blood enemies. Nothing was making sense tonight.

“It is a long way to Caemlyn,” Faile went on quietly. Her eyes very intent on his, but her face could have been wood for all the expression it had. “Weeks to ride there, plus however long it might take to reach and convince Morgase, then more weeks to return with the Queen’s Guards.”

“We can hold out that long easily,” he told her. *Burn me if I can’t lie as well as Mat!* “Luc was right. There can’t be more than a thousand Trollocs still out there. The *dream*?” She nodded. At last she understood. “We can hold out here for a very long time, but in the meanwhile they’ll be burning crops and doing the Light knows what. We’ll need the Queen’s Guards to rid ourselves of them completely. You are the logical one to go. You know how to talk to a queen, being a queen’s cousin and all. Faile, I know what I’m asking is dangerous . . .” Not as dangerous as staying. “. . . But once you reach the ferry, you’ll be on your way.”

He did not hear Loial approach until the Ogier laid his book of notes down in front of Faile. “I could not help overhearing, Faile. If you are going to Caemlyn, would you carry this? To keep it safe until I can come for it.” Squaring the volume up almost tenderly, he added, “They print many very fine books in Caemlyn. Forgive me for interrupting, Perrin.” But his teacup eyes were on her, not him. “Faile suits you. You should fly free, like a falcon.” Patting Perrin on the shoulder, he murmured in a deep rumble, “She should fly free,” then made his way to his pallet and lay down facing the wall.

“He is very tired,” Perrin said, attempting to make it seem just a comment. The fool Ogier could ruin everything! “If you leave tonight, you can be at Watch Hill by daybreak. You’ll have to swing to the east; the Trollocs are fewer there. This is very important to me . . . to Emond’s Field, I mean. Will you do it?”

She stared at him silently for so long he wondered if she meant to answer. Her eyes seemed to glisten. Then she got up and sat down on his lap, stroking his beard. “This needs trimming. I like it on you, but I do not want it down to your chest.”

He came close to gaping. She often changed the subject on him, but usually when she was losing an argument. “Faile, please. I need you to carry this message to Caemlyn.”

Her hand tightened in his beard, and her head swung as if she were arguing with herself inside her head. “I will go,” she said at last, “but I want a price. You always make me do things the hard way. In Saldaea, I would not have to be the one who asked. My price is . . . a wedding. I want to marry you,” she finished up in a rush.

“And I you.” He smiled. “We can say the betrothal vows in front of the Women’s Circle tonight, but I’m afraid the wedding has to wait a year. When you come back from Caemlyn—” She very nearly yanked a handful of beard out of his chin.

“I will have you for husband tonight,” she said in fierce, low tones, “or I will not go until I do!”

“If there was any way, I would,” he protested. “Daise Congar would crack my head if I wanted to go against custom. For the love of the Light, Faile, just carry the message, and I’ll wed you the very first day I can.” He would. If that day ever came.

Suddenly she was very intent on his beard, smoothing it and not meeting his eyes. She started speaking slowly but picked up speed like a runaway horse. “I . . . just happened to mention . . . in passing . . . I just *mentioned* to Mistress al’Vere how we had been traveling together—I don’t know how it came up—and she said—and Mistress Congar agreed with her—not that I talked to everybody!—she said that we probably—certainly—could be considered betrothed already under your customs, and the year is just to make sure you really do get on well together—which we do, as anyone can see—and here I am being as forward as some Domani hussy or one of those Tairen galls—if you ever even *think* of Berelain—oh, Light, I’m babbling, and you won’t even—”

He cut her off by kissing her as thoroughly as he knew how.

“Will you marry me?” he said breathlessly when he was done. “Tonight?” He must have done ever better with the kiss than he thought; he had to repeat himself six times, with her giggling against his throat and demanding he say it again, before she seemed to understand.

Which was how he found himself not half an hour later kneeling opposite her in the common room, in front of Daise Congar and Marin al’Vere, Alsbet Luhhan and Neysa Ayellin and all the Women’s Circle. Loial had been roused to stand for him with Aram, and Bain and Chiad stood for Faile. There were no flowers to put in her hair or his, but Bain, guided by Marin, tucked a long red wedding ribbon around his neck, and Loial threaded another through Faile’s dark hair, his thick fingers surprisingly deft and gentle. Perrin’s hands trembled as he cupped hers.

“I, Perrin Aybara, do pledge you my love, Faile Bashere, for as long as I live.” *For as long as I live and after.* “What I possess in this world I give to you.” *A horse, an axe, a bow. A hammer. Not much to gift a bride. I give you life, my love. It’s all I have.* “I will keep and hold you, succor and tend you, protect and shelter you, for all the days of my life.” *I can’t keep you; the only way I can protect you is to send you away.* “I am yours, always and forever.” By the time he finished, his hands were shaking visibly.

Faile moved her hands to hold his. “I, Zarine Bashere . . .” That was a surprise; she hated that name. “. . . do pledge you my love, Perrin Aybara. . . .” Her hands never trembled at all.

* * *

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CHAPTER 54

Into the Palace

Seated on the tail end of the high-wheeled cart trundling up a twisty Tanchican street behind four sweating men, Elayne scowled through the grimy veil that covered her from eyes to chin, kicking her bare feet irritably. Every lurch over the paving stones jarred her to the top of her skull; the more she braced herself by holding on to the rough wooden planks of the cart bed, the worse it was. It did not seem to bother Nynaeve much; she jounced about like Elayne, but, frowning slightly and eyes looking inward, she appeared hardly aware of it. And Egeanin, crowded against Nynaeve on the other side, veiled and with her dark hair in braids to her shoulders, rode each jolt easily; arms folded. Finally Elayne emulated the Seanchan woman; she could not avoid swaying into Nynaeve, but the ride no longer felt as if her lower teeth were going to be driven through the upper.

She would have walked gladly, even barefoot, but Bayle Domon had said it would not look right; people might wonder why women were not riding when there was plenty of room, and the last thing they wanted was anyone thinking about them twice. Of course he was not being bounced about like a sack of turnips; he was walking, at the head of the cart with ten of the twenty sailors he had brought along for escort. More would seem suspicious, he claimed. She suspected he would not have had so many if not for her and the other two women.

The cloudless sky still stretched gray overhead, though first light had crept on before they set out; the streets were still largely empty, and silent except for the rumble of the cart and the creak of its axle. When the sun topped the horizon people would begin to venture out, but now the few she saw were knots of men in baggy trousers and dark cylindrical caps, scuttling along with the furtive air of having been up to no good while dark had held. The old piece of canvas tossed over the cart's load was carefully arranged so anyone could see it covered only three large baskets, yet even so one or another of those small clusters would pause like a pack of dogs, veiled faces all coming up together, eyes swiveling to follow the cart. Apparently twenty men with boarding swords and cudgels were too many to face, because all eventually hurried on.

The wheels dropped into a large hole where paving stones had been pried up in one of the riots; the cart fell away beneath her. She almost bit her tongue as she and the cart bed met again with a hard smack. Egeanin and her casual arm-folding! Grabbing the edge of the cart bed, she frowned at the Seanchan woman. And found her tight-lipped and holding on with both hands also.

"Not quite the same as standing on deck after all," Egeanin said with a shrug.

Nynaeve grimaced slightly and tried to edge away from the Seanchan woman, though how she might manage it without climbing into Elayne's lap was difficult to see. "I am going to speak to Master Bayle Domon," she muttered meaningfully, just as if the cart had not been her suggestion in the first place. Another lurch clicked her teeth shut.

They all three wore drab brown wool, thin-woven but coarse and not very clean, poor farm women's dresses like shapeless sacks compared with the clinging silks of Rendra's taste. Refugees from the countryside earning a meal as they could; that was what they were supposed to be. Egeanin's relief at her first sight of the dresses had been quite evident, and almost as strange as her presence on the cart. Elayne would not have thought the latter conceivable.

There had been quite a lot of discussion—that was what the men called it—in the Chamber of Falling Blossoms, but she and Nynaeve had countered most of their fool objections and ignored the rest. The two of them had to enter the Panarch's Palace, and as soon as possible. That was when Domon had raised another objection, one not as silly as the rest.

"You can no go into the palace alone," the bearded smuggler muttered, staring at his fists on the table. "You say you will no channel unless you must, no to warn these Black Aes Sedai." Neither of them had seen any need to mention one of the Forsaken. "Then you must have muscle to swing a club if the need do arise, and eyes to watch your backs will no be amiss either. I am known there, to the servants. I did take gifts to the old Panarch too. I will go with you." Shaking his head, he growled, "You do make me stretch my neck on the headsman's block because I did leave you at Falme.

Fortune prick me if you do no! Well, it do be done now; you can no object to *this*! I will go in with you."

"You are a fool, Illianer," Juilin said contemptuously before she or Nynaeve could open their mouths. "You think the Taraboners will allow you to wander about the palace as you wish? A scruffy smuggler from Illian? I know the ways of servants, how to duck my head and make some empty-headed noble think. . . ." He cleared his throat hastily, and hurried on without looking at Nyaneve—or at her! "I should be the one to go with them."

Thom laughed at the other two men. "Do you think *either* of you could pass for a Taraboner? I can; these will do in a pinch." He knuckled his long mustaches. "Besides, you cannot run around the Panarch's Palace carrying cudgel or staff. A more . . . subtle . . . method of protection is needed." He flourished a hand, and a knife suddenly appeared, spinning through his fingers to vanish just as quickly; up his sleeve, Elayne believed.

"You all know what you have to do," Nynaeve snapped, "and you cannot do it trying to watch over us like a pair of geese for market!" Taking a deep breath, she went on, in a milder tone. "If there was a way one of you could come along, I'd appreciate the extra eyes if nothing else, but it cannot be. We have to go alone, it seems, and that is all there is to it."

"I can accompany you," Egeanin announced suddenly from where Nynaeve had made her stand in the corner of the room. Everybody turned to look at her; she frowned back as though not quite certain herself. "These women are Darkfriends. They should be brought to justice."

Elayne was simply startled at the offer, but Nynaeve, the corners of her mouth going white, looked ready to drub the woman for it. "You think we would trust you, Seanchan?" she said coldly. "Before we leave, you'll be locked securely in a storeroom however much talk it—"

"I give oath by my hope of a higher name," Egeanin broke in, putting her hands over her heart, one atop the other, "that I will not betray you in any way, that I will obey you and guard your backs until you are safely out of the Panarch's Palace." Then she bowed three times, deeply and formally. Elayne had no idea what "hope of a higher name" meant, but the Seanchan woman certainly made it sound binding.

"She can do it," Domon said with slow reluctance. He eyed Egeanin and shook his head. "Fortune prick me if there be more than two or three of my men I would wager on, coin for coin, against her." Nynaeve frowned at her hand gripping half a dozen of her long braids, then quite deliberately gave them a yank.

"Nynaeve," Elayne told her firmly, "you yourself said you would like another pair of eyes, and I definitely would. Besides which, if we are to do this without channeling, I would not mind having someone along who can handle a nosy guard if need be. I am not up to thumping men with my fists, and neither are you. You remember how she can fight."

Nynaeve glared at Egeanin, frowned at Elayne, and then stared at the men as if they had plotted this behind her back. At last, though, she nodded.

"Good," Elayne said. "Master Domon, that means three sets of dresses, not two. Now, the three of you had best be off. We want to be on our way by daybreak."

The cart jerking to a halt brought Elayne out of her reverie.

Dismounted Whitecloaks were questioning Domon. Here the street ran into a square behind the Panarch's Palace, a much smaller square than the one in front. Beyond, the palace stood in piles of white marble, slender towers banded with lacy stonework, snowy domes capped with gold and topped by golden spires or weather vanes. The streets to either side were much wider than most in Tanchico, and straighter.

The slow *clop-clop* of a horse's hooves on the square's broad paving stones announced another rider, a tall man in burnished helmet, armor gleaming beneath his white cloak with its golden sunburst and crimson shepherd's crook. Elayne put her head down; the three knots of rank under the flaring sun told her this was Jaichim Carridin. The man had never seen her, but if he thought she was staring he might wonder why. The hooves passed on along the square without pausing.

Egeanin had her face right down, too, but Nynaeve frowned openly after the Inquisitor. "That man is very worried about something," she murmured. "I hope he's not heard—"

"The Panarch is dead!" a man's voice shouted from somewhere across the square. "They've killed her!"

There was no telling who had shouted, or where. The streets Elayne could see were blocked by Whitecloaks on horses.

Looking back down the street the cart had just climbed, she wished the guards would question Domon more quickly. People were gathering down at the first bend, milling about and peering up toward the square. It seemed Thom and Juilin had made a good job of seeding their rumors during the night. Now if only things did not erupt while they sat out here in the middle of it. If a riot started now. . . . The only thing that kept her hands from shaking was her double grip on the cart bed. *Light, a mob out here and the Black Ajah inside, maybe Moghedien. . . . I'm so frightened my mouth is dry.* Nynaeve and Egeanin were watching the crowd growing down the street, too, and not even blinking, much less trembling. *I will not be a coward. I will not!*

The cart rumbled forward, and she heaved a sigh of relief. It took her a moment to realize she had heard twin echoes from the other two women.

Before gates not much wider than the cart Domon was questioned again, by men in pointed helmets, their breastplates embossed with a tree painted gold. Soldiers of the Panarch's Legion. The questions were shorter this time; Elayne thought she saw a small purse change hands, and then they were inside, rumbling across the rough-paved yard outside the kitchens. Except for Domon, the sailors remained out with the soldiers.

Elayne hopped down as soon as the cart halted, working her bare feet on the paving; the uneven stones were *hard*. It was difficult to believe the thin sole of a slipper could make so much difference. Egeanin scrambled up into the cart to pass the baskets out, Nynaeve taking the first on her back, one hand twisted behind her underneath, the other over her shoulder to grip the rim. Long white peppers, a little wizened by their journey all the way from Saldaea, filled the baskets nearly to the top.

As Elayne was taking hers, Domon came to the end of the cart and pretended to inspect the ice peppers. "The Whitecloaks and the Panarch's Legion do be close to blows, it do appear," he murmured, fingering peppers. "That lieutenant did say the Legion could protect the Panarch themselves if most of the Legion had no been sent to the ring forts. Jaichim Carridin do have access to the Panarch, but no the Lord Captain of the Legion. And they are no pleased that all the guards inside do be Civil Watch. A suspicious man might say someone do want the Panarch's guards to watch each other more than anything else."

"That is good to know," Nynaeve murmured without looking at him. "I've always said you can learn useful things listening to men's gossip."

Domon grunted sourly. "I will take you inside; then I must go back to my men to make sure they do no get caught up in the mob." Every sailor from every ship Domon had in port was out in the streets around the palace.

Hefting her own basket on her back, Elayne followed the other two women behind him, keeping her head down and wincing at every step until she was on the reddish-brown tiles of the kitchen. The smells of spices and cooking meat and sauces filled the room.

“Ice peppers for the Panarch,” Domon announced. “A gift from Bayle Domon, a good shipowner of this city.”

“More of the ice peppers?” a stout, dark-braided woman in a white apron and the ever-present veil said, barely looking up from a silver tray where she was arranging an ornately folded white napkin among dishes of thin, golden Sea Folk porcelain. There were a dozen or more aproned women in the kitchen, as well as a pair of boys turning dripping roasts on spits in two of the six fireplaces, but clearly she was the chief cook. “Well, the Panarch, she seems to have enjoyed the last. Into the storeroom there.” She gestured vaguely toward one of the doors on the far side of the room. “I have no time to bother with you now.”

Elayne kept her eyes on the floor as she trailed after Nynaeve and Egeanin, sweating, and not for the heat of the iron stoves and fireplaces. A skinny woman in green silk not of Tarabon cut stood beside one of the wide tables, scratching the ears of a scrawny gray cat as it lapped cream from a porcelain dish. The cat named her, as well as her narrow face and wide nose. Marillin Gemalphin, once of the Brown Ajah, now of the Black. If she looked up from that cat, if she really became aware of them, there would be no need for channeling for her to know that two of them could; this close the woman would be able to sense the ability itself.

Sweat dripped from the end of Elayne’s nose by the time she pushed the storeroom door shut behind her with a hip. “Did you see her?” she demanded in a low voice, letting her basket half-fall to the floor. Fretwork carved through the plastered wall just under the ceiling let in dim light from the kitchen. Rows of tall shelves filled the floor of the large room, laden with sacks and net bags of vegetables and large jars of spice. Barrels and casks stood everywhere, and a dozen dressed lambs and twice as many geese hung on hooks. According to the sketchy floorplan Domon and Thom had drawn between them, this was the smallest storeroom for food in the palace. “This is disgusting,” she said. “I know Rendra keeps a full kitchen, but at least she buys what she needs as she can. These people have been feasting while—”

“Hold your concern until you can do something about it,” Nynaeve told her in a sharp whisper. She had upended her basket on the floor and was stripping off her rough farm woman’s dress. Egeanin was already down to her shift. “I did see her. If you want her to come in here to see what the noise is about, keep talking.”

Elayne sniffed, but let it pass. She had not been making that much noise. Pulling off her own dress, she dumped the peppers out of her basket, and what had been hidden under them as well. Among other things, a dress of white belted in green, fine-spun wool embroidered above the left breast with a green tree of spreading branches atop the outline of a trefoil leaf. Her grimy veil was replaced by a clean one, of linen scraped nearly as sheer as silk. White slippers with padded soles were welcome on feet bruised by that walk from cart to kitchen.

The Seanchan woman had been the first out of her old clothes, but she was the last into her white garment, muttering all the while about “indecent” and “serving girl,” which made no sense. The dresses *were* servants’ dresses; the whole point was that servants could go anywhere and a palace had too many for anyone to notice three more. And as for indecent. . . . Elayne could remember being a touch hesitant about wearing the Tarabon style in public, but she had become used to it soon enough, and even this thin wool could not cling as silk did. Egeanin seemed to have very strict ideas of modesty.

Eventually, though, the woman had done up her last lace, and the farm clothes had been stuffed into the baskets and covered with ice peppers.

Marillin Gemalphin was gone from the kitchen, though the raggedy-eared gray cat still lapped cream on the table. Elayne and the other two started for the door that led deeper into the palace.

One of the undercooks was frowning at the cat, fist on her ample hips. “I would like to strangle this cat,” she muttered, pale brown braids swinging as she shook her head angrily. “It eats the cream, and because I put the drop of cream on the berries for my breakfast, I have the bread and water for my meals!”

“Count yourself lucky you are not out in the street, or swinging from the gallows.” The chief cook did not sound sympathetic. “If a lady says you have stolen, then you have stolen, even if it is the cream for her cats, yes? You, there!”

Elayne and her companions froze at the shout.

The dark-braided woman shook a long wooden spoon at them. “You come into my kitchen and stroll about as in the garden, you lazy sows you? You have come for the breakfast of the Lady Ispan, yes? If you do not have it there when she wakes, you will learn how to jump. Well?” She gestured at the silver tray she had been laboring over before, covered now with a snowy linen cloth.

There was no way to speak; if any one of them opened her mouth, her first words would show her no Taraboner. Thinking quickly, Elayne bobbed a servant’s curtsy and picked up the tray; a servant carrying something was going about her work and not likely to be stopped or told to do something else. Lady Ispan? Not an uncommon name in Tarabon, but there was an Ispan on the list of Black sisters.

“So you mock me, do you, you little cow you?” the stout woman roared, and started around the table waving her thick wooden spoon threateningly.

There was nothing to do without giving herself away; nothing but stay and be hit, or run. Elayne darted out of the kitchen with the tray, Nynaeve and Egeanin at her heels. The cook’s shouts followed them, but not the cook, thankfully. An image of the three of them running through the palace pursued by the stout woman made Elayne want to giggle hysterically. *Mock her?* She was sure that had been exactly the same curtsy servants had given her thousands of times.

More storerooms lined the narrow hallway leading away from the kitchen, and tall cupboards for brooms and mops, buckets and soaps, linens for tables, and all sorts of assorted things. Nynaeve found a fat feather duster in one. Egeanin took an armful of folded towels from another, and a stout stone pestle out of a mortar in a third. She hid the pestle under the towels.

“A cudgel is sometimes handy,” she said when Elayne raised an eyebrow. “Especially when no one expects you to have it.”

Nynaeve sniffed but said nothing. She had hardly acknowledged Egeanin at all since agreeing to her presence.

Deeper in the palace the hallways broadened and heightened, the white walls carved with friezes and the ceilings set with gleaming arabesques of gold. Long, bright carpets ran along white-tiled floors. Ornate golden lamps on gilded stands gave light and the scent of perfumed oil. Sometimes the corridor opened into courtyards rounded by walks with slim, fluted columns, overlooked by balconies screened by filigreed stonework. Large fountains burbled; fish red and white and golden swam beneath lily pads with huge white flowers. Not at all like the city outside.

Occasionally they saw other servants, men and women in white, tree and leaf embroidered on one shoulder, hurrying about their tasks, or men in the gray coats and steel caps of the Civil Watch carrying staffs or cudgels. No one spoke to them or even looked twice, not at three serving women obviously at their work.

At last they came to the narrow servants' stairs marked on their sketchy map.

"Remember," Nynaeve said quietly, "if there are guards on her door, leave. If she is not alone, leave. She is far from the most important reason we are here." She took a deep breath, making herself look at Egeanin. "If you let anything happen to her—"

A trumpet sounded faintly from outside. A moment later a gong rang inside, and shouted orders drifted down the hall. Men in steel caps appeared for a moment down the hallway, running.

"Maybe we will not have to worry about guards on her door," Elayne said. The riot had begun in the streets. Rumors spread by Thom and Juilin to gather the crowd. Domon's sailors to egg them on. She regretted the necessity, but the disturbance would pull most of the guards out of the palace, maybe all with luck. Those people out there did not know it, but they fought in a battle to save their city from the Black Ajah and the world from the Shadow. "Egeanin should go with you, Nynaeve. Your part *is* the most important. If one of us needs someone to watch her back, it is you."

"I've no need for a Seanchan!" Shouldering her duster like a pike, Nynaeve strode off down the hall. She really did not move like a servant. Not with that militant stride.

"Should we not be about our own task?" Egeanin said. "The riot will not hold attention completely for long."

Elayne nodded. Nynaeve had passed out of sight around a corner.

The stairs were narrow and hidden in the wall, to keep servants as unseen as possible. The corridors on the second floor were much as those on the first, except that double-pointed arches were almost as likely to give onto a stone-latticed balcony as onto a room. There seemed to be far fewer servants as they made their way to the west side of the palace, and none more than glanced at them. Wonderfully, the hallway outside the Panarch's apartments was empty. No guards in front of the wide, tree-carved doors set in a double-peaked frame. Not that she had meant to retreat had there been guards, no matter what she had told Nynaeve, but it did make things simpler.

A moment later she was not so sure. She could feel someone channeling in those rooms. Not strong flows, but definitely the Power being woven, or maybe a weave maintained. Few women knew the trick of tying a weave.

“What is the matter?” Egeanin asked.

Elayne realized she had stopped. “One of the Black sisters is in there.” One, or more? Only one channeling, certainly. She pressed close to the doors. A woman was *singing* in there. She put her ear to the carved wood, heard raucous words, muffled yet clearly understandable.

“My breasts are round, and my hips are too.
I can flatten a whole ship’s crew.”

Startled, she jerked back, porcelain dishes sliding on the tray under the cloth. Had she somehow come to the wrong room? No, she had memorized the sketch. Besides, in the entire palace the only doors carved with the tree led to the Panarch’s apartments.

“Then we must leave her,” Egeanin said. “You can do nothing without warning the others of your presence.”

“Perhaps I can. If they feel me channel, they will think it is whoever is in there.” Frowning, she bit her lower lip. How many were there? She could do at least three or four things at once with the Power, something only Egwene and Nynaeve could match. She ran down a list of Andoran queens who had shown courage in the face of great danger, until she realized it was a list of all the queens of Andor. *I will be queen one day; I can be as brave as they.* Readying herself, she said, “Throw open the doors, Egeanin, then drop down so I can see everything.” The Seanchan woman hesitated. “Throw open the doors.” Elayne’s own voice surprised her. She had not tried to *make* it anything, but it was quiet, calm, commanding. And Egeanin nodded, almost a bow, and immediately flung open both doors.

“My thighs are strong are strong as anchor chain.
My kiss can burst—”

The dark-braided singer, standing wrapped in flows of Air to her neck and a soiled, wrinkled Taraboner gown of red silk, cut off short as the doors banged back. A frail-appearing woman, lounging in pale blue of a high-necked Cairhienin cut on a long padded bench, ceased nodding her head to the song and leaped to her feet, outrage replacing the grin on her fox-shaped face.

The glow of *saidar* already surrounded Temaile, but she did not have a chance. Appalled at what she saw, Elayne embraced the True Source and lashed out hard with flows of Air, webbing her from shoulders to ankles, wove a shield of Spirit and slammed it between the woman and the Source. The glow around Temaile vanished, and she went flying across the bench as if she had been struck by a galloping horse, eyes rolling up into her head, to land unconscious on her back three paces away on the green-and-gold carpet. The dark-braided woman gave a start as the flows around her winked out of existence, felt at herself in wondering disbelief as she stared from Temaile to Elayne and Egeanin.

Tying off the weave holding Temaile, Elayne hurried into the room, eyes searching for others of the Black Ajah. Behind her, Egeanin closed the doors after them. There did not seem to be anyone else. “Was she alone?” she demanded of the woman in red. The Panarch, by Nynaeve’s description. Nynaeve *had* mentioned *some*thing about a song.

“You are not . . . with them?” Amathera said hesitantly, dark eyes taking in their dresses. “You are Aes Sedai also?” She seemed willing to doubt that despite the evidence of Temaile. “But not with them?”

“Was she alone?” Elayne snapped, and Amathera gave a little jump.

“Yes. Alone. Yes, she. . . .” The Panarch grimaced. “The others made me sit on my throne and speak the words they put into my mouth. It amused them to make me sometimes give justice, and sometimes pronouncements of horrible injustice, rulings that will cause strife for generations if I cannot put them aright. But her!” That full-lipped little mouth opened in a snarl. “Her they set to watch over me. She hurts me for no reason except to make me weep. She made me eat an entire trayful of white ice peppers and would not let me drink a drop until I begged on my knees while she laughed! In my dreams she hoists me to the top of the Tower of Morning by my ankles and lets me fall. A dream, but it seems real, and each time she lets me fall screaming a little nearer the ground. And she laughs! She makes me learn lewd dances, and filthy songs, and laughs when she tells me that before they leave she will make me sing and dance to entertain the—” With a shriek like a pouncing cat she threw herself across the bench onto the bound woman, slapping wildly, pummeling with her fists.

Egeanin, arms folded in front of the doors, seemed ready to let it go on, but Elayne wove flows of Air around Amathera’s waist. To her surprise she was able to lift her off the already senseless woman and set her on her feet. Perhaps learning how to handle those heavy weavings from Jorin had increased her strength.

Amathera kicked at Temaile, turning her glare on Elayne and Egeanin when her slippered feet missed. “I am the Panarch of Tarabon, and I mean to dispense justice to this woman!” That rosebud mouth had a very sulky look. Had the woman no sense of herself, of her position? She was equal to the king, a ruler!

“And I am the Aes Sedai who has come to rescue you,” Elayne said coolly. Realizing she still held the tray, she set it on the floor hurriedly. The woman seemed to be having enough trouble seeing beyond the white servants’ dresses without that. Temaile’s face was quite red; she would wake to bruises. No doubt fewer than she deserved. Elayne wished there was a way to take Temaile with them. A way to bring even one to justice in the Tower. “We have come—at considerable risk!—to take you out of here. Then you can reach the Lord Captain of the Panarch’s Legion, and Andric and his army, and you can chase these women out. Perhaps we will be lucky enough to take some of them for trial. But first we must get you away from them.”

“I do not need Andric,” Amathera muttered. Elayne would have sworn she almost said “now.” “There are soldiers of my Legion around the palace. I know this. I have been allowed to speak to none of them, but once they see me, and hear my voice, they will do what must be done, yes? You Aes Sedai cannot use the One Power to harm. . . .” She trailed off, scowling at the unconscious Temaile. “You cannot use it as a weapon, at least, yes? I know this.”

Elayne surprised herself by weaving tiny flows of Air, one to each of Amathera’s braids. The braids lifted straight up into the air, and the pouty-mouth fool had no choice but to follow them up on tiptoe. Elayne walked her that way, on tiptoe, until the woman stood right in front of her, dark eyes wide and indignant.

“You will listen to me, Panarch Amathera of Tarabon,” she said in icy tones. “If you try to walk out to your soldiers, Temaile’s cronies may very well tie you up in a bundle and hand you back to her. Worse, they will learn that my friends and I are here, and that I will not allow. We are going to *creep* out of here, and if you will not agree to that, I’ll bind and gag you and leave you beside Temaile for her friends to find.” There *had* to be some way to take Temaile, too. “Do you understand me?”

Amathera nodded slightly, held up as she was. Egeanin made an approving sound.

Elayne loosed the flows; the woman’s heels dropped to the carpet. “Now let’s see if we can find you something to wear that is suitable for sneaking.” Amathera nodded again, but her mouth was set at its sulkiest. Elayne hoped Nynaeve was having an easier time of it.

* * *

Nynaeve entered the great exhibition hall with its multitude of thin columns, feather duster already moving. This collection must always need dusting, and surely no one would look twice at a woman doing what was needed. She looked around, eyes drawn to wired-together bones that looked like a long-legged horse with a neck that pushed its skull up twenty feet. The vast chamber stretched emptily in all directions.

But someone could come in at any moment; servants who actually had been sent to clean, or Liandrin and all of her fellows come to search. Still holding the duster prominently, just in case, she hurried down to the white stone pedestal that had held the dull black collar and bracelets. She did not realize she had been holding her breath until she exhaled on seeing the things still there. The glass-sided table holding the *cuendillar* seal lay another fifty paces on, but this came first.

Climbing over the wrist-thick white silk rope, she touched the wide, jointed collar. *Suffering. Agony. Woe.* They rolled through her; she wanted to weep. What kind of thing could absorb all that pain? Pulling her hand back, she glared at the black metal. Meant to control a man who could channel. Liandrin and her Black sisters meant to use it to control Rand, turn him to the Shadow, force him to serve the Dark One. Someone from her village, controlled and used by Aes Sedai! Black Ajah, but Aes Sedai as surely as Moiraine with her scheming! *Egeanin, making me like a filthy Seanchan!*

The sudden incongruity of the last thought hit her; abruptly she realized she was deliberately making herself angry, angry enough to channel. She embraced the Source; the Power filled her. And a serving woman with the tree-and-leaf on her shoulder entered the columned hall.

Quivering with the urge to channel, Nynaeve waited, even lifting the duster, running the feathers over the collar and bracelets. The serving woman started down the pale floorstones; she would go in a moment, and Nynaeve could. . . . What? Slip the things into her belt pouch and take them, but. . . .

The serving woman would go? *Why did I think she'll leave instead of staying to work?* She glanced sideways up the room at the woman coming toward her. Of course. No broom or mop, no feather duster, not even a rag. *Whatever she's here for, it cannot take lo*—

Suddenly she saw the woman's face clearly. Sturdily handsome, framed by dark braids, smiling in an almost friendly fashion but not really paying her any mind. Certainly not threatening in any way. Not quite the same face, but she knew it.

Before thought she struck out, weaving a hammer-hard flow of Air to smash that face. In an instant the glow of *saidar* surrounded the other women, her features changed—somehow more regal now, prouder, Moghedien's face remembered; and startled as well, surprised that she had not approached unsuspected—and Nynaeve's flow was sliced razor clean. She staggered under the whiplash recoil, like a physical blow, and the Forsaken struck with a complex weave of Spirit streaked by Water and Air. Nynaeve had no idea what it was meant to do; frantically she tried to cut it as she had seen the other woman do, with a keen-edged weave of Spirit. For a heartbeat she felt love, devotion, worship for the magnificent woman who would deign to allow her to. . . .

The intricate weave parted, and Moghedien missed a step. A tinge remained in Nynaeve's mind, like a fresh memory of wanting to obey, to grovel and please, what had happened at their first meeting all over again; it heated her rage. The knife-sharp shield that Egwene had used to still Amico Nagoyin sprang into being, more weapon than shield, lashed at Moghedien—and was blocked, woven Spirit straining against woven Spirit, just short of severing Moghedien from the Source forever. Again the Forsaken's counterblow came, slashing like an axe, intended to cut Nynaeve off in the same way. Forever. Desperately Nynaeve blocked it.

Suddenly she realized that under her anger she was terrified. Holding off the other woman's attempt to still her while trying to do the same to her took everything she had. The Power boiled in her till she thought she must burst; her knees quivered with the effort of standing. And all went into those two things; she could not spare enough to light a candle. Moghedien's axe of Spirit waxed and waned in sharpness, but that would not matter if the woman managed to drive it home; Nynaeve could not see any real difference in outcome between being stilled by the woman and merely—*merely*!—being shielded and at her mercy. The thing brushed against the flow of Power from the Source into her, like a knife hovering over a chicken's stretched neck. The image was all too apt; she wished she had not thought of it. In the back of her mind a tiny voice gibbered at her. *Oh, Light, don't let her. Don't let her! Light, please, not that!*

For a moment she considered letting go her own attempt to cut Moghedien off—for one thing, she had to keep forcing it back to a razor edge; the woven flows did not want to hold the keenness—letting go and using that strength to force Moghedien's attack further back, maybe sever it. But if she tried, the other woman would not need to defend; she could add that strength to her own attack. And she was one of the Forsaken. Not just a Black sister. A woman who had been Aes Sedai in the Age of Legends, when Aes Sedai had been able to do things undreamed of now. If Moghedien threw her whole strength at her. . . .

A man who came in then, or any woman unable to channel, would have seen only two women facing each other across the white silk rope from a distance of less than ten feet. Two women staring at one another in a vast hall full of strange things. They would have seen nothing to say it was a duel. No leaping about and hacking with swords as men would do, nothing smashed or broken. Just two women standing there. But a duel all the same, and maybe to the death. Against one of the Forsaken.

"All my careful planning ruined," Moghedien said abruptly in a tight, angry voice, white-knuckled hands gripping her skirts. "At the very least I shall have to go to untold effort to put everything back as it was. It may not be possible. Oh, I do mean to make you pay for that, Nynaeve al'Meara. This has been such a cozy hiding place, and those blind women have a number of very useful items in their possession even if they do not—" She shook her head, lips peeling back to bare her teeth in a snarl. "I think I will take you with me this time. I know. I shall keep you for a live mounting block. You will be brought out to kneel on all fours so I can step from your back to my saddle. Or perhaps I shall give you to Rahvin. He always repays favors. He does have a pretty little queen to amuse him now, but pretty women were always Rahvin's weakness. He likes to have two or three or four at once dancing attendance on him. How will you like that? To spend the rest of your life competing for Rahvin's favors. You will want to, once he has his hands on you; he has his little tricks. Yes, I do believe Rahvin shall have you."

Anger welled up in Nynaeve. Sweat streamed down her face, and her legs shook as if they might give way, but anger gave her strength. Furious, she managed to push her weapon of Spirit a hair closer to severing Moghedien from the Source before the woman halted it again.

"So you discovered that little gem behind you," Moghedien said in a moment of precarious balance. Surprisingly, her voice was almost conversational. "I wonder how you did that. It does not matter. Did you come to take it away? Perhaps to destroy it? You cannot destroy it. That is not metal, but a form of *cuendillar.* Even balefire cannot destroy *cuendillar.* And if you mean to use it, it does have . . . drawbacks, shall we say? Put the collar on a man who channels, and a woman wearing the bracelets can make him do whatever she wishes, true, but it will not stop him going mad, and there is a flow the other way, too. Eventually he will begin to be able to control you, too, so you end with a struggle at every hour. Not very palatable when he is going mad. Of course, you can pass the bracelets around, so no one has too much exposure, but that does mean trusting someone else with him. Men are always so good at violence; they make wonderful weapons. Or two women can each wear one bracelet, if you have someone you trust enough; that slows the seepage considerably, I understand, but it also lessens your control, even if you work in perfect unison. Eventually, you will find yourselves in a struggle for control with him, each of you needing him to remove your bracelet as surely as he needs you to remove the collar." She tilted her head, lifted a quizzical eyebrow. "You are following this, I trust? Controlling Lews Therin—Rand al'Thor as he is called now—would be most useful, but is it worth the price? You can see why I have left the collar and bracelets where they are."

Trembling to contain the Power, to hold her woven flows, Nynaeve frowned. Why was the woman telling her all of this? Did she think it did not matter because she was going to win? Why her sudden change from rage to talk? There was sweat on Moghedien’s face, too. Quite a lot of sweat, beading on her broad forehead, running down her cheeks.

Suddenly everything changed in Nynaeve’s mind. Moghedien’s was not a voice tight with anger; it was a voice tight with strain. Moghedien was not suddenly going to hurl all of her strength at her; she already was. The woman was putting out as much effort as she. She was facing one of the Forsaken, and far from being plucked like a goose for supper, she had not lost a feather. She was meeting one of the Forsaken, strength for strength! Moghedien was trying to distract her, to gain an opening before her own strength gave out! If only she could do the same. Before her strength went.

“Do you wonder how I know all this? The collar and bracelets were made after I was. . . . Well, we will not talk of that. Once I was free, the first thing I did was seek information about those last days. Last years, really. There are a good many fragments here and there that make no sense to anyone who does not have some idea to begin with. The Age of Legends. Such a quaint name you have given my time. Yet even your wildest tales no more than hint at the half. I had lived over two hundred years when the Bore was opened, and I was still young, for an Aes Sedai. Your ‘legends’ are but pale imitations of what we could do. Why. . . .”

Nynaeve stopped listening. A way to distract the woman. Even if she could think of something to say, Moghedien would be on her guard against the method she herself was using. She could not spare effort for as much as a thread-thin weave, any more than . . . any more than Moghedien could. A woman from the Age of Legends, a woman long used to wielding the One Power. Perhaps used to doing almost everything with the Power before she was imprisoned. In hiding since being freed, how used to doing things without the Power had she become?

Nynaeve let her legs sag. Dropping the feather duster, she caught hold of the pedestal to support herself. There was very little fakery needed.

Moghedien smiled and took a step nearer. “. . . travel to other worlds, even worlds in the sky. Do you know that the stars are. . . .” So sure, that smile. So triumphant.

Nynaeve seized the collar, ignoring the joltingly pained emotions that spilled into her, and hurled it, all in one motion.

The Forsaken had only begun to gape when the wide black circlet struck her between the eyes. Not a hard blow, certainly not enough to stun, but not expected, either. Moghedien’s control over her woven flows faltered, just slightly, only for an instant. Yet for that instant the balance between them shifted. The shield of Spirit slid between Moghedien and the Source; the halo surrounding her winked out.

The woman's eyes bulged. Nynaeve expected her to leap for her throat; that was what she would have done. Instead, Moghedien jerked her skirts to her knees and ran.

With no need to defend herself, it took only a little effort for Nynaeve to weave Air around the fleeing woman. The Forsaken froze in midstride.

Hurriedly Nynaeve tied her weaving. She had done it. *I faced one of the Forsaken and beat her,* she thought incredulously. Looking at the woman held from the neck down by air with the consistency of stone, even seeing her leaning forward on one foot, it was hard to believe. Examining what she had done, she saw it had not been as complete a victory as she had wanted. The shield had blurred its sharp edge before it slid home. Moghedien was captured and shielded, but not stilled.

Trying not to totter, she walked around in front of the other woman. Moghedien still looked queenly, but like a very frightened queen, licking her lips, eyes darting wildly. "If . . . if you f-free me, we can c-come to s-some arrangement. There is m-much I can t-teach you—"

Ruthlessly Nynaeve cut her off, weaving a gag of Air that held the woman's jaws gaping. "A live mounting block. Wasn't that what you said? I think that is a very good idea. I like to ride." She smiled at the woman, whose eyes looked to be coming out of her head.

Mounting block indeed! Once Moghedien had been put on trial in the Tower and stilled—there could be no doubt of the sentence for one of the Forsaken—she would surely be put to some useful work in kitchens or gardens or stables, except when she was brought out to show that even the Forsaken could not escape justice, and treated no differently from any other servant, beyond being watched. But let her think Nynaeve was as cruel as she. Let her think it until she was actually put on. . . .

Nynaeve's mouth twisted. Moghedien was not going to be put on trial. Not now, anyway. Not unless she could figure out some way to get her out of the Panarch's Palace. The woman seemed to believe the grimace portended something ill for her; tears leaked from her eyes, and her mouth worked, trying to force words past the gag.

Disgusted with herself, Nynaeve walked unsteadily back to where the black collar lay, stuffing it quickly into her belt pouch before the stark emotions in it could do more than touch her. The bracelets followed, with the same feelings of suffering and sorrow. *I was ready to torture her by letting her think I would! She deserves it surely, but that is not me. Or is it? Am I no better than Egeanin?*

She jerked around, furious that she could even consider such a question, and stalked past Moghedien to the glass-walled table. There had to be some way to bring the woman to justice.

There were seven figurines in the case. Seven, and no seal.

For a moment she could only stare. One of the figures, an odd animal shaped roughly like a pig but with a large round snout and feet as wide as its thick legs, stood where the seal had, in the center of the table. Suddenly her eyes narrowed. It was not really there; the thing was woven from Air and Fire, in flows so minute they made cobwebs seem cables. Even concentrating, she could barely see them. She doubted if Liandrin or any of the other Black sisters could have. A tiny, slicing flick of the Power, and the fat animal vanished, in its place the black-and-white seal on its red-lacquered stand. Moghedien, the hider, had hidden it in plain sight. Fire melted a hole in the glass, and the seal went into her pouch, too. It bulged now, and pulled her belt down.

Frowning at the woman poised on the toe of one slipper, she tried to think of some means of taking her as well. But Moghedien would not fit in her pouch, and she rather thought that even if she could pick the other woman up, the sight might raise a few eyebrows. Still, as she made her way to the nearest arched doorway, she could not help looking back every other step. If only there was some way. Pausing for one last, regretful look from the doorway, she turned to go.

This door opened onto a courtyard with a fountain full of lilypads. On the other side of the fountain, a slim, coppery-skinned woman in a pale cream Taraboner dress that would have made Rendra blush was just raising a fluted black rod a pace in length. Nynaeve recognized Jeaine Caide. More, she recognized the rod.

Desperately she flung herself to one side, so hard that she slid along the smooth white floorstones until one of the thin columns stopped her with a jar. A leg-thick bar of white shot through where she had been standing, as if the air had turned to molten metal, slicing all the way across the exhibition hall; where it struck, pieces simply vanished out of columns, priceless artifacts ceased to exist. Hurling flows of Fire behind her blindly, hoping to strike something, anything, in the courtyard, Nynaeve scrambled away across the hall on hands and knees. Little more than waist-high, the bar sawed sideways, carving a swathe through both walls; between, cases and cabinets and wired skeletons collapsed and crashed. Severed columns quivered; some fell, but what dropped onto that terrible sword did not survive to smash displays and pedestals to the floor. The glass-walled table fell before the molten shaft vanished, leaving a purplish bar that seemed burned into Nynaeve's vision; the *cuendillar* figures were all that dropped out of that molten white shaft, bouncing on the floor.

The figurines did not break, of course. It seemed Moghedien was right; not even balefire could destroy *cuendillar.* That black rod was one of the stolen *ter'angreal.* Nynaeve could remember the warning appended to their list in a firm hand. *Produces balefire. Dangerous and almost impossible to control.*

Moghedien seemed to be trying to scream through her invisible gag, head whipping back and forth in a frenzy as she fought her bonds of Air, but Nynaeve spared her no more than a glance. As soon as the balefire disappeared, she raised herself up enough to peer back across the hall, through the rent sawed along the chamber wall. Beside the fountain, Jeaine Caide was swaying, one hand to her head, the black rod almost falling from the other. But before Nynaeve could strike at her, she had clutched the fluted rod again; balefire burst from its end, destroying everything in its path through the chamber.

Dropping almost to her belly, Nynaeve crawled the other way as fast as she could, amid the crash and clatter of falling columns and masonry. Panting, she pulled herself into a corridor slashed through both walls. There was no telling how far the balefire had sliced; all the way out of the palace, perhaps. Twisting about on a carpet littered with bits of stone, she peeked cautiously around the side of the doorframe.

The balefire had gone again. Silence held in the ruined exhibition hall, except when a weakened piece of stonework gave way and smashed to the rubble-strewn floor. There was no sign of Jeaine Caide, though enough of the far wall had fallen to show the fountained courtyard clearly. She was not about to risk going to see if the *ter'angreal* had killed the woman in using it. Her breath came raggedly, and her arms and legs trembled enough that she was glad to lie there a moment. Channeling took energy the same as any other work; the more you did, the more energy. And the wearier you were, the less you could channel. She was not entirely certain she herself was up to facing even a weakened Jeaine Caide right then.

Such a fool she had been. Battling Moghedien with the Power, and never thinking that channeling that strong would have every Black sister in the palace jumping out of her skin. She was lucky the Domani woman had not arrived with her *ter'angreal* while she was still absorbed with the Forsaken. They very likely both would have died before they knew she was there.

Suddenly she stared in disbelief. Moghedien was gone! The balefire had not come nearer than ten feet from where she had stood, but she was not there any longer. It was impossible. She had been shielded.

“How do I know what's impossible?” Nynaeve muttered. “It was impossible for me to beat one of the Forsaken, but I did it.”

Still no sign of Jeaine Caide.

Pushing herself to her feet, she hurried for the appointed meeting place. If only Elayne had not run into any trouble, they might make it out here safely after all.

* * *

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CHAPTER 55

Into the Deep

Servants boiled along the halls as Nynaeve ran, shouting frantic questions. They might not be able to sense channeling, but they had certainly felt the palace being torn half apart. She threaded her way through, just one more serving woman in a panic as far as they were concerned.

Saidar faded from her as she sped down corridors and across courtyards. Holding on to anger was difficult when she was increasingly uneasy for Elayne. If the Black sisters had found her. . . . Who knew what they had beside the balefire *ter'angreal*? The list they had been given certainly did not give a use for everything.

Once she saw Liandrin, with her pale honey braids, and Rianna, with that white streak in her black hair, hurrying down a flight of broad marble stairs; she could not see the glow of *saidar* around them, but from the way servants cried out and leaped from their path, they were whipping a way clear for themselves with the Power. It made her glad she had not tried to cling to the Source herself; they would have picked her out of the throng in an instant by the glow, and until she had some rest, she was not up to facing either of them, much less both. She had what she had come for. They had to wait.

The crowd thinned and disappeared by the time she reached the narrow hall on the west side of the palace that was the meeting place. The others were waiting for her beside a small, bronze-studded door fastened with a large iron lock. Including Amathera, standing very straight, wearing a light linen cloak with the hood up. The Panarch's white dress might pass for serving-woman garb if you did not look closely enough to see it was silk, and the veil that did not hide her face was certainly servant's linen. The sound of shouts came muffled through the door. Apparently the riot was still going on. Now if only the men were doing the rest of their part.

Ignoring Egeanin, Nynaeve threw her arms around Elayne in a quick hug. “I was so worried. Did you have any trouble?”

“Not a bit,” Elayne replied. Egeanin shifted slightly, and the younger woman gave her a meaningful look, then added, “Amathera did cause a little problem, but we sorted it out.”

Nynaeve frowned. “Trouble? Why would she give trouble? Why would you give trouble?” That last was for the Panarch, who held her head high, refusing to look at anyone. Elayne seemed as reluctant.

It was the Seanchan woman who answered. “She tried to sneak off to rouse her soldiers to harry the Darkfriends out. After she had been warned.” Nynaeve refused to look at her.

“Do not scowl so, Nynaeve,” Elayne said. “I chased her down quickly, and we had a little talk. I think she is in perfect agreement with me now.”

The Panarch’s cheek twitched. “I am in agreement, Aes Sedai,” she said hastily. “I will do exactly as you say, and I will provide papers that should make even the rebels let you pass unhindered. There is no need for more . . . talking.”

Elayne nodded as if all of that made sense, motioning for the woman to be quiet. Whereupon the Panarch obediently closed her mouth. A trifle sullenly, but perhaps that was just the shape of her mouth. Clearly there had been some very odd goings on, and Nynaeve intended to find the bottom of them. Later. The narrow hallway was still empty in both directions, but panicked shouts still echoed from deeper in the palace. The mob rumbled beyond the small door.

“But what of you?” Elayne went on with a frown. “You were supposed to be here half an hour ago. Did you cause all of this? I felt two women channeling enough of the Power to shake the palace down, and then a bit later someone did try to shake it down. I thought it must be you. I had to restrain Egeanin from going to find you.”

Egeanin? Nynaeve hesitated, then made herself touch the Seanchan woman’s shoulder. “Thank you.” Egeanin looked as though she did not quite understand herself what she had done, but she gave a quick nod. “Moghedien found me, and because I was worrying about how to bring her out for trial, Jeaine Caide nearly took my head off with balefire.” Elayne gave a small squeak, and she hurried to reassure her. “It didn’t really come close to me.”

“You *captured* Moghedien? You captured one of the *Forsaken*?”

"Yes, but she got away." There. She had admitted everything. Conscious of all their eyes on her, she shifted uncomfortably. She did not like being in the wrong. She especially did not like being in the wrong when it was she who had pointed out that it was wrong in the first place. "Elayne, I know what I said about being careful, but once I had her in my hands, it seemed all I could think of was bringing her to trial." Taking a deep breath, Nynaeve made her voice apologetic. She hated doing that. Where were those fool men? "I endangered everything because I didn't keep my mind on what we were about, but please don't scold me."

"I won't," Elayne said firmly. "So long as you remember to be careful in the future." Egeanin cleared her throat. "Oh, yes," Elayne added hastily. The waiting seemed to be getting to her; there were spots of color in her cheeks. "Did you find the collar, and the seal?"

"I have them." She patted her pouch. The shouting outside seemed to be getting louder. And the shouts echoing down the halls were, too. Liandrin must be turning the palace upside down to find out what had happened. "What is keeping those men?"

"My Legion," Amathera began. Elayne looked at her, and she snapped her mouth shut. Whatever talk they had had must have been something. The Panarch was pouting like a girl afraid of being sent to bed without supper.

Nynaeve glanced at Egeanin. The Seanchan woman was watching the door intently. She had wanted to come after her. *Why won't she let me hate her? Am I so different from her?*

Suddenly the door swung open. Juilin pulled two thin bent metal rods out of the lock and straightened from a crouch. Blood ran down the side of his face. "Hurry. We must be away from here before it gets out of hand."

Staring past him wide-eyed, Nynaeve wondered what he considered out of hand. Bayle Domon's sailors, at least three hundred of them, formed a semicircle two deep about the door, Domon himself waving a cudgel, shouting to encourage them. He had to shout for the roar that filled the wide street. Men jostled and struggled and shouted in a seething mass, barely held back by the sailors' clubs and staffs. Not that they were really interested in the sailors. Scattered through the crowd, clumps of mounted Whitecloaks swung their swords at men crowding them with pitchforks and barrel staves and bare hands. Showers of stones fell around them, sometimes banging off a helmet, but silently in the uproar. A lone Whitecloak's horse suddenly screamed and reared, and toppled over backward; it scrambled to its feet quickly, minus its rider. Other riderless animals dotted the mass of men. Was this what they had set off just to cover themselves? She tried reminding herself why—put her hand on her pouch to feel the *cuendillar* seal, the collar and bracelets—but it was hard. Men were dying out there, surely.

"Will you women move?" Thom called, waving for them to come out. He had a bleeding gash over one bushy eyebrow, perhaps from a stone, and his brown cloak would not even do for the ragbag now. "If the Panarch's Legion ever stops running, this could grow messy."

Amathera made a startled sound, just before Elayne pushed her firmly out. Nynaeve and Egeanin followed, and as soon as all four women were out, the sailors folded in around them in a tight ring that began struggling away from the palace. It was all Nynaeve could do to keep her feet, jostled by the men who were trying to protect her. Once Egeanin slipped and nearly fell. Nynaeve caught her arm, helped her back up, and got a grateful grin. *We are not so different*, she thought. *Not the same, but not all that different.* She did not have to make herself smile encouragingly at the Seanchan woman.

The milling mass lasted several streets away from the palace, but once they broke clear the narrow twisting ways were almost empty. Those who were not actually involved in the riot seemed wise enough to stay clear of it. The sailors spread out a little, giving the women more room. Any straggler who looked in their direction got hard stares, though. The streets of Tanchico were still the streets of Tanchico. Somehow that surprised Nynaeve. It seemed that she had been weeks inside the palace. Surely the city should be different.

When the babble began to fade behind them, Thom managed a quite elegant bow to Amathera as he limped along. "An honor, Panarch," he said. "If I may be of any service, you have only to speak."

Shockingly, Amathera glanced at Elayne, grimaced slightly, and said, "You mistake me, good sir. I am only a poor refugee from the countryside, rescued by these good women."

Thom exchanged startled looks with Juilin and Domon, but when he opened his mouth, Elayne said, "Could we get on to the inn, Thom? This is hardly the place for conversation."

When they reached the Three Plum Court, it was scarcely less surprising to hear Elayne introduce the Panarch to Rendra as Thera, a refugee with no money who needed a pallet, and maybe some work to earn her meals. The innkeeper shrugged resignedly, but as she led “Thera” away to the kitchens she was already telling the woman what lovely hair she had and how pretty she would look in the right dress.

Nynaeve waited until the rest of them were in the Chamber of Falling Blossoms with the door closed before saying, “*Thera*? And she went along! Elayne, Rendra will have the woman serving at table in the common room!”

Elayne did not seem surprised. “Yes, very likely.” Sinking into a chair with a sigh, she kicked off her slippers and began massaging her feet vigorously. “It was not difficult to convince Amathera she should stay in hiding for a few days. It really isn’t that far from ‘The Panarch is dead’ to ‘Death to the Panarch.’ I think seeing the riot helped, too. She doesn’t want to depend on Andric to put her back on her throne; she wants her own soldiers to do it, even if it means hiding until she can get in touch with the Lord Captain of the Legion. I believe Andric is in for a surprise with her. It is too bad he doesn’t surprise *her*. She deserves it.” Domon and Juilin exchanged glances, shook their heads uncomprehendingly. Egeanin nodded to herself as if she, at least, understood, and approved.

“But why?” Nynaeve demanded. “You may have been upset because she sneaked off on her own, but this? How did she manage that anyway, with two of you watching her?” Egeanin’s eyes flickered toward Elayne, so quickly Nynaeve was not sure she had really seen it.

Elayne bent to rub the sole of one foot. It must have hurt; there was red in her cheeks. “Nynaeve, the woman has no idea what the lives of the common people are like.” As if she did! “She does seem to have a true concern for justice—I think she does—yet it did not bother her at all that there was enough food in the palace for a year. I mentioned the soup kitchens, and she did not know what I was talking about! A few days working for her supper will do her good.” Stretching her legs under the table, she worked her bare toes. “Oh, that does feel good. Not that she’ll have many, I suppose. Not if she is to rally the Panarch’s Legion to pry Liandrin and the others out of the palace. A pity, but there it is.”

“Well, she has to,” Nynaeve told her firmly. It was good to sit down, though she could not understand the girl’s concern with her feet. They had hardly walked at all today. “And the sooner the better. We need the Panarch, and not in Rendra’s kitchen.” She did not think there was any need to worry about Moghedien. That woman had had every opportunity to come into the open, after she had freed herself. That still puzzled her; she must have been careless in tying off the shield. But if Moghedien had been unwilling to face her then, when she must have known Nynaeve was nearly exhausted, she could not think the woman would come after them. Not for something she seemed to think was not worth very much. The same did not apply to Liandrin, however. If Liandrin figured out half of what had happened, she *would* be hunting them.

"The justice of the Daughter-Heir," Thom murmured, "may yet supersede the justice of the Panarch. There were men streaming in through that door as we left, and I think some had already got in the front. I saw smoke coming out of several windows. By tonight, little more than a fire-gutted ruin will remain. No need for soldiers to chase the Black Ajah, and thus 'Thera' can have her few days to learn the lesson you want to teach. You will make a fine queen one day, Elayne of Andor."

Elayne's pleased smile faded as she looked at him. Rising to pad around the table, she rummaged in his coat pockets for a kerchief and began dabbing blood from his forehead despite his protests. "Hold still," she told him, sounding for all the world like a mother tending an unruly child.

"Could we at least see what we risked our necks for?" he said when it became clear Elayne was going to do exactly as she wished.

Opening her belt pouch, Nynaeve laid the contents out on the table, the black-and-white disc that helped hold the Dark One's prison shut, the collar and bracelets that sent ripples of sorrow through her before she could lay them down. Everyone gathered close to stare.

Domon fingered the seal. "I did own a thing like this once."

Nynaeve doubted it. Only seven had been made. Three were broken now, *cuendillar* or no. Another was in Moiraine's hands. Four surviving. How well could four keep that prison at Shayol Ghul locked? A shivery thought.

Egeanin touched the collar, pushed the bracelets away from the collar. If she felt the emotions trapped in them, she did not show it. Perhaps that sensitivity came only with the ability to channel. "It is not an *a'dam*," the Seanchan woman said. "That is made of a silvery metal, and all of one piece."

Nynaeve wished she had not mentioned *a'dam*. *But she never wore the bracelet of one. And she did let that poor woman she told us about go. Poor woman.* She—*this Bethamin—was the one who controlled women with an* a’dam. Egeanin had showed more mercy than Nynaeve would have. “It is as least as much like an *a’dam* as you and I are alike, Egeanin.” The woman looked startled, but after a moment she nodded. Not so different. Two women, each doing the best she could.

“Do you mean to keep on pursuing Liandrin?” Juilin seated himself, arms folded on the table, studying the things there. “Whether or not she is chased out of Tanchico, she is still out there. And the others. But these seem too important to leave lying about. I am only a thief-catcher, but I would say these must be taken to the White Tower for safekeeping.”

“No!” Nynaeve was startled at her own vehemence. So were the others, by the way they stared at her. Slowly she picked up the seal and replaced it in her pouch. “This goes to the Tower. But that. . . .” She did not want to touch the black things again. If those were in the Tower, Aes Sedai might decide to use them just as the Black Ajah had intended to. To control Rand. Would Moiraine? Siuan Sanche? She would not take the chance. “That is too dangerous to risk it ever falling back into the hands of Darkfriends. Elayne, can you destroy them? Melt them. I don’t care if they burn through the table. Just destroy them!”

“I see what you mean,” Elayne said with a grimace. Nynaeve doubted she did—Elayne believed in the Tower wholeheartedly—but she believed in Rand, too.

Nynaeve could not see the glow of *saidar*, of course, but the intent way the girl stared at the vile objects told her she was channeling. The bracelets and necklace lay there. Elayne frowned; her stare became more intent. Abruptly she shook her head. Her hand poised hesitantly for a moment, close to one of the bracelets, before picking it up. And dropped it again, with a gasp. “It feels. . . . It’s full of. . . .” Drawing a deep breath, she said, “I did what you asked, Nynaeve. A hammer would be burning a puddle for the Fire I wove into it, but it isn’t even warm.”

So Moghedien had not lied. Doubtless she had thought there was no need, that she would surely win. *How* did *the woman get loose*? But what to do with the things? She was not going to let them fall into *anyone’s* hands.

“Master Domon, do you know a very deep part of the sea?”

“I do, Mistress al’Meara,” he said slowly.

Gingerly, trying not to feel the emotions, Nynaeve shoved the collar and bracelets across the table to him. “Then drop these into it, where no one can ever fish them out again.”

After a moment, he nodded. “I will.” He stuffed them into his coat pocket hurriedly, clearly disliking to touch something that must have to do with the Power. “In the deepest part of the sea I do know, near the Aile Somera.”

Egeanin was frowning at the floor, no doubt thinking about the Illianer leaving. Nynaeve had not forgotten the woman calling him “a properly set-up man.” She herself felt like laughing. It was all but done. As soon as Domon could sail, the hateful collar and bracelets would be gone forever. They could leave for Tar Valon. And then. . . . Then back to Tear, or wherever al’Lan Mandragoran was. Facing Moghedien, realizing how close she had been to being killed or worse, only made her urgency to deal with him greater. A man she had to share with a woman she hated, but if Egeanin could look fondly on a man she once took prisoner—and Domon was certainly eyeing her with interest—and if Elayne could love a man who would go mad, then she could puzzle out some way to enjoy what she could have of Lan.

“Shall we go downstairs and see how ‘Thera’ is taking to being a servant?” she suggested. Soon for Tar Valon. Soon.

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CHAPTER 56

Goldeneyes

The common room of the Winespring Inn was silent but for the scratch of Perrin’s pen. Silent, and empty but for him and Aram. Late-morning light made small pools beneath the windows. No cooking smells came from the kitchen; there were no fires lit anywhere in the village, and even coals banked in ashes had been doused. No point in giving the gift of fire easy to hand. The Tinker—he sometimes wondered whether it was proper to think of Aram that way any longer, but a man could not stop being what he was, sword or no—stood against the wall by the front door, watching Perrin. What did the man expect? What did he want? Dipping his pen in the small stone ink jar, Perrin set aside the third sheet of paper and began a fourth.

Pushing through the door, bow in hand, Ban al’Seen rubbed an uneasy finger up and down his big nose. “The Aiel are back,” he said quietly, but his feet moved as if he could not make them be still. “Trollocs coming, from north and south. Thousands of them, Lord Perrin.”

“Don’t call me that,” Perrin said absently, frowning at the page. He had no way with words. He certainly did not know how to say things in the fancy way women liked. All he could was write what he felt. Dipping the pen again, he added a few lines.

> *I will not ask your forgiveness for what I did. I do not know if you could give it, but I will not ask. You are more precious to me than life. Never think I have abandoned you. When the sun shines on you, it is my smile. When you hear the breeze stir through the apple blossoms, it is my whisper that I love you. My love is yours forever.*
>
> *Perrin*

For a moment he studied what he had written. It did not say enough, but it would have to do. He did not have the right words any more than he had time.

Carefully blotting the damp ink with sand, he folded the pages together. He very nearly wrote “Faile Bashere” on the outside before making it “Faile Aybara.” He realized he did not even know if a wife took her husband’s name in Saldaea; there were places where they did not. Well, she had married him in the Two Rivers; she would have to put up with Two Rivers customs.

He placed the letter in the middle of the mantel over the fireplace—perhaps it would reach her eventually—and adjusted the wide red marriage ribbon behind his collar so it hung down his lapels properly. He was supposed to wear it for seven days, an announcement to everyone who saw him that he was newly wed. “I will try,” he told the letter softly. Faile had tried to tie one in his beard; he wished he had let her.

“Pardon, Lord Perrin?” Ban said, still shifting his feet anxiously. “I didn’t hear.” Aram was chewing his lip, his eyes wide and frightened.

“Time to see to the day’s work,” Perrin said. Perhaps the letter would reach her. Somehow. He took his bow from the table and slung it on his back. Axe and quiver already hung at his belt. “And don’t call me that!”

In front of the inn, the Companions were gathered on their horses, Wil al’Seen with that fool wolfhead banner, the long staff resting on his stirrup iron. How long since Wil had refused to carry the thing? The survivors of those who had joined him the first day jealously guarded the right, now. Wil, with his bow on his back and a sword at his hip, looked proud as an idiot.

As Ban scrambled into his saddle, Perrin heard him say, “The man is as cool as a winter pond. Like ice. Maybe it won’t be so bad today.” He barely paid attention. The women were gathered on the Green.

They made a circle five or six deep around the tall pole where the larger red wolfhead flapped out in a breeze. Five or six deep, shoulder to shoulder, with polearms made from scythes and pitchforks, and wood-axes, and even stout kitchen knives and cleavers. Throat tight, he mounted Stepper and rode toward them. The children were a tight mass inside the circle of women. All the children in Emond’s Field.

Riding slowly along the ranks, he felt the women’s eyes following him, and the children’s. Fear scent, and worry; the children showed it on their too-pale faces, but all smelled of it. He reined in where Marin al'Vere and Daise Congar and the rest of the Women's Circle stood together. Alsbet Luhhan had one of her husband's hammers on her shoulder, and her Whitecloak helmet acquired the night of her rescue sat slightly crooked because of her thick braid. Neysa Ayellin held a long-bladed carving knife firm in her hand, and had two more stuck behind her belt.

"We have planned this out," Daise said, looking up at him as if she expected an argument and did not intend to allow it. She held a pitchfork, fastened to a pole nearly three feet taller than she, upright in front of her. "If the Trollocs break through anywhere, you men are going to be busy, so we will take the children out. The older ones know what to do, and they've all played hide-and-seek in the woods. Just to keep them safe until they can come out."

The older ones. Boys and girls of thirteen and fourteen had toddlers strapped on their backs, and held smaller children by the hand. Girls older than that stood in the ranks with the women; Bode Cauthon had a wood-axe gripped in both hands, her sister Eldrin a boar spear with a broad point. Boys older were out with the men, or up on the thatched rooftops with their bows. The Tinkers were in with the children. Perrin glanced down at Aram, standing by his stirrup. They would not fight, but each adult had two babes fastened on his or her back and another cradled in the crook of an elbow. Raen and Ila, each with an arm around the other, would not look at him. Just to keep them safe until they could come out.

"I'm sorry." He had to stop and clear his throat. He had not meant it to come to this. Think as hard as he could, nothing else came that he could have done. Even giving himself to the Trollocs would not have stopped them killing and burning. The end would have been the same. "It was not fair, what I did with Faile, but I had to. Please understand that. I had to."

"Don't be silly, Perrin," Alsbet said, voice emphatic but round face smiling warmly. "I can never abide it when you're silly. Do you think we would expect you to do any different?"

A heavy cleaver in one hand, Marin reached up to pat his knee with the other. "Any man worth cooking a meal for would have done the same."

"Thank you." Light, but he sounded hoarse. In a minute he would be snuffling like a girl. But for some reason he could not smooth his voice. They must think him an idiot. "Thank you. I shouldn't have fooled you, but she'd not have gone if she suspected."

"Oh, Perrin." Marin laughed. She actually laughed, with all they faced, and smelling of fear as she did; he wished he had half her courage. "We knew what you were up to before you ever put her on her horse, and I am not sure she didn't as well. Women do find themselves doing what they don't want just to please you men. Now you go on and do what you have to. This is Women's Circle business," she added firmly.

Somehow he managed to smile back at her. "Yes, mistress," he said, knuckling his forehead. "Beg pardon. I know enough to keep my nose out of that." The women around her laughed in soft amusement as he turned Stepper away.

Ban and Tell were riding right behind him, he realized, with the rest of the Companions strung out after Wil and the banner. He motioned the pair to come up beside him. "If things go badly today," he said when they were on either side of him, "the Companions are to come back here and help the women."

"But—"

He cut Tell's protest short. "You do what I say! If it goes wrong, you get the women and children out! You hear me?" They nodded; reluctantly, but they did it.

"What about you?" Ban asked quietly.

Perrin ignored him. "Aram, you stick with the Companions."

Striding along between Stepper and Tell's shaggy horse, the Tinker did not even look up. "I go where you go." He said it simply, but his tone left no room for argument; he was going to do as he wanted whatever Perrin said. Perrin wondered if real lords ever had problems like this.

At the west end of the Green, the Whitecloaks were all mounted, cloaks with the golden sunburst bright, helmets and armor gleaming, lance points shining, a long column of fours that stretched back between the nearest houses. They must have spent half the night polishing. Dain Bornhald and Jaret Byar swung their horses to face Perrin. Bornhald sat straight in his saddle, but he smelled of apple brandy. Byar's gaunt face twisted with an even deeper rage than usual as he stared at Perrin.

"I thought you would be at your places by now," Perrin said.

Bornhald frowned at his horse's mane, not answering. After a moment, Byar spat, "We are leaving here, Shadowspawn." An angry mutter rose from the Companions, but the hollow-eyed man ignored them as he did

Aram's reaching over his shoulder to his sword hilt. "We will cut our way back to Watch Hill through your friends and rejoin the rest of our men."

Leaving. Over four hundred soldiers, leaving. Whitecloaks, but mounted soldiers, not farmers, soldiers who had agreed—Bornhald had agreed!—to support the Two Rivers men wherever the fighting was hottest. If Emond's Field was to have any chance at all, he had to hang on to these men. Stepper tossed his head and snorted as if catching his rider's mood. "Do you still believe I'm a Darkfriend, Bornhald? How many attacks have you seen so far? Those Trollocs have tried to kill me as much as anybody else."

Bornhald raised his head slowly, eyes haunted and at the same time half-glazed. Hands in steel-backed gauntlets flexed on his reins unconsciously. "Do you think I do not know by now that these defenses were prepared without you? It was none of your doing, yes? I will not keep my men here to watch you feed your own villagers to the Trollocs. Will you dance atop a pile of their bodies when it is done, Shadowspawn? Not ours! I mean to live long enough to see you brought to justice!"

Perrin patted Stepper's neck to quiet the stallion. He had to keep these men. "You want me? Very well. When it's over, when the Trollocs are done, I'll not resist if you try to arrest me."

"No!" Ban and Tell shouted together, and growls built behind them from the others. Aram peered up at Perrin, stricken.

"An empty promise," Bornhald sneered. "You mean everyone to die here save yourself!"

"You'll never know if you run away, will you?" Perrin made his voice hard and contemptuous. "I will keep my promise, but if you run, you might never find me again. Run, if you want! Run, and try to forget what happens here! All your talk of protecting people from Trollocs. How many died at Trolloc hands after you came? My family wasn't the first, and certainly not the last. Run! Or stay, if you can remember you're men. If you need to find the courage, look at the women, Bornhald. Any one of them is braver than the whole lot of you Whitecloaks!"

Bornhald shook as though every word were a blow; Perrin thought the man might fall out of his saddle. Swaying upright, Bornhald stared at him. "We will remain," he said hoarsely.

"But, my Lord Bornhald," Byar protested.

“Clean!” Bornhald roared at him. “If we must die here, we will die clean!” He wrenched his head back to Perrin, spittle on his lips. “We will remain. But at the last I will see you dead, Shadowspawn! For *my* family, for *my* father, I—will—see—you—*dead*!” Sawing his horse around roughly, he cantered back to his white-cloaked column. Byar bared his teeth in a wordless snarl at Perrin before following.

“You do not mean to keep that promise?” Aram said anxiously. “You cannot.”

“I have to check everyone,” Perrin said. Small chance he would live long enough to keep it. “There isn’t much time.” He booted Stepper in the flanks and the horse leaped forward, toward the west end of the village.

Behind the sharp stakes facing the Westwood, men crouched with their spears and halberds and polearms fashioned by Haral Luhhan, who was there in his blacksmith’s vest with a scythe blade on the end of an eight-foot shaft. Behind them stood the men with bows in ranks broken by four catapults, Abell Cauthon walking along slowly to speak to each man.

Perrin reined in beside Abell. “Word is they’re coming from north and south,” he said quietly, “but keep a sharp eye.”

“We’ll watch. And I’m ready to send half my men wherever they are needed. They’ll not find Two Rivers folk easy meat.” Abell’s grin was reminiscent of his son’s.

To Perrin’s embarrassment, the men raised a ragged cheer as he rode by, with the Companions and the banner at his heels: “Goldeneyes! Goldeneyes!” and now and then a “Lord Perrin!” He knew he should have stamped harder on that in the beginning.

To the south, Tam had charge, more grim-faced than Abell and striding almost like a Warder, hand resting on his sword hilt. That wolfish, deadly grace looked strange on the blocky, gray-haired farmer. Yet his words to Perrin were not so different from Abell’s. “We Two Rivers folk are a tougher lot than most know,” he said quietly. “Don’t you worry we will not do ourselves proud today.”

Alanna was at one of the six catapults here, fussing over a large stone being lifted into the cup on the end of the thick arm. Ihvon sat his horse near her in his Warder’s color-changing cloak, slender as a steel blade and alert as a hawk; there was no doubt he had chosen his ground—wherever Alanna was—and his fight—to bring her out alive whatever. He barely looked at Perrin. But the Aes Sedai paused, hands hovering over the stone, eyes following him as he passed. He could all but feel her weighing and measuring and judging. Those cheers followed him, too.

Where the hedge of stakes ran beyond the few houses east of the Winespring Inn, Jon Thane and Samel Crawe had charge between them. Perrin told them what he had Abell, and once again got much the same reply. Jon, in a mail shirt with holes rusted through in several places, had seen the smoke of his mill burning, and Samel, with his horse face and long nose, was sure he had seen the smoke of his farm. Neither expected an easy day, but both wore stony determination like cloaks.

It was to the north that Perrin had decided to make his fight. Fingering the ribbon hanging down one lapel, he peered in the direction of Watch Hill, the direction Faile had gone, and wondered why he had chosen the northside. *Fly free, Faile. Fly free, my heart.* He supposed it was good a place to die as any.

Bran supposedly was in charge here, in his steel cap and disc-sewn metal jerkin, but he stopped checking the men along the hedge to give Perrin as much of a bow as his girth would allow. Gaul and Chiad stood ready, heads wrapped in *shoufa* and faces hidden to the eyes behind black veils. Side by side, Perrin noted; whatever had passed between them, it seemed to outweigh their clans' blood feud. Loial had a pair of wood-axes, dwarfed in his huge hands; his tufted ears thrust forward fiercely, and his wide face was grim.

Do you think I would run away? he had said when Perrin suggested he could slip off into the night after Faile. His ears had dropped with weariness and hurt. *I came with you, Perrin, and I will stay until you go.* And then he had laughed suddenly, a deep booming sound that almost rattled the dishes. *Perhaps someone will even tell a story of me, one day. We do not go in for such things, but there could be an Ogier hero, I suppose. A joke, Perrin. I made a joke. Laugh. Come, we will tell each other jokes, and laugh, and think of Faile flying free.*

"It is no joke, Loial," Perrin murmured as he rode along the lines of men, trying not to listen to their cheers. "You are a hero whether you want to be or not." The Ogier gave him a tight, wide-mouthed grin before setting his eyes back on the cleared ground beyond the hedge. White-striped sticks marked hundred-pace intervals out to five hundred; beyond that lay quilted fields, tabac and barley, most trampled in earlier attacks, and hedges and low stone fences, and copses of leatherleaf, pine and oak.

So many faces Perrin knew in those waiting ranks of men. Stout Eward Candwin and lantern-jawed Paet al'Caar with spears. White-haired Buel Dowtry, the fletcher, stood with the bowmen, of course. There was stocky, gray-haired Jac al'Seen and his bald cousin Wit, and gnarled Flann Lewin, a lanky beanpole like all of his male kin. Jaim Torfinn and Hu Marwin, among the first to ride after him; they had felt too uncomfortable to join the Companions, as if missing the ambush in the Waterwood had opened some gap between them and the others. Elam Dowtry, and Dav Ayellin, and Ewin Finngar. Hari Coplin and his brother Darl, and old Bili Congar. Berin Thane, the miller's brother, and fat Athan Dearn, and Kevrim al'Azar, whose grandsons had grown sons, and Tuck Padwhin, the carpenter, and. . . .

Making himself stop counting them, Perrin rode to where Verin stood beside one of the catapults under the watchful eye of Tomas on his gray. The plump, brown-clad Aes Sedai studied Aram a moment before turning her birdlike gaze up to Perrin, one eyebrow raised as if to question why he was bothering her.

"I am a little surprised to see you and Alanna still here," he told her. "Hunting girls who can learn to channel can't be worth getting killed. Or keeping a string tied to a *ta'veren*, either."

"Is that what we are doing?" Folding her hands at her waist, she tilted her head to one side thoughtfully. "No," she said at last, "I do not think we could go quite yet. You are a very interesting study, as much as Rand, in your own way. And young Mat. Could I only split myself into three, I would latch one onto each of you and follow you every moment of the day and night even if I had to marry you."

"I already have a wife." It felt odd, saying that. Odd, and good. He had a wife, and she was safe.

She shattered his moment of reverie. "Yes, you do. But you do not know what marrying Zarine Bashere means, do you?" She reached up to turn his axe in its loop on his belt, studying it. "When are you going to give this up for the hammer?"

Staring at the Aes Sedai, he reined Stepper back a pace, pulling the axe out of her hands, before he knew it. What marrying Faile *meant*? Give up the axe? What did she mean? What did she know?

"ISAM!" The guttural roar rose like thunder, and Trollocs appeared, each half again as tall as a man and twice as wide, trotting into the fields to halt beyond bowshot, a hulking, blackmailed mass, deep and stretching the length of the village. Thousands of them packed together, huge faces distorted by beaks and snouts, heads with horns or feathered crests, spikes at elbows and shoulders, scythe-curved swords and spiked axes, hooked spears and barbed tridents, a seemingly endless sea of cruel weapons. Behind them, Myrddraal galloped up and down on midnight horses, raven-black cloaks hanging undisturbed as they whirled their mounts.

"ISAM!"

"Interesting," Verin murmured.

Perrin would not have thought that was the word. This was the first time the Trollocs had shouted anything understandable. Not that he had any idea what it meant.

Smoothing his marriage ribbon, he forced himself to ride calmly to the center of the Two Rivers line. The Companions formed behind him, the breeze lifting the banner with its red wolfhead. Aram had his sword out in both hands. "Be ready!" Perrin called. His voice was steady; he could not believe it.

"ISAM!" And the black tide rolled forward, howling wordlessly.

Faile was safe. Nothing else mattered. He would not let himself see the faces of the men stretched out to either side of him. He heard the same howls drifting from the south. Both sides at once. They had never tried that before. Faile was safe. "At four hundred paces . . . !" All along the ranks, bows rose together. Closer the howling mass came, long thick legs eating ground. Closer. "Loose!"

The snap of bowstrings was lost in the Trolloc roar, but a goose-fletched hail streaked the sky as it arced out, plunged down into the black-mailed horde. Stones from the catapults erupted in fiery balls and sharp splinters in those seething ranks. Trollocs fell. Perrin saw them go down, trampled beneath boots and hooves. Even some Myrddraal fell. Yet the tidal wave rushed on, closing holes and gaps, apparently undiminished.

There was no need to order another volley. A second followed the first as quickly as men could nock arrows, a second rain of broadhead points rising before the first dropped, the third following behind, the fourth, the fifth. Fire exploded among the Trollocs as fast as the catapult arms could be winched down, Verin galloping from catapult to catapult to lean down from her saddle. And the huge bellowing forms came on, crying in no language

Perrin understood, but crying for blood, human blood and flesh. Men crouching behind the stakes readied themselves, hefting their weapons.

Perrin felt cold inside. He could see the ground behind the Trolloc charge already littered with their dead and dying, yet it hardly seemed they were fewer. Stepper pranced nervously, but he could not hear the dun's whicker for the rolling howls of Trollocs. The axe came into his hand smoothly, long half-moon blade and thick spike catching the sunlight. Not midday yet. *My heart is yours forever, Faile.* This time, he did not think the stakes would . . .

Not even slowing, the front rank of Trollocs ran onto the sharp stakes, faces contorted by snouts or beaks twisting with pained shrieks, howling as they were impaled, driven down by more huge shapes scrambling up over their backs, some of those falling among the stakes, replaced by more, always more. One last volley of arrows drove home at point-blank range, and then it was the spears and halberds and home-made polearms, thrusting and stabbing at towering forms in black mail, sometimes falling while the bowmen shot as best they could at the inhuman faces above their friends' heads, boys shooting down from the rooftops as well, madness and death and earsplitting roars and screams and howls. Slowly, inexorably, the Two Rivers line bulged inward at a dozen places. If it broke, anywhere. . . .

"Fall back!" Perrin bellowed. A boar-snouted Trolloc, already bleeding, forced its way through the ranks of men, shrieking and striking with its thick, curved sword. Perrin's axe split its head to the snout. Stepper was trying to rear, screaming silently in the din. "Fall back!" Darl Coplin went down, clutching a thigh transfixed by a wrist-thick spear; old Bili Congar tried to drag him backward while awkwardly wielding a boar spear; Hari Coplin swung his halberd in defense of his brother, mouth wide in a seemingly soundless shout. "Fall back between the houses!"

He was not sure whether others heard and passed the order, or the mountainous weight of Trollocs simply pressed in, but slowly, one grudging step at a time, the humans moved back. Loial swung his bloodied axes like mallets, wide mouth snarling. Beside the Ogier, Bran thrust his spear grimly; he had lost his steel cap, and blood ran in his fringe of gray hair. From his stallion Tomas carved a space around Verin; hair in wild disarray, she had lost her horse; balls of fire streaked from her hands, and every Trolloc struck exploded in flames as if soaked in oil. Not enough to hold. The Two Rivers men edged back, jostling around Stepper. Gaul and Chiad fought back-to-back; she had only one spear left, and he slashed and stabbed with his heavy knife. Back. To west and east men had curved out from the defenses there to keep the Trollocs from flanking them, pouring arrows in. Not enough. Back.

Suddenly a huge ram-horned shape was trying to pull Perrin out of the saddle, trying to climb up after him. Thrashing, Stepper went down under the combined weight. Leg pinned and pained near to breaking, Perrin struggled to bring his axe around, to fight hands bigger than an Ogier's away from his throat. The Trolloc screamed as Aram's sword sliced into its neck. Even as it collapsed atop Perrin, spraying blood, the Tinker spun smoothly to run another Trolloc through the middle.

Grunting with pain, Perrin kicked his way clear, aided by Stepper scrambling to his feet, but there was no time to think of remounting. He barely rolled aside as a black horse's hooves stamped where his head had been. Pale, eyeless face snarling, the Fade leaned from its saddle as he tried to rise, dead-black sword slashing, brushing his hair as he dropped. Ruthlessly he swung his axe, chopping one of the horse's legs out from under it. Horse and rider toppled together; as they fell, he buried his axe where the Halfman's eyes should have been.

He wrenched the blade free in time to see Daise Congar's pitchfork tines take a goat-snouted Trolloc in the throat. It seized the long shaft with one hand, stabbing a barbed spear at her with the other, but Marin al'Vere calmly hamstrung it with one blow of her cleaver; the leg gave way, and she just as coolly severed the Trolloc's spine at the base of its neck. Another Trolloc lifted Bode Cauthon into the air by her braid; mouth wide in a terrified scream, she sank her wood-axe into its mailed shoulder just as her sister, Eldrin, thrust her boar spear through its chest and gray-braided Neysa Ayellin drove a thick butchering knife in as well.

All up and down the line, as far as Perrin could see, the women were there. Their numbers were the only reason the line still held, almost driven back against the houses. Women among the men, shoulder to shoulder; some no more than girls, but then, some of those "men" had never shaved yet. Some never would. Where were the Whitecloaks? *The children!* If the women were here, there was no one to get the children out. *Where are the bloody Whitecloaks?* If they came now, at least they might buy another few minutes. A few minutes to get the children away.

A boy, the same dark-haired runner who had come for him the night before, seized his arm as he turned to search for the Companions. The Companions had to try to cut a way out for the children. He would send them, and do what he could here. “Lord Perrin!” the boy shouted at him through the deafening din. “Lord Perrin!”

Perrin tried to shake him off, then snatched him up kicking under one arm; he belonged with the other children. Split up, in tight ranks stretching from house to house, Ban and Tell and the other Companions were shooting from their saddles, over the heads of the men and women. Wil had driven the banner’s staff into the ground so he could work his bow, too. Somehow, Tell had managed to catch up Stepper; the dun’s reins were tied to Tell’s saddle. The boy could go on Stepper’s back.

“Lord Perrin! Please listen! Master al’Thor says somebody’s attacking the Trollocs! Lord Perrin!”

Perrin was halfway to Tell, hobbling on his bruised leg, when it penetrated. He stuffed the axe haft through his belt to hoist the boy up in front of his face by the shoulders. “Attacking them? Who?”

“I don’t know, Lord Perrin. Master al’Thor said to tell you he thought he heard somebody shouting ‘Deven Ride.’ ”

Aram grabbed Perrin’s arm, wordlessly pointing with his bloody sword. Perrin turned in time to see a hail of arrows plunge into the Trollocs. From the north. Another flight was already rising toward the top of its arc.

“Go back to the other children,” he said, setting the boy down. He had to be up where he could see. “Go! You did well, boy!” he added as he ran awkwardly for Stepper. The little fellow scampered back into the village grinning. Every step sent a jolt of pain up Perrin’s leg; maybe the thing *was* broken. He had no time to worry about that.

Seizing the reins Tell tossed him, he hauled himself up into his saddle. And wondered if he was seeing what he wanted to see instead of what was really there.

Beneath a red-eagle banner at the edge of where the fields had been stood long rows of men in farmer’s clothes, shooting their bows methodically. And beside the banner, Faile sat Swallow’s saddle, Bain at her stirrup. It had to be Bain behind that black veil, and he could see Faile’s face clearly. She looked excited, fearful, terrified and exuberant. She looked beautiful.

Myrddraal were trying to turn some of the Trollocs around, trying to lead a charge against the Watch Hill men, but it was useless. Even Trollocs who did turn went down before they covered fifty strides. A Fade and its horse fell, not to arrows, but to panicked Trolloc hands and spears. It was the Trollocs moving back now, then running in a frenzy, fleeing shots from both sides once the Emond's Field men had room to lift bows, too, Trollocs falling, Myrddraal going down. It was a slaughter, but Perrin hardly saw. Faile.

The same boy appeared at his stirrup. "Lord Perrin!" he shouted. To be heard above cheering now, men and women shouting for joy and relief as the last Trollocs who had not made it out of bow range fell. Not many had, Perrin believed, but he was barely able to think. Faile. The boy tugged at his breeches' leg. "Lord Perrin! Master al'Thor said to tell you the Trollocs are breaking! And they *are* shouting 'Deven Ride'! The men, I mean. I heard them!"

Perrin bent to ruffle the boy's curly hair. "What's your name, lad?"

"Jaim Aybara, Lord Perrin. I'm your cousin, I think. Sort of, anyway."

Perrin squeezed his eyes shut for a moment to keep the tears in. Even when he opened them his hand still trembled on the lad's head. "Well, Cousin Jaim, you tell your children about today. You tell your grandchildren, your grandchildren's children."

"I'm not going to have any," Jaim said stoutly. "Girls are horrible. They laugh at you, and they don't like to do anything worth doing, and you never understand what they're saying."

"I think one day you'll find out they're the opposite of horrible. Some of it won't change, but that will." Faile.

Jaim looked doubtful, but then he brightened, a wide grin spreading across his face. "Wait till I tell Had Lord Perrin called me cousin!" And he darted away to tell Had, who would have children, too, and all the other boys who would, one day. The sun stood straight overhead. An hour, maybe. It had all taken no more than an hour. It felt like a lifetime.

Stepper moved forward, and he realized he must have dug his heels in. Cheering people made way for the dun, and he hardly heard them. There were great gaps where Trollocs had broken down the stakes with sheer weight of numbers. He rode through one over a mound of dead Trollocs and never noticed. Dead Trollocs bristling with arrows carpeted the open ground, and here and there a pincushioned Fade flailed and thrashed. He saw none of it. He had eyes for only one thing. Faile.

She started out from the Watch Hill men, pausing to stop Bain from following, and rode to meet him. She rode so gracefully, as if the black mare were part of her, slimly erect, guiding Swallow more with her knees than the reins held so casually in one hand. The red marriage ribbon still twined through her hair, the ends dangling past her shoulders. He must find her flowers.

For a moment those tilted eyes studied him, her mouth. . . . Surely she could not be uncertain, but she smelled it. “I said I would go,” she said finally, holding her head high. Swallow danced sideways, neck arched, and Faile mastered the mare without seeming to notice. “I did not say how far. You cannot say I did.”

He could not say anything. She was so beautiful. He just wanted to look at her, to see her, beautiful, alive, with him. Her scent was clean sweat with just the slightest hint of herbal soap. He was not sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry. Maybe both. He wanted to pull all the smell of her into his lungs.

Frowning, she went on. “They were ready, Perrin. Truly, they were. I barely had to say anything to convince them to come. The Trollocs had hardly bothered them at all, but they could see the smoke. We traveled hard, Bain and I, and reached Watch Hill well before first light, and we started back as soon as the sun rose.” Her frown became a wide smile, eager and proud. Such a beautiful smile. Her dark eyes sparkled. “They followed me, Perrin. They followed me! Even Tenobia has never led men in battle. She wanted to once, when I was eight, but Father had a talk with her alone in her chambers, and when he rode off to the Blight she stayed behind.” With a rueful grin, she added, “I think you and he use the same methods sometimes. Tenobia exiled him, but she was only sixteen, and the Council of Lords managed to change her mind after a few weeks. She will be blue with envy when I tell her.” Again she paused, this time drawing a deep breath and planting a fist on her hip. “Aren’t you going to say anything?” she demanded impatiently. “Are you just going to sit there like a hairy lump? I did not say I would leave the Two Rivers. You said that, not I. You’ve no right to be angry because I did not do what I never promised! And you trying to send me away because you thought you were going to die! I came back to—”

"I love you." It was all he could say, but strangely it seemed to be enough. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than she reined Swallow close enough to throw an arm around him and press her face against his chest; she seemed to be trying to squeeze him in two. He stroked her dark hair gently, just feeling the silkiness of it, just feeling her.

"I was so afraid I would be too late," she said into his coat. "The Watch Hill men marched as fast as they could, but when we arrived, and I saw the Trollocs fighting right in among the houses, so many of them, as if the village were being buried in an avalanche, and I couldn't see you. . . ." She drew a shivering breath and let it out slowly. When she spoke again, her voice was calmer. Just. "Did the men from Deven Ride come?"

He gave a start, and his hand stopped stroking. "Yes, they did. How did you know? Did you arrange that, too?" She began shaking; it took him a moment to know she was laughing.

"No, my heart, though I would have if I could. When that man came with his message—'We are coming'—I thought—hoped—that that was what it meant." Pulling her face back a little, she looked up at him seriously. "I could not tell you, Perrin. I could not raise your hopes when I only suspected. It would have been too cruel if. . . . Don't be angry with me, Perrin."

Laughing, he lifted her out of her saddle and set her sideways in front of his; she laughed her protests, and stretched across the high pommel to put both arms around him. "I will never, ever be angry with you, I sw—" She cut him off with a hand over his mouth.

"Mother says the worst thing Father ever did to her was vow never to be angry with her. It took her a year to force him to take it back, and she says he was hardly fit to live with long before then from holding in. You *will* be angry with me, Perrin, and I with you. If you want to make me another wedding vow, vow you will not hide it when you are. I cannot deal with what you will not let me see, my husband. My husband," she repeated in a satisfied tone, snuggling against him. "I do like the sound of that."

He noticed she did not say she would always let him know when *she* was angry; on past experience, he would have to discover it the hard way at least half the time. And she made no promises not to keep secrets from him again, either. Right then, it did not matter so long as she was with him. "I will let you know when I'm angry, my wife," he promised. She gave him a slanted look, as if she was not sure how to take that. *You won't ever come to understand them, Cousin Jaim, but you won't care.*

Abruptly he became aware of the dead Trollocs all around him, like a black field full of feathered weeds, the thrashing Myrddraal still refusing to die finally. Slowly he turned Stepper. A slaughter yard and a shambles of Shadowspawn stretching for hundreds of paces in every direction. Crows hopped across the ground already, and vultures soared overhead in a huge milling cloud. No ravens, though. And the same to the south, according to Jaim; he could see the vultures wheeling beyond the village for proof. Not enough to repay for Deselle or Adora or little Paet or. . . . Not enough; it would never be enough. Nothing could ever repay for them. He hugged Faile; hard enough to make her grunt, but when he tried to ease up, she put her hands on his arms, gripping just as hard to keep them where they were. She was enough.

People were streaming out of Emond's Field, Bran limping and using his spear for a staff, Marin smiling with an arm around him, Daise being hugged by her husband, Wit, and Gaul and Chiad hand in hand with their veils down. Loial's ears drooped wearily, and Tam had blood on his face, and Flann Lewin was standing only with the help of his wife, Adine; there was blood on nearly everyone, and hasty bandages. But they came out in a widening throng, Elam and Dav, Ewin and Aram, Eward Candwin and Buel Dowtry, Hu and Tad the stablemen from the Winespring Inn, Ban and Tell and the Companions riding with that banner still. This time he did not see the missing faces, only those who were still there. Verin and Alanna on their horses, with Tomas and Ihvon riding close behind. Old Bili Congar waving a jug that surely held ale, or better yet brandy, and Cenn Buie as gnarled as ever if bruised, and Jac al'Seen with an arm around his wife, and his sons and daughters around him with their wives and husbands. Raen and Ila, still with the babes on their backs. More. Faces he did not know at all; men who must be from Deven Ride and the farms down there. Boys and girls running among them, laughing.

They fanned out to either side, forming a great hollow circle with the Watch Hill men, Faile and him at its center. Everyone avoided the dying Fades, but it was as if they did not see the Shadowspawn lying everywhere, only the pair on Stepper. Silently they watched, until Perrin began to feel nervous. *Why doesn't somebody say something? Why are they staring like that?*

The Whitecloaks appeared, riding slowly out of the village in their long gleaming column of fours, Dain Bornhald at their head with Jaret Byar. Every white cloak shone as though freshly laundered; every lance slanted at precisely the same angle. Sullen mutters rose, but people moved aside to let them enter the circle.

Bornhald raised a gauntleted hand, halting the column in a jingle of bridles and creak of saddles, when he faced Perrin. “It is done, Shadowspawn.” Byar’s mouth quivered on the brink of a snarl, but Bornhald’s face never changed, his voice never rose. “The Trollocs are done here. As we agreed, I arrest you now for Darkfriend and murderer.”

“No!” Faile twisted around to stare up at Perrin, eyes angry. “What does he mean, as you *agreed*?”

Her words were nearly drowned by the roar from every side. “No! No!” and “You will not take him!” and “Goldeneyes!”

Keeping his gaze on Bornhald, Perrin lifted a hand, and silence descended slowly. When all was quiet, he said, “I said I would not resist, if you aided.” Surprising, how calm his voice was; inside he seethed with a slow, cold anger. “If you *aided*, Whitecloak. Where were you?” The man did not answer.

Daise Congar stepped out from the encircling throng with Wit, who clung to her as if he never intended to let go of her again. For that matter, her stout arm was wrapped around Wit’s shoulders in much the same fashion. They made an odd picture as she planted her pitchfork-polearm firmly, her the taller by a head and holding her considerably smaller husband as though she meant to protect him. “They were on the Green,” she announced loudly, “all lined up and sitting their horses pretty as girls ready for a dance at Sunday. They never stirred. It was that that made us come . . .” A fierce murmur of agreement rippled from the women. “. . . when we saw you were about to be overrun, and they just sat there like bumps on a log!”

Bornhald did not take his eyes from Perrin for an instant; he did not even blink. “Did you think I would trust you?” he sneered. “Your plan only failed because these others arrived—yes?—and you can claim no part in that.” Faile shifted; without looking away from the man, Perrin laid a finger across her lips just as she opened her mouth. She bit him—hard—but she did not say anything. Bornhald’s voice finally began to rise. “I will see you hang, Shadowspawn. I will see you hang, whatever it takes! I will see you dead if the world burns!” The last came as a shout. Byar’s sword slid a hand of bare steel from its scabbard; a massive Whitecloak behind him—Farran, Perrin thought his name was—drew his completely, with a pleased smile rather than Byar’s toothy snarl.

They froze as quivers rattled to arrows being drawn, and bows came up all around the circle, fletchings drawn to ear, every broadhead shaft pointed at a Whitecloak. Up and down the thick column, high-cantled saddles creaked as men shifted uneasily. Bornhald showed no sign of fear, and he did not smell of it, either; his scent was all hate. He ran almost fevered eyes over the Two Rivers folk encircling his men and returned them to Perrin just as hot and hate-filled.

Perrin motioned downward, and tension was let off bowstrings reluctantly, bows lowered slowly. “You would not help.” His voice was cold iron, anvil-hard. “Since you came to the Two Rivers, the help you’ve given has been almost accidental. You never really cared if people were burned out, killed, so long as you could find somebody to call Darkfriend.” Bornhald shivered, though his eyes still burned. “It is time for you to go. Not just from Emond’s Field. It is time for you to gather up your Whitecloaks and leave the Two Rivers. Now, Bornhald. You are going now.”

“I *will* see you hang one day,” Bornhald said softly. He jerked his hand for the column to follow and booted his horse forward as if he meant to ride Perrin over.

Perrin moved Stepper aside; he wanted these men gone, not more killing. Let the man have a final gesture of defiance.

Bornhald never turned his head, but hollow-cheeked Byar stared silent hate at Perrin, and Farran seemed to look at him with regret for some reason. The others kept their eyes front as they passed in a jingle of tack and the clop of hooves. Silently the circle opened to let them out, heading north.

A knot of ten or twelve men approached Perrin on foot, some in mismatched bits and pieces of old armor, all grinning anxiously, as the last of the Whitecloaks went by. He did not recognize any of them. A wide-nosed, leathery-faced fellow seemed to be their leader, his white hair bare but a rusty mail shirt covering him to the knees, though the collar of a farmer’s coat poked up around his neck. He bowed awkwardly over his bow. “Jerinvar Barstere, my Lord Perrin. Jer, they call me.” He spoke hurriedly, as if afraid of being interrupted. “Pardon for bothering you. Some of us will see the Whitecloaks along, if that's all right with you. A good many want to get on home, even if we can't get there before dark. There's as many Whitecloaks again in Watch Hill, but they would not come. Had orders to hold fast, they said. Bunch of fools, if you ask me, and we're more than tired of having them around, poking their noses into people's houses and trying to make you accuse your neighbor of something. We'll see them off, if that's all right with you." He gave Faile an abashed look, ducking his broad chin, but the flow of words did not slow. "Pardon, my Lady Faile. Didn't mean to bother you and your lord. Just wanted to let him know we're with him. A fine woman you have there, my Lord. A fine woman. No offense meant, my Lady. Well, we've daylight still, and talk shears no sheep. Pardon for bothering you, my Lord Perrin. Pardon, my Lady Faile." He bowed again, imitated by the others, and they hurried away with him herding them, muttering at them, "No time for us to be bothering the lord and his lady. There's work to do yet."

"Who was that?" Perrin said, a trifle stunned by the torrent; Daise and Cenn together could not talk that much. "Do you know him, Faile? From Watch Hill?"

"Master Barstere is the Mayor of Watch Hill, and the others are the Village Council. The Watch Hill Women's Circle will be sending a delegation down under their Wisdom once they're certain it is safe. To see if 'this Lord Perrin' is right for the Two Rivers, they say, but they all wanted me to show them how to curtsy to you, and the Wisdom, Edelle Gaelin, is bringing you some of her dried-apple tarts."

"Oh, burn me!" he breathed. It was spreading. He knew he should have stamped it down hard in the beginning. "Don't call me that!" he shouted after the departing men. "I'm a blacksmith! Do you hear me? A blacksmith!" Jer Barstere turned to wave at him and nod before hurrying the others on.

Chortling, Faile tugged at his beard. "You are a sweet fool, my Lord Blacksmith. It is too late to turn back now." Suddenly her smile became truly wicked. "Husband, is there any possibility you might be alone with your wife any time soon? Marriage seems to have made me as bold as a Domani gall! I know you must be tired, but—" She cut off with a small shriek and clung to his coat as he booted Stepper to a gallop toward the Winespring Inn. For once the cheers that followed did not bother him at all.

"Goldeneyes! Lord Perrin! Goldeneyes!"

From the thick branch of a leafy oak on the edge of the Westwood, Ordeith stared at Emond's Field, a mile to the south. It was impossible. *Scourge them. Flay them.* Everything had been going according to plan. Even Isam had played into his hands. *Why did the fool stop bringing Trollocs? He should have brought in enough to turn the Two Rivers black with them!* Spittle dripped from his lips, but he did not notice, any more than he realized that his hand was fumbling at his belt. *Harry them till their hearts burst! Harrow them into the ground screaming!* All planned to pull Rand al'Thor to him, and it came to this! The Two Rivers had not even been scratched. A few farms burned did not count, nor a few farmers butchered alive for Trolloc cookpots. *I want the Two Rivers to* burn, *burn so the fire lives in men's memories for a thousand years!*

He studied the banner waving over the village, and the one not that far below him. A scarlet wolfhead on scarlet-bordered white, and a red eagle. Red for the blood the Two Rivers must shed to make Rand al'Thor howl. Manetheren. *That's meant to be Manetheren's banner.* Someone had told them of Manetheren, had they? What did these fools know of the glories of Manetheren? *Manetheren. Yes.* There was more than one way to scourge them. He laughed so hard he nearly fell out of the oak before he realized that he was not holding on with both hands, that one gripped his belt where a dagger should have hung. The laugh twisted into a snarl as he stared at that hand. The White Tower held what had been stolen from him. What was his by right as old as the Trolloc Wars.

He let himself drop to the ground, and scrambled onto his horse before looking at his companions. His hounds. The thirty or so Whitecloaks remaining no longer wore their white cloaks, of course. Rust spotted their dull plate-and-mail, and Bornhald would never have recognized those sullen, suspicious faces, dirty and unshaven. The humans watched Ordeith, distrustful yet afraid, not even glancing at the Myrddraal in their midst, its slug-pale, eyeless face as bleakly wooden as theirs. The Halfman feared Isam would find it; Isam had not at all been pleased when that raid on Taren Ferry let so many escape to carry away word of what was happening in the Two Rivers. Ordeith giggled at the thought of Isam discomforted. The man was a problem for another time, if he still lived.

"We ride for Tar Valon," he snapped. Hard riding, to beat Bornhald to the ferry. Manetheren's banner, raised again in the Two Rivers after all these centuries. How the Red Eagle had harried him, so long ago. “But Caemlyn first!” *Scourge them and flay them!* Let the Two Rivers pay first, and then Rand al’Thor, and then. . . .

Laughing, he galloped north through the forest, not looking back to see if the others followed. They would. They had nowhere else to go now.

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CHAPTER 57

A Breaking in the Three-fold Land

The molten afternoon sun broiled the Waste, flinging shadows across the mountains to the north, just ahead now. The dry hills passed beneath Jeade'en's hooves, high and low like swells in an ocean of cracked clay, miles rolling away behind. The mountains had held Rand's eyes since they first came in sight the day before, not snowcapped, not so tall as the Mountains of Mist, much less the Spine of the World, but jagged slabs of brown and gray stone, streaked in some places with yellow or red or bands of glittering flecks, tumbled about so that a man might think to try the Dragonwall afoot first. Sighing, he settled in his saddle and adjusted the *shoufa* he wore with his red coat. In those mountains lay Alcair Dal. Soon there would be an ending of sorts, or a beginning. Maybe both. Soon, perhaps.

Yellow-haired Adelin strode easily ahead of the dapple stallion, and nine more sun-dark *Far Dareis Mai* made a wide ring around him, all with bucklers and spears in hand, cased bows on their backs, black veils dangling on their chests ready to be lifted. Rand's honor guard. The Aiel did not call it that, yet the Maidens came to Alcair Dal for Rand's honor. So many differences, and he did not know what half really were even when he saw them.

For instance, Aviendha's behavior toward the Maidens, and theirs to her. Most of the time, as now, she walked beside his horse with her arms folded in the shawl around her shoulders; green eyes intent beneath her dark head scarf on the mountains ahead, she seldom spoke with the Maidens beyond a word or two, but that was not the oddity. Her arms folded; that was the heart of it. The Maidens knew she wore the ivory bracelet, yet seemed to pretend not to see it; she would not take it off, yet hid her wrist whenever she thought one of them might be looking.

You have no society, Adelin had told him when he suggested some other than the Maidens of the Spear might provide his escort. Each chief, whether of clan or sept, would be accompanied by men from the society he had belonged to before becoming chief. *You have no society, but your mother was a Maiden.* The yellow-haired woman and the other nine had not looked at Aviendha, a few steps away in the entry hall to Lian's roof; they had *not* looked intently. *For countless years Maidens who would not give up the spear have given their babes for the Wise Ones to hand to other women, none knowing where the child went or even whether boy or girl. Now a Maiden's son has come back to us, and we know him. We will go to Alcair Dal for your honor, son of Shaiel, a Maiden of the Chumai Taardad.* Her face was so set—all of their faces were, including Aviendha's—that he thought they might offer to dance the spears if he refused.

When he accepted, they made him go through that ritual of "Remember honor" again, this time with some drink called *oosquai*, made from *zemai*, drinking to the bottom of a small silver cup with each of them. Ten Maidens; ten little cups. The stuff looked like faintly brown-tinged water, tasted almost like it—and was stronger than double-distilled brandy. He had not been able to walk straight after, and they had got him to bed, laughing at him, no matter how he protested, as much as he could with all of them tickling him so he could barely breathe for laughing himself. All but Aviendha. Not that she went away; she stayed and watched the whole thing with a face as blank as stone. When Adelin and the others finally tucked him into his blankets and left, Aviendha sat down beside the door, spreading her dark, heavy skirts, watching him stonily until he fell asleep. At his waking, she was still there, still watching. And refusing to talk about Maidens or *oosquai* or any of it; as far as she was concerned, it seemed not to have happened. Whether the Maidens would have been as reticent, he did not know; how could you possibly look ten women in the face and ask why they had gotten you drunk and made a game of taking your clothes off and putting you to bed?

So many differences, so few that made much sense that he could see, and no telling which might trip him up and ruin all his plans. Yet he could not afford to wait. He glanced over his shoulder. What was done, was done. *And who can say what's yet to come?*

Well behind, the Taardad followed him. Not just the Nine Valley Taardad and the Jindo, but the Miadi and the Four Stones, the Chumai and the Bloody Water and more, broad columns surrounding the peddlers' lurching wagons and the Wise Ones' party, reaching back two miles through the shimmering heat haze, ringed by scouts and outrunners. Every day more had come in response to the runners Rhuarc had sent that first day, a hundred men and Maidens here, three hundred there, five hundred, according to the size of each sept and what each hold needed to keep for safety.

In the distance to the south and west, another band was approaching at a run, trailing dust for their pace; perhaps they belonged to some other clan on its way to Alcair Dal, but he thought not. Only two-thirds of the septs represented yet, but he estimated there were well over fifteen thousand Taardad Aiel strung out behind him. An army on the march, and still growing. Nearly an entire clan coming to a meeting of chiefs, in violation of all custom.

Suddenly Jeade'en topped a rise, and there in a long, wide hollow below was the fair gathered for the meeting, and on the hills beyond, the camps of the clan and sept chiefs who had already arrived.

Spread among two or three hundred of the low, wall-less tents, all widely spaced, were pavilions of the same grayish brown material that were tall enough to stand beneath, with goods displayed on blankets in the shade, brightly glazed pottery and even brighter rugs, jewelry in silver or gold. Aiel crafts mainly, but there would be things from beyond the Waste as well, including perhaps silk and ivory from far to the east. No one seemed to be trading; the few men and women in sight sat in one or another of the pavilions, usually alone.

Of the five camps scattered on heights around the fair, four looked just as empty, only a few dozen men or Maidens stirring amid tents set up for as many as a thousand. The fifth camp sprawled over twice as much ground as any of the others, with hundreds of people visible, and likely as many more inside the tents.

Rhuarc trotted up the hill behind Rand with his ten *Aethan Dor,* Red Shields, followed by Heirn with ten *Tain Shari*, True Bloods, and forty-odd more sept chiefs with their escorts for honor, all with spears and bucklers, bows and quivers. It made a formidable force, more than had taken the Stone of Tear. Some of the Aiel in the camps and among the pavilions were peering at the hilltop. Not at the Aiel gathered there, Rand suspected. At him; a man on a horse. A thing seen very seldom in the Three-fold Land. He would show them more before he was done.

Rhuarc's gaze settled on the largest camp, where more Aiel in *cadin'sor* were boiling out of the tents, all to stare in their direction. "Shaido, unless I mistake myself," he said quietly. "Couladin. You are not the only one to break custom, Rand al'Thor."

"Perhaps as well I did." Rand dragged the *shoufa* from around his head and stuffed it into his coat pocket atop the *angreal*, the carving of a round-faced man with a sword across his knees. The sun began baking his bare head to show him how much protection the cloth had been. "If we had come according to custom. . . ." The Shaido were loping toward the mountains, leaving behind apparently empty tents. And causing some little stir in the other camps, and the fair; the Aiel gave over staring at a man on a horse to peer after the Shaido. "Could you have forced a way into Alcair Dal against two-to-one odds or better, Rhuarc?"

"Not before nightfall," the clan chief replied slowly, "not even against Shaido dogrobbers. This is more than violation of custom! Even Shaido should have more honor than this!"

Angry mutters of agreement rose from the other Taardad on the hilltop. Except the Maidens; for some reason they had gathered around Aviendha off to one side, talking seriously among themselves. Rhuarc spoke a few quiet words to one of his Red Shields, a green-eyed fellow who looked as if his face had been used to pound fence posts, and the man turned downhill, running swiftly back toward the approaching Taardad.

"Did you expect this?" Rhuarc asked Rand as soon as the Red Shield left. "Is that why you summoned the entire clan?"

"Not this exactly, Rhuarc." The Shaido began forming lines before a narrow gap into the mountains; they were veiling themselves. "But there was no other reason for Couladin to leave in the night except that he was eager to be somewhere, and where would he better like to be than here, causing me trouble? Are the others already in Alcair Dal? Why?"

"The opportunity presented by chiefs meeting is not to be missed, Rand al'Thor. There will be discussions of boundary disputes, grazing rights, a dozen things. Water. If two Aiel from different clans meet, they discuss water. Three from three clans, and they discuss water and grazing."

"And four?" Rand asked. Five clans represented already, and the Taardad made six.

Rhuarc hesitated a moment, hefting one of his short spears unconsciously. "Four will dance the spears. But it should not be so here."

The Taardad parted to let the Wise Ones through, shawls over their heads, with Moiraine and Lan and Egwene riding behind. Egwene and the Aes Sedai wore those white cloths around their temples, in damp imitation of the Aielwomen's head scarves. Mat rode up, too, off by himself, black-hafted spear across his pommel. His wide-brimmed hat shadowed his, face as he studied what lay ahead.

The Warder nodded to himself when he saw the Shaido. "That could be messy," he said softly. His black stallion rolled an eye at Rand's dapple; only that, and Lan was intent on the Aiel ranks before the gap, yet he patted Mandarb's neck soothingly. "But not now, I think."

"Not now," Rhuarc agreed.

"If only you would . . . *allow* me to go in with you." Except for that one slight hitch, Moiraine's voice was as serene as ever; cool calm painted her ageless features, but her dark eyes looked at Rand as if her gaze alone could force him to relent.

Amys's long pale hair, hanging below her shawl, swung as she shook her head firmly. "It is not his decision, Aes Sedai. This is the business of chiefs, men's business. If we let you go into Alcair Dal now, the next time Wise Ones meet, or roofmistresses, some clan chief will want to put his nose in. They think we meddle in their affairs, and often try to meddle in ours." She gave Rhuarc a quick smile meant to convey that she did not include him; her husband's lack of expression told Rand he thought otherwise.

Melaine gripped her shawl under her chin, precisely staring at Rand. If she did not agree with Moraine, at least she mistrusted what he would do. He had hardly slept since leaving Cold Rocks; if they had peered into his dreams, they had seen only nightmares.

"Be careful, Rand al'Thor," Bair said as if she had read his thoughts. "A tired man makes mistakes. You cannot afford mistakes today." She pulled her shawl down around her thin shoulders, and her thin voice took on an almost angry note. "*We* cannot afford for you to make mistakes. The Aiel cannot afford it."

The coming of more riders to the hilltop had drawn eyes back to them. Among the pavilions several hundred Aiel, men in *cadin'sor* and long-haired women in skirts and blouses and shawls, made a watchful crowd. Its attention shifted when Kadere's dusty white wagon appeared behind its team of mules off to the right, with the heavy, cream-coated peddler on the driver’s seat, and Isendre all in white silk holding a matching parasol. Keille’s wagon followed, with Natael handling the reins at her side, and the canvas-topped wagons, and finally the three big waterwagons like huge barrels on wheels with their long mule teams. They looked at Rand as the wagons rumbled past in a squeal of ungreased axles, Kadere and Isendre, Natael in his gleeman’s patch-covered cloak, Keille’s great bulk encased in snowy white, a white lace shawl on her ivory combs. Rand patted Jeade’en’s arched neck. Men and women began spilling out of the fair below to meet the approaching wagons. The Shaido were waiting. Soon, now.

Egwene moved her gray close to Jeade’en; the dapple stallion tried to nuzzle Mist and got nipped for his trouble. “You’ve not given me any chance to speak to you since Cold Rocks, Rand.” He said nothing; she was Aes Sedai now, and not just because she called herself one. He wondered if she had spied on his dreams, too. Her face looked tight, her dark eyes tired. “Do not keep to yourself, Rand. You do not fight alone. Others do battle for you, too.”

Frowning, he tried not to look at her. His first thought was of Emond’s Field and Perrin, but he did not see how she could know where Perrin had gone. “What do you mean?” he said finally.

“I fight for you,” Moiraine said before Egwene could open her mouth, “as does Egwene.” A look flashed between the two women. “People fight for you who do not know it, any more than you know them. You do not realize what it means that you force the form of the Age Lace, do you? The ripples of your actions, the ripples of your very existence, spread across the Pattern to change the weave of life-threads of which you will never be aware. The battle is far from yours alone. Yet you stand in the heart of this web in the Pattern. Should you fail, and fall, all fails and falls. Since I cannot go with you into Alcair Dal, let Lan accompany you. One more pair of eyes to watch your back.” The Warder turned slightly in his saddle, frowning at her; with the Shaido veiled for killing, he would not be eager to leave her alone.

Rand did not think he was supposed to have seen that look pass from Moiraine to Egwene. So they had a secret to keep from him. Egwene *did* have Aes Sedai eyes, dark and unreadable. Aviendha and the Maidens had come back to him. “Let Lan stay with you, Moiraine. *Far Dareis Mai* carries my honor.”

Moiraine's mouth tightened at the corners, but apparently that was exactly the right thing to say so far as the Maidens were concerned. Adelin and the others donned wide grins.

Below, Aiel were crowding around wagon drivers as they began unhitching the mules. Not everyone was paying attention to the Aiel. Keille and Isendre stared at one another from beside their wagons, Natael speaking urgently to one woman, Kadere to the other, until they finally stopped their duel of eyes. The two women had been like that for some time. Had they been men, Rand would have expected it to come to blows long since.

"Be on your guard, Egwene," Rand said. "All of you, be on your guard."

"Even the Shaido will not bother Aes Sedai," Amys told him, "any more than they will bother Bair or Melaine or myself. Some things are beyond even Shaido."

"Just be on your guard!" He had not meant to be that sharp. Even Rhuarc stared at him. They did not understand, and he dared not tell them. Not yet. Who would spring their trap first? He had to risk them as well as himself.

"What about me, Rand?" Mat said suddenly, rolling a gold coin across the fingers of one hand as though unaware of it. "You have any objections to my going with you?"

"Do you want to? I thought you'd stay with the peddlers."

Mat frowned at the wagons below, looked to the Shaido lined before the mountain gap. "I don't think it will be so easy to get out of here if you get yourself killed. Burn me if you don't stick me in the rendering kettle one way or. . . . *Dovienya,*" he muttered—Rand had heard him say that before; Lan said it meant "luck" in the Old Tongue—and flipped the gold coin into the air. When he tried to snatch it back, it bounced off his fingertips and fell to the ground. Somehow, improbably, the coin landed on edge, rolling downhill, bounding across cracks in the baked clay, glittering in the sunlight, all the way down to the wagons, where it finally fell over. "Burn me, Rand," he growled, "I wish you wouldn't do that!"

Isendre picked up the coin and stood fingering it, peering up at the hilltop. The others stared, too; Kadere, and Keille, and Natael.

"You can come," Rand said. "Rhuarc, isn't it about time?"

The clan chief glanced over his shoulder. "Yes. Just about . . ." Behind him, pipes began playing a slow dancing tune. ". . . now."

Singing rose to the pipes. Aiel boys stopped singing when they reached manhood, except for certain occasions. Only in battle songs and laments for the dead did an Aielman sing once he had taken up the spear. There were surely Maidens' voices in that chanted harmony of parts, but deep male voices swallowed them.

"Wash the spears—while the sun climbs high.
Wash the spears—while the sun falls low."

Half a mile to right and left Taardad appeared, running in time to their song in two wide columns, spears ready, faces veiled, seemingly endless columns rolling toward the mountains.

"Wash the spears—Who fears to die?
Wash the spears—No one I know!"

In the clan camps and in the fair, Aiel stared in amazement; something in the way they held themselves told Rand they were silent. Some of the wagon drivers stood as if stunned; others let their mules run loose and dove under their wagons. And Keille and Isendre, Kadere and Natael, watched Rand.

"Wash the spears—while life holds true.
Wash the spears—until life ends.
Wash the spears. . . ."

"Shall we go?" He did not wait for Rhuarc's nod to heel Jeade'en to a walk down the hill, Adelin and the other Maidens falling in around him. Mat hesitated a moment before booting Pips to follow, but Rhuarc and the Taardad sept chiefs, each with his ten, stepped off with the dapple. Once, halfway to the fair tents, Rand looked back to the hilltop. Moiraine and Egwene sitting their horses with Lan. Aviendha standing with the three Wise Ones. All watching him. He had almost forgotten what it was like not to have people watching him.

As he rode abreast of the fair, a delegation came out, ten or a dozen women in skirts and blouses and much gold and silver and ivory, as many men in the grays and browns of the *cadin'sor* but unarmed save for a belt knife, and that usually smaller than the heavy-bladed weapon Rhuarc wore. Still, they took a position that forced Rand and the others to halt, and appeared to ignore the veiled Taardad streaming by to east and west.

“Wash the spears—Life is a dream.
Wash the spears—All dreams must end.”

“I did not expect this of you, Rhuarc,” a heavyset, gray-haired man said. He was not fat—Rand had not seen a fat Aiel—his heaviness was muscle. “Even from the Shaido it was a surprise, but you!”

“Times change, Mandhuin,” the clan chief replied. “How long have the Shaido been here?”

“They arrived just at sunrise. Why they traveled in the night, who can say?” Mandhuin frowned slightly at Rand, tilted his head toward Mat. “Strange times indeed, Rhuarc.”

“Who is here besides the Shaido?” Rhuarc asked.

“We Goshien arrived first. Then the Shaarad.” The heavy man grimaced over his blood enemies’ name, without stopping his study of the two wetlanders. “The Chareen and the Tomanelle came later. And last the Shaido, as I said. Sevanna convinced the chiefs to go in only a short time ago. Bael saw no reason to meet today, nor did some of the others.”

A broad-faced woman in her middle years, with hair yellower than Adelin’s, put fists on her hips in a rattle of ivory and gold bracelets. She wore as many, and as many necklaces, as Amys and her sister-wife combined. “We hear He Who Comes With the Dawn has come out of Rhuidean, Rhuarc.” She was frowning at Rand and Mat. The entire delegation was. “We hear that the *Car’a’carn* will be announced today. Before all of the clans arrive.”

“Then someone spoke you a prophecy,” Rand said. He touched the dapple’s flanks with his heels; the delegation moved out of his way.

“*Dovienya*,” Mat murmured. “*Mia dovienya nesodhin soende*.” Whatever it meant, it sounded a fervent wish.

The Taardad columns had come up on either side of the Shaido and turned to face them across a few hundred paces, still veiled, still singing. They made no move that could be considered threatening, really, only stood there, fifteen or twenty times the Shaido numbers, and sang, voices thundering in chanting harmony.

“Wash the spears—till shade is gone.
Wash the spears—till water turns dry.
Wash the spears—How long from home?
Wash the spears—Until I die!”

Riding closer to the black-veiled Shaido, Rand saw Rhuarc lift a hand to his own veil. “No, Rhuarc. We are not here to fight them.” He meant that he hoped it would not come to that, but the Aielman took it differently.

“You are right, Rand al’Thor. No honor to the Shaido.” Leaving his veil hanging, Rhuarc raised his voice. “No honor to the Shaido!”

Rand did not turn his head to look, but he had the feeling black veils were being lowered behind him.

“Oh, blood and ashes!” Mat muttered. “Blood and bloody ashes!”

“Wash the spears—till the sun grows cold.
Wash the spears—till water runs free.
Wash the spears. . . .”

The lines of Shaido shifted uneasily. Whatever Couladin or Sevanna had told them, they could count. To dance the spears with Rhaurc and those with him was one thing, even if it went against all custom; to face enough Taardad to sweep them away like an avalanche was something else. Slowly they parted, moving back to let Rand ride through, stepping back to make a wide path.

Rand heaved a sigh of relief. Adelin and the other Maidens, at least, walked looking straight ahead, as though the Shaido did not exist.

“Wash the spears—while I breathe.
Wash the spears—my steel is bright.
Wash the spears. . . .”

The chant faded to a murmur behind them as they passed into the wide, steep-walled gorge, deep and shadowed as it wound into the mountains. For minutes the loudest sounds were the clatter of hooves on stone, the whisper of soft Aiel boots. Abruptly the passage gave way to Alcair Dal.

Rand could see why the canyon had been called a bowl, though there was nothing golden about it. Almost perfectly round, its gray wall sloped all the way around except at the far end, where it curled inward like a breaking wave. Clusters of Aiel dotted the slopes, heads and faces bare, many more clusters than there were clans. The Taardad who had come with the sept chiefs peeled away toward one or another of those. According to Rhuarc, grouping by society rather than clan was an aid to keeping peace. Only his

Red Shields and the Maidens continued on with Rand and the Taardad chiefs.

The sept chiefs of the other clans all sat by clan, cross-legged before a deep ledge beneath the curling overhang. Six small knots, one of Maidens, stood between the sept chiefs and the ledge. Supposedly these were the Aiel who had come for the honor of clan chiefs. Six, although only five clans were represented. Sevanna would have the Maidens—though Aviendha had been quick to point out that Sevanna had never been *Far Dareis Mai*—but the extra. . . . Eleven men in that, not ten. Even seeing only the back of a flame-haired head, Rand was sure it was Couladin.

On the ledge itself stood a golden-haired woman in as much jewelry as the woman back at the fair tents, gray shawl draped over her arms—Sevanna, of course—and four clan chiefs, none armed save for his long belt knife, and one the tallest man Rand had ever seen. Bael of the Goshien Aiel, by the descriptions Rhuarc had given; the fellow had to be at least a hand taller than Rhuarc or himself. Sevanna was speaking, and some trick of the canyon's shape carried her words clearly throughout.

". . . allow him to speak!" Her voice was tight and angry. Head high and back straight she tried to dominate the ledge by force of will. "I demand it as my right! Until a new chief is chosen, I stand for Suladric and the Shaido. I demand my right!"

"You stand for Suladric until a new chief is chosen, roofmistress." The white-haired man who spoke in irascible tones was Han, clan chief of the Tomanelle. With a face like dark, wrinkled leather, he would have been taller than average in the Two Rivers; for an Aiel, he was short, if stocky. "I have no doubt you know the rights of a roofmistress well, but perhaps not so well those of a clan chief. Only one who has entered Rhuidean may speak here—and you, who stand in Suladric's place"—Han did not sound happy about that, but then he sounded as if he was seldom happy—"but the dreamwalkers have told our Wise Ones Couladin was refused the right to enter Rhuidean."

Couladin shouted something, plainly furious yet indistinct—apparently the canyon's trick only worked from the ledge—but Erim, of the Chareen, his own bright red hair nearly half-white, cut him off sharply. "Have you no respect for custom and law, Shaido? Have you no honor? Stand silent here."

A few eyes on the slopes turned to see who the newcomers were. A ripple of nudges brought more around at the sight of two outlanders on horseback at the head of the sept chiefs, and one of the riders followed close by Maidens. How many Aiel peered down at him, Rand wondered. Three thousand? Four? More? None made a sound.

“We have gathered here to hear a great announcement,” Bael said, “when all the clans have come.” His dark reddish hair was graying, too; there were no young men among clan chiefs. His great height and deep voice drew eyes to him. “When all the clans have come. If all Sevanna wishes to speak of now is letting Couladin speak, I will go back to my tents and wait.”

Jheran, of the Shaarad, blood enemy of Bael’s Goshien, was a slender man, gray streaked heavily through his light brown hair. Slender, as a steel blade is slender, he spoke to no one of the chiefs in particular. “I say we do not return to our tents. Since Sevanna has brought us in, let us discuss what is only somewhat less important than the announcement we await. Water. I wish to discuss the water at Chain Ridge Stand.” Bael turned toward him threateningly.

“Fools!” Sevanna snapped. “I will have done with waiting! I—”

It was then that those on the ledge became aware of the new arrivals. In utter silence they watched them approach, the clan chiefs frowning, Sevanna scowling. She was a pretty woman, well short of her middle years—and younger-looking for standing among men well the other side of theirs—but with a greedy mouth. The clan chiefs were dignified, even Han in a sour-mouthed fashion; her pale green eyes had a calculating look. Unlike any Aielwoman Rand had ever seen, she wore her loose white blouse undone low enough to show considerable tanned cleavage, framed by her many necklaces. He could have known the men for clan chiefs by their manner; if Sevanna was a roofmistress, she was surely nothing like Lian.

Rhuarc strode straight to the ledge, gave his spears and buckler, his bow and quiver, to his Red Shields, and climbed up. Rand handed his reins to Mat—who muttered, “Luck with us!” as he eyed the surrounding Aiel; Adelin nodded encouragingly to Rand—and stepped straight from his saddle to the ledge. A startled murmur rolled around the canyon.

“What do you do, Rhuarc,” Han demanded, scowling, “bringing this wetlander here? If you will not kill him, at least send him down from standing like a chief.”

“This man, Rand al’Thor, has come to speak to the chiefs of the clans. Did not the dreamwalkers tell you that he would come with me?” Rhuarc’s words brought a louder murmur from the listeners.

“Melaine told me many things, Rhuarc,” Bael said slowly, frowning at Rand. “That He Who Comes With the Dawn had come out of Rhuidean. You cannot mean that this man. . . .” He trailed off in disbelief.

“If this wetlander can speak,” Sevanna said quickly, “so may Couladin.” She lifted a smooth hand, and Couladin scrambled onto the ledge, face an angry red.

Han rounded on him. “Stand down, Couladin! It is bad enough that Rhuarc violates custom without you doing it as well!”

“It is time to be done with worn-out customs!” the fiery-haired Shaido shouted, stripping off his gray-and-brown coat. There was no need for shouting—his words echoed across the canyon—but he did not lower his voice. “I am He Who Comes With the Dawn!” Shoving shirtsleeves above his elbows, he thrust his fists into the air. Around each forearm wound a serpentine creature scaled in crimson and gold, glittering metallically feet each tipped with five golden claws, golden-maned heads resting on the backs of his wrists. Two perfect Dragons. “I am the *Car’a’carn*!” The roar that came back was like thunder, Aiel leaping to their feet and shouting joyously. The sept chiefs were on their feet, too, the Taardad clustered worriedly, the others shouting as loudly as anyone.

The clan chiefs looked stunned, even Rhuarc. Adelin and her nine Maidens hefted their spears as if they expected to use them any moment. Eyeing the gap leading out, Mat pulled his hat low and guided the two horses close to the ledge, motioning surreptitiously for Rand to get back into his saddle.

Sevanna smiled smugly, adjusting her shawl, as Couladin strode to the front of the ledge with his arms high. “I bring change!” he shouted. “According to the prophecy, I bring new days! We will cross the Dragonwall again, and take back what was ours! The wetlanders are soft, but rich! You remember the wealth brought back when last we went into the wetlands! This time, we will take it all! This time . . . !”

Rand let the man’s tirade wash over him. Of things possible, he had never suspected this. *How?* The word kept sliding through his head, yet he could not believe how composed he was. Slowly he took off his coat, hesitating a moment before fishing the *angreal* from his pocket; sticking it into the waistband of his breeches, he dropped the coat and walked to the front of the ledge, calmly undoing the laces of his sleeves. They slid down as he raised his arms above his head.

It took a moment for the assembled Aiel to notice the Dragons wrapped around his arms, too, shining in the sunlight. Their hush came by increments, but it was total. Sevanna's mouth dropped open; she had not known of this. Obviously Couladin had not thought Rand would follow so quickly, had not told her another bore the markings, too. *How?* The man must have believed he would have time; once he had established himself, Rand could be dismissed as a fraud. *Light, how?* If the roofmistess of Comarda Hold was stunned now, so were the clan chiefs, save only Rhuarc. Two men marked as prophecy said only one could be.

Couladin ranted on, waving his arms to make sure all saw. ". . . will not stop with the lands of the oathbreakers! We will take all the lands to the Aryth Ocean! The wetlanders cannot stand against—" Suddenly he became aware of the silence where eager cries had been. He knew what had caused it. Without turning to look at Rand, he shouted, "Wetlander! Look at his clothes! A wetlander!"

"A wetlander," Rand agreed. He did not raise his voice, but the canyon carried it to everyone. The Shaido looked startled for a moment, then grinned triumphantly—until Rand went on. "What does the Prophecy of Rhuidean say? 'Born of the blood.' My mother was Shaiel, a Maiden of the Chumai Taardad." *Who was she really? Where did she come from?* "My father was Janduin, of the Iron Mountain sept, clan chief of the Taardad." *My father is Tam al'Thor. He found me, raised me, loved me. I wish I could have known you, Janduin, but Tam is my father.* " 'Born of the blood, but raised by those not of the blood.' Where did the Wise Ones send to look for me? Into the holds of the Three-fold Land? They sent across the Dragonwall, where I was raised. According to the prophecy."

Bael and the other three nodded slowly, but reluctantly; there was still the matter of Couladin also bearing the Dragons, and doubtless they would rather have one of their own. Sevanna's face had firmed; no matter who bore the real markings, there was no doubt whom she supported.

Couladin's confidence never wavered; he sneered openly at Rand, the first time he had even looked at him. "How long since the Prophecy of Rhuidean was first spoken?" He still seemed to think he had to shout. "Who can say how much the words have changed? My mother was *Far Dareis Mai* before she gave up the spear. How much has the rest changed? Or been changed! It is said we once served the Aes Sedai. I say they mean to bind us to them once more! This wetlander was chosen because he resembles us! He is none of our blood! He came with Aes Sedai leading him on a leash! And the Wise Ones greeted them as they would first-sisters! You have all heard of Wise Ones who can do things beyond belief. The dreamwalkers used the One Power to keep me from this wetlander! They used the One Power, as Aes Sedai are said to do! The Aes Sedai have brought this wetlander here to bind us with fakery! And the dreamwalkers help them!”

“This is madness!” Rhuarc strode up beside Rand, staring out at the still silent gathering. “Couladin never went to Rhuidean. I heard the Wise Ones refuse him. Rand al’Thor did go. I saw him leave Chaendaer, and I saw him return, marked as you see.”

“And why did they refuse me?” Couladin snarled. “Because the Aes Sedai told them to! Rhuarc does not tell you that one of the Aes Sedai went down from Chaendaer with this wetlander! That is how he returned with the Dragons! By Aes Sedai witchery! My brother Muradin died below Chaendaer, murdered by this wetlander and the Aes Sedai Moiraine, and the Wise Ones, doing Aes Sedai bidding, let them walk free! When night came, I went to Rhuidean. I did not reveal myself until now because this is the proper place for the *Car’a’carn* to show himself! I *am* the *Car’a’carn*!”

Lies, touched with just enough flecks of truth. The man was all victorious confidence, sure he had an answer for anything.

“You say you went to Rhuidean without the permission of the Wise Ones?” Han demanded, frowning. Towering Bael looked just as disapproving with his arms folded, Erim and Jheran only slightly less so. The clan chiefs, at least, still wavered. Sevanna gripped her belt knife, glaring at Han as if she would like to drive it into his back.

Couladin had his answer, though. “Yes, without it! He Who Comes With the Dawn brings change! So says the prophecy! Useless ways must change, and I will change them! Did I not arrive here with the dawn?”

The clan chiefs stood balanced on the edge, and so did all the watching Aiel, all on their feet now, staring silently, waiting in their thousands. If Rand could not convince them, he likely would not leave Alcair Dal alive. Mat motioned again to Jeade’en’s saddle. Rand did not even bother to shake his head. There was a consideration beyond getting out alive; he needed these people, needed their loyalty. He *had* to have people who followed him because they believed, not to use him, or for what he could give them. He had to.

“Rhuidean,” he said. The word seemed to fill the canyon. “You claim you went to Rhuidean, Couladin. What did you see there?”

“All know Rhuidean is not to be spoken of,” Couladin shot back.

“We can go apart,” Erim said, “and speak in private so you can tell us—” The Shaido cut him off, face flushed angrily.

“I will speak of it with no one. Rhuidean is a holy place, and what I saw was holy. *I* am holy!” He raised his Dragon marked arms again. “These make me holy!”

“I walked among glass columns beside *Avendesora*.” Rand spoke quietly, but the words carried everywhere. “I saw the history of the Aiel through my ancestors’ eyes. What did you see, Couladin? I am not afraid to speak. Are you?” The Shaido quivered with rage, face nearly the color of his fiery hair.

Uncertain looks passed between Bael and Erim, Jheran and Han. “We must go apart for this,” Han muttered.

Couladin did not seem to realize he had lost his advantage with the four, but Sevanna did. “Rhuarc has told him these things,” she spat. “One of Rhuarc’s wives is a dreamwalker, one of those who aids the Aes Sedai! Rhuarc has told him!”

“Rhuarc would not,” Han snapped at her. “He is clan chief, and a man of honor. Do not speak of what you do not know, Sevanna!”

“I am not afraid!” Couladin shouted. “No man can call me afraid! I, too, saw with my ancestors’ eyes! I saw our coming to the Three-fold Land! I saw our glory! The glory I will bring back to us!”

“I saw the Age of Legends,” Rand announced, “and the beginning of the Aiel journey to the Three-fold Land.” Rhuarc caught his arm, but he shook the clan chief off. This moment had been fated since the Aiel gathered before Rhuidean the first time. “I saw the Aiel when they were called the Da’shain Aiel, and followed the Way of the Leaf.”

“No!” The shout rose from out in the canyon and spread in a roar. “No! No!” From thousands of throats. Spearpoints shaken in the air caught the sunlight. Even some of the Taardad sept chiefs were shouting. Adelin stared up at Rand, stricken. Mat shouted something at Rand, lost in the thunder, waving urgently for him to take his saddle.

“Liar!” The canyon’s shape carried Couladin’s bellow, wrath mixed with triumph, over the shouts of the gathering. Shaking her head frantically, Sevanna reached for him. She must at least have suspected now that he was the fake, yet if she could keep him quiet they might yet pull it off. As Rand hoped, Couladin pushed her away. The man knew Rand had been to Rhuidean—he could not possibly believe half of his own story—but neither could he believe this. “He proves himself a fraud from his own mouth! We have always been warriors! Always! To the beginning of time!”

The roar swelled, spears shaking, but Bael and Erim, Jheran and Han stood in stony silence. They knew now. Unaware of their looks, Couladin waved his Dragon-wreathed arms to the assembled Aiel, exulting in the adulation.

“Why?” Rhuarc said softly beside Rand. “Did you not understand why we do not speak of Rhuidean? To face that we were once so different from everything we believe, that we were the same as the despised Lost Ones you call Tuatha’an. Rhuidean kills those who cannot face it. Not more than one man in three lives who goes to Rhuidean. And now you have spoken for all to hear. It cannot be stopped here, Rand al’Thor. It will spread. How many will be strong enough to bear it?”

He will take you back, and he will destroy you. “I bring change,” Rand said sadly. “Not peace, but turmoil.” *Destruction follows on my heels everywhere. Will there ever be anywhere I do not tear apart?* “What will be, will be, Rhuarc. I can’t change it.”

“What will be, will be,” the Aielman murmured after a moment.

Couladin still strode up and down, shouting to the Aiel of glory and conquest, unaware of the clan chiefs staring at his back. Sevanna did not look at Couladin at all; her pale green eyes were intent on the clan chiefs, lips pulled back in a grimace, breasts heaving with anxious breaths. She had to know what their silent stares meant.

“Rand al’Thor,” Bael said loudly, the name slicing through Couladin’s shouts, cutting off the roar of the crowd like a blade. He stopped to clear his throat, head swinging as though seeking a way out of this. Couladin turned, folding his arms confidently, no doubt expecting a sentence of death for the wetlander. The very tall clan chief took a deep breath. “Rand al’Thor is the *Car’a’carn*. Rand al’Thor is He Who Comes With the Dawn.” Couladin’s eyes widened in incredulous fury.

“Rand al’Thor is He Who Comes With the Dawn,” leathery-faced Han announced, just as reluctantly.

“Rand al’Thor is He Who Comes With the Dawn.” That from Jheran, grimly, and from Erim, “Rand al’Thor is He Who Comes With the Dawn.”

“Rand al’Thor,” Rhuarc said, “is He Who Comes With the Dawn.” In a voice too soft to carry even from the ledge, he added, “And the Light have mercy on us.”

For a long, stretched moment the silence lasted. Then Couladin leaped snarling from the ledge, snatching a spear from one of his *Seia Doon*, hurling it straight at Rand. Yet as he moved down, Adelin leaped up; his spearpoint stabbed through the layered bullhide of her outstretched buckler, swinging her around.

Pandemonium exploded through the canyon, men shouting and shoving. The other Jindo Maidens jumped up beside Adelin, forming a screen in front of Rand. Sevanna had climbed down to shout urgently at Couladin, hanging on his arm as he tried to lead his Shaido Black Eyes against the Maidens between him and Rand. Heirn and a dozen more Taardad sept chiefs joined Adelin, spears ready, but others were shouting loudly. Mat scrambled up, gripping his black-hafted spear with its raven-marked sword point, roaring what had to be curses in the Old Tongue. Rhuarc and the other clan chiefs raised their voices, vainly trying to restore order. The canyon boiled like a cauldron. Rand saw veils lifted. A spear flashed, stabbing. Another. He had to stop this.

He reached out for *saidin*, and it flooded into him until he thought he would burst if he did not burn first; the filth of the taint spreading through him seemed to curdle his bones. Thought floated outside the Void; cold thought. Water. Here where water was so scarce, the Aiel always talked of water. Even in this dry air there was some water. He channeled, not really knowing what he did, reached out blindly.

Sharp lightning crackled above Alcair Dal, and the wind rushed in from every direction, howling across the lip of the canyon to drown the Aiel’s shouts. Wind, bringing minute traces of water, more and more, until something happened no man had ever seen there. A mist of rain began to fall. The wind above shrieked and swirled. Wild lightnings streaked the sky. And the rain grew heavier and heavier, to a driving downpour, sweeping over the ledge, plastering his hair to his head and his shirt to his back, blanking out everything fifty paces away.

Abruptly the rain stopped hitting him; and invisible dome expanded around him, pushing Mat and the Taardad away. Through the water pouring down its side he could dimly see Adelin pounding at it, trying to force her way through to him.

"You utter fool, playing games with these other fools! Wasting all my planning and effort!"

Water dripped down his face as he turned to face Lanfear. Her silver-belted white dress was perfectly dry, the black waves of her hair untouched by a single raindrop among the silver stars and crescents. Those large black eyes stared at him furiously; anger twisted her beautiful face.

"I didn't expect you to reveal yourself yet," he said quietly. The Power still filled him; he rode the buffeting torrents, holding on with a desperation he kept out of his voice. It was not necessary to pull in more, only to let it come till it seemed his bones would crisp to ash. He did not know if she could shield him while *saidin* actually roared through him, but he let it fill him against the possibility. "I know you are not alone. Where is he?"

Lanfear's beautiful mouth tightened. "I knew he would give himself away, coming into your dream. I could have managed matters if his panic —"

"I knew from the start," he broke in. "I expected it from the day I left the Stone of Tear. Out here, where anyone could see I was fixed on Rhuidean and the Aiel. Do you think I did not expect some of you to come after me? But the trap is *mine*, Lanfear, not yours. Where is he?" The last came as a cold shout. Emotion skittered uncontrollably around the Void that surrounded him inside, the emptiness that was not empty, the emptiness filled with the Power.

"If you knew," she snapped back, "why did you chase him away with your talk of fulfilling your destiny, of doing *what has to be done*?" Scorn weighted the words like stones. "I brought Asmodean to teach you, but he was always one to leap to another plan if the first proved difficult. Now he thinks he has found something better for himself in Rhuidean. And he is off to take it while you stand here. Couladin, the Draghkar, all to hold your attention while he made sure. All my plans for nothing because you must be stubborn! Do you have any idea what effort it will take to convince him again? It must be him. Demandred or Rahvin or Sammael would kill you before teaching you to lift a hand unless they have you bound like a dog at heel!"

Rhuidean. Yes. Of course. Rhuidean. How many weeks to the south? Yet he had done something once. If he could remember how. . . . “And you let him go? After all your talk of aiding me?”

“Not openly, I said. What could he find in Rhuidean worth my coming into the open? When you agree to stand with me will be time enough. Remember what I told you, Lews Therin.” Her voice took on a seductive note; those full lips curved, those dark eyes tried to swallow him like bottomless pools. “Two great *sa’angreal*. With those, together, we can challenge—” This time she stopped on her own. He had remembered.

With the Power he *folded* reality, *bent* a small patch of what was. A door opened beneath the dome in front of him. That was the only way to describe it. An opening into darkness, into somewhere else.

“You do remember a few things, it seems.” She eyed the doorway, shifted that suddenly suspicious gaze to him. “Why are you so anxious? What is in Rhuidean?”

“Asmodean,” he said grimly. For a moment he hesitated. He could not see beyond the rain-drenched dome. What was happening out there? And Lanfear. If only he could remember how he had shielded Egwene and Elayne. *If only I could make myself kill a woman who’s only frowning at me. She is one of the Forsaken!* It was no more possible now than it had been in the Stone.

Stepping through the door, he left her on the ledge and closed it behind him. No doubt she knew how to make one of her own, but the making of it would slow her down.

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CHAPTER 58

The Traps of Rhuidean

Darkness surrounded him once the door vanished, blackness stretching in all directions, yet he could see. There was no sensation of heat or cold, even wet as he was; no sensation at all. Only existence. Plain gray stone steps rose in front of him, each step hanging unsupported, arching out until they dwindled from sight. He had seen these before, or their like; somehow he knew they would take him where he had to go. He ran up the impossible stairs, and as his boot left each one behind with its damp footprint, it faded away, vanished. Only steps ahead waited, only those taking him where he had to go. That was as it had been before, too.

Did I make *these with the Power, or do they exist some other way?*

With the thought, the gray stone under his foot began to fade, and all the others ahead shimmered. Desperately he concentrated on them, gray stone and real. Real! The shimmering stopped. They were not so plain now, but polished, the edges carved in a fancy border he thought he recalled seeing somewhere before.

Not caring where—not sure he dared think too long on it—he ran as hard as he could, taking the steps three at a time through the endless dark. They would take him where he wanted to go, but how long would it take? How much head start did Asmodean have? Did the Forsaken know a faster way to travel? That was the trouble. The Forsaken had all the knowledge; all he had was desperation.

Looking ahead, he winced. The steps had accommodated themselves to his long stride, with wide spaces between requiring those leaps now, across black as deep as . . . as what? A fall here might never end. He forced himself to ignore the gaps, to keep running. The old, half-healed wound in his side began to throb, a vague awareness. But if he was aware of it at all, wrapped inside *saidin*, the wound was close to breaking open. *Ignore it.* The thought floated across the Void inside him. He did not dare lose this race, not if it killed him. Would these steps never stop climbing? How far had he come?

Suddenly he saw a figure in the distance ahead and off to his left, a man it seemed, in a red coat and red boots, standing on a glistening silvery platform that slid through the darkness. Rand needed no closer look to be sure it was Asmodean. The Forsaken was not running like a half-spent country boy; he was riding that whatever-it-was.

Rand stopped dead on one of the stone steps. He had no idea what that platform was, shining like polished metal, but. . . . The steps ahead of him vanished. The piece of stone beneath his boots began to glide forward, faster and faster. There was no wind in his face to tell him he was moving, nothing in that vast black to mark motion at all—except that he was beginning to catch up to Asmodean. He did not know if he was doing this with the Power; it just seemed to happen. The step wobbled, and he made himself stop wondering. *I don't know enough yet.*

The dark-haired man stood at his ease, one hand on a hip, pensively fingering his chin. A spill of white lace dripped from his neck; more half-hid his hands. His high-collared red coat seemed shinier than silk satin, and was oddly cut, with tails hanging almost to his knees. What seemed to be black threads, like fine steel wires, ran off from the man, disappearing into the surrounding dark. Those Rand had surely seen before.

Asmodean turned his head, and Rand gaped. The Forsaken could change their faces—or at least make you see a different face; he had seen Lanfear do it—but these were the features of Jasin Natael, the gleeman. He had been sure it would be Kadere, with his predatory eyes that never changed.

Asmodean saw him at the same moment and gave a start. The Forsaken's silver perch darted forward—and suddenly a huge sheet of fire, like a thin slice from a monstrous flame, swept back toward Rand, a mile high and a mile wide.

He channeled at it desperately; just as it was about to strike him, it suddenly burst into shards, hurtling away from him, winking out. Yet even as the fiery curtain vanished it revealed another rushing at him. He shattered that, exposing another, splintered the third to reveal a fourth. Asmodean was getting away, Rand was sure of it. He could not see the Forsaken at all for the flames. Anger slid across the surface of the Void, and he channeled.

A wave of fire enveloped the crimson curtain sweeping toward him and rolled on, carrying it away, not a thin slice, but wild, billowing gouts as if whipped by stormwinds. He quivered with the Power roaring through him; anger at Asmodean clawed at the surface of the Void.

A hole appeared in the erupting surface. No, not a hole exactly. Asmodean and his shining platform stood in the middle of it, but as the flaming wave washed forward it slid together again. The Forsaken had built some sort of shield around himself.

Rand made himself ignore the distant anger outside the Void. It was only in cold calm that he could touch *saidin*; acknowledging anger would shatter the Void. The billows of fire ceased to exist as he stopped channeling. He had to catch the man, not kill him.

The stone step slid through the blackness even faster. Asmodean drew closer.

Abruptly the Forsaken's platform stopped. A bright hole appeared in front of him, and he jumped through; the silvery thing vanished, and the door began to close.

Rand lashed out wildly with the Power. He had to hold it open; once it closed, he would have no idea where Asmodean had fled. The shrinking stopped. A square of harsh sunlight, big enough to step through. He had to hold it open, reach it before Asmodean could go too far. . . .

Even as he thought about stopping, the step halted dead. It halted, but he hurtled forward, flying through the doorway. Something tugged his boot, and then he was tumbling head over heels across hard ground, to land finally in a breathless heap.

Fighting to fill his lungs, he pushed himself to his feet, not daring to let himself be helpless a moment. The One Power still filled him with life and vileness; his bruises felt as distant as his struggle for breath, as far off as the yellow dust that covered his damp clothes, covered him. Yet at the same time he was aware of every stir of furnace air, every grain of dust, every minute crack in the hard-baked clay. Already the sun was baking away the moisture, sucking it from his shirt and breeches. He was in the Waste, in the valley below Chaendaer, not fifty steps from fog-shrouded Rhuidean. The doorway was gone.

He took a step toward the wall of mist and stopped, lifting his left foot. His bootheel was sliced cleanly though. The tug he had felt; the doorway closing. He was dimly aware of shivering in spite of the heat. He had not known it was that dangerous. The Forsaken had all the knowledge. Asmodean would not escape him. Grimly he adjusted his clothes, tucking the carved little man and his sword firmly in place, ran to the fog and in. Gray blindness enveloped him. The Power filling him did nothing to make him see better here. Running blind.

Abruptly he threw himself down, rolling the last stride out of the fog onto gritty paving stones. Lying there, he stared up at three bright ribbons, silver-blue in the strange light of Rhuidean, stretching to left and right, floating in the air. When he stood, they were at the level of his waist, chest and neck, and so thin that they vanished edge-on. He could see how they had been made and hung, even if he did not understand it. Hard as steel, sharp enough to make a razor seem a feather. Had he run into those, they would have sliced through him. A tiny surge of the Power, and the silver ribbons fell in dust. Cold anger, outside the Void; inside, cold purpose, and the One Power.

The bluish glow of the fog dome cast its shadowless light on the half-finished, slab-sided palaces of marble and crystal and cut glass, the cloud-piercing towers, fluted and spiraled. And down the broad street ahead of him ran Asmodean, past dry fountains, toward the great plaza at the heart of the city.

Rand channeled—it seemed oddly difficult; he pulled at *saidin*, wrenched at it until it raged into him—he channeled, and thick bolts of jagged lightning shot from the dome-clouds. Not at Asmodean. Just ahead of the Forsaken, gleaming pillars of red and white, fifty feet thick and a hundred paces high, centuries old, exploded and toppled across the street in rubble and clouds of dust.

From huge windows of colored glass, images of majestically serene men and women seemed to look at Rand in reproof. “I have to stop him,” he told them; his voice seemed to echo in his own ears.

Asmodean paused, starting back from the collapsing masonry. The dust drifting toward him never touched his shiny red coat; it parted around him, leaving clear air.

Fire bloomed around Rand, enveloped him as the air *became* flame—and vanished before he was even aware of how he did it. His clothes were dry and hot; his hair felt singed, and baked dust fell at every step as he ran. Asmodean was scrambling over the broken stone blocking the street; more lightning flashed, raising gouts of shattered paving stone ahead of him, ripping open crystal palace walls to rain ruin before him.

The Forsaken did not slow, and as he vanished, lightning flashed from the glowing clouds toward Rand, stabbing blindly but meant to kill. Running, Rand wove a shield around himself. Shards of stone bounded from it as he dodged crackling blue bolts, leaped over the holes they tore in the pavement. The air itself sparkled; the hair of his arms lifted with it, the hair on his head stirred.

There was something woven into the barrier of shattered columns. He hardened the shield around himself. Great tumbled chunks of red and white stone exploded as he reached to climb, a burst of pure light and flying stone. Safe inside his bubble, he ran through, only vaguely aware of the rumble of collapsing buildings. He had to stop Asmodean. Straining—and it took strain—he threw lightning ahead, balls of fire ripping up out of the ground, anything to slow the red-coated man. He was catching up. He entered the plaza only a dozen paces behind. Trying to increase his speed, he redoubled his efforts at slowing Asmodean, and fleeing, Asmodean fought to kill him.

The *ter'angreal* and other precious things the Aiel had given their lives to bring here were hurled into the air by lightning, tossed wildly by spinning whirlwinds of fire, constructs of silver and crystal shattering, strange metal shapes toppling as the ground shivered and broke open in wide rents.

Searching wildly, Asmodean ran. And flung himself at what might seem the least significant thing in all that litter. A carved white stone figurine perhaps a foot long, lying on its back, a man holding a crystal sphere in one upraised hand. Asmodean closed his hands on it with an exultant cry.

A heartbeat later, Rand's hands grasped it, too. For the barest instant he stared into the Forsaken's face; he looked no different than he had as a gleeman, except for a wild desperation in his dark eyes, a somewhat handsome man in his middle years—nothing at all to say he was one of the Forsaken. The barest instant, and they both reached through the figure, through the *ter'angreal*, for one of the two most powerful *sa'angreal* ever made.

Vaguely Rand was aware of a great, half-buried statue in far-off Cairhien, of the huge crystal sphere in its hand, glowing like the sun, pulsing with the One Power. And the Power in him surged up like all the seas of the world in storm. With this surely he could do anything; surely he could even have Healed that dead child. The taint swelled as much, curling ’round every particle of him, seeping into every crevice, into his soul. He wanted to howl; he wanted to explode. Yet he only held half what that *sa’angreal* could deliver; the other half filled Asmodean. Back and forth they struggled, tripping over scattered and broken *ter’angreal*, falling, neither daring to let go of the figure with even one finger for fear the other would pull it away. Yet as they rolled over and over, banging now against a redstone doorframe that somehow still stood, now against a fallen crystal statue lying on its side unbroken, a nude woman clasping a child to her breast, as they fought for possession of the *ter’angreal*, the battle was fought on another level, too.

Hammers of Power large enough to level mountains struck at Rand, and blades that could have pierced the earth’s heart; unseen pincers tried to tear his mind from his body, ripped at his very soul. Every scrap of Power he could draw went to hurl those attacks away. Any one could destroy him as if he had never been; he was sure of it. Where they went he could not be sure. The ground bounded beneath them, shaking them as they struggled, flinging them about in a writhing tangle of straining muscle. Dimly he was aware of vast rumbles, of a thousand whining hums like some strange music. The glass columns, quivering, vibrating. He could not worry about them.

All those nights without sleep were catching up to him, the running he had done on top of it. He was tired, and if he could even know it inside the Void, then he was near exhaustion. Tossed by the quaking earth, he realized he was no longer trying to pull the *ter’angreal* from Asmodean, only to hold on. Soon his strength would go. Even if he managed to retain his grip on the stone figure, he would have to let go of *saidin* or be swept away by the rush of it, destroyed as surely as Asmodean would do it. He could not pull another thread through the *ter’angreal*; he and Asmodean were equally balanced, each with half of what the great *sa’angreal* in Cairhien could draw. Asmodean panted in his face, snarling; sweat dripped from the Forsaken’s forehead, ran down his cheeks. The man was tired, too. But as tired as he?

The flailing earth heaved Rand on top for an instant, and just as quickly spun Asmodean up, but in that brief moment Rand felt something pressed between them. The carving of the fat little man with the sword, still tucked into his waistband. An insignificant thing next to the immense Power they drew upon. A cup of water compared to a vast river, to an ocean. He did not even know if he could use it while linked to the great *sa'angreal*. And if he could? Asmodean's teeth bared. Not a grimace, but a weary rictus of a smile; the man thought he was winning. Perhaps he was. Rand's fingers trembled, weakening around the *ter'angreal*; it was all he could do to hold on to *saidin*, even linked as he was to the huge *sa'angreal*.

He had not seen those strange things like black steel wires around Asmodean since leaving the dark place, but he could visualize them even in the Void, place them in his mind around the Forsaken. Tam had taught him the Void as an aid to archery, to be one with the bow, the arrow, the target. He made himself one with those imagined black wires. He barely saw Asmodean frown. The man must be wondering why his face had grown calm; there was always calm in the moment before the arrow was loosed. He reached through the small *angreal* in his waistband, and more of the Power flowed into him. He did not waste time on exulting; it was such a small flow beside what he already contained, and this was his final blow. This would use his final strength. He formed it like a sword of Power, a sword of Light, and struck; one with the sword, one with the imagined wires.

Asmodean's eyes went wide, and he screamed, a howl from the depths of horror; like a struck gong the Forsaken quivered. For an instant there seemed to be two of him, shivering away from each other; then they slid back together. He fell over on his back, arms flung out in his now dirty, tattered red coat, chest heaving; staring up at nothing, his dark eyes looked lost.

As he collapsed, Rand lost his hold on *saidin*, and the Power left him. He had barely enough strength to clutch the *ter'angreal* to his chest and roll away from Asmodean. Pushing himself to his knees felt like climbing a mountain; he huddled around the figure of the man with his crystal sphere.

The earth had stopped moving. The glass columns still stood—he was grateful for that; destroying them would have been like obliterating the history of the Aiel—but *Avendesora*, that had lived three thousand years in legend and truth, *Avendesora* blazed like a torch, and as for the rest of Rhuidean. . . .

The plaza looked as if everything had been picked up and flung about by a mad giant. Half the great palaces and towers were only heaps of rubble, some spilling into the square; huge toppled columns marred others, and fallen walls, and empty gaps where huge windows of colored glass had been. A rift ran the whole way across the city, a split in the earth fifty feet wide. The destruction did not end there. The dome of fog that had hidden Rhuidean for so many centuries was dissipating; the underside no longer glowed, and harsh sunlight poured through great new gaps. Beyond, Chaendaer's peak looked different, lower, and on the other side of the valley some of the mountains were definitely lower. Where one mountain had stood, a fan of stone and dirt stretched across the north end of the valley.

I destroy. Always I destroy! Light, will it ever end?

Asmodean rolled onto his belly, pushed to hands and knees. His eyes found Rand, and the *ter'angreal*, and he made as if to crawl toward them.

Rand could not have channeled a spark, but he had learned how to fight before his first nightmare of channeling. He lifted a fist. "Don't even think about it." The Forsaken stopped, swaying wearily. His face sagged, yet despair and desire warred across it; hate and fear glittered in his eyes.

"I do like to see men fight, but you two cannot even stand." Lanfear moved into Rand's view, surveying the devastation. "You have made a thorough job of it. Can you feel the traces? This place was shielded in some way. You did not leave enough for me to say how." Dark eyes suddenly bright, she knelt in front of Rand, peering at what he held. "So that is what he was after. I thought they were all destroyed. Only half remains of the single one I have seen; a fine trap for some unwary Aes Sedai." She put out a hand, and he clutched the *ter'angreal* tighter. Her smile did not touch her eyes. "Keep it, certainly. To me it is no more than a figurine." Rising, she dusted her white skirts though they did not need it. When she realized he was watching her, she stopped searching the rubble-strewn plaza with her eyes, made her smile brighter. "What you used was one of the two *sa'angreal* I told you of. Did you feel the *immensity* of it? I have wondered what it must be like." She seemed unaware of the hunger in her voice. "With those, together, we can displace the Great Lord of the Dark himself. We can, Lews Therin! Together."

"Help me!" Asmodean crawled toward her unsteadily, his upraised face painted in dread. "You don't know what he has done. You must help me. I would not have come here if not for you.”

“What has he done?” she sniffed. “Beaten you like a dog, and not half so well as you deserve. You were never meant for greatness, Asmodean, only to follow those who are great.”

Somehow Rand managed to stand, still holding the stone-and-crystal figure to his chest. He would not continue on his knees in her presence. “You *Chosen*”—he knew taunting her was dangerous, but he could not stop himself—“gave your souls to the Dark One. You let him attach himself to you.” How many times had he replayed his battle with Ba’alzamon? How many times before he began to suspect what those black wires were? “I cut him off from the Dark One, Lanfear. I cut him off!”

Her eyes widened in shock, staring from him to Asmodean. The man had begun to weep. “I did not think that was possible. Why? Do you think to bring *him* to the Light? You’ve changed nothing about him.”

“He is still the same man who gave himself to the Shadow in the first place,” Rand agreed. “You told me how little you *Chosen* trust one another. How long could he keep it secret? How many of you would believe he didn’t do it himself somehow? I am glad you thought it impossible; maybe the rest of you will as well. You gave me the whole idea, Lanfear. A man to teach me how to control the Power. But I won’t be taught by a man linked to the Dark One. Now I don’t have to be. He may be the same man, but he doesn’t have much choice, does he? He can stay and teach me, hope I win, help me win, or he can hope the rest of you don’t take the excuse to turn on him. Which do you think he’ll choose?”

Asmodean stared wild-eyed at Rand from his crouch, then thrust out a pleading hand toward Lanfear. “They will believe you! You can tell them! I would not be here except for you! You must tell them! I am faithful to the Great Lord of the Dark!”

Lanfear stared at Rand, too. For the first time ever that he had seen, she looked uncertain. “How much *do* you remember, Lews Therin? How much is you, and how much the shepherd? This is the sort of plan you might have devised when we—” Drawing a deep breath, she turned her head to Asmodean. “Yes, they will believe me. When I tell them you went over to Lews Therin. Everyone knows you will leap wherever you think your best chance lies. There.” She nodded to herself in satisfaction. “Another little present for you, Lews Therin. That shield will allow a trickle through, enough for him to teach. It will dissipate with time, but he’ll not be able to challenge you for months, and by that time he *will* have no choice but to remain with you. He was never very good at breaking through a shield; you must be willing to accept pain, and he never could."

"NOOOOOO!" Asmodean crawled toward her. "You cannot do this to me! Please, Mierin! Please!"

"My name is *Lanfear*!" Rage twisted her face to ugliness, and the man lifted into the air, spread-eagled; his clothes pressed to him and the flesh of his face distorted, spread out like butter under a rock.

Rand could not let her kill the man, but he was too tired to touch the True Source unaided; he could barely sense it, a dim glow just out of sight. For an instant his hands tightened on the stone man with the crystal sphere. If he reached through to the huge *sa'angreal* in Cairhien again now, that much of the Power might destroy him. Instead, he reached through the carving in his waistband; with the *angreal*, it was a feeble flow, a hairthin trickle compared to the other, but he was too weary to pull more. He hurled it all between the two Forsaken, hoping to distract her if nothing else.

A bar of white-hot fire ten feet tall streaked between the pair in a blur surrounded by arcing blue lightning, searing a pace-deep groove across the square, a smooth-sided gash glowing with melted earth and stone; the fiery shaft struck a green-streaked palace wall and exploded, the roar buried in the rumble of collapsing marble. On one side of the melted slash Asmodean dropped to the pavement in a shuddering heap, blood trickling from nose and ears; on the other, Lanfear staggered back as if struck, then rounded on Rand. He swayed with the effort of what he had done, and lost *saidin* once more.

For a moment rage engorged her face as deeply as it had for Asmodean. For a moment Rand stood on the brink of death. Then fury vanished with startling abruptness, buried behind a seductive smile. "No, I mustn't kill him. Not after we have gone to so much effort." Moving closer, she reached up to stroke the side of his neck, where her bite from the dream was just healing; he had not let Moiraine know of it. "You still bear my mark. Shall I make it permanent?"

"Did you harm anyone at Alcair Dal, or in the camps?"

Her face never stopped smiling, but her caress changed, fingers suddenly poised as if to rip out his throat. "Such as who? I thought you had realized you did not love that little farmgirl. Or is it the Aiel jade?" A viper.

A deadly viper who loved him—*The Light help me*!—and he did not know how to stop her if she decided to bite, whether him or someone else.

“I don’t want anyone hurt. I need them yet. I can use them.” It was painful saying that, painful for the amount of truth in it. But keeping Lanfear’s fangs out of Egwene and Moiraine, away from Aviendha and anyone else close to him, that was worth a little pain.

Throwing back her beautiful head, she laughed like chiming bells. “I can remember when you were too softhearted to use anyone. Devious in battle, hard as stone and arrogant as the mountains, but open and softhearted as a girl! No, I did not harm any of your precious Aes Sedai, or your precious Aiel. I do not kill without cause, Lews Therin. I do not even hurt without cause.” He was careful not to look at Asmodean; white-faced, drawing jagged breaths, the man had pushed up on one hand, using the other to wipe blood from his mouth and chin.

Turning slowly, Lanfear surveyed the great square. “You have destroyed this city as well as any army could have.” But it was not the ruined palaces she stared at, though she pretended; it was the broken square with its jumbled litter of *ter’angreal* and who knew what else. The corners of her mouth were tight when she turned back to Rand; her dark eyes held a spark of suppressed anger. “Use his teachings well, Lews Therin. The others are still out there, Sammael with his envy of you, Demandred with his hate, Rahvin with his thirst for power. They will be more eager to bring you down, not less, if—when—they discover you hold that.”

Her gaze flickered to the foot-tall figure in his hands, and for an instant he thought she was considering taking it from him. Not to keep the others from his back, but because with it he might be too powerful for her to handle. Right then he was not certain he could stop her if she used nothing but her hands. One instant she was weighing whether to leave the *ter’angreal* in his possession, the next measuring his tiredness. However much she talked of loving him, she would want to be far from him when he regained enough strength to use the thing. Briefly she scanned the plaza again, lips pursed; then abruptly a door opened beside her, not a door to blackness, but into what seemed a palace chamber, all carved white marble and white silk hangings.

“Which one were you?” he said as she stepped toward it, and she paused, looking over a shoulder at him with an almost coy smile.

"Do you think I could stand to be fat, ugly Keille?" She ran hands down her rounded slimness for emphasis. "Isendre, now. Slim, beautiful Isendre. I thought if you suspected, you would suspect her. My pride is strong enough to support a little fat, when it must." The smile became a baring of teeth. "Isendre thought she was dealing with simple Friends of the Dark. I would not be surprised if right now she is frantically trying to explain to some angry Aiel women why a large quantity of their gold necklaces and bracelets are in the bottom of her chest. She actually did steal some of them herself."

"I thought you said you didn't harm anyone!"

"Now your soft heart shows. I can show a tender, woman's heart when I choose. You'll not be able to save her being welted, I think—she deserves that for the least of the looks she gave me—but if you return quickly, you can prevent them sending her off with one waterskin to walk out of this blighted land. They are quite hard on thieves, it seems, these Aiel." She gave an amused laugh, shaking her head in wonder. "So different from what they were. You could slap a Da'shain's face, and all he did was ask what he had done. Slap again, and he asked if he had offended. He would not change if you continued all day." Giving Asmodean a contemptuous sidelong look, she added, "Learn well and quickly, Lews Therin. I mean us to rule together, not to watch Sammael kill you or Graendal add you to her collection of handsome young men. Learn well and quickly." She stepped into the chamber of white marble and silk, and the doorway seemed to turn sideways, narrowed, vanished.

Rand drew the first deep breath he had taken since her appearance. Mierin. A name remembered from the glass columns. The woman who had found the Dark One's prison in the Age of Legends, who had bored into it. Had she known what it was? How had she escaped that fiery doom he had seen? Had she given herself to the Dark One even then?

Asmodean was struggling to his feet, unsteady and nearly falling again. He no longer bled, but blood still traced thin lines from his ears down the sides of his neck, made a smear across his mouth and chin. His filthy red coat was torn, his white lace ripped and snagged. "It was my link to the Great Lord that allowed me to touch *saidin* without going mad," he said hoarsely. "All you have done is make me as vulnerable as you. You might as well let me go. I am not a very good teacher. She only chose me because—" His lips writhed, trying to pull the words back.

“Because there isn’t anyone else,” Rand finished for him and turned away.

On tottering legs Rand crossed the broad square, picking his way through the litter. He and Asmodean had been flung halfway around the forest of glass columns from *Avendesora*. Crystal plinths lay against fallen statues of men and women, some broken in chunks, some not even chipped. A great flat ring of silvery metal had been flipped up on chairs of metal and stone, strange shapes in metal and crystal and glass, all mixed in a heap with shattered bits, a black metal shaft like a spear standing upright, improbably balanced on the pile. The entire plaza was like that.

Out from the great tree, a little searching among the jumble found what he sought. Kicking aside pieces of what seemed to be spiraled glass tubes, he shoved a plain-carved chair of red crystal aside and picked up a foot-tall figurine, a robed woman with a serene face, worked in white stone, holding up a clear sphere in one hand. Unbroken. As useless to him, or to any man, as its male twin was to Lanfear. He considered breaking it. One swing of his arm could shatter that crystal globe on the paving stones, surely.

“She was looking for that.” He had not realized Asmodean had followed him. Wavering, the man scrubbed at his bloody mouth. “She will rip your heart out to put her hands on it.”

“Or yours, for keeping it secret from her. She *loves* me.” *Light help me. Like being loved by a rabid wolf!* After a moment he put the female statue in the crook of his arm with the male. There might be a use for it. *And I don’t want to destroy anything else.*

Yet as he looked around, he saw something besides destruction. The fog was almost gone from the ruined city; only a few wispy sheets remained to drift among the buildings still standing beneath the sinking sun. The valley floor tilted sharply to the south now, and water spilled out of the great rent across the city, the gash that went all the way down to where that deep hidden ocean of water lay. Already the lower end of the valley was filling. A lake. It might reach nearly to the city eventually, a lake maybe three miles long in a land where a pool ten feet across drew people. People would come to this valley to live. He could almost see the surrounding mountains already terraced with crops growing green. They would tend *Avendesora*, the last chora tree. Perhaps they would even rebuild Rhuidean. The Waste would have a city. Perhaps he would even live to see it.

With the *angreal*, the round little man with his sword, he was able to open a doorway to blackness. Asmodean stepped through with him reluctantly, sneering faintly when a single carved stone step appeared, just wide enough for the two of them. Still the same man who had given himself to the Dark One. His calculating, sideways glances were reminder enough of that, if Rand needed any.

They only spoke twice as the step soared through the darkness.

Once Rand said, “I cannot call you Asmodean.”

The man shivered. “My name was Joar Addam Nesossin,” he said at last. He sounded as if he had stripped himself bare, or lost something.

“I can’t use that either. Who knows what scrap holds that name somewhere? The idea is to keep someone from killing you for a Forsaken.” And to keep anyone from knowing he had a Forsaken for teacher. “You will have to go on being Jasin Natael, I think. Gleeman to the Dragon Reborn. Excuse enough for keeping you close.” Natael grimaced, but said nothing.

A little later, Rand said, “The first thing you’ll show me is how to guard my dreams.” The man only nodded, sullenly. He would cause problems, but they could not be as large as the problems of ignorance.

The step slowed, stopped, and Rand *folded* again. The doorway opened on the ledge in Alcair Dal.

The rain had stopped, though the evening-shadowed floor of the canyon was still sodden, churned to mud by Aiel feet. Fewer Aiel than before, perhaps as many as a fourth fewer. But not fighting. Staring at the ledge, where Moiraine and Egwene, Aviendha and the Wise Ones had joined the clan chiefs, who stood talking with Lan. Mat was squatting a little distance from them, hat brim pulled down and black-hafted spear propped on his shoulder, Adelin and her Maidens standing around him. They gaped as Rand stepped out of the doorway, stared more when Natael followed in his tattered shiny red coat and white lace. Mat jumped to his feet with a grin, and Aviendha half-raised a hand toward him. The Aiel in the canyon watched silently.

Before anyone could speak, Rand said, “Adelin, would you send someone out to the fair and tell them to stop beating Isendre? She is not as big a thief as they think.” The yellow-haired woman looked startled, but immediately spoke to one of the Maidens, who dashed off.

“How did you know about that?” Egwene exclaimed, at the same time Moiraine demanded, “Where have you been? How?” Her wide dark eyes darted from him to Natael, her Aes Sedai calm nowhere in evidence. And the Wise Ones . . . ? Sun-haired Melaine looked ready to drag answers out of him with her bare hands. Bair scowled as though she meant to switch them out. Amys shifted her shawl and ran fingers through her pale hair, unable to decide whether she was worried or relieved.

Adelin handed him his coat, still damp. He wrapped it around the two stone figures. Moiraine was considering those, too. He did not know if she even suspected what they were, but he intended to hide them as best he could from anyone. If he could not trust himself with *Callandor*'s power, how much less with the great *sa'angreal*? Not until he had learned more of how to control it, and himself.

"What happened here?" he asked, and the Aes Sedai's mouth tightened at being ignored. Egwene did not look much more pleased.

"The Shaido have gone, behind Sevanna and Couladin," Rhuarc said. "All who remain acknowledge you as *Car'a'carn*."

"The Shaido were not the only ones who fled." Han's leathery face twisted sourly. "Some of my Tomanelle went as well. And Goshien, and Shaarad, and Chareen." Jheran and Erim nodded almost as dourly as Han.

"Not with the Shaido," tall Bael rumbled, "but they went. They will spread what happened here, what you revealed. That was ill done. I saw men throw away their spears and run!"

He will bind you together, and destroy you.

"No Taardad left," Rhuarc put in, not pridefully but as a simple statement of fact. "We are ready to go where you lead."

Where he led. He was not done with the Shaido, with Couladin, or Sevanna. Scanning the Aiel around the canyon he could see shaken faces, for all they had chosen to stay. What must those who had run be like? Yet the Aiel were only a means to an end. He had to remember that. *I have to be even harder than they.*

Jeade'en waited beside the ledge with Mat's gelding. Motioning Natael to stay close, Rand climbed into the saddle, coat-wrapped bundle secure under his arm. Mouth twisted, the once Foresaken came to stand by his left stirrup. Adelin and her remaining Maidens leaped down to form around them, and surprisingly, Aviendha climbed down to take her usual place on his right. Mat jumped to Pips's saddle in one bound.

Rand looked back up at the people on the ledge, all of them watching, waiting. "It will be a long road back." Bael turned his face away. "Long, and bloody." The Aiel faces did not change. Egwene half stretched out a hand toward him, eyes pained, but he ignored her. "When the rest of the clan chiefs come, it begins."

"It began long ago," Rhuarc said quietly. "The question is where and how it ends."

For that, Rand had no answer. Turning the dapple, he rode slowly across the canyon, surrounded by his peculiar retinue. Aiel parted in front of him, staring, waiting. The night's cold was already coming on.

* * *

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And when the blood was sprinkled on ground where nothing could grow, the Children of the Dragon did spring up, the People of the Dragon, armed to dance with death. And he did call them forth from the wasted lands, and they did shake the world with battle.

—from *The Wheel of Time*
by Sulamein so Bhagad
Chief Historian at the Court of the Sun,
the Fourth Age

The End
of the Fourth Book of
The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Accepted, the: Young women in training to be Aes Sedai who have reached a certain level of power and passed certain tests. It normally takes five to ten years to be raised from novice to the Accepted. Accepted are somewhat less confined by rules than novices, and are allowed to choose their own areas of study, within limits. Accepted wear a Great Serpent ring, but only on the third finger of the left hand. When an Accepted is raised Aes Sedai, she chooses her Ajah, gains the right to wear the shawl, and may wear the ring on any finger or not at all if circumstances warrant. *See also* Aes Sedai.

a'dam (AYE-dam)**:** A Seanchan device for controlling a woman who can channel, consisting of a collar and bracelet linked by a leash, all of silvery metal. It has no effect on a woman who cannot channel. *See also damane*; Seanchan; *sul'dam*.

Adelin (AD-ehl-ihn)**:** A woman of the Jindo sept of the Taardad Aiel. A Maiden of the Spear who came to the Stone of Tear.

Aes Sedai (EYEZ seh-DEYE)**:** Wielders of the One Power. Since the Time of Madness, all surviving Aes Sedai are women. Widely distrusted and feared, even hated. Blamed by many for the Breaking of the World, and thought to meddle in the affairs of nations. At the same time, few rulers are without an Aes Sedai advisor, even in lands where such a connection must be kept secret. After some years of channeling the One Power, Aes Sedai take on an ageless quality, so that one old enough to be a grandmother may show no signs of age except perhaps a few gray hairs. *See also* Ajah; Amyrlin Seat; Time of Madness.

Age Lace: Alternative name for the Pattern. *See* Pattern of an Age.

Age of Legends: Age ended by the War of the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. A time when Aes Sedai performed wonders now only dreamed of. *See also* Wheel of Time, the; Breaking of the World, the; War of the Shadow.

Aiel (eye-EEL)**:** The people of the Aiel Waste. Fierce and hardy. Veil their faces before they kill, giving rise to the saying "acting like a black-veiled Aiel" to describe someone being violent. Deadly warriors with weapons or with bare hands, they will not touch a sword. Their pipers play them into battle with the music of dances. Aiel call battle "the dance," and "the dance of spears." *See also* Aiel warrior societies; Aiel Waste.

Aiel War, the: (976–78 NE) When King Laman (LAY-mahn) of Cairhien cut down *Avendoraldera*, four clans of the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World. They looted and burned the capital city of Cairhien as well as many other cities and towns, and the conflict extended into Andor and Tear. By the conventional view, the Aiel were finally defeated at the Battle of the Shining Walls, before Tar Valon; in fact, Laman was killed in that battle, and having done what they came for, the Aiel re-crossed the Spine. *See also Avendoraldera*; Cairhien.

Aiel warrior societies: Aiel warriors are all members of one of the warrior societies, such as the Stone Dogs (*Shae'en M'taal*), the Red Shields (*Aethan Dor*), the Water Seekers (*Duahde Mahdi'in*) or the Maidens of the Spear (*Far Dareis Mai*). Each has its own customs, and sometimes specific duties. For example, Red Shields act as police. Stone Dogs are often used as rear guards during retreats, while Maidens are often scouts. Aiel clans frequently raid and battle, but members of the same society will not fight each other even if their clans do so. Thus there are always lines of contact between the clans even during open warfare. *See also* Aiel; Aiel Waste; *Far Dareis Mai*.

Aiel Waste: Harsh, rugged and all-but-waterless land east of the Spine of the World. Called the Three-fold Land by the Aiel. Few outsiders enter; the Aiel consider themselves at war with all other peoples and do not welcome strangers. Only peddlers, gleemen, and the Tuatha'an are allowed safe entry, although Aiel avoid all contact with the Tuatha'an, whom they call "the Lost Ones." No maps of the Waste itself are known to exist.

Aile Jafar (EYEL jah-FAHR)**:** A group of Sea Folk islands approximately due west of Tarabon.

Aile Somera (EYEL soh-MEER-ah)**:** A group of Sea Folk islands approximately due west of Toman Head.

Ajah (AH-jah)**:** Societies among the Aes Sedai, seven in number and designated by colors: Blue, Red, White, Green, Brown, Yellow and Gray. All Aes Sedai except the Amyrlin Seat belong to one. Each follows a specific philosophy of the use of the One Power and the purposes of the Aes Sedai. The Red Ajah bends its energies to finding men who can channel, and to gentling them. The Brown forsakes involvement with the mundane world and dedicates itself to seeking knowledge, while the White, largely eschewing both the world and the value of worldly knowledge, devotes itself to questions of philosophy and truth. The Green Ajah (called the Battle Ajah during the Trolloc Wars) holds itself ready for Tarmon Gai'don, the Yellow concentrates on the study of Healing, and Blue sisters involve themselves with causes and justice. The Gray are mediators, seeking harmony and consensus. Rumors of a Black Ajah, dedicated to serving the Dark One, are officially denied.

Alanna Mosvani (ah-LAN-nah mos-VANH-nie): An Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah.

al’Meara, Nynaeve (al-MEER-ah, NIGH-neev): A woman once the Wisdom of Emond’s Field, in the Two Rivers district of Andor (AN-door). Now one of the Accepted.

al’Thor, Rand (al-THOR, RAND): A young man from Emond’s Field who is *ta’veren*. Once a shepherd. Now proclaimed as the Dragon Reborn.

al’Thor, Tam (al-THOR, TAM): A farmer and shepherd in the Two Rivers. As a young man, he left to become a soldier, returning with a wife (Kari, now deceased) and a child (Rand).

Alteima (ahl-TEEM-ah): A High Lady of Tear, ambitious and concerned for her husband’s health.

al’Vere, Egwene (eh-GWAIN): A young woman from Emond’s Field. Now one of the Accepted.

Alviarin (ahl-vee-AH-rihn): An Aes Sedai of the White Ajah.

Amyrlin Seat (AHM-ehr-lin SEAT): (1) Leader of the Aes Sedai. Elected for life by the Hall of the Tower, which consists of three representatives (called Sitters, as in “a Sitter for the Green”) from each Ajah. The Amyrlin Seat has, theoretically, supreme authority among the Aes Sedai, and ranks as the equal of a king or queen. A slightly less formal usage is “the Amyrlin.” (2) The throne on which the leader of the Aes Sedai sits.

Amys (ah-MEESE): Wise One of Cold Rocks Hold, and a dreamwalker. An Aiel of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel. Wife of Rhuarc, sister-wife to Lian (lee-AHN), who is roofmistress of Cold Rocks Hold, and sister-mother to Aviendha.

angreal (anh-gree-AHL): Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow anyone capable of channeling to handle a greater amount of the Power than would be safe or even possible unaided. Some were made for use by women, others by men. Rumors of *angreal* usable by both men and women have never been confirmed. Their making is no longer known. Few remain in existence. *See also* channel; *sa’angreal*; *ter’angreal*.

Arad Doman (AH-rad do-MAHN)**:** Nation on the Aryth Ocean. Presently wracked by civil war and simultaneously by wars against those who have declared for the Dragon Reborn and against Tarabon. Most Domani merchants are women, and according to the saying, to “let a man trade with a Domani” is to do something extremely foolish. Domani women are famous—or infamous—for their beauty, seductiveness, and scandalous clothes.

Aram (AH-rahm)**:** A handsome young man of the Tuatha’an.

Artur Hawkwing: Legendary king, Artur Paendrag Tanreall (AHR-tuhr PAY-ehn-DRAG tahn-REE-ahl). Ruled FY 943–94. United all lands west of the Spine of the World. Sent armies across the Aryth Ocean (FY 992), but contact with these was lost at his death, which set off the War of the Hundred Years. His sign was a golden hawk in flight. *See also* War of the Hundred Years.

Atha’an Miere (ah-thah-AHN mee-EHR)**:** *See* Sea Folk.

Avendesora (AH-vehn-deh-SO-rah)**:** In the Old Tongue, “the Tree of Life.” Mentioned in many stories and legends, which give various locations.

Avendoraldera (AH-ven-doh-ral-DEH-rah)**:** Tree grown in the city of Cairhien from a sapling of *Avendesora,* a gift from the Aiel in 566 NE, although no record shows any connection between the Aiel and *Avendesora*. *See also* Aiel War, the.

Aviendha (ah-vee-EHN-dah)**:** A woman of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel.

Aybara, Perrin (ay-BAHR-ah, PEHR-rihn)**:** A young man from Emond’s Field, formerly a blacksmith’s apprentice. He is *ta’veren*. *See also ta’veren.*

Ba’alzamon (bah-AHL-zah-mon)**:** In the Trolloc tongue, “Heart of the Dark.” Believed by most, erroneously, to be the Trolloc name for the Dark One. *See also* Dark One; Trollocs.

Bain (BAYN)**:** A woman of the Black Rock sept of the Shaarad Aiel. A Maiden of the Spear.

Bair (BAYR)**:** A Wise One of the Haido sept of the Shaarad Aiel. A dreamwalker.

Berelain sur Paendrag (BEH-reh-lain suhr PAY-ehn-DRAG)**:** First of Mayene, Blessed of the Light, Defender of the Waves, High Seat of House Paeron (pay-eh-ROHN). A beautiful and willful young woman, and a skillful ruler. She will have what she wants, whatever it takes, and she always keeps her word. *See* Mayene.

Birgitte (ber-GEET-teh)**:** Hero of legend and story, renowned for her beauty almost as much as for her bravery and skill at archery. Carried a silver bow and silver arrows with which she never missed. One of the heroes called back when the Horn of Valere is sounded. Always linked with the hero-swordsman, Gaidal Cain. *See also* Cain, Gaidal; Horn of Valere.

Blight, the: *See* Great Blight, the.

Borderlands, the: The nations bordering the Great Blight: Saldaea, Arafel, Kandor, and Shienar.

Bornhald, Dain (BOHRN-hahld, DAY-ihn)**:** A Captain of the Children of the Light.

Breaking of the World, the: During the Time of Madness, male Aes Sedai who had gone insane, able to wield the One Power to a degree now unknown, changed the face of the earth. They leveled mountain ranges and raised new mountains, lifted dry land where seas had been and made the ocean cover once dry land. Many parts of the world were completely depopulated, the survivors scattered like dust on the wind. This destruction is remembered in stories, legends, and history as the Breaking of the World. *See also* Time of Madness; Hundred Companions, the.

Byar, Jaret (BY-ahr, JAH-ret)**:** An officer of the Children of the Light.

cadin'sor (KAH-dihn-sohr)**:** Garb of Aiel warriors; coat and breeches in browns and grays that fade into rock or shadow, along with soft, laced knee-high boots. In the Old Tongue, "working clothes."

Caemlyn (KAYM-lihn)**:** The capital city of Andor.

Cain, Gaidal (KAIN, GAY-dahl)**:** hero-swordsman of legend and story, always linked to Birgitte and said to be as handsome as she was beautiful. Said to be invincible when his feet were on his native soil. One of the heroes called back when the Horn of Valere is sounded. *See also* Birgitte; Horn of Valere.

Cairhien (KEYE-ree-EHN)**:** Both a nation along the Spine of the World and the capital city of that nation. The city was burned and looted during the Aiel War, as were many other towns and villages. The abandonment of farmland near the Spine of the World after the war made necessary the importation of grain. The assassination of King Gall-drian (998 NE) resulted in war for succession to the Sun Throne, causing the disruption of grain shipments and famine. The banner of Cairhien is a many-rayed golden sun rising on a field of sky blue.

Callandor (CAH-lahn-DOOR)**:** The Sword That Is Not a Sword, the Sword That Cannot Be Touched. Crystal sword once held in the Stone of Tear. A powerful male *sa'angreal*. Its removal from the chamber called the Heart of the Stone was, along with the fall of the Stone, a major sign of the Dragon's Rebirth and the approach of Tarmon Gai'don. *See also* Dragon Reborn; *sa'angreal*; Stone of Tear.

Carridin, Jaichim (CAHR-ih-dihn, JAY-kim)**:** An Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light, a high officer of the Children of the Light.

Cauthon, Abell (CAW-thon, AY-bell)**:** A farmer in the Two Rivers. Father of Mat Cauthon. Wife: Natti (NAT-tee). Daughters: Eldrin (EHL-drihn), and Bodewhin (BOHD-wihn), called Bode.

Cauthon, Mat: A young man from Emond's Field in the Two Rivers who is *ta'veren*. Full name: Matrim (MAT-trim) Cauthon.

Chaendaer (CHAY-ehn-DARE)**:** A mountain in the Aiel Waste, above the valley of Rhuidean. *See also*: Aiel Waste; Rhuidean.

channel (verb): To control the flow of the One Power. *See also* One Power, the

Chiad (CHEE-ahd)**:** A woman of the Stones River sept of the Goshien Aiel, who have blood feud with the Shaarad. A Maiden of the Spear.

Children of the Light: Society of strict ascetic beliefs, owing allegiance to no nation and dedicated to the defeat of the

Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar (LOH-thayr MAHN-tee-LAHR) to proselytize against an increase in Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military organization. Extremely rigid in their beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. Consider Aes Sedai and any who support them to be Darkfriends. Known disparagingly as Whitecloaks. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white. *See also* Questioners, the.

Chronicles, Keeper of the: Second in authority to the Amyrlin Seat among Aes Sedai, she also acts as secretary to the Amyrlin. Chosen for life by the Hall of the Tower, usually from the same Ajah as the Amyrlin. A slightly less formal usage is “the Keeper.” *See also* Amyrlin Seat; Ajah.

Congar, Daise (COHN-gahr, DAYS)**:** A woman of the Two Rivers, now Wisdom of Emond’s Field. Husband: Wit.

Couladin (COO-lah-dihn)**:** An ambitious man of the Domai sept of the Shaido Aiel. His warrior society is *Seia Doon*, the Black Eyes.

cuendillar (CWAIN-deh-yar)**:** An indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any force used in an attempt to break it is absorbed, making *cuendillar* stronger. Also called heartstone.

damane (dah-MAH-nee)**:** In the Old Tongue, literally: “leashed one.” Seanchan term for women who can channel and who are, as they see it, properly controlled by use of *a’dam*. All across Seanchan, young women are tested each year until the age when the inborn ability to channel would have manifested itself. Just as with young men found able to channel (who are executed), *damane* are written out of family records and removed from the rolls of citizens, in effect ceasing to exist as people. Women who can channel but who have not yet been made *damane* are called *marath’damane*, literally, “those who must be leashed.” *See also a’dam*; Seanchan; *sul’dam*.

Damodred, Lord Galadedrid (DAHM-oh-drehd, gah-LAHD-eh-drihd)**:** Half-brother to Elayne and Gawyn, sharing the same father, Taringail (TAH-rihn-gail) Damodred. His sign is a winged silver sword, point down.

Darkfriends: Those who follow the Dark One and believe they will gain great power and rewards, and even immortality, when he is freed from his prison.

Dark One: Most common name, used in every land, for Shai'tan (SHAY-ih-TAN). The source of evil, antithesis of the Creator. Imprisoned by the Creator in Shayol Ghul at the moment of Creation. An attempt to free him brought about the War of the Shadow, the tainting of *saidin*, the Breaking of the World, and the end of the Age of Legends.

Dark One, naming the: Saying the true name of the Dark One (Shai'tan) draws his attention, inevitably bringing ill fortune at best, disaster at worst. For that reason, many euphemisms are used, among them the Dark One, Father of Lies, Sightblinder, Lord of the Grave, Shepherd of the Night, Heartsbane, Soulsbane, Heartfang, Old Grim, Grassburner, and Leafblighter. Darkfriends call him the Great Lord of the Dark. Someone who seems to be inviting ill fortune is often said to be "naming the Dark One."

Daughter-Heir: Title of the heir to the throne of Andor. The eldest daughter of the Queen succeeds her mother on the throne. Without a surviving daughter, the throne goes to the nearest female blood relation of the Queen.

Daughter of the Night: *See* Lanfear.

din Jubai Wild Winds, Coine (dihn joo-BUY: coh-EEN)**:** A woman of the Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk. Sailmistress of the raker *Wavedancer*. Sister of Jorin.

din Jubai White Wing, Jorin (joh-RIHN)**:** A woman of the Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk. Windfinder of the raker *Wavedancer*. Sister of Coine.

Domon, Bayle (DOH-mon, BAIL)**:** Sea-captain born in Illian, once a captive of the Seanchan, now a successful smuggler into and between war-torn Tarabon and Arad Doman. A sometime collector of antiquities, and a man who pays his debts.

Dragon, false: Name given to various men who have claimed to be the Dragon Reborn. Some began wars that involved many nations. Over the centuries most were men unable to channel, but a few could do so. All, however, either disappeared or were captured or killed without fulfilling any of the Prophecies of the Dragon. Among those who could channel, the most powerful were Raolin Darksbane (335–36 AB), Yurian Stonebow (circa 1300–1308 AB), Davian (FY 351), Guaire Amalasan (FY 939–43), and Logain (997 NE). *See also* Dragon Reborn; War of the Second Dragon.

Dragon, Prophecies of the: Generally little known and seldom spoken of, the Prophecies, given in *The Karaethon Cycle* (ka-REE-ah-thon), foretell that the Dark One will be freed again to touch the world, and that Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, Breaker of the World, will be reborn to fight Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle against the Shadow. He will, say the Prophecies, save the world—and Break it again. *See also* Dragon, the.

Dragon, the: Name by which Lews Therin Telamon was known during the War of the Shadow, some three thousand or more years ago. In the madness that overtook all male Aes Sedai, Lews Therin killed everyone who carried any of his blood, as well as everyone he loved, thus earning the name Kinslayer. *See also* Hundred Companions, the; Dragon Reborn; Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Dragon Reborn: According to the Prophecies of the Dragon, the man who is the Rebirth of Lews Therin Kinslayer. *See also* Dragon, the; Dragon, false; Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Dreadlords: Men and women able to channel, who went over to the Shadow during the Trolloc Wars, acting as generals over armies of Trollocs and Darkfriends. Occasionally confused with the Forsaken by the less well educated.

Dreamer: *See* Talents.

dreamwalker: Aiel name for a woman able to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod*.

Egeanin (egg-ee-AHN-ihn)**:** A Seanchan ship's captain on detached duty.

Elaida (eh-LY-da)**:** An Aes Sedai of the Red Ajah. Formerly advisor to Queen Morgase of Andor. She sometimes has the Foretelling.

Elayne (ee-LAIN) **of House Trakand** (trah-KAND)**:** Queen Morgase's daughter, the Daughter-Heir to the Throne of Andor. Now one of the Accepted. Her sign is a golden lily.

Estanda (eh-STAHN-dah)**:** A High Lady of Tear who believes in extracting what is owed slowly but in full.

Faile (fah-EEL)**:** In the Old Tongue, means "falcon." Name assumed by Zarine Bashere (zah-REEN bah-SHEER), a young woman from Saldaea.

Far Dareis Mai (FAHR DAH-rize MY)**:** Literally "Maidens of the Spear." An Aiel warrior society which, unlike any other, admits women and only women. A Maiden may not marry and remain in the society, nor may she fight while carrying a child. Any child born to a Maiden is given to another woman to raise, in such a way that no one knows the child's mother. ("You may belong to no man, nor may any man belong to you, nor any child. The spear is your lover, your child, and your life.") *See also* Aiel; Aiel warrior societies.

Five Powers, the: There are threads to the One Power, named according to the sorts of things that can be done using them—Earth, Air (sometimes called Wind), Fire, Water, and Spirit, which are called the Five Powers. A wielder of the Power will have a greater strength with one, or possibly two, of these, and lesser with the others. In the Age of Legends, Spirit was found equally in men and in women, but great ability with Earth and/or Fire occurred much more often among men, with Water and/or Air among women. Despite exceptions, it was so often so that Earth and Fire came to be regarded as male Powers, Air and Water as female.

Flame of Tar Valon: Symbol of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, and the Aes Sedai. A stylized representation of a flame; a white teardrop, point upwards.

Forsaken, the: Name given to thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends, thus among the most powerful ever known, who went over to the Dark One during the War of the Shadow in return for the promise of immortality. According to both legend and fragmentary records, they were imprisoned along with the Dark One when his prison was resealed. The names given to them are still used to frighten children. They were: Aginor (AGH-ih-nohr), Asmodean (ahs-MOH-dee-an), Balthamel (BAAL-thah-mell), Be'lal (BEH-lahl), Demandred (DEE-man-drehd), Graendal (GREHN-dahl), Ishamael (ih-SHAH-may-EHL), Lanfear (LAN-feer), Mesaana (meh-SAH-nah), Moghedien (moh-GHEH-dee-ehn), Rahvin (RAAV-ihn), Sammael (SAHM-may-EHL), and Semirhage (SEH-mih-RHAHG).

Gaidin (GYE-deen)**:** Literally, "Brother to Battles." A title used by Aes Sedai for the Warders. *See also* Warder.

Galad (gah-LAHD)**:** *See* Damodred, Lord Galadedrid.

Game of Houses, the: Name given the scheming, plots, and manipulations for advantage by noble Houses. Great value is given to subtlety, to aiming at one thing while seeming to aim at another, and to achieving ends with the least visible effort. Also known as the Great Game, and sometimes by its name in the Old Tongue: *Daes Dae'mar* (DAH-ess day-MAR).

Gaul (GAHWL)**:** A man of the Imran sept of the Shaarad Aiel, who have blood feud with the Goshien. A Stone Dog.

Gawyn (GAH-wihn) **of House Trakand** (trah-KAND)**:** Queen Morgase's son, and Elayne's brother, who will be First Prince of the Sword when Elayne ascends to the throne. His sign is a white boar.

Gelb, Floran (GEHLB, FLOHR-an)**:** A former sailor with reasons to avoid Bayle Domon.

gentling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a male who can channel from the One Power. Necessary because any man who channels will go insane from the taint on *saidin* and almost certainly do horrible things with the Power in his madness. One who has been gentled can still sense the True Source, but cannot touch it. Whatever madness has come before gentling is arrested but not cured, and if it is done soon enough death can be averted. *See also* One Power, the; stilling.

gleeman: A traveling storyteller, musician, juggler, tumbler, and all-around entertainer. Known by trademark cloaks of many-colored patches, glee-men perform mainly in the villages and smaller towns.

Gray Man: One who has voluntarily surrendered his or her soul in order to become an assassin serving the Shadow. Gray Men are so ordinary in appearance that the eye can slide right past without noticing them. The vast majority of Gray Men are indeed men, but a small number are women. Also called the Soulless.

Great Blight, the: A region in the far north, entirely corrupted by the Dark One. A haunt of Trollocs, Myrddraal, and other creatures of the Shadow.

***Great Hunt of the Horn, The*:** A cycle of stories concerning the legendary search for the Horn of Valere, in the years between the end of the Trolloc Wars and the beginning of the War of the Hundred Years. If told in its entirety, the cycle would take many days. *See also* Horn of Valere.

Great Lord of the Dark: The name by which Darkfriends refer to the Dark One, claiming that to speak his true name would be blasphemous.

Great Serpent: A symbol for time and eternity, ancient before the Age of Legends began, consisting of a serpent eating its own tail. A ring in the shape of the Great Serpent is awarded to women who have been raised to the Accepted among the Aes Sedai.

hide: A unit of area for measuring land, equal to 100 paces by 100 paces.

High Lords of Tear: Acting as a council, the High Lords are historically the rulers of the nation of Tear, which has neither king nor queen. Their numbers are not fixed, and have varied from as many as twenty to as few as six. Not to be confused with the Lords of the Land, who are lesser Tairen lords.

Horn of Valere (vah-LEER)**:** Legendary object of the Great Hunt of the Horn. Supposedly can call back dead heroes from the grave to fight against the Shadow. A new Hunt of the Horn has been called, and oaths have been administered to the Hunters in Illian.

Hundred Companions, the: One hundred male Aes Sedai, among the most powerful of the Age of Legends, who, led by

Lews Therin Telamon, launched the final stroke that ended the War of the Shadow by sealing the Dark One back into his prison. The Dark One's counterstroke tainted *saidin*; the Hundred Companions went mad and began the Breaking of the World. *See also* Time of Madness; Breaking of the World, the; True Source; One Power, the.

Illian (IHL-lee-an)**:** A great port on the Sea of Storms, capital city of the nation of the same name.

Isendre (ih-SEHN-dreh)**:** A beautiful and mysterious woman traveling in the Aiel Waste.

Kadere, Hadnan (kah-DEER, HAHD-nahn)**:** A peddler traveling the Aiel Waste. A man with knowledge to sell, if he can find the right price.

kaf (KAAF)**:** A Seanchan drink, brewed black and drunk steaming hot, sometimes sweetened but often not. A stimulating beverage.

Keille Shaogi: *See* Shaogi, Keille.

Lan (LAN)**; al'Lan Mandragoran** (AHL-LAN man-DRAG-or-an)**:** A Warder, bonded to Moiraine. Uncrowned King of Malkier, Dai Shan (Battle Lord), and the last surviving Malkieri lord. *See also* Warder; Moiraine; Malkier.

Lanfear (LAN-fear)**:** In the Old Tongue: "Daughter of the Night." One of the Forsaken, perhaps the most powerful next to Ishamael. Unlike the others, she chose this name herself. Said to have loved Lews Therin Telamon, and to have hated his wife, Ilyena. *See also* Forsaken, the; Dragon, the.

Laras (LAH-rahs)**:** Mistress of the Kitchens in the White Tower, the center of Aes Sedai power, in Tar Valon. A woman of surprising knowledge and shocking past.

league: *See* length, units of.

Leane (lee-AHN-eh)**:** An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. Keeper of the Chronicles. *See also* Ajah; Chronicles, Keeper of the.

length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Lews Therin Telamon; Lews Therin Kinslayer: *See* Dragon, the.

Liandrin (lee-AHN-drihn)**:** An Aes Sedai formerly of the Red Ajah, from Tarabon. Now known to be of the Black Ajah.

Lini (LIHN-nee)**:** Childhood nurse to the Lady Elayne, and before her to Elayne's mother, Morgase.

Logain (loh-GAIN)**:** A man who once claimed to be the Dragon Reborn, now gentled and imprisoned in the White Tower in Tar Valon.

Loial (LOY-ahl) **son of Arent** (AH-rehnt) **son of Halan** (HAY-lahn)**:** An Ogier from Stedding Shangtai. Would-be author of a book about the Dragon Reborn.

Luhhan, Haral (LOOH-hahn, HAH-rahl)**:** Blacksmith of the Two Rivers, and member of the Village Council of Emond's Field. His wife Alsbet (AHLS-beht) is a member of the Women's Circle.

Malkier (mahl-KEER)**:** A nation, once one of the Borderlands, now consumed by the Blight. The sign of Malkier was a golden crane in flight.

Manetheren (mahn-EHTH-ehr-ehn)**:** One of the Ten Nations that made the Second Covenant. Also the capital city of that nation. Both city and nation were utterly destroyed in the Trolloc Wars. *See also* Trolloc Wars.

Mayene (may-EHN)**:** City-state on the Sea of Storms, hemmed in and historically oppressed by Tear. Derives its wealth and its independence from knowledge of where to find the oilfish shoals, which rival in economic importance the olive groves of Tear, Illian, and Tarabon. Oilfish and olives provide nearly all lamp oil. The ruler of Mayene is styled "the First"; Firsts claim to be descendants of Artur Hawkwing. The banner of Mayene is a golden hawk in flight on a field of blue.

Melaine (meh-LAYN)**:** A Wise One of the Jhirad sept of Goshien Aiel. A dreamwalker.

Merrilin, Thom (MER-rih-lihn, TOM)**:** A not-so-simple gleeman.

mile: *See* length, units of.

Min (MIN)**:** A young woman with the ability to read things about people in the auras and images she sometimes sees surrounding them.

Moiraine (mwah-RAIN)**:** An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. Born in House Damodred, though not in line of succession to the throne, and raised in the Royal Palace in Cairhien.

Morgase (moor-GAYZ)**:** By the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Trakand. Her sign is three golden keys. The sign of House Trakand is a silver keystone.

Myrddraal (MUHRD-draal)**:** Creatures of the Dark One, commanders of the Trollocs. Twisted offspring of Trollocs in which the human stock used to create the Trollocs has resurfaced, but tainted by the evil that made the Trollocs. They have no eyes, but can see like eagles in light or dark. They have certain powers stemming from the Dark One, including the ability to cause paralyzing fear with a look, and to vanish wherever there are shadows. Among known weaknesses is that they are reluctant to cross running water. In different lands they are known by many names, among them Halfman, the Eyeless, Shadowman, Lurk, Fetch, and Fade.

Natael, Jasin (nah-TAYL, JAY-sihn)**:** A gleeman traveling the Aiel Waste.

Niall, Pedron (NEYE-awl, PAY-drohn)**:** Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light. *See also* Children of the Light.

Oaths, Three: The oaths taken by an Accepted on being raised to Aes Sedai. Spoken while holding the Oath Rod, a *ter'angreal* that makes oaths binding. They are: (1) To speak no word that is not true. (2) To make no weapon with which one man may kill another. (3) Never to use the One Power as a weapon except against Shadowspawn, or in the last extreme of defense of her own life, or that of her Warder or another Aes Sedai. The second oath was the first adopted, in reaction to the War of the Shadow. The first oath, while held to the letter, is often circumvented by careful speaking. It is believed that the last two are inviolable.

Ogier (OH-gehr)**:** (1) A non-human race, characterized by great height (ten feet is average for adult males), broad, almost snout-like noses, and long, tufted ears. They live in areas called *stedding*. Their separation from these *stedding* after the Breaking of the World (a time called the Exile by Ogier) resulted in what is called the Longing; an Ogier who is too long out of the *stedding* sickens and dies. They rarely leave their *stedding* and typically have little contact with humankind. Knowledge of them among humans is sparse, and many believe Ogier to be only legends. Although thought to be a pacific people and extremely slow to anger, some old stories say they fought alongside humans in the Trolloc Wars, and call them implacable enemies. By and large, they are extremely fond of knowledge, and their books and stories often contain information lost to humans. A typical Ogier life-span is at least three to four times that of a human. (2) Any individual of that non-human race. *See also* Breaking of the World, the; *stedding*.

Old Tongue: The language spoken during the Age of Legends. It is generally expected that nobles and the educated will have learned to speak it, but most know only a few words. Translation is often difficult, as it is a language capable of many subtly different meanings.

One Power, the: The power drawn from the True Source. The vast majority of people are completely unable to learn to channel the One Power. A very small number can be taught to channel, and an even tinier number have the ability inborn. These few have no need to be taught; they will channel whether they want to or not, often without even realizing what they are doing. This inborn ability usually manifests itself in late adolescence or early adulthood. If control is not taught, or self-learned (extremely difficult, with a success rate of only one in four), death is certain. Since the Time of Madness, no man has been able to channel the Power without eventually going completely, horribly mad, and then, even if he has learned some control, dying from a wasting sickness that causes the sufferer to rot alive, a sickness caused, as is the madness, by the Dark One’s taint on *saidin*. *See also* Aes Sedai; channel; Five Powers, the; Time of Madness; True Source.

Ordeith (OHR-deeth)**:** In the Old Tongue, “Wormwood.” Name taken by a man who advises Pedron Niall.

Pattern of an Age: The Wheel of Time weaves the threads of human lives into the Pattern of an Age, often called simply the Pattern, which forms the substance of reality for that Age. *See also ta’veren*.

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. Avowed purposes are to discover the truth in disputations and uncover Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is torture; their normal manner that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. Refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light, the Hand that digs out truth, and at times act as if they were entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the Questioners is the High Inquisitor, who sits on the Council of the Anointed. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd’s crook.

Rendra (REHN-drah)**:** A woman of Tarabon. Innkeeper of the Three Plums Court, in Tanchico.

Rhuarc (RHOURK)**:** An Aiel, clan chief of the Taardad Aiel.

Rhuidean (RHUY-dee-ahn)**:** A place in the Aiel Waste to which must go any man wanting to be a clan chief and any woman wanting to be a Wise One. Men may enter only once, women twice. Only one man in three survives his journey to Rhuidean. The survival rate for women is considerably higher for both visits. Its location is a secret closely guarded by the Aiel. The prescribed penalty for a non-Aiel entering the valley of Rhuidean is death, though some who are favored (such as peddlers or gleemen) might simply be stripped naked, given waterskins, and allowed to attempt to walk out of the Waste.

sa'angreal (SAH-ahn-GREE-ahl)**:** Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow channeling much more of the One Power than would otherwise be possible or safe. A *sa'angreal* is similar to, but more powerful than, an *angreal*. The amount of the Power that can be wielded with a *sa'angreal* compares to the amount that can be handled with an *angreal* as the Power wielded with the aid of an *angreal* does to the amount that can be handled unaided. The making of them is no longer known. As with *angreal*, there are male and female *sa'angreal*. Only a handful remain, far fewer even than *angreal*.

sa'sara (sah-SAHR-rah)**:** An indecent Saldaean dance, outlawed by a number of Saldaean queens, but to no avail. Saldaean history records three wars, two rebellions, and countless unions and/or feuds between noble houses, as well as innumerable duels, sparked by women dancing the sa'sara. One rebellion was supposedly quelled when a defeated queen danced it for the victorious general; he married her and restored her throne. This tale is not found in any official history and has been denied by every queen of Saldaea.

saidar (sah-ih-DAHR)**;** ***saidin*** (sah-ih-DEEN)**:** *See* True Source.

Sandar, Juilin (sahn-DAHR, JUY-lihn)**:** A thief-catcher from Tear.

Sea Folk: More properly, the Atha'an Miere, the People of the Sea. A secretive people. Inhabitants of islands in the Aryth (AH-rihth) Ocean and the Sea of Storms, they spend little time ashore, living most of their lives on their ships. Most seaborne trade is carried by Sea Folk ships.

Seana (see-AHN-ah)**:** A Wise One of the Black Cliffs sept of the Nakai Aiel. A dreamwalker.

Seanchan (SHAWN-CHAN)**:** (1) Descendants of the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean, who conquered the lands there. They believe that any woman who can channel must be controlled for the safety of everyone else, and any man who can channel must be killed for the same reason. (2) The land from which the Seanchan come.

Seekers for Truth: A police/spy organization of the Seanchan Imperial Throne. Although most are property of the Imperial family, they have wide powers. Even one of the Blood (a Seanchan noble) can be arrested for failure to answer any question put by a Seeker, or for failure to cooperate fully with a Seeker, this last defined by the Seekers themselves, subject only to review by the Empress.

Servants, Hall of the: In the Age of Legends, the great meeting hall of the Aes Sedai.

Sevanna (seh-VAHN-nah)**:** A woman of the Jumai sept of the Shaido Aiel. Widow of Suladric (soo-LAH-dric), who was clan chief of the Shaido, and thus roofmistress of Comarda Hold until a new clan chief is chosen.

Shaogi, Keille (shah-OH-ghe, KEYEL-lee)**:** A peddler traveling the Aiel Waste. A woman with plans even larger than she is.

Shayol Ghul (SHAY-ol GHOOL)**:** A mountain in the Blasted Lands, the site of the Dark One’s prison.

Siuan Sanche (SWAHN SAHN-chay)**:** Daughter of a Tairen fisherman, she was, according to Tairen law, put on a ship to Tar Valon before the second sunset after discovery that she had the potential to channel. Formerly of the Blue Ajah.

Soulless: *See* Gray Man.

span: *See* length, units of.

Spine of the World, the: A towering mountain range, with few passes, which separates the Aiel Waste from the lands to the west.

stedding (STEHD-ding)**:** An Ogier (OH-geer) homeland. Many *stedding* have been abandoned since the Breaking of the World. They are shielded in some way, no longer understood, so that within them no Aes Sedai can channel the One Power, nor even sense the True Source. Attempts to wield the One Power from outside a *stedding* have no effect inside the *stedding* boundary. No Trolloc will enter a *stedding* unless driven, and even Myrddraal will do so only at the greatest need and with the greatest reluctance. Even Darkfriends, if truly dedicated, feel uncomfortable within a *stedding*.

stilling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a woman who can channel from the One Power. A woman who has been stilled can sense the True Source, but cannot touch it. So seldom has it been done that novices are required to learn the names and crimes of all women who have suffered it. Officially, stilling is the result of trial and sentence for a crime. When it happens accidentally, it is called being burned out. In practice, the term stilling is often used for both.

Stone of Tear: A great fortress in the city of Tear, said to have been made by use of the One Power soon after the Breaking of the World. Attacked and besieged unsuccessfully countless times, it fell in a single night to the Dragon Reborn and a few hundred Aiel, thus fulfilling two parts of the Prophecies of the Dragon. The Stone contains a collection of *an'greal* and *ter'angreal* rivaling that of the White Tower, a collection gathered, some say, in an attempt to diminish the glare of possessing *Callandor*.

sul'dam (SOOL-dam)**:** Literally, "leash holder." Seanchan term for a woman with the ability to control, by means of an *a'dam*, a woman who can channel. Young women in Seanchan are tested for this ability at the same time as the testing for *damane* and to the same age. A fairly honored position among the Seanchan. Many more *sul'dam* are found than *damane*. *See also a'dam*; *damane*; Seanchan.

sursa (SUHR-sah)**:** Thin, paired sticks used as eating implements in Arad Doman in place of forks. Some say the difficulty of eating with *sursa* is the source of Domani merchants' fabled perseverance; others claim it is the source of the equally fabled Domani temper.

Talents: Abilities in the use of the One Power in specific areas. The best known of these is Healing. Some, such as Traveling, the ability to shift from one place to another without crossing the intervening space, have been lost. Others, such as

Foretelling (the ability to foretell future events, but in a general way), are now found rarely. Another Talent long thought lost is Dreaming, which involves, among other things, interpreting the Dreamer's dreams to foretell future events in more specific fashion than Foretelling does. Some Dreamers had the ability to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the World of Dreams, and (it is said) even other people's dreams. The last known Dreamer was Corianin Nedeal (coh-ree-AHN-ihn neh-dee-AHL), who died in 526 NE, but there is now another, known to but a few.

ta'maral'ailen (tah-MAHR-ahl-EYE-lehn)**:** In the Old Tongue, "Web of Destiny." A great change in the Pattern of an Age, centered around one or more people who are *ta'veren*. *See also* Pattern of an Age; *ta'veren*.

Tarabon (TAH-rah-BON)**:** Nation on the Aryth Ocean. Capital city: Tanchico (tan-CHEE-coh). Once a great trading nation, a source of rugs, dyes and fireworks produced by the Guild of Illuminators, among other things. Now wracked by civil war, as well as by simultaneous wars against Arad Doman and people sworn to the Dragon Reborn.

Tarmon Gai'don (TAHR-mohn GAY-dohn)**:** The Last Battle. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the; Horn of Valere.

ta'veren (tah-VEER-ehn)**:** A person around whom the Wheel of Time weaves all surrounding life-threads, perhaps ALL life-threads, to form a Web of Destiny. *See also* Pattern of an Age.

Tear (TEER)**:** A nation on the Sea of Storms. Also the capital city of that nation, a great seaport. The banner of Tear is three white crescent moons slanting across a field half red, half gold. *See also* Stone of Tear.

Telamon, Lews Therin (TEHL-ah-mon, LOOZ THEH-rihn)**:** *See* Dragon, the.

Tel'aran'rhiod (tel-AYE-rahn-rhee-ODD)**:** In the Old Tongue, "the Unseen World," or "the World of Dreams." A world glimpsed in dreams which was believed by the ancients to permeate and surround all other possible worlds. Unlike other dreams, what happens to living things in the World of Dreams is real; a wound taken there will still be there on awakening, and one who dies there does not wake at all.

ter'angreal (TEER-ahn-GREE-ahl)**:** Remnants of the Age of Legends that use the One Power. Unlike *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, each *ter'angreal* was made to do a particular thing. Some *ter'angreal* are used by Aes Sedai, but the original purposes of many are unknown. Some require channeling, while others may be used by anyone. Some will kill or destroy the ability to channel of any woman who uses them. *See also angreal*;*sa'angreal*.

Time of Madness: The years after the Dark One's counter-stroke tainted the male half of the True Source, when male Aes Sedai went mad and Broke the World. The exact duration of this period is unknown, but it is believed to have lasted nearly one hundred years. It ended completely only with the death of the last male Aes Sedai. *See also* Hundred Companions, the; True Source; One Power, the.

Torean (toh-ree-AHN)**:** A High Lord of Tear. A man who desires what neither his vast fortune nor his face will gain him.

Traveling People: *See* Tuatha'an.

Trollocs (TRAHL-lohks)**:** Creatures of the Dark One, created during the War of the Shadow. Huge of stature, they are a twisted blend of animal and human stock. Divided into tribe-like bands, among them the Dha'vol, the Ko'bal, and the Dhai'mon. Vicious by nature, they kill for the pure pleasure of killing. Deceitful in the extreme, they cannot be trusted unless coerced by fear.

Trolloc Wars: A series of wars, beginning about 1000 AB and lasting more than three hundred years, during which Trolloc armies ravaged the world. Eventually the Trollocs were driven back into the Great Blight, but some nations ceased to exist, and others that survived were almost depopulated. All records of the time are fragmentary.

True Source: The driving force of the universe, which turns the Wheel of Time. Divided into a male half (*saidin*) and a female half (*saidar*), which work at the same time with and against each other. Only a man can draw on *saidin*, only a woman on *saidar*. Since the beginning of the Time of Madness, *saidin* has been tainted by the Dark One's touch. *See also* One Power, the.

Tuatha'an (too-AH-thah-AHN)**:** A wandering folk, also known as the Tinkers and as the Traveling People, who live in brightly painted wagons and follow a totally pacifist philosophy called the Way of the Leaf. They are among the few who can cross the Aiel Waste unmolested, for the Aiel strictly avoid all contact with them.

Verin Mathwin (VEHR-ihn MAH-thwihn)**:** An Aes Sedai of the Brown Ajah.

Warder: A warrior bonded to an Aes Sedai. The bonding is a thing of the One Power: by it he gains such gifts as quick healing, the ability to go long periods without food, water, or rest, and the ability to sense the taint of the Dark One at a distance. So long as a Warder lives, the Aes Sedai to whom he is bonded knows he is alive however far away he is, and when he dies she will know the moment and manner of his death. While most Ajahs believe an Aes Sedai may have one Warder bonded to her at a time, the Red Ajah refuses to bond any Warders at all, while the Green Ajah believe an Aes Sedai may bond as many as she wishes. Ethically the Warder must accede to the bonding voluntarily, but it has been known to be done against the Warder's will. What the Aes Sedai gain from the bonding is a closely held secret. *See also* Aes Sedai.

War of Power: *See* War of the Shadow.

War of the Hundred Years (FY 994–FY 1117): A series of overlapping wars among constantly shifting alliances, precipitated by the death of Artur Hawkwing and the resulting struggle for his empire. The War of the Hundred Years depopulated large parts of the lands between the Aryth Ocean and the Aiel Waste, from the Sea of Storms to the Great Blight. So great was the destruction that only fragmentary records of the time remain. The empire of Artur Hawkwing was pulled apart, and the nations of the present day were formed. *See also* Hawkwing, Artur.

War of the Second Dragon (FY 939–43): War fought against the false Dragon Guaire Amalasan. During this war a young king named Artur Paendrag Tanreall, later known as Artur Hawkwing, rose to overwhelming prominence.

War of the Shadow: Also known as the War of Power. Began shortly after the attempt to free the Dark One, and soon involved the whole world. In a world where even the memory of war had been forgotten, every facet of war was rediscovered, often twisted by the Dark One's touch on the world, and the One Power was used as a weapon. The war was ended by the resealing of the Dark One into his prison. *See also* Hundred Companions, the; Dragon, the.

weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Wheel of Time, the: Time is a wheel with seven spokes, each spoke an Age. As the Wheel turns, Ages come and go, each leaving memories that fade to legend, then to myth, and are forgotten by the time that Age comes again. The Pattern of an Age is slightly different each time an Age comes, and each time it is subject to greater change.

Whitecloaks: *See* Children of the Light.

wilder: A woman who has learned to channel the One Power on her own, surviving the crisis as only one in four does. Such women usually build barriers against knowing what it is they are doing, but if these can be broken down, wilders are among the most powerful of channelers. The term is often used in derogatory fashion.

Wisdom: In villages, a woman chosen by the Women's Circle for her knowledge of such things as healing and foretelling the weather, as well as common good sense. Generally considered the equal of the Mayor, and in some villages his superior. She is chosen for life, and it is very rare for a Wisdom to be removed from office before her death. Depending on the land, she may instead have another title, such as Guide, Healer, Wise Woman, or Seeker.

Wise One: Among the Aiel, Wise Ones are women chosen by other Wise Ones and trained in healing, herbs and other things, much like Wisdoms. Usually there is a single Wise One to each clan or sept hold. Some Wise Ones are said to have wondrous healing abilities, and to do things that seem miraculous. They have great authority and responsibility, as well as great influence with sept and clan chiefs, though these men often accuse them of meddling.

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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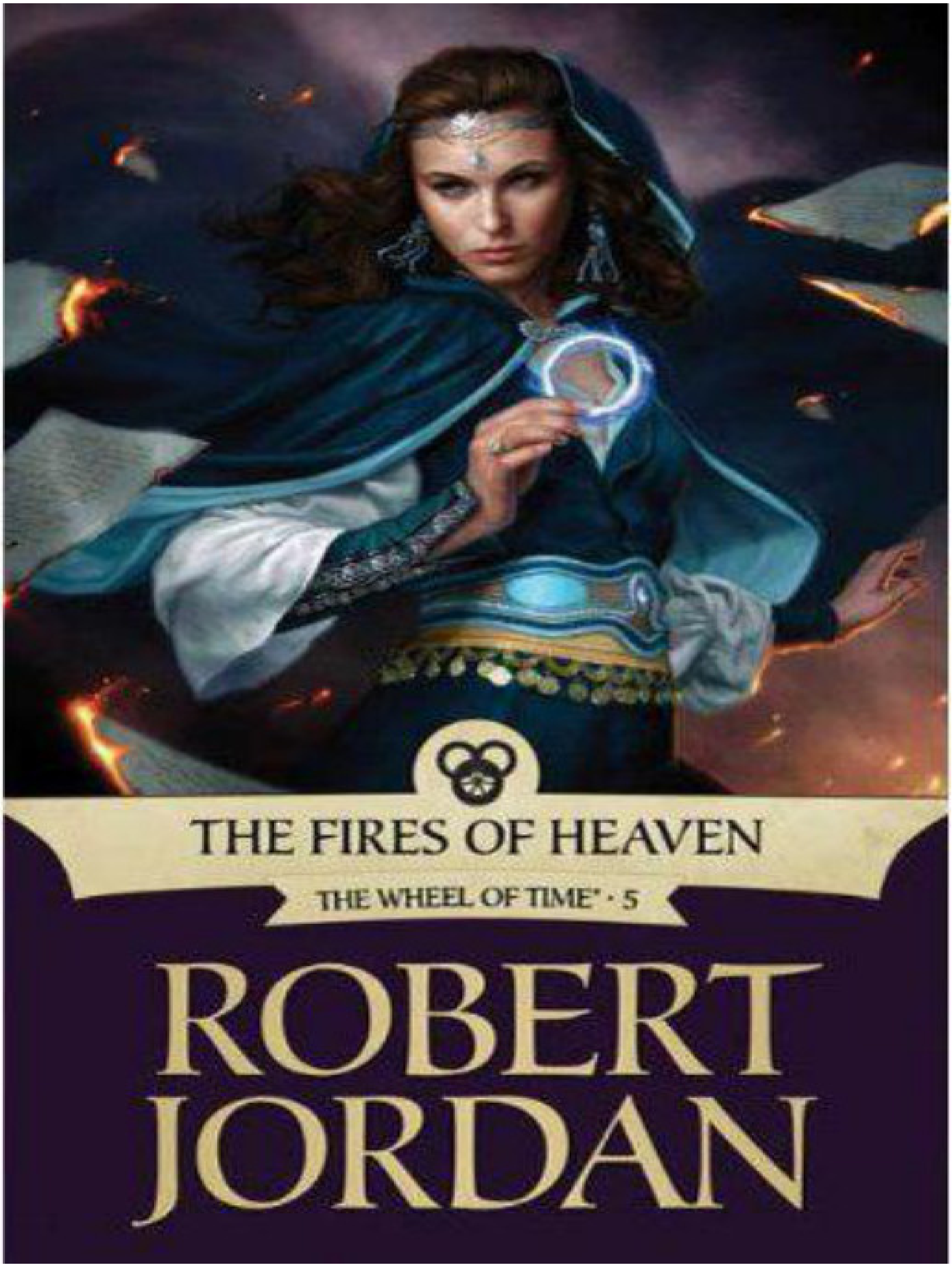
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For Harriet
The light of her eyes is my Light.

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With his coming are the dread fires born again. The hills burn, and the land turns sere. The tides of men run out, and the hours dwindle. The wall is pierced, and the veil of parting raised. Storms rumble beyond the horizon, and the fires of heaven purge the earth. There is no salvation without destruction, no hope this side of death.

—fragment from *The Prophecies of the Dragon*
believed translated by N'Delia Basolaine
First Maid and Swordfast to Raidhen of Hoi Cuchone
(circa 400 AB)

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PROLOGUE

The First Sparks Fall

Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan absently fingered the long, seven-striped stole about her shoulders, the stole of the Amyrlin Seat, as she sat behind her wide writing table. Many would have accounted her beautiful, at first glance, but a second look made it clear that the severity of her ageless, Aes Sedai face was not a momentary matter. Today there was something more, a light of anger in her dark eyes. If anyone had noticed.

She barely listened to the women arrayed on stools before her. Their dresses were every color from white to the darkest red, in silk or wool as each woman's taste dictated, yet all but one wore their formal shawls, embroidered White Flame of Tar Valon centered on their backs, colored fringe proclaiming their Ajahs, as though this were a meeting of the Hall of the Tower. They discussed reports and rumors of events in the world, trying to sift fact from fancy, trying to decide the Tower's course of action, but they seldom even glanced at the woman behind the table, the woman they had sworn to obey. Elaida could not keep her full attention on them. They did not know what was really important. Or rather, they knew and feared to speak of it.

"There is apparently something happening in Shienar." That was Danelle, slight and often seemingly lost in a dream, the only Brown sister present. Green and Yellow also had only one sister apiece, and none of the three Ajahs was pleased about that. There were no Blues. Now Danelle's big blue eyes looked thoughtfully inward; an unnoticed ink smudge stained her cheek, and her dark gray wool dress was rumpled. "There are rumors of skirmishes. Not with Trollocs, and not Aiel, though raids through the Niamh Passes appear to have increased. Between Shienarans. Unusual for the Borderlands. They seldom fight each other."

“If they intend to have a civil war, they have chosen the proper time for it,” Alviarin said coolly. Tall and slim and all in white silk, she was the one without a shawl. The stole of the Keeper around her shoulders was white also, to show she had been raised from the White Ajah. Not Red, Elaida’s former Ajah, as tradition held. Whites were always cool. “The Trollocs might as well have vanished. The entire Blight seems quiet enough for two farmers and a novice to guard.”

Teslyn’s bony fingers shuffled papers on her lap, though she did not look at them. One of four Red sisters there—more than any other Ajah—she ran Elaida a close second for severity, though no one had ever thought her beautiful. “Better perhaps if it did no be so quiet,” Teslyn said, her Illianer accent strong. “I did receive a message this morning that the Marshal-General of Saldaea does have an army on the move. No toward the Blight, but in the opposite direction. South and east. He would no ever have done that if the Blight did no seem to be asleep.”

“Then word of Mazrim Taim is seeping out.” Alviarin could have been discussing the weather or the price of carpets instead of a potential disaster. Much effort had gone into capturing Taim, and as much into hiding his escape. No good to the Tower if the world learned they could not hold on to a false Dragon once he was taken. “And it seems that Queen Tenobia, or Davram Bashere, or both, thinks we cannot be trusted to deal with him again.”

Dead quiet fell at the mention of Taim. The man could channel—he had been on his way to Tar Valon to be gentled, cut off from the One Power forever, when he was broken free—yet that was not what curbed tongues. Once the existence of a man able to channel the One Power had been the deepest anathema; hunting such men down was the main reason of existence for the Red, and every Ajah helped as it could. But now most of the women beyond the table shifted on their stools, refusing to meet each other’s eyes, because speaking of Taim brought them too close to another subject they did not want to speak aloud. Even Elaida felt bile rise in her stomach.

Apparently Alviarin experienced no such reluctance. One corner of her mouth quirked momentarily in what might have been smile or grimace. “I will redouble our efforts to retake Taim. And I suggest that a sister be dispatched to counsel Tenobia. Someone used to overcoming the sort of stubborn resistance that young woman will put up.”

Others rushed to help fill the silence.

Joline shifted her green-fringed shawl on slender shoulders and smiled, though it seemed a bit forced. “Yes. She needs an Aes Sedai at her shoulder. Someone able to handle Bashere. He has excessive influence with Tenobia. He must move his army back where it can be used if the Blight wakes up.” Too much bosom showed in the gap of her shawl, and her pale green silk was too snug, too clinging. And she smiled too much for Elaida’s liking. Especially at men. Greens always did.

“The last thing we need now is another army on the march,” Shemerin, the Yellow sister, said quickly. A slightly plump woman, she had somehow never really managed the outward calm of Aes Sedai; there was often a strain of anxiety around her eyes, and more so of late.

“And someone to Shienar,” added Javindhra, another Red. Despite smooth cheeks, her angular face was hard enough to hammer nails. Her voice was harsh. “I don’t like trouble of this sort in the Borderlands. The last thing we need is Shienar weakening itself to the point where a Trolloc army could break through.”

“Perhaps.” Alviarin nodded, considering. “But there are agents in Shienar—Red, I am sure, and perhaps others?—” The four Red sisters nodded tightly, reluctantly; no one else did. “—who can warn us if these small clashes become anything to worry us.”

It was an open secret that every Ajah except the White, devoted to logic and philosophy as it was, had watchers and listeners scattered through the nations to varying degrees, though the Yellow network was believed to be a pitiful thing. There was nothing of sickness or Healing they could learn from those who could not channel. Some individual sisters had their own eyes-and-ears, though perhaps even more closely guarded than agents of the Ajahs. The Blues had had the most extensive, both Ajah and personal.

“As for Tenobia and Davram Bashere,” Alviarin went on, “are we agreed that they must be dealt with by sisters?” She hardly waited for heads to nod. “Good. It is done. Memara will do nicely; she will take no nonsense from Tenobia, while never letting her see the leash. Now. Does anyone have fresh word out of Arad Doman or Tarabon? If we do not do something there soon, we may find that Pedron Niall and the Whitecloaks have sway from Bandar Eban to the Shadow Coast. Evanellein, you have something?” Arad Doman and Tarabon were racked by civil wars, and worse. There was no order anywhere. Elaida was surprised they would bring it up.

“Only a rumor,” the Gray sister replied. Her silk dress, matching the fringe on her shawl, was finely cut and scooped low at the neck. Often Elaida thought the woman should have been Green, so concerned was she with her looks and clothes. “Almost everyone in those poor lands is a refugee, including those who might send news. The Panarch Amathera has apparently vanished, and it seems an Aes Sedai may have been involved. . . .”

Elaida’s hand tightened on her stole. Nothing touched her face, but her eyes smoldered. The matter of the Saldaean army was done. At least Memara was Red; that was a surprise. But they had not even asked her opinion. It was done. The startling possibility that an Aes Sedai was involved in the disappearance of the Panarch—if this was not another of the thousand improbable tales that drifted from the western coast—could not take Elaida’s mind from that. There were Aes Sedai scattered from the Aryth Ocean to the Spine of the World, and the Blues at least might do anything. Less than two months since they had all knelt to swear fealty to her as the embodiment of the White Tower, and now the decision was made without so much as a glance in her direction.

The Amyrlin’s study sat only a few levels up in the White Tower, yet this room was the heart of the Tower as surely as the Tower itself, the color of bleached bone, was the heart of the great island city of Tar Valon, cradled in the River Erinin. And Tar Valon was, or should be, the heart of the world. The room spoke of the power wielded by the long line of women who had occupied it, floor of polished redstone from the Mountains of Mist, tall fireplace of golden Kandori marble, walls paneled in pale, oddly striped wood marvelously carved with unknown birds and beasts more than a thousand years ago. Stone like glittering pearls framed the tall, arched windows that let onto the balcony overlooking the Amyrlin’s private garden, the only stone like it known, salvaged from a nameless city swallowed by the Sea of Storms during the Breaking of the World. A room of power, a reflection of Amyrlins who had made thrones dance to their calling for nearly three thousand years. And they did not even ask her opinion.

It happened too often, this slighting. Worst—most bitter of all, perhaps—they usurped her authority without even thinking of it. They knew how she had come to the stole, knew their aid had put it on her shoulders. She herself had been too much aware of that. But they presumed too far. It would soon be time to do something about that. But not quite yet.

She had put her own stamp on the room, as much as possible, with a writing table ornately carved in triple-linked rings and a heavy chair that raised an inlaid ivory Flame of Tar Valon above her dark hair like a large snowy teardrop. Three boxes of Altaran lacquerwork were arranged on the table, precisely equidistant from each other; one held the finest of her collection of carved miniatures. A white vase on a simple plinth against one wall held red roses that filled the room with sweet fragrance. There had been no rain since she was raised, but fine blossoms were always available with the Power; she had always liked flowers. They could be so easily pruned and trained to produce beauty.

Two paintings hung where, seated, she could see them merely by lifting her head. The others avoided looking at them; among all the Aes Sedai who came to Elaida's study, only Alviarin ever so much as glanced at them.

"Is there any news of Elayne?" Andaya asked diffidently. A thin, birdlike little woman, outwardly timid despite Aes Sedai features, the second Gray looked an unlikely mediator, but was in fact one of the best. There were still faint traces of Tarabon in her voice. "Or Galad? If Morgase discovers that we have lost her stepson, she may begin to ask more questions concerning the whereabouts of her daughter, yes? And if she learns we have lost the Daughter-Heir, Andor may become as closed to us as Amadicia."

A few women shook their heads—there was no news, and Javindhra said, "A Red sister is in place in the Royal Palace. Newly raised, so she can easily pass for other than Aes Sedai." She meant that the woman had not yet taken on the agelessness that came with long use of the Power. Someone trying to guess the age of any woman in the study would have fumbled over a range of twenty years, and in some cases would be off by twice that. "She is well trained, though, quite strong, and a good observer. Morgase is absorbed in putting forward her claim to the Cairhienin throne." Several women shifted on their stools, and as if realizing she had stepped close to dangerous ground, Javindhra hurried on. "And her new lover, Lord Gaebril, seems to be keeping her occupied otherwise." Her thin mouth narrowed even further. "She is completely besotted with the man."

“He keeps her concentrated on Cairhien,” Alviarin said. “The situation there is nearly as bad as in Tarabon and Arad Doman, with every House contending for the Sun Throne, and famine everywhere. Morgase will reestablish order, but it will take time for her to have the throne secure. Until that is done, she will have little energy left to worry about other matters, even the Daughter-Heir. And I set a clerk the task of sending occasional letters; the woman does a good imitation of Elayne’s hand. Morgase will keep until we can secure proper control of her again.”

“At least we still have her son in hand.” Joline smiled.

“Gawyn do hardly be in hand,” Teslyn said sharply. “Those Younglings of his do skirmish with Whitecloaks on both sides of the river. He does act on his own as much as at our direction.”

“He will be brought under control,” Alviarin said. Elaida was beginning to find that constant cool composure hateful.

“Speaking of the Whitecloaks,” Danelle put in, “it appears that Pedron Niall is conducting secret negotiations, trying to convince Altara and Murandy to cede land to Illian, and thus keep the Council of Nine from invading one or both.”

Safely back from the precipice, the women on the other side of the table nattered on, deciding whether the Lord Captain Commander’s negotiations might gain too much influence for the Children of the Light. Perhaps they should be disrupted so the Tower could step in and replace him.

Elaida’s mouth twisted. The Tower had often in its history been cautious of necessity—too many feared them, too many distrusted them—but it had never *feared* anything or anyone. Now, it feared.

She raised her eyes to the paintings. One consisted of three wooden panels depicting Bonwhin, the last Red to have been raised to the Amyrlin Seat, a thousand years before, and the reason no Red had worn the stole since. Until Elaida. Bonwhin, tall and proud, ordering Aes Sedai in their manipulations of Artur Hawkwing; Bonwhin, defiant, on the white walls of Tar Valon, under siege by Hawkwing’s forces; and Bonwhin, kneeling and humbled, before the Hall of the Tower as they stripped her of stole and staff for nearly destroying the Tower.

Many wondered why Elaida had had the triptych retrieved from the storerooms where it had lain covered in dust; if none spoke openly, she had still heard the whispers. They did not understand that constant reminder of the price of failure was necessary.

The second painting was in the new fashion, on stretched canvas, a copy of a street artist's sketch from the distant west. That one caused even more unease among the Aes Sedai who saw it. Two men fought among clouds, seemingly in the sky, wielding lightning for weapons. One had a face of fire. The other was tall and young, with reddish hair. It was the youth who caused the fear, who made even Elaida's teeth clench. She was not sure if it was in anger, or to keep them from chattering. But fear could and must be controlled. Control was all.

"We are done, then," Alviarin said, rising smoothly from her stool. The others copied her, adjusting skirts and shawls in preparation for leaving. "In three days, I will expect—"

"Have I given you leave to go, daughters?" Those were the first words Elaida had spoken since telling them to be seated. They looked at her in surprise. Surprise! Some moved back toward the stools, but not with any haste. And not a word of apology. She had let this go on much too long. "Since you are standing, you will remain so until I am done." A moment of confusion caught those half-seated, and she continued as they straightened again uncertainly. "I have heard no mention of the search for that woman and her companions."

No need to name *that woman*, Elaida's predecessor. They knew who she meant, and Elaida found it harder every day even to think the former Amyrlin's name. All of her current problems—all!—could be laid at *that woman*'s feet.

"It is difficult," Alviarin said evenly, "since we have bolstered the rumors that she was executed." The woman had ice for blood. Elaida met her eyes firmly until she added a belated "Mother," but it, too, was placid, even casual.

Elaida swung her gaze to the others, made her voice steel. "Joline, you have charge of that search, and of the investigation of her escape. In both cases I hear of nothing but difficulties. Perhaps a daily penance will help you increase your diligence, daughter. Write out what you think suitable and submit it to me. Should I find it—less than suitable, I will triple it."

Joline's ever-present smile faded in satisfactory fashion. She opened her mouth, then closed it again under Elaida's steady stare. Finally, she curtsied deeply. “As you command, Mother.” The words were tight, the meekness forced, but it would do. For now.

“And what of trying to bring back those who fled?” If anything, Elaida’s tone was even harder. The return of the Aes Sedai who had run away when *that woman* was deposed meant the return of Blues to the Tower. She was not sure she could ever trust any Blue. But then, she was not sure she could ever bring herself to trust any who had fled instead of hailing her ascension. Yet the Tower must be whole again.

Javindhra was overseeing that task. “Again, there are difficulties.” Her features remained as severe as ever, but she licked her lips quickly at the storm that swept silently across Elaida’s face. “Mother.”

Elaida shook her head. “I will not hear of difficulties, daughter. Tomorrow you will place before me a list of everything you have done, including all measures taken to see the world does not learn of any dissension in the Tower.” That was deadly important; there was a new Amyrlin, but the world must see the Tower as united and strong as ever. “If you do not have enough time for the work I give you, perhaps you should give up your place as Sitter for the Red in the Hall. I must consider it.”

“That will not be necessary, Mother,” the hard-faced woman said hurriedly. “You will have the report you require tomorrow. I am sure many will start returning soon.”

Elaida was not so certain, however much she wanted it—the Tower must be strong; it *must*!—but her point was made. Troubled thoughtfulness marked every eye but Alviarin’s. If Elaida was ready to come down on one of her own former Ajah, and even harder on a Green who had been with her from the first day, perhaps they had made a mistake in treating her as a ceremonial effigy. Perhaps *they* had put her on the Amyrlin Seat, but now *she* was the Amyrlin. A few more examples in the coming days should drive it home. If necessary, she would have every woman here doing penance till they begged mercy.

“There are Tairen soldiers in Cairhien, as well as Andoran,” she went on, ignoring averted eyes. “Tairen soldiers sent by the man who took the Stone of Tear.” Shemerin clasped her plump hands tight, and Teslyn flinched. Only Alviarin remained unruffled as a frozen pond. Elaida flung out her hand and pointed to the painting of two men fighting with lightning. “Look at it. Look! Or I will have every last one of you on hands and knees scrubbing floors! If you have not the backbone even to look at a painting, what courage can you have for what is to come? Cowards are no use to the Tower!”

Slowly they raised their eyes, shuffling feet like nervous girls instead of Aes Sedai. Only Alviarin merely looked, and only she appeared untouched. Shemerin wrung her hands, and tears actually welled in her eyes. Something would have to be done about Shemerin.

“Rand al’Thor. A man who can channel.” The words left Elaida’s mouth like a whip. They made her own stomach knot up till she feared she might vomit. Somehow she kept her face smooth and pressed on, pushed the words out, stones from a sling. “A man fated to go mad and wreak horror with the Power before he dies. But more than that. Arad Doman and Tarabon and everything between is a ruin of rebellion because of him. If the war and famine in Cairhien cannot be tied to him of a certainty, he surely precipitates a greater war there, between Tear and Andor, when the Tower needs peace! In Ghealdan, some mad Shienaran preaches of him to crowds too great for Alliandre’s army to contain. The greatest danger the Tower has ever faced, the greatest threat the world has ever faced, and you cannot make yourselves speak of him? You cannot gaze at his image?”

Silence answered her. All save Alviarin looked as though their tongues were frozen. Most stared at the young man in the painting, birds hypnotized by a snake.

“Rand al’Thor.” The name tasted bitter on Elaida’s lips. Once she had had that young man, so innocent in appearance, within arm’s reach. And she had not seen what he was. Her predecessor had known—had known for the Light alone knew how long, and had left him to run wild. *That woman* had told her a great deal before escaping, had said things, when put hard to the question, that Elaida would not let herself believe—if the Forsaken were truly free, all might be lost—but somehow she had managed to refuse some answers. And then escaped before she could be put to the question again. *That woman* and Moiraine. *That woman* and the Blue had known all along. Elaida intended to have them both back in the Tower. They would tell every last scrap of what they knew. They would plead on their knees for death before she was done.

She forced herself to go on, though the words curdled in her mouth. “Rand al’Thor is the Dragon Reborn, daughters.” Shemerin’s knees gave way, and she sat down hard on the floor. Some of the others appeared to have weak knees as well. Elaida’s eyes flogged them with scorn. “There can be no doubt of it. He is the one spoken of in the Prophecies. The Dark One is breaking free of his prison, the Last Battle is coming, and the Dragon Reborn must be there to face him or the world is doomed to fire and destruction so long as the Wheel of Time turns. And he runs free, daughters. We do not know where he is. We know a dozen places he is not. He is no longer in Tear. He is not here in the Tower, safely shielded, as he should be. He brings the whirlwind down on the world, and we must stop it if there is to be any hope of surviving Tarmon Gai'don. We must have him in hand to see he fights in the Last Battle. Or do any of you believe he will go willingly to his prophesied death to save the world? A man who must be going mad already? We must have him in control!"

"Mother," Alviarin began with that irritating lack of emotion, but Elaida stopped her with a glare.

"Putting our hands on Rand al'Thor is more important by far than skirmishes in Shienar or whether the Blight is quiet, more important than finding Elayne or Galad, more important even than Mazrim Taim. You will find him. You *will*! When next I see you, each of you will be ready to tell me in detail what you have done to make it so. Now you may leave me, daughters."

A ripple of unsteady curtsies, breathy murmurs of "As you command, Mother," and they came close to running, Joline helping Shemerin wobble to her feet. The Yellow sister would do nicely for the next example; some would be necessary, to make sure none of them slid back, and she was too weak to be allowed in this council. Of course, this council would not be allowed to continue much longer in any case. The Hall would hear her words, and leap.

All save Alviarin went.

For a long moment after the door had closed behind the others, the two women met each other's eyes. Alviarin had been the first, the very first, to hear and agree with the charges against Elaida's predecessor. And Alviarin knew full well why she wore the Keeper's stole instead of someone from the Red. The Red Ajah had favored Elaida unanimously, but the White had not done so, and without wholehearted support from the White, many others might not have come round, in which case Elaida would have been in a cell instead of sitting on the Amyrlin Seat. That is, if the remains of her head were not decorating a spike for the ravens to play with. Alviarin would not be so easily intimidated as the others. If she could be intimidated at all. There was a disturbing feel of equal-to-equal in Alviarin's unwavering gaze.

A tap at the door sounded loud in the quiet.

"Come!" Elaida snapped.

One of the Accepted, a pale, slender girl, stepped hesitantly into the room and immediately dropped a curtsy so low her white skirt with its seven bands of color at the hem made a wide pool around her on the floor. From the wideness of her blue eyes and the way she kept them on the floor, she had caught the mood of the women leaving. Where Aes Sedai left shaking, an Accepted went at great peril. "M-Mother, Master F-Fain is here. He said you w-would see him at th-this hour." The girl swayed in her crouch, on the point of falling over from stark fear.

"Then send him in, girl, instead of keeping him waiting," Elaida growled, but she would have had the girl's hide if she had not kept the man outside. The anger she held back from Alviarin—she would not let herself think that she did not dare show it—that anger welled up. "And if you cannot learn to speak properly, perhaps the kitchens are a better place for you than the Amyrlin's anteroom. Well? Are you going to do as you were told? Move, girl! And tell the Mistress of Novices you need to be taught to obey with alacrity!"

The girl squeaked something that might have been a correct response and darted out.

With an effort, Elaida got hold of herself. It did not concern her whether Silviana, the new Mistress of Novices, beat the girl to incoherence or let her off with a lecture. She barely saw novices or Accepted unless they intruded on her, and cared less. It was Alviarin she wanted humbled and on her knees.

But Fain, now. She tapped one finger against her lips. A bony little man with a big nose, who had appeared at the Tower only days earlier in dirty, once-fine clothes too big for him, arrogant and cringing by turns, seeking audience with the Amyrlin. Except for those who served the Tower, men came there only under duress or in great need, and none asked to speak to the Amyrlin. A fool, in some ways, or conceivably a half-wit; he claimed to be from Lugard, in Murandy, but spoke in various accents, sometimes slipping from one to another in midsentence. Yet it seemed he might be useful.

Alviarin was still looking at her, so icily complacent, just a hint in her eyes of the questions she must have about Fain. Elaida’s face hardened. Almost she reached for *saidar,* the female half of the True Source, to teach the woman her place with the Power. But that was not the way. Alviarin might even resist, and fighting like a farmgirl in a stableyard was no method for the Amyrlin to make her authority plain. Yet Alviarin would learn to yield to her as surely as the others would. The first step would be leaving Alviarin in the dark concerning Master Fain, or whatever his real name was.

Padan Fain put the frantic young Accepted out of his mind as he stepped into the Amyrlin’s study; she was a toothsome bit, and he liked them fluttering like birds in the hand, but there were more important matters to concentrate on now. Dry-washing his hands, he ducked his head suitably low, suitably humbly, but the two awaiting him seemed unaware of his presence at first, locked eye-to-eye as they were. It was all he could do not to stretch out a hand to caress the tension between them. Tension and division wove everywhere through the White Tower. All to the good. Tension could be tweaked, division exploited, as need be.

He had been surprised to find Elaida on the Amyrlin Seat. Better than what he had expected, though. In many ways she was not so tough, he had heard, as the woman who had worn the stole before her. Harder, yes, and more cruel, but more brittle, too. More difficult to bend, likely, but easier to break. If either became necessary. Still, one Aes Sedai, one Amyrlin even, was much like another to him. Fools. Dangerous fools, true, but useful dupes at times.

Finally they realized he was there, the Amyrlin frowning slightly at being taken by surprise, the Keeper of the Chronicles unchanging. “You may go now, daughter,” Elaida said firmly, a slight but definite emphasis on “now.” Oh, yes. The tensions, the cracks in power. Cracks where seeds could be planted. Fain caught himself on the point of giggling.

Alviarin hesitated before giving the briefest of curtsies. As she swept out of the room, her eyes brushed across him, expressionless yet disconcerting. Unconsciously he huddled, hunching his shoulders protectively; his upper lip fluttered in a half-snarl at her slim back. On occasion he had the feeling, just for an instant, that she knew too much about him, but he could not have said why. Her cool face, cool eyes, they never changed. At those times he wanted to make them change. Fear. Agony. Pleading. He nearly laughed at the thought. No point, of course. She could know nothing. Patience, and he could be done with her and her never-changing eyes.

The Tower held things worth a little patience in its strongrooms. The Horn of Valere was there, the fabled Horn made to call dead heroes back from the grave for the Last Battle. Even most of the Aes Sedai were ignorant of that, but he knew how to sniff out things. The dagger was there. He felt its pull where he stood. He could have pointed to it. It was his, a part of him, stolen and mired away here by these Aes Sedai. Having the dagger would make up for so much lost; he was not sure how, but he was sure it would. For Aridhol lost. Too dangerous to return to Aridhol, perchance to be trapped there again. He shivered. So long trapped. Not again.

Of course, no one called it Aridhol any longer, but Shadar Logoth. Where the Shadow Waits. An apt name. So much had changed. Even himself. Padan Fain. Mordeth. Ordeith. Sometimes he was uncertain which name was really his, who he really was. One thing was sure. He was not what anyone thought. Those who believed they knew him were badly mistaken. He was transfigured, now. A force unto himself, and beyond any other power. They would all learn, eventually.

Suddenly he realized with a start that the Amyrlin had said something. Casting about in his mind, he found it. “Yes, Mother, the coat suits me very well.” He ran a hand down the black velvet to show how fine he found it, as if garments mattered. “ ’Tis a very good coat. I am thanking you kindly, Mother.” He was prepared to suffer more of her trying to make him feel at ease, ready to kneel and kiss her ring, but this time she went straight to the heart.

“Tell me more of what you know of Rand al’Thor, Master Fain.”

Fain’s eyes went to the painting of the two men, and as he gazed at it, his back straightened. Al’Thor’s portrait tugged at him almost as much as the man would, sent rage and hate roiling along his veins. Because of that young man, he had suffered pain beyond remembering, pain he did not let himself remember, and suffered far worse than pain. He had been broken and remade because of al’Thor. Of course, that remaking had given him the means of revenge, but that was beside the point. Beside his desire for al’Thor’s destruction, everything else dimmed from sight.

When he turned back to the Amyrlin, he did not realize his manner was as commanding as hers, meeting her stare for stare. “Rand al’Thor is devious and sly, uncaring of anyone or anything but his own power.” Fool woman. “He’s never a one to do what you expect.” But if she could put al’Thor in his hands. . . . “He is difficult to lead—very difficult—but I believe it can be done. First you must tie a string to one of the few he trusts. . . .” If she gave him al’Thor, he might leave her alive when he finally went, even if she was Aes Sedai.

Lounging in a gilded chair in his shirtsleeves, one booted leg over the padded arm, Rahvin smiled as the woman standing before the fireplace repeated what he had told her. There was a slight glaze in her large, brown eyes. A young, pretty woman, even in the plain gray woolens she had adopted for disguise, but that was not what interested him about her.

No breath of air stirred through the room’s tall windows. Sweat rolled down the woman’s face as she spoke, and beaded on the narrow face of the other man present. For all of that man’s fine red silk coat with its golden embroidery, he stood as stiffly as a servant, which he was in a way, if of his own free will, unlike the woman. Of course, he was deaf and blind for the moment.

Rahvin handled the flows of Spirit he had woven around the pair delicately. There was no need to damage valuable servants.

He did not sweat, of course. He did not let the summer’s lingering heat touch him. He was a tall man, large, dark and handsome despite the white streaking his temples. Compulsion had presented no difficulties with this woman.

A scowl twisted his face. It did with some. A few—a very few—had a strength of self so firm that their minds searched, even if unaware, for crevices through which to slide away. It was his bad luck that he still had some small need for one such. She could be handled, but she kept trying to find escape without knowing she was trapped. Eventually that one would no longer be needed, of course; he would have to decide whether to send her on her way or be rid of her more permanently. Dangers lay either way. Nothing that could threaten him, of course, but he was a careful man, meticulous. Small dangers had a way of growing if ignored, and he always chose his risks with a measure of prudence. To kill her, or keep her?

The cessation of the woman’s speech pulled him from his reverie. “When you leave here,” he told her, “you will remember nothing of this visit. You will remember only taking your usual morning walk.” She nodded, eager to please him, and he tied off the strands of Spirit lightly, so they would evaporate from her mind shortly after she reached the street. Repeated use of compulsion made obedience easier even when it was not in use, but while it was, there was always a danger it might be detected.

That done, he released Elegar’s mind as well. Lord Elegar. A minor noble, but faithful to his vows. He licked his thin lips nervously and glanced at the woman, then went immediately to one knee before Rahvin. Friends of the Dark—Darkfriends they were called, now—had begun learning just how strictly they would be kept to their vows now that Rahvin and the others were freed.

“Take her to the street by back ways,” Rahvin said, “and leave her there. She is not to be seen.”

“It will be as you say, Great Master,” Elegar said, bowing where he knelt. Rising, he backed from Rahvin’s presence, bowing and pulling the woman along by one arm. She went docilely, of course, her eyes still fogged. Elegar would ask her no questions. He knew enough to be well aware that there were things he did not want to know.

“One of your play pretties?” a woman’s voice said behind him as the carved door closed. “Have you taken to dressing them like that?”

Snatching at *saidin,* he filled himself with the Power, the taint on the male half of the True Source rolling off the protection of his bonds and oaths, the ties to what he knew as a greater power than the Light, or even the Creator.

In the middle of the chamber a gateway stood above the red-and-gold carpet, an opening to somewhere else. He had a brief view of a chamber lined with snowy silken hangings before it vanished, leaving a woman, clad in white and belted in woven silver. The slight tingle in his skin, like a faint chill, was all that told him she had channeled. Tall and slender, she was as beautiful as he was handsome, her dark eyes bottomless pools, her hair, decorated with silver stars and crescents, falling in perfect black waves to her shoulders. Most men would have felt their mouths go dry with desire.

“What do you mean to come sneaking up on me, Lanfear?” he demanded roughly. He did not let go of the Power, but rather prepared several nasty surprises in case he had need. “If you want to speak with me, send an emissary, and I will decide when and where. And if.”

Lanfear smiled that sweet, treacherous smile. “You were always a pig, Rahvin, but seldom a fool. That woman is Aes Sedai. What if they miss her? Do you also send out heralds to announce where you are?”

“Channel?” he sneered. “She is not strong enough to be allowed outdoors without a keeper. They call untutored children Aes Sedai when half of what they know is self-taught tricks and the other half barely scratches the surface.”

“Would you still be so complacent if those untutored children put a circle of thirteen around you?” The cool mockery in her voice stabbed him, but he did not let it show.

“I take my precautions, Lanfear. Rather than one of my ‘play pretties,’ as you call them, she is the Tower’s spy here. Now she reports exactly what I want her to, and she is eager to do so. Those who serve the Chosen in the Tower told me right where to find her.” The day would come soon when the world gave up the name Forsaken and knelt to the Chosen. It had been promised, so very long ago. “Why have you come, Lanfear? Surely not in aid of defenseless women.”

She merely shrugged. “You can play with your toys as much as you wish, so far as I am concerned. You offer little in the way of hospitality, Rahvin, so you will forgive me if . . .” A silver pitcher rose from a small table by Rahvin’s bed and tilted to pour dark wine into a gold-chased goblet. As the pitcher settled, the goblet floated to Lanfear’s hand. He felt nothing beyond a slight tingle, of course, saw no flows being woven; he had never liked that. That she would be able to see as little of his weaving was only a slight redressing of the balance.

“Why?” he demanded again.

She sipped calmly before speaking. “Since you avoid the rest of us, a few of the Chosen will be coming here. I came first so you would know it is not an attack.”

“Others? Some plan of yours? What need have I of someone else’s designs?” Suddenly he laughed, a deep, rich sound. “So it is no attack, is it? You were never one for attacking openly, were you? Not as bad as Moghedien, perhaps, but you did always favor the flanks and the rear. I will trust you this time, enough to hear you out. As long as you are under my eye.” Who trusted Lanfear behind him deserved the knife he might well find in his back. Not that she was so very trustworthy even when watched; her temper was uncertain at best. “Who else is supposed to be part of this?”

He had clearer warning this time—it was male work—as another gateway opened, showing marble arches opening onto wide stone balconies, and gulls wheeling and crying in a cloudless blue sky. Finally a man appeared and stepped through, the way closing behind him.

Sammael was compact, solid and larger-seeming than he truly was, his stride quick and active, his manner abrupt. Blue-eyed and golden-haired, with a neat square-trimmed beard, he would perhaps have been above the ordinary in looks except for a slanting scar, as if a red-hot poker had been dragged across his face from hairline to jaw. He could have had it removed as soon as it was made, all those long years ago, but he had elected not to.

Linked to *saidin* as tightly as Rahvin—this close Rahvin could feel it, dimly—Sammael eyed him warily. “I expected serving maids and dancing girls, Rahvin. Have you finally wearied of your sport after all these years?” Lanfear laughed softly into her wine.

“Did someone mention sport?”

Rahvin had not even noticed the opening of a third gateway, showing a large room full of pools and fluted columns, nearly nude acrobats and attendants wearing less. Oddly, a lean old man in a wrinkled coat sat disconsolately among the performers. Two servants in filmy bits of nothing much, a well-muscled man bearing a wrought-gold tray and a beautiful, voluptuous woman, anxiously pouring wine from a cut-crystal flagon into a matching goblet on the tray, followed the true arrival before the opening winked out.

In any other company but Lanfear’s, Graendal would have been accounted a stunningly beautiful woman, lush and ripe. Her gown was green silk, cut low. A ruby the size of a hen’s egg nestled between her breasts, and a coronet encrusted with more rested on her long, sun-colored hair. Beside Lanfear she was merely plumply pretty. If the inevitable comparison bothered her, her amused smile gave no sign of it.

Golden bracelets clattered as she waved a heavily beringed hand generally behind her; the female servant quickly slipped the goblet into her grasp with a fawning smile mirrored by the man. Graendal took no notice. “So,” she said gaily. “Nearly half the surviving Chosen in one place. And no one trying to kill anyone. Who would have expected it before the Great

Lord of the Dark returns? Ishamael did manage to keep us from one another’s throats for a time, but this . . .”

“Do you always speak so freely in front of your servants?” Sammael said with a grimace.

Graendal blinked, glanced back at the pair as if she had forgotten them. “They won’t speak out of turn. They worship me. Don’t you?” The two fell to their knees, practically babbling their fervent love of her. It was real; they actually did love her. Now. After a moment, she frowned slightly, and the servants froze, mouths open in midword. “They do go on. Still, they won’t bother you now, will they?”

Rahvin shook his head, wondering who they were, or had been. Physical beauty was not enough for Graendal’s servants; they had to have power or position as well. A former lord for a footman, a lady to draw her bath; that was Graendal’s taste. Indulging herself was one thing, but she was wasteful. This pair might have been of use, properly manipulated, but the level of compulsion Graendal employed surely left them good for little more than decoration. The woman had no true finesse.

“Should I expect more, Lanfear?” he growled. “Have you convinced Demandred to stop thinking he is all but the Great Lord’s heir?”

“I doubt he is arrogant enough for that,” Lanfear replied smoothly. “He can see where it took Ishamael. And that is the point. A point Graendal raised. Once we were thirteen, immortal. Now four are dead, and one has betrayed us. We four are all who meet here today, and enough.”

“Are you certain Asmodean went over?” Sammael demanded. “He never had the courage to take a chance before. Where did he find the heart to join a lost cause?”

Lanfear’s brief smile was amused. “He had the courage for an ambush he thought would set him above the rest of us. And when his choice became death or a doomed cause, it took little courage for him to choose.”

“And little time, I’ll wager.” The scar made Sammael’s sneer even more biting. “If you were close enough to him to know all of this, why did you leave him alive? You could have killed him before he knew you were there.”

“I am not as quick to kill as you. It is final, with no going back, and there are usually other, more profitable ways. Besides, to put it in terms you would understand, I did not want to launch a frontal assault against superior forces.”

"Is he really so strong?" Rahvin asked quietly. "This Rand al'Thor. Could he have overwhelmed you, face-to-face?" Not that he himself could not, if it came to it, or Sammael, though Graendal would likely link with Lanfear if either of the men tried. For that matter, both women were probably filled to bursting with the Power right that moment, ready to strike at the slightest suspicion of either man. Or of each other. But this farmboy. An untrained shepherd! Untrained unless Asmodean was trying.

"He is Lews Therin Telamon reborn," Lanfear said just as softly, "and Lews Therin was as strong as any." Sammael absently rubbed the scar across his face; it had been Lews Therin who gave it to him. Three thousand years ago and more, well before the Breaking of the World, before the Great Lord was imprisoned, before so much, but Sammael never forgot.

"Well," Graendal put in, "have we come around at last to what we are here to discuss?"

Rahvin gave a displeased start. The two servants were frozen still—or again, rather. Sammael muttered in his beard.

"If this Rand al'Thor really is Lews Therin Telamon reborn," Graendal went on, settling herself on the man's back where he crouched on all fours, "I am surprised you haven't tried to snuggle him into your bed, Lanfear. Or would it be so easy? I seem to remember Lews Therin led you by the nose, not the other way around. Squelched your little tantrums. Sent you running to fetch his wine, in a manner of speaking." She set her own wine on the tray, held out rigidly by the sightlessly kneeling woman. "You were so obsessed with him you'd have stretched out at his feet if he said 'rug.' "

Lanfear's dark eyes glittered for a moment before she regained control of herself. "He may be Lews Therin reborn, but he is not Lews Therin himself."

"How do you know?" Graendal asked, smiling as if it were all a joke. "It may well be that, as many believe, all are born and reborn as the Wheel turns, but nothing like this has ever happened that I have read. A specific man reborn according to prophecy. Who knows what he is?"

Lanfear gave a disparaging smirk. "I have observed him closely. He is no more than the shepherd he seems, still more naive than not." Scorn faded to seriousness. "But now he has Asmodean, weak ally as he is. And even before Asmodean, four of the Chosen have died confronting him."

"Let him whittle away the dead wood," Sammael said gruffly. He wove flows of Air to drag a chair across the carpet and sprawled with his boots crossed at the ankle and one arm over the low, carved back. Anyone who believed he was at ease was a fool; Sammael had always liked to dupe his enemies into thinking they could take him by surprise. “More for the rest of us on the Day of Return. Or do you think he might win Tarmon Gai’don, Lanfear? Even if he stiffens Asmodean’s backbone, he has no Hundred Companions this time. With Asmodean or alone, the Great Lord will extinguish him like a broken sar-light.”

The look Lanfear gave him bristled with contempt. “How many of us will be alive when the Great Lord is freed at last? Four gone already. Will he come after you next, Sammael? You might like that. You could finally get rid of that scar if you defeated him. But I forget. How many times did you face him in the War of Power? Did you ever win? I cannot seem to remember.” Without pause she rounded on Graendal. “Or it might be you. He is reluctant to hurt women for some reason, but you won’t even be able to make Asmodean’s choice. You cannot teach him any more than a stone could. Unless he decides to keep you as a pet. That would be a change for you, would it not? Instead of deciding which of your pretties pleases you best, you could learn to please.”

Graendal’s face contorted, and Rahvin prepared to shield himself against whatever the two women might hurl at one another, prepared to Travel at even a whiff of balefire. Then he sensed Sammael gathering the Power, sensed a difference in it—Sammael would call it seizing a tactical advantage—and bent to grab the other man’s arm. Sammael shook him off angrily, but the moment had passed. The two women were looking at them now, not each other. Neither could know what had almost happened, but clearly something had passed between Rahvin and Sammael, and suspicion lit their eyes.

“I want to hear what Lanfear has to say.” He did not look at Sammael, but meant it for him. “There must be more to this than a foolish attempt to frighten us.” Sammael jerked his head in what might have been a nod or merely disgruntlement. It would have to do.

“Oh, there is, though a little fright could not hurt.” Lanfear’s dark eyes still held distrust, but her voice was as clear as still water. “Ishamael tried to control him and failed, tried to kill him in the end and failed, but Ishamael tried bullying and fear, and bullying does not work with Rand al’Thor.”

“Ishamael was more than half-mad,” Sammael muttered, “and less than half-human.”

“Is that what we are?” Graendal arched an eyebrow. “Merely human? Surely we are something more. This is human.” She stroked a finger down the cheek of the woman kneeling beside her. “A new word will have to be created to describe us.”

“Whatever we are,” Lanfear said, “we can succeed where Ishamael failed.” She was leaning slightly forward, as if to force the words on them. Lanfear seldom showed tension. Why now?

“Why only we four?” Rahvin asked. The other “why” would have to wait.

“Why more?” was Lanfear’s reply. “If we can present the Dragon Reborn kneeling to the Great Lord on the Day of Return, why share the honor—and the rewards—further than need be? And perhaps he can even be used to—how did you put it, Sammael?—whittle away the dead wood.”

It was the sort of answer Rahvin could understand. Not that he trusted her, of course, or any of the others, but he understood ambition. The Chosen had plotted among themselves for position up to the day Lews Therin had imprisoned them in sealing up the Great Lord’s prison, and they had begun again the day they were freed. He just had to be sure Lanfear’s plot did not disrupt his own plans. “Speak on,” he told her.

“First, someone else is trying to control him. Perhaps to kill. I suspect Moghedien or Demandred. Moghedien has always tried to work from the shadows, and Demandred always did hate Lews Therin.” Sammael smiled, or perhaps grimaced, but his hatred was a pale thing beside Demandred’s, though for better cause.

“How do you know it is not one of us here?” Graendal asked glibly.

Lanfear’s smile showed as many teeth as the other woman’s, and as little warmth. “Because you three choose to carve out niches for yourselves and secure your power while the rest slash at each other. And other reasons. I told you I keep a close watch on Rand al’Thor.”

It was true, what she said of them. Rahvin himself preferred diplomacy and manipulation to open conflict, though he would not shy from it if needed. Sammael’s way had always been armies and conquest; he would not go near Lews Therin, even reborn as a shepherd, until he was sure of victory. Graendal, too, followed conquest, though her methods did not involve soldiers; for all her concern with her toys, she took one solid step at a time. Openly to be sure, as the Chosen reckoned such things, but never stretching too far at any step.

“You know I can keep an eye on him unseen,” Lanfear continued, “but the rest of you must stay clear or run the risk of detection. We must draw him back. . . .”

Graendal leaned forward, interested, and Sammael began to nod as she went on. Rahvin reserved judgment. It might well work. And if not . . . If not, he saw several ways to shape events to his advantage. This might work out very well indeed.

* * *

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CHAPTER

1

Fanning the Sparks

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the great forest called Braem Wood. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

South and west it blew, dry, beneath a sun of molten gold. There had been no rain for long weeks in the land below, and the late-summer heat grew day by day. Brown leaves come early dotted some trees, and naked stones baked where small streams had run. In an open place where grass had vanished and only thin, withered brush held the soil with its roots, the wind began uncovering long-buried stones. They were weathered and worn, and no human eye would have recognized them for the remains of a city remembered in story yet otherwise forgotten.

Scattered villages appeared before the wind crossed the border of Andor, and fields where worried farmers trudged arid furrows. The forest had long since thinned to thickets by the time the wind swept dust down the lone street of a village called Kore Springs. The springs were beginning to run low this summer. A few dogs lay panting in the swelter, and two shirtless boys ran, beating a stuffed bladder along the ground with sticks. Nothing else stirred, save the wind and the dust and the creaking sign above the door of the inn, red brick and thatch-roofed like every other building along the street. At two stories, it was the tallest and largest structure in Kore Springs, a neat and orderly little town. The saddled horses hitched in front of the inn barely twitched their tails. The inn's carved sign proclaimed the Good Queen's Justice.

Blinking against the dust, Min kept an eye pressed to the crack in the shed's rough wall. She could just make out one shoulder of the guard on the shed door, but her attention was all for the inn further on. She wished the name were less ominously apt. Their judge, the local lord, had apparently arrived some time ago, but she had missed seeing him. No doubt he was hearing the farmer's charges; Admer Nem, along with his brothers and cousins and all their wives, had seemed in favor of an immediate hanging before one of the lord's retainers happened by. She wondered what the penalty was here for burning up a man's barn, and his milkcows with it. By accident, of course, but she did not think that would count for much when it all began with trespass.

Logain had gotten away in the confusion, abandoning them—he would, burn him!—and she did not know whether to be happy about that or not. It was he who had knocked Nem down when they were discovered just before dawn, sending the man's lantern flying into the straw. The blame was his, if anyone's. Only sometimes he had trouble watching what he said. Perhaps as well he was gone.

Twisting to lean back against the wall, she wiped sweat from her brow, though it only sprang out again. The inside of the shed was stifling, but her two companions did not appear to notice. Siuan lay stretched out on her back in a dark woolen riding dress much like Min's, staring at the shed roof, idly tapping her chin with a straw. Coppery-skinned Leane, willowy and as tall as most men, sat cross-legged in her pale shift, working on her dress with needle and thread. They had been allowed to keep their saddlebags, after they were searched for swords or axes or anything else that might help them escape.

"What's the penalty for burning down a barn in Andor?" Min asked.

"If we are lucky," Siuan replied without moving, "a strapping in the village square. Not so lucky, and it will be a flogging."

"Light!" Min breathed. "How can you call that *luck*?"

Siuan rolled onto her side and propped herself up on an elbow. She was a sturdy woman, short of beautiful though beyond handsome, and looked no more than a few years older than Min, but those sharp blue eyes had a commanding presence that did not belong on a young woman awaiting trial in a backcountry shed. Sometimes Siuan was as bad as Logain about forgetting herself; maybe worse. "When a strapping is done," she said in a brook-no-nonsense, do-not-be-foolish tone, "it is done, and we can be on our way. It wastes less of our time than any other penalty I can think of. Considerably less than hanging, say. Though I don't think it will come to that, from what I remember of Andoran law."

Wheezing laughter shook Min for a moment; it was that or cry. "Time? The way we are going, we've nothing but time. I swear we have been through every village between here and Tar Valon, and found nothing. Not a glimmer, not a whisper. I don't think there *is* any gathering. And we are on foot, now. From what I overheard, Logain took the horses with him. Afoot and locked in a shed awaiting the Light knows what!"

"Watch names," Siuan whispered sharply, shooting a meaning glance at the rough door with the guard on the other side. "A flapping tongue can put you in the net instead of the fish."

Min grimaced, partly because she was growing tired of Siuan's Tairen fisherman's sayings, and partly because the other woman was right. So far they had outrun awkward news—deadly was a better word than awkward—but some news had a way of leaping a hundred miles in a day. Siuan had been traveling as Mara, Leane as Amaena, and Logain had taken the name Dalyn, after Siuan convinced him Guaire was a fool's choice. Min still did not think anyone would recognize her own name, but Siuan insisted on calling her Serenla. Even Logain did not know their true names.

The real trouble was that Siuan was not going to give up. Weeks of utter failure, and now this, yet any mention of heading for Tear, which was sensible, set off a tempest that quailed even Logain. The longer they had searched without finding what Siuan sought, the more temper she had developed. *Not that she couldn't crack rocks with it before.* Min was wise enough to keep that particular thought to herself.

Leane finally finished with her dress and tugged it on over her head, doubling her arms behind her to do up the buttons. Min could not see why she had gone to the trouble; she herself hated needlework of any sort. The neckline was a little lower now, showing a bit of Leane's bosom, and it fit in a snugger way there and perhaps around the hips. But what was the point, here? No one was going to ask her to dance in this roasting shed.

Digging into Min's saddlebags, Leane pulled out the wooden box of paints and powders and whatnots that Laras had forced on Min before they set out. Min had kept meaning to throw it away, but somehow she had never gotten around to it. There was a small mirror inside the hinged lid of the box, and in moments Leane was at work on her face with small rabbit-fur brushes. She had never shown any particular interest in the things before. Now she appeared vexed that there was only a blackwood hairbrush and a small ivory comb to use on her hair. She even muttered about the lack of a way to heat the curling iron! Her dark hair had grown since they began Siuan's search, but it still came well short of her shoulders.

After watching a bit, Min asked, "What are you up to, Le—Amaena?" She avoided looking at Siuan. She *could* guard her tongue; it was just being cooped up and baked alive, that on top of the coming trial. A hanging or a public strapping. What a choice! "Have you decided to take up flirting?" It was meant for a joke—Leane was all business and efficiency—something to lighten the moment, but the other woman surprised her.

"Yes," Leane said briskly, peering wide-eyed into the mirror while she carefully did something to her eyelashes. "And if I flirt with the right man, perhaps we will not need to worry about strappings or anything else. At the least, I might get us lighter sentences."

Hand half-raised to wipe her face again, Min gasped—it was like an owl announcing it meant to become a hummingbird—but Siuan merely sat up facing Leane with a level "What brought this on?"

Had Siuan directed that gaze at her, Min suspected she would have confessed to things she had forgotten. When Siuan concentrated on you like that, you found yourself curtsying and leaping to do as you were told before you realized it. Even Logain did, most of the time. Except for the curtsy.

Leane calmly stroked a tiny brush along her cheekbones and examined the result in the small mirror. She did glance at Siuan, but whatever she saw, she answered in the same crisp tones she always used. "My mother was a merchant, you know, in furs and timber mainly. I once saw her fog a Saldaean lord's mind till he consigned his entire year's timber harvest to her for half the amount he wanted, and I doubt he realized what had happened until he was nearly back home. If then. He sent her a moonstone bracelet, later. Domani women don't deserve the whole reputation they have—stiff-necked prigs going by hearsay built most of it—but we have earned some. My mother and my aunts taught me along with my sisters and cousins, of course."

Looking down at herself, she shook her head, then returned to her ministrations with a sigh. "But I fear I was as tall as I am today on my fourteenth naming day. All knees and elbows, like a colt that grew too fast. And not long after I could walk across a room without tripping twice, I learned—” She drew a deep breath. “—learned my life would take me another way than being a merchant. And now that is gone, too. About time I put to use what I was taught all those years ago. Under the circumstances, I can’t think of a better time or place.”

Siuan studied her shrewdly a moment more. “That isn’t the reason. Not the whole reason. Out with it.”

Hurling a small brush into the box, Leane blazed up in a fury. “The whole reason? I do not know the whole reason. I only know I need something in my life to replace—what is gone. You yourself told me that is the only hope of surviving. Revenge falls short, for me. I know your cause is necessary, and perhaps even right, but the Light help me, that is not enough either; I can’t make myself be as involved as you. Maybe I came too late to it. I will stay with you, but it isn’t enough.”

Anger faded as she began resealing pots and vials and replacing them, though she used more force than was strictly necessary. There was the merest hint of rose scent about her. “I know flirting isn’t something to fill up the emptiness, but it is enough to fill an idle moment. Maybe being who I was born to be will suffice. I just do not know. This isn’t a new idea; I always wanted to be like my mother and my aunts, daydreamed of it sometimes after I was grown.”

Leane’s face became pensive, and the last things went into the box more gently. “I think perhaps I’ve always felt I was masquerading as someone else, building up a mask until it became second nature. There was serious work to be done, more serious than merchanting, and by the time I realized there was another way I could have gone even so, I had the mask on too firmly to take off. Well, that is done with, now, and the mask *is* coming off. I even considered beginning with Logain a week ago, for practice. But I *am* out of practice, and I think he is the kind of man who might hear more promises than you meant to offer, and expect to have them fulfilled.” A small smile suddenly appeared on her lips. “My mother always said if that happened, you had miscalculated badly; if there was no back way out, you had to either abandon dignity and run, or pay the price and consider it a lesson.” The smile took on a roguish cast. “My Aunt Resara said you paid the price and enjoyed it.”

Min could only shake her head. It was as if Leane had become a different woman. Talking that way about . . . ! Even hearing it, she could hardly believe. Come to that, Leane actually looked different. For all of the work with brushes, there was not a hint of paint or powder on her face that Min could see, yet her lips seemed fuller, her cheekbones higher, her eyes larger. She was a more than pretty woman at any time, but now her beauty was magnified fivefold.

Siuan was not quite finished, though. “And if this country lord is one like Logain?” she said softly. “What will you do then?”

Leane drew herself up stiff-backed on her knees and swallowed hard before answering, but her voice was perfectly level. “Given the alternatives, what choice would you make?”

Neither blinked, and the silence stretched.

Before Siuan could answer—if she meant to; Min would have given a pretty to hear it—the chain and lock rattled on the other side of the door.

The other two women got slowly to their feet, gathering their saddlebags in calm preparation, but Min leaped up wishing she had her belt knife. *Fool thing to wish for,* she thought. *Just get me in worse trouble. I’m no bloody hero in a story. Even if I jumped the guard*—

The door opened, and a man with a long leather jerkin over his shirt filled the doorway. Not a fellow to be attacked by a young woman, even with a knife. Maybe not even with an axe. Wide was the word for him, and thick. The few hairs remaining on his head were more white than not, but he looked hard as an old oak stump. “Time for you girls to stand before the lord,” he said gruffly. “Will you walk, or must we haul you like grain sacks? You go, either way, but I’d as soon not have to carry you in this heat.”

Peeking past him, Min saw two more men waiting, gray-haired but just as hard, if not quite so big.

“We will walk,” Siuan told him dryly.

“Good. Come, then. Step along. Lord Gareth won’t like being kept waiting.”

Promise to walk or no, each man took one of them firmly by the arm as they started up the dusty dirt street. The balding man’s hand encircled Min’s arm like a manacle. *So much for running for it*, she thought bitterly. She considered kicking his booted ankle to see if that would loosen his grip, but he looked so solid she suspected all it would earn her was a sore toe and being dragged the rest of the way.

Leane appeared lost in thought; she half-made small gestures with her free hand, and her lips moved silently as though reviewing what she meant to say, but she kept shaking her head and starting over again. Introspection wrapped Siuan, too, but she wore an openly worried frown, even chewing her underlip; Siuan *never* showed that much unease. All in all, the pair of them did nothing for Min's confidence.

The beam-ceilinged common room of the Good Queen's Justice did less. Lank-haired Admer Nem, a yellowed bruise around his swollen eye, stood to one side with half a dozen equally stout brothers and cousins and their wives, all in their best coats or aprons. The farmers eyed the three prisoners with a mixture of anger and satisfaction that made Min's stomach sink. If anything, the farmwives' glares were worse, pure hate. The rest of the walls were lined six deep with villagers, all garbed for the work they had interrupted for this. The blacksmith still wore his leather apron, and a number of women had sleeves rolled up, arms dusted with flour. The room buzzed with their murmuring among themselves, the elders as much as the few children, and their eyes latched onto the three women as avidly as the Nems' did. Min thought this must be as much excitement as Kore Springs had ever witnessed. She had seen a crowd with this mood once—at an execution.

The tables had been removed, except for one placed in front of the long brick fireplace. A bluff-faced, stocky man, his hair thick with gray, sat facing them in a well-cut coat of dark green silk, hands folded in front of him on the tabletop. A slim woman who showed as much age stood beside the table in a fine, gray wool dress embroidered with white flowers around the neck. The local lord, Min supposed, and his lady; country nobility little better informed of the world than their tenants and crofters.

The guards situated them in front of the lord's table and melted into the watchers. The woman in gray stepped forward, and the murmurs died.

"All here attend and give ear," the woman announced, "for justice will be meted today by Lord Gareth Bryne. Prisoners, you are called before the judgment of Lord Bryne." Not the lord's lady, then; an official of some sort. Gareth Bryne? The last Min remembered, he was Captain-General of the Queen's Guards, in Caemlyn. If it was the same man. She glanced at Siuan, but Siuan had her eyes locked on the wide floorboards in front of her feet. Whoever he was, this Bryne looked weary.

"You are charged," the woman in gray went on, "with trespass by night, arson and destruction of a building and its contents, the killing of valuable livestock, assault on the person of Admer Nem, and the theft of a purse said to contain gold and silver. It is understood that the assault and theft were the work of your companion, who escaped, but you three are equally culpable under the law."

She paused to let it sink in, and Min exchanged rueful glances with Leane. Logain *would* have to add theft to the stew. He was probably halfway to Murandy by now, if not more distant yet.

After a moment the woman began again. "Your accusers are here to face you." She gestured to the cluster of Nems. "Admer Nem, you will give your testimony."

The stout man eased forward in a blend of self-importance and self-consciousness, tugging at his coat where the wooden buttons strained over his middle, running his hands through thinning hair that kept dropping into his face. "Like I said, Lord Gareth, it was like this. . . ."

He gave a fairly straightforward account of discovering them in the hayloft and ordering them out, though he made Logain near a foot taller and turned the man's single blow into a fight where Nem gave as good as he got. The lantern fell, the hay went up, and the rest of the family came spilling out of the farmhouse into the predawn; the prisoners were seized and the barn burned to the ground, and then the loss of the purse from the house was discovered. He did slight the part where Lord Bryne's retainer rode by as some of the family were bringing out ropes and eyeing tree limbs.

When he started on the "fight" again—this time he seemed to be winning—Bryne cut him off. "That will be enough, Master Nem. You may step back."

Instead, a round-faced one of the Nem women, of an age to be Admer's wife, joined him. Round-faced, but not soft; round like a frying pan or a river rock. And flushed with something more than anger. "You whip these hussies good, Lord Gareth, hear? Whip them good, and ride them to Jornhill on a rail!"

"No one called on you to speak, Maigan," the slim woman in gray said sharply. "This is a trial, not a petition meeting. You and Admer step back. Now." They obeyed, Admer with a shade more alacrity than Maigan. The gray-clad woman turned to Min and her companions. "If you wish to offer testimony, in defense or mitigation, you may now give it." There was no sympathy in her voice, nor anything else for that matter.

Min expected Siuan to speak—she always took the lead, did the talking—but Siuan never stirred or raised her eyes. Instead, it was Leane who moved toward the table, her eyes on the man behind it.

She stood as straight as ever, but her usual walk—a graceful stride, but a stride—had become a sort of glide, with just a hint of willowy sway to it. Somehow her hips and bosom seemed more obvious. Not that she flaunted anything; the way she moved just made you aware. “My Lord, we are three helpless women, refugees from the storms that sweep the world.” Her usually brisk tones were gone, changed to a velvety soft caress. There was a light in her dark eyes, a sort of smoldering challenge. “Penniless and lost, we took shelter in Master Nem’s barn. It was wrong, I know, but we were afraid of the night.” A small gesture, hands half-raised, the insides of her wrists to Bryne, made her seem for a moment utterly helpless. Only for that moment, though. “The man Dalyn was a stranger to us really, a man who offered us his protection. In these days, women alone must have a protector, my Lord, yet I fear we made a poor choice.” A widening of the eyes, an entreating look, said he could make a better for them. “It was indeed he who attacked Master Nem, my Lord; we would have fled, or worked to repay our night’s lodging.” Stepping around the side of the table, she knelt gracefully beside Bryne’s chair and gently rested the fingers of one hand on his wrist as she gazed up into his eyes. A tremble touched her voice, but her slight smile was enough to set any man’s heart racing. It—suggested. “My Lord, we are guilty of some small crime, yet not so much as we are charged with. We throw ourselves on your mercy. I beg you, my Lord, have pity on us, and protect us.”

For a long moment, Bryne stared back into her eyes. Then, clearing his throat roughly, he scraped back his chair, rose, and walked around the opposite end of the table from her. There was a stir among the villagers and farmers, men clearing their throats as their lord had done, women muttering under their breath. Bryne stopped in front of Min. “What is your name, girl?”

“Min, my Lord.” She caught a muffled grunt from Siuan and hastily added, “Serenla Min. Everyone calls me Serenla, my Lord.”

“Your mother must have had a premonition,” he murmured with a smile. He was not the first to react to the name in a like way. “Do you have any statement to make, Serenla?”

“Only that I am very sorry, my Lord, and it really wasn’t our fault. Dalyn did it all. I ask for mercy, my Lord.” That did not seem much alongside Leane’s plea—anything at all would seem insignificant beside

Leane's performance—but it was the best she could find. Her mouth was as dry as the street outside. What if he did decide to hang them?

Nodding, he moved over to Siuan, who was still studying the floor. Cupping a hand under her chin, he raised her eyes to his. "And what is your name, girl?"

With a jerk of her head, Siuan pulled her chin free and took a step back. "Mara, my Lord," she whispered. "Mara Tomanes."

Min groaned softly. Siuan was plainly frightened, yet at the same time she stared at the man defiantly. Min more than half-expected her to demand Bryne let them walk away on the instant. He asked her if she wished to make a statement, and she denied it in another unsteady whisper, but all the while looking at him as though she were the one in charge. She might be controlling her tongue, but certainly not her eyes.

After a time, Bryne turned away. "Take your place with your friends, girl," he told Leane as he returned to his chair. She joined them with a look of open frustration, and what in anyone else Min would have called a touch of petulance.

"I have reached my decision," Bryne said to the room at large. "The crimes are serious, and nothing I have heard alters the facts. If three men sneak into another's house to steal his candlesticks and one of them attacks the owner, all three are equally guilty. There must be recompense. Master Nem, I will give you the cost of rebuilding your barn, plus the price of six milkcows." The stout farmer's eyes brightened, until Bryne added, "Caralin will disburse the coin to you when she is content as to costs and prices. Some of your cows were going dry, I hear." The slim woman in gray nodded in satisfaction. "For the bump on your head, I award you one silver mark. Don't complain," he said firmly as Nem opened his mouth. "Maigan has given you worse for drinking too much." A ripple of laughter among the onlookers greeted that, not diminished at all by Nem's half-abashed glares, and perhaps spurred by the tightlipped look Maigan gave her husband. "I will also replace the amount of the stolen purse. Once Caralin has satisfied herself as to how much was in it." Nem and his wife appeared equally disgruntled, but they held their tongues; it was plain he had given them what he would. Min began to feel hope.

Leaning his elbows on the table, Bryne turned his attention to her and the other two. His slow words tied her stomach into a knot. "You three will work for me, at the normal wages for whatever tasks you are given, until the coin I've paid out is repaid to me. Do not think I am being lenient. If you swear an oath that satisfies me you don't have to be guarded, you can work in my manor. If not, it means the fields, where you can be under someone's eyes every minute. Wages are lower in the fields, but it is your decision."

Frantically she racked her brain for the weakest oath that might satisfy. She did not like breaking her word in any circumstances, but she meant to be gone as soon as a chance presented, and she did not want too heavy an oathbreaking on her conscience.

Leane seemed to be searching, too, but Siuan barely hesitated before kneeling and folding her hands over her heart. Her eyes seemed fastened to Bryne's, and the challenge had not faded one bit. "By the Light and my hope of salvation and rebirth, I swear to serve you in whatever way you require for as long as you require, or may the Creator's face turn from me forever and darkness consume my soul." She delivered the words in a breathy whisper, but they created a dead silence. There was no oath stronger, unless it was the one a woman took on being made Aes Sedai, and the Oath Rod bound her to that as surely as to a part of her flesh.

Leane stared at Siuan; then she was on her knees, too. "By the Light and my hope of salvation and rebirth . . ."

Min floundered desperately, searching for some way out. Swearing a lesser oath than they did meant the fields for certain, and someone watching her every instant, but this oath. . . . By what she had been taught, breaking it would be not much less than murder, maybe no less. Only there *was* no way out. The oath, or who knew how many years laboring in a field all day and probably locked up at night. Sinking down beside the other two women, she muttered the words, but inside she was howling. *Siuan, you utter fool! What have you gotten me into now? I can't stay here! I have to go to Rand! Oh, Light, help me!*

"Well," Bryne breathed when the last word was spoken, "I did not expect that. But it does suffice. Caralin, would you take Master Nem somewhere and find out what he thinks his losses amount to? And clear everyone else but these three out of here, too. And make arrangements to transport them to the manor. Under the circumstances, I don't think guards will be necessary."

The slim woman gave him a harassed look, but in short order she had everyone moving out in a milling throng. Admer Nem and his male kin stuck close to her, his face especially painted with avarice. The Nem women looked scarcely less greedy, but they still spared a few hard glowers for Min and the other two, who remained kneeling as the room emptied out. For herself, Min did not believe her legs could hold her up. The same phrases repeated over and over in her mind. *Oh, Siuan, why? I* can't *stay here. I can't!*

"We have had a few refugees through here," Bryne said when the last of the villagers had gone. He leaned back in his chair, studying them. "But never as odd a threesome as you. A Domani. A Tairen?" Siuan nodded curtly. She and Leane stood up, the slender, coppery-skinned woman delicately brushing her knees, Siuan simply standing. Min managed to join them, on wobbly legs. "And you, Serenla." Once more he gave the ghost of a smile at the name. "Somewhere in the west of Andor, unless I mistake your accent."

"Baerlon," she muttered, then bit her tongue too late. Someone might know Min was from Baerlon.

"I've heard of nothing in the west to make refugees," he said in a questioning tone. When she remained silent, he did not press it. "After you have worked off your debt, you will be welcome to remain in my service. Life can be hard for those who've lost their homes, and even a maid's cot is better than sleeping under a bush."

"Thank you, my Lord," Leane said caressingly, making a curtsy so graceful that even in her rough riding dress it looked part of a dance. Min's echo was leaden, and she did not trust her knees for a curtsy. Siuan simply stood there staring at him and said nothing at all.

"A pity your companion took your horses. Four horses would reduce your debt by some."

"He was a stranger, and a rogue," Leane told him, in a voice suitable for something far more intimate. "I for one am more than happy to exchange his protection for yours, my Lord."

Bryne eyed her—appreciatively, Min thought—but all he said was "At least you will be safely away from the Nems at the manor."

There was no reply for that. Min supposed scrubbing floors in Bryne's manor would not be much different from scrubbing floors in the Nem farmhouse. *How do I get out of this? Light, how?*

The silence went on, except for Bryne drumming his fingers on the table. Min would have thought he was at a loss for what to say next, but she did not think this man was ever off balance. More likely he was irritated that only Leane appeared to be showing any gratitude; she supposed their sentence could have been much worse, from his point of view. Perhaps Leane’s heated glances and stroking tones had worked after a fashion, but Min found herself wishing the woman had remained the way she was. Being hung up by the wrists in the village square would be better than this.

Finally Caralin returned, muttering to herself. She sounded prickly, reporting to Bryne. “It will take days to get straight answers from those Nems, Lord Gareth. Admer would have five new barns and fifty cows, if I let him. At least I believe there really was a purse, but as to how much was in it . . .” She shook her head and sighed. “I will find out, eventually. Joni is ready to take these girls to the manor, if you are done with them.”

“Take them away, Caralin,” Bryne said, rising. “When you’ve sent them off, join me at the brickyard.” He sounded weary again. “Thad Haren says he needs more water if he’s to keep making bricks, and the Light alone knows where I will find it for him.” He strode out of the common room as if he had forgotten all about the three women who had just sworn to serve him.

Joni turned out to be the wide, balding man who had come for them in the shed, waiting now in front of the inn beside a high-wheeled cart enclosed by a round canvas cover, with a lean brown horse in the shafts. A few of the villagers stood about to watch their departure, but most seemed to have gone back to their homes and out of the heat. Gareth Bryne was already far down the dirt street.

“Joni will see you safely to the manor,” Caralin said. “Do as you are told, and you will not find the life hard.” For a moment she considered them, dark eyes nearly as sharp as Siuan’s; then she nodded to herself as if satisfied and hurried off after Bryne.

Joni held the curtains open for them at the back of the cart, but let them clamber up unaided and find places to sit on the cart bed. There was not so much as a handful of straw for padding, and the heavy covering trapped the heat. He said not a word. The cart rocked as he climbed up on the driver’s seat, hidden by the canvas. Min heard him cluck to the horse, and the cart lurched off, wheels creaking slightly, bumping over occasional potholes.

There was just enough of a crack in the covering at the back for Min to watch the village dwindle behind them and vanish, replaced alternately by long thickets and rail-fenced fields. She felt too stunned to speak. Siuan's grand cause was to end scrubbing pots and floors. She should never have helped the woman, never stayed with her. She should have ridden for Tear at the first opportunity.

"Well," Leane said suddenly, "that worked out not badly at all." She was back to her usual brisk voice again, but there was a flush of excitement—excitement!—in it, and a high color in her cheeks. "It could have been better, but practice will take care of that." Her low laugh was almost a giggle. "I never realized how much fun it would be. When I actually felt his pulse racing . . ." For a moment she held out her hand the way she had placed it on Bryne's wrist. "I don't think I ever felt so alive, so aware. Aunt Resara used to say men were better sport than hawks, but I never really understood until today."

Holding herself against the sway of the cart, Min goggled at her. "You have gone mad," she said finally. "How many years have we sworn away? Two? Five? I suppose you hope Gareth Bryne will spend them dandling you on his knee! Well, I hope he turns you over it. Every day!" The startled look on Leane's face did nothing for Min's temper. Did she expect Min to take it as calmly as she appeared to? But it was not Leane that Min was really angry with. She twisted around to glare at Siuan. "And you! When you decide to give up, you don't do it small. You just surrender like a lamb at slaughter. Why did you choose *that* oath? Light, why?"

"Because," Siuan replied, "it was the one oath I could be sure would keep him from setting people to watch us night and day, manor house or not." Lying half stretched out on the rough planks of the cart, she made it sound the most obvious thing in the world. And Leane appeared to agree with her.

"You mean to break it," Min said after a moment. It came out in a shocked whisper, but even so she glanced worriedly at the canvas curtains that hid Joni. She did not think he could have heard.

"I mean to do what I must," Siuan said firmly, but just as softly. "In two or three days, when I can be sure they really aren't watching us especially, we will leave. I fear we must take horses, since ours are gone. Bryne must have good stables. I will regret that." And Leane just sat there like a cat with cream on her whiskers. She must have realized from the first; that was why she had not hesitated in swearing.

“You will regret stealing horses?” Min said hoarsely. “You plan to break an oath anyone but a Darkfriend would keep, and you regret stealing horses? I can’t believe either of you. I don’t *know* either of you.”

“Do you really mean to stay and scrub pots,” Leane asked, her voice just as low as theirs, “when Rand is out there with your heart in his pocket?”

Min glowered silently. She wished they had never learned she was in love with Rand al’Thor. Sometimes she wished she had never learned it. A man who barely knew she was alive, a man like that. What he was no longer seemed as important as the fact that he had never looked at her twice, but it was all of a piece, really. She wanted to say she would keep her oath, forget about Rand for however long it took her to work off her debt. Only, she could not open her mouth. *Burn him! If I’d never met him, I wouldn’t be in this pickle!*

When the silence between them had gone on far too long for Min’s liking, broken only by the rhythmic creak of the wheels and the soft thud of the horse’s hooves, Siuan spoke. “I mean to do as I swore to do. When I have finished what I *must* do first. I did not swear to serve him immediately; I was careful not to even imply it, strictly speaking. A fine point, I know, and one Gareth Bryne might not appreciate, but true all the same.”

Min sagged in amazement, letting herself lurch with the cart’s slow motion. “You intend to run away, then come back in a few years and hand yourselves over to Bryne? The man will sell your hides to a tannery. *Our* hides.” Not until she said that did she realize she had accepted Siuan’s solution. Run away, then come back and . . . *I can’t! I love Rand. And he wouldn’t notice if Gareth Bryne made me work in his kitchens the rest of my life!*

“Not a man to cross, I agree,” Siuan sighed. “I met him once—before. I was terrified he might recognize my voice today. Faces may change, but voices don’t.” She touched her own face wonderingly, as she sometimes did, apparently unaware of doing so. “Faces do change,” she murmured. Then her tone firmed. “I’ve paid heavy prices already for what I had to do, and I will pay this one. Eventually. If you must drown or ride a lionfish, you ride and hope for the best. That is all there is to it, Serenla.”

“Being a servant is far from the future I would choose,” Leane said, “but it *is* in the future, and who knows what may happen before? I can remember too well when I thought I had no future." A small smile appeared on her lips, her eyes half-closed dreamily, and her voice became velvet. "Besides, I don't think he will sell our hides at all. Give me a few years of practice, and then a few minutes with Lord Gareth Bryne, and he will greet us with open arms and put us up in his best rooms. He'll deck us with silks, and offer his carriage to carry us wherever we want to go."

Min left her wrapped in her fantasy. Sometimes she thought the other two both lived in dreamworlds. Something else occurred to her. A small thing, but it was beginning to irritate. "Ah, Mara, tell me something. I've noticed some people smile when you call me by name. Serenla. Bryne did, and he said something about my mother having a premonition. Why?"

"In the Old Tongue," Siuan replied, "it means 'stubborn daughter.' You did have a stubborn streak when we first met. A mile wide and a mile deep." Siuan said that! Siuan, the most stubborn woman in the whole world! Her smile was as wide as her face. "Of course, you do seem to be coming along. At the next village, you might use Chalinda. That means 'sweet girl.' Or maybe—"

Suddenly the cart gave a harder lurch than any before, then picked up speed as if the horse were reaching for a gallop. Bumping around like grain on a chaffing sieve, the three women stared at one another in surprise. Then Siuan levered herself up and pulled aside the canvas hiding the driver's seat. Joni was gone. Throwing herself across the wooden seat, Siuan grabbed the reins and reared back, hauling the horse to a halt. Min threw open the back curtains, searching.

The road ran through a thicket here, nearly a small forest of oak and elm, pine and leatherleaf. The dust of their short dash was still settling, some of it on Joni, where he lay sprawled by the side of the hard-packed dirt road sixty or so paces back.

Instinctively Min leaped down and ran back to kneel beside the big man. He was still breathing, but his eyes were closed and a bloody gash on the side of his head was coming up in a purple lump.

Leane pushed her aside and felt Joni's head with sure fingers. "He will live," she said crisply. "Nothing seems broken, but he will have a headache for days after he wakes." Sitting back on her heels, she folded her hands, and her voice saddened. "There is nothing I can do for him in any case. Burn me, I promised myself I would not cry over it again."

“The question—” Min swallowed and started again. “The question is, do we load him in the back of the cart and take him on to the manor, or do we—go?” *Light, I’m no better than Siuan!*

“We could carry him as far as the next farm,” Leane said slowly.

Siuan came up to them, leading the cart horse as if afraid the placid animal might bite. One glance at the man on the ground, and she frowned. “He never had that falling off the cart. I don’t see root or rock here to cause it.” She started studying the wood around them, and a man rode out of the trees on a tall black stallion, leading three mares, one shaggy and two hands shorter than the others.

He was a tall man in a blue silk coat, with a sword at his side, his hair curling to broad shoulders, darkly handsome despite a hardening as though misfortune had marked him deeply. And he was the last man Min expected to see.

“Is this your work?” Siuan demanded of him.

Logain smiled as he reined in beside the cart, though there was little amusement in it. “A sling is a useful thing, Mara. You are lucky I am here. I didn’t expect you to leave the village for some hours yet, and barely able to walk then. The local lord was indulgent, it seems.” Abruptly his face went even darker, and his voice was rough stone. “Did you think I would leave you to your fate? Maybe I should have. You made promises to me, Mara. I want the revenge you promised. I’ve followed you halfway to the Sea of Storms on this search, though you won’t tell me what for. I’ve asked no questions as to how you plan to give me what you promised. But I will tell you this now. Your time is growing short. End your search soon, and deliver your promises, or I will leave you to find your own way. You’ll quickly find most villages offer small sympathy to penniless strangers. Three pretty women alone? The sight of this,” he touched the sword at his hip, “has kept you safe more times than you can know. Find what you are seeking soon, Mara.”

He had not been so arrogant at the beginning of their journey. Then he had been humbly thankful for *their* help—as humbly as a man like Logain could manage, anyway. It seemed that time—and a lack of results—had withered his gratitude.

Siuan did not flinch away from his stare. “I hope to,” she said firmly. “But if you want to go, then leave our horses and go! If you won’t row, get out of the boat and swim by yourself! See how far you get with your revenge alone."

Logain's big hands tightened on his reins until Min heard his knuckles crack. He shivered with emotions in strong check. "I will stay a while longer, Mara," he said finally. "A little while longer."

For an instant, to Min's eyes, a halo flared around his head, a radiant crown of gold and blue. Siuan and Leane saw nothing, of course, though they knew what she could do. Sometimes she saw things about people—viewings, she called them—images or auras. Sometimes she knew what they meant. That woman would marry. That man would die. Small matters or grand events, joyous or bleak, there was never any rhyme or reason to who or where or when. Aes Sedai and Warders always had auras; most people never did. It was not always pleasant, knowing.

She had seen Logain's halo before, and she knew what it meant. Glory to come. But for him, perhaps above all men, surely that made no sense at all. His horse and his sword and his coat had come from playing at dice, though Min was not certain how fair the games had been. He had nothing else, and no prospects except Siuan's promises, and how could Siuan ever keep them? His very name was likely a death sentence. It just made no sense.

Logain's humor returned as suddenly as it had gone. Pulling a fat, roughly woven purse from his belt, he jangled it at them. "I've come by a few coins. We won't have to sleep in another barn for a while."

"We heard of it," Siuan said dryly. "I suppose I should have expected no better from you."

"Think of it as a contribution to your search." She stretched out her hand, but he tied the purse back to his belt with a faintly mocking grin. "I would not want to taint your hand with stolen coin, Mara. Besides, this way perhaps I can be sure *you* won't run off and leave *me*." Siuan looked as if she could have bitten a nail in two, but she said nothing. Standing in his stirrups, Logain peered down the road toward Kore Springs. "I see a flock of sheep coming this way, and a pair of boys. Time for us to ride. They'll carry word of this as fast as they can run." Settling back down, he glanced at Joni, still lying there unconscious. "And they'll fetch help for that fellow. I don't think I hit him hard enough to hurt him badly."

Min shook her head; the man continually surprised her. She would not have thought he would spare a second thought for a man whose head he had just cracked.

Siuan and Leane wasted no time scrambling into their high-cantled saddles, Leane onto the gray mare she called Moonflower, Siuan onto Bela, the short, shaggy mare. It was more of a scramble for Siuan. She was no horsewoman; after weeks in the saddle she still treated sedate Bela like a fiery-eyed warhorse. Leane handled Moonflower with effortless ease. Min knew she was somewhere in between; she climbed onto Wildrose, her bay, with considerably more grace than Siuan, considerably less than Leane.

"Do you think he will come after us?" Min asked as they started south, away from Kore Springs, at a trot. She meant the question for Siuan, but it was Logain who answered.

"The local lord? I doubt he thinks you important enough. Of course, he may send a man, and he'll certainly spread your descriptions. We will ride as far as we can manage before stopping, and again tomorrow." It seemed he was taking charge.

"We *aren't* important enough," Siuan said, bouncing awkwardly in her saddle. She might have been wary of Bela, but the look she directed at Logain's back said his challenge to her authority would not last long.

For herself, Min hoped Bryne considered them unimportant. He probably did. As long as he never learned their real names. Logain quickened the stallion's pace, and she heeled Wildrose to keep up, putting her thoughts ahead, not behind.

Tucking his leather gauntlets behind his sword belt, Gareth Bryne picked up the curl-brimmed velvet hat from his writing table. The hat was the latest fashion from Caemlyn. Caralin had seen to that; he had no care for fashion, but she thought he should dress suitably for his position, and it was the silks and velvets she laid out for him in the mornings.

As he set the high-crowned hat on his head, he caught sight of his shadowy reflection in one of the study windows. Fitting that it was so wavery and thin. Squint as much as he would, his gray hat and gray silk coat, embroidered with silver scrolls down the sleeves and collar, looked nothing like the helmet and armor he was used to. That was over and done. And this . . . This was something to fill empty hours. That was all.

"Are you certain you want to do this, Lord Gareth?"

He turned from the window to where Caralin stood beside her own writing table, across the room from his. Hers was piled with the estate account books. She had run his estates all the years he had been gone, and without doubt she still made a better job of it than he did.

“If you had set them to work for Admer Nem, as the law required,” she went on, “this would be none of your affair at all.”

“But I did not,” he told her. “And would not if I had it to do again. You know as well as I do, Nem and his male kin would be trying to corner those girls day and night. And Maigan and the rest of the women would make their lives the Pit of Doom, that is if all three girls didn’t accidentally fall down a well and drown.”

“Even Maigan would not use a well,” Caralin said dryly, “not with the weather we’ve been having. Still, I take your point, Lord Gareth. But they have had most of a day and a night to run in any direction. You will locate them as soon by sending out word of them. If they can be found.”

“Thad can find them.” Thad was over seventy, but he could still track yesterday’s wind across stone by moonlight, and he had been more than happy to turn the brickyard over to his son.

“If you say so, Lord Gareth.” She and Thad did not get on. “Well, when you bring them back, I can certainly use them in the house.”

Something in her voice, casual as it was, pricked his attention. A touch of satisfaction. Practically from the day he arrived home Caralin had introduced a succession of pretty maids and farmgirls into the manor house, all willing and eager to help the lord forget his miseries. “They are oathbreakers, Caralin. I fear it’s the fields for them.”

A brief, exasperated tightening of her lips confirmed his suspicions, but she kept her tone indifferent. “The other two perhaps, Lord Gareth, but the Domani girl’s grace would be wasted in the fields, and would suit serving at table very well. A remarkably pretty young woman. Still, it will be as you wish, of course.”

So that was the one Caralin had picked out. A remarkably pretty young woman indeed. Though oddly different from the Domani women he had met. A touch hesitant here, a touch too fast there. Almost as if she were just now trying out her arts for the first time. That was impossible, of course. Domani women trained their daughters to twine men around their fingers almost from the cradle. Not that she had been ineffective, he admitted. If Caralin had sprung her on him among the farmgirls . . . Remarkably pretty.

So why was it not her face that kept filling his mind? Why did he find himself thinking of a pair of blue eyes? Challenging him as though wishing she had a sword, afraid and refusing to yield to fear. Mara Tomanes. He had been sure she was one to keep her word, even without oaths. “I will bring her back,” he muttered to himself. “I will know why she broke oath.”

“As you say, my Lord,” Caralin said. “I thought she might do for your bedchamber maid. Sela is getting a bit old to be running up and down the stairs to fetch for you at night.”

Bryne blinked at her. What? Oh. The Domani girl. He shook his head at Caralin’s foolishness. But was he being any less foolish? He was the lord here; he should remain here to take care of his people. Yet Caralin had taken better care than he knew how, all the years he was gone. He knew camps and soldiers and campaigns, and maybe a bit of how to maneuver in court intrigues. She was right. He should take off his sword and this fool hat, and have Caralin write out their descriptions, and . . .

Instead, he said, “Keep a close eye on Admer Nem and his kin. They’ll try to cheat you as much as they can.”

“As you say, my Lord.” The words were perfectly respectful; the tone told him to go teach his grandfather to shear sheep. Chuckling to himself, he went outside.

The manor house was really little more than a tremendously overgrown farmhouse, two rambling stories of brick and stone under a slate roof, added to again and again by generations of Brynes. House Bryne had owned this land—or it had owned them—since Andor was wrought from the wreckage of Artur Hawkwing’s empire a thousand years before, and for all that time it had sent its sons off to fight Andor’s wars. He would fight no more wars, but it was too late for House Bryne. There had been too many wars, too many battles. He was the last of the blood. No wife, no son, no daughter. The line ended with him. All things had to end; the Wheel of Time turned.

Twenty men waited beside saddled horses on the stone-paved yard in front of the manor house. Men even grayer than he, mostly, if they had hair. Experienced soldiers all, former squadmen, squadron leaders and bannermen who had served with him at one time or another in his career. Joni Shagrin, who had been Senior Bannerman of the Guards, was right at the front with a bandage around his temples, though Bryne knew for a fact his daughters had set their children to keep him in his bed. He was one of the few who had any family, here or anywhere else. Most had chosen to come serve Gareth Bryne again rather than drink away their pensions over reminiscences no one but another old soldier wanted to hear.

All wore swords belted over their coats, and a few carried long, steel-tipped lances that had hung for years on a wall until this morning. Every saddle had a fat blanket roll behind, and bulging saddlebags, plus a pot or kettle and full water bags, just as if they were riding out on campaign instead of a week's jaunt to chase down three women who set fire to a barn. Here was a chance to relive old days, or pretend to.

He wondered if that was what was rousting him out. He was certainly too old to go riding off after a set of pretty eyes on a woman young enough to be his daughter. Maybe his granddaughter. *I am not that big a fool*, he told himself firmly. Caralin could manage things better with him not getting in the way.

A lanky bay gelding came galloping up the oak lane that led down to the road, and the rider threw himself out of the saddle before the animal came to a full stop; the man half-stumbled but still managed to put fist to heart in a proper salute. Barim Halle, who served under him as a senior squadman years ago, was hard and wiry, with a leather egg for a head and white eyebrows that seemed to be trying to make up for the lack of other hair. "You been recalled to Caemlyn, my Captain-General?" he panted.

"No," Bryne said, too sharply. "What do you mean riding in here as though you had Cairhienin cavalry on your tail?" Some of the other horses were frisking, catching the bay's mood.

"Never rode that hard unless we was chasing them, my Lord." Barim's grin faded when the man saw he was not laughing. "Well, my Lord, I seen the horses, and I reckoned—" The man took another look at his face and cut off that line. "Well, actually, I got some news, too. I been over to New Braem to see my sister, and I heard plenty."

New Braem was older than Andor—"old" Braem had been destroyed in the Trolloc Wars, a thousand years before Artur Hawkwing—and it was a good place for news. A middling-sized border town well to the east of his estates, on the road from Caemlyn to Tar Valon. Even with Morgase's current attitude, the merchants would keep that road busy. "Well, out with it, man. If there's news, what is it?"

"Uh, just trying to figure where to start, my Lord." Barim straightened unconsciously, as though making a report. "Most important, I reckon, they say Tear has fallen. Aielmen took the Stone itself, and the Sword That Cannot Be Touched has flat been touched. Somebody drew it, they say."

"An Aielman drew it?" Bryne said incredulously. An Aiel would die before he touched a sword; he had seen it happen, in the Aiel War. Though it was said *Callandor* was not really a sword at all. Whatever that meant.

"They didn't say, my Lord. I heard names; Ren somebody or other most often. But they was talking it like fact, not rumor. Like everybody knew."

Bryne's forehead creased in a frown. Worse than troubling, if true. If *Callandor* had been drawn, then the Dragon was Reborn. According to the Prophecies, that meant the Last Battle was coming, the Dark One breaking free. The Dragon Reborn would save the world, so the Prophecies said. And destroy it. This was news enough by itself to have set Halle galloping, if he had thought twice.

But the leathery fellow was not finished. "Word come down from Tar Valon is near as big, my Lord. They say there's a new Amyrlin Seat. Elaida, my Lord, who was the Queen's advisor." Blinking suddenly, Halle hurried on; Morgase was forbidden ground, and every man on the estate knew it, though Bryne had never said so. "They say the old Amyrlin, Siuan Sanche, was stilled and executed. And Logain died, too. That false Dragon they caught and gentled last year. They talked it like it was true, my Lord. Some of them claimed they was in Tar Valon when it all happened."

Logain was no great news, even if he had started a war in Ghealdan by claiming to be the Dragon Reborn. There had been several false Dragons the last few years. He could channel, though; that was a fact. Until the Aes Sedai gentled him. Well, he was not the first man to be caught and gentled, cut off from the Power so he could never channel again. They said men like that, whether false Dragons or just poor fools the Red Ajah took against, never lived long. It was said they gave up wanting to live.

Siuan Sanche, though, that was news. He had met her once, nearly three years ago. A woman who demanded obedience and gave no reasons. Tough as an old boot, with a tongue like a file and a temper like that of a bear with a sore tooth. He would have expected her to tear any upstart claimant limb from limb with her bare hands. Stilling was the same as gentling for a man, but more rare by far. Especially for an Amyrlin Seat. Only two Amyrlins in three thousand years had suffered that fate, so far as the Tower admitted, though it was possible they could have hidden two dozen more; the Tower was very good at hiding what they wanted hidden. But an execution on top of stilling seemed unnecessary. It was said women survived stilling no better than men did gentling.

It all stank of trouble. Everyone knew the Tower had secret alliances, strings tied to thrones and powerful lords and ladies. With a new Amyrlin raised in this fashion, some would surely try to test whether the Aes Sedai still watched as closely. And once this fellow in Tear quelled any opposition—not that there was likely to be much if he really did have the Stone—he would move, against Illian or Cairhien. The question was, how quickly could he move? Would forces be gathered against him, or for him? He had to be the true Dragon Reborn, but the Houses would go both ways, and the people, too. And if petty squabbles broke out because the Tower—

“Old fool,” he muttered. Seeing Barim give a start, he added, “Not you. Another old fool.” None of this was his affair any longer. Except to decide which way House Bryne went, when the time came. Not that anyone would care, except to know whether or not to attack him. Bryne had never been a powerful House, or large.

“Uh, my Lord?” Barim glanced at the men waiting with their horses. “Do you think you might need me, my Lord?”

Without even asking where or why. He was not the only one bored with country life. “Catch up to us when you have your gear together. We’ll be heading south on the Four Kings Road to start.” Barim saluted and dashed away, dragging his horse behind him.

Climbing into his saddle, Bryne swung his arm forward without a word, and the men fell into a column of twos behind him as they headed down the oak lane. He meant to have answers. If he had to take this Mara by the scruff of the neck and shake her, he would have answers.

The High Lady Alteima relaxed as the gates of the Royal Palace of Andor swung open and her carriage rolled in. She had not been certain they would open. It had surely taken long enough to get a note taken in, and longer still to have a reply. Her maid, a thin girl acquired here in Caemlyn, goggled and all but bounced on the seat across from her at the excitement of actually entering the palace.

Snapping open her lace fan, Alteima tried to cool herself. It was still well short of midday; the heat would grow worse yet. To think she had always thought of Andor as cool. Hastily she reviewed what she meant to say one last time. She was a pretty woman—she knew exactly how pretty—with large brown eyes that made some mistakenly think her innocent, even harmless. She knew she was neither, but it suited her very well to have others believe her so. Especially here, today. This carriage had taken almost the last of the gold she had managed to carry away when she fled Tear. If she was to reestablish herself, she needed powerful friends, and there was none more powerful in Andor than the woman she had come to see.

The carriage halted near a fountain in a column-ringed courtyard, and a servant in red-and-white livery rushed to open the door. Alteima barely glanced at the courtyard or the serving man; her mind was all on the meeting ahead. Black hair spilled to the middle of her back from beneath a close-fitting cap of seed pearls, and more pearls lined the tiny pleats of her high-necked gown of watery green silk. She had met Morgase once, briefly, five years ago during a state visit; a woman who radiated power, as reserved and stately as one should expect of a queen, and also proper, in the Andoran way. Which meant prim. The rumors in the city that she had a lover—a man not much liked, it seemed—did not fit that very well, of course. But from what Alteima remembered, the formality of the gown—and the high neck—should please Morgase.

As soon as Alteima's slippers were firmly on the paving stones, the maid, Cara, leaped down and began fussing over the fall of the pleats. Until Alteima snapped her fan shut and slapped the girl's wrist with it; a courtyard was no place for that. Cara—such a foolish name—flinched back, clutching her wrist with a wounded look and the beginnings of tears.

Alteima compressed her lips in irritation. The girl did not even know how to take mild reproof. She had been fooling herself: the girl would not do; she was too obviously untrained. But a lady had to have a maid, especially if she was to differentiate herself from the mass of refugees in Andor. She had seen men and women laboring in the sun, even begging in the streets, while wearing the remnants of Cairhienin nobles' garb. She thought she had recognized one or two. Perhaps she should take one of them in service; who could know the duties of a lady's maid better than a lady? And if they were reduced to working with their hands, they should leap at the chance. It might be amusing to have a former "friend" for a maid. Too late for today, though. And an untrained maid, a local girl, said a little too clearly that Alteima was at the edge of her resources, only one step removed from those beggars herself.

She put on a look of concerned gentleness. “Did I hurt you, Cara?” she said sweetly. “Remain here in the carriage and soothe your wrist. I am certain someone will bring you cool water to drink.” The mindless gratitude on the girl’s face was stupefying.

The liveried men, well trained, stood looking at nothing at all. Still, word of Alteima’s kindness would spread, if she knew anything about servants.

A tall young man appeared before her in the white-collared red coat and burnished breastplate of the Queen’s Guard, bowing with a hand to his sword hilt. “I am Guardsman-Lieutenant Tallanvor, High Lady. If you will come with me, I will escort you to Queen Morgase.” He offered an arm, which she took, but otherwise she was scarcely aware of him. She had no interest in soldiers unless generals and lords.

As he attended her down broad corridors seemingly full of scurrying men and women in livery—they took care not to impede her way, of course—she subtly examined the fine wall hangings, the ivory-inlaid chests and highchests, the bowls and vases of chased gold or silver, or thin Sea Folk porcelain. The Royal Palace did not display as much wealth as the Stone of Tear, but Andor was still a wealthy land, perhaps even as wealthy as Tear. An older lord would do nicely, malleable for a woman still young, perhaps a touch feeble and infirm. With vast estates. That would be a beginning, while she found out exactly where the strings of power lay in Andor. A few words exchanged with Morgase some years ago were not much of an introduction, but she had that which a powerful queen must want and need. Information.

Finally Tallanvor ushered her into a large sitting room with a high ceiling painted in birds and clouds and open sky, where ornately carved and gilded chairs stood before a polished white marble fireplace. A part of Alteima’s mind noted with amusement that the wide red-and-gold carpet was Tairen work. The young man went to one knee. “My Queen,” he said in a suddenly rough voice, “as you have commanded, I bring you the High Lady Alteima, of Tear.”

Morgase waved him away. “You are welcome, Alteima. It is good to see you again. Sit, and we will talk.”

Alteima managed a curtsy and murmured thanks before taking a chair. Envy curdled inside her. She had remembered Morgase as a beautiful woman, but the golden-haired reality told her how pale that memory had grown. Morgase was a rose in full bloom, ready to overshadow every other flower. Alteima did not blame the young soldier for stumbling on his way out. She was just glad he was gone, so she would not have to be aware of him looking at the two of them, comparing.

Yet, there were changes, too. Vast changes. Morgase, by the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Trakand, so very reserved and stately and proper, wore a gown of shimmering white silk that showed enough bosom to shock a tavern maid in the Maule. It clung to hip and thigh close enough to suit a Taraboner jade. The rumors were clearly true. Morgase had a lover. And for her to have altered so much, it was equally clear that she tried to please this Gaebril, not make him please her. Morgase still radiated power and a presence that filled the room, but that dress transformed both to something less.

Alteima was doubly glad she had worn a high neck. A woman that deep in a man's thrall could lash out in a jealous rage on the smallest provocation or none at all. If she met Gaebril, she would present him as near indifference as civility would allow. Even being suspected of *thinking* of poaching Morgase's lover could get her a hangman's noose instead of a rich husband on his last legs. She herself would have done the same.

A woman in red-and-white livery brought wine, an excellent Murandian, and poured it into crystal goblets deeply engraved with the rearing Lion of Andor. As Morgase took a goblet, Alteima noticed her ring, a golden serpent eating its own tail. The Great Serpent ring was worn by some women who had trained in the White Tower, as Morgase had, without becoming Aes Sedai, as well as by Aes Sedai themselves. It was a thousand-year tradition for the Queens of Andor to be Tower trained. But rumors were on every lip of a break between Morgase and Tar Valon, and the anti-Aes Sedai sentiment in the streets could have been quashed quickly had Morgase wanted to. Why was she still wearing the ring? Alteima would be careful of her words until she knew the answer.

The liveried woman withdrew to the far end of the room, out of earshot but close enough to see when the wine needed replenishing.

Taking a sip, Morgase said, "It is long since we met. Is your husband well? Is he in Caemlyn with you?"

Hastily Alteima shuffled her plans. She had not thought Morgase knew she had a husband, but she had always been able to think on the run. "Tedosian was well when I last saw him." The Light send he died soon. As well to get on with it. “He was of some question about serving this Rand al’Thor, and that is a dangerous chasm to straddle. Why, lords have been hung as if they were common criminals.”

“Rand al’Thor,” Morgase mused softly. “I met him once. He did not look like one who would name himself the Dragon Reborn. A frightened shepherd boy, trying not to show it. Yet thinking back, he seemed to be looking for some—escape.” Her blue eyes looked inward. “Elaida warned me of him.” She seemed unaware of having spoken those last words.

“Elaida was your advisor then?” Alteima said cautiously. She knew it was so, and it made the rumors of a break all the more difficult to believe. She had to know if it was true. “You have replaced her, now that she is Amyrlin?”

Morgase’s eyes snapped back into focus. “I have not!” The next instant her voice softened again. “My daughter, Elayne, is training in the Tower. She has already been raised to the Accepted.”

Alteima fluttered her fan, hoping sweat was not breaking out on her forehead. If Morgase did not know her own feelings toward the Tower, there was no way to speak safely. Her plans teetered on the edge of a precipice.

Then Morgase rescued them, and her. “You say your husband was of two minds about Rand al’Thor. And you?”

She nearly sighed with relief. Morgase might be behaving like an untutored farmgirl over this Gaebril, but she still had her sense when it came to power and possible dangers to her realm. “I observed him closely, of course, in the Stone.” That should plant the seed, if it needed planting. “He can channel, and a man who can channel is always to be feared. Yet he is the Dragon Reborn. There is no doubt. The Stone fell, and *Callandor* was in his hand when it did. The Prophecies . . . I fear I must leave decisions of what to do about the Dragon Reborn to those who are wiser than I. I only know that I am afraid to remain where he rules. Even a High Lady of Tear cannot match the courage of the Queen of Andor.”

The golden-haired woman gave her a shrewd look that made her afraid she had overdone the flattery. Some did not like it too open. But Morgase merely leaned back in her chair and sipped her wine. “Tell me about him, this man who is supposed to save us, and destroy us doing it.”

Success. Or at least, the beginnings of it. “He is a dangerous man beyond any question of the Power. A lion seems lazy, half-asleep, until suddenly he charges; then he is all speed and power. Rand al'Thor seems innocent, not lazy, and naive, not asleep, but when he charges . . . He has no proper respect for person or position at all. I did not exaggerate when I said he has hanged lords. He is a breeder of anarchy. In Tear under his new laws, even a High Lord or Lady can be called before a magistrate, to be fined or worse, on the charges of the meanest peasant or fisherman. He . . ."

She kept strictly to the truth as she saw it; she could tell the truth as quickly as a lie when it was necessary. Morgase sipped her wine and listened; Alteima might have thought her lounging indolently, except that her eyes showed she was taking in every word and storing it. "You must understand," Alteima finished, "that I have only touched the surface. Rand al'Thor and what he has done in Tear are subjects for hours."

"You will have them," Morgase said, and in her mind Alteima smiled. Success. "Is it true," the Queen went on, "that he brought Aiel with him to the Stone?"

"Oh, yes. Great savages with their faces hidden half the time, and even the women ready to kill as soon as look. They followed him like dogs, terrorizing everyone, and took whatever they wanted from the Stone."

"I had thought it must be the wildest rumor," Morgase reflected. "There have been rumors this past year, but they have not come out of the Waste in twenty years, not since the Aiel War. The world certainly does not need this Rand al'Thor bringing the Aiel down on us again." Her look sharpened again. "You said 'followed.' They have gone?"

Alteima nodded. "Just before I left Tear. And he went with them."

"With them!" Morgase exclaimed. "I feared he was in Cairhien right this—"

"You have a guest, Morgase? I should have been told, so I could greet her."

A big man strode into the room, tall, his gold-embroidered red silk coat fitting massive shoulders and a deep chest. Alteima did not need to see the radiant look on Morgase's face to name him as Lord Gaebril; the assurance with which he had interrupted the Queen did that. He lifted a finger, and the serving woman curtsied and left quickly; he did not ask Morgase's permission to dismiss her servants from her presence, either. He was darkly handsome, incredibly so, with wings of white at his temples.

Composing her face to commonplace, Alteima put on a marginally welcoming smile, suitable for an elderly uncle with neither power, wealth nor influence. He might be gorgeous, but even if he did not belong to Morgase, he was not a man she would try manipulating unless she absolutely had to. There was perhaps even more of an air of power about him than about Morgase.

Gaebril stopped by Morgase and put his hand on her bare shoulder in a very familiar way. She clearly came close to resting her cheek on the back of his hand, but his eyes were on Alteima. She was used to men looking at her, but these eyes made her shift uneasily; they were far too penetrating, saw far too much.

“You come from Tear?” The sound of his deep voice sent a tingle through her; her skin, even her bones, felt as though she had been dipped in icy water, but oddly her momentary anxiety melted.

It was Morgase who answered; Alteima could not seem to find her tongue with him watching her. “This is the High Lady Alteima, Gaebril. She has been telling me all about the Dragon Reborn. She was in the Stone of Tear when it fell. Gaebril, there really were Aiel—” The pressure of his hand cut her off. Irritation flashed across her face, but then it was gone, replaced by a smile beaming up at him.

His eyes, still on Alteima, sent that shiver through her again, and this time she gasped aloud. “So much talking must have fatigued you, Morgase,” he said without shifting his gaze. “You do too much. Go to your bedchamber and sleep. Go now. I will wake you when you have rested enough.”

Morgase stood immediately, still smiling at him devotedly. Her eyes seemed slightly glazed. “Yes, I am tired. I will take a nap now, Gaebril.”

She glided from the room with never a glance at Alteima, but Alteima’s attention was all on Gaebril. Her heart beat faster; her breath quickened. He was surely the handsomest man she had ever seen. The grandest, the strongest, the most powerful. . . . Superlatives rolled through her mind like a flood.

Gaebril paid no more attention to Morgase’s leaving than she did. Taking the chair the Queen had vacated, he leaned back with his boots stretched out in front of him. “Tell me why you came to Caemlyn, Alteima.” Again the chill ran through her. “The absolute truth, but keep it brief. You can give me details later if I want them.”

She did not hesitate. “I tried to poison my husband and had to flee before Tedosian and that trull Estanda could kill me instead, or worse. Rand al'Thor meant to let them do it, as an example." Telling made her cringe. Not because it was a truth she had kept hidden so much as because she found she wanted to please him more than anything else in the world, and she feared that he might send her away. But he wanted the truth. "I chose Caemlyn because I could not bear Illian and though Andor is little better, Cairhien is in near ruins. In Caemlyn, I can find a wealthy husband, or one who thinks he is my protector if need be, and use his power to—"

He stopped her with a wave of his hand, chuckling. "A vicious little cat, though pretty. Perhaps pretty enough to keep, with your teeth and claws drawn." Suddenly his face became more intent. "Tell me what you know of Rand al'Thor, and especially his friends, if he has any, his companions, his allies."

She told him, talking until her mouth and throat went dry, and her voice cracked and rasped. She never raised her goblet until he told her to drink; then she gulped the wine down and spoke on. She could please him. She could please him better than Morgase could think of.

The maids working in Morgase's bedchamber dropped hasty curtsies, surprised to see her there in the middle of the morning. Waving them out of the room, she climbed onto her bed still in her dress. For a time she lay staring at the gilded carvings of the bedposts. No Lions of Andor here, but roses. For the Rose Crown of Andor, but roses suited her better than lions.

Stop being stubborn, she chided herself, then wondered why. She had told Gaebril she was tired, and . . . Or had he told her? Impossible. She was the Queen of Andor, and no man told her to do anything. *Gareth.* Now why had she thought of Gareth Bryne? He had certainly never told her to do anything; the Captain-General of the Queen's Guards obeyed the Queen, not the other way around. But he had been stubborn, entirely capable of digging in his heels until she came around to his way. *Why am I thinking of him? I wish he were here.* That was ridiculous. She had sent him away for opposing her; about what no longer seemed quite clear, but that was not important. He had opposed her. She could remember the feelings she had had for him only dimly, as though he had been gone for years. Surely it had not been so long? *Stop being stubborn!*

Her eyes closed, and she fell immediately into sleep, a sleep troubled by restless dreams of running from something she could not see.

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CHAPTER

2

Rhuidean

High in the city of Rhuidean, Rand al'Thor looked out from a tall window; whatever glass might have once been in it was long since gone. The shadows below slanted sharply east. A bard-harp played softly in the room behind him. Sweat evaporated from his face almost as soon as it appeared; his red silk coat, damp between the shoulders, hung open in a fruitless bid for air, and his shirt was unlaced half down his chest. Night in the Aiel Waste would bring freezing cold, but during daylight even a breeze was never cool.

With his hands above his head on the smooth stone window frame, his coatsleeves fell down to reveal the front part of the figure wrapped around each forearm: a golden-maned, serpentine creature with eyes like the sun, scaled in scarlet and gold, each foot tipped with five golden claws. Part of his skin, they were, not tattoos; they glittered like precious metals and polished gems, seemed almost alive in the late-afternoon sunlight.

Those marked him, to the people on this side of the mountain range variously called the Dragonwall or the Spine of the World, as He Who Comes With the Dawn. And like the herons branded into his palms, they marked him for those beyond the Dragonwall, too, according to the Prophecies, as the Dragon Reborn. In both cases prophesied to unite, save—and destroy.

They were names he would have avoided if he could, but that time was long past if it had ever existed, and he no longer thought of it. Or if he did, on rare occasion, it was with the faint regret of a man recalling a foolish dream of his boyhood. As if he were not close enough to boyhood to remember every minute. Instead, he tried to think only of what he had to do. Fate and duty held him on the path like a rider's reins, but he had often been called stubborn. The end of the road must be reached, but if it could be attained by a different way, maybe it need not be the end. Small chance. No chance, almost certainly. The Prophecies demanded his blood.

Rhuidean stretched below him, seared by a sun still pitiless as it sank toward craggy mountains, bleak, with barely a sign of vegetation. This rugged, broken land, where men had killed or died over a pool of water they could step across, was the last place on earth anyone would think to find a great city. Its long-ago builders had never finished their work. Impossibly tall buildings dotted the city, stepped and slab-sided palaces that sometimes ended after eight or even ten stories, not with a roof but with the ragged masonry of another half-built floor. The towers soared higher yet, but stopped in jagged abruptness as often as not. Now a good quarter of the great structures, with their massive columns and immense windows of colored glass, lay strewn as rubble across wide avenues with broad strips of bare dirt down their centers, dirt that had never held the trees they were planned for. The marvelous fountains stood dry as they had for hundreds upon hundreds of years. All that futile labor, the builders finally dying with their work undone; yet at times Rand thought that maybe the city had only been begun so he could find it.

Too proud, he thought. *A man would have to be half-mad at least to be so proud.* He could not help chuckling dryly. There had been Aes Sedai with the men and women who had come here so long ago, and they had known *The Karaethon Cycle,* the Prophecies of the Dragon. Or perhaps they had written the Prophecies. *Too proud by tenfold.*

Directly below him lay a vast plaza, half-covered in stretching shadow, littered with a jumble of statues and crystal chairs, oddities and peculiar shapes of metal or glass or stone, things he could put no name to, scattered about in tangled heaps as if deposited by a storm. Even the shadows were cool only by comparison. Rough-clothed men—not Aiel—sweated to load wagons with items chosen by a short, slender woman in pristine blue silk, straight-backed and gliding from place to place as though the heat did not press down on her as hard as on the others. Still, she wore a damp white cloth tied around her temples; she just did not let herself show the effects of the sun. Rand would have wagered she did not even perspire.

The workmen's leader was a dark, bulky man named Hadnan Kadere, a supposed merchant dressed all in cream-colored silk that was sweat-sodden today. He mopped his face continually with a large handkerchief, shouting curses at the men—his wagon drivers and guards—but he leaped as quickly as they to haul at whatever the slim woman pointed out, big or small. Aes Sedai had no need of size to impose their will, but Rand thought

Moiraine would have done as well if she had never been near the White Tower.

Two of the men were trying to move what appeared to be an oddly twisted redstone doorframe; the corners did not meet properly, and the eye did not want to follow the straight pieces. It stayed upright, turning freely but refusing to tip over however they manhandled it. Then one slipped and fell through the doorway up to his waist. Rand tensed. For a moment, the fellow seemed not to exist above the waist; his legs kicked wildly in panic. Until Lan, a tall man in drab shades of green, strode over and hauled him out again by his belt. Lan was Moiraine's Warder, bonded to her in some way Rand did not understand, and a hard man who moved like the Aiel, like a hunting wolf; the sword at his hip did not seem part of him, it was part of him. He dropped the workman on the paving stones on the seat of his breeches and left him there; the fellow's terrified cries rose thinly to Rand, and his companion looked ready to run. Several of Kadere's men who had been close enough to see were looking at one another and at the mountains around the city, plainly assessing their chances.

Moiraine appeared among them so quickly it seemed by the Power, moving smoothly from man to man. Her manner made Rand almost hear the cool, imperious instructions coming from her lips, so full of certainty that they would be obeyed that not obeying would seem foolish. In short order she overrode resistance, stamped firmly on objections, chivvied them every one back to work. The pair with the doorframe were soon dragging and shoving as hard as ever, if with frequent looks at Moiraine when they thought she would not see. In her own way, she was even harder than Lan.

As far as Rand knew, all of those things down there were *angreal* or *sa'angreal* or *ter'angreal,* made before the Breaking of the World to magnify the One Power or use it in various ways. Made with the Power certainly, though not even Aes Sedai knew how to construct such things now. He more than suspected the use of the twisted doorframe—a doorway to another world—but for the rest, he had no idea. No one did. That was why Moiraine worked so hard, to have as many as she could carted to the Tower for study. It was possible that even the Tower did not contain as many objects of the Power as lay about this square, though supposedly the Tower held the largest collection in the world. Even there, the Tower only knew the uses of some.

What was in the wagons or tossed about on the pavement did not interest Rand; he had already taken what he needed from down there. Had already taken more than he wanted, in some ways.

In the center of the plaza, near the burned remains of a great tree a hundred feet high, stood a small forest of tall glass columns, each nearly as tall as the tree and so slender it seemed the first stormwind must bring them all crashing down. Even with an edge of shadow touching them, the columns caught and refracted the sunlight in glitters and sparkles. For countless years Aielmen had entered that array and returned marked as Rand was, but on only one arm, marked as clan chiefs. They came out marked or did not come out. Aielwomen had come to this city as well, on the path toward becoming Wise Ones. No one else, not and live. *A man may go to Rhuidean once, a woman twice; more means death.* That was what the Wise Ones had said, and it had been truth, then. Now anyone could enter Rhuidean.

Hundreds of Aiel walked the streets, and increasing numbers actually dwelled in the buildings; each day more of the dirt strips down the streets showed beans or squash or *zemai,* arduously watered from clay pots hauled from the huge new lake that filled the south end of the valley, the only such body of water in the entire land. Thousands made their camps in the surrounding mountains, even on Chaendaer itself, where before they had come only with ceremony, to send a single man or woman at a time into Rhuidean.

Wherever he went, Rand brought change and destruction. This time, he hoped against hope that the change was for the good. It might yet be so. The burned tree mocked him. *Avendesora,* the legendary Tree of Life; the stories never said where it was, and it had been a surprise to find it here. Moiraine said it still lived, that it would put out shoots again, but so far he saw only blackened bark and bare branches.

With a sigh, he turned from the window into a big room, though not the biggest in Rhuidean, with tall windows on two sides, its domed ceiling worked in a fanciful mosaic of winged people and animals. Most of the furniture left in the city had long since rotted away even in the dryness, and much of the little that remained was riddled with beetles and worms. But on the far side of the room stood one high-backed chair, solid, and its gilding largely intact, but mismatched with its table, a wide thing with legs and edges thickly carved in flowers. Someone had polished the wood with beeswax till it shone dully despite its age. The Aiel had found them for him, though they shook their heads at such things; there were few trees in the Waste that could have produced wood straight and long enough to make that chair, and none to make the table.

That was all the furniture, as he thought of it. A fine silk Illianer carpet in blue and gold, booty in some long-ago battle, covered the middle of the dark red floor tiles. Cushions lay scattered about, in bright silks, and tasseled. Those were what Aiel used instead of chairs, when they did not merely sit on their heels, as comfortable as he would be in a padded chair.

Six men reclined against cushions on the carpet. Six clan chiefs, representing the clans that had so far come to follow Rand. Or rather, to follow He Who Comes With the Dawn. Not always eagerly. He thought Rhuarc, a broad-shouldered, blue-eyed man with heavy streaks of gray in his dark red hair, might have some friendship for him, but not the rest. Only six of the twelve.

Ignoring the chair, Rand sat down cross-legged, facing the Aiel. Outside of Rhuidean, the only chairs in the Waste were chief’s chairs, used only by the chief and only for three reasons: to be acclaimed as clan chief, to accept the submission of an enemy with honor, or to pass judgment. Taking the chair with these men now would imply that he meant to do one of those.

They wore the *cadin’sor,* coats and breeches in shades of brown and gray that would fade into the ground, and soft boots that laced to the knee. Even here, meeting with the man they had proclaimed the *Car’a’carn,* the chief of chiefs, each had a heavy-bladed knife at his belt and the gray-brown *shoufa* draped like a wide scarf around his neck; if any man covered his face with the black veil that was part of the *shoufa,* he would be ready to kill. It was not beyond possibility. These men had fought one another in a never-ending cycle of clan raids and battles and feuds. They watched him, waited for him, but an Aiel’s waiting always spoke of a readiness to move, suddenly and violently.

Bael, the tallest man Rand had ever seen, and Jheran, blade-slender and whip-quick, lay as far from one another as they could manage and still be on the carpet. There was blood feud between Bael’s Goshien and Jheran’s Shaarad, suppressed for He Who Comes With the Dawn but not forgotten. And perhaps the Peace of Rhuidean still held, despite all that had happened. Still, the tranquil sounds of the harp made a sharp contrast with the hard refusal of Bael and Jheran to look at one another. Six sets of eyes, blue or green or gray, in sun-dark faces; Aiel could make hawks look tame.

"What must I do to bring the Reyn to me?" he said. "You were sure they would come, Rhuarc."

The chief of the Taardad looked at him calmly; his face could have been carved stone for all its expression. "Wait. Only that. Dhearic will bring them. Eventually."

White-haired Han, lying next to Rhuarc, twisted his mouth as if about to spit. His leathery face wore a sour look, as usual. "Dhearic has seen too many men and Maidens sit staring for days, then throw down their spears. Throw them down!"

"And run away," Bael added quietly. "I have seen them myself, among the Goshien, even from my own sept, running. And you, Han, among the Tomanelle. We all have. I do not think they know where they are running to, only what they are running from."

"Cowardly snakes," Jheran barked. Gray streaked his light brown hair; there were no young men among Aiel clan chiefs. "Stinkadders, wriggling away from their own shadows." A slight shift of his blue eyes toward the far side of the carpet made it clear he meant it for a description of the Goshien, not just those who had thrown down their spears.

Bael made as if to rise, his face hardening further, if that was possible, but the man next to him put a quieting hand on his arm. Bruan, of the Nakai, was big enough and strong enough for two blacksmiths, but he had a placid nature that seemed odd for an Aiel. "All of us have seen men and Maidens run." He sounded almost lazy, and his gray eyes looked so, yet Rand knew otherwise; even Rhuarc considered Bruan a deadly fighter and a devious tactician. Luckily, not even Rhuarc was stronger for Rand than Bruan. But he had come to follow He Who Comes With the Dawn; he did not know Rand al'Thor. "As you have, Jheran. You know how hard it was to face what they face. If you cannot name coward those who died because they could not face it, can you name coward those who run for the same reason?"

"They should never have learned," Han muttered, kneading his red-tasseled blue cushion like an enemy's throat. "It was for those who could enter Rhuidean and live."

He spoke the words to no one in particular, but they had to be for Rand's ears. It was Rand who had revealed to everyone what a man learned amid the glass columns in the plaza, revealed enough that the chiefs and Wise Ones could not turn aside when asked the rest. If there was an Aiel in the Waste who did not know the truth now, he had not spoken to anyone in a month.

Far from the glorious heritage of battle most believed in, the Aiel had begun as helpless refugees from the Breaking of the World. Everyone who survived had been refugees then, of course, but the Aiel had never seen themselves as helpless. Worse, they had been followers of the Way of the Leaf, refusing to do violence even in defense of their lives. Aiel meant "dedicated" in the Old Tongue, and it had been to peace that they were dedicated. Those who called themselves Aiel today were the descendants of those who had broken a pledge of untold generations. Only one remnant of that belief remained: an Aiel would die before taking up a sword. They had always believed it a part of their pride, of their separateness from those who lived outside the Waste.

He had heard Aiel say that they had committed some sin to be placed in the desolate Waste. Now they knew what it was. The men and women who had built Rhuidean and died here—those called the Jenn Aiel, the Clan That Was Not, on the few occasions they were spoken of—had been the ones who kept faith with the Aes Sedai of the time before the Breaking. It was hard to face the knowledge that what you had always believed was a lie.

"It had to be told," Rand said. *They had a right to know. A man shouldn't have to live a lie. Their own prophecy said I would break them. And I couldn't have done differently.* The past was past and done; he should be worrying about the future. *Some of these men dislike me, and some hate me for not being born among them, but they follow. I need them all.* "What of the Miagoma?"

Erim, lying between Rhuarc and Han, shook his head. His once bright red hair was half white, but his green eyes were as strong as any younger man's. His big hands, wide and long and hard, said his arms were as strong, too. "Timolan does not let his feet know which way he will jump until after he has leaped."

"When Timolan was young as a chief," Jheran said, "he tried to unite the clans and failed. It will not sit well with him that at last one has come to succeed where he failed."

“He will come,” Rhuarc said. “Timolan never believed himself He Who Comes With the Dawn. And Janwin will bring the Shiande. But they will wait. They must settle matters in their own minds first.”

“They must settle He Who Comes With the Dawn being a wetlander,” Han barked. “I mean no offense, *Car’a’carn.*” There was no obsequiousness in his voice; a chief was not a king, and neither was the chief of chiefs. At best he was first among equals.

“The Daryne and the Codarra will come eventually, as well, I think,” Bruan said calmly. And quickly, lest silence should grow to a reason for dancing the spears. First among equals at best. “They have lost more than any other clan to the bleakness.” That was what the Aiel had taken to calling the long period of staring before someone tried to run away from being Aiel. “For the moment, Mandelain and Indirian are concerned with holding their clans together, and both will want to see the Dragons on your arms for themselves, but they will come.”

That left only one clan to be discussed, the one none of the chiefs wanted to mention. “What news of Couladin and the Shaido?” Rand asked.

Silence answered him, broken only by the softly serene sounds of the harp in the background, each man waiting for another to speak, all coming as close as Aiel could to showing discomfort. Jheran frowned at his thumbnail, and Bruan toyed with one of the silvery tassels on his green cushion. Even Rhuarc studied the carpet.

Graceful, white-robed men and women moved into the hush, pouring worked silver goblets of wine to set beside each man, bringing small silver plates with olives, rare in the Waste, and white ewe’s-milk cheese, and the pale, wrinkled nuts the Aiel called *pecara*. The Aiel faces looking out of those pale cowls had downcast eyes and an unfamiliar meekness on their features.

Whether captured in battle or on a raid, the *gai’shain* were sworn to serve obediently for one year and a day, touching no weapon, doing no violence, at the end returning to their own clan and sept as if nothing had happened. A strange echo of the Way of the Leaf. *Ji’e’toh*, honor and obligation, required it, and breaking *ji’e’toh* was nearly the worst thing an Aiel could do. Perhaps *the* worst. It was possible that some of these men and women were serving their own clan chief, but neither would acknowledge it by the blink of an eye so long as the period of *gai’shain* held, not even for a son or daughter.

It struck Rand suddenly that this was the real reason that some Aiel took what he had revealed so hard. To those, it must seem that their ancestors had sworn *gai'shain,* not only for themselves but for all succeeding generations. And those generations—all, down to the present day—had broken *ji'e'toh* by taking up the spear. Had the men in front of him ever worried along those lines? *Ji'e'toh* was very serious business to an Aiel.

The *gai'shain* departed on soft slippered feet, barely making a sound. None of the clan chiefs touched their wine, or the food.

"Is there any hope that Couladin will meet with me?" Rand knew there was not; he had stopped sending requests for a meeting once he learned Couladin was having the messengers skinned alive. But it was a way to start the others talking.

Han snorted. "The only word we have had from him is that he means to flay *you* when next he sees you. Does that sound as if he will talk?"

"Can I break the Shaido away from him?"

"They follow him," Rhuarc said. "He is not a chief at all, but they believe he is." Couladin had never entered those glass columns; he might even still believe as he claimed, that everything Rand had said was a lie. "He says that he is the *Car'a'carn,* and they believe that as well. The Shaido Maidens who came, came for their society, and that because *Far Dareis Mai* carried your honor. None else will."

"We send scouts to watch them," Bruan said, "and the Shaido kill them when they can—Couladin builds the makings of half a dozen feuds—but so far he shows no signs of attacking us here. I have heard that he claims we have defiled Rhuidean, and that attacking us here would only deepen the desecration."

Erim grunted and shifted on his cushion. "He means there are enough spears here to kill every Shaido twice over and to spare." He popped a piece of white cheese into his mouth, growling around it. "The Shaido were ever cowards and thieves."

"Honorless dogs," Bael and Jheran said together, then stared at one another as though each thought the other had tricked him into something.

"Honorless or not," Bruan said quietly, "Couladin's numbers are growing." Calm as he sounded, he still took a deep drink from his goblet before going on. "You all know what I am speaking of. Some of those who run, after the bleakness, do not throw away their spears. Instead they join with their societies among the Shaido."

"No Tomanelle has ever broken clan," Han barked.

Bruan looked past Rhuarc and Erim at the Tomanelle chief and said deliberately, "It has happened in every clan." Without waiting for another challenge to his word, he settled back on his cushion. "It cannot be called breaking clan. They join their societies. Like the Shaido Maidens who have come to their Roof here."

There were a few mutters, but no one disputed him this time. The rules governing Aiel warrior societies were complex, and in some ways their members felt as closely bound to society as to clan. For instance, members of the same society would not fight each other even if their clans were in blood feud. Some men would not marry a woman too closely related to a member of their own society, just as if that made her their own close blood kin. The ways of *Far Dareis Mai,* the Maidens of the Spear, Rand did not even want to think about.

"I need to know what Couladin intends," he told them. Couladin was a bull with a bee in his ear; he might charge in any direction. Rand hesitated. "Would it violate honor to send people to join their societies among the Shaido?" He did not need to describe what he meant any further. To a man, they stiffened where they lay, even Rhuarc, eyes cold enough to banish the heat from the room.

"To spy in that manner"—Erim twisted his mouth around "spy" as if the word tasted foul—"would be like spying on your own sept. No one of honor would do such a thing."

Rand refrained from asking whether they might find someone with a slightly less prickly honor. The Aiel sense of humor was a strange thing, often cruel, but about some matters they had none at all.

To change the subject, he asked, "Is there any word from across the Dragonwall?" He knew the answer; that sort of news spread quickly even among as many Aiel as were gathered around Rhuidean.

"None worth the telling," Rhuarc replied. "With the troubles among the treekillers, few peddlers come into the Three-fold Land." That was the Aiel name for the Waste; a punishment for their sin, a testing ground for their courage, an anvil to shape them. "Treekillers" was what they called Cairhienin. "The Dragon banner still flies over the Stone of Tear. Tairens have moved north into Cairhien as you ordered, to distribute food among the treekillers. Nothing more."

"You should have let the treekillers starve," Bael muttered, and Jheran closed his mouth with a snap. Rand suspected he had been about to say much the same.

"Treekillers are fit for nothing except to be killed or sold as animals in Shara," Erim said grimly. Those were two of the things Aiel did to those who came into the Waste uninvited; only gleeman, peddlers, and Tinkers had safe passage, though Aiel avoided the Tinkers as if they carried fever. Shara was the name of the lands beyond the Waste; not even the Aiel knew much about them.

From the corner of his eye, Rand saw two women standing expectantly just inside the tall, arched doorway. Someone had hung strings of colored beads there, red and blue, to replace the missing doors. One of the women was Moiraine. For a moment he considered making them wait; Moiraine had that irritatingly commanding look on her face, clearly expecting them to break off everything for her. Only, there was really nothing left to discuss, and he could tell from the men's eyes that they did not want to make conversation. Not so soon after speaking of the bleakness, and the Shaido.

Sighing, he stood, and the clan chiefs imitated him. All except Han were as tall as he or taller. Where Rand had grown up, Han would have been considered of average height or better; among Aiel, he was accounted short. "You know what must be done. Bring in the rest of the clans, and keep an eye on the Shaido." He paused a moment, then added, "It will end well. As well for the Aiel as I can manage."

"The prophecy said you would break us," Han said sourly, "and you have made a good beginning. But we will follow you. Till shade is gone," he recited, "till water is gone, into the Shadow with teeth bared, screaming defiance with the last breath, to spit in Sightblinder's eye on the Last Day." Sightblinder was one of the Aiel names for the Dark One.

There was nothing for Rand except to make the proper response. Once he had not known it. "By my honor and the Light, my life will be a dagger for Sightblinder's heart."

"Until the Last Day," the Aiel finished, "to Shayol Ghul itself." The harper played on pacifically.

The chiefs filed out past the two women, eyeing Moiraine respectfully. There was nothing of fear in them. Rand wished he could be as sure of himself. Moiraine had too many plans for him, too many ways of pulling strings he did not know she had tied to him.

The two women came in as soon as the chiefs were gone, Moiraine as cool and elegant as ever. A small, pretty woman, with or without those Aes Sedai features he could never put an age to, she had abandoned the damp, cooling cloth for her temples. In its place, a small blue stone hung suspended on her forehead from a fine golden chain in her dark hair. It would not have mattered if she had kept it; nothing could diminish her queenly carriage. She usually seemed to own a foot more height than she actually had, and her eyes were all confidence and command.

The other woman was taller, though still short of his shoulder, and young, not ageless. Egwene, whom he had grown up with. Now, except for her big dark eyes, she could almost have passed as an Aiel woman, and not only for her tanned face and hands. She wore a full Aiel skirt of brown wool and a loose white blouse of a plant fiber called *algode*. *Algode* was softer than even the finest-woven wool; it would do very well for trade, if he ever convinced the Aiel. A gray shawl hung around Egwene’s shoulders, and a folded gray scarf made a wide band to hold back the dark hair that fell below her shoulders. Unlike most Aielwomen, she wore only one bracelet, ivory carved into a circle of flames, and a single necklace of gold and ivory beads. And one more thing. A Great Serpent ring on her left hand.

Egwene had been studying with some of the Aiel Wise Ones—exactly what, Rand did not know, though he more than suspected something to do with dreams; Egwene and the Aielwomen were closemouthed—but she had studied in the White Tower, too. She was one of the Accepted, on the way to becoming Aes Sedai. And passing herself off, here and in Tear at least, as full Aes Sedai already. Sometimes he teased her about that; she did not take his japes very well, though.

“The wagons will be ready to leave for Tar Valon soon,” Moiraine said. Her voice was musical, crystalline.

“Send a strong guard,” Rand said, “or Kadere may not take them where you want.” He turned for the windows again, wanting to look out and think, about Kadere. “You’ve not needed me to hold your hand or give you permission before.”

Abruptly something seemed to strike him across the shoulders, for all the world like a thick hickory stick; only the slight feel of goose bumps on his skin, not likely in this heat, told him that one of the women had channeled.

Spinning back to face them, he reached out to *saidin,* filled himself with the One Power. The Power felt like life itself swelling inside him, as if he were ten times, a hundred times as alive; the Dark One's taint filled him, too, death and corruption, like maggots crawling in his mouth. It was a torrent that threatened to sweep him away, a raging flood he had to fight every moment. He was almost used to it now, and at the same time he would never be used to it. He wanted to hold on to the sweetness of *saidin* forever, and he wanted to vomit. And all the while the deluge tried to scour him to the bone and burn his bones to ash.

The taint would drive him mad eventually, if the Power did not kill him first; it was a race between the two. Madness had been the fate of every man who had channeled since the Breaking of the World began, since that day when Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, and his Hundred Companions had sealed up the Dark One's prison at Shayol Ghul. The last backblast from that sealing had tainted the male half of the True Source, and men who could channel, madmen who could channel, had torn the world apart.

He filled himself with the Power. . . . And he could not tell which woman had done it. They both looked at him as if butter would not melt in their mouths, each with an eyebrow arched almost identically in slightly amused questioning. Either or both could be embracing the female half of the Source right that instant, and he would never know.

Of course, a stick across the shoulders was not Moiraine's way; she found other means of chastising, more subtle, usually more painful in the end. Yet even sure that it must have been Egwene, he did nothing. *Proof.* Thought slid along the outside of the Void; he floated within, in emptiness, thought and emotion, even his anger, distant. *I will do nothing without proof. I will not be goaded, this time.* She was not the Egwene he had grown up with; she had become part of the Tower since Moiraine sent her there. Moiraine again. Always Moiraine. Sometimes he wished he were rid of Moiraine. *Only sometimes?*

He concentrated on her. "What do you want of me?" His voice sounded flat and cold to his own ears. The Power stormed inside him. Egwene had told him that for a woman, touching *saidar,* the female half of the Source, was an embrace; for a man, always, it was a war without mercy. "And don't mention wagons again, little sister. I usually find out what you mean to do long after it is done."

The Aes Sedai frowned at him, and no wonder. She was surely not used to being addressed so, not by any man, even the Dragon Reborn. He had no idea himself where "little sister" had come from; sometimes of late words seemed to pop into his head. A touch of madness, perhaps. Some nights he lay awake till the small hours, worrying about that. Inside the Void, it seemed someone else's worry.

"We should speak alone." She gave the harper a cool glance.

Jasin Natael, as he called himself here, lay half-sprawled on cushions against one of the windowless walls, softly playing the harp perched on his knee, its upper arm carved and gilded to resemble the creatures on Rand's forearms. Dragons, the Aiel called them. Rand had only suspicions where Natael had gotten the thing. He was a dark-haired man, who would have been accounted taller than most elsewhere than the Aiel Waste, in his middle years. His coat and breeches were dark blue silk suitable for a royal court, elaborately embroidered with thread-of-gold on collar and cuffs, everything buttoned up or laced despite the heat. The fine clothes were at odds with his gleeman's cloak spread out beside him. A perfectly sound cloak, but covered completely with hundreds of patches in nearly as many colors, all sewn so as to flutter at the slightest breeze, it signified a country entertainer, a juggler and tumbler, musician and storyteller who wandered from village to village. Certainly not a man to wear silk. The man had his conceits. He appeared completely immersed in his music.

"You can say what you wish in front of Natael," Rand said. "He is gleeman to the Dragon Reborn, after all." If keeping the matter secret was important enough, she would press it, and he would send Natael away, though he did not like the man to be out of his sight.

Egwene sniffed loudly and shifted her shawl on her shoulders. "Your head is swelled up like an overripe melon, Rand al'Thor." She said it flatly, as a statement of fact.

Anger bubbled outside the Void. Not at what she had said; she had been in the habit of trying to take him down a rung even when they were children, usually whether he deserved it or not. But of late it seemed to him she had taken to working with Moiraine, trying to put him off balance so the Aes Sedai could push him where she wanted. When they were younger, before they learned what he was, he and Egwene had thought they would marry one day. And now she sided with Moiraine against him.

Face hard, he spoke more roughly than he intended. “Tell me what you want, Moiraine. Tell me here and now, or let it wait until I can find time for you. I’m very busy.” That was an outright lie. Most of his time was spent practicing the sword with Lan, or the spears with Rhuarc, or learning to fight with hands and feet from both. But if there was any bullying to be done here today, he would do it. Natael could hear anything. Almost anything. So long as Rand knew where he was at all times.

Moiraine and Egwene both frowned, but the real Aes Sedai at least seemed to see he would not be budged this time. She glanced at Natael, her mouth tightening—the man still seemed deep in his music—then took a thick wad of gray silk from her pouch.

Unfolding it, she laid what it had contained on the table, a disc the size of a man’s hand, half dead black, half purest white, the two colors meeting in a sinuous line to form two joined teardrops. That had been the symbol of Aes Sedai, before the Breaking, but this disc was more. Only seven like it had ever been made, the seals on the Dark One’s prison. Or rather, each was a focus for one of those seals. Drawing her belt knife, its hilt wrapped in silver wire, Moiraine scraped delicately at the edge of the disc. And a tiny flake of solid black fell away.

Even encased in the Void, Rand gasped. The emptiness itself quivered, and for an instant the Power threatened to overwhelm him. “Is this a copy? A fake?”

“I found this in the square below,” Moiraine said. “It is real, though. The one I brought with me from Tear is the same.” She could have been saying she wanted pea soup for the midday meal. Egwene, on the other hand, clutched her shawl around her as if cold.

Rand felt the stirrings of fright himself, oozing across the surface of the Void. It was an effort to let go of *saidin,* but he forced himself. If he lost concentration, the Power could destroy him where he stood, and he wanted all his attention on the matter at hand. Even so, even with the taint, it was a loss.

That flake lying on the table was impossible. Those discs were made of *cuendillar,* heartstone, and nothing made of *cuendillar* could be broken, not even by the One Power. Whatever force was used against it only made it stronger. The making of heartstone had been lost in the Breaking of the

World, but whatever had been made of it during the Age of Legends still existed, even the most fragile vase, even if the Breaking had sunk it to the bottom of the ocean or buried it beneath a mountain. Of course, three of the seven discs were broken already, but it had taken a good deal more than a knife.

Come to think of it, though, he did not know how those three really had been broken. If no force short of the Creator could break heartstone, then that should be that.

“How?” he asked, surprised that his voice was still as steady as when the Void had surrounded him.

“I do not know,” Moiraine replied, just as calm outwardly. “But you do see the problem? A fall from the table could break this. If the others, wherever they may be, are like this, four men with hammers could break open that hole in the Dark One’s prison again. Who can even say how effective one is, in this condition?”

Rand saw. *I’m not ready yet.* He was not sure he ever would be ready, but he surely was not yet. Egwene looked as though she were staring into her own open grave.

Rewrapping the disc, Moiraine replaced it in her pouch. “Perhaps I will think of a possibility before I carry this to Tar Valon. If we know why, perhaps something can be done about it.”

He was caught by the image of the Dark One reaching out from Shayol Ghul once more, eventually breaking free completely; fires and darkness covered the world in his mind, flames that consumed and gave no light, blackness solid as stone squeezing the air. With that filling his head, what Moiraine had just said took a moment to penetrate. “You intend to go yourself?” He had thought she meant to stick to him like moss to a rock. *Isn’t this what you want?*

“Eventually,” Moiraine replied quietly. “Eventually I will—have to leave you, after all. What will be, must be.” Rand thought she shivered, but it was so quick it could have been his imagination, and the next instant she was all composure and self-control once more. “You must be ready.” The reminder of his doubts came unpleasantly. “We should discuss your plans. You cannot sit here much longer. Even if the Forsaken are not planning to come after you, they are out there, spreading their power. Gathering the Aiel will do no good if you find that everything beyond the Spine of the World is in their hands.”

Chuckling, Rand leaned back against the table. So this was just another ploy; if he was anxious about her leaving, perhaps he would be more willing to listen, more amenable to being guided. She could not lie, of course, not right out. One of the vaunted Three Oaths took care of that: to speak no word that was not true. He had learned that it left a barn-width of wriggle room. She would leave him alone eventually. After he was dead, no doubt.

"You want to discuss my plans," he said dryly. Pulling a short-stemmed pipe and a leather tabac pouch from his coat pocket, he thumbed the bowl full and briefly touched *saidin* to channel a flame dancing above the tabac. "Why? They are my plans." Puffing slowly, he waited, ignoring Egwene's glower.

The Aes Sedai's face never changed, but her large, dark eyes seemed to blaze. "What have you done when you refused to be guided by me?" Her voice was as cool as her features, yet the words still seemed to come like whip-cracks. "Wherever you have gone, you have left death, destruction and war behind you."

"Not in Tear," he said, too quickly. And too defensively. He must not let her put him off balance. Determinedly, he took spaced, deliberate puffs at his pipe.

"No," she agreed, "not in Tear. For once you had a nation behind you, a people, and what did you do with it? Bringing justice to Tear was commendable. Establishing order in Cairhien, feeding the hungry, is laudable. Another time I would praise you for it." She herself was Cairhienin. "But it does not help you toward the day you face Tarmon Gai'don." A single-minded woman, and cold when it came to anything else, even her own land. But should he not be just as single-minded?

"What would you have me do? Hunt down the Forsaken one by one?" Again he forced himself to draw more slowly on the pipe; it was an effort. "Do you even know where they are? Oh, Sammael is in Illian—you know that—but the rest? What if I go after Sammael as you wish, and find two or three or four of them? Or all nine?"

"You could have faced three or four, perhaps all nine surviving," she said icily, "had you not left *Callandor* in Tear. The truth is, you are running. You do not really have a plan, not a plan to ready you for the Last Battle. You run from place to place, hoping that in some way everything will come out for the best. Hoping, because you do not know what else to do. If you would take my advice, at least you—" He cut her off, gesturing sharply with his pipe, with never a care for the glares the two women gave him.

"I do have a plan." If they wanted to know, let them know, and he would be burned if he changed a word. "First, I mean to put an end to the wars and killing, whether I started them or not. If men have to kill, let them kill Trollocs, not each other. In the Aiel War, four clans crossed the Dragonwall, and had their way for better than two years. They looted and burned Cairhien, defeated every army sent against them. They could have taken Tar Valon, had they wanted. The Tower couldn't have stopped them, because of your Three Oaths." Not to use the Power as a weapon except against Shadowspawn or Darkfriends, or in defense of their own lives, that was another of the Oaths, and the Aiel had not threatened the Tower itself. Anger had him in its grip now. Running and hoping, was he? "Four clans did that. What will happen when I lead eleven across the Spine of the World?" It would have to be eleven; small hope of bringing in the Shaido. "By the time the nations even think of uniting, it will be too late. They'll accept my peace, or I'll be buried in the Can Breat." A discordant plunk rose from the harp, and Natael bent over the instrument, shaking his head. In a moment the soothing sounds came again.

"A melon couldn't be swollen enough for your head," Egwene muttered, folding her arms beneath her breasts. "And a stone couldn't be as stubborn! Moiraine is only trying to help you. Why won't you see that?"

The Aes Sedai smoothed her silk skirts, though they did not need it. "Taking the Aiel across the Dragonwall might be the worst thing you could possibly do." There was an edge to her voice, anger or frustration. At least he was getting across to her that he was no puppet. "By this time, the Amyrlin Seat will be approaching the rulers of every nation that still has a ruler, laying the proofs before them that you are the Dragon Reborn. They know the Prophecies; they know what you were born to do. Once they are convinced of who and what you are, they will accept you because they must. The Last Battle is coming, and you are their only hope, humankind's only hope."

Rand laughed out loud. It was a bitter laugh. Sticking his pipe between his teeth, he hoisted himself to sit cross-legged atop the table, staring at them. "So you and Siuan Sanche still think you know everything there is to know." The Light willing, they did not know near everything about him, and would never find out. "You're both fools."

“Show some respect!” Egwene growled, but Rand went on over her words.

“The Tairen High Lords know the Prophecies, too, and they knew me, once they saw the Sword That Cannot Be Touched clutched in my fist. Half of them expect me to bring them power or glory or both. The other half would as soon slip a knife in my back and try to forget the Dragon Reborn was ever in Tear. That is how the nations will greet the Dragon Reborn. Unless I quell them first, the same way I did the Tairens. Do you know why I left *Callandor* in Tear? To remind them of me. Every day they know it is there, driven into the Heart of the Stone, and they know I’ll come back for it. That is what holds them to me.” That was one reason he had left the Sword That Is Not a Sword behind. He did not like even to think of the other.

“Be very careful,” Moiraine said after a moment. Just that, in a voice all frozen calm. He heard stark warning in the words. Once he had heard her say in much the same tone that she would see him dead before letting the Shadow have him. A hard woman.

For a long moment she gazed at him, her eyes dark pools that threatened to swallow him. Then she made a perfect curtsy. “By your leave, my Lord Dragon, I will see to letting Master Kadere know where I expect him to work tomorrow.”

No one could have seen or heard the faintest mockery in action or words, but Rand felt it. Anything that might put him off balance, make him more biddable by guilt or shame or uncertainty or whatever, she would try. He stared after her until the clicking beads in the doorway obscured her.

“There is no need you scowling like that, Rand al’Thor.” Egwene’s voice was low, her eyes irate; she held on to her shawl as if she wanted to strangle him with it. “Lord Dragon, indeed! Whatever you are, you’re a rude, ill-mannered lout. You deserve more than you got. It would not kill you to be civil!”

“So it *was* you,” he snapped, but to his surprise she half-shook her head before catching herself. It had been Moiraine after all. If the Aes Sedai was showing that much temper, something must be wearing at her terribly. Him, no doubt. Perhaps he should apologize. *I suppose it* wouldn’t *hurt to be civil.* Though he could not see why he was supposed to be mannerly to the Aes Sedai while she tried to lead him on a leash.

But if he was thinking of trying to be polite, Egwene was not. If glowing coals were dark brown, they would have been exactly like her eyes. “You are a wool-headed fool, Rand al’Thor, and I should never have told Elayne you were good enough for her. You aren’t good enough for a weasel! Bring your nose down. I remember you sweating, trying to talk your way out of some trouble Mat had gotten you into. I can remember Nynaeve switching you till you howled, and you needing a cushion to sit on the rest of the day. Not that many years gone, either. I ought to tell Elayne to forget you. If she knew half what you’ve turned into . . .”

He gaped at her as the tirade went on, with her more furious than at any time since first coming through the bead curtain. Then it hit him. That little near shake of her head that she had not meant to give, letting him know it had been Moiraine who struck him with the Power. Egwene worked very hard at doing what she was about in proper fashion. Studying with the Wise Ones, she wore Aiel clothes; she might even be trying to adopt Aiel customs, for all he knew. It would be like her. But she worked hard at being a proper Aes Sedai all the time, even if she *was* only one of the Accepted. Aes Sedai usually kept a rein on their tempers, but they never ever gave anything away that they wanted to hide.

Ilyena never flashed her temper at me when she was angry with herself. When she gave me the rough side of her tongue, it was because she . . . His mind froze for an instant. He had never met a woman named Ilyena in his life. But he could summon up a face for the name, dimly; a pretty face, skin like cream, golden hair exactly the shade of Elayne’s. This had to be the madness. Remembering an imaginary woman. Perhaps one day he would find himself having conversations with people who were not there.

Egwene’s harangue shut off with a concerned look. “Are you all right, Rand?” The anger was gone from her voice as if it had never been. “Is something wrong? Should I fetch Moiraine back to—”

“No!” he said, and just as quickly softened his own tone. “She can’t Heal. . . .” Even an Aes Sedai could not Heal madness; none of them could Heal any of what ailed him. “Is Elayne well?”

“She is well.” Despite what Egwene had said, there was a hint of sympathy in her voice. That was all he really expected. Beyond what he had known when Elayne left Tear, what she was up to was an Aes Sedai concern and none of his; so Egwene had told him more than once, and Moiraine echoed her. The three Wise Ones who could dreamwalk, those Egwene was studying with, had been even less informative; they had their own reasons not to be pleased with him.

“I had best go, too,” Egwene went on, settling her shawl over her arms. “You are tired.” Frowning slightly, she said, “Rand, what does it mean to be buried in the Can Breat?”

He started to ask what under the Light she was talking about. Then he remembered using that phrase. “Just something I heard once,” he lied. He had no more idea what it meant than where it had come from.

“You rest, Rand,” she said, sounding twenty years older rather than two younger. “Promise me you will. You need it.” He nodded. She studied his face for a moment as though searching for the truth, then started for the door.

Rand’s silver goblet of wine floated up from the carpet and drifted to him. He hastily snatched it out of the air just before Egwene looked back over her shoulder.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t tell you this,” she said. “Elayne didn’t give it to me as a message for you, but . . . She said she loves you. Perhaps you know already, but if you don’t, you should think about it.” With that she was gone, the beads clicking together behind her.

Leaping from the table, Rand hurled the goblet away, splashing wine across the floor tiles as he rounded on Jasin Natael in a fury.

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CHAPTER 3

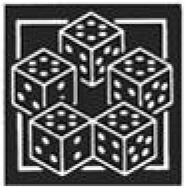

Pale Shadows

Seizing *saidin,* Rand channeled, wove flows of Air that snatched Natael up from the cushions; the gilded harp tumbled to the dark red tiles as the man was pinned against the wall, immobile from neck to ankles and his feet half a pace above the floor. “I’ve warned you! *Never* channel when anyone else is around. Never!”

Natael tilted his head in that peculiar way he had, as if trying to look at Rand sideways, or watch without being noticed. “If she had seen, she would have thought it was you.” There was no apology in his voice, no diffidence, but no challenge either; he seemed to think he was offering a reasonable explanation. “Besides, you looked thirsty. A court-bard should look after his lord’s needs.” That was one of the small conceits he surrounded himself with; if Rand was the Lord Dragon, then he himself must be a court-bard, not a simple gleeman.

Feeling disgusted with himself as much as angry at the man, Rand unraveled the weave and let him drop. Manhandling him was like picking a fight with a boy of ten. He could not see the shield that constricted the other man’s access to *saidin*—it was female work—but he knew it was there. Moving a goblet was about the extent of Natael’s ability, now. Luckily the shield had been hidden from female eyes, too. Natael called the trick “inverting”; he did not seem able to explain it, though. “And if she’d seen my face and was suspicious? I was as startled as if that goblet had flown at me by itself!” He stuck his pipe back between his teeth and sent up furious streams of smoke.

“She still wouldn’t suspect.” Settling back onto the cushions, the other man took up the harp again, strumming a line of music that had a devious sound. “How could anyone suspect? I do not entirely believe the situation myself.” If there was even a touch of bitterness in his voice, Rand could not detect it.

He was not entirely sure he believed it either, though he had worked hard enough for it. The man in front of him, Jasin Natael, had another name. Asmodean.

Idly playing the harp, Asmodean did not look like one of the dreaded Forsaken. He was even moderately handsome; Rand supposed he would be attractive to women. It often seemed strange that evil had left no outward mark. He was one of the Forsaken, and far from trying to kill him, Rand hid what he was from Moiraine and everyone else. He needed a teacher.

If what was true for the women Aes Sedai called “wilders” also held for men, he had only one chance in four of surviving the attempt to learn to use the Power on his own. That was discounting the madness. His teacher had to be a man; Moiraine and others had told him often enough that a bird could not teach a fish to fly, nor a fish a bird to swim. And his teacher had to be someone experienced, someone who already knew all the things he needed to learn. With Aes Sedai gentling men who could channel as soon as they were found—and fewer were found every year—that left small choices. A man who had simply discovered he could channel would know no more than he did. A false Dragon who could channel—if Rand could find one not already caught and gentled—would not be likely to give up his own dreams of glory for another claiming to be the Dragon Reborn. What remained, what Rand had lured to him, was one of the Forsaken.

Asmodean plucked random chords as Rand took a seat on a cushion facing him. It was well to remember that the man had not changed, not inside, from the day so long ago when he had pledged his soul to the Shadow. What he did now, he did under duress; he had not come to the Light. “Do you ever think of turning back, Natael?” He was always careful of the name; one breath of “Asmodean,” and Moiraine would be sure he had gone over to the Shadow. Moiraine and maybe others. Neither he nor Asmodean might survive that.

The man’s hands froze on the strings, his face utterly blank. “Turn back? Demandred, Rahvin, any of them would kill me on sight, now. If I was lucky. Except Lanfear perhaps, and you will understand if I don’t want to put her to the test. Semirhage could make a boulder beg for mercy and thank her for death. And as for the Great Lord—”

“The Dark One,” Rand broke in sharply around his pipestem. The Great Lord of the Dark was what Darkfriends called the Dark One. Darkfriends and the Forsaken.

Asmodean bowed his head briefly in acquiescence. “When the Dark One breaks free . . .” If his face had been expressionless before, now it was bleak in every line. “Suffice it to say that I will find Semirhage and give myself to her before I’ll face the—the Dark One’s punishment for betrayal.”

“As well you are here to teach me, then.”

Mournful music began to flow from the harp, speaking of loss and tears. “ ‘The March of Death,’ ” Asmodean said over the music, “the final movement of *The Grand Passions Cycle*, composed some three hundred years before the War of Power by—”

Rand cut him off. “You are not teaching me very well.”

“As well as may be expected, under the circumstances. You can grasp *saidin* every time you try, now, and tell one flow from another. You can shield yourself, and the Power does what you want it to.” He stopped playing and frowned, not looking at Rand. “Do you think Lanfear really intended me to teach you everything? If she had wanted that, she would have contrived to stay close so she could link us. She wants you to live, Lews Therin; but this time she means to be stronger than you.”

“Don’t call me that!” Rand snapped, but Asmodean did not seem to hear.

“If you planned this between you—trapping me—” Rand sensed a surge in Asmodean, as if the Forsaken were testing the shield Lanfear had woven around him; women who could channel saw a glow surrounding another woman who had embraced *saidar* and felt her channeling clearly, but he never saw anything around Asmodean and felt little. “If you worked it out together, then you let her outfox you on more levels than one. I’ve told you I am not a very good teacher, especially without a link. You did plan it between you, didn’t you?” He did look at Rand then, sidelong but still intent. “How much do you remember? Of being Lews Therin, I mean. She said you recalled nothing at all, but she could lie to the Gr—the Dark One himself.”

“This time she spoke the truth.” Seating himself on one of the cushions, Rand channeled one of the clan chiefs’ untouched silver goblets to him. Even such a brief touch of *saidin* was exhilarating—and fouling. And hard to release. He did not want to talk about Lews Therin; he was tired of people thinking he *was* Lews Therin. The bowl of his pipe had grown hot with all the puffing, so he held it by the stem and gestured with it. “If linking will help you teach me, why don’t we link?”

Asmodean looked at him as if he had asked why they did not eat rocks, then shook his head. “I continually forget how much you don’t know. You and I cannot. Not without a woman to join us. You could ask Moiraine, I suppose, or the girl Egwene. One of them might be able to reason out the method. So long as you don’t mind them finding out who I am.”

“Don’t lie to me, Natael,” Rand growled. Well before meeting Natael he had learned that a man’s channeling and a woman’s were as different as men and women themselves, but he took little the man said on trust. “I’ve heard Egwene and others talk about Aes Sedai linking their powers. If they can do it, why not you and I?”

“Because we can’t.” Exasperation filled Asmodean’s tone. “Ask a philosopher if you want to know why. Why can’t dogs fly? Perhaps in the grand scheme of the Pattern, it’s a balance for men being stronger. We cannot link without them, but they can without us. Up to thirteen of them can, anyway, a small mercy; after that, they need men to make the circle larger.”

Rand was sure he had caught a lie, this time. Moiraine said that in the Age of Legends men and women had been equally strong in the Power, and she could not lie. He said as much, adding, “The Five Powers are equal.”

“Earth, Fire, Air, Water, and Spirit.” Natael strummed a chord for each. “They are equal, true, and it is also true that what a man can do with one, a woman can also. In kind, at least. But that has nothing to do with men being stronger. What Moiraine believes to be truth, she tells as truth whether or not it is; one of a thousand weaknesses in those fool Oaths.” He played a bit of something that did indeed sound foolish. “Some women have stronger arms than some men, but in general it is the other way around. The same holds with strength in the Power, and in about the same proportion.”

Rand nodded slowly. It did make a kind of sense. Elayne and Egwene were considered two of the strongest women to train in the Tower for a thousand years or more, but he had tested himself against them once, and later Elayne had confessed that she felt like a kitten seized by a mastiff.

Asmodean was not finished. “If two women link, they do not double their strength—linking is not as simple as adding together the power of each—but if they are strong enough, they can match a man. And when they take the circle to thirteen, then you must be wary. Thirteen women who can barely channel could overpower most men, linked. The thirteen weakest women in the Tower could overpower you or any man, and barely breathe hard. I came across a saying in Arad Doman. ‘The more women there are about, the softer a wise man steps.’ It would not be bad to remember it.”

Rand shivered, thinking of a time when he had been among many more than thirteen Aes Sedai. Of course, most of them had not known who he was. If they had . . . *If Egwene and Moiraine linked* . . . He did not want to believe Egwene had gone that far toward the Tower and away from their friendship. *Whatever she does, she does with her whole heart, and she’s becoming Aes Sedai. So is Elayne.*

Swallowing half his wine did not completely wash the thought away. “What more can you tell me about the Forsaken?” It was a question he was sure he had asked a hundred times, but he always hoped there was a scrap more to dig out. Better than thinking about Moiraine and Egwene linking to . . .

“I have told everything I know.” Asmodean sighed heavily. “We were hardly close friends at the best. Do you believe I am holding back something? I don’t know where the others are, if that is what you want. Except Sammael, and you knew he’d taken Illian for his kingdom before I told you. Graendal was in Arad Doman for a time, but I expect she has gone now; she likes her comforts too well. I suspect Moghedien is or was in the west somewhere as well, but no one ever finds the Spider unless she wants to be found. Rahvin has a queen for one of his pets, but your guess is as good as mine as to what country she rules for him. And that is all I know that might help locate them.”

Rand had heard all that before; it seemed he had heard all Asmodean had to say of the Forsaken fifty times already. So often that at moments it seemed he had always known what the man was telling him. Some of it he almost wished he had never learned—what Semirhage found amusing, for instance—and some made no sense. Demandred had gone over to the Shadow because he envied Lews Therin Telamon? Rand could not imagine envying someone enough to do anything because of it, and surely not that. Asmodean claimed it had been the thought of immortality, of endless Ages of music, that had seduced him; he claimed to have been a noted composer of music, before. Senseless. Yet in that mass of often blood-chilling knowledge might lie keys to surviving Tarmon Gai’don. Whatever he told Moiraine, he knew he would have to face them then, if not before. Emptying the goblet, he set it on the floor tiles. Wine would not wash out facts.

The bead curtain rattled, and he looked over his shoulder as *gai'shain* entered, white-robed and silent. While some began gathering up the food and drink that had been laid out for him and the chiefs, another, a man, carried a large silver tray to the table. On it were covered dishes, a silver cup, and two large, green-striped pottery pitchers. One would hold wine, the other water. A *gai'shain* woman brought in a gilded lamp, already lit, and set it beside the tray. Through the windows, the sky was beginning to take on the yellow-red of sunset; in the brief time between baking and freezing, the air actually felt comfortable.

Rand stood as the *gai'shain* departed, but did not follow immediately. "What do you think of my chances when the Last Battle comes, Natael?"

Asmodean hesitated in pulling red-and-blue-striped wool blankets from behind his cushions and looked up at him, head tilted in that sideways manner of his. "You found . . . something . . . in the square the day we met here."

"Forget that," Rand said harshly. There had been two, not one. "I destroyed it, in any case." He thought Asmodean's shoulders slumped a trifle.

"Then the—Dark One—will consume you alive. As for me, I intend to open my veins the hour I know he is free. If I get the chance. A quick death is better than what I'll find elsewhere." He tossed the blankets aside and sat staring glumly at nothing. "Better than going mad, certainly. I'm as subject to that as you, now. You broke the bonds that protected me." There was no bitterness in his voice, only hopelessness.

"What if there was another way to shield against the taint?" Rand demanded. "What if it could be removed somehow? Would you still kill yourself then?"

Asmodean's barked laugh was utterly acid. "The Shadow take me, you must be beginning to think you really are the bloody Creator! We are dead. Both of us. Dead! Are you too blind with pride to see it? Or just too thick-witted, you hopeless shepherd?"

Rand refused to be drawn. "Then why not go ahead and end it?" he asked in a tight voice. *I wasn't too blind to see what you and Lanfear were up to. I wasn't too thick-witted to fool her and trap you.* "If there's no hope, no chance, not the smallest shred . . . then why are you still alive?"

Still not looking at him, Asmodean rubbed the side of his nose. "I once saw a man hanging from a cliff," he said slowly. "The brink was crumbling under his fingers, and the only thing near enough to grasp was a tuft of grass, a few long blades with roots barely clinging to the rock. The only chance he had of climbing back up on the cliff. So he grabbed it." His abrupt chuckle held no mirth. "He had to know it would pull free."

"Did you save him?" Rand asked, but Asmodean did not answer.

As Rand started for the doorway, the sounds of "The March of Death" began again behind him.

The strings of beads fell together behind him, and the five Maidens who had been waiting in the wide, empty hall flowed easily to their feet from where they had been squatting on the pale blue tiles. They were all but one tall for women, though not for Aielwomen. Their leader, Adelin, lacked little more than a hand of being able to look him in the eyes. The exception, a fiery redhead named Enaila, was no taller than Egwene, and extremely touchy about being so short. Like the clan chiefs', their eyes were all blue or gray or green, and their hair, light brown or yellow or red, was cut short except for a tail at the nape of the neck. Full quivers balanced the long-bladed knives at their belts, and they wore cased horn bows on their backs. Each carried three or four short, long-bladed spears and a round, bull-hide buckler. Aielwomen who did not want hearth and children had their own warrior society, *Far Dareis Mai,* the Maidens of the Spear.

He acknowledged them with a small bow, which made them smile; it was not an Aiel custom, at least not the way he had been taught to do it. "I see you, Adelin," he said. "Where is Joinde? I thought she was with you earlier. Has she taken ill?"

"I see you, Rand al'Thor," she replied. Her pale yellow hair seemed paler framing her sun-dark face, which had a fine white scar across one cheek. "In a way she has. She had been talking to herself all day, and not an hour ago, she went off to lay a bridal wreath at the feet of Garan, of the Jhirad Goshien." Some of the others shook their heads; marrying meant giving up the spear. "Tomorrow is his last day as her *gai'shain.* Joinde is Black Rock Shaarad," she added significantly. It was significant; marriages came frequently with men or women taken *gai'shain,* but very seldom between clans with blood feud, even blood feud in abeyance.

"It is an illness that spreads," Enaila said heatedly. Her voice was usually as hot as her hair. "One or two Maidens make their bridal wreaths every day since we came to Rhuidean."

Rand nodded with what he hoped they took for sympathy. It was his fault. If he told them, he wondered how many would still risk staying near him. All, probably; honor would hold them, and they had no more fear than the clan chiefs. At least it was only marriages, so far; even Maidens would think marrying better than what some had experienced. Maybe they would. “I will be ready to go in a moment,” he told them.

“We will wait with patience,” Adelin said. It hardly seemed patience; standing there, they all appeared poised on the edge of sudden movement.

It really did take him only a moment to do what he wanted, weave flows of Spirit and Fire into a box around the room and tie them so the weave held on its own. Anyone could go in or out—except a man who could channel. For himself—or Asmodean—walking through that doorway would be like walking through a wall of solid flame. He had discovered the weave—and that Asmodean, blocked, was too weak to channel through it—by accident. No one was likely to question the doings of a gleeman, but if someone did, Jasin Natael had simply chosen to sleep as far from Aiel as he could manage in Rhuidean. That was a choice that Hadnan Kadere’s drivers and guards, at least, could sympathize with. And this way Rand knew exactly where the man was of a night. The Maidens asked him no questions.

He turned away. The Maidens followed him, spread out and wary as if they expected an attack right there. Asmodean was still playing the lament.

Arms outstretched to either side, Mat Cauthon walked the wide white coping of the dry fountain, singing to the men who watched him in the fading light.

“We’ll drink the wine till the cup is dry,
and kiss the girls so they’ll not cry,
and toss the dice until we fly
to dance with Jak o’ the Shadows.”

The air felt cool after the day’s heat, and he thought briefly of buttoning up his fine green silk coat with the golden embroidery, but the drink the Aiel called *oosquai* had put a buzz in his head like giant flies, and the thought flittered away. The white stone figures of three women stood on a platform in the dusty basin, twenty feet tall and unclothed. Each had been made with one hand upraised, the other holding a huge stone jar tilted over her shoulder for water to pour from, but one was missing her head and upraised hand, and on another the jar was a shattered ruin.

“We’ll dance all night while the moon runs free,
and dandle the lasses upon our knee,
and then you’ll ride along with me,
to dance with Jak o’ the Shadows.”

“A fine song to be singing about death,” one of the wagon drivers shouted in a heavy Lugarder accent. Kadere’s men kept themselves in a tight knot apart from the Aielmen around the fountain; they were all tough, hard-faced men, but every one was sure any Aiel would slit his throat for a wrong glance. They were not far wrong. “I heard my old grandmother talk about Jak o’ the Shadows,” the big-eared Lugarder went on. “ ’Tisn’t right to sing about death that way.”

Mat muzzily considered the song he had been singing and grimaced. No one had heard “Dance with Jak o’ the Shadows” since Aldeshar fell; in his head, he could still hear the defiant song rising as the Golden Lions launched their last, futile charge at Artur Hawkwing’s encircling army. At least he had not been babbling it in the Old Tongue. He was not as juicy as he looked by half, but there had indeed been too many cups of *oosquai.* The stuff looked and tasted like brown water, but it hit your head like a mule’s kick. *Moiraine will pack me off to the Tower yet, if I’m not careful. At least it would get me out of the Waste and away from Rand.* Maybe he was drunker than he thought, if he considered that a fair trade. He shifted to “Tinker in the Kitchen.”

“Tinker in the kitchen, with a job of work to do.
Mistress up above, slipping on a robe of blue.
She dances down the staircase, her fancy all so free,
crying, Tinker, oh, dear Tinker, won’t you mend a pot for me?”

Some of Kadere’s men joined in the song as he danced back to where he had begun. The Aiel did not; among them, men did not sing except for battle chants or laments for the slain, and neither did Maidens, except among themselves.

Two Aielmen were squatting on the coping, showing none of the effects of the *oosquai* they had consumed, unless their eyes were the faintest bit glassy. He would be glad to get back where light-colored eyes were a rarity; growing up, he had not seen anything but brown or black except on Rand.

A few pieces of wood—wormholed arms and legs from chairs—lay on the broad paving stones, in the area left open by the watchers. An empty red pottery crock lay beside the coping, as did another that still held *oosquai*, and a silver cup. The game was to take a drink, then try to hit a target thrown into the air with a knife. None of Kadere's men and few of the Aiel would dice with him, not when he won as often as he did, and they did not play at cards. Knife throwing was supposed to be different, especially with *oosquai* added in. He had not won as often as he did with dice, but half a dozen worked gold cups and two bowls lay inside the basin beneath him, along with bracelets and necklaces set with rubies or moonstones or sapphires, and a scattering of coins as well. His flat-crowned hat and an odd spear with a black haft rested beside his winnings. Some of it was even Aiel made. They were more likely to pay for something with a piece of loot than with a coin.

Corman, one of the Aiel on the coping, looked up at him as he cut off singing. A white scar slanted across his nose. "You are nearly as good with knives as you are with dice, Matrim Cauthon. Shall we call it an end? The light is failing."

"There's plenty of light." Mat squinted at the sky; pale shadows covered everything here in the valley of Rhuidean, but the sky was still light enough to see against, at least. "My grandmother could make the throw in this. I could make it blindfolded."

Jenric, the other squatting Aiel, peered around the onlookers. "Are there women here?" Built like a bear, he considered himself a wit. "The only time a man talks like that is when there are women to impress." The Maidens scattered through the crowd laughed as hard as anyone else, and maybe harder.

"You think I can't?" Mat muttered, ripping off the dark scarf he wore around his neck to hide the scar where he had once been hung. "Just you shout 'now' when you throw it up, Corman." Hastily he tied the scarf around his eyes and drew one of his knives from his sleeve. The loudest sound was the watchers breathing. *Not drunk? I'm juicier than a fiddler's* *whelp*. And yet, he suddenly felt his luck, felt that surge the way he did when he knew which spots would show before the dice stopped tumbling. It seemed to clear his head a little. “Throw it,” he murmured calmly.

“Now,” Corman called, and Mat’s arm whipped back, then forward.

In the stillness, the *thunk* of steel stabbing wood was as loud as the clatter of the target on the pavement.

No one said a word as he pulled the scarf back down around his neck. A piece of a chair arm no bigger than his hand lay in the open space, his blade stuck firmly in the middle. Corman had tried to shave the odds, it appeared. Well, he had never specified the target. He suddenly realized he had not even made a wager.

Finally one of Kadere’s men half-shouted, “The Dark One’s own luck, that!”

“Luck is a horse to ride like any other,” Mat said to himself. No matter where it came from. Not that he knew where his luck came from; he only tried to ride it as best he could.

As quietly as he had spoken, Jenric frowned up at him. “What was that you said, Matrim Cauthon?”

Mat opened his mouth to repeat himself, then closed it again as the words came clear in his mind. *Sene sovya caba’donde ain dovienya*. The Old Tongue. “Nothing,” he muttered. “Just talking to myself.” The onlookers were beginning to drift away. “I guess the light really is fading too much to go on.”

Corman put a foot on the piece of wood to wrench Mat’s knife free and brought it back to him. “Some time again maybe, Matrim Cauthon, some day.” That was the Aiel way of saying “never” when they did not want to say it right out.

Mat nodded as he slipped the blade back into one of the sheaths inside his sleeve; it was the same as the time he had rolled six sixes twenty-three times in a row. He could hardly blame them. Being lucky was not all it was made out. He noted with a bit of envy that neither Aiel staggered in the slightest as they joined the departing crowd.

Scrubbing a hand through his hair, Mat sat down heavily on the coping. The memories that had once cluttered his head like raisins in a cake now blended with his own. In one part of his mind he knew he had been born in the Two Rivers twenty years before, but he could remember clearly leading the flanking attack that turned the Trollocs at Maighande, and dancing in the court of Tarmandewin, and a hundred other things, a thousand. Mostly battles. He remembered dying more times than he wanted to think of. No seams between lives anymore; he could not tell his memories from the others unless he concentrated.

Reaching behind him, he set his wide-brimmed hat on his head and fished the odd spear across his knees. Instead of an ordinary spearhead, it had what looked like a two-foot sword blade, marked with a pair of ravens. Lan said that that blade had been made with the One Power during the War of the Shadow, the War of the Power; the Warder claimed it would never need sharpening and never break. Mat thought he would not trust that unless he had to. It might have lasted three thousand years, but he had little trust of the Power. Cursive script ran along the black haft, punctuated at either end with another raven, inlaid in some metal even darker than the wood. In the Old Tongue, but he could read it now, of course.

Thus is our treaty written; thus is agreement made.
Thought is the arrow of time; memory never fades.
What was asked is given. The price is paid.

One way down the wide street, half a mile off, was a square that would have been called large in most cities. The Aiel traders were gone for the night, but their pavilions still stood, made of the same grayish brown wool used for Aiel tents. Hundreds of traders had come to Rhuidean from every part of the Waste, for the biggest fair the Aiel had ever seen, and more arrived every day. The traders had been among the first to actually start living in the city.

Mat did not really want to look the other way, toward the great plaza. He could make out the shapes of Kadere’s wagons, awaiting more loading tomorrow. What appeared to be a twisted redstone doorframe had been heaved into one that afternoon; Moiraine had taken particular care to see it lashed firmly in place just as she wanted.

He did not know what she knew of it—and he was not about to ask; better if she forgot he was alive, though small chance of that—but whatever she knew, he was sure he knew more. He had stepped through it, a fool looking for answers. What he had gotten instead was a head full of other men’s memories. That, and dead. He tucked the scarf closer around his neck. And two other things. A silver foxhead medallion that he wore under his shirt, and the weapon across his knees. Small recompense. He ran his fingers lightly down the script. *Memory never fades.* They had a sense of humor fit for Aiel, those folk on the other side of that doorway.

"Can you do that every time?"

He jerked his head around to stare at the Maiden who had just sat down beside him. Tall even for an Aiel, maybe taller than he was, she had hair like spun gold and eyes the color of a clear morning sky. She was older than he, maybe by ten years, but that had never put him off. Then again, she was *Far Dareis Mai.*

"I am Melindhra," she went on, "of the Jumai sept. Can you do that every time?"

She meant the knife throwing, he realized. She gave her sept, but no clan. Aiel never did that. Unless . . . She had to be one of the Shaido Maidens who had come to join Rand. He did not really understand all this about societies, but as for Shaido, he remembered them trying to stick spears in him too well. Couladin did not like anyone associated with Rand, and what Couladin hated, the Shaido hated. On the other hand, Melindhra had come here to Rhuidean. A Maiden. But she wore a small smile; her gaze held an inviting light.

"Most of the time," he said truthfully. Even when he did not feel it, his luck was good; when he did, it was perfect. She chuckled, her smile widening, as if she thought he was boasting. Women seemed to make up their minds whether you were lying without looking at the evidence. On the other hand, if they liked you, they either did not care or else decided even the most outrageous lie was true.

Maidens could be dangerous, whatever their clan—any woman could; he had learned that on his own—but Melindhra's eyes were definitely not just looking at him.

Dipping into his winnings, he pulled up a necklace of gold spirals, each centered on a deep blue sapphire, the largest as big as the joint of his thumb. He could remember a time—his own memory—when the smallest of those stones would have made him sweat.

"They'll look pretty with your eyes," he said, laying the heavy strand in her hands. He had never seen a Maiden wear baubles of any sort, but in his experience, every woman liked jewelry. Strangely, they liked flowers nearly as well. He did not understand it, but then, he was willing to admit that he understood women less than he did his luck, or what had happened on the other side of that twisted doorway.

“Very fine work,” she said, holding it up. “I accept your offer.” The necklace disappeared into her belt pouch, and she leaned over to push his hat back on his head. “Your eyes are pretty. Like dark polished catseye.” She twisted around to pull her feet up onto the coping and sat with her arms wrapped around her knees, studying him intently. “My spear sisters have told me about you.”

Mat pulled his hat back into place and watched her warily from under the brim. What had they told her? And what “offer”? It was only a necklace. The invitation was gone from her eyes; she looked like a cat studying a mouse. That was the trouble with Maidens of the Spear. Sometimes it was hard to tell whether they wanted to dance with you, kiss you, or kill you.

The street was emptying, the shadows deepening, but he recognized Rand slanting across down the way, pipe clenched between his teeth. He was the only man in Rhuidean likely to be walking with a fistful of *Far Dareis Mai. They’re always around him,* Mat thought. *Guarding him like a pack of she-wolves, leaping to do whatever he says.* Some men might have envied him that much, at least. Not Mat. Not most of the time. If it had been a pack of girls like Isendre, now . . .

“Excuse me for a moment,” he told Melindhra hurriedly. Leaning his spear against the low wall around the fountain, he leaped up already running. His head still buzzed, but not so loudly as before, and he did not stagger. He had no worries about his winnings. The Aiel had very definite views of what was allowed: taking in a raid was one thing, theft another. Kadere’s men had learned to keep their hands in their pockets after one of them had been caught stealing. After a beating that left him striped from shoulders to heels, he had been sent away. The one water bag he had been allowed would not have been nearly enough for him to reach the Dragonwall, even if he had had any clothes on. Now Kadere’s men would not pick up a copper they found lying in the street.

“Rand?” The other man walked on with his encircling escort. “Rand?” Rand was not even ten paces away, but he did not waver. Some of the Maidens looked back, but not Rand. Mat felt cold suddenly, and it had nothing to do with the onset of night. He wet his lips and spoke again, not a shout. “Lews Therin.” And Rand turned around. Mat almost wished he had not.

For a time they only looked at one another in the twilight. Mat hesitated about going closer. He tried telling himself it was because of the Maidens. Adelin had been one of those who taught him a so-called game, Maidens' Kiss, that he was never likely to forget; or play again, if he had any say in it. And he could feel Enaila's gaze like an auger boring into his skull. Who would have expected a woman to go up like oil thrown on a fire just because you told her she was the prettiest little flower you had ever seen?

Rand, now. He and Rand had grown up together. They and Perrin, the blacksmith's apprentice back in Emond's Field, had hunted together, fished together, tramped through the Sand Hills to the edge of the Mountains of Mist, camped under the stars. Rand was his friend. Only now he was the kind of friend who might bash your head in without meaning to. Perrin could be dead, because of Rand.

He made himself walk to arm's reach of the other man. Rand was nearly a head taller, and in the early-evening gloom he seemed taller yet. Colder than he had been. "I've been thinking, Rand." Mat wished he did not sound hoarse. He hoped Rand would answer to his right name this time. "I've been away from home a long time."

"We both have," Rand said softly. "A long time." Suddenly he gave a laugh, not loud, but almost like the old Rand. "Are you beginning to miss milking your father's cows?"

Mat scratched his ear, grinning a bit. "Not that, exactly." If he never saw the inside of another barn it would be too soon. "But I was thinking that when Kadere's wagons go, I might go with them."

Rand was silent. When he spoke again, the brief flash of mirth was gone. "All the way to Tar Valon?"

It was Mat's turn to hesitate. *He wouldn't give me away to Moiraine. Would he?* "Maybe," he said casually. "I don't know. That's where Moiraine will want me. Maybe I'll find a chance to get back to the Two Rivers. See if everything's all right at home." *See if Perrin's alive. See if my sisters are, and Mother and Da.*

"We all have to do what we must, Mat. Not what we want to, very often. What we must."

It sounded like an excuse, to Mat, as if Rand was asking him to understand. Only, he had done what he had to himself a few times. *I can't blame Perrin on him, not by himself. Nobody bloody forced me to follow* *after Rand like some bloody heelhound!* Only that was not true, either. He had been forced. Just not by Rand. “You won’t—stop me leaving?”

“I don’t try to tell you to come or go, Mat,” Rand said wearily. “The Wheel weaves the Pattern, not me, and the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.” For all the world like a bloody Aes Sedai! Half turning to go, Rand added, “Don’t trust Kadere, Mat. In some ways he’s about as dangerous a man as you ever met. Don’t trust him an inch, or you might get your throat slit, and you and I wouldn’t be the only ones to regret that.” Then he was gone, down the street in the deepening dusk, with the Maidens around him like slinking wolves.

Mat stared after him. Trust the merchant? *I wouldn’t trust Kadere if he was tied in a sack.* So Rand did not weave the Pattern? He came close! Before ever any of them learned that the Prophecies had anything to do with them, they had learned that Rand was *ta’veren,* one of those rare individuals who, instead of being woven willy-nilly into the Pattern, instead forced the Pattern to shape itself around them. Mat knew about being *ta’veren*; he was one himself, though not as strong as Rand. Sometimes Rand could affect people’s lives, change the course of them, just by being in the same town. Perrin was *ta’veren* as well—or maybe had been. Moiraine had thought it was significant, finding three young men who grew up in the same village, all destined to be *ta’veren.* She meant to fit them all into her plans, whatever they were.

It was supposed to be a grand thing; all the *ta’veren* Mat had been able to learn about had been men like Artur Hawkwing, or women like Mabriam en Shereed, who stories said had founded the Compact of the Ten Nations after the Breaking. But none of the stories told what happened when one *ta’veren* was close to another as strong as Rand. It was like being a leaf in a whirlpool.

Melindhra stopped beside him and handed him his spear and a heavy, coarse-woven sack that clinked. “I put your winnings in this for you.” She *was* taller than he was, by a good two inches. She glanced after Rand. “I had heard you were near-brother to Rand al’Thor.”

“In a manner of speaking,” he said dryly.

“It does not matter,” she said dismissively, and concentrated her gaze on him, fists on her hips. “You attracted my interest, Mat Cauthon, before you gave me a regard-gift. Not that I will give up the spear for you, of course, but I have had my eye on you for days. You have a smile like a boy about to do mischief. I like that. And those eyes.” In the failing light her grin was slow and wide. And warm. “I do like your eyes.”

Mat tugged his hat straight, though it had not been crooked. From pursuer to pursued, in the blink of an eye. It could happen like that, with Aiel women. Especially Maidens. “Does ‘Daughter of the Nine Moons’ mean anything to you?” It was a question he asked women sometimes. The wrong answer would send him out of Rhuidean tonight if he had to try walking out of the Waste.

“Nothing,” she said. “But there are things I like to do by moonlight.” Putting an arm around his shoulder, she took off his hat and began to whisper in his ear. In no time at all he was grinning even more widely than she.

* * *

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CHAPTER 4

Twilight

With his *Far Dareis Mai* escort, Rand approached the Rhuidean Roof of the Maidens. White stairs as wide as the tall building, each step a stride deep, ran up to thick columns twenty paces high, black-seeming in the twilight but bright blue by day, and fluted in spirals. The outside of the building was a patterned mosaic of glazed tiles, white and blue in spirals that appeared endless to the eye, and a huge window of colored glass directly above the columns showed a black-haired woman fifteen feet tall, in complicated blue robes, right hand upraised, either to bless or command a halt. Her face was serene and stern at the same time. Whoever she had been, she was surely no Aiel, not with that pale skin and those dark eyes. An Aes Sedai, perhaps. He tapped his pipe out on his bootheel and stuffed it into his coat pocket before starting up the steps.

Except for *gai'shain*, men were not allowed beneath a Roof of the Maidens, not any man, not in any hold in the Waste. A chief or a Maiden's blood kin could die trying, though in fact no Aielman would ever think of it. It was the same for any society; only members and the *gai'shain* were allowed inside.

The two Maidens standing guard at the tall bronze doors flashed Maiden handtalk at one another, cutting their eyes in his direction as he came through the columns, then shared a small grin. He wished he knew what they had said. Even in as dry a land as the Waste, bronze would tarnish with enough time, but *gai'shain* had polished these doors until they looked new-made. They stood wide open, and the pair of guards made no move to hinder him as he walked through, Adelin and the others on his heels.

The wide, white-tiled corridors and great rooms inside were full of Maidens, sitting about on bright cushions, talking, tending to weapons, playing cat's cradle, or stones, or Thousand Flowers, an Aiel game that involved laying out patterns of flat bits of stone carved with what seemed a hundred different symbols. Of course, a profusion of *gai'shain* moved smoothly about their chores, cleaning, serving, mending, seeing to oil lamps that ranged from simple glazed pottery to gilded loot from somewhere to the tall stand-lamps that had been found in the city. In most rooms, colorful carpets and bright tapestries covered the floors and walls, in nearly as many patterns and styles as there *were* carpets and tapestries. The walls and ceilings themselves were detailed mosaics, of forests and rivers and skies that had never been seen in the Waste.

Young or old, the Maidens smiled when they saw him, and some nodded familiarly or even patted his shoulder. Others called out, asking how he was, had he eaten, would he like the *gai'shain* to bring him wine or water? He responded briefly, though with answering smiles. He was well, and neither hungry nor thirsty. He kept walking, not even slowing when he spoke. Slowing would lead inevitably to stopping, and he was not up to that tonight.

Far Dareis Mai had adopted him, after a fashion. Some treated him as a son, others as a brother. Age seemed not to come into it; women with white in their hair might talk to him as a brother over tea, while Maidens no more than a year older than he tried to make sure he wore the proper clothes for the heat. There was no avoiding the mothering; they simply did it, and he could not see how to make them stop, short of using the Power against the whole lot of them.

He had thought of trying to have another society provide his guards—*Shae'en M'taal*, the Stone Dogs, perhaps, or *Aethan Dor*, the Red Shields; Rhuarc had been a Red Shield before becoming chief—only, what reason could he possibly give? Not the truth, certainly. Just thinking about explaining that to Rhuarc and the others made him uncomfortable; Aiel humor being what it was, even sour old Han would likely break his ribs laughing. Any reason at all would probably offend the honor of every last Maiden. At least they rarely mothered him except under the Roof, where there was no one to see but themselves, and *gai'shain* who knew better than to speak of anything that happened there. "The Maidens," he had once said, "carry my honor." Everyone remembered that, and the Maidens were as proud of it as if he had given them all thrones. But it had turned out that they carried it in a manner they chose.

Adelin and the other four left him to join their friends, but he was hardly alone as he climbed higher in the building, along curving flights of wide white stairs. He had to answer the same questions at practically every step. No, he was not hungry. Yes, he knew he was not used to the heat yet, and no, he had not spent too much time in the sun. He bore it all patiently, but he did heave a sigh of relief when he reached the second story above the huge window. Here there were no Maidens and no *gai'shain* in the broad hallways or on the stairs that led on upward. The bare walls and empty chambers emphasized the absence of people, but after traversing the floors below, he found solitude a blessing.

His bedroom was a windowless chamber near the center of the building, one of the few that was not huge, though its ceiling still reached high enough to make height the room's longest dimension. What it had been meant for originally, he had no idea; a mosaic of vines around the small fireplace was the only ornamentation. A servant's room, he would have said, but servants' rooms did not have a door sheathed in bronze, however plain, that he pushed most of the way shut. *Gai'shain* had polished the metal to a dull gleam. A few tasseled cushions lay scattered on the blue floor tiles for sitting, and a thick pallet, atop bright layered rugs, for sleeping. A simple blue-glazed pitcher of water and a dark green cup sat on the floor near the "bed." That was it, except for two three-pronged stand-lamps, already lit, and a pace-high pile of books in one corner. With a tired sigh, he lay down on the pallet still in his coat and boots; no matter how he shifted it was not much softer than sleeping on the bare floor.

The night's chill was already seeping into the room, but he did not bother to light the dried cow dung on the hearth; he was readier to face the cold than the smell. Asmodean had tried to show him a simple way to keep the room warm; simple, but something the man did not have enough strength to do himself. The one time Rand had tried it, he had awakened in the middle of the night, gasping for breath while the edges of the rugs smoldered from the heat of the floor. He had not made another attempt.

He had chosen this building for his quarters because it was whole and near to the plaza; its great high ceilings gave a semblance of coolness even to the hottest part of the day, and its thick walls kept out the worst of the cold at night. It had not been the Roof of the Maidens then, of course. One morning he simply awakened to find it so, Maidens in every room on the first two floors and their guards on the doors. It had taken him a while to realize that they intended the building for their society's Roof in Rhuidean, yet expected him to continue to stay in it. In fact, they were ready to move the Roof wherever he went. That was why he had to meet the clan chiefs elsewhere. The best he had been able to manage was to make the Maidens agree to stay below the floor where he slept; that had amused them all no end. *Even the* Car'a'carn *is not a king,* he reminded himself wryly. Twice already he had moved upward as the numbers of Maidens increased. Idly he tried to calculate how many more could come in before he was sleeping on the roof.

That was better than remembering how he had let Moiraine get under his skin. He had not meant her to learn his plans until the day the Aiel moved. She knew exactly how to manipulate his emotions, how to make him so angry that he said more than he wanted to. *I never used to get so angry. Why is it so hard to hold on to my temper?* Well, there was nothing she could do to stop him. He did not think there was. He had to remember to be careful around her. His increasing abilities occasionally made him careless toward her, but if he was far stronger, she still knew more than he, even with Asmodean's teaching.

In a way, letting Asmodean know his plans was less important than revealing his intentions to the Aes Sedai. *To Moiraine I'm still just a shepherd she can use for the Tower's ends, but to Asmodean I'm the only branch he can hold on to in a flood.* Strange to think he could probably trust one of the Forsaken more than he could Moiraine. Not that he could trust either very far. Asmodean. If his bonds to the Dark One had shielded him from the taint on *saidin,* there had to be another way to do it. Or to cleanse it.

The trouble was that before they went over to the Shadow, the Forsaken had been among the most powerful Aes Sedai in the Age of Legends, when things the White Tower never dreamed of were commonplace. If Asmodean did not know a way, it probably did not exist. *It has to. There has to be something. I'm not going to just sit until I go mad and die.*

That was plain foolish. Prophecy had made a rendezvous for him at Shayol Ghul. When, he did not know; but afterward, he would not have to worry about going mad any longer. He shivered and thought about unfolding his blankets.

The faint sound of soft-soled footsteps in the hall snapped him upright. *I told them! If they can't . . . !* The woman who pushed open the door, her arms full of thick wool blankets, was not anyone he expected.

Aviendha paused just inside the room to regard him with cool, blue-green eyes. A more than pretty woman, of an age with him, she had been a Maiden until she gave up the spear to become a Wise One, not very long ago. Her dark reddish hair still came well short of her shoulders and hardly needed the folded brown scarf to keep it out of her face. She seemed a bit awkward with her brown shawl, a bit impatient with her full gray skirts.

He felt a stab of jealousy at the silver necklace she wore, an elaborate string of intricately worked discs, each different. *Who gave her that?* She would not have chosen it herself; she did not seem to like jewelry. The only other piece she wore was a wide ivory bracelet, carved in finely detailed roses. He had given her that, and he was not sure she had forgiven him for it yet. It was foolish of him to be jealous in any case.

“I haven’t seen you in ten days,” he said. “I thought the Wise Ones would have tied you to my arm once they found out I’d blocked them out of my dreams.” Asmodean had been amused at the first thing he’d wanted to learn, and then frustrated at how long Rand took to learn it.

“I have my training to do, Rand al’Thor.” She would be one of the few Wise Ones who could channel; that was part of what she was being taught. “I am not one of your wetlander women, to stand about so you can look at me whenever you wish.” Despite knowing Egwene, and Elayne for that matter, she had an oddly wrongheaded view of what she called wetlander women, and of wetlanders in general. “They are not pleased at what you have done.” She meant Amys, Bair and Melaine, the three Wise One dreamwalkers who were teaching her, and trying to watch him. Aviendha shook her head ruefully. “They were especially not pleased that I had let you know they were walking your dreams.”

He stared at her. “You told them? But you didn’t really say anything. I figured it out myself, and I would have eventually even if you hadn’t let a hint slip out. Aviendha, they *told* me they could speak to people in their dreams. It was only a step from that.”

“Would you have had me dishonor myself further?” Her voice was level enough, but her eyes could have started the fire laid on the hearth. “I will not dishonor myself for you or any man! I gave you the trail to follow, and I will not deny my shame. I should have let you freeze.” She threw the blankets right on top of his head.

He pulled them off and laid them beside him on the pallet while trying to think of what to say. It was *ji’e’toh* again. The woman was as prickly as a thornbush. Supposedly she had been given the task of teaching him Aiel customs, but he knew her true job, to spy on him for the Wise Ones. Whatever dishonor was attached to spying among Aiel, apparently it did not extend to the Wise Ones. They knew he knew, but for some reason it did not seem to concern them, and as long as they were willing to let matters remain as they were, so was he. For one thing, Aviendha was not a very good spy; she almost never tried to find anything out, and her own temper got in the way of making him angry or guilty the way Moiraine did. For another, she was actually pleasant company sometimes, when she forgot to keep her thorns out. At least he knew who it was that Amys and the others had set to watch him; if it was not she, it would be someone else, and he would be constantly wondering who. Besides, she was never wary around him.

Mat, Egwene, even Moiraine sometimes looked at him with eyes that saw the Dragon Reborn, or at least the danger of a man who could channel. The clan chiefs and the Wise Ones saw He Who Comes With the Dawn, the man prophesied to break the Aiel like dried twigs; if they did not fear him, they still sometimes treated him like a red adder they had to live with. Whatever Aviendha saw, it never stopped her being scathing whenever she chose, which was most of the time.

An odd sort of comfort, but compared to the rest, it was a comfort nonetheless. He had missed her. He had even picked flowers from some of the spiny plants around Rhuidean—bloodying his fingers until he realized he could use the Power—and sent them to her, half a dozen times; the Maidens had carried the blossoms themselves, instead of sending *gai'shain.* She had never acknowledged them, of course.

“Thank you,” he said finally, touching the blankets. They seemed a safe enough subject. “I suppose you can’t have too many in the nights here.”

“Enaila asked me to bring them to you when she found out I was here to see you.” Her lips twitched in the beginnings of an amused smile. “A number of the spear-sisters were worried that you might not be warm enough. I am to see that you light your fire tonight; you didn’t last night.”

Rand felt his cheeks coloring. She knew. *Well, she would, wouldn’t she? The bloody Maidens may not tell her everything anymore, but they don’t bother to keep anything from her, either.* “Why did you want to see me?”

To his surprise, she folded her arms beneath her breasts and paced the short length of the room twice before stopping to glare at him. “This was not a regard-gift,” she said accusingly, shaking the bracelet at him. “You admitted as much.” True, though he thought she might have put a knife in his ribs had he not conceded it. “It was simply a fool gift from a man who did not know or care what my—what the spear-sisters might think. Well, this has no meaning either.” She pulled something from her pouch and tossed it onto the pallet beside him. “It cancels debt between us.”

Rand picked up what she had thrown and turned it over in his hands. A belt buckle in the shape of a dragon, ornately made in good steel and inlaid with gold. “Thank you. It’s beautiful. Aviendha, there is no debt to cancel.”

“If you will not take it against my debt,” she said firmly, “then throw it away. I will find something else to repay you. It is only a trinket.”

“Hardly a trinket. You must have had this made.”

“Do not think that means anything, Rand al’Thor. When I . . . gave up the spear, my spears, my knife”—unconsciously her hand brushed her belt, where that long-bladed knife used to hang—“even the points of my arrows were taken from me and handed to a smith to make simple things to give away. Most I gave to friends, but the Wise Ones had me name the three men and three women I most hate, and I was told to give each of them a gift made from my weapons, with my own hands. Bair says it teaches humility.” Straight-backed and glaring, biting off each word, she looked and sounded anything but humble. “So you will not think that means anything.”

“It means nothing,” he said, nodding sadly. Not that he wanted it to mean anything, really, but it would have been pleasing to think she might be beginning to see him as a friend. It was plain foolish to feel jealousy over her. *I wonder who gave it to her?* “Aviendha? Was I one of those you hate so much?”

“Yes, Rand al’Thor.” She suddenly sounded hoarse. For a moment she turned her face away, eyes shut and quivering. “I hate you with all of my heart. I do. And I always will.”

He did not bother to ask why. Once he had asked her why she disliked him and practically had his nose snapped off. She had not told him, though. But this was more than a dislike she sometimes seemed to forget. “If you really hate me,” he said reluctantly, “I will ask the Wise Ones to send someone else to teach me.”

“No!”

“But if you—”

“No!” If anything, her denial was even more fierce this time. She planted her fists on her hips and lectured as if she meant to drive every word home in his heart. “Even if the Wise Ones allowed me to stop, I have *toh,* obligation and duty, to my near-sister Elayne, to watch you for her. You belong to her, Rand al’Thor. To her and no other woman. Remember that.”

He felt like throwing up his hands. At least this time she was not describing to him how Elayne looked without any clothes; some Aiel customs took even more getting used to than others. He sometimes wondered if she and Elayne had agreed on this “watching” between them. He could not believe it, but then again, even women who were not Aiel were odd as often as not. More than that, he wondered who Aviendha was supposed to be protecting him from. Except for the Maidens and the Wise Ones, Aiel women seemed to look at him half as prophecy made flesh, and thus not really flesh at all, and half as a blood snake loose among children. The Wise Ones were nearly as bad as Moiraine when it came to trying to make him do what they wanted, and the Maidens he did not want to think about. The whole thing made him furious.

“Now, you listen to me. I kissed Elayne a few times, and I think she enjoyed it as much as I did, but I am not promised to anyone. I’m not even sure she wants that much from me anymore.” In the space of a few hours she had written him two letters; one called him the dearest light of her heart before going on to make his ears burn, while the other named him a coldhearted wretch she never wanted to see again and then proceeded to rip him up one side and down the other, better than Aviendha ever had. Women were definitely odd. “I don’t have time to think about women anyway. The only thing on my mind is uniting the Aiel, even the Shaido if I can. I—” He cut off with a groan as the very last woman he could have hoped for swayed into the room in a clatter of jewelry, carrying a silver tray with a blown-glass flagon of wine and two silver cups.

A diaphanous red silk scarf wrapped around Isendre’s head did nothing to hide her palely beautiful, heart-shaped face. Her long dark hair and dark eyes never belonged to any Aiel. Her full, pouting lips were curved enticingly—until she saw Aviendha. Then the smile faded to a sickly thing. Aside from the scarf she had on a dozen or more necklaces of gold and ivory, some set with pearls or polished gems. As many bracelets weighted each wrist, and even more bunched around her ankles. That was it; she wore not another thing. He made himself keep his eyes strictly on her face, but even so his cheeks felt hot.

Aviendha looked like a thunderhead about to spit lightning, Isendre like a woman who had just learned she was to be boiled alive. Rand wished he were in the Pit of Doom, or anywhere but there. Still, he got to his feet; he would have more authority looking down on them than the other way around. “Aviendha,” he began, but she ignored him.

“Did someone send you with that?” she asked coldly.

Isendre opened her mouth, the intended lie plain on her face, then gulped and whispered, “No.”

“You have been warned about this, *sorda*.” A *sorda* was a kind of rat, especially sly according to the Aiel, and good for absolutely nothing; its flesh was so rank that even cats seldom ate the ones they killed. “Adelin thought the last time would have taught you.”

Isendre flinched, and swayed as if about to faint.

Rand gathered himself. “Aviendha, whether she was sent or not doesn’t matter. I am a little thirsty, and if she was kind enough to bring me wine, she should be thanked for it.” Aviendha glanced coolly at the two cups and raised her eyebrows. He took a deep breath. “She should not be punished just for bringing me something to drink.” He was careful not to look at the tray himself. “Half the Maidens under the Roof must have asked if I—”

“She was taken by the Maidens for theft from Maidens, Rand al’Thor.” Aviendha’s voice was even colder than it had been for the other woman. “You have meddled too much already in the business of *Far Dareis Mai*, more than you should have been allowed. Not even the *Car’a’carn* can thwart justice; this is no concern of yours.”

He grimaced—and let it go. Whatever the Maidens did to her, Isendre certainly had coming. Just not for this. She had entered the Waste with Hadnan Kadere, but Kadere had not cracked his teeth when the Maidens took her for stealing the jewelry that was now all they let her wear. It had been all Rand could do to keep her from being sent off to Shara tethered like a goat, or else dispatched naked toward the Dragonwall with one water bag; watching her plead for mercy once she realized what the Maidens intended, he had not been able to make himself stay out of it. Once he had killed a woman; a woman who meant to kill him, but the memory still burned. He did not think he would ever be able to do it again, even with his life in the balance. A foolish thing, with female Forsaken likely seeking his blood or worse, but there it was. And if he could not kill a woman, how could he stand by and let a woman die? Even if she deserved it?

That was the rub. In any land west of the Dragonwall, Isendre would face the gallows or the headsman’s block for what he knew about her. About her, and Kadere, and probably most of the merchant’s men if not all. They were Darkfriends. And he could not expose them. Not even they were aware that he knew.

If any one of them was revealed as a Darkfriend . . . Isendre endured as best she could, because even being a servant and kept naked was better than being tied hand and foot and left for the sun, but none would keep silent once Moiraine had her hands on them. Aes Sedai had no more mercy for Darkfriends than for anyone else; she would loosen their tongues in short order. And Asmodean had come into the Waste with the merchant’s wagons, too, just another Darkfriend so far as Kadere and the others knew, though one with authority. No doubt they thought he had taken service with the Dragon Reborn on orders from some still higher power. To keep his teacher, to keep Moiraine from trying to kill both of them very probably, Rand had to keep their secret.

Luckily, no one questioned why the Aiel kept such a close watch on the merchant and his men. Moiraine thought it was the usual Aiel suspicion of outsiders in the Waste, magnified by them being in Rhuidean; she had had to use all of her persuasion to make the Aiel let Kadere and his wagons into the city. The suspicion was there; Rhuarc and the other chiefs likely would have set guards even if Rand had not asked. And Kadere just seemed happy he did not have a spear through his ribs.

Rand had no idea how he was going to resolve the situation. Or if he could. It was a fine mess. In gleemen’s stories, only villains got caught in a cleft stick like this.

Once she was sure that he was not going to try to interfere further, Aviendha turned her attention back to the other woman. “You may leave the wine.”

Isendre half-knelt gracefully to set the tray beside his pallet, a peculiar grimace on her face. It took Rand a moment to recognize an attempt to smile at him without letting the Aiel woman see.

“And now you will run to the first Maiden you can find,” Aviendha went on, “and tell her what you have done. Run, *sorda*!” Moaning and wringing her hands, Isendre ran in a great rattle of jewelry. As soon as she was out of the room, Aviendha rounded on him. "You belong to Elayne! You have no right to try luring any woman, but especially not that one!"

"Her?" Rand gasped. "You think I—? Believe me, Aviendha, if she were the last woman on earth, I'd still stay as far from her as I could run."

"So you say." She sniffed. "She has been switched seven times—seven!—for trying to sneak to your bed. She would not persist like that without some encouragement. She faces *Far Dareis Mai* justice, and she is no concern of even the *Car'a'carn.* Take that as your lesson for today on our customs. And remember that you belong to my near-sister!" Without letting him get a word in, she stalked out wearing such a look that he thought Isendre might not survive if Aviendha caught up to her.

Letting out a long breath, he got up long enough to put the tray and its wine in a corner of the room. He was not about to drink anything Isendre brought him.

Seven times she's tried to reach me? She must have learned that he interceded for her; no doubt to her way of thinking, if he was willing to do that for a smoky look and a smile, what might he do for more? He shivered at the thought as much as the increasing cold. He would rather have a scorpion in his bed. If the Maidens failed to convince her, he might tell her what he knew about her; that should put an end to any schemes.

Snuffing the lamps, he crawled onto his pallet in the dark, still booted and fully dressed, and fumbled around until he had pulled all of the blankets over him. Without the fire, he suspected he really would be grateful to Aviendha before morning. Setting the wards of Spirit that shielded his dreams from intrusion was almost automatic to him now, but even as he did it, he chuckled to himself. He could have gotten into bed and *then* put out the lamps, with the Power. It was the simple things that he never thought of doing with the Power.

For a time he lay waiting for his body's heat to warm the inside of the blankets. How the same place could be so hot by day and so cold by night was beyond him. Sticking one hand under his coat, he fingered the half-healed scar on his side. That wound, the one that Moiraine could never completely Heal, was what would kill him, eventually. He was sure of it. His blood on the rocks of Shayol Ghul. That was what the Prophecies said.

Not tonight. I won't think of that tonight. I have a little time yet. But if the seals can be shaved with a knife, now, do they still hold as strongly . . . ?

No. Not tonight.

The inside of the blankets was becoming a little warmer, and he shifted around, trying and failing to find a comfortable way to lie. *I should have washed,* he thought drowsily. Egwene was probably in a warm sweat tent right that minute. Half the time he used one, a fistful of Maidens tried to come in with him—and nearly rolled on the ground laughing when he insisted on them staying outside. It was bad enough having to undress and dress in the steam.

Sleep finally came, and with it, safely protected dreams, safe from the Wise Ones or anyone else. Not protected from his own thoughts, though. Three women invaded them continually. Not Isendre, except in a brief nightmare that nearly woke him. By turns he dreamed of Elayne, and Min, and Aviendha, by turns and together. Only Elayne had ever looked at him as a man, but all three saw him as who he was, not what he was. Aside from the nightmare, they were all pleasant dreams.

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CHAPTER
5

Among the Wise Ones

Standing as close as she could to the small fire in the middle of the tent, Egwene still shivered as she poured water from the generous teakettle into a wide, blue-striped bowl. She had lowered the sides of the tent, but cold seeped through the colorful layered rugs covering the ground, and all the fire's heat seemed to rush up and out of the smoke hole in the middle of the tent roof, leaving only the smell of the burning cow dung. Her teeth wanted to chatter.

Already the steam from the water was beginning to fade; she embraced *saidar* for a moment and channeled Fire to heat it more. Amys or Bair would probably have washed in it cold, though in fact they always took sweat baths. *So I'm not as tough as they are. I did not grow up in the Waste. I don't have to freeze to death and wash in cold water if I don't want to.* She still felt guilty as she lathered a cloth with a piece of lavender-scented soap bought from Hadnan Kadere. The Wise Ones had never asked her to do differently, but it still felt like cheating.

Letting go of the True Source made her sigh with remorse. Even trembling with cold, she laughed softly at her own foolishness. The wonder of being filled with the Power, the wondrous rush of life and awareness, was its own danger. The more you drew on *saidar,* the more you wanted to draw, and without self-discipline you eventually drew more than you could handle and either died or stilled yourself. And that was nothing to laugh at.

That's one of your biggest faults, she lectured herself firmly. *You always want to do more than you're supposed to. You ought to wash in cold water; that would teach you self-discipline.* Only there was so much to learn, and it sometimes seemed a lifetime would be too short to learn it. Her teachers were always so cautious, whether Wise Ones or Aes Sedai in the Tower; it was hard to hold back when she knew that in so many ways she already outstripped them. *I can do more than they realize.*

A blast of freezing air hit her, swirling smoke from the fire about the tent, and a woman's voice said, "If it pleases you—"

Egwene jumped, yelping shrilly before managing to get out, "Shut that!" She hugged herself to stop from capering. "Get in or get out, but shut it!" All that effort to be warm, and now she was icy goose bumps from head to toe!

The white-robed woman shuffled into the tent on her knees and let the tent flap drop. She kept her eyes downcast, her hands folded meekly; she would have done the same if Egwene had hit her instead of just shouting. "If it pleases you," she said softly, "the Wise One Amys sent me to bring you to the sweat tent."

Wishing she could stand on top of the fire, Egwene groaned. *The Light burn Bair and her stubbornness!* If not for the white-haired old Wise One, they could be in rooms in the city instead of tents on the edge of it. *I could have a room with a proper fireplace. And a door.* She was willing to bet that Rand did not have to put up with people wandering in on him whenever they wanted. *Rand bloody Dragon al'Thor snaps his fingers, and the Maidens jump like serving girls. I'll wager they've found him a real bed, instead of a pallet on the ground.* She was sure that he got a hot bath every night. *The Maidens probably haul buckets of hot water up to his rooms. I'll bet they even found him a proper copper bathtub.*

Amys, and even Melaine, had been amenable to Egwene's suggestion, but Bair had put her foot down, and they acquiesced like *gai'shain*. Egwene supposed that with Rand bringing so much change, Bair wanted to hold on to as much of the old ways as she could, but she wished the woman could have chosen something else to be intractable over.

There was no thought of refusing. She had promised the Wise Ones to forget that she was Aes Sedai—the easy part, since she was not—and do exactly as she was told. That was the hard part; she had been away from the Tower long enough to become her own mistress again. But Amys had told her flatly that dreamwalking was dangerous even after you knew what you were about and far more so until then. If she would not obey in the waking world, they could not trust her to obey in the dream, and they would not take the responsibility. So she did chores right along with Aviendha, accepted chastisement with as good a grace as she could muster, and hopped whenever Amys or Melaine or Bair said frog. In a manner of speaking. None of them had ever seen a frog. *Not that they'll want anything* *but for me to hand them their tea.* No, it would be Aviendha's turn to do that tonight.

For a moment she considered donning stockings, but finally just bent to slip on her shoes. Sturdy shoes, suitable for the Waste; she rather regretted the silk slippers she had worn in Tear. "What is your name?" she asked, trying to be companionable.

"Cowinde" was the docile reply.

Egwene sighed. She kept trying to be friends with the *gai'shain*, but they never responded. Servants were one thing she had not had a chance to get used to, though of course *gai'shain* were not precisely servants. "You were a Maiden?"

A quick, fierce flash of deep blue eyes told her that her guess was correct, but just as quickly they lowered again. "I am *gai'shain*. Before and after are not now, and only now exists."

"What is your sept and clan?" Usually there was no need to ask, not even with *gai'shain*.

"I serve the Wise One Melaine of the Jhirad sept, of the Goshien Aiel."

Trying to choose between two cloaks, a stout brown woolen and a blue quilted silk she had purchased from Kadere—the merchant had sold everything in his wagons to make room for Moiraine's freight, and at very good prices—Egwene paused to frown at the woman. That was no proper response. She had heard that a form of the bleakness had taken some *gai'shain*; when their year and a day was done, they simply refused to put off the robe. "When is your time up?" she asked.

Cowinde crouched lower, almost huddling over her knees. "I am *gai'shain*."

"But when will you be able to return to your sept, to your own hold?"

"I am *gai'shain*," the woman hoarsely told the rugs in front of her face. "If the answer displeases, punish me, but I can give no other."

"Don't be silly," Egwene said sharply. "And straighten up. You aren't a toad."

The white-robed woman obeyed immediately and sat there on her heels, submissively awaiting another command. That brief flare of spirit might as well never have been.

Egwene took a deep breath. The woman had made her own accommodation with the bleakness. A foolish one, but nothing she could say would change it. Anyway, she was supposed to be on her way to the sweat tent, not talking with Cowinde.

Remembering that cold draft, she hesitated. The icy gust had made two large white blossoms, resting in a shallow bowl, curl partway closed. They came from a plant called a *segade,* a fat, leafless, leathery thing that bristled with spines. She had come on Aviendha looking at them in her hands that morning; the Aiel woman had given a start when she saw her, then pushed them into Egwene's hands, saying she had picked them for her. She supposed there was enough of the Maiden left in Aviendha that she did not want to admit liking flowers. Though come to think of it, she had seen the occasional Maiden wearing a blossom in her hair or on her coat.

You are just trying to put it off, Egwene al'Vere. Now stop being a silly woolhead! You are being as foolish as Cowinde. "Lead the way," she said, and just had time to swing the woolen cloak around her nakedness before the woman swept open the tent flap for her, and for the bone-chilling night.

Overhead, the stars were crisp points in the darkness, and the three-quarter moon was bright. The Wise Ones' camp was a cluster of two dozen low mounds, not a hundred paces from where one of Rhuidean's paved streets ended in hard, cracked clay and stones. Moonshadows turned the city into strange cliffs and crags. Every tent had its flaps down, and the smells of fires and cooking blended to fill the air.

The other Wise Ones came here for almost daily gatherings, but they spent nights with their own septs. Several even slept in Rhuidean now. But not Bair. This was as close to the city as Bair had been willing to come; if Rand had not been there, doubtless she would have insisted on making camp in the mountains.

Egwene held the cloak tight with both hands and walked as fast as she could. Icy tendrils curled under the cloak's bottom, swept in every time her bare legs kicked a gap open. Cowinde had to pull her white robes to her knees in order to keep ahead. Egwene did not need the *gai'shain*'s guidance, but since the woman had been sent to bring her, she would be shamed and maybe offended if not allowed to. Clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering, Egwene wished the woman would run.

The sweat tent looked like any other, low and wide, with the flaps lowered all around, except that the smoke hole had been covered. Nearby a fire had burned down to glowing embers scattered over a few rocks the size of a man's head. There was not enough light to define the much smaller shadowed mound beside the tent entrance, but she knew it was neatly folded women's clothes.

Taking one deep, chilling breath, she hurriedly scuffed off her shoes, let her cloak drop, and all but dove into the tent. An instant of shuddering cold before the flap fell shut behind her, then steamy heat clamped down, squeezing out sweat that covered her in an instant sheen while she was still gasping and shaking.

The three Wise Ones who were teaching her about dreamwalking sat sweating unconcernedly, their waist-length hair hanging damply. Bair was talking to Melaine, whose green-eyed beauty and red-gold hair made a sharp contrast to the older woman's leathery face and long white tresses. Amys was white-haired, too—or perhaps it was just so pale a yellow that it seemed white—but she did not look old. She and Melaine could both channel—not many Wise Ones could—and she had something of the Aes Sedai look of agelessness about her. Moiraine, seeming slight and small beside the others, also looked unruffled, although sweat rolled down her pale nudity and slicked her dark hair to her scalp, with a regal refusal to acknowledge that she had no clothes on. The Wise Ones were using slim, curved pieces of bronze, called *staera,* to scrape off sweat and the day's dirt.

Aviendha was squatting sweatily beside the big black kettle of hot, sooty rocks in the middle of the tent, carefully using a pair of tongs to move a last stone from a smaller kettle to the larger. That done, she sprinkled water onto the rocks from a gourd, adding to the steam. If she let the steam fall too far, she would be spoken to sharply at the very least. The next time the Wise Ones met in the sweat tent, it would be Egwene's turn to tend the rocks.

Egwene cautiously sat down cross-legged next to Bair—instead of layered rugs, there was only rocky ground, unpleasantly hot, lumpy and damp—and realized with a shock that Aviendha had been switched, and recently. When the Aiel woman gingerly took her own place, beside Egwene, she did so with a face as stony as the ground, but a face that could not hide her flinch.

This was something Egwene did not expect. The Wise Ones exacted a hard discipline—harder even than the Tower, which took some doing—but Aviendha worked at learning to channel with a grim determination. She could not dreamwalk, but she surely put as much effort into absorbing every art of a Wise One as she could ever have put into learning her weapons as a Maiden. Of course, after she confessed to letting Rand know about the Wise Ones watching his dreams, they had made her spend three days digging shoulder-deep holes and filling them in again, but that was one of the few times Aviendha had ever seemed to put a foot wrong. Amys and the other two had held her up to Egwene so often as a model of meek obedience and proper fortitude that sometimes Egwene wanted to shriek, even if Aviendha was a friend.

"You took long enough in coming," Bair said grumpily, while Egwene was still gingerly searching for a comfortable seat. Her voice was thin and reedy, but a reed of iron. She continued to scrape her arms with a *staera*.

"I am sorry," Egwene said. There; that should be meek enough.

Bair sniffed. "You are Aes Sedai beyond the Dragonwall, but here you are yet a pupil, and a pupil does not dally. When I send for Aviendha, or send her for something, she runs, even if all I want is a pin. You could do much worse than to pattern yourself after her."

Flushing, Egwene tried to make her voice humble. "I will try, Bair." This was the first time a Wise One had made the comparison in front of others. She sneaked a glance at Aviendha and was surprised to find her looking thoughtful. Sometimes she wished her "near-sister" were not always such a good example.

"The girl will learn, Bair, or she will not," Melaine said irritably. "Instruct her in promptness later, if she still needs it." No more than ten or twelve years older than Aviendha, she usually sounded as if she had a burr under her skirts. Maybe she was sitting on a sharp rock. She would not move if she was; she would expect the rock to move. "I tell you again, Moiraine Sedai, the Aiel follow He Who Comes With the Dawn, not the White Tower."

Obviously, Egwene was meant to pick up what they were talking about as they went on.

"It may be," Amys said in a level voice, "that the Aiel will serve the Aes Sedai again, but that time has not come yet, Moiraine Sedai." Her scraping barely paused as she eyed the Aes Sedai calmly.

It would come, Egwene knew, now that Moiraine was aware that some of the Wise Ones could channel. Aes Sedai would be journeying into the Waste to find girls who could be taught, and would almost certainly be trying to take any Wise One with the ability back to the Tower, too. Once she had worried about the Wise Ones being browbeaten and dominated, hauled away whenever they wanted; Aes Sedai never let any woman who could channel run free of the Tower for long. She did not worry anymore, though the Wise Ones themselves seemed to. Amys and Melaine could match any Aes Sedai will for will, as they showed every day with Moiraine. Bair could very likely make even Siuan Sanche jump through hoops, and Bair could not even channel.

For that matter, Bair was not the strongest-willed Wise One. That honor went to an even older woman, Sorilea, of the Jarra sept of the Chareen Aiel. The Wise One of Shende Hold could channel less than most novices, but she was as likely to send another Wise One on an errand as a *gai'shain.* And they went. No, there was no reason to distress herself over Wise Ones being bullied.

"It is understandable that you wish to spare your lands," Bair put in, "but Rand al'Thor obviously does not mean to lead us to punish. No one who submits to He Who Comes With the Dawn, and the Aiel, will be harmed." So that was it. Of course.

"It is not only sparing lives or lands that concerns me." Moiraine made wiping sweat from her brow with one finger into a queenly gesture, but her voice sounded nearly as tight as Melaine's. "If you allow this, it will be disastrous. Years of planning are coming to fruition, and he means to ruin it all."

"Plans of the White Tower," Amys said, so smoothly she might have been agreeing. "Those plans have nothing to do with us. We, and the other Wise Ones, must consider what is right for the Aiel. We will see that the Aiel do what is best for the Aiel."

Egwene wondered what the clan chiefs would say about that. Of course, they frequently complained that the Wise Ones meddled in matters that were not theirs, so perhaps it would not come as a surprise. The chiefs all seemed to be hard-willed, intelligent men, but she believed they had as much chance against the combined Wise Ones as the Village Council back home did against the Women's Circle.

This time, though, Moiraine was right.

"If Rand—" she began, but Bair stepped on her firmly.

"We will hear what you have to say later, girl. Your knowledge of Rand al'Thor is valuable, but you will hold your peace and listen until you are bidden to speak. And stop looking sullen, or I will dose you with bluespine tea."

Egwene grimaced. Respect for the Aes Sedai, though a respect between equals, included but little for the pupil, even one they believed *was* Aes Sedai. She kept her tongue still, in any case. Bair was capable of sending her to fetch her herb pouches and telling her to brew the incredibly bitter tea herself; it had no purpose at all except to cure sullenness or sulkiness or whatever else a Wise One might find disfavor with, which it did by taste alone. Aviendha gave her a comforting pat on the arm.

"You believe it will not be a catastrophe for the Aiel as well?" It must have been difficult to sound as cool as a winter stream when you glistened from head to foot with condensed steam and your own sweat, but Moiraine apparently had no difficulty. "It will be the Aiel War all over again. You will kill and burn and loot towns as you did then, until you have turned every man and woman against you."

"The fifth is our due, Aes Sedai," Melaine said, throwing her long hair back over her shoulder so she could work a *staera* across a smooth shoulder. Even heavy and damp with the steam, her hair glistened like silk. "We took no more even from the treekillers." Her glance at Moiraine was too bland not to be significant; they knew she was Cairhienin. "Your kings and queens take as much in their taxes."

"And when the nations turn against you?" Moiraine persisted. "In the Aiel War, the nations united turned you back. That can and will happen again, with great loss of life on both sides."

"None of us fears death, Aes Sedai," Amys told her, smiling gently as if explaining something to a child. "Life is a dream from which we all must wake before we can dream again. Besides, only four clans crossed the Dragonwall under Janduin. Six are here already, and you say Rand al'Thor means to take all of the clans."

"The Prophecy of Rhuidean says he will break us." The spark in Melaine's green eyes could have been for Moiraine or because she was not as resigned as she sounded. "What does it matter whether it is here or beyond the Dragonwall?"

"You will lose him the support of every nation west of the Dragonwall," Moiraine said. She looked as calm as ever, but an edge in her voice said she was ready to chew rocks. "He must have their support!"

“He has the support of the Aiel nation,” Bair told her in that fragile, unyielding voice. She emphasized her words by gesturing with the slim metal blade. “The clans have never been a nation, but now he makes us one.”

“We will not help you turn him in this, Moiraine Sedai,” Amys added just as firmly.

“You may leave us now, Aes Sedai, if it pleases you,” Bair said. “We have discussed what you wished to discuss as much as we will tonight.” It was politely said, but a dismissal all the same.

“I will leave you,” Moiraine replied, once again all serenity. She sounded as though it were her suggestion, her decision. By this time she was used to the Wise Ones making it clear they were not under the Tower’s authority. “I have other matters to see to.”

That much had to be the truth, of course. Very likely something concerning Rand. Egwene knew better than to ask; if Moiraine wanted her to know, she would tell her, and if not . . . If not, she would be handed some slippery bit of Aes Sedai avoidance of a lie, or else be told bluntly that it was none of her business. Moiraine knew that “Egwene Sedai of the Green Ajah” was a fraud. She tolerated the lie in public, but otherwise she let Egwene know her proper place whenever it suited her.

As soon as Moiraine had gone, in a burst of cold air, Amys said, “Aviendha, pour the tea.”

The young Aiel woman gave a startled jerk, and her mouth opened twice before she said faintly, “I must brew it yet.” With that she scurried out of the tent on all fours. The second blast from outside dimmed the steam.

The Wise Ones exchanged looks that were almost as surprised as Aviendha’s. And Egwene’s; Aviendha always did even the most onerous chores efficiently, if not always with a good grace. Something must be troubling her greatly, to make her forget a thing like making tea. The Wise Ones always wanted tea.

“More steam, girl,” Melaine said.

That was her, Egwene realized, with Aviendha gone. Hurriedly splashing more water on the rocks, she channeled to heat the stones further, and the kettle, until she heard stones cracking and the kettle itself radiated heat like a furnace. The Aiel might be used to leaping from roasting in their own juices to freezing, but she was not. Hot, thick clouds rolled up to fill the tent. Amys nodded approvingly; she and Melaine could see the glow of *saidar* surrounding her, of course, though she herself could not. Melaine merely went on scraping with her *staera.*

Letting go of the True Source, she sat back and leaned close to Bair to whisper, “Has Aviendha done something very wrong?” She did not know how Aviendha would feel about it, but she saw no reason to embarrass her, even behind her back.

Bair had no such compunctions. “You mean her stripes?” she said in a normal voice. “She came to me and said she had lied twice today, though she would not say to whom or about what. It was her own affair, of course, so long as she did not lie to a Wise One, but she claimed her honor required that a *toh* must be met.”

“She *asked* you to . . .” Egwene gasped, but could not finish.

Bair nodded as if it were not very much out of the ordinary at all. “I gave her a few extra for troubling me with it. If *ji* was involved, her obligation is not to me. Very likely her so-called lies were nothing anyone but a *Far Dareis Mai* would worry about. Maidens, even former Maidens, are sometimes as fussy as men.” Amys gave her a flat look that was plain even in the thick steam. Like Aviendha, Amys had been *Far Dareis Mai* before becoming a Wise One.

Egwene had never met an Aiel who was not fussy about *ji’e’toh,* the way she saw it. But this! Aiel were all mad as loons.

Apparently, Bair had already put the matter out of her mind. “There are more Lost Ones in the Three-fold Land than I can ever remember before,” she said to the tent at large. That was what the Aiel had always called the Tinkers, the Tuatha’an.

“They flee the troubles beyond the Dragonwall.” The sneer in Melaine’s voice was clear.

“I have heard,” Amys said slowly, “that some of those who run after the bleakness have gone to the Lost Ones and asked to be taken in.” A long silence followed. They knew now that the Tuatha’an had the same descent as themselves, that they had broken away before the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World into the Waste, but if anything the knowledge had only deepened their aversion.

“He brings change,” Melaine whispered harshly into the steam.

“I thought you were reconciled to the changes he brings,” Egwene said, sympathy welling up in her voice. It must be very hard to have your whole life stood on end. She half-expected to be told to hold her tongue again, but no one did.

“Reconciled,” Bair said, as though tasting the word. “Better to say we endure them, as best we can.”

“He transforms everything.” Amys sounded troubled. “Rhuidean. The Lost Ones. The bleakness, and telling what should not have been told.” The Wise Ones—all the Aiel, for that matter—still had difficulty speaking of that.

“The Maidens cluster about him as though they owe more to him than to their own clans,” Bair added. “For the first time ever, they have allowed a man beneath a Roof of the Maidens.” For a moment Amys looked about to say something, but whatever she knew about the inner workings of *Far Dareis Mai* she shared with no one but those who were or had been Maidens of the Spear.

“The chiefs no longer listen to us as they did,” Melaine muttered. “Oh, they ask our advice as always—they have not become complete fools—but Bael will no longer tell me what he has said to Rand al’Thor, or Rand al’Thor to him. He says I must ask Rand al’Thor, who tells me to ask Bael. The *Car’a’carn,* I can do nothing about, but Bael . . . He has always been a stubborn, infuriating man, yet now he is beyond all bounds. Sometimes I want to thump his head with a stick.” Amys and Bair chuckled as if that were a fine joke. Or perhaps they just wanted to laugh to forget the changes for a time.

“There are only three things you can do with a man like that,” Bair chortled. “Stay away from him, kill him, or marry him.”

Melaine stiffened, her sun-dark face going red. For a moment Egwene thought the golden-haired Wise One was about to let fly words hotter than her face. Then a biting gust announced Aviendha’s return carrying a worked silver tray holding a yellow-glazed teapot, delicate cups of golden Sea Folk porcelain, and a stone jar of honey.

She shivered as she poured—no doubt she had not bothered to wrap anything around herself out there—and hurriedly passed around the cups and the honey. She did not fill cups for herself and Egwene until Amys told her she could, of course.

“More steam,” Melaine said; the chill air seemed to have cooled her temper. Aviendha set down her cup untouched and scrambled for the gourd, plainly trying to make up for her lapse with the tea.

“Egwene,” Amys said, sipping her tea, “how would Rand al’Thor take it if Aviendha asked to sleep in his sleeping chamber?” Aviendha froze with the gourd in her hands.

“In his—?” Egwene gasped. “You cannot ask her to do such a thing! You cannot!”

“Fool girl,” Bair muttered. “We do not ask her to share his blankets. But will he think that is what she asks? Will he even allow it? Men are strange creatures at the best, and he was not raised among us, so he is stranger still.”

“He certainly would not think any such thing,” Egwene spluttered, then more slowly, “I don’t think he would. But it isn’t proper. It just isn’t!”

“I ask that you not require this of me,” Aviendha said, sounding more humble than Egwene would have believed she could. She was sprinkling water in jerky motions, sending up increasing clouds of steam. “I have been learning a great deal the past days, not having to spend time with him. Since you have allowed Egwene and Moiraine Sedai to help me with channeling, I learn even faster. Not that they teach any better than you, of course,” she added hastily, “but I want very much to learn.”

“You will still learn,” Melaine told her. “You will not have to stay every hour with him. As long as you apply yourself, your lessons will not be much slowed. You do not study while you sleep.”

“I cannot,” Aviendha mumbled, head down over the water gourd. More loudly, and more firmly, she added, “I will not.” Her head came up, and her eyes were blue-green fire. “I will not be there when he summons that flip-skirt Isendre to his blankets again!”

Egwene gaped at her. “Isendre!” She had seen—and heartily disapproved of—the scandalous way the Maidens kept the woman naked, but this! “You can’t really mean he—”

“Be silent!” Bair snapped like a whip. Her blue-eyed stare could have chipped stone. “Both of you! You are both young, but even the Maidens should know men can be fools, especially when they are not attached to a woman who can guide them.”

“I am glad,” Amys said dryly, “to see you no longer hold your emotions so tightly, Aviendha. Maidens are as foolish as men when it comes to that; I remember it well, and it embarrasses me still. Letting emotions go clouds judgment for a moment, but holding them in clouds it always. Just be sure you do not release them too often, or when it is best to keep control of them.”

Melaine leaned forward on her hands, until it seemed the sweat dripping from her face must fall on the hot kettle. “You know your fate, Aviendha. You will be a Wise One of great strength and great authority, and more besides. You already have a strength in you. It saw you through your first test, and it will see you through this.”

“My honor,” Aviendha said hoarsely, then swallowed, unable to go on. She crouched there, huddling around the gourd as if it contained the honor she wanted to protect.

“The Pattern does not see *ji’e’toh,*” Bair told her, with only a hint of sympathy, if that. “Only what must and will be. Men and Maidens struggle against fate even when it is clear the Pattern weaves on despite their struggles, but you are no longer *Far Dareis Mai*. You must learn to ride fate. Only by surrendering to the Pattern can you begin to have some control over the course of your own life. If you fight, the Pattern will still force you, and you will find only misery where you might have found contentment instead.”

To Egwene, that sounded very much like what she had been taught concerning the One Power. To control *saidar,* you first had to surrender to it. Fight, and it would come wildly, or overwhelm you; surrender and guide it gently, and it did as you wished. But that did not explain why they wanted Aviendha to do this thing. She asked as much, adding again, “It is not proper.”

Instead of answering, Amys said, “Will Rand al’Thor refuse to allow her? We cannot force him.” Bair and Melaine were looking at Egwene as intently as Amys.

They were not going to tell her why. It was easier to make a stone talk than to get something out of a Wise One against her will. Aviendha was studying her toes in sulky resignation; she knew the Wise Ones would get what they wanted, one way or another.

“I don’t know,” Egwene said slowly. “I do not know him as well as I used to.” She regretted that, but so much had happened, quite aside from her realizing that she did not love him as more than a brother. Her training, in the Tower as well as here, had changed things just as much as him being who he had become. “If you give him a good reason, perhaps. I think he likes Aviendha." The young Aiel woman heaved a heavy sigh without looking up.

"A good reason," Bair snorted. "When I was a girl, any man would have been overjoyed to have a young woman show that much interest in him. He would have gone to pick the flowers for her bridal wreath himself." Aviendha started, and glared at the Wise Ones with some of her old spirit. "Well, we will find a reason even someone raised in the wetlands can accept."

"It is several nights before your agreed meeting in *Tel'aran'rhiod,*" Amys said. "With Nynaeve, this time."

"That one could learn much," Bair put in, "if she were not so stubborn."

"Your nights are free until then," Melaine said. "That is, unless you have been entering *Tel'aran'rhiod* without us."

Egwene suspected what was coming. "Of course not," she told them. It had only been a little. Any more than a little, and they would find out for sure.

"Have you succeeded in finding either Nynaeve's or Elayne's dreams?" Amys asked. Casually, as if it were nothing.

"No, Amys."

Finding someone else's dreams was a lot harder than stepping into *Tel'aran'rhiod,* the World of Dreams, especially if they were any distance away. It was easier both the closer they were and the better you knew them. The Wise Ones still demanded that she not enter *Tel'aran'rhiod* without at least one of them along, but someone else's dream was maybe just as dangerous in its own way. In *Tel'aran'rhiod* she was in control of herself and of things around her to a large degree, unless one of the Wise Ones decided to take over; her command of *Tel'aran'rhiod* was increasing, but she still could not match any of them, with their long experience. In another's dream, though, you were a part of that dream; it took all you could muster not to behave as the dreamer wanted, be as their dream took you, and still sometimes it did not work. The Wise Ones had been very careful when watching Rand's dreams never to enter fully. Even so they insisted she learn. If they were to teach dreamwalking, they meant to teach all that they knew of it.

She was not reluctant, exactly, but the few times they had let her practice, with themselves and once with Rhuarc, had been chastening experiences. The Wise Ones had some considerable mastery over their own dreams, so what had happened there—to show her the dangers, they said—had all been their doing, but it had been a shock to learn that Rhuarc saw her as a little more than a child, like his youngest daughters. And her own control had wavered for one fatal moment. After that she had *been* little more than a child; she still could not look at the man without remembering being given a doll for studying hard. And being as pleased with the gift as with his approval. Amys had had to come and take her away from happy play with it. Amys knowing was bad enough, but she suspected that Rhuarc remembered some of it, too.

"You must keep trying," Amys said. "You have the strength to reach them, even as far as they are. And it will do you no harm to learn how they see you."

She was not so sure of that herself. Elayne was a friend, but Nynaeve had been Wisdom of Emond's Field for most of her growing up. She suspected Nynaeve's dreams would be worse than Rhuarc's.

"Tonight I will sleep away from the tents," Amys went on. "Not far. You should be able to find me easily, if you try. If I do not dream of you, we will speak of it in the morning."

Egwene suppressed a groan. Amys had guided her to Rhuarc's dreams—she herself had remained only an instant, barely long enough to reveal that Rhuarc still saw her, unchanged, as the young woman he had married—and the Wise Ones had always been in the same tent before when she tried.

"Well," Bair said, rubbing her hands, "we have heard what needed to be heard. The rest of you can remain if you wish, but I feel clean enough to go to my blankets. I am not so young as the rest of you." Young or not, she could probably run any of them into the ground, then carry them the rest of the way.

As Bair was getting to her feet, Melaine spoke, and strangely for her, she was hesitant. "I need . . . I must ask your help, Bair. And you, Amys." The older woman settled back, and both she and Amys looked at Melaine expectantly. "I . . . would ask you to approach Dorindha for me." The last words came out in a rush. Amys smiled widely, and Bair cackled aloud. Aviendha seemed to understand, too, and be startled, but Egwene was lost.

Then Bair laughed. "You always said you did not need a husband and did not want one. I have buried three, and would not mind another. They are very useful when the night is cold."

“A woman can change her mind.” Melaine’s voice was firm enough, but belied by the deep flush in her cheeks. “I cannot stay away from Bael, and I cannot kill him. If Dorindha will accept me as her sister-wife, I will make my bridal wreath to lay at Bael’s feet.”

“What if he steps on it instead of picking it up?” Bair wanted to know. Amys fell back, laughing and slapping her thighs.

Egwene did not think there was much danger of that, not the way Aiel customs ran. If Dorindha decided she wanted Melaine for sister-wife, Bael would not have much say in the matter. It no longer shocked her, precisely, that a man could have two wives. Not exactly. *Different lands mean different customs,* she reminded herself firmly. She had never been able to bring herself to ask, but for all she knew, there might be Aiel women with two husbands. They were very strange people.

“I ask you to act as my first-sisters in this. I think that Dorindha likes me well enough.”

As soon as Melaine spoke those words, the other women’s hilarity changed to something else. They still laughed, but they hugged her and told her how happy they were for her, and how well she would do with Bael. Amys and Bair, at least, took Dorindha’s acceptance for granted. The three of them departed all but arm-in-arm, still laughing and giggling like girls. Not before telling Egwene and Aviendha to straighten the tent, though.

“Egwene, could a woman of your land accept a sister-wife?” Aviendha asked, using a stick to push the cover off the smoke hole.

Egwene wished she had left that duty till last; the heat began to dissipate immediately. “I don’t know,” she said, quickly gathering the cups and the honey jar. The *siaera* went onto the tray, too. “I don’t think so. Maybe if it was a close friend,” she added hurriedly; there was no point in seeming to denigrate Aiel ways.

Aviendha only grunted and began pushing up the side flaps.

Teeth chattering as loudly as the rattle of teacups and bronze blades on the tray, Egwene scurried outside. The Wise Ones were dressing unhurriedly, as though this were a balmy night and they in sleeping chambers in some hold. A white-robed figure, pale in the moonlight, took the tray from her, and she quickly began searching for her cloak and shoes. They were nowhere among the remaining garments on the ground.

“I had your things taken to your tent,” Bair said, tying the laces of her blouse. “You will not need them yet.”

Egwene's stomach sank into her feet. Hopping in place, she flapped her arms in a futile effort for warmth; at least they did not tell her to stop. Abruptly she realized the snowy-robed figure bearing the tray away was too tall for even an Aiel woman. Gritting her teeth, she glared at the Wise Ones, who seemed not to care if she froze to death jumping up and down. To the Aielwomen it might not matter that a man had seen them with no clothes on, at least if he was *gai'shain*, but it did to her!

In a moment, Aviendha joined them and, seeing her leaping about, merely stood there without any effort to find her own garments. She showed no more effect of the cold than the Wise Ones.

"Now," Bair said, settling her shawl on her shoulders. "You, Aviendha, are not only stubborn as a man, you cannot remember a simple task you have done many times. You, Egwene, are just as stubborn, and you still think you can linger in your tent when you are summoned. Let us hope running fifty times around the camp will temper your stubbornness, clear your minds, and remind you of how to answer a summons or do a chore. Off with you."

Without a word, Aviendha immediately began loping toward the edge of the camp, easily dodging dark-shrouded tent ropes. Egwene hesitated only a moment before following. The Aiel woman kept her pace down so she could catch up. The night air froze her, and the cracked stony clay underfoot was just as cold, and tried to catch her toes besides. Aviendha ran with effortless ease.

As they reached the last tent and turned southward, Aviendha said, "Do you know why I study so hard?" Neither the cold nor running had made an impression on her voice.

Egwene was shivering so hard she could barely speak. "No. Why?"

"Because Bair and the others always point to you, and tell me how easily you learn, how you never have to have something explained twice. They say I ought to be more like you." She gave Egwene a sidelong glance, and Egwene found herself sharing a giggle as they ran. "That is part of the reason. The things I am learning to do . . ." Aviendha shook her head, wonderment plain even by moonlight. "And the Power itself. I have never felt like that. So alive. I can smell the faintest scent, feel the slightest stir in the air."

"It is dangerous to hold on too long or too much," Egwene said. Running did seem to warm her a little, though now and again a shudder ran through her. “I’ve told you that, and I know the Wise Ones have, too.”

Aviendha merely sniffed. “Do you think I would stab my own foot with a spear?”

For a time they ran in silence.

“Did Rand really . . . ?” Egwene said finally. The cold had nothing to do with her difficulty getting the words out; in fact, she was beginning to sweat again. “I mean . . . Isendre?” She could not make herself say it clearer than that.

At last Aviendha said slowly, “I do not think that he did.” She sounded angry. “But why would she ignore switchings if he has shown no interest in her? She is a milk-hearted wetlander who waits for men to come to her. I saw how he looked at her, though he tried to hide it. He enjoyed looking at her.”

Egwene wondered if her friend ever thought of her as a milk-hearted wetlander. Probably not, or they would not be friends. But Aviendha had never learned to worry if what she said might hurt someone; she would probably be surprised to learn that Egwene could even think of being hurt.

“The way the Maidens make her dress,” Egwene admitted reluctantly, “any man would look.” Reminded that she herself was in the open without any clothes, she stumbled and almost fell as she looked around anxiously. The night was empty as far as she could make out. Even the Wise Ones were already back in their tents. Warm in their blankets. She was sweating, but the beads seemed to want to freeze as soon as they appeared.

“He belongs to Elayne,” Aviendha said fiercely.

“I admit I don’t know your customs fully, but ours are not the same as yours. He is not betrothed to Elayne.” *Why am I defending him? He’s the one who ought to be switched!* But honesty made her go on. “Even your Aielmen have the right to say no, if they’re asked.”

“You and she are near-sisters, as you and I are,” Aviendha protested, slowing a step before picking it up again. “Did you not ask me to look after him for her? Do you not want her to have him?”

“Of course I do. If he wants her.” That was not exactly true. She wanted Elayne to have what happiness she could, in love with the Dragon Reborn as she was, and she would do everything short of tying Rand hand and foot to see that Elayne got what she wanted. Maybe not far short, at that, if need be. Admitting it was another thing. Aielwomen were far more forward than she could ever make herself be. “It would not be right, otherwise.”

“He belongs to her,” Aviendha said determinedly.

Egwene sighed. Aviendha simply did not want to understand any customs but her own. The Aiel woman was still shocked that Elayne would not ask Rand to marry her, that a man could ask that question. “I’m sure the Wise Ones will listen to reason tomorrow. They can’t make you sleep in a man’s bedchamber.”

The other woman looked at her in clear surprise. For a moment her grace left her, and she stubbed a toe on the uneven ground; the mishap brought a few curses that would have made even Kadere’s wagon drivers listen with interest—and made Bair reach for the bluespine—but she did not stop running. “I do not understand why that upsets you so,” she said when the last curse died. “I have slept next to a man many times on raids, even sharing blankets for warmth if the night was very cold, but it disturbs you that I will sleep within ten feet of him. Is this part of your customs? I have noticed you will not bathe in the sweat tent with men. Do you not trust Rand al’Thor? Or is it me you do not trust?” Her voice had sunk to a concerned whisper by the end.

“Of course I trust you,” Egwene protested heatedly. “And him. It’s just that . . .” She trailed off, uncertain how to go on. Aiel notions of propriety were sometimes stricter than what she had grown up with, but in other ways they would have had the Women’s Circle back home trying to decide whether to faint or reach for a stout stick. “Aviendha, if your honor is involved somehow . . .” This was touchy ground. “Surely if you explain to the Wise Ones, they will not make you go against your honor.”

“There is nothing to explain,” the other woman said flatly.

“I know I don’t understand *ji’e’toh* . . .” Egwene began, and Aviendha laughed.

“You say you do not understand, Aes Sedai, yet you show that you live by it.” Egwene regretted maintaining that lie with her—it had been hard work to get Aviendha to call her simply Egwene, and sometimes she slipped back—but it had to be kept with everyone if it was to hold with anyone. “You are Aes Sedai, and strong enough in the Power to overcome Amys and Melaine together,” Aviendha continued, “but you said that you would obey, so you scrub pots when they say scrub pots, and you run when they say run. You may not know *ji’e’toh*, but you follow it.”

It was not the same thing at all, of course. She gritted her teeth and did as she was told because that was the only way to learn dreamwalking, and she wanted to learn, to learn everything, more than anything else she could imagine. To even think that she could live by this foolish *ji'e'toh* was simply silly. She did what she had to do, and only when and because she had to.

They were coming back to where they had begun. As her foot hit the spot, Egwene said, “That’s one,” and ran on through the darkness with no one to see but Aviendha, no one to say whether she went back to her tent right then. Aviendha would not have told, but it never occurred to Egwene to stop short of the fifty.

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CHAPTER
6

Gateways

Rand woke in total darkness and lay there beneath his blankets trying to think of what had wakened him. It had been something. Not the dream; he had been teaching Aviendha how to swim, in a pond in the Waterwood back home in the Two Rivers. Something else. Then it came again, like a faint whiff of a foul miasma creeping under the door. Not a smell at all, really; a sense of otherness, but that was how it felt. Rank, like something dead a week in stagnant water. It faded again, but not all the way this time.

Tossing aside his blankets, he stood up, wrapping himself in *saidin*. Inside the Void, filled with the Power, he could feel his body shiver, but the cold seemed in another place from where he was. Cautiously he pulled open the door and stepped out. Arched windows at either end of the corridor let in falls of moonlight. After the pitch black of his room, it was nearly like day. Nothing moved, but he could feel . . . something . . . coming closer. Something evil. It felt like the taint that roared through him on the Power.

One hand went to his coat pocket, to the small carved figure of a round little man holding a sword across his knees. An *angreal*; with that he could channel more of the Power than even he could safely handle unaided. He thought it would not be necessary. Whoever had sent this attack against him did not know who they were dealing with, now. They should never have let him wake.

For a moment, he hesitated. He could take the fight to whatever had been sent against him, but he thought it was still below him. Down where the Maidens were still sleeping, by the silence. With luck, it would not bother them, unless he rushed down to battle it in their midst. That would surely wake them, and they would not stand by and watch. Lan said that you should choose your ground, if you could, and make your enemy come to you.

Smiling, he raced the thud of his boots up the nearest curving stairway, on upward, until he reached the top floor. The highest level of the building was one large chamber with a slightly domed ceiling and scattered thin columns fluted in spirals. Glassless arched windows all around flooded every corner with moonlight. The dust and grit and sand on the floor still faintly showed his own footprints, from the one time he had come up here, and no other mark. It was perfect.

Striding to the center of the room, he planted himself atop the mosaic there, the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai, ten feet across. It was an apt place. "Under this sign will he conquer." That was what the Prophecy of Rhuidean said of him. He stood straddling the sinuous dividing line, one boot on the black teardrop that was now called the Dragon's Fang and used to represent evil, the other on the white now called the Flame of Tar Valon. Some men said it stood for the Light. An appropriate place to meet this attack, between Light and darkness.

The fetid feel grew stronger, and a burned sulphur smell filled the air. Suddenly things moved, slinking away from the stairs like moonshadows, along the outside of the room. Slowly they resolved into three black dogs, darker than night and big as ponies. Eyes shining silver, they circled him warily. With the Power in him, he could hear their hearts beat, like deep drums pounding. He could not hear them breathe, though; perhaps they did not.

He channeled, and a sword was in his hands, its slightly curving, heron-marked blade seeming hammered out of fire. He had expected Myrddraal, or something even worse than the Eyeless, but for dogs, even Shadowspawn dogs, the sword would be enough. Whoever had sent them did not know him. Lan said he had very nearly reached the level of a blademaster, now, and the Warder was sparing enough with praise to make him think he might have passed on to that level already.

With snarls like bones being ground to dust, the dogs hurtled at him from three sides, faster than galloping horses.

He did not move until they were almost on him; then he flowed, one with the sword, move to move, as though dancing. In the blink of an eye the sword form called Whirlwind on the Mountain became The Wind Blows Over the Wall became Unfolding the Fan. Great black heads flew apart from black bodies, their dripping teeth, like burnished steel, still bared as they bounced across the floor. He was already stepping from the mosaic as the dark forms collapsed in twitching, bleeding heaps.

Laughing to himself, he let the sword go, though he held on to *saidin*, to the raging Power, the sweetness and the taint. Contempt slid along the outside of the Void. Dogs. Shadowspawn, certainly, but still just . . . Laughter died.

Slowly, the dead dogs and their heads were melting, settling into pools of liquid shadow that quivered slightly, as if alive. Their blood, fanned across the floor, trembled. Suddenly the smaller pools flowed across the floor in viscous streams to merge with the larger, which oozed away from the mosaic to mound higher and higher, until the three huge black dogs stood there once more, slavering and snarling as they gathered massive haunches under them.

He did not know why he felt surprise, dim outside the emptiness. Dogs, yes, but Shadowspawn. Whoever had sent them had not been as careless as he had thought. But they still did not know him.

Instead of reaching for the sword again, he channeled as he remembered doing once long ago. Howling, the huge dogs leaped, and a thick shaft of white light shot from his hands, like molten steel, like liquid fire. He swept it across the springing creatures; for an instant they became strange shadows of themselves, all colors reversed, and then they were made of sparkling motes that broke apart, smaller and smaller, until there was nothing.

He let go of the thing he had made, with a grim smile. A purple bar of light still seemed to cross his vision in afterimage.

Across the great chamber a piece of one of the columns crashed to the floor tiles. Where that bar of light—or whatever it had been; not light, exactly—had swung, neat slices were gone from the columns. A gaping swath cut half the width of the wall behind them.

“Did any of them bite you, or bleed on you?”

He spun at the sound of Moiraine’s voice; absorbed in what he had done, he had not heard her come up the stairs. She stood clutching her skirts with both hands, peering at him, face lost in moonshadow. She would have sensed the things the same way he did, but to be here so quickly she must have run. “The Maidens let you pass? Have you become *Far Dareis Mai*, Moiraine?”

“They grant me some privileges of a Wise One,” she said in a rush, impatience raw in her usually melodious voice. “I told the guards I had to speak with you urgently. Now, answer me! Did the Darkhounds bite you, or bleed on you? Did their saliva touch you?”

“No,” he answered slowly. Darkhounds. The little he knew he had gotten from old stories, the sort used to frighten children in the southlands. Some grown-ups believed, too. “Why should a bite worry you? You could Heal it. Does this mean the Dark One is free?” Enclosed in the Void as he was, even fear was distant.

The tales he had heard said the Darkhounds ran the night in the Wild Hunt, with the Dark One himself the hunter; they left no print on even the softest dirt, only on stone, and they would not stop until you faced and defeated them or put running water between you. Crossroads were supposed to be particularly dangerous places to meet them, and the time just after sunset or just before sunrise. He had seen enough old stories walking by now to believe that any of it could be true.

“No, not that, Rand.” She seemed to be regaining her self-control; her voice was silver chimes again, calm and cool. “They are only another kind of Shadowspawn, something that should never have been made. But their bite is death as surely as a dagger in the heart, and I do not think I could have Healed such a wound before it killed you. Their blood, even their saliva, is poison. A drop on the skin can kill, slowly, with great pain at the end. You are lucky there were only three. Unless you killed more before I arrived? Their packs are usually larger, as many as ten or twelve, or so say the scraps left from the War of the Shadow.”

Larger packs. He was not the only target in Rhuidean for one of the Forsaken. . . .

“We must speak of what you used to kill them,” Moiraine began, but he was already running as hard as he could, ignoring her cries to know where he was going and why.

Down flights of stairs, through darkened corridors where sleepy Maidens, roused by the pounding boots, peered at him in consternation from moonlit rooms. Through the front doors, where Lan stood restlessly with the two women on guard, his color-shifting Warder’s cloak about his shoulders, making parts of him seem to blend into the night.

“Where is Moiraine?” he shouted as Rand dashed by, but Rand leaped down the broad steps two at a time without replying.

The half-healed wound in his side clenched like a fist, pain he was only vaguely aware of inside the Void, by the time he reached the building he sought. It stood at the very edge of Rhuidean, far from the plaza, as far from the camp Moiraine shared with the Wise Ones as it was possible to be and remain in the city. The upper floors had collapsed in a mound of rubble that fanned out onto the cracked earth beyond the pavement. Only the bottom two floors remained whole. Refusing his body's efforts to hunch over around the pain, he went in, still at a dead run.

Once the great antechamber, encircled by a stone balcony, had been tall; now it was taller, open to the night sky, its pale stone floor strewn with rubble from the collapse. In the moonshadows beneath the balcony, three Darkhounds were up on their hind legs, clawing and chewing at a bronze-clad door that shivered under their assault. The smell of burned sulphur hung strong in the air.

Remembering what had happened before, Rand darted to one side as he channeled, the shaft of liquid white fire streaking by the door as it destroyed the Shadowspawn. He had tried to make it less this time, to confine the destruction to the Darkhounds, but the thick wall at the far end of the chamber had a shadowed hole in it. Not all the way through, he thought—it was hard to tell by moonlight—but he would have to fine his control of this weapon.

The bronze sheathing on the door was tattered and torn as though the teeth and toenails of the Darkhounds really had been steel; lamplight shone through a number of small holes. There were pawprints in the floor-stones, but surprisingly few. Releasing *saidin,* he found a place where he would not cut his hand to shreds and pounded on the door. Suddenly the pain in his side was very real and present; he took a deep breath and tried to thrust it away. "Mat? It's me, Rand! Open up, Mat!"

After a moment, the door opened a crack, letting out a spill of lamplight; Mat peered through doubtfully, then pulled the door wider, leaning against it as if he had run ten miles carrying a sack of rocks. Except for a silver foxhead medallion hanging around his neck, its eye shaped and shaded like the ancient Aes Sedai symbol, he was naked. The way Mat felt about Aes Sedai, Rand was surprised he had not sold the thing long since. Deeper in the room, a tall, golden-haired woman was calmly wrapping a blanket around herself. A Maiden, by the spears and buckler lying at her feet.

Rand hastily averted his eyes and cleared his throat. “I just wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“We’re fine.” Uneasily, Mat looked around the antechamber. “Now we are. You killed it, or something? I don’t want to know what it was, as long as it’s gone. It’s bloody hard on a man sometimes, being your friend.”

Not only a friend. Another *ta’veren*, and perhaps a key to victory in Tarmon Gai’don; anyone who wanted to strike at Rand had reason to strike at Mat, as well. But Mat always tried to deny both things. “They’re gone, Mat. Darkhounds. Three of them.”

“I told you I didn’t want to know,” Mat groaned. “Darkhounds now. I can’t say it isn’t always something new around you. A man wouldn’t get bored; not until the day he died. If I hadn’t been on my feet for a drink of wine when the door started to open . . .” He trailed off, shivering, and scratched a red place on his right arm as he studied the ravaged metal sheathing. “You know, it’s funny how the mind plays tricks. When I was putting everything I had into holding this door shut, I could have sworn one of them had chewed a hole right through it. I could see its bloody head. And its teeth. Melindhra’s spear didn’t even faze it.”

Moiraine’s arrival was more spectacular this time, running in, skirts held up, panting and fuming. Lan was at her heels with his sword in hand and thunderclouds on his stone face, and right behind, a throng of *Far Dareis Mai* that spilled out into the street. Some of the Maidens wore no more than smallclothes, but every one held her spears alertly and had her *shoufa* wrapped around her head, black veil hiding all but her eyes, ready to kill. Moiraine and Lan, at least, looked relieved to see him standing there calmly talking to Mat, though the Aes Sedai also looked as if she meant to have strong words with him. With the veils, it was impossible to tell what the Aiel thought.

Letting out a loud yelp, Mat darted back into his room and began hastily tugging on a pair of breeches, his capering impeded by the way he kept trying to haul at the breeches and scratch his arm at the same time. The golden-haired Maiden watched with a broad grin that threatened to break into laughter.

“What’s the matter with your arm?” Rand asked.

“I told you the mind plays funny tricks,” Mat said, still trying to scratch and pull at the same time. “When I thought that thing chewed through the door, I thought it slobbered all over my arm, too, and now it bloody itches like fire. Even looks like a burn there."

Rand opened his mouth, but Moiraine was already pushing past him. Staring at her, Mat fell down while frantically dragging his breeches on the rest of the way, but she knelt beside him, ignoring his protests, clasping his head in her hands. Rand had been Healed before, and seen it done, but instead of what he expected, Mat only gave a shiver and lifted up the medallion by its leather thong so that it hung against his hand.

"Bloody thing is colder than ice all of a sudden," he muttered. "What are you doing, Moiraine? If you want to do something, Heal this itch; it has my whole arm now." His right arm was red from wrist to shoulder, and had begun to look puffy.

Moiraine stared at him with the most startled expression Rand had ever seen on her face. Maybe the only one. "I will," she said slowly. "If the medallion is cold, take it off."

Mat frowned at her, then finally pulled it over his head and laid it beside him. She took his head again, and he gave a shout as if he had been ducked headfirst into ice; his legs stiffened and his back arched; his eyes stared at nothing, as wide as they would go. When Moiraine took her hands away, he slumped, gulping air. The redness and swelling were gone. It took three tries before he could speak. "Blood and ashes! Does it have to be that flaming way every flaming time? It was just a bloody itch!"

"You watch your tongue with me," Moiraine told him, getting up, "or I will find Nynaeve and put her in charge of you." But her heart was not in it; she could have been talking in her sleep. She was trying not to stare at the foxhead as Mat hung it back around his neck. "You will need rest," she said absently. "Stay in bed tomorrow, if you feel like it."

The Maiden in the blanket—Melindhra?—knelt behind Mat and put her hands on his shoulders, looking up at Moiraine over his head. "I will see that he does as you say, Aes Sedai." With a sudden grin, she ruffled his hair. "He is my little mischief maker, now." From the horrified look on Mat's face, he was gathering his strength to run.

Rand became aware of soft, amused chuckles behind him. The Maidens, *shoufas* and veils around their shoulders now, had crowded around and were peering into the room.

"Teach him to sing, spear-sister," Adelin said, and the other Maidens crowed with laughter.

Rand rounded on them firmly. “Let the man rest. Don’t some of you have to put on clothes?” They gave way reluctantly, still trying to peer into the room, until Moiraine came out.

“Will you leave us, please?” the Aes Sedai said as the mangled door banged shut behind her. She half looked back with a vexed tightening of her mouth. “I must speak with Rand al’Thor alone.” Nodding, the Aiel women started for the door, some still jesting about whether Melindhra—a Shaido, it seemed; Rand wondered if Mat knew that—would teach Mat to sing. Whatever that meant.

Rand stopped Adelin with a hand on her bare arm; others who noticed stopped as well, so he spoke to them all. “If you will not go when I tell you to, what will you do if I have to use you in battle?” He did not intend to if he could help it; he knew they were fierce warriors, but he had been raised to believe it was a man’s place to die if necessary before a woman had to. Logic might say it was foolish, especially with women like this, but that was how he felt. He knew better than to tell them that, however. “Will you think it a joke, or decide to go in your own good time?”

They looked at him with the consternation of those listening to someone who had revealed his ignorance of the simplest facts. “In the dance of spears,” Adelin told him, “we will go as you direct, but this is not the dance. Besides, you did not tell us to go.”

“Even the *Car’a’carn* is not a wetlander king,” a gray-haired Maiden added. Sinewy and hard despite her age, she wore only a short shift and her *shoufa.* He was getting tired of that phrase.

The Maidens resumed their joking as they left him alone with Moiraine and Lan. The Warder had finally put up his sword, and looked as at ease as he ever did. Which was to say as still and calm as his face, all stony planes and angles in the moonlight, and with an air of being on the brink of sudden movement that made the Aiel appear placid in comparison. A braided leather cord held Lan’s hair, graying at the temples, back from his face. His gaze could have come from a blue-eyed hawk.

“I must speak with you about—” Moiraine began.

“We can talk tomorrow,” Rand said, cutting her off. Lan’s face hardened further, if such was possible; Warders were far more protective of their Aes Sedai, of their position as well as their persons, than they were of themselves. Rand ignored Lan. His side still wanted to hunch him over, but he managed to keep erect; he was not about to show her any weakness. “If you think I’ll help you get that foxhead away from Mat, you can think again.” Somehow that medallion had stopped her channeling. Or at least it had stopped her channeling from affecting Mat while he touched it. “He paid a hard price for it, Moiraine, and it is his.” Thinking of how she had thumped his shoulders with the Power, he added dryly, “Maybe I’ll ask if I can borrow it from him.” He turned away from her. There was still one he had to check on, though one way or another the urgency was gone; the Darkhounds would have done what they intended by now.

“Please, Rand,” Moiraine said, and the open pleading in her voice halted him in his tracks. He had never heard anything like that from her before.

The tone seemed to offend Lan. “I thought you had become a man,” the Warder said harshly. “Is this how a man behaves? You act like an arrogant boy.” Lan practiced the sword with him—and liked him, Rand thought—but if Moiraine said the right word, the Warder would do his best to kill him.

“I will not be with you forever,” Moiraine said urgently. Her hands gripped her skirts so hard that they trembled. “I might die in the next attack. I could fall from my horse and break my neck, or take a Darkfriend’s arrow through my heart, and death cannot be Healed. I have given my entire life to the search for you, to find you and help you. You still do not know your own strength; you cannot know half of what you do. I—apologize—most humbly for any offense I have given you.” Those words—words he had never thought to hear from her—came out as if dragged, but they came; and she could not lie. “Let me help you as much as I can, while I can. Please.”

“It’s hard to trust you, Moiraine.” He disregarded Lan, shifting in the moonlight; his attention was all on her. “You have handled me like a puppet, made me dance the way you wanted, from the day we met. The only times I’ve been free of you were either when you were far away or when I ignored you. And you make even that hard.”

Her laugh was as silvery as the moon above, but bitterness tinged it. “It has been more like wrestling with a bear than pulling strings on a puppet. Do you want an oath not to try manipulating you? I give it.” Her voice hardened to crystal. “I even swear to obey you like one of the Maidens—like one of the *gai’shain,* if you require—but you must—” Taking a deep breath, she began again, more softly. “I *ask* you, humbly, to allow me to help you.”

Lan was staring at her, and Rand thought his own eyes must be popping out of his head. “I will accept your help,” he said slowly. “And I apologize, too. For all the rudeness I’ve shown.” He had the feeling he was still being manipulated—he had had good cause to be rude, when he was—but she could not lie.

Tension drained from her visibly. She stepped closer to look up at him. “What you used to kill the Darkhounds is called balefire. I can still sense the residue of it here.” He could, too, like the fading smell remaining after a pie was carried out of the room, or the memory of something just snatched out of sight. “Since before the Breaking of the World, the use of balefire has been forbidden. The White Tower forbids us even to learn it. In the War of Power, the Forsaken and the Shadowsworn themselves used it only reluctantly.”

“Forbidden?” Rand said, frowning. “I saw you use it once.” He could not be sure in the pale light of the moon, but he thought color flamed in her cheeks. For this once, perhaps she was the one off balance.

“Sometimes it is necessary to do that which is forbidden.” If she was flustered, it did not show in her voice. “When anything is destroyed with balefire, it ceases to exist *before* the moment of its destruction, like a thread that burns away from where the flame touched it. The greater the power of the balefire, the further back in time it ceases to exist. The strongest I can manage will remove only a few seconds from the Pattern. You are much stronger. Very much so.”

“But if it doesn’t exist *before* you destroy it . . .” Rand raked fingers through his hair in confusion.

“You begin to see the problems, the dangers? Mat remembers seeing one of the Darkhounds chew through the door, but there is no opening, now. If it had slavered on him as much as he remembers, he would have been dead before I could reach him. For as far back as you destroyed the creature, whatever it did during that time *no longer happened*. Only the memories remain, for those who saw or experienced it. Only what it did before is real, now. A few tooth holes in the door, and one drop of saliva on Mat’s arm.”

“That sounds just fine to me,” he told her. “Mat’s alive because of it.”

“It is terrible, Rand.” An urgent note entered her voice. “Why do you think even the Forsaken feared to use it? Think of the effect on the Pattern of a single thread, one man, removed from hours, or days, that have already been woven, like one thread picked partly out of a piece of cloth. Fragments of manuscripts remaining from the War of Power say several entire cities were destroyed with balefire before both sides realized the dangers. Hundreds of thousands of threads pulled from the Pattern, gone for days already past; whatever those people had done, now no longer had been done, and neither had what others had done because of their actions. The memories remained, but not the actions. The ripples were incalculable. The Pattern itself nearly unraveled. It could have been the destruction of everything. World, time, Creation itself."

Rand shivered, nothing to do with the cold cutting through his coat. "I can't promise not to use it again, Moiraine. You yourself said there are times when it's necessary to do what's forbidden."

"I did not think that you would," she said coolly. Her agitation was vanishing, her balance restored. "But you must be careful." She was back to "must" again. "With a *sa'angreal* like *Callandor,* you could annihilate a city with balefire. The Pattern could be disrupted for years to come. Who can say that the weave would even remain centered on you, *ta'veren* as you are, until it settled down? Being *ta'veren,* and so strongly so, may be your margin of victory, even in the Last Battle."

"Perhaps it will," he said bleakly. In tale after heroic tale, the protagonist proclaimed he would have victory or death. It seemed that the best he could hope for was victory *and* death. "I have to check on someone," he went on quietly. "I will see you in the morning." Gathering the Power into him, life and death in swirling layers, he made a hole in the air taller than he was, opening into blackness that made the moonlight seem day. A gateway, Asmodean called it.

"What is that?" Moiraine gasped.

"Once I've done something, I remember how. Most of the time." That was no answer, but it was time to test Moiraine's vows. She could not lie, but Aes Sedai could find loopholes in a stone. "You are to leave Mat alone tonight. And you won't try to take that medallion away from him."

"It belongs in the Tower for study, Rand. It must be a *ter'angreal,* but none has ever been found that—"

"Whatever it is," he said firmly, "it is his. You will leave it with him."

For a moment she seemed to struggle with herself, back stiffening and head coming up as she stared at him. She could not be used to taking orders from anyone except Siuan Sanche, and Rand was willing to wager she had never done that without a tussle. Finally she nodded, and even made the suggestion of a curtsy. “As you say, Rand. It is his. Please be careful, Rand. Learning a thing like balefire by yourself can be suicide, and death cannot be Healed.” This time there was no mockery. “Until the morning.” Lan followed her as she left, the Warder giving Rand an unreadable expression; he would not be pleased by this turn of events.

Rand stepped through the gateway, and it vanished.

He was standing on a disc, a six-foot copy of the ancient Aes Sedai symbol. Even the black half of it seemed lighter against the endless darkness that surrounded him, above and below; he was sure that if he fell off, he would fall forever. Asmodean claimed there was a faster method, called Traveling, for using a gateway, but he had not been able to teach it, partly because he did not have the strength to make a gateway while wearing Lanfear’s shield. In any case, Traveling required that you know your starting point very well. It seemed more logical to him that you should have to know where you were heading well, but Asmodean seemed to think that that was like asking why air was not water. There was a great deal that Asmodean took for granted. Anyway, Skimming was fast enough.

As soon as he planted his boots on it, the disc lurched what seemed to be a foot and stopped, another gateway appearing in front of it. Fast enough, especially over this short distance. Rand stepped into the hallway outside the room where Asmodean was.

The moon through the windows at the ends of the corridor gave the only light; Asmodean’s lamp was out. The flows he had woven around the room were still in place, still firmly tied. Nothing moved, but there was still a faint smell of burned sulphur.

Moving close to the bead curtain, he peered through the doorway. Moonshadows filled the room, but one of them was Asmodean, tossing in his blankets. Wrapped in the Void, Rand could hear his heartbeat, smell the sweat of troubled dreams. He bent to examine the pale blue floor tiles, and the prints impressed in them.

He had learned to track as a boy, and reading them was no difficulty. Three or four Darkhounds had been there. They had approached the doorway one by one, it seemed, each stepping almost in the others’ footprints. Had the net woven around the room stopped them there? Or had they merely been sent to look, and report? Troubling to think of even Shadowspawn dogs having that much intelligence. But then, Myrddraal used ravens and rats for spies, too, and other animals closely linked to death. Shadoweyes, the Aiel called them.

Channeling fine flows of Earth, he smoothed out the floor tiles, lifting up the compressions until he was out in the empty, night-cloaked street and a hundred paces from the tall building. In the morning, anyone would be able to see the trail ending there, but none would suspect that the Darkhounds had gone anywhere near Asmodean. Darkhounds could have no interest in Jasin Natael the gleeman.

Every Maiden in the city was likely awake by this time; certainly none would still be asleep under the Roof of the Maidens. Making another gateway there in the street, a deeper blackness against the night, he let the disc carry him back to his own room. He wondered why he had chosen the ancient symbol—it was his choice, if unconscious; other times it had been a stairstep or a piece of floor. The Darkhounds had oozed away from that sign before re-forming. *Under this sign will he conquer.*

Standing in his pitch-black bedchamber, he channeled the lamps alight, but he did not let go of *saidin.* Instead he channeled again, careful not to spring any of his own traps, and a piece of the wall vanished, revealing a niche he had carved there himself.

In the little alcove stood two figurines a foot tall, a man and a woman, each in flowing robes and serene of face, each holding a crystal globe aloft in one hand. He had lied to Asmodean about them.

There were *angreal,* like the round little man in Rand's coat pocket, and *sa'angreal,* like *Callandor,* that increased the amount of the Power that could be safely handled as much over *angreal* as *angreal* did over channeling unaided. Both were very rare, and prized by Aes Sedai, though they could only recognize those attuned to women and *saidar.* These two figures were something else, not so rare, but just as highly valued. *Ter'angreal* had been made to use the Power not to magnify it, but to use it in specific ways. The Aes Sedai did not know the intended purpose even of most *ter'angreal* they had in the White Tower; some they used, but without knowing whether the use they put them to was anything like the function they had been made for. Rand knew the function of these two.

The male figure could link him to a huge replica of itself, the most powerful male *sa'angreal* ever made, even if he were on the other side of the Aryth Ocean from it. It had only been finished after the Dark One's prison was resealed—*How do I know that?*—and hidden before any of the male Aes Sedai going mad could find it. The female figure could do the same for a woman, joining her to the female equivalent of the great statue he hoped was still almost completely buried in Cairhien. With that much power . . . Moiraine had said death could not be Healed.

Unbidden, unwanted, memory returned of the next-to-last time he had dared let himself hold *Callandor,* images floating beyond the Void.

The body of the dark-haired girl, little more than a child, lay sprawled with eyes wide and fixed on the ceiling, blood blackening the bosom of her dress where a Trolloc had run her through.

The Power was in him. Callandor *blazed, and he* was *the Power. He channeled, directing flows into the child's body, searching, trying, fumbling; she lurched to her feet, arms and legs unnaturally rigid and jerky.*

"Rand, you cannot do this," Moiraine cried. "Not this!"

Breathe. She had to breathe. The girl's chest rose and fell. Heart. Had to beat. Blood already thick and dark oozed from the wound in her chest. Live, burn you! *his mind howled.* I didn't mean to be too late! *Her eyes stared at him, filmed, heedless of all the Power in him. Lifeless. Tears trickled unheeded down his cheeks.*

He forced the memory away roughly; even encased in the Void, it hurt. With this much Power . . . With this much Power, he could not be trusted. "You are not the Creator," Moiraine had told him as he stood over that child. But with that male figure, with only half of its power, he had made the mountains move, once. With far less, with only *Callandor,* he had been sure he could turn back the Wheel, make a dead child live. Not only the One Power was seductive; the power of it was, too. He should destroy them both. Instead he rewove the flows, reset the traps.

"What are you doing there?" a woman's voice said as the wall became apparently whole again.

Tying off the flows hastily—and the knot with its own deadly surprises—he pulled the Power into him and turned.

Beside Lanfear, in her white and silver, Elayne or Min or Aviendha would look almost ordinary. Her dark eyes alone were enough to make a man give up his soul. At the sight of her, his stomach clenched until he wanted to vomit.

"What do you want?" he demanded. Once he had blocked Egwene and Elayne both from the True Source, but he could not remember how. So long as Lanfear could touch the Source, he had more chance of catching the wind in his hands than of holding her prisoner. *One flash of balefire, and . . .* He could not do it. She was one of the Forsaken, but the memory of a woman's head rolling on the ground stopped him dead.

"You have two of them," she said finally. "I thought I glimpsed . . . One is a woman, isn't it?" Her smile could have halted a man's heart and made him grateful. "You are beginning to consider my plan, aren't you? With those, together, the other Chosen will kneel at our feet. We can supplant the Great Lord himself, challenge the Creator. We—"

"You were always ambitious, Mierin." His voice grated in his ears. "Why do you think I turned away from you? It wasn't Ilyena, whatever you like to think. You were out of my heart long before ever I met her. Ambition is all there is to you. Power is all you ever wanted. You disgust me!"

She stared at him, both hands pressed hard against her stomach, her dark eyes even larger than usual. "Graendal said . . ." she began faintly. Swallowing, she began again. "Lews Therin? I love you, Lews Therin. I have always loved you, and I always will. You know that. You must!"

Rand's face was like rock; he hoped it hid his shock. He had no idea where his words had come from, but it seemed he could remember her. A dim memory, from before. *I am not Lews Therin Telamon!* "I am Rand al'Thor!" he said harshly.

"Of course you are." Studying him, she nodded slowly to herself. That cool composure returned. "Of course. Asmodean has been telling you things, about the War of Power, and me. He lies. You did love me. Until that yellow-haired trollop Ilyena stole you." For an instant, rage made her face a contorted mask; he did not think she was even aware of it. "Did you know that Asmodean severed his own mother? What they call stilling, now. Severed her, and let Myrddraal drag her away screaming. Can you trust a man like that?"

Rand laughed aloud. "After I caught him, you helped trap him so he had to teach me. And now you say I cannot trust him?"

"For teaching." She sniffed dismissively. "He will do that because he knows his lot is cast with you for good. Even if he managed to convince the others that he has been a prisoner, they would still tear him apart, and he knows it. The weakest dog in the pack often suffers that fate. Besides, I watch his dreams on occasion. He dreams of you triumphing over the Great Lord and putting him up beside you on high. Sometimes he dreams of me."

Her smile said those dreams were pleasant for her, but not so for Asmodean. “But he will try to turn you against me.”

“Why are you here?” he demanded. Turn against her? No doubt she was full of the Power right that moment, ready to shield him if she even suspected he meant to try anything. She had done it before, with humiliating ease.

“I like you like this. Arrogant and proud, full of your own strength.”

Once she had said that she liked him unsure, that Lews Therin had been too arrogant. “Why are you here?”

“Rahvin sent the Darkhounds after you tonight,” she said calmly, folding her hands at her waist. “I would have come sooner, to help you, but I cannot let the others know I am on your side yet.”

On his side. One of the Forsaken loved him, or rather the man he had been three thousand years ago, and all she wanted was for him to give his soul to the Shadow and rule the world with her. Or a step below her, at least. That, and try to replace both the Dark One and the Creator. Was she completely mad? Or could the power of those two huge *sa’angreal* really be as great as she claimed? That was a direction he did not want his thoughts to take.

“Why would Rahvin choose now to attack me? Asmodean says he looks to his own interests, that he’ll sit to one side even in the Last Battle, if he can, and wait for the Dark One to destroy me. Why not Sammael, or Demandred? Asmodean says they hate me.” *Not me. They hate Lews Therin.* But to the Forsaken, that was the same thing. *Please, Light, I am Rand al’Thor.* He pushed away a sudden memory of this woman in his arms, both of them young and just learning what they could do with the Power. *I am Rand al’Thor!* “Why not Semirhage, or Moghedien, or Graen—?”

“But you *are* impinging on his interests now.” She laughed. “Don’t you know where he is? In Andor, in Caemlyn itself. He rules there in all but name. Morgase simpers and dances for him, her and half a dozen others.” Her lip curled in disgust. “He has men scouring town and countryside to find new pretties for him.”

For a moment shock held him. Elayne’s mother in the hands of one of the Forsaken. Yet he dared not show concern. Lanfear had displayed her jealousy more than once; she was capable of hunting Elayne down and killing her, if she even thought he had feelings for her. *What* do *I feel for* *her?* Aside from that, one hard fact floated beyond the Void, cold and cruel in its truth. He would not run off to attack Rahvin even if what Lanfear said was true. *Forgive me, Elayne, but I can't.* She might well be lying—she would weep no tears for any of the other Forsaken he killed; they all stood in the way of her own plans—but in any event, he was done with reacting to what others did. If he reacted, they could reason out what he would do. Let them react to him, and be as surprised as Lanfear and Asmodean had been.

"Does Rahvin think I'll rush to defend Morgase?" he said. "I have seen her once in my life. The Two Rivers is part of Andor on a map, but I never saw a Queen's Guardsman there. No one has in generations. Tell a Two Rivers man Morgase is his queen, and he'll probably think you're crazy."

"I doubt Rahvin expects you to run to defend your homeland," Lanfear said wryly, "but he will expect you to defend your ambitions. He means to sit Morgase on the Sun Throne, too, and use her like a puppet until the time he can come into the open. More Andoran soldiers move into Cairhien every day. And you sent Tairen soldiers north, to secure your own hold on the land. No wonder that he attacked you as soon as he found you."

Rand shook his head. It had not been that way at all, sending the Tairens, but he did not expect her to understand. Or believe him if he told her, for that matter. "I thank you for the warning." Politeness to one of the Forsaken! Of course, there was nothing he could do except hope that some of what she told him was truth. *A good reason not to kill her. She'll tell you more than she thinks, if you listen carefully.* He hoped that was his own thought, chill and cynical as it was.

"You ward your dreams against me."

"Against everyone." That was simple truth, though she was at least as prominent in the list as the Wise Ones.

"Dreams are mine. You and your dreams are mine especially." Her face remained smooth, but her voice hardened. "I can break through your warding. You would not like it."

To show his unconcern, he sat down on the foot of his pallet, legs folded and hands on his knees. He thought his face was as calm as hers. Inside him, the Power swelled. He had flows of Air ready to bind her, and flows of Spirit. That was what wove a shield against the True Source. The racking of his brain for the how of it seemed far off, but he could not remember anyway. Without that, the other was useless. She could pick apart or slice through anything he wove, even if she could not see it. Asmodean was trying to teach him that trick, but it was hard going without a woman's weaving to practice on.

Lanfear eyed him in a disconcerted fashion, a slight frown marring her beauty. "I have examined the Aielwomen's dreams. These so-called Wise Ones. They do not know how to shield themselves very well. I could frighten them till they never dream again, never even think of invading yours surely."

"I thought you would not help me openly." He did not dare tell her to leave the Wise Ones alone; she might well do something to spite him. She had made it plain from the start, if not in words, that she meant to have the upper hand between them. "Wouldn't that risk another of the Forsaken finding out? You aren't the only one who knows how to enter people's dreams."

"The Chosen," she said absently. For a moment she chewed a full underlip. "I have watched the girl's dreams, too. Egwene. Once I thought you had feelings for her. Do you know who she dreams of? Morgase's son and stepson. The son, Gawyn, most often." Smiling, she put on a tone of mock shock. "You would not believe a simple country girl could have such dreams."

She was trying to test his jealousy, he realized. She really thought he warded his dreams to hide thoughts of another woman! "The Maidens guard me closely," he said dryly. "If you want to know how close, look at Isendre's dreams."

Spots of color flared in her cheeks. Of course. He was not supposed to see what she was trying. Confusion rolled outside the Void. Or did she think . . . ? Isendre? Lanfear knew she was a Darkfriend. Lanfear had brought Kadere and the woman to the Waste in the first place. And planted most of the jewelry Isendre was accused of stealing; Lanfear's spite was cruel even when petty. Still, if she thought he could love her, Isendre being a Darkfriend was probably no obstacle in her eyes.

"I should have let them send her off to try reaching the Dragonwall," he went on casually, "but who knows what she might have said to save herself? I must protect her and Kadere to some extent in order to protect Asmodean."

The color faded, but as she opened her mouth again, a knock came at the door. Rand bounded to his feet. No one would recognize Lanfear, yet if a woman were discovered in his room, a woman whom none of the

Maidens below had seen enter, questions would be asked and he had no answers.

But Lanfear already had a gateway open, to somewhere full of white silk hangings and silver. “Remember that I am your only hope of surviving, my love.” It was a very cool voice in which to call someone that. “Beside me, you need fear nothing. Beside me, you can rule—everything that is or will be.” Lifting her snowy skirts, she stepped through, and the gateway winked shut.

The knock sounded again before he could make himself push away *saidin* and haul open the door.

Enaila peered past him suspiciously, muttering, “I thought perhaps Isendre. . . .” She gave him an accusing look. “Spear-sisters are searching everywhere for you. No one saw you return.” With a shake of her head, she straightened; she always tried to stand as tall as possible. “The chiefs have come to speak with the *Car’a’carn*,” she said formally. “They wait below.”

They waited on the columned portico, as it turned out, being men. The sky was still dark, but the first glimmers of dawn lined the mountains to the east. If they felt any impatience with the two Maidens who stood between them and the tall doors, it did not show on their shadowed faces.

“The Shaido are moving,” Han barked as soon as Rand appeared. “And the Reyn, the Miagoma, the Shiande. . . . Every clan!”

“Joining Couladin, or me?” Rand demanded.

“The Shaido are moving toward the Jangai Pass,” Rhuarc said. “For the others, it is too early to tell. But they are on the march with every spear not needed to defend the holds, herds and flocks.”

Rand only nodded. All of his determination not to let anyone else dictate what he would do, and now this. Whatever the other clans intended, Couladin had to plan a crossing into Cairhien. So much for his grand schemes of imposing peace, if the Shaido ravaged Cairhien even further while he sat in Rhuidean waiting for the other clans.

“Then we move for the Jangai, too,” he said finally.

“We cannot catch him if he means to cross,” Erim cautioned, and Han added sourly, “If any of the others are joining him, we will be caught strung out like blindworms in the sun.”

“I won’t sit here until I find out,” Rand said. “If I can’t catch Couladin, I mean to be right behind him into Cairhien. Rouse the spears. We leave as soon after first light as you can manage.”

Giving him that odd Aiel bow used only on the most formal occasions, one foot forward and one hand extended, the chiefs departed. Only Han said anything. “To Shayol Ghul itself.”

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CHAPTER 7

A Departure

Yawning in the early-morning grayness, Egwene pulled herself up onto her fog-colored mare, then had to handle her reins smartly as Mist frisked about. The animal had not been ridden in weeks. Aiel not only preferred their own legs, they avoided riding almost completely, though they did use packhorses and pack mules. Even if there had been enough wood to build wagons, the terrain in the Waste was not hospitable to wheels, as more than one peddler had learned to his or her sorrow.

She was not looking forward to the long journey west. The mountains hid the sun now, but the heat would grow by the hour once it climbed clear, and there would be no convenient tent to duck into at nightfall. She was not certain that Aiel garb was suitable for riding, either. The shawl, worn over her head, always did a surprisingly good job of keeping the sun off, but those bulky skirts would bare her legs to the thigh if she was not careful. Blisters worried her as much as modesty. *The sun on one side, and . . .* A month out of the saddle should not have softened her that much. She hoped it had not, or this would be a *very* long journey.

Once she had settled Mist down, Egwene found Amys looking at her, and shared a smile with the Wise One. All of that running the night before was not the reason she was still sleepy; if anything, it had helped her sleep even more soundly. She *had* found the other woman’s dreams last night, and in celebration they had sipped tea in the dream, in Cold Rocks Hold, early on an evening when children were playing among the crop-planted terraces and a pleasant breeze blew down the valley as the sun sank.

Of course, that would not have been enough to steal her rest, but she had been so exultant that when she left Amys’ dreams, she did not stop; she could not, not then, no matter what Amys would have said. There had been dreams all around, though with most she had no idea whose they were. With most, not all. Melaine had been dreaming of suckling a babe at her breast, and Bair of one of her dead husbands, both of them young and yellow-haired. She had been especially careful not to enter those; the Wise Ones would have known an intruder in an instant, and she shuddered to think of what they would have done before letting her go.

Rand's dreams had been a challenge, of course, one she could not fail to face. Now that she could flit from dream to dream, how could she not try where the Wise Ones failed? Only, attempting to enter his dreams had been like running headlong into an invisible stone wall. She knew that his dreams lay on the other side, and she was sure she could find a way through, but there had been nothing to work on, nothing to pry at. A wall of nothing. It was a problem she meant to worry at until she solved it. Once she put her mind on something, she could be as persistent as a badger.

All around her *gai'shain* were bustling about, loading the Wise Ones' camp onto mules. Before long, only an Aiel or someone just as skilled at tracking would be able to tell there had ever been tents on that patch of hard clay. The same activity covered the surrounding mountain slopes, and the hubbub extended into the city, as well. Not everyone would be going, but thousands would. Aiel thronged the streets, and Master Kadere's train of wagons stood strung out across the great plaza, laden with Moiraine's selections, the three white-painted water wagons at the end of the line like huge barrels on wheels behind twenty-mule teams. Kadere's own wagon, at the head of the column, was a little white house on wheels, with steps at the back and a metal stovepipe sticking out of the flat roof. The thick, hawk-nosed merchant, all in ivory-colored silk today, swept off his incongruously battered hat as she rode past, his dark, tilted eyes not sharing in the wide smile he flashed at her.

She ignored him frostily. His dreams had been decidedly dark and unpleasant, where they were not lewd as well. *He ought to have his head dunked in a* cask *of bluespine tea,* she thought grimly.

Approaching the Roof of the Maidens, she threaded her way through scurrying *gai'shain* and patiently standing mules. To her surprise, one of those loading the Maidens' things wore a black robe, not white. A woman, by the size of her, and staggering under the weight of a cord-tied bundle on her back. Bending as she guided Mist past, to get a look inside the woman's cowl, Egwene saw Isendre's haggard face, sweat already rolling down her cheeks. She was glad the Maidens had stopped letting the woman go outside—or sending her out—more naked than not, but it did seem needlessly cruel to robe her in black. If she was sweating so hard already, she would nearly die once the day's heat took hold.

Still, *Far Dareis Mai* business was none of hers. Aviendha had told her so gently but firmly. Adelin and Enaila had been little short of rude about it, and a wiry, white-haired Maiden named Sulin had actually threatened to haul her back to the Wise Ones by her ear. Despite her efforts to persuade Aviendha to stop addressing her as "Aes Sedai," it had been irritating to find that after walking a fine line of uncertainty toward her, the rest of the Maidens had come down on the side of her being just another pupil of the Wise Ones. Why, they would not even let her past the door of the Roof unless she claimed to be on an errand.

The quickness with which she heeled Mist on through the crowd had nothing to do with acceptance of *Far Dareis Mai* justice, or her uncomfortable awareness that some of the Maidens were eyeing her, no doubt ready to lecture if they thought she intended to interfere. It even had little to do with her dislike of Isendre. She did not want to think about her glimpse of the woman's dreams, just before Cowinde had come to rouse her. They had been nightmares of torture, of things being done to the woman that sent Egwene fleeing in horror, and with something dark and evil laughing as it watched her run. No wonder Isendre looked haggard. Egwene had started up out of her sleep so quickly that Cowinde had jumped back from laying a hand on her shoulder.

Rand was in the street in front of the Maidens' Roof, wearing a *shoufa* against the coming sun and a blue silk coat with enough gold embroidery to befit a palace, though it hung open halfway down the front. His belt had a new buckle, an elaborate thing shaped like a Dragon. He really was beginning to think a great deal of himself, that was clear. Standing beside Jeade'en, his dappled stallion, he was talking with the clan chiefs and some of the Aiel traders who would be staying in Rhuidean.

Jasin Natael, nearly at Rand's heels, with his harp on his back and holding the reins of a saddled mule bought from Master Kadere, was even more elaborately dressed, with silver embroidery nearly hiding his black coat, and spills of white lace at his neck and cuffs. Even his boots were worked in silver where they turned down at the knee. The gleeman's cloak with its patches did spoil the effect, but gleemen were odd folk.

The male traders wore the *cadin'sor,* and though their belt knives were smaller than those of warriors, Egwene knew they could all handle a spear if called to; they had something, if not all, of the deadly grace of their brothers who carried the spear. The women traders, in loose white *algode* blouses and full woolen skirts, head scarves and shawls, were more easily distinguishable. Except for Maidens and *gai'shain*—and Aviendha—Aielwomen all wore multiple bracelets and necklaces of gold and ivory, silver and gemstones, some of Aiel make, some traded for, and some looted. Among Aiel traders, though, the women displayed twice as many, if not more.

She caught part of what Rand was telling the traders.

". . . give the Ogier stonemasons a free hand on some of what they build, at least. On as much as you can make yourselves. There's no point in just trying to remake the past."

So he was having them send to the *stedding* for Ogier to rebuild Rhuidean. That was good. Much of Tar Valon was Ogier work, and where they were left to their own devices their buildings were enough to take the breath away.

Mat was already up on his gelding, Pips, with his wide-brimmed hat pulled down and the butt of that odd spear resting on his stirrup. As usual, his high-collared green coat looked slept in. She had avoided his dreams. One of the Maidens, a very tall golden-haired woman, gave Mat a roguish grin that seemed to embarrass him. And well it should; she was much too old for him. Egwene sniffed, *I know very well what* he *was dreaming about, thank you very much!* She only reined in beside him to look around for Aviendha.

"He told her to be quiet, and she did," he said as she halted Mist. He nodded toward Moiraine and Lan, she in pale blue silk, gripping the reins of her white mare, and he in his Warder's cloak, holding his great black warhorse. Lan was watching Moiraine intently, expressionless as always, while she looked ready to burst with impatience as she glared at Rand. "She started telling him why this is the wrong thing to do—sounded to me like she was saying it for the hundredth time—and he said, 'I've decided, Moiraine. Stand over there and be quiet till I have time for you.' Like he expected her to do as she was told. And she did. Is that steam coming out of her ears?"

His chortle was so pleased, so amused at his own wit, that she nearly embraced *saidar* and taught him a lesson right there in front of everybody. Instead she sniffed again, loudly enough to let him know it was for him and his wit and his amusement. He gave her a wry, sidelong look, and chuckled again, which did nothing for her temper.

For a moment she stared at Moiraine, perplexed. The Aes Sedai had done as Rand told her? Without protest? That was like one of the Wise Ones obeying, or the sun rising at midnight. She had heard about the attack, of course; rumors about giant dogs that left footprints on stone had been all over this morning. She could not see what that could have to do with this, but aside from the news of the Shaido it was the only new thing she knew of, and not enough to produce this reaction. *Nothing* could produce it, that she could think of. Doubtless Moiraine would tell her it was none of her concern, but one way or another she would worry it out. She did not like not understanding things.

Spotting Aviendha, standing on the bottom step of the Roof, she guided Mist around to the other side of the crowd near Rand. The Aiel woman was staring at him as hard as the Aes Sedai did, but with absolutely no expression. She kept turning the ivory bracelet on her wrist over and over, apparently without realizing it. Somehow or other that bracelet was part of the difficulty the woman was having with him. Egwene did not understand; Aviendha refused to talk about it, and she could not just ask someone else, not when it might embarrass her friend. Her own flame-carved ivory bracelet was a gift from Aviendha, to seal them as near-sisters; her return gift had been the silver necklace the other woman wore, which Master Kadere claimed was a Kandori pattern called snowflakes. She had had to ask Moiraine for enough money, but it had seemed appropriate for a woman who would never see snow. Or would not have if she was not leaving the Waste; small chance that she could return before winter. Whatever that bracelet meant, Egwene was confident she could puzzle it out eventually.

“Are you all right?” she asked. As she leaned out of her high-cantled saddle, her skirts shifted till her legs showed, but she was concerned enough with her friend to hardly notice.

She had to repeat the question before Aviendha gave a start and stared up at her. “All right? Of course I am.”

“Let me speak to the Wise Ones, Aviendha. I’m sure I can convince them that they cannot just make you . . .” She could not make herself say it, not out here where anyone in the crowd might hear.

“Does *that* still worry you?” Aviendha shifted her gray shawl and gave a small shake of her head. “Your customs are still very strange to me.” Her eyes drifted back to Rand like iron filings drawn to a lodestone.

“You do not have to be afraid of him.”

“I am not afraid of any man,” the other woman snapped, eyes flashing blue-green fire. “I want no trouble between us, Egwene, but you should not say such things.”

Egwene sighed. Friend or not, Aviendha was quite capable of trying to box her ears when offended enough. In any case, she was not sure she would have admitted it, either. Aviendha’s dream had been too painful to watch for long. Naked but for that ivory bracelet, and that seeming to drag at her as if it weighed a hundred pounds, Aviendha had been running as hard as she could across a cracked clay flat. And behind her, Rand came, a giant twice the size of an Ogier on a huge Jeade’en, slowly but inexorably catching up.

But you could not simply tell a friend that she was lying. Egwene’s face reddened slightly. Especially not when you would have to tell her how you knew. *She* would *box my ears, then. I won’t do it again. Go rummaging about in people’s dreams. Not in Aviendha’s dreams, anyway.* It was not right to spy on a friend’s dreams. Not that it was spying, exactly, but still . . .

The crowd around Rand was beginning to break up. He swung into his saddle easily, imitated promptly by Natael. One of the traders, a broad-faced, flame-haired woman wearing a small fortune in worked gold, cut gems and carved ivory, lingered, though. “*Car’a’carn,* do you mean to leave the Three-fold Land forever? You have spoken as if you will never return.”

The others stopped at that and turned back. Silence spread on an expanding ripple of murmurs telling what had been asked.

For a moment Rand was silent as well, looking around at the faces turned to him. At last he said, “I hope to return, but who can say what will happen? The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.” He hesitated, with every eye on him. “But I will leave you something to remember me by,” he added, sticking a hand in his coat pocket.

Abruptly a fountain near the Roof burst to life, water gushing from the mouths of incongruous porpoises standing on their tails. Beyond that, a statue of a young man with a horn raised to the sky suddenly was putting up a spreading fan, and then two stone women farther on were casting sprays of water from their hands. In stunned stillness the Aiel watched as all the fountains of Rhuidean flowed once more.

"I should have done that long since." Rand's mutter was no doubt meant for himself, but in the hush Egwene could hear him quite clearly. The splash of hundreds of fountains was the only other sound. Natael shrugged as if he had expected no less.

It was at Rand that Egwene stared, not the fountains. A man who could channel. *Rand. He's still Rand, despite everything.* But each time she saw him do it was like learning that he could all over again. Growing up, she had been taught that only the Dark One was more to be feared than a man who could channel. *Maybe Aviendha's right to be afraid of him.*

But when she looked down at Aviendha, open wonder shone on her face; so much water delighted the Aiel woman as the finest silk dress might have Egwene, or a garden full of flowers.

"It is time to march," Rand announced, reining the dapple westward. "Anyone who isn't ready will have to catch up." Natael followed close behind on the mule. Why did Rand let such a bootlicker stay near him?

The clan chiefs immediately began passing orders, and the bustle increased tenfold. Maidens and Water Seekers darted ahead, and more *Far Dareis Mai* closed around Rand as a guard of honor, incidentally enclosing Natael. Aviendha strode beside Jeade'en, right at Rand's stirrup, easily matching the stallion stride for stride even in her bulky skirts.

Falling in beside Mat, behind Rand and his escort, Egwene frowned. Her friend wore that look of grim determination again, as if she had to put her arm into a viper den. *I have to do something to help her.* Egwene did not give up on a problem once she had her teeth into it.

Settling herself in her saddle, Moiraine patted Aldieb's arched neck with a gloved hand, but she did not immediately follow Rand. Hadnan Kadere was bringing his wagons up the street, driving the lead wagon himself. She should have made him tear that wagon down to carry cargo as she had the other like it; the man was frightened enough of her, of Aes Sedai, to have done it. The doorframe *ter'angreal* was lashed firmly in the wagon behind Kadere, canvas tied over it tightly so no one could fall through by accident again. A long line of Aiel—*Seia Doon,* Black Eyes—strode along on either side of the wagon train.

Kadere bowed to her from the driver's seat, but her gaze swept on down to the line of wagons, all the way to the great square surrounding the forest of slim glass columns, already sparkling in the morning light. She would have taken everything in the plaza if she could, rather than the small fraction that would fit into the wagons. Some were too large. Like the three dull gray metal rings, each more than two paces across, standing on edge and joined at the middle. A braided leather rope had been strung around that one, to warn all from entering without the Wise Ones' permission. Not that anyone was likely to, of course. Only the clan chiefs and the Wise Ones entered that square with any sense of ease; only the Wise Ones touched anything, and they with something approaching proper reticence.

For countless years the second test faced by an Aiel woman who wanted to be a Wise One had been to enter the array of glittering glass columns, seeing exactly what the men saw. More women survived it than men—Bair said it was because women were tougher, Amys that those too weak to survive were winnowed out before reaching that point—but it was not a certainty. Those who did survive were not marked. The Wise Ones claimed that only men needed visible signs; for a woman, to be alive was enough.

The first test, the first winnowing, before any training even, was to step through one of those three rings. Which one did not matter, or perhaps the choice was a matter of fate. That step seemingly took her through her life again and again, her future spread out before her, all of the possible futures based on every decision she might make for the rest of her life. Death was possible in those, too; some women could not face the future any more than others could face the past. All possible futures were too many for a mind to retain, of course. They jumbled together and faded away for the most part, but a woman gained a sense of things that would happen in her life, that must happen, that might happen. Usually even that was hidden until the moment was on her. Not always, though. Moiraine had been through those rings.

A spoonful of hope and a cup of despair, she thought.

"I do not like seeing you like this," Lan said. From Mandarb's back and his own height, he looked down on her, disquiet creasing the corners of his eyes. For him that was near tears of frustration from another man.

Aiel streamed by on both sides of their horses, and *gai'shain* with pack animals. Moiraine was startled to realize that Kadere's water wagons had already gone by; she had not realized she had been staring at the plaza for so long.

“Like what?” she asked, turning her mare to join the throng. Rand and his escort were already out of the city.

“Worried,” he said bluntly, no readable expression on that stone-carved face now. “Afraid. I’ve never seen you afraid, not when we had Trollocs and Myrddraal swarming over us, not even when you learned the Forsaken were loose and Sammael was sitting almost on top of us. Is the end coming?”

She gave a start, and immediately wished she had not. He was looking straight ahead over his stallion’s ears, but the man never missed anything. Sometimes she thought he could see a leaf fall behind his back. “Do you mean Tarmon Gai’don? A redbird in Seleisin knows as well as I. The Light send, not so long as any of the seals remain unbroken.” The pair she had were on one of Kadere’s wagons, too, each packed by itself in a cask stuffed with wool. A different wagon than the redstone doorframe; she had made sure of that.

“What else could I mean?” he asked slowly, still not looking at her, and making her wish she had bitten her tongue. “You have become—impatient. I can remember when you could wait weeks for one tiny scrap of information, one word, without twitching a finger, but now—” He did look at her then, a blue-eyed gaze that would have intimidated most women. And most men as well. “The oath you gave to the boy, Moiraine. Whatever under the Light possessed you?”

“He has been drawing further and further away from me, Lan, and I must be close to him. He needs whatever guidance I can give, and I will do everything short of sharing his bed to see that he gets it.” The rings had told her that that would be disaster. Not that she had ever considered it—the very idea still shocked her!—but in the rings it was something she would or could have considered in the future. It was a measure of her growing desperation, no doubt, and in the rings she had seen that it would bring ruination on everything. She wished she could remember how—there were keys to Rand al’Thor in anything she could learn about him—but only the simple fact of calamity remained in her mind.

“Perhaps it will help your humility grow, if he tells you to fetch his slippers and light his pipe.”

She stared at him. Could that be a joke? If so, it was not amusing. She had never found that humility served very well in any situation. Siuan claimed that growing up in the Sun Palace in Cairhien had put arrogance deeply into Moiraine's bones, where she could not even see it—something she firmly denied—but for all that Siuan was a Tairen fisherman's daughter, she could match any queen stare for stare, and to her arrogance meant opposition to her own plans.

If Lan was attempting jokes, however feeble and wrongheaded, he was changing. For nearly twenty years he had followed her, and saved her life more times than she cared to count, often at great risk to his own. Always he had accounted his life a small thing, valuable only for her need of it; some said he wooed death the way a bridegroom wooed his bride. She had never held his heart, and never felt jealousy toward the women who seemed to throw themselves at his feet. He had long claimed that he had no heart. But he had found one this past year, found it when a woman tied it on a string to hang around her neck.

He denied her, of course. Not his love for Nynaeve al'Meara, once a Wisdom in the Two Rivers and now an Accepted of the White Tower, but that he could ever have her. He had two things, he said, a sword that would not break and a war that could not end; he would never gift a bride with those. That, at least, Moiraine had taken care of, though he would not know how until it was done. If he did, he would very probably try to change matters, stubborn fool man that he could be.

"This arid land seems to have withered your own humility, al'Lan Mandragoran. I shall have to find some water to make it grow again."

"My humility is honed to razor sharpness," he told her dryly. "You never let it grow too dull." Wetting a white scarf from his leather water bottle, he handed her the sodden cloth. She tied it around her temples without comment. The sun was beginning to rise above the mountains behind them, a searing ball of molten gold.

The thick column snaked up the barren side of Chaendaer, its tail still in Rhuidean when its head had crested the slope, then down onto rough, hilly flats dotted with rock spires and flat-topped buttes, some streaked with red or ocher through the gray or brown. The air was so clear that Moiraine could see for miles, even after they were down off Chaendaer. Great natural arches reared, and in every direction jagged mountains clawed at the sky. Dry gullies and hollows split a land sparsely dotted with low, thorny bushes and leafless spiny plants. The rare tree, gnarled and stunted, usually bore spines or thorns as well. The sun made it an oven. A hard land that had shaped a hard people. But Lan was not the only one changing, or being changed. She wished she could see what Rand would make of the Aiel in the end. There was a long journey ahead for everyone.

* * *

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CHAPTER

8

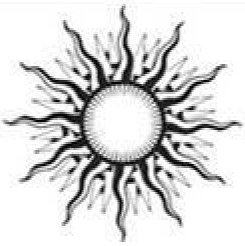

Over the Border

Clinging to her perch at the rear of the jouncing wagon, Nynaeve used one hand for herself and one for her straw hat as she peered back at the furious dust storm dwindling behind them in the distance. The broad brim shaded her face in the morning heat, but the breeze generated by the wagon's rumbling speed was enough to snatch it from her head despite the dark red scarf tied under her chin. Low-hilled grassland with occasional thickets rolled by, the grass sere and thin in the late-summer heat; dust churned up by the wagon wheels obscured her vision somewhat, and made her cough besides. The white clouds in the sky lied. There had been no rain since before they left Tanchico, weeks earlier, and it had been some time since the wide road had borne the traffic of wagons that once kept it hardpacked.

No one appeared riding out of that seemingly solid wall of brown, which was just as well. She had lost her anger at brigands trying to stop them this close to escaping the madness of Tarabon, and unless she was angry, she could not sense the True Source, much less channel. Even angry, she had been surprised at being able to raise such a storm; once whipped up, full of her fury, it held a life of its own. Elayne had been startled at the size of it, too, though thankfully she had not let on to Thom or Juilin. But even if her strength was increasing—her teachers in the Tower had said that it would, and certainly none of them was strong enough to best one of the Forsaken as she had—even with that, she still had that limitation. Had any of the bandits appeared, Elayne would have had to deal with them alone, and she did not want that. Her earlier anger was gone, but she was making fine for another crop.

Awkwardly climbing up over the canvas lashed across the load of casks, she reached down to one of the water barrels fastened along the sides of the wagon together with the chests of their possessions and supplies. Immediately her hat was on the back of her head, held only by the scarf. Her fingers could just touch the lid of the barrel, unless she released the rope that she was gripping with her other hand, and the way the wagon was lurching along, that would probably send her off onto her nose.

Juilin Sandar guided the lanky brown gelding he was riding—Skulker was the improbable name he had put on the animal—close to the wagon, and reached over to hand her one of the leather water bottles slung about his saddle. She drank gratefully, though not gracefully. Hanging there like a bunch of grapes on a windblown vine, she spilled nearly as much water down the front of her good gray dress as she did down her throat.

It was a suitable dress for a merchant, high-necked, finely woven and well-cut, but still plain. The pin on her breast, a small circle of dark garnets in gold, was perhaps too much for a merchant, but it had been a gift from the panarch of Tarabon, along with other jewelry, much richer, hidden in a compartment beneath the wagon driver's seat. She wore it to remind herself that even women who sat on thrones sometimes needed to be taken by the scruff of the neck and shaken. She had a little more sympathy for the Tower's manipulations of kings and queens now that she had dealt with Amathera.

She suspected that Amathera had meant her gifts as a bribe to make them depart Tanchico. The woman had been willing to buy a ship so that they would not remain an hour more than necessary, but no one had been willing to sell. The few vessels remaining in Tanchico Harbor that were suitable for more than coasting had been jammed with refugees. Besides, a ship was the obvious way, the fastest way, to leave, and the Black Ajah might well be watching for her and Elayne, after what had happened. They had been sent to hunt Aes Sedai who were Darkfriends, not to be ambushed by them. Thus the wagon and the long trek across a land torn by civil war and anarchy. She was beginning to wish she had not insisted on avoiding the ships. Not that she would ever admit it to the others.

When she tried to hand the water bottle back to Juilin, he waved it away. A tough man, seemingly carved from some dark wood, he was not very comfortable on the back of a horse. He looked ridiculous, to her; not because of his obvious ill ease in the saddle, but for the silly red Taraboner hat that he had taken to wearing on his flat, black hair, a brimless, conical thing, tall and flat-topped. It did not go well with his dark Tairen coat, tight to the waist, then flaring. She did not think it would go well with anything. In her opinion, he looked as if he were wearing a cake on his head.

It was clumsy scrambling the rest of the way forward with the leather bottle in one hand and her hat flapping, and she did it muttering imprecations for the Tairen thief-catcher—*Never thief-taker, not him!*—for Thom Merrilin—*Puffed-up gleeman!*—and for Elayne of House Trakand, Daughter-Heir of Andor, who ought to be shaken by the scruff of the neck herself!

She meant to slide onto the wooden driver’s seat between Thom and Elayne, but the golden-haired girl was pressed tightly against Thom, her own straw hat hanging on her back. She was clutching the white-mustached old fool’s arm as if afraid of falling off. Tight-mouthed, Nynaeve had to settle for Elayne’s other side. She was glad she had her hair in one proper braid again, wrist-thick and hanging down to her waist; she could give it a tug instead of thumping Elayne’s ear for her. The girl had used to seem reasonably sensible, but something seemed to have addled her wits in Tanchico.

“They aren’t following us anymore,” Nynaeve announced, pulling her hat back into place. “You can slow this thing down now, Thom.” She could have shouted that from the back and not needed to clamber over the casks, but the image of herself bouncing about and calling for them to slow had stopped her. She did not like making a fool of herself, and liked even less others seeing her in a foolish light. “Put your hat on,” she told Elayne. “That fair skin of yours will not appreciate this sun for long.”

As she had half-expected, the girl ignored her friendly advice. “You drive so wonderfully,” Elayne gushed as Thom drew back on the reins, pulling the four-horse team to a walk. “You were in control every minute.”

The tall, wiry man glanced down at her, bushy white eyebrows twitching, but all he said was, “We have more company ahead, child.” Well, maybe he was not such a fool.

Nynaeve looked, and saw the snowy-cloaked mounted column approaching them over the next low rise, perhaps half a hundred men in burnished mail and shining conical helmets, escorting as many heavily laden wagons. Children of the Light. She was suddenly very conscious of the leather thong hanging around her neck beneath her dress, and the two rings dangling between her breasts. Lan’s heavy gold signet ring, the ring of the Kings of lost Malkier, would mean nothing to the Whitecloaks, but if they saw the Great Serpent ring . . .

Fool woman! They aren't likely to, unless you decide to undress!

Hastily she ran an eye over her companions. Elayne could not stop being beautiful, and now that she had let go of Thom and was retying the green scarf that held her hat, her manner looked more suited to a throne room than a merchant's wagon, but aside from being blue, her dress was no different from Nynaeve's. She wore no jewelry; she had called Amathera's gifts "gaudy." She would pass; she had done so fifty times since Tanchico. Barely. Only, this was the first meeting with Whitecloaks. Thom, in stout brown wool, could have been any of a thousand gnarled, white-haired men who worked wagons. And Juilin was Juilin. He knew how to behave, though he looked as though he wished he were sure footed on the ground, with his staff or the slotted sword-breaker he wore at his belt, rather than on a horse.

Thom drew the team over to one side of the road and halted as several Whitecloaks broke away from the head of the column. Nynaeve put on a welcoming smile. She hoped they had not decided that they needed another wagon.

"The Light illumine you, Captain," she said to the narrow-faced man who was obviously the leader, the only one not carrying a steel-tipped lance. She had no idea what rank the two golden knots signified on the breast of his cloak, right below the flaring sunburst they all wore, but in her experience men would accept any flattery. "We are very glad to see you. Bandits tried to rob us a few miles back, but a dust storm appeared like a miracle. We barely esc—"

"You are a merchant? Few merchants have come out of Tarabon in some time." The man's voice was as harsh as his face, and that looked as though all joy had been boiled out of it before he left the cradle. Suspicion filled his dark, deep-set eyes; Nynaeve did not doubt that was permanent, too. "Bound to where, with what?"

"I carry dyes, Captain." She worked to maintain her smile under that steady, unblinking stare; it was a relief when he shifted it to the others briefly. Thom was making a good job of appearing bored, just a wagon driver who would be paid stopped or moving, and if Juilin had not snatched off that ridiculous hat as he once would have, at least he seemed no more than idly interested, a hired man with nothing to hide. When the

Whitecloak’s gaze dropped to Elayne, Nynaeve felt the other woman stiffen, and hurried on. “Taraboner dyes. The finest in the world. I can get a good price for them in Andor.”

At a signal from the captain—or whatever he was—one of the other Whitecloaks heeled his horse to the back of the wagon. Slicing one of the ropes with his dagger, he jerked some of the canvas loose, enough to expose three or four casks. “They’re branded ‘Tanchico,’ Lieutenant. This one says ‘crimson.’ Do you want me to break open a few?”

Nynaeve hoped the Whitecloak officer took the anxiety on her face the right way. Even without looking at her, she could all but feel Elayne wanting to call the soldier down for his manners, but any real merchant would be worried at having dyes exposed to the elements. “If you will show me the ones you want opened, Captain, I will be more than happy to do it myself.” The man showed no response at all, to flattery or offers of cooperation. “The casks were sealed to keep out dust and water, you see. If the cask head is broken, I’ll never be able to cover it over with wax again here.”

The rest of the column reached them and began to pass in a cloud of dust; the wagon drivers were roughly dressed, nondescript men, but the soldiers rode stiffly erect, their long steel lance points all slanted at exactly the same angle. Even sweaty-faced and coated with dust, they looked hard men. Only the drivers glanced at Nynaeve and the others.

The Whitecloak lieutenant waved dust away from his face with one gauntleted hand, then motioned the man back from the wagon. His eyes never left Nynaeve. “You come from Tanchico?”

Nynaeve nodded, a picture of cooperation and openness. “Yes, Captain. Tanchico.”

“What word have you of the city? There have been rumors.”

“Rumors, Captain? When we left, there was little order remaining. The city was full of refugees, and the countryside of rebels and bandits. Trade hardly exists.” That was the truth, pure and simple. “That’s why these dyes will fetch particularly good prices. There will be no more Taraboner dyes available for a long while, I think.”

“I do not care about refugees, trade or dyes, merchant,” the officer said in flat tones. “Was Andric still on the throne?”

“Yes, Captain.” Obviously, rumor said someone had taken Tanchico and supplanted the King, and perhaps someone had. But who—one of the rebel lords who fought each other as hard as they did Andric, or the Dragonsworn who had pledged themselves to the Dragon Reborn without ever seeing him? “Andric was still King, and Amathera still Panarch, when we left.”

His eyes said she could be lying. “It is said the Tar Valon witches were involved. Did you see any Aes Sedai, or hear of them?”

“No, Captain,” she said quickly. The Great Serpent ring seemed hot against her skin. Fifty Whitecloaks, close at hand. A dust storm would not help this time, and anyway, though she tried to deny it, she was more scared than angry. “Plain merchants don’t mingle with that sort.” He nodded, and she risked adding a question. Anything to change the subject. “If you please, Captain, have we entered Amadicia yet?”

“The border is five miles east,” he pronounced. “For the time being. The first village you come to will be Mardecin. Obey the law, and you will be well. There is a garrison of the Children there.” He sounded as if the garrison would spend all of its time making sure they did obey the law.

“Have you come to move the border?” Elayne asked suddenly and coolly. Nynaeve could have strangled her.

The deep-set, suspicious eyes shifted to Elayne, and Nynaeve said hastily, “Forgive her, my Lord Captain. My eldest sister’s girl. She thinks she should have been born a lady, and she can’t keep away from the boys besides. That’s why her mother sent her to me.” Elayne’s indignant gasp was perfect. It was also probably quite real. Nynaeve supposed she had not needed to add that about boys, but it seemed to fit.

The Whitecloak stared at them a moment longer, then said, “The Lord Captain Commander sends food into Tarabon. Otherwise, we would have Taraboner vermin over the border and stealing anything they could chew. Walk in the Light,” he added before swinging his horse to gallop back to the head of the column. It was neither suggestion nor blessing.

Thom got the wagon moving as soon as the officer left, but everyone sat silent, except for coughing, until they were well beyond the last soldier and out of the other wagons’ dust.

Swallowing a little water to wet her throat, Nynaeve pushed the water bottle at Elayne. “What did you mean back there?” she demanded. “We aren’t in your mother’s throne room, and your mother would not stand for it anyway!”

Elayne emptied the rest of the leather bottle before deigning to reply. “You were crawling, Nynaeve.” She pitched her voice high, in a mock servility. “I am very good and obedient, Captain. May I kiss your boots, Captain?”

“We are supposed to be merchants, not queens in disguise!”

“Merchants do not have to be lickspittles! You are lucky he didn’t think we were trying to hide something, acting so servile!”

“They don’t stare down their noses at Whitecloaks with fifty lances, either! Or did you think we could overwhelm them all with the Power, if need be?”

“Why did you tell him I could not keep away from boys? There was no need for that, Nynaeve!”

“I was ready to tell him anything that would make him go away and leave us alone! And you—!”

“Both of you shut up,” Thom barked suddenly, “before they come back to see which of you is murdering the other!”

Nynaeve actually twisted around on the wooden seat to look back before she realized the Whitecloaks were too far off to hear even if they had been shouting. Well, maybe they had been. It did not help that Elayne did the same.

Nynaeve took a firm hold on her braid and glared at Thom, but Elayne snuggled herself against his arm and practically cooed, “You are right, Thom. I am sorry I raised my voice.” Juilin was watching them sideways, pretending not to, but he was wise enough not to bring his horse close enough to become part of it.

Letting go of her braid before she pulled it out by the roots, Nynaeve adjusted her hat and sat staring straight ahead over the horses. Whatever had gotten into the girl, it was high time to get it out again.

Only a tall stone pillar to each side of the road marked the border between Tarabon and Amadicia. There was no traffic on the road but them. The hills gradually became a little higher, but otherwise the land remained much the same, brown grass and thickets with few green leaves except on pine or leatherleaf or other evergreens. Stone-fenced fields and thatch-roofed stone farmhouses dotted the slopes and dells, but they had a look of abandonment. No smoke rising from chimneys, no men working crops, no sheep or cows. Sometimes a few chickens scratched in a farmyard near the road, but they scurried away, gone feral, at the wagon’s approach.

Whitecloak garrison or no, apparently no one was willing to risk Taraboner brigands this close to the border.

When Mardecin appeared, from the top of a rise, the sun still had a long way to climb to its zenith. The town ahead looked too big for the name of village, nearly a mile across, straddling a small bridged stream between two hills, with as many slate roofs as thatched, and considerable bustle in the wide streets.

“We need to buy supplies,” Nynaeve said, “but we want to be quick about it. We can cover a lot of ground yet before nightfall.”

“We are wearing out, Nynaeve,” Thom said. “First light to last light every day for nearly a month. One day resting will not make much difference in reaching Tar Valon.” He did not sound tired. More likely he was looking forward to playing his harp or his flute in one of the taverns and getting men to buy him wine.

Juilin had finally brought his mount close to the wagon, and he added, “I could do with a day on my feet. I do not know whether this saddle or that wagon seat is worse.”

“I think we should find an inn,” Elayne said, looking up at Thom. “I have had quite enough of sleeping under this wagon, and I would like to listen to you tell stories in the common room.”

“One-wagon merchants are little more than peddlers,” Nynaeve said sharply. “They cannot afford inns in a town like this.”

She did not know whether that was true or not, but despite her own desire for a bath and clean sheets, she was not going to let the girl get away with directing the suggestion at Thom. It was not until the words were out of her mouth that she realized that she had given in to Thom and Juilin. *One day won’t hurt. It’s a long way to Tar Valon yet.*

She wished she had insisted on a ship. With a fast ship, a Sea Folk raker, they could have gotten to Tear in a third of what it had taken them to cross Tarabon, as long as they had good winds, and with the right Atha’an Miere Windfinder that would have been no problem; she or Elayne could have handled it, for that matter. The Tairens knew that she and Elayne were friends of Rand’s, and she expected that they still sweated buckets for fear of offending the Dragon Reborn; they would have provided a carriage and escort for the journey up to Tar Valon.

“Find us a place to camp,” she said reluctantly. She should have insisted on a ship. They might have been back in the Tower by now.

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CHAPTER

9

A Signal

Nynaeve had to admit that Thom and Juilin between them had chosen a good campsite, in a sparse thicket growing on an eastern slope, covered with dead leaves, a scant mile from Mardecin. Scattered sourgums and some sort of small, droopy-branched willow screened the wagon from the road and the town, and a two-foot-wide rivulet ran from a stone outcrop near the top of the rise, down a bed of dried mud twice as broad. Enough water for their purposes. It was even a little cooler under the trees, with a small and welcome breeze.

Once the two men had watered the team and hobbled them where the horses could feed on the sparse grass upslope, they tossed a coin to decide which should take the lanky gelding into Mardecin to purchase what they needed. The coin flipping was a ritual that they had developed. Thom, whose nimble fingers were used to performing sleight-of-hand, never lost when he flipped the coin, so Juilin always did it now.

Thom won anyway, and while he was stripping the saddle from Skulker, Nynaeve put her head under the wagon seat and levered up a floorboard with her belt knife. Besides two small gilded coffers containing Amathera's presents of jewelry, several leather purses bulging with coin lay in the recess. The panarch had been more than generous in her desire to see their backs. The other things looked trifling by comparison; a small dark wooden box, polished but plain and uncarved, and a washleather purse lying flat and showing the impression of a disc inside. The box held the two *ter'angreal* they had recovered from the Black Ajah, both linked to dreams, and the purse . . . That was their prize from Tanchico. One of the seals on the Dark One's prison.

As much as she wanted to find out where Siuan Sanche wanted them to chase the Black Ajah next, the seal was the source of her haste to reach

Tar Valon. Digging coins from one of the fat purses, she avoided touching the flat purse; the longer it remained in her possession, the more she wanted to hand it to the Amyrlin and be done with it. Sometimes she thought she could feel the Dark One, trying to break through, when she was near the thing.

She saw Thom off with a pocketful of silver and a strong admonition to search out some fruit and green vegetables; either man was likely as not to buy nothing but meat and beans, left to himself. Thom's limp as he led the horse off toward the road made her grimace; an old injury, and nothing to be done for it now, so Moiraine said. That rankled as much as the limp itself. Nothing to be done.

When she had left the Two Rivers, it had been to protect young people from her village, snatched away in the night by an Aes Sedai. She had gone to the Tower still with the hope that she could somehow shelter them, and the added ambition of bringing down Moiraine for what she had done. The world had changed since then. Or maybe she only saw the world differently. *No, it is not me that's changed. I'm the same; it is everything else that's different.*

Now it was all she could do to protect herself. Rand was what he was, and no turning back, and Egwene eagerly went her own way, not letting anyone or anything hold her back even if her way led over a cliff, and Mat had learned to think of nothing but women, carousing and gambling. She even found herself sympathizing with Moiraine sometimes, to her disgust. At least Perrin had gone back home, or so she had heard through Egwene, secondhand from Rand; perhaps Perrin was safe.

Hunting the Black Ajah was good and right and satisfying—and also terrifying, though she tried to hide that part; she was a grown woman, not a girl who needed to hide in her mother's apron—yet that was not the main reason she was willing to keep on bashing her head against a wall, keep on trying to learn to use the Power when most of the time she could not channel any more than Thom. That reason was the Talent called Healing. As Wisdom of Emond's Field it had been gratifying to bring the Women's Circle around to her way of thinking—especially since most were old enough to be her mother; with not many years on Elayne, she had been the youngest Wisdom ever in the Two Rivers—and even more so to see that the Village Council did what they should, stubborn men that they were. The most satisfaction, though, had always come from finding the right combination of herbs to cure an illness. To Heal with the One Power . . . She had done it, fumbling, curing what her other skills never could. The joy of it was enough to bring tears. One day she meant to Heal Thom and watch him dance. One day she would even Heal that wound in Rand's side. Surely there was nothing that could not be Healed, not if the woman wielding the Power was determined enough.

When she turned from watching Thom go, she found that Elayne had filled the bucket that normally hung beneath the wagon and was kneeling to wash her hands and face, a towel around her shoulders to keep her dress dry. That was something she particularly wanted to do herself. In this heat it was pleasant sometimes to wash in water cool from a stream. Often enough there had been no water but what was in the barrels strapped to the wagon, and that was needed for drinking and cooking more than washing.

Juilin was sitting with his back against one of the wagon wheels, his thumb-thick staff of pale ridged wood leaning next to him. His head was down, that silly hat tipped precariously over his eyes, but she was not willing to bet on even a man sleeping at this time of the morning. There were things he and Thom did not know, things it was best they did not know.

The thick carpet of dead sourgum leaves crackled as she seated herself near Elayne. "Do you think Tanchico really has fallen?" Rubbing a soapy cloth slowly across her face, the other woman did not reply. She tried again. "I think that Whitecloak's 'Aes Sedai' were us."

"Perhaps." Elayne's voice was cool, a pronouncement from the throne. Her eyes were blue ice. She did not look at Nynaeve. "And perhaps reports of what we did got tangled with other rumors. Tarabon could have a new king, and a new panarch, very easily."

Nynaeve kept her temper in check and her hands away from her braid. They clutched her knees instead. *You are trying to put her at ease with you. Watch your tongue.* "Amathera was difficult, but I do not wish her any harm. Do you?"

"A pretty woman," Juilin said, "especially in one of those Taraboner serving girl's dresses, with a pretty smile. I thought she—" He saw Elayne and her looking at him and quickly pulled his hat back down, pretending to sleep again. She and Elayne shared a glance, and she knew the other's thought was the same as hers. *Men.*

“Whatever has happened to Amathera, Nynaeve, she is behind us, now.” Elayne sounded more normal. Her washcloth slowed. “I wish her well, but mainly I hope the Black Ajah is not behind us. Not following, I mean.”

Juilin stirred uneasily without raising his head; he was still uncomfortable with the knowledge that Black Aes Sedai were real and not simply a tale in the streets.

He should be happy he doesn’t have our knowledge. Nynaeve had to admit that the thought was not entirely logical, but if he had known about the Forsaken being loose, even Rand’s foolish instruction to *look after* her and Elayne would not have kept him from running. Still, he was useful at times. He and Thom both. It had been Moiraine who had fastened Thom to them, and the man knew a great deal about the world for an ordinary gleeman.

“If they were following, they’d have caught up by now.” That was surely true, considering the usual lumbering speed of the wagon. “With any luck, they still do not know who we are.”

Elayne nodded, grim but her old self again, and began rinsing her face. She could be almost as determined as a Two Rivers woman. “Liandrin and most of her cronies surely escaped from Tanchico. Maybe all of them. And we still don’t know who is giving orders for the Black Ajah in the Tower. As Rand would say, we still have it to do, Nynaeve.”

Despite herself, Nynaeve winced. True, they had a list of eleven names, but once they were back in the Tower, almost any Aes Sedai they spoke to might be Black Ajah. Or any women they encountered on the road. For that matter, anyone they met *might* be a Darkfriend, but that was hardly the same thing, not by a wide degree.

“More than the Black Ajah,” Elayne continued, “I worry about Mo—” Nynaeve put a quick hand on her arm and nodded slightly toward Juilin. Elayne coughed and went on as though that was what had stopped her. “About Mother. She has no reason to like you, Nynaeve. Quite the opposite.”

“She is far away from here.” Nynaeve was glad her voice was steady. They were not talking about Elayne’s mother, but the Forsaken she had defeated. Part of her hoped fervently that Moghedien was far away. Very far.

“But if she was not?”

“She is,” Nynaeve said firmly, but she still hitched her shoulders uncomfortably. A part of her remembered humiliations suffered at Moghedien’s hands and desired nothing more than to face the woman again, to defeat her again, for good this time. Only, what if Moghedien took her by surprise, came at her when she was not angry enough to channel? The same was true of any of the Forsaken, of course, or of any Black sister for that matter, but after her rout in Tanchico, Moghedien had reason to hate her personally. Not pleasant at all to think that one of the Forsaken knew your name and likely wanted your head. *That is just rank cowardice,* she told herself sharply. *You are not a coward, and you will not be!* That did not stop the itch between her shoulder blades every time Moghedien came to mind, as if the woman was staring at her back.

“I suppose looking over my shoulder for bandits has made me nervous,” Elayne said casually, patting her face with the towel. “Why, sometimes when I dream of late, I have the feeling that someone is watching me.”

Nynaeve gave a start at what seemed an echo of her own thoughts, but then she realized there had been a slight emphasis on “dream.” Not any dreams, but *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Another thing the men did not know about. She had had the same sensation, but then there was often a feel of unseen eyes in the World of Dreams. It could be uncomfortable, but they had discussed the sensation before.

She made her voice light. “Well, your mother is not in our dreams, Elayne, or she would probably snatch us both up by an ear.” Moghedien would probably torture them until they begged for death. Or arrange a circle of thirteen Black sisters and thirteen Myrddraal; they could turn you to the Shadow against your will that way, bind you to the Dark One. Maybe Moghedien could even do it by herself. . . . *Don’t be ridiculous, woman! If she could have, she would have. You beat her, remember?*

“I do hope not,” the other woman replied soberly.

“Do you mean to give me a chance to wash?” Nynaeve asked irritably. Putting the girl at ease was all very well, but she could do with less talk of Moghedien. The Forsaken had to be somewhere distant; she would not have let them come this far peacefully if she knew where they were. *Light send that that’s true!*

Elayne emptied and refilled the bucket herself. She was a very nice girl usually, when she remembered that she was not in the Royal Palace in

Caemlyn. And when she was not acting the fool. That, Nynaeve would take care of when Thom came back.

Once Nynaeve had enjoyed a slow, cooling wash of face and hands, she set about making the camp ready, and put Juilin to breaking dead branches from the trees for a fire. By the time Thom returned with two wicker hampers slung across the gelding's back, her and Elayne's blankets were laid out under the wagon and the two men's under the hanging branches of one of the twenty-foot willows, a good supply of firewood had been stacked, the teakettle stood cooling beside the ashes of a fire in a circle cleared of leaves, and the thick pottery cups had been washed. Juilin was grumbling to himself as he caught water in the tiny stream to refill the water barrels. From the snatches Nynaeve heard, she was glad he kept most of it to an inaudible mutter. From her perch on one of the wagon shafts, Elayne hardly tried to hide her interested attempt to make out what he was saying. Both she and Nynaeve had put on clean dresses on the other side of the wagon, switching colors as it happened.

After fastening hobbles between the gelding's forelegs, Thom lifted the heavy hampers down easily and began unpacking them. "Mardecin's not as prosperous as it looks from a distance." He set a net bag of small apples on the ground, and another of some dark green leafy vegetable. "With no trade into Tarabon, the town is withering." The rest seemed to be all sacks of dried beans and turnips, plus pepper-cured beef and salt-cured hams. And a gray pottery bottle sealed with wax that Nynaeve was sure held brandy; both men had complained of not having a bit of something with their pipes of an evening. "You can hardly take six steps without seeing a Whitecloak or two. The garrison is about fifty men or so, with barracks over the hill from the town on the far side of the bridge. It was considerably larger, but it seems Pedron Niall is pulling Whitecloaks from everywhere into Amador." Knuckling his long mustaches, he looked thoughtful for a moment. "I cannot see what he is up to." Thom was not a man who liked that; usually a few hours in a place was enough for him to begin ferreting out the currents between noble and merchant Houses, the alliances and schemes and counterplots that made up the so-called Game of Houses. "The rumors are all about Niall trying to stop a war between Illian and Altara, or maybe Illian and Murandy. No reason there for him to be gathering in soldiers. I'll tell you one thing, though. Whatever that lieutenant said, it is a King's Tax that buys the food being sent into Tarabon, and the people are not happy with it. Not to feed Taraboners."

"King Ailron and the Lord Captain Commander are not our concern," Nynaeve said, studying what he had brought. *Three* salted hams! "We will pass through Amadicia as quickly and unobtrusively as we can. Perhaps Elayne and I will have more luck finding vegetables than you did. Would you care for a walk, Elayne?"

Elayne got up immediately, smoothing her gray skirts and lifting her hat from the wagon. "That would be very nice, after that wagon seat. It might be different if Thom and Juilin let me take a turn riding Skulker more often." For once she did not give the old gleeman a coquettish look, which was something.

Thom and Juilin exchanged glances, and the Tairen thief-catcher pulled a coin from his coat pocket, but Nynaeve gave him no chance to flip it. "We will be quite all right by ourselves. We could hardly expect trouble of any sort with so many Whitecloaks to keep order." Planting her hat on her head, she tied the scarf under her chin and gave them a firm look. "Besides, all those things Thom bought need to be put away." Both men nodded; slowly, reluctantly, but they did it. Sometimes they took their roles as supposed protectors entirely too seriously.

She and Elayne had reached the empty road and were walking down the verge, on the thin grass so as not to kick up dust, before she had it settled in her mind how to bring up what she wanted to say. Before she could speak, though, Elayne said, "You obviously want to talk to me alone, Nynaeve. Is it about Moghedien?"

Nynaeve blinked, and looked at the other woman sideways. It was well to remember that Elayne was no fool. She had only been acting like one. Nynaeve resolved to keep a tight hold on her temper; this was going to be difficult enough without letting it dissolve into a shouting match. "Not that, Elayne." The girl thought they should add Moghedien to their hunt; she could not seem to realize the difference between one of the Forsaken and, say, Liandrin, or Chesmal. "I thought we should discuss how you've been behaving toward Thom."

"I do not know what you mean," Elayne said, staring straight ahead toward the town, but sudden spots of color in her cheeks gave her the lie.

"Not only is he old enough to be your father twice over, but—"

“He is *not* my father!” Elayne snapped. “My father was Taringail Damodred, a Prince of Cairhien and First Prince of the Sword of Andor!” Straightening her hat needlessly, she went on in a milder tone, though not by much. “I am sorry, Nynaeve. I did not mean to shout.”

Temper, Nynaeve reminded herself. “I thought you were in love with Rand,” she said, making her voice gentle. It was not easy. “The messages you have me give to Egwene for him certainly say so. I expect you tell her the same.”

The color in the other woman’s face heightened. “I do love him, but . . . He is very far away, Nynaeve. In the Waste, surrounded by a thousand Maidens of the Spear who jump to do his bidding. I cannot see him, or speak to him, or touch him.” She was whispering by the end.

“You can’t think he’ll turn to a Maiden,” Nynaeve said incredulously. “He is a man, but he isn’t as fickle as that, and besides, one of them would put a spear in him if he looked at her crossways, even if he is this Dawn whatever. Anyway, Egwene says Aviendha is keeping an eye on him for you.”

“I know, but . . . I should have made *sure* that he knew I love him.” Elayne’s voice was determined. And worried. “I should have told him so.”

Nynaeve had hardly looked at a man before Lan, at least not seriously, but she had seen and learned much as Wisdom; from her observations, there was no quicker way to send a man running for his life, unless he said it first.

“I think Min had a viewing,” Elayne went on. “About me, and about Rand. She always used to joke about having to share him, but I think it wasn’t a joke and she could not bring herself to say what it really was.”

“That is ridiculous.” It certainly was. Though in Tear, Aviendha had told her of a vile Aiel custom. . . . *You share Lan with Moiraine,* a small voice whispered. *That isn’t the same thing at all!* she told it briskly. “Are you certain Min had one of her visions?”

“Yes. I wasn’t at first, but the more I think on it, the more sure I become. She joked about it too often to mean anything else.”

Well, whatever Min had seen, Rand was no Aiel. Oh, his blood might be Aiel as the Wise Ones claimed, but he had grown up in the Two Rivers, and she would not stand by and let him take up wicked Aiel ways. She doubted very much that Elayne would, either. “Is that why you’ve been—” She would not say *throwing yourself at* “—teasing Thom?”

Elayne gave her a sidelong glance, the crimson back in her cheeks. “There are a thousand leagues between us, Nynaeve. Do you think Rand is refraining from looking at other women? ‘A man is a man, on a throne or in a pigsty.’ ” She had a stock of homely sayings from her childhood nurse, a clearheaded woman named Lini whom Nynaeve wished she would meet one day.

“Well, I don’t see why you have to flirt just because you think Rand might.” She refrained from bringing up Thom’s age again. *Lan is old enough to be* your *father,* that small voice murmured. *I* love *Lan. If I can only reason out how to get him free of Moiraine. . . . That is not the matter at hand!* “Thom is a man with secrets, Elayne. Remember that Moiraine sent him with us. Whatever he is, he is no simple country gleeman.”

“He was a great man,” Elayne said softly. “He could have been greater, except for love.”

With that, Nynaeve’s temper snapped. She rounded on the other woman, seizing her by the shoulders. “The man doesn’t know whether to turn you over his knee or . . . or . . . climb a tree!”

“I know.” Elayne gave a frustrated sigh. “But I do not know what else to do.”

Nynaeve ground her teeth in the effort not to shake her until her skull rattled. “If your mother heard of this, she’d send Lini to haul you back to the nursery!”

“I am not a child any longer, Nynaeve.” Elayne’s voice was strained, and now the flush in her cheeks was not embarrassment. “I am as much a woman as my mother is.”

Nynaeve stalked on toward Mardecin, gripping her braid so hard that her knuckles hurt.

After a few strides, Elayne caught up. “Are we really going to buy vegetables?” Her face was composed, her tone light.

“Did you see what Thom brought back?” Nynaeve said tightly.

Elayne shuddered elaborately. “Three hams. And that awful peppered beef! Do men ever eat anything but meat if it isn’t set before them?”

Nynaeve’s temper faded as they walked on talking about the foibles of the weaker sex—men, of course—and such simple matters as that. Not completely away, of course. She liked Elayne, and enjoyed her company; at times it seemed as if the girl really was Egwene’s sister, as they sometimes called each other. When Elayne was not acting the twitchskirt. Thom could put a stop to it, of course, but the old fool indulged Elayne like a fond father with his favorite daughter, even when he did not know whether to say boo or faint. One way or another, she meant to get to the bottom of it. Not for Rand's sake, but because Elayne was better than this. It was as if she had contracted a strange fever. Nynaeve intended to cure it.

Granite slabs paved the streets of Mardecin, worn by generations of feet and wagon wheels, and the buildings were all brick or stone. A number of them were empty though, both shops and houses, sometimes with the front door standing open so Nynaeve could see the bare interior. She saw three blacksmith's shops, two abandoned, and in the third the smith was halfheartedly rubbing his tools with oil and the forges were cold. One slate-roofed inn, with men sitting morosely on benches out front, had a number of broken windows, and at another the adjoining stable had its doors half-off the hinges and a dusty coach squatting in the stableyard, one forlorn hen nesting on the driver's high seat. Somebody in that one was playing the bittern; "Heron on the Wing," it sounded like, but the tune was dispirited. The door of a third inn was barred by two splintery planks nailed across it.

People thronged the streets, but they moved lethargically, weighted down by the heat; dull faces said they had no real reason to stir at all, beyond habit. Many women, in large deep bonnets that almost hid their faces, had on dresses worn at the hem, and more than one man had a frayed collar or cuffs on his knee-length coat.

There were indeed Whitecloaks scattered through the streets; if not so many as Thom had made out, still enough. Nynaeve's breath caught every time she saw a man in a pristine cloak and shining armor look at her. She knew she had not worked with the Power nearly long enough to take on Aes Sedai agelessness, but those men might well try to kill her—a Tar Valon witch, and outlawed in Amadicia—if they even suspected a connection to the White Tower. They strode through the crowds, seemingly oblivious of the apparent poverty around them. People moved out of their way respectfully, receiving perhaps a nod, if that, and often a sternly pious "Walk in the Light."

Ignoring the Children of the Light as best she could, she set herself to finding fresh vegetables, but by the time the sun reached its peak, a blazing ball of gold that burned through the thin clouds, she and Elayne had wandered both sides of the low bridge and between them had managed to garner one small bunch of honeypeas, some tiny radishes, a few hard pears, and a basket to carry them in. Perhaps Thom really had looked. This time of year, the barrows and stalls should have been full of the summer's produce, but most of what they saw was heaped potatoes and turnips that had known better days. Thinking of all those empty farms approaching the town, Nynaeve wondered how these people were going to make it through the winter. She walked on.

Hanging upside down beside the door of a thatch-roofed seamstress's shop was a bunch of what looked almost like broomweed, with tiny yellow flowers, the stalks wrapped their whole length in a white ribbon, then tied with a dangling yellow one. It might have been some woman's feeble attempt at a festive decoration in the midst of hard times. But she was sure it was not.

Stopping beside an empty shop with a carving knife incised on the sign still hanging over the door, she pretended to search for a stone in her shoe while furtively studying the seamstress's shop. The door was open, and colorful bolts of cloth stood in the small-paned windows, but no one went in or out.

"Can you not find it, Nynaeve? Take off your shoe."

Nynaeve's head jerked; she had almost forgotten that Elayne was there. No one else was paying any attention to them, and no one looked close enough to overhear. She still lowered her voice. "That bunch of broomweed by that shop door. It is a Yellow Ajah signal, an emergency signal from one of the Yellow's eyes-and-ears."

She did not have to tell Elayne not to stare; the girl's eyes barely moved toward the shop. "Are you certain?" she asked quietly. "And how do you know?"

"Of course I am certain. It's exact; the hanging bit of yellow ribbon is even split in three." She paused to take a deep breath. Unless she was completely mistaken, that insignificant fistful of weeds held a dire meaning. If she *was* wrong, she was making a fool of herself, and she did hate to do that. "I spent a good deal of time talking with Yellows in the Tower." Healing was the main purpose of the Yellows; they did not care much for her herbs, but you did not need herbs when you could Heal with the Power. "One of them told me. She did not think it too great a transgression, since she was sure I'll choose Yellow. Besides, it has not been used in nearly three hundred years. Elayne, only a few women in each Ajah actually know who the Ajah's eyes-and-ears are, but a bunch of yellow flowers tied and hung like that tells any Yellow sister that here one is, and with a message urgent enough to risk uncovering herself.”

“How are we going to find out what it is?”

Nynaeve liked that. Not “What are we going to do?” The girl had backbone.

“Follow my lead,” she said, gripping the basket tighter as she straightened. She hoped she remembered everything Shemerin had told her. She hoped Shemerin had told her everything. The plump Yellow could be fluttery for an Aes Sedai.

The interior of the shop was not large, and every scrap of wall was taken up by shelves holding bolts of silk or finely woven wool, spools of piping and binding, and ribbon and lace of every width and description. Dressmaker’s dummies stood about the floor wearing garments ranging from half-made to complete, from something suitable for a dance in embroidered green wool to a pearly gray silk gown that could have done very well at court. At first glance the shop had a look of prosperity and activity, but Nynaeve’s sharp eye caught a hint of dust in one high neck of frothy Solinde lace, and on a large black velvet bow at the waist of another gown.

There were two dark-haired women in the shop. One, young and thin and trying to wipe her nose surreptitiously with the back of her hand, held a bolt of pale red silk clutched anxiously to her bosom. Her hair was a mass of long curls to her shoulders, in the Amadician fashion, but it seemed a tangle beside the other woman’s neat array. The other, handsome and in her middle years, was assuredly the seamstress, as proclaimed by the large bristling pincushion fastened to her wrist. Her dress was of a good green wool, well cut and well made to show her skill, but only lightly worked with white flowers around the high neck so as not to overshadow her patrons.

When Nynaeve and Elayne walked in, both women gaped as if none had entered in a year. The seamstress recovered first, regarding them with careful dignity as she made a slight curtsy. “May I serve you? I am Ronde Macura. My shop is yours.”

“I want a dress embroidered with yellow roses on the bodice,” Nynaeve told her. “But no thorns, mind,” she added with a laugh. “I don’t heal very fast.” What she said did not matter, so long as she included “yellow” and “heal” in it. Now, if only that bunch of flowers was not happenstance. If that was the case, she would have to find some reason not to buy a dress with roses. And a way to keep Elayne from recounting the whole miserable experience to Thom and Juilin.

Mistress Macura stared at her for a moment with dark eyes, then turned to the thin girl, pushing her toward the back of the shop. “Go on to the kitchen, Luci, and make a pot of tea for these good ladies. From the blue canister. The water’s hot, thank the Light. Go on, girl. Put that down and stop gawking. Quickly, quickly. The blue canister, mind. My best tea,” she said, turning back to Nynaeve as the girl vanished through a door at the rear. “I live over the shop, you see, and my kitchen is in the back.” She was smoothing her skirts nervously, thumb and forefinger of her right hand forming a circle. For the Great Serpent ring. There would be no need for an excuse about the dress, it seemed.

Nynaeve repeated the sign, and after a moment Elayne did, too. “I am Nynaeve, and this is Elayne. We saw your signal.”

The woman fluttered as if she might fly away. “The signal? Ah. Yes. Of course.”

“Well?” Nynaeve said. “What is the urgent message?”

“We should not talk about that out here . . . uh . . . Mistress Nynaeve. Anyone might walk in.” Nynaeve doubted that. “I will tell you over a nice cup of tea. My best tea, did I say?”

Nynaeve exchanged looks with Elayne. If Mistress Macura was this reluctant to speak her news, it must be appalling indeed.

“If we may just step into the back,” Elayne said, “no one will hear but us.” Her regal tone made the seamstress stare. For a moment, Nynaeve thought it might cut through her nervousness, but the next instant the fool woman was babbling again.

“The tea will be ready in a moment. The water’s already hot. We used to get Taraboner tea through here. That is why I am here, I suppose. Not the tea, of course. All the trade that used to be, and all the news that came both ways with the wagons. They—you are mainly interested in outbreaks of disease, or a new kind of illness, but I find that interesting myself. I dabble a little with—” She coughed and rushed on; if she smoothed her dress any harder, she would wear a hole in it. “Some about the Children, of course, but they—you—are not much interested in them, really.”

“The kitchen, Mistress Macura,” Nynaeve said firmly as soon as the other woman paused for breath. If the woman’s news made her this afraid, Nynaeve would brook no more delay in hearing it.

The door at the back opened enough to admit Luci's anxious head. "It's ready, Mistress," she announced breathlessly.

"This way, Mistress Nynaeve," the seamstress said, still rubbing the front of her dress. "Mistress Elayne."

A short hallway led past narrow stairs to a snug, beam-ceilinged kitchen, with a steaming kettle sitting on the hearth and tall cupboards everywhere. Copper pots hung between the back door and a window that looked out into a small yard with a high wooden fence. The small table in the middle of the floor held a brilliant yellow teapot, a green honey jar, three mismatched cups in as many colors, and a squat blue pottery canister with the lid beside it. Mistress Macura snatched the canister, lidded it, and hastily put it into a cupboard that held more in two dozen shades and hues.

"Sit, please," she said, filling the cups. "Please."

Nynaeve took a ladder-back chair next to Elayne, and the seamstress set cups in front of them, flitting to one of the cupboards for pewter spoons.

"The message?" Nynaeve said as the woman sat down across from them. Mistress Macura was too nervous to touch her own teacup, so Nynaeve stirred a little honey into hers and took a sip; it was hot, but had a cool, minty aftertaste. Hot tea might settle the woman's nerves, if she could be made to drink.

"A pleasant taste," Elayne murmured over the edge of her cup. "What sort of tea is it?"

Good girl, Nynaeve thought.

But the seamstress's hands only fluttered beside her cup. "A Taraboner tea. From near the Shadow Coast."

Sighing, Nynaeve took another swallow to settle her own stomach. "The message," she said insistently. "You did not hang that signal to invite us for tea. What is your urgent news?"

"Ah. Yes." Mistress Macura licked her lips, eyed them both, then said slowly, "It came near a month ago, with orders that any sister passing through heard it at all costs." She wet her lips again. "All sisters are welcome to return to the White Tower. The Tower must be whole and strong."

Nynaeve waited for the rest, but the other woman fell silent. *This* was the dire message? She looked at Elayne, but the heat seemed to be catching up to the girl; drooping in her chair, she was staring at her hands on the table. “Is that all of it?” Nynaeve demanded, and surprised herself by yawning. The heat must be reaching her, too.

The seamstress only watched her, intently.

“I said,” Nynaeve began, but suddenly her head felt too heavy for her neck. Elayne had slumped onto the table, she realized, eyes closed and arms hanging limply. Nynaeve stared at the cup in her hands with horror. “What did you give us?” she said thickly; that minty taste was still there, but her tongue felt swollen. “Tell me!” Letting the cup fall, she levered herself up against the table, knees wobbling. “The Light burn you, what?”

Mistress Macura scraped back her chair and stepped out of reach, but her earlier nervousness was now a look of quiet satisfaction.

Blackness rolled in on Nynaeve; the last thing she heard was the seamstress’s voice. “Catch her, Luci!”

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CHAPTER 10

Figs and Mice

Elayne realized that she was being carried upstairs by her shoulders and ankles. Her eyes opened, she could see, but the rest of her body might as well have belonged to someone else for all the control she had over it. Even blinking was slow. Her brain felt crammed full of feathers.

“She’s awake, Mistress!” Luci shrilled, nearly dropping her feet. “She’s looking at me!”

“I told you not to worry.” Mistress Macura’s voice came from above her head. “She cannot channel, or twitch a muscle, not with forkroot tea in her. I discovered that by accident, but it has certainly come in handy.”

It was true. Elayne sagged between them like a doll with half the stuffing gone, bumping her bottom along the steps, and she could as well have run as channel. She could sense the True Source, but trying to embrace it was like trying to pick up a needle on a mirror with cold-numbed fingers. Panic welled up, and a tear slid down her cheek.

Perhaps these women meant to turn her over to the Whitecloaks for execution, but she could not make herself believe that the Whitecloaks had women setting traps in the hope that an Aes Sedai might wander in. That left Darkfriends, and almost certainly serving the Black Ajah right along with the Yellow. She would surely be put in the hands of the Black Ajah unless Nynaeve had escaped. But if she was to escape, she could not count on anyone else. And she could neither move nor channel. Suddenly she realized that she was trying to scream, and producing only a thin, gurgling mewl. Halting it took all the strength she had left.

Nynaeve knew all about herbs, or claimed she did; why had she not recognized whatever that tea was? *Stop this whining!* The small, firm voice in the back of her head sounded remarkably like Lini. *A shoat squealing under a fence just attracts the fox, when it should be trying to run.*

Desperately, she set herself to the simple task of embracing *saidar.* It *had* been a simple task, but now she might as well have been attempting to reach *saidin.* She kept on, though; it was the only thing she could do.

Mistress Macura, at least, seemed to have no worry. As soon as they had dropped Elayne onto a narrow bed in a small, close room with one window, she hustled Luci right out again with not even a backward glance. Elayne's head had fallen so she could see another cramped bed, and a highchest with tarnished brass pulls on the drawers. She could move her eyes, but shifting her head was beyond her.

In a few minutes the two women returned, puffing, with Nynaeve slung between them, and heaved her onto the other bed. Her face was slack, and glistening with tears, but her dark eyes . . . Fury filled them, and fear, too, Elayne hoped anger was uppermost; Nynaeve was stronger than she, when she *could* channel; perhaps Nynaeve could manage where she was failing miserably, time after time. Those had to be tears of rage.

Telling the thin girl to stay there, Mistress Macura hurried out once more, this time coming back with a tray that she placed atop the highchest. It held the yellow teapot, one cup, a funnel and a tall hourglass. "Now Luci, mind you pour a good two ounces into each of them as soon as that hourglass empties. As soon, mind!"

"Why don't we give it to them now, Mistress?" the girl moaned, wringing her hands. "I want them to go back to sleep. I don't like them looking at me."

"They would sleep like the dead, girl, and this way we can let them rouse just enough to walk when we need them to. I will dose them more properly when it's time to send them off. They'll have headaches and stomach cramps to pay for it, but no more than they deserve, I suppose."

"But what if they *can* channel, Mistress? What if they do? They're looking at me."

"Stop blathering, girl," the older woman said briskly. "If they could, don't you think they would have by now? They are helpless as kittens in a sack. And they will stay that way as long you keep a good dose in them. Now, you do as I told you, understand? I must go tell old Avi to send off one of his pigeons, and make a few arrangements, but I will be back as soon as I can. You had better brew another pot of forkroot just in case. I'll go out the back. Close up the shop. Someone might wander in, and that would never do."

After Mistress Macura left, Luci stood staring at them for a while, still wringing her hands, then finally scurried out herself. Her sniffling faded down the stairs.

Elayne could see sweat beading on Nynaeve's brow; she hoped it was effort, not the heat. *Try, Nynaeve.* She herself reached for the True Source, fumbling clumsily through the wads of wool that seemed to pack her head, failed, tried again and failed, tried again. . . . *Oh, Light, try, Nynaeve! Try!*

The hourglass filled her eyes; she could not look at anything else. Sand pouring down, each grain marking another failure on her part. The last grain dropped. And Luci did not come.

Elayne strained harder, for the Source, to move. After a bit the fingers of her left hand twitched. *Yes!* A few minutes more, and she could lift her hand; only a feeble inch before it fell again, but it had lifted. With an effort, she could turn her head.

"Fight it," Nynaeve mumbled thickly, barely intelligible. Her hands were gripping the coverlet under her tightly; she seemed to be trying to sit up. Not even her head lifted, but she was trying.

"I am," Elayne tried to say; it sounded more like a grunt to her ears.

Slowly she managed to raise her hand to where she could see it, and hold it there. A thrill of triumph shot through her. *Stay afraid of us, Luci. Stay down there in the kitchen a little while longer, and . . .*

The door banged open, and sobs of frustration racked her as Luci dashed in. She had been so close. The girl took one look at them and with a yelp of pure terror darted for the highchest.

Elayne tried to fight her, but thin as she was, Luci batted her floundering hands away effortlessly, forced the funnel between her teeth just as easily. The girl panted as if running. Cold, bitter tea filled Elayne's mouth. She stared up at the girl in a panic that Luci's face shared. But Luci held Elayne's mouth shut and stroked her throat with a grim if fearful determination until she swallowed. As darkness overwhelmed Elayne, she could hear liquid sounds of protest coming from Nynaeve.

When her eyes opened again, Luci was gone, and the sands trickled through the glass again. Nynaeve's dark eyes were bulging, whether in fear or anger, Elayne could not have said. No, Nynaeve would not give in. That was one of the things she admired in the other woman. Nynaeve's head could have been on the chopping block and she would not give up. *Our heads* are *on the block!*

It made her ashamed that she was so much weaker than Nynaeve. She was supposed to be Queen of Andor one day, and she wanted to howl with terror. She did not, even in her head—doggedly she went back to trying to force her limbs to move, to trying to touch *saidar*—but she wanted to. How could she ever be a queen, when she was so weak? Again she reached for the Source. Again. Again. Racing the grains of sand. Again.

Once more the glass emptied itself without Luci. Ever so slowly, she reached the point where she could raise her hand again. And then her head! Even if it did flop back immediately. She could hear Nynaeve muttering to herself, and she could actually understand most of the words.

The door crashed open once more. Elayne lifted her head to stare at it despairingly—and gaped. Thom Merrilin stood there like the hero of one of his own tales, one hand firmly gripping the neck of a Luci near fainting, the other holding a knife ready to throw. Elayne laughed delightedly, though it came out more like a croak.

Roughly, he shoved the girl into a corner. "You stay there, or I'll strop this blade on your hide!" In two steps he was at Elayne's side, smoothing her hair back, worry painting his leathery face. "What did you give them, girl? Tell me, or—!"

"Not her," Nynaeve muttered. "Other one. Went away. Help me up. Have to walk."

Thom left her reluctantly, Elayne thought. He showed Luci his knife again threateningly—she cowered as if she never meant to move again—then made it disappear up his sleeve in a twinkling. Hauling Nynaeve to her feet, he began walking her up and down the few paces the room allowed. She sagged against him limply, shuffling.

"I am glad to hear this frightened little cat didn't trap you," he said. "If she had been the one . . ." He shook his head. No doubt he would think just as little of them if Nynaeve told him the truth; Elayne certainly did not intend to. "I found her rushing up the stairs, so panicked she did not even hear me behind her. I am not so glad that another one got away without Juilin seeing her. Is she likely to bring others back?"

Elayne rolled over onto her side. "I do not think so, Thom," she mumbled. "She can't let—too many people—know about herself." In another minute she might be able to sit up. She was looking right at Luci; the girl flinched and tried to shrink through the wall. "The Whitecloaks—would take her as—quickly as they would us."

“Juilin?” Nynaeve said. Her head wavered as she glared up at the gleeman. She had no trouble speaking, though. “I told the pair of you to stay with the wagon.”

Thom blew out his mustaches irritably. “You told us to put up the supplies, which did not take two men. Juilin followed you, and when none of you came back, I went looking for him.” He snorted again. “For all he knew, there were a dozen men in here, but he was ready to come in after you alone. He is tying Skulker in the back. A good thing I decided to ride in. I think we’ll need the horse to get you two out of here.”

Elayne found that she could sit up, barely, pulling herself hand over hand along the coverlet, but an effort to stand nearly put her flat again. *Saidar* was as unobtainable as ever; her head still felt like a goose-down pillow. Nynaeve was beginning to hold herself a little straighter, to lift her feet, but she still hung on Thom.

Minutes later Juilin arrived, pushing Mistress Macura ahead of him with his belt knife. “She came through a gate in the back fence. Thought I was a thief. It seemed best to bring her on in.”

The seamstress’s face had gone so pale at the sight of them that her eyes seemed darker, and about to come out of her head besides. She licked her lips and smoothed her skirt incessantly, and cast quick little glances at Juilin’s knife as if wondering whether it might not be best to run anyway. For the most part, though, she stared at Elayne and Nynaeve; Elayne thought it an even chance whether she would burst into tears or swoon.

“Put her over there,” Nynaeve said, nodding to where Luci still shivered in the corner with her arms wrapped around her knees, “and help Elayne. I never heard of forkroot, but walking seems to help the effects pass. You can walk most things off.”

Juilin pointed to the corner with his knife, and Mistress Macura scurried to it and sat herself down beside Luci, still wetting her lips fearfully. “I—would not have done—what I did—only, I had orders. You must understand that. I had orders.”

Gently helping Elayne to her feet, Juilin supported her in walking the few steps available, crisscrossing the other pair. She wished it were Thom. Juilin’s arm around her waist was much too familiar.

“Orders from whom?” Nynaeve barked. “Who do you report to in the Tower?”

The seamstress looked sick, but she clamped her mouth shut determinedly.

"If you don't talk," Nynaeve told her, scowling, "I'll let Juilin have you. He's a Tairen thief-catcher, and he knows how to bring out a confession as quickly as any Whitecloak Questioner. Don't you, Juilin?"

"Some rope to tie her," he said, grinning a grin so villainous that Elayne almost tried to step away from him, "some rags to gag her until she is ready to talk, some cooking oil and salt. . . ." His chuckle curdled Elayne's blood. "She will talk." Mistress Macura held herself rigidly against the wall, staring at him, eyes as wide as they would go. Luci looked at him as if he had just turned into a Trolloc, eight feet tall and complete with horns.

"Very well," Nynaeve said after a moment. "You should find everything you need in the kitchen, Juilin." Elayne shifted a startled look from her to the thief-catcher and back. Surely they did not really mean to . . . ? Not Nynaeve!

"Narenwin Barda," the seamstress gasped suddenly. Words tripped over one another spilling out of her. "I send my reports to Narenwin Barda, at an inn in Tar Valon called The Upriver Run. Avi Shendar keeps pigeons for me on the edge of town. He doesn't know who I send messages to or who I get them from, and he does not care. His wife had the falling sickness, and . . ." She trailed off, shuddering and watching Juilin.

Elayne knew Narenwin, or at least had seen her in the Tower. A thin little woman you could forget was there, she was so quiet. And kind, too; one day a week, she let children bring their pets to the Tower grounds for her to Heal. Hardly the sort of woman to be Black Ajah. On the other hand, one of the Black Ajah names they knew was Marillin Gemalphin; she liked cats, and went out of her way to look after strays.

"Narenwin Barda," Nynaeve said grimly. "I want more names, inside the Tower or out."

"I—don't have any more," Mistress Macura said faintly.

"We will see about that. How long have you been a Darkfriend? How long have you served the Black Ajah?"

An indignant squall erupted from Luci. "We aren't Darkfriends!" She glanced at Mistress Macura and sidled away from her. "At least, I'm not! I walk in the Light! I do!"

The other woman’s reaction was no less strong. If her eyes had bulged before, they popped now. “The Black—! You mean it really exists? But the Tower has always denied—Why, I asked Narenwin, the day she chose me for the Yellow’s eyes-and-ears, and it was the next morning before I could stop weeping and crawl out of my bed. I am not—not!—a Darkfriend! *Never!* I serve the Yellow Ajah! The *Yellow*!”

Still hanging on to Juilin’s arm, Elayne exchanged puzzled looks with Nynaeve. Any Darkfriend would deny it, of course, but there seemed a ring of truth in the women’s voices. Their outrage at the accusation was nearly enough to overcome their fear. From the way Nynaeve hesitated, she heard the same thing.

“If you serve the Yellow,” she said slowly, “why did you drug us?”

“It was her,” the seamstress replied, nodding at Elayne. “I was sent her description a month since, right down to that way she holds her chin sometimes so she seems to be looking down at you. Narenwin said she might use the name Elayne, and even claim to be of a noble House.” Word by word, her anger over being called a Darkfriend seemed to bubble higher. “Maybe you are a Yellow sister, but she’s no Aes Sedai, just a runaway Accepted. Narenwin said I was to report her presence, and that of anyone with her. And to delay her, if I could. Or even capture her. And anyone with her. How they expected me to capture an Accepted, I do not know—I don’t think even Narenwin knows about my forkroot tea!—but that is what my orders said! They said I should risk exposure even—here, where it’d be my death!—if I had to! You just wait until the Amyrlin puts her hands on you, young woman! On all of you!”

“The Amyrlin!” Elayne exclaimed. “What does she have to do with this?”

“It was on her orders. By order of the Amyrlin Seat, it said. It said the Amyrlin herself said I could use any means short of killing you. You will wish you *were* dead when the Amyrlin gets hold of you!” Her sharp nod was full of furious satisfaction.

“Remember that we are not in anyone’s hands yet,” Nynaeve said dryly. “You are in ours.” Her eyes looked as shocked as Elayne felt, though. “Was any reason given?”

The reminder that she was the captive sapped the brief burst of spirit from the woman. She sagged listlessly against Luci, each keeping the other from falling over. “No. Sometimes Narenwin gives a reason, but not this time.”

“Did you intend to just keep us here, drugged, until someone came for us?”

“I was going to send you off by cart, dressed in some old clothes.” Not even a shred of resistance remained in the woman’s voice. “I sent a pigeon to tell Narenwin you were here, and what I was doing. Therin Lugay owes me a strong favor, and I meant to give him enough forkroot to last all the way to Tar Valon, if Narenwin didn’t send sisters to meet you sooner. He thinks you are ill, and the tea is the only thing keeping you alive until an Aes Sedai can Heal you. A woman has to be careful, dealing in remedies in Amadicia. Cure too many, or too well, somebody whispers Aes Sedai, and the next you know your house is burning down. Or worse. Therin knows to hold his tongue about what he . . .”

Nynaeve made Thom help her closer, where she could stare down at the seamstress. “And the message? The real message? You did not put that signal out in the hope of luring us in.”

“I gave you the real message,” the woman said wearily. “I did not think it could do any harm. I don’t understand it, and I—please—” Suddenly she was sobbing, clinging to Luci as hard as the younger woman did to her, both of them wailing and babbling. “Please, don’t let him use the salt on me! Please! Not the salt! Oh, please!”

“Tie them up,” Nynaeve said disgustedly after a moment, “and we will go downstairs where we can talk.” Thom helped her to sit on the edge of the nearest bed, then quickly cut strips from the other coverlet.

In short order both women were bound, back to back, the hands of one to the feet of the other, with wadded bits of coverlet tied in for gags. The pair were still weeping when Thom assisted Nynaeve from the room.

Elayne wished she could walk as well as the other woman, but she still needed Juilin’s support not to go tumbling down the stairs. She felt a small stab of jealousy watching Thom with his arm around Nynaeve. *You are a foolish little girl,* Lini’s voice said sharply. *I am a grown woman,* she told it with a firmness she would not have dared with her old nurse even today. *I* do *love Rand, but he is far away, and Thom is sophisticated and intelligent and* . . . It sounded too much like excuses, even to her. Lini would have given the snort that meant she was about to stop tolerating foolishness.

“Juilin,” she asked hesitantly, “what were you going to do with the salt and cooking oil? Not exactly,” she added more quickly. “Just a general idea.”

He looked at her for a moment. “I do not know. But they did not, either. That is the trick of it; their minds made up worse than I ever could. I have seen a tough man break when I sent for a basket of figs and some mice. You have to be careful, though. Some will confess anything, true or not, just to escape what they imagine. I do not think those two did, though.”

She did not either. She could not repress a shiver, however. *What* would *somebody do with figs and mice?* She hoped she stopped wondering before she gave herself nightmares.

By the time they reached the kitchen, Nynaeve was tottering about without help, poking into the cupboard full of colorful canisters. Elayne needed one of the chairs. The blue canister sat on the table, and a full green teapot, but she tried not to look at them. She still could not channel. She could embrace *saidar*, yet it slipped away as soon as she did. At least she was confident now that the Power would return to her. The alternative was too horrible to contemplate, and she had not let herself until this moment.

“Thom,” Nynaeve said, lifting the lids on various containers and peering in. “Juilin.” She paused, took a deep breath, and, still not looking at the two men, said, “Thank you. I begin to see why Aes Sedai have Warders. Thank you very much.”

Not all Aes Sedai did. Reds considered all men tainted because of what men who could channel did, and a few never bothered because they did not leave the Tower or simply did not replace a Warder who died. The Greens were the only Ajah to allow bonding with more than one Warder. Elayne wanted to be a Green. Not for that reason, of course, but because the Greens called themselves the Battle Ajah. Where Browns searched for lost knowledge and Blues involved themselves in causes, Green sisters held themselves ready for the Last Battle, when they would go forth, as they had in the Trolloc Wars, to face new Dreadlords.

The two men stared at one another in open amazement. They had surely been ready for the usual rough side of Nynaeve’s tongue. Elayne was almost as shocked. Nynaeve liked having to be helped as much as she liked being wrong; either made her as prickly as a briar, though of course she always claimed to be a picture of sweet reason and sense.

"A Wisdom." Nynaeve took a pinch of powder from one of the canisters and sniffed it, touched it to the tip of her tongue. "Or whatever they call it here."

"They don't have a name for it here," Thom said. "Not many women follow your old craft in Amadicia. Too dangerous. For most of those it's only a sideline."

Pulling a leather scrip from the bottom of the cupboard, Nynaeve began making up small bundles from some of the containers. "And who do they go to when they're ill? A hedge-doctor?"

"Yes," Elayne said. It always pleased her to show Thom that she knew things about the world, too. "In Amadicia, it is men who study herbs."

Nynaeve frowned scornfully. "What could a man ever know about curing anything? I'd as soon ask a farrier to make a dress."

Abruptly Elayne realized that she had been thinking of anything and everything except what Mistress Macura had said. *Not thinking about a thorn doesn't make it hurt your foot less.* One of Lini's favorites. "Nynaeve, what do you think that message means? All sisters are welcome to return to the Tower? It makes no sense." That was not what she wanted to say, but at least she was closing in on it.

"The Tower has its own rules," Thom said. "What Aes Sedai do, they do for reasons of their own, and often not for those they give. If they give reasons at all." He and Juilin knew they were only Accepted, of course; that was at least part of why neither man did as he was told nearly as well as he might.

The struggle was plain on Nynaeve's face. She did not like being interrupted, or people answering for her. There was quite a list of things Nynaeve did not like. But it was only a moment since she had thanked Thom; it could not be easy to call down a man who had just saved you from being hauled off like a cabbage. "Very little in the Tower makes sense most of the time," she said sourly. Elayne suspected that the tartness was as much for Thom as the Tower.

"Do you believe what she said?" Elayne took a deep breath. "About the Amyrlin saying I was to be brought back by any means."

The brief look Nynaeve gave her was touched with sympathy. "I don't know, Elayne."

"She was telling the truth." Juilin turned one of the chairs around and straddled it, leaning his staff against the back. "I've questioned enough thieves and murderers to know truth when I hear it. Part of the time she was too frightened to lie, and the rest too angry."

"The pair of you—" Taking a deep breath, Nynaeve tossed the scrip onto the table and folded her arms as if to trap her hands away from her braid. "I am afraid Juilin is probably right, Elayne."

"But the Amyrlin knows what we are doing. She sent us out of the Tower in the first place."

Nynaeve sniffed loudly. "I can believe anything of Siuan Sanche. I would like to have her for one hour where she could not channel. We would see how tough she is then."

Elayne did not think that would make any difference. Remembering that commanding blue gaze, she suspected Nynaeve would earn a fine lot of bruises in the unlikely event that she ever got her wish. "But what are we going to do about it? The Ajahs have eyes-and-ears everywhere, it seems. And the Amyrlin herself. We could have women trying to slip things into our food all the way to Tar Valon."

"Not if we do not look like what they expect." Lifting a yellow jug out of the cupboard, Nynaeve set it on the table beside the teapot. "This is white henpepper. It will soothe a toothache, but it will also turn your hair black as night." Elayne put a hand to her red-gold tresses—*her* hair, not Nynaeve's, she would wager!—but as much as she hated the idea, it was a good one. "A little needle-work on some of those dresses in the front, and we are not merchants anymore, but two ladies traveling with their servants."

"Riding on a wagonload of dye?" Juilin said.

Her level look said gratitude for saving her extended only so far. "There is a coach in a stableyard on the other side of the bridge. I think the owner will sell it. If you go back to the wagon before somebody steals it—I do not know what got into you two, just leaving it for whoever came along!—if it is still there, you can take one of the purses. . . ."

A few people goggled when Noy Torvald's coach pulled up in front of Ronde Macura's shop, drawn by a team of four, with chests strapped to the roof and a saddled horse tied on behind. Noy had lost everything when the trade with Tarabon collapsed; he was scraping a living doing odd jobs for Widow Teran, now. No one in the street had ever seen the coachman before, a tall leathery fellow with long white mustaches and cold, imperious eyes, or the dark, hard-faced footman in a Taraboner hat who jumped down nimbly to open the coach door. The goggling turned to murmurs when two women swept out of the shop with bundles in their arms; one wore a green silk gown, the other plain blue wool, but each had a scarf wrapped around her head so that not so much as a hint of her hair was visible. They all but leaped into the coach.

Two of the Children began sauntering over to inquire who the strangers were, but while the footman was still scrambling up to the driver's seat, the coachman cracked his long whip, shouting something about making way for a lady. Her name was lost as the Children threw themselves out of the way, tumbling in the dusty street, and the coach rumbled away at a gallop toward the Amador Road.

The onlookers walked away talking among themselves; a mysterious lady, obviously, with her maid, making purchases from Ronde Macura and rushing away from the Children. Little enough happened in Mardecin of late, and this would provide days of conversation. The Children of the Light brushed themselves off furiously, but finally decided that reporting the incident would make them look foolish. Besides, their captain did not like nobles; he would probably send them to bring the coach back, a long ride in the heat for no more than an arrogant young sprig of one House or another. If no charges could be brought—always tricky with the nobility—it would not be the captain who took the blame. Hoping that word of their humiliation did not spread, they certainly never thought of questioning Ronde Macura.

A short time later, Therin Lugay led his cart into the yard behind the shop, provisions for the long journey ahead already packed away under the round canvas top. Indeed, Ronde Macura had cured him of a fever that had taken twenty-three the winter before, but it was a nagging wife and a shrewish mother-in-law that made him glad of a journey all the way to where the witches lived. Ronde had said someone might meet him, though not who, but he hoped to make it to Tar Valon.

He tapped on the kitchen door six times before going in, but it was not until he climbed the stairs that he found anyone. In the back bedroom, Ronde and Luci lay stretched out on the beds, sound asleep and fully clothed, if rather rumpled, with the sun still in the sky. Neither woman roused when he shook them. He did not understand that, or why one of the coverlets was lying on the floor cut into knotted strips, or why there were two empty teapots in the room but only one cup, or why a funnel was lying on Ronde’s pillow. But he had always known that there was a great deal in the world he did not understand. Returning to his cart, he thought about the supplies Ronde’s money had purchased, thought of his wife and her mother, and when he led the cart horse off, it was with the intention of seeing what Altara was like, or maybe Murandy.

One way and another, it was quite a time before a disheveled Ronde Macura tottered up to Avi Shendar’s house and sent off a pigeon, a thin bone tube tied to its leg. The bird launched itself north and east, straight as an arrow toward Tar Valon. After a moment’s thought, Ronde prepared another copy on another narrow strip of thin parchment, and fastened it to a bird from another coop. That one headed west for she had promised to send duplicates of all of her messages. In these hard times, a woman had to make out as best she could, and there could be no harm in it, not the sort of reports she made to Narenwin. Wondering if she could ever get the taste of forkroot out of her mouth, she would not have minded if the report brought just a little harm to the one who called herself Nynaeve.

Hoeing in his garden patch as usual, Avi paid no attention to what Ronde did. And as usual, as soon as she was gone, he washed his hands and went inside. She had placed a larger sheet of parchment underneath the strips to cushion the nib of the pen. When he held it up to the afternoon light, he could make out what she had written. Soon a third pigeon was on its way, heading in still another direction.

* * *

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CHAPTER 11

The Nine Horse Hitch

A wide straw hat shaded Siuan's face as she let Logain lead the way through Lugard's Shilene Gate under the late-afternoon sun. The city's tall gray outer walls were in some disrepair; in two places she could see, tumbled stone lowered the wall to no more than a tall fence. Min and Leane rode close behind her, both tired from the pace the man had set over the weeks since Kore Springs. He wanted to be in charge, and it took little enough to convince him that he was. If he said when they started of a morning, when and where they stopped of a night, if he kept the money, even if he expected them to serve his meals as well as cook them, it was of little account to her. All in all, she felt sorry for him. He had no idea what she planned for him. *A big fish on the hook to catch a bigger,* she thought grimly.

In name, Lugard was the capital of Murandy, the seat of King Roedran, but lords in Murandy spoke the words of fealty, then refused to pay their taxes, or do much of anything else that Roedran wanted, and the people did the same. Murandy was a nation in name only, the people barely held together by supposed allegiance to the king or queen—the throne changed hands at sometimes short intervals—and fear that Andor or Illian might snap them up if they did not hold together in some fashion.

Stone walls crisscrossed the city, most in a worse state than the outer bastions, for Lugard had grown haphazardly over the centuries, and more than once had actually been divided among feuding nobles. It was a dirty city, many of the broad streets unpaved and all of them dusty. Men in high-crowned hats and aproned women in skirts that showed their ankles dodged between merchants' lumbering trains, while children played in wagon ruts. Trade kept Lugard alive, trade up from Illian and Ebou Dar, from Ghealdan to the west and Andor to the north. Large bare patches of ground through the city held wagons parked wheel-to-wheel, many heavy-laden under strapped-down canvas covers, others empty and awaiting freight. Inns lined the main streets, along with horse lots and stables, nearly outnumbering the gray stone houses or shops, all roofed with tiles in blue or red or purple or green. Dust and noise filled the air, clanging from the smithies, the rumble of wagons and curses of the drivers, boisterous laughter from the inns. The sun baked Lugard as it slid toward the horizon, and the air felt as though it might never rain again.

When Logain finally turned in to a stableyard and dismounted behind a green-roofed inn called The Nine Horse Hitch, Siuan clambered down from Bela gratefully and gave the shaggy mare a doubtful pat on the nose, wary of teeth. In her view, sitting on the back of an animal was no way to travel. A boat went as you turned the rudder; a horse might decide to think for itself. Boats never bit, either; Bela had not so far, but she could. At least those awful first days of stiffness were gone, when she was sure Leane and Min were grinning behind her back as she hobbled about in the evening camp. After a day in the saddle, she still felt as if she had been thoroughly beaten, but she managed to hide it.

As soon as Logain began bargaining with the stableman, a lanky, freckled old fellow in a leather vest and no shirt, Siuan sidled close to Leane. “If you want to practice your wiles,” she said softly, “practice them on Dalyn the next hour.” Leane gave her a dubious look—she had dabbled in smiles and glances at some of the villages since Kore Springs, but Logain had gotten no more than a flat look—then sighed and nodded. Taking a deep breath, she glided forward in that startling sinuous way, leading her arch-necked gray and already smiling at Logain. Siuan could not see how she did that; it was as if some of her bones were no longer rigid.

Moving over to Min, she spoke just as quietly again. “The instant Dalyn is done with the stableman, tell him you are going to join me inside. Then hurry ahead, and stay away from him and Amaena until I come back.” From the noise roaring out of the inn, the crowd inside was big enough to hide an army. Surely big enough to hide the absence of one woman. Min got that mulish look about her eyes and opened her mouth, no doubt to demand why. Siuan forestalled her. “Just do it, Serenla. Or I’ll let you add cleaning his boots to handing him his plate.” The stubborn look remained, but Min gave a sullen nod.

Pushing Bela’s reins into the other woman’s hands, Siuan hurried out of the stableyard and started down the street in what she hoped was the right direction. She did not want to have to search the entire city, not in this heat and dust.

Heavy wagons behind teams of six or eight or even ten filled the streets, drivers cracking long whips and cursing equally at the horses and at the people who darted between the wagons. Roughly dressed men mingling through the crowds in long wagon drivers' coats sometimes directed laughing invitations at women who passed them. The women who wore colorful aprons, sometimes striped, their heads wrapped in bright scarves, walked on with eyes straight ahead, as though they did not hear. Women without aprons, hair hanging loose around their shoulders and skirts sometimes ending a foot or more clear of the ground, often shouted back even ruder replies.

Siuan gave a start when she realized that some of the men's suggestions were aimed at her. They did not make her angry—she really could not apply them to herself in her own mind—only startled. She was still not used to the changes in herself. That men might find her attractive. . . . Her reflection in the filthy window of a tailor's shop caught her eye, not much more than a murky image of a fair-skinned girl under a straw hat. She was young; not just young-appearing, as far as she could tell, but young. Not much older than Min. A girl in truth, from the vantage of the years she had actually lived.

An advantage to having been stilled, she told herself. She had met women who would pay any price to lose fifteen or twenty years; some might even consider her price a fair bargain. She often found herself listing such advantages, perhaps trying to convince herself they were real. Freed from the Three Oaths, she could lie at need, for one thing. And her own father would not have recognized her. She did not really look as she had as a young woman; the changes maturity had made were still there, but softened into youth. Coldly objective, she thought she might be somewhat prettier than she had been as a girl; pretty was the best that had ever been said of her. Handsome had been the more usual compliment. She could not connect that face to her, to Siuan Sanche. Only inside was she still the same; her mind yet held all its knowledge. There, in her head, she was still herself.

Some of the inns and taverns in Lugard had names like The Farrier's Hammer, or The Dancing Bear, or The Silver Pig, often with garish signs painted to match. Others had names that should not have been allowed, the mildest of that sort being The Domani Wench’s Kiss, with a painting of a coppery-skinned woman—bare to the waist!—with her lips puckered. Siuan wondered what Leane would make of that, but the way the woman was now, it might only give her notions.

At last, on a side street just as wide as the main, just beyond a gateless opening in one of the collapsing inner walls, she found the inn she wanted, three stories of rough gray stone topped with purple roof tiles. The sign over the door had an improbably voluptuous woman wearing only her hair, arranged to hide as little as possible, astride a barebacked horse, and a name that she skipped over as soon as she recognized it.

Inside, the common room was blue with pipesmoke, packed with raucous men drinking and laughing, trying to pinch serving maids, who dodged as best they could with long-suffering smiles. Barely audible over the babble, a zither and a flute accompanied a young woman singing and dancing on a table at one end of the long room. Occasionally the singer swirled her skirts high enough to show nearly the whole length of her bare legs; what Siuan could catch of her song made her want to wash out the girl’s mouth. Why would a woman go walking with no clothes on? Why would a woman sing about it to a lot of drunken louts? It was not a sort of place she had ever been into before. She intended to make this visit as brief as possible.

There was no mistaking the inn’s owner, a tall, heavyset woman encased in a red silk dress that practically glowed; elaborate, dyed curls—nature had never produced that shade of red, surely never with such dark eyes—framed a thrusting chin and a hard mouth. In between shouting orders to the serving girls, she stopped at this table or that to speak a few words or slap a back and laugh with her patrons.

Siuan held herself stiffly and tried to ignore the considering looks men gave her as she approached the crimson-haired woman. “Mistress Tharne?” She had to repeat the name three times, each louder than the last, before the inn’s owner looked at her. “Mistress Tharne, I want a job singing. I can sing—”

“You can, can you now?” The big woman laughed. “Well, I have a singer, but I can always use another to give her a rest. Let me be seeing your legs.”

“I can sing ‘The Song of the Three Fishes,’ ” Siuan said loudly. This had to be the right woman. Surely two women in one city could not have hair like that, not and answer to the right name at the right inn.

Mistress Tharne laughed harder still and slapped one of the men at the nearest table on the shoulder, jolting him half off his bench. “Not much call for that one here, eh, Pel?” Gap-toothed Pel, a wagon driver’s whip curled around his shoulder, cackled with her.

“And I can sing ‘Blue Sky Dawning.’ ”

The woman shook, scrubbing at her eyes as though she had laughed herself to tears. “Can you, now? Ah, I’m sure the lads will love that. Now let me see your legs. Your legs, girl, or get out!”

Siuan hesitated, but Mistress Tharne only stared at her. And an increasing number of the men did, too. This *had* to be the right woman. Slowly, she pulled her skirt up to her knees. The tall woman gestured impatiently. Closing her eyes, Siuan gathered more and more of her skirt in her hands. She felt her face growing redder by the inch.

“A modest one,” Mistress Tharne chortled. “Well, if those songs are the extent of your knowledge, you’d better have legs to make a man fall on his face. Can’t tell till we get those woolen stockings off her, eh, Pel? Well, come on with me. Maybe you have a voice, anyway, but I can’t hear it in here. Come on, girl! Hustle your rump!”

Siuan’s eyes snapped open, blazing, but the big woman was already striding toward the back of the common room. Backbone like an iron rod, Siuan let her skirts fall and followed, trying to ignore the guffaws and lewd suggestions directed at her. Her face was stone, but inside, worry warred with anger.

Before being raised to the Amyrlin Seat, she had run the Blue Ajah’s network of eyes-and-ears; some had also been her own personal listeners both then and later. She might no longer be Amyrlin, or even Aes Sedai, but she still knew all of those agents. Duranda Tharne had already been serving the Blue when she took over the network, a woman whose information was always timely. Eyes-and-ears were not to be found everywhere, and their reliability varied—there had been only one that she trusted enough to approach between Tar Valon and here, at Four Kings, in Andor, and she had vanished—but a vast amount of news and rumor passed through Lugard with the merchants’ wagon trains. There might be eyes-and-ears for other Ajahs here; it would be well to remember that. *Caution gets the boat home,* she reminded herself.

This woman fit the description of Duranda Tharne perfectly, and surely no other inn could have a name so vile, but why had she responded as she did when Siuan identified herself as another agent of the Blue? She had to risk it; Min and Leane, in their own fashion, were growing as impatient as Logain. Caution got the boat home, but sometimes boldness brought back a full hold. At the worst, she could knock the woman over the head with something and escape out the back. Eyeing the woman's width and height, and the firmness of her thick arms, she hoped that she could.

A plain door in the corridor that led to the kitchens opened into a sparsely furnished room, a desk and one chair on a scrap of blue carpet, a large mirror on one wall, and surprisingly, a short shelf with a few books. As soon as the door was shut behind them, diminishing if not cutting off the noise of the common room, the big woman rounded on Siuan, fists planted on ample hips. "Now, then. What do you want with me? Don't bother giving me a name; I don't want to know, whether it's yours or not."

A little of the tension oozed out of Siuan. Not the anger, though. "You had no right to treat me in that manner out there! What did you mean forcing me to—!"

"I had every right," Mistress Tharne snapped, "and every necessity. If you'd come at opening or closing, as you're supposed to, I could have hustled you in here and none the wiser. Do you think some of those men wouldn't be wondering if I escorted you back here like a long-lost friend? I can't afford to have anyone wondering about me. You're lucky I didn't make you take Susu's place on the table for a song or two. And you watch your manner with me." She raised a wide, hard hand threateningly. "I've married daughters older than you, and when I visit them, they step right and talk proper. You come Mistress Snip with me, and you'll be learning why. Nobody out there will even hear you yelp, and if they did, they wouldn't interfere." With a sharp nod, as if that were settled, she put fists on hips again. "Now, what do you want?"

Several times during the onslaught Siuan had tried to speak, but the woman rolled over her like a tidal wave. That was not something she was accustomed to. By the time Mistress Tharne was done, she quivered with anger; both hands held her skirts in a white-knuckled grip. She held on to her temper every bit as hard. *I am supposed to be just another agent,* she reminded herself firmly. *Not the Amyrlin anymore, just another agent.* Besides, she suspected that the woman might carry out her threat. This was something else still new to her, having to be wary of someone under her eye just because they were larger and stronger.

"I was given a message to deliver to a gathering of those we serve." She hoped Mistress Tharne took the strain in her voice for being cowed; the woman might be more helpful if she thought Siuan properly intimidated. "They were not where I was told to find them. I can only hope you know something to help me find them."

Folding her arms under a massive bosom, Mistress Tharne studied her. "Know how to hold your temper when it suits, eh? Good. What's happened in the Tower? And don't try denying you come from there, my fine haughty wench. Your message has courtier writ large all over it, and you never got that snooty manner in a village."

Siuan drew a deep breath before answering. "Siuan Sanche has been stilled." Her voice did not even tremble; she was proud of that. "Elaida a'Roihan is the new Amyrlin." She could not keep a hint of bite out of that, however.

Mistress Tharne's face showed no reaction. "Well, that explains some of the orders I've gotten. Some of them, maybe. Stilled her, did they? I thought she'd be Amyrlin forever. I saw her once, a few years ago in Caemlyn. At a distance. She looked like she could chew harness straps for breakfast." Those impossible scarlet curls swung as she shook her head. "Well, done's done. The Ajahs have split, haven't they? Only thing that fits; my orders, and the old buzzard stilled. The Tower's broken, and the Blues are running."

Siuan ground her teeth. She tried telling herself the woman was loyal to the Blue Ajah, not to her personally, but it did not help. *Old buzzard? She's old enough to be my mother. And if she was, I'd drown myself.* With an effort, she made her voice meek. "My message is important. I must be on my way as soon as possible. Can you help me?"

"Important, is it? Well, I'm doubting it. Trouble is, I can give you something, but it's up to you to cipher it out. Do you want it?" The woman refused to make this any easier.

"Yes, please."

"Sallie Daera. I don't know who she is or was, but I was told to give her name to any Blue who came around looking lost, so to speak. You may not be one of the sisters, but you carry your nose high enough for one, so there it is. Sallie Daera. Make of it what you will."

Siuan suppressed a thrill of excitement and made her face dejected. “I never heard of her, either. I’ll just have to go on looking.”

“If you find them, you tell Aeldene Sedai I’m still loyal, whatever’s happened. I’ve worked for the Blues so long, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself else.”

“I will tell her,” Siuan said. She had not known that Aeldene was her replacement controlling the Blues’ eyes-and-ears; the Amyrlin, whatever Ajah she came from, was of all but part of none. “I suppose you need some reason for not hiring me. I really cannot sing; that should do.”

“As if it mattered to that lot out there.” The big woman quirked an eyebrow and grinned in a way Siuan did not like. “I’ll think of something, wench. And I’ll give you a bit of advice. If you don’t climb down a rung or two, some Aes Sedai will take you down the whole ladder. I’m surprised it hasn’t been done already. Now go on. Get out of here.”

Hateful woman, Siuan growled in her head. *If there was a way to manage it, I’d have her doing penance till her eyes popped.* The woman thought she deserved more respect, did she? “Thank you for your help,” she said coolly, making a curtsy that would have graced any court. “You have been too kind.”

She was three steps into the common room when Mistress Tharne appeared behind her, raising her voice in a laughing shout that cut through the noise. “A shy maiden, that one! Legs white and slender enough to set you all drooling, and she bawled like a baby when I told her she’d have to show them to you! Just sat right down on the floor and cried! Hips round enough for any taste, and she . . . !”

Siuan stumbled as the tide of laughter rose, never quite drowning out the woman’s recitation. She managed another three steps, face red as a beet, then fled at a run.

In the street, she paused to get her breath back and let her heart stop pounding. *That horrible old harridan! I should . . . !* It did not matter what she should do; that disgusting woman had told her what she needed. Not Sallie Daera; not a woman at all. Only a Blue would know, or even suspect. Salidar. Birthplace of Deane Aryman, the Blue sister who had become Amyrlin after Bonwhin and had rescued the Tower from the ruin Bonwhin had poised it for. Salidar. One of the last places anyone would look for Aes Sedai, short of Amadicia itself.

Two men in snowy cloaks and brightly burnished mail were riding down the street toward her, reluctantly moving their horses aside for wagons. Children of the Light. They could be found everywhere these days. Tipping her head down, watching the Whitecloaks cautiously from beneath the brim of her hat, Siuan moved closer to the blue-and-green front of the inn. They glanced at her as they rode by—hard faces beneath shining conical helmets—and passed on.

Siuan bit her lip in vexation. She had probably called their attention to her by shrinking back. And if they had seen her face . . . ? Nothing, of course. Whitecloaks might try to kill an Aes Sedai they found alone, but hers was an Aes Sedai face no longer. Only, they had seen her try to hide from them. If Duranda Tharne had not upset her so, she would not have made such a foolish error. She could remember when a little thing like Mistress Tharne's remarks would not have made her stride waver in the least, when that overgrown dyed fishwife would not have dared say a word of it. *If that termagant doesn't like my manner, I'll . . .* What she would do was continue about the business she was on before Mistress Tharne pummeled her so she could not sit a saddle. Sometimes it was hard remembering that the days were gone when she could call kings or queens and have them come.

Striding down the street, she glared so hard that some of the wagon drivers bit back the comments they had been going to make to a pretty young woman alone. Some of them did.

Min sat on a bench against the wall of the crowded common room in The Nine Horse Hitch, watching a table surrounded by standing men, some with coiled driver's whips, others wearing the swords that marked them merchants' guards. Six more sat shoulder to shoulder around the table. She could just make out Logain and Leane, sitting on the far side. He wore a disgruntled frown; the other men hung on Leane's every smiling word.

The air was thick with pipesmoke, and full of chatter that nearly drowned the music of flute and tambour and the singing of a girl dancing on a table between the stone fireplaces. Her song had to do with a woman convincing six men that each was the only man in her life; Min found it interesting even when it made her blush. The singer darted jealous glances at the crowded table from time to time. Or rather at Leane.

The tall Domani woman had already been leading Logain by the nose when they entered the inn, and she had attracted more men like flies to honey with that swaying walk and the smoldering light in her eyes. There had very nearly been a riot, Logain and the merchants' guards with hands on swords, knives being drawn, the stout proprietor and two heavily muscled fellows rushing in with cudgels. And Leane had doused the flames much as she had ignited them, with a smile here, a few words there, a pat on the cheek. Even the innkeeper had lingered awhile, grinning like a fool, until his custom called him away. And Leane thought she needed practice. It hardly seemed fair.

If I could do that to one particular man, I'd be more than satisfied. Maybe she'd teach me—Light, what am I thinking? She had always been herself, and everyone else could accept her as she was or not. Now she was thinking about changing what she was, for a man. It was bad enough that she had to hide herself in a dress, instead of the coat and breeches she had always worn. *He'd look at you in a dress with neckline cut low. You've more to show than Leane does, and she—Stop that!*

"We have to go south," Siuan said at her shoulder, and Min gave a start. She had not seen the other woman come in. "Now." From the shine in Siuan's blue eyes, she had learned something. Whether she would share it was another matter. The woman seemed to think she was still Amyrlin, most of the time.

"We cannot reach anywhere else with an inn before nightfall," Min said. "We might as well take rooms here for the night." It was pleasant to sleep in a bed again instead of under hedges and in haystacks, even if she did usually have to share it with Leane and Siuan. Logain was willing to rent them all rooms, but Siuan was tight with their coin even when Logain was doling it out.

Siuan looked around, but whoever in the common room was not staring at Leane was listening to the singer. "That isn't possible. I—I think some Whitecloaks may be asking questions about me."

Min whistled softly. "Dalyn won't like that."

"Then do not tell him." Siuan shook her head at the gathering about Leane. "Just tell Amaena that we have to go. He'll follow. Let us just hope the rest don't as well."

Min grinned wryly. Siuan might claim that she did not care that Logain—Dalyn—had taken charge, mostly by just ignoring her whenever she tried to make him do anything, but she was still determined to bring him to heel again.

“What *is* a Nine Horse Hitch, anyway?” she asked, getting to her feet. She had gone out front hoping for a hint, but the sign over the door bore only the name. “I have seen eight, and ten, but never nine.”

“In this town,” Siuan said primly, “it is better not to ask.” Sudden spots of color in her cheeks made Min think that she knew very well. “Go fetch them. We’ve a long way to go, and no time to waste. And don’t let anyone overhear you.”

Min snorted softly. With that small smile on Leane’s face, none of those men would even see her. She wished she knew how Siuan had brought herself to the Whitecloaks’ attention. That was the last thing they needed, and it was not like Siuan to make mistakes. She wished she knew how to make Rand look at her like those men were looking at Leane. If they were going to be riding all night—and she suspected they were—maybe Leane *would* be willing to give her a few tips.

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CHAPTER 12

An Old Pipe

A gust of wind swirling dust down the Lugard street caught Gareth Bryne’s velvet hat, sweeping it from his head directly under one of the lumbering wagons. An iron-rimmed wheel ground the hat into the hard clay of the street, leaving a flattened ruin behind. For a moment he stared at it, then walked on. *It was showing travel stains anyway,* he told himself. His silk coat had been dusty before reaching Murandy, too; brushing no longer did much good, when he even took the trouble. It looked more brown than gray, now. He should find something plainer; he was not on his way to a ball.

Dodging between wagons rumbling down the rutted street, he ignored the drivers’ curses that followed him—any decent squadman could give better in his sleep—and ducked into a red-roofed inn called The Wagon Seat. The painting on the sign gave the name an explicit interpretation.

The common room was like every common room he had seen in Lugard, wagon drivers and merchants’ guards packed in with stablemen, farriers, laborers, every sort of man, all talking or laughing as loud as they could while drinking as much as they could, one hand for the cup and one to fondle the serving girls. For that matter, it was not all that much different from common rooms and taverns in many other towns, though most were considerably milder. A buxom young woman, in a blouse that seemed about to fall off, capered and sang atop a table at one side of the room, to the supposed music of two flutes and a twelve-string bittern.

He had little ear for music, but he paused a moment to appreciate her song; she would have gone over well in any soldiers’ camp he had ever seen. But then, she would have been as popular if she could not sing a note. Wearing that blouse, she would have found a husband in short order.

Joni and Barim were already there, Joni’s size enough to grant them a table by themselves despite his thin hair and the bandage he still wore around his temples. They were listening to the girl sing. Or at least staring at her. He touched each man on the shoulder and nodded toward the side door that led to the stableyard, where a sullen groom with a squint delivered their horses for three silver pennies. A year or so earlier Bryne could have bought a fair horse for no more. The troubles to the west and in Cairhien were playing havoc with trade and prices.

No one spoke until they passed the city gates and were on a seldom-traveled road winding north toward the River Storn, little more than a wide dirt track. Then Barim said, “They was here yesterday, my Lord.”

Bryne had learned that much himself. Three pretty young women together, obvious outlanders, could not pass through a city like Lugard without being remarked. By men, anyway.

“Them and a fellow with shoulders,” Barim went on. “Sounds maybe like that Dalyn that was with them when they burned down Nem’s barn. Anyway, whoever he is, they was at The Nine Horse Hitch for a bit, but all they did was drink some and leave. That Domani girl the lads was telling me about, she nearly kicked up a fuss flashing her smile and swaying about, but then she calmed everything down again the same way. Burn me, but I’d like to meet me a Domani woman.”

“Did you hear which way they went, Barim?” Bryne asked patiently. He had not been able to learn that.

“Uh, no, my Lord. But I heard there’s been plenty of Whitecloaks passing through, all heading west. You think maybe old Pedron Niall’s planning something? Maybe in Altara?”

“That’s not our business anymore, Barim.” Bryne knew his patience sounded a little frayed this time, but Barim was an old enough campaigner to stick to the matter at hand.

“I know where they went, my Lord,” Joni said. “West, on the Jehannah Road, and pushing hard by what I heard.” He sounded troubled. “My Lord, I found two merchants’ guards, lads who used to be in the Guards, and had a drink with them. Happens they were in a stew called The Good Night’s Ride when that girl Mara came in and asked for a job singing. She didn’t get it—didn’t want to show her legs the way the singers in most of these places do, as who can blame her?—and she left. From what Barim told me, it was right after that they all set off west. I don’t like it, my Lord. She isn’t the kind of girl to want a job in a place like that. I think she’s trying to get away from that Dalyn fellow.”

Strangely, despite the lump on his head, Joni had no animosity toward the three young women. It was his opinion, often expressed since leaving the manor, that the girls were in some sort of predicament and needed to be rescued. Bryne suspected that if he did catch up to the young women and take them back to his estate, Joni would be after him to turn them over to Joni's daughters to mother.

Barim had no such feelings. "Ghealdan." He scowled. "Or maybe Altara, or Amadicia. We'll kiss the Dark One getting them back. Hardly seems worth the annoyance for a barn and some cows."

Bryne said nothing. They had followed the girls this far, and Murandy was a bad place for Andormen; too many border troubles over too many years. Only a fool would chase into Murandy after an oathbreaker's eyes. How much bigger a fool to follow halfway across the world?

"Those lads I talked to," Joni said diffidently. "My Lord, it seems a lot of the old lads who—who served under you are being sent off." Emboldened by Bryne's silence, he went on. "Lots of new fellows in. Lots. Those lads said at least four or five for every one told he wasn't wanted anymore. The sort that like to cause trouble more than stop it. There's some calling themselves the White Lions who only answer to this Gaebril"—he spat to show what he thought of that—"and a bunch more not part of the Guards at all. Not House levies. Near as they could say, Gaebril's got ten times as many men under arms as there are Guards, and they've all sworn to the throne of Andor, but not to the Queen."

"That's no longer our business, either," Bryne said curtly. Barim had his tongue stuffed into his cheek, the way he always did when he knew something he either did not want to tell or was not sure was important enough. "What is it, Barim? Out with it, man."

The leather-faced fellow stared at him in amazement. Barim had never figured out how Bryne knew when he was holding back. "Well, my Lord, some of the folks I talked to said some of those Whitecloaks yesterday was asking questions. About a girl sounds like that Mara. Wanted to know who she was, where she went. Like that. I heard they got real interested when they learned she was gone. If they're after her, she could be hanged before we ever find her. If they have to go to the trouble of chasing her down, they might not ask too many questions about whether she's really a Darkfriend. Or whatever it is they're after her for."

Bryne frowned. Whitecloaks? What would the Children of the Light want with Mara? He would never believe she was a Darkfriend. But then, he had seen a baby-faced young fellow hanged in Caemlyn, a Darkfriend who had been teaching children in the streets about the glories of the Dark One—the Great Lord of the Dark, he had called him. The lad had killed nine of them in three years, as near as could be discovered, when they looked like turning him in. *No. That girl is no Darkfriend, and I'll stake my life on it.* Whitecloaks were suspicious of everyone. And if they took it into their heads that she had fled Lugard to avoid them . . .

He booted Traveler to a canter. The big-nosed bay gelding was not flashy, but he had endurance, and courage. The other two caught up soon enough, and they kept their mouths shut, seeing the mood he was in.

Two miles or so from Lugard, he turned off into a thicket of oak and leatherleaf. The rest of his men had made a temporary camp here, in a clear space under thick, spreading oak limbs. Several small, smokeless fires were burning; they would take any opportunity to brew up some tea. Some were dozing; sleep was another thing an old soldier never missed a chance to snatch.

Those awake kicked the rest out of their naps, and they all looked up at him. For a moment he sat his saddle studying them. Gray hair and bald heads and age-creased faces. Still hard and fit, but even so . . . He had been a fool to risk bringing them into Murandy just because he had to know why a woman had broken an oath. And maybe with Whitecloaks after them. No telling how far or how long from home before it was done. If he turned back now, they would have been gone more than a month before they saw Kore Springs again. If he went on, there was no guarantee the chase would stop short of the Aryth Ocean. He should be taking these men, and himself, home. He should. He had no call to ask them to try snatching those girls out of Whitecloak hands. He could leave Mara to Whitecloak justice.

"We will be heading west," he announced, and immediately there was a scramble of dousing fires with the tea and fastening pots to saddles. "We will have to press hard. I mean to catch them in Altara, if I can, but if not, there's no telling where they'll lead us. You could see Jehannah or Amador or Ebou Dar before we're done." He affected a laugh. "You'll find out how tough you are if we reach Ebou Dar. They've taverns there where the barmaids skin Illianers for dinner and spit Whitecloaks for sport."

They laughed harder than the jest was worth.

“We won’t worry with you along, my Lord,” Thad cackled, stuffing his tin cup into his saddlebags. His face was wrinkled like crumpled leather. “Why, I hear you had a run-in with the Amyrlin herself once, and—” Jar Silvin kicked him on the ankle, and he rounded on the younger man—gray-haired, but still younger—with a clenched fist. “Why’d you do that, Silvin? You want a broke head, you just—What?” The meaningful glares Silvin and some of the others were giving him finally sank in. “Oh. Oh, yes.” He buried himself in checking the girth straps on his saddle, but no one was laughing anymore.

Bryne forced his face to relax from stoniness. It was time he put the past in the past. Just because a woman whose bed he had shared—and more, he had thought—just because that woman looked at him as though she had never known him was no reason to stop speaking her name. Just because she had exiled him from Caemlyn, on pain of death, for giving her the advice he had sworn to give. . . . If she came a cropper with this Lord Gaebril who had suddenly appeared in Caemlyn, it was no longer any concern of his. She had told him, in a voice as flat and cold as smooth ice, that his name would never be spoken in the palace again, that only his long service kept her from sending him to the headsman for treason. Treason! He needed to keep spirits up, especially if this turned into a long chase.

Hooking a knee around the high cantle of his saddle, he took out his pipe and pouch and filled his pipe with tabac. The bowl was carved with a wild bull collared with the Rose Crown of Andor. For a thousand years that had been the sign of House Bryne; strength and courage in service of the queen. He needed a new pipe; this one was old.

“I didn’t come out of that as well as you might have heard.” He leaned down for one of the men to hand him a twig still glowing from one of the spent fires, then straightened to puff his pipe alight. “It was some three years ago. The Amyrlin was making a progression. Cairhien, Tear, Illian, and finishing up in Caemlyn before returning to Tar Valon. At that time we were having problems with Murandian border lords—as usual.” Laughter rippled; they had all served on the Murandian border at one time or another. “I had sent some of the Guards down to set the Murandians straight on who owned the sheep and cattle on our side of the border. I never expected the Amyrlin to take an interest.” He certainly had their attention; preparations to leave were still going on, but more slowly.

“Siuan Sanche and Elaida closeted themselves with Morgase—” There; he had said her name again, and it did not even smart. “—and when they came out, Morgase was half thunderhead, with lightning shooting out of her eyes, and half ten-year-old who’d been hauled up by her mother for stealing honeycakes. She’s a tough woman, but caught between Elaida and the Amyrlin Seat . . .” He shook his head, and they chuckled; Aes Sedai attentions were one thing none of them envied lords and rulers. “She ordered me to remove all troops from the border with Murandy immediately. I asked her to discuss it with me in private, and Siuan Sanche jumped all over me. In front of half the court, she chewed me up one side and down the other like a raw recruit. Said if I couldn’t do as I was told, she’d use me for fishbait.” He had had to beg her pardon before it was done—in front of everyone, for trying to do as he had been sworn to do—but there was no need to add that. Even at the end he had not been sure that she would not make Morgase behead him, or have it done herself.

“Must have meant to catch herself a mighty big fish,” someone laughed, and others joined in.

“The upshot was,” Bryne went on, “my hide got singed, and the Guards were ordered back from the border. So if you’re looking to me to protect you in Ebou Dar, just remember it’s my opinion those barmaids would hang the Amyrlin out to dry along with the rest of us.” They roared with mirth.

“Did you ever find out what it was about, my Lord?” Joni wanted to know.

Bryne shook his head. “Aes Sedai business of some sort, I expect. They don’t tell the likes of you and me what they are up to.” That earned a few chuckles as well.

They mounted up with an alacrity that belied their ages. *Some of them are no older than me,* he thought wryly. Too old to go chasing after a pretty pair of eyes young enough to be his daughter’s if not his granddaughter’s. *I only want to know why she broke oath,* he told himself firmly. *Only that.*

Raising his hand, he signaled forward, and they headed west, leaving a trail of dust. It would take hard riding to catch up. But he meant to. In Ebou Dar or the Pit of Doom, he would find them.

* * *

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CHAPTER
13

A Small Room in Sienda

Elayne held herself against the swaying of the coach on its leather hinges, trying to ignore Nynaeve's sour face across from her. The curtains were drawn back despite a sprinkling of dust that sometimes whipped through the windows; the breeze blew away some of the late-afternoon heat. Rolling, forested hills streamed past, the woods occasionally broken by short stretches of farmland. A lord's manor, in the fashion of Amadicia, topped one of the hills a few miles from the road, a huge stone foundation fifty feet high with an elaborate wooden structure atop that, all ornate balconies and red-tiled roofs. Once it all would have been stone, but many years had passed since a lord needed a fortress in Amadicia, and the king's law now required the wooden construction. No rebel lord would be able to hold out against the king for long. Of course, the Children of the Light were exempted from that law; they were immune to a number of Amadician laws. She had had to learn something of the laws and customs of other countries from the time she was a child.

Cleared fields dotted the distant hills, too, like brown patches on a mostly green cloth, the men working them seeming ants. Everything looked dry; one bolt of lighting would set a fire that could burn for leagues. But lightning meant rain, and the few clouds in the sky were too high and thin for that. Idly she wondered whether she could make it rain. She had learned considerable control over weather. Still, it was very difficult if you had to begin with nothing.

"Is my Lady bored?" Nynaeve asked acidly. "The way my Lady is staring at the countryside—down my Lady's nose—I think my Lady must want to travel faster." Reaching back over her head, she pushed open a small flap and shouted, "More speed, Thom. Don't argue with me! You hold your tongue, too, Juilin Thief-catcher! I said more speed!"

The wooden flap banged down, but Elayne could still hear Thom muttering loudly. Cursing, very likely; Nynaeve had been barking at the men all day. A moment later his whip cracked, and the coach racketed ahead even faster, rocking so hard that both women bounced on the golden-colored silk seats. The silk had been thoroughly dusted when Thom bought the vehicle, but the padding had long since gone hard. Yet jounced about as she was, the set of Nynaeve's jaw said she would not ask Thom to slow again right after ordering him to go faster.

"Please, Nynaeve," Elayne said. "I—" The other woman cut her off.

"Is my Lady uncomfortable? I know ladies are used to comfort, the sort of thing a poor maid wouldn't know about, but surely my Lady wants to make the next town before dark? So my Lady's maid can serve my Lady's supper and turn down my Lady's bed?" Her teeth clicked shut as the seat coming up met her coming down, and she glowered at Elayne as though it were her fault.

Elayne sighed heavily. Nynaeve had seen the point, back in Mardecin. A lady never traveled without a maid, and two ladies would probably have a pair. Unless they put Thom or Juilin in a dress, that meant one of them. Nynaeve *had* seen that Elayne knew more of how ladies behaved; she had put it very gently, and Nynaeve usually knew sense when she heard it. Usually. But that was back in Mistress Macura's shop, after they had filled the two women with their own horrible concoction.

Leaving Mardecin, they had traveled hard until midnight to reach a small village with an inn, where they had roused the innkeeper from his bed to rent two cramped rooms with narrow beds, waking before first light yesterday to push on, skirting around Amador by a few miles. Neither of them would be taken for anything but what they claimed, on sight, but neither felt comfortable about passing through a great city full of Whitecloaks. The Fortress of the Light was in Amador. Elayne had heard it said that the king reigned in Amador, but Pedron Niall ruled.

The trouble had started last night, at a place called Bellon, on a muddy stream grandly named the Gaean River, some twenty miles or so beyond the capital. The Bellon Ford Inn was larger than the first, and Mistress Alfara, the innkeeper, offered the Lady Morelin a private dining room, which Elayne could not very well refuse. Mistress Alfara had been sure that only the Lady Morelin's maid, Nana, would know how to serve her properly; ladies did require everything just so, the woman said, as well they should, and her girls were simply not used to ladies. Nana would know exactly how the Lady Morelin wanted her bed turned down, and would prepare her a nice bath after a hot day of travel. The list of things that Nana would do exactly right for her mistress had been endless.

Elayne was not sure whether Amadician nobility expected such or Mistress Alfara was just getting work out of an outlander's servant. She had tried to spare Nynaeve, but the woman had been as full of "as you wish" and "my Lady is most particular" as the innkeeper. She would have seemed a fool, or at least odd, to press it. They were trying to avoid attracting undue attention.

As long as they had been in Bellon, Nynaeve had acted the perfect lady's maid in public. In private was another matter. Elayne wished the woman would just revert to herself instead of bludgeoning her with a lady's maid from the Blight. Apologies had been met with "my Lady is too kind" or simply ignored. *I will not apologize again,* she thought for the fiftieth time. *Not for what was not my fault.*

"I have been thinking, Nynaeve." Gripping a hanging strap, she felt like the ball in the children's game called Bounce in Andor, where you tried to keep a colorful wooden ball bouncing up and down on a paddle. She would not ask for the coach to be slowed, though. She could stand it as long as Nynaeve did. The woman was so stubborn! "I want to reach Tar Valon and find out what is going on, but—"

"My Lady has been thinking? My Lady must have a headache from all that effort. I will make my Lady a nice tea of sheepstongue root and red daisy as soon as—"

"Be quiet, Nana," Elayne said, calmly but firmly; it was her very best imitation of her mother. Nynaeve's jaw dropped. "If you pull that braid at me, you can ride on the roof with the baggage." Nynaeve made a strangled sound, trying so hard to talk that nothing came out. Quite satisfactory. "Sometimes you seem to think I am still a child, but you are the one behaving like a child. I did not ask you to wash my back, but I would have had to wrestle to stop you. I did offer to scrub yours in turn, remember. And I offered to sleep in the trundle bed. But you climbed in and wouldn't get out. Stop sulking. If you like, I will be the maid at the next inn." It would probably be a disaster. Nynaeve would shout at Thom in public, or box someone's ears. But anything for a little peace. "We can stop right now and change in the trees."

“We chose the gowns to fit you,” the other woman muttered after a moment. Pushing the flap open again, she shouted, “Slow down! Are you trying to kill us? Fool men!”

There was dead silence from above as the coach’s speed diminished to something much more reasonable, but Elayne would have wagered the two men were talking. She straightened her hair as best she could without a mirror. It was still startling to see those glistening black tresses when she did look in one. The green silk was going to need a thorough brushing itself.

“What was it you were thinking, Elayne?” Nynaeve asked. Crimson stained her cheeks. At least she knew that Elayne was right, but backing down was very likely as much apology as she would ever give.

“We are rushing back to Tar Valon, but do we really have any idea what awaits us in the Tower? If the Amyrlin truly did give those orders . . . I do not really believe it, and I cannot understand it, but I do not intend to walk into the Tower until I do. ‘A fool puts her hand into a hollow tree without finding out what’s inside first.’ ”

“A wise woman, Lini,” Nynaeve said. “We may learn more if I see another bunch of yellow flowers hanging upside down, but until then I think we should behave as though the Black Ajah itself has control of the Tower.”

“Mistress Macura will have sent off another pigeon to Narenwin by now. With descriptions of this coach, and the dresses we took, and most likely Thom and Juilin too.”

“It cannot be helped. This would not have happened if we hadn’t dawdled across Tarabon. We should have taken ship.” Elayne gaped at her accusatory tone, and Nynaeve had the grace to blush again. “Well, done is done. Moiraine knows Siuan Sanche. Perhaps Egwene can ask her if—”

Abruptly the coach lurched to a halt, throwing Elayne forward on top of Nynaeve. She could hear horses screaming and thrashing as she frantically untangled herself, Nynaeve pushing her off as well.

Embracing *saidar,* she put her head out of the window—and released it again in relief. Here was something of a sort that she had seen pass through Caemlyn more than once. A traveling menagerie was camped amid afternoon shadows in a large clearing by the side of the road. A great, black-maned lion lay half-asleep in one cage that took up the entire back of a wagon, while his two consorts paced in the confines of another. A third cage stood open; in front of it a woman was making two black bears with white faces balance themselves on big red balls. Another cage held what appeared to be a large, hairy boar, except that its snout was too pointed and it had toes with claws; that came from the Aiel Waste, she knew, and was called a *capar.* Other cages held other animals, and brightly colored birds, but unlike any menagerie she had ever seen, this one traveled with human performers: two men were juggling ribbon-twined hoops between them, four acrobats were practicing standing on one another's shoulders in a tall column, and a woman was feeding a dozen dogs that walked on their hind legs and did backflips for her. In the background, some other men were putting up two tall poles; she had no idea what they were for.

None of that was what had the horses rearing in their harness and rolling their eyes, though, despite all that Thom could do with the reins. She could smell the lions herself, but it was at three huge, wrinkled gray animals that the horses gazed, wild-eyed. Two were as tall as the coach, with big ears and great curving tusks beside a long nose that dangled to the ground. The third, shorter than the horses if likely as heavy, had no tusks. A baby, she supposed. A woman with pale yellow hair was scratching that one behind the ear with a heavy, hooked goad. Elayne had seen creatures like this before, too. And had never expected to see them again.

A tall, dark-haired man strode out of the camp, of all things in this heat wearing a red silk cloak that he flourished as he made an elegant bow. He was good-looking, with a well-turned leg, and very much aware of both things. "Forgive me, my Lady, if the giant boar-horses frightened your animals." As he straightened, he beckoned two of his men to help quiet the horses, then paused, staring at her, and murmured, "Be still, my heart." It was just loud enough for Elayne to be sure she was supposed to hear. "I am Valan Luca, my Lady, showman extraordinary. Your presence overwhelms me." He made another bow, even more elaborate than the first.

Elayne shared a look with Nynaeve, catching the same amused smile that she knew she herself wore. A man very full of himself, this Valan Luca. His men did seem to be very good at soothing the horses; they still snorted and stamped, but their eyes were not so wide as they had been. Thom and Juilin were staring at the strange animals almost as hard as the horses were.

"Boar-horses, Master Luca?" Elayne said. "Where do they come from?"

"*Giant* boar-horses, my Lady" was the ready reply, "from fabled Shara, where I myself led an expedition into a wilderness full of strange civilizations and stranger sights to trap them. It would fascinate me to tell you of them. Gigantic people twice the size of Ogier." He made grand gestures to illustrate. "Beings with no heads. Birds big enough to carry off a full-grown bull. Snakes that can swallow a man. Cities made of solid gold. Descend, my Lady, and let me tell you."

Elayne had no doubt that Luca would fascinate himself with his own tales, but she certainly doubted that those animals came from Shara. For one thing, even the Sea Folk saw no more of Shara than the walled ports they were confined to; any who went beyond the walls was never seen again. The Aiel knew little more. For another, she and Nynaeve had both seen creatures like these in Falme, during the Seanchan invasion. The Seanchan used them for work animals, and for war.

"I think not, Master Luca," she told him.

"Then let us perform for you," he said quickly. "As you can see, this is no ordinary wandering menagerie, but something entirely new. A private performance. Tumblers, jugglers, trained animals, the strongest man in the world. Even fireworks. We have an Illuminator with us. We are on our way to Ghealdan, and tomorrow we will be gone on the wind. But for a pittance—"

"My mistress said she thinks not," Nynaeve broke in. "She has better things to spend her money on than looking at animals." In fact, she herself kept a tight fist on all their coin, reluctantly doling out what they needed. She seemed to think everything should cost what it had back in her Two Rivers.

"Why would you want to go to Ghealdan, Master Luca?" Elayne asked. The other woman did make rough spots and leave them to her to smooth over. "I hear there is a great deal of trouble there. I hear the army has not been able to suppress this man called the Prophet, with his preaching of the Dragon Reborn. Surely you do not want to travel into riots."

"Greatly exaggerated, my Lady. Greatly exaggerated. Where there are crowds, people want to be entertained. And where people want to be entertained, my show is always welcome." Luca hesitated, then stepped closer to the coach. An embarrassed look crossed his face as he gazed up into Elayne's eyes. "My Lady, the truth of the matter is that you would do me a very great favor by allowing me to perform for you. The fact is that one of the boar-horses caused a little trouble in the next town up the road. It was an accident," he added hastily, "I assure you. They are gentle creatures.

Not dangerous at all. But not only are the people of Sienda unwilling to let me put on a show, or even come to one here . . . Well, it took all of my coin to pay for the damages, and the fines." He winced. "Especially the fines. If you allowed me to entertain you—for a trifle, truly—I would name you as patroness of my show wherever we go across the world, spreading the fame of your generosity, my Lady . . . ?"

"Morelin," she said. "The Lady Morelin of House Samared." With her new hair, she could pass for Cairhienin. She had no time to see his show, as much as she would have enjoyed it another time, and she told him so, adding, "But I will help you a little, if you have no money. Give him something, Nana, to help him on his way to Ghealdan." The last thing she wanted was him "spreading her fame," but helping the poor and those in distress was a duty she would not slight when she had the means, even in a foreign land.

Grumbling, Nynaeve dug a purse out of her belt pouch and dipped into it. She leaned out of the coach enough to press Luca's hand around what she gave him. He looked startled as she said, "If you took a decent job of work, you would not have to beg. Drive on, Thom!"

Thom's whip cracked, and Elayne was thrown back into her seat. "You did not have to be rude," she said. "Or so abrupt. What did you give him?"

"A silver penny," Nynaeve replied calmly, putting the purse back into her pouch. "And more than he deserved."

"Nynaeve," Elayne groaned. "The man probably thinks we were making sport of him."

Nynaeve sniffed. "With those shoulders, a good day's work would not kill him."

Elayne kept silent, though she did not agree. Not exactly. Certainly work would not harm the man, but she did not think there was much available. *Not that I think Master Luca would accept work that didn't allow him to wear that cape.* If she brought it up, though, Nynaeve would probably argue—when she gently pointed out things that Nynaeve did not know, the woman was quite capable of accusing her of having an arrogant manner, or of lecturing—and Valan Luca was hardly worth another altercation so soon after smoothing over the last.

The shadows were lengthening by the time they reached Sienda, a sizable village of stone and thatch with two inns. The first, The King's Lancer, had a gaping hole where the front door had been, and a crowd was watching workmen make repairs. Perhaps Master Luca’s “boar-horse” had not liked the sign, propped up beside the hole now, a charging soldier with lance lowered. It seemed to have been ripped down somehow.

Surprisingly, there were even more Whitecloaks in the crowded dirt streets than back in Mardecin, far more, and other soldiers besides, men in mail and conical steel caps whose blue cloaks bore the Star and Thistle of Amadicia. There must be garrisons nearby. The King’s men and the Whitecloaks did not seem to like each other at all. They either brushed by as if the man wearing the wrong color did not exist, or else with challenging stares little short of drawn swords. Some of the white-cloaked men had red shepherd’s crooks behind the sunbursts on their cloaks. The Hand of the Light, those named themselves, the Hand that seeks out truth, but everyone else called them Questioners. Even the other Whitecloaks kept clear of them.

All in all, it was enough to make Elayne’s stomach clench. But there was no more than another hour’s sunlight left, if that, and that was taking into account the late-summer sunsets. Even driving half the night again would not guarantee another inn ahead, and driving on this late might call attention. Besides, they had reason to halt early today.

She exchanged looks with Nynaeve, and after a moment the other woman nodded and said, “We have to stop.”

When the coach drew up in front of The Light of Truth, Juilin hopped down to open the door, and Nynaeve waited with a deferential look on her face for him to hand Elayne down. She did flash Elayne a smile, though; she would not slide back into sulks. The leather scrip she slung from her shoulder appeared a bit incongruous, but not too much so, Elayne hoped. Now that Nynaeve had acquired a stock of herbs and ointments again, she did not mean to let them out of her sight.

From her first sight of the inn’s sign—a flaring golden sun like that the Children wore on their cloaks—she wished the “boar-horse” had taken exception to this place instead of the other. At least there was no shepherd’s crook behind it. Half the men filling the common room wore snowy white cloaks, their helmets set on the tables in front of them. She took a deep breath and a firm hold on herself not to spin on her heel and leave.

Aside from the soldiers, it was a pleasant inn, with high-beamed ceilings and dark polished paneling. Cut green branches decorated the cold hearths of two large fireplaces, and good cooking smells wafted from the kitchens. The white-aproned serving maids all seemed cheerful as they scurried among the tables with trays of wine and ale and food.

The arrival of a lady created little stir, this close to the capital. Or perhaps it was because of that lord's manor. A few men looked at her; more eyed her "maid" with interest, though Nynaeve's stern frown, when she realized they were staring at her, quickly turned them back to their wine. Nynaeve seemed to think a man looking was a crime, even if he said nothing and did not leer. Given that, sometimes Elayne wondered why she did not wear less becoming clothes. She had had to work very hard to make sure that simple gray dress fit the other woman properly. Nynaeve was hopeless with a needle when it came to fine work.

The innkeeper, Mistress Jharen, was a plump woman with long gray curls, a warm smile, and searching dark eyes. Elayne suspected she could spot a worn hem or a flat purse at ten paces. They obviously passed muster, for she made a deep curtsy, spreading her gray skirts wide, and made effusive welcome, inquiring whether the Lady was on her way to or from Amador.

"From," Elayne replied with a languid hauteur. "The city's balls were most enjoyable, and King Ailron is quite as handsome as they say, which is not always so for kings but I must return to my estates. I require a room for myself and Nana, and something for my footman and driver." Thinking of Nynaeve and the trundle, she added, "I must have two full beds. I need Nana close, and if she has only a trundle, she will keep me awake with her snoring." Nynaeve's respectful face slipped—just a fraction, thankfully—but it was quite true. She had snored terribly.

"Of course, my Lady," the plump innkeeper said. "I have just the thing. But your men will have to bed down in the stable, in the hayloft. I am quite crowded, as you can see. A troupe of vagabonds brought some horrible great animals into the village yesterday and one of them quite destroyed The King's Lancer. Poor Sim has lost half his custom or more, and they've all come here." Mistress Jharen's smile was more satisfaction than commiseration. "I do have one room left, however."

"I am sure it will do very well. If you will send up a light repast and some washwater, I think I shall retire early." There was still sunlight showing in the windows, but she put a hand delicately over her mouth as if stifling a yawn.

"Of course, my Lady. As you wish. This way."

Mistress Jharen seemed to think she had to keep Elayne entertained as she showed them to the second floor. She went on the whole way about the crowding at the inn and how it was a miracle that she had a room left, about the vagrants with their animals and how they had been chased out of town and good riddance to rubbish, about all the nobles who had stayed at her establishment over the years, even the Lord Captain Commander of the Children, once. Why, a Hunter of the Horn had come through just the day before, on his way to Tear, where they said the Stone of Tear had fallen into the hands of some false Dragon, and was it not horrible wickedness that men could do such things? "I hope they never find it." The innkeeper's gray curls swung as she shook her head.

"The Horn of Valere?" Elayne said. "Why ever not?"

"Why, my Lady, if they find it, it means the Last Battle is coming. The Dark One breaking free." Mistress Jharen shivered. "The Light send the Horn is never found. That way, the Last Battle cannot happen, can it?" There did not seem to be much answer to such curious logic.

The bedchamber was snug, if not *exactly* cramped. Two narrow beds with striped coverlets stood to either side of a window looking out onto the street, and little more than walking room separated them from each other or the white-plastered walls. A small table holding a lamp and tinderbox between the beds, a tiny, flowered rug, and a washstand with a small mirror above it completed the furnishings. Everything was clean and well polished, at least.

The innkeeper plumped the pillows and smoothed the coverlets and said the mattresses were the best goose down and the Lady's men would be bringing her chests up by the back stairs and everything would be very cozy, there was a good breeze at night if the Lady opened the window and left the door cracked. As though she would sleep with her door open to a public hallway. Two aproned girls arrived with a large blue pitcher of steaming water and a large lacquered tray covered with a white cloth before Elayne managed to get Mistress Jharen out. The shape of a wine pitcher and two cups mounded up one side of the cloth.

"I think she believed we might go to The King's Lancer even with a hole in it," she said, once the door was firmly shut. Looking around the room, she grimaced. There would barely be room for them and the chests. "I am not certain we shouldn't."

"I do not snore," Nynaeve said in a tight voice.

“Of course you do not. I had to say something though.”

Nynaeve gave a loud harrumph, but all she said was “I am glad I am tired enough to go to sleep. Aside from that forkroot, I did not recognize anything to aid sleep in what that Macura woman had.”

It took Thom and Juilin three trips to bring the iron-bound wooden chests up, grumbling all the while, the way men did, about having to haul them up the narrow stairs at the rear of the inn. They were muttering about being made to sleep in the stables, too, when they brought in the first one between them—it had leaf-shaped hinges; the bulk of their money and valuables were in the bottom of that, including the recovered *ter’angreal*—but one glance at the room and they shared a look and shut their mouths. About that, at least.

“We’re going to see what we can learn in the common room,” Thom said once the last chest was jammed in. Barely enough space remained to reach the washstand.

“And maybe take a walk around the village,” Juilin added. “Men talk when there’s as much dislike as I saw in the street.”

“That will be very good,” Elayne said. They did so want to think they had more to do than haul and carry. It had been so in Tanchico—and Mardecin, of course—and might well be again, but hardly here. “Do be careful not to get into any trouble with the Whitecloaks, now.” A long-suffering look passed between them, just as if she had not seen both with bruised and bleeding faces after jaunts for information, but she forgave them, and smiled at Thom. “I cannot wait to hear what you learn.”

“In the morning,” Nynaeve said firmly. She was looking away from Elayne so hard that she might as well have been glowering at her. “If you disturb us before then for less than Trollocs, you’ll learn the reason why.”

The glance that passed between the two men spoke volumes—it made Nynaeve’s eyebrows rise sharply—but once she had reluctantly handed over a few coins, they left agreeing to let the women sleep untroubled.

“If I cannot even speak to Thom,” Elayne began when they were gone, but Nynaeve cut her off.

“I am not having them walk in on me asleep in my shift.” She was awkwardly undoing the buttons down the back of her dress. Elayne went to help her, and she said, “I can manage. You get the ring out for me.”

With a sniff, Elayne pulled up her skirt to reach the small pocket she had sewn to the underside. If Nynaeve wanted to be peevish, let her; she would not respond even if Nynaeve began ranting again. There were two rings in the pocket. She left the golden Great Serpent she had been given on being raised to Accepted, and took out the stone ring.

All flecks and stripes of red and blue and brown, it was just too large to fit a finger, and flattened and twisted besides. Odd as it seemed, the ring had only one edge; a finger drawn along that edge would circle inside and out before coming back to where it began. It was a *ter'angreal,* and what it did was allow access to *Tel'aran'rhiod,* even for someone who did not have the Talent that Egwene and the Aiel dreamwalkers shared. All that was needed was to sleep with it next to your skin. Unlike the two *ter'angreal* they had recovered from the Black Ajah, it did not require channeling. For all Elayne knew, even a man might be able to use it.

Clad only in her linen shift, Nynaeve threaded the ring onto the leather thong with Lan's signet and her own Great Serpent, then reknotted and hung it back around her neck before lying down atop one of the beds. Carefully tucking the rings in next to her skin, she settled her head on the pillows.

"Is there time before Egwene and the Wise Ones get there?" Elayne asked. "I can never reason out what hour it is in the Waste."

"There is time unless she comes early, which she won't. The Wise Ones keep her on a very short leash. It will do her good, in the long run. She was always headstrong." Nynaeve opened her eyes, looking right at her—at her!—as if that could stand for her as well.

"Remember to tell Egwene to let Rand know that I am thinking of him." She was *not* going to let the woman start a row. "Tell her to . . . tell him that I love him, and only him." There. She had it out.

Nynaeve rolled her eyes in what was really a most offensive way. "If you wish me to," she said dryly, snuggling herself into the pillows.

As the other woman's breathing began to slow, Elayne pushed one of the chests against the door and sat on it to wait. She always hated waiting. It would serve Nynaeve right if she went down to the common room. Thom would probably still be there, and . . . And nothing. He was supposed to be her coachman. She wondered whether Nynaeve had thought of that before agreeing to be the maid. With a sigh, she leaned back against the door. She *did* hate waiting.

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CHAPTER
14

Meetings

The effects of the ring *ter'angreal* did not startle Nynaeve anymore. She was in the place she had been thinking of when sleep closed in, the great chamber in Tear called the Heart of the Stone, within the massive fortress called the Stone of Tear. The gilded stand-lamps were unlit, but pale light seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, to simply be all around her, fading into dim shadows in the distance. At least it was not hot; it never seemed hot or cold in *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

Huge redstone columns ran off in every direction, the vaulted dome far above lost in dim shadows along with more golden lamps hanging on golden chains. The pale floorstones beneath her feet were worn; the High Lords of Tear had come to this chamber—in the waking world, of course—only when their law and custom demanded, but they had come ever since the Breaking of the World. Centered beneath the dome was *Callandor,* apparently a glittering sword made of crystal, driven half its length into the stone of the floor. Just as Rand had left it.

She did not go near *Callandor.* Rand claimed to have woven traps around it with *saidin,* traps that no woman could see. She expected they would be nasty—the best of men could be vicious when they tried to be devious—nasty and just as primed for a woman as for the men who might use that *sa'angreal.* He had meant to guard it against those in the Tower as much as the Forsaken. Aside from Rand himself, the one who touched *Callandor* might die or worse.

That was a fact of *Tel'aran'rhiod.* What was in the waking world was here, too, although the reverse was not always so. The World of Dreams, the Unseen World, reflected the waking world, if sometimes in odd ways, and perhaps other worlds as well. Verin Sedai had told Egwene that there was a pattern woven of worlds, of the reality here and others, just as the weaving of people's lives made up the Pattern of the Ages. *Tel'aran'rhiod* touched them all, yet few could enter except accidentally, for unknowing moments, during their own mundane dreams. Dangerous moments for those dreamers, though they never knew it unless they were very unlucky. Another fact of *Tel'aran'rhiod* was that what happened to the dreamer here happened in the waking world, too. To die in the World of Dreams was to die in fact.

She had the sensation of being watched from the dimnesses between the columns, but it did not trouble her. It was *not* Moghedien. *Imaginary eyes; there* are *no watchers. I told Elayne to ignore them, and here I . . .* Moghedien would certainly do more than look. Even so, she wished she were angry enough to channel. Not that she was frightened, of course. Only not angry. Not frightened at all.

The twisted stone ring felt light, as if it were trying to drift up out of her shift, reminding her that she was wearing only that. As soon as she thought of clothing herself, she was in a dress. It was a trick of *Tel'aran'rhiod* that she liked; in some ways channeling was unnecessary, for here she could do things that she doubted any Aes Sedai had ever done with the Power. It was not the dress she had expected, though; not good stout Two Rivers wool. The high neck trimmed in Jaerecruz lace came right up under her chin, but pale yellow silk draped her in folds that clung revealingly. How many times had she called Taraboner gowns like this indecent when she had worn them to blend into Tanchico? It seemed that she had grown more used to them than she knew.

Giving her braid a sharp pull for the waywardness of her own mind, she left the dress as it was. The gown might not be as she wanted, but she was no flighty girl to go leaping and squealing over it. *A dress is a dress.* She would wear it when Egwene arrived, with whichever of the Wise Ones accompanied her this time, and if any of them said a word . . . *I did not come early to blather at myself about dresses!*

"Birgitte?" Silence answered her, and she raised her voice, though it should not have been necessary. In this place, this particular woman could hear her own name spoken on the other side of the world. "Birgitte?"

A woman stepped out from among the columns, blue eyes calm and proudly confident, her golden hair in a long braid more intricate than Nynaeve's own. Her short white coat and voluminous yellow silk trousers, gathered at the ankles above short boots with raised heels, were garments of more than two thousand years ago that she had taken a liking to. The arrows in the quiver at her side appeared to be silver, and so did the bow she carried.

“Is Gaidal about?” Nynaeve asked. He was usually close by Birgitte, and he made Nynaeve nervous, refusing to acknowledge her existence, scowling when Birgitte spoke to her. It had been something of a shock at first to find Gaidal Cain and Birgitte—long-dead heroes linked in so many stories and legends—in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. But, as Birgitte herself had said, where better for heroes bound to the Wheel of Time to await rebirth than in a dream? A dream that had existed as long as the Wheel. It was they, Birgitte and Gaidal Cain and Rogosh Eagle-eye and Artur Hawkwing and all the others, that the Horn of Valere would summon back to fight at Tarmon Gai’don.

Birgitte’s braid swung as she shook her head. “I have not seen him for some time. I think the Wheel has spun him out again. It always happens so.” Expectation and concern both touched her voice.

If Birgitte was right, then somewhere in the world a boychild had been born, a mewling babe with no knowledge of who he was, yet destined for adventures that would make new legends. The Wheel wove the heroes into the Pattern as they were needed, to shape the Pattern, and when they died they returned here to wait again. That was what it meant to be bound to the Wheel. New heroes could find themselves bound so as well, men and women whose bravery and accomplishments raised them far above the ordinary, but once bound, it was forever.

“How long do you have?” Nynaeve asked. “Years yet, surely.” Birgitte was always tied to Gaidal, had been tied in story after story, in Age after Age, of adventure and a romance that even the Wheel of Time did not break. She was always born after Gaidal; a year, or five, or ten, but after.

“I do not know, Nynaeve. Time here is not like time in the waking world. I met you here last ten days gone, as it seems to me, and Elayne only a day before. What was it for you?”

“Four days and three,” Nynaeve muttered. She and Elayne had been coming to speak with Birgitte as often as they could, though too frequently it had not been possible with Thom and Juilin sharing the camp and standing night guard. Birgitte actually remembered the War of Power, one lifetime of it anyway, and the Forsaken. Her past lives were like books fondly remembered from long ago, the more distant dimmer than the nearer, but the Forsaken stood out. Especially Moghedien.

“You see, Nynaeve? The flow of time here can shift in larger ways, too. It might be months before I am born again, or days. Here, for me. In the waking world it could be years yet before my birth.”

With an effort Nynaeve suppressed her vexation. “Then we mustn’t waste what time we have. Have you seen any of them since we last met?” There was no need to say who.

“Too many. Lanfear is often in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, of course, but I have seen Rahvin and Sammael and Graendal. Demandred. And Semirhage.” Birgitte’s voice tightened at the last name; even Moghedien, who hated her, did not frighten her visibly, but Semirhage was another matter.

Nynaeve shivered as well—the golden-haired woman had told her too much of that one—and realized she was wearing a thick wool cloak, with a deep hood pulled up to hide her face; flushing, she made it disappear.

“None of them have seen you?” she asked anxiously. Birgitte was more vulnerable than herself in many ways, despite her knowledge of *Tel’aran’rhiod*. She had never been able to channel; any of the Forsaken could destroy her as if crushing an ant, without breaking stride. And if she were destroyed here, there would be no rebirth for her ever again.

“I am not so unskilled—or so foolish—as to allow that.” Birgitte leaned on her silver bow; legend said she never missed with that bow and her silver arrows. “They are concerned with each other, not anyone else. I have seen Rahvin and Sammael, Graendal and Lanfear, each stalking the others unseen. And Demandred and Semirhage each shadowing them as well. I have not seen so much of them here since they were freed.”

“They are up to something.” Nynaeve bit her lip in vexed frustration. “But what?”

“I cannot say yet, Nynaeve. In the War of the Shadow, they were always plotting, against each other as often as not, but their work has never boded well for the world, waking or dreaming.”

“Try to find out, Birgitte; as much as you can safely, at any rate. Do not take any risks.” The other woman’s face did not change, but Nynaeve thought she was amused; the fool woman thought as little of danger as did Lan. She wished she could ask about the White Tower, about what Siuan might be scheming, but Birgitte could neither see nor touch the waking world unless she was called there by the Horn. *You are just trying to avoid what you really want to ask!* “Have you seen Moghedien?”

“No,” Birgitte sighed, “but not for lack of trying. In the usual course I can find anyone who knows they are in the World of Dreams; there is a feel, like ripples spreading through the air from them. Or perhaps from their awareness; I do not know, really. I am a soldier, not a scholar. Either she has not come into *Tel’aran’rhiod* since you defeated her, or . . .” She hesitated, and Nynaeve wanted to stop her from saying what she knew would come next, but Birgitte was too strong to dodge unpalatable possibilities. “Or else she knows I have been looking for her. She can hide, that one. She is not called the Spider for nothing.” That was what a *moghedien* had been, in the Age of Legends; a tiny spider that spun its webs in secret places, its bite poisonous enough to kill in heartbeats.

Suddenly very much aware of feeling unseen eyes, Nynaeve shivered heavily. It was not trembling. Just a shiver, not trembling. Still, she kept the sleek Taraboner gown firmly in mind lest she abruptly find herself wearing armor. It was embarrassing enough if that sort of thing happened when she was alone, even more under the cool blue gaze of a woman valiant enough to be a match for Gaidal Cain.

“Can you find her even when she wants to remain hidden, Birgitte?” It was a very great deal to ask, if Moghedien knew she was being hunted; like searching for a lion in high grass armed only with a stick.

The other woman did not hesitate. “Perhaps. I will try.” Hefting her bow, she added, “I must go, now. I do not want to risk being seen by the others when they come.”

Nynaeve put a hand on her arm to stop her. “It would be a help if you let me tell them. That way I could share what you’ve told me about the Forsaken with Egwene and the Wise Ones, and they could tell Rand. Birgitte, he needs to know—”

“You promised, Nynaeve.” Those bright blue eyes were unyielding as ice. “The prescripts say that we must not let anyone know that we reside in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* I have broken many by speaking to you, much more by giving aid, because I cannot stand by and watch you battle the Shadow—I have fought that battle in more lifetimes than I can remember—but I *will* keep as many of the prescripts as I can. You must hold to your promise.”

“Of course I will,” she said indignantly, “unless you release me from it. And I *do* ask you to—”

“No.”

And Birgitte was gone. One moment Nynaeve's hand rested on a white coatsleeve, the next on empty air. In her mind she ran through a few curses she had overheard from Thom and Juilin, the sort she would have scolded Elayne for listening to, much less using. There was no point calling Birgitte's name again. She probably would not come. Nynaeve only hoped she responded the next time she or Elayne called. "Birgitte! I will keep my promise, Birgitte!"

She would have heard that. Perhaps by their next meeting she would know something of Moghedien's activities. Nynaeve almost hoped she would not. If she did, it meant that Moghedien really was stalking *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

Fool woman! "If you don't look for snakes, you cannot complain when one bites you." She really did want to meet Elayne's Lini one day.

The emptiness of the vast chamber oppressed her, all those great polished columns and that sense of being watched from the dimness between. *If there really was anybody there, Birgitte would have known.*

She realized that she was smoothing the silk gown over her hips, and, to take her mind off eyes that were not there, she concentrated on the dress. It had been in good Two Rivers woolens that Lan had first seen her, and a simple embroidered dress that she had been wearing when he professed his love, but she wanted him to see her in gowns like this. It would not be indecent if he was the one seeing her.

A tall standing mirror appeared, casting her reflection as she turned this way and that, even peering back over her shoulder. The yellow folds sheathed her closely, suggesting everything they hid. The Women's Circle in Emond's Field would have hauled her off for a good talking to in private, Wisdom or no Wisdom. Yet it was quite beautiful. Here, alone, she could admit that she had a bit more than gotten used to wearing something like this in public. *You enjoyed it,* she scolded herself. *You are every bit as much a hussy as Elayne seems to be turning into!* But it was beautiful. And maybe not as immodest as she had always said. Not a neckline cut halfway to her knees, like the First of Mayene, for instance. Well, perhaps Berelain's were not that low, but they were still far deeper than respectability required.

She had heard about what Domani women often wore; even Taraboners called *those* indecent. With the thought, the yellow silk folds became rippling flows, with a narrow belt of woven gold. And thin. Her face colored. Very thin. Barely opaque at all, in fact. The gown certainly did more than suggest. If Lan saw her in that, he would not gabble that his love for her was hopeless and that he would not give her widow's weeds for a bridal gift. One glimpse, and his blood would catch fire. He would—

"What under the Light is that you have on, Nynaeve?" Egwene asked in scandalized tones.

Nynaeve leaped straight up, spinning, and when she came down facing Egwene and Melaine—it *would* be Melaine, though none of the Wise Ones would have been any better—the mirror was gone and she was wearing a dark woolen Two Rivers dress thick enough for the depths of winter. Mortified at being startled as much as anything else—it *was* mainly at being startled—she changed the dress instantly, without thinking, flashing back into the gossamer Domani and just as quickly to the yellow Taraboner folds.

Her face flamed. They probably thought her a complete fool. And in front of Melaine, at that. The Wise One was beautiful, with her long red-gold hair and clear green eyes. Not that she cared a whit how the woman looked. But Melaine had been at her last meeting here with Egwene, too, and taunted her about Lan. Nynaeve had lost her temper over it. Egwene claimed they were not taunts, not among Aielwomen, but Melaine had complimented Lan's shoulders, and his hands, and his eyes. What right did that green-eyed cat have to look at Lan's shoulders? Not that she had any doubts of his faithfulness. But he was a man, and far away from her, and Melaine was right there, and . . . Firmly, she put a stop to that line of reasoning.

"Is Lan—?" She thought her face was going to burn off. *Can't you control your own tongue, woman?* But she would not—could not—back away, not with Melaine there. Egwene's bemused smile was bad enough, but Melaine dared to put on a look of understanding. "Is he well?" She tried for cool composure, but it came out strained.

"He is well," Egwene said. "He worries about whether you are safe."

Nynaeve let out a breath she had not realized she was holding. The Waste was a dangerous place even without the likes of Couladin and the Shaido, and the man did not know the meaning of caution. He was worried about her safety? Did the fool man think she could not take care of herself?

"We've finally reached Amadica," she said quickly, hoping to cover herself. *A flapping tongue, and then sighs! The man has stolen my wits!* There was no telling from the others' faces whether she was succeeding. "A village called Sienda, east of Amador. Whitecloaks everywhere, but they don’t look at us twice. It is others we have to worry about.” In front of Melaine, she had to be careful—to bend the truth a little, in fact, here and there—but she told them of Ronde Macura and her odd message, and her trying to drug them. Trying, because she could not make herself admit in front of Melaine that the woman had succeeded. *Light, what am I doing? I’ve never lied to Egwene before in my life!*

The supposed reason—the return of a runaway Accepted—certainly could not be mentioned, not in front of one of the Wise Ones. They thought that she and Elayne were full Aes Sedai. But she had to let Egwene know the truth of that somehow. “It might have to do with some plot concerning Andor, but Elayne and you and I have things in common, Egwene, and I think we should be just as careful as Elayne.” The girl nodded slowly; she looked stunned, as well she might, but she seemed to understand. “A good thing the taste of that tea made me suspicious. Imagine trying to feed forkroot to someone who knows herbs as well as I do.”

“Schemes within schemes,” Melaine murmured. “The Great Serpent is a good sign for you Aes Sedai, I think. Someday you may swallow yourselves by accident.”

“We have news ourselves,” Egwene said.

Nynaeve could see no reason for the girl’s haste. *I am certainly not going to let the woman bait me into losing my temper. And I certainly wouldn’t get angry over her insulting the Tower.* She took her hand away from her braid. What Egwene had to say put temper right out of her head.

Couladin crossing the Spine of the World was surely grave, and Rand following scarcely less so; he was pushing hard for the Jangai Pass, marching from first light until after dusk, and Melaine said they would soon reach it. Conditions in Cairhien were harsh enough without a war between Aiel on its territory. And a new Aiel War to come, surely, if he tried to carry out his mad plan. Mad. Not yet, surely. He had to hang on to sanity, somehow.

How long since I was worrying how to protect him? she thought bitterly. *And now I just want him to stay sane to fight the Last Battle.* Not only for that reason, but for that one, too. He was what he was. *The Light burn me, I’m as bad as Siuan Sanche or any of them!*

It was what Egwene had to say about Moiraine that shocked her. “She *obeys* him?” she said incredulously.

Egwene gave a vigorous nod, in that ridiculous Aiel scarf. “Last night they had an argument—she’s still trying to convince him not to cross the Dragonwall—and finally he told her to stand outside until she cooled down; she looked about to swallow her tongue, but she did it. She stayed out in the night for an hour, anyway.”

“It is not proper,” Melaine said, resettling her shawl firmly. “Men have no more business ordering Aes Sedai about than they do Wise Ones. Even the *Car’a’carn*.”

“They certainly do not,” Nynaeve agreed, then had to clamp her mouth shut to keep from gaping at herself. *What do I care if he makes her dance to his tune? She has made all of us dance to hers often enough.* But it was not proper. *I do not* want *to be Aes Sedai, just to learn more about Healing. I want to stay who I am. Let him order her about!* Still, it was not proper.

“At least he talks with her, now,” Egwene said. “Before, he turned to acid if she came within ten feet of him. Nynaeve, his head swells bigger every day.”

“Back when I thought you’d follow me as Wisdom,” Nynaeve told her wryly, “I taught you how to take swelling down. Best for him if you do it, even if he has turned into the king bull in the pasture. Maybe most because he is. It seems to me that kings—and queens—can be fools when they forget what they are and act like who they are, but they’re worse when they only remember what they are and forget who. Most could do with someone whose only job is to remind them that they eat and sweat and cry the same as any farmer.”

Melaine folded her shawl around her, seeming unsure whether to agree or not, but Egwene said, “I try, but sometimes he doesn’t seem like himself at all, and even when he is, his arrogance is usually too thick a bubble to prick.”

“Do the best you can. Helping him hold on to himself may be the best thing that anyone could do. For him, and the rest of the world.”

That produced a silence. She and Egwene certainly did not like to talk about the eventuality of Rand going mad, and Melaine could not like it any better.

“I have something else important to tell you,” she went on after a moment. “I think the Forsaken are planning something.” It was not the same as telling them about Birgitte. She made it seem that she herself had seen Lanfear and the others. In truth, Moghedien was the only one she could recognize at sight, and maybe Asmodean, though she had only seen him once, and at a distance. She hoped neither of them thought to ask how she knew who was who, or why she thought Moghedien might be skulking about. In actuality, the problem did not arise from that at all.

“Have you been wandering the World of Dreams?” Melaine’s eyes were green ice.

Nynaeve met her level stare for level stare, despite Egwene’s rueful head-shaking. “I could hardly see Rahvin and the rest without it, now could I?”

“Aes Sedai, you know little, and you try too much. You should not have been taught the few pieces that you have. For myself, I sometimes regret that we agreed even to these meetings. Unschooled women should not be allowed in *Tel’aran’rhiod*.”

“I have schooled myself in more than you ever taught me.” Nynaeve kept her voice cool with an effort. “I learned to channel on my own, and I do not see why *Tel’aran’rhiod* should be any different.” It was only stubborn anger that made her say that. She had taught herself to channel, true, but without knowing what it was that she was doing and only after a fashion. Before the White Tower, she had Healed sometimes, but unaware, until Moiraine proved it to her. Her teachers in the Tower had said that was why she needed to be angry in order to channel; she had hidden her ability from herself, afraid of it, and only fury could break through that long-buried fear.

“So you are one of those the Aes Sedai call wilders.” There was a hint of something in the last word, but whether scorn or pity, Nynaeve did not like it. The term was seldom complimentary, in the Tower. Of course, there were no wilders among the Aiel. The Wise Ones who could channel found every last girl with the spark born in her, those who would develop the ability to channel sooner or later even if they did not try to learn. They claimed also to find every girl without the spark who could learn if instructed. No Aiel girl died trying to learn by herself. “You know the dangers of learning the Power without guidance, Aes Sedai. Do not think the dangers of the dream are less. They are just as great, perhaps more for those who venture without knowledge.”

“I am careful,” Nynaeve said in a tight voice. She had not come to be lectured by this sun-haired vixen of an Aiel. “I know what I am doing, Melaine.”

"You know nothing. You are as headstrong as this one was when she came to us." The Wise One gave Egwene a smile that actually seemed affectionate. "We tamed her excessive exuberance, and now she learns swiftly. Though she does have many faults, still." Egwene's pleased grin faded; Nynaeve suspected that grin was why Melaine had added the last. "If you wish to wander the dream," the Aiel woman went on, "come to us. We will tame your zeal, as well, and teach you."

"I do not need taming, thank you very much," Nynaeve said with a polite smile.

"*Aan'allein* will die on the day he learns that you are dead."

Ice stabbed into Nynaeve's heart. *Aan'allein* was what the Aiel called Lan. One Man, it meant in the Old Tongue, or Man Alone, or the Man Who Is an Entire People; exact translations from the Old Tongue were often difficult. The Aiel had a great deal of respect for Lan, the man who would not give up his war with the Shadow, the enemy that had destroyed his nation. "You are a dirty fighter," she muttered.

Melaine quirked an eyebrow. "Do we fight? If we do, then know that in battle there is only winning and losing. Rules against hurting are for games. I want your promise that you will do nothing in the dream without first asking one of us. I know Aes Sedai cannot lie, so I would hear you say it."

Nynaeve gritted her teeth. The words would be easy to say. She did not have to hold to them; she was not bound by the Three Oaths. But it would be admitting that Melaine was right. She did not believe it, and she would not say it.

"She'll not promise, Melaine," Egwene said finally. "When she gets that muley look, she wouldn't come out of the house if you showed her the roof on fire."

Nynaeve spared a piece of glare for her. Muley, indeed! When all she did was refuse to be pushed about like a rag doll.

After a long moment, Melaine sighed. "Very well. But it would be well to remember, Aes Sedai, that you are but a child in *Tel'aran'rhiod.* Come, Egwene. We must go." An amused wince crossed Egwene's face as the two faded away.

Abruptly Nynaeve realized that her clothes had changed. Had been changed; the Wise Ones knew enough of *Tel'aran'rhiod* to alter things about others as well as themselves. She wore a white blouse and a dark skirt, but unlike those of the women who had just gone, this stopped well short of her knees. Her shoes and stockings were gone, and her hair was divided into two braids, one over each ear, woven with yellow ribbons. A rag doll with a carved and painted face sat beside her bare feet. She could hear her teeth grinding. This had happened once before, and she had pried out of Egwene that this was how the Aiel dressed little girls.

In a fury she switched back to the yellow Tarabbner silk—this time it adhered even more closely—and kicked the doll. It sailed away, vanishing in midair. That Melaine probably had her eye on Lan; the Aiel all seemed to think he was some sort of hero. The high neck became a tall lace collar, and the deep narrow neckline showed her cleavage. If that woman so much as smiled at him . . . ! If he . . . ! Suddenly she became aware of her fast-sinking, rapidly widening neckline and hastily brought it back up; not all the way, but enough that she did not have to blush. The dress had grown so tight that she could not move; she took care of that, too.

So she was supposed to *ask permission*, was she? Go begging the Wise Ones before doing anything? Had she not defeated Moghedien? They had been properly impressed at the time, but they seemed to have forgotten.

If she could not use Birgitte to find out what was going on in the Tower, perhaps there was a way she could do it herself.

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CHAPTER

15

What Can Be Learned in Dreams

Carefully Nynaeve formed an image in her mind of the Amyrlin's study, just as she had envisioned the Heart of the Stone on going to sleep. Nothing happened, and she frowned. She should have been taken to the White Tower, to the room she had visualized. Trying again, she imagined a room there that she had visited much more often, if more unhappily.

The Heart of the Stone became the study of the Mistress of Novices, a compact, dark-paneled room full of plain, sturdy furnishings that had been used by generations of women who had held that office. When a novice's transgressions were such that extra hours of scrubbing floors or raking paths would not atone, it was here that she was sent. For an Accepted to receive that summons took a greater transgression, but still she went, on leaden feet, knowing the outcome would be just as painful, perhaps more so.

Nynaeve did not want to look at the room—Sheriam had called her willfully stubborn on her numerous visits—but found herself staring into the mirror on the wall, where novices and Accepted had to look at their own weeping faces while listening to Sheriam lecture about obeying the rules or showing proper respect or whatever. Obeying others' rules and showing required respect had always tripped up Nynaeve. The faint remnants of gilt on the carved frame said it had been there since the War of the Hundred Years, if not the Breaking.

The Taraboner dress was beautiful, but anyone who saw her in it would be suspicious. Even Domani women usually dressed circumspectly when they visited the Tower, and she could not imagine anybody dreaming of herself in the Tower except on her best behavior. Not that she was likely to meet anyone, except perhaps someone who had dreamed herself into *Tel'aran'rhiod* for a few moments; before Egwene, there had not been a woman in the Tower who could enter the World of Dreams unaided since Corianin Nedeal, over four hundred years ago. On the other hand, among the *ter'angreal* stolen from the Tower that were still in the hands of Liandrin and her confederates, eleven had last been studied by Corianin. The two others of Corianin's study, the two that she and Elayne had in hand, both gave access to *Tel'aran'rhiod*; it was best to assume that the rest did, too. There was small chance that Liandrin or any of the others would dream themselves back to the Tower they had fled, but even that chance was too big to risk when it might mean being waylaid. For that matter, she could not really be sure that the stolen *ter'angreal* were all that Corianin had investigated. The records were often murky about *ter'angreal* no one understood, and others could very well be in the hands of Black sisters still in the Tower.

The dress changed completely, became white wool, soft but not of a particularly fine quality, and banded at the hem with seven colored stripes, one for each Ajah. If she saw anyone who did not vanish after a few moments, she would take herself back to Sienda, and they would think she was only one of the Accepted, touching *Tel'aran'rhiod* in her dreams. No. Not the inn, but Sheriam's study. Anyone like that would have to be Black Ajah, and after all, she was supposed to be hunting them.

Completing her disguise, she gripped her suddenly red-gold braid and grimaced at Melaine's face in the mirror. Now, there was a woman she would like to hand over to Sheriam.

The study of the Mistress of Novices was near the novices' quarters, and the wide, tiled hallways flickered with occasional motion past elaborate wall hangings and unlit stand-lamps; flashes of frightened girls all in novice white. A good many novice nightmares would contain Sheriam. She ignored them as she hurried by; they were not in the World of Dreams long enough to see her, or if they did they would simply think her part of their own dream.

It was only a short climb up broad stairs to the Amyrlin's study. As she approached, suddenly Elaida was in front of her, sweaty-faced in a blood-red gown, the stole of the Amyrlin Seat around her shoulders. Or almost the Amyrlin's stole; it had no blue stripe.

Those stern dark eyes focused on Nynaeve. "I am the Amyrlin Seat, girl! Do you not know how to show respect? I will have yo—" In midword, she was gone.

Nynaeve exhaled raggedly. Elaida as Amyrlin; that was a nightmare for certain. *Probably her fondest dream,* she thought wryly. *It will snow in*

Tear before she *ever rises that high.*

The anteroom was much as she remembered it, with one wide table and a chair behind it for the Keeper of the Chronicles. A few chairs sat against the wall for Aes Sedai waiting to speak with the Amyrlin; novices and Accepted stood. The neat array of papers on the table, bound scrolls and large parchments with seals and letters, seemed unlike Leane, though. Not that she was untidy, quite the reverse, yet Nynaeve had always thought she would put everything away at night.

She pushed open the door to the inner room, but her step slowed as she entered. No wonder she had not been able to dream herself here; the room was nothing like what she remembered. That heavily carved table and tall, thronelike chair. The vine-carved stools arranged in a perfect curve in front of the table, not one so much as an inch out of place. Siuan Sanche affected simple furnishings, as if pretending she was still only a fisherman's daughter, and she kept only one extra chair, which she did not always let visitors use. And that white vase full of red roses, rigidly arranged on a pedestal like a monument. Siuan enjoyed flowers, but she preferred a bouquet of colors, like a field of wildflowers in miniature. Above the fireplace had hung a simple drawing of fishing boats in tall reeds. Now there were two paintings, one of which Nynaeve recognized. Rand, battling the Forsaken who had called himself Ba'alzamon, in the clouds above Falme. The other, on three wooden panels, portrayed scenes that linked to nothing she could pull out of her memory.

The door opened, and Nynaeve's heart leaped into her throat. A red-haired Accepted she had never seen before stepped into the room and stared at her. She did not wink out of existence. Just as Nynaeve was preparing to leap back to Sheriam's study, the red-haired woman said, "Nynaeve, if Melaine knew you were using her face, she'd do more than put you in a child's dress." And just that suddenly she was Egwene, in her Aiel garb.

"You nearly frightened ten years out of me," Nynaeve muttered. "So the Wise Ones have finally decided to let you come and go as you please? Or is Melaine behind—"

"You should be frightened," Egwene snapped, color rising in her cheeks. "You are a fool, Nynaeve. A child playing in the barn with a candle."

Nynaeve gaped. *Egwene* berating *her?* "You listen to me, Egwene al'Vere. I'll not take that from Melaine, and I won't take it—"

“You had best take it from someone, before you get yourself killed.”

“I—”

“I ought to take that stone ring away from you. I should have given it to Elayne and told her not to let you use it at all.”

“Told her not—!”

“Do you think Melaine was exaggerating?” Egwene said sternly, shaking her finger almost exactly like Melaine. “She was not, Nynaeve. The Wise Ones have told you the simple truth about *Tel’aran’rhiod* time and again, but you seem to think they’re fools whistling in a high wind. You are supposed to be a grown woman, not a silly little child. I vow, whatever sense you once had in your head seems to have vanished like a puff of smoke. Well, find it, Nynaeve!” She sniffed loudly, rearranging the shawl on her shoulders. “Right now you are trying to play with the pretty flames in the fireplace, too foolish to realize you might fall in.”

Nynaeve stared in amazement. They argued often enough, but Egwene had never ever tried to dress her down like a girl caught with her fingers in the honey jar. Never! The dress. It was the Accepted’s dress she was wearing, and someone else’s face. She changed herself back to herself, in a good blue wool that she had often worn for Circle meetings and to put the Council straight. She felt robed in all her old authority as Wisdom. “I am well aware of how much I don’t know,” she said levelly, “but those Aiel—”

“Do you realize you could dream yourself into something you could not get out of? Dreams are real here. If you let yourself drift into a fond dream, it could trap you. You’d trap yourself. Until you died.”

“Will you—?”

“There are nightmares walking *Tel’aran’rhiod,* Nynaeve.”

“Will you let me speak?” Nyaneve barked. Or rather, she tried to bark it; there was rather too much frustrated pleading in there to suit her. Any at all would have been too much.

“No, I will not,” Egwene said firmly. “Not until you want to say something worth listening to. I said nightmares, and I meant nightmares, Nynaeve. When someone has a nightmare while in *Tel’aran’rhiod,* it is real, too. And sometimes it survives after the dreamer has gone. You just don’t realize, do you?”

Suddenly rough hands enveloped Nynaeve’s arms. Her head whipped from side to side, eyes bulging. Two huge, ragged men lifted her into the air, faces half-melted ruins of coarse flesh, drooling mouths full of sharp, yellowed teeth. She tried to make them vanish—if a Wise One dreamwalker could, so could she—and one of them ripped her dress open down the front like parchment. The other seized her chin in a horny, callused hand and twisted her face toward him; his head bent toward her, mouth opening. Whether to kiss or bite, she did not know, but she would rather die than allow either. She flailed for *saidar* and found nothing; it was horror filling her, not anger. Thick fingernails dug into her cheeks, holding her head steady. Egwene had done this, somehow. Egwene. "Please, Egwene!" It was a squeal, and she was too terrified to care. "Please!"

The men—creatures—vanished, and her feet thudded to the floor. For a moment all she could do was shudder and weep. Hastily she repaired the damage to her dress, but the scratches from long fingernails remained on her neck and chest. Clothing could be mended easily in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* but whatever happened to a human . . . Her knees shook so badly that it was all she could do to stay upright.

She half-expected Egwene to comfort her, and for once she would have accepted it gladly. But the other woman only said, "There are worse things here, but nightmares are bad enough. I made these, and unmade them, but even I have trouble with those I just find. And I did not try to hold them, Nynaeve. If you knew how to unmake them, you could have."

Nynaeve tossed her head angrily, refusing to scrub the tears from her cheeks. "I could have dreamed myself away. To Sheriam's study, or back to my bed." She did not sound sulky. Of course she did not.

"If you had not been too scared spitless to think of it," Egwene said dryly. "Oh, take that sullen look off your face. It looks silly on you."

She glared at the other woman, but it did not work as it usually did. Instead of flaring into argument, Egwene merely arched an eyebrow at her. "None of this looks like Siuan Sanche," Nynaeve said to change the subject. What had gotten into the girl?

"It doesn't," Egwene agreed, looking around the room. "I see why I had to come by way of my old room in the novices' quarters. But I suppose people do decide to try something new sometimes."

"That is what I mean," Nynaeve told her patiently. She had not sounded sulky, and she had not looked sullen. It was ridiculous. "The woman who furnished this room doesn't look at the world the same as the woman who chose what used to be here. Look at those paintings. I don't know what the triple thing is, but you can recognize the other as well as I." They had both seen it happen.

"Bonwhin, I should say," Egwene said thoughtfully. "You never did listen to the lectures as you should. It is a triptych."

"Whatever it is, it's the other that's important." She had listened to the Yellows well enough. The rest was a pack of useless nonsense often as not. "It seems to me that the woman who hung it wants to be reminded how dangerous Rand is. If Siuan Sanche has turned against Rand for some reason . . . Egwene, this could be far worse than just her wanting Elayne back in the Tower."

"Perhaps," Egwene said judiciously. "Maybe the papers will tell us something. You search in here. When I finish with Leane's desk, I will help you."

Nynaeve stared indignantly at Egwene's back as she left. *You search in here, indeed!* Egwene had no right to give her orders. She ought to march right after her and tell her so in no uncertain terms. *Then why are you standing here like a lump?* she asked herself angrily. Searching the papers was a good idea, and she might as well do so in here as out there. In fact, the Amyrlin's desk was more likely to hold something important. Grumbling to herself about what she would do to set Egwene straight, she stalked to the thickly carved table, kicking her skirts with every step.

There was nothing on the table except three ornately lacquered boxes, arrayed with painful precision. Remembering the sorts of traps that could be set by someone wanting to insure privacy, she made a long stick to push open the hinged lid of the first, a gold and green thing decorated with wading herons. It was a writing case, with pens and ink and sand. The largest box, with red roses twining through golden scrolls, held twenty or more delicate carvings of ivory and turquoise, animals and people, all laid out on pale gray velvet.

As she pushed up the lid of the third box—golden hawks fighting among white clouds in a blue sky—she noticed that the first two were closed again. Things like that happened here; everything seemed to want to remain as it was in the waking world, and on top of that, if you took your eyes away for a moment, details could be different when you looked back.

The third box did hold documents. The stick vanished, and she gingerly lifted out the top sheet of parchment. Formally signed "Joline Aes Sedai," it was a humble request to serve a set of penances that made

Nynaeve wince just scanning them rapidly. Nothing there that mattered, except to Joline. A scrawl at the bottom said “approved” in angular script. As she reached to put the parchment down, it faded away; the box was closed, too.

Sighing, she opened it again. The papers inside looked different. Holding the lid, she lifted them out one by one and read quickly. Or tried to read. Sometimes the letters and reports vanished while she was still picking them up, sometimes when she was no more than halfway down a page. If they had a salutation, it was simply, “Mother, with respect.” Some were signed by Aes Sedai, others by women with other titles, nobles, or no honorific at all. None of it seemed to bear on the matter at hand. The Marshal General of Saldaea and his army could not be found, and Queen Tenobia was refusing to cooperate; she managed to finish that report, but it assumed that the reader knew why the man was not in Saldaea and what the queen was supposed to be cooperating about. No report had come from any Ajah’s eyes-and-ears in Tanchico for three weeks; but she got no further than that one fact. Some trouble between Illian on one side and Murandy on the other was abating, and Pedron Niall was claiming credit; even in the few lines she got she could see the writer’s teeth gnashing. The letters were all no doubt very important, those she was able to hurry through and those that faded away under her eyes, but of no use to her at all. She had just begun what seemed to be a report on a suspected—that was the word used—gathering of Blue sisters, when a wretched cry of “Oh, Light, no!” came from the outer room.

Darting for the door, she made a stout wooden club appear in her hands, its head bristling with spikes. But when she dashed in expecting to find Egwene defending herself, the woman was standing behind the Keeper’s table staring at nothing. With a look of horror on her face, to be sure, but still unharmed and unthreatened that Nynaeve could see.

Egwene gave a start at the sight of her, then gathered herself visibly. “Nynaeve, Elaida is Amyrlin Seat.”

“Don’t be a goose,” Nynaeve scoffed. Yet the other room, so unlike Siuan Sanche . . . “You’re imagining things. You must be.”

“I had a parchment in my hands, Nynaeve, signed ‘Elaida do Avriny a’Roihan, Watcher of the Seals, Flame of Tar Valon, The Amyrlin Seat,’ and sealed with the Amyrlin’s seal.”

Nynaeve’s stomach tried to flutter up into her chest. “But how? What has happened to Siuan? Egwene, the Tower doesn’t depose an Amyrlin except for something serious. Only two in nearly three thousand years.”

“Maybe Rand was serious enough.” Egwene’s voice was steady, though her eyes were still too wide. “Maybe she became ill with something the Yellows couldn’t Heal, or fell down the stairs and broke her neck. What matters is that Elaida is Amyrlin. I don’t think she will support Rand as Siuan did.”

“Moiraine,” Nynaeve muttered. “So sure that Siuan would put the Tower behind him.” She could not imagine Siuan Sanche dead. She had hated the woman often, been the slightest bit afraid of her on occasion—she could admit that now, to herself anyway—yet she had respected her, too. She had thought that Siuan would last forever. “Elaida. Light! She’s as mean as a snake and as cruel as a cat. There’s no telling what she might do.”

“I am afraid I have a clue.” Egwene pressed both hands to her stomach as though to quell flutters of her own. “It was a very short document. I managed to read it all. ‘All loyal sisters are required to report the presence of the woman Moiraine Damodred. She is to be detained if possible, by whatever means are necessary, and returned to the White Tower for trial on charge of treason.’ The same sort of language that was apparently used about Elayne.”

“If Elaida wants Moiraine arrested, it must mean she knows Moiraine has been helping Rand, and she does not like it.” Talking was good. Talking kept her from sicking up. Treason. They stilled women for that. She had wanted to bring Moiraine down. Now Elaida was going to do it for her. “She certainly won’t support Rand.”

“Exactly.”

“Loyal sisters. Egwene, that fits with the Macura woman’s message. Whatever happened to Siuan, the Ajahs have split over Elaida as Amyrlin. It must be.”

“Yes, of course. Very good, Nynaeve. I did not see that.”

Her smile was so pleased that Nynaeve smiled back. “There’s a report on Siu—on the Amyrlin’s writing table about a gathering of Blues. I was just reading it when you shouted. I’ll wager the Blues didn’t support Elaida.” The Blue and Red Ajahs had a sort of armed truce at the best of times, and came near going for each other’s throats at the worst.

But when they went back into the inner room, the report was not to be found. There were plenty of documents—Joline's letter had reappeared; a brief reading made Egwene's eyebrows climb nearly to her hair—but not the one that they wanted.

"Can you remember what it said?" Egwene asked.

"I had just gotten a few lines when you shouted, and . . . I just can't remember."

"Try, Nynaeve. Try very hard."

"I am, Egwene, but it will not come. I *am* trying."

What she was doing hit Nynaeve like a sudden hammer between the eyes. Excusing herself. To Egwene, a girl whose bottom she had switched for throwing a tantrum not more than two years ago. And a moment earlier she had been proud as a hen with a new egg because Egwene was pleased with her. She remembered quite clearly the day when the balance between them had shifted, when they ceased being the Wisdom and the girl who fetched when the Wisdom said fetch, becoming instead just two women far from home. It seemed that balance had shifted further, and she did not like it. She was going to have to do something to move it back where it belonged.

The lie. She had deliberately lied to Egwene for the first time ever today. That was why her moral authority had vanished, why she was floundering around, unable to assert herself properly. "I drank the tea, Egwene." She forced each word deliberately. She had to force them. "The Macura woman's forkroot tea. She and Luci hauled us upstairs like sacks of feathers. That is about how much strength we had between us. If Thom and Juilin hadn't come to pull us out by the scruffs of our necks, we would probably be there still. Or else on our way to the Tower, so full of forkroot we wouldn't wake up until we got here." Taking a deep breath, she tried for a tone of righteous firmness, but it was difficult when you had just confessed to having been an utter fool. What came out sounded much more tentative than she liked. "If you tell the Wise Ones about this—especially that Melaine—I'll box your ears."

Something in that should have sparked Egwene's ire. It seemed odd to want to start a row—usually their quarrels were over Egwene refusing to see reason, and they seldom ended pleasantly, since the girl had formed the habit of continuing to refuse—but that was certainly better than this. Yet

Egwene only smiled at her. An amused smile. A *condescending* amused smile.

“I more than suspected as much, Nynaeve. You used to drone on about herbs day and night, but you never mentioned any plant called forkroot. I was sure you’d never heard of it until that woman mentioned it. You’ve always tried to put the best face on things. If you fell head first into a pigsty, you’d try to convince everybody you did it on purpose. Now, what we have to decide—”

“I do no such thing,” Nynaeve spluttered.

“You certainly do. Facts are facts. You might as well stop whining about it and help me decide—”

Whining! This was not going at all the way she wanted. “They are no such thing. Not facts, I mean. I have never done what you said.”

For a moment Egwene stared at her silently. “You will not let go of this, will you? Very well. You lied to me . . .”

“It was not a lie,” she muttered. “Not exactly.”

The other woman ignored her interruption. “. . . And you lie to yourself. Do you remember what you made me drink the last time I lied to you?” Suddenly a cup was in her hand, full of viscous sickly green liquid; it looked as if it had been scooped from a scummy stagnant pond. “The *only* time I ever lied to you. The memory of that taste was an effective discouragement. If you cannot tell the truth even to yourself . . .”

Nynaeve took a step back before she could stop herself. Boiled catfern and powdered mavinsleaf; her tongue writhed at just the thought. “I did not *really* lie, actually.” Why was she making excuses? “I just didn’t tell the whole truth.” *I am the Wisdom! I was the Wisdom; that ought to count for something still.* “You cannot really think . . .” *Just tell her. You’re not the child here, and you certainly are not going to drink.* “Egwene, I—” Egwene pushed the cup nearly under her nose; she could smell the acrid tang. “All right,” she said hastily. *This can’t be happening!* But she could not take her eyes off that brimming cup, and she could not stop the words tumbling out. “Sometimes I try to make things look better for myself than they were. Sometimes. But never anything important. I’ve never—lied—about anything important. Never, I swear. Only small things.” The cup vanished, and Nynaeve heaved a sigh of relief. *Fool, fool woman! She couldn’t have made you drink it! What is wrong with you?*

“What we have to decide,” Egwene said as if nothing at all had happened, “is who to tell. Moiraine certainly has to know, and Rand, but if everyone hears of it . . . The Aiel are peculiar, about Aes Sedai no less than anything else. I think they’ll follow Rand as He Who Comes With the Dawn in spite of anything, but once they learn the White Tower is against him, maybe they won’t be so fervent.”

“They’ll learn sooner or later,” Nynaeve muttered. *She could* not *have made me drink it!*

“Later better than sooner, Nynaeve. So don’t you go bursting out in a temper and telling the Wise Ones about this at our next meeting. In fact, it would be best if you didn’t mention this visit to the Tower at all. That way maybe you can keep it secret.”

“I am not a fool,” Nynaeve said stiffly, and felt a slow burn when Egwene quirked that eyebrow at her again. She was not about to bring the visit up with the Wise Ones. Not because it was easier defying them behind their backs. Nothing like that. And she was *not* trying to put a good face on things. It was not fair that Egwene could leap about *Tel’aran’rhiod* however she wanted, while she had to put up with lectures and bullying.

“I know you are not,” Egwene said. “Unless you let your temper get the better of you. You need to hold your temper and keep your wits about you if you’re right about the Forsaken, especially Moghedien.” Nynaeve glowered at her, opening her mouth to say that she could too keep her temper and she would smack Egwene’s ears if she thought differently, but the other woman gave her no chance. “We must find that gathering of Blue sisters, Nynaeve. If they oppose Elaida, maybe—just maybe—they will support Rand the way Siuan did. Was a town mentioned, or a village? A country, even?”

“I think . . . I cannot remember.” She struggled to take the defensive note out of her voice. *Light, I confessed everything, made a fool of myself, and it’s only made things worse!* “I will keep trying.”

“Good. We must find them, Nynaeve.” For a moment Egwene studied her, while she refused to repeat herself. “Nynaeve, take care concerning Moghedien. Do not go rushing off like a bear in spring just because she got away from you in Tanchico.”

“I am not a fool, Egwene,” Nynaeve said carefully. It was frustrating having to hold her temper, but if all Egwene would do was ignore it or scold her, there was nothing to be gained beyond looking a bigger ninny-head than she did already.

“I know. You said that. Just be sure you remember it. Be careful.” Egwene did not fade away this time; she vanished, as suddenly as Birgitte.

Nynaeve stared at the spot where she had been, running through her head all the things she should have said. Finally she realized that she could stand there all night; she was repeating herself, and the time for saying anything was past. Grumbling under her breath, she stepped out of *Tel’aran’rhiod*, back to her bed in Sienda.

Egwene’s eyes popped open in near total darkness, broken only by a little moonlight streaming in through the smoke hole. She was glad to be under a pile of blankets; the fire was out, and freezing cold filled the tent. Her breath turned to mist in front of her face. Without raising her head, she scanned the interior. No Wise Ones. She was still alone.

That was her biggest fear on these solitary excursions into *Tel’aran’rhiod*: returning to find Amys or one of the others waiting for her. Well, maybe not her biggest fear—the dangers in the World of Dreams were every bit as great as she had told Nynaeve—but a big one nonetheless. It was not punishment that frightened her, not the sort that Bair doled out. Had she wakened to find a Wise One staring at her, she would have accepted such gladly, but Amys had told her near the beginning that if she entered *Tel’aran’rhiod* without one of them accompanying her, they would send her away, refuse to teach her any longer. That made her quail far more than anything else they could do. But even so, she had to push ahead. As rapidly as they taught, they were not rapid enough. She wanted to know now, to know everything.

Channeling, she lit her lamp and put flames in the firepit; nothing remained for them to burn, but she tied the weave off. She lay there, watching her breath mist in front of her mouth, and waited for warmth enough to dress. It was late, but perhaps Moiraine would still be awake.

What had happened with Nynaeve still amazed her. *I think she’d actually have drunk, if I had pressed her.* She had been so afraid that Nynaeve would learn that she certainly did not have the Wise Ones’ permission to jaunt about in the World of Dreams alone, so sure that the flush of embarrassment had given her away, that all she could think of was keeping Nynaeve from speaking, keeping her from winkling out the truth.

And she had been so sure that Nynaeve would find out anyway—the woman was quite capable of turning her in and saying it was for her own good—that all she could do was talk, try to keep the focus on whatever Nynaeve was doing wrong. No matter how angry Nynaeve made her, she could not seem to bring up a shout. And with all of that, somehow, she had gained the upper hand.

Come to think of it, Moiraine seldom raised her voice, and when she did she was least effective in having what she wanted done. It had been so even before she began behaving so strangely with Rand. The Wise Ones never yelled at anyone, either—except each other, sometimes—and for all their grumping about the chiefs no longer listening, they still seemed to get their way much more often than not. There was an old saying that she had never really understood before: "He strains to hear a whisper who refuses to hear a shout." She would not shout at Rand again. A quiet, firm, womanly voice, that was the thing. For that matter, she ought not to shout at Nynaeve, either; she *was* a woman, not a girl throwing tantrums.

She found herself giggling. She especially ought not to raise her voice with Nynaeve when speaking calmly produced such results.

The tent finally seemed warm enough, and she scampered out, dressing quickly. She still had to break ice in her water pitcher before she could wash the sleep out of her mouth. Tossing the dark woolen cloak about her shoulders, she untied the strands of Fire—Fire by itself was dangerous to leave tied—and as the flames vanished, ducked out of the tent. Cold closed on her like an icy vise as she hurried through the camp.

Only the nearest tents were really visible to her, low, shadowed shapes that could have been part of the rugged earth, save that the camp extended for miles into the mountainous land to either side. These tall jagged peaks were not the Spine of the World; that was much higher, and lay days to the west yet.

She approached Rand's tent hesitantly. A sliver of light showed along the tent flap. A Maiden seemed to rise out of the ground as she came closer, horn bow on her back, quiver at her waist, and spears and buckler in hand. Egwene could not make out any others in the darkness, but she knew they were there, even here surrounded by six clans all claiming loyalty to the *Car'a'carn.* The Miagoma were somewhere to the north, paralleling their march; Timolan would not say what his intentions were. Where the other clans were, Rand did not seem to care. His attention was all on the race for Jangai Pass.

"Is he awake, Enaila?" she asked.

Moonshadows shifted on the Maiden's face as she nodded. "He does not sleep enough. A man cannot go without rest." She sounded for all the world like a mother fretting over her son.

A shadow beside the tent stirred, became Aviendha with her shawl wrapped around her. She did not seem to feel the cool, only the hour. "I would sing him a lullaby, if I thought it might work. I have heard of women being kept awake all night by an infant, but a grown man should know that others would like to have their blankets." She and Enaila shared a quiet chuckle.

Shaking her head over Aiel strangeness, Egwene bent to peer through the crack. Several lamps lit the interior. He was not alone. Natael's dark eyes looked haggard, and he stifled a yawn. He at least wanted sleep. Rand lay sprawled close by one of the gilded oil lamps, reading a battered leather-bound book. One translation or another of the Prophecies of the Dragon, if she knew him at all.

Abruptly he flipped back through the pages, read, then laughed. She tried to tell herself there was nothing of madness in that laugh, only bitterness. "A fine joke," he told Natael, snapping the book shut and tossing it to him. "Read page two hundred eighty-seven and page four hundred, and tell me if you don't agree."

Egwene's mouth tightened as she straightened. He really should be more careful with a book. She could not speak to him, not in front of the gleeman. It was a shame that he had to use a man he barely knew for company. No. He had Aviendha, and the chiefs often enough, and Lan every day, and Mat sometimes. "Why don't you join them, Aviendha? If you were there, maybe he'd want to talk of something besides that book."

"He wanted to talk with the gleeman, Egwene, and he seldom does that in front of me or anyone. Had I not left, he and Natael would have."

"Children are a great worry, I have heard." Enaila laughed. "And sons the worst. You may find out the truth of this for me, now that you have given up the spear." Aviendha gave her a moonlit frown and stalked back to her place against the side of the tent like an offended cat. Enaila seemed to think that funny, too; she clutched her sides laughing.

Muttering to herself about Aiel humor—she almost never understood it—Egwene made her way to Moiraine's tent, not far from Rand's. Here, too, there was a sliver of light, and she knew that the Aes Sedai was awake. Moiraine was channeling; only tiny amounts of the Power, but still enough for Egwene to sense. Lan lay sleeping nearby, wrapped in his Warder's cloak; except for his head and boots, the rest of him seemed part of the night. Gathering her cloak, she held her skirts up and tiptoed so as not to wake him.

His breathing did not change, but something made her look at him again. Moonlight glinted on his eyes, open and watching her. Even as she turned her head, they closed again. Not another muscle stirred; he might never have wakened at all. Sometimes the man unnerved her. Whatever Nynaeve saw in him, she could not see.

Kneeling beside the tent flap, she peered in. Moiraine sat surrounded by the glow of *saidar,* the small blue stone that usually hung on her forehead dangling from her fingers in front of her face. It shone, adding a bit to the light of a single lamp. The firepit held only ashes; even the smell was gone.

"May I come in?"

She had to repeat herself before Moiraine answered. "Of course." The light of *saidar* faded away, and the Aes Sedai began fastening the fine golden chain back into her hair.

"You were eavesdropping on Rand?" Egwene settled herself beside the other woman. It was as cold in the tent as it was outside. She channeled flames atop the ashes in the firepit and tied the flow. "You said you would not do it again."

"I said that since the Wise Ones could watch his dreams, we should allow him some privacy. They have not asked again since he shut them out, and I have not offered. Remember that they have their own goals, which may not be those of the Tower."

As quickly as that, they had come to it. Egwene was still not sure how to tell what she knew without betraying herself to the Wise Ones, but perhaps the only method was to just tell it and then feel her way. "Elaida is Amyrlin, Moiraine. I do not know what has happened to Siuan."

"How do you know?" Moiraine said quietly. "Did you learn something dreamwalking? Or has your Talent as a Dreamer finally manifested itself?"

That was her way out. Some of the Aes Sedai in the Tower thought that she might be a Dreamer, a woman whose dreams foretold the future. She did have dreams that she knew were significant, but learning to interpret them was another matter. The Wise Ones said the knowledge had to come from within, and none of the Aes Sedai had been any more help. Rand sitting down in a chair, and somehow she knew that the chair's owner would be murderously angry at having her chair taken; that the owner was a woman was as much as she could pick out of that, and not a thing more. Sometimes the dreams were complex. Perrin, lounging with Faile on his lap, kissing her while she played with the short-cut beard that he wore in the dream. Behind them two banners waved, a red wolf's head and a crimson eagle. A man in a bright yellow coat stood near to Perrin's shoulder, a sword strapped to his back; in some way she knew that he was a Tinker, though no Tinker would even touch a sword. And every bit of it except the beard seemed important. The banners, Faile kissing Perrin, even the Tinker. Every time he moved closer to Perrin it was as if a chill of doom shot through everything. Another dream. Mat throwing dice with blood streaming down his face, the wide brim of his hat pulled low so she could not see his wound, while Thom Merrilin put his hand into a fire to draw out the small blue stone that now dangled on Moiraine's forehead. Or a dream of a storm, great dark clouds rolling without wind or rain while forked lightning bolts, every one identical, rent the earth. She had the dreams, but as a Dreamer she was a failure so far.

"I saw an arrest warrant for you, Moiraine, signed by Elaida as Amyrlin. And it was no ordinary dream." All true. Just not all of the truth. She was suddenly glad that Nynaeve was not there. *I'd be the one staring at a cup, if she was.*

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. Perhaps it will not matter so much if Rand takes the Aiel across the Dragonwall. I doubt that Elaida has continued to approach rulers, even if she knows that Siuan was doing so."

"Is that all you can say? I think Siuan was your friend once, Moiraine. Can't you shed a tear for her?"

The Aes Sedai looked at her, and that cool, serene gaze told her how far she had to go before she could use that title herself. Sitting, Egwene was nearly a head taller, and she was stronger in the Power besides, but there was more to being Aes Sedai than strength. "I have no time for tears, Egwene. The Dragonwall is not many days distant now, and the Alguenya.

. . . Siuan and I were friends, once. In a few months it will be twenty-one years since we began the search for the Dragon Reborn. Only the two of us, newly raised Aes Sedai. Sierin Vayu was raised Amyrlin shortly after, a Gray with more than a touch of Red in her. Had she learned what we intended, we would have spent the rest of our lives doing penance with Red sisters watching us even while we slept. There is a saying in Cairhien, though I have heard it as far away as Tarabon and Saldaea. ‘Take what you want, and pay for it.’ Siuan and I took the path we wanted, and we knew we would have to pay for it eventually.”

“I do not see how you can be so calm. Siuan could be dead, or even stilled. Elaida will either oppose Rand altogether or try to hold him somewhere until Tarmon Gai’don; you know she’ll never let a man who can channel run free. At least not everyone is behind Elaida. Some of the Blue Ajah are gathering somewhere—I don’t know where yet—and I think others have left the Tower, too. Nynaeve said that she was given a message about all sisters being welcome to return to the Tower by an eyes-and-ears of the Yellow. If Blues and Yellows have both gone, others must have. And if they oppose Elaida, they may support Rand.”

Moiraine sighed, a soft sound. “Do you expect me to be happy that the White Tower has split apart? I am Aes Sedai, Egwene. I gave my life to the Tower long before I ever suspected the Dragon would be Reborn in my lifetime. The Tower has been a bulwark against the Shadow for three thousand years. It has guided rulers to wise decisions, stopped wars before they began, halted wars that did begin. That humankind even remembers that the Dark One waits to escape, that the Last Battle will come, is because of the Tower. The Tower, whole and united. I could almost wish that every sister had sworn to Elaida, whatever happened to Siuan.”

“And Rand?” Egwene kept her voice just as steady, just as smooth. The flames were beginning to put a little warmth into the air, but Moiraine had just added her own chill. “The Dragon Reborn. You yourself said that he cannot be ready for Tarmon Gai’don unless he is allowed his freedom, both to learn and to affect the world. The Tower united could take him prisoner despite all the Aiel in the Waste.”

Moiraine smiled a small smile. “You learn. Cool reason is always better than hot words. But you forget that only thirteen sisters linked can shield any man from *saidin*, and even if they do not know the trick of tying flows, fewer can hold that shield.”

"I know you are not giving up, Moiraine. What do you mean to do?"

"I mean to deal with the world as I find the world, for as long as I can. At least Rand will be—easier to be around—now that I no longer need try to turn him from what he wants. I suppose I should be happy that he does not make me fetch his wine. He does listen most of the time, even if he seldom gives any sign what he thinks of what I tell him."

"I will leave you to tell him about Siuan and the Tower." That would avoid awkward questions; with Rand as bigheaded as he was, he might want to know more about her Dreaming than she could invent. "There's something else. Nynaeve has seen Forsaken in *Tel'aran'rhiod.* She mentioned every last one still alive except Asmodean and Moghedien. Including Lanfear. She thinks they are plotting something, perhaps together."

"Lanfear," Moiraine said after a moment.

They both knew that Lanfear had visited Rand in Tear, and maybe other times that he had not told them of. No one had much knowledge of the Forsaken except the Forsaken themselves—only fragments of fragments remained in the Tower—but it was known that Lanfear had loved Lews Therin Telamon. They two, and Rand, knew that she still did.

"With luck," the Aes Sedai went on, "we will not have to worry about Lanfear. The others Nynaeve saw are another matter. You and I must keep as close a watch as we can. I wish more of the Wise Ones could channel." She gave a small laugh. "But I might as well wish they were all Tower trained while I am about it, or to live forever. They may be strong in many ways, but they are sadly lacking in others."

"A watch is all very well, but what else? If six Forsaken come at him together, he will need every bit of help we can give him."

Moiraine leaned over to put a hand on her arm, a look of affection on her face. "We cannot hold his hand forever, Egwene. He has learned to walk. He is learning to run. We can only hope he learns before his enemies catch him. And, of course, continue to advise him. To guide him when we can." Straightening, she stretched, and stifled a small yawn behind her hand. "It is late, Egwene. And I expect that Rand will have us breaking camp in a very few hours now, even if he gets no sleep at all. I, however, would like to take what rest I can before facing my saddle."

Egwene made ready to go, but first she had a question. "Moiraine, why have you started doing everything Rand tells you to? Even Nynaeve doesn't think it is right.”

“She does not, does she?” Moiraine murmured. “She will be Aes Sedai yet, whatever she wishes. Why? Because I remembered how to control *saidar.*”

After a moment, Egwene nodded. To control *saidar,* first you had to surrender to it.

It was not until she was shivering her way back to her own tent that she realized Moiraine had spoken to her the whole time as an equal. Perhaps she was closer to being ready to choose her Ajah than she thought.

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CHAPTER 16

An Unexpected Offer

Sunlight creeping through the window woke Nynaeve. For a moment she lay sprawled atop the striped coverlet. Elayne lay sleeping in the other bed. The early morning was already warm, and the night had not been much better, but that was not the reason Nynaeve’s shift was twisted and sweaty. Her dreams after discussing what she had seen with Elayne had not been good. In most she had been back in the Tower, being dragged before the Amyrlin, who was sometimes Elaida and sometimes Moghedien. In some Rand had been lying beside the Amyrlin’s writing table like a dog, collared and leashed and muzzled. The dreams about Egwene had been as bad in a way; boiled catfern and powdered mavinsleaf tasted just as bad in a dream as they did awake.

Making her way to the washstand, she cleansed her face, and scrubbed her teeth with salt and soda. The water was not hot, but it could not be called cool either. The sodden shift she stripped off, and dug a fresh one from one of the chests, along with a hairbrush and mirror. Peering at her own image, she regretted undoing her braid for comfort. It had not helped, and now her hair hung in a tangle to her waist. Sitting down on the chest, she laboriously worked the knots out, then began giving her hair its hundred strokes.

Three scratches ran down her neck and disappeared beneath her shift. They were not as red as they might have been, thanks to an ointment of healall taken from the Macura woman. She had told Elayne they came from brambles. Foolish—she suspected that Elayne knew it was not true, despite her tale of looking about the Tower grounds after Egwene left—but she had been too upset to think straight. She had snapped at the other woman several times, for no reason except that she was thinking about her unfair treatment by Melaine and Egwene. *Not that it doesn’t do her good to be* *reminded she's not the Daughter-Heir here.* Still, it was none of the girl's fault; she would have to make it up to her.

In the mirror she saw Elayne rise and begin washing. "I still think my plan is best," the girl said, scrubbing her face. Her raven-dyed hair did not seem to have one snarl, despite her curls. "We could be in Tear much more quickly my way."

Her plan was to abandon the coach once they reached the Eldar, at some small village where there would not likely be many Whitecloaks, and just as important, no eyes-and-ears for the Tower. There they were to take a riverboat down to Ebou Dar, where they could find a ship for Tear. That they had to go to Tear was no longer in doubt. Tar Valon they would avoid at all cost.

"How long before a boat stops where we are?" Nynaeve said patiently. She had thought this was all settled before they went to sleep. It had been, to her mind. "You yourself said that every boat might not stop. And how long do we wait in Ebou Dar before we find a ship for Tear?" Putting the brush down, she began remaking her braid.

"The villagers hang out a flag if they want a boat to put in, and most will. And there are always ships for anywhere in a seaport the size of Ebou Dar."

As if the girl had ever been in a seaport of any size before leaving the Tower with Nynaeve. Elayne always thought that whatever she had not learned of the world as Daughter-Heir of Andor, she had learned in the Tower, even after plenty of proof to the contrary. And how dare she put on that forbearing tone with her! "We are not likely to find that gathering of Blues on a ship, Elayne."

Her own plan was to stick with the coach, cross the rest of Amadicia, then Altara and Murandy, to Far Madding in the Hills of Kintara, and over the Plains of Maredo to Tear. It would certainly take longer, but aside from the chance of finding that gathering somehow, coaches very rarely sank. She could swim, but she was not comfortable with land completely out of sight.

Patting her face dry, Elayne changed her shift and came to help with doing the braid. Nynaeve was not fooled; she would hear about boats again. Her stomach did not like boats. Not that that had influenced her decision, of course. If she could bring Aes Sedai to Rand's aid, it would be well worth the longer travel time.

“Have you recalled the name?” Elayne asked, weaving the strands of hair.

“At least I remembered there *was* a name. Light, give me time.” She was sure there had been a name. A town, it would have to be, or a city. She could not have seen the name of a country and forgotten it. Drawing a long breath, she took a hold on her temper, and went on in a milder tone. “I will remember it, Elayne. Just give me time.”

Elayne made a noncommittal sound and continued braiding. After a bit, she said, “Was it really wise to send Birgitte looking for Moghedien?”

Nynaeve shot the young woman a sidelong frown, but it rolled off her like water off oiled silk. As a change of subject, this was not the one she would have chosen. “Better we find her than she finds us.”

“I suppose so. But what will we do when we find her?”

She had no answer for that. But it was better to be the hunter than the hunted, however roughly it went. The Black Ajah had taught her that.

The common room was not crowded when they went down, yet even at that early hour there was a sprinkling of pale cloaks among the patrons, mostly on older men, all with officers’ rank. No doubt they preferred to eat from the inn’s kitchens rather than what Whitecloak cooks dished up in the garrison. Nynaeve would almost rather have eaten on a tray again, but that little room was like a box. All of these men were intent on their food, the Whitecloaks no less than the others. Surely it was quite safe. Cooking smells filled the air; apparently these men wanted beef or mutton even first thing in the morning.

No sooner did Elayne’s foot leave the last step than Mistress Jharen bustled up to offer them, or “the Lady Morelin” rather, a private dining room. Nynaeve never shifted her eyes toward Elayne, but the other woman said, “I think we will eat here. I seldom have the opportunity to eat in a common room, and I quite enjoy it, really. Have one of your girls bring us something cooling. If the day is like this already, I fear I’ll swelter before we reach the next stop.”

It was a constant wonder to Nynaeve that that haughty manner never got them thrown bodily into the street. She had met enough lords and ladies by now to know that nearly all behaved in that fashion, but still. She would not have put up with it for a minute. The innkeeper, though, bobbed a curtsy, smiling and drywashing her hands, then showed them to a table near a window looking onto the street and scurried away to do Elayne’s bidding.

Perhaps that was her way of getting back at the girl. They were off by themselves, well away from the men already at other tables, but anyone walking by could stare in at them, and if any of their food was hot—which she hoped it was not—they were as far from the kitchens as it was possible to be.

When it came, breakfast consisted of spicy muffins—wrapped in a white cloth and still warm, and pleasant even so—yellow pears, blue grapes that looked a bit wizened, and some sort of red things that the serving girl called strawberries, though they looked like no berry that Nynaeve had ever seen. They certainly did not taste anything like straw, especially with clotted cream spooned on top. Elayne claimed to have heard of them, but then she would. With a lightly spiced wine supposedly cooled in the springhouse—one sip told her that the spring was not very cool, if there was one—it made a refreshing morning meal.

The nearest man was three tables away, and he wore a dark blue woolen coat, a prosperous tradesman perhaps, but they did not talk. Plenty of time for that when they were on the road again, and could be sure that there was no danger of sharp ears. Nynaeve finished her food well before Elayne. The way the girl took her time quartering a pear, you would think they had all day to sit at table.

Suddenly Elayne's eyes went wide with shock, and the short knife clattered to the table. Nynaeve's head whipped around to find a man taking the bench on the other side of the table.

"I thought it was you, Elayne, but the hair put me off at first."

Nynaeve stared at Galad, Elayne's half-brother. Stared was the word, of course. Tall and steely slender, dark of hair and eye, he was the most handsome man she had ever seen. Handsome was not enough; he was gorgeous. She had seen women cluster around him in the Tower, even Aes Sedai, all of them smiling like fools. She wiped the smile from her own face. But she could do nothing about her racing heart, nor make herself breathe properly. She did not feel anything for him; it was just that he was beautiful. *Take hold of yourself, woman!*

"What are you doing here?" She was pleased that she did not sound strangled. It was not fair for a man to look like that.

"And what are you doing wearing *that*?" Elayne's voice was low, but it still held a snap.

Nynaeve blinked, and realized he wore a shirt of shining mail and a white cloak with two golden knots of rank beneath a flaring sun. She felt color rising in her cheeks. Staring at a man's face so hard that she had not even seen what he was wearing! She wanted to hide her own face from humiliation.

He smiled, and Nynaeve had to take a deep breath. "I am here because I was one of the Children recalled from the north. And I am a Child of the Light because it seemed the right thing to do. Elayne, when you two and Egwene vanished, it did not take long for Gawyn and me to find out that you were not doing penance on a farm, whatever we were told. They had no right to involve you in their plots, Elayne. Any of you."

"You seem to have attained rank very quickly," Nynaeve said. Did the fool man not realize that talking of Aes Sedai plots here was a good way to get them both killed?

"Eamon Valda seemed to think my experience warranted it, wherever gained." His shrug dismissed rank as unimportant. It was not modesty, precisely, but not pretense either. The finest swordsman among those who came to study with the Warders in the Tower, he had also stood high in the classes on strategy and tactics, but Nynaeve could not remember him boasting about his prowess, even in jest. Accomplishments meant nothing to him, perhaps because they came so easily.

"Does Mother know of this?" Elayne demanded, still in that quiet voice. Her scowl would have frightened a wild boar, though.

Galad shifted just a hair, uneasily. "There has been no good time to write her. But do not be so sure she will disapprove, Elayne. She is not so friendly with the north as she was. I hear a ban may be made law."

"I sent her a letter, explaining." Elayne's glare had transformed to puzzlement. "She must understand. She trained in the Tower, too."

"Keep your voice down," he said, low and hard. "Remember where you are." Elayne flushed a deep red, but whether in anger or embarrassment, Nynaeve could not say.

Abruptly she realized that he had been speaking as quietly as they, and carefully, too. He had not mentioned the Tower once, or Aes Sedai.

"Is Egwene with you?" he went on.

"No," she replied, and he sighed deeply.

"I had hoped . . . Gawyn was nearly unhinged with worry when she disappeared. He cares for her, too. Will you tell me where she is?"

Nynaeve took note of that “too.” The man had become a Whitecloak, yet he “cared for” a woman who wanted to be Aes Sedai. Men were so strange they were hardly human sometimes.

“We will not,” Elayne said firmly, the crimson receding from her cheeks. “Is Gawyn here, too? I will not believe he has become a—” She had the wit to lower her voice further, but she still said, “A Whitecloak!”

“He remains in the north, Elayne.” Nynaeve supposed that he meant Tar Valon, but surely Gawyn had gone from there. Surely he could not support Elaida. “You cannot know what has happened there, Elayne,” he continued. “All the corruption and vileness in that place bubbled to the top, as it had to. The woman who sent you away has been deposed.” He looked around and dropped his voice to a momentary whisper, despite no one being close enough to overhear. “Stilled and executed.” Taking a deep breath, he made a disgusted sound. “It was never a place for you. Or for Egwene. I have not been long with the Children, but I am certain my captain will give me leave to escort my sister home. That is where you should be, with Mother. Tell me where Egwene is, and I will see that she is brought to Caemlyn, too. You will both be safe there.”

Nynaeve’s face felt numb. Stilled. And executed. Not an accidental death, or illness. That she had considered the possibility did not make the fact less shocking. Rand had to be the reason. If there had ever been any small hope that the Tower might not oppose him, it was gone. Elayne showed no expression at all, her eyes staring at the distance.

“I see my news shocks you,” he said in a low voice. “I do not know how deeply that woman meshed you in her plot, but you are free of her now. Let me see you safely to Caemlyn. No one need know you had any more contact with her than the other girls who went there to learn. Either of you.”

Nynaeve showed him her teeth, in what she hoped looked like a smile. It was nice to be included, finally. She could have smacked him. If only he were not so good-looking.

“I will think on it,” Elayne said slowly. “What you say makes sense, but you must give me time to think. I must think.”

Nynaeve stared at her. It made sense? The girl was blathering.

“I can give you a little time,” he said, “but I do not have much if I am to ask leave. We may be ordered—”

Suddenly there was a square-faced, black-haired Whitecloak clapping Galad on the shoulder and grinning widely. Older, he wore the same two knots of rank on his cloak. “Well, young Galad, you can’t keep all the pretty women for yourself. Every girl in town sighs when you walk by, and most of their mothers as well. Introduce me.”

Galad scraped back his bench to stand. “I . . . thought I knew them when they came downstairs, Trom. But whatever charm you think I possess, it does not work on this lady. She does not like me, and I think she will not like any friend of mine. If you practice the sword with me this afternoon, perhaps you can attract one or two.”

“Never with you around,” Trom grumped good-naturedly. “And I’d sooner let the farrier pound my head with his hammer than practice against you.” But he let Galad start him for the door with only a regretful look at the two women. As they left, Galad shot a glance back at the table, full of frustration and indecision.

No sooner were they out of sight than Elayne stood. “Nana, I need you upstairs.” Mistress Jharen materialized at her side, inquiring if she had enjoyed her repast, and Elayne said, “I require my driver and footman immediately. Nana will settle the bill.” She was moving for the stairs before she finished speaking.

Nynaeve stared after her, then dug out her purse and paid the woman, making assurances that everything had been to her mistress’s liking and trying not to wince at the price. Once rid of the woman, she hurried upstairs. Elayne was stuffing their things into the chests any which way, including the sweaty shifts they had hung on the ends of the beds to dry.

“Elayne, what’s the matter?”

“We must leave immediately, Nynaeve. At once.” She did not look up until the last article was crammed in. “Right this minute, wherever he is, Galad is puzzling over something he may never have faced before. Two things that are right, but opposite. To his mind it is right to tie me to a pack horse if necessary and haul me to Mother, to salve her worries and *save* me from becoming Aes Sedai, whatever I want. And it is also right to turn us in, to the Whitecloaks or the army or both. That is the law in Amadicia, and Whitecloak law, too. Aes Sedai are outlawed here, and so is any woman who has ever trained in the Tower. Mother met Ailron once to sign a trade treaty, and they had to do it in Altara because Mother could not legally enter

Amadicia. I embraced *saidar* the moment I saw him, and I won't let it go until we are far from him."

"Surely you exaggerate, Elayne. He is your brother."

"He is *not* my brother!" Elayne drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "We had the same father," she said in a calmer voice, "but he is not my brother. I will not have him. Nynaeve, I've told you time and again, but you will not take it in. Galad does what is right. Always. He never lies. Did you hear what he said to that Trom fellow? He didn't say he did not know who we are. Every word he said was the truth. He does what is *right*, no matter who is hurt by it, even himself. Or me. He used to tell on Gawyn and me for everything, and on himself, too. If he decides the wrong way, we will have Whitecloaks lying in ambush for us before we reach the edge of the village."

A tap sounded at the door, and Nynaeve's breath caught in her throat. Surely Galad would not really . . . Elayne's face was set, ready to fight.

Hesitantly, Nynaeve cracked the door. It was Thom, and Juilin with that fool hat in his hand. "My Lady wants us?" Thom asked, with a touch of servility for anyone who might overhear.

Able to breathe again, not caring who was listening, she snatched the door the rest of the way open. "Get in here, you two!" She was growing tired of them looking at one another every time she spoke.

Before she had the door shut again, Elayne said, "Thom, we must leave right away." The determined look had left her face, and anxiety filled her voice. "Galad is here. You must remember what a monster he was as a child. Well, he is no better grown, and he is a Whitecloak besides. He could —" The words seemed to catch in her throat. She stared at Thom, mouth working soundlessly, but no more wide-eyed than he stared at her.

He sat down heavily on one of the chests, never taking his eyes from Elayne's. "I—" Clearing his throat roughly, he went on. "I thought I saw him, watching the inn. A Whitecloak. But he looked the man the boy would grow into. I suppose it shouldn't be a surprise he grew into a Whitecloak at that."

Nynaeve went to the window; Elayne and Thom hardly seemed to notice her passage between them. Traffic was beginning to pick up in the street, farmers and farm carts and villagers mingling with Whitecloaks and soldiers. Across the way, one Whitecloak was sitting on an upended barrel, that perfect face unmistakable.

“Did he—?” Elayne swallowed. “Did he recognize you?”

“No. Fifteen years changes a man more than it does a boy. Elayne, I thought you had forgotten.”

“I remembered in Tanchico, Thom.” With a wavering smile, Elayne reached out and tugged one of his long mustaches. Thom smiled back almost as unsteadily; he looked as if he was contemplating a leap from the window.

Juilin was scratching his head, and Nynaeve wished she had some idea what they were talking about, too, but there were more important matters at hand. “We still have to leave before he brings the entire garrison down on us. With him watching, it won’t be easy. I haven’t seen another patron who looks like they have a coach.”

“Ours is the only one in the stableyard,” Juilin said. Thom and Elayne were still staring at one another, plainly not hearing a word.

Driving off with the curtains down was no protection, then. Nynaeve was willing to bet that Galad had already learned exactly how they had come to Sienda. “Is there a back way from the stableyard?”

“A gate wide enough for one of us at a time,” Juilin said dryly. “And what’s on the other side is little more than an alley, anyway. There aren’t more than two or three streets in this village wide enough for the coach.” He studied that cylindrical hat, turning it in his hands. “I could get close enough to crack his head. If you were ready, you could drive off during the confusion. I could catch you up on the road.”

Nynaeve sniffed loudly. “How? Gallop after on Skulker? Even if you didn’t fall out of the saddle inside a mile, do you think you would even reach a horse if you attacked a Whitecloak in that street?” Galad was still there across the street, and Trom had joined him, the pair apparently chatting idly. She leaned over and yanked Thom’s nearest mustache. “Do you have anything to add? Any brilliant plans? Did all your listening to gossip yield anything that might help?”

He clapped a hand to his face and gave her an offended look. “Not unless you think there’s help in Ailron laying claim to some border villages in Altara. A strip the whole length of the border, from Salidar to So Eban to Mosra. Is there any help in that, Nynaeve? Is there? Try to pull a man’s mustache out of his face. Somebody ought to box your ears, for once.”

“What would Ailron want with a strip along the border, Thom?” Elayne asked. Perhaps she was interested—she seemed interested in every fool twist and turn of politics and diplomacy—or perhaps she was just trying to stop an argument. She used to try smoothing over things all the time, before she became wrapped up in flirting with Thom.

“It isn’t the King, child.” His voice softened, for her. “It’s Pedron Niall. Ailron does what he is told usually, though he and Niall make out that it isn’t so. Most of those villages have been empty since the Whitecloak War, what the Children call the Troubles. Niall was the general in the field then, and I doubt he’s ever given up wanting Altara. If he controls both banks of the Eldar, he can squeeze the river trade to Ebou Dar, and if he can crack Ebou Dar, the rest of Altara will trickle into his hands like grain flowing from a hole in a sack.”

“That is all very well,” Nynaeve said firmly before he or the girl could speak again. There had been something in what he had said that tickled her memory, but she could not say what or why. In any case, they had no time for lectures on relations between Amadicia and Altara, not with Galad and Trom watching the front of the inn. She said as much, adding, “What about you, Juilin? You consort with low types.” The thief-catcher always sought out the cutpurses and burglars and footpads in a town; he claimed they knew more of what was really going on than any official. “Are there smugglers we can bribe to sneak us out, or . . . or . . . You know the sort of thing we need, man.”

“I heard little. Thieves keep low in Amadicia, Nynaeve. First offense is branding, second is loss of your fight hand, and third is hanging, whether it’s the King’s crown or a loaf of bread. There aren’t many thieves in a town this size, not who do it for a living”—he was contemptuous of amateur thieves—“and for the most part they only wanted to talk about two things. Whether the Prophet is really coming to Amadicia, the way rumor says he is, and whether the town fathers might relent and let that traveling menagerie put on a show. Sienda is too far from the borders for smugglers to—”

She cut him off with peremptory satisfaction. “That is it! The menagerie.” They all looked at her as if she had gone mad.

“Of course,” Thom said, much too mildly. “We can get Luca to bring the boar-horses back, and make off while they destroy some more of the town. I don’t know what you gave him, Nynaeve, but he threw a rock at us as we were driving off.”

For once Nynaeve forgave him his sarcasm, feeble as it was. And his lack of wit to see what she saw. “That’s as may be, Thom Merrilin, but Master Luca wants a patron, and Elayne and I are going to be his patrons. We still have to abandon the coach and team—” That smarted; she could have built a snug house in the Two Rivers for what they had cost. “—And sneak out that back way.” Tossing open the chest with the leaf-shaped hinges, she rooted through clothes and blankets and pots and everything that she had not wanted to leave behind with the wagon full of dyes—she had made sure that the men packed everything except the harness—until she came to the gilded caskets and the purses. “Thom, you and Juilin go out by that back gate, and find a wagon and team of some sort. Buy some supplies and meet us on the road back to Luca’s camp.” Regretfully, she filled Thom’s hand with gold, not even bothering to count; there was no telling what things would cost, and she did not want him wasting time bargaining.

“That is a wonderful idea,” Elayne said, grinning. “Galad will be looking for two women, not a troupe of animals and jugglers. And he will never think we would head for Ghealdan.”

Nynaeve had not thought of that. She had intended making Luca head straight for Tear. A menagerie such as he had put together, with tumblers and jugglers in addition to animals, could earn its way almost anywhere, she was sure. But if Galad did come looking for them, or send someone, it would be to the east. And he might be smart enough to look even in a menagerie; men did show brains sometimes, usually when you least expected it. “That was the first thing I thought of, Elayne.” She ignored the sudden faint taste in her mouth, the acrid memory of boiled catfern and powered mavinsleaf.

Thom and Juilin protested, of course. Not the idea as such, but they seemed to think that one of them remaining behind could protect her and Elayne against Galad and any number of Whitecloaks. They did not seem to realize that if it came to that, channeling would do more than the pair of them and ten more besides. They still seemed troubled, but she managed to push them both out with the stern injunction “And don’t you dare come back here. We will meet you on the road.”

“If it comes to channeling,” Elayne quietly said once the door was shut, “we will quickly find ourselves facing the whole Whitecloak garrison, and probably the army garrison as well. The Power doesn't make us invincible. All it will take is two arrows."

"We will worry about that when it comes," Nynaeve told her. She hoped the men had not thought of that. If they had, likely one of them would lurk about, and probably rouse Galad's suspicions if he was not careful. She was ready to accept their help when it was needed—Ronde Macura had taught her that, though having to be rescued like a kitten down a well still galled—but it would be when she thought it necessary, not they.

A quick trip downstairs found Mistress Jharen. Her lady had changed her mind; she did not think she could face the heat and dust of travel again so quickly; she intended to nap, and did not want to be disturbed until a late supper that she would send down for. Here was the coin for another night's lodging. The innkeeper was very understanding of a noble lady's delicacy, and how inconstant their desires. Nynaeve thought, Mistress Jharen would be understanding of anything short of murder, so long as the reckoning was paid.

Leaving the plump woman, Nynaeve cornered one of the serving girls for a moment. A few silver pennies changed hands, and the girl darted off in her apron to find two of the deep bonnets that Nynaeve said looked so shady and cool; not the sort of thing her lady would wear, of course, but they would do nicely for her.

When she got back to the room, Elayne had the gilded caskets on a blanket with the dark polished box holding the recovered *ter'angreal* and the washleather purse that held the seal. The fat purses of coin lay beside Nynaeve's scrip on the other bed. Folding the blanket, Elayne tied the bundle with some stout cord from one of their chests. Nynaeve had saved *everything.*

She regretted leaving it all behind now. It was not just the expense. Not only that. You never knew when something was going to come in handy. Take the two woolen dresses that Elayne had laid out on her bed. They were not fine enough for a lady, and too fine for a lady's maid, but if they had left them in Mardeein as Elayne had wanted, they would be in a fine fix for clothing now.

Kneeling, Nynaeve rummaged in another chest. A few shifts, two more wool dresses for changes. The pair of cast-iron frying pans in a canvas bag were perfectly good, but too heavy, and the men would certainly not forget replacements for those. The sewing kit, in its neat bone-inlaid box; they would never think to buy so much as a pin. Her mind was only partly on her selections, though.

“You knew Thom before?” she asked in what she hoped was a casual tone. She watched Elayne from the corner of her eye while pretending to concentrate on rolling stockings.

The girl had begun pulling out clothes of her own, sighing over the silks before putting them aside. She froze with her hands deep in one of the chests, and she did not look at Nynaeve. “He was Court-bard in Caemlyn when I was little,” she said quietly.

“I see.” She did not see at all. How did a man go from a court-bard, entertaining royalty, the next thing to a noble, to a gleeman wandering from village to village?

“He was Mother’s lover after Father died.” Elayne had gone back to choosing, and she said it so matter-of-factly that Nynaeve gaped.

“Your mother’s—!”

The other woman still was not looking at her, though. “I did not remember him until Tanchico. I was very small. It was his mustaches, and standing close enough to look up at his face, and hearing him recite part of *The Great Hunt of the Horn.* He thought I’d forgotten again.” Her face colored slightly. “I—drank too much wine, and the next day I made out that I could not remember anything.”

Nynaeve could only shake her head. She remembered the night the girl had filled her fool self with wine. At least she had never done that again; her head the next morning had seemed an effective cure. Now she knew why the girl behaved as she did with Thom. She had seen the same back in the Two Rivers a few times. A girl just old enough to really think of herself as a woman. Who else would she measure herself against except her mother? And sometimes, who better to compete against, to prove that she was a woman? Usually it led to no more than trying to be better at everything from cooking to sewing, or maybe some harmless flirting with her father, but in the case of one widow, Nynaeve had seen the woman’s nearly grown daughter make a complete fool of herself trying to capture the man her mother intended to marry. The trouble was, Nynaeve had no idea what to do about this silliness in Elayne. Despite severe lectures and more from her and the Women’s Circle, Sari Ayellin had not settled down until her mother was married again and she herself had found a husband, too.

“I suppose he must have been like a second father to you,” Nynaeve said carefully. She pretended to concentrate on her own packing. Thom had certainly been looking at the girl that way. It explained so much.

“I hardly think of him so.” Elayne appeared intent on deciding how many silk shifts to take, but her eyes saddened. “I cannot really remember my father; I was only a baby when he died. Gawyn says he spent all of his time with Galad. Lini tried to make the best of it, but I know he never came to see Gawyn or me in the nursery. He would have, I know, once we were old enough to teach things, like Galad. But he died.”

Nynaeve tried again. “At least Thom is fit for a man of his age. We’d be in a fine fix if he suffered from stiff joints. Old men often do.”

“He could still do backflips if not for his limp. And I don’t care if he does limp. He is intelligent and knowledgeable about the world. He is gentle, and yet I feel quite safe with him. I don’t think I should tell him that. He tries to protect me enough as it is.”

With a sigh, Nynaeve gave up. For now, at least. Thom might look on Elayne as a daughter, but if the girl kept this up he just might remember that she was not, and then Elayne would find herself in the pickling kettle. “Thom is very fond of you, Elayne.” Time to shift to some other subject. “Are you sure about Galad? Elayne? Are you sure Galad could turn us in, Elayne?”

The other woman gave a start, wiping a small frown from her face.

“What? Galad? I’m *certain*, Nynaeve. And if we refuse to let him take us to Caemlyn, that will only make the decision for him.”

Muttering to herself, Nynaeve pulled a silk riding dress out of her chest. Sometimes she thought the Creator had only made men to cause trouble for women.

* * *

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CHAPTER 17

Heading West

When the serving girl came with the bonnets, Elayne was stretched out on one of the beds in a white silk shift, a damp cloth over her eyes, and Nynaeve was pretending to mend the hem of the pale green dress that Elayne had been wearing. As often as not she stuck her thumb; she would never have admitted it to anyone, but she was not very good at needlework. She wore her dress, of course—maids did not loll about like ladies—but she did have her hair hanging loose. Clearly she had no intention of leaving the room any time soon. She thanked the girl in a whisper, so as not to wake her lady, and pressed another silver penny on her, with the repeated injunction that her lady was not to be disturbed on any account.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Elayne bounded to her feet and began pulling their bundles out from under the beds. Nynaeve tossed the silk gown down and twisted her arms behind her to undo her buttons. In no time at all they were ready, Nynaeve in green wool, Elayne in blue, with the bundles on their backs. Nynaeve carried the scrip with her herbs and the money, Elayne the blanket-wrapped boxes. The deep curving brims of the bonnets hid their faces so well that Nynaeve thought they could have walked right by Galad without him knowing them, especially with her hair down; he would remember the braid. Mistress Jharen, however, might well stop two strange women coming with fat bundles from upstairs.

The back stairs ran down the outside of the inn, narrow stone flights clinging to the wall. Nynaeve felt a moment of sympathy for Thom and Juilin, hauling the heavy chests up these, but mainly her attention was on the stableyard and the slate-roofed stone stable. A yellow dog lay in the shade beneath the coach, sheltering from the already increasing heat, but all of the grooms were inside. Now and again she could see movement beyond the open stable doors, but no one came out; it was shady in there, too.

They trotted quickly across the stableyard to the alley between the stable and a tall stone fence. A full dung cart, swarming with flies and scarcely narrower than the alleyway, was just rumbling by. Nynaeve suspected that the glow of *saidar* surrounded Elayne, though she could not see it. She herself was hoping that the dog did not decide to bark, that no one came out of the kitchens or the stable. Using the Power was no way to sneak off quietly, and talking their way clear would leave traces for Galad to follow.

The rough wooden gate at the end of the alley had only a lift-latch, and the narrow street beyond, lined with simple stone houses with more thatched roofs than otherwise, was empty except for a handful of boys playing some game that seemed to involve hitting each other with a beanbag. The only adult in sight was a man feeding a cote of pigeons on a roof opposite, his head and shoulders up through a trapdoor. Neither he nor the boys more than glanced at them as they shut the gate and started along the winding street as if they had every right to be there.

They had walked a good five miles west of Sienda along the dusty road before Thom and Juilin caught up, Thom driving what looked like a Tinker's wagon, save that it was all one color, a drab green, with the paint flaked off in large patches. Nynaeve was grateful to stuff her bundles under the driver's seat and climb up beside him, but not so pleased to see Juilin riding Skulker. "I told you not to go back to the inn," she told him, vowing to hit him with something if he looked at Thom.

"I did not go back," he said, unaware that he had saved himself a sore head. "I told the head stableman that my Lady wanted berries fresh from the country, and Thom and I had to go fetch them. It's the sort of nonsense that some no—" He cut off, clearing his throat, as Elayne gave him a cool, expressionless look from the other side of Thom. Sometimes he forgot that she really was of royalty.

"We had to have some reason to leave the inn and the stables," Thom said, whipping up the horses. "I suppose you two said you were taking to your room with fainting spells, or the Lady Morelin was, but the grooms would have been wondering why we wanted to wander about in the heat instead of staying in a nice cool hayloft with no work to do, and maybe a pitcher of ale. Perhaps we'll not be worth talking about, now."

Elayne gave Thom a level look—no doubt for the "fainting spells"—that he pretended not to see. Or perhaps did not. Men could be blind when it suited them. Nynaeve sniffed loudly; he could not miss that. He certainly cracked his whip over the lead horses sharply enough right after. It was all just an excuse so they could take turns riding. That was another thing men did; made excuses to do exactly what they wanted. At least Elayne was frowning at him slightly instead of simpering.

"There is something else I learned last night," Thom went on after a time. "Pedron Niall is trying to unite the nations against Rand."

"Not that I don't believe it, Thom," Nynaeve said, "but how could you learn that? I cannot think some Whitecloak simply told you."

"Too many people were saying the same thing, Nynaeve. There's a false Dragon in Tear. A false Dragon, and never mind prophecies about the Stone of Tear falling, or *Callandor.* This fellow is dangerous, and the nations ought to unite, the way they did in the Aiel War. And who better to lead them against this false Dragon than Pedron Niall? When so many tongues say the same thing, the same thought exists higher up, and in Amadicia, not even Ailron expresses a thought without asking Niall first."

The old gleeman always seemed to put together rumors and whispers and come up with right answers far more often than not. No, not a gleeman; she had to remember that. Whatever he might claim, he had been a court-bard, and had probably seen court intrigue like that in his stories at close hand. Perhaps even dabbled in it himself, if he had been Morgase's lover. She eyed him sideways, that leathery face with bushy white eyebrows, those long mustaches as snowy as the hair on his head. There was no accounting for some women's taste.

"It isn't as if we should not have expected something like this." She never had. But she should have.

"Mother will support Rand," Elayne said. "I know she will. She knows the Prophecies. And she has as much influence as Pedron Niall."

The slight shake of Thom's head denied the last, at least. Morgase ruled a wealthy nation, but there were Whitecloaks in every land and from every land. Nynaeve realized she was going to have to start paying more attention to Thom. Perhaps he really did know as much as he pretended. "So now you think we should have let Galad escort us to Caemlyn?"

Elayne leaned forward to give her a firm look past Thom. "Certainly not. For one thing, there is no way to be sure that that would be his decision. And for another . . ." She straightened, obscuring herself behind the man; she seemed to be talking to herself, reminding herself. "For another, if Mother really has turned against the Tower, I want to do all my speaking to her by letter for the time being. She is quite capable of holding us both in the palace for our own good. She may not be able to channel, but I do not want to try going against her until I am full Aes Sedai. If then.”

“A strong woman,” Thom said pleasantly. “Morgase would teach you manners quickly enough, Nynaeve.” She gave him another loud sniff—all that loose hair hanging over her shoulders was no good for gripping—but the old fool only grinned at her.

The sun stood high by the time they reached the menagerie, still camped exactly where they had left it, in the clearing by the road. In the still heat, even the oaks looked a bit wilted. Except for the horses and the great gray boar-horses, the animals were all back in their cages and the humans were out of sight, too, no doubt inside the wagons that looked not much different from theirs. Nynaeve and the others had all climbed down before Valan Luca appeared, still in that ridiculous red silk cape.

There were no flowery speeches this time, no cape-swirling bows. His eyes widened when he recognized Thom and Juilin, narrowed at the boxlike wagon behind them. He bent to peer into the deep bonnets, and his smile was not pleasant. “So, come down in the world, have we, my *Lady* Morelin? Or maybe we were never up at all. Stole a coach and some clothes, did you? Well, I would hate to see such a pretty forehead branded. That is what they do here, in case you don’t know, if they do not do worse. So since it seems you’ve been found out—else why are you running?—I would suggest you hurry on as fast as you can. If you want your bloody penny back, it’s somewhere up the road. I threw it after you, and it can lie there till Tarmon Gai’don for all I care.”

“You wanted a patron,” Nynaeve said as he was turning away. “We can be your patrons.”

“You?” he sneered. But he stopped. “Even if a few coins stolen from some lord’s purse would help, I will not accept stolen—”

“We will pay your expenses, Master Luca,” Elayne broke in with that coolly arrogant tone of hers, “and one hundred gold marks besides, if we can travel with you to Ghealdan, and if you agree not to stop until you reach the border.” Luca stared at her, running his tongue over his teeth.

Nynaeve groaned softly. A hundred marks, and gold! A hundred silver would cover his expenses easily, to Ghealdan and further, whatever those so-called boar-horses ate.

“You stole that much?” Luca said cautiously. “Who is after you? I won’t risk Whitecloaks, or the army. They’ll throw us all into prison, and probably kill the animals.”

“My brother,” Elayne replied before Nynaeve could angrily deny that they had stolen anything. “It seems that a marriage has been arranged while I was away, and my brother was sent to find me. I have no intention of returning to Cairhien to marry a man a head shorter, three times my weight and thrice my age.” Her cheeks colored in only a fair imitation of anger; her throat clearing did it better. “My father has dreams of claiming the Sun Throne if he can gain enough support. My dreams concern a red-haired Andorman whom I *shall* wed, whatever my father says. And that, Master Luca, is as much as you need know of me and more.”

“Maybe you are who you say you are,” Luca said slowly, “and maybe you are not. Show me some of this money you claim you’ll give me. Promises buy small cups of wine.”

Angrily Nynaeve fumbled in her scrip for the fattest purse and shook it at him, then stuffed it out of sight when he reached for it. “You’ll get what you need as you need it. And the hundred marks after we reach Ghealdan.” A hundred marks gold! They would have to find a banker and use those letters-of-rights if Elayne kept on like this.

Luca gave a sour grunt. “Whether you stole that or not, you are still running from somebody. I won’t risk my show for you, whether it’s the army or some Cairhienin lord who might come looking. The lord might be worse, if he thinks I have stolen his sister. You will have to blend in.” That unpleasant smile came on his face again; he was not going to forget that silver penny. “Everybody who travels with me works at something, and you must as well, if you mean not to stand out. If the others know you are paying your way, they will talk, and you would not want that. Cleaning the cages will do; the horse handlers are always complaining about having to do that. I’ll even find that penny and give it back to you for pay. Never let it be said Valan Luca is not generous.”

Nynaeve was about to say in no uncertain terms that they would not pay his way to Ghealdan and work, too, when Thom laid a hand on her arm. Wordlessly, he bent to scuffle up pebbles from the ground and began juggling them, six in a circle.

“I have jugglers,” Luca said. The six became eight, then ten, a dozen. “You are not bad.” The circle became two, intertwining. Luca rubbed at his chin. “Maybe I could find a use for you.”

“I can also eat fire,” Thom said, letting the stones fall, “perform with knives,” he fanned his empty hands, then seemingly pulled a pebble from Luca’s ear, “and do a few other things.”

Luca suppressed his quick grin. “That does for you, but what about the rest?” He seemed angry with himself for showing any enthusiasm or approval.

“What is that?” Elayne asked, pointing.

The two tall poles Nynaeve had seen being erected now each had ropes to stay it and a flat platform at its top, with a rope stretched taut over the thirty paces between. A rope ladder hung from each platform.

“That is Sedrin’s apparatus,” Luca replied, then shook his head. “Sedrin the highwalker, dazzling with feats ten paces up on a thin rope. The fool.”

“I can walk on it,” Elayne told him. Thom reached for her arm as she took off her bonnet and started forward, but he subsided at a small shake of her head and a smile.

Luca barred her way, though. “Listen, Morelin, or whatever your name is, your forehead may be too pretty to brand, but your neck is far too pretty to snap. Sedrin knew what he was doing, and we finished burying him not more than an hour ago. That’s why everyone is in their wagons. Of course, he drank too much last night, after we were chased out of Sienda, but I’ve seen him highwalk with a bellyful of brandy. I will tell you what. You do not have to clean cages. You move into my wagon, and we will tell everyone you’re my ladylove. Just as a tale, of course.” His sly smile said he hoped for more than a tale.

Elayne’s smile in return should have raised frost on him. “I do thank you for the offer, Master Luca, but if you will kindly step aside. . . .” He had to, or else have her walk over him.

Juilin crumpled that cylindrical hat in his hands, then crammed it back onto his head as she began climbing one of the rope ladders, having a little difficulty with her skirts. Nynaeve knew what the girl was doing. The men should have, and perhaps Thom did, at least, but he still looked ready to rush over to catch her if she fell. Luca moved nearer, as though the same thought was in his head.

For a moment Elayne stood on the platform, smoothing her dress. The platform looked much smaller, and higher, with her on it. Then, delicately holding her skirts up as if to keep them out of mud, she stepped out onto the narrow rope. She might as well have been walking across a street. In a way, Nynaeve knew, she was. She could not see the glow of *saidar,* but she knew that Elayne had woven a path between the two platforms, of Air, no doubt, turned hard as stone.

Abruptly Elayne put her hands down and turned two cartwheels, raven-black hair flailing, silk-stockinged legs flashing in the sun. For the merest instant as she righted herself, her skirts seemed to brush a flat surface before she snatched them up again. Two more steps took her to the far platform. "Did Master Sedrin do that, Master Luca?"

"He did somersaults," he shouted back. In a mutter, he added, "But he did not have legs like that. A lady! Hah!"

"I am not the only one with this skill," Elayne called. "Juilin and—" Nynaeve gave a fierce shake of her head; channeling or no channeling, her stomach would enjoy that high rope as much as it did a storm at sea. "—and I have done this many times. Come on, Juilin. Show him."

The thief-catcher looked as if he would rather clean the cages with his bare hands. The lions' cages, with the lions inside. He closed his eyes, mouth moving in a silent prayer, and went up the rope ladder in the manner of a man mounting the scaffold. At the top, he stared from Elayne to the rope with a fearful concentration. Abruptly, he stepped out, walking rapidly, arms stretched out to either side, eyes fixed on Elayne and mouth moving in prayer. She climbed partway down the ladder to make room for him on the platform, then had to help him find the rungs with his feet and guide him down.

Thom grinned at her proudly as she came back and took her bonnet from Nynaeve. Juilin looked as if he had been soaked in hot water and wrung out.

"That was good," Luca said, rubbing his chin judiciously. "Not as good as Sedrin, mind, but good. I especially like the way you make it seem so easy, while—Juilin?—Juilin pretends to be frightened to death. That will go over very well." Juilin gave the man a bleak grin that had something of reaching for knives in it. Luca actually swirled that red cape as he turned to Nynaeve; he looked very satisfied indeed. "And you, my dear Nana? What surprising talent do you have? Tumbling, perhaps? Swallowing swords?"

"I dole out the money," she told him, slapping the scrip. "Unless you want to offer *me* your wagon?" She gave him a smile that wiped his clean away and backed him up two steps besides.

The shouting had roused people from the wagons, and everyone gathered around while Luca introduced the troupe's new performers. He was rather vague about Nynaeve, merely calling what she did startling; she needed to have a talk with him.

The horse handlers, as Luca called the men who had no performing talent, were a scruffy, surly lot in general, perhaps because they were paid less. There were not very many of them, compared to the number of wagons. In fact, it turned out that everyone helped with the work, including driving the wagons; there was not much money in a traveling menagerie, even one like this. The others were a mixed lot.

Petra, the strongman, was the biggest man Nynaeve had ever seen. Not tall, but wide; his leather vest showed arms the size of tree trunks. He was married to Clarine, the plump, brown-cheeked woman who trained dogs; she looked undersized beside him. Latelle, who performed with the bears, was a stern-faced, dark-eyed woman with short black hair and the beginnings of a sneer permanently on her lips. Aludra, the slender woman who was supposed to be an Illuminator, might even have been one. She did not wear her dark hair in Taraboner braids, not surprising given the feelings in Amadicia, but she had the proper accents, and who could say what had happened to the Guild of Illuminators? Their chapter house in Tanchico had certainly closed its doors. The acrobats, on the other hand, claimed to be brothers named Chavana, but though they were all short, compact men, they ranged in coloring from green-eyed Taeric—his high cheekbones and hooked nose proclaiming Saldaean blood—to Barit, who was darker than Juilin and had Sea Folk tattoos on his hands, though he wore no earrings or nose rings.

All but Latelle greeted the newcomers warmly; more performers meant more people attracted to the show, and more money. The two jugglers, Bari and Kin—they really were brothers, it turned out—engaged Thom in talk of their trade, once they found out that he did not work the same way they did. Drawing more people was one thing, competition another. Yet it was the pale-haired woman who cared for the boar-horses who attracted Nynaeve's immediate interest. Cerandin stood stiffly on the fringes and barely spoke—Luca claimed she had come from Shara with the animals—but her soft, slurred manner of speech made Nynaeve's ears go to points.

It took a little time to get their wagon in place. Thom and Juilin seemed more than pleased to have the horse handlers' help with the team, sullenly as it was given, and invitations were given to Nynaeve and Elayne. Petra and Clarine asked them to have tea once they were settled. The Chavanas wanted the two women to have supper with them, and Kin and Bari did, too, all of which made Latelle's sneer become a scowl. Those invitations they declined gracefully, Elayne perhaps a bit more so than Nynaeve; the memory of herself goggling at Galad like a frog-eyed girl was too fresh for her to be more than minimally polite to any man. Luca had his own invitation, for Elayne alone, spoken where Nynaeve could not hear. It earned him a slapped face, and Thom ostentatiously flashed knives that seemed to roll across his hands until the man went away growling to himself and rubbing his cheek.

Leaving Elayne putting her things away in the wagon—throwing them, really, and muttering to herself furiously—Nynaeve went off to where the boar-horses were hobbled. The huge gray animals seemed placid enough, but remembering that hole in the stone wall of The King's Lancer, she was not too sure about the leather cords connecting their massive front legs. Cerandin was scratching the big male with her bronze-hooked goad.

"What are they really called?" Diffidently, Nynaeve patted the male's long nose, or snout, or whatever it was. Those tusks were as big around as her leg and a good three paces long, and only a little larger than the female's at that. The snout snuffled at her skirt and she stepped back hastily.

"S'redit," the pale-haired woman said. "They are *s'redit,* but Master Luca thought a name more easily said was better." That drawling accent was unmistakable.

"Are there many *s'redit* in Seanchan?"

The goad stopped moving for an instant, then resumed scratching. "Seanchan? Where is that? The *s'redit* are from Shara, as I am. I have never heard of—"

"Perhaps you've seen Shara, Cerandin, but I doubt it. You are Seanchan. Unless I miss my guess, you were part of the invasion on Toman Head, left behind after Falme."

"There is no doubt," Elayne said, stepping up beside her. "We heard Seanchan accents in Falme, Cerandin. We will not hurt you."

That was more than Nynaeve was willing to promise; her memories of the Seanchan were not fond ones. And yet . . . *A Seanchan helped you when* *you needed it. They are not all evil. Only most of them.*

Cerandin let out a long sigh, and sagged a little. It was as if a tension so old that she was no longer aware of it had gone. "Very few people I have met know anything approaching the truth of The Return, or Falme. I have heard a hundred tales, each more fanciful than the last, but never the truth. As well for me. I *was* left behind, and many of the *s'redit*, also. These three were all I could gather. I do not know what happened to the rest. The bull is Mer, the cow Sanit, and the calf Nerin. She is not Sanit's."

"Is that what you did?" Elayne asked. "Train *s'redit*?"

"Or were you a *sul'dam*?" Nynaeve added before the other woman could speak.

Cerandin shook her head. "I was tested, as all girls are, but I could do nothing with the *a'dam.* I was glad to be chosen to work with *s'redit.* They are magnificent animals. You know a great deal, to know of *sul'dam* and *damane.* I have encountered no one before who knows of them." She showed no fear. Or perhaps it had been used up since finding herself abandoned in a strange land. Then again, maybe she was lying.

The Seanchan were as bad as Amadicians when it came to women who could channel, perhaps worse. They did not exile or kill; they imprisoned and used. By means of a device called an *a'dam*—Nynaeve was sure it must be a sort of *ter'angreal*—a woman who had the ability to wield the One Power could be controlled by another woman, a *sul'dam,* who forced the *damane* to use her talents for whatever the Seanchan wanted, even as a weapon. A *damane* was no better than an animal, if a well-tended one. And they made *damane* of every last woman found with the ability to channel or the spark born in her; the Seanchan had scoured Toman Head more thoroughly than the Tower had ever dreamed of. The mere thought of *a'dam* and *sul'dam* and *damane* made Nynaeve's stomach churn.

"We know a little," she told Cerandin, "but we want to know more." The Seanchan were gone, driven away by Rand, but that was not to say they would not return one day. It was a distant danger beside everything else they had to face, yet just because you had a thorn in your foot did not mean that a briar scratch on your arm would not fester eventually. "You would do well to answer our questions truthfully." There would be time on the journey north.

"I promise that nothing will happen to you," Elayne added. "I will protect you, if need be."

The pale-haired woman’s eyes shifted from one of them to the other, and suddenly, to Nynaeve’s amazement, she prostrated herself on the ground in front of Elayne. “You are a High Lady of this land, just as you told Luca. I did not realize. Forgive me, High Lady. I submit myself to you.” And she kissed the ground in front of Elayne’s feet. Elayne’s eyes looked ready to leap out of her face.

Nynaeve was sure she was no better. “Get up,” she hissed, looking around frantically to see if anyone was watching. Luca was—curse him!—and Latrelle, still wearing that scowl, but there was nothing to be done. “Get up!” The woman did not stir.

“Stand on your feet, Cerandin,” Elayne said. “No one requires people to behave that way in this land. Not even a ruler.” As Cerandin scrambled erect, she added, “I will teach you the proper way to behave in return for your answers to our questions.”

The woman bowed, hands on her knees and head down. “Yes, High Lady. It will be as you say. I am yours.”

Nynaeve sighed heavily. They were going to have a fine time traveling to Ghealdan.

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CHAPTER
18

A Hound of Darkness

Liandrin guided her horse through the crowded streets of Amador, the sneer on her rosebud lips hidden by her deep, curving bonnet. She had hated to give up her multitude of braids, and hated even more the ludicrous fashions of this ludicrous land; the reddish yellow of hat and riding dress she rather liked, but not the large velvet bows on both. Still, the bonnet hid her eyes—combined with honey-yellow hair, brown eyes would have named her Taraboner in an instant, not a good thing in Amadicia just now—and it hid what would have been even worse to show here, an Aes Sedai's face. Safely hidden, she could smirk at the Whitecloaks, who seemed to be every fifth man in the streets. Not that the soldiers who made another fifth would have been any better. None of them ever thought to look inside the bonnet, of course. Aes Sedai were outlawed here, and that meant there were none.

Even so, she felt a little better when she turned in at the elaborate iron gates in front of Jorin Arene's house. Another fruitless trip looking for word from the White Tower; there had been nothing since she had learned that Elaida thought she was in control of the Tower, and that the Sanche woman had been disposed of. Siuan had escaped, true, but she was a useless rag now.

The gardens behind the gray stone fence were full of plants going rather brown from lack of rain, but trimmed and trained into cubes and balls, though one was shaped like a leaping horse. Only one, of course. Merchants like Arene mimicked their betters, but they dared not go too far lest someone think their conceit too high. Elaborate balconies decorated the large wooden house with its red-tiled roofs, and even a colonnade of carved columns, but unlike the lord's dwelling it was meant to copy, it stood on a stone foundation no more than ten feet tall. A childish pretense at a noble's manor.

The stringy, gray-haired man who scurried out deferentially to hold her stirrup while she dismounted, and take her reins, was clad all in black. Whatever colors a merchant chose for livery, they were sure to be some real lord's colors, and even a minor lord could cause trouble for the richest seller of goods. People in the streets called black "merchant's livery," and snickered when they said it. Liandrin despised the groom's black coat as much as she did Arene's house and Arene himself. She would have true manors, one day. Palaces. They had been promised to her, and the power that went with them.

Stripping off her riding gloves, she stalked up the ridiculous ramp that slanted along the foundations to the vine-carved front doors. The lords' fortress manors had ramps, so of course a merchant who thought well of himself could not have steps. A black-clad young serving girl took gloves and hat in the round entrance hall, with its many doors and carved and brightly painted columns and its encircling balcony. The ceiling was lacquered in imitation of a mosaic, stars within stars in gold and black. "I will have my bath in one hour," she told the woman. "It will be the proper temperature this time, yes?" The maid went pale as she curtsied, stammering agreement before scurrying away.

Amellia Arene, Jorin's wife, came through one of the doors deep in conversation with a fat balding man in a spotless white apron. Liandrin breathed contemptuously. The woman had pretensions, yet she not only spoke to the cook herself, she brought the man out of his kitchens to discuss meals. She treated the servant like—like a friend!

Fat Evon saw her first and gulped, his piggy eyes darting away immediately. She did not like men looking at her, and she had spoken sharply to him on her first day here about the way his gaze sometimes lingered. He had tried to deny it, but she knew men's vile habits. Without waiting to be dismissed by his mistress, Evon all but ran back the way he had come.

The graying merchant's wife had been a stern-faced woman when Liandrin and the others came. Now she licked her lips and smoothed her bow-draped green silk needlessly. "There is someone upstairs with the others, my Lady," she said diffidently. She had thought that she could use Liandrin's name that first day. "In the front withdrawing room. From Tar Valon, I believe."

Wondering who it could be, Liandrin started for the nearest of the curving staircases. She knew few others of the Black Ajah, of course, for safety's sake; what others did not know, they could not betray. In the Tower she had known only one of the twelve who went with her when she left. Two of the twelve were dead, and she knew at whose feet to lay the blame. Egwene al'Vere, Nynaeve al'Meara, and Elayne Trakand. Everything had gone so badly in Tanchico that she would have thought those three upstart Accepted had been there, except that they were fools who had twice walked tamely into traps she had set. That they had escaped each was of no consequence. Had they been in Tanchico, they would have fallen into her hands, whatever Jeaine claimed to have seen. The next time she found them, they would never escape anything again. She would be done with them whatever her orders.

"My Lady," Amellia stammered. "My husband, my Lady. Jorin. Please, will one of you help him? He did not mean it, my Lady. He has learned his lesson."

Liandrin paused with one hand on the carved banister, looking back over her shoulder. "He should not have thought that his oaths to the Great Lord could be conveniently forgotten, no?"

"He *has* learned, my Lady. Please. He lies beneath blankets all day—in this heat—shivering. He weeps when anyone touches him, or speaks above a whisper."

Liandrin paused as if considering, then nodded graciously. "I will ask Chesmal to see what she can do. Yet you understand that I make no promises." The woman's unsteady thanks followed her up, but she paid them no mind. Temaile had let herself be carried away. She had been Gray Ajah before becoming Black, and she always made a point of spreading the pain evenly when she mediated; she had been very successful as a mediator, for she liked spreading pain. Chesmal said he might be able to do small tasks in a few months, so long as they were not too hard and no one raised a voice. She had been one of the best Healers in generations among the Yellow, so she should know.

The front withdrawing room startled her when she went in. Nine of the ten Black sisters who had come with her stood around the room against the carved and painted paneling, though there were plenty of silk-cushioned chairs on the gold-fringed carpet. The tenth, Temaile Kinderode, was handing a delicate porcelain cup of tea to a dark-haired, sturdily handsome woman in a bronze-colored gown of unfamiliar cut. The seated woman looked vaguely familiar, though she was not Aes Sedai; she was plainly approaching her middle years, and despite smooth cheeks there was nothing of agelessness about her.

Yet the mood made Liandrin cautious. Temaile was deceptively fragile in appearance, with big, childlike blue eyes that made people trust her; those eyes appeared worried now, or uneasy, and the teacup rattled on the saucer before the other woman took it. Every face looked uneasy, except that of the oddly familiar woman. Coppery-skinned Jeaine Caide, in one of those disgusting Domani garments that she wore inside the house, had tears still glistening on her cheeks; she had been a Green, and liked flaunting herself in front of men even more than most Greens. Rianna Andomeran, once White and always a coldly arrogant killer, nervously kept touching the pale streak in her black hair above her left ear. Her arrogance had been flattened.

“What has happened here?” Liandrin demanded. “Who are you, and what—?” Suddenly the memory flashed into her head. A Darkfriend, a servant in Tanchico who had continually gotten above herself. “Gyldin!” she snapped. This servant had followed them in some fashion and obviously was trying to pass herself off as a Black courier with some dire news. “You have overstepped yourself too far this time.” She reached to embrace *saidar,* yet even as she did the glow surrounded the other woman, and Liandrin’s reach ran into a thick invisible wall shutting her away from the Source. It hung there like the sun, tantalizingly out of reach.

“Stop gaping, Liandrin,” the woman said calmly. “You look like a fish. It is not Gyldin, but Moghedien. This tea needs more honey, Temaile.” The slender, fox-faced woman darted to take the cup, breathing heavily.

It had to be so. Who else could have so cowed the others? Liandrin looked at them standing around the walls. Round-faced Eldrith Jhondar, for once not looking vague at all despite an ink smudge on her nose, nodded vigorously. The others seemed afraid to twitch. Why one of the Forsaken—they were not supposed to use that name, but usually did, among themselves—why Moghedien would have masqueraded as a servant, she could not understand. The woman had or could have everything that she herself wanted. Not just knowledge of the One Power beyond her dreams, but power. Power over others, power over the world. And immortality. Power for a lifetime that would never end. She and her sisters had speculated on dissension among the Forsaken; there had been orders at odds with each other, and orders given to other Darkfriends at odds with theirs. Perhaps Moghedien had been hiding from the rest of the Forsaken.

Liandrin spread her divided riding skirts as best she could in a deep curtsy. “We welcome you, Great Mistress. With the Chosen to lead us, we shall surely triumph before the Day of the Great Lord’s Return.”

“Nicely said,” Moghedien said dryly, taking the cup back from Temaile. “Yes, this is much better.” Temaile looked absurdly grateful, and relieved. What had Moghedien done?

Suddenly a thought came to Liandrin, an unwelcome one. She had treated one of the Chosen as a servant. “Great Mistress, in Tanchico I did not know that you—”

“Of course you did not,” Moghedien said irritably. “What good to bide my time in the shadows if you and these others knew me?” Abruptly a small smile appeared on her lips; it touched nothing else. “Are you worried about those times you sent Gyldin to the cook to be beaten?” Sweat beaded suddenly on Liandrin’s face. “Do you truly believe I would allow such a thing? The man no doubt reported to you, but he remembered what I wanted him to remember. He actually felt sorry for Gyldin, so cruelly treated by her mistress.” That seemed to amuse her greatly. “He gave me some of the desserts that he made for you. It would not displease me if he still lives.”

Liandrin drew a relieved breath. She would not die. “Great Mistress, there is no need to shield me. I also serve the Great Lord. I swore my oaths as a Darkfriend before ever I went to the White Tower. I sought the Black Ajah from the day that I knew that I could channel.”

“So you will be the only one in this ill-ordered pack who does not need to learn who her mistress is?” Moghedien quirked an eyebrow. “I would not have thought it of you.” The glow around her vanished. “I have tasks for you. For all of you. Whatever you have been doing, you will forget. You are an inept lot, as you proved in Tanchico. With my hand on the dog whip, perhaps you will hunt more successfully.”

“We await orders from the Tower, Great Mistress,” Liandrin said. Inept! They had almost found what they were hunting for in Tanchico, when the city exploded in riots; they had barely escaped destruction at the hands of Aes Sedai who had somehow wandered into the middle of their plan. Had Moghedien revealed herself, or even taken part on their behalf, they would have triumphed. If their failure was anyone’s fault, it was

Moghedien’s herself. Liandrin reached toward the True Source, not to embrace it, but to be certain that the shield had not merely been tied off. It was gone. “We have been given great responsibilities, great works to perform, and surely we will be commanded to continue—”

Moghedien cut her off sharply. “You serve whichever of the Chosen chooses to snap you up. Whoever sends you orders from the White Tower, she takes her own from one of us now, and very likely grovels on her belly when she does. You will serve me, Liandrin. Be sure of it.”

Moghedien did not know who headed the Black Ajah. It was a revelation. Moghedien did not know everything. Liandrin had always imagined the Forsaken as close to omnipotent, something far beyond ordinary mortals. Perhaps the woman truly was in flight from the other Forsaken. To hand her over to them would surely earn her a high place. She might even become one of them. She had a trick, learned in childhood. And she could touch the Source. “Great Mistress, we serve the Great Lord, as you do. We also were promised eternal life, and power, when the Great Lord re—”

“Do you think that you are my equal, little sister?” Moghedien grimaced in disgust. “Did you stand in the Pit of Doom to dedicate your soul to the Great Lord? Did you taste the sweetness of victory at Paaran Disen, or the bitter ashes at the Asar Don? You are a barely trained puppy, not the packmistress, and you will go where I point until I see fit to give you a better place. These others thought themselves more than they are, too. Do you wish to try your strength against me?”

“Of course not, Great Mistress.” Not when she was forewarned and ready. “I—”

“You will do so sooner or later, and I prefer to put it out of the way now, in the beginning. Why do you think your companions look so cheerful? I have taught each of them the same lesson already today. I will not wonder when you must be taught, too. I will be done with it now. Try.”

Licking her lips fearfully, Liandrin looked around at the women standing rigidly against the walls. Only Asne Zeramene so much as blinked; she shook her head ever so slightly. Asne’s tilted eyes, high cheekbones and strong nose marked her Saldaean, and she had all the vaunted Saldaean boldness. If she counseled against, if her dark eyes held a tinge of fear, then it was surely best to grovel however much was needed to make Moghedien relent. And yet, there was her trick.

She went to her knees, head low, looking up at the Forsaken with a fear that was only partly feigned. Moghedien lounged in her chair, sipping the tea. “Great Mistress, I beg you to forgive me if I have presumed. I know that I am but a worm beneath your foot. I beg, as one who would be your faithful hound, for your mercy on this wretched dog.” Moghedien’s eyes dropped to her cup, and in a flash, while the words still tumbled from her mouth, Liandrin embraced the Source and channeled, seeking the crack that must be in the Forsaken’s confidence, the crack that was in everyone’s façade of strength.

Even as she lashed out, the light of *saidar* surrounded the other woman, and pain enveloped Liandrin. She crumpled to the carpet, trying to howl, but agony beyond anything she had ever known silenced her gaping mouth. Her eyes were going to burst from her head; her skin was going to peel away in strips. For an eternity she thrashed, and when it vanished as suddenly as it had begun, all she could do was lie there, shuddering and weeping open-mouthed.

“Do you begin to see?” Moghedien said calmly, handing the empty cup to Temaile with, “That was very good. But next time a little stronger.” Temaile looked as though she might faint. “You are not quick enough, Liandrin, you are not strong enough, and you do not know enough. That pitiful little thing you tried against me. Would you like to see what it is really like?” She channeled.

Liandrin gazed up at her adoringly. Crawling across the floor, she pushed words through the sobs she still could not stop. “Forgive me, Great Mistress.” This magnificent woman, like a star in the heavens, a comet, above all kings and queens in wonder. “Forgive, please,” she begged, pressing kisses against the hem of Moghedien’s skirt as she babbled. “Forgive. I am a dog, a worm.” It shamed her to her core that she had not meant those things before. They were true. Before this woman, they were all true. “Let me serve you, Great Mistress. Allow me to serve. Please. Please.”

“I am not Graendal,” Moghedien said, pushing her away roughly with one velvet-slippered foot.

Suddenly the sense of worship was gone. Lying there in a heap, weeping, Liandrin could remember it clearly, though. She stared at the Forsaken in horror.

“Are you convinced yet, Liandrin?”

“Yes, Great Mistress,” she managed. She was. Convinced that she dared not even think of trying again until she was certain of success. Her trick was only the palest shadow of what Moghedien had done. Could she but learn that . . .

“We shall see. I think you may be one of those who needs a second lesson. Pray it is not so, Liandrin; I make second lessons exceedingly sharp. Now take your place with the others. You will find that I have taken some of the objects of power that you had in your room, but you may keep the trinkets that remain. Am I not kind?”

“The Great Mistress is kind,” Liandrin agreed around hiccoughs and occasional sobs that she could not stifle.

Limply she staggered to her feet and went to stand beside Asne; the wall panel against her back helped to hold her upright. She saw the flows of Air being woven; only Air, but she still flinched as they bound her mouth shut and stopped sound from her ears. She certainly did not try to resist. She did not even let herself think of *saidar.* Who knew what one of the Forsaken could do? Perhaps read her thoughts. That almost made her run. No. If Moghedien knew her thoughts, she would be dead by now. Or still screaming on the floor. Or kissing Moghedien’s feet and begging to serve. Liandrin shivered uncontrollably; if that weave had not bound her mouth, her teeth would have been chattering.

Moghedien wove the same around all of them save Rianna, whom the Forsaken beckoned with an imperious finger to kneel before her. Then Rianna left, and Marillin Gemalphin was unbound and summoned.

From where she stood, Liandrin could see their faces even if their mouths moved soundlessly for her. Plainly each woman was receiving orders the others knew nothing of. The faces told little, though. Rianna merely listened, a touch of relief in her eyes, bowed her head in assent and went. Marillin looked surprised, and then eager, but she had been a Brown, and Browns could be enthusiastic over anything that allowed them a chance to unearth some moldy bit of lost knowledge. Jeaine Caide donned a slow mask of horror, shaking her head at first and trying to cover herself and that disgustingly sheer gown, but Moghedien’s face hardened, and Jeaine nodded hurriedly and fled, if not as eagerly as Marillin, just as quickly. Berylla Naron, lean almost to scrawniness and as fine a manipulator and plotter as there was, and Falion Bhoda, long-faced and cold despite her obvious fear, showed as little expression as Rianna had. Ispan Shefar, like

Liandrin from Tarabon, though dark-haired, actually kissed Moghedien's hem before she rose.

Then the flows were unwoven around Liandrin. She thought that it was her turn to be sent away on the Shadow knew what errand, until she saw the bonds dispelled around the others remaining as well. Moghedien's finger beckoned peremptorily, and Liandrin knelt between Asne and Chesmal Emry, a tall, handsome woman, dark-haired and dark-eyed. Chesmal, once Yellow, could Heal or kill with equal ease, but the intensity of her gaze on Moghedien, the way her hands trembled as they clutched her skirts, said she intended only to obey.

She would have to go by such signs, Liandrin realized. Approaching one of the others with her belief that rewards could be had for handing Moghedien to the rest of the Forsaken might well be disastrous if the one she spoke to had decided that it was in her best interests to be Moghedien's lapdog. She almost whimpered at the thought of a "second lesson."

"You, I keep with me," the Forsaken said, "for the most important task. What the others do may bear sweet fruit, but to me yours will be the most important harvest. A personal harvest. There is a woman named Nynaeve al'Meara." Liandrin's head came up, and Moghedien's dark eyes sharpened. "You know of her?"

"I despise her," Liandrin replied truthfully. "She is a filthy wilder who ought never to have been allowed in the Tower." She loathed all wilders. Dreaming of being Black Ajah, she herself had begun learning to channel a full year before going to the Tower, but she was in no way a wilder.

"Very good. You five are going to find her for me. I want her alive. Oh, yes, I do want her alive." Moghedien's smile made Liandrin shiver; giving Nynaeve and the other two to her might be entirely suitable. "The day before yesterday she was in a village called Sienda, perhaps sixty miles east of here, with another young woman in whom I may be interested, but they have vanished. You will . . ."

Liandrin listened eagerly. For this, she could be a faithful hound. For the other, she would wait patiently.

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CHAPTER

19

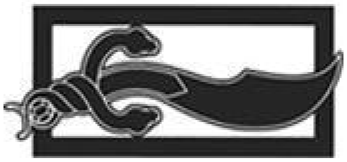

Memories

“My Queen?”

Morgase looked up from the book on her lap. Sunlight slanted through the window of the sitting room next to her bedchamber. The day was already hot, with no breeze, and sweat dampened her face. It would be noon before much longer, and she had not stirred from the room. That was unlike her; she could not remember why she had decided to laze the morning away with a book. She seemed unable to concentrate on reading of late. By the golden clock on the mantel above the marble fireplace, an hour had passed since she last turned a page, and she could not recall its words. It must be the heat.

The red-coated young officer of her Guards, kneeling with one fist pressed to the red-and-gold carpet, looked vaguely familiar. Once she had known the name of every Guard assigned to the Palace. Perhaps it was all the new faces. “Tallanvor,” she said, surprising herself. He was a tall, well-made young man, but she could not tell why she remembered him in particular. Had he brought someone to her once? Long ago? “Guardsman Lieutenant Martyn Tallanvor.”

He glanced at her, startlingly rough-eyed, before putting his gaze back on the carpet. “My Queen, forgive me, but I am surprised that you remain here, given the morning’s news.”

“What news?” It would be good to learn something besides Alteima’s gossip of the Tairen court. At times she felt that there was something else she wanted to ask the woman, but all they ever did was gossip, which she could never remember doing before. Gaebril seemed to enjoy listening to them, sitting in that tall chair in front of the fireplace with his ankles crossed, smiling contentedly. Alteima had taken to wearing rather daring dresses; Morgase would have to say something to her. Dimly she seemed to remember thinking that before. *Nonsense. If I had, I would have spoken to* *her already.* She shook her head, realizing that she had drifted away from the young officer entirely, that he had begun speaking and stopped when he saw she was not listening. “Tell me again. I was distracted. And stand.”

He rose, face angry, eyes burning on her before they dropped again. She looked where he had been staring and blushed; her dress was cut extremely low. But Gaebril liked her to wear them so. With that thought she ceased fretting about being nearly naked in front of one of her officers.

“Be brief,” she said curtly. *How dare he look at me in that manner? I should have him flogged.* “What news is so important that you think you can walk into my sitting room as if it were a tavern?” His face darkened, but whether from proper embarrassment or increased anger she could not say. *How dare he be angry with his queen! Does the man think all I have to do is listen to him?*

“Rebellion, my Queen,” he said in a flat tone, and all thought of anger and stares vanished.

“Where?”

“The Two Rivers, my Queen. Someone has raised the old banner of Manetheren, the Red Eagle. A messenger came from Whitebridge this morning.”

Morgase drummed her fingers on the book, her thoughts coming more clearly than it seemed they had in a very long time. Something about the Two Rivers, some spark she could not quite fan to life, tugged at her. The region was hardly part of Andor at all, and had not been for generations. She and the last three queens before her had been hard pressed to maintain a modicum of control over the miners and smelters in the Mountains of Mist, and even that modicum would have been lost had there been any way to get the metals out save through the rest of Andor. A choice between holding the mines’ gold and iron and other metals and keeping the Two Rivers’ wool and tabac had not been difficult. But rebellion unchecked, even rebellion in a part of her realm that she ruled only on a map, could spread like wildfire, to places that were hers in fact. And Manetheren, destroyed in the Trolloc Wars, Manetheren of legend and story, still had a hold on some men’s minds. Besides, the Two Rivers *was* hers. If they had been left to go their own way for far too long, they were still a part of her realm.

“Has Lord Gaebril been informed?” Of course he had not. He would have come to her with the news, and suggestions on how to deal with it. His suggestions were always clearly right. *Suggestions?* Somehow, it seemed that she could remember him telling her what to do. That was impossible, of course.

“He has, my Queen.” Tallanvor’s voice was still bland, unlike his face, where slow anger yet smoldered. “He laughed. He said the Two Rivers seemed to throw up trouble, and he would have to do something about it one day. He said this minor annoyance would have to wait its turn behind more important matters.”

The book fell as she sprang to her feet, and she thought Tallanvor smiled in grim satisfaction as she swept by him. A serving woman told her where Gaebril was to be found, and she marched straight to the colonnaded court, with its marble fountain, the basin full of lily pads and fish: It was cooler there, and shaded a little.

Gaebril sat on the broad white coping of the fountain, lords and ladies gathered around him. She recognized fewer than half. Dark square-faced Jarid of House Sarand, and his shrewish honey-haired wife, Elenia. That simpering Arymilla of House Marne, melting brown eyes always so wide in feigned interest, and bony, goat-faced Nasin of House Caeren, who would tumble any woman he could corner despite his thin white hair. Naean of House Arawn, as usual with a sneer marring her pale beauty, and Lir of House Baryn, a whip of a man, wearing a sword of all things, and Karind of House Anshar, with the same flat-eyed stare that some said had put three husbands under the ground. The others she did not know at all, which was strange enough, but these she never allowed into the Palace except on state occasions. Every one had opposed her during the Succession. Elenia and Naean had wanted the Lion Throne for themselves. What could Gaebril be thinking to actually bring them here?

“. . . the size of our estates in Cairhien, my Lord,” Arymilla was saying, leaning over Gaebril, as Morgase approached. None of them more than glanced at her. As if she were a servant with the wine!

“I want to speak with you concerning the Two Rivers, Gaebril. In private.”

“It has been dealt with, my dear,” he said idly, dabbling his fingers in the water. “Other matters concern me now. I thought you were going to read during the heat of the day. You should return to your room until the evening’s coolness, such as it is.”

My dear. He had called her “my dear” in front of these interlopers! As much as she thrilled to hear that on his lips when they were alone . . . Elenia was hiding her mouth. “I think not, Lord Gaebril,” Morgase said coldly. “You will come with me now. And these others will be out of the Palace before I return, or I will exile them from Caemlyn completely.”

Suddenly he was on his feet, a big man, towering over her. She seemed unable to look at anything but his dark eyes; her skin tingled as if an icy wind were blowing through the courtyard. “You will go and wait for me, Morgase.” His voice was a distant roar filling her ears. “I have dealt with all that needs dealing with. I will come to you this evening. You will go now. You will go.”

She had one hand lifted to open the door of her sitting room before she realized where she was. And what had happened. He had told her to go, and she had gone. Staring at the door in horror, she could see the smirks on the men’s faces, open laughter on some of the women’s. *What has happened to me? How could I become so besotted with any man?* She still felt the urge to enter, and wait for him.

Dazed, she forced herself to turn and walk away. It was an effort. Inside, she cringed at the idea of Gaebril’s disappointment in her when he did not find her where he expected, and cringed further at recognizing the fawning thought.

At first she had no notion of where she was going or why, only that she would not wait obediently, not for Gaebril, not for any man or woman in the world. The fountained courtyard kept repeating in her head, him telling her to go, and those hateful, amused faces watching. Her mind still seemed fogged. She could not comprehend how or why she could have let it happen. She had to think of something that she could understand, something she could deal with. Jarid Sarand and the others.

When she assumed the throne she had pardoned them for everything they had done during the Succession, as she had pardoned everyone who opposed her. It had seemed best to bury all animosities before they could fester into the sort of plotting and scheming that infected so many lands. The Game of Houses it was called—*Daes Dae’mar*—or the Great Game, and it led to endless, tangled feuds between Houses, to the toppling of rulers; the Game was at the heart of the civil war in Cairhien, and no doubt had done its part in the turmoil enveloping Arad Doman and Tarabon. The pardons had had to go to all to stop *Daes Dae’mar* being born in Andor, but could she have left any unsigned, they would have been the parchments with those seven’s names.

Gaebril knew that. Publicly she had shown no disfavor, but in private she had been willing to speak of her distrust. They had had to pry their jaws open to swear fealty, and she could hear the lie on their tongues. Any one would leap at a chance to pull her down, and all seven together . . .

There was only one conclusion she could reach. Gaebril must be plotting against her. It could not be to put Elenia or Naean on the throne. *Not when he has me already,* she thought bitterly, *behaving like his lapdog*. He must mean to supplant her himself. To become the first king that Andor had ever had. And she still felt the desire to return to her book and wait for him. She still ached for his touch.

It was not until she saw the aged faces in the hallway around her, the creased cheeks and often bent backs, that she became aware of where she was. The Pensioners' Quarters. Some servants returned to their families when they grew old, but others had been so long in the Palace that they could think of no other life. Here they had their own small apartments, their own shaded garden and a spacious courtyard. Like every queen before her, she supplemented their pensions by letting them buy food through the Palace kitchens for less than its cost, and the infirmary treated their ills. Creaky bows and unsteady curtsies followed her, and murmurs of "The Light shine upon you, my Queen," and "The Light bless you, my Queen," and "The Light protect you, my Queen." She acknowledged them absently. She knew where she was going now.

Lini's door was like all the others along the green-tiled corridor, unadorned save for a carving of the rearing Lion of Andor. She never thought of knocking before entering; she was the Queen, and this was her Palace. Her old nurse was not there, though a teakettle steaming over a small fire in the brick fireplace said she would not be long.

The two snug rooms were neatly furnished, the bed made to perfection, the two chairs precisely aligned at the table, where a blue vase in the exact center held a small fan of greenery. Lini had always been a great one for neatness. Morgase was willing to wager that within the wardrobe in the bedchamber every dress was arranged just so with every other, and the same for pots in the cupboard beside the fireplace in the other room.

Six painted ivory miniatures in small wooden stands made a line on the mantelpiece. How Lini could have afforded them on a nurse's stipend was more than Morgase had ever been able to imagine; she could not ask such a question, of course. In pairs, they showed three young women and the same three as babes. Elayne was there, and herself. Taking down the portrait of herself at fourteen, a slender filly of a girl, she could not believe that she had ever looked so innocent. She had worn that ivory silk dress the day she had gone to the White Tower, never dreaming at the time that she would be Queen, only harboring the vain hope that she might become Aes Sedai.

Absentmindedly she thumbed the Great Serpent ring on her left hand. She had not earned that, precisely; women who could not channel were not awarded the ring. But short of her sixteenth nameday she had returned to contest the Rose Crown in the name of House Trakand, and when she won the throne nearly two years later, the ring had been presented to her. By tradition, the Daughter-Heir of Andor always trained in the Tower, and in recognition of Andor's long support of the Tower was given the ring whether or not she could channel. She had only been the heir to House Trakand in the Tower, but they gave it to her anyway once the Rose Crown was on her head.

Replacing her own portrait, she took down her mother's, taken at perhaps two years older. Lini had been nurse to three generations of Trakand women. Maighdin Trakand had been beautiful. Morgase could remember that smile, when it had become a mother's loving beam. It was Maighdin who should have had the Lion Throne. But a fever had carried her away, and a young girl had found herself High Seat of House Trakand, in the middle of a struggle for the throne with no more support in the beginning than her House retainers and the House bard. *I won the Lion Throne. I will not give it up, and I will not see a man take it. For a thousand years a queen has ruled Andor, and I will not let that end now!*

"Meddling in my things again, are you, child?"

That voice triggered long-forgotten reflexes. Morgase had the miniature hidden behind her back before she knew it. With a rueful shake of her head she put the portrait back on its stand. "I am not a girl in the nursery any longer, Lini. You must remember that, or one day you will say something where I must do something about it."

"My neck is scrawny and old," Lini said, setting a net bag of carrots and turnips on the table. She looked frail in her neat gray dress, her white hair drawn back in a bun from a narrow face with skin like thin parchment, but her back was straight, her voice clear and steady, and her dark eyes as sharp as ever. "If you want to give it to hangman or headsman, I am almost done with it anyway. ‘A gnarled old branch dulls the blade that severs a sapling.’ ”

Morgase sighed. Lini would never change. She would not curtsy if the entire court were watching. “You do grow tougher as you grow older. I am not certain a headsman could find an axe sharp enough for your neck.”

“You’ve not been to see me in some time, so I suppose there’s something you need to work out in your mind. When you were in the nursery—and later—you always used to come to me when you couldn’t work matters out. Shall I make a pot of tea?”

“Some time, Lini? I visit you every week, and a wonder I do, given how you speak to me. I would exile the highest lady in Andor if she said half what you do.”

Lini gave her a level look. “You have not darkened my doorway since the spring. And I talk as I always have; I’m too old to change now. Do you want tea?”

“No.” Morgase put a hand to her head in confusion. She did visit Lini every week. She could remember. . . . She could not remember. Gaebril had filled her hours so completely that sometimes it was hard to remember anything other than him. “No, I do not want tea. I do not know why I came. You cannot help me with the problem I have.”

Her old nurse snorted, though somehow she made it a delicate sound. “Your trouble is with Gaebril, isn’t it? Only now you’re ashamed to tell me. Girl, I changed you in your cradle, tended you when you were sick and heaving your stomach up, and told you what you needed to know about men. You have never been too shamed to discuss anything with me, and now is no time to begin.”

“Gaebril?” Morgase’s eyes widened. “You know? But how?”

“Oh, child,” Lini said sadly, “everyone knows, though no one’s had the courage to tell you. I might have, if you hadn’t stayed away, but it is hardly something I could go running to you with, now is it? It is the kind of thing a woman won’t believe until she finds out for herself.”

“What are you talking about?” Morgase demanded. “It was your duty to come to me if you knew, Lini. It was everyone’s duty! Light, I am the last to know, and now it may be too late to stop it!”

“Too late?” Lini said incredulously. “Why should it be too late? You bundle Gaebril out of the Palace, out of Andor, and Alteima and the others with him, and it is done with. Too late, indeed.”

For a moment Morgase could not speak. “Alteima,” she said finally, “and . . . the others?”

Lini stared at her, then shook her head in disgust. “I am an old fool; my wits are dryrooted. Well, you know now. ‘When the honey’s out of the comb, there’s no putting it back.’ ” Her voice became gentler and at the same time brisk, the voice she had used for telling Morgase that her pony had broken a leg and had to be put down. “Gaebril spends most of his nights with you, but Alteima has nearly as much of his time. He spreads himself thin with the other six. Five have rooms in the Palace. One, a big-eyed young thing, he sneaks in and out for some reason all swathed in a cloak, even in this heat. Perhaps she has a husband. I’m sorry, girl, but truth is truth. ‘Better to face the bear than run from it.’ ”

Morgase’s knees sagged, and if Lini had not hurriedly pulled a chair from the table to shove under her, she would have sat down on the floor. Alteima. Him watching the two of them as they gossiped took on a new image, now. A man fondly watching two of his pet cats at play. And *six* others! Rage boiled up in her, a rage that had been lacking when she only thought he was after her throne. That she had considered coldly, clearly; as clearly as she could consider anything recently. That was a danger that had to be looked at with cold reason. But this! The man had ensconced his jades in her palace. He had made her just another of his trulls. She wanted his head. She wanted him flayed alive. The Light help her, she wanted his touch. *I must be going mad!*

“That will be solved along with everything else,” she said coldly. Much depended on who was in Caemlyn, and who on their country estates. “Where is Lord Pelivar? Lord Abelle? Lady Arathelle?” They led strong Houses, and many retainers.

“Exiled,” Lini said slowly, giving her an odd look. “You exiled them from the city last spring.”

Morgase stared back. She remembered none of that. Except that now, dim and distant, she did. “Lady Ellorien?” she said slowly. “Lady Aemlyn, and Lord Luan?” More strong Houses. More Houses that had been behind her before she gained the throne.

“Exiled,” Lini replied just as slowly. “You had Ellorien flogged for demanding to know why.” She bent to brush Morgase’s hair back, gnarled fingers lingering on her cheek as they had when she checked for fever. “Are you well, girl?”

Morgase nodded dully, but it was because she was remembering, in a shadowy way. Ellorien, screaming in outrage as her gown was ripped down the back. House Traemane had been the very first to throw its support to Trakand, brought by a plumply pretty woman only a few years older than Morgase. Brought by Ellorien, now one of her closest friends. At least, she had been. Elayne had been named after Ellorien's grandmother. Vaguely she could recall others leaving the city; distancing themselves from her, it seemed obvious now. And those who remained? Houses too weak to be of any use, or else sycophants. She seemed to recall signing numerous documents Gaebril had laid in front of her, creating new titles. Gaebril's toadeaters and her enemies; they were all she could count on being strong in Caemlyn.

"I do not care what you say," Lini said firmly. "You have no fever, but there's something wrong. You need an Aes Sedai Healer is what you need."

"No Aes Sedai." Morgase's voice was even harder. She fingered her ring again, briefly. She knew that her animosity toward the Tower had grown recently beyond what some might say was reasonable, yet she could no longer make herself trust a White Tower that seemed to be trying to hide her daughter from her. Her letter to the new Amyrlin demanding Elayne's return—no one *demanded* anything of an Amyrlin Seat, but she had—that letter was yet unanswered. It had barely had time to reach Tar Valon. In any case, she knew for cold fact that she would not have an Aes Sedai near her. And yet, right alongside that, she could not think of Elayne without a swell of pride. Raised Accepted after so short a time. Elayne might well be the first woman to sit on the throne of Andor as full Aes Sedai, not just Tower trained. It made no sense that she could feel both things at once, but very little made any sense just now. And her daughter would never have the Lion Throne if Morgase did not secure it for her.

"I said no Aes Sedai, Lini, so you might as well stop looking at me like that. This is one time you will not make me take bad-tasting medicine. Besides which, I doubt there is an Aes Sedai of any stripe to be found in Caemlyn." Her old supporters gone, exiled by her own signature, and maybe her enemies for good over what she had done to Ellorien. New lords and ladies in their places in the Palace. New faces in the Guards. What loyalty remained there? "Would you recognize a Guardsman Lieutenant named Tallanvor, Lini?" At the other woman's quick nod, she went on. "Find him for me, and bring him here. But do not let him know you are bringing him to me. In fact, tell everyone in the Pensioners' Quarters that, should anyone ask, I am not here."

"There is more to this than Gaebril and his women, isn't there?"

"Just go, Lini. And hurry. There is not much time." By the shadows she could see in the tree-filled garden through the window, the sun had passed its height. Evening would be there all too soon. Evening, when Gaebril would be looking for her.

When Lini left, Morgase remained in the chair, sitting rigidly. She dared not stand; her knees were stronger now, but she feared that if she began moving she would not stop until she was back in her sitting room, waiting for Gaebril. The urge was that strong, especially now that she was alone. And once he looked at her, once he touched her, she had no doubt that she would forgive him everything. Forget everything, maybe, based on how fuzzy and incomplete her memories were. Had she not known better, she could have thought that he had used the One Power on her in some way, but no man who could channel survived to his age.

Lini had often told her that there was always one man in the world for whom a woman would find herself behaving a brainless fool, but she had never believed that she could succumb. Still, her choices in men had never been good, however right they seemed at the time.

Taringail Damodred she had wed for political reasons. He had been married to Tigraine, the Daughter-Heir whose disappearance had set off the Succession when Mordrellen died. Marrying him had made a link with the old queen, smoothing the doubts of most of her opponents, and more importantly, had maintained the alliance that had ended the ceaseless wars with Cairhien. In such ways did queens choose their husbands. Taringail had been a cold, distant man, and there was never love, despite two wonderful children; it had been almost a relief when he died in a hunting accident.

Thomdril Merrilin, House bard and then Court-bard, had been a joy at first, intelligent and witty, a laughing man who used the tricks of the Game of Houses to aid her to the throne and help strengthen Andor once she had it. He had been twice her age then, yet she might have married him—marriages with commoners were not unheard of in Andor—but he vanished without a word, and her temper got the better of her. She never had learned why he had gone, but it did not matter. When he finally returned she would surely have rescinded the arrest order, but for once instead of softly turning her anger aside he had met her harsh word for harsh word, saying things she could never forgive. Her ears still burned to remember being called a spoiled child and a puppet of Tar Valon. He had actually shaken her, his queen!

Then there had been Gareth Bryne, strong and capable, as bluff as his face and as stubborn as she; he had turned out to be a treasonous fool. He was well out of her life. It seemed years since she had seen him instead of little more than half of one.

And finally Gaebril. The crown to her list of bad choices. At least the others had not tried to supplant her.

Not so many men for one woman's life, but in another way, too many. Another thing that Lini sometimes said was that men were only good for three things, though very good for those. She had been on the throne before Lini had thought her old enough to tell what the three things were. *Perhaps if I'd kept just to the dancing,* she thought wryly, *I'd not have so much trouble with them.*

The shadows in the garden beyond the window had shifted an hour's worth before Lini returned with young Tallanvor, who went to one knee while she was still shutting the door. "He didn't want to come with me at first," she said. "Fifty years ago I suppose I could have shown what you are displaying to the world, and he'd have followed quick enough, but now I must needs use sweet reason."

Tallanvor turned his head to look up at her sourly. "You threatened to harry me here with a stick if I did not come. You are lucky I wondered what was so important to you, instead of having somebody drag you to the infirmary." Her stern sniff did not faze him. His acrid gaze turned angry as it shifted to Morgase. "I see your meeting with Gaebril did not go well, my Queen. I had hoped for . . . more."

He was looking straight at her eyes, but Lini's comment had made her aware of her dress again. She felt as though glowing arrows were pointing to her exposed bosom. It was an effort to keep her hands calmly in her lap. "You are a sharp lad, Tallanvor. And loyal, I believe, else you would not have come to me with the news of the Two Rivers."

"I am not a boy," he snapped, jerking upright where he knelt. "I am a man who has sworn his life in service to his queen."

She let her temper flare right back at him. "If you are a man, behave as one. Stand, and answer your queen's questions truthfully. And remember that I *am* your queen, *young* Tallanvor. Whatever you think may have happened, I am Queen of Andor."

"Forgive me, my Queen. I hear and obey." The words were properly said, if not exactly contrite, but he stood, head high, staring at her as defiantly as ever. Light, the man was as stubborn as Gareth Bryne had ever been.

"How many loyal men are there among the Guards in the Palace? How many will obey their oaths and follow me?"

"I will," he said quietly, and suddenly all of his anger was gone, though he still stared intently at her face. "For the rest . . . If you wish to find loyal men, you must look to the outlying garrisons, perhaps as far as Whitebridge. Some who were in Caemlyn were sent to Cairhien with the levies, but the rest in the city are Gaebril's to a man. Their new . . . Their new oath is to throne and law, not the Queen."

It was worse than she had hoped for, but no more than she had expected, really. Whatever he was, Gaebril was no fool. "Then I must go elsewhere to begin reestablishing my rule." The Houses would be difficult to rally after the exiles, after Ellorien, but it had to be done. "Gaebril may try to stop me leaving the Palace"—she found a faint memory of trying to leave, twice, and being halted by Gaebril—"so you will procure two horses and wait in the street behind the south stables. I will meet you there, dressed for riding."

"Too public," he said. "And too close. Gaebril's men might recognize you, however you disguised yourself. I know a man. . . . Could you find an inn called The Queen's Blessing, in the western part of the New City?" The New City was new only in comparison with the Inner City it surrounded.

"I can." She did not like being opposed, even when it made sense. Bryne had done that, too. It would be a pleasure to show this young man just how well she could disguise herself. It was her habit once a year, though she realized that she had not done it so far this year, to dress as a commoner and walk the streets to feel the pulse of the people. No one had ever recognized her. "But can this man be trusted, young Tallanvor?"

"Basel Gill is as loyal to you as I am myself." He hesitated, anguish crossing his face then being replaced by anger once more. "Why have you waited so long? You must have known, you must have seen, yet you have waited while Gaebril tightened his hands around Andor's neck. Why have you waited?"

So. His anger was honestly come by, and it deserved an honest answer. Only she had no answer, certainly not one she could tell him. “It is not your place to question your Queen, young man,” she said with a gentle firmness. “A loyal man, as I know that you are loyal, serves without question.”

He let out a long breath. “I will await you in the stable of The Queen’s Blessing, my Queen.” And with a bow suitable for a state audience, he was gone.

“Why do you keep calling him young?” Lini demanded once the door closed. “It puts his back up. ‘A fool puts a burr under the saddle before she rides.’ ”

“He *is* young, Lini. Young enough to be my son.”

Lini snorted, and this time there was nothing delicate about it. “He has a few years on Galad, and Galad is too old to be yours. You were playing with dolls when Tallanvor was born, and thinking babes came the same way as dolls.”

Sighing, Morgase wondered if the woman had treated her mother like this. Probably. And if Lini lived long enough to see Elayne on the throne—which somehow she did not doubt, Lini would last forever—she would probably treat Elayne no differently. That was assuming that a throne remained for Elayne to inherit. “The question is, is he as loyal as he seems, Lini? One faithful Guardsman, when every other loyal man in the Palace has been sent away. Suddenly it seems too good to be true.”

“He swore the new oath.” Morgase opened her mouth, but Lini forestalled her. “I saw him afterwards, alone behind the stables. That’s how I knew who you meant; I found out his name. He did not see me. He was on his knees, tears streaming down his face. He alternated apologizing to you and repeating the old oath. Not just to ‘the Queen of Andor,’ but to ‘Queen Morgase of Andor.’ He swore in the old way, on his sword, slicing his arm to show he would shed his last drop before breaking it. I know a thing or two of men, girl. That one will follow you against an army with nothing but his bare hands.”

That was good to know. If she could not trust him, she would have to doubt Lini next. No, never Lini. He had sworn in the old way? That was something for stories, now. And she was letting her thoughts drift again. Surely Gaebril’s clouding of her mind was finished now, with all she knew. Then why did a part of her still want to go back to her sitting room and wait? She had to concentrate. “I will need a simple dress, Lini. One that does not fit too well. A little soot from the fireplace, and . . .”

Lini insisted on coming, too. Morgase would have had to tie her to a chair to leave her behind, and she was not certain that the old woman would have let herself be tied; she had always seemed frail, and had always been far stronger than she seemed.

When they slipped out through a small side gate, Morgase did not look very much like herself. A bit of soot had darkened her red-gold hair, taken its sheen away and made it lank. Sweat rolling down her face helped, as well. No one believed that queens sweated. A shapeless dress of rough—very rough—gray wool, with divided skirts, completed her disguise. Even her shift and stockings were coarse wool. She looked a farm woman who had ridden the cart horse to market and now wanted to see a little of the city. Lini looked herself, straight-backed and no-nonsense, in a green woolen riding dress, well cut but ten years out of fashion.

Wishing she could scratch, Morgase also wished that the other woman had not taken her so to heart about the dress not fitting very well. Stuffing the low-necked gown away under the bed, her old nurse had muttered some saying about displaying wares you did not mean to sell, and when Morgase claimed she had just made it up, her reply was *At my age, if I make it up, it’s still an old saying.* Morgase more than half-suspected that her itchy, ill-draped dress was punishment for that gown.

The Inner City was built on hills, streets following the natural curve of the land and planned to give sudden views of parks full of trees and monuments, or tile-covered towers glittering a hundred colors in the sun. Sudden rises hurled the eye across Caemlyn entire, to the rolling plains and forests beyond. Morgase saw none of it as she hurried through the crowds thronging the streets. Usually she would have tried to listen to the people, to gauge their mood. This time she heard only the hum and babble of a great city. She had no thought of trying to rouse them. Thousands of men armed mainly with stones and rage could overwhelm the Guards in the Royal Palace, but if she had not known it before, the riots in the spring that had brought Gaebril to her attention, and the near riots the year before, had shown what mobs could do. She meant to rule again in Caemlyn, not see it burned.

Beyond the white walls of the Inner City, the New City had its own beauties. Tall slender towers, and domes gleaming white and gold, huge expanses of red-tiled roofs, and the great, towered outer walls, pale gray streaked with silver and white. Broad boulevards, split down the middle by wide expanses of trees and grass, were jammed with people and carriages and wagons. Except to notice in passing that the grass was dying for lack of rain, Morgase kept her mind on what she was hunting.

From the experience of her annual forays, she chose the people she questioned carefully. Men, mostly. She knew how she looked, even with soot in her hair, and some women would give wrong directions from jealousy. Men, on the other hand, racked their brains to be right, to impress her. None with too smug a face, or too rough. The first were often offended at being approached, as though they were not afoot themselves, and the others were likely to think a woman asking directions had something else on her mind.

One fellow with a chin too big for his face, hawking a tray of pins and needles, grinned at her and said, “Did anyone ever tell you you look a mite like the Queen? Whatever mess she’s made of us, she’s a pretty one.”

She gave him a raucous laugh that earned a stern look from Lini. “You save your flattery for your wife. The second turn to the left, you say? I thank you. And for the compliment, too.”

As she pushed on through the crowd, a frown settled on her face. She had heard too much of that. Not that she looked like the Queen, but that Morgase had made a mess of things. Gaebril had raised taxes heavily to pay for his levies, it seemed, but she took the blame, and rightly so. The responsibility was the Queen’s. Other laws had come out of the Palace, as well, laws that made little sense, but did make people’s lives more difficult. She heard whispers about herself, that maybe Andor had had queens long enough. Only murmurs, but what one man dared speak in a low voice, ten thought. Perhaps it would not have been as easy as she had thought to rouse mobs against Gaebril.

Eventually she found her goal, a broad stone inn, the sign over the door bearing a man kneeling before a golden-haired woman in the Rose Crown, one of her hands on his head. The Queen’s Blessing. If it was meant to be her, it was not a good likeness. The cheeks were too fat.

Not until she stopped in front of the inn did she realize that Lini was puffing. She had set a quick pace, and the woman was far from young. “Lini, I am sorry. I should not have walked so—”

"If I can't keep up with you, girl, how will I be able to tend Elayne's babes? Do you mean to stand there? 'Dragging feet never finish a journey.' He said he would be in the stable."

The white-haired woman stalked off, muttering to herself, and Morgase followed her around the inn. Before stepping into the stone stable, she shaded her eyes to look at the sun. No more than two hours until dusk; Gaebril would be looking by then, if he was not already.

Tallanvor was not alone in the stall-lined stable. When he went to one knee on the straw-covered floor, in a green wool coat with his sword belted over it, two men and a woman knelt with him, if a bit hesitantly, unsure of her as she was. The stout man, pink-faced and balding, must be Basel Gill, the innkeeper. An old leather jerkin, studded with steel discs, strained around his girth, and he wore a sword at his hip, too.

"My Queen," Gill said, "I've not carried a sword in years—not since the Aiel War—but I'd count it an honor if you allowed me to follow you." He should have looked ridiculous, but he did not.

Morgase studied the other two, a hulking fellow in a rough gray coat, with heavy-lidded eyes, an oft-broken nose, and scars on his face, and a short, pretty woman approaching her middle years. She seemed to be with the street tough, but her high-necked blue wool dress appeared too finely woven for one like him to have bought.

The fellow sensed her doubts, for all his lazy-eyed appearance. "I am Lamgwin, my Queen, and a good Queen's man. 'Tisn't right, what's been done, and it has to be put straight. I want to follow you, too. Me and Breane, both."

"Rise," she told them. "It may be some days yet before it is safe for you to acknowledge me as your queen. I will be glad of your company, Master Gill. And yours, Master Lamgwin, but it will be safer for your woman if she remains in Caemlyn. There are hard days ahead."

Brushing straw from her skirts, Breane gave her a sharp look, and Lini a sharper. "I have known hard days," she said in a Cairhienin accent. Nobly born, unless Morgase missed her guess; one of the refugees. "And I never knew a good man until I found Lamgwin. Or until he found me. The loyalty and love he bears for you, I bear for him tenfold. He follows you, but I follow him. I will not stay behind."

Morgase drew breath, then nodded her acceptance. The woman seemed to take it for granted in any case. A fine seed for the army to retake her throne: One young soldier who scowled at her as often as not, a balding innkeeper who looked as if he had not been on a horse in twenty years, a street tough who appeared more than half-asleep, and a refugee Cairhienin noblewoman who had made it clear that her loyalties went only as far as the tough. And Lini, of course. Lini, who treated her as though she were still in the nursery. Oh, yes, a very fine seed.

“Where do we go, my Queen?” Gill asked as he began leading already saddled horses out of their stalls. Lamgwin moved with surprising speed to throw another high-cantled saddle on a horse for Lini.

Morgase realized that she had not considered that. *Light, Gaebril can’t still be fogging my mind.* She still felt that urge to return to her sitting room, though. It was not he. She had had to concentrate on getting out of the Palace and reaching here. Once she would have gone to Ellorien first, but Pelivar or Arathelle would do. Once she had reasoned out how to explain away their exiles.

Before she could open her mouth, Tallanvor said, “It must be to Gareth Bryne. There is hard feeling against you among the great Houses, my Queen, but with Bryne following you, they will reswear allegiance, if only because they know he will win every battle.”

She clamped her teeth shut to hold back instant refusal. Bryne was a traitor. But he was also one of the finest generals alive. His presence would be a convincing argument when she had to make Pelivar and the rest forget that she had exiled them. Very well. No doubt he would leap at the chance to be Captain-General of the Queen’s Guards once more. And if not, she would manage well enough without him.

When the sun touched the horizon, they were five miles out of Caemlyn and riding hard for Kore Springs.

* * *

Night was when Padan Fain felt most comfortable. As he padded through the tapestry-bedecked corridors of the White Tower, it seemed as though the darkness outside made a cloak to hide him from his enemies, despite the stand-lamps, gilded and mirrored, burning along his way. A false feeling, he knew; his enemies were many and everywhere. Right that moment, as in every waking hour, he could feel Rand al’Thor. Not where he was, but that he was still alive, somewhere. Still alive. It was a gift received at Shayol Ghul, in the Pit of Doom, that awareness of al’Thor.

His mind skittered away from memories of what had been done to him in the Pit. He had been distilled there, remade. But later, in Aridhol, he had been reborn. Reborn to smite old enemies and new.

He could feel something else as he stalked the empty night hallways of the Tower, a thing that was his, stolen from him. A sharper desire drew him at this moment than his longing for al’Thor’s death, or the Tower’s destruction, or even revenge against his ancient foe. A hunger to be whole.

The heavy paneled door had thick hinges and iron straps, and a black iron lock set in it as big as his head. Few doors in the Tower were ever locked—who would dare steal in the midst of Aes Sedai?—yet some things the Tower accounted too dangerous to be easily accessible. The most dangerous of all they kept behind this door, guarded by a stout lock.

Giggling softly, he took two thin, curved metal rods from his coat pocket, inserted them into the keyhole, probing and pressing, twisting. With a slow snap, the bolt came back. For a moment he sagged against the door, laughing hoarsely. Guarded by a stout lock. Surrounded by Aes Sedai power, and guarded by simple metal. Even the servants and novices should be done with their chores at this hour, but someone still might be awake, might just wander by. Occasional ripples of mirth still shook him as he replaced the lockpicks in his pocket and took out a fat beeswax candle, lighting the wick at a nearby stand-lamp.

He held the candle high as he closed the door behind him, peering around. Shelves lined the walls, holding plain boxes and inlaid chests of various sizes and shapes, small figures in bone or ivory or darker material, things of metal and glass and crystal that sparkled in the candlelight. Nothing that appeared dangerous. Dust covered everything; even the Aes Sedai came here seldom, and they allowed no one else in. What he was seeking pulled him to it.

On a waist-high shelf stood a dark metal box. He opened it, revealing lead walls two inches thick, with just enough space inside for a curved dagger in a golden sheath, a large ruby set in its hilt. Neither the gold nor the ruby, glittering dark as blood, interested him. Hastily he spilled a little wax to hold the candle beside the box and snatched up the dagger.

He sighed as soon as he touched it, stretched languorously. He was whole again, one with what had bound him so long ago, one with what in a very real way had given him life.

Iron hinges creaked faintly, and he darted for the door, baring the curved blade. The pale young woman opening the door had only time to gape, to try to leap back, before he slashed her cheek; in the same motion he dropped the sheath and seized her arm, jerked her past him into the storeroom. Putting his head out, he peered up and down the hallway. Still empty.

He took his time about pulling his head back and shutting the door again. He knew what he would find.

The young woman lay thrashing on the stone floor, trying and failing to scream. Her hands clawed at a face already black and bloated beyond recognition, the dark swelling oozing down onto her shoulders like thick oil. Her snowy skirts, banded in colors at the hem, flailed as her feet scrabbled uselessly. He licked at a splash of blood on his hand and giggled as he picked up the sheath.

"You are a fool."

He spun, dagger reaching, but the air around him seemed to turn solid, encasing him from his neck to the soles of his boots. He hung there, on the balls of his feet, dagger extended to stab, staring at Alviarin as she shut the door behind her and leaned against it to study him. There had been no creak this time. The soft scraping of the dying girl's slippers on the floorstones could never have masked it. He blinked away sweat that was suddenly stinging his eyes.

"Did you really think," the Aes Sedai went on, "that there would be no guard on this room, no watch kept? A ward was set on that lock. That young fool's task tonight was to monitor it. Had she done as she was supposed to, you would find a dozen Warders and as many Aes Sedai outside this door now. She is paying the price of her stupidity."

The thrashing behind him stilled, and his eyes narrowed. Alviarin was not Yellow Ajah, but even so she could have made an attempt to Heal the young woman. And she had not raised the alarm the Accepted should have, either, or she would not now be here alone. "You are Black Ajah," he whispered.

"A dangerous accusation," she said calmly. It was not clear to which of them it was dangerous. "Siuan Sanche tried to claim the Black Ajah was real when she was under the question. She begged to tell us of them. Elaida would not hear it, and will not. Tales of the Black Ajah are a vile slander against the Tower."

“You are Black Ajah,” he said in a louder voice.

“You want to steal that?” She sounded as though he had not spoken. “The ruby is not worth it, Fain. Or whatever your name is. That blade is tainted so none but a fool would touch it except with tongs, or be near it for a moment longer than necessary. You can see what it did to Verine. So why did you come here and go straight to what you should not have known was here? You cannot have had time for any search.”

“I could dispose of Elaida for you. One touch of this, and even Healing will not save her.” He tried to gesture with the dagger, but could not budge it a hair; if he could have moved it, Alviarin would be dead by now. “You could be first in the Tower, not second.”

She laughed at him, cool contemptuous chimes. “Do you think I would not be first if I had wished it? Second suits me. Let Elaida claim credit for what she calls successes, and sweat for her failures, too. I know where the power lies. Now, answer my questions, or two corpses will be found here in the morning instead of one.”

There would be two in any case, whether he answered her with suitable lies or not; she did not mean to let him live. “I have seen Thakan’dar.” Saying that hurt; the memories it brought were agony. He refused to whimper, forced the words out. “The great sea of fog, rolling and crashing in silence against the black cliffs, the fires of the forges glowing red beneath, and lightning stabbing up into a sky fit to drive men mad.” He did not want to go on, but he made himself. “I have taken the path down to the belly of Shayol Ghul, down the long way with stones like fangs brushing my head, to the shore of a lake of fire and molten rock—” *No, not again!* “—that holds the Great Lord of the Dark in its endless depths. The heavens above Shayol Ghul are black at noon with his breath.”

Alviarin was standing upright now, eyes wide. Not fearful, but impressed. “I have heard of . . .” she began softly, then shook herself and stared at him piercingly. “Who are you? Why are you here? Did one of the For—the Chosen send you? Why was I not informed?”

He threw back his head and laughed. “Are the tasks given to the likes of me for the likes of you to be knowing?” The accents of his native Lugard were strong again; in a way it was his native city. “Do the Chosen confide everything in you, then?” Something inside seemed to shout that this was not the way, but he hated Aes Sedai, and that something inside him did, too.

“Be careful, pretty little Aes Sedai, or they’ll be giving you to a Myrddraal for its sport.”

Her glare was icicles stabbing his eyes. “We shall see, Master Fain. I will clear away this mess you have made, and then we shall see which of us stands higher with the Chosen.” Eyeing the dagger, she backed from the room. The air around him did not soften until she had been gone a full minute.

Silently he snarled at himself. Fool. Playing the Aes Sedai’s game, groveling for them, then one moment of anger to ruin all. Sheathing the dagger, he nicked himself, and licked the wound before sticking the weapon under his coat. He was not at all what she thought. He had been a Darkfriend once, but he was beyond that, now. Beyond it, above it. Something different. Something more. If she managed to communicate with one of the Forsaken before he could dispose of her . . . Better not to try. No time to find the Horn of Valere now. There were followers awaiting him outside the city. They should still be waiting. He had put fear into them. He hoped some of the humans were still alive.

Before the sun rose he was out of the Tower, off the island of Tar Valon. Al’Thor was out there, somewhere. And he was whole again.

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CHAPTER
20

Jangai Pass

Under the looming Spine of the World, Rand guided Jeade’en up the stony slope from the foothills that began the foot of Jangai Pass. The Dragonwall pierced the sky, dwarfing all other mountains, its snowcapped peaks defying the baking afternoon sun. The tallest thrust well above clouds that mocked the Waste with promises of rain that had never come. Rand could not imagine why a man would want to climb a mountain, but it was said that men who had tried to scale these heights turned back, overcome with fear and unable to breathe. He could well believe that a man might grow too afraid to breathe, attempting to climb so high.

“. . . yet though the Cairhienin are consumed with the Game of Houses,” Moiraine was saying at his shoulder, “they will follow you so long as they know that you are strong. Be firm with them, but I would ask you to be fair also. A ruler who gives true justice . . .”

He tried to ignore her, as he did the other riders, and the creak and rumble of Kadere’s wagons, making heavy going further back. The broken gorges and gullies of the Waste were behind them, but these rugged rising hills, nearly as barren, were little better for wagons. No one had traveled this path in over twenty years.

Moiraine talked at him that way from daybreak to sunset whenever he let her. Her lectures could be on small things—details of court behavior, say, in Cairhien or Saldaea or somewhere else—or on large: the political influence of the Whitecloaks, or perhaps the effects of trade on rulers’ decisions to go to war. It was as if she meant to see him educated, as a noble would be, or should be, before he reached the other side of the mountains. It was surprising how often what she said reflected what anyone back in Emond’s Field would have called simple common sense. And also how often it did not.

Occasionally she came out with something startling; for instance, that he should trust no woman of the Tower except herself, Egwene, Elayne and Nynaeve, or the news that Elaida was now the Amyrlin Seat. Oath to obey or no, she would not tell him how she knew that. She said it was someone else's place to tell if she chose, someone else's secret, and she could not usurp it. He suspected the Wise One dreamwalkers, though they had stared him right in the eye and refused to say aye or nay. He wished he could make them swear Moiraine's oath; they interfered between him and the chiefs continually, as if they wanted him to go through them to reach the chiefs.

Right that minute he did not want to think about Elaida or the Wise Ones, or listen to Moiraine. Now he wanted to study the pass ahead, a deep gap in the mountains that twisted as though a blunt axe had tried to chop through again and again, never quite succeeding. A few minutes' hard ride, and he could be in it.

On one side of the pass mouth a sheer cliff had been smoothed over a hundred-pace width and carved, a wind-weathered snake entwining a staff a good three hundred spans high; monument or marker or ruler's sigil, it surely dated from some lost nation before Artur Hawkwing, perhaps even before the Trolloc Wars. He had seen remnants before from nations long vanished; often even Moiraine did not know their source.

High on the other side, so far up that he was not sure he was seeing what he thought, just below the snow line, stood something even stranger. Something that made the first monument of a few thousand years a commonplace. He could have sworn it was the remnants of shattered buildings, shining gray against the darker mountain, and stranger still, what appeared to be a dock of the same material, as for ships, slanting drunkenly down the mountain. If he was not imagining it, that had to date from before the Breaking. The face of the world had been changed utterly in those years. This could well have been an ocean's floor, before. He would have to ask Asmodean. Even if he had had the time, he did not think he would want to try reaching that altitude to find out for himself.

At the foot of the huge snake lay Taien, a high-walled town of moderate size, a remnant itself of the time when Cairhien had been allowed to send caravans across the Three-fold Land, and wealth had flowed from Shara along the Silk Path. There appeared to be birds above the town, and dark blotches at regular intervals along the gray stone walls. Mat stood in Pips' stirrups, shading his eyes with that broad-brimmed hat to peer up the pass, frowning. Lan's hard face wore no expression at all, yet he appeared just as intent; a gust of wind, a little cooler here, whipped his color-shifting cloak around him, and for a moment all of him from shoulders to boots seemed to blend into the rocky hills and sparse thornbushes.

"Are you listening to me?" Moiraine said suddenly, reining her white mare closer. "You must—!" She took a deep breath. "Please, Rand. There is so much that I must tell you, so much that you need to know."

The hint of pleading in her tone made him glance at her. He could remember when he had been overawed by her presence. Now she seemed quite small, for all her regal manner. A fool thing, that he should feel protective of her. "There is plenty of time ahead of us, Moiraine," he said gently. "I don't pretend to think I know as much of the world as you. I mean to keep you close from now on." He barely realized how great a change that was from when *she* was keeping *him* close. "But I have something else on my mind right now."

"Of course." She sighed. "As you wish. We have plenty of time yet."

Rand heeled the dappled gray stallion to a trot, and the others followed. The wagons quickened, too, though they could not keep up on the slope. Asmodean's—Jasin Natael's—patch-covered gleeman's cloak rippled behind him like the banner he carried at his stirrup, brilliant red with the white-and-black symbol of the ancient Aes Sedai at its center. His face wore a sullen glower; he had not been best pleased at having to be the bannerman. Under that sign he would conquer, the Prophecy of Rhuidean said, and perhaps it would not frighten the world so much as the Dragon Banner, Lews Therin's banner, that he had left flying over the Stone of Tear. Few would know this sign.

The blotches on the walls of Taien were bodies, contorted in their final agonies, bloated in the sun and hanging by their necks in a row that seemed to encircle the town. The birds were glossy black ravens, and vultures with their heads and necks befouled. Some ravens perched on corpses, gorging, unconcerned for the new arrivals. The sickly sweet stench of corruption hung in the dry air, and the acrid smell of char. Iron-strapped gates stood gaping open on an expanse of ruin, soot-streaked stone houses and collapsed roofs. Nothing moved except the birds.

Like Mar Ruois. He tried to shake the thought away, but in his head he could see that great city after it was retaken, immense towers blackened and collapsing, the remains of great bonfires at every street crossing, where those who had refused to swear to the Shadow had been bound and thrown alive to the flames. He knew whose memory it had to be, though he had not discussed it with Moiraine. *I am Rand al'Thor. Lews Therin Telamon is dead three thousand years. I am myself!* That was one battle he meant to win. If he did have to die at Shayol Ghul, he would die as himself. He made himself think of something else.

Half a month since he had left Rhuidean. Half a month, though the Aiel had set a pace afoot from sunup to sundown that wearied the horses. But Couladin had been moving this way a week before he learned of it. If they had not managed to close any ground, he would have that long to ravage Cairhien before Rand could reach it. Longer, before the Shaido could be brought to bay. Not a much happier thought.

"There's someone watching us from those rocks to the left," Lan said quietly. He seemed to be completely engrossed in studying what remained of Taien. "Not Aiel, or I doubt I would have seen a glimmer."

Rand was glad that he had made Egwene and Aviendha stay with the Wise Ones. The town gave him a new reason, but the watcher fit in with his original plan, when he had hoped that Taien had escaped. Egwene still wore the same Aiel clothes as Aviendha, and Aiel would not have been very welcome in Taien. They were even less likely to be welcome among the survivors.

He looked back at the wagons drawing to a halt a short distance downslope. Mutters drifted up from the drivers now that they could see the town clearly, and the wall's decorations. Kadere, his bulk all in white again today, mopped at his hawk-nosed face with a large kerchief; he appeared unperturbed, merely pursing his lips thoughtfully.

Rand expected that Moiraine would have to find new drivers once they were through the pass. Kadere and his crew would likely flee as soon as they had the chance. And he would have to let them go. It was not right—it was not justice—but it was necessary to protect Asmodean. How long now had he been doing what was necessary instead of what was right? In a fair world, they would be one and the same. That made him laugh, a hoarse wheeze. He was far from the village boy he had been, but sometimes that boy sneaked up on him. The others looked at him, and he fought the urge to tell them that he was not mad yet.

Long minutes passed before two coatless men and a woman emerged from the rocks, all three ragged and dirty and barefoot. They approached hesitantly, heads tilted uneasily, eyes darting from rider to rider, to the wagons and back, as though they might take flight at a shout. Gaunt cheeks and wavering steps spoke of hunger.

"Thank the Light," one of the men said finally. He was gray-haired—none of the three was young—his face deeply creased. His eyes lingered a moment on Asmodean, with falls of lace at collar and cuffs, but the leader of this train would not be riding a mule and carrying a banner. It was Rand's stirrup that he clutched anxiously. "The Light be praised that you came out of those terrible lands alive, my Lord." That might have been Rand's blue silk coat, embroidered in gold on the shoulders, or the banner, or simple flattery. The man certainly had no reason to think them other than merchants, if well dressed for it. "Those murdering savages have risen again. It is another Aiel War. They were over the wall in the night before anybody knew, killing everyone who raised a hand, stealing everything not mortared in place."

"In the night?" Mat said sharply. Hat pulled low, he was still studying the ruined town. "Were your sentries asleep? You did have sentries this close to your enemies? Even Aiel would have a hard time coming at you if you kept a good watch." Lan gave him an appraising look.

"No, my Lord." The gray-haired man blinked at Mat, then gave his answer to Rand. Mat's green coat was fine enough for a lord, but it hung open and looked slept in. "We . . . We had only a watchman at each gate. It has been long since any have even seen one of the savages. But this time . . . Whatever they did not steal, they burned, and drove us out to starve. Filthy animals! Thank the Light you have come to save us, my Lord, or we would all have died here. I am Tal Nethin. I am—I was—a saddlemaker. A good one, my Lord. This is my sister Aril, and her husband, Ander Corl. He makes fine boots."

"They stole people, too, my Lord," the woman said, her voice raw. Somewhat younger than her brother, she might have been handsome once, but haggard worry had etched lines in her face that Rand suspected would never entirely go away. Her husband had a lost look in his eyes, as if not exactly sure where he was. "My daughter, my Lord, and my son. They took all the young ones, everyone above sixteen, and some twice that or more. Said they were guy-something, and stripped them naked right in the street and herded them off. My Lord, can you . . . ?" She trailed off, eyes squeezing shut as the impossibility overwhelmed her, swaying. Small odds that she would ever see her children again.

Moiraine was out of her saddle in an instant and by Aril's side. The haggard woman gave a loud gasp as soon as the Aes Sedai's hands touched her, shivering to her toetips. Her wondering look turned to Moiraine questioningly, but Moiraine only held her as if supporting her.

The woman's husband suddenly gaped, staring at Rand's gilded belt buckle, the gift from Aviendha. "His arms were marked like that. Like that. All twined around, like the cliff snake."

Tal looked up at Rand uncertainly. "The savages' leader, my Lord. He—had markings like that on his arms. He wore those strange clothes they all do, but he had his coatsleeves cut off, and he made sure everybody saw."

"A gift I received in the Waste," Rand said. He made sure to keep his hands still on his pommel; his coatsleeves hid his own Dragons, except for the heads; they would be visible on the backs of his hands to anyone who looked closely. Aril had forgotten about wondering what Moiraine had actually done, and all three looked on the point of running. "How long since they left?"

"Six days, my Lord," Tal said uneasily. "They did what they did in a night and a day and were gone the next. We would have gone, too, but what if we met them coming back? Surely they were turned back at Selean?" That was the town at the other end of the pass. Rand doubted that Selean was in any better condition than Taien by this time.

"How many survivors are there besides you three?"

"Maybe a hundred, my Lord. Maybe more. Nobody has counted."

Abruptly anger flared in him, though he tried to hold it down. "A hundred of you?" His voice was icy iron. "And six days? Then why are your dead left for the ravens? Why do corpses still decorate your town walls? Those are your people filling your nostrils with their stink!" Huddling together, the three backed away from his horse.

"We were afraid, my Lord," Tal said hoarsely. "They went, but they could come back. And he told us . . . The one with the markings on his arms told us not to touch anything."

"A message," Ander said in a dull voice. "He chose them out to hang, just pulling them out until he had enough to line the wall. Men, women, he did not care." His eyes were fixed on Rand's buckle. "He said they were a message for some man who would be following him. He said he wanted this man to know . . . know what they were going to do on the other side of the Spine. He said . . . He said he would do worse to this man."

Aril's eyes widened suddenly, and the three stared beyond Rand for a moment, gaping. Then, screaming, they turned and ran. Black-veiled Aiel rose from the rocks they had come from, and they darted off in another direction. Veiled Aiel appeared there, too, and they collapsed to the ground, sobbing and holding each other as they were surrounded. Moiraine's face was cool and composed, but her eyes were not serene.

Rand twisted in his saddle. Rhuarc and Dhearic were coming up the slope, unveiling themselves and unwrapping the *shoufa* from around their heads. Dhearic was thicker than Rhuarc, with a prominent nose and paler streaks through his golden hair. He had brought the Reyn Aiel as Rhuarc had said he would.

Timolan and his Miagoma had been paralleling them to the north for three days, exchanging occasional messengers but giving no clue to his intentions. The Codarra and the Shiande and the Daryne were still somewhere to the east; following, so Amys and the others said from dreamtalking to their Wise Ones, but slowly. Those Wise Ones had no more idea of their clan chiefs' aims than Rand did of Timolan's.

"Was that necessary?" he said as the two chiefs came up to him. He had frightened the people first, but for cause, and had not made them think that they were going to die.

Rhuarc simply shrugged, and Dhearic said, "We put spears in place around this hold unseen, as you wished, and there seemed no reason to wait since no one remained here to dance spears. Besides, they are only treekillers."

Rand drew a deep breath. He had known this might be as large a problem as Couladin, in its own way. Nearly five hundred years ago the Aiel had presented Cairhien with a sapling, a cutting from *Avendesora,* and with it a right granted to no other nation, to trade across the Three-fold Land to Shara. They had given no reason—they did not like wetlanders very much at the best—but to the Aiel it had been required by *ji'e'toh.* During the long years of journey that had brought them to the Waste, only one people had not attacked them, only one had allowed them water uncontested when the world grew parched. And finally they had found the descendants of those people. The Cairhienin.

For five hundred years riches had flowed into Cairhien with the silk and the ivory. Five hundred years, and *Avendoraldera* grew in Cairhein. And then King Laman had had the tree cut down to make a throne. The nations knew why the Aiel had crossed the Spine of the World twenty years ago—Laman's Sin, they called it, and Laman's Pride—but few knew that to the Aiel it had not been a war. Four clans had come to find an oathbreaker, and when they had killed him, they returned to the Three-fold Land. But their contempt for the treekillers, the oathbreakers, had never died. Moiraine being Aes Sedai offset her being Cairhienin, but Rand was never sure how much.

"These folk broke no oaths," he told them. "Find the others; the saddlemaker says there are about a hundred. And be gentle with them. If any of them were watching, they're probably running away into the mountains by now." The two Aiel started to turn away, and he added, "Did you hear what they told me? What do you think of what Couladin did here?"

"They killed more than they had to," Dhearic said with a disgusted shake of his head. "Like black ferrets falling on rockhens' nests in a gully." Killing was as easy as dying, so the Aiel said; any fool could do either.

"And the other thing? Taking prisoners. *Gai'shain.*"

Rhuarc and Dhearic exchanged looks, and Dhearic's mouth tightened. Clearly they had heard, and it made them uncomfortable. It took a great deal to make an Aiel uncomfortable.

"It cannot be so," Rhuarc said at last. "If it is . . . *Gai'shain* is a thing of *ji'e'toh.* No one can be made *gai'shain* who does not follow *ji'e'toh,* else they are only human animals, such as the Sharans keep."

"Couladin has abandoned *ji'e'toh.*" Dhearic sounded as though he were saying stones had grown wings.

Mat guided Pips closer, using his knees. He had never been more than an indifferent rider, but sometimes, when he was thinking of something else, he rode as though born on a horse's back. "That surprises you?" he said. "After everything he has done already? The man would cheat at dice with his mother."

They gave him flat-eyed stares, like blue stones. In many ways, Aiel *were ji'e'toh.* And whatever else Couladin was, he was still Aiel in their eyes. Sept before clan, clan before outsiders, but Aiel before wetlanders.

Some of the Maidens joined them, Enaila and Jolien and Adelin, and wiry, white-haired Sulin, who had been chosen roofmistress of the Roof of the Maidens in Rhuidean. She had told the Maidens who stayed to choose another, and now she led the Maidens here. They sensed the mood, and said nothing, only grounded their spearpoints patiently. An Aiel who wanted to could make the rocks look hasty.

Lan broke the silence. “If Couladin expects you to be following him, he may have left a surprise somewhere in the pass. A hundred men could hold some of those narrows against an army. A thousand . . .”

“We will camp here, then,” Rand said, “and send scouts ahead to make sure the way is clear. *Duadhe Mahdi’in*?”

“Water Seekers,” Dhearic agreed, sounding pleased. That had been his society before he became clan chief.

Sulin and the other Maidens gave Rand flat stares as the Reyn chief walked away downslope. He had chosen scouts from other societies for the last three days, when he had begun to fear what he might find here, and he had the feeling they knew he was not just giving the others their turns. He tried to ignore their looks. Sulin’s was especially difficult; the woman could have driven nails with those pale blue eyes.

“Rhuarc, once the survivors are found, see that they’re fed. And well treated. We will take them with us.” His gaze was drawn to the town wall. Some Aiel were already using their curved horn bows to kill ravens. Sometimes Shadowspawn used ravens and other animals that fed on death as spies; Shadoweyes, the Aiel called them. These barely paused in the frenzied feeding until they fell transfixed with an arrow, but a wise man did not take chances with ravens or rats. “And see that the dead are buried.” At least in that, right and necessity were the same.

* * *

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CHAPTER

21

The Gift of a Blade

The camp began to go up quickly, in the mouth of Jangai Pass, if away from Taien, and spreading over the hills around the approaches, among the scattered thornbushes, and even onto the slopes of the mountains. Not that anything was very visible except what was inside the pass; Aiel tents blended into the stony soil so well that you could miss them even when you knew what you were looking for and where. In the hills the Aiel camped by clan, but those in the pass itself grouped themselves by society. They were mostly Maidens, but the men's societies sent their representatives, too, some fifty each, spreading tents well above the ruins of Taien in slightly separated camps. Everyone understood, or thought they did, about the Maidens carrying Rand's honor, but all societies wanted to guard the *Car'a'carn.*

Moiraine—and Lan, of course—went to get Kadere's wagons settled, just below the town; the Aes Sedai fussed over what was in those wagons nearly as much as she did over Rand. The drivers muttered and cursed about the town's smell, and avoided watching the Aiel cut bodies down from the wall, but after their months in the Waste, they seemed to like being close even to the wreckage of what they saw as civilization.

Gai'shain were erecting the Wise Ones' tents—those of Amys and Bair and Melaine—below the town, astride the faded track that led up out of the hills. Rand was sure they would say they had chosen the spot to be available to him as well as to the countless dozens of Wise Ones below, but he thought it no coincidence that anyone coming up from the hills to him would have to go through or around their camp to reach him. He was a little surprised to see Melaine directing the white-robed figures. Only three nights before, she had married Bael, in a ceremony that made her his wife and first-sister to his other wife, Dorindha. That part had been just as important as the marriage, apparently; Aviendha had been shocked at his surprise, or maybe angry.

When Egwene arrived with Aviendha up behind her on the gray mare, those full skirts pushed above their knees, they looked a matched pair despite their different coloring and Aviendha being tall enough to look over Egwene's shoulder without stretching, each with just one ivory bracelet and one necklace. The work of removing the hanged corpses had barely begun. Most of the ravens lay dead, bundles of black feathers littering the ground, and the rest had flown, but vultures too gorged to flap aloft still waddled through the ashes inside the walls.

Rand wished that there was some way he could keep the two women from having to see, but to his surprise, neither went running to empty her stomach. Well, he had not really expected anything of the sort from Aviendha; she had seen death often enough, and dealt it out, too, and her face remained expressionless. But he had not expected the pure pity in Egwene's eyes as she gazed at the bloated dead coming down.

She drew Mist over to Jeade'en and leaned to put a hand on his arm. "I am so sorry, Rand. There was no way you could have stopped this."

"I know," he told her. He had not even known there *was* a town here until Rhuarc mentioned it casually five days ago—his councils with the chiefs had all been on whether they could cover more ground in a day, and what Couladin would do when he cleared the Jangai—and by that time the Shaido had finished here and gone. He had done with cursing himself for a fool then.

"Well, just you remember it. It was not your fault." She heeled Mist on, and began talking to Aviendha before she was out of earshot. "I am glad he is taking it so well. He has the habit of feeling guilty over things he cannot control."

"Men always believe they are in control of everything around them," Aviendha replied. "When they find out they are not, they think they have failed, instead of learning a simple truth women already know."

Egwene giggled. "*That* is the simple truth. Once I saw those poor people, I thought we would find him heaving somewhere."

"Is his stomach so tender? I . . ."

Their voices faded away as the mare ambled on. Rand pulled himself back upright in the saddle, flushing. Trying to eavesdrop on them; he was behaving like an idiot. That did not stop him frowning at their departing backs. He only took responsibility for what he was accountable for, if only to himself. Just for things he could do something about. And what he should have done something about. He did not like them talking about him. Behind his back, or under his nose. The Light only knew what they were saying.

Dismounting, he led Jeade'en in search of Asmodean, who seemed to have wandered off. After so many days in the saddle, it was good to walk. Various clusters of tents were springing up along the pass; the mountain slopes and cliffs made formidable barriers, but the Aiel still arranged themselves as if they could expect attack from them. He had tried walking with the Aiel, but half a day was enough to put him back on the horse. It was hard enough to keep up with them mounted; they could wear out horses when they pressed.

Mat was down, too, squatting with his reins in one hand and that black-hafted spear across his knees, peering at the gaping gates, studying the town and muttering to himself while Pips tried to nibble at a thornbush. Mat was studying, not just staring. Where had that remark about sentries come from? Mat said odd things at times now, since their first visit to Rhuidean. Rand wished that he were willing to talk about what had happened, but he still denied that anything had, despite the foxhead medallion, the spear, and that scar around his neck. Melindhra, the Shaido Maiden that Mat had taken up with, was off to one side, watching Mat, until Sulin came and chased her away on some errand. Rand wondered if Mat knew the Maidens were laying bets on whether Melindhra would give up the spear for him. And on whether she would teach him to sing, too, though they only laughed when Rand asked what that meant.

The sound of music drew him to Asmodean, seated by himself on a granite outcrop with his harp on his knee. The crimson banner's staff had been twisted into the rocky soil, and the mule tethered to it. "You see, my Lord Dragon," he said cheerfully, "your bannerman keeps loyally to his duties." His voice and expression changed, and he said, "If you must have this thing, why not let Mat carry it, or Lan? Or Moiraine, for that matter? She would be glad to carry your banner, and clean your boots. Be careful of her. She is a devious woman. When a woman says she will obey you, of her own will, it is time to sleep lightly and watch your back."

"You carry it because you were chosen, Master Jasin Natael." Asmodean gave a start and looked around, though everyone else was too far away, and too busy, to be listening. None but they two would have understood, anyway. “What do you know about those ruins up near the snow line? They must come from the Age of Legends.”

Asmodean did not even glance up the mountain. “This world is very changed from the world I . . . went to sleep in.” He sounded weary, and he shivered slightly. “What I know of what lies where, I have learned since waking.” The mournful sounds of “The March of Death” rose from his harp. “That could be what is left of the city where I was born, for all I know. Shorelle was a port.”

The sun had maybe an hour before the Spine of the World hid it; this close to high mountains, night came early. “I am too tired for one of our discussions tonight.” That was what they called Asmodean’s lessons in public, even when no one was around. Added to practice sessions with Lan or Rhuarc, those lessons had left him little time for sleep since leaving Rhuidean. “You take to your tent when you’re ready, and I will see you in the morning. With the banner.” There *was* no one else to carry the bloody thing. Maybe he could find somebody in Cairhien.

As he was turning away, Asmodean plucked something discordant and said, “No burning nets woven around my tent tonight? Do you finally begin to trust me?”

Rand looked back over his shoulder. “I trust you like a brother. Until the day you betray me. You have a parole for what you’ve done, in return for your teaching, and a better bargain than you deserve, but the day you turn against me, I will tear it up and bury it with you.” Asmodean opened his mouth, but Rand forestalled him. “That is me talking, Natael. Rand al’Thor. Two Rivers folk don’t like people who try to stab them in the back.”

Irritably, he pulled at the dapple’s reins and went on before the other man could say anything. He was not sure whether Asmodean had any inkling that a dead man was trying to take him over, but he should not let himself give the man hints. Asmodean was sure enough already that his was a helpless cause; if he began to think that Rand was not in full control of his own mind, perhaps that he was going mad, the Forsaken would abandon him in a heartbeat, and there was too much Rand had to learn yet.

White-robed *gai’shain* were erecting his tent under Aviendha’s direction, well into the pass mouth, with that huge carved snake fearing above. The *gai’shain* had their own tents, but those would be the last erected, of course. Adelin and a dozen or so Maidens squatted nearby, watching, waiting to guard his sleep. Even with over a thousand Maidens encamped around him every night, they still put a guard on his tent.

Before approaching, he reached out through the *angreal* in his coat pocket to seize *saidin*. There was no need to actually touch the carving of the fat little man with a sword, of course. Mingled filth and sweetness filled him, that raging river of fire, that crushing avalanche of ice. Channeling as he had done every night since leaving Rhuidean, he set wards around the entire encampment, not only what was in the pass but every tent in the hills below as well, and on the slopes of the mountains. He needed the *angreal* to set wardings so large, but only just. He had thought that he was strong before, but Asmodean's teachings were making him stronger. No human or animal crossing the line of that ward would notice anything, but Shadowspawn that touched it would sound a warning that everyone in the tents would hear. Had he done this in Rhuidean, the Darkhounds could never have entered without him knowing.

The Aiel themselves would have to keep watch for human enemies. Wardings were complex weaves, if tenuous, and trying to make them do more than one thing could render them useless, in practicality. He could have made this one to kill Shadowspawn instead of merely giving warning, but that would have been like a beacon to any male Forsaken who might be searching, and to Myrddraal, too. No need to bring his enemies down on him when they might not know where he was. This, even one of the Forsaken would not know until he was close, and a Myrddraal not until it was too late.

Letting go of *saidin* was an exercise in self-control, despite the foulness of the taint, despite the way the Power tried to scour him away like sand on a riverbed, to burn him, obliterate him. He floated in the vast emptiness of the Void, yet he could feel the air stirring against each hair on his head, see the weave of the *gai'shain*'s robes, smell Aviendha's warm scent. He wanted more. But he could smell the ashes of Taien, too, smell the dead who had been burned, the corruption of those who had not, even the ones already buried, mingled with the dry soil of their graves. That helped. For a while after *saidin* was gone, all he did was take deep breaths of hot, arid air; compared to before, the whiff of death seemed absent, and the air itself pure and wonderful.

"Look what was here before us," Aviendha said as he let a meek-faced white-robed woman take Jeade'en. She held up a brown snake, dead, but as thick as his forearm and nearly three paces long. The bloodsnake took its name from the effect of its bite, turning the blood to jelly in minutes. Unless he missed his guess, the neat wound behind its head had come from her belt knife. Adelin and the other Maidens looked approving.

"Did you ever for one minute think that it could have bitten you?" he said. "Did you ever think of using the Power instead of a bloody belt knife? Why didn't you kiss it first? You had to be close enough."

She drew herself up, and her big green eyes should have brought on the night's chill early. "The Wise Ones say it is not good to use the Power too often." The clipped words were as cold as her eyes. "They say it is possible to draw too much and harm yourself." Frowning slightly, she added, more to herself than him, "Though I have not come near what I can hold yet. I am sure of it."

Shaking his head, he ducked into the tent. The woman would not listen to reason.

No sooner had he settled himself against a silk cushion near the still unlit fire than she followed him. Without the bloodsnake, thankfully, but gingerly carrying something long wrapped in thick layers of gray-striped blanket. "You were worried for me," she said in a flat voice. There was no expression at all on her face.

"Of course not," he lied. *Fool woman. She'll get herself killed yet because she doesn't have the sense to be careful when it's needed.* "I'd have been as worried for anyone. I would not want anyone bitten by a bloodsnake."

For a moment she eyed him doubtfully, then gave a quick nod. "Good. So long as you do not presume toward me." Tossing the bundled blanket at his feet, she sat on her heels across the firepit from him. "You would not accept the buckle as canceling debt between us . . ."

"Aviendha, there is no debt." He thought that she had forgotten about that. She went on as if he had not spoken.

". . . but perhaps that will cancel it."

Sighing, he unwrapped the striped blanket—warily, since she had held it far more uneasily than she had the snake; she had held the bloody snake as if it were a piece of cloth—unwrapped it, and gasped. What lay inside was a sword, the scabbard so encrusted with rubies and moonstones that it was hard to see the gold except where a rising sun of many rays had been inset. The ivory hilt, long enough for two hands, had another inlaid rising sun in gold; the pommel was thick with rubies and moonstones, and still more made a solid mass along the quillons. This had never been made to use, only to be seen. To be stared at.

“This must have cost . . . Aviendha, how could you pay for it?”

“It cost little,” she said, so defensively that she might as well have added that she lied.

“A sword. How did you ever come by a sword? How did *any* Aiel come by a sword? Don’t tell me Kadere had *this* hidden in his wagons.”

“I carried it in a blanket.” She sounded even more touchy now than she had about the price. “Even Bair said that would make it all right, so long as I did not actually touch it.” She shrugged uncomfortably, shifting and reshifting her shawl. “It was the treekiller’s sword. Laman’s. It was taken from his body as proof that he was dead, because his head could not be brought back so far. Since then it has passed from hand to hand, young men or fool Maidens who wanted to own the proof of his death. Only, each began to think of what it was, and soon sold it to another fool. The price has come down very far since it first was sold. No Aiel would lay hand to it even to remove the stones.”

“Well, it is very beautiful,” he said, as tactfully as he could manage. Only a buffoon would carry something this gaudy. And that ivory hilt would twist in a hand slippery with sweat or blood. “But I cannot let you . . .” He trailed off as he bared a few inches of the blade, out of habit, to examine the edge. Etched into the shining steel stood a heron, symbol of a blademaster. He had carried a sword marked like that once. Suddenly he was ready to bet that this blade was like it, like the raven-marked blade on Mat’s spear, metal made with Power that would never break and never need sharpening. Most blademasters’ swords were only copies of those. Lan could tell him for certain, but he was sure already in his own mind.

Pulling the scabbard off, he leaned across the firepit to place it in front of her. “I will take the blade to cancel the debt, Aviendha.” It was long and slightly curved, with a single edge. “Just the blade. You can have the hilt back, too.” He could have a new hilt and scabbard made in Cairhien. Maybe one of Taien’s survivors was a decent bladesmith.

She stared wide-eyed from the scabbard to him and back, mouth open, stunned for the first time that he had ever seen. “But those gems are worth much, much more than I—You are trying to put me in your debt again, Rand al’Thor.”

"Not so." If this blade had lain untouched, and untarnished, in its scabbard for over twenty years, it had to be what he thought. "I did not accept the scabbard, so it has been yours all along." Tossing one of the silk cushions into the air, he executed the seated version of the form called Low Wind Rising; feathers rained down as the blade sliced neatly through. "And I don't accept the hilt, either, so that's yours, too. If you have made a profit, it's your own doing."

Instead of looking happy at her good fortune—he suspected she had given everything that she had for the sword, and likely gotten back a hundred times as much or more in the scabbard alone—instead of seeming glad, or thanking him, she glared through the feathers as indignantly as any goodwife in the Two Rivers seeing her floor littered. Stiffly, she clapped, and one of the *gai'shain* appeared, immediately going to her knees to begin cleaning up the mess.

"It is my tent," he said pointedly. Aviendha sniffed at him in perfect imitation of Egwene. Those two women were definitely spending too much time together.

Supper, when it came at full dark, consisted of the usual flat pale bread, and a spicy stew of dried peppers and beans with chunks of nearly white meat. He only grinned at her when he learned that it was the bloodsnake; he had eaten snake and worse since coming to the Waste. *Gara*—the poisonous lizard—was the worst in his estimation; not for the taste, which was rather like chicken, but because it was lizard. It sometimes seemed that there must be more poisonous things—snakes, lizards, spiders, plants—in the Waste than in the rest of the world combined.

Aviendha appeared disappointed that he did not spit the stew out in disgust, though sometimes it was difficult to tell what she was feeling. At times she seemed to take great pleasure in discomfiting him. Had he been trying to pretend that he was Aiel, he would have thought she was trying to prove he was not.

Tired and eager for sleep, he only took off his coat and boots before crawling into his blankets and turning his back to Aviendha. Aielmen and-women might take sweatbaths together, but a short time in Shienar, where they did something much the same, had convinced him that he was not made for that sort of thing, not without going so red in the face that he died of it. He tried not to listen to the rustle of her undressing beneath her own blankets. At least she had that much modesty, but he kept his back turned anyway, just in case.

She claimed she was supposed to sleep there to continue his lessons on Aiel ways and customs, since he spent so much of his days with the chiefs. They both knew that was a lie, though what the Wise Ones thought she could find out this way, he could not imagine. She gave little grunts every now and then as she tugged at something, and muttered to herself.

To cover the sounds, and stop himself thinking of what they must mean, he said, “Melaine’s wedding was impressive. Did Bael really know nothing about it until Melaine and Dorindha told him?”

“Of course not,” she replied scornfully, pausing for what he thought was a stocking coming off. “Why should he know before Melaine laid the bridal wreath at his feet and asked him?” Abruptly she laughed. “Melaine nearly drove herself and Dorindha to distraction finding *segade* blossoms for the wreath. Few grow so close to the Dragonwall.”

“Does that mean something special? *Segade* blossoms?” That was what he had sent her, the flowers she had never acknowledged.

“That she has a prickly nature and means to keep it.” Another pause, broken by mutters. “Had she used leaves or flowers from sweetroot, it would have meant she claimed a sweet nature. Morning drop would mean she would be submissive, and . . . There are too many to list. It would take me days to teach all the combinations to you, and you do not need to know them. You will not have an Aiel wife. You belong to Elayne.”

He nearly looked at her when she said “submissive.” A word less likely to describe any Aiel woman he could not conceive. *Probably means she gives warning before she stabs you.*

There had been more of a muffled sound to her voice at the end. Pulling her blouse over her head, he realized. He wished the lamps were out. No, that would have made it worse. But then, he had been through this every single night since Rhuidean, and every single night it was worse. He had to put an end to it. The woman was going to sleep with the Wise Ones, where she belonged, from now on; he would learn what he could from her as he could. He had thought exactly the same thing for fifteen nights now.

Trying to chase the pictures out of his head, he said, “That bit at the end. After the vows were said.” No sooner had half a dozen Wise Ones pronounced their blessings than a hundred of Melaine’s blood kin had rushed in to surround her, all carrying their spears. A hundred of Bael’s kin had rallied to him, and he had fought his way to her. No one had been veiled, of course—it was all part of custom—but blood had still been shed on both sides. “A few minutes before, Melaine was vowing that she loved him, but when he reached her, she fought like a cornered ridgecat.” If Dorindha had not punched her in the shortribs, he did not think Bael would ever have gotten her over his shoulder to carry off. “He still has the limp and the black eye she gave him.”

“Should she have been a weakling?” Aviendha said sleepily. “He had to know the worth of her. She was not a trinket for him to put in his pouch.” She yawned, and he heard her nestling deeper into her blankets.

“What does ‘teaching a man to sing’ mean?” Aielmen did not sing, not once they were old enough to take up a spear, except for battle chants and laments for the dead.

“You are thinking of Mat Cauthon?” She actually giggled. “Sometimes, a man gives up the spear for a Maiden.”

“You’re making that up. I never heard of anything like that.”

“Well, it is not really giving up the spear.” Her voice held a thick muzziness. “Sometimes a man desires a Maiden who will not give up the spear for him, and he arranges to be taken *gai’shain* by her. He is a fool, of course. No Maiden would look at *gai’shain* as he hopes. He is worked hard and kept strictly to his place, and the first thing that is done is to make him learn to sing, to entertain the spear-sisters while they eat. ‘She is going to teach him to sing.’ That is what Maidens say when a man makes a fool of himself over one of the spear-sisters.” A very peculiar people.

“Aviendha?” He had said he was not going to ask her this again. Lan said it was Kandori work, a pattern called snowflakes. Probably loot from some raid up north. “Who gave you that necklace?”

“A friend, Rand al’Thor. We came far today, and you will start us early tomorrow. Sleep well and wake, Rand al’Thor.” Only an Aiel would wish you a good night by hoping you did not die in your sleep.

Setting the much smaller if much more intricate ward on his dreams, he channeled the lamps out and tried to sleep. A friend. The Reyn came from the north. But she had had the necklace in Rhuidean. Why did he care? Aviendha’s slow breathing seemed loud in his ears until he fell asleep, and then he dreamed a confused dream of Min and Elayne helping him throw Aviendha, wearing nothing but that necklace, over his shoulder, while she beat him over the head with a wreath of *segade* blossoms.

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CHAPTER

22

Birdcalls by Night

Lying facedown on his blankets with his eyes closed, Mat luxuriated in the feel of Melindhra’s thumbs kneading their way down his spine. There was nothing quite as good as a massage after a long day in the saddle. Well, some things were, but right then, he was willing to settle for her thumbs.

“You are well muscled for such a short man, Matrim Cauthon.”

He opened one eye and glanced back at her, kneeling astride his hips. She had built the fire up twice as high as needed, and sweat trickled down her body. Her fine golden hair, close-cut except for that Aiel tail at the nape of her neck, clung to her scalp. “If I’m too short, you can always find somebody else.”

“You are not too short for my taste,” she laughed, ruffling his hair. It was longer than hers. “And you are cute. Relax. This does no good if you tense.”

Grunting, he closed his eyes again. Cute? *Light!* And short. Only Aiel could call him short. In every other land he had been in, he was taller than most men, if not always by much. He could remember being tall. Taller than Rand, when he rode against Artur Hawkwing. And a hand shorter than he was now when he fought beside Maecine against the Aelgari. He had spoken to Lan, claiming he had overheard some names; the Warder said Maecine had been a king of Eharon, one of the Ten Nations—that much Mat already knew—some four or five hundred years before the Trolloc Wars. Lan doubted that even the Brown Ajah knew more; much had been lost in the Trolloc Wars, and more in the War of the Hundred Years. Those were the earliest and latest of the memories that had been planted in his skull. Nothing after Artur Paendrag Tanreall, and nothing before Maecine of Eharon.

“Are you cold?” Melindhra said incredulously. “You shivered.” She scrambled off him, and he heard her add wood to the fire; there was enough scrub here for burning. She slapped his bottom hard as she climbed back on, murmuring, “Good muscle.”

“If you keep on like that,” he muttered, “I’ll think you mean to spit me for supper, like a Trolloc.” It was not that he did not enjoy Melindhra—as long as she refrained from pointing out that she was taller, anyway—but the situation made him uncomfortable.

“No spits for you, Matrim Cauthon.” Her thumbs dug hard into his shoulder. “That is it. Relax.”

He supposed that he would marry someday, settle down. That was what you did. A woman, a house, a family. Shackled to one spot for the rest of his life. *I never heard of a wife yet that liked her husband having a drink or a gamble.* And there was what those folk on the other side of the doorframe *ter’angreal* had said. That he was fated “to marry the Daughter of the Nine Moons.” *A man has to marry sooner or later, I suppose.* But he certainly did not mean to take an Aiel wife. He wanted to dance with as many women as he could, while he could.

“You are not made for spits, but for great honor, I think,” Melindhra said softly.

“Sounds fine to me.” Only now he could not get another woman to look at him, not the Maidens or the others. It was as if Melindhra had hung a sign on him saying OWNED BY MELINDHRA OF THE JUMAI SHAIDO. Well, she would not have put that last bit on, not here. Then again, who knew what an Aiel would do, especially a Maiden of the Spear? Women did not think the same as men, and Aielwomen did not think like anybody else in the world.

“It is strange that you efface yourself so.”

“Efface myself?” he mumbled. Her hands did feel good; knots were coming out that he had not known were there. “How?” He wondered if it had something to do with that necklace. Melindhra seemed to set great store by it, or by receiving it, anyway. She never wore the thing, of course. Maidens did not. But she carried it in her pouch, and showed it to every woman who asked. A lot of them seemed to.

“You put yourself in the shadow of Rand al’Thor.”

“I’m not in anybody’s shadow,” he said absently. It could not be the necklace. He had given jewelry to other women, Maidens and others; he liked giving things to pretty women, even if all he got in return was a smile. He never expected more. If a woman did not enjoy a kiss and a cuddle as much as he did, what was the point?

“Of course, there is honor of a sort in being in the shadow of the *Car’a’carn*. To be near the mighty, you must stand in their shade.”

“Shade,” Mat agreed, not really hearing. Sometimes the women accepted and sometimes not, but none had decided they owned him. That was what rankled, really. He was not about to be owned by any woman, however pretty she was. And no matter how good her hands were at loosening knotted muscles.

“Your scars should be scars of honor, earned in your own name, as a chief, not this.” One finger traced along the hanging scar on his neck. “Did you earn this serving the *Car’a’carn*?”

Shrugging her hand away, he pushed up on his elbows and twisted to look at her. “Are you sure ‘Daughter of the Nine Moons’ doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“I have told you it does not. Lie down.”

“If you are lying to me, I swear I’ll welt your rump.”

Hands on hips, she looked down at him dangerously. “Do you think that you can . . . welt my rump, Mat Cauthon?”

“I’ll give it my best try.” She would probably put a spear through his ribs. “Do you swear you’ve never heard of the Daughter of the Nine Moons?”

“I never have,” she said slowly. “Who is she? Or what? Lie down, and let me—”

A blackbird called, seemingly everywhere in the tent and outside as well, and a moment later, a redwing. Good Two Rivers birds. Rand had chosen his warnings from what he knew, birds not found in the Waste.

Melindhra was off him in an instant, wrapping her *shoufa* around her head, veiling herself as she snatched up spears and bucklers. She darted from the tent like that.

“Blood and bloody ashes!” Mat muttered as he struggled into his breeches. A redwing meant the south. He and Melindhra had put up their tent to the south, with the Chareen, as far from Rand as they could get and stay in the encampment. But he was not going outside in those thornbushes naked, the way Melindhra had. The blackbird meant north, where the Shaarad were camped; they were coming from two sides at once.

Stamping his feet in his boots as best he could in the low tent, he looked at the silver foxhead lying beside his blankets. Shouts were rising outside, the clash of metal on metal. He had finally figured out that that medallion had somehow kept Moiraine from Healing him on her first try. So long as he had been touching it, her channeling had not affected him. He had never heard of Shadowspawn able to channel, but there was always the Black Ajah—so Rand said, and he believed it—and always the chance that one of the Forsaken had finally come after Rand. Pulling the leather thong over his head so the medallion hung on his chest, he snatched up his raven-marked spear and ducked out into cold moonlight.

He had no time to feel the icy chill. Before he was completely out of the tent, he almost lost his head to a scythe-curved Trolloc sword. The blade brushed his hair as he threw himself into a low dive, rolling to his feet with the spear ready.

At first glance in the darkness, the Trolloc might have been a bulky man, though half again as tall as any Aiel man, garbed all in black mail with spikes at elbows and shoulders, and a helmet with goat's horns attached. But these horns grew out of that too human head, and below the eyes a goat's muzzle thrust out.

Snarling, the Trolloc lunged at him, and howled in a harsh language never meant for a human tongue. Mat spun his spear like a quarterstaff, knocking the heavy, curved blade to one side, and thrust his long spearpoint into the creature's middle, mail parting for that Power-made steel as easily as the flesh beneath. The goat-snouted Trolloc folded over with a harsh cry, and Mat pulled his weapon free, dodging aside as it fell.

All around him Aiel, some unclothed or only half but all black-veiled, fought Trollocs with tusked boars' snouts or wolves' muzzles or eagles' beaks, some with heads horned or crested with feathers, wielding those oddly curved swords and spiked axes, hooked tridents and spears. Here and there one used a huge bow to shoot barbed arrows the size of small spears. Men fought alongside the Trollocs, too, in rough coats, with swords, shouting desperately as they died among the thornbushes.

"Sammael!"

"Sammael and the Golden Bees!"

The Darkfriends *were* dying, most as soon as they engaged an Aiel, but the Trollocs died harder.

"I am no bloody hero!" Mat shouted to no one in particular as he battled a Trolloc with a bear's muzzle and hairy ears, his third. The creature carried a long-handled axe, with half a dozen sharp spikes and a flaring blade big enough to split a tree, throwing it about like a toy in those great hairy hands. It was being near Rand that got Mat into these things. All he wanted from life was some good wine, a game of dice, and a pretty girl or three. “I don’t want to be mixed up in this!” Especially not if Sammael was around. “Do you hear me?”

The Trolloc went down with a ruined throat, and he found himself facing a Myrddraal, just as it finished killing two Aiel who had come at it together. The Halfman looked like a man, pasty pale, armored in black overlapping scales like a snake’s. It moved like a snake, too, boneless and fluid and quick, night-black cloak hanging still however it darted. And it had no eyes. Just a dead-white sweep of skin where eyes should be.

That eyeless gaze turned on him, and he shivered, fear oozing along his bones. “The look of the Eyeless is fear,” they said in the Borderlands, where they should know, and even Aiel admitted that a Myrddraal’s stare sent chills through the marrow. That was the creature’s first weapon. The Halfman came at him in a flowing run.

With a roar, Mat rushed to meet it, spear spinning like a quarterstaff, thrusting, ever moving. The thing carried a blade as dark as its cloak, a sword hammered at the forges of Thakan’dar, and if that cut him, he was as good as dead unless Moiraine appeared quickly with her Healing. But there was only one sure way to take down a Fade. All-out attack; you had to overwhelm it before it overwhelmed you, and a thought for defense could be a good way to die. He could not even spare a glance for the battle raging around him in the night.

The Myrddraal’s blade flickered like a serpent’s tongue, darted like black lightning, but to counter Mat’s attack. When raven-marked Power-wrought steel met Thakan’dar-made metal, blue light flashed around them, a crackle of sheet lightning.

Suddenly Mat’s slashing attack struck flesh. Black sword and pale hand flew away, and the reverse stroke sliced open the Myrddraal’s throat, but Mat did not stop. Thrust through the heart, cut to one hamstring, then the other, all in rapid succession. Only then did he step away from the thing still thrashing on the ground, flailing about with its good hand and severed stump, wounds spilling inky blood. Halfmen took a long time to admit that they were dead; they did not die completely except with a setting sun.

Looking around, Mat realized that the attack was over. Whatever Darkfriends or Trollocs were not dead, had fled; at least, he saw none standing except Aiel. Some of them were down, too. He plucked a kerchief from the neck of a Darkfriend corpse to wipe the Myrddraal's black blood from his spearpoint. It would etch the metal if left too long.

This night assault made no sense. By the bodies he could see in the moonlight, Trolloc and human, none had made it much past the first line of tents. And without far greater numbers, they could not have hoped for more.

"What was that you called out? *Carai* something. The Old Tongue?"

He turned to look at Melindhra. She had unveiled, but she still wore not a stitch more than her *shoufa*. There were other Maidens about, and men, wearing as little, and showing as little concern, though most did seem to be heading back to their tents without lingering. They had no modesty, that was it. No modesty at all. She did not even seem to feel the cold, though her breath made wisps of mist. He was as sweaty as she, and freezing now that he had no fight for his life to occupy his mind.

"Something I heard once," he told her. "I liked the sound of it." *Carai an Caldazar!* For the honor of the Red Eagle. The battle cry of Manetheren. Most of his memories were from Manetheren. Some of those he had had before the twisted doorway. Moiraine said it was the Old Blood coming out. Just as long as it did not come out of his veins.

She put an arm around his shoulders as he started back toward their tent. "I saw you with the Nightrunner, Mat Cauthon." That was one of the Aiel names for Myrddraal. "You are as tall as a man needs to be."

Grinning, he slipped his arm around her waist, but he could not get the attack out of his head. He wanted to—his thoughts were too snarled in his borrowed memories—but he could not. Why had anyone launched such a hopeless assault? No one but a fool attacked overwhelming force without a reason. That was the thought he could not pry out of his head. No one attacked without a reason.

The birdcalls pulled Rand awake immediately, and he seized *saidin* as he tossed the blankets aside and ran out, coatless, in his stockinged feet. The night was cold and moonlit, faint sounds of battle drifting up from the hills below the pass. Around him, Aiel stirred like scurrying ants, rushing into the night to where an attack might come here in the pass. The wards would signal again—Shadowspawn in the pass would cause a winterfinch to call—until he unraveled them in the morning, but there was no point in taking foolish chances.

Soon the pass was still again, the *gai'shain* in their tents, forbidden weapons even now, the other Aiel off at the places that might need defending. Even Adelin and the other Maidens had gone, as if they knew he would have held them back if they waited. He could hear a few mutters from the wagons near the town walls, but neither the drivers nor Kadere showed themselves; he did not expect them to. The faint sounds of battle—men shouting, screaming, dying—came from two directions. Both below, well away from him. People were out around the Wise Ones' tents, too; staring toward the fighting, it seemed.

An attack down there made no sense. It was not the Miagoma, not unless Timolan had taken Shadowspawn into his clan, and that was as likely as Whitecloaks recruiting Trollocs. He turned back toward his tent, and even enclosed in the Void he gave a start.

Aviendha had come out into the moonlight, a blanket wrapped around her. Just beyond her stood a tall man shrouded in a dark cloak; moonshadows drifted over a gaunt face that was too pale, with eyes too large. A crooning rose, and the cloak opened into wide, leathery wings like those of a bat. Moving as in a dream, Aviendha drifted toward the waiting embrace.

Rand channeled, and finger-thin balefire burned past her, an arrow of solid light, to take the Draghkar in the head. The effect of that narrower stream was slower, but no less sure than with the Darkhounds. The creature's colors reversed, black to white, white to black, and it became sparkling motes that melted in air.

Aviendha shook herself as the crooning ended, stared at the last particles as they vanished, and turned to Rand, gathering the blanket closer. Her hand came up, and a stream of fire as thick as his head roared toward him.

Startled even inside the emptiness, never thinking of the Power, he threw himself to the ground beneath the billowing flames. They died in an instant.

"What are you doing?" he barked, so angry, so shocked, that the Void cracked and *saidin* vanished from him. He scrambled to his feet, stalking toward her. "This tops any ingratitude I ever heard of!" He was going to shake her until her teeth rattled. "I just saved your life, in case you failed to notice, and if I offended some bloody Aiel custom, I don't give a—!"

"The next time," she snapped back, "I will leave the great *Car'a'carn* to deal with matters by himself!" Awkwardly clutching the blanket close, she ducked stiff-backed into the tent.

For the first time, he looked behind him. At another Draghkar, crumpled on the ground in flames. He had been so angry that he had not heard the crackling and popping as it burned, had not smelled the odor of burning grease. He had not even sensed the evil of it. A Draghkar killed by first sucking the soul away, and then life. It had to be close, touching, but this one lay no more than two paces from where he had been standing. He was not certain how effective a Draghkar's crooning embrace was against someone filled with *saidin,* but he was glad he had not found out.

Drawing a deep breath, he knelt beside the tent flap. "Aviendha?" He could not go in. A lamp was lit in there, and she could be sitting there naked for all he knew, mentally ripping him up and down the way he deserved. "Aviendha, I am sorry. I apologize. I was a fool to speak as I did without asking why. I should know that you wouldn't harm me, and I . . . I . . . I'm a fool," he finished weakly.

"A great deal you know, Rand al'Thor," came a muffled reply. "You *are* a fool!"

How *did* Aiel apologize? He had never asked her that. Considering *ji'e'toh,* teaching men to sing, and wedding customs, he did not think he would. "Yes, I am. And I apologize." There was no answer this time. "Are you in your blankets?" Silence.

Muttering to himself, he stood, working his stockinged toes on the icy ground. He was going to have to remain out here until he was sure she was decently covered. Without boots or coat. He seized hold of *saidin,* taint and all, just to be distanced from the bone-grinding cold, inside the Void.

The three Wise One dreamwalkers came running, of course, and Egwene, all staring at the burning Draghkar as they skirted it, drawing their shawls around them with almost the same motion.

"Only one," Amys said. "I thank the Light, but I am surprised."

"There were two," Rand told her. "I . . . destroyed the other." Why should he be hesitant just because Moiraine had warned him against balefire? It was a weapon like any other. "If Aviendha had not killed this one, it might have gotten me."

"The feel of her channeling drew us," Egwene said, looking him up and down. At first he thought she was checking for injuries, but she paid special attention to his stockinged feet, then glanced at the tent, where a crack in the tent flap showed lamplight. "You've upset her again, haven't you? She saved your life, and you . . . Men!" With a disgusted shake of her head, she brushed past him and into the tent. He heard faint voices, but could not make out what was being said.

Melaine gave a hitch to her shawl. "If you do not need us, then we must see what is happening below." She hurried off without waiting for the other two.

Bair cackled as she and Amys followed. "A wager on who she will check on first? My amethyst necklace that you like so much against that sapphire bracelet of yours?"

"Done. I choose Dorindha."

The older Wise One cackled again. "Her eyes are still full of Bael. A first-sister is a first-sister, but a new husband . . ."

They moved on out of earshot, and he bent toward the tent flap. He still could not hear what they were saying, not unless he stuck his ear to the crack, and he was not about to do that. Surely Aviendha had covered herself with Egwene in there. Then again, the way Egwene had taken to Aiel ways, it was just as likely she had peeled out of her clothes instead.

The soft sound of slippers announced Moiraine and Lan, and Rand straightened. Though he could hear both of them breathing, the Warder's steps still made barely an audible noise. Moiraine's hair hung about her face, and she held a dark robe around her, the silk shining with the moon. Lan was fully dressed, booted and armed, wrapped in that cloak that made him part of the night. Of course. The clamor of fighting was dying down in the hills below.

"I am surprised you were not here sooner, Moiraine." His voice sounded cold, but better his voice than him. He held onto *saidin,* fought it, and the night's icy chill remained something far off. He was aware of it, aware of each hair on his arms stirring with cold beneath his shirtsleeves, but it did not touch him. "You usually come looking for me as soon as you sense trouble."

"I have never explained all that I do or do not do." Her voice was as coolly mysterious as it had ever been, yet even in the moonlight Rand was certain that she was blushing. Lan looked troubled, though with him it was difficult to tell. "I cannot hold your hand forever. Eventually, you must walk alone."

“I did that tonight, didn’t I?” Embarrassment slid across the Void—that sounded as though he had done everything himself—and he added, “Aviendha all but took that one off my back.” The flames on the Draghkar were burning low.

“As well she was here, then,” Moiraine said calmly. “You did not need me.”

She had not been afraid, of that he was sure. He had seen her rush into the midst of Shadowspawn, wielding the Power as skillfully as Lan did his sword, seen it too often to believe fear in her. So why had she not come when she sensed the Draghkar? She could have, and Lan as well; that was one of the gifts a Warder received from the bond between him and an Aes Sedai. He could make her tell, catch her between her oath to him and her inability to lie straight out. No, he could not. Or would not. He would not do that to someone who was trying to help him.

“At least now we know what the attack below was about,” he said. “To make me think something important was happening there while the Draghkar slipped in on me. They tried that at Cold Rocks Hold, and it did not work there either.” Only, maybe it almost had, this time. If that *had* been the intent. “You would think they would try something different.” Couladin ahead of him; the Forsaken everywhere, it seemed. Why could he not face one enemy at a time?

“Do not make the mistake of thinking the Forsaken simple,” Moiraine said. “That could easily be fatal.” She shifted her robe as though wishing it were thicker. “The hour is late. If you have no further need of me . . . ?”

Aiel began to drift back as she and the Warder left. Some exclaimed over the Draghkar, and roused some of the *gai’shain* to drag it away, but most simply looked at it before going to their tents. They seemed to expect such things of him now.

When Adelin and the Maidens appeared, their soft-booted feet dragged. They stared at the Draghkar being hauled away by white-robed men, and exchanged long looks before approaching Rand.

“There was nothing here,” Adelin said slowly. “The attack was all below, Darkfriends and Trollocs.”

“Shouting ‘Sammael and the Golden Bees,’ I heard,” another added. With her head wrapped in a *shoufa,* Rand could not make out who she was. She sounded young; some of the Maidens were no more than sixteen.

Taking a deep breath, Adelin held out one of her spears, horizontally, in front of him, rock-steady. The others did the same, one spear each. "We—I—failed," Adelin said. "We should have been here when the Draghkar came. Instead we ran like children to dance the spears."

"What am I supposed to do with those?" Rand asked, and Adelin replied without hesitation.

"Whatever you wish, *Car'a'carn.* We stand ready, and will not resist."

Rand shook his head. *Bloody Aiel and their bloody* ji'e'toh. "You take those and go back to guarding my tent. Well? Go." Looks passed between them before they began to obey, as reluctantly as they had approached him in the first place. "And one of you tell Aviendha that I will be coming in when I return," he added. He was not going to spend the entire night outside wondering whether it was safe. He stalked away, the stony ground hard under his feet.

Asmodean's tent was not very far from his. There had not been a sound out of it. He whipped open the flap and ducked in. Asmodean was sitting in the dark, chewing his lip. He flinched when Rand appeared, and gave him no chance to speak.

"You did not expect me to take a hand, did you? I felt the Draghkar, but you could deal with those; you did. I have never liked Draghkar; we should never have made them. They have fewer brains than a Trolloc. Give them an order, and they still sometimes kill whatever is closest. If I had come out, if I had done something. . . . What if someone noticed? What if they realized it could not be you channeling? I—"

"Well for you that you didn't," Rand cut him off, sitting cross-legged in the dark. "If I had felt you full of *saidin* out there tonight, I might have killed you."

The other man's laugh was shaky. "I thought of that, too."

"It was Sammael who sent the attack tonight. The Trollocs and Darkfriends, anyway."

"It is not like Sammael to throw men away," Asmodean said slowly. "But he'll see ten thousand dead, or ten times that, if it gains him what he thinks is worth the cost. Maybe one of the others wants you to think it was him. Even if the Aiel took prisoners . . . Trollocs do not think of much besides killing, and Darkfriends believe what they are told."

"It was him. He tried to bait me into attacking him once in the same way, at Serendahar." *Oh, Light!* The thought drifted across the surface of the Void. *I said "me."* He did not know where Serendahar had been, or anything but what he had said. The words had just come out.

After a long silence, Asmodean said quietly, "I never knew that."

"What I want to know is, why?" Rand chose his words carefully, hoping that they were all his. He remembered Sammael's face, a man—*Not mine. Not my memory*—a compact man with a short yellow beard. Asmodean had described all the Forsaken, but he knew this image was not made from that description. Sammael had always wanted to be taller, and resented it that the Power could not make him so. Asmodean had never told him that. "From what you've told me, he is not likely to want to face me unless he is sure of victory, and maybe not then. You said he'd likely leave me to the Dark One, if he could. So why is he sure he'll win now, if I decide to go after him?"

They discussed it in the dark for hours without coming to any conclusion. Asmodean held to the opinion that it had been one of the others, hoping to send Rand against Sammael and thus get rid of one or both; at least, Asmodean said that he did. Rand could feel the man's dark eyes on him, wondering. That slip had been too big to cover.

When he finally returned to his own tent, Adelin and the dozen Maidens all sprang to their feet, all of them at once telling him that Egwene was gone and Aviendha long asleep, that she was angry with him, they both were. They gave so many different pieces of advice on handling the two women's anger, all at the same time, that he could understand none of it. Finally they fell silent, looks passing between them, and Adelin spoke alone.

"We must speak of tonight. Of what we did, and what we failed to do. We—"

"It was nothing," he told her, "and if it was something, it's forgiven and forgotten. I would like to have a few hours' sleep for once. If you want to discuss it go talk to Amys or Bair. I am sure they'll understand what you're after more than I do." That shut them up, surprisingly, and let him get inside.

Aviendha was in her blankets, with one slim, bare leg sticking out. He tried not to look at it, or her. She had left a lamp lit. He climbed into his own blankets gratefully and channeled the lamp out before releasing *saidin.* This time he dreamed of Aviendha hurling fire, only she was not hurling it at a Draghkar, and Sammael was sitting at her side, laughing.

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CHAPTER
23

“The Fifth, I Give You”

Reining Mist around on a grassy hilltop, Egwene watched the streams of Aiel coming down from the Jangai Pass. The saddle had pushed her skirts above her knees again, but she hardly noticed that now. She could not spend every minute fussing with them. And she had on stockings; it was not as though she were bare-legged.

In trotting columns the Aiel flowed by below her, arranged by clan and sept and society. Thousands upon thousands, with their pack horses and mules, the *gai’shain* who would tend the camps while the rest fought, spreading a mile wide, and more still in the pass or already out of sight ahead. Even without families, it seemed a nation on the march. The Silk Path had been a road here, a full fifty paces wide and paved with broad white stones, slicing straight through hills carved to make a level. Only occasionally was it visible through the mass of Aiel, although they seemed to prefer running on the grass, but many of the paving stones had lifted up at a corner or sunk down at one end. More than twenty years had gone by since this road had carried more than local farmers’ carts and a handful of wagons.

It was startling to see trees again, real trees, towering oaks and leatherleaf in actual thickets rather than an occasional wind-twisted, stunted shape, and tall grass waving in the breeze across the hills. There was real forest to the north, and clouds in the sky, thin and high, yet clouds. The air seemed blessedly cool after the Waste, and moist, though brown leaves and large brown swaths through the grass told her that in reality it might be hotter and drier than usual for the time of year. Still, the countryside of Cairhien was a lush paradise compared to the other side of the Dragonwall.

A small stream meandered north beneath a nearly flat bridge, bordered by the dried clay of a broader bed; the River Gaelin lay not too many miles away in that direction. She wondered what the Aiel would make of that river; she had seen Aiel near a river once before. The shrunken band of water marked a definite break in the steady flow of people, as men and Maidens paused to stare in amazement before leaping across.

Kadere’s wagons rumbled by on the road, the long mule teams working hard, but still losing ground to the Aiel. It had taken four days to traverse the twists and turns of the pass, and Rand apparently intended to go as far into Cairhien as he could in the few hours of daylight remaining. Moiraine and Lan rode with the wagons; not ahead of them, or even with Kadere’s boxlike little white house on wheels, but alongside the second wagon, where the canvas-covered shape of the doorframe *ter’angreal* made a hump above the rest of the load. Some of the load was wrapped carefully or packed in boxes or barrels that Kadere had brought into the Waste full of his goods, and some was simply stuck in wherever it would fit, odd shapes of metal and glass, a red crystal chair, two child-sized statues of a nude man and woman, rods of bone and ivory and strange black materials in varying lengths and thicknesses. All sorts of things, including some Egwene could hardly begin to describe. Moiraine had used every inch of space in all of the wagons.

Egwene wished that she knew why the Aes Sedai was so concerned with that particular wagon; perhaps no one else had noticed that Moiraine paid it more attention than all the others combined, but she had. Not that she was likely to find out any time soon. Her newfound equality with Moiraine was a tender thing, as she had learned when she asked that question, in the heart of the pass, and was told that her imagination was too vivid and if she had time to spy on the Aes Sedai, perhaps Moiraine should speak to the Wise Ones about intensifying her training. She had apologized profusely, of course, and the soft words seemed to have worked. Amys and the others were not taking any more of her nights than they had before.

A hundred or so Taardad *Far Dareis Mai* went trotting by on her side of the road, moving easily, veils hanging but ready to be donned, full quivers at hips. Some carried their curved horn bows, arrows nocked, while others had their bows cased on their backs, spears and bucklers swinging rhythmically as they ran. At their rear a dozen *gai’shain* in their white robes leading pack mules struggled to keep up. One wore black, not white; Isendre labored hardest of all. Egwene could pick Adelin out, and two or three others who had been guarding Rand’s tent the night of the attack. Each clutched a doll in addition to her weapons, a rough-made doll clothed in full skirts and white blouse; they looked even more stone-faced than usual, trying to pretend that they held no such thing.

She was not sure what that was about. The Maidens who stood that guard had come in a group to see Bair and Amys when their stint was done, and had spent a long time with them. The next morning, while camp was still breaking in the grayness before dawn, they had begun making those dolls. She had not been able to ask, of course, but she had commented on it to one, a red-haired Tomanelle of the Serai sept named Maira, and the woman said it was to remind her that she was not a child. Her tone made it clear that she did not want to talk. One of the Maidens carrying a doll was no more than sixteen, yet Maira was at least as old as Adelin. It made little sense, and that was frustrating. Every time Egwene thought she understood Aiel ways, something demonstrated that she did not.

Despite herself, her eyes were drawn back to the mouth of the pass. The row of stakes was still there, just visible, stretching from steep mountain slope to steep mountain slope except where Aiel had kicked some of them down. Couladin had left another message, men and women impaled across their path, standing there seven days dead. The tall gray walls of Selean clung to the hills at the right of the pass, nothing showing above them. Moiraine said it had held only a shadow of its one-time glory, yet it had still been a considerable town, much larger than Taien; no more remained of it, however. No survivors, either—except whoever the Shaido had carried off—although here some had probably run for places they thought safe. There had been farms on these hills; most of eastern Cairhien had been abandoned after the Aiel War, but a town needed farms for food. Now soot-streaked chimneys thrust up from blackened stone farm house walls; here a few charred rafters remained above a stone barn, there barn and farm house had collapsed from the heat. The hill where she sat Mist's saddle had been sheep pasture; near the fence at the foot of the hill, flies still buzzed over the refuse of butchering. Not an animal remained in any pasture, not a chicken scratching in a barnyard. The crop fields were burned stubble.

Couladin and the Shaido were Aiel. But so were Aviendha, and Bair and Amys and Melaine, and Rhuarc, who said she reminded him of one of his daughters. They had been disgusted at the impalements, yet even they seemed to think it little more than the treekillers deserved. Perhaps the only way to truly know the Aiel was to be born Aiel.

Casting a last glance at the destroyed town, she rode slowly down to the rough stone fence and let herself out at the gate, leaning down to refasten the rawhide thong out of habit. The irony was that Moiraine had said that Selean might actually go over to Couladin. In the shifting currents of *Daes Dae'mar,* in balancing an Aiel invader against a man who had sent Tairens into Cairhien, for whatever reason, the decision could have tipped either way, had Couladin given them a chance to choose.

She rode along the broad road until she caught up with Rand, in his red coat today, and joined Aviendha and Amys and thirty or more Wise Ones she barely knew besides the other two dreamwalkers, all following at a short distance. Mat, with his hat and his black-hafted spear, and Jasin Natael, leather-cased harp slung on his back and crimson banner rippling in the breeze, were riding, but hurrying Aiel passed the party by on both sides, because Rand led his dapple stallion, talking with the clan chiefs. Skirts or no skirts, the Wise Ones would have made a good job of keeping up with the passing columns if they were not sticking to Rand like pine sap. They barely glanced at Egwene, their eyes and ears focused on him and the seven chiefs.

". . . and whoever comes through after Timolan," Rand was saying in a firm voice, "has to be told the same thing." Stone Dogs left to watch at Taien had returned to report the Miagoma entering the pass a day behind. "I've come to stop Couladin despoiling this land, not to loot it."

"A hard message," Bael said, "for us as well, if you mean we cannot take the fifth." Han and the rest, even Rhuarc, nodded.

"The fifth, I give you." Rand did not raise his voice, yet suddenly his words were driven nails. "But no part of that is to be food. We will live on what can be found wild or hunted or bought—if there is anyone with food to sell—until I can have the Tairens increase what they're bringing up from Tear. If any man takes a penny more than the fifth, or a loaf of bread without payment, if he burns so much as a hut because it belongs to a treekiller, or kills a man who is not trying to kill him, that man will I hang, whoever he is."

"Dark to tell the clans this," Dhearic said, almost as stony. "I came to follow He Who Comes With the Dawn, not to coddle oathbreakers." Bael and Jheran opened their mouths as if to agree, but each saw the other and snapped his teeth shut again.

“Mark what I said, Dhearic,” Rand said. “I came to save this land, not ruin it further. What I say stands for every clan, including the Miagoma and any more who follow. Every clan. You mark me well.” This time no one spoke, and he swung back into Jeade’en’s saddle, letting the stallion walk on among the chiefs. Those Aiel faces showed no expression.

Egwene drew breath. Those men were all old enough to be his father and more, leaders of their people as surely as kings for all they disclaimed it, hardened leaders in battle. It seemed only yesterday that he had been a boy in more than age, a youth who asked and hoped rather than commanded and expected to be obeyed. He was changing faster than she could keep up with now. A good thing, if he kept these men from doing to other cities what Couladin had done to Taien and Selean. She told herself that. She only wished he could do it without showing more arrogance every day. How soon before he expected her to obey him as Moiraine did? Or all Aes Sedai? She hoped it was only arrogance.

Wanting to talk, she kicked a foot free of its stirrup and held a hand down for Aviendha, but the Aiel woman shook her head. She really did not like to ride. And maybe all those Wise Ones striding in a pack made her reluctant, too. Some of them would not have ridden had both their legs been broken. With a sigh, Egwene climbed down, leading Mist by the reins, settling her skirts a little grumpily. The soft, knee-high Aiel boots she wore looked comfortable and were, but not for walking very far on that hard, uneven pavement.

“He truly is in command,” she said.

Aviendha barely shifted her eyes from Rand’s back. “I do not know him. I cannot know him. Look at the thing he carries.”

She meant the sword, of course. Rand did not precisely carry it; it hung at the pommel of his saddle, in a plain scabbard of brown boarhide, the long hilt covered in the same leather, rising as high as his waist. He had had hilt and scabbard made by a man from Taien, on the journey through the pass. Egwene wondered why, when he could channel a sword of fire, and do other things that made swords seem toys. “You did give it to him, Aviendha.”

Her friend scowled. “He tries to make me accept the hilt, too. He used it; it is his. Used it in front of me, as if to mock me with a sword in his hand.”

“You are not angry about the sword.” She did not think Aviendha was; she had not said a word about it, that night in Rand’s tent. “You are still upset over how he spoke to you, and I do understand. I know he is sorry. He sometimes speaks without thinking, but if you would only let him apologize —”

“I do not want his apologies,” Aviendha muttered. “I do not want . . . I can bear this no more. I cannot sleep in his tent any longer.” Suddenly she took Egwene’s arm, and if Egwene had not known better, she would have thought her on the brink of tears. “You must speak to them for me. To Amys and Bair and Melaine. They will listen to you. You are Aes Sedai. They must let me return to their tents. They must!”

“Who must do what?” Sorilea said, dropping back from the others to walk alongside them. The Wise One of Shende Hold had thin white hair and a face like leather drawn tight over her skull. And clear green eyes that could knock a horse down at ten paces. That was the way she normally looked at anyone. When Sorilea was angry, other Wise Ones sat quietly and clan chiefs made excuses to leave.

Melaine and another Wise One, a graying Black Water Nakai, started to join them, too, until Sorilea turned those eyes on them. “If you were not so busy thinking of that new husband, Melaine, you would know Amys wants to talk with you. You, also, Aeron.” Melaine flushed bright red, and *scurried* back to the others, but the older woman got there first. Sorilea watched them go, then put her full attention on Aviendha. “Now we can have a quiet talk. So you do not want to do something. Something you were told to do, of course. And you think this child Aes Sedai can get you out of doing it.”

“Sorilea, I—” Aviendha got no further.

“In my day, girls jumped when a Wise One said jump, and continued jumping until they were told to stop. As I am still alive, it is still my day. Need I make myself clearer?”

Aviendha took a deep breath. “No, Sorilea,” she said meekly.

The old woman’s eyes came to rest on Egwene. “And you? Do you think you are going to beg her off?”

“No, Sorilea.” Egwene felt as though she should curtsy.

“Good,” Sorilea said, not sounding satisfied, just as if it was what she had expected. It almost certainly was. “Now I can speak to you of what I really want to know. I hear the *Car'a'carn* has given you an interest gift like no other ever heard of, rubies and moonstones."

Aviendha jumped as if a mouse had run up her leg. Well, she probably would not, but it was the way Egwene would have jumped in that circumstance. The Aiel explained about Laman's sword and the scabbard so hastily that her words tripped over one another.

Sorilea shifted her shawl, muttering about girls touching swords, even wrapped in blankets, and about having a sharp word with "young Bair." "So he has not captured your eye. A pity. It would bind him to us; he sees too many people as his, now." For a moment she eyed Aviendha up and down. "I will have Feran look at you. His greatfather is my sister-son. You have other duties to the people than learning to be a Wise One. Those hips were made for babes."

Aviendha stumbled over an upraised paving stone and just caught herself short of falling. "I . . . I will think on him, when there is time," she said breathlessly. "I have much to learn yet, of being a Wise One; and Feran is *Seia Doon,* and the Black Eyes have vowed not to sleep beneath roof or tent until Couladin is dead." Couladin was *Seia Doon.*

The leathery-faced Wise One nodded as though everything had been settled. "You, young Aes Sedai. You know the *Car'a'carn* well, it is said. Will he do as he has threatened? Hang even a clan chief?"

"I think . . . maybe . . . that he will." More quickly, Egwene added, "But I am sure he can be brought to see reason." She was not sure of any such thing, or even that it was reason—what he had said sounded only just—but justice would do him no good if he found the others turning against him as well as the Shaido.

Sorilea glanced at her in surprise, then turned a gaze on the chiefs around Rand's horse that should have knocked the lot of them flat. "You mistake me. He must show that mangy pack of wolves that he is the chief wolf. A chief must be harder than other men, young Aes Sedai, and the *Car'a'carn* harder than other chiefs. Every day a few more men, and even Maidens, are taken by the bleakness, but they are the soft outer bark of the ironwood. What remains is the hard inner core, and he must be hard to lead them." Egwene noticed that she did not include herself or the other Wise Ones among those who would be led. Muttering to herself about "mangy wolves," Sorilea strode ahead, and soon had all the Wise Ones listening as they walked. Whatever she was saying, it did not carry.

“Who is this Feran?” Egwene asked. “I’ve never heard you speak of him. What does he look like?”

Frowning at Sorilea’s back, more than half hidden by the women clustered around her, Aviendha spoke absently. “He looks much like Rhuarc, only younger, taller and more handsome, with much redder hair. For over a year he has been trying to attract Enaila’s interest, but I think she will teach him to sing before she gives up the spear.”

“I don’t understand. Do you mean to share him with Enaila?” It still felt odd, speaking so casually of that.

Aviendha stumbled again, and stared at her. “Share him? I want no part of him. His face is beautiful, but he laughs like a braying mule and picks at his ears.”

“But from the way you talked to Sorilea, I thought you . . . liked him. Why didn’t you tell her what you just told me?”

The other woman’s low laugh sounded pained. “Egwene, if she thought I was trying to balk in this, she would make the bridal wreath herself and drag both Feran and me by the neck to be wed. Have you ever seen anyone say ‘no’ to Sorilea? Could you?”

Egwene opened her mouth to say that of course she could, and promptly closed it again. Making Nynaeve step back was one thing, and trying the same with Sorilea quite another. It would be like standing in the path of a landslide and telling it to stop.

To change the subject, she said, “I will speak to Amys and the others for you.” Not that she really thought it would do much good now. The right time had been before it began. At least Aviendha saw the impropriety of the situation finally. Perhaps . . . “If we go to them together, I am sure they will listen.”

“No, Egwene. I must obey the Wise Ones. *Ji’e’toh* requires it.” Just as if she had not been asking for intercession a moment earlier. Just as if she had not all but begged the Wise Ones not to make her sleep in Rand’s tent. “But why is my duty to the people never what I wish? Why must it be what I would rather die before doing?”

“Aviendha, no one is going to make you marry, or have babies. Not even Sorilea.” Egwene wished she had sounded a bit less limp on that last.

“You do not understand,” the other woman said softly, “and I cannot explain it to you.” She gathered her shawl around her and would not speak of it further. She was willing to discuss their lessons, or whether Couladin would turn and give battle, or how marriage had affected Melaine—who seemed to have to work at being prickly now—or anything at all except what it was that she could not, or would not, explain.

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CHAPTER 24

A Message Sent

The land changed as the sun began to sink. The hills grew lower, the thickets larger. Often the toppled stone fences of what had been fields had become mounds sprouting wild hedges, or ran through long stands of oak and leatherleaf and hickory, pine and paperbark and trees Egwene did not know. The few farm houses had no roofs, and trees ten or fifteen paces high grew in them here, little woods enclosed inside the stone walls; complete with twittering birds and black-tailed squirrels. The occasional rivulet caused as much talk among the Aiel as the small forests did, and the grass. They had heard tales of the wetlands, read of them in books bought from merchants and peddlers like Hadnan Kadere, but few had actually seen them since the hunt for Laman. They adapted quickly, though; the gray-brown of the tents blended well with dead leaves under the trees and with the dying grass and weeds. The camp spread over miles, marked by thousands of small cookfires in the golden dusk.

Egwene was more than happy to crawl into her tent once the *gai'shain* had it up. Inside the lamps were lit and a small fire burned in the firepit. Unlacing her soft boots, she tugged them off and her woolen stockings as well, and sprawled on the bright layered rugs, wriggling her toes. She wished she had a basin of water to soak her feet. She could not pretend to be as hardy as the Aiel, but she was growing soft if a few hours of walking made her feet feel twice their size. Of course, water would be no problem here. Or it should not be—she remembered that shrunken stream—but surely she could even have a proper bath again.

Cowinde, meek and silent in her white robes, brought her supper, some of that pale flat bread made from *zemai* flour and in a red-striped bowl, a thick stew that she ate mechanically, though she felt more tired than hungry. She recognized the dried peppers and beans, but did not ask what the dark meat was. *Rabbit,* she told herself firmly, and hoped that it was. The Aiel ate things that would put more curl in her hair than Elayne had. She was willing to bet that Rand could not even look at what he was eating. Men were always picky eaters.

Once done with the stew, she stretched out near an ornately worked silver lamp that had a polished silver disc to reflect and increase its light. She had felt a little guilty once she realized that most of the Aiel had no light at night but their fires; few had brought lamps or oil except the Wise Ones and the chiefs of clans and septs. But there was no point to sitting in the dim illumination of the firepit when she could have proper light. That reminded her: the nights here would not be so drastic a contrast with the days as in the Waste; the tent was already beginning to feel uncomfortably warm.

She channeled briefly, flows of Air to smother the fire, and dug into her saddlebags for the worn leather-bound book that she had borrowed from Aviendha. It was a small fat volume with crowded lines of small print, hard to read except in good light, but easily portable. *The Flame, the Blade and the Heart,* it was called, a collection of tales about Birgitte and Gaidal Cain, Anselan and Barashelle, Rogosh Eagle-eye and Dunsinin, and a dozen more. Aviendha claimed that she liked it for the adventures and battles, and maybe she did, but every last story told of the love of a man and a woman, too. Egwene was willing to admit that that was what she liked, the sometimes stormy, sometimes tender threads of undying love. To herself she would admit it, anyway. It was hardly the sort of enjoyment a woman with any pretensions to sense at all could confess publicly.

In truth she did not feel like reading any more than she had felt like eating—all she really wanted to do was bathe and sleep, and she might be willing to forgo bathing—but tonight she and Amys were to meet Nynaeve in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* It would not be night yet wherever Nynaeve was, on her way to Ghealdan, and that meant remaining awake.

Elayne had made the menagerie sound quite exciting at their last meeting, though Egwene hardly thought that Galad’s presence was reason enough to go haring off like that. Nynaeve and Elayne had simply grown to like adventure, in her opinion. It was too bad about Siuan; they needed a firm hand to settle them down. Odd that she should think of Nynaeve so; Nynaeve had always been the one with the firm hand. But since that episode in the Tower of *Tel’aran’rhiod,* Nynaeve had become less and less someone she had to struggle against.

Guiltily, she realized as she turned a page that she was looking forward to seeing Nynaeve tonight. Not because Nynaeve was a friend, but because she wanted to see if the effects had lingered. If Nynaeve tugged at her braid, she would arch a cool eyebrow at her, and . . . *Light, I hope it's held. If she lets out about that jaunt, Amys and Bair and Melaine will take turns skinning me, if they don't just tell me to go.*

Her eyes kept trying to drift shut as she read, fuzzily half-dreaming the stories in the book. She could be as strong as any of these women, as strong and brave as Dunsinin or Nerein or Melisinde or even Birgitte, as strong as Aviendha. *Would* Nynaeve have sense enough to hold her tongue in front of Amys tonight? She had a vague thought of taking Nynaeve by the scruff of the neck and shaking her. Silly. Nynaeve was years the older. Arch an eyebrow at her. Dunsinin. Birgitte. As hardy and strong as a Maiden of the Spear.

Her head slipped down to the pages, and she tried to cradle the small book under her cheek as her breathing slowed and deepened.

She gave a start at finding herself among the great redstone columns of the Heart of the Stone, in the strange light of *Tel'aran'rhiod,* and another at realizing that she wore the *cadin'sor.* Amys would not be pleased to see her in that; not amused at all. Hastily she changed it, and was surprised when her clothes flickered back and forth between the *algode* blouse and bulky wool skirt and a fine gown of brocaded blue silk before finally settling on the Aiel garb, complete with her ivory bracelet of flames and her gold-and-ivory necklace. That indecision had not happened to her in some time.

For a moment she thought of stepping out of the World of Dreams, but she suspected she was soundly asleep, back in her tent. Very likely she would only step into a dream of her own, and she did not yet always have awareness in her dreams; without that, she could not return to *Tel'aran'rhiod.* She was not about to leave Amys and Nynaeve alone together. Who knew what Nynaeve would say, if Amys got her temper up? When the Wise One arrived, she would simply say that she had just arrived herself. The Wise Ones had always been a bit ahead of her, or arrived at the same time, before this, but surely if Amys believed she had only been there a second it would not matter.

She had almost grown accustomed to the feel of unseen eyes in this vast chamber. *Only the columns, and the shadows, and all this empty space.*

Still, she hoped that Amys was not too long in coming, nor Nynaeve. But they would be. Time could be as strange in *Tel'aran'rhiod* as in any dream, but it had to be a good hour yet before the arranged meeting. Perhaps she had time to . . .

Suddenly she realized that she could hear voices, like faint whispers among the columns. Embracing *saidar,* she moved cautiously toward the sound, toward the place where Rand had left *Callandor* beneath the great dome. The Wise Ones claimed that control of *Tel'aran'rhiod* was as strong as the One Power here, but she knew her abilities with the Power far better, and trusted them more. Still hidden well back among the thick redstone columns, she stopped and stared.

It was not a pair of Black sisters, as she had feared, and not Nynaeve, either. Instead, Elayne stood near the glittering shaft of *Callandor* rising out of the floorstone, deep in quiet conversation with as oddly dressed a woman as Egwene had ever seen. She wore a short white coat of peculiar cut and wide yellow trousers gathered in folds at her ankles, above short boots with raised heels. An intricate braid of golden hair hung down her back, and she held a bow that gleamed like polished silver. The arrows in the quiver shone, too.

Egwene squeezed her eyes shut. First the difficulty with her dress, and now this. Just because she had been reading about Birgitte—a silver bow told the name for certain—was no reason to imagine that she saw her. Birgitte waited—somewhere—for the Horn of Valere to call her and the other heroes to the Last Battle. But when Egwene opened her eyes again, Elayne and the oddly dressed woman were still there. She could not quite make out what they were saying, but she believed her eyes this time. She was on the point of going out to announce herself when a voice spoke, behind her.

"Did you decide to come early? Alone?"

Egwene whirled to face Amys, her sun-darkened face too youthful for her white hair, and leathery-cheeked Bair. Both stood with their arms folded beneath their breasts; even the way their shawls were pulled tight spoke of displeasure.

"I fell asleep," Egwene said. It was too much before time for her story to work. Even as she explained hastily about dozing off and why she had not gone back—minus the part about not wanting Nynaeve and Amys to talk alone—she was surprised to feel a tinge of shame that she had intended to lie and relief that she had not. Not that the truth would necessarily save her. Amys was not as strict as Bair—not quite—but she was perfectly capable of setting her to piling up rocks the rest of the night. Many of the Wise Ones were great believers in useless labor for punishment; you could not tell yourself you were doing anything other than being punished while you were burying ashes with a spoon. That was provided they did not simply refuse to teach her any more, of course. The ashes would be much preferable.

She could not hold back a sigh of relief when Amys nodded and said, "It can happen. But next time, return and dream your own dreams; I could have heard what Nynaeve has to say, and tell her what we know. If Melaine was not with Bael and Dorindha tonight, she would be here, as well. You frightened Bair. She is proud of your progress, and if anything happened to you . . ."

Bair did not look proud. If anything, she scowled even more deeply as Amys paused. "You are lucky Cowinde found you when she returned to clear away your supper, and was worried when she could not rouse you to move to your blankets. If I thought you had been here more than a few minutes alone . . ." The glare sharpened in dire promise for a moment, and then her voice turned grumpy. "Now I suppose we have to wait for Nynaeve to arrive, just to stop you begging if we send you back. If we must, we must, but we will use the time to advantage. Concentrate your mind on—"

"It isn't Nynaeve," Egwene said hastily. She did not want to know what a lesson would be like with Bair in this mood. "It is Elayne, and . . ." She trailed off, as she turned. Elayne, in elegant green silk suitable for a ball, was pacing up and down not far from *Callandor.* Birgitte was nowhere to be seen. *I did not imagine her.*

"She is here already?" Amys said, moving to where she could see, too.

"Another young fool," Bair muttered. "Girls today have no more brains or discipline than goats." She stalked out ahead of Egwene and Amys and planted herself across *Callandor*'s glittering shape from Elayne, fists on hips. "You are not my pupil, Elayne of Andor—though you've wheedled enough out of us to keep you from killing yourself here, if you are careful—but if you were, I would welt you from your toes up and send you back to your mother until you were grown enough to be let out of her sight. Which I think might take as many more years as you have lived already. I know you have been coming into the World of Dreams alone, you and Nynaeve. You are both fools to do it."

Elayne gave a start when they first appeared, but as Bair's tirade washed over her, she drew herself up, that chilly tilt to her chin. Her gown became red and took on a finer sheen, and grew embroidery down the sleeves and across the high bodice, including rearing lions in white and golden lilies, her own sigil. A thin golden diadem rested in her red-gold curls, a single rearing lion set in moonstones above her brows. She did not yet have the best control over such things. Then again, maybe she wore exactly what she intended this time. "I do thank you for your concern," she said regally. "Yet it is true that I am not your pupil, Bair of the Haido Shaarad. I am grateful for your instruction, but I must go my own way on the tasks given me by the Amyrlin Seat."

"A dead woman," Bair said coldly. "You claim obedience to a dead woman." Egwene could all but feel Bair's hackles standing erect in anger; if she did not do something, Bair might decide to teach Elayne a painful lesson. The last thing they needed was that sort of squabble.

"What . . . Why are you here instead of Nynaeve?" She had been going to ask what Elayne was doing there, but that would have given Bair an opening, and maybe sounded as if she were on the Wise One's side. What she wanted to ask was what Elayne had been doing talking to Birgitte. *I did not imagine it.* Maybe it had been someone dreaming she was Birgitte. But only those who entered *Tel'aran'rhiod* knowingly remained for more than minutes, and Elayne surely would not have been speaking with one of them. Where *did* Birgitte and the others wait?

"Nynaeve is nursing a sore head." The diadem vanished, and Elayne's gown became simpler, with only a few golden scrolls around the bodice.

"Is she ill?" Egwene asked anxiously.

"Only with a headache, and a bruise or two." Elayne giggled and winced at the same time. "Oh, Egwene, you would not have believed it. All four of the Chavanas had come to have supper with us. To flirt with Nynaeve, really. They tried flirting with me the first few days, but Thom had a talk with them, and they stopped. He did not have any right to do that. Not that I *wanted* them to flirt, you understand. Anyway, there they were, flirting with Nynaeve—or trying to, because she paid them no more mind than buzzing flies—when Latelle stalked up and began hitting Nynaeve with a stick, calling her all sorts of terrible names."

“Was she hurt?” Egwene was not sure which of them she meant. If Nynaeve’s temper was roused . . .

“Not her. The Chavanas tried to pull her off Latelle, and Taeric will likely limp for days, not to mention Brugh’s swollen lip. Petra had to carry Latelle to her wagon, and I doubt she’ll put her nose out for some time.” Elayne shook her head. “Luca did not know who to blame—one of his acrobats lamed and his bear trainer weeping on her bed—so he blamed everybody, and I thought Nynaeve was going to box his ears as well. At least she did not channel; I thought she was going to once or twice, until she had Latelle down on the ground.”

Amys and Bair exchanged unreadable glances; this certainly was not how they expected Aes Sedai to behave.

Egwene felt a little confused herself, but it was mainly over keeping up with all these people she had only heard of briefly before. Odd people, traveling with lions, dogs and bears. And an Illuminator. She did not believe this Petra could possibly be as strong as Elayne claimed. But then, Thom was eating fire as well as juggling, and what Elayne and Juilin were doing sounded as strange, even if she was using the Power.

If Nynaeve had come close to channeling . . . Elayne must have seen the glow of her embracing *saidar.* Whether they had a real reason to be hiding or not, they would not remain hidden long if one of them channeled and let people see it. The Tower’s eyes-and-ears would certainly hear; that sort of news traveled quickly, especially if they were not out of Amadicia yet.

“You tell Nynaeve from me that she had best hold her temper, or I’ll have some words to say to her that she will not like.” Elayne looked startled—Nynaeve had certainly not told her what had passed between them—and Egwene added, “If she channels, you can be sure Elaida will hear of it as soon as a pigeon can fly to Tar Valon.” She could not say more; as it was, it brought another exchange of glances between Amys and Bair. What they really thought of a Tower divided, and an Amyrlin who as far as they knew had given orders for Aes Sedai to be drugged, they had never let on. They could make Moiraine look like the village gossip when they wished. “In fact, I wish I had both of you alone. If we were in the Tower, in our old rooms, I’d say a few words to the pair of you.”

Elayne stiffened, as queenly and cool as she had been with Bair. “You may say them to me whenever you wish.”

Had she understood? Alone; away from the Wise Ones. In the Tower. Egwene could only hope. Best to change the subject and hope the Wise Ones were not picking over her words as carefully as she hoped that Elayne was. “Will this fight with Latelle cause problems?” What had Nynaeve been thinking of? Back home, she would have had any woman her age who did the same up before the Women’s Circle so fast that her eyes would pop. “You must be almost to Ghealdan by now.”

“Three more days, Luca says, if we are lucky. The menagerie does not move very fast.”

“Perhaps you should leave them now.”

“Perhaps,” Elayne said slowly. “I really would like to highwalk just once in front of . . .” With a shake of her head, she glanced at *Callandor*; the neckline of her gown dipped precipitously, then rose again. “I do not know, Egwene. We could not travel much faster alone than we are traveling, and we don’t know where to go exactly, yet.” That meant Nynaeve had not remembered where the Blues were gathering. If Elaida’s report had been right. “Not to mention that Nynaeve might burst if we had to abandon the wagon and buy saddle horses, or another coach. Besides, we are both learning a great deal about the Seanchan. Cerandin served as a *s’redit* handler at the Court of the Nine Moons, where the Seanchan Empress sits. Yesterday she showed us things that she took when she fled Falme. Egwene, she had an *a’dam.*”

Egwene stepped forward, her skirts brushing *Callandor.* Rand’s traps were not physical, whatever Nynaeve seemed to think. “Can you be sure she was not a *sul’dam*?” Her voice trembled with anger.

“I am certain,” Elayne said soothingly. “I put the *a’dam* on her myself, and it had no effect.”

That was a little secret that the Seanchan themselves did not know, or hid well if they did. Their *damane* were women born with the spark, women who would channel eventually even if untaught. But the *sul’dam,* who controlled the *damane*—they were the women who needed to be taught. The Seanchan thought that women who could channel were dangerous animals who had to be controlled, and yet unknowingly gave many of them honored positions.

“I do not understand this interest in the Seanchan.” Amys said the name awkwardly; she had never heard it until Elayne spoke it at their last meeting. “What they do is terrible, but they are gone. Rand al’Thor defeated them, and they fled.”

Egwene turned her back and stared at the huge polished columns running off into shadow. “Gone is not to say they will never come back.” She did not want them to see her face, not even Elayne. “We must know whatever we can learn, in case they ever return.” They had put an *a’dam* on her in Falme. They had meant to send her over the Aryth Ocean to Seanchan, to spend the rest of her life as a dog on a leash. Fury welled up in her every time she thought of them. And fear, too. The fear that if they did return, they would succeed in taking and holding her this time. That was what she could not allow them to see. The stark terror that she knew was in her eyes.

Elayne put a hand on her arm. “We will be ready for them if they do come back,” she said gently. “They will not find us in surprise and ignorance again.” Egwene patted her hand, though she wanted to clutch it; Elayne understood more than Egwene wished, yet it was comforting that she did.

“Let us finish what we are here for,” Bair said briskly. “You need to be asleep in truth, Egwene.”

“We had the *gai’shain* undress you, and put you in your blankets.” Surprisingly, Amys sounded as gentle as Elayne. “When you return to your body, you can sleep until morning.”

Egwene’s cheeks colored. Given Aiel ways, it was as likely as not that some of those *gai’shain* had been men. She would have to speak to them about that—delicately, of course; they would not understand, and it was not a thing she could be comfortable explaining.

The fear was gone, she realized. *Apparently I’m more afraid of being embarrassed than I am of the Seanchan.* It was not true, but she held to the thought.

There was really little to tell Elayne. That they were in Cairhien finally, that Couladin had devastated Selean and ravaged the surrounding land, that the Shaido were still days ahead and moving west. The Wise Ones knew more than she; they had not taken to their tents straightaway. There had been skirmishes in the evening, small ones and only a few, with mounted men who quickly fled, and other men on horses who had been sighted ran without fighting. There had been no prisoners taken. Moiraine and Lan seemed to think that the riders could have been bandits, or supporters of one or another of the Houses trying to claim the Sun Throne. All had been equally ragged. Whoever they were, word would soon spread that there were more Aiel in Cairhien.

“They had to learn sooner or later” was Elayne’s only comment.

Egwene watched Elayne as she and the Wise Ones faded away—to her it seemed as though Elayne and the Heart of the Stone became more and more attenuated—but her golden-haired friend gave no sign as to whether she had understood the message.

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CHAPTER

25

Dreams of Galad

Instead of returning to her own body, Egwene floated in darkness. She seemed to be darkness herself, without substance. Whether her body lay up or down or sideways from her, she did not know—there was no direction here—but she knew that it was near, that she could step into it easily. All around her in the blackness, fireflies seemingly twinkled, a vast horde fading away into unimaginable distance. Those were dreams, dreams of the Aiel in the camp, dreams of men and women across Cairhien, across the world, all glittering there.

She could pick out some among the nearer and name the dreamer, now. In one way those sparkles were just as alike as fireflies—that was what had given her so much trouble in the beginning—but in another, somehow, they now seemed as individual as faces. Rand's dreams, and Moiraine's, appeared muted, dimmed by the wards they had woven. Amys' and Bair's were bright and regular in their pulsing; they had taken their own advice, apparently. Had she not seen those, she would have been into her body in an instant. Those two could rove this darkness much more ably than she; she would not have known they were there until they pounced on her. If she ever learned to recognize Elayne and Nynaeve in the same way, she would be able to find them in that great constellation wherever they were in the world. But tonight she did not mean to observe anyone's dream.

Carefully she formed a well-remembered image in her mind, and she was back in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* inside the small, windowless room in the Tower where she had lived as a novice. A narrow bed was built against one white-painted wall. A washstand and a three-legged stool stood opposite the door, and the current occupant's dresses and shifts of white wool hung with a white cloak on pegs. There could as easily have been none; the Tower had not been able to fill the novices' quarters in many years. The floor was almost as pale as walls and clothes. Every day the novice who lived there would scrub that floor on hands and knees; Egwene had done so herself, and Elayne, in the next room. If a queen came to train in the Tower, she would start in a room like this, scrubbing the floor.

The garments were arranged differently when she glanced at them again, but she ignored that. Ready to embrace *saidar* in a heartbeat, she opened the door just enough to stick her head out. And drew a relieved breath when she found Elayne's head coming just as slowly out of the next doorway. Egwene hoped she did not appear as wide-eyed and uncertain. She motioned hurriedly, and Elayne scurried across in novice white that became a pale gray silk riding dress as she darted inside. Egwene hated gray dresses; that was what *damane* wore.

For an instant more she stayed there, scanning the railed galleries of the novices' quarters. Layer on layer they rose, and fell as many levels to the Novices' Court below. Not that she really expected Liandrin or worse to be out there, but it never hurt to be careful.

"I thought this was what you meant," Elayne said as she shut the door. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to remember what I can say in front of whom? Sometimes I wish we could just tell the Wise Ones everything. Let them know we are only Accepted, and be done with it."

"You would be done with it," Egwene said firmly. "I happen to be sleeping not twenty paces from them."

Elayne shivered. "That Bair. She reminds me of Lini when I'd broken something I was not supposed to touch."

"You wait until I introduce you to Sorilea." Elayne gave her a doubtful look, but then, Egwene was not sure that she would have believed Sorilea herself until she met her. There was no way to do this easily. She shifted her shawl. "Tell me about meeting Birgitte. It was Birgitte, wasn't it?"

Elayne staggered as if hit in the stomach. Her blue eyes closed for a moment, and she took a breath that must have filled her to the toes. "I cannot talk to you about that."

"What do you mean you can't talk? You have a tongue. Was it Birgitte?"

"I *cannot*, Egwene. You must believe me. I would if I could, but I cannot. Perhaps . . . I can ask . . ." If Elayne had been the kind of woman to wring her hands, she would have been doing it then. Her mouth opened and closed without any words coming out; her eyes darted around the room as if seeking inspiration or aid. Taking a deep breath, she fixed an urgent blue gaze on Egwene. “Anything I say violates confidences I promised to hold. Even that. Please, Egwene. You must trust me. And you must not tell *anyone* what you . . . think you saw.”

Egwene forced the stern frown from her face. “I will trust you.” At least she knew now for a fact that she had not been seeing things. *Birgitte? Light!* “I hope that one day you will trust me enough to tell me.”

“I *do* trust you, but . . .” Shaking her head, Elayne sat down on the edge of the neatly made bed. “We keep secrets too often, Egwene, but sometimes there is a reason.”

After a moment Egwene nodded and sat next to her. “When you can,” was all she said, but her friend gave her a relieved hug.

“I told myself I was not going to ask this, Egwene. Just once I was not going to have my head full of him.” The gray riding dress became a shimmering green gown; Elayne could not possibly have been aware of how deeply the neckline swooped. “But . . . is Rand well?”

“He is alive and unharmed, if that is what you mean. I thought he was hard in Tear, but today I heard him threaten to hang men if they go against his commands. Not that they are bad orders—he won’t let anyone take food without paying, or murder people—but still. They were the first to hail him as He Who Comes With the Dawn; they followed him out of the Waste without hesitation. And he threatened them, as hard as cold steel.”

“Not a threat, Egwene. He is a king, whatever you or he or anyone else says, and a king or queen must dispense justice without fear of enemies or favor for friends. Anyone who does that has to be hard. Mother can make the city walls seem soft, sometimes.”

“He doesn’t have to be so arrogant about it,” Egwene said levelly. “Nynaeve said I should remind him he’s only a man, but I’ve not figured out how yet.”

“He *does* have to remember he is only a man. But he has a right to expect to be obeyed.” There was something of a haughty tone to Elayne’s voice, until she glanced down at herself. Then her face went crimson, and the green gown suddenly had a lace neck under her chin. “Are you sure you are not mistaking that for arrogance?” she finished in a strangled voice.

“He’s as overweening as a pig in a pea field.” Egwene shifted herself on the bed; she remembered it as hard, but the thin mattress felt softer than what she slept on in the tent. She did not want to talk about Rand. “Are you certain this fight will not cause more trouble?" A feud with this Latelle could not make their traveling easier.

"I do not think so. Latelle's grievance against Nynaeve was that all the unattached men were no longer hers to pick and choose from. Some women do think that way, I suppose. Aludra keeps to herself, and Cerandin wouldn't have said boo to a goose until I started teaching her to stand up for herself, and Clarine is married to Petra. But Nynaeve has made it clear that she'll box the ears of any man who even *thinks* he can flirt with her, *and* she apologized to Latelle, so I hope that may settle it."

"She *apologized*?"

The other woman nodded, her face as bemused as Egwene knew her own must be. "I thought she *would* thump Luca when he told her she must—he doesn't seem to think her injunction holds to him, by the way—but she did it, after grumping about for an hour. Muttering about you, actually." She hesitated, giving Egwene a sidelong look. "Did you say something to her at your last meeting? She has been . . . different . . . since then, and sometimes she talks to herself. Argues, really. About you, from the little I've heard."

"I said nothing that did not have to be said." So it was holding, whatever it was that had happened between them. Either that, or Nynaeve was storing up her anger for the next time they met. She was not going to put up with the woman's temper anymore, not now that she knew she did not have to. "You tell her from me that she is too old to be rolling about on the ground fighting. If she gets into another, I'll have worse to say to her. You tell her that exactly. It will be worse." Let Nynaeve chew on that until next time. Either she would be mild as a lamb . . . Or else Egwene would just have to carry through on her threat. Nynaeve might be stronger in the Power, when she could channel, but here, Egwene was. One way or another, she was finished with Nynaeve's tantrums.

"I will tell her," Elayne said. "You have changed, too. There seems to be something of Rand's attitude about you."

It took Egwene a moment to realize what she meant, helped by that amused little smile. "Don't be silly."

Elayne laughed aloud and gave her another hug. "Oh, Egwene, you will be Amyrlin Seat one day, when I am Queen of Andor."

"If there is a Tower then," Egwene said soberly, and Elayne's laughter faded.

“Elaida cannot destroy the White Tower, Egwene. Whatever she does, the Tower will remain. Perhaps she will not stay Amyrlin. Once Nynaeve remembers the name of that town, I will wager that we find a Tower in exile, with every Ajah but the Red.”

“I hope so.” Egwene knew she sounded sad. She wanted Aes Sedai to support Rand and oppose Elaida, but that meant the White Tower broken for sure, maybe never to be made whole again.

“I must get back,” Elayne said. “Nynaeve insists that whichever of us does not enter *Tel’aran’rhiod* remain awake, and with her headache, she needs to drink one of her herb teas and sleep. I do not know why she is so insistent. Whoever is watching can do nothing to help, and we both know enough to be perfectly safe here, now.” Her green dress flickered to Birgitte’s white coat and voluminous yellow trousers for an instant, then snapped back. “She said I wasn’t to tell you this, but she thinks that Moghedien is trying to find us. Her and me.”

Egwene did not ask the obvious question. Clearly it was something that Birgitte had told them. Why did Elayne persist in trying to keep that secret? *Because she promised to. Elayne never broke a promise in her life.* “You tell her to be careful.” Small chance that Nynaeve was sitting and waiting, if she thought one of the Forsaken was after her. She would be remembering that she had defeated the woman once, and she had always had more courage than sense. “The Forsaken are nothing to take lightly. And neither are Seanchan, even if they are supposedly just animal trainers. You tell her that.”

“I do not suppose you would listen if I told you to be careful, too.”

She gave Elayne a startled look. “I am always careful. You know that.”

“Of course.” The last thing Egwene saw as the other woman faded away was a very amused smile.

Egwene herself did not go. If Nynaeve could not remember where that gathering of Blues was, perhaps she could discover it here. It was hardly a new idea: this was not her first trip to the Tower since her last meeting with Nynaeve. She put on a copy of Enaila’s face, with flame-colored hair to her shoulders, and an Accepted’s dress with its banded hem, then formed the image of Elaida’s ornately furnished study.

It was as it had been before, though on every visit fewer of the vine-carved stools stood in that arc in front of the wide writing table. The paintings still hung above the fireplace. Egwene strode straight to the table, pushing aside that thronelike chair with its inlaid ivory Flame of Tar Valon, so she could reach the lacquered letterbox. Lifting the lid, all fighting hawks and clouds, she began scanning parchments as fast as she could. Even so, some melted away half-read, or changed. There was no way to tell what was important and what insignificant beforehand.

Most seemed reports of failure. Still no word of where the Lord of Bashere had taken his army, and a note of frustration and worry tinging the words. That name tickled the back of her mind, but with no time to waste she pushed it firmly away and snatched up another sheet. No word on Rand's whereabouts, either, said a cringing report filled with near panic. That was good to know, and worth the trip by itself. More than a month had passed since the last news from Tanchico by any Ajah's eyes-and-ears, and others in Tarabon had also gone silent; the writer blamed the anarchy there; rumors that someone had taken Tanchico could not be confirmed, but the writer suggested that Rand himself was involved. Even better, if Elaida was looking in the wrong place by a thousand leagues. A confused report said that a Red sister in Caemlyn claimed to have seen Morgase at a public audience, but various Ajahs' agents in Caemlyn said the Queen had been in seclusion for days. Fighting in the Borderlands, possibly minor rebellions in Shienar and Arafel; the parchment was gone before she reached the reason. Pedron Niall calling in Whitecloaks to Amadicia, possibly to move against Altara. A good thing that Elayne and Nynaeve had only another three days there.

The next parchment was about Elayne and Nynaeve. First the writer advised against punishing the agent who had allowed them to escape—Elaida had scratched that out in bold strokes and written "Make an example!" in the margin—and then, just when the woman began to detail the search for the pair in Amadicia, the single sheet became a fistful, a sheaf of what seemed to be builders' and masons' estimates for constructing a private residence for the Amyrlin Seat on the Tower grounds. More like a palace, by the number of pages.

She let the pages fall, and they vanished before they finished scattering across the tabletop. The lacquered box was closed again. She could spend the rest of her life here, she knew; there would always be more documents in the box, and they would always be changing. The more ephemeral something was in the waking world—a letter, a piece of clothing, a bowl that might be frequently moved—the less firm its reflection in

Tel'aran'rhiod. She could not remain here too long; sleep while in the World of Dreams was not as restful as sleep undisturbed.

Hurrying out to the antechamber, she was about to reach for the neat piles of scrolls and parchments, some with seals, on the Keeper's writing table, when the room seemed to flicker. Before she had time to even consider what that meant, the door opened, and Galad stepped in, smiling, his brocaded blue coat fitting his shoulders perfectly, snug breeches showing the shape of his calves.

She took a deep breath, her stomach fluttering. It just was not fair for a man to have a face so beautiful.

He stepped closer, dark eyes twinkling, and brushed her cheek with his fingers. "Will you walk with me in the Water Garden?" he said softly.

"If you two wish to canoodle," a brisk woman's voice said, "you will not do so here."

Egwene spun, wide-eyed, staring at Leane seated behind the table with the Keeper's stole on her shoulders and a fond smile on her copper-cheeked face. The door to the Amyrlin's study was open, and inside Siuan stood beside her simple, well-polished writing table, reading a long parchment, the striped stole of office on her shoulders. This was madness.

She fled without thinking of what image she was forming, and found herself gulping for breath on the Green in Emond's Field, with the thatch-roofed houses all around, and the Winespring gushing from the stone outcrop on the broad expanse of grass. Near the swift, rapidly widening stream stood her father's small inn, its lower floor stone, the overhanging upper whitewashed. "The only roof like it in the Two Rivers," Bran al'Vere had often said of his red tiles. The large stone foundation near the Winespring Inn, a huge, spreading oak rising from its center, was far older than the inn, but some said an inn of some sort had stood there beside the Winespring Water for more than two thousand years.

Fool. After warning Nynaeve so firmly about dreams in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* she had nearly let herself be caught in one of her own. Though it was odd that it had been Galad. She did dream of him, sometimes. Her face heated; she certainly did not love him, or even like him very much, but he was beautiful, and in those dreams he had been much more what she could have wished him. It was his brother Gawyn that she dreamed of more often, but that was just as silly. Whatever Elayne said, he had never made any feelings known to her.

It was that fool book, with all those tales of lovers. As soon as she woke in the morning she was going to give the thing back to Aviendha. And tell her that she did not think that she read it for the adventures at all.

She was reluctant to leave, though. Home. Emond's Field. The last place that she had really felt safe. More than a year and a half had passed since she last saw it, yet everything seemed as she remembered. Not quite everything. On the Green stood two tall poles with large banners, one a red eagle, the other an equally red wolf's head.

Had Perrin anything to do with those? She could not imagine how. Yet he had come home, so Rand said, and she had dreamed of him with wolves more than once.

Enough idle standing about. It was time to—

Flicker.

Her mother stepped out of the inn, graying braid pulled over one shoulder. Marin al'Vere was a slim woman, still handsome, and the best cook in the Two Rivers. Egwene could hear her father laughing inside the common room, where he was meeting with the rest of the Village Council.

"Are you still out here, child?" her mother said, gently chiding and amused. "You've certainly been married long enough to know you shouldn't let your husband know you mope about waiting on him." With a shake of her head, she laughed. "Too late. Here he comes."

Egwene turned eagerly, eyes darting past the children playing on the Green. The timbers of the low Wagon Bridge thrummed as Gawyn galloped across and swung down from his saddle in front of her. Tall and straight in his gold-embroidered red coat, he had his sister's red-gold curls, and marvelous deep blue eyes. He was not so handsome as his half-brother, of course, but her heart beat faster for him than it had for Galad—*For Galad? What?*—and she had to press her hands to her stomach in a vain attempt to still gigantic butterflies.

"Did you miss me?" he said, smiling.

"A little." *Why did I think of Galad? As if I'd just seen him a moment ago.* "Now and then, when there was nothing interesting to occupy my time. Did you miss me?"

For answer, he pulled her off her feet and kissed her. She was not aware of very much else until he set her back down on unsteady legs. The banners were gone. *What banners?*

“Here he is,” her mother said, approaching with a babe wrapped in swaddling. “Here’s your son. He is a fine boy. He never cries at all.”

Gawyn laughed as he took the child, held him aloft. “He does have your eyes, Egwene. He will be a fine one with the girls one day.”

Egwene backed away from them, shaking her head. There *had* been banners, red eagle and red wolf’s head. She *had* seen Galad. In the Tower. “NOOOOOOO!”

She fled, leaping from *Tel’aran’rhiod* to her own body. Awareness remained only long enough for her to wonder how she could possibly have been fool enough to let her own fancies nearly trap her, and then she was deep in her own safe dream. Gawyn galloped across the Wagon Bridge, swinging down. . . .

Stepping out from behind a thatch-roofed house, Moghedien wondered idly where this little village was. Not the sort of place she would expect to see banners flying. The girl had been stronger than she had thought, to escape her weaving of *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Even Lanfear could not improve on her abilities here, whatever she claimed. Still, the girl had just been of interest because she was speaking to Elayne Trakand, who might lead her to Nynaeve al’Meara. The only reason to trap her had simply been to rid *Tel’aran’rhiod* of one who could walk it freely. It was bad enough that she must share it with Lanfear.

But Nynaeve al’Meara. That woman she meant to make beg to be bound in her service. She would take her in the flesh, perhaps ask the Great Lord to grant her immortality, so Nynaeve could have forever to regret opposing Moghedien. She and Elayne were scheming with Birgitte, were they? That was another she had reason to punish. Birgitte had not even known who Moghedien was, so long ago, in the Age of Legends, when she foiled Moghedien’s finely wrought plan to lay Lews Therin by his heels. But Moghedien had known her. Only, Birgitte—Teadra, she had been then—had died before she could deal with her. Death was no punishment, no end, not when it meant living on here.

Nynaeve al’Meara, Elayne Trakand, and Birgitte. Those three she would find, and deal with. From the shadows, so that they would not know until too late. All three, without exception.

She vanished, and the banners waved on in the breeze of *Tel’aran’rhiod.*

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CHAPTER 26

Sallie Daera

The halo of greatness, blue and gold, flickered fitfully around Logain’s head, though he rode slumped in his saddle. Min did not understand why it had appeared more often of late. He no longer even bothered to lift his eyes from the weeds in front of his black stallion to the low, wooded hills rolling by all around them.

The other two women rode together a little ahead, Siuan as awkward on shaggy Bela as she had ever been, Leane guiding her gray mare deftly, with knees more than reins. Only an unnaturally straight ribbon of ferns, poking through the leaf-covered forest floor, hinted that there had ever been a road here. The lacy ferns were withering, and the leaf mold rustled and crackled dryly under the horses’ hooves. Thickly woven branches gave a little shelter from the noonday sun, but it was hardly cool. Sweat rolled down Min’s face, despite an occasional breeze that stirred from behind them.

Fifteen days now they had ridden west and south from Lugard, guided only by Siuan’s insistence that she knew exactly where they were heading. Not that she shared her destination, of course; Siuan and Leane were as close-mouthed as sprung bear traps. Min was not even sure that Leane actually knew. Fifteen days, while towns and villages grew fewer and farther between, until finally there were none. Day by day Logain’s shoulders had sagged a little more, and day by day the halo appeared more often. At first he had only begun muttering that they were chasing Jak o’ the Mists, but Siuan had regained her leadership without opposition as he turned more and more inward. For the past six days he had not seemed to have the energy to care where they were going or whether they would ever get there.

Siuan and Leane talked quietly up ahead, now. All Min could hear was a barely audible murmur that might as well have been the wind in the leaves. And if she tried to ride closer, they would tell her to keep an eye on Logain, or simply stare at her until only a stone-blind fool could keep her nose where it did not belong. They had done both often enough. From time to time, though, Leane twisted in her saddle to look at Logain.

Finally Leane let Moonflower fall back beside his black stallion. The heat did not seem to be bothering her; not so much as a sheen of perspiration marred her coppery face. Min reined Wildrose aside to give her room.

"It won't be long now," Leane told him in a sultry voice. He did not look up from the weeds in front of his horse. She leaned closer, holding his arm for balance. Pressing against it, really. "A little while longer, Dalyn. You will have your revenge." His eyes stayed dully on the road.

"A dead man would pay more notice," Min said, and meant it. She had been taking notes in her head of everything Leane did, and talking with her of an evening, though trying not to let on why. She would never be able to behave the way that Leane did—*not unless I had enough wine in me that I couldn't think at all*—yet a few pointers might come in handy. "Maybe if you kissed him?"

Leane shot her a glare that could have frozen a rushing stream, but Min merely looked back. She had never had the problems with Leane that she did with Siuan—well, not as many, anyway—and the few difficulties had grown less since the other woman had left the Tower. Much fewer since they had begun discussing men. How could you be intimidated by a woman who had told you in dead seriousness that there were one hundred and seven different kisses, and ninety-three ways to touch a man's face with your hand? Leane actually seemed to believe these things.

Min had not meant it as a jibe, really, the suggestion of a kiss. Leane had been cooing at him, giving him smiles that should have made steam rise from his ears, since the day he had had to be hauled out of his blankets instead of rising first to chivvy the rest of them. Min did not know whether Leane actually felt something for the man, though she did find it hard to credit even the possibility, or was just trying to keep him from giving up and dying, to keep him alive for whatever Siuan had planned.

Leane certainly had not given up flirting with others besides him. She and Siuan had apparently worked out that Siuan would deal with women, Leane with men, and so it had been ever since Lugard. Her smiles and glances had twice gotten them rooms where the innkeeper had said there were none, lowered the bill at those and three more, and on two nights earned barns instead of bushes for sleeping. They had also gotten the four of them chased off by one farmwife with a pitchfork, and a breakfast of cold porridge *thrown* at them by another, but Leane had thought the incidents funny, if no one else did. The last few days, however, Logain had stopped reacting like every other man who saw her for more than two minutes. He had stopped reacting to her or anything else.

Siuan pulled Bela back stiffly, elbows out and managing to look on the point of falling off any moment. The heat was not touching her, either. "Have you viewed him today?" She hardly glanced at Logain.

"It is still the same," Min said patiently. Siuan refused to understand or believe, however many times she told her, and so did Leane. It would not have mattered if she had not seen the aura since her first viewing of it in Tar Valon. Had Logain been lying in the road, rasping his death rattle, she would have wagered all she had and more on a miraculous recovery, somehow. The appearance of an Aes Sedai to Heal him. Something. What she saw was always true. It always happened. She knew the same way that she had known the first time she saw Rand al'Thor that she would fall desperately, helplessly in love with him, the same way she had known she would have to share him with two other women. Logain was destined for glory such as few men had dreamed of.

"Don't you take that tone with me," Siuan said, that blue-eyed gaze sharpening. "It is bad enough we have to spoon-feed this great hairy carp to make him eat, without you going sulky as a fisher-bird in winter. I may have to put up with him, girl, but if you start giving me trouble, too, you will regret it in short order. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mara." *At least you could have put a touch of sarcasm in it,* she thought scornfully. *You don't have to be meek as a goose. You've told Leane off to her face.* The Domani woman had suggested that she practice what they had been discussing on a farrier in the last village. A tall, handsome man, with strong-looking hands and a slow smile, but still . . . "I will try not to be sulky." The worst part was that she realized she had tried to sound sincere. Siuan had that effect. Min could not even begin to imagine Siuan discussing how to smile at a man. Siuan would look a man in the eye, tell him what to do, and expect to see it done promptly. Just the way she did with everyone else. If she did anything else, as she had with Logain, it would only be because the point did not matter enough to press.

“It is not much farther, is it?” Leane said briskly. She saved the other voice for men. “I do not like the look of him, and if we have to stop for another night . . . Well, if he helps any less than he did this morning, I don’t know that we will be able to get him into his saddle again.”

“Not much, if those last directions I had are right.” Siuan sounded irritated. She had asked questions at that last village, two days ago—not letting Min hear, of course; Logain had showed no interest—and she did not like to be reminded of them. Min could not understand why. Siuan could hardly expect Elaida to be behind them.

She herself hoped it was not much farther. It was hard to be sure how far south they had drifted since leaving the highway to Jehannah. Most villagers had only vague notions of where their village actually was in relation to anything except the nearest towns, but when they crossed the Manetherendrelle into Altara, just before Siuan took them away from the well-traveled road, the grizzled old ferryman had been studying a tattered map for some reason, a map that stretched as far as the Mountains of Mist. Unless her estimate was off, they were going to reach another wide river in not many miles. Either the Boern, which meant they were already into Ghealdan, where the Prophet and his mobs were, or else the Eldar, with Amadicia and Whitecloaks on the far side.

She was betting on Ghealdan, Prophet or no Prophet, and even that was a surprise if they really were close. Only a fool would think to find a gathering of Aes Sedai any nearer to Amadicia than they had to be, and Siuan was anything but that. Whether they were in Ghealdan or Altara, Amadicia had to be not many miles distant.

“Gentling would have to catch up to him now,” Siuan muttered. “If he can only hang on a few more days . . .” Min kept her mouth shut; if the woman would not listen, there was no use in speaking.

Shaking her head, Siuan heeled Bela back into the lead, gripping her reins as though expecting the stout mare to bolt, and Leane returned to silken-voiced cajoling of Logain. Maybe she did have feelings for him; it would be no odder a choice than Min’s own.

Forested hills slid on by with never a sign of change, all trees and tangles of weeds and brambles. The ferns that marked the old road ran on, arrow-straight; Leane had said the soil was different where the road had been, as if Min should have known that. Squirrels with tufted ears sometimes chattered at them from a branch, and occasionally birds called. Which birds, Min could not begin to guess. Baerlon might not be a city when compared to Caemlyn or Ilian or Tear, but she thought of herself as a city woman; a bird was a bird. And she did not care what kind of dirt a fern grew in.

Her doubts began to surface again. They had oozed up more than once after Kore Springs, but back then it had been easier to push them down. Since Lugard they had bubbled to the top more often, and she found herself considering Siuan in ways she would never have dared, once. Not that she had the nerve to actually confront Siuan with any of them, of course; it galled her to admit that, even to herself. But maybe Siuan did *not* know where she was going. She could lie, since stilling broke her away from the Three Oaths. Maybe she was still just hoping that if she continued searching she would find some trace of what she needed desperately to find. In a small way, a peculiar way surely, Leane had begun making a life for herself apart from concerns of power and the Power and Rand. Not that she had abandoned them entirely, but Min did not think there *was* anything else for Siuan. The White Tower and the Dragon Reborn were the whole of her life, and she would hold to them even if she had to lie to herself.

Woodland gave way to a large village so quickly that Min stared. Sweet-gum and oak and scrubby pine—those were trees she could recognize—running to within fifty paces of thatch-roofed houses made of rounded river stones and clinging to low hills. She was willing to wager that not so long ago the forest had grown right through. A good many trees actually stood in narrow little thickets among some of the houses, crowding against the walls, and here and there unweathered stumps stood close by the front of a house. The streets still had a look of new-turned earth, not the hard-packed surface that came from generations of feet. Men in their shirtsleeves were up laying new thatch atop three large stone cubes that had to have been inns—one actually had the remains of a faded, weathered sign dangling above the door—yet no old thatch lay anywhere that she could see. There were far too many women out and about for the number of men in sight, and far too few children playing for the number of women. The smells of midday cooking in the air were the only normal things about the place.

If the first glimpse startled Min, when she really saw what lay in front of her she nearly fell out of her saddle. The younger women, shaking blankets from a window or hurrying on some errand, wore plain woolen dresses, but no village of any size had ever contained so many women in riding dresses of silk or fine wool, in every color and cut. Around those women, and around most of the men, auras and images floated before her eyes, changing and flickering; most people rarely had anything for her viewing, but Aes Sedai and Warders seldom lacked an aura for as much as an hour. The children must have belonged to Tower servants. Aes Sedai who married were few and far between, but knowing them, they would have made every effort to bring their servants, with their families, out of any place they felt that they must flee themselves. Siuan had found her gathering.

There was an eerie stillness as they rode into the village. No one spoke. Aes Sedai stood without moving, watching them, and so did younger women and girls who must be Accepted or even novices. Men who a moment before had been moving with wolfish grace were frozen, one hand hidden in thatch, or reaching into a doorway, doubtless where weapons were hidden. The children vanished, hurriedly herded away by the adults who had to be servants. Under all those unwinking stares, the hair on the back of Min's neck tried to stand up.

Leane appeared uneasy, casting sidelong glances at the people they rode past, but Siuan stayed smooth-faced and calm as she led the way straight to the largest inn, the one with the unreadable sign, and scrambled down to tie Bela to the iron ring of one of the stone hitching posts that appeared to have been only recently set upright. Helping Leane help Logain to the ground—Siuan never offered a hand in getting him up or down—Min found her eyes darting around. Everyone staring, no one moving. "I never expected to be greeted like a long-lost daughter," she murmured to the other woman, "but why isn't anyone at least saying hello?"

Before Leane could answer—if she meant to—Siuan said, "Well, don't stop pulling oar with the shore in reach. Bring him on in." She disappeared inside while Min and Leane were still guiding Logain to the door. He went easily, but when they ceased to urge him he took only one step before stopping.

The common room looked like none Min had ever seen before. The wide fireplaces were cold, of course, and had gaps where stones had fallen out; the plaster ceiling looked rotten, with holes in it as big as her head where the lathing showed. Mismatched tables of every size and shape stood about on an age-roughened floor that several girls were sweeping. Women with ageless faces sat examining parchments, giving orders to Warders, a few of whom wore their color-shifting cloaks, or to other women, some of whom had to be Accepted or novices. Others were too old for that, perhaps half of them graying and clearly showing their years, and there were men who were not Warders, too, most either darting off as though carrying messages or else fetching parchments or cups of wine to the Aes Sedai. The bustle had a satisfying air of something being done. Auras and images danced around the room, wreathing heads, so many that she had to try to ignore them before they overwhelmed her. It was not easy, but it was a trick she had had to learn when around more than a handful of Aes Sedai at once.

Four Aes Sedai glided forward to meet the newcomers, all grace and cool serenity in their divided skirts. For Min, seeing their familiar features was like reaching home after being lost.

Sheriam's tilted green eyes fixed immediately on Min's face. Rays of silver and blue flashed about her fiery hair, and a soft golden light; Min could not say what it meant. Slightly plump in her dark blue silk, at the moment she was sternness itself. "I would be happier to see you, child, if I knew how you discovered our presence here, and if I had some inkling of why you conceived the crackbrained idea of bringing him." Half a dozen Warders had drifted near, hands resting on swords, eyes sharp on Logain; he did not seem to see them at all.

Min gaped. Why were they asking *her*? "*My* crackbr—?" She had no chance to say more.

"It would be far better," pale-cheeked Carlinya cut in icily, "if he had died as the rumors say." It was not the ice of anger, but of cold reason. She was White Ajah. Her ivory-colored dress looked as if it had had hard wear. For an instant Min saw an image of a raven floating beside her dark hair; more a drawing of the bird than the bird itself. She thought it was a tattoo, but she did not know its meaning. She concentrated on faces, tried not to see anything else. "He looks nearly dead in any event," Carlinya continued, hardly taking breath. "Whatever you thought, you have wasted your effort. But I, too, would like to know how you came to Salidar."

Siuan and Leane stood there exchanging smugly amused glances, while the onslaught went on. No one even *looked* at them.

Myrelle, darkly beautiful in green silk embroidered on the bodice with slanting lines of gold, her face a perfect oval, usually wore a knowing smile that at times could rival Leane's new tricks. She was not smiling now as she jumped in right behind the White sister. "Speak up, Min. Don't stand there gaping like a dolt." She was noted for her fiery temper, even among the Greens.

"You must tell us," Anaiya added in a more kindly voice. Exasperation tinged it, though. A blunt-featured woman, and motherly despite Aes Sedai smoothness to her face, at the moment stroking her pale gray skirts, she looked like a mother who was trying not to reach for a switch. "We will find a place for you and these other two girls, but you must tell us how you came here."

Min shook herself, and closed her mouth. Of course. These other two girls. She had grown so used to them as they were that she no longer thought of how much they had changed. She doubted whether any of these women had seen either since they were hauled off to the dungeons beneath the White Tower. Leane looked ready to laugh, and Siuan all but shook her head in disgust at the Aes Sedai.

"I am not the one you want to talk to," Min told Sheriam. *Let "these other two girls" have those stares on them for a change.* "Ask Siuan, or Leane." They stared at her as if she were mad, until she nodded to her two companions.

Four sets of Aes Sedai eyes shifted to the others, but there was no instant recognition. They studied and frowned and passed glances between them. None of the Warders took their eyes from Logain or their hands from their swords.

"Stilling might produce this effect," Myrelle murmured finally. "I have read accounts that imply as much."

"The faces are close, in many ways," Sheriam said slowly. "Someone could have found women who look much like them, but why?"

Siuan and Leane did not look smug any longer. "We are who we are," Leane said crisply. "Question us. No impostor could know what we know."

Siuan did not wait for questions. "My face may be changed, yet at least I know what I am doing and why. That is more than I can say for you, I'll wager."

Min groaned at her steely tone, but Myrelle nodded, saying, "That is Siuan Sanche's voice. It is she."

“Voices can be trained,” Carlinya said, still coolly calm.

“But how far can memories be taught?” Anaiya frowned sternly. “Siuan—if that is who you are—on your twenty-second nameday we had an argument, you and I. Where did it occur, and what was the outcome?”

Siuan smiled confidently at the motherly woman. “During your lecture to the Accepted on why so many of the nations carved out of Artur Hawkwing’s empire after his death failed to survive. I still disagree with you on some points, by the way. The outcome was that I spent two months working three hours a day in the kitchens. ‘In the hope that the heat will overpower and diminish your ardor,’ I think you said.”

If she had thought that one answer would be sufficient, she was wrong. Anaiya had more questions, for both women, and so did Carlinya and Sheriam, who apparently had been novices and Accepted with the pair. They were all about the sort of thing no impostor would be able to learn, scrapes gotten into, pranks successful and not, opinions generally held of various Aes Sedai teachers. Min could not believe that the women who would become the Amyrlin Seat and the Keeper of the Chronicles could have dropped themselves into the soup so often, but she had the impression that this was only the tip of a buried mountain, and it appeared that Sheriam herself might not have been far behind them. Myrelle, the youngest by years, confined herself to amused comments, until Siuan said something about a trout put into Saroiya Sedai’s bath and a novice taught to mind her ways for half a year. Not that Siuan had much room to talk of anyone minding her ways. Washing a disliked Accepted’s shifts with itchweed when she was a novice? Sneaking out of the Tower to go fishing? Even Accepted needed permission to leave the Tower grounds except during certain hours. Siuan and Leane together had even chilled a bucket of water to near freezing and set it so it would douse an Aes Sedai who had had them switched, unfairly as they saw it. From the glint in Anaiya’s eyes, it was a good thing for them that they had not been found out that time. From what Min knew of novice training, and Accepted for that matter, these women were lucky that they had been allowed to remain long enough to become Aes Sedai, much less that they still had whole hides.

“I am satisfied,” the motherly woman said at last, glancing at the others.

Myrelle nodded after Sheriam did, but Carlinya said, “There is still the question of what to do with her.” She stared right at Siuan, unblinking, and the others suddenly seemed uneasy. Myrelle pursed her lips, and Anaiya studied the floor. Smoothing her dress, Sheriam seemed to avoid looking at the newcomers at all.

“We still know everything we knew before,” Leane told them, her sudden frown at least half-worry. “We can be of use.”

Siuan was dark-faced—Leane had seemed amused if anything at her recounted girlhood misdeeds and penalties, but Siuan had not liked the telling one bit—yet in contrast to her near-glare, her voice was only a little tight. “You wanted to know how we found you. I made contact with one of my agents who also works for the Blue, and she told me of Sallie Daera.”

Min did not understand that about Sallie Daera at all—who was she?—but Sheriam and the others nodded at one another. Siuan had done something other than tell them how, Min realized; she had let them know that she still had access to the eyes-and-ears who had served her as Amyrlin.

“You sit over there, Min,” Sheriam told Min, pointing to the one table not in use, in a corner. “Or are you still Elmindreda? And keep Logain with you.” She and the other three gathered Siuan and Leane, herding them toward the back of the common room. Two more women in riding dresses joined them before they vanished through a new-made door of uncured boards.

Sighing, Min took Logain’s arm and led him to the table, sat him down on a rough bench and took a shaky ladder-back chair herself. Two of the Warders positioned themselves nearby, leaning against the wall. They did not appear to be watching Logain, but Min knew the Gaidin; they saw everything, and they could have their swords out in less than a heartbeat while sleeping.

So there were to be no open arms in welcome, even with Siuan and Leane recognized. Well, what did she expect? Siuan and Leane had been the two most powerful women in the White Tower; now they were not even Aes Sedai. The others very likely did not know how to behave toward them. And appearing with a gentled false Dragon. Siuan had better not be lying or wishing about having a plan for him. Min did not think Sheriam and the others would be as patient as Logain had been.

And Sheriam, at least, had recognized her. She stood again, long enough to peer through a crack-paned window into the street. Their horses were still at the hitching posts, but one of those Warders who were not watching would have her before she had Wildrose's reins untied. This last time in the Tower, Siuan had gone to great lengths to disguise her. To no end, it seemed. She did not think any of them knew about her viewings, though. Siuan and Leane had held that tightly to themselves. Min would be just as glad if it remained that way. If these Aes Sedai learned of it, they would entangle her just as Siuan had, and she would never reach Rand. She was not going to be able to show off what she had learned from Leane if they kept her on a leash here.

Helping Siuan find this gathering, helping bring Aes Sedai to Rand's aid, was all very well and important, but she still had a personal goal. Making a man who had never looked at her twice fall in love with her before he went mad. Maybe she was as mad as he was fated to be. "Then we'll make a matched pair," she muttered to herself.

A freckled, green-eyed girl who had to be a novice stopped at her table. "Would you like something to eat or drink? There is venison stew, and wild pears. There might be some cheese, too." She put so much effort into not looking at Logain that she might as well have stared pop-eyed.

"Pears and cheese sound very good," Min told her. The last two days had been hungry; Siuan had managed to catch some fish in a stream, but Logain had done all the hunting when they had not eaten at an inn or a farm. Dried beans did not make a meal, in her opinion. "And some wine, if you have it. But first, I would like some information. Where are we, if it isn't a secret here, too? This village is called Salidar?"

"In Altara. The Eldar is about a mile to the west. Amadicia is on the other side." The girl put on a poor imitation of Aes Sedai mystery. "Where better to hide Aes Sedai than where they would never be looked for?"

"We should not have to hide," a dark, curly-haired young woman snapped, stopping. Min recognized her, an Accepted named Faolain; she would have expected her to be in the Tower still. Faolain had never liked anyone or anything as far as Min knew, and had often spoken of choosing the Red Ajah when she was raised. A perfect follower for Elaida. "Why did you come here? With *him*! Why did *she* come?" There was no doubt in Min's mind who she meant. "It is her fault we have to hide. I did not believe she helped Mazrim Taim escape, but if she appears here with *him*, maybe she did."

"That will be enough, Faolain," a slender woman with black hair spilling down her back to her waist told the round-faced Accepted. Min thought she knew the woman in the dark golden silk riding dress. Edesina. A Yellow, she believed. “Go about your duties,” Edesina said. “And if you mean to bring food, Tabiya, do it.” Edesina did not watch Faolain’s sullen curtsy—the novice gave a better and scurried away—but put a hand on Logain’s head instead. Eyes on the table, he did not seem to notice.

To Min’s eyes, a silvery collar suddenly appeared, snug around the woman’s neck, and as suddenly seemed to shatter. Min shivered. She did not like viewings connected to the Seanchan. At least Edesina would escape somehow. Even if Min had been willing to expose herself, there was no point in warning the woman; it would not change anything.

“It is the gentling,” the Aes Sedai said after a moment. “He has given up on wanting to live, I suppose. There is nothing I can do for him. Not that I am sure I should if I could.” The look she gave Min before leaving was far from friendly.

An elegant, statuesque woman in russet silk paused a few feet away, coolly examining Min and Logain with expressionless eyes. Kiruna was a Green, and regal in her manner; she was a sister of the King of Arafel, so Min had heard, but she had been friendly to Min in the Tower. Min smiled, but those large dark eyes swept over her without recognition, and Kiruna glided out of the inn, four Warders, disparate men but all with that deadly-seeming way of moving, suddenly heeling her.

Waiting for her food, Min hoped that Siuan and Leane were finding a warmer reception.

* * *

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CHAPTER

27

The Practice of Diffidence

You are rudderless,” Siuan told the six women facing her in six different sorts of chair. The room itself was a muddle. Two large kitchen tables against the walls held pens and ink jars and sand bottles in neat arrays. Mismatched lamps, some glazed pottery and some gilded, and candles in every thickness and length stood ready to provide light at nightfall. A scrap of Illianer silk carpet, rich in blues and reds and gold, lay on a floor of rough, weathered planks. She and Leane had been seated across the piece of carpet from the others, in such a way that they were the focus of every eye. Open casement windows with panes cracked or replaced by oiled silk let a breath of air stir in, but not enough to cut the heat. Siuan told herself that she did not envy these women their ability to channel—she was past that, surely—but she did envy the way none of them perspired. Her own face was quite damp. “All that activity out there is play and show. You might be fooling each other, and maybe even the Gaidin—though I’d not count on that, were I you—but you can’t fool me.”

She wished that Morvrin and Beonin had not been added to the group. Morvrin was skeptical of everything despite her placid, sometimes vaguely absent look, a stout Brown with gray-streaked hair who demanded six pieces of evidence before she would believe fish had scales. And Beonin, a pretty Gray with dark honey hair and blue-gray eyes so big they constantly made her appear slightly startled—Beonin made Morvrin seem gullible.

“Elaida has the Tower in her fist, and you know she will mishandle Rand al’Thor,” Siuan said scornfully. “It will be pure luck if she doesn’t panic and have him gentled before Tarmon Gai’don. You know that whatever you feel about a man channeling, Reds feel ten times more. The White Tower is at its weakest when it should be at its strongest, in the hands of a fool when it must have skilled command.” She wrinkled her nose, staring them in the eye one by one. “And you sit here, drifting with your sails down. Or can you convince me that you are doing more than twiddling your thumbs and blowing bubbles?"

"Do you agree with Siuan, Leane?" Anaiya asked mildly. Siuan had never been able to understand why Moiraine liked the woman. Trying to get her to do anything she did not want to was like hitting a sack of feathers. She did not stand up to you, or argue; she just silently refused to move. Even the way she sat, with her hands folded, looked more like a woman waiting to knead dough than an Aes Sedai.

"In part I do," Leane replied. Siuan gave her a sharp look that she ignored. "About Elaida, certainly. Elaida will misuse Rand al'Thor, as surely as she is misusing the Tower. For the rest, I know that you have worked hard to gather as many sisters here as you have, and I expect that you are working just as hard to do something about Elaida."

Siuan sniffed loudly. On her way through the common room she had snatched glimpses of some of those parchments being examined so assiduously. Lists of provisions, allotments of timber for rebuilding, assignments for woodcutting and repairing houses and cleaning out wells. Nothing more. Nothing that looked the least like a report on Elaida's activities. They were planning to winter here. All it took was one Blue being captured after she had learned of Salidar, one woman being put to the question—she would not hold back much if Alviarin had charge of it—and Elaida would know exactly where to net them. While they worried about planting vegetable gardens and having enough firewood cut before the first freeze.

"Then that is out of the way," Carlinya said coolly. "You do not seem to understand that you are not Amyrlin and Keeper any longer. You are not even Aes Sedai." Some had the grace to look embarrassed. Not Morvrin or Beonin, but the others. No Aes Sedai liked to speak of stilling, or be reminded of it; they would think it especially harsh in front of the two of them. "I do not say this to be cruel. We do not believe the charges against you—despite your traveling companion—or we would not be here, but you cannot assume your old places among us, and that is a simple fact."

Siuan remembered Carlinya well as novice and Accepted. Once a month she had committed some minor offense, a small thing that earned her an extra hour or two of chores. Exactly once each month. She had not wanted the others to think her a prig. Those had been her only offenses—she never broke another rule or put a foot wrong; it would not have been logical—yet she had never understood why the other girls had considered her an Aes Sedai pet anyway. A great deal of logic and not much common sense: that was Carlinya.

"While what was done to you followed the letter of the law narrowly," Sheriam said gently, "we agree that it was malignantly unjust, an extreme distortion of the law's spirit." The chairback behind her fire-red head was incongruously carved with what seemed to be a mass of snakes fighting. "Whatever rumor might say, most of the charges laid against you were so thin that they should have been laughed away."

"Not the charge that she knew of Rand al'Thor and conspired to hide him from the Tower," Carlinya broke in sharply.

Sheriam nodded. "But be that as it may, even that was not sufficient for the penalty given. Nor should you have been tried in secret, without even a chance to defend yourself. Never fear that we will turn our backs on you. We will see that you both are cared for."

"I thank you," Leane said, her voice soft and almost trembling.

Siuan grimaced at them. "You haven't even asked me about the eyes-and-ears I can use." She had liked Sheriam when they were students together, though years and position had opened water between them. "Cared for" indeed! "Is Aeldene here?" Anaiya started to shake her head before stopping herself. "I suspected not, or you would know more of what is going on. You've left them sending their reports to the Tower." Slow realization dawned on their faces; they had not known Aeldene's office. "I headed the Blue Ajah's net of eyes-and-ears, before I was raised Amyrlin." More surprise. "With a little effort every Blue agent, and those who served me as Amyrlin, too, can be sending her reports to you, by routes that keep her ignorant of their final destination." It would take considerably more than a little work, but she had already sketched most of it out in her head, and there was no need for them to know more at the moment. "And they can continue sending reports to the Tower, reports containing what . . . you want Elaida to believe." She had almost said "we"; she had to watch her tongue.

They did not like it, of course. The women who tended the networks might be unknown to all but a few, but they were every one Aes Sedai. They had always been Aes Sedai. But that was her only lever with which to pry her way into the circles where decisions were made. Otherwise, they would likely stuff her and Leane into a cottage with a servant to look after them, and maybe a rare visit from Aes Sedai who wanted to examine women who had been stilled, until they died. They would die soon, in those circumstances.

Light, they might even marry us off! Some thought that a husband and children could occupy a woman enough to replace the One Power in her life. More than one woman, stilled by drawing too much of *saidar* to herself, or in testing *ter'angreal* for their uses, had found herself being matched with potential husbands. Since those who did marry always put as much distance as possible between themselves and the Tower and its memories, the theory remained unproven.

"It should not be difficult," Leane said diffidently, "to put myself in touch with those who were my eyes-and-ears before I was Keeper. More importantly, as Keeper of the Chronicles I had agents in Tar Valon itself." Startlement widened a few eyes, though Carlinya's narrowed. Leane blinked, shifted uneasily, smiled weakly. "I always thought it foolish that we paid more attention to the mood of Ebou Dar or Bandar Eban than to the mood of our own city." They had to see the value of eyes-and-ears in Tar Valon.

"Siuan." Leaning forward in her thick-armed chair, Morvrin said the name firmly, as though to emphasize that she had not said Mother. That round face looked more stubborn than placid now, her stoutness a threatening mass. When Siuan had been a novice, Morvrin rarely seemed to notice the mischief of the girls around her, but when she did, she had taken care of matters herself, in ways that had everyone sitting straight and walking small for days. "Why should we allow you to do as you want? You have been stilled, woman. Whatever you were, you are no longer Aes Sedai. If we want these agents' names, you will both give them to us." There was a flat certainty to that last; they would give them, one way or another. They would, if these women wanted them enough.

Leane shivered visibly, but Siuan's chair creaked as she stiffened her back. "I know that I am not Amyrlin anymore. Do you think I don't know I was stilled? My face is changed, but not what is inside. Everything I ever knew is still in my head. Use it! For the love of the Light, use me!" She took a deep breath to calm herself—*Burn me if I let them shove me aside to rot!*—and Myrelle spoke into the pause.

"A young woman's temper to go with a young woman's face." Smiling, she sat on the edge of a stiff-backed armchair that could have stood in front of a farmer’s fireplace, if the farmer had not cared that the varnish was flaking. The smile was not her usual one, though, languid and knowing at the same time, and her dark eyes, nearly as large as Beonin’s, were full of sympathy. “I am sure that no one wants you to feel useless, Siuan. And I am sure that we all want to employ your knowledge fully. What you know will be of great use to us.”

Siuan did not want her sympathy. “You seem to have forgotten Logain, and why I dragged him all the way here from Tar Valon.” She had not meant to bring this up herself, but if they were going to let it lie wallowing . . . “My ‘crackbrained’ idea?”

“Very well, Siuan,” Sheriam said. “Why?”

“Because the first step to pulling Elaida down is for Logain to reveal to the Tower, to the world if need be, that the Red Ajah set him up as a false Dragon so that he could be pulled down.” She certainly had their attention now. “He was found by Reds in Ghealdan at least a year before he proclaimed himself, but instead of bringing him to Tar Valon to be gentled, they planted the idea in his head of claiming to be the Dragon Reborn.”

“You are certain of this?” Beonin asked quietly, in a heavy Taraboner accent. She sat very still in her tall, cane-bottomed chair, watching carefully.

“He does not know who Leane and I are. He talked with us sometimes on the journey here, late at night when Min was sleeping and he could not rest. He said nothing before because he thinks the entire Tower was behind it, but he knows that it was Red sisters who shielded him and talked to him of the Dragon Reborn.”

“Why?” Morvrin demanded, and Sheriam nodded.

“Yes, why? Any of us would go out of our way to see a man like that gentled, but the Red Ajah lives for nothing else. Why would they create a false Dragon?”

“Logain did not know,” she told them. “Perhaps they think they gain more by capturing a false Dragon than gentling a poor fool who might terrorize one village. Perhaps they have some reason to want more turmoil.”

“We do not suggest they’ve had anything to do with Mazrim Taim or any of the others,” Leane added quickly. “Elaida will no doubt be able to tell you what you want to know.”

Siuan watched them mull it over in silence. They never considered the possibility that she was lying. *An advantage to having been stilled.* It did not seem to occur to them that being stilled might have broken all ties to the Three Oaths. Some Aes Sedai studied stilled women, true, but gingerly and reluctantly. No one wanted to be reminded of what might happen to herself.

For Logain, Siuan had no worry. Not as long as Min continued to see whatever it was that she saw. He would live long enough to reveal what Siuan wanted him to, once she had talked to him. She had not dared risk his deciding to go his own way, which he might well have done had she told him before. But it was his one chance for revenge now against those who had gentled him, surrounded by Aes Sedai again as he was. Revenge only against the Red Ajah, true, but he would have to settle for that. A fish in the boat was worth a school in the water.

She glanced at Leane, who smiled the faintest possible smile. That was good. Leane had disliked being kept in the dark about her plan for the man until this morning, but Siuan had lived too long wrapped in secrecy to be easy revealing more than she had to, even to a friend. She thought that the idea of Red Ajah involvement with other false Dragons had been neatly planted. Reds had been the leaders in overthrowing her. There might not be a Red Ajah once this was done with.

“This changes a great deal,” Sheriam said after a time. “We cannot possibly follow an Amyrlin who would do such a thing.”

“Follow her!” Siuan exclaimed, for the first time truly startled. “You were actually considering going back to kiss Elaida’s ring? Knowing what she has done, and will do?” Leane quivered in her seat as if she wanted to say a few choice words herself, but they had agreed that Siuan was to be the one to lose her temper.

Sheriam looked a trifle embarrassed, and spots of color floated in Myrelle’s olive cheeks, but the others took it as calmly as sunshine.

“The Tower must be strong,” Carlinya said in a voice as hard as winter stone. “The Dragon has been Reborn, the Last Battle is coming, and the Tower must be whole.”

Anaiya nodded. “We understand your reasons for disliking Elaida, even hating her. We do understand, but we must think of the Tower, and the world. I confess I do not like Elaida myself. But then, I have never liked Siuan, either. It is not necessary to *like* the Amyrlin Seat. There is no need to glare so, Siuan. You have had a file for a tongue since you were a novice, and it has only roughened with the years. And as Amyrlin, you pushed sisters where you wanted and only seldom explained why. The two do not make a likable combination."

"I will try to . . . smooth my tongue," Siuan said dryly. Did the woman expect the Amyrlin Seat to treat every sister like a childhood friend? "But I hope what I've told you changes your desire to kneel at Elaida's feet?"

"If that is your smoother tongue," Myrelle said idly, "I may have to smooth it myself, if we do allow you to run the eyes-and-ears for us."

"We cannot go back to the Tower now, of course," Sheriam said. "Not knowing this. Not until we are in position to see Elaida deposed."

"Whatever she has done, the Reds, they will continue to support her." Beonin stated it as fact, not objection. It was no secret that the Reds resented the fact that there had not been an Amyrlin from their Ajah since Bonwhin.

Morvrin nodded heavily. "Others will, as well. Those who have thrown themselves too much behind Elaida to believe they have any other choice. Those who will support authority, however vile. And some who will believe we are dividing the Tower when it must be whole at any cost."

"All but the Red sisters can be approached," Beonin said judiciously, "negotiated with." Mediation and negotiation were her Ajah's reason for existence.

"It seems we will have a use for your agents, Siuan." Sheriam looked around at the others. "Unless anyone still thinks we should take them away from her?" Morvrin was the last to shake her head, but she did it, finally, after a long study that made Siuan feel she had been stripped, weighed and measured.

She could not stop a sigh of relief. Not a short life drying up in a cottage, but a life of purpose. It might still be a short life—no one knew how long a stilled woman could live given something to replace the One Power in her life—but with purpose it would be long enough. So Myrelle was going to smooth her tongue for her, was she? *I'll show that fox-eyed Green—I will hold my tongue and be glad she isn't doing more than look at me is what I'll do. I knew how this would go. Burn me, but I did.*

"Thank you, Aes Sedai," she said in the meekest tone she could find. To call them that pained her; it was another break, another reminder of what she was not any longer. "I will try to give good service." Myrelle did not have to nod in such a satisfied way. Siuan ignored a small voice that said she would have done as much or more in Myrelle's place.

"If I may suggest," Leane said, "it is not enough to wait until you have enough support in the Hall of the Tower to depose Elaida." Siuan put on an interested look, as though hearing this for the first time. "Elaida sits in Tar Valon, in the White Tower, and to the world she is Amyrlin. At the moment, you are only a flock of dissidents. She can call you rebels and agitators, and coming from the Amyrlin Seat, the world will believe it."

"We can hardly stop her being Amyrlin before she is deposed," Carlinya said, shifting on her chair in icy contempt. Had she been wearing her white-fringed shawl, she would have snapped it around her.

"You can give the world a true Amyrlin." Leane spoke not to the White sister, but to all of them, eyeing each in turn, sure of what she was saying yet at the same time offering a suggestion that she merely hoped they would take. It had been Siuan who pointed out that the techniques she employed on men could be adapted for women. "I saw Aes Sedai from every Ajah save the Red in the common room, and in the streets. Have them elect a Hall of the Tower here, and let that Hall select a new Amyrlin. Then you can present yourselves to the world as the true White Tower, in exile, and Elaida as a usurper. With Logain's revelations added in, can you doubt who the nations will accept as the real Amyrlin Seat?"

The idea took hold. Siuan could see them turning it over in their minds. Whatever the others thought, only Sheriam voiced a word against. "It will mean that the Tower truly is broken," the green-eyed woman said sadly.

"It already is broken," Siuan told her tartly, and instantly wished she had not when they all looked at her.

This was supposed to be purely Leane's notion. She herself had a reputation as a deft manipulator, and they could well be suspicious of anything she proposed. That was why she had begun by scathing them; they would not have believed her if she had begun with mild words. She would come at them as if she still thought herself Amyrlin, and let them put her in her place. By comparison, Leane would seem more cooperative, only offering the little she could, and they would be more likely to listen to her. Doing her own part had not been difficult—until it came to pleading; then she had wanted to hang them all in the sun to dry. Sitting here, doing nothing!

You didn't have to worry about them being suspicious. They think you are a broken reed. If everything went properly, they would not learn differently. A useful reed, but a weak one, not to be thought of twice. It was a painful accommodation to make, but Duranda Tharne had shown her the necessity in Lugard. They would accept her only on their terms, and she would have to make the best of it.

“I wish I had thought of this myself,” she went on. “Now that I hear it, Leane’s idea gives you a way to build the Tower again without having to tear it down completely first.”

“I still cannot like it.” Sheriam’s voice firmed. “But what must be must be. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, and the Light willing, it will weave Elaida out of the stole.”

“We will need to negotiate with those sisters who remain in the Tower,” Beonin mused, only half to herself. “The Amyrlin we choose, she must be a skilled negotiator, yes?”

“Clear thinking will be needed,” Carlinya put in. “The new Amyrlin must be a woman of cool reason and logic.”

Morvrin’s snort was loud enough to make everyone jump in their chairs. “Sheriam is the highest among us, and she has kept us together when we’d have been running in ten different directions.”

Sheriam shook her head vigorously, but Myrelle gave her no chance to speak. “Sheriam is an excellent choice. I can promise every Green sister here behind her, I know.” Anaiya opened her mouth, agreement plain on her face.

It was time to put a stop to this before it got out of hand. “If I may suggest?” Siuan thought she managed diffidence much better than she had meekness. It was a strain, but she thought she had better learn to maintain it. *Myrelle isn’t the only one who will try to stuff me in the bilges if they think I’ve overstepped my place. Whatever it is.* Only, they would not try; they would do. Aes Sedai expected—no, required—respect from those who were not. “It seems to me that whoever you choose should be someone who was not in the Tower when I . . . was deposed. Would it not be best if the woman who unites the Tower again was one whom no one could accuse of choosing a side on that day?” If she had to keep this up, she was going to burst a seam in her head.

“Someone very strong in the Power,” Leane added. “The stronger she is, the more she can stand for all that the Tower means. Or will again, once Elaida is gone.”

Siuan could have kicked her. That thought was supposed to wait a full day, to be tossed in once they actually began considering names. Between them, she and Leane knew enough of every sister to find some weakness, some doubt to be dangled subtly as to her fitness for stole and staff. She would rather wade naked through a school of silverpike than have these women realize that she was trying to manipulate them.

"A sister who was out of the Tower," Sheriam said, nodding. "That makes excellent sense, Siuan. Very good." How easily they slipped into patting her on the head.

Morvrin pursed her lips. "It will not be easy, finding whoever we choose."

"Strength narrows the possibilities." Anaiya looked around at the others. "It will not only make her a better symbol, to the other sisters at least, but strength in the Power often goes with strength of will, and whoever we choose will surely need that."

Carlinya and Beonin were the last to join in agreement.

Siuan kept her face smooth, her smile on the inside. The breaking of the Tower had changed many things, many ways of thinking besides her own. These women had led the Sisters gathered here, and now they were discussing who should be presented to their new Hall of the Tower as if that should not be the Hall's choice. It would not be difficult to bring them around, ever so gently, to the belief that the new Amyrlin should be one who could be guided by them. And unknowing, they and the Amyrlin she chose for her replacement, would be guided by herself. She and Moiraine had worked too long to find Rand al'Thor and prepare him, given too much of their lives, for her to risk the rest of it being bungled by someone else.

"If I may make another suggestion?" Diffidence was simply not in her nature; she was going to have to find something else. She waited, trying not to grit her teeth, for Sheriam to nod before going on. "Elaida will be attempting to discover where Rand al'Thor is; the farther south I came, the more rumors I heard that he has left Tear. I think that he has, and I think that I have reasoned out where he went."

There was no need for her to say that they had to find him before Tar Valon did. They all understood. Not only would Elaida mishandle him, certainly, but should she put her hands on him, display him shielded and in her control, any hope of toppling her would be gone. Rulers knew the

Prophecies, if their people usually did not; they would forgive her a dozen false Dragons out of necessity.

“Where?” Morvrin barked, a hair ahead of Sheriam, Anaiya and Myrelle all together.

“The Aiel Waste.”

There was a moment of silence before Carlinya said, “That is ridiculous.”

Siuan bit back an angry reply and smiled what she hoped was an apologetic smile. “Perhaps, but I read something of the Aiel when I was Accepted. Gitara Moroso thought that some of the Aiel Wise Ones might be able to channel.” Gitara had been Keeper then. “One of the books she had me read, an old thing from the dustiest corner of the library, claimed that the Aiel call themselves the People of the Dragon. I did not remember it until I tried puzzling out where Rand could have vanished to. The Prophecies say ‘the Stone of Tear shall never fall till the People of the Dragon come,’ and there were Aiel in the taking of the Stone. That, every rumor and tale agrees on.”

Morvrin’s eyes suddenly seemed to look elsewhere. “I remember speculation about the Wise Ones when I was newly raised to the shawl. It would be fascinating, if true, but Aiel are little more welcoming to Aes Sedai than to anyone else who enters the Waste, and their Wise Ones apparently have some law or custom against speaking to strangers, so I understand, which makes it extremely hard to come close enough to one to feel if she—” Suddenly she gave herself a shake, staring at Siuan and Leane as though her wandering had been their fault. “A thin straw to weave a basket, something you remember from a book likely written by someone who never saw an Aiel.”

“A very thin straw,” Carlinya said.

“But worth sending someone to the Waste?” It took effort to make that a question instead of a demand. Siuan thought she might sweat down to nothing if she could not find another way. She still had enough control of herself to ignore the heat, usually, but not while trying to drag these women along without letting them notice her fist in their hair. “I do not think the Aiel would try to harm an Aes Sedai.” Not if she was quick enough to show that she was Aes Sedai. Siuan did not think they would. It had to be risked. “And if he is in the Waste, the Aiel will know of it. Remember those Aiel at the Stone.”

“Perhaps,” Beonin said slowly. “The Waste is large. How many would we need to send?”

“If the Dragon Reborn is in the Waste,” Anaiya said, “the first Aiel met will know of it. Events follow this Rand al’Thor, by all accounts. He could not slip into the ocean without making a splash heard in every corner of the world.”

Myrelle smiled. “She should be Green. None of the rest of you will bond more than one Warder, and two or three Gaidin might be very useful in the Waste until the Aiel know her for Aes Sedai. I have always wanted to see an Aiel.” She had been a novice during the Aiel War, and not allowed out of the Tower. Not that any Aes Sedai had taken part beyond Healing, of course. The Three Oaths had bound them unless Tar Valon, or maybe even the Tower itself, was attacked, and that war had never crossed the rivers.

“Not you,” Sheriam told her, “or any other member of this council. You agreed to see this through, Myrelle, when you agreed to sit with us, and that does not include gallivanting off because you are bored. I fear there will be more excitement than any of us could wish, before we finish.” She would have made an excellent Amyrlin in other circumstances; in these, she was simply too strong and sure of herself. “But Greens . . . Yes, I think so. Two?” Her green eyes swept along the others. “To be certain?”

“Kiruna Nachiman?” Anaiya offered, and Beonin added, “Bera Harkin?” The others nodded, except for Myrelle, who shifted her shoulders irritably. Aes Sedai did not pout, but she came close.

Siuan took her second relieved breath. She was certain her reasoning was correct. He had vanished to somewhere, and if he was anywhere between the Spine of the World and the Aryth Ocean, rumors would have been flying. And wherever he was, Moiraine would be there with a hand on his collar. Kiruna and Bera would surely be willing to carry a letter to Moiraine, and they had seven Warders between them to keep the Aiel from killing them.

“We do not want to tire you and Leane,” Sheriam went on. “I will ask one of the Yellow sisters to look at both of you. Perhaps she can do something to help, to ease you in some way. I will have rooms found for you, where you can rest.”

“If you are to be our mistress of eyes-and-ears,” Myrelle added solicitously, “you must maintain your strength.”

“I am not so frail as you seem to think,” Siuan protested. “If I were, could I have followed you nearly two thousand miles? Whatever weakness I had after being stilled is gone, believe me.” The truth was that she had found a center of power again, and she did not want to leave it, but she could hardly say that. All those concerned eyes on her, and Leane. Well, not Carlinya’s particularly, but the rest. *Light! They’re going to have a novice tuck us into bed for a nap!*

A knock at the door was followed immediately by Arinvar, Sheriam’s Warder. Cairhienin, he was not tall, and slender besides, but in spite of gray at his temples he was hard of face, and he moved like a stalking leopard. “There are twenty-odd riders to the east,” he said without preamble.

“Not Whitecloaks,” Carlinya said, “or I presume you would have reported as much.”

Sheriam gave her a look. Many sisters could be prickly when it came to another stepping between them and their Gaidin. “We cannot allow them to get away, and perhaps carry word of our presence. Can they be captured, Arinvar? I would prefer that to killing them.”

“Either may be difficult,” he replied. “Machan says they are armed and have the look of veterans. Worth ten times their number of younger men.”

Morvrin made a vexed sound. “We must do one or the other. Forgive me, Sheriam. Arinvar, can the Gaidin sneak some of the more agile sisters close enough to weave Air around them?”

He shook his head fractionally. “Machan says they may have seen some of the Warders keeping watch. They would certainly see if we tried to bring more than one or two of you near. They are still coming, though.”

Siuan and Leane were not the only ones to exchange startled glances. Few men saw a Warder who did not want to be seen, even without the Gaidin cloak.

“Then you must do as you think best,” Sheriam said. “Capture them, if possible. But none must escape to betray us.”

Before Arinvar could complete his bow, hand to sword hilt, another man was beside him, a dark bear of a man, tall and wide, with hair to his shoulders and a short beard that left his upper lip bare. That flowing Warder movement seemed odd on him. He winked at Myrelle, his Aes Sedai, even as he said in a thick Illianer accent, “Most of the riders do be stopped, but one does come on by himself. If my aged mother did say different, I would still name him Gareth Bryne from the glimpse I did get.”

Siuan stared at him; her hands and feet suddenly felt cold. Strong rumor said that Myrelle had actually married this Nuhel and her other two Warders, in defiance of convention and law in every land Siuan had ever heard of. It was the sort of incongruous thought that drifted through a stunned mind, and right then she felt as if a mast had fallen on her head. Bryne, here? *It's impossible! It is mad!* Surely the man could not have followed them all this way for . . . *Oh yes, he could and would. That one would.* As they journeyed, she had told herself that it was only sensible caution to leave no trace behind, that Elaida knew they were not dead, whatever the rumors said, and she would not stop hunting until they were found or she was pulled down. Siuan had been irritated at having to ask directions finally, yet the thought that had snapped at her like a shark had not been that Elaida might somehow find a blacksmith in one small Altaran village, but that the blacksmith would be like a painted sign for Bryne. *Told yourself it was foolish, didn't you? And now here he is.*

She well remembered her confrontation with him, when she had had to bend him to her will on that matter of Murandy. It had been like bending a thick iron bar, or some huge spring that would leap back if she let up for an instant. She had had to bring all of her force to bear, had had to humiliate him publicly, in order to make certain he would remain bent for as long as she needed. He could hardly go against what he had agreed to on his knees, begging her pardon, with fifty nobles watching. Morgase had been difficult enough herself, and Siuan had not been willing to risk Bryne giving Morgase an excuse to go against her instructions. Strange to think that she and Elaida had worked together then, bringing Morgase to heel.

She had to take hold of herself. She was in a daze, thinking of everything except what she needed to. *Concentrate. This is no time to panic*. "You must send him away. Or kill him."

She knew it for a mistake while the words were still leaving her mouth, all too full of urgency. Even the Warders looked at her, and the Aes Sedai. . . . She had never before known what it felt like for someone who lacked the Power to have those eyes turned on them at full strength. She felt naked, her very mind laid bare. Even knowing that Aes Sedai could not read thoughts, she still wanted to confess before they listed her lies and crimes. She hoped that her face was not like Leane's, red-cheeked and wide-eyed.

"You know why he is here." Sheriam's voice was calmly certain. "Both of you do. And you do not want to confront him. Enough so that you would have us kill him for you.”

“There do be few great captains living.” Nuhel marked them off on gauntleted fingers. “Agelmar Jagad and Davram Bashere will no leave the Blight, I think, and Pedron Niall will surely no be of use to you. If Rodel Ituralde do be alive, he do be mired somewhere in what do remain of Arad Doman.” He raised his thick thumb. “And that do leave Gareth Bryne.”

“Do you think that we will need a great captain, then?” Sheriam asked quietly.

Nuhel and Arinvar did not look at one another, but Siuan still had the feeling that they had exchanged glances. “It is your decision, Sheriam,” Arinvar replied just as quietly, “yours and the other sisters, but if you mean to return to the Tower, we could use him. If you intend to remain here until Elaida sends for you, then not.” Myrelle gazed at Nuhel questioningly, and he nodded.

“It seems that you were right, Siuan,” Anaiya said wryly. “We have not fooled the Gaidin.”

“The question is whether he will agree to serve us,” Carlinya said, and Morvrin nodded, adding, “We must make him see our cause in such a way that he wishes to serve. It will not help us if it becomes known that we killed or imprisoned so notable a man before we have even begun.”

“Yes,” Beonin said, “and we must offer him the rewards that will bind him to us firmly.”

Sheriam turned her eyes on the two men. “When Lord Bryne reaches the village, tell him nothing, but bring him to us.” As soon as the door closed behind the Warders, her gaze firmed. Siuan recognized it; the same clear green stare that had novices’ knees knocking before a word was said. “Now. You will tell us exactly why Gareth Bryne is here.”

There was no choice. If they caught her in even the tiniest lie, they would begin to question everything. Siuan took a deep breath. “We took shelter for the night in a barn near Kore Springs, in Andor. Bryne is the lord there, and . . .”

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CHAPTER 28

Trapped

A Warder in a gray-green coat approached Bryne as soon as he rode Traveler past the first stone houses of the village. Bryne would have known the man for a Warder after watching him walk two strides, even without all the Aes Sedai faces staring at him in the street. What in the name of the Light were so many Aes Sedai doing this close to Amadicia? Rumor in villages behind said Ailron meant to claim this bank of the River Eldar, which meant the Whitecloaks did. Aes Sedai could defend themselves well, but if Niall sent a legion across the Eldar, a good many of these women would die. Unless he could no longer tell how long a stump had been exposed to air, this place had been buried in the forest two months ago. What had Mara gotten herself into? He was sure he would find her here; village men remembered three pretty young women traveling together, especially when one of them asked directions to a town abandoned since the Whitecloak War.

The Warder, a big man with a broad face, an Illianer by his beard, planted himself in the street in front of Bryne's big-nosed bay gelding and bowed. "Lord Bryne? I am Nuhel Dromand. If you will come with me, there are those who do wish to speak with you."

Bryne dismounted slowly, pulling off his gauntlets and tucking them behind his sword belt as he studied the town. The plain buff-colored coat he wore now was much better for a journey of this sort than the gray silk he had started in; that, he had given away. Aes Sedai and Warders, and others, watched him silently, but even those who had to be servants did not look surprised. And Dromand knew his name. His face was not unknown, but he suspected more than that. If Mara was—if *they* were Aes Sedai agents, it did not alter the oath they had taken. "Lead on, Nuhel Gaidin." If Nuhel was surprised at the address, he did not show it.

The inn that Dromand took him to—or what had been an inn once—had the look of headquarters for a campaign, all bustle and scurry. That is, if Aes Sedai had ever commanded a campaign. He spotted Serenla before she did him, seated in the corner with a big man who was very likely Dalyn. When she did see him, her chin dropped almost to the table, and then she squinted at him as if not believing her eyes. Dalyn appeared to be asleep with his eyes open, staring at nothing. None of the Aes Sedai or Warders seemed to notice as Dromand led him through, but Bryne would have wagered his manor and lands that any one of them had seen ten times as much as all the staring servants combined. He should have turned and ridden away as soon as he realized who was in this village.

He took careful note as he made his bows while the Warder introduced him to the six seated Aes Sedai—only a fool was careless around Aes Sedai—but his mind was on the two young women standing against the wall beside the fresh-swept fireplace and looking chastened. The willowy Domani minx was offering him a smile more tremulous than seductive for a change. Mara was frightened, too—terrified out of her skin, he would say—but those blue eyes still met his full of defiance. The girl had courage to suit a lion.

"We are pleased to greet you, Lord Bryne," the flame-haired Aes Sedai said. Just slightly plump, and with those tilted eyes, she was pretty enough to make any man look twice despite the Great Serpent ring on her finger. "Will you tell us what brings you here?"

"Of course, Sheriam Sedai." Nuhel stood at his shoulder, but if any women needed less guarding from one old soldier, Bryne could not imagine who. He was sure that they knew already, and watching their faces while he told the tale confirmed it. Aes Sedai let nothing be seen that they did not want seen, but at least one of them would have blinked when he spoke of the oath if they had not known beforehand.

"A dreadful story to relate, Lord Bryne." That was the one called Anaiya; ageless face or not, she looked more like a happy, prosperous farmwife than an Aes Sedai. "Yet I am surprised that you followed so far, even after oathbreakers." Mara's fair cheeks flushed a furious red. "Still, a strong oath, one that should not be broken."

"Unfortunately," Sheriam said, "we cannot let you take them quite yet."

So they were Aes Sedai agents. “A strong oath that should not be broken, yet you mean to keep them from honoring it?”

“They will honor it,” Myrelle said, with a glance at the pair by the fireplace that made them both stand straighter, “and you may rest assured that they already regret running away after giving it.” This time it was Amaena who reddened; Mara looked ready to chew rocks. “But we cannot allow it yet.” No Ajahs had been mentioned, yet he thought the darkly pretty woman was Green, and the stout, round-faced one called Morvrin was Brown. Perhaps it was the smile that Myrelle had given Dromand when the man brought him in, and Morvrin’s air of thinking of something else. “In truth, they did not say when they would serve, and we have a use for them.”

This was foolish; he should apologize for disturbing them and leave. And that was foolish, too. He had known before Dromand reached him in the street that he was unlikely to leave Salidar alive. There were probably fifty Warders in the forest around where he had left his men, if not a hundred. Joni and the others would give a good account of themselves, but he had not brought them all this way to die. Yet if he was a fool to have let a pair of eyes lure him into this trap, he might as well go the last mile for it. “Arson, theft and assault, Aes Sedai. Those were the crimes. They were tried, sentenced, and sworn. But I have no objection to remaining here until you are done with them. Mara can act as my dog robber when you do not need her. I will mark the hours she works for me, and count them against her service.”

Mara opened her mouth angrily, but almost as if the women had known that she would try to speak, six pairs of Aes Sedai eyes swiveled to her in unison. She shifted her shoulders, snapped her mouth shut, and then glared at him, fists rigidly at her sides. He was glad she did not have a knife in her hand.

Myrelle appeared close to laughter. “Better to choose the other, Lord Bryne. From the way she is looking at you, you would find her far more . . . congenial.”

He half-expected Amaena to go crimson, but she did not. And she was eyeing him—appraisingly. She even shared a smile with Myrelle. Well, she was Domani after all, and considerably more so than when he saw her last, it seemed.

Carlinya, cold enough to make the others seem warm, leaned forward. He was wary of her, and of the big-eyed one named Beonin. He was not sure why. Except that if he were in the Game of Houses here, he would say both women reeked of ambition. Maybe he was involved in exactly that.

"You should be aware," Carlinya said coolly, "that the woman you know as Mara is in reality Siuan Sanche, formerly the Amyrlin Seat: Amaena is really Leane Sharif, who was Keeper of the Chronicles."

It was all he could do not to gape like a country lout. Now that he knew, he could see it in Mara's face—in Siuan's—the face that had made him back down, softened into youth. "How?" was all he said. It was almost all he could have managed to say.

"There are some things men are better off not knowing," Sheriam replied coolly, "and most women."

Mara—no, he might as well think of her by her right name—Siuan had been stilled. He knew that. It must be something to do with stilling. If that swan-necked Domani had been Keeper, he was ready to wager she had been stilled, too. But talking about stilling around Aes Sedai was a good way to find out how tough you were. Besides, when they began going mysterious with you, Aes Sedai would not give a straight answer if you asked whether the sky was blue.

They were very good, these Aes Sedai. They had lulled him, then hit hard when his guard was down. He had a sinking feeling that he knew what they were softening him for. It would be interesting to learn whether he was right. "It does not change the oath they took. If they were still Amyrlin and Keeper, they could be held to that oath by any law, including that of Tar Valon."

"Since you have no objection to remaining here," Sheriam said, "you may have Siuan as your bodyservant, when we do not need her. You may have all three of them, if you wish, including Min, whom you apparently know as Serenla, all the time." For some reason, that seemed to irritate Siuan as much as what had been said about her; she muttered to herself, not loud enough to be heard. "And since you have no objections, Lord Bryne, while you remain with us there is a service that you can give us."

"The gratitude of Aes Sedai is not inconsiderable," Morvrin said.

"You will be serving the Light and justice in serving us," Carlinya added.

Beonin nodded, speaking in serious tones. “You served Morgase and Andor faithfully. Serve us as well, and you will not find exile at its end. Nothing we ask of you will go against your honor. Nothing we ask will harm Andor.”

Bryne grimaced. He was in the Game, all right. He sometimes thought that Aes Sedai must have invented *Daes Dae’mar*; they seemed to play it in their sleep. Battle was surely more bloody, but it was more honest, too. If they meant to pull his strings, then his strings would be pulled—they would manage it one way or another—but it was time to show them he was not a brainless puppet.

“The White Tower is broken,” he said flatly. Those Aes Sedai eyes widened, but he gave them no chance to speak. “The Ajahs have split. That is the only reason you can all be here. You certainly don’t need an extra sword or two”—he eyed Dromand and got a nod in return—“so the only service you can want out of me is to lead an army. To build one, first, unless you have other camps with a good many more men than I saw here. And that means you intend to oppose Elaida.” Sheriam looked vexed, Anaiya worried, and Carlinya on the point of speaking, but he went on. Let them listen; he expected he would be doing a great deal of listening to them in the months to come. “Very well. I’ve never liked Elaida, and I cannot believe she makes a good Amyrlin. More importantly, I can make an army to take Tar Valon. So long as you know the taking will be bloody and long.

“But these are my conditions.” They stiffened to a woman at that, even Siuan and Leane. Men did not make conditions for Aes Sedai. “First, the command is mine. You tell me what to do, but I decide how. You give commands to me, and I give them to the soldiers under me, not you. Not unless I have agreed to it first.” Several mouths opened, Carlinya’s and Beonin’s first, but he continued. “I assign men, I promote them, and I discipline them. Not you. Second, if I tell you it can’t be done, you will consider what I say. I don’t ask to usurp your authority”—small chance they would allow that—“yet I do not want to waste men because you do not understand war.” It would happen, but no more than once, if he was lucky. “Third, if you begin this, you will stay the course. I will be putting my head in a noose, and every man who follows along with me, and should you decide half a year from now that Elaida as Amyrlin is preferable to war, you will pull that noose tight for every one of us who can be hunted down. The nations may stay out of a civil war in the Tower, but they'll not let us live if you abandon us. Elaida will see to that.

"If you will not agree to these, then I do not know that I can serve you. Whether you bind me with the Power for Dromand here to slit my throat or I end attainted and hung, death is still the end."

The Aes Sedai did not speak. For a long moment they stared at him, until the itch between his shoulder blades made him wonder if Nuhel was ready to plunge a dagger in. Then Sheriam rose, and the others followed her to the windows. He could see their lips moving, but he heard nothing. If they wanted to hide their deliberations behind the One Power, so be it. He was not certain how much of what he wanted he could wring out of them. All, if they were sensible, but Aes Sedai could decide that strange things were sensible. Whatever they decided, he would have to accede with as good a grace as he could muster. It was a perfect trap that he had made for himself.

Leane gave him a look and a smile that said as plain as words that he would never know what he had missed; he thought it would have been a fine chase, with him being led by the nose. Domani women never promised half what you thought they did, and they gave only as much as they chose and changed their minds either way in a blink.

The bait in his trap stared at him levelly, strode across the floor until she stood so close that she had to crane her neck to stare up at him, and spoke in a low, furious voice. "Why did you do this? Why did you follow us? For a barn?"

"For an oath." For a pair of blue eyes. Siuan Sanche could not be more than ten years younger than he, but it was hard to remember that she was Siuan Sanche while looking at a face nearer thirty years younger. The eyes were the same, though, deep blue and strong. "An oath you gave to me, and broke. I should double your time for that."

Dropping her gaze from his, she folded her arms beneath her breasts, growling, "That has already been taken care of."

"You mean they punished you for oathbreaking? If you've had your bottom switched for it, it doesn't count unless I do it."

Dromand's chuckle sounded more than half scandalized—the man had to be still struggling with who Siuan had been; Bryne was not certain that he was not, too—and her face darkened until he thought she might have apoplexy. "My time has already been doubled, if not more, you pile of rancid fish guts! You and your marking hours! Not an hour will count until you have all three of us back at your manor, not if I must be your . . . your . . . *dog robber,* whatever that is . . . for twenty years!"

So they had planned for this, too, Sheriam and the others. He glanced to their conference by the windows. They seemed to have divided into two opposing groups; Sheriam, Anaiya and Myrelle on one side, Morvrin and Carlinya on the other, with Beonin standing between. They had been ready to give him Siuan and Leane and—Min?—as bribe or sop, before he ever walked in. They were desperate, which meant he was on the weaker side, but maybe they were desperate enough to give him what he needed for a chance of victory.

"You are taking pleasure from this, aren't you?" Siuan said fiercely the moment his eyes moved. "You buzzard. Burn you for a carp-brained fool. Now that you know who I am, it pleases you that I'll have to bow and scrape to you." She did not seem to be doing much of that yet. "Why? Is it because I made you back down over Murandy? Are you so small, Gareth Bryne?"

She was trying to make him angry; she realized that she had said too much, and did not want to give him time to think on it. Maybe she was no longer Aes Sedai, but manipulation was in her blood.

"You were the Amyrlin Seat," he said calmly, "and even a king kisses the Amyrlin's ring. I can't say that I liked how you went about it, and we may have a quiet talk sometime on whether it was necessary to do what you did with half the court looking on, but you will remember that I followed Mara Tomanes here, and it was Mara Tomanes I asked for. Not Siuan Sanche. Since you keep asking why, let me ask it. Why was it so important for me to allow the Murandians to raid across the border?"

"Because your interference then could have ruined important plans," she said, driving each word home in a tight voice, "just as your interference with me now can. The Tower had identified a young border lord named Dulain as a man who could one day truly unify Murandy, with our help. I could hardly allow the chance your soldiers might kill him. I have work to do here, *Lord* Bryne. Leave me to do it, and you may see victory. Meddle out of spite, and you ruin everything."

"Whatever your work is, I am sure Sheriam and the others will see you do it. Dulain? I've never heard of him. He cannot be succeeding yet." It was his opinion that Murandy would remain a patchwork of all but independent lords and ladies until the Wheel turned and a new Age came. Murandians called themselves Lugarders or Mindeans or whatever before they named a nation. If they even bothered to name one. A lord who could unite them, and who had Siuan's leash around his throat, could bring a considerable number of men.

"He . . . died." Scarlet spots appeared in her cheeks, and she seemed to struggle with herself. "A month after I left Caemlyn," she muttered, "some Andoran farmer put an arrow through him on a sheep raid."

He could not help laughing. "It was the farmers you should have made kneel, not me. Well, you no longer need concern yourself with such things." That was certainly true. Whatever use the Aes Sedai had for her, they would never let her near power or decisions again now. He felt pity for her. He could not imagine this woman giving up and dying, but she had lost about as much as it was possible to lose short of dying. On the other hand, he had not liked being called a buzzard, or a pile of reeking fish guts. What was the other thing? A carp-brained fool. "From now on, you can concern yourself with keeping my boots clean and my bed made."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "If that is what you want, *Lord* Gareth Bryne, you should choose Leane. *She* might be fool enough."

Only barely did he stop himself from goggling. The way women's minds worked never ceased to amaze him. "You vowed to serve me however I choose." He managed to chuckle. Why was he doing this? He knew who she was, and what she was. But those eyes still haunted him, staring a challenge even when she thought there was no hope, just as they were now. "You will discover the kind of man I am, Siuan." He meant it to soothe her after his jest, but from the way her shoulders stiffened, she seemed to take it as a threat.

Suddenly he realized that he could hear the Aes Sedai, a soft murmur of voices that went silent immediately. They stood together, staring at him with unreadable expressions. No, at Siuan. Their eyes followed her as she started back to where Leane still stood; as if she could feel the pressure of them, each step came a little quicker than the one before. When she turned again, beside the fireplace, her face told no more than theirs. A remarkable woman. He was not sure he could have done as well, in her place.

The Aes Sedai were waiting for him to approach. When he did, Sheriam said, "We accept your conditions without reservation, Lord Bryne, and pledge ourselves to hold to them. They are most reasonable."

Carlinya, at least, did not look as though she thought they were reasonable at all, but he did not care. He had been prepared to give up all but the last, that they stay the course, if need be.

He knelt where he was, right fist pressed to the scrap of carpet, and they encircled him, each laying a hand on his bowed head. He did not care whether they used the Power to bind him to his oath or search for truth—he was not sure they could do either, but who really knew what Aes Sedai could do?—and if they meant something else, there was nothing he could do about it. Trapped by a pair of eyes, like a bullgoose fool country boy. He *was* carp-brained. “I do pledge and vow that I will serve you faithfully until the White Tower is yours . . .”

Already, he was planning. Thad and maybe a Warder or two across the river to see what the Whitecloaks were up to. Joni, Barim and a few others down to Ebou Dar; it would keep Joni from swallowing his tongue every time he looked at “Mara” and “Amaena,” and every man he sent would know how to recruit.

“. . . building and directing your army to the best of my ability. . . .”

When the low buzz of talk in the common room died, Min looked up from the patterns she had been idly sketching on the table with a finger dipped in wine. Logain stirred, too, for a wonder, but only to stare at the people in the room, or maybe through them; it was hard to tell.

Gareth Bryne and that big Illianer Warder came out of the back room first. In the watchful silence, she heard Bryne say, “Tell them an Ebou Dari tavern maid sent you, or they’ll put your head on a stake.”

The Illianer roared with laughter. “A dangerous city, Ebou Dar.” Pulling leather gauntlets from behind his sword belt, he stalked out into the street drawing them on.

The talk began to pick up again as Siuan appeared. Min could not hear what Bryne said to her, but she strode after the Warder snarling to herself. Min had a sinking feeling that the Aes Sedai had decided that they were going to honor that fool oath Siuan had been so proud of, honor it right now. If she could convince herself that the pair of Warders lounging against the wall would not notice, she would be out of the door and into Wildrose’s saddle in a flash.

Sheriam and the other Aes Sedai came out last, with Leane. Myrelle sat Leane down at one of the tables and began discussing something, while the rest circulated through the room, stopping to speak to each Aes Sedai. Whatever they said, it produced reactions from outright shock to pleased grins, despite that fabled Aes Sedai serenity.

“Stay here,” Min told Logain, scraping back her rickety chair. She hoped he was not going to start trouble. He was staring at Aes Sedai faces, one by one, and appearing to see more than he had in days. “Just stay at this table till I get back, Dalyn.” She was out of the habit of being around people who knew his real name. “Please.”

“She sold me to Aes Sedai.” It was a shock to hear him speak after being so long silent. He shivered, then nodded. “I will wait.”

Min hesitated, but if two Warders could not stop him from doing anything stupid, a roomful of Aes Sedai certainly could. When she reached the door, a chunky bay gelding was being led away by a man with the look of a groom. Bryne’s horse, she supposed. Their own mounts were nowhere in sight. So much for any dash for freedom. *I’ll honor the bloody thing! I will! But they can’t keep me from Rand now. I’ve done what Siuan wanted. They have to let me go to him.* The only problem was that Aes Sedai decided for themselves what they had to do, and usually what other people had to do as well.

Siuan nearly knocked her down, bustling back in with a scowl on her face, a blanket roll under her arm and saddlebags over her shoulder. “Watch Logain,” she hissed under her breath without slowing. “Let no one talk to him.” She marched to the foot of the stairs, where a gray-haired woman, a servant, was starting to lead Bryne up, and fell in behind. From the stare she fixed on the man’s back, he should have been praying she did not reach for her belt knife.

Min smiled at the tall, slender Warder who had followed her to the door. He stood ten feet away, barely glancing at her, but she had no illusions. “We’re guests now. Friends.” He did not return the smile. *Bloody stone-faced men!* Why could they not at least give you a hint what they were thinking?

Logain was still studying the Aes Sedai when she got back to the table. A fine time for Siuan to want him kept silent, just when he was beginning to show life again. She needed to talk to Siuan. “Logain,” she said softly, hoping neither of the Warders lounging against the wall could hear. They had hardly seemed to breathe since taking their positions, except when one had followed her. “I don’t think you should say anything until Mara tells you what she has planned. Not to anyone.”

“Mara?” He gave her a dark sneer. “You mean Siuan Sanche?” So he remembered what he had heard in his daze. “Does anyone here look as if they want to talk to me?” He returned to his frowning study.

No one did look as if they wanted to talk with a gentled false Dragon. Except for the two Warders, no one seemed to be paying them any mind at all. If she had not known better, she would have said the Aes Sedai in the room were excited. They had hardly appeared lethargic before, but they certainly seemed to have more energy now, talking in small groups, issuing brisk orders to Warders. The papers they had been so intent on largely lay abandoned. Sheriam and the others who had taken Siuan away had returned to the room at the back, but Leane had two clerks at her table now, both women writing as fast as they could. And a steady stream of Aes Sedai were coming into the inn, disappearing through that rough plank door and not coming out. Whatever had happened in there, Siuan had surely stirred them up.

Min wished she had Siuan at the table, or better yet somewhere alone, for five minutes. Doubtless at that moment she was beating Bryne over the head with his saddlebags. No, Siuan would not resort to that, for all of her glares. Bryne was not like Logain, larger than life in every dimension, every emotion; Logain had managed to overpower Siuan for a time with sheer hugeness. Bryne was quiet, reserved, not a small man certainly, but hardly overbearing. She would not want the man she remembered from Kore Springs as an enemy, but she did not think that he would hold out long against Siuan. He might think she was going to meekly serve out her time as his servant, but Min had no doubts who would end doing what who wanted. She just had to talk to the woman about him.

As if Min’s thoughts had brought her, Siuan came stumping down the stairs, a bundle of white under her arm. Stalked down was nearer truth; if she had had a tail, she would have been lashing it. She paused for one instant, staring at Min and Logain, then marched toward the door that led to the kitchens.

“Stay here,” Min cautioned Logain. “And please, say nothing until . . . Siuan can talk to you.” She was going to have to get used to calling people by their right names again. He did not even look at her.

She caught up with Siuan in a hallway short of the kitchen; the rattle and splash of pots being scrubbed and dishes washed drifted through gaps where boards had dried in the kitchen door.

Siuan's eyes widened in alarm. "Why did you leave him? Is he still alive?"

"He'll live forever, for all I can see. Siuan, no one *wants* to talk to him. But I have to talk with you." Siuan stuffed the white bundle into her arms. Shirts. "What is this?"

"Gareth bloody Bryne's bloody laundry," the other woman snarled. "Since you are one of his *serving girls,* too, you can wash them. I must speak with Logain before anyone else."

Min caught her arm as she tried to brush past. "You can spare one minute to listen. When Bryne came in, I had a viewing. An aura, and a bull ripping roses from around its neck, and . . . None of it matters except the aura. I didn't even really understand that, but more than anything else."

"How much did you understand?"

"If you want to stay alive, you had better stay close to him." Despite the heat, Min shivered. She had only ever had one other viewing with an "if" in it, and both had been potentially deadly. It was bad enough sometimes knowing what *would* happen; if she started knowing what *might* . . . "All I know is this. If he stays close to you, you live. If he gets too far away, for too long, you are going to die. Both of you. I don't know why I should have seen anything about you in his aura, but you seemed like part of it."

Siuan's smile would have done to peel a pear. "I'd as soon sail in a rotting hull full of last month's eels."

"I never thought he'd follow us. Are they really going to make us go with him?"

"Oh, no, Min. He is going to lead our armies to victory. And make my life the Pit of Doom! So he's going to save my life, is he? I don't know that it is worth it." Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her skirts. "When you have those washed and ironed, bring them to me. I will take them up to him. You can clean his boots before you go to sleep tonight. We have a room—a cubbyhole—near him, so we will be close if he calls to have his bloody pillows plumped!" She was gone before Min could protest.

Staring down at the wadded shirts, Min was sure that she knew who was going to be doing all of Gareth Bryne's laundry, and it was not Siuan

Sanche. *Rand bloody al’Thor.* Fall in love with a man, and you ended up doing laundry, even if it did belong to another man. When she marched into the kitchen to demand a washtub and hot water, she was snarling every bit as much as Siuan.

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CHAPTER

29

Memories of Saldaea

Lying on his bed in the dark, in his shirtsleeves, Kadere idly twirled one of his large kerchiefs between his hands. The wagon's open windows let in moonlight, but not much breeze. At least Cairhien was cooler than the Waste. Someday he hoped to return to Saldaea, to walk in the garden where his sister Teodora had taught him his first letters and numbers. He missed her as much as he did Saldaea, the deep winters when trees burst from their sap freezing and the only way to travel was by snowshoes or skis. In these southlands, spring felt like summer, and summer like the Pit of Doom. Sweat rolled out of him in streams.

With a heavy sigh, he pushed his fingers into a small gap where the bed was built into the wagon. The folded scrap of parchment rustled. He left it there. He knew the words on it by heart.

You are not alone among strangers. A way has been chosen.

Just that, without signature, of course. He had found it slipped under his door when he retired for the night. There was a town not a quarter of a mile away, Eianrod, but even if a soft bed remained empty there, he doubted whether the Aiel would allow him to spend a night away from the wagons. Or that the Aes Sedai would. For the moment, his plans fit in well enough with Moiraine's. Perhaps he would get to see Tar Valon again. A dangerous place, for his sort, but the work there was always important, and invigorating.

He put his mind back on the note, though he wished he could afford to ignore it. The word "chosen" made him sure it came from another Darkfriend. The first surprise had been receiving it now, after crossing most of Cairhien. Nearly two months ago, right after Jasin Natael attached himself to Rand al'Thor—for reasons the man had never deigned to explain—and his new partner Keille Shaogi had disappeared—he suspected she was buried in the Waste, with a thrust from Natael's knife through her heart, and small riddance—soon after that, he had been visited by one of the Chosen. By Lanfear herself. She had given him his instructions.

Automatically his hand went to his chest, feeling through his shirt the scars branded there. He mopped his face with the kerchief. Part of his mind thought coldly, as it had at least once a day since, that they were an effective way to prove to him that it had not been an ordinary dream. An ordinary nightmare. Another part of him almost gibbered with relief that she had not returned.

The second surprise of the note had been the hand. A woman's hand, unless he missed his guess by a mile, and some of the letters formed in what he now knew for an Aiel way. Natael had told him that there must be Darkfriends among the Aiel—there were Darkfriends in every land, among every people—but he had never wanted to find brothers in the Waste. Aiel would kill you as soon as look at you, and you could put a foot wrong with them by breathing.

Taken all in all, the note spelled disaster. Possibly Natael had told some Aiel Darkfriend who he was. Angrily twirling the kerchief to a long thin cord, he snapped it tight between his hands. If the gleeman and Keille had not had proofs that they stood high in Darkfriend councils, he would have killed them both before going near the Waste. The only other possibility made his stomach leaden. "A way has been chosen." Maybe that had only been to put the word "chosen" down, and maybe it was meant to tell him that one of the Chosen had decided to use him. The note had not come from Lanfear; she would simply have spoken to him in his dreams once more.

In spite of the heat, he shivered, yet he had to wipe his face again, too. He had the feeling that Lanfear was a jealous mistress to serve, but if another of the Chosen wanted him he would have no choice. Despite all the promises made when he had given his oaths as a boy, he was a man of few illusions. Caught between two of the Chosen, he could be flattened like a kitten beneath a wagon wheel, and they would notice as much as the wagon did. He wished he were home in Saldaea. He wished he could see Teodora again.

A scraping at the door brought him to his feet; for all his bulk, he was more agile than he let anyone see. Mopping his face and neck, he made his way past the brick stove that he certainly had no need for here, and the cabinets with their ornately carved and painted uprights. When he pulled the door open, a slender figure swathed in black robes scurried in past him. He took one quick look around the moonlit darkness to make certain no one was watching—the drivers were all snoring beneath the other wagons and the Aiel guards never came among the wagons themselves—and quickly shut the door again.

“You must be hot, Isendre,” he chuckled. “Take off that robe and make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you, no,” she said bitterly from the shadowed depths of her cowl. She stood stiffly, but every now and then she twitched; the wool must be even itchier than usual tonight.

He chuckled again. “As you wish.” Beneath those robes, he suspected, the Maidens of the Spear still allowed her to wear nothing but the stolen jewelry, if that. She had become prudish in ways, since the Maidens had her. Why the woman had been stupid enough to steal, he could not understand. He had certainly made no objections when they dragged her screaming from the wagon by her hair; he was only glad that they had not thought he was involved. Her greediness had certainly made his task more difficult. “Have you anything to report on al’Thor or Natael?” A major part of Lanfear’s instruction had been to keep a close eye on those two, and he knew no better way to keep an eye on a man than to put a woman in his bed. Any man told his bedmate things he had vowed to keep secret, boasted of his plans, revealed his weaknesses, even if he was the Dragon Reborn and this Dawn fellow the Aiel called him.

She shuddered visibly. “At least I can come near Natael.” Come near him? Once the Maidens had caught her sneaking to the man’s tent, they had practically begun stuffing her into it every night. She always put the best face on matters. “Not that he tells me anything. Wait. Be patient. Keep silent. Make accommodation with fate, whatever that means. He says that every time I try to ask a question. For the most part, all he wants to do is play music I’ve never heard before and make love.” She never had anything more to say about the gleeman. For the hundredth time he wondered why Lanfear wanted Natael watched. The man was supposed to be as high as a Darkfriend could reach, only a step below the Chosen themselves.

“I take it that means you still have not managed to wriggle into al’Thor’s bed?” he asked, brushing past her to sit down on the bed.

“No.” She writhed uncomfortably.

“Then you will have to try harder, won’t you? I am growing tired of failure, Isendre, and our masters are not as patient as I. He’s only a man, whatever his titles.” She had often boasted to him that she could have any man she wanted, and make him do whatever she wanted. She had shown him the truth of her boasts. She had not needed to steal jewelry; he would have bought her anything she wanted. He *had* bought her more than he could afford. “The bloody Maidens can’t watch him every second, and once you are in his bed, he’ll not let them harm you.” One taste of her would be enough for that. “I have full faith and confidence in your abilities.”

“No.” If anything, the word was shorter this time.

He rolled and unrolled the kerchief irritably. “ ‘No’ is not a word our masters like to hear, Isendre.” That meant their lords among the Darkfriends; not all lords or ladies by any means—a groom might give orders to a lady, a beggar to a magistrate—but their commands were at least as strictly enforced as any noble’s, and usually more so. “Not a word our mistress will like to hear.”

Isendre shuddered. She had not believed his tale until he showed her the burns on his chest, but since then, one mention of Lanfear had been enough to quell any rebellion on her part. This time, she began to weep.

“I cannot, Hadnan. When we stopped tonight, I thought I might have a chance in a town instead of tents, but they caught me before I got within ten paces of him.” She pushed back her hood, and he gaped as moonlight played over her bare scalp. Even her eyebrows were gone. “They shaved me, Hadnan. Adelin and Enaila and Jolien, they held me down and shaved every hair. They beat me with nettles, Hadnan.” She shook like a sapling in high wind, sobbing slack-mouthed and mumbling the words. “I itch from shoulders to knees, and I burn too much to scratch. They said they’d make me *wear* nettles, the next time I so much as looked in his direction. They meant it, Hadnan. They did! They said they’d give me to Aviendha, and they told me what she would do. I cannot, Hadnan. Not again. I cannot.”

Stunned, he stared at her. She had had such lovely dark hair. Yet she was beautiful enough that even being bald as an egg only made her seem exotic. Her tears and sagging face detracted only a little. If she could put herself into al’Thor’s bed for just one night . . . It was not going to happen. The Maidens had broken her. He had broken people himself, and he knew the signs. Eagerness to avoid more punishment became eagerness to obey. The mind never wanted to admit it was running from something, so she would soon convince herself that she really wanted to obey, that she really wanted nothing more than to please the Maidens.

“What does Aviendha have to do with it?” he muttered. How soon before Isendre felt the need to confess her sins, as well?

“Al’Thor has been bedding her since Rhuidean, you fool! She spends every night with him. The Maidens think she will marry him.” Even through her sobs he could detect resentful fury. She would not like it that another had succeeded where she failed. Doubtless that was why she had not told him before.

Aviendha was a beautiful woman despite her fierce eyes, full-breasted compared to most of the Maidens, yet he would stack Isendre against her if only . . . Isendre slumped in the moonlight coming through the windows, quivering from head to toe, sobbing openmouthed, tears rolling down her cheeks that she did not even bother to wipe away. She would grovel on the ground if Aviendha frowned at her.

“Very well,” he said gently. “If you cannot, then you cannot. You can still pry something out of Natael. I know you can.” Rising, he took her shoulders to turn her toward the door.

She flinched away from his touch, but she did turn. “Natael will not want to look at me for days,” she said petulantly around hiccoughs and sniffs. Sobs threatened to break out again any moment, but his tone seemed to have soothed her. “I’m red, Hadnan. As red as if I had laid naked in the sun for a day. And my hair. It will take forever to grow ba—”

As she reached for the door, her eyes going to the handle, he had the kerchief spun to a cord in an instant and around her neck. He tried to ignore her rasping gurgles, the frantic scraping of her feet on the floor. Her fingers clawed at his hands, but he stared straight ahead. Even keeping his eyes open, he saw Teodora; he always did, when he killed a woman. He had loved his sister, but she had discovered what he was, and she would not have kept silent. Isendre’s heels drummed violently, but after what seemed an eternity they slowed, went still, and she became a dead weight dragging at his hands. He held the cord tight for a count of sixty before unwinding it and letting her fall. She would have been confessing, next. Confessing to being a Darkfriend. Pointing a finger at him.

Rummaging in the cabinets by touch, he pulled out a butchering knife. Disposing of a whole corpse would be difficult, but luckily the dead did not bleed much; the robe would absorb what little there was. Maybe he could find the woman who had left the note under his door. If she was not pretty enough, she must have friends who were also Darkfriends. Natael would not care if it was an Aiel woman who visited him—Kadere would rather have bedded a viper himself; Aiel were dangerous—and maybe an Aiel would have a better chance than Isendre against Aviendha. Kneeling, he hummed quietly to himself as he worked, a lullaby that Teodora had taught him.

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CHAPTER
30

A Wager

A soft night breeze stirred across the small town of Eianrod, then faded. Sitting on the stone rail of the wide flat bridge in the heart of the town, Rand supposed the breeze was hot, yet it hardly felt so after the Waste. Warm for nighttime perhaps, but not enough to make him unbutton his red coat. The river below him had never been large, and was half its normal width now, yet he still enjoyed watching the water flow north, moonshadows cast by scudding clouds playing across the darkly glittering surface. That was why he was out here in the night, really; to look at running water for a time. His wards were set, surrounding the Aiel encampment that itself surrounded the town. The Aiel themselves kept a watch a sparrow could not pierce unseen. He could waste an hour being soothed by the flow of a river.

It was surely better than another night where he had to order Moiraine to leave so he could study with Asmodean. She had even taken to bringing his meals to him and talking while he ate, as if she meant to cram everything she knew into his head before they reached the city of Cairhien. He could not face her begging to remain—actually begging!—as she had the previous night. For a woman like Moiraine, that behavior was so unnatural that he had wanted to agree simply to stop it. Which was very likely why she had done it. Much better an hour listening to the quiet liquid ripplings of the river. With luck, she would have given up on him for tonight.

The eight or ten paces of clay between water and weeds on both sides below him was dried and cracked. He peered up at the clouds crossing the moon. He could try to make those clouds give rain. The town's two fountains were both dry, and dust lay in a third of the wells not fouled beyond cleaning. Try was the word, though. He had made it rain once; remembering how was the trick. If he managed that, then he could try not to make it a drowning deluge and a tree-snapping windstorm this time.

Asmodean would be no help; he did not know much about weather, it seemed. For every thing the man taught him, there were two more that made Asmodean either throw up his hands or give a lick and a promise. Once he had thought that the Forsaken knew everything, that they were all but omnipotent. But if the others were like Asmodean, they had ignorances as well as weaknesses. It might actually be that he already knew more of some things than they. Than some of them, at least. The problem would be finding out who. Semirhage was almost as poor at handling weather as Asmodean.

He shivered as if this were night in the Three-fold Land. Asmodean had never told him that. Better to listen to the water and not think, if he meant to sleep at all tonight.

Sulin approached him, the *shoufa* around her shoulders so it uncovered her short white hair, and leaned on the railing. The wiry Maiden was armed for battle, bow and arrows, spears and knife and buckler. She had taken command of his bodyguard tonight. Two dozen more *Far Dareis Mai* squatted easily on the bridge ten paces away. “An odd night,” she said. “We were gambling, but suddenly everyone was throwing nothing but sixes.”

“I am sorry,” he told her without thinking, and she gave him a peculiar look. She did not know, of course; he had not spread it about. The ripples he gave off as *ta’veren* spread out in odd, random ways. Even the Aiel would not want to be within ten miles of him, if they knew.

The ground had given way beneath three Stone Dogs today, dropping them into a viper pit, but none of the dozens of bites had found anything but cloth. He knew that had been him, bending chance. Tal Nethin, the saddlemaker, had survived Taien to trip on a stone this very noon and break his neck falling on flat, grassy ground. Rand was afraid that had been him, too. On the other hand, Bael and Jheran had mended the blood feud between Shaarad and Goshien while he was with them, eating a midday meal of dried meat on the move. They still did not like each other, and hardly seemed to understand what they had done, but it *was* done, with pledges and water oaths given, each man holding the cup for the other to drink. To Aiel, water oaths were stronger than any other; it might be generations before Shaarad and Goshien so much as raided each other for sheep or goats or cattle.

He had wondered if those random effects would ever work in his favor; maybe this was as close as it came. What else had happened today that might be laid at his feet, he did not know; he never asked, and would as soon not hear. The Baels and Jherans could only partly make up for the Tal Nethins.

“I’ve not seen Enaila or Adelin for days,” he said. It was as good a change of subject as any. That pair in particular had seemed to be jealous of their places guarding him. “Are they ill?”

If anything, the look Sulin gave him was even more peculiar. “They will return when they learn to stop playing with dolls, Rand al’Thor.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Aiel were strange—Aviendha’s lessons often made them more so, not less—but this was ridiculous. “Well, tell them they are grown women and they ought to act it.”

Even by moonlight he could tell that her smile was pleased. “It shall be as the *Car’a’carn* wishes.” What did that mean? She eyed him a moment, lips pursed thoughtfully. “You have not eaten yet tonight. There is still enough food for everyone, and you will not fill one belly by going hungry yourself. If you do not eat, people will worry that *you* are ill. You will become ill.”

He laughed softly, a hoarse wheeze. The *Car’a’carn* one minute, and the next . . . If he did not fetch something to eat, Sulin would probably go get it for him. And try to feed him to boot. “I will eat. Moiraine must be in her blankets by now.” This time her odd look was satisfying; for a change he had said something that she did not understand.

As he swung his feet down, he heard the ring of horses’ hooves walking down the stone-paved street toward the bridge. Every Maiden was upright in an instant, face veiled; half nocked arrows. His hand went to his waist by instinct, but the sword was not there. The Aiel felt strange enough about him riding a horse and carrying the thing at his saddle; he had not seen any need to offend their customs more by wearing it. Besides, there were not many horses, and they were coming at a walk.

When they appeared, surrounded by an escort of fifty Aiel, the riders numbered fewer than twenty, slumping in their saddles dejectedly. Most wore rimmed helmets and Tairen coats with puffy, striped sleeves beneath their breastplates. The pair in the lead had ornately gilded cuirasses, and large white plumes attached to the front of their helmets, and the stripes on their sleeves had the glisten of satin in the moonlight. Half a dozen men at the rear, though, shorter and slighter than the Tairens, two with small banners called *con* on short staffs harnessed to their backs, wore dark coats and helmets shaped like bells cut away to expose their faces. Cairhienin used the banners to pick out officers in battle, and also to mark a lord's personal retainers.

The Tairens with plumes stared when they saw him, exchanged startled glances, then scrambled down to come kneel before him, helmets under their arms. They were young, little older than he, both with dark beards trimmed to neat points in the fashion of Tairen nobility. Dents marred their breastplates, and the gilding was chipped; they had been crossing swords somewhere. Neither as much as glanced at the Aiel surrounding them, as if when ignored they would disappear. The Maidens unveiled, though they looked no less ready to put spear or arrow through the kneeling men.

Rhuarc followed the Tairens, with a gray-eyed Aiel younger and slightly taller than he, and stood behind. Mangin was of the Jindo Taardad, and one of those who had gone to the Stone of Tear. Jindo had brought in the riders.

"My Lord Dragon," the plump, pink-cheeked lordling said, "burn my soul, but have they taken *you* prisoner?" His companion, jug ears and potato nose making him look a farmer despite his beard, kept sweeping lanky hair from his forehead nervously. "They said they were taking us to some Dawn fellow. The *Car'a'carn.* Means something about chiefs, if I remember what my tutor said. Forgive me, my Lord Dragon. I am Edorion of House Selorna, and this is Estean of House Andiama."

"I am He Who Comes With the Dawn," Rand told them quietly. "And the *Car'a'carn.*" He had them placed now: young lords who had spent their time drinking, gambling and chasing women when he was in the Stone. Estean's eyes nearly popped out of his face; Edorion looked as surprised for a moment, then nodded slowly, as if he suddenly saw how it made sense. "Stand. Who are your Cairhienin companions?" It would be interesting to meet Cairhienin who were not running for their lives from the Shaido, and any other Aiel they saw. For that matter, if they were with Edorion and Estean, they might be the first supporters he had met in this land. If the two Tairens' fathers had followed his orders. "Bring them forward."

Estean blinked in surprise as he rose, but Edorion barely paused in turning to shout, "Meresin! Daricain! Come here!" Much like calling dogs. The Cairhienins' banners bobbed as they dismounted slowly.

"My Lord Dragon." Estean hesitated, licking his lips as though thirsty. "Did you . . . Did you send the Aiel against Cairhien?"

“They’ve attacked the city, then?”

Rhuarc nodded, and Mangin said, “If these are to be believed, Cairhien still holds. Or did three days ago.” There was little doubt that he did not think it still did, and less that he cared about a city of treekillers.

“I did not send them, Estean,” Rand said as they were joined by the two Cairhienin, who knelt, doffing their helmets to reveal men of an age with Edorion and Estean, their hair shaved back in line with their ears and their dark eyes wary. “Those who attack the city are my enemies, the Shaido. I mean to save Cairhien if it can be saved.”

He had to go through the business of telling the Cairhienin to rise; his time with the Aiel had almost made him forget the habit this side of the Spine of the World, bowing and kneeling right and left. He had to ask for introductions, too, and the Cairhienin gave them themselves. Lieutenant Lord Meresin of House Daganred—his *con* was all wavy vertical lines of red and white—and Lieutenant Lord Daricain of House Annallin, his *con* covered with small squares of red and black. It was a surprise that they were lords. Though lords commanded and led soldiers in Cairhien, they did not shave their heads and become soldiers. Or had not; much had changed, apparently.

“My Lord Dragon.” Meresin stumbled a bit saying that. He and Daricain were both pale, slender men, with narrow faces and long noses, but he was a bit the heavier. Neither looked as if he had had much to eat lately. Meresin rushed on as if afraid of being interrupted. “My Lord Dragon, Cairhien can hold. For days yet, perhaps as many as ten or twelve, but you must come quickly if you are to save it.”

“That is why we came out,” Estean said, shooting Meresin a dark look. Both Cairhienin returned it, but their defiance was tinged with resignation. Estean raked stringy hair from his forehead. “To find help. Parties have been sent in every direction, my Lord Dragon.” He shivered despite the sweat on his brow, and his voice turned distant and hollow. “There were more of us when we started. I saw Baran go down, screaming with a spear through his guts. He’ll never turn a card at chop again. I could use a mug of strong brandy.”

Edorion turned his helmet in gauntleted hands, frowning. “My Lord Dragon, the city can hold a while longer, but even if these Aiel will fight those, the question is, can you bring them there in time? I think ten or twelve days is a more than generous estimate, myself. In truth, I only came because I thought dying with a spear through me would be better than being taken alive when they made it over the walls. The city is packed with refugees who fled ahead of the Aiel; there isn't a dog or a pigeon left in the city, and I doubt there will be a rat left soon. The one good thing is that no one seems to be worrying very much about who will take the Sun Throne, not with this Couladin outside."

"He called on us to surrender to He Who Comes With the Dawn, on the second day," Daricain put in, earning a sharp look from Edorion for the interruption.

"Couladin has some sport with prisoners," Estean said. "Out of bowshot, but where anyone on the walls can see. You can hear them screaming, too. The Light burn my soul, I don't know whether he is trying to break our will or simply likes it. Sometimes they let peasants make a run for the city, then shoot them full of arrows when they're almost safe. However safe Cairhien is. Only peasants, but . . ." He trailed off and swallowed hard, as if he had just remembered what Rand's opinions were of "only peasants." Rand just looked at him, but he seemed to shrivel, and muttered under his breath about brandy.

Edorion leaped into the momentary silence. "My Lord Dragon, the point is that the city can hold until you come, if you can come quickly. We only beat back the first assault because the Foregate caught fire. . . ."

"Flames nearly took the city," Estean interjected. The Foregate, a city in itself outside the walls of Cairhien, had been mostly wood, as Rand remembered. "Would have been disaster if the river was not right there."

The other Tairen went on right over him. ". . . but Lord Meilan has the defense well planned, and the Cairhienin appear to be keeping their backbones for the time." That earned him frowns from Meresin and Daricain that he either did not see or pretended not to. "Seven days with luck, perhaps eight at most. If you can . . ." A heavy sigh abruptly seemed to deflate Edorion's plumpness. "I did not see one horse," he said as if to himself. "The Aiel do not ride. You will never be able to move men afoot so far in time."

"How long?" Rand asked Rhuarc.

"Seven days" was the reply. Mangin nodded, and Estean laughed.

"Burn my soul, it took us as long to reach here on horses. If you think you can make the return in the same afoot, you must be . . ." Becoming aware of the Aiel eyes on him, Estean scrubbed the hair from his face. “Is there any brandy in this town?” he muttered.

“It isn’t how fast we can make it,” Rand said quietly, “but how fast you can, if you dismount some of your men and use their horses for spares. I want to let Meilan and Cairhien know that help is on the way. But whoever goes will have to be sure he can keep his mouth shut if the Shaido take him. I do not intend to let Couladin know any more than he can learn on his own.” Estean went whiter in the face than the Cairhienin.

Meresin and Daricain were on their knees together, each seizing one of Rand’s hands to kiss. He let them, with as much patience as he could find; one bit of Moiraine’s advice that had the ring of common sense was not to offend people’s customs, however strange or even repulsive, unless you absolutely had to, and even then think twice.

“We will go, my Lord Dragon,” Meresin said breathlessly. “Thank you, my Lord Dragon. Thank you. Under the Light, I vow I will die before revealing a word to any but my father or the High Lord Meilan.”

“Grace favor you, my Lord Dragon,” the other added. “Grace favor you, and the Light illumine you forever. I am your man to the death.” Rand let Meresin say that he also was Rand’s man before taking his hands back firmly and telling them to stand. He did not like the way they were looking at him. Edorion had called them like hounds, but men should not look at anyone as if they were dogs gazing at a master.

Edorion drew a deep breath, puffing his pink cheeks, and let it out slowly. “I suppose if I made it out in one piece, I can make it back in. My Lord Dragon, forgive me if I offend, but would you care to wager, say, a thousand gold crowns, that you can really come in seven days?”

Rand stared at him. The man was as bad as Mat. “I don’t have a hundred crowns silver, much less a thousand in—”

Sulin broke in. “He has it, Tairen,” she said firmly. “He will meet your wager, if you make it ten thousand by weight.”

Edorion laughed. “Done, Aiel. And worth every copper if I lose. Come to think, I’ll not live to collect if I win. Come, Meresin, Daricain.” It sounded as if he were summoning dogs to heel. “We ride.”

Rand waited until the three had made their bows and were halfway back to the horses before rounding on the white-haired Maiden. “What do you mean, I have a thousand gold crowns? I’ve never *seen* a thousand crowns, much less ten thousand.”

The Maidens exchanged glances as if he were demented; so did Rhuarc and Mangin. “A fifth of the treasure that was in the Stone of Tear belongs to those who took the Stone, and will be claimed when they can carry it away.” Sulin spoke as to a child, instructing it in the simple facts of everyday life. “As chief and battle leader there, one tenth of that fifth is yours. Tear submitted to you as chief by right of triumph, so one tenth of Tear is yours as well. And you have said we can take the fifth in these lands—a . . . tax, you called it.” She fumbled the word; the Aiel did not have taxes. “The tenth part of that is yours also, as *Car’a’carn.*”

Rand shook his head. In all of his talks with Aviendha, he had never thought to ask whether the fifth applied to him; he was not Aiel, *Car’a’carn* or no, and it had not seemed anything to do with him. Well, it might not be a tax, but he could use it as kings did taxes. Unfortunately, he had only the vaguest idea how that was. He would have to ask Moiraine; that was one thing she had missed in her lectures. Perhaps she thought it so obvious that he should know.

Elayne would have known what taxes were used for; it had certainly been more fun taking advice from her than from Moiraine. He wished he knew where she was. Still in Tanchico, probably; Egwene told him little more than a constant string of well-wishings. He wished he could sit Elayne down and make her explain those two letters. Maiden of the Spear or Daughter-Heir of Andor, women were strange. Except maybe Min. She had laughed at him, but she had never made him think she was speaking some strange language. She would not laugh, now. If he ever saw her again, she would run a hundred miles to get away from the Dragon Reborn.

Edorion dismounted all his men, taking one of their horses and stringing the others together by their reins, along with Estean’s. No doubt he was saving his own for the final sprint through the Shaido. Merisin and Daricain did the same with their men. Though it meant that the Cairhienin had only two spare mounts apiece, no one seemed to think they should have any of the Tairen horses. They clattered off together westward at a trot, with a Jindo escort.

Carefully not looking at anyone, Estean started to drift toward the soldiers standing uneasily in a circle of Aiel at the foot of the bridge. Mangin caught his red-striped sleeve. “You can tell us conditions inside Cairhien, wetlander.” The lumpy-faced man looked ready to faint.

“I am certain he will answer any questions you ask,” Rand said sharply, emphasizing the final word.

“They will only be asked,” Rhuarc said, taking the Tairen’s other arm. He and Mangin seemed to be holding the much shorter man up between them. “Warning the city’s defenders is well and good, Rand al’Thor,” Rhuarc went on, “but we should send scouts. Running, they can reach Cairhien as soon as those men on horses, and meet us coming back with word of how Couladin has disposed the Shaido.”

Rand could feel the Maidens’ eyes on him, but he looked straight at Rhuarc. “Thunder Walkers?” he suggested.

“*Sha’mad Conde*,” Rhuarc agreed. He and Mangin turned Estean—they *were* holding him up—and started toward the other soldiers.

“Ask!” Rand called after them. “He is your ally, and my liege man.” He had no idea whether Estean was that last or not—it was another thing to ask Moiraine—or even how much of an ally he really was—his father, the High Lord Torean, had plotted against Rand enough—but he would allow nothing close to Couladin’s ways.

Rhuarc turned his head and nodded.

“You tend your people well, Rand al’Thor.” Sulin’s voice was flat as a planed plank.

“I try,” he told her. He was not about to rise to the bait. Whoever went to scout the Shaido, some would not return, and that was that. “I think I will have something to eat now. And get some sleep.” It could not be much more than two hours to midnight, and sunrise still came early this time of year. The Maidens followed him, watching the shadows warily as if they expected attack, handtalk flickering among them. But then, Aiel always seemed to expect attack.

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CHAPTER

31

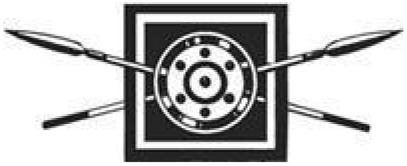

The Far Snows

The streets of Eianrod ran straight and met at right angles, where necessary slicing through hills that were otherwise neatly terraced with stone. The slate-roofed stone buildings had an angular look, as if they were all vertical lines. Eianrod had not fallen to Couladin; no people had been there when the Shaido swept through. A good many of the houses were only charred beams and hollow ruined shells, however, including most of the wide three-story marble buildings with balconies that Moiraine said had belonged to merchants. Broken furniture and clothes littered the streets, along with shattered dishes and shards of glass from windows, single boots and tools and toys.

The burning had come at different times—Rand could tell that much himself, from the weathering of blackened timbers and how much smell of char lingered where—but Lan had been able to chart the flow of battles by which the town had been taken and retaken. By different Houses contending for the Sun Throne, most likely, though from the look of the streets, the last to hold Eianrod had been brigands. A good many of the bands roaming Cairhien held allegiance to no one, and to nothing except gold.

It was to one of the merchants' houses that Rand went, on the largest of the town's two squares, three square stories of gray marble with heavy balconies and wide steps with thick angular stone siderails overlooking a silent fountain with a dusty round basin. A chance to sleep in a bed again had been too good to pass up, and he had hopes that Aviendha would choose to remain in a tent; whether his or with the Wise Ones, he did not care, so long as he did not have to try going to sleep while listening to her breathe a few paces away. Recently he had begun imagining he could hear her heart beat even when he had not taken hold of *saidin*. But if she did not stay away, he had taken precautions.

The Maidens stopped at the steps, some trotting around the building to take positions on all sides. He had feared that they would try declaring this a Roof of the Maidens, even for the one night, and so as soon as he had chosen the building, one of the few in town with a sound roof and most of the windows unbroken, he had told Sulin that he was declaring it the Roof of the Winespring Brothers. No one could enter who had not drunk from the Winespring, in Emond's Field. From the look she had given him, she knew very well what he was up to, but none of them followed him beyond the wide doors that seemed to be all narrow vertical panels.

Inside, the large rooms were bare, though white-robed *gai'shain* had spread a few blankets for themselves in the broad entry hall, its high plaster ceiling worked in a pattern of severe squares. Keeping *gai'shain* out was beyond him even had he wanted to, as much so as keeping Moiraine out if she was not asleep elsewhere. Whatever orders he gave about not being disturbed, she always found a way to make the Maidens let her by, and it always took a direct command for her to go before she would leave.

The *gai'shain* rose smoothly, men and women, before he had the door closed. They would not sleep until he did, and some would take turns remaining awake in case he wanted something in the night. He had tried ordering them not to, but telling a *gai'shain* not to serve according to custom was like kicking a bale of wool; whatever impression you made was gone as soon as your toes were. He waved them away and climbed the marble stairs. Some of those *gai'shain* had salvaged a few bits of furniture, including a bed and two feather mattresses, and he was looking forward to washing and—

He froze as soon as he opened the door to his bedchamber. Aviendha had not chosen to remain with the tents. She stood before the washstand, with its mismatched, cracked bowl and pitcher, a cloth in one hand and a bar of yellow soap in the other. She had no clothes on. She seemed as stunned as he, as incapable of moving.

"I . . ." She stopped to swallow, big green eyes locked on his face. "I could not make a sweat tent here in this . . . town, so I thought I would try your way of . . ." She was hard muscle and soft curves; she glistened damply from head to feet. He had never imagined that her legs were so long. "I thought you would remain longer at the bridge. I . . ." Her voice rose in pitch; her eyes widened in panic. "I did not arrange for you to see me! I must get away from you. As far away as I can! I must!"

Suddenly a shimmering vertical line appeared in the air near her. It widened, as if rotating, into a gateway. Icy wind rushed through it into the room, carrying thick curtains of snow.

"I must get away!" she wailed, and darted through into the blizzard.

Immediately the gateway began to narrow again, turning, but without thought Rand channeled, blocking it at half its former width. He did not know what he had done or how, but he was sure this was a gateway for Traveling, such as Asmodean had told him of and been unable to teach him. There was no time for thinking. Wherever Aviendha had gone, she had gone naked into the heart of a winter storm. Rand tied off the flows he had woven as he ripped all the blankets from the bed and tossed them onto her clothes and pallet. Seizing blankets, clothes and rugs all together, he plunged through only moments behind her.

Icy wind screamed through night air filled with swirling white. Even wrapped in the Void, he could feel his body shivering. Dimly he could make out scattered shapes in the darkness; trees, he thought. There was nothing for him to smell but cold. Ahead of him, a form moved, obscured by darkness and the snowstorm; he might have missed it but for the sharpness of his eyes in the Void. Aviendha, running as hard as she could. He lumbered after her through snow to his knees, clutching the thick bundle to his chest.

"Aviendha! Stop!" He was afraid that the howling wind would sweep his shout away, but she heard. And if anything, ran faster. He forced himself to more speed, staggering and tripping as the deepening snow tugged at his boots. The prints left by her bare feet were filling fast. If he lost sight of her in this. . . . "Stop, you fool woman! Are you trying to kill yourself?" The sound of his voice seemed to flog her to run harder.

Grimly, he pushed himself, half-falling and scrambling back up, knocked down by the hurtling wind as often as stumbling in the snow, blundering into trees. He had to keep his eyes on her. He was only thankful this forest, or whatever it was, had trees so far apart.

Plans skittered across the Void and were discarded. He could try quelling the storm—and maybe the result would turn the air to ice. A shelter of Air to keep the falling snow away would do nothing for that underfoot. He could melt a path for himself with Fire—and slog through mud instead. Unless . . .

He channeled, and the snow ahead of him melted in a band a span wide, a band that ran ahead of him as he did. Steam rose, and falling snow vanished a foot above the sandy soil. He could feel the heat of it through his boots. Down almost to his ankles, his body shook with the bone-chilling cold; his feet sweated and flinched away from the heated ground. But he was catching up now. Another five minutes and . . .

Suddenly the vague shape he had been following vanished as if she had fallen into a hole.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the spot where he had last seen her, he ran as hard as he could. Abruptly he was splashing in icy flowing water to his ankles, halfway to his knees. Ahead of him, the melting snow revealed more, and an edge of ice inching slowly back. No steam rose from the black water. Stream or river, it was too big for the amount of his channeling to warm the swift-moving flow even a hair. She must have run out onto the ice and fallen through, but he would not save her by trying to wade into this. Filled with *saidin*, he was barely aware of the cold, but his teeth chattered uncontrollably.

Retreating to the bank, gaze locked on where he thought Aviendha had gone down, he channeled flows of Fire into ground still bare, well back from the stream, until the sand melted and fused and glowed white. Even in this storm, that would stay hot for a time. He set the bundle down in the snow beside it—her life would depend on finding the blankets and rugs again—then waded through the deep white to one side of the melted path and lay flat. Slowly he crawled out onto the snow-covered ice.

The wind shrieked across him. His coat might as well not have existed. His hands were numb now, and his feet going; he had stopped shivering except for an occasional shudder. Coldly calm inside the Void, he knew what was happening; there were blizzards in the Two Rivers, perhaps even as bad as this. His body was being overwhelmed. If he did not find warmth soon, he would be able to calmly watch from the Void as he died. But if he died, Aviendha would, too. If she had not already.

He felt rather than heard the ice cracking beneath his weight. His probing hands fell into water. This was the place, but with snow whirling about, he could barely see. He flailed, searching, numb hands splashing. One hit something at the edge of the ice, and he commanded his fingers to close, felt frozen hair crackling.

Got to pull her out. He crawled backward, hauling at her. She was a dead weight, sliding slowly out of the water. *Don't care if the ice scrapes her. Better that than freezing or drowning.* Back. *Keep moving. If you quit, she dies. Keep moving, burn you!* Crawling. Pulling with his legs, pushing with one hand. The other locked in Aviendha's hair; no time to get a better grip; she could not feel it anyway. *You've had it easy for too long. Lords kneeling, and* gai'shain *running to fetch your wine, and Moiraine doing as she's told.* Back. *Time to do something yourself if you still can. Move, you flaming fatherless son of a spavined goat! Keep moving!*

Suddenly his feet hurt; the pain began creeping up his legs. It took him a moment to look back, and then he rolled off the steaming patch of melted sand. Tendrils of smoke, where his breeches had begun smoldering, were whisked away by the wind.

Fumbling for the bundle he had left, he swathed Aviendha from head to foot in all of it, the blankets, the rugs of her pallet, her clothes. Every bit of protection was vital. Her eyes were closed, and she did not move. He parted the blankets enough to put an ear to her chest. Her heart beat so slowly that he was not sure he was really hearing it. Even four blankets and half a dozen rugs were not enough, and he could not channel heat into her as he had the ground; even fining the flow as much as possible, he was more likely to kill than warm. He could feel the weave he had used to block open her gateway, a mile or perhaps two away through the storm. If he tried to carry her that far, neither of them would survive. They needed shelter, and they needed it here.

He channeled flows of Air, and snow began to move across the ground against the wind, building into thick square walls three paces on a side with one gap for a door, building higher, compacting the snow till it glistened like ice, roofing it over high enough to stand. Scooping Aviendha into his arms, he stumbled into the dark interior, weaving and tying flames dancing in the corners for light, channeling to scoop more snow to close the doorway.

Just with the wind shut away it felt warmer, but that would not be enough. Using the trick Asmodean had shown him, he wove Air and Fire, and the air around them grew warmer. He did not dare tie that weave off; if he fell asleep, it could grow and melt the hut. For that matter, the flames were almost as dangerous to leave, but he was too bone-weary and chilled to maintain more than one weave.

The ground inside had been cleared as he built, bare sandy soil with only a few brown leaves he did not recognize and some scruffy low dead weeds that were equally strange to him. Releasing the weave that warmed the air, he heated the ground enough to take away the iciness, then took up the other weave again. It was all he could do to lay Aviendha down gently rather than drop her.

He pushed a hand inside the blankets to feel her cheek, her shoulder. Trickles of water ran across her face as her hair melted. He was cold, but she was ice. She needed every scrap of warmth he could find for her, and he did not dare warm the air more. Already the insides of the walls shone with a faint layer of melt. However frozen he felt, he had more heat in him than she did.

Stripping off his clothes, he climbed into the coverings with her, arranging his own damp garments on the outside; they could help hold in the body heat. His sense of touch, enhanced by the Void and *saidin,* soaked in the feel of her. Her skin made silk feel rough. Compared to her skin, satin was . . . *Don't think.* He smoothed damp hair away from her face. He should have dried it, but the water no longer felt so cold, and there was nothing but the blankets or their clothes to use anyway. Her eyes were closed; her chest stirred against him slowly. Her head lay on his arm, snuggled against his chest. If she had not felt like winter itself, she could have been sleeping. So peaceful; not angry at all. So beautiful. *Stop thinking.* It was a sharp command outside the emptiness surrounding him. *Talk.*

He tried talking of the first thing that came to mind, Elayne and the confusion her two letters brought, but that soon had thoughts of golden-haired Elayne drifting across the Void, of kissing her in secluded spots in the Stone. *Don't think of kissing, fool!* He shifted to Min. He had never thought about Min that way. Well, a few dreams could not count. Min would have slapped his face if he had ever tried to kiss her, or else laughed and called him a woolhead. Only it seemed that speaking of any woman reminded him that he had his arms around a woman who had no clothes on. Filled with the Power, he could smell the scent of her, feel every inch of her as clearly as if he were running his hands . . . The Void trembled. *Light, you're only trying to warm her! Keep your mind out of the pigsty, man!*

Trying to drive thought away, he talked of his hopes for Cairhien, to bring peace and an end to the famine, to bring the nations behind him without any more bloodshed. But that had its own life, too, its own inevitable path, to Shayol Ghul, where he must face the Dark One and die, if the Prophecies were true. It seemed cowardly to say that he hoped he might live through that somehow. Aiel did not know cowardice; the worst of them was brave as a lion. “The Breaking of the World killed the weak,” he had heard Bael say, “and the Three-fold Land killed the cowards.”

He began speaking of where they might be, where she had brought them with her wild senseless flight. Somewhere far and strange, to have snow at this time of year. It had been worse than a senseless flight. Mad. Yet he knew that she had fled from him. *Fled* from him. How she must hate him, if she had to flee as far as she could rather than just tell him to leave her to her bath in privacy.

“I should have knocked.” At his own bedroom door? “I know you do not want to be around me. You don’t have to be. Whatever the Wise Ones want, whatever they say, you are going back to their tents. You will not have to come near me again. In fact, if you do, I . . . I’ll send you away.” Why hesitate on that? She gave him anger, coldness, bitterness when she was awake, and asleep. . . . “It *was* a crazy thing to do. You could have killed yourself.” He was stroking her hair again; he could not seem to stop. “If you ever do anything half so crazy again, I’ll break your neck. Do you have any idea how I will miss hearing you breathe at night?” Miss it? She drove him crazy with it! He was the one who was mad. He had to stop this. “You are going away, and that’s that, if I have to send you back to Rhuidean. The Wise Ones can’t stop me if I speak as *Car’a’carn*. You won’t have to run away from me again.”

The hand that he could not stop from stroking her hair froze as she stirred. She was warm, he realized. Very warm. He should be wrapping one of the blankets about himself decently and moving away. Her eyes opened, clear and deep, green, staring at him seriously from not a foot away. She did not seem surprised to see him, and she did not pull back.

He took his arms from around her, started to slither away, and she seized a handful of his hair in a painful grip. If he moved, he would have a bald patch. She gave him no chance to explain anything. “I promised my near-sister to watch you.” She seemed to be speaking to herself as much as to him, in a low, almost expressionless voice. “I ran from you as hard as I could, to shield my honor. And you followed me even here. The rings do not lie, and I can run no more.” Her tone firmed decisively. “I will run no more.”

Rand tried to ask her what she meant while attempting to untangle her fingers from his hair, but she clutched another handful on the other side and pulled his mouth to hers. That was the end of rational thought; the Void shattered, and *saidin* fled. He did not think he could have stopped himself had he wanted to, only he could not think of wanting to, and she certainly did not seem to want him to. In fact, the last thought he had of any coherency for a very long time was that he did not think he could have stopped *her.*

Some considerable time later—two hours, maybe three; he could hardly be sure—he lay atop the rugs with the blankets over him and his hands behind his head, watching Aviendha examine the slick white walls. They had held a surprising amount of the warmth; there was no need to latch on to *saidin* again, either to shut out cold or to try warming the air. She had done no more than rake her fingers through her hair on rising, and she moved completely unashamed at her nakedness. Of course, it was a bit late to be ashamed of something as small as having no clothes on. He had been worried about hurting her when dragging her out of the water, but she showed fewer scrapes than he did, and somehow they did not seem to mar her beauty at all.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Snow." He explained what snow was as best he could, but she only shook her head, partly in wonderment, partly disbelief. For someone who had grown up in the Waste, frozen water falling from the sky must seem as impossible as flying. According to the records, the only time it had ever even rained in the Waste was the time he had made it.

He could not stop a sigh of regret when she began pulling her shift over her head. "The Wise Ones can marry us as soon as we get back." He could still feel his weave holding her gateway open.

Aviendha's dark reddish head popped through the neck of the shift, and she stared at him flatly. Not unfriendly, but not friendly, either. Determined, though. "What makes you think a man has the right to ask me that? Besides, you belong to Elayne."

After a moment he managed to close his mouth. "Aviendha, we just . . . The two of us . . . Light, we *have* to marry now. Not that I'm doing it because I have to," he added hastily. "I want to." He was not sure of that at all, really. He thought he might love her, but he thought he might love

Elayne, too. And for some reason, Min kept creeping in. *You're as big a lecher as Mat.* But for once he could do what was right because it was right.

She sniffed at him and felt her stockings to be sure they were dry, then sat down to don them. "Egwene has spoken to me of your Two Rivers marriage customs."

"You want to wait a year?" he asked incredulously.

"The year. Yes, that is what I meant." He had never realized before how much leg a woman showed pulling on a stocking; odd that that could seem so thrilling after he had seen her naked and sweating and . . . He concentrated on listening to her. "Egwene said she thought of asking her mother's permission for you, but before she mentioned it her mother told her she had to wait another year even if she did have her hair in a braid." Aviendha frowned, one knee almost under her chin. "Is that right? She said a girl was not allowed to braid her hair until she was old enough to marry. Do you understand what I am saying? You look like that . . . fish . . . Moiraine caught in the river." There were no fish in the Waste; Aiel knew them only from books.

"Of course I do," he said. He might as well have been deaf and blind for all he understood. Shifting under the blankets, he made himself sound as sure as he could manage. "At least . . . Well, the customs are complicated, and I am not certain which part you are talking about."

She looked at him suspiciously for a moment, but Aiel customs were so intricate that she believed him. In the Two Rivers, you walked out for a year, and if you suited, then you became betrothed and finally married; that was as far as custom went. She went on as she dressed. "I meant about a girl asking her mother's permission during the year, and the Wisdom's. I cannot say I understand that." The white blouse going over her head muffled her words for a moment. "If she wants him, and she is old enough to marry, why should she need permission? But you see? By my customs," her tone of voice said they were the only ones that mattered, "it is my place to choose whether to ask you, and I will not. By your customs," fastening her belt, she shook her head dismissively, "I did not have my mother's permission. And you would need your father's, I suppose. Or your father-brother's, since your father is dead? We did not have them, so we cannot marry." She began folding the scarf to wrap around her forehead.

"I see," he said weakly. Any boy in the Two Rivers who asked his father for that kind of permission was asking to have his ears soundly boxed. When he thought of the lads who had sweated themselves silly worrying that someone, *anyone,* would find out what they were doing with the girl they meant to marry . . . For that matter, he remembered when Nynaeve caught Kimry Lewin and Bar Dowtry in Bar's father's hayloft. Kimry had had her hair braided for five years, but when Nynaeve was through with her, Mistress Lewin had taken over. The Women's Circle had nearly skinned poor Bar alive, and that was nothing to what they had done to Kimry over the month they thought was the shortest decent time to wait for a wedding. The joke told quietly, where it would not get to the Women's Circle, had been that neither Bar nor Kimry had been able to sit down the whole first week they were married. Rand supposed Kimry had failed to ask permission. "But I guess Egwene wouldn't know all the men's customs, after all," he continued. "Women don't know everything. You see, since I started it, we have to marry. It doesn't matter about permissions."

"*You* started it?" Her sniff was pointed and meaning. Aiel, Andoran or anything else, women used those noises like sticks, to prod or thump. "It does not matter anyway, since we are going by Aiel customs. This will not happen again, Rand al'Thor." He was surprised—and pleased—to hear regret in her voice. "You belong to the near-sister of my near-sister. I have *toh* to Elayne, now, but that is none of your concern. Are you going to lie there forever? I have heard that men turn lazy, after, but it cannot be long until the clans are ready to begin the morning's march. You must be there." Suddenly a stricken look crossed her face, and she sagged to her knees. "If we can return. I am not certain that I remember what I did to make the hole, Rand al'Thor. You must find our way back."

He told her how he had blocked her gateway and could still feel it holding. She looked relieved, and even smiled at him. But it became increasingly clear as she folded her legs and arranged her skirts that she did not mean to turn her back while he dressed.

"Fair's fair," he muttered after a long moment, and scrambled out of the blankets.

He tried to be as nonchalant as she had been, but it was not easy. He could feel her eyes like a touch even when he turned away from her. She had no call to tell him he had a pretty behind; he had not said anything about how pretty hers was. She only said it to make him blush, anyway. Women did not look at men that way. *And they don't ask their mother's* *permission to . . . ?* He had an idea that life with Aviendha had not become one bit easier.

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CHAPTER

32

A Short Spear

There was little discussion. Even if the storm still raged outside, they could make it back to the gateway using the blankets and rugs for cloaks. Aviendha began dividing them while he seized *saidin,* filling himself with life and death, molten fire and liquid ice.

"Split them equally," he told her. He knew his voice was cold and emotionless. Asmodean had said he could go beyond that, but he had not managed to so far.

She gave him a surprised look, but all she said was "There is more of you to cover," and went on as she was.

There was no point in arguing. In his experience, from Emond's Field to the Maidens, if a woman wanted to do something for you, the only way to stop her was to tie her up, especially if it involved sacrifice on her part. The surprise was that she had not sounded acid, had not said anything about him being a soft wetlander. Maybe something good besides a memory had come out of this. *She can't* really *mean never again.* He suspected that she meant exactly that, though.

Weaving a finger-thin flow of Fire, he sliced the outline of a door in one wall, widening the gap at the top. Startlingly, daylight shone through. Releasing *saidin*, he exchanged surprised looks with Aviendha. He knew he had lost track of time—*You lost track of the year*—but they could not have been inside that long. Wherever they were, it was a great distance from Cairhien.

He pushed against the block, but it did not budge until he put his back to it, dug in his heels and shoved with all of his might. Just as it occurred to him that he very probably could have done this more easily with the Power, the block toppled outward, taking him with it into cold, crisp pale daylight. Not all the way, though. It stopped at an angle, propped against snow that had built up around the hut. Lying on his back, with only a bit of his head sticking out, he could see other mounds, some smooth drifts around sparse, stunted trees that he did not recognize, others maybe burying bushes or boulders.

He opened his mouth—and forgot what he was going to say as *something* swept through the air not fifty feet above him, a leathery gray shape far bigger than a horse, on slow-beating widespread wings, a horny snout thrust out before and clawed feet and thin, lizardlike tail trailing behind. His head twisted on its own to follow the thing's flight over the trees. There were two people on its back; despite what seemed to be some sort of hooded garments, it was plain that they were scanning the ground below. If he had had more than his head showing, if he had not been directly under the creature, they would surely have seen him.

"Leave the blankets," he said as he ducked back inside. He told her what he had seen. "Maybe they'd be friendly and maybe not, but I'd as soon not find out." He was not sure he wanted to meet people who rode something like that in any case. If they were people. "We are going to *sneak* back to the gateway. As quickly as we can, but sneaking."

For a wonder she did not argue. When he commented on it as he was helping her climb over the ice block—that was a wonder, too; she accepted his hand without so much as a glare—she said, "I do not argue when you make sense, Rand al'Thor." That was hardly the way he remembered it.

The land around them lay flat beneath its deep blanket of snow, but to the west sharp, white-tipped mountains rose, peaks wreathed in cloud. He had no difficulty knowing they lay west, for the sun was rising. Less than half its golden ball stuck above the ocean. He stared at that. The land slanted down enough for him to see waves crashing in violent spray on a rocky, boulder-strewn shore maybe half a mile away. An ocean to the east, stretching endlessly to horizon and sun. If the snow had not been enough, that told him they were in no land he knew.

Aviendha stared at the rolling breakers and pounding waves in amazement, then frowned at him as it hit home. She might never have seen an ocean, but she had seen maps.

In her skirts the snow gave her even more trouble than it did him, and he floundered, digging his way through as much as walking, sometimes sinking to his waist. She gasped as he scooped her up in his arms, and her green eyes glared.

“We have to move faster than you can dragging those skirts,” he told her. The glare faded, but she did not put an arm around his neck, as he had half-hoped. Instead she folded her hands and put on a patient face. A bit touched with sullenness. Whatever changes what they had done might have wrought in her, she was not completely different. He could not understand why that should be a relief.

He could have melted a path through the snow as he had in the storm, but if another of those flying things came, that cleared path would lead straight to them. A fox trotted by across the snow well to his right, pure white except for a black tip to its bushy tail, occasionally eyeing him and Aviendha warily. Rabbit tracks marred the snow in places, blurred where they had leapt, and once he saw the prints of a cat that had to be as large as a leopard. Maybe there were larger animals still, maybe some flightless relative of that leathery creature. Not something he wanted to encounter, but there was always the chance the . . . *fliers* . . . might take the plowed furrow he was leaving now as the track of some animal.

He still made his way from tree to tree, wishing there were more of them, and closer together. Of course, if there had been, he might not have found Aviendha in the storm—she grunted, frowning up at him, and he loosened his hold on her again—but it would surely have helped now. It was because he was creeping in that way, though, that he saw the others first.

Less than fifty paces away, between him and the gateway—right at the gateway; he could feel his weave holding it—were four people on horseback and more than twenty afoot. The mounted were all women shrouded in long thick, fur-lined cloaks; two of them each wore a silvery bracelet on her left wrist, connected by a long leash of the same shining stuff to a bright collar tight around the neck of a gray-clad, cloakless woman standing in the snow. The others afoot were men in dark leather, and armor painted green and gold, overlapping plates down their chests and the outsides of their arms and fronts of their thighs. Their spears bore green-and-gold tassels, their long shields were painted in the same colors, and their helmets seemed to be the heads of huge insects, faces peering out through the mandibles. One was clearly an officer, lacking spear or shield, but with a curved, two-handed sword on his back. Silver outlined the plates of his lacquered armor, and thin green plumes, like feelers, heightened the illusion of his painted helmet. Rand knew where he and Aviendha were now. He had seen armor like that before. And women collared like that.

Setting her down behind something that looked a little like a wind-twisted pine, except that its trunk was smooth and gray, streaked with black, he pointed, and she nodded silently.

“The two women on leashes can channel,” he whispered. “Can you block them?” Hurriedly he added, “Don’t embrace the Source yet. They’re prisoners, but they still might warn the others, and even if they don’t, the women with the bracelets might be able to feel them sense you.”

She looked at him oddly, but wasted no time on foolish questions such as how he knew; they would come later, he knew. “The women with the bracelets can channel also,” she replied just as softly. “It feels very strange, though. Weak. As if they had never practiced it. I cannot see how that can be.”

Rand could. *Damane* were the ones who were supposed to be able to channel. If two women had somehow slipped through the Seanchan net to become *sul’dam* instead—and from the little he knew of them, that would not be easy, for the Seanchan tested every last woman during the years that she might first show signs of channeling—they would surely never dare to betray themselves. “Can you shield all four?”

She gave him a very smug look. “Of course. Egwene taught me to handle several flows at once. I can block them, tie those off, and wrap them up in flows of Air before they know what is happening.” That self-satisfied little smile faded. “I am fast enough to handle them, and their horses, but that leaves the rest to you until I can bring help. If any get away . . . They can surely cast those spears this far, and if one of them pins you to the ground . . .” For a moment she muttered under her breath, as if angry that she could not complete a sentence. Finally she looked at him, her gaze as furious as he had ever seen it. “Egwene has told me of Healing, but she knows little, and I less.”

What could she be angry about now? *Better to try understanding the sun than a woman,* he thought wryly. Thom Merrilin had told him that, and it was simple truth. “You take care of shielding those women,” he told her. “I will do the rest. Not until I touch your arm, though.”

He could tell she thought he was boasting, but he would not have to split flows, only weave one intricate flow of Air that would bind arms to sides and hold horses' feet as well as human. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed hold of *saidin*, touched her arm and channeled.

Shocked cries rose from the Seanchan. He should have thought of gags, too, but they could be through the gateway before they attracted anyone else. Holding on to the Source, he seized Aviendha's arm and half-dragged her through the snow, ignoring her snarls that she could walk. At least this way he broke a trail for her, and they had to hurry.

The Seanchan quieted, staring as he and Aviendha made their way around in front of them. The two women who were not *sul'dam* had thrown back their hoods, struggling against his weave. He held it rather than tying; he would have to release it when he went anyway; for the simple reason that he could not leave even Seanchan bound in the snow. If they did not freeze to death, there was always the big cat whose tracks he had seen. Where there was one, there must be more.

The gateway was there all right, but instead of looking into his room in Eianrod, it was a gray blank. It seemed narrower than he remembered, too. Worse, he could see the weave of that grayness. It had been woven from *saidin.* Furious thought slid across the Void. He could not tell what it was meant to do, yet it could easily be a trap for whoever stepped through, woven by one of the male Forsaken. By Asmodean, most likely; if the man could hand him over to the others, he might be able to regain his place among them. Yet there could be no question of staying here. If Aviendha only remembered how she had woven the gateway in the first place, she could open another, but as it was, they were going to have to use this, trap or no.

One of the mounted women, a black raven in front of a stark tower on the gray breast of her cloak, had a severe face and dark eyes that seemed to want to drill into his skull. Another, younger and paler and shorter, yet more regal, wore a silver stag's head on her green cloak. The little fingers of her riding gloves were too long. Rand knew from the shaven sides of her scalp that those long fingers covered nails grown long and no doubt lacquered, both signs of Seanchan nobility. The soldiers were stiff-faced and stiff-backed, but the officer's blue eyes glittered behind the jaws of the insectlike helmet, and his gauntleted fingers writhed as he struggled futilely to reach his sword.

Rand did not care very much about them, but he did not want to leave the *damane* behind. At the least he could give them a chance to escape.

They might be staring at him as they would a wild animal with bared fangs, but they had not chosen to be prisoners, treated little better than domestic animals themselves. He put a hand to the collar of the nearest, and felt a jolt that nearly numbed his arm; for an instant the Void shifted, and *saidin* raged through him like the snowstorm a thousandfold. The *damane*'s short yellow hair flailed as she convulsed at his touch, screaming, and the *sul'dam* connected to her gasped, face going white. Both would have fallen if not held by bonds of Air.

"You try it," he told Aviendha, working his hand. "A woman must be able to touch the thing safely. I don't know how it unfastens." It looked of a piece, linked somehow, just like bracelet and leash. "But it went on, so it must be able to come off." A few moments could not make any difference to whatever had happened to the gateway. Was it Asmodean?

Aviendha shook her head, but began fumbling at the other woman's collar. "Hold still," she growled as the *damane,* a pale-faced girl of sixteen or seventeen, tried to flinch back. If the leashed women had looked on Rand as a wild beast, they stared at Aviendha like a nightmare made flesh.

"She is *marath'damane,"* the pale girl wailed. "Save Seri, mistress! Please, mistress! Save Seri!" The other *damane,* older, almost motherly, began weeping uncontrollably. Aviendha glared at Rand as hard as she did the girl for some reason, muttering angrily under her breath as she worked at the collar.

"It is he, Lady Morsa," the other *damane*'s *sul'dam* said suddenly in a soft drawl that Rand could barely understand. "I have borne the bracelet long, and I could tell if the *marath'damane* had done more than block Jini."

Morsa did not look surprised. In fact, there seemed to be a light of horrified recognition in her blue eyes as she gazed at Rand. There was only one way that could be.

"You were at Falme," he said. If he went through first, it meant leaving Aviendha behind, although only for a moment.

"I was." The noblewoman looked faint, but her slow, slurring voice was coolly imperious. "I saw you, and what you did."

"Take a care I don't do the same here. Give me no trouble, and I will leave you in peace." He could not send Aviendha first, into the Light knew what. If emotion had not been so distant, he would have grimaced the way she was grimacing over that collar. They had to go through together, and be ready to face anything.

“Much has been kept secret about what happened in the lands of the great Hawkwing, Lady Morsa,” the severe-faced woman said. Her dark eyes were as hard on Morsa as they had been on him. “Rumors fly that the Ever Victorious Army has tasted defeat.”

“Do you now seek truth in rumor, Jalindin?” Morsa asked in a cutting tone. “A Seeker above all should know when to keep silent. The Empress herself has forbidden speech of the *Corenne* until she calls it again. If you—or I—speak so much as the name of the city where that expedition landed, our tongues will be removed. Perhaps you would enjoy being tongueless, in the Tower of Ravens? Not even the Listeners would hear you scream for mercy, or pay heed.”

Rand understood no more than two words in three, and it was not the odd accents. He wished he had time to listen. *Corenne*. The Return. That was what the Seanchan in Falme had called their attempt to seize the lands beyond the Aryth Ocean—the lands where he lived—that they considered their birthright. The rest—Seeker, Listeners, the Tower of Ravens—were a mystery. But apparently the Return had been called off, for the time being at least. That was worth knowing.

The gateway *was* narrower. Maybe as much as a finger width narrower than moments before. Only his block held it open; it had tried to close as soon as Aviendha released her weave, and it was still trying to.

“Hurry,” he told Aviendha, and she gave him a look so patient it could as well have been a stone between his eyes.

“I am trying, Rand al’Thor,” she said, still working at the collar. Tears trickled down Seri’s cheeks; a continuous low moan came from her throat, as if the Aiel woman intended to slit it. “You nearly killed the other two, and maybe yourself. I could feel the Power rushing into both of them wildly when you touched the other collar. So leave me to it, and if I can do it, I will.” Muttering a curse, she tried at the side.

Rand thought about making the *sul’dam* remove the collars—if anyone knew how the things came off, they would—but from the set frowns on their faces, he knew he would have to force them to it. If he could not kill a woman, he could not very well torture one.

With a sigh he glanced at the gray blankness filling the gateway again. The flows appeared to be woven into his; he could not slice one without the other. Passing through might trigger the trap, but cutting away the grayness, even if that act did not trip it, would allow the gateway to snap shut before they had a chance to leap through. It would have to be a blind jump into the Light knew what.

Morsa had listened carefully to every word he and Aviendha said, and now she was gazing thoughtfully at the two *sul'dam*, but Jalindin had never taken her eyes from the noblewoman's face. "Much has been kept secret that should not be held from the Seekers, Lady Morsa," the stern woman said. "The Seekers must know all."

"You forget yourself, Jalindin," Morsa snapped, her gloved hands jerking; had her arms not been bound to her sides, she would have sawed the reins. As it was, she tilted her head to stare down her nose at the other woman. "You were sent to me because Sarek looks above himself and has designs on Serengada Dai and Tuel, not to ask of what the Empress has—"

Jalindin broke in harshly. "It is you who forgets herself, Lady Morsa, if you think that you are proof against the Seekers for Truth. I myself have put both a daughter and a son of the Empress, may the Light bless her, to the question, and in gratitude for the confessions I wrenched from them she allowed me to gaze upon her. Think you that your minor House stands higher than the Empress's own children?"

Morsa remained upright, not that she had much choice, but her face went gray, and she licked her lips. "The Empress, may the Light illumine her forever, already knows far more than I can tell. I did not mean to imply —"

The Seeker cut her off again, twisting her head to speak to the soldiers as if Morsa did not exist. "The woman Morsa is in the custody of the Seekers for Truth. She will be put to the question as soon as we return to Merinloe. And the *sul'dam* and *damane,* as well. It seems they, too, have hidden what they should not." Horror painted the faces of the named women, but Morsa could have stood for any of them. Eyes wide and suddenly haggard, she slumped as much as her invisible bonds would allow, voicing not a word of protest. She looked as if she wanted to scream, yet she—accepted. Jalindin's gaze turned to Rand. "She named you Rand al'Thor. You will be well treated if you surrender to me, Rand al'Thor. However you came here, you cannot think to escape even if you kill us. There is a wide search for a *marath'damane* who channeled in the night." Her eyes flickered to Aviendha. "It will find you as well, inevitably, and you might be slain by accident. There is sedition in this district. I do not know how men like you are treated in your lands, but in Seanchan your sufferings can be eased. Here, you can find great honor in the use of your power."

He laughed at her, and she looked offended. "I cannot kill you, but I vow I should stripe your hide at least for that." He certainly would not have to worry about being gentled in Seanchan hands. In Seanchan, men who could channel were killed. Not executed. Hunted and shot down on sight.

The gray-filled gateway was another finger narrower, barely wide enough now for both of them to pass through together. "Leave her, Aviendha. We have to go now."

She released Seri's collar and gave him an exasperated look, but her eyes went past him to the gateway, and she hoisted her skirts to stump through the snow to him, muttering to herself about frozen water.

"Be ready for anything," he told her, putting an arm around her shoulders. He told himself they had to be close together to fit. Not because she felt good. "I don't know what, but be ready." She nodded, and he said, "Jump!"

Together they leaped into the grayness, Rand releasing the weave that had held the Seanchan in order to fill himself to bursting with *saidin* . . .

. . . and landed stumbling in his bedchamber in Eianrod, lamplit, with darkness outside the windows.

Asmodean sat against the wall beside the door with his legs crossed. He was not embracing the Source, but Rand slammed a block between the man and *saidin* anyway. Whirling with his arm still around Aviendha, he found the gateway gone. No, not gone—he could still see his weaving, and what he knew must be Asmodean's—but there seemed to be nothing there at all. Without pause he slashed his weave, and suddenly the gateway appeared, a rapidly narrowing view of Seanchan, the Lady Morsa slumped in her saddle, Jalindin shouting orders. A green-and-white tasseled spear lanced through the opening, just before it snapped shut. Instinctively, Rand channeled Air to snatch the suddenly wobbling two-foot length of spear. The shaft ended as smoothly as any craftsman could have worked it. Shivering, he was glad that he had not tried removing the gray barrier—whatever it had been—*before* jumping through.

"A good thing neither of the *sul'dam* recovered in time," he said, taking the severed spear in his hand, "or we'd have had worse than this coming after us." He watched Asmodean from the corner of his eye, but the man only sat there, looking slightly ill. He could not know whether Rand meant to stuff that spear down his throat.

Aviendha's sniff was her most pointed yet. "Do you think I released them?" she said heatedly. She removed his arm firmly, but he did not think her temper was for him. Or not for his arm, anyway. "I tied their shields as tightly as I could. They are your enemies, Rand al'Thor. Even the ones you called *damane* are faithful dogs who would have killed you rather than be free. You must be hard with your enemies, not soft."

She was right, he thought, hefting the spear. He had left enemies behind that he might well have to face one day. He had to become harder. Or else he would be ground to flour before he ever reached Shayol Ghul.

Abruptly she began smoothing her skirts, and her voice became almost conversational. "I notice that you did not save that whey-faced Morsa from her fate. From the way you looked at her, I thought big eyes and a round bosom had caught your eye."

Rand stared at her in amazement that oozed across the emptiness surrounding him like syrup. She could have been saying the soup was ready. He wondered how he was supposed to have noticed Morsa's bosom, hidden as it was in a fur-lined cloak. "I should have brought her," he said. "To question her about the Seanchan. I will be troubled by them again, I am afraid."

The glint that had appeared in her eye vanished. She opened her mouth, but stopped, glancing at Asmodean, when he raised a hand. He could all but see the questions about Seanchan piled up behind her eyes. If he knew her, once begun she would not stop digging until she had uncovered scraps he did not even remember he knew. Which might not be a bad thing. Another time. After he had wrung a few answers out of Asmodean. She was right. He had to be hard.

"That was a smart thing you did," she said, "hiding the hole I made. If a *gai'shain* had come in here, a thousand of the spear-sisters might have marched through seeking you."

Asmodean cleared his throat. "One of the *gai'shain* did come. Someone named Sulin had told her she must see you eat, my Lord Dragon, and to stop her from bringing the tray in here and finding you gone, I took the liberty of telling her that you and the young woman did not want to be disturbed." A slight tightening of his eyes caught Rand's attention.

"What?"

"Just that she took it strangely. She laughed out loud and went running off. A few minutes later, there must have been twenty *Far Dareis Mai* beneath the window, shouting and beating their spears on their bucklers for a good hour or more. I must say, my Lord Dragon, some of the suggestions they called up startled even me."

Rand felt his cheeks burning—it had happened on the other side of the bloody world, and still the Maidens knew!—but Aviendha only narrowed her eyes.

"Did she have hair and eyes like mine?" She did not wait for Asmodean's nod. "It must have been my first-sister Niella." She saw the startled question on Rand's face and answered it before he could speak. "Niella is a weaver, not a Maiden, and she was taken half a year ago by Chareen Maidens during a raid on Sulara Hold. She tried to talk me out of taking the spear, and she has always wanted me wed. I am going to send her back to the Chareen with a welt on her bottom for every one she told!"

Rand caught her arm as she started to stalk out of the room. "I want to talk with Natael. I don't suppose there is much time left until dawn . . ."

"Two hours, maybe," Asmodean put in.

". . . so there will be little sleeping now. If you want to try, would you mind making your bed elsewhere for what's left of the night? You need new blankets anyway."

She nodded curtly before pulling loose, and slammed the door behind her. Surely she was not angry at being tossed out of his bedchamber—how could she be; she had said nothing more would happen between them—but he was glad he was not Niella.

Bouncing the shortened spear in his hand, he turned to Asmodean.

"A strange scepter, my Lord Dragon."

"It will do for one." To remind him that the Seanchan were still out there. For once he wished his voice was even colder than the Void and *saidin* made it. He had to be hard. "Before I decide whether to skewer you with it like a lamb, why did you never mention this trick of making something invisible? If I hadn't been able to see the flows, I'd never have known the gateway was still there."

Asmodean swallowed, shifting as though he did not know whether Rand meant his threat. Rand was not sure himself. "My Lord Dragon, you never asked. A matter of bending light. You always have so many questions, it is hard to find a moment to speak of anything else. You must realize by now that I’ve thrown my lot in with yours completely.” Licking his lips, he got up. As far as his knees. And began to babble. “I felt your weave—anybody within a mile could have felt it—I never saw anything like it—I didn’t know that anyone but Demandred could block a gateway that was closing, and maybe Semirhage—and Lews Therin—I felt it, and came, and a hard time I had getting past those Maidens—I used the same trick—you *must* know I am your man now. My Lord Dragon, I am your man.”

It was the repetition of what the Cairhienin had said that got through as much as anything else. Gesturing with the half-spear, he said roughly, “Stand. You aren’t a dog.” But as Asmodean slowly rose, he laid the long spearpoint alongside the man’s throat. He had to be hard. “From now on, you will tell me two things I *don’t* ask about every time we talk. Every time, mind. If I think you are trying to hide anything from me, you will be glad to let Semirhage have you.”

“As you say, my Lord Dragon,” Asmodean stammered. He looked ready to bow and kiss Rand’s hand.

To avoid the chance, Rand moved to the blanketless bed and sat on the linen sheet, the feather mattresses yielding under him as he studied the spear. A good idea to keep it for remembrance, if not as a scepter. Even with everything else, he had best not forget the Seanchan. Those *damane*. If Aviendha had not been there to block them from the Source . . .

“You have tried showing me how to shield a woman and failed. Try showing me how to avoid flows I cannot see, how to counter them.” Once Lanfear had sliced his weavings as neatly as with a knife.

“Not easy, my Lord Dragon, without a woman to practice against.”

“We have two hours,” Rand said coldly, letting the man’s shield unravel. “Try. Try very hard.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 33

A Question of Crimson

The knife brushed Nynaeve's hair as it thunked into the board she was leaning against, and she flinched behind her blindfold. She wished she had a decent braid instead of locks hanging loose about her shoulders. If that blade had cut even one strand . . . *Fool woman*, she thought bitterly. *Fool, fool woman.* With the scarf folded over her eyes she could just see a narrow line of light at the bottom. It seemed bright, from the darkness behind the thick folds. There had to be enough light yet, even if it was late afternoon. Surely the man would not throw when he could not see properly. The next blade struck on the other side of her head; she could feel it vibrating. She thought it almost touched her ear. She was going to kill Thom Merrilin and Valan Luca. And maybe any other man she could get her hands on, on sheer principle.

"The pears," Luca shouted, as if he were not just thirty paces from her. He must think the blindfold made her deaf as well as blind.

Fumbling in the pouch at her belt, she brought out a pear and carefully balanced it atop her head. She *was* blind. A pure blind fool! Two more pears, and she gingerly extended her arms to either side between the knives that outlined her, holding one in either hand by the stems. There was a pause. She opened her mouth to tell Thom Merrilin that if he so much as nicked her, she would—

Tchunk-tchunk-tchunk! The blades came so fast she would have yelped if her throat had not contracted like a fist. She held only the stem in her left hand, the other pear trembled faintly with the knife through it, and the pear on her head leaked juice into her hair.

Snatching the scarf off, she stalked toward Thom and Luca, both of them grinning like maniacs. Before she could speak one of the words boiling up in her, Luca said admiringly, "You are magnificent, Nana. Your bravery is magnificent, but you are more so." He swirled that ridiculous red silk cloak in a bow, one hand over his heart. "I shall call this 'Rose Among Thorns.' Though truly, you are more beautiful than any mere rose."

"It doesn't take much bravery to stand like a stump." A rose, was she? She would show him thorns. She would show both of them. "You listen to me, Valan Luca—"

"Such courage. You never even flinch. I tell you, I would not have the stomach to do what you are doing."

That was the simple truth, she told herself. "I am no braver than I have to be," she said in a milder tone. It was hard to shout at a man who insisted on telling you how brave you were. Certainly better to hear than all that blather about roses. Thom knuckled his long white mustaches as if he saw something funny.

"The dress," Luca said, showing all of his teeth in a smile. "You will look wonderful in—"

"No!" she snapped. Whatever he had gained, he had just lost by bringing this up again. Clarine had made the dress Luca wanted her to wear, in silk more crimson than his cloak. It was her opinion that the color was to hide blood; if Thom's hand slipped.

"But, Nana, beauty in danger is a *great* draw." Luca's voice crooned as if whispering sweetness in her ear. "You will have every eye on you, every heart pounding for your beauty and courage."

"If you like it so much," she said firmly, "you wear it." Aside from the color, she was not about to show that much bosom in public, whether or not Clarine thought it was proper. She had seen Latelle's performing dress, all black spangles, with a high neck to her chin. She could wear something like . . . What was she thinking? She had no intention of actually going through with this. She had only agreed to this practice to stop Luca scratching at the wagon door every night to try convincing her.

The man was nothing if not deft at knowing when to change the subject. "What happened here?" he asked, suddenly all smooth solicitude.

She flinched as he touched her puffy eye. It was his bad luck to choose that. He would have done better to continue trying to stuff her into that red dress. "I did not like the way it looked at me in the mirror this morning, so I bit it."

Her flat tone and bared teeth made Luca snatch his hand back. From the wary gleam in his dark eyes, he suspected she might bite again. Thom was stroking his mustaches furiously, red in the face from the effort of not laughing. He knew what had happened, of course. He would. And as soon as she left, he would no doubt regale Luca with his version of events. Men could not avoid gossiping; it was in them at birth, and nothing women could do ever got it out of them.

The daylight was dimmer than she had thought. The sun sat red on the treetops to the west. "If you ever try this again without better light . . ." she growled, shaking a fist at Thom. "It's almost dusk!"

"I suppose," the man said, bushy eyebrow lifting, "this means you want to leave out the bit where *I* am blindfolded?" He was joking, of course. He had to be joking. "As you wish, Nana. From now on, only in the most perfect light."

It was not until she stalked away, swishing her skirts angrily, that she realized that she had agreed to actually do this fool thing. By implication, at least. They would try to hold her to it, as surely as the sun would set tonight. *Fool, fool,* fool *woman!*

The clearing where they—or Thom, at least, burn him and Luca both!—had been practicing stood some little distance from the camp over beside the road north. Doubtless Luca had not wanted to upset the animals should Thom put one of his knives through her heart. The man would likely have fed her corpse to the lions. The only reason he wanted her to wear that dress was so he could ogle what she had no intention of showing to anyone but Lan, and burn him, too, for a stubborn fool man. She wished she had him there so she could tell him so. She wished she had him there so she could be sure he was safe. She broke a dead dogfennel and used its feathery brown length like a whip to snap the heads off weeds that poked through the leaves on the ground.

Last night, Elayne had said, Egwene reported fighting in Cairhien, skirmishes with brigands, with Cairhienin who saw any Aiel as an enemy, with Andoran soldiers trying to claim the Sun Throne for Morgase. Lan had been involved in them; whenever Moiraine let him out of her sight, he apparently managed to take himself to the fighting, as if he could sense where it would be. Nynaeve had never thought that she would want the Aes Sedai to keep Lan on a short leash at her side.

This morning Elayne had still been disturbed about her mother's soldiers being in Cairhien, fighting Rand's Aiel, but what worried Nynaeve was the brigands. According to Egwene, if anyone could identify stolen property in a brigand's possession, if anyone could swear to seeing him kill anyone or burn so much as a shed, Rand was hanging him. He did not put his hands on the rope, but it was the same thing, and Egwene said he watched every execution with a face cold and hard as the mountains. That was not like him. He had been a gentle boy. Whatever had happened to him in the Waste had been very much for the worse.

Well, Rand was far away, and her own problems—hers and Elayne's—were no nearer solution. The River Eldar lay less than a mile north, spanned by a single lofty stone bridge built between tall metal pillars that glistened without a speck of rust. Remnants of an earlier time, certainly, perhaps even an earlier Age. She had gone up to it at midday, right after they arrived, but there had not been a boat in the river worthy of the name. Rowboats, small fishing boats working along the reed-lined banks, some strange, narrow little things that skittered over the water propelled by kneeling men with paddles, even a squat barge that looked to be moored in mud—there seemed to be a lot of mud showing on both sides, some of it dried hard and cracked, yet that was no wonder with the heat holding on so unseasonably—but nothing that could carry them swiftly away downriver as she wanted. Not that she knew where it was to take them, yet.

Rack her brains as she would, she could not remember the name of the town where the Blue sisters were supposed to be. She swiped savagely at a scatterhead, and it burst in little white feathers that floated to the ground. They probably were not there anymore in any case, if they ever had been. But it was the only clue they had to a safe place short of Tear. If she could only remember it.

The only good thing on the entire journey north was that Elayne had stopped flirting with Thom. There had not been an incident since joining the show. At least, it would have been good if Elayne had not apparently decided to pretend nothing had ever happened. Yesterday Nynaeve had congratulated the girl on coming to her senses, and Elayne had coolly replied, *Are you trying to find out if I will stand in your way with Thom, Nynaeve? He's rather old for you, and I did think you had planted your affections elsewhere, but you are old enough to make your own decisions. I am fond of Thom, as I think he is of me. I look on him like a second father. If you want to flirt with him, you have my permission. But I really did think you were more constant.*

Luca meant to cross the river in the morning, and Samara, the town on the other side, in Ghealdan, was no fit place to be. Luca had spent most of the day since their arrival over in Samara, securing a place to set up his show. He was only concerned that a number of other menageries had beaten him there, and he was not the only one to have more than animals. That was why he had grown particularly insistent about her letting Thom throw knives at her. She was lucky he did not want it done highwalking with Elayne. The man seemed to think the most important thing in the world was that his show should be bigger and better than any other. For herself, the worrisome thing was that the Prophet was in Samara, his followers crowding the town and spilling out into tents, huts and shanties around it, a city that overwhelmed Samara's own not inconsiderable size. It had a high stone wall, and most of the buildings were stone as well, many as much as three stories, and there were more roofs of slate or tile than thatch.

This side of the Eldar was no better. They had passed three Whitecloak encampments before reaching their stopping place, hundreds of white tents in neat rows, and there had to be more they had not seen. Whitecloaks on this side of the river, the Prophet and maybe a riot waiting to happen on the other, and she had no idea where to go and no way to get there except in a lumbering wagon that moved no faster than she could walk. She wished she had never let Elayne talk her into abandoning the coach. Not seeing a weed close enough to snap without stepping aside, she broke the dogfennel in half, then again, until the pieces were no longer than her hand, and tossed them to the ground. She wished she could do the same with Luca. And Galad Damodred, for sending them running here. And al'Lan Mandragoran, for not being here. Not that she *needed* him, of course. But his presence would have been . . . a comfort.

The camp was quiet, with evening meals cooking over small fires beside the wagons. Petra was feeding the black-maned lion, thrusting huge pieces of meat through the bars on a stick. The female lions were already hunkered down over theirs companionably, letting out an occasional growl if someone came too close to their cage. Nynaeve stopped near Aludra's wagon; the Illuminator was working with wooden mortar and pestle on a table let down from the side of her wagon, muttering to herself over whatever she was compounding. Three of the Chavanas smiled at Nynaeve enticingly, motioning her to join them. Not Brugh, who still glowered over his lip, though she had given him a salve to make the swelling go down.

Maybe if she hit the rest of them as hard, they would listen to Luca—and more importantly, to her!—and realize that she did not want their smiles. Too bad Master Valan Luca could not follow his own instructions. Latelle turned from the bear cage and gave her a tight smile; more of a smirk, really. Mainly, though, Nynaeve stared at Cerandin, who was filing the blunt toenails of one of the huge gray *s'redit* with what looked like a tool suitable for metal.

"That one," Aludra said, "she uses the hands and the feet with remarkable ability, no? Do not glare at me so, Nana," she added, dusting her hands. "I am not your enemy. Here. You must try these new firesticks."

Nynaeve took the wooden box from the dark-haired woman gingerly. It was a cube she could have held easily with one hand, but she used both. "I thought you called them strikers."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Firesticks, it says what they are much better than strikers, yes? I have smoothed the little holes that hold the sticks so they can no longer ignite on the wood. A good idea, no? And the heads, they are a new formulation. You will try them and tell me what you think?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you."

Nynaeve hurried on before the woman could press another box on her. She held the thing as if it might explode, which she was not certain it would not. Aludra had everyone trying out her strikers, or firesticks, or whatever she would decide to call them next. They certainly would light a fire or a lamp. They could also burst into flame if the blue-gray heads rubbed against each other or anything else rough. For herself, she would stick with flint and steel, or a coal kept properly banked in a box of sand. Much safer.

Juilin caught her before she could set foot on the steps of the wagon she shared with Elayne, his gaze going straight to her swollen eye. She glared at him so hard that he stepped back and snatched that ridiculous conical cap from his head. "I've been over the river," he said. "There are a hundred or so Whitecloaks in Samara. Just watching, and being watched as hard themselves by Ghealdanin soldiers. But I recognized one. The young fellow who was sitting across from The Light of Truth in Sienda."

She smiled at him, and he took another hasty step back, eyeing her warily. Galad in Samara. That was all they needed. "You always bring such wonderful news, Juilin. We should have left you in Tanchico, or better, on the dock in Tear." That was hardly fair. Better he told her of Galad than that she walked around a corner into the man. "Thank you, Juilin. At least we know to keep an eye out for him, now." His nod was hardly a proper response to graciously offered thanks, and he hurried away, clapping his hat on, as if he expected her to hit him. Men had no manners.

The interior of the wagon was far cleaner than it had been when Thom and Juilin purchased it. The flaking paint had all been scraped off—the men had grumbled about doing that—and the cabinets and the tiny table that was fastened to the floor oiled until they shone. The small brick stove with its metal chimney was never used—the nights were warm enough, and if they began cooking in here, Thom and Juilin would never take another turn—but it made a good place to keep their valuables, the purses and the jewelry boxes. The washleather pouch holding the seal—that she had stuffed in as far as it would go and had not touched since.

Elayne, seated on one of the narrow beds, stuffed something under the blankets when Nynaeve climbed inside, but before she could ask what it was, Elayne exclaimed, "Your eye! What happened to you?" They needed to wash her hair in henpepper again; faint hints of gold were showing at the roots of those black tresses. It had to be done every few days.

"Cerandin hit me when I wasn't looking," Nynaeve muttered. The remembered taste of boiled catfern and powdered mavinsleaf made her tongue curl. That was *not* why she had let Elayne go to the last meeting in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, too. She was *not* avoiding Egwene. It was just that she made most of the journeys into the World of Dreams between meetings, and it was only fair to give Elayne her chances to go. That was it.

Carefully she put the box of firesticks into one of the cabinets, next to two more. The one that had actually caught fire was long since discarded.

She did not know why she was hiding the truth. Elayne had obviously not been outside the wagon, or she would know already. She and Juilin were probably the only people in camp who did not know, now that Thom had surely revealed every disgusting detail to Luca.

Taking a deep breath, she sat down on the other bed and made herself meet Elayne's eyes. Something in the quiet of the other woman said she knew that more was coming.

"I . . . asked Cerandin about *damane* and *sul'dam.* I am certain she knows more than she lets on." She paused for Elayne to voice doubts that she had asked rather than demanded, to say that the Seanchan woman had already told them all she knew, that she had not had much contact with *damane* or *sul'dam.* But Elayne kept silent, and Nynaeve realized that she was only hoping to postpone the moment with an argument. “She got quite heated about not knowing any more, so I shook her. You’ve really gone too far with her. She waggled her finger under my nose!” Still Elayne only watched her, those cool blue eyes barely blinking. It was all Nynaeve could do not to look away as she went on. “She . . . threw me, somehow, over her shoulder. I got up and slapped her, and she knocked me down with her fist. That is how I got the eye.” She might as well tell the rest; Elayne would hear soon enough; better it came from her. She would rather have pulled out her tongue. “I wasn’t about to put up with that, certainly. We scuffled a little more.” Not much of a scuffle on her part, for all that she had refused to quit. The bitterest truth was that Cerandin had only stopped flipping her about and tripping her in sneaky ways because it had been like manhandling a child. Nynaeve had had as much chance as that child. If only no one had been watching, so she could have channeled; she had certainly been angry enough. If only no one had been watching, period. She wished Cerandin had pounded her with her fists until she bled. “Then Latelle gave her a stick. You know how that woman wants to get back at me.” There was certainly no need to say that Cerandin had been holding her head down over a wagon tongue at the time. No one had manhandled her like that since she threw a pitcher of water at Neysa Ayellin when she was sixteen. “Anyway, Petra broke it up.” Just in time, too. The huge man had taken the pair of them by the scruff of the neck like kittens. “Cerandin apologized, and that was that.” Petra had made the Seanchan woman apologize, true, but he had made Nynaeve do so as well, refusing to loose that gentle yet iron-hard grip on her neck until she did. She had hit him as hard as she could, right in the stomach, and he had not even blinked. Her hand felt as if it might swell, too. “Nothing much to it, really. I suppose Latelle will try to spread some story of her own making about it. That is the woman I ought to shake. I didn’t hit her half hard enough.”

She felt better for telling the truth, but Elayne had doubt on her face that made her want to change the subject. “What is that you’re hiding?” She reached over and pulled the blanket back, revealing the silvery length of the *a’dam* they had gotten from Cerandin. “Why under the Light do you want to look at that? And if you do, why hide it? It is a filthy thing, and I cannot understand how you can touch it, but if you want to, that is entirely up to you.”

"Don't sound so prim," Elayne told her. A slow smile broke across her face, a flush of excitement. "I think I could make one."

"Make one!" Nynaeve lowered her voice, hoping no one came running to see who was killing whom, but she did not soften it any. "Light, why? Make an open cesspit first. A midden heap. At least there's some decent use for those."

"I do not mean to actually make an *a'dam.*" Elayne held herself erect, chin tilted in that cool way of hers. She sounded offended, and icily calm. "But it is a *ter'angreal,* and I have puzzled out how it works. I saw you attend at least one lecture on linking. The *a'dam* links the two women; that is why the *sul'dam* must be a woman who can channel, too." She frowned slightly. "It is a strange link, though. Different. Instead of two or more sharing, with one guiding, it is one taking full control, really. I think that is the reason a *damane* cannot do anything the *sul'dam* doesn't want her to. I don't really believe there is any need for the leash. The collar and bracelet would work as well without it, and in just the same ways."

"Work as well," Nynaeve said dryly. "You've studied the matter a great deal for someone who has no intention of making one." The woman did not even have the grace to blush. "What use would you put it to? I cannot say I would take it amiss if you put one around Elaida's neck, but that doesn't make it any less disgus—"

"Don't you understand?" Elayne broke in, haughtiness all gone in excitement and fervor. She leaned forward to put a hand on Nynaeve's knee, and her eyes shone, she was so delighted with herself. "It is a *ter'angreal,* Nynaeve. And I think I can make one." She said each word slowly and deliberately, then laughed and rushed on. "If I can make this one, I can make others. Maybe I can even make *angreal* and *sa'angreal.* No one in the Tower has been able to do that in thousands of years!" Straightening, she shivered, and laid fingers across her mouth. "I never really thought of *making* anything myself before. Not anything *useful.* I remember seeing a craftsman once, a man who had made some chairs for the palace. They were not gilded, or elaborately carved—they were meant for the servants' hall—but I could see the pride in his eyes. Pride in what he had made, a thing well crafted. I would love to feel that, I think. Oh, if we only knew a fraction of what the Forsaken do. The knowledge of the Age of Legends inside their heads, and they use it to serve the Shadow. Think what we could do with it. Think what we could *make.*" She took a deep breath, dropping her hands in her lap, her enthusiasm barely diminished. “Well, be that as it may, I’ll wager I could puzzle out how Whitebridge was made, too. Buildings like spun glass, but stronger than steel. And *cuendillar,* and —”

“Slow down,” Nynaeve said. “Whitebridge is five or six hundred miles from here at least, and if you think you’re going to go channeling at the seal, you can think again. Who knows what could happen? It stays in its pouch, in the stove, until we find somewhere safe for it.”

Elayne’s eagerness was very odd. Nynaeve would not have minded a little of the Forsaken’s knowledge herself—far from it—but if she wanted a chair, she paid a carpenter. She had never wanted to make anything, aside from poultices and salves. When she was twelve, her mother had stopped going through the motions of teaching her to sew, after it became apparent that she did not care whether she sewed a straight seam and could not be made to care. As for cooking . . . She thought she was a good cook, actually, but the point was that she knew what was significant. Healing was important. Any man could build a bridge, and leave him to it was what she said.

“With you and your *a’dam,*” she went on, “I nearly forgot to tell you. Juilin saw Galad on the other side of the river.”

“Blood and bloody ashes,” Elayne muttered, and when Nynaeve raised her eyebrows, she added very firmly, “I will not listen to a lecture on my language, Nynaeve. What are we going to do?”

“As I see it, we can remain on this side of the river and have Whitecloaks looking us over, wondering why we left the menagerie, or we can cross the bridge and hope the Prophet doesn’t spark a riot and Galad doesn’t denounce us, or we can try to buy a rowboat and flee downriver. Not very good choices. And Luca will want his hundred marks. Gold.” She tried not to scowl, but that still rankled. “You promised it to him, and I suppose it would not be honest to sneak away without paying him.” She would have done it in a minute if there was anywhere to go.

“It certainly would not be,” Elayne said, sounding shocked. “But we do not have to worry about Galad, at least not as long as we stay close to the menagerie. Galad won’t go near one. He thinks putting animals in cages is cruel. He doesn’t mind hunting them, mind, or eating them, only caging them.”

Nynaeve shook her head. The truth was that Elayne would have found some way to delay, if only for one day, had there been any way to leave. The woman really wanted to highwalk in front of people other than the rest of the performers. And she herself was probably going to have to let Thom throw knives at her again. *I am* not *wearing that bloody dress, though!*

“The first boat that comes large enough to take four people,” she said. “We are hiring it. Trade on the river can’t have stopped altogether.”

“It would help if we knew where we were going.” The other woman’s tone was much too gentle. “We could simply head for Tear, you know. We do not have to stay fixed to this just because you . . .” She trailed off, but Nynaeve knew what she had been going to say. Just because *she* was stubborn. Just because she was so furious that she could not remember a simple name that she intended to remember it and go there if it killed her. Well, none of that was true. She intended to find these Aes Sedai who might just support Rand and bring them to him, not trail into Tear like a pitiful refugee fleeing for safety.

“I will remember,” she said in a level tone. *It ended with “bar.” Or was it “dar”? “Lar”?* “Before you are tired of flaunting yourself highwalking, I will.” *I* will *not wear that dress!*

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CHAPTER 34

A Silver Arrow

Elayne had the cooking that evening, which meant that none of the food was simple, despite the fact that they were eating on stools around a cookfire, with crickets chirping in the surrounding woods, and now and again some night-bird's thin, sad cry in the deepening darkness. The soup was served cold and jellied, with chopped green ferris sprinkled on top. The Light knew where she had found ferris, or the tiny onions she put in with the peas. The beef was sliced nearly thin enough to see through and wrapped around something made from carrots, sweetbeans, chives and goatcheese, and there was even a small honeycake for dessert.

It was all tasty, though Elayne fretted that nothing was exactly the way it should be, as if she thought she could duplicate the cooks' work in the Royal Palace in Caemlyn. Nynaeve was fairly sure the girl was not fishing for compliments. Elayne would always brush away compliments and tell you exactly what was not right: Thom and Juilin grumbled about there being so little beef, but Nynaeve noticed that they not only ate every scrap but looked disappointed when the last pea was gone. When she cooked, for some reason they always seemed to eat at one of the other wagons. When one of them made supper, it was always stew or else meat and beans so full of dried peppers that your tongue blistered.

They did not eat alone, of course. Luca saw to that, bringing his own stool and placing it right next to her, his red cloak spread to best effect and his long legs stretched out so that his calves showed well, above his turned-down boots. He was there almost every night. Oddly, the only nights he missed were when she cooked.

It was interesting, really, having his eyes on her when a woman as pretty as Elayne was there, but he did have his motives. He sat altogether too close—tonight she moved her stool three times, but he followed without missing a word or seeming to notice—and he alternated comparing her with various flowers, to the blossoms' detriment, ignoring the black eye he could not miss without being blind, and musing over how beautiful she would be in that red dress, with compliments on her courage thrown in. Twice, he slipped in suggestions that they take a stroll by moonlight, hints so veiled that she was not entirely sure that was what they were until she thought about it.

"That gown will frame your unfolding bravery to perfection," he murmured in her ear, "yet not a quarter so well as you display yourself, for night-blooming dara lilies would weep with envy to see you stroll beside the moonlit water, as I would do, and make myself a bard to sing your praises by this very moon."

She blinked at him, working that out. Luca seemed to believe she was fluttering her lashes; she accidentally hit him in the ribs with her elbow before he could nibble her ear. At least that seemed to be his intention, even if he was coughing now and claiming he had swallowed a cake crumb the wrong way. The man was certainly handsome—*Stop that!*—and he did have a shapely calf—*What are you doing, looking at his legs?*—but he must think her a brainless ninny. It was all in aid of his bloody show.

She moved her stool again while he was trying to get his breath back; she could not move it far without making it clear that she was running from him, though she held her fork ready in case he followed again. Thom studied his plate as though more than a smear remained on the white glaze. Juilin whistled tunelessly and nearly silently, peering into the dying fire with false intensity. Elayne looked at her and shook her head.

"It was so pleasant of you to join us," Nynaeve said, and stood up. Luca stood when she did, a hopeful look in his eye along with the shine of the firelight. She set her plate atop the one in his hand. "Thom and Juilin will be grateful for your help with the dishes, I am sure." Before his mouth finished falling open, she turned to Elayne. "It is late, and I expect we'll be moving across the river early."

"Of course," Elayne murmured, with just the hint of a smile. And she put her plate atop Nynaeve's before following her into the wagon. Nynaeve wanted to hug her. Until she said, "Really, you should not encourage him." Lamps mounted in wall brackets sprang alight.

Nynaeve planted her fists on her hips. "*Encourage* him! The only way I could encourage him less would be to stab him!" Sniffing for emphasis, she frowned at the lamps. "Next time, use one of Aludra's firesticks.

Strikers. You are going to forget one day and channel where you shouldn't, and then where will we be? Running for our lives with a hundred Whitecloaks after us."

Stubborn to a fault, the other woman refused to be diverted. "I may be younger than you, but sometimes I think I know more of men than you ever will. For a man like Valan Luca, that coy little flight of yours tonight was only asking him to keep pursuing you. If you would snap his nose off the way you did the first day, he might give up. You don't tell him to stop, you do not even ask! You kept smiling at him, Nynaeve. What is the man supposed to think? You haven't smiled at *anyone* in days!"

"I am trying to hold my temper," Nynaeve muttered. Everybody complained about her temper, and now that she was trying to control it, Elayne complained about that! It was not that she was fool enough to be taken in by his compliments. She certainly was not so big a fool as that. Elayne laughed at her, and she scowled.

"Oh, Nynaeve. 'You cannot hold the sun down at dawn.' Lini could have been thinking of you."

With an effort Nynaeve smoothed her face. She could too hold her temper. *Didn't I just prove it out there?* She held out her hand. "Let me have the ring. He *will* want to cross the river early tomorrow, and I want at least some real sleep after I'm done."

"I thought I would go tonight." Concern touched Elayne's voice. "Nynaeve, you've been entering *Tel'aran'rhiod* practically every night except the meetings with Egwene. That Bair intends to pick a bone with you, by the way. I had to tell them why you weren't there yet again, and she says you should not need rest however often you enter, unless you are doing something wrong." Concern became firmness, and the younger woman planted *her* fists on her hips. "I had to listen to a lecture that was meant for you, and it was not pleasant, with Egwene standing there nodding her head to every word. Now, I really think that tonight I should—"

"Please, Elayne." Nynaeve did not lower her outstretched hand. "I have questions for Birgitte, and her answers might make me think of more." She did have, sort of; she could always think of questions for Birgitte. It had nothing to do with avoiding Egwene, and the Wise Ones. If she visited *Tel'aran'rhiod* so often that Elayne always went to the meetings with Egwene, that was simply how it fell out.

Elayne sighed, but fished the twisted stone ring from the neck of her dress. “Ask her again, Nynaeve. It is very difficult facing Egwene. She *saw* Birgitte. She doesn’t say anything, but she looks at me. It is worse when we meet again after the Wise Ones have gone. She *could* ask then, and she still doesn’t, and that makes it far worse.” She frowned as Nynaeve transferred the small *ter’angreal* to the leather cord around her own neck, with Lan’s heavy ring and her Great Serpent. “Why do you suppose none of the Wise Ones ever come with her then? We don’t learn very much in Elaida’s study, but you would think they would at least want to *see* the Tower. Egwene doesn’t even want to talk about it in front of them. If I seem to come close, she gives me such a look that you’d think she meant to hit me.”

“I think they want to avoid the Tower as much as possible.” And wise they were indeed for that. If not for Healing, she would avoid it, and Aes Sedai, too. She was *not* becoming Aes Sedai; she was just hoping to learn more of Healing. And to help Rand, certainly. “They are free women, Elayne. Even if the Tower was not in the mess it is, would they really want Aes Sedai traipsing through the Waste, scooping them up to carry back to Tar Valon?”

“I suppose that is it.” Elayne’s tone said she could not understand it, though. *She* thought the Tower wonderful, and could not see why any woman would want to evade Aes Sedai. Sealed to the White Tower forever, they said when they put that ring on your finger. And they meant it. Yet the fool girl did not see it as onerous at all.

Elayne helped her undress, and she stretched out on her narrow bed in her shift, yawning. It had been a long day, and it was surprising how tiring standing still could be when someone unseen was hurling knives at you. Idle thoughts drifted through her head as she closed her eyes. Elayne had claimed she was practicing when she had acted the fool with Thom. Not that the fond-father-and-favorite-daughter they tried on now was much less foolish to watch. Maybe she could practice herself, just a bit, with Valan. Now, that *was* foolish. Men’s eyes might wander—Lan’s had *better* not!—but she knew how to be constant. She was simply not going to wear that dress. Far too much bosom.

Vaguely, she heard Elayne say, “Remember to ask her again.”

Sleep took her.

* * *

She stood outside the wagon, in the night. The moon was high, and drifting clouds cast shadows over the camp. Crickets chirruped, and the night-birds called. The lions' eyes shone as they watched her from their cages. The white-faced bears were dark sleeping mounds behind the iron bars. The long picket line stood empty of horses, Clarine's dogs were not on their leashes beneath her and Petra's wagon, and the space where the *s'redit* stood in the waking world was bare. She had come to understand that only wild creatures had reflections here, but whatever the Seanchan woman claimed, it was hard to think that those huge gray animals had been domesticated so long that they were no longer wild.

Abruptly she realized that she was wearing the dress. Blazing red, far too snug around the hips for decency, and a square neck cut so low she thought she might pop out. She could not imagine any woman but Berelain donning it. For Lan, she might. If they were alone. She *had* been thinking of Lan when she drifted off. *I was, wasn't I?*

In any case, she was not about to let Birgitte see her in the thing. The woman claimed to be a soldier, and the more time Nynaeve spent with her, the more she realized that some of her attitudes—and comments—were as bad as any man's. Worse. A combination of Berelain and a tavern brawler. The comments did not come out all the time, but they certainly did whenever Nynaeve allowed idle thoughts to put her in anything like this dress. She changed to good stout Two Rivers wool, dark, with a plain shawl she did not need, her hair decently braided again, and opened her mouth to call Birgitte.

"Why did you change?" the woman said, stepping out from the shadows to lean on her silver bow. Her intricate golden braid hung over her shoulder, and moonlight shone on her bow and arrows. "I remember wearing a gown that could have been twin to that, once. It was only to attract attention so Gaidal could sneak by—the guards' eyes bulged like frogs'—but it was fun. Especially when I wore it dancing with him later. He *always* hates dancing, but he was so intent on keeping any other man from getting close that he danced every dance." Birgitte laughed fondly. "I won fifty gold solids from him that night at spin, because he stared so much he never looked at his tiles. Men are peculiar. It was not as if he had never seen me—"

"That's as may be," Nynaeve cut in primly, wrapping the shawl firmly around her shoulders.

Before she could add her question, Birgitte said, “I have found her,” and all thought of the question fled.

“Where? Did she see you? Can you take me to her? Without her seeing?” Fear fluttered in Nynaeve’s belly—a fat lot Valan Luca would say about her courage if he could see her now—but she was sure it would turn to anger as soon as she saw Moghedien. “If you can bring me close . . .” She trailed off as Birgitte raised a hand.

“I cannot think she saw me, or I doubt I would be here now.” She was all seriousness now; Nynaeve found it much easier to be around her when she showed this side of being a soldier. “I can take you close for a moment, if you want to go, but she is not alone. At least . . . You will see. You must be silent, and you must take no action against Moghedien. There are other Forsaken. Perhaps you could destroy her, but can you destroy five of them?”

The fluttering in Nynaeve’s middle spread to her chest. And her knees. Five. She should ask what Birgitte had seen or heard and let it go at that. Then she could return to her bed and . . . But Birgitte was looking at her. Not questioning her courage, only looking. Ready to do this thing if she said. “I will be silent. And I won’t even think of channeling.” Not with five Forsaken together. Not that she could have channeled a spark at that moment. She stiffened her knees to keep them from knocking. “Whenever you are ready.”

Birgitte hefted her bow and put a hand on Nynaeve’s arm . . .

. . . and Nynaeve’s breath caught in her throat. They were standing on nothing, infinite blackness all around, no way to tell up from down, and in every direction a fall that would last forever. Head spinning, she made herself look where Birgitte pointed.

Below them, Moghedien also stood on darkness, garbed nearly as black as what surrounded her, bent and listening intently. And as far below her, four huge, high-backed chairs, each different, sat on an expanse of glistening white-tiled floor floating in the blackness. Strangely, Nynaeve could hear what those in the chairs said as well as if she had been among them.

“. . . never been a coward,” a plumply pretty, sun-haired woman was saying, “so why begin?” Seemingly attired in silvery-gray mist and sparkling gems, she lounged in a chair of ivory worked so it appeared made of naked acrobats. Four carved men held it aloft, and her arms rested along the backs of kneeling women; two men and two women held a white silk cushion behind her head, while above more were contorted into shapes Nynaeve did not believe a human body could attain. She blushed when she realized that some were performing more than acrobatic tricks.

A compact man of middling height, with a livid scar across his face and a square golden beard, leaned forward angrily. His chair was heavy wood, carved with columns of armored men and horses, a steel-gauntleted fist clasping lighting at the back's peak. His red coat made up for the lack of gilding on the chair, for golden scrollwork rolled across his shoulders and down his arms. "No one names me coward," he said harshly. "But if we continue as we are, he will come straight for my throat."

"That has been the plan from the beginning," said a woman's melodious voice. Nynaeve could not see the speaker, hidden behind the towering back of a chair that seemed all snow-white stone and silver.

The second man was large and darkly handsome, with white wings streaking his temples. He toyed with an ornate golden goblet, leaning back in a throne. That was the only possible word for the gem-encrusted thing; a mere hint of gold showed here and there, but Nynaeve would not have doubted that it was solid gold beneath all those glittering rubies and emeralds and moonstones; it had an air of weight quite apart from its massive size. "He will concentrate on you," the big man said in a deep voice. "If need be, one close to him will die, plainly at your order. He will come for you. And while he is fixed on you alone, the three of us, linked, will take him. What has changed to alter any of that?"

"Nothing has changed," the scarred man growled. "Least of all, my trust for you. I *will* be part of the link, or it ends now."

The golden-haired woman threw back her head and laughed. "Poor man," she said mockingly, waving a beringed hand at him. "Do you think he would not *notice* that you were linked? He has a teacher, remember. A poor one, but not a complete fool. Next you will ask to include enough of those Black Ajah children to take the circle beyond thirteen, so you or Rahvin must have control."

"If Rahvin trusts us enough to link when he must allow one of us to guide," the melodious voice said, "you can display an equal trust." The big man looked into his goblet, and the mist-clad woman smiled faintly. "If you cannot trust us not to turn on you," the unseen woman continued, "then trust that we will be watching each other too closely to turn. You *agreed* to all of this, Sammael. Why do you begin to quibble now?”

Nynaeve gave a start as Birgitte touched her arm . . .

. . . and they were back among the wagons, with the moon shining through the clouds. It seemed almost normal compared to where they had been.

“Why . . . ?” Nynaeve began, and had to swallow. “Why did you bring us away?” Her heart leaped into her throat. “Did Moghedien see us?” She had been so intent on the other Forsaken—on the mingled strangeness and commonplaceness of them—that she had forgotten to keep an eye on Moghedien. She heaved a fervent sigh when Birgitte shook her head.

“I never took my gaze from her for more than a moment, and she never moved a muscle. But I do not like being so exposed. If she *had* looked up, or one of the others . . .”

Nynaeve wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders and still shivered. “Rahvin and Sammael.” She wished she did not sound hoarse. “Did you recognize the others?” Of course Birgitte had; it was a foolish way to phrase it, but she was shaken.

“Lanfear was the one hidden by her chair. The other was Graendal. Do not think her a fool because she lolls in a chair that would make a Senje no-room keeper blush. She is devious, and she uses her *pets* in rites to cause the roughest soldier I ever knew to swear celibacy.”

“Graendal is devious,” Moghedien’s voice said, “but not devious enough.”

Birgitte whirled, silver bow coming up, silver arrow almost flying to nock—and abruptly hurtled thirty paces through the moonlight to crash against Nynaeve’s wagon so hard that she bounced back five and lay in a crumpled heap.

Desperately Nynaeve reached for *saidar.* Fear streaked through her anger, but there was anger enough—and it ran into an invisible wall between her and the warm glow of the True Source. She almost howled. Something seized her feet, jerking them backward and up off the ground; her hands flew up and back until wrists met ankles above her head. Her clothes became powder that slid from her skin, and her braid dragged her head back until the braid rested on her bottom. Frantic, she tried to step out of the dream. Nothing happened. She hung doubled in midair like some netted creature, every muscle strained to its limit. Tremors ran through her;

her fingers twitched feebly, brushing her feet. She thought if she tried to move anything else, her back would break.

Strangely, her fear was gone, now that it was too late. She was certain that she could have been quick enough, if not for the terror that had laced through her when she needed to act. All she wanted was a chance to put her hands around Moghedien's throat. *Much good that does now!* Every breath came in strained panting.

Moghedien moved to where Nynaeve could see her, between the quivering triangle of her arms. The glow of *saidar* surrounded the woman mockingly. "A detail from Graendal's chair," the Forsaken said. Her dress was mist like Graendal's, sliding from black fog to nearly transparent and back to gleaming silver. The fabric changed almost constantly. Nynaeve had seen her wear it before, in Tanchico. "Not something I would have thought of on my own, but Graendal can be . . . edifying." Nynaeve glared at her, but Moghedien did not appear to notice. "I can hardly believe that *you* actually came hunting *me*. Did you really believe that because once you were lucky enough to catch me off guard, you might be my equal?" The woman's laugh was cutting. "If you only knew the effort I have put into finding you. And you came to me." She glanced around at the wagons, studying the lions and bears for a moment before turning back to Nynaeve. "A menagerie? That would make you easy enough to find. If I needed to, now."

"Do your worst, burn you," Nynaeve snarled. As best she could. Doubled up as she was, she had to force the words out one by one. She did not dare look straight toward Birgitte—not that she could have shifted her head enough to—but rolling her eyes as if caught between fury and fear, she caught a glimpse. Her stomach went hollow, even stretched tight as a sheepskin for drying. Birgitte lay sprawled on the ground, silver arrows spilling from the quiver at her waist, her silver bow a span from her unmoving hand. "Lucky, you say? If you hadn't managed to sneak up on me, I'd have striped you till you wailed. I'd have wrung your neck like a chicken." She had only one chance, if Birgitte was dead, and a bleak one. To make Moghedien so angry that she killed her quickly in a rage. If only there was some way to warn Elayne. Her dying would have to do it. "Remember how you said you'd use me for a mounting block? And later, when I said I'd do the same for you? That was after I had beaten you. When you were whimpering and pleading for your life. Offering me anything. You are a gutless coward! The leavings from a nightjar! You piece of—!" Something thick crawled into her mouth, flattening her tongue and forcing her jaws wide.

"You are so simple," Moghedien murmured. "Believe me, I am quite angry enough with you already. I do not think I *will* use you for a mounting block." Her smile made Nynaeve's skin crawl. "I think I will turn you into a horse. It is quite possible, here. A horse, a mouse, a frog . . ." She paused, listening. ". . . a cricket. And every time you come to *Tel'aran'rhiod*, you'll be a horse, until I change it. Or some other with the knowledge does so." She paused again, looking almost sympathetic. "No, I'd not want to give you false hope. There are only nine of us now who know that binding, and you would not want any of the others to have you any more than myself. You will be a horse every time I bring you here. You will have your own saddle and bridle. I will even braid your mane." Nynaeve's braid jerked almost out of her scalp. "You will remember who you are even then, of course. I think I will enjoy our rides, though you may not." Moghedien took a deep breath, and her dress darkened to something that glistened in the pale light; Nynaeve could not be sure, but she thought it might be the color of wet blood. "You make me approach Semirhage. It will be well to be done with you, so I can turn my full attention to matters of importance. Is the little yellow-haired chit with you in this menagerie?"

The thickness vanished from Nynaeve's mouth. "I am alone, you stupid—" Pain. As if she had been beaten from ankles to shoulders, every stroke landing at once. She bellowed shrilly. Again. She tried to clamp her teeth shut, but her own endless shriek filled her ears. Tears rolled shamingly down her cheeks as she sobbed, waiting hopelessly for the next.

"Is she with you?" Moghedien said patiently. "Do not waste time trying to make me kill you. I won't. You will live many years serving me. Your rather pitiful abilities might be of some use once I train them. Once I train you. But I can make you think that what you just felt was a lover's caress. Now, answer my question."

Nynaeve managed to gather breath. "No," she wept. "She ran off with a man after we left Tanchico. A man old enough to be her grandfather, but he had money. We heard what happened in the Tower"—she was sure Moghedien must know of that—"and she was afraid to go back."

The other woman laughed. "A delightful tale. I can almost see what fascinates Semirhage about breaking the spirit. Oh, you are going to provide me with a great deal of entertainment, Nynaeve al’Meara. But first, you are going to bring the girl Elayne to me. You will shield her and bind her and bring her to lie at my feet. Do you know why? Because some things are actually stronger in *Tel’aran’rhiod* than in the waking world. That is why you will be a glossy white mare whenever I bring you here. And it is not only hurts taken here that last into waking. Compulsion is another. I want you to think of it for a moment or two, before you begin believing it your own idea. I suspect that the girl is your friend. But you are going to bring her to me like a pet—” Moghedien screamed as a silver arrow suddenly stuck its head out from below her right breast.

Nynaeve fell to the ground like a dropped sack. The fall knocked every speck of breath from her lungs as surely as a hammer in the belly. Straining to breathe, she struggled to make racked muscles move, to fight through pain to *saidar.*

Staggering on her feet, Birgitte fumbled another arrow from her quiver. “Go, Nynaeve!” It was a mumbling shout. “Get away!” Birgitte’s head wavered, and the silver bow wobbled as she raised it.

The glow around Moghedien increased until it seemed as if the blinding sun surrounded her.

The night folded in over Birgitte like an ocean wave, enveloping her in blackness. When it passed, the bow dropped atop empty clothes as they collapsed. The clothes faded like fog burning off, and only the bow and arrows remained, shining in the moonlight.

Moghedien sank to her knees, panting, clutching the protruding arrow shaft with both hands as the glow around her faded and died. Then she vanished, and the silver arrow fell where she had been, stained dark with blood.

After what seemed an eternity, Nynaeve managed to push up to hands and knees. Weeping, she crawled to Birgitte’s bow. This time it was not pain that made tears come. Kneeling, naked and not caring, she clutched the bow. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “Oh, Birgitte, forgive me. Birgitte!”

There was no answer except the mournful cry of a night-bird.

Liandrin leaped to her feet as the door to Moghedien’s bedchamber crashed open and the Chosen staggered into the sitting room, blood soaking her silk shift. Chesmal and Temaile rushed to her side, each taking an arm to keep the woman on her feet, but Liandrin remained by her chair. The others were out; perhaps out of Amador, for all Liandrin knew. Moghedien told only what she wanted the hearer to know, and punished questions she did not like.

“What happened?” Temaile gasped.

Moghedien’s brief look should have fried her where she stood. “You have some small ability with Healing,” the Chosen told Chesmal thickly. Blood stained her lips, trickled from the corner of her mouth in an increasing stream. “Do it. Now, fool!”

The dark-haired Ghealdanin woman did not hesitate in laying hands to Moghedien’s head. Liandrin sneered to herself as the glow surrounded Chesmal; concern painted Chesmal’s handsome face, and Temaile’s delicate, foxlike features were contorted with pure fright and worry. So faithful, they were. Such obedient lapdogs. Moghedien lifted up onto her toes, head flung back; eyes wide, she shook, breath rushing from her gaping mouth as if she had been plunged into ice.

In moments it was done. The glow around Chesmal disappeared, and Moghedien’s heels settled to the blue-and-green-patterned carpet. Without Temaile’s support, she might have fallen. Only a part of the strength for Healing came from the Power; the rest came from the person being Healed. Whatever wound had caused all that bleeding would be gone, but Moghedien was surely as weak as if she had lain in bed an invalid for weeks. She pulled the fine gold-and-ivory silk scarf from Temaile’s belt to wipe her mouth as the woman helped her turn toward the bedchamber door. Weak, and her back turned.

Liandrin struck as hard as she ever had, with everything she had puzzled out of what the woman had done to her.

Even as she did, *saidar* seemed to fill Moghedien like a flood. Liandrin’s probe died as the Source was shielded from her. Flows of Air picked her up and slammed her against the paneled wall hard enough to make her teeth rattle. Spread-eagled, helpless, she hung there.

Chesmal and Temaile exchanged confused glances, as if they did not understand what had occurred. They continued to support Moghedien as she came to stand in front of Liandrin, still calmly wiping her mouth on Temaile’s scarf. Moghedien channeled, and the blood on her shift turned black and flaked away, falling to the carpet.

“Y-you do not understand, Great M-mistress,” Liandrin said frantically. “I only wished to help you to have the good sleep.” For once in her life, slipping back into the accents of a commoner did not concern her in the least. “I only—” She cut off with a strangled gagging as a flow of Air seized her tongue, stretching it out between her teeth. Her brown eyes bulged. A hair more pressure, and . . .

“Shall I pull it out?” Moghedien studied her face, but spoke as if to herself. “I think not. A pity for you that the al’Meara woman makes me think like Semirhage. Otherwise, I might only kill you.” Suddenly she was tying off the shield, the knot growing ever more intricate, until Liandrin lost the twists and turns completely. And still it went on. “There,” Moghedien said finally in tones of satisfaction. “You will search a very long time to find anyone who can unravel that. But you will have no opportunity to search.”

Liandrin searched Chesmal’s face, and Temaile’s, for some sign of sympathy, pity, anything. Chesmal’s eyes were cold and stern; Temaile’s shone, and she touched her lips with the tip of her tongue and smiled. Not a friendly smile.

“You thought you had learned something of compulsion,” Moghedien went on. “I will teach you a bit more.” For an instant Liandrin shivered, Moghedien’s eyes filling her vision as the woman’s voice filled her ears, her entire head. “Live.” The instant passed, and sweat beaded on Liandrin’s face as the Chosen smiled at her. “Compulsion has many limits, but a command to do what someone wants to do in their inmost depths will hold for a lifetime. You will live, however much you think you want to take your life. And you will think of it. You will lie weeping many nights, wishing for it.”

The flow holding Liandrin’s tongue vanished, and she barely paused to swallow. “Please, Great Mistress, I swear I did not mean—” Her head rang and silvery black spots danced before her eyes from Moghedien’s slap.

“There are . . . attractions . . . to doing a thing physically,” the woman breathed. “Do you wish to beg more?”

“Please, Great Mistress—” The second slap sent her hair flying.

“More?”

“Please—” A third nearly unhinged her jaw. Her cheek burned.

“If you cannot be more inventive than that, I will not listen. You will listen instead. I think what I have planned for you would delight Semirhage herself.” Moghedien’s smile was almost as dark as Temaile’s. “You will live, not stilled, but knowing that you could channel again, if only you found someone to untie your shield. Yet that is only the beginning. Evon will be glad of a new scullery girl, and I am sure the Arene woman will want to have long talks with you about her husband. Why, they will enjoy your company so much that I doubt you will see the outside of this house during the years to come. Long years in which to wish that you had served me faithfully."

Liandrin shook her head, mouthing "no" and "please"; she was crying too hard to force the words out.

Turning her head to Temaile, Moghedien said, "Prepare her for them. And tell them they are not to kill or maim her. I want her always to believe she *might* escape. Even futile hope will keep her alive to suffer." She turned away on Chesmal's arm, and the flows holding Liandrin to the wall vanished.

Her legs gave way like straw, crumpling her to the carpet. Only the shield remained; she hammered at it futilely as she crawled after Moghedien, trying to catch the hem of her shift, sobbing brokenly. "Please, Great Mistress."

"They are with a menagerie," Moghedien told Chesmal. "All of your searching, and I had to find them myself. A menagerie should not be too difficult to locate."

"I will serve faithfully," Liandrin wept. Fear turned her limbs to water; she could not crawl fast enough to catch up. They did not even look back at her, scrabbling across the carpet after them. "Bind me, Great Mistress. Anything. I will be the faithful dog!"

"There are many menageries traveling north," Chesmal said, eagerness to negate her failure filling her voice. "To Ghealdan, Great Mistress."

"Then I must to Ghealdan," Moghedien said. "You will procure fast horses and follow—" The bedchamber door closed on her words.

"I will be the faithful dog," Liandrin sobbed in a heap on the carpet. Lifting her head, she blinked tears away to see Temaile watching her, rubbing her arms and smiling. "We could overwhelm her, Temaile. We three together could—"

"We *three*?" Temaile laughed. "You could not overwhelm fat Evon." Her eyes narrowed as she studied the shield fastened to Liandrin. "You might as well be stilled."

"Listen. Please." Liandrin swallowed hard, trying to clear her voice, but it was still thick, if burning with urgency, when she went on at frantic speed. “We have spoken of the dissension that must rule among the Chosen. If Moghedien hides herself so, she must hide from the other Chosen. If we take her and give her to them, think of the places we could have. We could be exalted above kings and queens. We could be Chosen ourselves!”

For a moment—one blessed, wonderful moment—the child-faced woman hesitated. Then she shook her head. “You have never known how high to lift your eyes. ‘Who reaches for the sun will be burned.’ No, I think that I will not be burned for reaching too high. I think that I will do as I am told, and soften you for Evon.” Suddenly she smiled, showing teeth that made her even more vulpine. “How surprised he will be when you crawl to kiss his feet.”

Liandrin started screaming before Temaile even began.

* * *

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CHAPTER

35

Ripped Away

Yawning, Elayne watched Nynaeve from her bed, her head propped up on one elbow and black hair spilling down her arm. It was really quite ridiculous, this insistence that whoever did not go to *Tel'aran'rhiod* remain awake. She did not know how long an interval Nynaeve had experienced in the World of Dreams, but Elayne had been lying here for a good two hours, with no book to read, no needlework to do, nothing at all to occupy her except staring at the other woman stretched out on her own narrow bed. Studying the *a'dam* was no good; she thought she had wrung everything out of it that she could. She had even tried a slight touch of Healing on the sleeping woman, perhaps all the Healing she knew. Nynaeve would never have consented to it awake—she did not think much of Elayne's abilities in that direction—or maybe she would have, in this case—but her black eye was gone. In truth, that was the most complicated Healing Elayne had ever done, and it really had exhausted her skill. Nothing to do. If she had some silver, she might have tried making an *a'dam*; silver was not the only metal, but she would have to melt coins to get enough. The other woman would be less pleased at that than at finding a second *a'dam*. If Nynaeve had been willing to tell Thom and Juilin about this, at least she could have invited Thom in for conversation.

They really did have the most delightful talks. Like a father passing on his knowledge to his daughter. She had never realized that the Game of Houses was so deeply embedded in Andor, if thankfully not so deeply as it was in some other lands. Only the Borderlands escaped it entirely, according to Thom. With the Blight right to the north, and Trolloc raids a daily fact, they had no time for maneuvering and scheming. She and Thom had wonderful talks, now that he was sure she was not going to try snuggling into his lap. Her face burned at the memory; she had actually thought of that once or twice, and mercifully had not quite brought herself to it.

“ ‘Even a queen stubs her toe, but a wise woman watches the path,’ ” she quoted softly. Lini was a wise woman. Elayne did not think she would make that particular mistake again. She knew she made many, but seldom the same twice. One day, perhaps, she would make few enough to be worthy to follow her mother on the throne.

Suddenly she sat up. Tears were leaking from Nynaeve’s closed eyes, trickling down the sides of her face; what Elayne had taken for a faint snore—Nynaeve *did* snore, whatever she said—was a tiny, whimpering sob deep in her throat. That should not be. If she had been injured, the hurt would have appeared, although she would not feel it here until she woke.

Perhaps I should wake her. But she hesitated, even as her hand stretched toward the other woman. Waking someone out of *Tel’aran’rhiod* was far from easy—shaking, even icy water in the face would not always do—and Nynaeve would not appreciate being pummeled awake after the bruising Cerandin had given her. *I wonder what really happened. I will have to ask Cerandin.* Whatever was going on, Nynaeve should be able to step out of the dream whenever she wished. Unless . . . Egwene said that the Wise Ones could hold someone in *Tel’aran’rhiod* against their will, though if they had taught her the trick, she had not passed it on to Elayne or Nynaeve. If someone was holding Nynaeve now, hurting her, it could not be Birgitte, or the Wise Ones. Well, the Wise Ones might, if they caught her wandering where they thought she should not. But if not them, that left only . . .

She took hold of Nynaeve’s shoulders to shake her—if that did not work, she would freeze the pitcher of water on the table, or slap her face silly—and Nynaeve’s eyes popped open.

Immediately Nynaeve began to weep aloud, the most despairing sound Elayne had ever heard. “I killed her. Oh, Elayne, I killed her with my foolish pride, thinking I could . . .” The words trailed off in openmouthed sobs.

“You killed who?” It could not be Moghedien; that woman’s death would surely not bring this grief. She was about to take Nynaeve in her arms to comfort her, when a pounding came at the door.

“Send them away,” Nynaeve mumbled, curling herself into a trembling ball in the middle of the bed.

Sighing, Elayne made her way to the door and pulled it open, but before she could say a word, Thom pushed past her out of the night, rumpled shirt bagging out of his breeches, carrying someone shrouded in his cloak in his arms. Only a woman's bare feet showed.

"She was just there," Juilin said behind him, as if he did not believe the words coming out of his own mouth. Both men were barefoot, and Juilin was stripped to the waist, lean and hairless-chested. "I woke for a moment, and suddenly she was standing there, naked as the day she was born, collapsing like a cut net."

"She's alive," Thom said, laying the cloak-wrapped figure on Elayne's bed, "but only barely. I could hardly hear her heart."

Frowning, Elayne pulled aside the cloak's hood—and found herself staring at Birgitte's face, pale and wan.

Nynaeve scrambled stiffly from the other bed to kneel beside the unconscious woman. Her face glistened with tears, but her weeping had stopped. "She is alive," she breathed. "She is alive." Abruptly she seemed to realize that she was in her shift in front of the men, but she barely spared them a glance, and all she said was "Get them out of here, Elayne. I can do nothing with them gawking like sheep."

Thom and Juilin rolled their eyes toward each other when Elayne made a herding motion at them, and shook their heads slightly, but they backed toward the door without complaint. "She is . . . a friend," Elayne told them. She felt as if she were moving in a dream, floating, without feeling. How could this be? "We will take care of her." How could it possibly have happened? "Now, don't say a word to anyone." The looks they gave her as she closed the door nearly made her blush. Of course they knew better than to talk. But men did have to be reminded of the simplest things sometimes, even Thom. "Nynaeve, how under the Light," she began, turning, and cut off as the glow of *saidar* surrounded the kneeling woman.

"Burn her!" Nynaeve growled, channeling fiercely. "Burn her forever for doing this!" Elayne recognized the flows being woven for Healing, but recognition was as far as she could go. "I will find her, Birgitte," Nynaeve muttered. Strands of Spirit predominated, but Water and Air were in there, and even Earth and Fire. It looked as complicated as embroidering one dress with either hand, and two more with your feet. Blindfolded. "I will make her pay." The glow shining about Nynaeve grew and grew, until it overwhelmed the lamps, until it hurt to look at her except through slitted eyes. “I swear it! By the Light and my hope of salvation and rebirth, I will!” The anger in her voice changed, becoming deeper if anything. “It isn’t working. There is nothing wrong with her to Heal. She is as perfect as anyone can be. But she is dying. Oh, Light, I can feel her slipping away. Burn Moghedien! Burn her! And burn me along with her!” She was not giving up, though. The weaving continued, complex flows weaving into Birgitte. And the woman lay there, golden braid flung over the side of the bed, the rise and fall of her chest slowing.

“I can do something that might help,” Elayne said slowly. You were supposed to have permission, but it had not always been so. Once it had been done almost as often without as with. There was no reason it should not work on a woman. Except that she had never heard of it being done to any but men.

“Linking?” Nynaeve did not look away from the woman on the bed, or stop her efforts with the Power. “Yes. You will have to do it—I don’t know how—but let me guide. I do not know half what I am doing right this minute, but I know that I *can* do it. You could not Heal a bruise.”

Elayne’s mouth tightened, but she let the remark lie. “Not linking.” The amount of *saidar* that Nynaeve had drawn into herself was amazing. If she could not Heal Birgitte with that, what Elayne could add would not make a difference. Together, they would be stronger than either apart, but not as strong as if their two strengths were simply added. Besides, she was not certain that she could link. She had only been linked once, and an Aes Sedai had done it, to show her what it was like more than how. “Stop, Nynaeve. You said yourself it is not working. Stop and let me try. If it doesn’t work, you can . . .” She could what? If Healing worked, it worked; if it did not . . . There was no point in trying again if it failed.

“Try what?” Nynaeve snapped, yet she moved away awkwardly, letting Elayne come close. The weave of Healing faded, but not the shining nimbus.

Instead of answering, Elayne put one hand on Birgitte’s forehead. Physical contact was as necessary for this as for Healing, and the two times she had watched it done in the Tower, the Aes Sedai had touched the man’s forehead. The flows of Spirit she wove were complex, if not so intricate as Nynaeve’s of a moment before. She barely understood some of what she was doing, and none at all of other parts, yet she had paid close attention, from her hiding place, to how the weave was shaped. Watched closely because she had built up a stock of stories in her head, made silly romances where there so seldom were any. After a moment, she sat down on the other bed and let *saidar* go.

Nynaeve frowned at her, then bent to examine Birgitte. The unconscious woman's color was perhaps a little better, her breathing a little stronger. "What did you do, Elayne?" Nynaeve did not take her eyes from Birgitte, but the glow around her faded away slowly. "It wasn't Healing. I think I could do it myself, now, but it was not Healing."

"Will she live?" Elayne asked faintly. There was no visible link between her and Birgitte, no flows, but she could sense the woman's weakness. A terrible weakness. She would know the moment Birgitte died, even if she was sleeping, or hundreds of miles away.

"I do not know. She isn't fading anymore, but I do not know." Weariness made Nynaeve's voice soft, and pain touched it strongly, as if she shared Birgitte's injury. Wincing, she rose and unfolded a red-striped blanket to spread over the woman lying there. "What did you do?"

Silence held Elayne long enough for Nynaeve to join her, lowering herself awkwardly onto the bed. "Bonding," Elayne said finally. "I . . . bonded her. As a Warder." The incredulous stare on the other woman's face made her rush on. "Healing was doing no good. I had to do something. You know the gifts a Warder gets from being bonded. One is strength, energy. He can keep going when other men would collapse and die, survive wounds that would kill anyone else. It was the only thing I could think of."

Nynaeve drew a deep breath. "Well, it is working better than what I did, at least. A woman Warder. I wonder what Lan will think of that? No reason why she shouldn't be. If any woman can, it would be her." Wincing, she curled her legs up beneath her; her gaze kept returning to Birgitte. "You will have to keep this secret. If anyone learns that an Accepted has bonded a Warder, whatever the circumstances . . ."

Elayne shivered. "I know," she said simply, and quite fervently. It was not quite a stilling offense, but any Aes Sedai would very likely make her wish she had been stilled. "Nynaeve, what happened?"

For a long moment she thought the other woman was going to start crying again as her chin quivered and her lips worked. When she began speaking, her voice was iron, her face a blend of fury and too many tears ever to be shed. She told the tale starkly, almost sketchily, until she came to

Moghedien’s appearance among the wagons. That she rendered in painful detail.

“I should be welted from the neck down,” she said bitterly at last, touching a smooth, unmarked arm. Unmarked or not, she flinched. “I don’t understand why I am not. I feel it, but I deserve the welts, for stupid, foolish pride. For being too afraid to do what I should. I deserved being hung up like a ham in a smokehouse. If there was any justice, I would still be dangling there, and Birgitte would not be lying on that bed, with us wondering whether she’ll live or not. If only I knew more. If only I could have Moghedien’s knowledge for five minutes, I *could* Heal her. I am sure of it.”

“If you were still hanging,” Elayne said practically, “in a very short while you would be waking up and shielding me. I don’t doubt Moghedien would have seen to it that you were angry enough to channel—she knows us all too well, remember—and I do doubt very much that I would have suspected anything until you had done it. I do not fancy being carted off to Moghedien, and I cannot believe you do either.” The other woman did not look at her. “It must have been a link, Nynaeve, like an *a’dam.* That is how she made you feel pain without marking you.” Nynaeve still sat there in a glowering sulk. “Nynaeve, Birgitte is alive. You did everything you could for her, and the Light willing, she will live. It was Moghedien who did this to her, not you. A soldier who takes blame for comrades who fall in battle is a fool. You and I are soldiers in a battle, but you are not a fool, so stop behaving like one.”

Nynaeve did look at her then, a scowl that lasted only a moment before she turned her face completely away. “You don’t understand.” Her voice sank almost to a whisper. “She . . . *was* . . . one of the heroes bound to the Wheel of Time, destined to be born again and again to make legends. She wasn’t born this time, Elayne. She was ripped out of *Tel’aran’rhiod* as she stood. Is she still bound to the Wheel? Or has she been ripped away from that, too? Ripped away from what her own courage earned her, because I was so proud, so man-stubborn stupid, that I made her hunt for Moghedien?”

Elayne had hoped that those questions had not occurred to Nynaeve yet, would not until she had had a little time to recover first. “Do you know how badly Moghedien was hurt? Maybe she is dead.”

“I hope not,” the other woman almost snarled. “I want to make her pay. . . .” She took a deep breath, but instead of invigorating her, it seemed to make her sag. “I would not count on her dying. Birgitte’s shot missed her heart. A wonder she managed to hit the woman at all, staggering as she was. I could not have stood up if I were thrown that far, hard enough to bounce like that. I couldn’t even stand up after what Moghedien did to me. No, she is alive, and we had best believe that she can have her wound Healed and be after us by morning.”

“She would still need time to rest, Nynaeve. You know that. Can she even know where we are? From what you said, she had no time to do more than see that this is a menagerie.”

“What if she did see more?” Nynaeve rubbed her temples as if it were difficult to think. “What if she knows *exactly* where we are? She could send Darkfriends after us. Or send word to Darkfriends in Samara.”

“Luca is livid because eleven menageries are already around the city, and three more are waiting to cross the bridge. Nynaeve, it will take her days to regain strength after a wound like that, even if she does find some Black sister to Heal her, or one of the other Forsaken. And more days to search through fifteen menageries. That is if there are not more on the road behind us, or coming from Altara. If she does come after us or send Darkfriends, either one, we are forewarned, and we have days to find a boat that can carry us downriver.” She paused a moment, thinking. “Do you have anything to dye your hair in that bag of herbs? I’ll wager anything that you had your hair braided in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Mine is always its real color, there. If yours is loose, as it is now, and another color, it will make us that much harder to find.”

“Whitecloaks everywhere,” Nynaeve sighed. “Galad. The Prophet. No boats. It is as if everything is conspiring to hold us here for Moghedien. I am so tired, Elayne. Tired of being afraid of who might be around the next corner. Tired of being afraid of Moghedien. I cannot seem to think of what to do next. My hair? Nothing that would make it any color I’d have.”

“You need to sleep,” Elayne said firmly. “Without the ring. Give it to me.” The other woman hesitated, but Elayne merely waited with her hand outstretched until Nynaeve fished the flecked stone ring from the cord around her neck. Stuffing it into her pouch, Elayne went on. “Now you lie down here, and I will watch Birgitte.”

Nynaeve stared at the woman stretched out on the other bed for a moment, then shook her head. “I can’t sleep. I . . . need to be alone. To walk.” Getting to her feet as stiffly as if she really had been beaten, she took her dark cloak from its peg and swung it over her shift. At the door she paused. “If she wants to kill me,” she said bleakly, “I do not know that I could make myself stop her.” She went into the night barefoot and sad-faced.

Elayne hesitated, unsure which woman needed her more, before settling back where she sat. Nothing she said could make things better for Nynaeve, but she had faith in the woman’s resilience. Time alone to work it all over in her mind, and she would see that blame lay at Moghedien’s door, not hers. She had to.

* * *

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CHAPTER 36

A New Name

For a long time Elayne sat there, watching Birgitte sleep. It did seem to be sleep. Once she stirred, muttering in a desperate voice, “Wait for me, Gaidal. Wait. I’m coming, Gaidal. Wait for . . .” Words trailed off into slow breath again. Was it stronger? The woman still looked deathly ill. Better than she had, but pale and drawn.

After perhaps an hour, Nynaeve returned, her feet dirty. Fresh tears shone on her cheeks. “I could not stay away,” she said, hanging her cloak back on its peg. “You sleep. I will watch her. I have to watch her.”

Elayne rose slowly, smoothing her skirts. Perhaps watching over Birgitte for a time would help Nynaeve work matters out. “I don’t feel like sleeping yet, either.” She was exhausted, but not sleepy any longer. “I think I will stroll outside myself.” Nynaeve only nodded as she took Elayne’s place on the bed, her dusty feet dangling over the side, her eyes fastened to Birgitte.

To Elayne’s surprise, Thom and Juilin were not asleep either. They had built a small fire beside the wagon and sat on either side of it, cross-legged on the ground, smoking their long-stemmed pipes. Thom had tucked his shirt in, and Juilin had donned his coat, though no shirt, and turned the cuffs back. She took a look around before joining them. No one stirred in the camp, dark except for the light of this one fire and the glow of the lamps from their wagon’s windows.

Neither man said anything while she settled her skirts; then Juilin looked at Thom, who nodded, and the thief-catcher took something from the ground and held it out to her. “I found it where she was lying,” the dark man said. “As if it had dropped from her hand.”

Elayne took the silver arrow slowly. Even the fletching feathers appeared to be silver.

"Distinctive," Thom said conversationally around his pipe. "And added to the braid . . . Every story mentions the braid for some reason. Though I've found some I think might be her under other names, without it. And some under other names with."

"I do not care about stories," Juilin put in. He sounded no more agitated than Thom. But then, it took a great deal to agitate either one of them. "Is it her? Bad enough if it isn't, a woman appearing naked out of nothing like that, but . . . What have you gotten us into, you and N . . . Nana?" He *was* troubled; Juilin did not make mistakes, and his tongue *never* slipped. Thom merely bubbled at his pipe, waiting.

Elayne turned the arrow in her hands, pretending to study it. "She is a friend," she said finally. Until—unless—Birgitte released her, her promise held. "She is not Aes Sedai, but she has been helping us." They looked at her, waiting for her to say more. "Why didn't you give this to Nynaeve?"

One of those glances passed between them—men seemed to carry on entire conversations through glances, around women at least—saying as clearly as spoken words what they thought of her keeping secrets. Especially when they all but knew for certain already. But she had given her word.

"She seemed upset," Juilin said, sucking at his pipe judiciously, and Thom took his from between his teeth and blew out his white mustaches.

"Upset? The woman came out in her shift, looking lost, and when I asked if I could help her, she didn't snap my head off. She cried on my shoulder!" He plucked at his linen shirt, muttering something about dampness. "Elayne, she *apologized* for every cross word she has ever said to me, which is very nearly every other word out of her mouth. Said she ought to be switched, or maybe that she had been; she was incoherent half the time. She said she was a coward, and a stubborn fool. I don't know what is the matter with her, but she isn't herself by a mile."

"I knew a woman who behaved like this, once," Juilin said, peering into the fire. "She woke to find a burglar in her bedchamber and stabbed the man through the heart. Only, when she lit a lamp, it was her husband. His boat had come back to the docks early. She walked around like Nynaeve for half a month." His mouth tightened. "Then she hanged herself."

"I hate to lay this burden on you, child," Thom added gently, "but if she can be helped, you are the only one of us who can do it. I know how to take a man out of his miseries. Give him a swift kick, or else get him drunk and find him a pr—" He harrumphed loudly, trying to make it seem a cough, and knuckled his mustaches. The one bad thing about him seeing her as a daughter was that now sometimes he seemed to think she was perhaps twelve. "Anyway, the point is that I do not know how to do this. And while Juilin might be willing to dandle her on his knee, I doubt she'd thank him for it."

"I would sooner dandle a fangfish," the thief-catcher muttered, but not as roughly as he would have yesterday. He was as concerned as Thom, though less willing to admit it.

"I will do what I can," she assured them, turning the arrow again. They were good men, and she did not like lying to them, or hiding things from them. Not unless it was absolutely necessary, anyway. Nynaeve claimed that you had to manage men for their own good, but there was such a thing as taking it too far. It was not right to lead a man into dangers he knew nothing of.

So she told them. About *Tel'aran'rhiod* and the Forsaken being loose, about Moghedien. Not quite everything, of course. Some events in Tanchico had been too shaming for her to want to think of them. Her promise held her concerning Birgitte's identity, and there was certainly no need to go into detail about what Moghedien had done to Nynaeve. It made explaining this night's happenings a little difficult, yet she managed. She did tell them everything she thought they should know, enough to make them aware for the first time what they were really up against. Not just the Black Ajah—that had certainly made them stare cross-eyed when they learned it—but the Forsaken, and one of them very likely hunting her and Nynaeve. And she made it quite plain that they two would be hunting Moghedien as well, and that anyone close to them was in danger of being caught between hunter and prey either way.

"Now that you know," she finished, "the choice to stay or go is yours." She left it at that, and was careful not to look at Thom. She hoped almost desperately that he would stay, but she would not let him think that she was asking, not by so much as a glance.

"I haven't taught you half what you need to know if you're to be as good a queen as your mother," he said, trying to sound gruff and spoiling it by brushing a strand of black-dyed hair from her cheek with a gnarled finger. "You'll not rid yourself of me this easily, child. I mean to see you mistress of *Daes Dae'mar* if I must drone in your ear until you go deaf. I haven’t even taught you to handle a knife. I tried to teach your mother, but she always said she could tell a man to use a knife if one needed using. Fool way to look at it.”

She leaned forward and kissed his leathery cheek, and he blinked, bushy eyebrows shooting up, then smiled and stuck his pipe back into his mouth.

“You can kiss me, too,” Juilin said dryly. “Rand al’Thor will have my guts for fish bait if I don’t hand you back to him in the same health he last saw you.”

Elayne lifted her chin. “I will not have you stay for Rand al’Thor, Juilin.” Hand her back? Indeed! “You will stay only if you want to. And I do not release you—or you, Thom!”—he had grinned at the thief-catcher’s comment—“from your promise to do as you are told.” Thom’s startled look was quite satisfying. She turned back to Juilin. “You will follow *me,* and Nynaeve of course, knowing full well the enemies we face, or you may pack your belongings and ride Skulker where you wish. I will give him to you.”

Juilin sat up straight as a post, his dark face going darker. “I have never abandoned a woman in danger in my life.” He pointed his pipestem at her like a weapon. “You send me away, and I will be on your heels like a soarer on a stern-chase.”

Not exactly what she wanted, but it would do. “Very well, then.” Rising, she held herself erect, the silver arrow at her side, and kept her slightly frosty manner. She thought they had finally realized who was in charge. “Morning is not far off.” Had Rand actually had the nerve to tell Juilin to “hand her back”? Thom would just have to suffer along with the other man for a time, and it served him right for that grin. “You will put out this fire and go to sleep. Now. No excuses, Thom. You’ll be no good at all tomorrow without sleep.”

Obediently they began scuffing dirt over the flames with their boots, but when she reached the plain wooden steps of the wagon, she heard Thom say, “Sounds like her mother sometimes.”

“Then I am glad I have never met the woman,” Juilin grumbled in reply. “Flip for first guard?” Thom murmured an assent.

She almost went back, but found herself smiling instead. *Men!* It was a fond thought. Her good mood lasted until she was inside.

Nynaeve sat on the very edge of the bed, holding herself up with both hands, eyes trying to drift shut as she watched Birgitte. Her feet were still dirty.

Elayne put Birgitte's arrow into one of the cupboards behind some rough sacks of dried peas. Luckily, the other woman never so much as glanced at her. She did not think the sight of the silver arrow was what Nynaeve needed right at that moment. But what was?

"Nynaeve, it is past time for you to wash your feet and go to sleep."

Nynaeve swayed in her direction, blinking sleepily. "Feet? What? I must watch her."

It would have to be one step at a time. "Your feet, Nynaeve. They are dirty. Wash them."

Frowning, Nynaeve peered down at her dusty feet, then nodded. She spilled water tipping the big white pitcher over the washbasin, and sloshed more out before she was washed and ready to towel dry, but even then she resumed her seat. "I must watch. In case . . . In case . . . She cried out once. For Gaidal."

Elayne pressed her back on the mattress. "You need sleep, Nynaeve. You can't keep your eyes open."

"I can," Nynaeve muttered sullenly, trying to sit up against Elayne's pressure on her shoulders. "I must watch her, Elayne. I must."

Nynaeve made the two men outside look sensible and biddable. Even if Elayne had had a mind to, there was no way to get her drunk and find her a—a pretty young man, she supposed it would have to be. That left a swift kick. Sympathy and common sense had surely made no impression. "I have had enough of this sulking and self-pity, Nynaeve," she said firmly. "You are going to sleep *now*, and in the morning you are not going to say one word about what a miserable wretch you are. If you cannot behave like the clearheaded woman you are, I will ask Cerandin to give you two black eyes for the one I took away. You did not even thank me for that. Now go to sleep!"

Nynaeve's eyes widened indignantly—at least she did not look on the point of tears—but Elayne slid them shut with her fingers. They closed easily, and despite softly murmured protests, the deep slow breath of sleep followed quickly.

Elayne patted Nynaeve's shoulder before straightening. She hoped it was a peaceful sleep, with dreams of Lan, but any sort of sleep was better for her now than none. Fighting a yawn, she bent to check Birgitte. She could not tell whether the woman’s color or breathing was any better. There was nothing to do but wait and hope.

The lamps did not seem to be bothering either of the women, so she left them alight and sat on the floor between the beds. They should help keep her awake. Not that she knew why she should remain awake, really. She had done what she could as much as Nynaeve had. Unthinkingly she leaned back against the front wall, and her chin sank slowly to her chest.

The dream was a pleasant one, if odd. Rand knelt before her, and she put a hand on his head and bonded him as her Warder. One of her Warders; she would *have* to choose Green now, with Birgitte. There were other women there, faces changing between one glance and the next. Nynaeve, Min, Moiraine, Aviendha, Berelain, Amathera, Liandrin, others she did not know. Whoever they were, she knew that she had to share him with them, because in the dream she was certain that that was what Min had viewed. She was not sure how she felt about that—some of those faces she wanted to claw to shreds—but if it was fated by the Pattern, it would have to be. Yet she would have one thing of him the others could never have, the bond between Warder and Aes Sedai.

“Where is this place?” Berelain said, raven-haired and so beautiful that Elayne wanted to bare her teeth. The woman wore the low-cut red dress that Luca wanted Nynaeve to wear; she always dressed revealingly. “Wake up. This is not *Tel’aran’rhiod.*”

Elayne started awake to find Birgitte leaning over the side of the bed, gripping her arm weakly. Her face was too pale, and damp with sweat as if a fever had broken, but her blue eyes were sharp and intent on Elayne’s face.

“This is not *Tel’aran’rhiod.*” It was not a question, but Elayne nodded, and Birgitte sank back with a long sigh. “I remember everything,” she whispered. “I am here as I am, and I remember. All is changed. Gaidal is out there, somewhere, an infant, or even a young boy. But even if I find him, what will he think of a woman more than old enough to be his mother?” She scrubbed angrily at her eyes, muttering, “I do not cry. I never cry. I remember that, the Light help me. I never cry.”

Elayne got up on her knees beside the woman’s bed. “You will find him, Birgitte.” She kept her voice low. Nynaeve still seemed sound asleep—a small, rasping snore rose from her regularly—but she needed rest, not to confront this all over again now. “Somehow you will. And he will love you. I know he will.”

“Do you think that is what matters? I could stand him not loving me.” Her glistening eyes gave her the lie. “He will need me, Elayne, and I will not be there. He always has more courage than is good for him; I always must supply him with caution. Worse, he will wander, searching for me, not knowing what he is looking for, not knowing why he feels incomplete. We are always together, Elayne. Two halves of a whole.” The tears welled up, flowing across her face. “Moghedien said she would make me cry forever, and she . . .” Suddenly her features contorted; low ragged sobs came as if ripped from her throat.

Elayne gathered the taller woman into her arms, murmuring words of comfort she knew were useless. How would she feel if Rand were taken away from her? The thought was nearly enough to make her put her head down atop Birgitte’s and join her weeping.

She was not sure how long it took Birgitte to cry herself out, but eventually she pushed Elayne away and settled back, wiping her cheeks with her fingers. “I have never done that except as a small child. Never.” Twisting her neck, she frowned at Nynaeve, still asleep on the other bed. “Did Moghedien hurt her badly? I have not seen anyone trussed like that since the Tourag took Mareesh.” Elayne must have looked confused, because she added, “In another Age. Is she hurt?”

“Not badly. Her spirit, mainly. What you did allowed her to escape, but only after . . .” Elayne could not make herself say it. Too many wounds were too fresh. “She blames herself. She thinks that . . . everything . . . is her fault, for asking you to help.”

“If she had not asked me, Moghedien would be teaching her to beg right now. She has as little caution as Gaidal.” Birgitte’s dry tone sounded odd with her wet cheeks. “She did not drag me into this by my hair. If she claims responsibility for the consequences, then she claims responsibility for my actions.” If anything, she sounded angry. “I am a free woman, and I made my own choices. She did not decide for me.”

“I must say you are taking this better than . . . I would.” She could not say “better than Nynaeve.” That was true, but the other was as well.

“I always say, if you must mount the gallows, give a jest to the crowd, a coin to the hangman, and make the drop with a smile on your lips.” Birgitte’s smile was grim. “Moghedien sprang the trap, but my neck is not yet snapped. Perhaps I will surprise her before it is done." The smile faded into a frown as she studied Elayne. "I can . . . feel you. I think I could close my eyes and point to you a mile away."

Elayne took a very deep breath. "I bonded you as a Warder," she said in a rush. "You were dying, and Healing did no good, and . . ." The woman was looking at her. Not frowning anymore, but her eyes were disconcertingly sharp. "There was no other choice, Birgitte. You would have died, else."

"A Warder," Birgitte said slowly. "I think I remember hearing a tale of a female Warder, but it was in a life so long ago that I cannot remember more than that."

It was time for another deep breath, and this time she had to force the words. "There is something you should know. You will discover it sooner or later, and I've decided not to keep things from people who have a right to know, not unless I absolutely must." A third breath. "I am not Aes Sedai. I am only Accepted."

For a long moment, the golden-braided woman stared up at her, then slowly shook her head. "An Accepted. In the Trolloc Wars, I knew an Accepted who bonded a fellow. Barashelle was due to be tested the next day for raising to full Aes Sedai, and certain to be given the shawl, but she was afraid that a woman testing that same day would take him. In the Trolloc Wars, the Tower tried to raise women as quickly as possible, from necessity."

"What happened?" Elayne could not stop herself from asking. Barashelle? That name sounded familiar.

Lacing her fingers over the blanket atop her bosom, Birgitte shifted her head on the pillow and put on a look of mock sympathy. "Needless to say, she was not allowed to take the tests once it was discovered. Necessity did not outweigh such an offense. They made her pass the poor fellow's bond to another, and to teach her patience, put her into the kitchens among the scullions and spit-girls. I heard that she stayed there three years, and when she did receive her shawl, the Amyrlin Seat herself chose her Warder, a leather-faced, stone-stubborn man named Anselan. I saw them a few years after, and I could not tell which of them gave the commands. I do not think Barashelle was certain either."

"Not pleasant," Elayne muttered. Three years in the . . . Wait. Barashelle and *Anselan*? It could not be the same pair; that story said nothing about Barashelle being Aes Sedai. But she had read two versions and heard Thom tell another, and all had Barashelle doing some long, arduous service to earn Anselan's love. Two thousand years could change a great deal in a story.

"Not pleasant," Birgitte agreed, and suddenly her eyes were much too large and innocent in her pale face. "I suppose, since you wish me to keep your dreadful secret, you will not ride me as hard as some Aes Sedai ride their Warders. It would not do to push me to tell just to escape you."

Elayne's chin came up instinctively. "That sounds very like a threat. I do not take well to threats, from you or anyone else. If you think—"

The reclining woman caught her arm and cut her off apologetically; her grip was noticeably stronger. "Please. I did not intend it that way. Gaidal claims I have a sense of humor like a rock tossed into a shoja-circle." A cloud swept across her face at Gaidal's name, and was gone. "You saved my life, Elayne. I will keep your secret and serve you as Warder. And be your friend, if you will have me."

"I will be proud to have you for friend." Shoja-circle? She would ask another time. Birgitte might be stronger, but she needed rest, not questions. "And for Warder." It seemed that she really was going to choose the Green Ajah; aside from everything else, that was the only way she could bond Rand. The dream was still clear in her mind, and she intended to convince him to accept it one way or another. "Perhaps you could try to . . . moderate . . . your sense of humor?"

"I will try." Birgitte sounded as if she were saying she would try to pick up a mountain. "But if I am to be your Warder, even in secret, then I will be Warder to you. You can barely hold your eyes open. It is time for you to sleep." Elayne's eyebrows and chin shot up together, but the woman gave her no opportunity to speak. "Among many other things, it is a Warder's place to tell his—her—Aes Sedai when she pushes herself too hard. Also to provide a dose of caution when she thinks she can walk into the Pit of Doom. And to keep her alive so she can do what she must. I will do these things for you. Never fear for your back when I am near, Elayne."

She did need sleep, she supposed, but Birgitte needed it more. Elayne dimmed the lamps and got the woman settled and asleep, though not until Birgitte had seen her put a pillow and blankets on the floor between the beds for herself. There was some slight argument over who would sleep on the floor, but Birgitte was still weak enough that Elayne had no trouble making her stay in the bed. Well, not very much anyway. At least Nynaeve's soft snore never broke.

She herself did not go to sleep immediately, whatever she had told Birgitte. The woman could not put her nose outside the wagon until she had something to wear, and she was taller than Elayne or Nynaeve. Sitting down between the beds, Elayne began letting out the hem on her dark gray silk riding dress. There would hardly be time in the morning for more than a quick fitting and stitching the new hem. Sleep overtook her with her ripping no more than half done.

She had the dream of bonding Rand again, more than once. Sometimes he knelt voluntarily, and sometimes she had to do what she had done with Birgitte, even sneaking into his bedchamber while he slept. Birgitte was one of the other women now. Elayne did not mind that *too* much. Not her, or Min, or Egwene, or Aviendha, or Nynaeve, though she could not imagine what Lan would say to that last. Others, though . . . She had just ordered Birgitte, in a Warder's color-shifting cloak, to drag Berelain and Elaida to the kitchens for three years, when suddenly the two women began pummeling her. She awakened to find Nynaeve trampling her to reach Birgitte and check on the woman. The gray light just before dawn showed in the small windows.

Birgitte woke claiming she was as strong as ever, and ravenous besides. Elayne was not certain whether Nynaeve had finished her bout of self-blame. She did not wring her hands or speak of it, but while Elayne washed her face and hands, and explained about the menagerie and why they had to remain with it a while longer, Nynaeve hastily peeled and cored red pears and yellow apples, sliced cheese, and handed it all to Birgitte on a plate with a cup of watered wine with honey and spices. She would have fed the woman had Birgitte let her. Nynaeve washed Birgitte's hair in white henpepper herself, until it was as black as Elayne's—Elayne did her own, of course—donated her best stockings and shift, and looked disappointed when a pair of Elayne's slippers fit better. She insisted on helping Birgitte into the gray silk as soon as her hair had been toweled dry and braided again—the hips and bosom needed letting out, too, but that would have to wait—and even wanted to stitch the hem herself, until Elayne's incredulous stare made her retreat to her own ablutions, muttering as she scrubbed her face that she could sew as well as anyone. When she wanted to.

When they went outside at last, the first sharp golden edge of the sun was peeking above the trees to the east. For this little while, the day felt deceptively comfortable. There was not a cloud to be seen in the sky, and by noon the air would be hot and gritty.

Thom and Juilin were hitching the team to the wagon, and the whole camp bustled in preparation for moving. Skulker was already saddled, and Elayne made a note to herself to speak up about riding today herself before one of the men took possession of the saddle. Even if Thom or Juilin got there first, though, she would not be too disappointed. This very afternoon she would highwalk in front of people for the first time. The costume Luca had shown her made her a little nervous, but at least she was not moaning about it as Nynaeve did.

Luca himself came striding rapidly through the camp, red cloak fluttering behind, chivvying and shouting unneeded instructions. “Latelle, wake those bloody bears! I want them on their feet, snarling, when we drive through Samara. Clarine, you watch those dogs this time. If one of them goes chasing after a cat again . . . Brugh, you and your brothers do your tumbling just ahead of my wagon, mind. *Just* ahead. This is supposed to be a stately procession, not a race to see which of you can backflip the fastest! Cerandin, keep those boar-horses in hand. I want people to gasp in amazement, not run in terror!”

He stopped at their wagon, glowering at Nynaeve and herself equally with a bit left over for Birgitte. “Kind of you to decide to come with the rest of us, Mistress Nana, *my Lady* Morelin. I thought you meant to sleep until midday.” He nodded toward Birgitte. “Having a chat with someone from across the river, are you? Well, we’ve no time for visitors. I mean to be set up and performing by noon.”

Nynaeve looked taken aback by the onslaught, but by the end of his second sentence she was meeting him glare for glare. Whatever her awkwardness toward Birgitte, it apparently did not hinder her temper where others were concerned. “We will be ready as soon as anyone, and you know it, Valan Luca. Besides, an hour or two will make no difference anyway. There are enough people gathered on the other side of the river that if one in a hundred comes to your show it will be more than you ever dreamed. If we decide to make a leisurely breakfast, you can just twiddle your thumbs and wait. You’ll not get what you want if you leave us behind.”

That was her bluntest reminder yet of the promised hundred gold marks, but for once it did not slow him. “Enough people? Enough people! People must be attracted, woman. Chin Akima has been in place three days, and he has a fellow who juggles swords and axes. And nine acrobats. Nine! Some woman I’ve never heard of has two women acrobats who do things on a hanging rope that would make the Chavanas’ eyes pop. You would not believe the crowds. Sillia Cerano has men with their faces painted like court fools, splashing each other with water and hitting each other over the head with bladders, and people are paying an extra silver penny just to watch!” Suddenly his eyes narrowed, focusing on Birgitte. “Would you be willing to paint your face? Sillia doesn’t have a woman among her fools. Some of the horse handlers would be willing. It doesn’t hurt, getting hit with an inflated bladder, and I will pay you. . . .” He trailed off, musing—he did not like parting with money any more than Nynaeve did—and Birgitte spoke into his momentary silence.

“I am not a fool, and will not be a fool. I am an archer.”

“An archer,” he muttered, eyeing the intricate glossy black braid pulled over her left shoulder. “And I suppose you call yourself Birgitte. What are you? One of those idiots hunting the Horn of Valere? Even if the thing exists, what chance any one of you will find it more than another? I was in Illian when the Hunters’ oaths were given, and there were thousands in the Great Square of Tammaz. But for glory that you *can* attain, nothing can outshine the applause of—”

“I am an archer, pretty man,” Birgitte broke in firmly. “Fetch a bow, and I will outshoot you or anyone you name, a hundred gold crowns to your one.” Elayne expected Nynaeve to yelp—it was they who would have to cover the wager if Birgitte lost, and whatever she claimed, Elayne did not think Birgitte could be fully recovered already—yet all Nynaeve did was close her eyes briefly and draw a deep, long breath.

“Women!” Luca growled. Thom and Juilin did not have to look as if they agreed. “You are a fine match for the *Lady* Morelin and Nana, or whatever their names are.” He swept his silk cloak in a wide gesture at the surrounding hustle of men and horses. “It may have escaped your keen eye, *Birgitte,* but I have a show to get under way, and my rivals are already draining Samara of coin like the cutpurses they are.”

Birgitte smiled, a slight curving of her lips. “Are you afraid, pretty man? We can make your side a silver penny.”

Elayne thought Luca might have apoplexy from the color that crept into his face. His neck suddenly looked too big for his collar. “I will fetch my bow,” he almost hissed. “You can work off the hundred marks with your face painted, or cleaning cages for all I care!”

“Are you sure that you are well enough?” Elayne asked Birgitte as he stalked off muttering to himself. The only word she caught was a repeat of “Women!” Nynaeve was looking at the woman with the braid as if she wanted the ground to open and swallow her; herself, not Birgitte. A number of the horse handlers had gathered around Thom and Juilin for some reason.

“He has nice legs,” Birgitte said, “but I have never liked tall men. Add a pretty face, and they are always insufferable.”

Petra had joined the group of men, twice as wide as any other. He said something, then shook hands with Thom. The Chavanas were there as well. And Latelle, talking earnestly with Thom while darting dark looks at Nynaeve and the two women with her. By the time Luca returned with an unstrung bow and a quiver of arrows, no one was making preparations any longer. The wagons and horses and cages—even the tethered boar-horses—stood abandoned, the people all clustered around Thom and the thief-catcher. They followed as Luca led the way a short distance out of the camp.

“I am accounted a fair shot,” he said, carving a white cross chest-high to himself on the trunk of a tall oak. He had some of his jauntiness back, and he swaggered as he strode off fifty paces. “I will take the first shot, so you can see what you face.”

Birgitte plucked the bow from his hand and walked off another fifty as he stared after her. She shook her head over the bow, but braced it on her slippered foot and strung it in one smooth motion before Luca joined her and Elayne and Nynaeve. Birgitte pulled an arrow from the quiver he held, examined it a moment, then tossed it aside like rubbish. Luca frowned and opened his mouth, but she was already discarding a second shaft. The next three went to the leaf-covered ground as well before she stuck one point-down in the soil beside her. Of twenty-one, she kept only four.

“She can do it,” Elayne whispered, trying to sound certain. Nynaeve nodded bleakly; if they had to pay out a hundred gold crowns, they would soon be selling the jewelry Amathera had given them. The letters-of-rights were all but useless, as she had explained to Nynaeve; their use would eventually point a finger to where they had been been for Elaida, if not where they were. *If I had just spoken up in time, I could have stopped this. As my Warder, she has to do as I say. Doesn't she?* From the evidence so far, obedience was no part of the bond. Had those Aes Sedai she had spied on made the men give oaths as well? Now that she thought of it, she believed one of them had.

Birgitte nocked an arrow, raised the bow, and loosed seemingly without pausing to aim. Elayne winced, but the steel point struck dead center in the middle of the carved white cross. Before it stopped quivering, the second brushed in beside it. Birgitte did wait a moment then, but only for the two arrows to still. A gasp rose from the onlookers as the third shaft *split* the first, but that was nothing to the absolute silence as the last split the other just as neatly. Once could have been chance. Twice . . .

Luca looked as if his eyes were coming out of his head. Mouth hanging open, he stared at the tree, then at Birgitte, at the tree, then Birgitte. She proffered the bow, and he shook his head weakly.

Suddenly he flung the quiver away, spreading his arms wide with a glad cry. "Not knives! Arrows! From a hundred paces!"

Nynaeve sagged against Elayne as the man explained what he wanted, but she made not one sound of protest. Thom and Juilin were collecting money; most handed over coins with a sigh or a laugh, but Juilin had to snag Latelle's arm as she tried to slip away, and speak some angry words before she dug coins from her pouch. So that was what they had been up to. She would have to speak to them firmly. But later. "Nana, you don't have to go through with this." The woman only stared at Birgitte, eyes haggard.

"Our wager?" Birgitte said when Luca ran out of wind. He grimaced, then fished slowly into his pouch and tossed her a coin. Elayne caught the glint of gold in the sun as Birgitte examined it, then tossed it right back. "The bet was a silver penny on your part."

Luca's eyes widened in startlement, but the next moment he was laughing and pressing the gold crown into her hand. "You are worth every copper of it. What do you say? Why, the Queen of Ghealdan herself might come to see a performance such as yours. Birgitte and her arrows. We will paint them silver, and the bow!"

Desperately Elayne wanted Birgitte to look at her. They might as well put up a sign for Moghedien as do what the man suggested.

But Birgitte only bounced the coin on her hand, grinning. "Paint will ruin an already shabby bow," she said finally. "And call me Maerion; I was called that, once." Leaning on the bow, she let her smile widen. "Can I have a red dress, too?"

Elayne heaved a sigh of fervent relief. Nynaeve looked as if she were going to sick up.

* * *

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CHAPTER
37

Performances in Samara

For what seemed the hundredth time, Nynaeve held a lock of her hair up to look at it and sighed. Thick murmurs of talk and laughter from hundreds if not thousands of throats, distant music that was nearly drowned out, drifted in through the wagon walls. She had not minded spending the parade through the streets of Samara in the wagon with Elayne—occasional peeks through the windows had convinced her that she would just as soon not be out in those packed crowds, yelling and barely making way for the wagons—but every time she looked at the brassy red of her hair, she wished she had been doing somersaults with the Chavanas rather than dyeing it.

Carefully not looking at herself, she wrapped up completely in her plain dark gray shawl, turned, and gave a start to find Birgitte standing in the doorway. The woman had ridden in Clarine and Petra's wagon during the parade, with Clarine altering a spare red dress she had been making for Nynaeve at Luca's direction; he had given Clarine her instructions before Nynaeve ever agreed. Birgitte wore it now, her black-dyed braid pulled over her shoulder so it nestled between her breasts, totally unconscious of the low square neck. Just looking at her made Nynaeve fold her shawl tighter; Birgitte could not show a fingernail more of pale bosom and retain the slightest claim to decency. As it was, such a claim would be feeble, really quite laughable. Looking at her made Nynaeve's stomach knot up, but not for reasons of clothes or skin.

"If you are going to wear the dress, why cover up?" Birgitte came inside and closed the door behind her. "You are a woman. Why not be proud of it?"

"If you think I shouldn't," Nynaeve replied hesitantly, and slowly let the shawl slide down to her elbows, revealing the twin of the other woman's garment. She felt all but naked. "I only thought . . . I thought . . ." Gripping her silk skirts hard to keep her hands at her sides, she held her gaze on the other woman. Even knowing she wore exactly the same herself, it was easier that way.

Birgitte grimaced. “And if I wanted you to lower the neck another inch?”

Nynaeve opened her mouth, face going as scarlet as the gown, but for a moment nothing came out. When it did, she sounded as if she were being strangled. “There isn’t an inch to lower it. Look at your own. There isn’t a *tenth*!”

Three quick, frowning strides, and Birgitte bent slightly to put her face right in Nynaeve’s. “And if I said I wanted you to rid yourself of that inch?” she snarled, showing teeth. “What if I wanted to paint your face, so Luca could have his fool? What if I stripped you out of it altogether and painted you from head to toe? A fine target you would make then. Every man inside fifty miles would come to see.”

Nynaeve’s mouth worked, but this time no sound emerged at all. She wanted very much to close her eyes; maybe when she opened them, none of this would be happening.

With a disgusted shake of her head, Birgitte took a seat on one of the beds, one elbow on her knee and her blue eyes sharp. “This must stop. When I look at you, you flinch. You run about waiting on me hand and foot. If I glance for a stool, you fetch one. If I lick my lips, you have a cup of wine in my hands before I know I am thirsty. You would wash my back and put the slippers on my feet if I let you. I am neither monster nor invalid nor child, Nynaeve.”

“I am only trying to make up for—” she began timidly, and jumped when the other woman roared.

“Make up? You are trying to make me less!”

“No. No, it is not that, truly. I am to blame—”

“You take responsibility for my actions,” Birgitte broke in fiercely. “*I* chose to speak to you in *Tel’aran’rhiod. I* chose to help you. *I* chose to track Moghedien. And *I* chose to take you to see her. *Me!* Not you, Nynaeve, me! I was not your puppet, your pack hound, then, and I will not be now.”

Nynaeve swallowed hard and gripped her skirts more tightly. She had no right to be angry with this woman. No right at all. But Birgitte had every right. “You did what I asked. It is my fault that you . . . that you are here. It is all my fault!”

“Have I mentioned fault? I see none. Only men and dim-witted girls take blame where there is none, and you are neither.”

“It was my foolish pride that made me think I could best her again, and my cowardice that let her . . . that let her . . . If I had not been so afraid I could not spit, I might have done something in time.”

“A coward?” Birgitte’s eyes widened, openly incredulous, and scorn touched her voice. “You? I thought you had more sense than to confuse fear with cowardice. You could have fled *Tel’aran’rhiod* when Moghedien released you, but you stayed to fight. No fault or blame to you that you could not.” Drawing a deep breath, she rubbed her forehead for a moment, then leaned forward intently again. “Listen to me close, Nynaeve. I take no blame for what was done to you. I saw, but I could not twitch. Had Moghedien tied you into a knot or cored you like an apple, still I would take no blame. I did what I could, when I could. And you did the same.”

“It was not the same.” Nynaeve tried to take the heat out of her voice. “It *was* my fault that you were there. My fault that you are here. If you . . .” She stopped to swallow again. “If you . . . miss . . . when you shoot at me today, I want you to know that I will understand.”

“I do not miss where I aim,” Birgitte said dryly, “and where I aim will not be at you.” She began taking things from one of the cabinets and laying them on the small table. Half-finished arrows, scraped shafts, steel arrow points, stone glue pot, fine cord, gray goose feathers for fletchings. She had said she would make her own bow, too, as soon as she could. Luca’s she called “a knot-riddled branch broken from a cross-grained tree by a blind idiot in the middle of the night.”

“I liked you, Nynaeve,” she said as she laid everything out. “Thorns, warts and all. I no longer do, as you are now . . .”

“You have no reason to like me, now,” Nynaeve said miserably, but the other woman spoke right over her without looking up.

“. . . and I will not allow you to make me less, to make my decisions less, by claiming responsibility for them. I have had few women friends, but most have had tempers like snowghosts.”

“I wish you could be my friend once more.” What under the Light was a snowghost? Something from another Age, no doubt. “I would never try to make you less, Birgitte. I only—”

Birgitte paid her no mind, except to raise her voice. Her attention seemed all on her arrow shafts. “I would like to like you again, whether you return the liking or not, but I cannot until you are yourself again. I could live with you a milk-tongued sniveling wretch if that was what you were. I take people as they are, not as I would like them to be, or else I leave them. But that is not what you are, and I will not accept your reasons for playing at it. So. Clarine told me of your encounter with Cerandin. Now I know what to do the next time you claim my decisions as your own." She swished a length of ashwood vigorously. "I am sure Latelle will be happy to provide the switch."

Nynaeve forced her jaws to unclench, forced her tone as smooth as she could make it. "You have a perfect right to do whatever you wish to me." Her fists in her skirts quivered more than her voice.

"A touch of temper showing? Just at the edges?" Birgitte grinned at her, at once amused and startlingly feral. "How long before it bursts into flame? I am willing to wear out any number of switches, if need be." The grin faded into seriousness. "I will make you see the right of this, or I will drive you away. There is no other course. I cannot—will not—leave Elayne. That bond honors me, and I will honor it, and her. And I will not allow you to think that you make my decisions, or made them. I am myself, not an appendage to you. Now go away. I must finish these arrows if I am to have even a few shafts that will fly true. I do not mean to kill you, and I would not have it happen by accident." Unstopping the glue pot, she bent over the table. "Do not forget to curtsy like a good girl on your way out."

Nynaeve made it as far as the foot of the steps before pounding her fist on her thigh in a fury. How dare the woman? Did she think that she could just . . . ? Did she think that Nynaeve would put up with . . . ? *I thought she could do anything she wanted to you*, a small voice whispered in her head. *I said she could kill me*, she snarled at it, *not humiliate me!* Before much longer *everybody* would be threatening her with that bloody Seanchan woman!

The wagons stood abandoned, except for a few rough-coated horse handlers for guards, near the tall sprawling canvas fence erected to contain Luca's show. From this large brown-grass meadow half a mile from Samara the gray stone walls of the city were clearly visible, with squat towers at the gates, and a few of the taller buildings showing roofs of thatch or tile. Outside the walls, villages of huts and rude shanties sprouted like mushrooms in every direction, full of the Prophet's followers, and they had stripped every tree for miles either for building or for firewood.

The show’s entrance for patrons was on the other side, but two of the horse handlers, with stout cudgels, stood on this side to discourage any who did not want to pay from entering as the performers did. Nynaeve was almost upon them, striding as hard as she could and muttering angrily to herself, when their idiotic grins made her realize that the shawl was still looped over her elbows. Her stare wiped their faces blank. Only then did she cover herself properly, and slowly; she was not about to have these louts think they could make her yelp and leap. The skinny one, with a nose that took up half of his face, held the canvas flap aside, and she ducked through into pandemonium.

Everywhere people thronged, in noisy milling clusters of men and women and children, in chattering streams flowing from one attraction to the next. All but the *s’redit* performed on raised wooden stages Luca had had built. Cerandin’s boar-horses had the largest crowd, the huge gray animals actually balancing on their forelegs, even the baby, long snouts curved up sinuously, while Clarine’s dogs had the smallest, for all they did back-springs and flips over each others’ backs. A good many people paused to stare at the lions and the hairy boarlike *capars* in their cages, the strangely horned deer from Arafel and Saldaea and Arad Doman and the bright birds from the Light knew where, and some waddling, brown-furred creatures with big eyes and round ears that sat placidly eating leaves from branches gripped in their forepaws. Luca’s tale on where they came from varied—she supposed he did not know—and he had not been able to make up a name for them that pleased him. A huge snake from the marshes of Illian, four times as long as a man; earned nearly as many gasps as the *s’redit*, although simply lying there, apparently asleep, but she was pleased to see that Latelle’s bears, at the moment standing atop huge red wooden balls that they rolled in circles with their feet, attracted few more than the dogs. Bears these people could see in their own forests, even if these did have white faces.

Latelle sparkled in the afternoon sunlight in her black spangles. Cerandin glittered almost as much in blue, and Clarine in green, though neither had quite as many sequins sewn on as Latelle, but every last one of the dresses had a collar right up under the chin. Of course, Petra and the Chavanas were performing attired only in bright blue breeches, but that was to show off their muscles. Only understandable. The acrobats were standing one atop the other’s shoulders, four high. Not far from them, the strongman took a long bar with a large iron ball at each end—two men were needed to hand the thing up to him—and immediately began twirling it in his thick hands, even spinning the bar around his neck and across his back.

Thom was juggling fire, and eating it as well. Eight flaming batons made a perfect circle: then suddenly he had four in each hand, one sticking up from each cluster. Deftly popping each upraised flaming end into his mouth in turn, he appeared to swallow, and took them out extinguished, looking as if he had just had something tasty. Nynaeve could not fathom how he did not scorch his mustaches off, much less burn his throat. A twist of his wrists, and the unlit batons folded into the lit like fans. A moment later they were making two interlinked circles above his head. He wore the same brown coat he always did, though Luca had given him a red one sewn with sequins. From the way Thorn’s bushy eyebrows rose as she stalked past, he did not understand why she glared at him. His own coat, indeed!

She hurried on toward the thick, impatiently buzzing crowd circled around the two tall poles with the rope stretched tightly between. She had to use her elbows to reach the front row, though two women did glare and snatch their men out of her way when the shawl slipped. She would have glared back had she not been so busy blushing and covering herself. Luca was there, frowning as anxiously as a husband outside a birthing room, next to a thick fellow with his head shaved except for a grizzled topknot. She slipped in on the other side of Luca. The shaven-headed man had a villainous look; a long scar sliced down his left cheek, and a patch over that eye was painted with a scowling red replacement. Few of the men she had seen here were armed with more than a belt knife, but he wore a sword strapped to his back, the long hilt rising above his right shoulder. He looked vaguely familiar for some reason, but her mind was all on the highrope. Luca frowned at the shawl, smiled at her, and tried to put an arm around her waist.

While he was still trying to catch his breath from her elbow and she was still getting her shawl decently back in place, Juilin came staggering out of the crowd on the other side, conical red hat tilted jauntily, coat half off one shoulder and a wooden mug in his fist slopping over the rim. With the overcareful steps of a man whose head contains more wine than brains, he approached the rope ladder leading up to one of the high platforms and stared at it.

“Go on!” someone shouted. “Break your fool neck!”

“Wait, friend,” Luca called, starting forward with smiles and flourishes of his cloak. “That is no place for a man with a belly full of—”

Setting the mug on the ground, Juilin scampered up the ladder and stood swaying on the platform. Nynaeve held her breath. The man had a head for heights, and well he should after a life of chasing thieves across the rooftops of Tear, but still . . .

Juilin turned as if lost; he appeared too drunk to see or remember the ladder. His eyes fixed on the rope. Tentatively, he put one foot onto the narrow span, then drew it back. Pushing the hat back to scratch his head, he studied the taut rope, and abruptly brightened visibly. Slowly he got down on hands and knees and crawled wobbling out onto the rope. Luca shouted for him to come down, and the crowd roared with laughter.

Halfway across, Juilin stopped, swaying awkwardly, and peered back, his eyes latching onto the mug he had left on the ground. Plainly he was considering how to get back to it. Slowly, with exceeding care, he stood, facing the way he had come and wavering from side to side. A gasp rose from the crowd as his foot slipped and he fell, somehow catching himself with one hand and a knee hooked around the rope. Luca caught the Taraboner hat as it fell, shouting to everyone that the man was mad, and whatever happened was no responsibility of his. Nynaeve pressed both hands tight against her middle; she could imagine being up there, and even that was enough to make her feel ill. The man was a fool. A pure bull-goose fool!

With an obvious effort, Juilin managed to catch the rope with his other hand, and pulled himself along it hand-over-hand. To the far platform. Swaying from side to side, he brushed his coat, tried to pull it straight and succeeded only in changing which shoulder hung down—and spotted his mug at the floor of the other pole. Pointing to it gleefully, he stepped out onto the rope again.

This time at least half the onlookers shouted for him to go back, shouted that there was a ladder behind him; the others only laughed uproariously, no doubt waiting for him to break his neck. He walked across smoothly, slid down the rope ladder with his hands and feet on the outside, and snatched up the wooden mug to take a deep drink. Not until Luca clapped the red hat on Juilin’s head and they both bowed—Luca flourishing his cloak in such a way that Juilin was behind it half the time—did the watchers realize that it had all been part of the show. A moment of silence, and then they exploded with applause and cheers and laughter. Nynaeve had half-thought they might turn ugly after being duped. The fellow with the topknot looked villainous even while laughing.

Leaving Juilin standing beside the ladder, Luca came back to stand between Nynaeve and the man with the topknot. “I thought that would go well.” He sounded incredibly self-satisfied, and he made little bows to the crowd as if he had been the one up on the rope.

Giving him a sour frown, she had no time to speak the acid comment on her tongue, because Elayne came bounding through the crowd to stand beside Juilin with her arms upraised and one knee bent.

Nynaeve’s mouth tightened, and she shifted her shawl irritably. Whatever she thought of the red dress that she had found herself wearing without really knowing how, she was not sure that Elayne’s costume was not worse. The Daughter-Heir of Andor was all in snow white, with a scattering of white sequins sparkling on her short coat and snug breeches. Nynaeve had not really believed that Elayne would actually appear in the clothes in public, but she had been too concerned over her own attire to give her opinion. The coat and breeches made her think of Min. She had never approved of Min wearing boy’s clothes, but the color and spangles made these even more—flagrant.

Juilin held the rope ladder for Elayne to climb, though there was no need. She went up as adeptly as he could have. He vanished into the crowd as soon as she reached the top, where she posed again, beaming at the thunderous applause as if at the adulation of her subjects. As she stepped out onto the rope—somehow it seemed even thinner than when Juilin had been on it—Nynaeve all but ceased breathing, and she stopped thinking of Elayne’s clothes, or her own, at all.

Elayne made her way out onto the rope, arms outstretched to either side, and she was not channeling a platform of Air. Slowly she stepped her way across, one foot in front of the other, never wavering, supported only by the rope. Channeling would be far too dangerous if Moghedien had even a clue to where they were; the Forsaken or Black sisters could be in Samara, and they would be able to feel the weave. And if they were not in Samara now, they might be soon. On the far platform, Elayne paused to considerably more applause than Juilin had received—Nynaeve could not understand that—and started back. Almost to the end, she pivoted smoothly, walked back halfway, pivoted again. And wobbled, just catching herself.

Nynaeve felt as though a hand had her by the throat. At a slow steady pace, Elayne highwalked to the platform, once more posing to thunderous shouts and clapping.

Nynaeve swallowed her heart and breathed again, raggedly, but she knew it was not over.

Raising her hands above her head, Elayne suddenly cartwheeled herself along the rope, black tresses whipping, white-sheathed legs flashing in the sun. Nynaeve yelped and clutched Luca's arm as the girl reached the far platform, stumbled in landing and caught herself just short of going over the edge.

"What's the matter?" he murmured beneath the gasp rising from the crowd. "You've seen her do this every evening since Sienda. And a good many other places, too, I would think."

"Of course," she said weakly. Eyes fixed on Elayne, she barely noticed the arm he slipped around her shoulders, certainly not enough to do anything about it. She had tried to talk the girl into feigning a sprained ankle, but Elayne insisted that after all of that practice with the Power, she did not need it now. Maybe Juilin did not—apparently he did not—but Elayne had never gone scrambling over rooftops in the night.

The return cartwheels went perfectly, and the landing, but Nynaeve did not look away, or loose her hold on Luca's sleeve. After what now seemed the inevitable pause for applause, Elayne returned to the rope for more pivots, one leg raised and whipping down and up so quickly that it seemed she kept it outstretched the whole while, and for a slow handstand that lifted her straight as a dagger, white-slippered toes pointed to the sky. And a backflip that had the crowd gasping and her swaying from side to side, only just catching her balance. Thom Merrilin had taught her that, and the handstand.

From the corner of her eye Nynaeve caught Thom, two places down from her, eyes riveted to Elayne, poised on the balls of his feet. He looked as proud as a peacock. He looked ready to rush forward and catch her if she fell. If she did fall, it would be at least partly his fault. He should never have taught her those things!

One last passage of cartwheels, white legs flashing and glittering in the sun, faster than before. A passage that had never been mentioned to Nynaeve! She would have eviscerated Luca with her tongue had he not muttered angrily that Elayne adding to the act just for applause was a good way to break her neck. One last pause to pose for more of that applause, and Elayne at last climbed down.

Shouting, the crowd rushed in on her. Luca and four horse handlers with cudgels appeared around her as if by the Power, but even so Thom beat them to her, limp and all.

Nynaeve jumped as high as she could, just managing to see over enough heads to make out Elayne. The girl did not seem frightened, or even taken aback, by all the waving hands trying to touch her, stretching between her encircling guards. Head high, face flushed from effort, she still managed a cool and regal grace as she was escorted away. How she could do that, garbed as she was, Nynaeve simply could not imagine.

“Face like a bloody queen,” the one-eyed man muttered to himself. He had not gone running with the others, but merely let them stream past. Roughly dressed in a plain coat of dark gray wool, he certainly looked solid enough to have no fears of being knocked down and trampled. He appeared as if he could use that sword. “Burn me for a sheep-gutted farmer, but she’s flaming well brave enough for a bloody queen.”

Nynaeve gaped at him as he strode away through the crowd, and it was not his language. Or rather, it was, partly. Now she remembered where she had seen him, a one-eyed man with a topknot who could not say two sentences without the vilest curses.

Forgetting about Elayne—she was certainly safe enough—Nynaeve began pushing her way through the throng after him.

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CHAPTER 38

An Old Acquaintance

With the crowds, it took Nynaeve some little time to catch up, muttering every time she was jostled by a man gaping at everything in sight or a woman dragging a child with either hand, children usually trying to drag *her* to two different attractions at once. The one-eyed man barely paused to look at anything except the big snake and the lions, until he reached the boar-horses. He had to have seen them earlier, situated as they were near the patrons' entrance. Every time the *s'redit* stood on their hind legs, as they were doing now, the great tusked heads of the adults could be seen by those outside the canvas fence, and the press to enter intensified a little more.

Beneath a wide red sign that said VALAN LUCA in ornate gold script on both sides, two of the horse handlers collected admission from people funneled between two thick ropes, taking the money in clear blown-glass pitchers—both thick and flawed; Luca would never lay out coin for better—so they could see that the coins were right without touching them. They dumped the money straight from the pitchers through a hole in the top of an iron-strapped box so wrapped about with chain that Petra had to have put it in place before the first silver penny went in. Another pair of horse handlers—thick-shouldered, broken-nosed men with the sunken knuckles of brawlers—stood nearby with cudgels to make sure that the crowd remained orderly. And to keep an eye on the men taking the money, Nynaeve suspected. Luca was not a trusting man, especially when it came to coin. In fact, he was as tight as the skin on an apple. She had never met anyone so stingy.

Slowly she elbowed close to the man with the gray-streaked topknot. *He* had had no trouble reaching the front rank before the *s'redit*, of course; his scar and painted eyepatch would have seen to that, even without the sword on his back. At the moment he was watching the big gray animals with a grin and what she supposed was wonder on that stony face.

"Uno?" She thought that was the right name.

His head turned to stare at her. Once she had the shawl back in place, he raised the stare to her face, but no recognition lit in his dark eye. The other, the painted red glaring one, made her a little queasy.

Cerandin waved her goad, shouting something slurred beyond intelligibility, and the *s'redit* turned; Sanit, the cow, placing her feet on Mer's broad, rounded back while he remained upright. Nerin, the calf, put her feet low on Sanit's back.

"I saw you in Fal Dara," Nynaeve said. "And again on Toman Head, briefly. After Falme. You were with . . ." She did not know how much she could say with people cheek-by-jowl around her; rumors of the Dragon Reborn had circulated all through Amadicia, and some even had his name right. "With Rand."

Uno's real eye narrowed—she tried not to see the other—and after a moment he nodded. "I remember the face. I never forget a flaming pretty face. But the hair was bloody well different. Nyna?"

"Nynaeve," she told him sharply.

He shook his head, eyeing her up and down, and before she could say another word, he had seized her arm and was all but dragging her out through the entrance.

The horse handlers there recognized her, of course, and the broken-nosed fellows started forward hefting their cudgels. She waved them away furiously even as she was yanking her arm free; it took three tries, and still it was more a matter of his letting go. The man had a grip like iron. The men with the clubs hesitated, then drifted back to their places when they saw Uno drop his grip. Apparently they knew what Valan Luca would prefer them to be guarding.

"What do you think you are doing?" she demanded, but Uno only motioned her to follow, watching to see that she did so without more than slowing his stride through the crowd waiting to get in. He had slightly bowed legs, and moved like a man more used to the back of a horse than his own feet. Growling to herself, she picked up her skirts and stalked after him toward the town.

Two other menageries were set up behind brown canvas walls not far off, and beyond them more lay scattered among the crowded shanty villages. None too close to the city walls, though. Apparently the governor, as they called the woman Nynaeve could have named mayor—though she had never heard of a woman mayor—had decreed half a mile as the distance, to protect the town in case any of the animals got loose.

The sign over the entrance to the nearest show said MAIRIN GOME in florid green and gold. Two women were clearly visible above the sign, clinging to a rope hanging from a tall framework of poles that had not been there when Luca's walls went up. Apparently the boar-horses' rearing high enough to be seen was having an effect. The women contorted themselves into positions that made Nynaeve think uncomfortably of what Moghedien had done, and somehow even managed to hold themselves out in horizontal handstands to either side of the rope. The crowd waiting impatiently in front of Mistress Gome's sign was almost as large as the one in front of Luca's. None of the other shows had anything visible that she could see, and their crowds were much smaller.

Uno refused to answer her questions or say a word or do more than give her dire frowns until they were out of the jam of people and onto a cart path of hard-packed dirt. "What I am flaming trying to do," he growled then, "is to take you where we can flaming well talk without you being torn to flaming bits by flaming folk trying to kiss your flaming hem when they find out you flaming know the Lord Dragon." There was no one within thirty paces of them, but he still stared around for anyone who might hear. "Blood and bloody ashes, woman! Don't you know what these flaming goat-heads are like? Half of them think the Creator talks to him over bloody supper every night, and the other half think he *is* the bloody Creator!"

"I will thank you to moderate your language, Master Uno. And I will thank you to slow down, too. We are not running a footrace. Where are you going, and why should I stir another step with you?"

He rolled his eye toward her, chuckling wryly. "Oh, I do remember you. The one with the fla—the mouth. Ragan thought you could skin and butcher a blo—a bull at ten paces with your tongue. Chaena and Nangu thought fifty." At least he did shorten his stride.

Nynaeve stopped dead. "Where and why?"

"Into the town." He did not stop. He strode right on, flipping a hand for her to follow. "I don't know what you're flam—what you're doing here, but I remember you were mixed up with that *blue* woman."

Snarling under her breath, she gathered her skirts and hurried after him again; it was the only way to hear. He continued as if she had been beside him the whole time. “This is no blood—no place for you to be. I can scrape together enough bio—aagh!—enough coin to get you to Tear, I think. Rumor says that’s where the Lord Dragon is.” Again he looked around warily. “Unless you want to go to the island instead.” He must have meant Tar Valon. “There’s blo—there’s odd rumors floating around about that, too. Peace, if there aren’t!” He came from a land that had not known peace in three thousand years; Shienarans used the word as talisman and oath both. “They say the old Amyrlin’s been deposed. Executed maybe. Some say they fought and burned the whole—” He paused, taking a deep breath and grimacing horribly. “—the whole city.”

Walking along, she studied him in amazement. She had not seen him in nearly a year, had never spoken more than two words together to him, and yet he . . . Why did men always think a woman needed a man to look after her? Men could not lace up their own shirts without a woman to help! “We are doing quite well as we are, thank you. Unless you know when a river trader will dock on his way downriver.”

“We? Is the blue woman with you, or the brown?” That had to be Moiraine and Verin. He was certainly being cautious.

“No. Do you remember Elayne?” He gave a blunt nod, and a mischievous impulse seized her; nothing seemed to faze the man, and he obviously expected to just take charge of her welfare. “You saw her again just now. You said she had a”—she made her voice gruff in imitation of his—“face like a bloody queen.”

He stumbled in a quite satisfactory way, and glared around him so fiercely that even two Whitecloaks riding by skirted wide around him, though they tried to pretend he had nothing to do with it, of course. “Her?” he growled incredulously. “But her bloody hair was black as a raven’s. . . .” He glanced athers, and the next minute he was pacing up the cart path again, muttering half to himself, “The flaming woman is daughter to a queen. A bloody queen! Showing her bloody legs that way.” Nynaeve nodded in agreement. Until he added, “You bloody southlanders are bloody strange! No flaming decency at all!” He had fine room to talk. Shienarans might dress properly, but she still blushed to remember that in Shienar men and women bathed together as often as not, and thought no more of it than of eating together.

"Did your mother never teach you to talk decently, man?" His real eye frowned at her almost as darkly as the painted one, and he rolled his shoulders. In Fal Dara he and everyone else had treated her as nobly born, or the next thing to. Of course, it was hard to pass herself off as a lady in that dress, and with her hair a shade that nature never made. She arranged her shawl more snugly and folded her arms to hold it in place. The gray wool was terribly uncomfortable in that dry heat, and she herself was not feeling very dry at all; she had never heard of anyone who died of sweating, but she thought she might well be the first. "What are you doing here, Uno?"

He looked around before answering. Not that he had need; there was little traffic on the path—an occasional ox-drawn cart, a few folk in farm clothes or rougher, here and there a man on a horse—and no one seemed willing to come any closer to him than they had to. He appeared a man who might cut somebody's throat on a whim. "The blue woman gave us a name in Jehannah, and said we were to wait there until she sent instructions, but the woman in Jehannah was dead and buried when we arrived. An old woman. Died in her sleep, and none of her relatives had ever heard the blue woman's name. Then Masema started talking to people, and . . . Well, there was no point staying there for orders we'd never hear if they did come. We stay close to Masema because he slips us enough to live on, though none except Bartu and Nengar listen to his trash." The grizzled topknot swung as he shook his head in irritation.

Suddenly Nynaeve realized that there had not been a single obscene word in that. He looked about to swallow his tongue. "Perhaps if you cursed only occasionally?" She sighed. "Maybe once every other sentence?" The man smiled at her so gratefully that she wanted to throw up her hands in exasperation. "How is it that Masema has money when the rest of you do not?" She remembered Masema: a dark sour man who liked no one and nothing.

"Why, he's the bloody Prophet they've all come to hear. Would you like to meet him?" He gave the impression of counting his sentences. Nynaeve breathed deeply; the man was going to take her literally. "He might find you a flaming boat, if you want one. In Ghealdan, what the Prophet wants, the Prophet usually gets. No, he always flaming gets it in the end, one way or another. The man was a good soldier, but who'd have ever thought he would turn out like this?" His frown took in all the rude villages and the people, even the shows and the city ahead.

Nynaeve hesitated. The dreaded Prophet, rousing mobs and riots, was Masema? But he *did* preach the coming of the Dragon Reborn. They were almost to the town gate, and there was time yet before she must stand up and let Birgitte shoot arrows at her. Luca had been more than disappointed that the woman insisted on being called Maerion. If Masema *could* find a boat heading downriver . . . Today, maybe. On the other hand, there *were* the riots. If rumor inflated them tenfold, then only hundreds had died in towns and cities farther north. Only hundreds.

"Just don't remind him that you have anything to do with that bloody island," Uno went on, eyeing her thoughtfully. Now that she thought of it, she realized that he very likely did not know what her connection to Tar Valon actually was. Women did go there without becoming Aes Sedai, after all, to seek help or answers. He was aware that she was involved in some way, but no more than that. "He isn't much friendlier to women from there than the Whitecloaks are. If you just keep your mouth bloody well shut about it, he'll likely pass it over. For somebody who comes from the same village as the Lord Dragon, Masema will probably have a flaming boat *built*."

The crowds were thicker at the city gates, flanked by squat gray towers, men and women streaming in and out, afoot and mounted, in every sort of garb from rags to embroidered silk coats and dresses. The gates themselves, thick and iron-bound, stood open under the guard of a dozen spearmen in scaled tunics and round steel caps with flat rims. Actually, the guards paid more attention to half their number of Whitecloaks lounging nearby than to anything else. It was the men in snowy cloaks and burnished mail who watched the flow of people.

"Do the Whitecloaks cause much trouble?" she asked quietly.

Uno pursed his lips as if to spit, glanced at her, and did not. "Where do they bloody not? There was a woman with one of these traveling shows who did tricks, sleight of hand. Four days ago a flaming mob of pigeon-gutted sheep-heads tore the show apart." Valan Luca had certainly never mentioned that! "Peace! What they wanted was the woman. Claimed she was"—he glowered at the folk hurrying by, and lowered his voice—"Aes Sedai. And a Darkfriend. Broke her bloody neck getting her to a rope, so I hear, but they hung her corpse anyway. Masema had the ringleaders beheaded, but it was Whitecloaks whipped up the bloody mob.” His scowl matched the red eye painted on his patch. “There’s been too many flaming hangings and beheadings, if you bloody well ask me. Bloody Masema’s as bad as the bloody Whitecloaks when it comes to finding a Darkfriend under every flaming rock.”

“Once every other sentence,” she murmured, and the man actually blushed.

“Don’t know what I’m thinking,” he grumped, coming to a stop. “Can’t take you in there. It’s half festival and half riot, with a cutpurse every third step and a woman not safe out-of-doors after dark.” He sounded more scandalized about the last than the rest; in Shienar, a woman was safe anywhere, any time—except from Trollocs and Myrddraal, of course—and any man would die to see it so. “Not safe. I’ll take you back. When I find a way, I’ll come for you.”

That settled it for her. Pulling her arm loose before he could get a grip on it, she quickened her pace toward the gates. “Come along, Uno, and do not dawdle. If you dawdle, I will leave you behind.” He caught up to her, grumbling under his breath about the stubbornness of women. Once she understood that that was his subject, and that apparently he did not think her injunction against cursing held when talking to himself, she stopped listening.

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CHAPTER
39

Encounters in Samara

The Whitecloaks at the gates gave Uno and Nynaeve no more mind than they gave anyone else in the steady throng, which was to say a cold suspicious stare, searching yet quick. Too many people made anything else impossible, and maybe the scale-armored guards did, too. Not that there was any reason for more except in her mind. Her Great Serpent ring and Lan's heavy gold ring both nestled in her pouch—the dress's low neckline meant she could not wear them on the thong—but somehow she almost expected Children of the Light to pick out a Tower-trained woman by instinct. Her relief was palpable when those icy, unfeeling eyes swept past her.

The soldiers paid the two of them as little attention—once she rearranged her shawl yet again. Uno's scowl might have helped send their eyes back to the Whitecloaks, but the man had no right to scowl in the first place. It was her business.

Rewrapping the folded length of gray wool one more time, she tied the ends around her waist. The shawl defined her bosom more than she wished, and still exposed a bit of cleavage, yet it was a considerable improvement on the dress alone. At least she would not have to worry about the shawl slipping again. If only the thing were not so hot. The weather really should be turning soon. They were not *that* far south of the Two Rivers.

Uno patiently waited on her for a change. She was of two minds as to whether this was simple courtesy—his scarred face looked a deal *too* patient—but finally they walked together into Samara. Into chaos.

A babble of noise hung over everything, no one sound distinguishable. People jammed the rough stone-paved streets all but shoulder to shoulder from slate-roofed taverns to thatch-roofed stables, from raucous inns with simple painted signs like The Blue Bull or The Dancing Goose to shops where the signs had no words, only a knife-and-scissors here, a bolt of cloth there, a goldsmith's scales or a barber's razor, a pot or a lamp or a boot.

Nynaeve saw faces as pale as that of any Andorman and as dark as that of any of the Sea Folk, some clean, some dirty, and coats with high collars, low collars, no collars, drably colored and bright, plain and embroidered, shabby and near new-made, in styles strange as often as familiar. One fellow with a dark forked beard wore silver chains across the chest of his plain blue coat, and two with their hair in braids—*men*, with a black braid over each ear below their shoulders!—had tiny brass bells sewn to their red coatsleeves and the turned-down tops of thigh-high boots. Whatever land they hailed from, those two were not fools; their dark eyes were hard and searching as Uno's, and they carried curved swords on their backs. A bare-chested man in a bright yellow sash, skin a deeper brown than aged wood and hands intricately tattooed, had to be one of the Sea Folk, though he wore neither earrings nor nose ring.

The women were equally as diverse, hair ranging from raven black to yellow so pale it was nearly white, braided or gathered or hanging loose, cut short, to the shoulders, to the waist, dresses in worn wool or neat linen or shimmering silk, collars brushing chins with lace or embroidery and necklines every bit as low as the one she hid. She even saw a copper-complexioned Domani woman in a barely opaque red gown that covered her to the neck and hid next to nothing! She wondered how safe that woman would be after dark. Or in this broad daylight, for that matter.

The occasional Whitecloaks and soldiers in that milling mass seemed overwhelmed, struggling to make ground as hard as anyone else. Ox-carts and horse-drawn wagons inched along the haphazardly crisscrossing streets, bearers jostled sedan chairs through the crowds, and now and then a lacquered coach with a plumed team of four or six made its laborious way, liveried footman and steel-capped guards vainly trying to clear a path. Musicians with flute or zither or bittern played at every corner where there was not a juggler or an acrobat—their skill certainly nothing to make Thom or the Chavanas worry—always with another man or woman holding out a cap for coins. Ragged beggars wove through it all, plucking at sleeves and proffering grimy hands, and hawkers bustled with trays of everything from pins to ribbons to pears, their cries lost in the din.

Her head spun by the time Uno drew her into a narrower street where the throng seemed thinner, if only by comparison. She paused to straighten her clothes, disarrayed from plunging through the crowd, before following him. It was a trifle quieter here, too. No street entertainers, and fewer hawkers and beggars. Beggars kept clear of Uno, even after he tossed a few coppers to a wary pack of urchins, for which she did not blame them. The man just did not look . . . charitable.

The town's buildings loomed over these narrow ways, despite being only two or three stories, putting the streets themselves in shadow. But there was good light in the sky, hours yet till dusk. Still plenty of time to get back to the show. If she had to. With luck, they could all be boarding a riverboat by sunset.

She gave a start when another Shienaran suddenly joined them, sword on his back and head shaven but for that topknot, a dark-haired man only a few years older than she. Uno gave curt introductions and explanation without slowing.

"Peace favor you, Nynaeve," Ragan said, the skin of his dark cheek dimpling around a triangular white scar. Even smiling, his face was hard; she had never met a soft Shienaran. Soft men did not survive along the Blight, nor soft women either. "I remember you. Your hair was different, was it not? No matter. Never fear. We will see you safely to Masema and to wherever you would go after. Just be sure not to mention Tar Valon to him." No one was sparing them a second glance, but he lowered his voice anyway. "Masema thinks the Tower will try to control the Lord Dragon."

Nynaeve shook her head. Another fool man who was going to take care of her. At least he did not try to engage her in conversation; the mood she was in, she would have given him the rough side of her tongue if he so much as commented on the heat. Her own face felt a trifle damp, and no wonder, having to wear a shawl in this weather. Abruptly she remembered what the one-eyed man had said concerning Ragan's opinion of her tongue. She did not think she more than glanced at him, but Ragan moved to the other side of Uno as if for shelter and eyed her warily. Men!

The streets grew still narrower, and though the stone buildings lining them did not grow smaller, it was more often than not the backs of the buildings they saw, and rough gray walls that could hide only small yards. Eventually they turned down an alley barely wide enough for all three of them abreast. At the far end, a lacquered and gilded coach stood surrounded by scale-armored men. More immediately, halfway between her and the coach, fellows lounged thickly along both sides of the alley. In a motley of coats, most clutched clubs or spears or swords as different as their garb.

They could have been a pack of street toughs, but neither of the Shienarans slowed, so she did not either.

“The street out front will be full of bloody fools hoping to catch a glimpse of Masema at a bloody window.” Uno’s voice was pitched for her ears alone. “The only way to get in is by the back.” He fell silent as they came close enough for the waiting men to hear.

Two of those were soldiers with rimmed steel helmets and scaled tunics, swords at hip and spears in hand, but it was the others who studied the three newcomers and fingered their weapons. They had disturbing eyes, too intent, almost feverish. For once, she would have been pleased to see an honest leer. These men did not care whether she was a woman or a horse.

Without a word Uno and Ragan unfastened the scabbarded blades from their backs and handed them and their daggers to a plump-faced man who might have been a shopkeeper once, from the look of his blue woolen coat and breeches. The clothing had been good; it was clean, but heavily worn, and wrinkled as if it had been slept in for a month. Plainly he recognized the Shienarans, and though he frowned at her for a moment, especially at her belt knife, he silently nodded to a narrow wooden gate in the stone wall. That was perhaps the most off-putting fact of all; none of them made a sound.

On the other side of wall was a small yard where weeds stuck up between cobblestones. The tall stone house—three broad, pale-gray stories, with wide windows and scroll-worked eaves and gables, roofed in dark red tiles—must have been one of the finest in Samara. Once the gate was closed behind them, Ragan spoke softly. “There have been attempts to kill the Prophet.”

It took Nynaeve a moment to realize that he was explaining why their weapons had been taken. “But you are his friends,” she protested. “You all followed Rand to Falme together.” She was not about to start calling him the Lord Dragon.

“That’s why we’re bloody let in at all,” Uno said dryly. “I told you we don’t see everything the way . . . the Prophet does.” The slight pause, and the quick half-glance back at the gate to see if anyone was listening, spoke volumes. It had been Masema, before. And Uno was clearly a man who did not temper his tongue easily.

“Just watch what you say for once,” Ragan told her, “and likely you will get the help you want.” She nodded, as agreeably as anyone could wish

—she knew sense when she heard it, even if he had no right to offer it—and he and Uno exchanged doubtful glances. She was going to stuff these two into a sack with Thom and Juilin and switch anything that stuck up.

Fine house as it might be, the kitchen was dusty, and empty except for one bony, gray-haired woman, her drab gray dress and white apron the only clean things in sight as they walked through. Sucking her teeth, the old woman hardly glanced up from stirring a small kettle of soup over a tiny blaze in one of the wide stone fireplaces. Two battered pots hung on hooks where twenty could have, and a cracked pottery bowl on a blue-lacquered tray stood on the broad table.

Beyond the kitchen, moderately fine hangings decorated the walls. Nynaeve had developed something of an eye in the last year, and these scenes of feasts and hunts for deer and bear and boar were only good, not excellent. Chairs and tables and chests lined the halls, dark lacquer streaked with red, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Hangings and furniture alike were also dusty, and the red-and-white-tiled floor had had only a halfhearted lick with a broom. Cobwebs decorated the corners and cornices of the high plaster ceiling.

There were no other servants—or anyone else—in sight until they came to a weedy fellow sitting on the floor beside an open door, his grimy red silk coat much too large for him and at odds with a filthy shirt and worn woolen breeches. One of his cracked boots had a large hole in the sole; a toe poked through another in the other one. He held up a hand, whispering, “The Light shine on you, and praise the name of the Lord Dragon?” He made it sound a question, querulously twisting a narrow face as unwashed as his shirt, but then he did the same with everything. “The Prophet can’t be disturbed now? He’s busy? You’ll have to wait a bit?” Uno nodded patiently, and Ragan leaned against the wall; they had been through this before.

Nynaeve did not know what she had expected of the Prophet, not even now that she was aware who he was, but certainly not filth. That soup had smelled like cabbage and potatoes, hardly the fare for a man who had an entire city dancing for him. And only two servants, both of whom could well have come from the rudest huts outside the city.

The skinny guard, if such he was—he had no weapon; perhaps he was not trusted either—seemed to have no objection when she moved to where she could see through the doorway. The man and woman inside could not have been more different. Masema had shaved even his topknot, and his coat was plain brown wool, heavily wrinkled but clean, although his knee-high boots were scuffed. Deep-set eyes turned his permanently sour look to a scowl, and a scar made a pale triangle on his dark cheek, a near mirror image of Ragan's, only more faded with age and a hair nearer the eye. The woman, in elegantly gold-embroidered blue silk, was short of her middle years and quite lovely despite a nose perhaps too long for beauty. A simple blue net cap gathered dark hair spilling almost to her waist, but she wore a broad necklace of gold and firedrops with a matching bracelet, and gemmed rings decorated nearly every finger. Where Masema seemed poised to rush at something, teeth bared, she bore herself with stately reserve and grace.

". . . so many follow wherever you go," she was saying, "that order flies over the wall when you arrive. People are not safe in themselves or their property—"

"The Lord Dragon has broken all bonds of law, all bonds made by mortal men and women." Masema's voice was heated, but intense, not angry. "The Prophecies say that the Lord Dragon will break all chains that bind, and it is so. The Lord Dragon's radiance will protect us against the Shadow."

"It is not the Shadow that threatens here, but cutpurses and slipfingers and headcrackers. Some who follow you—many—believe that they can take what they wish from whoever has it without payment or leave."

"There is justice in the hereafter, when we are born again. Concern with things of this world is useless. But very well. If you wish earthly justice"—his lip curled contemptuously—"let it be this. Henceforth, a man who steals will have his right hand cut off. A man who interferes with a woman, or insults her honor, or commits murder will be hung. A woman who steals or commits murder will be flogged. If any accuses and finds twelve who will agree, it will be done. Let it be so."

"As you say, of course," the woman murmured. Aloof elegance remained on her face, but she sounded shaken. Nynaeve did not know how Ghealdanin law ran, but she did not think it could be so casual as that. The woman took a deep breath. "There is still the matter of food. It becomes difficult to feed so many."

"Every man, woman and child who has come to the Lord Dragon must have a full belly. It must be so! Where gold can be found, food can be found, and there is too much gold in the world. Too much concern with gold." Masema's head swung angrily. Not angry with her, but in general. He looked to be searching for those who concerned themselves with gold so he could unleash fury on their heads. "The Lord Dragon has been Reborn. The Shadow hangs over the world, and only the Lord Dragon can save us. Only belief in the Lord Dragon, submission and obedience to the word of the Lord Dragon. All else is useless, even where it is not blasphemy."

"Blessed be the name of the Lord Dragon in the Light." It had the sound of a rote reply. "It is no longer simply a matter of gold, my Lord Prophet. Finding and transporting food in sufficient—"

"I am not a lord," he broke in again, and now he was angry. He leaned toward the woman, spittle on his lips, and though her face did not change, her hands twitched as if they wanted to clutch her dress. "There is no lord but the Lord Dragon, in whom the Light dwells, and I am but one humble voice of the Lord Dragon. Remember that! High or low, blasphemers earn the scourge!"

"Forgive me," the begemmed woman murmured, spreading her skirts in a curtsy fit for a queen's court. "It is as you say, of course. There is no lord save the Lord Dragon, and I am but a humble follower of the Lord Dragon—blessed be the name of the Lord Dragon—who comes to hear the wisdom and guidance of the Prophet."

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Masema was suddenly cold. "You wear too much gold. Do not let earthly possessions seduce you. Gold is dross. The Lord Dragon is all."

Immediately she began plucking rings from her fingers, and before the second was off, the weedy fellow scurried to her side, pulling a pouch from his coat pocket and holding it for her to drop them in. The bracelet and necklace followed as well.

Nynaeve looked at Uno and raised an eyebrow.

"Every penny goes to the poor," he told her in a low voice that barely reached her ear, "or somebody who needs it. If some merchant hadn't bloody given him her house, he'd be in a bloody stable, or one of those huts outside the city."

"Even his food comes as a gift," Ragan said just as quietly. "They used to bring him dishes fit for a king, until they learned he just gave away everything but a little bread, and soup or stew. He hardly drinks wine, now."

Nynaeve shook her head. She supposed it was one way to find money for the poor. Simply rob anyone who was *not* poor. Of course, that would just make everyone poor in the end, but it might work for a time. She wondered if Uno and Ragan knew the whole of it. People who claimed they were collecting money to help others often had a way of letting a good bit stick in their own pockets, or else they liked the power that spreading it about gave them, liked it far too much. She had better feeling for the man who freely gave one copper from his own purse than for the fellow who wrested a gold crown from someone else's. And less for fools who abandoned their farms and shops to follow this . . . this *Prophet,* with no idea where their next meal would come from.

Inside the room, the woman curtsied to Masema even more deeply than before, spreading her skirts wide and bowing her head. "Until I once again have the honor of the Prophet's words and counsel. The name of the Lord Dragon be blessed in the Light."

Masema waved her away absently, already half forgotten. He had seen them in the hall, and was looking at them with as close to pleasure as his dour face could come. It was not very close. The woman swept out, not even appearing to see Nynaeve or the two men. Nynaeve sniffed as the weedy fellow in the red coat waved anxiously for them to come in. For someone who had just given up her jewelry on demand, that woman managed a fine queenly air.

The skinny man scampered back to his place by the door as the other three men shook hands in the Borderlands fashion, gripping forearms.

"Peace favor your sword," Uno said, echoed by Ragan.

"Peace favor the Lord Dragon" was the reply, "and his Light illumine us all." Nynaeve's breath caught. There was no doubt to his meaning; the *Lord Dragon* was the source of the Light. And he had the nerve to speak of blasphemy from others! "Have you come to the Light at last?"

"We walk in the Light," Ragan said carefully. "As always." Uno kept silent, his face blank.

Weary patience made an odd play on Masema's sour features. "There is no way to the Light save through the Lord Dragon. You will see the way and the truth in the end, for you have seen the Lord Dragon, and only those whose souls are swallowed in the Shadow can see and not believe. You are not such. You will believe."

In spite of the heat and the wool shawl, goose bumps crawled along Nynaeve's arms. Total conviction filled the man's voice, and this close she could see a glint in his nearly black eyes that bordered on madness. He swept those eyes over her, and she stiffened her knees. He made the most rabid Whitecloak she had ever seen appear mild. Those fellows in the alley were only a pale imitation of their master.

“You, woman. Are you ready to come to the Light of the Lord Dragon, abandoning sin and flesh?”

“I walk in the Light as best I can.” She was irritated to find herself speaking as carefully as Ragan. Sin? Who did he think he was?

“You are too concerned with the flesh.” Masema’s gaze was withering as it swept over her red dress and the shawl wrapped tightly around her.

“And what do you mean by that?” Uno’s eye widened in startlement, and Ragan made small shushing motions, yet she could as soon have flown as stopped. “Do you think you have a right to tell me how to dress?” Before she quite realized what she was doing, she had untied the shawl and looped it over her elbows; it really was much too hot, anyway. “*No* man has that right, for me or any other woman! If I chose to go *naked,* it would be none of your concern!”

Masema contemplated her bosom for a moment—not so much as a hint of admiration lit his deep eyes, only acid contempt—then raised that stare to her face. Uno’s real eye and painted made a perfect match, scowling at nothing, and Ragan winced, surely muttering to himself inside his head.

Nynaeve swallowed hard. So much for guarding her tongue. For perhaps the first time in her life, she truly regretted speaking her mind without thinking first. If this man could order men’s hands cut off, order men hanged, with only a jack-fool excuse of a trial, what was he not capable of? She thought she was angry enough to channel.

But if she did . . . If Moghedien or any Black sisters *were* in Samara . . . *But if I don’t* . . . ! She wanted very much to wrap the shawl back around her, up to her chin. But not with him staring at her. Something in the back of her mind shouted at her not to be a complete woolhead—only men let pride overcome sense—but she met Masema’s gaze defiantly, even if she did have to stop herself from swallowing again.

His lip curled. “Such garments are worn to entice men, and for no other reason.” She could not understand how his voice could be so fervent and so icy at the same time. “Thoughts of the flesh distract the mind from the Lord Dragon and the Light. I have considered banning dresses that distract men’s eyes, and minds. Let women who would waste time in attracting men, and men who would attract women, be scourged until they know that only in perfect contemplation of the Lord Dragon and the Light can joy be found." He was not really looking at her any longer. That dark burning stare looked through her, to something distant. "Let taverns, and places that sell strong drink, and all places that would take the minds of people from that perfect contemplation, be closed and burned to the ground. I frequented such places in my days of sin, but now I heartily regret, as all should regret their transgressions. There is only the Lord Dragon and the Light! All else is illusion, a snare set by the Shadow!"

"This is Nynaeve al'Meara," Uno said quickly into the first pause for breath. "From Emond's Field, in the Two Rivers, whence the Lord Dragon comes." Masema's head turned slowly to the one-eyed man, and she hastily took the opportunity to re-do the shawl as she had had it. "She was at Fal Dara with the Lord Dragon, and at Falme. The Lord Dragon rescued her at Falme. The Lord Dragon cares for her as for a mother."

Another time, she would have given him a few choice words, and maybe a well-boxed ear. Rand had *not* rescued her—or not exactly, anyway—and she was only a handful of years older than he. A mother, indeed!

Masema turned back to her. The zealous light that had burned in his eyes before was nothing to what was there now. They almost glowed.

"Nynaeve. Yes." His voice quickened. "Yes! I remember your name, and your face. Blessed are you among women, Nynaeve al'Meara, none more so save the blessed mother of the Lord Dragon herself, for you watched the Lord Dragon grow. You attended the Lord Dragon as a child." He seized her arms, hard fingers biting in painfully, but he seemed unaware of it. "You will speak to the crowds of the Lord Dragon's boyhood, of his first words of wisdom, of the miracles that accompanied him. The Light has sent you here to serve the Lord Dragon."

She was not exactly sure what to say. There had never been any miracles around Rand that *she* had seen. She had *heard* of things, in Tear, but you could hardly call what a *ta'veren* caused miracles. Not really. Even what had occurred at Falme had a rational explanation. Sort of. And as for words of wisdom, the first she had heard out of him had been a fervent promise never to throw a rock at anyone again, offered after she had paddled his young backside for it. She did not believe she had heard another word since that she could call wise. In any case, if Rand had given sage advice from his cradle, if there had been comets by night and apparitions in the sky by day, she still would not have stayed with this madman.

"I must travel downriver," she said guardedly. "To join him. The Lord Dragon." That name curdled on her tongue, so soon after her promise to herself, but Rand was apparently never anything as simple as "he" around the Prophet. *I am just being sensible. That's all it is.* "A man is an oak, a woman a willow," the saying ran. The oak fought the wind and was broken, while the willow bent when it must and survived. That did not mean she had to like bending. "He . . . the Lord Dragon . . . is in Tear. The Lord Dragon has summoned me there."

"Tear." Masema took his hands away, and she surreptitiously rubbed her arms. She did not have to try hiding it, though; he was staring at something beyond sight again. "Yes, I have heard." Speaking to something beyond sight, too, or to himself. "When Amadicia has come to the Lord Dragon as Ghealdan has, I will lead the people to Tear, to bask in the radiance of the Lord Dragon. I will send disciples to spread the word of the Lord Dragon throughout Tarabon and Arad Doman, to Saldaea and Kandor and the Borderlands, to Andor, and I will lead the people to kneel at the Lord Dragon's feet."

"A wise plan . . . uh . . . O Prophet of the Lord Dragon." A fool plan if she had ever heard one. That was not to say it would not work. Fool plans often did, for some reason, when men made them. Rand might even enjoy having all those people kneel to him, if he was half as arrogant as Egwene claimed. "But we . . . I cannot wait. I have been summoned, and when the Lord Dragon summons, mere mortals must obey." Some day she was going to get a chance to box Rand's head for her need to do this! "I have to find a boat going downriver."

Masema stared at her for so long that she began to grow nervous. Sweat trickled down her back, and between her breasts, and it was only partly the heat. That stare would have made Moghedien sweat.

Finally he nodded, fiery zealotry fading to leave only his usual dour scowl. "Yes," he sighed. "If you have been summoned, you must go. Go with the Light, and in the Light. Dress more appropriately—those who have been close to the Lord Dragon must be virtuous above all others—and meditate on the Lord Dragon and his Light."

"A riverboat?" Nynaeve insisted. "You must know whenever a boat reaches Samara, or any village along the river. If you could just tell me where I might find one, it would make my journey much . . . swifter." She had been going to say “easier,” but she did not think ease mattered much to Masema.

“I do not concern myself with such things,” he said testily. “But you are right. When the Lord Dragon commands, you must come on the hour. I will ask. If a vessel can be found, someone will tell me of it eventually.” His eyes shifted to the other two men. “You must see that she is safe until then. If she persists in clothing herself in this manner, she will attract men with vile thoughts. She must be protected, like a wayward child, until she is reunited with the Lord Dragon.”

Nynaeve bit her tongue. A willow, not an oak, when a willow was needed. She managed to mask her irritation behind a smile that had to carry all the gratitude the idiot man could wish. A dangerous idiot, however. She had to remember that.

Uno and Ragan made their goodbyes quickly, with more forearm clasping, and hustled her out, one on either arm, as if they thought it necessary to hurry her away from Masema for some reason. Masema appeared to have forgotten them before they reached the door; he was already frowning at the weedy man, waiting next to a bluff fellow in a farmer’s coat who was crumpling his cap in thick hands, awe painted across his broad face.

She did not say a word as they retraced their steps through the kitchen, where the gray-haired woman was sucking her teeth and stirring the soup as if she had not moved in the interval. Nynaeve held her tongue while they retrieved their weapons, held it until they were out of the alleyway, into something approaching the width of a street. Then she rounded on them, shaking her finger under each nose alternately. “How dare you *drag* me out like that!” People passing by grinned—men ruefully, women appreciatively—though none could have had an idea what she was berating them over. “Another five minutes, and I would have had him finding a boat today! If you ever lay hands on me again—!” Uno snorted so loudly that she cut off with a start.

“Another five bloody minutes, and Masema would have bloody well laid hands on *you*. Or rather, he’d have said that someone should, and then someone flaming well would have! When he says something should be done, there are always fifty flaming hands, or a hundred, or a flaming thousand if need be, to do it!” He stalked off down the street, Ragan at his side, and she had to go with them or be left. Uno paced on as if he knew she would trail after. She almost went the other way just to prove him wrong. Following had nothing to do with fear of getting lost in that rabbit warren of streets. She could have found her way out. Eventually. “He had a flaming Lord of the Crown High Council flogged—flogged!—for half the heat in his voice that you had,” the one-eyed man growled. “Contempt for the word of the Lord Dragon, he called it. Peace! Demanding what bloody right he had to comment on your flaming clothes! For a few minutes you did well enough, but I saw your face there at the end. You were ready to flaming lace into him again. The only thing worse you could have done would be to bloody name the Lord Dragon. He calls that blasphemy. As well name the flaming Dark One.”

Ragan’s topknot bobbed as he nodded. “Remember the Lady Baelome, Uno? Right after the first rumors came from Tear naming the Lord Dragon, Nynaeve, she said something about ‘this Rand al’Thor’ in Masema’s hearing, and he called for an axe and a chopping block without pause for breath.”

“He had someone beheaded for *that*?” she said incredulously.

“No,” Uno muttered in disgust. “But only because she bloody well groveled when she realized he flaming meant it. She was dragged out and hung up by her flaming wrists from the back of her own coach, then strapped the bloody length of whatever village it was we were in then. Her own flaming retainers stood like a bunch of sheep-gutted farmers and watched it.”

“When it was done,” Ragan added, “she thanked Masema for his mercy, the same as Lord Aleshin did.” His tone had too much pointedness to suit her; he was delivering a moral, and intended her to take it in. “They had reason, Nynaeve. Theirs would not have been the first heads he has put on a stake. Yours could have been the latest. And ours with it, if we tried to give aid. Masema plays no favorites.”

She drew breath. How could Masema have all this power? And not only among his own followers, apparently. But then, there was no reason lords or ladies could be not as great fools as any farmer; a good many were greater, in her estimation. That idiot woman with her rings had surely been a lady; no merchant ever wore firedrops. Yet surely Ghealdan had laws and courts and judges. Where was the queen, or the king? She could not remember which Ghealdan had. No one in the Two Rivers had ever had much truck with kings or queens, yet that was what they were for, them and lords and ladies, seeing justice fairly done. But whatever Masema did here was no concern of hers. She had more important problems than worrying over a flock of imbeciles who let a madman trample them.

Still, curiosity made her say, “Does he mean that about trying to stop men and women looking at one another? What does he think will happen if there are no marriages, no children? Will he stop people farming next, or weaving or making shoes, so they can think about Rand al’Thor?” She enunciated the name deliberately. These two went around calling him “the Lord Dragon” at the drop of a pin almost as much as Masema did. “I will tell you this. If he tries telling women how to dress, he *will* start a riot. Against him.” Samara must have something like a Women’s Circle—most places did, even if they called it something else, even when it was not a formal arrangement at all; there were some things men just did not have the sense to see to—and they surely could and did call women down for wearing inappropriate clothes, but that was not the same as a man putting his finger into it. Women did not meddle in men’s affairs—well, no more than was necessary—and men should not meddle in women’s. “And I expect the men will react no better if he tries closing taverns and the like. I never knew a man yet who wouldn’t cry himself to sleep if he could not put his nose in a mug now and then.”

“Maybe he will,” Ragan said, “and maybe he won’t. Sometimes he orders things, and sometimes he forgets, or puts it off anyway, because something more important comes along. You would be surprised,” he added dryly, “at what his followers will accept from him without a whimper.” He and Uno were flanking her, she realized, and watching the other folk in the street warily. Even to her, the pair of them appeared ready to draw swords in a heartbeat. If they actually thought to carry out Masema’s instructions, they had another think coming.

“He isn’t against bloody marriage,” Uno growled, staring so hard at a peddler with meat pies on a tray that the man turned and ran without taking the coins from two women holding pies in their hands. “You’re lucky he did not remember you have no husband, or he might have sent you to the Lord Dragon with one. Sometimes he picks out three or four hundred unmarried men and as many women, and flaming well marries them. Most have never seen each other before that day. If the pigeon-gutted dirt-grubbers don’t bloody complain about that, do you think they’ll open their flaming mouths about ale?”

Ragan muttered something under his breath, but she caught enough to narrow her eyes. “Some man doesn’t know how bloody lucky *he* is.” That was what he had said. He did not even notice her glare. He was too busy scanning the street, watching against someone who might try to abscond with her like a pig in a sack. She was half tempted to take off the shawl and throw it away. He did not seem to hear her sniff, either. Men could be insufferably blind and deaf when they wished to.

“At least he didn’t try to steal my jewelry,” she said. “Who was that fool woman who gave him hers?” She could not have much sense if she had become one of Masema’s followers.

“That,” Uno said, “was Alliandre, Blessed of the Light, Queen of bloody Ghealdan. And a dozen more titles, the way you southlanders like to pile them up.”

Nynaeve stubbed her toe on a cobblestone and almost fell. “So that is how he does it,” she exclaimed, shaking off their helping hands. “If the *queen* is fool enough to listen to him, no wonder he can do whatever he wants.”

“Not a fool,” Uno said sharply, flashing a frown at her before returning to watching the street. “A wise woman. When you bloody find yourself straddling a wild horse, you bloody well ride it the way it’s bloody going, if you’re smart enough to pour water out of a bloody boot. You think she’s a fool because Masema took her rings? She’s flaming smart enough to know he might demand more if she stopped wearing jewelry when she comes to him. The first time, he went to her—been the other way round, since—and he *did* take the rings right off her flaming fingers. She had strands of pearls in her hair, and he broke the strings pulling them out. All of her ladies-in-waiting were down on their knees gathering the bloody things off the floor. Alliandre even picked up a few herself.”

“That doesn’t sound so wise to me,” she said stoutly. “It sounds like cowardice.” *Whose knees were shaking because he looked at her?* a voice in her head asked. *Who was sweating herself silly?* At least she had managed to face up to him. *I did. Bending like a willow isn’t the same as cowering like a mouse.* “Is she the queen, or isn’t she?”

The two men exchanged those irritating looks, and Ragan said quietly, “You don’t understand, Nynaeve. Alliandre is the fourth to sit on the Light Blessed Throne since we came to Ghealdan, and that’s barely half a year. Johanin wore the crown when Masema began attracting a few crowds, but he thought Masema a harmless madman and did nothing even when the crowds grew and his nobles told him he had to put an end to it. Johanin died in a hunting accident—"

"Hunting accident!" Uno interjected, sneering. A hawker who happened to be looking at him dropped his tray of pins and needles. "Not unless he didn't know one bloody end of a flaming boar spear from the other. Flaming southlanders and their flaming Game of Houses!"

"And Ellizelle succeeded," Ragan took up. "She had the army dispersing the crowds, until finally there was a pitched battle and it was the army that was chased off."

"Bloody poor excuse for soldiers," Uno muttered. She was going to have to speak to him about his language again.

Ragan nodded agreement, but went on with what he had been saying. "They say Ellizelle took poison after that, but however she died, she was replaced by Teresia, who lasted a full ten days after her coronation, just until she had a chance to send two thousand soldiers against ten thousand folk who had gathered to hear Masema outside Jehannah. After her soldiers were routed, she abdicated to marry a rich merchant." Nynaeve stared at him incredulously, and Uno snorted. "That is what they say," the younger man maintained. "Of course, in this land, marrying a commoner means giving up any claim to the throne forever, and whatever Beron Goraed feels about having a pretty young wife with royal blood, I hear he was dragged from his bed by a score of Alliandre's retainers and hauled to Jheda Palace for a wedding in the small hours of the morning. Teresia went off to live on her husband's new country estate while Alliandre was being crowned, all before sunrise, and the new queen summoned Masema to the palace to tell him he would not be troubled again. Inside two weeks *she* was calling on *him*. I do not know whether she really believes what he preaches, but I know she took the throne of a land on the edge of civil war, with Whitecloaks ready to move in, and she stopped it the only way she could. That is a wise queen, and a man could be proud to serve her, even if she is a southlander."

Nynaeve opened her mouth, and forgot what she was going to say when Uno said, in a casual tone, "There's a flaming Whitecloak following us. Don't look around, woman. You have more bloody sense than that."

Her neck stiffened with the effort of keeping her eyes forward; prickles crawled up her back. "Take the next turn, Uno."

“That carries us away from the main streets, and the flaming gates. We can flaming lose him in the crowds.”

“Take it!” She inhaled slowly, made her voice less shrill. “I need a sight of him.”

Uno glowered so fiercely that people stepped out of their way for ten paces ahead, but they turned down the next narrow street. She shifted her head a trifle as they made the turn, just enough to peek from the edge of her eye before the corner of a small stone tavern cut off her view. The snowy cloak with the flaring sun stood out among the thin crowd. There was no mistaking that beautiful face, the face she had been sure she would see. No other Whitecloak than Galad could have a reason to follow her, and none to follow Uno or Ragan.

* * *

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CHAPTER 40

The Wheel Weaves

As soon as the building hid Galad, Nynaeve's eyes darted down the street ahead. Fury bubbled up, at herself as much as Galadedrid Damodred. *You witless woolhead!* It was a narrow way like all the rest, paved with rounded stones, lined with gray shops and houses and taverns, populated with a scattered afternoon crowd. *If you hadn't come into town, he'd never have found you!* Too scattered to hide anyone. *You had to go see the Prophet! You had to go believing* the Prophet *would whisk you away before Moghedien gets here! When are you going to learn you can't depend on anyone but yourself?* In an instant she made her choice. When Galad turned that corner and did not see them, he would begin looking into shops, and maybe taverns as well.

"This way." Gathering her skirts, she darted into the nearest alley and pressed her back against the wall. No one glanced at her twice, furtive as she was, and what that had to say about the way things were in Samara she did not want to consider. Uno and Ragan were beside her before she finished setting her feet, crowding her farther down the dusty dirt alleyway, past an old splintered bucket and a rain barrel dried to the point of collapse inside its hoops. At least they were doing what she wanted. In a manner of speaking. Tense hands on long sword hilts rising above their shoulders, they were ready to protect her whether she desired it or not. *Let them, you fool! Do you think you can protect yourself?*

She was certainly angry enough. Galad, of all people! She should never have left the menagerie! A fool whim, and one that might ruin everything. She could no more channel here than against Masema. Just the possibility that Moghedien or Black sisters were in Samara made her dependent on two men for her safety. It was enough to screw her anger tight; she could have chewed a hole in the stone wall behind her. She knew why Aes Sedai had Warders—all but Reds, anyway. In her head, she did. In her heart, it just made her want to snarl.

Galad appeared, threading his way slowly through the folk out in the street, eyes searching. By all reason, he should have gone on by—he should have—yet almost immediately his gaze settled on the alleyway. On them. He did not even have the grace to appear pleased or surprised.

Uno and Ragan moved together as Galad turned toward the alley. The one-eyed man had his sword out in the blink of an eye, and Ragan was scarcely slower for all he paused to push her deeper into the narrow passage. They positioned themselves one behind the other; should Galad make it past Uno, he would still have Ragan to face.

Nynaeve ground her teeth. She could make all these swords unnecessary, useless; she could sense the True Source, like a light unseen over her shoulder, waiting for her embrace. She could do it. If she dared.

Galad stopped at the alley mouth, cloak thrown back, one hand resting nonchalantly on his sword hilt, a picture of spring-steel grace. Except for his burnished mail, he could have been at a ball.

“I do not want to kill either of you, Shienaran,” he said calmly to Uno. Nynaeve had heard Elayne and Gawyn speak of Galad’s sword skill, but for the first time she realized that he might really be as good as they said. At least, *he* thought he was. Two seasoned soldiers with blades bare, and he eyed them as a wolfhound would eye a pair of lesser dogs, not seeking a fight yet utterly confident he could take both. Never quite looking away from the two men, he addressed her. “Someone else might have run into a shop or an inn, but you never do what is expected. Will you let me speak with you? There is no need to make me kill these men.”

None of the passersby were stopping, but even with three men blocking her view she could see heads swiveling for a glimpse of what had drawn the Whitecloak. And plainly taking in the swords. Rumors would be hatching in all those minds and taking flight on wings that made duskswallows seem slow.

“Let him by,” she commanded. When Uno and Ragan did not budge, she repeated herself, even more firmly. They did move aside then, slowly, as much as the narrow alley would allow, yet though neither said a word, there was an air of muttering about them. Galad came by smoothly, seeming to forget the Shienarans. She suspected that believing so would be a mistake; the top-knotted men plainly did not.

Aside from one of the Forsaken, she could not imagine a man she would less like to see right then, but with that face in front of her, she was all too conscious of her own breathing, her own heartbeat. It was ludicrous. Why could the man not be ugly? Or at least plain.

“You knew I knew that you were following.” Accusation rang strongly in her voice, though she was not sure what she was accusing him of. Not doing what she had expected and wanted, she imagined ruefully.

“I assumed as much as soon as I recognized you, Nynaeve. I remember that you generally see more than you let on.”

She would not let him divert her with compliments. Look where that had gotten her with Valan Luca. “What are you doing in Ghealdan? I thought you were on your way to Altara.”

For a moment he stared down at her with those dark, beautiful eyes, then abruptly laughed. “In all the world, Nynaeve, only you would ask me the question I should be asking you. Very well. I’ll answer you, for all it should be the other way round. I did have orders for Salidar, in Altara, but all changed when this Prophet fellow—What is the matter? Are you unwell?”

Nyaneve forced her face to smoothness. “Of course not,” she said irritably. “My health is quite good, thank you very kindly.” Salidar! Of course! The name was like one of Aludra’s firesticks going off in her head. All of that racking of her brain, and Galad casually handed her what she had been unable to dig up on her own. Now if only Masema found a ship quickly. If only she could make sure Galad would not betray them. Without letting Uno and Ragan kill him, of course. Whatever Elayne said, Nynaeve could not believe she would appreciate having her brother cut down. Small chance he would believe Elayne was not with her. “I just cannot get over my shock at seeing you.”

“A small patch on mine, when I learned you had slipped out of Sienda.” Sternness became that handsome face to an unfortunate degree, but his tone offset it. Somewhat. He could have been lecturing a small girl who had sneaked out of the house after her bedtime to climb trees. “I was sick near to death with worry. What under the Light possessed you? Have you any idea of the risks you ran? And to come here, of all places. Elayne always chooses to saddle a horse at the gallop if she can, but I thought that you, at least, had more sense. This so-called Prophet—” He cut off, eyeing the other two men. Uno had grounded his swordpoint, scarred hands folded atop the pommel. Ragan appeared to be inspecting his blade's edge to the exclusion of everything else.

"I have heard rumors," Galad went on slowly, "that he is Shienaran. You *cannot* have been witless enough to get yourself mixed up with him." There was too much question in that for her taste by far.

"Neither of them is the Prophet, Galad," she said wryly. "I've known them both for some little time, and I can assure you of that. Uno, Ragan, unless you intend to prune your toenails, put those things up. Well?" They hesitated before doing as they were told, Uno grumping under his breath and glaring, but they did it finally. Men usually responded to a firm voice. Most did. Sometimes, anyway.

"I hardly thought they were, Nynaeve." Galad's tone, even more arid than hers, made her bristle, but when he went on, he sounded annoyed rather than superior. And worried. Which made her bristle even more, of course. *He* all but gave her palpitations, and *he* had the nerve to be worried. "I do not know what you and Elayne have fallen into here, and I do not care, so long as I can extract you from it before you are hurt. Trade is slow on the river, but a suitable boat of some sort should call in the next few days. Let me know where I can find you, and I will secure you passage to somewhere in Altara. From there, you can make your way to Caemlyn."

She gaped in spite of herself. "You mean to find us a ship?"

"It is all I can do, now." He sounded apologetic, and shook his head as if arguing with himself. "I cannot escort you to safety; my duty is here."

"We wouldn't want to take you from your duty," she said, a touch breathless. If he wanted to misunderstand, let him. The most she had hoped for was that he would leave them be.

He seemed to feel the need to defend himself. "It is hardly safe to send you off alone, but a boat will take you away before the entire border explodes. Which it will, soon or late; all it needs is one spark, and the Prophet is sure to strike it if no one else does. You must see to getting yourselves to Caemlyn, you and Elayne. All I ask is your promise that you will go there. The Tower is no place for either of you. Or for—" He clamped his teeth shut, but he might as well have gone ahead and named Egwene.

It could not hurt, having Galad looking for a boat, too. If Masema could forget whether he intended to close the taverns, he could forget to have anyone find a riverboat. Especially if he thought a convenient bout of forgetfulness might keep her there to further his own plans. It could not hurt—if she could trust Galad. If she could not, then she would have to hope he was not as good with that sword as he thought he was. A stark thought, but not so stark as what might happen—*would* happen—if he proved untrustworthy.

"I am what I am, Galad, and Elayne is the same." Dodging around Masema had put a bad taste on her tongue. A little White Tower sidestepping was as close as she could come. "And you are what you are, now." She raised her eyebrows significantly at his white cloak. "That lot hates the Tower, and they hate women who can channel. Now that you are one of them, why shouldn't I think there will be fifty of you after me inside the hour, trying to put an arrow in my back if they can't haul me off to a cell? Me, and Elayne as well."

Galad's head jerked in irritation. Or maybe he was offended. "How often must I tell you? I would never let harm come to my sister. Or to you."

It truly was annoying, realizing that she was annoyed at the pause that made it clear she was an afterthought. She was not some silly girl, to lose her wits because a man had eyes that somehow managed to be melting and incredibly penetrating at the same time. "If you say it so," she told him, and his head tossed again.

"Tell me where you are put up, and I will bring word, or send it, as soon as I locate a suitable vessel."

If Elayne was right, he could no more lie than could an Aes Sedai who had sworn the Three Oaths, but still she hesitated. A mistake here could be her last. She had a right to take risks for herself, but this risk involved Elayne, too. And Thom and Juilin, for that matter; they were her responsibility, whatever they wanted to think. But she was here, and the decision had to be hers. Not that it might be any other way, frankly.

"Light, woman, what more do you want of me?" Galad growled, half-raising his hands as though to grab her shoulders. Uno's blade was between them in a flash of bright steel, but Elayne's brother actually brushed it aside like a twig, and paid it no more mind than one. "I mean no harm to you, now or ever; I swear it by my mother's name. You say that you are what you are? I know what you are. And what you are not. Perhaps half the reason I wear this," he touched an edge of his snowy cloak, "is because the Tower sent you out—you and Elayne and Egwene—for the Light knows what reason, when you are what you are. It was like sending a boy who has just learned to hold a sword into battle, and I will never forgive them. There is still time for both of you to turn aside; you do not have to carry that sword. The Tower is too dangerous for you or my sister, especially now. Half the world is become too dangerous for you! Let me help you to safety." The tightness slid from his voice, though it took on a raw edge. "I beg you, Nynaeve. If anything happened to Elayne . . . I half-wish that Egwene were with you, so I could . . ." Scrubbing a hand through his hair, he looked left and right, searching for how to convince her. Uno and Ragan held their blades ready to drive through his body, but he did not appear to see them. "In the name of the Light, Nynaeve, please allow me to do what I can."

It was a simple thing that finally tipped the balance in her mind. They were in Ghealdan. Amadicia was the only land that actually made a crime out of a woman being able to channel, and they were on the opposite bank of the river. That left only Galad's oaths as a Child of the Light to battle against his duty to Elayne. She gave blood the edge in that struggle. Besides, he really was too gorgeous for her to let Uno and Ragan kill him. Not that that had anything to do with her decision, of course.

"We are with Valan Luca's show," she said at last.

He blinked at her, frowned. "Valan Luca's . . . ? You mean one of the menageries?" Incredulity and disgust fought in his voice. "What under the Light are you doing in company like that? Those who keep such shows are no better than . . . No matter. If you need coin, I can supply some. Enough to see you in a decent inn."

His tone bespoke his certainty that she would do as he wanted. Not a "can I help you with a few crowns?" or a "would you like me to find a room for you?" He thought they should be in an inn, so into an inn they would go. The man might have observed enough to know she would duck into an alley, but he did not know her at all, it seemed. Besides, there were reasons to stay with Luca.

"Do you think there is a room, or a hayloft, not taken in all of Samara?" she asked, a touch more tartly than intended.

"I am certain I can find—"

She cut him off. "The last place anyone would look for us is among the shows." The last place anyone but Moghedien would look, at least. "You'll agree we should keep from sight as much as possible? If you *did* find a room, more than likely you'd have to have someone put out of it. A Child of the Light securing a room so for two women? That would set tongues wagging and draw eyes like flies to a midden."

He did not like it, grimacing, and glaring at Uno and Ragan as if it were their fault, but he had enough sense to see sense. "It is no fit place for either of you, but it is probably safer than anywhere inside the city at that. Since you have at least agreed to go to Caemlyn, I will say no more on it."

She kept her face smooth and let him think as he wished. If he thought she had promised what she had not, that was his affair. She had to keep him away from the show as much as possible, though. One glimpse of his sister in those spangled white breeches, and the uproar would overshadow any riot Masema could raise. "You will have to stay clear of the menagerie, mind. Until you find a ship, anyway. Then come to the performers' wagons at nightfall and ask for Nana." He liked that even less, if possible, but she forestalled him firmly. "I've not seen a single Child of the Light near any of the shows. If you visit one, don't you think people will notice and ask why?"

His smile was still gorgeous, but it showed too many teeth. "You have an answer for everything, it seems. Do you have any objection to my escorting you back there, at least?"

"I most certainly do. There will be rumors as it is—a hundred people must have noticed us talking here"—she could no longer see the street past the three men, yet she had no doubt passersby were still glancing into the alley, and Uno and Ragan had not resheathed their swords—"but if you accompany me, we'll be seen by ten times as many."

His wince was half rueful, half mirthful. "An answer for everything," he muttered. "But you have the right of it." Clearly he wished she did not. "Hear me, Shienarans," he said, turning his head, and suddenly his voice was steel. "I am Galadedrid Damodred, and this woman is under my protection. As for her companion, I would count it small loss to die in order to save her the smallest harm. If you allow either to come to that smallest harm, I will find you both and kill you." Ignoring the sudden, dangerous blankness of their faces as completely as he did their swords, he swung his eyes back to her. "I suppose you still will not tell me where Egwene is?"

"All you need know is that she is far from here." Folding her arms beneath her breasts, she could feel her heart beating through her ribs. Was she making a dangerous mistake because of a pretty face? "And safer than any action of yours can make her."

He looked as if he did not believe her, but he made no more of it. “With luck, I will find a vessel in a day or two. Until then, stay close to this Valan Luca’s . . . show. Stay low and avoid notice. As much as you can with your hair that color. And tell Elayne not to run away from me again. The Light shone on you to let me find you still in one piece, and it will have to shine twice as brightly to keep you from harm if you try haring off across Ghealdan. This Prophet’s blasphemous ruffians are everywhere, without respect for law or persons, and that does not count brigands taking advantage of disorder. Samara itself is a wasp nest, but if you will sit quietly—and convince my headstrong sister to do the same—I will find a way to get you out of it before you are stung.”

It was an effort to keep her mouth shut. Taking what she told him and making it an injunction to her! Next thing the man would want to pack her and Elayne in wool and sit them on a shelf! *Wouldn’t it be best if* someone *did?* a tiny voice asked. *Haven’t you caused enough trouble going your own way?* She told the voice to be quiet. It did not listen, but began listing disasters and near disasters sprung from her own stubbornness.

Apparently taking her silence for acquiescence, he turned away from her—and stopped. Ragan and Uno had moved to block his way to the street, glancing at her with that strange, deceptive calm men so often adopted when they were a hairsbreadth from sudden violence. The air seemed to crackle, until she motioned hurriedly. The Shienarans lowered their blades and stood aside, and Galad took his hands from his sword, brushed past them and melded into the crowd without a backward glance.

Nynaeve gave Uno and Ragan each a good glare before stalking off in the opposite direction. There she had had everything arranged properly, and they had to nearly ruin it all. Men always seemed to think violence could solve anything. If she had had a stout stick, she would have thumped all three of them about the shoulders until they saw reason.

The Shienarans seemed to see a little of it, now; they caught up to her, swords scabbarded on their backs once more, and followed without a word, even when she twice took a wrong turn and had to double back. It was especially well for them that they kept silent then. She had had enough of holding her tongue. First Masema, and then Galad. All she wanted was a wafer-thin excuse to tell someone exactly what she thought. Especially that little voice in her head, pushed back to an insect buzz now but refusing to be quiet.

By the time they were out of Samara and on that dirt cart track, with its sparse traffic, the voice refused to be denied. She worried over Rand's arrogance, but hers had brought herself and others as near calamity as made no never mind. For Birgitte, perhaps it was well over the line, even if she was alive. The best thing was for Nynaeve not to confront them again, not the Black Ajah and not Moghedien, not until someone who knew what they were doing could decide what should be done. Protest welled up, but she stamped on it as firmly as she ever had on Thom or Juilin. She would go to Salidar and hand the matter over to the Blues. That was how it would be. She was set on it.

"Have you eaten something that disagrees with you?" Ragan said. "Your mouth is twisted as if you had chewed a ripe duckberry."

She gave him a look that snapped his teeth shut and stalked on. The two Shienarans kept pace to either side.

What was she going to do with them? That she should put them to some use was never in doubt; their appearance was too providential to throw away. For one thing, two additional pairs of eyes—Well, three eyes anyway; she was going to learn to look at that patch without swallowing if it killed her—more eyes hunting for a ship might mean finding one sooner. All very well if Masema or Galad found a vessel first, but she did not want either to know more of her doings than she had to allow. There was no telling what either might do.

"Are you following me because Masema told you to look after me," she demanded, "or because Galad did?"

"What flaming difference does it make?" Uno muttered. "If the Lord Dragon has summoned you, you bloody well—" He cut off, frowning, as she raised one finger. Ragan eyed it as if it were a weapon.

"Do you mean to help Elayne and me reach Rand?"

"We've nothing better to do," Ragan said dryly. "As it is, we'll not see Shienar again till we are gray and toothless. We might as well ride with you to Tear or wherever he is."

She had not considered that, but it made sense. Two more to help Thom and Juilin with chores and standing guard. No need to let them know how long that might take, or how many stops and detours could lie along the way. The Blues in Salidar might not let any of them go further. Once they reached Aes Sedai, they would be only Accepted again. *Stop thinking about it! You* are *going to do it!*

The crowd waiting in front of Luca's garish sign appeared no smaller than it had before. A stream of people trickled into the meadow to join the throng as another stream meandered out, exclaiming over what they had seen. Now and again the "boar-horses" were visible, rearing above the canvas wall, to *oohs* and *aahs* from those waiting to get in. Cerandin was putting them through their paces again. The Seanchan woman always saw that the *s'redit* got plenty of rest. She was very firm about that, whatever Luca wanted. Men *did* do as they were told when you left no doubt that anything else was inconceivable. Usually they did.

Short of the well-trampled brown grass, Nynaeve stopped and turned to face the two Shienarans. She kept her face calm, but they looked suitably wary, though in Uno's case, regrettably, that involved fiddling with his eyepatch in a queasy-making way. The folk heading to or from the show paid no heed to them.

"Then it will not be because of Masema *or* Galad," she said firmly. "If you are going to travel with me, you will do as *I* say, else you can go your own way, for I'll have none of you."

Of course they had to exchange glances before nodding acceptance. "If that's how it flaming has to be," Uno growled, "then well enough. If you don't have somebody to bloody well look after you, you'll never flaming live to reach the Lord Dragon. Some sheep-gutted farmer will have you for breakfast because of your tongue." Ragan gave him a guarded look that said he agreed with every word but strongly doubted Uno's wisdom in voicing them. Ragan, it seemed, had the makings of a wise man in him.

If they accepted her terms, it did not really matter why. For now. There would be plenty of time later to set them straight.

"I don't doubt the others will agree, too," Ragan said.

"Others?" she said, blinking. "You mean there are more than the two of you? How many?"

"There are only fifteen of us altogether now. I don't think Bartu or Nengar will come."

"Sniffing after the bloody *Prophet*." Uno turned his head and spat copiously. "Only fifteen. Sar went over that bloody cliff in the mountains, and Mendao had to get himself into a flaming duel with three Hunters for the Horn, and . . ."

Nynaeve was too busy stopping herself from gaping to listen. Fifteen! She could not help toting up in her head what it would cost to feed fifteen men. Even when they were not particularly hungry, Thom or Juilin, either one, ate more than Elayne and her combined. Light!

On the other hand, with fifteen Shienaran soldiers, there was no need to wait for a ship. A riverboat was certainly the fastest way to travel—she remembered what she had heard of Salidar, now; a river town, or close by; a boat could take them right to it—yet a Shienaran escort would make their wagon just as safe, from Whitecloaks or bandits or followers of the Prophet. But much slower. And a lone wagon heading away from Samara with such an escort would certainly stand out. A signpost for Moghedien, or the Black Ajah. *I will let the Blues deal with them, and that is that!*

"What is wrong?" Ragan asked, and Uno added apologetically, "I shouldn't have mentioned how Sakaru died." Sakaru? That must have been after she stopped listening. "I don't spend much time around fla—, around ladies. I forget you have weak bell—, I mean, uh, delicate stomachs." If he did not stop tugging at that eyepatch, he was going to find out how delicate her stomach was.

The number changed nothing. If two Shienarans were good, fifteen were wonderful. Her own private army. No need to worry about Whitecloaks or brigands or riots, or whether she had made a mistake about Galad. How many hams could fifteen men eat every day? A firm voice. "Right, then. Every night just after dark, one of you—one, mind!—will come here and ask for Nana. That's the name I am known by." She had no reason for the order, except to put them in the habit of doing what she told them. "Elayne goes by Morelin, but you ask for Nana. If you need coin, come to me, not Masema." She had to suppress a wince as the words left her mouth. There was still gold in the wagon's stove, but Luca had not demanded his hundred gold crowns yet, and he would. There was always the jewelry, if need be, though. She had to be sure they were weaned away from Masema. "Aside from that, none of you are to come near me, or the show." Without that, they would likely set a guard, or some such idiocy. "Not unless a riverboat arrives. In that case, you come running on the instant. Do you understand me?"

"No," Uno muttered. "Why do we flaming have to keep away—?" His head jerked back as her admonitory finger almost touched his nose.

"Do you remember what I said about your language?" She had to make herself give him a level look; that glaring red eyepatch made her stomach do flips. “Unless you do remember, you will learn why men in the Two Rivers have decent tongues in their mouths.”

She watched him turn that over in his mind. He did not know what her connection with the White Tower was, only that it existed. She might be an agent of the Tower, or Tower-trained. Or even Aes Sedai, though one not long to the shawl. And the threat was vague enough for him to put his own worst interpretation to it. She had known that technique long before hearing Juilin mention it to Elayne.

When it appeared the idea had taken hold—and before he could ask any questions—she lowered her hand. “You will stay away for the same reason Galad does. So as not to draw attention. For the rest, you will do it because I say so. If I must explain my every decision to you, I’ll have time for nothing else, so you must make the best of it.”

That was a suitably Aes Sedai comment. Besides, they had no choice if they intended to help her reach Rand, as they thought, which meant they had no choice. All in all, she was feeling quite satisfied with herself as she shooed them off back toward Samara and strode past the waiting crowd and under the sign bearing Valan Luca’s name.

To her surprise, there was an addition to the show. On a new platform not far from the entry, a woman in gauzy yellow trousers was standing on her head, arms outstretched to either side with a pair of white doves on each hand. No, not on her head. The woman was gripping some sort of wooden frame in her *teeth* and balancing on that. As Nynaeve watched, aghast, the peculiar acrobat lowered her hands to the platform for a moment while bending herself double, until she seemed to be sitting on her own head. Even that was not enough. Her legs curved down in front of her, then impossibly back up under her arms, whereupon she transferred the doves to the upturned soles of her feet, now the highest part of the contorted ball she had knotted herself into. The onlookers gasped and applauded, but the sight made Nynaeve shiver. It was all too good a reminder of what Moghedien had done to her.

That isn’t why I mean to hand her over to the Blues, she told herself. *I just do not want to cause calamity again.* That was true, but she was also afraid that the next time, she would not escape so easily or so lightly. She would not have admitted that to another soul. She did not like admitting it to herself.

Giving the contortionist one last puzzled glance—she could not begin to puzzle out what the woman had twisted herself into now—she turned away. And started as Elayne and Birgitte suddenly appeared at her side out of the milling crowd. Elayne had a cloak decently covering her white coat and breeches; Birgitte was all but flaunting her low-necked red gown. No, there was no “all but” to it. She stood even straighter than usual and had tossed back her braid to remove even its minimal covering. Nynaeve fingered the knot of her shawl at her waist, wishing every glance at Birgitte did not remind her how much she herself would be showing once the gray wool came off. The other woman’s quiver hung at her belt, and she carried the bow Luca had found for her. Surely the day was too late for her to go through with the shooting.

A glance at the sky told Nynaeve she was wrong. Despite everything that had happened, the sun still stood well above the horizon. Shadows stretched long, but not long enough to dissuade Birgitte, she suspected.

In an attempt to cover checking the sun, she nodded toward the woman in the gauzy trousers, who had now begun to twist herself into something that Nynaeve *knew* was impossible. While still balancing on her teeth. “Where did she come from?”

“Luca hired her,” Birgitte answered calmly. “He bought some leopards, as well. Her name is Muelin.”

If Birgitte was all self-possessed coolness, Elayne very nearly quivered with emotion. “’Where did she *come* from?’ ” she spluttered. “She came from a show that a mob nearly destroyed!”

“I heard about that,” Nynaeve said, “but that isn’t what is important. I —”

“Not important!” Elayne rolled her eyes to the heavens as if for guidance. “Did you also hear *why*? I don’t know whether it was Whitecloaks or this Prophet, but somebody whipped up that mob because they thought . . .” She glanced around without slowing and lowered her voice; none of the crowd had stopped, but every passerby stared at two obvious performers standing. “. . . that a woman in the show might wear a shawl.” She emphasized the last word significantly. “Fools to think she’d be with a traveling menagerie, but then, you and I are. And you go dashing into the city without a word to anyone. We’ve heard everything from a bald-headed man carrying you off over his shoulder to you kissing a Shienaran and traipsing away with him arm in arm.”

Nynaeve was still gaping when Birgitte added, “Luca was upset, whatever the tale. He said . . .” She cleared her throat and made her voice deep. “ ‘So she likes rough men, does she? Well, I can be as rough as a winter cob!’ And off he set, leading two lads with shoulders like s’Gandin quarrynien, to fetch you back. Thom Merrilin and Juilin Sandar went as well, in not much better temper. That did not improve Luca’s, but they were all so upset over you it left no room for anger at each other.”

For a moment Nynaeve stared in confusion. She liked rough men? What could he possibly mean by . . . ? Slowly it sank in, and she groaned. “Oh, that is just what I need.” And Thom and Juilin running around Samara. The Light knew what trouble they could get into.

“I still want to know what you thought you were doing,” Elayne said, “but we are wasting time here.”

Nynaeve let them start her off through the crowd, one to either side, but even with the news of Luca and the others, she felt satisfied with her day’s work. “We should be out of here in a day or two, with luck. If Galad doesn’t find us a boat, Masema will. It turns out he is the Prophet. You remember Masema, Elayne. That sour-faced Shienaran we saw—” Realizing that Elayne had stopped, Nynaeve paused for her to catch up again.

“Galad?” the younger woman said disbelievingly, forgetting to hold her cloak closed. “You saw—you *spoke* to Galad? *And* the Prophet? You must have, or how would they be trying to find a vessel? Did you have tea with them, or did you just meet them in a common room? Where the bald-headed man carried you, no doubt. Maybe the King of Ghealdan was there, too? Would you please convince me I am dreaming so I can wake up?”

“Get a grip on yourself,” Nynaeve said firmly. “It is a queen, now, not a king, and yes, she was. And he wasn’t bald; he had a topknot. The Shienaran, I mean. Not the Prophet. *He’s* as bald as—” She glared at Birgitte until the woman stopped snickering. The glower slipped a little when Nynaeve remembered who she was glowering at and what she had done to her, but if the woman had not smoothed her features, they might have found out whether she could bring herself to slap Birgitte cross-eyed. They began walking again, and she said as levelly as she could manage, “This is what happened. I saw Uno, one of the Shienarans who was at Falme, watching you highwalk, Elayne. He doesn’t think any better of the

Daughter-Heir of Andor showing her legs than I do, by the way. In any case, Moiraine sent them here after Falme, but . . .”

She related everything quickly as they made their way through the crowd, riding roughshod over Elayne’s increasingly incredulous exclamations, answering their questions in as few words as possible. Despite a quick interest in the shifts of the Ghealdanin throne, Elayne concentrated on *exactly* what Galad had said and why Nynaeve had been fool enough to approach the Prophet, *whoever* he was. That word—*fool*—popped up often enough to make Nynaeve keep a tight leash on her temper. She might doubt whether she could slap Birgitte, but Elayne had no such protection, Daughter-Heir or not. A few more repetitions, and the girl would discover it. Birgitte was more interested in Masema’s intentions on the one hand and the Shienarans on the other. It seemed she had encountered Borderlanders in previous lives, though their nations had had different names, and thought well of them by and large. She said little, really, but she appeared to approve of holding on to the Shienarans.

Nynaeve expected the news about Salidar to startle them, or excite them, or anything but what it did. Birgitte took it as matter-of-factly as if she had said they would eat supper with Thom and Juilin that night. Plainly she meant to go where Elayne did, and all else mattered little. Elayne looked doubtful. Doubtful!

“Are you certain? You have tried so hard to remember, and . . . Well, it seems awfully fortuitous that Galad should just happen to mention it to you.”

Nynaeve glowered. “Of course I am certain. Coincidences *do* happen. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, as you may have heard. I remember now that he mentioned it in Sienda, too, but I was so concerned over *you* being concerned about him that I didn’t—” She cut off short.

They had arrived at a long narrow area near the north wall, marked off by ropes. At one end stood something like a segment of wooden fence, two paces wide and two tall. People lined the ropes four deep, with children crouching down in front or holding a father’s leg or a mother’s skirts. A buzz rose as the three women appeared. Nynaeve would have stopped dead, but Birgitte had her by the arm, and it was walk or be dragged.

“I thought we were going to the wagon,” she said faintly. Busy with talking, she had paid too little attention to where they were going.

“Not unless you want to see me shoot in the dark,” Birgitte replied. She sounded all too willing to give it a try.

Nynaeve wished she could have made some other comment than a squeak. The bit of fence filled her vision as they progressed down the open space, to the exclusion of the onlookers. Even their increasing murmurs sounded distant. The fence looked a mile from where Birgitte would stand.

“Are you sure that he said he swore by . . . our mother?” Elayne demanded sourly. Acknowledging Galad as her brother even that far was unpleasant for her.

“What? Yes. I said so, didn’t I? Listen. If Luca is in the city, he would not know whether we did this or not until it was too late to . . .” Nynaeve knew she was babbling, but she could not seem to stop her tongue. Somehow she had never realized how *far* a hundred paces really was. In the Two Rivers, grown men always shot targets at twice that. But then, none of those targets had ever been *her.* “I mean, it already is very late. The shadows . . . The glare . . . We really should do this in the morning. When the light is—”

“If he swore by her,” Elayne broke in as if she had not been listening, “then he will hold to it no matter what. He would sooner break an oath on his hope of salvation and rebirth than that. I think . . . no, I *know* we can trust him.” She did not sound as if she particularly liked it, though.

“The light is just fine,” Birgitte said, a hint of amusement in her calm voice. “I might try it blindfolded. This lot will want it to look difficult, I think.”

Nynaeve opened her mouth, but nothing came out. This time she would have settled for a squeak. Birgitte was only making a bad joke. She had to be joking.

They positioned her with her back against the rough wooden fence, and Elayne began tugging at the knot in the shawl as Birgitte turned back the way they had come, drawing an arrow from her quiver.

“You really did something foolish this time,” Elayne muttered. “We can trust Galad’s oath, I’m sure, but you could not know what he might do beforehand. And to approach the Prophet!” She jerked the shawl from Nynaeve’s shoulders roughly. “You could have had *no* idea whatsoever what *he* might do. You worried everybody and risked everything!”

“I know,” Nynaeve managed to get out. The sun was in her eyes; she could no longer see Birgitte at all. But Birgitte could see her. Of course she could. That was the important thing.

Elayne looked at her suspiciously. “You know?”

“I know I risked everything. I should have talked with you, asked you. I know I’ve been a fool. I should not be allowed outside without a keeper.” It all came in a breathless rush. Birgitte *must* be able to see her.

Suspicion became concern. “Are you all right? If you really do not want to do this . . .”

The woman thought she was afraid. Nynaeve could not, would not, allow that. She forced a smile, hoped her eyes were not too wide. Her face felt tight. “Of course I want to. I’m looking forward to it, actually.”

Elayne gave her a dubious frown, but nodded at last. “You are *sure* about Salidar?”

She did not wait for an answer, but hurried off to one side, folding the shawl. For some reason, Nynaeve could not work up a proper indignation over the question, or Elayne not waiting. Her breath was coming so fast that she was dimly aware that she might come right out of the dress’s low neck, yet even that thought could not catch her. The sun filled her view; had she squinted, she might have been able to make out Birgitte after a fashion, but her eyes had a will of their own, increasingly widening. There was nothing she could do now. It was a punishment for taking foolish risks. She could manage only the tiniest pique over being punished after working everything out so well. And Elayne did not even believe her about Salidar! She would have to take it stoically. She would—

Seemingly out of nowhere an arrow *tchunked* into the wood, vibrating against her right wrist, and stoic resolve broke with a low wail. It was all she could do to keep her knees straight. A second arrow brushed the other wrist, producing a slightly higher pitch to her yelp. She could as soon stop Birgitte’s shafts as silence herself. Arrow by arrow the yelps rose higher, and it seemed to her almost as if the crowd was cheering her cries. The louder she shrieked, the louder they cheered and applauded. By the time she was outlined from knees to head, the applause was thunderous. In truth, she felt some irritation at the finish, when the crowd all rushed to throng around Birgitte, leaving her standing there staring at the fletchings around her. Some still quivered. *She* still quivered.

Pushing away, she scurried off toward the wagons as quickly as she could before anyone noticed how much her legs were wobbling. Not that anyone was paying any attention to *her.* All she had done was stand there and pray Birgitte did not sneeze, or get an itch. And tomorrow she would have to go through it again. That or let Elayne—and worse, Birgitte—know she could not face it.

When Uno came that night asking after Nana, she told him in no uncertain terms to prod Masema as much as he dared and to find Galad and tell him he *must* find a boat quickly, whatever it required. Then she took to her bed without eating and tried to make herself believe that she could convince Elayne and Birgitte that she was too ill to stand against that wall. Only, she was all too certain they would know exactly what her illness was. That even Birgitte would likely be all sympathy just made it worse. One of those fool men *had* to find a riverboat!

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CHAPTER
41

The Craft of Kin Tovere

One hand on his sword hilt, the other holding the green-and-white tasseled length of Seanchan spear, Rand ignored the others on the sparsely treed hilltop for the moment while he studied the three camps spread out below in the midmorning sun. Three distinct camps, and that was the rub. They were all the Cairhienin and Tairen forces at his disposal. Every man else who could use sword or spear was penned in the city, or the Light alone knew where.

The Aiel had rounded up refugees in hordes between the Jangai Pass and here, and a few had even straggled in on their own, lured by rumors that *these* Aiel at least were not killing everyone in sight, or else too dispirited to care so long as they had a meal before dying. Too many thought they would die, at the hands of the Aiel or the Dragon Reborn, or in the Last Battle, which they seemed to think was shaping up for any day now. A goodly number all together, but farmers and craftsmen and shopkeepers for the most part. Some knew how to use bow or sling to fetch a rabbit, but there was not a soldier in the lot and no time to teach them. The city of Cairhien itself lay little more than five miles to the west, some of the fabled “topless towers of Cairhien” visible above the intervening forest. The city sprawled across hills hard by the River Alguenya, encircled by Couladin’s Shaido and those who had joined him.

One haphazard set of tents and cookfires in the long shallow valley below Rand held some eight hundred Tairens, armored men. Nearly half were Defenders of the Stone in burnished breastplates and rimmed helmets, their plump coatsleeves striped black and gold. The rest were levies from a double handful of lords whose banners and pennants made a circle in the camp’s center around the silver Crescent-and-Stars of the High Lord Weiramon. Guards stood thickly along their picket lines as if they expected a raid against the horses any minute.

Three hundred paces away, the second camp guarded their horses as tightly. The animals were a mixed lot, few approaching the fine arch-necked stock of Tear, and some former plow and cart horses were tied along those ropes or Rand missed his guess. The Cairhienin numbered perhaps a hundred more than the Tairens, but their tents were fewer and most often patched, and their banners and *con* represented some seventy-odd lords. Few Cairhienin nobles still had many retainers, and the army had broken apart early in the civil war.

The last gathering lay another five hundred paces along, full of Cairhienin for the most part, yet well and truly separated from the others by more than distance. Larger than the other pair combined, this camp held few tents or horses. It displayed no banners, and only the officers wore *con,* the small pennants on their backs in solid colors meant to pick them out for their men rather than signify a House. Infantry might be necessary, but rare was the lord of Tear or Cairhien, either one, who would admit it. Certainly none would agree to actually lead such. It was the most orderly of the camps, though, the cookfires in neat rows, the long pikes stacked upright where they could be seized in a moment and clusters of archers or crossbowmen dotted along the lines. According to Lan, discipline kept men alive in battle, but infantry were more likely to know it and believe than cavalry.

The three groups were supposedly together, under the same command—the High Lord Weiramon had brought them in from the south late the day before—but the two camps of horsemen watched each other nearly as warily as they did the Aiel on the surrounding hills, the Tairens with a dose of contempt that the Cairhienin echoed in ignoring the third, which in turn eyed the others sullenly. Rand's followers, his allies, and as ready to fight each other as anyone else.

Still pretending to study the camps, Rand examined Weiramon, helmetless and iron-spined straight nearby. Two younger men, minor Tairen lords, hung at the High Lord's heels, dark beards trimmed and oiled in perfect imitation of Weiramon's except that his was streaked with gray, and their breastplates, worn over brightly striped coats, bore goldwork only a touch less ornate than his. Aloof, apart from everyone else on the hilltop yet close to Rand, they could have been waiting for some martial ceremony at a royal court, except for the sweat rolling down their faces. They ignored that as well, though.

The High Lord's sigil lacked only a few stars to duplicate Lanfear's, but the long-nosed fellow was not her in disguise, with his mainly gray hair oiled like his beard and combed in a vain attempt to hide its thinness. He had been coming north with reinforcements from Tear when he heard that Aiel were attacking the city of Cairhien itself. Instead of turning back or sitting still, he continued north as hard as his horses could stand, gathering what forces he found along the way.

That was the good news of Weiramon. The bad was that he had fully expected to dispel the Shaido around Cairhien with what he had brought. He still did. And he was none too happy that Rand would not let him be about it or that he was surrounded by Aiel. One Aiel was no different from another to Weiramon. To the others, too, for that matter. One of the young lords pointedly sniffed a scented silk handkerchief whenever he looked at an Aiel. Rand wondered how long the fellow would survive. And what Rand would have to do about it when he died.

Weiramon noticed Rand watching, and cleared his throat. "My Lord Dragon," he began in a gravelly bark, "one good charge will scatter them like quail." He slapped his gauntlets against his palm loudly. "Foot never stands up to horse. I will send in the Cairhienin to flush them, then follow with my—"

Rand cut him off. Could the man count at all? Did the number of Aiel he could see here give him no clue to how many might be around the city? It did not matter. Rand had heard as much of this as he could stomach. "You are certain of the news you bring from Tear?"

Weiramon blinked. "News, my Lord Dragon? What—? Oh, that. Burn my soul, there's nothing to that. Illianer pirates often try to raid along the coast." They were more than trying, by what the man had said when he arrived.

"And the attacks on the Plains of Maredo? Do they often do that, as well?"

"Why, burn my soul, those are just brigands." It was more statement of fact than protest. "Perhaps not Illianers at all, but certainly not soldiers. The jumble those Illianers make of things, who can say whether king or Assemblage or Council of Nine has the whiphand on any given day, yet if they do decide to move, it will be armies striking at Tear under the Golden Bees, not raiders burning merchants' wagons and border farms. You can mark me on that."

“If you wish it,” Rand replied, as politely as he could. Whatever power the Assemblage, or the Council of Nine, or Mattin Stepaneos den Balgar had, it was what Sammael chose to leave them. But relatively few knew that the Forsaken were loose already. Some who should know refused to believe, or ignored it—as if that would make the Forsaken go away—or seemed to think that if it had to happen, it would be in some vague and preferably distant future. There was no point in trying to convince Weiramon, whichever group he belonged in. The man’s belief or disbelief changed nothing.

The High Lord scowled at the hollow between the hills. More specifically, at the two Cairhienin camps. “With no proper rule here as yet, who can say what riffraff have drifted south?” Grimacing, he slapped his gauntlets even harder before turning back to Rand. “Well, we will bring them to heel soon enough for you, my Lord Dragon. If you will only give the order, I can drive. . . .”

Rand brushed past him, not listening, though Weiramon followed, still asking authority to attack, the other two trailing him like heelhounds. The man was a stone-blind fool.

They were not alone, of course. The hilltop was crowded, really. Sulin had a hundred *Far Dareis Mai* arrayed around the peak, for one thing, every last one looking even more ready to don her veil than Aiel usually did. It was not only the nearness of the Shaido that had Sulin on edge. In mockery of Rand’s contempt for the suspicions in the camps below, Enaila and two Maidens were never far from Weiramon and his lordlings, and the closer they stood to Rand, the more the three Maidens looked about to don veils.

Not far off, Aviendha stood talking with a dozen or more Wise Ones, shawls looped over their elbows, all but she decked in bracelets and necklaces. Surprisingly, it was a bony white-haired woman, even older than Bair, who seemed to be taking the lead. Rand would have expected Amys or Bair, but even they shut up as soon as Sorilea spoke. Melaine was with Bael, halfway between the other Wise Ones and the other clan chiefs. She kept adjusting the coat of Bael’s *cadin’sor* as if he did not know how to dress himself, and he had the patient look of a man reminding himself of all the reasons he had married. It might be personal, but Rand suspected the Wise Ones were trying to influence the chiefs again. If that was the case, he would learn the particulars soon enough.

It was Aviendha who held Rand’s eye, though. She smiled at him briefly before returning to listening to Sorilea. A friendly smile, but no more. That was something, he supposed. She had not lashed out at him once since what had happened between them, and if she sometimes made an acid comment, it was no sharper than what he might have expected from Egwene. Except the one time he had brought up marriage again; then she had scorched his ears so thoroughly that he had left it alone thereafter. But friendly was as far as it went, though she was sometimes careless now about undressing in front of him at night. She still insisted on sleeping no more than three paces from him.

The Maidens, at any rate, seemed sure that there were a lot fewer than three paces between their blankets, and he kept expecting that certainty to spread, but so far it had not. Egwene would come down on him like a falling tree if she even *suspected* something like that. It was easy enough for her to talk of Elayne, but he could not even puzzle out Aviendha, and she was right there in front of him. All in all, he was tenser than ever when he as much as looked at Aviendha, but she seemed more relaxed than he had ever seen her. Somehow or other, that seemed the opposite of how it should be. It all seemed topsy-turvy with her. But then, Min was the only woman who had *not* made him feel as if he were standing on his head half the time.

Sighing, he walked on, still not listening to Weiramon. One day he was going to understand women. When he had the time to apply to it. He suspected a lifetime would not be enough, though.

The clan chiefs had their own gathering, of sept chiefs and representatives from the societies. Rand recognized some of them. Dark Heirn, chief of the Jindo Taardad, and Mangin, who gave him a companionable nod and the Tairens a contemptuous grimace. Spear-slender Juranai, leader of *Aethan Dor,* the Red Shields, on this expedition despite a few streaks of white in his pale brown hair, and Roidan, thick-shouldered and gray, who led *Sha’mad Conde*, the Thunder Walkers. Those four had sometimes joined him in practicing the Aiel way of fighting without weapons since leaving the Jangai Pass.

“Do you want to go hunting today?” Mangin asked as Rand passed, and Rand looked at him in surprise.

“Hunting?”

“There is not much to give sport, but we could try catching sheep in a sack.” The wry glance Mangin darted at the Tairens left little doubt what “sheep” he meant, though Weiramon and the others did not see. Or affected not to. The lordling with the perfumed handkerchief sniffed it again.

“Another time, maybe,” Rand replied, shaking his head. He thought he could have been friends with any of the four, but especially Mangin, who had a sense of humor much like Mat’s. If he had no time to study women, he certainly had no time for making new friends. Little time for old friends, for that matter. Mat worried him.

On the highest part of the hill, a heavy framework tower of logs thrust above the treetops, the wide platform at the top twenty spans or more above the ground. The Aiel knew nothing about working with wood on that scale, but there had been plenty among the Cairhienin refugees who did.

Moiraine was waiting at the base of the first slanting ladder with Lan, and Egwene. Egwene had been getting a good bit of sun; she really could have passed for Aiel except for her dark eyes. A short Aiel. He scanned her face quickly, but detected nothing except tiredness. Amys and the others must be working her too hard with her training. She would not thank him for interceding, though.

“Have you decided?” Rand asked, stopping. Weiramon fell silent at last.

Egwene hesitated, but Rand noted that she did not look at Moiraine before nodding. “I will do what I can.”

Her reluctance bothered him. He had not asked Moiraine—she could not use the One Power as a weapon against the Shaido, not unless they threatened her or he managed to convince her they were all Darkfriends—but Egwene had not taken the Three Oaths, and he had been sure she would see the necessity. Instead, she had gone white-faced when he suggested it and had avoided for him for three days until now. At least she had agreed. Whatever made the fight shorter against the Shaido must be for the good.

Moiraine’s face never changed, though he had no doubt what she thought. Those smooth Aes Sedai features, those Aes Sedai eyes, could register icy disapproval without altering a jot.

Thrusting the piece of spear through his belt, he put foot to the first rung—and Moiraine spoke.

“Why are you wearing a sword again?”

The last question he would have expected. “Why shouldn’t I?” he muttered, and scrambled upward. Not a good answer, but she had caught him off balance.

The half-healed wound in his side tugged as he climbed, not quite hurting but seeming about to break open just the same. He paid it no mind; it often felt that way when he exerted himself.

Rhuarc and the other clan chiefs came after him, Bael leaving Melaine last of all, but thankfully Weiramon and his two toadies remained on the ground. The High Lord *knew* what was to be done; he needed and wanted no more information. Feeling Moiraine's eyes following him, Rand glanced down. Not Moiraine. It was Egwene watching him climb, her face so close to Aes Sedai that he could not have slid a hair through the difference. Moiraine had her head together with Lan's. He hoped Egwene was not going to change her mind.

On the broad platform at the top, two short, sweating young men in shirtsleeves were setting a brass-bound wooden tube, three paces long and bigger around than either's arm, on a pivoting frame fastened to the railing. An identical tube already sat a few paces away, where it had been almost since the tower was completed the day before. A third coatless man wiped his bald head with a striped kerchief while he growled at them.

"Easy with it. *Easy*, I said! You motherless weasels knock a lens out of alignment, and I will knock your brainless heads backward to front. Fasten it tight, Jol. Tight! If it falls while the Lord Dragon is looking through it, you both had better jump after it. Not just for him. You break my work and you will wish you had broken your fool skulls."

Jol and the other fellow, Cail, worked on, quickly but not very visibly perturbed. They had had years to grow used to Kin Tovere's way of talking. It had been finding a craftsman who made lenses and looking glasses—and his two apprentices—among the refugees that had first given Rand the idea for this tower.

At first none of the three noticed they were not alone. The clan chiefs climbed on silent feet, and Tovere's harangue was enough to cover the sound of Rand's boots. Rand himself was startled when Lan's head popped through the open trap after Bael; boots or no, the Warder made no more noise than the Aiel. Even Han stood a head taller than the Cairhienin.

When they finally did see the new arrivals, the two apprentices gave wide-eyed starts as if they had never seen an Aiel before, then bent themselves in half bowing to Rand and stayed that way. The lensmaker jerked almost as much at the sight of the Aiel, but made a more restrained bow, wiping his head again in the middle of it.

"Told you I would have the second finished today, my Lord Dragon." Tovere managed to get respect into his tone without making his voice one bit less gruff. "A wonderful thought, this tower. I would never have conceived it, but once you started asking how far you could see with a looking glass . . . Give me time, and I will make you one to see Caemlyn from here. If the tower is built high enough," he added judiciously. "There are limits."

"What you've done already is more than enough, Master Tovere." More than Rand had hoped for, certainly. He had already had a look through the first looking glass.

Jol and Cail were still bent at right angles, heads down. "Perhaps you had best take your apprentices below," Rand said. "So we don't get crowded."

There was room for four times as many, but Tovere immediately poked Cail's shoulder with a thick finger, "Come along, you ham-fisted stableboys. We are in the Lord Dragon's way."

The apprentices barely straightened enough to follow him, gazing round-eyed at Rand even more than at the Aiel as they vanished down the ladder. Cail was a year older than he, Jol two. Both had been born in bigger towns than he had imagined before leaving the Two Rivers, had visited Cairhien and seen the king and the Amyrlin Seat, if at a distance, while he was still tending sheep. Very likely, they still knew more of the world than he in some ways. Shaking his head, he bent to the new looking glass.

Cairhien leaped into view. The forests, never particularly thick to one used to Two Rivers' woods, stopped completely well short of the city, of course. High gray, square-towered walls in a perfect square against the river mocked the hills' flowing curves. Within, more towers rose in a precise pattern, marking the points of a grid, some twenty times as high as the walls or more, yet all surrounded by scaffolding. The legendary topless towers were still being rebuilt after their burning in the Aiel War.

When last he had seen the city, another city had surrounded it from riverbank to riverbank—Foregate, a rabbit warren as raucous as Cairhien was solemn, all in wood. Now only a wide stretch of ash and charred timbers bordered the walls. How that fire had been kept from spreading into Cairhien itself, he could not understand.

Banners decked every tower in the city, too distant to make out clearly, but scouts had described them to him. Half bore the Crescents of Tear; the other half, perhaps not surprisingly, duplicated the Dragon banner he had left flying over the Stone of Tear. Not one bore the Rising Sun of Cairhien.

Moving the looking glass only a little swept the city from his sight. On the far side of the river still stood the blackened stone shells of the granaries. Some of the Cairhienin Rand had talked to claimed the torching of the granaries had led to riots and then King Galldrian's death, and thus to the civil war. Others said Galldrian's assassination had caused the riots and the burning. Rand doubted that he would ever know which was the truth, or whether either was.

A number of burned-out hulks dotted both banks of the wide river, but none lay close to the city. Aiel had an uneasiness—fear might be too strong a word—about bodies of water they could not step across or wade, but Couladin had managed to put barriers of floating logs across the Alguenya both above and below Cairhien, along with enough men to see they were not cut. Fire-arrows had done the rest. Nothing except rats and birds could get into or out of Cairhien without Couladin's leave.

The hills around the city showed little sign of a besieging army. Here and there vultures flapped heavily, no doubt feasting on the remains of some attempt to break out, but no Shaido were visible. Aiel seldom were unless they wanted to be.

Wait. Rand swung the looking glass back to a treeless hilltop perhaps a mile from the city walls. Back to a cluster of men. He could not discern faces, or much else aside from the fact that they all wore the *cadin'sor.* One thing more. One of those men had bare arms. Couladin. Rand was sure it must be imagination, but he thought that when Couladin moved, he could see sunlight glittering off the metallic scales encircling the man's forearms in imitation of his own. Asmodean had put those there. Just an attempt to divert Rand's attention, to occupy him while Asmodean worked his own plans, but without that, how much would have turned out differently? Certainly, he would not be standing on this tower, watching a besieged city and awaiting a battle.

Suddenly, something streaked through the air on that distant hilltop, a long blur, and two of the men there went down thrashing. Staring at the fallen men, both apparently transfixed with the same spear, Couladin and the others seemed as stunned as Rand. Twisting the looking glass, Rand scanned for the man who had thrown with such force. He had to be brave—and a fool—to get close enough. Rand's search widened quickly, beyond any possible range of a human arm. He was beginning to think of Ogier—not likely; it took a great deal to rouse an Ogier into violence—when another streaking blur caught his eye.

Startled, he half-straightened before jerking the glass back to Cairhien's walls. That spear—or whatever it was—had come from there. He was certain of it. How was another matter entirely. At this distance it was all he could do to make out an occasional someone moving on the walls or atop a tower.

Raising his head, Rand found Rhuarc just stepping away from the other looking glass, giving up his place to Han. That was the whole reason for the tower and the glasses. Scouts brought back what word they could of how the Shaido were deployed, but this way the chiefs could see for themselves the terrain on which the battle would be fought. They had worked out a plan between them already, but one more look at the land could never go amiss. Rand did not know much about battles, but Lan thought their plan a good one. At least, Rand did not know much in his own mind; sometimes those other memories crept in, and then he seemed to know more than he wanted.

"Did you see that? Those . . . spears?"

Rhuarc looked as puzzled as Rand knew he himself must, but the Aiel nodded. "The last took another Shaido, but he crawled away. Not Couladin, worse luck." He gestured to the looking glass, and Rand let him take his place.

Was it such bad luck? Couladin's death would not end the threat to Cairhien, or to anywhere else. Now they were this side of the Dragonwall, the Shaido would not tamely return just because the man they thought was the true *Car'a'carn* died. It might well shake them, but not enough for that. And after all Rand had seen, he did not think Couladin deserved so easy a way out. *I can be as hard as I must,* he thought, stroking his sword hilt. *For him, I can.*

* * *

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CHAPTER
42

Before the Arrow

The inside of a tent roof had to be the most boring sight in the world, but lying back in his shirtsleeves on scarlet-tasseled cushions that Melindhra had acquired, Mat studied the gray-brown cloth intently. Or rather, he stared beyond it. One arm curled behind his head, he swirled a hammered-silver goblet full of good wine from the south of Cairhien. A small cask had cost him as much as two good horses would—as much as two horses would have if the world and everything in it had not been stood on its head—but he counted it a small price for something decent. Sometimes a drop or two splashed over onto his hand, but he never noticed and he never took a drink.

By his book, matters had long since gone beyond merely serious. Serious was being stuck in the Waste with no idea of the way out. Serious was Darkfriends popping up when you least expected, Trolloc attacks in the night, the odd Myrddraal freezing your blood with an eyeless stare. That sort of thing came quickly, and usually was done before you had much chance to think. It was certainly not what you would seek out, yet if you had to, you could live with it if you could live through it. But for days he had known where they were heading, and why. Nothing quick about it. Days to think.

I am no bloody hero, he thought grimly, *and I'm no bloody soldier.* Fiercely he pushed down a memory of walking fortress walls, ordering his last reserves to where another crop of Trolloc scaling ladders had sprung up. *That was* not *me, the Light burn whoever it was! I'm* . . . He did not know what he was—a sour thought—but whatever he was, it involved gambling and taverns, women and dancing. That he was sure of. It involved a good horse and every road in the world to choose from, not sitting and waiting for somebody to shoot arrows at him or try to stick a sword or a spear through his ribs. Any different would make him a fool, and he would not be that, not for Rand or Moiraine or anybody else.

As he sat up, the silver foxhead medallion, hanging on its leather thong, slipped from the unlaced neck of his shirt. He tucked it back before taking a long swallow of wine. The medallion made him safe from Moiraine, or any other Aes Sedai, as long as they did not get it away from him—surely one or another would try sooner or later—but nothing except his own wits kept him safe from some fool killing him along with a few thousand other fools. Or from Rand, or from being *ta'veren*.

A man ought to be able to find a profit in something like that, having events twist themselves around him. Rand certainly had, in a way. He himself had never noticed anything twisting around him except the fall of dice. He would not turn away from some of the things that happened to *ta'veren* in stories. Wealth and fame dropped into their pockets as if from the sky; men who wanted to kill them decided to follow instead, and women with ice in their eyes decided to melt.

Not that he was complaining at what he had, really. And certainly not that he wanted anything like Rand's bargain; the price to get into the game was too high. It was just that he seemed to be stuck with all the burdens of being *ta'veren* and none of the pleasure.

"It is time to go," he told the empty tent, then paused thoughtfully and sipped at the goblet. "It is time to get on Pips and ride. Ride to Caemlyn, maybe." Not a bad city, so long as he avoided the Royal Palace. "Or Lugard." He had heard rumors about Lugard. A fine place, that, for the likes of him. "Time to leave Rand in my dust. He's got a bloody Aiel army and more Maidens than he can count taking care of him. He doesn't need me."

That last was not strictly true. In some strange way he was tied to Rand's success or failure in Tarmon Gai'don, him and Perrin both, three *ta'veren* all tangled together. The histories would probably only mention Rand. Small chance he or Perrin would find any place in the stories. And then there was the Horn of Valere. Which he did not want to think about, and would not. Not until he had to. There might be some way out of that particular mess yet. Any way he looked at it, the Horn was a problem for another day. A distant day. With luck, all those bills would come due on a very distant day. Only, that might take more luck than he had.

The point now was that he had said all of that about going and felt scarcely a twinge. Not long ago, he had been unable even to speak of leaving; when he got too far from Rand, he had been drawn back like a hooked fish on some invisible line. Then he had become able to say it, even to lay plans, but the slightest thing would distract him, make him put off his schemes for stealing away. Even in Rhuidean, when he had told Rand he was going, he had been sure something would get in the way. It had, in a manner of speaking; Mat had made it out of the Waste, but he was no further from Rand than before. This time, he did not think he would be diverted.

“Not like I was abandoning him,” he muttered. “If he can’t bloody take care of himself by now, he’ll never be able to. I’m not his bloody nursemaid.”

Draining the goblet, he scrambled into his green coat, settled his knives in their hiding places, arranged a dark yellow silk scarf to hide the hanging scar on his throat, then snatched up his hat and ducked out.

Heat hit him in the face after the relatively cool shade inside. He was not sure how the seasons changed here, but summer was hanging on too long to suit him. One thing he had looked forward to on leaving the Waste was the arrival of autumn. A little coolness. No luck here. At least the hat’s wide brim kept the sun off.

This hilly Cairhienin forest was a pitiful thing, more clearings than trees and half of them going brown in the drought. Not a patch on the Westwood, back home. Low Aiel tents were everywhere, though at any distance they took on the look of a pile of dead leaves or a bare hummock of ground unless the side flaps were up, and even then they were not easy to see. The Aiel going about their business did not look at him twice.

From one crest as he crossed the encampment, he caught sight of Kadere’s wagons, all in a circle, the drivers lying in the shade underneath and the peddler nowhere in view. Kadere kept to his wagon more and more, seldom poking his nose out except when Moiraine came to inspect the ladings. The Aiel ringing the wagons, small knots with spears and bucklers, bows and quivers, made little pretense of being anything but guards. Moiraine must think Kadere or some of his men would try to make off with what she had brought out of Rhuidean. Mat wondered whether Rand realized that he was giving her anything and everything she asked. For a while Mat had thought Rand had gotten the upper hand there, but he was not so sure any longer, even if Moiraine did do everything but curtsy and fetch Rand’s pipe.

Rand’s tent was on a hilltop by itself, naturally, that red banner on a staff at its front. It rippled in a light breeze, sometimes standing out enough to show the black-and-white disc. The thing made Mat’s skin crawl as much as the Dragon banner had. If a man wanted to avoid Aes Sedai entanglements, as any but an idiot would, the last thing to do was wave that symbol about.

The slopes of the hill were bare, but Maidens’ tents encircled the foot of the hill and spread through the trees up surrounding slopes and down the other side. That was as usual, too, and so was the Wise Ones’ camp within the *Far Dareis Mai*, dozens of low tents in shouting distance of Rand’s hill, with white-robed *gai’shain* bustling about.

There were only a few of the Wise Ones to be seen, yet they made up for lack of numbers with the stares that followed him. He had no idea how many could channel in that bunch, but they were a fair equal of Aes Sedai weighing and measuring when it came to stares. He picked up his pace, making an effort not to shrug uncomfortably; he could feel those eyes on his back as surely as he could have a poke from a stick. And he would have to run the same gauntlet coming out. Well, a few words with Rand, and it would be the last time he had to run it.

Only, when he pulled off his hat and ducked into Rand’s tent, no one was there except Natael, lounging on the cushions with his gilded, dragon-carved harp propped against his knee and a gold goblet in his hand.

Mat grimaced, and swore under his breath. He should have known as much. If Rand had been here, he would have had to pass through a circle of Maidens right around the tent. Most likely he was up at that new-built tower. A good idea, that. Know the terrain. That was the second rule, close behind “Know your enemy,” and not much to choose between them.

The thought put a sour twist to his mouth. Those rules came from other men’s memories; the only rules he wanted to remember were “Never kiss a girl whose brothers have knife scars” and “Never gamble without knowing a back way out.” He almost wished those memories of other men were still separate lumps in his brain instead of oozing into his thoughts when he least expected.

“Trouble with a bilious stomach?” Natael asked lazily. “One of the Wise Ones might have a root to cure it. Or you could try Moiraine.”

Mat could not like the man; he always seemed to be thinking of a joke he did not mean to share. And he always looked as if he had three servants taking care of his clothes. All that snowy lace at collar and cuffs, always seeming freshly laundered. The fellow never appeared to sweat, either. Why Rand wanted him around was a mystery. He almost never played anything merry on that harp. “Will he be back soon?”

Natael shrugged. “When he decides to. Perhaps soon, perhaps late. No man clocks the Lord Dragon. And few women.” There it was again, that secretive smile. A touch bleak, this time.

“I’ll wait.” He meant to go through with this. Too many times he had found himself putting off going.

Natael sipped at his wine, studying him across the goblet’s rim.

It was bad enough that Moiraine and the Wise Ones watched him in that silent, searching way—sometimes Egwene did, too; she had certainly changed, half Wise One and half Aes Sedai—but from Rand’s gleeman, it was enough to set his teeth on edge. The best thing about leaving would be not having anyone look at him as if they would know in a minute what he was thinking, and already knew whether his smallclothes were clean.

Two maps lay spread out near the firepit. One, copied in detail from a tattered map found in a half-burned town, covered northern Cairhien from west of the Alguenya halfway to the Spine of the World, while, the other, newly drawn and sketchy, showed the land around the city. Slips of parchment held down with pebbles dotted both. If he was going to stay, and ignore Natael’s searching look at the same time, there was nothing for it but to study the maps.

With the toe of his boot he shifted a few pebbles on the map of the city so he could read what was written on the parchments. In spite of himself, he winced. If the Aiel scouts could count, Couladin had nearly one hundred and sixty thousand spears—Shaido and those who had supposedly gone to join their societies among the Shaido. A hard nut to crack, and prickly. This side of the Spine of the World had not seen an army like that since Artur Hawkwing’s time.

The second map showed the other clans that had crossed the Dragonwall. All had now, in one force or another, strung out according to when they had left the Jangai and spread apart, but too close to here for comfort. The Shiande, the Codarra, the Daryne, and the Miagoma. Between them, they apparently had at least as many spears as Couladin; they had not left many behind, if that was true. The seven clans with Rand almost doubled that, easily enough to face Couladin or the four clans. Either or. Not both, not at once. But both at once might be what Rand had to fight.

What the Aiel called the bleakness had to be affecting those clans, too—every day still men tossed down their weapons and vanished—but only a fool would think it lessened their numbers any more than it did Rand's. And there was always the possibility that some of those were going to Couladin. The Aiel did not speak of it very much or very freely, and masked the idea behind talk of joining societies, but even now, men and Maidens decided they could not accept Rand or what he had told them of themselves. Every morning some were missing, and not all left their spears behind.

"A pretty situation, wouldn't you say?"

Mat's head jerked up at Lan's voice, but the Warder had entered the tent alone. "Just something to look at while I waited. Is Rand coming back?"

"He will be with us soon." Thumbs tucked behind his sword belt, Lan stood beside Mat, looking down at the map. His face gave away as much as a statue's would. "Tomorrow should bring the largest battle since Artur Hawkwing."

"You don't say?" Where was Rand? Still up on that tower, probably. Maybe he should go there. No, he could end up haring all over the camp, always one step behind. Rand would come here eventually. He wanted to talk about something besides Couladin. *This fight is none of mine. I'm not running away from anything that concerns me in the least.* "What about them?" He gestured to the slips representing the Miagoma and the others. "Any word on whether they mean to join Rand, or do they just intend to sit there watching?"

"Who can say? Rhuarc doesn't seem to know any more than I do, and if the Wise Ones do, they are not telling. The only thing certain is that Couladin is not going anywhere."

Couladin again. Mat shifted uncomfortably and took a half-step toward the entrance. No, he *would* wait. Fastening his gaze on the maps, he pretended to study them further. Perhaps Lan would leave him in silence. He just wanted to say his piece to Rand and go.

The Warder appeared to want to talk, though. "What do you think, Master Gleeman? Should we rush down on Couladin with everything and crush him tomorrow?"

“That sounds as good to me as any other plan,” Natael replied dourly. Emptying the goblet down his throat, he dropped it on the carpets and picked up the harp to begin softly strumming something dark and funereal. “I lead no armies, Warder. I command nothing save myself, and not always that.”

Mat grunted, and Lan glanced at him before returning to his study of the maps. “You do not think it a good plan? Why not?”

He said it so casually that Mat answered without thinking. “Two reasons. If you surround Couladin, trap him between you and the city, you might crush him against it.” How long was Rand going to be? “But you might push him right over the walls, too. From what I hear, he’s nearly gotten over twice already, even without miners or siege engines, and the city is hanging on by its teeth.” Say his piece and go, that was it. “Press him enough, and you’ll find yourself fighting inside Cairhien. Nasty thing, fighting in a city. And the idea is to save the place, not finish ruining it.” Those slips laid out on the maps, the maps themselves, made it all so clear.

Frowning, he squatted with his elbows on his knees. Lan got down with him, but he hardly noticed. A dicey problem. And fascinating. “Best if you try to shove him away. Hit him from the south, mainly.” He pointed to the River Gaelin; it joined the Alguenya some miles north of the city. “There are bridges up here. Leave the Shaido a clear path to them. Always leave a way out, unless you really want to find out how hard a man can fight when he’s nothing to lose.” His finger slid east. Wooded hills for the most part, it seemed. Probably not much different from right around here. “A blocking force here on this side of the river will make sure they go for the bridges, if it’s big enough and positioned right. Once they are moving, Couladin won’t want to try fighting someone ahead of him while you’re coming behind.” Yes. Almost exactly the same as at Jenje. “Not unless he’s a complete fool, anyway. They might make it to the river in good order, but those bridges will choke them. I don’t see Aiel swimming, or hunting out fords for that matter. Keep the pressure on, shove them across. With luck you’ll be able to harry them all the way to the mountains.” It was like Cuaindaigh Fords, too, late in the Trolloc Wars, and on much the same scale. Not much different from the Tora Shan, either. Or Sulmein Gap, before Hawkwing found his stride. The names flickered through his head, the images of bloody fields forgotten even by historians. Absorbed in the map as he was, they did not register as anything but his own remembrances.

“Too bad you don’t have more cavalry. Light cavalry is best for the harrying. Bite at the flanks, keep them running, and never let them settle to fight. But Aiel should do almost as well.”

“And the other reason?” Lan asked quietly.

Mat was caught up in it, now. He more than merely liked gambling, and battle was a gamble to make dicing in taverns a thing for children and toothless invalids. Lives were the stake here, your own and other men’s, men who were not even there. Make the wrong wager, a foolish bet, and cities died, or whole nations. Natael’s somber music was fit accompaniment. At the same time, this was a game that set the blood racing.

Without lifting his eyes from the map, he snorted. “You know as well as I. If even one of those four clans decides to side with Couladin, they’ll take you from behind while your hands are still full of Shaido. Couladin will be the anvil and they the hammer, with you the nut between. Only take half of what you have against Couladin. That makes it an even fight, but you have to settle for it.” There was no such thing as fairness in war. You took your enemy from behind, when he least expected it, when and where he was weakest. “You still have an edge. He has to worry about a sortie from the city. The other half, you split in three parts. One to funnel Couladin to the river, the other two a few miles apart, between the city and the four clans.”

“Very neat,” Lan said, nodding. That slab-carved face never changed, but approval touched his voice, if lightly. “It would gain a clan nothing to attack either force, especially not when the other could take it in the rear. And none will try to interfere in what happens around the city for the same reason. Of course, all four could join. Not likely, if they haven’t already, but if they do, everything changes.”

Mat laughed aloud. “Everything always changes. The best plan lasts until the first arrow leaves the bow. This would be easy enough for a child to handle, except for Indirian and the rest not knowing their own minds. If they all decide to go over to Couladin, you toss the dice and hope, because the Dark One’s in the game for sure. At least you’ll have enough strength clear of the city nearly to match them. Enough to hold them for the time you need. Abandon the idea of pursuing Couladin and turn everything on them as soon as he’s well and truly begun crossing the Gaelin. But it’s my bet they'll wait and watch, and come to you once Couladin is done for. Victory settles a lot of arguments in most men's heads."

The music had stopped. Mat glanced at Natael, and found the man holding his harp rigidly, staring at him over it harder than ever. Staring as if he had never seen him before, did not know what he was. The gleeman's eyes were dark polished glass, his knuckles white on the harp's gilding.

With that it all crashed home, what he had been saying, the memories he had been embracing. *Burn you for a fool for not guarding your tongue!* Why had Lan had to take the conversation that way? Why could he not have talked about horses, or the weather, or just kept his mouth shut? The Warder had never seemed all that eager to talk before. Usually the man made a tree seem talkative. Of course, he could have kept his own mind focused and his own mouth shut, too. At least he had not been babbling in the Old Tongue. *Blood and ashes, but I* hope *I wasn't!*

Springing to his feet, Mat turned to go, and found Rand standing just inside the tent, absently twisting that odd bit of tasseled spear as if he did not realize he was holding it. How long had he been there? It did not matter. Mat spilled it all out in a rush. "I'm leaving, Rand. Come first light in the morning, I am in the saddle and gone. I'd go this minute if I could get far enough in half a day to suit me for stopping. I mean to put as many miles between me and the Aiel—*any* Aiel—as Pips can cover before I make camp." No point in bedding down close enough to be snapped up and hung out to dry by somebody's scouts; Couladin must have them out, too, and even the others might not recognize him before he had a spear in his liver.

"I will be sorry to see you go," Rand said quietly.

"Don't try to talk me out of—" Mat blinked. "That's it? You'll be sorry to see me go?"

"I've never tried to make you stay, Mat. Perrin went when he had to, and so can you."

Mat opened his mouth, then closed it again. Rand had never tried to make him stay, true. He had just done it without trying. But there was not the slightest bit of *ta'veren* tugging, now, no vague feelings that he was doing the wrong thing. He was firm and clear in his purpose.

"Where will you go?"

"South." Not that there was much choice of direction. The others led to the Gaelin, with nothing north of the river that he was interested in, or else to Aiel, one lot that would certainly kill him and one that might or might not, depending on how close by Rand was and what they had had for supper the night before. Not good odds, by his reckoning. “To begin, anyway. Then somewhere there’s a tavern, and some women who don’t carry spears.” Melindhra. She might present a problem. He had the feeling she might be the sort of woman who did not let go until *she* wanted. Well, one way or another, he would deal with her. Maybe he could just ride out before she knew it. “This isn’t for me, Rand. I don’t know anything about battles, and I don’t want to know.” He avoided looking at Lan and Natael. If either man cracked his teeth, he would punch him right in the mouth. Even the Warder. “You understand, don’t you?”

Rand’s nod could have been understanding. Maybe it was. “I’d forget saying goodbye to Egwene, were I you. I am no longer certain how much of what I tell her I might as well be telling Moiraine, or the Wise Ones, or both.”

“I reached that conclusion a long time ago. She’s left Emond’s Field further behind than either of us. And regrets it less.”

“Maybe,” Rand said sadly. “The Light shine on you, Mat,” he added, sticking out his hand, “and send you smooth roads, fair weather and pleasant company until we meet again.”

That would not be soon, if Mat had his way. He felt a little sad about that, and a little foolish for feeling sad, yet a man had to look after himself. When all was said and done, that was the long and short of it.

Rand’s grip was as hard as it had ever been—all that swordwork had only added new calluses atop older bowman’s—but the ridged heron brand in his palm was distinct against Mat’s hand. Just a little reminder, in case he should forget the markings under his friend’s coatsleeves, or those even stranger things inside his head that let him channel. If he could forget that Rand could channel—and he had not thought of it once in days; days!—then it was *far* past time to be gone.

A few more awkward words standing there—Lan seemed to ignore them, arms folded, silently studying the maps, while Natael had begun idly plucking his harp; Mat had an ear for music, and to him the unfamiliar tune had an ironic sound; he wondered why the fellow had chosen it—a few more moments and Rand half-stepping around actually putting an end to it, and then Mat was outside. There was a crowd out there, a good hundred Maidens spread about the hilltop and walking on tiptoe they were so ready to spear somebody, all seven clan chiefs waiting patient and still as stone, three Tairen lords trying to pretend that they were not sweating and the Aiel did not exist.

He had heard about the lords' arrival, and had even gone to take a look at their camp—or camps—but there had been no one there he knew, and no one wanting to take a turn at dice or cards. These three eyed him up and down, frowning disdainfully, and apparently decided he was no better than the Aiel, which was to say not worth seeing.

Clapping his hat on his head and pulling the brim low over his eyes, Mat studied the Tairens coldly in return for a moment. He had the pleasure of seeing the younger pair, at least, become uncomfortably aware of him again before he started down the hill. The gray-beard still looked all barely concealed impatience to enter Rand's tent, but it did not matter anyway. He would never see any of them again.

He had no idea why he had not simply ignored them. Except that his step was lighter and he felt full of vinegar. No wonder, really, leaving tomorrow at last. The dice seemed to be spinning in his head, and there was no knowing what pips would show when they landed. Odd, that. It must be Melindhra worrying him. Yes. He would definitely leave early, and as quietly as a mouse tiptoeing on feathers.

Whistling, he set off for his tent. What was the tune? Oh, yes. "Dance with Jak o' the Shadows." He had no intention of dancing with death, but it had a merry sound, so he whistled it anyway as he tried to plan the best route away from Cairhien.

Rand stood staring after Mat long after the tent flaps had fallen to hide him. "I only heard the last bit," he said finally. "Was it all like that?"

"Very nearly," Lan replied. "With only a few minutes to study the maps, he laid out close to the battle plan that Rhuarc and the others made. He saw the difficulties and the dangers, and how to meet them. He knows about miners and siege engines, and using light cavalry to harry a defeated foe."

Rand looked at him. The Warder showed no surprise, not the twitch of an eyelash. Of course, he was the one who had said Mat seemed surprisingly knowledgeable about military matters. And Lan was not going to ask the obvious question, either, which was good. Rand had no right to give the little answer he had.

He could have asked a few questions himself. Such as, What did miners have to do with battles? Or maybe it was only sieges. Whatever the answer, there was not a mine closer than the Kinslayer’s Dagger, and no certainty anyone was still digging ore. Well, this battle would be fought without. The important thing was that he knew Mat had gained more on the other side of that doorway *ter’angreal* than a tendency to spout the Old Tongue when not thinking. And knowing that, Rand would surely make use of it.

You don’t have to get any harder, he thought bitterly. He had seen Mat climbing toward this tent, and never hesitated in sending Lan in to discover what might come to the surface in idle conversation, alone. That had been deliberate. The rest might or might not be, but it would happen. He hoped Mat had a fine time while he was free. He hoped that Perrin was enjoying himself in the Two Rivers, showing off Faile to his mother and sisters, maybe marrying her. He hoped it because he knew he would draw them back, *ta’veren* pulling at *ta’veren,* and he the strongest. Moiraine had named it no coincidence, three such growing up in the same village, all nearly the same age; the Wheel wove happenstance and coincidence into the Pattern, but it did not lay down the likes of the three of them for no reason. Eventually he would pull his friends back to him, however far they went, and when they came, he would use them, however he could. However he had to. Because he did have to. Because whatever the Prophecy of the Dragon said, he was sure the only chance he had of winning Tarmon Gai’don lay in having all three of them, three *ta’veren* who had been tied together since infancy, tied together once more. No, he did not need to become hard. *You’re rank enough already to make a Seanchan spew his supper!*

“Play ‘March of Death,’ ” he commanded in a harsher voice than he wanted, and Natael looked at him blankly for a moment. The man had been listening to everything. He would have questions, but he would find no answers. If Rand could not tell Lan Mat’s secrets, he would not spread them before one of the Forsaken, however tame he appeared. This time he deliberately made his tone rough, and pointed the length of spear at the man. “Play it, unless you know a sadder. Play something to make *your* soul weep. If you have one still.”

Natael gave him an ingratiating smile and a seated bow, but he went white around the eyes. It was indeed “The March of Death” that he began, yet it had a sharper edge on his harp than ever before, a dirgelike keen that surely would make any soul weep. He stared fixedly at Rand as if hoping to see some effect.

Turning away, Rand stretched out on the carpets with his head to the maps and a red-and-gold cushion under his elbow. “Lan, would you ask the others to come in now?”

The Warder made a formal bow before stepping outside. It was the first time that he had ever done that, but Rand noticed only absently.

The battle would begin tomorrow. It was a polite fiction that he helped Rhuarc and the others plan. He was smart enough to know what he did not know, and despite all of his talks with Lan and Rhuarc, he knew he was not ready. *I’ve planned a hundred battles this size or more and given orders that led to ten times as many.* Not his thought. Lews Therin knew war—had known war—but not Rand al’Thor, and that was him. He listened, asked questions—and nodded as if he understood when the chiefs said a thing should be done a certain way. Sometimes he did understand and wished he did not, because he knew where that understanding came from. His only real contribution had been to say that Couladin had to be defeated without destroying the city. In any case, this meeting would only add a few touches at most to what had already been decided. Mat would have been useful, with his new-found knowledge.

No. He would not think of his friends, of what he would do to them before it was all done. Even leaving the battle aside, there was plenty to occupy him, things he could do something about. The absence of Cairhienin flags above Cairhien marked a major problem, and the continued skirmishes with Andorans another. What Sammael was up to warranted thought, and . . .

The chiefs filed in in no particular order. This time Dhearic came first, Rhuarc and Erim together at the rear with Lan. Bruan and Jheran took the places next to Rand. They did not concern themselves with precedence among themselves, and *Aan’allein* they seemed to take as all but one of them.

Weiramon entered last, his lordlings at his heels and a tight-mouthed scowl on his face. Precedence certainly mattered to him. Muttering into his oiled beard, he stalked his way around the firepit, taking up a place behind Rand. Until the chiefs’ flat stares finally broke through his shell, at least. Among Aiel, a close kinsman or society brother might position himself so, if there was the possibility of a knife in the back. He still frowned at Jheran and Dhearic as though expecting one of them to make room.

Finally Bael gestured to the place beside him, across the maps from Rand, and after a pause, Weiramon strode back to sit cross-legged and rigid, staring straight ahead and looking like a man who had swallowed an unripe plum whole. The younger Tairens stood almost as stiffly at his back, one with the grace to look embarrassed.

Rand took note of him but said not a word, only thumbed his pipe full of tabac and seized *saidin* long enough to light it. He had to do something about Weiramon; the man exacerbated old problems and made new ones. Not a flicker crossed Rhuarc's features, but the other chiefs' expressions ranged from Han's sour disgust to Erim's clear, cold-eyed readiness to dance spears there and then. Perhaps there was a way for Rand to rid himself of Weiramon and make a beginning on another of his worries at the same time.

With Rand's example, Lan and the chiefs began filling pipes.

"I see only small changes necessary," Bael said, puffing his pipe alight, and sparking a glower from Han, as usual.

"Do these small changes concern the Goshien, or perhaps some other clan?"

Putting Weiramon from his mind, Rand bent himself to listening as they worked out what had to be altered from their new view of the terrain. Now and again one of the Aiel would glance at Natael, a brief tightness to eyes or mouth suggesting that the mournful music plucked at something in him. Even the Tairens grimaced sadly. The sounds washed over Rand, though, touching nothing. Tears were a luxury he could no longer afford, not even inside.

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CHAPTER
43

This Place, This Day

The next morning Rand was up and dressed well before first light. In truth, he had not slept, and it had not been Aviendha who kept him awake, not even after she began undressing before he could put out the lamps and channeled one alight again as soon as he did, chiding him that she was unable to see in the dark even if he could. He made no reply, and hours later, had hardly noticed when she rose, a good hour before he did, dressed and left. He did not even think to wonder where she was going.

The thoughts that had had him staring up into the blackness still ran through his head. Men would die today. A great many men, even if everything went perfectly. Nothing he did now would change it; today would run out according to the Pattern. But over and over he mulled the decisions he had made since he first entered the Waste. Could he have done something different, something that would have avoided this day, this place? Next time, perhaps. The tasseled length of spear lay atop his sword belt and scabbarded blade beside his blankets. There would be a next time, and one beyond that, and beyond again.

While darkness still held, the chiefs came in a bunch for a few final words, to report that their men were in position and ready. Not that anything else was expected. Stone-faced as they were, some emotion showed. An odd mix, though, a skim of ebullience over somberness.

Erim actually wore a slight smile. “A good day, to see the end of the Shaido,” he said finally. He seemed to be walking on his toes.

“The Light willing,” Bael said, his head brushing the roof of the tent, “we will wash the spears in Couladin’s blood before sunfall.”

“Bad luck to talk of what will be,” Han muttered. The skim was very thin on him, of course. “Fate will decide.”

Rand nodded. “The Light send it does not decide on too many of our number dead.” He wished his concern were only that few men should die because men should not have their lives cut short, but there were many more days to come. He would need every spear to bring order to this side of the Dragonwall. That was a bone between him and Couladin every bit as much as the rest.

“Life is a dream,” Rhuarc told him, and Han and the others nodded agreement. Life was only a dream, and all dreams had to end. Aiel did not run toward death, yet they did not run from it either.

As they were departing, Bael paused. “Are you certain of what you want the Maidens to do? Sulin has been speaking to the Wise Ones.”

So that was what Melaine had been at Bael about. The way Rhuarc stopped to listen, he had been hearing from Amys on the subject, too.

“Everyone else is doing what they are supposed to without complaining, Bael.” That was unfair, but this was no game. “If the Maidens want special consideration, Sulin can come to me, not go running to the Wise Ones.”

Had they been anything but Aiel, Rhuarc and Bael would have been shaking their heads as they left. Rand supposed each would get an earful from his wife, but they would have to live with it. If *Far Dareis Mai* carried his honor, this time they would carry it where he wanted.

To Rand’s surprise Lan appeared just as he was ready to go out himself. The Warder’s cloak hung down his back, disturbing the vision as it rippled with his movements.

“Is Moiraine with you?” Rand had expected Lan to be glued to her side.

“She is fretting in her tent. She cannot possibly Heal even all of the worst hurt today.” That was her choice of how to help; she could not use the Power as a weapon today, but she could Heal. “Waste always angers her.”

“It angers us all,” Rand snapped. His taking Egwene away probably upset her, too. As far as he could tell, Egwene was not very good at Healing on her own, but she could have aided Moiraine. Well, he needed her to keep her promise. “Tell Moiraine if she needs help, ask some of the Wise Ones who can channel.” But few Wise Ones had any knowledge of Healing. “She can link with them and use their strength.” He hesitated. Had Moiraine ever spoken of linking to him? “You didn’t come here to tell me Moiraine is brooding,” he said irritably. It was difficult sometimes, keeping straight what came from her, what from Asmodean, and what bubbled up from Lews Therin.

“I came to ask why you’ve taken to wearing a sword again.”

“Moiraine asked already. Did she send—?”

Lan’s face did not change, but he cut in roughly. “I want to know. You can make a sword from the Power, or kill without, but suddenly you are wearing steel on your hip again. Why?”

Unconsciously, Rand ran one hand up the long hilt at his side. “It’s hardly fair to use the Power that way. Especially against someone who can’t channel. I might as well fight a child.”

The Warder stood silent for a time, studying him. “You mean to kill Couladin yourself,” he said at last in flat tones. “That sword against his spears.”

“I don’t mean to seek him out, but who can say what will happen?” Rand shrugged uncomfortably. Not to hunt for him. But if ever his twisting of chance was to favor him, let it be to bring him face-to-face with Couladin. “Besides, I’d not put it past him to seek me. The threats I’ve heard from him have been personal, Lan.” Raising one fist, he thrust his arm out of a crimson coatsleeve enough to make the golden-maned Dragon’s fore end plainly visible. “Couladin won’t rest while I live, not so long as we both wear these.”

And truth to tell, he would not rest himself until only one living man bore the Dragons. By rights he should lump Asmodean in with Couladin. Asmodean had marked the Shaido. But Couladin’s unrestrained ambition had made it possible; his ambition and refusal to abide by Aiel law and custom had led inevitably to this place, this day. Beyond the bleakness and war between Aiel, there was Taien to be laid at Couladin’s feet, and Selean, and dozens of ruined towns and villages since, countless hundreds of burned farms. Unburied men and women and children had fed the vultures. If he was the Dragon Reborn, if he had any right to demand that any nation follow him, much less Cairhien, then he owed them justice.

“Then have him beheaded when he’s taken,” Lan said harshly. “Set a hundred men, or a thousand, with no purpose but to find and take him. But do not be fool enough to fight him! You are good with a blade now—very good—but Aielmen are all but born with spear and buckler in hand. A spear through your heart, and all has been for naught.”

“So I should avoid the fighting? Would you, if Moiraine had no claims on you? Will Rhuarc, or Bael, or any of them?”

“I am not the Dragon Reborn. The fate of the world does not rest on me.” But the momentary heat had gone from his voice. Without Moiraine, he would have been wherever the fighting was hottest. If anything, he looked to be regretting those claims at the moment.

“I’ll not take needless risks, Lan, but I can’t run from them all.” The Seanchan spear would remain in the tent today; it would only get in his way if he did find Couladin. “Come. The Aiel will finish it without us if we stand here much longer.”

When he ducked outside, only a few stars remained, and a thin brightness outlined the eastern horizon sharply. That was not why he stopped, though, and Lan with him. Maidens made a ring around the tent, shoulder to shoulder, facing inward. A thick ring that spread down the dark shrouded slopes, *cadin’sor*-clad women jammed so a mouse could not have slipped through. Jeade’en was nowhere in sight, though a *gai’shain* had been ordered to have him saddled and waiting.

Not Maidens alone. Two women in the front rank wore bulky skirts and pale blouses, their hair bound back with folded scarves. It was too black yet to discern faces with any certainty, but there was something in the shape of those two, in their folded-arm stance, that named Egwene and Aviendha.

Sulin stepped forward before he could open his mouth to ask what they were up to. “We have come to escort the *Car’a’carn* to the tower with Egwene Sedai and Aviendha.”

“Who put you up to this?” Rand demanded. One glance at Lan showed it had not been him. Even in the darkness the Warder looked startled. For a moment anyway, his head jerking up; nothing surprised Lan for long. “Egwene is supposed to be on her way to the tower now, and the Maidens are supposed to be there to guard her. What she will do today is very important. She must be protected while she does it.”

“We will protect her.” Sulin’s voice was as flat as a planed board. “And the *Car’a’carn*, who gave his honor to *Far Dareis Mai* to carry.” A murmur of approval rippled through the Maidens.

“It only makes sense, Rand,” Egwene said from where she stood. “If one using the Power as a weapon will make the battle shorter, three will shorten it even more. And you are stronger than Aviendha and me together.”

She did not sound as if she liked saying that last. Aviendha said nothing, but the way she stood was eloquent.

“This is ridiculous,” Rand scowled. “Let me through, and go to your assigned place.”

Sulin did not budge. “*Far Dareis Mai* carries the honor of the *Car’a’carn*,” she said calmly, and others took it up. No louder, but from so many women’s voices it made a high rumble. “*Far Dareis Mai* carries the honor of the *Car’a’carn. Far Dareis Mai* carries the honor of the *Car’a’carn*.”

“I said let me through,” he demanded the instant the sound died.

As if he had told them to begin again, they did. “*Far Dareis Mai* carries the honor of the *Car’a’carn. Far Dareis Mai* carries the honor of the *Car’a’carn*.” Sulin just stood there looking at him.

After a moment Lan leaned close to murmur dryly, “A woman is no less a woman because she carries a spear. Did you ever meet one who could be diverted from anything she really wanted? Give over, or we will stand here all day while you argue and they chant at you.” The Warder hesitated, then added, “Besides which, it does make sense.”

Egwene opened her mouth as the litany fell off once more, but Aviendha put a hand on her arm and whispered a few words, and Egwene said nothing. He knew what she had intended to say, though. She had been about to tell him he was a stubborn foolish woolhead or some such.

The trouble was that he was beginning to feel like one. It *did* make sense for him to go to the tower. He had nothing to do elsewhere—the battle was in the hands of the chiefs and fate, now—and he would be of more use channeling than riding around hoping to meet with Couladin. If being *ta’veren* could pull Couladin to him, it could draw him to the tower as easily as anywhere else. Not that he would have much chance of seeing the man, not after ordering every last Maiden to defend the tower.

But how to back down and retain a scrap of dignity after blustering left, right and center? “I’ve decided I can do the most good from the tower,” he said, his face going hot.

“As the *Car’a’carn* commands,” Sulin replied without a hint of mockery, just as if it had been his idea from the first. Lan nodded, then slipped away, the Maidens making narrow room for him.

The gap closed up right behind Lan, though, and when they began to move, Rand had no choice except to go with them. He could have channeled, of course, flung Fire about or knocked them down with Air, but that was hardly the way to behave with people on his side, let alone women. Besides, he was not sure he could have made them leave him short of killing, and maybe not then. And anyway, he had decided he was of most use at the tower, after all.

Egwene and Aviendha were as silent as Sulin as they walked, for which he was grateful. Of course, at least part of their silence had to do with picking their way uphill and down in the dark without breaking their necks. Aviendha did raise a mutter now and then that he barely caught, something angry about skirts. But neither made fun of him for backing down so visibly. Though that might well come later. Women seemed to enjoy jabbing the needle in just when you thought the danger was past.

The sky began to lighten into gray, and as the log tower came into sight above the trees, he broke the quiet himself. “I didn’t expect you to be part of this, Aviendha. I thought you said Wise Ones take no part in battles.” He was sure she had. A Wise One could walk through the middle of a battle untouched, or into any hold or stand of a clan that had blood feud with hers, but she took no part in fighting, certainly not with channeling. Until he came to the Waste, even most Aiel had not really known that some Wise Ones could channel, though there were rumors of strange abilities, and sometimes something the Aiel thought might be close to channeling.

“I am not a Wise One yet,” she replied pleasantly, shifting her shawl. “If an Aes Sedai like Egwene can do this, so can I. I arranged it this morning, while you still slept, but I have thought of it since you first asked Egwene.”

There was enough light now for him to see Egwene flush. When she saw him glancing at her, she tripped over nothing, and he had to catch her arm to keep her from falling. Avoiding his eyes, she jerked free. Maybe he would not have to worry about any needles from her. They started uphill through the sparse woods toward the tower.

“They didn’t try to stop you? Amys, I mean, or Bair, or Melaine?” He knew they had not. If they had, she would not be there.

Aviendha shook her head, then frowned thoughtfully. “They talked for a long time with Sorilea, then told me to do as I thought I must. Usually they tell me to do as *they* think I must.” Glancing at him sideways, she added, “I heard Melaine say that you bring change to everything.”

“I do that,” he said, setting his foot on the bottom rung of the first ladder. “The Light help me, that I do.”

The view from the platform was magnificent even to the naked eye, the land spreading out in wooded hills. The trees were thick enough to hide the Aiel moving toward Cairhien—most would already be in position—but dawn cast the city itself in golden light. A quick scan through one of the looking glasses showed the barren hills along the river placid and seemingly empty of life. That would change soon enough. The Shaido were there, if concealed for now. They would not remain concealed when he began to direct. . . . What? Not balefire. Whatever he did, it had to unnerve the Shaido as much as possible before his Aiel attacked.

Egwene and Aviendha had been taking turns looking through the other long tube, with pauses for quiet discussion, but now they were simply talking softly. Exchanging nods finally, they moved closer to the railing and stood with their hands on the rough-hewn timber, staring toward Cairhien. Goose bumps suddenly dotted his skin. One of them was channeling, maybe both.

It was the wind that he noticed first, blowing toward the city. Not a breeze; the first real wind he had felt in this country. And clouds were beginning to form above Cairhien, heaviest to the south, growing thicker and blacker as he watched, roiling. Only there, over Cairhien and the Shaido. Everywhere else as far as he could see, the sky was a clear blue, with only a few high thin white wisps. Yet thunder rolled, long and solid. Suddenly lightning stabbed down, a jagged silver streak that rent a hilltop below the city. Before the crack of the first bolt reached the tower, two more crackled earthward. Wild forks danced across the sky, but those single lances of brilliant white struck with the regularity of a heartbeat. Abruptly, ground exploded where no lightning had fallen, fountaining fifty feet, then again somewhere else, and again.

Rand had no idea which woman was doing what, but they certainly looked set to harrow the Shaido out. Time to do his bit, or stand watching. Reaching out, he seized *saidin.* Icy fire scoured the outside of the Void that surrounded what was Rand al’Thor. Coldly, he ignored the oily filth seeping into him from the taint, juggled wild torrents of the Power that threatened to engulf him.

At this distance, there were limits to what he could do. In fact, it was about as far as he could do anything, really, without *angreal* or *sa’angreal.*

Very likely that was why the women were channeling one lightning bolt at a time, one explosion; if he was at his boundary, they must be stretching theirs.

A memory slid across the emptiness. Not his; Lews Therin’s. For once he did not care. In an instant he channeled, and a ball of fire enveloped the top of a hill nearly five miles away, a churning mass of pale yellow flame. When it faded, he could see without the looking glass that the hill was lower now, and black at the crest, seemingly melted. Between the three of them, there might be no need for the clans to fight Couladin at all.

Ilyena, my love, forgive me!

The Void trembled; for an instant Rand teetered on the brink of destruction. Waves of the One Power crashed through him in a froth of fear; the taint seemed to solidify around his heart, a reeking stone.

Clutching the rail until his knuckles ached, he forced himself back to calmness, forced the emptiness to hold. Thereafter he refused to listen to the thoughts in his head. Instead he concentrated everything on channeling, on methodically searing one hill after another.

Standing well back into what treeline there was on the crest, Mat held Pips’ nose under his arm so the gelding would not whicker as he watched a thousand or so Aiel slanting toward him across the hills from the south. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, stretching long rippling shadows to one side of the trotting mass. The night’s warmth was already beginning to give way to the heat of day. The air would swelter once the sun reached any height. He was already beginning to sweat.

The Aiel had not seen him yet, but he had few doubts that they would if he waited there much longer. It hardly mattered that they very nearly had to be Rand’s men—if Couladin had men to the south, the day was going to get very interesting for those stupid enough to be in the middle of the fighting—hardly mattered because he was not going to run the risk of letting them see him. He had already come too close to an arrow this morning for that kind of carelessness. Absently he fingered the neat slice across the shoulder of his coat. Good shooting, at a moving target only half-seen through trees. He could have admired it more had he not been the target.

Without taking his eyes from the approaching Aiel, he carefully backed Pips deeper into the sparse thicket; if they saw him and picked up their pace, he wanted to know. People said Aiel could run down a man on horseback, and he meant to have a good lead if they tried.

Not until the trees hid them from him did he quicken his own step, leading Pips onto the reverse slope before mounting and turning west. A man could not be too careful if he wanted to stay alive on this day and this ground. He muttered to himself as he rode, hat pulled low to shade his face and black-hafted spear across his pommel. West. Again.

The day had begun so well, a good two hours before first light, when Melindhra had gone off to some meeting of the Maidens. Thinking him asleep, she had not glanced at him as she stalked out muttering half under her breath about Rand al'Thor and honor and "*Far Dareis Mai* above all." She sounded as if she were arguing with herself, but frankly, he did not care whether she wanted to pickle Rand or stew him. Before she was a minute out of the tent, he was stuffing his saddlebags. No one had so much as looked at him twice while he saddled Pips and ghosted away to the south. A good beginning. Only he had not counted on columns of Taardad and Tomanelle and every other bloody clan sweeping around to the south. No consolation that it was very close to what he had babbled to Lan. He wanted to go south, and those Aiel had forced him toward the Alguenya. Toward where the fighting would be.

A mile or two on, he cautiously turned Pips upslope, pausing deep in the scattered trees on the crest. It was a higher hill than most, and he had a good view. This time there were no Aiel in sight, but the column winding along the bottom of the twisting hill valley was almost as bad. Mounted Tairens had the lead behind a knot of colorful lords' banners, with a gap back to a thick, bristling snake of pikemen in the Tairens' dust, and then another to the Cairhienin horse, with their multitude of banners and pennants and *con*. The Cairhienin maintained no order at all, milling about as lords shifted back and forth for conversation, but at least they had flankers out to either side. In any case, as soon as they were past, he had a clear route south. *And I'll not stop until I'm halfway to the bloody Erinin!*

A flicker of movement caught his eye, well ahead of the column below. He would not have seen it except for being so high. None of the riders could have, certainly. Digging his small looking glass from his saddlebags—Kin Tovere liked the dice—he peered toward what he had seen, and whistled softly through his teeth. Aiel, at least as many as the men in the valley, and if they were not Couladin's, they meant to give a nameday surprise, for they were lying low among the dying bushes and dead leaves.

For a moment he drummed fingers on his thigh. Shortly there were going to be some corpses down there. And not many of them Aiel. *None of my affair. I am out of this, out of here, and heading south.* He would wait a bit, then head off while they were all too busy to notice.

This fellow Weiramon—he had heard the gray beard's name yesterday—was a stone fool. *No foreguard out, and no scouts, or he'd know what was bloody in store for him.* For that matter, the way the hills lay, the way the valley twisted, the Aiel could not see the column, either, only its thin dust rising skyward. They certainly had had scouts to get themselves in place; they could not just be waiting there on the off chance.

Idly whistling "Dance with Jak o' the Shadows," he put the looking glass back to his eye and studied the hilltops. Yes. The Aiel commander had left a few men where they could signal a warning just before the column entered the killing ground. But even they could not possibly see anything yet. In a few minutes the first Tairens would come in sight, but until then . . .

It came as a shock when he heeled Pips to a gallop downslope. *What under the Light am I doing?* Well, he could not just stand by and let them all go their deaths like geese to the knife. He would warn them. That was all. Tell what lay in wait ahead, then he was gone.

The Cairhienin outriders saw him coming before he reached the bottom of the slope, of course, heard Pips' dead-flat charge. Two or three lowered their lances. Mat did not precisely enjoy having a foot and a half of steel pointed at him, and still less three times over, but obviously one man was no threat, even riding like a madman. They let him pass, and he swung in near the lead Cairhienin lords long enough to shout, "Halt here! Now! By order of the Lord Dragon! Else he'll channel your head into your belly and feed you your own feet for breakfast!"

His heels dug in, and Pips sprang ahead. He only glanced back to be sure they were doing what he said—they were, if showing some confusion over it; the hills hid them from the Aiel still, and once their dust settled, the Aiel would have no way of knowing they were there—and then he was lying low on the gelding's neck, whipping Pips with his hat and galloping up alongside the infantry.

If I wait to let Weiramon pass the orders, it'll be too late. That's all. He would give his warning and go.

The foot marched in blocks of two hundred or so pikemen, with one mounted officer in the front of each and maybe fifty archers or crossbowmen at the rear. Most looked at him curiously as he dashed by, Pips' heels kicking up spurts of dust, but none broke stride. Some of the officers' mounts frisked as if the riders wanted to come see what had him in such a hurry, but none of them left their places either. Good discipline. They would need it.

Defenders of the Stone brought up the tail end of the Tairens, in their breastplates and puffy black-and-gold-striped coatsleeves, plumes of various colors on the rimmed helmets marking officers and underofficers. The rest were armored the same, but bore the colors of various lords on their sleeves. The silk-coated lords themselves rode at the very front in ornate breastplates and large white plumes, their banners rippling behind them in a rising breeze toward the city.

Reining around in front of them so quickly that Pips danced, Mat shouted, "Halt, in the name of the Lord Dragon!"

It seemed the fastest way to stop them, but for a moment he thought they meant to ride right over him. Almost at the last moment, a young lord he remembered from outside Rand's tent flung up a hand, and then they were all drawing rein in a flurry of shouted orders that ran back along the column. Weiramon was not there; not a lord was as much as ten years older than Mat.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the fellow who had signaled. Dark eyes glared arrogantly down a sharp nose, chin lifted so his pointed beard looked ready to stab. Sweat trickling down his face spoiled it only a little. "The Lord Dragon himself gave me this command. Who are you to—?"

He cut off as another man Mat knew caught his sleeve, whispering urgently. Potato-faced Estean looked haggard beneath his helmet as well as hot—the Aiel had wrung him out concerning conditions in the city, so Mat had heard—but he had gambled at cards with Mat in Tear. He knew exactly who Mat was. Estean's breastplate alone had chips in the ornate gilding; none of the others had done more than ride around looking pretty. Yet.

Sharp-nose's chin came down as he listened, and when Estean left off, he spoke in a more moderate tone. "No offense intended . . . ah . . . Lord

Mat. I am Melanril, of House Asegora. How may I serve the Lord Dragon?" Moderation slipped into actual hesitation at that last, and Estean broke in anxiously.

"Why should we 'halt'? I know the Lord Dragon told us to hold back, Mat, but burn my soul, there's no honor in sitting and letting the Aiel do all the fighting. Why should we be saddled with chasing them after they're broken? Besides, my father is in the city, and . . ." He trailed off under Mat's stare.

Mat shook his head, fanning himself with his hat. The fools were not even where they should be. There was no chance of turning them back, either. If Melanril would go—and looking at him, Mat was not sure he would, even on supposed orders from the Lord Dragon—there was still no chance. He sat his saddle in plain sight of the Aiel lookouts. If the column started turning around, they would know themselves discovered, and very likely they would attack while the Tairens and the Cairhienin pike were tangled up. It would be a slaughter as surely as if they had gone ahead in ignorance.

"Where is Weiramon?"

"The Lord Dragon sent him back to Tear," Melanril replied slowly. "To deal with the Illianer pirates, and the bandits on the Plains of Maredo. He was reluctant to go, of course, even for so great a responsibility, but . . . Pardon, Lord Mat, but if the Lord Dragon sent you, how is it that you don't know—"

Mat cut him off. "I am no lord. And if you want to question what Rand lets people know, ask him." That set the fellow back; he was not about to question the Lord bloody Dragon about anything. Weiramon was a fool, but at least he was old enough to have been in a battle. Except for Estean, looking like a sack of turnips tied on his horse, all this lot had seen was a tavern fight or two. And maybe a few duels. Fat lot of good that would do them. "Now, you all listen to me. When you pass through that gap ahead between the next two hills, Aiel are going to come down on you like an avalanche."

He might as well have told them there was going to be a ball, with the women all sighing to meet a Tairen lordling. Eager grins broke out, and they started dancing their horses about, slapping each other on the shoulder and boasting how many they would kill. Estean was odd man out, just sighing and easing his sword in its scabbard.

“Don’t stare up there!” Mat snapped. The fools. In a minute they would be calling the charge! “Keep your eyes on me. On me!”

It was who he was friends with that settled them down. Melanril and the others in their fine, unmarked armor frowned impatiently, not understanding why he did not want to let them begin the business of killing Aiel savages. If he had not been Rand’s friend they probably would have trampled him and Pips both.

He could let them go charging off. They would do it piecemeal, leaving the pikes and the Cairhienin horse behind, though the Cairhienin might join in once they realized what was happening. And they would all die. The smart thing would be to let them get on with it while he headed in the opposite direction. The only trouble was that once these idiots let the Aiel know they were discovered, those Aiel might decide to do something fancy, like swinging around to take the strung-out fools in the flank. If that happened, there was no certainty that he would get clear.

“What the Lord Dragon wants you to do,” he told them, “is to ride ahead slowly, just as if there wasn’t an Aiel inside a hundred miles. As soon as the pikes are through the gap, they’ll form a hollow square, and you get yourselves inside it double quick.”

“Inside!” Melanril protested. Angry mutters rose from the other young lords—except Estean, who looked thoughtful. “There is no honor in hiding behind stinking—”

“You bloody do it,” Mat roared, reining Pips close to Melanril’s horse, “or if the bloody Aiel don’t kill you, Rand will, and whatever he leaves, I’ll chop into sausage myself!” This was taking too long; the Aiel had to be wondering what they were talking about by now. “With any luck, you will be set before the Aiel can hit you. If you have horsebows, use them. Otherwise, hold tight. You’ll get your bloody charge, and you’ll know when, but if you move too early . . . !” He could almost feel time running down.

Setting the butt of his spear in his stirrup like a lance, he heeled Pips back down the column. When he glanced over his shoulder, Melanril and the others were talking and peering after him. At least they were not haring up the valley.

The commander of the pikemen proved to be a pale, slender Cairhienin, half a head shorter than Mat and mounted on a gray gelding that looked past ready for the pasture. Daerid had hard eyes, though, an oft-broken nose, and three white scars crisscrossing his face, one of them not very old. He took off his bell-shaped helmet while he talked with Mat; the front of his head was shaved. No lord, he. Maybe he had been part of the army, before the civil war started. Yes, his men knew how to form a hedgehog. He had not faced Aiel, but he had faced brigands, and Andoran cavalry. There was an implication that he had fought other Cairhienin as well, for one of the Houses contesting for the throne. Daerid sounded neither eager nor reluctant; he sounded like a man with a job of work to do.

The column stepped off as Mat turned Pips' head the other way. They marched with a measured pace, and a quick look behind showed the Tairens' horses moving no faster.

He let Pips go a little quicker than a walk, but not much. It seemed he could feel Aiel eyes on his back, feel them wondering what he had said, and where he was going now and why. *Just a messenger who's delivered his message and is going away. Nothing to worry about.* He certainly hoped that was what the Aiel thought, but his shoulders did not untense until he was sure they could no longer see him.

The Cairhienin were still waiting where he had left them. They still had their flankers out, too. Banners and *con* made a thicket where the lords had gathered, one in ten or better of the Cairhienin's number. Most of them wore plain breastplates, and where there was gilt or silverwork, it was battered as though a drunken blacksmith had been at it. Some of their mounts made Daerid's look like Lan's warhorse. Could they even do what was needed? But the faces that turned to him were hard, the gazes harder.

He was in the clear, now, hidden from the Aiel. He could ride on. After telling this lot what was expected of them, anyway. He had sent the others on into the Aiel trap; he could not simply abandon them.

Talmanes of House Delovinde, his *con* three yellow stars on blue and his banner a black fox, was even shorter than Daerid and had three years on Mat at most, but he led these Cairhienin although there were older men and even gray hair present. His eyes held as little expression as Daerid's, and he looked like a coiled whip. His armor and sword were utterly plain. Once he had told Mat his name the man listened quietly while Mat laid out his plan, leaning a little out of the saddle to cut lines in the ground with the sword-bladed spear.

The other Cairhienin lords gathered round on their horses, watching, but none so sharply as Talmanes. Talmanes studied the map he drew, and studied him from boots to hat, even his spear. When he was done, the fellow still did not speak, until Mat barked, “Well? I don’t care whether you take it or leave it, but your friends will be hip-deep in Aiel in not much longer.”

“The Tairens are no friends of mine. And Daerid is . . . useful. Certainly not a friend.” Dry chuckles ran through the onlooking lords at the suggestion. “But I will lead one half, if you lead the other.”

Talmanes pulled off one steel-backed gauntlet and put out his hand, but for a moment Mat only stared at it. Lead? Him? *I’m a gambler, not a soldier. A lover.* Memories of battles long gone spun through his head, but he forced them down. All he had to do was ride on. But then maybe Talmanes would leave Estean and Daerid and the rest to roast. On the spit Mat had hung them from. Even so, it was a surprise to him when he grasped the other’s hand and said, “You just be there when you’re supposed to be.”

For reply Talmanes began calling off names in a quick voice. Lords and lordlings reined toward Mat, each followed by a bannerman and perhaps a dozen retainers, until he had four hundred odd of the Cairhienin. Talmanes did not have much to say after, either; he just led the remainder west at a trot, trailing a faint cloud of dust.

“Keep together,” Mat told his half. “Charge when I say charge, run when I say run, and don’t make any noise you don’t have to.” There was the creak of saddles and the thud of hooves as they followed him, of course, but at least they did not talk, or ask questions.

A last glimpse of the other bristle of bright banners and *con*, and then a twist in the shallow valley hid them. How had he gotten into this? It had all started so simply. Just give warning and go. Each step after had seemed so small, so necessary. And now he had waded waist deep into the mud, and no choice but to keep on. He hoped Talmanes meant to show up. The man had not even asked who he was.

The hill valley twisted and forked as he angled north, but he had a good sense of direction. For instance, he knew exactly which way lay south and safety, and it was not the way he was heading. Dark clouds were forming up there toward the city, the first he had seen so thick in a long time. Rain would break the drought—good for the farmers, if any remained—and settle the dust—good for horsemen, so they did not announce themselves too early. Maybe if it rained, the Aiel would give up and go home. The wind was beginning to pick up, too, bringing a little cool, for a wonder.

The sound of fighting drifted over the crests, men shouting, men screaming. It had begun.

Mat turned Pips, raised his spear and swung it right and left. He was almost surprised when the Cairhienin formed into one long line to either side of him, facing upslope. The gesture had been instinctive, from another time and place, but then, these men had seen fighting. He started Pips up through the scattered trees at a slow walk, and they kept pace to the quiet jangle of bridles.

His first thought on reaching the height was relief at seeing Talmanes and his men coming into sight on the crest across from him. His second was to curse.

Daerid had formed the hedgehog, spiny thickets of pikes four deep interspersed with bowmen to make a large hollow square. Long pikes made it difficult for the Shaido to get close, however they rushed in, and the archers and crossbowmen were exchanging shots hot and fast with the Aiel. Men were falling on both sides, but the pikes simply closed in when one of their number went down, making the square tighter. Of course, the Shaido did not appear to slacken their assault either.

The Defenders were dismounted in the center, and maybe half the Tairen lords with their retainers. Half. That was what made him want to curse. The rest dashed about among the Aiel, slashing and stabbing with sword and lance in knots of five or ten, or alone. Dozens of riderless horses told how well they were doing. Melanril was off with only his bannerman, laying about with his blade. Two Aiel darted in to neatly hamstring the lordling's horse; it fell, head flailing—Mat was sure it screamed, but the din swallowed it—and then Melanril vanished behind *cadin'sor*-clad figures, spears stabbing. The bannerman lasted a moment longer.

Good riddance, Mat thought grimly. Standing in his stirrups, he raised the sword-bladed spear high, then swept it forward, shouting, *"Los! Los caba'drin!"*

He would have had the words back if he could, and not because they were Old Tongue; it was a boiling cauldron down in the valley. But whether or not any of the Cairhienin understood a command of "horsemen forward" in the Old Tongue, they understood the gesture, especially when he dropped back into his saddle and dug in his heels. Not that he really wanted to, but he could not see any choice now. He had put those men down there—some might have gotten away if he had told them to turn and run—and he just did not have a choice.

Banners and *con* waving, the Cairhienin charged downhill with him, shouting battle cries. In imitation of him, no doubt, though what he was shouting was “Blood and bloody ashes!” Across the valley, Talmanes raced down just as hard.

Sure that they had all the wetlanders penned, the Shaido never saw the others until crashed into from behind on both sides. It was then that the lightning began to fall. And after that things really got hairy.

* * *

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CHAPTER 44

The Lesser Sadness

Rand’s shirt clung to him with the sweat of effort, but he kept his coat on for protection from the wind gusting toward Cairhien. The sun had at least another hour to reach its noonday peak, yet already he felt as if he had run all morning and been beaten with a club at the finish. Wrapped in the Void, he was only distantly aware of the weariness, dimly perceiving the ache in arms and shoulders, in the small of his back, a throb around the tender scar in his side. That he was aware of them at all told the story. With the Power in him, he could make out individual leaves on the trees at a hundred paces, but whatever happened to him physically should have been as if it were happening to someone else.

He had long since taken to drawing on *saidin* through the *angreal* in his pocket, the stone carving of the fat little man. Even so, working the Power was a strain now, weaving it at this distance of miles, but only the rancid threads streaking what he drew kept him from pulling more, from trying to pull it all to him. The Power was that sweet, taint or no. After hours of channeling without rest, he was that tired. At the same time, he had to fight *saidin* itself harder, to put more of his strength into keeping it from burning him to ash where he stood, from burning his mind to ash. It was ever more difficult to hold off *saidin*’s destruction, more difficult to resist the desire to draw more, more difficult to handle what he did draw. A nasty downward spiral, and hours to go before the battle was decided.

Wiping sweat from his eyes, he gripped the platform’s rough railing. He was near the brink, yet he was stronger than Egwene or Aviendha. The Aiel woman was standing, peering off toward Cairhien and the storm clouds, occasionally bending to stare through the long looking glass; Egwene sat cross-legged, leaning back against an upright still covered in gray bark, her eyes closed. They both looked as worked out as he felt.

Before he could do anything—not that he knew what; he had no skill at Healing—Egwene’s eyes opened, and she stood, exchanging a few quiet words with Aviendha that the wind snatched away from even his *saidin*-enhanced hearing. Then Aviendha sat down in Egwene's place and let her head fall back against the upright. The black clouds around the city continued to stab lightning, but they were wild forks far more often than single lances now.

So they were taking turns, giving each other a rest. It would have been nice to have someone do that with him, but he did not regret telling Asmodean to stay in his tent. He would not have trusted him to channel. Especially not now. Who could say what he would have done when he saw Rand weakened as he was?

Staggering slightly, Rand pulled his looking glass around to study the hills outside the city. Life was certainly visible there now. And death. Wherever he looked there was fighting, Aiel against Aiel, a thousand here, five thousand there, swarming over the treeless hills and too closely meshed for him to do anything. He could not find the column of horse and pike.

Three times he had seen them, once fighting twice their number of Aiel. He was certain they were still out there. Small hope that Melanril had decided to obey his orders at this late juncture. Choosing the man just because he had had the grace to be embarrassed by Weiramon's behavior had been a mistake, but there had been little time to make a choice, and he had had to get rid of Weiramon. Nothing to be done about it now. Maybe one of the Cairhienin could be put in command. If even his direct order would make the Tairens follow a Cairhienin.

A milling mass right at the city's high gray wall caught his eye. Tall iron-bound gates stood open, Aiel battling horsemen and spearmen almost in the open while folk tried to close the gates, tried and failed because of the press of bodies. Horses with empty saddles and armored men unmoving on the ground half a mile from the gate marked where the sortie had been driven back. Arrows rained down from the walls, and head-sized chunks of rubble—even occasional spears slashing down with enough force to spit two men, or three, though he still could not see from where exactly—but the Aiel were going over their dead, ever closer to forcing their way in. A quick scan showed him two more columns of Aiel trotting toward the gates, perhaps three thousand all told. He did not doubt that they were Couladin's as well.

He was aware of grinding his teeth. If the Shaido got inside Cairhien, he would never drive them north. He would have to dig them out street by street; the cost in lives would dwarf the number of those already dead, and the city itself would end a ruin like Eianrod, if not Taien. Cairhienin and Shaido were mingled like ants in a bowl, but he had to do something.

Taking a deep breath, he channeled. The two women had set the conditions, bringing the storm clouds; he did not need to be able to see their weavings to take advantage of them. Stark silver-blue lightning struck into the Aiel, once, twice, again, as fast as a man could clap.

Rand jerked his head up, blinking away the burning lines that still seemed to cross his sight, and when he looked through the long tube again, Shaido lay like cut barley all around where the bolts had fallen. Men and horses thrashed on the ground closer to the gates, too, and some did not move at all, but the uninjured were dragging the injured and the gates were beginning to close.

How many won't make it back inside? How many of my own did I kill? The cold truth was that it did not matter. It had had to be done, and it was done.

And well it was. Distantly he felt his knees wobbling. He would have to pace himself if he was to last the rest of the day. No more laying about him everywhere; he had to spot where he was particularly needed, where he could make a—

The storm clouds were massed only over the city and the hills to the south, but that did not stop lightning from slashing out of the clear, cloudless sky above the tower, flashing down into the gathered Maidens below with a deafening crack.

Hair lifting with the tingle in the air, Rand stared. He could feel that bolt in another way, feel the weaving of *saidin* that had made it. *So Asmodean was tempted even back in the tents.*

There was no time for thought, though. Like rapid beats on a giant drum, bolt followed bolt, marching through the Maidens until the last struck the base of the tower in an explosion of splinters the size of arms and legs.

As the tower slowly began to slant over, Rand threw himself at Egwene and Aviendha. Somehow he managed to scoop them both into one arm, then wrap the other around an upright on what was now the upslope side of the platform. They stared at him wide-eyed, mouths coming open, but there was no more time for speaking than for thinking. The shattered log tower toppled, crashing through the branches of the trees. For an instant he believed they might cushion the fall.

With a snap, the upright he clung to broke off. The ground came up and knocked all the breath out of him a heartbeat before the women came down on top of him. Darkness rolled in.

He regained consciousness slowly. Hearing returned first.

“. . . have dug us up like a boulder and sent us rolling downhill in the night.” It was Aviendha’s voice, low, as if she spoke for her own ears. There was something moving on his face. “You have taken away what we are, what we were. You must give us something in return, something to be. We need you.” The moving thing slowed, touched more softly. “I need you. Not for myself, you will understand. For Elayne. What is between her and me now is between her and me, but I will hand you to her. I will. If you die, I will carry your corpse to her! If you die—!”

His eyes popped open, and for a moment they stared at each other almost nose to nose. Her hair was all in disarray, her head scarf gone, and a purple lump marred her cheek. She straightened jerkily, folding a damp cloth stained with blood, and began dabbing at his forehead with considerably more force than before.

“I’ve no intention of dying,” he told her, though in truth he was not sure of that at all. The Void and *saidin* were gone, of course. Just thinking of losing them as he had made him shiver; it was pure luck that *saidin* had not scoured his mind blank in that last instant. Just thinking of seizing the Source again made him groan. Without the Void for buffer, he felt every ache, every bruise and scrape, to the fullest. He was so tired he could have dropped off to sleep at once if he had not hurt so much. As well he did hurt, then, because he surely could not sleep. Not for a long time yet.

Sliding a hand beneath his coat, he touched his side, then surreptitiously wiped the blood off his fingers onto his shirt before bringing the hand out again. No wonder that a fall like that had broken open the half-healed, never-healed wound. He did not seem to be bleeding too badly, but if the Maidens saw it, or Egwene, or even Aviendha, he might have a fight to keep from being hauled off to Moiraine for Healing. He had too much to do yet for that—being Healed on top of everything else would act on him like a cudgel to the temple—and besides, there must be far worse hurt than what he suffered for her to deal with.

Grimacing, suppressing another groan, he got to his feet with only a little help from Aviendha. And promptly forgot about his injuries.

Sulin sat on the ground nearby, with Egwene bandaging a bloody split in her scalp and muttering fiercely at herself because she did not know how to Heal, but the white-haired Maiden was not the only casualty, and not the worst by far. Everywhere *cadin'sor*-clad women were covering the dead with blankets, and tending those who had merely been burned, if "merely" could be used for lightning burns. Except for Egwene's grumbling, the hilltop lay in near silence, even the injured women quiet save for hoarse breathing.

The log tower, all but unrecognizable now, had not spared the Maidens in its fall, breaking arms and legs, tearing open gashes. He watched as a blanket was laid over the face of a Maiden with red-gold hair almost the shade of Elayne's, head twisted at an unnatural angle and glazed eyes staring. Jolien. One of those who first crossed the Dragonwall to search for He Who Comes With the Dawn. She had gone to the Stone of Tear for him. And now she was dead. For him. *Oh, you've done well at keeping the Maidens from harm,* he thought bitterly. *Very well indeed.*

He could still feel the lightning, or rather the residue of its making. Almost like the after-image burned into his eyes earlier, he could trace the weave, though it was fading. To his surprise, it led west, not back toward the tents. Not Asmodean, then.

"Sammael." He was sure of it. Sammael had sent that attack in the Jangai, Sammael was behind the pirates and the raids in Tear, and Sammael had done this. His lips peeled back in a snarl, and his voice was a harsh whisper. "Sammael!" He did not realize he had taken a step until Aviendha seized his arm.

A moment later, Egwene had the other, the pair of them clinging to him as if they meant to root him to the spot. "Do not be a complete woolhead," Egwene said, giving a start at his glare but not letting go. She had redone the brown scarf around her head, but combing with her fingers had not put her hair back in order, and dust still covered her blouse and skirt. "Whoever did this, why do you think he waited so long, until you must be tired? Because if he missed killing you, and you went after him, you would be easy meat. You can barely stand on your own!"

Aviendha was no readier to let go, meeting his stare with a flat one of her own. "You are needed here, Rand al'Thor. Here, *Car'a'carn.* Does your honor lie with killing this man, or here with those you have brought to this land?"

A young Aiel man came running up through the Maidens, *shoufa* around his shoulders, spears and buckler swinging easily. If he thought it odd to find two women holding Rand between them, he gave no hint of it. He eyed the shattered remnants of the tower and the dead and wounded with a slight curiosity, as though wondering how it might have happened and where the enemy dead might be. Grounding his spearpoints in front of Rand, he said, "I am Seirin, of the Shorara sept of the Tomanelle."

"I see you, Seirin," Rand replied just as formally. Not easy with a pair of women holding him as if they thought he might run.

"Han of the Tomanelle sends word to the *Car'a'carn*. The clans to the east are moving toward each other. All four. Han means to join with Dhearic, and he has sent to Erim to join them."

Rand drew a measured breath, and hoped the women thought his grimace was for the news; his side burned, and he could feel blood spreading slowly down his shirt. So there would be nothing to force Couladin north when the Shaido broke. If they broke; they had given no evidence of it yet that he had seen. Why were the Miagoma and the others joining together? If they meant to come against him, they were only giving warning. But if they meant to come against him, Han and Dhearic and Erim would be outnumbered, and if the Shaido held long enough and the four clans broke through . . . Across the wooded hills he could see that it had begun to rain over the city now that Egwene and Aviendha were not holding the clouds. That would hamper both sides. Unless the women were in better shape than they looked, they might be unable to regain control from this distance.

"Tell Han to do what he must to keep them off our backs."

Young as he was—he was about Rand's age, come to that—Seirin raised an eyebrow in surprise. Of course. Han would not do differently, and Seirin knew it. He waited only long enough to make certain that Rand had no further message; then he was off and running downhill, just as fast as he had come. No doubt he hoped to get back without missing any more of the fighting than he had to. For that matter, it might already have begun, there to the east.

"I need someone to fetch Jeade'en," Rand said as soon as Seirin had dashed off. If he tried to walk that far, he really would need the women to hold him up. The two of them looked nothing alike, yet they managed practically identical suspicion. Those frowns must have been one of the things every girl was taught by her mother. “I am not going after Sammael.” Not yet. “I have to get closer to the city, though.” He nodded to the fallen tower; that was the only gesture available with them hanging on. Master Tovere might be able to salvage the lenses from the looking glasses, but there were not three logs of the tower unbroken. No more observing everything from on high today.

Egwene was plainly uncertain, but Aviendha barely paused before asking a young Maiden to go to the *gai’shain.* To fetch Mist, too, which he had not counted on. Egwene began brushing herself off, muttering under her breath at the dust, and Aviendha had found an ivory comb and another scarf somewhere. Despite the fall, somehow they already looked considerably less disheveled than he. Weariness still marked their faces, but as long as they could channel at all, they would be useful.

That gave him pause. Did he ever think of anyone now except as to how useful they were? He should be able to keep them as safe as they had been atop the tower. Not that the tower had been very safe, as it turned out, but this time he would manage things better.

Sulin stood as he approached, a pale cap of *algode* bandage covering the top of her head, her hair a white fringe below.

“I am moving nearer the city,” he told her, “where I can see what is happening, and maybe do something about it. Everyone who is injured is to remain here, along with enough others to protect them if need be. Make it a strong guard, Sulin; I only need a handful with me, and it’s poor repayment for the honor the Maidens have shown me if I let their wounded be slaughtered.” That should hold the greater part of them away from the fighting. He himself would have to stay clear to keep the rest out, but the way he felt, that would be no burden. “I want you to stay here, and—”

“I am not one of the injured,” she said stiffly, and he hesitated, then nodded slowly.

“Very well.” He had no doubt that her injury was serious, but neither did he doubt that she was tough. And if she stayed, he might be stuck with someone like Enaila leading his guard. Being treated like a brother was nowhere near as annoying as being treated like a son, and he was in no mood to put up with the latter. “But I trust you to see that no one follows who *is* injured, Sulin. I will have to keep moving. I can’t afford anyone who will slow me down or must be left behind.”

She nodded so quickly that he was convinced she would make any Maiden with as much as a scratch remain behind. Except herself, of course. This was one time he felt no guilt over using someone. The Maidens had chosen to carry the spear, but they had chosen to follow him, too. Maybe "follow" was not precisely the word, considering some of the things they did, but that did not change anything, to his mind. He would not, he could not, order a woman to her death, and that was that. In truth, he had expected some sort of protest before this. He was only grateful that it had not come. *I must be more subtle than I think.*

Two pale-robed *gai'shain* arrived leading Jeade'en and Mist, and behind them followed a crowd of others, arms full of bandages and ointments and over their shoulders bulging water bags in layers, under the direction of Sorilea and a dozen other Wise Ones whom he had met. At most he thought he might know the names of half.

Sorilea was very definitely in charge, and she quickly had *gai'shain* and other Wise Ones alike circulating among the Maidens tending wounds. She eyed Rand and Egwene and Aviendha, frowning thoughtfully and pursing her thin lips, obviously thinking that all three looked tossed about enough to need their injuries bathed. That look was enough to send Egwene scrambling into the gray's saddle with a smile and a nod for the aged Wise One, though if Aiel had been more familiar with riding, Sorilea would have realized that Egwene's awkward stiffness was not usual. And it was a measure of Aviendha's condition that she let Egwene pull her up behind the saddle without the slightest protest. She smiled at Sorilea, too.

Gritting his teeth, Rand pulled himself into his own saddle in one smooth motion. Aching muscles' protests were buried under an avalanche of pain in his side, as though he had been stabbed anew, and it took a full minute before he could breathe again, but he let none of it show.

Egwene reined Mist close to Jeade'en, near enough to whisper. "If you cannot mount a horse any better than that, Rand al'Thor, maybe you should forget about riding at all for a while." Aviendha wore one of those blank Aiel expressions, but her eyes were intent on his face.

"I noticed you mounting, too," he said quietly. "Maybe you ought to stay here and help Sorilea until you feel better." That shut her up, even if it did tighten her mouth sourly. Aviendha gave Sorilea another smile; the old Wise One was still watching.

Rand booted the dapple to a trot downhill. Every step sent a jolt up his side that had him breathing through his teeth, but he had ground to cover, and he could not do it at a walk. Besides, Sorilea's stare had been starting to get on his nerves.

Mist joined Jeade'en before he was fifty paces down the overgrown slope, and another fifty brought Sulin and a stream of Maidens, some running to position themselves ahead. More than he had hoped for, but it should not matter. What he had to do would not involve getting very close to the fighting. They could stay back in safety with him.

Seizing *saidin* was an effort in and of itself, even through the *angreal,* and the sheer weight of it seemed to press down on him greater than ever, the taint stronger. At least the Void shielded him from his own pain. Somewhat, anyway. And if Sammael tried to play games with him again . . .

He quickened Jeade'en's pace. Whatever Sammael did, he still had his own job to do.

Rain dripped from the brim of Mat's hat, and periodically he had to lower his looking glass and wipe off the end of the tube. The downpour had slackened in the last hour, but the sparse branches overhead gave no shelter at all. His coat was long since soaked, and Pips' ears were down; the horse stood as if not intending to move however Mat thumped his heels.

He did not know for sure what time of day it was. Somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, he thought, but the dark clouds had not thinned along with the rain, and they hid the sun where he was. On the other hand, it felt very much like three or four days since he had ridden down to warn the Tairens. He was still not sure why he had done that.

It was southward that he peered, and a way out that he looked for. A way out for three thousand men; easily that many survived yet, though they had no idea what he was up to. They believed he was hunting another fight for them, but three so far were three too many by his book. He thought he could have escaped on his own, now, so long as he kept his eyes open and his wits about him. Three thousand men, however, drew eyes whenever they moved, and they did not move quickly, what with more than half their number afoot. That was why he was on this Light-forsaken hilltop, and why the Tairens and Cairhienin were all jammed into the long, narrow hollow between this hill and the next. If he simply made a break for it . . .

Jamming the looking glass back to his eye, he glared south at sparsely wooded hills. Here and there were thickets, some fairly large, but most of the land was scrub or grass even here. He had worked back to the east, using every fold in the ground that would hide a mouse, bringing the column with him out of the treeless terrain and into some proper cover. Out of those bloody lightning strikes and fireballs; he was not sure whether it was worse when they came, or when the earth simply erupted in a roar for no apparent reason. All that effort to find that the battle was shifting with him. He could not seem to get out of the center of the thing.

Where's my bloody luck now that I really need it? He was a pea-brained fool for staying. Just because he had managed to keep the others alive this long did not mean he could keep it up. Soon or late, the dice would come up the Dark One's Eyes. *They're the flaming soldiers. I should leave them to it and ride.*

But he kept searching, scanning the wooded peaks and ridges. They gave cover for Couladin's Aiel as well as for him, but here and there he could make them out. Not all were involved in pitched battles, but every last group was larger than his, every one was between him and safety to the south, and he had no way to tell who was who until it might be too late. The Aiel themselves seemed to know at a glance, but that did him no good.

Some mile or more off, a few hundred *cadin'sor*-clad shapes running eight abreast and heading east topped a rise where half-a-dozen leatherleaf made a poor excuse for a copse. Before the lead runners could start down the other side, a lightning bolt flashed down into their midst, splashing men and earth like a stone thrown into a pond. Pips did not even quiver as the clap reached Mat; the gelding had grown accustomed to closer strikes than that.

Some of the fallen men picked themselves up, limping, and immediately joined those who had kept their feet in a hasty check of the unmoving. No more than a dozen were hauled across shoulders before they all dashed down from the height, back the way they had come. None paused to look at the crater. Mat had watched them learn that lesson; waiting only invited a second silvery lance from the clouds. In moments they were out of sight. Except for the dead.

He swung the looking glass east. There was a look of sunlight a few miles that way. The log tower should have been visible, poking above the trees, but he had not been able to find it in some time. Maybe he was looking in the wrong places. It did not matter. The lightning had to be Rand's work, and all the rest of it as well. *If I can get far enough that way . . .*

He would be right back where he started. Even if it was not the pull of *ta'veren* drawing him back, he would have a hard time leaving again once Moiraine found out. And there was Melindhra to consider. He had never heard of a woman who would not take it askance when a man tried to walk out of her life without letting her know.

As he panned the looking glass slowly, hunting the tower, a slope covered in spaced leatherleaf and paperbark abruptly went up in flames, every tree became a torch at the same instant.

Slowly he lowered the brass-bound tube; he hardly required it to see the fire, and the thick gray smoke already making a thick plume into the sky. He did not need signs to recognize channeling when he saw it, not like that. Had Rand finally tipped over the edge of madness? Or maybe Aviendha had finally had enough of being forced to stay around him. Never upset a woman who could channel; that was a rule Mat seldom managed to follow, but he did try.

Save the smart mouth for somebody besides yourself, he thought sourly. He was just trying not to think about the third alternative. If Rand had not finally gone mad, and Aviendha or Egwene or one of the Wise Ones had not decided to be rid of him, then someone else was taking a hand in the day's business. He could add two twos without getting five. *Sammael.* So much for trying that way out; it was no way out of anything. *Blood and bloody ashes! What* has *happened to my—?*

A fallen branch cracked under someone's foot behind him, and he reacted without thinking, knees more than reins pulling Pips in a tight circle, sword-bladed spear whipping across from the pommel of his saddle.

Estean almost dropped his helmet, his eyes going wide, as the short blade stopped a breath short of splitting his head for him. The rain had slicked his hair down into his face. Also afoot, Nalesean grinned, partly startled and partly amused at the other young Tairen's discomfort. Square-faced and blocky, Nalesean was the second since Melanril to lead the Tairen cavalry. Talmanes and Daerid were there as well, a pace behind as usual, and blank-faced beneath their bell-shaped helmets, also as usual. The four had left their horses farther back in the trees.

“There are Aiel coming straight for us, Mat,” Nalesean said as Mat raised the raven-marked spear upright. “The Light burn my soul if there’s a one less than five thousand.” He grinned at that, too. “I don’t think they know we’re here waiting for them.”

Estean nodded once. “They are keeping to the valleys and hollows. Hiding from . . .” He glanced at the clouds and shivered. He was not the only one to be uneasy about what might come out of the sky; the other three looked up, too. “Anyway, it’s plain they mean to go through where Daerid’s men are.” There was actually a touch of respect in his voice when he mentioned the pikes. Grudging, true, and not very strong, but it was difficult to look down on someone after they had saved your neck a few times. “They will be on top of us before they see us.”

“Wonderful.” Mat breathed. “That is just bloody wonderful.”

He meant it for sarcasm, yet Nalesean and Estean missed the flavor, of course. They looked eager. But Daerid wore as much expression on his scarred face as a rock, and Talmanes lifted an eyebrow at Mat just a fraction, shook his head a hair. That pair knew fighting.

The first encounter with the Shaido had been an even wager at best, one Mat would never have taken if not forced. That all the lightning had shaken the Aiel enough to turn it into a rout changed nothing. Twice more today they had seen action, when Mat discovered himself in a choice of whether to catch or be caught, and neither had come out nearly as well as the Tairens believed. One had been a draw, but only because he had been able to lose the Shaido after they pulled back to regroup. At least they had not come again while he was getting everyone away through the twisting hill valleys. He suspected they had found something else to occupy them; maybe more of that lightning, or fireballs, or the Light knew what. He knew very well what had allowed them to escape their last fight with skins mostly whole. Another bunch of Aiel plowing into the rear of those fighting him, just in time to keep the pikes from being overrun. The Shaido had decided to withdraw to the north, and the others—he still did not know who—had swung off to the west, leaving him in possession of the field. Nalesean and Estean considered it a clear victory. Daerid and Talmanes knew better.

“How long?” Mat asked.

It was Talmanes who answered. “Half an hour. Perhaps a little more, if grace favors us.” The Tairens looked doubtful; they still did not seem to realize how quickly Aiel could move.

Mat had no such illusions. He had already studied the surrounding terrain, but he looked at it again and sighed. There was a very good view from this hill, and the only halfway decent stand of trees within half a mile was right where he sat his saddle. The rest was scrub brush, little as much as waist-high, dotted with leatherleaf and paperbark and the occasional oak. Those Aiel would surely send scouts up here for a look, and there was no chance at all that even the horsemen could get out of sight before they did. The pikes would be right out in the open. He knew what had to be done—it was catch or be caught again—but he did not have to like it.

He only took a glance, but before he could open his mouth, Daerid said, "My scouts tell me Couladin himself is with this lot. At least, their leader has his arms bare, and shows marks such as the Lord Dragon is said to carry."

Mat grunted. Couladin, and heading east. If there was any way to step aside, the fellow would run headlong into Rand. That might even be what he was after. Mat realized that he was smoldering, and it had nothing to do with Couladin wanting to kill Rand. The Shaido chief, or whatever the man was, might remember Mat vaguely as somebody hanging about Rand, but Couladin was the reason he was stuck out here in the middle of a battle, trying to stay alive, wondering whether any minute it was going to turn into a personal fight between Rand and Sammael, the kind of fight that might kill everything within two or three miles. *That's if I don't get a spear through the brisket first.* And no more choice about it than had a goose hanging outside the kitchen door. None of it would be so without Couladin.

A pity no one had killed the man years ago. He certainly gave excuses enough. Aiel seldom let anger show, and when they did, it was cold and tight. Couladin, on the other hand, seemed to flare up two or three times a day, losing his head in a fiery rage as quick as snap a straw. A miracle he was still alive, and the Dark One's own luck.

"Nalesean," Mat said angrily, "swing your Tairens wide to the north and come in on these fellows from behind. We will be holding their attention, so you ride hard and come down like a barn collapsing." *So he has the Dark One's luck, does he? Blood and ashes, but I hope mine is back in.* "Talmanes, you do the same to the south. Move, both of you. We've little time, and it's wasting."

The two Tairens bowed hastily and dashed for their horses, clapping on their helmets. Talmanes' bow was more formal. "Grace favor your sword, Mat. Or perhaps I should say your spear." Then he was gone, too.

Looking up at Mat as the three vanished down the hill, Daerid slashed rain from his eyes with a finger. "So you will stay with the pikes this time. You must not let your anger at this Couladin overcome you. A battle is no place to try fighting a duel."

Mat barely stopped from gaping. A duel? Him? With Couladin? Was that why Daerid thought he was staying with the foot? He had chosen it because it was safer to be behind the pikes. That was his reason. The whole reason. "Not to worry. I can hold myself in rein." And he had thought Daerid the most sensible of the whole lot.

The Cairhienin merely nodded. "I thought that you could. You have seen pikes pushed before, and faced a charge or two, I vow. Talmanes gives praises when there are two moons, yet I heard him say aloud that he would follow wherever you led. Some day I would like to hear your story, Andorman. But you are young—under the Light, I mean no disrespect—and young men have hot blood."

"This rain will keep it cool if nothing else does." *Blood and ashes!* Were they all mad? Talmanes was praising him? He wondered what they would say if they found out he was only a gambler following bits of memory from men dead a thousand years and more. They would be drawing lots for first chance to spit him like a pig. The lords especially; no one liked being made to look a fool, but nobles seemed to like it least of all, perhaps because they so often managed it on their own. Well, one way or another, he meant to be miles away when that discovery came. *Bloody Couladin. I'd like to shove this spear down his throat!* Heeling Pips, he started for the opposite slope, where the foot waited below.

Daerid climbed into his own saddle and swung in beside him, nodding as Mat spun out his plan. The bowmen on the slopes, where they could cover the flanks, but lying down, hidden in the brush until the last minute. One man on the crest to signal the Aiel in sight. And the pikes to step off as soon as he did, marching straight out toward the approaching enemy. "As soon as *we* can see the Shaido, we'll retreat just as fast as we can, almost back to the gap between these two hills, then turn to face them."

"They will think we wanted to run, realized we could not, and turned at bay like a bear to the hounds. Seeing us less than half their number and fighting only because we must, they should think to roll over us. Can we but hold their attention until the horse comes down on them from behind

. . .” The Cairhienin actually grinned. “It is using the Aiel’s own tactics against them.”

“We had better hold their bloody attention.” Mat’s tone was as dry as he was wet. “To make sure we do—to make sure *they* don’t start putting loops around *our* flanks—I want a cry raised as soon as you stop the retreat. ‘Protect the Lord Dragon.’ ” This time Daerid laughed aloud.

That should bring the Shaido in right enough, especially if Couladin was leading. If Couladin really was leading, if he thought Rand was with the pikes, if the pikes could hold until the horse arrived . . . A lot of ifs. Mat could hear those dice rolling in his head again. This was the biggest gamble he had ever taken in his life. He wondered how long it was until nightfall; a man should be able to make his way out in the night. He wished those dice would get out of his head, or else fall so he knew what they showed. Scowling into the rain, he booted Pips on down the hillside.

Jeade’en stopped on a crest where a dozen trees made a thin topknot, and Rand hunched slightly against the pain in his side. The crescent moon, riding high, cast a pale light, yet even to his *saidin*-amplified vision anything more than a hundred paces distant was featureless shadow. Night swallowed the surrounding hills whole, and he was only intermittently aware of Sulin hovering nearby, and Maidens all around him. But then, he could not seem to keep his eyes more than half open; they felt grainy, and he thought the gnawing pain in his side might be all that held him awake. He did not think of it often. Thought was not only distant now, it was slow.

Was it twice Sammael had attempted his life today, or three times? More? It seemed that he should be able to remember how often someone had tried to kill him. No, not to kill. To bait. *Are you still so jealous of me, Tel Janin? When did I ever slight you, or give you one finger less than your due?*

Swaying, Rand scrubbed a hand through his hair. There had been something odd about that thought, but he could not recall what. Sammael. . . . No. He could deal with him when . . . if . . . No matter. Later. Today Sammael was only a distraction from what was important. He might even be gone.

Vaguely it seemed that there had been no attack after . . . After what? He recalled countering Sammael’s last move with something particularly nasty, but he could not pull the memory to the surface. Not balefire. *Mustn’t* *use that. Threatens the fabric of the Pattern. Not even for Ilyena? I would burn the world and use my soul for tinder to hear her laugh again.*

He was drifting again, away from what was important.

However long ago the sun had gone down, it had sunk on fighting, lengthening shadows gradually overwhelming the golden-red light, the men killing and dying. Now, vagrant winds still brought distant shouts and screams. Because of Couladin, true, but at the heart of it, because of himself.

For a moment he could not remember his name.

"Rand al'Thor," he said aloud, and shivered, though his coat was damp with sweat. For an instant, that name had sounded strange to him. "I am Rand al'Thor, and I need to . . . I need to see."

He had not eaten since morning, but then, the taint on *saidin* drove hunger away. The Void quivered constantly, and he hung on to the True Source by his fingernails. It was like riding a bull driven mad by redwort, or swimming naked in a river of fire churned to rapids by jagged boulders of ice. Yet when he was not on the brink of being gored or battered or drowned, it seemed that *saidin* was the only strength left in him. *Saidin* was there, filing at the edges of him, trying to erode or corrode his mind, but ready to be used.

With a jerky nod, he channeled, and something burned high in the sky. Something. A ball of bubbling blue flame that banished shadows in harsh light.

Hills mounded up all around, trees black in the stark illumination. Nothing moved. A faint sound came to him on a gust of wind. Cheering perhaps, or singing. Or maybe he was imagining things; it was so tiny, he could well have been, and it died with the wind.

Suddenly he became aware of the Maidens around him, hundreds of them. Some, including Sulin, were staring at him, but many had their eyes squeezed shut. It took him a moment to realize they were trying to preserve night vision. He frowned, searching. Egwene and Aviendha were no longer there. Another long moment passed before he remembered to loose the weave of his channeling and let blackness reclaim the night. A deep blackness to his eyes, now.

"Where are they?" He was vaguely irritated when he had to say who he meant, and just as vaguely aware that he had no reason for it.

“They went to Moiraine Sedai and the Wise Ones at dusk, *Car’a’carn,*” Sulin replied, moving closer to Jeade’en. Her short white hair shone in the moonlight. No, her head was bandaged. How could he have forgotten? “A good two hours gone. They know that flesh is not stone. Even the strongest legs can run only so far.”

Rand frowned. Legs? They had been riding Mist. The woman was making no sense. “I have to find them.”

“They are with Moiraine Sedai and the Wise Ones, *Car’a’carn,*” she said slowly. He thought she was frowning, too, but it was hard to be sure.

“Not them,” he muttered. “Have to find my people. They’re still out there, Sulin.” Why was the stallion not moving? “Can you hear them? Out there, in the night. Still fighting. I need to help them.” Of course; he had to dig his heels into the dapple’s ribs. But when he did, Jaede’en only shifted sideways, with Sulin holding on to his bridle. He did not remember that she had been holding the bridle.

“The Wise Ones must speak to you now, Rand al’Thor.” Her voice had changed, but he was too weary to say how.

“Can’t it wait?” He must have missed the runner with the message. “I must find them, Sulin.”

Enaila seemed to spring up on the other side of the stallion’s head. “You have found your people, Rand al’Thor.”

“The Wise Ones are waiting for you,” Sulin added. She and Enaila turned Jeade’en without waiting on his agreement. Maidens crowded in for some reason as they started along a winding way down the side of the hill, faces reflecting moonlight as they stared up at him, so close their shoulders brushed the horse’s flanks.

“Whatever they want,” he grumbled, “they had best be quick.” There was no need for them to be leading the dapple, but it was too much effort to make a fuss over it. He twisted to look back, grunting at the pain in his side; the crest was already swallowed in the night. “I have a lot to do yet. I need to find . . .” Couladin. Sammael. The men who were fighting and dying for him. “I need to find them.” He was so tired, but he could not sleep yet.

Lamps on poles lit the Wise Ones’ encampment, and small fires where kettles of water were hauled away and replaced by white-robed men and women as soon as they began boiling. *Gai’shain* scurried everywhere, and Wise Ones as well, tending the wounded whose numbers swelled the camp. Moiraine was moving slowly down the long lines of those who could not stand, only rarely pausing to lay hands on an Aiel who then thrashed in the throes of being Healed. She swayed whenever she straightened, and Lan hovered behind her as if wanting to hold her up, or expecting to have to. Sulin exchanged words with Adelin and Enaila, too low for Rand to make out, and the younger women ran to speak to the Aes Sedai.

Despite the numbers of wounded, not all of the Wise Ones were looking after them. Inside a pavilion off to one side, perhaps twenty sat in a circle listening to one standing in the center. When she sat, another took her place. *Gai'shain* knelt around the outside of the pavilion, but none of the Wise Ones appeared to have any interest in wine, or anything except what they were hearing. Rand thought the speaker was Amys.

To his surprise, Asmodean was also helping out with the wounded, the water bag hanging from each shoulder looking decidedly odd with his dark velvet coat and white lace. Straightening from giving a drink to a man stripped to the waist except for bandages, he saw Rand and hesitated.

After a moment he handed the water bags to one of the *gai'shain* and wove his way through the Maidens toward Rand. They ignored him—they all seemed to be watching Adelin and Enaila speaking to Moiraine or else eyeing Rand—and his face was tight by the time he had to pause for the solid circle of *Far Dareis Mai* around Jeade'en. They were slow in parting, and did so just enough to let him through to Rand's stirrup.

"I was sure you must be safe. I was sure." From his tone of voice, he had been no such thing. When Rand did not speak, Asmodean shrugged uncomfortably. "Moiraine insisted I carry water. A forceful woman, to not allow the Lord Dragon's bard to . . ." Trailing off, he licked his lips quickly. "What happened?"

"Sammael," Rand said, but not in answer. He was just speaking the thoughts that drifted through the Void. "I remember when he was first named Destroyer of Hope. After he betrayed the Gates of Hevan, and carried the Shadow down into the Rorn M'doi and the heart of Satelle. Hope did seem to die that day, Culan Cuhan wept. What is wrong?" Asmodean's face had gone as white as Sulin's hair; he only shook his head mutely. Rand peered at the pavilion. Whoever was speaking now, he did not know her. "Is that where they are waiting for me? Then I should join them."

"They will not welcome you yet," Lan said, appearing beside Asmodean, who jumped, "or any man." Rand had not heard or seen the Warder approach either, but he only turned his head. Even that seemed an effort. It seemed to be someone else's head. "They meet with Wise Ones from the Miagoma, the Codarra, the Shiande and the Daryne."

"The clans are coming to me," Rand said flatly. But they had waited long enough to make today bloodier. It never happened like that in the stories.

"So it seems. But the four chiefs will not meet you until the Wise Ones have made their arrangements," Lan added dryly. "Come. Moiraine can tell you more than I of it."

Rand shook his head. "Done is done. I can hear details later. If Han doesn't need to keep them from our backs any longer, then I need him. Sulin, send a runner. Han—"

"It *is* done, Rand," the Warder said insistently. "All of it. Only a few Shaido remain south of the city. Thousands have been taken prisoner, and most of the rest are crossing the Gaelin. Word would have been sent to you an hour ago, had anyone known where you were. You've kept moving. Come and let Moiraine tell you."

"Done? We've won?"

"You have won. Completely."

Rand peered at the men being bandaged, the patient lines awaiting bandages and those leaving with them. The rows that lay almost unmoving. Moiraine was still making her way along those, pausing wearily here and there to Heal. Only a few of the wounded would be here, of course. They would have been coming as they could throughout the day, leaving as and when they could. If they could. None of the dead would be here. *Only a battle lost is sadder than a battle won.* He seemed to remember saying that before, long ago. Perhaps he had read it.

No. There were too many living in his responsibility for him to worry over the dead. *But how many faces will I know, like Jolien's? I will never forget Ilyena, not if all the world burns!*

Frowning, he raised a hand to his head. Those thoughts had seemed to come on top of one another, from different places. He was so tired he could hardly think. But he needed to, needed thoughts that did not slide by almost beyond his reach. He released the Source and the Void, and convulsed as *saidin* almost drove him under in that moment of retreat. He barely had time to realize his mistake. With the Power gone, exhaustion and pain crashed down on him.

He was aware of faces turned up to him as he toppled from his saddle, mouths moving, hands reaching to grab him, cushion his fall.

“Moiraine!” Lan shouted, voice hollow in Rand’s ears. “He is bleeding badly!”

Sulin had his head cradled in her arms. “Hold on, Rand al’Thor,” she said urgently. “Hold on.”

Asmodean said nothing, but his face was bleak, and Rand felt a trickle of *saidin* flowing into him from the man. Darkness came.

* * *

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CHAPTER 45

After the Storm

Sitting on a small boulder jutting from the foot of the slope, Mat winced as he pulled his broad-brimmed hat lower against the midmorning sun. Partly to shield his eyes from the sun. There was another thing he did not want to see, though cuts and bruises reminded him, especially the arrow slash along his temple that the hat pressed against. An ointment from Daerid's saddlebags had stopped the bleeding, there and elsewhere, yet everything still hurt, and most of it stung. That part would grow worse. The heat of the day was just beginning to take hold, but sweat was beading up on his face and already dampening his smallclothes and shirt. Idly he wondered whether autumn would ever come to Cairhien. At least discomfort kept him from thinking how tired he was; even after a night with no sleep he would have lain awake in a feather bed, much less blankets on the ground. Not that he wanted to be anywhere near his tent in any case.

A fine bloody to-do. Nearly killed, I'm sweating like a pig, I can't find a comfortable place to stretch out, and I don't dare get drunk. Blood and bloody ashes! He stopped fingering a slice across the chest of his coat—an inch difference, and that spear would have gone through his heart; Light, but the man had been good!—and put that part of it out of his mind. Not that it was easy, with what was going on all around him.

For once the Tairens and Cairhienin did not seem to mind seeing Aiel tents in every direction. There were even Aiel right in the camp, and almost as miraculously, Tairens mingling with Cairhienin among the smoky cook-fires. Not that anyone was eating; the kettles had not been set on the fires, although he could smell meat burning somewhere. Instead, most were as drunk as they could manage on wine, brandy, or Aiel *oosquai*, laughing and celebrating. Not far from where he sat, a dozen Defenders of the Stone, stripped to sweaty shirtsleeves, were dancing to the claps of ten times as many watchers. In a line, with arms around each others' shoulders, they stepped so quickly that it was a wonder none of them tripped or kicked the man next to them. For another circle of onlookers, near a ten-foot pole stuck in the ground—Mat hastily averted his eyes—as many Aielmen were doing some kicking of their own. Mat assumed it was a dance; another Aiel was playing the pipes for them. They leaped as high as they could, flung one foot even higher, then landed on that foot and immediately leaped upward again, faster and faster, sometimes spinning like horizontal tops at the height of their leaps, or turning somersaults or backflips. Seven or eight Tairens and Cairhienin sat nursing broken bones from trying it, all the while cheering and laughing like madmen, passing a stone crock of something back and forth. In other places other men were dancing, and maybe singing. It was hard to say, in the din. Without stirring, he could count ten flutes, not to mention twice as many tin whistles, and a skinny Cairhienin in a ragged coat was blowing something that looked part flute and part horn with some odd bits tossed in. And there were countless drums, most of them pots being banged with spoons.

In short, the camp was bedlam and a ball rolled into one. He recognized it, mainly from those memories he could still assign to other men if he concentrated hard enough. A celebration of still being alive. One more time they had walked under the Dark One's nose and survived to tell the tale. One more dance along the razor's edge finished. Almost dead yesterday, maybe dead tomorrow, but alive, gloriously alive, today. He did not feel like celebrating. What good was being alive if it meant living in a cage?

He shook his head as Daerid, Estean and a heavyset red-haired Aiel man he did not know staggered by, holding each other up. Barely audible through the clamor, Daerid and Estean were trying to teach the taller man between them the words to "Dance with Jak o' the Shadows."

"We'll sing all night, and drink all day,
and on the girls we'll spend our pay,
and when it's gone, then we'll away,
to dance with Jak o' the Shadows."

The sun-dark fellow showed no interest in learning, of course—he would not unless they convinced him it was a proper battle hymn—but he listened, and he was not the only one. By the time the three passed out of sight in the milling crowd, they had acquired a tail of twenty more, waving dented pewter cups and tarred-leather mugs, all bellowing the tune at the top of their lungs.

"There're some delight in ale and wine,
and some in girls with ankles fine,
but my delight, yes, always mine,
is to dance with Jak o' the Shadows."

Mat wished he had never taught any of them the song. The teaching had just kept his mind occupied while Daerid stopped him from bleeding to death; that ointment stung as bad as the gashes themselves had, and Daerid would never make a seamstress jealous with his delicate handling of needle and thread. Only, the song had spread from that first dozen like fire in dry grass. Tairens and Cairhienin, horse and foot, had all been singing it when they returned at dawn.

Returned. Right back to the hill valley where they had started, below the ruin of the log tower, and no chance for him to get away. He had offered to ride ahead, and Talmanes and Nalesean nearly came to blows over who was to provide his escort. Not everyone had become the best of friends. All he needed now was for Moiraine to come asking questions about where he had been and why, nattering at him about *ta'veren* and duty, about the Pattern and Tarmon Gai'don, until his head spun. Doubtless she was with Rand now, but she would get around to him eventually.

He glanced up at the hilltop and the tangle of shattered logs among broken trees. That Cairhienin fellow who had made the looking glasses for Rand was up there with his apprentices, poking about. The Aiel had been full of what happened there. It was definitely past time for him to be gone. The foxhead medallion protected him from women channeling, but he had heard enough from Rand to know a man's channeling was different. He had no interest in finding out whether the thing would shield him from Sammael and his ilk.

Grimacing at darts of pain, he used the black-hafted spear to lever himself to his feet. Around him the celebration went on. If he drifted down to the picket lines now . . . He was not looking forward to saddling Pips.

"The hero should not sit without drinking."

Startled, he jerked around, grunting at the stab of his wounds, to stare at Melindhra. She had a large clay pitcher in one hand, not spears, and her face was not veiled, but her eyes seemed to be weighing him. "Now listen, Melindhra, I can explain everything."

“What must be explained?” she asked, flinging her free arm around his shoulders. Even with the sudden jolt, he tried to stand straighter; he still was not used to having to look up at a woman. “I knew you would seek your own honor. The *Car’a’carn* casts a great shadow, but no man wishes to spend his life in the shade.”

Closing his mouth hurriedly, he managed a faint, “Of course.” She was not going to try to kill him. “That’s it exactly.” In his relief, he took the pitcher from her, but his gulp turned into a splutter. It was the rawest double-distilled brandy he had ever tasted.

She retrieved the pitcher long enough to take a draw, then sighed gratefully and pushed it back at him. “He was a man of much honor, Mat Cauthon. Better that you had captured him, but even by killing him, you have gained much *ji*. It was well that you sought him out.”

Despite himself, Mat looked at what he had been avoiding, and shivered. A leather cord tied in short flame-red hair held Couladin’s head atop the ten-foot pole near where the Aielmen were dancing. The thing seemed to be grinning. At him.

Sought Couladin out? He had done his best to keep the pikes between him and *any* of the Shaido. But that arrow had clipped the side of his head, and he was on the ground before he knew it, struggling to get to his feet with the fight raging all around him, laying about him with the raven-marked spear, trying to make it back to Pips. Couladin had appeared as if springing out of air, veiled for killing, but there had been no mistaking those bare arms, entwined with Dragons glittering gold-and-red. The man had been cutting a swath into the pikemen with his spears, shouting for Rand to show himself, shouting that *he* was the true *Car’a’carn*. Maybe he really believed it by then. Mat still did not know whether Couladin had recognized him, but it had made no difference, not when the fellow decided to carve a hole through him to find Rand. He did not know who had cut off Couladin’s head afterward, either.

I was too busy trying to stay alive to watch, he thought sourly. And hoping he would not bleed to death. Back in the Two Rivers he had been as fine a hand with a quarterstaff as anyone, and a quarterstaff was not so different from a spear, but Couladin must have been born with the things in his hands. Of course, that skill had not availed the man much in the end. *Maybe I still have a little bit of luck. Please, Light, let it show itself now!*

He was thinking of how to get rid of Melindhra so he could saddle Pips when Talmanes presented himself with a formal bow, hand to heart in the Cairhienin fashion. “Grace favor you, Mat.”

“And you,” Mat said absently. She was not going to go because he asked. Asking would certainly put a fox in the henyard. Maybe if he told her he wanted to take a ride. They said Aiel could run down horses.

“A delegation came from the city during the night. There will be a triumphal procession for the Lord Dragon, in gratitude from Cairhien.”

“Will there?” She had to have duties of some sort. The Maidens were always flocking around Rand; maybe she would be called off for that. Glancing at her though, he did not think he had better count on it. Her wide smile was . . . proprietary.

“The delegation was from the High Lord Meilan,” Nalesean said, joining them. His bow was just as correct, both hands sweeping wide, but hasty. “It is he who offers the procession to the Lord Dragon.”

“Lord Dobraine, Lord Maringil and Lady Colavaere, among others, also came to the Lord Dragon.”

Mat pulled his mind back to the moment. Each of the pair was trying to pretend the other of them did not exist—both looking right at him, with never the flicker of an eye toward each other—but their faces were as tight as their voices from the strain, their hands white-knuckled on sword hilts. It would be a cap to everything if they came to blows, and him likely still trying to hobble out of reach when one of them ran him through by accident. “What does it matter who sent a delegation, as long as Rand gets his procession?”

“It matters that you should ask him for our rightful place at the head,” Talmanes said quickly. “You slew Couladin, and earned us that place.” Nalesean closed his mouth and scowled; plainly he had been about to say the same thing.

“You two ask him,” Mat said. “It’s none of my affair.” Melindhra’s hand tightened on the back of his neck, but he did not care. Moiraine would surely not be far from Rand. He was not about to put his neck in a second noose while still trying to think his way out of the first.

Talmanes and Nalesean gaped at him as if he were demented. “You are our battle leader,” Nalesean protested. “Our general.”

“My bodyservant will polish your boots,” Talmanes put in with a small smile that he carefully did not direct at the square-faced Tairen, “and brush and mend your clothes. So you will appear at your best."

Nalesean gave his oiled beard a jerk; his eyes darted halfway to the other man before he could stop them. "If I may offer, I have a good coat I think will fit you well. Gold satin and crimson." It was the Cairhienin's turn to glower.

"General!" Mat exclaimed, holding himself up with the spear haft. "I'm no flaming—! I mean, I wouldn't want to usurp your place." Let them figure out which one of them he meant.

"Burn my soul," Nalesean said, "it was your battle skill that won for us, and kept us alive. Not to mention your luck. I've heard how you always turn the right card, but it is more than that. I'd follow you if you had never met the Lord Dragon."

"You are our leader," Talmanes said right on top of him, in a voice more sober if no less certain. "Until yesterday I have followed men of other lands because I must. You I will follow because I want to. Perhaps you are not a lord in Andor, but here, I say that you are, and I pledge myself your man."

Cairhienin and Tairen stared at one another as though startled at voicing the same sentiment, then slowly, reluctantly, exchanged brief nods. If they did not like each other—and only a fool would bet against that—they could meet on this point. After a fashion.

"I will send my groom to prepare your horse for the procession," Talmanes said, and barely frowned when Nalesean added, "Mine can share the work. Your mount must do us proud. And burn my soul, we need a banner. Your banner." At that the Cairhienin nodded emphatically.

Mat was not sure whether to laugh hysterically or sit down and cry. Those bloody memories. If not for them, he would have ridden on. If not for Rand, he would not have the things. He could trace the steps that led to them, each necessary as it seemed at the time and seeming an end in itself, yet each leading inevitably to the next. At the beginning of it all lay Rand. And bloody *ta'veren*. He could not understand why doing something that seemed absolutely necessary and as close to harmless as he could make it always seemed to lead him deeper into the mire. Melindhra had begun stroking the back of his neck instead of squeezing it. All he needed now . . .

He glanced up the hill, and there she was. Moiraine, on her delicate-stepping white mare, with Lan on his black stallion towering at her side. The Warder bent toward her as if to listen, and there seemed to be a brief argument, a violent protest on his part, but after a moment the Aes Sedai reined Aldieb around and rode out of sight toward the opposite slope. Lan remained where he was on Mandarb, watching the camp below. Watching Mat.

He shivered. Couladin’s head really did appear to be grinning at him. He could almost hear the man speak. *You may have killed me, but you’ve put your foot squarely in the trap. I’m dead, but you’ll never be free.*

“Just bloody wonderful,” he muttered, and took a long, choking swallow of the rough brandy. Talmanes and Nalesean seemed to think he meant it as said, and Melindhra laughed agreement.

Some fifty or so Tairens and Cairhienin had gathered to watch the two lords speak to him, and they took his drinking as a signal to serenade him, beginning with a verse of their own.

“We’ll toss the dice however they fall,
and snuggle the girls be they short or tall,
then follow young Mat whenever he calls,
to dance with Jak o’ the Shadows.”

With a wheezing laugh he could not stop, Mat sank back down onto the boulder and set about emptying the pitcher. There had to be some way out of this. There just had to be.

Rand’s eyes opened, slowly, staring up at the roof of his tent. He was naked beneath a single blanket. The absence of pain seemed almost startling, yet he felt even weaker than he remembered. And he did remember. He had said things, thought things. . . . His skin went cold. *I cannot let him take control. I am me! Me!* Fumbling beneath the blanket, he found the smooth round scar on his side, tender yet whole.

“Moiraine Sedai Healed you,” Aviendha said, and he gave a start.

He had not seen her, sitting cross-legged on the layered rugs near the firepit, sipping from a silver cup worked with leopards. Asmodean lay sprawled across tasseled cushions, chin on his arms. Neither appeared to have slept; dark circles underlined their eyes.

“She should not have had to,” Aviendha went on in a cool voice. Tired or not, she had every hair in place, and her neat clothes were a sharp contrast to Asmodean’s rumpled dark velvets. Now and then she twisted the ivory bracelet of roses-and-thorns that he had given her as if not realizing what she was doing. She wore the silver snowflake necklace, too. She still had not told him who had given it to her, though she had seemed amused when she realized he really wanted to know. She certainly did not look amused now. “Moiraine Sedai herself was near collapse from Healing wounded. *Aan’allein* had to carry her to her tent. Because of you, Rand al’Thor. Because Healing you took the last of her strength.”

“The Aes Sedai is on her feet already,” Asmodean put in, stifling a yawn. He ignored Aviendha’s pointed stare. “She has been here twice since sunrise, though she said you would recover. I think she was not so certain last night. Nor was I.” Pulling his gilded harp around in front of him, he fussed with it, speaking in an idle tone. “I did what I could for you, of course—my life and fortune are tied to yours—but my talents lie elsewhere than Healing, you understand.” He strummed a few notes to demonstrate. “I understand that a man can kill or gentle himself doing what you did. Strength in the Power is useless if the body is exhausted. *Saidin* can easily kill, if the body is exhausted. Or so I have heard.”

“Are you finished sharing your wisdom, Jasin Natael?” Aviendha’s tone was chillier, if anything, and she did not wait for a reply before turning a gaze like blue-green ice back to Rand. The interruption, it seemed, was his fault. “A man may behave like a fool sometimes, and little is the worse for it, but a chief must be more than a man, and the chief of chiefs more still. You had no right to push yourself near to death. Egwene and I tried to make you come with us when we grew too tired to continue, but you would not listen. You may be as much stronger than we as Egwene claims, yet you are still flesh. You are the *Car’a’carn,* not a new *Seia Doon* seeking honor. You have *toh,* obligation, to the Aiel, Rand al’Thor, and you cannot fulfill it dead. You cannot do everything yourself.”

For a moment he could only gape at her. He had barely managed to do anything at all, had left the battle to others for all practical purposes while he stumbled about trying to be useful. He had not even been able to stop

Sammael from striking where and as he chose. And she upbraided him for doing too much.

“I will try to remember,” he said finally. Even so, she looked ready to lecture more. “What news of the Miagoma and the other three clans?” he asked, as much to divert her as because he wanted to know. Women seldom seemed willing to stop until they had hammered you into the ground, unless you managed to distract them.

It worked. She was full of what she knew, of course, and as eager to instruct as to scold. Asmodean’s soft strumming—for once, something pleasant, even pastoral—made an odd background for her words.

The Miagoma, the Shiande, the Daryne and the Codarra were camped within sight of one another, a few miles to the east. A steady stream of men and Maidens moved between the camps, including Rand’s, but only among societies, and Indirian and the other chiefs were not stirring. There was no doubt now that they would come to Rand eventually, but not until the Wise Ones finished their talks.

“They are still talking?” Rand said. “What under the Light do they have to discuss that takes so long? The chiefs are coming to follow me, not them.”

She gave him a flat look that would have done credit to Moiraine. “The Wise Ones’ words are for Wise Ones, Rand al’Thor.” Hesitating, she added, as if making a concession, “Egwene may tell you something of it. When it is done.” Her tone implied that Egwene might not, too.

She resisted his attempts to learn more, and finally he let it lie. Perhaps he would find out before it bit him, and perhaps not, but either way, he was not going to pry one word out of her that she did not want to speak. Aes Sedai had nothing on Aiel Wise Ones when it came to guarding their secrets and surrounding themselves with mystery. Aviendha was absorbing that particular lesson very well.

Egwene’s presence at the meeting of Wise Ones came as a surprise, and so did Moiraine’s absence—he would have expected her to be in the middle, twitching strings to her plans—but it turned out that one grew from the other. The new-come Wise Ones had wanted to meet with one of the Aes Sedai who followed the *Car’a’carn,* and although she was back on her feet after Healing him, Moiraine claimed to have no time. Egwene had been routed from her blankets as a replacement.

That made Aviendha laugh. She had been outside when Sorilea and Bair practically dragged Egwene from her tent, trying to pull on her clothes while they hustled her along. “I called to her that she would have to dig holes in the ground with her teeth this time if she had been caught in a misdeed, and she was so sleepy she believed me. She began protesting that she would not, so hard that Sorilea began demanding what she had done to think she deserved to. You should have seen Egwene’s face.” She laughed so hard that she nearly toppled over.

Asmodean actually looked at her askance—though why he should, being what and who he was, was beyond Rand—but Rand only waited patiently until she caught her breath. For Aiel humor, this was mild. More the sort of thing he would have expected from Mat than from any woman, but mild even so.

When she straightened, wiping her eyes, he said, “What of the Shaido, then? Or are their Wise Ones also at this conclave?”

She answered still giggling into her wine; she considered the Shaido finished, hardly worth considering now. Thousands of prisoners had been taken, with a trickle still being brought in, and the fighting had died down except for a few small skirmishes here and there. Yet the more he got out of her, the less he could see them as done for. With the four clans keeping Han occupied, the bulk of Couladin’s people had crossed the Gaelin in good order, even carrying away most of the Cairhienin prisoners they had captured. Worse, they had destroyed the stone bridges behind them.

That did not concern her, but it did him. Tens of thousands of Shaido north of the river, no way to get at them until the bridges were replaced, and even wooden spans would take time. It was time that he did not have.

At the very end, when it seemed there was no more to say on the Shaido, she told him what made him forget worrying about the Shaido and what trouble they would cause. She just tossed it in, as if she had almost forgotten.

“Mat killed Couladin?” he said incredulously when she was done. “Mat?”

“Did I not say so?” The words were sharp, but halfhearted. Peering at him over her winecup, she seemed more interested in how he would take the news than in whether he doubted her word.

Asmodean plucked a few chords of something martial; the harp seemed to echo to drums and trumpets. “In some ways, a young man of as many surprises as you. I truly look forward to meeting the third of you, this Perrin, one day."

Rand shook his head. So Mat had not escaped the pull of *ta'veren* to *ta'veren* after all. Or maybe it was the Pattern that had caught him, and being *ta'veren* himself. Either way, he suspected Mat was not too happy right that moment. Mat had not learned the lesson that he had. Try to run away, and the Pattern pulled you back, often roughly; run in the direction the Wheel wove you, and sometimes you could manage a little control over your life. Sometimes. With luck, maybe more than any expected, at least in the long haul. But he had more urgent concerns than Mat, or the Shaido.

A glance at the entrance told him the sun was well up, though all he saw otherwise was two Maidens squatting just outside, spears across their knees. A night and most of a morning with him unconscious, and Sammael had either not tried to find him or had failed.

He was careful to use that name, even to himself, though another floated in the back of his mind now. Tel Janin Aellinsar. No history recorded the name, no fragment in the library at Tar Valon; Moiraine had told him everything the Aes Sedai knew of the Forsaken, and it was little more than was told in village tales. Even Asmodean had always called him Sammael, if for a different reason. Long before the War of the Shadow ended, the Forsaken had embraced the names men had given them, as if symbols of rebirth in the Shadow. Asmodean's own true name—Joar Addam Nessosin—made the man flinch, and he claimed to have forgotten the others in the course of three thousand years.

Perhaps there was no real reason to hide what was going on inside his head—maybe it was only an attempt to deny reality to himself—but Sammael the man would remain. And as Sammael, he would pay in full for every Maiden he had killed. The Maidens Rand had not been able to keep safe.

Even as he made the resolution, he grimaced. He had made a beginning by sending Weiramon back to Tear—the Light willing, only he and Weiramon knew how much of one, so far—but he could not go chasing off after Sammael, whatever he wanted or vowed. Not yet. There were matters to be seen to here in Cairhien, first. Aviendha might think he did not understand *ji'e'toh,* and perhaps he did not, but he understood duty, and he had one to Cairhien. Besides, there were ways to tail it in with Weiramon.

Sitting up—and trying not to show the effort of it—he covered himself as decently as he could in the blanket and wondered where his clothes were; he did not see anything but his boots, standing over behind Aviendha. She probably knew. It might have been *gai'shain* who undressed him, but it could just as easily have been she. “I need to go into the city. Natael, have Jeade’en saddled and brought up.”

“Tomorrow, perhaps,” Aviendha told him firmly, catching Asmodean’s coatsleeve as he started to rise. “Moiraine Sedai said you would need to rest for—”

“Today, Aviendha. Now. I don’t know why Meilan isn’t here, if he’s alive, but I mean to find out. Natael, my horse?”

She put on a stubborn face, but Asmodean jerked his arm free, smoothing the wrinkled velvet, and said, “Meilan was here, and others.”

“He was not to be told—” Aviendha began angrily, then tightened her mouth before finishing, “He needs to rest.”

So the Wise Ones thought they could keep things from him. Well, he was not as weak as they believed. He tried to stand, holding the blanket close, and turned the motion into shifting his position when his legs refused to cooperate. Maybe he was as weak as they thought. But he did not intend to let that stop him.

“I can rest when I’m dead,” he said, and wished he had not when she flinched as if he had hit her. No, she would not have flinched at a blow. His staying alive was important to her for the Aiel’s sake, and a threat there could hurt her more than a fist. “Tell me about Meilan, Natael.”

Aviendha kept a sullen silence, though if looks had had anything to do with it, Asmodean would have been struck dumb as well.

A rider had come from Meilan in the night, bearing flowery praises and assurances of undying loyalty. At dawn Meilan himself appeared, with the six other High Lords of Tear who were in the city and a small host of Tairen soldiers who fingered sword hilts and gripped lances as though more than half expecting to fight the Aiel who had stood silently watching them ride in.

“It came close,” Asmodean said. “This Meilan is not used to being thwarted, I think, and the others scarcely more so. Especially the lumpy-faced one—Torean?—and Simaan. That one has eyes as sharp as his nose. You know I am used to dangerous company, but these men are as dangerous in their way as any I have known.”

Aviendha sniffed loudly. “Whatever they are used to, they had no choice with Sorilea and Amys and Bair and Melaine on one side, and Sulin with a thousand *Far Dareis Mai* on the other. And there were some Stone Dogs,” she conceded, “and a few Water Seekers and some Red Shields. If you truly serve the *Car’a’carn* as you claim, Jasin Natael, you should guard his rest as they do.”

“It is the Dragon Reborn I follow, young woman. The *Car’a’carn*, I leave to you.”

“Go on, Natael,” Rand said impatiently, earning a sniff for himself.

She was right concerning the Tairens’ choices, though perhaps the Maidens and others fingering their veils had concerned them more than the Wise Ones. In any case, even Aracome, a graying, slender man with a long-smoldering temper, had been near bursting aflame by the time they reined their horses around, and Gueyam, bald as a stone and wide as a blacksmith, was white-faced in rage. Asmodean was not sure whether it had been the certainty of being overwhelmed that stopped them drawing swords, or the realization that if they somehow managed to cut a path to Rand, he was unlikely to welcome them with his allies’ blood on their blades.

“Meilan’s eyes were bulging out of his head,” the man finished. “But before leaving, he shouted out his allegiance and fealty to you. Perhaps he thought you might hear. The others echoed him quickly, yet Meilan added something that made them stare. ‘I make a gift of Cairhien to the Lord Dragon,’ he said. Then he announced that he would prepare a grand triumph for you when you’re ready to enter the city.”

“There’s an old saying in the Two Rivers,” Rand said dryly. “ ‘The louder a man tells you he’s honest, the harder you must hold on to your purse.’ ” Another said, “The fox often offers to give the duck its pond.” Cairhien was his without gifts from Meilan.

He had no doubts about the man’s loyalty. It would last just as long as Meilan believed he would be destroyed if caught betraying Rand. If caught; that was the hook. Those seven High Lords in Cairhien had been the most assiduous in trying to see him dead in Tear. That was why he had sent them here. Had he executed every Tairen noble who plotted against him, there might have been none left. At the time, handing them anarchy, famine and civil war to deal with a thousand miles from Tear had seemed a good way to put a crimp in their schemes while doing some good where it needed doing.

Of course, he had not even known Couladin existed then, much less that the man would lead him to Cairhien.

It would be easier if this was a story, he thought. In stories, there were only so many surprises before the hero knew everything he needed; he himself never seemed to know a quarter of everything.

Asmodean hesitated—that old saying about shouting men might be applied to him, too, as he was no doubt aware—but when Rand said no more, he added, “I think he wants to be King of Cairhien. Subject to you, of course.”

“And preferably with me far away.” Meilan probably expected Rand to return to Tear, and to *Callandor*. Meilan certainly would never be afraid of too much power.

“Of course.” Asmodean sounded even drier than Rand had. “There was another visit between those two.” A dozen Cairhienin lords and ladies, without retainers, came cloaked and with faces hidden in their hoods despite the heat. Plainly they knew that the Aiel despised Cairhienin, and just as plainly returned the sentiment, yet they were as nervous that Meilan might discover they had come as that the Aiel might decide to kill them. “When they saw me,” Asmodean said wryly, “half seemed ready to kill me for fear I was Tairen. You have *Far Dareis Mai* to thank that you still have a bard.”

Few as they were, the Cairhienin had still been harder to turn back than Meilan, growing sweatier and more white-faced by the minute, but stubbornly demanding to see the Lord Dragon. It was a measure of their desire that when demands failed, they finally descended to open begging. Asmodean might have thought Aiel humor odd or harsh, but he chuckled over nobles in silk coats and riding dresses trying to pretend he was not there as they knelt to catch at the Wise Ones’ woolen skirts.

“Sorilea threatened to have them stripped and flogged back to the city.” His muted laughter turned disbelieving. “They actually discussed it among themselves. Had the requirement allowed them to reach you, I do believe some would have accepted.”

“Sorilea should have done it,” Aviendha put in, surprisingly agreeable. “The oathbreakers have no honor. At last Melaine had the Maidens throw them across their horses like bundles and run the animals from camp, with the oathbreakers hanging on as they might.”

Asmodean nodded. “But before that, two of them did speak to me, once they were certain I was not a Tairen spy. Lord Dobraine, and Lady Colavaere. They clouded everything in so many hints and innuendos that I cannot be certain, but I would not be surprised if they mean to offer you the Sun Throne. They could bandy words with . . . some people I used to be acquainted with.”

Rand barked a laugh. “Maybe they will. If they can manage the same terms as Meilan.” He had not needed Moiraine to tell him that Cairhienin played the Game of Houses in their sleep, nor Asmodean to tell him they would try it with the Forsaken. The High Lords to the left and the Cairhienin to the right. One battle done, and another, of a different sort if no less dangerous, beginning. “In any case, I mean the Sun Throne for someone who has a right to it.” He ignored the speculation on Asmodean’s face; perhaps the man had tried to help him the night before and perhaps he had not, but he did not trust the fellow enough to let him know half of his plans. However much Asmodean’s future might be tied to his, his loyalty was all necessity, and he was still the same man who had chosen to give his soul to the Shadow. “Meilan wants to give me a grand entry when I am ready, does he? So much the better that I see what’s what before he expects me.” It came to him why Aviendha had become so agreeable, even helping the talk along. As long as he sat here talking, he was doing exactly what she wanted. “Are you going to get my horse, Natael, or must I?”

Asmodean’s bow was deep, formal, and on the surface, at least, sincere. “I serve the Lord Dragon.”

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CHAPTER 46

Other Battles, Other Weapons

Frowning after Asmodean and wondering how far he trusted the man, Rand was startled when Aviendha threw down her cup, splashing wine onto the rugs. Aiel did not waste anything that could be drunk, not only water.

Staring at the wet spot, she appeared just as surprised, but only for a moment. The next instant she had planted fists on hips where she sat and was glaring at him. “So the *Car’a’carn* will enter the city when he can barely sit up. I said the *Car’a’carn* must be more than other men, but I did not know he was more than mortal.”

“Where are my clothes, Aviendha?”

“You are only flesh!”

“My clothes?”

“Remember your *toh,* Rand al’Thor. If I can remember *ji’e’toh,* so can you.” That seemed a strange thing to say; the sun would rise at midnight before she forgot the smallest scrap of *ji’e’toh*.

“If you keep on like this,” he said with a smile, “I will begin thinking you care for me.”

He meant it for a jest—there were only two ways to deal with her, joke or simply override her; arguing was fatal—and a mild one considering they had spent a night in each other’s arms, but her eyes went wide in outrage, and she jerked at the ivory bracelet as if to pull it off and throw it at him. “The *Car’a’carn* is so far above other men that he does not need clothes,” she spat. “If he wishes to go, let him go in his skin! Must I bring Sorilea and Bair? Or perhaps Enaila, and Somara, and Lamelle?”

He stiffened. Of all the Maidens who treated him as a long-lost son of ten, she had chosen the three worst. Lamelle even brought him soup—the woman could not cook a lick, but she insisted on making him soup! “You bring whoever you wish,” he told her in a tight, flat voice, “but I *am* the

Car'a'carn, and I *am* going into the city." With luck, he could find his clothes before she returned. Somara was nearly as tall as he, and, at the moment, probably stronger. The One Power certainly would do him no good; he could not have embraced *saidin* if Sammael appeared in front of him, much less held onto it.

For a long moment she met his stare, then abruptly picked up the leopard-worked cup and refilled it from a hammered-silver pitcher. "If you can find your clothes and dress yourself without falling down," she said calmly, "you may go. But I will accompany you, and if I think you are too weak to continue, you will return here if Somara must carry you in her arms."

He stared as she stretched out on one elbow, carefully arranged her skirts, and began sipping at her wine. If he mentioned marriage again, no doubt she would snap his head off again, but in some ways she behaved as if they were married. The worst parts of it, at least. The parts that did not seem a pennyworth different from Enaila or Lamelle at *their* worst.

Muttering to himself, he gathered the blanket around him and shuffled past her and the firepit to his boots. Clean woolen stockings were folded up inside, but nothing else. He could summon *gai'shain*. And have the entire matter spread through the camp. Not to mention the possibility that the Maidens would get into it after all; then the question would be whether he was the *Car'a'carn*, who must be obeyed, or just Rand al'Thor, another man entirely in their eyes. A rolled rug at the back of the tent caught his eye; rugs were always spread out. His sword was inside, the belt with the Dragon buckle wrapped around the scabbard.

Humming to herself, eyes lidded, Aviendha looked half asleep as she watched him search. "You no longer need . . . *that*." She invested the word with so much disgust that no one would have believed she had given him the sword.

"What do you mean?" There were only a few small chests in the tent, inlaid with mother-of-pearl or worked in brass, or in one case, gold leaf. The Aiel preferred putting things in bundles. None held his clothes. The gold-covered chest, all unfamiliar birds and animals, held tightly tied leather sacks and gave off a smell of spices when he raised the lid.

"Couladin is dead, Rand al'Thor."

Startled, he stopped and stared at her. "What are you talking about?" Would Lan have told her? No one else knew. But why?

“No one told me, if that is what you are thinking. I know you now, Rand al’Thor. I learn you more every day.”

“I wasn’t thinking any such thing,” he growled. “There isn’t anything anybody could tell.” Irritably, he snatched up the scabbarded sword and carried it awkwardly under his arm as he went on searching. Aviendha continued sipping wine; he thought she might be hiding a smile.

A fine thing. The High Lords of Tear sweated when Rand al’Thor looked at them, and the Cairhienin might offer him their throne. The greatest Aiel army the world had ever seen had crossed the Dragonwall on the orders of the *Car’a’carn,* the chief of chiefs. Nations trembled at mention of the Dragon Reborn. Nations! And if he did not find his clothes, he would sit waiting on permission to go outside from a lot of women who thought they knew better about everything than he did.

He finally found them when he noticed the gold-embroidered cuff of a red coatsleeve sticking out from under Aviendha. She had been sitting on them all along. She grunted sourly when he asked her to move, but she did it. Finally.

As usual, she watched him shave and dress, channeling the water hot for him without comment—and without being asked—after the third time he nicked himself and muttered about cold water. In truth, this time he was bothered as much because she might see his unsteadiness as for any other cause. *You can become used to anything if it goes on long enough,* he thought wryly.

She misunderstood his head shaking. “Elayne will not mind if I look, Rand al’Thor.”

Pausing with the laces of his shirt half done, he stared at her. “Do you really believe that?”

“Of course. You belong to her, but she cannot own the sight of you.”

Laughing silently, he went back to the laces. It was good to be reminded that her newfound mystery hid ignorance, aside from anything else. He could not help smiling smugly as he finished dressing, buckled on his sword and took up the tasseled Seanchan spearhead. That last turned the smile a touch toward grimness. He had meant it as a reminder that the Seanchan were still in the world, but it served to recall all the things that he must juggle. Cairhienin and Tairens, Sammael and the other Forsaken, the Shaido and nations that did not know him yet, nations that would have to before Tarmon Gai'don. Dealing with Aviendha was really quite simple compared with that.

Maidens leaped to their feet when he ducked out of the tent quickly to hide the unsteadiness of his legs. He was not sure how far he succeeded. Aviendha kept to his side as though she not only intended to catch him if he fell over but fully expected him to. It did nothing for his mood when Sulin, in her cap of bandages, looked questioningly at her—not him; her!—and waited for her nod before ordering the Maidens to be ready to move.

Asmodean came riding his mule up the hill, leading Jeade'en by the reins. Somehow he had found time to don fresh clothes, all dark green silk. With spills of white lace, of course. The gilded harp hung on his back, but he had given up wearing the gleeman's cloak, and he no longer carried the crimson banner with its ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai. That office fell to a Cairhienin refugee named Pevin, an expressionless fellow in a patched farmer's coat of rough dark gray wool, on a brown mule that should have been put out to grass from pulling a cart some years back. A long scar, still red, ran up the side of his narrow face from jaw to thinning hair.

Pevin had lost his wife and sister to the famine, his brother and a son to the civil war. He had no idea which Houses' men had killed them, or who they had supported for the Sun Throne. Fleeing toward Andor had cost him a second son at the hands of Andoran soldiers and a second brother to bandits, and returning had cost the last son, dead on a Shaido spear, and his daughter as well, carried off while Pevin was left for dead. The man rarely spoke, but as near as Rand could make out, his beliefs had been winnowed down to a bare three. The Dragon had been Reborn. The Last Battle was coming. And if he stayed close to Rand al'Thor, he would see his family avenged before the world was destroyed. The world would end, surely, but it did not matter, nothing did, so long as he saw that vengeance. He bowed silently to Rand from his saddle as the mare reached the crest. His face was absolutely blank, but he held the banner straight and steady.

Climbing onto Jeade'en, Rand pulled Aviendha up behind him without letting her use a stirrup, just to show her that he could, and kicked the dapple into motion before she was settled. She flung both arms around his waist, grumbling only partly under her breath; he caught a few more snippets of her current opinion of Rand al'Thor, and of the *Car'a'carn,* too. She made no move to let go, though, for which he was grateful. Not only was it pleasant having her pressed against his back, the support was welcome. With her halfway to the saddle, he had suddenly not been sure whether she was coming up or he down. He hoped she had not noticed. He hoped that was not why she was holding on to him so tightly.

The crimson banner with its large black-and-white disc rippled behind Pevin as they zigzagged down the hill and along the shallow valleys. As usual, the Aiel gave little attention to the party as it passed, though the banner marked his presence as surely as the encircling escort of several hundred *Far Dareis Mai* easily keeping pace with Jeade'en and the mules. They went on about their business among the tents covering the slopes, at most glancing up at the sound of hooves.

It had been startling to hear of nearly twenty thousand prisoners taken from Couladin's followers—until leaving the Two Rivers, he had never really believed so many people could be in one place—but seeing them was twice the shock. In clusters of forty or fifty, they dotted the hillsides like cabbages, men and women alike sitting naked in the sun, each cluster under the eyes of one *gai'shain,* if that. Certainly no one else paid them much mind, though now and again a *cadin'sor*-clad figure approached one of the groups and ordered a man or woman off on an errand. Whoever was called out went at a run, unguarded, and Rand saw several returning to slip back into their places. For the rest, they sat quietly, almost looking bored, as if they had no reason to be elsewhere, or desire to be, either.

Perhaps they would put on white robes just as calmly. Yet he could not help remembering how easily these same people had violated their own laws and customs already. Couladin might have begun the violation or ordered it, but they had followed and obeyed.

Frowning at the prisoners—twenty thousand, and more to come; he would certainly never trust one to hold to *gai'shain*—it took some time before he noticed an oddity among the other Aiel. Maidens and Aielmen who carried the spear never wore anything on their heads except the *shoufa*, and never any color that would not fade into rocks and shadows, but now he saw men with a narrow scarlet headband. Perhaps one in four or five had a strip of cloth knotted around his temples, with a disc embroidered or painted above the brows, two joined teardrops, black and white. Perhaps most strangely of all, *gai'shain* wore it, too; most had their cowls up, but every last bareheaded one wore it. And *algai'd'siswai* in their *cadin'sor* saw and did nothing, whether wearing the headband or not. *Gai'shain* were never to wear anything that those who could touch weapons did. Never.

“I do not know,” Aviendha said curtly into his back when he asked what it meant. He tried to sit up straighter; she really did seem to be holding to him more tightly than necessary. After a moment, she went on, so softly that he had to listen sharp to catch it all. “Bair threatened to strike me if I mentioned it again, and Sorilea hit me across the shoulders with a stick, but I think they are those who claim we are *siswai’aman*.”

Rand opened his mouth to ask the meaning—he knew a scant few words of the Old Tongue, no more—when interpretation floated to the surface in his mind. *Siswai’aman*. Literally, the spear of the Dragon.

“Sometimes,” Asmodean chuckled, “it is difficult to see the difference between oneself and one’s enemies. They want to own the world, but it seems you already own a people.”

Turning his head, Rand stared at him until amusement faded and, shrugging uncomfortably, he let his mule fall back beside Pevin and the banner. The trouble was that the name did imply—more than implied—ownership; that was out of Lews Therin’s memories, too. It did not seem possible to own people, but if it was, he did not want to. *All I want is to use them,* he thought wryly.

“I see you don’t believe it,” he said over his shoulder. None of the Maidens had donned the thing.

Aviendha hesitated before saying, “I do not know what to believe.” She spoke as quietly as before, yet she sounded angry, and unsure. “There are many beliefs, and the Wise Ones are often silent, as if they do not know the truth. Some say that in following you, we expiate the sin of our ancestors in . . . in failing the Aes Sedai.”

The catch in her voice startled him; he had never considered that she might be as worried as any other Aiel about what he had revealed of their past. Ashamed might be a better word than worried; shame was an important part of *ji’e’toh*. They were ashamed of what they had been—followers of the Way of the Leaf—and at the same time ashamed that they had abandoned their pledge to it.

“Too many have heard some version of part of the Prophecy of Rhuidean now,” she went on in a more controlled tone, for all the world as if she had heard a word of that prophecy herself before she began training to become a Wise One, “but it has been twisted. They know that you will destroy us . . .” Her control faltered for the space of one deep breath. “But many believe that you will kill us all in endless dances of the spear, a sacrifice to atone for the sin. Others believe that the bleakness itself is a testing, to wear away all but the hard core before the Last Battle. I have even heard some say that the Aiel are now your dream, and that when you wake from this life, we will be no more."

A grim set of beliefs, that. Bad enough that he had revealed a past they saw as shaming. It was a wonder they had not all left him. Or gone mad. "What do the Wise Ones believe?" he asked, as quietly as she.

"That what must be, will be. We will save what can be saved, Rand al'Thor. We do not hope to do more."

We. She included herself among the Wise Ones, just as Egwene and Elayne included themselves among Aes Sedai. "Well," he said lightly, "I expect Sorilea at least believes I should have my ears boxed. Probably Bair does, too. And certainly Melaine."

"Among other things," she mumbled. To his disappointment, she pushed away from him, although keeping a hold on his coat. "They believe many things I could wish they did not."

He grinned in spite of himself. So she did not believe he needed his ears boxed. That was a pleasant change since waking.

Hadnan Kadere's wagons lay a mile or so from his tent, circled in a broad depression between two hills where Stone Dogs kept watch. A cream-colored coat straining over his bulk, the hatchet-nosed Darkfriend looked up, mopping his face with the inevitable large handkerchief, as Rand rode past with his banner and loping escort. Moiraine was there as well, examining the wagon where the doorframe *ter'angreal* was lashed under canvas behind the driver's seat. She did not even glance around until Kadere spoke to her. By his gestures, he was plainly suggesting that she might want to accompany Rand. In fact, he appeared eager for her to go, and small wonder. He had to be congratulating himself on keeping his being a Darkfriend hidden so long, but the more he was in company with an Aes Sedai, the more he was in danger of discovery.

Indeed, it was a surprise to Rand that the man was still there. At least half of the drivers who had entered the Waste with him had slipped away since crossing the Dragonwall, replaced by Cairhienin refugees chosen by Rand himself, to make sure they were not of Kadere's sort. He expected every morning to find the fellow himself gone, too, especially since Isendre's escape. The Maidens had nearly torn the wagons apart looking for the woman, while Kadere sweated his way through three handkerchiefs.

Rand would not regret it if Kadere managed to sneak off in the night. The Aiel guards had orders to let him go, so long as he did not try to take Moiraine's precious wagons. More obviously every day, their loads were a treasure to her, and Rand would not see her lose them.

He glanced over his shoulder, but Asmodean was staring straight ahead, ignoring the wagons altogether. He claimed to have had no contact with Kadere since Rand captured him, and Rand thought it might be true. Certainly, the merchant never left his wagons, and was never out of sight of Aiel guards except when inside his own wagon.

Opposite the wagons, Rand half drew rein without thinking. Surely Moiraine would want to accompany him into Cairhien; she might have crammed his head full, but it always seemed there was another piece she wanted to fit in, and this once in particular he could do with her presence and advice. But she merely looked at him for a long moment, then turned back to the wagon.

Frowning, he heeled the dapple on. As well to remember she had other sheep to shear than he knew about. He had become too trusting. Best to be as wary of her as of Asmodean.

Trust no one, he thought bleakly. For an instant he did not know whether it was his thought or Lews Therin's, but in the end he decided it did not matter. Everybody had their own goals, their own desires. Much the best to trust no one completely except himself. Yet he wondered, with another man oozing through the back of his mind, how far could he trust himself?

Vultures filled the sky around Cairhien in spiraling layers of black wings. On the ground they flapped about among clouds of buzzing flies, squawking hoarsely at glossy ravens that tried to usurp their rights to the dead. Where Aiel went across the treeless hills, recovering the bodies of their slain, the birds lumbered aloft fatly, screeching protests, then settled again as soon as the living humans were a few paces gone. Vultures and ravens and flies together could not really have made the sunlight dimmer, yet it seemed so.

Stomach twisting, trying not to see, Rand heeled Jeade'en faster, until Aviendha clung to his back once more and the Maidens were running. No one protested, and he did not believe it was only because Aiel could maintain that speed for hours. Even Asmodean looked pale around the eyes. Pevin's face never changed, though the bright banner whipping above him appeared a mockery in that place.

What lay ahead was little better. Rand remembered the Foregate as a raucous beehive, a tangled warren of streets full of noise and color. Now it was a still, thick band of ashes surrounding the square gray walls of Cairhien on three sides. Charred timbers lay crazily atop stone foundations, and here and there a soot-black chimney yet stood, sometimes tilting precariously. In places, a chair lying somehow untouched in the dirt street, a hasty bundle dropped by someone fleeing, a rag doll, emphasized the desolation.

Breezes stirred some of the banners on the city's towers and along the walls, a Dragon standing out red-and-gold on white at one place, the Crescents of Tear white on red-and-gold at another. The middle set of the Jangai Gates stood open, three tall square arches in the gray stone guarded by Tairen soldiers in rimmed helmets. Some were mounted but most afoot, and the variously colored stripes on their wide sleeves showed they were retainers of several lords.

Whatever was known in the city about the battle being won, and Aiel allies coming to the rescue, the approach of half a thousand *Far Dareis Mai* created some little stir. Hands went uncertainly to sword hilts, or spears and long shields, or lances. Some of the soldiers half moved as if to close the gates even while looking to their officer, with three white plumes on his helmet, who hesitated, standing in his stirrups and shading his eyes against the sun to study the crimson banner. And more particularly, Rand.

Abruptly the officer sat down, saying something that sent two of the mounted Tairens galloping back through the gates. Almost immediately, he was waving the other men aside, calling, “Make way for the Lord Dragon Rand al'Thor! The Light illumine the Lord Dragon! All glory to the Dragon Reborn!”

The soldiers still appeared uneasy about the Maidens, but they formed into lines to either side of the gates, bowing deeply as Rand rode through. Aviendha sniffed loudly at his back, and again when he laughed. She did not understand, and he had no intention of explaining. What amused him was that however hard Tairens or Cairhienin or anyone else tried to puff up his head, he could rely on her and the Maidens, at least, to take the swelling down. And Egwene. And Moiraine. And Elayne and Nynaeve, for that matter, if he ever saw either again. Come to think of it, the lot of them seemed to make that a large part of their life's work.

The city beyond the gates stilled his laughter.

Here the streets were paved, some broad enough for a dozen or more large wagons abreast, all straight as knife cuts and crossing at right angles. The hills that rolled outside the walls were here carved and terraced, faced with stone; they looked as much made by men as the stone buildings with their severe straight lines and sharp angles, or the great towers with their unfinished tops, surrounded by scaffolding. People crowded the streets and the alleys, dull-eyed and hollow-cheeked, huddling beneath makeshift lean-tos or ragged blankets rigged as tents, or simply jammed together in the open, in the dark clothes favored by Cairhienin city dwellers and the bright colors of Foregaters and the rough garb of farmers and villagers. Even the scaffolds were filled, on every level to the very top, where folk looked tiny for the height. Only the middle of the streets remained clear as Rand and the Maidens made their way along, and that only for as long as it took the people to surge out around them.

It was the people who stilled his mirth. Worn and ragged as they were, jammed together like sheep in a too-small pen, they cheered. He had no idea how they knew who he was, unless perhaps the officer's shouts at the gates had been heard, but a roar sprang ahead of him as he circled through the streets, the Maidens forcing a way through the throng. The thunder of it overwhelmed any words except for the occasional "Lord Dragon" when enough shouted it together, but the meaning was clear in men and women holding up children to see him pass, in scarves and scraps of cloth waved from every window, in people who tried to push past the Maidens with outstretched hands.

They certainly seemed to have no fear of Aiel, not at the chance to lay a finger on Rand's boots, and their numbers were such, the pressure of hundreds shoving them forward, that some managed to wriggle through. Actually, a good many touched Asmodean's instead—he certainly looked a lord, in all his dripping lace, and perhaps they thought the Lord Dragon must be an older man than the youth in a red coat—but it made no difference. Whoever managed to put hand to anyone's boot or stirrup, even Pevin's, wore joy on their faces and mouthed "Lord Dragon" into the din even as Maidens forced them back with their bucklers.

Between the clamor of acclaim and the riders sent by the officer at the gate, it was no surprise when Meilan appeared, a dozen lesser Tairen lords for retinue and fifty Defenders of the Stone to clear his way, laying about them with the butts of their lances. Gray-haired, hard and lean in his fine silk coat with stripes and cuffs of green satin, the High Lord sat his saddle with the stiff-backed ease of one who had been put on a horse and taught to command it almost as soon as he could walk. He ignored the sweat on his face, and equally the possibility that his escort might trample someone. Both were minor annoyances and the sweat likely the greater.

Edorion, the pink-cheeked lordling who had come to Eianrod, was among the others, not quite so plump as he had been, so his red-striped coat hung on him. The only other Rand recognized was a broad-shouldered fellow in shades of green; Reimon had liked to play at cards with Mat back in the Stone, as he recalled. The others were older men for the most part. None displayed any more consideration of the crowd they plowed through than Meilan. There was not one Cairhienin in the lot.

The Maidens let Meilan ride through when Rand nodded, but closed behind him to exclude the rest, a fact the High Lord did not notice at first. When he did, his dark eyes smoldered angrily. He was often angry, Meilan was, since Rand had first come to the Stone of Tear.

The noise began to abate with the Tairen arrival, fading to a dull murmur by the time Meilan made a rigid bow to Rand from his saddle. His gaze flickered to Aviendha before he decided to ignore her, just as he was trying to ignore the Maidens. “The Light illumine you, my Lord Dragon. Be you well come to Cairhien. I must apologize for the peasants, but I was unaware you meant to enter the city now. Had I known, they would have been cleared. I meant to give you a grand entry, befitting the Dragon Reborn.”

“I have had one,” Rand said, and the other man blinked.

“As you say, my Lord Dragon.” He went on after a moment, his tone making it clear that he did not understand. “If you will accompany me to the Royal Palace, I have arranged a small greeting. Small indeed, I fear, since I had no warning of you, yet by this even I will make sure—”

“Whatever you have arranged now will do,” Rand cut in, and received another bow and a thin, oily smile for reply. The fellow was all subservience now, and in an hour he would be talking as to someone too feeble-witted to understand facts held under his nose, but beneath it all lay a contempt and hatred that he believed Rand did not see although they shone in his eyes. Contempt because Rand was not a lord—not truly, as Meilan saw it, by birth—and hatred because Meilan had had the power of life and death before Rand came, with few his equal and none his superior. To believe that the Prophecies of the Dragon would be fulfilled someday was one thing; to have them fulfilled, and his own power diminished by them, was quite another.

There was a moment of confusion before Rand made Sulin allow the other Tairen lords to bring their horses in behind Asmodean and Pevin's banner. Meilan would have had the Defenders clear the way again, but Rand curtly ordered that they follow behind the Maidens. The soldiers obeyed, faces unchanging beneath the rims of their helmets, though their white-plumed officer shook his head, and the High Lord put on a condescending smile. That smile faded when it became clear that the crowds opened up easily ahead of the Maidens. That they did not have to club a path through, he attributed to the Aiel reputation for savagery, and frowned when Rand made no reply. One thing Rand made note of: Now that he had Tairens with him, the cheers did not rise again.

The Royal Palace of Cairhien occupied the highest hill of the city, exactly in the center, square and dark and massive. In fact, between the palace in all its levels and the stone-faced terracing, it was hard to say there was a hill there at all. Lofty colonnaded walks and tall narrow windows, high above the ground, did no more to relieve the ridigity than did gray, stepped towers precisely placed in concentric squares of increasing height. The street became a long, broad ramp leading up to tall bronze gates, and a huge square courtyard beyond lined with Tairen soldiers standing like statues, spears slanted. More stood on the overlooking stone balconies.

A ripple of murmurs ran through the ranks at the appearance of the Maidens, but it was quickly stilled in chanted shouts of "All glory to the Dragon Reborn! All glory to the Lord Dragon and Tear! All glory to the Lord Dragon and the High Lord Meilan!" From Meilan's expression, you would have thought it all spontaneous.

Dark-garbed servants, the first Cairhienin Rand had seen in the palace, rushed out with worked golden bowls and white linen cloths as he swung a leg over the high pommel and slid from his saddle. Others came to take reins. He took the excuse of bathing his face and hands in cool water to leave Aviendha to climb down by herself. Trying to help her down might have ended with them both flat on the paving stones.

Unprompted, Sulin chose out twenty Maidens besides herself to accompany him within. On the one hand, he was glad she did not want to keep every last spear around him. On the other hand, he wished Enaila, Lamelle and Somara were not among the twenty. The considering looks they gave him—especially Lamelle, a lean, strong-jawed woman with dark red hair, nearly twenty years older than he—made him grind his teeth while trying to smile reassuringly. Somehow Aviendha must have managed to speak to them, and to Sulin, behind his back. *I may not be able to do anything about the Maidens,* he thought grimly as he tossed a linen towel back to one of the serving men, *but burn me if there isn't* one *Aiel woman who'll learn I'm the* Car'a'carn*!*

The other High Lords greeted him at the foot of the broad gray stairs that led up from the courtyard, all in colorful silk coats and satin stripes and silver-worked boots. It was plain that none were aware Meilan had gone to meet him until after the fact. Potato-faced Torean, oddly languid for such a lumpy man, sniffed anxiously at a scented handkerchief. Gueyam, oiled beard making his head seem even balder, clenched fists the size of small hams and glared at Meilan even as he bowed to Rand. Simaan's sharp nose seemed to quiver in outrage; Maraconn, with blue eyes rare in Tear, compressed his thin lips until they almost disappeared; and while Hearne's narrow face was all smiles, he tugged unconsciously at one ear-lobe as he did when furious. Only blade-slender Aracome showed no outward emotion, but then he almost always kept his anger well banked until ready to let it burst into flame.

It was too good an opportunity to miss. Silently thanking Moiraine for her lessons—it was easier to trip a fool than to knock him down, she said—Rand clasped Torean's pudgy hand warmly and clapped Gueyam on the point of a thick shoulder, returned Hearne's smile with one warm enough for a close companion and nodded silently to Aracome with a seemingly significant glance. Simaan and Maraconn he all but ignored after one look as flat and cool as a deep winter pond for each.

That was all it needed for the moment, beyond watching their eyes shift and faces tighten in thought. They had played *Daes Dae'mar,* the Game of Houses, their entire lives, and being among Cairhienin, who could read volumes in a raised eyebrow or a cough, had only heightened their sensitivity. Each man knew Rand had no reason to be friendly toward him, but each had to wonder if his own greeting was only to cover something real with someone else. Simaan and Maraconn appeared the most worried, yet the others eyed those two perhaps the most suspiciously of all. Perhaps his coolness had been the true cover. Or maybe that was what they were meant to think.

For himself, Rand thought that Moiraine would be proud of him, and so would Thom Merrilin. Even if none of these seven was actively plotting against him at the moment—something he did not think even Mat would bet on—men in their positions could do much to disrupt his plans without being seen to, and they would do so from habit if for no other reason. Or they would have. He had them off balance now. If he could keep them that way, they would be too busy watching each other, and too afraid of being watched in turn, to trouble him. They might even obey for once without finding a hundred reasons why things should be done differently from what he wanted. Well, that might be asking too much.

His satisfaction slipped when he saw Asmodean's sardonic grin. Worse was Aviendha's wondering stare. She had been in the Stone of Tear; she knew who these men were, and why he had sent them here. *I do what I must*, he thought sourly, and wished it did not sound as if he were trying to excuse himself.

"Inside," he said, more sharply than he intended, and the seven High Lords jumped as if suddenly recalling who and what he was.

They wanted to crowd around him as he climbed the stairs, but except for Meilan to show the way, the Maidens simply made a solid circle around him, and the High Lords brought up the rear with Asmodean and the lesser lords. Avienda stuck close by . . . of course, and Sulin was on his other side, Somara and Lamelle and Enaila right behind him. They could have reached out and touched his back without stretching. He gave Aviendha an accusing look, and she arched her eyebrows at him so questioningly that he almost believed she had had nothing to do with it. Almost.

The corridors of the palace were empty except for dark-liveried servants who bowed almost chest to knees or curtsied just as deeply as he passed, but when he entered the Grand Hall of the Sun he discovered that the Cairhienin nobility had not been excluded from the palace entirely.

"The Dragon Reborn comes," intoned a white-haired man just inside the huge gilded doors worked with the Rising Sun. His red coat embroidered with six-pointed stars in blue, a little large on him after his time in Cairhien, marked him for an upper servant of Meilan's House. "All hail the Lord Dragon Rand al'Thor. All glory to the Lord Dragon."

A quick roar filled the chamber to its angle-vaulted ceiling, fifty paces up. “Hail the Lord Dragon Rand al’Thor! All glory to the Lord Dragon! The Light illumine the Lord Dragon!” The silence that followed seemed twice as still by comparison.

Between massive square columns of marble thick-streaked with blue so deep it was almost black stood more Tairens than Rand expected, ranks of Lords and Ladies of the Land dressed in their finest, in peaked velvet hats and coats with puffy, striped sleeves, in colorful gowns and lace ruffs and close-fitting caps intricately embroidered or sewn with pearls or small gems.

To their rear were the Cairhienin, darkly garbed except for slashes of color across the breast of gown or knee-length coat. The more stripes in House colors, the higher the rank of the wearer, but men and women with color from neck to waist or lower stood behind Tairens clearly of minor Houses, with yellow embroidery instead of thread-of-gold and wool instead of silk. No few of the Cairhienin men had shaved and powdered the front of their heads; all of the younger men had.

The Tairens looked expectant, if uneasy; the Cairhienin faces could have been chiseled from ice. There was no way to say who had cheered and who not, but Rand suspected most of those cries had come from the front rows.

“A good many wished to serve you here,” Meilan murmured as they made their way up the blue-tiled floor with its great golden mosaic of the Rising Sun. A ripple of silent curtsies and bows followed.

Rand only grunted. They wished to serve him? He did not need Moiraine to know that these lesser nobles hoped to become greater on estates carved out of Cairhien. No doubt Meilan and the other six had already intimated if not promised which lands would be whose.

At the far end of the Grand Hall, the Sun Throne itself stood centered atop a wide dais of deep blue marble. Even here Cairhienin restraint held, for a throne at any rate. The great heavy-armed chair glittered with gilt and golden silk, but somehow it seemed to be all plain vertical lines, except for the wavy-rayed Rising Sun that would stand above the head of whoever sat on it.

That was meant to be him, Rand realized long before reaching the nine steps to the dais. Aviendha climbed up with him, and Asmodean, as his bard, was allowed up as well, but Sulin quickly arrayed the other Maidens around the dais, their casually held spears blocking Meilan as well as the rest of the High Lords. Frustration painted those Tairen faces. The Hall was so quiet that Rand could hear himself breathe.

"This belongs to someone else," he said finally. "Besides, I've spent too long in the saddle to welcome such a hard seat. Bring me a comfortable chair."

There was a moment of shocked silence before a murmur ran through the Hall. Meilan suddenly wore such a look of speculation, quickly suppressed, that Rand nearly laughed. Very likely Asmodean was right about the man. Asmodean himself was eyeing Rand with barely hidden surmise.

It was some minutes before the fellow in the star-embroidered coat ran up panting, followed by two dark-liveried Cairhienin carrying a high-backed chair piled with silk-covered cushions, and pointed out where to place it with a great many worried glances at Rand. Vertical lines of gilt ran up the chair's heavy legs and back, but it seemed insignificant in front of the Sun Throne.

While the three servants were still bowing themselves away, bending double on every step, Rand tossed most of the cushions to one side and sat down gratefully, the Seanchan spearhead on his knee. He was careful not to sigh, though. Aviendha was watching him too carefully for that, and the way Somara kept glancing from her to him and back confirmed his suspicions.

But whatever his problems with Aviendha and *Far Dareis Mai,* most present awaited his words with equal parts eagerness and trepidation. *At least* they'll *jump when I say "toad,"* he thought. They might not like it, but they would do it.

With Moiraine's help he had worked out what he must do here. Some he had known was right even without her suggestions. It would have been good to have her there to whisper in his ear if needed, instead of Aviendha waiting to signal Somara, but there was no point in waiting. Surely every Tairen and Cairhienin noble in the city was in this chamber.

"Why do the Cairhienin hang back?" he said loudly, and the crowd of nobles shifted, exchanging confused glances. "Tairens came to help, but that is no reason for Cairhienin to hold themselves in the rear here. Let everyone sort themselves by rank. Everyone."

It was difficult to say whether Tairens or Cairhienin were the most stunned, though Meilan looked ready to swallow his tongue, and the other six not far behind. Even slow-burning Aracome went white in the face. With much shuffling of boots and twitching aside of skirts, with many icy stares on both sides, it was done, until the front rows were all men and women with stripes across their chests and the second held only a few Tairens. Meilan and his fellows had been joined at the foot of the dais by twice their number of Cairhienin lords and ladies, most graying and everyone stripes from neck nearly to knees, though perhaps "joined" was not the right word. They stood in two groups, with a full three paces between, and looked away from one another so hard that they might as well have shaken fists and shouted. Every eye was on Rand, and if the Tairens were in a fury, the Cairhienin were still ice, with only hints of a thaw in the considering way they studied him.

"I have noticed the banners flying above Cairhien," he went on once the movement stilled. "It is well that so many of the Crescents of Tear fly. Without Tairen grain, Cairhien would have no living to hoist a banner, and without Tairen swords, the people of this city who survived today, noble as well as common, would be learning to obey the Shaido. Tear has earned her honor." That puffed up the Tairens, of course, bringing fierce nods and fiercer smiles, though it certainly seemed to confuse the High Lords, coming on the heels of the other. For that matter, the Cairhienin below the dais were eyeing one another doubtfully. "But I do not need so many banners for myself. Let one Dragon banner remain, on the highest tower of the city so all who approach can see, but let the rest be taken down and replaced with the banners of Cairhien. This is Cairhien, and the Rising Sun must and will fly proudly. Cairhien has her own honor, which she shall keep."

The chamber erupted in a roar so suddenly that Maidens hefted their spears, a roar that reverberated from wall to wall. In an instant Sulin was flashing Maiden handtalk, but already half-raised veils were being let fall. The Cairhienin nobles were cheering every bit as loudly as the people in the streets had, capering and waving their arms like Foregaters at festival. In the pandemonium it was the Tairens' turn to exchange silent stares. They did not look angry. Even Meilan appeared unsure more than anything else, though like Torean and the others, he watched in amazement the lords and ladies of high rank around him, so coldly dignified a moment before, now dancing and shouting for the Lord Dragon.

Rand did not know what any of them read into his words. Certainly he had expected them to hear more than he said, especially the Cairhienin, and perhaps even that some would hear what he really meant, but nothing had prepared him for this display. Cairhienin reserve was an odd thing, he well knew, mixed at times with unexpected boldness. Moiraine had been reticent on the matter, for all her insistence on trying to teach him everything; the most she had said was that if that reserve broke, it could do so to a surprising degree. Surprising, indeed.

When the cheering finally died down, the giving of oaths of fealty began. Meilan was the first to kneel, tight-faced as he pledged under the Light and by his hope of salvation and rebirth to serve faithfully and obey; it was an old form, and Rand hoped it might actually constrain some to keep the oath. Once Meilan had kissed the tip of the Seanchan spearhead, trying to hide a sour grimace by stroking his beard, he was replaced by the Lady Colavaere. A more than handsome woman in her middle years, with dark ivory lace spilling over the hands she placed between Rand’s, and horizontal slashes of color from high lace collar to her knees, she gave the oath in a clear, firm voice and the musical accent he was used to hearing from Moiraine. Her dark gaze had something of the weighing-and-measuring look of Moiraine as well, most especially when she eyed Aviendha as she curtsied her way back down the steps. Torean replaced her, sweating as he swore, and Lord Dobraine replaced Torean, deep-set eyes probing, one of the few older men to have shaved the front of his long, mostly gray hair, then Aracome, and . . .

Rand felt impatience as the procession continued, one by one up to kneel before him, Cairhienin succeeding Tairen succeeding Cairhienin, as he had decreed. This was all necessary, so Moiraine said—and so agreed a voice in his head that he knew for Lews Therin’s—but to him it was part of the delay. He must have their loyalty, if only on the surface, in order to begin making Cairhien secure, and that beginning, at least, had to be made before he could move on Sammael. *And that I will do! I have too much to do yet to let him go on stabbing at my ankles from the bushes! He will find out what it means to rouse the Dragon!*

He did not understand why those coming before him began to sweat and lick their lips as they knelt and stammered the words of fealty. But then, he could not see the cold light burning in his own eyes.

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CHAPTER 47

The Price of a Ship

Finishing her morning wash, Nynaeve toweled herself dry and pulled on a fresh silk shift reluctantly. Silk was not as cool as linen, and even with the sun only just up, the heat in the wagon foretold another scorching day. Besides which, the thing was cut so she was half afraid it would fall in a puddle around her ankles if she breathed wrong. At least it was not damp with nightsweat, as her discarded one was.

Disturbing dreams had racked her sleep, dreams of Moghedien that woke her bolt upright—and those better than the ones she did not wake out of—dreams of Birgitte shooting arrows at her and *not* missing, dreams of the Prophet’s followers rioting through the menagerie, of being stranded forever in Samara because no vessel ever came, of reaching Salidar and finding Elaida in charge. Or Moghedien again, there, too. She had wakened weeping from that one.

All just worry, of course, and natural enough. Three nights camped here without a ship appearing, three sweltering days of standing blindfolded against that cursed piece of wall. That was enough to put anyone on edge, even without worrying whether Moghedien was closing in. But then, just because the woman knew they were with a menagerie did not mean she had to find them in Samara. There were other traveling menageries in the world besides those gathered here. Thinking up reasons not to worry was easier than not worrying, though.

But why should I be anxious about Egwene? Dipping a split twig into a small dish of salt-and-soda on the washstand, she began scrubbing her teeth vigorously. Egwene had popped up in nearly every dream, yammering at her, but she could not see how Egwene came into them.

In truth, anxiety and lack of sleep were only part of what made her mood vile this morning. The others were such minor things, but they were realities. A pebble in your shoe was small compared to having your head cut off, but if the pebble was there and the chopping block might never be . . .

It was not possible to avoid her own reflection, and her hair hanging loose about her shoulders instead of decently braided. Brush it how she would, the brassy red color never became less loathsome. And she knew all too well that a blue dress was laid out on the bed behind her. A blue to make even a Tinker woman blink, and cut as low as the original red gown hanging on a peg. That was why she had on this precariously clinging shift. One dress like that was not enough, not according to Valan Luca. Clarine was at work on another pair in a virulent yellow, and there was talk of stripes. Nynaeve did not want to know about stripes.

At least the man could let me choose the colors, she thought, working the split twig furiously. Or Clarine. But no, he had his own ideas, and he never asked. Not Valan Luca. His color choices sometimes made her forget the necklines. *I ought to throw it in his face!* Yet she knew she would not. Birgitte flaunted herself in those dresses without the hint of a blush. The woman was certainly *nothing* like any of the stories about her! Not that she was going to wear the fool dress without protest because Birgitte did. She was not competing with the woman in any way. It was just that . . . "If you have to do a thing," she growled around the twig, "best you get used it."

"What did you say?" Elayne asked. "If you're going to talk, please take that out of your mouth. The noise is disgusting otherwise."

Wiping her chin, Nynaeve glared over her shoulder. Elayne was seated on her own narrow bed with her legs drawn up beside her, braiding her black-dyed hair. She already had on her white breeches, all sewn with spangles, and a snowy silk blouse with ruffles at the neck that was much too sheer. Her sequin-splattered white coat lay beside her. White. She also had two suits of clothes for performing, with a third in the making, all in white, if not exactly plain. "If you are going to dress in that fashion, Elayne, you should not sit so. It's indecent."

The other woman glowered sullenly, but she did put her slippered feet on the floor. And raised her chin in that haughty way she had. "I think I may take a walk into the town this morning," she said coolly, still working at the braid. "This wagon is . . . confining."

Rinsing her mouth, Nynaeve spat into the washbowl. Loudly. The wagon certainly did seem smaller by the day. Maybe they did need to keep out of sight as much as possible—it had been her idea, one she was coming to regret—but this was becoming ridiculous. Three days shut up with Elayne except when they went to perform was beginning to feel like three weeks. Or three months. She had never before realized what an acid tongue Elayne had. A ship had to come. Any kind of ship. She would give every last coin hidden in the brick stove, every last jewel, anything, for a ship today. "Well, that wouldn't attract any attention, would it? But perhaps you could use the exercise. Or maybe it's just the way those breeches fit your hips."

Blue eyes flared, but Elayne's chin remained high and her tone cold. "I dreamed about Egwene last night, and between going on about Rand and Cairhien—*I* worry about what is happening there, even if *you* do not—in between, she said you were turning into a screaming harridan. Not that *I* think so, necessarily. *I* would have said a fishmonger."

"Now you listen to me, you ill-tempered little chit! If you don't—"

Still glaring, Nynaeve snapped her mouth shut, then drew breath slowly. With an effort she forced her voice to be level. "You dreamed about Egwene?" Elayne nodded curtly. "And she talked of Rand and Cairhien?" The younger woman rolled her eyes in exaggerated exasperation and went on with her braid. Nynaeve made her hand loose its fistful of brassy red hair, made herself stop thinking of teaching the Daughter-Heir of bloody Andor some simple common courtesy. If they did not find a ship soon . . . "If you can think of anything except how to show more of your legs than you already are, it might interest you to know that she was in my dreams, too. She said Rand won a great victory at Cairhien yesterday."

"I may be exposing my legs," Elayne barked, spots of color rising in her cheeks, "but at least I am not flashing my—You dreamed of her, too?"

It did not take long to compare notes, though Elayne continued to show a viperish tongue; Nynaeve had had a perfectly good reason for screaming at Egwene, and Elayne probably *had* been dreaming of parading in front of Rand in her sequined costume, if not less. Saying so was simple honesty. Even so, it quickly became clear that Egwene had said the same things in both their dreams, and that left little room for doubt.

"She kept saying she was really there," Nynaeve muttered, "but I thought it was just part of the dream." Egwene had told them often enough that it was possible, talking to someone in her dreams, but she had never said that she could. "Why should I have believed? I mean, she said she'd finally recognized some spear he's taken to carrying as Seanchan work. That's preposterous."

"Of course." Elayne arched one eyebrow in an irritating manner. "Just as preposterous as finding Cerandin and her *s'redit.* There *must* be other Seanchan refugees, Nynaeve, and spears are likely the *least* of what they left behind."

Why could the woman not say anything without a barb? "I notice how well *you* believed."

Elayne threw the finished braid over her shoulder, then tossed her head again, superciliously, for good measure. "I do hope Rand is all right." Nynaeve sniffed; Egwene had said he would need days of rest before he was on his feet again but he *had* been Healed. The other woman continued, "No one has ever taught him he mustn't overextend himself. Doesn't he know the Power can kill him if he draws too much, or weaves when tired? That much is the same for him as for us."

So she meant to change the subject, did she? "Perhaps he doesn't know," Nynaeve told her sweetly, "since there isn't a White Tower for men." That made her think of something else. "Do you think it really was Sammael?"

Caught with a retort on the tip of her tongue, Elayne glowered at her sideways, then heaved a peevish sigh. "It hardly matters to us, does it? What we should be thinking about is using the ring again. For more than meeting Egwene. There is so much to learn. The more I do learn, the more I know how much I don't know yet."

"No." Nynaeve did not really expect the other woman to take out the ring *ter'angreal* then and there, but she took a reflexive step toward the brick stove. "No more trips to *Tel'aran'rhiod*, for either of us, except to meet her."

Elayne went right on without appearing to notice. Nynaeve could have been talking to herself. "It isn't as though we need to channel. We won't give ourselves away that way." She did not look at Nynaeve, but there was a hint of bite in her voice. She maintained that they could use the Power, if they were careful. For all Nynaeve knew, Elayne did just that behind her back. "I'll wager if one of us visited the Heart of the Stone tonight, Egwene would be there. Think, if *we* could talk to her in *her* dreams, we'd not need to worry about encountering Moghedien in *Tel'aran'rhiod* any longer."

“You think it’s easy to learn, then?” Nynaeve asked dryly. “If that’s so, why hasn’t she taught us already? Why hasn’t she done it before this?” Her heart was not in it, though. She was the one worried about Moghedien. Elayne knew the woman was dangerous, but it was like knowing a viper was dangerous; Elayne knew, but Nynaeve had been bitten. And being able to communicate without entering the World of Dreams would be valuable quite aside from avoiding Moghedien.

In any case, Elayne still was paying no attention to her. “I wonder why she was so insistent we not tell anyone. That makes no sense.” For a moment she worried her underlip with her teeth. “There is another reason to talk to her as soon as we can. It didn’t mean anything to me then, but the last time she spoke to me, she vanished in midsentence. What I remember now is that before she did, she suddenly looked surprised, and frightened.”

Nynaeve took a deep breath and pressed both hands hard against her stomach in a vain effort to quiet sudden flutters. She managed to keep her voice flat, though. “Moghedien?”

“Light, you do have cheerful thoughts! No. If Moghedien could come into our dreams, I think we would know it by now.” Elayne gave a small shiver; she did have some idea of how dangerous Moghedien was. “Anyway, it wasn’t that sort of look. She was frightened, but not enough for that.”

“Then maybe she isn’t in any danger. Maybe . . .” Forcing her hands to her sides, Nynaeve compressed her lips angrily. Only, she was not certain who she was angry with.

Putting the ring away, out of sight, except for meetings with Egwene, had been a good idea. It had. Any venture into the World of Dreams could have found Moghedien, and keeping clear of her was better than a good idea. She already knew she was overmatched. That thought rankled, worse every time she had it, but it was the simple truth.

Yet now there was the chance that Egwene needed help. A small chance. Just because she was properly wary of Moghedien did not mean she was underrating the possibility. And it might be that Rand had one of the Forsaken after him in the same personal way that Moghedien was after her and Elayne. What Egwene reported, both of Cairhien and of the mountains, smacked of one man daring another to knock a chip off his shoulder. Not that she could see anything to do about that. But Egwene . . .

Sometimes it seemed to Nynaeve that she had forgotten why she had left the Two Rivers in the first place. To protect young people from her village who had been caught in Aes Sedai webs. Not that much younger than herself—only a few years—yet the gap seemed wider when you were the village Wisdom. Of course, the Women's Circle in Emond's Field had certainly chosen a new Wisdom by now, but that did not make it less her village, or them less her people. In her heart of hearts, it made her no less the Wisdom. Somehow, though, protecting Rand and Egwene and Mat and Perrin from Aes Sedai had become helping them survive, and finally, without her quite realizing when or how, even that goal had been submerged in other needs. Entering the White Tower to learn how better to pull down Moiraine had become a burning desire to learn how to Heal. Even her hatred for Aes Sedai meddling in people's lives now coexisted with her desire to become one. Not that she really wanted to, but it was the only way to learn what she wanted to learn. Everything had become as tangled as one of those Aes Sedai webs, herself included, and she did not know how to escape.

I am still who I always have been, I will *help them, as much as I can.* "Tonight," she said aloud, "I will use the ring." Sitting down on the bed, she began to pull on her stockings. Stout wool was hardly comfortable in this heat, but at least part of her would be decently clothed. Stout stockings, and stout shoes. Birgitte wore brocaded slippers, and gossamer silk stockings that surely looked cool. She put the thought firmly out of her head. "Just to see if Egwene *is* in the Stone. If she isn't, I will come back, and we won't use the ring again until the next scheduled meeting."

Elayne watched her, with an unblinking stare that made her tug at her stockings in increasing discomfort. The woman did not say a word, but her expressionless gaze implied that Nynaeve might be lying. To Nynaeve it did. It did not help that the thought had flittered on the edge of consciousness that she could easily make sure the ring was not touching her skin when she went to sleep; there was no real reason to believe that Egwene would be waiting in the Heart of the Stone tonight. She had never really considered it—the thought had drifted up unbidden—but it had been there, and made it hard to meet Elayne's eyes. What if she was afraid of Moghedien? It was only good sense, however it galled to admit it.

I will do what I must. She clamped down firmly on butterflies in the pit of her belly. By the time she tossed the shift down over her stockings, she was eager to don the blue dress and go out into the heat just to escape Elayne's eyes.

Elayne was just finishing helping her with the rows of small buttons up the back—and muttering that no one had helped *her,* as if anyone needed help with breeches—when the wagon door banged open, letting in a wave of hot air. Startled, Nynaeve jumped and covered her bosom with both hands before she could stop herself. When Birgitte climbed in instead of Valan Luca, she tried to pretend she was adjusting the neckline.

Smoothing identical brilliant blue silk over her hip, the taller woman pulled her thick black braid over one bare shoulder with a self-pleased grin. "If you want to draw attention, don't bother fiddling. It is too obvious. Just breathe deeply." She demonstrated, then laughed at Nynaeve's scowl.

Nynaeve made an effort to keep her temper. Though why she should, she did not know. She could hardly imagine that she had felt guilt over what had happened. Gaidal Cain was probably glad to get away from the woman. And Birgitte got to wear her hair the way she wanted. Not that that had anything to do with anything. "I knew someone like you in the Two Rivers, *Maerion.* Calle knew every merchant's guard by his first name, and she certainly had no secrets from any of them."

Birgitte's smile tightened. "And I knew a woman like you, once. Mathena looked down her nose at men, too, and even had a poor fellow executed for coming on her by accident while she swam naked. She had never even been kissed, until Zheres stole one from her. You'd have thought she had discovered men for the first time. She became so besotted, Zheres had to go live on a mountain to escape her. Watch out for the first man to kiss you. One has to come along sooner or later."

Fists clenching, Nynaeve took a step toward her. Or tried to. Somehow Elayne was in between them, hands upraised.

"Both of you stop it this minute," she said, eyeing them in turn with equal haughtiness. "Lini always said 'Waiting turns men into bears in a barn, and women into cats in a sack,' but you will stop clawing at one another right now! I will not put up with it any longer!"

To Nynaeve's surprise, Birgitte actually blushed and mumbled a sullen apology. To Elayne, of course, but the apology itself was the surprise. Birgitte had chosen to stay close to Elayne—there was no need for her to hide—but after three days the heat was apparently affecting her as badly as it did Elayne. For herself, Nynaeve gave the Daughter-Heir her frostiest stare. She had managed to maintain an even disposition while they waited, cooped up together—she had—but Elayne certainly had no room to talk.

“Now,” Elayne said, still in that icy tone, “did you have some reason for barging in like a bull, or have you simply forgotten how to knock?”

Nynaeve opened her mouth to say something about cats—just a gentle reminder—but Birgitte forestalled her, if in a tighter voice.

“Thom and Juilin are back from the town.”

“Back!” Nynaeve exclaimed, and Birgitte glanced at her before returning to Elayne.

“You did not send them?”

“I did not,” Elayne said grimly.

She was out of the door, Birgitte at her heels, before Nynaeve could say a word. There was nothing for it but to follow, grumbling to herself. Elayne had better not suddenly think she was the one giving orders. Nynaeve had still not forgiven her for revealing so much to the men.

The dry heat seemed even worse outside, for all the sun still sat on the canvas wall around the menagerie. Sweat popped out on her brow before she reached the foot of the ladder, but for once she did not grimace.

The two men sat on three-legged stools beside the cookfire, hair wild and coats looking as if they had rolled in the dirt. A trickle of red ran from beneath a wadded cloth Thom was pressing to his scalp, down across a fan of dried blood that covered his cheek and stained one long white mustache. A purple lump the size of a hen’s egg stood out beside Juilin’s eye, and he held his thumb-thick staff of pale ridged wood in a hand roughly wrapped with a bloody bandage. That ridiculous conical red cap, sitting on the back of his head, appeared to have been trampled.

From the noises inside the canvas walls, the horse handlers were already at work cleaning cages, and no doubt Cerandin was with her *s’redit*—none of the men would go near them—but there was relatively little stir around the wagons as yet. Petra was smoking his long-stemmed pipe while he helped Clarine prepare their breakfast. Two of the Chavanas were studying some piece of apparatus with Muelin, the contortionist, while the other pair were chatting with two of the six female acrobats Luca had hired away from Sillia Cerano’s show. They claimed to be sisters named Murasaka, despite being even more disparate in looks and coloring than the Chavanas. One of the pair lounging in colorful silk robes with Brugh and Taeric had blue eyes and almost white hair, the other skin nearly as dark as her eyes. Everyone else was already garbed for the day’s first performance, the men bare-chested in colorful breeches, Muelin in gauzy red and a tight matching vest, Clarine in high-necked green sequins.

Thom and Juilin attracted a few looks, but fortunately no one thought it necessary to come inquire after their health. Perhaps it was the hangdog way they sat, shoulders slumped, eyes on the ground under their boots. Doubtless they knew they were in for a tongue-lashing that would sear their hides. Nynaeve certainly intended to give them one.

Elayne, though, gasped at the sight of them and went running to kneel beside Thom, all the anger of a moment before taking wing. “What happened? Oh, Thom, your poor head. That must hurt so. This is beyond my abilities. Nynaeve will take you inside and see to it. Thom, you are too old to get yourself into scrapes like this.”

Indignantly, he fended her off as best he could while holding his compress in place. “Leave over, child. I’ve had worse than this falling out of bed. Will you leave over?”

Nynaeve was not about to do any Healing, despite being angry enough. She planted herself in front of Juilin, fists on her hips and a brook-no-nonsense, answer-me-right-now look on her face. “What do you mean, sneaking off without telling me?” As well to start letting Elayne know that *she* was not in charge. “If you had gotten your throat cut instead of a mouse on your eye, how would we know what had happened to you? There was no reason for you to go. None! Finding a ship has been seen to.”

Juilin glared up at her, shoving his cap forward over his forehead. “Seen to, is it? Is that why the three of you have taken to stalking about like—?” He cut off as Thom groaned loudly and swayed.

Once the old gleeman had quieted Elayne’s concerned flutters with protestations that it had just been a momentary pang, that he was fit to attend a ball—and given Juilin a significant glance he obviously hoped the women would not see—Nynaeve turned a dangerous eye back to the dark Tairen, to learn just what it was he thought they had been stalking about like.

“A good thing we did go,” he told her instead in a tight voice. “Samara’s a school of silverpike around a chunk of bloody meat. There are mobs on every street hunting Darkfriends and anybody else who isn’t ready to hail the Prophet as the one true voice of the Dragon Reborn.”

“It started three hours or so ago, near the river,” Thom put in, giving in with a sigh to Elayne’s bathing his face with a damp cloth. He appeared to be ignoring her mutters, which must have taken some doing, since Nynaeve could clearly hear “foolish old man” and “need someone to take care of you before you get yourself killed” among other things in a tone easily as exasperated as it was fond. “How it began, I don’t know. I heard Aes Sedai blamed, Whitecloaks, Trollocs, everybody but the Seanchan, and if they knew the name, they’d blame them, too.” He winced at Elayne’s pressure. “The last hour we were a little too personally involved in getting clear to learn much.”

“There are fires,” Birgitte said. Petra and his wife noticed her pointing and stood to stare worriedly. Two dark plumes of smoke rose above the canvas wall in the direction of the town.

Juilin rose and looked Nynaeve in the eyes with a hard gaze. “It is time to go. Maybe we’ll stand out enough for Moghedien to find us, but I doubt it; there are people running every direction they can run. In another two hours, it won’t be a pair of fires, it will be fifty, and avoiding her won’t do much good if we’re torn to pieces by a mob. They’ll turn to the shows once they have smashed what can be smashed in the town.”

“Don’t use that name,” Nynaeve said sharply, with a frown for Elayne that the younger woman did not see. Letting men know too much was always a mistake. The trouble was, he was right, but letting a man know that too quickly was a mistake, too. “I will consider your suggestion, Juilin. I would hate to run away for no reason, and then learn that a ship had come right after we left.” He stared at her as if she were mad, and Thom shook his head despite Elayne’s holding it still for her washing, but a figure making his way through the wagons brightened Nynaeve. “Perhaps it’s come already.”

Uno’s painted eyepatch and scarred face, his topknot and the sword on his back, attracted casual nods from Petra and the various Chavanas and one shiver from Muelin. He had made each of the evening visits himself, though with nothing to report. His presence now had to mean there was something.

As usual he grinned at Birgitte as soon as he saw her, and rolled his lone eye in an ostentatious stare at her exposed bosom, and as usual she grinned back and eyed him up and down lazily. For once, though, Nynaeve did not care how reprehensibly they behaved. “Is there a ship?”

Uno’s grin faded. “There’s a bloo—a ship,” he said grimly, “if I can get you to it whole.”

“We know all about the rioting. Surely fifteen Shienarans can get us safely through.”

“You know about the rioting,” he muttered, eyeing Thom and Juilin. “Do you fla—do you know Masema’s people are fighting Whitecloaks in the streets? Do you know he’s bloo—he’s ordered his people to take Amadicia with fire and sword? There are thousands across the blo—aagh! —the river already.”

“That’s as may be,” Nynaeve said firmly, “but I expect you to do as you said you would. You promised to obey *me,* if you recall.” She put just a slight emphasis on the word, and gave Elayne a meaning look.

Pretending not to see, the woman stood, bloodied washcloth in her hand, and directed her attention to Uno. “I have always been told that Shienarans are among the bravest soldiers in the world.” That razor edge to her voice had suddenly become regal silk and honey. “I heard many stories of Shienaran bravery when I was a child.” She rested a hand on Thom’s shoulder, but her eyes remained on Uno. “I remember them still. I hope I shall always remember them.”

Birgitte stepped closer and began massaging the back of Uno’s neck while she looked him straight in the eye. That glaring red eye on his eyepatch did not seem to upset her at all. “Three thousand years guarding the Blight,” she said gently. Gently. It had been two days since she had spoken to Nynaeve like that! “Three thousand years, and never a step back not paid for ten times over in blood. This may not be Enkara, or the Soralle Step, but I know what you will do.”

“What did you do,” he growled, “read all the flaming histories of the flaming Borderlands?” Immediately he flinched and glanced at Nynaeve. It had been necessary to tell him she expected absolutely clean language out of him. He was not taking it well, but there was no other way to prevent backsliding, and Birgitte should not frown at her. “Can you talk to them?” he directed at Thom and Juilin. “They’re fla—fools to try this.”

Juilin flung up his hands, and Thom laughed out loud. “Did you ever know a woman who listened to sense when she didn’t want to?” the gleeman replied. He grunted as Elayne pulled his compress away and began dabbing at his split scalp with perhaps a bit more force than was strictly necessary.

Uno shook his head. “Well, if I’m to be cozened, I suppose I’ll be cozened. But mark this. Masema’s people found the ship—*Riversnake,* or something like—not an hour after it docked, but Whitecloaks seized it. That’s what started this little row. The bad news is the Whitecloaks still hold the docks. The worse is, Masema may have forgotten the ship—I went to see him, and he wouldn’t hear of ships; all he can talk about is hanging Whitecloaks, and making Amadicia bend knee to the Lord Dragon if he has to put the whole land to the torch—but he hasn’t bothered to tell all of his people. There’s been fighting near the river, and may still be. Getting you through the riots will be bad enough, but if there’s a battle at the docks, I make no promises. And how I’m to put you on a ship in Whitecloak hands, I don’t begin to know.” Letting out a long breath, he scrubbed sweat from his forehead with the back of a scarred hand. The strain of so long a speech without cursing was plain on his face.

Nynaeve might have relented on his language at that moment—if she had not been too stunned to speak. It had to be coincidence. *Light, I said anything for a ship, but I didn’t mean this. Not this!* She did not know why Elayne and Birgitte were staring at her with such blank expressions. They had known everything she had, and neither had brought up this possibility. The three men exchanged frowns, obviously aware that something was going on and just as obviously unaware what it was, for which thank the Light. Much better when they did not know everything. It just had to be coincidence.

In one way, she was more than happy to focus on another man making his way through the wagons; it gave an excuse to pull her eyes away from Elayne and Birgitte. In another way, the sight of Galad made her stomach settle right to her shoes.

He wore plain brown and a flat velvet cap instead of his white cloak and burnished mail, but his sword still rested on his hip. He had not been to the wagons before, and the effect of his face was dramatic. Muelin took an unconscious step toward him, and the two slender acrobats leaned forward, mouths open. The Chavanas were plainly forgotten, and scowling for it. Even Clarine smoothed her dress as she watched him, until Petra took his pipe from his mouth and said something. Then she went over to where he sat, laughing, and snuggled his face to her plump bosom. But her eyes still followed Galad over her husband’s head.

Nynaeve was in no mood to be affected by a handsome face; her breath hardly quickened at all. “It was you, wasn’t it?” she demanded before he even reached her. “You seized the *Riversnake*, didn’t you? Why?”

“Riverserpent,” he corrected, eyeing her incredulously. “You did ask me to secure you passage.”

“I didn’t ask you to start a riot!”

“A riot?” Elayne put in. “A war. An invasion. All begun over this vessel.”

Galad answered calmly. “I gave Nynaeve my word, sister. My first duty is to see you safely on your way to Caemlyn. And Nynaeve, of course. The Children would have had to fight this Prophet soon or late.”

“Couldn’t you simply have let us know the ship was here?” Nynaeve asked wearily. Men and their word. It was all very admirable, sometimes, but she should have listened when Elayne said he did what he saw as right no matter who was hurt.

“I don’t know what the Prophet wanted the ship for, but I doubt it was so you could take passage downriver.” Nynaeve flinched. “Besides which, I paid the captain your passage while he was still unloading his cargo. An hour later, one of the two men I left to make sure he did not sail without you came to tell me the other man was dead and the Prophet had taken the ship. I don’t understand what you are so upset about. You wanted a ship, needed a ship, and I got you one.” Frowning, Galad addressed Thom and Juilin. “What is the matter with them? Why do they keep staring at one another?”

“Women,” Juilin said simply, and got slapped on the back of the head by Birgitte for his trouble. He glared at her.

“Horseflies have a nasty bite,” she grinned, and his glower faded into uncertainty as he readjusted his cap.

“We can sit here all day discussing right and wrong,” Thom said dryly, “or we can take this vessel. Passage has been paid, and there’s no getting the price back now.”

Nynaeve flinched again. However he meant it, she knew how she heard it.

“There may be trouble reaching the river,” Galad said. “I donned this clothing because the Children are not popular in Samara at the moment, but the mobs can set on anyone.” He eyed Thom doubtfully, with his white hair and long white mustaches, and Juilin a little less so—even disheveled, the

Tairen looked hard enough to pound posts—then turned to Uno. "Where is your friend? Another sword might be useful until we reach my men."

Uno's smile was villainous. Clearly, there was no more love between them than at their first meeting. "He's about. And maybe one or two more. I'll see them to the ship, if your Whitecloaks can hold on to it. Or if they can't."

Elayne opened her mouth, but Nynaeve spoke up quickly. "That's enough, both of you!" Elayne would just have tried honeyed words again. They might have worked, but she wanted to lash out. At something, anything. "We need to move quickly." She should have considered, when she flung two madmen at the same target, what might happen if they both hit at once. "Uno, gather the rest of your men, as fast as you can." He tried to tell her they were already waiting on the other side of the menagerie, but she plowed on. They *were* madmen, *both* of them. *All* men were! "Galad, you—"

"Rouse and rise!" Luca's shout cut into her words as he trotted between the wagons, limping, and with a bruise discoloring the side of his face. His scarlet cape was soiled and torn. It seemed Thom and Juilin were not the only ones to have entered the town. "Brugh, go tell the horse handlers to hitch the teams! We'll have to abandon the canvas," he grimaced at the words, "but I mean to be on the road in under an hour! Andaya, Kuan, pull your sisters out! Wake anybody still asleep, and if they're washing, tell them to dress dirty or come naked! Hurry, unless you're ready to proclaim the Prophet and march to Amadicia! Chin Akima's lost his head already, along with half his performers, and Sillia Cerano and a dozen of hers were flogged for being too slow! Move!" By that time, everybody except those around Nynaeve's wagon were at the run.

Luca's limp slowed as he approached, eyeing Galad warily. And Uno, for that matter, though he had seen the one-eyed man twice before. "Nana, I want to talk to you," he said quietly. "Alone."

"We will not be going with you, Master Luca," she told him.

"Alone," he said, and seized her arm, hauling her away.

She looked back to tell the others not to interfere and found there was no need. Elayne and Birgitte were hurrying off toward the canvas wall that encompassed the menagerie, and except for a few glances at her and Luca, the four men were engrossed in conversation. She sniffed loudly. Fine men they were, to watch a woman manhandled and do nothing.

Jerking her arm free, she strode along beside Luca, silk skirts swishing her displeasure. “I suppose you want your money, now that we are going. Well, you shall have it. One hundred gold marks. Though I think you should allow something for the wagon and horses we’re leaving behind. And for what we’ve brought in. We have certainly increased the number of your patrons. Morelin and Juilin with their highwalking, me with the arrows, Thom—”

“Do you think I want the gold, woman?” he demanded rounding on her. “If I did, I’d have asked for it the day we crossed the river! Have I asked? Did you ever think why not?”

In spite of herself, she took a step back, crossing her arms beneath her breasts sternly. And immediately wished she had not; that stance more than emphasized what she was exposing. Stubbornness kept her arms where they were—she was not about to let him think she was flustered, especially since she was—but surprisingly, his eyes remained on hers. Maybe he was ill. He had never avoided looking at her bosom before, and if Valan Luca was not interested in bosoms *or* gold . . . “If not about the gold, then why do you want to talk to me?”

“All the way back here from the town,” he said slowly, following her, “I kept thinking that now you would finally go.” She refused to back away again, even when he was standing over her and staring down intently. At least he was still looking at her face. “I don’t know what you are running from, Nana. Sometimes, I almost believe your story. Morelin certainly has a noblewoman’s manner about her, at least. But you were never a lady’s maid. The last few days, I’ve half expected to find the pair of you rolling on the ground tearing one another’s hair. And maybe Maerion in the pile.” He must have seen something on her face, because he cleared his throat and hurried on. “The point is, I can find someone else for Maerion to shoot at. You do scream so beautifully, anyone would think you were truly terrified, but—” He cleared his throat again, even more hastily, and drew back. “What I am trying to say is that I want you to stay. There’s a wide world out there, a thousand towns waiting for a show like mine, and whatever is chasing you will never find you with me. A few of Akima’s people, and some of Sillia’s who haven’t been marched off across the river—they’re joining me. Valan Luca’s show will be the greatest the world has ever seen.”

“Stay? Why should I stay? I told you from the first we only wanted to reach Ghealdan, and nothing has changed.”

“Why? Why, to have my children, of course.” He took one of her hands in both of his. “Nana, your eyes drink my soul, your lips inflame my heart, your shoulders make my pulse race, your—”

She cut in hurriedly. “You want to marry me?” she said incredulously.

“Marry?” He blinked. “Well . . . uh . . . yes. Yes, of course.” His voice picked up strength again, and he pressed her fingers to his lips. “We will be wed at the first town where I can arrange it. I’ve never asked another woman to marry me.”

“I can quite believe it,” she said faintly. It took some effort to pull her hand free. “I am sensible of the honor, Master Luca, but—”

“Valan, Nana. Valan.”

“But I must decline. I am betrothed to another.” Well, she was, in a way. Lan Mandragoran might think his signet ring just a gift, but she saw it differently. “And I am going.”

“I should bundle you up and carry you with me.” Dirt and rips somewhat spoiled the grandiloquent flourish of his cape as he drew himself up. “With time, you would forget the fellow.”

“You try it, and I’ll have Uno make you wish you had been sliced for sausage.” That barely deflated the fool man at all. She drove a finger hard against his chest. “You do not know me, Valan Luca. You don’t know anything about me. My enemies, the ones you dismiss so easily, would make you take off your skin and dance in your bones, and you would be grateful if that was all they did. Now, I am going, and I don’t have time to listen to your drivel. No, don’t say any more! My mind is set, and you will not change it, so you might as well stop blathering.”

Luca sighed heavily. “You are the only woman for me, Nana. Let other men choose boring flutterers with their shy sighs. A man would know he had to walk through fire and tame a lioness with his bare hands every time he approached you. Every day an adventure, and every night . . .” His smile almost earned him boxed ears. “I will find you again, Nana, and you will choose me. I know it in here.” Thumping his chest dramatically, he gave his cape an even more pretentious swirl. “And you know it, too, my dearest Nana. In your fair heart, you do.”

Nynaeve did not know whether to shake her head or gape. Men *were* mad. *All* of them.

He insisted on escorting her back to her wagon, holding her arm as if they were at a ball.

Stalking though the turmoil of horse handlers rushing to hitch teams, the din of men shouting, horses whickering, bears growling, leopards coughing, Elayne found herself muttering under her breath to match any of the animals. Nynaeve had no room to talk about her showing her legs. She had seen the way the woman stood up straighter when Valan Luca appeared. And breathed deeper, too. For Galad as well, for that matter. It was not as if she *enjoyed* wearing breeches. They *were* comfortable, true, and cooler than skirts. She could see why Min chose to wear men's clothes. Almost. There was the problem of getting past the feeling that the coat was really a dress that barely covered your hips. She had just managed that, so far. Not that she intended to let Nynaeve know, her and her viperish tongue. The woman should have realized Galad would ignore the cost of keeping his promise. It was not as if Elayne had not told her about him often enough. And involving the Prophet! Nynaeve just acted without thinking about what she was doing.

"Did you say something?" Birgitte asked. She had gathered her skirts over one arm to keep up, unashamedly baring her legs from blue brocaded slippers to *well* above her knees, and those sheer silk stockings did not hide as much as breeches.

Elayne stopped dead. "What do you think of how I am dressed?"

"It allows freedom of movement," the other woman said judiciously. Elayne nodded. "Of course, it's good that your bottom isn't too big, as tight as those—"

Striding on furiously, Elayne tugged the coat down with sharp yanks. Nynaeve's tongue had nothing on Birgitte's. She really should have required some oath of obedience, or at least some show of proper respect. She would have to remember that once it came time to bond Rand. When Birgitte caught up to her, wearing a sour expression as if *she* were driven almost beyond endurance, neither of them spoke.

Dressed in green sequins, the pale-haired Seanchan woman was using her goad to guide the huge bull *s'redit* as his head pushed the heavy wagon holding the black-maned lion's cage. A horse handler in a shabby leather vest held the wagon tongue, steering the wagon around to where its horses could be hitched more easily. The lion stalked back and forth, lashing his tail and now and then giving a hoarse cough that sounded like the beginning of a roar.

“Cerandin,” Elayne said, “I must speak to you.”

“In a moment, Morelin.” Fixed on the tusked gray animal as she was, her quick, slurred way of speaking made her nearly unintelligible.

“Now, Cerandin. We have little time.”

But the woman did not halt the *s’redit* and turn until the horse handler called out that the wagon was in position. Then she said impatiently, “What do you need, Morelin? I have much to do, yet. And I would like to change; this dress is not for traveling.” The animal stood waiting patiently behind her.

Elayne’s mouth tightened slightly. “We are leaving, Cerandin.”

“Yes, I know. The riots. Such things should not be allowed. If this Prophet thinks to harm us, he will learn what Mer and Sanit can do.” She twisted to scratch Mer’s wrinkled shoulder with her goad, and he touched her shoulder with his long nose. A “trunk,” Cerandin called it. “Some prefer *lopar* or *grolm* for battle, but *s’redit* properly used—”

“Be quiet and listen,” Elayne said firmly. It was an effort to maintain her dignity, with the Seanchan woman being obtuse and Birgitte standing aside with her arms folded. She was certain Birgitte was just waiting to say something else cutting. “I do not mean the show. I mean myself, and Nana, and you. We are taking ship this morning. In a few hours, we will be beyond the Prophet’s reach forever.”

Cerandin shook her head slowly. “Few river craft can carry *s’redit*, Morelin. Even if you’ve found one that can, what would they do? What would I do? I do not think I can earn as much by myself as I can with Master Luca, not even with you high walking and Maerion shooting her bow. And I suppose Thom would juggle. No. No, it is better if we all remain with the show.”

“The *s’redit* will have to be left behind,” Elayne admitted, “but I am sure that Master Luca will take care of them. We will not be performing, Cerandin. There’s no more need for that. Where I am going, there are those who would like to learn about . . .” She was conscious of the horse handler, a lanky fellow with an incongruously bulbous nose, standing close enough to listen. “About where you came from. Much more than you’ve told us already.” No, not listening. Leering. By turns at Birgitte’s bosom and at *her* legs. She looked at him until his insolent grin turned sickly and he scuttled back to his duties.

Cerandin was shaking her head again. “I am to leave Mer and Sanit and Nerin to be cared for by men who are afraid to come near them? No, Morelin. We will stay with Master Luca. You, too. It is much better. Remember how bedraggled you were the day you came? You do not want to return to that.”

Drawing a deep breath, Elayne stepped closer. No one but Birgitte was close enough to overhear, but she did not want to take foolish chances. “Cerandin, my true name is Elayne of House Trakand, Daughter-Heir of Andor. One day, I will be Queen of Andor.”

Based on the woman’s behavior the first day, and even more on what she had told them of Seanchan, that should have been enough to quell any resistance. Instead, Cerandin looked her straight in the eye. “You claimed to be a lady the day you came, but . . .” Pursing her lips, she eyed Elayne’s breeches. “You are a very good highwalker, Morelin. With practice, you may be good enough to perform before the Empress one day. Everyone has a place, and everyone belongs in their place.”

For a moment, Elayne’s mouth worked soundlessly. Cerandin did not believe her! “I have wasted quite enough time, Cerandin.”

She reached for the woman’s arm, to haul her along bodily if necessary, but Cerandin caught her hand, twisted, and with a wide-eyed yelp Elayne found herself on tiptoe, wondering whether her wrist would break before her arm came out of her shoulder. Birgitte just stood there, arms folded under her breasts, and had the nerve to raise an eyebrow questioningly!

Elayne gritted her teeth. She *would* not ask for help. “Release me, Cerandin,” she demanded, wishing she did not sound quite so breathy. “I said, release me!”

Cerandin did, after a moment, and stepped back warily. “You are a friend, Morelin, and always will be. You could be a lady, one day. You have the manner, and if you attract a lord, he may take you for one of his *asa*. *Asa* sometimes become wives. Go with the Light, Morelin. I must finish my work.” She held out the goad for Mer to curl his trunk around, and the big animal let her lead him ponderously away.

“Cerandin,” Elayne said sharply. “Cerandin!” The pale-haired woman did not look back. Elayne glared at Birgitte. “A great lot of help you were,” she growled, and stalked off before the other woman could reply.

Birgitte caught her up and fell in at her side. “From what I hear, and what I’ve seen, you have spent considerable time teaching the woman she has a backbone. Did you expect me to help you take it away from her again?”

“I was not trying to do any such thing,” Elayne muttered. “I was trying to take care of her. She is a long way from home, a stranger wherever she goes, and there are some who would not treat her kindly if they learned where she came from.”

“She seems well able to take care of herself,” Birgitte said dryly. “But then, perhaps you taught her that, too? Perhaps she was helpless before you found her.” Elayne’s stare seemed to slide off her like ice sliding down warm steel.

“You just stood and watched her. You are supposed to be my . . .” She glanced around; it was only a glance, but several of the horse handlers ducked their heads away. “My Warder. You are supposed to help me defend myself when I cannot channel.”

Birgitte looked around, too, but unfortunately there was no one close enough to make her hold her tongue. “I will defend you when you are in danger, but if the danger is only of being turned over someone’s knee because you’ve behaved like a spoiled child, I will have to decide whether it’s better to let you learn a lesson that might save you the same or worse another time. Telling her you were heir to a throne! Really! If you are going to be Aes Sedai, you had better start practicing how to bend the truth, not break it into shards.”

Elayne gaped. It was not until she stumbled over her own feet that she managed to say, “But I am!”

“If you say so,” Birgitte said, rolling her eyes at the spangled breeches.

Elayne could not help herself. Nynaeve wielding her tongue like a needle, Cerandin stubborn as two mules, and now this. She threw back her head and screamed with frustration.

When the sound died, it seemed as if the animals had quieted. Horse handlers stood about, staring at her. Coolly, she ignored them. Nothing could worm its way under her skin now. She was as calm as ice, perfectly in control of herself.

“Was that a cry for help,” Birgitte said, tilting her head, “or are you hungry? I suppose I could find a wet nurse in—”

Elayne strode away with a snarl that would have done any of the leopards proud.

* * *

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CHAPTER
48

Leavetakings

Once she was back in the wagon, Nynaeve changed into a decent dress, with a few exasperated mutters for having to undo one set of buttons and do up another by herself. The plain gray wool, fine and well cut yet hardly elaborate, would pass without comment almost anywhere, but it was decidedly warmer. Still, it felt good to be decently garbed again. And somehow *odd*, as if she were wearing too many clothes. It must be the heat.

Quickly she knelt in front of the small brick stove with its tin chimney and opened the iron door on their valuables.

The twisted stone ring was fast nestled into her belt pouch beside Lan's heavy signet ring and her gold Great Serpent. The small gilded coffer containing the gems Amathera had given her went into the leather scrip with the pouches of herbs taken from Ronde Macura in Mardecin and the small mortar and pestle for preparing them; she fingered through the latter just to remind herself what each contained, from healall to that dreadful forkroot. The letters-of-rights went in as well, and three of the six purses, none quite as fat as it had been after paying the menagerie's way to Ghealdan. Luca might not be interested in his hundred marks, but he had had no qualms about collecting his expenses. One of the letters authorizing the bearer to do whatever she wished in the name of the Amyrlin Seat joined the rings. No more than vague rumors of some sort of trouble in Tar Valon had reached Samara; she might find a use for it, even with Siuan Sanche's signature. The dark wooden box she left where it sat, next to three of the purses, as well as the rough jute bag containing the *a'dam*—that, she certainly had no wish to touch—and the silver arrow Elayne had found the night of the calamitous encounter with Moghedien.

For a moment she frowned at the arrow, contemplating Moghedien. It *was* best to do whatever was necessary to avoid her. *It was. I bested her* *once!* And had been hung up like a sausage in the kitchen the second time. If not for Birgitte . . . *She made her own choice.* The woman had said so, and it was true. *I could defeat her again. I could. But if I failed* . . . If she failed . . .

She was only trying to avoid the washleather purse stuffed right to the back, and she knew it, yet there was not a hair's difference for ugliness between the purse and the thought of losing to Moghedien again. Drawing a deep breath, she gingerly reached in and took it up by the drawstrings, and knew she had been wrong. Evil seemed to bathe her hand, stronger than ever, as if the Dark One really was trying to break through the *cuendillar* seal inside. Better to dwell all day on defeat by Moghedien; there was a *world* of difference between thought and reality. It had to be imagination—there had been no such feeling in Tanchico—but she wished she could let Elayne carry that, too. Or leave it there.

Stop being foolish, she told herself firmly. *It holds the Dark One's prison shut. You are just letting your fancies run wild.* But she still dropped it like a week-dead rat onto the red dress Luca had had made, then wrapped and tied the thing securely with more than a little haste. The silken parcel went into the middle of a bundle of clothes she was taking with her, inside her good gray traveling cloak. A few inches' distance was enough to take away the sensation of dark bleakness, but she still wanted to wash her hand. If only she did not know it was there. She *was* being foolish. Elayne would laugh at her, and Birgitte, as well. And rightly.

Actually, the clothes she wanted to keep made two packages, and she regretted every stitch she had to leave behind. Even the low-cut blue silk. Not that she ever wanted to wear anything like it again—she did not intend to *touch* the red dress, certainly, until she handed the intact packet to an Aes Sedai in Salidar—but she could not help totting up the cost of clothes, horses and wagons abandoned since leaving Tanchico. And the coach, and the barrels of dye. Even Elayne would have winced if she had ever thought of it. That young woman believed there would always be coin when she reached into her purse.

She was still making the second bundle when Elayne returned and silently changed into a blue silk dress. Silently, except for mutters when she had to double her arms behind her to fasten the buttons. Nynaeve would have helped, had she been asked, but since she was not, she examined the other woman for bruises while she changed. She thought she had heard a scream only minutes before Elayne arrived, and if she and Birgitte had actually come to blows . . . She was not certain she was glad to find none. A riverboat would be just as confining as this wagon in its own way, and less than pleasant if the two women were at one another’s throats. But then again, it might have helped had they worked off some of their beastly tempers.

Elayne said not a word while she gathered her own belongings, not even when Nynaeve asked, quite amiably, where she had gone haring off to as if she had sat on a cockleburr. That got only a raised chin and a chilly stare, as though the girl thought she was already on her mother’s throne.

Sometimes Elayne was even more silent, in a way that said far more than words could. Finding three purses remaining, she paused before taking them, and the temperature in the wagon lowered considerably, though the purses were only her share. Nynaeve was tired of the carping over how she doled out coins; let the woman watch them dribble away and realize there might be no more for some time. When Elayne realized the ring was gone, though, and the dark box still sitting there . . .

Elayne hefted the box and opened the lid, pursing her lips as she studied the contents, the other two *ter’angreal* they had carried all the way from Tear. A small iron disc worked on both sides with a tight spiral, and a narrow plaque five inches long, seemingly amber yet harder than steel, and with a sleeping woman somehow carved inside it. Either could be used to enter *Tel’aran’rhiod,* though not so easily or so well as could the ring; to use either it was necessary to channel Spirit, the sole one of the Five Powers that could be channeled in sleep. It had seemed only right to Nynaeve, leaving them for Elayne, since she was taking charge of the ring. Closing the box with a sharp click, Elayne stared at her, absolutely expressionless, then stuffed it into one of her bundles alongside the silver arrow. Her silence was thunderous.

Elayne also made two bundles, but hers were larger; she left nothing out except the spangled coats and breeches. Nynaeve refrained from suggesting that she had overlooked them; she should have, with the sulking that was going on, but *she* knew how to promote harmony. She limited herself to one sniff when Elayne ostentatiously added the *a’dam* to her things, though from the look she got in return, you would have thought she had made her objections known at length. By the time they left the wagon, the quiet could have been chipped and used to chill wine.

Outside, the men were ready. And muttering to themselves, and throwing impatient looks at her and Elayne. It was hardly fair. Galad and Uno had nothing to prepare. Thom's flute and harp hung on his back in leather cases, along with a small bundle, and Juilin, notched sword-breaker at his belt and leaning on his head-high staff, wore an even smaller bundle, neatly tied. Men were willing to wear the same clothes until they rotted off.

Of course, Birgitte was ready, too, bow in hand, quiver at her hip, and a cloak-wrapped bundle at her feet not much smaller than one of Elayne's. Nynaeve would not have put it past Birgitte to have Luca's dresses in there, but it was what she wore that gave a moment's pause. Her divided skirts could have been the voluminous trousers she had worn in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, except for being more gold than yellow and not being gathered at the ankles. The short blue coat was identical in cut.

The mystery of where the garments had come from was solved when Clarine scurried up, chattering that she had taken too long, with two more of the skirts and another coat to fold into Birgitte's bundle. She stayed to say how sorry she was that they were leaving the show, and she was not the only one to take a few moments from the bustle of hitching horses and packing up. Aludra came with wishes for a safe journey, wherever they were going, in her Taraboner accents. And with two more boxes of her firesticks. Nynaeve tucked them into her scrip with a sigh. She had made a point of leaving the others behind, and Elayne had pushed them to the back of the shelf, behind a sack of beans, when she thought Nynaeve was not looking. Petra offered to help escort them to the river, pretending not to see his wife's eyes tighten with concern, and so did the Chavanas, and Kin and Bari, the jugglers, though when Nynaeve told them there was no need, and Petra frowned, they could barely hide their relief. She had to speak quickly, for Galad and the other men looked on the point of accepting. Surprisingly, even Latelle appeared briefly, with words of regret, smiles, and eyes that said she would carry their bundles if it saw them gone any sooner. Nynaeve was surprised Cerandin did not come, though in a way she was just as glad. Elayne might get on famously with the woman, but since the incident where she had been assaulted, Nynaeve had felt a tension whenever she was around her, perhaps the more because Cerandin gave no outward sign of the same.

Luca himself was the last, thrusting a handful of pitiful, drought-dwarfed wildflowers at Nynaeve—the Light alone knew where he had found them—with protestations of undying love, extravagant praises for her beauty, and dramatic vows to find her again if he had to travel to the corners of the world. She was not sure which made her cheeks grow hotter, but her frosty stare wiped the grin from Juilin's face and astonishment from Uno's. Whatever Thom and Galad thought, they had enough sense to keep their features smooth. She could not make herself look at Birgitte or Elayne.

The worst was that she had to stand there and listen, wilted flowers drooping over her hand, her face growing redder. Trying to send him away with a flea in his ear would likely only have sparked him to greater efforts, and given the others more fodder than they already had. She very nearly heaved a sigh of relief when the idiot man finally bowed himself away in elaborate flourishes of his cape.

She held on to the flowers, striding ahead of the others so she did not have to see their faces and angrily shoving bundles back into place when they shifted, until she was out of sight of the wagons around the canvas wall. Then she threw the bedraggled blossoms down so violently that Ragan and the rest of the rough-clad Shienarans, squatting halfway across the meadow to the road, exchanged glances. Each had a blanket-wrapped bundle on his back—small, of course!—alongside his sword, but they were hung about with enough water bottles to last for days, and every third man had a pot or kettle dangling somewhere. Fine. If there was cooking to be done, let them do it! Not waiting for them to decide whether she was safe to approach, she stalked out to the dirt road alone.

Valan Luca was the source of her fury—humiliating her that way! She should have thumped his head and the Dark One take what anyone thought!—but its target was Lan Mandragoran. Lan had never given her flowers. Not that that was of any account. He had expressed his feelings in words deeper and more heartfelt than Valan Luca could ever manage. She had meant every word to Luca, but if Lan said he was going to carry you off, threats would never stop him; channeling would not stop him unless you managed it before he turned your brain and your knees to jelly with kisses. Still, flowers would have been nice. Nicer than another explanation of why their love could never be, certainly. Men and their word! Men and their *honor!* Wedded to death, was he? Him and his personal war with the Shadow! He was going to live, he was going to wed her, and if he thought differently on either point, she intended to set him straight. There was only the small matter of his bond to Moiraine to deal with. She could have screamed in frustration.

She was a hundred paces down the road before the others caught up, glancing at her sideways. Elayne only sniffed loudly while struggling to readjust the two large bundles on her back—she *would* have to take everything—but Birgitte strode along pretending to speak under her breath yet quite audibly muttering about women who rushed off like Carpan girls leaping from a river cliff. Nynaeve ignored them equally.

The men spread out, Galad in the lead flanked by Thom and Juilin, the Shienarans in a long file to either side, wary eyes searching every withered bush and fold in the ground. Walking in the middle of them, Nynaeve felt foolish—you would have thought they expected an army to rise up out of the ground; you would have thought she and the other two women were helpless—especially when the Shienarans silently followed Uno's lead and unlimbered their swords. Why, there was not a human being in sight; even the shanty villages appeared abandoned. Galad's blade remained in its scabbard, but Juilin began hefting his thumb-thick staff instead of using it for a walking stick, and knives appeared in Thom's hands and vanished as if he was unconscious of what he was doing. Even Birgitte fitted an arrow to her bow. Nynaeve shook her head. It would take a brave mob to come in eyeshot of this lot.

Then they reached Samara, and she began to wish she had accepted Petra's offer, and the Chavanas', and anyone else's she could have found.

The gates stood open and unguarded, and six black columns of smoke rose above the gray town walls. The streets beyond were still. Shattered glass from broken windows crunched underfoot; that was the only sound except for a distant buzz, like monstrous swarms of wasps scattered through the city. Furniture and bits of clothing littered the paving stones, pots and pottery, things dragged from shops and homes, whether by looters or by people fleeing there was no way to tell.

Not only property had been destroyed. In one place a corpse in a fine green silk coat hung half out of a window, limp and unmoving; in another a fellow garbed in rags dangled by his neck from the eaves of a tinsmith's shop. Sometimes, down a side street or alley, she caught a glimpse of what might have been discarded bundles of old clothes; she knew they were not.

In one doorway, where the splintered door hung crazily by a single hinge, small flames licked up around a wooden staircase, smoke just beginning to trickle out. The street might be empty now, but whoever had done that was not long gone. Head swiveling, trying to watch every way at once, Nynaeve took a firm hold on her belt knife.

Sometimes the angry buzz grew louder, a wordless guttural roar of rage that seemed no more than one street over, and sometimes it faded to a dull murmur; yet when trouble came, it came suddenly and silently. The mass of men stalked around the next corner but one, like a pack of hunting wolves, jamming the street from side to side, soundless but for the thud of boots. The sight of Nynaeve and the others was a torch tossed into a haystack. There was no hesitation; as one they surged forward, howling and rabid, waving pitchforks and swords, axes and clubs, anything that could be taken to hand for a weapon.

Enough anger still clung in Nynaeve for her to embrace *saidar,* and she did it without thinking, even before she saw the glow spring up around Elayne. There were a dozen ways she could halt this mob by herself, a dozen more she could destroy it if she chose. If not for the possibility of Moghedien. She was not sure whether the same thought held Elayne. She only knew that she hung on to her anger and the True Source with equal fervor, and it was Moghedien more than the onrushing rabble that made it hard. She hung on to them, and knew she dared do nothing. Not if there was any other chance. Almost, she wished she could cut the flows being woven by Elayne. There had to be some other chance.

One man, a tall fellow in a ragged red coat that had belonged to someone else once by its green-and-gold embroidery, ran out in front of the others on long legs, shaking a wood-axe overhead. Birgitte’s arrow took him through one eye. He went down in a sprawling heap and was trampled by the others, all contorted faces and wordless screams. Nothing was going to stop them. With a wail, half outrage, half pure fear, Nynaeve jerked her belt knife free and at the same time prepared to channel.

Like a wave striking boulders, the charge splintered on Shienaran steel. The top-knotted men, not much less ragged than those they fought, worked their two-handed swords methodically, craftsmen at their craft, and the onslaught went no farther than their thin line. Men fell screaming for the Prophet, but more scrambled over them. Juilin, the fool, was in that row, flat-topped conical cap perched on his dark head, thin staff a blur that deflected stabs, broke arms and cracked skulls. Thom worked behind the line, his limp strong as he darted from place to place to confront the few who managed to wriggle through; only a dagger in either hand, yet even swordsmen died on those blades. The gleeman’s leathery face was grim, but when one bulky fellow in a blacksmith’s leather vest nearly reached Elayne with his pitchfork, Thom snarled as viciously as any in the mob and very nearly cut the man’s head off while slitting his throat. Through it all Birgitte calmly shifted from spot to spot, every arrow finding an eye.

Yet if they held the mob, it was Galad who broke them. He faced their charge as though awaiting the next dance at a ball, arms folded and unconcerned, not even bothering to bare his blade until they were almost on top of him. Then he did dance, all his grace turned in an instant to fluid death. He did not stand against them; he carved a path into their heart, a clear swath as wide as his sword’s reach. Sometimes five or six men closed in around him with swords and axes and table legs for clubs, but only for the brief time it took them to die. In the end, all their rage, all their thirst for blood, could not face him. It was from him that the first ran, flinging away weapons, and when the rest fled, they divided around him. As they vanished back the way they had come, he stood twenty paces from anyone else, alone among the dead and the groans of the dying.

Nynaeve shivered as he bent to clean his blade on a corpse’s coat. He was graceful, even doing that. He was beautiful, even doing that. She thought she might sick up.

She had no idea how long it had taken. Some of the Shienarans were leaning on their swords, panting. And eyeing Galad with a good deal of respect. Thom was bent over with one hand on his knee, trying to fend Elayne off with the other while telling her he just had to catch his breath. Minutes, an hour; it could have been either.

For once, looking at the injured men lying on the pavement here and there, the one crawling away, she felt no desire to Heal, no pity at all. Not far off was a pitchfork, where someone had flung it; a man’s severed head was impaled on one tine, a woman’s on another. All she felt was queasy, and grateful that it was not her head. That, and cold.

“Thank you,” she said aloud, to no one in particular and to everyone. “Thank you very much.” The words grated a little—she did not like confessing something she had not been able to do for herself—but they were fervent. Then Birgitte nodded in acknowledgment, and Nynaeve had to struggle with herself. But the woman had done as much as anyone.

Considerably more than she herself. She thrust her belt knife back into its sheath. “You . . . shot very well.”

With a wry grin, as if she knew exactly how difficult those words had been, Birgitte set about recovering her arrows. Nynaeve shuddered and tried not to watch.

Most of the Shienarans had wounds, and Thom and Juilin both wore their own blood in places—miraculously, Galad was untouched; or perhaps not so miraculously, remembering how he had handled his sword—but, manlike to the bitter end, every one of them insisted that his hurts were not serious. Even Uno said they had to keep moving, him with one arm hanging and a gash down the side of his face whose scar would nearly mirror the first if it was not Healed soon.

In truth, she was not reluctant to go, despite telling herself that she should be seeing to injuries. Elayne put a supporting arm around Thom; he responded by refusing to lean on her and beginning to recite a tale in High Chant, so flowery it was difficult to recognize the story of Kirukan, the beautiful soldier queen of the Trolloc Wars.

“She had a temper like a boar caught in briars at the best,” Birgitte said softly to no one in particular. “Not at all like anyone close by.”

Nynaeve ground her teeth. Catch her complimenting the woman again, no matter what she did. Come to think of it, any man in the Two Rivers could have shot as well at that range. Any boy.

Rumbles followed them, distant roars from other streets, and often she had the feeling of eyes watching from one of the vacant, glassless windows. But word must have spread, or else the watchers had seen what happened, because they saw no one else living until suddenly two dozen Whitecloaks stepped into the street in front of them, half with drawn bows, the rest with bared blades. The Shienarans’ blades were up in a heartbeat.

Quick words between Galad and a fellow with a grizzled face beneath his conical helmet passed them through, though the man did eye the Shienarans doubtfully, and Thom and Juilin, and for that matter Birgitte. It was enough to rankle Nynaeve. All very well for Elayne to march along with her chin raised, ignoring the Whitecloaks as though they were servants, but Nynaeve did not like being taken for granted.

The river was not far. Beyond a few small stone warehouses under slate roofs, the town’s three stone docks barely reached water over the dried mud. A fat vessel with two masts sat low at the end of one. Nynaeve hoped there would be no problem obtaining separate cabins. She hoped it would not heave too badly.

A small crowd huddled twenty paces from the dock, under the watchful eyes of four white-cloaked guards; nearly a dozen men, mainly old and all ragged and bruised, and twice as many women, most with two or three children clinging to them, some with a babe in arms beside. Two more Whitecloaks stood right at the dock. The children hid their faces in their mothers' skirts, but the adults gazed yearningly at the ship. The sight wrenched at Nynaeve's heart; she remembered the same gazes, many more of them, in Tanchico. People desperately hoping for a way to safety. She had not been able to do anything for those.

Before she could do anything for these, Galad had seized her and Elayne by the arm and hustled them along the dock and down an unsteady gangplank. Six more stern-faced men in white cloaks and burnished mail stood on the deck, watching a cluster of barefoot and mostly bare-chested men squatting in the bluff bows. It was close whether the captain at the foot of the plank gazed at the Whitecloaks more sourly or at the motley party that trooped onto his ship.

Agni Neres was a tall, bony man in a dark coat, with ears that stood out and a dour cast to his narrow face. He paid no mind to the sweat rolling down his cheeks. "You paid me passage for two women. I suppose you want me to take the other wench and the men for free?" Birgitte eyed him dangerously, but he seemed not to see.

"You shall have your fare money, my good captain," Elayne told him coolly.

"As long as it's reasonable," Nynaeve said, and ignored Elayne's sharp glance.

Neres' mouth thinned, though it hardly seemed possible, and he addressed Galad again. "Then if you'll get your men off my craft, I'll sail. I like being here in daylight now less than ever."

"As soon as you take your *other* passengers on," Nynaeve said, nodding to the people huddled ashore.

Neres looked for Galad only to find that he had moved away to speak with the other Whitecloaks, then eyed the folk ashore and spoke to the air above Nynaeve's head. "Any who can pay. Not many in that lot look like they can. And I could not take the lot if they could."

She raised herself on tiptoe, so he could not possibly miss her smile. It snapped his chin down into his collar. “Every last one of them, *Captain.* Else I’ll shave your ears off for you.”

The man’s mouth opened angrily; then abruptly his eyes widened, staring past her. “All right,” he said quickly. “But I expect some sort of payment, mind. I give alms on Firstday, and that’s long past.”

Heels settling back to the deck, she looked over her shoulder suspiciously. Thom, Juilin and Uno stood there, blandly watching her and Neres. As blandly as they could manage with Uno’s features, and blood all over their faces. Far too blandly.

With a sharp sniff, she said, “I will see them all aboard before anybody touches a rope,” and went in search of Galad. She supposed he deserved some thanks. He had thought what he was doing was the right thing. That was the trouble with the best of men. They always thought they were doing the right thing. Still, whatever the three had done, they *had* saved argument.

She found him with Elayne, that handsome face painted with frustration. He brightened at the sight of her. “Nynaeve, I’ve paid your way as far as Boannda. That’s only halfway to Altara, where the Boern runs into the Eldar, but I could not afford to pay further. Captain Neres took every copper in my purse, and I had to borrow besides. The fellow charges ten prices. I’m afraid you will have to make your own way to Caemlyn from there. I truly am sorry.”

“You have done quite enough already,” Elayne put in, her eyes drifting toward the plumes of smoke rising above Samara.

“I gave my promise,” he said with a weary resignation. Plainly they had had the same exchange before Nynaeve came.

Nynaeve managed to offer her thanks, which he dismissed graciously, but with a look as if she, too, did not understand. And she was more than ready to admit as much. He started a war to keep a promise—Elayne was right about that; it would be a war, if it was not already—yet, with his men holding Neres’ ship, he would not demand a better price. It was Neres’ ship, and Neres could charge as he chose. As long as he took Elayne and Nynaeve. It was true: Galad never counted the cost of doing right, not to himself or anyone else.

At the gangplank, he paused, staring at the town as if seeing the future. “Stay clear of Rand al’Thor,” he said bleakly. “He brings destruction. He *will* break the world again before he is done. Stay clear of him." And he was trotting up to the dock, already calling for his armor.

Nynaeve found herself sharing a wondering gaze with Elayne, though it quickly broke up in embarrassment. It was hard to share a moment like that with someone you knew might rake you with her tongue. At least, that was why she felt discomfited; why Elayne should look flustered, she could not imagine, unless the woman was starting to come to her senses. Surely Galad did not suspect they had no intention of going to Caemlyn. Surely not. Men were never that perceptive. She and Elayne did not look at one another again for some time.

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CHAPTER 49

To Boannda

There was little trouble getting the huddled crowd of men, women and children aboard. Not once Nynaeve made it clear to Captain Neres that he *was* going to find room for everyone and whatever *he* thought he was going to charge, *she* knew *exactly* how much she would give for their fares to Boannda. Of course, it might have helped a little that she'd taken the precaution of quietly telling Uno to have the Shienarans do something with their swords. Fifteen hard-faced, rough-dressed men, all with shaved heads and topknots not to mention bloodstains, oiling and sharpening blades, laughing as one recounted how another had almost been spitted like a lamb—well, they had a most salutary effect. She counted the money into his hand, and if it pained her, she only had to summon the memory of those docks at Tanchico to keep counting. Neres was right in one thing: These folk did not look to have much coin; they would need whatever coppers they had. Elayne had no call to ask in that sickly sweet tone if she was having a tooth pulled.

The crew ran at Neres' shouted commands to cast off while the last of the people were still scrambling aboard carrying their wretched possessions in their arms, those who had anything at all beyond the rags on their backs. In truth, they crowded even the fat vessel so that Nynaeve began to wonder whether Neres had been right about that, too. Yet such hope dawned on their faces once their feet were firmly on the deck that she was embarrassed to have considered it. And when they learned she had paid their passage, they clustered around her, struggling to kiss her hands, the hem of her skirt, crying out thanks and blessings, some with tears streaming down dirty cheeks, men as well as women. She wished she could sink through the planks under her feet.

The decks bustled as sweeps went out and sails rose, and Samara began to dwindle behind before she could put an end to the demonstration completely. If Elayne or Birgitte had said one word, she would have thumped them both twice around the ship for good measure.

Five days they were on *Riverserpent,* five days running down the slowly winding Eldar through baking days and nights not much cooler. Some things changed for the better in that time, but the voyage did not begin well.

The first real problem of the trip was Neres' cabin in the stern, the only accommodation on the ship except the deck. Not that Neres was reluctant about moving out. His haste—breeches and coats and shirts flung over his shoulders and dangling from a great wad in his arms, shaving mug clutched in one hand and razor in the other—made Nynaeve look hard at Thom and Juilin and Uno. It was one thing for her to make use of them when she chose to, quite another for them to go *looking after* her behind her back. Their faces could not have been more open, or their eyes more innocent. Elayne brought up another of Lini's sayings. "An open sack hides nothing, and an open door hides little, but an open man is surely hiding something."

But whatever problem the men might prove to be, the problem now was the cabin itself. It smelled of must and mold even with the tiny windows swung out, and they let little light into its dank confines. "Confines" was the word. The cabin was small, smaller than the wagon, and most of the space was taken by a heavy table and high-backed chair fastened to the floor, and the ladder leading up to the deck. A washstand built into the wall, with a grimy pitcher and bowl and a narrow dusty mirror, crowded the room still more, and completed the furnishings except for a few empty shelves and pegs for hanging clothes. The ceiling beams crouched right overhead, even for them. And there was only one bed, wider than what they had been sleeping on, yet hardly wide enough for two. Tall as he was, Neres might as well have lived in a box. The man surely had not given up one inch that might be stuffed with cargo.

"He came to Samara in the night," Elayne muttered, unburdening herself of her bundles and putting hands on hips as she looked around disparagingly, "and he wanted to leave in the night. I heard him tell one of his men that he meant to sail on through the night whatever the . . . the *wenches* . . . wanted. Apparently, he's not much pleased to be moving in daylight."

Thinking of the other woman’s elbows and cold feet, Nynaeve wondered whether she would not have done better to sleep up above with the refugees. “What are you going on about?”

“The man is a smuggler, Nynaeve.”

“In *this* vessel?” Dropping her own bundles, Nynaeve laid the scrip on the table and sat down on the edge of the bed. No, she would not sleep on deck. The cabin might smell, but it could be aired out, and if the bed was cramped, it had a thick feather mattress. The ship *did* roll disturbingly; she might as well have what comfort she could. Elayne could not *chase* her out of there. “It is a *barrel.* We will be lucky to reach Boannda in *two* weeks. The Light alone knows how long to Salidar.” Neither of them really knew how far Salidar was, and it was not yet time to broach the matter with Captain Neres.

“Everything fits. Even the name. *Riverserpent.* What honest trader would name his craft so?”

“Well, what if he is? It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve made use of a smuggler.”

Elayne threw up her hands in exasperation; she always did think obeying the law was important, however fool the law was. She shared more with Galad than she would be willing to admit. So Neres had called them wenches, had he?

The second difficulty was room for the others. *Riverserpent* was not a very large vessel, if wide, and counting everyone there were well over a hundred people aboard. A certain amount of space had to go to the crew working the sweeps and tending ropes and sails, and that did not leave much for the passengers. It did not help that the refugees kept as far from the Shienarans as possible; it seemed they had had their fill of armed men. There was scarcely room for everyone to sit, and none for lying down.

Nynaeve approached Neres straight away. “These folk need more room. Especially the women and children. Since you have no more cabins, your hold will have to do.”

Neres’ face darkened. Staring straight ahead, somewhere a pace to her left, he growled, “My hold is full of valuable cargo. Very valuable cargo.”

“I wonder if customs men are active along the Eldar here?” Elayne said idly, eyeing the tree-lined banks to either side. The river was only a few hundred paces wide here, bordered with dried black mud and bare yellow clay. “Ghealdan to one side and Amadicia to the other. It might seem odd, your hold full of goods from the south and you heading south. Of course, you probably have all the documents showing where you've paid duties. And you could explain that you didn't unload because of the troubles in Samara. I have heard that excise men are quite understanding, really."

The corners of his mouth turning down, he still did not look at either of them.

Which was why he had a very good view when Thom fanned empty hands, made a flourish, and was suddenly twirling a pair of knives through his fingers before making one of them disappear.

"Just keeping in practice," Thom said, scratching one long mustache with the other blade. "I like to maintain certain . . . skills." The gash in his white-haired scalp and the fresh blood on his face, added to a bloodstained rent in one shoulder of his coat and tears elsewhere besides, made him look villainous in any company but Uno's. The Shienaran's toothy smile held no mirth at all, and did unfortunate things to his long scar and the new slash down his face, red and raw. The glaring crimson eye on his patch almost paled in comparison.

Neres shut his eyes and drew a long, long breath.

The hatches came open, and crates and casks went splashing over the side, some heavy, most light and smelling of spices. Neres winced every time the river closed over something else. He brightened—if such a thing could be said of him—when Nynaeve directed that bolts of silk and carpets and bales of fine woolens be left below. Until he realized that she meant them for bedding. If his face had been sour before, now it could have curdled milk in the next room. Through the whole thing he never said a word. When women began drawing up buckets of water on ropes to wash their children right there on the deck, he strode to the stern, hands clenched behind his back, and stared at the few floating casks as they fell behind.

In a way, it was Neres' peculiar attitude toward women that began smoothing the edges from Elayne's acid tongue, and Birgitte's. That was the way Nynaeve saw it; she herself had maintained her usual even disposition, of course. Neres disliked women. The crew spoke quickly when they had to speak to one of the women, all the while darting glances at the captain until they could hurry back to their duties. A fellow who seemed to have nothing to do for a moment was more likely than not to be sent running to some task by a roar from Neres if he exchanged two words with anyone in skirts.

Their hasty comments and muttered warnings made Neres' opinions perfectly clear.

Women cost a man money, they fought like alley cats, and they caused trouble. Any and all trouble a man had could be laid to women, one way or another. Neres expected half of them to be rolling on the deck clawing one another before the first sunset. They would all flirt with his crew, and bring on dissension where they did not cause fights. Could he have sent all women off his ship, forever, he might have been happy. Could he have had them out of his life, he would have been ecstatic.

Nynaeve had never encountered the like. Oh, she had heard men mutter about women and money, as if men did not fling coin about like water—they just had no head for money, less than Elayne—and she had even heard them lay various troubles to women, usually when it was they themselves who had caused all the bother. But she could not recall *ever* meeting a man who truly *disliked* women. It was a surprise to learn that Neres had a wife and a horde of children in Ebou Dar, but no surprise that he stayed at home only long enough to load a new cargo. He did not even want to *talk* to a woman. It was simply amazing. Sometimes Nynaeve found herself looking at him sideways, the way she would have at some incredible animal. Far stranger than *s'redit,* or anything else in Luca's menagerie.

Naturally, there was no way that Elayne or Birgitte could vent their bile where he might hear. Rolling eyes and meaningful looks among Thom and the others were bad enough; they at least made some effort to hide them. Neres' open satisfaction at having his ridiculous expectations met—he surely would have seen it so—that would have been unbearable. He left them no choice but to swallow their acid and smile.

For herself, Nynaeve could have done with a little time with Thom and Uno and Juilin away from Neres' eye. They were forgetting themselves again, forgetting they were supposed to do as they were told. The results did not matter; they should wait. And for some reason they had taken to tormenting Neres with darkly smiling comments about cracking heads and slitting throats. But the only place she could be sure of avoiding Neres was in the cabin. They were not particularly large men, though Thom *was* tall and Uno fairly wide, yet crowded in there, they would have filled the tiny space to where they were looming over her. Hardly conducive to the tongue-lashing she wanted to hand out; give a man the chance to loom, and he had the battle half won. So she put on a pleasant mask, ignored startled frowns from Thom and Juilin, incredulous stares from Uno and Ragan, and enjoyed the outward good temper the other women had been forced to adopt.

She managed to keep smiling when she learned why the sails were so full, the undulating riverbanks rushing by under the afternoon as fast as a trotting horse. Neres had had the sweeps pulled in and stored along the railings; he almost looked happy. Almost. A low clay bluff ran along the Amadicia bank: on the Ghealdan side lay a broad ribbon of reeds between river and trees, mainly brown where water had receded. Samara lay only a few hours upriver.

“You channeled,” she said to Elayne through her teeth. Wiping sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, she resisted the urge to dash it to the slowly heaving deck. The other passengers left a clear space for the two of them and Birgitte a few paces across, but she still kept her voice low, and as affable as she could manage. Her stomach seemed to move a heartbeat behind the ship’s roll; that hardly improved her temper. “This wind is your doing.” She hoped there was enough red fennel in her scrip.

From Elayne’s damply glowing countenance and wide eyes, milk and honey should have fountained from her mouth. “You are turning into a frightened rabbit. Pull yourself together. Samara is *miles* behind us. No one could sense anything useful from that far. She would have to be on the ship with us to know. I was very quick.”

Nynaeve thought her own face might crack if she held her smile any longer, but out of the corner of her eye she could see Neres, studying his passengers and shaking his head. Angry as she was at that moment, she could also see the almost faded residue of the other woman’s weaving. Working weather was like rolling a stone downhill; it tended to keep going the way you started it. When it bounced away from the path, as it would sooner or later, you just had to twitch it back. Moghedien might have felt a weave of that size from Samara—maybe—but certainly not well enough to say where it had been done. She herself was a match for Moghedien in raw strength, and if she was not strong enough to do something, it seemed safe to say the Forsaken was not either. And she did want to travel as quickly as possible; right then, one day more than necessary in close quarters with the other two held as much attraction for her as sharing the cabin with Neres. For that matter, an extra day on water was nothing to look forward to. How could a ship move in such a fashion when the river looked so flat?

Smiling was beginning to make her lips ache. “You should have asked, Elayne. You always go and do things without asking, without thinking. It’s time you realized if you fall into a hole running blindly, your old nurse isn’t going to come pick you up and wash your face.” By the last word, Elayne’s eyes were as round as teacups, and her bared teeth looked ready to bite.

Birgitte put a hand on each of them, leaning close and beaming as though joy had her by the throat. “If you two don’t stop this, I’m going to tip you both into the river to cool off. You are both acting like Shago barmaids with winteritch!”

Sweating faces frozen in amiability, the three women stalked in different directions, just as far apart as the ship would allow. Near sunset Nynaeve heard Ragan say that she and the others must really be relieved to be away from Samara, the way they were all but laughing on one another’s shoulder, and the other men seemed to be thinking much the same, but the rest of the women aboard watched them with faces much too smooth. *They* knew trouble when they saw it.

Yet bit by bit, that trouble oozed away. Nynaeve was not exactly sure how. Perhaps the pleasant exteriors Elayne and Birgitte put on just seeped inside in spite of them. Perhaps the ridiculousness of it all, trying to keep a friendly smile on your face while putting a proper bite into your words, struck them more and more. Whatever did it, she could not complain at the outcome. Slowly, day by day, words and tones began to match faces, and now and then one of them even looked embarrassed, plainly remembering how she had been behaving. Neither spoke one word of apology, of course, which Nynaeve quite understood. Had she been as foolish and vicious as they, she certainly would not want to remind anyone.

The children played a part in restoring Elayne and Birgitte to equilibrium, too, though it actually started with Nynaeve looking after the men’s wounds that first morning on the river. She brought out her scrip full of herbs, making poultices and ointments, bandaging cuts. Those gashes made her angry enough to Heal—sickness and injury always made her angry—and she did so, for some of the worst, though she had to be careful. Wounds vanishing would have set people talking, and the Light knew what Neres would do if he thought he had an Aes Sedai aboard; very likely sneak a man ashore in Amadicia by night and try to have them arrested. For that matter, the news might have sent some of the refugees over the side.

With Uno, for example, she rubbed a touch of stinging mardroot-oil liniment into his heavily bruised shoulder, dabbed a bit of healall ointment on the fresh slash down his face—no point wasting either—and wrapped his head in bandages until he could hardly move his jaw before Healing him. When he gasped and flailed, she said briskly, “Don’t be such a baby. I wouldn’t have thought a little pain would bother a big strong man. Now, you leave those alone; if you even touch them in the next three days, I’ll dose you with something you won’t soon forget.”

He nodded slowly, staring at her so uncertainly that it was plain he did not know what she had done. If he realized when he finally took the bandages off, with luck no one else would remember exactly how bad the gash had been, and he should have sense enough to keep his mouth shut.

Once she began, it was only natural to go on to the rest of the passengers. Few of the refugees lacked bruises and scrapes, and some of the children were showing signs of fevers or worms. Those she could Heal without worry; children always made a fuss when they were dosed with anything that did not taste of honey. If they told their mothers it had felt odd, children always had fancies.

She had never really been comfortable around children. True, she wanted to have Lan’s babies. Part of her did. Children could make a mess from nothing. They seemed to have the habit of doing the opposite of what you told them as soon as your back was turned, just to see how you would react. Yet she found herself smoothing back the dark hair of a boy no higher than her waist who stared up at her owlishly with bright blue eyes. They looked very like Lan’s eyes.

Elayne and Birgitte joined her, just to help keep order at first, but one way or another they gravitated to the children, too. Strangely, Birgitte did not look at all silly with a boy of three or four cradled on either hip and a ring of children about her, singing them a nonsense song about dancing animals. And Elayne handed round a sack of sweet red candies. The Light knew where she had gotten them, or why. She did not look guilty at all when Nynaeve caught her sneaking one into her own mouth; she only grinned, gently pulled a little girl’s thumb from *her* mouth and replaced it with another candy. The children laughed as if just remembering how, and snuggled themselves into Nynaeve’s skirts, or Elayne’s or Birgitte’s, as easily as into their mothers’. It was very difficult to maintain any sort of temper in those circumstances. She could not even bring herself to do more than sniff, and that faintly, when Elayne resumed her study of the *a'dam* in the privacy of the cabin on the second day. The woman seemed more convinced than ever that the bracelet, necklace and leash created a strange form of linking. Nynaeve even sat with her once or twice; the sight of the vile thing itself was enough to enable her to embrace *saidar* and follow along.

The refugees' stories came out, of course. Families separated, lost or dead. Farms and shops and crafts ruined as ripples of the world's troubles spread out, disrupting trade. People could not buy when they could not sell. The Prophet had only been the last brick on the cart that broke the axle. Nynaeve said nothing when she saw Elayne slipping a gold mark to a fellow with thin gray hair who knuckled a wrinkled forehead and tried to kiss her hand. She would learn how fast gold vanished. Besides, Nynaeve had handed out a few coins herself. Well, perhaps more than a few.

All but two of the men were grizzled or balding, with leathery faces and work-callused hands. Younger men had been snatched into the army if they were not caught up by the Prophet; those who refused one or the other had been hanged. The young pair—little more than boys, really; Nynaeve doubted if either had to shave regularly—wore hunted stares, and flinched if one of the Shienarans looked at them. Sometimes the older men talked of starting over, finding a bit of land to farm or taking up their trade again, but the tone of their voices said it was more bluff and bravado than real hope. Mostly they talked quietly of their families; a wife lost, sons and daughters lost, grandchildren lost. They sounded lost. The second night, a jug-eared fellow who had seemed the most enthusiastic in a sad lot had just vanished; he was simply gone when the sun came up. He might have swum ashore. Nynaeve hoped he had.

Still, it was the women who caught her heart. They had no more prospects than the men, no more certainties, but most had more burdens. None had a husband with her, or even knew if she had a husband alive, yet the responsibilities that weighed them down also kept them moving. No woman with grit could give up when she had children. Even the others meant to find some future, though. They all had at least a scrap of the hope the men only pretended to. Three especially tugged at her.

Nicola was about her age and height, a slender dark-haired weaver with big eyes who had been intending to marry. Until her Hyran took it into his head that duty called him to follow the Prophet, to follow the Dragon

Reborn; he would marry her when his duty was seen to. Duty had been very important to Hyran. He would have made a good and conscientious husband and father, so Nicola said. Only, whatever was in his head had not done him much good when someone split it with an axe. Nicola did not know who, or why, just that she had to get as far from the Prophet as she could. Somewhere, there had to be a place where there was no killing, where she would not always be in fear of what might be around the next corner.

Marigan, a few years older, had been plump once, but her frayed brown dress hung on her loosely now, and her blunt face looked beyond weary. Her two sons, six and seven, stared silently at the world with too-big eyes; clinging to each other, they seemed frightened of everything and everyone else, even their own mother. Marigan had dealt in cures and herbs in Samara, though she had some odd ideas about both. That was no wonder, really; a woman who offered healing with Amadicia and Whitecloaks right across the river had to keep low, and even from the first she had had to teach herself. All she had ever wanted to do was cure sickness, and she claimed to have done it well, though she had not been able to save her husband. The five years since his death had been hard, and the coming of the Prophet had certainly not helped her any. Mobs searching for Aes Sedai chased her into hiding after she had cured a man of fever and rumor had turned it into bringing him back from the dead. That was how little most people knew of Aes Sedai; death was beyond the power to Heal. Even Marigan seemed to think it was not. She did not know where she was going any more than Nicola. A village somewhere, she hoped, where she could dispense herbs again in peace.

Areina was the youngest of the three, with steady blue eyes in a face bruised purple and yellow, and not from Ghealdan at all. Her clothes would have said that if nothing else did, a short dark coat and voluminous trousers not much different from Birgitte’s. They were the sum of her possessions. She would not say where she was from exactly, but she was forthcoming about the road that had led her to *Riverserpent.* About some of it; Nynaeve had to infer in places. Areina had gone to Illian meaning to bring her younger brother home before he could take the oath as a Hunter for the Horn. With thousands in the city, however, she had never found him, but somehow she had found herself taking the oath, setting out to see the world while not quite believing the Horn of Valere existed, half hoping that somewhere she would find young Gwil and take him home. Things had been . . . difficult . . . since. Areina was not precisely reluctant to talk, but she made such an effort to put a good face on things. . . . She had been chased out of several villages, robbed once, and beaten several times. Even so, she had no intention of giving up or seeking sanctuary, or a peaceful village. The world was still out there, and Areina meant to wrestle it to the ground. Not that she put it that way, but Nynaeve knew it was what the woman meant.

Nynaeve knew very well why they touched her most, too. Each story could have been the reflection of a thread in her own life. What she did not quite understand was why she liked Areina best. It was her opinion, putting this and that together, that nearly all of Areina's troubles came from having too free a tongue, telling people exactly what she thought. It could hardly be coincidence that she was harried out of one village so quickly she had to leave her horse behind after calling the mayor a pie-faced loon and telling some village women that dry-bones kitchen sweepers had no right to question why she was on the road alone. That was what she admitted to saying. Nynaeve thought a few days of herself for example would do Areina worlds of good. And there had to be something she could do for the other two, as well. She could understand a desire for safety and peace very well.

There was an odd exchange the morning of the second day, while tempers were still tender and tongues—*some* people's tongues!—still rough. Nynaeve said something, quite mildly, about Elayne not being in her mother's palace, so she need not think Nynaeve was going to sleep shoved against the wall every night. Elayne tilted up her chin, but before she could open her mouth, Birgitte blurted, "You are the Daughter-Heir of Andor?" She hardly looked around to make sure no one was close enough to hear.

"I am." Elayne sounded more dignified than Nynaeve remembered in some time, but there was a hint of—could it be satisfaction?

Face completely blank, Birgitte simply turned away, walking up into the bow where she sat on a coil of rope, staring at the river ahead. Elayne frowned after her, then finally went to sit beside her. They sat talking softly for some time. Nynaeve would not have joined them even had she been *asked*! Whatever they discussed, Elayne seemed slightly disgruntled, as if she had expected some other result, but after that there was hardly a cross word between them.

Birgitte resumed her own name later that same day, though it was a last flare of temper that did it. With Moghedien safely behind them, she and Elayne washed the black out of their hair with pokeleaf, and Neres seeing one with red-gold curls about her shoulders and the other yellow-gold in an intricate braid, and that one with bow and quiver, muttered acridly about "Birgitte stepping out of the bloody stories." It was his misfortune that she overheard. That *was* her name, she told him sharply, and if he did not like it, she would pin his ears to either mast he chose. Blindfolded. He stalked off red-faced and shouting for lines to be tightened that could not have been made any tighter without popping.

At that point Nynaeve would not have cared whether Birgitte actually carried out the threat. Pokeleaf might have left a slight reddish cast to her own hair, yet it was close enough to its natural color almost to make her cry for joy. Unless everyone aboard came down with sore gums and toothaches, she had more than enough pokeleaf remaining. And sufficient red fennel to keep her stomach in its place. She could not help sighing in satisfaction once her hair was dry and in a proper braid again.

Of course, with Elayne channeling good winds and Neres running light or dark, thatch-roofed villages and farms sped past on either bank, marked by people waving in the day and lit windows in the night, showing no sign of the turmoil farther upriver. Broad as the misnamed craft was, it made good time, rolling along downriver.

Neres seemed torn between pleasure at his good luck at such winds and worry at moving in daylight. More than once he gazed longingly at a backwater, a tree-shrouded stream or a pool cut deep into the bank where *Riverserpent* might have been moored and hidden. Occasionally Nynaeve remarked where he could hear about how glad he must be that the people from Samara would soon be off his ship, with a comment thrown in about how well this woman was looking now that she was rested or how energetic that woman's children were. That was enough to put ideas of stopping right out of his head. It might have been easier to threaten him with the Shienarans, or Thom and Juilin, but those fellows were getting entirely too bigheaded as it was. And she certainly had no intention of arguing with a man who still would neither look at her nor talk to her.

Gray dawning of the third day saw the crew manning the sweeps again to draw them in to a dock at Boannda. It was a considerable town, larger than Samara, on a point of land where the swift River Boern, coming down from Jehannah, ran into the slower Eldar. There were even three towers inside the tall gray walls, and a building shining white beneath a red tile roof that could certainly pass for a palace, if a small one. As *Riverserpent* was lashed fast to the heavy pilings at the end of one dock—half their length across dried mud—Nynaeve wondered aloud why Neres had gone all the way to Samara when he could have unloaded his goods here.

Elayne nodded toward a stout man on the dock who wore a chain with some sort of seal hanging across his chest. There were several others like him, all with the chain and a blue coat, intently watching two other broad vessels unload at other docks. "Queen Alliandre's excisemen, I should say." Drumming his fingers on the rail, Neres was *not* looking at the men just as intently as they were at the other vessels. "Perhaps he had an arrangement with those in Samara. I don't think he wants to talk to these."

The men and women from Samara marched reluctantly up the gangplank, ignored by the excisemen. There was no custom duty on people. For the Samarans, it was the beginning of uncertainty. They had their lives ahead of them, and to begin anew, what they stood up in and what Nynaeve and Elayne had given them. Before they were halfway down the dock, still huddling together, some of the women were beginning to look as disheartened as the men. Some even began to cry. Vexation painted Elayne's face. She always wanted to take care of everyone. Nynaeve hoped Elayne did not discover that she had slipped a few more silvers to some of the women.

Not all left the ship. Areina remained, and Nicola, and Marigan, tightly clutching her sons, who gazed in anxious silence after the other children vanishing toward the town. The two lads had not said a word since Samara that Nynaeve had heard.

"I want to go with you," Nicola told Nynaeve, unconsciously wringing her hands. "I feel safe near you." Marigan nodded emphatically. Areina said nothing, but she stepped closer to the other two women, making herself part of the group even as she looked levelly at Nynaeve, defying her to send her away.

Thom shook his head slightly, and Juilin grimaced, but it was to Elayne and Birgitte that Nynaeve looked. Elayne did not hesitate in nodding, and the other woman was only a second behind. Gathering her skirts, Nynaeve marched to Neres, standing in the stern.

"I suppose I will have my ship back now," he told the air somewhere between the ship and the dock. "Not beforetime. This voyage has been the worst I ever undertook."

Nynaeve smiled broadly. For once, he did look at her before she was done. Well, he almost did.

It was not as if Neres had much choice. He could hardly appeal to the authorities in Boannda. And if he did not like the fares she offered, well, he had to sail downriver anyway. So *Riverserpent* cast off again, heading for Ebou Dar, with one stop to be made that he was not informed of until Boannda began falling astern.

"Salidar!" he growled, staring over Nynaeve's head. "Salidar's been abandoned since the Whitecloak War. It would take a fool woman to want to be ashore at Salidar."

Even smiling, Nynaeve was angry enough to embrace the Source. Neres roared, slapping at his neck and his hip at the same time. "The horseflies are very bad this time of year," she said sympathetically. Birgitte roared with laughter before they were halfway down the deck.

Standing in the bows, Nynaeve inhaled deeply as Elayne channeled to bring the wind up again and *Riverserpent* lumbered into the strong current flowing out of the Boern. She was all but eating red fennel for meals, but even if she ran out before Salidar, she would not care. Their journey was almost over. Everything she had been through was worth it, for that. Of course, she had not always thought so, and Elayne and Birgitte's rasping tongues had not been the only cause.

That first night, lying on the captain's bed in her shift while a yawning Elayne occupied the chair and Birgitte leaned against the door with her head brushing the beams, Nynaeve had used the twisted stone ring. A single rusty gimbal-mounted lamp gave light, and surprisingly, a scent of spice from the oil; maybe Neres had not liked the stench of must and mold, either. If she was ostentatious about nestling the ring between her breasts—and making sure the others knew it touched skin—well, she had cause. A few hours of superficially reasonable behavior on their parts had not made her less wary.

The Heart of the Stone was exactly as it had been every time before, pale light coming from everywhere and nowhere, the glittering crystal sword *Callandor* thrust into the floorstones beneath the great dome, rows of huge polished redstone columns running off into shadow. And that sensation of being watched that was so common in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. It was all Nynaeve could do not to flee, or set off on a frantic search through the columns. She forced herself to stand in one place beside *Callandor,* counting slowly to one thousand and pausing every hundred to call Egwene's name.

Truly, it was all she could do. The control she was so proud of vanished. Her clothes flickered with her worries about herself and Moghedien, Egwene and Rand and Lan. Between one minute and the next stout Two Rivers woolens became a muffling cloak and deep hood which became a suit of Whitecloak mail which became the red silk dress—only transparent!— which became an ever thicker cloak which became . . . She thought her face changed, too. Once she saw her hands, with skin darker than Juilin's. Perhaps if Moghedien could not recognize her . . .

"Egwene!" The last hoarse call echoed among the columns, and Nynaeve made herself stand there shivering for one more count of one hundred. The great chamber remained empty except for her. Wishing she could feel more regret than haste, she stepped out of the dream . . .

. . . and lay fingering the stone ring on its thong, staring at the thick beams above the bed and listening to the thousand creaks of the ship rushing downriver through the darkness.

"Was she there?" Elayne demanded. "You were not gone very long, but—"

"I am tired of being afraid," Nynaeve said without taking her gaze from the beams. "I am s-so tired of being a c-coward." The last words dissolved into tears she could neither stop nor hide, no matter how she scrubbed at her eyes.

Elayne was there in an instant, holding her and smoothing her hair, and an instant later, Birgitte pressed a cloth dampened in cool water against the back of her neck. She cried herself out to the sound of them telling her she was not a coward.

"If I thought Moghedien was hunting me," Birgitte said finally, "I would run. If there was no other place to hide than a badger's hole, I would wriggle in and curl into a ball and sweat until she was gone. I would not stand in front of one of Cerandin's *s'redit* if it charged, either; and neither is cowardice. You must choose your own time and your own ground, and come at her in the way she least expects. I will take my revenge on her if ever I can, but that is the only way I will. Anything else would be foolish."

That was hardly what Nynaeve wanted to hear, but her tears and their comfort made another gap in the thorny hedges that had grown up between them.

"I will prove to you that you are no coward." Taking the dark wooden box from the shelf where she had put it, Elayne removed the spiral-scribed iron disc. "We will go back together."

That, Nynaeve wanted to hear even less. But there was no way to avoid it, not after they had told her she was not a coward. So back they went.

To the Stone of Tear, where they stared at *Callandor*— better than looking over your shoulder and wondering whether Moghedien was going to appear—then to the Royal Palace in Caemlyn with Elayne leading, and Emond's Field under Nynaeve's guidance. Nynaeve had seen palaces before, with their huge halls and great painted ceilings and marble floors, their gilding and fine carpets and elaborate hangings, but this was where Elayne had grown up. Seeing it, and knowing that, made her understand a little of Elayne. Of course the woman expected the world to bend itself to her; she had grown up being taught that it would, in a place where it did.

Elayne, a pale image of herself because of the *ter'angreal* she was using, was strangely quiet while they were there. But then, Nynaeve was quiet in Emond's Field. For one thing, the village was larger than she remembered, with more thatch-roofed houses and others' wooden frameworks going up. Someone was building a *very* big house just outside the village, three sprawling stories, and a stone plinth five paces high had been erected on the Green, carved all over with names. A good many she recognized; they were mostly Two Rivers names. A flagpole stood to either side of the plinth, one topped by a banner with a red wolf's head, the other one with a red eagle. Everything looked prosperous and happy—as much as she could say, with no people there—but it made no sense. What on earth were those banners? And who would be building such a house?

They flashed to the White Tower, to Elaida's study. Nothing had changed there, except that only half a dozen stools remained in the semicircle in front of Elaida's table. And the triptych of Bonwhin was gone. The painting of Rand remained, with a poorly mended tear in the canvas across Rand's face, as if someone had thrown something at it.

They rifled the papers in the lacquered box with its golden hawks, and those on the Keeper's table in the anteroom. Documents and letters changed while they looked at them, yet they did learn a little. Elaida knew that Rand had crossed the Dragonwall into Cairhien, but of what she intended to do about it, there was no clue. An angry demand that all Aes Sedai return to the Tower immediately unless they had specific orders otherwise from her. Elaida seemed to be angry about a good deal, that so few sisters had returned after her offer of amnesty, that most of the eyes-and-ears in Tarabon were still silent, that Pedron Niall was still calling Whitecloaks back to Amadicia when she did not know why, that Davram Bashere still could not be found despite having an army with him. Fury filled every document over her seal. None of it seemed of real use or interest, except maybe about the Whitecloaks. Not that they should have any difficulty there as long as they were on *Riverserpent.*

When they returned to their bodies on the ship, Elayne was silent as she rose from the chair and replaced the disc in the box. Without thinking, Nynaeve got up to help her out of her dress. Birgitte scrambled up the ladder as they climbed into the bed together in their shifts; she intended to sleep right at the top of the ladder, she said.

Elayne channeled to extinguish the lamp. After a time lying in the dark, she said, “The palace seemed so . . . empty, Nynaeve. It felt so empty.”

Nynaeve did not know what else a place was supposed to be in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* “It was the *ter’angreal* you used. You looked almost foggy to me.”

“Well, I looked just fine to me.” There was only a touch of asperity in Elayne’s voice, though, and they settled down to sleep.

Nynaeve had remembered the other woman’s elbows accurately, but they could not diminish her good mood, and neither could Elayne’s complaining murmur that *she* had cold feet. She had done it. Perhaps forgetting to be afraid was not the same as not being afraid, but at least she had gone back to the World of Dreams. Perhaps one day she could find the nerve again not to be afraid.

Having begun, it was easier to go on than to stop. Every night after that they entered *Tel’aran’rhiod* together, always with a visit to the Tower to see what they could learn. There was not very much, besides an order sending an emissary to Salidar to invite the Aes Sedai there to return to the Tower. Except, the invitation—as much as Nynaeve could read before it changed to a report on screening potential novices for proper attitudes, whatever that was supposed to mean—was more a demand that those Aes Sedai submit to Elaida immediately and be thankful they were allowed to. Still, it was confirmation that they were not chasing a wild hare. The trouble with the rest of what they saw in fragments was they did not know enough to fit them together. Who *was* this Davram Bashere, and why was Elaida so frantic to find him? Why had Elaida forbidden anyone to mention the name of Mazrim Taim, the false Dragon, with a threat of stiff penalties? Why had Queen Tenobia of Saldaea and King Easar of Shienar both written letters politely but stiffly resenting White Tower meddling in their affairs? It all made Elayne murmur one of Lini's sayings: " 'To know two, you must first know one.' " Nynaeve could only agree that it certainly seemed so.

Aside from the trips to Elaida's study, they worked at learning control, of themselves and their surroundings in the World of Dreams. Nynaeve did not mean to let herself be caught again as she had been by Egwene, and by the Wise Ones. Moghedien she tried not to think about. Much better to concentrate on the Wise Ones.

Of Egwene's trick of appearing in their dreams, as she had in Samara, they could puzzle out nothing; calling her did nothing except increase that uneasy feeling of being watched, and she did not make another such appearance. Trying to hold somebody else in *Tel'aran'rhiod* was incredibly frustrating, even after Elayne hit on the trick, which was to see the other as just another part of the dream. Elayne did it finally—and Nynaeve congratulated her with as good grace as she could muster—but for days Nynaeve could not. Elayne might as well have been the near mist she seemed, vanishing with a smile whenever she chose. When Nynaeve finally managed to fasten Elayne there, she felt the strain as if she were picking up a boulder.

Creating fantastical flowers or shapes by thinking of them was much more fun. The effort involved seemed related to both how large the thing was and whether it might really exist. Trees covered with wildly shaped blossoms in red and gold and purple were harder to make than a stand-mirror to examine what you had done to your dress, or what the other woman had done to it. A gleaming crystal palace rising out of the ground was harder still, and even if it felt solid to the touch, it changed whenever the image in your mind wavered and vanished as soon as the image did. They quietly decided to leave animals alone after a peculiar thing—much like a horse with a horn on its nose!— chased them both up a hill before they could make it vanish. That very nearly sparked a new argument, with each of them claiming the other had made it, but by that time Elayne had recovered enough of her old self to start giggling over how they must have looked, racing up the hill with their skirts hauled up, shouting at the thing to go away. Even Elayne's stubborn refusal to admit it had been her fault could not stop Nynaeve's giggles from bubbling up, too.

Elayne alternated between the iron disc and the apparently amber plaque with its carving of a sleeping woman, but she did not really like using either *ter'angreal*. As hard as she worked with them, she did not feel as fully in *Tel'aran'rhiod* as with the ring. And each did have to be worked; it was not possible to tie the flow of Spirit, or you bounced right back out of the World of Dreams immediately. Channeling anything else at the same time seemed all but impossible, yet Elayne could not understand why. She seemed more interested in how they had been made, and not at all pleased that they did not yield their secrets as easily as the *a'dam*. Not knowing the "why" was a burr in her stocking.

Once, Nynaeve tried one of the pair, coincidentally on the night they were to meet Egwene, the night after leaving Boannda. She would not have been angry enough if not for the thing that rubbed her wrong so often. Men.

Neres began it, stumping around the deck as the sun began to sink, muttering to himself about having his cargo *stolen*. She ignored him, of course. Then Thom, making up his bed at the foot of the after mast, said quietly, "He has a point."

It was plain he did not see her in the fading lurid light, and neither did Juilin, squatting beside him. "He's a smuggler, but he did pay for those goods. Nynaeve had no right to seize them."

"A woman's flaming rights are whatever she flaming says they are." Uno laughed. "That's what women in Shienar say, anyway."

That was when they saw her and fell silent, as usual finding wisdom too late. Uno rubbed at his cheek, the one without a scar. He had removed his bandages that day, and he knew now what had been done. She thought he looked embarrassed. It was hard to tell in the fast-shifting shadows, but the other two seemed to have no expression at all.

She did nothing to them, of course, only stalked away with a firm grip on her braid. She even managed to stalk down the ladder. Elayne already had the iron disc in her hand; the dark wooden box sat open on the table. Nynaeve picked up the yellowish plaque carved inside with a sleeping woman; it felt slick and soft, not at all something that would scratch metal. With that edge of anger smoldering inside her, *saidar* was a warm glow just out of sight over her shoulder. “Maybe I can come up with some idea why this thing won’t let you channel anything but dribbles.”

Which was how she found herself in the Heart of the Stone, channeling a flow of Spirit into the plaque, which in *Tel’aran’rhiod* was tucked into her belt pouch. As she often did in the World of Dreams, Elayne wore a gown suitable for her mother’s court, green silk embroidered in gold around the neck, with a necklace and bracelets of gold links and moonstones, but Nynaeve was surprised to discover that she herself had on something not very different, though her hair was in a braid—and its own color—instead of loose about her shoulders. Her gown was pale blue and silver, and if not so low as Luca’s dresses, still lower than she thought she would have chosen. Still, she liked the way the single firedrop on its silver chain looked gleaming between her breasts. Egwene would not find it easy to bully a woman dressed so. Certainly not that that could have had anything to do with why she had donned it, even unconsciously.

Right away she saw what Elayne had meant about looking just fine; to herself, she appeared no different than the other woman, who had the twisted stone ring somehow threaded onto her necklace. Elayne, however, said she looked . . . misty. Misty was how *saidar* felt, too, except for the flow of Spirit she had begun to weave while awake. The rest was thin, and even the never-seen warmth of the True Source seemed muted. Her anger remained just strong enough for her to channel. If irritation at the men faded before the puzzle, that puzzle was its own irritant; steeling herself to confront Egwene had no part in it; she was not steeling herself at all, and there was no reason for the faint taste of boiled catfern and powdered mavinsleaf on her tongue! Yet producing a single flame, dancing in midair, one of the first things a novice was taught, seemed as difficult as throwing Lan over her shoulder. The flame looked attenuated even to her, and as soon as she tied the weave, it began to fade away. In seconds it was gone.

“Both of you?” Amys said. She and Egwene were just there, on the other side of *Callandor*, both in Aiel skirts and blouses and shawls. At least Egwene had not donned so many necklaces and bracelets. “Why do you appear so strange, Nynaeve? Have you learned to come waking?”

Nynaeve gave a little jump. She did so hate people sneaking up on her. “Egwene, how did you—” she began, smoothing her skirts, at the same time that Elayne said, “Egwene, we can’t understand how you—”

Egwene broke in. “Rand and the Aiel have won a great victory at Cairhien.” Out it all came in a torrent, everything she had told them in their dreams, from Sammael to the Seanchan spearhead. Each word almost tripped over the next, and she drove every one home with an intent stare.

Nynaeve exchanged confused glances with Elayne. Surely she *had* told them. They could not have imagined it, not with every word confirmed now. Even Amys, long white hair only emphasizing the not quite Aes Sedai agelessness of her face, looked amazed at the flood.

“*Mat* killed Couladin?” Nynaeve exclaimed at one point. That had certainly not been in their dreams of her. It did not sound like Mat at all. Leading soldiers? *Mat?*

When Egwene finally trailed off, shifting her shawl and breathing a little quickly—she had barely paused for breath along the way—Elayne said weakly, “Is he well?” She sounded as if she was almost beginning to doubt her own memories.

“As well as can be expected,” Amys said. “He drives himself hard, and listens to no one. Except Moiraine.” Amys was not pleased.

“Aviendha is with him almost all the time,” Egwene said. “She is taking good care of him for you.”

Nynaeve doubted that. She did not know much about Aiel, but she suspected that if Amys said “hard,” anyone else would say “murderously.”

Apparently, Elayne agreed. “Then why is she letting him push himself? What is he doing?”

Quite a bit, it turned out, and clearly too much. Two hours each day practicing the sword with Lan or anyone else he could find. That made Amys’ mouth tighten sourly. Two more studying the Aiel way of fighting without weapons. Egwene might find that strange, but Nynaeve was all too aware of how helpless you could be when you could not channel. Still, Rand certainly should never find himself in that position. He had become a king, or something more, surrounded by *Far Dareis Mai* guards, ordering lords and ladies about. In fact, he spent so much time ordering them, and chasing after them to make sure they did what he said, that he would not spare time for meals if the Maidens did not bring him food wherever he was. For some reason, while that seemed to irk Egwene almost as much as it did Elayne, Amys looked distinctly amused, though her face went back to Aiel stoniness once she saw Nynaeve notice. Yet another hour each day was given to a strange school he had founded, inviting not only scholars but craftsmen, from some fellow who made looking glasses to a woman who had constructed some sort of huge crossbow with pulleys that could hurl a spear a mile. He had told no one his purpose there, except maybe Moiraine, but the only answer the Aes Sedai had given Egwene was that the urge to leave something behind was strong in everyone. Moiraine did not seem to care what Rand did.

“What remains of the Shaido are retreating north,” Amys said grimly, “and more slip across the Dragonwall to them every day, but Rand al’Thor seems to have forgotten them. He is sending the spears south, toward Tear. Half are gone already. Rhuarc says he has not even told the chiefs why, and I do not think Rhuarc would lie to me. Moiraine stands closer to Rand al’Thor than any except Aviendha, yet she refuses to ask him.” Shaking her head, she muttered, “Though in her defense, I will say that even Aviendha has learned nothing.”

“The best way to keep a secret is to tell no one,” Elayne told her, which earned her a hard stare. Amys was not far behind Bair when it came to stares that made you shift your feet.

“We aren’t going to reason it out here,” Nynaeve said, fixing her gaze on Egwene. The other woman seemed uneasy. If there was any time to begin redressing the balance between them, it might as well be now. “What I want to know—”

“You are quite right,” Egwene cut in. “We are not in Sheriam’s study, where we can lounge about and chatter. What have you to tell us? Are you still with Master Luca’s menagerie?”

Nynaeve’s breath caught, questions flying right out of her head. There was so much to tell. And so much not to. She claimed she had followed Lanfear to the meeting between the Forsaken, and spoke only of seeing Moghedien spying. Not that she wanted to avoid telling how she had been handled by Moghedien—not really; not exactly—but Birgitte had not released them from their promise of secrecy. Of course, that meant not telling about Birgitte at all, that she was with them. It was awkward, knowing that Egwene knew Brigitte was helping them, and still having to keep pretending that Egwene knew nothing at *all*, but Nynaeve managed despite stammering when Egwene arched her eyebrows. The Light be thanked, Elayne helped her present Samara as Galad and Masema’s fault.

Which it was, in truth. If either had simply sent to tell her about the ship, none of the rest would have followed.

When she finished—with Salidar—Amys said quietly, “You are certain they will support the *Car’a’carn*?”

“They must know the Prophecies of the Dragon as well as Elaida,” Elayne said. “The best way to oppose her is to attach themselves to Rand, and make it clear to the world that *they* intend to support him all the way to Tarmon Gai’don.” Not the slightest quaver in her voice betrayed that she was not speaking of an absolute stranger. “Otherwise, they are just rebels, with no claim to legitimacy. They need him at least as much as he needs them.”

Amys nodded, but not as if she was ready to agree yet.

“I think I remember Masema,” Egwene said. “Hollow eyes and a sour mouth?” Nynaeve nodded. “I can hardly imagine him as any sort of prophet, but I can see him starting a riot or a war. I’m sure Galad only did what he thought was best.” Egwene’s cheeks colored slightly; even the memory of Galad’s face could do that. “Rand will want to know about Masema. And Salidar. If I can make him stand still long enough to listen.”

“I want to know how it happens that you are both here,” Amys said. She listened to their explanation, and turned the plaque over in her hand once Nynaeve fished it out. Having the *ter’angreal* touched by someone else while she was using it made Nynaeve’s skin crawl. “I believe you are less here than Elayne,” the Wise One said finally. “When a Dreamwalker enters the World of Dreams in her sleep, only a tiny bit of her remains with her body, just enough to keep her body alive. If she puts herself into a shallow sleep, where she can be here and also speak to those around her in the waking world, she looks as you do to one who is here fully. Perhaps it is the same. I do not know that I like it, any woman who can channel being able to enter *Tel’aran’rhiod,* even in this state.” She returned the *ter’angreal* to Nynaeve.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Nynaeve hastily tucked the plaque away again. Her stomach was still fluttering.

“If you have told everything . . .” Amys paused while Nynaeve and Elayne hurriedly said that they had. The woman’s blue eyes were incredibly penetrating. “Then we must go. I will admit there is more to be gained from these meetings than I first supposed, but I have much to do yet tonight.” She glanced at Egwene, and they vanished as one.

Nynaeve and Elayne did not hesitate. Around them the great redstone columns changed in a blink to a small, dark-paneled room, its furnishings few, plain and sturdy. Nynaeve's anger had been wavering, and with it her hold on *saidar,* but the Mistress of Novices' study firmed both. Stubbornly defiant indeed! She hoped that Sheriam was in Salidar; it would be a pleasure to face her on an equal footing. Still, she could have wished to be somewhere else. Elayne was peering into the mirror with its flaking gilt frame, nonchalantly adjusting her hair with her hands. Only she had no need to use her hands here. She did not like being in this room either. Why had Egwene suggested meeting here? Elaida's study might not be the most comfortable place to be, but it was better than this.

A moment later, Egwene was there, on the other side of the broad table, eyes icy and hands on her hips as if she was the room's rightful occupant.

Before Nynaeve could open her mouth, Egwene said, "Have you two brainless flaptongues become witless ninnies? If I ask you to keep something to yourselves, do you immediately tell the first person you meet? Did it never occur to you that you don't have to tell everyone everything? I thought you two were good at keeping secrets." Nynaeve's cheeks grew warmer; at least she could not possibly be as scarlet as Elayne. Egwene was not quite finished. "As for how I did it, I can't teach you. You have to be a Dreamwalker. If you can touch somebody's dreams with the ring, I don't know how. And I doubt you can with that other thing. Try to keep your mind on what you're doing. Salidar may be nothing like you expect. Now, I also have things to do tonight. At least *try* to keep your wits about you!" And she was gone so suddenly the last word almost seemed to come from empty air.

Embarrassment ate at Nynaeve's anger. She *had* nearly burst out with it after Egwene asked her not to. And Birgitte: How could you keep a secret when the other woman *knew*? Embarrassment won, and *saidar* slipped away like sand through her fingers.

Nynaeve wakened with a jerk, the deep yellow *ter'angreal* firmly clutched in one hand. The gimbal-mounted lamp was turned down to a dim light. Elayne lay crowded in next to her, still asleep; the ring on its thong had slid down into the hollow of her throat.

Muttering to herself, Nynaeve clambered over the other woman to put away the plaque, then poured a little water into the washbasin to bathe her face and neck. The water was lukewarm, but it felt cool. In the shadowy light, she thought the mirror said she was still blushing. So much for redressing the balance. If only they had met anywhere else. If only she had not flapped her tongue like a brainless girl. It would have gone better if she had been using the ring, instead of being a wraith as far as the other woman was concerned. It was all Thom and Juilin's fault. And Uno's. If they had not made her angry . . . No, it was Neres' fault. He . . . She took the pitcher in both hands and washed her mouth. It was only the taste of sleep she was trying to get rid of. Nothing like boiled catfern and powdered mavinsleaf. Nothing at all.

When she turned from the washstand, Elayne was just sitting up, untying the leather cord that held the ring. "I saw you losing *saidar,* so I went by Elaida's study, but I didn't think I should stay long in case you worried. I didn't learn anything, except that Shemerin is to be arrested and reduced to Accepted." She got up and tucked the ring into the box.

"They can do that? Demote an Aes Sedai?"

"I don't know. I think Elaida is doing anything she wants. Egwene shouldn't wear those Aiel clothes. They are not very becoming."

Nynaeve let out the breath she had been holding. Obviously Elayne wanted to ignore what Egwene had said. Nynaeve was willing to let her. "No, they certainly aren't." Climbing onto the bed, she scrunched over against the wall; they took turns sleeping on the outside.

"I did not even have a chance to send a message to Rand." Elayne got in after, and the lamp winked out. The small windows let in only dribbles of moonlight. "And one to Aviendha. If she is taking care of him for me, then she ought to take care of him."

"He isn't a horse, Elayne. You don't own him."

"I never said I did. How will you feel if Lan takes up with some Cairhienin woman?"

"Don't be silly. Go to sleep." Nynaeve burrowed fiercely into her small pillow. Perhaps she should have sent word to Lan. All those noblewomen, Tairen as well as Cairhienin. Feeding a man honey instead of telling him the truth. He had better not forget who he belonged to.

Below Boannda, woods closed in tightly on both sides of the river, unbroken tangles of trees and vines. Villages and farms vanished. The Eldar might as well have run through wilderness a thousand miles from human habitation. Five days out of Samara, early afternoon found *Riverserpent* anchored in the middle of a bend in the river, while the ship's one boat ferried the remaining passengers to a beach of cracked dry mud bordered by low, forested hills. Even the tall willows and deep-rooted oaks showed some brown leaves.

"There was no need to give the man that necklace," Nynaeve said on the shore, watching the rowboat approach, crowded with four oarsmen, Juilin and the last five Shienarans. She hoped she had not been gullible; Neres had showed her his map of this stretch of the river, pointing out the mark for Salidar two miles from the water, but nothing else indicated there had ever been a village anywhere near here. The forest wall was quite unbroken. "What I paid him was quite enough."

"Not to cover his cargo," Elayne replied. "Just because he's a smuggler doesn't mean *we* have a right to take it from him." Nynaeve wondered whether she had been talking to Juilin. Probably not. It was just the law again. "Besides, yellow opals are gaudy, especially in that setting. Anyway, it was worth it, just to see his face." Elayne giggled abruptly. "He looked at me *this* time." Nynaeve tried not to, but she could not help giggling, too.

Thom was up near the trees, trying to amuse Marigan's two boys by juggling colored balls produced from his sleeves. Jaril and Seve stared at him silently, hardly blinking, and held on to each other. Nynaeve had not really been surprised when Marigan and Nicola asked to accompany her. Nicola might be watching Thom and laughing delightedly now, but she would have spent every moment at Nynaeve's side had the latter allowed it. Areina wanting to come had been something of a shock, though. She was sitting off by herself on a fallen log, watching Birgitte, who was stringing her bow. All three women might be in for a shock when they discovered what was in Salidar. At least Nicola would find her sanctuary, and Marigan might even have a chance to dispense herbs if there were not too many Yellows about.

"Nynaeve, have you thought about . . . how we're going to be received?"

Nynaeve looked at Elayne in astonishment. They had crossed half the world, or near enough, and defeated the Black Ajah twice. Well, they had had help in Tear, but Tanchico had been all their doing. They brought news of Elaida and the Tower she was willing to bet no one in Salidar had. And most importantly, they could help these sisters make contact with Rand.

“Elayne, I won’t say they will greet us as heroes, but it wouldn’t surprise me if they kissed us before today is done.” Rand alone would be worth that.

Two of the barefoot sailors leaped out to hold the rowboat against the current, and Juilin and the Shienarans splashed ashore as the sailors scrambled back aboard. On *Riverserpent* men were already hauling in the anchor.

“Clear us a path, Uno,” Nynaeve said. “I mean to be there before dark.” From the look of the forest, all vines and dusty undergrowth, two miles might take that long. If Neres had not managed to gull her. That worried her more than anything else.

* * *

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CHAPTER

50

To Teach, and Learn

Some four hours later, the sweat running down Nynaeve’s face had very little to do with unseasonable heat, and she was wondering whether it might not have been better if Neres had gulled them. Or refused to carry them beyond Boannda. Late-afternoon sunlight slanted sharply through windows with mostly cracked panes. Clutching her skirts in blended irritation and unease, she tried to avoid looking at the six Aes Sedai grouped around one of the sturdy tables near the wall. Their mouths moved silently as they conferred behind a screen of *saidar.* Elayne had her chin high, her hands folded calmly at her waist, but a tightness about her eyes and the corners of her mouth spoiled her regal air. Nynaeve was not sure she wanted to know what the Aes Sedai were saying; one stunning blow after another had knocked all her high expectations into a daze. One more shock and she thought she might scream, and she did not know whether from fury or pure hysteria.

Very nearly everything except their clothes was laid out on that table, from Birgitte’s silver arrow in front of stout Morvrin to the three *ter’angreal* before Sheriam, to the gilded coffers in front of dark-eyed Myrelle. Not one of the women looked pleased. Carlinya’s face might have been carved from snow, even motherly Anaiya wore a stern mask, and Beonin’s look of constant wide-eyed startlement had a distinctly annoyed cast. Annoyed and something more. Sometimes Beonin made as if to touch the white cloth spread neatly over the *cuendillar* seal, but her hand always stopped and retreated.

Nynaeve’s eyes jerked away from the cloth. She knew exactly when things had begun to go wrong. The Warders who surrounded them in the woods had been proper, if cool—once she made Uno and the Shienarans put up their swords, anyway. And Min’s warm greetings had been all laughter and hugs. But the Aes Sedai and others in the streets, caught up in their own errands, had scurried along with hardly a glance for the party being escorted in. Salidar was quite crowded, with armed men drilling in nearly every open space. The first person aside from the Warders and Min to pay any attention to them at all had been the lean Brown sister they were taken to, in what had once been the common room of this inn. She and Elayne had told the story they had agreed on to Phaedrine Sedai, or tried to. Five minutes into it, they were left standing, with strict orders not to move a foot or speak a word, even to each other. Ten more minutes, staring at one another in confusion, while all around them Accepted and white-clad novices, Warders and servants and soldiers bustled between tables where Aes Sedai pored over papers and briskly handed out orders, and then they had been hustled before Sheriam and the others so quickly Nynaeve did not think her shoes had touched the floor twice. That was when the grilling had begun, more suitable for captured prisoners than returning heroes. Nynaeve dabbed at the perspiration on her face, but as soon as she tucked the handkerchief back up her sleeve, her hands returned to their grip on her skirts.

She and Elayne were not alone standing on the colorful silk carpet. Siuan, in a plain dress of fine blue wool, might have been there by choice if Nynaeve had not known better, her face cool, utterly composed. She seemed lost in untroubled thought. Leane at least watched the Aes Sedai, yet she appeared equally confident. In fact, somehow more self-confident than Nynaeve remembered. The copper-skinned woman looked even more willowy, too, more supple in some fashion. Perhaps it was her scandalous dress. That pale green silk was every bit as high-necked as Siuan’s, but it clung to every curve of her, and the material only managed to be opaque by a thin hair. It was their faces that truly stunned Nynaeve, though. She had never expected to find either alive, and certainly never looking so very young—no more than a few years older than she if that. They did not so much as glance at one another. In truth, she thought she detected a distinct chill between them.

There was another difference about them, one that Nynaeve was just beginning to recognize. If everyone including Min had been ginger about it, no one made any real secret of the fact that they had been stilled. Nynaeve could feel that lack. Perhaps it was being in a room where all the other women could channel, or perhaps it was knowing they had been stilled, but for the first time she was truly conscious of the ability in Elayne and the others. And its absence from Siuan and Leane. Something had been taken from them, cut away. It was like a wound. Perhaps the worst wound a woman could suffer.

Curiosity overcame her. What sort of wound would it be? What had been cut away? She might as well make use of the waiting, and the irritation that larded itself through her nervousness. She reached out to *saidar.* . . .

“Did anyone grant you permission to channel here, Accepted?” Sheriam asked, and Nynaeve gave a start, hurriedly releasing the True Source.

The green-eyed Aes Sedai led the others back to their mismatched chairs, arranged on the carpet in a semicircle that had the four standing women as its focus. Some of them carried things from the table. They sat staring at Nynaeve, earlier emotion swallowed in Aes Sedai calm. None of those ageless faces acknowledged the heat by so much as a single bead of moisture. Finally Anaiya said in a gently chiding voice, “You have been very long from us, child. Whatever you have learned in the interval, you have apparently forgotten much.”

Blushing, Nynaeve curtsied. “Forgive me, Aes Sedai. I did not mean to overstep.” She hoped they thought it was shame that heated her cheeks. She *had* been away from them a long time. Just one day ago, *she* had given the orders and people jumped when she spoke. Now she was the one expected to jump. It galled.

“You tell an interesting . . . story.” Carlinya obviously believed little of it. The White sister turned Birgitte’s silver arrow over in long slender hands. “And you acquired some strange possessions.”

“The Panarch Amathera gave us many gifts, Aes Sedai,” Elayne said. “She seemed to think we saved her throne.” Even delivered in a perfectly level voice, that speech was a walk on thin ice. Nynaeve was not the only one irritated by their fall from freedom. Carlinya’s smooth face tightened.

“You come with disturbing news,” Sheriam said. “And some disturbing . . . things.” Her slightly tilted eyes wandered to the table, to the silvery *a’dam*, and returned firmly to Elayne and Nynaeve. Since learning what it was, what it was for, most of the Aes Sedai had treated it like a live red adder. Most had.

“If the thing does what these children claim,” Morvrin said absently, “we need to study it. And if Elayne really believes she can make a *ter’angreal.* . . .” The Brown sister shook her head. Her real attention was on the flattened stone ring, all flecked and striped in red and blue and brown, that she held in one hand. The other two *ter'angreal* lay on her broad lap. “You say that this came from Verin Sedai? How is it this was never mentioned to us before?” That was not directed at Nynaeve or Elayne, but at Siuan.

Siuan frowned, but not the fierce frown Nynaeve remembered. It held a touch of diffidence, as if she knew she was speaking to her superiors, and so did her voice. That was another change Nynaeve could hardly believe. “Verin never told me of it. I would very much like to ask her a few questions.”

“And *I* have questions about *this*.” Myrelle's olive face darkened as she unfolded a familiar paper—why had they ever kept that?— and read aloud. “ ‘What the bearer does is done at my order and by my authority. Obey, and keep silent, at my command. Siuan Sanche, Watcher of the Seals, Flame of Tar Valon, The Amyrlin Seat.’ ” She crumpled the paper and its seal in her fist. “Hardly something to be handed out to Accepted.”

“At the time, I did not know who I could trust,” Siuan said smoothly. The six Aes Sedai stared at her. “It was within my authority then.” The six Aes Sedai did not blink. Her voice took on a thread of exasperated pleading. “You cannot call me to account for doing what I had to do when I had a perfect right to do it. When the boat's sinking, you plug the hole with what you can find.”

“And why did you not tell us?” Sheriam asked quietly, but with a hint of steel. As Mistress of Novices she had never raised her voice, though sometimes you wished she would. “Three Accepted—Accepted!—sent out of the Tower chasing thirteen full sisters of the Black Ajah. Do you use babies to plug the hole in your boat, Siuan?”

“We are hardly babies,” Nynaeve told her heatedly. “Several of those thirteen are dead, and we thwarted their plans twice. In Tear, we—”

Carlinya cut her off like an icy knife. “You have told us all about Tear, child. And Tanchico. And defeating Moghedien.” Her mouth twisted wryly. She had already said that Nynaeve had been a fool to come within a mile of one of the Forsaken, that she was lucky to have escaped with her life. That Carlinya did not know how right she was—they certainly had not told everything—only made Nynaeve's stomach clench tighter. “You *are* children, and lucky if we decide not to spank you. Now hold your peace until you are called on to speak.” Nynaeve flushed heavily, hoping they took it for embarrassment, and held her peace.

Sheriam had never taken her eyes from Siuan. “Well? Why have you never mentioned sending three children out to hunt lions?”

Siuan drew a deep breath, but folded her hands and ducked her head penitently. “There seemed no point, Aes Sedai, with so much else of importance. I have held nothing back, when there was the faintest reason for telling. Every scrap I knew of the Black Ajah, I told. I’ve not known where these two were or what they were up to for some time. The important thing is that they are here now, and with those three *ter’angreal*. You must realize what it means to have access to Elaida’s study, to her papers, if only in bits. You’d never have known that she knows where you are until it was too late, except for that.”

“We realize that,” Anaiya said, eyeing Morvrin, who was still frowning at the ring. “It is just that perhaps the means of it takes us a little by surprise.”

“Tel’aran’rhiod,” Myrelle breathed. “Why, it has become no more than a matter for scholarly discussion in the Tower, almost a legend. And Aiel Dreamwalkers. Who would have imagined that Aiel Wise Ones could channel, much less this?”

Nynaeve wished they had been able to keep that secret—like Birgitte’s true identity and a few other things they had managed to hold back—but it was difficult to keep things from slipping out when you were being questioned by women who could bore holes in stone with a look when they wanted. Well, she supposed she should be glad they had managed to hang on to what they had. Once *Tel’aran’rhiod* had been mentioned, and that they had entered it, a mouse would have treed cats before these women stopped asking questions.

Leane took a half-step forward, not looking at Siuan. “The *important* thing is that with these *ter’angreal* you can talk to Egwene, and through her to Moiraine. Between them, you can not only keep an eye on Rand al’Thor, you should be able to influence him even in Cairhien.”

“Where he went from the Aiel Waste,” Siuan said, “where I predicted he would be.” If her eyes and words were directed at the Aes Sedai, her astringent tone was plainly meant for Leane, who grunted.

“Much good that did. Two Aes Sedai sent off to the Waste chasing ducks.”

Oh, yes, there was very definitely a chill there.

“Enough, children,” Anaiya said, very much as if they really were children and she a mother used to their petty squabbles. She eyed the other Aes Sedai meaningfully. “It will be a very good thing to be able to talk with Egwene.”

“If these work as claimed,” Morvrin said, bouncing the ring on one palm and fingering the other *ter’angreal* on her lap. The woman would not believe the sky was blue without proof.

Sheriam nodded. “Yes. That will be your first duty, Elayne, Nynaeve. You will have a chance to teach Aes Sedai, showing us how to use them.”

Nynaeve curtsied, baring her teeth; they could take it for a smile if they chose. Teach them? Yes, and never get near the ring, or the others, again after. Elayne’s curtsy was even stiffer, her face a cool mask. Her eyes rolled toward that fool *a’dam* almost longingly.

“The letters-of-rights will be useful,” Carlinya said. With all that White Ajah coolness and logic, testiness still showed in the way she clipped her words. “Gareth Bryne always wants more gold than we have, but with those, we may almost be able to satisfy him.”

“Yes,” Sheriam said. “And we must take most of the coin, too. There are more mouths to feed and more backs to clothe every day, here and elsewhere.”

Elayne gave a gracious nod, just as if they would not take the money whatever she said, but Nynaeve simply waited. Gold and letters-of-rights and even *ter’angreal* were only a part.

“For the rest,” Sheriam went on, “we are agreed that you left the Tower by command, however erroneous it was, and you cannot be held to account for it. Now that you are safely back with us, you will resume your studies.”

Nynaeve only breathed out slowly. It was no more than she had expected since the questioning began. Not that she liked it, but for once no one was going to be able to accuse her of having a temper. Not when in all probability it would do no good.

Elayne, though, burst out with a sharp, “But—!” Just that, before Sheriam cut in just as sharply.

“You will resume your studies. You are both very strong, but you are not Aes Sedai yet.” Those green eyes held them until she was sure they had taken it, and then she spoke again, her voice milder. Milder, but still firm. “You are returned to us, and if Salidar is not the White Tower, you may still consider it so. From what you have told us in the last hour, there is considerably more you have yet to tell." Nynaeve's breath caught, but Sheriam's eyes slid back to the *a'dam*. "A pity you did not bring the Seanchan woman with you. That, you really should have done." For some reason, Elayne blushed bright red, and looked angry at the same time. For herself, Nynaeve was only relieved it was the Seanchan the woman meant. "But Accepted cannot be called to account for not thinking as Aes Sedai," Sheriam went on. "Siuan and Leane will have many questions for you. You will cooperate with them, and answer to the best of your abilities. I trust I do not have to remind you not to take advantage of their present condition. Some Accepted, and even some novices, have thought to lay blame for events, and even take punishments into their own hands." That mild tone became cold steel. "Those young women are now extremely sorry for themselves. Need I say more?"

Nynaeve was no more hasty than Elayne to let her know she did not, which was to say they both almost stammered in their haste to get it out. Nynaeve had not thought of assigning blame—to her thinking, Aes Sedai were all to blame—but she did not want Sheriam angry with her. Realizing that fact drove the truth home bitterly; the days of freedom certainly were gone.

"Good. Now you may take the jewels the Panarch gave you, and the arrow—when there is time, you must tell me why she made you a gift like that—and go. One of the other Accepted will find you places to sleep. Proper dresses may be harder to come by, but they will be found. I expect you to put your . . . adventures . . . behind you, and fit smoothly back into your proper place." Plain although unspoken was the promise that if they did not fit back in smoothly, they would be smoothed until they did. Sheriam gave a satisfied nod when she saw they understood.

Beonin had not said a word since the shield of *saidar* was lowered, but as Nynaeve and Elayne made their curtsies, the Gray sister rose and strode to the table where their things were laid out. "And what of this?" she demanded in heavy Taraboner accents, whipping aside the white cloth that covered the seal on the Dark One's prison. For a change, her large blue-gray eyes looked more angry than startled. "Are there to be no more questions about this? Do you all mean to ignore it?" The black-and-white disc lay there, next to the washleather purse, in a dozen or more pieces, fitted back together as neatly as they could be.

“It was whole when we put it in the purse.” Nynaeve paused to work moisture back into her mouth. As much as her eyes had avoided the covering cloth before, they could not leave the seal now. Leane had smirked when she saw the red dress unwrapped from around its cargo, and said . . . No, she would not run away from it, even in her head! “Why should we have thought to take special care? It’s *cuendillar*!”

“We didn’t look at it,” Elayne said breathlessly, “or touch it more than we had to. It felt filthy, evil.” It no longer did. Carlinya had made them each hold a piece, demanding to know what evil feeling they were talking about.

They had said the same things before, more than once, and no one paid them any heed now.

Sheriam rose and went to stand beside the honey-haired Gray. “We are ignoring nothing, Beonin. Asking these girls more questions will do no good. They have told us what they know.”

“More questions are always good,” Morvrin said, but she had stopped fiddling with the *ter’angreal* to stare at the broken seal as hard as anyone else. It might be *cuendillar*— she and Beonin had each tested it and said it was—yet she had broken one fragment with her hands.

“How many of the seven still hold?” Myrelle asked softly, as if speaking to herself. “How long until the Dark One breaks free, and the Last Battle comes?” Every Aes Sedai did some of almost everything, according to her talents and inclinations, yet each Ajah had its own reason for being. Greens—who called themselves the Battle Ajah—held themselves ready to face new Dreadlords in the Last Battle. There was almost a hint of eagerness in Myrelle’s voice.

“Three,” Anaiya said unsteadily. “Three still hold. If we know everything. Let us pray that we do. Let us pray three are enough.”

“Let us pray those three are stronger than this one,” Morvrin muttered. “*Cuendillar* cannot be broken so, not and *be cuendillar.* It cannot.”

“We will discuss this in due course,” Sheriam said. “After more immediate matters that we can do something about.” Taking the cloth from Beonin, she covered the broken seal once more. “Siuan, Leane, we have reached a decision concerning—” She stopped short as she turned and saw Elayne and Nynaeve. “Were you not told to go?” For all her outward calm, the turmoil inside showed in her forgetting their presence.

Nynaeve was more than ready to drop another curtsy, blurt a hurried “By your leave, Aes Sedai,” and scurry for the door. Without moving a muscle, the Aes Sedai—and Siuan and Leane—watched her and Elayne go. Nynaeve felt their eyes like a shove. Elayne stepped not a whit more slowly, for all she cast another look at the *a'dam.*

Once Nynaeve had the door closed and could lean back against its unpainted wood, clutching the gilded coffer to her breasts, she took her first comfortable breath, or so it seemed, since entering the old stone inn. She did not want to think about the broken seal. Another broken seal. She would not. Those women could shear sheep with their eyes. She could almost look forward to watching their first meeting with the Wise Ones; if she was not likely to be squarely in the middle. It had been more than difficult when she first went to the Tower, learning to do as she was told by others, to bend her neck. After long months when she gave the orders—well, once she had consulted Elayne; usually—she did not know how she was going to learn to pull wool and scratch gravel all over again.

The common room, with its ill-patched plaster ceiling and cold stone fireplaces near collapsing, was the same beehive it had been when she first entered. No one gave her more than a glance now, and she gave them less. A small crowd awaited her and Elayne.

Thom and Juilin, on a rough bench against the flaking plaster wall, had their heads together with Uno, who was squatting in front of them, long sword hilt rising over his shoulder. Areina and Nicola, both staring amazed at everything and trying not to show it, occupied another bench with Marigan, who was watching Birgitte attempt to amuse Jaril and Seve by awkwardly juggling three of Thom's colored wooden balls. Kneeling behind the boys, Min was tickling them, whispering in their ears, but they only clung to each other, silently staring with those too-big eyes.

Only two others in the entire room were not scurrying about. Two of Myrelle's three Warders happened to be leaning against the wall in conversation a few paces beyond the benches, just this side of the door back to the kitchen corridor. Croi Makin, a yellow-haired young splinter of stone from Andor with a fine profile, and Avar Hachami, hawk-nosed and square-chinned with a thick gray-streaked mustache like down-curved horns. No one would call Hachami handsome even before his dark-eyed stare made them swallow. They were not looking at Uno or Thom or anyone else, of course. It was only happenstance that they alone had nothing to do and had chosen just that spot to do it. Of course.

Birgitte dropped one of the balls when she saw Nynaeve and Elayne. “What did you tell them?” she asked quietly, barely glancing at the silver arrow in Elayne’s hand. The quiver hung at her belt; but her bow was propped against the wall.

Moving closer, Nynaeve carefully did not look toward Makin and Hachami. Just as carefully she lowered her voice and was sparing with emphasis. “We told them everything they asked for.”

Elayne touched Birgitte’s arm. “They know you are a good friend who has helped us. You are welcome to stay here, just the same as Areina and Nicola and Marigan.”

Only when some of Birgitte’s tension melted did Nynaeve realize how much had been there. The blue-eyed woman scooped up the fallen yellow ball and smoothly tossed all three back to Thom, who snagged them with one hand and made them vanish in a single motion. She wore the faintest of relieved grins.

“I can’t tell you how glad I am to see the pair of you,” Min said for at least the fourth or fifth time. Her hair was longer than it had been, though still a dark cap around her head, and she looked different in some other way that Nynaeve could not put a finger on. Surprisingly, freshly embroidered flowers climbed the lapels of her coat; she had always worn quite plain clothes before. “A friendly face is rare around here.” Her eyes flickered just a fraction toward the two Warders. “We have to settle down alone and have a long talk. I can’t wait to hear what you’ve been up to since you left Tar Valon.” Or to tell what she had been up to as well, else Nynaeve missed her guess.

“I would like very much to talk to you, too,” Elayne said, quite seriously. Min looked at her, then sighed and nodded, not as eager as a moment before.

Thom and Juilin and Uno came up behind Birgitte and Min, their faces set in that way men took on when they meant to say things they thought a woman might not like to hear. Before they could open their mouths, though, a curly-haired woman in an Accepted’s dress pushed between Juilin and Uno, glowering at them, and planted herself in front of Nynaeve.

Faolain’s dress, with its seven bands of color at the hem for the Ajahs, was not quite as white as it should have been, and her dark face wore a scowl. “I am surprised to see you here, wilder. I thought you had gone running back to your village, and our fine Daughter-Heir to her mother.”

“Are you still souring milk for a hobby, Faolain?” Elayne asked.

Nynaeve kept her face pleasant. Just barely. Twice in the Tower Faolain had been set to teach her something. To put her in her place, was her own opinion. Even when teacher and pupil were both Accepted, the teacher had the status of Aes Sedai so long as the lesson lasted, and Faolain took full advantage. The curly-haired woman had spent eight years as a novice and five more as Accepted; she was not best pleased that Nynaeve had never had to be a novice at all, or that Elayne had worn pure white for less than a year. Two lessons from Faolain, and two trips to Sheriam’s study for Nynaeve, for stubbornness, temper, a list as long as her arm. She made her voice light. “I heard Siuan and Leane have been badly treated by someone. I think Sheriam means to make an example to end it once and for all.” She kept her eyes steady on the other woman’s, and Faolain’s widened in alarm.

“I’ve done nothing since Sheriam—” Faolain’s mouth snapped shut, and her face colored heavily. Min hid her mouth behind her hand, and Faolain jerked her head around, studying the other women, from Birgitte to Marigan. She motioned brusquely to Nicola and Areina. “You two will do, I suppose. Come with me. Now. No dawdling.” They rose slowly, Areina staring warily and Nicola with fingers fretting at the waist of her dress.

Elayne stepped between them and Faolain before Nynaeve could, chin high and eyes imperious blue ice. “What do you want with them?”

“I am obeying Sheriam Sedai’s orders,” Faolain replied. “I myself think they are too old for first testing, but I obey orders. A sister accompanies Lord Bryne’s recruiting parties, testing women even as old as Nynaeve.” Her sudden smile could have come from a viper. “Shall I inform Sheriam Sedai that you disapprove, Elayne? Shall I tell her you won’t let your *retainers* be tested?” Elayne’s chin came down somewhat during that, but of course she could not simply back down. She needed a diversion.

Nynaeve touched Faolain’s shoulder. “Have they found many?”

In spite of herself, the woman’s head turned, and when she glanced back, Elayne was soothing Areina and Nicola, explaining that they would not be hurt, or forced into anything. Nynaeve would not have gone so far. When Aes Sedai found someone with the spark born in her like Elayne or Egwene, someone who would channel eventually whether she wanted to or not, they were quite open about bundling her into training whatever her wishes. They seemed more lenient about those who could be trained but would never touch *saidar* without it, and about wilders, those who had survived the one-in-four chance of teaching themselves, usually without knowing what they had done and often blocked in some way, as Nynaeve was. Supposedly they could choose to come or stay. Nynaeve had chosen to enter the Tower, but she suspected that if she had not, she still would have gone, perhaps even tied hand and foot. Aes Sedai gave women who had the smallest chance of joining them as much choice as a lamb on a feastday.

“Three,” Faolain said after a moment. “All that effort, and they’ve found three. One a wilder.” She truly did not like wilders. “I do not know why they are so eager to find new novices. The novices we have can’t be raised Accepted until we regain the Tower. It is all Siuan Sanche’s fault, her and Leane.” A muscle in her cheek twitched, as if she realized that remark might be thought to harass the former Amyrlin and Keeper, and she seized Areina and Nicola each by an arm. “Come along. I obey orders, and if you’re to be tested, you’ll be tested, waste of time or no waste of time.”

“A nasty woman,” Min murmured, squinting after Faolain as she hurried the other across the common room. “You’d think, if there was any justice, she would have an unpleasant future ahead of her.”

Nynaeve wanted to ask what Min had seen in her viewing of the curly-haired Accepted—there were a hundred questions she wanted to ask her—but Thom and the other two men planted themselves firmly in front of her and Elayne, Juilin and Uno to either side so among the three they could see in every direction. Birgitte was leading Jaril and Seve to their mother, keeping her out of it. Min knew what the men were up to, too, by the rueful look she gave them; she seemed about to say something, but in the end she only shrugged and joined Birgitte.

By Thom’s face, he could have been about to comment on the weather, or ask what was for supper. Nothing important. “This place is full of dangerous fools and dreamers. They think they can depose Elaida. That’s why Gareth Bryne is here. To raise an army for them.”

Juilin’s grin almost split his dark face in two. “Not fools. Madwomen and madmen. I don’t care if Elaida was there the day Logain was born. They’re mad to think they can pull down an Amyrlin sitting in the White Tower from here. We could reach Cairhien in a month, maybe.”

“Ragan and a few of the others already have horses marked out for borrowing.” Uno was grinning, too; it looked incredibly incongruous with that glaring red eye on his patch. “The guards are set to watch for people coming in, not going out. We can lose them in the forest. It'll be dark soon. They'll never find us." The women's donning their Great Serpent rings back by the river had had a remarkable effect on his language. Though he did seem to make up for it when he thought they could not hear.

Nynaeve looked at Elayne, who shook her head slightly. Elayne would put up with anything to be Aes Sedai. And herself? Small chance that they could influence these Aes Sedai to support Rand if they had decided to try controlling him instead. Make that no chance; she might as well be realistic. And yet . . . And yet there was Healing. She would learn nothing of it in Cairhien, but here . . . Not ten paces from her, Therva Maresis, a slender Yellow with a long nose, was methodically ticking off points on a parchment with her pen. A bald-headed Warder with a black beard stood conferring with Nisao Dachen near the door, head and shoulders above her despite being no taller than average, while Dagdara Finchey, as wide as any man in the room and taller than most, addressed a group of novices in front of one of the unlit fireplaces, briskly sending them off one by one on errands. Nisao and Dagdara were Yellow Ajah, too; it was said that Dagdara, her graying hair marking considerable age on an Aes Sedai, knew more of Healing than any two others. It was not as if Nynaeve would be able to do anything useful if she did go to Rand. Just watch him go mad. If she could progress with Healing, maybe she could find a way to hold that madness off. There was too much that Aes Sedai were willing to call hopeless and let go at that to suit her.

All of that flashed through her head in the time it took to look at Elayne and turn back to the men. "We will be staying here. Uno, if you and the others want to go to Rand, you are free to, as far as I'm concerned. I fear I no longer have money to help you." The gold the Aes Sedai had taken was needed just as they said, but she could not help wincing at the few silvers left in her purse. These men had followed her—and Elayne, of course—for all the wrong reasons, but that did not lessen her responsibility for them. Their loyalties were to Rand; they had no reason to enter a struggle for the White Tower. With a glance at the gilded coffer, she added reluctantly, "But I do have some things you can sell along the way."

"You must go, too, Thom," Elayne said. "And you, Juilin. There's no point in remaining. We have no need of you now, but Rand will." She tried to press her casket of jewels into Thom's hands, but he refused to take it.

The three men exchanged looks in that irritating way they had, Uno going so far as to roll his eye. Nynaeve thought she heard Juilin mutter something under his breath about having said they would be stubborn.

"Perhaps in a few days," Thom said.

"A few days," Juilin agreed.

Uno nodded. "I could do with a little rest if I'm going to be running from Warders halfway to Cairhien."

Nynaeve gave them her flattest stare and deliberately tugged her braid. Elayne had her chin as high as it had ever been, her blue eyes haughty enough to chip ice. Thom and the others surely knew the signs by now; their nonsense was not going to be allowed. "If you think you are still following Rand al'Thor's orders to look after us—" Elayne began in frosty tones at the same time that Nynaeve said heatedly, "You promised to do as you were told, and I mean to see—"

"Nothing like that," Thom broke in, brushing back a strand of Elayne's hair with a gnarled finger. "Nothing at all like. Can't an old man with a limp want a little rest?"

"To tell the truth," Juilin said, "I am just staying because Thom owes me money. Dice."

"Do you expect us to steal twenty horses from Warders like falling out of bed?" Uno growled. He seemed to have forgotten just offering to do exactly that.

Elayne stared, at a loss for words, and Nynaeve was having difficulty finding them herself. How far they had fallen. Not so much as a shifted foot in the three of them. The trouble was that she was torn. She had determined to send them away. She had, and not because she didn't want them around watching her curtsy and scrape right and left. Not at all. Yet with almost nothing in Salidar as she had expected, she had to admit, however reluctantly, that it would be . . . comforting . . . to know she and Elayne had more than Birgitte to depend on. Not that she would take up the offer of escape, of course—if that was what it should be called—not under any circumstances. Their presence would just be . . . comforting. Certainly not that she would let them know that. She would not have to, since they were going, whatever they thought. Rand *could* find use for them, very probably, and they would only get in the way here. Except . . .

The unpainted door opened, and Siuan stalked out, followed by Leane. They stared at each other coldly before Leane sniffed and glided away, startlingly sinuous as she vanished around Croi and Avar into the corridor that led to the kitchens. Nynaeve frowned slightly. In the midst of all that iciness there had been one instant, a brief flicker she almost missed with it right in front of her. . . .

Siuan swung toward her, then abruptly stopped short, her face going blank. Someone else had joined the small gathering.

Gareth Bryne, dented breastplate buckled over his plain buff-colored coat and steel-backed gauntlets tucked behind his sword belt, radiated command. Mostly gray hair and a bluff face gave him the appearance of a man who had seen everything, endured everything; a man who could endure anything.

Elayne smiled, nodding graciously. A far cry from her astonished stares, coming into Salidar, when she had first recognized him at the length of the street. “I will not say it is entirely good to see you, Lord Gareth. I have heard of some difficulty between Mother and you, but I am sure it can be mended. You know Mother is hasty sometimes. She will come ’round, and ask you back to your proper place in Caemlyn, you may be certain of it.”

“Done is done, Elayne.” Ignoring her astonishment—Nynaeve doubted anyone who knew Elayne’s rank had ever been so curt to her—he turned to Uno. “Have you thought on what I said? Shienarans are the finest heavy cavalry in the world, and I have lads who are just right for proper training.”

Uno frowned, his one eye sliding to Elayne and Nyfiaeve. Slowly, he nodded. “I’ve nothing better to do. I’ll ask the others.”

Bryne clapped him on the shoulder. “Well enough. And you, Thom Merrilin.” Thom had half turned away at the other man’s approach, knuckling his mustaches and staring at the floor as if to obscure his face. Now he met Bryne’s level stare with one of his own. “I once knew a fellow with a name much like yours,” Bryne said. “A skilled player of a certain game.”

“I once knew a fellow who looked much like you,” Thom replied. “He tried hard to put me in chains. I think he’d have cut my head off if he ever laid hands on me.”

“A long time ago, that would be? Men do strange things for women sometimes.” Bryne glanced at Siuan and shook his head. “Will you join me for a game of stones, Master Merrilin? I sometimes find myself wishing for a man who knows the game well, the way it’s played in lofty circles.”

Thom’s bushy white eyebrows drew down almost as far as Uno’s had, but he never took his eyes from Bryne. “I might play a game or two,” he said finally, “once I know the stakes. As long as you understand I don’t intend to spend the rest of my life playing stones with you. I don’t like staying too long in one place anymore. My feet itch, sometimes.”

“So long as they don’t itch in the middle of a crucial game,” Bryne told him dryly. “The two of you come with me. And don’t expect much sleep. Around here, everything needs doing yesterday, except what should have been done last week.” Pausing, he looked at Siuan again. “My shirts came back only half clean today.” With that he was leading Thom and Uno off. Siuan glared at his back, then shifted her frown to Min, and Min grimaced and darted off the way Leane had gone.

Nynaeve did not understand that last exchange at all. And the nerve of those men, thinking they could talk over her head—or under her nose, or whatever—without her understanding every word. Enough of them, anyway.

“A good thing he has no need for a thief-catcher,” Juilin said, eyeing Siuan sideways, and plainly uncomfortable. He had not gotten over the shock of learning her name; Nynaeve was not sure he had taken in about her being stilled, and no longer the Amyrlin Seat. He certainly shifted his feet for *her.* “This way I can sit and talk. I’ve seen a lot of fellows who look like they might unwind over a mug of ale.”

“He practically ignored me,” Elayne said incredulously. “I don’t care what the trouble is between him and Mother, he has no right. . . . Well, I will tend to Lord Gareth Bryne later. I have to talk to Min, Nynaeve.”

Nynaeve started to follow as Elayne hurried toward that hall to the kitchens—Min would give straight answers—but Siuan caught her arm in an iron grip.

The Siuan Sanche who had meekly ducked her head before those Aes Sedai was gone. No one here wore the shawl. Her voice never rose; it did not need to. She fixed Juilin with a stare that had him almost jumping out of his skin. “You watch what questions you ask, thief-catcher, or you’ll gut yourself for market.” Those cold blue eyes shifted to Birgitte and Marigan. Marigan’s mouth twisted as if she tasted something bad, and even Birgitte blinked. “You two find an Accepted named Theodrin and ask her about somewhere to sleep tonight. Those children look as if they should be in bed already. Well? Move your feet!” Before they had stirred a step—and

Birgitte was moving as quickly as Marigan, maybe quicker—she rounded on Nynaeve. “You, I have questions for. You were told to cooperate, and I suggest you do if you know what’s good for you.”

It was like being caught in a high wind. Before Nynaeve knew it, Siuan was hurrying her up rickety steps with a railing cobbled together from unpainted wood, hustling her down a rough-floored corridor to a tiny room with two cramped beds built into the wall, one above the other. Siuan took the only stool, motioning her to sit on the lower bed. Nynaeve chose to stand, if only to show she was not going to be pushed. There was not much else in the room. A washstand with a brick propping up one leg held a chipped pitcher and basin. A few dresses hung from pegs, and what appeared to be a pallet lay rolled up in one corner. Nynaeve had fallen far in the space of a day, but Siuan had fallen farther than she could imagine. She did not think she would have too much trouble with the woman. Even if Siuan did still have the same eyes.

Siuan sniffed. “Suit yourself, then, girl. The ring. It doesn’t require channeling?”

“No. You heard me tell Sheriam—”

“Anyone can use it? A woman who can’t channel? A man?”

“Possibly a man.” *Ter’angreal* that did not need the Power usually worked for men or women. “For any woman, yes.”

“Then you are going to teach me to use it.”

Nynaeve raised one eyebrow. This might be a lever to get what she wanted. If not, she had another. Maybe. “Do they know about this? All the talk was of showing them how it works. You were never mentioned.”

“They don’t know.” Siuan did not appear shaken at all. She even smiled, and not pleasantly. “And they won’t. Else they’ll learn you and Elayne have been posing as full sisters since you left Tar Valon. Moiraine might be letting Egwene get away with it—if she hasn’t tried it, too, I don’t know a bar knot from a running hitch—but Sheriam, Carlinya . . . ? They’ll have you squealing like a spawning grunter before they’re done. Long before.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Nynaeve realized she was sitting on the edge of the bed. She did not remember sitting down. Thom and Juilin would hold their tongues. No one else knew. She had to talk to Elayne. “We haven’t pretended anything of the sort.”

"Don't lie to me, girl. If I needed confirmation, your eyes gave it. Your stomach is turning somersaults, isn't it?"

It most certainly was. "Of course not. If I teach you anything, it's because I want to." She was not going to let this woman bully her. The last vestige of pity winked out. "*If* I do, I want something in return. To study you and Leane. I want to know if stilling can be Healed."

"It can't," Siuan said flatly. "Now—"

"Anything short of death should be."

" 'Should be' isn't 'is,' girl. Leane and I were promised we would be left alone. Speak to Faolain or Emara if you want to know what happens to anyone who molests us. They weren't the first or the worst, but they cried the longest."

Her other lever. Near panic had driven it right out of her head. If it existed. One glance. "What would Sheriam say if she knew you and Leane weren't ready to tear out each other's hair at all?" Siuan just looked at her. "They think you're tamed, don't they? The more you snap at anybody who can't snap back, the more they take it for proof when you leap to obey every time an Aes Sedai coughs. Was a little cringing all it took to make them forget the two of you had worked hand-in-hand for years? Or did you convince them stilling had changed everything about you, not just your face? When they find out you've been scheming behind their backs, manipulating them, you'll howl louder than any grunter. Whatever *that* is." Not so much as a blink. Siuan was not going to loose her temper and let any admissions slip out. Yet there had been something in that brief look; Nynaeve was sure of it. "I want to study you—and Leane—whenever I want. And Logain." Perhaps she could learn something there as well. Men were different; it would be like looking at the problem from another angle. Not that she would Heal him even if she discovered how. Rand's channeling was necessary. She was not about to loose another man on the world who could wield the Power. "If not, then you can forget about the ring, and *Tel'aran'rhiod*." What was Siuan after there? Probably just to revisit something that at least seemed like being Aes Sedai. Nynaeve stamped firmly on momentarily rekindled pity. "And if you make any claims about us pretending to be Aes Sedai, then I'll have no choice but to tell about you and Leane. Elayne and I might be uncomfortable until the truth comes out, but it will, and the truth will make you weep as long as Faolain and Emara together."

Silence stretched. How did the other woman manage to look so cool? Nynaeve had always thought it had to do with being Aes Sedai. Her lips felt dry, the only part of her that did. If she was wrong, if Siuan was willing to put it to the test, she knew who would be weeping.

Finally, Siuan muttered, “I hope Moiraine has managed to keep Egwene’s backbone more supple than this.” Nynaeve did not understand, but she hardly had time to consider it. The next instant, the other woman was leaning forward, hand outstretched. “You keep my secrets, and I will keep yours. Teach me the ring, and you can study stilling and gentling to your heart’s content.”

Nynaeve barely managed to hold in a relieved sigh as she clasped the offered hand. She had done it. For the first time in what seemed forever, someone had tried to bully her and failed. She almost felt ready to face Moghedien. Almost.

Elayne caught up with Min just outside the back door of the inn and fell in beside her. Min had what looked like two or three white shirts wadded under one arm. The sun sat on the treetops, and in the fading light the stableyard had the soft look of dirt not long turned, with a huge stump that might have belonged to an oak right in the middle. The thatch-roofed stone stable had no doors, allowing a good look at men moving among filled stalls. Surprisingly, Leane was talking to a large man on the edge of the stable’s shadow. Roughly dressed, he looked a blacksmith, or a brawler. What was surprising was how close Leane stood, head tilted as she stared up at him. And then she actually patted his cheek before turning away and hurrying back into the inn. The big man stared after her a moment, then melted into the shadows.

“Don’t ask me what she’s up, to,” Min said. “Strange people come to see Siuan or her, and some of the men, she . . . Well, you saw.”

Elayne did not really care what Leane did. But now that she had Min alone, she did not know how to bring up what she wanted. “What are you doing?”

“Laundry,” Min muttered, shifting the shirts irritably. “I can’t tell you how good it is to see Siuan the mouse for once. She doesn’t know whether the eagle is going to eat her or make her a pet, but she has the same choice she gives everybody else. None!”

Elayne quickened her pace to keep up as they crossed the stableyard. Whatever that was about, it gave no opening. “Did you know what Thom was going to suggest? We are staying.”

“I told them you would. Not a viewing.” Min’s step slowed again as they started between the stable and a crumbling stone wall, down a dim alley of brush stubble and trampled weeds. “I just didn’t think you would give up the chance to study again. You were always eager. Nynaeve, too, even if she won’t admit it. I wish I’d been wrong. I’d go with you. At least, I . . .” She muttered something furious-sounding under her breath. “Those three you brought with you are trouble, and that *is* a viewing.”

There it was. The crack she needed. But instead of asking what she had intended, she said, “You mean Marigan and Nicola and Areina? How can they be trouble?” Only a fool passed over what Min saw.

“I don’t know exactly. I only caught glimpses of aura, and just out of the corner of my eye. Never when I was looking right at them, where I might have made something out. There aren’t many who have auras all the time, you know. Trouble. Maybe they’ll carry tales. Were you up to anything you wouldn’t want the Aes Sedai to know about?”

“Certainly not,” Elayne said briskly. Min looked at her sideways, and she added, “Well, nothing we didn’t have to do. They can’t possibly know about it anyway.” This was not taking her where she wanted to go. Drawing a deep breath, she leaped off the cliff. “Min, you had a viewing about Rand and me, didn’t you?” She went two steps before she realized the other woman had stopped.

“Yes.” It was a wary word.

“You saw that we were going to fall in love.”

“Not exactly. I saw you’d fall in love with him. I don’t know what he feels for you, only that he’s tied to you some way.”

Elayne’s mouth tightened. That was about what she had expected, but not what she wanted to hear. *“Wish” and “want” trip the feet, but “is” makes the path smoother.* That was what Lini said. You had to deal with what was, not what you wished was. “And you saw there would be someone else. Someone I’d have to . . . share . . . him with.”

“Two,” Min said hoarsely. “Two others. And . . . And I’m one.”

Mouth already open for the next question, for a moment Elayne could only stare. “You?” she got out at last.

Min bristled. “Yes, me! Do you think I can’t fall in love? I didn’t want to, but I did, and that’s that.” She stalked past Elayne down the alleyway, and this time Elayne was slower to catch up.

It certainly explained a few things. How nervously Min had always sidestepped talking about it. The embroidery on her lapels. And unless she was imagining it, Min was wearing rouge, too. *How do I feel about it?* she wondered. She could not sort it out. “Who is the third?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Min mumbled. “Only that she has a temper. Not Nynaeve, thank the Light.” She gave a weak laugh. “I don’t think I could have survived that.” Once more she gave Elayne a cautious sidelong look. “What does this mean between you and me? I like you. I never had a sister, but sometimes I feel like you. . . . I want to be your friend, Elayne, and I won’t stop liking you whatever happens, but I can’t stop loving him.”

“I don’t very much like the idea of having to share a man,” Elayne said stiffly. That was certainly an understatement.

“Me, neither. Only . . . Elayne, it shames me to admit it, but I will take him any way I can get him. Not that either of us has much choice. Light, he’s scrambled my whole life. Just thinking about him scrambles my brains.” Min sounded as if she did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Elayne exhaled slowly. Not Min’s fault. Was it better that it was Min rather than, say, Berelain or somebody else she could not abide? *“Ta’veren,”* she said. “He bends the world around him. We are chips caught in a whirlpool. But I seem to recall you and me and Egwene saying we’d never let a man come between us being friends. We will work it out somehow, Min. And when we find out who the third is . . . Well, we’ll work that out, as well. Somehow.” A *third!* Could *she* be Berelain? *Oh, blood and ashes!*

“Somehow,” Min said bleakly. “Meanwhile, you and I are caught here in a leg trap. I know there’s another, I know I can’t do anything about it, but I had enough trouble reconciling myself to you, and . . . Cairhienin women aren’t all like Moiraine. I saw a Cairhienin noblewoman in Baerlon once. On the surface, she made Moiraine look like Leane, but sometimes she said things, hinting. And her auras! I don’t think a man in the whole town was safe alone with her, not unless he was ugly, lame, and better yet, dead.”

Elayne sniffed, but she managed to make her voice light. “Never you mind about that. We have another sister, you and I, one you’ve never met. Aviendha is keeping a close eye on Rand, and he doesn’t go ten steps without a guard of Aiel Maidens of the Spear.” A Cairhienin woman? At least she had met Berelain, knew something of her. No. She was not going to fret over it like some brainless girl. A grown woman dealt with the world as it was and made the best of it. Who could it be?

They had come out into an open yard dotted with cold ashes. Huge kettles, most pitted where rust had been scrubbed away, stood against the encircling stone wall, which had been toppled in several places by trees growing up in it. Despite the shadows crossing the yard, two steaming kettles still sat on flames, and three novices, hair sweat-soaked and white skirts tied up, were hard at work on scrub boards stuck into broad washpots full of soapy water.

With a glance at the shirts under Min’s arm, Elayne embraced *saidar*. “Let me help you with those.” Channeling to do assigned chores was forbidden—physical labor built character, so they said—but this could not be counted the same. If she swirled the shirts around in the water violently enough, there should be no reason to get their hands wet. “Tell me everything. Are Siuan and Leane as changed as they seem? How did you get here? Is Logain *really* here? And why are you laundering some man’s shirts? Everything.”

Min laughed, plainly pleased to change the subject. “ ‘Everything’ will take a week. But I’ll try. First, I helped Siuan and Leane get out of the dungeon Elaida had stuck them in, and then . . .”

Making appropriate sounds of amazement, Elayne channeled Air to lift one of the boiling kettles clear of its flames. She hardly noticed the novices’ incredulous stares; she was used to her own strength now, and it rarely occurred to her that she did things, without thinking, that some full Aes Sedai could not do at all. Who was the third woman? Aviendha had *better* be keeping a close eye on him.

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CHAPTER

51

News Comes to Cairhien

A thin thread of blue smoke rising from the plain, short-stemmed pipe clenched in his teeth, Rand rested one hand on the balcony's stone railing and looked into the garden below. Sharp shadows were lengthening; the sun was a red ball falling through a cloudless sky. Ten days in Cairhien, and this seemed the first moment he had stood still when he was not asleep. Selande stood close by his side, pale face tilted up to watch him, not the garden. Her hair was not so elaborately done as that of a woman of higher rank, but it still added half a foot to her height. He tried to ignore her, but it was difficult to ignore a woman who insisted on pressing her firm bosom against your arm. The meeting had gone on long enough for him to want a moment's break. He had known it for a mistake as soon as Selande followed him out.

"I know a secluded pool," she said softly, "where this heat might be escaped. A sheltered pool, where nothing would disturb us." The music of Asmodean's harp drifted out through the square arches behind them. Something light, cool sounding.

Rand puffed a little more vigorously. The heat. Nothing compared to the Waste, but . . . Autumn should be coming on, yet the afternoon felt like the depths of summer. A rainless summer. Shirt-sleeved men in the garden were spreading water from buckets, doing it late to avoid evaporation, but too much was brown or dying. The weather could not be natural. The burning sun mocked him. Moiraine agreed, and Asmodean, but neither knew what to do or how, any more than he did. Sammael. Sammael he could do something about.

"Cool water," Selande murmured, "and you and I alone." She snuggled closer, though he did not see how it was possible.

He wondered when the next taunt would come. No dashing off in a temper, whatever Sammael did. Once his methodical buildup in Tear was done, then he would loose the lightning. One crushing stroke to put an end to Sammael, and add Illian to his bag at the same time. With Illian, Tear and Cairhien, plus an army of Aiel big enough to overwhelm any nation in weeks, he . . .

“Would you not like to swim? I do not swim well myself, but surely you will teach me.”

Rand sighed. For a moment he wished Aviendha was there. No. The last thing he wanted was a bruised Selande running screaming with her clothes half torn off.

Hooding his eyes, he looked down at her and spoke quietly around his pipe. “I can channel.” She blinked, drawing back without moving a muscle. They never understood why he would bring that up; for them it was something to be glossed over, ignored if possible. “They say I’ll go mad. But I’m not mad yet. Not yet.” He chuckled from deep in his chest, then cut it off abruptly, made his face blank. “Teach you to swim? I’ll hold you up in the water with the Power. *Saidin* is tainted, you know. The Dark One’s touch. You won’t feel it, though. All around you, but you’ll not feel a thing.” Another chuckle, with a hint of a wheeze. Her dark eyes were as wide and round as they would go, her smile a sickly rictus. “Later, then. I want to be alone, to think about . . .” He bent as if to kiss her, and with a squeak, she dropped a curtsy so sudden that at first he thought her legs had collapsed.

Backing away, curtsying hurriedly at every other step, she babbled about the honor of serving him, her deepest wish to serve him, all in a voice on the brink of hysteria, until she bumped into one of the square arches. A final, half-bend of her knees, and she darted inside.

With a grimace, he turned back to the railing. Frightening women. She would have made excuses had he asked her to leave him, would have taken a command as only a temporary setback unless it was to stay out of his sight, and even then. . . . Maybe word would spread this time. He had to keep a short rein on his temper; it ran away too easily of late. It was the drought he could do nothing about, the problems that sprang up like weeds wherever he looked. A few moments more alone with his pipe. Who would rule a nation when he could have easier work, such as carrying water uphill in a sieve?

Across the garden, between two of the Royal Palace’s stepped towers, he had a view of Cairhien, harshly lit and shadowed, mastering the hills more than flowing over them. His crimson flag with the ancient Aes Sedai symbol hung limply above one of those two towers, a long copy of the Dragon Banner over the other. That one flew a dozen places in the city, including the tallest of the great unfinished towers, right in front of him. Shouting had done as little as orders there; neither Tairens nor Cairhienin could believe he really meant that he only wanted one, and Aiel did not care about banners one way or another.

Even now, deep inside the palace, he could hear the murmur of a city jammed to bursting. Refugees from every corner of the land, more afraid to return to their homes than they were to have the Dragon Reborn in their midst. Merchants seeping in, selling whatever people could afford to buy and buying whatever people could not afford to keep. Lords and armed men rallying to his banner, or to someone’s. Hunters for the Horn thinking it must be found near him; a dozen Foregaters, or a hundred, were ready to sell it to any of them. Ogier stonemasons down from Stedding Tsofu to see if there was work for their fabled skills. Adventurers, some of whom might have been bandits a week gone, come to see what they could pick up. There had even been a hundred or so Whitecloaks, though they had galloped out as soon as it was clear the siege had been lifted. Did Pedron Niall’s ingathering of the Whitecloaks concern him? Egwene gave him hints of things, but she saw matters from the White Tower, wherever she stood. The Aes Sedai point of view was not his.

At least the wagon trains full of grain were beginning to arrive from Tear with some regularity. Hungry people could riot. He wished he could have simply left it at being glad they were not so hungry anymore, but there it was. The bandits were fewer. And the civil war had not resumed. Yet. More good news. He had to make certain it stayed that way before he could leave. A hundred things to take care of before he could go after Sammael. Only Rhuarc and Bael remained of the chiefs he really trusted, those who had marched from Rhuidean with him. But if the four clans who had joined him late could not be trusted on the march to Tear, could he trust them loose in Cairhien? Indirian and the others had acknowledged him as *Car’a’carn*, but they knew him as little as he knew them. The message that morning might be a problem. Berelain, First of Mayene, was only a few hundred miles south of the city, on her way to join him with a small army; he had no idea how she had led it across Tear. Oddly, her letter had asked if Perrin was with him. No doubt she feared Rand might forget her small country if she did not remind him. It might almost be a pleasure to watch her spar with the Cairhienin, the latest in a long line of Firsts who had managed to keep Tear from swallowing their country by playing the Game of Houses. Perhaps if he put her in charge here . . . He would be taking Meilan and the other Tairens with him when the time came. If it ever came.

This was no better than what was waiting inside. Tapping the dottle from his pipe, he ground out the tabac's last sparks under his boot. No need to risk fire to the garden; it would go up like a torch. The drought. The unnatural weather. He realized he was snarling silently. First work on what he knew he could do something about. It took an effort to smooth his face before he went in.

Asmodean, as well dressed as any lord, with falls of lace at his neck, plucked a soothing melody from his harp in one corner, leaning against the dark severe paneling as if lounging at his leisure. The others who were sitting bobbed out of their chairs at Rand's appearance, and back down at his sharp gesture. Meilan, Torean and Aracome occupied carved-and-gilded chairs on one side of the deep red and gold carpet, each with a young Tairen lord at his back, mirroring the Cairhienin on the other side. Dobraine and Maringil had a young lord apiece behind them, too, each with the front of his head shaved and powdered like Dobraine's. A white-faced Selande stood at Colavaere's shoulder, and trembled when Rand looked at her.

Schooling his face, he strode down the carpet to his own chair. That chair alone was reason to control his features. It was a new gift from Colavaere and the other two, in what they imagined was the Tairen style. He must like Tairen gaudiness; he ruled Tear, had sent them here. Carved Dragons held it up, all sparkling red and gold with enamel and gilt, and great sunstones for their golden eyes. Two more made the arms, and others climbed the tall back. Countless craftsmen must have gone without sleep since his arrival to make the thing. He felt like a fool sitting on it. Asmodean's music had changed; it had a grand sound, now, a triumphal march.

And yet, there was an added wariness in those dark Cairhienin eyes watching him, a wariness reflected in the Tairens. It had been there before he went outside, too. Perhaps in attempting to curry favor they had made a mistake that was only now dawning on them. They had all tried to ignore who he was, pretend he was simply some young lord who had conquered them, who could be dealt with and manipulated. That chair—that throne—held up in front of them who and what he really was.

“Are the soldiers moving on schedule, Lord Dobraine?” The harp faded away as soon as he opened his mouth, Asmodean apparently absorbed in preening it.

The leathery man smiled grimly. “They are, my Lord Dragon.” No more than that. Rand had no illusions that Dobraine liked him more than any of the others did, or that he would not try to gain advantage where he could, but Dobraine actually seemed ready to hold to the oath he had sworn. The colorful slashes down the chest of his coat were worn from a breastplate being buckled over them.

Maringil shifted forward on his chair, whip-slender and tall for a Cairhienin, white hair almost touching his shoulders. His forehead was not shaved, and his coat, stripes nearly to his knees, bore no visible wear. “We need those men here, my Lord Dragon.” Hawk’s eyes blinked at the gilded throne, focused on Rand again. “There are many bandits at large in the land yet.” He shifted again, so he did not have to look at the Tairens. Meilan and the other two were smiling faintly.

“I have set Aiel to hunting bandits,” Rand said. They did have orders to sweep up any brigands in their path. And to not go out of their way to find them. Even Aiel could not do that and move quickly. “I’m told that three days ago, Stone Dogs killed nearly two hundred near Morelle.” That was near the southernmost line claimed by Cairhien in recent years, halfway to the River Iralell. No need to let this lot know that those Aiel might be as far as the river by now. They could cover long distances faster than horses.

Maringil persisted, frowning uneasily. “There is another reason. Half of our land west of the Alguenya is in the hands of Andor.” He hesitated. They all knew Rand had grown up in Andor; a dozen rumors made him a son of one Andoran House or another, even a son of Morgase herself, either cast off because he could channel or fled before he could be gentled. The slender man went on as if tiptoeing barefoot and blindfolded among daggers. “Morgase does not seem to be reaching for more as yet, but what she has already must be taken back. Her heralds have even proclaimed her right to the—” He stopped abruptly. None of them knew who Rand meant the Sun Throne for. Maybe it was Morgase.

Colavaere's dark gaze had Rand on balance scales again; she had said little today. She would not until she learned why Selande's face was so white.

Suddenly Rand was tired, of nobles balking, of all the manueyering in *Daes Dae'mar*. "Andoran claims to Cairhien will be taken care of when I am ready. Those soldiers will go to Tear. You will follow the High Lord Meilan's good example of obedience, and I'll hear no more on it." He swung toward the Tairens. "Your example is a good one, Meilan, isn't it? And yours, Aracome? If I ride out tomorrow, I won't find a thousand Defenders of the Stone camped ten miles south who were supposed to be on their way back to Tear two days ago, will I? Or two thousand armsmen from Tairen Houses?"

Those faint smiles faded with each word. Meilan became very still, dark eyes glittering, and Aracome's narrow face went pale, whether from anger or fear it was hard to say. Torean dabbed at his lumpy face with a silk handkerchief pulled from his sleeve. Rand ruled in Tear, and meant to rule; *Callandor* driven into the Heart of the Stone proved that. That was why they had not protested against his sending Tairen soldiers to Cairhien. They thought to carve new estates, perhaps kingdoms, here, far from where he ruled.

"You will not, my Lord Dragon," Meilan said finally. "Tomorrow I will ride with you so you may see for yourself."

Rand did not doubt it. A rider would be dispatched south as soon as the man could arrange it, and by tomorrow those soldiers would be far on toward Tear. It would do. For now. "I am done, then. You may leave me."

A few starts of surprise, masked so quickly they might have been imagined, and they were rising, bowing and curtsying, Selande and the young lords backing away. They had expected more. An audience with the Dragon Reborn was always long, and tortuous as they saw it, with him firmly bending them the way he meant them to go, whether it was declaring that no Tairen could claim lands in Cairhien without marrying into a Cairhienin House, or refusing to allow the expulsion of Foregaters, or making laws apply to nobles that had never applied to any but commoners before.

His eyes followed Selande for a moment. She was not the first in the last ten days. Nor the tenth, or even the twentieth. He had been tempted, at least at first. When he rejected slender, plump promptly replaced her, as tall or dark, for Cairhienin anyway, replaced short or fair. A constant search for the woman who would please him. The Maidens turned back those who tried to sneak into his quarters at night, firmly but more gently than Aviendha had handled the one she caught. Aviendha apparently took Elayne's ownership of him with little short of deadly seriousness. Yet her Aiel sense of humor seemed to find tormenting him very satisfying; he had seen the satisfaction on her face when he groaned and hid his face as she started undressing for the night. Thus he could have resented her deadly seriousness if he had not quickly understood what was behind that string of pretty young women.

"My Lady Colavaere."

She stopped as soon as he spoke her name, cool-eyed and calm beneath her ornate tower of dark curls. Selande had no choice but to remain with her, though she was plainly as reluctant to stay as the others were to go. Meilan and Maringil bowed themselves out last, so intent on Colavaere and trying to puzzle out why she had been called to stay that they did not realize they were side by side. Their eyes were a perfect match, dark and predatory.

The dark-paneled door closed. "Selande is very pretty young woman," Rand said. "But some prefer the company of a more mature . . . more knowledgeable . . . woman. You will sup alone with me tonight, when Second Even is rung. I look forward to the pleasure." He waved her away before she could say anything, if she could have. Her face did not change, but her curtsy was a trifle unsteady. Selande looked purely amazed. And infinitely relieved.

Once the door had closed again, behind the two women, Rand threw back his head and laughed. A harsh, sardonic laugh. He was tired of the Game of Houses, so he played it without thinking. He was disgusted with himself for frightening one woman, so he frightened another. It was reason enough to laugh. Colavaere stood behind that line of young women who had been flinging themselves at him. Find a bedpartner for the Lord Dragon, a young woman whose strings she pulled, and Colavaere would have a string tied firmly to Rand. But it was some other woman she meant to bed, and perhaps even marry, the Dragon Reborn. Now she would sweat all the hours until Second Even. She had to know she was pretty, if short of beautiful, and if he rebuffed all the young women she sent, perhaps it was because he wanted one with another fifteen or so years. And she would be certain she did not dare say no to the man who held Cairhien in his fist. By tonight, she should be amenable, should stop this idiocy. Aviendha would very likely slit the throat of any woman she found in his bed; besides, he had no time for all these easily frightened doves thinking to sacrifice themselves for Cairhien and Colavaere, There were too many problems to deal with, and no time.

Light, what if Colavaere decides it's worth the sacrifice? She might. She was easily cold-blooded enough. *Then I'll have to see that it's cold with fear.* It would not be difficult. He could sense *saidin* like something just beyond the edge of sight. He could feel the taint on it. Sometimes he thought that what he felt was the taint in him, now, the dregs left by *saidin*.

He found that he was glaring at Asmodean. The man seemed to be studying him, face expressionless. The music resumed again, like water babbling over stones, soothing. So he needed soothing, did he?

The door opened without a knock, admitting Moiraine, Egwene and Aviendha together, the younger women's Aiel garb framing the Aes Sedai's pale blue. For anyone else, even Rhuarc or another chief still near the city or yet another delegation of Wise Ones, a Maiden would have entered to announce them. These three the Maidens sent on in even if he was taking a bath. Egwene glanced at "Natael" and grimaced, and the tune became lower, and for a moment intricate, perhaps a dance, before settling to what might have been the sighing of breezes. The man wore a twisted smile, directed at his harp.

"I'm surprised to see you, Egwene," Rand said. He swung his leg over the arm of the chair. "What is it—six days you've been avoiding me? Have you brought me more good news? Has Masema sacked Amador in my name? Or have these Aes Sedai you say support me turned out to be Black Ajah? You notice I don't ask *who* they are, or where. Not even how you know. I don't ask you to divulge Aes Sedai secrets, or Wise Ones' secrets, or whatever they are. Just give me the driblets you're willing to dole out, and let me worry whether what you don't care to tell me will stab me in the night."

She looked at him calmly. "You know what you need to know. And I will not tell you what you do not need to know." That was what she had said six days ago. She was as much Aes Sedai as Moiraine, for all one wore Aiel garb and the other pale blue silk.

There was nothing calm about Aviendha. She moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Egwene, green eyes flashing, back so straight it might have been iron. He was half surprised Moiraine did not join them, so they could all three glare at him. Her vow of obedience left a startling amount of room, it seemed, and the three seemed to have become close since his argument with Egwene. Not that it had been much of an argument; you could not argue very well with a woman who watched with cool eyes, never raised her voice, and after one refusal to answer declined even to acknowledge your question again.

"What do you want?" he said.

"These came for you in the last hour," Moiraine said, extending two folded letters. Her voice seemed to fit Asmodean's chime-like tune.

Rand rose to take them suspiciously. "If they're for me, how did they come into your hands?" One was addressed to "Rand al'Thor" in an exact, angular hand, the other to "The Lord Dragon Reborn" in script flowing yet no less precise. The seals were unbroken. A second look made him blink. The two seals seemed to be the same red wax, and one bore the impression of the Flame of Tar Valon, the other a tower overlaid on what he recognized as the island of Tar Valon.

"Perhaps because of where they came from," Moiraine replied, "and from whom." It was no explanation, but it was as much as he would get unless he demanded more. Even then he would have to prod her through every step. She kept her vow, but in her own way. "There are no poison needles in the seals. And no traps woven."

He paused with his thumb against the Flame of Tar Valon—he had not thought of either—then broke it. Another Flame in red wax stood beside the signature, Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan in a hasty scrawl above her titles. The rest was in the angular hand.

> *There can be no denial that you are the one prophesied, yet many will try to destroy you for what else you are. For the sake of the world, this cannot be allowed. Two nations have bent knee to you, and the savage Aiel as well, but the power of thrones is as dust beside the One Power. The White Tower will shelter and protect you against those who refuse to see what must be. The White Tower will see that you live to see Tarmon Gai'don. None else can do this. An escort of Aes Sedai will come to bring you to*

> *Tar Valon with the honor and respect you deserve. This I pledge to you.*

"She doesn't even ask," he said wryly. He remembered Elaida well for having met her only once. A woman hard enough to make Moiraine seem a kitten. The "honor and respect" he deserved. He would wager that the escort of Aes Sedai just happened to number thirteen.

Passing Elaida's letter back to Moiraine, he opened the other. The page was covered in the same hand that had addressed it.

> *With respect, I humbly beg to make myself known to the great Lord Dragon Reborn, whom the Light blesses as savior of the world.*
>
> *All the world must stand in awe of you, who has conquered Cairhien in one day as you did Tear. Yet be wary, I beseech you, for your splendor will inspire jealousy even in those not toiled in the Shadow. Even here in the White Tower are the blind who cannot see your true radiance, which will illumine us all. Yet know that some rejoice in your coming, and will delight to serve your glory. We are not those who would steal your luster for ourselves, but rather those who would kneel to bask in your brilliance. You shall save the world, according to the Prophecies, and the world shall be yours.*
>
> *To my shame, I must beg you to let no one see these words, and to destroy them when once read. I stand, naked of your protection, among some who would usurp your power, and I cannot know who around you is as faithful as I. I am told that Moiraine Damodred may be with you. She may serve you devotedly, obeying your words as law, as I will, yet I cannot know, for I remember her as a secretive woman, much given to plotting, as Cairhienin are. Yet even if you believe she is your creature, as I, I beg you to keep this missive secret, even from her. My life lies beneath your fingers, my Lord Dragon Reborn, and I am your servant.*
>
> *Alviarin Freidhen*

He read it through again, blinking, then handed it to Moiraine. She barely scanned the page before giving it to Egwene, who had her head over the other letter with Aviendha. Perhaps Moiraine already knew what they contained?

“A good thing you gave your oath,” he said. “The way you used to be, keeping everything back, I might have been ready to suspect you by now. A good thing you’re more open now.” She did not react. “What do you make of it?”

“She must have heard about your swelled head,” Egwene said softly. He did not think he had been meant to hear. Shaking her head, she said more loudly, “This doesn’t sound like Alviarin at all.”

“It is her hand,” Moiraine said. “What do *you* make of it, Rand?”

“I think there’s a rift in the Tower, whether Elaida knows it or not. I assume an Aes Sedai can’t write a lie more easily than she can speak one?” He did not wait for her nod. “If Alviarin had been less flowery, I might have thought they were working together to pull me in. I can’t see Elaida even thinking half of what Alviarin wrote, and I can’t see her having a Keeper who could write it, not if she knew.”

“You are not going to do this thing,” Aviendha said, Elaida’s letter crumpled in her hand. It was not a question.

“I am not a fool.”

“Sometimes you are not,” she said grudgingly, and made it worse by raising a questioning eyebrow to Egwene, who considered for a moment, then shrugged.

“Do you see anything else?” Moiraine asked.

“I see White Tower spies,” he told her dryly. “They know I hold the city.” For at least two or three days after the battle, the Shaido would have stopped anything but a pigeon going north. Even a rider who knew where to change horses, no sure thing between Cairhien and Tar Valon, could not have reached the Tower in time for these letters to come back today.

Moiraine smiled. “You learn quickly. You will do well.” For a moment she almost looked fond. “What will you do about it?”

“Nothing, except make sure that Elaida’s ‘escort’ doesn’t get within a mile of me.” Thirteen of the weakest Aes Sedai could overwhelm him linked, and he did not think Elaida would send her weakest. “That, and be aware that the Tower knows what I do the day after I do it. Nothing more until I know more. Could Alviarin be one of your mysterious friends, Egwene?”

She hesitated, and he suddenly wondered whether she had told Moiraine any more than she had him. Was it Aes Sedai secrets she kept, or Wise Ones'? At last she said simply, "I do not know."

A rap came at the door, and Somara put her flaxen head into the room. "Matrim Cauthon has come, *Car'a'carn*. He says that you sent for him."

Four hours ago, as soon as he had learned Mat was back in the city. What would the excuse be this time? It was time to be done with excuses. "Stay," he told the women. Wise Ones made Mat almost as uneasy as Aes Sedai did; these three would put him off balance. He did not give a second thought to using them. He was going to use Mat, too. "Send him in, Somara."

Mat strolled into the room grinning, as if it was a common room. His green coat hung open, and his shirt was half unlaced, exposing the silver foxhead dangling on his sweaty chest, but the dark silk scarf was draped around his neck to hide his hanging scar in spite of the heat. "Sorry if I took too long. There were some Cairhienin who thought they knew how to play cards. Doesn't he know anything livelier?" he asked, jerking his head toward Asmodean.

"I hear," Rand said, "that every young man who can pick up a sword wants to join the Band of the Red Hand. Talmanes and Nalesean are having to turn them away in droves. And Daerid has doubled the number of his footmen."

Mat paused in lowering himself into the chair Aracome had used. "It's true. A fine lot of young . . . fellows wanting to be heroes."

"The Band of the Red Hand," Moiraine murmured. "*Shen an Calhar.* A legendary group of heroes indeed, though the men in it must have changed many times in a war that lasted well over three hundred years. It is said they were the last to fall to the Trollocs, guarding Aemon himself, when Manetheren died. Legend says a spring rose where they fell, to mark their passing, but I rather think the spring was already there."

"I wouldn't know about that." Mat touched the foxhead medallion, and his voice picked up strength. "Some fool got the name from somewhere, and they all started using it."

Moiraine glanced at the medallion dismissively. The small blue stone hanging on the forehead seemed to catch the light and glow, though the angles were wrong. "You are very brave, it seems, Mat." It was flatly said, and the silence that followed stiffened his face. "Very brave," she said finally, “to lead *Shen an Calhar* across the Alguenya and south against the Andorans. Even braver than that, for there are rumors that you went alone to scout the way, and Talmanes and Nalesean had to ride hard to catch up to you.” Egwene sniffed loudly in the background. “Hardly wise for a young lord leading his men.”

Mat’s lip curled. “I’m no lord. I’ve more respect for myself than that.”

“But very brave,” Moiraine said as if he had not spoken. “Andoran supply wagons burned, outposts destroyed. And three battles. Three battles, and three victories. With small loss to your own men, though outnumbered.” As she fingered a rip in the shoulder of his coat, he sank back as far the chair would allow. “Are you drawn to the thick of battles, or are they drawn to you? I am almost surprised you came back. To hear the stories, you might have driven the Andorans back across the Erinin had you stayed.”

“Do you think this is funny?” Mat snarled. “If you have something to say, say it. You can play the cat all you want, but I’m no mouse.” For an instant his eyes flickered toward Egwene and Aviendha, watching with folded arms, and he fingered the silver foxhead again. He had to be wondering. It had stopped one woman’s channeling from touching him. Would it stop three?

Rand only watched. Watched his friend being softened for what he meant to do to him. *Is there anything left to me but necessity?* It was a quick thought, there and gone. He would do what he must.

The Aes Sedai’s voice gained a rime of crystal frost as she spoke, almost in an echo. “We all do as we must, as the Pattern decrees. For some there is less freedom than for others. It does not matter whether we choose or are chosen. What must be, must be.”

Mat did not look softened at all. Wary, yes, and certainly angry, but not softened. He could have been a tomcat backed into a corner by three hounds. A tomcat who meant to go down hard. He seemed to have forgotten anyone was in the room except for himself and the three women. “You always have to push a man where you want him, don’t you? Kick him there, if he won’t go led by the nose. Blood and bloody ashes! Don’t glare at me, Egwene, I’ll speak the way I want. Burn me! All it needs is for Nynaeve to be here, yanking her braid out of her head, and Elayne staring down her nose. Well, I’m glad she isn’t, to hear the news, but even if you had Nynaeve, I’d not be shoved—”

“What news?” Rand said sharply. “News Elayne shouldn’t hear?”

Mat looked up at Moiraine. “You mean there’s something you haven’t ferreted out?”

“What news, Mat?” Rand demanded.

“Morgase is dead.”

Egwene gasped, clasping both hands to her mouth below eyes like huge circles. Moiraine whispered something that might have been a prayer. Asmodean’s fingers never faltered on the harp.

Rand felt as if his belly had been ripped out. *Elayne, forgive me.* And a faint echo, altered. *Ilyena, forgive me.* “Are you certain?”

“As certain as I can be without seeing the body. It seems Gaebril has been named King of Andor. And Cairhien, too, for that matter. Supposedly Morgase did it. Something about the times needing a strong man’s hand or some such, as if anybody could have a stronger than Morgase herself. Only, those Andorans down south have heard rumors that she hasn’t been seen in weeks. More than rumors. You tell me what it adds up to. Andor’s never had a king, but now it has one, and the queen’s vanished. Gaebril’s the one wanted Elayne killed. I tried to tell her that, but you know how she always knows more than a mudfooted farmer. I don’t think he’d balk a second at slitting a queen’s throat.”

Rand discovered that he was sitting in one of the chairs across from Mat, though he did not remember moving. Aviendha laid a hand on his shoulder. Concern tightened her eyes. “I am all right,” he said roughly. “There’s no need to send for Somara.” Her face reddened, but he hardly noticed.

Elayne would never be able to forgive him. He had known that Rahvin—Gaebril—held Morgase prisoner, but he had ignored it because the Forsaken might expect him to help her. He had gone his own way, to do what they did not expect. And ended chasing Couladin instead of doing what he planned. He had known, and concentrated his attention on Sammael. Because the man taunted him. Morgase could wait while he smashed Sammael’s trap and Sammael with it. And so Morgase was dead. Elayne’s mother was dead. Elayne would curse him to her deathbed.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Mat was going on. “There are a lot of queen’s men down there. They are not so sure about fighting for a king. You find Elayne. Half of them will flock to you to put her on the—”

“Shut up!” Rand barked. He quivered so hard with fury that Egwene stepped back, and even Moiraine eyed him carefully. Aviendha’s hand tightened on his shoulder, but he shook it off as he stood. Morgase dead because he had done nothing. His own hand had been on the knife as surely as Rahvin’s. Elayne. “She will be avenged. Rahvin, Mat. Not Gaebril. Rahvin. I’ll lay him by the heels if I never do another thing!”

“Oh, blood and bloody ashes!” Mat groaned.

“This is madness.” Egwene flinched as if realizing what she had said, but she kept that firm, calm voice. “You have your hands full with Cairhien yet, not to mention the Shaido to the north and whatever it is you’re planning in Tear. Do you mean to start another war, with two on your plate already and a ruined land besides?”

“Not a war. Me. I can be in Caemlyn in an hour. A raid—right, Mat?—a raid, not a war. I’ll rip Rahvin’s heart out.” His voice was a hammer. He felt as if acid filled his veins. “I could wish I had Elaida’s thirteen sisters to take with me, to smother him, and bring him to justice. Tried and hung for murder. That would be justice. But he’ll just have to die however I can kill him.”

“Tomorrow,” Moiraine said softly.

Rand glared at her. But she was right. Tomorrow would be better. A night to let his rage cool. He needed to be cold when he faced Rahvin. Now he wanted to seize *saidin* and lay about him, destroying. Asmodean’s music had changed again, to a tune that street musicians in the city had played during the civil war. You could still hear it sometimes when a Cairhienin noble passed. “The Fool Who Thought He Was King.” “Get out, Natael. Get out!”

Asmodean straightened smoothly, bowing, but his face could have done for snow, and he crossed the room quickly, as if uncertain what one second more might bring. He always pushed, but perhaps this time he had pushed too far. As he opened the door, Rand spoke again.

“I will see you tonight. Or I will see you dead.”

Asmodean’s bow was not so graceful this time. “As my Lord Dragon commands,” he said hoarsely, and hurriedly pulled the door shut with him on the other side.

The three women looked at Rand, expressionless, not blinking.

“The rest of you go, too.” Mat practically bounded toward the door. “Not you. I have things to say to you yet.”

Mat stopped short, sighing loudly and fiddling with his medallion. He was the only one who had moved.

"You do not have thirteen Aes Sedai," Aviendha said, "but you have two. And myself. I may not know as much as Moiraine Sedai, but I am as strong as Egwene, and I am no stranger to the dance." She meant the dance of spears, what the Aiel called battle.

"Rahvin is mine," he told her quietly. Maybe Elayne could forgive him a little if he at least avenged her mother. Probably not, but maybe he could forgive himself. A little. He forced his hands to stay at his sides, to not make fists.

"Will you draw a line on the ground for him to step over?" Egwene asked. "Put a chip on your shoulder? Have you considered that Rahvin might not be alone if he calls himself King of Andor now? Much good it will do when you appear if one of his guards puts an arrow through your heart."

He could remember wishing she would not shout at him, but it had been so much easier then. "Did you think I meant to go alone?" He had; he had never thought of anyone to guard his back, though now he could hear a small whisper, *He likes to come from behind, or at your flanks.* He could hardly think clearly at all. His anger seemed to have a life of its own, stoking the fires that kept it boiling. "But not you. This is dangerous. Moiraine can come if she wishes."

Egwene and Aviendha did not look at one another before stepping forward, but they moved as one, not stopping until they were so close even Aviendha had to tilt her head back to look up at him.

"Moiraine can come if she wishes," Egwene said.

If her voice was smooth ice, Aviendha's was molten stone. "But it is too dangerous for us."

"Have you become my father? Is your name Bran al'Vere?"

"If you have three spears, do you put two aside because they are newer made?"

"I do not want to risk you," he said stiffly.

Egwene arched her eyebrows. "Oh?" That was all.

"I am not *gai'shain* to you." Aviendha bared her teeth. "You will never choose what risks I take, Rand al'Thor. Never. Know it now."

He could . . . What? Wrap them in *saidin* and leave them? He still could not shield them. So they might well snare him in return. A fine mess, all because they wanted to be stubborn.

“You have thought of guards,” Moiraine said, “but what if who is with Rahvin is Semirhage, or Graendal? Or Lanfear? These two might overwhelm one such, but could you face her and Rahvin together alone?”

There had been something in her voice when she said Lanfear’s name. Was she afraid that if Lanfear was there, he might finally join her? What would he do if she was there? What could he do? “They can come,” he said through clenched teeth. “Now will you go?”

“As you command,” Moiraine said, but they were in no hurry about it. Aviendha and Egwene took ostentatious care in rearranging their shawls before they started for the door. Lords and ladies might dart at his word, but never them.

“You did not try to talk me out of it,” he said abruptly.

He meant it for Moiraine, but Egwene spoke first, though to Aviendha, and with a smile. “Stopping a man from what he wants to do is like taking a sweet from a child. Sometimes you have to do it, but sometimes it just isn’t worth the trouble.” Aviendha nodded.

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” was Moiraine’s reply. She stood in the doorway looking more Aes Sedai than he ever remembered her, ageless, with dark eyes that seemed ready to swallow him, slight and slender yet so regal she could have commanded a roomful of queens if she could not channel a spark. That blue stone on her forehead was catching the light again. “You will do well, Rand.”

He stared at the door long after it closed behind them.

It was a scuff of boots that recalled him to Mat’s presence. Mat was trying to slide toward the door, moving slowly so as not to be seen.

“I need to talk to you, Mat.”

Mat grimaced. Touching the foxhead like a talisman, he spun to face Rand. “If you think I’m going to put my head on the block just because those fool women did, you can forget it now. I’m no bloody hero, and I don’t want to be one. Morgase was a pretty woman—I even liked her; as much as you can like a queen—but Rahvin is Rahvin, burn you, and I—”

“Shut up and listen. You have to stop running.”

“Burn me if I will! This is no game I chose, and I won’t—”

“I said, shut up!” Rand drove the foxhead against Mat’s chest with a hard finger. “I know where you got this. I was there, remember? I cut the rope you were hanging from. I don’t know exactly what got shoved into your head, but whatever it is, I need it. The clan chiefs know war, but somehow you know it, too, and maybe better. I need that! So this is what you're going to do, you and the Band of the Red Hand. . . ."

"Be careful tomorrow," Moiraine said.

Egwene paused at the door to her room. "Of course we'll be careful." Her stomach was turning backflips, but she kept her voice steady. "We know how dangerous facing one of the Forsaken will be." By Aviendha's expression, they might have been talking about what was for supper. But then, she was never afraid of anything.

"Do you, now," Moiraine murmured. "Be very careful anyway, whether you think one of the Forsaken is near or not. Rand will need both of you in the days to come. You handle his temper well—though I may say your methods are unusual. He will need people who cannot be driven away or quelled by his rages, who will tell him what he must hear instead of what they think he wants to."

"You do that, Moiraine," Egwene told her.

"Of course. But he will still need you. Rest well. Tomorrow will be . . . difficult for us all." She glided away down the corridor, passing from dimness to pool of lamplight to dimness. Night was already coming to these shadowed halls, and oil was in short supply.

"Will you stay with me awhile, Aviendha?" Egwene asked. "I feel more like talking than eating."

"I must tell Amys what I have promised to do tomorrow. And I must be in Rand al'Thor's sleeping chamber when he comes."

"Elayne can never complain that you haven't watched Rand closely for her. Did you really drag the Lady Berewin down the hall by her hair?"

Aviendha's cheeks colored faintly. "Do you think these Aes Sedai in—Salidar?—will help him?"

"Be careful of that name, Aviendha. Rand cannot be allowed to find them without preparation." The way he was now, they would be more likely to gentle him, or at least send thirteen sisters of their own, than help him. She would have to stand between them in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* she and Nynaeve and Elayne, and hope those Aes Sedai had committed themselves too far to back out before they discovered how near the brink he was.

"I will be careful. Rest well. And eat well tonight. In the morning, eat nothing. It is not good to dance the spears with a full stomach."

Egwene watched her stride away before pressing her hands to her stomach. She did not think she would eat tonight or in the morning. Rahvin. And maybe Lanfear, or one of the others. Nynaeve had faced Moghedien and won. But Nynaeve was stronger than she or Aviendha, when she could channel at all. There might not be another. Rand said the Forsaken did not trust one another. She could almost wish he was wrong, or at least that he was not so certain. It was frightening when she thought she saw another man looking through his eyes, heard another man's words come out of his mouth. It should not be so; everyone was reborn as the Wheel turned. But everyone was not the Dragon Reborn. Moiraine would not talk of it. What would Rand do if Lanfear was there? Lanfear had loved Lews Therin Telamon, but what had the Dragon felt for her? How much of Rand was still Rand?

"You will work yourself into a tizzy this way," she said firmly. "You're not a child. Act like a woman."

When a serving woman brought her supper of snapbeans and potatoes and fresh baked bread, she made herself eat. It tasted like ashes.

Mat strode through the dimly lit corridors of the palace and flung open the door of the rooms that had been set aside for the young hero of the battle against the Shaido. Not that he had spent much time there; hardly any. Servants had lit two of the stand-lamps. Hero! He was no hero! What did a hero get? An Aes Sedai patting you on the head before she sent you out like a hound to do it again. A noblewoman condescending to favor you with a kiss, or laying a flower on your grave. He stalked back and forth in his anteroom, for once not pricing the flowered Illianer carpet or the chairs and chests and tables gilded and inlaid with ivory.

The stormy meeting with Rand had gone on till the sun set, him dodging, refusing, Rand following as doggedly as Hawkwing after the rout at Cole Pass. What was he to do? If he rode out again, Talmanes and Nalesean would surely follow with as many men as they could put in the saddle, expecting him to find another battle. And he probably would; that was what really put a chill on it. Much as he hated to admit it, the Aes Sedai was right. He was drawn to battle or it to him. Nobody could have tried harder to avoid one on the other side of the Alguenya. Even Talmanes had commented on it. Until the second time his careful creeping away from one lot of Andorans took them where there was no choice but to fight another.

And every time he could feel the dice rolling in his head; it was almost like a warning that a fight was just over the next hill, now.

There was always a ship, or might be, down at the docks beside the grain barges. Hard to find yourself in a battle on a ship in the middle of a river. Except the Andorans held one bank of the Alguenya for half its length or more below the city. The way his luck was running, the ship would run aground on the west bank with half the Andoran army camped there.

That left doing what Rand wanted. He could just see it.

"Good morrow, High Lord Weiramon, and all you other High Lords and Ladies. I'm a gambler, a farmboy, and I'm here to take command of your bloody army! The bloody lord Dragon Reborn will be with us as soon as he flaming takes care of one bloody little matter!"

Snatching his black-hafted spear from the corner, he hurled it the length of the room. It struck a wall hanging—a hunting scene—and the stone wall behind with a loud *clang,* then dropped to the floor, leaving the hunters neatly sliced in two. Swearing, he hurried to pick it up. The two-foot sword-blade was not chipped or marred. Of course not. Aes Sedai work.

He fingered the ravens on the blade. "Will I ever be free of Aes Sedai work?"

"What was that?" Melindhra asked from the door.

He eyed her as he propped the spear against the wall, and for a change it was not spun-gold hair or clear blue eyes or a firm body that he thought of. It seemed that every Aiel went to the river sooner or later, to stare silently at so much water in one place, but Melindhra went every day, just about. "Has Kadere found ships yet?" Kadere would not be going to Tar Valon on grain barges.

"The peddler's wagons are still there. I do not know about . . . ships." She pronounced the unfamiliar word awkwardly. "Why do you wish to know?"

"I'm going away for a while. For Rand," he added hastily. Her face was too still. "I'd take you with me if I could, but you wouldn't want to leave the Maidens." A ship, or his own horse? And to where? That was the question. He could reach Tear quicker on a fast rivership than on Pips. If he was fool enough to make that choice. If he had any choice.

Melindhra's mouth tightened briefly. To his surprise, it was not over his leaving her. "So you slip back into Rand al'Thor's shadow. You have gained much honor of your own, among the Aiel as well as the wetlanders. Your honor, not honor reflected from the *Car'a'carn*."

"He can keep his honor and take it to Caemlyn or the Pit of Doom for all I care. Don't you worry. I'll find plenty of honor. I will write you about it. From Tear." Tear? He would never escape Rand, or Aes Sedai, if he made that choice.

"He is going to Caemlyn?"

Mat suppressed a wince. He was not supposed to say anything about that. Whatever he decided about the rest, he could do that much. "Just a name pulled from my pocket. Because of the Andorans down south, I suppose. I wouldn't know where he's—"

He had no warning. One instant she was just standing there, the next her foot was in his middle, driving out breath, doubling him over. Eyes bulging, he fought to keep his feet, to straighten, to think. Why? She spun like a dancer, backwards, and her other foot against the side of his head drove him staggering. Without a pause she leaped straight up, kicking out, her soft bootsole taking him hard flush in the face.

When his eyes cleared enough to see, he was on his back, halfway across the room from her. He could feel blood on his face. His head seemed stuffed with wool, and the room seemed to rock. That was when he saw her take a knife from her pouch, slim blade not much longer than her hand, gleaming in the lamplight. Winding the *shoufa* around her head in a quick motion, she raised the black veil across her face.

Groggily, he moved by instinct, without thinking. The blade came out of his sleeve, left his hand as if floating through jelly. Only then did he realize what he had done and stretch out desperately, trying to snatch it back.

The hilt bloomed between her breasts. She sagged to her knees, fell back.

Mat pushed himself up, wavering on hands and knees. He could not have stood if his life hung on it, but he crawled to her, muttering wildly. "Why? Why?"

He jerked her veil aside, and those clear blue eyes focused on him. She even smiled. He did not look at the knife-hilt. His knife-hilt. He knew where the heart was in a body. "Why, Melindhra?"

"I always liked your pretty eyes," she breathed, so faint he had to strain to hear.

“Why?”

“Some oaths are more important than others, Mat Cauthon.” The slim-bladed knife came up swiftly, all her remaining strength behind it, the point driving the dangling foxhead against his chest. The silver medallion should not have stopped a blade, but the angle was just that much wrong, and some hidden flaw in the steel snapped the blade off right at the hilt just as he caught her hand. “You have the Great Lord’s own luck.”

“Why?” he demanded. “Burn you, why?” He knew there would be no answer. Her mouth remained open, as though she might say something more, but her eyes were already beginning to glaze.

He started to pull the veil back up, to cover her face and staring eyes, then let his hand fall. He had killed men, and Trollocs, but never a woman. Never a woman until now. Women were glad when he came into their lives. It was not boasting. Women smiled for him; even when he left them, they smiled as if they would welcome him back. That was all he ever really wanted from women; a smile, a dance, a kiss, and to be remembered fondly.

He realized his thoughts were babbling. Jerking the bladeless hilt from Melindhra’s hand—it was gold-mounted jade, inlaid with golden bees—he hurled it into the marble fireplace, hoping it shattered. He wanted to cry, to howl. *I don’t kill women! I kiss them, I don’t . . . !*

He had to think clearly. Why? Not because he was leaving, surely. She had hardly reacted to that. Besides, she thought he was chasing off after honor; she had always approved of that. Something she had said tugged at him, and then came back, with a chill. The Great Lord’s own luck. He had heard it differently, many times. The Dark One’s own luck. “A Darkfriend.” A question, or certainty? He wished the thought made what he had done easier in his mind. He was going to carry her face to his grave.

Tear. He had as much as told her he was going to Tear. The dagger. Golden bees in jade. He would wager there were nine without looking. Nine golden bees on a field of green. The sign of Illian. Where Sammael ruled. Could Sammael be afraid of him? How could Sammael even know? It was only a few hours since Rand had asked Mat—told him—and he was not sure himself what he was going to do. Maybe Sammael would not take the chance? Right. One of the Forsaken, afraid of a gambler, however stuffed with other men’s battle knowledge his head might be. That was ridiculous.

It all came down to this. He could believe that Melindhra had not been a Darkfriend, that she had decided to kill him on a whim, that there was no connection between a jade hilt inlaid with golden bees and his maybe going to Tear to lead an army against Illian. He could if he was a bullgoose fool. Better to err toward caution, he always said. One of the Forsaken had noticed him. He certainly was not standing in Rand’s shadow now.

Sliding across the floor, he sat with his chin on his knees and his back against the door, staring at Melindhra’s face, trying to decide what to do. When a servant knocked with his supper, he shouted for her to go away. Food was the last thing he wanted. What was he going to do? He wished he did not feel the dice spinning in his head.

* * *

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CHAPTER 52

Choices

Laying down his razor, Rand wiped the last flecks of lather from his face and began doing up his shirtlaces. Early morning sunlight streamed through the square arches leading to his bedchamber balcony; the heavy winter curtains had been hung, but tied back to let in a breath of air. He would be presentable when he killed Rahvin. The thought loosed a bubble of rage, floating up out of his belly. He forced it back down. He would be presentable, and calm. Cold. No mistakes.

When he turned from the gilt-framed mirror, Aviendha was sitting on her rolled-up pallet against the wall, beneath a hanging portraying impossibly high gold towers. He had offered to have another bed put in the room, but she claimed mattresses were too soft for sleeping. She was watching him intently, her shift forgotten in one hand. He had been careful about not looking around from his shaving to give her time to dress, but aside from her white stockings, she wore not a stitch.

"I would not shame you in front of other men," she said abruptly.

"Shame me? What do you mean?"

She stood in one smooth motion, surprisingly pale where the sun had not touched her, slender and hard-muscled, yet with roundnesses and softnesses that haunted his dreams. This was the first time he had allowed himself to look at her openly when she flaunted herself, but she did not seem aware of it. Those big blue-green eyes were fixed on his. "I did not ask Sulin to include Enaila or Somara or Lamelle that first day. Nor did I ask them to watch you, or to do anything if you faltered. That was only their own concern."

"You just let me think they would try to carry me off like a babe if I wavered. A fine distinction."

His wry tone flew right past her. "It made you take care when you needed to."

“I see,” he said dryly. “Well, I thank you for the promise not to shame me, in any case.”

She smiled. “I did not say that, Rand al’Thor. I said not in front of other men. If you require it, for your own good. . . .” Her smile deepened.

“Do you mean to come like that?” He gestured irritably, taking her in from head to toe.

She had never shown the slightest embarrassment at being naked in front of him—far from it—but she glanced down at herself, then at him looking at her, and her face reddened. Suddenly she was surrounded by a flurry of dark brown wool and white *algode,* flying into her clothes so quickly that he could have thought she was channeling them on. “Have you arranged everything?” came from the middle of it. “Have you spoken to the Wise Ones? You were gone late last night. Who else comes with us? How many can you take? No wetlanders, I hope. You cannot trust them. Especially not treekillers. Can you truly carry us to Caemlyn in one hour? Is it like what I did the night . . . ? I mean to say, how will you do it? I cannot like trusting myself to things I do not know and cannot understand.”

“Everything is arranged, Aviendha.” Why was she babbling? And refusing to meet his eye? He had met with Rhuarc and the other chiefs still near the city; they had not truly liked his plan, but they saw it in terms of *ji’e’toh,* and none thought he had any other choice. They discussed it quickly, agreed, and then turned the talk to other things. Nothing to do with Forsaken or Illian or battle at all. Women, hunting, whether Cairhienin brandy could compare with *oosquai,* or wetlander tabac with what was grown in the Waste. For an hour he had almost forgotten what lay ahead. He hoped that the Prophecy of Rhuidean was somehow wrong, that he would not destroy those men. The Wise Ones had come to him, a delegation of more than fifty, alerted by Aviendha herself and led by Amys and Melaine and Bair; or maybe by Sorilea. With Wise Ones often it was difficult to tell who was in charge. They had not come to talk him out of anything—*ji’e’toh* again—but to make sure he understood that his obligation to Elayne did not outweigh that to the Aiel, and they had kept him in the meeting room until they were satisfied. It was that or lift them bodily out of his way to reach the door. When they wanted to be, those women were as good at ignoring shouts as Egwene had become. “We’ll find out how many I can take when I try. Only Aiel.” With luck, Meilan and Maringil and the rest would not know he was gone until after he went. If the Tower had spies in Cairhien, maybe the Forsaken did as well, and how could he trust people to keep secrets who could not see the sun rise without trying to use the fact in *Daes Dae'mar*?

By the time he had shrugged into a red coat embroidered in gold, a fine wool eminently suitable for a Royal Palace, in Caemlyn or Cairhien—the thought amused him, in a bleak sort of way—by that time, Aviendha was almost dressed. It was a wonder to him how she could scramble into her clothes so quickly and yet have nothing out of place. "A woman came last night while you were away."

Light! He had forgotten Colavaere. "What did you do?"

She paused in tying the laces of her blouse, eyes trying to bore a hole in his head, but her tone was offhand. "I took her back to her own chambers, where we talked for a time. There will be no more treekiller flipskirts scratching at your tent flap, Rand al'Thor."

"The very end I aimed at, Aviendha. Light! Did you hurt her badly? You can't go around beating ladies. These people cause me enough trouble without you bringing more."

She sniffed loudly and went back to her laces. "Ladies! A woman is a woman, Rand al'Thor. Unless she is a Wise One," she added judiciously. "That one sits lightly this morning, but her bruises can be hidden, and with a day's rest she will be able to leave her chambers. And she knows the right of matters, now. I told her if she caused you any bother again—*any* bother—I would come talk to her once more. A much longer talk. She will do as you say, when you say it. Her example will teach others. The treekillers understand nothing else."

Rand sighed. Not a method he would or could have chosen, but it might actually work. Or it might only make Colavaere and the others more sly from now on. Aviendha might not be worried about repercussions against herself—in fact, he would be surprised if she had even considered the possibility—but a woman who was High Seat of a powerful House was not the same as a young noblewoman of lesser rank. Whatever the effect for him, Aviendha could find herself set upon in some dark hallway and given ten times what she had given Colavaere, if not worse. "Next time, let me handle matters my way. I am the *Car'a'carn,* remember."

"You have shaving lather on your ear, Rand al'Thor."

Muttering to himself, he snatched up the striped towel and shouted, "Come!" to a rap at the door.

Asmodean entered, pale lace at the neck and cuffs of his black coat, harpcase slung on his back and a sword at his hip. It might have been winter for the coolness of his face, but his dark eyes were wary.

"What do you want, Natael?" Rand demanded. "I gave you your instructions last night."

Asmodean wet his lips and glanced once at Aviendha, who was frowning at him. "Wise instructions. I suppose I might learn something to your advantage, remaining here and watching, but the talk this morning is all of the shrieks from Lady Colavaere's apartments last night. It is said she displeased you, though no one seems to know quite how. That uncertainty is making everyone step lightly. I doubt anyone will breathe in the next few days without considering what you might make of it." Aviendha's face was a picture of insufferable self-satisfaction.

"So you want to come with me?" Rand said softly. "You want to be at my back when I face Rahvin?"

"What better place for the Lord Dragon's bard? But better yet, say under your eye. Where I can show my loyalty. I am not strong." Asmodean's grimace seemed natural enough in any man making that admission, but for an instant Rand sensed *saidin* filling the other man, felt the taint that twisted Asmodean's mouth. Just for an instant, but long enough for him to judge. If Asmodean had drawn as much as he could, he would be hard pressed to match one of the Wise Ones who could channel. "Not strong, yet perhaps I can help in some small way."

Rand wished he could see the shield Lanfear had woven. She had said it would dissipate with time, but Asmodean did not seem able to channel any more strongly now than he had the first day he was in Rand's hands. Perhaps she had lied, to give Asmodean false hope, to make Rand believe the man would grow strong enough to teach him more than he ever would. *It would be like her.* He was uncertain whether that was his thought or Lews Therin's, but he was sure it was true.

The long pause made Asmodean lick his lips again. "A day or two will not matter here. You will be back by then, or dead. Let me prove my loyalty. Perhaps I can do something. A whisker more weight on your side might shift the balance." Once more *saidin* poured into him, just for a moment. Rand felt a sensation of strain, yet it was still a feeble flow. "You know my choices. I am clinging to that tuft of grass on the cliff's lip, praying for it to hold one more heartbeat. If you fail, I am worse than dead.

I must see you win and live.” Suddenly eyeing Aviendha, he seemed to realize he might have said too much. His laugh was a hollow sound. “Else how can I compose the songs of the Lord Dragon’s glory? A bard must have something to work with.” The heat never touched Asmodean—a trick of the mind, he claimed, not the Power—but beads of sweat oozed down his forehead now.

Under his eyes, or left behind? Perhaps to run looking for a hiding place when he began wondering what was happening in Caemlyn. Asmodean would be the man he was until he died and was reborn, and perhaps even after. “Under my eyes,” Rand said quietly. “And if I even suspect that where that whisker falls might displease me . . .”

“I put my trust in the Lord Dragon’s mercy,” Asmodean murmured, bowing. “With the Lord Dragon’s permission, I will wait outside.”

Rand glanced around the room as the man departed, backing away still half-bowed. His sword lay on the gilt-lined chest at the foot of the bed, Dragon-buckled sword belt wrapped around the scabbard and the Seanchan spearhead. The killing today would not be with steel, not on his part. He touched his pocket, felt the hard carved shape of the fat little man with his sword; that was the only sword he needed today. For a moment, he considered Skimming to Tear, to take back *Callandor,* or even to Rhuidean for what was hidden there. He could destroy Rahvin with either before the man knew he was there. He could destroy Caemlyn itself with either. But could he trust himself? So much power. So much of the One Power. *Saidin* hung there just out of sight. The taint seemed part of him. Rage oozed just beneath the surface, at Rahvin, at himself. If it broke loose, and he held even *Callandor* . . . What would he do? He would be invincible. With the other, he could Skim to Shayol Ghul itself, put an end to it all, end it now one way or another. One way or another. No. He was not in this alone. He could not afford anything but victory.

“The world rides on my shoulders,” he murmured. Suddenly he yelped and clapped a hand to his left buttock. It felt as though a needle had stabbed him, but he did not need the goose bumps fading on his arms to tell him what had happened. “What was that for?” he growled at Aviendha.

“Just to see whether the *Lord Dragon* was still made of flesh like the rest of us mortals.”

“I am,” he said flatly, and seized *saidin*— all the sweetness; all the filth—just long enough to channel briefly.

Her eyes widened, but she did not flinch, only looked at him as if nothing had occurred at all. Still, as they crossed the anteroom, she rubbed furtively at her bottom when she thought he was looking the other way. It seemed she was ordinary flesh, too. *Burn me, I thought I'd taught her a few manners.*

Pulling open the door, he stepped out and stood staring. Mat was leaning on his odd spear with that broad-brimmed hat pulled low, a little apart from Asmodean, but that was not took him aback. There were no Maidens. He should have known something was wrong when Asmodean came in unannounced. Aviendha was looking around in amazement, as if she expected to find them behind one of the tapestries.

"Melindhra tried to kill me last night," Mat said, and Rand stopped thinking about Maidens. "One minute we were talking, the next she was trying to kick my head off."

Mat told the story in short sentences. The dagger with the golden bees. His conclusions. He closed his eyes when he told how he had ended it—a simple, stark, "I killed her"— and opened them again quickly as if he saw something behind his eyelids he did not care to see.

"I'm sorry you had to do that," Rand said quietly, and Mat gave a bleak shrug.

"Better her than me. I suppose. She was a Darkfriend." He did not sound as if it made much difference.

"I will settle Sammael. Just as soon as I'm ready."

"And how many will that leave?"

"The Forsaken are not here," Aviendha snapped. "And neither are the Maidens of the Spear. Where are they? What have you done, Rand al'Thor?"

"Me? There were twenty right here when I came to bed last night, and I haven't seen one since."

"Perhaps it is because Mat . . ." Asmodean began, and stopped when Mat looked at him, a tight-mouthed blend of pain and readiness to hit something.

"Do not be fools," Aviendha said in a firm voice. "*Far Dareis Mai* would not claim *toh* against Mat Cauthon for this. She tried to kill him, and he killed her. Even her near-sisters would not, if she had had any. And no one would claim *toh* against Rand al'Thor for what another did unless he ordered it done. *You* have done something, Rand al'Thor, something great and dark, or they would be here."

"I've done nothing," he told her sharply. "And I don't intend to stand here discussing it. Are you dressed for the ride south, Mat?"

Mat shoved a hand into his coatpocket, fingering something. He usually kept his dice and dicecup in there. "Caemlyn. I'm tired of them sneaking up on me. I want to sneak up on one of them for a change. I just hope I get the bloody pat on the head instead of the bloody flower," he added with a grimace.

Rand did not ask him what he meant. Another *ta'veren.* Two together to twist chance perhaps. No way to tell *how,* or even *if,* but . . . "It seems like we'll be together a little longer." Mat looked more resigned than anything else.

Before they had gone far down the tapestry-lined corridor, Moiraine and Egwene met them, gliding along together as if the day held no more ahead than a walk in one of the gardens. Egwene, cool-eyed and calm, golden Great Serpent on her finger, really could have been Aes Sedai despite her Aiel clothes and shawl and the folded scarf around her temples, while Moiraine . . . Gold threads caught the light, faintly streaking Moiraine's gown of shimmering blue silk. The small blue stone on her forehead, hanging from its gold chain fastened in her waves of dark hair, shone as brightly as the large gold-set sapphires around her neck. Hardly suitable garb for what they intended, yet in his red coat, Rand could not comment.

Perhaps it was being here, where House Damodred had once held the Sun Throne, but Moiraine's graceful carriage was more regal than he remembered ever seeing it. Not even the presence of "Jasin Natael" could spoil that queenly serenity with surprise, but amazingly, she gave Mat a warm smile. "So you are going, too, Mat. Learn to trust the Pattern. Do not waste your life attempting to change what cannot be changed." From Mat's face, he might have been considering changing his mind about being there at all, but the Aes Sedai turned from him without a trace of worry. "These are for you, Rand."

"More letters?" he said. One bore his name in an elegant hand that he recognized immediately. "From you, Moiraine?" The other carried Thom Merrilin's name. Both had been sealed with blue wax, apparently with her Great Serpent ring, impressed with the image of the snake biting its own tail. “Why write me a letter? And sealed. You’ve never been afraid to say whatever you wanted to say to my face. If I ever forgot it, Aviendha has been reminding me that I’m only flesh and blood.”

“You have changed from the boy I first saw outside the Winespring Inn.” Her voice was a soft silver chiming. “You are hardly the same at all. I pray you have changed enough.”

Egwene murmured something low. Rand thought it was, “I pray you have not changed too much.” She was frowning at the letters as if she, too, wondered what was in them. So was Aviendha.

Moiraine went on more brightly, even briskly. “Seals ensure privacy. That contains things I wish you to think on; not now; when you have time for thinking. As for Thom’s letter, I know no safer hands than yours in which to place it. Give it to him when you see him again. Now, there is something you must see at the docks.”

“The docks?” Rand said. “Moiraine, this morning of all mornings, I’ve no time for—”

But she was already moving down the corridor as if sure he would follow. “I have had horses readied. Even one for you, Mat, just in case.” Egwene hesitated only a moment, then followed.

Rand opened his mouth to call Moiraine back. She had sworn to obey. Whatever she had to show him, he could see it another day.

“What could an hour hurt?” Mat muttered. Perhaps he was reconsidering.

“It would not be amiss for you to be seen this morning,” Asmodean said. “Rahvin might just know of it as soon as it happens. If he has any suspicions—if he has any spies who may have listened at keyholes—it might allay them for today.”

Rand looked at Aviendha. “Do you also counsel delay?”

“I counsel that you listen to Moiraine Sedai. Only fools ignore Aes Sedai.”

“What could be at the docks more important than Rahvin?” he growled, then shook his head. There was a saying in the Two Rivers, not that anybody said it where women could hear. “The Creator made women to please the eye and trouble the mind.” Aes Sedai were certainly no different in one respect. “One hour.”

The sun was not yet high enough to lift the city wall's long shadow from the stone quay where Kadere's wagons were lined up, but he still mopped his face with a large handkerchief. It was only partly the heat that made him sweat. Great gray curtain walls stretching into the river at either end of the row of docks made the quay seem a dim box, with him caught in it. There were nothing but broad, round-bowed grain barges docked here, and the same anchored in the river waiting their turn to unload. He had considered slipping onto one when it cast off, but it meant abandoning most of what he still possessed. Yet had he thought the slow passage downriver would take him anywhere except to his death, he would have. Lanfear had not returned to his dreams, but he had the burns on his chest to remind him of her commands. Just the thought of disobeying one of the Chosen made him shiver, even with sweat rolling down his face.

If only he knew who to trust; to the extent it was possible to trust any of his fellow Darkfriends. The last of his drivers who had sworn the oaths had vanished two days ago, very likely on one of the grain barges. He still did not know which Aiel woman had slipped that note under his wagon door—"You are not alone among strangers. A way has been chosen"—though he had several possibilities in mind. The docks held almost as many Aiel as they did workmen, come to stare at the river; he had seen a few of those faces more often than seemed reasonable, and some had looked at him consideringly. A few Cairhienin had as well, and a Tairen lord. That meant nothing by itself, of course, but if he could find a few men to work with . . .

A mounted party appeared in one of the gateways, Moiraine and Rand al'Thor leading the way with the Aes Sedai's Warder as they threaded though the carts hauling grainsacks away. A wave of cheers rode with them.

"All glory to the Lord Dragon!" and "Hail the Lord Dragon!" and now and again "Glory to Lord Matrim! Glory to the Red Hand!"

For once the Aes Sedai turned down toward the tail end of the line of wagons without so much as a glance at Kadere. He was just as glad. Even if she had not been Aes Sedai, even if she had not looked at him as if she knew every black corner of his mind, he would as soon not have looked too closely at some of the things she had filled his wagons with. Yesterday evening she had made him strip the canvas off that oddly twisted redstone doorframe in the wagon just behind his. She seemed to take a perverse delight in making him help her himself with whatever she wanted to study. He would have covered the thing up again if he could bear to go near it, or could make any of his drivers do so. None with him now had seen Herid fall half through it in Rhuidean and half disappear—Herid had been the first to run away once they cleared the Jangai; the man had not been entirely right in the head after the Warder hauled him back—but they could look at it, see the way the corners did not meet properly, how you could not follow it around with your eyes without blinking and growing dizzy.

Kadere ignored the first three riders as much as the Aes Sedai had ignored him, and Mat Cauthon almost as much. The man was wearing *his* hat; he had never been able to find a replacement. The Aiel wench, Aviendha, rode up behind the young Aes Sedai's saddle, both with their skirts pushed up to show their legs. If he needed any confirmation that the Aiel woman was bedding al'Thor, he only had to see the way she looked at him; a woman who had taken a man to her bed always looked at him with that light of ownership in her eyes after. More importantly, Natael was with them. This was the first time Kadere had been this close to him since crossing the Spine of the Wall. Natael, who stood high in the Darkfriends. If he could get past the Maidens to reach Natael . . .

Suddenly Kadere blinked. Where were the Maidens? Al'Thor always had an escort of spear-wielding women. Frowning, he realized he could not see a single Maiden among the Aiel on the quay or the docks.

"Aren't you going to look at an old friend, Hadnan?"

That melodious voice jerked Kadere around, gaping at a hatchet-nosed face, dark eyes almost hidden by rolls of fat. "Keille?" It was impossible. No one survived alone in the Waste except Aiel. She *had* to be dead. But there she stood, white silk straining over her bulk, ivory combs standing tall in her dark curls.

A faint smile on her lips, she turned with a grace that still surprised him in a woman so large and lightly climbed the steps into his wagon.

For a moment he hesitated, then hurried after her. He would as soon Keille Shaogi really had died in the Waste—the woman was bossy and obnoxious; she need not think she was getting a penny of the little he had managed to salvage—but she stood as high as Jasin Natael. Perhaps she would answer a few questions. At the least, he would have someone to work with. At the worst, someone to put blame on. Power went with standing high, but so did blame for the failures of those beneath you. More than once he had fed his superiors to those still higher up in order to cover himself.

Carefully closing the door, he turned—and would have screamed if his throat had not clenched too tight for sound.

The woman who stood there wore white silk, but she was not fat. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, eyes like dark, bottomless mountain pools, woven silver belting her narrow waist, silver crescents in her shimmering black hair. Kadere knew that face from his dreams.

His knees thudding to the floor shook breath loose. “Great Mistress,” he said hoarsely, “how may I serve?”

Lanfear might have been looking at an insect, one she might crush beneath her slipper or might not. “By showing your obedience to my commands. I have been too busy to watch Rand al’Thor myself. Tell me what he has done, aside from conquering Cairhien, what he plans to do.”

“It is difficult, Great Mistress. One such as myself cannot come close to such as he.” An insect, those cool eyes said, allowed to live so long as it was useful. Kadere racked his brain for everything he had seen or heard or imagined. “He is sending Aiel south in huge numbers, Great Mistress, though I do not know why. The Tairens and Cairhienin do not seem to notice, but I don’t think they can tell one Aiel from another.” Neither could he. He would not dare lie to her, but if she thought he had more use than he did . . . “He has founded a school of some sort, in a city palace that belonged to a House with no survivors. . . .” At first there was no way to tell whether she liked what she was hearing, but as he went on, her face began to darken.

“What is it you want me to see, Moiraine?” Rand said impatiently, tying Jeade’en’s reins to one wheel of the last wagon in line.

She was standing on tiptoe to peer over the side of the wagon bed at a pair of casks that seemed familiar. Unless he was mistaken, they held the two *cuendillar* seals, packed in wool for protection now that they were no longer unbreakable. He felt the Dark One’s taint strongly here; it almost seemed to come from the casks, a faint miasma as from something rotting in a hidden place.

“It will be safe here,” Moiraine murmured. Lifting her skirts gracefully, she started up the line of wagons. Lan heeled her, a half-tame wolf, the cloak hanging down his back all disturbing ripples of color and nothingness.

Rand glared. “Did she tell you what it was, Egwene?”

“Just that you had to see something. That you had to come here, anyway.”

“You must trust Aes Sedai,” Aviendha said, almost as levelly, but with a hint of doubt. Mat snorted.

“Well, I mean to find out now. Natael, go tell Bael I’ll be with him in —”

At the other end of the line, the side of Kadere’s wagon exploded, splinters scything down Aiel and townsfolk. Rand knew; he did not need goose bumps prickling his skin to know. He raced toward the wagon, after Moiraine and Lan. Time seemed to slow, everything happening at once, as if the air were jelly clinging to each moment.

Lanfear stepped out into stunned silence except for the moans and screams of the injured, something limp and pale and red-streaked hanging from her hand, dragging behind her as she walked down invisible steps. Her face was a mask carved of ice. “He told me, Lews Therin,” she almost screamed, flinging the pale thing into the air. Something caught it, inflated it for a moment into a bloody, transparent statue of Hadnan Kadere; his skin, removed whole. The figure collapsed and fell as Lanfear’s voice rose to a screech. “You let another woman touch you! Again!”

Moments clinging, all happening at once.

Before Lanfear reached the stones of the quay, Moiraine lifted her skirts higher and began running straight toward her. Quick as she was, Lan was quicker, ignoring her shout of, “No, Lan!” Sword coming out, long legs carried him ahead of her, color-shifting cloak waving behind as he charged. Suddenly he seemed to run into an invisible stone wall, bounce back, try to stagger forward again. One step, and as if a giant hand had smashed him aside, he flew ten paces through the air, crashing to the stones.

While he was in midair, Moiraine jerked forward, feet skidding along the pavement, until she was face to face with Lanfear. It was only for a moment. The Forsaken looked at her as though wondering what could have gotten in her way, then Moiraine was flung to one side so hard she rolled over and over until she disappeared beneath one of the wagons.

The quayside was in turmoil. Just moments since Kadere’s wagon erupted, yet only the blind could not know the One Power was being wielded by the woman in white. Along the docks axes flashed, cutting ropes, freeing barges as their crews desperately fended the craft toward open water and flight. Bare-chested dockmen and dark-clothed townsfolk struggled to jump aboard. In the other direction men and women milled and screamed as they fought to pass through the gates into the city. And among them, *cadin'sor*-clad figures veiled themselves and rushed at Lanfear with spears or knives or bare hands. There could be no doubt she was the source of the attack, no doubt she fought with the Power. They ran to dance the spears regardless.

Fire rolled over them in waves. Arrows of it pierced those who came on with their clothes in flames. It was not as if Lanfear battled them, or even paid them any real mind. She might have been brushing aside gnats or bitemes. Those who fled burned as well as those who tried to fight. She moved toward Rand as if nothing else existed.

Heartbeats only.

Three steps she had taken when Rand seized the male half of the True Source, molten steel and steel-shattering ice, sweet honey and midden heap. Deep in the Void, the fight for survival was distant, the battle before him scarely less. As Moiraine vanished beneath the wagon, he channeled, pulling the heat from Lanfear's fires, sinking it into the river. Flames that a moment before engulfed human forms, vanished. In the same instant he wove the flows again, and a misty gray dome came into being, a long oval enclosing him and Lanfear and most of the wagons, an almost transparent wall that shut out all not already within. Even as he tied the weave, he was not sure what it was or where it had come from—some memory of Lews Therin's perhaps—but Lanfear's fires struck it and stopped. He could see people outside dimly, too many thrashing and flailing—he had taken the flames, not the searing of flesh; that stench still hung in the air—but none would burn now that had not already. Bodies lay inside, too, mounds of charred cloth, some stirring feebly, moaning. She did not care; her channeled flames winked out; the gnats were dispelled; she never glanced aside.

Heartbeats. He was cold in the emptiness of the Void, and if he felt sorrow for the dead and dying and scarred, the feeling was so far off it might not have been. He was cold itself. Emptiness itself. Only the rage of *saidin* filled him.

Movement to either side. Aviendha and Egwene, eyes concentrated on Lanfear. He had meant to shut them out from this. They must have raced with him. Mat and Asmodean; outside; the wall missed the final few wagons. In icy calm he channeled Air to snare Lanfear; Egwene and Aviendha could shield her while he distracted her.

Something severed his flows; they snapped back so hard that he grunted.

“One of them?” Lanfear snarled. “Which is Aviendha?” Egwene threw her head back and wailed, eyes bulging, the world’s agony shrieking from her mouth. “Which?” Aviendha rose on tiptoes, shuddering, howls chasing Egwene’s as they climbed higher and higher.

The thought was suddenly there in the emptiness. *Spirit woven so, with Fire and Earth. There.* Rand felt something being cut, something he could not see, and Egwene collapsed in a motionless heap, Aviendha to hands and knees, head down and swaying.

Lanfear staggered, her eyes going from the women to him, dark pools of black fire. “You are mine, Lews Therin! Mine!”

“No.” Rand’s voice seemed to come to his ears down a mile-long tunnel. *Distract her from the girls.* He kept moving forward, did not look back. “I was never yours, Mierin. I will always belong to Ilyena.” The Void quivered with sorrow and loss. And with desperation, as he fought something besides the scouring of *saidin.* For a moment he hung balanced. *I am Rand al’Thor.* And, *Ilyena, ever and always my heart.* Balanced on a razor edge. *I am Rand al’Thor!* Other thoughts tried to well up, a fountain of them, of Ilyena, of Mierin, of what he could do to defeat her. He forced them down, even the last. If he came down on the wrong side . . . *I am Rand al’Thor!* “Your name is Lanfear, and I’ll die before I love one of the Forsaken.”

Something that might have been anguish crossed her face; then it was a marble mask once more. “If you are not mine,” she said coldly, “then you are dead.”

Agony in his chest, as if his heart was about to explode, in his head, white-hot nails driving into his brain, pain so strong that inside the Void he wanted to scream. Death was there, and he knew it. Frantically—even in the Void, frantic; emptiness shimmered, dwindled—he wove Spirit and Fire and Earth, flailing it wildly. His heart was no longer beating. Fingers of dark pain crushing the Void. Gray veil falling over his eyes. He felt his weave slice raggedly through hers. The burn of breath in empty lungs, lurch of heart beginning to pump again. He could see again, silver and black flecks floated between him and a stone-faced Lanfear still catching her balance from the rebound of her flows. The pain was there in head and chest like wounds, but the Void firmed, and bodily pain was remote.

Well that it was distant, for he had no time to recover. Forcing himself to move forward, he struck at her with Air, a club to knock her senseless. She slashed the weave, and he struck again, again, again each time that she sliced through his last weave, a furious rain of blows she somehow saw and countered, always moving closer. If he could keep her occupied for a moment more, if one of those invisible cudgels landed on her head, if he could get close enough to strike her with his fist . . . Unconscious, she would be as helpless as anyone else.

Suddenly she seemed to realize what he was doing. Still blocking his blows as easily as if she could see every one, she danced backwards until her shoulders hit the wagon behind her. And she smiled like winter's heart. "You will die slowly, and beg me to let you love me before you die," she said.

It was not at him directly that she struck this time. It was at his link to *saidin*.

Panic rang the Void like a gong at the first knife-sharp touch, the Power diminishing as it slid deeper between him and the Source. With Spirit and Fire and Earth he cut at the knife blade; he knew where to find it; he knew where his link was, could feel that first nick. Her attempted shield vanished, reappeared, returned as fast as he could cut it, but always with that momentary ebbing of *saidin,* moments when it almost failed, leaving his counterstroke barely enough to foil her attack. Handling two weaves at once should have been easy—he could handle ten or more—but not when one was a desperate defense against something he could not know was there until it was almost too late. Not when another man's thoughts kept trying to surface inside the Void, trying to tell him how to defeat her. If he listened, it might be Lews Therin Telamon who walked away, with Rand al'Thor a voice sometimes floating in his head if that.

"I'll make *both* of those trulls watch you beg," Lanfear said. "But should I make them watch you die first, or you them?" When had she climbed into the open wagon bed? He had to watch her, watch for any hint that she was tiring, her concentration slipping. It was a vain hope. Standing beside the twisted doorframe *ter'angreal,* she looked down at him, a queen about to pass sentence, yet she could spare time for chill smiles at a dark ivory bracelet that she turned over and over in her fingers. "Which will hurt you most, Lews Therin? I want you to hurt. I want you to know pain such as no man has ever known!”

The thicker the flow to him from the Source, the harder it would be to cut. His hand tightened on his coat pocket, the fat little stone man with his sword hard against the heron branded into his palm. He drew on *saidin* as deeply as he could, till the taint floated in the emptiness with him like misting rain.

“Pain, Lews Therin.”

And there was pain, the world swallowed in agony. Not heart or head this time, but everywhere, every part of him, hot needles stabbing into the Void. He almost thought he could hear a quenching hiss at each thrust, and each came deeper than the last. Her attempts to shield him did not slow; they came faster, stronger. He could not believe she was so strong. Clinging to the Void, to searing, freezing *saidin,* he defended himself wildly. He could end it, finish her. He could call down lightning, or wrap her in the fire she herself had used to kill.

Images darted through the pain. A woman in a dark merchant’s dress, toppling from her horse, the fire-red sword light in his hands; she had come to kill him, with a fistful of other Darkfriends. Mat’s bleak eyes; *I killed her.* A golden-haired woman lying in a ruined hallway where, it seemed, the very walls had melted and flowed. *Ilyena, forgive me!* It was a despairing cry.

He could end it. Only, he could not. He was going to die, perhaps the world would die, but he could not make himself kill another woman. Somehow it seemed the richest joke the world had ever seen.

Wiping the blood from her mouth, Moiraine crawled out from beneath the tail of the wagon and rose unsteadily to her feet, the sound of a man’s laughter in her ears. In spite of herself, her eyes darted, searching for Lan, found him lying almost against the foggy gray wall of the dome that stretched overhead. He twitched, perhaps trying to find strength to rise, perhaps dying. She forced him out of her mind. He had saved her life so many times that by rights it should have belonged to him, but she had long since done what she could to see that he survived his lone war with the Shadow. Now he must live or die without her.

It was Rand laughing, on his knees on the stones of the quay. Laughing, with tears streaming down a face twisted like a man being put to the question. Moiraine felt a chill. If the madness had him, it was beyond her. She could only do what she could do. What she must do.

The sight of Lanfear hit her like a blow. Not surprise, but the shock of seeing what had been in her dreams so often since Rhuidean. Lanfear standing on the wagon bed, blazing bright as the sun with *saidar,* framed by the twisted redstone *ter'angreal* as she stared down at Rand, a pitiless smile on her lips. She was turning a bracelet in her hands. An *angreal*; unless Rand had his own *angreal,* she should be able to crush him with that. Either he did, or Lanfear was toying with him. It did not matter. Moiraine did not like that circle of carved age-dark ivory. At first glance it seemed to be an acrobat bending backwards to grip his ankles. Only a closer look would show that his wrists and ankles were bound together. She did not like it, but she had brought it out of Rhuidean. Yesterday she had taken the bracelet from a sack of odds-and-ends and left it lying there at the foot of the doorframe.

Moiraine was slight, a small woman. Her weight did not disturb the wagon at all as she pulled herself up. She winced as her dress caught on a splinter and tore, but Lanfear did not look around. The woman had dealt with every threat except Rand; he was the only corner of the world she acknowledged in the least right then.

Suppressing a small bubble of hope—she could not allow herself that luxury—Moiraine balanced upright a moment on the wagon tail, then embraced the True Source and leaped at Lanfear. The Forsaken had an instant's warning, enough to turn before Moiraine struck her, clawing the bracelet away. Face to face, they toppled through the doorframe *ter'angreal*. White light swallowed everything.

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CHAPTER

53

Fading Words

In the depths of a shrinking Void, Rand saw Moiraine hurtle seemingly out of nowhere to grapple with Lanfear. The attacks on him ceased as the two women plunged through the doorframe *ter'angreal* in a flash of white light that did not end; it filled the subtly twisted redstone rectangle as though trying to flood through and striking some invisible barrier. Lightnings arched silver and blue around the *ter'angreal*, more and more violently; rasping buzzes crackled through the air.

Rand staggered to his feet. The pain was not gone really, but the pressure was, bringing promise that the pain would go. His eyes could not leave the *ter'angreal*. *Moiraine.* Her name hung in his head, sliding across the Void.

Lan lurched by him, fixed on the wagon, leaning as if only by moving forward could he stop from falling.

More than standing was beyond Rand for the moment. He channeled, caught the Warder in flows of Air. "You . . . You can't do anything, Lan. You can't go after her."

"I know," Lan said hopelessly. Held in mid-step, he did not struggle, only stared at the *ter'angreal* that had swallowed Moiraine. "The Light send me peace, I know."

The wagon itself had caught fire now. Rand tried to suppress the flames, but as soon as he drew the heat from one blaze, the lightnings ignited another. The doorframe itself was beginning to smoke, though it was stone, a white, acrid smoke that gathered thickly under the gray dome. Even a whiff burned Rand's nostrils and made him cough; his skin prickled and stung where the smoke brushed. Hastily he untied the weave of the dome, dispelled it rather than wait for it to dissipate, and wove around the wagon a tall chimney of Air that gleamed like glass to carry the fumes high and away. Only then did he release Lan. He would not have put it past the man to follow Moiraine anyway if he could have reached the wagon. It was all in flames now, the redstone doorway as well, melting as if it were wax, but for a Warder that might not matter.

“She is gone. I cannot feel her presence.” The words sounded ripped out of Lan’s chest. He turned and began walking down the line of wagons without a backward glance.

Following the Warder with his eyes, Rand saw Aviendha on her knees, holding Egwene. Releasing *saidin*, he began to run down the quay. Physical pain that had been distant crashed home, but he ran, however awkwardly. Asmodean was there, too, looking around as if he expected Lanfear to leap out from behind a wagon or a toppled grain cart. And Mat, squatting with his spear propped across his shoulder, fanning Egwene with his hat.

Rand skidded to a halt. “Is she . . . ?”

“I don’t know,” Mat said miserably.

“She still breathes.” Aviendha sounded uncertain how long that would continue, but Egwene’s eyes fluttered open as Amys and Bair pushed roughly past Rand with Melaine and Sorilea. The Wise Ones knelt clustered around the younger women, murmuring to themselves and each other as they examined Egwene.

“I feel . . .” Egwene began weakly, and stopped to swallow. Her face was bloodless pale. “I . . . hurt.” A tear leaked from one eye.

“Of course you do,” Sorilea said briskly. “That is what happens when you let yourself be caught in a man’s schemes.”

“She cannot go with you, Rand al’Thor.” Melaine’s sun-haired beauty was openly angry, but she was not looking at him; it could have been anger at him or anger at what had happened.

“I . . . will be right as wellwater . . . with a little rest,” Egwene whispered.

Bair dampened a cloth from a waterskin and laid it across Egwene’s forehead. “You will be right with a great deal of rest. I fear you will not be meeting Nynaeve and Elayne tonight. You will not go near *Tel’aran’rhiod* for some days, until you are stronger again. Do not give me that stubborn look, girl. We will watch your dreams to make sure, if need be, and give your care to Sorilea if you so much as think of disobeying.”

“You will not disobey me more than once, Aes Sedai or not,” Sorilea said, but with a touch of sympathy at odds with her leathery-faced grimness. Frustration was plain in Egwene’s face.

“I, at least, am well enough to do what must be done,” Aviendha said. In truth, she looked not much less haggard than Egwene, but she managed a defiant stare at Rand, plainly expecting argument. Her defiance faded somewhat when she realized the four Wise Ones were looking at her. “I am,” she muttered.

“Of course,” Rand said hollowly.

“I am,” she insisted. To him; she carefully avoided meeting the Wise Ones’ gaze. “Lanfear had me a moment less than she did Egwene. That was enough to make the difference between us. I have *toh* to you, Rand al’Thor. I do not think we would have survived many moments more. She was very strong.” Her eyes darted down to the burning wagon. Fierce flames had already reduced it to a shapeless charred pile inside the glassy chimney; the redstone *ter’angreal* was no longer visible at all. “I did not see all that happened.”

“They are . . .” Rand cleared his throat. “They are both gone. Lanfear is dead. And so is Moiraine.” Egwene began to cry, sobs shaking her in Aviendha’s clasp. Aviendha put her head down on the other woman’s shoulder as if she, too, might weep.

“You are a fool, Rand al’Thor,” Amys said, standing. That surprisingly youthful face beneath her headscarf and white hair was stone hard. “About this and many other things, you are a fool.”

He turned away from the accusation in her eyes. Moiraine was dead. Dead because he could not bring himself to kill one of the Forsaken. He did not know whether he wanted to cry or laugh wildly; if he did either, he did not think he would be able to stop.

The dockside that had been emptying when he made the dome was filled again, though few came nearer than where that misty gray wall had stood. Wise Ones moved about aiding the burned, comforting the dying, assisted by white-robed *gai’shain* and men in the *cadin’sor.* Moans and cries stabbed at him. He had not been quick enough. Moiraine dead; no Healing for even the worst injured. Because he . . . *I could not. The Light help me, I could not!*

More Aielmen stood watching him, some only now unveiling; he still did not see one Maiden. Not only Aiel were there. Dobraine, bareheaded on a black gelding, did not take his eyes from Rand, and not far off Talmanes and Nalesean and Daerid sat their horses watching Mat almost as closely as they did Rand. People lined the top of the great city wall, outlined and cast in shadow by the rising sun, and more along the curtain walls. Two of those shadowed shapes turned away when he looked up, saw each other only twenty paces apart, and seemed to recoil. He would have wagered they were Meilan and Maringil.

Lan was back with the horses at the last wagon in the line, stroking Aldieb's white nose. Moiraine's mare.

Rand went to him. "I'm sorry, Lan. If I'd been faster, if I'd . . ." He exhaled heavily. *I couldn't kill one, so I killed the other. The Light burn me blind!* If it had, at that moment, he would not have cared.

"The Wheel weaves." Lan went to Mandarb, busied himself checking the black stallion's saddlegirth. "She was a soldier, a warrior in her way as much as I. This could have happened two hundred times these past twenty years. She knew it, and so did I. It was a good day to die." His voice was as hard as it had ever been, but those cold blue eyes were red-rimmed.

"Still, I am sorry. I should have . . ." The man would not be comforted by should-haves, and they dug at Rand's soul. "I hope you can still be my friend, Lan, after. . . . I value your counsel—and your sword-training—and I'll need both in the days to come."

"I am your friend, Rand. But I cannot stay." Lan swung up into his saddle. "Moiraine did something to me that has not been done in hundreds of years, not since the time when Aes Sedai still sometimes bonded a Warder whether he wanted it or not. She altered my bond so it passed to another when she died. Now I must find that other, become one of her Warders. I am one, already. I can feel her faintly, somewhere far to the west, and she can feel me. I must go, Rand. It is part of what Moiraine did. She said she would not allow me time to die avenging her." He gripped the reins as if holding Mandarb back, as if holding himself back from digging his spurs in. "If you ever see Nynaeve again, tell her . . ." For an instant that stone face crumpled in anguish; an instant, then it was granite again. He muttered under his breath, but Rand heard. "A clean wound heals quickest and pains shortest." Aloud, he said, "Tell her I've found someone else. Green sisters are sometimes as close to their Warders as other women are to husbands. In every way. Tell her I've gone to be a Green sister's lover, as well as her sword. These things happen. It has been a long time since I've seen her."

"I will tell her whatever you say, Lan, but I don't know that she'll believe me."

Lan bent from the saddle to catch Rand's shoulder in a hard grip. Rand remembered calling the man a half-tame wolf, but those eyes made a wolf seem a lapdog. "We are alike in many ways, you and I. There is a darkness in us. Darkness, pain, death. They radiate from us. If ever you love a woman, Rand, leave her and let her find another. It will be the best gift you can give her." Straightening, he raised one hand. "Peace favor your sword. *Tai'shar* Manetheren." The ancient salute. True blood of Manetheren.

Rand lifted his hand. "*Tai'shar* Malkier."

Lan heeled Mandarb's flanks, and the stallion leaped forward, scattering Aiel and everyone else from his path, as if to carry the last of the Malkieri wherever he was headed at a gallop the entire way.

"The last embrace of the mother welcome you home, Lan," Rand murmured, then shivered. That was part of the funeral service in Shienar, and elsewhere in the Borderlands.

They were still watching him, the Aiel, the people atop the walls. The Tower would know of today, or a version of it, as soon as a pigeon could fly there. If Rahvin did have some way of watching as well—all it took was one raven in the city, one rat here along the river—he certainly would not expect anything today. Elaida would think him weakened, perhaps more pliable, and Rahvin . . .

He realized what he was doing and winced. *Stop it! For one minute at least, stop and mourn!* He did not want all those eyes on him. Aiel fell back before him almost as readily as they had before Mandarb.

The dockmaster's slate-roofed hut was a single windowless stone room lined with shelves full of ledgers and scrolls and papers, lit by two lamps on a rough table covered with tax seals and customs stamps. Rand slammed the door behind him to shut out eyes.

Moiraine dead, Egwene injured, and Lan gone. A high price to pay for Lanfear.

"Mourn, burn you!" he growled. "She deserved that much! Don't you have any feelings left?" But mostly he felt numb. His body hurt, but under it was deadness.

Hunching his shoulders, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and felt Moiraine's letters. Slowly he drew them out. Some things he should think on, she had said. Stuffing Thom's back, he broke the seal on the other. The pages were covered thickly with Moiraine's elegant script.

> *These words will fade within moments after this leaves your hands—a warding attuned to you—so be careful of it. That you are reading this means that events have fallen out at the docks as I hoped. . . .*

He stopped, staring, then read on quickly.

> *Since the first day I reached Rhuidean, I have known—it need not trouble you how; some secrets belong to others, and I will not betray them—that a day would come in Cairhien when news would arrive of Morgase. I did not know what that would be—if what we heard is true, the Light have mercy on her soul; she was willful and stubborn, with the temper of a lioness at times, but for all that a true, good and gracious queen—but each time that news led to the docks on the following day. There were three branches from the docks, but if you are reading this, I am gone, and so is Lanfear. . . .*

Rand's hands tightened on the pages. She had known. Known, and still she brought him here. Hurriedly he smoothed out the crumpled paper.

> *The other two paths were much worse. Down one, Lanfear killed you. Down the other, she carried you away, and when next we saw you, you called yourself Lews Therin Telamon and were her devoted lover.*
>
> *I hope that Egwene and Aviendha have survived unharmed. You see, I do not know what happens in the world after, except perhaps for one small thing which does not concern you.*
>
> *I could not tell you, for the same reason I could not tell Lan. Even given the choices, I could not be sure which you would pick. Men of the Two Rivers, it seems, retain much of storied Manetheren in them, traits shared with men of the Borderlands. It is said that a Borderlander will take a dagger's wound to avoid harm to a woman and count it fair trade. I dared not risk that you would place my life above your own, certain that somehow you could sidestep fate. Not a risk, I fear, but a foolish certainty, as today has surely proved. . . .*

"My choice, Moiraine," he muttered. "It was my choice."

> *A few final points.*
>
> *If Lan has not already gone, tell him that what I did to him, I did for the best. He will understand one day, and I hope, bless me for it.*
>
> *Trust no woman fully who is now Aes Sedai. I do not speak simply of the Black Ajah, though you must always be watchful for them. Be as suspicious of Verin as you are of Alviarin. We have made the world dance as we sang for three thousand years. That is a difficult habit to break, as I have learned while dancing to your song. You must dance free, and even the best intentioned of my sisters may well try to guide your steps as I once did.*
>
> *Please deliver Thom Merrilin's letter safely when you meet him again. There is a small matter that I once told him of which I must make clear for his peace of mind.*
>
> *Lastly, be wary, too, of Master Jasin Natael. I cannot approve wholly, but I understand. Perhaps it was the only way. Yet be careful of him. He is the same man now that he always was. Remember that always.*
>
> *May the Light illumine and protect you. You will do well.*

It was signed simply "Moiraine." She had almost never used her House name.

He reread the second last paragraph again closely. Somehow she had known who Asmodean was. It had to be that. Known that one of the Forsaken was right there in front of her, and never blinked once. She had known why, too, if he read it right. He would have thought in a letter that would go blank when he set it down, she could have come right out and said what she meant. Not just concerning Asmodean. About how she had learned what she had in Rhuidean—something to do with Wise Ones, or he missed his guess, and as much chance of finding out more from the letter as from them—about Aes Sedai—was there a reason she mentioned Verin? And why Alviarin instead of Elaida?—even about Thom and Lan. For some reason he did not think she had left a letter for Lan; the Warder was not the only one who believed in clean wounds. He almost took Thom's letter out and opened it, but she might have warded it the same way she had his. Aes Sedai and Cairhienin, she had wrapped herself in mystery and manipulation to the end. To the end.

That was what he was trying to avoid with all this blather about her keeping secrets. She had known what would happen and come as bravely as any Aiel. Come to her death knowing it waited. She had died because he could not bring himself to kill Lanfear. He could not kill one woman, so another died. His eyes fell on the last words.

. . . You will do well.

They cut like a cold razor.

"Why do you weep here alone, Rand al'Thor? I have heard that some wetlanders think it is shame to be seen weeping."

He glared at Sulin, standing in the doorway. She was fully accoutred, cased bow on her back, quiver at her belt, round hide buckler and three spears in hand. "I'm not. . . ." There was dampness on his cheeks. He scrubbed it away. "It's hot in here. Makes me sweat like a . . . What do you want? I thought you had all decided to abandon me and go back to the Three-fold Land."

"It is not we who have abandoned you, Rand al'Thor." Shutting the door behind her, she sat on the floor and laid her buckler and a pair of the spears down. "You have abandoned us." In one motion she put a foot against the last spear between her hands, heaved, and snapped it in two.

"What are you doing?" She tossed aside the pieces and picked up another spear. "I said, what are you doing?" The white-haired Maiden's face might have given even Lan pause, but Rand bent and seized the spear between her hands; her soft-booted foot came to rest against his knuckles. Not lightly.

"Will you put us in skirts, and make us marry and tend hearth? Or are we to lie beside your fire and lick your hand when you give us a scrap of meat?" Her muscles tensed, and the spear broke, scoring his palm with splinters.

He snatched his freed hand back with a curse, shaking off droplets of blood. "I don't mean any such thing. I thought you understood." She took up the last spear, set her foot, and he channeled, weaving Air to hold her as she was. She only stared at him wordlessly. "Burn me, you said nothing! So I kept the Maidens out of the battle with Couladin. Not everyone fought that day. And you never said a word."

Sulin's eyes widened in incredulity. "*You* kept *us* from the dance of spears? *We* kept *you* from the dance. You were like a girl newly wed to the spear, ready to rush out and kill Couladin with never a thought for the spear you might take from behind. You are the *Car'a'carn*. You have no right to risk yourself needlessly." Her voice flattened. "Now you go to fight the Forsaken. The secret is well kept, but I have heard enough from those who lead the other societies."

"And you want to keep me out of this fight as well?" he said quietly.

"Do not be a fool, Rand al'Thor. Any could have danced the spears with Couladin; for you to risk it was the thinking of a child. None among us can face the Shadowsouled, save you."

"Then why . . . ?" He stopped; he already knew the answer. After that blood-soaked day against Couladin, he had convinced himself they would not mind. He had wanted to believe they would not.

"Those who go with you have been chosen." The words came like hurled stones. "Men from every society. Men. There are no Maidens, Rand al'Thor. *Far Dareis Mai* carries your honor, and you take ours away."

He drew a deep breath, fumbling for words. "I . . . do not like to see a woman die. I hate it, Sulin. It curdles me up inside. I could not kill a woman if my life hung on it." The pages of Moiraine's letter rustled in his hand. Dead because he could not kill Lanfear. Not always just his own life. "Sulin, I would rather go against Rahvin alone than see one of you die."

"A foolish thing. Everyone needs another to watch her back. So it is Rahvin. Even Roidan of the Thunder Walkers and Turol of the Stone Dogs held that back." She glanced at her upraised foot, held against the spear by the same flows that snared her arms. "Release me, and we will talk."

After a moment's hesitation, he unraveled the weave. He was tensed to seize her again if need be, but she only crossed her legs and sat bouncing the spear on her palms. "Sometimes I forget you were raised out of our blood, Rand al'Thor. Listen to me. I am what I am. *This* is what I am." She hefted the spear.

"Sulin—"

"Listen, Rand al'Thor. I *am* the spear. When a lover came between me and the spear, I chose the spear. Some chose the other way. Some decide they have run with the spears long enough, that they want a husband, a child. I have never wanted anything else. No chief would hesitate to send me wherever the dance is hottest. If I died there, my first-sisters would mourn me, but not a fingernail more than when our first-brother fell. A treekiller who stabbed me to the heart in my sleep would do me more honor than you do. Do you understand now?"

"I understand, but . . ." He did understand. She did not want him to make her something other than what she was. All he had to do was be willing to watch her die. "What happens if you break the last spear?"

"If I have no honor in this life, perhaps in another." She said it as if it was just another explanation. It took him a moment to comprehend. All he had to do was be willing to watch her die.

"You don't leave me any choices, do you?" No more than Moiraine had.

"There are always choices, Rand al'Thor. You have a choice, and I have one. *Ji'e'toh* allows no other."

He wanted to snarl at her, to curse *ji'e'toh* and everyone who followed it. "Choose out your Maidens, Sulin. I don't know how many I can take, but *Far Dareis Mai* will have as many as any other society."

He stalked past her and her sudden smile. Not relief. Pleasure. Pleasure that she would have the chance to die. He should have left her wrapped up in *saidin,* left her to be dealt with somehow when he came back from Caemlyn. Slamming the door open, he strode out onto the quay—and stopped.

Enaila headed a line of Maidens, each with three spears in her hands, a line leading back from the dockmaster's door, vanishing into the nearest of the gates to the city. Some of the Aielmen on the dockside eyed them curiously, but it was obviously something between *Far Dareis Mai* and the *Car'a'carn,* and no business of any other society. Amys and three or four other Wise Ones who had once been Maidens were watching more closely. Most of the non-Aiel had gone, except for a few men nervously righting overturned grain carts and trying to look elsewhere. Enaila stepped toward Rand, then halted and smiled as Sulin came out. Not relief. Pleasure. Smiles of pleasure running back down that long line of Maidens. Smiles on those Wise Ones, too, and a sharp nod for him from Amys as if he had put an end to some idiotic behavior.

"I thought maybe they were going to go in one at a time and kiss you out of your miseries," Mat said.

Rand frowned at him, standing there leaning on his spear and grinning, wide-brimmed hat tipped back on his head. "How can you be so cheerful?" The smell of seared flesh still hung in the air, and the moans of burned men and women being cared for by Wise Ones.

“Because I’m alive,” Mat snarled. “What do you want me to do, cry?” He shrugged uncomfortably. “Amys says Egwene really will be all right in a few days.” He did look around then, but as though he did not want to see what he saw. “Burn me, if we’re going to do this thing, let’s do it. *Dovie’andi se tovya sagain.*”

“What?”

“I said, it’s time to roll the dice. Did Sulin stop up your ears?”

“Time to roll the dice,” Rand agreed. The flames had died inside the glassy chimney of Air, but the white smoke still rose as though flames yet consumed the *ter’angreal. Moiraine.* He should have . . . Done was done. The Maidens were crowding down around Sulin, as many as would fit onto the quay. Done was done, and he had to live with it. Death would be a release from what he had to live with. “Let’s do it.”

* * *

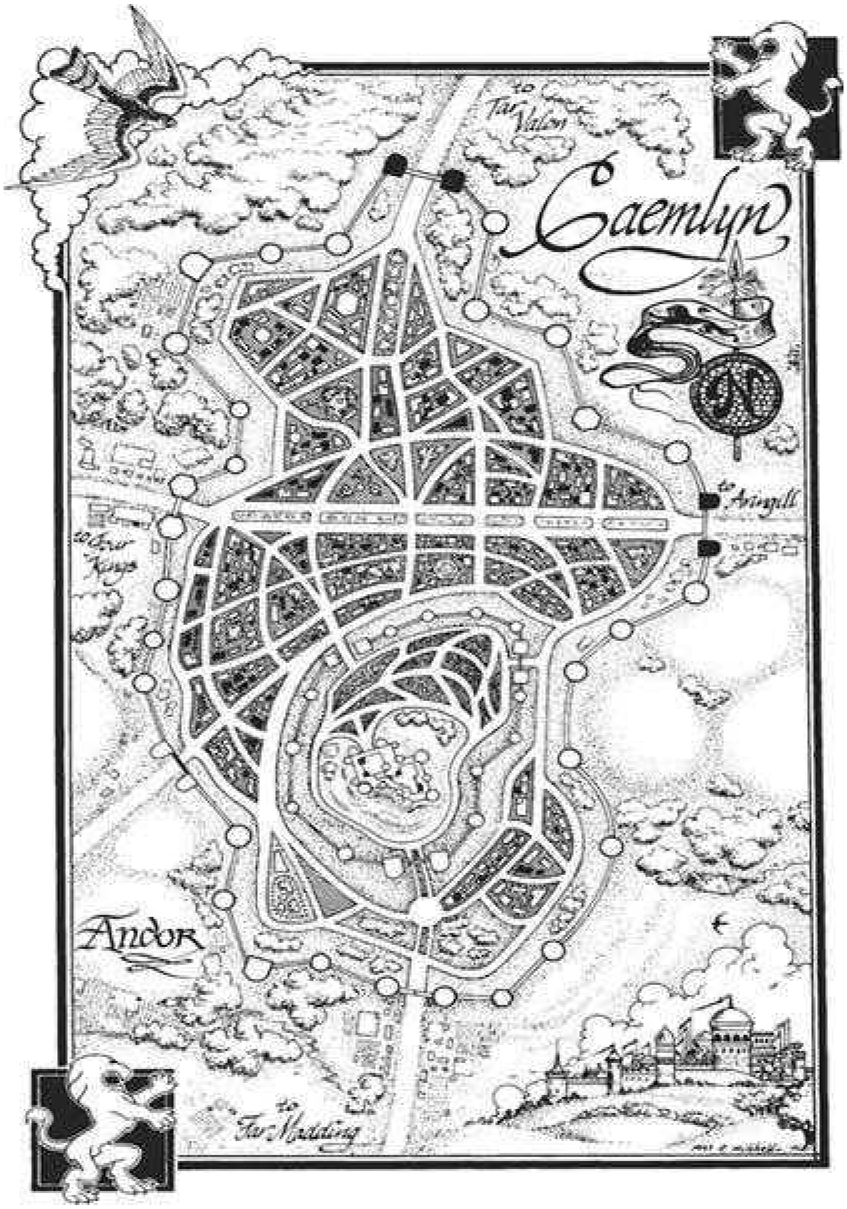
to Tar Valon
Caemlyn
to Aringill
to Four Kings
Andor
to Far Madding

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CHAPTER 54

To Caemlyn

Five hundred of the Maidens behind Sulin accompanied Rand back to the Royal Palace, where Bael waited in the great court inside the front gates with Thunder Walkers and Black Eyes and Water Seekers and men from every other society, their numbers filling the courtyard and crowding back into the palace through every door down to the smallest servants' way. Some watched from lower windows, waiting their turn to come out. The surrounding stone balconies were empty. In the entire courtyard only one man waited who was not Aiel; Tairens and Cairhienin—especially Cairhienin—stayed clear when Aiel gathered. The exception stood above Bael on the wide gray steps leading into the place. Pevin, with the crimson banner hanging limply from its staff, and no more expression surrounded by Aiel than at any other time.

Aviendha, behind Rand's saddle, clung tightly to him, breasts pressed against his back, until the very moment he dismounted. There had been an exchange between her and some of the Wise Ones back at the docks that he did not think he had been supposed to hear.

"Go with the Light," Amys had said, touching Aviendha's face. "And guard him closely. You know how much depends on him."

"Much depends on you both," Bair told Aviendha, almost at the same time that Melaine said irritably, "It would be easier if you had succeeded by now."

Sorilea snorted. "Even Maidens knew how to handle men in my day."

"She has been more successful than you know," Amys told them. Aviendha shook her head; the roses-and-thorns ivory bracelet slid down her arm as she raised a hand to forestall the other woman, but Amys went on over her half-formed protests. "I have waited for her to tell us, but since she will not—" She saw him then, standing only ten feet away, with Jeade'en's reins in his hand, and cut off sharply. Aviendha turned to see what Amys was staring at; when her eyes found him, bright crimson suffused her face,

then drained away so suddenly that even her sun-dark cheeks looked pale. The four Wise Ones fixed him with flat, unreadable gazes.

Asmodean and Mat came up behind him, leading their horses. "Do women learn that look in the cradle?" Mat muttered. "Do their mothers teach them? I'd say the mighty Car'a'carn *will get his ears singed if he stays around here much longer."*

Shaking his head, Rand reached up as Aviendha swung a leg over to slide down, and lifted her from the dapple's back. For a moment he held her by the waist, looking down into her clear blue-green eyes. She did not look away, and her expression never changed, but her hands tightened slowly on his forearms. What success was she supposed to have? He had thought she was set to spy on him for the Wise Ones, but if she ever asked a question about things he held back from the Wise Ones, it was in open anger at him for keeping secrets from them. Never slyly, never trying to ferret something out. Bludgeon, maybe, but never ferret. He had considered the possibility that she was like one of Colavaere's young women, but only for the brief moment it took to think of the notion. Aviendha would never let herself be used in that way. Besides, even if she had, giving him one taste of herself then denying him so much as a kiss afterward, not to mention making him chase her halfway around the world, was no way to go about it. If she was more than casual about being naked in front of him, Aiel customs were different. If his distress at it satisfied her, likely it was because she thought it was a great joke to play on him. So what was she supposed to be successful at? Plots all around him. Was everyone scheming? He could see his face in her eyes. Who had given her that silver necklace?

"I like canoodling as much as the next man," Mat said, "but don't you think there are a few too many people watching?"

Rand released Aviendha's waist and stepped back, but no more quickly than she. She bent her head, fussing with her skirt, muttering about how riding had disarrayed it, but not before he saw her cheeks redden. Well, he had not meant to embarrass her.

Scowling around the courtyard, he said, "I told you I don't know how many I can take, Bael." With the Maidens spilling back through the gates onto the ramp, there was barely room to move in the courtyard. Five hundred from each society meant six thousand Aiel; the hallways inside must be packed.

The towering Aiel chief shrugged. Like every other Aiel there, he had his *shoufa* wrapped around his head, ready to veil. No crimson headband, though it seemed at least half the others wore the black-and-white disc on their foreheads. “Every spear that can follow you, will. Will the two Aes Sedai come soon?”

“No.” It was good that Aviendha kept her promise not to let him touch her again. Lanfear had tried to kill her and Egwene because she did not know which was Aviendha. How had Kadere found out to tell her? No matter. Lan was right. Women found pain—or death—when they came too close to him. “They will not be coming.”

“There are stories of . . . trouble . . . by the river.”

“A great victory, Bael,” Rand said wearily. “And much honor earned.” *But not by me.* Pevin came down past Bael to stand behind Rand’s shoulder with the banner, his narrow, scarred face absolutely blank. “Does the whole palace know about this, then?” Rand asked.

“I heard,” Pevin said. His jaw worked, chewing for more words. Rand had found him a replacement for his patched country coat, good red wool, and the man had had Dragons embroidered on it, one climbing either side of his chest. “That you were going. Somewhere.” That seemed to exhaust his store.

Rand nodded. Rumors grew in the palace like mushrooms in the shade. But as long as Rahvin did not find out. He scanned the tile roofs and towertops. No ravens. He had not seen a raven in some time, though he heard of other men killing them. Perhaps they avoided him now. “Stand ready.” He seized *saidin,* floated in emptiness, emotionless.

The gateway appeared at the foot of the steps, first a bright line that seemed to *turn,* opening into a square hole into blackness four paces wide. Not a murmur came from the Aiel. Those beyond would be able to see him as through a smoked glass, a dusky shimmering in the air, but they could as well try walking through one of the palace walls. From the side, the gateway would be invisible except to the few close enough to see what might seem a long, fine hair drawn tight.

Four paces was as large as Rand could make it. There were limits for one man by himself, Asmodean claimed; it seemed there were always limits. The amount of *saidin* you drew did not matter. The One Power had little to do with gateways, really; only the making. Beyond, was something else. A dream of a dream, Asmodean called it.

He stepped through onto what appeared to be a paving stone lifted from the courtyard, but here the gray square hung in the midst of utter darkness, with a sense that in every direction there was nothing. Nothing, forever. It was not like night. He could see himself and the stone perfectly. But everything else, everywhere else, was blackness.

It was time to see how large he could make a platform. With the thought, more stones appeared all at once, duplicating the courtyard to an inch. He imagined it larger still. That quickly, gray stone stretched as far as he could see. With a start, he realized that his boots were beginning to sink into the stone under his feet; it looked no different, yet it yielded slowly like mud, oozing up around his boots. Hastily, he brought everything back to a square the size of what was outside—that much stayed solid—then began increasing it by one outer row of stones at a time. It did not take long to realize he could not make the platform much larger than his first attempt. The stone still looked all right, it did not sink beneath his feet, but the second added row felt . . . insubstantial, like a thin shell that might crack at a wrong step. Was that because this was as large as the thing could be made? Or because he had not thought of it larger at first? *We all make our limits.* The thought slid up surprisingly from somewhere. *And we set them further out than we have any right.*

Rand felt himself shiver. In the Void, it seemed like feeling someone else shiver. It was well to be reminded that Lews Therin was still inside him. He had to be careful not to fall into a battle for self while confronting Rahvin. If not for that, he might have . . . No. What had happened on the quay was done; he would not make a hash of it for breakfast.

Reducing the platform by one outer ring of square stones, he turned. Bael was waiting out there in what seemed a huge square doorway into daylight with the steps beyond. At his side, Pevin looked no more perturbed by what he saw than the Aiel chief, which was to say not at all. Pevin would carry that banner wherever Rand went, even the Pit of Doom, and never blink. Mat shoved back his hat to scratch his head, then jerked it low again, muttering something about dice in his head.

“Impressive,” Asmodean said quietly. “Quite impressive.”

“Flatter him some other time, harper,” Aviendha said.

She was the first to step through, watching Rand, not where she put her feet. She walked all the way to him without once so much as glancing at anything except his face. When she reached him, though, it was to swing away abruptly, settle her shawl over her elbows, and study the darkness. Sometimes women were stranger than anything else the Creator could possibly have made.

Bael and Pevin came right behind her; then Asmodean, one hand clutching the strap of his harpcase across his chest, the other white-knuckled on his sword hilt; and Mat, swaggering, but a trifle reluctant and grumbling as if arguing with himself. In the Old Tongue. Sulin claimed the honor to be first else, but soon a wide stream followed, not just Maidens of the Spear, but *Tain Shari,* True Bloods, and *Far Aldazar Din,* Brothers of the Eagle; Red Shields and Dawn Runners, Stone Dogs and Knife Hands, representatives of every society, crowding through.

As the numbers increased, Rand moved to the far side of the platform from the gateway. There was no need to see where he was going, really, but he wanted to. In truth, he could have remained at the other end, or gone to one side; direction here was mutable; whatever way he chose to move would take him to Caemlyn if done properly. And to the endless black of nowhere if done wrong.

Except for Bael and Sulin—and Aviendha, of course—the Aiel left a little space around him and Mat, Asmodean and Pevin. “Stay away from the edge,” Rand said. The Aiel nearest him moved back all of a foot. He could not see over the forest of *shoufa*-shrouded heads. “Is it full?” he called. The thing might hold half those who wanted to go, but not many more. “Is it full?”

“Yes,” a woman’s voice called back finally, reluctantly—he thought it sounded like Lamelle—but there was still a milling in the gateway, Aiel sure there must be room for one more.

“Enough!” Rand shouted. “No more! Clear the gateway! Everyone stand well clear!” He did not want what had happened to the Seanchan spear to happen here to living flesh.

A pause, and then, “It is clear.” It *was* Lamelle. He would have bet his last copper that Enaila and Somara were back there somewhere, too.

The gateway seemed to turn sideways, thinning until it vanished with one final flash of light.

“Blood and ashes!” Mat muttered, leaning disgustedly on his spear. “This is worse than the flaming Ways!” Which earned him a startled look from Asmodean, and a considering one from Bael. Mat did not notice; he was too busy glaring at the blackness.

There was no sense of motion, no breeze to stir the banner Pevin held. They could have been standing still. But Rand knew better; he could almost feel the place they were approaching draw nearer.

"If you come out too close to him, he will sense it." Asmodean licked his lips and avoided looking at anyone. "At least, that is what I have heard."

"I know where I am going," Rand said. Not too close. But not too far. He remembered the spot well.

No movement. Endless black, and them hanging in it. Motionless. Half an hour passed perhaps.

A slight stir ran through the Aiel.

"What is it?" Rand asked.

Murmurs came across the platform. "Someone fell," a bulky man near him said at last. Rand recognized him. Meciar. He was *Cor Darei*, a Night Spear. He wore the red headband.

"Not one of the . . ." Rand began, then caught Sulin looking at him, flat-eyed.

He turned to stare out into the darkness, anger a stain clinging to the emotionless Void. So it was not supposed to matter more to him if one of the Maidens had fallen, was it? It did. Falling forever through endless black. Would sanity crack before death came, from starvation or thirst or fear? In that fall, even an Aiel must eventually find fear strong enough to stop a heart. He almost hoped so; it must be more merciful than the other.

Burn me, what happened to all that hardness I was so proud of? A Maiden or a Stone Dog, a spear is a spear. Only, thinking it could not make it so. *I* will *be hard!* He would let the Maidens dance the spears where they wished. He would. And he knew he would search out the name of every one who died, that every name would be another knife-cut on his soul. *I will be hard. The Light help me, I will. The Light help me.*

Seemingly motionless, hanging in blackness.

The platform stopped. It was hard to say how he knew, when he could tell it was moving before, but he did.

He channeled, and a gateway opened in the same way it had in the courtyard in Cairhien. The angle of the sun had hardly changed, but here early-morning light shone on a paved street, and a rising slope patched brown with drought-killed grass and wildflowers, a slope topped by a stone wall two spans high or more, the stones worked rough so it seemed something natural. Above that wall he could see the golden domes of the

Royal Palace of Andor, a few of the pale spires topped with banners rippling the White Lion on a breeze. On the other side of that wall was the garden where he had first met Elayne.

Blue eyes floated accusingly outside the Void, the darting memory of kisses stolen in Tear, the memory of a letter laying her heart and soul at his feet, of messages borne by Egwene professing love. What would she say if she ever learned about Aviendha, about that night together in the snow hut? Memory of another letter, icily spurning him, a queen condemning a swineherd to outer darkness. It did not matter. Lan was right. But he wanted . . . What? Who? Blue eyes, and green, and dark brown. Elayne, who maybe loved him and maybe could not make up her mind? Aviendha, who taunted him with what she would not let him touch? Min, who laughed at him, thought him a wool-headed fool? All that flashed along the boundaries of the Void. He tried to ignore it, to ignore anguished memories of another blue-eyed woman, lying dead in a palace corridor, so long ago.

He had to stand there, while Aiel dashed out behind Bael, veiling themselves, spreading left and right. It was his presence that maintained the platform; it would vanish as soon as he stepped through the gateway. Aviendha waited almost as calmly as Pevin, though she did occasionally put her head out to frown faintly in one direction or the other down the street. Asmodean fingered his sword and breathed too quickly; Rand wondered whether the man knew how to use the thing. Not that he would have to. Mat stared up the wall as though at a bad remembrance. He had entered the Palace this way once, too.

The last veiled Aiel went by, and Rand motioned the others out, then followed. The gateway winked out of existence, leaving him in the middle of a long circle of wary Maidens. Aiel were running down the curving street—it followed the line of the hill; all the streets of the Inner City flowed with the land—vanishing around winding corners as they hurried to find and secure anyone who might give alarm. More were climbing the slope, and some had even begun to scale the wall, using tiny knobs and ridges for finger- and toe-holds.

Suddenly Rand stared. To his left the street bowed downward and rounded out of sight, the decline giving a view past tile-covered towers, sparkling in the morning sun with a hundred changing colors, across tile roofs all the way to one of the Inner City’s many parks, its white walks and monuments forming a lion’s head when seen from this angle. To his right the street rose a little before curving away, more towers topped by spires or domes of various shapes glittering above the rooftops. Aiel filled the street, fanning out quickly into side streets that spiraled away from the palace. Aiel, and not a soul else. The sun was high enough for people to be out and about their business, even this close to the Palace.

Like a nightmare the wall above toppled outward in half a dozen places, Aiel and stones smashing down on those still climbing. Before those bouncing, sliding chunks of masonry reached the streets, Trollocs appeared in the openings, dropping the tree-thick battering rams they had used and drawing scythe-curved swords—more, with spiked axes and barbed spears, huge man-shapes in black mail with spikes at shoulders and elbows, huge man-faces distorted by snouts and muzzles, beaks and horns and feathers, plunging down the slope with eyeless Myrddraal like midnight serpents in their midst. All along the street howling Trollocs and silent Myrddraal poured from doorways, leaped from windows. Lightning stabbed from the cloudless sky.

Rand wove Fire and Air to meet Fire and Air, a slow-spreading shield racing lightnings' fall. Too slow. One bolt struck the shield directly above his head, shattering in a blinding glare, but others grounded themselves, and his hair lifted as the air itself seemed to hammer him down. Almost he lost the weave, almost the Void itself, but he wove what he could not see through eyes still filled with coruscating light, spread the shield against bolts from the heavens that he could at least feel hammering at it. Hammering to reach him, but that could change. Drawing *saidin* through the *angreal* in his pocket, he wove the shield until he was sure it must cover half of the Inner City, then tied it off. As he pushed himself to his feet, sight began to return, watery and painful at first. He had to move fast. Rahvin knew he was here. He had to . . .

Surprisingly little time had passed, seemingly. Rahvin had not cared how many of his own he took. Stunned Trollocs and Myrddraal on the slope were falling to spears in the hands of Maidens, many of whom moved unsteadily themselves. Some Maidens, those nearest Rand, were only now pulling themselves up from where they had been flung, and Pevin stood spraddle-legged, holding himself upright with the red banner's staff, his scarred face still blank as slate. More Trollocs boiled through the gaps in the wall above, and the din of battle filled the streets in all directions, but it might as well have been in another country so far as Rand was concerned.

There had been more than one bolt in that first volley, but not all had been aimed at him. Mat's smoking boots lay a dozen paces from where Mat himself sprawled on his back. Tendrils of smoke rose from the black haft of his spear, too, from his coat, even from the silver foxhead, hanging out of his shirt, that had not saved him from a man's channeling. Asmodean was a twisted shape of char, recognizable only from the blackened harpcase still strapped to his back. And Aviendha . . . Unmarked, she could have laid down to rest—if she could have rested staring unblinking at the sun.

Rand bent to touch her cheek. Cooling already. It felt . . . Not like flesh.

"RAAAAHVIIIIN!"

It startled him a little, that sound coming from his throat. He seemed to be sitting somewhere deep in the back of his own head, the Void around him vaster, emptier, than it had ever been before. *Saidin* raged through him. He did not care if it scoured him away. The taint seeped through everything, tarnished everything. He did not care.

Three Trollocs broke past the Maidens, great spiked axes and oddly hooked spears in hairy hands, all-too-human eyes fixing on him, standing there apparently unarmed. The one with a boar's tusked snout went down with Enaila's spear through its spine. Eagle's beak and bear's muzzle raced on toward him, one on booted feet, the other on paws.

Rand felt himself smile.

Fire burst from the two Trollocs, a flame at every pore, bursting through black mail. Even as their mouths opened to scream, a gateway opened right where they stood. Bloody halves of burning, cleanly sliced Trolloc fell, but Rand was staring through the opening. Not into blackness, but a great columned hall with lion-carved stone panels, where a large man with wings of white in his dark hair started up in surprise from a gilded throne. A dozen men, some dressed as lords, some in breastplates, turned to see what their master was looking at.

Rand barely noticed them. "Rahvin," he said. Or someone did. He was not sure who.

Sending fire and lightning ahead of him, he stepped through and let the gateway close behind him. He was death.

Nynaeve was having no trouble maintaining the temper that allowed her to channel a flow of Spirit to the amber sleeping woman in her pouch.

Even the feel of unseen eyes could not touch her through her anger this morning. Siuan stood in front of her on a Salidar street in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* a street empty save for them, a few flies, and one fox that paused to look at them curiously before trotting on.

"You must concentrate," Nynaeve barked. "You had more control than this the first time. Concentrate!"

"I *am* concentrating, you fool girl!" Siuan's plain blue wool dress was suddenly silk. The seven-striped stole of the Amyrlin Seat hung around her neck, and a golden serpent bit its own tail on her finger. Frowning at Nynaeve, she did not seem aware of the change, though she had already worn the same five times today. "If there's any difficulty, it lies in that foul-tasting brew you fed me! Faagh! I can still taste it. Like flatfish gall." Stole and ring vanished; the silk dress's high neck plunged low enough to show the twisted stone ring, dangling between her breasts on a fine gold chain.

"If you didn't insist on me teaching you when you needed something to help you sleep, you wouldn't need it." So there had been a little sheepstongue root and a few other things that were not really necessary in the mix. The woman deserved to have her tongue curdled.

"You can hardly teach me when you're teaching Sheriam and the others." The silk paled; the neck was high again, surrounded by a white lace ruff, and a cap of pearls fitted close on Siuan's hair. "Or would you rather I came after them? You claim you need *some* sleep undisturbed."

Nynaeve quivered, fists clenched at her sides. Sheriam and the others were not the worst thing stoking her anger. She and Elayne took turns bringing them to *Tel'aran'rhiod* two at a time, sometimes all six in one night, and even if she was the teacher they never let her forget she was Accepted and they Aes Sedai. One sharp word when they made a foolish mistake . . . Elayne had only been sent to scrub pots once, but Nynaeve's hands were shriveled from hot, soapy water; back where her body lay sleeping they were, anyway. But they were not the worst. Nor was the fact that she barely had a moment to spare for investigating what, if anything, could be done about stilling and gentling. Logain was more cooperative than Siuan and Leane in any case, or at least more eager. Thank the Light he understood about keeping it secret. Or thought he did; he probably believed she would Heal him eventually. No, worse than that was that Faolain had been tested and raised . . . not Aes Sedai—not without the Oath Rod, which was tight in the Tower—but to something more than Accepted. Faolain wore any dress she chose now, and if she could not wear the shawl or choose an Ajah, she had been given other authority. Nynaeve thought she had fetched more cups of water, more books—left deliberately, she was sure!—more pins and inkjars and other useless things in the last four days than she had her entire stay in the Tower. Yet even Faolain was not the worst of all. She did not even want to remember that. Her anger could have heated a house in winter.

"What's put a hook in your gills today, girl?" Siuan had on a gown like those Leane wore, only more sheer than even Leane would ever wear in public, so thin it was hard to tell what color it was. Not the first time she had had that on today, either. What was perking around in the back of the woman's mind? In the World of Dreams, things like these changes of clothing betrayed thoughts you might not even know you had. "You have been almost decent company until today," Siuan continued irritably, then paused. "Until today. I see it now. Yesterday afternoon Sheriam assigned Theodrin to begin helping you break down that block you've built up. Is that what has your shift in a twist? You don't like Theodrin telling you what to do? She's a wilder, too, girl. If anyone can help you learn to channel without eating nettles first, she—"

"And what has you so jittery you can't hold your dress still?" Theodrin—that was what really hurt. The failure. "Maybe it's something I heard last night?" Theodrin was even-tempered, good-humored, patient; she said it could not be done in one session; her own block had taken months to demolish, and she had finally realized she was channeling long before going to the Tower. Still, failure hurt, and worst of all, if anyone ever discovered that she had cried like a baby in Theodrin's comforting arms when she knew she was failing . . . "I heard you heaved Gareth Bryne's boots at his head when he told you to sit down and polish them properly—he still doesn't know Min does the polishing, does he?—so he turned you upside down and—"

Siuan's full-armed slap rung her ears. For an instant she could only stare at the other woman, eyes going wider and wider. With a wordless shriek, she tried to punch Siuan in the eye. Tried, because somehow Siuan had tangled a fist in her hair. A moment later they were down in the dirt of the street, rolling about and screaming, flailing wildly.

Grunting, Nynaeve thought she was getting the better of it even if she did not know whether she was on the top or the bottom half the time. Siuan was trying to yank her braid out by the roots with one hand while the other pounded at her ribs or anything else it could find, but she had the other woman the same way, and Siuan's yanking and punching were definitely growing weaker, and she herself was going to pound Siuan senseless in another minute, then snatch her bald. Nynaeve yelped as a toe caught her hard on the shin. The woman kicked! Nynaeve tried to knee her, but it was not easy in skirts. Kicking was not fighting fair!

Suddenly Nynaeve realized that Siuan was shaking. At first she thought the woman was crying. Then she realized it was laughter. Pushing herself up, she brushed strands of hair out of her face—her braid was all but undone—and glared down at the other woman. "What are you laughing at? Me? If you are . . . !"

"Not at you. At us." Still quivering with mirth, Siuan shoved Nynaeve off her. Siuan's hair was in wild disarray, and dust covered the plain wool dress she wore now, worn-looking and neatly darned in several places. She was barefoot, too. "Two grown women, rolling around like . . . I haven't done that since I was . . . twelve, I think. I started thinking that all we needed would be fat Cian snatching me up by an ear to tell me girls don't fight. I heard she once knocked down a drunken printer; I don't know why." Something very like giggles took her for a moment, then she quieted them and stood, brushing dust from her clothes. "If we have a disagreement, we can settle it like adult women." And in a careful tone, "Still, it might be a good idea not to discuss Gareth Bryne." She gave a start as the worn dress became a gown, red with black-and-gold embroidery around hem and swooping neckline.

Nynaeve sat there staring at her. What would she have done as Wisdom if she found two women rolling around in the dirt that way? If anything, the answer kept her anger at a simmer. Siuan still did not seem to realize that there was no need to brush away dust with your hands in *Tel'aran'rhiod.* Snatching away fingers that had been repairing her braid, Nynaeve got up quickly; before she was on her feet again, her braid hung perfect over her shoulder and her good Two Rivers woolens might have just been laundered.

"I agree," she said. She would have made any two women she caught like that sorry they had been born even before she hauled them before the Women's Circle. What was she doing lashing out with her fists like some fool man? First Cerandin—she did not want to think about that episode, but there it was—then Latelle, and now this. Was she going to get around her block by being angry all the time? Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—that thought did nothing for her temper. "If we have disagreements, we can . . . discuss them."

"Which I suppose means we'll shout at one another," Siuan said dryly. "Well, better that than the other."

"We would not have to shout if you—!" Drawing a deep breath, Nynaeve jerked her eyes away; this was no way to begin anew. That breath caught in her throat, and she turned her head back to Siuan so quickly it seemed she had been shaking it. She hoped it did. Just for an instant, there had been a face in a window across the street. And there was a flutter in her belly, a bubble of fear, a burn of anger at being afraid. "I think we should go back now," she said quietly.

"Go back! You said that vile concoction would put me to sleep for a good two hours, and we haven't been here much more than half that."

"Time works differently here." Had it been Moghedien? The face had vanished so quickly it could have been someone dreaming herself here for an instant. If it was Moghedien, they must not—must not on any account—let her know she had been seen. They had to get away. Bubble of fear, burn of anger. "I told you. A day in *Tel'aran'rhiod* can be an hour in the waking world, or the other way round. We—"

"I've dipped better out of the bilge in a bucket, girl. You needn't think you can get away with shortchanging me. You'll teach me everything you teach the others, as agreed. We can go when I wake up."

There was no time. If it had been Moghedien. Siuan's dress was green silk now, and the Amyrlin's stole and her Great Serpent ring were back, but for a wonder the neckline was almost as low as anything she had worn before. The ring *ter'angreal* hung above her breasts, somehow part of a necklace of square emeralds.

Nynaeve moved without thinking. Her hand lashed out, snatched the necklace so hard it tore free from Siuan's neck. Siuan's eyes widened, but as soon as the clasp broke, she vanished, and necklace and ring melted from Nynaeve's hand. For an instant she stared at her empty fingers. What happened to someone sent out of *Tel'aran'rhiod* like that? Had she sent Siuan back to her sleeping body? Or to somewhere else? To nowhere?

Panic seized her. She was just standing there. Quick as thought she fled, the World of Dreams seeming to change around her.

She stood on a dirt street in a small village of wooden houses, none more than a single story. The White Lion of Andor waved from a tall staff, and a single stone dock stuck out into a broad river where a flock of long-billed birds flapped south low over the water. It all looked vaguely familiar, but it took her a moment to know where she was. Jurene. In Cairhien. And that river was the Erinin. It had been here that she and Egwene and Elayne had boarded the *Darter,* as badly misnamed as the *Riverserpent,* to continue their journey to Tear. That time seemed like something read in a book long ago.

Why had she jumped to Jurene? That was simple, and answered as soon as she thought of it. Jurene was the one place she knew well enough to leap to in *Tel'aran'rhiod* that she could be sure Moghedien did not know. They had been there for an hour, before Moghedien knew she existed, and she was sure neither she nor Elayne had ever mentioned it again, in *Tel'aran'rhiod* or awake.

But that left another question. The same one, in a way. Why Jurene? Why not step out of the Dream, wake up in her own bed, such as it was, if washing dishes and scrubbing floors on top of everything had not left her so weary she slept right on? *I can still step out.* Moghedien had seen her in Salidar, if that had been Moghedien. Moghedien knew Salidar now. *I can tell Sheriam.* How? Admit she was teaching Siuan? She was not supposed to have her hands on those *ter'angreal* except with Sheriam and the other Aes Sedai. How Siuan got hold of them when she wanted, Nynaeve did not know. No, she was not afraid of more hours up to her elbows in hot water. She was afraid of Moghedien. Anger burned in her belly fiercely. She wished she had some goosemint out of her scrip of herbs. *I am so . . . so* bloody *tired of being afraid.*

There was a bench in front of one of the houses, overlooking dock and river. She sat down and considered her situation from every angle. It was ridiculous. The True Source was a pale thing. She channeled a flame dancing in air above her hand. *She* might look solid—to herself, anyway—but she could see the river through that scrap of fire. She tied it off, and it faded away like mist as soon as the knot was done. How could she face Moghedien when the weakest novice in Salidar could match or better her strength? That was why she had fled here instead of leaving *Tel'aran'rhiod.* Afraid and angry at being afraid, too angry to think straight, to consider her own weakness.

She would step out of the Dream. Whatever Siuan's scheme had been, it was done; she would have to take her chances right along with Nynaeve. The thought of more hours scrubbing floors tightened her hand on her braid. Days more likely, and maybe Sheriam's switch besides. They might never let her near one of the dream *ter'angreal* again, or any *ter'angreal*. They would set Faolain over her instead of Theodrin. A finish to studying Siuan and Leane, much less Logain; maybe a finish to studying Healing.

In a fury she channeled another flame. If it was a whit stronger, she could not see it. So much for trying to crank her anger in hope it would help. "There's nothing for it but to just tell them I saw Moghedien," she muttered, yanking her braid hard enough to hurt. "Light, they *will* give me to Faolain. I'd almost rather die!"

"But you seem to enjoy running little errands for her."

That mocking voice pulled Nynaeve up off the bench like hands on her shoulders. Moghedien stood in the street all in black, shaking her head at what she saw. With all her strength Nynaeve wove a shield of Spirit and hurled it between the other woman and *saidar.* Tried to hurl it between; it was like chopping at a tree with a paper hatchet. Moghedien actually smiled before she bothered to slice Nynaeve's weave, and that as casually as brushing a biteme away from her face. Nynaeve stared at her as though poleaxed. After everything it came down to this. The One Power, useless. All the anger bubbling inside her, useless. All her plans, her hopes, useless. Moghedien did not bother to strike back. She did not even bother to channel a shield of her own. That was how much contempt she had.

"I was afraid you had seen me. I grew careless when you and Siuan started trying to kill each other. With your hands." Moghedien gave a belittling laugh. She was weaving something, lazily because there was no reason to hurry. Nyaneve did not know what it was, yet she wanted to scream. Fury seethed inside her, but fear dulled her wits, rooted her feet to the ground. "Sometimes I think you are all too ignorant even to train, you and the former *Amyrlin Seat* and all the rest. But I cannot allow you to betray me." That weave was reaching out for her. "It is time to collect you at last, it seems."

"Hold, Moghedien!" Birgitte shouted.

Nynaeve's mouth dropped open. It *was* Birgitte, as she had been, in her short white coat and wide yellow trousers, intricate golden braid pulled over her shoulder, silver arrow drawn on silver bow. It was impossible. Birgitte was no longer part of *Tel'aran'rhiod,* she was back in Salidar, making sure no one discovered Nynaeve and Siuan asleep with the sun up and began asking questions.

Moghedien was so shocked, the flows she had woven vanished. Shock lasted less than a moment, though. The gleaming arrow flew from Birgitte's bow—and evaporated. The bow evaporated. Something seemed to seize the archer, jerking her arms straight up, pulling her clear of the ground. Almost immediately she was snubbed short, pulled tight between wrists and ankles a foot above the ground.

"I should have considered the possibility of you." Moghedien turned her back on Nynaeve to move closer to Birgitte. "Do you enjoy your flesh? Without Gaidal Cain?"

Nynaeve thought of channeling. But what? A dagger that might not even penetrate the woman's skin? Fire that would not singe her skirts? Moghedien knew how useless she was; she was not even looking at her. If she stopped the flow of Spirit to the sleeping woman in amber, she would wake in Salidar, she could give warning. Her face twisted near to tears as she looked at Birgitte. The golden-haired woman hung there, staring defiantly at Moghedien. Moghedien contemplated her in return as a woodcarver would a block of wood.

There's only me, Nynaeve thought. *I might as well not be able to channel at all. There's only me.*

Lifting that first foot was like pulling it out of knee-deep mud, the second staggering step no easier. Toward Moghedien. "Don't hurt me," Nynaeve cried. "Please. Don't hurt me." A chill ran through her. Birgitte was gone. A child of perhaps three or four, in short white coat and wide yellow trousers, stood there playing with a toy-sized silver bow. Flipping her golden braid back, the child aimed the bow at Nynaeve and giggled, then stuck a finger in her mouth as though unsure whether she had done something wrong. Nynaeve sagged to her knees. It was hard work crawling in skirts, but she did not think she could have remained standing. Somehow she managed, reaching out a pleading hand and whimpering. "Please. Don't hurt me. Please. Don't hurt me." Over and over as she dragged toward the Forsaken, a broken beetle scrabbling in the dirt.

Moghedien watched silently, until at last she said, "Once I thought you were stronger than this. Now I find I truly like the sight of you on your knees. That is close enough, girl. Not that I think you have courage enough to try tearing *my* hair out. . . .” She seemed amused by the notion.

Nynaeve’s hand wavered a span from Moghedien. It had to be close enough. There was only her. And *Tel’aran’rhiod*. The image formed in her head, and there it was, silver bracelet on her outstretched wrist, silver leash linking it to the silver collar around Moghedien’s neck. It was not just the *a’dam* she fixed in her head, but Moghedien wearing it, Moghedien and the *a’dam,* a part of *Tel’aran’rhiod* that she held in the form she wanted. She knew something of what to expect; she had worn an *a’dam*’s bracelet briefly once, in Falme. In a strange way she was aware of Moghedien in the same way she was aware of her own body, her own emotions, two sets, each distinct, but each in her own head. One thing she had only hoped, because Elayne insisted it was so. The thing was indeed a link; she could feel the Source *through* the other woman.

Moghedien’s hand leaped to the collar, shock rounding her eyes. Rage and horror. Rage more than horror, at first. Nynaeve felt them almost as if they were her own. Moghedien had to know what the leash-and-collar was, yet she tried to channel anyway; at the same time Nynaeve felt a slight shifting in herself, in the *a’dam,* as the other woman tried to bend *Tel’aran’rhiod* to herself. Suppressing Moghedien’s attempt was simple; the *a’dam* was a link, with her in control. Knowing that made it easy. Nynaeve did not want to channel those flows, so they were not channeled. Moghedien might as well have tried to pick up a mountain with her bare hands. Horror overwhelmed rage.

Getting to her feet, Nynaeve fastened the proper image in her mind. She did not just imagine Moghedien leashed in the *a’dam,* she *knew* Moghedien was leashed, as firmly as she knew her own name. The sense of shifting, of her skin trying to crawl, did not go away, though. “Stop that,” she said sharply. The *a’dam* did not move, but it seemed to tremble unseen. She thought of blackwasp nettles lightly brushing the other woman from shoulders to knees. Moghedien shuddered, exhaled convulsively. “Stop it, I said, or I’ll do worse.” The shifting ceased. Moghedien watched her warily, still clutching the silver collar around her neck and with an air of being poised on her toes for flight.

Birgitte—the child who was, or had been, Birgitte—stood eyeing them curiously. Nynaeve formed the image of her as a grown woman, concentrated. The little girl put her finger back in her mouth and began studying the toy bow. Nynaeve breathed angrily. It was hard changing what someone else was already maintaining. And on top of that, Moghedien had claimed she could make changes permanent. But what she could do, she could undo. “Restore her.”

“If you release me, I—”

Nynaeve thought of nettles again, and not a light brush this time. Moghedien sucked air through clenched teeth, shook like a bedsheet in a high wind.

“That,” Birgitte said, “was the most frightening thing that has ever happened to me.” Herself once more, she wore the short coat and wide trousers, but she had no bow or quiver. “I *was* a child, but at the same time, what was me—really me—was just some fancy floating in the back of that child’s mind. And I knew it. I knew I was just going to watch what happened and play. . . .” Flipping her golden braid back over her shoulder, she gave Moghedien a hard look.

“How did you get here?” Nynaeve asked. “I am grateful, you understand, but . . . how?”

Birgitte gave Moghedien a final stony stare, then opened her coat to fish in the neck of her blouse, pulling up the twisted stone ring on a leather thong. “Siuan woke up. Just for a moment, and not all the way. Long enough to grumble about you snatching this from her. When you didn’t wake right behind her, I knew something must be wrong, so I took the ring and the last of what you mixed for Siuan.”

“There was hardly any left. Only the dregs.”

“Enough to put me to sleep. It tastes horrible, by the way. After that, it was as easy as finding feather-dancers in Shiota. In some ways this is almost as if I were still—” Birgitte cut off with another glare for Moghedien. The silver bow reappeared in her hand, and a quiver of silver arrows at her hip, yet after one moment they vanished again. “Past is past, and the future is ahead,” she said firmly. “I was not truly surprised to realize there were two of you who knew they were in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. I knew the other must be her, and when I arrived and saw the pair of you . . . It seemed as if she had already captured you, but I hoped that if I distracted her, you might come up with something.”

Nynaeve felt a stab of shame. She had considered abandoning Birgitte. That was what she had almost come up with. The thought had only been there for a moment, rejected as soon as it came, but it had come. What a coward she was. Surely Birgitte never even had moments when fear almost took control of her. "I . . ." A faint taste of boiled catfern and powdered mavinsleaf. "I almost ran away," she said faintly. "I was so frightened my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I almost ran away and left you."

"Oh?" Nynaeve writhed inside as Birgitte considered her. "But you did not, did you? I should have loosed before I called out, but I've never felt comfortable shooting anyone from behind. Even her. Still, it all worked out. But what do we do with her now?"

Moghedien certainly seemed to have overcome her fear. Ignoring the silver collar around her throat, she watched Nynaeve and Birgitte as though they were the prisoners, not she, and she was deliberating what to do with them. Except for an occasional twitch of her hands, as if she wanted to scratch where her skin held the memory of nettles, she appeared black-clad serenity. Only the *a'dam* let Nynaeve know there was fear in the woman, almost a gibbering, but pushed down to a muted buzz. She wished the thing let her know what Moghedien was thinking as well as feeling. Then again, she was just as glad not to be inside the mind behind those cold dark eyes.

"Before you consider anything . . . drastic," Moghedien said, "remember that I know much that would be useful to you. I have observed the other Chosen, peeked into their schemes. Is that not worth something?"

"Tell me, and I will consider whether it's worth anything," Nynaeve said. What could she do with the woman?

"Lanfear, Graendal, Rahvin and Sammael are plotting together."

Nynaeve gave the leash a short tug, staggering her. "I know that. Tell me something new." The woman was captive here, but the *a'dam* only existed so long as they were in *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

"Do you know they are drawing Rand al'Thor to attack Sammael? But when he does, he will find the others as well, waiting to trap him between them. At least, he will find Graendal and Rahvin. I think Lanfear plays another game, one the others know nothing about."

Nynaeve exchanged worried glances with Birgitte. Rand must learn of this. He would, as soon as she and Elayne could speak to Egwene tonight. If they could manage to put their hands on the *ter'angreal* long enough.

"That is," Moghedien murmured, "if he lives long enough to find them."

Nynaeve took hold of the silvery leash where it joined the collar and pulled the Forsaken's face close to hers. Dark eyes met her gaze flatly, but she could feel anger through the *a'dam*, and fear wriggling up and being stamped down. “You listen to me. Do you think I don't know why you are pretending to be so cooperative? You think if you keep talking long enough, I will make some slip, and you can escape. You think the longer we talk, the harder I'll find it to kill you.” That much was true enough. To kill somebody in cold blood, even one of the Forsaken, would be hard, maybe harder than she could manage. What was she going to do with the woman? “But you understand this. I won't allow hinting at things. If you try keeping anything back from me, I will do to you everything you ever thought of doing to me.” Dread, creeping through the leash, like bone-chilling shrieks deep in Moghedien's mind. Maybe she did not know as much about *a'dam* as Nynaeve thought. Maybe she believed Nynaeve could read her thoughts if she tried. “Now if you know of some threat to Rand, something ahead of Sammael and the others, you tell me. Now!”

Words spilled from Moghedien's mouth, and her tongue flickered out to wet her lips continually. “Al'Thor means to go after Rahvin. Today. This morning. Because he thinks Rahvin killed Morgase. I don't know whether he did or not, but al'Thor believes it. But Rahvin never trusted Lanfear. He never trusted any of them. Why should he? He thought it all might be some trap set for him, so he has laid a trap of his own. He has set Wards through Caemlyn so if a man channels a spark he will know. Al'Thor will walk right into it. He almost certainly already has. I think he meant to leave Cairhien right after sunrise. I had no part of it. It was none of it my doing. I—”

Nynaeve wanted to shut her up; the fear sweat glistening on the woman's face made her sick, but if she had to listen to that pleading voice, too . . . She started to channel, wondering whether she would be strong enough to hold Moghedien's tongue, then smiled. She was linked to Moghedien, and in control. Moghedien's eyes bulged as she wove flows to stop her own mouth and tied them. Nynaeve added plugs for her ears, too, before turning to Birgitte. “What do you think?”

“Elayne's heart will break. She loves her mother.”

“I know that!” Nynaeve took a breath. “I will cry with her and mean every tear, but right now I must worry about Rand. I think she was telling the truth. I could almost feel it.” She caught the silver leash just below her bracelet and shook it. “Maybe it's this, and maybe it was imagination. What do you believe?”

"That it's the truth. She was never very brave unless she clearly had the upper hand, or thought she could get it. And you certainly put the fear of the Light into her."

Nynaeve grimaced. Birgitte's every word put another bubble of anger in her belly. She was never very brave except when she clearly had the upper hand. That could describe herself. She had put the fear of the Light into Moghedien. She had, and she had meant every word when she said it. Boxing somebody's ears when they needed it was one thing; threatening torture, wanting to torture, even Moghedien, was something else again. And here she was trying to avoid what she knew she had to do. Never very brave except when she clearly had the upper hand. This time the bubble of anger was seeded by herself. "We have to go to Caemlyn. I do, at least. With her. I may not be able to channel strongly enough to tear paper as I am, but with the *a'dam* I can use her strength."

"You won't be able to affect anything in the waking world from *Tel'aran'rhiod,*" Birgitte said quietly.

"I know! I know, but I have to do something."

Birgitte threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, Nynaeve, it is such an embarrassment being associated with such a coward as you." Abruptly her eyes widened in surprise. "There wasn't much of your potion left. I think I am wak—" In mid-word, she was simply no longer there.

Taking a deep breath, Nynaeve untied the flows around Moghedien. Or made her do it; with the *a'dam* it was hard to tell which, really. She wished Birgitte was still there. Another pair of eyes. Someone who probably knew *Tel'aran'rhiod* better than she ever could. Someone who was brave. "We are taking a trip, Moghedien, and you are going to help me with every last scrap of you. If anything takes me by surprise . . . Suffice it to say, anything that happens to the one wearing this bracelet happens to the one wearing the collar. Only about tenfold." The sickly look on Moghedien's face said she believed. Which was just as well, since it was true.

Another deep breath, and Nynaeve began forming the image of the one place in Caemlyn she knew well enough to remember. The Royal Palace, where Elayne had taken her. Rahvin must be there. But in the waking world, not the World of Dreams. Still, she had to do something. *Tel'aran'rhiod* changed around her.

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CHAPTER 55

The Threads Burn

Rand stopped. A long scorch along the corridor wall marked where half a dozen costly tapestries had gone to ash. Flames licked upward on another; a number of inlaid chests and tables were only charred ruins. Not his work. Thirty paces further on, red-coated men in breastplates and helmets with barred face-guards lay contorted in death on the white floor tiles, useless swords in hands. Not his work either. Rahvin had been wasteful of his own in attempting to reach Rand. He had been clever in his attacks, clever in his escapes, but from the moment he fled the throne room he had not faced Rand for more than the instant it took to strike and flee. Rahvin was strong, perhaps as strong as Rand, and more knowledgeable, but Rand had the fat-little-man *angreal* in his pocket, and Rahvin had none.

The corridor was doubly familiar, once for having seen it before, once for having seen something similar.

I walked this way with Elayne and Gawyn the day I met Morgase. The thought slithered painfully along the boundaries of the Void. He was cold in there, without emotion. *Saidin* raged and burned, but he was icy calm.

And another thought, like a stab. *She lay on a floor like this, her golden hair spread as though sleeping. Ilyena Sunhair. My Ilyena*.

Elaida had been there that day, too. *She Foretold the pain I'd bring. She knew the darkness in me. Some of it. Enough*.

Ilyena, I did not know what I was doing. I was mad! I am mad. Oh, Ilyena!

Elaida knew—some—but she did not tell even all of that. Better if she had told.

Oh, Light, is there no forgiveness? I did what I did in madness. Is there no mercy?

Gareth Bryne would have killed me, had he known. Morgase would have ordered my death. Morgase would be alive, perhaps. Elayne's mother alive. Aviendha alive. Mat. Moiraine. How many alive, if I had died?

I have earned my torment. I deserve the final death. Oh, Ilyena, I deserve death.

I deserve death.

Bootsteps behind him. He turned.

They came out of a broad crossing corridor not twenty paces from him, two dozen men in breastplates and helmets and the white-collared red coats of the Queen's Guards. Except that Andor had no queen now, and these men had not served her while she lived. A Myrddraal led them, pale eyeless face like something found under a rock, overlapping plates of black armor heightening the illusion of a serpent as it moved, black cloak hanging motionless however it moved. The look of the Eyeless was fear, but fear was a distant thing in the Void. They hesitated when they saw him; then the Halfman raised its black-bladed sword. Men who had not already drawn put hands to hilts.

Rand—he thought that was his name—channeled in a way he could not remember doing before.

Men and Myrddraal stiffened where they stood. White frost grew thick on them, frost that smoked as Mat's boots had smoked. The Myrddraal's upraised arm broke off with a loud crack. When it hit the floor tiles, arm and sword shattered.

Rand could feel the cold—yes, that was his name; Rand—cold like a knife as he walked past and turned the way they had come. Cold, yet warmer than *saidin*.

A man and a woman crouched against the wall, servants liveried in red and white, short of their middle years and holding each other as though for protection. Seeing Rand—there was more to the name; not just Rand—the man started to rise from where he had huddled away from the Myrddraal-led band, but the woman hauled him back by his sleeve.

"Go in peace," Rand said, putting out a hand. Al'Thor. Yes, Rand al'Thor. "I'll not hurt you, but you could be hurt if you stay."

The woman's brown eyes rolled up in her head. She would have collapsed in a heap if the man had not caught her, and his narrow mouth was working rapidly, as if he was praying but could not get the words out.

Rand looked where the man was looking. His hand had stretched out of his coatsleeve far enough to bare the Dragon's golden-maned head that was part of his skin. “I will not hurt you,” he said, and walked on, leaving them there. He had Rahvin to corner yet. Rahvin to kill. And then?

No sound but the click of his boots on the tiles. And deep in his head, a faint voice murmuring mournfully of Ilyena and forgiveness. He strained to feel Rahvin channeling, to feel the man filled with the True Source. Nothing. *Saidin* seared his bones, froze his flesh, scoured his soul, but from without it was not easy to see until you were close. A lion in high grass, Asmodean had said once. A rabid lion. Should Asmodean count among those who should not have died? Or Lanfear? No. Not—

He had only a moment's warning to throw himself flat, a hair-thin slice of time between feeling flows suddenly woven and an arm-thick bar of white light, liquid fire, slicing through the wall, ripping across like a sword through where his chest had been. Where that bar slashed, on both sides of the hallways, wall and friezes, doors and tapestries ceased to exist. Severed wall hangings and chunks of stone and plaster broken free rained to the floor.

So much for the Forsaken fearing to use balefire. Who had told him that? Moiraine. She surely had deserved to live.

Balefire leaped from his hands, a brilliant white shaft streaking toward where that other bar had originated. The other failed even as his punched through the wall, leaving a purple afterimage fanning across his vision. He released his own flow. Had he done it finally?

Scrambling to his feet, he channeled Air, slamming ruined doors open so hard that the remnants ripped from the hinges. Inside, the room was empty. A sitting room, with chairs arrayed before a great marble fireplace. His balefire had taken a bite out of one of the arches leading to a small courtyard with a fountain, and another from one of the fluted columns along the walk beyond.

Rahvin had not gone that way, though, and he had not died in that blast of balefire. A residue hung in the air, a fading remnant of woven *saidin*. Rand recognized it. Different from the gateway he had made to Skim to Caemlyn, or the one to Travel—he knew now that was what he had done—into the throne room. But he had seen one like this in Tear, had made one himself.

He wove another now. A gateway, an opening at least, a hole in reality. It was not blackness on the other side. In fact, if he had not known the way was there, if he could not have seen the weave of it, he might not have known. There before him were the same arches opening onto the same courtyard and fountain, the same columned walk. For an instant the neatly rounded holes his balefire had made in arch and column wavered, filled, then were holes again. Wherever that gateway led, it was to somewhere else, a reflection of the Royal Palace as once it had been a reflection of the Stone of Tear. Vaguely he regretted not talking to Asmodean about it while he had the chance, but he had never been able to speak of that day to anyone. It did not matter. On that day he had carried *Callandor*, but the *angreal* in his pocket had already proved enough to harry Rahvin.

Stepping through quickly, he loosed the weave and hurried away across the courtyard as the gateway vanished. Rahvin would have felt that gate if he was close enough and trying. The fat little stone man did not mean he could stand and wait to be attacked.

No sign of life, except for himself and one fly. That was the way it had been in Tear, too. Stand-lamps in the hallways stood unlit, with pale wicks that had never seen a flame, yet even in what should have been the dimmest hall there was light, seemingly coming from everywhere and nowhere. Sometimes those lamps moved, too, and other things as well. Between one glance and the next, a tall lamp might have moved a foot, a vase in a niche an inch. Little things, as if someone had shifted them in the time his eyes were away. Wherever this was, it was a strange place.

It came to him, as he trotted along another colonnade, sensing for Rahvin, that he had not heard the voice crying over Ilyena since he channeled balefire. Perhaps he had somehow chased Lews Therin out of his head.

Good. He stopped at the edge of one of the Palace gardens. The roses and whitestar bushes looked as drought-bedraggled as they would have in the real palace. On some of the white spires rising above the rooftops, the White Lion banner rippled, but which spire could change in the blink of an eye. *Good, if I don’t have to share my head with*—

He felt odd. Insubstantial. He raised his arm, and stared. He could see the garden through coatsleeve and arm as through a mist. A mist that was thinning. When he glanced down, he could see the walk’s paving stones through himself.

No! It was not his thought. An image began to coalesce. A tall, dark-eyed man with a worry-creased face and more white in his hair than brown. *I am Lews Ther*—

I am Rand al'Thor, Rand broke in. He did not know what was happening, but the faint Dragon was beginning to fade from the misty arm held in front of his face. The arm began to look darker, the fingers on his hand longer. *I am me*. That echoed in the Void. *I am Rand al'Thor*.

He fought to picture himself in his own mind, struggled to make the image of what he saw in the mirror every day shaving, what he saw in a stand-mirror dressing. It was a frantic fight. He had never really looked at himself. The two images waxed and waned, the older dark-eyed man and the younger with blue-gray eyes. Slowly the younger image firmed, the older faded. Slowly his arm grew more solid. His arm, with the Dragon twined around it and the heron branded into his palm. There had been times he hated those marks, but now, even enclosed within the emotionless Void, he almost grinned to see them.

Why had Lews Therin tried to take him over? To make him into Lews Therin. He was sure that was who that dark-eyed man with the suffering face had been. Why now? Because he could in this place, whatever it was? Wait. It had been Lews Therin who shouted that adamant "no." Not an attack by Lews Therin. By Rahvin, and not using the Power. If the man had been able to do this back in Caemlyn, the real Caemlyn, he would have. It had to be some ability he had gained here. And if Rahvin had gained it, perhaps he had, too. The image of himself had been what held him, brought him back.

He focused on the nearest rosebush, a thing a span high, and imagined it growing thin, foggy. Obediently, it melted away to nothing, but as soon as the picture in his mind was nothing, the rosebush was suddenly back, just as it had been.

Rand nodded coldly. It had limits, then. There were always limits and rules, and he did not know them here. But he knew the Power, as much as Asmodean had taught him and he had taught himself, and *saidin* was still in him, all the sweetness of life, all the corruption of death. Rahvin had to have seen him to attack. With the Power you had to see something to affect it, or know *exactly* where it was in relation to you down to a hair. Perhaps it was different here, but he did not think so. He almost wished Lews Therin had not gone silent again. The man might know this place and its rules.

Balconies and windows overlooked the garden, in some places four stories high. Rahvin had tried to . . . unmake him. He drew on the raging torrent of *saidin* through the *angreal*. Lightnings flashed from the sky, a hundred forking silver bolts, more, stabbing at every window, every balcony. Thunder filled the garden, erupting chunks of stone. The air itself crackled, and the hair on his arms and chest tried to stand under his shirt. Even the hair on his head began to lift. He let the lightnings die. Here and there bits of shattered stone windowframe and balcony broke loose, the crash of their fall muted by the echoes of thunder still ringing in his ears.

Gaping holes peered down now where windows had. They looked like sockets in some monstrous skull, the ruined balconies like a dozen splintered mouths. If Rahvin had been at any of them, he was surely dead. Rand would not believe it until he saw the corpse. He wanted to see Rahvin dead.

Wearing a snarl he did not know was there, he stalked back into the palace. He had wanted to see Rahvin die.

Nynaeve hurled herself flat and scrambled along the hall floor as *something* slashed through the nearest wall. Moghedien slithered as fast as she, but if the woman had not, she would have hauled her by the *a'dam*. Had that been Rand, or Rahvin? She had seen bars of white fire, liquid light, like that in Tanchico, and she had no wish to be anywhere near one again. Balefire was one weave she did not know and did not want to know. *I want to Heal, burn both of these fool men, not learn a fancy way to kill!*

She levered herself up to a crouch, peered back the way they had come. Nothing. An empty Palace hallway. With a ten-foot long gash through both walls, as neat as any stoneworker could have done, and bits of tapestry lying on the floor. No sign of either man. She had not had a glimpse of either so far. Only their handiwork. Sometimes that handiwork had almost been her. A good thing that she could draw on Moghedien's anger, filter it out of the terror clawing to escape and let it seep into her. Her own was a pitiful thing that would scarcely have allowed her to sense the True Source, much less channel the flow of Spirit that kept her in *Tel'aran'rhiod*.

Moghedien was hunched over on her knees, dry retching. Nynaeve's mouth tightened. The woman had tried to remove the *a'dam* again. Her cooperation had faded quickly when they discovered Rand and Rahvin actually here in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Well, trying to unfasten that collar when it was around your neck was its own punishment. At least Moghedien did not have anything left in her stomach this time.

"Please." Moghedien caught at Nynaeve's skirt. "I tell you, we must get away." Stark panic made her voice painful. Moghedien's clawing terror mirrored itself on her face. "They are here in the flesh. The flesh!"

"Be quiet," Nynaeve said absently. "Unless you've lied to me, that is an advantage. For me." The other woman claimed that being in the World of Dreams physically limited your control of the Dream. Or rather, she admitted it, after letting a bit of the knowledge slip. She had admitted, too, that Rahvin did not know *Tel'aran'rhiod* as well as she. Nynaeve hoped that meant he did not know it as well as *she* did. That he knew more than Rand, she did not doubt. That wool-headed man! Whatever his reason for coming after Rahvin, he should never have let the man lead him here, where he did not know the rules, where thoughts could kill.

"Why will you not understand what I tell you? Even if they had only dreamed themselves here, either would be stronger than we. Here in the flesh, they could crush us without blinking. In the flesh they can draw *saidin* more deeply than we can draw *saidar* dreaming."

"We are linked." Still not paying attention, Nynaeve gave her braid a sharp pull. No way to tell which direction they had gone. And no warning of anything until she saw them. Somehow it still seemed unfair that they could channel without her being able to see or feel the flows. A stand-lamp that had been sliced in two was suddenly whole again, then not, just as quickly. That white fire must be incredibly powerful. *Tel'aran'rhiod* usually healed itself rapidly whatever you did to it.

"You brainless fool," Moghedien sobbed, shaking Nynaeve's skirt with both hands as if wanting to shake Nynaeve. "It does not matter how brave you are. We are linked, but you contribute nothing the way you are. Not a shred. It is my strength, and your madness. They are here in the flesh, not dreaming! They are using things you have never dreamed of! They will destroy us if we stay!"

"Keep your voice down," Nynaeve snapped. "Do you want to bring one of them down on us?" She looked both ways hurriedly, but the hallway was still empty. Had that been footsteps, boots? Rand or Rahvin? One had to be approached as carefully as the other. A man in a fight for his life could strike out before he saw they were friends. Well, that she was, anyway.

“We must go,” Moghedien insisted, but she did lower her voice. She got to her feet, sullen defiance twisting her mouth. Fear and anger writhed inside her, first one stronger, then the other. “Why should I help you any further? This is madness!”

“Would you rather feel the nettles again?”

Moghedien flinched, yet her dark eyes remained stubborn. “You think I will let them kill me rather than be hurt by you? You *are* mad. I will not stir from this spot until you are ready to take us away from here.”

Nynaeve jerked her braid again. If Moghedien refused to walk, she would have to drag her. Not a very quick way to search, with what seemed miles of Palace corridors yet to go. She should have been harsher when the woman first tried balking. In Nynaeve’s place, Moghedien would have killed without hesitation, or, if she thought the other useful, woven the trick of taking someone’s will, making them worship her. Nynaeve had tasted that once, in Tanchico, and even had she known how it was done, she did not think she could do it to somebody else. She despised this woman, hated her with all her being. But even if she had not needed her, she could not have killed her just standing there. The trouble was, she was afraid that Moghedien knew that, too, now.

Still, a Wisdom headed the Women’s Circle—even if the Circle did not always agree—and the Women’s Circle dealt out punishments to women who broke the law or offended custom too deeply, and to men, too, for some transgressions. She might not have Moghedien’s stomach for killing, for crushing people’s minds, but. . . .

Moghedien opened her mouth, and Nynaeve filled it with a gag of Air. Or rather she made Moghedien do it; with the *a’dam* linking them, it was like channeling herself, but Moghedien knew it was her own abilities being used like a tool in Nynaeve’s hand. Dark eyes glittered indignantly as Moghedien’s own flows snared her arms to her sides and pulled her skirts tight around her ankles. For the rest, Nynaeve used the *a’dam*, just as with the nettles, creating the sensations she wanted the other woman to feel. Not the reality; the *feel* of reality.

Moghedien stiffened in her bonds as a leather strap seemed to strike her bottom. That was what it would feel like to her. Outrage and humiliation rolled through the leash. And contempt. Compared to her elaborate ways of hurting people, this seemed suitable for a child.

“When you are ready to cooperate again,” Nynaeve said, “just nod.” This could not take long. She could not just stand there while Rand and Rahvin tried to kill one another. If the wrong one died because she avoided danger by letting Moghedien keep her there . . .

Nynaeve remembered a day when she was sixteen, just after she had been judged old enough to put her hair in a braid. She had stolen a plum pudding from Corin Ayellin on a dare from Nela Thane and walked out the kitchen door right into Mistress Ayellin. Adding the aftermath, sending it along the leash in a lump, made Moghedien’s eyes pop.

Grimly, Nynaeve did it again. *She won’t stop me short!* Again. *I will help Rand whatever she thinks!* Again. *Even if it kills us!* Again. *Oh, Light, she could be right; Rand could kill us both before he knows it’s me*. Again. *Light, I hate being afraid!* Again. *I hate her!* Again. *I hate her!* Again.

Abruptly she realized Moghedien was jerking frantically in her bonds, nodding her head so violently it seemed about to come off. For a moment, Nynaeve gaped at the other woman’s tear-streaked face, then stopped what she was doing and hurriedly unraveled the flows of Air. Light, what had she done? She was not Moghedien. “I take it you won’t give me any more trouble?”

“They will kill us,” the other woman mumbled faintly, and nearly unintelligibly through her sobs, but at the same time she nodded a hurried acquiescence.

Deliberately, Nynaeve hardened herself. Moghedien deserved everything she had gotten and much, much more. In the Tower, one of the Forsaken would have been stilled and executed as soon as the trial could be concluded, and little evidence needed beside who she was. “Good. Now we —”

Thunder shook the entire Palace, or something very much like thunder, except that the walls rattled and dust rose off the floor. Nynaeve half fell into Moghedien, and they danced trying to keep their feet. Before the upheaval had faded completely, it was replaced by a roar like some monstrous fire racing up a chimney the size of a mountain. That lasted only a moment. The silence after seemed deeper than before. No. There were boots. A man running. The sound echoed down the hallway. From the north.

Nynaeve pushed the other woman away. “Come on.”

Moghedien whimpered, but did not resist being pulled down the hall. Her eyes were huge, though, and her breath came too fast. Nynaeve thought it was a good thing she had Moghedien along, and not just for access to the One Power. After all her years hiding in shadows, the Spider was such a coward she almost made Nynaeve feel brave by comparison. Almost. It was only anger at her own fear that made her able to hold on to that one flow of Spirit that kept her in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, now. Moghedien was stark terror to her bones.

Pulling Moghedien behind her by the gleaming leash, Nynaeve quickened her step. Chasing the fading sound of those other steps.

Rand stepped into the round courtyard warily. Half of the white-paved circle cut into the structure rising three stories behind him; the other half was bounded by a stone semicircle atop pale columns five paces high, sticking out into yet another garden, shaded gravel walks beneath low spreading trees. Marble benches surrounded a pool with lilypads. And fish, gold and white and red.

Suddenly the benches shifted, flowed, changed into faceless manshapes, still as white and hard-looking as the stone. He had already learned the difficulty of changing something that Rahvin had altered. Lightning danced from his fingertips, shattering stone men to shards.

The air became water. Choking, Rand struggled to swim toward the columns; he could see the garden beyond. There must be some kind of barrier to stop all the water pouring out. Before he could channel, gold and red and white shapes were darting around him, larger than the fish in the pool had been. And with teeth. They ripped at him; blood curled up in red mist. Instinctively he flailed at the fish with his hands, but the cold part of him, deep in the Void, channeled. Balefire flared, at the barrier if there was one, at any place Rahvin might be to see this courtyard. The water roiled, throwing him around violently, as it rushed in to fill the empty tunnels carved by balefire. Flickers of gold and white and red darted at him, adding new threads of crimson to the water. Tossed about, he could not see to aim his wild bolts; they flashed in every direction. No breath left. He tried to think of air, or the water being air.

Suddenly it was. He dropped hard to the paving stones among small fish flopping about, rolled over and pushed himself up. It was all air again; even his clothes were dry. The stone ring flickered between standing untouched and lying in ruins with half the columns down. Some of the trees lay tangled atop their own stumps, then stood whole, then were fallen again.

The Palace behind him had holes punched in white walls, even one through a high gilded dome above, and gashes slashed across windows, some with pierce-work stone screens. The damage all flickered, vanishing and reappearing. Not the slow, sometime shifts of before, but constant. Damage, then none, then some, then none, then all again.

Wincing, he pressed his hand to his side, to the old, half-healed wound. It stung as if his exertions had nearly torn it open. He stung all over, from a dozen or more bleeding bites. That had not changed. The bloody rips in his coat and breeches were still there. Had he managed to change the water back to air? Or had one of his frenzied bolts of balefire driven Rahvin off, or even killed him? It did not matter, unless it was the last.

Wiping blood out of his eyes, he studied the windows and balconies around the garden, the colonnade high on the far side. Or rather, he started to, but something else caught his eye. Below the colonnade, he could just make out the fading remnants of a weave. From there he could tell it was a gateway, but to see what kind and where it led, he had to be closer. Leaping over a jumble of worked stone that vanished while he was above it, he darted across the garden, dodging around trees fallen on the walkway. That residue was almost gone; he had to get close enough before it vanished completely.

Abruptly he fell, gravel scraping his palms as he caught himself. He could not see anything that might have tripped him. He felt woozy, almost as if he had been hit on the head. He tried to scramble to his feet, to reach that residue. And realized his body was writhing. Long hair covered his hands; his fingers seemed to be shrinking, drawing back into his hands. They were almost paws. A trap. Rahvin had not fled. The gateway had been a trap, and he had walked into it.

Desperation clung to the Void as he struggled to cling to himself. His hands. They were hands. Almost hands. He forced himself up. His legs seemed to bend wrong. The True Source receded; the Void shrank. Streaks of panic flared beyond the emotionless emptiness. Whatever Rahvin was trying to change him to, it could not channel. *Saidin* slipping away, thinning, thin even pulled through the *angreal*. The surrounding balconies stared down at him, empty, and the colonnade. Rahvin had to be at one of those stone-screened windows, but which? He had no strength for a hundred lightning bolts this time. One burst. He could manage that. If he did it quickly. Which window? He fought to be himself, fought to draw *saidin* into him, welcomed every stain of the taint as evidence that he still held the Power. Staggering in a crooked circle, searching vainly, he roared Rahvin's name. It sounded like a beast's roar.

Pulling Moghedien behind her, Nynaeve rounded the corner. Ahead of her, a man vanished around the next turning, the sound of his boots echoing behind. She did not know how long she had been following those boots. Sometimes they had gone silent, and she had had to wait for them to start again to gain a direction. Sometimes when they stopped things happened; she had not seen any of it, but once the Palace had rung like a struck bell, and another time the hair on her head had tried to stand up as the air seemed to crackle, and another . . . It did not matter. This was the first time she had caught a glimpse of the man who wore those boots. She did not think it was Rand in that black coat. The height was right, but he was too large, too heavy in the chest.

She was running before she knew it. Her stout shoes had long since become velvet slippers for silence. If she could hear him, he could hear her. Moghedien's frenzied panting was louder than their footfalls.

Nynaeve reached the turn and stopped, peeking cautiously around the corner. She held *saidar*—through Moghedien, but it was hers—ready to channel. There was no need. The hallway was empty. A door stood far down a wall with windows filled with arabesque-pierced stone, but she did not think he could have reached that. Nearer, another corridor ran off to the right. She hurried to that, looked warily again. Empty. But a staircase spiraled upward just beyond where the hallways met.

For a moment she hesitated. He had been hurrying somewhere. This corridor led back the way they had come. Would he have been running to go back? Up then.

Drawing Moghedien behind her, she climbed the steps slowly, straining to hear anything except the Forsaken's nearly hysterical breath and the blood pounding in her own ears. If she found herself face to face with him . . . She knew he was there already, somewhere ahead. Surprise had to be on her side.

At the first landing, she paused. The hallways here mirrored those below. They were just as empty, too, just as silent. Had he gone on up?

The stair quivered faintly beneath her feet as if the palace had been struck by a huge battering ram, then another. Again, as a bar of white fire punched through the top of one of the stone-screened windows, skewed wildly upward at an angle, then winked out as it started to slice into the ceiling.

Nynaeve swallowed, blinking in a vain effort to rid herself of the pale violet fan that hung across her vision in memory of the thing. That had to be Rand, trying to strike at Rahvin. If she was too close to him, Rand might catch her by accident. If he was flailing like that—it had had the look of flailing to her—he could catch her anywhere without knowing it.

The quivers had ceased. Moghedien's eyes shone with terror. By what Nynaeve felt through the *a'dam*, it was a wonder the woman was not writhing on the floor, shrieking and frothing at the mouth. Nynaeve felt a little like shrieking herself. She made herself put her foot on the next step. Up was as good a way as any. The second step was almost as hard. Slowly, though. No need to come on him too suddenly. Surprise had to be on his part. Moghedien followed like a whipped dog, shivering.

As Nynaeve climbed, she embraced *saidar* as fully as she could, as much as Moghedien could handle, to the point where the sweetness of it became almost a pain. That was the warning. More, and she would approach the point where it was more than she could take in, the point where she would still herself, burn the ability to channel right out of herself. Or perhaps out of Moghedien, under the circumstances. Or both of them. Any way at all, it would be disaster now. She held that point though, the . . . *life* . . . filling her a needle's light pressure just short of breaking skin. It was as much as she could have embraced had she been channeling on her own. She and Moghedien were much the same strength in the Power; Tanchico had proved that. Was it enough? Moghedien insisted the men were stronger. Rahvin, at least—Moghedien knew him—and it did not seem likely Rand could have survived this long unless he was just as strong. It was not fair that men should have the muscles and greater strength in the Power, too. The Aes Sedai in the Tower had always said they had been equal. It just was not—

She was babbling. Taking a deep breath, she drew Moghedien behind her off the staircase. This was as high as it went.

This hall was empty. She went to where it met the crossing corridor, peeked. And there he was. A tall black-clad man, large, with wings of white in his dark hair, peering through the curving slots of one of the stone window-screens at something below. There was sweat and effort on his face, but he seemed to be smiling. A handsome face, as handsome as Galad’s, but she felt no quickening of her breath for this one.

Whatever he was staring at—Rand perhaps?—had his full attention, but Nynaeve gave him no chance to notice her. It might be Rand down there. She could not tell whether Rahvin was channeling or not. She filled the corridor around him with fire from wall to wall, floor to ceiling, pouring into it all of *saidar* she held, fire so hot the stone itself smoked. The heat made her flinch back.

Rahvin screamed in the middle of the flame—it was one flame—and staggered away from her, back to where the hallway became a columned walk. A heartbeat, less, while she still flinched, and he stood, inside the flame but surrounded by clear air. Every scrap of *saidar* she could channel was going into that inferno, but he held it at bay. She could see him through the fire; it gave everything a red cast, but she could see. Smoke rose from his charred coat. His face was a seared ruin, one eye milky white. But both eyes were malevolent as he turned them on her.

No emotion reached her along the *a’dam*’s leash, only leaden dullness. Nynaeve’s stomach fluttered. Moghedien had given up. Given up because death was there for them.

* * *

Fire thrust through the carved window-screens above Rand, fingers of it filling every hole, dancing toward the colonnade. As it did, the struggle within him ceased abruptly. He was himself so suddenly it was almost a shock. He had been drawing desperately at *saidin*, trying to hold onto some of it. Now it rushed into him, an avalanche of fire and ice that made his knees buckle, made the Void tremble with pain that shaved at it like a lathe.

And Rahvin stumbled backwards out onto the colonnade, face turned to something inside. Rahvin wreathed in fire, yet somehow standing as though untouched. If untouched now, it had not been so before. Only the size of the figure, the impossibility of it being anyone else, told Rand it was him. The Forsaken was a figure of char and cracked red flesh that would have strained any Healer to mend. The agony of it must have been overwhelming. Except that Rahvin would be inside the Void within that burned remnant of a man, wrapped in emptiness where the body’s pain was distant and *saidin* close at hand.

Saidin raged inside Rand, and he loosed it all. Not to Heal.

“Rahvin!” he screamed, and balefire flew from his hands, molten light thicker than a man, driven by all the Power he could draw.

It struck the Forsaken, and Rahvin ceased to exist. The Darkhounds in Rhuidean had become motes before they vanished, whatever kind of life they had had struggling to continue, or the Pattern struggling to maintain itself even for them. Before this, Rahvin simply . . . ceased.

Rand let the balefire die, pushed *saidin* away a little. Trying to blink away the purple afterimage, he stared up at the wide hole in the marble balustrade, the remains of one column a fang above it, stared at the matching hole in the Palace roof. They did not flicker, as if what he had done was too strong even for this place to mend. After everything, it seemed almost too easy. Perhaps there was something up there to convince him Rahvin was really dead. He ran toward a door.

Frantically, Nynaeve threw everything into trying to close the flame tight around Rahvin once more. The thought came that she should have used lightning. She was going to die. Those horrible eyes had fixed on Moghedien, not her, but she was going to die, too.

Liquid fire sliced up into the colonnade, so hot it made the fire she had made seem cool. Shock made her release her weaving, and she flung up a hand to protect her face, yet before it had raised halfway, the liquid fire was gone. So was Rahvin. She did not believe he had escaped. There had been an instant, so brief she could almost have imagined it, when that white bar touched him and he became . . . mist. Just an instant. She could have imagined. But she did not believe so. She drew a shuddering breath.

Moghedien had her face in her hands, weeping, trembling. The one emotion Nynaeve sensed through the *a’dam* was relief so powerful it drowned anything else.

Hurried boots grated on the stairs below.

Nynaeve spun, took a step toward the spiral staircase. She was surprised to realize she was drinking deeply of *saidar*, holding herself ready.

That surprise faded when Rand climbed into sight. He was not as she remembered. His features were the same, but his face was hard. Blue ice made his eyes. The bloody rips in his coat and breeches, the blood on his face, seemed to suit that face.

The way he looked, she would not be surprised if he killed Moghedien on the spot the instant he discovered who she was. Nynaeve had uses for her yet. He would recognize an *a'dam*. Without another thought she changed it, let the leash vanish, leaving only the silver bracelet on her wrist and the collar on Moghedien. A moment of panic when she comprehended what she had done, then a sigh as she realized that she still felt the other woman. It worked exactly as Elayne had said it would. Perhaps he had not seen. She was between him and Moghedien; the leash had trailed behind her.

He barely glanced at Moghedien. "I thought about those flames, coming up here. I thought it might have been you or . . . Where is this? Is this where you meet Egwene?"

Looking up at him, Nynaeve tried not to swallow. So cold, that face. "Rand, the Wise Ones say what you've done, what you are doing, is dangerous, even evil. They say you lose something of yourself if you come here in the flesh, some part of what makes you human."

"Do the Wise Ones know everything?" He brushed past her and stood staring at the colonnade. "I used to think Aes Sedai knew everything. It doesn't matter. I don't know how human the Dragon Reborn can afford to be."

"Rand, I . . ." She did not know what to say. "Here, let me Heal you at least."

He held still for her to reach up and take his head in her hands. For her part, she had to suppress a wince. His fresh wounds were not serious, only numerous—what could have bitten him; she was sure most of these were bites—but the old wound, that half-healed, never-healing wound in his side, that was a sinkhole of darkness, a well filled with what she thought the taint of *saidin* must be like. She channeled the complex flows, Air and Water, Spirit, even Fire and Earth in small amounts, that made up Healing. He did not roar and flail about. He did not even blink. He shivered. That was all. Then he took her wrists and brought her hands down from his face. She was not reluctant. His new injuries were gone, every bite and scrape and bruise, but not the old wound. Nothing had changed about that. Anything short of death should be capable of being Healed, even that. Anything!

"Is he dead?" he asked quietly. "Did you see him die?"

"He's dead, Rand. I saw."

He nodded. "But there are others still, aren't there? Other . . . Chosen."

Nynaeve felt a stabbing sliver of fear from Moghedien, but she did not glance back. “Rand, you must go. Rahvin is dead, and this place is dangerous for you as you are. You must go, and not come back here in the body.”

“I will go.”

He did nothing that she could see or feel—of course, she could not—but for a moment she thought the hallway behind him had . . . turned in some way. But it did not look any different. Except . . . She blinked. There was no half-gone column in the colonnade beyond him, no hole in the stone railing.

He went on as if nothing had happened. “Tell Elayne. . . . Ask her not to hate me. Ask her . . .” Pain twisted his face. For a moment she saw the boy she had known, looking as though something precious was being ripped away from him. She reached out to comfort him, and he stepped back, his face stone again, and bleak. “Lan was right. Tell Elayne to forget me, Nynaeve. Tell her I’ve found something else to love, and there’s no room left for her. He wanted me to tell you the same thing. Lan has found someone else, too. He said for you to forget him. Better never to have been born than to love us.” He stepped back again, three long steps, the hall seemed to turn dizzyingly with him in it—or part of the hall did—and he was gone.

Nynaeve stared at where he had been, and not at the fitfully flickering reappearance of the damage to the colonnade. Lan had told him to say *that*?

“A . . . remarkable man,” Moghedien said softly. “A very, very dangerous man.”

Nynaeve stared at her. Something new was coming through the bracelet to her. Fear was still there, but muted by . . . Expectation might have been the best way to describe it.

“I have been helpful, have I not?” Moghedien said. “Rahvin dead, Rand al’Thor saved. None of it would have been possible without me.”

Nynaeve understood now. Hope more than expectation. Sooner or later Nynaeve would have to wake. The *a’dam* would vanish. Moghedien was trying to remind her of her aid—as if it had not had to be wrenched out of her—just in case Nynaeve might be steeling herself to kill before she went. “It is time for me to go, too,” Nynaeve said. Moghedien’s face did not alter, but fear strengthened and so did hope. A large silver cup appeared in Nynaeve’s hand, apparently filled with tea. “Drink this.”

Moghedien edged back. “What—?”

“Not poison. I could kill you easily enough without, if that was my aim. After all, what happens to you here is real in the waking world, too.” Hope much stronger than fear now. “It will make you sleep. A deep sleep; too deep to touch *Tel’aran’rhiod*. It’s called forkroot.”

Moghedien took the cup slowly. “So I cannot follow you? I will not argue.” She tipped back her head and swallowed until the cup was empty.

Nynaeve watched her. That much should put her down quickly. Yet a cruel streak made her speak. She knew it was cruel and did not care. Moghedien should not have any quiet rest at all. “You knew Birgitte was not dead.” Moghedien’s gaze narrowed slightly. “You knew who Faolain is.” The other woman’s eyes tried to widen, but she was already drowsy. Nynaeve could feel the forkroot’s effects spreading. She concentrated on Moghedien, held there in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. No easy sleep for one of the Forsaken. “And you knew who Siuan is, that she used to be the Amyrlin Seat. I’ve never mentioned that in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Never. I’ll see you very shortly. In Salidar.”

Moghedien’s eyes rolled up her head. Nynaeve was not sure whether it was the forkroot or a faint, but it did not matter. She released the other woman, and Moghedien winked out. The silver collar rang as it hit the floor tiles. Elayne would be happy about that, at least.

Nynaeve stepped out of the Dream.

Rand trotted along the corridors of the Palace. There seemed to be less damage than he remembered, but he did not really look. He strode out into the great courtyard at the front of the Palace. Blasts of Air knocked the tall gates half off their hinges. Beyond lay a huge oval plaza, and what he had been searching for. Trollocs and Myrddraal. Rahvin was dead, and the other Forsaken were elsewhere, but there were Trollocs and Myrddraal to kill in Caemlyn.

They were fighting, a milling mass of hundreds, perhaps thousands, surrounding something he could not see through their black-mailed numbers, as tall as a Myrddraal on its horse. Just barely he could make out his crimson banner deep in their midst. Some swung round to face the Palace as the gates were hurled asunder.

Yet Rand stopped dead. Balls of fire rolled through the packed black-mailed mass, and burning Trollocs lay everywhere. It could not be.

Not daring to hope or think, he channeled. Shafts of balefire leaped from his hands as fast as he could weave them, narrower than his little finger, precise and cut off as soon as they struck. They were much less powerful than the one he had used against Rahvin at the end, than any he had used against Rahvin, but he could not risk one slicing through to those trapped in the center of all those Trollocs. It made little difference. The first-struck Myrddraal seemed to reverse colors, become a white-clad black shape, then it was drifting motes that vanished as its horse fled madly. Trollocs, Myrddraal, every one that turned toward him went the same, and then he began carving into the backs of those still facing the other way, so a continuous haze of sparkling dust seemed to fill the air, renewed as it evaporated.

They could not stand against that. Bestial cries of rage turned to howls of fear, and they fled in every direction except toward him. He saw one Myrddraal try to turn them and be trampled under, rider and horse, but the rest spurred their animals away.

Rand let them go. He was busy staring at the veiled Aiel bursting out of their encirclement with spears and heavy-bladed knives. It was one of them carrying the banner; Aiel did not carry banners, but this one, a bit of red headband showing beneath his *shoufa*, did. There were battles going on down some of the streets leading from the plaza, too. Aiel against Trollocs. Townsfolk against Trollocs. Even armored men in the uniform of the Queen's Guards against Trollocs. Apparently some who were willing to kill a queen could not stomach Trollocs. Rand only barely noticed, though. He was searching through the Aiel.

There. A woman in a white blouse, one hand holding up her bulky skirts as she slashed at a fleeing Trolloc with a short knife; an instant later flames enveloped the bear-snouted figure.

"Aviendha!" Rand did not know he was running until he shouted. "Aviendha!"

And there was Mat, coat torn and blood on his sword-blade spearpoint, leaning on the black shaft watching the Trollocs flee, content to let someone else do the fighting now that that was possible. And Asmodean, sword held awkwardly and trying to look every way at once in case any Trolloc decided to turn back. Rand could sense *saidin* in him, though weakly; he did not think much of Asmodean's fighting had been with that blade.

Balefire. Balefire that burned a thread out of the Pattern. The stronger that balefire was, the further back that burning went. And whatever that person had done *no longer had happened*. He did not care if his blast at Rahvin had unraveled half the Pattern. Not if this was the result.

He became aware of tears on his cheeks, and let *saidin* and the Void go. He wanted to feel this. “Aviendha!” Snatching her up, he whirled her around, with her staring down at him as if he had gone mad. He did not want to put her down, but he did. So he could hug Mat. Or try to.

Mat fended him off. “What’s the matter with you? You’d think you thought we were dead. Not that we weren’t, almost. Being a general has to be safer than this!”

“You’re alive.” Rand laughed. He brushed back Aviendha’s hair; she had lost her headscarf, and it hung loose around her neck. “I’m happy you’re alive. That’s all.”

He took in the plaza again, and his joy faded. Nothing could extinguish it, but the bodies lying in heaps where the Aiel had made their stand lessened it. Too many of them were not big enough to be men. There was Lamelle, veil gone and half her throat as well; she would never make him soup again. Pevin, both hands clutching the wrist-thick shaft of the Trolloc spear through his chest and the first expression on his face Rand had ever seen. Surprise. Balefire had cheated death for his friends, but not for others. Too many. Too many Maidens.

Take what you can have. Rejoice in what you can save, and do not mourn your losses too long. It was not his thought, but he took it. It seemed a good way to avoid going mad before the taint on *saidin* drove him to it.

“Where did you go?” Aviendha demanded. Not angrily. If anything, she looked relieved. “One second you were there, the next you were gone.”

“I had to kill Rahvin,” he said quietly. She opened her mouth, but he put his fingers over it to silence her, then gently pushed her away. Take what you can have. “Leave it at that. He’s dead.”

Bael came limping up, *shoufa* still around his head but veil hanging down his chest. There was blood on his thigh, and on the point of his one remaining spear as well. “The Nightrunners and Shadowtwisted are running, *Car’a’carn*. Some of the wetlanders have joined the dance against them. Even some of the armored men, though they danced against us at first.” Sulin was behind him, unveiled, a nasty red gash across her cheek.

“Hunt them down however long it takes,” Rand said. He began walking, not sure where as long as it was away from Aviendha. “I don’t want them loose on the countryside. Keep an eye on the Guards. I’ll find out later which of them were Rahvin’s men and which . . .” He walked on, talking and not looking back. Take what you can have.

* * *

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CHAPTER
56

Glowing Embers

The high window had more than enough room for Rand to stand in it, stretching far above his head and clearing his shoulders by two feet to either side. Shirtsleeves rolled up, he stared down at one of the Royal Palace's gardens. Aviendha was trailing her hand in the fountain's redstone basin, still intrigued by so much water with no purpose but to be looked at and keep ornamental fish alive. She had been more than indignant at first, when he told her she could not go chasing Trollocs through the streets. In fact, he was not sure she would not be down there now if not for a quiet escort of Maidens that Sulin did not think he had noticed. Neither was he supposed to have heard the white-haired Maiden remind her that she was *Far Dareis Mai* no longer and not yet a Wise One. Coatless, but wearing his hat against the sun, Mat was sitting on the coping of the basin, talking to her. No doubt probing for what she knew of whether the Aiel were preventing people from leaving; even if Mat did decide to accept his fate, it was unlikely he would ever stop complaining about it. Asmodean sat on a bench in the shade of a red myrtle tree, playing his harp. Rand wondered whether the man knew what had happened, or suspected. He should have no memory—for him, it never happened—but who could say what one of the Forsaken knew or could reason out?

A polite cough turned him away from the garden.

The window where he stood was a span and a half above the floor in the west wall of the throne room, the Grand Hall where Queens of Andor had received embassies and pronounced judgment for nearly a thousand years. It was the only place he had thought he could be sure of watching Mat and Aviendha unseen and undisturbed. Rows of white columns twenty paces high marched down the sides of the hall. The light from the tall windows in the walls mingled with colored light from great windows set in the arching ceiling, windows where the White Lion alternated with portraits of early queens of the realm and scenes of great Andoran victories. Enaila and Somara did not appear impressed.

Rand let himself down by his fingertips. “Is there news from Bael?”

Enaila shrugged. “The hunt for Trollocs goes on.” By her tone, the diminutive woman would have liked to be part of that. Somara’s height made her seem even shorter. “Some of the city people give aid. Most hide. The city gates are held. None of the Shadowtwisted will escape, I think, but I fear some of the Nightrunners may.” Myrddraal were hard to kill, and just as hard to corner. Sometimes it was easy to believe the old tales that they rode shadows and could vanish by turning sideways.

“We brought you some soup,” Somara said, nodding her flaxen head toward a silver tray covered with a striped cloth, sitting on the dais that held the Lion Throne. Carved and gilded, with huge lion’s paws at the ends of its legs, the throne was a massive chair at the top of four white marble stairs, with a strip of red carpet leading up to it. The Lion of Andor, picked out in moonstones on a field of rubies, would have stood above Morgase’s head whenever she occupied that seat. “Aviendha says you have not eaten yet today. It is the soup Lamelle used to make for you.”

“I suppose none of the servants have come back,” Rand sighed. “One of the cooks, maybe? A helper?” Enaila shook her head scornfully. She would serve her time as *gai’shain* with a good grace, if it ever came to that, but the idea of anyone spending their entire life serving someone else disgusted her.

Climbing the stairs, he squatted to twitch the cloth aside. His nose twitched, too. By the smell, whichever of them had made it was no better a cook than Lamelle had been. The sound of a man’s boots coming up the hall gave him an excuse to turn his back on the tray. With any luck, he would not have to eat it.

The man approaching up the long, red-and-white-tiled floor was certainly no Andorman, in his short gray coat and those baggy trousers stuffed into boots turned down at the knee. Slender and only a hand taller than Enaila, he had a hooked beak of a nose and dark tilted eyes. Gray streaked his black hair and a thick mustache like down-curved horns around his wide mouth. He paused to make a leg and bow slightly, handling the curved sword at his hip gracefully despite the fact that incongruously he carried two silver goblets in one hand and a sealed pottery jar in the other.

“Forgive my intrusion,” he said, “but there was no one to announce me.” His clothes might be plain and even travel-worn, but he had what appeared to be an ivory rod capped with a golden wolf’s head thrust behind his sword belt. “I am Davram Bashere, Marshal-General of Saldaea. I am here to speak with the Lord Dragon, who rumors in the city say is here in the Royal Palace. I assume that I address him?” For an instant his eyes went to the glittering Dragons twining red-and-gold around Rand’s arms.

“I am Rand al’Thor, Lord Bashere. The Dragon Reborn.” Enaila and Somara had moved between Rand and the man, each with a hand on the hilt of her long-bladed knife, poised to veil. “I am surprised to find a Saldaean lord in Caemlyn, much less wanting to speak to me.”

“In truth, I rode to Caemlyn to speak to Morgase, but I was put off by Lord Gaebril’s toadies—King Gaebril, I should say? Or does he still live?” Bashere’s tone said he doubted it, and did not care one way or the other. He did not pause. “Many in the city say Morgase is dead, as well.”

“They’re both dead,” Rand said bleakly. He sat down on the throne, his head resting against the moonstone Lion of Andor. The throne had been sized for women. “I killed Gaebril, but not before he killed Morgase.”

Bashere quirked an eyebrow. “Should I hail King Rand of Andor, then?”

Rand leaned forward angrily. “Andor has always had a queen, and it still does. Elayne was Daughter-Heir. With her mother dead, she is queen. Maybe she has to be crowned first—I don’t know the law—but she is queen as far as I am concerned. I am the Dragon Reborn. That is as much as I want, and more. What is it you want of me, Lord Bashere?”

If his anger disturbed Bashere at all, the man gave no outward sign. Those tilted eyes watched Rand carefully, but not uneasily. “The White Tower allowed Mazrim Taim to escape. The false Dragon.” He paused, then went on when Rand said nothing. “Queen Tenobia did not want Saldaea troubled again, so I was sent to hunt him down once more and put an end to him. I have followed him south for many weeks. You need not fear I’ve brought a foreign army into Andor. Except for an escort of ten, the rest I left camped in Braem Wood, well north of any border Andor has claimed in two hundred years. But Taim is in Andor. I am sure of it.”

Rand leaned back again, hesitating. “You cannot have him, Lord Bashere.”

“May I ask why not, my Lord Dragon? If you wish to use Aiel to hunt him, I have no objection. My men will remain in Braem Wood until I return.”

This part of his plan he had not meant to reveal so soon. Delay could be costly, but he had intended to have a firm hold on the nations first. Yet it might as well begin now. “I am announcing an amnesty. I can channel, Lord Bashere. Why should another man be hunted down and killed or gentled because he can do what I can? I will announce that any man who can touch the True Source, any man who wants to learn, can come to me and have my protection. The Last Battle is coming, Lord Bashere. There may not be time for any of us to go mad before, and I would not waste one man for the risk anyway. When the Trollocs came out of the Blight in the Trolloc Wars, they marched with Dreadlords, men and women who wielded the Power for the Shadow. We will face that again at Tarmon Gai’don. I don’t know how many Aes Sedai will be at my side, but I won’t turn away any man who channels if he will march with me. Mazrim Taim is mine, Lord Bashere, not yours.”

“I see.” It was flatly said. “You have taken Caemlyn. I hear that Tear is yours, and Cairhien soon will be if it is not already. Do you mean to conquer the world with your Aiel and your army of men channeling the One Power?”

“If I must.” Rand said it just as levelly. “I’ll welcome any ruler as an ally who welcomes me, but so far all I’ve seen is maneuvering for power, or outright hostility. Lord Bashere, there’s anarchy in Tarabon and Arad Doman, and not far from it in Cairhien. Amadicia is eyeing Altara. The Seanchan—you may have heard rumors of them in Saldaea; the worst are likely true—the Seanchan on the other side of the world eyeing us all. Men fighting their own petty battles with Tarmon Gai’don on the horizon. We need peace. Time before the Trollocs come, before the Dark One breaks free, time to ready ourselves. If the only way I can find time and peace for the world is to impose it, I will. I don’t want to, but I will.”

“I have read *The Karaethon Cycle*,” Bashere said. Putting the goblets under his arm for a moment, he broke the wax seal on the jar and filled them with wine. “More importantly, Queen Tenobia has read the Prophecies, too. I cannot speak for Kandor, or Arafel, or Shienar. I believe they will come to you—not a child in the Borderlands but knows the Shadow waits in the Blight to descend on us—but I cannot speak for them.”

Enaila eyed the goblet he handed her suspiciously, but she climbed the stairs to hand it to Rand. “In truth,” Bashere continued, “I cannot even speak for Saldaea. Tenobia rules; I am only her general. But I think once I send a fast rider to her with a message, the return will be that Saldaea marches with the Dragon Reborn. In the meanwhile, I offer you my services, and those of nine thousand Saldaean horse.”

Rand swirled the goblet, staring down into the dark red wine. Sammael in Illian, and other Forsaken the Light alone knew where. Seanchan waiting across the Aryth Ocean, and men here ready to leap for their own advantage and profit whatever it cost the world. “Peace is far off yet,” he said softly. “It will be blood and death for some time to come.”

“It always is,” Bashere replied quietly, and Rand did not know which statement he was speaking to. Perhaps both.

Tucking his harp under his arm, Asmodean drifted away from Mat and Aviendha. He enjoyed playing, but not for a pair who did not listen, much less appreciate. He was not sure what had happened that morning, and not sure he wanted to be sure. Too many Aiel had expressed surprise at seeing him, had claimed they had seen him dead; he did not want details. There was a long gash down the wall in front of him. He knew what made that sharp edge, that surface as slick as ice, smoother than any hand could have polished in a hundred years.

Idly—but with a shiver, too—he wondered whether being reborn in this fashion made him a new man. He did not think so. Immortality was gone. That was a gift of the Great Lord; he used that name in his head, whatever al’Thor demanded on his tongue. That was proof enough that he was himself. Immortality gone—he knew it must be imagination, yet sometimes he thought he could feel time dragging at him, pulling him toward a grave he had never thought to meet—and drawing the little of *saidin* he could was like drinking sewage. He was hardly sorry Lanfear was dead. Rahvin either, but Lanfear especially, for what she had done to him. He would laugh when each of the others died, too, and most for the last. It was not that he had been reborn as a new man at all, but he would cling to that tuft of grass on the cliff’s brink as long as he could. The roots would give way eventually, the long fall would come, but until then he was still alive.

He pulled open a small door, intending to find his way to the pantry. There should be some decent wine. One step, and he stopped, the blood draining from his face. “You? No!” The word still hung in the air when death took him.

Morgase blotted sweat from her face, then tucked the handkerchief back up her sleeve and readjusted her somewhat ragged straw hat. At least she had managed to acquire a decent riding dress, though even fine gray wool was still uncomfortable in this heat. Actually, Tallanvor had acquired it. Letting her horse walk, she eyed the tall young man, riding up ahead through the trees. Basel Gill’s roundness emphasized how tall and fit Tallanvor was. He had handed the dress to her saying it suited her better than the itchy thing she had fled the Palace in, looking down at her, never blinking, never speaking a word of respect. Of course, she herself had decided it was not safe for anyone to know who she was, especially after discovering Gareth Bryne gone from Kore Springs; why did the man have to be off chasing barnburners when she needed him? No matter; she would do as well without him. But there was something disturbing in Tallanvor’s eyes when he called her simply Morgase.

Sighing, she glanced back over her shoulder. Hulking Lamgwin rode watching the forest, Breane at his side watching him as much as anything else. Her army had not grown a whit since Caemlyn. Too many had heard of nobles exiled for no cause and unjust laws in the capital to do more than scoff at the most casual mention of stirring a hand in support of their rightful ruler. She doubted that even knowing who spoke to them would have made a difference. So here she rode through Altara, keeping to forest as much as possible because there seemed to be parties of armed men everywhere, rode through the forest with a scar-faced street tough, a besotted refugee Cairhienin noblewoman, a stout innkeeper who could hardly keep from kneeling whenever she glanced at him, and a young soldier who sometimes looked at her as though she had on one of those dresses she had worn for Gaebril. And Lini, of course. There was no forgetting Lini.

As if thinking of her had been a summons, the old nurse heeled her horse closer. “Better to keep your eyes ahead,” she said quietly. “ ‘A young lion charges quickest, and when you least expect it.’ ”

“You think Tallanvor is dangerous?” Morgase said sharply, and Lini gave her a sidelong, considering look.

“Only the way any man can be dangerous. A fine figure of man, don’t you think? More than tall enough. Strong hands, I should think. ‘There’s no point letting honey age too long before you eat it.’ ”

“Lini,” Morgase said warningly. The old woman had been going on this way too often of late. Tallanvor was a handsome man, his hands did look strong, and he had a well-turned calf, but he was young, and she was his queen. The last thing she needed was to start looking at him as a man instead of her subject and soldier. She was about to tell Lini that—and that the woman had lost her wits if she thought she was going to take up with any man ten years her junior; he had to be that—but Tallanvor and Gill were turning back. “You hold your tongue, Lini. If you put foolish ideas into that young man’s head, I will leave you somewhere.” Lini’s snort would have earned the highest noble in Andor time in a cell to meditate. If she still had her throne, it would.

“Are you sure you want to do this, girl? ‘It’s too late to change your mind after you’ve jumped off the cliff.’ ”

“I will find my allies where I can find them,” Morgase told her stiffly.

Tallanvor reined up, sitting tall in his saddle. Sweat rolled down his face, but he seemed to ignore the heat. Master Gill tugged at the neck of his disc-covered jerkin as though he wished he could have it off.

“The wood gives way to farms just ahead,” Tallanvor said, “but it isn’t likely anyone will recognize you here.” Morgase met his gaze levelly; day by day it was becoming increasingly hard to look away when he was looking at her. “Another ten miles should take us to Cormaed. If that fellow in Sehar was not lying, there will be a ferry, and we can be on the Amadicia side before dark. Are you certain you want to do this, Morgase?”

The way he said her name . . . No. She was letting Lini’s ridiculous fancies take hold of her. It was the accursed heat. “I have made up my mind, young Tallanvor,” she said coolly, “and I do not expect you to question me when I have done so.”

She heeled her mount hard, letting the horse’s leap forward break their gazes apart, letting it shove past him. He could catch up to her. She would find her allies where she found them. She would have her throne back, and woe to Gaebril or *any* man who thought he could sit on it in her place.

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And the Glory of the Light did shine upon him.
And the Peace of the Light did he give men.
Binding nations to him. Making one of many.
Yet the shards of hearts did give wounds.
And what was once did come again
    —in fire and in storm
    splitting all in twain.
For his peace . . .
    —for his peace . . .
    . . . was the peace . . .
    . . . was the peace . . .
    . . . of the sword.

And the Glory of the Light did shine upon him.

—from *“Glory of the Dragon”*
composed by Meane sol Ahelle,
the Fourth Age

The End
of the Fifth Book of
The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars’ end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Accepted: Young women in training to be Aes Sedai who have reached a certain level of power and passed certain tests. It normally takes five to ten years to be raised from novice to Accepted. Somewhat less confined by rules than novices, they are allowed to choose their own areas of study, within limits. Accepted wear a Great Serpent ring on the third finger of the left hand. When an Accepted is raised Aes Sedai, which usually takes another five to ten years, she chooses her Ajah, gains the right to wear the shawl, and may wear the ring on any finger or not at all if circumstances warrant. *See also* Aes Sedai.

a'dam (AYE-dam): A Seanchan device for controlling a woman who can channel, consisting of a collar and bracelet linked by a leash, all of silvery metal. It has no effect on a woman who cannot channel. *See also damane*; Seanchan; *sul'dam*.

Aes Sedai (EYEZ seh-DEYE): Wielders of the One Power. Since the Time of Madness, all are women. Widely distrusted and feared, even hated. Blamed by many for the Breaking of the World, and thought to meddle in the affairs of nations. At the same time, few rulers are without an Aes Sedai advisor, even where such a connection must be secret. After some years of channeling the One Power, Aes Sedai take on an ageless quality, so that one old enough to be a grandmother may show no signs of age except perhaps a few gray hairs. *See also* Ajah; Amyrlin Seat; Time of Madness.

Age of Legends: Age ended by the War of the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. A time when Aes Sedai performed wonders now only dreamed of. *See also* Breaking of the World; War of the Shadow; Wheel of Time.

Aiel (eye-EEL): The people of the Aiel Waste. Fierce and hardy. They veil their faces before they kill. Deadly warriors with weapons or bare hands, they will not touch a sword, nor ride a horse unless pressed. Their pipers play them into battle with the music of dances. Aiel call battle "the dance," and "the dance of spears." They are divided into twelve clans: the Chareen, the Codarra, the Daryne, the Goshien, the Miagoma, the Nakai, the Reyn, the Shaarad, the Shaido, the Shiande, the Taardad, and the Tomanelle. Sometimes they speak of a thirteenth clan, the Clan That Is Not, the Jenn, who were the builders of Rhuidean. *See also* Aiel warrior societies; Aiel Waste; Rhuidean.

Aiel kinship terms: Aiel relationships of blood are expressed in complex ways which outsiders consider unwieldy, but which Aiel consider precise. A few examples must suffice to demonstrate, as an entire volume would be needed for a full explanation. First-brother and first-sister have the same mother. Second-brother and second-sister refer to the children of one's mother's first-sister or first-brother, and sister-mothers and sister-fathers are first-sisters and first-brothers of one's mother.

Greatfather or greatmother refers to the father or mother of one's own mother, while the parents of one's father are second greatfather or second greatmother; one is closer blood kin to one's mother than father. Beyond this the complications grow and are thickened by such factors as the ability of close friends to adopt each other as first-brother or first-sister. When it is also considered that Aielwomen who are close friends sometimes marry the same man, thus becoming sister-wives and married to each other as well as to him, the convolutions become even more apparent.

Aiel War: (976–78 NE) When King Laman (LAY-mahn) of Cairhien cut down *Avendoraldera*, four clans of the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World. They looted and burned the capital city of Cairhien as well as many other cities and towns, and the conflict extended into Andor and Tear. By the conventional view, the Aiel were finally defeated at the Battle of the Shining Walls, before Tar Valon; in fact, Laman was killed in that battle, and having done what they came for, the Aiel recrossed the Spine. *See also Avendoraldera*; Cairhien; Spine of the World.

Aiel warrior societies: Aiel warriors are all members of one of twelve societies. These are Black Eyes *(Seia Doon)*, Brothers of the Eagle *(Far Aldazar Din)*, Dawn Runners *(Rahien Sorei)*, Knife Hands *(Sovin Nai)*, Maidens of the Spear *(Far Dareis Mai)*, Mountain Dancers *(Hama N'dore)*, Night Spears *(Cor Darei)*, Red Shields *(Aethan Dor)*, Stone Dogs *(Shae'en M'taal)*, Thunder Walkers *(Sha'mad Conde)*, True Bloods *(Tain Shari)*, and Water Seekers *(Duadhe Mahdi'in)*. Each has its own customs, and sometimes specific duties. For example, Red Shields act as police, and Stone Dogs are often used as rearguards during retreats, while Maidens are often scouts. Aiel clans frequently raid and battle one another, but members of the same society will not fight each other even if their clans do so. Thus there are always lines of contact between the clans, even during open warfare. *See also* Aiel; Aiel Waste; *Far Dareis Mai*.

Aiel Waste: Harsh, rugged and all-but-waterless land east of the Spine of the World. Called the Three-fold Land by the Aiel. Few outsiders enter; the Aiel consider themselves at war with all other peoples and do not welcome strangers. Only peddlers, gleemen, and the Tuatha’an are allowed safe entry, although Aiel avoid all contact with the Tuatha’an, whom they call “the Lost Ones.” No maps of the Waste itself are known to exist.

Ajah (AH-jah): Societies among the Aes Sedai, seven in number and designated by colors: Blue, Red, White, Green, Brown, Yellow and Gray. All Aes Sedai except the Amyrlin Seat belong to one. Each follows a specific philosophy of the use of the One Power and the purposes of the Aes Sedai. The Red Ajah bends its energies to finding men who can channel, and to gentling them. The Brown forsakes the mundane world and dedicates itself to seeking knowledge, while the White, largely eschewing both the world and the value of worldly knowledge, devotes itself to questions of philosophy and truth. The Green Ajah (called the Battle Ajah during the Trolloc Wars) holds itself ready for Tarmon Gai’don, the Yellow concentrates on the study of Healing, and Blue sisters involve themselves with causes and justice. The Gray are mediators, seeking harmony and consensus. Rumors of a Black Ajah, dedicated to serving the Dark One, are officially denied.

Alviarin Freidhen (ahl-vee-AH-rihn FREYE-dhehn): An Aes Sedai of the White Ajah, now raised to Keeper of the Chronicles, second only to the Amyrlin Seat among Aes Sedai. A woman of cold logic and colder ambition.

Amadicia (ah-mah-DEE-cee-ah): A nation lying south of the Mountains of Mist, between Tarabon and Altara. Its capital Amador (AH-mah-door) is the home of the Children of the Light, whose Lord Captain Commander has, in fact if not in name, more power than the king. Anyone with the ability to channel is outlawed in Amadicia; by law they are to be imprisoned or exiled, but in actuality are often killed while “resisting arrest.” The banner of Amadicia is a six-pointed silver star overlaid on a red thistle on a field of blue. *See also* channel; Children of the Light.

Amyrlin Seat (AHM-ehr-lin SEAT): (1) Leader of the Aes Sedai. Elected for life by the Hall of the Tower, which consists of three representatives (called Sitters, as in “a Sitter for the Green”) from each Ajah. The Amyrlin Seat has, theoretically, supreme authority among the Aes Sedai, and ranks as the equal of a king or queen. A slightly less formal usage is “the Amyrlin.” (2) The throne on which the leader of the Aes Sedai sits.

Amys (ah-MEESE): Wise One of Cold Rocks Hold, and a dreamwalker. An Aiel of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel. Wife of Rhuarc, sister-wife to Lian (lee-AHN), who is roofmistress of Cold Rocks Hold. Amys is sister-mother to Aviendha.

Andor (AN-door): A wealthy land which stretches from the Mountains of Mist to the River Erinin, at least on a map, though the queen’s control has not reached further west than the River Manetherendrelle in several generations. *See also* Daughter-Heir.

angreal (anh-gree-AHL): Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow anyone capable of channeling to handle a greater amount of the Power than is safe or even possible unaided. Some were made for use by women, others by men. Rumors of *angreal* usable by both men and women have never been confirmed. Their making is no longer known, and few remain in existence. *See also* channel; *sa’angreal*;*ter’angreal*.

Arad Doman (AH-rad do-MAHN): Nation on the Aryth Ocean. Presently racked by civil war and simultaneously by wars against those who have declared for the Dragon Reborn and against Tarabon. Most Domani merchants are women, and according to the saying, to “let a man trade with a Domani” is to do something extremely foolish. Domani women are famous—or infamous—for their beauty, seductiveness, and scandalous clothes.

Artur Hawkwing: Legendary king, Artur Paendrag Tanreall (AHR-tuhr PAY-ehn-DRAG tahn-REE-ahl). Ruled FY 943–94. United all lands west of the Spine of the World. Sent armies across the Aryth Ocean (FY 992), but contact with these was lost at his death, which set off the War of the Hundred Years. His sign was a golden hawk in flight. *See also* War of the Hundred Years.

Avendesora (AH-vehn-deh-SO-rah): In the Old Tongue, “the Tree of Life.” Mentioned in many stories and legends, which give various locations. Its true location is known to only a few.

Avendoraldera (AH-ven-doh-ral-DEH-rah): Tree grown in the city of Cairhien from a sapling of *Avendesora*, a gift from the Aiel in 566 NE, although no written record shows any connection between the Aiel and *Avendesora*. *See* Aiel War.

Aviendha (ah-vee-EHN-dah): A woman of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel, in training to be a Wise One. She fears nothing, except her fate.

Bair (BAYR): A Wise One of the Haido sept of the Shaarad Aiel. A dreamwalker.

Berelain sur Paendrag (BEH-reh-lain suhr PAY-ehn-DRAG): First of Mayene, Blessed of the Light, Defender of the Waves, High Seat of House Paeron (pay-eh-ROHN). A beautiful and willful young woman, and a skillful ruler. *See also* Mayene.

Birgitte (ber-GEET-teh): Hero of legend and story, renowned for her beauty almost as much as for her bravery and skill at archery. Supposedly carried a silver bow and silver arrows with which she never missed. One of the heroes to be called back when the Horn of Valere is sounded. Always linked with the hero-swordsman Gaidal Cain. Except for her beauty and skill with a bow, she is little like the stories of her. *See also* Cain, Gaidal; Horn of Valere.

Blight, the: *See* Great Blight.

Borderlands: The nations bordering the Great Blight: Saldaea, Arafel, Kandor, and Shienar. Their history is one of unending raids and war against Trollocs and Myrddraal. *See also* Great Blight.

Breaking of the World: During the Time of Madness, male Aes Sedai who had gone insane changed the face of the earth. They leveled mountain ranges and raised new mountains, lifted dry land where seas had been and made oceans cover once-dry land. Much of the world was completely depopulated, the survivors scattered like dust on the wind. This destruction is remembered in stories, legends, and history as the Breaking of the World. *See also* Time of Madness.

Breane Taborwin (bree-AN tah-BOR-wihn): Formerly a high-ranking lady of Cairhien, now a penniless refugee who has found happiness with the sort of man she once had servants flog out of her sight.

cadin'sor (KAH-dihn-sohr): Garb of Aiel warriors; coat and breeches in browns and grays that fade into rock or shadow, along with soft, laced knee-high boots. In the Old Tongue, "working clothes."

Caemlyn (KAYM-lihn): The capital city of Andor. *See* Andor.

Cairhien (KEYE-ree-EHN): Both a nation along the Spine of the World and the capital city of that nation. The city was burned and looted during the Aiel War, as were many other towns and villages. The abandonment of farmland near the Spine of the World after the war made necessary the importation of grain. The assassination of King Galldrian (998 NE) resulted in war for succession to the Sun Throne, disrupting grain shipments and bringing famine. The banner of Cairhien is a many-rayed golden sun rising on a field of sky blue. *See also* Aiel War.

Callandor (CAH-lahn-DOOR): The Sword That Is Not a Sword, the Sword That Cannot Be Touched. Crystal sword once held in the Stone of Tear. A powerful male *sa'angreal*. Its removal from the chamber called the Heart of the Stone was, along with the fall of the Stone, a major sign of the Dragon's Rebirth and the approach of Tarmon Gai'don. Replaced in the Heart, driven into the stone, by Rand al'Thor. *See also* Dragon Reborn; *sa'angreal*; Stone of Tear.

channel: (verb) To control the flow of the One Power. *See also* One Power.

Children of the Light: Society of strict ascetic beliefs, owing allegiance to no nation and dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years to proselytize against an increase in Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military society. Extremely rigid in beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. Consider Aes Sedai and any who support them to be Darkfriends. Known disparagingly as Whitecloaks. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white.

Colavaere (COH-lah-veer) **of house saighan** (sye-GHAN): A high-ranking lady of Cairhien, manipulative and scheming, which is to describe Cairhienin nobility in general, who has had so much power that she sometimes forgets her own vulnerability to a greater.

Couladin (COO-lah-dihn): An ambitious man of the Domai sept of the Shaido Aiel. His warrior society is *Seia Doon*, the Black Eyes.

cuendillar (CWAIN-deh-yar): An indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any force used in an attempt to break it is absorbed, making *cuendillar* stronger. Also called heartstone.

damane (dah-MAH-nee): In the Old Tongue, literally: "leashed one." Seanchan term for women who can channel and are, as they see it, properly controlled by use of *a'dam*. Women who can channel but are not yet *damane* are called *marath'damane*, literally, "those who must be leashed." *See also a'dam*; Seanchan; *sul'dam*.

Darkfriends: Adherents of the Dark One. They believe they will gain great power and rewards, even immortality, when he is freed.

Dark One: Most common name, used in every land, for Shai'tan (SHAY-ih-TAN). The source of evil, antithesis of the Creator. Imprisoned by the Creator in Shayol Ghul at the moment of Creation. An attempt to free him brought about the War of the Shadow, the tainting of *saidin*, the Breaking of the World, and the end of the Age of Legends.

Dark One, naming the: Saying the true name of the Dark One (Shai'tan) draws his attention, bringing ill fortune at best, disaster at worst. For that reason many euphemisms are used, among them the Dark One, Father of Lies, Sightblinder, Lord of the Grave, Shepherd of the Night, Heartsbane, Soulsbane, Heartfang, Old Grim, Grassburner and Leaf-blighter. Darkfriends call him the Great Lord of the Dark. Someone who seems to be inviting ill fortune is often said to be "naming the Dark One."

Daughter-heir: Title of the heir to the Lion Throne of Andor. Without a surviving daughter, the throne goes to the nearest female blood relation of the Queen. Dissension over exactly who was nearest by blood has several times led to power struggles, the latest being “the Succession”—so called in Andor and “the Third War of Andoran Succession” elsewhere—which brought Morgase of House Trakand to the throne.

Dobraine (doh-BRAIN) **of house Taborwin** (tah-BOHR-wihn): A high-ranking lord of Cairhien who believes in keeping the letter of his oaths.

Dragon, false: Name given to various men who have claimed to be the Dragon Reborn. Some began wars that involved many nations. Over the centuries most were unable to channel, but a few could. All, however, either disappeared or were captured or killed without fulfilling any of the Prophecies of the Dragon. Among those who could channel, the most powerful were Raolin Darksbane (active 335–36 AB), Yurian Stonebow *(circa* 1300–1308 AB), Davian (FY 351), Guaire Amalasan (FY 939–43), Logain (997 NE), and Mazrim Taim (998 NE). *See also* Dragon Reborn.

Dragon, Prophecies of the: Little known except among the well-educated and seldom spoken of, the Prophecies, given in *The Karaethon Cycle* (ka-REE-ah-thon), foretell that the Dark One will be freed again, and that Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, will be Reborn to fight Tarmon Gai’don, the Last Battle against the Shadow. He will, say the Prophecies, save the world—and Break it again. *See also* Dragon, the.

Dragon, the: Name by which Lews Therin Telamon was known during the War of the Shadow, some three thousand or more years ago. In the madness that overtook all male Aes Sedai, Lews Therin killed everyone who carried any of his blood, as well as everyone he loved, thus earning the name Kinslayer. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the; Dragon Reborn.

Dragon Reborn: According to the Prophecies of the Dragon, the man who is the Rebirth of Lews Therin Kinslayer. *See also* Dragon, false; Dragon, Prophecies of the; Dragon, the.

Dragonwall: *See* Spine of the World.

Dreadlords: Men and women able to channel, who went over to the Shadow during the Trolloc Wars, acting as generals over armies of Trollocs, Myrddraal and Darkfriends. Occasionally confused with the Forsaken by the less well educated.

Dreamer: *See* Talents.

dreamwalker: Aiel name for a woman able to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod. See also Tel'aran'rhiod*.

Egwene al'Vere (eh-GWAIN al-VEER): A young woman from Emond's Field, in the Two Rivers district of Andor. Now one of the Accepted, she is in training with Aiel dreamwalkers, and is possibly a Dreamer. *See also* dreamwalker; Talents.

Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan (eh-LY-da doh AHV-rih-nee ah-ROY-han): An Aes Sedai, formerly of the Red Ajah, now raised to the Amyrlin Seat. Once advisor to Queen Morgase of Andor. She sometimes has the Foretelling.

Elayne (ee-LAIN) **of House Trakand** (trah-KAND): Queen Morgase's daughter, the Daughter-Heir to the Throne of Andor. Now one of the Accepted. Her sign is a golden lily. *See also* Daughter-Heir.

Enaila (eh-NYE-lah): A Maiden of the Spear. Of the Jarra sept of the Chareen Aiel. Touchy concerning her height, she has a remarkable attitude toward Rand al'Thor considering that she is no more than a year older than he.

Faile (fah-EEL): In the Old Tongue, means "falcon." Name assumed by Zarine Bashere (zah-REEN bah-SHEER), a young woman from Saldaea.

Faolain orande (FOW-lain oh-RAN-deh): An Accepted who does not like wilders.

Far Dareis Mai (FAHR DAH-rize MY): In the Old Tongue, literally, "Of the Spear Maidens." Aiel warrior society which, unlike any other, admits women and only women. A Maiden may not marry and remain in the society, nor may she fight while carrying a child. Any child born to a Maiden is given to another woman to raise, in such a way that no one knows the child's mother. ("You may belong to no man, nor may any man belong to you, nor any child. The spear is your lover, your child, and your life.") *See also* Aiel; Aiel warrior societies.

Five Powers: There are threads to the One Power, named according to the sorts of things that can be done using them—

Earth, Air (sometimes called Wind), Fire, Water, and Spirit, which are called the Five Powers. A wielder of the Power will have a greater strength with one, or possibly two but rarely more, and lesser with the others. In the Age of Legends, Spirit was found equally in men and in women, but great ability with Earth and/or Fire occurred much more often among men, ability with Water and/or Air among women. Despite exceptions, it was so often so that Earth and Fire came to be regarded as male Powers, Air and Water as female.

Flame of Tar Valon: Symbol of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, and the Aes Sedai. A stylized representation of a flame; a white teardrop, point upwards.

Forsaken, the: Name given to thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends, thus among the most powerful ever known, who went over to the Dark One during the War of the Shadow in return for the promise of immortality. Their own name for themselves was “the Chosen.” According to both legend and fragmentary records, they were imprisoned along with the Dark One when his prison was resealed. The names given to them are still used to frighten children. They were: Aginor (AGH-ih-nohr), Asmodean (ahs-MOH-dee-an), Balthamel (BAAL-thah-mell), Be’lal (BEH-lahl), Demandred (DEE-man-drehd), Graendal (GREHN-dahl), Ishamael (ih-SHAH-may-EHL), Lanfear (LAN-feer), Mesaana (meh-SAH-nah), Moghedien (moh-GHEH-dee-ehn), Rahvin (RAAV-ihn), Sammael (SAHM-may-EHL), and Semirhage (SEH-mih-RHAHG).

Gaidal Cain (GAY-dahl KAIN): Hero-swordsman of legend and story, always linked to Birgitte and said to be as handsome as she was beautiful. One of the heroes supposed to be called back when the Horn of Valere is sounded. *See also* Birgitte; Horn of Valere.

Gaidin (GYE-deen): In the Old Tongue, “Brother to Battles.” A title used by Aes Sedai for the Warders. *See also* Warder.

gai’shain (GYE-shain): In the Old Tongue, “Pledged to Peace in Battle.” An Aiel taken prisoner by other Aiel during raid or battle is required by *ji’e’toh* to serve his or her captor humbly and obediently for one year and a day, touching no weapon and doing no violence. A Wise One, a blacksmith, a child or a woman with a child under the age of ten may not be made *gai'shain*.

Galad (gah-LAHD): Lord Galadedrid Damodred (gah-LAHD-eh-drihd DAHM-oh-drehd): Called Galad. Half-brother to Elayne and Gawyn, sharing the same father, Taringail (TAH-rihn-gail) Damodred. His sign is a winged silver sword, point down.

Game of Houses: Name given the scheming, plots, and manipulations for advantage by noble Houses. Great value is given to subtlety, to aiming at one thing while seeming to aim at another, and to achieving ends with the least visible effort. Also known as the Great Game, and sometimes by its name in the Old Tongue: *Da'es Daemar* (DAH-ess day-MAR).

Gareth Bryne (GAH-rehth BRIHN): Once Captain-General of the Queen's Guards in Andor. Exiled by Queen Morgase. Considered one of the greatest generals living. The sigil of House Bryne is a wild bull, the rose crown of Andor around its neck. Gareth Bryne's personal sigil is three golden stars, each of five rays.

Gawyn (GAH-wihn) **of House Trakand** (trah-KAND): Queen Morgase's son, and Elayne's brother, who will be First Prince of the Sword when Elayne ascends to the throne. His sign is a white boar.

gentling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a male who can channel from the One Power. Necessary because any man who channels will go insane from the taint on *saidin* and almost certainly do horrible things with the Power in his madness before the taint kills him. One who has been gentled can still sense the True Source, but cannot touch it. Whatever madness has come before gentling is arrested but not cured, and if it is done soon enough death can be averted. A man who is gentled, however, inevitably gives up wanting to live; those who do not succeed in committing suicide usually die anyway within a year or two. *See also* One Power; stilling.

gleeman: A traveling storyteller, musician, juggler, tumbler, and all-around entertainer. Known by their trademark cloaks of many-colored patches, gleemen perform mainly in the villages and smaller towns.

Great Blight: A region in the far north, entirely corrupted by the Dark One. A haunt of Trollocs, Myrddraal, and other creatures of the Shadow.

Great Lord of the Dark: Name by which Darkfriends refer to the Dark One, claiming that to speak his true name would be blasphemous.

Great Serpent: A symbol for time and eternity, ancient before the Age of Legends began, consisting of a serpent eating its own tail. A ring in the shape of the Great Serpent is awarded to women who have been raised to the Accepted among the Aes Sedai.

High Lords of Tear: Acting as a council, the High Lords are historically the rulers of the nation of Tear, which has neither king nor queen. Their numbers are not fixed, and have varied from as many as twenty to as few as six. Not to be confused with the Lords of the Land, who are lesser Tairen lords.

Horn of Valere (vah-LEER): The legendary object of the Great Hunt of the Horn, it can call back dead heroes from the grave to fight against the Shadow. A new Hunt of the Horn has been called, and sworn Hunters for the Horn can now be found in many nations.

Illian (IHL-lee-an): A great port on the Sea of Storms, capital city of the nation of the same name.

Isendre (ih-SEHN-dreh): A beautiful and greedy woman who angered the wrong woman and for once in her life told the truth when she denied stealing.

ji’e’toh (jih-eh-toh): In the Old Tongue, “honor and obligation” or “honor and duty.” The complex code by which Aiel live, and which would take a shelf of volumes to explain. By way of small example, there are many paths to gain honor in battle. The smallest is to kill, for anyone can kill. The greatest is to touch an armed and living enemy without causing harm. Somewhere in the middle is to make an enemy *gai’shain*. For another example, shame, which also has many levels in *ji’e’toh*, is considered on many of those levels to be worse than pain, injury or even death.

For a third, there are, again, many degrees of *toh,* or obligation, but even the smallest of these must be met in full. *Toh* outweighs other considerations to the extent that an Aiel will often accept shame, if necessary, to fulfill an obligation that might seem minor to an outlander. *See also gai'shain*.

Juilin sandar (JUY-lihn sahn-DAHR): A thief-catcher from Tear.

Kadere, Hadnan (kah-DEER, HAHD-nahn): A supposed peddler who regrets ever having entered the Aiel Waste.

Lamgwin Dorn (lam-GWIHN DOHRN): A street tough and brawler who is loyal to his queen.

Lan (LAN); **al'Lan Mandragoran** (AHL-LAN man-DRAG-or-an): A Warder, bonded to Moiraine. Uncrowned King of Malkier, Dai Shan (Battle Lord), and the last surviving Malkieri lord. *See also* Warder; Moiraine; Malkier.

Lanfear (LAN-feer): In the Old Tongue, "Daughter of the Night." One of the Forsaken. Unlike the others, she chose this name herself. Said to have loved Lews Therin Telamon, and to have hated his wife, Ilyena. *See also* Forsaken; Dragon, the.

Leane Sharif (lee-AHN-eh shah-REEF): Once an Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah, and Keeper of the Chronicles. Now deposed and stilled, seeking to rediscover who she is. *See also* Ajah.

Length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Lews Therin Telamon; Lews Therin Kinslayer: *See* Dragon, the.

Liandrin (lee-AHN-drihn): An Aes Sedai formerly of the Red Ajah, from Tarabon. Now known to be of the Black Ajah.

Lini (LIHN-nee): Childhood nurse to the Lady Elayne, and before her to Elayne's mother, Morgase, as well as to Morgase's mother. A woman of vast inner strength, considerable perception, and a great many sayings.

Logain (loh-GAIN): A man who once claimed to be the Dragon Reborn, now gentled. *See also* Dragon, false.

Lugard (LOO-gahrd): Nominally the capital of Murandy, though that country is a quilt of loyalties to towns and individual lords and ladies, and whoever sits on the throne seldom has any real control over even the city. Lugard is a major trade center, and a byword for thievery, licentiousness and general disrepute.

Macura, Ronde (mah-CURE-ah, rohn-deh): A seamstress in Amadicia who tried to serve too many masters and mistresses without knowing who they all were.

Maighande (mye-GHAN-deh): One of the greatest battles of the Trolloc Wars. The victory of humankind here began the long push that finally drove the Trollocs back to the Great Blight. *See also* Great Blight; Trolloc Wars.

Malkier (mahl-KEER): A nation, once one of the Borderlands, now consumed by the Blight. The sign of Malkier was a golden crane in flight.

Manetheren (mahn-EHTH-ehr-ehn): One of the Ten Nations that made the Second Covenant. Also the capital city of that nation. Both city and nation were utterly destroyed in the Trolloc Wars. *See also* Trolloc Wars.

Mat Cauthon: A young man, from Emond's Field in the Two Rivers district of Andor, who is *ta'veren* and also extremely lucky. Full name: Matrim (MAT-trim) Cauthon.

Mayene (may-EHN): City-state on the Sea of Storms, hemmed in and historically oppressed by Tear. The ruler of Mayene is styled "the First"; Firsts claim to be descendants of Artur Hawkwing. The banner of Mayene is a golden hawk in flight on a field of blue.

Mazrim Taim (MAHZ-rihm tah-EEM): A false Dragon who raised havoc in Saldaea until he was defeated and captured. Not only able to channel, but supposedly of great strength. *See also* Dragon, false.

Meilan (MYE-lan) **of House Mendiana** (mehn-dee-AH-nah): A High Lord of Tear. A competent general, but a man of ambitions and hates. *See also* High Lords of Tear.

Melaine (meh-LAYN): A Wise One of the Jhirad sept of Goshien Aiel. A dreamwalker. *See also* dreamwalker.

Melindhra (meh-LIHN-dhrah): A Maiden of the Spear, of the Jumai sept of the Shaido Aiel. A woman of divided loyalties. *See also* Aiel warrior societies.

Min (MIN): A young woman with the ability to read things about people in the auras and images she sometimes sees surrounding them.

Moiraine (mwah-RAIN): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. Born in Cairhein, of House Damodred, though not in line of succession to the throne, and raised in the Royal Palace. Rarely uses her House name, and keeps her association with it as secret as possible.

Morgase (moor-GAYZ): By the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Trakand. Her sign is three golden keys. The sign of House Trakand is a silver keystone.

Myrddraal (MUHRD-draal): Creatures of the Dark One, commanders of the Trollocs. Twisted offspring of Trollocs in which the human stock used to create the Trollocs has resurfaced, but tainted by the evil that made the Trollocs. They have no eyes, but can see like eagles in light or dark. They have certain powers stemming from the Dark One, including the ability to cause paralyzing fear with a look, and to vanish wherever there are shadows. Among Myrddraal's known weaknesses is that they are reluctant to cross running water. Mirrors reflect them only mistily. In different lands they are known by many names, among them Halfman, the Eyeless, Shadowman, Lurk, Fetch, and Fade.

Natael, Jasin (nah-TAYL, JAY-sihn): Name used by Asmodean, one of the Forsaken.

Niall, Pedron (NEYE-awl, PAY-drohn): Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light. *See also* Children of the Light.

Nynaeve al'Meara (NIGH-neev al-MEER-ah): A woman once the Wisdom of Emond's Field, in the Two Rivers district of Andor. Now one of the Accepted.

Oaths, Three: The oaths taken by an Accepted on being raised to Aes Sedai. Spoken while holding the Oath Rod, a *ter'angreal* that makes oaths binding. They are: (1) To speak no word that is not true. (2) To make no weapon with which one man may kill another. (3) Never to use the One Power as a weapon except against Shadowspawn, or in the last extreme of defense of her own life, or that of her Warder or another Aes Sedai. The second oath was the first adopted after the War of the Shadow. The first oath, while held to the letter, is often circumvented by careful speaking. It is believed that the last two are inviolable.

Ogier (OH-gehr): (1) A non-human race, characterized by great height (ten feet is average for adult males), broad, almost snout-like noses, and long, tufted ears. They live in areas called *stedding*, which they rarely leave, and they typically have little contact with humankind. Knowledge of them among humans is sparse, and many believe Ogier to be only legends, though they are wondrous stonemasons and built most of the great cities constructed after the Breaking.

Old Tongue: The language spoken during the Age of Legends. It is generally expected that nobles and the educated will have learned to speak it, but most know only a few words. Translation is often difficult, as it is a language capable of many subtly different meanings. *See also* Age of Legends.

One Power: The power drawn from the True Source. The vast majority of people are completely unable to learn to channel the One Power. A very small number can be taught to channel, and an even tinier number have the ability inborn. These few have no need to be taught; eventually they will channel whether they want to or not, often without even realizing what they are doing. This inborn ability usually manifests itself in late adolescence or early adulthood. If control is not taught, or self-learned (extremely difficult, with a success rate of only one in four), death is certain. Since the Time of Madness, no man has been able to channel the Power without eventually going completely, horribly mad, and then, even if he has learned some control, dying from a wasting sickness that causes the sufferer to rot alive, a sickness caused, as is the madness, by the Dark One’s taint on *saidin. See also* Aes Sedai; channel; Five Powers; Time of Madness; True Source.

Pattern of an Age: The Wheel of Time weaves the threads of human lives into the Pattern of an Age, often called simply the Pattern, which forms the substance of reality for that Age. *See also ta’veren*.

Rand al'Thor (RAND al-THOR): A young man from Emond's Field, in the Two Rivers district of Andor, who is *ta'veren*. Once a shepherd. Now proclaimed as the Dragon Reborn, and also as He Who Comes With the Dawn, prophecied to unite the Aiel and break them. It also seems likely that he is the Coramoor, or Chosen One, sought by the Sea Folk. *See also* Aiel; Dragon Reborn.

Rhuarc (RHOURK): An Aiel, clan chief of the Taardad Aiel.

Rhuidean (RHUY-dee-ahn): A great city, the only one in the Aiel Waste and totally unknown to the outside world. Abandoned for nearly three thousand years. Once men among the Aiel were allowed to enter Rhuidean only once, in order to be tested, inside a great *ter'angreal*, for fitness to become clan chief (only one in three survived), and women only twice, for testing in that same *ter'angreal* and again to become Wise Ones, though with a considerably higher survival rate. Now the city is inhabited again, by Aiel, and a great lake occupies one end of the valley of Rhuidean, fed by an underground ocean of fresh water and in turn feeding the only river in the Waste.

sa'angreal (SAH-ahn-GREE-ahl): Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow channeling much more of the One Power than is otherwise possible or safe. A *sa'angreal* is similar to, but more powerful than, an *angreal*. The amount of the Power that can be wielded with a *sa'angreal* compares to the amount that can be handled with an *angreal* as the Power wielded with the aid of an *angreal* does to the amount that can be handled unaided. The making of them is no longer known. As with *angreal*, there are male and female *sa'angreal*. Only a handful remain, far fewer even than *angreal*.

saidar (sah-ih-DAHR); *saidin* (sah-ih-DEEN): *See* True Source.

Seanchan (SHAWN-CHAN): (1) Descendants of the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean, who conquered the lands there. They believe that any woman who can channel must be controlled for the safety of everyone else, and any man who can channel must be killed for the same reason. (2) The land from which the Seanchan come.

Seekers for Truth: A police/spy organization of the Seanchan Imperial Throne. Although most Seekers are property of the Imperial family, they have wide powers. Even one of the Blood (a Seanchan noble) can be arrested for failure to answer any question put by a Seeker, or for failure to cooperate fully with a Seeker, this last defined by the Seekers themselves, subject only to review by the Empress.

Shayol Ghul (SHAY-ol GHOOL): A mountain in the Blasted Lands, beyond the Great Blight. Site of the Dark One's prison.

Siuan Sanche (SWAHN SAHN-chay): Daughter of a Tairen fisherman, according to Tairen law she was put on a ship to Tar Valon before the second sunset after discovery that she had the potential to channel. Once Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah and later Amyrlin Seat, she was deposed and stilled. Now seeking to avoid the fate she fears.

Spine of the World: A towering mountain range, with few passes, which separates the Aiel Waste from the lands to the west. Also called the Dragonwall.

stilling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a woman who can channel from the One Power. A woman who has been stilled can sense the True Source, but not touch it. So seldom has it been done that novices are required to learn the names and crimes of all women who have suffered it. Officially, stilling is the result of trial and sentence for a crime. When it happens accidentally, it is called being burned out. In practice, the term "stilling" is often used for both. Women who have been stilled, however it occurred, seldom survive long; they seem to simply give up and die.

Stone of Tear: A great fortress in the city of Tear, said to have been made with the One Power soon after the Breaking of the World. Attacked and besieged unsuccessfully countless times, it fell in a single night to the Dragon Reborn and a few hundred Aiel, thus fulfilling two parts of the Prophecies of the Dragon. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the.

sul'dam (SOOL-dam): Literally, "leash holder." Seanchan term for a woman with the ability to control, by means of an *a'dam*, a woman who can channel. A fairly honored position among the Seanchan. What is known only to a few is that *sul'dam* are in fact those women who could be taught to channel. *See also a'dam*;*damane*; Seanchan.

Talents: Abilities in the use of the One Power in specific areas. The best known is Healing. Some, such as Traveling, the ability to shift from one place to another without crossing the intervening space, have been lost to the Aes Sedai of today. Others, such as Foretelling (the ability to foretell future events, but in a general way), are now found rarely. Another Talent long thought lost is Dreaming, which involves, among other things, interpreting the Dreamer's dreams to foretell future events in more specific fashion than Foretelling does. Some Dreamers had the ability to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the World of Dreams, and (it is said) even other people's dreams. The last acknowledged Dreamer was Corianin Nedeal (coh-ree-AHN-ihn neh-dee-AHL), who died in 526 NE, but there is now another, known to but a few. *See also Tel'aran'rhiod*.

Tallanvor, Martyn (TAL-lahn-vohr, mahr-TEEN): Guardsman-Lieutenant of the Queen's Guards who loves his queen more than life or honor.

ta'maral'ailen (tah-MAHR-ahl-EYE-lehn): In the Old Tongue, "Web of Destiny." A great change in the Pattern of an Age, centered around one or more people who are *ta'veren*. *See also* Pattern of an Age; *ta'veren*.

Tanchico (tan-CHEE-coh): Capital city of Tarabon. *See* Tarabon.

Tarabon (TAH-rah-BON): Nation on the Aryth Ocean. Once a great trading nation, a source of rugs, dyes and fireworks produced by the Guild of Illuminators, among other things. Little news has come out of Tarabon since the land became racked by anarchy and civil war compounded by simultaneous wars against Arad Doman and the Dragonsworn, people who have sworn to follow the Dragon Reborn.

Tarmon Gai'don (TAHR-mohn GAY-dohn): The Last Battle. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the; Horn of Valere.

ta'veren (tah-VEER-ehn): A person around whom the Wheel of Time weaves all surrounding life-threads, perhaps ALL life-threads, to form a Web of Destiny. *See also* Pattern of an Age; *ta'maral'ailen*.

Tear (TEER): A nation on the Sea of Storms. Also the capital city of that nation, a great seaport. The banner of Tear is three white crescent moons slanting across a field half red, half gold. *See also* Stone of Tear.

Telamon, Lews Therin (TEHL-ah-mon, LOOZ THEH-rihn): *See* Dragon, the.

Tel'aran'rhiod (tel-AYE-rahn-rhee-ODD): In the Old Tongue, "the Unseen World," or "the World of Dreams." A world glimpsed in dreams which was believed by the ancients to permeate and surround all other possible worlds. Many can touch *Tel'aran'rhiod* for a few moments in their dreams, but few have ever had the ability to enter it at will, though some *ter'angreal* have recently been discovered to confer that ability. Unlike other dreams, what happens to living things in the World of Dreams is real; a wound taken there will still exist on awakening, and one who dies there does not wake at all. *See also ter'angreal*.

ter'angreal (TEER-ahn-GREE-ahl): Remnants of the Age of Legends that use the One Power. Unlike *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, each *ter'angreal* was made to do a particular thing. Some *ter'angreal* are used by Aes Sedai, but the original purposes of many are unknown. Some require channeling, while others may be used by anyone. Some will kill or destroy the ability to channel of any woman who uses them. Like *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, the making of them has been lost since the Breaking of the World. *See also angreal*; *sa'angreal*.

Thom Merrilin (TOM MER-rih-lihn): A not-so-simple gleeman and traveler. *See also* gleeman.

Time of Madness: The years after the Dark One's counterstroke tainted the male half of the True Source, when male Aes Sedai went mad and Broke the World. The exact duration of this period is unknown, but it is believed to have lasted nearly one hundred years. It ended completely only with the death of the last male Aes Sedai. *See also* One Power; True Source.

Trollocs (TRAHL-lohks): Creatures of the Dark One, created during the War of the Shadow. Huge of stature, they are a twisted blend of animal and human stock. Divided into tribe-like bands, among them the Dha'vol, the Ko'bal, and the Dhai'mon. Vicious by nature, they kill for the pure pleasure of killing. Deceitful in the extreme, they cannot be trusted unless coerced by fear.

Trolloc Wars: A series of wars, beginning about 1000 AB and lasting more than three hundred years, during which Trolloc armies ravaged the World. Eventually the Trollocs were driven back into the Great Blight, but some nations ceased to exist, and others that survived were almost depopulated. All records of the time are fragmentary.

True Source: The driving force of the universe, which turns the Wheel of Time. Divided into a male half *(saidin)* and a female half *(saidar)*, which work at the same time with and against each other. Only a man can draw on *saidin*, only a woman on *saidar*. Since the beginning of the Time of Madness, *saidin* has been tainted by the Dark One's touch. *See also* One Power.

Verin Mathwin (VEH-rihn MATH-wihn): Aes Sedai of the Brown Ajah, last known to be in the Two Rivers purportedly seeking girls who could be taught to channel. *See also* Ajah.

Warder: A warrior bonded to an Aes Sedai. The bonding is a thing of the One Power: by it he gains such gifts as quick healing, the ability to go long periods without food, water, or rest, and the ability to sense the taint of the Dark One at a distance. So long as a Warder lives, the Aes Sedai to whom he is bonded knows he is alive however far away he is, and when he dies she will know the moment and manner of his death. While most Ajahs believe an Aes Sedai may have one Warder bonded to her at a time, the Red Ajah refuses to bond any Warders at all, and the Green Ajah believes an Aes Sedai may bond as many as she wishes. Ethically the Warder must accede to the bonding voluntarily, but it has been known to be done against the Warder's will. What the Aes Sedai gain from the bonding is a closely held secret. *See also* Aes Sedai.

War of Power: *See* War of the Shadow.

War of the hundred years (Fy 994–Fy1117): A series of overlapping wars among constantly shifting alliances, precipitated by the death of Artur Hawkwing and the resulting struggle for his empire. The War of the Hundred Years depopulated large parts of the lands between the Aryth Ocean and the Aiel Waste, from the Sea of Storms to the Great Blight. So great was the destruction that only fragmentary records of the time remain. The empire of Artur Hawkwing was pulled apart, and the nations of the present day were formed. *See also* Hawkwing, Artur.

War of the Shadow: Also known as the War of Power. Began shortly after the attempt to free the Dark One, and soon involved the whole world. In a world where even the memory of war had been forgotten, every facet of war was rediscovered, often twisted by the Dark One's touch on the world, and the One Power was used as a weapon. The war was ended by the resealing of the Dark One into his prison in a strike led by Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, and one hundred male Aes Sedai called the Hundred Companions. The Dark One's counterstroke tainted *saidin* and drove Lews Therin and the Hundred Companions insane, thus beginning the Time of Madness. *See also* Dragon, the; One Power, the; Time of Madness, the.

Weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Wheel of Time, the: Time is a wheel with seven spokes, each spoke an Age. As the Wheel turns, Ages come and go, each leaving memories that fade to legend, then to myth, and are forgotten by the time that Age comes again. The Pattern of an Age is slightly different each time an Age comes, and each time it is subject to greater change.

Whitecloaks: *See* Children of the Light.

wilder: A woman who has learned to channel the One Power on her own, surviving the crisis as only one in four does. Such women usually build barriers against knowing what it is they are doing, but if these can be broken down, wilders are among the most powerful of channelers. The term is often used in derogatory fashion.

Wisdom: In villages, a woman chosen by the Women's Circle for her knowledge of such things as healing and foretelling the weather, as well as common good sense. Generally considered the equal of the Mayor, and in some villages his superior. She is chosen for life, and it is very rare for a Wisdom to be removed from office before her death. Depending on the land, she may instead have another title, such as Guide, Healer, Wise Woman, or Seeker.

Wise one: Among the Aiel, Wise Ones are women chosen by other Wise Ones and trained in healing, herbs and other things, much like Wisdoms. Usually there is a single Wise One to each clan or sept hold. They have great authority and responsibility, as well as great influence with sept and clan chiefs, though these men often accuse them of meddling. Wise Ones stand outside all feuds and battles, and according to *ji'e'toh* may not be harmed or impeded in any way. Some Wise Ones have the ability to channel, but they do not advertise this. Three Wise Ones now living are dreamwalkers, with the ability to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod* and to speak to other people in their dreams, among other things. *See also* dreamwalker; *ji'e'toh*;*Tel'aran'rhiod*.

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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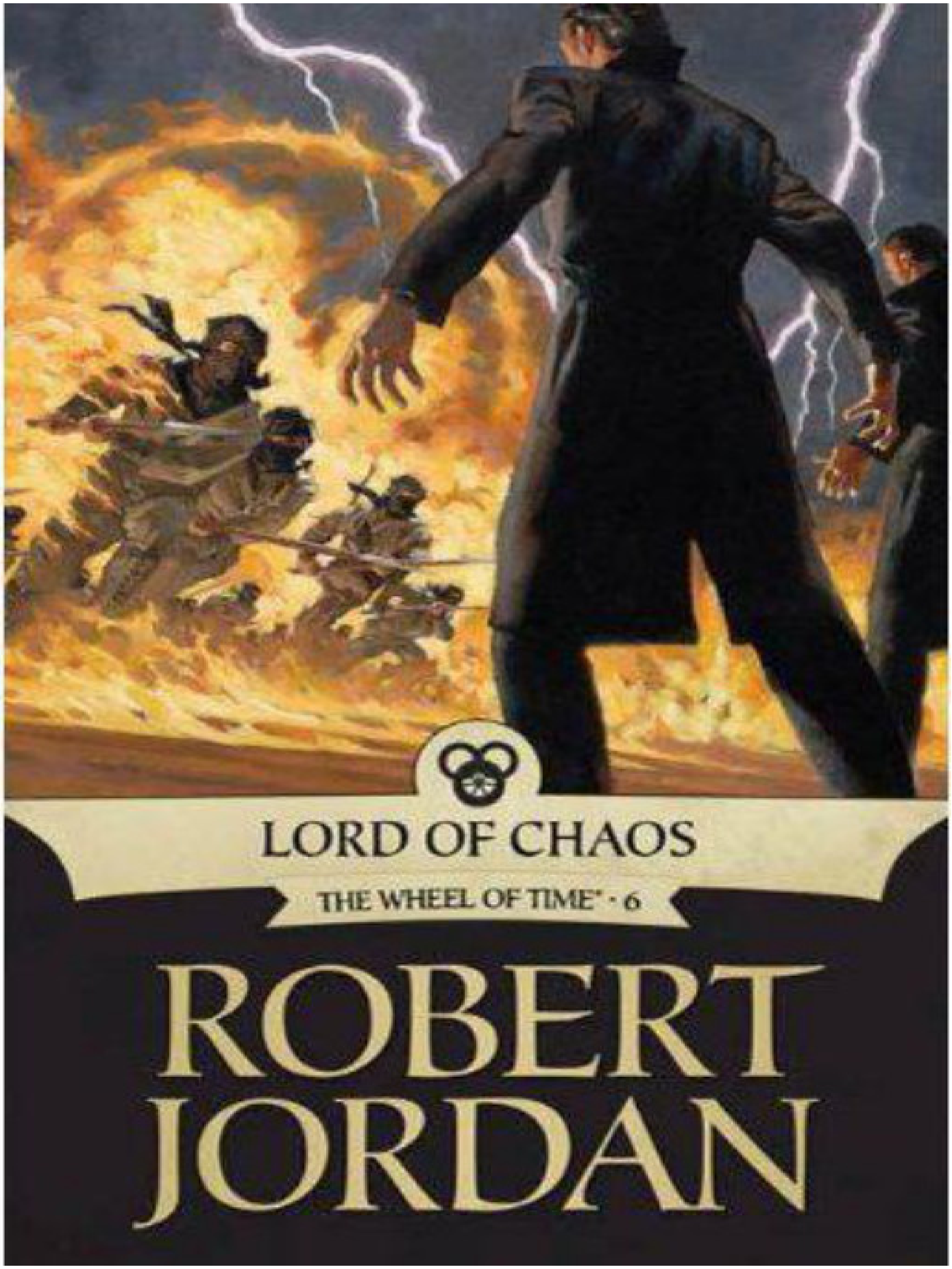
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The lions sing and the hills take flight.
The moon by day, and the sun by night.
Blind woman, deaf man, jackdaw fool.
Let the Lord of Chaos rule.

—chant from a children’s game
heard in Great Arvalon,
the Fourth Age

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PROLOGUE

The First Message

Demandred stepped out onto the black slopes of Shayol Ghul, and the gateway, a hole in reality's fabric, winked out of existence. Above, roiling gray clouds hid the sky, an inverted sea of sluggish ashen waves crashing around the mountain's hidden peak. Below, odd lights flashed across the barren valley, washed-out blues and reds, failing to dispel the dusky murk that shrouded their source. Lightning streaked *up* at the clouds, and slow thunder rolled. Across the slope steam and smoke rose from scattered vents, some holes as small as a man's hand and some large enough to swallow ten men.

He released the One Power immediately, and with the vanished sweetness went the heightened senses that made everything sharper, clearer. The absence of *saidin* left him hollow, yet here only a fool would even appear ready to channel. Besides, here only a fool would want to see or smell or feel too clearly.

In what was now called the Age of Legends, this had been an idyllic island in a cool sea, a favorite of those who enjoyed the rustic. Despite the steam it was bitter cold, now; he did not allow himself to feel it, but instinct made him pull his fur-lined velvet cloak closer. Feathery mist marked his breath, barely visible before the air drank it. A few hundred leagues north the world was pure ice, but Thakan'dar was always dry as any desert, though always wrapped in winter.

There was water, of a sort, an inky rivulet oozing down the rocky slope beside a gray-roofed forge. Hammers rang inside, and with every ring, white light flared in the cramped windows. A ragged woman crouched in a hopeless heap against the forge's rough stone wall, clutching a babe in her arms, and a spindly girl buried her face in the woman's skirts. Prisoners from a raid down into the Borderlands, no doubt. But so few; the Myrddraal must be gnashing their teeth. Their blades failed after a time and had to be replaced, no matter that raids into the Borderlands had been curtailed.

One of the forgers emerged, a thick slow-moving man shape that seemed hacked out of the mountain. The forgers were not truly alive; carried any distance from Shayol Ghul, they turned to stone, or dust. Nor were they smiths as such; they made nothing but the swords. This one's two hands held a sword blade in long tongs, a blade already quenched, pale like moonlit snow. Alive or not, the forger took care as it dipped the gleaming metal into the dark stream. Whatever semblance of life it had could be ended by the touch of that water. When the metal came out again, it was dead black. But the making was not done yet. The forger shuffled back inside, and suddenly a man's voice raised a desperate shout.

"No? No! NO!" He shrieked then, the sound dwindling away without losing intensity, as though the screamer had been yanked into unimaginably far distance. Now the blade was done.

Once more a forger appeared—perhaps the same, perhaps another—and hauled the woman to her feet. Woman, babe and child began to wail, but the infant was pulled away and shoved into the girl's arms. At last the woman found a scrap of resistance. Weeping, she kicked wildly, clawed at the forger. It paid no more mind than stone would have. The woman's cries vanished as soon as she was inside. The hammers began ringing again, drowning the sobs of the children.

One blade made, one making, and two to come. Demandred had never before seen fewer than fifty prisoners waiting to give their mite to the Great Lord of the Dark. The Myrddraal must be gnashing their teeth, indeed.

"Do you loiter when you have been summoned by the Great Lord?" The voice sounded like rotted leather crumbling.

Demandred turned slowly—how dare a Halfman address him in that tone—but the quelling words died in his mouth. It was not the eyeless stare of its pasty-pale face; a Myrddraal's gaze struck fear in any man, but he had rooted fear out of himself long ago. Rather, it was the black-clad creature itself. Every Myrddraal was the height of a tall man, a sinuous imitation of a man, as alike as though cast in one mold. This one stood head and shoulders taller.

"I will take you to the Great Lord," the Myrddraal said. "I am Shaidar Haran." It turned away and began climbing the mountain, like a serpent in its fluid motion. Its inky cloak hung unnaturally still, without even a ripple.

Demandred hesitated before following. Halfmen's names were always in the Trollocs' tongue-wrenching language. "Shaidar Haran" came from what people now named the Old Tongue. It meant "Hand of the Dark." Another surprise, and Demandred did not like surprises, especially not at Shayol Ghul.

The entry into the mountain could have been one of the scattered vents, except that it emitted no smoke or steam. It gaped enough for two men abreast, but the Myrddraal kept the lead. The way slanted down almost immediately, the tunnel floor worn smooth as polished tiles. The cold faded as Demandred followed Shaidar Haran's broad back down and down, slowly replaced by increasing heat. Demandred was aware of it, but did not let it touch him. A pale light rose from the stone, filling the tunnel, brighter than the eternal twilight outside. Jagged spikes jutted from the ceiling, stony teeth ready to snap shut, the Great Lord's teeth to rend the unfaithful or the traitor. Not natural, of course, but effective.

Abruptly, he noticed something. Every time he had made this journey, those spikes had all but brushed the top of his head. Now they cleared the Myrddraal's by two hands or more. That surprised him. Not that the height of the tunnel changed—the strange was ordinary here—but the extra space the Halfman was given. The Great Lord gave his reminders to Myrddraal as well as men. That extra space was a fact to be remembered.

The tunnel opened out suddenly onto a wide ledge overlooking a lake of molten stone, red mottled with black, where man-high flames danced, died and rose again. There was no roof, only a great hole rising through the mountain to a sky that was not the sky of Thakan'dar. It made that of Thakan'dar look normal, with its wildly striated clouds streaking by as though driven by the greatest winds the world had ever seen. This, men called the Pit of Doom, and few knew how well they had named it.

Even after all his visits—and the first lay well over three thousand years in the past—Demandred felt awe. Here he could sense the Bore, the hole drilled through so long ago to where the Great Lord had lain imprisoned since the moment of Creation. Here the Great Lord's presence washed over him. Physically, this place was no closer to the Bore than any other in the world, but here there was a thinness in the Pattern that allowed it to be sensed.

Demandred came as close to smiling as he ever did. What fools they were who opposed the Great Lord. Oh, the Bore was still blocked, though more tenuously than when he had wakened from his long sleep and broken free of his own prison in it. Blocked, but larger than when he woke. Still not so large as when he had been cast into it with his fellows at the end of the War of Power, but at each visit since waking, a little wider. Soon the blockage would be gone, and the Great Lord would reach out across the earth again. Soon would come the Day of Return. And he would rule the world for all time. Under the Great Lord, of course. And with those of the other Chosen who survived, also of course.

“You may leave now, Halfman.” He did not want the thing here to see the ecstasy overcome him. The ecstasy, and the pain.

Shaidar Haran did not move.

Demandred opened his mouth—and a voice exploded in his head.

DEMANDRED.

To call it a voice was to call a mountain a pebble. It nearly crushed him against the inside of his own skull; it filled him with rapture. He sank to his knees. The Myrddraal stood watching impassively, but only a small part of him could even notice the thing with that voice filling his brain.

DEMANDRED. HOW FARES THIS WORLD?

He was never sure how much the Great Lord knew of the world. He had been as startled by ignorance as by knowledge. But he had no doubt what the Great Lord wanted to hear.

“Rahvin is dead, Great Lord. Yesterday.” There was pain. Euphoria too strong became pain quickly. His arms and legs twitched. He was sweating, now. “Lanfear has vanished without a trace, just as Asmodean did. And Graendal says Moghedien failed to meet her as they had agreed. Also yesterday, Great Lord. I do not believe in coincidence.”

THE CHOSEN DWINDLE, DEMANDRED. THE WEAK FALL AWAY. WHO BETRAYS ME SHALL DIE THE FINAL DEATH. ASMODEAN, TWISTED BY HIS WEAKNESS. RAHVIN DEAD IN HIS PRIDE. HE SERVED WELL, YET EVEN I CANNOT SAVE HIM FROM BALEFIRE. EVEN I CANNOT STEP OUTSIDE OF TIME. For an instant terrible anger filled that awful voice, and—could it be frustration? An instant only. DONE BY MY ANCIENT ENEMY, THE ONE CALLED DRAGON. WOULD YOU UNLEASH THE BALEFIRE IN MY SERVICE, DEMANDRED?

Demandred hesitated. A bead of sweat slid half an inch on his cheek; it seemed to take an hour. For a year during the War of Power, both sides had used balefire. Until they learned the consequences. Without agreement, or truce—there had never been a truce any more than there had been quarter—each side simply stopped. Entire cities died in balefire that year, hundreds of thousands of threads burned from the Pattern; reality itself almost unraveled, world and universe evaporating like mist. If balefire was unleashed once more, there might be no world to rule.

Another point pricked him. The Great Lord already knew how Rahvin had died. And seemed to know more of Asmodean than he. “As you command, Great Lord, so shall I obey.” His muscles might be jerking, but his voice was rock steady. His knees began to blister from the hot stone, yet the flesh might as well have been someone else’s.

SO YOU SHALL.

“Great Lord, the Dragon can be destroyed.” A dead man could not wield balefire again, and perhaps then the Great Lord would see no need for it. “He is ignorant and weak, scattering his attentions in a dozen directions. Rahvin was a vain fool. I—”

WOULD YOU BE NAE’BLIS?

Demandred’s tongue froze. Nae’blis. The one who would stand only a step below the Great Lord, commanding all others. “I wish only to serve you, Great Lord, however I may.” Nae’blis.

THEN LISTEN, AND SERVE. HEAR WHO WILL DIE AND WHO LIVE.

Demandred screamed as the voice crashed home. Tears of joy rolled down his face.

Unmoving, the Myrddraal watched him.

“Stop fidgeting.” Nynaeve testily flipped her long braid over her shoulder. “This won’t work if you twitch around like children with an itch.”

Neither of the women across the rickety table appeared any older than she, though they were by twenty years or more, and neither was really fidgeting, but the heat had Nynaeve on edge. The small windowless room seemed airless. She dripped sweat; they appeared cool and dry. Leane, in a Domani dress of too-thin blue silk, merely shrugged; the tall coppery-skinned woman possessed an apparently infinite store of patience. Usually. Siuan, fair and sturdy, seldom had any.

Now Siuan grunted and resettled her skirts irritably; she used to wear fairly plain clothes, but this morning she was in fine yellow linen embroidered with a Tairen maze around a neckline that barely missed being too low. Her blue eyes were cold as deep well water. As cold as deep well water would have been if the weather had not gone mad. Her dresses might have changed, but not her eyes. “It won’t work in any case,” she snapped. Her manner of speaking was the same, too. “You can’t patch a hull when the whole boat’s burned. Well, it’s a waste of time, but I promised, so get on with it. Leane and I have work to do.” The pair of them ran the networks of eyes-and-ears for the Aes Sedai here in Salidar, the agents who sent in reports and rumors of what was going on in the world.

Nynaeve smoothed her own skirts to soothe herself. Her dress was plain white wool, with seven bands of color at the hem, one for each Ajah. An Accepted’s dress. It annoyed her more than she could ever have imagined. She would much rather have been in the green silk she had packed away. She was willing to admit her acquired taste for fine clothes, privately at least, but her choice of that particular dress was only for comfort—it was thin, light—not because green seemed one of Lan’s favorite colors. Not at all. Idle dreaming of the worst sort. An Accepted who put on anything except the banded white would soon learn she was a *long* step below Aes Sedai. Firmly she put all that out of her head. She was not here to fret over fripperies. He liked blue, too. No!

Delicately she probed with the One Power, first at Siuan, then Leane. In a manner of speaking, she was not channeling at all. She could not channel a scrap unless angry, could not even sense the True Source. Yet it came to the same thing. Fine filaments of *saidar*, the female half of the True Source, sifted through the two women at her weaving. They just did not originate with her.

On her left wrist Nynaeve wore a slender bracelet, a simple segmented silver band. Mainly silver, anyway, and from a special source, though that made no difference. It was the only piece of jewelry she wore aside from the Great Serpent ring; Accepted were firmly discouraged from wearing much jewelry. A matching necklace snugged around the neck of the fourth woman, on a stool against the rough-plastered wall with her hands folded in her lap. Clad in a farmer’s rough brown wool, with a farmer’s worn sturdy face, she did not sweat a drop. She did not move a muscle either, but her dark eyes watched everything. To Nynaeve, the radiance of *saidar* surrounded her, but it was Nynaeve who directed the channeling. Bracelet and necklace created a link between them, much in the way Aes Sedai could link to combine their power. Something about “absolutely identical matrices” was involved, according to Elayne, after which the explanation truly became incomprehensible. In truth, Nynaeve did not think Elayne understood half as much as she pretended. For herself, Nynaeve did not understand at all, except that she could feel the other woman’s every emotion, feel the woman herself, but tucked away in a corner of her head, and that all the other woman’s grasp of *saidar* was in her control. Sometimes she thought it would have been better if the woman on the stool were dead. Simpler, certainly. Cleaner.

“There’s something torn, or cut,” Nynaeve muttered, wiping absently at the sweat on her face. It was just a vague impression, barely there at all, but it was also the first time she had sensed more than emptiness. It could be imagination, and the desperate wanting to find something, anything.

“Severing,” the woman on the stool said. “That was what it was called, what you name stilling for women and gentling for men.”

Three heads swiveled toward her; three sets of eyes glared with fury. Siuan and Leane had been Aes Sedai until they were stilled during the coup in the White Tower that put Elaida on the Amyrlin Seat. Stilled. A word to cause shudders. Never to channel again. But always to remember, and know the loss. Always to sense the True Source and know you could never touch it again. Stilling could not be Healed any more than death.

That was what everyone believed, anyway, but in Nynaeve’s opinion the One Power should be able to Heal anything short of death. “If you have something useful to add, Marigan,” she said sharply, “then say it. If not, keep quiet.”

Marigan shrank back against the wall, eyes glittering and fixed on Nynaeve. Fear and hate rolled through the bracelet, but they always did to one degree or another. Captives seldom loved their captors, even—perhaps especially—when they knew they deserved captivity and worse. The problem was that Marigan also said severing—stilling—could not be Healed. Oh, she was full of claims that anything else except death could be Healed in the Age of Legends, that what the Yellow Ajah called Healing now was only the crudest hasty battlefield work. But try to pin her down on specifics, on even a hint of how, and you found nothing there. Marigan knew as much about Healing as Nynaeve did about blacksmithing, which was that you stuck metal in hot coals and hit it with a hammer. Certainly not enough to make a horseshoe. Or Heal much beyond a bruise.

Twisting around in her chair, Nynaeve studied Siuan and Leane. Days of this, whenever she could pry them away from their other work, and so far she had learned nothing. Suddenly she realized she was turning the bracelet on her wrist. Whatever there the gain, she hated being linked to the woman. The intimacy made her skin crawl. *At least I might learn something*, she thought. *And it couldn't fail any worse than everything else has*.

Carefully she undid the bracelet—the clasp was impossible to find unless you knew how—and handed it to Siuan. "Put this on." Losing the Power was bitter, but this had to be done. And losing the waves of emotion was like taking a bath. Marigan's eyes followed the narrow length of silver as if hypnotized.

"Why?" Siuan demanded. "You tell me this thing only works—"

"Just put it on, Siuan."

Siuan eyed her stubbornly for a moment—Light, but the woman could be obstinate!—before closing the bracelet around her wrist. A look of wonder came onto her face immediately, then her eyes narrowed at Marigan. "She hates us, but I knew that. And there's fear, and . . . Shock. Not a glimmer on her face, but she's shocked to her toes. I don't think she believed I could use this thing, either."

Marigan shifted uneasily. So far only two who knew about her could use the bracelet. Four would give more chances for questions. On the surface she seemed to be cooperating fully, but how much was she hiding? As much as she could, Nynaeve was sure.

With a sigh, Siuan shook her head. "And I cannot. I should be able to touch the Source through her, isn't that right? Well, I can't. A grunter could climb trees first. I've been stilled, and that is that. How do you get this thing off?" She fumbled at the bracelet. "How do you bloody get it off?"

Gently Nynaeve laid a hand over Siuan's on the bracelet. "Don't you see? The bracelet won't work for a woman who can't channel any more than the necklace would work on her. If I put either on one of the cooks, it would be no more than a pretty piece for her."

"Cooks or no cooks," Siuan said flatly, "I cannot channel. I have been stilled."

"But there is something there to be Healed," Nynaeve insisted, "or you'd feel nothing through the bracelet."

Siuan jerked her arm free and stuck her wrist out. "Take it off."

Shaking her head, Nynaeve complied. Sometimes Siuan could be as bullheaded as any man!

When she held the bracelet toward Leane, the Domani woman lifted her wrist eagerly. Leane pretended to be as sanguine over having been stilled as Siuan was—as Siuan pretended to be—but she did not always succeed. Supposedly, the only way to survive stilling for long was to find something else to fill your life, to fill the hole left by the One Power. For Siuan and Leane that something was running their networks of agents, and more importantly, trying to convince the Aes Sedai here in Salidar to support Rand al'Thor as the Dragon Reborn without letting any of the Aes Sedai know what they were doing. The question was whether that was enough. The bitterness on Siuan's face, and the delight on Leane's as the bracelet snapped shut, said that maybe nothing could ever be.

"Oh, yes." Leane had a brisk, clipped way of speaking. Except when talking to men, anyway; she was Domani, after all, and of late making up for time lost in the Tower. "Yes, she really is stunned, isn't she? Beginning to control it now, though." For a few moments she sat silently, considering the woman on the stool. Marigan stared back warily. At last, Leane shrugged. "I cannot touch the Source, either. And I tried to make her feel a fleabite on her ankle. If it had worked, she would have had to show something." That was the other trick of the bracelet; you could make the woman wearing the necklace feel physical sensations. Only the sensations—there was no mark whatever you did, no real damage—but the feel of a sound switching or two had sufficed to convince Marigan that cooperation was her best choice. That and the alternative, a quick trial followed by execution.

Despite her failure, Leane watched closely as Nynaeve undid the bracelet and refastened it on her own wrist. It seemed that she, at least, had not given up completely on channeling again one day.

Regaining the Power was wonderful. Not as wonderful as drawing *saidar* herself, being filled with it, but even touching the Source through the other woman was like redoubling the life in her veins. To hold *saidar* inside was to want to laugh and dance with pure joy. She supposed that one day she would become used to it; full Aes Sedai must. Balanced against that, linking with Marigan was a small price. "Now that we know there's a chance," she said, "I think—"

The door banged open, and Nynaeve was on her feet before she knew it. She never thought of using the Power; she would have screamed if her throat had not closed tight. She was not the only one, but she hardly noticed Siuan and Leane leaping up. The fear cascading through the bracelet seemed an echo of her own.

The young woman who shut the splintery wooden door behind her took no notice of the commotion she had caused. Tall and straight in an Accepted's banded white dress, with sun-gold curls nestled on her shoulders, she looked spitting mad. Even with her face tight with anger and dripping sweat she somehow managed to look beautiful, though; it was a knack Elayne had. "Do you know what they're doing? They are sending an embassy to . . . to Caemlyn! And they refuse to let me go! Sheriam *forbade* me to mention it again. Forbade me even to *speak* of it!"

"Did you never learn to knock, Elayne?" Straightening her chair, Nynaeve sat down again. Fell, really; relief weakened her knees. "I thought you *were* Sheriam." Just the thought of discovery cored out her middle.

To her credit, Elayne blushed and apologized immediately. Then spoiled it by adding, "But I don't see why you were so goosey. Birgitte is still outside, and you *know* she would warn you if anyone else came close. Nynaeve, they *must* let me go."

"They *must* do nothing of the kind," Siuan said gruffly. She and Leane were seated again, too. Siuan sat up straight, as always, but Leane sagged back, as flimsy as Nynaeve's knees. Marigan was leaning against the wall, breathing hard, eyes closed and hands pressed hard against the plaster. Relief and stark terror surged through the bracelet in alternating jolts.

"But—"

Siuan did not allow Elayne another word. "Do you think Sheriam, or any of the others, will let the Daughter-Heir of Andor fall into the hands of the Dragon Reborn? With your mother dead—"

"I don't believe that!" Elayne snapped.

"You don't believe Rand killed her," Siuan went on relentlessly, "and that's a different thing. I don't, either. But if Morgase were alive, she would come forward and acknowledge him the Dragon Reborn. Or, if she believed him a false Dragon in spite of the proof, she'd be organizing resistance. None of my eyes-and-ears have heard a whisper of either. Not just in Andor, but not here in Altara and not in Murandy."

"They *have*," Elayne forced in. "There's rebellion in the west."

“Against Morgase. Against. If it’s not a rumor, too.” Siuan’s voice was flat as a planed board. “Your mother is dead, girl. Best to admit as much and get your weeping done.”

Elayne’s chin rose, a very annoying habit she had; she was the picture of icy arrogance, though most men seemed to find it attractive for some reason. “You complain continually over how long it is taking to get in touch with all of your agents,” she said coolly, “but I will set aside whether you can have heard all there is to hear. Whether my mother is alive or not, *my* place is in Caemlyn, now. I *am* Daughter-Heir.”

Siuan’s loud snort made Nynaeve jump. “You’ve been Accepted long enough to know better.” Elayne had as much potential as had been seen in a thousand years. Not as much as Nynaeve, if she ever learned to channel at will, but still enough to make any Aes Sedai’s eyes light up. Elayne’s nose wrinkled—she knew very well that if she had already been on the Lion Throne, the Aes Sedai still would have gotten her away for training, by asking if possible, by stuffing her into a barrel if necessary—and she opened her mouth, but Siuan did not even slow down. “True, they’d not mind you taking the throne sooner than later; there hasn’t been a Queen who was openly Aes Sedai in far too long. But they won’t let you go until you’re a full sister, and even then, because you *are* Daughter-Heir and will be Queen soon, they won’t let you near the Dragon bloody Reborn until they know how far they can trust him. Especially since this . . . *amnesty* of his.” Her mouth twisted sourly around the word, and Leane grimaced.

Nynaeve’s tongue curdled, too. She had been brought up to fear any man who could channel, fated to go mad and, before the Shadow-tainted male half of the Source killed him horribly, bring terror to everyone around him. But Rand, whom she had watched grow up, was the Dragon Reborn, born both as a sign that the Last Battle was coming and to fight the Dark One in that battle. The Dragon Reborn; humanity’s only hope—and a man who could channel. Worse, reports were that he was trying to gather others like him. Of course, there could not be many. Any Aes Sedai would hunt down one of those—the Red Ajah did little else—but they found few, far fewer than once, according to the records.

Elayne was not about to give up, though. That was one admirable thing about her; she would not give up if her head were on the block and the axe descending. She stood there with her chin up, facing Siuan’s stare, which Nynaeve often found hard to do. “There are two clear reasons why I should go. First, whatever has happened to my mother, she *is* missing, and as Daughter-Heir, I can calm the people and assure them the succession is intact. Second, I can approach Rand. He trusts me. I would be *far* better than anyone the Hall chooses."

The Aes Sedai here in Salidar had chosen their own Hall of the Tower, a Hall-in-exile, as it were. They were supposed to be mulling over the choice of a new Amyrlin Seat, a rightful Amyrlin to challenge Elaida's claim to the title and the Tower, but Nynaeve had not seen much sign of it.

"So kind of you to sacrifice yourself, child," Leane said dryly. Elayne's expression did not change, yet she colored furiously; few outside this room knew, and no Aes Sedai, but Nynaeve had no doubt that Elayne's first act in Caemlyn would be to get Rand alone and kiss him within an inch of his life. "With your mother . . . missing . . . if Rand al'Thor has you, and Caemlyn, he has Andor, and the Hall won't let him have any more of Andor than they have to, or anywhere else if they can help it. He carries Tear and Cairhien in his pocket, and the Aiel as well, it seems. Add Andor, and Murandy and Altara—with us in it—fall if he sneezes. He is growing too powerful, too fast. He might decide he doesn't need us. With Moiraine dead, there's no one near him we can trust."

That made Nynaeve wince. Moiraine was the Aes Sedai who had brought her and Rand out of the Two Rivers and changed their lives. Her and Rand and Egwene and Mat and Perrin. She had wanted for so long to make Moiraine pay for what she had done to them that losing her was like losing a piece of herself. But Moiraine was dead in Cairhien, taking Lanfear with her; she was fast becoming a legend among the Aes Sedai here, the only Aes Sedai to have killed one of the Forsaken, much less two. The only good thing Nynaeve could find in it, much as it shamed to find any good, was that now Lan was freed from being Moiraine's Warder. If she could ever find him.

Siuan took up immediately where Leane left off. "We can't afford to let the boy go sailing off with no guidance at all. Who knows what he might do? Yes, yes, I know you're ready to argue for him, but I don't care to hear it. I'm trying to balance a live silverpike on my nose, girl. We can't let him grow too strong before he accepts us, and yet we don't dare hold him back too much. And I'm trying to keep Sheriam and the others convinced they *should* support him when half the Hall secretly don't want anything to do with him, and the other half think in their heart of hearts that he should be gentled, Dragon Reborn or not. In any case, whatever your arguments, I suggest you heed Sheriam. You won't change any minds, and Tiana doesn't have enough novices here to keep her busy."

Elayne's face tightened angrily. Tiana Noselle, a Gray sister, was Mistress of Novices here in Salidar. An Accepted had to step considerably further out of line to be sent to Tiana than did a novice, but by the same token, the visit was always that much more shaming and painful. Tiana might show a little kindness to a novice, if only a little; she felt Accepted should know better, and made sure they felt the same long before they left her small cubbyhole of a study.

Nynaeve had been studying Siuan, and now something popped into her head. "You knew all about this . . . embassy, or whatever it is . . . didn't you? You two always have your heads together with Sheriam and her little circle." The Hall might have all the supposed authority until they chose an Amyrlin, but Sheriam and the handful of other Aes Sedai who had first organized the arrivals in Salidar still kept the real control of things. "How many are they sending, Siuan?" Elayne gasped; plainly she had not thought of this. That showed how upset she was. Usually she caught nuances Nynaeve missed.

Siuan denied nothing. Since being stilled she could lie like a wool merchant, but when she decided to be open, she was as open as a slap in the face. "Nine. 'Enough to do honor to the Dragon Reborn'—fish guts! an embassy to a *king* is seldom more than three!—'but not enough to frighten him.' If he's learned enough to be frightened."

"You had better hope he has," Elayne said coldly. "If he hasn't, then nine may be eight too many."

Thirteen was the dangerous number. Rand was strong, perhaps as strong as any man since the Breaking, but thirteen Aes Sedai linked could overwhelm him, shield him from *saidin*, and take him prisoner. Thirteen was the number assigned when a man was gentled, though Nynaeve had begun to think the assignment more custom than requirement. Aes Sedai did a good many things because they always had.

Siuan's smile was far from pleasant. "I wonder why no one else thought of that? Think, girl! Sheriam does, and so does the Hall. Only one will go near him at first, and no more after that than he's comfortable with. But he'll know nine came, and somebody will certainly tell him what an honor that is."

“I see,” Elayne said in a small voice. “I should have known one of you would think of it. I’m sorry.” That was another good thing about her. She could be stubborn as a cross-eyed mule, but when she decided she was wrong, she admitted it as nicely as any village woman. Most unusual for a noble.

“Min will be going too,” Leane said. “Her . . . talents may be useful to Rand. The sisters won’t know that part, of course. She can keep her secrets.” As if that were the important thing.

“I see,” Elayne said again, flatly this time. She made an effort to brighten her tone, a miserable failure. “Well, I see you’re busy with . . . with Marigan. I did not mean to disturb you. Please, don’t let me interrupt.” She was gone before Nynaeve could open her mouth, the door banging shut behind her.

Angrily, Nynaeve rounded on Leane. “I thought Siuan was the mean one of you, but that was vicious!”

It was Siuan who answered. “When two women love the same man, it means trouble, and when the man is Rand al’Thor. . . . The Light knows how sane he still is, or what course they might send him off on. If there’s any hair-pulling and clawing to be done, let them do it now, here.”

Without thought, Nynaeve’s hand found her braid and jerked it back over her shoulder. “I ought to. . . .” Trouble was, there was little she could do, and nothing to make any difference. “We’ll go on from where we left off when Elayne came in. But, Siuan. . . . If you ever do something like that to her again,” *or to me,* she thought, “I’ll make you sorry you—Where do you think you’re going?” Siuan had scraped back her chair and risen, and after a glance, Leane did the same.

“We have work,” Siuan said curtly, already heading for the door.

“You promised to make yourself available, Siuan. Sheriam told you to.” Not that Sheriam thought it any less a waste of time than Siuan, but Nynaeve and Elayne had earned rewards, and a certain amount of indulgence. Like Marigan to be their maid, to give them more time for Accepted’s studies.

Siuan gave her an amused look from the door. “Maybe you’ll complain to her? And explain how you do your research? I want time with *Marigan* this evening; I have some more questions.”

As Siuan left, Leane said sadly, “It would be nice, Nynaeve, but we have to do what we *can* do. You could try Logain.” Then she was gone, too.

Nynaeve scowled. Studying Logain had taught her even less than studying the two women. She was no longer certain she could learn anything from him at all. Anyway, the last thing she wanted was to Heal a gentled man. He made her nervous in any case.

"You bite at one another like rats in a sealed box," Marigan said. "On the evidence, your chances are not very good. Perhaps you should consider . . . other options."

"Hold your filthy tongue!" Nynaeve glared at her. "Hold it, the Light burn you!" Fear still oozed through the bracelet, but something else as well, something almost too feeble to exist. A faint spark of hope, perhaps. "The Light burn you," she muttered.

The woman's real name was not Marigan, but Moghedien. One of the Forsaken, trapped with her own overweening pride and held prisoner in the midst of Aes Sedai. Only five women in the world knew, none Aes Sedai, but keeping Moghedien secret was purest necessity. The Forsaken's crimes made her execution as sure as the sun rising. Siuan agreed; for every Aes Sedai who counseled waiting, if any did, ten would demand immediate justice. Into an unmarked grave with her would go all her knowledge from the Age of Legends, when things undreamed of today were done with the Power. Nynaeve was not sure she believed half of what the woman told her of that Age. She certainly understood less than half.

Digging information out of Moghedien was not easy. Sometimes it was like Healing; Moghedien had never been interested in much that could not advance her, preferably by shortcuts. The woman was hardly likely to reveal the truth, but Nynaeve suspected she had been some sort of swindler or the like before swearing her soul over to the Dark One. Sometimes she and Elayne just did not know the questions to ask. Moghedien seldom volunteered anything, that was certain. Even so, they had learned a great deal, and passed most on to the Aes Sedai. As results of their researches and studies as Accepted, of course. They had gained a lot of credit.

She and Elayne would have kept knowledge of her to themselves if they could, but Birgitte had known from the start, and Siuan and Leane had to be told. Siuan had known enough of the circumstances that led to Moghedien's capture to demand a full explanation, and had the leverage to obtain one. Nynaeve and Elayne knew some of Siuan and Leane's secrets; they seemed to know all of her and Elayne's except the truth about Birgitte. It made for a precarious balance, with the advantage to Siuan and Leane.

Besides, bits of Moghedien's revelations concerned supposed Darkfriend plots and hints of what the other Forsaken might be up to. The only way to pass those on was to make them seem to have come from Siuan and Leane's agents. Nothing about the Black Ajah—hidden deep and long denied—though that interested Siuan most. Darkfriends disgusted her, but the very idea of Aes Sedai swearing themselves to the Dark One was enough to screw Siuan's anger to an icy rage. Moghedien claimed to have been afraid to go near *any* Aes Sedai, and that was believable enough. Fear was a permanent part of the woman. No wonder she had hidden in the shadows enough to be called the Spider. All in all, she was a treasure trove too valuable to give to the headsman, yet most Aes Sedai would not see it so. Most Aes Sedai might refuse to touch or trust anything learned from her.

Guilt and revulsion stabbed Nynaeve, not for the first time. Could any amount of knowledge justify keeping one of the Forsaken from justice? Turning her in meant punishment, probably dreadful, for everyone involved, not just herself, but Elayne and Siuan and Leane. Turning her in meant Birgitte's secret would come out. And all that knowledge lost. Moghedien might know nothing of Healing, but she had given Nynaeve a dozen hints of what was possible, and there had to be more in her head. With those to guide her, what might she discover eventually?

Nynaeve wanted a bath, and it had nothing to do with the heat. "We will talk about the weather," she said bitterly.

"You know more about controlling weather than I do." Moghedien sounded weary, and an echo slid through the bracelet. There had been enough questions on the subject. "All I know is that what is happening is the Great—the Dark One's work." She had the nerve to smile ingratiatingly at the slip. "No mere human is strong enough to change that."

It took effort for Nynaeve not to grind her teeth. Elayne knew more about working weather than anyone else in Salidar, and she said the same. Including the Dark One part, though any but a fool would know that, with the heat so strong when it should be coming on for snow, with no rain and the streams drying. "Then we'll talk about using different weaves to Heal different illnesses." The woman said that took more time than what was done now, but all the strength for it came from the Power, not from the patient and the woman channeling. Of course, she said *men* had actually been better at some kinds of Healing, and Nynaeve was not about to believe that. "You must have seen it done at least once."

She settled down to bore away for nuggets in the dross. Some knowledge was worth a great deal. She just wished she did not feel that she was digging through slime.

Elayne did not hesitate once she was outside, only waved to Birgitte and went on. Birgitte, her golden hair in an intricate waist-long braid, was playing with two small boys while she kept watch in the narrow alley, her bow propped against a leaning fence beside her. Or trying to play with them. Jaril and Seve stared at the woman in her odd wide yellow trousers and short dark coat, but they showed no more reaction than that. They never did, and they never spoke. They were supposed to be "Marigan's" children. Birgitte was happy playing with them, and a touch sad; she always liked playing with children, especially little boys, and she always felt that way when she did. Elayne knew it as well as she knew her own feelings.

If she had thought Moghedien had anything to do with their condition. . . . But the woman claimed they were as they had been when she picked them up for her disguise in Ghealdan, orphans in the street, and some of the Yellow sisters said they had simply seen too much in the riots in Samara. Elayne could believe it from what she herself had encountered there. The Yellow sisters said time and care would help them; Elayne hoped it was so. She hoped she was not allowing the one responsible to escape justice.

She did not want to think about Moghedien now. Her mother. No, she definitely did not want to think about her. Min. And Rand. There had to be some way to handle this. Barely seeing Birgitte's return nod, she hurried up the alley and out onto the main street of Salidar beneath a cloudless, broiling midday sky.

For years Salidar had stood abandoned, before Aes Sedai fleeing Elaida's coup began to gather there, but now fresh thatch topped the houses, most of which showed considerable new repairs and patches, and the three large stone buildings that had been inns. One, the largest, was called the Little Tower by some; that was where the Hall met. Only what was necessary had been done, of course; cracked glass filled many windows, or none. More important matters were afoot than repointing stonework or painting. The dirt streets were filled to bursting. Not just with Aes Sedai, of course, but Accepted in banded dresses and scurrying novices in pure white, Warders moving with the deadly grace of leopards whether lean or bulky, servants who had followed Aes Sedai from the Tower, even a few children. And soldiers.

The Hall here was preparing to enforce its claims against Elaida by arms if necessary, just as soon as they chose a true Amyrlin Seat. The distant clang of hammers, cutting through the crowds' murmur from forges outside the village, spoke of horses being shod, armor being mended. A square-faced man, his dark hair heavy with gray, went riding slowly down the street in a buff-colored coat and battered breastplate. Picking his way through the crowd, he eyed marching clusters of men with long pikes on their shoulders, or bows. Gareth Bryne had agreed to recruit and lead the Salidar Hall's army, though Elayne wished she knew the full how and why. Something to do with Siuan and Leane, though what, she could not imagine, since he ran both women ragged, especially Siuan, fulfilling some oath Elayne did not have the straight of either. Just that Siuan complained bitterly about having to keep his room and his clothes clean on top of her other duties. She complained, but she did it; it must have been a strong oath.

Bryne's eyes passed across Elayne with barely a hesitation. He had been coolly polite and distant since she arrived in Salidar, though she had known him since her cradle. Until less than a year ago he had been Captain-General of the Queen's Guards, in Andor. Once, Elayne had thought he and her mother would marry. No, she was not going to think of her mother! Min. She had to find Min and talk.

No sooner had she begun to weave through the crowded dusty street, though, than two Aes Sedai found her. There was no choice but to stop and curtsy, while the throng streamed around them. Both women beamed. Neither sweated a drop. Pulling a handkerchief from her sleeve to dab at her face, Elayne wished she had already been taught that particular bit of Aes Sedai lore. "Good day, Anaiya Sedai, Janya Sedai."

"Good day, child. Do you have any more discoveries for us today?" As usual, Janya Frende spoke as though there was no time to get the words out. "Such remarkable strides you've made, you and Nynaeve, especially for Accepted. I still don't see how Nynaeve does it, when she has so many difficulties with the Power, but I must say I'm delighted." Unlike most Brown sisters, often absentminded beyond their books and studies, Janya Sedai was quite neat, every short dark hair tidy around the ageless face that marked Aes Sedai who had worked long with the Power. But the slender woman's appearance did hint at her Ajah. Her dress was plain gray, and stout wool—Browns seldom thought of clothes as more than decent covering—and even when she was talking to you, she wore a little frown, as though squinting in thought about something else entirely. She would have been pretty without that frown. “That way of wrapping yourself in light to become invisible. Remarkable. I’m sure someone will find how to stop the ripples, so you can move about with it. And Carenna is quite excited over that little eavesdropping trick of Nynaeve’s. Naughty of her, to think of that, but useful. Carenna thinks she sees how to adapt it to *talk* to someone at a distance. Think of it. To talk with someone a mile away! Or two, or even—” Anaiya touched her arm, and she cut off, blinking at the other Aes Sedai.

“You are making great strides, Elayne,” Anaiya said calmly. The bluff-faced woman was always calm. “Motherly” was the word to describe her, and comforting usually, though Aes Sedai features made putting an age to her impossible. She was also one of the small circle around Sheriam who held the real power in Salidar. “Greater than any of us expected, truly, and we expected much. The first to make a *ter’angreal* since the Breaking. That is remarkable, child, and I want you to know that. You should be very proud.”

Elayne stared at the ground in front of her toes. Two waist-high boys went dodging by through the crowd, laughing. She wished no one were close enough to hear this. Not that any of the passersby gave them a second glance. With so many Aes Sedai in the village, not even novices curtsied unless an Aes Sedai addressed them, and everyone had errands that needed to be done yesterday.

She did not feel proud at all. Not with all of their “discoveries” coming from Moghedien. There had been a good many, beginning with “inverting,” so a weave could not be seen by any but the woman who had woven it, yet they had not passed everything on. How to hide your ability to channel, for one. Without that, Moghedien would have been unmasked in hours—any Aes Sedai within two or three paces of a woman could sense whether she could channel—and if they learned how to do that, they might learn how to penetrate it. And how to disguise yourself; inverted weaves made “Marigan” look nothing at all like Moghedien.

Some of what the woman knew was just too repulsive. Compulsion, for instance, bending people’s will, and a way to implant instructions so the recipient would not even remember the orders when he carried them out. Worse things. Too repulsive, and maybe too dangerous to trust anyone with.

Nynaeve said they had to learn them in order to learn how to counter them, but Elayne did not want to. They were keeping so many secrets, telling so many lies to friends and people on their side, that she almost wished she could take the Three Oaths on the Oath Rod without waiting to be raised Aes Sedai. One of those bound you to speak no word that was not true, bound you as though a part of your flesh.

“I haven’t done as well as I might with the *ter’angreal,* Anaiya Sedai.” That, at least, was hers and hers alone. The first had been the bracelet and necklace—a fact kept well hidden, needless to say—but they were an altered copy of a nasty invention, the *a’dam,* that the Seanchan left behind when their invasion was driven into the sea at Falme. The plain green disc that allowed someone not strong enough to work the invisibility trick—not many were—had been her idea from the first. She had no *angreal* or *sa’angreal* to study, so they had been impossible to make so far, and even after her ease in copying the Seanchan device, *ter’angreal* had not proven as easy as she had thought. They used the One Power instead of magnifying it, used it for one specific purpose, to do one thing. Some could even be used by people who could not channel, even men. They should have been simpler. Maybe they were, in function, but not simple to make.

Her modest statement unleashed a torrent from Janya. “Nonsense, child. Absolute nonsense. Why, I’ve no doubt that as soon as we are back in the Tower and can test you properly and put the Oath Rod in your hand, you’ll be raised to the shawl as well as the ring. No doubt. You really are fulfilling all the promise that was seen in you. And more. No one could have expected—” Anaiya touched her arm again; it seemed a set signal, because once more Janya stopped and blinked.

“No need to swell the child’s head too far,” Anaiya said. “Elayne, I’ll have no sulking out of you. You should have outgrown that long since.” The mother could be firm as well as kindly. “I won’t have you pouting over a few failures, not when your success was so wonderful.” Elayne had made five tries at the stone disc. Two did nothing, and two made you appear blurry, as well as sick to your stomach. The one that worked had been the third attempt. More than a few failures in Elayne’s book. “Everything you’ve done is wonderful. You, and Nynaeve, too.”

“Thank you,” Elayne said. “Thank you both. I’ll try not to be sulky.” When an Aes Sedai said you were sulky, the one thing you did not do was tell her you were not. “Will you excuse me, please? I understand the embassy to Caemlyn is leaving today, and I want to say goodbye to Min.”

They let her go, of course, though Janya might have taken half an hour to do so without Anaiya there. Anaiya eyed Elayne sharply—she surely knew all about the words with Sheriam—but said nothing. Sometimes an Aes Sedai’s silences were as loud as words.

Thumbing the ring on the third finger of her left hand, Elayne darted on at a near trot, eyes focused far enough ahead that she could claim not to have seen anyone else who tried to stop her for congratulations. It might work, and it might mean a visit to Tiana; indulgences for good work only went so far. Right that moment, she would much prefer Tiana to praise she did not deserve.

The gold ring was a serpent biting its own tail, the Great Serpent, a symbol of Aes Sedai, but worn by Accepted too. When she donned the shawl, fringed in the color of the Ajah she selected, she would wear it on the finger she chose. It would be the Green Ajah for her, of necessity; only Green sisters had more than one Warder, and she wanted to have Rand. Or as much of him as she could, at least. The difficulty was that she had already bonded Birgitte, the first woman ever to become a Warder. That was why she could sense Birgitte’s feelings, how she knew Birgitte had gotten a splinter in her hand that morning. Only Nynaeve knew about the bond. Warders were for full Aes Sedai; for an Accepted who overstepped that bound, no indulgences in the world would save her hide. For them it had been necessity, not whim—Birgitte would have died, else—but Elayne did not think that would make any difference. Breaking a rule with the Power could be fatal for yourself and others; to set that firmly in your mind, Aes Sedai seldom let anyone get away with breaking any rule for any reason.

There was so much subterfuge here in Salidar. Not just Birgitte, and Moghedien. One of the Oaths kept an Aes Sedai from lying, but what was not spoken of did not have to be lied over. Moiraine had known how to weave a cloak of invisibility, maybe the same one they learned from Moghedien; Nynaeve had seen Moiraine do it once, before Nynaeve knew anything of the Power. No one else in Salidar had known, though. Or admitted to it, anyway. Birgitte had confirmed what Elayne had begun to suspect. Most Aes Sedai, maybe all, kept back at least part of what they learned; most had their own secret tricks. Those might become common knowledge taught to novices or Accepted, if enough Aes Sedai learned them

—or they might die with the Aes Sedai. Two or three times she thought she had seen a glimmer in someone’s eyes when she demonstrated something. Carenna had leaped onto the eavesdropping trick with suspicious quickness. But it was hardly the sort of accusation an Accepted could make against Aes Sedai.

Knowing did not make her own deceptions more palatable, but maybe it helped a little. That and remembering necessity. If only they would stop praising her for what she had not done.

She was sure she knew where to find Min. The River Eldar lay not three miles west of Salidar, and a tiny stream ran through the edge of the village on its way through the forest to the river. Most of the trees that had grown up in the town had been cut down after Aes Sedai began arriving, but a small patch on the stream’s bank remained behind some houses, on a scrap of land too narrow to be useful. Min claimed to like cities best, yet she often went to sit among those trees. It was a way to escape the company of Aes Sedai and Warders awhile, and for Min that was almost essential.

Sure enough, when Elayne edged her way around the corner of a stone house onto the slender strip, along a runnel of water no wider, Min was sitting there with her back against a tree, watching the little brook burble over rocks. As much as was left of it; the stream trickled down a bed of dried mud twice as wide as it was. The trees held a few leaves here, though most of the surrounding forest was beginning to go bare. Even the oaks.

A dried branch cracked under Elayne’s slipper, and Min jumped to her feet. As usual she wore a boy’s gray coat and breeches, but she had had small blue flowers embroidered on the lapels and up the sides of the snug legs. Oddly, since she said the three aunts who raised her had been seamstresses, Min seemed not to know one end of a needle from the other. She stared at Elayne, then grimaced and ran her fingers through dark shoulder-length hair. “You know” was all she said.

“I thought we should talk.”

Min scrubbed her hands through her hair again. “Siuan didn’t tell me until this morning. I’ve been trying to work up courage to tell you ever since. She wants me to spy on him, Elayne. For the embassy, and she gave me names in Caemlyn, people who can send messages back to her.”

“You won’t do it, of course,” Elayne said, without a hint of question, and Min gave her a grateful look. “Why were you afraid to come to me? We are friends, Min. And we promised each other not to let a man come between us. Even if we do both love him."

Min's laugh had a huskiness to it; Elayne supposed many men would find that attractive. And she was pretty, in a mischievous sort of way. And a few years older; was that in her favor, or against? "Oh, Elayne, we said that when he was safely away from both of us. Losing you would be like losing a sister, but what if one of us changes her mind?"

Best not to ask which of them that was supposed to be. Elayne tried not to think of the fact that if she bound and gagged Min with the Power and inverted the weave, she might be able to hide the woman in a basement until the embassy was long gone. "We won't," she said simply. No, she could not do that to Min. She wanted Rand all to herself, but she could not hurt Min. Maybe she could just ask the other woman not to go until they both could. Instead, she said, "Is Gareth releasing you from your oath?"

This time Min's laugh was a bark. "Hardly. He says he'll make me work it off sooner or later. Siuan's the one he really wants to hold on to, the Light knows why." A slight tensing of her face made Elayne think there was a viewing involved in it, but she did not ask. Min never talked about those unless they concerned you.

She had an ability known to few in Salidar. Elayne and Nynaeve, Siuan and Leane; that was all. Birgitte did not know, but then Min did not know about Birgitte. Or Moghedien. So many secrets. But Min's was her own. Sometimes she saw images or auras around people, and sometimes she knew what they meant. When she knew, she was always right; for instance, if she said a man and woman would marry, then sooner or later they married, even if they plainly hated one another now. Leane called it "reading the Pattern," but it had nothing to do with the Power. Most people carried the images only occasionally, but Aes Sedai and Warders always. Min's retreats here were to escape that deluge.

"Will you carry a letter to Rand for me?"

"Of course." The other woman's assent was so quick, her face so open, that Elayne blushed and went on hurriedly. She was not sure she would have agreed had the circumstances been reversed. "You mustn't let him know about your viewings, Min. Concerning us, I mean." One thing Min had viewed about Rand was that three women would fall hopelessly in love with him, be tied to him forever, and that one of them would be herself. The second had turned out to be Elayne. "If he learns about the viewing, he might decide it isn't what we want, only the Pattern, or his being *ta'veren*. He could decide to be noble and save us by not letting either of us near him."

"Maybe," Min said doubtfully. "Men are strange. More likely, if he realizes we'll both come running when he crooks a finger, he'll crook it. He won't be able to help himself. I've seen them do it. I think it has something to do with the hair on their chins." She had such a wondering look that Elayne was not sure whether or not that was a joke. Min seemed to know a lot about men; she had worked mainly in stables—she liked horses—but once she had mentioned serving table in a tavern. "Either way, I won't tell. You and I will divide him up like a pie. Maybe we'll let the third have a bit of crust when she shows up."

"What are we going to do, Min?" Elayne had not meant to say that, certainly not in a near wail. Part of her wanted to say unequivocally that *she* would never come for a crooked finger; part wanted him to crook it. Part of her wanted to say she would *not* share Rand, not in any way, not with *anyone*, even a friend, and Min's viewings could go to the Pit of Doom; part wanted to box Rand's ears for doing this to her and Min. It was all so childish she felt like hiding her head, but she could not untangle the snarl in her feelings. Leveling her voice, she answered her own question before Min could. "What we're going to do is sit here awhile and talk." She suited the words, choosing a spot where the dead leaves were particularly thick. A tree made a fine backrest. "Only not about Rand. I am going to miss you, Min. It's so good to have a friend I can trust."

Min sat cross-legged beside her and idly began digging up pebbles and tossing them into the stream. "Nynaeve is your friend. You trust her. And Birgitte certainly seems to be one; you spend more time with her than you do with Nynaeve, even." A slight frown creased her forehead. "Does she really *believe* she's Birgitte out of the legends? I mean, the bow and the braid—every tale mentions those, even if her bow isn't silver—and I can't think she was born with the name."

"She was born with it," Elayne said carefully. It was true, in a way. Best to steer the talk another way. "Nynaeve still can't decide whether I'm a friend or somebody she has to browbeat into doing what she think's right. And she spends more time remembering I'm her Queen's daughter than I do. I think she holds it against me sometimes. You never do that."

“Maybe I’m not so impressed.” Min wore a grin, but on the other she sounded serious. “I was born in the Mountains of Mist, Elayne, at the mines. Your mother’s writ runs pretty thin that far west.” The smile vanished from her face. “I’m sorry, Elayne.”

Stifling a flash of indignation—Min was every bit as much a subject of the Lion Throne as Nynaeve!—Elayne let her head fall back against the tree. “Let’s talk of something happy.” The sun sat molten overhead through the branches; the sky was a clear sheet of blue, unmarked by even one cloud to the horizon. On impulse, she opened herself to *saidar* and let it fill her, as though all the joy of life in the world had been distilled and every drop in her veins replaced with the essence. If she could make just one cloud form, it would be a sign that everything would come out all right. Her mother would be alive. Rand would love her. And Moghedien . . . would be dealt with. Somehow. She wove a tenuous web through the sky as far as she could see, using Air and Water, searching for the moisture for a cloud. If she only strained hard enough. . . . The sweetness quickly built close to pain, the danger sign; draw much more of the Power, and she could still herself. Just one little cloud.

“Happy?” Min said. “Well, I know you don’t want to talk about Rand, but aside from you and me, he’s still the most important thing in the world right now. And the happiest. Forsaken fall dead when he appears, and nations line up to bow. The Aes Sedai here are ready to support him. I know they are, Elayne; they have to. Why, next Elaida will hand the Tower over to him. The Last Battle will be a walk for him. He’s winning, Elayne. We’re winning.”

Releasing the Source, Elayne sagged back, staring at a sky as empty as her mood had become. You did not need to be able to channel to see the Dark One’s hand at work, and if he could touch the world this much, if he could touch it at all. . . . “Are we?” she said, but too softly for Min to hear.

The manor house was unfinished yet, the greatroom’s tall wooden panels pale and unstained, but Faile ni Bashere t’Aybara held court every afternoon, as proper for the lord’s wife, in a massive high-backed chair carved with falcons, just in front of a bare stone fireplace that mirrored another at the end of the room. The empty chair by her side, carved with wolves, and a large wolf’s head at its peak, should have been occupied by her husband, Perrin t'Bashere Aybara, Perrin Goldeneyes, Lord of the Two Rivers.

Of course, the manor was only an overgrown farmhouse, the greatroom stretched fewer than fifteen paces—how Perrin had stared when she insisted on it being that big; he was still used to thinking of himself as a blacksmith, or even a blacksmith's apprentice—and the name given her at birth had been Zarine, not Faile. These things did not matter. Zarine was a name for a languorous woman who sighed tremulously over poems composed to her smiles. Faile, the name she had chosen as a sworn Hunter for the Horn of Valere, meant falcon in the Old Tongue. No one who got a good look at her face, with its bold nose and high cheekbones and dark tilted eyes that flashed when she was angry, could doubt which suited her best. For the rest, intentions counted a great deal. So did what was right and proper.

Her eyes were flashing at the moment. It had nothing to do with Perrin's stubbornness, and little with the unseasonable heat. Though in truth, futilely working a pheasant feather fan for a breeze against the sweat sliding down her cheeks did not help her temper at all.

This late in the afternoon few remained of the crowd who had come to have her judge their disputes. Actually, they came for Perrin to hear them, but the idea of passing judgment on people he had grown up among horrified him. Unless she managed to corner the man, he vanished like a wolf in fog when it came time for the daily audience. Luckily, the people did not mind it when Lady Faile heard them instead of Lord Perrin. Or few did, anyway, and those wise enough to hide the fact.

"You brought this to me," she said in a flat voice. The two women perspiring before her chair shuffled their feet uneasily and studied the polished floorboards.

Coppery-skinned Sharmad Zeffar's plump curves were covered, if far from obscured, by a high-necked but barely opaque Domani dress, the pale golden silk worn at hem and cuffs, still with a sprinkling of small travel-stains beyond cleaning; silk was silk, after all, and seldom to be had here. Patrols into the Mountains of Mist searching for remnants of the past summer's Trolloc invasion found few of the bestial Trollocs—and no Myrddraal, thank the Light—but they did find refugees nearly every day, ten here, twenty there, five somewhere else. Most came out of Almoth Plain, but a good many from Tarabon and, like Sharmad, from Arad Doman, all fleeing lands ruined by anarchy on top of civil war. Faile did not want to think of how many died in the mountains. Lacking roads or even paths, the mountains were no easy journey in the best of times, and these were far from the best.

Rhea Avin was no refugee, for all she wore a copy of a Taraboner dress in fine-woven wool, soft gray folds that molded and emphasized almost as much as Sharmad's thinner garb. Those who survived the long trek over the mountains brought more than troubling rumors, skills previously unseen in the Two Rivers, and hands to work farms depopulated by the Trollocs. Rhea was a pretty, round-faced woman born not two miles from where the manor now stood, her dark hair in a wrist-thick braid to her waist. In the Two Rivers, girls did not braid their hair until the Women's Circle said they were old enough to marry, whether that was fifteen or thirty, though few went beyond twenty. In fact, Rhea was a good five years older than Faile, her hair four years braided, but at the moment she looked as if she still wore it loose on her shoulders and had just realized that what had seemed a wonderful idea at the time was really the stupidest thing she could have done. For that matter, Sharmad seemed even more abashed, for all she had a year or two on Rhea; for a Domani to find herself in this situation must be humiliating. Faile wanted to slap the pair of them cross-eyed—except that a lady could not do that.

"A man," she said as levelly as she could manage, "is not a horse or a field. Neither of you can own him, and to ask me to say which has the right to him. . . ." She drew a slow breath. "If I thought Wil al'Seen had been leading you both on, I might have something to say on the matter." Wil had an eye for the women, and they for him—he had very well-turned calves—but he never made promises. Sharmad looked ready to sink into the floor; Domani women had a reputation for twining men around their fingers, after all, not the other way around. "As it is, this is my judgment. You will both go to the Wisdom and explain matters to her, leaving nothing out. She will handle this. I expect to hear that she's seen you before nightfall."

The pair flinched. Daise Congar, the Wisdom here in Emond's Field, would not tolerate this sort of nonsense. In fact, she would go well beyond not tolerating it. But they curtsied, muttering "Yes, my Lady" in forlorn unison. If not already, they soon would sorely regret wasting Daise's time.

And mine, Faile thought firmly. Everyone knew Perrin rarely sat in audience, or they would never have brought their fool "problem." Had he been here where he belonged, they would have slipped away rather than air it in front of him. Faile hoped the heat had Daise in a prickle. Too bad there was no way to get Daise to take Perrin in hand.

Cenn Buie replaced the women almost before they could get out of the way on dragging feet. Despite leaning heavily on a walking staff nearly as gnarled as himself, he managed a florid bow, then spoiled it by raking bony fingers through lank thinning hair. As usual, his rough brown coat looked slept in. “The Light shine on you, my Lady Faile, and on your honored husband, the Lord Perrin.” The grand words sounded odd in his scratchy voice. “Let me add my wishes for your continued happiness to those of the Council. Your intelligence and beauty make our lives brighter, as does the justice of your pronouncements.”

Faile drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair before she could stop herself. Flowery praises instead of the normal sour grumbling. Reminding her that he sat on the Emond’s Field Village Council and so was a man of influence, due respect. And playing for sympathy with that staff; the thatcher was as spry as anyone half his age. He wanted something. “What do you bring me today, Master Buie?”

Cenn straightened, forgetting to prop himself up with his stick. And forgetting to keep the acrid note out of his voice. “It’s all these outlanders flooding in, bringing all sorts of things we don’t want here.” He seemed to have forgotten she was an outlander, too; most Two Rivers folks had. “Strange ways, my Lady. Indecent clothes. You’ll be hearing from the women about the way those Domani hussies dress, if you haven’t already.” She had, as it happened, from some of them, though a momentary gleam in Cenn’s eye said he would regret it if she gave in to their demands. “Strangers stealing the food from our mouths, taking away our trade. That Taraboner fellow and his fool tile-making, for example. Taking up hands that could be put to useful work. He doesn’t care about good Two Rivers people. Why, he. . . .”

Fanning herself, she stopped listening while giving every appearance of paying close attention; it was a skill her father had taught her, necessary at times like this. Of course. Master Hornval’s roof tiles would compete with Cenn’s thatchwork.

Not everyone felt as Cenn did about the newcomers. Haral Luhhan, the Emond’s Field blacksmith, had gone into partnership with a Domani cutler and a whitesmith from Almoth Plain, and Master Aydaer had hired three men and two women who knew furniture making and carving, and gilding as well, though there certainly was no gold lying about for that. Her chair and Perrin's were their work, and as fine as she had seen anywhere. For that matter, Cenn himself had taken on half a dozen helpers, and not all Two Rivers folk; a good many roofs had burned when the Trollocs came, and new houses were going up everywhere. Perrin had no right to make her listen to this nonsense alone.

The people of the Two Rivers might have proclaimed him their lord—as well they might after he led them to victory over the Trollocs—and he might be beginning to realize he could not change that—as he certainly should, when they bowed and called him Lord Perrin to his face right after he told them not to—yet he dug in his heels at the trappings that went with being a lord, all the things that people *expected* from their lords and ladies. Worse, he balked at the duties of a lord. Faile knew those things exactly, as the eldest surviving child of Davram t'Ghaline Bashere, Lord of Bashere, Tyr and Sidona, Guardian of the Blightborder, Defender of the Heartland, Marshal-General to Queen Tenobia of Saldaea. True, she had run away to become a Hunter for the Horn—and then given that up for a husband, which sometimes still stunned her—but she remembered. Perrin listened when she explained, and even nodded his head in the proper places, but trying to make him actually do any of it was like trying to make a horse dance the sa'sara.

Cenn finally ran down in splutters, only just remembering to swallow the invective that bubbled behind his teeth.

"Perrin and I chose to use thatch," Faile said calmly. While Cenn was still nodding in self-satisfaction, she added, "You haven't finished it, yet." He gave a start. "You seem to have taken on more roofs than you can handle, Master Buie. If ours isn't done soon, I fear we will have to ask Master Hornval about his tiles." Cenn's mouth worked in vigorous silence; if she put a tile roof on the manor, others would follow. "I have enjoyed your discourse, but I am sure you would rather finish my roof than waste time in idle conversation, however pleasant."

Lips thinning, Cenn glowered for a moment, then made a sketchy bow. Muttering something unintelligible except for a strangled "my Lady" at the end, he stalked out thumping the bare floor with his stick. The things people found to waste her time. Perrin was going to do his share of this if she had to tie him hand and foot.

The rest were not so provoking. A once-stout woman, her patched flower-embroidered dress hanging on her like a sack, who had come all the way from Toman Head, beyond Almoth Plain, wanted to deal in herbs and cures. Hulking Jon Ayellin rubbing his bald head and skinny Thad Torfinn twisting the lapels of his coat, disputing the boundaries of their fields. Two dark Domani men in long leather vests, with close-trimmed beards, miners who thought they had seen signs of gold and silver nearby on their way through the mountains. And iron, though they were less interested in that. And finally, a wiry Taraboner, a transparent veil across her narrow face and her pale hair in a multitude of thin braids, who claimed to have been a master carpetweaver and to know the making of rug looms.

The woman with an interest in herbs Faile directed to the local Women's Circle; if Espara Soman knew what she was about, they would find her a place under one of the village Wisdoms. With all the new people coming in, many in a bad way from the journey, not a Wisdom in the Two Rivers but had an apprentice or two, and all were on the lookout for more. Maybe not exactly what Espara wanted, but where she would have to start. A few questions made it plain that neither Thad nor Jon really remembered where the boundary lay—apparently they had been arguing it since before she was born—so she directed them to split the difference. Which seemed to be what each had thought the Village Council would decide, the reason for keeping the argument between themselves so long.

The others she granted the permission they sought. They did not really need permission, but it was best to let them know where authority lay from the start. In return for her consent and enough silver to buy supplies, Faile made the two Domani agree to give Perrin a tenth part of what they found, as well as to locate the iron mentioned in passing. Perrin would not like it, but the Two Rivers had nothing like taxes, and a lord was expected to do things and provide things that required money. And the iron would be as useful as the gold. As for Liale Mosrara, if the Taraboner claimed more skill than she had, her enterprise would not last long, but if she did. . . . Three clothweavers already ensured that the merchants would find more than raw wool when they came down from Baerlon next year, and decent carpets would be another trade item to bring in more coin. Liale promised the first and finest from her looms to the manor, and Faile nodded a gracious acceptance of the gift; she could give more if and when the carpets appeared. The floors did need covering. All in all, everyone seemed reasonably satisfied. Even Jon and Thad.

As the Taraboner woman backed away curtsying, Faile stood, glad to be done, then stopped when four women entered through one of the doorways that flanked the far fireplace, all sweating in dark stout Two Rivers woolens. Daise Congar, as tall as most men and wider, overtopped the other Wisdoms and thrust herself forward to take the lead here on the outskirts of her own village. Edelle Gaelin, from Watch Hill, gray-braided and slender, made it plain with her straight back and stiff face that she thought she should have Daise's place, by virtue of age and her long time in office if no other reason. Elwinn Taron, the Wisdom of Deven Ride, was the shortest, a round woman with a pleasant motherly smile that she wore even when she was making people do what they did not want to. The last, Milla al'Azar, from Taren Ferry, trailed behind; the youngest, almost young enough to be Edelle's daughter, she always appeared uncertain around the others.

Faile remained standing, fanning herself slowly. She truly wished Perrin there, now. Very much. These women had as much authority in their villages as the mayor—sometimes, in some ways, more—and they had to be handled carefully, with due dignity and respect. That made matters difficult. They turned into simpering girls around Perrin, eager to please, but with her. . . . The Two Rivers had had no nobles in centuries; they had not seen so much as a representative of the Queen in Caemlyn for seven generations. Everyone was still working out how to behave toward a lord and a lady, including these four. Sometimes they forgot she was the Lady Faile and saw only a young woman whose marriage Daise had presided over just a few months ago. They could be all curtsies and "yes, of course, my Lady," and right in the middle of it tell her exactly what to do about something without seeing anything at all incongruous. *You are not going to leave this to me anymore, Perrin*.

They curtsied now, with varying degrees of skill, and said, "The Light shine on you, my Lady," on top of one another.

Amenities out of the way, Daise started in before she was completely upright again. "Three more boys have run off, my Lady." Her tone fell halfway between the respect of the words and the now-you-listen-to-me-young-woman she sometimes used. "Dav Ayellin, Ewin Finngar, and Elam

Dowtry. Run off to see the world because of Lord Perrin's stories about what's out there."

Faile blinked in surprise. Those three were hardly boys. Dav and Elam were as old as Perrin, and Ewin not really that much younger than she herself. And Perrin's stories, which he told seldom and reluctantly, were hardly the only way Two Rivers youths learned about the outside world now. "I could ask Perrin to speak to you, if you wish."

They stirred, Daise looking for him expectantly, Edelle and Milla automatically smoothing their skirts, Elwinn just as unconsciously drawing her braid over her shoulder and arranging it carefully. Abruptly they realized what they were doing and froze, not looking at one another. Or at her. The one advantage Faile had with them was that they knew the effect her husband had on them. So many times she had seen one or another firm herself up after meeting with Perrin, plainly vowing not to let it happen again; so many times she had seen resolution fly out the window at a sight of him. None was really sure whether she preferred to deal with him or with her.

"That will not be necessary," Edelle said after a moment. "Boys running off are a bother, but only a bother." Her tone had slid a little further from "my Lady" than Daise's, and plump Elwinn added a smile suitable for mother to young daughter.

"As long as we're here, my dear, we really might as well mention something else. Water. You see, some of the people are worried."

"It hasn't rained in months," Edelle added, and Daise nodded.

This time Faile did blink. They were too intelligent to think Perrin could do anything about that. "The springs are all still flowing, and Perrin has ordered more wells dug." Actually he had only suggested it, but it had come to the same thing, fortunately. "And long before planting time, the irrigation canals from the Waterwood will be done." That was her doing; half the fields in Saldaea were irrigated, but no one here had ever heard of the practice. "Anyway, the rains have to come sooner or later. The canals are only in case." Daise nodded again, slowly, and Elwinn and Edelle. But they knew all this as well as she.

"It isn't the rain," Milla muttered. "Not exactly, anyway. It isn't natural. You see, none of us can Listen to the Wind." She hunched her shoulders under the others' sudden frowns. Plainly she was saying too much, and giving away secrets besides. Supposedly all the Wisdoms could predict the weather by Listening to the Wind; at least, they said that they all could. But even so Milla plowed on doggedly. “Well, we can’t! We look at clouds instead, and how the birds behave, and the ants and caterpillars and. . . .” Drawing a deep breath, she straightened, but still avoided the other Wisdoms’ eyes. Faile wondered how she managed to deal with the Women’s Circle in Taren Ferry, much less the Village Council. Of course, they were as new at it as Milla; that village had lost its whole population when the Trollocs came, and everyone there now was new. “It isn’t natural, my Lady. The first snows should have been here weeks ago, but it might as well be the middle of summer. We’re not worried, my Lady, we’re frightened! If nobody else will admit it, I will. I lie awake most nights. I haven’t slept properly in a month, and. . . .” She trailed off, color blooming in her face as she realized she might have gone too far. A Wisdom was supposed to be in control in all times; she did not run around saying she was frightened.

The others shifted their gazes from Milla to Faile. They said nothing, faces expressionless enough for Aes Sedai.

Faile understood, now. Milla had spoken simple truth. The weather was *not* natural; it was most *un*natural. Faile often lay awake herself, praying for rain, or better still snow, trying not to think of what lurked behind the heat and drought. Yet a Wisdom was supposed to reassure others. Who could she go to when she needed reassurance herself?

These women might not have known what they were doing, but they had come to the right place. Part of the compact between noble and commoner, ingrained in Faile from her birth, was that nobles provided safety and security. And a part of giving security was to remind people that evil times were not forever. If today was bad, then tomorrow would be better, and if not tomorrow, then the day after. She wished she could be certain of that herself, but she had been taught to give those under her strength even when she had none herself, to soothe their fears, not infect them with her own.

“Perrin told me about his people before I ever came here,” she said. He was not a man to brag, but things had a way of coming out. “When hail flattens your crops, when the winter kills half your sheep, you buckle down and keep going. When Trollocs devastated the Two Rivers, you fought back, and when you were done with them, you set about rebuilding without missing a step.” She would not have believed that without seeing for herself, not of southerners. These people would have done very well in Saldaea, where Trolloc raids were a matter of course, in the northern parts at least. “I cannot tell you the weather will be what it should tomorrow. I can tell you that Perrin and I will do what needs to be done, whatever can be done. And I don’t need to tell you that you will take what each day brings, whatever it is, and be ready to face the next. That is the kind of people the Two Rivers breeds. That is who you are.”

They truly were intelligent. If they had not admitted to themselves why they had come, they had to now. Had they been less intelligent, they might have taken umbrage. But even words they had said themselves before had the desired effect coming from someone else. Of course, that carried its own embarrassment. It was a proper muddle, and they were a study in crimson cheeks and unspoken wishes to be somewhere else.

“Well, of course,” Daise said. Planting stout fists on ample hips, she stared at the other Wisdoms, daring them to gainsay her. “I’ve said as much, haven’t I? The girl talks sense. I said as much when she first came here. That girl has a head on her, I said.”

Edelle sniffed. “Did anyone say she didn’t, Daise? I didn’t hear it. She does very well.” To Faile she added, “You do very well, indeed.”

Milla bobbed a curtsy. “Thank you, Lady Faile. I know I’ve said the same to fifty people, but coming from you, somehow it—” A loud *harrumph* from Daise cut her short; that was going too far. Milla grew redder in the face.

“This is very nice work, my Lady.” Elwinn leaned forward to finger the narrow, divided riding skirt that Faile favored. “There’s a Taraboner seamstress down in Deven Ride who could do even better for you, though. If you don’t mind my saying. I had a word with her, and she only makes decent dresses now, except for married women.” That motherly smile came onto her face again, indulgent and iron at the same time. “Or if they’re courting. Beautiful things, she makes. Why, she’d count it a pleasure to work with your coloring and figure.”

Daise began smiling complacently before the other woman was done. “Therille Marza, right here in Emond’s Field, is already making Lady Faile half a dozen dresses. And the most beautiful gown.” Elwinn drew herself up, and Edelle pursed her lips, and even Milla looked thoughtful.

As far as Faile was concerned, the audience was over. The Domani seamstress required a firm hand and constant vigilance to keep her from dressing Faile for the court in Bandar Eban. The gown had been Daise’s idea, sprung as a surprise, and even if it was in the Saldaean style rather than Domani, Faile did not know where she was to wear it. It would be a long time before the Two Rivers ran to balls or promenades. Left to themselves, the Wisdoms would soon be competing to see which village would dress her.

She offered them tea, with a casual comment that they could discuss how to hearten the people about the weather. That hit too close to home after the last few minutes, and they nearly tripped over themselves regretting duties that would not allow them to stay.

Thoughtfully, she watched them go, Milla drawing up the rear as usual, a child tagging after older sisters. It might be possible to have a few quiet words with some of the Women’s Circle in Taren Ferry. Each village needed a strong mayor and a strong Wisdom to stand up for their interests. Quiet, careful words. When Perrin had discovered she had been talking to the men in Taren Ferry before the election for mayor—if a man had good wits and was strong for her and Perrin, why should the men who were going to vote not know that she and Perrin returned that support?—when he found out. . . . He was a gentle man, slow to anger, but just to be safe she had barricaded herself in their bedroom until he cooled down. Which had not happened until she promised not to “interfere” again in any mayoral election, in the open or behind his back. That last had been most unfair of him. It was most inconvenient, too. But it had not occurred to him to mention Women’s Circle voting. Well, what he did not know would do him a great deal of good. And Taren Ferry, too.

Thinking of him made her remember her promise to herself. The feathered fan picked up speed. Today had not been the worst for nonsense, and not even the worst with the Wisdoms—there had been no questions about when Lord Perrin could expect an heir, the Light be blessed!—but maybe the unrelenting heat had finally screwed her irritation to the sticking place. Perrin *would* do his duty, or. . . .

Thunder rolled over the manor, and lightning lit the windows. Hope swelled inside her. If rain had come. . . .

She ran silently on slippered feet, searching out Perrin. She wanted to share the rain with him. And she still intended a few firm words. More than a few, if necessary.

Perrin was where she expected, all the way up on the third floor, on the roofed porch at the front, a curly-haired man in a plain brown coat, with heavy shoulders and arms. Broad back to her, he was leaning against one of the porch columns. Staring down at the ground to one side of the manor, not up at the sky. Faile stopped in the doorway.

Thunder boomed again, and lightning sheeted blue across the sky. Heat lightning, in a cloudless sky. Not a herald of rain. No rain to break heat. No snow to follow. Sweat beaded on her face, but she shivered.

“The audience is over?” Perrin said, and she jumped. He had not raised his head. It was difficult sometimes to remember how sensitive his hearing was. Or he could have smelled her; she hoped it was the perfume, not the sweat.

“I half thought I’d find you with Gwil or Hal.” That was one of his worst faults; she tried to train servants, and to him they were men to laugh with and have a mug of ale. At least he did not have a roving eye, as so many men did. He never realized Calle Coplin had taken service in the manor because she hoped to do more for Lord Perrin than make his bed. He had not even noticed when Faile chased Calle out with a stick of kindling.

Moving up beside him, she saw what he was watching. Two men, stripped to the waist, working with wooden practice swords below. Tam al’Thor was a solid, graying man, Aram slender and young. Aram was learning fast. Very fast. Tam had been a soldier, and a blademaster, but Aram was pressing him hard.

Automatically her eyes went to the tents clustered in a stone-fenced field half a mile toward the Westwood. The rest of the Tinkers were camped amid half-finished wagons like small houses on wheels. Of course, they no longer acknowledged Aram as one of them, not since he had picked up that sword. The Tuatha’an never did violence, not for any reason. She wondered whether they would go as they planned, when the wagons the Trollocs had burned were replaced. After gathering in all those who had hidden in the thickets, they yet numbered little more than a hundred. Probably they would, leaving Aram behind of his own choice. No Tuatha’an had ever settled in one place that she had ever heard.

But then, people in the Two Rivers used to say nothing there ever changed, yet a great deal had since the Trollocs. Emond’s Field, just a hundred paces south of the manor, was larger than she had first seen, all the burned houses rebuilt and new going up. Some in brick, another new thing.

And some with tile roofs. At the rate new dwellings were being erected, the manor would be in the village soon. There was talk of a wall, in case the Trollocs returned. Change. A handful of children were following Loial's great height along one of the village streets. Only a few months since the sight of the Ogier, with his tufted ears and broad nose almost as wide as his face, half again as tall as a man, had drawn every child in the village in gaping wonder, and their mothers in a terror to protect them. Now mothers sent their children for Loial to read to them. The outlanders in their strangely cut coats and dresses, dotted among Emond's Fielders, stood out almost as much as Loial, but no one looked at them twice, or at the village's three Aiel, strange, tall folk in browns and grays. Until a few weeks ago there had been two Aes Sedai here, as well, and even they had gotten no more than respectful bows and curtsies. Change. The two flagpoles not far from the Winespring, on the Green, were visible over the rooftops, one bearing the red-bordered red wolf's head that had become Perrin's sigil, the other the crimson eagle in flight that marked Manetheren. Manetheren had vanished in the Trolloc Wars, some two thousand years ago, but this land had been part of it, and the Two Rivers flew that flag almost by acclamation. Change, and they had no notion how large it was, how inexorable it was. But Perrin would see them through it to whatever came beyond. With her help, he would.

"I used to hunt rabbits with Gwil," Perrin said. "He's only a few years older than me, and he used to take me hunting sometimes."

It took her a moment to remember what he was talking about. "Gwil is trying to learn how to be a footman. You don't help him when you invite him to go smoke his pipe with you in the stables and talk horses." She took a deep slow breath. This would not be easy. "You have a duty to these people, Perrin. However hard it is, however much you want not to, you have to do your duty."

"I know," he said softly. "I can feel him tugging at me."

His voice was so strange that she reached up to grip his short beard and make him look down at her. His golden eyes, still as strange and mysterious to her as ever, looked sad. "What do you mean? You might think fondly of Gwil, but he—"

"It's Rand, Faile. He needs me."

The knot inside her that she had been trying to deny clenched even tighter. She had convinced herself this danger had gone with the Aes Sedai.

Foolish, that. She was married ta a *ta'veren*, a man fated to bend lives around him into the shape the Pattern required, and he had grown up with two more *ta'veren*, one the Dragon Reborn himself. It was a part of him she had to share. She did not like sharing even a hair, but there it was. "What are you going to do?"

"Go to him." His gaze shifted for a moment, and her eyes followed. Against the wall leaned a blacksmith's heavy hammer and an axe with a wicked halfmoon blade and a haft a pace long. "I couldn't. . . ." His voice was almost a whisper. "I couldn't find how to tell you. I'll go tonight, when everyone's asleep. I don't think there's much time, and it could be a long way. Master al'Thor and Master Cauthon will help you with the mayors, if you need it. I spoke to them." He tried to make his voice lighter, a pitiful effort. "You shouldn't have any trouble with the Wisdoms anyway. Funny; when I was a boy the Wisdoms always seemed so fearsome, but they're really easy as long as you're firm."

Faile compressed her lips. So he had spoken to Tam al'Thor and Abell Cauthon, had he, but not to her? And the Wisdoms! She would like to make him wear her skin for a day and see how easy the Wisdoms were. "We can't leave as quickly as that. It will take time to organize a proper entourage."

Perrin's eyes narrowed. "We? You're not going! It will be—!" He coughed, went on in a milder tone. "It will be best if one of us stays here. If the lord goes off, the lady should remain to take care of things. That makes sense. More refugees every day. All those disputes to be settled. If you go, too, it'll be worse than the Trollocs around here."

How could he think she would not notice such a clumsy recovery? He had been going to say it would be dangerous. How could his wanting to keep her out of danger always make her feel so warm inside at the same time it made her so angry? "We will do what you think best," she said mildly, and he blinked suspiciously, scratched his beard, then nodded.

Now it was only necessary to make him see what really was best. At least he had not said right out she *could not* go. Once he dug in his heels, she could as easily shift a grain barn with her hands as shift him, but with care it could be avoided. Usually.

Abruptly she threw her arms around him and buried her face against his broad chest. His strong hands smoothed her hair softly; he probably thought she was worried about him leaving. Well, she was, in a way. Just not about him leaving without her; he had not yet learned what it meant to have a Saldaean wife. They had been getting on so well away from Rand al'Thor. Why did the Dragon Reborn need Perrin now, so strongly that Perrin could feel it across however many hundred leagues lay between them? Why was time so short? Why? Perrin's shirt clung to his sweaty chest, and the unnatural heat sent more sliding down her face, but Faile shivered.

One hand on his sword hilt, Gawyn Trakand bounced a small rock on his palm as he made another circuit of his men, checking their positions around the tree-topped hill. A dry hot wind carrying dust across the rolling brown grasslands fluttered the plain green cloak hanging down his back. Nothing to be seen but dead grass, scattered thickets and a dotting of mostly withered bushes. There was too much front to cover with the men he had if it came to a fight here. He had grouped them in clusters of five swordsmen afoot, with bowmen fifty paces back up the hill. Fifty more waited with lance and horse near the camp on the crest, to be committed where necessary. He hoped it would not be necessary today.

There had been fewer Younglings in the beginning, but their reputation brought recruits. The added numbers would be helpful; no recruit was allowed out of Tar Valon until he was up to standard. It was not that he expected fighting this day more than any other, but he had learned it came most often when unexpected. Only Aes Sedai would wait until the last minute to tell a man about a thing like what was to happen today.

"Is everything well?" he said, stopping beside a group of swordsmen. In spite of the heat, some wore their green cloaks so that Gawyn's white charging boar showed, embroidered on the breast.

Jisao Hamora was the youngest, still with a boy's grin, but he was also the only one of the five with the small silver tower on his collar, marking him a veteran of the fighting in the White Tower. He answered. "All is well, my Lord."

The Younglings deserved their name. Gawyn himself, a few years past twenty, was among the oldest. It was a rule that they accepted none who had served in any army, or borne arms for any lord or lady, or even worked as a merchant's guard. The first Younglings had gone to the Tower as boys and young men to be trained by the Warders, the finest swordsmen, the finest fighters, in the world, and they continued part of that tradition, at least, though Warders no longer trained them. Youth was no detriment. They had held a small ceremony only a week past for the first whiskers Benji Dalfor had ever shaved that were not fuzz, and he bore a scar across his cheek from the Tower fighting. The Aes Sedai had been too busy for Healing in the days right after Siuan Sanche was deposed as Amyrlin. She might still be Amyrlin if the Younglings had not faced many of their former teachers and bested them in the halls of the Tower.

“Is there any point to this, my Lord?” Hal Moir asked. He was two years older than Jisao, and like many who did not wear the silver tower, he regretted not having been there. He would learn. “There isn’t a glimmer of Aielmen.”

“You think not?” Without any hefting to give warning, Gawyn hurled the rock as hard as he could at the only bush close enough to hit, a scraggly thing. The rustle of dead leaves was the only sound, but the bush shook just a bit more than it should have, as though a man somehow hidden behind it had been struck in a tender place. Exclamations rose from the newer men; Jisao only eased his sword. “An Aiel, Hal, can hide in a fold in the ground you wouldn’t even stumble over.” Not that Gawyn knew any more of Aiel than he read in books, but he had read every book he could find in the White Tower’s library by any man who had actually fought them, every book by any soldier who seemed to know what he was talking about. A man had to ready himself for the future, and it seemed the world’s future was war. “But if the Light pleases, there won’t be any fighting today.”

“My Lord!” came a hail from up the hill as the lookout spotted what he just had: three women emerging from a small thicket a few hundred paces west, coming toward the hill. West; a surprise. But Aiel always liked surprise.

He had read about Aielwomen fighting alongside the men, but these women could never fight in those dark bulky skirts and white blouses. They carried shawls looped over their arms despite the heat. On the other hand, how had they reached that thicket unseen? “Keep your eyes open, and not on them,” he said, and then disobeyed himself by watching the three Wise Ones, the emissaries from the Shaido Aiel, with interest. They could be no other, out here.

They came on at a stately pace, not at all as if approaching a large party of armed men. Their hair was long, to the waist—he had read that Aiel kept it cut short—and held back by folded kerchiefs. They wore so many bracelets and long necklaces of gold and silver and ivory that the glitter should have given them away at a mile.

Straight-backed and proud-faced, the three women strode past the swordsmen with hardly a glance and started up the hill. Their leader was a golden-haired woman, her loose blouse unlaced to show considerable tanned cleavage. The other two were gray, with leathery faces; she had to be less than half their age.

“I wouldn’t mind asking that one to dance,” one of the Younglings said admiringly when the women had gone past. He was a good ten years younger than the golden-haired woman.

“I wouldn’t if I were you, Arwin,” Gawyn said dryly. “It might be misunderstood.” He had read that Aiel called battle “the dance.” “Besides, she’d have your liver for dinner.” He had caught a glimpse of her pale green eyes, and he had never seen harder.

He watched the Wise Ones until they had climbed the hill to where half a dozen Aes Sedai waited with their Warders. Those who had Warders; two were Red Ajah, and Reds did not. When the women disappeared into one of the tall white tents, and the five Warders had taken up guard around it, he went on with his circuit of the hill.

The Younglings were alert since word of the Aiel’s arrival had spread, which did not please him. They should have been this alert before. Even most who did not wear the silver tower had seen fighting around Tar Valon. Eamon Valda, the Whitecloak Lord Captain in command, had pulled nearly all his men out to the west more than a month ago, but the handful he left behind tried to keep together the brigands and bullyboys Valda had gathered. The Younglings had dispersed those, at least. Gawyn wished he could think they had driven Valda off, too—the Tower had certainly kept its own soldiers far from the skirmishing, for all that the Whitecloaks’ only reason for being there had been to see what harm they could do the Tower—but he suspected that Valda had his own reasons. Likely orders from Pedron Niall, and Gawyn would have given much to know what they were. Light, but he hated not knowing. It was like fumbling your way in the dark.

The truth was, he admitted, that he was irritated. Not only about the Aiel, about not being told of this meeting until this morning. He had not been told where they were going, either, until he was taken aside by Coiren Sedai, the Gray sister who led the Aes Sedai. Elaida had been closemouthed and imperious when she was his mother’s advisor in Caemlyn; since being raised to the Amyrlin Seat she made the old Elaida seem open and warm. No doubt she had pressured him to form this escort as much to get him away from Tar Valon as for any other reason.

The Younglings had sided with her in the fighting—the old Amyrlin was stripped of Staff and Stole by the Hall, the attempt to free her rebellion against the law, clear and simple—but Gawyn had had his doubts about all Aes Sedai long before he heard the charges against Siuan Sanche read. That they pulled strings and made thrones dance was a thing said so often that he had hardly paid it any mind, but then he saw the strings being pulled. The effects at least, and his sister Elayne was the one who danced, danced right out of his sight, out of existence for all he knew. Her, and another. He had fought to keep Siuan imprisoned, then turned around and let her escape. If Elaida ever discovered that, his mother's crown would not keep him alive.

Even with that, Gawyn had chosen to stay, because his mother had always supported the Tower, because his sister wanted to be Aes Sedai. And because another woman wanted to. Egwene al'Vere. He had no right to even think of her, but abandoning the Tower would be abandoning her. For such flimsy reasons did a man choose his fate. Knowing they were flimsy did not change them, though.

He glared at the sere, windswept grasslands as he strode from one position to the next. So here he was, hoping the Aiel did not decide to attack despite—or because of—whatever it was the Shaido Wise Ones were talking over with Coiren and the others. He suspected there might be enough out there to overrun him even with Aes Sedai help. He was on his way to Cairhien, and he did not know how he felt about that. Coiren had made him swear to hold his mission secret, and even then seemed afraid of what she was saying. Well she might be. It was always best to examine carefully what an Aes Sedai said—they could not lie, but they could spin truth like a top—yet even so, he found no hidden meanings. The six Aes Sedai were going to ask the Dragon Reborn to accompany them to the Tower, with the Younglings, commanded by the son of the Queen of Andor, for an escort of honor. There could be only one reason, one that plainly shocked Coiren enough that she only hinted at it. It shocked Gawyn. Elaida intended to announce to the world that the White Tower supported the Dragon Reborn.

It was almost unbelievable. Elaida had been a Red before she became Amyrlin. Reds hated the very idea of men channeling; they did not think much of men in general, for that matter. Yet the fall of the once-invincible Stone of Tear, fulfilling prophecy, said Rand al’Thor was the Dragon Reborn, and even Elaida said the Last Battle was coming. Gawyn could hardly reconcile the frightened farmboy who had literally fallen into the Royal Palace in Caemlyn with the man in the rumors that drifted up the River Erinin to Tar Valon. It was said he had hanged Tairen High Lords and let Aiel loot the Stone. He had certainly brought the Aiel across the Spine of the World, for only the second time since the Breaking, to ravage Cairhien. Perhaps it was the madness. Gawyn had rather liked Rand al’Thor; he regretted that the man had turned out to be what he was.

By the time he came back to Jisao’s group, someone else was in sight coming from the west, a peddler in a floppy hat, leading a slab-sided pack mule. Straight toward the hill; he had seen them.

Jisao shifted, then went still again when Gawyn touched his arm. Gawyn knew what the younger man was thinking, but if the Aiel decided to kill this fellow, there was nothing they could do. Coiren would be less than pleased if he started a battle with the people she was talking to.

The peddler shambled along unconcernedly, right by the bush Gawyn had disturbed with his rock. The mule started cropping desultorily at the brown grass as the man pulled off his hat, sketched a bow that took them all in and began mopping his grizzled face with a grimy neckerchief. “The Light shine on you, my Lords. You’re well set up for traveling in these parlous times, as any man can see, but if there’s any small thing you need, like as not old Mil Tesen’s got it in his packs. Ain’t no better prices in ten miles, my Lords.”

Gawyn doubted there was as much as a farm within ten miles. “Parlous times indeed, Master Tesen. Aren’t you afraid of Aiel?”

“Aiel, my Lord? They’s all down to Cairhien. Old Mil can smell Aiel, he can. Truth, he wishes there was some here. Fine trading with Aiel. They got lots of gold. From Cairhien. And they don’t bother peddlers. Everybody knows that.”

Gawyn forbore asking why, if the Aiel in Cairhien made such good trading, the man was not heading south. “What news of the world, Master Tesen? We’re from the north, and you may know what hasn’t caught up to us yet from the south.”

“Oh, big doings southward, my Lord. You’ll have heard of Cairhien? Him that calls himself Dragon and all?” Gawyn nodded, and he went on.

“Well, now he’s taken Andor. Most of it, anyway. Their queen’s dead. Some say he’ll take the whole world before—” The man cut off with a strangled yelp before Gawyn realized he had seized the fellow’s lapels.

“Queen Morgase is dead? Speak, man! Quickly!”

Tesen rolled his eyes looking for help, but he spoke, and quickly. “That’s what they say, my Lord. Old Mil don’t know, but he thinks it so. Everybody says it, my Lord. Everybody says this Dragon did it. My Lord? Old Mil’s neck, my Lord! My Lord!”

Gawyn jerked his hands away as though burned. He felt on fire inside. It had been another neck he wanted in his hands. “The Daughter-Heir.” His voice sounded far off. “Is there any word of the Daughter-Heir, Elayne?”

Tesen backed away a long pace as soon as he was free. “Not as old Mil knows, my Lord. Some says she’s dead, too. Some says he killed her, but old Mil don’t know for sure.”

Gawyn nodded slowly. Thought seemed to be drifting up from the bottom of a well. *My blood shed before hers; my life given before hers*. “Thank you, Master Tesen. I. . . .” *My blood shed before hers* . . . That was the oath he had taken when barely tall enough to peer into Elayne’s cradle. “You may trade with. . . . Some of my men may need . . .” Gareth Bryne had had to explain to him what it meant, but even then he had known he had to keep that oath if he failed at everything else in his life. Jisao and the others were looking at him worriedly. “Take care of the peddler,” he told Jisao roughly, and turned away.

His mother dead, and Elayne. Only a rumor, but rumors on everyone’s lips sometimes had a way of turning out true. He climbed half a dozen paces toward the Aes Sedai camp before he knew it. His hands hurt. He had to look to realize they were cramping from the grip he had on his sword hilt, and he had to force them to let go. Coiren and the others meant to take Rand al’Thor to Tar Valon, but if his mother was dead. . . . Elayne. If they were dead, he would see whether the Dragon Reborn could live with a sword through his heart!

Adjusting her red-fringed shawl, Katerine Alruddin rose from the cushions with the other women in the tent. She almost sniffed when Coiren, plump and pompous, intoned, “As it has been agreed, so shall it be.” This was a meeting with savages, not the conclusion of a treaty between the Tower and a ruler.

The Aielwomen showed no more reaction, no more expression, than when they first arrived. That was something of a surprise; kings and queens betrayed their innermost feelings when faced by two or three Aes Sedai, much less half a dozen; brutish savages surely should be trembling visibly by now. Perhaps that should have been almost no reaction. Their leader—her name was Sevanna, followed by some nonsense about "septs" and "Shaido Aiel" and "wise"—said, "It is agreed so long as I get to see his face." She had a sulky mouth, and wore her blouse unlaced to attract men's eyes; that the Aiel chose one like her to lead showed how crude they were. "I want to see him, and have him see me, when he is defeated. Only with that will your Tower be allied to the Shaido."

The hint of eagerness in her voice made Katerine suppress a smile. Wise? This Sevanna truly was a fool. The White Tower did not have allies; there were those who served its ends willingly and those who served unwillingly, no others.

A slight thinning at the corners of Coiren's mouth betrayed her irritation. The Gray was a good negotiator, but she did like to have things done just so, every foot placed exactly where it had been planned to go. "Without doubt, your service deserves what you ask."

One of the gray-haired Aiel—Tarva, or some such—narrowed her eyes, but Sevanna nodded, hearing what Coiren had wanted her to hear.

Coiren set out to escort the Aielwomen as far as the foot of the hill, along with Erian, a Green, and Nesune, a Brown, and the five Warders they had between them. Katerine went as far as the edge of the trees to watch. On arrival the Aiel had been allowed to come up alone, like the supplicants they were, but now they were given all honor to make them believe they truly were friends and allies. Katerine wondered whether they were civilized enough to recognize the subtleties.

Gawyn was down there, sitting on a rock, staring off across the grasslands. What would that young man think if he learned he and his children were only here to get them away from Tar Valon? Neither Elaida nor the Hall liked having a pack of young wolves about who refused to accept the leash. Perhaps the Shaido could be prevailed upon to eliminate the problem. Elaida had intimated as much. That way his death would not rebound against the Tower with his mother.

"If you stare so at the young man much longer, Katerine, I will begin to think you should be a Green."

Katerine stamped out a quick spark of anger and inclined her head respectfully. “I was only speculating on his thoughts, Galina Sedai.”

That was as much respect as was proper in so public a place, and perhaps even a touch more. Galina Casban looked forty at most but was at least twice Katerine’s true age, and for eighteen years the round-faced woman had been the head of the Red Ajah. A fact not known outside the Ajah, of course; such things were for the Ajah alone. She was not even one of the Sitters for the Red in the Hall of the Tower; Katerine suspected that the heads of most other Ajahs were. Elaida would have named her leader of this expedition instead of that self-important Coiren, except that Galina herself had pointed out that a Red might make Rand al’Thor suspicious. The Amyrlin Seat was supposed to be of all Ajahs and none, renouncing her old loyalty, but if Elaida deferred to anyone—which was debatable, true—she deferred to Galina.

“Will he come willingly, as Coiren thinks?” Katerine asked.

“Perhaps,” Galina said dryly. “The honor this delegation does him should be enough to make a king carry his throne to Tar Valon on his back.”

Katerine did not bother to nod. “The woman Sevanna will kill him, given a chance.”

“Then she must not be given a chance.” Galina’s voice was cold, her plump mouth tight. “The Amyrlin Seat will not be pleased to have her plans disrupted. And you and I will have days to scream in the dark before we die.”

Drawing her shawl up over her shoulders reflexively, Katerine shuddered. There was dust in the air; she would get out her light cloak. It would not be Elaida’s rage that killed them, though her fury could be terrible. For seventeen years Katerine had been Aes Sedai, but not until the morning before they departed Tar Valon had she learned that she shared more than the Red Ajah with Galina. Twelve years she had been a member of the Black Ajah, never knowing that Galina had too, for far longer. Of necessity Black sisters kept themselves hidden, even from each other. Their rare gatherings were held with faces covered and voices disguised. Before Galina, Katerine had known only three to recognize. Orders were left on her pillow, or in a pocket of her cloak, the ink ready to vanish if any hand but hers touched the paper. She had a secret place to leave messages, and dire orders not to try to see who came to take them. She had never disobeyed.

There might be Black sisters among those following a day behind, but she had no way of knowing.

"Why?" she asked. Orders to preserve the Dragon Reborn made no sense, even if they delivered him into Elaida's hands.

"Questions are dangerous for one sworn to obey without."

Katerine shuddered again, and barely stopped herself from curtsying. "Yes, Galina Sedai." But she could not help wondering. Why?

"They show neither respect nor honor," Therava growled. "They allow us to enter their camp as though we were toothless dogs, then take us out under guard like suspected thieves."

Sevanna did not look around. She would not until safely back among the trees. The Aes Sedai would be watching for signs of nervousness. "They agreed, Therava," she said. "That is enough for now." For now. One day, these lands would be the Shaido's for the looting. Including the White Tower.

"This is all badly thought out," the third woman said in a tight voice. "Wise Ones avoid Aes Sedai; it has always been so. Perhaps it was well enough for you, Sevanna—as Couladin's widow, and Suladric's, you speak as clan chief until we send another man to Rhuidean—but the rest of us should be no part of it."

Sevanna barely forced herself to keep walking. Desaine had spoken against her being chosen as a Wise One, speaking loudly about her having served no apprenticeship and paid no visit to Rhuidean, claiming that her place standing for the clan chief disqualified her. Besides, as the widow of not just one, but two dead chiefs, perhaps she carried bad luck. Fortunately, enough of the Shaido Wise Ones had listened to Sevanna, not Desaine. It was *un*fortunate that Desaine had too many listeners to be safely done away with. Wise Ones were supposed to be inviolate—they even came and went freely among the Shaido from those betrayers and fools down in Cairhien—but Sevanna meant to find a way.

As though Desaine's doubts had infected Therava, she began muttering, only half to herself. "What is ill done is going against Aes Sedai. We served them before the Breaking, and failed them: that is why we were sent to the Three-fold Land. If we fail them again, we will be destroyed."

That was what everyone believed; it was part of the old tales, almost part of custom. Sevanna was not so sure. These Aes Sedai looked weak and foolish to her, traveling with a few hundred men for escort through lands where the true Aiel, the Shaido, could smother them with thousands. “A new day has come,” she said sharply, repeating part of one of her speeches to the Wise Ones. “We are no longer bound to the Three-fold Land. Any eye can see that what was, has changed. We must change, or be ended as if we never were.” She had never told them how much change she intended, of course. The Shaido Wise Ones would never send a man to Rhuidean, if she had her way.

“New day or old day,” Desaine grumbled, “what are we to do with Rand al’Thor if we do manage to take him from the Aes Sedai? Better, and easier, to slip a knife between his ribs while they are escorting him north.”

Sevanna did not answer. She did not know what to answer. Not yet. All she knew was that once she had the so-called *Car’a’carn*, the chief of chiefs of all the Aiel, chained before her tent like a vicious dog, then this land would truly belong to the Shaido. And to her. She had known that even before the strange wetlander man somehow found her in the mountains these people called Kinslayer’s Dagger. He had given her a small cube of some hard stone, intricately carved in strange patterns, and told her what to do with it, with the aid of a Wise One who could channel, once al’Thor was in her hands. She carried it in her belt pouch at all times; she had not decided what to do about it, but so far she had told no one about man or cube. Head high, she walked on beneath that blistering sun in an autumn sky.

The palace garden might have had a semblance of coolness had there been any trees, but the tallest things were fanciful topiary, tortured into the shapes of running horses or bears performing tumblers’ tricks or the like. Shirtsleeved gardeners scurried about with buckets of water beneath the scalding afternoon sun, trying to save their creations. They had given up on the flowers, clearing all the patterned beds and laying them with sod that was dying too.

“A pity the heat is so bad,” Ailron said. Sweeping a lace handkerchief from the lace-fringed sleeve of his yellow silk coat, he dabbed delicately at his face, then tossed it aside. A servant in gold-and-red livery quickly snatched it from the graveled walk and faded into the background again: another liveried man laid a fresh replacement in the King’s hand to be tucked up his sleeve. Ailron did not acknowledge it, of course, or even appear to notice. “These fellows usually manage to keep everything alive till spring, but I may lose a few this winter. Since it doesn’t seem as if we’ll have any winter. They take cold better than drought. Don’t you think they’re very fine, my dear?”

Ailron, Anointed by the Light, King and Defender of Amadicia, Guardian of the Southern Gate, was not as handsome as rumor made him, but then, Morgase had suspected when she first met him, years ago, that he might be the source of those rumors himself. His dark hair was full and wavy—and quite definitely receding in front. His nose was a bit too long, his ears a touch too big. His whole face vaguely suggested softness. One day she would have to ask. The Southern Gate to what?

Working her carved ivory fan, she eyed one of the gardeners’ . . . constructs. It seemed to be three huge nude women wrestling desperately with gigantic serpents. “They are quite remarkable,” she said. One said what one must when coming as a beggar.

“Yes. Yes, aren’t they? Ah, it looks as if affairs of state call me. Pressing matters, I fear.” A dozen men, coated as colorfully as the flowers that were no longer there, had appeared on the short marble stair at the far end of the walk and were waiting in front of a dozen fluted columns that supported nothing. “Until this evening, my dear. We will speak further of your dreadful problems, and what I can do.”

He bowed over her hand, stopping just short of kissing it, and she curtsied slightly, murmuring appropriate inanities, and then he swept away, followed by all but one of the coterie of servants that had been trailing them everywhere.

With him gone, Morgase worked the fan harder than she could in his presence—the man pretended the heat barely touched him, with sweat streaming down his face—and turned back toward her apartments. Hers by sufferance, just as the pale blue gown she wore was a gift. She had insisted on the high neck despite the weather; she had definite ideas about low necklines.

The lone serving man followed behind her, at a short distance. And Tallanvor, of course, on her heels and still insisting on wearing the rough green coat he had traveled here in, sword on his hip as though he expected an attack in the Seranda Palace, not two miles from Amador. She tried to ignore the tall young man, but as usual, he would not be ignored.

“We should have gone to Ghealdan, Morgase. To Jehannah.”

She had let some things go on far too long. Her skirts swished as she whirled to confront him, and her eyes blazed. “On our journey, certain discretions were necessary, but those around us now know who I am. You will remember that too, and show proper respect for your Queen. On your knees!”

To her shock, he did not move. “Are you my Queen, Morgase?” At least he lowered his voice so the servant could not overhear and spread it about, but his eyes. . . . She very nearly backed away from the stark desire there. And the anger. “I will not abandon you this side of death, Morgase, but you abandoned much when you abandoned Andor to Gaebril. When you find it again, I will kneel at your feet, and you can strike off my head if you choose, but until then. . . . We should have gone to Ghealdan.”

The young fool would have been willing to die fighting the usurper even after she discovered that no House in Andor would support her, and day by day, week by week since she had decided her only choice was to seek foreign aid, he had grown more insolent and insubordinate. She could ask Ailron for Tallanvor’s head, and receive it with no questions asked. But just because they were unasked did not mean they would be unthought. She truly was a beggar here, and could not afford to ask one favor more than absolutely necessary. Besides, without Tallanvor, she would not be here. She would be a prisoner—worse than a prisoner—to Lord Gaebril. Those were the only reasons Tallanvor would keep his head.

Her army guarded the ornately carved doors to her apartments. Basel Gill was a pink-cheeked man with graying hair combed vainly back over a bald spot. His leather jerkin, sewn with steel discs, strained around his girth, and he wore a sword he had not touched in twenty years before belting it on to follow her. Lamgwin was bulky and hard, though heavy-lidded eyes made him look half-asleep. He wore a sword too, but the scars on his face and a nose broken more than once made it plain he was used to employing fists, or a cudgel. An innkeeper and a street tough; aside from Tallanvor, that was the army she had so far to take back Andor and her throne from Gaebril.

The pair were all awkward bows, but she glided past and slammed the door in Tallanvor’s face. “The world,” she announced in a growl, “would be a far better place without men.”

“An emptier place, certainly,” Morgase’s old nurse said from her chair beside a velvet-draped anteroom window. With her head bent over her embroidery hoop, Lini's gray bun waggled in the air. A reed-thin woman, she was not nearly so frail as she looked. "I assume Ailron was no more forthcoming today? Or is it Tallanvor, child? You must learn not to let men put you in a fret. Fretting makes your face blotchy." Lini still would not admit that she was out of the nursery, despite having been nurse to Morgase's daughter in turn.

"Ailron was charming," Morgase said carefully. The third woman in the room, on her knees taking folded bedsheets from a chest, sniffed loudly, and Morgase avoided glaring at her with an effort. Breane was Lamgwin's . . . companion. The short suntanned woman followed where he went, but she was Cairhienin, and Morgase was no queen of hers, as she made clear. "Another day or two," Morgase continued, "and I think I will get a pledge from him. Today, he finally agreed I need soldiers from outside to retake Caemlyn. Once Gaebril is driven from Caemlyn, the nobles will flock to me once more." She hoped they would; she was in Amadicia because she had let Gaebril blind her, had mistreated even her oldest friends among the Houses at his behest.

" 'A slow horse does not always reach the end of the journey,' " Lini quoted, still intent on her embroidery. She was very fond of old sayings, some of which Morgase suspected her of making up on the spot.

"This one will," Morgase insisted. Tallanvor was wrong about Ghealdan; according to Ailron, that country was in near anarchy because of this Prophet all the servants whispered about, the fellow preaching the Rebirth of the Dragon. "I would like some punch, Breane." The woman only looked at her until she added, "If you please." Even then she set about the pouring with a wooden sulkiness.

The mixture of wine and fruit juices was iced, and refreshing in the heat; the silver goblet felt good against Morgase's forehead. Ailron had snow and ice brought down from the Mountains of Mist, though it took nearly a steady stream of wagons to provide enough for the palace.

Lini took a goblet, too. "Concerning Tallanvor," she began after a sip.

"Leave over, Lini!" Morgase snapped.

"So he is younger than you," Breane said. She had poured for herself, as well. The effrontery of the woman! She was supposed to be a servant, whatever she had been in Cairhien. "If you want him, take him. Lamgwin says he is sworn to you, and I have seen him look at you." She laughed huskily. “He will not refuse.” Cairhienin were disgusting, but at least most of them kept their dissolute ways decently hidden.

Morgase was about to order her from the room when a knock came at the door. Without waiting permission, a white-haired man who looked all sinew and bone entered. His snowy cloak was emblazoned with a flaring golden sun on the breast. She had hoped to avoid Whitecloaks until she had Ailron’s seal on a firm agreement. The chill of the wine abruptly passed straight into her bones. Where were Tallanvor and the others, that he had walked right in?

Dark eyes going straight to her, he made the most minimal of bows. His face was aged, the skin drawn tight, but this man was as feeble as a hammer. “Morgase of Andor?” he said in a firm deep voice. “I am Pedron Niall.” Not just any Whitecloak; the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light himself. “Do not fear. I have not come to arrest you.”

Morgase held herself straight. “Arrest me? On what charge? I cannot channel.” No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she nearly clicked her tongue in exasperation. She should not have mentioned channeling; that she had put herself on the defensive was an indication of how flustered she was. It was true, what she had said, so far as it went. Fifty times trying to sense the True Source to find it once, and when found, twenty times attempting to open herself to *saidar* in order to catch a dribble once. A Brown sister named Verin had told her that there was hardly any need for the Tower to hold her until she learned to handle her tiny ability safely. The Tower did anyway, of course. Still, even that much ability to channel was outlawed in Amadicia, the penalty death. The Great Serpent ring on her hand that so fascinated Ailron now seemed hot enough to glow.

“Tower trained,” Niall murmured. “That is forbidden, as well. But as I said, I come not to arrest, but to help. Send your women away, and we will talk.” He made himself at home, taking a tall padded armchair and flipping his cloak over the back. “I will have some of that punch before they go.” To Morgase’s displeasure, Breane brought him a goblet immediately, eyes down and face as expressionless as a board.

Morgase made an effort to take back control. “They stay, Master Niall.” She would not give this man the satisfaction of a title. The lack did not appear to faze him. “What has happened to my men outside? I will hold it against you if they’ve been harmed. And why do you think I need your help?”

"Your men are uninjured," he said dismissively over his punch. "Do you think Ailron will give you what you need? You are a beautiful woman, Morgase, and Ailron prizes women with sun-gold hair. He will come a little closer each day to the agreement you seek, never quite reaching it, until you decide that perhaps, with . . . a certain sacrifice, he will yield also. But he will come no nearer what you want, whatever you give. This so-called Prophet's mobs ravage the north of Amadicia. To the west lies Tarabon, with a ten-sided civil war, brigands sworn to the so-called Dragon Reborn, and rumors of Aes Sedai and the false Dragon himself to frighten Ailron. Give you soldiers? Could he find ten men for every one he has under arms now, or even two, he would mortgage his soul. But I can send five thousand Children of the Light riding to Caemlyn with you at their head if you but ask."

To say she was stunned would have been to minimize Morgase's feeling. She made her way to a chair across from him with a proper stateliness, and sat down before her legs gave way. "Why would you want to help me oust Gaebril?" she demanded. Obviously he knew everything; no doubt he had spies among Ailron's servants. "I've never given the Whitecloaks the free rein they want in Andor."

This time he grimaced. Whitecloaks did not like that name. "Gaebril? Your lover is dead, Morgase. The false Dragon Rand al'Thor has added Caemlyn to his conquests." Lini made a faint noise as if she had pricked herself, but he kept his eyes on Morgase.

For herself, Morgase had to grip the arm of her chair to keep from pressing a hand against her stomach. If her other hand had not been resting the goblet on the other chair arm, she would have slopped punch onto the carpet. Gaebril dead? He had gulled her, turned her into his doxy, usurped her authority, oppressed the land in her name, and finally named himself King of Andor, which had never had a king. How, after all that, could there possibly be this faint regret that she would never feel his hands again? It was madness; if she had not known it was impossible, she would have believed he had used the One Power on her in some way.

But al'Thor had Caemlyn now? That might change everything. She had met him once, a frightened country youth from the west trying his best to show proper respect for his queen. But a youth carrying the heron-mark sword of a blademaster. And Elaida had been wary of him. "Why do you call him a false Dragon, Niall?" If he intended to call her by name, he could do without even a commoner's "master." "The Stone of Tear has fallen, as the Prophecies of the Dragon said. The High Lords of Tear themselves have acclaimed him the Dragon Reborn."

Niall's smile was mocking. "Everywhere he has appeared, there have been Aes Sedai. They do his channeling for him, mark me. He is no more than a puppet of the Tower. I have friends in many places"—he meant spies—"and they tell me there's evidence the Tower set up Logain, the last false Dragon, too. Perhaps he got above himself, so they had to finish him."

"There is no proof of that." She was pleased that her voice was steady. She had heard the rumors about Logain on the way to Amador. But they were only rumors.

The man shrugged. "Believe as you will, but I prefer truth to foolish fancies. Would the true Dragon Reborn do as he has done? The High Lords acclaimed him, you say? How many did he hang before the rest bowed down? He let Aiel loot the Stone, and all of Cairhien. He says Cairhien shall have a new ruler—one he will name—but the only real power in Cairhien is himself. He says there will be a new ruler in Caemlyn, too. You are dead; did you know that? There is mention of the Lady Dyelin, I believe. He has sat on the Lion Throne, used it for audiences, but I suppose it was too small, being made for women. He has put it up as a trophy of his conquest and replaced it with his own throne, in the Grand Hall of your Royal Palace. Of course, all has not gone well for him. Some Andoran Houses think he killed you; there's sympathy for you, now you're dead. He holds what he holds of Andor in an iron fist, though, with a horde of Aiel and an army of Borderland ruffians the Tower recruited for him. But if you think he will welcome you back to Caemlyn and give you back your throne. . . ."

He let the words trail off, but the torrent had hit Morgase like hailstones. Dyelin was next in line for the throne only if Elayne died without issue. Oh, Light, Elayne! Was she still safe in the Tower? Strange to think she had such an antipathy for Aes Sedai, largely because they had lost Elayne for a time, that she had demanded Elayne's return when no one *demanded* anything from the Tower, yet now she hoped they held her daughter tightly. She remembered one letter from Elayne, after she returned to Tar Valon. Had there been others? So much of what had happened while Gaebril held her in thrall was vague. Surely Elayne must be safe. She should be worried about Gawyn too, and Galad—the Light knew where they were—but Elayne was her heir. Peace in Andor depended on a smooth succession.

She had to think carefully. It all hung together, yet well-crafted lies did, and this man would be a master at that craft. She needed facts. That Andor believed her dead was no surprise; she had had to sneak from her own realm to avoid Gaebril and those who might turn her over to him or else avenge Gaebril's wrongs on her. If sympathy came from it, she could make use of it when she rose from the dead. Facts. "I will need time to think," she told him.

"Of course." Niall rose smoothly; she would have risen too, so he did not tower over her, but she was not sure her legs would support her. "I will return in a day or two. In the meantime, I wish to be sure of your safety. Ailron is so wrapped in his own concerns, there is no telling who might slip in, perhaps intent on harm. I have taken the liberty of posting a few of the Children here. With Ailron's consent."

Morgase had always heard that the Whitecloaks were the true power in Amadicia, and she was certain she had just heard proof.

Niall was slightly more formal in his leaving than in coming, making a bow that might have done for an equal. One way and another, he was letting her know that she had no choice.

No sooner had he gone than Morgase pushed to her feet, but Breane was still quicker in darting for the doors. Even so, before either woman had gone three steps, one of them banged open, Tallanvor and the other two men spilling into the room.

"Morgase," Tallanvor breathed, trying to absorb her with his eyes. "I was afraid—"

"Afraid?" she said contemptuously. It was too much; he would not learn. "Is this how you protect me? A boy could have done as much! But then, a boy did."

That smoldering gaze remained on her a moment longer; then he turned and pushed his way past Basel and Lamgwin.

The innkeeper stood wringing his hands. "They were at least thirty, my Queen. Tallanvor would have fought; he tried to cry out, to warn you, but they clubbed him with a hilt. The old one said they didn't mean to hurt you, but they didn't need any but you, and if they had to kill us. . . ." His eyes went to Lini and Breane, who was staring Lamgwin up and down to make sure he had taken no injury. The man appeared as concerned for her. "My Queen, if I'd thought we could do any good. . . . I'm sorry. I failed you."

" 'The right medicine always tastes bitter,' " Lini murmured softly. "Most of all for a child who throws a sulky tantrum." At least for once she did not say it for the whole room to hear.

She was right. Morgase knew that. Except about the tantrum, of course. Basel looked miserable enough to welcome beheading. "You did not fail me, Master Gill. I may ask you to die for me one day, but only when there's greater good to come of it. Niall only wanted to talk." Basel perked up right away, but Morgase could feel Lini's eyes on her. Very bitter. "Will you ask Tallanvor to come to me. I—I wish to apologize to him for my hasty words."

"The best way to apologize to a man," Breane said, "is to trip him in a secluded part of the garden."

Something snapped in Morgase. Before she knew it she had hurled her goblet at the woman, spraying punch across the carpet. "Get out!" she shrieked. "All of you, get out! You can deliver my apologies to Tallanvor, Master Gill."

Breane calmly brushed punch from her dress, then took her time walking to Lamgwin and linking her arm through his. Basel was all but bouncing on his toes trying to herd them out.

To Morgase's surprise, Lini went, too. That was not Lini's way; she was much more likely to remain and lecture her old charge as if she were still ten. Morgase did not know why she put up with it. Still, she almost told Lini to stay. But then they were all gone, the door was shut—and she had more important matters to worry about than whether Lini's feelings were bruised.

Pacing across the carpet, she tried to think. Ailron would demand trade concessions—and maybe Niall's "sacrifice"—for help. She was willing to give him the trade concessions, but she feared Niall might be right about how many soldiers Ailron would spare her. Niall's demands would be easier to grant, in a way. Probably free access to Andor for as many Whitecloaks as he chose. And freedom for them to root out the Darkfriends they found in every attic, to rouse mobs against friendless women they accused of being Aes Sedai, to kill real Aes Sedai. Niall might even demand a law against channeling, against women going to the White Tower.

It would be possible—but difficult, and bloody—to oust the Whitecloaks once they entrenched themselves, but was it necessary to let them in at all? Rand al'Thor was the Dragon Reborn—she was certain of that no matter what Niall said; she was almost certain—yet ruling nations was no part of the Prophecies of the Dragon that she knew. Dragon Reborn or false Dragon, he could not have Andor. Yet how was she to know?

A timid scratch at the door brought her around. "Come," she said sharply.

The door opened slowly to admit a grinning young man in gold-and-red livery, a tray in his hands bearing a fresh pitcher of iced punch, the silver already beading with cold. She had half-expected Tallanvor. Lamgwin stood guard alone in the corridor, as far as she could see. Or rather lounged against a wall like a tavern bouncer. She waved the young man to put his tray down.

Angrily—Tallanvor should have come; he should have come!—she resumed her pacing. Basel and Lamgwin might hear rumors in the nearest village, but they would be rumors, and maybe planted by Niall. The same held true for the palace servants.

"My Queen. May I speak, my Queen?"

Morgase turned in amazement. Those were the accents of Andor. The young man was on his knees, grin flashing from uncertain to cocky and back. He might have been good-looking except that his nose had been broken and not properly tended. On Lamgwin it looked rugged, if low; this lad looked as if he had tripped and fallen on his face.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "How did you come here?"

"I'm Paitr Conel, my Queen. From Market Sheran. In Andor?" he added, as if she might not realize that. Impatiently she motioned him to go on. "I came to Amador with my uncle Jen. He's a merchant from Four Kings, and he thought he might find some Taraboner dyes. They're dear, with all the troubles in Tarabon, but he thought they might be cheaper—" Her mouth tightened, and he went on in a rush. "We heard about you, my Queen, that you were here in the palace, and given the law in Amadicia, and you being trained in the White Tower and all, we thought we could help you. . . ." He swallowed hard, and finished in a small voice. "Help you escape."

"And are you prepared to help me . . . escape?" Not the best plan, but she could always ride north to Ghealdan. How Tallanvor would gloat. No, he would not, and that would be worse.

But Paitr shook his head wretchedly. “Uncle Jen had a plan, but now there’s Whitecloaks all over the palace. I didn’t know what else to do but come on to you, the way he told me. He’ll think of something, my Queen. He’s smart.”

“I’m sure he is,” she murmured. So Ghealdan went glimmering again. “How long are you gone from Andor? A month? Two?” He nodded. “Then you don’t know what is happening in Caemlyn,” she sighed.

The young man licked his lips. “I. . . . We’re staying with a man in Amador who has pigeons. A merchant. He gets messages from everywhere. Caemlyn, too. But it’s all bad news that I hear, my Queen. It may take a day or two, but my uncle will figure out another way. I just wanted to let you know help was nearby.”

Well, that was as might be. A race between Pedron Niall and this Paitr’s uncle Jen. She wished she were not so sure how to bet. “In the meantime, you can tell me just how bad matters are in Caemlyn.”

“My Queen, I was just supposed to let you know about the help. My uncle will be angry if I stay—”

“I *am* your Queen, Paitr,” Morgase said firmly, “and your uncle Jen’s, too. He will not mind if you answer my questions.” Paitr looked as though he might bolt, but she settled herself in a chair and began digging for the truth.

Pedron Niall was feeling quite good as he dismounted in the main courtyard of the Fortress of the Light and tossed his reins to a stableman. Morgase was well in hand, and he had not had to lie once. He did not like lying. It had all been his own interpretation of events, but he was sure of it. Rand al’Thor was a false Dragon and a tool of the Tower. The world was full of fools who could not think. The Last Battle would not be some titanic struggle between the Dark One and a Dragon Reborn, a mere man. The Creator had abandoned mankind to its own devices long ago. No, when Tarmon Gai’don came, it would be as in the Trolloc Wars two thousand years ago and more, when hordes of Trollocs and other Shadowspawn poured out of the Great Blight, tore through the Borderlands and nearly drowned humanity in a sea of blood. He did not mean to let mankind face that divided and unprepared.

A ripple of bows from white-cloaked Children followed him through the stone-walled corridors of the Fortress, all the way to his private audience chamber. In the anteroom, his pinch-faced secretary, Balwer, leaped to his feet with a fussy recitation of papers awaiting the Lord Captain's signature, but Niall's attention was on the tall man who rose easily from one of the chairs against the wall, a crimson shepherd's crook behind the golden sun on his cloak and three golden knots of rank below.

Jaichim Carridin, Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light, looked as hard as he was, but with more gray at his temples than the last time Niall had seen him. His dark, deep-set eyes held a tinge of worry, and it was no wonder. The last two missions he had been given ended in disaster; not auspicious for a man who aspired to be High Inquisitor one day, and perhaps even Lord Captain Commander.

Tossing his cloak to Balwer, Niall motioned Carridin to follow into the audience chamber proper, where captured battle flags and the banners of old enemies made trophies on the dark paneled walls and a huge sunburst set into the floor held enough gold to make most men stare. Aside from that, it was a plain, soldier's room, a reflection of Niall himself. Niall seated himself in a high-backed chair, well made but undecorated. The long twin hearths at either end of the room stood cold and swept at a time of year when they should have held roaring fires. Proof enough that the Last Battle was near. Carridin bowed deeply and knelt on the sunburst, worn smooth by centuries of feet and knees.

"Have you speculated on why I sent for you, Carridin?" After Almoth Plain and Falme, after Tanchico, the man could not be blamed if he believed he was to be arrested. But if he suspected such a possibility, nothing showed in his voice. As usual, he could not help showing that he knew more than anyone else. Definitely more than he was supposed to.

"The Aes Sedai in Altara, my Lord Captain Commander. A chance to wipe out half the Tar Valon witches, right on our doorstep." An exaggeration; a third were in Salidar, perhaps, but no more.

"And have you speculated aloud, among your friends?" Niall doubted that Carridin had any, but there were those he drank with. Of late, got drunk with. The man had certain skills, though; useful skills.

"No, my Lord Captain Commander. I know better than that."

"Good," Niall said. "Because you are not going anywhere near this Salidar, and neither is any other of the Children." He could not be sure whether it was relief that flashed across Carridin's face. If so, it was out of character; the man had never shown any lack of courage. And relief certainly did not suit his reply.

"But they are waiting to be snapped up. This is proof the rumors are true, the Tower is divided. We can destroy this lot without the others raising a hand. The Tower could be weakened enough to fall."

"Think you so?" Niall said dryly. He laced his fingers across his middle and kept his voice mild. Questioners—the Hand despised that name, but even he used it—Questioners never saw anything not shoved under their noses. "Even the Tower can hardly come out openly for this false Dragon al'Thor. What if he turns, as Logain did? But a rebel group? They could support him, and the White Tower's skirts are clean whatever happens." He was sure that was the way of it. If not, there would be ways to use any real split to further weaken the Tower, but he believed he was right. "In any case, what the world sees, matters. I will not let them see merely a struggle between the Children and the Tower." Not until the world saw the Tower for what it was, a sink of Darkfriends meddling with forces mankind was not meant to touch, the force that had caused the Breaking of the World. "This struggle is the world against the false Dragon al'Thor."

"Then if I am not going to Altara, my Lord Captain Commander, what are my orders?"

Niall let his head fall back with a sigh. He felt tired suddenly. He felt all of his years and more. "Oh, you will be going to Altara, Carridin."

Rand al'Thor's name and face had been known to him since shortly after the supposed invasion from across the sea at Falme, an Aes Sedai plot that had cost the Children a thousand men and begun the spread of the Dragonsworn and chaos across Tarabon and Arad Doman. He had known what al'Thor was and believed he could use him as a goad to force the nations to unite. Once bound together, behind his leadership, they could have disposed of al'Thor and been ready for the Trolloc hordes. He had sent emissaries to every ruler of every land to point out the danger. But al'Thor moved faster than he could believe even now. He had meant to let a rabid lion roam the streets long enough to frighten everyone, but the lion had become a giant that moved like lightning.

Yet all was not lost; he had to keep reminding himself. More than a thousand years ago, Guaire Amalasan had named himself the Dragon Reborn, a false Dragon who could channel. Amalasan had conquered more land than al’Thor now held, before a young king named Artur Paendrag Tanreall took the field against him and began his own climb to empire. Niall did not consider himself another Artur Hawkwing, but he was what the world had. He would not give up while he lived.

Already he had begun to counter al’Thor’s growing strength. Besides emissaries to rulers, he had sent men to Tarabon and Arad Doman. A few men to find the right ears, to whisper that all their troubles could be laid at the feet of the Dragonsworn, those fools and Darkfriends who had declared for al’Thor. And at the feet of the White Tower. Plenty of rumors already came out of Tarabon of Aes Sedai involved in the fighting, rumors to ready men’s ears to hear the truth. Now was time to launch the next part of his new plan, to show the fence-sitters which side to choose. Time. He had so little time. Yet he could not help smiling. There were those, now dead, who had once said, “When Niall smiles, he is going for the throat.”

“Altara and Murandy,” he told Carridin, “are about to be tormented by a plague of Dragonsworn.”

The chamber had the appearance of a palace sitting room—vaulted ceiling of worked plaster, finely woven carpets on the white-tiled floor, elaborately carved paneling for the walls—though it was far from any palace. Indeed, it was far from anywhere, in any way that most humans would understand. Mesaana’s russet silk dress rustled as she moved around a lapis-inlaid table, amusing herself with the placement of ivory dominoes in a complex tower, each level larger than the one below. She prided herself on doing this purely with a knowledge of stresses and leverage, not a thread of the Power. She had the tower to nine levels.

In truth, more than amusing herself, she was avoiding conversation with her companion. Semirhage sat doing needlework in a high-backed chair covered in red tapestry, long slender fingers deftly making minuscule stitches to form a labyrinthine pattern of tiny flowers. It was always a surprise that the woman liked an activity so . . . ordinary. Her black dress was a sharp contrast against the chair. Not even Demandred dared suggest to Semirhage’s face that she wore black so often because Lanfear wore white.

For the thousandth time Mesaana tried to analyze why she felt uncomfortable around the other woman. Mesaana knew her own strengths and weaknesses, with the One Power and elsewhere. She matched well with

Semirhage on most points, and where she did not, she had other strengths to lay against weaknesses in Semirhage. It was not that. Semirhage took delight in cruelty, a pure pleasure in giving anguish, but that surely was not the problem. Mesaana could be cruel where necessary, and she did not care what Semirhage did to others. There had to be a reason, but she could not find it.

Irritably she placed another domino, and the tower collapsed with a clatter, spilling ivory tiles onto the floor. With a click of her tongue, she turned from the table, folding her arms beneath her breasts. “Where is Demandred? Seventeen days since he went to Shayol Ghul, but he waits until now to inform us of a message, then does not appear.” She had been to the Pit of Doom twice in that time herself, made that nerve-racking walk with the stone fangs brushing her hair. To find nothing except a strange too-tall Myrddraal that would not speak. The Bore had been there, certainly, but the Great Lord had not answered. She did not remain long either time. She had thought herself beyond fear, at least the sort a Halfman’s gaze brought, but twice the Myrddraal’s silent eyeless stare had sent her away with quickening steps that only tight self-control kept from becoming a run. Had channeling there not been a sure way to die, she would have destroyed the Halfman, or Traveled from the Pit itself. “Where is he?”

Semirhage raised her eyes from her stitchery, unblinking dark eyes in a smooth dark face, then put aside the needlework and stood gracefully. “He will come when he comes,” she said calmly. She was always calm, just as she was always graceful. “If you do not want to wait, then go.”

Unconsciously Mesaana raised herself a little on her toes, but she still had to look up. Semirhage stood taller than most men, though so perfectly proportioned that you did not realize it until she stood over you, looking down. “Go? I *will* go. And he can—”

There was no warning, of course. There never was, when a man channeled. A bright vertical line appeared in the air, then widened as the gateway turned sideways to open long enough for Demandred to step through, giving them each a small bow. He was all in dark gray today, with a little pale lace at his neck. He adapted easily to the fashions and fabrics of this Age.

His hawk-nosed profile was handsome enough, though not quite the sort to make every woman’s heart beat faster. In a way, “almost” and “not quite” had been the story of Demandred’s life. He had had the misfortune to be born one day after Lews Therin Telamon, who would become the Dragon, while Barid Bel Medar, as he was then, spent years almost matching Lews Therin's accomplishments, not quite matching Lews Therin's fame. Without Lews Therin, he would have been the most acclaimed man of the Age. Had he been appointed to lead instead of the man he considered his intellectual inferior, an overcautious fool who too often managed to scrape up luck, would he stand here today? Now, that *was* idle speculation, though she had made it before. No, the important point was that Demandred despised the Dragon, and now that the Dragon had been Reborn, he had transferred that contempt whole.

"Why—?"

Demandred raised a hand. "Let us wait until we are all here, Mesaana, and I will not have to repeat myself."

She felt the first spinning of *saidar* a moment before the glowing line appeared and became a gateway. Graendal stepped out, for once unaccompanied by half-clad servants, and let the opening vanish as quickly as Demandred had. She was a fleshy woman with elaborately curled red-gold hair. Somewhere she had actually managed to find streith for her high-necked gown. High-necked, but mirroring her mood—the fabric was transparent mist. At times Mesaana wondered whether Graendal really took note of anything beyond her sensual pleasures.

"I wondered whether you would be here," the new arrival said lightly. "You three have been so secretive." She gave a gay, slightly foolish laugh. No, it would be a dire mistake to take Graendal at surface value. Most who had taken her for a fool were long since dead, victims of the woman they disregarded.

"Is Sammael coming?" he asked.

Graendal waved a beringed hand dismissively. "Oh, he doesn't trust you. I don't think the man trusts himself anymore." The streith darkened; a concealing fog. "He's marshaling his armies in Illian, moaning over not having shocklances to arm them. When he isn't doing that, he's searching for a usable *angreal* or *sa'angreal*. Something of decent strength, of course."

Their eyes all went to Mesaana, and she drew a deep breath. Any of them would have given—well, almost anything, for a suitable *angreal* or *sa'angreal*. Each was stronger than any of these half-trained children who called themselves Aes Sedai today, but enough half-trained children linked together could crush them all. Except, of course, that they no longer knew how, and no longer had the means in any case. Men were needed to take a link beyond thirteen, more than one to go beyond twenty-seven. In truth, those girls—the oldest seemed girls to her; she had lived over three hundred years, quite aside from her time sealed in the Bore, and had only been considered just into her middle years—those girls were no real danger, but that did not lessen the desire of anyone here for *angreal*, or better yet the more powerful *sa'angreal*. With those remnants from their own time, they could channel amounts of the Power that would have burned them to ash without. Any of them would risk much for one of those prizes. But not everything. Not with no real need. That lack did not still the desire, though.

Automatically Mesaana dropped into a lecturing tone. "The White Tower now has guards *and* wards on their strongrooms, inside and out, plus they count *everything* four times each day. The Great Hold in the Stone of Tear is also warded, with a nasty thing that would have held me fast had I tried to pass through or untie it. I don't think it can be untied except by whoever wove it, and until then it is a trap for any other woman who can channel."

"A dusty jumble of useless rubbish, so I've heard," Demandred said in dismissal. "The Tairens gathered anything with even a rumored connection to the Power."

Mesaana suspected he had more than hearsay to go on. She also suspected there was a trap for men woven around the Great Hold, too, or Demandred would have had his *sa'angreal* and launched himself at Rand al'Thor long since. "No doubt there are some in Cairhien and Rhuidean, but even if you do not walk right into al'Thor, both are full of women who can channel."

"Ignorant girls." Graendal sniffed.

"If a kitchen girl puts a knife in your back," Semirhage said coolly, "are you less dead than if you fall in a sha'je duel at Qal?"

Mesaana nodded. "That leaves whatever might he buried in ancient ruins or forgotten in an attic. If you want to count on finding something by chance, do so. I will not. Unless someone knows the location of a stasis box?" There was a certain dryness to that last. The stasis boxes should have survived the Breaking of the World, but that upheaval had likely as not left them on the bottom of an ocean or buried beneath mountains. Little remained of the world they had known beyond a few names and legends.

Graendal’s smile was all sweetness. “I always thought you should be a teacher. Oh. I am sorry. I forgot.”

Mesaana’s face darkened. Her road to the Great Lord began when she was denied a place in the Collam Daan all those years ago. Unsuited for research, they had told her, but she could still teach. Well, she had taught, until she found how to teach them all!

“I am still waiting to hear what the Great Lord said,” Semirhage murmured.

“Yes. Are we to kill al’Thor?” Mesaana realized she was gripping her skirt with both hands and let go. Strange. She never let anyone get under her skin. “If all goes well, in two months, three at most, he will be where I can safely reach him, and helpless.”

“Where you can safely reach him?” Graendal arched an eyebrow quizzically. “Where *have* you made your lair? No matter. Bare as it is, it’s as good a plan as I’ve heard lately.”

Still Demandred kept silent, stood there studying them. No, not Graendal. Semirhage and her. And when he did speak, half to himself, it was to they two. “When I think where you two have placed yourselves, I wonder. How much has the Great Lord known, for how long? How much of what has happened has been at his design all along?” There was no answer to that. Finally, he said, “You want to know what the Great Lord told me? Very well. But it stays here, held close. Since Sammael chose to stay away, he learns nothing. Nor do the others, whether alive or dead. The first part of the Great Lord’s message was simple. ‘Let the Lord of Chaos rule.’ His words, exact.” The corners of his mouth twitched, as close to a smile as Mesaana had ever seen from him. Then he told them the rest.

Mesaana found herself shivering and did not know whether she did so from excitement or fear. It could work; it could hand them everything. But it required luck, and gambling made her uncomfortable. Demandred was the gambler. He was right about one thing; Lews Therin had made his own luck as a mint made coin. In her opinion it seemed that so far Rand al’Thor did the same.

Unless. . . . Unless the Great Lord had a plan beyond the one he had revealed. And that frightened her more than any other possibility.

The gilt-framed mirror reflected the room, the disturbingly patterned mosaics on the walls, the gilded furnishings and fine carpets, the other mirrors and the tapestries. A palace room without a window—or a door. The mirror reflected a woman striding up and down in a dark blood-red gown, her beautiful face a combination of rage and disbelief. Still, disbelief. It reflected his own face, too, and that interested him far more than the woman. He could not resist touching his nose and mouth and cheeks for the hundredth time to make sure they were real. Not young, but younger than the face he had worn on first waking from the long sleep, with all its endless nightmares. An ordinary face, and he had always hated being ordinary. He recognized the sound in his throat as a budding laugh, a giggle, and stifled it. He was not mad. Despite everything, he was not that.

A name had been given to him during this second, far more horrific sleep, before he woke to this face and body. Osan'gar. A name given by a voice he knew and dared not disobey. His old name, given in scorn and adopted in pride, was gone forever. The voice of his master had spoken and made it so. The woman was Aran'gar; who she had been, was no more.

Interesting choices, those names. *Osan'gar* and *aran'gar* were the left- and right-hand daggers in a form of dueling briefly popular early in that long building from the day the Bore had been made to the actual beginning of the War of Power. His memories were spotty—too much had been lost in the long sleep, and the short—but he remembered that. The popularity had been brief because almost inevitably both duelists died. The daggers' blades were coated with slow poison.

Something blurred in the mirror, and he turned, not too quickly. He had to remember who he was, and make sure others remembered. There still was no door, but a Myrddraal shared the room with them. Neither thing was strange in this place, but the Myrddraal stood taller than any Osan'gar had seen before.

He took his time, letting the Halfman wait to be acknowledged, and before he could open his mouth, Aran'gar spat, "Why has this been done to me? Why have I been put into this body? Why?" The last was almost a shriek.

Osan'gar would have thought the Myrddraal's bloodless lips twitched in a smile, except that was impossible, here or anywhere. Even Trollocs had a sense of humor, if a vile and violent one, but not Myrddraal. "You were both given the best that could be taken in the Borderlands." Its voice was a viper rustling in dry grass. "It is a fine body, strong and healthy. And better than the alternative."

Both things were true. It was a fine body, suitable for a *daien* dancer in the old days, sleekly lush, with a green-eyed ivory oval of a face to match, framed by glossy black hair. And anything bettered the alternative.

Perhaps Aran’gar did not see it that way. Rage mottled that beautiful face. She was going to do something reckless. Osan’gar knew it; there had always been a problem in that regard. Lanfear seemed cautious by contrast. He reached for *saidin*. Channeling here could be dangerous, but less than allowing her to do something truly stupid. He reached for *saidin*—and found nothing. He had not been shielded; he would have felt it, and known how to work around or break it, given time, if it was not too strong. This was as if he had been severed. Shock petrified him where he stood.

Not so for Aran’gar. Perhaps she had made the same discovery, but it affected her differently. With a screech like a cat she launched herself at the Myrddraal, fingernails clawed.

A futile attack, of course. The Myrddraal did not even shift its stance. Casually it caught her by the throat, raised her straight-armed till her feet left the floor. The screech became a gurgle, and she grabbed the Halfman’s wrist with both hands. With her dangling in its grasp, it turned that eyeless stare to Osan’gar. “You have not been severed, but you will not channel until you are told you may. And you will never strike at me. I am Shaidar Haran.”

Osan’gar tried to swallow, but his mouth was dust. Surely the creature had nothing to do with whatever had been done to him. Myrddraal had powers of a sort, but not that. Yet it knew. He had never liked Halfmen. He had helped make the Trollocs, blending human and animal stock—he was proud of that, of the skill involved, the difficulty—but these occasional throwback offspring made him uneasy at the best of times.

Shaidar Haran turned its attention back to the woman twitching in its fist. Her face was beginning to go purple, and her feet kicked feebly. “You will adapt. The body bends to the soul, but the mind bends to the body. You are adapting already. Soon it will be as if you had never had any other. Or you may refuse. Then another will take your place, and you will be given to . . . my brothers, blocked as you are.” Those thin lips twitched again. “They miss their sport in the Borderlands.”

“She cannot speak,” Osan’gar said. “You’re killing her! Don’t you know who we are? Put her down, Halfman! Obey me!” The thing had to obey one of the Chosen.

But the Myrddraal impassively studied Aran’gar’s darkening face for a long moment more before letting her feet touch the carpet and loosening its grip. “I obey the Great Lord. No other.” She hung on, wavering, coughing and gulping air. Had it taken its hand away, she would have fallen. “Will you submit to the will of the Great Lord?” Not a demand, just a perfunctory question in that rasping voice.

“I—I will,” she managed hoarsely, and Shaidar Haran let her go.

She swayed, massaging her throat, and Osan’gar moved to help her, but she threatened him with a glare and a fist before he touched her. He backed away with raised hands. That was one enmity he did not need. But it was a fine body, and a fine joke. He had always prided himself on his sense of humor, but this was rich.

“Do you not feel gratitude?” the Myrddraal said. “You were dead, and are alive. Think of Rahvin, whose soul is beyond saving, beyond time. You have a chance to serve the Great Lord again, and absolve yourselves of your errors.”

Osan’gar hastened to assure it that he was grateful, that he wanted nothing more than to serve and gain absolution. Rahvin dead? What had happened? No matter; one fewer of the Chosen meant one more chance for true power when the Great Lord was free. It abraded, humbling himself before something that could be said to be as much his creation as the Trollocs, but he remembered death too clearly. He would grovel before a worm to avoid that again. Aran’gar was no less quick, he noted, for all the anger in her eyes. Clearly, she remembered too.

“Then it is time for you to go into the world once more in the service of the Great Lord,” Shaidar Haran said. “None but I and the Great Lord know you live. If you succeed, you will live forever and be raised above all others. If you fail. . . . But you will not fail, will you?” The Halfman did smile then. It was like seeing death smile.

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CHAPTER 1

Lion on the Hill

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose among brown-thicketed hills in Cairhien. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

Westward the wind blew over abandoned villages and farms, many only jumbles of charred timber. War had racked Cairhien, war and civil war, invasion and chaos, and even now that it was done, insofar as it *was* done, only a handful began to trickle back to their homes. The wind held no moisture, and the sun tried to sear away what little remained in the land. Where the small town of Maerone faced larger Aringill across the River Erinin, the wind crossed into Andor. Both towns baked, and if more prayers for rain rose in Aringill, where refugees from Cairhien jammed inside the walls like fish in a cask, even the soldiers packed around Maerone offered up words to the Creator, sometimes drunkenly, sometimes fervently. Winter should have been beginning to send out tendrils, the first snows long past, and those who sweated feared the reason it was not so, though few dared voice those fears.

Westward the wind blew, stirring drought-shriveled leaves on the trees, riffling the surface of shrinking streams bordered in hard-baked mud. There were no burned-out ruins in Andor, but villagers eyed the swollen sun nervously and farmers tried not to look at fields that had produced no fall crops. Westward, until the wind passed across Caemlyn, lifting two banners above the Royal Palace, in the heart of the Ogier-built Inner City. One banner floated red as blood, upon it a disc divided by a sinuous line, half white, half black as deep as the white was brilliant. The other banner slashed snow white across the sky. The figure on it, like some strange golden-maned, four-legged serpent, sun-eyed and scaled scarlet and gold, seemed to ride on the wind. It was a close question which of the two caused more fear. Sometimes, the same breast that held fear, held hope. Hope of salvation and fear of destruction, from the same source.

Many said Caemlyn was the second most beautiful city in the world, and not only Andorans, who often named it first, over ranking Tar Valon itself. Tall round towers marched along the great outer wall of gray stone streaked silver and white, and within rose even taller towers, and domes of white and gold gleaming in the pitiless sun. The city climbed over hills to its center, the ancient Inner City, encircled by its own shining white wall, containing its own towers and domes, purple and white and gold and glittering tile mosaics, that looked down on the New City, well under two thousand years old.

As the Inner City was the heart of Caemlyn, and more than merely by being its center, the Royal Palace was the heart of the Inner City, a gleeman’s tale of snowy spires and golden domes and stonework like lace. A heart that beat in the shadow of those two banners.

Stripped to the waist and balanced easily on the balls of his feet, at the moment Rand was no more aware that he was in a white-tiled courtyard of the Palace than he was of the onlookers among the surrounding colonnades. Sweat slicked his hair to his skull, rolled down his chest. The half-healed round scar on his side ached fiercely, but he refused to acknowledge it. Figures like that on the white banner overhead twined around his forearms, glittering metallically red-and-gold. Dragons, the Aiel called them, and others were taking up the name. He was dimly aware of the heron branded neatly into each of his palms, but only because he could feel them against the long hilt of his wooden practice sword.

He was one with the sword, flowing from stance to stance without thought, boots scraping softly on the pale tiles. Lion on the Hill became Arc of the Moon became Tower of Morning. Without thought. Five sweating, bare-chested men circled him, sidestepping warily from stance to stance, practice swords shifting. They were all he was really aware of. Hard-faced and confident, they were the best he had found so far. The best since Lan went. Without thought, as Lan had taught him. He was one with the sword, one with the five men.

Abruptly he ran forward, the encircling men moving rapidly to keep him centered. Just at the moment when that balance teetered on breaking, when at least two of the five had begun to shift toward breaking it, he suddenly turned in midstep and was running the other way. They tried to react, but it was too late. With a loud clack he caught the downstroke of a practice sword on his own blade of bundled lathes; simultaneously his right foot took the grizzled-haired man next over in the belly. Grunting, the man bent double. Locked blade to blade, Rand forced his broken-nosed opponent to turn, kicking the doubled-over man again as they went around. Grizzle-hair went down gasping for air. Rand's opponent tried to back away to use his blade, but that freed Rand's blade to spiral around his—The Grapevine Twines—and thrust hard against his chest, hard enough to knock him off his feet.

Only heartbeats had passed, few enough that just now were the other three closing in. The first, a quick squat little man, belied his stature by leaping over broken-nose with a yell as broken-nose toppled. Rand's practice blade took him across the shins, half upending him, then again across the back, driving him down to the paving stones.

That left only two, but they were the two best, a limber pole of a man whose sword moved like a serpent's tongue, and a heavy shaven-headed fellow who never made a mistake. They separated immediately, to come at Rand from two sides, but he did not wait. Quickly he closed with the skinny man; he had only moments before the other rounded the fallen.

The skinny man was good as well as fast; Rand offered gold for the best, and they came. He was tall for an Andoran, though Rand overtopped him by a hand, yet height had little bearing with the sword. Sometimes strength did. Rand went at him in all-out attack; the man's long face tightened as he gave ground. The Boar Rushes Down the Mountain crashed through Parting the Silk, broke Lightning of Three Prongs, and the bundled lathes slashed hard against the side of the man's neck. He fell with a strangled grunt.

Immediately Rand threw himself down and to the right, rolling up to his knees on the paving stones, blade streaking into The River Undercuts the Bank. The shaven-headed man was not fast, but somehow he had anticipated. Even as Rand's lathe blade swept across the fellow's wide middle, the man's own blade cracked down on Rand's head.

For a moment Rand wavered, his vision a blur of black flecks. Shaking his head in an effort to clear his eyes, he used the practice sword to push himself to his feet. Panting hard, the shaven-headed man watched him cautiously.

“Pay him,” Rand said, and wariness left the shaven-headed man’s face. Needless wariness. As if Rand had not promised an extra day’s coin to any man who managed to strike him. Triple to any who defeated him one-to-one. It was a way to make sure nobody held back to flatter the Dragon Reborn. He never asked their names, and if they took the omission amiss, so much the better if it made them try harder. He wanted opponents to test him, not become friends. The friends he did have would curse the hour they met him one day, if they did not already. The others were stirring, too; a man “killed” was to stay where he lay until it was all done, an obstruction as a real corpse would be, but the squat man was having to help grizzle-hair up, and having trouble standing unaided himself. The limber fellow worked his head around, wincing. There would be no more practice today. “Pay them all.”

A ripple of clapping and praise ran through the watchers among the narrow fluted columns, lords and ladies in colorful silks heavy with elaborate embroidery and braid. Rand grimaced and tossed his sword aside. That lot had all been toadeaters to Lord Gaebril when Queen Morgase—*their* queen—was little more than a prisoner in this palace. Her palace. But Rand needed them. For the moment. *Clutch the bramble, and you will be pricked,* he thought. At least, he hoped it was his thought.

Sulin, the wiry white-haired leader of Rand’s escort of Aiel Maidens of the Spear, leader of the Maidens this side of the Spine of the World, pulled a gold Tar Valon mark from her belt pouch, tossed it with a grimace that drew at the nasty scar on the side of her face. The Maidens did not like Rand handling a sword, even a practice blade. They did not approve of any sword. No Aiel did.

The shaven-headed man caught the coin, and answered Sulin’s blue-eyed stare with a careful bow. Everyone was careful around the Maidens, in their coats and breeches and soft, laced boots of browns and grays made to fade into the bleak landscape of the Waste. Some had begun adding shades of green, to suit what they called the wetlands despite the drought. Compared to the Aiel Waste, it was still wet; few Aiel had seen water they could not step across before leaving the Waste, and bitter feuds had been fought over pools two or three paces wide.

Like any Aiel warrior, like the twenty other light-eyed Maidens around the courtyard, Sulin kept her hair cut short except for a tail on the nape of her neck. She carried three short spears and a round bull-hide buckler in her left hand, and a pointed heavy-bladed knife at her belt. Like any Aiel warrior, down to those the age of Jalani, all of sixteen and with traces of baby fat still on her cheeks, Sulin knew how to use those weapons well, and would on slight provocation, at least as folk this side of the Dragonwall saw it. Except for her, the Maidens watched everyone, every piercework screened window and pale stone balcony, every shadow. Some had short curved bows of horn with arrows nocked, and more shafts ready in bristling quivers worn at the waist. *Far Dareis Mai*, the Maidens of the Spear, carried the honor of their prophesied *Car'a'carn*, if sometimes in their own peculiar way, and not a one of them but would die to keep Rand alive. The thought made his stomach boil in its own acid.

Sulin continued tossing the gold with a sneer—it pleased Rand to use Tar Valon coins for this debt—another for shaven-head, one for each of the others. Aiel approved of most wetlanders little more than of swords, and that took in anyone not born and bred Aiel. For most Aiel, that would have included Rand despite his Aiel blood, but there were the Dragons on his arms. One marked a clan chief, earned by risking life on strength of will; two marked the *Car'a'carn*, the chief of chiefs, He Who Comes With the Dawn. And the Maidens had other reasons for approval.

Gathering up practice swords, shirts and coats, the men bowed their way from his presence. “Tomorrow,” Rand called after them. “Early.” Deeper bows acknowledged the order.

Before the bare-chested men were gone from the courtyard, the Andoran nobles swept out of the colonnades, a rainbow of silks crowding around Rand, dabbing at sweaty faces with lace-trimmed handkerchiefs. They made Rand's bile rise. *Use what you must use, or let the Shadow cover the land*. Moiraine had told him that. He almost preferred the honest opposition of the Cairhienin and Tairens to this lot. That nearly made him laugh, calling what those did honest.

“You were wonderful,” Arymilla breathed, lightly laying a hand on his arm. “So quick, so strong.” Her big brown eyes seemed even more melting than usual. She was apparently fool enough to think him susceptible: her green gown, covered with vines in silver, was cut low by Andoran standards, which meant it showed a hint of cleavage. She was pretty, but easily old enough to be his mother. None of them was any younger, and some older, but all competed at licking Rand's boots.

"That was magnificent, my Lord Dragon." Elenia nearly elbowed Arymilla aside. That smile looked odd on the honey-haired woman's vulpine face; she had the reputation of a termagant. Not around Rand, of course. "There has never been a swordsman like you in the history of Andor. Even Souran Maravaile, who was Artur Hawkwing's greatest general and husband to Ishara, first to sit on the Lion Throne—even he died when confronted by only four swordsmen. Assassins, in the twenty-third year of the War of the Hundred Years. Though he did kill all four." Elenia seldom missed a chance to point out her knowledge of Andor's history, especially in areas where not much was known, like the war that had broken Hawkwing's empire apart after his death. At least today she did not add justifications of her claims to the Lion Throne.

"Just a bit of bad luck at the end," Elenia's husband, Jarid, put in jovially. He was a square man, dark for an Andoran. Embroidered scrollwork and golden boars, the sign of House Sarand, covered the cuffs and long collars of his red coat, and the White Lions of Andor the long sleeves and high neck of Elenia's matching red gown. Rand wondered whether she thought he would not recognize the lions for what they were. Jarid was High Seat of his House, but all the drive and ambition came from her.

"Marvelously well done, my Lord Dragon," Karind said bluntly. Her shimmery gray dress, cut as severely as her face but heavy with silver braid on sleeves and hem, almost matched the streaks through her dark hair. "You surely must be the finest swordsman in the world." Despite her words, the blocky woman's flat-eyed look was like a hammer. Had she had brains to match her toughness, she would have been dangerous.

Naean was a slim, palely beautiful woman, with big blue eyes and waves of gleaming black hair, but the sneer she directed at the five departing men was a fixture. "I suspect they planned it out beforehand so one would manage to strike you. They will divide the extra coin among them." Unlike Elenia, the blue-clad woman with the silver Triple Keys of House Arawn climbing her long sleeves never mentioned her own claims to the throne, not where Rand could hear. She pretended to be content as High Seat of an ancient House, a lioness pretending to be content as a housecat.

“Can I always count on my enemies not to work together?” he asked quietly. Naean’s mouth worked in surprise; she was hardly stupid, yet seemed to think those who opposed her should roll onto their backs as soon as she confronted them, and seemed to take it as a personal affront when they did not.

One of the Maidens, Enaila, ignored the nobles to hand Rand a thick length of white toweling to wipe his sweat away. A fiery redhead, she was short for an Aiel, and it grated at her that some of these wetlander women were taller than she. The majority of the Maidens could stare most of the men in the room straight in the eyes. The Andorans did their best to ignore her too, but their pointed looks elsewhere made the attempts glaring failures. Enaila walked away as if they were invisible.

The silence lasted just moments. “My Lord Dragon is wise,” Lord Lir said with a small bow and a slight frown. The High Seat of House Baryn was blade-slender and blade-strong in a yellow coat adorned with gold braid, but too smoothly unctuous, too smooth altogether. Nothing but those occasional frowns ever sullied that surface, as if he was unaware of them, yet he was hardly the only one to give Rand strange looks. They all looked at the Dragon Reborn in their midst with wondering disbelief sometimes. “One’s enemies usually do work together sooner or later. One must identify them before they have the chance to.”

More praise for Rand’s wisdom flowed from Lord Henren, blocky, bald and hard-eyed, and from gray-curled Lady Carlys, with her open face and devious mind, from plump giggly Daerilla, and thin-lipped nervous Elegar, and nearly a dozen others who had held their tongues while those more powerful spoke.

The lesser lords and ladies fell silent as soon as Elenia opened her mouth once more. “There is always the difficulty of knowing your enemies before they make themselves known. It is often too late, then.” Her husband nodded sagely.

“I always say,” Naean announced, “that who does not support me, opposes me. I’ve found it a good rule. Those who hang back may be waiting until your back is turned to plant a dagger.”

This was hardly the first time they had tried to secure their own places by casting suspicion on any lord or lady not standing with them, but Rand wished he could stop them short of telling them to stop. Their attempts to play the Game of Houses were feeble compared to the sly maneuverings of Cairhienin, or even Tairens, and they were irritating besides, but there were thoughts he did not want them to have yet. Surprisingly, aid came from white-haired Lord Nasin, the High Seat of House Caeren.

“Another Jearom,” the man said, an obsequious smile awkward on his gaunt, narrow face. He drew exasperated looks, even from some of the minor nobles before they caught themselves. Nasin had been a little addled since the events surrounding Rand’s coming to Caemlyn. Instead of the Star and Sword of his House, Nasin’s pale blue lapels were incongruously worked with flowers, moondrops and loversknots, and he sometimes wore a flower in his thinning hair like a country youth going courting. House Caeren was too powerful for even Jarid or Naean to push him aside, though. Nasin’s head bobbed on a scrawny neck. “Your bladework is spectacular, my Lord Dragon. You are another Jearom.”

“Why?” The word cut across the courtyard, souring the Andorans’ faces.

Davram Bashere was certainly no Andoran, with his tilted, almost black eyes, a hooked beak of a nose, and thick gray-streaked mustaches curving down like horns around his wide mouth. He was slender, little taller than Enaila, in a short gray coat embroidered with silver on cuffs and lapels, and baggy trousers tucked into boots turned down at the knee. Where the Andorans had stood to watch, the Marshal-General of Saldaea had had a gilded chair dragged to the courtyard, and sprawled in it with a leg over one of its arms, ring-quilloned sword twisted so the hilt sat in easy reach. Sweat glistened on his dark face, but he paid it as little mind as he did the Andorans.

“What do you mean?” Rand demanded.

“All this sword practice,” Bashere said easily. “And with five men? No one exercises against five. It’s foolish. Sooner or later your brains will be spilled on the ground in a melee like that, even with practice swords, and to no purpose.”

Rand’s jaw tightened. “Jearom once defeated ten.”

Shifting in his chair, Bashere laughed. “Do you think you’ll live long enough to equal the greatest swordsman in history?” An angry mutter came from the Andorans—feigned anger, Rand was sure—but Bashere ignored it.

"You are who you are, after all." Suddenly he moved like an uncoiling spring; the dagger drawn while shifting flashed toward Rand's heart.

Rand did not move a muscle. Instead he seized *saidin*, the male half of the True Source; it took no more thought than breathing. *Saidin* flooded into him, carrying the Dark One's taint, an avalanche of foul ice, a torrent of reeking molten metal. It tried to crush him, to scour him away, and he rode it like a man balancing atop a collapsing mountain. He channeled, a simple weave of Air that wrapped up the dagger and stopped it an arm's length from his chest. Emptiness surrounded him; he floated in the middle of it, in the Void, thought and emotion distant.

"Die!" Jarid shouted, drawing his sword as he ran toward Bashere. Lir and Henren and Elegar and every Andoran lord had his sword out, even Nasin, though he looked about to drop his. The Maidens had wrapped their *shoufa* around their heads, black veils coming up to cover their faces to blue or green eyes as they raised long-pointed spears; Aiel always veiled before killing.

"Stop!" Rand barked, and everyone froze in their tracks, the Andorans blinking in confusion, the Maidens simply poised on their toes. Bashere had not moved again beyond settling back into the chair, his leg still hooked over the arm.

Plucking the horn-hilted dagger from the air with one hand, Rand let go of the Source. Even with the taint twisting his belly, the taint that eventually destroyed men who channeled, letting go was difficult. With *saidin* in him, he saw more clearly, heard more sharply. It was a paradox he did not understand, but when he was floating in that seemingly endless Void, somehow buffered against bodily feeling and emotions, every sense was magnified; without it he felt only half-alive. And some of the taint seemed to remain behind, but not the mitigating glory of *saidin*. The deadly glory that would kill him if he wavered an inch in the struggle with it.

Turning the dagger in his hands, he walked slowly to Bashere. "Had I been an eyeblink slower," he said softly, "I'd be dead. I could kill you where you sit and no law in Andor or anywhere else would say me wrong." He was ready to do it, he realized. Cold rage had replaced *saidin*. A few weeks' acquaintance did not cover this.

The Saldaean's tilted eyes were as calm as if he lolled in his own home. "My wife would not like that. Nor you, for that matter. Deira would probably take command and set out hunting Taim again. She doesn't approve of my agreement to follow you."

Rand shook his head slightly, the edge of his anger dulled a little by the man's composure. And his words. It had been a surprise to learn that among Bashere's nine thousand Saldaean horse all of the nobles had brought their wives, and most of the other officers as well. Rand did not understand how a man could take his wife into danger, but it was traditional in Saldaea, except when campaigning into the Blight.

He avoided looking at the Maidens. They were warriors to their toenails, but women, too. And he had promised not to keep them from danger, even death. He had made no promise not to flinch at it, though, and it ripped at him inside when he had to, but he kept his promises. He did what he had to do even when he hated himself for it.

With a sigh he tossed the dagger aside. "Your question," he said politely. "Why?"

"Because you are who you are," Bashere said plainly. "Because you—and those men you're gathering, I suppose—are what you are." Rand heard feet shuffling behind him; for all they tried to, the Andorans could never hide their horror at his amnesty. "You can do what you did with the dagger every time," Bashere went on, putting his raised boot down and leaning forward, "but for any assassin to reach you, he has to get past your Aiel. And my horsemen, for that matter. Bah! If anything gets close to you, it won't be human." Throwing his hands wide, he settled back again. "Well, if you want to practice the sword, do it. A man needs exercise, and relaxation. But don't get your skull split open. Too much depends on you, and I don't see any Aes Sedai around to Heal you." His mustache almost hid his sudden grin. "Besides, if you die, I don't think our Andoran friends will maintain their warm welcome for me and my men."

The Andorans had put up their swords, but their eyes remained on Bashere malevolently. Nothing to do with how close he had come to killing Rand. Usually they kept their faces smooth around Bashere, for all he was a foreign general with a foreign army on Andoran soil. The Dragon Reborn wanted Bashere there, and this lot would have smiled at a Myrddraal if the Dragon Reborn wanted it. But if Rand might turn on him. . . . No need to hide anything then. They were vultures who had been ready to feed on Morgase before she died, and they would feed on Bashere given half a chance. And on Rand. He could hardly wait to be rid of them.

The only way to live is to die. The thought came into his head suddenly. He had been told that once, in such a way he had to believe it, but the thought was not his. *I must die. I deserve only death*. He turned away from Bashere clutching at his head.

Bashere was out of his chair in an instant, clutching Rand's shoulder though it was head high to him. "What is the matter? Did that blow really crack your head?"

"I am fine." Rand pulled his hands down; there was never any pain in this, only the shock of having another man's thoughts in his head. Bashere was not the only one watching. Most of the Maidens were eyeing him as closely as they did the courtyard, especially Enaila and yellow-haired Somara, the tallest of them. Those two would probably bring him some sort of herb tea as soon as their duties were done, and stand over him till he drank it. Elenia and Naean and the rest of the Andorans were breathing hard, clutching at coats and skirts, studying Rand with the wide-eyed fear of people afraid they might be seeing the first signs of madness. "I am fine," he told the courtyard. Only the Maidens relaxed, and Enaila and Somara not very far.

Aiel did not care about "the Dragon Reborn"; to them Rand was the *Car'a'carn*, prophesied to unite them, and to break them. They took it in stride, though they worried about it too, and they seemed to take his channeling in stride as well, and everything that might go with it. The others—*The wetlanders*, he thought dryly—called him the Dragon Reborn, and never speculated on what that meant. They believed he was the rebirth of Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, the man who had sealed the hole into the Dark One's prison and ended the War of the Shadow three thousand years ago and more. Ended the Age of Legends as well, when the Dark One's last counterstroke tainted *saidin*, and every man who could channel began to go insane, starting with Lews Therin himself and his Hundred Companions. They called Rand the Dragon Reborn, and never suspected that some part of Lews Therin Telamon might be inside his head, as mad as the day he had begun the Time of Madness and the Breaking of the World, as mad as any of those male Aes Sedai who had changed the face of the world beyond recognition. It had come on him slowly, but the more Rand learned of the One Power, the stronger he became with *saidin*, the stronger Lews Therin's voice became, and the harder Rand had to fight to keep a dead man's thoughts from taking him over. That was one reason why he liked sword practice; the absence of thought was a barrier to keep him himself.

“We need to find an Aes Sedai,” Bashere muttered. “If those rumors are true. . . . The Light burn my eyes, I wish we had never let that one leave.”

A good many people had fled Caemlyn in the days after Rand and the Aiel seized the city; the Palace itself nearly emptied overnight. There were people Rand would liked to have found, people who had helped him, but they had all vanished. Some still slipped away. One fleeing in those first days had been a young Aes Sedai, young enough that her face still lacked the distinctive agelessness. Bashere’s men sent word when they found her at an inn, but when she found out who Rand was, she ran screaming. Literally screaming. He never even learned her name or Ajah. Rumor said another was somewhere in the city, but a hundred rumors were loose in Caemlyn now, a thousand, each less likely than the next. Definitely unlikely any would lead to an Aes Sedai. Aiel patrols had spotted several passing Caemlyn by, each plainly going somewhere in a hurry and none with any intention of entering a city occupied by the Dragon Reborn.

“Could I trust any Aes Sedai?” Rand asked. “It was just a headache. My head isn’t hard enough not to ache a little when it’s hit.”

Bashere snorted hard enough to stir his thick mustaches. “However hard your head is, sooner or later you’ll have to trust Aes Sedai. Without them, you’ll never bring all the nations behind you short of conquest. People look for such things. However many of the Prophecies they hear you’ve fulfilled, many will wait for the Aes Sedai to put their stamp on you.”

“I won’t avoid fighting anyway, and you know it,” Rand said. “The Whitecloaks aren’t likely to welcome me into Amadicia even if Ailron agrees, and Sammael certainly won’t give up Illian without a fight.” *Sammael and Rahvin and Moghedien and*. . . . Harshly he forced the thought from his consciousness. It was not easy. They came without warning, and it was never easy.

A thump made him look over his shoulder. Arymilla lay in a heap on the paving stones. Karind was kneeling to pull her skirts down over her ankles and chafe her wrists. Elegar swayed as though he might join Arymilla in a moment, and neither Nasin nor Elenia appeared in much better state. Most of the rest looked ready to sick up. Mention of the

Forsaken could do that, especially since Rand had told them that Lord Gaebril really had been Rahvin. He was not sure how much they believed, but just considering the possibility was enough to unhinge the knees of most. Their shock was why they were still alive. Had he believed they had served knowingly. . . . *No,* he thought. *If they'd known, if they were all Darkfriends, you'd still use them*. Sometimes he was so sick of himself that he really was ready to die.

At least he was telling the truth. The Aes Sedai were all dying to keep it secret, the Forsaken being free; they feared that knowing would just bring more chaos and panic. Rand was trying to spread the truth. People might panic, but they would have time to recover. The Aes Sedai way, knowledge and panic might come too late for recovery. Besides, people had a right to know what they faced.

"Illian won't hold out long," Bashere said. Rand's head whipped back around, but Bashere was too old a campaigner to speak of what he should not where others could hear. He was just taking the talk away from the Forsaken. Though if the Forsaken, or anything else, made Davram Bashere nervous, Rand had not seen it yet. "Illian will crack like a nut hit by a hammer."

"You and Mat worked out a good plan." The basic idea had been Rand's, but Mat and Bashere had provided the thousand details that would make it work. Mat more than Bashere.

"An interesting young fellow, Mat Cauthon," Bashere mused. "I look forward to speaking with him again. He never would say who he studied under. Agelmar Jagad? I hear you've both been to Shienar." Rand said nothing. Mat's secrets were his own; Rand was not really sure what they were himself. Bashere tilted his head, scratched at a mustache with one finger. "He's young to have studied under anyone. No older than you. Did he find a library somewhere? I would like to see the books he's read."

"You'll have to ask him," Rand said. "I don't know." He supposed Mat had to have read a book sometime, somewhere, but Mat did not have much interest in books.

Bashere only nodded. When Rand did not want to talk about something, Bashere usually let it alone. Usually. "The next time you jaunt off to Cairhien, why don't you bring back the Green sister who's there? Egwene Sedai? I've heard the Aiel speak of her; they say she's from your home village, too. You could trust her, couldn't you?"

“Egwene has other duties,” Rand laughed. A Green sister. If Bashere only knew.

Somara appeared at Rand’s side with his linen shirt and his coat, a fine red wool cut in the Andoran style, with dragons on the long collar and laurel leaves thick on the lapels and climbing the sleeves. She was tall even for an Aiel woman, maybe not quite a hand shorter than he. Like the other Maidens, she had lowered her veil, but the gray-brown *shoufa* still hid all but her face. “The *Car’a’carn* will catch a chill,” she murmured.

He doubted it. The Aiel might find this heat nothing out of the ordinary, but already sweat streamed down him nearly as hard as while working the sword. Still, he pulled the shirt over his head and tucked it in, though leaving the laces undone, then shrugged into the coat. He did not think Somara would actually try to put the clothes on him, not in front of others, but this way he would avoid lectures from her and Enaila, and very likely some of the others, along with the herb tea.

To most Aiel he was the *Car’a’carn*, and so it was with the Maidens. In public. Alone with these women who had chosen to reject marriage and the hearth in favor of the spear, matters became more complicated. He supposed he could stop it—maybe—but he owed it to them not to. Some had already died for him, and more would—he had promised, the Light burn him for it!—and if he could let them do that, he could let them do the rest. Sweat soaked through the shirt immediately and began making dark patches on the coat.

“You need the Aes Sedai, al’Thor.” Rand hoped Bashere was half this dogged when it came to fighting; that was the man’s reputation, but he had only reputation and a few weeks to go by. “You can’t afford to have them against you, and if they don’t at least think they have a few strings tied to you, they might go that way. Aes Sedai are tricksome; no man can know what they’ll do or why.”

“What if I tell you there are hundreds of Aes Sedai ready to support me?” Rand was aware of the Andorans listening; he had to be careful not to say too much. Not that he knew much. What he did know was probably exaggeration and hope. He certainly doubted the “hundreds,” whatever Egwene hinted.

Bashere’s eyes narrowed. “If there’s been an embassy from the Tower, I would know, so. . . .” His voice dropped to a near whisper. “The split? The Tower has really *split*?” He sounded as if he could not believe the words coming out of his own mouth. Everyone knew Siuan Sanche had been deposed from the Amyrlin Seat and stilled—and executed, so rumor ran—yet to most people a division in the Tower was only conjecture, and few truly believed. The White Tower had remained whole, a monolith towering over thrones, for three thousand years. But the Saldaean was a man who considered all possibilities. He went on in a true whisper, stepping close so the Andorans could not overhear. “It must be the rebels ready to support you. You could strike a better deal with them—they’ll need you as much as you need them, maybe more—but rebels, even Aes Sedai rebels, won’t carry nearly the weight of the White Tower, certainly not with any crown. Commoners might not know the difference, but kings and queens will.”

“They’re still Aes Sedai,” Rand said just as quietly, “whoever they are.” *And wherever they are,* he thought dryly. *Aes Sedai . . . Servants of All . . . the Hall of the Servants is broken . . . broken forever . . . broken . . . Ilyena, my love. . . .* Ruthlessly he quashed Lews Therin’s thoughts. Sometimes they had actually been a help, giving him information he needed, but they were growing too strong. If he did have an Aes Sedai there—a Yellow; they knew the most of Healing—perhaps she. . . . There had been one Aes Sedai he trusted, though not until shortly before her death, and Moiraine had left him a piece of advice about Aes Sedai, about every other woman who wore the shawl and the ring. “I’ll never trust any Aes Sedai,” he rasped softly. “I will use them, because I do need them, but Tower or rebel, I know they’ll try to use me, because that is what Aes Sedai do. I’ll never trust them, Bashere.”

The Saldaean nodded slowly. “Then use them, if you can. But remember this. No one resists for long going the way the Aes Sedai want.” Abruptly he barked a short laugh. “Artur Hawkwing was the last, so far as I know. The Light burn my eyes, maybe you’ll be the second.”

The scrape of boots announced an arrival in the courtyard, one of Bashere’s men, a heavy-shouldered, hatchet-nosed young fellow a head taller than his general, with a luxuriant black beard as well as thick mustaches. He walked like a man more used to a saddle under him than his own feet, but he handled the sword at his hip smoothly as he bowed. To Bashere, more than to Rand. Bashere might follow the Dragon Reborn, but Tumad—Rand thought that was his name; Tumad Ahzkan—followed Bashere. Enaila and three other Maidens fastened their eyes on the new Saldaean; they did not really trust any wetlander around the *Car’a’carn*.

“There is a man has presented himself at the gates,” Tumad said uneasily. “He says. . . . It is Mazrim Taim, my Lord Bashere.”

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CHAPTER

2

A New Arrival

Mazrim Taim. Before Rand, other men through the centuries had claimed to be the Dragon Reborn. The last few years before Rand had seen a plague of false Dragons, some of whom could actually channel. Mazrim Taim was one of those, raising an army and ravaging Saldaea before he was taken. Bashere's face did not change, but he gripped his sword hilt white-knuckle hard, and Tumad was looking at him for orders. Taim's escape, on the way to Tar Valon to be gentled, was the reason Bashere had come to Andor in the first place. That was how much Saldaea feared and hated Mazrim Taim; Queen Tenobia had sent Bashere with an army to pursue the man wherever he went, however long it took, to make sure Taim never troubled Saldaea again.

The Maidens merely stood calmly, but that name burst among the Andorans like a torch tossed in dry grass. Arymilla was just being helped to her feet, yet her eyes rolled up in her head again; she would have gone down in a heap once more if Karind had not eased her to the paving stones. Elegar staggered back among the columns and bent over, retching loudly. The rest were all gasps and panic, pressing handkerchiefs to mouths and clutching at sword hilts. Even stolid Karind licked her lips nervously.

Rand took his hand away from his coat pocket. "The amnesty," he said, and both Saldaeans gave him a long flat look.

"What if he has not come for your amnesty?" Bashere said after a moment. "What if he still claims to be the Dragon Reborn?" Feet shuffled among the Andorans; no one wanted to be within miles of where the One Power might be used in a duel.

"If he thinks that," Rand said firmly, "I will disabuse him." He had the rarest sort of *angreal* in his pocket, one made for men, a carving of a fat little man with a sword. However strong Taim might be, he could not stand up to that. “But if he has come for the amnesty, it is his, the same as any other.” Whatever Taim had done in Saldaea, he could not afford to turn away a man who could channel, a man who would not have to be taught from the first steps. He needed such a man. He would turn away no one except one of the Forsaken, not unless he was forced to. *Demandred and Sammael, Semirhage and Mesaana, Asmodean and*. . . . Rand forced Lews Therin down; he could not afford distractions now.

Again Bashere paused before speaking, but finally he nodded and let go of his sword. “Your amnesty holds, of course. But mark me, al’Thor. If Taim ever sets foot in Saldaea again, he will not live to leave. There are too many memories. No command I give—nor Tenobia herself—will stop it.”

“I will keep him out of Saldaea.” Either Taim had come here to submit to him, or else it was going to be necessary to kill him. Unconsciously Rand touched his pocket, pressing the fat little man through the wool. “Let’s have him in here.”

Tumad eyed Bashere, but Bashere’s short nod came so quickly that it seemed Tumad bowed in response to the spoken command. Irritation flashed in Rand, but he said nothing, and Tumad hurried away in that slightly rolling walk. Bashere folded his arms across his chest and stood with one knee bent, a portrait of a man at his ease. Those dark tilted eyes, fixed on the way Tumad had gone, made it a portrait of a man waiting to kill something.

The scuffling of feet started again among the Andorans, hesitant half-steps away then pulling back. Their breathing sounded as though they had run miles.

“You may leave,” Rand told them.

“I for one will stand at your shoulder,” Lir began just as Naean said sharply, “I will not run before—”

Rand cut them both off. “Go!”

They wanted to show him they were unafraid, even if they were ready to soil themselves; they wanted to run, abandoning what dignity they had not already tossed at his feet. It was a simple choice. He was the Dragon Reborn, and currying favor meant obedience, and obedience in this case meant doing what they truly wanted. A flurry of extravagant bows and deep skirt-spreading curtsies, hurried murmurs of “By your leave, my Lord Dragon” and “As you command, my Lord Dragon,” and they were . . . not exactly scurrying out, but walking as quickly as they could manage without appearing to scurry. In the opposite direction from that in which Tumad had gone; no doubt they did not want to risk a chance encounter with Mazrim Taim on his way in.

The waiting stretched out in the heat—it took time to bring a man through the sprawling corridors from the Palace gates—but once the Andorans were gone no one moved. Bashere kept his gaze steady on the place Taim would appear. The Maidens watched everywhere, but they always did, and if they looked ready to veil themselves again in an instant, they always did that too. Except for their eyes, they could have been statues.

Finally the sound of boots echoed into the courtyard. Rand almost reached out for *saidin*, then held back. The man would be able to tell he held the Power as soon as he entered the court; Rand could not afford to appear afraid of him.

Tumad emerged into the sunlight first, then a black-haired man of well above average height whose dark face and tilted eyes, hooked nose and high cheekbones, marked him another Saldaean, though he was clean-shaven and garbed like a once prosperous Andoran merchant lately fallen on hard times. His dark blue coat had been of fine wool trimmed in darker velvet, but wear had made the cuffs ragged, his breeches bagged at the knee, and dust coated his cracked boots. Still, he walked proudly, no mean feat with four more of Bashere’s men behind him, those almost straight, slightly serpentine blades bare and the points inches from his ribs. The heat hardly seemed to touch him. The Maidens’ eyes followed his progress.

Rand studied Taim as the man and his escort crossed the courtyard. At least fifteen years older than himself; thirty-five, then, or a few years more at most. Little was known and less written of men who could channel—it was a subject most decent people avoided—but Rand had learned what he could. Relatively few men actually sought it out; that was one of Rand’s problems. Since the Breaking, most men who channeled had the ability born in them, ready to spring out as they grew into manhood. Some managed to keep madness at bay for years before Aes Sedai found and gentled them; others were already hopelessly mad when found, at times less than a year after first touching *saidin*. Rand had clung to sanity for close to two years, so far. Yet in front of him he had a man who must have managed it for ten or fifteen. That alone was worth something.

They halted a few paces before him at a gesture from Tumad. Rand opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Lews Therin rose up in a frenzy in his head. *Sammael and Demandred hated me, whatever honors I gave them. The more honors, the worse the hate, until they sold their souls and went over. Demandred especially. I should have killed him! I should have killed them all! Scorched the earth to kill them all! Scorch the earth!*

Face frozen, Rand fought for his own mind. *I am Rand al'Thor. Rand al'Thor! I never knew Sammael or Demandred or any of them! The Light burn me, I am Rand al'Thor!* Like a faint echo, one more thought came from elsewhere. *The Light burn me*. It sounded like a plea. Then Lews Therin was gone, driven back into whatever shadows he lived in.

Bashere took advantage of the silence. "You say you're Mazrim Taim?" He sounded doubtful, and Rand looked at him in confusion. Was this Taim or not? Only a madman would claim that name if it was not his.

The prisoner's mouth quirked in what might have been the beginning of a smile, and he rubbed his chin. "I shaved, Bashere." His voice held more than a hint of mockery. "It is hot this far south, or had you not noticed? Hotter than it should be, even here. Do you want proof of me? Shall I channel for you?" His dark eyes flickered to Rand, then back to Bashere, whose face was growing darker by the minute. "Perhaps not that, not now. I remember you. I had you beat at Irinjavar, until those visions appeared in the sky. But everyone knows that. What does everyone not know, that you and Mazrim Taim will?" Focused on Bashere, he seemed unaware of his guards, or their swords still hovering near his ribs. "I hear you hid what happened to Musar and Hachari and their wives." The mockery was gone; he was just relating what had happened, now. "They shouldn't have tried to kill me under a parley flag. I trust you found them good places as servants? All they'll really want to do now is serve and obey; they won't be happy otherwise. I could have killed them. They all four drew daggers."

"Taim," Bashere growled, hand darting for his hilt, "you . . . !"

Rand stepped in front of him, seizing his wrist with the blade half-drawn. The guards' blades, Tumad's as well, were touching Taim now, very likely touching flesh the way they were shoved against his coat, but he did not flinch. "Did you come to see me," Rand demanded, "or to taunt Lord Bashere? If you do it again, I'll let him kill you. My amnesty pardons what you've done, but it doesn't let you flaunt your crimes."

Taim studied Rand a moment before speaking. Despite the heat, the fellow barely sweated. “To see you. You were the one in the vision in the sky. They say it was the Dark One himself you fought.”

“Not the Dark One,” Rand said. Bashere was not fighting him exactly, but he could feel the tension in the man’s arm. If he let go, that blade would be out and through Taim in a heartbeat. Unless he used the Power. Or Taim did. That had to be avoided, if it could be. He kept his grip on Bashere’s wrist. “He called himself Ba’alzamon, but I think he was Ishamael. I killed him later, in the Stone of Tear.”

“I hear you’ve killed a number of the Forsaken. Should I call you my Lord Dragon? I have heard this lot use the title. Do you mean to kill all the Forsaken?”

“Do you know any other way to deal with them?” Rand asked. “They die, or the world does. Unless you think they can be talked into abandoning the Shadow the way they abandoned the Light.” This was becoming ridiculous. Here he was, carrying on a conversation with a man who certainly had five sword points drawing blood beneath his coat while he himself held on to another man who wanted to add a sixth and draw more than a trickle. At least Bashere’s men were too disciplined to do more without their general’s word. At least Bashere was keeping his mouth shut. Admiring Taim’s coolness, Rand went on as quickly as he could without seeming to be hurried.

“Whatever your crimes are, Taim, they pale beside the Forsaken’s. Have you ever tortured an entire city, made thousands of people assist in breaking each other slowly, in breaking their own loved ones? Semirhage did that, for no more reason than that she could, to prove she could, for the pleasure of it. Have you murdered children? Graendal did. She called it kindness, so they would not suffer after she enslaved their parents and carried them away.” He just hoped the other Saldaeans were listening half as closely as Taim; the man had actually leaned forward slightly in interest. He hoped they did not ask too many questions about where all this came from. “Have you given people to Trollocs to eat? All the Forsaken did—prisoners who would not turn always went to the Trollocs, if they weren’t murdered out of hand—but Demandred captured two cities just because he thought the people there had slighted him before he went over to the Shadow, and every man, woman and child went into Trolloc bellies. Mesaana set up schools in the territory she controlled, schools where children and young people were taught the *glories* of the Dark One, taught to kill their friends who didn't learn well enough or fast enough. I could go on. I could start from the beginning of the list and go through all thirteen names, adding a hundred crimes as bad to every name. Whatever you've done, it doesn't rank with that. And now you've come to accept my pardon, to walk in the Light and submit to me, to battle the Dark One as hard as you ever battled anyone. The Forsaken are reeling; I mean to hunt them all down, eradicate them. And you will help me. For that, you've earned your pardon. I tell you true, you'll probably earn it a hundred times over again before the Last Battle is done."

At last he felt Bashere's arm relax, felt the man's sword sliding back into its scabbard. Rand barely stopped himself from exhaling in relief. "I don't see any reason to guard him so closely now. Put up your swords."

Slowly, Tumad and the others began sheathing their blades. Slowly, but they were doing it. Then Taim spoke.

"Submit? I had thought more of a compact between us." The other Saldaeans tensed; Bashere was still behind Rand, but Rand could *feel* him stiffening. The Maidens did not move a muscle, except that Jalani's hand twitched toward her veil. Taim tilted his head, unaware. "I would be the lesser partner, of course, yet I have had years more than you to study the Power. There is much I could teach you."

Rage rose up in Rand till his vision filmed red. He had spoken of things he should have no knowledge of, had probably birthed a dozen rumors about himself and the Forsaken, all to make this fellow's deeds seem less dark, and the man had the audacity to speak of *compacts*? Lews Therin raved in his head. *Kill him! Kill him now! Kill him!* For once Rand did not bother to quell the voice. "No compact!" he growled. "No partners! I am the Dragon Reborn, Taim! Me! If you have knowledge I can make use of, I will, but you will go where I say, do as I say, when I say."

Without a pause Taim slipped to one knee. "I submit to the Dragon Reborn. I will serve and obey." The corners of his mouth quivered again in that almost smile as he rose. Tumad gaped at him.

"That fast?" Rand said softly. The rage was not gone; it was white hot. If he gave way, he was not sure what he would do. Lews Therin still babbled in the shadows of his head. *Kill him! Must kill him!* Rand pushed Lews Therin away, to a barely audible murmur. Perhaps he should not be surprised at this; strange things happened around *ta'veren*, especially one as strong as himself. That a man might change his mind in a moment, even if his course had been carved in stone, should be no great surprise. But the anger had him, and a strong streak of suspicion. "You named yourself the Dragon Reborn, fought battles all over Saldaea, were only captured because you were knocked unconscious, and you give up this quickly? Why?"

Taim shrugged. "What are my choices? To wander the world alone, friendless, hunted, while you rise to glory? That's supposing Bashere doesn't manage to kill me before I can leave the city, or your Aielwomen don't. Even if they don't, the Aes Sedai will corner me sooner or later; I doubt the Tower means to forget Mazrim Taim. Or I can follow you, and part of that glory will be mine." For the first time he looked around, at his guards, at the Maidens, and shook his head as if he could not believe it. "I might have been the one. How could I be sure otherwise? I can channel; I'm strong. What said I was not the Dragon Reborn? All I had to do was fulfill just one of the Prophecies."

"Like managing to be born on the slopes of Dragonmount?" Rand said coldly. "That was the first Prophecy to be met."

Taim's mouth quirked again. It really was not a smile; it never touched his eyes. "Victors write history. Had I taken the Stone of Tear, history would have shown I was born on Dragonmount, of a woman never touched by a man, and the heavens opened up in radiance to herald my coming. The sort of thing they say about you, now. But you took the Stone with your Aiel, and the world hails you as the Dragon Reborn. I know better than to stand against that; you are the one. Well, since the whole loaf won't be mine, I will settle for whatever slices fall my way."

"You may find honors, Taim, and you may not. If you begin to fret over them, think what happened to the others who've done what you did. Logain, captured and gentled; rumor says he died in the Tower. A nameless fellow beheaded in Haddon Mirk by the Tairens. Another burned by the Murandians. Burned alive, Taim! That's what the Illianers did to Gorin Rogad four years ago, as well."

"Not a fate I would embrace," Taim said levelly.

"Then forget honors and remember the Last Battle. Everything I do is aimed at Tarmon Gai'don. Everything I tell you to do will be aimed at it. *You* will aim at it!"

"Of course." Taim spread his hands. "You are the Dragon Reborn. I don't doubt that; I acknowledge it publicly. We march toward Tarmon

Gai'don. Which the Prophecies say you will win. And the histories will say that Mazrim Taim stood at your right hand."

"Perhaps," Rand told him curtly. He had lived too many prophecies to believe any of them meant exactly what they said. Or even that they ensured anything. In his opinion, prophecy set the conditions that had to be met for a thing to happen; only, meeting them did not mean the thing *would* happen, just that it *could*. Some of the conditions set in the Prophecies of the Dragon more than implied that he had to die for any chance at victory. Thinking of that did nothing for his temper. "The Light send your chance doesn't come too soon. Now. What knowledge do you have that I need? Can you teach men to channel? Can you test a man to know whether he can be taught?" Unlike women, one man who could channel could not simply sense the ability in another. There was as much different between men and women with the One Power as there was between men and women; sometimes it was a matter of hair-fine degree, sometimes stone versus silk.

"Your amnesty? Some fools have actually shown up to learn how to be like you and me?"

Bashere only stared at Taim contemptuously, arms folded and boots spread apart, but Tumad and the guards shifted uneasily. The Maidens did not. Rand had no idea how the Maidens felt about the score of men who had answered his call; they never gave any sign. With the memory of Taim as a false Dragon strong in their heads, few of the Saldaeans could hide their ill ease.

"Just answer me, Taim. If you can do what I want, say so. If not. . . ."That was the anger talking. He could not send the man away, not if every day was a struggle with him. Taim seemed to think he would, though.

"I can do both," he said quickly. "I have found five over the years—not that I was really looking—but only one had the courage to go beyond the testing." He hesitated, then added, "He went mad after two years. I had to kill him before he killed me."

Two years. "You've held it off a deal longer than that. How?"

"Worried?" Taim asked softly, then shrugged. "I can't help you. I don't know how; I just did. I'm sane as . . ." His eyes flickered toward Bashere, ignoring the other man's flat stare. ". . . as Lord Bashere."

But Rand wondered, suddenly. Half the Maidens had returned to watching the rest of the courtyard; they were not likely to focus so deeply on one possible threat that they ignored others. The possible threat was

Taim, and the second half of the Maidens still had their eyes fixed on him and Rand for any sign the threat was real. Any man would have to be aware of them, sudden death in their eyes, their hands. Rand was, and they wanted to protect him. And Tumad and the other guards still gripped their sword hilts, ready to draw again. If Bashere's men and the Aiel decided to kill Taim, the man would have a hard time escaping that courtyard however he channeled, unless Rand helped him. Yet Taim paid the soldiers and the Maidens no more outward attention than he did the colonnades' columns or the paving stones beneath his boots. Bravery, real or feigned, or something else? A kind of madness?

After a moment of silence, Taim spoke again. "You don't trust me yet. No reason you should. Yet. In time you will. In token of that future trust, I brought you a present." From under his worn coat he pulled a rag-wrapped bundle a little larger than a man's two fists together.

Frowning, Rand took it, and his breath caught when he felt the hard shape inside. Hastily he pulled away multicolored rags, revealing a disc the size of his palm, a disc like that on the scarlet banner above the palace, half white and half black, the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai, before the Breaking of the World. He ran his fingers across the mated teardrops.

Only seven like this had been made, of *cuendillar*. Seals on the Dark One's prison, seals that held the Dark One away from the world. He had two more, hidden away very carefully. Protected very carefully. Nothing could break *cuendillar*, not even the One Power—the lip of a delicate cup made of heartstone could scratch steel, or diamond—but three of the seven *had* been broken. He had seen them, shattered. And he had watched Moiraine carve a thin sliver from the edge of one. The seals were weakening, the Light alone knew why or how. The disc in his hands had the hard slickness of *cuendillar*, like a blend of the finest porcelain and polished steel—but he was sure it would break if he let it fall to the stones under his feet.

Three broken. Three in his possession. Where was the seventh? Only four seals stood between humankind and the Dark One. Four, if the last was still whole. Only four, standing between humankind and the Last Battle. How well did they still hold, weakened as they were?

Lews Therin's voice came up like thunder. *Break it break them all must break them must must must break them all break them and strike must strike quickly must strike now break it break it break it. . . .*

Rand shook with the effort of fighting that voice down, forcing away a mist that clung like spiderwebs. His muscles ached as if he wrestled with a man of flesh, a giant. Handful by handful he stuffed the fog that was Lews Therin into the deepest crannies, the deepest shadows, he could find in his mind.

Abruptly he heard the words he was muttering hoarsely. "Must break it now break them all break it break it break it." Abruptly he realized he had his hands over his head, holding the seal, ready to smash it to the white pavement. The only thing stopping him was Bashere, up on his toes, hands raised to grip Rand's arms.

"I don't know what that is," Bashere said quietly, "but I think maybe you should wait before deciding to break it. Eh?" Tumad and the others were no longer watching Taim; they gaped wide-eyed at Rand. Even the Maidens had shifted their eyes to him, eyes full of concern. Sulin took a half step toward the men, and Jalani's hand was outstretched toward Rand as if she did not realize it.

"No." Rand swallowed; his throat hurt. "I don't think I should." Bashere stepped back slowly, and Rand brought the seal down just as slowly. If Rand had thought Taim unflappable, he had proof to the contrary now. Shock painted the man's face. "Do you know what this is, Taim?" Rand demanded. "You must, or you wouldn't have brought it to me. Where did you find it? Do you have another? Do you know where another is?"

"No," Taim said, voice unsteady. Not with fear, precisely; more like a man who had felt a cliff unexpectedly crumbling under him and had somehow found himself back on solid ground. "That is the only one I. . . . I've heard all sorts of rumors since I escaped the Aes Sedai. Monsters leaping out of thin air. Strange beasts. Men talking to animals, and the animals talking back. Aes Sedai going mad like we're supposed to. Whole villages going mad, killing each other. Some could be true. Half what I know to be true is no less insane. I heard some of the seals have been broken. A hammer could break that one."

Bashere frowned, stared at the seal in Rand's hands, then gasped. He understood.

"Where did you find it?" Rand repeated. If he could find the last. . . . Then what? Lews Therin stirred, but he refused to listen.

"In the last place you would expect," Taim replied, "which I suppose is the first place to look for the others. A decaying little farm in Saldaea. I stopped for water, and the farmer gave it to me. He was old, with no children or grandchildren to pass it on to, and he thought I was the Dragon Reborn. He claimed his family had guarded it more than two thousand years. Claimed they were kings and queens during the Trolloc Wars, and nobles under Artur Hawkwing. His tale could have been true. No more unlikely than finding that in a hut only a few days ride from the Blightborder."

Rand nodded, then stooped to gather up the rags. He was used to the unlikely happening around him; it had to happen elsewhere, sometimes. Hurriedly rewrapping the seal, he handed it to Bashere. "Guard this carefully." *Break it!* He squashed the voice hard. "Nothing must happen to it."

Bashere took the bundle reverently in both hands. Rand was unsure whether the man's bow was for him or the seal. "For ten hours or ten years, it will be safe until you require it."

For a moment Rand studied him. "Everybody's waiting for me to go mad, afraid of it, but not you. You must have thought I finally was, just now, but you weren't afraid of me even then."

Bashere shrugged, grinning behind his gray-streaked mustaches. "When I first slept in a saddle, Muad Cheade was Marshal-General. The man was as mad as a hare in spring thaw. Twice every day he searched his bodyservant for poison, and he drank nothing but vinegar and water, which he claimed was sovereign against the poison the fellow fed him, but he ate everything the man prepared for as long as I knew him. Once he had a grove of oaks chopped down because they were looking at him. And then insisted they be given decent funerals; he gave the oration. Do you have any idea how long it takes to dig graves for twenty-three oak trees?"

"Why didn't somebody do something? His family?"

"Those not mad as he was, or madder, were afraid to look at him sideways. Tenobia's father wouldn't have let anyone touch Cheade anyway. He might have been insane, but he could outgeneral anyone I ever saw. He never lost a battle. He never even came close to losing."

Rand laughed. "So you follow me because you think I can out-general the Dark One?"

"I follow you because you are who you are," Bashere said quietly. "The world must follow you, or those who survive will wish themselves dead."

Slowly Rand nodded. The Prophecies said he would break nations and bind them together. Not that he wanted to, but the Prophecies were his only guide to how to fight the Last Battle, how to win it. Even without them, he thought the binding together was necessary. The Last Battle would not be just him against the Dark One. He could not believe that; if he was going mad, he was not yet mad enough to believe he was more than a man. It would be mankind against Trollocs and Myrddraal, too, and every sort of Shadowspawn the Blight could vomit out, and Darkfriends rising out of their hiding places. There would be other dangers on that road to Tarmon Gai'don, and if the world was not united. . . . *You do what must be done*. He was not sure whether that was himself or Lews Therin, but it was the truth, as far as he could see.

Walking quickly to the nearest colonnade, he spoke over his shoulder to Bashere. "I am taking Taim to the farm. Do you want to come along?"

"The farm?" Taim said.

Bashere shook his head. "Thank you, no," he said dryly. He might not allow any nerves to show, but Rand and Taim together were probably as much as he could take; he certainly avoided the farm. "My men are growing soft policing the streets for you. I mean to put some of them back into their saddles properly for a few hours. You were going to inspect them this afternoon. Has that changed?"

"What farm?" Taim said.

Rand sighed, suddenly weary. "No, that hasn't changed. I will be there if I can." It was too important to change, though none but Bashere and Mat knew; he could not let anyone else think it more than a casual matter, a useless ceremony for a man growing taken with the pomp of his position, the Dragon Reborn going out to be cheered by his soldiers. He had another visit to make today, too, one that everyone would think he was trying to keep secret. It might even stay secret, from most, but he had no doubt that those he wanted to learn of it, would.

Taking up his sword from where it stood against one of the narrow columns, he buckled it on over his undone coat. The belt was unadorned dark boarhide, just like the scabbard and the long hilt; the buckle was ornate, a finely worked dragon of etched steel inlaid with gold. He should get rid of that buckle, find something plain. He could not bring himself to do it, though. It had been a gift from Aviendha. Which was the reason he should rid himself of it. He could never think his way out of that circle.

Something else waited there for him, too, a two-foot length of spear with a green-and-white tassel below the sharp head. He hefted it as he turned back to the courtyard. One of the Maidens had carved the short shaft with Dragons. Some people were already calling it the Dragon Scepter, especially Elenia and that lot. Rand kept the thing close to remind himself that he might have more enemies than those he could see.

“What farm are you talking about?” Taim’s voice grew harder. “Where is it you mean to take me?”

For a long moment Rand studied the man. He did not like Taim. Something in the fellow’s manner would not allow it. Or maybe something in himself. For so long he had been the only man who could even think of channeling without looking over his shoulder in a sweat for Aes Sedai. Well, it seemed a long time, and at least the Aes Sedai would not try to gentle him, not now that they knew who he was. Could it be as simple as that? Jealousy that he was no longer unique? He did not think so. Apart from everything else, he would welcome more men who could channel walking the earth unmolested. Finally he would stop being a freak. No, it would not go that far, not this side of Tarmon Gai’don. He was unique; he was the Dragon Reborn. Whatever his reasons, he just did not like the man.

Kill him! Lews Therin shrieked. *Kill them all!* Rand pushed the voice back down. He did not have to like Taim, only to use him. And trust him. That was the hard part.

“I’m taking you where you can serve me,” he said coldly. Taim did not flinch or frown; he merely watched and waited, the corners of his mouth twitching for one moment in that almost smile.

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CHAPTER 3

A Woman’s Eyes

Stilling his irritation—and Lews Therin’s mutters—Rand reached out for *saidin*, launched himself into the now familiar battle for control and survival in the midst of emptiness. The taint oozed through him as he channeled; even within the void he could feel it seeming to filter into his bones, perhaps into his soul. He had no way to describe what he did except as making a fold in the Pattern, a hole through it. This he had learned on his own, and his teacher had not been very good at explaining even what lay behind the things he taught. A bright vertical line appeared in the air, widening quickly into an opening the size of a large doorway. In truth, it seemed to turn, the view through it, a sunlit clearing among drought-draggled trees, rotating to a halt.

Enaila and two more Maidens lifted their veils and leaped through almost before it settled; half a dozen others followed, some with horn bows ready. Rand did not expect there to be anything for them to guard against. He had put the other end—if there *was* another end; he did not understand, but it seemed to him there was only one—in the clearing because a gateway opening up could be dangerous around people, but telling the Maidens, or any Aiel, that there was no need to be on guard was like telling a fish there was no need to swim.

“This is a gateway,” he told Taim. “I’ll show you how to make one if you didn’t catch it.” The man was staring at him. If he had been watching carefully, he should have seen Rand’s weaving of *saidin*; any man able to channel could do that.

Taim joined him as he stepped through into the clearing, Sulin and the rest of the Maidens following. Some gave the sword at Rand’s hip a disdainful glance as they streamed past him, and Maiden handtalk flashed silently among them. Disgustedly, no doubt. Enaila and the foreguard had already spread out warily among the bedraggled trees; their coats and breeches, the *cadin'sor*, made them seem part of the shadows whether or not they had added green to the gray and brown. With the Power in him, Rand could see each dead needle distinctly on each of the pines; more were dead than were alive. He could smell the sour sap of the leatherleafs. The air itself smelted hot, dry and dusty. There was no danger for him here.

"Wait, Rand al'Thor," came a woman's urgent voice from the other side of the gateway. Aviendha's voice.

Rand let go of the weave and *saidin* immediately, and the gateway winked out just as it had come. There were dangers and dangers. Taim looked at him curiously. Some of the Maidens, veiled and unveiled, spared him a moment for looks of their own. Disapproving ones. Fingers flashed in Maiden handtalk. They had the sense to keep their tongues still, though; he had made himself clear on that.

Ignoring curiosity and disapproval alike, Rand started off through the trees with Taim at his side, dead leaves and twigs crackling as they went. The Maidens, in a wide circle around them, made no sound in their soft boots, laced to the knee. Vigilance buried their moment of rebuke. Some had made this journey with Rand before, always without incident, but nothing would ever convince them these woods were not a good site for an ambush. Before Rand, life in the Waste had been nearly three thousand years of raids, skirmishes, feuds and wars, unbroken for any length of time.

There were surely things he could learn from Taim—if not nearly so much as Taim thought—but the teaching would go both ways, and it was time for him to start educating the older man. "Sooner or later you will come up against the Forsaken, following me. Maybe before the Last Battle. Probably before. You don't seem surprised."

"I have heard rumors. They had to break free eventually."

So the word was spreading. Rand grinned in spite of himself. The Aes Sedai would not be pleased. Aside from anything else, there was a certain pleasure in tweaking their noses. "You can expect anything at any time. Trollocs, Myrddraal, Draghkar, Gray Men, *gholam*. . . ."

He hesitated, heron-branded palm stroking his long sword hilt. He had no idea what a *gholam* was. Lews Therin had not stirred, but he knew that was the source of the name. Bits and pieces sometimes drifted across whatever thin barrier lay between him and that voice, and became part of Rand's memories, usually without anything to explain them. It happened more often, lately. The fragments were not something he could fight, like the voice. The hesitation lasted only a moment.

“Not just in the north, near the Blight. Here, or anywhere. They are using the Ways.” That was something else he had to deal with. But how? First made with *saidin*, the Ways were dark now, as tainted as *saidin*. The Shadowspawn could not avoid all of the dangers in the Ways that killed men or worse, yet they still managed to use them, and if the Ways were not as quick as gateways and Traveling, or even Skimming, they still allowed hundreds of miles to be covered in a day. A problem for later. He had too many problems for later. He had too many problems for now. Irritably, he slashed at leatherleaf with the Dragon Scepter; pieces of wide, tough leaves fell, most brown. “If you’ve ever heard a legend about it, expect it. Even Darkhounds, though if they’re really the Wild Hunt, at least the Dark One isn’t free to ride behind them. They’re bad enough anyway. Some you can kill, the way the legends say, but some won’t die for anything short of balefire, that I’m sure of. Do you know balefire? If you don’t, that is one thing I’ll not teach you. If you do, don’t use it on anything but Shadowspawn. And do not teach it to anyone.

“The source of some of those rumors you heard might be . . . I don’t know what to call them except ‘bubbles of evil.’ Think of them like the bubbles that sometimes rise up in a bog, only these are rising from the Dark One as the seals weaken, and instead of rotten smells, they are full of . . . well, evil. They drift along the Pattern until they burst, and when they do, anything can happen. Anything. Your own reflection can leap out of the mirror and try to kill you. Believe me.”

If the litany dismayed Taim, he did not show it. All he said was “I have been in the Blight; I’ve killed Trollocs before, and Myrddraal.” He pushed a low branch out of the way and held it for Rand. “I have never heard of this balefire, but if a Darkhound comes after me, I will find some way to kill it.”

“Good.” That was for Taim’s ignorance as much as his confidence. Balefire was one bit of knowledge Rand would not mind seeing vanish from the world completely. “With luck you won’t find anything like that out here, but you can never be sure.”

The woods gave way abruptly to a farmyard, with a sprawling thatch-roofed house of two weathered stories, smoke rising from one of its chimneys, and a large barn that had a distinct lean. The day was no cooler here than in the city a few miles away, the sun no less blistering. Chickens scratched the dust, two dun cows chewed their cud in a rail-fenced enclosure, a flock of tethered black goats busily stripped leaves from bushes within their reach, and a high-wheeled cart stood in the barn's shadow, but the place did not look like a farm. There were no fields in sight; forest stretched all around the yard, broken only by the dirt track meandering northward, used for rare excursions to the city. And there were too many people.

Four women, all but one in her middle years, were hanging wash on a pair of lines, and nearly a dozen children, none older than nine or ten, played among the chickens. There were men about, too, most doing chores. Twenty-seven of them, though in some cases it was a stretch to call them men. Eben Hopwil, the skinny fellow pulling up a bucket of water from the well, claimed to be twenty and was certainly four or five years younger. His nose and ears seemed the biggest parts of him. Fedwin Morr, one of three men sweating on the roof replacing old thatch, was a good deal huskier, with a good deal fewer blotches, but certainly no older. More than half of the men had only three or four years on those two. Rand had almost sent some of them home, Eben and Fedwin at least, save that the White Tower took novices as young and sometimes younger. Gray showed among darker hair on a few heads, and crease-faced Damer Flinn, in front of the barn using peeled branches to show two of the younger men how to handle a sword, had a limp and retained only a thin fringe of white hair. Damer had been in the Queen's Guards until he took a Murandian lance in his thigh. He was no swordsman, but he seemed competent to show the others how not to stab themselves in the foot. Most of the men were Andoran, a few Cairhienin. None had come from Tear yet, though the amnesty had been proclaimed there, too; it would take time for men to come that far.

Damer was the first to notice the Maidens, tossing down his branch and directing his pupils' attention toward Rand. Then Eben dropped his bucket with a yell, splashing water all over himself, and everyone was scrambling, shouting at the house, to cluster anxiously behind Damer. Two more women appeared from inside, aproned and red-faced from cookfires, and helped the others gather the children behind the men.

"There they are," Rand told Taim. "You have nearly half a day left. How many can you test? I want to know who can be taught as soon as possible."

"This lot was dredged from the bottom of . . ." Taim began contemptuously, then stopped in the middle of the farmyard, staring at Rand. Chickens scratched in the dust around his feet. "You haven't tested any of them? Why, in the name of . . . ? You cannot, can you? You can Travel, but you do not know how to test for the talent."

"Some don't really want to channel." Rand eased his grip on his sword hilt. He disliked admitting gaps in his knowledge to this man. "Some haven't thought beyond a chance at glory or wealth or power. But I want to keep any man who can learn, whatever his reasons."

The students—the men who would be students—were watching him and Taim from in front of the barn with a fair approximation of calm. They had all come to Caemlyn hoping to learn from the Dragon Reborn, after all, or thinking they did. It was the Maidens, making a ring about the farmyard and prowling into the house and barn, that caught their eyes with a wary fascination, even apprehension. The women clutched the children to their skirts, gazes fixed on Rand and Taim, expressions ranging from flat-eyed stares to anxious lip-chewing.

"Come on," Rand said. "It's time to meet your students."

Taim hung back. "Is this truly all you want me for? To try to teach these pathetic dregs? If any of them can be taught. How many do you really think to find in a handful that just straggled to you?"

"This is important, Taim; I'd do it myself, if I could, if I had time." Time was always key, always lacking. And he had made the admission, as much as it curdled his tongue. He realized he did not much like Taim, but he did not have to like him. Rand did not wait, and after a moment the other man caught up with long strides. "You mentioned trust. I'm trusting you with this." *Don't trust!* Lews Therin panted in the dim recesses. *Never trust! Trust is death!* "Test them and start teaching as soon you know who can learn."

"As the Lord Dragon wishes," Taim murmured wryly as they reached the waiting group. Bows and curtsies, none very polished, greeted them.

"This is Mazrim Taim," Rand announced. Jaws dropped and eyes widened, of course. Some of the younger men stared as though they thought he and Taim had come there to fight; a few seemed to be looking forward to watching. "Introduce yourselves to him. From today, he will be teaching you." Taim gave Rand a tight-mouthed look as the students slowly gathered before him and began giving their names.

In truth, the men's reactions varied. Fedwin pushed eagerly to the front, right alongside Damer, while Eben hung to the rear, face white. The others were somewhere in between, hesitant, uncertain, but speaking up finally. Rand's declaration meant an end to weeks of waiting for some of them, to years of dreaming, perhaps. Reality began today, and reality might mean channeling, with all that entailed for a man.

A stocky dark-eyed man, six or seven years older than Rand, ignored Taim and slipped away from the others. In a farmer's rough coat, Jur Grady shifted from foot to foot in front of Rand and twisted a cloth cap in blunt hands. He peered at the cap or the ground under his worn boots, only occasionally glancing up at Rand. "Uh . . . my Lord Dragon, I've been thinking . . . uh . . . my pa is looking after my croft, a good piece of land if the stream don't dry up there might be a crop yet, if it rains, and . . . and. . . ." He crushed the cap, then straightened it again carefully. "I've been thinking about going home."

The women were not gathering around Taim. In a silent line of worried eyes, they held hard to the children and watched. The youngest, a plump pale-haired woman, a boy of four playing with her fingers, was Sora Grady. Those women had followed their husbands here, but Rand suspected that half the talk between husband and wife eventually turned to leaving. Five men had left already, and if none gave marriage as a reason, all had been married. What woman could be comfortable watching her husband wait to learn to channel? It must be like watching him wait to commit suicide.

Some would say this was no place for families, yet most likely those same people would also say the men should not be here, either. In Rand's opinion, the Aes Sedai had made a mistake sealing themselves off from the world. Few entered the White Tower beyond Aes Sedai, women who wanted to be Aes Sedai, and those who served them; only a relative handful seeking help, and then under what they saw as great pressure. When Aes Sedai left the Tower, most held themselves aloof, and some never did leave. To Aes Sedai, people were pieces in a game and the world was the board, not a place to live in. To them, only the White Tower was real. No man could forget the world and ordinary people when he had his family in front of him.

This only had to last until Tarmon Gai'don—how long? A year? Two?—but the question was whether it could even do that. Somehow, it would.

He would make it last. Families reminded men what they were going to fight for.

Sora’s eyes were fastened on Rand.

“Go, if you want to,” he told Jur. “You can leave any time before you actually start learning to channel. Once you take that step, you’re the same as a soldier. You know we’ll need every soldier we can find before the Last Battle, Jur. The Shadow will have new Dreadlords ready to channel; you can count on it. But it’s your choice. Maybe you’ll be able to sit it out on your farm. There must be a few places in the world that will escape what’s coming. I hope so. Anyway, the rest of us will do our best to make sure as much escapes as possible. At least you can give your name to Taim, though. It would be a shame to leave before you even know whether you could learn.” Turning away from Jur’s confused face, Rand avoided Sora’s eyes. *And you condemn Aes Sedai for manipulating people*, he thought bitterly. He did what he had to do.

Taim was still collecting names out of the shifting pack, and still tossing barely subdued glares at Rand. Abruptly Taim’s patience seemed to give out. “Enough of this; names can come later, for those of you who will still be here tomorrow. Who is the first to be tested?” Just that quickly their tongues froze. Some did not even blink as they stared at him. Taim pointed a finger at Damer. “I might as well get you out of the way. Come here.” Damer did not move until Taim grabbed his arm and hauled him a few paces apart from the rest.

Watching, Rand moved nearer, too.

“The more Power that’s used,” Taim told Damer, “the easier it is to detect the resonance. On the other hand, too big a resonance could do unpleasant things to your mind, maybe kill you, so I’ll start small.” Damer blinked; plainly he barely understood a word, except maybe the part about unpleasant things and dying. Rand knew the explanation was meant for him, though; Taim was covering his ignorance.

Abruptly a tiny flame appeared, an inch tall, dancing in midair equidistant between the three men. Rand could feel the Power in Taim, though only a small amount, and see the thin flow of Fire the man wove. The flame brought a startling relief to Rand, startling because it was proof Taim really could channel. Bashere’s first doubts must have stuck in the back of his mind.

“Concentrate on the flame,” Taim said. “You are the flame; the world is the flame; there is nothing but the flame.”

“Don’t feel nothing but an ache starting in my eyes,” Damer muttered, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of a rough, callused hand.

“Concentrate!” Taim snapped. “Do not talk, do not think, do not move. Concentrate.” Damer nodded, then blinked at Taim’s frown and froze, staring silently at the small flame.

Taim seemed intent, but on what Rand was not sure; he seemed to be listening. A resonance, he had said. Rand focused, listening, feeling for—something.

Minutes stretched out with none of them moving a muscle. Five, six, seven slow minutes, with Damer hardly even blinking. The old man breathed hard, and he sweated so much he looked as though someone had upended a bucket over his head. Ten minutes.

Suddenly Rand felt it. The resonance. A small thing, a tiny echo of the minuscule flow of Power pulsing in Taim, but this seemed to come from Damer. It had to be what Taim meant, but Taim did not move. Perhaps there was more, or maybe this was not what Rand thought.

Another minute or two went by, and finally Taim nodded and let the flame and *saidin* go. “You can learn . . . Damer, was it?” He seemed surprised; no doubt he had not believed the very first man tested would pass, and a nearly bald old man at that. Damer grinned weakly; he looked like he might vomit. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised if every one of these simpletons passes,” the hawk-nosed man muttered with a glance at Rand. “You seem to have luck enough for ten men.”

Boots shuffled uneasily among the rest of the “simpletons.” Undoubtedly some were already hoping they would fail. They could not back out now, but if they failed, they could go home knowing they had tried without having to face what came with passing.

Rand felt a little surprise himself. There had not been anything more than that echo after all, and he had felt it before Taim, the man who knew what he was looking for.

“In time we’ll find out how strong you can be,” Taim said as Damer slipped back among the others. They opened a little distance around him and did not meet his eyes. “Perhaps you will turn out strong enough to match me, or even the Lord Dragon here.” The space around Damer widened a fraction. “Only time will tell. Pay attention while I test the others. If you are sharp, you should catch on to it by the time I find four or five more." A quick look at Rand said that was meant for him. "Now, who tests next?" No one moved. The Saldaean stroked his chin. "You." He pointed to a lumpy fellow somewhere well beyond thirty, a dark-haired weaver named Kely Huldin. In the line of women, Kely's wife moaned.

Twenty-six more tests were going to take the rest of the daylight, maybe more. Heat or no heat, the days still grew shorter as if winter really was coming on, and a failed test would take a few minutes longer than one passed, just to make certain. Bashere was waiting, and there was Weiramon to visit yet, and . . .

"Carry on with this," Rand told Taim. "I will come back tomorrow to see how you've done. Remember the trust I'm putting in you." *Don't trust him,* Lews Therin groaned. The voice seemed to come from some capering figure in the shadows of Rand's head. *Don't trust. Trust is death. Kill him. Kill them all. Oh, to die and be done, done with it all, sleep without dreams, dreams of Ilyena, forgive me, Ilyena, no forgiveness, only death, deserve to die. . . .* Rand turned away before the struggle inside could show on his face. "Tomorrow. If I can."

Taim caught up to him before he and the Maidens were halfway back to the trees. "If you stay a little longer, you can learn the test." Exasperation touched his voice. "If I really do find four or five more, anyway, which truly won't surprise me. You do seem to have the Dark One's own luck. I assume you want to learn. Unless you mean to dump it all on my shoulders. I warn you, it will be slow. However hard I press, this Damer has days yet, weeks, before he can even sense *saidin,* much less seize it. Just seize it, not channel even a spark."

"I already picked up the test," Rand replied. "It wasn't difficult. And I do mean to put it all on your shoulders, until you can find more and teach them enough so they can help you look. Remember what I said, Taim. Teach them fast." There were dangers in that. Learning to channel the female half of the True Source was learning an embrace, so Rand had been told, learning to submit to something that would obey once you surrendered to it. It was guiding a huge force that would not harm you unless you misused it. Elayne and Egwene thought that natural; to Rand it was almost beyond belief. Channeling the male half was a constant war for control and survival. Leap into it too far, too fast, and you were a boy tossed naked into a pitched battle against armored foes. Even once you learned, *saidin* could destroy you, kill you or obliterate your mind, if it did not simply burn the ability to channel from you. The same price that Aes Sedai exacted from the men they caught who could channel, you could exact from yourself in one careless moment, one instant of letting your guard down. Not that some of the men in front of the barn would not be willing to pay that price right that minute. Kely Huldin's round-faced wife had him by the front of his shirt, talking urgently. Kely was swinging his head uncertainly, and the other married men were looking uneasily toward their wives. But this was a war, and wars had casualties, even among married men. Light, but he was growing calloused enough to sicken a goat. He turned a little, so he did not have to see Sora Grady's eyes. "Walk the edge with them," he told Taim. "Teach them as much as they can learn as fast as they can learn it."

Taim's mouth tightened slightly at Rand's first words. "As much as they can learn," he said flatly. "But what? Things that can be used as weapons, I suppose."

"Weapons," Rand agreed. They had to be weapons, all of them, himself included. Could weapons allow themselves families? Could a weapon allow itself to love? Now, where had *that* come from? "Anything they can learn, but that most of all." They were so few. Twenty-seven, and if there was even one more than Damer who could learn, Rand would thank his being *ta'veren* for drawing the man to him. Aes Sedai only caught and gentled men who actually channeled, but they had become very good at it over the last three thousand years. Some Aes Sedai apparently believed they were succeeding in something they had never intended, culling the ability to channel out of humanity. The White Tower had been built to house three thousand Aes Sedai all the time, and far more if all their numbers had to be called in, with rooms for hundreds of girls in training, but before the split there had only been forty or so novices in the Tower and fewer than fifty Accepted. "I need more numbers, Taim. One way or another, find more. Teach them the test before anything else."

"You mean to try matching the Aes Sedai, then?" Taim seemed unperturbed even if that was Rand's plan. His dark tilted eyes were steady.

"How many Aes Sedai are there altogether? A thousand?"

"Not so many, I think," Taim said cautiously.

Culling the human race. Burn them for it, even if they had cause. "Well, there will be enemies enough anyway." One thing he did not lack was enemies. The Dark One and the Forsaken, Shadowspawn and

Darkfriends. The Whitecloaks certainly and very likely Aes Sedai, or some of them, those who were Black Ajah and those who wanted to control him. Those last he counted enemies even if they did not think themselves so. There surely would be Dreadlords, just as he had said. And more beyond that. Enemies enough to crush all his plans, crush everything. His grip tightened on the carved haft of the Dragon Scepter. Time was the greatest enemy of all, the one he had the least chance of defeating. “I am going to defeat them, Taim. All of them. They think they can tear everything down. It’s always tearing down, never building up! I’m going to build something, leave something behind. Whatever happens, I will do that! I’ll defeat the Dark One. And cleanse *saidin*, so men don’t have to fear going mad, and the world doesn’t have to fear men channeling. I’ll . . .”

The green-and-white tassel swung as he angrily jerked the length of spear. It was impossible. The heat and dust mocked him. Some of it had to be done, but it was all impossible. The best any of them could hope for was to win and die before they went mad, and he did not see how to manage even that much. All he could do was keep trying. There should be a way, though. If there was such a thing as justice, there should be a way.

“Cleanse *saidin*,” Taim said softly. “I think that would take more power than you can imagine.” His eyes lidded thoughtfully. “I have heard of things called *sa’angreal*. Do you have one you think could actually—”

“Never mind what I have or don’t have,” Rand snapped. “You teach whoever can learn, Taim. Then find more and teach them. The Dark One won’t wait on us. Light! We don’t have enough time, Taim, but we have to make do. We have to!”

“I will do what I can. Just do not expect Damer to topple a city’s walls tomorrow.”

Rand hesitated. “Taim? Keep a watch out for any student who learns too fast. Let me know immediately. One of the Forsaken might try to slip in among the students.”

“One of the Forsaken!” It was almost a whisper. For the second time, Taim looked shaken, this time well and truly taken aback. “Why would—?”

“How strong are you?” Rand broke in. “Seize *saidin*. Do it. As much as you can hold.”

For a moment Taim only looked at him, expressionless; then the Power flooded into him. There was no glow such as women could see around one another, only a sense of force and menace, but Rand could feel it clearly, and judge it. Taim held enough of *saidin* to devastate the farm and everyone there in seconds, enough to lay waste as far as he could see. It was not much short of what Rand himself could manage, unaided. But then, the man could be holding back. There was no sense of strain and he might not want to show his full strength to Rand; how could he know how Rand might react?

Saidin, the sense of it, faded from Taim, and for the first time Rand realized that he himself was filled with the male half of the Source, a raging flood, every thread he could pull through the *angreal* in his pocket. *Kill him,* Lews Therin muttered. *Kill him now!* For a moment shock gripped Rand; the emptiness surrounding him wavered, *saidin* raged and swelled, and he barely released the Power before it could crush the Void and him both. Had he seized the Source or had Lews Therin? *Kill him! Kill him!*

In a fury, Rand screamed inside his head, *Shut up!* To his surprise, the other voice vanished.

Sweat rolled down his face, and he wiped it away with a hand that wanted to shake. He had grasped the Source himself; it had to have been so. A dead man's voice could not have done it. Unconsciously, he had not been willing to trust Taim holding so much of *saidin* while he stood helpless. That was it.

"Just you keep an eye out for anyone who learns too fast," he muttered. Maybe he was telling Taim too much, but people had a right to know what they might face. As much as they needed to know. He dared not allow Taim or anyone else to find out where he had learned much of what he knew. If they discovered that he had held one of the Forsaken prisoner and allowed him to escape. . . . Rumor would strip away mention of prisoners if that leaked out. The Whitecloaks claimed he was a false Dragon, and very likely a Darkfriend besides; they said as much of anyone who touched the One Power. If the world learned about Asmodean, many more might believe. Never mind that Rand had needed a man to teach him of *saidin*. No woman could have, any more than they could see his weavings, or he theirs. *Men believe the worst easily, and women believe it hides something still darker*; that was an old Two Rivers saying. He would deal with Asmodean himself if the man ever turned up again. "Just you keep an eye out. Quietly."

"As my Lord Dragon commands." The man actually bowed slightly before starting back across the farmyard.

Rand realized the Maidens were looking at him. Enaila and Somara, Sulin and Jalani and all the rest, concern filling their eyes. They accepted almost everything he did, all the things that made him flinch when he did them, all the things everyone but the Aiel flinched at; what put their hackles up were usually matters he did not understand at all. They accepted, and *worried* about him.

"You must not tire yourself," Somara said quietly. Rand looked at her, and the flaxen-haired woman's cheeks reddened. This might not count as a public place—Taim was already too distant to overhear—but the remark was still going too far.

Enaila, though, pulled a spare *shoufa* from her belt and handed it to him. "Too much sun is not good for you," she murmured.

One of the others muttered, "He needs a wife to look after him." He could not tell which; even Somara and Enaila confined that sort of talk behind his back. He knew who was meant, though. Aviendha. Who better to marry the son of a Maiden than a Maiden who had given up the spear to become a Wise One?

Suppressing a flash of anger, he wound the *shoufa* around his head, and was grateful for it. The sun truly was hot, and the gray-brown cloth deflected a surprising amount of the heat. His sweat dampened it immediately. Did Taim know something like the Aes Sedai trick of not letting heat or cold touch them? Saldaea was in the far north, yet the man hardly seemed to perspire as much as the Aiel. Despite his gratitude, what Rand said was "What I must not do is stand around here wasting time."

"Wasting time?" young Jalani said in a too innocent voice, rewinding her *shoufa* and momentarily exposing short hair nearly as red as Enaila's. "How can the *Car'a'carn* be wasting time? The last time I sweated as much as he is, I had run from sunup to sundown."

Grins and outright laughter spread through the other Maidens, red-haired Maira, at least ten years older than Rand, slapping her thigh, golden-haired Desora hiding her smiles behind a hand as she always did. Scar-faced Liah bounced up and down on her toes, while Sulin almost doubled over. Aiel humor was strange at best. Heroes in stories never had jokes made at their expense, not even odd ones, and he doubted kings did either. Part of the problem was that an Aiel chief, even the *Car'a'carn*, was not a king; he might have the authority of one in many ways, but any Aiel could and would walk up to a chief and say exactly what he thought. The bigger part, however, was something else.

Despite his having been raised in the Two Rivers by Tam al’Thor and, until her death when he was five, Tam’s wife, Kari, Rand’s true mother had been a Maiden of Spear who died giving birth to him on the slopes of Dragonmount. Not an Aiel, though his father had been, but still a Maiden. Now Aiel customs stronger than law had touched him. No, not touched; enveloped. No Maiden could marry and still carry the spear, and unless she gave up the spear any child she bore was given to another woman by the Wise Ones, in such a way that the Maiden never knew who that woman was. Any child born of a Maiden was believed to be lucky, both in itself and to raise, though none but the woman who raised the child and her husband ever knew it was not her own. Yet beyond that, the Aiel Prophecy of Rhuidean said that the *Car’a’earn* would be such a one, raised by wetlanders. To the Maidens, Rand was all those children come back, the first child of a Maiden ever to be known to everyone.

Most, whether older than Sulin or as young as Jalani, welcomed him like a long-lost brother. In public they gave him as much respect as they did any chief, marginal as that might be sometimes, but alone with them he might as well have been that brother, though whether he was a younger brother or an older did not seem to have anything to do with the woman’s own age. He was just glad that only a handful took Enaila and Somara’s path; alone or not, it was plain irritating to have a woman no older than himself behaving as though he were her son.

“Then we ought to go somewhere I won’t sweat,” he said, managing a grin. He owed it to them. Some had already died for him, and more would before it was done. The Maidens quickly subdued their mirth, ready to go where the *Car’a’carn* said, ready to defend him.

The question was, where to go? Bashere was waiting for his carefully casual visit, but if Aviendha had heard about that, she might well be with Bashere. Rand had been avoiding her as much as possible, especially being alone with her. Because he wanted to be alone with her. He had managed to keep that from the Maidens so far, if they ever so much as suspected, they would make his life miserable. The fact was, he *had* to stay away from her. He carried death with him like a contagious disease; he was a target, and people died near him. He had to harden his heart and let Maidens die—the Light burn him forever for that promise!—but Aviendha had given up the spear to study with the Wise Ones. He was not sure what he felt for her, only that if she died because of him, something in him would die, too. It was lucky that she had no emotional tangles where he was concerned. She tried to stay close to him only because the Wise Ones wanted her to watch him for them, and because she wanted to watch him for Elayne. Neither reason made the situation any easier for Rand; exactly the opposite.

The decision was easy, really. Bashere would have to wait, so he could avoid Aviendha; and the visit to Weiramon, intended to begin in the Palace with attempts at stealth meant to be pierced, would come now. A foolish reason to make a decision, but what was a man to do when a woman refused to see sense? It might work out for the best this way. Those who were supposed to learn of that visit still would, and perhaps believe what they were supposed to all the more because it was made in true concealment. Perhaps the call on Bashere and the Saldaeans would even seem more casual because he left it until late in the day. Yes. Twists within twists worthy of a Cairhienin playing the Game of Houses.

Seizing *saidin*, he opened a gateway, the slash of light widening to show the interior of a large green-striped tent, empty save for a carpeting of colorful rugs woven in Tairen maze patterns. There was no chance of an ambush in that tent, less even than around the farm, but Enaila and Maira and others still veiled themselves and darted through. Rand paused to look back.

Kely Huldin was making his way toward the farmhouse, head down and his wife herding their two children at his side. She kept reaching over to pat him consolingly, but even across the farmyard Rand could make out her beaming face. Plainly Kely had failed. Taim was facing Jur Grady, both staring at a tiny flame wavering between them. Sora Grady, her son clasped to her breast, was not watching her husband. Her eyes were still locked on Rand. *A woman's eyes cut deeper than a knife;* another Two Rivers saying.

Stepping through the gateway, he waited for the rest of the Maidens to follow, then released the Source. He did what he had to do.

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CHAPTER 4

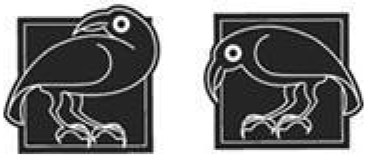

A Sense of Humor

The tent’s dim interior was hot enough to make Caemlyn, some eight hundred miles or so north, seem pleasantly cool, and when Rand pushed the flap open, he blinked. The sun was a hammer that made him glad of the *shoufa*.

A copy of the Dragon banner hung above the green-striped tent, alongside one of the crimson banners bearing the ancient Aes Sedai symbol. More tents stretched across a rolling plain where all but a few tufts of tough grass had long since been beaten to dust by hooves and boots—peak-roofed tents and flat, most white by far if often dirty white, but many in colors or stripes, tents and the colorful banners of lords. An army had gathered here on the border of Tear, on the edge of the Plains of Maredo, thousands upon thousands of soldiers from Tear and Cairhien. The Aiel had made their own camps well away from the wetlanders, five Aiel for every Tairen and Cairhienin and more arriving by the day. It was an army to make Illian shake in its boots, a host already mighty enough to smash anything in its path.

Enaila and the rest of the foreguard were already outside, veils down, with a dozen or so Aielmen. The Aiel kept a constant guard on this tent. Clothed and armed like the Maidens, they were as tall as Rand or taller, lions to the Maidens’ leopards, hard-faced sun-dark men with cold eyes of blue or green or gray. Today they were *Sha’mad Conde*, Thunder Walkers, led by Roidan himself, who headed the society this side of the Dragonwall. The Maidens carried the honor of the *Car’a’carn*, but every warrior society demanded some share of the guard duty.

One thing about some of the men’s garb differed from the Maidens’. Half wore a crimson cloth knotted around their temples, with the ancient Aes Sedai symbol a black-and-white disc above their brows. It was a new thing, first seen only a few months earlier. Wearers of the headband considered themselves *siswai’aman*; in the Old Tongue, the Spears of the

Dragon. The Spears Owned by the Dragon might be closer. The headbands, and their meaning, made Rand uncomfortable, but there was little he could do when the men refused even to admit they were wearing them. Why no Maidens had donned the things—none he had seen at least—he had no idea. They were almost as reluctant to talk about it as the men.

"I see you, Rand al'Thor," Roidan said gravely. There was considerably more gray than yellow in Roidan's hair, but a blacksmith could have used the heavy-shouldered man's face for hammer or anvil, and by the scars across his cheeks and nose it seemed possible that more than one had. Icy blue eyes made his face soft by comparison. He avoided looking at Rand's sword. "May you find shade this day." That had nothing to do with the molten sun or the cloudless sky—Roidan did not seem to sweat at all—it was simply a greeting among people from a land where the sun was always baking hot and a tree rare.

Equally formal, Rand replied, "I see you, Roidan. May you find shade this day. Is the High Lord Weiramon about?"

Roidan nodded toward a large pavilion with red-striped sides and a crimson roof, ringed by men with tall spears slanted precisely, shoulder-to-shoulder in the burnished breastplates and gold-and-black coats of Tairen Defenders of the Stone. Above it, the Three Crescents of Tear, white on red and gold, and the many-rayed Rising Sun of Cairhien, gold on blue, flanked Rand's own scarlet flag, all three twitching in a breeze that might have come from an oven.

"The wetlanders are all there." Looking Rand straight in the eyes, Roidan added, "Bruan has not been asked to that tent in three days, Rand al'Thor." Bruan was clan chief of the Nakai Aiel, Roidan's clan; they were both Salt Flat sept. "Nor has Han of the Tomanelle, or Dhearic of the Reyn, or any clan chief."

"I will speak with them," Rand said. "Will you tell Bruan and the others I am here?" Roidan nodded gravely.

Eyeing the men sideways, Enaila leaned close to Jalani, then spoke in a whisper that could have been heard clearly at ten paces. "Do you know why they are called Thunder Walkers? Because even when they are standing still, you keep looking to the sky expecting to see lightning." The Maidens hooted with laughter.

A young Thunder Walker leaped in the air, kicking a soft knee-high boot higher than Rand's head. He was handsome except for the puckered white scar that ran up under the strip of black cloth covering a missing eye. He wore the headband, too. “Do you know why Maidens use handtalk?” he shouted at the top of his leap, and, landing, he put on a befuddled grimace. Not directed at the Maidens, though; he spoke to his companions, ignoring the women. “Because even when they are not talking, they cannot stop talking.” The *Sha’mad Conde* laughed as hard as the Maidens had.

“Only Thunder Walkers would see honor in guarding an empty tent,” Enaila told Jalani sadly, shaking her head. “The next time they call for wine, if the *gai’shain* bring them empty cups, they will no doubt get drunker than we can on *oosquai*.”

Apparently the Thunder Walkers thought Enaila had gained the best of the exchange. The one-eyed man and several others raised their bull-hide bucklers toward her and rattled spears against them. For her part, she simply listened a moment, then nodded to herself and fell in with the others as they followed Rand.

Musing to himself about Aiel humor, Rand studied the sprawling camp. The aromas of food drifted from hundreds of scattered cookfires, bread baking in coals, meat roasting on spits, soup bubbling in kettles hung on tripods. Soldiers always ate well and often when they could; campaigning usually brought scant meals. The fires added their own sweetish smells; there was more dried ox dung to burn on the Plains of Maredo than wood.

Here and there archers or crossbowmen or pikemen moved about in leather jerkins sewn with steel discs or simply padded coats, but Tairen and Cairhienin nobles alike despised foot and lauded horse, so mounted men were most in evidence. Tairens in helmets rimmed and ridged, and breast plates over fat-sleeved coats striped in the colors of their various lords. Cairhienin in dark coats and battered breastplates and helmets like bells cut away to expose their faces. Small banners called *con*, on short staffs fastened to some men’s backs, marked minor Cairhienin nobility and younger sons, and sometimes merely officers, though few Cairhienin commoners rose to rank. Or Tairen, for that matter. The two nationalities did not mingle, and while the Tairens often slouched in their saddles and always directed a sneer at any Cairhienin who came near, the shorter Cairhien sat their horses stiffly, as though straining for the last inch of height, and ignored the Tairens completely. They had fought more than one war against each other before Rand made them ride together.

Roughly dressed, grizzled old men and some little more than boys went poking around the tents with stout sticks, one or another now and again scaring up a rat that he chased down and clubbed before adding it to the others dangling from his belt. A big-nosed fellow in a stained leather vest and no shirt, bow in hand and quiver at his waist, laid a long string of crows and ravens tied together by the feet on a table in front of one tent and received a purse in exchange from the bored-looking helmetless Tairen behind it. Few this far south really believed Myrddraal used rats and ravens and such for spies—Light, except for those who had actually seen them, almost no one this far south truly believed in Myrddraal, or Trollocs!—but if the Lord Dragon wanted the camp kept clear of the creatures, they were happy to oblige, especially since the Lord Dragon paid in silver for every corpse.

Cheers rose, of course; no one else would be walking about with an escort of Maidens of the Spear, and there was the Dragon Scepter. “The Light illumine the Lord Dragon!” and “Grace favor the Lord Dragon!” and the like showered from every side. Many even sounded sincere, though it was difficult to tell with men bellowing at the top of their lungs. Others only stared woodenly, or turned their horses and rode away, not too fast. After all, there was no telling when he might decide to call down lightning or make the ground split open; men who channeled did go mad, and who knew what a madman might do or when? Whether cheering or not, they eyed the Maidens warily. Few had really grown accustomed to seeing women carrying weapons like men; besides, everyone knew Aiel were every bit as unpredictable as madmen.

The noise was not enough to keep Rand from hearing what the Maidens were saying behind him.

“He has a fine sense of humor. Who is he?” That was Enaila.

“His name is Leiran,” Somara replied. “A Cosaida Chareen. You think he has humor because he thought your joke better than his. He does look to have strong hands.” Several of the Maidens chortled.

“Did you not think Enaila funny, Rand al’Thor?” Sulin was striding at his side. “You did not laugh. You never laugh. Sometimes I do not think you have a sense of humor.”

Stopping dead, Rand rounded on them so suddenly that several reached for their veils and looked about for what had startled him. He cleared his throat. “An irascible old farmer named Hu discovered one morning that his best rooster had flown into a tall tree beside his farm pond and wouldn't come down, so he went to his neighbor, Wil, and asked for help. The men had never gotten along, but Wil finally agreed, so the two men went to the pond and began climbing the tree, Hu first. They meant to frighten the rooster out, you see, but the bird only kept flying higher, branch by branch. Then, just as Hu and the rooster reached almost the very top of the tree, with Wil right behind, there was a loud crack, the branch under Hu's feet broke away, and down he went into the pond, splashing water and mud everywhere. Wil scrambled down as fast as he could and reached out to Hu from the bank, but Hu just lay there on his back, sinking deeper into the mud until only his nose stuck out of the water. Another farmer had seen what happened, and he came running and pulled Hu out of the pond. 'Why didn't you take Wil's hand?' he asked Hu. 'You could have drowned.' 'Why should I take his hand now?' Hu grumped. 'I passed him just a moment ago in broad daylight, and he never spoke a word to me.' " He waited expectantly.

The Maidens exchanged blank looks. Finally Somara said, "What happened with the pond? Surely the water is the point of this story."

Throwing up his hands, Rand started for the red-striped pavilion again. Behind him he heard Liah say, "I think it was supposed to be a joke."

"How can we laugh when he doesn't know what happened to the water?" Maira said.

"It was the rooster," Enaila put in. "Wetlander humor is strange. I think it was something about the rooster."

He tried to stop listening.

The Defenders stiffened even more rigidly at his approach, if that was possible, and the two standing before the gold-fringed entry flaps stepped aside smoothly, pulling them open. Their eyes stared past the Aiel women.

Rand had led the Defenders of the Stone once, in a desperate fight against Myrddraal and Trollocs in the halls of the Stone of Tear itself. They would have followed anyone who stepped forward to lead that night, but it had been him.

"The Stone still stands," he said quietly. That had been their battlecry. Quick smiles flashed across some of those faces before they snapped back to wooden stillness. In Tear commoners did not smile at what a lord said unless absolutely sure the lord wanted them to smile.

Most of the Maidens squatted easily outside, spears across their knees, a posture they could hold for hours without moving a muscle, but Sulin followed Rand inside with Liah, Enaila and Jalani. If those Defenders had all been childhood friends of Rand, the Maidens would have been as cautious, but the men inside were not friends at all.

Colorful, fringed carpets floored the pavilion, Tairen mazes and elaborate scrollwork patterns, and in the middle sat a massive table, heavily carved and gilded and garishly inlaid with ivory and turquoise, that very likely needed a wagon all to itself for transport. The map-covered table separated a dozen sweaty-faced Tairens from half as many Cairhienin, who suffered even more from the heat, each man holding a golden goblet that self-effacing servants in black-and-gold livery kept filled with punch. All the nobles were in silk, but the clean-shaven Cairhienin, short, slight and pale compared to the men on the other side of the table, wore coats dark and sober except for bright horizontal slashes of their House colors across the chest, the number indicating the rank of the House, while the Tairens, most with beards oiled and trimmed to neat points, wore padded coats that were a garden of red and yellow and green and blue, satin and brocade, silver thread and thread-of-gold. The Cairhienin were solemn, even dour, most gaunt-cheeked and each with the front of his head shaved and powdered in what had once been the fashion only among soldiers in Cairhien, not lords. The Tairens smiled and sniffed scented handkerchiefs and pomanders that filled the pavilion with their heavy aromas. Beside the punch, the one thing they seemed to have in common was flat-eyed stares for the Maidens, followed hard by the pretense that the Aiel were invisible.

The High Lord Weiramon, oiled beard and hair streaked gray, bowed deeply. He was one of four High Lords there, in elaborately silver-worked boots, the others being unctuous, overly plump Sunamon; Tolmeran, whose iron-gray beard seemed a spear point on the shaft of his leanness; and potato-nosed Torean, looking more a farmer than most farmers—but Rand had given Weiramon the command. For the time being. The other eight were lesser lords, some clean-shaven though with no less gray in their hair; they were here through their oaths of fealty to one or another of the High Lords, yet they all had some experience of fighting.

Weiramon was not short for a Tairen, though Rand stood a head taller, but he always reminded Rand of a banty rooster, all puffed out chest and strutting. “All hail the Lord Dragon,” he intoned, bowing, “soon to be

Conqueror of Illian. All hail the Lord of the Morning." The rest were no more than a breath behind, Tairens spreading arms wide, Cairhienin touching hand to heart.

Rand grimaced. Lord of the Morning had been one of Lews Therin's titles, or so the fragmentary histories said. A great deal of knowledge had been lost in the Breaking of the World, and more went up in smoke during the Trolloc Wars and later during the War of the Hundred Years, yet surprising shards sometimes survived. He was surprised that Weiramon's use of the title had not brought Lews Therin's mad yammering. Come to think of it, Rand had not heard that voice since shouting at it. As far as he could recall that was the first time he had ever actually addressed the voice sharing his head. The possibilities behind that sent a chill down his back.

"My Lord Dragon?" Sunamon dry-washed fleshy hands. He seemed to be trying not to see the *shoufa* wrapped around Rand's head. "Are you—?" Swallowing his words, he put on an ingratiating smile; asking a potential madman—potential at the very least—whether he was well was perhaps not what he wanted to say. "Would the Lord Dragon like some punch? A Lodanaille vintage mixed with honeymelon." A lanky Lord of the Land sworn to Sunamon, a man named Estevan with a hard jaw and harder eyes, motioned sharply, and a servant darted for a golden goblet from a side table against the canvas wall; another hurried to fill it.

"No," Rand said, then more strongly, "No." He waved the servant away without really seeing him. Had Lews Therin actually *heard*? Somehow that made the whole thing worse. He did not want to think about the possibility now; he did not want to think of it at all. "As soon as Hearne and Simaan get here, almost everything will be in place." Those two High Lords should be arriving soon; they led the last large parties of Tairen soldiers to have left Cairhien, over a month ago. Of course, there were smaller groups on the way south, and more Cairhienin. More Aiel, too; the stream of Aiel would draw things out. "I want to see—"

Abruptly he realized the pavilion had gone very quiet, very still, except for Torean suddenly tipping back his head to gulp down the rest of his punch. He scrubbed a hand across his mouth and held out the goblet for more, but the servants seemed to be trying to fade into the red-striped walls. Sulin and the other three Maidens were suddenly up on their toes, ready to veil.

"What is it?" he asked quietly.

Weiramon hesitated. “Simaan and Hearne have . . . gone to Haddon Mirk. They are not coming.” Torean snatched a worked-gold pitcher from one of the servants and filled his own goblet, slopping punch onto the carpets.

“And why have they gone there instead of coming here?” Rand did not raise his voice. He was sure he knew the answer. Those two—and five more High Lords besides—had been sent to Cairhien mainly to occupy minds set to plot against him.

Malicious smiles flickered among the Cairhienin, most half-hidden in quickly raised goblets. Semaradrid, the highest-ranking, slashes of color on his coat to below the waist, wore his sneer openly. A long-faced man with white streaks at his temples and dark eyes that could chip stone, he moved stiffly from wounds suffered in his land’s civil war, but his limp came from fighting Tear. His main reason for cooperating with the Tairens was that they were not Aiel. But then, the Tairens’ main reason for cooperating was that the Cairhienin were not.

It was one of Semaradrid’s countrymen who answered, a young lord named Meneril who had half Semaradrid’s stripes on his coat, and on his face a scar from the civil war that pulled up the left corner of his mouth in a permanent sardonic smile. “Treason, my Lord Dragon. Treason and rebellion.”

Weiramon might have been hesitant about saying those words to Rand’s face, yet he was not about to let an outlander speak for him. “Yes, rebellion,” he said hurriedly, glaring at Meneril, but his usual pomposity quickly returned. “And not only them, my Lord Dragon. The High Lords Darlin and Tedosian and the High Lady Estanda are in it, too. Burn my soul, but they all put their names to a letter of defiance! It seems some twenty or thirty minor nobles are involved as well, some little more than jumped-up farmers. Light-blasted fools!”

Rand almost admired Darlin. The man had opposed him openly from the start, fleeing the Stone when it fell and trying to rouse resistance among the country nobles. Tedosian and Estanda were different. Like Hearne and Simaan they had bowed and smiled, called him Lord Dragon and plotted behind his back. Now his forbearance was repaid. No wonder Torean was spilling punch over his white-streaked beard as he drank; he had been involved deeply with Tedosian, and with Hearne and Simaan for that matter.

“They wrote more than defiance,” Tolmeran said in a cold voice. “They wrote that you are a false Dragon, that the fall of the Stone and your drawing of The Sword That Is Not a Sword were some Aes Sedai trick.” There was a hint of question in his tone; he had not been in the Stone of Tear the night it fell to Rand.

“What do you believe, Tolmeran?” It was a seductive claim in a land where channeling had been outlawed before Rand changed the law, and Aes Sedai were at best tolerated, where the Stone of Tear had stood invincible for close to three thousand years before Rand took it. And a familiar claim. Rand wondered whether he would find Whitecloaks when these rebels were laid by the heels. He thought Pedron Niall might be too smart to allow that.

“I think you drew *Callandor*,” the lean man said after a moment. “I think you are the Dragon Reborn.” Both times there was a slight emphasis on “think.” Tolmeran had courage. Estevan nodded; slowly, but he did it. Another brave man.

Even they did not ask the obvious question, though, whether Rand wanted the rebels rooted out. Rand was not surprised. For one thing, Haddon Mirk was no easy place to root anyone out of, a huge tangled forest lacking villages, roads or even paths. In the choppy mountainous terrain along its northernmost edge a man would be lucky to cover a handful of miles in a long day, and armies could maneuver until their food ran out without finding one another. Perhaps more importantly, whoever asked that question could be suspected of volunteering to lead the expedition, and a volunteer could be suspected of wanting to join Darlin, not lay him by the heels. Tairens might not play *Daes Dae’mar*, the Game of Houses, the way Cairhienin did—that lot read volumes in a glance and heard more in a sentence than you ever meant to put there—but they still schemed and watched one another, suspicious of schemes, and they believed everyone else did the same.

Still, it suited Rand to leave the rebels where they were for now. All of his attention had to be on Illian; it had to be *seen* to be there. But he could not be seen as soft, either. These men would not turn on him, but Last Battle or no Last Battle, only two things kept the Tairens and Cairhienin from each other’s throats. They preferred each other to Aielmen, if barely, and they feared the wrath of the Dragon Reborn. If they lost that fear, they would be trying to kill one another, and the Aiel, before you could say Jak o’ the Mists.

“Does anyone speak in their defense?” he asked. “Does anyone know any mitigation?” If any did, they held their tongues; counting the servants, nearly two dozen pairs of eyes watched him, waiting. Perhaps the servants most intently of all. Sulin and the Maidens watched everything *except* him. “Their titles are forfeited, their lands and estates confiscated. Arrest warrants are to be signed for every man whose name is known. And every woman.” That could present a problem; the penalty in Tear for rebellion was death. He had changed some laws, but not that one, and it was too late now. “Publish it that whoever kills one of them will be absolved of murder, and whoever aids them will be charged with treason. Any who surrender will be spared their lives,” which might solve the difficulty of Estanda—he would not order a woman executed—if he could work how to manage it, “but those who persist will hang.”

The nobles shifted uneasily and exchanged glances, whether Tairen or Cairhienin. Blood drained from more than one face. They had certainly expected the death sentences—there could be no less for rebellion, and with war in the offing—but the stripping of titles plainly shocked them. Despite all the laws Rand had changed in both lands, despite lords hauled before magistrates and hanged for murder or fined for assault, they still thought there was some difference bred in the bone, some natural order that made them lions by right and commoners sheep. A High Lord who went to the gibbet died a High Lord, but Darlin and the others would die peasants in these men’s eyes, a much worse fate than the dying itself. The servants remained poised with their pitchers, waiting to refill any goblet that had to be tilted very far in drinking. Features as expressionless as ever, there seemed to be a cheerfulness in some of those eyes not there before.

“Now that that’s settled,” Rand said, dragging off the *shoufa* as he went to the table, “let’s see the maps. Sammael is more important than a handful of fools rotting in Haddon Mirk.” He hoped they did rot. Burn them!

Weiramon’s mouth tightened, and Tolmeran quickly smoothed out a frown. Sunamon’s face was so smooth it might have been a mask. The other Tairens looked as doubtful, and the Cairhienin as well, though Semaradrid hid it well. Some had seen Myrddraal and Trollocs during that attack on the Stone, and some had seen his duel with Sammael at Cairhien, yet they thought his claim the Forsaken were loose a symptom of insanity. He had heard whispers that he had wrought all the destruction at Cairhien himself, striking out maniacally at friend and foe alike. Going by Liah's stony face, one of them was going to get a Maiden's spear through him if they did not guard those looks.

They gathered around the table, though, as he tossed down the *shoufa* and rummaged through the maps scattered in layers. Bashere was right; men would follow madmen who won. So long as they won. Just as he found the map he wanted, a detailed drawing of the eastern end of Illian, the Aiel chiefs arrived.

Bruan of the Nakai Aiel was first to enter, followed closely by Jheran of the Shaarad, Dhearic of the Reyn, Han of the Tomanelle, and Erim of the Chareen, each acknowledging the nods of Sulin and the three Maidens. Bruan, a massive man with sad gray eyes, really was the leader of the five clans Rand had sent south so far. None of the others objected; Bruan's oddly placid manner belied his battle skills. Clothed in the *cadin'sor, shoufa* hanging loose about their necks, they were unarmed except for their heavy belt knives, but then, an Aiel was hardly unarmed even when he had only his hands and feet.

The Cairhienin simply pretended they were not there, but the Tairens made a point of sneering and sniffing ostentatiously at their pomanders and scented handkerchiefs. Tear had lost only the Stone to the Aiel, and that with the aid of the Dragon Reborn, as they believed—or of Aes Sedai—but Cairhien had twice been ravaged by them, twice defeated and humiliated.

Except for Han, the Aiel ignored them all. Han, white-haired and with a face like creased leather, glared murderously. He was a prickly man at best, and it might not have helped that some of the Tairens were as tall as he. Han was short for an Aiel—which meant well above average for a wetlander—and as touchy about it as Enaila. And of course, Aiel despised "treekillers," one of their names for Cairhienin, beyond any other wetlanders. Their other name for them was "oathbreakers."

"The Illianers," Rand said firmly, smoothing the map out. He used the Dragon Scepter to hold down one end and a gold-mounted inkpot and matching sand-bowl for the other. He did not need these men to start killing each other. He did not think they would—while he was there, at least. In stories allies eventually came to trust and like one another; he doubted these men ever would.

The rolling Plains of Maredo extended a little distance into Illian, giving way to forested hills well short of the Manetherendrelle, and the

River Shal branching off from it. Five inked crosses about ten miles apart marked the eastern edge of those hills. The Doirlon Hills.

Rand put his finger on the middle cross. “Are you sure Sammael has not added any new camps?” A slight grimace on Weiramon’s face made him snap irritably, “Lord Brend, if you prefer, then, or the Council of Nine, or Mattin Stepaneos den Balgar, if you want the king himself. Are they still like this?”

“Our scouts say so,” Jheran said calmly. Slender as a blade is slender, his light brown hair heavily streaked with gray, he was always calm now that the Shaarad’s four-hundred-year blood feud with the Goshien Aiel had ended with Rand’s coming. “*Sovin Nai* and *Duadhe Mahdi’in* keep a close watch.” He nodded slightly in satisfaction, and so did Dhearic. Jheran had been *Sovin Nai*, a Knife Hand, before becoming chief, and Dhearic *Duadhe Mahdi’in*, a Water Seeker. “We know any changes in five days by runners.”

“My scouts believe they are,” Weiramon said as if Jheran had not spoken. “I send a new troop every week. It takes a full month for them to come and go, but I assure you, I am as up-to-date as the distance allows.”

The Aiel’s faces might have been carved from stone.

Rand ignored the interplay. He had tried before to hammer shut the gaps between Tairen, Cairhienin and Aiel, and they always sprang apart as soon as his back turned. It was useless effort.

As for the camps. . . . He knew there were still only five; he had visited them, in a manner of speaking. There was a . . . place . . . that he knew how to enter, a strange, unpeopled reflection of the real world, and he had walked the wooden walls of those massive hillforts there. He knew the answers to almost every question he intended to ask, but he was juggling plans within plans like a gleeman juggling fire. “And Sammael is still bringing more men up?” This time he emphasized the name. The Aiel’s expressions did not change—if the Forsaken were loose, the Forsaken were loose; the world had to be faced as it was, not as you wished it to be—but the others darted those quick, worried glances at him. They had to get used to it sooner or later. They had to believe sooner or later.

“Every man in Illian who can hold a spear without tripping over it, or so it seems,” Tolmeran said with a glum expression. He was as eager to fight the Illianers as any Tairen—the two nations had hated each other since they were wrested from the wreckage of Artur Hawkwing’s empire; their history was one of wars fought on the slightest excuse—but he seemed a little less likely than the other High Lords to think every battle could be won by one good charge. “Every scout that makes it back reports the camps larger, with more formidable defenses.”

“We should move now, my Lord Dragon,” Weiramon said forcefully. “The Light burn my soul, I can catch the Illianers with their breeches around their ankles. They’ve tied themselves down. Why, they hardly have any horse at all! I’ll crush them in detail, and the way will be open to the city.” In Illian, as in Tear and Cairhien, “the city” was the city that had given the nation its name. “Burn my eyes, I will put your banner over Illian in a month, my Lord Dragon. Two at most.” Glancing at the Cairhienin, he added as if the words were being pulled from him, “Semaradrid and I will.” Semaradrid bowed slightly. Very slightly.

“No,” Rand said curtly. Weiramon’s was a plan for disaster. A good two hundred and fifty miles lay between the camp and Sammael’s great hillforts across a plain of grass where a fifty-foot rise was considered a tall hill and a thicket of two hides a forest. Sammael had scouts, too; any rat or raven could be one of Sammael’s scouts. Two hundred and fifty miles. Twelve or thirteen days for the Tairens and Cairhienin, with luck. The Aiel could make it in perhaps five, if they pushed—a lone scout or two moved faster than an army, even among Aiel—but they were no part of Weiramon’s design. Long before Weiramon reached the Doirlon Hills, Sammael would be ready to crush the Tairen, not the other way around. A fool plan. Even more foolish than the one Rand had given them. “I’ve given your orders. You hold here until Mat arrives to take command, and even then, no one moves a foot until I think I have enough numbers here. There are more men on their way, Tairens, Cairhienin, Aiel. I mean to smash Sammael, Weiramon. Smash him forever, and bring Illian under the Dragon Banner.” That much was true. “I only wish I could be with you, but Andor requires my attention yet.”

Weiramon’s face became sour stone, Semaradrid’s grimace should have turned the wine in his punch to vinegar, and Tolmeran wore such a lack of expression that his disapproval was plain as a fist in the nose. In Semaradrid’s case, it was the delay that worried. He had pointed out more than once that if every day brought more men to the camp here, it also brought more to the forts in Illian. No doubt Weiramon’s plan was the result of his urgings, though he would have made a better. Tolmeran’s doubts centered on Mat. Despite what he had heard from Cairhienin of Mat’s skill in battle, Tolmeran thought it flattery from fools for a country man who happened to be a friend of the Dragon Reborn. They were honest objections, and Semaradrid's even had validity—if the plan they had been given had been more than another screen. It was unlikely Sammael depended entirely on rats and ravens for his spying. Rand expected there were human spies in the camp for other Forsaken as well, and probably for the Aes Sedai.

"It shall be as you say, my Lord Dragon," Weiramon said heavily. The man was brave enough when it came to battle, but a pure blind idiot unable to think beyond the glory of the charge, his hatred of Illianers, his contempt for Cairhienin and Aiel "savages." Rand was sure Weiramon was exactly the man he needed. Tolmeran and Semaradrid would not move too soon so long as Weiramon held the command.

For a long while further they talked and Rand listened, asking occasional questions. There was no more opposition, no more suggestions that the attack be made now, no discussion of the attack at all. What Rand questioned Weiramon and the others about was wagons, wagons and what was in them. The Plains of Maredo had few villages and far between, no city except Far Madding in the north, and barely enough farmland to feed the people already there. A huge army would need a constant stream of wagons out of Tear bringing everything from flour for bread to nails for horseshoes. Except for Tolmeran, the High Lords were of the opinion that the army could carry what it needed to cross the plain and then could live off Illian; there seemed to be a certain relish in the thought of stripping their ancient enemy's lands to the ground like a swarm of locusts. The Cairhienin had a different opinion, especially Semaradrid and Meneril. Not only commoners had gone hungry during Cairhien's civil war and the Shaido's siege of their capital; their hollow cheeks spoke eloquently of that. Illian was a fat land, and even the Doirlon Hills held farms and vineyards, but Semaradrid and Meneril did not want to trust their soldiers' bellies to uncertain forage if there was another way. As for Rand, he did not want Illian ravaged any more than could not be avoided.

He did not really press anyone. Sunamon assured him the wagons were being assembled, and he had long since learned his lesson about telling Rand one thing and doing another. Supplies were being gathered all across Tear, despite Weiramon's grimaces of impatience with the whole notion and Torean's sweaty mutters about the expense. The important thing, though, was that the plan he had given them was going forward—and would be seen to be going forward.

Leavetaking involved more grandiose prattle and elaborate bows while he rewound the *shoufa* around his head and took up the Dragon Scepter again, with halfhearted invitations to stay for a banquet and equally insincere offers to attend him to his departure if he could not remain to eat the feast they would have prepared. Tairen or Cairhienin, they avoided the company of the Dragon Reborn as much as they safely could without losing his favor, while pretending that they did no such thing. Most especially they wanted to be elsewhere when he channeled. They did escort him to the entrance and a few steps outside, of course, but Sunamon sighed audibly when he left them, and Rand heard Torean actually giggling in relief.

The Aiel chiefs went with Rand silently, and the Maidens outside joined Sulin and the other three in making a ring around the six men as they started toward the green-striped tent. This time there were only a few cheers, and the chiefs said nothing. They had said almost as little back in the pavilion. When Rand commented on it, Dhearic said, “These wetlanders do not want to hear us.” He was a husky man, within a finger width of Rand’s height, with a big nose and paler streaks prominent in his golden hair. His blue eyes were filled with contempt. “They hear only the wind.”

“Did they tell you of those who rebel against you?” Erim asked. Taller than Dhearic, he had a pugnacious jaw and almost as much white as red in his hair.

“They did,” Rand said, and Han frowned at him.

“If you are sending these Tairens after their own kind, it is a mistake. Even if they could be trusted, I do not think they could do it. Send the spears. One clan would be enough and more.”

Rand shook his head. “Darlin and his rebels can wait. Sammael is what’s important.”

“Then let us go to Illian now,” Jheran said. “Forget these wetlanders, Rand al’Thor. Already there are nearly two hundred thousand spears gathered here. We can destroy the Illianers before Weiramon Saniago and Semaradrid Maravin can be halfway there.”

For a moment Rand squeezed his eyes shut. Was everyone going to argue with him? These were not men who would give way at a frown from the Dragon Reborn. The Dragon Reborn was only a wetlander prophecy; they followed He Who Comes With the Dawn, the *Car’a’carn*, and as he had long since grown tired of hearing, even the *Car'a'carn* was not a king. "I want your word to stay here until Mat tells you to move. A promise from each of you."

"We will stay, Rand al'Thor." Bruan's deceptively mild voice had a tight edge. The others' agreements came in harder voices, but they came.

"But it is wasting time," Han added, twisting his mouth. "May I never know shade if it is not." Jheran and Erim nodded.

Rand had not expected them to give in so quickly. "Now and then you have to waste time to save it," he said, and Han snorted.

Back at the green-striped tent the Thunder Walkers had lifted up the sides on poles, letting the breeze blow through the shaded interior. Hot and dry as it was, the Aiel seemed to find it refreshing. Rand did not think he sweated a drop less than he had in the sun. He pulled off the *shoufa* as he settled to the layered rugs with Bruan and the other chiefs facing him. The Maidens added their number to the Thunder Walkers around the tent; every so often banter between them drifted in, and laughter at it. This time Leiran seemed to be getting the better of it; at least, the Maidens rattled spears against bucklers at him twice. Rand understood almost none of it.

Thumbing his short-stemmed pipe full of tabac, he passed the goatskin pouch around for the chiefs to fill their pipes—he had found a small cask of good Two Rivers leaf in Caemlyn—then channeled his alight while they sent a Thunder Walker for a burning twig from one of the cookfires. When all the pipes were lit they settled down to talk, puffing contentedly.

The conversation lasted fully as long as his discussion with the lords, not because there was that much to talk about but because Rand had talked alone with the wetlanders. Aiel were touchy about honor; their lives were governed by *ji'e'toh*, honor and obligation, with rules as complex and odd as their humor. They talked of the Aiel still on their way down from Cairhien, of when Mat would arrive and of what if anything should be done about the Shaido. They talked about hunting and women and whether brandy was as good as *oosquai*, and about humor. Even patient Bruan finally spread his hands in surrender and gave up trying to explain Aiel jokes. What under the Light was funny about a woman stabbing her husband by accident, whatever the circumstances, or a man ending up married to the sister of the woman he wanted to marry? Han grumped and snorted and refused to believe Rand did not understand; *he* laughed so hard at the one about the stabbing that he nearly fell over. The one thing they did not talk about was the coming war against Illian.

When they left, Rand stood squinting at the sun, halfway down toward the horizon. Han was repeating the story about the stabbing, and the departing chiefs chuckled over it again. Tapping his pipe out on the heel of his palm, Rand ground the dottle underfoot in the dust. There was still time to return to Caemlyn and meet Bashere, but he went back inside the tent and sat watching the sun sink. As it touched the horizon, turning red as blood, Enaila and Somara brought him a plate of mutton stew heaped high enough for two men, a round loaf of bread and a pitcher of mint tea that had been set in a bucket of water to cool.

"You do not eat enough," Somara said, trying to smooth his hair before he moved his head away.

Enaila eyed him. "If you did not avoid Aviendha so, she would see that you ate."

"He attracts her interest, then runs from her," Somara muttered. "You must attract her again. Why do you not offer to wash her hair?"

"He should not be *that* forward," Enaila said firmly. "Asking to brush her hair will be more than enough. He does not want her to think him forward."

Somara sniffed. "She will not think he is forward when he runs from her. You can be too modest, Rand al'Thor."

"You do realize that neither of you is my mother, don't you?"

The two *cadin'sor*-clad women looked at each other in confusion. "Do you think this is another wetlander joke?" Enaila asked, and Somara shrugged.

"I do not know. He does not look amused." She patted Rand on the back. "I am sure it was a good joke, but you must explain it to us."

Rand suffered in silence, grinding his teeth, while they watched him eat. They literally watched every spoonful. Matters became no better when they left with his plate and Sulin joined him. Sulin had some blunt, and most improper, advice on how he could reattract Aviendha's notice; among the Aiel, it was the sort of thing a first-sister might do for a first-brother.

"You must be decently modest in her eyes," the white-haired Maiden told him, "but not so modest she thinks you boring. Ask her to scrape your back in the sweat tent, but shyly, with your eyes downcast. When you undress for bed, let yourself dance as if life pleases you, then apologize when you suddenly realize she is there and put yourself straight into your blankets. Can you blush?”

A great deal of suffering in silence. The Maidens knew too much, and not enough.

When they returned to Caemlyn, well after the sun had gone down, Rand crept into his apartment with his boots in his hands, fumbling his way through the anteroom into his bedchamber in the dark. Even if he had not known Aviendha would be there, already on her pallet on the floor by the wall, he would have felt her presence. In the stillness of the night, he could hear her breathing. For once it seemed he had managed to wait long enough for her to fall asleep. He had tried to stop this, but Aviendha paid him no mind and the Maidens laughed at his “shyness” and “modesty.” Good things in a man when alone, they agreed, so long as not carried too far.

He climbed into his bed with a sense of relief that Aviendha was already asleep—and some disgruntlement that he dared not light a lamp to wash—and she turned over on her pallet. Very likely she had been awake all along.

“Sleep well and wake,” was all she said.

Thinking what idiocy it was to feel this sudden contentment because a woman he wanted to avoid told him good night, he stuffed a goose-down pillow beneath his head. Aviendha probably thought this the most marvelous joke; taunting was almost an art among Aiel, and the nearer it came to bringing blood, the better. Sleep began to come, and his last conscious thought was that he had a huge joke of his own, though only he and Mat and Bashere knew it yet. Sammael had no sense of humor at all, but that great hammer of an army waiting in Tear was the biggest joke the world had ever seen. With any luck, Sammael would be dead before he knew he should laugh.

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CHAPTER 5

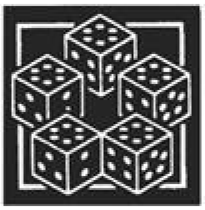

A Different Dance

The Golden Stag lived up to its name in most ways. Polished tables and benches with rose-carved legs dotted the large common room. One white-aproned serving girl did nothing but sweep the white stone floor. Blue-and-gold scroll-work made a broad painted band on the plaster walls just below the high beamed ceiling. The fireplaces were well-dressed stone, their hearths decorated with a few evergreen branches, and a stag chiseled above each lintel supporting a winecup in branching antlers. A tall clock with a little gilding stood on one mantel. A knot of musicians played on a small dais at the back, two perspiring men in their shirtsleeves with keening flutes, a pair plucking nine-string bitterns, and a red-faced woman in a blue-striped dress working tiny wooden hammers across a dulcimer on thin legs. More than a dozen serving maids scurried in and out, stepping quickly in their aprons and pale blue dresses. Most were pretty, though some carried nearly as many years as Mistress Daelvin, the round little innkeeper with her wispy gray bun at the nape of her neck. Just the sort of place Mat liked; it fairly oozed comfort and an air of money. He had chosen it because it sat nearly dead center in the town, but the other had not hurt.

Not everything fitted the second-best inn in Maerone, of course. The smells from the kitchen were mutton and turnips again, and the inevitable spicy barley soup, and they mingled with the smell of dust and horses from outside. Well, food was a problem in a town jammed with refugees and soldiers, and more in camps all around it. Men’s voices singing raucous marching songs came and went in the street, the sounds of boots and horses’ hooves and men cursing the heat. The common room was hot, too, without a breath of air stirring; had the windows been swung out, dust would soon have coated everything inside, and it still would not have done much for the heat inside. Maerone was a griddle.

As far as Mat could see, the whole bloody world was drying up, and he did not want to think about why. He wished he could forget the heat, forget why he was in Maerone, forget everything. His good green coat, gold-embroidered on collar and cuffs, was undone, his fine linen shirt unlaced, yet he still sweated like a horse. It might have helped to remove the black silk scarf looped around his neck, but he seldom did where anyone could see. Draining the last of his wine, he set the burnished pewter cup on the table at his elbow and picked up his broad-brimmed hat to fan himself. Whatever he drank no sooner went in than he sweated it out.

When he chose to stay at the Golden Stag, the lords and officers of the Band of the Red Hand followed his lead, which meant all others stayed clear. That usually did not displease Mistress Daelvin. She could have rented out every bed five times over just among the lords and lordlings of the Band, and that sort paid well, had few fights and usually took them outside before spilling blood. This midday, however, only nine or ten men occupied the tables, and she occasionally blinked at the empty benches, patted at her bun and sighed; she would not sell much wine before evening. A large part of her profits came from wine. The musicians played vigorously, though. A handful of lords pleased with the music—anyone with gold deserved a “my Lord” so far as they were concerned—could be more generous than a room full of common soldiers.

Unfortunately for the musicians’ purses, Mat was the only man listening, and he winced at every third note. It really was not their fault; the music sounded fine if you did not know what you were listening to. Mat did—he had taught it to them, clapping the beat and humming—but no one else had heard that tune in more than two thousand years. The best to be said was that they had the rhythms right.

A bit of conversation caught his ear. Tossing his hat down, he waved his cup to signal for more wine and leaned across his table toward the three men drinking around the next. “What was that?”

“We are trying to figure out how to win some of our money back from you,” Talmanes said, unsmiling over his winecup. He was not upset. Only a few years older than Mat’s twenty, and a head shorter, Talmanes seldom smiled. The man always made Mat think of a compressed spring. “No one can beat you at cards.” The commander of half the Band’s cavalry, he was a lord here in Cairhien, but the front of his head was shaved and powdered, though sweat had washed some of it away. A good many younger

Cairhienin lords had taken up soldiers' styles. Talmanes' coat was plain, too, without a noble's slashes of color, although he was entitled to quite a few.

"Not so," Mat protested. True, when his luck was in, it was perfect, but it ran in cycles, especially with things that had as much order as a deck of cards. "Blood and ashes! You won fifty crowns from me last week." Fifty crowns; a year or so ago, he would have turned backflips at winning one crown, and wept at the thought of losing one. A year or so ago, he had not had one to lose.

"How many hundred behind does that leave me?" Talmanes asked dryly. "I want a chance to win some back." If he ever did start winning against Mat with any consistency, he would start worrying too. Like most of the Band, he took Mat's luck as a talisman.

"Dice are no bloody good," Daerid said. Commander of the Band's foot, he drank thirstily and ignored a grimace only half-hidden behind Nalesean's oiled beard. Most nobles Mat had met thought dice common, fit only for peasants. "I have never seen you end the day behind at dice. It has to be something you have no control over, no hand in, if you understand."

Just a little taller than his fellow Cairhienin Talmanes, Daerid was a good fifteen years older, his nose broken more than once and three white scars crisscrossing his face. The only one of the three not nobly born, he wore the front of his head shaved and powdered, too; Daerid had been a soldier all his life.

"We thought horses," Nalesean put in, gesturing with his pewter cup. A blocky man, taller than either of the Cairhienin, he led the other half of the cavalry in the Band. Given the heat, Mat often wondered why he kept his luxuriant black beard, but he trimmed it every morning to keep the point sharp. And where Daerid and Talmanes wore their plain gray coats hanging open, Nalesean had his—green silk with those padded Tairen sleeves striped and cuffed in gold satin—buttoned to the neck. His face glistened with sweat that he ignored. "Burn my soul, but your luck holds hard with battle and cards. And dice," he added with another grimace at Daerid. "But in horse racing, it's all the horse."

Mat smiled and propped his elbows on the table. "Find yourself a good horse, and we'll see." His luck might not affect a horse race—aside from dice and cards and the like, he could never be sure what it would touch or when—but he had grown up watching his father trade horseflesh, and his own eye for a horse was fairly sharp.

“Do you want this wine, or not? I cannot pour it if I cannot reach your cup.”

Mat glanced over his shoulder. The serving maid behind him with a polished pewter pitcher was short and slim, a dark-eyed, pale-cheeked beauty with black curls nestling on her shoulders. And that precise, musical Cairhienin accent made her voice into chimes. He had had his eye on Betse Silvin since the first day he walked into the Golden Stag, but this was his first chance to speak to her; there were always five things that needed doing immediately and ten that should have been done yesterday. The other men had already buried their faces in their wine, leaving him as alone with the woman as they could without walking out. They had manners, even the two nobles.

Grinning, Mat swung his legs over the bench and held out his cup for her to fill. “Thank you, Betse,” he said, and she bobbed a curtsy. When he asked her to pour one for herself and join him, however, she set the pitcher on the table, folded her arms and tilted her head to one side, eyeing him up and down.

“I hardly think Mistress Daelvin would like that. Oh, no, I do not think she would. Are you a lord? They all seem to jump for you, but no one calls you ‘my Lord.’ They barely even bow; just the commoners.”

Mat’s eyebrows shot up. “No,” he said, more curtly than he wished, “I am *not* a lord.” Rand could let people run around calling him Lord Dragon and the like, but that was not for Matrim Cauthon. No, indeed. Taking a deep breath, he put his grin back on. Some women tried to nudge a man off balance, but it was a dance he was good at. “Just call me Mat, Betse. I’m sure Mistress Daelvin won’t mind if you just sit with me.”

“Oh, yes, she would. But I suppose I can talk a bit; you must be almost a lord. Why are you wearing that in this heat?” Leaning forward, she pushed his scarf down with a finger. He had not been paying attention, and had let it slip a little. “What is this?” She ran her finger along the pale thickened ridge that circled his neck. “Did someone try to hang you? Why? You are too young to be a hardened scofflaw.” He pulled his head back and hastily retied the black silk to hide his scar, but Betse was not put off. Her hand dipped into the unlaced front of his shirt to pull up the silver foxhead medallion he wore on a leather thong. “Was it for stealing this? It looks valuable; is it valuable?” Mat snatched the medallion away, stuffed it back where it belonged. The woman hardly drew breath, certainly not enough for him to get a word in. He heard Nalesean and Daerid chuckling behind him, and his face darkened. Sometimes his luck with gambling was stood on its head with women, and they always found it funny. “No, they would not have let you keep it if you stole it, would they?” Betse chattered on. “And if you are almost a lord, I suppose you can own things like that. Perhaps it was because you knew too much. You look a young man who knows a great deal. Or thinks he does.” She smiled one of those shrewd little smiles that women wore when they wanted to fuddle a man. It seldom meant they knew anything, but they could make you think they did. “Did they try to hang you for thinking you knew too much? Or was it for pretending to be a lord? Are you sure you are not a lord?”

Daerid and Nalesean were laughing right out, now, and even Talmanes was chuckling, though they tried to pretend it was about something else. Daerid wheezingly interjected some tale about a man falling off a horse whenever he had breath enough, but there was nothing funny in the bits Mat heard.

He kept his grin on, though. He was not going to be routed even if she *could* talk faster than he could run. She was very pretty, and he had spent the last few weeks talking to the likes of Daerid and worse, sweaty men who sometimes forgot to shave and too often had no chance to bathe. Perspiration beaded Betse’s cheeks, but she gave off a faint smell of lavender-scented soap. “Actually, I got that scratch for knowing too little,” he said lightly. Women always liked it when you played down your scars; the Light knew he was growing enough of them. “I know too much now, but too little then. You could say I was hanged for knowledge.”

Shaking her head, Betse pursed her lips. “That sounds like it is supposed to be witty, Mat. Lordlings say witty things all the time, but you say you are not a lord. Besides, I am a simple woman; wit goes right over my head. I think simple words are best. Since you are not a lord, you should speak simply, or else some might think you were playing at being a lord. No woman likes a man pretending to be what he is not. Maybe you could explain what you were trying to say?”

Maintaining his smile was an effort. Bandying words with her was not going at all the way he wanted. He could not tell whether she was a complete nit or just managing to make him trip over his ears trying to keep up. Either way, she was still pretty, and she still smelled of lavender, not sweat. Daerid and Nalesean seemed to be choking to death. Talmanes was humming "A Frog on the Ice." So he was skidding about with his feet in the air, was he?

Mat put down his winecup and rose, bowing over Betse's hand. "I am who I am and no more, but your face drives words right out my head." That made her blink; whatever they said, women always like flowery talk. "Will you dance?"

Not waiting for an answer, he led her toward where a clear floor stretched the length of the common room through the tables. With luck, dancing would slow her tongue a little, and he was lucky, after all. Besides, he had never heard of a woman whose heart was not softened by dancing. *Dance with her, and she will forgive much; dance well, and she will forgive anything*. That was a very old saying. Very old.

Betse hung back, biting her lip and looking for Mistress Daelvin, but the plump little innkeeper only smiled and waved Betse on, then patted ineffectually at the tendrils escaping her bun and went back to chivvying the other serving maids as though the tables were full. Mistress Daelvin would have been all over any man she thought was behaving improperly—despite her placid appearance, she kept a short cudgel in her skirts and sometimes used it; Nalesean still eyed her carefully when she came close—but if a free-spending man wanted a dance, what was the harm in that? He held Betse's hands outstretched to either side. There should be just enough room between the tables. The musicians began to play louder, if no better.

"Follow me," he told her. "The steps are simple to start." In time to the music he began, dip and a gliding sidestep to the right, left foot sliding after. Dip and a gliding step and slide, with arms outstretched.

Betse caught on quickly, and she was light on her feet. When they reached the musicians, he smoothly lifted her hands overhead and spun himself and her back to back. Then it was dip and sidestep, twirl face-to-face, dip, sidestep and twirl, again and again, all the way back to where they began. She fell into that just as swiftly, smiling up at him in delight whenever the turns allowed. She truly was pretty.

"A little more complicated now," he murmured, turning so they faced the musicians side by side, wrists crossed and hands linked in front of them. Right knee up, slight kick left, then glide forward and right. Left knee up, slight kick right, then glide forward and left. Betse laughed as they wove their way to the performers once more. The steps became more intricate with each passage, but she needed only one demonstration to match him, light as a feather in his hands with each twist and turn and spin. Best of all, she did not say a word.

The music caught him up, missed notes and all, and the pattern dance, and memories floated in his head as they floated back and forth across the floor. In memory he was a head taller, with long golden mustaches and blue eyes. He wore a red-sashed coat of amber silk with a ruff of finest Barsine lace and yellow sapphire studs from Aramaelle on his chest, and he danced with a darkly beautiful emissary of the Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk. The fine gold chain linking her nose ring to one of her multitude of earrings held tiny medallions that identified her as Wavemistress of Clan Shodin. He did not care how powerful she was; that was for the king to worry over, not a middling lord. She was beautiful and light in his arms, and they danced beneath the great crystal dome at the court of Shaemal, when all the world envied Coremanda's splendor and might. Other memories flitted around the edges, sparking off bits of that remembered dance. The morrow would bring news of increasingly heavy Trolloc raids out of the Great Blight, and another month word that Barsine of the golden spires had been ravaged and burned and the Trolloc hordes were sweeping south. So would begin what later would be called the Trolloc Wars, though none gave it that name to begin, three hundred years and more of all but unbroken battle, blood, fire and ruin before the Trollocs were driven back, the Dreadlords hunted down. So would begin the fall of Coremanda, with all its wealth and power, and Essenia, with its philosophers and famed seats of learning, of Manetheren and Eharon and all of the Ten Nations, smashed even in victory to rubble from which other lands would rise, lands that barely remembered the Ten Nations as more than myths of a happier time. But that lay ahead, and he banished those memories in the pleasure of this one. Tonight he danced the pattern dance with. . . .

He blinked, for an instant startled by sunlight streaming through the windows and the fair face beaming up at him through a sheen of perspiration. Very nearly he fumbled the complex interweaving of his feet with Betse's as they whirled down the floor, but he caught himself before tripping her, the steps coming instinctively. This dance was his as surely as those memories were, borrowed or stolen, but so seamlessly woven into those he really had lived that he could no longer tell the difference without thinking. All his, now, filling holes in his own memories; he might as well have lived them all.

It had been true, what he told her about the scar on his neck. Hanged for knowledge, and for lack of it. Twice he had stepped through a *ter'angreal* like a bull-goose fool, a country idiot thinking it simple as a walk across the meadow. Well, almost as simple. The results only hardened his mistrust of anything to do with the One Power. The first time he had been told he was fated to die and live again, among other things he did not want to hear. Some of those other things had set him on the path to his second journey through a *ter'angreal,* and that had led to him having a rope tied around his neck.

A series of steps, each taken for good cause or pure necessity, each seeming so reasonable at the time, and each leading to things he had never imagined. He always seemed to find himself caught in that sort of dance. He had been dead for sure until Rand cut him down and revived him. For the hundredth time he remade a promise to himself. From now on he was going to watch where he put his feet. No more jumping into things without thinking what might come of it.

In truth, he had gained more than the scar that day. The silver foxhead for one, its single eye shaded to look like the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai. Sometimes he laughed so hard over that medallion that his ribs hurt. He did not trust any Aes Sedai, so he even bathed and slept with the thing around his neck. The world was a funny place—funny peculiar, usually.

Another gain really had been knowledge, if unwanted knowledge. Slices of other men's lives packed his head now, thousands of them, sometimes only a few hours, sometimes years altogether though in patches, memories of courts and combats stretching for well over a thousand years, from long before the Trolloc Wars to the final battle of Artur Hawkwing's rise. All his now, or they might as well be.

Nalesean and Daerid and Talmanes were clapping to the music, and the other men scattered around the tables too. Men of the Band of the Red Hand, urging their commander on in his dance. Light but that name made Mat cringe inside. It had belonged to a legendary band of heroes who died trying to save Manetheren. Not a man who rode or marched behind the Band's banner but thought they would end up in the legends too. Mistress Daelvin was clapping as well, and the rest of the maids had stopped to watch.

Those other men's memories were why the Band followed Mat, though they did not know. Because his head held memories of more battles and campaigns than a hundred men could have faced. Whether he had been on the winning side or the losing, he remembered how those battles were won or lost, and it took only a little wit to translate that into winning for the Band. So far it had, at least. When he could find no way to avoid the fighting.

More than once he had wished those bits of other men were out of his head. Without them, he would not be where he was, commanding nearly six thousand soldiers and more wanting to join every day, about to lead them south and take command of the bloody invasion of a land controlled by one of the bloody Forsaken. He was no hero, and did not want to be one. Heroes had a bad habit of getting killed. When you were a hero, it was toss the dog a bone and shove him into a corner out of the way, unless it was promise the dog a bone and send him out to hunt again. The same for soldiers, for that matter.

On the other hand, without those memories he would not have six thousand soldiers around him. He would stand alone, *ta'veren* and tied to the Dragon Reborn, a naked target and known to the Forsaken. Some of them apparently knew entirely too much about Mat Cauthon. Moiraine had claimed he was important, that maybe Rand needed him and Perrin both to win the Last Battle. If she had been right, he would do what he had to—he would; he just had to get used to the idea—but he was not about to be a bloody hero. If he could just figure out what to do about the bloody Horn of Valere. . . . Offering up a small prayer for Moiraine's soul, he hoped she had been wrong.

He and Betse reached the end of the clear space for the final time, and she collapsed against his chest laughing when he stopped. "Oh, that was wonderful. I felt like I was in a royal palace somewhere. Can we do it again? Oh, can we? Can we?" Mistress Daelvin applauded for a moment, then realized the other serving maids were standing about and rounded on them, sending them scurrying like chickens with vigorous waves of her arms.

"Does 'Daughter of the Nine Moons' mean anything to you?" The words just popped out. It was thinking about those *ter'angreal* that did it. Wherever he found the Daughter of the Nine Moons—*Please, Light, let it be a long time yet!* It was a fervent thought—wherever he found her, it would not be serving table at a small-town inn crammed full of soldiers and refugees. Then again, who could say when it came to prophecy? It had been prophecy, in a way. To die and live again. To marry the Daughter of the Nine Moons. To give up half the light of the world to save the world, whatever that meant. He *had* died, after all, swinging on that rope. If that was true, the rest had to be. No way out of that.

"Daughter of the Nine Moons?" Betse said breathlessly. Lack of breath did not slow her down. "Is it an inn? A tavern? Not here in Maerone, I know that. Maybe across the river in Aringill? I have never been to—"

Mat laid a finger across her lips. "It doesn't matter. Let's dance another dance." A country dance this time; something from the here and now, with no memories but his attached to it. Only, he really did have to think to tell them apart now.

A throat clearing made him glance over his shoulder, and he sighed at the sight of Edorion standing in the doorway, steel-backed gauntlets tucked behind his sword belt and helmet beneath his arm. The young Tairen lord had been a plump, pink-cheeked man when Mat gambled with him in the Stone of Tear, but he had grown harder and sun-dark since coming north. The rimmed helmet bore no plumes now, and chips and dents marred the once ornate gilding on his breastplate. His puffy-sleeved coat was blue striped with black, but showing wear.

"You told me to remind you of your rounds at this hour." Edorion coughed into his fist; he ostentatiously did not glance at Betse. "But I could come back later if you wish."

"I'll come now," Mat told him. It was important to make rounds every day, inspect something different every day; those other men's memories told him that, and he had come to trust them about things like this. If he was stuck in this job, he might as well try to do it right. Doing it right might keep him alive. Besides, Betse had drawn away from him and was trying to pat sweat from her face with her apron and straighten her hair at the same time. The euphoria was fading from her face. It did not matter. She would remember. *Dance well with a woman,* he thought smugly, *and she's halfway yours*.

"Give these to the musicians," he told her, folding three gold marks into her hand. However badly they had played, for a time the tune had taken him away from Maerone and the immediate future. Anyway, women liked generosity. This was going very well. With a bow, just short of kissing her hand, he added, "Until later, Betse. We'll dance again when I come back."

To his surprise, she waggled a finger under his nose and gave an admonitory shake of her head as if she had read his mind. Well, he had never claimed to understand women.

Settling his hat on his head, he took up his black-hafted spear from beside the door. That was another gift from the other side of that *ter'angreal*, with its inscription of the shaft in the Old Tongue and its odd head like a short sword blade marked with two ravens.

"We'll do the drinking rooms today," he told Edorion, and they strode out into the full heat of midday, into the bedlam of Maerone.

It was a small, unwalled town, though fifty times larger than anything he had seen before leaving the Two Rivers. An overgrown village, really, few of the brick and stone buildings more than a single story high and only the inns rising as much as three, with as many roofs of wooden shingles or thatch as slate or tile. Now the streets, most hard-packed dirt, were thronged with people. The townsfolk were of every sort, mainly Cairhienin and Andorans. Although it lay on the Cairhienin side of the Erinin, Maerone was in no nation now, but balanced between, with folk from half a dozen lands living there or passing through. There had even been three or four Aes Sedai since Mat arrived. Even wearing the medallion he walked wide of them—no need to seek out trouble—but they all moved on as quickly as they came. His luck did run good when it was important. So far it had.

The townspeople hurried about their business, for the most part ignoring the many ragged men, women and children who wandered about blankly. All Cairhienin, those last usually found their way down to the river before returning to the refugee camps ringing the town. Few left to go home, though. The civil war might be over up in Cairhien, but there were still brigands, and they feared the Aiel. For all Mat knew, they feared running into the Dragon Reborn. The simple truth of it was, they had run as far as they could; none had energy remaining for much beyond those trips to the river to stare at Andor.

The Band's soldiers added to the crowds, ones or threes meandering about the shops and taverns, troops in formation, crossbowmen and archers in jerkins covered with steel discs, pikemen in battered breastplates cast off by their betters or looted from the dead. Everywhere rode breastplated horsemen, Tairen lancers in rimmed helmets and Cairhienin in bell-shaped helmets, even some Andorans in conical helmets with barred face-guards. Rahvin had tossed a good many men out of the Queen's Guards, men too loyal to Morgase, and some had joined the Band. Hawkers wove through the mass with their trays, crying needles and thread, ointments claimed to be good for any wound and remedies for everything from blisters to watery bowels to camp fever, soap, tin pots and cups guaranteed not to rust out, woolen stockings, knives and daggers of the finest Andoran steel—the seller’s word on it—every sort of thing that a soldier might need or the vendors thought he might be convinced he did. The din was such that any hawkers’ bellows were swallowed up three paces away.

The soldiers recognized Mat right away, of course, and many raised cheers, even men too far away to see more than his broad-brimmed hat and odd spear. Those picked him out as clearly as any noble’s sigil. He had heard all the rumors about why he disdained armor and helmet; there were all sorts, from mad bravery to the claim that only a weapon forged by the Dark One himself could kill him. Some said the hat had been given him by Aes Sedai, and as long as he wore it *nothing* could kill him. The fact was it was an ordinary hat, and he wore it because it gave good shade. And because it was a good reminder to stay clear of anywhere he might need helmet and armor. The tales circulating about his spear, with that inscription that few even among the nobles could read, were more extravagant still. None could match the truth, though. That raven-marked blade had been made by Aes Sedai during the War of the Shadow, before the Breaking; it never needed sharpening, and he doubted he could break it if he tried.

Waving to acknowledge shouts of “The Light illumine Lord Matrim!” and “Lord Matrim and victory!” and such drivel, he made his way through the crowds with Edorion. At least he did not have to push; they gave way as soon as they saw him. He wished so many of the refugees did not stare as though he had the key to their hopes hidden in his pocket. Aside from making sure they got food from the wagon trains coming up from Tear, he did not know what he could do. A good many were dirty as well as ragged.

“Did the soap get out to the camps?” he muttered.

Edorion heard despite the uproar. “It did. Most trade it back to the peddlers for cheap wine. They don’t want soap; they want to cross the river, or else drown their miseries.”

Mat grunted sourly. Passage to Aringill was one thing he could not give them.

Until civil war and worse tore Cairhien apart, Maerone had been a transit point for trade between Cairhien and Tear, which meant it had almost as many inns and taverns as it did houses. The first five he poked his nose into varied little, from The Fox and Goose to The Wagoner's Whip, stone buildings with packed tables and the occasional budding fistfight, which Mat ignored. No one was drunk, though.

The River Gate, all the way across town, had been Maerone's best inn, but heavy planks nailed across its sun-carved doors served as a reminder to the innkeepers and tapsters not to get the Band's soldiers drunk. Still, even sober soldiers fought, Tairen against Cairhienin against Andoran, foot against horse, one lord's men against another's, veterans against new recruits, soldiers against civilians. Fights were quelled before they got out of hand, though, by soldiers carrying cudgels and wearing red armbands that stretched from wrist to elbow. Each unit had to take its turn providing Redarms, different men every day, and the Redarms had to pay for any damage the day they were on duty. It made them industrious in keeping the peace.

At The Fox and Goose a gleeman was juggling flaming batons, a stout man in his middle years, while another, a skinny balding fellow at The Erinin Inn, had his harp in hand and declaimed part of *The Great Hunt of the Horn*. Despite the heat each wore his distinctive cloak, all covered with patches in a hundred colors that fluttered when he moved; a gleeman would give up a hand before that cloak. They had fairly attentive audiences—many of the onlookers came from villages that eagerly greeted a gleeman's visit—more so than the girl singing on a table in a tavern called The Three Towers. She was pretty enough, with her long dark curls, but a song about true love was not likely to interest the raucously laughing men drinking there. The remaining places had no entertainment beyond a musician or two, yet the crowds were louder still, and dice games at half the tables made Mat's fingers twitch. But he really did almost always win, at least with dice, and it would not be right to take coin from his own soldiers. That was what most of the men at the tables were; few refugees had coin to spend in common rooms.

A handful of others dotted the members of the Band. Here a lean, fork-bearded Kandori with a moonstone the size of his thumbnail in one earlobe and silver chains across the chest of his red coat, there a copper-skinned Domani woman, though wearing a modest blue dress, with quick eyes and gemmed rings on all her fingers, elsewhere a Taraboner in a conical flat-topped blue cap, thick mustache hidden behind a transparent veil. Plump men in Tairen coats tight to the waist or bony fellows in Murandian coats hanging to the knee; sharp-eyed women in dresses high-necked or ankle-length, but always in well-cut wool of sober color. Merchants all, ready to leap in when tirade reopened between Andor and Cairhien. And in every common room two or three men sat apart from the others, usually alone, for the most part hard-eyed fellows, some well dressed, others little better garbed than the refugees, but every one looking as if he knew how to use the sword at his hip or on his back. Mat identified two women with that lot, though neither showed a weapon; one had a long walking staff propped against her table, and he supposed the other had knives hidden in her riding dress. He carried a few throwing knives tucked about his person, too. He was sure he knew what she and the others were about, and she was a fool if she went at it unarmed.

As he and Edorion stepped out of The Wagoner's Whip, Mat stopped to watch a blocky woman in divided brown skirts wend her way through the crowds. Unblinking eyes that caught everything in the street belied the apparent placidity of her round face, and so did the studded cudgel at her belt, and a dagger heavy-bladed enough to do for an Aielman. So, a third woman in the lot. Hunters for the Horn was what they were, the legendary Horn of Valere that would call dead heroes back from the grave to fight in the Last Battle. Whoever found it would earn a place in the histories. *If there's anyone left to write a bloody history*, Mat thought wryly.

Some believed the Horn would turn up where there was turmoil and strife. Four hundred years since the Hunt of the Horn was last called, and this time people had all but dropped out of the trees to take the oaths. He had seen flocks of Hunters in the streets of Cairhien, and he expected to see more flocks when he reached Tear. Without doubt they would be streaming toward Caemlyn now as well. He wished one of them had found the thing. To the best of his knowledge the Horn of bloody Valere lay somewhere deep in the White Tower, and if he knew anything about Aes Sedai he would be surprised if a dozen of them were aware of it.

A troop of foot behind a mounted officer in a dented breastplate and a Cairhienin helmet marched between him and the blocky woman, close to two hundred pikemen, weapons a tall forest of spikes, followed by fifty or more archers with quivers on hips and bows slung on shoulders. Not the Two Rivers longbow Mat had grown up with, but a fair enough weapon. He had to find enough crossbows to go around, though the archers would not willingly make the change. They sang as they marched, the massed voices enough to punch through the rest of the noise.

“You’ll feed on beans and on rotten hay,
and a horse’s hoof come your naming day.
You’ll sweat and bleed till you grow old,
and your only gold will be dreams of gold,
if you go to be a soldier.
If you go to be a soldier.”

A fat knot of civilians trailed along behind, townsmen and refugees mingled, young men all, watching curiously and listening. It never ceased to amaze Mat. The worse the song made soldiering seem—this was far from the worst—the larger the crowd. Sure as water was wet, some of those men would be talking to a bannerman before the day was out, and most who did would sign their names or make their mark. They must think the song was an attempt to scare them off and keep the glory and loot. At least the pikes were not singing “Dance with Jak o’ the Shadows.” Mat hated that song. Once the lads realized Jak o’ the Shadows was death, they started panting to find a bannerman.

“Your girl will marry another man.
A muddy grave will be all your land.
Food for the worms and none to mourn.
You’ll curse the day you were ever born,
if you go to be a soldier.
If you go to be a soldier.”

“There’s a good deal of wondering,” Edorion said casually as the formation swung on down the street with its trail of idiots, “about when we’ll be heading south. There are rumors.” He peered at Mat from the corner of his eye, measuring his mood. “I noticed the farriers checking the teams for the supply wagons.”

“We’ll move when we move,” Mat told him. “No need to let Sammael know we’re coming.”

Edorion gave him a level look. This Tairen was no dunce. Not that Nalesean was—he was just overeager sometimes—but Edorion had a sharp mind. Nalesean would never have noticed the farriers. Too bad that House Aldiaya outranked House Selorna, or Mat would have had Edorion in

Nalesean's place. Fool nobles and their fool fixation on rank. No, Edorion was no blockhead; he knew that as soon as the Band moved south word would speed ahead with the river traffic, and maybe by pigeon as well. Mat would not have placed a bet against spies in Maerone if he had felt his luck strong enough to pound his skull apart.

"There's also a rumor the Lord Dragon was in the town yesterday," Edorion said, as softly as the street noise would allow.

"The biggest thing that happened yesterday," Mat said wryly, "was I had my first bath in a week. Now come on. It's going to take half what daylight is left to finish this as it is."

He would have given a pretty to find out how that rumor began. Only off by a half day, and there certainly had been no one to see. It had been the small hours of morning when a slash of light suddenly appeared in his room at The Golden Stag. He had thrown himself desperately across the four-posted bed, one boot on and one half off, pulling the knife he wore hanging between his shoulder blades before he realized it was Rand, stepping out of one of those bloody holes in nothing, apparently from the palace in Caemlyn by the columns visible before the opening winked out. It was startling, him coming in the middle of the night, without any Aiel, and popping right into Mat's room, which last still made the hair on Mat's neck stand up. That thing could have sliced him in two had he been standing in the wrong place. He did *not* like the One Power. The whole thing had been very strange.

"Make haste slowly, Mat," Rand said, striding up and down. He never looked in Mat's direction. Sweat slicked his face, and his jaw was tight. "He has to see it coming. Everything depends on it."

Seated on his bed, Mat jerked his boot the rest of the way off and dropped it on the scrap of rug Mistress Daelvin had given him. "I know," he said sourly, pausing to rub an ankle he had cracked on a bedpost. "I helped make the bloody plan, remember?"

"How do you know you're in love with a woman, Mat?" Rand did not stop his striding, and he dropped it in as if it fit what he had been saying.

Mat blinked. "How in the Pit of Doom should I know? That's one snare I've never put a foot in. What brought that on?"

But Rand only moved his shoulders as though shrugging something off. "I'll finish Sammael, Mat. I promised that; I owe it to the dead. But where are the others? I need to finish them all."

"One at a time, though." He barely managed to keep the question out of that; there was no telling what Rand might take into his head these days.

"There are Dragonsworn in Murandy, Mat. In Altara, too. Men sworn to me. Once Illian is mine, Altara and Murandy will drop like ripe plums. I'll make contact with the Dragonsworn in Tarabon—and in Arad Doman—and if the Whitecloaks try to keep me out of Amadicia, I'll crush them. The Prophet has Ghealdan primed, and Amadicia almost, so I hear. Can you imagine Masema as the Prophet? Saldaea will come to me; Bashere is sure of it. All the Borderlands will come. They have to! I am going to do it, Mat. Every land united before the Last Battle. I'm going to do it!" Rand's voice had taken on a feverish tone.

"Sure, Rand," Mat said slowly, depositing his other boot beside the first. "But one thing at a time, right?"

"No man should have another man's voice in his head," Rand muttered, and Mat's hands froze in the act of tugging off a woolen stocking. Oddly, he found himself wondering whether the pair had another day's wear in them. Rand knew something of what had happened inside that ter'angreal *in Rhuidean—knew he had somehow gained knowledge of soldiering, anyway—but not the whole of it. Mat thought not the whole of it. Not about other men's memories. Rand did not seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. He just scrubbed fingers through his hair and went on. "He can be gulled, Mat—Sammael always thinks in straight lines—but is there any opening he can slip through? If there's any mistake, thousands will die. Tens of thousands. Hundreds will anyway, but I don't want it to be thousands."*

Mat grimaced so fiercely that a sweaty-faced hawker trying to sell him a dagger, the hilt half-covered in colorful glass "gems," nearly dropped the thing burying himself in the crowd. It had all been like that with Rand, bouncing from the invasion of Illian to the Forsaken to women—Light, Rand was the one who always had the way with women, him and Perrin—from the Last Battle to the Maidens of the Spear to things Mat hardly understood, seldom listening to Mat's replies and sometimes not even waiting for them. Hearing Rand talk about Sammael as if he knew the man was more than just disconcerting. He knew Rand would go mad eventually, but if madness was creeping in already. . . .

And what of the others, those fools Rand was gathering who *wanted* to channel, and this fellow Taim, who already could? Rand had just dropped that in casually; Mazrim Taim, false bloody Dragon, teaching Rand's bloody students or whatever they were. When they all started going insane, Mat did not want to be within a thousand miles.

Only he had as much choice as a leaf in a whirlpool. He was *ta'veren*, but Rand was more so. Nothing in the Prophecies of the Dragon about Mat Cauthon, but he was caught, a shoat under a fence. Light, but he wished he had never seen the Horn of Valere.

It was with a grim face that he stalked through the next dozen taverns and common rooms, circling out from The Golden Stag. They were really no different from the first, packed tables full of men drinking and dicing and arm-wrestling, musicians often as not drowned out by the uproar, Redarms quashing fights as soon as they began, a gleeman reciting *The Great Hunt* in one—that was popular even without Hunters about—in another a short, pale-haired woman singing a slightly bawdy song somehow made bawdier by her round face of wide-eyed innocence.

His bleak mood held when he left The Silver Horn—idiotic name!—and its innocent-faced singer. Maybe that was why he went running toward the shouting that erupted down the street in front of another inn. The Redarms would take care of it if it involved soldiers, but Mat shoved his way through the crowd anyway. Rand going mad, leaving him hanging out in the storm. Taim and those other idiots ready to follow him into insanity. Sammael waiting in Illian, and the rest of the Forsaken the Light knew where, all probably looking for a chance to take Mat Cauthon's head in passing. That did not even count what the Aes Sedai would do to him if they laid hands on him again: the ones who knew too much, anyway. And everybody thinking he was going to go out and be a bloody hero! He usually tried to talk his way out of a fight if he could not walk wide of it, but right then he wanted an excuse to punch somebody in the nose. What he found was not anything he expected.

A crowd of townspeople, short, drably clothed Cairhienin and a sprinkling of taller Andorans in brighter colors, made an expressionless ring around two tall lean men with curled mustaches, long Murandian coats in bright silk, and swords with ornate, gilded pommels and quillons. The fellow in a red coat stood grinning in amusement while he watched the one in yellow shake a boy little taller than Mat's waist by the collar like a dog shaking a rat.

Mat held on to his temper; he reminded himself that he did not know what had started all this. "Easy with the boy," he said, laying a hand on yellow-coat’s arm. “What did he do to deserve—?”

“He touched me horse!” the man snapped in a Mindean accent, shaking off Mat’s hand. Mindeans boasted—boasted!—that they had the worst tempers of anyone in Murandy. “I’ll break his skinny peasant neck for him! I’ll wring his scrawny—!”

Without another word Mat brought the butt of his spear up hard, straight between the fellow’s legs. The Murandian’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. His eyes rolled up till almost nothing showed but white. The boy darted off as the man’s legs folded, depositing him on knees and face in the street. “No, you won’t,” Mat said.

That was not the end of it, of course; the man in the red coat snatched at his sword. He managed to bare an inch of blade before Mat cracked his wrist with the spear-butt. Grunting, he let go the sword hilt, but grabbed for the long-bladed dagger on his belt with his other hand. Hastily Mat clipped him over the ear; not hard, but the fellow went down atop the other man. Bloody fool! Mat was not sure whether he was describing red-coat or himself.

Half a dozen Redarms had finally pushed through the onlookers, Tairen cavalrymen awkward afoot in knee boots, their swollen black-and-gold sleeves crushed under the armbands. Edorion had the boy in hand, a gaunt sullen-looking lad of six or so, wriggling bare toes in the dust and now and again giving an experimental tug at Edorion’s grip. He was perhaps the ugliest child Mat had ever seen, with a squashed nose, a mouth too wide for his face and ears too big that stuck out besides. By the holes in his coat and breeches, he was one of the refugees. He looked more dirt than anything else.

“Settle this out, Harnan,” Mat said. That was a lantern-jawed Redarm, a file leader with a long-suffering expression and a crude tattoo of a hawk on his left cheek. The fashion seemed to be spreading through the Band, but most limited themselves to parts of the body normally covered. “Find out what caused all this, then run these two louts out of town.” They deserved that much, whatever the provocation.

A skinny man in a Murandian coat of dark wool wiggled through the onlookers and dropped to his knees beside the pair on the ground. Yellow-coat had begun emitting strangled groans, and red-coat was beginning to clutch his head in his hands and mumble what sounded like imprecations. The newcomer made more noise than both together. “Oh, me Lords! Me

Lord Paers! Me Lord Culen! Are you killed?” He stretched trembling hands toward Mat. “Oh, don’t kill them, me Lord! Not helpless like this. They’re Hunters for the Horn, me Lord. I’m their man, Padry. Heroes, they are, me Lord.”

“I’m not going to kill anybody,” Mat cut in, disgusted. “But you get these heroes on their horses and out of Maerone by sunset. I don’t like grown men who threaten to break a child’s neck. Sunset!”

“But, me Lord, they’re injured. He’s only a peasant boy, and he was molesting Lord Paers’ horse.”

“I was only sitting on it,” the boy burst out. “I was not—what you said.”

Mat nodded grimly. “Boys don’t get their necks broken for sitting on a horse, Padry. Not even *peasant* boys. You get these two gone, or I’ll see about breaking *their* necks.” He motioned to Harnan, who nodded sharply to the other Redarms—file leaders never did anything themselves, any more than bannermen did—who snatched Paers and Culen up roughly and hustled them away groaning with Padry trailing behind, wringing his hands and protesting that his masters were in no condition to ride, that they were Hunters for the Horn and heroes.

Edorion still held the source of all this bother by an arm, Mat realized. The Redarms were gone, and the townsfolk drifting away. No one glanced twice at the boy; they had their own children to look after, and a hard enough time doing that. Mat exhaled heavily. “Don’t you realize you could be hurt ‘just sitting’ on a strange horse, boy? A man like that probably rides a stallion that could trample a little boy into the bottom of his stall so no one could ever tell you were there.”

“A gelding.” The boy gave another jerk at Edorion’s grip, and finding it had not loosened, put on a sulky face. “It was a gelding, and it would not have hurt me. Horses like me. I am not a *little boy*: I am nine. And my name is Olver, not *boy*.”

“Olver, is it?” Nine? He might be. Mat had trouble telling, especially with Cairhienin children. “Well, Olver, where are your mother and father?” He looked around, but the refugees he saw passed by as quickly as the townsfolk. “Where are they, Olver? I have to get you back to them.”

Instead of answering, Olver bit his lip. A tear trickled from one eye, and he scrubbed it away angrily. “The Aiel killed my papa. One of those . . .

Shado. Mama said we were going to Andor. She said we were going to live on a farm. With horses."

"Where is she now?" Mat asked softly.

"She got sick. I—I buried her where there were some flowers." Suddenly Olver kicked Edorion and began thrashing in his grip. Tears rolled down his face. "You let me go. I can take care of myself. You let me go."

"Take care of him until we can find somebody," Mat told Edorion, who gaped at him in the middle of trying to fend the boy off and hold on to him at the same time.

"Me? What am I to do with this leopard of a carpet mouse?"

"Get him a meal, for one thing." Mat's nose wrinkled; by the smell, Olver had spent at least a little time on the floor of that gelding's stall. "And a bath. He stinks."

"You talk to me," Olver shouted, rubbing at his face. The tears helped him rearrange the dirt. "You talk to me, not over my head!"

Mat blinked, then bent down. "I'm sorry, Olver. I always hated people doing that to me, too. Now, this is how it is. You smell bad, so Edorion here is going to take you to The Golden Stag, where Mistress Daelvin is going to let you have a bath." The sulkiness on Olver's face grew. "If she says anything, you tell her I said you could have one. She can't stop you." Mat held in a grin at the boy's sudden stare; that would have spoiled it. Olver might not like the idea of a bath, but if someone might try to stop him from having one. . . . "Now, you do what Edorion says. He's a real Tairen lord, and he's going to find you a good hot meal, and some clothes without holes in them. And some shoes." Best not to add "somebody to look after you." Mistress Daelvin could take care of that; a little gold would overcome any reluctance.

"I do not like Tairens," Olver mumbled, frowning first at Edorion then Mat. Edorion had his eyes shut and was muttering to himself. "He is a real lord? Are you a lord, too?"

Before Mat could say anything, Estean came running through the crowd, lumpy face red and sweat-soaked. His dented breast-late retained few shreds of its former gilded glory, and the red satin stripes on his yellow coatsleeves were worn. He did not at all look the son of the richest lord in Tear. But then, he never had. "Mat," he puffed, shoving fingers through lank hair that kept falling over his forehead. "Mat. . . . Down at the river. . . ."

"What?" Mat cut in irritably. He was going to start having "I am not a bloody lord" embroidered on his coats. "Sammael? The Shaido? The Queen's Guards? The bloody White Lions? What?"

"A ship, Mat," Estean panted, raking at his hair. "A big ship. I think it's the Sea Folk."

That was unlikely; the Atha'an Miere never took their ships farther from open sea than the nearest port. Still. . . . There were not very many villages along the Erinin to the south, and the supplies the wagons could carry were going to run thin before the Band reached Tear. He had already hired riverboats to trail along with the march, but a larger vessel would be more than useful.

"Look after Olver, Edorion," he said, ignoring the man's grimace. "Estean, show me this ship." Estean nodded eagerly and would have set out at a run again if Mat had not grabbed his sleeve to slow him to a walk. Estean was always eager, and he learned slowly; the combination was the reason he bore five bruises from Mistress Daelvin's cudgel.

The numbers of refugees grew as Mat neared the river, both going down and coming back lethargically. Half-a-dozen broad-beamed ferries sat tied to the long tarred-timber docks, but the oars had been carried away and there was not a crewman in sight on any of them. The only boats showing any activity were half-a-dozen rivercraft, stout one-and two-masted vessels that had put in briefly on their way upriver or down. The barefoot crewmen barely stirred on the boats Mat had hired; their holds were full, and their captains assured him they could sail as soon as he gave the word. Ships moved on the Erinin, wallowing bluff-bowed craft with square sails and quick narrow vessels with triangular sails, but nothing crossing between Maerone and walled Aringill, where the White Lion of Andor flew.

That banner had flown above Maerone, too, and the Andoran soldiers who held the town had not been willing to let the Band of the Red Hand enter. Rand might hold Caemlyn, but his command did not extend to the Queen's Guards here, or the units that Gaebril had raised, like the White Lions. The White Lions were somewhere to the east now—they had fled in that direction, anyway, and any of a dozen rumors of brigands could have been their work—but the rest had crossed the river after sharp skirmishing with the Band. Nothing had crossed the Erinin since.

The only thing Mat really saw, though, was a ship anchored in the middle of the broad river. It really was a Sea Folk vessel, taller and longer than any of the river craft but still sleek, with two raked masts. Dark figures climbed about in the rigging, some bare-chested in baggy breeches that looked black at the distance, some in bright-colored blouses marking the women. Half the crew would be women, near enough. The big square sails had been pulled up to the crossyards, yet they hung in slack folds, ready to be loosed in an instant.

“Find me a boat,” he told Estean. “And some rowers.” Estean would need to be reminded of that. The Tairen blinked at him, raking at his hair. “Hurry, man!” Estean nodded jerkily and lurched into a run.

Walking down to the end of the nearest dock, Mat propped his spear on his shoulder and dug his looking glass from his coat pocket. When he put the brass-bound tube to his eye, the ship leaped closer. The Sea Folk appeared to be waiting for something, but what? Some glanced toward Maerone, but most were staring the opposite way, including everyone on the tall quarterdeck; that would be where the Sailmistress was, and the other ship’s officers. He swung the looking glass to the far side of the river, crossing a long narrow rowboat with dark men at the oars, racing toward the ship.

There was something of a commotion on one of Aringill’s long docks, nearly the twins of Maerone’s. White-collared red coats and burnished breastplates denoted Queen’s Guardsmen, plainly meeting a knot of arrivals from the ship. What made Mat whistle softly was the pair of fringed red parasols among the newcomers, one of two tiers. Sometimes those old memories came in handy; that two-tiered parasol marked a clan Wavemistress, the other her Swordmaster.

“I have a boat, Mat,” Estean announced breathlessly at his shoulder. “And some rowers.”

Mat turned the looking glass back to the ship. By the activity on deck, they were hauling the small boat up on the other side, but already men at the capstan were hauling the anchor up and the sails were being shaken out. “Looks like I won’t need it,” he muttered.

On the other side of the river the Atha’an Miere delegation vanished up the dock with an escort of guardsmen. The whole thing made no sense. Sea Folk nine hundred miles from the sea. Only the Mistress of the Ships outranked a Wavemistress; only the Master of the Blades outranked a Swordmaster. No sense at all, not by any of those other men’s memories. But they *were* old; he “remembered” that less was known of the Atha’an

Miere than of any people except the Aiel. He knew more of Aiel from his own experience than from those memories, and that little enough. Maybe somebody who knew the Sea Folk today could make top from bottom in it.

Already sails billowed above the Sea Folk ship, with the anchor still being hauled dripping onto the foredeck. Whatever had them in such a hurry, it apparently would not take them back to the sea. With slowly increasing speed the vessel glided upriver, curving toward the marsh-lined mouth of the Alguenya a few miles north of Maerone.

Well, it was nothing to do with him. With one last regretful look at the ship—the thing would have carried as much as all the smaller craft he had hired put together—Mat shoved the looking glass back in his pocket and turned his back on the river. Estean was still hovering, staring at him.

“Tell the rowers they can go, Estean,” Mat sighed, and the Tairen stumped away muttering to himself and scrubbing his hands through his hair.

More mud was visible than the last time he had come down to the river a few days ago. Just a sticky strip less than a hand wide between the water and the pace-deep band of cracked mud above, but proof even a river like the Erinin was slowly drying up. Nothing to do with him. Nothing he could do about it, anyway. He turned and headed back to his rounds of the taverns and common rooms; it was important that nothing seem out of the ordinary about today.

When the sun went down, Mat was back in The Golden Stag, dancing with Betse, minus her apron, while the musicians played as loudly as they could. Country dances this time, and tables pushed back to make room for six or eight couples. Dark brought a little coolness, but only by comparison with daylight. Everyone still sweated. Men laughing and drinking filled the benches, and the serving girls scurried to put mutton, turnips and barley soup on the tables and keep ale mugs and winecups full.

Surprisingly, the women seemed to consider dancing a break from lugging trays about. At least, every one of them smiled eagerly when it was her turn to dab perspiration from her face and doff her apron for a dance, though she sweated just as hard once it began. Maybe Mistress Daelvin had worked out some sort of schedule. If she had, Betse was an exception. That slender young woman fetched wine for no one but Mat, danced with no one but Mat, and the innkeeper beamed at them so much like a mother at her daughter’s wedding that it made Mat uncomfortable. In fact, Betse danced with him till his feet hurt and his calves ached, yet she never ceased smiling, her eyes shining with pure pleasure. Except when they stopped to catch breath, of course. For him to catch breath; she certainly showed no need. As soon as their feet halted, her tongue took off at a gallop. For that matter, it did the same whenever he tried to kiss her, and she always turned her head, exclaiming over something or other, so he kissed an ear or hair instead of lips. She always seemed startled by it, too. He still could not figure out whether she was an utter featherhead or very clever.

It was closer to two hours past midnight than one by the clock when he finally told her he had had enough for one night. Disappointment crossed her face, and a small pout appeared. She looked ready to dance until dawn. She was not alone; one of the older serving women was leaning on one hand against a wall to massage a foot, but most of the others appeared bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as Betse. The greater part of the men appeared to be wearing out, fixed smiles on those letting themselves be dragged away from their benches and a good many just waving the women away. Mat did not understand. It must be because the man did most of the work in dancing, he decided, all the lifting and turning. And women were light; leaping about simply took less energy for them. Blinking at a stout serving maid who was whirling Estean around the floor rather than the other way—the man could dance; he had that talent—Mat pressed a gold coin into Betse's hand, a fat Andoran crown, for her to buy herself something pretty.

She studied the coin for a moment, then lifted up on her toes to kiss him lightly on the mouth, like the brush of a feather. "I would never hang you whatever you did. You will dance with me tomorrow?" Before he could answer she giggled and darted away, eyeing him over her shoulder even when she started trying to pull Edorion out to the dance area. Mistress Daelvin intercepted the pair and, shoving an apron into Betse's hands, jerked a thumb toward the kitchens.

Mat limped slightly as he made his way to the table against the back wall where Talmanes, Daerid and Nalesean had ensconced themselves. Talmanes was staring into his winecup as if to find deep answers. A grinning Daerid was watching Nalesean try to fend off a plump serving maid with gray eyes and light brown hair while not admitting that his feet were sore. Mat leaned his fists on the table. "The Band moves south at first light. You best start making preparations." The three men gaped at him.

“That is only a few hours,” Talmanes protested at the same time that Nalesean said, “It will take that long just to root them out of the drinking rooms.”

Wincing, Daerid shook his head. “None of us will get any sleep tonight.”

“I will,” Mat said. “One of you wake me in two hours. First light, and we’re marching.”

Which was how he found himself astride Pips, his sturdy brown gelding, in the gray predawn, with his spear across his saddle and his unstrung longbow shoved beneath his saddle girth, with not enough sleep and an ache behind his eyes, watching the Band of the Red Hand leave Maerone. All six thousand of them. Half horse, half foot, and all making enough noise to rouse the dead. Despite the hour, people lined the streets and hung gawking from every upper window.

The Band’s square red-fringed banner led the way, a red hand on white, the Band’s motto crimson-embroidered below. *Dovie’andi se tovya sagain*. “It’s time to toss the dice.” Nalesean, Daerid and Talmanes rode with the flag, ten mounted men pounding away at brass kettledrums hung with scarlet skirting, and as many trumpeters adding flourishes. Behind came Nalesean’s horsemen, a mixture of Tairen armsmen and Defenders of the Stone, Cairhienin lordlings with *con* on their backs and retainers at their heels, and a sprinkling of Andorans, each squadron and troop with its own long banner bearing the Red Hand, a sword and a number. Mat had had them draw lots for who got which number.

The mixing had caused some grumbling; more than a little, truth to tell. In the beginning, Cairhienin horse all followed Talmanes, and Tairens Nalesean. The foot had been a mongrel lot from the start. There had been mutters about making each unit the same size, too, and the numbers on the pennants. Lords and captains had always gathered as many men as would follow, who were known as Edorion’s men, or Meresin’s, or Alhandrin’s. They still did some of that—for example, Edorion’s five hundred called themselves Edorion’s Hammers, not the First Squadron—but Mat had driven it into their heads that every man belonged to the Band, not whatever land he had happened to be born in, and any who did not like doing things his way were free to leave. The remarkable thing was, none had.

Why they stayed was hard to understand. Certainly, they won when he led them, but some still died. He had a difficult time keeping them fed and seeing they got their pay more or less on time, and they might as well forget the wealth they boasted they were going to loot. Nobody had seen a coin of it so far, and he did not see much chance they ever would. It was madness.

The First Squadron raised a cheer quickly taken up by the Fourth and Fifth. Carlomin's Leopards and Reimon's Eagles, they called themselves. "Lord Matrim and victory! Lord Matrim and victory!"

If Mat had had a rock handy, he would have thrown it at them.

The infantry came next in a flowing snake, each company behind a drum beating cadence as well as one of the long pennants, theirs with a pike instead of a sword across the hand, twenty ranks bristling with pikes followed by five of archers or cross-bowmen. Each company had a flute or two as well, and they sang to the music.

"We drink all night and dance all day,
and on the girls we spend our pay,
and when we're done, then we'll away,
to dance with Jak o' the Shadows."

Mat waited out the song until the first of Talmanes' cavalry appeared, then dug his heels into Pips' flanks. No need to attend the supply wagons at the tail end, or the strings of remounts. Horses would go lame between here and Tear, or die from things the farriers could not remedy, and a cavalryman without a horse was not worth much. On the river seven small ships crept downstream under triangular sails, little faster than the current. Each carried a small white flag with the Red Hand. Other craft were setting forth, too, some sprinting south under every scrap of canvas they could hold.

As he caught up to the head of the column the sun finally peeked above the horizon, sending the first rays across the rolling hills and scattered thickets. He pulled his hat low against the glare of the brilliant sliver. Nalesean had a gauntleted fist to his mouth, stifling an impressive yawn, and Daerid sat slumped in his saddle, heavy-lidded, as if he might drift off to sleep right there. Only Talmanes was straight-backed, wide-eyed and alert. Mat felt more in sympathy with Daerid.

Even so, he raised his voice to be heard over the drums and trumpets. "Put the scouts out as soon as we're beyond sight of the town." Both forest and open country lay farther south, but a fairly well established road cut across both; most traffic went by water, but enough had gone on foot or wagon over the years to mark out a track. "And shut that bloody noise up."

“The scouts?” Nalesean said wonderingly. “Burn my soul, there’s no one with so much as a spear inside ten miles of us, unless you think the White Lions have stopped running, and if they have, they won’t come closer than fifty miles if they have any notion we’re about.”

Mat ignored him. “I want to make thirty-five miles today. When we can do thirty-five every day, we’ll see how far we can push it.” They gaped at him, of course. Horses could not maintain that pace very long, and anybody but Aiel considered twenty-five miles an excellent day’s march for foot. But he had to play this out the way it had been dealt. “Comadrin wrote, ‘Attack on ground where your enemy believes you will not, from an unexpected direction at an unexpected time. Defend where your enemy believes you are not, and when he believes you will run. Surprise is the key to victory, and speed is the key to surprise. For the soldier, speed is life.’ ”

“Who is Comadrin?” Talmanes asked after a moment, and Mat had to gather himself to answer.

“A general. Dead a long time. I read his book once.” He remembered reading it, anyway, more than once; he doubted a copy existed anywhere now. For that matter, he remembered meeting Comadrin, after losing a battle to him some six hundred years before Artur Hawkwing. Those memories did creep up on him. At least he had not delivered that little speech in the Old Tongue; he usually managed to avoid that sort of thing now.

Watching the mounted scouts fan out ahead across the rolling river plain, Mat relaxed. His part of it was begun, according to plan. A hasty departure on short notice as if he were trying to sneak away south, but showy enough to make sure it was noticed. The combination would make him seem a fool, and that was to the good, too. Teaching the Band to move fast was a good idea—moving fast could keep you away from the fighting—but their progress was sure to be noted from the river if nowhere else. He scanned the sky; no ravens or crows, but that did not mean much. No pigeons, either, yet if none had left Maerone this morning he would eat his saddle.

In a few days at most Sammael would learn the Band was coming, hurrying, and the word Rand had put about down in Tear would have made it clear that Mat’s arrival would signal the imminent invasion of Illian. At the best speed the Band could do, it was still more than a month to Tear. With any luck, Sammael would be cracked like a louse between two rocks before Mat ever had to come within a hundred miles of the man. Sammael could see everything coming—almost everything—but it was going to be a different dance than he expected. Different than anyone but Rand, Mat and Bashere expected. That was the real plan. Mat actually found himself whistling. For once everything was going to work out the way he expected.

* * *

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CHAPTER 6

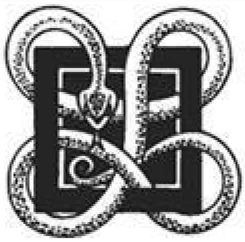

Threads Woven of Shadow

Cautiously Sammael stepped onto flowery silk carpets, leaving the gateway open in case he needed to retreat and holding hard to *saidin*. Usually he refused meetings except on neutral ground, or his own, but this was the second time he had come here. A matter of necessity. He had never been a trusting man, and was less so since hearing bits of what had passed between Demandred and the three women, and Graendal certainly had told him only enough to support some gain she saw for herself. He quite understood; he had plans of his own the other Chosen knew nothing about. There would only be one Nae'blis, and that was a prize worth as much as immortality itself.

He stood on a deep dais, marble-railed at one end, where tables and chairs of gilded work and carved ivory, some quite disgusting in their details, were arranged to command the rest of the long, columned hall, ten feet below. No stairs led down there; it was a huge, extravagant pit in which to present entertainment. Sunlight sparkled through tall windows where colored glass made elaborate patterns. None of the sun's blistering heat penetrated; the air was cool, though he felt it only remotely. Graendal had no more need than he to make such an effort, but of course she would. The wonder was that she had not extended the net to the entire palace.

There was something different in the lower part of the chamber since his last visit, but he could not see what. Three long wading pools ran down the center of the hall, each with a fountain—sleek forms, motion frozen in stone—that sent water almost to the carved marble ribs of the arched ceiling overhead. Men and women sported in the pools wearing scraps of silk or less, while others garbed in little more performed along the sides, acrobats and jugglers, dancers in varied styles and musicians playing flutes and horns, drums and all sorts of stringed instruments. Of every size, every shade of skin and hair and eyes, each was more physically perfect than the last. It was all meant to amuse whoever stood on the dais. It was idiocy. A waste of time and energy. Typical of Graendal.

The dais had been empty except for himself when he stepped onto it, but with *saidin* filling him, he smelled Graendal's sweet perfume, like an air from a garden of flowers, and heard her slippers whispering on the carpets well before she spoke behind him. "Are my pets not beautiful?"

She joined him at the railing, smiling at the display below. Her thin blue Domani gown clung and more than hinted. As usual she had a ring with different stones on every finger, four or five gem-encrusted bracelets on each wrist, and a wide collar of huge sapphires snugged around the gown's high neck. He did not know about such things, but he suspected hours had gone into arranging those sun-gold curls touching her shoulders, and the moondrops seemingly scattered through them; there was something about their casualness that hinted at precision.

Sammael sometimes wondered about her. He had never met her until he chose to abandon a losing cause and follow the Great Lord, but everyone knew of her, famous and honored, a dedicated ascetic, treating those with disturbed minds Healing could not touch. At that first meeting, when she accepted his initial pledges to the Great Lord, every trace of the abstemious benefactor was gone, as if she had deliberately become the opposite of everything she had been before. On the surface her total fixation was her own pleasure, nearly obscuring a desire to pull down everyone who had a particle of power. And that in turn almost hid her own thirst for power, very seldom exercised openly. Graendal had always been very good at hiding things in plain sight. He thought he knew her better than any of the other Chosen did—she had accompanied him to Shayol Ghul to make his obeisance—but even he did not know all the layers of her. She had as many shades as a *jegal* had scales, slipping from one to another as quickly as lightning. She had been the mistress then, he the acolyte, for all his accomplishments as a general. That situation had changed.

None of the waders or performers looked up, but with her appearance they became more energetic, more graceful if that was possible, attempting to display themselves to best advantage; they existed to please her. Graendal made sure of that.

She gestured to four acrobats, a dark-haired man supporting three slim women, coppery skins oiled and gleaming. "They are my favorites, I think.

Ramsid is the Domani king’s brother. The woman standing on his shoulders is Ramsid’s wife; the other two are the king’s youngest sister and eldest daughter. Don’t you find it remarkable what can be learned with the proper encouragement? Consider all the talents going to waste.” That was one of her favorite concepts. A place for everyone and everyone in their place, chosen for them according to their talents and the needs of society. Which needs always seemed to center on her own desires. The whole thing bored Sammael; had her precepts been applied to him, he would still stand where he was.

The male acrobat turned slowly to give them a good view; he held a woman straight-armed to either side while they hung by one hand from the grip of the one on his shoulders. Graendal had already moved on, to a very dark-skinned man and woman with curly hair, both of great beauty. The slender pair played oddly elongated harps, with chimes that resonated to the plucked strings in crystalline echoes. “My newest acquisitions, from the lands beyond the Aiel Waste. They should thank me for rescuing them. Chiape was Sh’boan, a sort of empress, newly widowed, and Shaofan was to marry her and become Sh’botay. For seven years she would have ruled absolutely, then died. Whereupon he would have chosen a new Sh’boan and ruled absolutely until his death in seven years. They have followed that cycle for nearly three thousand years without a break.” She gave a small laugh and shook her head wonderingly. “Shaofan and Chiape insist the deaths are natural. The Will of the Pattern, they call it. To them everything is the Will of the Pattern.”

Sammael kept his eyes on the people below. Graendal prattled like a fool, but only a true fool took her for one. What she seemed to let slip among her babbling was often planted as carefully as a *conje* needle. The key was picking out why, and what she meant to gain. Why would she suddenly have snatched pets from so far away? She seldom went out of her way. Was she trying to divert him toward the lands beyond the Waste by making him think she had an interest there? The battlefield was here. The Great Lord’s first touch when he broke free would land here. The rest of the world would be whipped by the fringes of storms, even racked by storms, but those storms would generate here.

“Since so much of the Domani king’s family met with your approval,” he said dryly, “I am surprised no more did.” If she wanted to divert him, she would find a way to slide it in again. She never thought anyone knew her tricks well enough to see through them.

A lithe dark-haired woman, not young but with the sort of pale beauty and elegance that would last all her life, appeared at his elbow cradling a crystal goblet of dark wine punch in both hands. He took it, though he had no intention of drinking; beginners watched for a major assault till their eyes burned, and let a lone assassin walk up behind them. Alliances, however temporary, were all very well, but the fewer of the Chosen who remained on the Day of Return, the greater the chance among the survivors to be named Nae'blis. The Great Lord had always encouraged such . . . competition; only the fittest were worthy to serve. At times Sammael believed that the one chosen to rule the world forever would be the last of the Chosen left standing.

The woman turned back to a muscular young man who held a golden tray with another goblet and a tall matching pitcher. Both wore diaphanous white robes, and neither gave so much as the flicker of an eye to the gateway, opening into his apartments in Illian. When she served Graendal, the woman's face was a portrait of worship. There was never any trouble about speaking in front of her servants and pets, though they would not number a single Friend of the Dark among them. She distrusted Friends of the Dark, claiming they were too easily swayed, but the level of Compulsion used on those who served her personally left little room for anything beyond adoration.

"I almost expect to see the king himself here serving wine," he continued.

"You know I choose only the most exquisite. Alsalam is not up to my standard." Graendal took the wine from the woman with barely a glance, and not for the first time Sammael wondered whether the pets were another screen, like the chattering. A little prodding might shake something loose.

"Sooner or later you will slip, Graendal. One of your visitors will recognize one who serves him wine or turns down his bed, and he will have sense enough to hold his tongue until he leaves. What will you do if someone descends on this palace with an army to rescue a husband or a sister? An arrow may not be a shocklance, yet it can still kill you."

She threw back her head and laughed, a trill of gay amusement, plainly too silly to see the implied insult. Plainly, as long as you did not know her. "Oh, Sammael, why would I let them see anything but what I want them to?

I certainly do not send my pets to serve them. Alsalam's supporters and his opponents, even the Dragonsworn, leave here thinking I support them and only them. And they do not want to disturb an invalid." His skin tingled slightly as she channeled, and for an instant her image changed. Her skin became coppery but dull, her hair and eyes dark but flat; she appeared gaunt and frail, a once-beautiful Domani woman slowly losing a battle against illness. He barely stopped his lip from curling. One touch would prove the angular contours of that face were not hers—only the most subtle use of Illusion could pass that test—but Graendal seemed wedded to flamboyance. The next moment she was herself again, wearing a wry smile. "You would not believe how they all trust and listen to me."

It never ceased to amaze him that she chose to remain here in a palace well known across Arad Doman, with civil war and anarchy all around her. Of course, he did not think she had let any others of the Chosen know where she had established herself. That she trusted him with the knowledge made him wary. She liked her comforts, and never wanted to expend much effort to keep them, yet this palace was in sight of the Mountains of Mist, and considerable work was necessary to keep the turmoil away from her, to keep anyone from asking where the former owner had gone, along with his family and servants. Sammael would not be surprised if every Domani who visited here left believing that this land had been handed down in her family since the Breaking. She used Compulsion so often like a hammer that one might forget that she could wield the weaker forms of it with great delicacy, twisting a mind's path so subtly that even the closest examination might miss every trace of her. In fact, she might have been the best at that who ever lived.

He let the gateway vanish but held on to *saidin*; her tricks would not work on a man wrapped in the Source. And in truth, he enjoyed the struggle for survival, though it was unconscious now; only the strongest deserved to survive, and he proved his own fitness to himself every day in that battle. There was no way she could know he still grasped *saidin*, but she smiled briefly into her goblet as if she did. He liked people pretending to know things almost as little as he liked them knowing things he did not. "What do you have to tell me?" he said, more roughly than he intended.

"About Lews Therin? You never seem interested in anything else. Now, he would be a pet. I would make him the centerpiece of every display. Not that he is handsome enough, normally, but who he is makes up for that." Smiling into her goblet again, she added in a murmur that would have been inaudible without *saidin* in him, "And I do like them tall."

It was an effort not to stand up as straight as he could. He was not short, but it rankled that his height did not match his ability. Lews Therin had been a head taller than he; so was al'Thor. There was always an assumption that the taller man was the better. It took another effort not to touch the scar that slanted across his face from hairline to square-cut beard. Lews Therin had given him that; he kept it for a reminder. He suspected she had misunderstood his question on purpose, to bait him. "Lews Therin is long dead," he said harshly. "Rand al'Thor is a jumped-up farmboy, a *choss*-hauler who has been lucky."

Graendal blinked at him as if surprised. "Do you really think so? There has to be more than luck behind him. Luck could not have carried him so far, so fast."

Sammael had not come to talk about al'Thor, yet ice formed at the base of his spine. Thoughts he had forced himself to dismiss came oozing back. Al'Thor was not Lews Therin, but al'Thor was Lews Therin's soul reborn, as Lews Therin himself had been the rebirth of that soul. Sammael was neither philosopher nor theologian, yet Ishamael had been both, and he claimed to have divined secrets hidden in that fact. Ishamael had died mad, true, but even when he was still sane, back when it seemed they surely would drive Lews Therin Telamon to defeat, he claimed this struggle had gone on since the Creation, an endless war between the Great Lord and the Creator using human surrogates. More, he avowed that the Great Lord would almost as soon have turned Lews Therin to the Shadow as have broken free. Maybe Ishamael had been a little mad then, too, but there had been efforts to turn Lews Therin. And Ishamael said that it had happened in the past, the Creator's champion made a creature of the Shadow and raised up as the Shadow's champion.

There were unsettling implications in those claims, ramifications Sammael did not want to consider, but the thing that shoved itself to the front of his mind was the possibility that the Great Lord might really want to make al'Thor Nae'blis. It could not happen in a vacuum. Al'Thor would need help. Help—that could explain his supposed luck so far. "Have you learned where al'Thor is hiding Asmodean? Or anything of Lanfear's whereabouts? Or Moghedien's?" Of course, Moghedien always hid herself;

the Spider was forever popping up just when you were sure she was finally dead.

"You know as much as I do," Graendal said blithely, pausing for a sip from her goblet. "Myself, I think Lews Therin killed them. Oh, don't grimace at me. Al'Thor, since you insist." The thought did not seem to disturb her, but then, she would never find herself in open conflict with al'Thor. That had never been her way. If al'Thor ever discovered her, she simply would abandon everything and re-establish herself elsewhere—or else surrender before he could strike a blow, then begin convincing him that she was indispensable. "There are rumors out of Cairhien about Lanfear dying at Lews Therin's hands the same day he killed Rahvin."

"Rumors! Lanfear has been aiding al'Thor since the beginning, if you ask me. I would have had his head in the Stone of Tear except that someone sent Myrddraal and Trollocs to save him! That was Lanfear; I am certain. I'm done with her. The next time I see her, I'll kill her! And why would he kill Asmodean? I would if I could find him, but he has gone over to al'Thor. He's teaching him!"

"Always some excuse for your failures," she whispered into her punch, again too softly for him to have heard without *saidin*. In a louder voice, she said, "Choose your own explanations, if you wish. You may even be right. All I know is that Lews Therin seems to be removing us from the game one by one."

Sammael's hand trembled with anger, nearly slopping punch from his goblet before he could still it. Rand al'Thor was *not* Lews Therin. He himself had outlived the great Lews Therin Telamon, handing out praise for victories he could not have won himself and expecting others to lap it up. His only regret was that the man had not left a grave for him to spit on.

Waving ringed fingers in time to a snatch of music from below, Graendal spoke absently, as though her real attention was on the tune. "So many of us have died confronting him. Aginor and Balthamel. Ishamael, Be'lal and Rahvin. And Lanfear and Asmodean, whatever you believe. Possibly Moghedien; she might be creeping about in the shadows waiting until the rest of us have fallen—she's foolish enough. I do hope you have somewhere prepared to run. There doesn't seem to be any doubt that he is going after you next. Soon, I would say. I'll face no armies here, but Lews Therin is gathering quite a large one to hurl against you. The price you pay if you must be *seen* to wield power as well as wield it."

He did have lines of retreat prepared, as it happened—that was only prudent—but hearing in her voice the certainty of his need infuriated him. "And if I destroy *al'Thor* then, it will violate none of the Great Lord's command." He did not understand, but there was no requirement to understand the Great Lord, only to obey. "As far as you've told it to me. If you have held back. . . ."

Graendal's eyes hardened to blue ice. She might avoid confrontation, but she did not like threats. The next instant she was all inane smiles again. As changeable as the weather in M'jinn. "What Demandred told me that the Great Lord told him, I have passed on to you, Sammael. Every word. I doubt even he would dare lie in the Great Lord's name."

"But you've told me little enough of what he plans to do," Sammael said softly, "him or Semirhage or Mesaana. Practically nothing."

"I have told you what I know." She sighed irritably. Perhaps she was telling the truth. She seemed to regret not knowing herself. Perhaps. With her, anything and everything could be show. "For the rest. . . . Think back, Sammael. We used to plot against one another almost as hard as we fought Lews Therin, yet we were winning before he caught us all gathered at Shayol Ghul." She shuddered, and for a moment her face looked haggard. Sammael did not want to remember that day either, or what came after, a dreamless sleep while the world changed past recognition and all he had wrought vanished. "Now we have awakened in a world where we should stand so far above ordinary mortals as to be another species—and we are dying. For a moment forget who will be Nae'blis. Al'Thor—if you must call him by that name—al'Thor was as helpless as a babe when we woke."

"Ishamael did not find him so," he said—of course, Ishamael *had* been mad then—but she continued as if he had not spoken.

"We behave as if this is the world we knew, when nothing is what we knew. We die one by one, and al'Thor grows stronger. Lands and people gather behind him. And we die. Immortality is mine. I do not want to die."

"If he frightens you, then kill him." Before the words were well out of his mouth he would have swallowed them if he could.

Disbelief and scorn twisted Graendal's face. "I serve the Great Lord and obey, Sammael."

"As do I. As well as any."

"So good of you to deign to kneel to our Master." Her voice was as wintry as her smile, and his face darkened. "All I say is that Lews Therin is as dangerous now as he ever was in our own time. Frightened? Yes, I am frightened. I intend to live forever, not meet Rahvin's fate!"

"Tsag!" The obscenity at least made her blink and truly look at him. "Al'Thor—al'Thor, Graendal! An ignorant boy, whatever Asmodean manages to teach him! A primitive lout who probably still believes that nine-tenths of what you and I take for granted is impossible! Al'Thor makes a few lords bow and thinks he has conquered a nation. He hasn't the will to close his fist and truly conquer them. Only the Aiel—*Bajad drovja!* Who would have thought they could change so?"—he had to get a grip on himself; he never cursed like this; it was a weakness—"only they truly follow him, and not all of them. He hangs by a thread, and he will fall, one way or another."

"Will he? What if he is . . . ?" She stopped, raising her goblet so rapidly that punch spilled onto her wrist, and gulped until the goblet was almost empty. The elegant serving woman came scurrying with the crystal pitcher. Graendal thrust out the goblet to be refilled and went on breathlessly. "How many of us will die before it is done? We must stand together as we never have before."

That was not what she had started to say. He ignored the ice that gripped his spine once more. Al'Thor would not be chosen Nae'blis. He would not! So she wanted them to stand together, did she? "Then link with me. The pair of us linked would be more than a match for al'Thor. Let that be the beginning of our new standing together." His scar tightened as he smiled at the sudden blankness on her face. The link had to come from her, but with only the two of them, she would have to give him control and trust him to choose when to end it. "So. It seems we will go on as before." There had never been any question of it, really; trust was no part of any of them. "What more do you have to tell me?" That was the reason he had come here, not to listen to her rattle on about Rand al'Thor. Al'Thor would be dealt with. Directly or indirectly.

She stared at him, gathering herself, eyes glittering with enmity. Finally she said, "Little enough." She would not forget that he had seen her lose control. None of her anger came out in her voice; her tone was smooth, even offhand. "Semirhage missed the last gathering; I don't know why, and I do not think Mesaana or Demandred does either. Mesaana in particular was annoyed, though she tried to hide it. She thinks Lews Therin soon will be in our hands, but then she has said the same every time. She was sure

Be’lal would kill or capture him in Tear; she was very proud of that trap. Demandred warns you to be careful.”

“So Demandred knows you and I meet,” he said flatly. Why had he ever expected to receive more than driblets from her?

“Of course he does. Not how much I tell you, but that I tell you something. I am trying to bring us together, Sammael, before it is too—”

He cut in sharply. “You deliver a message to Demandred from me. Tell him I know what he is up to.” Events to the south had Demandred’s mark all over them. Demandred had always liked using proxies. “Tell *him* to be careful. I won’t have him or his *friends* interfering in my plans.” Perhaps he could direct al’Thor’s attention there; that would likely put an end to him. If other means did not work. “So long as they steer clear of me, his lackeys can carve out what he wants, but they will steer clear or he will answer for it.” There had been a long struggle after the Bore was opened into the Great Lord’s prison, many years before enough strength was gathered to move openly. This time, when the final seal was shattered, he would present the Great Lord with nations ready to follow. If they did not know who they followed, what did that matter? He would not fail, as Be’lal and Rahvin had. The Great Lord would see who served him best. “You tell him!”

“If you wish it,” she said, grimacing reluctantly. An instant later that lazy smile came onto her face again. Changeable. “All these threats weary me. Come. Listen to the music and calm yourself.” He started to tell her he had no interest in music, as she knew very well, but she turned to the marble railing. “There they are. Listen.”

The very dark man and woman had come to the foot of the dais with their peculiar harps. Sammael supposed the chimes added something to their playing; what, he could not say. They beamed reverently up at Graendal when they saw her watching.

Despite her own advice to listen, Graendal went on talking. “A peculiar place they come from. Women who can channel are required to marry the sons of women who can channel, and everyone of those bloodlines is marked with tattoos on their faces at birth. No one with the markings is allowed to marry anyone without; any child of such a union is killed. Tattooed males are killed in their twenty-first year in any case, and cloistered before, ignorant even of how to read.”

So she had come back to it after all. She truly must think he was simple. He decided to plant a small barb of his own. “Do they bind themselves like criminals?”

A look of puzzlement flashed across her face and was hastily suppressed. Plainly she had not reasoned it out; there was no reason she should. Few people in their time had ever committed one violent crime, let alone more. Before the Bore, at least. She did not admit her ignorance, of course. There were times when it was best to hide lack of knowledge, but Graendal often carried the practice to a fault. That was why he had mentioned it; he knew it would dig at her, and serve her right for the useless shreds she doled out.

“No,” she said as if she had understood. “The Ayyad, as they call themselves, live in their own small towns, avoiding everyone else, and supposedly never channel without permission or orders from the Sh’botay or Sh’boan. In fact, they are the real power, and the reason the Sh’botay and Sh’boan only rule seven years.” Rich laughter bubbled up in her for a moment. She herself had always believed in being the power behind the power. “Yes, a fascinating land. Too far from the center to be of any use for many years, of course.” She made a slight, dismissive gesture, fluttering beringed fingers. “There will be plenty of time to see what can be made of it after the Day of Return.”

Yes, she definitely wanted him to think she had some interest there. If she really had, she never would have mentioned the place. He set his untouched goblet on the tray the muscular fellow had ready before his hand finished moving. Graendal did train her servants well. “I am sure their music is fascinating,” if you cared for that sort of thing, “but I have preparations to see to.”

Graendal laid a hand on his arm. “Careful preparations, I trust? The Great Lord will not be pleased if you disturb his plans.”

Sammael’s mouth tightened. “I have done everything short of surrendering to convince al’Thor I am no threat to him, but the man seems obsessed with me.”

“You could abandon Illian, start again elsewhere.”

“No!” He had never run from Lews Therin, and he would not run from this provincial buffoon. The Great Lord could not mean to put one like that above the Chosen. Above him! “You have told me all of the Great Lord’s command?”

“I dislike repeating myself, Sammael.” Her voice held a touch of exasperation, her eyes a hint of anger. “If you did not believe me the first time, you will not now."

He stared at her a moment longer, then nodded brusquely. Very probably she had told the truth there; a lie touching the Great Lord could rebound with deadly force. "I see no reason to meet again until you have something to tell me besides whether Semirhage was there or not." His brief frown at the harpists should be enough to convince her she had succeeded in her misdirection; he turned his gaze into a disapproving sweep across the people splashing in the pools, the acrobats and the rest, so it would not seem obvious. All this wasted effort, all this display of flesh, really did disgust him. "Next time you can come to Illian."

She shrugged as though it did not matter, but her lips moved slightly, and his *saidin*-enhanced hearing plucked "If you are still there" from the air.

Icily Sammael opened a gateway back to Illian. The muscular young man failed to move quickly enough; he did not have time to scream before he was sliced in two down the middle, him and the tray and the crystal pitcher. The edge of a gateway made a razor seem blunt. Graendal pursed her lips peevishly at the loss of one of her pets.

"If you want to help us stay alive," Sammael told her, "find out how Demandred and the others mean to carry out the Great Lord's instructions." He stepped through the gateway, never taking his eyes from her face.

Graendal maintained her vexed expression until the gateway closed behind Sammael, then allowed herself to tap her fingernails on the marble railing. With his golden hair Sammael might have been handsome enough to stand among her pets, if he would let Semirhage remove the burned furrow that slanted across his face; she was the only one remaining with the skill to do what would once have been a simple matter. It was an idle thought. The real question was whether her effort had paid off.

Shaofan and Chiape played their strange atonal music, full of complex harmonies and odd dissonances, quite beautifully; their faces shone with joy that they might be pleasing her. She nodded, and could almost feel their delight. They were much happier now than they would have been left to themselves. So much effort to procure them, and solely for this few minutes with Sammael. Of course, she could have taken less trouble—anyone at all from their lands would have done as well—but she had her standards even when preparing a momentary subterfuge. Long ago she had chosen to seek every pleasure, to deny herself none that did not threaten her standing with the Great Lord.

Her eyes fell on the offal staining her carpet, and her nose twitched irritably. The weaving might be salvaged, but it annoyed her that she would have to remove the blood herself. She gave quick orders, and Osana ran to oversee having the carpet removed. And Rashan's remains disposed of.

Sammael was a transparent fool. No, not a fool. He was deadly enough when he had something to fight directly, something he could see clearly, but he might as well be blind when it came to subtleties. Very likely he believed her ruse was intended to mask what she and the others were up to. One thing he would never consider was that she knew every twitch of his mind, every twist of his thoughts. After all, she had spent nearly four hundred years studying the workings of minds far more convoluted than his. Transparent, he was. However much he tried to hide it, he was frantic. He was trapped in a box of his own devising, a box he would defend to the death rather than abandon, a box in which he very probably would die.

She sipped her wine, and her forehead furrowed slightly. Possibly she had already achieved her end with him, though she had expected it to take four or five visits. She would have to find reason to call on him in Illian; it was best to observe the patient even after it appeared the desired path had been taken.

Whether the boy was a simple farm lad or Lews Therin himself truly come back—she could not make up her mind on that—he had proven himself far too dangerous. She served the Great Lord of the Dark, but she did not mean to die, not even for the Great Lord. She would live forever. Of course, one did not go against even the slightest of the Great Lord's wishes unless one wished to spend an eternity dying and another eternity wishing for the lesser agony of that long death. Still, Rand al'Thor had to be removed, but it would be Sammael who earned the blame. If he realized that he had been aimed at Rand al'Thor like a *dornat* set to hunt, she would be very much surprised. No, not a man to recognize subtleties.

Far from stupid, though. It would be interesting to discover how he had found out about the binding. She herself would never have learned had Mesaana not made a rare slip while venting her anger on an absent Semirhage; her fury had been strong enough that she did not realize how much she had revealed. How long had Mesaana been tucked away inside the White Tower? The mere fact that she was opened interesting avenues. If there were some way to discover where Demandred and Semirhage had placed themselves, it might be possible to work out what they intended to do. They had not trusted her with that. Oh, no. Those three had worked together since before the War of Power. On the surface, at least. She was sure they had plotted against one another as assiduously as any of the Chosen, but whether Mesaana undercut Semirhage or Semirhage Demandred, she had never yet found a crack between them into which a wedge could be driven.

A scuff of boots announced an arrival, but not men to replace the carpet and remove Rashan. Ebram was a tall, well-made young Domani in tight red breeches and a flowing white shirt; he could have fit into her collection of pets if he had been more than a merchant's son. His eyes were intent on her as he knelt, dark and shining. "The Lord Ituralde has come, Great Mistress."

Graendal set the goblet atop a table that at first glance seemed to be inlaid with ivory dancers. "Then he shall speak with the Lady Basene."

Ebram rose smoothly and offered an arm for the frail Domani woman he now saw. He knew who lay behind the weaving of Illusion, but even so the reverence on his face faded slightly; she knew it was Graendal, not Basene, whom he worshiped. At the moment she did not care. Sammael was at the very least pointed at Rand al'Thor, and perhaps launched. As for Demandred and Semirhage and Mesaana. . . . Only she herself knew that she had made her own journey to Shayol Ghul and down to the lake of fire. Only she knew that the Great Lord had all but promised to name her Nae'blis, a promise sure to be fulfilled with al'Thor out of the way. She would be the most obedient of the Great Lord's servants. She would sow chaos till the harvest made Demandred's lungs explode.

Semirhage let the iron-bound door close behind her. One of the glowbulbs, salvaged from the Great Lord alone knew where, flickered fitfully, but they still gave better light than the candles and oil lamps she had to accept in this time. Aside from the light, the place had the intimidating look of a prison, rough stone walls and a bare floor with a small crude wooden table in one corner. Not her notion; she would have had it all spotless white and gleaming *cueran*, sleek and sterile. This place had been prepared before she knew the need. A pale-haired silk-clad woman hung spread-eagled from nothing in the middle of the room, glaring at her defiantly. An Aes Sedai. Semirhage hated Aes Sedai.

"Who are you?" the patient demanded. "A Darkfriend? A Black sister?"

Ignoring the noise, Semirhage quickly checked the buffer between the woman and *saidar*. If it failed, she could mask the wretch again with no trouble—it was a measure of the woman's weakness that she could afford to leave the knotted buffer unwatched—but taking care was second nature to her, taking each step in its exact turn. Now for the woman's clothing. Someone in garments felt safer than someone without. Delicately she wielded Fire and Wind, slicing away dress and shift and every scrap right down to the patient's shoes. Drawing everything out in front of the woman in one compressed bundle, she channeled again, Fire and Earth, and fine dust rained down onto the stone floor.

The woman's blue eyes bulged. Semirhage doubted she could duplicate those simple feats even if she had been able to follow them.

"Who are you?" This time there was an edge to the demand. Fear perhaps. It was always good if that began early.

Precisely Semirhage located the centers in the woman's brain that received messages of pain from the body, and just as meticulously began to stimulate them with Spirit and Fire. Only a little at first, building slowly. Too much at once could kill in moments, yet it was remarkable how far the system could be taken if fed in finely increasing increments. Working on something you could not see was a difficult task, even this close, but she was as knowledgeable about the human body as anyone had ever been.

The spread-eagled patient shook her head as if she could shake off the pain, then realized she could not and fixed Semirhage with a stare. Semirhage merely watched, and maintained the net. Even in something as hurried as this must be, she could afford a little patience.

How she did hate any who called themselves Aes Sedai. She had been one herself, a true Aes Sedai, not an ignorant fool like the simpleton hanging before her. She had been known, famed, whisked to every corner of the world for her ability to mend any injury, to bring people back from the brink when everyone else said there was nothing more to be done. And a delegation from the Hall of the Servants had offered her a choice that was no choice: to be bound never to know her pleasures again, and with that binding be able to see the end of life approach; or else to be severed, and cast out as Aes Sedai. They had expected her to accept binding; that was the rational, proper thing to do, and they were rational, proper men and women. They never expected her to flee. She had been one of the first to go to Shayol Ghul.

Fat beads of sweat popped out on the patient's pale face. Her jaw knotted, and her nostrils flared as she sucked in air. Now and then she gave a small grunt. Patience. Soon, now.

It had been jealousy, the jealousy of those who could not do what she could. Had anyone she pulled back from death's grasp ever said they would rather have died than suffer the little extra she exacted? And the others? There were always those who deserved to suffer. What matter that she enjoyed giving them their deserts? The Hall and its hypocritical whining about legalities and rights. She had deserved the right to do as she did; she had earned the right. She had been more valuable to the world than all those together who entertained her with their screams. And in jealousy and spite the Hall had tried to pull *her* down!

Well, some of them had fallen into her hands during the war. Given time she could break the strongest man, the proudest woman, mold them exactly as she wanted them to be. The process might be slower than Compulsion, but it was infinitely more enjoyable, and she did not think even Graendal could undo what she did. Compulsion could be unraveled. But her patients. . . . On their knees they had begged to give their souls to the Shadow, and had served obediently until they died. Each time Demandred had been full of what a coup it was, another Counselor of the Hall publicly proclaiming allegiance to the Great Lord, but for her the best part had been the way their faces went pale, even years later, when they saw her, the way they hurried to assure her that they remained faithful to what she had made of them.

The first sob ripped out of the woman hanging in the air and was stifled. Semirhage waited impassively. Haste might be necessary here, but too much haste could spoil everything. More sobbing erupted, overwhelming the patient's efforts to subdue it, growing louder, louder, until it swelled to a howl. Semirhage waited. The woman shone with a greasy slick of sweat; her head flung from side to side, flailing her hair, and she jerked helplessly in her unseen tethers, convulsive flutters. Full-throated, ear-shattering shrieks lasted until breath was exhausted and began again as soon as lungs could be filled. Those wide bulging blue eyes saw nothing; they seemed to be glazing. Now it began.

Semirhage cut off her streams of *saidar* abruptly, but minutes passed before the screams subsided into panting. “What is your name?” she asked gently. The question did not matter as long as it was one the woman would answer. It could have been “Do you still defy me?”—it was often pleasant to keep on with that one until they pleaded to prove they no longer did—but she needed to make every question count this time.

Involuntary shudders ran through the hanging woman. Giving Semirhage a wary, slitted gaze, she licked her lips, coughed, and finally muttered hoarsely, “Cabriana Mecandes.”

Semirhage smiled. “It is good to tell me the truth.” There were pain centers in the brain, and pleasure centers. She stimulated one of the latter, just for a few moments but hard, as she moved closer. The jolt widened Cabriana’s eyes as far as they would go; she gasped and shook. Plucking a handkerchief from her sleeve, Semirhage lifted the woman’s wondering face and tenderly dabbed away sweat. “I know this is very hard on you, Cabriana,” she said warmly. “You must try not to make it more difficult.” With a soft touch she smoothed damp hair away from the woman’s face. “Would you like something to drink?” Not waiting for an answer, she channeled; a battered metal flask floated from the small table in the corner to her hand. The Aes Sedai never took her eyes from Semirhage, but she drank thirstily. After a few swallows, Semirhage took the flask away and returned it to the table. “Yes, that’s better, isn’t it? Remember, try not to make it difficult for yourself.” As she turned away, the woman spoke again, in a rasping voice.

“I spit in the milk of your mother, Darkfriend! Do you hear me? I. . . .”

Semirhage stopped listening. Any other time there would have been a spreading glow of pleasure that the patient’s defiance had not been crushed yet. The purest exhilaration came from shaving away defiance and dignity in minute slices, watching the patient finally realize that they were going and struggle vainly to cling to what remained. No time for that now. Carefully she once more set the web on the pain centers of Cabriana’s brain and knotted it. Normally she liked to be in personal control, but some haste was necessary. Triggering the net, she channeled to extinguish the lights and left, closing the door behind her. Darkness would work its part, too. Alone, in the dark, with the pain.

Despite herself Semirhage made a vexed sound. There was no finesse in this. She did not like having to hurry. And to be called away from her charge; the girl was willful and obdurate, the circumstances difficult.

The corridor came close to matching the chamber for bleakness, a broad shadowy shaft through stone, with crossing passageways that she had no desire to explore nearly lost in the murk. Only two other doors were in sight, one leading to her present quarters. They were comfortable enough rooms if she had to be here, but she made no move toward them. Shaidar Haran stood in front of that door, black-clad and wreathed in dimness like smoke, so still that it was almost a shock when it spoke, a sound of bone dust being ground.

“What have you learned?”

The summons to Shayol Ghul had resulted in a warning from the Great Lord. *WHEN YOU OBEY SHAIDAR HARAN, YOU OBEY ME. WHEN YOU DISOBEY SHAIDAR HARAN. . . .* However much the warning nettled, there had been no need for more. “Her name. Cabriana Mecandes. I could hardly learn more so quickly.”

It flowed across the hallway in that eye-wrenching way, ebon cloak hanging in denial of motion. One moment it was a statue ten paces away, the next it loomed over her so she had the choice of backing away or craning her neck to look up at that dead-white, eyeless face. Backing away was out of the question. “You will drain her completely, Semirhage. You will squeeze her dry, without delay, and tell me every scrap that you learn.”

“I promised the Great Lord that I would,” she told it coldly.

Bloodless lips twisted in a smile. That was its only reply. Turning sharply, it strode away through patches of shadow—and abruptly was gone.

Semirhage wished she knew how Myrddraal did that. It had nothing to do with the Power, but on the edges of shadow, where light was becoming dark, a Myrddraal could suddenly be elsewhere, in another shadow far away. Long ago Aginor had tested over a hundred of them to destruction in a vain effort to learn how it was done. The Myrddraal themselves did not know; she herself had proved that.

Abruptly she realized that her hands were pressed hard against her stomach, which seemed a ball of ice. It had been many years since she had felt fear anywhere except facing the Great Lord in the Pit of Doom. The frozen lump began to melt as she moved to the other prison door. Later she would analyze the emotion dispassionately; Shaidar Haran might be different from any other Myrddraal she had ever seen, but it was still a Myrddraal.

Her second patient, hanging like the first in midair, was a blocky, square-faced man in a green coat and breeches suitable for fading into a forest. A full half of the glowbulbs here shimmered on the edge of failure—that any had survived so long was a miracle—but Cabriana's Warder was unimportant, really. What was needed, for whatever purpose, rested in the Aes Sedai's mind, yet the Myrddraal apparently had been told to capture an Aes Sedai, and in their minds for some reason Aes Sedai and Warders seemed inseparable. As well they had, though. She had not before had an opportunity to break one of these storied fighters.

His dark eyes tried to bore holes through her head as she removed his clothing and boots and destroyed them as she had Cabriana's. He was hairy, a mass of large hard muscles and scars. He never flinched. He said nothing. His defiance was different from the woman's. Hers was bold, flung in your face, his a quiet refusal to bend. He might be harder to crack than his mistress. Normally he would have been much the more interesting.

Pausing, Semirhage studied him. There was something. . . . A tightness around the mouth and eyes. As if he already fought pain. Of course. That peculiar bond between Aes Sedai and Warder. Strange that these primitives should have come up with something that none of the Chosen understood, yet it was so. From the little she knew, this fellow quite possibly felt at least some of what the other patient was undergoing. Another time that would present interesting possibilities. Now, it only meant that he thought he knew what he was facing.

"Your owner does not take very good care of you," she said. "If she was more than a savage, there would be no need for you to be marred with all those scars." His expression changed only slightly. To a tinge of contempt. "So."

This time she set the net on the pleasure centers and began the slowly increasing stimulation. He was intelligent. He frowned, shook his head, then his eyes narrowed, fixed on her like chips of dark ice. He knew he should not be feeling that rising bliss, and though he could not see her net, he knew it had to be her work, so he set himself to fight it. Semirhage almost smiled. No doubt he thought pleasure easier to fight than pain. On rare occasions she had broken patients with no more than this. It gave her little enjoyment, and afterward they could not think coherently, simply wanting more of the ecstasy that bloomed in their heads, but it was quick, and they would do absolutely anything for more. That lack of coherence was why she had not used it on the other patient; she needed answers there. This fellow would learn the difference soon enough.

Difference. She put a finger to her lips in thought. Why was Shaidar Haran different from every other Myrddraal? She did not like discovering an oddity just when everything seemed to be going in their favor, and a Myrddraal set above the Chosen, even occasionally, was more than a mere oddity. Al'Thor was blinded, his attention all on Sammael, and Graendal was letting Sammael know enough to keep him from ruining everything with his pride. Of course, Graendal and Sammael were certainly scheming for advantage, together or separately. Sammael was a hot *so-far* with warped steering planes, and Graendal not much easier to predict. They had never learned that power came only from the Great Lord, handed out as he chose, for his own reasons. At his whims; she could think that in the safety of her head.

More troubling were the Chosen who had vanished. Demandred insisted they must be dead, but she and Mesaana were not so sure. Lanfear. If there was any justice, time would give her Lanfear. The woman was always there when least expected, always behaving as if she had the right to dabble her fingers in others' plans, always flitting to safety if her dabbling brought ruin. Moghedien. She skulked out of sight, but she had never gone so long before without making herself known, just to remind the rest of them that she, too, was Chosen. Asmodean. A traitor, and so doomed, but he really had vanished, and Shaidar Haran's existence and her own orders here combined to remind her that the Great Lord worked in his own ways toward his own goals.

The Chosen were no more than pieces on the board; they might be Counselors and Spires, but they were still pieces. If the Great Lord moved her here secretly, might he not be moving Moghedien or Lanfear, or even Asmodean? Might Shaidar Haran not be sent to deliver covert commands to Graendal or Sammael? Or for that matter, to Demandred or Mesaana? Their uneasy alliance—if it could be called by so strong a name—had lasted a long time, but neither would tell her if they received secret orders from the Great Lord, any more than she would ever let them learn of the orders that had brought her here, or those that had had her send Myrddraal and Trollocs to the Stone of Tear to battle those sent by Sammael.

If the Great Lord meant to make al'Thor Nae'blis, she herself would kneel to him—and wait for a slip to deliver him into her hands. Immortality meant infinite time to wait. There would always be other patients to amuse her in the meantime. What troubled her was Shaidar Haran. She had never been more than an indifferent *tcheran* player, but Shaidar Haran was a new piece on the board, one of unknown strength and purpose. And one daring way to capture your opponent's High Counselor and turn it to your side was to sacrifice your Spires in a false attack. She would kneel if need be, for as long as need be, but she would not be sacrificed.

An odd feel to the net pulled her out of her thoughts. She took one look at the patient and clicked her tongue in exasperation. His head hung to one side, chin dark with blood where he had chewed his tongue, eyes staring and already filmed over. Inattention, and she had let the stimulation grow too fast, too far. With an irritation that never touched her face, she stopped channeling. There was no point trying to stimulate the brain of a corpse.

A sudden thought occurred to her. If the Warder could feel what the Aes Sedai felt, was the reverse true? Eyeing the scars that decorated the man's body, she was sure it was impossible; even these simple fools would have altered the bond if it meant sharing the feel of *that*. Still, she abandoned the cadaver and stepped across the corridor with some haste.

Screams heard before she opened the iron-bound door onto darkness brought a deep breath of relief. Killing the woman before draining her of everything she knew would probably have meant remaining here until another Aes Sedai was captured. At the least.

There were barely intelligible words among the throat-shredding howls, words that seemed to have all the force of the patient's soul behind them. "Pleeeeaaaase! Oh, Light, PLEEEEAAAASE!"

Semirhage smiled faintly. There was a little fun in this after all.

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CHAPTER 7

A Matter of Thought

Seated on her mattress, Elayne finished the one hundred strokes with her left hand, then put the hairbrush away in her small leather traveling case and pushed it back under the narrow bed. A dull ache rested behind her eyes from a day spent channeling, making *ter'angreal*. Too often *trying* to make *ter'angreal* Nynaeve, balanced atop their loose-jointed stool, had long since completed brushing her waist-length hair and was nearly done replaiting her braid loosely for sleep. Sweat made her face glisten.

Even with the one window open, the small room was stifling. The moon hung fat in a star-filled black sky. Their stub of candle provided a fitful glow. Candles and lamp oil were in short supply in Salidar; no one got more than a scrap of light at night unless they had to work with pen and ink. The room truly was cramped, with little space to move around the two short beds. Most of what they owned was packed away in a pair of battered brass-bound chests. Accepted's dresses and cloaks they certainly had no need of now hung from pegs in the walls, where ragged holes in the crazed yellowing plaster showed the lathing beneath. A tiny table with a tilt was shoved between the beds, and a rickety washstand in the corner held a white pitcher and basin with an amazing number of chips between them. Even Accepted who had their heads patted at every turn were not indulged.

A handful of bedraggled blue and white wildflowers—fooled by the weather into blooming late, and not very well—stuck out of a yellow vase with a broken neck between a pair of brown pottery cups on the table. The only other spot of color was a green-striped song sparrow in a wicker cage. Elayne was nursing it for a broken wing. She had tried her small skill with Healing on another bird, but songbirds at least were too small to survive the shock.

No complaining, she told herself firmly. Aes Sedai lived a little better, novices and servants a little worse, and Gareth Bryne's soldiers slept on the ground most often. *What can't be changed must be endured*. Lini used to say that all the time. Well, Salidar held small enough comfort, and no luxury. And no coolness, either.

Pulling her shift away from her body, she blew down her front. "We want to be there ahead of them, Nynaeve. You know how they go on if they have to wait."

Not a breath of breeze stirred, and the parched air seemed to pull perspiration from every pore. There must be something that could be done about the weather. Of course, if there was, Sea Folk Windfinders would probably already have done it, but she still might think of something, if only the Aes Sedai would give her time enough away from *ter'angreal*. As Accepted, she supposedly could take her studies where she wanted, but. . . . *If they thought I could eat and show them how to make* ter'angreal *at the same time, I wouldn't have a minute to myself*. At least there would be a break in that tomorrow.

Shifting to her bed, Nynaeve frowned and fiddled with the *a'dam* bracelet on her wrist. She always insisted one of them wear it even when they slept, though it produced decidedly odd and unpleasant dreams. There was hardly need; the *a'dam* would hold Moghedien just as well hanging on a peg, and on top of that, she shared a truly tiny cubbyhole with Birgitte. Birgitte was as good a guard as could be, and besides, Moghedien almost wept any time Birgitte so much as frowned. She had the least reason to want Moghedien alive, the most to want her dead, which the woman knew very well. Tonight the bracelet would be less use than usual.

"Nynaeve, they'll be *waiting*."

Nynaeve sniffed loudly—she did not do well being at anyone's beck and call—but she took one of two flattened stone rings from the table between the beds. Both too large for a finger, one was striped and flecked blue and brown, the other blue and red, and each was twisted so it had only one edge. Unfastening the leather thong hanging around her neck, Nynaeve threaded the blue-and-brown ring alongside another, heavy and gold. Lan's signet. She touched the thick gold band tenderly before tucking both inside her shift.

Elayne picked up the blue-and-red ring, frowning at it.

The rings were *ter'angreal* she had made in imitation of one now in Siuan's possession, and despite their simple appearance, they were complex beyond belief. Sleeping with one next to your skin would take you into *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the World of Dreams, a reflection of the real world. Perhaps of all worlds; some Aes Sedai claimed that there were many worlds, as if all variations of the Pattern had to exist, and that all those worlds together made up a still larger Pattern. The important thing was that *Tel'aran'rhiod* reflected this world, and had properties that were extremely useful. Especially since the Tower knew nothing of entering it, so far as they could discover.

Neither of these rings worked quite as well as the original, though they did work. Elayne was getting a little better at that; of four attempts to produce a copy, only one had been a failure. A *much* better average than with the things she made from scratch. But what if one of her failures did worse than simply not work, or not work very well? Aes Sedai had been stilled studying *ter'angreal*. Burned out, it was called when it happened by accident, yet it was just as final. Nynaeve did not think so, of course but Nynaeve would not be satisfied till she Healed somebody three days dead.

Elayne turned the ring in her fingers. What it did was simple enough to understand, but the "how" still escaped her. "How" and "why" were the keys. With the rings she thought the pattern of colors had as much to do with it as the shape—anything other than the twisted ring did nothing, and the one that had turned out solid blue just gave you horrific nightmares—but she was not sure how to reproduce the original's red, blue and brown. Yet the fine structure of her copies was the same, the way the tiniest bits of them, too small to see or even detect without the One Power, were arranged. Why should the *colors* matter? There seemed to be one common thread in those tiny structures for *ter'angreal* that required channeling to work, and another for those that simply made use of the Power—stumbling on that was what allowed her to even attempt to make original *ter'angreal*—but there was so much she did not know, so much she was guessing at.

"Are you going to sit there all night?" Nynaeve asked dryly, and Elayne gave a start. Setting one of the pottery cups back on the table, Nynaeve arranged herself on her bed, hands folded across her middle. "You *were* the one who mentioned not keeping them waiting. For myself, I don't mean to give those biddies an excuse to chew my tailfeathers."

Hastily Elayne slipped the speckled ring—it was not really stone anymore, though it had started out that way—onto a cord that she tied around her own neck. The second pottery cup also held a tincture of herbs that Nynaeve had prepared, slightly sweetened with honey to negate a bitter taste. Elayne drank about half, from past experience enough to help her sleep even with a headache. Tonight was one of those nights she could not afford to dally.

Stretching out on the cramped bed, she channeled briefly to extinguish the candle, then flapped her shift to produce a little cool. Well, a stir in the air, anyway. “I wish Egwene would get better. I am tired of the scraps Sheriam and the rest of them toss us. I want to know what is happening!”

She had touched on a hazardous topic, she realized. Egwene had been injured a month and a half ago in Cairhien, on the day Moiraine and Lanfear died. The day Lan vanished.

“The Wise Ones say she *is* getting better,” Nynaeve murmured sleepily in the dark. For once she did not sound as if she had followed the path to Lan. “That’s what Sheriam and her little circle say, and they have no reason to lie even if they could.”

“Well, I wish I could look over Sheriam’s shoulder tomorrow night.”

“As well wish—” Nynaeve stopped for a yawn. “As well wish the Hall will choose you Amyrlin while you’re about it. You might have that one, granted. By the time they choose anyone, we’ll both be gray-haired enough for the job.”

Elayne opened her mouth to reply, but with the other woman’s example, it turned into a yawn too. Nynaeve began to snore, not loudly, but with dogged persistence. Elayne let her eyes drift shut, but her thoughts tried to remain focused in spite of herself.

The Hall certainly was being dilatory, the Sitters meeting for less than an hour some days and often not at all. To talk to one, you would think she saw no urgency, though of course the Sitters for the six Ajahs—there were no Reds in Salidar, of course—did not tell other Aes Sedai what they discussed in session, much less an Accepted. They certainly had cause for dispatch. If their intentions remained secret, their gathering surely no longer did. Elaida and the Tower would not ignore them forever. Beyond that, the Whitecloaks were still only a few miles away in Amadicia, and rumors had begun of Dragonsworn right here in Altara. The Light alone knew what Dragonsworn might get up to if Rand had no control over them. The

Prophet was a good example—or rather a horrid one. Riots, homes and farms burned, people murdered for not showing enough fervor in support of the Dragon Reborn.

Nynaeve's snoring sounded like cloth ripping, but in the distance. Another yawn cracked Elayne's jaws; she turned on her side and snuggled into the thin pillow. Reasons for dispatch. Sammael sat in Illian, and it was only a few hundred miles to the Illianer border, far too close with one of the Forsaken. The Light alone knew where the other Forsaken were, or what they were scheming. And Rand; they had to be concerned about Rand. He was not a danger, of course. He could never be that. But he *was* the key to everything; the world truly did bend itself around him now. She *would* bond him, somehow. Min. She and the embassy had to be more than halfway to Caemlyn by now. No snows to slow them. Another month yet for them to arrive. Not that she was concerned about Min going to Rand. What was the girl thinking of? Min. Sleep slid over her, and she slid into *Tel'aran'rhiod* . . .

. . . and found herself standing in the main street of silent night-shrouded Salidar, with the moon gibbous overhead. She could see quite clearly, more so than moonlight alone would have allowed. There was always a sense of light in the World of Dreams, from everywhere and nowhere, as if the darkness itself had some dark glow. But then, dreams were like that, and this was a dream, if not any ordinary dream.

The village here reflected the real Salidar, but in strange facsimile, more still than even night would make it. Every window was dark, and an air of emptiness hung heavily, as if no one occupied any of the buildings. Of course, no one did, here. A nightbird's reedy cry was answered by another, then a third, and something made a faint rustling noise as it skittered away in the odd half-light, but the stables would be empty, and the picket lines outside the village, and the clearings where sheep and cattle had been gathered. Wild creatures there would be in plenty, but none domesticated. Details changed between one glance and the next; the thatch-roofed buildings remained the same, yet a water barrel would be in a slightly different place, or gone, a door that had stood open was closed. The more ephemeral a thing was in the real world, the more its position or condition might change, the less firm its reflection.

Occasionally motion flickered in the dark street, someone appearing and vanishing after a few steps, or even floating across the ground as if flying. Many people's dreams could touch *Tel'aran'rhiod,* but only briefly. Which was lucky for them. Another property of the World of Dreams was that what happened to you here was still real when you woke. If you died here, you did not wake. A strange reflection. Only the heat was the same.

Nynaeve stood there in an Accepted's white dress with the banded hem, impatient beside Siuan and Leane. She had the silver bracelet, too, though it would not work from here to the waking world; it still held Moghedien, but Nynaeve, out of her body, would not be feeling anything through it. Leane was regally slim, though in Elayne's opinion her barely opaque Domani gown of thin silk detracted from her elegance. The color kept shifting, too; that sort of thing happened until you learned what you were doing here. Siuan was better. She wore a simple dress of blue silk, with a scooped neck just low enough to show the twisted ring on a necklace. On the other hand, lace trim sometimes appeared on the dress and the necklace changed from a plain silver chain to elaborate pieces with rubies or firedrops or emeralds set in gold, with earrings to match, then back to the plain chain.

That was the original ring hanging around Siuan's neck; she appeared as solid as any of the buildings. To herself, Elayne looked just as solid, but she knew that to the others she seemed slightly misty, like Nynaeve and Leane. You almost thought you might see the moonlight through them. That was what using a copy did. She could sense the True Source, but as she was, *saidar* felt tenuous; if she tried to channel, that would be meager too. With the ring Siuan wore, it would not be so, but that was the price of having secrets someone else knew and you did not dare have exposed. Siuan trusted the original more than Elayne's copies, so she wore it—or sometimes Leane did—while Elayne and Nynaeve, who could use *saidar*, made do.

"Where are they?" Siuan demanded. Her neckline swooped up and down. The dress was green, now, the necklace a strand of fat moonstones. "It's bad enough they want to stick an oar into my work and row as they please; now they make me wait."

"I do not know why it upsets you for them to come along," Leane told her. "You like watching them make mistakes. They do not know half of what they think they do." For a moment her gown slid dangerously close to transparency; a close torque of fat pearls appeared around her neck and vanished. She did not notice. She had even less experience here than Siuan.

“I need some real sleep,” Siuan muttered. “Bryne tries to run me breathless. But I have to wait on the pleasure of women who’ll spend half the night remembering how to walk. Not to mention being lumbered with these two.” She frowned at Elayne and Nynaeve, then rolled her eyes skyward.

Nynaeve gripped her braid firmly, a sure indication of temper working. For once, Elayne agreed with her wholeheartedly. It was more than difficult being a teacher with pupils who thought they knew more than they did and were far more likely to call down the teacher than the teacher was to get away with calling them down. Of course, the others were far worse than Siuan or Leane. Where *were* the others?

Movement appeared up the street. Six women, surrounded by the glow of *saidar*, who did not vanish. As usual, Sheriam and the rest of her council had dreamed themselves into their own bedchambers and walked out. Elayne was not sure how far they understood the attributes of *Tel’aran’rhiod* yet. In any case, they often insisted on doing things their own way even when there was a better. Who could know better than an Aes Sedai?

The six Aes Sedai truly were beginners in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, and their dresses changed every time Elayne looked at them. First one was wearing the embroidered Aes Sedai shawl, fringed in the color of her Ajah and with the white Flame of Tar Valon a bold teardrop on the back, then four were, then none. Sometimes it was a light traveling cloak, as to keep dust off, with the Flame on back and left breast. Their ageless faces showed no signs of the heat, of course—Aes Sedai never did—and no sign they were aware of how their clothes were changing, either.

They were as misty as Nynaeve or Leane. Sheriam and the others put more faith in dream *ter’angreal* that required channeling than in the rings. They just did not seem willing to believe that *Tel’aran’rhiod* had nothing to do with the One Power. At least Elayne could not tell which were using her copies. Somewhere about them three would have a small disc of what had once been iron, scribed on both sides with a tight spiral and powered by a flow of Spirit, the only one of the Five Powers that could be channeled in your sleep. Except here, anyway. The other three would be carrying small plaques once amber, with a sleeping woman worked inside each. Even if she had all six *ter’angreal* in front of her, Elayne would not have been able to pick out the two originals; those copies had gone very well. Just the same, it was still copying.

As the Aes Sedai came down the dirt street together, she heard the tail end of their conversation, though she could not make head nor foot of it.

“. . . will scorn our choice, Carlinya,” fiery-haired Sheriam was saying, “but they will scorn any choice we make. We might as well stay by our decision. You do not need me to list reasons again.”

Morvrin, a stout Brown sister with gray-streaked hair, snorted. “After all our work with the Hall, we would have a hard time changing their minds now.”

“As long as no ruler scoffs, why should we care?” Myrelle said heatedly. The youngest of the six, not many years Aes Sedai, she sounded decidedly irritated.

“What ruler would dare?” Anaiya asked, much like a woman asking what child would dare track mud on her carpets. “In any case, no king or queen knows enough of what passes among Aes Sedai to understand. Only the sisters’ opinions need concern us, not theirs.”

“What worries me,” Carlinya replied coolly, “is that if she is easily guided by us, she may be as easily guided by others.” The pale, almost black-eyed White was always cool, some would say icy.

Whatever they were talking about, it was nothing they wanted to discuss in front of Elayne or the others; they fell silent just before reaching them.

Siuan and Leane’s reaction to the newcomers had been to turn their backs on each other sharply, as if they had been having words interrupted by the Aes Sedai’s arrival. For Elayne’s part, she quickly checked her dress. It was the proper banded white. She did not know how she felt about that, appearing in the right dress without thought; she would have wagered that Nynaeve had had to change her garb after appearing. But then, Nynaeve was far more intrepid than she, struggling against limits that she herself acquiesced to. How could she ever manage to rule Andor? If her mother was dead. If.

Sheriam, slightly plump and with high cheekbones, turned tilted green eyes on Siuan and Leane. For a moment she wore a blue-fringed shawl. “If you two cannot learn to get along, I vow I’ll send both of you to Tiana.” It had the sound of something said often and no longer really meant.

“You worked together long enough,” Beonin said in her heavy Taraboner accent. A pretty Gray with honey-colored hair in a multitude of braids, she had blue-gray eyes that constantly looked startled. Nothing surprised Beonin, though. She would not believe the sun came up in the morning until she saw for herself, yet if one morning it did not, Elayne doubted that Beonin would turn a hair. It would just confirm that she had been right to demand proof. “You can and must work together again.”

Beonin sounded as if she had said that so often that she hardly thought of it. All the Aes Sedai were long since used to Siuan and Leane. They had begun handling them as they might have managed two girls who could not stop squabbling. Aes Sedai did have a tendency to see anyone who was not as a child. Even these two who once had been sisters.

“Send them to Tiana or don’t,” Myrelle snapped, “but don’t talk about it.” Elayne did not think the darkly beautiful woman was angry at Siuan or Leane. Perhaps not at anyone or anything in particular. She had a volatile temper remarkable even among Greens. Her golden yellow silk dress became high-necked, but with an oval cutout that exposed the tops of her breasts; she wore a peculiar necklace, too, like a wide silver collar supporting three small daggers, hilts nestling in her cleavage. A fourth dagger appeared and was gone so quickly it might have been imagination. She eyed Nynaeve up and down as if searching for fault. “Are we going to the Tower, or aren’t we? If we are going to do this, we might as well accomplish something useful while we are about it.”

Elayne knew why Myrelle was angry, now. When she and Nynaeve first came to Salidar, they had been meeting Egwene in *Tel’aran’rhiod* every seven days to share what they had learned. Which had not always been easy, since Egwene was always accompanied by at least one of the Aiel dreamwalkers she was studying with. Meeting without a Wise One or two had taken some pains. In any case, all that ended when they reached Salidar. These six Aes Sedai of Sheriam’s council had taken over the meetings, when they had had only the three original *ter’angreal* and little more knowledge of *Tel’aran’rhiod* than how to reach it. That had been just when Egwene was injured, which left Aes Sedai facing Wise Ones, two sets of proud resolute women, each suspicious of what the other wanted, neither willing to yield an inch or bow her neck a hair.

Of course, Elayne did not know what went on at those meetings, but she had her own experiences to go by, and fragments dropped here and there by Sheriam and the others.

Aes Sedai were sure they could learn anything once they knew there was something to be learned, usually required the respect due a queen, and always expected to be told what they wanted to know without delays or quibbles. They had apparently demanded answers about everything, from what Rand was planning to when Egwene would be well enough to return to the World of Dreams, to whether it was possible to spy on people's dreams in *Tel'aran'rhiod* or to enter the World of Dreams physically, or bring someone into the dream against their will. They had even asked more than once whether it was possible to affect the real world by what you did in the dream, a pure impossibility they apparently doubted. Morvrin had read a little about *Tel'aran'rhiod*, enough to come up with plenty of questions, though Elayne suspected Siuan supplied her share. She thought Siuan was angling to attend the meetings herself, but the Aes Sedai seemed to think it concession enough to allow her to use the ring as an aid in her work with the eyes-and-ears. Aes Sedai interference in that work was what upset her.

As for the Aiel. . . . Wise Ones—the dreamwalkers, at least, Elayne was aware from her own encounters, not only knew just about everything there was to know about the World of Dreams, but looked on it almost as a private preserve. They did not like anyone coming there in ignorance, and had a rough way of dealing with what they saw as foolishness. Besides which, they were a closemouthed lot, apparently fiercely loyal to Rand, unwilling to say much more than that he was alive, or that Egwene would return to *Tel'aran'rhiod* when she was well enough, and more than unwilling to answer questions they considered improper. Which last could mean that they did not believe the questioner knew enough yet to hear the answer, or that question or answer or both somehow violated their strange philosophy of honor and obligation. Elayne knew little more of *ji'e'toh* than that it existed, and that it made for very peculiar, very touchy behavior.

All in all, it was a recipe for disaster, and Elayne thought it very probably was served up fresh every seven days, at least from the Aes Sedai point of view.

Sheriam and the other five had required lessons every night in the beginning, but now there were only two times they did so. The night before meeting the Wise Ones, as if to hone their skills one last time before a contest. And the night after, usually tight-mouthed, as if to work out what had gone wrong and how to counter it. Myrelle was probably already seething over tomorrow night's disaster. There surely would be one of some kind.

Morvrin turned to Myrelle and opened her mouth, but suddenly there was another woman among them. It took Elayne a moment to recognize Gera, one of the cooks, in those ageless features. Wearing a green-fringed shawl with the Flame of Tar Valon on her back and weighing no more than half what she really did, Gera raised an admonitory finger to the Aes Sedai—and was gone.

"So those are her dreams, are they?" Carlinya said coolly. Her snow-white silk dress grew sleeves that hung in points over her hands, and a high tight neck under her chin. "Someone should speak to her."

"Leave over, Carlinya," Anaiya chuckled. "Gera's a good cook. Let her have her dreams. I can see the attraction myself." Abruptly she became slimmer and taller. Her features did not really alter; she wore the same plain, motherly face as always. With a laugh she changed back. "Can't you see the fun in something for once, Carlinya?" Even Carlinya's sniff was cool.

"Clearly," Morvrin said, "Gera saw us, but will she remember?" Her dark, steely eyes were thoughtful. Her dress, plain dark wool, held the steadiest among the six. Details shifted, but so subtly that Elayne could not really say what was different.

"Of course she will," Nynaeve said acerbically. She had explained this before. Six Aes Sedai looked at her, eyebrows rising, and she moderated her voice. A little. She hated scrubbing pots, too. "If she remembers the dream, she will. But only as a dream."

Morvrin frowned. She ran Beonin a close second in wanting proof. Nynaeve's long-suffering expression was going to get her in trouble, whatever her tone. Before Elayne could say anything to take the Aes Sedai's attention from Nynaeve, though, Leane spoke up with an expression close to a simper.

"Don't you think we should go, now?"

Siuan snorted contemptuously at the timidity, and Leane cut her eyes at her sharply. "Yes, you'll want to have as much time in the Tower as possible," Siuan said, diffident in turn, and Leane sniffed.

They really did it very well. Sheriam and the others never suspected that Siuan and Leane were not simply two stilled women clinging to a purpose that might keep them alive, clinging to the edge of what they had been. Two women childishly at one another's throats all the time. The Aes Sedai should have remembered that Siuan had had the reputation of a strong-willed and devious manipulator, and to a lesser extent so had Leane. Had they presented a unified front, or shown their true faces, the six would have remembered, and looked hard at everything the pair said. But divided, spitting rancor in each other's face, all but groveling to the Aes Sedai and plainly not even aware of it. . . . When one was reluctantly forced to agree with what the other said, it lent extra weight. When one objected on obviously frivolous grounds, so did that. Elayne knew they used the pretense to guide Sheriam and the others toward supporting Rand. She just wished she knew what else they used it for.

"They're right," Nynaeve said firmly, giving Siuan and Leane a disgusted look. Their pretence irked Nynaeve no end: Nynaeve would not have groveled for her life. "You should know by now that the longer you spend here, the less real rest you get. Sleep while you are in *Tel'aran'rhiod* doesn't do as much good as ordinary sleep. Now, remember that if you see anything out of the ordinary, you need to be careful." She truly did hate repeating herself—the fact showed clearly in her voice—but with these women, Elayne had to admit it was too often necessary. If only Nynaeve did not sound as if she were talking to dim-witted children. "When somebody dreams themselves into *Tel'aran'rhiod* like Gera, but they're having a nightmare, sometimes the nightmare survives, and those are very dangerous. Avoid anything that looks unusual. And try to control your thoughts this time. What you think of here can become real. That Myrddraal that popped out of nowhere last time might have been a leftover nightmare, but I think one of you let her mind wander. You were talking about the Black Ajah, if you'll remember, and discussing whether they were letting Shadowspawn into the Tower." As if that were not bad enough, she had to add, "You won't impress the Wise Ones tomorrow night if you drop a Myrddraal into the middle of everything." Elayne winced.

"Child," Anaiya said gently, adjusting the blue-fringed shawl that was suddenly looped over her arms, "you have been doing very good work, but that doesn't excuse a peevish mouth."

"You have been given a number of privileges," Myrelle said, not at all gently, "but you seem to forget that they *are* privileges." Her frown should have been enough to make Nynaeve quake. Myrelle had been increasingly hard on Nynaeve the past weeks. She had her shawl on, too. They all did, a bad sign.

Morvrin snorted bluntly. “When I was Accepted, any girl who spoke to an Aes Sedai that way would have spent the next month scrubbing floors, if she was due to be raised Aes Sedai the next day.”

Elayne spoke up hurriedly, hoping she could forestall their own disaster. Nynaeve had put on what she probably thought was a conciliatory face, but she looked sulky and stubborn. “I am sure she didn’t mean anything, Aes Sedai. We have been working very hard. Please forgive us.” Adding herself might help, since she had done nothing. It might also have them both scrubbing floors. At least it made Nynaeve look at her. And think, apparently, since her features smoothed into something that did seem appeasing and she made a curtsy and stared at the ground as though abashed. Maybe she really was. Maybe. Elayne rushed on as if Nynaeve had made a formal apology and had it accepted. “I know you all do want to spend as much time as possible at the Tower, so perhaps we shouldn’t wait any longer? If you will all visualize Elaida’s study, just as you saw it last time?” Elaida was never called the Amyrlin in Salidar, and in the same way the Amyrlin’s study in the White Tower had its name shifted. “Everyone fix it in your minds, so we all arrive together.”

Anaiya was the first to nod, but even Carlinya and Beonin let themselves be diverted.

It was unclear whether the ten of them moved or *Tel’aran’rhiod* moved around them. It could have been either from the little Elayne really understood; the World of Dreams was almost infinitely malleable. One moment they were standing in the street in Salidar, the next in a large and ornate room. The Aes Sedai gave satisfied nods, still inexperienced enough to be pleased at anything that worked as they thought it should.

As surely as *Tel’aran’rhiod* reflected the waking world, this room reflected the power of the women who had occupied it over the last three thousand years. The gilded stand-lamps were unlit, but there was light, in the odd way of *Tel’aran’rhiod* and dreams. The tall fireplace was golden marble from Kandor, the floor polished redstone from the Mountains of Mist. The walls had been paneled a relatively short time ago—a mere thousand years—in pale wood, oddly striped and carved with marvelous beasts and birds that Elayne was sure had come straight out of the carver’s imagination. Gleaming pearly stone framed tall arched windows that let onto the balcony overlooking the Amyrlin’s private garden; that stone had been salvaged from a nameless city submerged in the Sea of Storms during the Breaking of the World, and no one had ever found its like elsewhere.

Each woman who used that room put her own mark on it, if only for the time of her possession, and Elaida was no different. A heavy thronelike chair, an ivory Flame of Tar Valon cresting the high back, stood behind a massive writing table ornately carved in triple-linked rings. The tabletop was bare except for three boxes of Altaran lacquerwork, each precisely the same distance from the next. A plain white vase stood atop a severe white plinth against one wall. The vase held roses, the number and color changing at every look, but always arranged with a harsh rigidity. Roses, at this time of year, in this weather! The One Power had been *wasted* to make them grow. Elaida had done the same when she was advisor to Elayne’s mother.

Above the fireplace hung a painting in the new style, on stretched canvas, of two men fighting among clouds, hurling lightning. One man had a face of fire, and the other was Rand. Elayne had been at Falme; the painting was not too far from the truth. A tear in the canvas across Rand’s face, as though something heavy had been thrown at it, had been mended almost invisibly. Plainly Elaida wanted a constant reminder of the Dragon Reborn, and just as plainly she was not happy having to look at it.

“If you will excuse me,” Leane said before all the satisfied nodding was done, “I must see if my people have received my messages.” Every Ajah except the White had a network of eyes-and-ears scattered across the nations, and so did a good many individual Aes Sedai, but Leane was rare, perhaps unique, in that as Keeper she had created a net in Tar Valon itself. No sooner had she spoken than she vanished.

“She should not be wandering about alone here,” Sheriam said in an exasperated voice. “Nynaeve, go after her. Stay with her.”

Nynaeve gave her braid a tug. “I don’t think—”

“Very often you do not,” Myrelle cut her off. “For once do as you are told, when you are told, Accepted.”

Exchanging wry glances with Elayne, Nynaeve nodded, visibly suppressing a sigh, and disappeared. Elayne had little sympathy. Had Nynaeve not indulged her irritation back in Salidar it might have been possible to explain that Leane could be anywhere in the city, that it would be almost impossible to find her, and that she had been venturing into *Tel’aran’rhiod* alone for weeks.

“Now to see what we can learn,” Morvrin said, but before anyone could move, Elaida was behind the writing table, glaring.

An unyielding stern-faced woman, handsome rather than beautiful, and dark of hair and eye, Elaida wore a blood-red dress, with the striped stole of the Amyrlin Seat about her shoulders. “As I have Foretold,” she intoned. “The White Tower will be reunited under me. Under *me*!” She pointed harshly to the floor. “Kneel, and ask forgiveness of your sins!” With that, she was gone.

Elayne let out a long breath, and was gratified to realize she was not the only one.

“A Foretelling?” Beonin’s forehead creased thoughtfully. She did not sound worried, but she might well have. Elaida did have the Foretelling, if fitfully. When the Foretelling laid hold of a woman and she knew a thing would happen, it did.

“A dream,” Elayne said, and was surprised at how steady her voice was. “She’s asleep and dreaming. No wonder if she dreams everything to her liking.” *Please, Light, let it only be that*.

“Did you notice the stole?” Anaiya asked no one in particular. “It had no blue stripe.” The Amyrlin’s stole was supposed to have one stripe for each of the seven Ajahs.

“A dream,” Sheriam said flatly. She sounded unafraid, but she had her blue-fringed shawl on again and was clutching it around her. So was Anaiya.

“Whether it is or not,” Morvrin said placidly, “we may as well do what we came for.” Not much could frighten Morvrin.

The abrupt stir of activity at the Brown sister’s words made it suddenly clear how still everyone had gone. She, Carlinya and Anaiya glided swiftly out to the anteroom, where the Keeper’s worktable would be. That was Alviarin Freidhen, under Elaida; a White, strangely, though the Keeper *always* came from the Amyrlin’s own Ajah.

Siuan stared after them testily. She claimed there was often more to be learned from Alviarin’s papers than from Elaida’s, for Alviarin sometimes seemed to know more than the woman she supposedly served, and twice Siuan had found evidence that Alviarin had countermanded Elaida’s orders, apparently without repercussions. Not that she had told Elayne or Nynaeve what orders. There were definite limits to Siuan’s sharing.

Sheriam, Beonin and Myrelle gathered at Elaida's desk, opened one of the lacquered boxes, and began rifling through the papers inside. Elaida kept her recent correspondence and reports there. The box, worked in golden hawks fighting among white clouds in a blue sky, would suddenly shut again every time one of them let go of the lid, until they remembered to hold it open, and the papers themselves changed even as they were being read. Paper truly was ephemeral. Amid vexed *tsks* and annoyed sighs, the Aes Sedai persevered.

"Here's a report from Danelle," Myrelle said, hastily scanning a page. Siuan tried to join them—Danelle, a young Brown, had been part of the cabal that deposed her—but Beonin gave her a sharp frown that sent her back to a corner grumbling to herself. Beonin had returned her attention to the box and its documents before Siuan had taken three steps; the other two women never noticed. Myrelle went right on talking. "She says that Mattin Stepaneos accepts wholeheartedly, Roedran is still trying to take every side, while Alliandre and Tylin want more time to consider their answers. There's a note here in Elaida's hand. 'Press them!' " She clicked her tongue as the report melted into air in her hand. "It did not say about what, but there can be only two possibilities to take in those four." Mattin Stepaneos was King of Illian and Roedran of Murandy, while Alliandre was Queen of Ghealdan and Tylin of Altara. The subject had to be Rand or the Aes Sedai opposing Elaida.

"At least we know our emissaries still have as good a chance as Elaida's," Sheriam said. Of course, Salidar had sent none to Mattin Stepaneos; Lord Brend of the Council of Nine, Sammael, was the true power in Illian. Elayne would have given a pretty to know what Elaida proposed that Sammael was willing to support, or at least let Mattin Stepaneos say that he would support. She was sure the three Aes Sedai would have given as much, but they just went on snatching documents out of the lacquerwork box.

"The arrest warrant for Moiraine, it is still in force," Beonin said, shaking her head as the sheet in her hand suddenly turned to a fat sheaf. "She does not yet know Moiraine is dead." Grimacing at the pages, she let them fall; they scattered like leaves, and melted into air before settling. "Elaida still means to build herself a palace, too."

"She would," Sheriam said dryly. Her hand jerked as she took in what appeared to be a short note. "Shemerin has run away. The *Accepted*

Shemerin."

All three glanced at Elayne before turning back to the box, which they had to open again. None made any comment on what Sheriam had said.

Elayne very nearly ground her teeth. She and Nynaeve had told them Elaida was reducing Shemerin, a Yellow sister, to the Accepted, but of course they had not believed. An Aes Sedai could be made to do penance, she might be cast out, but she could not be demoted short of stilling. Only, it seemed that Elaida was doing exactly as that, whatever Tower law said. Maybe she was rewriting Tower law.

A number of things they had told these women had not really been believed. Such young women, Accepted, could not know enough of the world to know what could be and what not. Young women were credulous, gullible; they might well see and believe what was not there at all. It was an effort not to stamp her foot. An Accepted took what Aes Sedai wished to hand out and did not ask for what Aes Sedai did not choose to give. Such as apologies. She kept her face smooth and her smoldering inside.

Siuan felt under no such restraints. Most of the time she did not. When the Aes Sedai were not looking at her, she bathed them all in a glower. Of course, if one of the three glanced in her direction, her face became meek acceptance in a twinkling. She was very practiced at that. A lion survives by being a lion, she had once told Elayne, and a mouse by being a mouse. Even so, Siuan made a poor and reluctant mouse.

Elayne thought she detected worry in Siuan's eyes. This task had been Siuan's since she proved to the Aes Sedai that she could use the ring safely—after secret lessons for her and Leane from Nynaeve and Elayne, true—and a prime source of information. It took time to reestablish contact with eyes-and-ears scattered across the nations, and redirect their reports from the Tower to Salidar. If Sheriam and the others meant to take this over, Siuan might be less useful. In the history of the Tower no network of agents had ever been run by any but a full sister until Siuan came to Salidar with her knowledge of the Amyrlin's eyes-and-ears, and the Blue Ajah's that she had run before becoming Amyrlin. Beonin and Carlinya were openly reluctant to depend on a woman who was no longer one of them, and the others were not far behind. Truth to tell, they were none of them comfortable around a woman who had been stilled.

There really was nothing for Elayne to do, either. The Aes Sedai might call this a lesson, they might even think of it so, but she knew from past experience that if she tried to do any teaching without being asked, she would have her nose snapped off in short order. She was there to answer any questions they might have and nothing more. She thought of a stool—it appeared, the legs carved in vines—and sat down to wait. A chair would have been more comfortable, but it might occasion comment. An Accepted sitting too comfortably was often considered an Accepted with not enough to do. After a moment Siuan made herself an almost identical stool. She gave Elayne a tight smile—and the Aes Sedai backs a scowl.

The first time Elayne had visited this room in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* there had been a semicircle of such stools, a dozen or more, in front of the heavily carved table. Each visit since had seen fewer, and now none. She was sure that indicated something, though she could not imagine what. She was sure Siuan thought so, too, and very likely had puzzled out a reason, but if she had, she had not shared it with Elayne or Nynaeve.

"The fighting in Shienar and Arafel is dying down," Sheriam murmured half to herself, "but still nothing here to say why it began. Skirmishes only, yet Bordermen do not fight one another. They have the Blight." She was Saldaean, and Saldaea was one of the Borderlands.

"At least the Blight is still quiet," Myrelle said. "Almost too quiet. It cannot last. A good thing that Elaida has plenty of eyes-and-ears through the Borderlands." Siuan managed to combine a wince with a glare at the Aes Sedai. Elayne did not think she had managed yet to make contact with any of her agents in the Borderlands; they lay a long way from Salidar.

"I would feel better if the same could be said of Tarabon." The page in Beonin's hand grew longer and wider; she glanced at it, sniffed, and tossed it aside. "The eyes-and-ears in Tarabon, they are still silent. All of them. The only word she has of Tarabon is rumors from Amadicia that Aes Sedai are involved in the war." She shook her head at the absurdity of committing such rumors to paper. Aes Sedai did not involve themselves in civil wars. Not openly enough to be detected, at any rate. "And there are no more than a handful of confused reports from Arad Doman, it seems."

"We will know about Tarabon soon enough ourselves," Sheriam said soothingly. "A few more weeks."

The search went on for hours. There was never any shortage of documents; the lacquered box never emptied. In fact, the stack inside sometimes increased with the removal of a paper. Of course, only the shortest held steady long enough to be read in full, but occasionally a letter or report that had already been scanned would come out of the box again. Long stretches passed in silence, yet some documents elicited comment; a few the Aes Sedai discussed. Siuan began stringing a cat's-cradle between her hands, apparently paying no attention at all. Elayne wished she could do the same, or better yet read—a book appeared on the floor at her feet, *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*, before she made it go away—but women who were not Aes Sedai were granted more leeway than those training to be. Still, she learned a few things by listening.

Aes Sedai involvement in Tarabon was not the only rumor that had found its way to Elaida's writing table. Pedron Niall's ingathering of the Whitecloaks was rumored to have as its goal everything from seizing the throne of Amadicia—which he certainly had no need of—to crushing the wars and anarchy in Tarabon and Arad Doman, to *supporting* Rand. Elayne would believe that when the sun rose in the west. There were reports of strange occurrences in Illian and Cairhien—there might have been others, but those were the ones they saw—villages taken by madness, nightmares walking in daylight, two-headed calves that talked, Shadowspawn appearing out of thin air. Sheriam and the other two passed over those lightly; the same sort of stories drifted to Salidar from parts of Altara and Murandy and across the river from Amadicia. The Aes Sedai dismissed them as hysteria among people learning of the Dragon Reborn. Elayne was not so sure. She had seen things they had not, for all their years and experience. Her mother was rumored to be raising an army in the west of Andor—under the ancient flag of Manetheren, of all things!—as well as being held prisoner by Rand and fleeing to every nation imaginable, including the Borderlands and Amadicia, which last was purely *un*imaginable. Apparently the Tower believed none of it. Elayne wished she knew what to believe.

She stopped fretting over where her mother really was when she heard Sheriam mention her name. Not speaking to her; reading hurriedly from a square sheet of paper that became a long parchment with three seals at the bottom. Elayne Trakand was to be located and returned to the White Tower at all costs. If there was any more bungling, those who failed would "envy the Macura woman." That made Elayne shiver; on their way to Salidar a woman named Ronde Macura had come within an eyelash of sending her and Nynaeve back to the Tower like bundles of wash to the laundry. The ruling house of Andor, Sheriam read, was "the key," which made as little sense. The key to what?

None of the three Aes Sedai so much as glanced in her direction. They just exchanged glances and went on with what they were doing. Perhaps they had forgotten her, but then again, perhaps not. Aes Sedai did what they did. If she was to be shielded from Elaida, that was an Aes Sedai decision, and if they decided for some reason to hand her to Elaida bound hand and foot, that was their choice too. "*The pike does not ask the frog's permission before dining,*" as she remembered Lini saying.

Elaida's response to Rand's amnesty was evident in the condition of the report. Elayne could almost see her crumpling the sheet of paper in her fist, starting to rip it apart, then coldly smoothing it out and adding it to the box. Elaida's rages were almost always cold. She had not written anything on that document, but scrawled biting words on another, enumerating the Aes Sedai in the Tower, made clear she was almost ready to declare publicly that any who did not obey her order to return were traitors. Sheriam and the other two discussed the possibility calmly. However many sisters intended to obey, some would have far to travel; some might not even have received the summons yet. In any case, such a decree would confirm to the world all the rumors of a divided Tower. Elaida must be near panic to consider such a thing, or else maddened beyond reason.

A sliver of cold slid down Elayne's backbone, and nothing to do with whether Elaida was fearful or engaged. Two hundred ninety four Aes Sedai in the Tower, supporting Elaida. Nearly one-third of all Aes Sedai, almost as many as had gathered in Salidar. It might be that the best that could be expected was for the rest to split down the middle as well. After a great rush in the beginning, the numbers coming into Salidar had slowed to a trickle. Perhaps the flow to the Tower had dwindled as well. It could be hoped.

For a time they did their searching in silence, then Beonin exclaimed, "Elaida, she has sent emissaries to Rand al'Thor." Elayne leaped to her feet, and barely held her tongue at a clutching gesture from Siuan, spoiled a little by her failure to make the cat's-cradle disappear first.

Sheriam reached for the single sheet, but it became three before her hand touched it. "Where is she sending them?" she asked at the same time Myrelle asked, "When did they leave Tar Valon?" Serenity hung on by its fingernails.

“To Cairhien,” Beonin said. “And I did not see when, if it was mentioned. But they certainly will go on to Caemlyn as soon as they discover where he is.”

Even so, that was good; it might take a month or more to travel from Cairhien to Caemlyn. The Salidar embassy would reach him first, surely. Elayne had a ragged map tucked away beneath her mattress back in Salidar, and every day she marked off how far she thought they might have traveled toward Caemlyn.

The Gray sister was not finished. “It seems that Elaida, she means to offer him support. And an escort to the Tower.” Sheriam’s eyebrows rose.

“That is preposterous.” Myrelle’s olive cheeks darkened. “Elaida was Red.” An Amyrlin was of all Ajahs and none, yet no one could simply abandon where they came from.

“That woman will do anything,” Sheriam said. “He might find the White Tower’s support attractive.”

“Perhaps we can send a message to Egwene through the Aiel women?” Myrelle suggested in a doubtful tone.

Siuan gave a loud, and very phony, cough, but Elayne had had all she could stand. Warning Egwene was vital, of course—Elaida’s people would surely drag her back to the Tower if they discovered her in Cairhien, and not to a pleasant reception—but the rest . . . ! “How can you think Rand would listen to anything Elaida says? Do you think he does not know she was Red Ajah, and what that means? They aren’t going to offer him support, and you know it. We have to warn him!” There was a contradiction in that, and she knew it, but worry had hold of her tongue. If anything happened to Rand, she would die.

“And how do you suggest that *we* do that, Accepted?” Sheriam asked coolly.

Elayne was afraid she must look like a fish, with her mouth hanging open. She had not a clue what answer to give. She was saved suddenly by distant screaming, followed by wordless shouts from the anteroom. She was closest to the door, but she ran through with the others on her heels.

The room was empty except for the Keeper’s writing table, with its piles of papers and stacks of scrolls and documents, and a row of chairs against one wall where Aes Sedai would sit while waiting to speak to Elaida. Anaiya, Morvrin and Carlinya were gone, but one of the tall outer doors was still swinging shut. A woman’s frantic screams rolled through the narrowing opening. Sheriam, Myrelle and Beonin almost knocked Elayne down in their haste to reach the hall. They might have appeared misty, but they felt solid enough.

“Be careful,” Elayne shouted, yet there was really nothing to do but gather her skirts and follow as quickly as possible with Siuan. They stepped into a scene from nightmare. Literally.

Some thirty paces to their right, the tapestry-hung corridor suddenly widened into a stony cavern that seemed to stretch forever, lit in dim patches by the red glow of scattered fires and braziers. There were Trollocs everywhere, great manlike shapes, their all-too-human faces distorted by bestial muzzles and snouts and beaks, sporting horns or tusks or feathered crests. Those in the distance appeared more indistinct than the nearest, only half-formed, while the nearest were giants twice as tall as a man, even larger than any real Trolloc, all clad in leather and black spiked mail, howling and capering around cookfires and cauldrons, racks and strange spiked frames and metal shapes.

It really was a nightmare, though larger than any Elayne had heard of from Egwene or the Wise Ones. Once freed of the mind that created them, such things sometimes drifted through the World of Dreams and sometimes latched on to a particular spot. Aiel dreamwalkers destroyed each as a matter of course whenever they found one, but they—and Egwene—had told her the best thing to do was avoid any she saw altogether. Unfortunately, Carlinya apparently had not listened when she and Nynaeve passed that on.

The White sister was bound and hanging by her ankles from a chain that disappeared into darkness overhead. To Elayne’s eyes the glow of *saidar* still surrounded her, but Carlinya writhed frantically and screamed as she was slowly lowered headfirst toward a great bubbling black kettle of boiling oil.

Even as Elayne ran into the corridor, Anaiya and Morvrin halted at the border where hallway abruptly became cavern. For all of a heartbeat, they halted, then suddenly their hazy forms seemed to elongate toward the boundary, like smoke drawn into a chimney. No sooner had they touched it than they were inside, Morvrin shouting as two Trollocs turned great iron wheels that stretched her out tighter and tighter, Anaiya dangling by her wrists as Trollocs danced about her, flogging her with metal-tipped whips that tore long rents in her dress.

“We must link,” Sheriam said, and the glow surrounding her merged with that around Myrelle and Beonin. Even so, it did not come near the brightness of that around a single woman in the waking world, a woman who was not a misty dream.

“No!” Elayne shouted urgently. “You mustn’t accept it as real. You must treat it as—” She seized Sheriam’s arm, but the flow of Fire the three had woven, tenuous even with them linked, touched the dividing line between dream and nightmare. The weave vanished there as if the nightmare had absorbed it, and in the same instant the three Aes Sedai became drawn out, mist caught in a wind. They had time only for startled yells before they touched the boundary and vanished. Sheriam reappeared inside, her head sticking up from a dark metal bell shape. Trollocs turned handles and jerked levers on the outside, and Sheriam’s red hair flailed wildly as she shrieked in rising crescendos. Of the other two there was no sign, but Elayne thought she could hear more screaming in the distance, someone wailing “No!” over and over, another shrieking for help.

“Do you remember what we told you about dispelling nightmares?” Elayne asked.

Eyes fixed on the scene in front of her, Siuan nodded. “Deny its reality. Try to fix things in your mind as they would be without it.”

That had been Sheriam’s mistake, all the Aes Sedai’s mistake probably. By trying to channel against the nightmare they had accepted it as real, and that acceptance had pulled them into it as surely as walking in, leaving them helpless unless they remembered what they had forgotten. Which they showed no sign of doing. The climbing shrieks augered into Elayne’s ears.

“The corridor,” she muttered, trying to form in her head how it had been when she saw it last. “Think of the corridor the way you remember it.”

“I’m trying, girl,” Siuan growled. “It isn’t working.”

Elayne sighed. Siuan was right. Not a line of the scene before them so much as wavered. Sheriam’s head was almost vibrating above the metal shroud that enclosed the rest of her. Morvrin’s howls came in strained pants; Elayne almost thought she could hear the woman’s joints being pulled apart. Carlinya’s hair, hanging below her, was almost touching the roiling surface of the hot oil. Two women were not enough. The nightmare was too big.

“We need the others,” she said.

“Leane and Nynaeve? Girl, if we knew where to find them, Sheriam and the rest would be dead before. . . .” She trailed off, staring at Elayne. “You don’t mean Leane and Nynaeve, do you? You mean Sheriam and. . . .” Elayne only nodded; she was too frightened to speak. “I don’t think they can hear us from here, or see us. Those Trollocs haven’t even glanced our way. That means we have to try from inside.” Elayne nodded again. “Girl,” Siuan said in a toneless voice, “you have a lion’s courage, and maybe a fisherbird’s sense.” With a heavy sigh, she added, “But I don’t see any other way myself.”

Elayne agreed with her about everything except the courage. If she had not had her knees locked, she would have been in a heap on the floor tiles, patterned in all the colors of the Ajahs. She realized she had a sword in her hand, a great gleaming length of steel, absolutely useless even had she known how to wield it. She let it fall, and it vanished before reaching the floor. “Waiting isn’t helping anything,” she muttered. Much longer, and the little courage she had managed to scrape together would surely evaporate.

Together she and Siuan stepped toward the boundary. Elayne’s foot touched that dividing line, and suddenly she felt herself being pulled in, sucked like water through a tube.

One instant she was standing in the hallway, staring at the horrors, the next she was lying on her belly on rough gray stone, wrists and ankles tightly tied in the small of her back, and the horrors were all around her. The cavern stretched endless in every direction; the Tower corridor no longer seemed to exist. Screams filled the air, echoing from rocky walls and a ceiling dripping stalactites. A few paces from her a huge black cauldron stood steaming over a roaring fire. A boar-snouted Trolloc, complete with tusks, was tossing in lumps that seemed to be unidentifiable roots. A cookpot. Trollocs ate anything. Including people. She thought of her hands and feet free, but the coarse rope still dug into her flesh. Even the pale shadow of *saidar* had vanished; the True Source no longer existed for her, not here. A nightmare in truth, and she was well and truly caught.

Siuan’s voice cut through the screams in a pained moan. “Sheriam, listen to me!” The Light alone knew what was being done to her; Elayne could not see any of the others. Only hear them. “This is a dream! *Aah . . . aaaaaaah!* Th-think how it should be!”

Elayne took it up. “Sheriam, Anaiya, everybody, listen to me! You must think of the corridor as it was! As it really is! This is only real as long as you believe it!” She set the image of the corridor in her head firmly, colored tiles in ordered rows and gilded stand-lamps and brilliant woven tapestries. Nothing changed. The screams still echoed. “You must think of the corridor! Hold it in your minds, and it will be real! You can defeat this if you try!” The Trolloc looked at her; it had a thick sharp-pointed knife in its hand now. “Sheriam, Anaiya, you have to concentrate! Myrelle, Beonin, concentrate on the corridor!” The Trolloc heaved her onto her side. She tried to wriggle away, but a massive knee held her in place effortlessly while the thing began slicing at her clothes like a hunter skinning a deer carcass. Desperately she held on to the image of the hallway. “Carlinya, Morvrin, for the love of the Light, concentrate! Think of the corridor! The corridor! All of you! Think of it hard!” Grunting something in a harsh language never meant for a human tongue, the Trolloc flipped her facedown again and knelt on her, thick knees crushing her arms against her back. “The corridor!” she screamed. It tangled heavy fingers in her hair, yanked her head back. “The corridor! Think of the corridor!” The Trolloc’s blade touched her tight-stretched neck beneath her left ear. “The corridor! The corridor!” The blade began to slide.

Suddenly she was staring at colored floor tiles under her nose. Clapping hands to her throat, marveling that they were free to move, she felt wetness and brought her fingers up to stare at them. Blood, but only a tiny smear. A shudder rippled through her. If that Trolloc had succeeded in cutting her throat. . . . No Healing could have cured that. Shuddering again, she pushed slowly to her feet. It was the Tower hallway outside the Amyrlin’s study, with no sign of Trollocs or caverns.

Siuan was there, looking a mass of bruises in a torn dress, and the Aes Sedai, misty forms of near ruin. Carlinya was in the best shape, and she stood wide-eyed and shaking, fingering dark hair that now ended frizzily a hand from her scalp. Sheriam and Anaiya seemed to be weeping heaps of bloody rags. Myrelle huddled in on herself, white-faced, naked and covered with long red scratches and welts. Morvrin moaned every time she moved, and she moved unnaturally, as though her joints did not work properly anymore. Beonin’s dress appeared to have been clawed to shreds, and she was panting on her knees, more wide-eyed than ever, holding on to the wall to keep from falling over.

Abruptly Elayne realized that her own dress and shift were hanging from her shoulders, neatly sliced open down the front. A hunter skinning a deer carcass. She shivered so hard she almost fell. Repairing the garments was a simple matter of thought, but she was not sure how long it would take to repair her memories.

“We must go back,” Morvrin said, kneeling awkwardly between Sheriam and Anaiya. Despite her stiffness and groans, she sounded as stolid as ever. “There is Healing to be done, and none here can manage it as we are.”

“Yes.” Carlinya touched her short hair again. “Yes, it might be best if we returned to Salidar.” Her voice was a decidedly unsteady version of its normal iciness.

“I will stay a little while, if no one objects,” Siuan told them. Or rather suggested, in that ill-fitting humble voice. Her dress was whole again, but the bruises remained. “I might learn a little more that’s useful. All that’s wrong with me are a few lumps, and I’ve had worse falling in a boat.”

“You look more as if someone had dropped a boat on you,” Morvrin told her, “but the choice is yours.”

“I will stay, too,” Elayne said. “I can help Siuan, and I wasn’t hurt at all.” She was aware of the nick on her throat every time she swallowed.

“I don’t need any help,” Siuan said, at the same time that Morvrin said in an even firmer voice, “You kept your head very well tonight, child. Don’t spoil it now. You are coming with us.”

Elayne nodded grumpily. Arguing would get her nowhere except into hot water. You would have thought the Brown sister was the teacher here, and Elayne the pupil. They probably thought she had stumbled into the nightmare the same way they did. “Remember, you can step out of the dream straight into your own body. You do not have to go back to Salidar first.” There was no way of telling whether they heard her. Morvrin had turned away as soon as she nodded.

“Be easy, Sheriam,” the stout woman said soothingly. “We will be back in Salidar in a few moments. Be easy, Anaiya.” Sheriam at least had stopped crying, though she still moaned in pain. “Carlinya, will you help Myrelle? Are you ready, Beonin? Beonin?” The Gray raised her head and stared at Morvrin a moment before nodding.

The six Aes Sedai vanished.

With a last glance at Siuan, Elayne was only a moment behind, but she did not go to Salidar. Someone would very likely be coming to Heal the scrape on her neck, if they had noticed it, but for a little while they would be concerned with six Aes Sedai who would wake looking as if they had been pushed through some monstrous clockworks. Elayne had those few minutes, and another destination in mind.

The Grand Hall in her mother's palace in Caemlyn did not appear around her with any ease. There was a feel of resistance before she stood on a red-and-white tiled floor beneath the great arched roof, between rows of massive white columns. Once more light seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. The huge windows overhead, depicting the White Lion of Andor alternating with the earliest queens of the realm and scenes of great Andoran victories, were indistinct with the night outside.

Immediately she saw the difference from what she knew that had made coming here difficult. On the dais at the end of the hall where the Lion Throne should have stood was instead a grandiose monstrosity made of Dragons sparkling gold and red in gilt and enamel, with sunstones for their eyes. Her mother's throne had not been removed from the chamber. It stood on a kind of pedestal, behind and above the monstrous thing.

Elayne walked slowly down the hall and climbed the white marble stairs to stare up at the gilded throne of Andoran Queens. The White Lion of Andor, picked out in moonstones against a field of rubies on the back, would have stood above her mother's head.

"What are you doing, Rand al'Thor?" she whispered harshly. "What do you think you are doing?"

She was terribly afraid that he was bungling matters without her there to guide him between the pitfalls. True, he had handled the Tairens well enough, and apparently the Cairhienin, but her people were different, bluff and straightforward, with a dislike of being maneuvered or bullied. What had worked in Tear or Cairhien could blow up in his face like an Illuminator's display of fireworks.

If only she could be with him. If only she could warn him about the Tower's embassy. Elaida had to have some trick hidden, to spring when he least expected it. Would he be sensible enough to see it? For that matter, she had no idea what the Salidar embassy's orders were. Despite Siuan's efforts, most Aes Sedai in Salidar still seemed of two minds about Rand al'Thor; he was the Dragon Reborn, prophesied savior of humanity, but then again, he was a man who could channel, doomed to madness, death and destruction.

Take care of him, Min, she thought. *Reach him quickly and take care of him.*

A stab of jealousy hit her that Min would be there to do what she wanted to. She might have to share him, but she *would* have part of him all to herself. She *would* bond him as her Warder, whatever it took.

“It will be done.” She stretched a hand up toward the Lion Throne, to swear as queens had sworn since there was an Andor. The pedestal was too high for her to reach, but the intent should count. “It *will* be done.”

Time was running out. An Aes Sedai would be coming, back in Salidar, to wake her and Heal the pitiful scratch on her neck. With a sigh, she stepped out of the dream.

Demandred moved out from behind the columns of the Grand Hall and looked from the two thrones to where the girl had vanished. Elayne Trakand, unless he missed his guess wildly, and using a minor *ter’angreal* by the faint look of her, one made for training beginning students. He would have given much to know what was in her head, but her words and expression had been plain enough. She did not like what al’Thor was doing here, not in the least, and meant to do something about it. A determined young woman, he suspected. In any case, another thread in the tangle yanked, however feeble the pull turned out to be.

“Let the Lord of Chaos rule,” he told the thrones—though he still wished he knew why it had to be so—and opened a gateway to leave *Tel’aran’rhiod*.

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CHAPTER 8

The Storm Gathers

Nynaeve woke the next morning at first light feeling grumpy. She had a sense of bad weather coming, yet a glance out of the window revealed not a single cloud marring the still gray sky. Already the day promised to be another oven. Her shift was sweat-damp and twisted from tossing and turning. Once she had been able to rely on her ability to Listen to the Wind, but it seemed to have gone all askew since leaving the Two Rivers, when it did not desert her completely.

Waiting her turn to use the washstand did not help, either, nor listening to Elayne's recital of what had happened after she left them in Elaida's study. Her own night had been one long futile search through the streets of Tar Valon, empty save for herself, pigeons, rats and heaps of garbage. That had been a shock. Tar Valon was always kept spotless; Elaida must be neglecting the city terribly for garbage to show in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Once she had glimpsed Leane through the window of a tavern near South-harbor, of all places, but when she hurried inside, the common room was empty except for the freshly painted blue tables and benches. She should just have given up, but Myrelle had been badgering her lately, and she wanted a clear conscience when she told the woman that she had tried. Myrelle could pounce on an evasion as quickly as anyone Nynaeve had ever seen or heard of. To finish it off, she had stepped out of *Tel'aran'rhiod* last night to find Elayne's ring already back on the table and Elayne fast asleep. If there had been a prize for useless effort, she would have won it walking away. And now to learn that Sheriam and the rest had nearly gotten themselves killed . . . Even the song sparrow's chirping in its wicker cage earned a sour look.

"They think they know everything," Nynaeve muttered disparagingly. "I told them about nightmares. I warned them, and last night was not the first time." It made no difference that all six sisters had been Healed before she so much as got back from *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Much too easily it could have ended much worse—because they thought they knew it all. The irritated tugs she gave her braid delayed redoing it for the day. The *a'dam* bracelet sometimes caught on her hair, too, but she was not about to take it off. It was Elayne's turn to wear it today, but she was just as likely to leave it on a peg on the wall. Worry tickled through the bracelet, and the inevitable fear, but more than anything else, frustration. Doubtless "Marigan" was already helping with breakfast; having to do chores seemed to grate at her more than being a prisoner did. "That was good thinking on your part, Elayne. You didn't say how you ended up in it yourself after trying to warn everybody else."

Still scrubbing with her facecloth, Elayne shuddered. "It wasn't so hard to think of it. A nightmare that size needed all of us to handle. Maybe they learned a little humility. Maybe their meeting with the Wise Ones tonight won't be so bad."

Nynaeve nodded to herself. As she had thought. Not about Sheriam and the others; Aes Sedai would find humility when goats flew on wings, and a day before the Wise Ones at that. About Elayne. She had probably let herself be caught in the nightmare, though the girl would never admit it. Nynaeve was not sure whether Elayne thought taking credit for bravery was boasting or whether she simply did not realize how brave she was. Either way, Nynaeve was torn between admiration for the other woman's courage and a wish that just once Elayne would acknowledge it. "I thought I saw Rand." That brought the facecloth down.

"Was he there in the flesh?" That was dangerous, according to the Wise Ones; it risked losing some part of what made you human. "You warned him about that."

"When did he start listening to sense? I only glimpsed him. Maybe he just touched *Tel'aran'rhiod* in a dream." Unlikely, that. He apparently hedged his dreams with wards so strong she did not think he could reach the World of Dreams any other way than in the flesh, not even if he had been a Dreamwalker *and* had one of the rings. "Maybe it was somebody who looked a little like him. As I said, I only saw him for a moment, in the square in front of the Tower."

"I should be there with him," Elayne muttered. Emptying the basin into the night jar, she moved aside to let Nynaeve reach the washstand. "He *needs* me."

“What he needs is what he has always needed.” Nynaeve glowered as she refilled the basin from the pitcher. She did hate washing in water that had stood all night. At least it was not cold; there was no such thing as cold water anymore. “Somebody to box his ears once a week on general principles and keep him on the straight and narrow.”

“It isn’t fair.” A clean shift going over Elayne’s head muffled the words. “I worry about him all the time.” Her face popped out the top, looking more worried than indignant whatever her tone, and she pulled a banded white dress from one of the pegs. “I even worry about him in my *dreams*! Do you think he spends all his time fretting about *me*? *I* don’t.”

Nynaeve nodded, though a part of her considered that it was not exactly the same. Rand had been told Elayne was safe with Aes Sedai, if not where. How could Rand ever be safe? She bent over the basin, and Lan’s ring fell out of her shift, dangling on its leather cord. No, Elayne was right. Whatever Lan was doing, wherever he was, she doubted he thought of her half as often as she did of him. *Light, let him be alive even if he doesn’t think of me at all*. That possibility made her angry enough to pull her braid out by the roots, if she had not had her hands full of soap and facecloth. “You can’t concern yourself over a man all the time,” she said sourly, “even if you do want to be a Green. What did they find out last night?”

It was a long tale, though with little meat to it, and after a bit Nynaeve sat down on Elayne’s bed to listen and ask questions. Not that the answers told her much either. It was just not the same when you did not see the documents yourself. All very well to learn Elaida finally knew about Rand’s amnesty, but what did she mean to do about it? Proof the Tower was approaching rulers might actually be good news; it might light a fire under the Hall. Something had to. Elaida sending an embassy to Rand was certainly a worry, but he could not be fool enough to listen to anyone who came from Elaida. Could he? There just was not enough in what Elayne had overheard. And what was Rand doing putting the Lion Throne on a pedestal? What was he doing with a throne at all? He might be the Dragon Reborn and this Aiel *car*-whatever, but she could not get past the fact that she had tended him when he was a child and paddled his bottom when he needed it.

Elayne went right ahead dressing, and was done before her story was. “I’ll tell you the rest later,” she said hastily, and flew out the door.

Nynaeve grunted and went back to clothing herself unhurriedly. Elayne was teaching her first class of novices today, something Nynaeve had not been allowed to do yet. But if she was not trusted to teach novices, there was still Moghedien. She would be done with her breakfast chores shortly.

The only trouble was, when Nynaeve found the woman, Moghedien was up to her elbows in soapy water, the silver necklace of the *a'dam* looking especially out of place. She was not alone; a dozen other women were industriously scrubbing clothes on washboards in a wooden-fenced yard, amid steaming kettles of boiling water. More were hanging the first wash on long lines strung between poles, but heaps of bed linens and smallclothes and every sort of thing waited their turn on the washboards. The look Moghedien gave Nynaeve should have been enough to fry her hide. Hatred, shame and outrage rolled through the *a'dam*, nearly enough to swamp the ever-present fear.

The woman in charge, a sticklike gray-haired woman named Nildra, came bustling up, a stirring paddle held like a scepter and her dark woolen skirts tied up to the knee to keep them off ground muddy from spilled water. "Good morning, Accepted. I suppose you want Marigan, eh?" Her tone was a dry blend of respect with knowledge that tomorrow she might find any one of the Accepted added to her laundresses for a day or a month, to be worked and chivvied as hard as the rest if not harder. "Well, I can't let her go, yet. I'm shorthanded as it is. One of my girls is getting married today, another ran off, and two are on light work because they're pregnant. Myrelle Sedai told me I could have her. Maybe I can do without her in a few hours. I'll see."

Moghedien straightened, opening her mouth, but Nynaeve silenced her with a firm look—and a conspicuous touch to the *a'dam* bracelet on her wrist—and she resumed work. All it would take would be a few wrong words from Moghedien, a complaint that would never come from the farm woman she appeared to be, to start her on a path to stilling and the headsman, and Nynaeve and Elayne on one not much better. Nynaeve could not help swallowing in relief when Moghedien bent back to her washboard, mouth working as she muttered under her breath. Immense shame and outright fury surged through the *a'dam*.

Nynaeve managed a smile for Nildra and murmured something, she was not sure what, then stalked off to one of the communal kitchens to find breakfast. Myrelle, again. She wondered if the Green had taken against her personally for some reason. She wondered if she was going to harvest a permanently sour stomach from keeping Moghedien. She was practically eating goosemint like candy since putting the *a'dam* on the woman.

It was easy enough to get a clay mug full of tea with honey and a bun hot from the oven, but once she had them, she walked while she ate. Sweat beaded on her face. Even at that early hour heat was building and the air dry. The rising sun formed a dome of molten gold above the forest.

The dirt streets were full, as usual when there was light to see. Aes Sedai glided past serenely, ignoring dust and heat, mysterious-faced on mysterious errands, often with Warders heeling them, cold-eyed wolves vainly pretending to be tame. There were soldiers everywhere, usually marching or riding in blocks, though Nynaeve did not understand why they were allowed to crowd the streets so when they had camps in the woods. Children darted about, often aping the soldiers with sticks for swords and pikes. White-clad novices trotted through the throng about their chores. Servants moved somewhat more slowly, women with armloads of sheets for Aes Sedais' beds or baskets of bread from the kitchens, men leading ox-carts piled with firewood, hauling chests or shouldering whole sheep carcasses for the kitchens. Salidar had not been made to hold so many people; the village was ready to pop at the seams.

Nynaeve kept moving. An Accepted's day was supposedly her own for the most part, unless she was teaching novices, to be used studying what she chose to, alone or with an Aes Sedai, but an Accepted who appeared to be doing nothing could be snapped up by any Aes Sedai. She did not intend to spend the day helping a Brown sister catalog books or copying out notes for a Gray. She *hated* copying, with all that tongue clicking if she made a blot and all those sighs because her script was not as neat as a clerk's. So she wove through the dust and the crowd, and kept an eye out for Siuan and Leane. She was angry enough to channel without using Moghedien.

Every time she became aware of the heavy gold ring nestling between her breasts she thought, *He has to be alive. Even if he's forgotten me, Light, just let him be alive*. Which last, of course, only made her angrier. If al'Lan Mandragoran so much as let forgetting her cross his mind, she would set him straight. He had to be alive. Warders often died avenging their Aes Sedai—it was as sure as the sun coming up that no Warder would let anything stand in the way of that retribution—but there was no way for Lan to avenge Moiraine any more than if she had fallen off a horse and broken her neck. She and Lanfear had killed one another. He *had* to be alive. And why should she feel guilty over Moiraine's death? True, it had freed Lan for her, but she had had nothing to do with it. Yet her first thought on learning Moiraine was dead, however momentary, had been joy that Lan was free, not sorrow for Moiraine. She could not rid herself of shame over that, and it made her angrier than ever.

Suddenly she saw Myrelle stalking down the street in her direction with yellow-haired Croi Makin, one of her three Warders, striding at her side, a young splinter of a man but hard as rock. A determined look on her face, the Aes Sedai certainly showed no effects from the night before. There was nothing to say Myrelle was looking for her, but Nynaeve quickly ducked into a large stone building that had once been one of Salidar's three inns.

The broad common room had been cleared and furnished like a reception room; its plaster walls and high ceiling had been patched, a few bright tapestries had been hung, and a few colorful rugs lay scattered on a floor that no longer looked precisely splintered but still did not want to hold a polish. The shaded interior actually seemed cool after the street. Cooler, at least. It was also in use.

Logain stood insolently in front of one of the wide unlit fireplaces, the tails of his gold-embroidered red coat shoved behind his back, under the watchful gaze of Lelaine Akashi, her blue-fringed shawl marking the occasion as formal. A slender woman with a dignified air that could sometimes break in a warm smile, she was one of the three Sitters for the Blue Ajah in the Hall of the Tower in Salidar. Today it was her penetrating eye most in evidence as she studied Logain's audience.

Two men and a woman resplendent in embroidered silks and gold jewelry, all three graying, and one of the men nearly bald and wearing a square-cut beard and long mustache to make up for it. Powerful Altaran nobles, they had arrived the day before with strong escorts and as much suspicion for one another as for the Aes Sedai gathering an army inside Altara. Altarans gave allegiance to a lord or a lady or a town, with little if any left for a nation called Altara, and few nobles paid taxes, or heed to what the queen in Ebou Dar said, but they gave heed to an army in their midst. The Light alone knew what effect the rumors of Dragonsworn had on them. For the moment, though, they forgot to stare haughtily at one another or defiantly at Lelaine. Their eyes were fixed on Logain as they might have been on a huge, brightly colored viper.

To complete the cycle, copper-skinned Burin Shaeren, looking carved from an uprooted stump, watched both Logain and the visitors, a man ready to move suddenly and violently in the blink of an eye. Lelaine's Warder was there only partly to guard Logain—supposedly Logain was in Salidar of his own free will, after all—and mainly to protect the man from his visitors and a knife in his heart.

For his part, Logain appeared to flourish under all those stares. A tall man with curling hair that touched his broad shoulders, dark and handsome if hard of face, he looked as proud and confident as an eagle. It was a promise of vengeance that put the light in his eyes, though. If he could not repay everyone he wanted to, he could at least repay some. "Six Red sisters found me in Cosamelle about a year before I proclaimed myself," he said as Nynaeve came in. "Javindhra, the leader was called, though one named Barasine talked a good deal. And I heard Elaida mentioned, as if she knew what these were about. They found me asleep, and I thought I was done when they shielded me."

"Aes Sedai," the listening woman broke in harshly. Stocky and hard-eyed, she had a thin scar across her cheek that Nynaeve found incongruous on a woman. Altaran women did have a reputation for fierceness, of course, though very likely overblown. "Aes Sedai, how can what he claims be true?"

"I do not know how, Lady Sarena," Lelaine said calmly, "but it was confirmed to me by one who cannot lie. He speaks true."

Sarena's face did not change, but her hands clenched into fists behind her back. One of her companions, the tall gaunt-faced man with more gray hair than black, had his thumbs tucked behind his sword belt, trying to appear at ease, but his grip was white-knuckle tight.

"As I was saying," Logain went on with a smooth smile, "they found me, and gave me a choice of death on the spot or taking what they offered. A strange choice, not at all what I expected, but not one I had to think long on. They did not come out and say they had done this before, but there was a practiced feel to it. They gave no reasons, but it seems clear, looking back. Bringing in a man who could channel carried little glory; pulling down a false Dragon, though. . . ."

Nynaeve frowned. He was so casual about it, a man discussing the day's hunting, yet it was his own downfall he spoke of, and every word another nail in Elaida's coffin. Maybe in a coffin for the whole Red Ajah. If the Reds had pushed Logain to name himself the Dragon Reborn, could they have done the same for Gorin Rogad or Mazrim Taim? Perhaps for *all* the false Dragons throughout history? She could all but see the thoughts turning in the Altarans' minds like gears in a mill, reluctantly at first, then spinning faster and faster.

"For a whole year they helped me avoid other Aes Sedai," Logain said, "sent messages when one was near, though there weren't many then. After I proclaimed myself, and began to gather a following, they sent news of where the king's armies were, and in what numbers. How else do you think I always knew where to strike and when?" His listeners shifted their feet, as much for his feral grin as for his words.

He hated Aes Sedai. Nynaeve was sure of that from the few times she had been able to bring herself to study him. Not that she had done so since before Min left, or learned anything when she had. Once she had thought studying him would be looking at the problem from a different angle—never was just how different men were as clear as in using the Power—but it was worse than staring into a dark hole; there was nothing there, not even the hole. All in all, being around Logain was unsettling. He had watched her every move with a burning intensity that made her shiver even knowing she could wrap him up in the Power if he so much as lifted a finger wrong. Not the sort of fervor that men's eyes often directed at women, but a pure contempt that never touched his face at all, which made it all the more horrifying. Aes Sedai had shut him away from the One Power forever; Nynaeve could imagine her own feelings if anyone did that to her. He could not revenge himself on all Aes Sedai, however. What he could do was destroy the Red Ajah, and he was making a fair beginning to it.

This was the first time three had come at once, but every week or so brought another lord or lady to hear his tale, from across Altara and sometimes as far as Murandy, and every one left looking squeezed flat by what Logain had to say. Small wonder; the only news more shocking would have been for the Aes Sedai to admit the Black Ajah really did exist. Well, they were not about to do that, not publicly, and for much the same reason they held news of Logain as close as possible. It might have been the Red Ajah who did this, but they were still Aes Sedai, and too many people could not tell one Ajah from another. All in all, only a few were brought to hear Logain, yet every one of that handful was chosen for the power of the House they led. Houses that now would lend their support to the Aes Sedai in Salidar, if not always openly, or at worst, withhold support from Elaida.

“Javindhra sent me word when more Aes Sedai came,” Logain said, “the ones hunting me, and where they would be, so I could come on them before they knew.” Lelaine’s serene, ageless features hardened for a moment, and Burin’s hand drifted toward his sword hilt. Sisters had died before Logain was captured. Logain did not seem to notice their reactions. “The Red Ajah never played me false until they betrayed me in the end.”

The bearded man was staring at Logain so hard it was plain he was making himself do it. “Aes Sedai, what of his followers? Perhaps he was safe in the Tower, but he was captured a good many leagues closer to where we stand.”

“They were not all killed or captured,” the gaunt-faced lord put in right behind him. “Most escaped, melted away. I know my history, Aes Sedai. Raolin Darksbane’s followers dared attack the White Tower itself after he was taken, and Guaire Amalasan’s as well. We remember too well Logain’s army marching across our lands to want it to come again, to rescue him.”

“You need have no fear of that.” Lelaine eyed Logain with a brief smile, as a woman might a fierce dog she knew tamed to her leash. “He has no more desire for glory, only to make some small restitution for the harm he did. Besides which, I doubt many of his former followers would come if he did call, not after he was carried to Tar Valon in a cage and gentled.” Her light laugh was echoed by the Altarans, but only after a moment, and weakly. Logain’s face was an iron mask.

Abruptly Lelaine noticed Nynaeve just inside the doorway, and her eyebrows rose. She had exchanged pleasant words with Nynaeve more than once, and praised her and Elayne’s supposed discoveries, but she could be as quick as any other Aes Sedai to call down an Accepted who put a foot wrong.

Nynaeve dropped a curtsy, gesturing with the clay mug, now empty of tea. “Pardon me, Lelaine Sedai. I must take this back to the kitchen.” She darted out into the baking street before the Aes Sedai could say a word.

Luckily, Myrelle was nowhere in sight now. Nynaeve was in no mood for yet another lecture on showing responsibility or holding her temper or any one of a dozen fool things. An even better piece of luck, Siuan was standing not thirty paces away, facing Gareth Bryne in the middle of the street with the passing throng parting around them. Like Myrelle, Siuan showed no sign of the battering Elayne had reported; perhaps they would have more respect for *Tel'aran'rhiod* if they could not simply step out and have their blunders Healed. Nynaeve moved closer.

"What is the matter with you, woman?" Bryne growled at Siuan. His gray head lowered over her youthful-seeming one; booted feet planted wide and fists on hips made him seem as wide as a boulder. The sweat rolling down his face might have been on someone else's for all the mind he paid it. "I compliment you on how soft my shirts are, and you snap my head off. And I said you looked cheerful, hardly the opening of a battle, I thought. It was a compliment, woman, if not one with roses in it."

"Compliments?" Siuan growled right back, blue eyes blazing up at him. "I don't want your compliments! It just pleases you that I have to iron your shirts. You are a smaller man than I ever thought, Gareth Bryne. Do you expect me to trail after you like a camp follower when the army marches, hoping for more of your *compliments*? And you will *not* address me so, as *woman*! It sounds like 'Here, dog!' "

A vein started throbbing on Bryne's temple. "It pleases me that you keep your word, *Siuan*. And if the army ever does march, I expect you to continue keeping it. I never asked that oath of you; it was your own choice, to try wiggling out of responsibility for what you did. You never thought you'd be called to keep it, did you? Speaking of the army marching, what have you heard while groveling for the Aes Sedai and kissing their feet?"

In one heartbeat Siuan went from fiery rage to icy calm. "That is no part of my oath." You might have thought her a young Aes Sedai, standing there straight-backed with that coolly arrogant defiance, one who had not worked with the Power long enough to take on agelessness. "I will not spy for you. You serve the Hall of the Tower, Gareth Bryne, on *your* oath. Your army will march when the Hall decides. Listen for their words, and obey when you hear."

The change in Bryne was as lightning quick. "You would be an enemy worth crossing swords with," he chuckled admiringly. "You would be a better. . . ." That fast the chuckle faded back into a glower. "The Hall, is it? Bah! You tell Sheriam she might as well stop avoiding me. What can be done here has been done. Tell her a wolfhound kept in a cage might as well be a pig when the wolves come. I didn't gather these men to be sold at market." With a short nod, he went striding off through the crowd. Siuan stared after him, frowning.

"What was that all about?" Nynaeve asked, and Siuan gave a start.

"None of your business is what it was," she snapped, smoothing her dress. You would have thought Nynaeve had sneaked up on her purposely. The woman always took everything personally.

"Let it pass," Nynaeve said levelly. She was not going to let herself be led off down a side trail. "What I won't let pass is studying you." She was going to do something useful today if it killed her. Siuan opened her mouth, looking around. "No, I don't have Marigan, and right now, I don't need her. You've let me near you twice—twice!—since I found a clue that something in you might be Healed. I mean to study you today, and if I don't, I *will* tell Sheriam you're disobeying her orders to make yourself available. I swear I will!"

For a moment she thought the other woman was going to dare her to do her worst, but at last Siuan said grudgingly, "This afternoon. I am busy this morning. Unless you think what you want is more important than helping your Two Rivers friend?"

Nynaeve stepped closer. No one in the street was paying them any mind beyond a glance in passing, but she lowered her voice anyway. "What are they planning about him? You keep saying they haven't made up their minds what to do, but they must have come to *some* conclusion by now." If they had, Siuan would know of it, whether she was supposed to or not.

Abruptly Leane was there, and Nynaeve might as well not have spoken. Siuan and Leane glared at one another, stiff-backed as two strange cats in a small room.

"Well?" Siuan muttered with a tight jaw.

Leane sniffed, and her curls swung as she tossed her head. A sneer twisted her lips, yet her words did not match expression or tone. "I tried to talk them out of it," she spat, but softly. "Only they had not listened to you enough to even consider it. You won't be meeting the Wise Ones tonight."

"Fishguts!" Siuan growled, and turning on her heel, she stalked away, but no more quickly than Leane in the opposite direction.

Nynaeve almost threw up her hands in frustration. Talking as if she were not there, as if she did not know exactly what they were talking about. Ignoring her. Siuan had better appear this afternoon as promised, or she would find a way to wring her out and hang her up to dry! She jumped as a woman spoke behind her.

“Those two should be sent to Tiana for a sound switching.” Lelaine stepped up beside Nynaeve, looking first after Siuan then Leane. Going around sneaking up on people! There was no sign of Logain or Burin or the Altaran nobles. The Blue sister shifted her shawl. “They are not what they were, of course, but one would think they could retain a little decorum. It will not do if they actually come to hair-pulling in the street.”

“Sometimes people just rub one another the wrong way,” Nynaeve said. Siuan and Leane worked so hard to maintain their fiction, the least she could do was support it. How she hated people sneaking up on her.

Lelaine eyed Nynaeve’s hand on her braid, and she snatched it away. Too many knew about that habit; a habit she had tried hard to break. But what the Aes Sedai said was “Not when it impinges on the dignity of Aes Sedai, child. Women who serve Aes Sedai should show some reserve in public however silly they are in private.” There was certainly nothing to be said to that; nothing safe, anyway. “Why did you come in where I was showing Logain just now?”

“I thought the room was empty, Aes Sedai,” Nynaeve said hastily. “I’m sorry. I hope I did not disturb you.” That was no answer—she could hardly say she had been hiding from Myrelle—but the slender Blue only met her eyes for a moment.

“What do you think Rand al’Thor will do, child?”

Nynaeve blinked in confusion. “Aes Sedai, I haven’t seen him in half a year. All I know is what I’ve heard here. Is the Hall . . . ? Aes Sedai, what has the Hall decided about him?”

Scrutinizing Nynaeve’s face, Lelaine pursed her lips. Those dark eyes, seeming to see inside your head, were quite unsettling. “A remarkable coincidence. You come from the same village as the Dragon Reborn, and so does that other girl, Egwene al’Vere. Great things were expected when she became a novice. Do you have any idea where she is?” She did not wait for an answer. “And the other two young men, Perrin Aybara and Mat Cauthon. Both *ta’veren* as well, so I understand. Remarkable, indeed. Then there is you, with your extraordinary discoveries despite your limitations. Wherever Egwene is, does she also venture where none of us have gone? All of you have occasioned a good deal of discussion among the sisters, as you may imagine.”

“I hope they say good things,” Nynaeve said slowly. There had been many questions about Rand since coming to Salidar, especially since the embassy left for Caemlyn—some Aes Sedai seemed able to speak of little else to her—but this seemed something different. That was the trouble with talking to Aes Sedai. Half the time you could not be sure what they meant or what they were after.

“Do you still have hopes of Healing Siuan and Leane, child?” Nodding as if Nynaeve had answered, Lelaine sighed. “Sometimes I think Myrelle is right. We indulge you too much. Whatever your discoveries, perhaps we should put you in Theodrin’s charge until your block against channeling at will is broken. Considering what you have done in the last two months, think what you could do then.” Gripping her braid unconsciously, Nynaeve tried to get a word in edgewise, a carefully framed protest, but Lelaine ignored the attempt. Which was probably for the best. “You do Siuan and Leane no favors, child. Let them forget who and what they were and be content with who and what they are. From the way they behave, the only thing that keeps them from forgetting completely is you, and your foolish attempts to Heal what cannot be Healed. They are no longer Aes Sedai. Why hold out false hope?”

There was a hint of compassion in her voice, and a tinge of contempt too. Those not Aes Sedai were less, after all, and Siuan and Leane’s ruse had definitely painted them among the least. Plus, of course, no few here in Salidar blamed the Tower’s troubles on Siuan, on her plotting while Amyrlin. Very likely they believed she deserved everything that had happened to her and more.

What *had* been done complicated the whole thing, though. Stilling was rare. Before Siuan and Leane, no woman had been tried and stilled in one hundred and forty years, and none burned out in at least a dozen. A stilled woman usually tried to get as far from Aes Sedai as she could. No doubt if Lelaine had been stilled, she would want to forget being Aes Sedai if she could. No doubt she would like to forget that Siuan and Leane had been, too, that all that had been taken away from them. If they could be seen as two women never able to channel, never Aes Sedai, a good many Aes Sedai would be more comfortable.

“Sheriam Sedai has given me permission to try,” Nynaeve said as firmly as she dared to a full sister. Lelaine held her eyes until she let her gaze drop. Her knuckles whitened around her braid before she could let go, but she kept her face smooth. Trying to trade stares with an Aes Sedai was a woolhead's trick for an Accepted.

"We are all fools sometimes, child, yet a wise woman learns to limit how often. Since you seem to have finished breakfast, I suggest you rid yourself of that mug and find something to do before you find yourself in hot water instead. Have you ever considered cutting your hair short? No matter. Off with you."

Nynaeve dropped a curtsy, but it was being made to the Aes Sedai's back before she reached the bottom of it. Safe from Lelaine's eyes, she glowered at the woman. Cut her *hair*? She lifted her braid and shook it at the retreating Aes Sedai. That she had waited until it was safe made her furious, though if she had not waited she would almost certainly be on her way to join Moghedien at the laundry, with a stop to see Tiana on the way. Months sitting here in Salidar doing nothing—for all practical purposes it seemed she was, no matter what she and Elayne managed to pull out of Moghedien—amid Aes Sedai who did nothing except talk and wait while the world went on its way to ruin without them, and Lelaine thought she should cut her hair! She had pursued the Black Ajah, been captured and escaped, captured one of the Forsaken in turn—well, none of them knew that—helped the Panarch of Tarabon regain her throne however briefly, and now all she did was sit and take credit for what she could shake loose from Moghedien. Cut her hair? She might as well shave herself bald for all the good it would do!

She caught sight of Dagdara Finchey striding through the throng, as wide as any man in the street and taller than most, and the round-faced Yellow made her angry, too. One reason she had chosen to remain in Salidar was to study with the Yellows, for they knew more of Healing than anyone else; everyone said so. But if any of them knew more than she already did, they were not sharing it with a mere Accepted. The Yellows should have been the most welcoming to her desire to Heal anything and everything, even stilling, but they were the least. Dagdara would have had her scrubbing floors from sunup to sundown until she gave up "foolish notions and wasting time" if Sheriam had not intervened, while Nisao Dachen, a diminutive Yellow with eyes that could drive nails, refused to even speak to Nynaeve as long as she persisted in trying to "alter how the Pattern has been woven."

To top it all off, her weather sense still told her a storm was on its way, closer now, while the cloudless sky and burning sun taunted her.

Muttering to herself, she tucked the clay mug into the back of a passing woodcart and set off weaving through the crowded street. There was nothing to do except keep moving until Moghedien was free, and the Light knew how long that would be. A whole morning wasted, added to a string of wasted days.

Many of the Aes Sedai nodded and smiled at her, but by the simple expedient of smiling back apologetically and quickening her step for a few paces as if hurrying somewhere, she avoided stopping for the inevitable questions about what new things they might expect out of her. In her present mood she might just tell them exactly what she thought, which would be foolish in the extreme. Doing nothing. Asking *her* what Rand was going to do. Telling her to cut her hair. Bah!

Of course, they were not all smiles. Not only did Nisao look right through Nynaeve; Nynaeve had to step nimbly out of the way before the tiny woman walked right over her. And a haughty, pale-haired Aes Sedai with a prominent chin, guiding a tall roan gelding through the crowd, cast a sharp blue-eyed frown at her as she rode by. Nynaeve did not recognize her. The woman was perfectly neat in a riding dress of pale gray silk, but the light linen dustcloak folded in front of her saddle spoke of travel and named her a new arrival. Adding to the likelihood that she was new come, the lanky green-coated Warder at her heels on a tall gray warhorse looked uneasy. Warders *never* looked uneasy, but Nynaeve supposed joining a rebellion against the Tower might make for an exception. Light! Even new arrivals came ready to put her back up!

And then there was scar-faced Uno, his head shaven except for a topknot and his missing eye covered by a patch painted with a hideous glaring red replacement. Pausing in the leather-lunged flaying of an abashed young man in plate-and-mail armor who stood holding the reins of a horse with a lance lashed to the saddle, Uno directed a warm grin in Nynaeve’s direction. Well, it would have been warm without the eyepatch. Nynaeve’s grimace made him blink and hurry back to dressing down the soldier.

It was not Uno or his eyepatch that soured her stomach. Not exactly. He had accompanied her and Elayne to Salidar, and once promised to steal horses—“borrow,” he called it—if they wanted to leave. No chance of that now. Uno wore a band of golden braid on the cuffs of his worn dark coat now; he was an officer, training heavy cavalry for Gareth Bryne, and much too caught up in it to bother himself with Nynaeve. No, that was not true. If she said she wanted to go, he would procure horses in a matter of hours, and she would ride with an escort of top-knotted Shienarans who had given their allegiance to Rand and were only in Salidar because she and Elayne brought them there. Only, she would have to admit she had been wrong in deciding to stay, admit she had been lying all those times she had told him she was happy right where she was. Making those admissions was just beyond her. Uno's main reason for staying was that he thought he should *look after* her and Elayne. He would hear no admissions from her!

The whole thought of leaving Salidar was a new one, sparked by Uno, and it set her thinking fiercely. If only Thom and Juilin had not gone jaunting off to Amadicia. Not that they had made the trip for the fun of it, really. Back in the days when it seemed die Aes Sedai here might really do something, they had volunteered to scout out what was going on across the river. Meaning to penetrate as far as Amador itself, they had been gone well over a month, and would not return for days more at best. They were not the only scouts, of course; even Aes Sedai and Warders had been sent, though most of those were aimed farther west, at Tarabon. A show of doing something, and the delay before any could return with word, was a good excuse to wait. Nynaeve wished she had not let the two men go. Neither would have, had she said no.

Thom was an old gleeman, though he had once been considerably more, and Juilin a thief-taker from Tear, both competent men who knew how to handle themselves in strange places, and handy in a number of ways. They had accompanied her and Elayne to Salidar, too, and neither would have asked questions if told she wanted to leave. Undoubtedly they would have said a good deal behind her back, but not to her face, the way Uno would.

It was galling to admit that she really needed them, but she was not sure she knew how to go about stealing a horse. In any case, an Accepted would be noticed fooling around the horses, in the stables as much as out on the soldiers' picket lines, and if she changed out of the banded white dress, she would certainly be seen and reported before she got anywhere near a horse. Even if she managed it, she would be pursued. Runaway Accepted, like runaway novices, were almost always brought back to face punishment that erased any thought of a second attempt. When you began training to be Aes Sedai, Aes Sedai were not finished with you until *they* said they were.

It was not fear of punishment that held her, of course. What was a switching or two against the chance of being killed by the Black Ajah, or facing one of the Forsaken? It was just a matter of whether she really wanted to go. Where would she go, for instance? To Rand, in Caemlyn? Egwene in Cairhien? Would Elayne come? Certainly, if they went to Caemlyn. Was it a desire to *do* something, or fear that Moghedien was going to be discovered? The punishment for running away would not be a patch on that! She had reached no conclusion when she rounded a corner and found herself looking at Elayne's novice class, gathered in an open space between two thatch-roofed stone houses where the fallen-in ruins of a third had been cleared away.

More than twenty white-clad women sat on low stools in a semicircle, watching Elayne guide two of their number through an exercise. The glow of *saidar* surrounded all three women. Tabiya, a green-eyed freckle-faced girl of sixteen or so, and Nicola, a slender black-haired woman Nynaeve's age, were unsteadily passing a small flame back and forth. It wavered and sometimes vanished for an instant when one was too slow to catch it up from the other and maintain it. In her present mood, Nynaeve could clearly see the flows they wove.

Eighteen novices had been whisked away when Sheriam and the rest fled—Tabiya was one of those—but most in this group were like Nicola, newly recruited since the Aes Sedai established themselves in Salidar. Nicola was not the only woman there older than usual for a novice; a good half were. When Nynaeve and Elayne went to the Tower, Aes Sedai rarely tested women much older than Tabiya—Nynaeve had been remarked for her age as much as for being a wilder—but perhaps in desperation, the Aes Sedai here had expanded their testing to women even a year or two beyond Nynaeve. The result was that Salidar now held more novices than the White Tower had for years. That success had made the Aes Sedai send sisters out across Altara in a village-by-village search.

"Do you wish you were teaching that class?"

The voice at her shoulder made Nynaeve's stomach turn over. Twice in one morning. She wished she had some goosemint in her belt pouch. If she kept letting herself be taken by surprise, she was going to end up sorting papers for a Brown yet.

Of course, the apple-cheeked Domani woman was not Aes Sedai. Back in the Tower, Theodrin would have been raised to the shawl already, but here she had been raised to something more than Accepted, less than a full sister. She wore her Great Serpent ring on her right hand not her left, and a green dress that went well with her bronze coloring, but she could not choose an Ajah or wear the shawl.

"I have better things to be about than teaching a bunch of thickheaded novices."

Theodrin only smiled at the tartness in Nynaeve's voice. She was quite nice, really. "A thickheaded Accepted to teach thickheaded novices?" Usually, she was nice. "Well, once we have you where you can channel without being ready to thump their heads, you will be teaching novices too. And I would not be surprised if you were raised soon after, the things you've been discovering. You know, you have never told me what your trick was." Wilders almost always had some trick they had learned, the first unveiling of the ability to channel. The other thing most wilders had in common was a block, something they had built up in their minds to hide their channeling even from themselves.

Nynaeve kept her face smooth with an effort. To be able to channel whenever she wanted. To be raised Aes Sedai. Neither would remedy the problem of Moghedien, but she would be able to go where she wanted then, study as she wanted without anyone telling her this or that simply could not be Healed. "People got well when they shouldn't. I would get so mad that somebody was going to die, that everything I knew about herbs wasn't enough . . ." she shrugged. "And they got well."

"Much better than mine." The slender woman sighed. "I could make a boy want to kiss me, or not want to. My block was men, not anger." Nynaeve looked at her incredulously, and Theodrin laughed. "Well, it was emotion, too. If there was a man present, and I liked or disliked him a great deal, I could channel. If I felt neither one way nor the other, or there wasn't a man at all, I might as well have been a tree so far as *saidar* was concerned."

"How did you ever break through that?" Nynaeve asked curiously. Elayne had the novices all paired off now, fumbling their way through passing small flames back and forth.

Theodrin's smile deepened, but a blush stained her cheeks, too. "A young man named Charel, a groom in the Tower stables, began making eyes at me. I was fifteen, and he had the most gorgeous smile. The Aes Sedai let him sit in on my lessons, quietly in a corner, so I could channel at all. What I didn't know was that Sheriam had arranged for him to meet me in the first place." Her cheeks darkened more. "I also didn't know he had a twin sister, or that after a few days, the Charel sitting in the corner was really Marel. When she took off her coat and shirt one day in the middle of my lesson, I was so shocked I fainted. But after that, I could channel whenever I wanted."

Nynaeve burst out laughing—she could not help it—and despite her blushes Theodrin joined in without restraint. "I wish it could be that easy for me, Theodrin."

"Whether it is or not," Theodrin said, her laughter fading, "we will break down your block. This afternoon—"

"I'm studying Siuan this afternoon," Nynaeve cut in hastily, and Theodrin's mouth tightened.

"You have been avoiding me, Nynaeve. In the past month you've managed to wriggle out of all but three appointments. I can accept your trying and failing, but I will not accept you being afraid to try."

"I am not," Nynaeve began indignantly, as a small voice asked whether she was trying to hide the truth from herself. It was so disheartening to try and try and try—and fail.

Theodrin let her have no more than those few words. "Allowing that you have commitments today," she said calmly, "I will see you tomorrow, and every day thereafter, or I will be forced to take other steps. I don't want to do that, and you do not want me to, but I mean to break your block down. Myrelle has asked me to make special efforts, and I vow that I will."

The near echo of what she had told Siuan made Nynaeve's jaw drop. This was the first time the other woman had used the increased authority of her position. It would be just the way Nynaeve's luck was running today for her and Siuan to end up waiting to see Tiana side by side.

Theodrin did not wait for a reply. She merely nodded as if she had received agreement, then glided off up the street. Nynaeve could almost see a fringed shawl around her shoulders. This morning was not going well at all. And Myrelle again! She wanted to scream.

Over among the novices, Elayne gave her a proud smile, but Nynaeve only shook her head and turned away. She was going back to her room. It was a measure of how the day was progressing that before she was halfway there Dagdara Finchey crashed into her running and knocked her flat on her back. Running! An Aes Sedai! The big woman did not stop, either, or as much as shout an apology over her shoulder as she plowed through the crowd.

Nynaeve picked herself up, dusted herself off, stumped the rest of the way to her room and slammed the door behind her. It was hot and close, the beds were unmade until Moghedien could get around to them, and worst of all, Nynaeve’s weather sense told her there should have been a hailstorm breaking over Salidar right that minute. But she would not be surprised there, or trampled.

Flinging herself down atop her rumpled sheets, she lay fingering the silver bracelet, thoughts skittering from what she might manage to dig out of Moghedien today to whether Siuan would appear that afternoon, from Lan to her block to whether she was going to stay in Salidar. It would not be running away, really. She would probably go to Caemlyn, to Rand; he did need somebody to keep his head from swelling too big, and Elayne would like that. She just wished leaving—*not* running away!—had not begun to seem even more attractive after Theodrin announced her intentions.

She expected to have some sign in the emotions oozing through the *a’dam* that Moghedien was finished with her work, and to have to go find her—she often hid when she was sulking—but the shame and outrage never decreased, and the door banging open came as a complete surprise.

“So there you are,” Moghedien grated. “Look!” She held up her hands. “Ruined!” To Nynaeve they looked no different from any hands that been doing laundry; white and wrinkled, true, but that would fade. “It is not enough that I must live in squalor, fetching and carrying like a servant, now I’m expected to labor like some primitive—!”

Nynaeve cut her off by a simple expedient. She thought of one quick stroke of a switch, what it felt like, then shifted the thought into the part of her mind that held Moghedien’s received emotions. The other woman’s dark eyes widened, and her mouth clamped shut, lips compressing. Not a hard blow, but a reminder.

“Close the door and sit down,” Nynaeve said. “You can make the beds later. We are going to have a lesson.”

“I am used to better than this,” Moghedien grumbled as she complied. “A night laborer in Tojar was used to better!”

“Unless I miss my guess,” Nynaeve told her sharply, “a night laborer in wherever didn’t have a death sentence hanging over his head. Any time you want it, we can tell Sheriam exactly who you are.” It was pure bluff—Nynaeve’s stomach clenched up in a burning ball at the mere thought—but a sickening flood of fear roared out of Moghedien. Nynaeve almost admired how steady the woman’s face remained; had she felt like that, she would have been shrieking and gnashing her teeth on the floor.

“What do you want me to show you?” Moghedien said in a level tone. They always had to tell her what they wanted out of her. She practically never volunteered anything unless they pressed her to a point Nynaeve considered the brink of torture.

“We’ll try something you haven’t been very successful with teaching. Detecting a man’s channeling.” So far, that was the only thing she and Elayne had not been able to pick up quickly. It could be useful if she did decide to go to Caemlyn.

“Not easy, especially with no man to practice on. A pity you haven’t been able to Heal Logain.” There was no mockery in Moghedien’s voice or on her face, but she glanced at Nynaeve and hurried on. “Still, we can try the forms again.”

The lesson truly was not easy. It never was, even with something Nynaeve could learn right away once the weaves became clear. Moghedien could not channel without Nynaeve allowing her to, without Nynaeve guiding her, in fact, but in a new lesson Moghedien had to give the lead for how the flows were to go. It made a pretty tangle, the main reason they were not able to learn a dozen new things from her every day. In this case Nynaeve already had *some* idea of how the flows were woven, but it was an intricate lacework of all of the Five Powers that made Healing seem simple, and the pattern shifted at blinding speed. Its difficulty was the reason it had never been used very often, Moghedien claimed. It also gave you a grinding headache if kept up very long.

Nynaeve lay back on her bed and worked at it as hard as she could, though. If she did go to Rand, she might need this, and there was no telling how soon. She channeled the flows all by herself, too; an occasional thought of Lan or Theodrin kept her anger twisted up tight enough. Sooner or later Moghedien was going to be called to account for her crimes, and where would Nynaeve be then, used to drawing on the other woman’s power whenever she wanted? She had to live and work with her own limits.

Could Theodrin find a way to break her block? Lan had to be alive, so she could find him. The ache became a pain that bored at her temples. A tightness appeared around Moghedien's eyes, and she rubbed at her head sometimes, but underneath the fear the bracelet carried a current of what almost seemed contentment. Nynaeve supposed that even when you did not want to teach, it must bring a certain satisfaction. She was not sure she liked Moghedien displaying such a normal human response.

She was not sure how long the lesson went on, with Moghedien murmuring, "Almost" and "Not quite," but when the door banged open again, she nearly lifted straight up off the mattress. The sudden bolt of fear from Moghedien would have accompanied howling in another woman.

"Have you heard, Nynaeve?" Elayne asked, pushing the door to. "There's an emissary from the Tower, from Elaida."

Nynaeve forgot the words she would have shouted if her heart had not been clogging her throat. She even forgot her headache. "An emissary? You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, Nynaeve. Do you think I'd come running for *gossip*? The whole village is aflutter."

"I don't know why," Nynaeve said sourly. The grating inside her skull was back. And all the goosemint in her scrip of herbs under the bed would not have quieted the burning in her stomach. Would the girl never learn to knock? Moghedien had both hands pressed to her belly as though she could use some goosemint as well. "We did tell them Elaida knew about Salidar."

"Maybe they believed us," Elayne said, dropping onto the foot of Nynaeve's bed, "and maybe they didn't, but this drove it home. Elaida knows where we are, and likely what we are up to. Any of the servants could be her eyes-and-ears. Maybe even some of the sisters. I caught a glimpse of the emissary, Nynaeve. Pale yellow hair and blue eyes that could freeze the sun. A Red named Tarna Feir, Faolain said. One of the Warders who was keeping guard escorted her in. When she looks at you, she could be looking at a stone."

Nynaeve looked at Moghedien. "We're done with the lesson for now. Come back in an hour and you can make the beds." She waited until Moghedien had gone, tight-lipped and gripping her skirts in fists, then turned to Elayne. "What . . . message did she bring?"

"They certainly didn't tell me, Nynaeve. Every Aes Sedai I passed was wondering the same thing. I heard when Tarna was told she'd be received by the Hall of the Tower, she laughed. And not as if she was amused. You do not think. . . .” Elayne chewed at her underlip for a moment. “You don’t think they could really decide to. . . .”

“Go back?” Nynaeve said incredulously. “Elaida will want them to come the last ten miles on their knees, and the final mile on their bellies! Even if she didn’t, even if this Red says, ‘Come home. All is forgiven and dinner’s waiting,’ do you think they could brush aside Logain so easily?”

“Nynaeve, Aes Sedai could brush aside anything to make the White Tower whole again. Anything. You don’t understand them the way I do; there were Aes Sedai in the palace from the day I was born. The question now is, what is Tarna saying to the Hall? And what are they saying to her?”

Nynaeve rubbed her arms irritably. She had no answers, only hopes, and her weather sense told her that that hailstorm that was not there was beating the roofs of Salidar like drums. The feeling went on for days.

* * *

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CHAPTER 9

Plans

“You had these Illuminators brought to Amador?” Many would have flinched to hear such a cold tone from Pedron Niall, but not the man standing on the inlaid golden sunburst before Niall’s plain high-backed chair. He exuded confidence and competence. Niall continued, “There is a reason I have two thousand of the Children guarding the border with Tarabon, Omerna. Tarabon is quarantined. *No* one is allowed across the border. Not a sparrow would cross if I had my way.”

Omerna was the picture of what an officer of the Children of the Light was supposed to be, tall and commanding, with a bold, fearless face, a strong chin and waves of white at his temples. His dark eyes seemed more than capable of surveying the harshest battlefield undismayed, as indeed they had. At the moment they seemed to indicate deeply considered thought. The white-and-gold tabard of a Lord Captain, Anointed of the Light, suited him. “My Lord Captain Commander, they wish to establish a chapter house here.” Even his voice, deep and mellifluous, fit the image. “Illuminators travel everywhere. It should be possible to slip agents among them easily. Agents welcomed into every town, every noble’s manor, every ruler’s palace.” Supposedly Abdel Omerna was a relatively minor member of the Council of Anointed. In truth, he was the Children of the Light’s spymaster. After a manner of speaking. “Think of it!”

What Niall thought was that the Guild of Illuminators was Taraboner to the last man and woman, and Tarabon was infected with chaos and madness that he would not let loose in Amadicia. If cauterizing that infection had to wait, he could at least isolate it. “They will be treated like anyone else who slips through, Omerna. Kept under guard, allowed to talk to no one, and escorted out of Amadicia without delay.”

“If I may insist, my Lord Captain Commander, their usefulness is worth the little gossip they might spread. They keep to themselves. And aside from their use for my agents, the prestige of having an Illuminators’ chapter house in Amador would be considerable. The only chapter house, now. The one in Cairhien has been abandoned, and the one in Tanchico surely has been, too.”

Prestige! Niall rubbed his left eye to soothe an involuntary flutter. Little point in getting angry with Omerna, but restraint took an effort. The morning heat cooked his temper over a slow fire. “They do indeed keep to themselves, Omerna. They live with their own, travel with their own, and barely speak to anyone else. Do you mean to have these agents marry Illuminators? They rarely marry outside their guild, and there is no way to become an Illuminator except by birth.”

“Ah. Well. I am sure a way can be found.” Nothing could dent that façade of confidence and competence.

“It shall be done as I say, Omerna.” The man actually opened his mouth again, but Niall forestalled him irritably. “As I say, Omerna! I’ll hear no more on it! Now what information do you have today? What *useful* information? That is your function. Not providing fireworks for Ailron.”

Omerna hesitated, plainly wanting to make another plea for his precious Illuminators, but in the end he said portentously, “The reports of Dragonsworn in Altara are more than rumor, it seems. And perhaps in Murandy as well. The infestation is small, but it will grow. A strong move now could settle for them and the Aes Sedai in Salidar in one—”

“Do you dictate strategy for the Children now? Gather information, and leave its use to me. What else do you have for me?”

The man’s response to being cut off was a calm bow of acquiescence. Omerna was very good at remaining calm; it was perhaps what he did best. “I have good news. Mattin Stepaneos is ready to join you. He hesitates to make a public announcement, but my people in Illian report that he soon will. He is reported eager.”

“That would be remarkably good,” Niall said dryly. Remarkable, certainly. Among the banners and pennants lining the cornices of the chamber, Mattin Stepaneos’ Three Leopards, silver on black, hung next to a gold-fringed Illianer Royal Standard, nine bees worked in thread-of-gold on green silk. The Illianer king came out on top in the Troubles finally, at least to the point of forcing a treaty that affirmed the border between Amadicia and Altara where it was at the beginning, but Niall doubted the man would ever forget that he had had the advantage of terrain and numbers at Soremaine and still been defeated and captured. If the Illianer Companions had not covered the field for the rest of the army to escape Niall's trap, Altara would be a fief of the Children today, and very likely Murandy and even Illian. Worse, Mattin Stepaneos had a Tar Valon witch for an advisor, though he hid the fact, and her. Niall sent emissaries because he dared not leave a path untried, but yes, Mattin Stepaneos joining him willingly would be remarkable indeed. "Continue. And be brief. I have a busy day today, and I can read your written reports later."

Despite those instructions Omerna's rendition was long, delivered in a sonorous voice full of certainty. Al'Thor had barely extended his control in Andor beyond Caemlyn. His lightning onslaught was clearly stalled at last—as Omerna carefully pointed out that he had predicted. There was little chance the Borderlands would join the Children against the false Dragon any time soon; lords in Shienar, Arafel and Kandor were taking advantage of the Blight's quiet to rebel, and the Queen of Saldaea had gone into seclusion in the country, in fear of the same according to Omerna. His agents were at work, however, and the Borderland rulers would be brought to heel as soon as these small rebellions were quashed. On the other hand, the rulers of Murandy, Altara and Ghealdan were ready to fall into line, though making ambivalent noises at present to soothe the Tar Valon witches. Alliandre of Ghealdan knew her throne was shaky, knew she needed the Children to avoid plummeting as abruptly as her predecessors, while both Tylin of Altara and Roedran of Murandy hoped that the Children's weight would make them more than figureheads at last. Plainly the man considered those lands already as good as in Niall's coat pocket.

Within Amadicia, the picture was even better, by Omerna's reckoning. Recruits flocked to the Children's banners in greater numbers than for years. Strictly speaking, that was none of Omerna's concern, but he always larded his reports with any good news he could find. The Prophet would not trouble the land much longer; at present his rabble squabbled over looting villages and manors in the north, and might well scatter back into Ghealdan at the next push by Ailron's soldiers. Little room remained in the jails, because Darkfriends and Tar Valon spies were being arrested faster than they could be hanged. The search for Tar Valon witches had found only two so far, but over a hundred women had been put to the question, an indication of how vigilant the patrols were. And fewer refugees from Tarabon were being apprehended, proof the quarantine was becoming more effective; those caught were being thrown back into Tarabon as fast as they could be taken back to the border. He hurried past that last, unsurprising given his stupidity with the Illuminators.

Niall listened just enough to know where to nod. Omerna had been an adequate commander in the field, so long as someone told him what to do, but in his present position, his credulous stupidity was trying. He had reported Morgase dead, her corpse seen and identified beyond doubt, up to the very day Niall brought him face-to-face with her. He had ridiculed "rumors" that the Stone of Tear had fallen, and still denied that the mightiest fortress in the world could have been taken by any outside force; there had been treason, he insisted, a High Lord who had betrayed the Stone to al'Thor and Tar Valon. He maintained that the disaster at Falme and the troubles in Tarabon and Arad Doman were the work of Artur Hawkwing's armies come back across the Aryth Ocean. He was convinced that Siuan Sanche had not been deposed at all, that al'Thor was insane and dying, that Tar Valon had murdered King Galldrian to deliberately set off the civil war in Cairhien, and that these three "facts" were somehow tied into those ridiculous rumors, always from somewhere conveniently far away, of people bursting into flame or nightmares leaping out of thin air and slaughtering whole villages. He was not sure how exactly, but he was working on a grand theory he promised to deliver any day, a theory that supposedly would unravel all the witches' schemes and deliver Tar Valon into Niall's hands.

That was the way with Omerna; he either invented convoluted reasons for what happened, or else seized on gossip in the streets and swallowed it whole. He spent a good deal of his time listening to gossip, in manor houses *and* in the streets. Not only had he been seen drinking in the taverns with Hunters for the Horn, it was an ill-kept secret that he had laid out huge sums for no fewer than three supposed Horns of Valere. Each time he had carried the thing off to the country and puffed on it for days, till even he had to admit that no dead heroes out of legend were going to come riding back from the grave. Even so, the failures were unlikely to stop him from future purchases in dark alleys or the back rooms of taverns. The simple form of it was this: where a spymaster should doubt his own face in the mirror, Omerna believed anything.

Eventually the man ran down, and Niall said, “I will give your reports due consideration, Omerna. You have done well.” How the fellow preened, smoothing his tabard. “Leave me, now. On your way out, send Balwer in. I have some letters to dictate.”

“Of course, my Lord Captain Commander. Ah.” In the middle of his bow, Omerna frowned and fumbled in the pocket of his white undercoat, pulling out a tiny bone cylinder that he handed to Niall. “This arrived at the pigeoncote this morning.” Three thin red stripes ran the length of the cylinder, meaning it was to be brought to Niall with the wax seals intact. And the man had almost forgotten it.

Omerna waited, no doubt hoping for a hint of what the cylinder contained, but Niall waved him toward the door. “Do not forget Balwer. If Mattin Stepaneos might join me, I must write and see if I can add a little weight to his making the right decision.” Omerna had no choice but to make his bow anew and go.

Even when the door closed behind the man, Niall only fingered the cylinder. These rare special messages seldom brought good news. Rising slowly—of late he sometimes felt age in his bones—he filled a plain silver goblet with punch, but then left it sitting on the table and flipped open a folder of scroll-worked leather lined with linen. It contained a single sheet of heavy paper, crumpled and partly torn, a street artist’s drawing in colored chalks of two men fighting in clouds, one with a face made of fire, the other with dark reddish hair. Al’Thor.

All his plans to hinder the false Dragon had gone awry, all his hopes to slow the man’s tide of conquest, to divert him. Had he waited too long, let al’Thor grow too powerful? If so, there was only one way to deal with him quickly, the knife in the dark, the arrow from a rooftop. How long did he dare wait? Did he dare risk not waiting? Too much haste could spell disaster as surely as too long a delay.

“My Lord sent for me?”

Niall eyed the man who had entered so silently. On the face of it, it hardly seemed possible that Balwer could move without a dry rustle announcing his presence. Everything about him was narrow and pinched; his brown coat hung from knobby shoulders, and his legs looked as if they might snap under his desiccated weight. He moved like a bird hopping from limb to limb. “Do you believe the Horn of Valere will call dead heroes back to save us, Balwer?”

“Perhaps, my Lord,” Balwer said, folding his hands fussily. “Perhaps not. I would not count on it, myself.”

Niall nodded. “And do you think Mattin Stepaneos will join me?”

“Again, perhaps. He will not want to finish dead or a puppet. His first and only concern is to hold on to the Laurel Crown, and the army gathering in Tear must make him sweat for that.” Balwer smiled thinly, a bare compression of lips. “He has spoken openly about accepting my Lord’s proposal, but on the other hand I’ve just learned he has been communicating with the White Tower. Apparently he has agreed to something, though I don’t yet know what.”

The world knew that Abdel Omerna was the Children’s spymaster. Such a position should have been secret, of course, but stableboys and beggars pointed him out in the street, warily, lest the most dangerous man in Amadicia see them. The truth was that Omerna was a decoy, a fool who did not know himself that he was only a mask hiding the true master of spies in the Fortress of the Light. Sebban Balwer, Niall’s prim dried-up little secretary with his disapproving mouth. A man no one would ever suspect, or credit if he was named to them.

Where Omerna believed everything, Balwer believed nothing, perhaps not even in Darkfriends, or the Dark One. If Balwer did believe in anything, it was looking over men’s shoulders, listening to their whispers, rooting out their secrets. Of course, he would have served any master as well as he did Niall, but that was all to the good. What Balwer learned was never tainted by what he knew had to be true, or wanted to be true. Disbelieving everything, he always managed to root out truth.

“No more than I expected out of Illian, Balwer, but even he can be brought round.” He would have to be. It could not be too late. “Is there any fresh word from the Borderlands?”

“Not yet, my Lord. But Davram Bashere is in Caemlyn. With thirty thousand light horse, my informants claim, but I think no more than half that. He would not weaken Saldaea too far, however quiet the Blight, even if Tenobia commanded him to.”

Niall grunted, the corner of his left eye trembling. He fingered the sketch lying in its folder; supposedly it was a fair likeness of al’Thor. Bashere in Caemlyn; a good reason for Tenobia to be hiding in the country from his envoy.

There was no good news from the Borderlands, whatever Omerna thought. The “minor rebellions” Omerna reported were minor, but not rebellions of the sort the man thought. Along the Blightborder men were arguing over whether al’Thor was another false Dragon or the Dragon Reborn. Borderlanders being as they were, sometimes those arguments flared into small-scale battles. The fighting had begun in Shienar about the time the Stone of Tear was falling, confirmation of the witches’ involvement if any was needed. How it would all be settled was yet in doubt, according to Balwer.

That al’Thor remained confined to Caemlyn was one of the few things Omerna had right. Yet why, with Bashere and Aiel and the witches? Not even Balwer had been able to answer that. Whatever the reason, the Light be praised for it! The Prophet’s mobs had settled in to loot the north of Amadicia, true, but they were consolidating their hold, killing or putting to flight any who refused to declare for the Prophet of the Dragon. Ailron’s soldiers had only stopped retreating because the accursed Prophet had stopped advancing. Alliandre and the others Omerna was certain would join him were in fact dithering, putting off his ambassadors with flimsy excuses and delays. He suspected they no more knew how they would leap than he did.

On the surface everything seemed to be going al’Thor’s way at the moment, except for whatever held him in Caemlyn, but Niall had always been at his most dangerous when he was outnumbered and with his back to the wall.

If the rumors could be believed, Carridin was doing well in Altara and Murandy, though not as quickly as Niall would have liked. Time was as much an enemy as al’Thor or the Tower. Yet even if Carridin was only doing well in the rumors, that should be enough. Perhaps it was time to extend the “Dragonsworn” into Andor. Perhaps Illian, as well, though if the army gathering in Tear was not enough to show Mattin Stepaneos the path, a few farms and villages raided would hardly make a difference. The size of that army horrified Niall; if it was half what Balwer reported, a quarter, it still horrified him. Nothing like it had been seen since Artur Hawkwing’s day. Rather than frighten men into joining Niall, an army like that might intimidate them into falling in behind the Dragon banner. Could he have found a year, just half a year, he would have accounted it worth al’Thor’s whole army of fools and villains and Aiel savages.

All was not lost, of course. All was never lost as long as you were alive. Tarabon and Arad Doman were as useless to al'Thor and the witches as to him, two pits full of scorpions; only a fool would put a hand in there until more of the scorpions killed one another off. If Saldaea was lost, which he would not concede, Shienar and Arafel and Kandor still hung in the balance, and balances could be tipped. If Mattin Stepaneos wanted to ride two horses at once—he had always liked to try that—he could yet be forced to choose the right one. Altara and Murandy would be prodded to the proper side, and Andor would drop into his hand whether or not he decided a touch of Carridin's whip was required. In Tear, Balwer's agents had convinced Tedosian and Estanda to join Darlin, turning a show of defiance into real rebellion, and the man was confident the same could be done in Cairhien, and in Andor. Another month, two at the outside, and Eamon Valda would arrive from Tar Valon; Niall could have done without Valda, but then the great majority of the Children's strength would be in one spot, ready to use where it could do the most good.

Yes, he had a good deal on his side yet. Nothing had solidified, but everything coalesced. Time was all that was needed.

Realizing he still held the bone cylinder, he cracked the wax seal with a thumbnail and carefully drew out the thin paper rolled up inside.

Balwer said nothing, but his mouth compressed again, not in a smile this time. Omerna he put up with, knowing the man a fool, much preferring to remain hidden himself, but he did not like Niall receiving reports that bypassed him, from men he did not know.

A tiny, spidery scrawl covered the slip in a cipher that few besides Niall knew, none of them in Amador. For him, reading it was as easy as reading his own hand. The sign at the bottom made him blink, and so did the contents. Varadin was, or had been, one of the best of his personal agents, a rug seller who did good service during the Troubles while peddling his wares through Altara, Murandy and Illian. What he earned there had set him up as a wealthy merchant in Tanchico, regularly supplying fine carpets and wines to the palaces of King and Panarch, as well as to most of the nobles of their courts, and always leaving with his eyes and ears full. Niall had thought him long since dead in the upheaval there; this was the first word from him in a year. From what Varadin wrote, it would have been better if he truly had been a year dead. In the jerky hand of a man on the brink of madness, it was a wild disjointed ramble about men riding strange beasts and flying creatures, Aes Sedai on leashes and the *Hailene*. That meant Forerunners in the Old Tongue, but there was not even an attempt to explain why Varadin was terrified of them or who they were supposed to be. Plainly the man had taken a brain fever from watching his country disintegrate around him.

Annoyed, Niall crumpled the paper and threw it aside. "First I must sit through Omerna's idiocy and now this. What else do you have for me, Balwer?" Bashere. Matters could become nasty with Bashere to general al'Thor's armies. The man had earned his reputation. A dagger in the shadows for him?

Balwer's eyes never left Niall's face by so much as a flicker, but Niall knew the tiny ball of paper on the floor would end up in the man's hands unless he burned it. "Four things that might be of interest, my Lord. The least first. The rumors about meetings between the Ogier *stedding* are true. For Ogier, they seem to be showing some haste." He did not say what the meetings were about, of course; getting a human into an Ogier Stump was as impossible as getting an Ogier to spy. Easier to have the sun rise at night. "Also, there are an unusual number of Sea Folk ships in the southern ports, not taking cargo, not sailing."

"What are they waiting for?"

For a moment Balwer's mouth tightened as though drawstrings had been pulled shut. "I do not know yet, my Lord." Balwer never liked admitting there were any human secrets he could not ferret out. Trying to learn more than the surface of what went on among the Atha'an Miere was like trying to learn how the Guild of Illuminators made fireworks, an exercise in futility. At least the Ogier might eventually make known the decisions of their meetings.

"Continue."

"The news of middling interest is . . . peculiar, my Lord. Al'Thor has reliably been reported in Caemlyn, in Tear and in Cairhien, sometimes on the same day."

"Reliably? Reliable madness. The witches probably have two or three men who look like al'Thor, enough to fool anyone who doesn't know him. That would explain a good deal."

"Perhaps, my Lord. My informants *are* reliable."

Niall slapped the leather folder closed, hiding al'Thor's face. "And the news of greatest interest?"

“I have it from two sources in Altara—reliable sources, my Lord—that the witches in Salidar claim the Red Ajah encouraged Logain to become a false Dragon. All but created him, in fact. They have Logain in Salidar—or a man they say is Logain—and are showing him to nobles they bring there. I have no proof, but I suspect they are telling the same tale to any ruler they can reach.”

Frowning, Niall studied the banners overhead. Those represented enemies from nearly every land; no one had ever defeated him twice, and few once. The banners were all faded with age, now. Like him. Yet he was not too faded to see an end to what he had begun. Every banner taken in bloody battle, where you never really knew what was happening beyond sight of your own eyes, where certain victory and certain defeat could be equally ephemeral. The worst battle he had ever fought, armies blundering into one another in the night near Moisen, during the Troubles, had been clear as a bright summer’s day compared to the one he fought now.

Could he have been wrong? Could the Tower really be broken? A struggle of some sort between the Ajahs? Over what? Al’Thor? If the witches were fighting among themselves, there would be many in the Children ready to advocate Carridin’s solution, a strike to destroy Salidar and as many of the witches as possible. Men who believed thinking of tomorrow was thinking ahead but never considered next week or next month, let alone next year. Valda, for one; perhaps it was just as well he had not reached Amador yet. For another, Rhadam Asunawa, the High Inquisitor of the Questioners. Valda always wanted to use an axe, even when a poniard was best for the task at hand. Asunawa just wanted every woman who had ever spent a night in the Tower hanged as of yesterday, every book that mentioned Aes Sedai or the One Power burned, and the words themselves banned. Asunawa never had a thought beyond those goals, nor a care for costs. Niall had worked too hard, risked too much, to allow this to become a struggle between the Children and the Tower in the eyes of the world.

In truth, it did not matter whether he was wrong. If he was, it still could be very much to his advantage. Perhaps more than if he was right. With a little luck, he could shatter the White Tower past repairing, splinter the witches into shards easily ground to dust. Al’Thor would surely falter then, while remaining enough of a threat to be used as a goad. And he could hold closely to the truth. Fairly closely.

Without taking his eyes from the banners, he said, “The split in the Tower is real. The Black Ajah rose up, the victors hold the Tower and the losers were driven out to lick their wounds in Salidar.” He looked at Balwer, and nearly smiled. One of the Children would have been protesting that there was no Black Ajah, or rather that all the witches were Darkfriends; the newest recruit would have. Balwer merely looked at him, not at all as if he had just blasphemed against all the Children stood for. “The only decision to make is whether the Black Ajah won or lost. I think they won. Most people will think of whoever holds the Tower as the real Aes Sedai. Let them associate *real* Aes Sedai with Black Ajah. Al’Thor is a creature of the Tower, a vassal of the Black Ajah.” Lifting his winecup from the table, he took a sip; it did not help the heat. “Perhaps I can fit it in with why I haven’t moved against Salidar yet.” Through his emissaries, he had been using the failure to move as proof of how dire he saw the threat from al’Thor; he was willing to let the witches congregate on Amadicia’s doorstep rather than be diverted from the danger of the false Dragon. “The women there, appalled after all these years at how pervasive the Black Ajah is, repelled at last by the evil they’ve been immersed in. . . .” His inventiveness ran out—they were all servants of the Dark One; what evil could repel them?—but after a moment Balwer took it up.

“Perhaps they’ve decided to throw themselves on my Lord’s mercy, even ask my Lord’s protection. Losers in a rebellion, weaker than their enemies, fearing to be crushed; a man falling off a cliff to certain death will stretch out a hand even to his worst enemy. Perhaps. . . .” Balwer tapped bony fingers against his lips in thought. “Perhaps they are ready to repent their sins and renounce being Aes Sedai?”

Niall stared at him. He suspected the Tar Valon witches’ sins were among the things Balwer did not believe in. “That is absurd,” he said flatly. “It’s the sort of thing I might expect from Omerna.”

His secretary’s face remained as prim as ever, but he began dry-washing his hands the way he did when he felt insulted. “What my Lord might expect to hear from him, but just the sort of thing that will be repeated where he does most of his listening, in the streets and where nobles gossip over wine. Absurdities are never laughed at there; only listened to. What is too absurd to believe is believed because it is too absurd to be a lie.”

“How would you present it? I will start no rumor of the Children dealing with witches.”

“It would only be rumor, my Lord.” Niall’s gaze hardened, and Balwer spread his hands. “As my Lord wishes. Each retelling always adds embellishment, so a simple tale has the best chance of the core surviving. I suggest four rumors, my lord, not one. The first, that the division in the Tower was caused by a Black Ajah uprising. The second, that the Black Ajah won, and control the Tower. Third, the Aes Sedai in Salidar, repelled and horrified, are renouncing being Aes Sedai. And fourth, they have approached you, seeking mercy and protection. For most people, each will be a confirmation of the others.” Tugging on his lapels, Balwer gave a narrow self-satisfied smile.

“Very good, Balwer. Let it be so.” Niall took a deeper drink of wine. The heat was making him feel his age. His bones seemed brittle. But he would last long enough to see the false Dragon put down and the world united to face Tarmon Gai’don. Even if he did not live to lead in the Last Battle, the Light would surely grant him that much. “And I want Elayne Trakand and her brother Gawyn found, Balwer, and brought to Amador. See to it. You may leave me now.”

Instead of going, Balwer hesitated. “My Lord knows I never suggest any course of action.”

“But you mean to suggest one now? What is it?”

“Press Morgase, my Lord. More than a month has passed, and she still *considers* my Lord’s proposal. She—”

“Enough, Balwer.” Niall sighed. Sometimes he wished Balwer were not an Amadician, but a Cairhienin who had taken in the Game of Houses with his mother’s milk. “Morgase is more committed to me every day, whatever she believes. I would like it better had she accepted immediately—I could have Andor raised against al’Thor today, with a thick leavening of Children to stiffen it—but every day that she remains my guest ties her to me more tightly. Eventually she will discover she is allied to me because the world believes she is, tangled so tightly she can never escape. And no one will ever be able to say I coerced her, Balwer. That is important. It is always harder to abandon an alliance the world thinks you entered freely than one you can prove you were forced into. Reckless haste leads to ruin, Balwer.”

“As my Lord says.”

Niall gestured a dismissal, and the man bowed his way out. Balwer did not understand. Morgase was a rugged opponent. Pressed too hard, she would turn and fight whatever the odds. Yet pressed just hard enough, she would fight the enemy she thought she saw and never see the trap building around her until it was too late. Time pressed down on him, all the years he had lived, all the months he desperately needed, but he would not let haste ruin his plans.

The stooping falcon struck the large duck in an explosion of feathers, and the two birds separated, the duck tumbling toward the ground. Banking sharply in the cloudless sky, the falcon swooped back onto her falling prey, clutched it in her talons. The weight of the duck burdened her, but she struggled back toward the people waiting below.

Morgase wondered whether she was like the falcon, too proud and too determined to realize when she had latched on to a prize too heavy for her wings to support. She tried to make her gloved hands loosen their grip on her reins. Her wide-brimmed white hat, with its long white plumes, provided a little protection from the unrelenting sun, but sweat beaded on her face. In a riding dress of green silk embroidered in gold, she did not look a prisoner.

Figures mounted and afoot filled the long pasture of dried brown grass, though they did not crowd it. A cluster of musicians in white-embroidered blue tabards, with flutes and bitterns and tambours, produced a light tune suitable for an afternoon over chilled wine. A dozen handlers in long, elaborately worked leather vests over billowing white shirts stroked hooded falcons perched on their gauntleted arms, or puffed short pipes and blew streams of blue smoke at their birds. Twice as many brightly liveried servants moved about with fruits and wine in golden gob lets on golden trays, and a band of men clad in bright mail encircled the pasture just short of the largely bare-branched trees. All in aid of Morgase and her retinue, to ensure their hawking went safely.

Well, that was the reason given, though the Prophet’s people were a good two hundred miles north and brigands seemed unlikely this close to Amador. And despite the women clustered around her on their mares and geldings, in bright silk riding dresses and wide-brimmed hats resplendent with colored plumes, their hair in the long ringlets currently in fashion in the Amadician court, Morgase’s retinue in truth consisted of Basel Gill, awkward on his horse off to one side, with his jerkin of metal discs straining around his girth over the red silk coat she had procured him so he would not be outshone by the servants, and Paitr Conel, even more awkward in a page's red-and-white coat and displaying the nervousness he had shown since she added him to her party. The women were nobles from Ailron's court, "volunteers" to be Morgase's ladies-in-waiting. Poor Master Gill fingered his sword and eyed the Whitecloak guards disconsolately. That was what they were, though, as usual when escorting her out of the Fortress of Light, not wearing their white cloaks. And they were guards. If she tried to ride too far or remain out too long, their commander, a hard-eyed young man named Norowhin who hated pretending to be other than a Whitecloak, would "suggest" that she return to Amador because the heat was growing too great, or because of a sudden rumor of bandits in the area. There was no arguing with fifty armored men, not with any dignity. Norowhin had come within a hair of taking her reins from her the first time. That was the reason she never let Tallanvor accompany her on these rides. That young fool might insist on her honor and rights if there were a hundred men against him. He spent his spare hours practicing the sword as though he expected to carve a way to freedom for her.

Startlingly a sudden breeze brushed her face, and she realized that Laurain had leaned from her saddle to fan her with a white lace fan. A slender young woman with dark eyes set slightly too close together, Laurain wore a permanent simper. "It must be so gratifying for Your Majesty to learn that her son has joined the Children of the Light. And to have attained rank so quickly."

"That should be no surprise," Altalin said, fanning her own plump face. "Her Majesty's son would of course rise quickly, as the sun in splendor does." She basked in the appreciative murmurs from some of the other women for her pitiful pun.

Morgase kept her face smooth with difficulty. Niall's news last evening, during one of his surprise visits, had come as a shock. Galad a Whitecloak! At least he was safe, so Niall said. But unable to visit her; the duties of a Child of the Light kept him away. But assuredly he would be part of her escort when she returned to Andor at the head of an army of the Children.

No, Galad was no more safe than Elayne or Gawyn. Perhaps less. The Light send that Elayne was secure in the White Tower. The Light send that

Gawyn was alive; Niall claimed not to know where he was, except that he was not in Tar Valon. Galad was a knife to her throat. Niall would never be so crude as to even suggest it, but one simple order from him could send Galad where he would surely die. The one protection he had was that Niall might think she did not care as much for him as for Elayne and Gawyn.

“I am pleased for him if it is what he seeks,” she told them in an indifferent tone. “But he is Taringail’s son, not mine, Taringail was a marriage of state, you understand. Strange, but he has been dead so long, I can hardly recall his face. Galad is free to do as he will. It is Gawyn who will be First Prince of the Sword when Elayne follows me on the Lion Throne.” She waved away a servant with a goblet on a tray. “Niall could at least have provided us with decent wine.” A wave of anxious titters answered her. She had had some success in drawing them closer to her, yet none could be easy about offending Pedron Niall, not where it might get back to him. Morgase took every opportunity to do so in their hearing. It convinced them of her bravery, important if she was to gain even partial allegiance. Perhaps more importantly, for her own mind at least, it helped maintain the illusion that she was not Niall’s prisoner.

“I hear that Rand al’Thor displays the Lion Throne like a trophy from the hunt.” That was Marande, a pretty woman with a heart-shaped face, somewhat older than the others. The sister of the High Seat of House Algoran, she was powerful in her own right, perhaps powerful enough to have resisted Ailron, but not Niall. The others reined their mounts aside for her to heel her bay gelding closer to Morgase. There was no question of gaining any sort of allegiance or friendship from Marande.

“I have heard as much,” Morgase replied blithely. “The lion is a dangerous animal to hunt, and the Lion Throne more so. Especially for a man. It always kills men who seek it.”

Marande smiled. “I also hear he gives high places to men who can channel.”

That produced uneasy glances among the other women, and a worried buzz. One of the younger women, Marewin, slight and little more than a girl, swayed in her high-cantled saddle as if she might faint. News of al’Thor’s amnesty had spawned frightening tales; rumors only, Morgase fervently hoped. The Light send it was all rumor, men who could channel gathering in Caemlyn, carousing in the Royal Palace, terrorizing the city.

“You hear a great deal,” Morgase said. “Do you spend all your time listening at cracked doors?”

Marande’s smile deepened. She had been unable to resist pressure to become one of Morgase’s attendants, but she was powerful enough to show her displeasure without fear. She was like a thorn driven deep into the foot, impossible to dislodge and giving a sharp jab at every step. “I have little time left from the pleasure of serving Your Majesty to listen anywhere, but I do try to catch what news I can of Andor. So I may converse with Your Majesty. I hear the false Dragon consorts daily with Andoran nobles. Lady Arymilla and Lady Naean, Lord Jarid and Lord Lir. Others, friends of theirs.”

One of the falconers lifted a hooded, sleek gray bird with black wings up to Morgase. Silver bells on the falcon’s jesses tinkled as she shifted on the handler’s gauntlet.

“Thank you, but I have had enough of hawking for today,” Morgase told him, then raised her voice. “Master Gill, gather the escort. I am returning to the city.”

Gill gave a start. He knew very well that all he was there for was to ride at her heels, but he began waving and shouting orders to the Whitecloaks as if he believed they would obey. For her part, Morgase turned her black mare immediately. She did not take the animal faster than a walk, of course. Norowhin would have been on her like a flash if he saw a possibility she was considering escape.

As it was, the cloakless Whitecloaks were galloping to form up their escort before the mare had gone ten steps, and before she reached the edge of the meadow, Norowhin was at her side, a dozen men ahead and the rest close behind. The servants and musicians and falconers were left to gather themselves up and follow as quickly as they could.

Gill and Paitr took their places behind her, and then came the ladies-in-waiting. Marande wore her smile like a badge of triumph now, though some of the others frowned in disapproval. Not too openly—even if she had had to yield to Niall, the woman was a force to be reckoned with in Amadicia—but most of them did try to do their best at a task they did not want. For the greater part they would likely have attended Morgase willingly; it was residing inside the Fortress of the Light they did not like.

Morgase would have smiled herself if she could be sure Marande would not see it. The only reason she had not insisted weeks ago that the woman be sent away was how free she was with her tongue. Marande enjoyed pricking her with how far Andor had fallen from her grasp, but the names she chose were a balm to Morgase. All men and women who had opposed her during the Succession, all sycophants of Gaebril. She expected no less of them, and no more. Had Marande named others, the result would have been different. Lord Pelivar or Abelle or Luan, Lady Arathelle or Ellorien or Aemlyn. Others. They had never been part of Marande's stabs, and they would have been if even a whisper from Andor had made her think of them. So long as Marande did not mention them, there was at least hope that they had not knelt to al'Thor. They had supported Morgase's first claim to the throne, and they might yet again, the Light willing.

Nearly leafless forest gave way to a road of hard-packed dirt, and they took it south toward Amador. Stretches of woods alternated with coppiced trees and fallow stone-fenced fields, with thatch-roofed stone houses and barns standing well back from the road. A good many people crowded the way, raising dust that made Morgase tie a silk kerchief across her face, though they scrambled aside onto the verge at the first glimpse of such a large party of armed and armored men. Some even darted into the trees or leaped fences and scurried across the fields. The Whitecloaks ignored them, and no farmers appeared to shake a fist or shout at the trespassers. Several of the farms had an abandoned look, with no chickens or animals in sight.

Among the people on the road there was an ox-cart here, a man with a few sheep there, somewhere else a young woman herding a flock of geese. Plainly they were all local people. Some had a bundle shouldered or a fat scrip, but most were empty-handed, walking as if with no idea where they were going. The numbers of the latter sort had increased every time Morgase had been allowed to leave Amador, no matter in which direction.

Adjusting the kerchief over her nose, Morgase eyed Norowhin sideways. He was about Tallanvor's age and height, but there the resemblance ended. Red-faced under his burnished conical helmet and peeling from the sun, he had never been handsome. A lanky build and a thrusting nose made her think of a pickaxe. Every time she left the Fortress of the Light, he led her "escort," and every time she tried to engage him in conversation. Whitecloak or not, every inch she could shift him from being her jailor was a victory. "Are these people refugees from the Prophet, Norowhin?" They could not all be; as many were heading north as south.

"No," he said curtly, without even glancing at her. His eyes scanned the roadsides as if he expected a rescue to appear for her any moment.

That, unfortunately, was the sort of response she had had so far, but she persevered. "Who are they, men? Not Taraboners, surely. You do a very good job of moving them on." She had seen a party of Taraboners, fifty or so men, women and children, dirty and half falling with weariness, being herded west like cattle by mounted Whitecloaks. Only the bitter knowledge that she could do absolutely nothing had enabled her to hold her tongue. "Amadicia is a rich land. Even this drought cannot have driven so many from their farms in just a few months."

Norowhin's face worked. "No," he said finally. "They are refugees from the false Dragon."

"But how? He is hundreds of leagues from Amadicia."

Again a struggle was plain on the man's sunburned face, either for words or against speaking. "They believe he is the true Dragon Reborn," he said at last, sounding disgusted. "They say he has broken all bonds, according to the Prophecies. Men forsake their lords, apprentices desert their masters. Husbands abandon their families, and wives their husbands. It is a plague carried on the wind, a wind that blows from the false Dragon."

Morgase's eyes fell on a young man and woman huddled in each other's arms, watching her party pass. Sweat streaked the dirt on their faces, and dust coated their plain clothes. They looked hungry, their cheeks sunken, their eyes too big. Could this be happening in Andor? Had Rand al'Thor done this to Andor too? *If he has, he will pay*. The problem was making sure the cure was not worse than the disease. To deliver Andor, even from this, and hand it to the Whitecloaks. . . .

She tried to keep the conversation going, but having delivered himself of more words than he had ever before spoken to her at one time, Norowhin retreated into monosyllables. It did not matter; if she could crack his reserve once, she could again.

Twisting in her saddle, she tried to see the young man and woman, but they were hidden behind the Whitecloak soldiers. That did not matter either. Those faces would reside in her memory, alongside her promise.

* * *

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CHAPTER 10

A Saying in the Borderlands

For a moment Rand wished for the days when he could have strolled the Palace corridors alone. This morning he was accompanied by Sulin and twenty Maidens, by Bael, clan chief of the Goshien Aiel, with half a dozen *Sovin Nai*, Knife Hands, from the Jhirad Goshien for Bael's honor, and by Bashere with as many of his hawk-nosed Saldaeans. They crowded the broad, tapestry-hung hallway, the *cadin'sor*-clad *Far Dareis Mai* and *Sovin Nai* staring through servants who bowed or curtsied hastily and got out of the way, and the younger Saldaeans swaggering in their short coats and their baggy breeches tucked into their boots. It was hot even here in the shaded passage, and dust motes danced in the air. Some of the servants wore the red-and-white livery they had worn when Morgase ruled, but most were new, garbed in whatever they had on when they came applying for the job, a motley collection of farmers' and tradesmen's woolens, mainly dark and plain but running the range of colors, with here and there splashes of embroidery or bits of lace.

Rand made a mental note to have Mistress Harfor, the First Maid, find livery enough to go around, so the newcomers would not feel required to work in their best clothes. Palace livery was certainly finer than anything country folk had except perhaps for feastdays. The servants numbered fewer than in Morgase's day, and a good many of the red-and-white attired men and women were gray and stooped, out of the pensioners' quarters. Instead of fleeing when so many others did, they had quit their retirement rather than see the palace become run down. Another mental note. Have Mistress Harfor—First Maid was an unprepossessing title, but Reene Harfor ran the Royal Palace day-to-day—find enough servants so these oldsters could enjoy their pensions. Were the pensions still being paid with Morgase dead? He should have thought of that before; Halwin Norry, the chief clerk, would know. It was like being beaten to death with feathers.

Everything reminded him of something else to be done. The Ways; that was no feather. He had the Waygate here in Caemlyn under guard, and those near Tear and Cairhien, but he could not even be sure how many more there were.

Yes, he would have traded all the bows and curtsies, all the honor guards, all the questions and burdens, all the people whose needs had to be met, for the days when he had to worry about providing a coat for himself. Of course, in those days he would not have been allowed to stroll these corridors at all, certainly not without a different sort of guard, one to make sure he did not slip a silver-and-gold chalice from its niche in the wall, or an ivory carving from a lapis-inlaid table.

At least Lews Therin's voice was not muttering at him this morning. At least he seemed to be getting the way of the mental trick Taim had shown him; sweat trickled down Bashere's face, but the heat hardly touched Rand. He wore his silver-embroidered coat of gray silk buttoned to the neck, and if he felt a little warm, he did not sweat a drop. Taim assured him that in time he would not even feel heat or cold great enough to disable another man. It was a matter of distancing from himself, of concentrating inward, a little like the way he prepared to embrace *saidin*. Strange that it should be so close to the Power yet have nothing to do with it at all. Did Aes Sedai do the same? He had never seen one sweat. Had he?

Abruptly he laughed out loud. Wondering whether Aes Sedai ever sweated! Maybe he was not mad yet, but he could pass fair for a wool-headed fool.

"Did I say something funny?" Bashere asked dryly, knuckling his mustaches. Some of the Maidens looked at him expectantly; they were making an effort to understand wetlander humor.

How Bashere kept his equanimity, Rand did not know. A rumor had reached the Palace that very morning, of fighting in the Borderlands, between Borderlanders. Travelers' tales sprang up like weeds after rain, but this had come from the north, apparently with merchants who had been at least as far as Tar Valon. Nothing in it said where or who exactly. Saldaea was as likely as anywhere else, and Bashere had had no word from there since he left months ago, yet he might have heard that the price of turnips had risen for all the effect the rumor had had on him.

Of course, Rand knew nothing of what was going on in the Two Rivers either—unless vague mutters of an uprising somewhere in the west touched his home; in these days, that could be anything or nothing—but it was not the same for him. He had abandoned the Two Rivers. Aes Sedai had spies everywhere, and he would not wager a copper that the Forsaken did not as well. The Dragon Reborn had no interest in the flyspeck village where Rand al'Thor had grown up; he was far beyond that. If he was not, then Emond's Field was a hostage to use against him. Still, he would not split hairs with himself. Abandonment was abandonment.

If I could find a way to escape my destiny, do I deserve to? That was his own thought, not Lews Therin's.

Shifting shoulders that suddenly seemed to ache dully, he kept his voice light. "Forgive me, Bashere. Something odd just occurred to me, but I have been listening. You were saying Caemlyn is filling up. For every man who ran away because he was afraid of the false Dragon, two have come because I'm not, and he isn't. You see?"

Bashere grunted, which might have meant anything.

"How many have come for other reasons, Rand al'Thor?" Bael was the tallest man Rand had ever seen, a good hand taller than Rand himself. He made an odd contrast with Bashere, who stood shorter than any of the Maidens except Enaila. Gray streaked thickly through Bael's dark reddish hair, but his face was lean and hard, his blue eyes sharp. "You have enemies enough for a hundred men. Mark me, they will try to strike at you again. There could even be Shadowrunners among them."

"Even if there are no Darkfriends," Bashere put in, "trouble brews in the city like tea left on the boil. A number of people have been severely beaten, evidently for doubting you're the Dragon Reborn, and one poor fellow was hauled from a tavern into a barn and hanged from the rafters for laughing at your miracles."

"My miracles?" Rand said incredulously.

A wrinkled, white-haired serving man in a too-large coat of livery, with a large vase in his hands, trying to bow and step out of the way at the same time, tripped on his heel and fell backward. The pale green vase, paper-thin Sea Folk porcelain, flew over his head and went tumbling end-over-end across the dark red floor tiles, spinning and bouncing until it came to rest, upright, thirty or so paces down the hall. The old man scrambled to his feet with surprising spryness and ran to snatch up the vase, running his hands over it and exclaiming in disbelief as much as relief when he found not a chip or a crack. Other servants stared with just as much incredulity, before abruptly coming to themselves and hurrying on about their tasks. They avoided looking at Rand so hard that several forgot to bow or curtsy.

Bashere and Bael exchanged looks, and Bashere blew out his thick mustaches.

"Strange occurrences, then," he said. "Every day there's another story about a child falling headfirst onto paving stones from a window forty feet up, without so much as a single bruise. Or a grandmother getting in the way of two dozen runaway horses, only somehow they don't even buffet her, much less knock her down and trample her. Some fellow threw five crowns twenty-two times straight at dice the other day, and they lay that at your feet, too. Luckily for him."

"It is said," Bael added, "that yesterday a basket of roof tiles fell from a roof and landed in the street unbroken in the shape of the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai." He glanced at the openmouthed white-haired servant, clutching the vase to his chest as they passed. "I do not doubt that it did."

Rand exhaled slowly. They did not mention the other sort, of course. The man who stumbled on a step and was hanged when his kerchief caught on the door latch. The loose slate ripped from a roof by a high wind that sailed through an open window and a doorway to kill a woman sitting at table with her family. The sort of thing that did happen, but rarely. Only such things were not rare around him. For good or ill, for ill as often as good, he twisted chance merely by being within a few miles. No, if the Dragons disappeared from his arms and the branded herons from his palms, he was still marked. There was a saying in the Borderlands: *"Duty is heavier than a mountain, death lighter than a feather."* Once you had that mountain firmly on your shoulders, there was no way to put it down. There was no one else to carry it anyway, and no use whining about it.

He made his voice brisk. "Have you found the men who did the hanging?" Bashere shook his head. "Then find them, and arrest them for murder. I want a stop put to this. Doubting me isn't a crime." Rumor said the Prophet had made it one, but there was nothing he could do about that yet. He did not even know where Masema was, beyond somewhere in Ghealdan or Amadicia. If he had not gone elsewhere meantime. Yet another note chalked up in his head; he had to find the man and rein him somehow.

"No matter how far it goes?" Bashere said. "There are whispers you're a false Dragon who killed Morgase with Aes Sedai help. The people are supposed to rise up against you and avenge their queen. There may be more than one someone. It isn't clear."

Rand's face hardened. The first part he could live with—he had to; there were too many variations to stamp out however many times he denied it—but he would not tolerate incitement to rebellion. Andor would be one land he did not split apart in war. He would give Elayne a land as unblemished as it had come to him. If he ever found her, he would. "Find who began it," he said harshly, "and toss them in prison." Light, how to find who started a whisper? "If they seek pardon, they can ask Elayne for it." A young serving woman in a rough brown dress, dusting a blue spun-glass bowl, caught sight of his face, and the bowl dropped from her suddenly shaking hands and shattered. He did not always alter chance. "Is there any good news? I could do with some."

The young woman bent unsteadily to gather up the shards of the bowl, but Sulin glanced at her, just glanced, and she sprang back, flattening herself wide-eyed against a tapestry showing a leopard hunt. Rand did not understand it, but some women seemed more frightened of the Maidens than they did of Aiel men. The young woman looked at Bael as if hoping he would protect her. He did not appear to see her at all.

"That depends on how you define good news." Bashere shrugged. "I've learned that Ellorien of House Traemane and Pelivar of House Coelan entered the city three days ago. Sneaked in, you might say, and neither has come near the Inner City that I've heard. Talk in the streets has Dyelin of House Taravin in the country nearby. None of them has responded to your invitations. I've heard nothing to connect any of them to the whispers." He glanced at Bael, who gave a slight shake of his head.

"We hear less than you, Davram Bashere. These people speak more freely around other wetlanders."

It was good news in any case. Those were people Rand needed. If they believed him a false Dragon, he could find a way around that. If they believed he had killed Morgase. . . . Well, so much the better if they remained loyal to her memory, and her blood. "Send them fresh invitations to visit me. Include Dyelin's name; they may know where she is."

"If I send such an invitation," Bashere said doubtfully, "it may do no more than remind them there's a Saldaean army in Andor."

Rand hesitated, then nodded, suddenly grinning. "Ask the Lady Arymilla to carry it. I don't doubt she'll leap at the chance to show them how close she is to me. But you write it out." Moiraine's lessons in playing the Game of Houses were coming in useful once more.

"I do not know whether it is good news or bad," Bael said, "but the Red Shields tell me two Aes Sedai have taken rooms at an inn in the New City." The Red Shields had been helping Bashere's men police Caemlyn and were now taking it over alone. Bael grinned slightly at the chagrin on Bashere's face. "We hear less, Davram Bashere, but perhaps sometimes we see more."

"Is one of them our friend who likes cats?" Rand asked. The stories of an Aes Sedai in the city persisted; sometimes there were two, or three, or a whole party. The closest Bashere or Bael had come to anything at all, though, were a few stories of an Aes Sedai who Healed dogs and cats, but always the next street over, told by someone who had been told by someone who had heard it in a tavern or in the market.

Bael shook his head. "I do not think so. The Red Shields said these two seem to have arrived in the night." Bashere looked interested—he seldom let an opportunity pass to repeat that Rand needed Aes Sedai—but Bael was frowning slightly, so slightly it would not have been noticeable on anyone but an Aiel. Aiel were careful in their dealings with Aes Sedai, even reluctant.

Those few words contained plenty for Rand to think on, and every path came back to himself. Two Aes Sedai had to have a reason to come into Caemlyn, when their sisters were avoiding the city since he appeared there. The most likely reason was something to do with him. In the best of times few people journeyed by night, and these were not the best times. Aes Sedai arriving in the dark might be trying to avoid notice, and the most likely notice for them to avoid was his. On the other hand, they might just be going somewhere urgently. Which could spell a mission for the Tower. The truth of it was, he could not think what might be more important to the Tower right now than himself. Or they might be on their way to join the Aes Sedai that Egwene insisted were going to support him.

Whatever it was, he wanted to know. The Light alone knew what the Aes Sedai were up to—the Tower or Elayne's hidden lot—but he had to find out. There were too many of them, and they could be too dangerous, for him not to. How would the Tower react when Elaida learned of his amnesty? How would any Aes Sedai? Had they heard yet?

As they approached the doors at the end of the corridor, he opened his mouth to tell Bael to ask one of the Aes Sedai to come to the Palace. He could handle two Aes Sedai if it came to that—so long as they did not catch him by surprise—but there was no point taking chances until he knew who they were and what they were about.

Pride fills me. I am sick with the pride that destroyed me!

Rand missed a step. That was the first time today that Lews Therin's voice had spoken inside his head—and too much like a comment on his thoughts of Aes Sedai for comfort—but it was not what made him swallow what he had been going to say and stop dead.

Because of the heat the doors stood open, giving out into one of the Palace gardens. The flowers were gone, and some of the rose and whitestar bushes looked wilted, but the shade trees still stood, if with few leaves, around the white marble fountain that splashed in the garden's heart. A woman in bulky brown wool skirts and a loose white *algode* blouse stood beside the fountain, a gray shawl looped over her arms, staring in wonder as she often did at water with no use except to be looked at. Rand's eyes drank in the lines of Aviendha's face, the waves of reddish hair falling to her shoulders from the folded gray scarf fastened around her temples. Light but she was beautiful. Studying the spray of water, she had not seen him yet.

Did he love her? He did not know. She was all tangled in his head and his dreams with Elayne, and even Min. What he did know was that he was dangerous; he had nothing to offer any woman except pain.

Ilyena, Lews Therin wept. *I killed her! The Light consume me forever!*

"A pair of Aes Sedai showing up like that might be important," Rand said quietly. "I think I should visit this inn and see why they're here." Almost everyone stopped when he did, but Enaila and Jalani exchanged glances and kept on right past him toward the garden. He raised his voice a fraction and hardened it considerably more. "The Maidens here will come with me. Anyone who wants to put on a dress and discuss matchmaking can stay behind."

Enaila and Jalani stiffened and spun to face him, indignation lighting their eyes. A good thing Somara was not in today's guard; she might have gone on anyway. Sulin's fingers flashed in Maiden handtalk, and whatever she had to say, it quenched indignation and set embarrassed flames in the two Maidens' cheeks instead. The Aiel had all sorts of hand signals for when silence was best. Every clan had its private set, and every society as well, besides which there were those all the Aiel knew, but only the Maidens had made a language of them.

Rand did not wait for Sulin to finish before turning away from the garden. These Aes Sedai might leave Caemlyn as quickly as they had come. He glanced over his shoulder. Aviendha was still staring at the water; she had not seen him. He quickened his step. “Bashere, would you send one of your men to have horses readied? At the South Stable Gate.” The main gates of the Palace opened onto the Queen’s Plaza, which would be full of people hoping for a glimpse of him. It would have taken half an hour to make a way through, if he was lucky.

Bashere motioned, and one of the younger Saldaeans loped ahead in that rolling stride of a man more used to a saddle. “A man must know when to retreat from a woman,” Bashere said to the air, “but a wise man knows that sometimes he must stand and face her.”

“Young men,” Bael said indulgently. “A young man chases shadows and runs from moonlight, and in the end he stabs himself in the foot with his own spear.” Some of the other Aiel chuckled, Maidens and Knife Hands alike. The older ones did.

Irritated, Rand looked over his shoulder again. “Neither of you would look well in a dress.” Surprisingly, the Maidens and Knife Hands laughed again, more loudly. Maybe he was getting a grip on Aiel humor.

It was as he expected when he rode out of the South Stable Gate into one of the Inner City’s curving streets. Jeade’en’s hooves rang on the paving stones as the stallion frisked; the dapple seldom got out of the stable of late. There were plenty of people in the street, but nowhere near the numbers to be expected on the other side of the Palace and all going about their own business. Even so, fingers pointed, and people leaned close to one another, murmuring. Some might have recognized Bashere—unlike Rand, he had been out and about in the city often—but anybody emerging from the Palace, especially with an escort of trotting Aiel, had to be important. The murmurs and pointing fingers followed.

Despite the stares, Rand tried to enjoy the beauties of the Ogier-built Inner City. The few occasions he found to just enjoy anything were precious. Streets curved out from the shining white Royal Palace, flowing along the contours of the hills like a part of the land. Everywhere stood slender towers covered in colored tiles, or domes of gold or purple or white, sparkling in the sunlight. Here a line of sight had been left clear to give a view of tree-filled park, there a rise threw the eyes across the city to the rolling plains and forests beyond the tall silver-streaked white wall that enclosed all of Caemlyn. The Inner City had been laid out to delight and soothe the eye. According to the Ogier, only Tar Valon itself and storied Manetheren had ever surpassed it, and many humans, Andorans foremost among them, believed that Caemlyn matched either.

The pure white walls of the Inner City marked the beginning of the surrounding New City, with its own domes and spires, some trying to match the height of those in the Inner City on its higher hills. Here the narrower streets were packed full of humanity, and even the broad boulevards, split down the middle by tree-lined expanses, were filled with people and ox-carts and horse-drawn wagons, folk on horseback and in carriages and sedan chairs. A buzz hung in the air, as from a huge hive of bees.

Passage was slower here, though the crowds gave way. They did not know who he was any more than did those in the Inner City, but no one wanted to get in the way of striding Aiel. It simply took time with so many people. And there was every sort of person. Farmers in rough woolens and merchants in coats or dresses of finer cut. Craftsmen hurrying about their trades and hawkers crying their wares from trays and pushcarts, everything from pins and ribbons to fruit and fireworks, the last two equally dear now. A gleeman in his patch-covered cloak rubbed shoulders with three Aiel inspecting the blades displayed on tables before a cutler’s workshop. Two lean fellows with their dark hair in braids and swords on their backs—Hunters for the Horn, Rand expected—stood chatting with a number of Saldaeans as they listened to a woman playing the flute and a man the tambour on a street corner. Cairhienin, shorter and paler, stood out among the Andorans, and so did the darker Tairens, but Rand saw Murandians in long coats and Altarans in elaborate vests, fork-bearded Kandori, even a pair of Domani with long thin mustaches and earrings.

Another sort of people stood out too, those who wandered about in rumpled coats and wrinkled dresses, often dusty and always blinking and staring, plainly with nowhere to go and no idea of what to do next. That sort had gone as far as they could toward what they sought. Him. The Dragon Reborn. What he was to do with them he had no notion, yet they were his responsibility, one way or another. No matter that he had not asked them to throw over their lives, had not wanted them to abandon everything. They had. Because of him. And if they learned who he was, they might well overwhelm the Aiel and tear him apart in their eagerness just to touch him.

He touched the fat-little-man *angreal* in his coat pocket. A fine thing, if it came to him using the One Power to protect himself against people who had given up everything because of him. That was why he seldom ventured into the city. One reason, anyway. There was just too much to be done to go for an idle ride.

The inn Bael led him to, toward the western end of the city, was called Culain's Hound, three stories of stone with a red tile roof. On the twisting side street, the passing throng backed up both ways, narrowing to crowd around Rand's party when it stopped. Rand touched the *angreal* again—two Aes Sedai; he should be able to handle them without resorting to that—before dismounting and going in. Not before three Maidens and a pair of Knife Hands, of course, all on their toes and a hair from veiling. He could have taught a cat to sing first. Leaving two Saldaeans with the horses, Bashere and the others strode in at his heels along with Bael, the rest of the Aiel following except for those who had taken up guard outside. What they found was not what Rand expected.

The common room could have changed places with any of a hundred or more in Caemlyn, great barrels of ale and wine lining one plain plastered wall, topped with smaller casks of brandy, and a gray-striped cat sprawled on top of all, a pair of stone fireplaces, the hearths swept bare, and three or four aproned serving women moving among tables and benches scattered around a bare wooden floor beneath a beamed ceiling. The innkeeper, a round-faced man with three chins, a white apron straining around his bulk, trotted up washing his hands and eyeing the Aiel only a touch nervously. Caemlyn had learned they were not going to pillage and burn everything in sight—convincing the Aiel that Andor was not a conquered land and they could not take the fifth had been a harder proposition—but that was not to say innkeepers were used to having two dozen appear in their common rooms at once.

The innkeeper concentrated on Rand and Bashere. Mainly on Bashere. Both were clearly men of substance by their clothes, but Bashere was the elder by a good many years and thus likely to be the more important. "Welcome, my Lord, my Lords. What may I offer you? I have wines from Murandy as well as Andoran, brandy from. . . ."

Rand ignored the man. What was not like a hundred other common rooms was the patrons. At this hour he would have expected one or two men perhaps, but there were none. Instead most of the tables were filled with plainly dressed young women, girls really for the most part, who twisted around on their benches, teacups in hand, to gawk at the new arrivals. More than one gasped at Bael's height. Not all of them stared at the Aiel, though, and it was the near dozen who gaped at *him* that made Rand's eyes widen. He knew them. Not all well, but he did know them. One in particular seized his attention.

"Bode?" he said in disbelief. That big-eyed girl staring at him—when had she gotten old enough to put her hair in a braid?—was Bodewhin Cauthon, Mat's sister. And there was plump Hilde Barran sitting next to skinny Jerilin al'Caar, and pretty Marisa Ahan, with her hands clapped to her cheeks the way she always did when surprised, and buxom Emry Lewin and Elise Marwin and Darea Candwin and. . . . They were from Emond's Field, or close by. Darting a look over the rest of the tables, he realized the others must be Two Rivers girls, too. Most of them, anyway—he saw a Domani face, and one or two more that might well be from off—but every dress could have been seen any day on the Green in Emond's Field. "What under the Light are you doing here?"

"We are on our way to Tar Valon," Bode managed despite gaping. The only thing about her that looked at all like Mat was a mischievous something around the eyes. Her astonishment at seeing him vanished quickly in a broad smile of wonder and delight. "To become Aes Sedai, like Egwene and Nynaeve."

"We could ask the same of you," willowy Larine Ayellin put in, arranging her thick braid over her shoulder with studied casualness. The oldest of the Emond's Field girls—a good three years younger than him, but the only one besides Bode to have her hair braided—she had always had a good opinion of herself. She was pretty enough for all the boys to have confirmed it for her. "Lord Perrin hardly said two words about you except to say you were off having adventures. And wearing fine coats, which I see you are."

"Is Mat well?" Bode asked, suddenly anxious. "Is he with you? Mother worries about him so. He wouldn't even remember to put on clean stockings if someone didn't tell him."

"No," Rand said slowly, "he's not here. But he's well."

"We hardly expected to find you in Caemlyn," Jancy Torfinn piped up in her high voice. She could not be more than fourteen; she was the youngest, at least among the Emond's Fielders. "Verin Sedai and Alanna Sedai will be pleased, I'll wager. They're always asking what we know about you."

So those were the two Aes Sedai. He knew Verin, a Brown sister, more than slightly. He did not know what to think about her being here, though. That was hardly most important anyway. These girls were from *home*. "Everything is all right in the Two Rivers, then? In Emond's Field? Perrin got there all right, it seems. Wait! *Lord* Perrin?"

That opened the sluice gate. The rest of the Two Rivers girls were more interested in studying the Aiel with sidelong peeks, especially Bael, and a few spared glances for the Saldaeans, but the Emond's Field girls crowded around Rand, all trying to tell him everything at once, all jumbled up and wrong way round, interspersed with questions about himself and Mat, about Egwene and Nynaeve, most of which he could not have answered in under an hour had they given him a chance.

Trollocs had invaded the Two Rivers, but Lord Perrin drove them off. They went on so about the great battle, everyone talking at the same time, that it was hard to pick out any details except that there had been one. Everybody fought, of course, but it had been Lord Perrin who saved everybody. Always *Lord* Perrin; any time he said just Perrin they corrected him in the perfunctory way they might someone who said horse when he should have said sawhorse.

Even with the news that the Trollocs were beaten, Rand's chest tightened. He had abandoned them to this. If he had gone, there might not have been such a long list of the dead, so many names that he knew. But if he had gone, he would not have the Aiel behind him. Cairhien would not be his, as much as it was, and Rahvin would likely be sending a united Andor against him and the Two Rivers. There was a price to be paid for any decision he made. There was a price for who he was. Other people paid it. He had to keep reminding himself that it was a far smaller price than they would pay without him. The reminder did not help much, though.

Taking his expression for dismay at the listing of Two Rivers' dead, the girls hastened on to happier things. It seemed Perrin had married Faile, too. Rand wished him happiness in that, and wondered how long any happiness they found could last. The girls thought it romantic and wonderful, and only seemed to regret that there had been no time for the usual wedding parties. They were quite approving of Faile, quite admiring, and a touch envious, even Larine.

There had been Whitecloaks, too, and with them Padan Fain, the old peddler who used to come to Emond's Field every spring. The girls seemed unsure whether the Whitecloaks had been friends or enemies, but to Rand, Fain made the difference if there was any real doubt. Fain was a Darkfriend, maybe worse than a Darkfriend, who would do anything to harm Rand and Mat and Perrin. Especially Rand. Maybe the worse news they had to tell him was that no one knew whether Fain was dead. In any case, the Whitecloaks were gone, the Trollocs were gone, and refugees were flooding in across the Mountains of Mist, bringing all sorts of new things, from customs to trades, plants and seeds to clothes. One of the other girls was a Domani, and there were two Taraboners and three from Almoth Plain.

"Larine bought a Domani dress," little Jancy laughed, cutting her eyes, "but her mother made her take it back to the seamstress." Larine raised her hand, then thought better of it and simply rearranged her braid with a sniff. Jancy giggled.

"Who cares about dresses?" Susa al'Seen exclaimed. "Rand doesn't care about dresses." A slight, fluttery girl, Susa had always been excitable, and right now she was bouncing on her toes. "Alanna Sedai and Verin Sedai tested everybody. Well. Almost everybody . . ."

"Cilia Cole wanted to be tested, too," Marce Eldin, a stocky girl, put in. Rand did not much remember her, except that she had always had her nose in a book, even walking in the street. "She insisted! She passed, but they told her she was too old to be a novice."

Susa went right on over Marce. ". . . And we all passed . . ."

"We've been traveling all day and practically all night since Whitebridge," Bode put in. "It is so good to stay in one place a little while."

"Have you seen Whitebridge, Rand?" Jancy said on top of Bode. "The White Bridge itself?"

". . . And we're going to Tar Valon to become Aes Sedai!" Susa finished with a glare that took in Bode, Marce and Jancy. "In Tar Valon!"

"We will not be going to Tar Valon just yet."

The voice from the door to the street spun the girls' attention from Rand, but the two Aes Sedai just coming in waved aside their questions offhandedly. The Aes Sedai's regard was all for Rand. They were disparate women, despite the common link of their faces. Either could have been any age at all, but Verin was short and plump, square-faced, with a touch of gray in her hair, while the other, who must be Alanna, was dark and slender, a beautiful vulpine woman with waves of black hair and a light in her eyes that spoke of a temper. And with a slight redness around them, as if she had been crying, though Rand could hardly believe an Aes Sedai weeping. Her riding dress was gray silk slashed with green, and looked as if she had just donned it, while Verin's pale brown appeared slightly rumpled. If Verin paid little heed to her clothes, though, her dark eyes were sharp enough. They latched on to Rand as tightly as mussels on a rock.

Two men in dull green coats followed them into the common room, one stocky and gray-haired, the other a tall dark whip of a man, but each had a sword on his hip, and the fluid way they moved would have named them Warders even without the Aes Sedai. They ignored Rand entirely, instead watching the Aiel and Saldaeans with a stillness that spoke of sudden movement in check. For their part, the Aiel did not move exactly, but there was an air of veils going up about them, Maidens and Knife Hands alike, and the young Saldaeans' fingers suddenly hovered near sword hilts. Only Bael and Bashere appeared truly at ease. The girls noticed nothing except the Aes Sedai, but the fat innkeeper sensed the mood and began wringing his hands, no doubt seeing his common room destroyed, if not his whole inn.

"There will be no trouble," Rand said loudly and levelly, for the innkeeper, for the Aiel. For everyone, he hoped. "No trouble unless you start it, Verin." Several of the girls goggled at him, speaking so to an Aes Sedai, and Larine sniffed loudly.

Verin studied him with birdlike eyes. "Who are we to start trouble near you? You have come far since I saw you last."

For some reason, he did not want to talk about that. "If you've decided not to go to Tar Valon, then you must have heard the Tower is broken." That caused a startled buzz among the girls; they certainly had not heard. The Aes Sedai gave no reaction at all. "Do you know where those who oppose Elaida are?"

"There are things we should discuss in private," Alanna said calmly. "Master Dilham, we will need your private dining room." The innkeeper nearly fell over himself assuring her that it was at her disposal.

Verin started toward a side door. “This way, Rand.” Alanna looked at him, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Rand held in a wry grin. They had just walked in and taken charge, but it seemed that Aes Sedai did that as naturally as breathing. The Two Rivers girls stared at him with varying degrees of commiseration. Doubtless they expected the Aes Sedai to skin him if he did not speak right and sit straight. Perhaps Verin and Alanna did, too. With a smooth bow he motioned for Alanna to proceed him. So he had come a long way, had he? They had no idea how far.

Alanna acknowledged his bow with a nod, gathered her skirts and glided after Verin, but trouble followed immediately. The two Warders made as if to trail the Aes Sedai, and before they had taken a full step a pair of cold-eyed *Sovin Nai* moved to block them, while Sulin’s fingers flickered in handtalk, sending Enaila and a blocky Maiden named Dagendra toward the door the Aes Sedai were approaching. The Saldaeans looked to Bashere, who gestured for them to stay, but then he himself looked a question at Rand.

Alanna made a vexed sound. “We will speak with him alone, Ihvon.” The slender Warder frowned, then nodded slowly.

Verin glanced back, looking slightly startled, as though pulled from deep thought. “What? Oh, yes, of course. Tomas, stay here, please.” The gray-haired Warder appeared doubtful, and he gave Rand a hard look before lounging back against the wall beside the door to the street. At least, he was lounging if a tripwire could be said to be lounging. Only then did the Knife Hands relax—as much as Aiel ever relaxed.

“I want to talk to them alone,” Rand said, looking straight at Sulin. For a moment he thought she meant to dispute him. Her jaw firmed stubbornly; finally handtalk passed between her, Enaila and Dagendra, and they moved back, looking at him and shaking their heads in disapproval. Sulin’s fingers moved again, and all the Maidens laughed. He wished there was some way to learn handtalk; Sulin had been scandalized when he asked.

Confused looks passed among the Two Rivers girls as Rand started after the Aes Sedai, and he closed the door behind them on a rising buzz. It was a small room, but with polished chairs instead of benches and pewter candlesticks on both the polished table and the vine-carved mantel above the fireplace. The two windows were shut, yet no one made a move to open one. He wondered if either Aes Sedai had noticed that the heat touched him no more than it did them.

“Will you be taking them to the rebels?” he asked immediately.

Frowning, Verin smoothed her skirts. “You know considerably more about that than we do.”

“We did not hear of events in the Tower until Whitebridge.” Alanna’s tone was cool, but there was heat in the eyes she kept fixed on him. “What do you know of . . . rebels?” A world of distaste entered her voice with that word.

So they had heard the rumors first in Whitebridge, and made haste here, keeping everything from the girls. And by the reactions of Bode and the others, the decision not to go to Tar Valon was fresh. Seemingly they had found confirmation this morning. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me who your spy in Caemlyn is.” They merely looked at him, Verin tilting her head to study him. Strange how Aes Sedai gazes had been so unsettling once, so serene whatever was happening, so knowing. Having an Aes Sedai stare at him, or even two, no longer made his stomach turn uneasily. *Pride*, Lews Therin laughed madly, and Rand suppressed a grimace. “I’ve been told rebels exist. You haven’t denied knowing where they are. I mean no harm to them, far from it. I have reason to believe they might support me.” He kept back his main reason for wanting to know. Perhaps Bashere was right, perhaps he did need Aes Sedai backing, but mainly he wanted to know because he had been told Elayne was with them. He needed her to gain Andor peacefully. That was his only motive in seeking her. The only one. He was as dangerous to her as to Aviendha. “For the love of the Light, if you know, tell me.”

“If we did know,” Alanna replied, “we would have no right to tell anyone. Should they decide to support you, you may be certain they will seek you out.”

“In their time,” Verin said, “not yours.”

He smiled grimly. He should have expected as much, or as little. Moiraine’s advice was in the front of his head. Trust no woman who wore the shawl on the day she died.

“Is Mat with you?” Alanna asked as if that were the last thing on her mind really.

“If I knew where he was, why should I tell you? Turn and turn about?” They did not seem to think that was funny.

“It is foolish to treat us as enemies,” Alanna murmured, moving toward him. “You look tired. Are you getting enough rest?” He stepped back from her raised hand, and she stopped. “Like you, Rand, I mean no harm. Nothing I do here will cause you any injury.”

Since she had said it straight out, it must be so. He nodded, and she raised her hand to his head. His skin tingled faintly as she embraced *saidar*, and a familiar warm ripple passed through him, the feel of her checking his health.

Alanna nodded in satisfaction. And suddenly the warmth was heat, one great flash of it, as if he stood for a heartbeat in the middle of a roaring furnace. Even after it passed, he felt odd, aware of himself as he never had been before, aware of Alanna. He swayed, head light, muscles watery. An echo of confusion and unease rang from Lews Therin.

“What did you do?” he demanded. In a fury, he seized *saidin*. The strength of it helped hold him upright. “What did you do?”

Something beat at the flow between him and the True Source. They were trying to shield him! Weaving his own shields, he slammed them into place. He truly had gone far, and learned much, since Verin last saw him. Verin staggered, putting a hand on the table for support, and Alanna grunted as if he had punched her.

“What did you do?” Even deep in the cold emotionless Void as he was, his voice grated. “Tell me! I made no promises not to hurt you. If you don’t tell me—”

“She bonded you,” Verin said quickly, but if her serenity had been ruffled, it cloaked her again in an instant. “She bonded you as one of her Warders. That is all.”

Alanna recovered her composure even faster. Shielded, she faced him calmly, arms folded, a hint of contentment about her eyes. Contentment! “I said I would not injure you, and I have done exactly the opposite of injury.”

Drawing deep slow breaths, Rand tried to settle himself. He had walked into it like a puppy. Rage crawled across the outside of the Void. Calm. He must be calm. One of her Warders. She was Green then; not that that made any difference. He knew little of Warders, certainly not how to break the bond, or if it could be broken. All Rand felt from Lews Therin was a sense of stunned shock. Not for the first time Rand wished Lan had not gone galloping away after Moiraine died.

“You said you won’t be going to Tar Valon. In that case, since you don’t seem to know whether you know where the rebels are, you can remain here in Caemlyn.” Alanna opened her mouth, but he rode over her. “Be grateful if I decide not to tie off those shields and leave you like that!” That got their attention. Verin’s mouth tightened, and Alanna’s eyes could have done for that furnace he had felt. “You will stay away from me, though. Both of you. Unless I send for you, the Inner City is barred to you. Try to break that, and I *will* leave you shielded, and in a cell besides. Do we understand one another?”

“Perfectly.” Despite her eyes, Alanna’s voice was ice. Verin merely nodded.

Flinging open the door, Rand stopped. He had forgotten the Two Rivers girls. Some were talking to the Maidens, some were just studying them and whispering over their tea. Bode and a handful of the Emond’s Fielders were questioning Bashere, who had a pewter mug in his fist and one foot up on a bench. They looked half-entertained, half-aghast. The door banging open whipped their heads around.

“Rand,” Bode exclaimed, “this man is saying awful things about you.”

“He says you’re the Dragon Reborn,” Larine spluttered. The girls in the rest of the room apparently had not heard; they gasped.

“I am,” Rand said wearily.

Larine sniffed and folded her arms beneath her breasts. “As soon as I saw that coat I knew you had gotten a big head, running off with an Aes Sedai the way you did. I knew it before you talked so disrespectfully to Alanna Sedai and Verin Sedai. But I didn’t know you had become a stone blind jack-fool.”

Bode’s laugh was more appalled than amused. “You shouldn’t say such a thing even as a joke, Rand. Tam raised you better than that. You’re Rand al’Thor. Now stop this foolishness.”

Rand al’Thor. That was his name, but he hardly knew who he was. Tam al’Thor had raised him, but his father had been an Aiel chief, now long dead. His mother had been a Maiden, but not Aiel. That was as much as he really knew of who he was.

Saidin still filled him. Gently he wrapped Bode and Larine in flows of Air and lifted them until their shoes dangled a foot above the floor. “I am the Dragon Reborn. Denying won’t change it. Wishing won’t change it. I’m not the man you knew back in Emond’s Field. Do you understand now? Do you?” He realized he was shouting and clamped his mouth shut. His stomach was lead, and he was trembling. Why had Alanna done what she did? What Aes Sedai scheme was hatching behind that pretty face? Trust none of them, Moiraine had said.

A hand touched his arm, and his head jerked around.

“Please let them down,” Alanna said. “Please. They are frightened.”

They were more than frightened. Larine’s face seemed drained of blood, and her mouth gaped as wide as it would go, as if she wanted to scream and had forgotten how. Bode was sobbing so hard she quivered. They were not the only ones. The rest of the Two Rivers girls had huddled together as far from him as they could get, and most of them were crying too. The serving maids were in that tight cluster as well, weeping as hard as anyone else. The innkeeper had sagged to his knees, goggle-eyed and gurgling wordlessly.

Rand eased the two girls back down and hastily let go of *saidin*. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.” As soon as they could move, Bode and Larine fled to join the other girls clutching one another. “Bode? Larine? I’m sorry. I won’t hurt you, I promise.” They did not look at him. None of them did. Sulin was certainly looking at him, and the rest of the Maidens too, blank-faced, flat-eyed disapproving stares.

“What’s done is done,” Bashere said, setting down his mug. “Who knows? Perhaps it’s for the best.”

Rand nodded slowly. It probably was. Best that they wanted to stay clear of him. Best for them. He just wished he could have talked a little while longer about home. A little while longer with them seeing only Rand al’Thor. His knees still wobbled from the bonding, but once he began moving, he did not stop until he was back in Jeade’en’s saddle. Best that they were afraid of him. Best that he forgot the Two Rivers. He wondered whether that mountain ever got lighter for a time, or only kept on getting heavier.

* * *

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CHAPTER 11

Lessons and Teachers

As soon as Rand was out the door Verin let loose the breath she had been holding. Once she had told Siuan and Moiraine how dangerous he was. Neither had listened, and now the passage of little more than a year saw Siuan stilled and probably dead, while Moiraine. . . . The streets crawled with rumors about the Dragon Reborn in the Royal Palace, most beyond belief, and none that was credible mentioned an Aes Sedai. Moiraine might have decided to let him think he was going his own way, but she would never allow him to get far from her, not now when he was rising to such power. Not now when the hazard he presented had grown so great. Had Rand turned on her, more violently than he just had on them? He had aged since she last saw him; his face bore the tightness of struggle. The Light knew he had reason enough, but could it be the struggle for sanity as well?

So. Moiraine dead, Siuan dead, the White Tower broken, and Rand possibly on the edge of madness. Verin *tsk*ed irritably. If you took risks, sometimes the bill came due when you least expected, in the last way you expected. Almost seventy years of delicate work on her part, and now it might all go for naught because of one young man. Even so, she had lived too long, been through too much, to allow herself to be dismayed. *First things first; take care of what can be done now before worrying too long over what might never be*. That lesson had been forced on her, but she had taken it to heart.

The first thing was to settle the young women down. They still huddled like a flock of sheep, weeping and holding on to one another and hiding their faces. She quite understood; this was not her first time to confront a man who could channel, much less the Dragon Reborn himself, and her stomach heaved as if on a ship at sea. She began with comforting words, patting a shoulder here, stroking hair there, trying to make her voice motherly. Convincing them that Rand was gone—which in most cases meant convincing them to open their eyes—went a long way toward bringing relative calm. At least the sobbing subsided. But Jancy kept demanding piercingly that someone tell her Rand had been lying, that it had all been a trick, while Bodewhin was just as shrill in wanting her brother found and rescued—Verin would have given a great deal to know where Mat was—and Larine blubbered that they had to leave Caemlyn immediately, on the minute.

Verin drew one of the serving maids aside. A plain-faced woman at least twenty years older than any of the Two Rivers folk, she was wide-eyed, although wiping away tears with her apron and shaking. After requesting her name, Verin said, “Bring them all nice fresh tea, Azril, hot and with plenty of honey, and put a little brandy in it.” Considering the younger women for a moment, she added, “Make it more than a little. A generous splash each.” That should help soothe their nerves. “And you and the other maids have some, as well.” Azril sniffed and blinked and wiped her face, but she curtsied; being sent about her regular duties seemed to lessen her tears, if not her fright.

“Serve them in their rooms,” Alanna said, and Verin nodded agreement. A little sleep would do wonders. They were only a few hours out of bed, but brandy atop all their hard travel should do the trick.

The order caused a commotion.

“We can’t hide here,” Larine managed around sniffles and hiccoughs. “We have to go! Now! He’ll kill us!”

Bodewhin’s cheeks glistened damply, but her face had taken on a determined cast. That Two Rivers stubbornness was going to cause more than one of these young women trouble. “We have to find Mat. We can’t leave him with . . . with a man who can. . . . We can’t! Even if it is Rand, we just can’t!”

“I want to see Caemlyn,” Jancy squeaked, though she was still trembling.

The rest joined in right on top of those three, a handful tremulously supporting Jancy despite their fear, the majority adamantly in favor of departure. One of the young women from Watch Hill, a tall, pretty girl named Elle, fair-haired for the Two Rivers, began to wail again at the top of her lungs.

It was all Verin could do not to smack the lot of them. There was excuse for the youngest, but Larine and Elle and the others with their hair braided were supposed to be women. Most had not been touched, and the danger was gone. On the other hand, they were all tired, Rand's visit had been a shock, and they were likely to face a good many more in the near future, so she held her exasperation in check.

Alanna did not. Even among Greens she was noted for her quicksilver disposition, and it was worse of late. “You will go to your rooms now,” she said coolly, but her voice was all that was cool. Verin sighed as the other Aes Sedai wove Air and Fire into Illusion. Gasps filled the room, and already wide eyes bulged. There was no real need for this, but custom frowned on interfering with another sister publicly, and in truth, Verin found the sudden cessation of Elle's howls a relief. Her own nerves were far from their best. The untrained young women could not see the flows, of course; to them it seemed that Alanna was growing taller with every word. Her voice grew with it, tone unchanged, but booming to match her apparent size. “You are to be novices, and the first lesson a novice must learn is to obey Aes Sedai. Immediately. Without complaint or quibble.” Alanna stood in the middle of the common room unchanged—to Verin, at least—but the Illusion's head touched the ceiling beams. “Now, run! Whoever is not in her room by the time I count five will regret it to her dying day. One. Two. . . .” Before she reached three there was a mad squealing scramble on the stairs at the back of the room; it was a wonder no one was trampled.

Alanna did not bother to go beyond four. As the last of the Two Rivers girls vanished above, she released *saidar*, the Illusion vanished, and she gave a short satisfied nod. Verin expected the young women would have to be cajoled even to peek out of their rooms now. Perhaps it was just as well. With matters as they were, she did not want anyone sneaking out for a view of Caemlyn and having to be retrieved.

Of course, Alanna had had her effect elsewhere, too. It was necessary to coax the maids out from under the tables where they had hidden, and the one who had collapsed trying to crawl to the kitchen had to be helped back onto her feet. They made no noise; they just trembled like leaves in a high wind. Verin had to give each one a little push to start her moving, and repeated her orders about the brandy and tea three times before Azril stopped gazing at her as if watching her sprout another head. The innkeeper’s jaw was on his chest; his eyes seemed ready to fall out of his face. Verin looked at Tomas and motioned to the swaying fellow.

Tomas gave her a wry look—he always did when she asked him to clear up trivial matters, yet he seldom questioned her orders—then clapped an arm around Master Dilham’s shoulders and asked in a jovial tone whether the two of them might not share a few mugs of the inn’s best wine. A good man, Tomas, skilled in surprising areas. Ihvon had seated himself with his back against the wall and his boots up on a table. He managed to keep an eye on the door to the street and one on Alanna. A very cautious eye on Alanna. He was more than solicitous of her since Owein, her other Warder, had died in the Two Rivers—and wisely more than wary of her temper, though she usually managed to control it better than she had today. Alanna herself showed no interest in helping clean up the mess she had made. She stood in the middle of the common room looking at nothing, arms folded. To anyone not Aes Sedai she probably seemed serenity incarnate. To Verin, Alanna was a woman ready to explode.

Verin touched her arm. “We must talk.” Alanna looked at her, eyes unreadable, then without a word glided toward the private dining room.

Behind her Verin heard Master Dilham say in a shaken voice, “Do you suppose I could claim the Dragon Reborn patronized my inn? He did come in, after all.” For a brief moment she smiled; he would be all right, at least. Her smile vanished as she closed the door, sealing her and Alanna in.

Alanna was already stalking back and forth in the small room, the silk of her divided skirts whispering like swords sliding from scabbards. There was no face of serenity now. “The gall of the man. The utter gall! Detaining us! *Restricting* us!”

Verin watched her for a few moments before speaking. It had taken her ten years to get over Balinor’s death and bond Tomas. Manna’s emotions had been raw since Owein’s death, and she had held them in far too long. The occasional bouts of weeping she had allowed herself since departing the Two Rivers were not enough of a release. “I suppose he can keep us out of the Inner City with guards at the gate, but he cannot really hold us in Caemlyn.”

That got the withering glance it deserved. They could leave with little difficulty—however much Rand had taught himself, there was little chance he had managed to discover wards—but it would mean relinquishing the Two Rivers girls. No Aes Sedai had found a trove like the Two Rivers in . . .

Verin could not imagine how long. Perhaps not since the Trolloc Wars. Even young women of eighteen—the limit they had set for themselves—often found it hard to accept the strictures of the novitiate, yet had they extended the limit only five years, she and Alanna could have brought out twice as many, if not more. Five of these girls—five!—had the spark inborn, including Mat's sister and Wile and young Jancy; they would channel eventually whether anyone taught them or not and be very strong. She and Alanna had left two more behind to be gathered up in a year or so, when they were old enough to leave home. That was safe enough; a girl with the ability born in her very rarely manifested it before fifteen without training. The rest showed exceptional promise; all of them. The Two Rivers was a lode of pure gold.

Now that she had the other woman's attention, Verin changed the subject. She certainly had no intention of abandoning those young women. Or of moving any further from Rand than she had to. "Do you think he is right about rebels?"

Manna's fists tightened for a moment on her skirts. "The possibility repels me! Could we really have come to . . . ?" She trailed off, sounding lost. Her shoulders slumped. Tears bubbled just beneath the surface, barely held in check.

Now that the other woman's anger was dulled, Verin had questions to ask before sharpening it again. "Is there any prospect your butcher can tell you more of what has happened in Tar Valon, if you dig?" The woman was not really Alanna's; she was a Green Ajah agent, discovered because Alanna had noticed an emergency signal of some sort outside her shop. Not that Alanna had told Verin what it was, of course. Verin certainly would not have revealed any Brown signal.

"No. She knows no more than the message she gave me, and that dried her mouth so, she was hardly able to form words. All loyal Aes Sedai to return to the Tower. All is forgiven." That was the essence of it, anyway. A flash of anger lit Alanna's eyes, but only for a moment and not as strong as before. "If not for all those rumors, I'd never have let you know who she is." That, and her emotions being unbalanced. At least she had stopped pacing.

"I know," Verin said, sitting down at the table, "and I will respect the confidence. Now. You must agree that message makes the rumors true. The

Tower is broken. In all probability, there *are* rebels somewhere. The question is, what do we do about it?”

Alanna looked at her as if she were mad. Small wonder. Siuan had to have been deposed by the Hall of the Tower, according to Tower law. Even a suggestion of going against Tower law was unthinkable. But then, the Tower broken was unthinkable.

“If you have no answer now, think on it. And think on this. Siuan Sanche was part of finding young al’Thor in the first place.” Alanna opened her mouth—doubtless to ask how Verin knew, and whether she had been part of it, too—but Verin gave her no chance. “Only a simpleton would believe that role played no part in bringing her down. Coincidences that large do not exist. So think what Elaida’s view of Rand must be. She was Red, remember. While you are thinking, answer me this. What were you at, bonding him like that?”

The question should not have caught Alanna by surprise, yet it did. She hesitated, then drew out a chair and sat, arranging her skirts before she answered. “It was the logical thing to do, with him right there in front of us. It should have been done long ago. You could not—or would not.” Like most Greens, she was somewhat amused by other Ajahs’ insistence that each sister have only one Warder. What Greens thought of the Reds having none was better left unsaid. “They all should have been bonded at the first chance. They are too important to run loose, him most of all.” Color blossomed suddenly in her cheeks; it would be a good while yet before she had full control of her emotions again.

Verin knew what caused the blushes; Alanna had let her tongue run away with her. They had had Perrin under their eyes for long weeks while testing young women in the Two Rivers, but Alanna had quickly gone silent on the subject of bonding him. The reason was as simple as a heated promise from Faile—delivered well out of Perrin’s hearing—that if Alanna did any such thing, she would not leave the Two Rivers alive. Had Faile known more of the bond between Aes Sedai and Gaidin, that threat would not have worked, yet her ignorance if nothing else had stayed Alanna’s hand. Very likely it had been frustration over that, plus the frayed state of her nerves, that had led to what she did with Rand. Not only bonding him, but doing so without his permission. That had not been done in hundreds of years.

Well, Verin thought dryly, *I have broken a few customs in my time*. "Logical?" she said, smiling to take the sting from her words. "You sound like a White. Well. Now that you have him, what are you going to do with him? Considering the lessons he taught us. I am minded of a fireside tale when I was a girl, about a woman who put saddle and bridle on a lion. She found it a fine and wonderful ride, but then discovered she could never dismount and never sleep."

Shivering, Alanna rubbed her arms. "I still cannot believe he is so strong. If only we had linked sooner. And I tried. . . . I failed. . . . He is so strong!"

Verin barely kept from shivering herself. They could not have linked sooner, not unless Alanna was suggesting they should have linked before she bonded him. Verin was not sure what the result of that would have been. In any case, it had been a series of extremely bad moments, from discovering that they could not cut him off from the True Source to the contemptuous ease with which he had shielded them, snapping their connections to *saidar* like thread. Both of them at once. Remarkable. How many would it take to shield and hold him? The full thirteen? That was only tradition, but it might be necessary with him. At any rate, that was speculation for another day. "And then there is the matter of his amnesty."

Alanna's eyes widened. "Surely you don't believe that! With every false Dragon there have been tales that he was gathering men who could channel, all as false as the men. They wanted power for themselves, not to share it with other men."

"He is not a false Dragon," Verin said quietly, "and that may change everything. If one rumor is true, so can another be, and the amnesty has been on every tongue since Whitebridge."

"Even if it is, perhaps no one has come. No decent man wants to channel. If more than a handful wanted it, we would have had false Dragons every week."

"He is *ta'veren*, Alanna. He draws what he needs to him."

Alanna's mouth worked, her hands now white-knuckled fists on the table. Every shred of Aes Sedai tranquility gone, she trembled visibly. "We can't allow. . . . Men channeling, loosed on the world? If it is true, we must stop it. We must!" She was on the point of springing up again, eyes flashing.

“Before we can decide what to do about them,” Verin said calmly, “we need to know where he is keeping them. The Royal Palace seems likely, but finding out may be difficult with the Inner City denied to us. This is what I propose. . . .” Alanna leaned forward intently.

There was a good deal to be worked out, though most would come later. A good many questions to be answered, later. Was Moiraine dead, and if so, how had she died? Were there rebels, and what should her and Alanna’s stance be concerning them? Should they try to deliver Rand to Elaida, or to these rebels? Where were they? That knowledge would be valuable whichever way the other questions were answered. How were they to make use of the so very fragile leash Alanna had placed on Rand? Should one or both try to take Moiraine’s place? For the first time since Alanna had begun to let her emotions over Owein creep to the surface, Verin was glad she had held them in long enough to become so volatile. In her raveled condition, Alanna was bound to be more amenable to guidance, and Verin knew exactly how some of those questions had to be answered. She did not think Alanna would like some of those answers. Best not to let her learn them until it was too late to change them.

Rand raced back to the Palace at a gallop, slowly outdistancing even the running Aiel, ignoring their shouts as he ignored the shaken fists of people forced to leap out of Jeade’en’s way, and the jumble of overturned sedan chairs and coaches locked wheel-to-wheel with market carts in his wake. Bashere and the Saldaeans barely kept up on their smaller horses. He was not sure why he was in such a hurry—the news he carried was not that urgent—but as the shakiness faded from his arms and legs, he realized more and more that he was aware of Alanna still. He could *feel* her. It was as if she had crawled inside his head and taken up residence. If he could feel her, could she feel him the same way? What else could she do? What else? He had to get away from her.

Pride, Lews Therin cackled, and for once Rand did not try to silence the voice.

He had a different destination than the palace in mind, but Traveling required you to know the place you left from even better than the place you were going. At the South Stable he tossed the stallion’s reins to a leather-vested groom and ran, his long legs carrying him ahead of the Saldaeans down corridors where servants gaped at him, arresting bows and curtsies as he sped past. In the Great Hall he grasped *saidin*, opened the hole in air and darted through into the clearing near the farm, letting the Source go.

Releasing a long breath, he sank to his knees in the dead leaves. The heat beneath the bare branches hammered him; he had lost the necessary concentration a long while back. He could still feel her, but it was fainter here—if a certainty that she was in *that* direction could be said to be faint. He could have pointed it out with his eyes closed.

For a moment he took hold of *saidin* again, that rage of fire and ice and sour slime. He held a sword in his hands, a sword made of fire, of Fire, a heron dark on the slightly curved red blade, though he did not recall thinking of it. Fire, but the long hilt felt cool and firm against his palms. The Void made no difference, the Power made no difference. Alanna was still there, curled up in a corner of his brain, watching him.

With a bitter laugh he released the Power again and knelt there. He had been so sure. Only two Aes Sedai. Of course he could handle them; he had handled Egwene and Elayne together. What could they possibly do to him? He realized he was still laughing. He did not seem able to stop. Well, it was funny. His fool pride. Overconfidence. It had gotten him in trouble before, and more than him. He had been so sure that he and the Hundred Companions could seal the Bore safely. . . .

Leaves crackled as he forced himself to his feet. “That was not me!” he said hoarsely. “That was not me! Get out of my head! All of you get out of my head!” Lews Therin’s voice murmured indistinctly, distantly. Alanna waited silently, patiently, in the back of his head. The voice seemed afraid of her.

Deliberately Rand brushed off the knees of his breeches. He would not surrender to this. Trust no Aes Sedai; he would remember that from now on. *A man without trust might as well be dead*, Lews Therin giggled. He would not surrender.

Nothing had changed about the farm. Nothing and everything. The farmhouse and the barn were the same, the chickens and goats and cows. Sora Grady watched his arrival from a window, blank-faced and cold. She was the only woman now; all the other wives and sweethearts had gone with the men who failed Taim’s testing. Taim had the students in a clear area of hard red clay and fitful weeds beyond the barn. All seven of them. Aside from Sora’s husband, Jur, only Damer Flinn, Eben Hopwil and

Fedwin Morr remained from that first testing. The others were new, all looking almost as young as Fedwin and Eben.

Except for white-haired Damer, the students sat in a line facing away from Rand. Damer stood in front of them, frowning as he stared at a head-sized stone thirty paces away.

“Now,” Taim said, and Rand felt Damer seize *saidin*, saw him inexpertly weave Fire and Earth.

The stone exploded, and Damer and the other students threw themselves flat to escape flying shards. Not Taim; stone splinters bounced off the shield of Air that he had thrown up at the last instant. Lifting his head warily, Damer wiped blood from a shallow gouge below his left eye. Rand’s mouth tightened; it was only luck that none of those flying pieces had struck him. He glanced back at the farmhouse; Sora was still there, unhurt apparently. And still staring at him. The chickens had hardly paused in their scratching; they seemed to be used to this.

“Perhaps you will remember what I say next time,” Taim said calmly, letting his weave vanish. “Shield as you strike, or you may kill yourself.” He glanced at Rand as if he had been aware he was there all the time. “Continue,” he told the students, and walked toward Rand. His hawk-nosed face seemed to have a cruel cast today.

As Damer sat down in the line, blotchy-faced Eben stood up, nervously tugging a big ear as he used Air to lift another stone from a pile off to one side. His flows wobbled, and he dropped it once before setting it in place.

“Is it safe to leave them alone like that?” Rand asked as Taim reached him.

The second stone exploded like the first, but this time all of the students had woven shields. So had Taim, surrounding himself and Rand. Without a word Rand took hold of *saidin* again and made his own shield, forcing Taim’s away from him. Taim’s mouth quirked in that near smile.

“You said to push them, my Lord Dragon, so I push. I make them do everything with the Power, the chores, everything. The newest got his first hot meal last night. If they can’t heat it themselves, they eat cold. For most things it still takes twice as long as doing it by hand, but they’re learning the Power as fast as they can, believe me. Of course, there still aren’t very many.”

Ignoring the implied question, Rand looked around. “Where’s Haslin? Not drunk again? I told you, he’s only to have wine at night.” Henre Haslin had been Master of the Sword for the Queen’s Guards, in charge of training recruits, until Rahvin began remaking the Guards, discarding everyone faithful to Morgase or sending them off to fight in Cairhien. Too old for campaigning, Haslin had been handed his pension and shown the gate, and when news of Morgase’s death spread through Caemlyn, he crawled into a winejar. But he thought Rahvin—Gaebril, to him—had killed Morgase, not Rand, and he could teach. When he was sober.

“I sent him away,” Taim said. “What good are swords?” Another rock exploded. “I can barely avoid stabbing myself, and I’ve never felt the lack. They have the Power, now.”

Kill him! Kill him now! Lews Therin’s voice echoed hollowly through the Void. Rand stamped the echo out, but he could not stamp out the anger that suddenly seemed a shell around the emptiness containing him. The Void kept his voice drained of emotion, though. “Find him, Taim, and bring him back. Tell him you have changed your mind. Tell the students that. Tell them whatever you choose, but I want him here, giving lessons every day. They need to be part of the world, not apart from it. What are they supposed to do if they can’t channel? When you were shielded by the Aes Sedai, you might still have escaped if you knew how to use a sword, how to fight with your hands.”

“I did escape. Here I am.”

“Some of your followers broke you free, so I heard, else you’d have ended up in Tar Valon like Logain, gentled. These men won’t have followers. Find Haslin.”

The other man bowed smoothly. “As my Lord Dragon commands. Was that what brought my Lord Dragon here? Haslin and swords?” The merest hint of contempt tinged his voice, but Rand ignored it.

“There are Aes Sedai in Caemlyn. Trips to the city have to stop, yours and the students’ too. The Light only knows what will happen if one of them runs into an Aes Sedai and she recognizes what he is.” Or for that matter, when he recognized her, as he assuredly would. He would probably run or strike out in a panic, and either would mark him. Either would doom him. From what Rand saw, Verin or Alanna could wrap up any of the students like a child.

Taim shrugged. “Doing an Aes Sedai’s head like one of those rocks isn’t beyond them even now. The weave is only a little different.” Glancing over his shoulder, he raised his voice. “Concentrate, Adley. Concentrate.” The lanky fellow standing in front of the other students, all arms and legs, gave a start and lost *saidin*, then fumbled it back again. Another rock exploded as Taim turned back to Rand. “For that matter, I can . . . remove . . . them myself, if you are not up to it.”

“If I wanted them dead, I’d have killed them.” He thought he could do it, if they tried to kill him, or gentle him. He hoped he could. But would they try either after bonding him? That was one thing he did not intend to let Taim know; even without Lews Therin’s mutters he did not trust the man enough to expose any weakness he could hide. *Light, what sort of hold did I let Alanna get on me?* “If the time comes to kill Aes Sedai, I’ll let you know. Until then, no one is to so much as shout at one unless she’s trying to take his head off. In fact, you’re all to stay as far from Aes Sedai as you can. I want no incidents, nothing to put them against me.”

“You think they are not already?” Taim murmured. Again Rand ignored him. This time because he was not sure of the answer.

“And I don’t want anybody dead or gentled because his head is too big for his cap. Make sure they know it. I hold you responsible for them.”

“As you wish,” Taim said with another shrug. “Some will die sooner or later, unless you mean to keep them cooped here forever. Even if you do, some will probably die. It’s almost unavoidable, unless I slow the lessons. You would not have to husband them so, if you let me go out looking.”

There it was again. Rand looked at the students. A sweating, pale-haired youth with blue eyes was having a hard time moving a stone into place. He kept losing *saidin*, and the rock moved by small leaps across the ground. In a few hours the wagon would be coming out from the Palace with the applicants who had arrived since midday yesterday. Four this time. Some days it was only three, or two, though the numbers had been increasing generally. Eighteen since he brought Taim out here seven days ago, and only three of them could learn to channel. Taim insisted that was a remarkable number considering that they simply walked into Caemlyn looking for the opportunity. He had also pointed out more than once that at this rate, they could match the Tower in six years or so. Rand needed no reminders that he did not have six years. And he did not have time to let them train more slowly.

“How would you do it?”

“Using gateways,” Taim had picked that up right away; he was very quick with everything Rand showed him. “I can visit two or even three villages a day. Villages will be easier in the beginning than even small towns. I’ll leave Flinn to watch the lessons—he’s the furthest along, despite what you saw—and take Grady or Hopwil or Morr. You’ll have to supply some decent horses. The nag that pulls our cart won’t do.”

“What do you intend, though? Just ride in and announce that you’re looking for men who want to channel? You’ll be lucky if the villagers don’t try to hang you.”

“I can be a little more circumspect than that,” Taim said dryly. “I will say I’m recruiting men to follow the Dragon Reborn.” A little more circumspect? Not much. “That should frighten the people just enough to keep them from my throat long enough to gather in whoever is willing. And it culls out anybody who isn’t ready to support you. I don’t suppose you mean to train up men who’ll turn on you the first chance they find.” He raised a questioning eyebrow, but did not wait for the unnecessary answer. “Once I have them safely away from the village, I can bring them here through a gateway. Some might panic, but they should not be too hard to handle. Once they’ve agreed to follow a man who can channel, they can hardly balk at letting me test them. Those who fail, I’ll send on to Caemlyn. It’s time you started rasing an army of your own instead of depending on others. Bashere could change his mind; he will, if Queen Tenobia tells him to. And who can know what these so-called Aiel will do.” This time he paused, but Rand held his tongue. He had thought along the same lines himself, if certainly not about the Aiel, but Taim had no need to know that. After a moment the man went on as if he had never brought up the subject. “I’ll make you a wager. You name the price. The first day I recruit, I will find as many men who can learn as walk into Caemlyn in a month on their own. Once Flinn and some of the others are ready to go out without me. . . .” He spread his hands. “I will match the White Tower for you in less than a year. And every man a weapon.”

Rand hesitated. Letting Taim go off was a risk. The man was too aggressive. What would he do if he came across an Aes Sedai on one of his recruiting trips? Maybe he would keep his word and spare her life, but what if she discovered what he was? What if she shielded and captured him? That was a loss Rand could not afford. He could not train students and do everything else he had to do as well. Six years to match the Tower. If Aes Sedai did not find this place first and destroy it and the students before they knew enough to defend themselves. Or less than a year. Finally he nodded. Lews Therin’s voice was a mad buzz in the distance. “You will have your horses.”

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CHAPTER

12

Questions and Answers

"Well?" Nynaeve said as patiently as she could. Keeping her hands in her lap was an effort, as was sitting still on her bed. She stifled a yawn. The hour was early, and she had not slept well for three nights now. The wicker cage was empty, the song sparrow set free. She wished she was free. "Well?"

Elayne was kneeling on her own bed, head and shoulders out the window into the tiny alley behind the house. From there she had just the slimmest line of sight to the rear of the Little Tower, where most of the Sitters were already receiving the Tower envoy this morning. A slight view, but enough to see a bit of the ward against eavesdropping that enclosed the inn. It was the sort that stopped anyone who was trying to listen with the Power. The price of sharing knowledge.

After a moment Elayne sat back on her heels, frustration painting her face. "Nothing. You said those flows could slip through undetected. I don't think I was noticed, but I certainly heard nothing."

That last was directed at Moghedien, on their rickety stool in a corner. The woman's lack of sweat irritated Nynaeve no end. She claimed it took time working with the Power before you could achieve the detachment necessary to ignore heat or cold, not much better than the Aes Sedais' vague promises that it would come "eventually." Nynaeve and Elayne dripped sweat, Moghedien looked cool as an early spring day, and Light, it grated!

"I said they should." Moghedien's dark eyes darted defensively, though mostly she kept her gaze on Elayne; she always concentrated on whoever wore the *a'dam* bracelet. "Should. There are thousands of ways to spin wards. It can take days to spin a hole through one."

Nynaeve held her tongue, but barely. They had been trying for days. This was the third since Tarna Feir's arrival, and the Hall still held the Red sister’s message from Elaida closely. Well, Sheriam and Myrelle and that lot knew—Nynaeve would not have been surprised if they had known before the Hall did—but even Siuan and Leane had been shut outside of those daily meetings. At least, they had professed to be.

Nynaeve realized she was plucking at her skirts, and stilled her hands. Somehow, they had to find out what Elaida wanted—and more importantly, the Hall’s answer. They had to. Somehow.

“I have to go,” Elayne sighed. “I must show some more sisters how I make *ter’angreal*.” Very few Aes Sedai in Salidar showed the knack, but they all wanted to learn, and most seemed to think they could, once they made Elayne demonstrate often enough. “You might as well take this,” she added, unfastening the bracelet. “I want to try something new in the making after the sisters are done with me, and then I have a novice class.” She did not sound happy about that either, not the way she had before the first time. After every class, she came back so full of irritation she bristled like a cat. The youngest girls were overeager, leaping ahead to things they had no idea how to handle, often without asking first, and the oldest, although a little more cautious, were much more likely to argue, or plain balk at an order from a woman six or seven years their junior. Elayne had taken to muttering “fool novices” and “headstrong idiots” like an Accepted of ten years. “You can have time for questions. Maybe you’ll have more luck with how to detect a man than I have.”

Nynaeve shook her head. “I’m supposed to help Janya and Delana with their notes this morning.” She could not help grimating. Delana was a Sitter for the Gray Ajah as Janya was for the Brown, but Nynaeve would get no glimmer of anything from them. “And then I have another *lesson* from Theodrin.” Another waste of time. Everybody in Salidar was wasting time. “Wear it,” she said as Elayne started to hang the bracelet on a wall peg with their clothes.

The golden-haired woman gave an affected sigh, but refastened the bracelet. In Nynaeve’s opinion, Elayne was entirely too trusting of the *a’dam*. True, so long as the necklace remained on Moghedien’s neck, any woman able to channel could find her with the bracelet, and control her. If no one wore the bracelet, she could not move more than a dozen paces from it without falling to her knees retching, and the same if she shifted the bracelet more than a few inches from where it had been left, or tried to unfasten the necklace herself. Maybe it would hold her even on the peg, but maybe one of the Forsaken could reason a way around that, given enough chances. Once, in Tanchico, Nynaeve had left Moghedien shielded and bound with the Power, for just a few moments, and she managed to escape. The how of that had been one of the first things Nynaeve questioned her about once she was captured again, though prying out an answer almost required wringing her neck. A tied-off shield was vulnerable, it seemed, if the woman shielded had a little time and patience. Elayne insisted that would not work against the *a'dam*—there was no knot to attack, and with the necklace around her neck Moghedien could not even *try* to touch *saidar* without permission—but Nynaeve preferred taking no chances.

"Do your copying slowly," Elayne said. "I've copied for Delana before. She *hates* blots or mistakes. She'll make you do it over fifty times to get a clean page if need be."

Nynaeve scowled. Her own hand might not be as clean and delicate as Elayne's, but she was not some lout who had just learned which end of the pen to dip in the ink. The younger woman took no notice, simply slipped out of the room with a final smile. Maybe she had only meant to be helpful. If the Aes Sedai ever learned how much Nynaeve hated copying, they would start assigning it to her for punishment.

"Perhaps you ought to go to al'Thor," Moghedien said abruptly. She was sitting differently, straighter. Her dark eyes held steady on Nynaeve's. Why?

"What do you mean?" Nynaeve demanded.

"You and Elayne should go to Caemlyn, to Rand, She can be queen, and you. . . ." Moghedien's smile was not at all pleasant. "Sooner or later, they will sit you down and dig for how you can make all these marvelous discoveries yet quake like a girl caught with stolen sweets when you try to channel for them."

"I do not—!" She was not going to explain herself, not to this woman. Why was Moghedien so forward all of a sudden? "Just you remember, whatever happens to me if they find out the truth, your head will be on the chopping block before the week is done."

"Whereas you will have much longer to suffer. Semirhage once made a man scream his every waking hour for five years. She even kept him sane, but in the end even she could not keep his heart beating. I doubt any of these children have a tenth of Semirhage's skill, but you may find out firsthand how much they do have."

How could the woman be saying this? Her normal cringing anxiety had been shed like a snake skin. They could have been two equals discussing something of casual interest. No, worse. Moghedien's attitude said it was of casual interest to her, but dire to Nynaeve. Nynaeve wished she had the bracelet. It would have been a comfort. Moghedien's emotions could not possibly be as cool and calm as her face, and her voice.

Nynaeve's breath caught. The bracelet. That was it. The bracelet was not in the room. A ball of ice formed in the pit of her stomach; the sweat suddenly seemed to roll more heavily down her face. Logically, whether the bracelet was there or not made no difference. Elayne had it on—*Please, Light, don't let her have taken it off!*—and the other half of the *a'dam* was firmly around Moghedien's neck. Only, logic had nothing to do with it. Nynaeve had never been alone with the Woman without the bracelet there. Or rather, the only times she had had ended in near total disaster. Moghedien had not been wearing the *a'dam* then, but that made no difference either. She was one of the Forsaken, they were alone, and Nynaeve had no way to control her. She gripped her skirts to keep from gripping her belt knife.

Moghedien's smile deepened, as if she had read her thoughts. "In this, you can be sure I have your best interests at heart. This," her hand hovered near the necklace for a moment, carefully not touching it, "will hold me in Caemlyn as well as here. Slavery there is better than death here. But don't take too long to decide. If these so-called Aes Sedai resolve to return to the Tower, what better gift to take the new Amyrlin Seat than you, a woman so close to Rand al'Thor? And Elayne. If he feels for her half what she does for him, holding her will tie a cord to him he'll never be able to cut."

Nynaeve stood, forcing her knees straight. "You can make the beds and clean the room, now. I expect to find it spotless when I return."

"How much time do you have?" Moghedien said before she reached the door. The woman could have been asking whether the water was hot for tea. "A few more days at most before they send their answer back to Tar Valon? A few hours? How will they balance Rand al'Thor, and even Elaida's supposed crimes, against making their precious White Tower whole again?"

"Pay special attention to the chamber pots," Nynaeve said without turning around. "I want them clean this time." She left before Moghedien could say anything else, shutting the door behind her firmly.

She leaned back against the rough wooden planks, breathing deeply in the cramped windowless hallway. Dipping into her belt pouch, she plucked out a small sack and popped two frilly goosemint leaves into her mouth. Goosemint took time to soothe a burning belly, but she chewed and swallowed as though haste could make it work faster. The last few moments had been one blow after another as Moghedien shattered one thing after another that she had *known*. Even with all her distrust, she had believed the woman cowed. False. Oh, Light, false. She had been sure Moghedien knew almost as little about Elayne and Rand as the Aes Sedai did. False. And for her to suggest going to him. . . . They had talked too freely in front of her. What else had they let slip, and what use could Moghedien make of it?

Another Accepted entered the dim hall from the small house's front room, and Nynaeve straightened, tucking the goosemint away and smoothing her dress. Every room but the front one had been made into sleeping quarters, and Accepted and servants filled them, three or four to a room not much larger than the one behind her and sometimes two to a bed. The other Accepted was a slight woman, almost wispy, with gray eyes and a quick grin. An Illianer, Emara did not like Siuan or Leane, which Nynaeve found easy to understand, and thought they should be sent away—decently, as she put it—the way stilled women always had been, but aside from that she was pleasant, not even resenting Elayne and Nynaeve's "extra space" or "Marigan" doing their chores. No few did.

"I hear you do be copying for Janya and Delana," she said in her high-pitched voice, brushing past toward her own room. "Take my advice, and write as fast you can. Janya does care more for getting all her words down than for a few smudges."

Nynaeve glared at Emara's back. Write slow for Delana. Write fast for Janya. A fine lot of counsel that added up to. In any case, she could not make herself worry about blotting copy now. Or even about Moghedien, until she had a chance to talk it over with Elayne.

Shaking her head and muttering under her breath, she stalked outside. Maybe she had been taking things for granted, letting things slip, but it was time to give herself a good shake and stop it. She knew who she had to find.

In the last few days a quiet had settled over Salidar, although the streets were just as crowded. For one thing, the forges outside the village were silent. Everyone had been told to guard their tongues while Tarna was there, about the embassy on its way to Caemlyn, about Logain, who was safely tucked away in one of the soldiers' camps, even about the soldiers themselves, and why they had been gathered. It left most fearful of saying anything at all above a whisper. The low buzz of talk had an anxious note.

Everyone was affected. Servants who normally hurried now moved hesitantly, casting fearful glances over their shoulders. Even Aes Sedai seemed wary beneath their calm, eyeing each other in a calculating manner. There were few soldiers in the streets now, as though Tarna had not seen her fill the first day and come to her own conclusions. The wrong answer to the Hall would put nooses around all their necks; even rulers and nobles who wanted to stand aside from the Tower troubles would likely hang any soldiers they laid hands on, just to keep the notion of rebellion from spreading. Feeling the uncertainty, those few wore carefully blank faces or anxious frowns. Except for Gareth Bryne, waiting patiently in front of the Little Tower. He had been there every day, from before the Sitters arrived until they left. She thought he wanted to make sure they remembered him, and what he was doing for them. The one time she had seen the Sitters coming out, they had not appeared pleased to see him.

Only the Warders seemed no different for the Red sister's arrival. The Warders and the children. Nynaeve gave a start when three small girls burst up in front of her like quail, ribbons in their hair, sweaty, dusty and laughing as they ran. The children did not know what Salidar waited for, and likely would not understand if they did know. Each Warder would follow his Aes Sedai, whatever she decided and wherever she went, and never turn a hair.

Most of the muted talk seemed to be about the weather. That and tales from elsewhere about strange happenings, two-headed calves talking and men smothered by swarms of flies, all the children in a village disappearing in the middle of the night and people struck dead by something unseen in broad daylight. Anyone who could think clearly knew that the drought and unseasonable heat were the Dark One's hand touching the world, but even most Aes Sedai doubted Elayne and Nynaeve's claims that the other happenings were as real, that bubbles of evil were rising from the Dark One's prison as the seals weakened, rising and drifting along the Pattern till they burst. Most people could not think clearly. Some blamed it all on Rand. Some said the Creator was displeased that the world had not gathered behind the Dragon Reborn, or displeased that the Aes Sedai had not captured and gentled him, or displeased that Aes Sedai were opposing a seated Amyrlin. Nynaeve had heard people say the weather would come right as soon as the Tower was whole again. She pushed through the crowd.

“. . . swear it’s true!” murmured a cook all flour to her elbows. “There’s a Whitecloak army massed the other side of the Eldar, just waiting word from Elaida to attack.” Aside from the weather and two-headed calves, tales of Whitecloaks outnumbered every other sort, but *Whitecloaks* waiting orders from *Elaida*? The heat had melted the woman’s brains!

“The Light stand witness, it’s true,” a grizzled carter muttered to a frowning woman whose well-cut wool dress marked her an Aes Sedai’s maid. “Elaida’s dead. The Red’s come to summon Sheriam to be the new Amyrlin.” The woman nodded, accepting every word of it.

“I say Elaida’s a fine Amyrlin,” one rough-coated man said, shifting a bundle of fagots on his shoulder. “As fine as any.” He did not murmur to his companion. He spoke loudly, trying hard not to look around to see who had heard him.

Nynaeve’s mouth twisted sourly. He wanted to be overheard. How *had* Elaida discovered Salidar so quickly? Tarna must have left Tar Valon soon after Aes Sedai began gathering in the village. Siuan had pointed out darkly that a goodly number of Blue sisters were still missing—the original message to gather in Salidar had been aimed at Blues—and Alviarin was accomplished at applying the question. A stomach-turning thought, but not as wrenching as the most common explanation: secret supporters of Elaida here in Salidar. Everybody looked sideways at everybody else, and the woodman was not the first Nynaeve had heard say much the same, in the same manner. Aes Sedai might not say it, but Nynaeve suspected some wanted to. It all stirred Salidar into a stew, and not a tasty one. It made what she was doing even more right.

Finding who she sought took time. She needed groups of children playing, and there were not many children in Salidar. Sure enough, Birgitte was watching five boys scramble about the street throwing a small bag of pebbles at each other, all laughing uproariously whenever one of them was hit, including the one hit. It made no more sense than most boys’ games. Or men’s.

Birgitte was not alone, of course. She seldom was unless she made an effort to be. Areina stood at her shoulder, dabbing at the perspiration streaming down her face and trying not to show boredom with the children. A year or two younger than Nynaeve, Areina wore her dark hair in a braid patterned after Birgitte’s golden one, though still little below her shoulders; Birgitte’s hung properly to the waist. Her clothes copied Birgitte, too, a waist-length coat of pale gray and voluminous bronze-colored trousers, gathered at the ankle above short boots with raised heels, as did the bow she carried and the quiver at her waist. Nynaeve did not think Areina had ever held a bow before meeting Birgitte. She ignored the woman.

“I need to talk to you,” she told Birgitte. “Alone.”

Areina glanced at her, blue eyes close to contempt. “I’d think you’d be wearing your shawl this fine day, Nynaeve. Oh, my. You seem to be sweating like a horse. Why is that?”

Nynaeve’s face tightened. She had befriended the woman before Birgitte had, but the friendship melted on reaching Salidar. Learning that Nynaeve was not full Aes Sedai brought something more than disappointment. Only a request from Birgitte had held Areina back from informing the Aes Sedai that she had masqueraded as one. Besides, Areina had taken the oaths as a Hunter for the Horn, and Birgitte was certainly a better model for that life than Nynaeve. To think she had once pitied the woman her bruises!

“From your face,” Birgitte said with a sweaty grin, “either you’re ready to strangle somebody—probably Areina here—or else your dress fell off in the middle of a pack of soldiers and you weren’t wearing a shift.” Areina snorted a laugh, but she looked shocked. Why she should, Nynaeve did not know; the woman had had plenty of time to become used to Birgitte’s so-called sense of humor, more suited as it was to some unshaven man with his nose in a mug and his belly full of ale.

Nynaeve studied the boys’ play for a minute to give her irritation a chance to die down. Worse than useless to let herself get angry when she had a favor to ask.

Seve and Jaril were among the boys dodging and tossing the bag. The Yellows had been right about them; time was what they had needed. After close to two months in Salidar with other children and no fear, they laughed and shouted as loudly as the rest.

A sudden thought hit her like a hammer. “Marigan” still looked after them, if grudgingly, saw that they were bathed and fed, but now that they were talking again, at any time they might tell that the woman was not their mother. Perhaps they already had. That might not cause questions, but then again it might, and questions could bring the house of twigs they had built tumbling down on their heads. The ball of ice reappeared in the pit of Nynaeve's belly. Why had she not thought of this before?

She gave a start as Birgitte touched her arm. "What is wrong, Nynaeve? You look as though your best friend died and cursed you with her last breath."

Areina was striding away, stiff-backed, casting, one look over her shoulder at them. The woman could watch Birgitte drink and flirt with men without turning a hair, and even try to emulate her, yet she bristled every time Birgitte wanted to be alone with Elayne or Nynaeve. Men were no threat; only women could be friends in Areina's book, but only she could be Birgitte's friend. The idea of having two friends seemed foreign to her. Well, enough and be done with her.

"Could you get horses for us?" Nynaeve tried to steady her voice. That was not what she had come to ask, but Seve and Jaril made it an excellent question. "How long will it take?"

Birgitte drew her out of the street, to the mouth of a narrow alley between two weathered houses, and looked around carefully before answering. No one was close enough to overhear, or pay them any mind. "A day or two. Uno was just telling me—"

"Not Uno! We will leave him out of this. Just you, me, Elayne and Marigan. Unless Thorn and Juilin return in time. And Areina, I suppose, if you insist."

"Areina's a fool some ways," Birgitte said slowly, "but life will wring that out of her, or wring her out. You know I'd never insist on her going along if you and Elayne don't want her."

Nynaeve kept silent. The woman was behaving as if *she* was the jealous one! It was none of her affair if Birgitte wanted to take up with somebody as fickle as Areina.

Rubbing a knuckle across her lips, Birgitte frowned. "Thorn and Juilin are good men, but the best way to avoid trouble is to make sure no one wants to trouble you. A dozen or so Shienarans in armor—or out—would go a long way toward that. I don't understand you and Uno. He is tough, and he'd follow you and Elayne into the Pit of Doom." A sudden grin bloomed on her face. "Besides, he's a well-set-up fellow."

"We do not need anyone to hold our hands," Nynaeve told her stiffly. Well set up? That painted eyepatch flashed queasily across her mind, and the scars. The woman had the strangest taste in men. "We can handle anything that comes our way. I'd think we've already proved that, if it needed proof."

"I know we can, Nynaeve, but we'll draw trouble like flies to a midden. Altara's at a slow boil. Every day brings another tale of Dragonsworn, and I'll wager my best silk dress against one of your old shifts that half of them are really just brigands who'll see four women alone as easy meat. We will have to prove we're not every second day. Murandy's worse, I hear, full of Dragonsworn and bandits and refugees from Cairhien, afraid the Dragon Reborn will fall on them any day. I assume you don't mean to cross over into Amadicia. I assume it's Caemlyn." Her intricate braid swung slightly as she tilted her head and raised a questioning eyebrow. "Does Elayne agree with you about Uno?"

"She will," Nynaeve muttered.

"I see. Well, when she does, I will procure as many horses as we need. But I want her to tell me why we should not take Uno."

The unyielding finality of her tone heated Nynaeve's face angrily. If she did ask Elayne ever so sweetly to tell Birgitte that Uno was to stay here, they might well find him waiting down the road, and Birgitte all amazement over how he knew they were going and which way. The woman might be Elayne's Warder, but sometimes Nynaeve wondered which of them was really in charge. When she found Lan—when, not if!—she intended to make him swear oaths fit to curl his hair that he would abide by her decisions.

She drew deep calming breaths. No point arguing with a stone wall. She might as well get on to the reason she had hunted up Birgitte in the first place.

Casually she took a step deeper into the narrow alley, making the other woman follow. Brown stubble remained underfoot from the brush that had been cleared out of it. Trying to appear offhanded, she studied the press in the street. Still no one giving them more than a glance. She lowered her voice anyway. "We need to know what Tarna is telling the Hall, and what they're telling her. Elayne and I have tried to find out, but they ward the meetings against eavesdropping. Only with the Power, though. They're so caught up that someone can listen in that way, they seem to have forgotten about pressing an ear to a door. If someone were to—"

Birgitte cut her off in a flat voice. "No."

“At least consider it. Elayne or I are ten times as likely to be caught as you.” She thought of adding that Elayne was rather clever, but the other woman sniffed.

“I said no! You’ve been many things since I’ve known you, Nynaeve, but never silly. Light, they’ll announce it to everyone in a day or two.”

“We need to know now,” Nynaeve hissed, swallowing. “You man-brained idiot.” Silly? Of course she had never been silly! She must not be angry. If she could convince Elayne to go, they might not be here in a day or two. Best not to open that bag of snakes again.

Shuddering—a touch ostentatiously, Nynaeve thought—Birgitte leaned on her bow. “I was caught spying on Aes Sedai once. They tossed me out on my ear three days later, and I left Shaemal as fast as I could reach a horse. I will not go through that to gain you a day you don’t need.”

Nynaeve remained calm. She made an effort to maintain a smooth face, to not grind her teeth, to not yank her braid. She was calm. “I never heard any story about you spying on Aes Sedai.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wanted them back. The core of Birgitte’s secret was that she was the Birgitte in the stories. Nothing that made that connection was ever to be mentioned.

For a moment Birgitte’s face was stone, hiding everything inside. It was enough to make Nynaeve shiver; there was too much pain wrapped in the other woman’s secret. Finally stone became flesh once more, and Birgitte sighed. “Time changes things. I hardly recognize half those tales myself, and the other half not at all. We’ll not speak of it again.” That was very plainly not a suggestion.

Nynaeve opened her mouth with no clear idea of what to say—her own debt to Birgitte meant she did not want to poke at the woman’s pain, but to be balked over two simple requests . . . !—and a third woman’s voice spoke suddenly from the mouth of the alley.

“Nynaeve, Janya and Delana want you right this minute.”

Nynaeve tried to climb straight up into the air; her heart tried to climb through the roof of her mouth.

In the mouth of the alley, novice-clad Nicola looked startled for a moment. So did Birgitte; then she studied her bow, looking amused.

Nynaeve had to swallow twice before she could force a word out. How much had the woman heard? “If you think that’s any way to speak to an Accepted, Nicola, you had best learn better quickly, or you will be taught.”

It was a properly Aes Sedai thing to say, but the slender woman's dark eyes surveyed Nynaeve, weighing and measuring. "I am sorry, Accepted," she said, curtsying. "I will try to be more careful."

The curtsy was just exactly deep enough for an Accepted, to the inch, and if the tone was cool, it was not cool enough to call her down for. Areina had not been the only traveling companion disappointed by learning the truth about Elayne and Nynaeve, but Nicola had agreed to keep the secret as if surprised they thought they had to ask. Then, after testing revealed she could learn to channel, the weighing and measuring entered her eyes.

Nynaeve understood all too well. Nicola lacked the inborn spark—without teaching, she would never have touched *saidar*—but already her promise was spoken of, the strength she would have one day if she applied herself. Two years earlier, with more potential than any novice in centuries, she would have caused real excitement. That was before Elayne and Egwene, and Nynaeve herself, though. Nicola never said anything, yet Nynaeve was certain she was determined to match Elayne and Nynaeve, if not better them. She never stepped over the line of propriety, but she often walked it.

Nynaeve gave her a sharp nod. Understanding did not stop her wanting to dose the fool woman with triple-strength sheeps-tongue root for pure idiocy. "See that you do. Go tell the Aes Sedai I will be with them in just a few moments." Nicola curtsied again, but as she turned away, Nynaeve said, "Wait." The woman stopped immediately. It was not there now, but for an instant Nynaeve had been sure she saw a flash of—satisfaction? "Did you tell me everything?"

"I was sent to tell you to come, Accepted, and I did." Bland as water a week in the pitcher.

"What did they say? Their exact words."

"Exact words, Accepted? I don't know that I can remember their *exact* words, but I'll try. Remember it was them who said it; I'm only repeating. Janya Sedai said something like, 'If that fool girl doesn't show up soon, I vow she won't be able to sit down comfortably until she's old enough to be a grandmother.' And Delana Sedai said, 'She'll be that old before she decides to appear. If she isn't here inside the quarter hour, I will turn her hide into dust rags.' " Her eyes were innocence itself. "That was about twenty minutes ago, Accepted. Maybe a little longer."

Nynaeve very nearly swallowed again. Just because Aes Sedai could not lie did not mean every threat had to be taken literally, but sometimes a sparrow would starve on the difference. With anybody but Nicola, she would have yelped “Oh, Light!” and scurried. Not under those eyes. Not in front of a woman who seemed to be storing up a list of her weaknesses. “In that case, I suppose there’s no need for you to run ahead of me. Go on about your duties.” Turning her back on Nicola’s curtsy as if she had no care in the world, she spoke to Birgitte. “I’ll talk with you later. I suggest you do nothing about the matter until then.” With luck that might keep her away from Uno. With a great deal of luck.

“I will consider your suggestion,” Birgitte said gravely, but there was nothing grave about the mixture of sympathy and amusement on her face. The woman knew Aes Sedai. In some ways, she knew more about Aes Sedai than any Aes Sedai.

There was nothing for it but to accept and hope. As Nynaeve started up the street, Nicola fell in beside her. “I told you to be about your duties.”

“They said to come back when I found you, Accepted. Is that one of your herbs? Why do you use herbs? Is it because you can’t—? Forgive me, Accepted. I should not have mentioned that.”

Nynaeve blinked at the sack of goosemint in her hand—she did not remember taking it out—and stuffed it back in her pouch. She wanted to chew the whole sackful of leaves. She ignored the apology and its cause; one was surely as false as the other was deliberate. “I use herbs because Healing isn’t always necessary.” Would the Yellows disapprove if that got back to them? They were contemptuous of herbs; they only seemed interested in illnesses that did need Healing. Or those where it was not cracking pecans with a sledgehammer, anyway. What was she doing worrying over what she said to Nicola in case it should be carried to Aes Sedai? The woman was a novice, no matter how she looked at her and Elayne. It did not matter how she looked at them. “Keep quiet,” she said irritably. “I want to think.”

Nicola did keep quiet as they wended their way through the crowded streets, but it seemed to Nynaeve that the woman’s steps dragged. Perhaps it was only imagination, but Nynaeve’s knees began to ache from the effort of not outpacing her. Under no circumstances would she let Nicola see her even appear to hurry.

The situation set a slow burn inside her. Of everybody who could have been sent to fetch her, it was hard to imagine anyone worse than Nicola and her eyes. Birgitte was probably running off to find Uno right that minute. The Sitters were probably telling Tarna they were ready to kneel and kiss Elaida's ring. Seve and Jaril were probably telling Sheriam they did not know "Marigan" from a wild goose. It had been that kind of day, and the molten sun stood only a quarter toward its peak in the cloudless sky.

Janya and Delana were waiting in the front room of the small house they shared with three other Aes Sedai. Each with her own bedroom, of course. Each Ajah had a house for its meetings, but Aes Sedai were scattered about through the village depending on when they had come in. Frowning at the floor, lips pursed, Janya appeared unaware of their arrival. Pale-haired Delana, though—her hair was so fair there was no telling whether there was white in it or not—Delana focused her equally pale blue eyes on them as soon as they set foot inside the door. Nicola jumped. Nynaeve would have felt better about that had she not done the same. Usually the stout Gray's eyes were no different from any other Aes Sedai's, but when she really focused on you, it was as if nothing else existed but you. Some said Delana was successful as a mediator because both sides would agree just to make her stop staring at them. You started thinking of what you had done wrong even if you had done nothing. The list that popped into Nynaeve's head made her curtsy as deeply as Nicola before she knew it.

"Ah," Janya said, blinking as if they had sprung out of the floor, "there you are."

"Forgive me for being late," Nynaeve said hastily. Let Nicola hear whatever she wanted. Delana was staring at her, not Nicola. "I lost track of the time, and—"

"No matter." Delana's voice was deep for a woman, her accent a throaty echo of Uno's Shienaran. It was oddly melodious in such a round woman, but then Delana was oddly graceful for one so stout. "Nicola, be off with you. You'll be running errands for Faolain until your next lesson." Nicola wasted no time dropping another curtsy and darting out. Maybe she had wanted to hear what the Aes Sedai said to Nynaeve for being late, but no one walked any lines with Aes Sedai.

Nynaeve would not have cared if Nicola sprouted wings. She had just realized there was no inkpot on the table where the Aes Sedai took their meals, no sand bowl, no pen, no paper. None of what she would need. Had she been supposed to bring it? Delana was *still* staring at her. The woman *never* stared at anyone that long. She never stared at all unless she had a reason.

“Would you like cool mint tea?” Janya said, and it was Nynaeve’s turn to blink. “I do think tea is comforting. It smooths conversation, I always find.” Not waiting for an answer, the birdlike Brown sister began filling mismatched cups from a blue-striped teapot on the sideboard. A rock stood in place of one of the sideboard’s legs. Aes Sedai might have more room, but their furnishings were just as battered. “Delana and I decided our notes could wait for another time. We will just talk, instead. Honey? I prefer it without, myself. All that sweetness ruins the flavor. Young women always want their honey. Such wonderful things, you’ve been doing. You and Elayne.” A loud throat-clearing made her look at Delana questioningly. After a moment Janya said, “Ah. Yes.”

Delana had pulled one of the chairs from the table into the middle of the bare floor. One cane-bottomed chair. From the moment Janya mentioned conversation Nynaeve had known that that was not at all what was going to happen. Delana motioned to the chair, and Nynaeve took a seat on the very edge of it, accepted a cup on a chipped saucer from Janya with a murmured “Thank you, Aes Sedai.” She did not have long to wait.

“Tell us about Rand al’Thor,” Janya said. She appeared ready to say more, but Delana cleared her throat again; Janya blinked and fell silent, sipping her tea. They stood to either side of Nynaeve’s chair. Delana glanced at her, then sighed and channeled the third cup to herself. It floated across the room. Delana fixed on her again in that way that seemed to bore holes in your head, Janya apparently lost in thought and maybe not seeing her at all.

“I’ve told you everything I know,” Nynaeve sighed. “Well, told Aes Sedai, anyway.” She had, too. Nothing she knew could harm him—not any more than knowing what he was, anyway—and it might help if she could make the sisters see him as a man. Not a man who could channel; just a man. Not an easy task with the Dragon Reborn. “I don’t know any more.”

“Don’t sulk,” Delana snapped. “And don’t fidget.”

Nynaeve set her cup back in the saucer and wiped her wrist on her skirt.

“Child,” Janya said, her tone all compassion, “I know you think you’ve told all you know, but Delana. . . . I cannot think you would hold back on purpose—”

“Why would she not?” Delana barked. “Born in the same village. Watched him grow up. Her loyalties may be more to him than to the White Tower.” That razor gaze descended on Nynaeve again. “Tell us something you haven’t told before. I’ve heard all your stories, girl, so I will know.”

“Try, child. I’m sure you don’t want to make Delana angry with you. Why—” Janya cut off at another throat-clearing.

Nynaeve hoped they thought her teacup rattling meant she was rattled as well. Dragged here terrified—no, not terrified, but worried at least—over how angry they might be, and now this. Being around Aes Sedai taught you to listen carefully. You still might not catch what they really meant, but you had a better chance than if you listened with half an ear, the way most people usually did. Neither one had really said they thought she was keeping anything back. They just intended to frighten her on the chance that they might shake something else loose. She was not afraid of them. Well, not much. She was furious.

“When he was a boy,” she said carefully, “he would accept his punishment without any argument if he thought he deserved it, but if he didn’t think so, he fought every step of the way.”

Delana snorted. “You’ve told that to everyone who would listen. Something else. Quickly!”

“You can lead him, or convince him, but he won’t be pushed. He digs in his heels if he thinks you’re—”

“And that.” Hands on broad hips, Delana bent down until her head was level with Nynaeve’s. Nynaeve almost wished she had Nicola staring at her again. “Something you’ve not told every cook and laundress in Salidar.”

“Do try, child,” Janya said, and for a wonder left it at that.

They dug away, Janya prompting sympathetically, Delana boring without mercy, and Nynaeve brought up every scrap she could remember. It earned her no respite; every scrap had been told so many times before she could identify them by taste. As Delana kindly pointed out. Well, not so kindly. By the time Nynaeve managed to take a sip of her tea, it tasted stale, and the sweetness almost curled her tongue. Janya apparently really did believe young women liked lots of honey. The morning passed slowly. Very slowly.

“This is taking us nowhere,” Delana said at last, glaring at Nynaeve as if it were all her fault.

“May I go then?” Nynaeve asked wearily. Every drop of sweat that drenched her seemed to have been squeezed out. She felt limp. She also wanted to slap both those cool Aes Sedai faces.

Delana and Janya exchanged glances. The Gray shrugged and walked over to the sideboard for another cup of tea. “Of course you may,” Janya said. “I know this must have been difficult for you, but we really do need to know Rand al’Thor better than he knows himself if we are to decide what’s best. Otherwise, everything could turn to catastrophe. Oh, my, yes. You’ve done very well, child. But then, I never expected any less of you. Anyone who can make the discoveries you’ve made, with your handicap . . . why, I expect nothing less than excellence from you. And to think. . . .”

It took quite a while for her to run down and let Nynaeve stagger outside. Stagger she did, on wobbly knees. Everybody was talking about her. Of course they were. She should have listened to Elayne and begun leaving all the so-called discoveries to her. Moghedien was right. Sooner or later they were going to start probing for how she did it. So they had to decide what was best, to avoid catastrophe. No clue there to what they intended toward Rand.

A glance at the sun, almost overhead, told her she was already late for her appointment with Theodrin. At least she had a good excuse this time.

Theodrin’s house—hers and two dozen other women’s—lay beyond the Little Tower. Nynaeve slowed as she came abreast of the onetime inn. The gaggle of Warders out front near Gareth Bryne were evidence the meeting still went on. A residue of anger enabled her to see the ward, a close flat dome mostly of Fire and Air with touches of Water, shimmering to her eyes over the entire building, the knot holding it in tantalizing fashion. Touching that knot would be as good as offering her hide to a tannery; there were plenty of Aes Sedai in the crowded street. Now and then some of the Warders moved back and forth through the shimmer, invisible to them, as one group broke up and another formed. The same ward Elayne had failed to penetrate. A shield against eavesdropping. With the Power.

Theodrin’s house stood a hundred paces or so farther up the street, but Nynaeve turned into the yard beside a thatch-roofed house just two beyond the former inn. A rickety wooden fence enclosed the tiny plot of withered weeds behind the house, but it had a gate, hanging on one hinge that was nearly all rust. It squealed murderously when she shifted the gate. She looked around hastily—no one at any of the windows; no one in the street could see her—gathered her skirts and darted through into the narrow alleyway that eventually ran by the room she shared with Elayne.

For a moment she hesitated, wiping sweaty palms on her dress, remembering what Birgitte had said. She knew she was a coward at heart, much as she hated the fact. Once she had thought herself brave enough. Not a hero, like Birgitte, but brave enough. The world had taught her better. Just thinking of what the sisters would do if they caught her—made her want to turn around and run to Theodrin. The chance was vanishingly small that she could actually find a window on the very room where the Sitters were. Impossibly small.

Trying to work some moisture back into her mouth—how could her mouth be so dry when the rest of her was so damp?—she crept closer. One day she wanted to know what it was like to be brave, like Birgitte or Elayne, instead of a coward.

The ward did not tingle when she stepped through. It did not feel like anything at all. She had known it would not. Touching it could do no harm, but she flattened herself against the rough stone wall. Bits of creeper clinging to its cracks brushed her face.

Slowly she edged along to the nearest casement window—and nearly turned around and left right then. It was shut tight, all the glass gone, replaced by oiled cloth that might let in light but certainly did not allow her to see anything. Or hear anything; at least, if there was anybody on the other side, no noise escaped. Taking a deep breath, she inched to the next window. One pane had been replaced here too, but the remainder showed a battered once-ornate table covered with papers and inkpots, a few chairs, and an otherwise empty room.

Muttering a curse she had heard from Elayne—the girl had a surprising stock of such tucked away—she felt her way along the rough stone. The third window was swung out. She pressed her nose close. And jerked back. She had not really believed she would find anything, but Tarna was in there. Not with Sitters, but Sheriam and Myrelle and the rest of that lot. If her heart had not been pounding so hard, she would have heard the murmur of their voices before she looked.

Kneeling down, she moved as close to the casement as she could without being seen by those inside. The bottom of the window rubbed against her head.

“. . . sure that is the message you wish me to carry back?” That steely voice had to be Tarna’s. “You request more time to consider? What is there to consider?”

“The Hall—” Sheriam began.

“The *Hall,*” the Tower envoy scoffed. “Do not believe me blind to where power lies. That so-called *Hall* thinks what you six tell them to think.”

“The Hall, it has asked for more time,” Beonin said firmly. “Who can say what decision they will reach?”

“Elaida will have to wait to hear their decision,” Morvrin said in a fair imitation of Tarna’s icy tone. “Can she not wait a small time to see the White Tower whole once more?”

Tarna’s reply was even colder, though. “I will carry your . . . the *Hall’s* . . . message to the Amyrlin. We shall see what she thinks of it.” A door opened and closed with a sharp bang.

Nynaeve could have screamed with frustration. Now she knew the answer, but not the question. If only Janya and Delana had released her a little sooner. Well, it was better than nothing. Better than “We will return and obey Elaida.” There was no point staying here, waiting for someone to look out and see her.

She started to ease away, and Myrelle said, “Perhaps we should just send a message. Perhaps we should simply summon her.” Frowning, Nynaeve held her place. Her who?

“The forms must be met,” Morvrin said gruffly. “The proper ceremonies must be followed.”

Beonin spoke on her heels in firm tones. “We must meet every letter of the law. The smallest slip, it will be used against us.”

“And if we have made a mistake?” Carlinya sounded heated for perhaps the first time in her life. “How long are we to wait? How long dare we wait?”

“As long as need be,” Morvrin said.

“As long as we must.” That from Beonin. “I have not waited this long for the biddable child just to abandon all our plans now.”

For some reason that produced a silence, although Nynaeve did hear someone murmur “biddable” again as if examining the word. What child? A novice or Accepted? It made no sense. Sisters *never* waited on novices or Accepted.

“We have gone too far to turn back, Carlinya,” Sheriam said finally. “Either we bring her here and make sure she does as she should, or we leave everything to the Hall and hope they do not lead us all to disaster.” From her tone, she considered that last a hope for fools.

“One slip,” Carlinya said coldly, even more coldly than usual, “and we will all end with our heads on pikes.”

“But who will put them there?” Anaiya asked thoughtfully. “Elaida, the Hall, or Rand al’Thor?”

Silence stretched, the skirts rustled, and the door opened and closed once more.

Nynaeve risked a peek. The room was empty. She made a vexed sound. That they intended to wait was small consolation; the final answer could still be anything. Anaiya’s comment showed they were still as wary of Rand as of Elaida. Maybe more. Elaida was not gathering men who could channel. And who was the “biddable child”? No, that was unimportant. They could have fifty schemes weaving she knew nothing about.

The ward winked out, and Nynaeve jumped. It was past time to be gone from here. Scrambling to her feet, she began dusting her knees vigorously as she stepped away from the wall. One step was all she took. She stopped, bent over with her hands frozen over the dirty spots on her dress, staring at Theodrin.

The apple-cheeked Domani woman met her gaze, not saying a word.

Hastily Nynaeve considered and rejected the fool claim that she had been searching for something she dropped. Instead she straightened and walked slowly by the other woman as if there was nothing to explain. Theodrin fell in beside her silently, hands folded at her waist. Nynaeve considered her options. She could hit Theodrin over the head and run. She could get back on her knees and plead. Both notions had a good deal wrong with them to her way of thinking, but she could not pull up anything in between.

“Have you been keeping calm?” Theodrin asked, looking straight ahead.

Nynaeve gave a start. That had been the other woman’s instruction to her after yesterday’s attempt to break down her block. Keep calm, very calm; think only quiet composed thoughts. “Of course,” she laughed weakly. “What could there be to upset me?”

“That is good,” Theodrin said serenely. “Today I mean to try something a little more . . . direct.”

Nynaeve glanced at her. No questions? No accusations? The way this day had been going she could not believe she was getting off so lightly.

Neither saw the woman watching them from a second-story window.

* * *

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CHAPTER 13

Under the Dust

Wondering whether to undo her braid, Nynaeve glowered out from under a frayed red-striped towel at her dress and shift, hanging over chairbacks and dripping on the clean-swept floorboards. Another raveled towel, striped green and white and considerably larger, served her as a substitute garment. “Now we know shock doesn’t work,” she growled at Theodrin, and winced. Her jaw hurt, and her cheek still stung. Theodrin had quick reflexes and a strong arm. “I could channel now, but for a moment there, *saidar* was the furthest thing from my mind.” In that drenched moment of gasping for breath, when thought had fled and instinct had taken over.

“Well, channel your things dry,” Theodrin muttered.

It made Nynaeve’s jaw feel better, watching Theodrin peer into a broken triangle of mirror and finger her eye. The flesh looked a little puffy already, and Nynaeve suspected that left alone the bruise would be spectacular. Her own arm was not so weak. A bruise was the least Theodrin deserved!

Perhaps the Domani thought the same, because she sighed, “I won’t try that again. But one way or another, I will teach you to surrender to *saidar* without first being angry enough to bite it.”

Frowning at the soaked garments, Nynaeve considered a moment. She had never done anything like this before. The prohibition against doing chores with the Power was strong, and with good reason. *Saidar* was seductive. The more you channeled, the more you wanted to channel, and the more you wanted to channel, the greater the risk that eventually you would draw too much and still or kill yourself. The sweetness of the True Source filled her easily now. Theodrin’s bucket of water had seen to that, if the rest of the morning had not. A simple weave of Water drew all the moisture from her clothes to fall on the floor in a puddle that quickly spread to join what the bucket had put there.

“I am not very good at surrendering,” she said. Unless there was no point in fighting, anyway. Only a fool went on where there was no chance at all. She could not breathe under water, she could not fly by flapping her arms—and she could not channel except when angry.

Theodrin shifted her frown from the puddle to Nynaeve and planted fists on slim hips. “I am well aware of that,” she said in a too level tone. “By all I’ve been taught, you should not be able to channel at all. I was taught you must be calm to channel, cool and serene inside, open and utterly yielding.” The glow of *saidar* surrounded her, and flows of Water gathered the puddle into a ball sitting incongruously on the floor. “You must surrender before you can guide. But you, Nynaeve . . . however hard you try to surrender—and I’ve seen you try—you hang on with your fingernails unless you’re furious enough to forget to.” Flows of Air lifted the wobbling ball. For a moment, Nynaeve thought the other woman meant to toss it at her, but the watery sphere floated across the room and out one of the open windows. It made a great splash falling, and a cat screamed in startled fury. Perhaps the prohibition did not apply when you reached Theodrin’s level.

“Why not leave it at that?” Nynaeve tried to sound bright, but she thought she failed. She *wanted* to channel whenever she pleased. But as the old saying went, “If wishes were wings, pigs would fly.” “No use wasting —”

“Leave that,” Theodrin said as Nynaeve started to use the weave of water on her hair. “Let go of *saidar* and allow it to dry naturally. And put on your clothes.”

Nynaeve’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t have another surprise waiting, do you?”

“No. Now start preparing your mind. You are a flower bud feeling the warmth of the Source, ready to open to that warmth. *Saidar* is the river, you the bank. The river is more powerful than the bank, yet the bank contains and guides it. Empty your mind except for the bud. There is nothing in your thoughts but the bud. You are the bud. . . .”

Pulling her shift over her head, Nynaeve sighed as Theodrin’s voice droned on hypnotically. Novice exercises. If those worked with her, she would have been channeling whenever she wanted long ago. She should stop this and see to what she really could do, such as convincing Elayne to go to Caemlyn. But she wanted Theodrin to be successful, even if it entailed ten buckets of water. Accepted did not walk out; Accepted did not defy. She hated being told what she could not do even worse than being told what she must.

Hours passed, with them now seated facing one another across a table that looked to have come out of a ramshackle farmhouse, hours of repeating drills that the novices were probably doing right that moment. The flower bud, and the riverbank. The summer breeze, and the babbling brook. Nynaeve tried to be a dandelion seed floating on the wind, the earth drinking in spring rain, a root inching its way through the soil. All without result, or at least the result Theodrin wanted. She even suggested Nynaeve imagine herself in a lover's arms, which turned out a disaster, since it made her think of Lan, and how *dare* he vanish like this! But every time frustration sparked anger like a hot coal in dry grass and put *saidar* in her grasp, Theodrin made her release it and start again, soothing, calming. The way the woman remained fixed on what she wanted was maddening. Nynaeve thought she could teach mules how to be stubborn. She never got frustrated; she had serenity down to an art. Nynaeve wanted to upend a bucket of cold water over *her* head and see how *she* liked it. Then again, considering the ache in her jaw, maybe that was not such a good idea.

Theodrin Healed that ache before Nynaeve left, which was about the extent of her abilities in that Talent. After a moment, Nynaeve gave Healing in return. Theodrin's eye had turned a brilliant purple, and she really hated not leaving it to remind the woman to have a little care what she did in the future, but turnabout was fair, and Theodrin's gasping shivers as the flows of Spirit, Air and Water ran through her were some recompense for Nynaeve's own gasps when that bucket had emptied over her. Of course, she shivered too, at her own Healing, but you could not have everything.

Outside, the sun stood halfway down toward the western horizon. Down the street, a ripple of bows and curtsies moved through the crowd, and then the shifting throng opened to reveal Tarna Feir, gliding along like a queen walking through a pigsty, the red-fringed shawl looped over her arms like a blatant banner. Even at fifty paces her attitude was plain in the way she held her head, the way she kept her skirts out of the dust, the way she ignored even those making courtesy as she passed. The first day there had been many fewer courtesies and much more bluster, but an Aes Sedai was an Aes Sedai, to the sisters in Salidar anyway. To drive that home, two

Accepted, five novices and near a dozen serving men and women were spending what would have been their free hours hauling kitchen garbage and chamber-pot emptyings out to the woods and burying them.

As Nynaeve slipped away, before Tarna could see her in turn, her stomach growled loudly enough for a fellow with a basket of turnips on his back to give her a startled look. Breakfast time had gone in Elayne's attempt to pierce the ward, the midday meal in Theodrin's exercises. And she was not finished with the woman today. Theodrin's instructions had been not to sleep tonight. Perhaps exhaustion would work where shock had not. *Any block can be broken,* Theodrin had said, her voice all implacable confidence, *and I* will *break yours. It only takes once. One time channeling without anger, and* saidar *will be yours*.

At the moment all Nynaeve wanted to be hers was some food. The scullions were already cleaning up, of course, and almost done, but the smell of mutton stew and roast pig hanging around the kitchens made her nose twitch. She had to settle for two pitiful apples, a bit of goat cheese and a heel of bread. The day was not getting any better.

Back in their room she found Elayne sprawled atop her bed. The younger woman glanced at her without raising her head, then rolled her eyes back up to stare at the cracked ceiling. "I have had the most *miserable* day, Nynaeve," she sighed. "Escaralde *insists* on learning to make *ter'angreal* when she isn't strong enough, and Varilin did *something*—I don't know what—and the stone she was working on turned into a ball of . . . well, it wasn't quite flame . . . right in her hands. Except for Dagdara, I think she'd have died; no one else there could have Healed her, and I don't think there was time to fetch someone who could. Then I was thinking about Marigan—if we can't learn how to detect a man channeling, maybe we can learn to detect what he's done; I seem to remember Moiraine *implying* that was possible. I *think* I do—anyway, I was thinking about her, and somebody touched me on the shoulder, and I screamed like I'd been stuck with a needle. It was just some poor carter wanting to ask me about a fool rumor, but I frightened him so, he nearly ran."

She drew breath finally, and Nynaeve abandoned the notion of throwing her last apple core at her and darted into the momentary quiet. "Where is Marigan?"

"She was finished tidying—and took her time about it, too—so I sent her off to her own room. I *am* still wearing the bracelet. See?" She waved her arm in the air and let it fall back to the mattress, but the flow of words did not slow. “She was going on in that *awful* whining way about how we should run off to Caemlyn, and I just could *not* stand it another minute, not on top of everything else. My novice class was a disaster. That *horrible* Keatlin woman—the one with the nose?—kept muttering about how she’d never let a *girl* order her around back home, and Faolain came *stalking* up demanding to know why I had Nicola in the class—how was *I* supposed to know Nicola was meant to be running errands for her?—then *Ibrella* decided to see how big a flame she could make and nearly set the whole *class* on fire, and Faolain dressed me down right in front of *everybody* for not keeping my class under control, and Nicola said *she*—”

Nynaeve gave up trying to get a word in edgewise—maybe she should have thrown the apple core—and just shouted. “I think Moghedien’s right!”

That name shut the other woman’s mouth, and sat her up staring, too. Nynaeve could not help looking around to see if anyone had overheard, even if they were in their own room.

“That is foolish, Nynaeve.”

Nynaeve did not know whether Elayne meant the suggestion or speaking Moghedien’s name aloud, and she did not intend to inquire. Sitting on her own bed opposite Elayne, she adjusted her skirts. “No, it isn’t. Any day now Jaril and Seve will tell somebody Marigan isn’t their mother, if they haven’t already. Are you ready for the questions that will bring? I’m not. Any day some Aes Sedai is going to start digging into how I can discover anything without being in a fury from sunup to sundown. Every second Aes Sedai I speak to mentions it, and Dagdara has been looking at me in a funny way lately. Besides, they aren’t going to do anything here but sit. Unless they decide to go back to the Tower. I sneaked up and listened to Tarna talking with Sheriam—”

“You *what*?”

“I sneaked up and listened,” Nynaeve said levelly. “The message they’re sending to Elaida is that they need more time to consider. That means they’re at least considering forgetting about the Red Ajah and Logain. How they can, I don’t know, but they must be. If we stay here much longer, we may end up handed to Elaida as a present. At least if we go now we can tell Rand not to count on any Aes Sedai being behind him. We can tell him not to trust any Aes Sedai.”

Frowning prettily, Elayne folded her legs beneath her. “If they’re still considering, it means they haven’t decided. I think we should stay. Maybe we can help them decide the right way. Besides, unless you mean to talk Theodrin into coming along, you’ll never break through your block if we go.”

Nynaeve ignored that. A fine lot of good Theodrin had done so far. Buckets of water. No sleep tonight. What next? The woman had as good as said she meant to try anything and everything until she found what worked. Anything and everything took in too much to Nynaeve’s way of thinking. “Help them decide? They won’t listen to us. *Siuan* hardly listens to us, and if she has us by the scruff of the neck, we at least have her by the toe.”

“I still think we should stay. At least until the Hall *does* decide. Then, if worse comes to worst, we can at least tell Rand a fact and not a maybe.”

“How are we supposed to find out? We can’t count on me finding the right window to listen at twice. If we wait until they announce it, we may be under guard. Me, at least. There isn’t an Aes Sedai doesn’t know Rand and I both come from Emond’s Field.”

“Siuan will tell us before anything is announced,” the fool girl said calmly. “You don’t think she and Leane will go meekly back to Elaida, do you?”

There was that. Elaida would have Siuan and Leane’s heads before they could curtsy. “That still doesn’t consider Jaril and Seve,” she persisted.

“We will think of something. In any case, they aren’t the first refugee children cared for by somebody not related to them.” Elayne probably thought her dimpled smile was reassuring. “All we need do is put our heads to it. At the very least, we should wait for Thom to return from Amadicia. I cannot leave him behind.”

Nynaeve threw up her hands. If looks reflected character, Elayne should have looked like a mule carved in stone. The girl had made Thom Merrilin a replacement for the father who died when she was little. She also sometimes seemed to think he could not find his way to the dinner table unless she held his hand.

The only warning Nynaeve had was the feel of *saidar* being embraced close by, then the door swung open on a flow of Air, and Tarna Feir stepped into the room. Nynaeve and Elayne popped to their feet. An Aes Sedai was an Aes Sedai, and some of those burying refuse were there on Tarna’s word alone.

The yellow-haired Red sister scrutinized them, her face arrogant winter marble. “So. The Queen of Andor and the crippled wilder.”

“Not yet, Aes Sedai,” Elayne replied with a cool politeness. “Not until I am crowned in the Great Hall. And only if my mother is dead,” she added.

Tarna’s smile could have frozen a snowstorm. “Of course. They tried to keep you a secret, but whispers do get about.” Her gaze took in the narrow beds and the rickety stool, the clothes on their wall pegs and the cracked plaster. “I should think you would have better quarters, considering all the miraculous things you’ve done. Were you in the White Tower where you belong, I would not be surprised to see you both tested for the shawl by now.”

“Thank you,” Nynaeve said, to show she could be as civil as Elayne. Tarna looked at her. Those blue eyes made the rest of that face seem warm. “Aes Sedai,” Nynaeve added hastily.

Tarna turned back to Elayne. “The Amyrlin has a special place in her heart for you, and for Andor. She has such a search being made for you as you would not believe. I know it would please her greatly if you returned with me to Tar Valon.”

“My place is here, Aes Sedai.” Elayne’s voice was still pleasant, but her chin came up in a good match to Tarna’s haughtiness. “I will return to the Tower when the rest do.”

“I see,” the Red said flatly. “Very well. Leave us now. I wish to speak to the wilder alone.”

Nynaeve and Elayne exchanged glances, but there was nothing for Elayne to do but curtsy and go.

When the door closed, a startling change came over Tarna. She sat on Elayne’s bed and swung her legs up, crossing her ankles, leaning back against the chipped headboard and folding her hands on her stomach. Her face thawed, and she even smiled. “You look uneasy. Do not be. I will not bite you.”

Nynaeve could have believed that better if the other woman’s eyes had changed too. The smile never touched them; in contrast, they seemed ten times as hard, a hundred times as cold. The combination made her skin crawl. “I am not uneasy,” she said stiffly, planting her feet to keep them from shifting.

“Ah. Offended, is it? Why? Because I called you ‘wilder’? I’m a wilder too, you know. Galina Casban beat my block out of me herself. She knew my Ajah long before I did, and took a personal interest in me. She always does in those she thinks will choose Red.” She shook her head, laughing, eyes like frozen knives. “The hours I spent howling and weeping before I could find *saidar* without my eyes shut tight; you cannot weave if you cannot see the flows. I understand Theodrin is using gentler methods with you.”

Nynaeve’s feet moved in spite of herself. Surely Theodrin would not try that! Surely not. Stiffening her knees did nothing for the flutter in her stomach. So she was not supposed to be offended, was she? Was she to dismiss “crippled,” too? “What did you wish to speak to me about, Aes Sedai?”

“The Amyrlin wants to see Elayne safe, but in many ways you are every bit as important. Perhaps more. What you have in your head of Rand al’Thor could be beyond price. And what Egwene al’Vere has in hers. Do you know where she is?”

Nynaeve wanted to wipe the sweat from her face, but she kept her hands by her sides. “I have not seen her in a long time, Aes Sedai.” Months, since their last meeting in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. “May I ask, what does . . .” No one in Salidar called Elaida Amyrlin, but she was supposed to be respectful to this woman. “. . . the Amyrlin intend about Rand?”

“Intend, child? He’s the Dragon Reborn. The Amyrlin knows that, and she intends to give him every honor he deserves.” A touch of intensity entered Tarna’s voice. “Think, child. This lot will return to the fold once it dawns on them fully what they do, but every day could be vital. Three thousand years the White Tower has guided rulers; there would have been more wars and worse without the Tower. The world faces disaster if al’Thor lacks that guidance. But you cannot guide what you do not know, any more than I could channel with my eyes closed. The best thing for him is for you to return with me and give your knowledge of him to the Amyrlin now, instead of in weeks or months. Best for you, as well. You can never be made Aes Sedai here. The Oath Rod is in the Tower. The testing can only be done in the Tower.”

Sweat stung Nynaeve’s eyes, but she refused to blink. Did the woman think she could be bribed? “The truth of it is, I never spent much time around him. I lived in the village, you see, and he on a farm off in the Westwood. Mainly all I remember is a boy who never listened to reason. He had to be pushed into doing what he should, or dragged into it. Of course, that was when he was a boy. He may have changed, for all I know. Most men are just the boy grown tall, but he could have."

For a long moment Tarna merely looked at her. A very long moment, under that frigid stare. "Well," she said at last, and flowed onto her feet so quickly Nynaeve almost stepped back, though there was nowhere in the tiny room to step back to. That unsettling smile remained in place. "Such an odd group gathered here. I haven't seen either, but I understand Siuan Sanche and Leane Sharif grace Salidar. Not the sort a wise woman would consort with. And perhaps other odd folk, too? You would do much better to come with me. I leave in the morning. Let me know tonight whether I should expect to meet you on the road."

"I'm afraid not—"

"Think on it, child. This could be the most important decision you ever make. Think very hard." The amiable mask vanished, and Tarna swept out of the room.

Nynaeve's knees gave way, depositing her on the bed. The woman set such a gamut of emotions running through her, she did not know what to make of them. Uneasiness and anger roiled about with exhilaration. She wished the Red had some way to communicate with the Tower Aes Sedai seeking Rand. Oh, to be a fly on the wall when they tried using her assessment of him. Trying to bribe her. Trying to frighten her. And doing a fair job of the latter. Tarna was so sure the Aes Sedai here would kneel to Elaida; it was a foregone conclusion, only the timing in doubt. And had that been a hint about Logain? Nynaeve suspected Tarna knew more of Salidar than the Hall or Sheriam suspected. Perhaps Elaida did have supporters here.

Nynaeve kept expecting Elayne to return, and when a good half hour passed without her, she went out hunting, first loping up and down dusty streets, then trotting, pausing here to climb up on a cart tongue, there to mount an upended barrel or a stone stoop, and peer across the heads of the crowd. The sun descended to less than its own height above the tree line before she stalked back to the room, muttering to herself. And found Elayne, plainly just arrived herself.

"Where have you been? I thought Tarna might have you tied up somewhere!"

"I was getting these from Siuan." Elayne opened her hand. Two of the twisted stone rings lay on her palm.

“Is one of those the real one? It’s a good idea to take them, but you should have tried to get the real one.”

“Nothing has changed my mind, Nynaeve. I still think we should stay.”

“Tarna—”

“Only convinced me. If we go, Sheriam and the Hall *will* choose the Tower whole over Rand. I just know it.” She put her hands on Nynaeve’s shoulders, and Nynaeve let herself be sat down on her bed. Elayne took the other opposite her and leaned forward intently. “You remember what you told me about using need to find something in *Tel’aran’rhiod*? What we need is a way to convince the Hall not to go to Elaida.”

“How? What? If Logain isn’t enough. . . .”

“We will know what when we find it,” Elayne said firmly.

Nynaeve fingered her wrist-thick braid absently. “Will you agree to go if we don’t find anything? I don’t much like the thought of sitting here until they decide to put us under guard.”

“I’ll agree to go provided you agree to stay if we do find something useful. Nynaeve, as much as I want to see him, we can do more good here.”

Nynaeve hesitated before finally muttering, “Agreed.” It seemed safe enough. Without some idea of what they were looking for, she could not imagine they would find anything at all.

If the day had seemed to pass slowly before, it began to crawl now. They lined up at one of the kitchens for plates of sliced ham, turnips and peas. The sun sat on the treetops for hours, it seemed. Most in Salidar went to bed with the sun, but a few lights appeared in windows, especially the Little Tower. The Hall was feasting Tarna tonight. Bits of harp music occasionally drifted from the former inn; the Aes Sedai had found a harper of sorts among the soldiers and had him shaved and stuffed into something like livery. People passing by in the street darted quick glances at it before hurrying on or ignored it so hard they practically shook with the effort. Once again Gareth Bryne was the exception. He ate his meal seated on a wooden box in the middle of the street; any of the Hall looking out a window would have to see him. Slowly, ever so slowly, the sun slid down behind the trees. Dark came abruptly, with no twilight to speak of, and the streets emptied. The harper’s melody began again. Gareth Bryne still sat on his box on the edge of a pool of light from the Hall’s banquet. Nynaeve shook her head; she did not know whether he was being admirable or foolish. Some of each, she suspected.

It was not until she was in her bed with the flecked stone *ter'angreal* on the cord around her neck with Lan's heavy gold signet and the candle snuffed that she remembered Theodrin's instructions. Well, too late for that now. Theodrin would never know whether she slept anyway. Where *was* Lan?

The sound of Elayne's breathing slowed, Nynaeve snuggled into her small pillow with a tiny sigh, and . . .

. . . she stood at the foot of her empty bed, looking at a misty Elayne in the not quite light of night in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. No one to see them here. Sheriam or one of her circle might be about, or Siuan or Leane. True, the pair of them had a right to visit the World of Dreams, but on tonight's quest neither wanted to answer questions. Elayne apparently saw it as a hunt; consciously or not, she had togged herself out like Birgitte, in green coat and white trousers. She blinked at the silver bow in her hand, and it vanished along with the quiver.

Nynaeve checked her own garments and sighed. A blue silk ball gown, embroidered with golden flowers around the low neckline and in twined lines down the full skirt. She could feel velvet dancing slippers on her feet. What you wore in *Tel'aran'rhiod* did not really matter, but whatever had possessed her mind to choose this? "You realize this might not work," she said, changing to good plain Two Rivers woolens and stout shoes. Elayne had no right to smile that way. A silver bow. Ha! "We're supposed to have some idea at least of what we're looking for, something about it."

"It will have to do, Nynaeve. According to you, the Wise Ones said the stronger the need the better, and we surely need something, or the help we promised Rand is going to vanish except for whatever Elaida is willing to give. I won't let that happen, Nynaeve. I will not."

"Put your chin down. Neither will I, if there's anything we can do about it. We might as well get on with this." Linking hands with Elayne, Nynaeve closed her eyes. Need. She hoped some part of her had some notion what it was they needed. Maybe nothing would happen. Need. Suddenly everything seemed to slide around her; she felt *Tel'aran'rhiod* tilt and swoop.

Her eyes sprang open immediately. Each step using need was taken blind, of necessity, and while each took you closer to what you sought, any one could drop you down in a pit of vipers, or a lion disturbed at its kill could bite your leg off.

There were no lions, yet what there was was disturbing. It was bright midday, but that did not bother her; time flowed differently here. She and Elayne were holding hands in a cobblestone street, surrounded by buildings of brick and stone. Elaborate cornices and friezes decorated houses and shops alike. Ornate cupolas decorated tile rooftops, and bridges of stone or wood arched across the street, sometimes three or four stories up. Heaps of garbage, old clothes and broken furniture stood piled on street corners, and rats scurried about by the score, sometimes pausing to chitter fearless challenges at them. People dreaming themselves to the brink of *Tel'aran'rhiod* flickered in and out of existence. A man fell shrieking from one of the bridges and vanished before he hit the cobblestones. A howling woman in a torn dress ran a dozen paces toward them before she too winked out. Truncated screams and shouts echoed through the streets, and sometimes coarse laughter with a maniacal edge.

"I don't like this," Elayne said in a worried tone.

In the distance, a great bone-white shaft reared above the city, far overtopping other towers, many of them linked by bridges that made those where they were seem low. They were in Tar Valon, in the part where Nynaeve had caught a glimpse of Leane last time. Leane had not been very forthcoming about what she had been doing; increasing the awe and legend of the mysterious Aes Sedai, she had claimed with a smile.

"It doesn't matter," Nynaeve said stoutly. "Nobody in Tar Valon even knows about the World of Dreams. We won't run into anybody." Her stomach turned over as a bloody-faced man suddenly appeared, staggering toward them. He had no hands, only spurting stumps.

"That was not what I meant," Elayne muttered.

"Let's be on about it." Nynaeve closed her eyes. Need.

Shift.

They were in the Tower, in one of the tapestry-hung curving hallways. A plump novice-clad girl popped into existence not three paces away, her big eyes going wider when she saw them. "Please," she whimpered. "Please?" And was gone.

Suddenly Elayne gasped, "Egwene!"

Nynaeve whirled around, but the passage was empty.

"I saw her," Elayne insisted. "I know I did."

"I suppose she can touch *Tel'aran'rhiod* in an ordinary dream like anyone else," Nynaeve told her. "Let's just get on with what we're here for.” She was beginning to feel more than uneasy. They linked hands again. Need.

Shift.

It was not an ordinary storeroom. Shelves lined the walls and made two short rows out in the floor, neatly lined with boxes of various sizes and shapes, some plain wood, some carved or lacquered, with things wrapped in cloth, with statuettes and figurines, and peculiar shapes seemingly of metal or glass, crystal or stone or glazed porcelain. Nynaeve needed no more to know they must be objects of the One Power, *ter’angreal* most likely, perhaps some *angreal* and *sa’angreal*. Such a disparate collection, stored away so tidily, could not be anything else in the Tower.

“I don’t think there is any point to going further here,” Elayne said dejectedly. “I don’t know how we could ever get anything out of here.”

Nynaeve gave her braid a short tug. If there really was something here they could use—there had to be, unless the Wise Ones had lied—then there had to be a way to reach it in the waking world. *Angreal* and the like were not heavily guarded; usually, when she had been in the Tower, only by a lock and a novice. The door here was made of heavy planks with a heavy black iron lock set in it. No doubt it was fastened, but she fixed it in her mind as undone and pushed.

The door swung open into a guardroom. Narrow beds stacked one atop another lined one wall, and racked halberds lined another. Beyond a heavy, battered table ringed by stools was another door, iron-strapped, with a small grille set in it.

As she turned back to Elayne she was suddenly aware that the door was shut again. “If we can’t get to what we need here, maybe we can somewhere else. I mean, maybe something else will do. At least we have a hint now. I think these are *ter’angreal* nobody has found how to use yet. That’s the only reason they would be guarded like this. It could be dangerous even to channel close to them.”

Elayne gave her a wry look. “But if we try again, won’t it just bring us right back here? Unless. . . . Unless the Wise Ones told you how to exclude a place from the search.”

They had not—they had not been eager to tell her anything at all—but in a place where you open a lock by thinking it was open, anything should be possible. “That’s exactly what we do. We fix it in our heads that what we want isn’t in Tar Valon.” Frowning at the shelves, she added, “And I’ll wager it is a *ter'angreal* nobody knows how to use." Though how that would convince the Hall to support Rand, she could not imagine.

"We need a *ter'angreal* that isn't in Tar Valon," Elayne said as if convincing herself. "Very well. We go on."

She held out her hands, and after a moment Nynaeve took them. Nynaeve was not sure how she had become the one to insist on continuing. She wanted to leave Salidar, not find a reason to stay. But if it assured that the Salidar Aes Sedai would support Rand. . . .

Need. A *ter'angreal*. Not in Tar Valon. Need.

Shift.

Wherever they were, the dawn-lit city was certainly not Tar Valon. Not twenty paces away the broad paved street became a white stone bridge with statues at either end, arching over a stone-lined canal. Fifty paces the other way stood another. Slender, balcony-ringed towers stood everywhere, like spears driven through round slices of ornate confection. Every building was white, the doorways and windows large pointed arches, sometimes double or triple arches. On the grander buildings, long balconies of white-painted wrought iron, with intricate wrought-iron screens to hide any occupants, looked down on the streets and canals, and white domes banded with scarlet or gold rose to points as sharp as the towers.

Need. *Shift*.

It might as well have been a different city. The street was narrow and unevenly paved, hemmed in on both sides by buildings five and six stories high, their white plaster flaked away in many places to expose the brick beneath. There were no balconies here. Flies buzzed about, and it was hard to say whether it was still dawn because of the shadows down on the ground.

They exchanged looks. It seemed unlikely they would find a *ter'angreal* here, but they had gone too far to stop now. Need.

Shift.

Nynaeve sneezed before she could open her eyes, and again as soon as they were open. Every shift of her feet kicked up swirls of dust. This storeroom was not at all like that in the Tower. Chests, crates and barrels crowded the small room, piled every which way atop one another, with barely an aisle left between, and all under a thick layer of dust. Nynaeve sneezed so hard she thought her shoes would come off—and the dust vanished. All of it. Elayne wore a small smug smile. Nynaeve said nothing, only fixed the room firmly in her mind *without* dust. She should have thought of that.

Looking over the jumble, she sighed. The room was no larger than the one where their bodies lay sleeping in Salidar, but searching through all that. . . . "It will take weeks."

"We could try again. It might at least show which things to look through." Elayne sounded as doubtful as Nynaeve felt.

Still, it was as good a suggestion as any. Nynaeve closed her eyes, and once more came the *shift*.

When she looked again, she was standing at the end of the aisle away from the door, facing a square wooden chest taller than her waist. The iron straps seemed all rust, and the chest itself looked to have spent the last twenty years being beaten with hammers. A less likely repository for anything useful, especially a *ter'angreal*, Nynaeve could not imagine. But Elayne was standing right beside her, staring at the same chest.

Nynaeve put a hand on the lid—the hinges *would* open smoothly—and pushed it up. There was not even the hint of a squeal. Inside, two heavily rusted swords and an equally brown breastplate with a hole eaten through it lay atop a tangle of cloth-wrapped parcels and what seemed to be the refuse from somebody's old clothespress and a couple of kitchens.

Elayne fingered a small kettle with a broken spout. "Not weeks, but the rest of the night, anyway."

"Once more?" Nynaeve suggested. "It could not hurt." Elayne shrugged. Eyes shut. Need.

Nynaeve reached out, and her hand came down on something hard and rounded, covered with crumbling cloth. When she opened her eyes. Elayne's hand was right next to hers. The younger woman's grin nearly split her face in two.

Getting it out was not easy. It was not small, and they had to shift tattered coats and dented pots and parcels that crumbled to reveal figurines and carved animals and all sorts of rubbish. Once they had it out, they had to hold it between them, a wide flattish disc wrapped in rotted cloth. With the cloth stripped away, it turned out to be a shallow bowl of thick crystal, more than two feet across and carved deeply inside with what appeared to be swirling clouds.

"Nynaeve," Elayne said slowly, "I think this is. . . ."

Nynaeve gave a start and nearly dropped her side of the bowl as it suddenly turned a pale watery blue and the carved clouds shifted slowly. A heartbeat later, the crystal was clear again, the carved clouds still. Only she was certain the clouds were not the same as they had been.

"It is," Elayne exclaimed. "It's a *ter'angreal*. And I will bet anything it has something to do with weather. But I'm not quite strong enough to work it by myself."

Gulping a breath, Nynaeve tried to make her heart stop pounding. "Don't do that! Don't you realize you could still yourself, meddling with a *ter'angreal* when you don't know what it does?"

The fool girl had the nerve to give her a surprised stare. "That *is* what we came to look for, Nynaeve. And do you think there is *anyone* who knows more about *ter'angreal* than I do?"

Nynaeve sniffed. Just because the woman was right did not mean she should not have given a little warning. "I'm not saying it isn't wonderful if this can do something about the weather—it is—but I don't see how it can be what we need. This won't shift the Hall one way or the other about Rand."

"'What you need isn't always what you want,' " Elayne quoted. "Lini used to say that when she wouldn't let me go riding, or climb trees, but maybe it holds here."

Nynaeve sniffed again. Maybe it did, but right now she wanted what she wanted. Was that so much to ask?

The bowl faded out of their hands, and it was Elayne's turn to give a start, muttering about never getting used to that. The chest was closed, too.

"Nynaeve, when I channeled into the bowl, I felt. . . . Nynaeve, it isn't the only *ter'angreal* in this room. I think there are *angreal*, too, maybe even *sa'angreal*."

"Here?" Nynaeve said incredulously, staring around the cluttered little room. But if one, why not two? Or ten, or a hundred? "Light, don't channel again! What if you make one of them do something by accident? You could still—"

"I do know what I am doing, Nynaeve. Really, I do. The next thing *we* have to do is find out exactly where this room is."

That proved to be no easy task. Though the hinges seemed solid masses of rust, the door was no impediment, not in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. The problems began after that. The dim narrow corridor outside had only one small window at its end, and that showed nothing but a peeling white-plastered wall across the street. Climbing down cramped flights of stone-faced stairs did no good. The street outside could have been the first they had seen in this quarter of the city, wherever that was, all the buildings as near alike as made no difference. The tiny shops along the street had no signs, and the only thing marking inns were blue-painted doors. Red seemed to indicate a tavern.

Nynaeve strode off searching for some landmark, something to pinpoint their location. Something to say what the city was. Every street she came to seemed like the last, but she quickly found a bridge, plain stone, unlike the others she had seen, and lacking statues. The center of its arch showed her only the canal, meeting others in both directions, more bridges, more buildings with flaking white plaster.

Suddenly she realized she was alone. “Elayne.” Silence, except for the echo of her voice. “Elayne? Elayne!”

The golden-haired woman popped around a corner near the foot of the bridge. “There you are,” said Elayne. “This place makes a rabbit warren look well planned. I turned my head for an instant, and you were gone. Did you find anything?”

“Nothing.” Nynaeve glanced down the canal again before joining Elayne. “Nothing at all useful.”

“At least we can be sure where we are. Ebou Dar. It must be.” Elayne’s short coat and wide trousers became a green silk gown with spills of lace dangling over her hands, a high elaborately embroidered collar, and a narrow neckline deep enough to show considerable cleavage. “I can’t think of another city with so many canals except Illian, and this is certainly not Illian.”

“I should hope not,” Nynaeve said faintly. It had never even occurred to her that a blind search might take them into Sammael’s lair. Her own dress had changed, she realized, to a deep blue silk suitable for traveling, complete with a linen dustcloak. She made the cloak vanish, but left the rest.

“You would like Ebou Dar, Nynaeve. Ebou Dari Wise Women know more about herbs than anybody. They can cure anything. They have to, because Ebou Dari fight duels over a sneeze, noble or common, men or women.” Elayne giggled. “Thom says there used to be leopards here, but they left because they found Ebou Dari too touchy to live with.”

“That’s all very well,” Nynaeve told her, “but they can run each other through as much as they want for all I care. Elayne, we might as well have put the rings away and just slept. I couldn’t walk back to that room from here if I was to receive the shawl when I got there. If only there was some way to make a map. . . .” She grimaced. As well ask for wings in the waking world; if they could take a map out of *Tel’aran’rhiod*, they could take the bowl.

“Then we will just have to come to Ebou Dar and search,” Elayne said firmly. “In the real world. At least we know what *part* of the city to look in.”

Nynaeve brightened. Ebou Dar lay only a few hundred miles down the Eldar from Salidar. “That sounds a very good notion. And it will get us away before everything falls on our heads.”

“Really, Nynaeve. Is that still the most important thing to you?”

“It is one important thing. Can you think of anything else to do here?” Elayne shook her head. “Then we might as well go back. I’d like a little real sleep tonight.” There was no telling how much time had passed in the waking world while you were in *Tel’aran’rhiod*; sometimes an hour there was an hour here, sometimes a day, or more. Luckily, it did not seem to work the other way, or at least not as much anyway, or you might starve to death sleeping.

Nynaeve stepped out of the dream . . .

. . . and her eyes popped open, staring into her pillow, which was as sweat-damp as she. Not a breath of air stirred through the open window. Silence had fallen over Salidar, the loudest sound the thin cries of night herons. Sitting up, she untied the cord around her neck and unstrung the twisted stone ring, pausing for a moment to finger Lan’s thick gold ring. Elayne stirred, then sat up yawning and channeled a stub of candle alight.

“Do you think it will do any good?” Nynaeve asked quietly.

“I do not know.” Elayne stopped to muffle a yawn behind her hand. How could the woman manage to look pretty yawning, with her hair a mess and a red wrinkle from a pillow marring one cheek? That was a secret Aes Sedai ought to investigate. “What I do know is that bowl may be able to do something about the weather. I know a cache of *ter’angreal* and *angreal* has to be put in the right hands. It’s our duty to hand them over to the Hall. To Sheriam, anyway. I know if it doesn’t make them support Rand, I’ll keep hunting until I find something that does. And I know I want to sleep. Could we talk about this in the morning?” Without waiting for an answer, she doused the candle, curled up again and was breathing the deep, slow breaths of sleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Nynaeve stretched out again, staring at the ceiling through the darkness. At least they would be on their way to Ebou Dar soon. Tomorrow, maybe. A day or two, at most, to ready themselves for the journey and stop a passing riverboat. At least. . . .

Suddenly she remembered Theodrin. If it took two days to get ready, Theodrin would want her two sessions, sure as a duck had feathers. And she expected Nynaeve not to sleep tonight. There was no possible way she could know, but. . . .

Sighing heavily, she climbed out of bed. There was not much room to pace, but she used it all, getting angrier by the minute. All she wanted was to get away. She had said she was not very good at surrendering, but maybe she was getting good at running away. It would be so wonderful to channel whenever she wanted. She never even noticed the tears that began leaking down her cheeks.

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CHAPTER 14

Dreams and Nightmares

At the sight of Nynaeve and Elayne, Egwene did not step out of the dream; she leaped out. Not back to her sleeping body in Cairhien—the night was too young yet—but to a vast blackness filled with twinkling pinpricks of light, more by far than the number of stars in the clearest sky, each sharp and distinct as far as the eye could see. If she had had eyes here, that was. Formless, she floated in the infinity between *Tel'aran'rhiod* and the waking world, the narrow gap between dream and reality.

Had she possessed a heart here, it would have been pounding like a mad drum. She did not think they had seen her, but what under the Light were they doing *there*, in a part of the Tower that held nothing of interest? On these nightly excursions she carefully avoided the Amyrlin's study, the novices' quarters, even the Accepted's quarters. It always seemed that if Nynaeve or Elayne or both were not in one of those places, someone else was. She could have approached Nynaeve or Elayne, of course—they certainly knew how to keep secrets—but something told her not to; she had dreamed of doing it, and it always seemed a nightmare. Not the sort that woke you in a cold sweat, but the kind that made you twist fretfully. Those other women. Did the Aes Sedai in Salidar know strangers wandered the Tower in the World of Dreams? Strange to her, at least. If they did not, she had no way to warn them. No way she could take. It was all so frustrating!

The great spangled ocean of darkness swirled around her, seeming to move while she stood still. A fish at home in that ocean, she swam confidently, without really needing to think about it any more than the fish did. Those flickering lights were dreams, all the dreams of all the people of the world. Of all worlds, places that were not quite the world she knew, worlds nothing like it at all. Verin Sedai first told her of those, the Wise Ones affirmed it was so, and she herself had glimpsed things, peeking in, that she simply could not credit, not even in a dream. Not nightmares—those always seemed washed in red, or blue, or a murky gray like deep shadows—but filled with impossible things. Better to avoid them; clearly she did not belong in those worlds. Peering into such a dream was like suddenly being surrounded by broken mirrors, everything whirling and no way to tell up from down. It made her want to empty her stomach, and if she did not have one here, she would again on stepping back into her body. Sicking up was no way to wake yourself.

She had learned a few things alone like this, added to what the Wise Ones had taught her, even ventured where they would have barred the way. And yet. . . . She had no doubt she would know more, much more, if she had had a dreamwalker looking over her shoulder. Telling her that this was too dangerous yet and that forbidden altogether, true, yet suggesting what to try as well. Long past the simple things, easily puzzled out—well, not exactly easily; never that—she had reached a point where she could reason the next step on her own, but they were steps the Wise One dreamwalkers had taken long ago. What took her a month to master for herself, they could teach in a night, in an hour. When they decided she was ready. Never until then. It galled so, when all she wanted was to learn. To learn everything. Right now.

Each light looked identical to every other, yet she had learned to recognize a handful. How exactly, she did not know, a thing that irked her no end. Even the Wise Ones did not know that. Still, once she identified which dream belonged to which person, she could find that person's dreams again like an arrow to the target, no matter if they went to the other side of the world. That light was Berelain, the First of Mayene, the woman Rand had put in charge in Cairhien. Looking into Berelain's dreams made Egwene uncomfortable. Usually they were no different from any other woman's—any woman interested equally in power, politics and the latest fashion in dresses—but sometimes Berelain dreamed of men, even men Egwene knew, in a way that made Egwene blush to remember.

And that slightly muted glow over there was Rand, his dreams guarded behind a ward woven of *saidin*. She almost stopped—it piqued her that something she could not see or feel could shut her out like a stone wall—but instead let it pass. Another night of futility held no attraction.

This place skewed distance the way *Tel'aran'rhiod* did time. Rand was sleeping in Caemlyn, unless he had jaunted to Tear, a thing she very much wanted to know how he did, but only a little way from his dream, Egwene picked out another light she recognized. Bair, in Cairhien, hundreds of leagues from Rand; wherever Rand was, she knew for a fact it was not Cairhien this night. *How* did he do it?

The field of lights streaked by as Egwene darted away from the Wise One's dream. Had she seen Amys and Melaine as well, she might not have fled, but if the other two dreamwalkers were not asleep and dreaming, they could be dreamwalking. One of them might be where she was, even ready to swoop down and haul her out of the dream, or into the dreamwalker's own dream. She doubted she could stop them, not yet. She would be at the other's mercy, just a part of *her* dream. Holding on to yourself inside someone else's dream was hard enough when the dreamer was an ordinary person with no idea what was going on, although no harder than getting out before they stopped dreaming of you, which they were unlikely to do before waking with you actually there in the dream. With a dreamwalker, as aware of her dreams as of the walking world, it was impossible. And that would be the *best* part of it.

It dawned on her that she was being foolish. Running was useless. If Amys or Melaine had found her, she would be somewhere else already. For that matter, she could be racing right toward them. The rush of lights by her did not slow, it simply stopped dead. That was the way here.

Vexed, she considered what to do next. Aside from teaching herself what she could of *Tel'aran'rhiod,* her main purpose here was to glean a few scraps of events in the world. At times it seemed the Wise Ones would not tell her whether the sun was up if she could not see for herself. They said she must not become agitated. How could she avoid it, fretting over what she did not know? That was what she had been doing in the White Tower; trying to pick up some hint of Elaida's intentions. And Alviarin's. Hints were the best she had been able to find, and few of those. She hated not knowing; ignorance was like suddenly going blind and deaf.

Well, the whole Tower was off her list now; it had to be when she could no longer be certain which parts were safe. The rest of Tar Valon had been struck off already, after the fourth time she nearly walked into a copper-skinned woman, this time nodding in satisfaction as, of all things, she studied a stable that seemed freshly painted blue. Whoever she was, she had not dreamed herself into *Tel'aran'rhiod* for a moment by accident; she did not vanish, the way a casual dreamer did, and she appeared made of mist. Using a *ter'angreal,* obviously, which meant she was almost certainly Aes Sedai. Egwene knew of only one *ter'angreal* that allowed access to the World of Dreams without channeling, and Nynaeve and Elayne had that. The willowy woman had not been Aes Sedai long, though. Quite beautiful—and wearing a scandalously thin dress—she appeared Nynaeve's age, not ageless.

Egwene might have tried following her—she might be Black Ajah, after all; they had stolen dream *ter'angreal*—but balancing the risk of being found out, even captured, against the fact that she could tell no one anything she learned, not until she could talk to Nynaeve and Elayne again, not unless she discovered something so dire that everything depended on it. . . . After all, the Black Ajah was Aes Sedai business; quite aside from any other reasons for keeping secrets, she could not tell just anyone. It was no choice at all.

Absently, she studied the nearest lights in the blackness. She did not recognize any of them. They held absolutely still around her, shimmering stars frozen in clear black ice.

There were too many strangers in the World of Dreams lately to suit her peace of mind. Two, but that was two too many. The copper-skinned woman and another, a sturdily pretty woman who moved with a purposeful stride, blue-eyed and with a determined face. The determined woman, as Egwene thought of her, must be able to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod* on her own—she seemed solid, not carved from fog—and whoever she was, for whatever reason she was there, she was about the Tower more often than Nynaeve and Elayne and Sheriam and the rest put together. She seemed to appear everywhere. In addition to the Tower, she had nearly surprised Egwene on her last trip to Tear. *Not* on a meeting night, of course; the woman had been stalking about the Heart of the Stone muttering to herself angrily. And she had been in Caemlyn on Egwene's last *two* trips.

The chances the determined woman was Black Ajah were as great as with the other, but then again, either could be from Salidar. Or both, though Egwene had never seen them together, or with anyone from Salidar. For that matter, either could be from the Tower itself. Divisions enough there for one side to be spying on another, and sooner or later the Tower Aes Sedai would learn of *Tel'aran'rhiod* if they had not already. The two strangers presented nothing but questions without answers. The only thing Egwene could think to do was avoid them.

Of course, she tried to avoid everyone in the World of Dreams of late. She had taken to looking over her shoulder, to thinking somebody was sneaking up behind her, to seeing things. She thought she had caught glimpses of Rand, of Perrin, even Lan, half-seen out of the corner of her eye. Imagination, of course, or maybe the chance touch of their dreams, but on top of everything else, it had her jumpy as a cat in a dogyard.

She frowned—or would have, had she a face. One of those lights looked. . . . Not familiar; she did not know it. But it seemed to . . . attract her. Wherever her gaze shifted, it came back to that same sparkling pinpoint.

Perhaps she could try finding Salidar again. That meant waiting for Nynaeve and Elayne to leave *Tel'aran'rhiod*—she knew their dreams by sight, of course; in her sleep, she thought with a silent giggle—and so far, a dozen attempts to locate Salidar that way had produced as much result as trying to get through the ward around Rand's dreams. Distance and location here really bore no relation to anything in the waking world; Amys said there *was* no distance or location here. On the other hand, it was as good as any—

Startlingly, the pinpoint her gaze kept returning to began to drift toward her, swelling until what had been a distant star quickly became a full white moon. A spark of fear lit inside her. Touching a dream, peeking inside, was easy—a finger to the surface of water, a touch so light that the water rose to the finger but the surface was never broken—yet it was all supposed to be at her volition. A dreamwalker sought the dream; the dream did not seek her. She willed it to go away, willed the starry scape to move. Only that one light moved, expanding to fill her vision with white light.

Frantically she tried to pull away. White light. Nothing but white light, absorbing her. . . .

She blinked, staring in amazement. Around her stretched a forest of great white columns. Most of it seemed fuzzy, indistinct, especially what was far away, but one thing sharp and real was Gawyn, trotting across the white-tiled floor toward her in a plain green coat, anxiety and relief mingled on his face. It was nearly Gawyn's face, anyway. Gawyn might not be as gorgeous as his half-brother Galad, but he was still a handsome man, yet this face seemed . . . ordinary. She tried to move and could not, not to any extent. Her back was to one of the columns, and chains held her wrists above her head.

This must be Gawyn’s dream. Out of all of those countless points of light, she had stopped near his. And somehow been drawn in. How was a question for later. Now she wanted to know why he would dream of holding her captive. Firmly she fixed the truth in her mind. This was a dream, someone else’s dream. She was herself, not whatever it was he wanted her to be. She did not accept the reality of anything here. Nothing here touched the true her. Those truths repeated like a chant in her head. It made thinking of anything else difficult, but so long as she held them hard she could risk staying. At least, long enough to find out what peculiar oddities the man had rolling around in his head. Holding her captive!

Abruptly a huge gout of flame bloomed on the floor tiles, and acrid yellow smoke billowed. Rand stepped out of that inferno garbed in gold-embroidered red like a king, facing Gawyn, and the fire and smoke vanished. Only it hardly seemed Rand at all. The real Rand was of a height and size with Gawyn, but this image overtopped Gawyn by a head. The face was just vaguely Rand’s, coarser and harder than it should be, the cold face of a murderer. This man wore a sneer. “You will not have her,” he snarled.

“You will not keep her,” Gawyn replied calmly, and suddenly both men held swords.

Egwene gaped. Not Gawyn holding her prisoner. He dreamed of rescuing her! From Rand! Time to leave this madness. She concentrated on being *outside*, back in the darkness, looking at this from the *outside*. Nothing happened.

Swords met with a clash, and the two men danced a deadly dance. Deadly if it had not been a dream, anyway. It was all nonsense. Dreaming a swordfight, of all things. And it was not a nightmare; everything looked normal, if fuzzy, not washed in color. “A man’s dreams are a maze even he cannot know,” Bair had told her once.

Egwene closed her eyes, focused her entire mind. Outside. She was outside, looking in. No room for anything else in her head. Outside, looking in. Outside, looking in. Outside!

She opened her eyes once more. The fight was reaching its climax. Gawyn’s blade drove into Rand’s chest, and as Rand sagged, the steel pulled free, swept in a shining arc. Rand’s head spun across the floor almost to her feet; it came to rest staring up at her. A scream bubbled in her throat before she could quell it. A dream. Just a dream. But those dead staring eyes seemed very real.

Then Gawyn was in front of her, sword back in its scabbard. Rand's head and body were gone. Gawyn reached for the manacles holding her, and they were gone, too.

"I knew you would come," she breathed, and gave a start. She was herself! She could not give in to this, not for a moment, or she would be well and truly trapped.

Smiling, Gawyn scooped her up into his arms. "I am glad you knew it," he said. "I would have come sooner if I could. I should never have left you in danger so long. Can you forgive me?"

"I can forgive you anything." There were two Egwenes now, one snuggling contentedly in Gawyn's arms as he carried her down a palace corridor lined with colorful tapestries and great mirrors in ornately gilded frames, the other riding in the back of the first's head.

This was becoming serious. Concentrate as hard as she would on being outside, she stayed there, watching through the eyes of a second her. Hurriedly she stifled curiosity as to what Gawyn dreamed about her. That sort of interest was dangerous. She accepted none of this! But none of it changed.

The corridor appeared quite real where she looked, though what was seen from the corner of her eye seemed hazy. Her own image glimpsed in a mirror caught her attention; she would have twisted to stare at it as they passed, but she was only a passenger in the head of the woman of Gawyn's dreams. The woman reflected for that instant had been her—there was no feature she could have pointed to and said it differed in the slightest from her real face—but somehow the whole was. . . . Beautiful was the only word. Stunningly so. Was that how Gawyn saw her?

No! No curiosity! Outside!

Between one stride and the next the corridor became a hillside carpeted in wildflowers, their scent rich on a soft breeze. The real Egwene gave a mental start. Had she done that? The barrier between her and the other thinned. She focused furiously. It was not real; she refused to accept it; she was herself. Outside. She wanted to be outside, looking in.

Gently Gawyn laid her down on a cloak already spread there on the hillside, in the manner of things in dreams. Kneeling beside her, he brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, let his fingers trail back to the corner of her mouth. Focusing on anything was very hard. She might have no control over the body she rode in, but she felt what it did, and his fingers seemed to make sparks jump.

"My heart is yours," he intoned softly, "my soul, my everything." His coat was scarlet now, elaborately worked in gold leaves and silver lions. He made grand gestures, touching head or hearty. "When I think of you, there is no room for any other thought. Your perfume fills my brain and sets my blood afire. My heart pounds till I could not hear the world crack apart. You are my sun and my moon and my stars, my heaven and earth, more precious to me than life or breath or—" Abruptly he stopped, grimacing. "You sound a fool," he muttered to himself.

Egwene would have disagreed had she had any control over her vocal cords. It was very nice hearing those things, even if they were a bit over the top. Just a bit.

When he grimaced, she felt a loosening, but

Flick.

Gently Gawyn laid her down on a cloak already spread there on the hillside, in the manner of things in dreams. Kneeling beside her, he brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, let his fingers trail back to the corner of her mouth. She might have no control over the body she rode in, but she could feel what it felt, and his fingers seemed to make sparks jump.

No! She could not let herself accept any part of his dream!

His face was a map of pain, his coat stark gray. His hands rested on his knees in fists. "I have no right to speak to you as I might wish," he said stiffly. "My brother loves you. I know Galad is in agony with fear for you. He is a Whitecloak at least half because he thinks the Aes Sedai have misused you. I know he—" Gawyn's eyes squeezed shut. "Oh, Light, help me!" he moaned.

Flick.

Gently Gawyn laid her down on a cloak already spread there on the hillside, in the manner of things in dreams. Kneeling beside her, he brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, let his fingers trail back to the corner of her mouth.

No! She was losing the little control she had! She had to get out! *What are you afraid of?* She was not sure whether that was her thought or the other Egwene's. The barrier between them was gauze now. *This is Gawyn. Gawyn.*

"I love you," he said hesitantly. In the green coat again, still less handsome than he really was, he plucked at one of his buttons before letting his hand drop. He looked at her as though afraid of what he might see on her face, hiding it, but not well. "I have never said that to another woman, never wanted to say it. You have no idea how hard it is to say to you. Not that I don't want to," he added hastily, flinging a hand toward her, "but to say it, with no encouragement, is like tossing aside my sword and baring my chest for a blade. Not that I think you would—Light! I can't say this properly. Is there any chance that you . . . might come . . . in time . . . to feel some . . . regard . . . for me? Something . . . more than friendship?"

"You sweet idiot," she laughed softly. "I love you" *I love you,* echoed in the part of her that was really her. She felt the barrier vanishing, had a moment to realize she did not care, and then there was only one Egwene again, an Egwene who happily twined her arms around Gawyn's neck.

Sitting on the stool in the dim moonlight, Nynaeve stuffed a yawn back into her mouth with her knuckles and blinked eyes that felt full of sand. This was going to work; oh, yes, it was. She would fall asleep saying hello to Theodrin, if not before! Her chin sank, and she jerked herself to her feet. The stool had begun feeling like stone—her bottom had gone numb—but that discomfort was apparently not enough anymore. Perhaps a walk outside. Arms outstretched, she felt her way to the door.

Abruptly a distant scream shattered the night, and as it did, the stool struck her hard in the back, knocking her against the rough door with a startled scream of her own. Stunned, she stared at the stool, lying on its side on the floor now, one leg shoved awry.

"What is it?" Elayne cried, coming bolt upright in her bed.

More screams and shouts sounded through Salidar, some from inside their own house, and a vague rumble and clatter that seemed to come from everywhere. Nynaeve's empty bed rattled, then slid a foot across the floor. Elayne's heaved, nearly tossing her out.

"A bubble of evil." Nynaeve was startled at how cool she sounded. There was no point leaping about and flapping her arms, but inside she was doing just that. "We have to wake anybody who's still asleep." She did not know how anyone could sleep through this racket, but those who did could die before they knew it.

Not waiting for a reply, she hurried out and pushed open the next door down the hall—and ducked as a white washbasin hurtled through the space where her head had been to smash against the wall behind her. Four women shared this room, in two beds a little larger than her own. Now one bed lay with its legs in the air, two women trying to crawl from beneath it. On the other, Emara and Ronelle, another Accepted, thrashed and made choking sounds, wrapped tight in their own bedsheet.

Nynaeve grabbed the first woman out from under the overturned bed, a gaping skinny serving woman named Mulinda, and shoved her toward the door. "Go! Wake anybody in the house still sleeping, and help anybody you can! Go!" Mulinda went, stumbling, and Nynaeve hauled her trembling sleeping companion to her feet. "Help me, Satina. Help me with Emara and Ronelle."

Trembling she might have been, but the plump woman nodded and set to with a will. It was not just a matter of unwinding the sheet, of course. The thing seemed alive, like a vine that would tighten until it crushed what it held. Nynaeve and Satina together barely peeled it away from the two women's throats; then the pitcher leaped from the washstand to crash against the ceiling, Satina jumped and lost her hold, and the sheet snapped out of Nynaeve's hands, right back where it had been. The two women's struggles were weakening; one made a rattling noise in her throat, the other no sound at all. Even by the little moonlight that came through the window their faces seemed swollen and dark.

Seizing the sheet again with both hands, Nynaeve opened herself to *saidar*, and found nothing. *I'm surrendering, burn you! I am surrendering! I need the Power!* Nothing. The bed shimmied against her knees, and Satina squeaked. "Don't just stand there!" Nynaeve snapped. "Help me!"

Abruptly the sheet jerked out of her grip once more, but instead of winding around Emara and Ronelle again, it pulled the other way so hard they tumbled over one another, nearly blurring as it unwound. Noticing Elayne in the doorway, Nynaeve closed her mouth with a click of teeth. The sheet hung from the ceiling. The Power. Of course.

"Everybody's awake," Elayne said, handing her a robe. She already had one over her own shift. "A few bruises and scrapes, one or two nasty cuts to be seen to when there's time, and I think *everybody* is going to have bad dreams for a few days, but that's the extent of it. Here." Screams and shouts still rang through the night. Satina jumped again as Elayne let the sheet fall, but it just lay there on the floor. The overturned bed shifted, though, creaking. Elayne bent over the groaning women on the bed. “I think they’re dizzy, mainly. Satina, help me get them on their feet.”

Nynaeve glowered at the robe in her hands. Well they might be dizzy, spun about like tops. Light, but she was useless. Rushing in like a fool to take charge. Without the Power, she was just useless.

“Nynaeve, could you give me a hand?” Elayne held a swaying Emara upright, while Satina was more than half-carrying Ronelle to the door. “I think Emara’s going to sick up, and it better be outside. I think the chamber pots are broken.” The smell said she was right. Pottery grated against the floor, trying to slither out from under the overturned bed.

Nynaeve thrust her arms angrily into her robe. She could sense the Source now, a warm glow just out of sight, but she deliberately ignored it. She had done without the Power for years. She could do without it now. Lifting Emara’s free arm over her shoulder, she helped guide the moaning woman toward the street. They almost made it.

When they got outside after wiping Emara’s mouth, everyone else was already huddled together in front of the house in robes or whatever they had slept in. The still full moon, hanging in a clear sky, gave a bright light. People were spilling out of the other houses in a bedlam of bellows and shrieks. One board in a fence rattled, then another. A bucket suddenly went bouncing down the street. A cart loaded with firewood abruptly rolled forward, shafts plowing shallow furrows in the hard ground. Smoke began to rise a house down the way, and voices began shouting for water.

The dark shape of someone lying in the street drew Nynaeve. One of the nightwatchmen, by the flickering lantern near his outstretched hand. She could see his staring eyes glittering in the moonlight, the blood covering his face, the dent in the side of his head where something had struck him like an axe. She felt his throat for a pulse anyway. She wanted to howl with fury. People should die after a long life, in their own beds, surrounded by family and friends. Anything else was waste. Pure miserable waste!

“So you’ve found *saidar* tonight, Nynaeve. Good.”

Nynaeve jumped, and stared up at Anaiya. She did hold *saidar*, she realized. And useless even with it. Rising, she wearily dusted her knees and tried not to look at the dead man. If she had been quicker, could it have made a difference?

The glow of the Power surrounded Anaiya, but not only her; the single light enveloped as well two more fully clothed Aes Sedai, an Accepted in a robe, and three novices, two in their shifts. One of those in her shift was Nicola. Nynaeve could see other glowing groups, dozens and dozens of them, moving in the street. Some seemed all Aes Sedai, but most not.

"Open yourself to linking," Anaiya went on. "And you, Elayne, and. . . . What is wrong with Emara and Ronelle?" On learning they were just dizzy, she muttered something under her breath, then told them to find a circle and link with it as soon as their heads were steady. Hurriedly she chose out four more Accepted from the cluster around Elayne. "Sammael—if it is him instead of one of the others—will learn we are far from helpless. Quickly now. Embrace the Source, but hold yourself at the point of embracing. You are open and yielding."

"This isn't one of the Forsaken," Nynaeve began, but the motherly Aes Sedai cut her off firmly.

"Don't argue, child, just open yourself. We have expected an attack, if not exactly like this, and planned for it. Quickly, child. There is no time to squander on idle chatter."

Snapping her mouth shut, Nynaeve tried to put herself on that brink where you embraced *saidar*, on the moment of surrender. It was not easy. Twice she felt the Power flow not just into her, but through her into Anaiya, and twice it snapped back. Anaiya's mouth tightened; she stared at Nynaeve as though thinking she did it on purpose. The third time was like being seized by the scruff of the neck. *Saidar* swept through Nynaeve to Anaiya, and when she attempted to pull back—it was her, she realized, not the flow itself—her flow was held, melting into a larger.

A sense of awe came over her. She found herself looking at the faces of the others, wondering if they felt the same. She was a part of something more than herself, greater than herself. Not just the One Power. Emotions tumbled in her head, fear and hope and relief—and yes, awe, more than any other—a sense of calm that had to come from the Aes Sedai, and she could not tell which emotions were hers. It should have been chilling, but she felt closer to these women than she could have to any sister, as if they were all one flesh. A lanky Gray named Ashmanaille smiled warmly at her, seemingly recognizing her thoughts.

Nynaeve's breath caught as it occurred to her that she no longer felt angry. Anger had vanished, swallowed in wonder. Yet somehow, now that control had passed to the Blue sister, the flow of *saidar* continued. Her eyes fell on Nicola and found no sisterly smile, only that considering study. Reflexively Nynaeve tried to pull back from the link, and nothing happened. Until Anaiya broke the circle she was part of it, and that was that.

Elayne joined much more easily, first slipping the silver bracelet into her robe's pocket. Cold sweat broke out on Nynaeve's face. What might have happened had Elayne entered the link already linked to Moghedien by the *a'dam*? She had no notion, which only made the question worse. Nicola frowned from Nynaeve to Elayne. Surely she could not separate out which emotions were which, not when Nynaeve could not tell her own. The final two were brought into the circle just as easily, Shimoku, a pretty dark-eyed Kandori who had become Accepted just before the Tower divided, and Calindin, a Taraboner with her black hair in a multitude of thin braids who had been Accepted for a good ten years. A woman little more than a novice and another who struggled for every scrap she learned, but they had no trouble linking.

Suddenly Nicola spoke, sounding half-asleep. “The lion sword, the dedicated spear, she who sees beyond. Three on the boat, and he who is dead yet lives. The great battle done, but the world not done with battle. The land divided by the return, and the guardians balance the servants. The future teeters on the edge of a blade.”

Anaiya stared at her. “What was that, child?”

Nicola blinked. “Did I say something, Aes Sedai?” she asked weakly. “I feel . . . peculiar.”

“Well, if you're going to be sick,” Anaiya said briskly, “get it over with. Linking takes some women funny the first time. We have no time to coddle your stomach.” As if to prove it, she gathered her skirts and started down the street. “Stay close, now, all of you. And sing out if you see something that needs dealing with.”

That was hardly a problem. People milled about in the streets, crying out to know what was happening or just crying out, and things moved. Doors slammed and windows banged open with no one touching them. Crashes and splinterings came from inside the houses. Pots, tools, stones, anything loose, might leap or dart at any moment. A stout cook in her shift snagged a hurtling bucket out of the air with a nearly hysterical laugh, but when a pale lean fellow in his smallclothes tried to knock away a stick of firewood, the result was the crack of his arm breaking. Ropes writhed their way about legs and arms, and even people's clothes began to crawl. They found a hairy man with his shirt wrapped around his head, flailing about so hard he kept at bay those who were trying to peel it away before it smothered him. A woman who had managed to pull on a dress if not fasten it up clung to the thatch on the edge of a roof, shrieking at the top of her lungs as the dress tried to haul her across the house, or maybe into the sky.

Dealing with these things proved no more problem than finding them. The flows of Power Anaiya wielded through the link—and those from other circles—would have had no trouble stopping a herd of charging bulls, much less a kettle that took it in mind to fly. And once a thing was stopped, whether by the Power or by hand, it seldom stirred again. There were just so many of them. There was not even time to stop for Healing unless a life was in danger; bruises, bleeding and broken bones had to wait while another fenceboard was slapped to the ground, hopefully before it split a head; another barrel halted in its wild rolling, before it broke a leg.

A sense of frustration grew in Nynaeve. So many things to quell; all small, but a man with his skull cracked by a frying pan or a woman strangled by her own shift was as dead as someone struck down by the Power. It was not just her frustration; she thought it came from every woman in the circle, even the Aes Sedai. But all she could do was march along with the others, watch Anaiya weave the combination of their flows to battle a thousand small dangers. Nynaeve lost herself in being a conduit, in being one with a dozen other women.

Finally Anaiya halted, frowning. The link dissolving caught Nynaeve by surprise. For a moment she sagged where she stood, staring uncomprehendingly. Moans and weeping had replaced screams and shouts; the palely lit street was still except for people trying to help the injured. By the moon, less than an hour had passed, but it seemed to Nynaeve like ten. Her back ached where the stool had hit her, her knees wobbled, her eyes felt scrubbed. She yawned so hard she thought her ears would pop.

"Not at all what I expected from one of the Forsaken," Anaiya muttered only half under her breath. She sounded tired too, but she launched right into the next thing to be done, catching Nicola by the shoulder. "You can hardly stand. Bed for you. Off you go, child. I want to speak to you first thing in the morning, before breakfast. Angla, you stay; you can link again and lend a little strength for the Healing. Lanita, bed."

“It wasn’t the Forsaken,” Nynaeve said. Mumbled, really. Light, she was tired. “It was a bubble of evil.” The three Aes Sedai stared at her. For that matter, so did the rest of the Accepted, except for Elayne, and the novices too. Even Nicola, who had not yet gone. For once, Nynaeve did not care how much the woman weighed her with her eyes; she was too sleepy to care.

“We saw one in Tear,” Elayne said, “in the Stone.” Only the aftermath, really, but that was closer than either of them had ever hoped to be again. “If Sammael attacked us, he wouldn’t toss sticks about.” Ashmanaille exchanged unreadable glances with Bharatine, a Green who managed to make rail-thin look gracefully slender and a long nose look elegant.

Anaiya never flickered an eyelid. “You seem to have plenty of energy left, Elayne. You can help with the Healing, too. And you, Nynaeve. . . . You’ve lost it again, haven’t you? Well, you look as if you ought to be carried to bed, but you will have to find your own way. Shimoku, stand up and go to bed, child. Calindin, you come with me.”

“Anaiya Sedai,” Nynaeve said carefully, “Elayne and I found something tonight. If we could speak to you alo—”

“Tomorrow, child. To bed with you. Now, before you fall down.” Anaiya did not even wait to see whether she was obeyed. Drawing Calindin after her, she strode to a groaning man lying with his head in a woman’s lap and bent over him. Ashmanaille pulled Elayne another way, and Bharatine took Angla a third. Before she vanished into the crowd, Elayne looked over her shoulder at Nynaeve and shook her head slightly.

Well, perhaps this was not the best time or place to bring up the bowl and Ebou Dar. There had been something odd in Anaiya’s reaction, as though she would be disappointed to learn this truly had not been an attack by the Forsaken. Why? She was too tired to think straight. Anaiya might have controlled the flows, but *saidar* had passed through Nynaeve for a good hour, enough to weary someone who had had a good night’s sleep.

Swaying, Nynaeve caught sight of Theodrin. The Domani woman limped along with a pair of white-clad novices at her side, pausing where someone seemed to have an injury her skill at Healing could handle. She did not see Nynaeve.

I will go to bed, Nynaeve thought sullenly. *Anaiya Sedai told me to.* Why had Anaiya seemed disappointed? Some thought nuzzled at the corner of her mind, but she was too sleepy to catch it. Her steps dragged, nearly stumbling on level ground. She *would* go to sleep, and Theodrin could make of it what she wanted.

* * *

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CHAPTER 15

A Pile of Sand

Egwene’s eyes opened, stared at nothing. For a moment she lay on her bedding, idly fingering the Great Serpent ring on its thong around her neck. Wearing it on her hand caused too many odd looks. Easier to fit in as a student of the Wise Ones if no one thought of her as Aes Sedai. Which she was not, of course. She was Accepted, yet had pretended to be Aes Sedai so long, she sometimes almost forgot that she was not.

A bit of early sunlight crept in at the door flap, barely lighting the tent’s interior. She might as well not have slept at all, and her temples were throbbing. Since the day Lanfear had nearly killed her and Aviendha, the day the Forsaken and Moiraine had killed each other, her head always hurt after a visit to *Tel’aran’rhiod*, though never enough to be a real bother. Anyway, back home Nynaeve had taught her something of herbs, and she had managed to find a few of the right sort here in Cairhien. Sleepwell root would make her drowsy—or maybe, as weary she was, it might put her under for hours—but it would clear any vestige of a headache.

Climbing to her feet, she straightened her twisted sweat-soaked shift and padded across the layered carpets to the washbasin, a carved crystal bowl that had probably once held wine punch for some nobleman. In any case, it held plain water as well as the blue-glazed pitcher did, water that hardly felt cool at all when she splashed it on her face. Her gaze met her own eyes in the small gilt-framed mirror propped against the dark tent wall, and her cheeks crimsoned.

“Well, what did you think would happen?” she whispered. She would not have thought it possible, but her reflection’s face grew redder.

It had only been a dream, not like *Tel’aran’rhiod*, where what happened to you was real when you woke. But she remembered everything, just as if it had been real. She thought her cheeks might burn right off. Just a dream, and Gawyn’s dream at that. He had no right to dream about her like that.

“It was all his doing,” she told her reflection angrily, “not mine! I had no choice in it!” Her mouth snapped shut ruefully. Trying to hold a man at fault for his dreams. And talking to a mirror like a goosehead.

Pausing at the door flap, she stooped to peer out. Her low tent stood on the edge of the Aiel encampment. The gray walls of Cairhien rose some two miles to the west across the bare hills, with nothing between except the charred ground where Foregate had once encircled the city. By the sharp cast to the light, the sun was just peeking over the horizon, yet Aiel already bustled among the tents.

No early rising for her this morning. After a whole night out of her body—her cheeks heated again; Light, was she going to go the rest of her life blushing over a *dream*? She was very much afraid she might—after that she could sleep until afternoon. The smell of cooking porridge was no competition for heavy eyelids.

Wearily she went back to her blankets and collapsed, rubbing her temples. She was too tired to prepare the sleepwell root, but then, she thought she was too tired for it to matter. The dull pain always faded in an hour or so; it would be gone when she woke.

Given everything, it was no surprise that Gawyn filled her dreams. Sometimes she repeated one of his, though not exactly, of course; in her versions, certain embarrassing events just did not occur, or at least were glossed over. Gawyn spent a good deal more time reciting poetry, and holding her while they watched sunrises and sunsets. He did not stumble over saying he loved her, either. And he looked as handsome as he really was. Others were all her own. Tender kisses that lasted forever. Him kneeling while she cupped his head in her hands. Some made no sense. Twice, right atop one another, she dreamed of taking him by the shoulders and trying to turn him to face the other way against his will. Once he brushed her hands away roughly; the other time, she was somehow stronger than he. The two blended together hazily. In another he began swinging a door closed on her, and she knew if that narrowing gap of light vanished, she was dead.

Dreams tumbled through her head, not all of him, and usually nightmarish.

Perrin came and stood before her, a wolf lying at his feet, a hawk and a falcon perched on his shoulders glaring at each other over his head. Seemingly unaware of them, he kept trying to throw away that axe of his, until finally he ran, the axe floating through the air, chasing him. Again Perrin; he turned away from a Tinker and ran, faster and faster though she called for him to come back. Mat spoke strange words she almost understood—the Old Tongue, she thought—and two ravens alighted on his shoulders, claws sinking through his coat into the flesh beneath. He seemed no more aware of them than Perrin had been of the hawk and falcon, yet defiance passed across his face, and then grim acceptance. In another a woman, face shrouded in shadow, beckoned him toward great danger; Egwene did not know what, only that it was monstrous. Several concerned Rand, not all bad, but all odd. Elayne, forcing him to his knees with one hand. Elayne and Min and Aviendha, sitting in a silent circle around him, each in turn reaching out to lay a hand on him. Him walking toward a burning mountain, something crunching beneath his boots. She stirred and whimpered; the crunching things were the seals on the Dark One’s prison, shattering with his every step. She knew it. She did not need to see them to know.

Feeding on fear, her dreams became worse. The two strange women she had been seeing in *Tel’aran’rhiod* caught her and dragged her before a table full of hooded women, and when they took off their hoods, every one was Liandrin, the Black sister who had captured her in Tear. A hard-faced Seanchan woman handed her a silvery bracelet and necklace connected by a silvery leash, an *a’dam*. That made her cry out; Seanchan had put an *a’dam* on her once. She would die before letting it happen again. Rand capered through the streets of Cairhien, laughing as he blasted buildings and people with lightning and fire, and other men ran with him, hurling the Power; that awful amnesty of his had been announced in Cairhien, but surely no man would *choose* to channel. The Wise Ones caught her in *Tel’aran’rhiod* and sold her like an animal in the lands beyond the Aiel Waste; that was what they did to Cairhienin they found in the Waste. She stood outside herself, watching her face melt, her skull crack open, and dimly seen shapes poke at her with hard sticks. Poke at her. Poke. . . .

She bolted up, gasping, and Cowinde sat back on her heels beside the bed, head bowed in the cowl of her white woolen robe.

“Forgive me, Aes Sedai. I only meant to wake you to break the night’s fast.”

“You didn’t have to jab a hole in my ribs,” Egwene muttered, and was instantly sorry.

Irritation flared in Cowinde’s deep blue eyes, and was snuffed out, hidden behind the *gai’shain* mask of compliant acceptance. Sworn to obey meekly and touch no weapon for a year and a day, *gai’shain* accepted whatever happened, whether a rude word, a blow, even a knife in the heart very likely. Though to an Aiel, killing a *gai’shain* was the same as killing a child. There was no excuse; the perpetrator would be struck down by his own brother or sister. Yet, it was a mask, Egwene was certain. *Gai’shain* worked at it doggedly, but they were still Aiel, and a people less meek Egwene could not imagine. Even one like Cowinde, who refused to put off the white when her year and a day was done. Her refusal was an act of stubborn pride and defiance, as much as any man refusing to retreat from ten enemies. Such tangles the Aiel’s *ji’e’toh* got them into.

That was one reason Egwene tried to watch how she spoke to *gai’shain*, especially those like Cowinde. They had no way to fight back without violating everything they believed in. On the other hand, Cowinde had been a Maiden of the Spear, and would be again if she could ever be convinced to put off that robe. Forgetting the Power, she could probably tie Egwene into a knot while honing a spear at the same time.

“I do not want any breakfast,” Egwene told her. “Just go away and let me sleep.”

“No breakfast?” Amys said, necklaces and bracelets of ivory and silver and gold clicking as she ducked into the tent. She wore no rings—Aiel did not—but for the rest she had on enough to do three women with some to spare. “I thought your appetite at least had recovered fully.”

Bair and Melaine followed her in, each as bedecked with jewelry. The three were from different clans, but where most other Wise Ones who had crossed the Dragonwall stayed close to their septs, their tents were together nearby. They took places on bright, tasseled cushions at the foot of her bedding, adjusting the dark shawls Aielwomen never seemed to be without. Those not *Far Dareis Mai*, anyway. Amys was as white-haired as Bair, but where Bair’s grandmotherly face bore deep creases, Amys looked oddly young, perhaps because of the contrast between hair and face. She said it had been nearly as pale when she was a child.

Usually Bair or Amys took the lead, but today Melaine, sun-haired and green-eyed, spoke first. “If you stop eating, you cannot get well. We had considered letting you come to the next meeting with the other Aes Sedai—they ask every time when you will come—”

“And make wetlander fools of themselves every time,” Amys put in acidly. She was not a sour woman, but the Aes Sedai in Salidar seemed to make her so. Maybe it was just meeting Aes Sedai. By custom, Wise Ones avoided them, especially Wise Ones who could channel, like Amys and Melaine. Besides, they were not pleased that the Aes Sedai had replaced Nynaeve and Elayne at the meetings. Neither was Egwene. She suspected the Wise Ones felt they had impressed those two with the seriousness of *Tel’aran’rhiod*. By the fragments she heard of the meetings now, the Aes Sedai were not impressed at all. Very little impressed Aes Sedai.

“But we may have to think again,” Melaine went on calmly. She had been prickly as a thornbush before her recent marriage, but little seemed to crack her composure now. “You must not return to the dream until your body has its full strength back.”

“Your eyes are pinched,” Bair said in a concerned, reedy voice that matched her face. In many ways she was the hardest of the three, though. “Did you sleep poorly?”

“How could she otherwise?” Amys asked grumpily. “I tried to look in on her dreams three times last night, and found nothing. No one can sleep well if they do not dream.”

Egwene’s mouth went dry in a heartbeat; her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. They would have to check on the one night she was not back in her body in just a few hours.

Melaine frowned. Not at Egwene; at Cowinde, still kneeling with her head down. “There is a pile of sand near my tent,” she said with something near her old sharpness. “You will search it grain by grain until you find one red grain. If it is not the one I seek, you will have to begin again. Go now.” Cowinde merely bowed until her face touched the colorful carpets, then scampered out. Looking at Egwene, Melaine smiled pleasantly. “You seem surprised. If she will not do what is proper on her own, I will make her decide to do it. Since she claims to serve me yet, she is still my responsibility.”

Bair’s long hair swung as she shook her head. “It will not work.” She adjusted her shawl on angular shoulders. Egwene sweated in just her shift, with the sun not really up yet, but the Aiel were used to far hotter. “I have beaten Juric and Beira until my arm wearied, but however many times I tell them to take off the white, they are back in the robes before sunset.”

“It is an abomination,” Amys muttered. “Since we crossed into the wetlands, a full quarter of those whose time is done have refused to return to their septs. They twist *ji’e’toh* beyond its meaning.”

That was Rand’s doing. He had revealed to all what only clan chiefs and Wise Ones had known before, that once all Aiel had refused to touch weapons or do violence. Now some believed they all properly should be *gai’shain.* Others refused to accept Rand as the *Car’a’carn* because of it, and still a few each day went to join the Shaido in the mountains to the north. Some simply threw down their weapons and vanished; no one knew what came of them. Taken by the bleakness, the Aiel called it. The strangest part of it to Egwene was that none of the Aiel blamed Rand, except the Shaido anyway. The Prophecy of Rhuidean said that the *Car’a’carn* would take them back and destroy them. Back to what, none seemed certain, but that he would destroy them, somehow, they accepted as calmly as Cowinde had begun a task she knew was hopeless.

Right that moment Egwene would not have cared if every Aiel in Cairhien donned a white robe. Let these Wise Ones even suspect what she had been up to. . . . She would have dug through a *hundred* piles of sand, willingly, but she did not think she would be so lucky. Her punishment would be much worse. Once Amys had said if she failed to do exactly as she was told—the World of Dreams being too dangerous, without that promise—Amys would no longer teach her. No doubt the others would agree; that was the punishment she feared. Better a *thousand* piles of sand under a broiling sun.

“Do not look so shaken,” Bair chuckled. “Amys is not angry at all wetlanders, certainly not at you, who have become like a daughter of our tents. It is your sister Aes Sedai. The one called Carlinya suggested we may be holding you against your will.”

“Suggested?” Amys’ pale eyebrows climbed nearly to her hairline. “The woman said as much!”

“And learned to guard her tongue better.” Bair laughed, rocking on her scarlet cushion. “I will wager she did. When we left them, she was still yelping and trying to get those scarlet puffers out of her dress. A scarlet puffer,” she confided to Egwene, “looks much like a red adder if your eye is dull like a wetlander’s, but it is not poisonous. It does wriggle when confined, though.”

Amys sniffed. “They would have been gone if she thought of them gone. The woman learns nothing. The Aes Sedai we served in the Age of Legends could not have been such fools.” But she sounded mollified.

Melaine was chortling quite openly, and Egwene found herself giggling too. Some Aiel humor was beyond explaining, but not this. She had only met Carlinya three times, but the image of that stiff, icily supercilious woman dancing about trying to haul snakes out of her dress—it was all she could do to keep from laughing out loud.

“At least your humor is in good fettle,” Melaine said. “The head pains have not come back?”

“My head feels fine,” Egwene lied, and Bair nodded.

“Good. We were worried when they persisted. So long as you refrain from entering the dream for a while longer, they should stay away. Do not fear you suffer any ill effect from them; the body uses pain to tell us to rest.”

That nearly made Egwene laugh again, though not in humor. Aiel ignored gaping wounds and broken bones because they could not be bothered right then. “How much longer do I have to stay out?” she asked. She hated lying to them, but she hated doing nothing even worse. The first ten days after Lanfear hit her with whatever that had been were bad enough; then she could not even think without her head splitting. Once she could, what her mother called “the itchy hands of idleness” had driven her into *Tel’aran’rhiod* behind the Wise Ones’ backs. You learned nothing resting. “The next meeting, you said?”

“Perhaps,” Melaine replied with a shrug. “We will see. But you must eat. If your desire for food is gone, something is wrong that we do not know.”

“Oh, I can eat.” The porridge cooking outside did smell good. “I was just being lazy, I suppose.” Getting up without wincing was a chore; her head did not like being moved yet. “I thought of some more questions last night.”

Melaine rolled her eyes in amusement. “Since, you were hurt you ask five questions for every one you asked before.”

Because she was trying to puzzle things out for herself. She could not say that, of course, so she just dug a clean shift from one of the small chests lining the tent wall and exchanged it for her sweaty one.

“Questions are good,” Bair said. “Ask.”

Egwene chose her words carefully. And went on with her dressing, casually, in the same white *algode* blouse and bulky wool skirt the Wise Ones wore. “Is it possible to be pulled into someone’s dream against your will?”

“Of course not,” Amys said, “not unless your touch is all thumbs.”

But right on top of her, Bair said, “Not unless there is strong emotion involved. If you try to watch the dream of someone who loves or hates you, you can be pulled in. Or if you love or hate them. That last is why we do not dare try to watch Sevanna’s dreams, or even to speak with the Shaido Wise Ones in their dreams.” It still surprised Egwene that these women, and the other Wise Ones, all visited and talked with the Shaido Wise Ones. Wise Ones were supposed to be above feuds and battles, but she would have thought opposing the *Car’a’carn*, vowing to kill him, took the Shaido well beyond that. “Leaving the dream of someone who hates you, or loves you,” Bair finished, “is like trying to climb from a deep pit with sheer sides.”

“There is that.” Amys seemed to recover her humor suddenly; she gave Melaine a sidelong glance. “That is why no dreamwalker ever makes the mistake of trying to watch her husband’s dreams.” Melaine stared straight ahead, face darkening. “She does not make it twice anyway,” Amys added.

Bair grinned, deepening the creases of her face, and very pointedly did not look at Melaine. “It can be quite a shock, especially if he is angry with you. If, to choose an example from air, *ji’e’toh* takes him away from you, and you, like some silly child, were foolish enough to tell him he would not go if he loved you.”

“This is running far afield from her question,” a crimson-faced Melaine said stiffly. Bair cackled loudly.

Egwene stifled curiosity, and amusement. She made her voice ever so offhanded. “What if you don’t try to look in?” Melaine gave her a grateful look, and she felt a twinge of guilt. Not enough that she would not ask for the whole story later, though. Anything that made *Melaine* blush so had to be hilarious.

“I heard of such a thing,” Bair said, “when I was young and just beginning to learn. Mora, the Wise One of Colrada Hold, trained me, and she said that if the emotion was *very* strong, love or hate so great it left room for nothing else, you could be drawn in merely by letting yourself be aware of the other’s dream.”

“I have never heard anything like that,” Melaine said. Amys merely looked doubtful.

“Nor have I from any save Mora,” Bair told them, “but she was a remarkable woman. It was said she was approaching her three hundredth year when she died from a bloodsnake’s bite, yet she looked as young as either of you. I was only a girl, but I remember her well. She knew many things, and could channel strongly. Other Wise Ones came from every clan to learn from her. I think love so great, or hate so, is very rare, but she said this happened to her twice, once with the first man she married, and once with a rival for her third husband’s interest.”

“Three hundred?” Egwene exclaimed, a soft knee-high boot half-laced. Surely even Aes Sedai did not live that long.

“I said that it was said,” Bair replied, smiling. “Some women age more slowly than others, like Amys here, and when it is a woman like Mora, tales are born. Someday I will tell you the story of how Mora moved a mountain. Supposedly, at least.”

“Another day?” Melaine said a touch too politely. Plainly she still smarted over whatever had happened in Bael’s dream, and over the fact the others knew. “I heard every tale of Mora when I was a child; I have them all by heart, I think. If Egwene ever finishes dressing, we must see her fed.” A gleam in her green eyes said she meant to watch every bite go down; clearly her suspicions about Egwene’s health had not been soothed. “And answer the rest of her questions.”

Frantically Egwene fumbled for another. Usually she had a slew of questions, but the events of the night had left her with just that one. If she let it remain at that, they might start wondering whether it had come because she had sneaked off to spy on someone’s dream. Another question. Not about her own odd dreams. Some of them probably had meaning, if she could ferret it out. Anaiya claimed Egwene was a Dreamer, able to foretell the course of future events, and these three women thought it might be so, but they said she had to learn it from within. Besides, she was not sure she wanted to discuss her dreams with anyone. These women already knew more than she really liked about what went on inside her head. “Ah . . . what about dreamwalkers who aren’t Wise Ones? I mean, do you ever see other women in *Tel’aran’rhiod*?”

“Sometimes,” Amys said, “but not often. Without a guide to teach her, a woman may not realize she does more than have vivid dreams.”

“And of course,” Bair added, “unknowing as she is, the dream may well kill her before she can learn. . . .”

Safely away from the dangerous topic, Egwene relaxed. She had received more answer than she could have hoped for. She already knew she loved Gawyn—*Did you, then?* a voice whispered. *Were you willing to admit it?*—and his dreams certainly indicated he loved her. Though of course, if men could say things waking they did not mean, they very probably could dream them. But to have the Wise Ones confirm it, that he loved her strongly enough to overwhelm anything she. . . .

No. That was to be dealt with later. She did not even have an idea where in the world he was. The important thing now was that she knew the danger. She would be able to recognize Gawyn’s dreams the next time, and avoid them. *If you really want to*, that small voice whispered. She hoped the Wise Ones took the color rising in her cheeks for a healthy glow. She wished she knew what her own dreams meant. If they meant anything.

Yawning, Elayne climbed onto a stone stoop so she could see over the heads of the crowd. There were no soldiers in Salidar today, but people packed the street and hung out of windows, waiting in hushed anticipation, all staring at the Little Tower. The shuffling of feet and an occasional cough from the rising dust were the only sounds. Despite the early morning heat, people barely moved beyond stirring a fan or hat to make a little breeze.

Leane stood in the gap between two thatch-roofed houses, on the arm of a tall, hard-faced man Elayne had never seen before. Very much on his arm. No doubt one of Leane’s agents. Most Aes Sedai eyes-and-ears were women, but Leane’s all seemed to be men. She kept them largely out of sight, but Elayne had noticed her once or twice patting an unfamiliar cheek, smiling up at a pair of strange eyes. She had no idea how Leane did it. Elayne was sure if she tried those Domani tricks, the fellow would think she had promised a good more than she intended, but these men took a pat and a smile from Leane and went trotting away as happy as if handed a chest of gold.

Elsewhere in the crowd, Elayne spotted Birgitte, wisely keeping away from her this morning. For a change that horrid Areina was nowhere to be seen. The night had been well beyond hectic, and Elayne had not gone to bed until the sky was already beginning to lighten toward gray. In truth, she would, not have gone at all if Birgitte had not told Ashmanaille she thought

Elayne looked unsteady. Not a matter of how she looked at all, of course; the bond with a Warder ran both ways. So what if she had been a little tired? There had been plenty of work to do, and she could still channel more strongly than half the Aes Sedai in Salidar. That bond told her that Birgitte had not slept yet, not her! Elayne sent off to bed like a novice, while Birgitte carried the injured and cleared away wreckage all night!

A glance showed Leane alone now, squeezing into the crowd to find a good place to watch. There was no sign of the tall man.

A yawning, bleary-eyed Nynaeve climbed up beside Elayne, glaring down a leather-vested woodcutter who would have gotten there before her. Muttering to himself, the fellow shoved back into the crowd. Elayne wished Nynaeve would not do that. The yawn, not the glare. Her own jaw cracked in mimicry before she could stop it. There was some excuse for Birgitte—some, maybe; a little—but none for Nynaeve. Theodrin could not possibly expect her to have stayed awake after last night, and Elayne had heard Anaiya tell her to go to bed, yet there she was when Elayne came in, balancing herself on the stool despite its now crooked leg, head nodding every two minutes, muttering about showing Theodrin, showing everyone.

The *a'dam* bracelet conveyed fear to Elayne, of course, but something that might have been amusement as well. Moghedien had spent the night hiding under her bed, untouched and, because she was well hidden, without picking up one single stick of rubbish. She had even gotten a good night's sleep once the first commotion died down. It seemed that old saw about the Dark One's luck held sometimes.

Nynaeve began another yawn, and Elayne jerked her eyes away. Even so, she had to shove her fist against her mouth in a not very successful attempt to avoid imitation. The shuffling feet and coughs took on an impatient sound.

The Sitters were still inside the Little Tower with Tarna, but the Red's roan gelding already stood in the street before the former inn, and a dozen Warders were holding their horses' bridles, their color-shifting cloaks making them uneasy to look at, an escort of honor for the first miles of Tarna's journey back to Tar Valon. The crowd waited for more than the Tower envoy's departure, though most looked as worn out as Elayne felt.

"You'd think she was . . . was. . . ." Nynaeve gaped hard behind her hand.

“Oh, blood and ashes,” Elayne muttered, or tried to. Everything after “oh” came out a strangled croak around the fist stuffed in her mouth. Lini said remarks like that were the sign of a slow mind and a dull wit—right before washing your mouth out—but sometimes nothing else could sum up your feelings in as few words. She would have said more, but had no chance.

“Why don’t they give her a procession?” Nynaeve growled. “I do not see why they have to give the woman all this to-do.” And she yawned again. Again!

“Because she is Aes Sedai, sleepyhead,” Siuan said, joining them. “Two sleepyheads,” she added with a glance at Elayne. “You’ll catch minnows if you keep doing that.” Elayne snapped her mouth shut and gave the woman her coldest stare. As usual, it slid off like rain from a glazed roof tile. “Tarna is Aes Sedai, my girls,” Siuan went on, peering toward the waiting horses. Or maybe it was the clean cart that had been pulled in front of the stone building that had her eye. “An Aes Sedai is Aes Sedai, and nothing changes that.” Nynaeve gave her a look she did not see.

Elayne was glad Nynaeve held her tongue; the obvious reply would have been hurtful. “What was the toll last night?”

Siuan answered without looking away from where Tarna would appear. “Seven dead, here in the village. Nearly a hundred in the soldiers’ camps. All those swords and axes and the like lying about, and no one to channel them down. There are sisters out there now, Healing.”

“Lord Gareth?” Elayne asked, a touch anxiously. The man might be cold toward her now, but once he had had a warm smile for a child and a pocket that always held hard candies.

Siuan snorted so hard that people turned around to look. “That one,” she muttered. “A lionfish would break its teeth on the man.”

“You seem in a fine temper this morning,” Nynaeve said. “Have you finally learned what the Tower’s message is? Gareth Bryne asked you to marry him? Somebody died and left you—?”

Elayne tried not to look at Nynaeve; even the sound of a yawn made her jaws creak.

Siuan gave Nynaeve a level look, but for once Nynaeve met it just as flatly, if a bit watery-eyed.

“If you’ve learned something,” Elayne broke in before they could stare one another senseless, “tell us.”

"A woman who claims to be Aes Sedai when she isn't," Siuan murmured as though voicing an idle thought, "is neck-deep in a boiling kettle, true enough, but if she's claimed a particular Ajah, that Ajah has first call on her. Has Myrelle ever told you about the woman she caught claiming to be a Green in Chachin? A former novice who failed her test for Accepted. Ask her, some time when she has an hour or two. It will take that long to tell. The fool girl probably wished she had been stilled before Myrelle was done, stilled and her head cut off as well."

For some reason the threat had no more effect than the glare had on Nynaeve, not even a quiver. Perhaps they were both just too tired. "You tell me what you know," Elayne said in a low voice, "or the next time we're alone, I will teach you to sit up straight, and you can run whining to Sheriam if you want." Siuan's eyes narrowed, and suddenly Elayne yelped, clapping a hand to her hip.

Siuan drew back the hand that had delivered the pinch without any try at stealth. "I don't take well to threats, girl. You know as well as I do what Elaida said; you saw it before anyone here."

"Come back; all is forgiven?" Nynaeve said incredulously.

"More or less. With a load of fish guts about the Tower needing to be whole more now than ever, and a bit of slippery eeling about no one needing to fear except those who 'have placed themselves in true rebellion.' The Light knows what that means. I don't."

"Why are they keeping it secret?" Elayne demanded. "They can't possibly think anyone will go back to Elaida. All they need do is trot out Logain." Siuan said nothing, only frowned at the waiting Warders.

"I still don't see why they're asking for more time," Nynaeve muttered. "They know what they have to do." Siuan kept silent, but Nynaeve's eyebrows rose slowly. "You didn't know their answer."

"I do now," Siuan clipped the words, and said something under her breath about "weak-kneed fools." Elayne agreed silently.

Suddenly the front door of the onetime inn opened. Half a dozen Sitters came out in their fringed shawls, one from each Ajah, then Tarna, followed by the rest. If the waiting folk had expected some sort of ceremony, they were sorely disappointed. Climbing into her saddle, Tarna ran her eyes slowly over the Sitters, glanced at the crowd with an unreadable face, then heeled the gelding to a walk. Her encircling escort of

Warders moved with her. A concerned buzz, like the sound of disturbed bees, rose from the onlookers as they gave way.

The murmuring lasted until Tarna passed from sight, out of the village, and Romanda climbed up onto the cart, smoothly hitching her yellow-fringed shawl into place. Dead silence fell. By tradition the eldest Sitter made pronouncements from the Hall. Romanda did not move like an old woman, of course, and her face was as ageless as any, yet even streaks of gray hair marked considerable age on an Aes Sedai, and the bun gathered at the nape of her neck was pale gray without a trace of anything darker. Elayne wondered how old she was, but asking an Aes Sedai's age was about the rudest thing possible.

Romanda wove simple flows of Air to make her high soprano voice carry; it came to Elayne as if she had been face-to-face with the woman. "Many of you have been worried these last few days, but needlessly. Had Tarna Sedai not come to us, we would have sent missives to the White Tower ourselves. After all, we can hardly be said to be hiding here." She paused as if to give the crowd time to laugh, but they merely stared at her, and she adjusted her shawl. "Our purpose here has not changed. We seek truth and justice, to do what is right . . ."

"Right for who?" Nynaeve murmured.

". . . and we shall neither flag nor fail. Go about your tasks as you have, assured that you remain sheltered beneath our hands, now and after our assured return to our proper places in the White Tower. The Light shine upon you all. The Light shine upon all of us."

The murmuring rose again, and the crowd began milling slowly, as Romanda climbed down. Siuan's face might have been carved from stone; her lips were pinched bloodless. Elayne wanted to ask questions, but Nynaeve hopped off the stoop and began pushing toward the three-story stone building. Elayne followed quickly. Last night Nynaeve had been ready to toss out what they had learned with never a care; it had to be presented carefully if it was to be any use in swaying the Hall. And it certainly seemed they did need swaying. Romanda's announcement had been a wagonload of nothing. It had certainly upset Siuan.

Wriggling between two hefty fellows who were glaring at Nynaeve's back—*she* had stepped on toes to get by—Elayne glanced over her shoulder and caught Siuan watching her and Nynaeve. For just a moment; as soon as the woman realized she had been seen, she pretended to spot someone in the crowd and jumped down as if going to them. Frowning, Elayne hurried on. Was Siuan upset, or was she not? How much of her irritation and ignorance were really pretense? Nynaeve's notion of running off to Caemlyn—Elayne was not sure she had given it up yet—was worse than silly, but she herself was looking forward to Ebou Dar, to doing something of real use. All these secrets and suspicions were an itch she could not reach. If only Nynaeve did not put her foot in it.

She caught up to Nynaeve just as the other woman caught Sheriam, near the cart Romanda had spoken from. Morvrin was there too, and Carlinya, all three in their shawls. All the Aes Sedai wore shawls this morning. Carlinya's short hair, worked into a cap of dark curls, was the only sign of their near disaster in *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

"We need to speak to you alone," Nynaeve told Sheriam. "In private."

Elayne sighed. Not the best beginning, but not the worst, either.

Sheriam studied the two of them for a moment, then glanced at Morvrin and Carlinya and said, "Very well. Inside."

When they turned, Romanda was between them and the door, a solidly handsome, dark-eyed woman with her yellow-fringed shawl, all flowers and vines except for the Flame of Tar Valon, high between her shoulders. Ignoring Nynaeve, she smiled warmly at Elayne, one of those smiles Elayne had come to expect, and dread, from Aes Sedai. For Sheriam and Carlinya and Morvrin, though, her face was very different. She stared at them, expressionless, head erect, until they dipped slight curtsies and murmured, "By your leave, Sitter." Only then did she move aside, and even then she sniffed loudly.

The common run of folk never noticed, of course, but Elayne had caught snippets among the Aes Sedai about Sheriam and her little council. Some thought they only saw to the day-to-day running of Salidar, freeing the Hall for more important matters. Some knew they had influence with the Hall, but how much varied according to who spoke. Romanda was one who believed they had entirely too much; worse, they had two Blues and no Yellow in their number. Elayne felt her eyes as she followed the others through the doorway.

Sheriam led them to one of the private chambers just off the former common room, with beetle-chewed paneling and a paper-strewn table against one wall. Her eyebrows lifted when Nynaeve asked them to ward against eavesdropping, but she wove the ward around the inside of the room without comment. Remembering Nynaeve's excursion, Elayne checked to be sure both windows were tightly shut.

"I expect no less than news Rand al'Thor is on his way here," Morvrin said dryly. A quick glance passed between the other two Aes Sedai. Elayne stifled indignation; they really did think she and Nynaeve were holding back secrets about Rand. Them and their secrets!

"Not that," Nynaeve said, "but something as important, in a different way." And out tumbled the story of their trip to Ebou Dar and finding the bowl *ter'angreal*. Not in proper order, and not mentioning the Tower, but all the essential points were there.

"Are you certain this bowl is a *ter'angreal*?" Sheriam asked when Nynaeve ran down. "It can affect the weather?"

"Yes, Aes Sedai," Elayne answered simply. Simple was best, to begin. Morvrin grunted; the woman doubted everything.

Sheriam nodded, shifting her shawl. "Then you have done well. We will send a letter to Merilille." Merilille Ceandevin was the Gray sister sent to convince the queen in Ebou Dar to support Salidar. "We will need all the details from you."

"She'll never find it," Nynaeve burst out before Elayne could open her mouth. "Elayne and I can." Aes Sedai eyes chilled.

"It probably would be impossible for her," Elayne put in hastily. "We *saw* where the bowl is, and it will be difficult for *us*. But at least we *know* what we saw. Describing it in a letter just won't be the same."

"Ebou Dar is no place for Accepted," Carlinya said coldly.

Morvrin's tone was a little more kindly, if still gruff. "We must all do what we can do best, child. Do you think Edesina or Afara or Guisin wanted to go to Tarabon? What can they do to bring order to that unquiet land? But we must try, so they went. Kiruna and Bera are probably in the Spine of the World right this minute, on their way to search for Rand al'Thor in the Aiel Waste because we thought—only thought—when we sent them that he might be there. That we were right makes their journey no less futile now, with him out of the Waste. We all do what we can, what we must. You two are Accepted. Accepted do not go running off to Ebou Dar or anywhere else. What you two can and must do is remain here and study. Were you full sisters, I would still say keep you here. No one has made the sort of discoveries you have, the sheer number in so short a time, in a hundred years."

Nynaeve being Nynaeve, she ignored what she did not want to hear and focused on Carlinya. “We have done very well on our own, thank you. I doubt Ebou Dar can be as bad as Tanchico.”

Elayne did not think the woman knew she had a death grip on her braid. Would Nynaeve never learn that simple civility sometimes won what honesty would surely lose? “I understand your concerns, Aes Sedai,” Elayne said, “but however immodest it might be, the truth is that I am better qualified to locate a *ter’angreal* than anyone else in Salidar. And Nynaeve and I know better where to look than we could ever put on paper. If you send us to Merilille Sedai, under her guidance I am sure we could locate it in short order. A few days to Ebou Dar by riverboat and a few days back, with a few days under Merilille Sedai’s eye in Ebou Dar.” It was an effort not to draw a deep breath. “In the meantime, you could send a message to one of Siuan’s eyes-and-ears in Caemlyn, so it will be there when Merana Sedai and the embassy arrive.”

“Why under the Light should we do that?” Morvrin rumbled.

“I thought Nynaeve told you, Aes Sedai. I’m not sure, but I think the bowl needs a man channeling too, to make it work.”

That caused a small commotion, of course. Carlinya gasped, and Morvrin muttered to herself, and Sheriam’s mouth actually fell open. Nynaeve gaped as well, but just for an instant; Elayne was sure she covered before the others noticed. They were too stunned to see very much. The thing was, it was a lie, pure and simple. Simple was the key. Supposedly the greatest achievements in the Age of Legends had been done by men and women channeling together, probably linked. Very likely there *were* *ter’angreal* that needed a man to work. In any case, if *she* could not work the bowl alone, certainly no one in Salidar could. Except Nynaeve, maybe. If it required Rand, they could not pass up the chance to do something about the weather, and by the time she “discovered” that a circle of women could manage the bowl, the Aes Sedai in Salidar would have tied themselves to Rand too tightly to break loose.

“That is all very well,” Sheriam said at last, “but it does not change the fact that you are Accepted. We will send a letter to Merilille. There has been some talk about the two of you—”

“Talk,” Nynaeve snapped. “That is all you do, you *and* the Hall! Talk! Elayne and I can find this *ter’angreal*, but you would rather prattle like laying hens.” Words tumbled over each other coming out of her. She kept such a steady strain on her braid, Elayne half-expected to see it come loose in her hand. “You sit here, hoping Thom and Juilin and the others will come back and tell you the Whitecloaks aren’t going to fall on us like a house, when they might come back with Whitecloaks on their heels. You sit, poking at the problem of Elaida instead of doing what you said you would, fumbling over Rand. Do you know how you stand toward him yet? Do you, with your embassy on its way to Caemlyn? Do you know why you sit and talk? I do! You’re afraid. Afraid of the Tower divided, afraid of Rand, the Forsaken, the Black Ajah. Last night Anaiya let slip that you had a plan ready in case one of the Forsaken attacked. All those circles linking, right on top of the bubble of evil—do you finally believe in that?—but all mismatched and most with more novices than Aes Sedai. Because only a few Aes Sedai knew beforehand. You think the Black Ajah’s right here in Salidar. You were afraid your plan might get back to Sammael, or one of the others. You don’t trust each other. You don’t trust anybody! Is that why you won’t send us to Ebou Dar? Do you think *we’re* Black Ajah, or we’ll run off to Rand, or . . . or . . . !” She trailed off in furious splutters and panting. She had hardly drawn breath through the entire tirade.

Elayne’s first wincing instinct was to smooth it over somehow, though how was a question she could not begin to answer. As easy to smooth over a mountain range. It was the Aes Sedai who made her forget to worry whether Nynaeve had managed to shatter everything. Those expressionless faces, those eyes that seemed able to see through stone, should have conveyed nothing at all. To her, they did convey something. There was none of the cold anger that should have flowed toward anyone foolish enough to rant at Aes Sedai. This was a covering up, and the only thing to hide was truth, a truth they did not want to admit themselves. They were afraid.

“Are you quite done?” Carlinya asked in a voice that should have frozen the sun in its flight.

Elayne sneezed, banging her head on the side of the overturned cauldron. The smell of burned soup filled her nose. The midmorning sun had heated the dark interior of the big cookpot until it felt as if it still sat on a fire; sweat dripped off her. No, it poured off. Dropping the coarse pumice stone, she backed out on her knees and glared at the woman next to her. Or rather, at the half of a woman sticking out of a slightly smaller kettle lying on its side. She poked Nynaeve in the hip, and smiled grimly when the poke produced the bang of a head against iron and a yelp. Nynaeve backed out with a baleful stare, not hindered at all by a yawn she stifled behind a grimy hand. Elayne gave her no chance to speak.

“You just had to blow up, didn’t you? You couldn’t hold on to your temper for five minutes. We had everything in our hands, and you had to kick us in the ankles.”

“They wouldn’t have let us go to Ebou Dar anyway,” Nynaeve muttered. “And I didn’t do all the kicking of ankles.” She shoved her chin up in a ridiculous fashion, so she had to look down her nose to see Elayne. “ ‘Aes Sedai rule their fear,’ ” she said in tones that might have done for berating a drunken layabout who had staggered into your horse, “ ‘they do not allow it to rule them. Lead, and we will follow gladly, but you must lead, not cower, hoping that something will make your troubles vanish.’ ”

Elayne’s cheeks heated. She had not looked anything like that. And she certainly had not sounded like that. “Well, perhaps we both overstepped good sense, but—” She cut off at the sound of a footstep.

“So the Aes Sedai’s golden children have decided to take a rest, have they?” Faolain’s smile was as far from friendly as it was possible for a smile to be. “I am not here for the joy of it, you know. I meant to spend today working on something of my own, something not terribly inferior to what you golden children have done, I think. Instead, I must watch Accepted scrub pots for their sins. Watch so you don’t sneak off like the wretched novices the pair of you should be. Now back to work. I can’t leave until you’re done, and I do not intend to spend the whole day here.”

The dark, curly-haired woman was like Theodrin, something more than Accepted, but less than Aes Sedai. As Elayne and Nynaeve would have been, if Nynaeve had not behaved liked a stepped-on cat. Nynaeve and herself, Elayne amended reluctantly. Sheriam had told them as much in the middle of telling them just how long they would be working their “free” hours in the kitchens, the dirtiest work the cooks could find. But no Ebou Dar in any case; that had been made clear, too. A letter would be on its way to Merilille by noon if not already.

“I . . . am sorry,” Nynaeve said, and Elayne blinked at her. Apologies from Nynaeve were snow in midsummer.

“I’m sorry, too, Nynaeve.”

“Yes you are,” Faolain told them. “As sorry as I’ve seen. Now back to work! Before I find reason to send you to Tiana when you’re done here.”

With a rueful glance at Nynaeve, Elayne crawled back into the cauldron, attacking the charred soup with the pumice stone as though attacking Faolain. Stone dust and bits of black-burned vegetable flew. No, not Faolain. The Aes Sedai, sitting when they should be acting. She *was* going to get to Ebou Dar, she *was* going to find that *ter'angreal*, and she *was* going to use it to tie Sheriam and all the rest of them to Rand. On their knees! Her sneeze very nearly took her shoes off.

Sheriam turned from where she had been watching the young women through a crack in the fence, and began walking up the narrow alley with its fitful crop of withered weeds and stubble. “I regret that.” Considering Nynaeve’s words, and her tone—and Elayne’s, the wretched child!—she added, “Somewhat.”

Carlinya sneered. She was very good at that. “Do you want to tell Accepted what fewer than two dozen Aes Sedai know?” Her mouth clicked shut at a sharp look from Sheriam.

“There are ears where we least expect them,” Sheriam said softly.

“Those girls are right about one thing,” Morvrin said. “Al’Thor turns my bowels to water. What options are left to us with him?”

Sheriam was not sure they had not long since run out of options.

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CHAPTER 16

Tellings of the Wheel

With the Dragon Scepter across his knees, Rand lounged on the Dragon Throne. Or made a show of lounging, at least. Thrones were not made for relaxation, this one least of all, it seemed, but that was only part of the difficulty. Sensing Alanna was part too, for all that it nudged at him constantly. If he told the Maidens, they would. . . . No. How could he even think of that? He had frightened her enough to keep her at bay; she had made no effort to enter the Inner City. He would know if she did. No, for the moment Alanna was less of a problem than the inadequate seat cushion.

Despite the silver-worked blue coat buttoned to its collar, the heat did not reach him—he really was getting the way of Taim's trick—but if pure impatience had produced sweat, he would have dripped as if just climbing out of a river. Keeping cool presented no problem at all. Keeping still did. He intended to give Elayne an Andor whole and unharmed, and this morning would be the first real step to that. If they ever came.

". . . and in addition," the tall bony man standing before the Throne said in a near monotone, "one thousand four hundred twenty-three refugees from Murandy, five hundred sixty-seven from Altara, and one hundred nine from Illian. As far as the head count inside the city proper has gone to this date, I hasten to add." The few wisps of gray hair remaining to Halwin Norry stood up like quill pens stuck behind his ears, appropriate since he had been Morgase's chief clerk. "I have hired twenty-three additional clerks for the enumeration, but the number is still clearly insufficient for. . . ."

Rand stopped listening. Grateful as he was that the man had not run away as so many others had, he was not certain anything was real to Norry except the numbers in his ledgers. He recited the number of deaths during the week and the price of turnips carted in from the countryside in the same dusty tone, arranged the daily burials of penniless friendless refugees with no more horror and no more joy than he showed hiring masons to check the repair of the city walls. Illian was just another land to him, not the abode of Sammael, and Rand just another ruler.

Where are they? he wondered furiously. *Why hasn't Alanna at least tried to sidle up to me?* Moiraine would never have been frightened off so easily.

Where are all the dead? Lews Therin whispered. *Why will they not be silent?*

Rand chuckled grimly. Surely that had to be a joke.

Sulin was sitting easily on her haunches to one side of the throne's dais, and red-haired Urien to the other. Today twenty *Aethan Dor,* Red Shields, waited among the Grand Hall's columns with the Maidens, some wearing the red headband. They stood or squatted or sat, some talking quietly, but as usual looked ready to spring into action in a heartbeat, even the Maiden and two Red Shields who were dicing. At least one pair of eyes always seemed to be watching Norry; few Aiel trusted a wetlander this close to Rand.

Abruptly Bashere appeared in the Hall's tall doorway. When he nodded, Rand sat up. At last. At bloody last. The green-and-white tassel swayed as he gestured with the dragon-carved length of Seanchan spear. "You've done well, Master Norry. Your report left nothing out. I will see that the gold you need is provided. But I must attend to other matters now, if you will forgive me."

The man gave no sign of curiosity or hurt at being cut off so abruptly. He merely stopped in midword, bowed with "As the Lord Dragon commands" in that same dry tone, and backed away three steps before turning. He did not even glance at Bashere in passing. Nothing real but the ledgers.

Impatiently, Rand nodded to Bashere and set himself erect and stiff-backed on the throne. The Aiel went silent. It made them seem twice as ready.

When the Saldaean entered, he did not come alone. Two men and two women followed close behind, none young, in rich silks and brocades. They tried to pretend Bashere did not exist, and almost carried it off, but the watchful Aiel among the columns were another story. Golden-haired Dyelin missed only a step, but Abelle and Luan, both graying yet hard-faced, frowned at the *cadin'sor*-clad figures and instinctively felt for the swords they did not wear today, while Ellorien, a plump dark-haired woman who would have been pretty were her face not so determinedly stony, stopped dead and glared before she came to herself and caught up to the others with a quick stride. Their first good view of Rand took them aback as well, all of them. Quick wondering glances passed between them. Perhaps they had thought he would be older.

"My Lord Dragon," Bashere intoned loudly, halting before the dais, "Lord of the Morning, Prince of the Dawn, True Defender of the Light, before whom the world kneels in awe, I give to you Lady Dyelin of House Taravin, Lord Abelle of House Pendar, Lady Ellorien of House Traemane, and Lord Luan of House Norwelyn."

The four Andorans looked at Bashere then, with tight lips and sharp sidelong glances. There had been something in his tone that made it sound as if he was giving Rand four horses. To say their spines stiffened would be to say water became wetter, yet it seemed so as they stared up at Rand. Mostly at Rand. Their eyes could not help drifting to the Lion Throne shining and glittering on its pedestal beyond his head.

He wanted to laugh at their outraged faces. Outraged, but also careful, and perhaps a touch impressed in spite of themselves. He and Bashere had worked out that list of titles between them, but the bit about the world kneeling was new, Bashere's own late addition. Moiraine had given him the advice, though. He almost thought he heard her silvery voice again. *How people see you first is what they hold hardest in their minds. It is the way of the world. You can step down from a throne, and even if you behave like a farmer in a pigsty, some part in each of them will remember that you did descend from a throne. But if they see only a young man first, a country man, they will resent him stepping up to his throne later, whatever his right, whatever his power.* Well, if a title or two could make anything so, everything would be a deal easier.

I was the Lord of the Morning, Lews Therin mumbled. *I am the Prince of the Dawn.*

Rand kept his face smooth. "I will not welcome you—this is your land, and the palace of your queen—but I am pleased you accept my invitation." After five days, and with just a few hours' notice, but he did not mention that. Rising, he laid the Dragon Scepter on the throne, then trotted down from the dais. With a reserved smile—*Never be hostile unless you must,* Moiraine had said, *but above all never be overly friendly. Never be eager*—

he gestured to five comfortably cushioned chairs with padded backs, set in a circle among the columns. “Join me. We will talk and have some chilled wine.”

They followed, of course, eyeing the Aiel and him with equal curiosity and perhaps equal animosity, both poorly hidden. When they were all seated, *gai’shain* came, silent in their hooded white robes, bringing wine and golden goblets already damp with condensation. Another stood behind each chair with a plumed fan, gently stirring the air. Every chair but Rand’s. They noted that, noted the lack of sweat on his face. But the *gai’shain* did not perspire either, even in their robes, and neither did the other Aiel. He watched the nobles’ faces over his own winecup.

Andorans were proud of being more straightforward than many, and they were not slow to boast that the Game of Houses was far more entwined in other lands than in theirs, yet they still believed they could play *Daes Dae’mar* when they had to. After a fashion they could, but the truth was, Cairhienin and even Tairens considered them simple when it came to the subtle move and countermove of the Great Game. These four kept their composure for the most part, but to someone schooled by Moiraine, schooled harder in Tear and Cairhien, they gave away much with every shift of eye, every slight change of expression.

First it dawned on them that there was no chair for Bashere. Quick looks flickered between them, a slight brightening, especially when they realized Bashere was striding from the throne room. All four actually let themselves glance after him with the faintest of satisfied smiles. They must dislike a Saldaean army in Andor as much as Naean and that lot did. Now their thoughts were obvious: Perhaps the foreigner’s influence was less than they had feared. Why, Bashere had been treated as no more than a superior servant.

Dyelin’s eyes widened slightly at almost the same instant as Luan’s, and only a moment ahead of the other two. For a moment they stared at Rand so closely it was plain they avoided looking at one another. Bashere was an outlander, but also the Marshal-General of Saldaea, three times a lord, and uncle to Queen Tenobia. If Rand used him like a servant. . . .

“Excellent wine.” Staring into his goblet, Luan hesitated before adding, “My Lord Dragon.” It might have been pulled put of him with a rope.

“From the south,” Ellorien said after a sip. “A Tunaighan Hills vintage. A wonder you can find ice in Caemlyn this year. I have heard people already calling this ‘the year without a winter.’ ”

“Do you think I would waste time and effort finding ice,” Rand said, “when so many troubles inflict the world?”

Abelle’s angular face paled, and he seemed to force himself to take another swallow. On the other hand, Luan emptied his winecup deliberately and thrust it out to be filled by a *gai’shain* whose green eyes flashed a fury at strong odds with the obstinate mildness of his sun-dark face. Serving wetlanders was like being a servant, and Aiel despised the very notion of servants. How that disgust squared with the very concept of *gai’shain* Rand had never been able to determine, but it was so.

Dyelin held her wine firmly on her knees and ignored it thereafter. This close, Rand could see touches of gray in her golden hair; she was still lovely, though in nothing except the hair did she look at all like Morgase or Elayne. Next in line for the throne, she must be a cousin at least, and close. Frowning briefly at him, she seemed on the point of shaking her head, but instead said, “We are concerned with the world’s troubles, but more with those inflicting Andor. Did you bring us here to find a cure?”

“If you know one,” Rand replied simply. “If not, I must look elsewhere. Many think they know the right cure. If I cannot find the one I want, I will have to accept the next best.” That tightened mouths. On the way here, Bashere had taken them through a courtyard where Arymilla and Lir and the rest of those had been left cooling their heels. Taking their ease in the Palace, it would seem. “I would think you’d want to help put Andor back together. You’ve heard my proclamation?” He did not have to say which one; in this context, there could be only one.

“A reward offered for news of Elayne,” Ellorien said flatly, her face becoming even stonier, “who is to be made queen now that Morgase is dead.”

Dyelin nodded. “That seemed well, to me.”

“Not to me!” Ellorien snapped. “Morgase betrayed her friends and spurned her oldest adherents. Let us see an end to House Trakand on the Lion Throne.” She seemed to have forgotten Rand. They all did.

“Dyelin,” Luan said curtly. She shook her head as if she had heard this before, but he went on. “She has the best claim. I speak for Dyelin.”

“Elayne is the Daughter-Heir,” the golden-haired woman told them levelly. “*I* speak for Elayne.”

“What does it matter who any of us speak for?” Abelle demanded. “If he killed Morgase, he will—” Abelle cut off abruptly with a grimace, then looked at Rand, not exactly in defiance, but definitely daring him to do his worst. And expecting him to.

“Do you really believe that?” Rand glanced sadly at the Lion Throne on its pedestal. “Why under the Light would I kill Morgase only to hand that to Elayne?”

“Few know what to believe,” Ellorien said stiffly. Spots of color still stained her cheeks. “People say many things, most foolish.”

“Such as?” He directed the question to her, but it was Dyelin who answered, looking him straight in the eye.

“That you will fight the Last Battle and kill the Dark One. That you are a false Dragon, or an Aes Sedai puppet, or both. That you’re Morgase’s illegitimate son, or a Tairen High Lord, or an Aielman.” She frowned again for a moment, but did not stop. “That you are the son of an Aes Sedai by the Dark One. That you *are* the Dark One, or else the Creator clothed in flesh. That you will destroy the world, save it, subjugate it, bring a new Age. As many tales as there are mouths. Most say you killed Morgase. Many add Elayne. They say your proclamation is a mask to hide your crimes.”

Rand sighed. Some of those sayings were worse than any he had heard. “I won’t ask which you believe.” Why did she keep frowning at him? She was not the only one. Luan did too, and Abelle and Ellorien darted the sort of glances at him that he had come to expect from Arymilla’s bunch when they thought he was not looking. *Watching. Watching.* That was Lews Therin, a hoarse giggling whisper. *I see you. Who sees me?* “Instead, will you help me make Andor whole again? I don’t want Andor to become another Cairhien, or worse, a Tarabon or Arad Doman.”

“I know something of the *Karaethon Cycle*,” Abelle said. “I believe you are the Dragon Reborn, but nothing there speaks of you ruling, only fighting the Dark One at Tarmon Gai’don.”

Rand’s hand tightened on his goblet so hard the dark surface of the wine trembled. How much easier if these four were like most of the Tairen High Lords, or the Cairhienin, but not one of them wanted a shaving more power for themselves than they already had. However the wine had been chilled, he doubted the One Power would intimidate this lot. *In all likelihood, they'd tell me to kill them and be burned for it!*

Burn for it, Lews Therin echoed morosely.

"How many times must I say I don't want to rule Andor? When Elayne sits on the Lion Throne, I will leave Andor. And never return, if I have my way."

"If the throne belongs to anyone," Ellorien said tightly, "it belongs to Dyelin. If you mean what you say, see her crowned, and go. Then Andor will be whole, and I don't doubt Andoran soldiers will follow you to the Last Battle, if that's what is called for."

"I refuse still," Dyelin answered in a strong voice, then turned to Rand. "I will wait and consider, my Lord Dragon. When I see Elayne alive and crowned, and you leave Andor, I will send my retainers to follow you whether anyone else in Andor does the same. But if time passes and you still reign here, or if your Aiel savages do here what I've heard they did in Cairhien and Tear"—she scowled at the Maidens and Red Shields, and the *gai'shain* too, as if she saw them looting and burning—"or you loose here those . . . men you gather with your amnesty, then I will come against you, whether anyone else in Andor does the same."

"And I will ride beside you," Luan said firmly.

"And I," Ellorien said, echoed by Abelle.

Rand threw back his head and laughed in spite of himself, half mirth, half frustration. *Light! And I thought honest opposition would be better than sneaking behind my back or licking my boots!*

They eyed him uneasily, doubtless thinking it was madness at work. Maybe it was. He was not sure himself anymore.

"Consider what you must," he told them, standing to end the audience. "I mean what I said. But consider this as well. Tarmon Gai'don is coming closer. I don't know how long we have for you to spend considering."

They made their goodbyes—a careful bow of the head, as between equals, and at that more than when they arrived—but as they turned to go, Rand caught Dyelin's sleeve. "I have a question for you." The others paused, half turning back. "A private question." After a moment she nodded, and her companions moved a little way down the throne room. They watched closely, but they were not near enough to hear. "You looked at me . . . strangely," he said. *You and every other noble I've met in Caemlyn.* Every Andoran noble, at least. "Why?"

Dyelin peered up at him, then finally nodded slightly to herself. “What is your mother’s name?”

Rand blinked. “My mother?” Kari al’Thor was his mother. That was how he thought of her; she had raised him from infancy, until she died. But he decided to give her the cold truth he had learned in the Waste. “My mother’s name was Shaiel. She was a Maiden of the Spear. My father was Janduin, clan chief of the Taardad Aiel.” Her eyebrows rose doubtfully. “I will swear it on any oath you choose. What does that have to do with what I want to know? They’re both long dead.”

Relief crept across her face. “A chance resemblance, it seems; no more. I do not mean to say you don’t know your parents, but you have the west of Andor on your tongue.”

“A resemblance? I grew up in the Two Rivers, but my parents were as I said. Who do I look like to make you stare at me?”

She hesitated, then sighed. “I do not suppose it matters. Someday you must tell me how you had Aiel parents yet were raised in Andor. Twenty-five years ago, more now, the Daughter-Heir of Andor vanished in the night. Her name was Tigraine. She left behind a husband, Taringail, and a son, Galad. I know it is only chance, yet I see Tigraine in your face. It was a shock.”

Rand felt a shock of his own. He felt cold. Fragments of the tale the Wise Ones had told him spun through his head. . . . *a golden-haired young wetlander, in silks . . . son she loved; a husband she did not . . . Shaiel was the name she took. She never gave another . . . You have something of her in your features.* “How was it that Tigraine vanished? I have an interest in the history of Andor.”

“I will thank you not to call it history, my Lord Dragon. I was a girl when it happened, but more than a child, and here in the Palace often. One morning, Tigraine simply was not in the Palace, and she was never seen again. Some claimed to see Taringail’s hand in it, but he was half-mad with grief. Taringail Damodred wanted more than anything else in the world to see his daughter Queen of Andor and his son King of Cairhien. He was Cairhienin, Taringail. That marriage was meant to stop the wars with Cairhien, and it did, yet Tigraine vanishing made them think Andor wanted to break the treaty, which led them to scheme the way Cairhienin do, which led to Laman’s Pride. And you of course know where that led,” she added dryly. “My father said Gitara Sedai was really at fault.”

"Gitara?" A wonder he did not sound strangled. He had heard that name more than once. It had been an Aes Sedai named Gitara Moroso, a woman with the Foretelling, who announced that the Dragon had been Reborn on the slopes of Dragonmount, and so set Moiraine and Siuan on their long search. It had been Gitara Moroso who years before that told "Shaiel" that unless she fled to the Waste, telling no one, and became a Maiden of the Spear, disaster would fall on Andor and the world.

Dyelin nodded, a touch impatiently. "Gitara was counselor to Queen Mordrellen," she said briskly, "but she spent more time with Tigraine and Luc, Tigraine's brother, than with the Queen. After Luc rode north, never to return, whispers said Gitara had convinced him that his fame lay in the Blight, or his fate. Others said it was that he would find the Dragon Reborn there, or that the Last Battle depended on him going. That was about a year before Tigraine disappeared. Myself, I doubt Gitara had anything to do with it, or with Luc. She stayed the Queen's counselor until Mordrellen died. From heartbreak over Tigraine on top of Luc, so it was said. Which began the Succession, of course." She glanced toward the others, who were shifting their feet and frowning with suspicion and impatience, but she could not resist adding one more thing. "You would have found a different Andor, without that. Tigraine queen, Morgase only High Seat of House Trakand, Elayne not born at all. Morgase married Taringail once she had the throne, you see. Who can say what else would be changed?"

Watching her join the others and go, he thought of one thing that would have changed. He would not be in Andor, for he would not have been born. Everything folded back into itself, in endless circles. Tigraine went to the Waste in secret, which made Laman Damodred cut down *Avendoraldera*, a gift of the Aiel, to make a throne, an act which brought the Aiel across the Spine of the World to kill him—that had been their only goal, though the nations called it the Aiel War—and with the Aiel came a Maiden named Shaiel, who died giving birth. So many lives changed, lives ended, so she could give birth to him at the proper time and place and die doing it. Kari al'Thor was the mother he remembered, if dimly, yet he wished he could have known Tigraine or Shaiel or whatever she wanted to call herself, even if only for a little while. Just to have seen her.

Useless dreaming. She was long dead. It was over and done. So why did it still nag at him?

The Wheel of Time and the wheel of a man's life turn alike without pity or mercy, Lews Therin murmured.

Are you really there? Rand thought. *If there's more than a voice and a few old memories, answer me! Are you there?* Silence. He could use Moiraine's advice now, or somebody's.

Abruptly he realized he was staring at the white marble wall of the Grand Hall, staring just north of west. Toward Alanna. She was away from Culain's Hound. *No! Burn her!* He would not replace Moiraine with a woman who would ambush him that way. He could not trust any woman touched by the Tower. Except three. Elayne, Nynaeve and Egwene. He hoped he could trust them. If only just a little.

For some reason he looked up at the great vaulted ceiling, with its colored windows depicting battles and queens, alternating with the White Lion. Those more than life-size women seemed to stare at him, in disapproval, wondering what he was doing there. Imagination, of course, but why? Because he had learned about Tigraine? Imagination, or madness?

"Someone has come I think you should see," Bashere said at his elbow, and Rand jerked away from the women overhead. Had he really been glaring back at them? Bashere had one of his horsemen with him, a taller fellow—not hard to be, beside Bashere—with a dark beard and mustaches, his tilted eyes green.

"Not unless it's Elayne," Rand said, more harshly than he meant, "or somebody with proof the Dark One is dead. I am going to Cairhien this morning." He had had no such intention until the words left his mouth. Egwene was there. And the queens overhead were not. "It's been weeks since I was there last. If I don't keep an eye on them, some lord or lady will claim the Sun Throne behind my back." Bashere looked at him strangely. He was explaining too much.

"As you say, but you will want to see this man first. He says he comes from Lord Brend, and I think he speaks truth." The Aiel were on their feet in the instant; they knew who used that name.

For Rand's part, he stared at Bashere in surprise. The last thing he expected was an emissary from Sammael. "Bring him in."

"Hamad," Bashere said with a jerk of his head, and the younger Saldaean trotted away.

A few minutes later Hamad returned with a knot of Saldaeans warily guarding a fellow in their midst. At first glance nothing about the man accounted for their caution. With no weapon visible, he wore a long gray coat with a raised collar, and a curly beard but no mustache, both in the Illianer fashion. He had a stub of a nose and a wide, grinning mouth. As he came closer, though, Rand realized that grin never altered by a hair. The man's whole face seemed frozen in that one mirthful expression. By contrast, his dark eyes stared out of that mask, swimming with fear.

At ten paces, Bashere raised his hand, and the guard halted. The Illianer, staring at Rand, did not seem to notice until Hamad presented a sword point to his chest, making him stop or be run through. He only glanced at the slightly serpentine blade, then returned to staring at Rand with those terrified eyes in that grinning face. His hands hung at his sides, twitching as much as his face was still.

Rand started to close the distance, but abruptly Sulin and Urien were there, not exactly blocking his way, yet positioned so that he would have to push between them.

"I wonder what has been done to him?" Sulin said, studying the fellow. A number of Maidens and Red Shields had come out from the columns, some even veiled. "If he is not Shadowspawn, he is touched by the Shadow."

"One like that might do things we cannot know," Urien said. He was one of those with a scarlet strip of cloth around his temples. "Kill with a touch, perhaps. A pretty message that would be to send an enemy."

Neither looked at Rand, not directly, but he nodded. Perhaps they were right. "How are you called?" he asked. Sulin and Urien moved a step to either side when they saw he would stay where he was.

"I do come from . . . from Sammael," the man said woodenly through that grin. "I do bring a message for . . . for the Dragon Reborn. For you."

Well, that was direct enough. Was he a Darkfriend, or just some poor soul Sammael had trapped in one of the nastier weavings Asmodean had talked about? "What message?" Rand said.

The Illianer's mouth worked, struggled. What came out bore no relation to the voice he had used before. It was deeper, full of confidence, in a different accent. "We will stand on different sides, you and I, come the day of the Great Lord's Return, but why should we kill each other now and leave Demandred and Graendal to contest for the world over our bones?" Rand knew that voice, in one of those scraps from Lews Therin that had settled in his mind. Sammael's voice. Lews Therin snarled wordlessly.

"Already you have much to digest," the Illianer went on—or Sammael did. "Why bite off more? And hard chewing, even if you don't find Semirhage or Asmodean taking you from behind while you are busy with it. I propose a truce between us, a truce until the Day of Return. If you do not move against me, I will not against you. I will pledge not to move east beyond the Plains of Maredo, nor further north than Lugard in the east or Jehannah in the west. You see, I leave the greater share by far to you. I do not claim to speak for the rest of the Chosen, but at least you know you have nothing to fear from me, or out of the lands I hold. I will pledge not to aid them in anything they do against you, nor to help them defend against you. You have done well so far in removing the Chosen from the field. I have no doubt you will continue to do well, better than before, knowing your southern flank is safe and the others fight without my aid. I suspect that on the Day of Return, there will be only you and I, as it should be. As it was meant to be." The man's teeth clicked shut, hidden behind that frozen grin. His eyes looked near madness.

Rand stared. A truce with Sammael? Even if he could have trusted the man to keep it, even if it meant one danger set aside until all the others were dealt with, it also meant leaving countless thousands to Sammael's mercy, a quality the man had never had. He felt rage sliding across the surface of the Void, and realized he had seized *saidin.* That torrent of searing sweetness and freezing filth seemed to echo his anger. Lews Therin. Well enough that he should be mad in his madness. The echo resonated with his own fury till he could not tell one from the other.

"Take this message back to Sammael," he said coldly. "Every death he has caused since waking, I lay at his feet and call due. Every murder he has ever done or caused, I lay at his feet and call due. He escaped justice in the Rorn M'doi, and at Nol Caimaine, and Sohadra. . . ." More of Lews Therin's memories, but the pain of what had been done there, the agony of what Lews Therin's eyes had seen, burned across the Void as if Rand's. ". . . But I will see justice done now. Tell him, no truce with the Forsaken. No truce with the Shadow."

The messenger lifted a spasming hand to wipe sweat from his face. No, not sweat. His hand came away red. Crimson droplets oozed from his pores, and he trembled head to foot. Hamad gasped and stepped back, and he was not the only one. Bashere knuckled his mustaches with a grimace, and even the Aiel stared. Painted red, the Illianer collapsed in a convulsing heap, blood spreading around him in a dark, glistening pool smeared by his thrashing.

Rand watched him die, buried deep in the Void, feeling nothing. The Void walled off emotion, and there was nothing he could have done in any case. Had he known Healing, he did not think it would have stopped that.

"I think," Bashere said slowly, "maybe Sammael will have his answer when this fellow does not return. I have heard of killing a messenger who brought bad news, but never killing him to tell you the news was bad."

Rand nodded. The death changed nothing; it changed no more than learning of Tigraine had. "Have someone see to his burial. A prayer will not hurt, even if it doesn't help either." Why did those queens in their colored windows still seem accusing? Surely they had seen as bad in their lifetimes, maybe even in this chamber. He could still point to Alanna, feel her; the Void was no shield. Could he trust Egwene? She kept secrets. "I may spend the night in Cairhien."

"A strange end to a strange man," Aviendha said, stepping around the dais. Small doors behind it led to robing rooms, and from there to corridors beyond.

Rand started to step between her and what lay on the red-and-white tiles, then stopped. After one curious glance, Aviendha ignored the body. When she was a Maiden of the Spear she had surely seen as many men die as he ever had. By the time she gave up the spear, she had probably killed as many as he had then seen die.

It was him she concentrated on, running her eyes over him to make sure he had taken no hurt. Some of the Maidens smiled at her, and they opened a path to Rand, pushing Red Shields aside where necessary, but she stayed where she was, readjusting her shawl and studying him. It was a good thing that whatever the Maidens thought, she only stayed near him because the Wise Ones told her to, to spy on him, because he found himself wanting to put his arms around her right there. Good that she did not want him. He had given her the ivory bracelet she wore, roses among thorns, suiting her nature. It was her only piece of jewelry except for a silver necklace, the intricate patterns the Kandori called snowflakes. He did not know who had given her that.

Light! he thought disgustedly. Wanting Aviendha *and* Elayne, when he knew he could have neither. *You're worse than Mat ever thought of being.*

Even Mat had the sense to stay away from a woman if he thought he would harm her.

“I must go to Cairhien too,” she said.

Rand grimaced. One attraction of a night in Cairhien was that it would be a night without her in the same room.

“It has nothing to do with . . .” she began sharply, then bit her full underlip, blue-green eyes flashing. “I must speak with the Wise Ones, with Amys.”

“Of course,” he told her. “No reason you shouldn’t.” There was always the chance he could manage to leave her behind there.

Bashere touched his arm. “You were going to watch my horsemen go through their paces again this afternoon.” The tone was casual, yet his tilted eyes gave the words heavy weight.

It *was* important, but Rand felt a need to be out of Caemlyn, out of Andor. “Tomorrow. Or the day after.” He had to be away from the eyes of those queens, wondering whether one of their blood—Light, he was!—would tear their land apart as he had so many others. Away from Alanna. If only for a night, he had to be away.

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CHAPTER 17

The Wheel of a Life

Gathering his sword belt from beside the throne with a flow of Air, and the scepter too, Rand opened the gateway right there before the dais, a slash of light that rotated, widening to give a view of an empty dark-paneled chamber more than six hundred miles from Caemlyn, in the Sun Palace, the Royal Palace of Cairhien. Set aside for his use this way, the room held no furnishings, but dark blue floor tiles and wood-paneled walls glistened from polishing. Windowless, the room was bright anyway; eight gilded stand-lamps burned day and night, mirrors magnifying the oil-fed flames. He paused to buckle on his sword while Sulin and Urien opened the door to the corridor and led veiled Maidens and Red Shields through before him.

In this case he thought their caution ridiculous. The broad corridor outside, the only way to reach the room, was already crowded with thirty or so *Far Aldazar Din*, Brothers of the Eagle, and nearly two dozen of Berelain's Mayeners in red-painted breastplates and rimmed potlike helmets that came down to the nape of the neck in back. If there was one place anywhere that Rand knew he needed no Maidens, it was Cairhien, more so even than Tear.

A Brother of the Eagle was already loping down the hallway by the time Rand appeared, and a Mayener awkwardly clutching spear and shortsword as he followed the taller Aielman. In fact, a small army trailed after the *Far Aldazar Din*, servants in various liveries, a Tairen Defender of the Stone in burnished breastplate and black-and-gold coat, a Cairhienin soldier with the front of his head shaved, his breastplate much more battered than the Tairen's, two young Aielwomen in dark heavy skirts and loose white blouses whom Rand thought he recognized as apprentices to Wise Ones. News of his arrival would spread quickly. It always did.

At least Alanna was far away. Verin, too, but most of all Alanna. He still felt her, even at this distance, just a vague impression that she was somewhere to the west. Like the feel of a hand just a hair from touching the back of his neck. Was there any way to get free of her? He seized *saidin* again for a moment, but that still made no difference.

You never escape the traps you spin yourself. Lews Therin's murmur sounded confused. *Only a greater power can break a power, and then you're trapped again. Trapped forever so you cannot die.*

Rand shivered. Sometimes it really did seem that voice was speaking to him. If only it would make sense once in a while, having it in his head would be easier.

"I see you, *Car'a'carn*," one of the Brothers of the Eagle said. His gray eyes were on a level with Rand's, the scar slashing across his nose stark white against his sun-dark face. "I am Corman of the Mosaada Goshien. May you find shade this day."

Rand had no chance to answer properly before the pink-cheeked Mayener officer was shouldering in. Well, not exactly shouldering—he was too slender to shoulder aside a man a head taller and half again as wide, especially an Aiel, though maybe young enough to think he could—yet he did squeeze himself in front of Rand next to Corman, tucking under his arm a crimson helmet with a single slender red plume. "My Lord Dragon, I am Havien Nurelle, Lord Lieutenant in the Winged Guards"—there were wings worked on the sides of his helmet—"in service to Berelain sur Paendrag Paeron, First of Mayene, and at your service also." Corman gave him an amused sideways look.

"I see you, Havien Nurelle," Rand said gravely, and the boy blinked. Boy? Come to think on it, he might be no younger than Rand. That was a shock! "If you and Corman will show me—" Suddenly he realized Aviendha was gone. He nearly broke his back trying to avoid the woman, and the first time in weeks he agreed to let her near him, she slipped away as soon as his head turned! "Take me to Berelain and Rhuarc," he ordered gruffly. "If they're not together, take me to whoever is closer, and find the other." Running to the Wise Ones, no doubt, to report on what he had been up to. He *would* leave the woman behind here.

What you want is what you cannot have. What you cannot have is what you want. Lews Therin laughed maniacally. It did not bother Rand as much as it once had. Not quite as much. What had to be endured, could be.

Discussing who was nearest, Corman and Havien left their men behind, but they still made quite a procession, with all the Maidens and Red Shields following close, crowding the square-vaulted hallway. The corridor had a dark, heavy feel despite lighted stand-lamps. There was very little color anywhere, except in occasional tapestries, and the Cairhienin tried to make up for it by having everything rigidly arranged, whether embroidered flowers or birds, deer or leopards in a hunt, or nobles in battle. For the Cairhienin servants who scurried out of the way, livery usually meant colored stripes on the cuffs and a house badge embroidered on the breast; sometimes a collar or sleeves in House colors, very seldom an entire coat or dress. Only upper servants would show more color. Cairhienin liked order, and disliked flamboyance. An occasional niche held a golden bowl or a Sea Folk vase, but stark and worked with straight lines, trying to disguise their curves if they had any. Whenever the hall gave way to a square-columned colonnade, if there was a garden below, the walks made a precise grid, every flower bed the same size, shrubs and small trees rigidly pruned and spaced. Had the drought and heat allowed any flowers, he was sure they too would have bloomed in straight lines.

Rand wished Dyelin could see those bowls and vases. The Shaido had carried away whatever they could lift, all the way across Cairhien, and burned what they could when they could not carry it, but such behavior violated *ji'e'toh.* The Aiel who followed Rand and had saved the city had taken, but by their rules, when they took a place in battle they were allowed a fifth of what it held and not a spoon more. Bael had agreed, reluctantly, to forgo even that in Andor, but Rand thought no one without a list would believe anything had been taken here at all.

For all their discussion, Corman and Havien failed to find either Rhuarc or Berelain before they were found themselves instead.

The two came to meet Rand alone in one of the colonnades, without entourage, which only made him feel as though he was leading a parade himself. Rhuarc in his *cadin'sor*, gray streaking his dark red hair, towered over Berelain, a pale, beautiful young woman in a blue and white dress cut low enough to make Rand clear his throat when she curtsied. *Shoufa* looped loosely around his neck, Rhuarc carried no weapon but a heavy Aiel knife. She wore the Diadem of the First, a golden hawk in flight, in shining black hair that made waves to bare shoulders.

Perhaps it was just as well Aviendha had gone; sometimes she had a violent way toward women she even thought were putting themselves forward with him.

Suddenly he realized that Lews Therin was humming tunelessly. Something about it seemed troubling, but what . . . ? Humming. Like a man admiring a pretty woman who was not aware of him.

Stop that! Rand shouted inside his head. *Stop looking through my eyes!* No telling whether he heard—was there someone there to hear?—but the humming stopped.

Havien went to one knee, but Berelain gestured him to rise almost absently. “I trust all is well with my Lord Dragon, and with Andor.” She had the sort of voice that made a man listen. “And with your friends, Mat Cauthon and Perrin Aybara, as well.”

“All is well,” he told her. She always asked after Mat and Perrin, however often he told her one was on his way to Tear and the other he had not seen since before going to the Waste. “And with you?”

Berelain glanced at Rhuarc as they fell in on either side of Rand, proceeding into the next stretch of corridor. “As well as can be expected, my Lord Dragon.”

“It is well, Rand al’Thor,” Rhuarc said. There was not much expression on his face, but then, there seldom was.

Rand knew both understood why he had put Berelain in charge here. Cold reasons. The first ruler to offer him alliance freely, he could trust her because she needed him, now more than ever since that alliance, to keep Tear from Mayene’s throat. The High Lords had always tried to treat Mayene like a province. Besides, a foreigner from a small nation hundreds of leagues south, she had no reason to favor one faction over another in Cairhien, she had no hope of seizing power, and she knew the running of a country. Hard reasons. Given how Aiel felt about Cairhienin and Cairhienin about Aiel, putting Rhuarc in charge would have led to bloodshed, and Cairhien had had enough of that.

The arrangement seemed to be working out well. As with Semaradrid and Weiramon in Tear, the Cairhienin accepted a Mayener as governor as much because she was not Aiel as because Rand appointed her. Berelain did know what she was doing, and she at least listened to advice offered by Rhuarc, speaking for the clan chiefs remaining in Cairhien. No doubt she had to deal with the Wise Ones as well—they would give up meddling, which they did not see as such, a day after Aes Sedai did—but she had not mentioned them so far.

“And Egwene?” Rand said. “Is she any better?”

Berelain's lips compressed slightly. She did not like Egwene. But then, Egwene did not like her. No reason for it, that he knew, but there it was.

Rhuarc spread his hands. "So far as Amys tells me." As well as being a Wise One, Amys was his wife. One of his wives; he had two, one of the odder Aiel customs among many Rand found odd. "She says Egwene yet needs rest, light exercise, plenty of food and fresh air. I think she takes walks in the cool of the day." Berelain gave him a wry look; the faint sheen of perspiration on her face did not detract from her beauty, but of course Rhuarc was not sweating at all.

"I would like to see her. If the Wise Ones permit," Rand added. The Wise Ones were as jealous of their prerogatives as any Aes Sedai he had ever met, making sure of them with sept chiefs, clan chiefs and perhaps most of all with the *Car'a'carn.* "But first we. . . ."

A noise had been catching the edge of hearing as they approached another place where one wall of the corridor was replaced by balustraded columns. The clatter of practice swords. He glanced down in passing. At least that was his intention. What he saw in the stone-paved courtyard below stilled his tongue and stopped his feet. Under the eye of a stiff-backed Cairhienin in a plain gray coat, a dozen sweat-drenched women flailed away in pairs, some wearing riding dresses with divided skirts, some men's coats and breeches. Most were awkward in the forms if vigorous, while others flowed from stance to stance smoothly yet swung the bundled-lathe blades hesitantly. All wore grim determination like a cloak, though grimness was likely to break into rueful laughter when one realized she had made a mistake.

The stiff-backed fellow clapped his hands, and the panting women leaned on their practice swords, some working arms clearly unused to this. From beyond Rand's sight servants darted out, bowing and curtsying right and left as they proffered trays with pitchers and cups. But if they were servants, their livery was odd for Cairhien. They wore white. Dresses or coats and breeches, all pure white.

"What is that?" he asked. Rhuarc made a disgusted sound.

"Some of the Cairhienin women are quite impressed with the Maidens," Berelain said, smiling. "They want to be Maidens. Only, of the sword, I suppose, not the spear." Sulin stiffened indignantly, and handtalk flashed among the Maidens; the gestures seemed outraged. "These are daughters of noble Houses," Berelain went on. "I let them stay here because their parents would not allow this. There are nearly a dozen schools in the city now that will teach the sword to women, but many need to sneak away to attend. It is not only women, of course. The younger Cairhienin in general seem very impressed with the Aiel. They are adopting *ji'e'toh.*"

"They are mangling it," Rhuarc growled. "Many ask about our ways, and who would not teach one who would learn what is proper? Even a treekiller." He looked ready to spit. "But they take what they are told and change it."

"Not change, really," Berelain protested. "Only adapt, I think." Rhuarc's eyebrows rose a fraction, and she sighed. Havien's face was a picture of affront, seeing his ruler challenged. Neither Rhuarc nor Berelain noticed, they were intent on Rand. He had the feeling this was an argument the pair had had often.

"They change it," Rhuarc repeated deliberately. "Those fools down there in white claim to be *gai'shain. Gai'shain!*" The other Aielmen muttered; handtalk flickered among the Maidens again. Havien began to look a trifle uneasy. "What battle or raid were they taken in? What *toh* have they incurred? You confirmed my ban on fighting in the city, Berelain Paeron, yet they fight duels wherever they think they'll not be found, and the loser puts on white. If one strikes another while both are armed, the one struck pleads for a duel, and if it is refused, puts on white. What has that to do with honor or obligation? They change everything, and do things to make a Sharaman blush. It should be stopped, Rand al'Thor."

Berelain's jaw firmed stubbornly, her hands tightening to fists on her skirts. "Young men always fight." Her tone was condescending enough that you might almost have forgotten she was young herself. "But since they began this, not one has died in a duel. Not one. That alone is worth letting them go on. Besides which, I have faced down fathers and mothers, some powerful, who wanted their daughters sent home. I will not deny those young women what I promised them."

"Keep them if you wish," Rhuarc said. "Let them learn the *sword*, if they wish. But let them stop claiming to follow *ji'e'toh.* Let there be an end to them putting on white and claiming to be *gai'shain.* What they do offends." His chill blue eyes were fixed on Berelain, but her large dark eyes remained steady on Rand.

He hesitated only a moment. He thought he understood what drove the younger Cairhienin to *ji'e'toh.* Twice conquered by Aiel in twenty-odd years, they had to wonder whether the secret lay there. Or maybe they thought their defeats just showed that the Aiel way was better. Clearly the Aiel were upset by what they saw as a mockery of their beliefs, but in truth, some of the ways Aiel became *gai'shain* seemed no less peculiar. For instance, speaking to a man of his father-in-law or to a woman of her mother-in-law—second-father and second-mother, in the Aiel way—was considered hostile enough to justify drawing weapons unless they had mentioned them first. If the offended party instead touched you after you spoke, under *ji'e'toh* it was the same as touching an armed enemy without harming him. That gained much *ji* and incurred much *toh*, but the one touched could demand to be made *gai'shain* to lessen the other's honor and their own obligation. By *ji'e'toh*, a proper demand to be made *gai'shain* had to be honored, so a man or woman could end up *gai'shain* for mentioning somebody's mother-in-law. Hardly less foolish than what these Cairhienin were doing. Really it came down to one thing, though. He had put Berelain in charge; he had to support her. It was as simple as that. "Cairhienin offend you by being Cairhienin, Rhuarc. Leave them be. Who knows, maybe they will eventually learn enough that you won't have to hate them anymore."

Rhuarc grunted sourly, and Berelain smiled. To Rand's surprise, for one moment she seemed about to put her tongue out at the Aielman. Only his imagination, of course. She was only a few years older than himself, but she had been ruling Mayene while he was still guarding sheep in the Two Rivers.

Sending Corman and Havien back to their guard, Rand moved on, with Rhuarc and Berelain to either side and the rest following close. A parade. All it needed was drums and trumpets.

The clatter of practice swords started up again behind him. Another change, however small. Even Moiraine, who had long studied the Prophecies of the Dragon, had not known whether his Breaking the World again meant he would bring on a new Age, but he was certainly bringing changes, one way and another. As many by accident, it seemed, as on purpose.

When they reached the door of the study Berelain and Rhuarc shared—rising suns decorated the long panels of dark polished wood, indicating some royal use once—Rand stopped, turning to Sulin and Urien. If he could not dispense with all these guards here, there was nowhere he could. "I mean to return to Caemlyn an hour or so after sunrise tomorrow. Until then, visit the tents, see your friends, and try not to start any blood feuds. If you insist, two of you can hang about to protect me from mice; I don't think anything larger will jump out at me here."

Urien grinned slightly and nodded, though he did gesture about head-high to a Cairhienin and murmur, "The mice can be big here."

For an instant Rand thought Sulin meant to argue. Her flat stare lasted only a moment, though, before she nodded. Still tight-mouthed, however. Doubtless he would hear the argument in full once there were only Maidens to hear.

A large room, the study presented sharp contrasts even at his second sight of it. On the high worked-plaster ceiling, straight lines and sharp angles made elaborately repeating patterns, and around the walls as well as on a wide fireplace faced with deep blue marble. A massive table stood in the middle of the floor, covered with papers and maps, marking a boundary of sorts. The two tall narrow windows to one side of the fireplace held clay pots on deep stools, filled with small plants that showed a few tiny red-and-white blossoms. On that side of the table a long wall hanging showed ships at sea, and men hauling nets filled with oilfish, the source of Mayene's wealth. An embroidery hoop, with needle and red thread dangling from a piece of half-finished work, sat on a high-backed chair wide enough for Berelain to curl up in if she wished. There was a single carpet on the floor, in flowerlike patterns of gold and red and blue, and a small table beside the chair held a silver wine pitcher and goblets on a silver tray, as well as a slim book bound in red with a gold-worked piece of leather marking Berelain's place.

The floor on the other side of the table was layered in brightly colored rugs, with tasseled cushions of red and blue and green scattered about. A tabac pouch, a short-stemmed pipe, and a pair of tongs sat beside a covered brass bowl atop a small brassbound chest, while a slightly larger chest, strapped with iron, held an ivory carving of a gawky animal Rand doubted really existed. Two dozen books of all sizes, from small enough to fit a coat pocket to large enough that even Rhuarc must need both hands to pick them up, made a neat row across the floor along the wall. Aiel made everything in the Waste that they needed except books; peddlers had made fortunes among Aiel hauling nothing but books.

"Now," Rand said when the door was closed, leaving him alone with Rhuarc and Berelain, "how are things really?"

“As I said,” Berelain replied. “As well as can be expected. There is more talk of Caraline Damodred and Toram Riatin in the streets, but most people are too tired to want another war for a time.”

“It is said ten thousand Andormen soldiers have joined them.” Rhuarc began thumbing his pipe full. “Rumor always multiplies by ten when not twenty, yet it is troubling if true. The scouts say their numbers are not large, but left to grow they could be more than an annoyance. The yellow-fly is almost too small to see, but if you leave its egg in your skin, you will lose an arm or leg before it hatches—if it does not kill you.”

Rand grunted noncommittally. Darlin’s rebellion in Tear was not the only one he had to face. House Riatin and House Damodred, the last two to hold the Sun Throne, had been bitter rivals before Rand appeared, and likely would be again if he disappeared. Now they had put rivalry aside—on the surface at least; what went on below the surface with Cairhienin could be something else entirely—and, like Darlin, meant to gather strength somewhere Toram and Caraline thought safe. In their case, the foothills of the Spine of the World, as far from the city as they could be and remain in the country. They had gathered the same mix as Darlin, nobles mainly of middle rank, displaced country folk, some outright mercenaries and perhaps a few former brigands. Niall’s hand might be there, as well, as it was with Darlin.

Those foothills were not nearly so impenetrable as Haddon Mirk, but Rand held his hand: He had too many enemies in too many places. If he paused to swat Rhuarc’s yellowfly here, he might find a leopard on his back somewhere else. He had it in mind to take the leopard first. If only he knew where all the other leopards were.

“What of the Shaido?” he asked, setting the Dragon Scepter down on a half-unrolled map. It showed the north of Cairhien, and the mountains called Kinslayer’s Dagger. The Shaido might not be as big a leopard as Sammael, but they were a sight bigger than High Lord Darlin or Lady Caraline. Berelain handed him a goblet of wine, and he thanked her. “Have the Wise Ones said anything at all about Sevanna’s intentions?”

He would have thought at least one or two could listen and look around just a little when she journeyed up to Kinslayer’s Dagger. He would wager the Shaido Wise Ones did when they came below the River Gaelin. He said neither thing, of course. The Shaido might have abandoned *ji’e’toh*, but Rhuarc had a traditional Aiel view of spying. The Wise Ones' views were another thing again, though exactly what could be hard to pin down.

"They say the Shaido are building holds." Rhuarc paused, using a pair of tongs to hold a hot coal from the sand-filled brass bowl over his pipe. When he had it puffed alight, he went on. "They do not think the Shaido ever mean to return to the Three-fold Land. Nor do I."

Rand scrubbed his free hand through his hair. Caraline and Toram festering, and the Shaido settling in this side of the Dragonwall. A far more dangerous brew than Darlin. And Alanna's unseen finger seemed on the point of touching him. "Is there any other good news?"

"There is fighting in Shamara," Rhuarc said around his pipestem.

"Where?" Rand asked.

"Shamara. Or Shara. They give many names for their land. Co'dansin, Tomaka, Kigali, others. Any could be true, or none. They lie without thought, those people. Unwind every bolt of silk you trade for, or find that only the outside is silk. And if the next time in the tradehold you happen to find the man who traded with you, he will deny seeing you before, or coming to trade before. If you press it, the others kill him to appease you, then say only he could do anything concerning the silk, and try to trade you water as wine."

"Why is fighting in Shara good news?" Rand asked softly. He did not really want to hear the answer. Berelain was listening with interest; no one except the Aiel and the Sea Folk knew much more of the closed lands beyond the Waste than that ivory and silk came from there. That, and the tales in *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*, which were probably too fanciful to be true. Though come to think of it, Rand did remember the lying being mentioned, and the different names, except the examples Farstrider had given matched none of Rhuarc's as far as he could recall.

"There is never fighting in Shara, Rand al'Thor. It is said the Trolloc Wars infested them"—Trollocs had entered the Aiel Waste too; since then the Trolloc name for the Aiel Waste was the Dying Ground—"but if there has been one battle since, no word of it has come to the tradeholds. Not much word of anything outside the holdwalls does come inside. They say their land has always been one, not many as here, always at peace. When you came from Rhuidean as the *Car'a'carn*, word of you spread, and of your title among the wetlanders here. The Dragon Reborn. Word traveled to the tradeholds along the Great Rift and the Cliffs of Dawn." Rhuarc's eyes were calm and steady; this did not trouble him. “Now word comes back across the Three-fold Land. There is fighting in Shara, and Sharamen in the tradeholds ask when the Dragon Reborn will Break the World.”

Suddenly the wine tasted sour. Another place like Tarabon and Arad Doman, torn just by hearing of him. How far did the ripples spread? Were there wars he would never hear of in lands he would never hear of, because of him?

Death rides on my shoulder, Lews Therin muttered. *Death walks in my footsteps. I am death.*

Shuddering, Rand set his goblet on the table. How much did the Prophecies demand in all those tantalizing hints and grandly roundabout verses? Was he supposed to add Shara, or whatever it was really called, to Cairhien and the rest? The entire world? How, when he could not even hold Tear or Cairhien completely? It would take more than one man’s lifetime. Andor. If he was meant to rip every other land apart, rip the whole world, he would hold Andor safe for Elayne. Somehow.

“Shara, or whatever it’s called, is a long way from here. One step at a time, and Sammael is the first step.”

“Sammael,” Rhuarc agreed. Berelain shivered, and emptied her goblet.

For a time they talked of the Aiel who were still moving south. Rand intended the hammer being made in Tear to be clearly big enough to smash anything Sammael could put in its way. Rhuarc seemed content; it was Berelain who complained that more needed to be kept in Cairhien. Until Rhuarc shushed her. She muttered something about him being too stubborn for his own good, but she went on to the efforts to resettle farmers on the land. She thought by next year there would be no need for grain from Tear. If the drought ever broke. If it did not, Tear would not be supplying grain to itself, much less anywhere else. The first tendrils of trade were beginning to reappear. Merchants had begun coming in from Andor and Tear and Murandy, down from the Borderlands. A Sea Folk ship had even dropped anchor in the river that very morning, which she found strange, so far from the sea, but welcome.

Berelain’s face took on an intensity, and her voice a brisk tone, as she moved around the table to take up this sheaf of papers or that, discussing what Cairhien needed to buy and what it could afford to buy, what it had to sell now and what it would have in six months, in a year. Depending on the weather, of course. She brushed by that as if it was of no matter, though giving Rand a level look that said he was the Dragon Reborn and if there was any way to stop the heat, he should find it. Rand had seen her meltingly seductive, he had seen her frightened, defiant, wrapped in arrogance, but never like this. She seemed a different woman altogether. Rhuarc, seated on one of his cushions puffing on his pipe, appeared amused as he watched her.

". . . this school of yours might do some good," she said, frowning at a long sheet covered in a precise hand, "if they would stop thinking of new things long enough to make what they have already thought of." She tapped her lips with a finger, peering at nothing thoughtfully. "You say give them what gold they ask, but if you would let me hold back unless they actually —"

Jalani put her plump face in at the door—Aiel seemed not to understand knocking—and said, "Mangin is here to speak with Rhuarc and you, Rand al'Thor."

"Tell him I'll be happy to talk with him later—" Rand got that far before Rhuarc broke in quietly.

"You should speak with him now, Rand al'Thor." The clan chief's face looked grave; Berelain had replaced the long paper on the table and was studying the floor.

"Very, well," Rand said slowly.

Jalani's head vanished, and Mangin came in. Taller than Rand, he had been one of those who crossed the Dragonwall in search of He Who Comes With the Dawn, one of the handful who took the Stone of Tear. "Six days ago I killed a man," he began without preamble, "a treekiller, and I must know if I have *toh* to you, Rand al'Thor."

"To me?" Rand said. "You can defend yourself, Mangin; Light, you know tha—" For a moment he was silent, meeting gray eyes that were sober but certainly not afraid. Curious, maybe. Rhuarc's face told him nothing; Berelain was still not meeting his gaze. "He did attack you, didn't he?"

Mangin shook his head slightly. "I saw that he deserved to die, so I killed him." He said it conversationally; he saw the drains needed cleaning, so he cleaned them. "But you have said we cannot kill the oathbreakers except in battle, or if they attack us. Do I have *toh* toward you now?"

Rand remembered what he had said. . . . *him will I hang.* His chest felt tight. "Why did he deserve to die?"

"He wore what he had no right to," Mangin replied.

“Wore what? What did he wear, Mangin?”

Rhuarc answered, touching his left forearm. “This.” He meant the Dragon coiled around his arm. Clan chiefs did not display them often, or even speak of them; almost everything about the markings were shrouded in mystery, and the chiefs were content to leave it so. “It was a thing of needles and inks, of course.” A tattoo.

“He was pretending to be a clan chief?” Rand realized he was searching for an excuse. . . . *him will I hang.* Mangin had been one of the first to follow him.

“No,” Mangin said. “He was drinking, and showing off what he should not have had. I see your eyes, Rand al’Thor.” He grinned suddenly. “It is a puzzle. I was right to kill him, but now I have *toh* to you.”

“You were wrong to kill him. You know the penalty for murder.”

“A rope around the neck, as these wetlanders use.” Mangin nodded thoughtfully. “Tell me where and when; I will be there. May you find water and shade today, Rand al’Thor.”

“May you find water and shade, Mangin,” Rand told him sadly.

“I suppose,” Berelain said when the door closed behind Mangin, “that he really will walk to his own hanging of his own accord. Oh, don’t look at me that way, Rhuarc. I don’t mean to impugn him, or Aiel honor.”

“Six days,” Rand growled, rounding on her. “You knew why he was here, both of you. Six days ago, and you left it to me. Murder is murder, Berelain.”

She drew herself up regally, but she sounded defensive. “I am not used to men coming to me and saying they have just committed murder. Bloody *ji’e’toh.* Bloody Aielmen and their bloody honor.” The curses sounded odd coming from her mouth.

“You have no cause to be angry with her, Rand al’Thor,” Rhuarc put in. “Mangin’s *toh* is to you, not to her. Or to me.”

“His *toh* was to the man he murdered,” Rand said coldly. Rhuarc looked shocked. “The next time somebody commits murder, don’t wait for me. You follow the law!” That way, perhaps he would not have to pass sentence again on a man he knew and liked. He would if he had to. He knew that, and it saddened him. What had he become?

The wheel of a man’s life, Lews Therin murmured. *No mercy. No pity.*

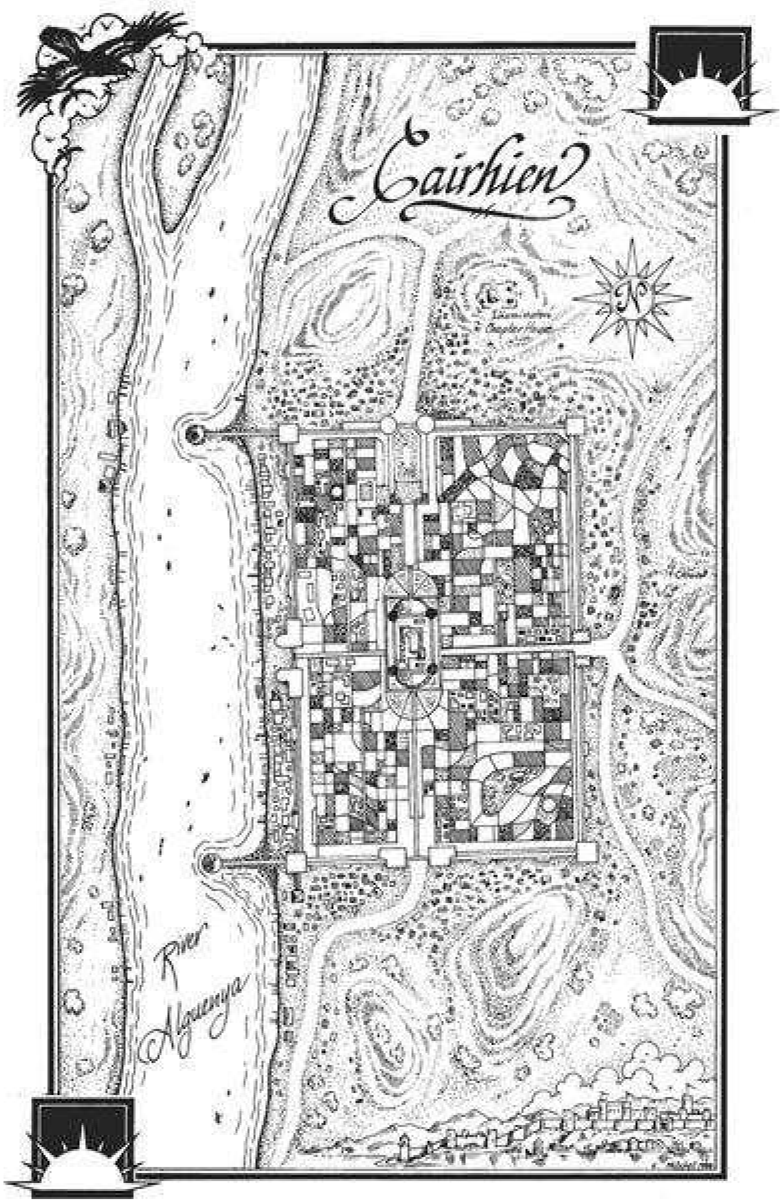
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CHAPTER 18

A Taste of Solitude

“Are there any more problems you want me to deal with?” Rand’s tone made it clear he meant problems they should have already solved. Rhuarc shook his head slightly; Berelain’s face reddened as well. “Good. Set a date for Mangin’s hanging—” *If it hurts too much*, Lews Therin laughed in a hoarse whisper, *make it hurt someone else instead*. His responsibility. His duty. He stiffened his back to keep that mountain from crushing him. “Hang him tomorrow. Tell him I said so.” He paused, glaring, then realized he was waiting for Lews Therin’s comment, not theirs. Waiting for a dead man’s voice, a dead madman. “I’m going to the school.”

Rhuarc pointed out that the Wise Ones were probably on their way from the tents, and Berelain that Tairen and Cairhienin nobles alike would be clamoring to know where she was hiding Rand, but he told them to tell the truth. And tell the lot of them not to follow him; he would return when he returned. The pair looked as if they had swallowed sour plums, but he snatched up the Dragon Scepter and left.

In the hallway, Jalani and a yellow-haired Red Shield not much older than she came smoothly to their feet, glancing at one another hastily. Otherwise the corridor was empty except for a few scurrying servants. One of each; it figured, though Rand wondered whether Urien had had to wrestle Sulin to make it so.

Motioning them to follow, he went straight, down to the nearest stable, where the stalls were the same green marble as the columns that held the high ceiling. The head groom, a gnarled fellow with big ears, the Rising Sun of Cairhien worked on his short leather vest, was so shocked by Rand appearing with only two Aiel for escort that he kept staring at the stable doors for more and bowed so often between stares that Rand wondered whether he would ever get a horse. But once the man shouted “A horse for the Lord Dragon!” six stablemen leaped to prepare a tall, fiery-eyed bay gelding with a gold-fringed bridle and a gold-worked saddle atop a sky-blue saddlecloth fringed and embroidered with rising suns in gold.

As quickly as they moved, the big-eared head groom was gone by the time Rand swung into the saddle. To hunt for the coterie of followers the Dragon Reborn must have, possibly. Or to tell someone Rand was leaving the palace practically alone. Cairhien was like that. The sleek bay wanted to frisk, but while still trying to settle his dancing, Rand trotted him out of the palace grounds, past startled Cairhienin guards. He was not worried about assassins laying an ambush from the big-eared man's warning; anyone who ambushed him would find they had come to the shearing without clippers. Any delay, though, and likely he would have nobles crowding around so thickly he could not leave without them. It felt good to be alone for a change.

He glanced at Jalani and the young Aiel man trotting beside the bay. Dedric, he thought; a Jaern Rift Codara. Almost alone. He could feel Alanna still, and Lews Therin moaned in the far distance over his dead Ilyena. He could never be entirely alone. Maybe never again. What he had of solitude felt good, though, after so long.

Cairhien was a large city, its major streets wide enough to dwarf the people crowding them. Each street slashed arrow-straight through hills carved and stone-terraced until they seemed man-made, meeting every other street at a right angle. Throughout the city rose huge towers wrapped in wooden scaffolding that nearly hid elaborate square-arched buttresses, towers that seemed to touch the sky and meant to go higher. Twenty years since the fabled topless towers of Cairhien, a wonder of the world, had burned like torches during the Aiel War, and their rebuilding was still not done.

Making a way was not easy; the trotting did not last. Rand had grown accustomed to crowds opening up before his usual escort, yet with hundreds of *cadin'sor*-clad Aiel just within his sight among the slow-flowing throng, it was not quite the same, not for only two. Some of those Aiel recognized him, he thought, but they ignored him, not about to cause embarrassment by calling attention when the *Car'a'carn* wore a sword and, not as bad but hardly to be applauded, rode a horse. To Aiel, shame and embarrassment were far worse than pain, though of course *ji'e'toh* had to complicate things with degrees Rand understood only in part. Aviendha could explain it certainly; she seemed to want him to become Aiel.

Plenty of others jammed the streets too, Cairhienin in their usual drab clothing and also in the shabby bright colors of those who had lived in the Foregate before it burned, Tairens a head taller in the crowd, if not as tall as the Aiel. Ox-carts and horse-drawn wagons threaded through the throng, yielding way to closed lacquer carriages and sedan chairs, sometimes with a House banner. Hawkers cried wares from trays, and peddlers from pushcarts; musicians, tumblers and jugglers performed on street corners. Both were changes. Once Cairhien had been quiet, subdued, except in the Foregate. Some of that sobriety still held. The shops still had small signs, displaying no goods outside. And if the former Foregaters seemed raucous as ever, laughing loudly and shouting at one another, arguing right there in the street, the other Cairhienin still eyed them with prim distaste.

No one but Aiel recognized the bareheaded horseman in a silver-worked blue coat, though occasionally someone glanced twice at his saddlecloth. The Dragon Scepter was not well known here yet. Nobody gave way. Rand felt torn between impatience and the pleasure of not being the focus of every eye.

The school occupied a palace a mile from the Sun Palace, once the property of one Lord Barthanes, now dead and unlamented, a great heap of stone squares with sharply angular towers and severe balconies. The tall gates onto the main courtyard stood open, and when Rand rode in, he found a welcome.

Idrien Tarsin, who headed the school, stood on the broad steps at the far end of the courtyard, a stocky woman in a plain gray dress, straight-backed enough to seem a head taller than she was. She was not alone. Dozens and dozens of others crowded the stone steps, men and women in wool much more often than silk, frequently worn and seldom ornamented. Older folk, mainly. Idrien was not the only one with more gray than black in her hair, or no black at all, or no hair at all, though here and there a younger face peered eagerly at Rand. Younger meaning ten or fifteen years older than he.

They were the teachers, in a way, though this was not exactly a school. Pupils did come to learn—young men and women hung gaping out of every window around the courtyard, now—but for the most part Rand had wanted to gather knowledge in one place. Time and again he had heard how much had been lost in the War of the Hundred Years and the Trolloc Wars. How much more must have vanished in the Breaking of the World? If he was going to Break the World again, he meant to create repositories where knowledge could be preserved. Another school had already started in Tear, though just barely, and he had begun seeking a place in Caemlyn.

Nothing ever goes as you expect, Lews Therin murmured. *Expect nothing, and you will not be surprised. Expect nothing. Hope for nothing. Nothing.*

Suppressing the voice, Rand dismounted.

Idrien came to meet him with a curtsy. As usual, when she rose it was something of a shock to realize yet again that she was barely as tall as his chest. “Welcome to the School of Cairhien, my Lord Dragon.” Her voice was surprisingly sweet and youthful, a startling contrast to her blunt face. He had heard it harden, though, with students and teachers; Idrien held a tight rein on the school.

“How many spies do you have in the Sun Palace?” he asked mildly. She looked startled, perhaps that he would suggest such a thing, but more likely because the question was not proper manners in Cairhien.

“We have prepared a small display.” Well, he had not really expected an answer. She eyed the two Aiel like a woman eyeing two large and muddy dogs of uncertain temperament, but contented herself with a sniff. “If my Lord Dragon will follow me?”

He followed, frowning. A display of what?

The entry hall of the school was a vast chamber of polished dark gray columns and pale gray floor tiles, with a gray-veined marble balcony all the way around three spans up. Now it was largely filled with . . . contraptions. The teachers crowding in behind him went running to them. Rand stared, suddenly remembering what Berelain had said about the school making things. But what?

Idrien told him—after a fashion—leading him from one to the next, where men and women explained what they had created. He even understood some of it.

An array of screens and scrapers and crocks full of linen scraps produced finer paper than anyone made now, or so its inventor said. A great hulking shape of levers and huge flat plates was a printing press, much better than those already in use, according to its maker. Dedric showed considerable interest in that, until Jalani apparently decided he should be watching for somebody trying to attack the *Car’a’carn*: she trod hard on his foot, and he limped after Rand. There was a plow on wheels meant to turn six furrows at once—Rand could recognize that, at least; he thought it might work—and another thing with shafts for horses that was meant to harvest hay in place of men with scythes, and a new sort of loom that was easier to operate, so the fellow who made it said. There were painted wooden models of viaducts to carry water to places where the wells were going dry, of new drains and sewers for Cairhien, even a tabletop exhibit with tiny figures of men and carts, cranes and rollers, meant to show how roads could be built and paved as well as they had in years long gone.

Rand did not know whether any of it would work, but some looked worth trying. That plow, for instance, could be handy if Cairhien was ever to feed itself again. He would tell Idrien to build it. No, he would tell Berelain to tell her. *Always follow lines of authority in public view*, Moiraine had said, *unless you mean to undercut someone and bring them down.*

Among the teachers he knew was Kin Tovere, a stocky lensmaker who kept wiping his bald head with a striped handkerchief. Aside from looking glasses in various sizes—“Count the hairs in a man’s nose at a mile,” he said; that was how he talked—he had a lens as big across as his head, a sketch of the looking glass to hold it and more like it, a thing six paces long, and a scheme for looking at the stars, of all things. Well, Kin always wanted to look at things far off.

Idrien wore a look of quiet satisfaction while Rand studied Master Tovere’s sketch. She was not much for anything but the practical. During the siege of Cairhien, she herself had built a huge crossbow, all levers and pulleys, that hurled a small spear a full mile hard enough to drive through a man. Had she her way, there would be no time wasted on anything not real and solid.

“Build it,” Rand told Kin. Maybe it was of no real use, not like the plow, but he liked Tovere. Idrien sighed and shook her head. Tovere beamed. “And I’m giving you a prize of a hundred gold crowns. This looks interesting.” That produced a buzz, and it was close whether Idrien’s jaw or Tovere’s dropped farther.

Other things in the hall made Tovere seem as levelheaded as the would-be road-builder. The round-faced fellow who did something with cow dung that ended with a bluish flame burning at the end of a brass tube; even he did not seem to know what it was for. The lanky young woman whose display was mainly a shell of paper moored by strings and kept aloft by the heat rising from a small fire in a brazier. She mumbled something about flying—he was sure that was what she said—and birds' wings being curved—she had sketches of birds, and of what seemed to be *wooden* birds—but she was so tongue-tied meeting the Dragon Reborn that he could not understand another word, and Idrien certainly could not explain what it was about.

And then there was the balding man with an assemblage of brass tubes and cylinders, rods and wheels, all covering a heavy wooden table freshly gouged and scraped, some gouges nearly deep enough to pierce the tabletop. For some reason half the man's face and one of his hands were swathed in bandages. As soon as Rand appeared in the entry hall, he had begun anxiously building a fire under one of the cylinders. When Rand and Idrien stopped in front of him, he moved a lever and smiled proudly.

The contraption began to quiver, steam hissing out from two or three places. The hiss grew to a shriek, and the thing began trembling. It groaned ominously. The shriek became ear-piercing. It shook so hard the table moved. The balding man threw himself at the table, fumbling a plug loose on the largest cylinder. Steam rushed out in a cloud, and the thing went still. Sucking burned fingers, the man managed a weak grin.

"Very nice brasswork," Rand said before letting Idrien lead him away. "What was that?" he asked quietly when they were out of earshot.

She shrugged. "Mervin will not tell anyone. Sometimes there are bangs in his rooms loud enough to make doors tremble, and he has scalded himself six times so far, but he claims it will bring a new Age when he makes it work." She glanced at Rand uneasily.

"Mervin is welcome to bring it if he can," he told her dryly. Maybe the thing was supposed to make music? All those shrieks? "I don't see Herid. Did he forget to come down?"

Idrien sighed again. Herid Fel was an Andoran who somehow had ended up reading in the Royal Library here—a student of history and philosophy, he called himself—and hardly the sort to endear himself to her. "My Lord Dragon, he never comes out of his study except to go to the Library."

Getting away required a small speech, delivered standing on a stool with the Dragon Scepter in the crook of his arm, telling them that their creations were wonderful. Some might be, for all he knew. Then he was able to slip off with Jalani and Dedric. And Lews Therin, and Alanna. They left behind a pleased babble. He wondered whether any besides Idrien had ever thought of making a weapon.

Herid Fel's study lay on an upper floor, where the view was of nothing much but the dark tile roofs of the school and one square, stepped tower that blocked off anything else. Herid claimed he never looked out of the windows anyway.

"You can wait out here," Rand said on reaching the narrow door—the room inside was narrow, too—and was surprised when Jalani and Dedric agreed right away.

A number of small things suddenly came together. Jalani had not given his sword one disapproving look, something she made a point of, since he came out of the meeting with Rhuarc and Berelain. Neither she nor Dedric had so much as glanced at the horse in the stable, or made a disparaging remark about how his own legs should be good enough for him, another thing she did regularly.

As if for confirmation, as Rand turned to the door, Jalani briefly eyed Dedric up and down. Briefly, but with decidedly open interest and a smile. Dedric ignored her so intently he might as well have stared. That was the Aiel way, pretending not to understand until she made herself clearer. She would have done the same had he begun the looking.

"Enjoy yourselves," Rand said over his shoulder, producing two startled stares, and went inside.

The small room was all books and scrolls and sheafs of paper, or so it appeared. Crowded shelves walled the room to the ceiling except for the doorway and two open windows. Books and papers covered the table that took up most of the floor, lay in a jumble on the extra chair, even here and there on the little remaining of the floor. Herid Fel himself was a stout man who looked as if he had forgotten to brush his thin gray hair this morning. The pipe clenched in his teeth was unlit, and pipe ash sprinkled the front of his rumpled brown coat.

He blinked at Rand for a moment, then said, "Ah. Yes. Of course. I was about to. . . ." He frowned at the book in his hands, then sat down behind the table and fingered through some loose sheets of paper in front of him, muttering quietly. Turning to the title page of the book, he scratched his head. Finally he looked back at Rand, and blinked in surprise again. "Oh, yes. What was it you wanted to talk about?"

Rand cleared the second chair, putting the books and papers on the floor, propped the Dragon Scepter on the pile and sat down. He had tried talking with others here, philosophers and historians, learned women and scholars, and it was like trying to pin down an Aes Sedai. They were very certain of what they were certain of, and about the rest they drowned you in words that could mean anything. They either grew angry when pressed—they seemed to think he was doubting their knowledge, apparently a deep sin—or they increased the torrent of words till he did not know what half of them meant, or they became obsequious, trying to find out what he wanted to hear so they could tell it to him. Herid was different. One of the things that always seemed to slip his mind was that Rand was the Dragon Reborn, which suited Rand very well. "What do you know about Aes Sedai and Warders, Herid? About the bond?"

"Warders? Bond? As much as anybody not Aes Sedai, I suppose. Which isn't saying much, mind." Herid sucked at his pipe, not seeming to realize it had gone out. "What did you want to know?"

"Can it be broken?"

"Broken? Oh, no. I don't think so. Unless you mean when the Warder or the Aes Sedai dies. That breaks it. I think. I remember hearing something about the bond once, but I can't remember. . . ." Catching sight of a sheaf of notes on his table, Herid drew it to him with his fingertips and began reading, frowning and shaking his head. The notes looked to be in his own hand, but he did not seem to agree with them anymore.

Rand sighed; he almost thought if he turned his head quickly enough, he would see Alanna's hand poised over him. "What about the question I posed you last time? Herid? Herid?"

The stout man's head jerked up. "Oh. Yes. Ah, question. Last time. Tarmon Gai'don. Well, I don't know what it will be like. Trollocs, I suppose? Dreadlords? Yes. Dreadlords. But I have been thinking. It can't be the Last Battle. I don't think it can. Maybe every Age has a Last Battle. Or most of them." Suddenly he frowned down his nose at the pipe in his teeth, and began rummaging across the table. "I have a tinderbox here somewhere."

"What do you mean it can't be the Last Battle?" Rand tried to keep his voice smooth. Herid always came to the point; you just had to prod him toward it.

“What? Yes, exactly the point. It can’t be the Last Battle. Even if the Dragon Reborn seals the Dark One’s prison again as well as the Creator made it. Which I don’t think he can do.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “He isn’t the Creator, you know, whatever they say in the streets. Still, it has to be sealed up again by somebody. The Wheel, you see.”

“I don’t see. . . .” Rand trailed off.

“Yes, you do. You’d make a good student.” Snatching his pipe out, Herid drew a circle in the air with the stem. “The Wheel of Time. Ages come and go and come again as the Wheel turns. All the catechism.” Suddenly he stabbed a point on that imaginary wheel. “Here the Dark One’s prison is whole. Here, they drilled a hole in it, and sealed it up again.” He moved the bit of the pipe along the arc he had drawn. “Here we are. The seal’s weakening. But that doesn’t matter, of course.” The pipestem completed the circle. “When the Wheel turns back to here, back to where they drilled the hole in the first place, the Dark One’s prison has to be whole again.”

“Why? Maybe the next time they’ll drill through the patch. Maybe that’s how they could do it the last time—drill into what the Creator made, I mean—maybe they drilled the Bore through a patch and we just don’t know.”

Herid shook his head. For a moment he stared at his pipe, once more realizing it was unlit, and Rand thought he might have to recall him again, but instead Herid blinked and went on. “Someone had to make it sometime. For the first time, that is. Unless you think the Creator made the Dark One’s prison with a hole and patch to begin.” His eyebrows waggled at the suggestion. “No, it was whole in the beginning, and I think it will be whole again when the Third Age comes once more. Hmmm. I wonder if *they* called it the Third Age?” He hastily dipped a pen and scribbled a note in the margins of an open book. “Umph. No matter now. I’m not saying the Dragon Reborn will be the one to make it whole, not in this Age necessarily anyway, but it must be so before the Third Age comes again, and enough time passed since it was made whole—an Age, at least—that no one remembers the Dark One or his prison. No one remembers. Um. I wonder. . . .” He peered at his notes and scratched his head, then seemed startled to find he used the hand holding the pen. There was a smudge of ink in his hair. “Any Age where seals weaken must remember the Dark One eventually, because they will have to face him and wall him up again." Sticking his pipe back between his teeth, he tried to make another note without dipping the pen.

"Unless the Dark One breaks free," Rand said quietly. "To break the Wheel of Time, and remake Time and the world in his own image."

"There is that." Herid shrugged, frowning at the pen. Finally he thought of the inkpot. "I don't suppose there's much you or I can do about it. Why don't you come study here with me? I don't suppose Tarmon Gai'don will happen tomorrow, and it would be as good a use of your time as—"

"Is there any reason you can think of to break the seals?"

Herid's eyebrows shot up. "Break the seals? Break the seals? Why would anyone but a madman want to do that? Can they even be broken? I seem to remember reading somewhere they can't, but I don't recall now that it said why. What made you think of a thing like that?"

"I don't know," Rand sighed. In the back of his head Lews Therin was chanting. *Break the seals. Break the seals, and end it. Let me die forever.*

Fanning herself idly with a corner of her shawl, Egwene peered both ways down the crossing hallway, hoping she had not gotten lost again. She was very much afraid she had, and not pleased if it was so. The Sun Palace had miles of corridor, none much cooler than outside, and she had spent little time in them to learn her way.

There were Maidens everywhere in twos and threes—far more than Rand normally brought with him; certainly far more than usual when he was not there. They simply appeared to be strolling, but to her something about them seemed . . . furtive. A number knew her by sight, and she might have expected a friendly word—the Maidens especially seemed to have decided that being a pupil of the Wise Ones outweighed being Aes Sedai, as they thought she was, to the point that she was not Aes Sedai any longer—but when they saw her, they looked as startled as an Aiel was likely to look. Acknowledging nods came a beat late, and they hurried on without speaking. It was not behavior conducive to asking directions.

Instead she frowned at a sweaty-faced servant with thin blue and gold stripes on his cuffs, wondering whether he knew how to get where she wanted to go from here. The difficulty was, she was not exactly sure where it was she did want to go. Unfortunately, the fellow was plainly on edge with so many Aiel about. Seeing an Aiel woman frowning at him—they never seemed to notice her dark eyes, which certainly no Aiel had—and his head probably full of tales about the Maidens, he turned and ran as hard as he could.

She sniffed irritably. She did not really need directions anyway. Sooner or later she had to come on something she recognized. Certainly no point in going back the way she had come, but which of the other three? Choosing one, she strode off firmly, and even some of the Maidens stepped out of her way.

In truth, she was feeling a bit grumpy. Seeing Aviendha again after all this time would have been wonderful, if the woman had not simply nodded to her coolly and ducked into a private conference in Amys' tent. Private indeed, Egwene learned when she tried to follow.

You were not summoned, Amys had said sharply, while Aviendha sat cross-legged on a cushion, staring dejectedly at the layered carpets in front of her. *Go and take a walk. And eat something. A woman is not meant to look like a reed.*

Bair and Melaine had come hurrying, summoned by *gai'shain*, but Egwene was excluded. It had helped a little seeing a string of Wise Ones turned away too, though only a little. After all, she was Aviendha's friend, and if she was in some sort of trouble, Egwene wanted to help.

"Why are you here?" Sorilea's voice demanded behind her.

Egwene was proud of herself. She turned calmly to face the Wise One of Shende Hold. A Jarra Chareen, Sorilea had thin white hair and a face that was leathery skin pulled tight over her skull. She was all sinew and bone, and though she could channel, she had less strength in the Power than most novices Egwene had met. In fact, in the Tower, she certainly would never have gone beyond novice before being sent away. Of course, channeling did not really count for much among Wise Ones. Whatever the mysterious rules governing Wise Ones, when Sorilea was about, leadership always settled on her. Egwene thought it was pure strength of will.

A good head taller than Egwene, as most Aielwomen were, Sorilea stared at her with a green-eyed gaze that could knock a bull off its feet. That was a relief; it was Sorilea's normal way of looking at everyone. Had she a bone to pick, the walls would have been crumbling wherever she looked and tapestries catching fire. Well, that was how it seemed, anyway.

“I’ve come to see Rand,” Egwene said. “Walking in from the tents seemed as good exercise as any.” Certainly better that walking five or six times briskly around the city walls, the usual Aiel notion of light exercise. She hoped Sorilea did not ask why. She truly did not like lying to any of the Wise Ones.

Sorilea stared at her a moment as if she had sniffed something hidden, then hitched her shawl up on narrow shoulders and said, “He is not here. He has gone to his school. Berelain Paeron suggests it would not be wise to follow him, and I agree.”

Keeping her face smooth was an effort for Egwene. That the Wise Ones would take to Berelain had been the last thing she expected. They treated her as a woman of sense and respect, which made no sense *at all* to Egwene, and not because Rand had given her authority. They cared not a twig for any wetlander authority. It seemed ridiculous. The Mayener woman flaunted herself in scandalous clothes and flirted outrageously—when she did not do more than flirt, as Egwene darkly believed she did. Not at all the sort of woman for Amys to smile on like a favorite daughter. Or Sorilea.

Unbidden thoughts of Gawyn floated up in her head. It had only been a dream, and his dream at that. Certainly nothing like what Berelain did.

“When a young woman’s cheeks redden for no apparent reason,” Sorilea said, “there is usually a man involved. What man has attracted your interest? Can we expect to see you lay a bridal wreath at his feet soon?”

“Aes Sedai seldom marry,” Egwene told her coolly.

The leather-faced woman’s snort sounded like cloth ripping. The Maidens and the Wise Ones, indeed all the Aiel, might have decided she was not Aes Sedai so long as she studied with Amys and the others, but Sorilea took it further. She seemed to think Egwene had become Aiel. Added to which, there was nowhere Sorilea did not think she had a right to stick a finger. “You will, girl. You are not one to become *Far Dareis Mai* and think men are a sport like hunting, if that. Those hips were made for babies, and you will have them.”

“Will you tell me where I can wait for Rand?” Egwene asked, more faintly than she would have liked. Sorilea was not a dreamwalker, able to interpret dreams, and she certainly had none of the Foretelling, but she could be so definite that what she said seemed inevitable. Gawyn’s babies. Light, how could she have Gawyn’s babies? In truth, Aes Sedai almost never married. Rare was the man who wanted to marry a woman who, with the Power, could handle him like a child if she chose.

“This way,” Sorilea said. “Is it Sanduin, that strapping True Blood I saw around Amys’ tent yesterday? That scar makes the rest of his face more handsome. . . .”

Sorilea continued to come up with names as she led Egwene through the palace, always watching from the corner of a shrewd eye for any reaction. She also did her best to list each man’s charms, and since this included describing what he looked like without clothes—Aiel men and women shared the same sweat tents—she certainly got enough blushes.

By the time they reached the rooms where Rand would be spending the night, Egwene was more than glad to offer hasty thanks and firmly shut the sitting room door on her. Luckily, the Wise One must have had business of her own to see to, or she might well have pushed her way in.

Drawing a deep breath, Egwene began smoothing her skirts and adjusting her shawl. They did not need it, but she felt as if she had been tumbled downhill. The woman more than liked to play matchmaker. She was capable of fashioning the bridal wreath for a woman, dragging her to lay it at the feet of the man Sorilea had chosen, and twisting his arm until he picked it up. Well, not exactly dragging and arm-twisting, but it came to the same thing. Of course, Sorilea would not take it that far with her. The thought made her giggle. After all, Sorilea did not really think she had become Aiel; she knew Egwene was Aes Sedai, or thought she was anyway. No, of course there was no reason to worry over that!

With her hands on the folded gray scarf that held her hair back, she froze at the sound of soft footsteps in the bedchamber. If Rand could leap about from Caemlyn to Cairhien, perhaps he had leaped straight to his bedchamber. And perhaps someone—or something—was waiting for him. She embraced *saidar* and wove several nasty things, ready to use. A *gai’shain* woman came out, arms full of bundled sheets, and gave a start at the sight of her. Egwene released *saidar* and hoped she was not blushing again.

Niella looked enough like Aviendha to startle at first glance in that deep-cowled white robe. Until you realized you had to add six or seven years to a face that was perhaps not quite so tanned, perhaps a little plumper. Aviendha’s sister had never been a Maiden of the Spear; a weaver instead, she had completed well over half her year and a day.

Egwene offered no greeting; it would only embarrass Niella. “Do you expect Rand soon?” she asked.

“The *Car’a’carn* will come when he comes,” Niella replied, eyes meekly downcast. That truly appeared odd; Aviendha’s face, even plumper, did not go well with meekness. “It is for us to be ready when he comes.”

“Niella, do you have any idea why Aviendha would need to closet herself with Amys and Bair and Melaine?” It certainly had nothing to do with dreamwalking; Sorilea had as much ability there as Aviendha.

“She is here? No, I know no reason.” But Niella’s blue-green eyes narrowed slightly as soon as she spoke.

“You do know something,” Egwene insisted. She might as well take advantage of *gai’shain* obedience. “Tell me what it is, Niella.”

“I know that Aviendha will stripe me till I cannot sit if the *Car’a’carn* finds me standing here with dirty bedding,” Niella said ruefully. Egwene did not know whether *ji’e’toh* was involved somehow, yet when they were together, Aviendha held her sister twice as strictly to account as any other *gai’shain.*

Niella’s robe trailed across the patterned carpet as she glided hurriedly toward the door, but Egwene caught her sleeve. “When your time is up, will you put off the white?”

It was not a proper question, and meekness vanished in pride enough for any Maiden. “To do otherwise mocks *ji’e’toh*,” Niella said stiffly. Abruptly a slight smile flickered on her lips. “Besides, my husband would come looking for me, and he would not be pleased.” The mild mask returned; her eyes turned down. “May I go now? If Aviendha is here, I would not meet her can I avoid it, and she will come to these chambers.”

Egwene let her go. She had had no right to ask anyway; speaking of a *gai’shain*’s life before the white, or after, was shaming. She felt a little ashamed herself, though of course she did not really try to follow *ji’e’toh.* Only enough to be polite.

Alone, she settled into a severely carved and gilded armchair, finding it strangely uncomfortable after so long sitting cross-legged on cushions or the ground. Tucking her legs beneath her, she wondered what Aviendha was discussing with Amys and the other two. Rand, almost certainly. He always concerned the Wise Ones. They did not care about the wetlander Prophecies of the Dragon, but they knew the Prophecy of Rhuidean back to front. When he destroyed the Aiel, as that prophecy said he would, “a remnant of a remnant" would be saved, and they intended to see that the remnant was as large as possible.

That was why they made Aviendha stay close to him. Too close for decency. If she went into the bedchamber, she was sure she would find a pallet made up on the floor for Aviendha. Still, Aiel saw such things differently. The Wise Ones meant Aviendha to teach him Aiel ways and customs, to remind him that his blood was Aiel if not his upbringing. Apparently the Wise Ones thought that needed *every* waking hour, and considering what they faced, she could not fault them entirely. Not entirely. Just the same, it was not decent, making a woman sleep in the same room with a man.

Still, she could do nothing about Aviendha's problem, especially when Aviendha did not seem to see the problem. Leaning on her elbow, Egwene tried to think of how she was going to approach Rand. Her mind went round and round, but she had not settled on anything by the time he entered, murmuring something to two Aiel in the hallway before shutting the door.

Egwene bounded to her feet. "Rand, you have to help me with the Wise Ones; they'll listen to you," she burst out before she could stop herself. That was *not* what she had intended at all.

"It is good to see you again too," he said, smiling. He was carrying that length of Seanchan spear, carved with Dragons since she saw it last. She wished she knew where he had gotten the thing; anything Seanchan made her skin crawl. "I am well, thank you, Egwene. And you? You look to be yourself again, full of ginger as ever." He looked so tired. And hard, hard enough to make that smile appear odd. He seemed harder every time she saw him.

"You needn't think you're amusing," she glowered. Best to go on as she had begun. Better than backing and filling, giving him more reason to grin. "Will you help me?"

"How?" Making himself at home—well, they were his rooms—he tossed the tasseled spearhead on a small table with leopard-carved legs and shed his sword belt and coat. Somehow he was not sweating any more than the Aiel did. "The Wise Ones listen to me, but they only hear what they want to. I've come to recognize that flat-eyed look they get when they decide I'm talking nonsense, and instead of embarrassing me by saying so, or arguing about it, they'll just ignore it." He pulled one of the gilded chairs around to face her and sprawled in it, booted feet stretched in front of him.

He managed to do even that with an air of arrogance. He definitely had too many people bowing to him.

"You do talk nonsense sometimes," she muttered. For some reason, having no more time to think concentrated her thoughts. Adjusting her shawl carefully, she placed herself in front of him. "I know that you would like to hear from Elayne again." Why did his face go all sad like that, and at the same time winter cold? Likely because he had not heard from Elayne in so long. "I doubt Sheriam has been giving the Wise Ones very many messages from her for you." None, so far as she knew, though he had seldom been in Cairhien to receive any. "I'm the one Elayne will trust with that sort of missive. I can bring them to you, if you convince Amys that I'm strong enough to . . . to return to my studies."

She wished she had not faltered, but he already knew too much about dreamwalking, if not *Tel'aran'rhiod.* Almost everything about dreamwalking but the name was a close secret among the Wise Ones, particularly those who could dreamwalk. She had no right to give away their secrets.

"Will you tell me where Elayne is?" He might have been asking for a cup of tea.

She hesitated, but the agreement between her, Nynaeve and Elayne—Light, how long ago had they made it?—that agreement held. He was no longer the boy she had grown up with. He was a man full of himself, and whatever his tone, those steady eyes on her face *demanded* an answer. If Aes Sedai and Wise Ones struck sparks, Aes Sedai and he would strike a conflagration. There had to be a buffer between the two, and the only buffers available were the three of them. It had to be done, but she hoped they did not get burned up doing it. "I can't tell you that, Rand. I have no right. It isn't mine to tell." And that was the truth, too. For that matter, it was not as if she could tell him where this Salidar was, beyond Altara, somewhere along the River Eldar.

He leaned forward intently. "I know she's with Aes Sedai. You told me those Aes Sedai support me, or might. Are they afraid of me? I will take oath to stay away from them, if they are. Egwene, I mean to give Elayne the Lion Throne and the Sun Throne. She has claim to both; Cairhien will accept her as quickly as Andor does. I need her, Egwene."

Egwene opened her mouth—and realized that she was about to tell him all she knew about Salidar. Barely in time she clamped her teeth shut so hard her jaws ached, and opened herself to *saidar.* The sweet feel of life, so strong it overwhelmed everything else, seemed to help; slowly the urge to talk began to ebb.

He sat back with a sigh, and she stared at him wide-eyed. It was one thing to know he was the strongest *ta'veren* since Artur Hawkwing, but quite something else to become caught up in it herself. It was all she could do not to hug herself and shiver.

"You won't tell me," he said. Not a question. Briskly he rubbed his forearms through his shirtsleeves, reminding her that she held *saidar*; close like this, he would be feeling it as a faint tingle. "Do you think I meant to force it out of you?" he snapped, suddenly angry. "Am I such a monster now that you need the Power to protect yourself from me?"

"I don't need anything to protect me from you," she said as calmly as she could. Her stomach was still turning over slowly. He was Rand, and he was a man who could channel. A part of her wanted to gibber and wail. She was ashamed of it, but that did not make it go away. Putting away *saidar*, she regretted a tinge of reluctance. Yet it did not matter; if it came to that sort of struggle, unless she managed to shield him he would handle her as easily as if they arm-wrestled. "Rand, I am sorry I can't help you, but I cannot. Even so, I ask you again to help me. You know it would be helping yourself."

His anger was swallowed by a maddening grin; it was frightening how quickly that could happen with him. " 'A cat for a hat, or a hat for a cat,' " he quoted.

But nothing for nothing, she finished mentally. She had heard Taren Ferry folk say that when she was a girl. "You put your cat in your hat and stuff it down your breeches, Rand al'Thor," she told him coldly. She managed not to slam the door on her way out, but it was a near thing.

Striding away, she wondered what she was going to do. Somehow she had to convince the Wise Ones to let her back into *Tel'aran'rhiod*—legally, so to speak. Sooner or later he was going to encounter the Aes Sedai of Salidar, and it would help so much if she could talk to Elayne or Nynaeve again first. She was a little surprised that Salidar had not approached him already; what was holding Sheriam and the rest back? Nothing she could do about it, and they probably knew better than she.

One thing she was eager to tell Elayne. Rand needed her. He sounded as if he meant that more than anything he had ever said in his life. That should set to rest all her worries about whether he still loved her. No man could say he needed you that way unless he loved you.

For a few moments Rand sat staring at the door after it closed behind Egwene. She had changed so much from the girl he grew up with. In those Aiel clothes she managed a good imitation of a Wise One—except for the height, anyway; a short Wise One, with big dark eyes—but then, Egwene always did everything with her whole heart. She had stayed as cool as any Aes Sedai, seizing *saidar* when she thought he was threatening her. That was what he had to remember. Whatever clothes she wore, she wanted to be Aes Sedai, and she would keep Aes Sedai secrets even after he made it clear that he needed Elayne to insure peace in two nations. He had to think of her as Aes Sedai. It was saddening.

Wearily he got to his feet and donned his coat again. There were still the Cairhienin nobles to see, Colavaere and Maringil, Dobraine and the rest. And the Tairens; Meilan and Aracome and that lot would twitch if he gave the Cairhienin a moment more than they got. And the Wise Ones would want their turn at him, and Timolan and the rest of the clan chiefs here he had not met with yet today. Why had he ever wanted to leave Caemlyn? Well, talking with Herid had been pleasant; the questions he brought up were not, but it was nice to talk to someone who never remembered he was the Dragon Reborn. And he had found a little time without a coterie of Aiel surrounding him; he was going to find more of that.

He caught sight of himself in a gilt-framed mirror. “At least you didn’t let her see you were tired,” he told his reflection. That had been one of Moiraine’s more succinct bits of advice. *Never let them see you weaken.* He just had to become used to thinking of Egwene as one of them.

Apparently squatting at her ease in the garden below Rand al’Thor’s rooms, Sulin tossed a small knife into the dirt, seemingly amusing herself with a game of flip. A rock owl’s cry from one of the windows brought her to her feet with an oath, slipping the knife behind her belt. Rand al’Thor had left his rooms again. Keeping watch over him this way was not going to work. If she had Enaila or Somara here, she would set them on him. Normally she tried to protect him from that sort of nonsense as she would a first-brother.

Trotting to the nearest doorway, she joined three more Maidens—none had come with her—and began to search the warren of corridors while trying to appear just to be walking. Whatever the *Car'a'carn* wanted, nothing must happen to the only son of a Maiden ever to come back to them.

* * *

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CHAPTER 19

Matters of Toh

Rand thought that he would sleep well that night. He was nearly tired enough to forget Alanna’s touch, and more important, Aviendha was out in the tents with the Wise Ones, not undressing for bed with no regard for his presence, not disturbing his rest with the sound of her breathing. Something else made him toss, though. Dreams. He always warded his dreams, to keep the Forsaken out—and the Wise Ones—but warding could not keep out what was already inside. Dreams came of huge white things like giant birdwings without the bird, sailing across the sky; of great cities of impossibly tall buildings, shining in the sun, with shapes like beetles and flattened water-drops speeding along the streets. He had seen all that before, inside the huge *ter’angreal* in Rhuidean where he had gained the Dragons on his arms, and knew them for images of the Age of Legends, but this time it was all different. Everything seemed twisted, the colors . . . wrong, as though something had gone askew in his eyes. The sho-wings faltered and fell, each carrying hundreds to death. Buildings shattered like glass, cities burned, the land heaved like storm-tossed seas. And time after time he faced a beautiful golden-haired woman, watched love turn to terror on her face. Part of him knew her. Part of him wanted to save her, from the Dark One, from any harm, from what he himself was about to do. So many parts of him, mind splintered in glittering shards, all screaming.

He woke in darkness, sweating, shaking. Lews Therin’s dreams. That had never happened before, not dreaming the man’s dreams. He lay there the hours remaining until sunrise, staring at nothing, afraid to close his eyes. He held on to *saidin* as if he could use it to fight the dead man, but Lews Therin remained silent.

When pale light finally appeared at the windows, a *gai’shain* slipped silently into the room with a cloth-covered silver tray. Seeing Rand awake, he did not speak, only bowed and left just as quietly. With the Power in him, Rand smelled cool sweetberry tea and warm bread, butter and honey, the hot porridge Aiel ate mornings, all as if his nose were in the tray. Releasing the Source, he dressed and buckled on his sword. He did not touch the cloth covering the food; he did not much feel like eating. Holding the Dragon Scepter in the crook of his elbow, he left his apartments.

The Maidens were back in the wide corridor with Sulin, and Urien and his Red Shields, but not alone. People crowded the hallway shoulder to shoulder beyond the guards. And some inside the ring. Aviendha stood among a delegation of Wise Ones, Amys and Bair and Melaine, Sorilea of course, Chaelin, a Smoke Water Miagoma with touches of gray in her dark red hair, and Edarra, a Neder Shiande who looked not much older than himself, though she already had an apparently unshakable calm in her blue eyes and a straight-backed presence to match the others. Berelain was with them, too, but not Rhuarc or any of the other clan chiefs. What he had had to say to them had been said, and Aiel did not draw things out. But then, why were the Wise Ones there? Or Berelain? The green-and-white dress she wore this morning showed a pleasant expanse of pale bosom.

Then there were the Cairhienin, outside the ring of Aiel. Colavaere, strikingly handsome in her middle years, dark hair an elaborate tower of curls and horizontal slashes coloring her gown from high gold-embroidered collar to below her knees, more slashes than anyone else present. Solid, square-faced Dobraine, the front of his mostly gray hair shaved soldier fashion and his coat worn from the straps of a breastplate. Maringil, straight as a blade, white hair touching his shoulders; he had not shaved his forehead, and his dark silk coat, striped like Dobraine’s nearly to his knees, was fit for a ball. Two dozen or more clustered behind, mostly younger men and women, few wearing horizontal stripes even as low as the waist. “Grace favor the Lord Dragon,” they murmured, bowing hand to heart or curtsying, and, “Grace honors us with the Lord Dragon’s presence.”

The Tairens had their contingent as well, High Lords and Ladies without lesser nobles, in peaked velvet hats and silk coats with puffy, satin-striped sleeves, in bright gowns with broad lace ruffs and close-fitting caps of pearls or gems, making their respects with “The Light illumine the Light Dragon.” Meilan stood foremost, of course, lean and hard and expressionless, with his gray pointed beard. Close beside him, Fionnda’s stem expression and iron eyes somehow did not diminish her beauty, while willowy Anaiyella's simpers lessened hers. There were certainly no smiles of any sort on the faces of Maraconn, a blue-eyed rarity among Tairens, or bald Gueyam, or Aracome, who looked twice as slender alongside Gueyam's solid width if just as steely. They—and Meilan—had been thick with Hearne and Simaan. Rand had not mentioned those two yesterday, or their treason, but he was sure it was known here, and equally sure his silence was given meaning according to each man's own mind. They had grown used to such since coming to Cairhien, and this morning they watched Rand as if he might suddenly produce orders for their arrest.

In truth, nearly everyone was watching someone. A good many eyed the Aiel nervously, often hiding anger with varying success. Others watched Berelain almost as closely; he was surprised to see that even the men, even the Tairens, had more thought than lechery on their faces. Most watched him, of course; he was who he was, and what he was. Colavaere's cool gaze shifted between him and Aviendha, where it heated; there was bad blood there, though Aviendha seemed to have forgotten. Colavaere would certainly never forget the beating she had received from Aviendha after being discovered in Rand's rooms, or forgive the fact that it was common knowledge now. Meilan and Maringil each made his awareness of the other plain by avoiding the other's eyes. Both wanted the throne of Cairhien, and both thought the other his chief rival. Dobraine watched Meilan and Maringil, though why was anyone's guess. Melaine studied Rand, while Sorilea studied *her*, and Aviendha frowned at the floor. One big-eyed young woman among the Cairhienin wore her hair loose and cut off at the shoulder instead of piled in ornate curls, and a sword belted over a dark riding dress with only six slashes of color. Many of the others did not bother to hide disparaging smiles when they glanced at her; she hardly seemed to notice, alternating between staring at the Maidens with stark admiration or at Rand with stark fear. He remembered her. Selande, one of the stream of beautiful women Colavaere had thought would tie the Dragon Reborn to her schemes, until Rand convinced her it would not work. With Aviendha's unasked help, unfortunately. He hoped Colavaere feared him enough to forget revenge on Aviendha, but he wished he could make Selande believe she had nothing to fear. *You cannot please everyone*, Moiraine had said. *You cannot soothe everyone.* A hard woman.

To cap it all, the Aiel watched everyone except the Wise Ones, of course. And except Berelain, for some reason. They always eyed wetlanders suspiciously, yet she might as well have been another Wise One.

“You all honor me.” Rand hoped he did not sound too dry. Back to a parade. He wondered where Egwene was. Probably lolling in bed. Briefly he considered finding her and making one last effort to. . . . No, if she would not tell, he did not know how to make her. Too bad being *ta’veren* did not work when he most wanted it to. “Unfortunately, I will not be able to talk with you more this morning. I am returning to Caemlyn.” Andor was the problem he had to deal with now. Andor, and Sammael.

“Your orders are to be carried out, my Lord Dragon,” Berelain said. “This morning, so you may witness it.”

“My orders?”

“Mangin,” she said. “He was told this morning.” Most of the Wise Ones had donned a flat expression, but Bair and Sorilea both wore open disapproval. Surprisingly, it was directed at Berelain.

“I don’t mean to be a witness to every murderer who’s hung,” Rand said coldly. In truth, he had forgotten, or rather shoved it out of his mind. Hanging a man you liked was not something anyone would want to remember. Rhuarc and the other chiefs had not even mentioned it when he spoke with them. Another truth was that he would not make this execution special. Aiel had to live by the law like anyone else; Cairhienin and Tairens had to see that, and know that if he would not play favorites with the Aiel, he certainly would not with them. *You use everything and everybody*, he thought, sickened; at least, he hoped he had thought it. Besides, he did not want to watch any hanging; much less Mangin’s.

Meilan certainly looked thoughtful, and sweat was beading on Aracome’s forehead, though that might have been the heat. Colavaere, face going pale, seemed to be seeing him for the first time ever. Berelain divided a rueful glance between Bair and Sorilea, who nodded; could they have told her he would answer as he had? It did not seem possible. The others’ reactions varied from surprise to satisfaction, but he noted Selande in particular. Wide-eyed, she forgot the Maidens; if she had looked at Rand fearfully before, now she was terrified. Well, so be it.

“I will be leaving for Caemlyn immediately,” Rand told them. A soft sound rippled among the Cairhienin and Tairens, very much like sighs of relief.

It was no surprise that they all accompanied him as far as the chamber set aside for his Traveling. Except for Berelain, the Maidens and Red

Shields kept the wetlanders back; they did not particularly like letting Cairhienin near him, and he was as glad as they barred the Tairens today. There were plenty of glares, but no one said anything, not to him. Not even Berelain, who followed right behind with the Wise Ones and Aviendha, talking quietly, occasionally laughing softly. That made the hair on his neck stand, Berelain and Aviendha talking together. And laughing?

At the square-carved door to the Traveling chamber, he looked carefully above Berelain's head as she swept him a deep curtsy. "I will tend Cairhien without fear or favor until you return, my Lord Dragon." Perhaps, despite Mangin, she really had come this morning just to say that, and be heard by the other nobles. It brought an indulgent smile from Sorilea for some reason. He needed to find out what was going on there; he was not going to have the Wise Ones interfering with Berelain. The rest of the Wise Ones had drawn Aviendha aside; they seemed to be taking turns speaking to her, quite firmly though he could not make out words. "When you see Perrin Aybarra next," Berelain added, "please give him my warmest wishes. And Mat Cauthon, also."

"We await the Lord Dragon's return eagerly," Colavaere lied, keeping her face carefully neutral.

Meilan glared at her for having managed to speak first, and made a flowery speech, saying no more really than she had, which Maringil of course had to top, for floweriness at least. Fionnda and Anaiyella outdid both, adding enough compliments that he eyed Aviendha anxiously, but the Wise Ones still had her occupied. Dobraine contented himself with, "Until my Lord Dragon's return," while Maraconn, Gueyam and Aracome murmured something indistinct with wary eyes.

It was a relief to duck inside, away from them. The surprise came when Melaine followed him ahead of Aviendha. He raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I must consult with Bael on business of the Wise Ones," she told him in a no-nonsense voice, then immediately shot a sharp look at Aviendha, who had on such an innocent face that Rand knew she was hiding something. Aviendha looked many things naturally, but never innocent; never that innocent.

"As you wish," he said. He suspected the Wise Ones had been waiting a chance to send her to Caemlyn. Who better to make sure Rand did not influence Bael the wrong way than Bael's wife? Like Rhuarc, the man had two, which Mat always said was either a dream or a nightmare and he could not decide which.

Aviendha watched closely as he opened a gateway back to Caemlyn, into the Grand Hall. She usually did, though she could not see his flows. Once she had made a gateway herself, but in a rare moment of panic, and she had never been able to remember how. Today for some reason the rotating slash of light apparently reminded her of what happened that time; red suffused her tan cheeks, and she suddenly refused to look in his direction. With the Power filling him, he smelled her, the herbal scent of her soap, a hint of sweet perfume he could not remember her wearing before. For once truly eager to be rid of *saidin*, he was the first one through into the empty throne room. Alanna seemed to crash home in his head, her presence as palpable as if she had been right in front of him. She had been weeping, he thought. Because he had gone away? Well, let her weep for that. Somehow he had to break free of her.

His going first did not sit well with the Maidens or Red Shields, of course. Urien merely grunted and shook his head disapprovingly. A white-faced Sulin went up on her toes to put herself nose-to-nose with Rand. "The great and powerful *Car'a'carn* gave his honor to *Far Dareis Mai* to carry," she all but hissed in a low whisper. "If the mighty *Car'a'carn* dies in ambush while the Maidens protect him, *Far Dareis Mai* has no honor left. If the all-conquering *Car'a'carn* does not care, perhaps Enaila is right. Perhaps the omnipotent *Car'a'carn* is a willful boy who should be held by the hand lest he run over a cliff because he will not look."

Rand's jaw tightened. In private he gritted his teeth and put up with this—with less pointed than this, usually—for the debt he owed the Maidens, but not even Enaila or Somara had ever openly berated him in public. Melaine was already halfway down the hall, skirts gathered up and almost trotting; apparently she could not wait to reestablish the Wise Ones' influence with Bael. He could not tell whether Urien had heard, though the man seemed awfully intent on directing his veiled *Aethan Dor* as they searched through the columns with the Maidens, something they had no need of direction to do. Aviendha, on the other hand, arms folded beneath her breasts, wore such a mix of frown and approval that he had no doubts about her.

"Yesterday went very well," he told Sulin firmly. "From now on, I think two guards will be more than sufficient." Her eyes almost bulged; she could not seem to find breath to speak. Now that he had taken away, it was time to give back, before she exploded like an Illuminator's fireworks. "It's different when I go outside the Palace, of course. The guard you have been giving me will do then, but here, or in the Sun Palace or the Stone of Tear, two are enough." He turned away while her mouth still worked silently.

Aviendha fell in beside him as he walked around the dais holding the thrones to the small doors behind. He had come here instead of straight to his own rooms in hope that he could lose her. Even without *saidin* he could smell her, or maybe it was the memory. Either way, he wished his head were clogged with a cold; he liked the smell too much.

Shawl wrapped around her tightly, Aviendha stared straight ahead of her as if troubled, not noticing when he held the door into one of the lion-paneled dressing rooms for her, something that usually aroused at least a little ire, perhaps a tart question as to which of her arms was broken. When he asked what was the matter, she gave a start. "Nothing. Sulin was right. But. . . ." Suddenly she gave a reluctant grin. "Did you see her face? No one has set her down like that since . . . since never, I think. Not even Rhuarc."

"I'm a little surprised to find you on my side."

She stared at him with those big eyes. He could spend all day just trying to decide whether they were blue or green. No. He had no right to think about her eyes. What had happened after she made that doorway—to run from him—made no difference. He especially had no right to think about that.

"You trouble me so, Rand al'Thor," she said without a bit of heat. "Light, sometimes I think the Creator made you just to trouble me."

He wanted to tell her it was her own fault—more than once he had offered to send her back to the Wise Ones, though it would just mean them putting someone else in her place—but before he could open his mouth, Jalani and Liah caught up, followed almost immediately by two Red Shields, one a graying fellow with three times the scars Liah had on her face. Rand directed Jalani and the scarred man back to the throne room, which nearly precipitated an argument. Not from the Red Shield, who merely glanced at his fellow, shrugged and went, but Jalani drew herself up.

Rand pointed to the door leading to the Grand Hall. "The *Car'a'carn* expects *Far Dareis Mai* to go where he commands."

"You may be a king to the wetlanders, Rand al'Thor, but not to Aiel." A tough sullenness marred Jalani's dignity, reminding him how young she was. “The Maidens will never fail you in the dance of spears, but this is not the dance.” Still, she went, after a rapid exchange of handtalk with Liah.

With Liah and the lean Red Shield, a yellow-haired man named Cassin who stood a good inch taller than Rand, Rand strode quickly through the palace to his rooms. And with Aviendha, of course. If he had thought those bulky skirts might make her fall behind, he was mistaken. Liah and Cassin remained in the hallway outside his sitting room, a large chamber with a marble frieze of lions below the high ceiling and tapestries of hunting scenes and misty mountains, but Aviendha followed him inside.

“Shouldn’t you be with Melaine?” he demanded. “Business of the Wise Ones and all that?”

“No,” she said curtly. “Melaine would not be pleased if I interfered right now.”

Light, but *he* should not be pleased that she was not going. Tossing the Dragon Scepter atop a table with gilded vine-carved legs, he undid his sword belt and added that. “Did Amys and the others tell you where Elayne is?”

For a long moment Aviendha stood in the middle of the blue-tiled floor looking at him, her expression unreadable. “They do not know,” she said finally. “I asked.” He had expected she would. She had not done it in months, but before coming to Caemlyn the first time with him, every second word out of her mouth had been a reminder that he belonged to Elayne. In her view he did, and what had happened between them beyond that gateway she had made clearly did not alter the fact, and would not happen again, something else she had made quite clear. Exactly as he wanted it; he was worse than a pig to feel regret. Ignoring all the fine gilded chairs, she settled cross-legged on the floor, arranging her skirts gracefully. “They did speak of you, though.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” he said dryly, and to his surprise her cheeks reddened. Aviendha was not a woman for blushes, and this made twice in one day.

“They have shared dreams, some of which concern you.” She sounded slightly strangled until she paused to clear her throat, then fixed him with a steady, determined gaze. “Melaine and Bair dreamed of you on a boat,” she said, the word still awkward after all these months in the wetlands, “with three women whose faces they could not see, and a scale tilting first one way then the other. Melaine and Amys dreamed of a man standing by your side with a dagger to your throat, but you did not see him. Bair and Amys dreamed of you cutting the wetlands in two with a sword." For an instant her eyes darted contemptuously to the scabbarded blade lying atop the Dragon Scepter. Contemptuously, and a bit guiltily. She had given him that, once the property of King Laman, carefully wrapped in a blanket so she could not be said to have actually touched it. "They cannot interpret the dreams, but they thought you should know."

The first was as opaque to him as to the Wise Ones, but the second seemed obvious. A man he could not see with a dagger had to be a Gray Man; their souls given up to the Shadow—not merely pledged, but given away—they could slip past notice even when you looked right at them, and their only real purpose was assassination. Why had the Wise Ones not understood something so plain? As for the last, he feared that was plain as well. He already was cutting lands apart. Tarabon and Arad Doman were ruins, the rebellions in Tear and Cairhien could become more than skulking talk at any time, and Illian would certainly feel the weight of his sword. And that was aside from the Prophet, and the Dragonsworn down in Altara and Murandy.

"I don't see any mystery in two of those, Aviendha." But when he explained, she gave him a doubtful look. Of course. If Wise One dreamwalkers could not interpret a dream, certainly no one else could. He grunted sourly and flung himself into a chair facing her. "What else did they dream?"

"There is one other I can tell you, though it may not concern you." Which meant there were some she would not tell, which made him wonder why the Wise Ones had discussed them with her, since she was not a dreamwalker. "All three had this dream, which makes it especially significant. Rain," that word still came clumsily too, "coming from a bowl. There are snares and pitfalls around the bowl. If the right hands pick it up, they will find a treasure perhaps as great as the bowl. If the wrong hands, the world is doomed. The key to finding the bowl is to find the one who is no longer."

"No longer what?" This certainly sounded more important than the rest. "Do you mean somebody who's dead?"

Aviendha's dark reddish hair swung below her shoulders as she shook her head. "They know no more than I said." To his surprise, she rose smoothly with those automatic adjustments to her clothes that women always made.

"Do you—" He coughed deliberately. *Do you have to go?* he had been about to say. Light, he wanted her to go. Every minute around her was torture. But then, every minute away from her was torture too. Well, he could do what was right and what was good for him, and best for her. "Do you want to go back to the Wise Ones, Aviendha? To resume your studies? There really isn't any point to your staying longer. You've taught me so much, I might as well have been raised Aiel."

Her sniff said volumes, but of course she did not leave it at that. "You know less than a boy of six. Why does a man listen to his second-mother before his own mother, and a woman to her second-father before her own? When can a woman marry a man without making a bridal wreath? When must a roofmistress obey a blacksmith? If you take a silversmith *gai'shain*, why must you let her work one day for herself for each she works for you? Why is the same not true of a weaver?" He floundered for answers short of admitting he did not know, but she suddenly fiddled with her shawl as if she had forgotten him. "Sometimes *ji'e'toh* makes for very great jokes. I would laugh my sides apart if I were not the butt of this one." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I will meet my *toh*."

He thought she was talking to herself, but he answered. Carefully. "If you mean about Lanfear, it wasn't me who saved you. Moiraine did. She died saving all of us." Laman's sword had rid her of her only other *toh* to him, though he had never been able to understand what that was. The only obligation she knew. He prayed she never learned of the other; she would see it as one, though he certainly did not.

Aviendha peered at him, head tilted and a slight smile flickering on her lips. She had regained a self-possession that would have done Sorilea proud. "Thank you, Rand al'Thor. Bair says it is well to be reminded now and then that a man does not know everything. Be sure to let me know when you mean to go to sleep. I would not come late and wake you."

Rand sat there staring at the door after she had gone. A Cairhienin playing the Game of Houses was usually easier to understand than any woman making no effort to be enigmatic at all. He suspected that what he felt for Aviendha, whatever that was, tangled things up worse.

What I love, I destroy, Lews Therin laughed. *What I destroy, I love.*

Shut up! Rand thought furiously, and the thin-edged laughter vanished. He did not know who he loved, but he knew who he was going to save. From whatever he could, but from him most of all.

In the hallway, Aviendha sagged against the door, taking deep calming breaths. Meant to be calming, anyway. Her heart still tried to tear through her rib cage. Being near Rand al'Thor stretched her naked over hot coals, stretched her till she thought her bones would pop apart. He brought such shame to her as she had never thought she would know. A great joke, she had told him, and part of her did want to laugh. She had *toh* toward him, but much more toward Elayne. All he had done was save her life. Lanfear would have killed her without him. Lanfear had wanted to kill her in particular, as painfully as possible. Somehow, Lanfear had known. Beside what she had incurred toward Elayne, her *toh* toward Rand was a termite mound beside the Spine of the World.

Cassin—the cut of his coat told her he was Goshien as well as *Aethan Dor*; she did not recognize his sept—merely glanced at her from where he squatted with his spears across his knees; he knew nothing, of course. But Liah smiled at her, entirely too encouragingly for a woman she did not know, entirely too knowingly for anyone. Aviendha was shocked to find herself thinking that Chareen, as Liah's coat marked her, were often sneaking cats; she had never thought of any Maiden as anything but *Far Dareis Mai*. Rand al'Thor had unstrung her brain.

Still, her fingers flashed angrily. *Why do you smile, girl? Have you no better use for your time?*

Liah's eyebrows raised slightly, and if anything her smile became amused. Her fingers moved in answer. *Who do you call girl, girl? You are not yet wise, but no longer Maiden. I think you will put your soul in a wreath to lay at a man's feet.*

Aviendha took a furious step forward—there were few insults worse among *Far Dareis Mai*—then stopped. In *cadin'sor* she did not think Liah could match her, but in skirts, she would be defeated. Worse, Liah would probably refuse to make her *gai'shain*; she could, attacked by a woman who was not a Maiden and not yet a Wise One, or demand the right to beat Aviendha before any of the Taardad who could be gathered. A lesser shame than the refusal, but not small. Worst of all, whether she won or lost, Melaine surely would choose a method to remind her she had left the spear behind that would make her wish Liah had drubbed her ten times before all the clans. In a Wise One’s hands, shame was keener than a flaying knife. Liah never moved a muscle; she knew all that as well as Aviendha did.

“Now you stare at one another,” Cassin said idly. “One day I must learn this handtalk of yours.”

Liah glanced at him, her laugh silvery. “You will look pretty in skirts, Red Shield, the day you come to ask to become a Maiden.”

Aviendha drew a relieved breath when Liah’s eyes left hers; under the circumstances, she could not have looked away first honorably. Automatically her fingers moved in acknowledgment, the first handtalk a Maiden learned, since the phrase a new Maiden used most often. *I have* toh.

Liah signed back without pause. *Very small, spear-sister.*

Aviendha smiled gratefully for the missing hooked little finger that would have made the term mocking, used to women who gave up the spear and then tried to behave as if they had not.

A wetlander servant was running up the hall. Keeping her face clear of the disgust she felt for someone who spent his life serving others, Aviendha strode off the other way, so she would not have to pass the fellow. Killing Rand al’Thor would meet one *toh*, killing herself the second, but each *toh* blocked that solution to the other. Whatever the Wise Ones said, she had to find some way to meet both.

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CHAPTER 20

From the Stedding

Rand had just begun thumbing tabac into his short pipe when Liah put her head in at the door. Before she could speak, a panting round-faced man in red-and-white livery pushed past her, and fell to his knees before Rand while she stared in amazement.

“My Lord Dragon,” the fellow burst out in a breathless squeak, “Ogier have come to the Palace. *Three* of them! They have been given wine, and offered more, but they insist only on seeing the Lord Dragon.”

Rand made his voice easy; he did not want to frighten the man. “How long have you been in the Palace . . . ?” The fellow’s livery coat fit him, and he was not young. “I’m afraid I don’t know your name.”

The kneeling man goggled. “My name? Bari, my Lord Dragon. Uh, twenty-two years, my Lord Dragon, come Winternight. My Lord Dragon, the Ogier?”

Rand had visited an Ogier *stedding* twice, but he was not sure of the proper etiquette. Ogier had built most of the great cities, the oldest parts of them, and still came out of their *stedding* occasionally to make repairs, yet he doubted Bari would have been this excited for anyone else less than king or Aes Sedai. Maybe not for them. Rand stuffed pipe and tabac pouch back into his pocket. “Take me to them.”

Bari leaped to his feet, all but bouncing on his toes. Rand suspected he had made the right choice; the man showed no surprise that the Lord Dragon was going to the Ogier instead of having them brought to him. He left his sword and the scepter behind; Ogier would not be impressed by either. Liah and Cassin came, of course, and it was plain Bari would have run back as well if not for the necessity of keeping his pace to Rand’s.

The Ogier waited in a courtyard with a fountain, its basin filled with lily pads and red and gold fish, a white-haired man in a long coat that flared above high boots with their tops turned down, and two women, one noticeably much younger than the other, their skirts embroidered in vines and leaves, the elder's considerably more elaborate that the younger's. Golden goblets made for humans seemed tiny in their hands. Several trees retained some of their leaves, and the Palace itself gave shade. The Ogier were not alone; when Rand appeared, Sulin and a good three dozen Maidens were crowded around them, and Urien, plus fifty or more Aielmen. The Aiel had the grace to fall silent when they saw Rand.

The Ogier man said, "Your name sings in my ears, Rand al'Thor," in a voice like rumbling thunder and gravely made introductions. He was Haman, son of Dal son of Morel. The older woman was Covril, daughter of Ella daughter of Soong, and the younger was Erith, daughter of Iva daughter of Alar. Rand remembered seeing Erith once, in Stedding Tsofu, a hard two-day ride from the city of Cairhien. He could not imagine what she was doing in Caemlyn.

The Ogier made the Aiel seem small; they made the courtyard seem small. Haman stood over half again as tall as Rand and broad in proportion, Covril less than a head—an Ogier head—shorter than that, and even Erith topped Rand by nearly a foot and a half. Yet that was the smallest difference between Ogier and humans. Haman's eyes were as large and round as teacups, his broad nose nearly covered his face, and his ears stood up through his hair, tipped with white tufts. He wore long drooping white mustaches and a narrow beard beneath his chin, and his eyebrows hung down to his cheeks. Rand could not have said precisely how Covril's and Erith's faces differed—except for lacking beards and mustaches, of course, and their eyebrows were not quite so long or thick—but they seemed somehow more delicate. Though Covril's was quite stern at the moment—she looked familiar, too, for some reason—and Erith appeared worried, her ears sagging.

"If you will forgive me a moment," Rand told them.

Sulin did not let him get another word out. "We came to talk with the Treebrothers, Rand al'Thor," she said firmly. "You must know the Aiel have long been waterfriends to the Treebrothers. We go to trade in their *stedding* often."

"That is quite true," Haman murmured. For an Ogier, it was a murmur. An avalanche somewhere out of sight.

"I am sure the others did come to talk," Rand told Sulin. He could pick out the members of her guard this morning by eye, every last one of them; Jalani blushed a deep red. On the other hand, aside from Urien, no more than three or four of the morning's Red Shields were there. "I would not like to think I need to ask Enaila and Somara to take *you* in charge." Sulin's tanned face darkened with indignation, making the scar she had taken following him stand out more. "I would talk with them alone. Alone," he emphasized, eyeing Liah and Cassin. "Unless you think I need protection from them?" If anything that made her more offended, and she gathered up the Maidens with quick flashes of handtalk in what for anyone but an Aiel would surely have been called a huff. Some of the Aielmen were chuckling as they left; Rand supposed he had made a joke of some kind.

As they went, Haman stroked his long beard. "Humans have not always thought us so safe, you know. Um. Um." His musing sounded like a huge bumblebee. "It is in the old records. Very old. Only fragments, really, but dating from just after—"

"Elder Haman," Covril said politely, "if we may stick to the matter at hand?" This bumblebee rumbled at a higher pitch.

Elder Haman. Where had Rand heard that before? Each *stedding* had its Council of Elders.

Haman sighed deeply. "Very well, Covril, but you are showing unseemly haste. You barely gave us time to wash before coming here. I vow, you've begun to leap about like. . . ." Those big eyes flickered toward Rand, and he covered a cough with a hand the size of a large ham. Ogier considered humans hasty, always trying to do now what could not possibly matter until tomorrow. Or until next year; Ogier took a very long view. They also thought it insulting to remind humans of how they leaped about. "This has been a most exacting journey Outside," Haman went on, explaining to Rand, "not the least of it discovering that the Shaido Aiel had besieged Al'cair'rahienallen—most extraordinary, that—and that you were actually there, but then you left before we could speak with you, and. . . . I cannot help feeling we have been impetuous. No. No, you speak, Covril. It is for you I left my studies, and my teaching, to go running across the world. My classes will be in riot by now." Rand almost grinned; the way Ogier normally did things, Haman's classes would take half a year to decide he really was gone and a year more to discuss what to do about it.

“A mother has some right to be anxious,” Covril said, tufted ears quivering. She seemed to be battling between the respect due an Elder and a most un-Ogier-like impatience. When she turned to Rand, she drew herself up, ears standing straight and chin firm. “What have you done with my son?”

Rand gaped. “Your son?”

“Loial!” She stared as if he were mad. Erith was peering at him anxiously, hands clutched to her breast. “You told the Eldest of the Elders of Stedding Tsofu that you would look after him,” Covril marched on. “They told me you did. You did not call yourself Dragon then, but it was you. Wasn’t it, Erith? Did Alar not say Rand al’Thor?” She did not give the younger woman time for more than a nod. As her voice picked up speed, Haman began to look pained. “My Loial is too young to be Outside, too young to be running across the world, doing the things you no doubt have him doing. Elder Alar told me about you. What has my Loial to do with the Ways and Trollocs and the Horn of Valere? You will hand him over to me now, please, so I can see him properly married to Erith. She will settle his itchy feet.”

“He’s very handsome,” Erith murmured shyly, her ears quivering so hard with embarrassment that the dark tufts blurred. “And I think he’s very brave, too.”

It took Rand a moment to regain his balance mentally. An Ogier being firm sounded much the same as a mountain falling. An Ogier being firm and speaking rapidly. . . .

By Ogier lights, Loial *was* too young to have left the *stedding* alone, little more than ninety. Ogier were very long-lived. From the first day Rand had met him, all full of eagerness to see the world, Loial had been worried over what would happen when the Elders realized he had run away. Most of all, he worried about his mother coming after him with a bride in tow. He said the man had no say in these things among Ogier, and the woman not much; it was all the two mothers’ doing. It was not beyond possibility to find yourself betrothed to a woman you had never met before the day your mother introduced you to your prospective bride and mother-in-law.

Loial seemed to think marriage would be the end of everything for him, certainly to all his wishes to see the world, and whether it would or not, Rand could not hand a friend over to what he feared. He was about to say he did not know where Loial was and suggest they return to the *stedding* until he came back—he had his mouth open to say it—when a question occurred to him. It embarrassed him that he could not remember something so important; to Loial, it was. "How long has he been out of the *stedding*?"

"Too long," Haman grumbled like boulders rolling downhill. "The boy never wanted to apply himself. Always talking about seeing Outside, as if anything has really changed from what's in the books he should have been studying. Um. Um. What real change is it if humans change the lines on a map? The land is still—"

"He has been Outside much too long," Loial's mother put in as firmly as a post driven into dry clay. Haman frowned at her, and she managed to stare back at him just as firmly although her ears vibrated in embarrassment.

"M-more than five years now," Erith said. For a moment her ears wilted, then shot up and stubbornly back. In a very good imitation of Covril, she said, "I want him to be my husband. I knew that when I first saw him. I will not let him die. Not from being foolish."

Rand and Loial had talked of many things, and one of them had been the Longing, although Loial had not liked talking about it. When the Breaking of the World drove humans to flee for whatever safety they could find, it drove Ogier from the *stedding* too. For long years humans had wandered in a world that changed sometimes by the day, hunting that safety, and Ogier had wandered, hunting for the *stedding* lost in the changing land. It was then that the Longing entered them. An Ogier away from the *stedding* wanted to return. An Ogier long from the *stedding* needed to return. An Ogier too long from the *stedding* died.

"He told me of an Ogier who stayed out longer," Rand said quietly. "Ten years, I think he said."

Haman was shaking his massive head before Rand finished. "It will not do. That I know of, five have remained Outside that long and survived to return, and I think I would know if more had. Such madness would be written about and talked about. Three of those died within a year of coming home, the fourth was an invalid for the rest of his life, and the fifth little better, needing a stick to walk. Though she did continue writing. Um. Um. Dalar had some interesting things to say concerning—" This time when Covril opened her mouth, his head whipped around; he stared at her, long eyebrows humping up, and she began smoothing her skirts furiously. But she stared right back. “Five years is a short time, I know,” Haman told Rand, while watching Covril sharply from the corner of his eye, “but we are tied to the *stedding* now. We heard nothing in the city to indicate that Loial is here—and from the excitement we ourselves caused, I think we would have—but if you will tell us where he is, you will be doing him a very great kindness.”

“The Two Rivers,” Rand said. Saving a friend’s life was not betraying him. “When I last saw him, he was setting out in good company, with friends. It’s a quiet place, the Two Rivers. Safe.” It was now, again, thanks to Perrin. “And he was well a few months ago.” Bode had said as much when the girls were telling what had happened back home.

“The Two Rivers,” Haman muttered. “Um. Um. Yes, I know where that is. Another long walk.” Ogier seldom rode, there being few horses that could bear them, and they preferred their own feet in any case.

“We must start out immediately,” Erith said in a firm if light rumble. Light compared to Haman. Covril and Haman looked at her in surprise, and her ears wilted completely. She was, after all, a very young woman accompanying an Elder and a woman Rand suspected was of some importance in her own right from the way she stood up to Haman. Erith was probably not a day over eighty.

Smiling at the thought—a slip of a girl; maybe only seventy—Rand said, “Please accept the hospitality of the Palace. A few days’ rest might even make your journey faster. And you might be able to help me, Elder Haman.” Of course; Loial was always talking about his teacher, Elder Haman. Elder Haman knew everything, according to Loial. “I need to locate the Waygates. All of them.”

All three Ogier spoke at once.

“Waygates?” Haman said, ears and eyebrows both shooting up. “The Ways are very dangerous. Far too dangerous.”

“A few days?” Erith protested. “My Loial could be dying.”

“A few days?” Covril said on top of her. “My Loial could be—” She cut off, staring at the younger woman, lips compressed and ears quivering.

Haman frowned at them both, stroking his narrow beard irritably. “I do not know why I let myself be talked into this. I should be teaching my classes, and speaking to the Stump. If you were not such a respected Speaker, Covril. . . .”

"You mean if you were not married to my sister," she said stoutly. "Voniel told you to do your duty, Haman." Haman's brows lowered till the long ends hung on his cheeks, and her ears seemed to lose most of their stiffness. "I meant to say she *asked* you," she went on. Not hurriedly, exactly, not losing aplomb, but definitely not hesitating. "By the Tree and stillness, I meant no offense, Elder Haman."

Haman harrumphed loudly—which for an Ogier meant very loudly—and turned to Rand, tugging his coat as if it had been disarrayed.

"Shadowspawn are using the Ways," Rand said before Haman could speak. "I have set guards on the few I can reach." Including the one outside Stedding Tsofu, plainly after their departure. These three could not have walked all the way from Stedding Tsofu after his last futile visit. "A bare handful. All of them need to be guarded, or else Myrddraal and Trollocs can come boiling out of nowhere, as far as anybody they catch is concerned. But I don't even know where they all are."

That would still leave gateways, of course. Sometimes he wondered why one of the Forsaken did not pour a few thousand Trollocs into the Palace by a gateway. Ten thousand, or twenty. He would be hard pressed to stop that, if he could stop it at all. It would be a slaughter at best. Well, he could do nothing about a gateway unless he was there. He could do something about the Waygates.

Haman exchanged looks with Covril. They drew aside, speaking in a whisper, and for a wonder, it was low enough that all he heard was a buzz like a huge swarm of bees on the roof. He must be right about her having some importance. A Speaker; he had heard the capital. He considered seizing *saidin*—he would be able to hear, then—and rejected it disgustedly. He had not sunk to eavesdropping yet. Erith divided her attention evenly between her elders and Rand, all the while unconsciously smoothing her skirts.

Rand hoped they did not inquire why he had not asked his question of the Council of Elders in Stedding Tsofu. Alar, Eldest of the Elders there, had been very firm; the Stump was meeting, and nothing so odd—so peculiar as to never have been thought of before—as handing control of the Waygates to a human could be done unless the Stump concurred. Who he was hardly seemed to matter to her any more than it did to these three.

Finally Haman came back frowning and gripping the lapels of his coat. Covril was frowning too. "This is all very hasty, very hasty," Haman said in slow tones like gravel sliding. “I wish I could discuss it with. . . . Well, I cannot. Shadowspawn, you say? Um. Um. Very well, if there must be haste, there must be haste. Never let it be said that Ogier cannot move quickly when needs require, and perhaps they do now. You must understand, the Council of Elders in any *stedding* may tell you no, and so may the Stump.”

“Maps!” Rand shouted, so loudly that all three Ogier jumped. “I need maps!” He spun around looking for one of the servants who always seemed to be about, for a *gai’shain*, anyone. Sulin put her head into the courtyard through a doorway. She would be nearby, after everything he had told her. “Maps,” he barked at her. “I want every map in the Palace. And a pen, and ink. Now! Quickly!” She looked at him almost disparagingly—Aiel did not use maps, indeed claimed not to need them—and turned away. “Run, *Far Dareis Mai*!” he snapped. She looked over her shoulder at him—and ran. He wished he knew how his face looked, so he could recall it for use again.

Haman appeared as though he would be wringing his hands if his dignity had been just a little smaller. “Really, there is very little we can possibly tell you that you don’t already know. Every *stedding* has one just Outside.” The first Waygates could not have been made inside, with the ability to channel blocked by the *stedding* itself; even when Ogier were given the Talisman of Growing, and could themselves make the Ways grow to a new Waygate, the Power was still involved, if not channeling. “And all your cities that have Ogier groves. Though it does seem the city here has grown *over* the grove. And in Al’cair’rahienallen. . . .” He trailed off, shaking his head.

The trouble could be summed up by that name. Three thousand years ago, near enough, there had been a city called Al’cair’rahienallen, built by Ogier. Today it was Cairhien, and the grove the Ogier builders planted to remind them of their *stedding* was part of an estate that had belonged to the same Barthanes whose palace now housed Rand’s school. Nobody but Ogier and maybe some Aes Sedai remembered Al’cair’rahienallen. Not even Cairhienin.

Whatever Haman believed, much could change in three thousand years. Great Ogier-built cities had ceased to exist, some leaving not so much as a name behind. Great cities had risen that the Ogier had had no hand in. Amador, begun after the Trolloc Wars, was one, so Moiraine had told him, and Chachin in Kandor, and Shol Arbela in Arafel, and Fal Moran in Shienar. In Arad Doman, Bandar Eban had been built on the ruins of a city destroyed in the War of the Hundred Years, a city Moiraine knew three names for, each suspect, and itself built on the ruins of a nameless city that had vanished in the Trolloc Wars. Rand knew of a Waygate in Shienar, in the countryside near a moderate town that had kept part of the name of the huge city leveled by Trollocs, and another inside the Blight, in Shadow-murdered Malkier. Other places there had simply been change, or growth, as Haman himself had pointed out. The Waygate here in Caemlyn sat in a basement now. A well-guarded basement. Rand knew there was a Waygate in Tear, out in the great pastureland where the High Lords ran their famous horse herds. There should be one somewhere in the Mountains of Mist, where Manetheren had once stood, wherever that was. As far as *stedding* went, he knew where to find Stedding Tsofu. Moiraine had not considered *stedding* or Ogier a vital part of his education.

“You don’t know where the *stedding* are?” Haman said incredulously when Rand finished explaining. “Is this Aiel humor? I have never understood Aiel humor.”

“For Ogier,” Rand said gently, “it has been a long time since the Ways were made. For humans, it has been a *very* long time.”

“But you do not even *remember* Mafal Dadaranell, or Ancohima, or Londaren Cor, or . . . ?”

Covril put a hand on Haman’s shoulder, but the pity in her eyes was directed at Rand. “He does not remember,” she said softly. “Their memories are gone.” She made it sound the greatest loss imaginable. Erith, hands clasped to her mouth, appeared ready to cry.

Sulin returned, quite deliberately not running, followed by a fat cluster of *gai’shain*, their arms filled to overflowing with rolled maps of all sizes, some long enough to drag on the courtyard paving stones. One white-robed man carried an ivory-inlaid writing box. “I have set *gai’shain* looking for more,” she said stiffly, “and some of the wetlanders.”

“Thank you,” he told her. A little of the tautness went from her face.

Squatting down, he began spreading maps right there on the paving stones, sorting them. A number were of the city, and many of parts of Andor. He quickly found one showing the whole stretch of the Borderlands, and the Light knew what that was doing in Caemlyn. Some were old and tattered, showing borders that no longer applied, naming countries that had faded away hundreds of years before.

Borders and names were enough to rank the maps by age. On the oldest, Hardan bordered Cairhien to the north; then Hardan was gone and Cairhien's borders swept halfway to Shienar before creeping back as it became clear the Sun Throne simply could not hold on to that much land. Maredo stood between Tear and Illian, then Maredo was gone, and Tear and Illian's borders met on the Plains of Maredo, slowly falling back for the same reasons as Cairhien's. Caralain vanished, and Almoth, Mosara and Irenvelle, and others, sometimes absorbed by other nations, most often eventually becoming unclaimed land and wilderness. Those maps told a story of fading since Hawkwing's empire crumbled, of humanity in slow retreat. A second Borderland map showed only Saldaea and part of Arafel, but it showed the Blightborder fifty miles farther north too. Humanity retreated, and the Shadow advanced.

A bald, skinny man in ill-fitting Palace livery scurried into the courtyard with another armload, and Rand sighed and went on selecting and discarding.

Haman gravely examined the writing box that was held out to him by the *gai'shain*, then produced one almost as large, though quite plain, from a capacious coat pocket. The pen he took from it was polished wood, rather fatter than Rand's thumb and long enough to look slender. It fit the Ogier's sausage-thick fingers perfectly. He got down on hands and knees, crawling among the maps as Rand sorted, occasionally dipping his pen in the *gai'shain's* inkpot, annotating in a handwriting that seemed too large until you realized that for him it was very small. Covril followed, peering over his shoulder even after he asked the second time whether she really thought he would make a mistake.

It was an education for Rand, beginning with seven *stedding* scattered through the Borderlands. But then, Trollocs feared to enter a *stedding*, and even Myrddraal needed some great purpose to drive them into one. The Spine of the World, the Dragonwall, held thirteen, including one in Kinslayer's Dagger, from Stedding Shangtai in the south to Stedding Qichen and Stedding Sanshen in the north, only a few miles apart.

"The land truly changed in the Breaking of the World," Haman explained when Rand commented. He continued marking briskly, though; briskly for an Ogier. "Dry land became sea and sea dry land, but the land folded as well. Sometimes what was far apart became close together, and what was close, far. Though of course, no one can say whether Qichen and Sanshen were far apart at all."

"You forgot Cantoine," Covril announced, making another liveried servant drop his fresh armload of maps with a start.

Haman gave her a look and lettered in the name just above the River Iralell, not far north of Haddon Mirk. In the strip west of the Dragonwall from the southern border of Shienar to the Sea of Storms, there were only four, all newfound as the Ogier considered it, meaning the youngest, Tsofu, had had Ogier back for six hundred years and none of the others for more than a thousand. Some of the locations were as big a surprise as the Borderlands, such as the Mountains of Mist, which had six, and the Shadow Coast. The Black Hills were included, and the forests above the River Ivo, and the mountains above the River Dhagon, just north of Arad Doman.

Sadder was the list of *stedding* abandoned, given up because the numbers there had grown too few. The Spine of the World and the Mountains of Mist and the Shadow Coast were in that list too, and so was a *stedding* deep on Almoth Plain, near the great forest called the Paerish Swar, and one in the low mountains along the north of Toman Head, facing the Aryth Ocean. Perhaps saddest was the one marked on the very edge of the Blight in Arafel; Myrddraal might be reluctant to enter a *stedding*, but as the Blight marched south year by year, it swept over everything.

Pausing, Haman said sadly, "Sherandu was swallowed by the Great Blight one thousand eight hundred forty-three years ago, and Chandar nine hundred sixty-eight."

"May their memories flourish and flower in the Light," Covril and Erith murmured together.

"I know of one you didn't mark," Rand said. Perrin had told him of sheltering in it once. He pulled out a map of Andor east of the River Arinelle and touched a spot well above the road from Caemlyn to Whitebridge. It was close enough.

Haman grimaced, almost a snarl. "Where Hawkwing's city was to be. That was never reclaimed. Several *stedding* were found and never reclaimed. We try to stay away from the lands of men as much as possible." All of the marks were in rugged mountains, in places men found hard to enter, or in a few cases just far from any human habitation. Stedding Tsofu lay far closer than any other to where humans dwelled, and even then Rand knew it was a full day to the nearest village.

“This would be a fine discussion another time,” Covril said, directing her words to Rand yet plainly meaning them for Haman, as her sidelong looks indicated, “but I want to make as far west as I can before nightfall.” Haman sighed heavily.

“Surely you’ll stay here awhile,” Rand protested. “You must be exhausted, walking all the way from Cairhien.”

“Women do not become exhausted,” Haman said, “they only exhaust others. That is a very old saying among us.” Covril and Erith sniffed in harmony. Muttering to himself, Haman went on with his listing, but now it was cities that the Ogier had built, cities where the groves had been, each grove holding its Waygate to carry Ogier back and forth to the *stedding* without passing through the so-often troubled lands of men.

Caemlyn he marked, of course, and Tar Valon, Tear and Illian, Cairhien and Maradon and Ebou Dar. That was the end as far as cities that still existed were concerned, and Ebou Dar he wrote as Barashta. Perhaps Barashta belonged with the others, in a way, with the dots made in places where the maps showed nothing but a village if that. Mafal Dadaranell, Ancohima, and Londaren Cor, of course, and Manetheren. Aren Mador, Aridhol, Shaemal, Braem, Condaris, Hai Ecorimon, Iman. . . . As that list grew, Rand began to see damp spots on each map when Haman was done. It took him a moment to realize that the Ogier Elder was weeping silently, letting the tears fall as he marked cities dead and forgotten. Perhaps he wept for the people, perhaps for the memories. The one thing Rand could be sure of was that it was not for the cities themselves, not for the lost works of Ogier masons. To the Ogier, stonework was only something they had picked up during the Exile, and what work in stone could compare with the majesty of trees?

One of those names more than tugged at Rand’s memories, and its location as well, east of Baerlon, several days above Whitebridge on the Arinelle. “There was a grove here?” he said, fingering the mark.

“At Aridhol?” Haman said. “Yes. Yes, there was. A sad business, that.”

Rand did not raise his head. “In Shadar Logoth,” he corrected. “A very sad business. Could you—would you—show me that Waygate if I took you there?”

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CHAPTER 21

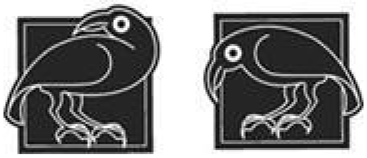

To Shadar Logoth

“Take us there?” Covril said, frowning formidably at the map in Rand’s hands. “It will carry us well out of our way, if I remember where the Two Rivers is correctly. I will not waste another day finding Loial.” Erith nodded firmly.

Haman, cheeks still damp with tears, shook his head for their haste but said, “I cannot allow it. Aridhol—Shadar Logoth, as you rightly name it now—is no place for someone as young as Erith. In good truth, it is no place for anyone.”

Letting the map fall, Rand stood up. He knew Shadar Logoth better than he wanted to. “You will lose no time. In fact, you’ll gain. I will take you there by Traveling, by a gateway; you will be most of the way to the Two Rivers today. We’ll not be long. I know you can lead me right to the Waygate.” Ogier could sense Waygates, if they were not too far.

This necessitated another conference beyond the fountain, one Erith demanded to be part of. Rand caught only snatches, yet it was plain that Haman, shaking his great head doggedly, opposed the plan while Covril, ears so stiff it seemed she was trying for every inch of height, insisted on it. At first Covril frowned at Erith as much as at Haman; whatever the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law among Ogier, she clearly thought the younger woman had no business in this. It did not take her long to change her mind, though. The Ogier women flanked Haman, hammering at him relentlessly.

“. . . too dangerous. Much too dangerous,” came like distant thunder from Haman.

“. . . almost there today. . . .” A slighter thunder from Covril.

“. . . he has been Outside too long already. . . .” An almost silvery peal from Erith.

“. . . haste makes for waste . . .”

“. . . my Loial. . . .”

“. . . my Loial. . . .”

“. . . Mashadar beneath our feet. . . .”

“. . . my Loial. . . .”

“. . . my Loial. . . .”

“. . . as an Elder. . . .”

“. . . my Loial. . . .”

“. . . my Loial. . . .”

Haman came back to Rand tugging at his coat as though it had been ripped half off, followed by the women. Covril maintained a smoother face than Erith, who fought to suppress a smile, but their tufted ears were at the same jaunty angle, somehow conveying satisfaction.

“We have decided,” Haman said stiffly, “to accept your offer. Let this ridiculous gallivanting be done with so I can return to my classes. And to the Stump. Um. Um. There is much to be said about you before the Stump.”

Rand did not care whether Haman told the Stump he was a bully. Ogier held themselves apart from men except for repairing their old stonework, and it was unlikely they would influence any human one way or another about him. “Good,” he said. “I will send someone to fetch your belongings from your inn.”

“We have everything right here.” Covril went back around to the other side of the fountain, bent, and straightened with two bundles that had been hidden behind the basin. Either would have made a heavy load for a man. She handed one to Erith and slipped a strap tied to the other over her head so it slanted across her chest, holding the bundle against her back.

“If Loial were here,” Erith explained, donning her bundle, “we would be ready to start back to Stedding Tsofu without delay. If not, we would be ready to go on. Without delay.”

“Actually, it was the beds,” Haman confided, holding his hands to indicate a size to fit a human child. “Once every inn Outside had two or three Ogier rooms, but they seem very hard to find now. It is difficult to understand.” He glanced at the marked maps and sighed. “It was difficult to understand.”

Waiting just long enough for Haman to fetch his own bundle, Rand seized *saidin* and opened a gateway right there beside the fountain, a hole in the air that showed a ruined, weed-filled street and collapsing buildings.

“Rand al’Thor.” Sulin almost strolled into the courtyard, just ahead of a cluster of map-laden servants and *gai’shain*. Liah and Cassin were with her, pretending to be just as casual. “You asked for more maps.” Sulin’s glance at the gateway was barely short of accusing.

“I can protect myself better there than you can,” Rand told her coldly. He did not intend it to be cold, but wrapped in the Void, he could not make his voice anything but cold and distant. “There is nothing your spears can fight, and some things they can’t.”

Sulin still wore a good deal of her earlier stiffness. “All the more reason for us to be there.”

That could not possibly make sense to anyone not Aiel, but. . . . “I will not argue it,” he said. She would try to follow, if he refused; she would summon Maidens who would try to leap through even if he was closing the gateway. “I expect you have the rest of today’s guard just inside. Whistle them up. But everyone is to stay close to me and touch nothing. Be quick about it. I want this done with.” His memories of Shadar Logoth were not pleasant.

“I sent them away as you insisted,” Sulin said disgustedly. “Give me a slow count of one hundred.”

“Ten.”

“Fifty.”

Rand nodded, and her fingers flashed. Jalani darted away inside, and Sulin’s hands flickered again. Three *gai’shain* women dropped their armloads of maps, looking startled—Aiel *never* looked that surprised—gathered long white robes and vanished back into the Palace in different directions, but quickly as they moved, Sulin was ahead of them.

As Rand reached, twenty, Aiel began bounding into the courtyard, hurtling though windows, leaping down from balconies. He almost lost the count. Every one was veiled, and only some Maidens. They stared about in confusion when they found only Rand and three Ogier, who blinked at them curiously. Some lowered their veils. The Palace servants huddled together.

The flow continued even after Sulin returned, unveiled, dead on the count of fifty, the courtyard filling with Aiel. Quickly it became clear that she had spread the word the *Car’a’carn* was in danger, the only way she felt she could gather enough spears in the time allotted. A little sour grumping passed among the men, but most decided it was a fine joke, some chuckling or rattling spears on bucklers. None left, though; they looked at the gateway and settled on their haunches to see what was happening.

Ears sharpened with the Power, Rand heard a Maiden named Nandera, sinewy yet still handsome despite more gray than yellow in her hair, whisper to Sulin. “You spoke to *gai’shain* as *Far Dareis Mai*.”

Sulin’s blue eyes met Nandera’s green levelly. “I did. We will deal with it when Rand al’Thor is safe today.”

“When he is safe,” Nandera agreed.

Sulin chose out twenty Maidens quickly, some who had been part of the guard that morning and some not, but when Urien began picking Red Shields, men from other societies insisted they should be included. That city through the gateway looked a place where enemies might be found, and the *Car’a’carn* must be protected. If the truth be told, no Aiel turned away from a possible fight, and the younger they were, the more likely to try to find one. Another argument almost started when Rand said the men could not number more than the Maidens—that would dishonor *Far Dareis Mai*, since he had given them his honor to carry—and the Maidens not more than Sulin had already chosen. He truly was taking them where no battle skills could protect them, and every one who came with him was one more he would have to watch out for. That he did not explain; no telling whose honor he would step on if he did.

“Remember,” he said once they were sorted out, “touch nothing. Take nothing, not even a sip of water. And stay in sight always; don’t go inside any building for any reason.” Haman and Covril nodded vigorously, which seemed to impress the Aiel more than Rand’s words. So long as they *were* impressed.

They stepped through the gateway into a city long dead, a city more than dead.

A golden sun more than halfway to its zenith roasted the ruins of greatness. Here and there a huge intact dome topped a pale marble palace, but more were holed than not, and most often only a curved and broken fragment remained. Long columned walks ran to towers as tall as anything Cairhien had ever dreamed of, and to towers ending jaggedly. Everywhere roofs had fallen in, bricks and stone fanned across fractured paving stones from collapsed buildings and walls. Shattered fountains and broken monuments decorated every intersection. Stunted trees, dying in the drought, dotted great hills of rubble. Dead weeds lined cracks in streets and buildings. Nothing moved, not a bird, not a rat, not a breeze. Silence shrouded Shadar Logoth. Shadar Logoth. Where the Shadow Waits.

Rand let the gateway vanish. No Aiel unveiled. The Ogier stared around, faces tight and ears laid stiffly back. Rand held on to *saidin* in that fight that Taim said told a man he was alive. Even if he had not been able to channel, maybe especially then, he would have wanted that reminder here.

Aridhol had been a great capital in the days of the Trolloc Wars, an ally of Manetheren and the rest of the Ten Nations. When those wars had lasted long enough to dwarf the War of the Hundred Years, when it seemed the Shadow was everywhere victorious and every victory of the Light did no more than buy time, a man named Mordeth became a councilor in Aridhol, and counseled the rule that to win, to survive, Aridhol must be harder than the Shadow, more cruel than the Shadow, less trusting. Slowly they made it so, until in the end, Aridhol became, if not blacker than the Shadow, as black. With war still raging against the Trollocs, Aridhol finally turned in on itself, turned on itself, consumed itself.

Something was left behind, something that had kept anyone from ever living here again. Not a pebble of this place but was tainted with the hatred and suspicion that had murdered Aridhol and left Shadar Logoth. Not a pebble but could infect, with time.

And more than the taint remained, though that was enough to keep any sane man away.

Rand turned slowly where he stood, staring up at windows like empty eye sockets, the eyes gouged out. With the sun climbing high he could feel unseen watchers. When he had been here before, that feeling had not come this strongly until the sun began to go down. Much more than the taint remained. A Trolloc army had died camping here, vanished except for messages smeared on walls in blood, begging the Dark One to save them. Night was no time to be in Shadar Logoth.

This place frightens me, Lews Therin murmured beyond the Void. *Does it not frighten you?*

Rand's breath caught. Was the voice actually addressing him? *Yes, it frightens me.*

There is darkness here. Blackness blacker than black. If the Dark One chose to live among men, he would choose here.

Yes. He would.

I must kill Demandred.

Rand blinked. *Does Demandred have some connection to Shadar Logoth? To here?*

I remember at last killing Ishamael. There was a sense of wonder in the voice, at a new discovery. *He deserved to die. Lanfear deserved to die, too, but I am glad I was not the one to kill her.*

Was it just happenstance that the voice seemed to speak to him? Was Lews Therin hearing, answering? *How did I—did you kill Ishamael? Tell me how.*

Death. I want the rest of death. But not here. I do not want to die here.

Rand sighed. Just happenstance. He would not want to die here either. A nearby palace, broken columns along its front, had a distinct lean toward the street. It could fall any time, and bury them where they stood. “Lead on,” he told Haman. To the Aiel, he added, “Remember what I said. Touch nothing, take nothing, and stay in sight.”

“I did not think it would be so bad,” Haman muttered. “It almost washes away the Waygate.” Erith moaned, and Covril looked as though she would if she were not too dignified. Ogier were sensitive to the mood of a place. Haman pointed. The sweat on his face had nothing to do with the heat. “That way.”

Broken pavement crunched beneath Rand’s boots like bones grinding. Haman directed them around corners and down streets, past one set of ruins after another, but his direction was sure. The encircling Aiel moved on their toes. Their eyes above the black veils did not look as if they expected attack, but as if the attack had already begun.

The unseen watchers and broken buildings brought back memories Rand would as soon have avoided. Here Mat had begun a road that took him to the Horn of Valere, that almost killed him on the way, maybe the road that had led him to Rhuidean and the *ter’angreal* he did not want to talk about. Here Perrin had disappeared when they were all forced to flee in the night, and when Rand finally saw him again, far from here, he had golden eyes and a sad look and secrets that Moiraine had never shared with Rand.

He had not escaped unscathed himself, though Shadar Logoth had not touched him directly. Padan Fain had followed them all here, himself and Mat and Perrin, Moiraine and Lan, Nynaeve and Egwene. Padan Fain, peddler and frequent visitor to the Two Rivers. Padan Fain, Darkfriend. More than Darkfriend now, and worse, so Moiraine had said. Fain had followed them all here, but what left was more than Fain, or less. Fain, as much as he was still Fain, wanted Rand dead. He had threatened everyone

Rand loved if Rand would not come to him. And Rand had not. Perrin had dealt with that, kept the Two Rivers safe, but Light how it hurt. What *had* Fain been doing with the Whitecloaks? Could Pedron Niall be a Darkfriend? If Aes Sedai could be, then so could the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light.

“There it is,” Haman said, and Rand gave a start. Shadar Logoth was the last place on earth to lose yourself in thought.

Where the Elder stood had been a spacious square once, though a weathered mound of rubble filled one end now. In the middle of the square, where a fountain might have been, was instead an ornate filigree fence of some shiny metal, Ogier-high and untouched by rust. That enclosed what appeared to be a tall length of stone carved with vines and leaves so delicately done that you expected to feel the breeze that was riffling them, that you were surprised to realize, they were gray not green. The Waygate, though it certainly looked like no kind of gate.

“They cut down the grove as soon as the Ogier departed for the *stedding*,” Haman muttered angrily, long brows drawn down, “no more than twenty or thirty years, and extended the city.”

Rand touched the fence with a flow of Air, wondering how to get through, and blinked as the whole thing collapsed into twenty or more pieces, which fell with loud shivering clangs that made the Ogier jump. Rand shook his head. Of course. Metal that had survived so long without a spot of rust *must* be Power-wrought, maybe even remnants from the Age of Legends, but the joins that had held them together had long since corroded, awaiting one good shove.

Covril laid a hand on his shoulder. “I would ask you not to open it. No doubt Loial told you how—he always did show too much interest in that sort of thing—but the Ways are dangerous.”

“I can lock it,” Haman said, “so it cannot be opened again without the Talisman of Growing. Um. Um. A simple matter; simply done.” He did not seem eager, though. He certainly did not move any closer.

“It might have to be used without time for fetching anything,” Rand told him. All the Ways might have to be used, whatever the dangers. If he could cleanse them somehow. . . . That was almost as grandiose as his boast to Taim that he would cleanse *saidin.*

He began weaving *saidin* around the Waygate, using all Five Powers, even lifting the segments of fence back into place. From the first flow he channeled, the taint seemed to pulse inside him, a slowly building vibration. It must have been the evil in Shadar Logoth itself, a resonance of evil to evil. Even in the Void he felt dizzy from those reverberations, as though the world swung beneath his feet in time to them; they made him want to vomit up everything he had ever eaten. Still, he persevered. He could not send men to stand guard here any more than he could have had them search.

What he wove and then inverted was a vicious sort of trap to suit a vicious place. A ward of surpassing nastiness. Humans could cross it unharmed, perhaps even the Forsaken—he could ward against humans or Shadowspawn, not both—and even a male Forsaken could not detect it. Should any sort of Shadowspawn pass through. . . . That was the viciousness. They would not die right away; they might even live to make it beyond the city walls. Long enough for the dead to be far off, not here to frighten the next Myrddraal that came. Long enough for a Trolloc army to exit perhaps, picking up their own deaths as they did. Cruel enough for a Trolloc. Making the thing sickened him as much as the taint on *saidin.*

Tying off the weave and loosing *saidin* brought only some relief. The residue of filth that always seemed to remain behind still throbbed; it almost felt as though the ground were throbbing beneath his boots. His teeth and ears ached. He could not wait to get away from here.

Taking a deep breath, he prepared to channel again, to open a gateway—and stopped, frowning. Quickly he counted everyone, then did it again, more slowly. “Somebody’s missing. Who?”

The Aiel took only a moment to confer.

“Liah,” Sulin said through her veil.

“She was right behind me.” There was no mistaking Jalani’s voice.

“Maybe she saw something.” He thought that was Desora.

“I told everybody to stay together!” Rage washed across the Void, waves breaking to froth on a boulder. One of them missing, here, and they took it with that Light-blasted Aiel coolness. A Maiden missing. A woman missing, in Shadar Logoth. “When I find her . . . !” Inch by inch he fought down the fury that threatened to engulf the emptiness around him. What he wanted to do to Liah was shout at her till she fainted, send her to Sorilea for the rest of her life. That rage wanted white-hot murder. “Split up in pairs. Shout, look everywhere, but don’t go inside, not for any reason. And stay out of shadows. You can die here before you know it. You can all die before any of you know it. If you see her in a building, even if she looks just fine, find me unless she comes out to you."

"We can search faster if we each search alone," Urien said, and Sulin nodded agreement. There were far too many nods.

"Pairs!" Rand fought the fury down again. *The Light burn Aiel stubbornness!* "At least that way you have somebody to watch your back. For once do what I say when I say it. I've been here; I know a little about this place."

A few minutes later, most spent in argument over how many should stay with Rand, twenty pairs of Aiel scattered. The one remaining was Jalani, Rand thought, though it was hard to tell with the veil. For once she did not appear to be happy guarding him; the green eyes held a decided touch of sullenness.

"I suppose we could make another pair," Haman said, looking at Covril.

She nodded. "And Erith can remain here."

"No!" Rand and Erith said at almost the same instant. The older Ogier turned with faces of grave disapproval. Erith's ears sagged until they looked ready to fall off.

Rand grabbed hold of his temper firmly. Once it had seemed that in the Void, any anger was off in the far distance somewhere, attached to him by no more than a thread. More and more it threatened to overwhelm him, to overwhelm the Void. Which might be disastrous. Aside from that, though. . . . "I'm sorry. I had no business shouting at you, Elder Haman, or you, Speaker Covril." Was that the right way to say it? Was it even a title of that sort? Nothing in their expressions said either way. "I would appreciate it if you would all stay with me. Then we can all search together."

"Of course," Haman said. "I really don't see how I can offer you more protection than you can offer yourself, but it is yours." Covril and Erith both nodded approvingly. Rand had no idea what Haman was talking about, but it did not seem the time to ask, with the three of them apparently bucked up to protect him. He had no doubt he could safeguard all three as long as they kept close.

"So long as you follow your own rules, Rand al'Thor." The green-eyed Maiden was indeed Jalani, and sounding heartened that she would not have to stand and wait. Rand hoped he had given the others a better idea of what this place was like.

From the beginning the search was frustrating. They walked up and down the streets watched by invisible eyes, sometimes climbing over strewn rubble, taking turns calling, “Liah! Liah!” Covril’s shouts made leaning walls creak; Haman’s made them groan ominously. Nothing answered. The only other sounds were the shouts of the search parties and mocking echoes along the streets. Liah! Liah!

The sun had climbed nearly overhead when Jalani said, “I do not think she would have gone this far, Rand al’Thor. Not unless she was trying to get away from us, and she would not do that.”

Rand turned from peering through shadowed columns at the head of wide stone steps, trying to see into a great chamber beyond. As far as he could make out, there was nothing in there but dust. No footprints. The unseen watchers had faded; they were not gone even now, but almost. “We have to search as much as we can. Maybe she. . . .” He did not know how to finish. “I won’t leave her here, Jalani.”

The sun swung higher and began to descend, and he was standing atop what had been a palace once, or maybe a whole block of buildings. It was a hill now, weathered enough over the years that only the number of broken bricks and pieces of worked stone sticking out of the dry soil said it had been anything else. “Liah!” he shouted through cupped hands. “Liah!”

“Rand al’Thor,” a Maiden called from the street below, lowering her veil so he could see it was Sulin. She and another Maiden, still veiled, stood with Jalani and the Ogier. “Come down.”

He scrambled down in a cloud of dust and a shower of bits of brick and stone, moving so fast that he nearly fell twice. “You’ve found her?”

Sulin shook her head. “We should have by now if she is alive. She would not have gone far on her own. If anyone carried her far, they carried her dead, I think; she would not go easily. And if she was injured too badly to answer our shouts, I think that also must mean she is dead.” Haman sighed sadly. The Ogier women’s long eyebrows dropped to their cheekbones; for some reason, their sad, pitying looks were directed at Rand.

“Keep looking,” he said.

“May we look inside the buildings? There are many rooms we cannot see from outside.”

Rand hesitated. Well short of midafternoon yet, and he could feel the eyes again. As strong as they had been with the sun setting his first time here. Shadows were not safe in Shadar Logoth. “No. But we keep looking.”

He was not sure how long he went on shouting his way up one street and down the next, but after a time Urien and Sulin stepped in front of him, both unveiled. The sun sat at the treetops to the west, a blood-red ball in a cloudless sky. Shadows stretched long across the ruins.

"I will search as long as you wish," Urien said, "but calling and looking have done what they can. If we could search the buildings—"

"No." It came out a croak, and Rand cleared his throat. Light, but he wanted a drink of water. The invisible watchers filled every window, every opening, thousands of them, waiting, anticipating. And shadows cloaked the city. Shadows were not safe in Shadar Logoth, but darkness brought out death. Mashadar rose with sunset. "Sulin, I. . . ." He could not make himself say they had to give up, leave Liah behind whether she was dead or alive, maybe lying somewhere unconscious, behind a wall, or under a heap of bricks that might have tumbled down on her. She could be.

"Whatever watches us is waiting for nightfall, I think," Sulin said. "I have looked into windows where something was looking back at me, but there was nothing there. Dancing the spears with something we cannot see will not be easy."

Rand realized he had wanted her to say again that Liah must be dead, that they could go. Liah could be injured somewhere; it was possible. He touched his coat pocket; the fat-little-man *angreal* was back in Caemlyn with his sword and the scepter. He was not sure he could protect everyone once night fell. Moiraine had thought the whole White Tower could not kill Mashadar. If it could be said to be alive.

Haman cleared his throat. "From what I remember of Aridhol," he said, frowning, "of Shadar Logoth, that is—when the sun goes down, we will probably all die."

"Yes." Rand breathed the word reluctantly. Liah, maybe alive. All the others. Covril and Erith had their heads together a little way off. He caught a murmur of "Loial."

Duty is heavier than a mountain, death lighter than a feather.

Lews Therin had to have that from him—memories passed both ways across that barrier, it seemed—but it cut to the heart.

"We have to go now," he told them. "Whether Liah is alive or dead, we—must go." Urien and Sulin only nodded, but Erith moved closer and patted him on the shoulder with surprising gentleness for a hand that could have gripped his head.

“If I might trouble you,” Haman said, “we have been rather longer than we expected.” He gestured to the sinking sun. “If you would do us the favor of carrying us outside the city in the same way you brought us here, I would appreciate it greatly.”

Rand remembered the forest outside Shadar Logoth. No Myrddraal or Trollocs there this time, but a thick wood, and the Light alone knew how far to the nearest village or in what direction. “I will do better than that,” he said. “I can take you straight to the Two Rivers as quickly.”

The two older Ogier nodded gravely. “The blessing of the Light and stillness be on you for your help,” Covril murmured. Erith’s ears quivered with anticipation, perhaps equally for seeing Loial and leaving Shadar Logoth.

Rand hesitated a moment. Loial would probably be in Emond’s Field, but he could not take them there. Too much chance news of his visit would slip out of the Two Rivers. Away from the village, then, far enough to avoid the farms that clustered close nearby.

The vertical slash of light appeared and widened; the taint pounded inside him again, worse than before; the ground seemed to beat at the soles of the boots.

Half a dozen Aiel leaped through, and the three Ogier followed with a haste that was not at all unseemly in the circumstances. Rand paused, looking back over the ruined city. He had promised to let the Maidens die for him.

As the last of the Aiel went through, Sulin hissed, and he glanced at her, but she was looking at his hand. At the back of his hand, where his fingernails had sliced a gash that oozed blood. Wrapped in the Void as he was, the pain might have belonged to someone else. The physical mark did not matter; it would heal. He had made deeper inside, where no one could see. One for each Maiden who died, and he never let them heal.

“We are done here,” he said, and stepped through the gateway into the Two Rivers. The throbbing vanished with the gateway.

Frowning, Rand tried to orient himself. Placing a gateway precisely was not easy where you had never been before, but he had picked a field he did know, a weedy meadow a good two-hour walk south of Emond’s Field that no one ever used for anything. In the lurid twilight he could see sheep, though, a sizable flock, and a boy with a crook in his hands and a bow on his back, staring at them from a hundred paces. Rand did not need the

Power in him to tell the boy was goggling, as well he might. Dropping the crook, he set off running for a farmhouse that had not been there when Rand was last here. A tile-roofed farmhouse.

For a moment Rand wondered whether he was really in the Two Rivers at all. No, the feel of the place told him he was. The smell of the air shouted home. All those changes Bode and the rest of the girls had told him about—they had not really sunk in; nothing ever really changed in the Two Rivers. Should he send the girls back here, back home? *What you should do is stay clear of them.* It was an irritable thought.

"Emond's Field is that way," he said. Emond's Field. Perrin. Tam might be there, too, at the Winespring Inn, with Egwene's parents. "That is where Loial should be. I don't know if you can make it before dark. You might ask at the farmhouse. I'm sure they will give you a place to sleep. Don't tell them about me. Tell no one how you came." The boy had seen but a boy's tale might well be taken for exaggeration when Ogier appeared.

Adjusting the bundles on their backs, Haman and Covril exchanged looks, and she said, "We will say nothing of how we came. Let people make the stories they wish."

Haman stroked his beard and cleared his throat. "You must not kill yourself."

Even in the Void, Rand was startled. "What?"

"The road ahead of you," Haman rumbled, "is long, dark, and, I very much fear, bloodstained. I also very much fear that you will take us all down that road. But you must live to reach the end of it."

"I will," Rand replied curtly. "Fare you well." He tried to put some warmth into that, some feeling, but he was not sure he succeeded.

"Fare you well," Haman said, and the women echoed it before all three turned toward the farmhouse. Not even Erith sounded as if she believed he would, though.

A moment longer Rand stood there. People had appeared outside the house, watching the Ogier approach, but Rand stared north and west, not toward Emond's Field, but toward the farm where he had grown up. When he turned away and opened a gateway to Caemlyn, it was like tearing his own arm off. The pain was a much more suitable memorial for Liah than a scratch.

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CHAPTER 22

Heading South

The five stones made a smoothly spinning circle above Mat’s hands, one red, one blue, one clear green, the others striped in interesting ways. He rode on, guiding Pips with his knees, the black-hafted spear thrust behind the saddle girth on the opposite side from his unstrung bow. The stones made him think of Thom Merrilin, who had taught him to juggle, and he wondered whether the old fellow was still alive. Probably not. Rand had sent the gleeman haring after Elayne and Nynaeve what seemed a very long time ago now, supposedly to look out for them. If any two women needed looking out for less, Mat did not know them, but no two were more likely to get a man killed because they would not listen to reason. Nynaeve, poking into everything a man did or said or thought and tugging her bloody braid at a fellow all the time, and Elayne the bloody Daughter-Heir, thinking she could get her way by sticking her nose in the air and telling you what for as bad as Nynaeve ever did, only Elayne was worse, because if frosty high-handedness failed, Elayne smiled and flashed her dimple and expected everybody to fall down because she was pretty. He hoped Thom had managed to survive their company. He hoped they were all right too, but he would not mind if they had found themselves in the pickling kettle at least once since scurrying off to the Light knew where. Let them see what it was like without him to haul them out, and never an honest word of thanks when he was there to do it. Not too hot a kettle, mind—just enough to make them wish Mat Cauthon were around to rescue them again like an idiot.

“What about you, Mat?” Nalesean asked, reining closer. “Did you ever think what it would be like to be a Warder?”

Mat nearly dropped the stones. Daerid and Talmanes looked at him, sweaty-faced and waiting an answer. The sun was sliding toward the horizon; not long before they would have to stop. Twilight seemed to last a little longer as the days shortened, but Mat wanted to be settled in with his pipe by dusk. Besides, in terrain like this, horses broke legs once the light failed. So did men.

The Band stretched out northward behind them, horse and foot beneath a rising tail of dust, banners flying but drums silent, across low hills covered with sparse scrub and scattered thickets. Eleven days since leaving Maerone, and they were halfway to Tear or a little better, moving faster than Mat had really hoped for. And only one full day spent resting the horses. He was certainly in no hurry to take Weiramon's place, but he could not help wondering how much distance they *could* cover between sunup and sundown if they had to. So far their best had been forty-five miles, as near as anyone could calculate. Of course, the supply wagons took half the night catching up, but the foot had been making a point lately of showing they could match the horse over the long haul if not the short.

A little farther back and to the east, a band of Aiel crested a tree-fringed rise, running easily and slowly closing the distance. Likely they had been trotting since sunrise, and would until nightfall if not later. If they passed the Band while there was still light to see, it would be encouragement for tomorrow. Whenever Aiel passed them, they seemed ready to try for another mile or two the next day.

A few miles ahead the thickets blended into solid forest again; it would be necessary to drop down closer to the Erinin before they reached that. As they crested a hilltop, Mat could see the river, and the five hired riverboats flying the Red Hand. Four more were on their way back to Maerone to reload, mainly with fodder for the horses. What he could not see yet knew were there were the people, some meandering upriver, some down, some changing direction whenever they met a group led by someone with a convincing tongue. A handful had carts, usually pulled by themselves, and a few wagons, but most nothing beyond what they wore on their backs; even the densest brigands had learned there was no point to bothering those. Mat had no idea where they were going and neither did they, yet they were just enough to clog the sorry excuse for a road along the river. Short of clubbing people out of the way, the Band could make much better time up here.

“A Warder?” Mat said, tucking the stones into his saddlebags. He could find more anywhere, but he liked the colors. He had an eagle feather in there, too, and a piece of weathered snow-white stone that might have been carved with scrolls once. There had been a boulder that looked as if it had been the head of a statue, too, but the thing would have needed a wagon. “Never. They’re all fools and dupes, letting Aes Sedai lead them around by the nose. What put a notion like that in your head?”

Nalesean shrugged. He fairly oozed sweat, but he still wore his coat—red striped with blue today—buttoned to the neck. Mat’s hung open, and he still thought he was broiling. “I suppose it’s all the Aes Sedai,” the Tairen said. “Burn my soul, it can’t but make you think, can it? I mean, burn my soul, what are they up to?” He meant the Aes Sedai on the other side of the Erinin, reportedly scurrying upriver or down a sight quicker than the wanderers that were over there as well.

“Best not to think about them is what I say.” Mat touched the silver foxhead through his shirt; even with that, he was glad the Aes Sedai were across the river. A handful of his soldiers traveled on each of the river craft, and few as villages were, they put a boat ashore on his orders at every one they passed on the far side, to see what they could learn. So far the news had been unrevealing and often unpleasant. Aes Sedai swarming was the least of it.

“And how are we not to think of them?” Talmanes asked. “Do you think the Tower really did pull Logain’s strings?” That was one of the newer bits, just two days old.

Mat pulled off his hat long enough to mop his forehead before answering. Nightfall would be a little cooler. But no wine, no ale, no women, and no gambling. Who would be a soldier for choice? “There’s not much I’d say was beyond Aes Sedai.” Sliding a finger behind the scarf around his neck, he eased it. One thing about Warders, by what he knew from observing Lan anyway, they never seemed to sweat. “But that? Talmanes, I’d believe you were Aes Sedai first. You aren’t, are you?”

Daerid doubled over the pommel of his saddle laughing, and Nalesean nearly fell off his horse. Talmanes stiffened at first, but finally he grinned. He almost chuckled. The man did not have much sense of humor, but he did have some.

His seriousness reasserted itself quickly, though. “What about the Dragonsworn? If it is true, Mat, it means trouble.” The others’ laughter might as well have been chopped with an axe.

Mat grimaced. That was the newest news or rumor—call it what you would—picked up yesterday, a village burned somewhere in Murandy. Worse, supposedly they had killed everybody who would not swear to the Dragon Reborn, and their families with them. “Rand will settle for them. If it's true. Aes Sedai, Dragonsworn, all that is his business, and we're well out of it. We have our own to tend."

That made nobody's face less grim, of course. They had seen too many burned villages, and thought they would see more soon after reaching Tear. Who would be a solider?

A horseman appeared over the next rise ahead, galloping toward them, leaping his mount over brush rather than swerve around even on the downslope. Mat signed for a halt, adding, "No trumpets." Word rippled behind him in a fading murmur, but he kept his eyes on the rider.

Dripping sweat, Chel Vanin reined his dun gelding in before Mat. In a rough gray coat that fit his balding bulk like a sack, he sat his saddle like a sack, too. Vanin was fat, and no getting around it. Yet improbable as it seemed, he could ride anything ever born, and he was very good at what he did.

Long before they reached Maerone, Mat had surprised Nalesean, Daerid and Talmanes by asking for the names of the best poachers and horse thieves among their men, the ones they knew were guilty but could not prove anything against. The two nobles in particular had not wanted to admit having any such men in their commands, but after a little prodding they came up with the names of three Cairhienin, two Tairens and, surprisingly, two Andorans. Mat had not thought any of the Andorans had been with the Band long enough to make themselves known like that, but apparently word got about.

Those seven men he took aside and told that he needed scouts, and that a good scout used much the same skills as a poacher or horse thief. Ignoring fervent denials that they had ever committed any crime whatsoever—more from each than from Talmanes and Nalesean combined, and just as eloquent if far coarser—he offered pardons for any thefts done before that day, triple pay and no work details as long as they reported the truth. And a hanging for the first lie; a lot of men could die from a scout's lie. Even with the threat they leaped at it, probably more for less work than for the extra silver.

But seven was not enough, so he asked them to suggest others, and to keep in mind what he said about the needed skills, as well as the fact that whether they lived to collect their triple pay would depend in large part on the abilities of those they named. That caused a lot of chin-scratching and edgy looks, but between them they produced eleven more names, emphasizing all the while that they were not implying anything about those fellows. Eleven men, good enough poachers and horse thieves that neither Daerid nor Talmanes nor Nalesean had suspected them but not good enough to avoid the notice of the first seven. Mat made those the same offer, and asked for names again. By the time he reached a point where no more names were to be found, he had forty-seven scouts. Hard times had put a lot of men to soldiering instead of the craft they would rather have followed.

The last, named by all three just before him, had been Chel Vanin, an Andoran who had lived in Maerone but ranged wide on both sides of the Erinin. Vanin could steal a hen pheasant's eggs without disturbing her on the nest, though it was unlikely he would fail to put her in the sack too. Vanin could steal a horse out from under a nobleman without the nobleman knowing it for two days. Or so his recommenders claimed in tones of awe. With a gap-toothed smile and a look of utter innocence on his round face, Vanin had protested he was a stableman and sometime farrier, when he could find work. But he would take the job for four times the Band's normal pay. So far, he had been more than worth it.

Sitting his dun in front of Mat on that hilltop, Vanin looked disturbed. He approved of Mat not wanting to be called "my Lord," since he did not much like bowing to anyone, but he managed to knuckle his forehead casually in a rough sort of salute. "I think you got to see this. I don't know what to make of it myself. You got to look for yourself."

"Wait here," Mat told the others, and to Vanin, "Show me."

It was not a long ride, just over the next two hills and up a winding stream with wide borders of dried mud. The smell announced what Vanin wanted him to see before the first vultures waddled into the air. The others just flapped a few paces before settling again, darting featherless heads and squawking challenges. Worst were those that never looked up from their dinners, milling piles of stained black feathers.

An overturned wagon like a little house on wheels, virulently painted in green and blue and yellow, identified the scene as a Tinker caravan, but few of the wagons had escaped burning. Bodies lay everywhere in bright clothes torn and darkened with dried blood, men and women and children. A part of Mat analyzed it coldly; the rest of him wanted to vomit, or run, anything but sit there on Pips. The attackers had come from the west first. Most of the men and older boys lay there, mingled with what was left of a number of large dogs, as if they had tried to form a line, to hold back killers with their bodies while the women and children ran. A futile flight. Heaped corpses showed where they had run headlong into the second attack. Only the vultures moved now.

Vanin spat disgustedly through a gap in his teeth. “You chase them off before they steal too much—they’ll snap up children if you don’t look sharp; raise them as their own—maybe you add a kick to speed them, but you don’t do this. Who would?”

“I don’t know. Brigands.” The horses were all gone. But brigands wanted to steal, not kill, and no Tinker would resist if you stole his last penny and his coat to boot. Mat forced his hands to ease their grip on his reins. There was nowhere to look without seeing a dead woman, a dead child. Whoever did this had not wanted any survivors. He rode a slow circuit around the site, trying to ignore the vultures that hissed and flared their wings when he passed—the ground was too dry to hold tracks well, although he thought horses had gone in several directions—and came back to Vanin. “You could have told me about it. I don’t need to see.” *Light, but I don’t!*

“I could’ve told you there was no good tracks,” Vanin said, turning his horse to wade the shallow stream. “Maybe you need to see this.”

Fire had taken most of the wagon lying on its side, but the wagon bed survived, propped on yellow wheels with red spokes. A man in a coat that still showed a little eye-wrenching blue lay hard against it, one sprawled hand black with blood. What he had written in shaky letters stood out darker than the wood of the wagon bottom.

TELL THE DRAGON REBORN

Tell him what? Mat thought. That somebody had killed a whole caravan of Tinkers? Or had the man died before he could write whatever it was? It would not have been the first time Tinkers had come onto important information. In a story he would have lived just long enough to scrawl the vital bit that meant victory. Well, whatever the message, nobody was ever going to know a word more now.

“You were right, Vanin.” Mat hesitated. Tell the Dragon Reborn what? No reason to start any more rumors than they already had. “See the rest of this wagon burns before you leave. And if anybody asks, there was nothing here but a lot of dead men.” And women, and children.

Vanin nodded. “Filthy savages,” he muttered, and spat through his teeth again. “Could have been some of them, I suppose.”

That band of Aielmen had caught up, three or four hundred strong. They trotted down the slope and crossed the stream no more than fifty paces from the wagons. A number raised a hand in greeting; Mat did not recognize them, but a good many Aiel had heard of Rand al'Thor's friend, he who wore the hat and whom it was better not to gamble against. Across the stream and up the next slope, and all those bodies might as well not have existed.

Bloody Aiel, Mat thought. He knew that Aiel avoided Tinkers, ignored them, if not why, but this. . . . "I don't think so," he said. "See it burns, Vanin."

Talmanes and the other two were right where he had left them, of course. When Mat told them what lay ahead, and that burial parties had to be told off, they nodded grimly, Daerid muttering a disbelieving, "Tinkers?"

"We will camp here," Mat added.

He expected some comment—there was light left for a few more miles, and these three had gotten caught up in how far the Band could move in a day to the point of laying wagers—but Nalesean just said, "I'll send a man down to signal the ships before they get too far ahead."

Maybe they felt the way he did. Unless they swung all the way over to the river, there would be no avoiding at least the sight of vultures scattering into the sky from the burial parties. Just because a man had seen death did not mean he had to enjoy it. For Mat's part, he thought another look at those birds would empty his stomach. In the morning there would only be graves, safely out of eyeshot.

The memory would not go out of his head, though, even after his tent was raised on that very hilltop where it might catch a breeze off the river if one ever decided to rise. Bodies hacked by killers, ravaged by vultures. Worse than the battle around Cairhien against the Shaido. Maidens had died there, but he had not seen any, and there had been no children. A Tinker would not fight even to defend his life. Nobody killed the Traveling People. He picked at his beef and beans, and retired to his tent as soon as he could. Even Nalesean did not want to talk, and Talmanes looked tighter than ever.

Word of the killing had spread. There was a quiet over the camp Mat had heard before. Usually the darkness would be broken by at least a little raucous laughter and sometimes songs off-key and off-color until the bannermen drove the handful who would not admit they were tired to their blankets. Tonight was like the times they had found a village with the dead unburied or a group of refugees who had tried to keep their little from bandits. Few could laugh or sing after that, and those who could were usually silenced by the rest.

Mat lay smoking his pipe while darkness fell, but the tent was close, and sleep would not come for memories of Tinker dead, older memories of older dead. Too many battles, and too many dead. He fingered his spear, traced the inscription in the Old Tongue along the black shaft.

Thus is our treaty written; thus is agreement made.
Thought is the arrow of time; memory never, fades.
What was asked is given; the price is paid.

He had gotten the worst of that deal.

After a time he gathered a blanket, and after a moment the spear, and padded outside in his smallclothes, the silver foxhead on his bare chest catching the light of the clipped moon. There was a slight breeze, a meager stirring with little coolness that scarcely shifted the Red Hand banner on its staff stuck in the ground before his tent, yet better than inside.

Tossing his blanket down among the scrub, he lay on his back. When he was a boy, he'd sometimes used to put himself to sleep naming the constellations. In that cloudless sky, the moon gave enough light to wash out most stars even if it was waning, but it left enough. There was the Haywain, high overhead, and the Five Sisters, and the Three Geese pointing the way north. The Archer, the Plowman, the Blacksmith, the Snake. Aiel called that one the Dragon. The Shield, that some called Hawkwing's Shield—that made him shift; in some of his memories he did not like Artur Paendrag Tanreall at all—the Stag, and the Ram. The Cup, and the Traveler with her staff standing out sharp.

Something caught his ear, he was not sure what. If the night had not been so still, the faint sound might not have seemed furtive, but it was and it did. Who would be sneaking around up here? Curious, he lifted up on an elbow—and froze.

Like moonshadows, shapes moved around his tent. Moonlight caught one enough for him to make out a veiled face. Aiel? What under the Light? Silently they surrounded the tent, closed in; bright metal flashed in the night, whispers of cloth being sliced, and they vanished inside. A moment only and they were back out. And looking around; there was light enough to see that.

Mat gathered his feet under him. If he kept low, he might be able to slip away without being heard.

"Mat?" Talmanes called up the hillside; he sounded drunk.

Mat went still; maybe the man would go back if he thought he was asleep. The Aiel seemed to melt away, but he was sure they had gone to ground where they were.

Talmanes' boots crunched closer. "I have some brandy here, Mat. I think you should take it. It is very good for dreams, Mat. You do not remember them."

Mat wondered whether the Aiel would hear him over Talmanes if he went now. Ten paces or so to where the nearest men would be sleeping—the First Banner of Horse, Talmanes' Thunderbolts, had the "honor" tonight—less than ten to his tent, and the Aiel. They were fast, but with a step or two, they should not catch him before he had fifty men almost within arm's reach.

"Mat? I do not believe you are asleep, Mat. I saw your face. It is better once you kill the dreams. Believe me, I know."

Mat crouched, clutching his spear and taking a deep breath. Two strides.

"Mat?" Talmanes was nearer. The idiot was going to step on an Aiel any time now. They would cut his throat without making a sound.

Burn you, Mat thought. *All I needed was two strides.* "Out swords!" he shouted, leaping upright. "Aiel in the camp!" He sprinted down the slope. "Rally to the banner! Rally to the Red Hand! Rally, you dog-riding grave-robbers!"

That woke everyone, of course, as well it should with him bellowing like a bull in briars. Shouts spread in every direction; drums began beating assembly, trumpets sounding rally. Men of the First Horse roared out of their blankets, racing toward the banner waving swords.

Still, the fact was, the Aiel had a shorter distance to run than the soldiers. And they knew what they were after. Something—instinct, his luck, being *ta'veren*; Mat certainly did not hear anything over the racket—made him turn just as the first veiled shape appeared behind as if springing out of the air. No time to think. He blocked the thrust of a stabbing spear with the haft of his spear, but the Aiel caught his return slash on a buckler and kicked him in the belly. Desperation gave Mat strength to keep his legs straight with no air in his lungs; he twisted aside frantically from a spearhead that sliced his ribs, clipped the Aiel's legs out from under him with his own spear haft, and stabbed him through the heart. Light, but he hoped it was a him.

He jerked the spear free just in time to face the onslaught. *I should have run when I first had the bloody chance!* He worked the thing like a quarterstaff as fast as he ever had in his life, spinning, blocking away lancing Aiel spearpoints, no time to strike back. Too many. *I should have kept my bloody mouth shut and run!* He found breath again. "Rally, you pigeon-gutted sheep-stealers! Are you all deaf? Clean out your ears and rally!"

Wondering why he was not dead yet—he had been lucky with one Aiel, but nobody had enough luck to face this—he suddenly realized he was no longer alone. A skinny Cairhienin in his smallclothes fell nearly under his feet with a shrill yell, only to be replaced by a Tairen with his shirt flapping and sword swinging. More crowded in, shouting everything from "Lord Matrim and victory!" to "The Red Hand!" to "Kill the black-eyed vermin!"

Mat slipped back and left them to it. *The general who leads in the front of battle is a fool.* That came from one of those old memories, a quote from somebody whose name was not part of the memory. *A man could get killed in there.* That was pure Mat Cauthon.

In the end, it was a sheer matter of numbers. A dozen Aiel and, if not the whole Band, several hundred who managed to reach the hilltop before it was done. Twelve Aiel dead and, because they were Aiel, half again as many of the Band, with twice that or more bleeding if still alive to groan while they were tended. Even with his brief exposure, Mat stung and bled at half a dozen places, at least three of which he suspected would need stitching.

His spear made a good walking staff as he limped around to where Talmanes was stretched out on the ground with Daerid tying a tourniquet around his left leg.

Talmanes' white shirt, hanging loose, glistened darkly in two places. "It seems," he panted, "Nerim will get to try his hand as a seamstress on me again, burn him for a ham-fisted bull." Nerim was his serving man, and mended his master as often as his master's clothes.

"Will he be all right?" Mat asked softly.

Daerid shrugged. He wore only his breeches. “He is bleeding less than you, I think.” He glanced up. He would have a new scar to add to the collection on his face. “As well you got out of their way, Mat. It is clear they were after you.”

“Good not to give them what they came for.” Wincing, Talmanes struggled to his feet with the aid of an arm over Daerid’s shoulder. “It would be a shame to lose the Band’s luck to a handful of savages in the night.”

Mat cleared his throat. “That’s the way it seemed to me, too.” The image of the Aiel vanishing into his tent welled up in his mind, and he shivered. Why under the Light would Aiel want to kill him?

Nalesean appeared from where the dead Aiel were laid out in a row. Even now he had his coat on, though not buttoned; he kept frowning at a bloodstain on the lapel, maybe his blood, maybe not. “Burn my soul, I knew those savages would turn on us sooner or later. I expect they came from that lot who passed us earlier.”

“I doubt it,” Mat said. “If they had wanted me, they could have had me spitted and over the fire for dinner before any of you knew it.” He made himself hobble over and study the Aiel, taking a lantern someone had brought to aid the moonlight. The relief of finding only men’s faces nearly unhinged his knees. He did not know any of them, but then, he did not really know many Aiel. “Shaido, I expect,” he said, returning to the others with the lantern. They could be Shaido. They could be Darkfriends; he knew all too well that there were Darkfriends among the Aiel. And Darkfriends, of course, did have reason to want him dead.

“Tomorrow,” Daerid said, “I think we should try to find one of those Aes Sedai across the river. Talmanes here will live unless all the brandy leaked out of him, but some of the others might not be so fortunate.” Nalesean said nothing, but his grunt spoke volumes; he was Tairen, after all, with less love than Mat for Aes Sedai.

Mat did not hesitate in agreeing. He would not be letting any Aes Sedai channel at him—in a way, every scar marked a small victory, another time he had avoided Aes Sedai—but he could not ask a man to die. Then he told them what else he wanted.

“A ditch?” Talmanes said in tones of disbelief.

“All the way around the camp?” Nalesean’s pointed beard quivered. “Every night?”

“And a palisade?” Daerid exclaimed. Glancing around, he lowered his voice. There were still quite a few soldiers about, hauling away the dead. “There will be a mutiny, Mat.”

“No there won’t,” Mat said. “By morning, every last man will know Aiel sneaked through the whole camp to reach my tent. Half won’t sleep for thinking they will wake with an Aiel spear in their ribs. You three make sure they understand the fact that a palisade just might keep Aiel from sneaking in again.” At the least it would slow them down. “Now go away and let me get a little sleep tonight.”

After they had gone, he studied his tent. Long slashes in the walls, where Aiel had gone in, stirred in the fitful breeze. Sighing, he started to return to his blanket in the scrub, then hesitated. That noise that had alerted him. The Aiel had not made another, not a whisper. A shadow made as much noise as an Aiel. So what had it been?

Leaning on his spear, he limped around the tent, studying the ground. He was not sure what he was looking for. Soft Aiel boots had left no marks that he could make out by lantern light. Two of the tent ropes hung where they had been cut, but. . . . He set the lantern down and fingered the ropes. That sound could have been taut rope being sliced, yet there was no reason to cut these to get inside. Something about the angle of the cuts, the way they lined up with one another, caught his attention. Taking up the lantern, he cast around. A wiry bush not far away had been trimmed along one side, thin branches with small leaves lying on the ground. A very neat trimming, perfectly flat, the severed branch ends smooth as though planed by a cabinetmaker.

The hair on the back of Mat’s neck stirred. One of those holes in the air that Rand used had been opened here. Bad enough that Aiel had tried to kill him, but they had been sent by somebody who could make one of those . . . gateways, Rand called them. Light, if he was not safe from the Forsaken with the Band around him, where was he safe? He wondered how he was going to sleep from now on with watch fires around his tent. And guards; a guard of honor, he could call it to take some of the sting away, to stand sentry around his tent. Next time it would probably be a hundred Trollocs, or a thousand, instead of a handful of Aiel. Or was he important enough for that? If they decided he was too important, the next time it could be one of the Forsaken. Blood and ashes! He had never asked to be *ta’veren*, never asked to be tied to the Dragon bloody Reborn.

"Blood and bloody—!"

Soil crunching underfoot warned him, and he spun swinging the spear with a snarl. Barely in time he stopped the slashing blade, as Olver screamed and fell flat on his back, staring wide-eyed at the spearpoint.

"What in the bloody Pit of Doom are you doing here?" Mat snapped.

"I . . . I. . . ." The boy stopped to swallow. "They say fifty Aiel tried to kill you in your sleep, Lord Mat, but you killed them first, and I wanted to see if you were all right, and. . . . Lord Edorion bought me some shoes. See?" He raised a shod foot.

Muttering under his breath, Mat hauled Olver to his feet. "That wasn't what I meant. Why aren't you in Maerone? Didn't Edorion find somebody to look after you?"

"She just wanted Lord Edorion's coin, not me. She had six children of her own. Master Burdin gives me lots to eat, and all I have to do is feed and water his horses, and rub them down. I like that, Lord Mat. He will not let me ride them, though."

A throat cleared. "Lord Talmanes sent me, my Lord." Nerim was short even for a Cairhienin, a skinny gray-haired man with a long face that seemed to say nothing was going well at the moment and in the long run, this was a better day than most. "If my Lord will pardon me for saying, those bloodstains will never come out of my Lord's smallclothes, but if my Lord will allow it, I may be able to do something for the tears in my Lord." He had his sewing box under one arm. "You, boy, fetch some water. No back talk. Water for my Lord, and quickly." Nerim combined picking up the lantern with a bow. "If my Lord will step inside? Night air is bad for wounds."

In short order Mat was stretched out beside his bedding—"My Lord will not want to stain his blankets"—letting Nerim wash away dried blood and sew him up. Talmanes was right; as a seamstress, the man was a ham-fisted cook. With Olver there, there was no choice but to grit his teeth and bear it.

To try taking his mind elsewhere than Nerim's needle, Mat pointed to the frayed cloth scrip hanging from Olver's shoulder. "What do you have in there?" he panted.

Olver clutched the tattered bag to his chest. He was certainly cleaner than he had been, if no prettier. The shoes appeared stout, and his woolen shirt and breeches looked new. "It is mine," he said defensively. "I did not steal anything." After a moment, he opened the bag and began laying things out. A spare pair of breeches, two more shirts and some stockings had no interest for him, but he listed the other things. "This is my redhawk's feather, Lord Mat, and this stone is just the color of the sun. See?" He added a small purse. "I have five coppers and a silver penny." A rolled cloth tied with a string and a small wooden box. "My game of Snakes and Foxes; my father made it for me; he drew the board." For a moment his face crumpled, then he went on. "And see, this stone has a fish head in it. I do not know how it got there. And this is my turtle shell. A blue-back turtle. See the stripes?"

Wincing at a particularly hard thrust of the sewing needle, Mat stretched his hand to finger the rolled cloth. Much better if he breathed through his nose. It was odd how those holes in his real memories worked; he could remember how to play Snakes and Foxes, but not ever playing it. "That's a fine turtle shell, Olver. I had one, once. A green basker." Stretching his hand the other way, he reached his own purse; he dipped out two gold Cairhienin crowns. "Add these to your purse, Olver. A man needs a little gold in his pocket."

Stiffly Olver began stuffing things back into his scrip. "I do not beg, Lord Mat. I can work for my supper. I am not a beggar."

"Never meant to say you are." Mat cast around hurriedly for some reason to pay the boy two crowns. "I . . . I need someone to carry messages for me. Can't ask any of the Band; they are all busy soldiering. Of course, you'd have to take care of your own horse. I could not ask anybody to do it for you."

Olver sat up straight. "I would have my own horse?" he said incredulously.

"Of course. There is one thing. My name is Mat. You call me *Lord* Mat again, and I'll tie your nose in a knot." Bellowing, he jerked half-upright. "Burn you, Nerim, that's a leg, not a bloody side of beef!"

"As my Lord says," Nerim murmured, "my Lord's leg is not a side of beef. Thank you, my Lord, for instructing me."

Olver was feeling his nose hesitantly, as if considering whether it could be tied in a knot.

Mat settled back with a groan. Now he had saddled himself with a boy, and had done the lad no favor—not if he was nearby the next time the Forsaken tried to reduce the number of *ta'veren* in the world. Well, if

Rand's plan worked, there would be one less Forsaken. If Mat Cauthon had his way, he intended to stay out of trouble and out of danger until there were no Forsaken.

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CHAPTER 23

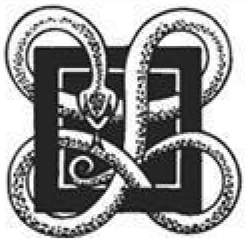

To Understand a Message

Graendal managed not to stare as she entered the room, but her streith gown went dead black before she could control herself and return it to a blue mist. Sammael had done enough to make anyone doubt that this chamber was in the Great Hall of the Council in Illian. But then, she would be very surprised if anyone but he ever penetrated this far uninvited into “Lord Brend’s” apartments.

The air was pleasantly cool; in one corner rose the hollow cylinder of an exchanger. Glowbulbs, bright and steady, stood oddly in heavy gold candleholders, giving much better illumination than candles or oil lamps ever could. A small music box sat on the marble mantelpiece, producing from its memory the soft strains of a sound-sculpture that very likely had not been heard outside this room in well over three thousand years. And she recognized several of the artworks on the walls.

She paused in front of Ceran Tol’s “Tempo of Infinity.” Not a copy. “One might think you had looted a museum, Sammael.” It was hard to keep the envy from her voice, and when she saw his faint smile, she realized she had failed.

Filling two silver-chased goblets with wine, he handed her one. “Only a stasis box. I suppose people tried to save what they could in the last days.” His smile pulled at that awful scar across his face as he beamed around the chamber, with especial fondness for the zara board projecting its field of still-transparent boxes in the air; he had always liked the more violent games. Of course, a zara board meant his stasis box had been filled by someone who followed the Great Lord; possession of a single once-human playing piece had meant imprisonment at the least on the other side. What else had he found?

Sipping her wine—and suppressing a sigh; it was from the here and now; she had hoped for a delicate Satare or one of the exquisite Comolads—she stroked her gown with beringed fingers. “I found one as well, but beyond streith, it contained the most appalling collection of useless rubbish.” After all, since he had invited her here and let her see this, it was a time for confidences. Small confidences.

“How sad for you.” Again that faint smile. He *had* found something more than playthings and pretties. “On the other hand,” he went on, “think how awful it would have been to open a box and rouse a nest of cafar, say, or a jumara, or one of Aginor’s other little creations. Did you know there are jumara loose in the Blight? Full-grown, though they’ll never transform now. They call them Worms.” He laughed so hard at that, he shook.

Graendal smiled a good deal more warmly than she felt inside, though if her gown changed color, it was by a hair. She had had an unpleasant, in fact almost fatal, experience with one of Aginor’s creations. The man had been brilliant in his way, but mad. None but a madman would have made the *gholam*. “You seem in very good mood.”

“Why should I not be?” he said expansively. “I all but have my hands on a cache of *angreal* and who can say what else. Do not look so surprised. Of course I’ve known that the rest of you have been trying to look over my shoulder in hopes I will lead you to it. Well, it will do you no good. Oh, I will share, but after it’s mine, and after I have first choice.” Sprawling in a heavily gilded chair—or perhaps it was solid gold; that would be like him—he balanced one boot atop the toe of the other and stroked his golden beard. “Besides, I sent an emissary to al’Thor. And the answer was favorable.”

Graendal almost spilled her wine. “It was? I heard that he killed your messenger.” If her knowing that much shook him, he held it in. He even smiled.

“Al’Thor killed no one. Andris went there to die; do you think I wanted to wait on couriers, or *pigeons*? How he died told me al’Thor’s answer.”

“Which was?” she said carefully.

“A truce between us.”

Icy fingers seemed to dig into her scalp. It could not be true. Yet he looked more at ease than she had seen him since waking. “Lews Therin would never—”

“Lews Therin is long dead, Graendal.” The interruption was amused, even mocking. No anger at all.

She covered a deep breath by pretending to drink. Could it be true? “His army is still gathering in Tear. I have seen it. That hardly looks like a truce to me.”

Sammael laughed outright. “It takes time to redirect an army. Believe me, it will never move against me.”

“You think not? One or two of my little friends say he wants you dead because you killed some of his pet Maidens. Were I you, I would be thinking about somewhere less conspicuous, somewhere he might not find me.” Not a flicker of an eyelid out of him. It was as if all the strings that usually moved him had been cut.

“What should it matter a few Maidens died?” The look on his face was truly puzzled. “It was battle; soldiers die in battle. Al’Thor may be a farmer, but he has generals to fight his battles and explain matters. I doubt he even noticed.”

“You really never have looked at these people. They have changed as much as the land, Sammael. Not just the Aiel. In some ways, the rest have changed much more. Those soldiers were women, and to Rand al’Thor, that makes a difference.”

He shrugged dismissively, and she suppressed contempt, kept the streith steady in a calm fog. He had never understood that you must understand people to make them do as you wished. Compulsion was all very well, but you could not use Compulsion on the entire world.

She wondered whether the stasis box had been this cache that he claimed he would put his hands on soon. If he had even one *angreal*. . . . If he did, she would find out, but probably not before he let her. “I suppose we shall see how much wiser the primitive Lews Therin has become, then.” She raised a doubting eyebrow, managed a smile of her own. No reaction. Where had he found this leash for his temper? Lews Therin’s name alone should have been enough to loose it. “If he fails to chase you out of Illian like a cosa scampering up a tree, perhaps—”

“That might be waiting too long,” he cut in smoothly. “Too long for you, that is.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat, Sammael?” Her gown shifted to a pale rose, but she let it stay. Let him be aware she was angry. “I thought you learned long ago that threatening me is a mistake.”

“No threats, Graendal,” he replied calmly. All of his pressure points had gone numb; nothing seemed to shift him out of that amused coolness. “Merely facts. Al’Thor will not attack me, and I will not attack him. And of course, I agreed not to aid any other Chosen should al’Thor find them. All very much in accordance with the Great Lord’s commands, wouldn’t you say?”

“Of course.” She kept her face smooth, but the streith had gone a deeper rose, losing some of its mistiness. In part the color was still anger. There was more to this, but how was she to find out?

“Which means,” he continued, “that on the Day of Return, I will very likely be the only one remaining to face al’Thor.”

“I doubt he will manage to kill all of us,” she said acidly, but acid churned in her stomach, as well. Too many of the Chosen had died. Sammael *had* found a way to stand aside until the last; it was the only explanation.

“You think not? Not even if he learns where you all are?” That smile deepened. “I am sure I know what Demandred is scheming, but where is he hiding? Where is Semirhage? Mesaana? What about Asmodean and Lanfear? Moghedien?”

Those cold fingers returned, imprinting themselves on her skull. He would not lounge there and talk this way—he would not dare suggest what he was suggesting—unless. . . . “Asmodean and Lanfear are dead, and I am sure Moghedien must be, too.” She was surprised to hear her own voice, hoarse and unsteady. Wine did not seem to dampen her dry throat.

“And the others?” It was just a question; his voice was not in the slightest insistent. It sent a shiver through her.

“I’ve told you what I know, Sammael.”

“Which is nothing. When I am Nae’blis, I will choose who stands just below me. That one will have to be alive to receive the Great Lord’s touch.”

“Are you saying you have been to Shayol Ghul? That the Great Lord promised you . . . ?”

“You will know all when it is time, and not before. But a small advice, Graendal. Prepare now. Where are they?”

Her mind worked furiously. He must have had that promise. He must. But why him? No, there was no time for speculation. The Great Lord chose as he wished. And Sammael knew where she was, at least. She could flee Arad Doman, establish herself elsewhere; it would not be difficult. Giving up the little games she played there, and even the larger games that might have to be abandoned, would be a small loss compared with having al’Thor—or Lews Therin—come after her. She had no intention of ever confronting him directly; if Ishamael and Rahvin had fallen to him, she was not about to risk his strength, not head-on. Sammael *must* have had the promise. If he died now. . . . He was certainly holding *saidin*—he would be mad to say these things otherwise—and he would feel the instant she embraced *saidar.* She would be the one to die. He must have had it. “I . . . do not know where Demandred or Semirhage is. Mesaana . . . Mesaana is in the White Tower. That is all I know. I swear it.”

A tightness in her chest loosened when he finally nodded. “You will find the others for me.” It was not a question. “All of them, Graendal. If you want me to believe anyone dead, show me a corpse.”

She very much wished she dared turn him into a corpse. Her gown rippled through violent shades of red, echoing the anger and fear and shame that rippled through her uncontrollably. Very well, let him think her cowed for the moment. If he fed Mesaana to al’Thor, if he fed them all to al’Thor, so be it, so long as that kept al’Thor from her own throat. “I will try.”

“Do more than try, Graendal. More than try.”

When Graendal was gone, the gateway back to her palace in Arad Doman closed, Sammael let the smile dissolve on his face. His jaws ached from holding it. Graendal thought too much; she was so used to making others act for her that she failed to think of acting for herself. He wondered what she would say if she ever discovered that he had manipulated her as deftly as she had manipulated so many fools in her time. He would wager everything that she never saw his real purpose. So, Mesaana was inside the White Tower. Mesaana in the Tower, and Graendal in Arad Doman. Had Graendal been able to see his face then, she would have known real fear. Whatever happened, Sammael intended to be the one still standing on the Day of Return, to be named Nae’blis and defeat the Dragon Reborn.

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CHAPTER 24

An Embassy

Turning away from the musicians on the street corner, a perspiring woman puffing at a long flute and a red-faced man plucking a nine-string bittern, Egwene threaded her way through the crowd with a light heart. The sun stood high in the sky, molten gold, and the paving stones were hot enough to burn through the soles of her soft boots. Sweat dripped from her nose, her shawl felt like a heavy blanket even looped loosely over her elbows, and there was enough dust in the air that she already wanted to wash, yet she smiled. Some people eyed her askance, when they thought she was not looking, which almost made her laugh. That was how they looked at Aiel. People saw what they expected to see, and they saw a woman in Aiel garb, never noticing her eyes or her height.

Hawkers and peddlers cried their wares, competing against the shouts of butchers and candlemakers, the rattle and clatter from silversmiths’ and potters’ shops, the squeal of ungreased axles. Rough-tongued wagon drivers and men walking alongside ox-carts loudly contested the way with dark-lacquered sedan chairs and sober coaches with House sigils on the doors. There were musicians everywhere, along with tumblers and jugglers. A knot of pale women in riding dresses, carrying swords, swaggered by, imitating how they imagined men behaved, laughing too raucously and pushing their way in a manner that would have started a dozen fights in a hundred paces had they been men. A blacksmith’s hammer rang on his anvil. In general a babble and hum of bustle hung in the air, the noise of a city that she had almost forgotten among the Aiel. Perhaps she had missed it.

She did laugh then, right there in the street. The first time she had heard the noise of a city, it had nearly stunned her. Sometimes it seemed that wide-eyed girl had been someone else.

A woman working her bay mare through the crowd turned to look at her curiously. The horse had small silver bells tied in her long mane and tail, and the woman had more bells in the dark hair that hung halfway down her back. Pretty, she could not have been much older than Egwene, but she had a hardness to her face, and a sharp eye, and no fewer than six knives at her belt, one nearly as large as an Aiel's. A Hunter for the Horn, no doubt.

A tall handsome man in a green coat, two swords on his back, watched the woman ride on. He was probably another. They seemed to be everywhere. As the crowd swallowed the woman on the bay, he turned and saw Egwene looking at him. Smiling with sudden interest, he squared broad shoulders and started toward her.

Hastily Egwene put on her coldest face, tried to combine Sorilea at her sternest with Siuan Sanche, the stole of the Amyrlin Seat around her shoulders.

He stopped, looking surprised. As he turned away, she distinctly heard him growl, "Flaming Aiel." She could not help laughing again; he must have heard despite the noise, because he stiffened, shaking his head. But he did not look back.

The source of her good mood was twofold. One was the Wise Ones finally agreeing that walking in the city provided as much exercise as walking around it outside the walls. Sorilea in particular did not seem to understand why she wanted to spend a minute more than she had to among throngs of wetlanders, especially cramped inside walls. Mostly, though, she felt good because they had told her that now the headaches that had puzzled them so were completely gone—she had not been able to hide them altogether—she could return to *Tel'aran'rhiod* soon. Not in time for the next meeting, three nights off, but before the one after.

That was a relief in more ways than one. An end to having to sneak into the World of Dreams. An end to laboriously working everything out for herself. An end to being terrified the Wise Ones would catch her and refuse to teach her any more. An end to needing to lie. It was necessary—she could not afford to waste time; there was too much to learn, and she could not believe she would have time to learn it all—but they would never understand.

Aiel dotted the crowd, both in *cadin'sor* and in *gai'shain* white. The *gai'shain* went where they were sent, yet the others might well be inside the walls for their first time, and quite possibly their last. The Aiel really did not seem to like cities, though a good many had come in six days ago, to see Mangin hang. It was said he put the noose around his own neck, and made some Aiel joke about whether the rope would break his neck or his neck the rope. She had heard several Aiel repeat the joke, but never a comment about the hanging. Rand had liked Mangin; she was sure of it. Berelain had informed the Wise Ones of the sentence as though telling them their wash would be ready the next day, and the Wise Ones had listened the same way. Egwene did not think she would ever understand Aiel. She was very much afraid she did not understand Rand anymore. As for Berelain, Egwene understood her all too well; that one was only interested in men who were alive.

With thoughts like those, it took an effort to regain her good mood. The city was certainly no cooler than outside the walls—in fact, with no breeze and people so close, it might have been hotter—and nearly as dusty, but at least she was not trudging along with nothing to look at but the ashes of Foregate. A few more days and she would be able to learn again, to really learn. That put a smile back on her face.

She stopped near a wiry, damp-faced Illuminator; it was easy to tell what he was, or had been. His thick mustaches were not covered by the diaphanous veil Taraboners often wore, but baggy breeches, embroidered on the legs, and an equally loose shirt embroidered across the chest marked him well enough. He was selling finches and warblers in crudely made cages. With their chapter house burned by the Shaido, a number of Illuminators were trying to find the means to return to Tarabon.

“I have it from the most reliable source,” he was telling a handsome graying woman in a plainly cut dark blue dress. A merchant, no doubt, catching a jump on those waiting for better times in Cairhien. “The Aes Sedai,” the Illuminator confided, leaning over a caged bird to whisper, “they are divided. The Aes Sedai, they are at war. With one another.” The merchant nodded agreement.

Egwene stopped pretending to consider a green-headed finch and moved on, though she had to hop out of the way of a round-faced gleeman, striding along with self-important flourishes of his patch-covered cloak. Gleemen knew very well that they were among the few wetlanders welcome in the Waste; Aiel did not intimidate them. At least, they pretended so.

That rumor troubled her. Not that the Tower had split apart—that could not have been kept secret much longer—but talk of war between Aes Sedai. Knowing that Aes Sedai were set against Aes Sedai was like knowing one part of her family was set against another, just barely tolerable for knowing the reasons, yet the thought that it might come to more. . . . If only there were some way to Heal the Tower, to make it whole again without bloodshed.

A little farther down the street, a perspiring Foregate woman who might have been pretty if her face were cleaner was dispensing rumor along with ribbons and pins from a tray hung from a neckstrap. She wore a blue silk dress, slashed with red in the skirt, that had been made for a shorter woman; the heavily worn hem was high enough to show her stout shoes, and holes in the sleeves and bodice showed where embroidery had been picked out. “I tell you a fact,” she informed the women picking over her tray, “there has been Trollocs seen around the city. Ah, yes, that green will set off your eyes. Hundreds of Trollocs and. . . .”

Egwene barely paused. If there had been even one Trolloc anywhere near the city, the Aiel would have known long before it became street gossip. She wished the Wise Ones gossiped. Well, they did, sometimes, but only about other Aiel. As far as Aiel were concerned, nothing about wetlanders was very absorbing. Being able to pop into Elaida’s study in *Tel’aran’rhiod* whenever she wanted and read the woman’s letters had accustomed her to knowing what was happening in the world, though.

Abruptly Egwene realized she was looking around differently, looking at people’s faces. There were Aes Sedai eyes-and-ears in Cairhien as surely as she was sweating. Elaida must receive a report a day by pigeon from Cairhien, if not more. Tower spies, Ajah spies, spies for individual Aes Sedai. They were everywhere, often where and who you least suspected. Why were those two tumblers just standing there? Were they catching their breath, or watching her? They sprang back into action, one leaping up to a handstand on the other’s shoulders.

A spy for the Yellow Ajah had once tried to bundle Elayne and Nynaeve off to Tar Valon, on orders issued by Elaida. Egwene did not actually know that Elaida wanted her as well, but assuming anything else would be very foolish. Egwene could not make herself believe that Elaida would forgive anyone who had worked closely for the woman she deposed.

For that matter, some of the Aes Sedai in Salidar probably had eyes-and-ears here too. If word ever reached them of “Egwene Sedai of the Green Ajah. . . .” It could be anybody. That skinny woman in the shop door, apparently studying a bolt of dark gray cloth. Or the blowsy woman lolling beside the tavern door, flapping her apron at her face. Or that fat fellow with his pushcart full of pies—Why was he looking at her so strangely? She very nearly headed for the nearest city gate.

It was the fat fellow who stopped her, or rather the way he suddenly tried to cover his pies with his hands. He was staring at her because she had been staring at him. He was probably afraid an Aiel “savage” was going to take some of his wares without paying.

Egwene laughed weakly. Aiel. Even people who looked her in the face assumed she was Aiel. A Tower agent who was looking for her would walk right past. Feeling a good deal better, she went back to meandering through the streets, listening where she could.

The trouble was, she had grown used to knowing things just weeks, or even days, after they happened, and with a certainty that they had happened. Rumor might cross a hundred miles in a day or take a month, and it birthed ten daughters every day. Today she learned that Siuan had been executed because she unearthed the Black Ajah, that Siuan *was* Black Ajah and still alive, that the Black Ajah had driven those Aes Sedai who were not Black from the Tower. They were not new tales, only variations on old. One new story, spreading like fire in a summer meadow, was that the Tower had been behind all the false Dragons; that made her so angry she stalked away stiff-backed every time she heard it. Which meant she did a good bit of stiff-backed stalking. She heard that Andorans in Aringill had declared some noblewoman queen—Dylin, Delin, the name varied—now that Morgase was dead, which might be true, and that Aes Sedai were running around Arad Doman doing very improbable things, which was certainly untrue. The Prophet was Coming to Cairhien; the Prophet had been crowned King of Ghealdan—no, Amadicia; the Dragon Reborn had killed the Prophet for blasphemy. The Aiel were all leaving; no, they meant to settle and stay. Berelain was to be crowned on the Sun Throne. A skinny little man with shifty eyes nearly got himself beaten by his listeners outside a tavern for saying that Rand was one of the Forsaken, but Egwene stepped into that without thought.

“Have you no honor?” she demanded coldly. The four coarse-faced men who had been on the point of grabbing the skinny fellow blinked at her. They were Cairhienin, not all that much taller than she, but much bulkier, with the broken noses and sunken knuckles of brawlers, yet she held them where they stood with her sheer intensity. That and the presence of Aiel in the street; they were not fool enough to become rough with an Aiel woman, as they thought, in those circumstances. “If you must face a man for what he says, face him one at a time, in honor. This is not battle; you shame yourselves to go four at one.”

They stared at her as if she were mad, and slowly her face reddened. She hoped they thought it anger. Not how dare you pick on someone weaker, but how dare you not let him fight you one by one? She had just lectured them as if they followed *ji’e’toh.* Of course, if they did, there would have been no need to lecture.

One of the men ducked his head in a sort of half-bow. His nose was not only crooked, the tip was missing. “Uh . . . he is gone now . . . uh. . . . Mistress. Can we go too?”

It was true; the skinny man had used her interference to vanish. She felt a flash of contempt. Running because he feared to face four. How could he bear the shame? Light, she was doing it again.

She opened her mouth to say that of course they could—and nothing came out. They took her silence for assent, or maybe excuse, and hurried away, but she barely noticed them go. She was too busy staring at the back of a mounted party making its way up the street.

She did not recognize the dozen or so green-cloaked soldiers forcing a path through the crowd, but who they escorted was a different matter. She could only see the backs of the women—five or six, she thought, between the soldiers—just parts of their backs, but that was more than enough. Much more. The women wore light dustcloaks, pale linen in shades of brown, and Egwene found herself staring right at what seemed to be a pure white disc embroidered on the back of one of those cloaks. Only the stitching picked out the white Flame of Tar Valon from the border signifying the White Ajah. She caught a glimpse of green, of red. Red! Five or six Aes Sedai, riding toward the Royal Palace, where a copy of the Dragon banner waved fitfully atop a stepped tower alongside one of Rand’s crimson flags bearing the ancient Aes Sedai symbol. Some called *that* the

Dragon banner, and others al’Thor’s banner, or even the Aiel banner, and a dozen other names besides.

Wriggling through the crowd, she followed them maybe twenty paces, then stopped. A Red sister—at least one Red that she had seen—had to mean this was the long-expected embassy from the Tower, the one Elaida had written would escort Rand to Tar Valon. More than two months since that letter arrived by a hard-riding courier; this party must have left not long behind.

They would not find Rand—not unless he had slipped in unannounced; she had decided that he had somehow rediscovered the Talent called Traveling, but that put her no closer to knowing how it was done—yet whether they found Rand or not, they must not find Egwene. The best she could expect was to be hauled up short as an Accepted out of the Tower with no full sister to oversee her, and that could be expected only if Elaida really was not hunting for her. Even then they would haul her back to Tar Valon, and Elaida; she had no illusions that she could resist five or six Aes Sedai.

With a last look after the receding Aes Sedai, she gathered her skirts and began to run, dodging between people, sometimes caroming off them, ducking under the noses of teams pulling wagons or carriages. Angered shouts followed her. When she at last dashed through one of the tall square-arched city gates, the hot wind hit her in the face. Unhindered by buildings, it carried sheets of dust that made her cough, but she kept running, all the way back to the Wise One’s low tents.

To her surprise a sleek gray mare, saddle and bridle worked and fringed with gold, stood outside Amys’ tent, in the charge of a *gai’shain* who kept his eyes down except when patting the spirited animal. Ducking inside, she found the rider, Berelain, sipping tea with Amys and Bair and Sorilea, all stretched out on bright, tasseled cushions. A white-robed woman, Rodera, knelt to one side, meekly waiting to refill cups.

“There are Aes Sedai in the city,” Egwene said as soon as she was inside, “heading toward the Sun Palace. It must be Elaida’s embassy to Rand.”

Berelain rose gracefully; Egwene had to admit, if grudgingly, that the woman was graceful. And her riding dress was decently cut, for even she was not fool enough to go riding in the sun in her usual garb. The others rose with her. “I must return to the palace, it seems,” she sighed. “The Light knows how they will feel about no one there to greet them. Amys, if you know where Rhuarc is, could you send a message for him to meet me?"

Amys nodded, but Sorilea said, "You should not depend on Rhuarc so much, girl. Rand al'Thor gave Cairhien to you to tend. Let most men have a finger, and they will have the whole hand before you know. Let a clan chief have a finger, and he will have the entire arm."

"It is true," Amys murmured. "Rhuarc is the shade of my heart, but it is true."

Pulling slim riding gloves from behind her belt, Berelain began tugging them on. "He reminds me of my father. Too much so, sometimes." For an instant she grimaced ruefully. "But he gives very good advice. And he knows when to loom, and how much. I think even Aes Sedai must be impressed by Rhuarc staring at them."

Amys laughed in her throat. "He is impressive. I will send him to you." She kissed Berelain lightly on the forehead and each cheek.

Egwene stared; that was how a mother kissed her son or daughter. What *was* going on between Berelain and the Wise Ones? She could not ask, of course. Such a question would be shaming to her and to the Wise Ones. To Berelain too, though Berelain would not know it, and Egwene would not mind shaming Berelain until her hair fell out.

As Berelain turned to leave the tent, Egwene put a hand on the woman's arm. "They must be handled carefully. They'll not be friendly toward Rand, but the wrong words, a wrong move, could make them open enemies." That was true enough, but not what she needed to say. She would rather have her tongue torn out than ask a favor of Berelain.

"I have dealt with Aes Sedai before, Egwene Sedai," the other woman said dryly.

Egwene refrained from drawing a deep breath. It had to be done, but she would not let this woman see how hard it was. "Elaida means no good to Rand, no more than a weasel means to a chicken, and these Aes Sedai are Elaida's. If they learn of an Aes Sedai on Rand's side, here where they can reach her, she might just disappear one day soon after." Looking into Berelain's unreadable face, she could not make herself say more.

After a long moment, Berelain smiled. "Egwene Sedai, I will do whatever I can for Rand." Both smile and tone of voice . . . insinuated.

"Girl," Sorilea said sharply, and for a wonder, spots of color bloomed in Berelain's cheeks.

Not looking at Egwene, Berelain said in a carefully neutral voice, “I would appreciate it if you did not tell Rhuarc.” In fact, she was not looking at anyone, but she tried to ignore Egwene’s presence.

“We will not,” Amys put in quickly, leaving Sorilea with her mouth open. “We will not.” The repetition was directed at Sorilea with a blend of firmness and asking, and at last the eldest Wise One nodded, if somewhat grudgingly. Berelain actually sighed with relief before ducking out of the tent.

“The child has spirit,” Sorilea laughed as soon as Berelain was gone. Reclining on the cushions again, she patted the space next to her for Egwene. “We should find the right husband for her, a man to match her. If such exists among wetlanders.”

Wiping her hands and face with the damp cloth Rodera brought, Egwene wondered whether that was enough opening to ask about Berelain in good honor. She accepted a teacup of green Sea Folk porcelain and took her place in the circle of Wise Ones. If one of the others responded to Sorilea, that might be enough.

“Are you certain these Aes Sedai mean harm to the *Car’a’carn*?” Amys asked instead.

Egwene colored. Thinking about gossip when there were important matters to attend. “Yes,” she replied quickly, then more slowly, “At least. . . . I don’t know that they mean to harm him, exactly. Not intentionally, anyway.” Elaida’s letter had mentioned “all the honor and respect” he deserved. How much did a former Red sister think any man who could channel deserved? “But I don’t doubt they will want to control him somehow, make him do what Elaida wants. They aren’t his friends.” How much were the Salidar Aes Sedai his friends? Light, she needed to talk with Nynaeve and Elayne. “And they will not care that he is the *Car’a’carn*.” Sorilea grunted sourly.

“You believe they will try to harm you?” Bair asked, and Egwene nodded.

“If they discover I’m here. . . .” She tried to cover a shiver by sipping her mint tea. Whether as a handle on Rand or as an unsupervised Accepted, they would do their best to haul her back to the Tower. “They’ll not leave me free if they can help it. Elaida will not want Rand listening to anyone but her.” Bair and Amys exchanged grim looks.

“Then the answer is simple.” Sorilea sounded as if it had all been decided. “You will stay among the tents, and they will not find you. Wise Ones avoid Aes Sedai, in any case. If you remain with us a few more years, we will make a fine Wise One of you.”

Egwene almost dropped her cup. “You flatter me,” she said carefully, “but sooner or later, I will have to go.” Sorilea did not look convinced. Egwene had learned to hold her own with Amys and Bair, after a fashion, but Sorilea. . . .

“Not soon, I think,” Bair told her, with a smile to take the sting out. “You have much to learn yet.”

“Yes, and eager to get back to it,” Amys added. Egwene struggled not to blush, and Amys frowned. “You look odd. Did you overuse yourself this morning? I was sure you had recovered enough—”

“I have,” Egwene said hastily. “Truly, I have. I haven’t had a headache in days. It was the dust, running back here. And the crowd in the city was more than I remembered. And I was so excited, I didn’t breakfast very well.”

Sorilea motioned to Rodera. “Bring some honeybread, if there is any, and cheese, and any fruit you can find.” She poked Egwene in the ribs. “A woman should have some flesh to her.” That from a woman who looked as if she had been left in the sun till most of her flesh had dried away.

Egwene did not really mind eating—she had been too excited to eat this morning—but Sorilea watched every bite go down, and her scrutiny made swallowing a little difficult. That and the fact that they wanted to discuss what to do about the Aes Sedai. If the Aes Sedai were hostile to Rand, they would have to be watched, and a way found to safeguard him. Even Sorilea was a bit edgy about the possibility that they might be putting themselves against Aes Sedai directly—not afraid; it was going against custom that made them uneasy—but whatever was necessary to protect the *Car’a’carn* had to be done.

For Egwene’s part, she worried that they might turn Sorilea’s suggestion that she remain among the tents into a command. There would be no way to evade that one, no way to avoid fifty eyes except by staying inside her own tent. How did Rand Travel? The Wise Ones would do whatever was necessary, so long as it did not touch *ji’e’toh*: Wise Ones might interpret it differently here and there, but they held to their interpretation as tightly as any other Aiel. Light, Rodera was Shaido, one of thousands captured in the battle that drove the Shaido away from the city, but the Wise Ones treated her no differently than any other *gai'shain*, and as far as Egwene could see, Rodera behaved no differently than any other *gai'shain*, not in the slightest. They would not go against *ji'e'toh*, no matter how necessary it might be.

Fortunately the subject did not come up. Unfortunately, the question of her health did. The Wise Ones did not know Healing, or how to check someone's health with the Power. Instead, they tested with their own methods. Some seemed familiar from when she had studied under Nynaeve to become a Wisdom: peering into her eyes, listening to her heart through a hollow wooden tube. Some were distinctly Aiel. She touched her toes until she felt dizzy, jumped up and down in one place until she thought her eyes would bounce out of her head, and ran around the Wise One's tents until spots swam before her, then had water poured over her head by a *gai'shain*, drank as much as she could hold, gathered up her skirts, and ran some more. Aiel were great believers in hardiness. Had she been a step too slow, had she staggered to a halt before Amys said she could, they would have decided her health was not sufficiently recovered after all.

When Sorilea finally nodded and said, "You are as sound as a Maiden, girl," Egwene was swaying and gulping for air. A Maiden would not have been, she was sure. Still, she felt pride. She had never thought of herself as soft, but she knew very well that before she began living with the Aiel she would have fallen on her face halfway through the test. *Another year*, she thought, *and I will run as well as any* Far Dareis Mai.

On the other hand, she was hardly up to returning to the city. She joined the Wise Ones in their sweat tent—for once they did not make her pour water over the hot rocks; Rodera did that—luxuriating in the damp heat as it relaxed her muscles, and only left because Rhuarc and two other clan chiefs, Timolan of the Miagoma and Indirian of the Codarra, joined them, tall massive graying men with hard sober faces. That sent her diving out of the tent to hastily wrap her shawl around her. She always expected to hear laughter when she did that, but the Aiel never seemed to understand why she hurried from the sweat tent whenever men came in. It would have fit right into Aiel humor if they had, but luckily they just did not make the connection, for which she was very glad.

Gathering the rest of her clothes in her arms from the neat piles outside the sweat tent, she hurried back to her own. The sun was sitting low now, and after a light meal, she was ready to fall asleep, too tired to even think of *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Too tired to remember most of her dreams, either—that was something the Wise Ones had been teaching her—but most of those she did remember were about Gawyn.

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CHAPTER 25

Like Lightning and Rain

For some reason, when Cowinde came to wake her in the gray before dawn, Egwene felt refreshed despite her dreams. Refreshed and ready to see what she could learn in the city. One long yawn and stretch, and she was on her feet, humming as she washed and dressed hurriedly, hardly taking the time to brush her hair properly. She would have hurried away from the tents without wasting time on breakfast, but Sorilea saw her, and that put an abrupt end to that notion. Which turned out to be just as well.

"You should not have left the sweat tent so soon," Amys told her, taking a bowl of porridge and dried fruit from Rodera. Close to two dozen Wise Ones had crowded into Amys' tent, and Rodera, Cowinde and a white-robed man named Doilan, another Shaido, were scurrying to serve them all. "Rhuarc had much to say about your sisters. Perhaps you can add more."

After months of pretense, Egwene did not need to think to know she meant the Tower embassy. "I will tell you what I can. What did he say?"

For one thing, that there were six Aes Sedai, and two of them Red, not one—Egwene could not believe the arrogance, or perhaps stupidity, of Elaida to have sent any at all—but at least a Gray was in charge. The Wise Ones, most lying in a large circle like the spokes of a wheel, some standing or kneeling in the spaces between, turned their eyes to Egwene as soon as the list of names was done.

"I'm afraid I only know two of them," she said carefully. "There are a good many Aes Sedai, after all, and I haven't been a full sister long enough to know many." Heads nodded; they accepted that. "Nesune Bihara is fair-minded—she listens to all sides before reaching a conclusion—but she can find even the smallest flaw in what you say. She sees everything, remembers everything; she can glance at a page once and repeat it back word for word, or the same for a conversation she heard a year ago.

Sometimes she talks to herself, though, speaks her thoughts without realizing it.”

“Rhuarc said she was interested in the Royal Library.” Bair stirred her porridge, watching Egwene. “He said he heard her mutter something about seals.” A quick murmur rippled through the other women, silenced when Sorilea cleared her throat loudly.

Spooning up porridge—there were slices of dried plum and some kind of sweet berries in hers—Egwene considered. If Elaida had put Siuan to the question before she was executed, then she knew of three seals that were broken. Rand had two hidden—Egwene wished she knew where; he did not seem to trust anyone of late—and Nynaeve and Elayne had found one in Tanchico and carried it to Salidar, but Elaida had no way of knowing about those. Unless, perhaps, she had spies in Salidar. No. That was speculation for another time, useless now. Elaida must be searching desperately for the rest. Sending Nesune to the second-greatest library in the world after that in the White Tower made sense, and swallowing some dried plum, she told them so.

“I said as much last night,” Sorilea growled. “Aeron, Colinda, Edarra, you three go to the Library. Three Wise Ones should be able to find what can be found before one Aes Sedai.” That produced three long faces; the Royal Library was huge. Still, Sorilea was Sorilea, and if the named women sighed and muttered, they put down their porridge bowls and left immediately. “You said you know two,” Sorilea went on before they were out of the tent. “Nesune Bihara and who?”

“Sarene Nemdahl,” Egwene said. “You must understand, I do not know either well. Sarene is like most Whites—she reasons everything out logically, and sometimes she seems surprised when somebody acts from the heart—yet she has a temper. Most of the time she keeps it tightly bottled, but put a foot wrong at the wrong time and she can . . . snap your nose off before you can blink. She listens to what you say, though, and she will admit she was wrong, even after her temper has snapped. Well, once it mends, anyway.”

Putting a spoonful of berries and porridge into her mouth, she tried to study the Wise Ones without seeming to; no one appeared to have noticed her hesitation. She had almost said Sarene would send you to scrub floors before you could blink. The only way she knew either woman was from lessons as a novice. Nesune, a slender Kandori with birdlike eyes, could tell when someone's attention drifted even with her back turned; she had taught several classes Egwene had been in. Egwene had only heard two lectures by Sarene, on the nature of reality, but it was hard to forget a woman who told you with absolute seriousness that beauty and ugliness were equally illusion while wearing a face that would make any man look twice.

"I hope you can remember more," Bair said, leaning toward her on an elbow. "It seems you are our only source of information."

That did take a moment for Egwene to puzzle out. Yes, of course. Bair and Amys must have tried to look into the Aes Sedai's dreams last night, but Aes Sedai warded their dreams. It was a skill she regretted not learning herself before leaving the Tower. "If I can. Where are their rooms in the palace?" If she was going to go near Rand the next time he came, it would help if she did not blunder by their apartments trying to find her way. Especially Nesune's. Sarene might not remember one particular novice, but Nesune most certainly would. For that matter, one of those she did not know might, too; there had been a lot of talk about Egwene al'Vere when she was in the Tower.

"They decline Berelain's offer of shade even for one night." Amys frowned. Among Aiel, an offer of hospitality was always accepted; to refuse, even between blood enemies, was shaming. "They stay with a woman named Arilyn, a noble among the treekillers. Rhuarc believes that Coiren Saeldain knew this Arilyn before yesterday."

"One of Coiren's spies," Egwene said with certainty. "Or one of the Gray Ajah's."

Several Wise Ones muttered angrily under their breath; Sorilea snorted loudly in disgust, and Amys gave a heavy, disappointed sigh. Others had a different view. Corelna, a green-eyed hawk of a woman with gray heavy in her flaxen hair, shook her head doubtfully, while Tialin, a lean redhead with a sharp nose, looked at Egwene in open disbelief.

Spying violated *ji'e'toh*, though how that squared with the dreamwalkers' peeking into people's dreams whenever they liked was something Egwene had not worked out. There was no use pointing out that Aes Sedai did not follow *ji'e'toh*. They knew that; they just found it hard to really believe or understand, about Aes Sedai or anyone.

Whatever they thought, she would have wagered anything on being right. Galldrian, the last King of Cairhien, had had an Aes Sedai advisor before he was assassinated. Niande Moorwyn had been all but invisible even before she disappeared following Galldrian's death, but one thing Egwene had learned was that she had occasionally visited the country estates of Lady Arilyn. Niande was a Gray.

"They have apparently placed a hundred guards under that roof," Bair said after a time. Her voice became very bland. "They say the city is still unsettled, but I think they fear the Aiel." Disturbingly interested looks appeared on a number of faces.

"A hundred!" Egwene exclaimed. "They brought a hundred men?"

Amys shook her head. "More than five hundred. Timolan's scouts found most of them camped less than half a day north of the city. Rhuarc spoke of it, and Coiren Saeldain said the men were a guard of honor, but they left most outside the city so as not to *alarm* us."

"They think they will escort the *Car'a'carn* to Tar Valon." Sorilea's voice could have cracked stone, and her expression made her tone seem soft. Egwene had not kept back the contents of Elaida's letter to Rand. The Wise Ones liked it less every time they heard it.

"Rand is not fool enough to accept that offer," Egwene said, but her mind was not on that. Five hundred men could be a guard of honor. Elaida might well think the Dragon Reborn would expect something like that, even be flattered. A number of suggestions occurred to her, but she had to be careful. The wrong word might make Amys and Bair—or worse, Sorilea, dodging Sorilea was like to trying to climb out of a briar patch—give her commands that she could not obey and still do what only she could. Or would, at least. "I assume the chiefs are keeping an eye on those soldiers outside the city?" Half a day north—more like a full day, since they were not Aiel—was too far to be dangerous, but a little caution never hurt. Amys nodded; Sorilea looked at Egwene as though she had asked whether the sun was in the sky at midday. Egwene cleared her throat. "Yes." The chiefs were not likely to make that sort of mistake. "Well. These are my suggestions. If any of these Aes Sedai goes to the palace, some of you who can channel should go behind them and make sure they do not leave any sort of trap." They nodded. Two-thirds of the women there could wield *saidar*, some not much more than Sorilea, others equaling Amys, who was as strong as most Aes Sedai Egwene had yet met; the proportions were about the same for Wise Ones as a whole. Their skills differed from Aes Sedai's—less in some places, more in a few, but generally just different—yet they should be able to sniff out any unwelcome gifts. “And we must make sure there are only six.”

She had to explain. They had read wetlanders’ books, but even those who could channel did not really know the rituals that had grown up around Aes Sedai dealing with men who had found *saidin*. Among the Aiel, a man who learned he could channel thought he was chosen, and went north into the Blight to hunt the Dark One; none ever returned. For that matter, Egwene had not known the rituals either, until she went to the Tower; the stories she had heard before seldom bore any resemblance to the truth.

“Rand can handle two women at once,” she finished. She knew that for a fact. “He might even be able to handle six, but if they are more than they’ve put themselves forward to be, then it is proof they have lied at the least, even if just by leaving something out.” She almost winced at their frowns; if you lied, you incurred *toh* toward whoever you lied to. But in her case, it was necessary. It *was*.

The rest of breakfast was taken up with the Wise Ones deciding who would go through the palace today and which chiefs could be trusted with choosing men and Maidens to watch for more Aes Sedai. Some might be reluctant to put themselves against Aes Sedai in any way; the Wise Ones did not say that right out, but it was clear enough from what they did say, often sourly. Others might think any threat to the *Car’a’carn*, even from Aes Sedai, could best be handled by the spear. A few of the Wise Ones seemed to have moved toward that opinion too; Sorilea stepped heavily on more than one oblique suggestion that the difficulty would be solved if the Aes Sedai were simply no longer there. In the end, Rhuarc and Mandelain of the Daryne were the only two they could agree on.

“Make sure they don’t chose any *siswai’aman*,” Egwene said. Those would certainly resort to the spear at the slightest hint of a threat. The remark got her a great many stares, ranging from flat to wry. None of the Wise Ones were fools. One thing troubled her. Not one of them mentioned what she was used to hearing almost any time Aes Sedai were discussed: that the Aiel had once failed the Aes Sedai and would be destroyed if they did again.

Aside from that one comment, Egwene kept out of the discussion, busying herself with a second bowl of porridge, with dried pear as well as plums, which earned an approving nod from Sorilea. It was not Sorilea’s approval she was after. She was hungry, but mainly she hoped they would forget she was there. It seemed to work.

Breakfast and discussion done, she strolled to her tent, then crouched just inside the entry flap, watching a small knot of Wise Ones make their way to the city, led by Amys. When they vanished through the nearest gate, she popped back outside again. There were Aiel everywhere, *gai'shain* and others, but the Wise Ones were all inside, and no one glanced at her as she walked toward the city wall, not too quickly. If anyone did take notice of her, they should think she was just off for her morning exercise. The wind picked up, blowing waves of dust and old ash from Foregate, but she maintained her steady pace. Just out for exercise.

In the city, the first person she asked, a lanky woman selling wrinkled apples from a cart for an exorbitant price, did not know directions to the Lady Arilyn's palace, nor did a plump seamstress who went wide-eyed at an apparent Aiel woman entering her shop, nor a balding cutler who thought she would be much more interested in his knives. Finally a narrow-eyed silversmith who watched her closely the whole time she was inside her shop told her what she wanted. Striding away through the crowds, Egwene shook her head. She sometimes forgot how big a city like Cairhien really was, that not everyone knew where everything was.

As it was, she got lost three times and had to ask directions twice more before she found herself pressed against the side of a hire stable, peering around the corner at a squat pile of dark stone across the street, all narrow windows and angular balconies and stepped towers. It was small for a palace, though huge for a house; Arilyn was somewhere just above the middle of Cairhien's nobility, if Egwene remembered rightly. Green-coated soldiers in breastplates and helmets stood guard on the broad front stairs, at every gate she could see, even on the balconies. Oddly, they all appeared to be young. Still, that was not what interested her. Women were channeling inside that building, and for her to feel it from down the street, for her to feel it so solidly, they were not handling small quantities of *saidar.* The amount lessened suddenly, but it was still significant.

She chewed at her lip. She could not tell what they were doing, not without seeing the flows, but by the same token, they had to see the flows to weave them. Even if they were at a window, any flows directed out of the mansion that she could not see would have to be aimed south, away from the Sun Palace, away from everything. What were they doing?

One set of gates swung open long enough to emit a matched team of six bays drawing a closed black carriage with a sigil lacquered on its door, two silver stars on a field of red and green stripes. It worked northward through the crowd, the liveried driver plying a long whip as much to make people move aside as to encourage the horses. The Lady Arilyn going somewhere, or some of the embassy?

Well, she had not come here just to stare. Edging back so only one eye peeked around the corner, just enough to see the great house, she drew a small red stone from her belt pouch, took a deep breath and began to channel. If one of them was looking out on this side, she would be able to see the flows, but not Egwene. It had to be risked.

The smooth stone was just that, a stone polished in a stream, but Egwene had learned this trick from Moiraine, and Moiraine had used a stone for a focus—a gem as it happened, but the kind did not matter—so Egwene did too. It was mostly Air she wove, with a touch of Fire, done just so. It allowed you to eavesdrop. Spy, the Wise Ones would say. Egwene did not care what it was called, so long as she learned something of what the Tower Aes Sedai intended.

Her weave touched a window opening carefully, oh so delicately, then another, and another. Silence. Then. . . .

“. . . so I says to him,” a woman’s voice said in her ear, “if you want them beds made, you better leave off tickling my chin, Alwin Rael.”

Another woman giggled. “Oh, you never did.”

Egwene grimaced. Maids.

A stout woman passing with a basket of bread on her shoulder peered at Egwene in a puzzled manner. As well she might, hearing two women’s voices with only Egwene standing there, and her lips not moving. Egwene solved it the quickest way she knew. She glared so furiously that the woman squeaked and nearly dropped her basket dashing off into the crowd.

Reluctantly Egwene lowered the strength of her weave; she might not be able to hear as well, but better that than attracting gawkers. As it was, enough people glanced at her, an Aiel woman pressing herself against a wall, though no one more than hesitated before moving on; no one wanted trouble with Aiel. She put them out of her mind. Window by window she moved the weave, sweating furiously, and not only because of the already rising heat. Just one Aes Sedai glimpsing her flows, even if she did not recognize what they were, would know someone was channeling at them.

They would have to suspect the purpose. Egwene inched back, leaving only half an eye showing.

Silence. Silence. A rustle of some sort. Someone moving? Slippers on a carpet? No words, though. Silence. A man muttering, apparently emptying chamber pots and not at all pleased; ears hot, she hurried on. Silence. Silence. Silence.

“. . . really believe this is necessary?” Even in a whisper, as it seemed, the woman’s voice sounded rich and full of herself.

“We must be prepared for any eventuality, Coiren,” another woman replied in a voice like an iron rod. “I heard an arresting rumor—” A door closed firmly, cutting off the rest.

Egwene slumped against the stable’s stone wall. She could have screamed with frustration. The Gray sister who was in charge, and the other had to be one of the Aes Sedai or she would never have spoken so to Coiren. None better to say what she wanted to hear, and they had to walk away. What arresting rumor? What eventualities? How did they mean to prepare? The channeling inside the manor changed again, increasing. What were they up to? Drawing a deep breath, she began again, doggedly.

As the sun climbed higher, she heard a great many usually unidentifiable noises, and a good bit of servants’ gossip and chatter. Somebody named Ceri was going to have another baby, and the Aes Sedai were to have wine from Arindrim, wherever that was, with their midday meal. The most interesting news was that Arilyn had indeed been in that carriage, off to meet her husband in the country. For all the good knowing that did. A whole morning wasted.

The front doors of the mansion swung wide, liveried servants bowing. The soldiers did not stiffen, but they did look more attentive. Nesune Bihara walked out, followed by a tall young man who seemed to have been carved from a boulder.

Egwene released her weave hastily, released *saidar*, and took a deep calming breath; this was no time to panic. Nesune and her Warder conferred; then the dark-haired Brown sister peered down the street, first one way then the other. She was definitely looking for something.

Egwene decided that perhaps it was a good time to panic after all. Pulling herself back slowly so as not to draw Nesune’s sharp eye, she whipped around as soon as she was out of the woman’s sight, gathered her skirts and ran, bulling her way into the crowd. For all of three strides she ran. Then she struck a stone wall, bounced off, and sat down in the street so hard that she bounced again on the hot paving blocks.

Dazed, she stared up, becoming more dazed by the heartbeat. The stone wall was Gawyn, staring down at her, looking as stunned as she. His eyes were the most brilliant blue. And those red-gold curls. She wanted to wrap those around her fingers again. She felt her face going scarlet. *You never did that*, she thought firmly. *It was only a dream!*

“Did I hurt you?” he said anxiously, beginning to kneel beside her.

She scrambled to her feet, dusting herself off hurriedly; if she could have had a wish granted right then, it would be never to blush again. Already they had attracted a ring of onlookers. Wrapping an arm in his, she drew him down the street the way she had been going. A glance over her shoulder revealed only the milling throng. Even if Nesune came to that very corner, she would see nothing more. Still, Egwene did not slow; the crowd gave way for an Aiel woman and a man tall enough to be Aiel even if he did wear a sword. The way he moved said he knew how to use it; he moved like a Warder.

After a dozen paces she reluctantly unwound her arm from his. He caught her hand before it got away, though, and she let him hold it as they walked. “I suppose,” he mused after a bit, “that I am to ignore the fact that you are dressed like an Aiel. The last I heard, you were in Illian. And I suppose I should not comment on you running away from a palace where six Aes Sedai are staying. Strange behavior for an Accepted.”

“I’ve never been in Illian,” she said, hastily looking around to see if any Aiel were close enough to have heard. Several glanced in her direction, but none were in earshot. Suddenly what he had said hit her. She took in his green coat, the same shade as those on the soldiers. “You’re with them. The Tower Aes Sedai.” Light, she was a fool not to have realized as soon as she saw him.

His face softened; it had been very hard for an instant. “I command the guard of honor the Aes Sedai have brought to escort the Dragon Reborn to Tar Valon.” His voice was a curious blend, wryness and anger and weariness. “If he chooses to go, at least. And if he was here. I understand he . . . appears and disappears. Coiren is vexed.”

Egwene’s heart was in her throat. “I . . . I must ask you a favor, Gawyn.”

"Anything except these," he said simply. "I will not harm Elayne or Andor, and I will not become Dragonsworn. Anything else in my power is yours."

Heads turned toward them. Any mention of Dragonsworn caught ears. Four hard-faced men with wagon drivers' whips coiled over their shoulders glared at Gawyn, cracking their knuckles the way some men did before fighting. Gawyn only looked at them. They were not small men, but their belligerence faded under his gaze. Two actually knuckled their foreheads to him before they all slipped away into the river of people. But there were still too many staring, too many trying to look as if they were not listening. Dressed as she was, she attracted eyes without saying a word. Add in a man with red-gold hair, well over a span tall, who looked a Warder, and the combination could not help but draw attention.

"I need to speak with you privately," she said. *If any woman has bonded Gawyn Warder, I'll. . . .* Curiously, the thought had no real heat.

Without a word he took her to a nearby inn, The Long Man, where a golden crown tossed to the round innkeeper produced an almost reverent curtsy and a small private dining room, dark-paneled, with heavily polished table and chairs and dried flowers in a blue vase on the hearth. Gawyn closed the door, and a sudden awkwardness descended as they faced each other alone. Light, but he was gorgeous, easily as gorgeous as Galad, and the way his hair curled around his ears . . .

Gawyn cleared his throat. "The heat seems to get worse every day." He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face, then offered it to her. Abruptly realizing it was used, he cleared his throat again. "I have another, I think."

She produced her own while he was searching his pockets. "Gawyn, how can you serve Elaida after what she did?"

"The Younglings serve the Tower," he replied stiffly, but his head swung uneasily. "We do as long as. . . . Siuan Sanche. . . ." For a moment his eyes went icy cold. Just for an instant. "Egwene, my mother always used to say, 'Even a queen must obey the law she makes, or there is no law.' " He shook his head angrily. "I shouldn't be surprised to find you here. I should have known you would be where al'Thor is."

"Why do you hate him?" That had been hate in his voice or she had never heard it. "Gawyn, he really is the Dragon Reborn. You must have heard what happened in Tear. He—"

“I do not care if he is the Creator made flesh,” he grated. “Al’Thor killed my mother!”

Egwene’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Gawyn, no! No, he did not!”

“Can you swear it? Were you there when she died? It’s on every tongue. The Dragon Reborn took Caemlyn, and killed Morgase. He probably killed Elayne, too. I can find no word of her.” All the anger drained out of him. He slumped where he stood, head falling forward, fists clenched and eyes closed. “I can find out nothing,” he whispered.

“Elayne is unharmed,” Egwene said, surprised to find herself right in front of him. She reached up, and surprised herself again by running her fingers into his hair as she raised his head. It felt just as she remembered. Her hands flashed back as if burned. She was sure she would flush so crimson her face would ignite, except. . . . Color stained Gawyn’s cheeks. Of course. He remembered too, though only as his own dream. That truly should have set her face afire, but somehow it did the opposite. Gawyn’s blush steadied her nerves, even made her want to smile. “Elayne is safe, Gawyn. I *can* swear to that.”

“Where is she?” His voice was anguished. “Where has she been? Her place is in Caemlyn now. Well, not Caemlyn—not so long as al’Thor might be there—but in Andor. Where is she, Egwene?”

“I . . . cannot tell you. I can’t, Gawyn.”

He studied her, face expressionless, then sighed. “You are more Aes Sedai every time I see you.” His laugh sounded forced. “Do you know I used to think about being your Warder? How is that for foolish?”

“You will be my Warder.” She had not realized the words were coming out of her mouth until they did, but once they did, she knew they were true. That dream. Gawyn kneeling for her to hold his head. It could have meant a hundred things or nothing, but she knew.

He grinned at her. The idiot thought she was joking! “Not me, surely. Galad, I think. Though you’ll have to beat away other Aes Sedai with a stick. Aes Sedai, serving girls, queens, chambermaids, merchants, farmwives. . . . I’ve seen them all look at him. Don’t bother claiming you don’t think he’s—”

The simplest way to silence that nonsense was to put a hand over his mouth. “I do not love Galad. I love you.”

The man still tried to pretend it was a jest, smiling against her fingers. “I cannot be a Warder. I’m to be Elayne’s First Prince of the Sword.”

“If the Queen of Andor can be Aes Sedai, a Prince can be a Warder. And you will be mine. Push that through your thick skull; I am serious. And I love you.” He stared at her. At least he was not smiling anymore. But he said nothing, just stared. She took her hand away. “Well? Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“When you wish for so long that you could hear something,” he said slowly, “and then suddenly, with no warning, you do, it is like a lightning strike and rain on parched ground at the same time. You’re stunned, but you cannot hear enough.”

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” she told him, smiling. “Well?”

For answer, he picked her up and kissed her. It was every bit as good as the dreams. It was better. It was. . . . When he finally set her down, she clung to his arms; her knees did not seem to be working properly. “My Lady Aiel Egwene Aes Sedai,” he said, “I love you, and I cannot wait for you to bond me.” Shedding mock formality, he added in a softer tone, “I love you, Egwene al’Vere. You said you wanted a favor. What? The moon on a necklace? I’ll set a goldsmith to work within the hour. Stars to wear in your hair? I will—”

“Don’t tell Coiren or the others that I am here. Don’t mention me to them at all.”

She expected some hesitation, but he simply said, “They’ll not learn of you from me. Or from anyone else, can I help it.” He paused a moment, then took her by the shoulders. “Egwene, I will not ask why you’re here. No, just listen. I know Siuan mired you in her schemes, and I understand that you feel loyalty to a man from your own village. That doesn’t matter. You should be in the White Tower, studying; I remember them all saying you were going to be a powerful Aes Sedai one day. Do you have a plan for returning without . . . penalties?” She shook her head wordlessly, and he went on in a rush. “Maybe I can think of something, if you don’t first. I know you had no choice but to obey Siuan, but I doubt Elaida will give that much weight; even mentioning the name Siuan Sanche around her is nearly as much as your head is worth. I will find some way, somehow. I swear it. But promise me that until I do you will not . . . do anything foolish.” His hands tightened for a moment almost to the point of pain. “Just promise me you will be careful.”

Light, but this was a fine pickle. She could not tell him she had no intention of returning to the Tower as long as Elaida sat on the Amyrlin Seat. And something foolish almost certainly meant anything to do with Rand. He looked so worried. For her. “I will be careful, Gawyn. I promise.” *As careful as I can be,* she amended to herself; it was only a small change, but somehow it made what she had to say next more difficult. “I have a second favor to ask. Rand did not kill your mother.” How could she word this to put the least strain on him? Strain or no, she had to. “Promise me you will not raise a hand against Rand until I can prove he didn’t.”

“I swear.” Again no hesitation, but his voice was rough, and his hands squeezed again briefly, harder than before. She did not flinch; the slight pain felt like a repayment for the pain she was causing him.

“It has to be that way, Gawyn. He did not do it, but it will take time to prove.” How under the Light could she? Rand’s word would not be enough. All such a tangle. She had to concentrate on one thing at a time. What were those Aes Sedai up to?

Gawyn startled her by drawing a ragged breath. “I will give over everything, betray everything, for you. Come away with me, Egwene. We will both leave it all behind. I have a small estate south of Whitebridge, with a vineyard and a village, so far into the country that the sun rises two days late. The world will hardly touch us there. We can be married on the way. I don’t know how much time we will have—al’Thor; Tarmon Gai’don—I do not know, but we will have it together.”

She stared up at him in amazement. Then she realized she had voiced that last thought aloud, What were those Aes Sedai up to?, and a key word—betray—slid into place. He thought she wanted him to spy on them. And he would. Desperately seeking a way not to, he still would, if she asked. Anything, he had promised, and anything he meant, whatever the cost to him. She made a promise to herself; to him really, but it was not the sort of promise she could speak aloud. If he let slip something she could use, she would—she had to—but she would not dig, not for the smallest scrap. Whatever the cost. Sarene Nemdahl would never understand, but it was the only way she could match what he had laid at her feet.

“I cannot,” she said softly. “You can never know how much I want to, but I cannot.” She laughed abruptly, feeling tears in her eyes. “And you. Betray? Gawyn Trakand, that word fits you as darkness fits the sun.” Unspoken promises were all very well, but she could not leave it at that.

She would use what he gave her, use it against what he believed. There had to be an offering. “I sleep in the tents, but every morning I walk in the city. I come through the Dragonwall Gate, not long after sunrise.”

He understood, of course. Her offering of faith in his word, her freedom put in his pocket. He took her hands in both of his, turned them so he could kiss her palms gently. “A precious thing, what you’ve given me to hold. If I go to the Dragonwall Gate every morning, someone is sure to notice, and I may not be able to get away every morning, but do not be too surprised if I appear beside you shortly after you enter the city most days.”

When Egwene finally got back outside, the sun had moved a considerable distance into the hottest part of the afternoon, thinning the crowds a little. Saying goodbye had taken longer than she thought it would; kissing Gawyn might not be the sort of exercise the Wise Ones intended her to take, but her heart was still racing as if she had been running.

Putting him firmly out of mind—well, pushing him to the back with some effort; putting him out seemed to be beyond her—she returned to her vantage point beside the stable. Someone was still channeling inside the mansion; more than one probably, unless that one was weaving something large; the feel was less than earlier, but still strong. A woman was going into the house, a dark-haired woman Egwene did not recognize, though the agelessness of that hard face marked her. She did not try to eavesdrop again and did not stay long—if they were going in and out, there was too much chance of being seen and recognized despite her clothes—but as she hurried away, one thought hammered at her. What were they up to?

“We intend to offer him escort to Tar Valon,” Katerine Alruddin said, shifting slightly. She could never decide whether Cairhienin chairs were as uncomfortable as they looked or one merely believed they were because they looked so uncomfortable. “Once he leaves Cairhien for Tar Valon, there will be . . . a vacuum here.”

Unsmiling in the gilded chair opposite her, the Lady Colavaere leaned forward slightly. “You interest me, Katerine Sedai. Leave us,” she snapped to the servants.

Katerine smiled.

“We intend to offer him escort to Tar Valon,” Nesune said precisely, but she felt the smallest flash of irritation. Despite a smooth face, the Tairen kept shifting his feet, anxious in the presence of an Aes Sedai, perhaps apprehensive that she might channel. Only an Amadician would have been worse. “Once he departs for Tar Valon, there will be a need for strength in Cairhien.”

The High Lord Meilan licked his lips. “Why do you tell me this?”

Nesune’s smile might have meant anything.

When Sarene entered the sitting room, only Coiren and Erian were there sipping at tea. And a servant waiting to pour, of course. Sarene motioned him out. “Berelain, she may prove to be difficult,” she said once the door closed. “I do not know whether the apple or the whip will work best with her. I am supposed to see Aracome tomorrow, am I not, but I think that more time will be necessary with Berelain.”

“Apple or whip,” Erian said in a tight voice. “Whichever do be necessary.” Her face might have been pale marble framed by raven’s wings. Sarene’s secret vice was poetry, though she would never have let anyone know she could be interested in something so . . . emotional. She would have died of shame had Vitalien, her Warder, ever discovered that she had written lines comparing him to a leopard, among other graceful, powerful and dangerous animals.

“Pull yourself together, Erian.” As usual, Coiren sounded as if she were making a speech. “What troubles her, Sarene, is a rumor that Galina heard, a rumor that a Green sister was in Tear with young Rand al’Thor and is now here in Cairhien.” She *always* called him “young Rand al’Thor,” as though reminding her listeners that he was young and therefore inexperienced.

“Moiraine *and* a Green,” Sarene mused. That could indeed indicate trouble. Elaida insisted that Moiraine and Siuan had acted alone in letting al’Thor run without guidance, but if even one additional Aes Sedai was involved, it might mean others had been as well, and that was a string that might lead all the way to some, perhaps many, of those who had fled the Tower when Siuan was deposed. “Still, it is only the rumor.”

“Perhaps not,” Galina said as she slipped into the chamber. “Have you not heard? Someone channeled at us this morning. For what purpose I cannot say, but we can imagine very closely I believe.”

The beads worked in Sarene’s tiny dark braids made clicking noises as she shook her head. “It is not the proof of a Green, Galina. It is not even the proof of an Aes Sedai. It could be some poor wretch who was put out of the Tower for failing the test as Accepted. And you know as well as I do that some of these Aielwomen can channel."

Galina smiled, a sliver of teeth in night-eyed sternness. "I think it is proof of Moiraine. I have heard she had a trick of eavesdropping, and I do not believe this story of her so conveniently dead, with no corpse seen and no one able to tell details."

That bothered Sarene as well. Partly because she had liked Moiraine—they had been friends as novices and Accepted, though Moiraine was a year ahead, and that friendship had continued over their few meetings in the years since—and partly because it *was* too vague and top convenient, Moiraine dying, vanishing really, when an arrest warrant hung over her. Moiraine might well be capable of faking her own death under those circumstances. "So you believe we have both Moiraine and a Green sister whose name we do not know to deal with? It is still only the speculation, Galina."

Galina's smile did not change, but her eyes glittered. She was too hard for logic—she believed what she believed whatever the evidence—yet Sarene had always believed great fires roared somewhere in Galina's depths. "What I believe," Galina said, "is that Moiraine *is* the so-called Green. What better way to hide from arrests than to die and reappear as someone else of another Ajah? I have even heard that this Green is short; we all know Moiraine is far from a tall woman." Erian had sat up stony straight, her brown eyes large smoldering coals of outrage. "When we lay hands on this *Green* sister," Galina told her, "I propose that we give her into your charge for the journey back to the Tower." Erian nodded sharply, but the heat did not fade from her eyes.

Sarene felt stunned. Moiraine? Claim another Ajah than her own? Surely not. Sarene had never married—it was illogical to believe two people could remain compatible for a lifetime—but the only thing she could compare that to was sleeping with another woman's husband. But it was the charge that stunned her, not the possibility that it might be true. She was about to point out that there were many short women in the world, and that shortness was relative, when Coiren spoke in that billowing voice.

"Sarene, you must take your turn again. We must be prepared, whatever happens."

“I do not like it,” Erian said firmly. “It does be like preparing for failure.”

“It is only logical,” Sarene told her. “Dividing time into the smallest possible increments, it is impossible to say with any true certainty what will happen between one and the next. Since chasing al’Thor to Caemlyn might mean we would arrive to find that he has come here, we remain here with as much certainty as we can have that he will eventually return, yet that could be tomorrow or a month from now. Any single event in any hour of that wait, or any combination of events, could leave us with no alternative. Thus, preparation is logical.”

“Very nicely explained,” Erian said dryly. She had no head for logic; sometimes Sarene thought that beautiful women did not, though there was no logic in the connection that she could see.

“We have as much time as we need,” Coiren pronounced. When she was not making a speech, she made pronouncements. “Beldeine arrived today and took a room near the river, but Mayam is not due for two days. We must take care, and that gives us time.”

“I still do not like preparing for failure,” Erian murmured into her teacup.

“I will not take it amiss,” Galina said, “if we find time to take Moiraine to justice. We have waited this long; there is not that much hurry with al’Thor.”

Sarene sighed. They did very well at the things they did, but she could not understand it; there was barely a logical bone in one of them.

Retiring upstairs to her chambers, she seated herself in front of the cold fireplace and began to channel. Could this Rand al’Thor really have rediscovered how to Travel? It surpassed belief, yet it was the only explanation. What sort of man was he? That she would discover when she met him, not before. Filled with *saidar* nearly to the point where sweetness became pain, she began running through novice exercises. They were as good as anything. Preparation was only logical.

* * *

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CHAPTER 26

Connecting Lines

Thunder rolled across the low, brown grassland hills in a continuous peal, though the sky held not a cloud, only the burning sun, still with a way to climb. On a hilltop, Rand held the reins and the Dragon Scepter on the pommel of his saddle and waited. The thunder swelled. It was hard not to look over his shoulder constantly, south toward Alanna. She had bruised her heel this morning and scraped her hand, and she was in a temper. How and what for, he had no notion; he had no real notion how he could be so sure. The thunder crested.

The Saldaean horsemen appeared over the next rise, three abreast at a dead gallop in a long snake that kept coming, down the slope into the broad sweep between the hills. Nine thousand men made a very long snake. At the foot of the slope they divided, the center column coming on while the others peeled off to right and left, each column dividing again and again until they rode by hundreds, swooping past one another. Riders began standing on their saddles, sometimes on feet, sometimes on hands. Others swung impossibly low to slap the ground on first one side of their galloping mounts, then the other. Men left their saddles entirely to crawl underneath speeding horses, or dropped to the ground to run a pace beside the animal before leaping back into the saddle, then dropping on the other side to repeat the performance.

Rand lifted his reins and heeled Jeade'en. As the dapple moved, so did the Aiel surrounding him. This morning the men were Mountain Dancers, *Hama N'dore*, more than half wearing the headband of *siswai'aman*. Caldin, graying and leathery, had tried to get Rand to let him bring more than twenty, what with so many armed wetlanders about; none of the Aiel wasted any time with disparaging looks for Rand's sword. Nandera spent more time watching the two hundred-odd women who trailed after them on horses; she seemed to find more threat in the Saldaean ladies and officers' wives than in the soldiers, and having met some of the Saldaean women, Rand was not ready to argue. Sulin would probably have agreed. It occurred to him that he had not seen Sulin in. . . . Not since returning from Shadar Logoth. Eight days. He wondered if he had done something to offend her.

This was no time to worry about Sulin or *ji'e'toh*. He circled around the valley until he reached the hilltop over which the Saldaeans had first appeared to him. Bashere himself rode about down there examining first one group as they went through their paces, then another; almost coincidentally, he just happened to do this standing up on his saddle.

For an instant Rand seized *saidin*, and released it a heartbeat later. With his vision enhanced, it had not been difficult to see the two white stones lying near the foot of the slope, right where Bashere had placed them personally last night, four paces apart. With luck, no one had seen him. With luck, no one would ask too many questions about this morning. Below, some men were riding two horses now, a foot on each saddle, still at a dead gallop. Others had a man on their shoulders, sometimes in a handstand.

He looked around at the sound of a horse walking toward him. Deira ni Ghaline t'Bashere rode through the Aiel with seeming unconcern; armed only with a small knife at her silver belt, in a riding dress of gray silk embroidered in silver down the sleeves and on the high neck, she appeared to be daring them to attack her. As tall as many of the Maidens, nearly a hand taller than her husband, she was a big woman. Not stout, nor even plump; simply big. She had wings of white in her black hair, and her dark tilted eyes were fixed on Rand. He suspected she was a beautiful woman when his presence did not turn her face to granite.

"Is my husband . . . *amusing* you?" She never gave Rand a title, never used his name.

He looked at the other Saldaean women. They watched him like a troop of cavalry ready to charge, faces also granite, tilted eyes icy. All they awaited was Deira's command. He could well believe the stories of Saldaean women taking up fallen husbands' swords and leading their men back into battle. Being pleasant had gotten him exactly nowhere with Bashere's wife; Bashere himself only shrugged and said she was a difficult woman at times, all the while grinning with what could only be pride.

“Tell Lord Bashere I am pleased,” he said. Turning Jeade’en, he started back toward Caemlyn. The Saldaean women’s eyes seemed to press against his back.

Lews Therin was giggling; that was the only word for it. *Never prod at a woman unless you must. She will kill you faster than a man and for less reason, even if she weeps over it after.*

Are you really there? Rand demanded. *Is there more to you than a voice?* Only that soft, mad laughter answered.

He stewed over Lews Therin all the way back to Caemlyn, and even after they had ridden past one of the long markets of tile roofs lining the approaches to the gates and into the New City. He worried over going mad—not just the fact of it, though that was bad enough; if he went insane, how could he do what he had to do?—but he had seen no sign of it. But then, if his mind did crack, would he know it? He had never seen a madman. All he had to go by was Lews Therin maundering in his head. Did all men go mad alike? Would he end like that, laughing and weeping over things no one else saw or knew? He knew he had a chance to live, if a seemingly impossible one. *If you would live, you must die;* that was one of three things he knew must be true, told to him inside a *ter’angreal* where the answers were always true if apparently never easy to understand. But to live like that. . . . He was not sure he would not rather die.

The crowds in the New City gave way before more than forty Aiel, and a handful recognized the Dragon Reborn as well. Maybe more did, but it was a ragged handful of cheers that went up as he rode by. “The Light shine on the Dragon Reborn!” and “The glory of the Light for the Dragon Reborn!” and “The Dragon Reborn, King of Andor!”

That last one jolted him whenever he heard it, and he heard it more than once. He had to find Elayne. He could feel his teeth grinding. He could not look at the people in the street; he wanted to smash them to their knees, roar at them that Elayne was their queen. Trying not to hear, he studied the sky, the rooftops, anything but the crowd. And that was why he saw the man in a white cloak rise up on a red-tiled rooftop and lift a crossbow.

Everything happened in heartbeats. Rand seized *saidin* and channeled as the bolt flew toward him; it struck Air, a silvery blue mass hanging above the street, with a clang as of metal against metal. A ball of fire leaped from Rand’s hand, struck the crossbowman in the chest as the bolt was bouncing away from the shield of Air. Flames engulfed the man, and he fell shrieking from the rooftop. And someone leaped into Rand, carrying him out of the saddle.

He hit the paving stones hard with a weight atop him; breath and *saidin* left him together. Struggling for air, he wrestled with the weight, wrenched it off—and found himself holding Desora by the arms. She smiled at him, a beautiful smile; then her head slumped sideways. Sightless blue eyes stared at him, already glazing. The crossbow bolt standing out from her ribs pressed against his wrist. Why had she ever wanted to hide such a beautiful smile?

Hands seized him, hauled him to his feet; Maidens and Mountain Dancers pushed him to the side of the street, close against the front of a tinsmith's shop, and formed a tight, veiled circle around him, horn bows in hand, eyes searching street and rooftops. Shouts and screams rang everywhere, but the street was already clear for better than fifty paces either way, and then it was a milling mass of people struggling to get away. The street was clear except for bodies. Desora, and six others, three of them Aiel. One more a Maiden, he thought. It was hard to be sure from a distance with someone lying crumpled like a heap of rags.

Rand moved, and the Aiel around him pressed together more tightly, a wall of flesh. "These places are rabbit warrens," Nandera said conversationally, without letting her eyes stop their search above her veil. "If you join the dance in there, you can take a blade in the back before you know there is danger."

Caldin nodded. "This reminds me of a time near Sedar Cut, when—We have a prisoner, at least." Some of his *Hama N'dore* had appeared from a tavern across the street, pushing ahead of them a man with his arms and elbows bound behind him. He continued to struggle until they shoved him to his knees on the paving stone and laid spearpoints against his throat. "Perhaps he will tell us who commanded this." Caldin sounded as though he did not doubt it in the least.

A moment later Maidens came out of another building with a second bound man who was limping, his face covered in blood. In short order four men knelt in the street under Aiel guard. Finally the semicircle hemming Rand loosened.

The four were hard-faced men all, though the blood-smeared fellow swayed and rolled his eyes at the Aiel. Two others wore sullen defiance, the fourth a sneer.

Rand's hands twitched. "Are you sure they were part of it?" He could not believe how soft his voice sounded, how steady. Balefire would solve everything. *Not balefire,* Lews Therin panted at him. *Never again.* "Are you sure?"

"They were," a Maiden said; he could not see who, behind her veil. "Those we killed all wore this." She tugged a cloak free from behind the bloodied man's bound arms. A worn white cloak, grimy and stained, with a golden sunburst embroidered on the chest. The other three had them too.

"These were set to watch," a broad Mountain Dancer added, "and report if the attack went badly for the others." He laughed, a short bark. "Whoever sent them did not know how badly it would go."

"None of these men fired a crossbow?" Rand asked. Balefire. *No*, Lews Therin shrieked in the distance. The Aiel exchanged glances, shook *shoufa*-wrapped heads. "Hang them," Rand said. The bloody-faced man nearly collapsed. Rand seized him in flows of Air, dragged him to his feet. It was the first he realized that he held *saidin.* He welcomed the struggle for survival; he even welcomed the taint, staining his bones like acid slime. It made him less aware of things he would rather not remember, emotions he would rather not have. "What is your name?"

"F-Faral, m-my Lord. D-Dimir Faral." Eyes almost popping out of his head stared at Rand through that mask of blood. "P-Please don't h-hang me, m-my Lord. I'll w-walk in the Light, I s-swear!"

"You are a very lucky man, Dimir Faral." Rand's voice sounded as distant in his own ears as Lews Therin's cries. "You are going to watch your friends hang." Faral began to weep. "Then you'll be given a horse, and you will go tell Pedron Niall that one day I will hang him too for what happened here." When he loosed the flows of Air, Faral collapsed in a heap, moaning that he would ride to Amador without stopping. The three who were to die stared contemptuously at the sobbing man. One of them spat at him.

Rand put them out of his mind. Niall was the only one he had to remember. There was something else he had to do yet. He pushed away *saidin*, went through the struggle to escape it without being obliterated, the struggle to make himself release it. For what he had to do, he wanted no screen between him and his emotions.

A Maiden was straightening Desora's body; she had raised Desora's veil. She reached to stop him when he touched that piece of black *algode*, then hesitated, looking at his face, and settled back on her haunches.

Lifting the veil, he memorized Desora's face. She looked as if she were sleeping now. Desora, of the Musara sept of the Reyn Aiel. So many names. Liah, of the Cosaida Chareen, and Dailin, of the Nine Valleys Taardad, and Lamelle, of the Smoke Water Miagoma, and. . . . So many. Sometimes he ran down that list name by name. There was one name in it he had not added. Ilyena Therin Moerelle. He did not know how Lews Therin had put it there, but he would not have erased it if he knew how.

It was both an effort and a relief to turn away from Desora, a pure relief to find that what he had thought was a second dead Maiden was instead a man, short for an Aiel man. He hurt for the men who died for him, but with them he could remember an old saying. *"Let the dead rest, and care for the living."* Not easily, but he could make himself do it. He could not even make himself summon the words when it was a woman who had died.

Skirts spread on the paving stones caught his eye. Not only Aiel had died.

She had taken a crossbow bolt squarely between the shoulder blades. Almost no blood stained the back of her dress; it had been quick, a small mercy. Kneeling, he turned her over as gently as he could; the other end of the bolt stood out from her chest. It was a square face, a woman in her middle years, a touch of gray in her hair. Her dark eyes were open wide; she looked surprised. He did not know her name, but he memorized her face. She had died for being on the same street with him.

He caught at Nandera's arm, and she shook his hand free, not wanting the use of her bow impaired, but she did look at him. "Find this woman's family and see they have whatever they need. Gold. . . ." It was not enough. What they needed was a wife back, a mother back; he could not give them that. "See to them," he said. "And find out her name."

Nandera stretched a hand toward him, then put it back to her bow. When he stood, the Maidens were watching him. Oh, they were watching everything as usual, but those veiled faces turned toward him a little more often. Sulin knew how he felt, if she did not know about the list, but he had no idea whether she had told the others. If she had, he had no idea how they felt about it.

Walking back to where he had fallen, he picked up the tasseled Dragon Scepter. Bending was an effort, and the short length of spear felt heavy. Jeade'en had not gone far once his saddle was empty; the horse was well trained. Rand climbed onto the dapple's back. "I've done as much as I can here," he said—let them think whatever they wanted—and dug in his heels.

If he could not outdistance memory, he outdistanced the Aiel. For a time at least. He had handed Jeade'en over to a stableman and was inside the Palace before Nandera and Caldin caught up to him, with about two-thirds the number of Maidens and Mountain Dancers they had had. Some had been left to care for the dead. Caldin looked sourly irritated. From the heat in Nandera's eyes, Rand thought he should be glad she was not veiled.

Before she could speak, Mistress Harfor approached Rand and curtsied deeply. "My Lord Dragon," she said in a deep, strong voice, "there is a petition for audience with you from the Wavemistress of Clan Catelar, of the Atha'an Miere."

If the fine cut of Reene's red-and-white dress was not enough to say that "first maid" was a misnomer, her manner certainly was. A slightly plump woman with graying hair and a long chin, she looked Rand right in the eye, tilting her head back to manage it, and somehow combined a proper degree of deference, an utter lack of obsequiousness, and an aloofness most noblewomen could not attain. Like Halwin Norry, she had stayed when most others fled, though Rand half-suspected that her motive had been to defend and preserve the Palace from invaders. He would not have been surprised to learn that she periodically searched his chambers for hidden Palace valuables. He would not have been surprised to learn she tried to search the Aiel.

"Sea Folk?" he said. "What do they want?"

She gave him a patient look, trying to make allowances. Very plainly trying. "The petition does not say, my Lord Dragon."

If Moiraine had known anything about the Sea Folk, she had not made it part of his education, but from Reene's attitude, this woman was important. A Wavemistress certainly sounded important. That would mean the Grand Hall. He had not been there since returning from Cairhien. Not that he had any reason to avoid the throne room; there just had been no need to go there. "This afternoon," he said slowly. "Tell her I will see her in the midafternoon. You've given her good apartments? And her retinue?" He doubted anyone with so grand a title traveled alone.

"She refused them; they have taken rooms at The Ball and Hoop." Her mouth flattened slightly; apparently, however lofty a Wavemistress, that was not proper in Reene Harfor's eyes. "They were very dusty and travel-sore, hardly able to stand. They came by horse, not coach, and I do not believe they are used to horses." She blinked as if surprised to have unbent that much, and regained her reserve like donning a cloak. "Someone else wishes to see you, my Lord Dragon." Her tone picked up the faintest hint of distaste. "The Lady Elenia."

Rand almost grimaced himself. No doubt Elenia had another lecture prepared on her claims to the Lion Throne; so far he had managed not to hear more than one word in three. She would be easy enough to turn down. Still, he really should know something of Andor's history, and no one handy knew more of it than Elenia Sarand. "Send her to me in my rooms, please."

"Do you really mean the Daughter-Heir to have the throne?" Reene's tone was not harsh, but all deference was gone. Her face had not changed, yet Rand was sure that with a wrong answer she would shout "For Elayne and the White Lion!" and try to bash his brains in, Aiel or no Aiel.

"I do," he sighed. "The Lion Throne is Elayne's. By the Light and my hope of rebirth and salvation, it is."

Reene studied him a moment, then spread her skirts in another deep curtsy. "I will send her to you, my Lord Dragon." Her back was stiff as she glided away, but it always was; there were no telling whether she believed a word.

"A crafty enemy," Caldin said heatedly before Reene had gone five paces, "will set a weak ambush you are meant to break through. Confident because you have dealt with the threat, your guard relaxed, you walk into the second, stronger ambush."

Right on top of Caldin, Nandera said in a cold voice, "Young men can be impetuous, young men can be rash, young men can be fools, but the *Car'a'carn* cannot let himself be a young man."

Rand glanced over his shoulder before starting off, just long enough to say, "We're back inside the Palace now. Choose your two." It was little surprise that Nandera and Caldin chose themselves, and none at all that they strode after him wrapped in a hard silence.

At the door to his apartments, he told them to send Elenia in when she came and left them in the corridor. There was plum punch in a silver-chased pitcher waiting, but he did not touch it. Instead he stood staring at it, trying to plan out what he was going to say, until he realized what he was doing and grunted in surprise. What was there to plan?

A tap at the door announced honey-haired Elenia, who swept a curtsy in a dress worked with golden roses. On any other woman, Rand would have thought they were just roses; on Elenia, they had to stand for the Rose Crown. “My Lord Dragon is most gracious to receive me.”

“I want to ask you some things about Andor’s history,” Rand said. “Will you take plum punch?”

Elenia’s eyes widened in delight before she could stop them. Undoubtedly she had planned how to work Rand around to this in order to lead into her claims, and here it was handed to her. A smile bloomed on her foxlike face. “May I have the honor of pouring for my Lord Dragon?” she said, not waiting for him to wave his assent. She was so pleased with the turn of events that he almost expected her to press him into a chair and urge him to put his feet up. “Upon what point of history may I shed light?”

“A general sort of . . .” Rand frowned; that would give the excuse to be listing her ancestry in detail inside of two sentences “. . . that is, how Souran Maravaile came to bring his wife here. Was he from Caemlyn?”

“Ishara brought Souran, my Lord Dragon.” Elenia’s smile turned briefly indulgent. “Ishara’s mother was Endara Casalain, who was Artur Hawkwing’s governor here then—the province was called Andor—and also the granddaughter to Joal Ramedar, the last King of Aldeshar. Souran was only . . . only a general”—she had been going to say a commoner; he would have wagered on it—“though Hawkwing’s finest, of course. Endara resigned her. warrant and knelt to Ishara as Queen.” Somehow, Rand did not believe it had happened quite that way, or so smoothly. “They were the worst of times, of course, quite as bad as the Trolloc Wars, I am sure. With Hawkwing dead, every noble thought to become High King. Or High Queen. Ishara knew that no one would be able to take it all, though; there were too many factions, and alliances broke as soon as made. She convinced Souran to raise the siege of Tar Valon, and brought him and as much of his army as he could hold together here.”

“Souran Maravaile was the one besieging Tar Valon?” Rand said, startled. Artur Hawkwing had laid a twenty-year siege against Tar Valon, and put a price on the head of every Aes Sedai.

“The final year of it,” she said, a touch impatiently, “as nearly as the histories record.” It was plain she had little real interest in Souran except as Ishara’s husband. “Ishara was wise. She promised the Aes Sedai that her eldest daughter would be sent to study in the White Tower, thus gaining the

Tower's backing and an Aes Sedai advisor named Ballair, the first ruler to do so. Others did follow, of course, but they still wanted Hawkwing's throne." She had the bit in her teeth now, face animated, goblet forgotten, gesturing With her free hand. Words bubbled out. "A full generation passed before that idea died, although Narasim Bhuran did try as late as the last ten years of the War of the Hundred Years—a dismal failure that ended with his head on a pike after a year—and Esmara Getares' effort some thirty years earlier gained considerable ground before she tried to conquer Andor and spent the last twelve years of her life as the *guest* of Queen Telaisien. Esmara was assassinated in the end, though there is no record of why anyone would want her dead once Telaisien broke her power. You see, the Queens who came after Ishara, from Alesinde to Lyndelle, followed what she had begun, and not only in sending a daughter to the Tower. Ishara had Souran secure the land around Caemlyn first, only a few villages in the beginning, then slowly expanded her control. Why, it took five years for her sway to reach the River Erinin. But the land that Andor's Queens held was solidly theirs when most others who called themselves kings or queens were still more interested in gaining hew lands than in solidifying what they already had."

She paused for breath, and Rand leaped in quickly. Elenia spoke of these people as if she knew them personally, but his head was spinning with names he had never heard before. "Why is there no House Maravaile?"

"None of Ishara's sons lived past twenty." Elenia shrugged and sipped her punch; the subject did not interest her. But it did give her a new topic. "Nine queens reigned over the course of the War of the Hundred Years, and none had a son live beyond twenty-three. The battles were constant, and Andor was pressed from every side. Why, in Maragaine's reign, four kings brought armies against her—there is a town named for the battle, on the site. The kings were—"

"But all the queens have been descendants of Souran and Ishara?" Rand put in quickly. The woman would give him a day-by-day account if he let her. Sitting, he motioned her to take a chair.

"Yes," she said reluctantly. Probably reluctant to include Souran. But she brightened immediately. "You see, it is a matter of how much of Ishara's blood one has. How many lines connect you to her, and in what degree. In my case—"

"It isn't easy for me to understand. For example, take Tigraine and Morgase. Morgase had the best claim to succeed Tigraine. I suppose that means Morgase and Tigraine were closely related?"

"They were cousins." Elenia made an effort to hide her irritation over being interrupted so often, especially now that she was so close to the heart of what she wanted to say, but her mouth still narrowed. She looked like a fox that wanted to bite, but the chicken kept slipping just out of reach.

"I see." Cousins. Rand drank deeply, half-emptying his goblet.

"We are all cousins. All the Houses." His silence seemed to invigorate her. Her smile returned. "With marriages over a thousand years, there is not a House without some drop of Ishara's blood. But the degree is what is important, that and the number of connecting lines. In my case—"

Rand blinked. "You're *all* cousins? *All* of you? That doesn't seem poss—" He leaned forward intently. "Elenia, if Morgase and Tigraine had been . . . merchants, or farmers . . . how closely would they have been related?"

"Farmers?" she exclaimed, staring at him. "My Lord Dragon, what a peculiar—" The blood drained slowly from her face; he had been a farmer, after all. She wet her lips, a nervous flicker of the tongue. "I suppose . . . I should have to think. Farmers. I suppose that means imagining all the Houses as farmers." A nervous titter broke from her before she drowned it in her punch. "Had they been farmers, I don't think anyone would consider them related at all. All the connections are too far back. But they were not, my Lord Dragon. . . ."

He stopped listening with more than half an ear and sank back in his chair. Not related.

". . . have thirty-one lines to Ishara, while Dyelin has only thirty, and. . . ."

Why did he feel so relaxed suddenly? Knots had vanished from his muscles that he had not even known were there until they went.

". . . if I may say so, my Lord Dragon."

"What? Forgive me. My mind wandered for a moment—the problems of. . . . I missed the last thing you said." There had been something in it that had tugged at his ear, though.

Elenia wore the obsequious, flattering smile that looked so strange on her face. "Why, I was just saying that you yourself bear some resemblance to Tigraine, my Lord Dragon. You might even have some touch of Ishara's blood your—" She cut off with a squeak, and he realized he was on his feet.

“I . . . feel a little tired.” He tried to make his voice normal, but it sounded as distant as if he were deep in the Void. “If you would leave me, please.”

He did not know how his face looked, but Elenia bounced out of her chair, hurried to set her goblet on the table. She was trembling, and if her face had been bloodless before, now it looked like snow. Dropping a curtsy deep enough for a scullery maid caught stealing, she hurried toward the door, each step faster than the last, all the while watching him over her shoulder, until she tore the door open and the sound of running slippers receded down the hall. Nandera put her head in, checking on him, before pulling the door shut.

For a long time Rand stood staring at nothing. No wonder those ancient queens had been staring at him; they knew what he was thinking when he did not himself. That sudden worm of worry that had gnawed at him unseen since he discovered his mother’s real name. But Tigraine had not been related to Morgase. His mother had not been related to Elayne’s mother. He was not related to. . . .

“You’re worse than a lecher,” he said aloud, bitterly. “You’re a fool and a. . . .” He wished Lews Therin would speak, so he could say to himself, *That is a madman; I am sane.* Was it those dead rulers of Andor he felt staring at him, or was it Alanna? Striding to the door, he jerked it open. Nandera and Caldin were sitting on their heels beneath a tapestry of brightly colored birds. “Assemble your people,” he told them. “I’m going to Cairhien. Please don’t tell Aviendha.”

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CHAPTER 27

Gifts

Walking back out to the great sprawl of tents, Egwene tried to get a grip on herself, but she was not sure her feet actually touched the ground. Well, she knew they did. They added their small portion to the waves of dust swept along by the hot gusting wind; coughing, she wished Wise Ones wore veils. A shawl wrapped around your head was not the same, and it was like wearing a sweat tent besides. Yet she felt as if her feet trod on air. Her brain seemed to be spinning, and not from the heat.

At first she had thought Gawyn was not going to meet her, but then he was suddenly just there as she walked through the crowds. They had spent the entire morning in the private dining room of The Long Man, holding hands and talking over tea. She was absolutely brazen, kissing him as soon as the door closed, before he so much as made a move to kiss her, even sitting on his knee once, though that had not lasted long. It made her start thinking of his dreams, about maybe slipping back into them again, about things no decent woman should be thinking at all! Not an unmarried woman, anyway. She had bounded up like a startled doe, startling him in turn.

Hastily she looked around. The tents were still half a mile off, and there was not a living soul closer. If there had been, they could not have seen her blushes. Realizing she was grinning idiotically behind the shawl, she wiped it away. Light, she had to keep a rein on herself. Forget the feel of Gawyn’s strong arms and remember why they had had so much time at The Long Man.

Threading through the crowd, she peered about, looking for Gawyn and trying with some difficulty to pretend casualness; she did not want him to think her eager, after all. Suddenly a man leaned toward her, whispering fiercely. “Follow me to The Long Man.”

She jumped; she could not help herself. It took her a moment to recognize Gawyn. He wore a plain brown coat, and a thin dustcloak hung *down his back, the hood up and nearly hiding his face. He was not the only one cloaked—any but Aiel who went beyond the city walls wore one—but not many had their hoods raised in that oven heat.*

She caught his sleeve firmly as he tried to slide away ahead of her. "What makes you think I'll just go off to an inn with you, Gawyn Trakand?" she demanded, eyes narrowing. She did keep her voice down, though; no need to attract eyes to an argument. "We were going to walk. You are taking entirely too much for granted if you think for a moment—"

Grimacing, he whispered at her hurriedly. "The women I came with are looking for someone. Someone like you. They say little in front of me, but I've caught a word here and there. Now follow me." Without a backward glance he strode off down the street, leaving her to follow with a lurching stomach.

The memory settled her feet firmly. The burned-over ground was nearly as hot as the city paving stones through the soles of her soft boots. She trudged through the dust, thinking furiously. Gawyn had not known much more than he told in that first exchange. He argued that it could not be her they were looking for, that she just had to be careful of her channeling and stay out of sight as much as possible. Only, he had not looked very convinced himself, not wearing a disguise. She refrained from mentioning his clothes; he was so worried that if these Aes Sedai found her she would be in all sorts of troubles, worried that he would lead them to her, so plainly unwilling to stop seeing her even if he did suggest it himself. And so convinced that what she needed was to sneak somehow back to Tar Valon and into the Tower. That, or to make her peace with Coiren and the others and return with them. Light, but she should have been angry at him, thinking he knew what was best for her better than she did, but for some reason it made her want to smile indulgently even now. For some reason she just could not think straight about him, and he seemed to creep into whatever thought she had.

Chewing her lip, she focused on the real problem. The Tower Aes Sedai. If only she could bring herself to question Gawyn; it would not be betraying him to ask just a few small questions, their Ajahs, where they went, or. . . . No! She had made that promise to herself, but breaking it would dishonor him. No questions. Only what he volunteered.

Whatever he said, she had no reason to think they were looking for Egwene al'Vere. And, she admitted reluctantly, no real reason to think they were not, only a lot of suppositions and hopes. Just because a Tower agent would not recognize Egwene al'Vere in an Aiel woman did not say that the agent had not heard the name, even heard of Egwene Sedai of the Green Ajah. She winced. From now on, she would have to be very careful in the city. More than careful.

She had reached the edge of the tents. The encampment sprawled over miles, covering the hills east of the city whether treed or not. Aiel moved among the low tents, but only a handful of *gai'shain* nearby. None of the Wise Ones were in sight. She had broken a promise to them. To Amys, really, but to all of them. Necessity seemed an increasingly thin reed to support her deception.

"Join us, Egwene," a woman's voice called. Even with her head covered, Egwene was not hard to pick out unless surrounded by girls not yet full grown. Surandha, Sorilea's apprentice, had poked her dark golden head out of a tent and was waving to her. "The Wise Ones are meeting back among the tents, all of them, and they've given us all the day for ourselves. The entire day." That was a luxury seldom offered, and not one Egwene would pass up.

Inside, women lay sprawled on cushions reading by oil lamps—the tent was closed against dust, and thus against light as well—or sat sewing or knitting or doing embroidery. Two were playing cat's cradle. A low murmur of conversation filled the tent, and several smiled greetings. They were not all apprentices—two mothers and several first-sisters had come to visit—and the older women wore as much jewelry as any Wise One. Everyone had their blouses half-unlaced and shawls wrapped around their waists, though the trapped heat did not seem to bother them.

A *gai'shain* moved about refilling teacups. Something in the way he moved said he was a craftsman, not *algai'd'siswai*; he was still hard of face, yet a trifle softer by comparison, and maintaining a meek manner seemed less of a struggle. He wore one of those headbands naming him *siswai'aman.* None of the women gave it a second glance, though *gai'shain* were not supposed to wear anything but white.

Egwene tied her shawl around her waist and gratefully accepted water to wash her face and hands, then undid a few of her blouse laces and took a tasseled red cushion between Surandha and Estair, Aeron's red-haired apprentice. "What are the Wise Ones meeting about?" Her mind was not on the Wise Ones. She had no intention of avoiding the city entirely—she had agreed to look in at The Long Man every morning to see whether Gawyn was there, though the smirk on the stout innkeeper's face made her cheeks grow warm; the Light only knew what that woman thought!—but there definitely would be no more attempts to listen in at Lady Arilyn's mansion. After leaving Gawyn she had gone near enough to sense the channeling continuing inside, but left after one quick peek around the corner. Just standing that close produced the uneasy feeling that Nesune was going to pop up behind her. "Does anyone know?"

"Your sisters, of course," Surandha laughed. She was a handsome woman, with large blue eyes, and laughter made her beautiful. Some five years older than Egwene, she could channel as strongly as many Aes Sedai and was eagerly awaiting the call to a hold of her own. In the meanwhile, of course, she jumped when Sorilea *thought* jump. "What else would make them leap as if they had sat on *segade* spines?"

"We should send Sorilea to talk with them," Egwene said, taking a green-striped cup of tea from the *gai'shain*. While telling her how his Younglings were crowded into all the bedrooms not taken by the Aes Sedai, and some into the stables, Gawyn had let slip that there was no room for even another scullery maid, and that the Aes Sedai were not preparing any. It was good news. "Sorilea could make any number of Aes Sedai sit up straight." Surandha's head went back in gales of laughter.

Estair's laugh was faint, and more than a touch scandalized. A slender young woman with serious gray eyes, she always behaved as if a Wise One was watching her. It never ceased to amaze Egwene that Sorilea should have an apprentice who was full of fun, while Aeron, pleasant and smiling, with never a cross word, had one who seemed to hunt for rules to obey. "I believe it is the *Car'a'carn*," Estair said in the gravest of tones.

"Why?" Egwene asked absently. She was just going to have to avoid the city. Except for Gawyn, of course; embarrassing as it might be to admit, she would not forgo meeting him for anything less than the certainty of Nesune waiting in The Long Man. That meant back to walking around the city walls for exercise, in all that dust. This morning had been an exception, but she was not going to give the Wise Ones any excuse to put off her return to *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Tonight they would meet the Salidar Aes Sedai alone, but in seven nights, she would be with them. "What now?"

"You have not heard?" Surandha exclaimed.

In two or three days she could approach Nynaeve and Elayne, or speak to them in their dreams again. Try to speak to them, anyway; you could never be absolutely certain the other person knew you were more than a dream, not unless they were used to communicating that way, which Nynaeve and Elayne certainly were not. She had only spoken to them that way once before. In any case, the thought of approaching them at all still made her vaguely uneasy. She had had another hazy almost nightmare about it; every time one of them said a word, they tripped and fell on their faces or dropped a cup or plate or knocked over a vase, always something that shattered on impact. Since interpreting the dream about Gawyn becoming her Warder she had been making an effort at all of them. To no real effect so far, but she was sure that one had meaning. Maybe it was best to wait on the next meeting to speak to them. Besides, there was always the chance of running into Gawyn's dreams again, being drawn in. Just the thought made her cheeks color.

"The *Car'a'carn* has returned," Estair said. "He is to meet your sisters this afternoon."

All thoughts of Gawyn and dreams gone, Egwene frowned into her teacup. Twice inside ten days. It was unusual for him to come back so soon. Why had he? Had he learned of the Tower Aes Sedai somehow? How? And as always, his trips themselves triggered their own question. *How* did he do it?

"How does he do what?" Estair asked, and Egwene blinked, startled that she had spoken aloud.

"How does he upset my stomach so easily?"

Surandha shook her head in commiseration, but she grinned too. "He is a man, Egwene."

"He is the *Car'a'carn,*" Estair said with heavy emphasis, and more than a touch of reverence. Egwene would not be entirely surprised to see her wind that fool strip of cloth around her head.

Surandha immediately tackled Estair over how she was ever going to deal with a hold chief, much less a sept or clan chief, if she did not realize that a man did not stop being a man just because he led, while Estair maintained stoutly that the *Car'a'carn* was different. One of the older women, Mera, who had come to see her daughter, leaned toward them and said that the way to handle any chief—hold, sept, clan *or* the *Car'a'carn*—was the same as the way to handle a husband, which brought a laugh from

Baerin, also there to visit a daughter, and a comment that that would be a good way to have a roofmistress lay her knife at your feet, a declaration of feud. Baerin had been a Maiden before she married, but anyone could declare a feud with anyone other than a Wise One or a blacksmith. Before the words were well out of Mera's mouth everybody except the *gai'shain* joined in, overwhelming poor Estair—the *Car'a'carn* was a chief among chiefs, no more; that was certain—but arguing whether it was better to approach a chief directly or through his roofmistress.

Egwene paid little attention. Surely Rand would not do anything foolish. He had been properly doubtful concerning Elaida's letter, yet he believed Alviarin's, which was not only more cordial, but downright fawning. He thought he had friends, even followers, in the Tower. She did not. Three Oaths or no Three Oaths, she was convinced Elaida and Alviarin had worked up that second letter between them, with all its ridiculous talk of "kneeling in his radiance." It was all a ploy to get him into the Tower.

Looking at her hands regretfully, she sighed and set down her cup. It was snatched up by the *gai'shain* before her hand was well away.

"I must go," she told the two apprentices. "There's something I realize I have to do." Surandha and Estair made noises about going with her—well, more than noises; if Aiel said something, they meant it—but they were caught up in the discussion and did not argue when she insisted they stay. Wrapping her shawl around her head again and leaving the rising voices behind—Mera was telling Estair in no uncertain tones that she might be a Wise One eventually, but until she was she could listen to a woman who had managed a husband and raised three daughters and two sons without a sister-wife to help—Egwene ducked back into the windblown dust.

In the city, she tried to creep through the crowded streets without appearing to creep, tried to look every way while seeming to watch only where she was going. The chances of walking into Nesune were small, but. . . . Ahead of her two women in sober dresses and prim aprons sidestepped to go around one another, but both moved the same way, and they came nose to nose. Murmured apologies, and each woman stepped aside again. In the same direction. More apologies, and as if dancing, they moved together once more. As Egwene passed them, they were still stepping from side to side in perfect unison, faces beginning to redden, apologies swallowed behind compressed lips. How long it might go on she had no idea, but it was well to remember that Rand was in the city. Light, when he was around, it would not be beyond belief for her to walk right up on all six Aes Sedai just as a gust of wind ripped the shawl from around her head and three people shouted her name and called her Aes Sedai. With him around, it would not be entirely beyond belief to walk into Elaida.

She hurried on, increasingly uneasy about being caught in one of his *ta'veren* swirls, increasingly wild-eyed. Fortunately, the sight of a wild-eyed Aiel with her face hidden—what did they know of the difference between a shawl and a veil?—made people move out of her way, which allowed her to speed along at a near trot, but she did not draw a peaceful breath until she slipped into the Sun Palace by a small servant's door in the rear.

A strong smell of cooking hung in the narrow hallway, and liveried men and women scurried back and forth. Others, taking their ease in their shirtsleeves or flapping aprons to make a little breeze, stared at her in astonishment. Likely no one except other servants came this close to the kitchens from one year to the next. Certainly not an Aiel. They looked as though they expected her to produce a spear from under her skirts.

She pointed a finger at a round little man who was wiping his neck with a kerchief. "Do you know where Rand al'Thor is?"

He gave a start, rolling his eyes toward his companions, who were quickly drifting away. His feet shifted, wanting very much to follow. "The Lord Dragon, uh . . . Mistress? In his chambers? I suppose, anyway." He began to shuffle sideways, bowing. "If Mistress . . . uh . . . if my Lady will forgive, I must get back to my—"

"You will take me there," she said firmly. She was not going to wander about this time.

One last eye-rolling after his vanished friends, a sigh quickly suppressed, a hurried frightened look to see whether he had offended, and he scampered off to fetch his coat. He was very efficient in the warren of palace corridors, hurrying along and bowing her way at every turn, but when at last he pointed with yet another bow to tall doors worked with gilded rising suns and guarded by a Maiden and an Aiel man, she felt a flash of contempt as she dismissed him. She could not understand why; he was simply doing what he was paid to do.

The Aiel man stood as she approached, a *very* tall man in his middle years, with bull-like chest and shoulders and cold gray eyes. Egwene did not know him, and he plainly meant to turn her away. Luckily she did know the Maiden.

“Let her pass, Marie,” Somara said, grinning. “This is Amys’ apprentice, hers and Bair’s and Melaine’s, the only apprentice I know to serve three Wise Ones. And from the look of her, they have sent her running with strong words for Rand al’Thor.”

“Running?” Marie’s chuckle softened neither face nor eyes. “Crawling, it looks.” He went back to watching the corridor.

Egwene did not have to ask what he meant. Digging her handkerchief out of her belt pouch, she wiped hurriedly at her face; no one could take you seriously dirty, and Rand had to listen. “Important words anyway, Somara. He is alone, I hope. The Aes Sedai haven’t come yet?” The handkerchief came away gray and went back into her pouch with a sigh.

Somara shook her head. “It is some good time before they are due. Will you tell him to be careful? I mean no disrespect to your sisters, but he will not look where he leaps. He is headstrong.”

“I will tell him.” Egwene could not help a grin. She had heard Somara talk this way before—with the sort of exasperated pride a mother might have for an overadventurous son of about ten—and a few other Maidens as well. It had to be some sort of Aiel joke, and even if she did not understand, she was in favor of anything that kept him from getting too big a head. “I’ll tell him to wash his ears, too.” Somara actually nodded before catching herself. Egwene drew a deep breath. “Somara, my sisters mustn’t find out I am here.” Marie glanced at her curiously, between studying every servant who entered the hallway. She had to be careful. “We are not close, Somara. In fact, you might say we are as far apart as sisters can be.”

“The worst bad blood is between first-sisters,” Somara said with a nod. “Go in. They will not hear your name from me, and if Marie’s tongue flaps, I will tie a knot in it.” Marie, head and shoulders taller and weighing at least twice as much, smiled slightly without looking at her.

The Maidens’ habit of sending her in without announcing her had led to embarrassments in the past, but this time Rand was not sitting in his bath. The apartments had obviously belonged to the king, and the anteroom was more a throne room in miniature. Miniature by comparison with the real throne room, anyway. The wavy rays of a golden sun a full span across, set in the polished stone floor, were the only curves in sight. Tall mirrors in severe gold frames lined the walls beneath broad straight bands of gilding, and the deep cornice was made of golden triangles overlapping like scales. Heavily gilded chairs to either side of the rising sun made two facing lines as stiff as their tall backs. Rand sat in another chair, with twice the gilding and a back twice as high, atop a small dais that was itself encrusted with gilt. In a red silk coat embroidered in gold and holding that piece of carved Seanchan spear in the crook of his arm, he wore a dark scowl. He looked a king, and one about to do murder.

She planted her fists on her hips. “Somara says you should wash your ears right this instant, young man,” she said, and his head jerked up.

Surprise, and a touch of outrage, lasted only a moment. With a grin he stepped down and tossed the spearhead onto the chair seat. “What under the Light have you been doing?” Striding the length of the chamber, he took her by the shoulders and turned her to face the nearest mirror.

She winced in spite of herself. She was a sight. The dust that had sifted through her shawl—no; mud, with the sweat added—made streaks across her cheeks and swirls across her forehead where she had tried to scrub it away.

“I’ll have Somara send for some water,” he said dryly. “Perhaps she’ll think it is for my ears.” That grin was insufferable!

“There is no need,” she told him with as much dignity as she could muster. She was not about to have him stand there watching her wash. Pulling out her already grimy handkerchief, she hurriedly tried to clean off the worst. “You’re meeting Coiren and the others soon. I don’t have to warn you they’re dangerous, do I?”

“I think you just did. They aren’t all coming. I said no more than three, so that is what they’re sending.” In the mirror his head tilted as if he were listening, and he nodded, voice dropping to a murmur. “Yes, I can handle three, if they aren’t too strong.” Abruptly he noticed her looking. “Of course, if one of them is Moghedien in a wig, or Semirhage, I may be in trouble.”

“Rand, you must take this seriously.” The handkerchief was not doing much good. With the greatest reluctance, she spat on it; there was simply no dignified way to spit on a handkerchief. “I know how strong you are, but they are Aes Sedai. You can’t behave like they’re women in from the country. Even if you think Alviarin *will* kneel at your feet, and all her friends with her, these were sent by Elaida. You can’t think she means anything but to try putting a leash on you. The short and simple of it is, you should send them away."

"And trust your hidden friends?" he asked softly. Much too softly.

There was nothing to be done with her face; she should have let him send for the water. There was no asking for it now, though, not after refusing. "You know you cannot trust Elaida," she said carefully, turning to him. Mindful of what had happened the last time, she did not even want to mention the Aes Sedai in Salidar. "You know that."

"I don't trust any Aes Sedai. They"—there was a hesitation in his voice, as if he had started to use another word, though she could not imagine what—"will try to use me, and I will try to use them. A pretty circle, don't you think?" If she had ever considered the possibility that he could be allowed near the Salidar Aes Sedai, his eyes disabused her of it, so hard, so cold, that she shivered inside.

Maybe if he got angry enough, if he struck enough sparks with Coiren that the embassy went back to the Tower empty-handed, on their own. . . . "If you think it is pretty, I suppose it is; you *are* the Dragon Reborn. Well, since you intend to go through with this, you might as well do it right. Just remember that they are Aes Sedai. Even a king listens to Aes Sedai with respect, even when he doesn't agree, and he'd set out for Tar Valon on the hour if summoned. Even the Tairen High Lords would, or Pedron Niall." The fool man grinned at her again, or at least showed his teeth; the rest of his face was as blank as river rock. "I hope you're paying attention. I am trying to help you." Just not the way he thought. "If you mean to use them, you can't make them bristle like doused cats. The Dragon Reborn won't impress them any more than he does me, with your fancy coats and your thrones and your fool scepter." She shot a scornful look at the tasseled spearhead; Light, the thing made her skin crawl! "They aren't going to fall on their knees when they see you, and it won't kill you when they don't. It will not kill you to be courteous, either. Bend your stubborn neck. It isn't groveling to show a proper deference, a little humbleness."

"Proper deference," he said thoughtfully. With a sigh, he shook his head ruefully, scrubbed a hand through his hair. "I suppose I can't talk to an Aes Sedai the same way I do to some lord who's been plotting behind my back. It's good advice, Egwene. I'll try. I will be humble as a mouse."

Trying not to look hurried, she rubbed at her face again with the handkerchief to hide her goggling. She was not really sure her eyes were popping, but she thought they must be. Her whole life, any time she pointed out that right was a better way, he stuck out his chin and insisted on left! Why did he have to choose now to listen?

Was there anything to the good as matters stood? At least it could not hurt him to display some respect. Even if they followed Elaida, the idea of anyone showing impertinence to any Aes Sedai really did upset her. Only she *wanted* him to be impertinent, to be as arrogant as he had ever been. There was no point in trying to undo it, not how; he was not slow-witted. Only exasperating.

"Was that all you came for?" he asked.

She could not go yet. There might be a chance to put things right, or at least make sure he was not wool-headed enough to go to Tar Valon. "Do you know there's a Sea Folk Wavemistress on a ship in the river? The *White Spray.*" That was as good a change of topic as any. "She came to see you, and I hear she is growing impatient." That was from Gawyn. Erian had had herself rowed out to discover what Sea Folk were doing so far inland, and was refused permission to board. She had come back in a mood that would have been called a tail-lashing fury in any woman not Aes Sedai. Egwene more than suspected why they were here, but she was not about to tell Rand; for once let him meet somebody without expecting them to bow down.

"The Atha'an Miere are everywhere, it seems." Rand took a seat in one of the chairs; he looked amused for some reason, but she would swear it had nothing to do with the Sea Folk. "Berelain says I should meet this Harine din Togara Two Winds, but if her temper is anything like Berelain reports, she can wait. I have enough women angry with me for the moment."

That was almost an opening, but not quite. "I cannot understand why. You always have such a winning way about you." Immediately she wished she had the words back; they only reinforced what she did *not* want him to do.

Frowning, he seemed not to have heard her at all. "Egwene, I know you don't like Berelain, but it hasn't gone beyond that, has it? I mean, you make such a good job of playing at Aiel, I could imagine you offering to dance the spears with her. She was troubled about something, uneasy, but she wouldn't say what."

Probably the woman had found a man who told her no; that would be enough to shake Berelain's world to its foundations. "I've not said a dozen words to her since the Stone of Tear, and not many more then. Rand, you don't think—"

One of the doors opened just barely enough to admit Somara, who shut it again behind her quickly. "The Aes Sedai are here, *Car'a'carn.*"

Rand's head swiveled toward the door, his face stone. "They weren't to come for another—! Thinking to catch me off guard, were they? They have to learn who sets the rules here."

Right then Egwene did not care if they were trying to catch him in his smallclothes. All thought of Berelain vanished. Somara made a small gesture that might have been commiseration. She did not care about that either. Rand could keep them from taking her, if she asked. All it meant was staying close to him from now on so they could not shield her and hustle her away the first time she put her nose into the street. All it meant was asking, putting herself under his protection. The choice between that and being hauled back to the Tower in a sack was so thin it made her stomach hurt. For one thing, she would never become Aes Sedai hiding behind him, and for another, the idea of hiding behind anyone set her teeth on edge. Only, they were here, right outside the door, and inside the hour she might be in that sack, or as good as. Deep slow breaths did nothing to steady her twitching nerves.

"Rand, is there another way out of here? If there isn't, I will hide in one of the other rooms. They mustn't know I am here. Rand? Rand! Are you listening to me?"

He spoke, but definitely not to her. "You *are* there," he whispered hoarsely. "Too much coincidence for you to think of that now." He was staring at nothing with a look of fury, and maybe fear. "Burn you, answer me! I know you're there!"

Egwene licked her lips before she could stop herself. Somara might be gazing at him with what could be described as fond motherly concern—and him not even noticing her joke—but Egwene's stomach was turning over slowly. He could not have gone mad as suddenly as that. He could not have. But he had seemed to listen to some hidden voice just a little while ago, and maybe spoken to it then too.

She did not remember crossing the intervening space, but abruptly her hand was pressed against his forehead. Nynaeve always said to check for fever first, though what good that would do now. . . . If only she knew more than a scrap of Healing. But that would do no good, either. Not if he was. . . . “Rand, are you . . . ? Are you feeling all right?”

He came to himself, shying back from her hand, peering at her suspiciously. The next moment he was on his feet, gripping her arm, all but hauling her down the chamber so quickly she nearly tripped over her skirts trying to keep up. “Stand right there,” he ordered briskly, planting her beside the dais, and backed away.

Rubbing her arm vigorously enough that he could not miss it, she started to follow. Men never realized how strong they were; even Gawyn did not always, though she did not really mind with him. “What do you think—?”

“Don’t move!” In a disgusted tone he added, “Burn him, it seems it ripples if you move. I’ll fasten it to the floor, but you still can’t jump about. I don’t know how big I can make it, and this is no time to find out.” Somara’s mouth had fallen open, though she snapped it shut quickly.

Fasten what to the floor? What was he talking—? It came to her so suddenly that she forgot to wonder who the “him” was. Rand had woven *saidin* around her. Her eyes widened; she was breathing too quickly, but she could not stop. How close was it? Every shred of reason told her the taint could not seep out of whatever he channeled; he had touched her with *saidin* before, but if anything, that thought only made it worse. Instinctively she narrowed her shoulders and held her skirts close in front of her.

“What—? What did you do?” She was very proud of her voice, a trifle unsteady maybe, but nothing like the wail she wanted to let out.

“Look in that mirror,” he laughed. Laughed!

Grumpily she obeyed—and gasped. There in the silvered glass was the gilded chair on its dais. Some of the rest of the room. But not her. “I’m . . . invisible,” she breathed. Once Moiraine had hidden them all behind a screen of *saidar*, but how had he learned it?

“Much better than hiding under my bed,” he said, speaking to air a good hand to the right of her head. As if *that* had ever entered her mind! “I want you to see how respectful I can be. Besides,” his tone became more serious, “maybe you’ll see something I miss. Maybe you’ll even be willing to tell me.” With a bark of a laugh he leaped onto the dais, scooped up the tasseled spearhead and took his seat. “Send them in, Somara. Let the embassy of the White Tower approach the Dragon Reborn.” His twisted smile made Egwene almost as uncomfortable as the nearness of woven *saidin.* How close *was* the bloody stuff?

Somara vanished, and in moments the doors opened wide.

A plump, stately woman who could only be Coiren led the way in a dark blue gown, flanked a pace to the rear by Nesune in plain brown wool and a raven-haired Aes Sedai in green silk, a pretty, round-faced woman with a plump, demanding mouth. Egwene wished Aes Sedai always wore the colors of their Ajah—Whites did at every chance—because whatever that woman was, she would not believe her Green, not with the hard stare she gave Rand from her first step into the room. Cold serenity barely masked her contempt, perhaps did mask it for anyone not used to Aes Sedai. Would Rand see? Maybe not; he seemed to be concentrating on Coiren, whose face was completely unreadable. Nesune, of course, took in everything, birdlike eyes darting this way and that.

Right then, Egwene was very glad of the cloak he had woven for her. She started to dab at her face with the handkerchief she still held, then froze. He said he would fix it to the floor. Had he? Light, she might be standing there naked for all she knew. Except that Nesune's gaze swept past without pausing. Sweat rolled down Egwene's face. It poured. Burn the man! She would have been perfectly happy hiding under his bed.

Behind the Aes Sedai came a full dozen more women, plainly dressed, with coarse linen dustcloaks hanging down their backs. Most were stocky, but they labored under the weight of two chests, not small, the polished brass strapping worked with the Flame of Tar Valon. The serving women set the chests down with audible sighs of relief, furtively working arms and knuckling backs as the doors swung shut, and Coiren and the other two sank into curtsies in perfect unison, though not very deeply.

Rand was down out of the chair before they straightened. The glow of *saidar* surrounded the Aes Sedai, all three together; they had linked. Egwene tried to remember what she had seen, how they did it; despite the glow, nothing ruffled their outward calm as Rand strode by them to the serving women and peered into each face in turn.

What was he—? Of course; making sure none had the ageless face of an Aes Sedai. Egwene shook her head, then froze again. He was a fool if he thought that enough. Most wore too much age—not all old by any means, but you could put an age to them—yet two were young enough to be Aes Sedai not long raised. They were not—Egwene could only sense the ability in the three Aes Sedai, and she was close enough—but he certainly could not tell by looking.

Tipping up one solid young woman’s chin, he smiled into her eyes. “Do not be afraid,” he said softly. She swayed as if she might faint. With a sigh, Rand spun on his heel. He did not look at the Aes Sedai as he passed them. “You will not channel around me,” he said firmly. “Let it go.” A brief look of speculation crossed Nesune’s face, but the other two serenely watched him take his seat. Rubbing his arm—Egwene had been there when he learned that tingle—he spoke in a harder tone. “I said you will not channel around me. Or even embrace *saidar.*”

A stretched-out moment, while Egwene prayed silently. What would he do if they held on to the Source? Try to cut them off? Cutting a woman off from *saidar* once she embraced it was far harder than shielding her beforehand. She was not certain even he could manage it with three women, and linked to boot. Worse, what would they do if he tried anything at all? The glow vanished, and she barely stopped a heavy sigh of relief. Whatever he had done made her invisible, but plainly it did not stop sound.

“Much better.” Rand’s smile took them all in, but it never reached his eyes. “Let us begin again from the beginning. You are honored guests, you only entered this very moment.”

They understood, of course. He had not been guessing. Coiren stiffened slightly, and the raven-haired woman’s eyes actually widened. Nesune merely nodded to herself, adding to her mental notes. Egwene hoped desperately that he would be careful. Nesune would not miss anything.

With a visible effort Coiren gathered herself, smoothing her dress and very nearly adjusting the shawl she was not wearing. “I have the honor,” she announced in ringing tones, “to be Coiren Saeldain Aes Sedai, Ambassador from the White Tower and emissary of Elaida do Avriny a’Roihan, the Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat.” Somewhat less florid introductions, though with the full honorific Aes Sedai, named the other two; the hard-eyed woman was Galina Casban.

“I am Rand al’Thor.” The simplicity was a marked contrast. They had not mentioned the Dragon Reborn and neither had he, but somehow his leaving it out seemed to make the title whisper faintly in the room.

Coiren drew a deep breath, moved her head as if hearing that whisper. “We bring a gracious invitation to the Dragon Reborn. The Amyrlin Seat is fully cognizant that signs have been given and prophecies fulfilled, that. . . .” Those deep round tones took little time to reach the point, that Rand should accompany them, “in all honor as deserved,” to the White Tower, and that if he accepted this invitation, Elaida offered not only the protection of the Tower, but the full weight of its authority and influence behind him. Another goodly bit of flowery speech flowed before she finished with, “. . . and in token of this, the Amyrlin Seat sends this trifling gift.”

She turned toward the chests, raising her hand, then hesitated with the faintest grimace. She had to gesture twice before the servants understood and lifted the brass-strapped lids; apparently she had planned to fling them open with *saidar.* Leather sacks filled the chests. At another, sharper, gesture, the serving women began untying them.

Egwene swallowed a gasp. No wonder those women had struggled! The opened sacks spilled gold coins of every size, sparkling rings and glittering necklaces and unset gems. Even if those below held dross, it was a fortune.

Leaning back in that thronelike chair, Rand looked at the chests with a near smile. The Aes Sedai studied him, faces masks of composure, yet Egwene thought she detected a hint of complacency in Coiren’s eyes, a faint increase of contempt on Galina’s full lips. Nesune. . . . Nesune was the real danger.

Abruptly the lids snapped down without a hand touching them, and the serving women leaped back, not bothering to muffle their squeals. The Aes Sedai stiffened, and Egwene prayed as hard as she sweated. She wanted him arrogant and a touch insolent, but just enough to put their backs up, not to the point of making them decide to try gentling him on the spot.

Suddenly it occurred to her that so far he had shown nothing of that “humble as a mouse.” He had never intended to. The man had been toying with her! If she were not too frightened to be sure of her knees, she would go over and box his ears.

“A great deal of gold,” Rand said. He seemed relaxed, his smile taking in his whole face. “I can always find a use for gold.” Egwene blinked. He sounded almost greedy!

Coiren answered with a smile of her own, a definite picture of poised self-satisfaction now. “The Amyrlin Seat is, of course, most generous. When you reach the White Tower—”

“When I reach the Tower,” Rand cut in as though thinking aloud. “Yes, I look forward to the day I stand in the Tower.” He leaned forward, elbow on his knee and Dragon Scepter dangling. “It will take a little time, you understand. I have commitments to meet first, here, in Andor, elsewhere.”

Coiren’s mouth tightened for just an instant. Her voice remained as smooth and round as ever, though. “We surely have no objections to resting a few days before we begin the return journey to Tar Valon. In the meanwhile, may I suggest that one of us remain close at hand, to offer advice should you wish it? We have, of course, heard of Moiraine’s unfortunate demise. I cannot offer myself, but Nesune or Galina would be most willing.”

Rand studied the named pair with a frown, and Egwene held her breath. He seemed to be listening to something again, or listening for something. Nesune examined him in return as openly as he did her. Galina’s fingers stroked her skirts unconsciously.

“No,” he said at last, sitting back with his arms on the arms of the chair. He made it look even more a throne than before. “It might not be safe. I would not like one of you to take a spear through your ribs by accident.” Coiren opened her mouth, but he rode over her. “For your own safety, none of you should come closer to me than a mile without permission. Best if you stay that far from the Palace without permission, too. You will know when I’m ready to go with you. I promise that.” Abruptly he was on his feet. Atop the dais he stood tall enough that the Aes Sedai had to crane their necks, and it was plain none of them liked it any more than they liked his restrictions. Three faces carved in stone stared up at him. “I will let you go back to your resting now. The quicker I can see to certain things, the quicker I can go to the Tower. I will send word when I can see you again.”

They were not pleased at so sudden a dismissal, or likely at any dismissal—Aes Sedai were the ones who said when an audience was done—yet there was little they could do except make their minimal curtsies, disgruntlement nearly breaking through Aes Sedai calm.

As they turned to go, Rand spoke again, casually. “I forgot to ask. How is Alviarin?”

“She is well.” Galina’s mouth hung open for a moment, her eyes widening. She appeared startled to have spoken.

Coiren hesitated on the brink of using the opening to say more, but Rand stood impatiently, all but tapping his foot. When they were gone, he stepped down, hefting that spearhead and staring at the doors that had closed behind them.

Egwene wasted not a moment striding toward him. “What game are you playing at, Rand al’Thor?” She had taken half a dozen steps before a glimpse of her reflection in the mirrors made her realize she had walked right through his weave of *saidin.* At least she had not known when it touched her. “Well?”

“She’s one of Alviarin’s,” he said thoughtfully. “Galina. She is one of Alviarin’s friends. I’d bet on it.”

Planting herself in front of him, she sniffed. “You’d lose your coin and stick yourself in the foot with a pitchfork, too. Galina is a Red, or I never saw one.”

“Because she doesn’t like me?” He was looking at her now, and she almost wished he was not. “Because she’s afraid of me?” He was not grimacing or glaring, or even staring particularly hard, yet his eyes seemed to know things she did not. She *hated* that. His smile came so suddenly she blinked. “Egwene, do you expect me to believe you can tell a woman’s Ajah by her face?”

“No, but—”

“Anyway, even Reds might end following me. They know the Prophecies as well as anybody else. ‘The unstained tower breaks and bends knee to the forgotten sign.’ Written before there was a White Tower, but what else could ‘the unstained tower’ be? And the forgotten sign? My banner, Egwene, with the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai.”

“Burn you, Rand al’Thor!” The curse came more awkwardly than she could have wished; she was not accustomed to saying such things. “The Light burn you! You can’t really be thinking of going with them. You can’t!”

He showed his teeth in amusement. Amusement! “Didn’t I do what you wanted? What you told me to do *and* what you wanted.”

Her lips compressed indignantly. Bad enough that he knew, but throwing it in her face was just rude. “Rand, please listen to me. Elaida—”

“The question now is how to get you back to the tents without them finding out you were here. I expect they have eyes-and-ears in the Palace.”

“Rand, you have to—!”

“How about riding in one of those big laundry baskets? I can have a couple of Maidens carry it.”

She very nearly threw up her hands. He was as eager to be rid of her as he had been of the Aes Sedai. “My own feet will do well enough, thank you.” A laundry basket, indeed! “I wouldn’t have to worry if you told me how you step from Caemlyn to here whenever you want.” She did not understand why asking should rasp so, yet it did. “I know you can’t teach me, but if you told me how, maybe I could work out how to do it with *saidar.*”

Instead of the joke at her expense she more than half-expected, he took the end of her shawl in both hands. “The Pattern,” he said. “Caemlyn,” one finger on his left hand tented the wool, “and Cairhien.” A finger on the other hand made a tent, and he brought the two tents together. “I bend the Pattern and bore a hole from one to the other. I don’t know what I bore through, but there’s no space between one end of the hole and the other.” He let the shawl drop. “Does that help?”

Chewing her lip, she frowned at the shawl sourly. It did not help at all. Just the thought of tearing a hole in the Pattern made her queasy. She had hoped it would be like something she had worked out concerning *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Not that she ever meant to use it, of course, but she had had all that time on her hands, and the Wise Ones kept grumbling about the Aes Sedai asking how to enter in the flesh. She thought the way would be to create—a similarity seemed the only way to describe it—a similarity between the real world and its reflection in the World of Dreams. That should make a place where it was possible to simply step from one to the other. If Rand’s method of travel had seemed even slightly the same, she would have been willing to try, but this. . . . *Saidar* did as you wanted as long as you remembered it was infinitely stronger than you and had to be guided gently; try to force the wrong thing, and you were dead or burned out before you could scream.

“Rand, are you sure there isn’t any sense of making things the same . . . or. . . .” She did not know how to put it, but in any case, he shook his head before she trailed off.

“That sounds like changing the weave of the Pattern. I think it would tear me apart if I so much as tried. I bore a hole.” He poked a finger at her to demonstrate.

Well, there was no point in pursuing that. She shifted her shawl irritably. “Rand, about those Sea Folk. I don’t know any more than I’ve read”—she did, but she still was not going to tell him—“but it must be something important to bring them this far to see you.”

“Light,” he muttered absently, “you jump around like a drop of water on a hot griddle. I’ll see them when I have time.” For a moment he rubbed at his forehead, and his eyes seemed to see nothing. With a blink he was seeing her again. “Do you intend to stay until they come back?” He really did want to be rid of her.

At the door she paused, but he was already stalking up the room, hands clasped behind his back, talking to himself. Softly, but she could make out some. “Where are you hiding, burn you? I know you’re there!”

Shivering, she let herself out. If he really was going mad already, there was no changing it. The Wheel weaved as the Wheel willed, and its weaving must be accepted.

Realizing that she was eyeing the servants passing up and down the hall, wondering which might be Aes Sedai agents, she made herself stop. The Wheel weaved as the Wheel willed. With a nod for Somara, she squared her shoulders and tried very hard not to scuttle on her way to the nearest servants’ entrance.

There was little talk as Arilyn’s best coach lurched away from the Sun Palace followed by the wagon that had borne the chests, burdened now only with the serving women and driver. Steepling her fingers in the coach, Nesune tapped them thoughtfully against her lips. A fascinating young man. A fascinating subject for study. Her foot touched one of the specimen boxes under the seat; she never went anywhere without proper specimen boxes. One would think that the world must have been catalogued long since, yet since leaving Tar Valon she had tucked away fifty plants, twice as many insects, and the skins and bones of a fox, three sorts of lark, and no fewer than five species of ground squirrel that she was sure were nowhere in the records.

“I did not realize you were friendly with Alviarin,” Coiren said after a time.

Galina sniffed. “It is not necessary to be friends to know she was well when we left.” Nesune wondered whether the woman knew that she pouted. Only the shape of her mouth perhaps, but one had to learn to live with one’s face. “Do you think he truly knew?” Galina went on. “That we had. . . . It is impossible. He must have been guessing.”

Nesune’s ears perked, though she continued to tap her lips. That was clearly an effort to change the subject, and a sign that Galina was nervous besides. Silence had held as long as it did because no one wanted to mention al’Thor and there seemed no other topic possible. Why did Galina not want to speak of Alviarin? The two certainly were not friends; it was a rare Red who had a friend outside her Ajah. Nesune filed the question in its own mental cubbyhole.

“If he was guessing, he could make his fortune at the fairs.” Coiren was no fool. Bombastic beyond all reason, but never a fool. “However ridiculous it might seem, we must assume he can sense *saidar* in a woman.”

“That might be disastrous,” Galina muttered. “No. It cannot be. He must have guessed. Any man who can channel would assume we would embrace *saidar.*”

The woman’s pout irritated Nesune. This entire expedition irritated her. She would have been more than happy to join it if asked, but Jesse Bilal had not asked; Jesse had practically shoved her onto her horse physically. However it might be in other Ajahs, the head of the Browns’ council was not expected to behave so. Worst of all, though, Nesune’s companions were so focused on young al’Thor that they seemed to have gone blind to all else.

“Do you have any notions,” she mused aloud, “as to the sister who shared our interview?”

It might not have been a sister—three Aielwomen seemed to turn up whenever she went into the Royal Library, and two could channel—but she wanted to see their reactions. She was not disappointed; or rather, she was. Coiren only sat up straight, but Galina stared. It was all Nesune could do not to sigh. They truly were blind. Only a few paces from a woman able to channel, and they had not sensed her because they could not see her.

“I don’t know how she was hidden,” Nesune went on, “but it will be interesting to discover.” It had to have been his work; they would have seen any weaving of *saidar.* They did not ask whether she was sure; they knew she always identified a guess.

“Confirmation that Moiraine is alive.” Galina settled back with a grim smile. “I suggest we set Beldeine to find her. Then we take her and bundle her into the basement. That takes her away from al’Thor, and we can carry her to Tar Valon along with him. I doubt he’ll even notice, so long as we let enough gold glitter under his nose.”

Coiren shook her head emphatically. “We have no more confirmation than we already had, not of Moiraine. It may be this mysterious Green. As far as finding whoever it is, I agree, but we must consider the rest carefully. I will not risk everything that has been so carefully planned. We must be aware that al’Thor is connected to this sister—whoever she may be—and that his plea for time may be only a strategy. Fortunately, we have time.” Galina nodded, however reluctantly; she would marry and settle on a farm before she risked their plans.

Nesune allowed herself a small sigh. Aside from pomposity, stating the obvious was Coiren’s only real fault. She did have a good mind, when she used it. And they did have time. Her foot touched one of the specimen boxes again. However events spun out, the paper she intended to write on al’Thor would be the culmination of her life.

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CHAPTER 28

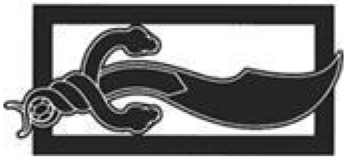

Letters

Lews Therin *was* there—Rand was sure of it—but not a whisper sounded in his head that was not his own. For the rest of the day he did try to think of other things, useless as they might be. Berelain was ready to jump out of her skin for the number of times he popped in on her to ask about something she was perfectly capable of handling without him; he was not sure, but he thought she started trying to avoid him. Even Rhuarc began to look a little hunted after the tenth time Rand cornered him over the Shaido; the Shaido had not stirred, and the only choices Rhuarc could see were to leave them in Kinslayer’s Dagger or dig them out. Herid Fel had wandered off, as Idrien quickly pointed out he often did, and was nowhere to be found; when Fel became lost in thought, he sometimes lost his way in the city, too. Rand shouted at her. Fel was not her fault, not her responsibility, but Rand left her white and trembling. His temper rippled like a line of thunderstorms sweeping in from the horizon. He shouted at Meilan and Maringil till they shook in their boots and left him with pasty faces, reduced Colavaere to incoherent tears and actually sent Anaiyella running with her skirts hiked to her knees. For that matter, when Amys and Sorilea came to ask what he had told the Aes Sedai, he shouted at them as well; from the look on Sorilea’s face as they stalked away, he suspected that might have been the first time anyone had ever raised voice to her. It was knowing—*knowing*—that Lews Therin was really there, more than a voice, a man hiding inside his head.

He was almost afraid to fall asleep when night came, afraid Lews Therin might seize control while he slept, and when he did sleep his troubled dreams made him toss and mutter. The first hint of light though the windows woke him in tangled sweat-soaked sheets, with grainy eyes, a mouth that tasted like a horse six days dead, and legs that ached. The dreams he remembered had all been of running from something he could not see. He levered himself out of the great four-posted bed and made his ablutions at the gilded washstand. With the sky just turning gray outside, the *gai'shain* who would bring fresh water had not appeared yet, but last night's did well enough.

He had nearly finished shaving when he stopped, razor poised against his cheek, staring at himself in the mirror on the wall. Running. He had been sure it was the Forsaken he was running from in those dreams, or the Dark One, or Tarmon Gai'don, or maybe even Lews Therin. So full of himself; surely the Dragon Reborn would dream of being pursued by the Dark One. For all his protests that he was Rand al'Thor, it seemed that he could forget as easily as anyone else. Rand al'Thor had run away from Elayne, from his fear of loving Elayne, just as he had run from fear of loving Aviendha.

The mirror shattered, shards dropping into the porcelain washbasin. The pieces remaining in the frame cast back a fragmented image of his face.

Releasing *saidin*, he carefully scraped away the last bit of lather and folded the razor deliberately. No more running. He would do what he had to do, but no more running.

Two Maidens were waiting in the corridor when he emerged. Harilin, a lanky redhead about his age, went running for the others as soon as he appeared. Chiarid, a merry-eyed blonde old enough to be his mother, accompanied him through hallways where only a few servants stirred, surprised to see him so early. Usually Chiarid liked to make jokes at his expense when they were alone—he understood some; she saw him as a younger brother who needed to be kept from getting too big for his hat—but she felt his mood this morning and said not a word. She did give his sword one disgusted glance, but only one.

Nandera and the rest of the Maidens caught up before he was halfway to the Traveling chamber, and caught his silence as quickly. So did the Mayeners and Black Eyes guarding the square-carved door. Rand thought he might leave Cairhien without anyone speaking until a young woman in the red-and-blue of Berelain's personal servants rushed in and bobbed a deep curtsy just as he opened the gateway.

"The First sends this," she panted, extending a letter with a large green seal. Apparently she had run all the way trying to find him. "It's from the Sea Folk, my Lord Dragon."

Rand stuffed the letter into his coat pocket and stepped through the gateway, ignoring the woman's question as to whether there was any reply. Silence suited him this morning. He ran a thumb along the carving on the Dragon Scepter. He would be strong and hard, and put all this self-pity behind him.

The dark Grand Hall in Caemlyn brought Alanna nestling back into his head. Night still held here, but she was awake; he knew as surely as he knew she was weeping, as surely as he knew her tears stopped moments after he closed the gateway behind the last of the Maidens. A small ball of ragged unreadable emotion still sat in the back of his head, yet he was certain she knew he had returned. No doubt she and her bond had played their part in his flight, but he accepted the bond now even if he did not like it. That nearly made him chuckle wryly; he had better accept it, since he could not change it. She had tied a thread to him—no more than a thread; Light, let it be no more—and it should not cause trouble unless he let her close enough to make it a leash. He wished Thom Merrilin were there; Thom probably knew all about Warders and bonds; he knew surprising things. Well, finding Elayne would find Thom. That was all there was to it.

Saidin made a globe of light, Fire and Air, to illumine the way out of the throne room. The ancient queens, hidden in the darkness far overhead, did not bother him at all. They were only pictures in colored glass.

The same could not be said of Aviendha. Outside his apartments Nandera dismissed the Maidens except for Jalani, and the two went in with him to check the rooms while he used the Power to light the lamps and tossed the Dragon Scepter onto a small ivory-inlaid table that had considerably less gilt than it would have had in the Sun Palace. All the furnishings were that way, with less gilding and more carving, usually lions or roses. One large red carpet covered the floor, with gold thread outlining roses.

Without *saidin* in him, he doubted he could have heard the Maidens' soft footfalls, but before they crossed the anteroom Aviendha came stalking out of the still dark bedchamber with her hair in wild disarray and her belt knife in hand. And wearing only her skin. At the sight of him she went stiff as a post and stalked back the way she had come, little short of running. A small light appeared through the doorway, a lamp lit. Nandera laughed softly and exchanged amused glances with Jalani.

“I will never understand Aiel,” Rand muttered, pushing the Source away. It was not so much that the Maidens found the situation funny; he had long since given up on Aiel humor. It was Aviendha. She might think it *very* funny to undress for bed in front of him, but let him catch so much as a glimpse of ankle when she did not choose to show it, and she turned into a scalded cat. Not to mention blaming him.

Nandera chortled. “It is not Aiel you cannot understand, but women. No man has ever understood women.”

“Men, on the other hand,” Jalani put in, “are very simple.” He stared at her, with the baby fat still on her cheeks, and she colored faintly. Nandera looked ready to laugh out loud.

Death, Lews Therin whispered.

Rand forgot everything else. *Death? What do you mean?*

Death comes.

What kind of death? Rand demanded. *What are you talking about?*

Who are you? Where am I?

Rand felt as though a fist had clutched his throat. He had been sure, but. . . . This was the first time Lews Therin had said anything to him, something clearly and plainly addressed to him. *I am Rand al’Thor. You are inside my head.*

Inside . . . ? No! I am myself! I am Lews Therin Telamon! I am meeeeeeeeee! The cry faded away into the distance.

Come back, Rand shouted. *What death? Answer me, burn you!* Silence. He shifted uneasily. Knowing was one thing, but a dead man, inside him, talking of death, made him feel unclean, like the faintest brush of the taint on *saidin.*

Something touched his arm, and he nearly seized at the Source again before he realized it was Aviendha. She must have flown into her clothes, yet she looked as if she had taken an hour to arrange every hair to her liking. People said Aiel showed no emotion, but it was just that they were more reserved than most. Their faces told as much as anyone else’s if you knew what to look for. Aviendha was torn between concern and wanting to be angry.

“Are you well?” she asked.

“I was just thinking,” he told her. True enough. *Answer me, Lews Therin! Come back and answer me!* Why had he ever thought silence suited the morning?

Unfortunately, Aviendha took him at his word, and if there was nothing to be concerned about. . . . She put her fists on her hips. That was one thing he understood about women, Aiel, Two Rivers or whoever; fists on hips meant trouble. He need not have bothered lighting the lamps; her eyes were hot enough to light the room. “You went away without me again. I promised the Wise Ones to stay near you until I must go, but you make my promise nothing. You have *toh* to me for this, Rand al’Thor. Nandera, from now on I must be told where he is going and when. He must not be allowed to go without me if I should accompany him.”

Nandera hesitated not a moment before nodding. “It shall be as you wish, Aviendha.”

Rand squared around on both women. “Now, just you wait! Nobody is to be told my comings and goings unless I say so.”

“I have given my word, Rand al’Thor,” Nandera said in a flat voice. She looked him in the eye with no notion of backing up.

“As do I,” Jalani said just as levelly.

Rand opened his mouth, then closed it again. Bloody *ji’e’toh*. No use mentioning he was the *Car’a’carn*, of course. Aviendha looked faintly surprised that he had even protested; apparently to her it was a foregone conclusion. He shifted his shoulders uneasily, though not because of Aviendha. That unclean feel was still there, and stronger. Maybe Lews Therin had come back. Silently Rand called to him, but there was still no answer.

A tap on the door barely preceded Mistress Harfor, who made her usual deep curtsy. The First Maid showed no sign of the early hour, of course; whatever the time of day, Reene Harfor always looked as if she had just gotten dressed. “There have been arrivals in the city, my Lord Dragon, which Lord Bashere thought you should be told of as soon as possible. Lady Aemlyn and Lord Culhan entered yesterday at noon, and are staying with Lord Pelivar. Lady Arathelle came an hour later, with a large retinue. Lord Barel and Lord Macharan, Lady Sergase and Lady Negara entered separately in the night, with only a few retainers each. None has presented their respects at the Palace.” She delivered the last in the same even tone, with no hint of her own opinion.

“That is good news,” he told her, and it was, whether they had left respects or not. Aemlyn and her husband Culhan were nearly as powerful as Pelivar, Arathelle more powerful than any except Dyelin and Luan. The others were of minor Houses, and only Barel among them High Seat of his House, but the nobles who had opposed "Gaebril" were beginning to gather. At least, it was good news provided he found Elayne before they decided to try taking Caemlyn away from him.

Mistress Harfor eyed him a moment, then extended a blue-sealed letter. "This was delivered late last evening, my Lord Dragon. By a stableboy. A dirty stableboy. The Sea Folk Wave-mistress was not well pleased that you were gone when she appeared for her audience." This time her disapproval was clear in her voice, though not whether it was for the Wavemistress or Rand missing the audience or the means of the letter's delivery.

He sighed; he had forgotten all about the Sea Folk here in Caemlyn. That reminded him of the letter he had been given in Cairhien, and he dug it out. Both green wax and blue bore the same impression, though he could not make out what it was supposed to be. Two things like flattened bowls with a thick ornate line running from one through the other. Each was addressed to "The Coramoor," whoever or whatever that was. Himself, he supposed. Maybe that was what the Sea Folk called the Dragon Reborn. He broke the blue seal first. There was no salutation, and it was certainly unlike anything else Rand had ever seen addressed to the Dragon Reborn.

> *The Light willing, you will perhaps return to Caemlyn eventually. As I have traveled far to see you, perhaps I will find time for it when you do.*
>
> *Zaida din Parede Blackwing*
> *of Clan Catelar, Wavemistress*

It seemed Mistress Harfor was right; the Wavemistress was not best pleased. The green seal hid little better.

> *If it pleases the Light, I will receive you on the deck of White Spray at your earliest convenience.*
>
> *Harine din Togara Two Winds*
> *of Clan Shodein, Wavemistress*

"Are they bad news?" Aviendha asked.

"I don't know." Frowning at the letters, he was barely aware of Mistress Harfor admitting a woman in the red-and-white and exchanging quiet words with her. Neither of these Sea Folk women sounded like anybody he wanted to spend an hour with. He had read every translation of the Prophecies of the Dragon he could find, and though the clearest was often murky, he remembered nothing that indicated the Atha'an Miere. Perhaps, on their ships at sea and their distant islands, they would be one people untouched by him or Tarmon Gai'don. He owed this Zaida an apology, but maybe he could fob her off with Bashere; Bashere certainly had enough titles to flatter anybody's vanity. "I don't think so."

The servant sank to her knees before him, white head bowed low and hands raised high to proffer yet another letter, this one on thick parchment. The posture itself made him blink; even in Tear he had never seen a servant cringe so, much less in Andor. Mistress Harfor was frowning and shaking her head. The kneeling woman spoke, still with her face down. "This has come for my Lord Dragon."

"Sulin?" he gasped. "What are you doing? What are you doing in that . . . *dress*?"

Sulin turned her face up; she looked perfectly horrible, a wolf trying very hard to pretend she was a doe. "It is what women wear who serve and obey as commanded for coins." She waggled the letter in her still upraised hands. "I was commanded to say that this has just come for my Lord Dragon, by a . . . a horseman who left as soon as it was handed over." The First Maid clicked her tongue irritably.

"I want a straight answer," he said, snatching the sealed parchment. She bounded to her feet as soon as it left her hands. "Come back here, Sulin. Sulin, I want an answer!" But she ran as fleetly as she ever had in *cadin'sor*, straight to the doors and out.

For some reason Mistress Harfor glared at Nandera. "I told you this would not work. And I told you both that as long as she wears the Palace livery, I expect her to do the Palace proud whether she's Aiel or the Queen of Saldaea." Curtsying, she gave Rand a hasty "My Lord Dragon" and stalked out talking to herself about crazy Aiel.

He was ready to agree. He looked from Nandera to Aviendha to Jalani. None of them appeared in the least surprised. Not one looked as if she had seen a thing out of the ordinary. "Will you tell me what under the Light is going on? That was Sulin!"

"First," Nandera said, "Sulin and I went to the kitchens. She thought scrubbing pots and the like would be suitable. But a fellow there said he had all the scullions he needed; he seemed to think Sulin would always be fighting the others. He was not very tall," she marked just under Rand's chin, "but just as wide, and I think he would have offered to dance the spears with us if we had not gone away. Then we went to the woman Reene Harfor, since she seems to be roofmistress here." A slight grimace passed over her face; a woman should be roofmistress or not—Aiel thinking held no place for a First Maid. "She did not understand, but at last she agreed. I almost thought Sulin would change her mind when she realized Reene Harfor meant her to put on a dress, but of course she did not. Sulin has more courage than I. I would rather be made *gai'shain* by a new *Seia Doon*."

"I," Jalani said stoutly, "would rather be beaten by the first-brother of my worst enemy in front of my mother every day for a year."

Nandera's eyes tightened in disapproval and her fingers twitched, but instead of handtalk she said deliberately, "You boast like a Shaido, girl." Had Jalani been older, the three calculated insults might have caused trouble, but instead she squeezed her eyes shut to hide the sight of those who had heard her shamed.

Rand scrubbed fingers through his hair. "Reene didn't understand? I don't understand, Nandera. Why is she doing this? Has she given up the spear? If she's married an Andorman"—stranger things had happened around him—"I'll give her enough gold to buy a farm or whatever they want. She doesn't have to become a servant." Jalani's eyes shot open, and the three women were looking at him as if *he* was the one mad.

"Sulin is meeting her *toh*, Rand al'Thor," Aviendha said firmly; she stood very straight and met his gaze directly, a good imitation of Amys. Only there was less imitation in it every day and more her. "It does not concern you."

Jalani nodded a very definite agreement. Nandera only stood there, idly examining a spearpoint.

"Sulin concerns me," he told them. "If something happened to her—" Suddenly he remembered the exchange he had overheard before going to Shadar Logoth. Nandera had accused Sulin of speaking to *gai'shain* as *Far Dareis Mai*, and Sulin admitted it and said they would deal with it later. He had not seen Sulin since returning from Shadar Logoth, but he had assumed she was angry with him and simply letting others do the work of guarding him. He should have known better. Being around any Aiel for long would teach you some of *ji'e'toh*, and Maidens were touchier than anyone, except maybe Stone Dogs and Black Eyes. Then there was Aviendha and her attempts to turn him into an Aiel.

This situation was simple, or as simple as anything ever was in *ji'e'toh.* If he had not been so caught up in himself, he would have realized from the first. You could remind even a roofmistress who she was every day she wore *gai'shain* white—it was deeply shaming, but permitted, even encouraged sometimes—yet for the members of nine of the thirteen societies, that reminder was a deep dishonor except under a handful of circumstances he could not recall. *Far Dareis Mai* was most definitely one of the nine. It was one of the few ways to incur *toh* toward a *gai'shain,* but that was considered the hardest obligation of all to meet. Seemingly Sulin had chosen to meet it by accepting a greater shame, in Aiel eyes, than she had given. It was her *toh,* so her choice how to meet it, her choice how long she continued to do what she despised. Who knew the worth of her honor or the depth of her obligation better than she herself? Still, she had only done what she did in the first place because he had not allowed her enough time. "It is my fault," he said.

That was the wrong thing to say. Jalani gave him a startled stare. Aviendha flushed with embarrassment; she continually drove home that there were no excuses under *ji'e'toh.* If saving your child brought an obligation to a blood enemy, you paid the price without quibble.

The look Nandera shot at Aviendha could charitably be called disparaging. "If you stopped daydreaming about his eyebrows, you would teach him better."

Aviendha's face went dark with indignation, but Nandera flashed hand-talk at Jalani, which made Jalani throw back her head and laugh, and made the crimson in Aviendha's cheeks brighten and return to pure embarrassment. Rand half-expected to hear an offer to dance spears. Well, not that exactly; Aviendha had taught him that neither Wise Ones nor their apprentices did that sort of thing. But it would not surprise him if she boxed Nandera's ears.

He spoke quickly to forestall any such thing. "Since I caused Sulin to do what she did, don't I have *toh* toward her?"

Apparently it was possible to make a bigger fool of himself than he already had. Somehow Aviendha's face grew redder still, and Jalani took a sudden interest in the carpet under her feet. Even Nandera looked a little chagrined at his ignorance. You could be told that you had *toh,* though that was insulting, or you could be reminded of it, but asking meant that you did not know. Well, he knew that he did. He could begin by ordering Sulin out of that ridiculous job as a servant, letting her put on *cadin'sor* again, and. . . . And stop her from meeting her *toh*. Anything he did to lighten her burden would interfere with her honor. Her *toh*, her choice. There was something in that, but he could not see what. Maybe he could ask Aviendha. Later, when she would not die from mortification. All three women's faces made it clear he had embarrassed her more than enough for the time being. Light, what a mess.

Wondering how he could find a way out, he realized he still held the letter Sulin had brought. He thrust it into a pocket and unbuckled his sword belt to lay it atop the Dragon Scepter, then retrieved the parchment. Who would send him a message by a rider who did not even stop for breakfast? There was nothing on the outside, no name; only the now vanished courier could have said who it was directed to. Once more the seal was nothing he recognized, some sort of flower impressed in purple wax, but the parchment itself was heavy, of the most expensive sort. The contents, in a fine lacy hand, brought a thoughtful smile.

> *Cousin,*
>
> *The times are delicate, but I felt I must write to assure you of my goodwill, and to express my hopes of yours in return. Never fear; I know you and acknowledge you, but there are those who would not smile on anyone who approached you save through them. I ask nothing save that you hold my confidences in the fires of your heart.*
>
> *Alliandre Maritha*

"What are you grinning at?" Aviendha asked, peering at the letter curiously. There was still a touch of anger around her mouth for what he had put her through.

"It's just pleasant to hear from somebody simple in her ways," he told her. The Game of Houses was simple compared with *ji'e'toh*. There was enough of the name to let him know who sent it, but if the parchment fell into the wrong hands, it would seem a note to a friend, or maybe a warm reply to a petitioner. Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, Blessed of the Light, Queen of Ghealdan, would certainly never sign a letter so intimately to someone she had never met, above all not to the Dragon Reborn. Plainly she was worried about the Whitecloaks in Amadicia, and about the Prophet, Masema. He was going to have to do something about Masema. Alliandre was being cautious, not risking any more on paper than she had to. And she reminded him to burn this. The fires of his heart. Still, it was the first time any ruler had approached him without his sword at that nation's throat. Now if he could just find Elayne and give her Andor before he had another battle here.

The door opened gently and he looked up, but saw nothing and returned to the letter, wondering whether he had dug out everything that was in it. Reading, he rubbed his nose. Lews Therin and his talk of death. Rand could not rid himself of that feel of filth.

"Jalani and I will take our places outside," Nandera said.

He nodded absently over the letter. Thom would probably find six things in the first glance that he had missed.

Aviendha put a hand on his arm, then snatched it away. "Rand al'Thor, I must talk with you seriously."

Suddenly everything came together in his head. The door had opened. He was smelling filth, not just feeling it, but it was not really a smell. Dropping the letter, he pushed Aviendha away from him hard enough that she toppled with a startled yell—clear of him, though; clear of danger; everything seemed to have slowed down—and seized *saidin* as he spun.

Nandera and Jalani were just turning back to see what had made Aviendha shout. Rand had to look carefully to see the tall man in a gray coat that neither Maiden saw at all as he glided right by them, dark lifeless eyes fixed on Rand. Even concentrating, Rand found his own gaze wanting to slide past the Gray Man. That was what he was; one of the Shadow's assassins. As the letter was settling to the floor, the Gray Man realized Rand had seen him. Aviendha's shout still hung in the air and she was in mid bounce from sitting down hard; a knife appeared in the Gray Man's hand, held low, and he darted forward. Rand wrapped him in coils of Air almost contemptuously. And a wrist-thick bar of fire flashed past his shoulder, burned a hole through the Gray Man's chest large enough for a fist. The assassin died before he could twitch; his head fell over, and those eyes, no more dead than they had been, stared at Rand.

Dead, whatever had been done to the Gray Man to make him hard to see no longer held. Dead, he suddenly was as visible as anyone else. Aviendha, just starting to gather herself on the floor, gave a startled yelp, and Rand felt the goose bumps that told him she had embraced *saidar.* Nandera's hand jerked toward her veil with a bit-off exclamation, and Jalani half-raised hers.

Rand let the corpse fall, but he held on to *saidin* as he turned to confront Taim, standing in the doorway of his bedchamber. "Why did you kill him?" Only part of the cold hardness in his voice came from the Void. "I had him captured; he might have told me something, maybe even who sent him. What are you doing here anyway, sneaking in through my bedroom?"

Taim strolled in completely at ease, wearing a black coat with dragons entwined around the sleeves in blue and gold. Aviendha scrambled to her feet, and despite *saidar*, her eyes said she was as ready to use her drawn belt knife on Taim as she was to sheathe it. Nandera and Jalani had veiled, and stood poised on their toes, spears ready. Taim ignored them; Rand felt the Power leave the man. Taim did not even seem concerned that *saidin* still filled Rand. That peculiar almost-smile quirked his lips as he glanced at the dead Gray Man.

"Nasty things, the Soulless." Anybody else would have shivered; not Taim. "I came to your balcony by gateway because I thought you would want to hear the news right away."

"Somebody who learns too fast?" Rand broke in, and Taim flashed that half-smile again.

"No, not one of the Forsaken in disguise, not unless he's managed to disguise himself as a boy not much past twenty. His name is Jahar Narishma, and he has the spark, though it has not come out yet. Men usually show later than women. You should return to the school; you would be surprised by the changes."

Rand did not doubt it. Jahar Narishma was never an Andoran name; Traveling had no limits that he knew, but it seemed Taim's recruiting had ventured far afield. He said nothing, only glanced at the corpse on the carpet.

Taim grimaced, but he was not out of countenance, only irritated. "Believe me, I wish he was still alive as much as you do. I saw him and acted without thinking; the last thing I want is to see you dead. You seized him the moment I channeled, but it was too late to stop."

I must kill him, Lews Therin muttered, and the Power surged in Rand. Frozen, he struggled to push *saidin* away, and it was a struggle. Lews

Therin was trying to hang on, trying to channel. Finally, slowly, the One Power faded like water draining from a hole in a bucket.

Why? he demanded. *Why do you want to kill him?* There was no answer, only mad laughter and weeping in the distance.

Aviendha was looking at him with a face full of concern. She had put up her knife, but the tingle along his skin said she retained *saidar.* The two Maidens had unveiled, now that it seemed clear Taim's appearance was no attack; they managed to keep one eye on Taim, one on the rest of the room, and still give each other abashed glances for some reason.

Rand took a chair beside the table where his sword lay atop the Dragon Scepter. The struggle had lasted only moments, but his knees felt weak. Lews Therin had almost taken over, almost taken over *saidin* at least. Before, at the school, he had been able to fool himself, but not this time.

If Taim noticed anything, he showed no sign of it. Bending to pick up the letter, he glanced at it before handing it to Rand with a minimal bow.

Rand stuffed the parchment into his pocket. Nothing shook Taim; nothing disturbed his balance. Why did Lews Therin want to kill him? "The way you were all for going after the Aes Sedai, I'm surprised you don't suggest striking at Sammael. You and me together, maybe a few of the stronger students, dropping right on top of him in Illian through a gateway. That man had to come from Sammael."

"Perhaps," Taim said shortly, glancing at the Gray Man. "I would give a great deal to be sure." That had the ring of simple truth. "As for Illian, I doubt it would be as simple as disposing of a pair of Aes Sedai. I keep thinking what I would do in Sammael's place. I would have Illian warded in boxes, so if a man even thought of channeling, I'd know right where he was, and I would burn even the ground to ash before he had time to take a breath."

That was how Rand saw it, too; no one knew better than Sammael how to defend a place. Maybe it was just that Lews Therin was insane. Maybe jealous, too. Rand tried to tell himself he had not been avoiding the school because *he* was jealous, but he always felt a prickle of something around Taim. "You've delivered your news. I suggest you go see to training this Jahar Narishma. Train him well. He may have to use his ability soon enough."

For a moment Taim's dark eyes glittered, then he bowed his head slightly. Without a word he seized *saidin* and opened a gateway right there.

Rand made himself sit, empty, until the man was gone, the gateway thinning in a blazing line of light; he could not risk another struggle with Lews Therin, not when he might lose and find himself fighting Taim. Why *did* Lews Therin want the man dead? Light, Lews Therin seemed to want everybody dead, himself included.

It had been a most eventful morning, especially considering that the sky was still gray. Good news outweighed bad. He eyed the Gray Man sprawled on the carpet; that wound had probably been cauterized as soon as made, but Mistress Harfor would be sure to let him know, without saying a word, if there was even one bloodstain. As for this Sea Folk Wavemistress, she could stew in her own petulance for all of him; he had enough to handle without adding *another* touchy woman.

Nandera and Jalani were still shifting from foot to foot near the door. They should have gone to their places outside as soon as Taim left.

"If you two are upset over the Gray Man," he said, "forget it now. Only a fool expects to notice one of the Soulless except by chance, and neither one of you is a fool."

"It is not that," Nandera said stiffly. Jalani's jaw was so tight she was plainly fighting to hold her tongue.

Just that quickly, he understood. They did not believe they should have spotted the Gray Man, but they were still ashamed they had not. Ashamed of that, and fearful of the shame of having word of their "failure" spread. "I don't want anyone to know Taim was here, or what he said. People are anxious enough knowing the school is somewhere near the city without being afraid Taim or one of the students will just appear. I think the best way is just to keep quiet about everything that happened this morning. We can't keep a corpse secret, but I want you to promise you'll say nothing except that a man tried to kill me and died for it. That's all I intend to tell anybody, and I'd hate for you to make me out a liar."

The gratitude on their faces was remarkable. "I have *toh*," they murmured almost together.

Rand cleared his throat roughly; that was not what he had been after, but at least he had eased their minds. Suddenly a way to deal with Sulin popped into his head. She would not like it, but it would still be meeting her *toh*, maybe the more so because she would not like it, and it would relieve his conscience somewhat and at least meet some of his *toh* to her.

"Get on to your guarding now, or I'll start thinking *you* want to stare at my eyebrows." That *was* what Nandera had said. Aviendha was fascinated by his *eyebrows*? "Go on. And find somebody to haul this fellow away." They left, all smiles and flickering handtalk, and he stood, taking Aviendha by the arm. "You said we had to talk. Come into the bedroom until this room is cleaned up." If there was a stain, maybe he could channel it out.

Aviendha jerked free. "No! Not there!" Drawing a deep breath, she moderated her tone, but she still looked suspicious, and more than a little angry. "Why can we not talk here?" No reason except a dead man on the floor, but that did not count with her. She pushed him back into his chair almost violently, then studied him and took another breath before speaking.

"*Ji'e'toh* is the core of the Aiel. We *are ji'e'toh.* This morning you shamed me to the bone." Folding her arms beneath her breasts and fixing him eye to eye, she lectured him on his ignorance and the importance of hiding it until she could rectify the matter, then went on to the fact that *toh* had to be met at all costs. She spent some time on that.

He was sure this was not what she had meant when she said she had to talk with him, but he was enjoying looking into her eyes too much to wonder. Enjoying it. Bit by bit he chased down the pleasure her eyes gave him and crushed it until only a dull ache remained.

He thought he had hidden it, but his face must have changed. Aviendha slowly trailed off and stood there staring at him, breathing hard. With a visible effort she pulled her eyes away. "At least you understand now," she muttered. "I must. . . . I need to. . . . So long as you understand." Gathering her skirts, she swept across the room—the corpse might as well have been a bush she had to step around—and out.

Leaving him in a room dimmer for some reason, alone with a dead man. That fit all too well. When *gai'shain* came to bear away the Gray Man, they found Rand laughing softly.

Padan Fain sat with his feet up on a hassock, studying the beauty of new-breaking sunlight glittering on the curved blade of the dagger that he turned over and over in his hands. Carrying it at his belt was not enough; from time to time he simply had to handle it. The large ruby set in the pommel shone with a deep malevolence. The dagger was part of him, or he of it. The dagger was part of Aridhol, what men called Shadar Logoth, but then, he was part of Aridhol too. Or it was part of him. He was quite mad and knew it very well, but being mad, he did not care. Sunlight gleamed on steel, steel more deadly now than any made at Thakan'dar.

A rustling caught his ear, and he glanced toward where the Myrddraal sat waiting his pleasure on the far side of the room. It did not try to meet his gaze; he had broken it of that long since.

He tried to return to his contemplation of the blade, to the perfect beauty of perfect death, the beauty of what Aridhol had been and would be again, but the Myrddraal had broken his concentration. Spoiled it. He very nearly went over and killed the thing. Halfmen took a long time to die; how long if he used the dagger? As if sensing his thoughts, it stirred again. No, it could be useful still.

It was hard for him to concentrate on one thing for long anyway. Except Rand al'Thor, of course. He could feel al'Thor, could point to him, this close. Al'Thor pulled at him, pulled till it hurt. There was a difference lately, a difference that had come suddenly, almost as if someone else had suddenly taken a partial possession of al'Thor, and in doing so pushed away a part of Fain's own possession. No matter. Al'Thor belonged to him.

He wished he could feel al'Thor's pain; surely he had caused him pain at least. Pinpricks only so far, but enough pinpricks would drain him dry. The Whitecloaks were set hard against the *Dragon Reborn.* Fain's lips peeled back in a sneer. Unlikely Niall would have ever supported al'Thor any more than Elaida would have, but it was best not to take too much for granted with Rand bloody al'Thor. Well, he had brushed them both with what he carried from Aridhol; they might possibly trust their own mothers, but never al'Thor now.

The door burst open, and young Perwyn Belman burst into the room pursued by his mother. Nan Belman was a handsome woman, though Fain seldom noticed whether a woman was or not now, a Darkfriend who had thought her oaths were just dabbling in wickedness until Padan Fain appeared on her doorstep. She believed him a Darkfriend too, one high in the councils. Fain had gone far beyond that, of course; he would be dead the moment one of the Chosen laid hands on him. The thought made him giggle.

Perwyn and his mother both shied at the sight of the Myrddraal, of course, but the boy recovered first and reached Fain while the woman was still trying to find her breath.

"Master Mordeth, Master Mordeth," the boy piped, dancing from foot to foot in his red-and-white coat, "I have news you wanted."

Mordeth. Had he used that name? Sometimes he could not recall what name he had used, what name was his. Sheathing the dagger beneath his coat, he put on a warm smile. "And what news would that be now, lad?"

"Someone tried to kill the Dragon Reborn this morning. A man. He's dead now. He got right past all the Aiel and everything, right into the Lord Dragon's rooms."

Fain felt his smile become a snarl. Trying to kill al'Thor? Al'Thor was his! Al'Thor would die by his hand, no other! Wait. The assassin had gotten past the Aiel, into al'Thor's rooms? "A Gray Man!" He did not recognize that grating sound as his own voice. Gray Men meant the Chosen. Would he never be free of their interference?

All that rage had to go somewhere before he burst. Almost casually he brushed his hand across the boy's face. The boy's eyes bulged; he began trembling so hard his teeth rattled.

Fain did not really understand the tricks he could work. A bit of something from the Dark One, perhaps, a bit from Aridhol. It had been after there, after he stopped being just Padan Fain, that the ability began to manifest, slowly. All he knew was that he could do certain things now, as long as he could touch what he worked with.

Nan flung herself to her knees beside his chair, clutching at his coat. "Mercy, Master Mordeth," she panted. "Please, have mercy. He's only a child. Only a child!"

For a moment he studied her curiously, head tilted. She was quite a pretty woman, really. Planting a foot against her chest, he shoved her aside so he could stand. The Myrddraal, peeking furtively, jerked its eyeless face away when it saw him watching. It remembered his . . . tricks very well.

Fain paced; he had to move. Al'Thor's downfall had to be his doing—his!—not the Chosen's. How could he hurt the man again, hurt to the heart? There were those nattering girls at Culain's Hound, but if al'Thor did not come when the Two Rivers was harrowed, what would he care even if Fain burned the inn down and the chits with it? What did he have to work with? Only a few remained of his onetime Children of the Light. That had only been a test really—he would have made the man who actually managed to kill al'Thor beg to be skinned alive!—yet it had cost him numbers. He had the Myrddraal, a handful of Trollocs hidden outside the city, a few

Darkfriends gathered in Caemlyn and on the way from Tar Valon. The pull of al'Thor dragged him on. It was the most remarkable thing about Darkfriends. There should be nothing to single out a Darkfriend from anyone else, but of late he found he could tell one at a glance, even someone who had only thought of swearing to the Shadow, as if they had a sooty mark on their foreheads.

No! He had to concentrate. Concentrate! Clear his mind. His eye fell on the woman, moaning and stroking her gibbering son, talking to him softly as if that would help. Fain had no notion how to stop one of his tricks once it began; the boy should survive, if a trifle the worse for wear, once the thing ground to a conclusion. Fain had not put his whole heart into making it. Clear his mind. Think of something else. A pretty woman. How long since he had had a woman?

Smiling, he took her arm. He had to pull her away from the fool boy. “Come with me.” His voice was different, grander, the Lugard accent gone, but he did not notice; he never did. “I am sure you, at least, know how to show true respect. If you please me, no harm will come to you.” Why was she struggling? He knew he was being charming. He was going to have to hurt her. It was all al'Thor's fault.

* * *

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CHAPTER 29

Fire and Spirit

Pausing in the shade in front of the Little Tower, Nynaeve carefully dabbed at her face, then tucked the handkerchief back up her sleeve. Not that it did much good—sweat popped out again right away—but she wanted to look her best inside. She wanted to look cool, serene, dignified. Small chance of that. Her temples were throbbing, and her stomach felt . . . fragile; she had not been able to look at breakfast this morning. Just the heat, of course, but she wanted to go back to her bed, curl up and die. To top it off, her weather sense was nagging at her; the molten sun should have been hidden by roiling black clouds and threatening bolts of lightning.

The Warders lounging out front did not look like guards at first glance, but they were. They reminded her of the Aiel she had seen in the Stone of Tear; they probably looked like wolves even when asleep. A bald, square-faced man, no taller than she but nearly as wide as he was tall, trotted out of the Little Tower and down the street, the hilt of the sword on his back thrusting up over his shoulder. Even he—Jori, bonded to Morvrin—managed it.

Top-knotted Uno passed, threading his horse through the crowd and hardly seeming to acknowledge the heat despite the steel plates and mail that covered him from the shoulders down. He twisted in his saddle to watch her with his good eye, and her face darkened. Birgitte *had* talked. Every time the man saw her he was obviously waiting for her to ask him for horses. She was almost ready to. Even Elayne could not say they were doing any good. Well, she could, and did, but she should not.

Uno rode out of sight around a corner, and Nynaeve sighed. She was just trying to put off going inside. Myrelle might be there. Blotting her face again, she frowned at her wrinkled hand—today would be the eleventh scrubbing pots, with twenty-nine more to go; twenty-nine!—and went in.

It was slightly cooler in what had been the common room when the Little Tower was an inn, offering a little relief to her aching head. Everyone called it “the waiting room” now. No time had been wasted for repairs here. The fireplaces had stones missing, and lathing showed through holes in the plaster. Areina and Nicola were working brooms with another novice, but making little impression on the age-roughened floor; Areina wore a scowl, but, then, she was never pleased at having to do chores with the novices. No one went choreless in Salidar. At the far end of the room Romanda was speaking with two slender, aged Aes Sedai—their faces might be ageless, but their hair was white—plainly new arrivals by the thin dustcloaks still hanging down their backs. No sign of Myrelle, which brought a sigh of relief; the woman raked Nynaeve over the coals at every opportunity, then raked her the other way! Aes Sedai sat at tables, mismatched but carefully arranged in rows, working over parchments or issuing orders to Warders and servants, but fewer than the first time she had seen the room. Only the Sitters and their servants lived on the floors above now; everyone else had been removed to make space for Aes Sedai to work in. The Little Tower had taken on attributes of the White Tower, the precise formality above all. When Nynaeve first saw this room it had had a bustle about it, an air of something being done. A false air, then. Now it seemed almost slow, but it was the feel of the White Tower.

Approaching one of the tables, not the nearest, she curtsied carefully. “Pardon, Aes Sedai, but I was told Siuan and Leane are here. Could you tell me where to find them?”

Brendas’ pen stopped moving and she looked up with cool dark eyes. Nynaeve had chosen her instead of someone nearer the door because Brendas was one of the few Aes Sedai who had never grilled her about Rand. Besides, once, when Siuan was Amyrlin, Siuan had chosen Brendas as one who could be trusted. That had nothing to do with this, but Nynaeve found small comforts where she could.

“They are with some of the Sitters, child.” Brendas’ voice was chimes, as emotionless as her pale face. Whites seldom showed emotion, but Brendas never showed any.

Nynaeve stifled an irritated sigh. If Sitters had them reporting on their eyes-and-ears, they might not be free for hours yet. Maybe not for the rest of the day. By then she would be head-down among the pots. “Thank you, Aes Sedai.”

Brendas stopped her curtsy with a gesture. “Did Theodrin make any progress with you yesterday?”

“No, Aes Sedai.” If her voice was bit tight, a touch curt, she had reason. Theodrin had said she meant to try everything, and apparently she really did mean everything. Yesterday’s effort had involved sipping wine to relax her, only somehow Nynaeve had ended up taking more than just a few sips. She did not think she would ever forget being carried back to her room singing—singing!—or remember without going red in the face. Brendas had to know. Everyone had to know. Nynaeve wanted to writhe.

“I only ask because your studies seem to be suffering. I’ve heard several sisters remark that you appear to have reached the end of your remarkable discoveries. Your extra chores might be the problem—but Elayne reveals something new every day, even with teaching her classes and working at the pots. A number of sisters are wondering whether they might not be able to help you more than Theodrin can. If we took it in turns, working you all day every day might prove more fruitful than these informal sessions with someone who is, after all, little more than Accepted herself.” It was all delivered in a level tone without the slightest accusation, yet Nynaeve’s face heated as if she had been shouted at.

“I’m sure Theodrin will find the key any day, Aes Sedai,” she almost whispered. “I will try harder, Aes Sedai.” Bobbing a hurried curtsy, she whirled around before Brendas could stop her again. With the result that she bumped into one of the two white-haired newcomers. They looked enough alike to be sisters in truth, almost mirror images of one another, with fine bones and long patrician faces.

The bump was more of a brush, really, and she did try to apologize, but the Aes Sedai fixed her with a stare to do a hawk proud. “Watch where you are going, Accepted. In my day, an Accepted who tried to trample Aes Sedai would have had hair whiter than mine by the time she finished scrubbing floors.”

The other touched her arm. “Oh, do let the child go, Vandene. We have work to do.”

Vandene directed a sharp sniff at Nynaeve, but allowed herself to be led outside.

Waiting a moment to let them leave, Nynaeve saw Sheriam come out of one of the meeting rooms with Myrelle, Morvrin and Beonin. Myrelle saw her, too, and started in her direction, but only a step before Sheriam and

Morvrin each put a hand on the Green sister's arms and spoke quickly and softly, with many a glance at Nynaeve. Still talking, the four crossed the room and disappeared through another door.

Nynaeve waited until she was back in front of the Little Tower before giving her braid a firm, deliberate tug. They had met the Wise Ones last night. Guessing why the others had stopped Myrelle from speaking was easy enough. If Egwene had finally been there in the Heart of the Stone, she was not to be told. Nynaeve al'Meara was in disgrace. Nynaeve al'Meara was scrubbing pots like a novice when she might have been at least a step higher than Accepted. Nynaeve al'Meara was getting nowhere with Theodrin, and all her marvelous discoveries had dried up. Nynaeve al'Meara would never be Aes Sedai. She had known it was a mistake to start funneling everything from Moghedien through Elayne. She had known it!

Her tongue tried to curl up at the memory of a vile taste. Boiled catfern and powdered mavinsleaf. An antidote she had used on many a child who would not stop lying. All right; she *had* been the one to suggest it herself, but it was still a mistake. Aes Sedai were no longer talking about her innovations; they talked about the lack of them. Aes Sedai who had never taken more than a passing interest in her block were now caught up in how to break it down. She could not win. One way or another she was going to end up with Aes Sedai examining her from hair to toenails, sunup to sundown.

She yanked harder on her braid, hard enough to hurt her scalp, and the way her head felt, that did nothing for her temper. A soldier in an archer's flat helmet and padded jerkin slowed to look at her curiously, but she gave him such a stare of refined malevolence that he stumbled over his own feet and quickly lost himself in the throng. *Why* did Elayne have to be so stubborn?

A man's hands closed on her shoulders, and she whirled about with words that would rip his head from his neck. They died on her tongue.

Thom Merrilin grinned down at her through his long white mustaches, sharp blue eyes twinkling in his gnarled face. "By the look of you, Nynaeve, I could almost think you were angry, but I know you have such a sweet disposition people ask you to dabble your fingers in their tea."

Juilin Sandar was there beside him, the lean fellow looking carved from dark wood, leaning on his thumb-thick bamboo staff. Juilin was

Tairen, not Taraboner, but he still wore that ridiculous flat-topped conical red cap, even more battered than she had last seen it. He snatched it off when she glanced at him. Both men were dusty and travel-worn, their faces gaunt, though neither had been particularly fleshy to begin with. They looked as if they had spent the weeks since leaving Salidar sleeping in their clothes when they were not in the saddle.

Before Nynaeve could open her mouth, they were hit by a human storm. Elayne flung herself at Thom so hard he staggered. He of course put his hands under her arms and hoisted her, whirling her around in a circle like a child despite his slight limp. He was laughing when he set her down again, and so was she. She reached up and tugged at one of his mustaches, and they fell to laughing even harder. He examined her hands, as wrinkled as Nynaeve's, asking what sort of trouble she had dived into without him to keep her on the straight and narrow, and she replied that she had no need of anyone to tell her what to do, only she spoiled it by blushing, and giggling, and biting her lip.

Nynaeve took a deep breath. Sometimes the pair of them took playing at father and daughter entirely too far. Sometimes Elayne seemed to think she was about ten, and so did Thom. "I thought you had a novice class this morning, Elayne."

The other woman glanced at her sideways, then gathered herself in an attempt at decorum that came too late, and set about straightening her banded dress. "I asked Calindin to take it," she said casually. "I thought I might keep you company. And I'm glad I did," she added with a grin for Thom. "Now we can hear everything you learned in Amadicia."

Nynaeve sniffed. Keep her company indeed. She did not remember everything about yesterday, but she remembered Elayne laughing while getting her undressed and putting her to bed with the sun not yet all the way down. And she was sure she remembered the woman asking whether she wanted a bucket of water to cool her head.

Thom noticed nothing; most men were blind, though he was sharp enough usually. "We will have to be quick," he said. "Now Sheriam's drained us dry, she means to have us report to some of the Sitters in person. Luckily, it boils down well enough. There aren't enough Whitecloaks along the Eldar to keep a mouse from crossing, if he had drums and trumpets to announce him a day ahead. Except for a strong force on the Tarabon border and the men he has trying to hold back the Prophet in the north, Niall seems to be gathering every last Whitecloak around Amadicia, and Ailron is pulling in his soldiers, too. Talk of Salidar had started in the streets before we left, but if Niall has even thought about the place twice, I could find not a hint of it anywhere."

"Tarabon," Juilin muttered, studying his cap. "All ill country for anyone who doesn't know how to take care of herself, or so we heard."

Nynaeve was not sure which of the two was best at dissembling, but she was sure either could lie to your face to make a wool merchant blue with envy. And right then, she was sure they were hiding something.

Elayne saw more than that. Gripping Thom's lapel, she peered up at him. "You heard something about Mother," she said calmly, and it was not a question.

Thom knuckled his mustaches. "There are a hundred rumors on every street in Amadicia, child, each wilder than the last." His gnarled leathery face was pure innocence and openness, but the man had not been innocent the day he was born. "It's said the whole White Tower is here in Salidar, with ten thousand Warders ready to cross the Eldar. It's said Aes Sedai have captured Tanchico, and Rand has wings he uses to fly around in the night, and—"

"Thom?" Elayne said.

He snorted, glaring at Juilin and Nynaeve as though this were their fault. "Child, it's just a rumor, as crazed as any we heard. I could not confirm anything, and believe me, I tried. I meant not to mention it. It just stirs up your pain. Let it pass, child."

"Thom." Much firmer. Shifting his feet, Juilin looked as if he wished he were somewhere else. Thom just looked grim.

"Well, if you must hear it. Everybody in Amadicia seems to think your mother is in the Fortress of the Light, that she's going to lead an army of Whitecloaks back to Andor."

Elayne shook her head, laughing softly. "Oh, Thom, do you think I would worry over something like that? Mother would never go to the Whitecloaks. I could wish she had. I could wish she was alive to. Even though it violates everything she ever taught me—bringing foreign soldiers into Andor; and Whitecloaks!—I could wish it. But if wishes were wings . . ." Her smile was sad, but it was a muted sadness. "I have done my grieving, Thom. Mother is dead, and I must do my best to be worthy of her.

She would never have gone running after ridiculous rumors, or wept over them either."

"Child," he said awkwardly.

Nynaeve wondered what if anything he himself felt about Morgase's death. Hard as it was to believe, he had been Morgase's lover once, when she was young and Elayne little more than a babe. Back then he must not have looked as though he had been left to dry in the sun too long. Nynaeve knew little more of how or why it ended than that he had slipped out of Caemlyn with an arrest warrant at his heels. Not the mark of a love to be told in the stories. At the moment he certainly appeared concerned only with whether Elayne was telling the truth or hiding her hurt, with patting her shoulder and stroking her hair. If Nynaeve had not wished they would just once snap at one another like normal people, she would have thought it a pretty picture.

A throat clearing broke up the vignette. "Master Merrilin?" Tabitha said, spreading her white dress in a quick curtsy. "Master Sandar? Sheriam Sedai says the Sitters are ready to receive you. She says you were not supposed to leave the Little Tower."

"The Little Tower, is it?" Thom said dryly, eyeing the former inn. "Elayne, they can't keep us forever. When we're done, you and I can discuss . . . whatever you wish." Motioning Tabiya to lead, he marched inside, his limp obvious, the way it was when he was tired. Juilin squared his shoulders and followed as though walking to a gallows; he was Tairen, after all.

Nynaeve and Elayne stood there, neither quite looking at the other.

Finally, Nynaeve said, "I was not—" at the same time that Elayne said, "I should not—" They cut off together, and moments passed in fidgeting with skirts and blotting faces.

"It is too hot to just stand here," Nynaeve said at last.

It was unlikely that the Sitters who were hearing Siuan and Leane's reports would stop to hear Thom and Juilin's. They split such things among them. That left Logain, much as she wished it did not. She would not learn anything. But it was better than twiddling her thumbs until a dozen Aes Sedai descended on her with an hourly schedule.

With a sigh she started down the street. Elayne came along as though she had been invited. That helped Nynaeve find the anger she was going to need. Abruptly she realized that Elayne's wrists were bare.

“Where is the bracelet?” she asked softly. No one in the street would understand if they heard, but caution once forgotten could be forgotten once too often. “Where is Marigan?”

“The bracelet is in my pouch, Nynaeve.” Elayne stepped aside to let a high-wheeled cart pass, then joined Nynaeve again behind the cart. “Marigan is doing our laundry, with about twenty other women around her. And groaning every time she moves. She said something she didn’t think Birgitte would hear, and Birgitte. . . . I *had* to take the thing off, Nynaeve. Birgitte had the right, and it *hurt.* I told Marigan to say she fell down some stairs.”

Nynaeve sniffed, but her heart was not in it. She had not been wearing the bracelet much of late. Not because she could not hand over anything she dug out as her own. She was still sure Moghedien knew *something* about Healing even if she did not realize it herself—nobody could be that blind—and there was the trick of detecting a man’s channeling that Moghedien kept saying they almost had right. The truth of it was, she was afraid she might do far worse than Birgitte had if she had any more contact with the woman than was absolutely necessary. Maybe it was the way satisfaction seemed to underlie everything else even when Moghedien was groaning from the fed-back pain of Nynaeve trying to master that detection. Maybe it was remembering how afraid she had been, alone with the woman without the bracelet. Maybe growing disgust at keeping one of the Forsaken from judgment. Maybe some of all of it. What she did know was that she had to make herself put on the bracelet now, and that whenever she saw Moghedien’s face, she wanted to pound it with her fists.

“I should not have laughed,” Elayne said. “I am sorry I did.”

Nynaeve stopped dead so suddenly that a horseman had to jerk his reins to keep from riding over her. He shouted something before the crowd carried him away, but shock muffled his words beyond hearing. Not shock at the apology. At what she had to say. The right thing to say. The truth.

Unable to look at Elayne, she started walking again. “You had every right to laugh. I. . . .” She swallowed hard. “I made a complete fool of myself.” She had. A few sips, Theodrin said; a cup. And she emptied the pitcher. If you were going to fail, better to have some other reason than that you just could not do it. “You should have sent for that bucket and dunked my head until I could recite *The Great Hunt of the Horn* without a mistake.”

She risked a glance from the corner of her eye. Small spots of color rested in Elayne's cheeks. So there had been mention of a bucket.

"It could happen to anyone," the other woman said simply.

Nynaeve felt her own cheeks heating. When it had happened to Elayne, she had dunked the girl to wash away the wine. "You should have done whatever you needed to . . . to sober me."

It was quite the oddest argument Nynaeve could remember, with her insisting she had been a total fool and deserved whatever came of it, while Elayne made excuse after excuse for her. Nynaeve did not understand why it felt so refreshing, taking all the blame on herself that way. She could not recall ever doing that before, not without hedging as far as she was able. She very nearly got angry with Elayne for not agreeing that she had been a childish buffoon. It lasted until they reached the small thatched house on the edge of the village where Logain was kept.

"If you don't stop this," Elayne said finally, "I vow I'll send for a bucket of water right this instant."

Nynaeve opened her mouth, then closed it again. Even in this newfound euphoria of admitting she had been wrong, that was going too far. Feeling this good, she could not face Logain. Feeling this good, it would be useless anyway, without Moghedien and the bracelet she definitely felt too fine to put on. She glanced at the two Warders standing guard beside the stone-linteled door. They were not close enough to hear, but she still pitched her voice low. "Elayne, let's go. Tonight." With Thom and Juilin in Salidar, there was no need to ask Uno to find horses. "Not to Caemlyn, if you don't want. To Ebou Dar. Merilille will never find that bowl, and Sheriam will never let us go find it. What do you say? Tonight?"

"No, Nynaeve. What good can we do Rand if they take us for runaways? Which is what we'd be. You promised, Nynaeve. You promised, if we found something."

"I promised if we found something we could use. All we've found is this!" Nynaeve thrust her shriveled hands under the other woman's nose.

The firmness slid from Elayne's face, and her voice; she pursed her lips and studied the ground. "Nynaeve, you know I told Birgitte we were staying. Well, it seems she told Uno that under no circumstances was he to provide you with a horse unless she said so. She told him you were thinking of running away. I didn't find out until it was too late." Her head tossed irritably. “If this is what having a Warder is like, I don’t know why anybody wants one.”

Nynaeve thought her eyes might burst from indignation. So *that* was why he had been staring at her. Euphoria vanished in a heat of—well, partly anger, partly humiliation. The man *knew*; he thought she. . . . Wait. For a moment she frowned at Elayne, then decided not to voice the question that had come to mind. Was Nynaeve the only name Birgitte had mentioned to Uno, or was Elayne perhaps included? Elayne had found herself quite an adopted family. In Thom, an indulgent father who wanted to teach her everything he knew, and in Birgitte, an older sister who thought it was her job to keep the younger from breaking her neck riding horses she could not handle yet.

“In that case,” she said flatly, “let’s see what I can learn from Logain.”

It was a small house, only two rooms, but thick stone walls made it relatively cool. Logain was in his shirtsleeves, smoking a pipe and reading by a window. The Aes Sedai were taking good care of him. The chairs and tables were as fine as anything in Salidar—nothing elaborate, but well made, though nothing matched anything else—and a scroll-woven red-and-gold carpet covered much of a floor that was swept so clean Nynaeve doubted he did the sweeping.

He set his book down when they entered, seemingly not at all put out by the lack of a knock. Rising leisurely, he tapped out his pipe, donned his coat and only then made a smooth leg. “It is good to see you again after so long. I thought you had forgotten me. Will you join me in some wine? The Aes Sedai keep me on short supply, but what they do let me have is not bad at all.”

The offer of wine would have been enough—Nynaeve barely suppressed a wince—if she had needed more. Thinking of Uno, the fact that he was male was enough. No need to pull up any of her anger from the Little Tower. Thinking of it added its bit, though. The True Source was suddenly there, an unseen warmth just out of sight. She opened herself, and *saidar* flooded her; if what she had felt earlier was euphoria, this was beyond ecstasy. She *was* surrendering to it, burn Theodrin!

“Sit down,” she told him coldly. “I’ll have no chatter out of you. Answer when you’re spoken to, and otherwise hold your tongue.”

Logain only shrugged and complied, meek as a puppy. No, not meek; that smile was pure insolence. Part came from his feelings toward Aes

Sedai, Nynaeve was certain, and part. . . . He watched Elayne take another chair, arranging her skirts with a studied care, and even if Nynaeve had not seen what he was looking at, she would have known it was a woman. There was no smirking about it, no leering, just. . . . Nynaeve did not know what, only that he directed the same at her, and she was suddenly very much aware that she was a woman and he a man. Maybe it was just that he was handsome and had broad shoulders, but she liked to think better of herself. Of course that was not it.

Clearing her throat, she wove filaments of *saidar* into him, Air and Water, Fire and Earth, Spirit. All the elements of Healing, but used now to probe. It would have helped to lay her hands on him, but she could not bring herself to do that. Bad enough to touch him with the Power. He was healthy as a bull and almost as strong, nothing wrong with him in the slightest—except for the hole.

It was not really a hole, more a feeling that what seemed continuous was not, that what seemed smooth and straight was really skirting around an absence. She knew that sensation well, from the early days, back when she thought she might really learn something. It still made her skin crawl.

He looked up at her intently. She did not remember moving closer. His face was fixed in a mask of brazen contempt; she might not be Aes Sedai, but she was the next thing to it.

“How can you do all of that at once?” Elayne asked. “I could not keep track of half of it.”

“Hush,” Nynaeve murmured. Hiding the effort required, she took Logain’s head in her hands roughly. Yes. It was better with physical contact, the impressions sharper.

She directed the full flow of *saidar* into where the hole should have been—and was almost surprised to find an emptiness. Of course, she still did not expect to learn anything. Men were as different from women in the Power as they were in flesh, maybe more so. She might as well study a rock to find out about fish. It was hard to keep her thoughts on what she was doing, knowing she was only going through motions, killing time as it were.

What is Myrelle going to say? Would she keep back a message from Egwene? That emptiness, so small she could pass right over it, was vast once she slipped the flows inside, immense enough to swallow them all. *If only I could talk to Egwene. I’ll wager once she knows the Tower is sending an embassy to Rand, and the Aes Sedai here are just sitting on their hands,* *she'll help me convince Elayne we've done all we can here.* Vast emptiness; nothingness. What about what she had found in Siuan and Leane, the feel of something cut? She was sure it was real, however faint. Men and women might be different, but maybe. . . . *All I need to do is talk to her somehow. She'll see that Rand would be better off with us there. Elayne will listen to her; Elayne thinks Egwene knows Rand better than anybody else.* There it was. Something cut. Just an impression, but the same as in Siuan and Leane. *So how do I find her? If only she'd pop into our dreams again. I'll bet I can talk her into joining us. The three of us would do much better with Rand. Together, we could tell him what we learn in* Tel'aran'rhiod, *keep him from making some wool-headed mistake with the Aes Sedai. She'll see that.* Something about that cut. . . . If it was bridged with Fire and Spirit, so. . . .

It was the slight widening of Logain's eyes that told her what she had done. Breath froze in her throat. She backed away from him so fast she stumbled over her skirt.

"Nynaeve," Elayne said, sitting up straight, "what is the mat—?"

A heartbeat, and Nynaeve had all of *saidar* she could hold redirected into a shield. "Go find Sheriam," she said hurriedly. "Nobody else but Sheriam. Tell her. . . ." She drew a deep breath that seemed like her first in hours; her heart was speeding to beat galloping horses. "Tell her I've Healed Logain."

* * *

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CHAPTER 30

To Heal Again

Something pushed against the shield Nynaeve had fastened between Logain and the True Source, building until the shield began to bend and the weave trembled on the brink of ripping apart. She let *saidar* flow through her, sweetness reaching the very edge of pain, channeling every thread into Spirit, into the shield. “Go, Elayne!” She did not care one bit if it came out a squeal.

Elayne, the Light shine on her, wasted no time on questions. She bounded out of her chair and was gone at a dead run.

Logain had not moved a muscle. His eyes held Nynaeve’s; they seemed to shine. Light, he was big. She fumbled for her belt knife, realized how ridiculous that was—he could probably take it away from her without sweating a drop more than he already was; his shoulders suddenly seemed as wide as she was tall—and diverted some of her weave to Air, to bonds that fastened him right where he sat, arm and leg. He was still big, yet suddenly he looked more normal, entirely manageable. Only then did it occur to her that she had lessened the strength of the shield. But she could not channel a hair more; already the . . . the pure joy of life that was *saidar* was so strong in her that she nearly wanted to weep. He smiled at her.

One of the Warders put his head in at the door, a dark-haired man with a bold nose and a deep, white scar running along his lean jaw. “Is anything amiss? The other Accepted, she went running like she had sat in the nettle patch.”

“Everything is quite under control,” she told him coolly. As coolly as she could manage. Nobody must know—nobody!—until she had a chance to speak with Sheriam, to get the woman on her side. “Elayne just remembered something she had forgotten.” That sounded inane. “You may leave us. I am busy.”

Tervail—that was his name; Tervail Dura, bonded to Beonin; and what under the Light did his name matter?—Tervail gave her a wry grin and a mocking bow before retreating. Warders seldom let Accepted get by with playing at Aes Sedai.

Not licking her lips took considerable effort. She studied Logain. He was outwardly calm, as if nothing had changed.

"There's no need for this, Nynaeve. Do you think I'll decide to attack a village with hundreds of Aes Sedai in it? They'd chop me to pieces before I took two steps."

"Be quiet," she said mechanically. Fumbling behind her, she found a chair and sat down, never taking her eyes off him. Light, what was keeping Sheriam? Sheriam had to understand it was an accident. She had to! Anger at herself was the only thing that kept her able to channel. How could she have been so careless, such a blind idiot?

"Don't be afraid," Logain said. "I won't turn against them now. They're succeeding in what I want, whether they know it or not. The Red Ajah is finished. In a year, there won't be an Aes Sedai will dare admit she's Red."

"I said be quiet!" she snapped. "Do you think I'll believe it's only Reds you hate?"

"You know, I saw a man once who will cause more trouble than I ever did. Maybe it was the Dragon Reborn; I don't know. It was when they took me through Caemlyn after I was captured. He was far away, but I saw a . . . a glow, and I knew he'd shake the world. Caged as I was, I couldn't help laughing."

Shifting a small portion of the Air holding him, she forced it between his jaws for a gag. His brows lowered in dark anger, gone in a flash, but she did not care. She had him secure now. At least. . . . He had not attempted to struggle at all, but that could be because he had known from the first that she would only snare him. It could. But how hard had he tried to break through her shield? That push, not exactly slow in building but certainly not fast. Almost like a man stretching muscles long unused, pushing at something not with the intent of moving it but just from the need to feel those muscles again. The thought turned her belly to ice.

Infuriatingly, Logain's eyes crinkled in amusement, almost as though he knew everything that had passed through her head. He sat there with his mouth gaping foolishly, bound and shielded, and he was the one at his ease.

How *could* she have been such a fool? She was not fit to be Aes Sedai, not if her block crumbled this instant. She was not fit to be let out alone. They ought to tell Birgitte to make sure she did not fall on her face in the dust trying to cross the street.

It was not intentional, but berating herself kept her anger on a slow simmer until the door burst open. It was not Elayne.

Sheriam followed Romanda in, with Myrelle and Morvrin and Takima close behind, then Lelaine and Janya, Delana and Bharatine and Beonin, more, crowding in until they filled the room. Nynaeve could see others through the door that had no room to close. Those inside peered at her, and her weaving, so intently that she swallowed hard and all her fine anger collapsed. And of course, so did her shield and the bonds holding Logain.

Before Nynaeve could ask somebody to shield him again, Nisao planted herself in front of her. Short as Nisao was, she managed to loom. "Now what is all this nonsense about you Healing him?"

"Is that what she says she did?" Logain actually managed to sound surprised.

Varilin crowded in beside Nisao. The slender red-haired Gray loomed by virtue of being as tall as Logain. "I feared this as soon as everyone began petting her over her discoveries. Once they ran out, the petting stopped, and she was sure to make some wild claim to get it back."

"It was letting her moon over Siuan and Leane," Romanda said firmly. "And this fellow. She should have been told there are things that cannot be Healed, and there's an end to it!"

"But I did!" Nynaeve protested. "I did! Please shield him. Please, you must!" The Aes Sedai in front of her turned to look at Logain, opening just enough space for her to see him too. He met all the stares with a bland face. He even shrugged!

"I think the least we can do is shield him until we are absolutely certain," Sheriam suggested. Romanda nodded, and a shield sprang into being strong enough to hold a giant as the glow of *saidar* surrounded nearly every woman in the room. Romanda restored a little order by briskly naming six to maintain a lesser but adequate shield.

Myrelle's hand closed around Nynaeve's arm. "If you will forgive us, Romanda, we need to talk to Nynaeve alone."

Sheriam's hand closed on the other arm. "Best if we don't leave it too long."

Romanda nodded absently. She was frowning at Logain. Most of the Aes Sedai were; nobody was leaving.

Sheriam and Myrelle pulled Nynaeve to her feet and propelled her toward the door.

"What are you doing?" she demanded breathlessly. "Where are you taking me?" Outside they jostled through the throng of Aes Sedai, many of whom peered at her sharply, even accusingly. They pushed right by Elayne, who grimaced apologetically. Nynaeve looked over her shoulder as the two Aes Sedai hustled her along so quickly she kept stumbling. Not that she expected Elayne to help her, but it might be the last time she saw her. Beonin was saying something to Elayne, who darted away though the crowd. "What are you going to do to me?" Nynaeve moaned.

"We could keep you scrubbing pots for the rest of your natural life," Sheriam said conversationally.

Myrelle nodded. "You could work in the kitchens all day."

"We could have you switched every day instead."

"Peel your hide off in strips."

"Nail you into a barrel and feed you through the bunghole in the end."

"Only mush, though. Stale mush."

Nynaeve's knees sagged. "It was an accident! I swear! I didn't mean to!"

Sheriam gave her a hard shake without slowing a step. "Don't be a fool, child. You may just have done the impossible."

"You believe me? You believe me! Why didn't you say something when Nisao and Varilin and—Why didn't you say something?"

"I said 'may,' child." Sheriam's voice was depressingly neutral.

"Another possibility," Myrelle said, "is that your brain has swollen from strain." Her lidded eyes regarded Nynaeve. "You would be surprised at the number of Accepted, and even novices, who claim they've rediscovered some lost Talent, or found a new. When I was a novice, an Accepted named Echiko was so convinced she knew how to fly, she leaped from the top of the Tower."

Head spinning, Nynaeve looked from one woman to the other. Did they believe her or not? Did they really think her *mind* had bent? *What under the Light are they going to do to me?* She tried to find words to convince them—she was not lying, not crazy; she *had* Healed Logain—but her mouth was still working soundlessly when they hurried her into the Little Tower.

Not until they entered what had been a private dining room, a long chamber where now a narrow table stood with chairs behind it near one wall, did Nynaeve realize they had gained a train of followers. More than a dozen Aes Sedai entered on their heels, Nisao folding her arms tightly beneath her breasts, and Dagdara with her chin thrust forward as though meaning to walk through a wall, Shanelle and Therva and. . . . All Yellow Ajah, save Sheriam and Myrelle. That table suggested a magistrate's chamber; that line of grim faces spoke of a trial. Nynaeve swallowed hard.

Sheriam and Myrelle left her standing and walked over to the table to confer quietly, their backs to her. When they turned again, their faces were unreadable.

"You claim that you Healed Logain." There was a hint of contempt in Sheriam's voice. "You claim you Healed a gentled man."

"You must believe me," Nynaeve protested. "You said you did." She jumped as something unseen struck her hard across the hips.

"Remember yourself, Accepted," Sheriam said coldly. "Do you make this claim?"

Nynaeve stared at the woman. Sheriam was the one crazed, bouncing back and forth this way. Still, she managed a respectful "Yes, Aes Sedai." Dagdara snorted like canvas ripping.

Sheriam gestured to quiet a murmur among the Yellows. "And you did it by accident, you say. If that's the case, I suppose there is no chance of you showing proof by doing it again."

"How could she?" Myrelle said, looking amused. Amused! "If she fumbled her way into it blindly, how could she possibly repeat it? But that would not matter unless she actually did the thing in the first place."

"Answer me!" Sheriam snapped, and that invisible switch struck again. This time Nynaeve managed not to leap. "Is there any chance you can remember even part of what you did?"

"I remember, Aes Sedai," she said sullenly, tensing for another blow. It did not come, but she could see the glow of *saidar* around Sheriam now. That glow seemed threatening.

A small commotion at the door, and Carlinya and Beonin pushed through the line of Yellow sisters, one shoving Siuan ahead of her, the other Leane. "They did not want to come," Beonin announced in an exasperated tone. “Can you believe that they tried to tell us that they were busy?” Leane was as blank-faced as any Aes Sedai, but Siuan darted sullen, angry looks at everybody, especially Nynaeve.

Finally Nynaeve understood. Finally everything came together. The Yellow sisters’ presence. Sheriam and Myrelle believing, then not believing, threatening her, snapping at her. It was all apurpose, all to make her angry enough to work her Healing on Siuan and Leane, to prove herself to the Yellows. No. By their faces, they were here to see her fail, not succeed. She made no effort to hide the firm tug she gave her braid. In fact, she did it again, in case anyone had missed the first time. She wanted to smack *all* their faces. She wanted to dose them with a concoction of herbs that would make them sit down on the floor and cry like babies just from the smell. She wanted to yank their hair out and strangle them with it, to—

“Do I have to put up with this nonsense?” Siuan growled. “I have important work to do, but if it were only heading fish it would be more im—”

“Oh, shut up,” Nynaeve broke in testily. One step, and she seized Siuan’s head in both hands as if she intended to break the woman’s neck. She had believed that nonsense, even the barrel! They had manipulated her like a puppet!

Saidar filled her, and she channeled as she had with Logain, blending all of the Five Powers. She knew what she was looking for this time, that almost-not-there-at-all sense of something cut. Spirit and Fire to mend the break, and. . . .

For a moment Siuan only stared, expressionless. Then the glow of *saidar* enveloped her. Gasps filled the room. Slowly Siuan leaned forward and kissed Nynaeve on either cheek. A tear leaked down her face, then another, and abruptly Siuan was weeping, hugging herself and shaking; the gleaming aura around her faded away. Sheriam quickly folded her into comforting arms; Sheriam looked as though she might cry too.

The rest of the room was staring at Nynaeve. The shock shining through all that Aes Sedai serenity was quite satisfying, and the disgruntlement too. Shanelle’s eyes, pale blue in a dark pretty face, seemed about to fall out of her head. Nisao’s mouth hung open, until she saw Nynaeve looking at her and snapped it shut.

“What made you think of using Fire?” Dagdara asked in a strangled voice that sounded entirely too high for such a big woman. “And Earth?

You used Earth. Healing is Spirit, Water and Air.” That opened the floodgate, questions from every throat, but they were all the same question really, just phrased differently.

“I don’t know why,” Nynaeve replied when she found an opening. “It just seemed right. I’ve almost always used everything.” Which produced a round of admonitions. Healing was Spirit, Water and Air. It was dangerous to experiment with Healing; a mistake could kill not only you but your patient. She said nothing in reply, but the warnings died off quickly in rueful glances and smoothed skirts; she had not killed anyone, and she had Healed what they said could not be Healed.

Leane wore such a hopeful smile that it was almost painful. Nynaeve approached her with a smile of her own, masking the smoldering irritation inside. The Yellow Ajah and all its vaunted knowledge of Healing that she had been ready to beg on her knees to share. She knew more of Healing than any of them! “Watch carefully, now. You’ll not get another chance soon to see it done.”

She felt the joining clearly as she channeled, though she still could not have said what it was she had joined. It felt different than with Logain—it had with Siuan as well—but as she kept telling herself, men and women *were* different. *Light, I’m lucky this works on them as well as it did on him!* That brought up an uncomfortable line of speculation. What if some things had to be Healed differently in men than in women? Maybe she did not know so very much more than the Yellows after all.

Leane’s reaction differed from Siuan’s. No tears. She embraced *saidar* and smiled beatifically, then released it, though the smile remained. Then she flung her arms around Nynaeve and hugged her till her ribs creaked, whispering, “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” over and over.

A murmur rose among the Yellows, and Nynaeve prepared to bask in their compliments. She would accept their apologies gracefully. Then she heard what they were saying.

“. . . used Fire and Earth as if she were trying to bore a hole through stone.” That from Dagdara.

“A smoother touch would be better,” Shanelle agreed.

“. . . see where Fire might be useful in problems with the heart,” Therva said, tapping her long nose. Beldemaine, a plump Arafellin with silver bells in her hair, nodded thoughtfully.

“. . . if the Earth were combined with Air just so, you see. . . .”

“. . . Fire woven into Water. . . .”

“. . . Earth blended with the Water. . . .”

Nynaeve gaped. They had forgotten her completely. They thought they could do what she had just showed them better than she could!

Myrelle patted her arm. “You did very well,” she murmured. “Don’t worry; they will be all praises later. Right now, they are still a little taken aback.”

Nynaeve sniffed loudly, but none of the Yellows seemed to notice. “I hope this at least means I don’t have to scrub pots anymore.”

Sheriam’s head whipped around with a startled expression. “Why, child, whatever gave you that notion?” She still had an arm around Siuan, who was dabbing at her eyes with a lace handkerchief in considerable embarrassment. “If anyone could break any rule they chose, do whatever they chose, and escape punishment merely by doing some good to balance it, the world would be chaos.”

Nynaeve sighed heavily. She should have known.

Stepping out from the other Yellows, Nisao cleared her throat, and in passing shot Nynaeve a glare that could only be called accusatory. “I suppose this means we will have to gentle Logain again.” She sounded as though she wanted to deny any of it had happened.

Heads began nodding, and then Carlinya spoke, like an icicle stabbed into the room. “Can we?” Every eye turned to her, but she went on calmly, coolly. “Ethically, can we consider supporting a man who can channel, a man trying to gather other men who can, while at the same time we go on as before, gentling those we find? Practically, what effect will it have on him when he learns? Distressing as it may be, as matters stand, he will see us as separate from the Tower, and more importantly, from Elaida and the Red Ajah. If we gentle even one man, we may lose that distinction, and with it our chance to gain a hold on him before Elaida does.”

Silence cloaked the room when she stopped. Aes Sedai exchanged troubled looks, and those directed at Nynaeve made Nisao’s look laudatory. Sisters had died in capturing Logain, and even if he was safely shielded again, she had given them him to deal with all over again, and a worse pickle besides.

“I think you should go,” Sheriam said softly.

Nynaeve was not about to argue. She made her curtsies as quickly and carefully as she could, and did her best not to run in leaving.

Outside, Elayne rose from the stone step. “I’m sorry, Nynaeve,” she said, brushing her skirt. “I was so excited, I blurted out everything to Sheriam before I realized Romanda and Delana were there.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nynaeve said heavily, starting down the crowded street. “It would have gotten out sooner or later.” It just was not fair, though. *I did something they said couldn’t be done, and I still have to scrub pots!* “Elayne, I don’t care what you say; we have to go. Carlinya was talking about getting a ‘hold’ on Rand. This lot won’t be any better than Elaida. Thom or Juilin will get horses for us, and Birgitte can just bite her elbow.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late,” Elayne said miserably. “Word is spreading already.”

Larissa Lyndel and Zenare Ghodar swooped down from opposite directions like hawks on either side of Nynaeve. Larissa was a bony woman whose plainness almost overcame Aes Sedai agelessness, Zenare slightly plump and haughty enough for two queens, but both wore faces of eager anticipation. They were Yellow Ajah, though neither had been in the room when she Healed Siuan and Leane.

“I want to see you go through everything step by step, Nynaeve,” Larissa said, laying hold of an arm.

“Nynaeve,” Zenare said, seizing the other arm, “I wager that I will find a hundred things you never thought of, if you repeat the weave often enough.”

Salita Toranes, Tairen and almost as dark as one of the Sea Folk, seemed to pop out of nowhere. “Others ahead of me, I see. Well, burn my soul if I’ll wait in line.”

“I was here first, Salita,” Zenare said firmly. And tightened her grip.

“*I* was first,” Larissa said, tightening hers.

Nynaeve shot a look of pure horror at Elayne, and got commiseration in return, and a shrug. This was what Elayne had meant about too late. She would not have a waking moment to herself after this.

“. . . angry?” Zenare was saying. “I know fifty ways at the front of my head to make her angry enough to chew rocks.”

“*I* can think of a *hundred,*” Larissa said. “*I* intend to break her block if it’s the last thing I do.”

Magla Daronos shouldered her way into the group, and she had the shoulders for it. She looked as if she worked the sword, or a blacksmith’s hammer. “You will break it, Larissa? Hah! I do have several ways in mind already to draw it out of her.”

Nynaeve just wanted to scream.

It was all Siuan could do not to embrace *saidar* and hold it, but she thought she might start crying again. That would never do. Besides, it would seem like some fool novice’s display to the women crowding around her in the waiting room. Every expression of wonder and delight, every warm welcome as if she had been away for years, came as balm, especially from those who had been friends before she became Amyrlin, before time and duty pulled them apart. Lelaine and Delana wrapped their arms around her as they had not in long years. Moiraine had been the only one closer, the only one beside Leane she had managed to keep after donning the stole, and duty had helped keep them together.

“It is so good to have you back,” Lelaine laughed.

“So very good,” Delana murmured warmly.

Siuan laughed, and had to scrub tears from her cheeks. Light, what was the matter with her? She had not wept this easily as a child!

Maybe it was just joy, at regaining *saidar*, at all the warmth around her. The Light knew, altogether it was enough to unsettle anybody. She had never dared dream this day might come, and now that it had, she held nothing against any of these women, not their cold distance before, not their insistence that she remember her place. The line between Aes Sedai and not Aes Sedai was clear—she had insisted on it before she was stilled, and it went without saying that she would again—and she knew how stilled women had to be dealt with for their own good and the good of those who could still channel. Had had to be dealt with. How strange it was that that would never be so again.

From the corner of her eye she saw Gareth Bryne trotting up the stairs at the side of the room. “Excuse me a moment,” she said, and hurried after him.

Even hurrying meant stopping every two steps to accept another congratulation all the way to the stairs, so she did not catch up until he was striding down a corridor on the second floor. Rushing ahead, she planted herself in front of him. His mostly gray hair was windblown, his square face and worn buff coat dusty. He looked as solid as stone.

Lifting a sheaf of papers, he said, “I have to drop this off, Siuan,” and tried to step around her.

She moved to block him. “I’ve been Healed. I can channel again.”

He nodded; just nodded! “I heard some talk. I suppose this means you’ll be channeling my shirts clean from now on. Maybe they actually will be clean how. I’ve regretted letting Min go so easily.”

Siuan stared at him. The man was no fool. Why was he pretending not to understand? “I am Aes Sedai again. Do you really expect an Aes Sedai to do your *laundry*?”

Just to drive it home, she embraced *saidar*—that missed sweetness was so wonderful she shivered—wrapped him in flows of Air, and lifted him. Tried to lift him. Gaping, she drew more, tried harder, until the sweetness stabbed like a thousand hooks. His boots never stirred from the floor.

It was impossible. True, the simple act of picking something up was one of the hardest in channeling, but she had been able to lift nearly three times her own weight.

“Is this supposed to impress me,” Bryne said calmly, “or frighten me? Sheriam and her friends gave their word, the Hall gave its word, and more importantly, you gave yours, Siuan. I wouldn’t let you get away from me if you were the Amyrlin again. Now undo whatever it is you’ve done, or when I get free of it, I’ll turn you upside down and smack you for being childish. You’re very seldom childish, so you needn’t think I will let you start now.”

In a near daze, she released the Source. Not for his threat—he was capable of it; he had done it before; but not for that—and not for shock at being unable to pick him up. Tears seemed to well up in her like a fountain; she hoped that letting go of *saidar* might stop them. A few still slid down her cheeks, though, however hard she blinked.

Gareth was cupping her face in his hands before she knew he had moved. “Light, woman, don’t, tell me I frightened you. I didn’t think being dropped in a pit with a pack of leopards would frighten you.”

“I am not frightened,” she said stiffly. Good; she could still lie. Tears, building inside.

“We have to work out some way not to be at one another’s throat all the time,” he said quietly.

“There is no reason for us to work out anything.” They were coming. They were coming. Oh, Light, she could not let him see. “Just leave me alone, please. Please, just go." For a wonder, he hesitated only a moment before doing as she asked.

With the sound of his boots behind her, she managed to make it around the corner into the crossing hallway before the dam burst and she sank to her knees weeping piteously. She knew what it was, now. Alric, her Warder. Her dead Warder, murdered when Elaida deposed her. She could lie—the Three Oaths were still gone—but some part of her bond to Alric, a bond flesh to flesh and mind to mind, had been resurrected. The pain of his death, the pain first masked by the shock of what Elaida intended and then buried by stilling, that pain filled her to the brim. Huddled against the wall, bawling, she was only glad Gareth was not seeing this. *I have no time to fall in love, burn him!*

The thought was a bucket of cold water in her face. The pain remained, but the tears stopped, and she scrambled to her feet. Love? That was as impossible as . . . as. . . . She could not think of anything impossible enough. The *man* was impossible!

Suddenly she realized Leane was standing not two paces away, watching. Siuan made one effort at wiping the tears from her face, then gave it up. There was nothing but sympathy on Leane's face. "How did you deal with Anjen's . . . death, Leane?" That had been fifteen years ago now.

"I cried," Leane said. "For a month I held it in during the day, and spent the night in a quivering ball of tears in the middle of my bed. After I had torn the sheets to shreds. For three more, I could find tears in my eyes without warning. Over a year passed before I stopped hurting. That's why I never bonded another. I did not think I could live through that again. It does pass, Siuan." She found a roguish smile somewhere. "Now I think I could manage two or three Warders, if not four."

Siuan nodded. She could cry at night. As for Gareth bloody Bryne. . . . There was no "as for." There was not! "Do you think they're ready?" They had had only a moment to talk below. This hook had to be set quickly or it would not be set at all.

"Perhaps. I did not have much time. And I had to be careful." Leane paused. "Are you sure you want to go through with this, Siuan? It's changing everything we have worked for, on no notice at all, and. . . . I am not as strong as I was, Siuan, and neither are you. Most of the women here can channel more than either of us, now. Light, I think some of the Accepted can, not even counting Elayne or Nynaeve."

“I know,” Siuan said. It had to be risked. The other plan had only been a stop-gap, because she was no longer Aes Sedai. But now she was Aes Sedai again, and she had been deposed with only the barest nod to Tower law. If she was Aes Sedai again, was she not Amyrlin again as well?

Squaring her shoulders, she went below to do battle with the Hall.

Lying on her bed in her shift, Elayne stifled a yawn and went back to rubbing the cream Leane had given her into her hands. It seemed to do some good; at least they *felt* softer. A night breeze stirred through the window, making the lone candle flicker. If anything, the air only made the room hotter.

Nynaeve staggered in, banged the door shut, flung herself across her bed, and lay staring at Elayne. “Magla is the most contemptible, hateful, *low* woman in the entire world,” she mumbled. “No, Larissa is. No, it’s Romanda.”

“I take it they made you angry enough to channel.” Nynaeve grunted, with the vilest expression, and Elayne hurried on. “How many did you demonstrate for? I expected you long ago. I looked for you at dinner, but I couldn’t find you.”

“I had a roll for dinner,” Nynaeve muttered. “One roll! I demonstrated for all of them, every last Yellow in Salidar. Only they aren’t satisfied. They want me one at a time. They set up a rotating schedule. Larissa has me tomorrow morning—before breakfast!—and Zenare right after, then. . . . They discussed how to make me angry as if I was not there!” She raised her head from the coverlet, looking hunted. “Elayne, they are competing over who is going to break my block. They’re like boys trying to catch a greased pig on feastday, and I am the pig!”

Yawning, Elayne handed her the pot of hand cream, and after a moment Nynaeve rolled over and began rubbing it on. Nynaeve still had her time at the pots, too.

“I’m sorry I didn’t do as you wanted days ago, Nynaeve. We could have woven disguises like Moghedien’s and walked right past everybody.” Nynaeve’s hands stopped. “What is the matter, Nynaeve?”

“I never thought of that. I never *thought* of it!”

“You didn’t? I was sure you had. You learned it first, after all.”

“I tried not even to think about what we couldn’t tell the sisters.” Nynaeve’s voice was flat as ice and about as cold and hard. “And now it is too late. I’m too tired to channel if you set my hair on fire, and if they have their way, I will be too tired forever. The only reason they let me go tonight was that I couldn't find *saidar* even when Nisao. . . ." She shuddered, and then her hands began moving again, smoothing in the cream.

Elayne let out a small breath. She had very nearly put her foot in it. She was tired, too. Admitting you had been wrong always made the other person feel better, but she hadn't meant to mention using *saidar* for disguises. From the first she had been afraid Nynaeve would do that. Here, at the very least, they could keep an eye on what the Salidar Aes Sedai intended, and maybe pass word to Rand through Egwene, once she returned to *Tel'aran'rhiod.* At the worst, they might have some small influence, through Siuan and Leane.

As if the thought were a summons, the door opened to admit just those women. Leane carried a wooden tray with bread and a bowl of soup, a red pottery cup and a white-glazed pitcher. There was even a sprig of green leaves in a tiny blue vase. "Siuan and I thought you might be hungry, Nynaeve. I hear the Yellows used you hard."

Elayne was uncertain whether she should rise or not. It was just Siuan and Leane, but they were Aes Sedai again. At least, she thought they were. The two solved the problem by sitting, Siuan on the foot of Elayne's bed, Leane on Nynaeve's. Nynaeve eyed them both suspiciously before sitting up with her back against the wall and taking the tray on her knees.

"I heard a rumor you addressed the Hall, Siuan," Elayne said carefully. "Should we have curtsied?"

"Do you mean are we Aes Sedai again, girl? We are. They wrangled like fishwives on Sunday, but they granted that much at least." Siuan exchanged glances with Leane, and Siuan's cheeks colored faintly. Elayne suspected she would never learn what had not been granted.

"Myrelle was kind enough to find me and let me know," Leane said into the momentary silence. "I think I am going to choose Green."

Nynaeve choked around her spoon. "What do you mean? Can you change Ajahs?"

"No, you cannot," Siuan told her. "But what the Hall decided is that although we are Aes Sedai, for a time we weren't. And since they insist on believing that codswallop was legal, all our ties, binds, associations and titles went overboard." Her voice was wry enough to rasp wood. "Tomorrow I ask the Blues whether they'll have me back. I've never heard of an Ajah turning anybody down—by the time you're raised from

Accepted, you've been guided to the right Ajah whether you know it or not—but the way matters are proceeding, I wouldn't be completely surprised if they slammed the door on my foot."

"How *are* matters proceeding?" Elayne asked. There was something here. Siuan bullied, prodded, twisted your arm; she did not bring soup, sit on your bed and chat like a friend. "I thought everything was going as well as could be expected." Nynaeve gave her a stare that managed to be incredulous and haggard at the same time. Well, Nynaeve ought to know what she meant.

Siuan twisted around to face her, but she included Nynaeve as well. "I went by Logain's house. Six sisters are maintaining his shield, the same as when he was captured. He tried to break free when he found out we knew he had been Healed, and they said if only five had been holding the shield, he might have. So he's as strong as he ever was, or close enough to make no difference. I'm not. Neither is Siuan. I want you to try again, Nynaeve."

"I knew it!" Nynaeve flung her spoon down on the tray. "I knew you had some reason for this! Well, I'm too tired to channel, and it wouldn't matter if I wasn't. You can't Heal what has been Healed. You get out of here, and take your vile-tasting soup with you!" Less than half the vile-tasting soup remained, and it was a big bowl.

"I know it won't work!" Siuan snapped back. "This morning I knew stilling couldn't be Healed!"

"A moment, Siuan," Leane said. "Nynaeve, do you realize what we are risking, coming here together? This isn't a room in an alley with your archer friend standing guard; there are women all through this house, with eyes to see and tongues to talk. If it is found out that Siuan and I have been playing a game with everybody—even ten years from now—well, suffice it to say, Aes Sedai can be given penance, and we would very likely still be on a farm hoeing cabbages after our hair turns white. We came because of what you did for us, to make a fresh start."

"Why didn't you go to one of the Yellows?" Elayne asked. "Most of them must know as much about it as Nynaeve by now." Nynaeve glared indignantly around the spoon. Vile-tasting?

Siuan and Leane exchanged looks, and at last Siuan said reluctantly, "If we go to a sister, everybody knows, soon or late. If Nynaeve does it, maybe anybody who managed to weigh us today will think they were mistaken. Supposedly, all sisters are equal, and there have been Amyrlins who barely managed to channel enough to earn the shawl, but Amyrlins and the heads of Ajahs aside, by custom, if another is stronger in the Power than you, you're expected to give way to her."

"I don't understand," Elayne said. She was getting quite a lesson out of this; the hierarchy made sense, but she supposed it was one of those things you did not learn until you actually were Aes Sedai. One way and another, she had picked up enough hints to suspect that in many ways your education only began when you put on the shawl. "If Nynaeve *can* Heal you again, then you're stronger."

Leane shook her head. "No one has ever been Healed from stilling before. Maybe the others will see it, say like being wilders. That puts you a little lower than your strength. Maybe having been weaker will count something. If Nynaeve couldn't Heal us all the way the first time, maybe she'll only take us to two-thirds what we were, or half. Even that would be better than now, but still most here would be as strong, and a good many stronger." Elayne stared, more confused than before. Nynaeve looked as if she had been hit between the eyes.

"Everything goes into it," Siuan explained. "Who learned fastest, who spent the least time as novice and Accepted. There are all sorts of shadings. You can't say precisely how strong anyone is. Two women might seem to be the same strength; maybe they are and maybe not, but the only way to say for certain would be a duel, and the Light be blessed, we're above that. Unless Nynaeve returns us to our full strength, we run the risk of standing fairly low."

Leane took it up again. "The hierarchy isn't supposed to rule anything except everyday life, but it does. Advice from somebody with higher standing is given more weight than from somebody with lower. It did not matter while we were stilled. We had no standing at all; they weighed what we said on merit alone. It will not be that way now."

"I see," Elayne said faintly. No wonder people thought Aes Sedai invented the Game of Houses! They made *Daes Dae'mar* look simple.

"It's nice to see that Healing you gave *somebody* more trouble than it did me," Nynaeve grumbled. Peering into the bottom of the bowl, she sighed, then wiped it out with the last bit of bread.

Siuan's face darkened, but she managed to keep her voice level. "You can see, we lay ourselves bare. And *not* just to convince you to try Healing again. You gave me back . . . my life. As simple as that. I had convinced myself I wasn’t dead, but it certainly seems so compared to this. So we make Leane’s fresh start. Friends, if you’ll have me for one. If not, then crewmates in the same boat.”

“Friends,” Elayne said. “Friends sounds much better to me.” Leane smiled at her, but she and Siuan were still watching Nynaeve.

Nynaeve peered from one to the other. “Elayne had a question, so I should have one. What did Sheriam and the others learn from the Wise Ones last night? Don’t say you do not know, Siuan. As far as I’m, concerned, you know what they think an hour after they think it.”

Siuan’s jaw set stubbornly; those deep blue eyes set themselves to intimidate. Suddenly she yelped, and bent to rub her ankle.

“Tell them,” Leane said, drawing back her foot, “or I will. All of it, Siuan.”

Glaring at Leane, Siuan puffed up till Elayne thought she might burst, but then her gaze touched Nynaeve, and she deflated. Words came out as though dragged, but they came. “The embassy from Elaida has reached Cairhien. Rand’s met them, but he seems to be trying to toy with them. At least let us hope that’s what he is doing. Sheriam and the others are set up because for once they managed not to make fools of themselves with the Wise Ones. And Egwene will be at the next meeting.” For some reason, that last seemed to come most reluctantly of all.

Nynaeve brightened, sitting up straighter. “Egwene? Oh, that’s wonderful! So they didn’t come off as fools for once. I half wondered why they were not here to drag us off for another lesson.” She squinted at Siuan; but even the squint looked cheerful. “A boat, you say? Who’s the captain?”

“I am, you wretched little—” Leane cleared her throat, and Siuan took a deep breath. “A share-crew, then; equal shares. But someone has to steer,” she added when Nynaeve began to smile, “and that *will* be me.”

“All right,” Nynaeve said after a long moment. Another hesitation, fiddling with her spoon, then, in a voice so casual Elayne wanted to throw up her hands, “Is there any chance you might help me—us—get us out of the kitchens?” They had faces no older than Nynaeve’s, but they had been Aes Sedai for a long time; their eyes remembered that Aes Sedai stare. Nynaeve met it more steadily than Elayne thought she could have—except for just a bit of shifting—but in the end it was no surprise when she muttered, “I suppose not.”

“We have to be going,” Siuan said, standing. “If anything, Leane understated the cost of discovery. We could be the first Aes Sedai skinned publicly, and I’ve already been the only first I want to.”

To Elayne’s surprise, Leane bent to hug her, whispering, “Friends.” Elayne returned the hug and the word warmly.

Leane also hugged Nynaeve, murmuring something Elayne could not hear, and then Siuan did too, with a “Thank you” that sounded gruff and reluctant.

At least, that was how it sounded to her, but once they were gone, Nynaeve said, “She was about to cry, Elayne. Maybe she really meant all of that. I suppose I should try to be nicer to her.” She sighed, which became a yawn, muffling “Especially since she’s Aes Sedai again.” And with that, she fell asleep with the tray still on her knees.

Muffling a yawn of her own behind her hand, Elayne got up and squared everything away neatly, tucking the tray under Nynaeve’s bed. It took a little time to get Nynaeve out of her dress and settled down into the bed more comfortably, but even that did not wake her. For herself, once Elayne had the candle snuffed and was hugging her pillow, she lay awake, staring at the darkness and thinking. Rand trying to deal with Aes Sedai sent by Elaida? They would eat him alive. Almost she wished she could have seen her way to accepting Nynaeve’s suggestion when it had a chance of success. She could guide him through any snares they set, she was sure—Thom had added a great deal to what her mother taught her—and he would listen to her. Besides, that way she could bond him. After all, she had not waited until she wore the shawl to bond Birgitte; why wait for Rand?

Shifting, she snuggled deeper into her pillow. He had to wait. He was in Caemlyn, not Salidar. Wait, Siuan said he was in Cairhien. How . . . ? She was too tired; the thought drifted. Siuan. Siuan was still hiding something; she was sure of it.

Sleep slid in, and with it a dream, a boat with Leane sitting in the bow flirting with a man whose face was different every time Elayne looked. In the stern, Siuan and Nynaeve were struggling, each trying to steer in a different direction—until Elayne stood up and took charge. A captain keeping secrets could be reason enough for a mutiny if need be.

In the morning Siuan and Leane returned before Nynaeve even opened her eyes, more than sufficient to make her angry enough to channel. It did no good, though. What was already Healed could not be Healed again.

“I will do what I can, Siuan,” Delana said, leaning forward to pat the other woman’s arm. They were alone in the sitting room, and the teacups on the small table between their chairs stood untouched.

Siuan sighed, looking dejected, though what she could expect after her outburst in front of the Hall, Delana did not know. Early-morning light spilled through the windows, and she thought of the breakfast she had not had yet, but this was Siuan. The situation was disconcerting, and Delana did not like being disconcerted. She had schooled herself not to see her old friend in this woman’s face—not hard, since she looked nothing at all like the Siuan Sanche Delana remembered, not at any age—yet seeing Siuan again, a Siuan young and pretty, was only the first shock. The second was Siuan appearing on her doorstep with the sun not up, asking help; Siuan never asked for help. And then there was the biggest shock of all, the one renewed every time she came face-to-face with Siuan since the al’Meara woman had worked her impossible miracle. She was stronger than Siuan, much stronger. The margin had always gone the other way; Siuan had taken the lead when they were novices, even before they were Accepted. Still, she *was* Siuan, and upset, which Delana never remembered before. Siuan could be upset, but she never let you see it. It distressed her that she could not do more for the woman who had stolen honeycakes with her and more than once had taken the blame for pranks they had both been involved in.

“Siuan, I can do this much at least. Romanda would be more than happy to take those dream *ter’angreal* into the Hall’s keeping. She doesn’t have enough Sitters with her to bring it off, but if Sheriam thinks she does, if she thinks you’ve used your influence with Lelaine and me to stop it, then she won’t be able to refuse you. I know Lelaine will agree. Though why you want to meet these Aielwomen, I cannot imagine. Romanda smiles like a cat in the buttery, watching Sheriam stalk around in a temper after one of those meetings. With your temper, you will likely burst something.” Such a change. Once she would never have thought of mentioning Siuan’s temper; now she mentioned it without thinking.

Siuan’s downcast face broke into a smile. “I hoped you would do something like that. I will speak to Lelaine. And Janya; I think Janya will help. You have to make sure Romanda doesn’t actually do it, though. From the little I know, Sheriam has worked out at least a semblance of how to get along with these Aiel. I’m afraid Romanda would need to start from the beginning. Of course, that might not be important to the Hall, but I would just as soon not have my first look at them when everybody has a hook in their gills."

Delana kept her smile inside as she escorted Siuan to the front step and gave her a hug. Yes, it would be very important to the Hall to keep the Wise Ones pacific, though Siuan had no way of knowing that. She watched Siuan hurry down the street before going back in. It seemed she was going to be the one doing the protecting now. She hoped she made as good a job of it as her friend had.

The tea was still warm, and she decided to send Miesa, her serving woman, for some rolls and fruit, but when a timid tap came at the sitting room door, it was not Miesa but Lucilde, one of the novices they had brought from the Tower.

The lanky girl bobbed a nervous curtsy, but Lucilde was always nervous. "Delana Sedai? A woman arrived this morning, and Anaiya Sedai said I should bring her to you? Her name's Halima Saranov? She says she knows you?"

Delana opened her mouth to say that she had never heard of any Halima Saranov, and a woman appeared in the doorway. Delana stared in spite of herself. The woman managed to be slender and lush at the same time, and wore a dark gray riding dress cut ridiculously low; long lustrous black hair framed a green-eyed face that probably made every man who glimpsed it gape. That was not why Delana stared, of course. The woman held her hands at her sides, but with thumbs thrust hard between the first two fingers. Delana had never expected to see that from any woman who did not wear the shawl, and this Halima Saranov could not even channel. She was close enough to be sure of that.

"Yes," Delana said, "it seems to me I do remember. Leave us, Lucilde. And, child, do try to remember that every sentence isn't a question." Lucilde bobbed a curtsy so quick and deep that she nearly fell. Under other circumstances, Delana would have sighed; she had never done well with novices, though she could not understand why.

Almost before the novice was out of the room, Halima swayed over to the chair Siuan had used and sat without a word of invitation. Picking up one of the untouched cups, she crossed her legs and sipped, watching Delana over the rim.

Delana fixed her with a hard stare. “Who do you think you are, woman? However high you think you stand, none stand higher than Aes Sedai. And where did you learn that sign?” For perhaps the first time in her life, that stare did no good.

Halima smiled at her mockingly. “Do you really think the secrets of the . . . shall we say, *darker* Ajah, are that secret? As for how high you stand, you know very well that if a beggar gave the proper signs, you would leap to obey. My story is that I was traveling companion for a time to one Cabriana Mecandes, a Blue sister. Unfortunately, Cabriana died in a fall from her horse, and her Warder simply refused to leave his blankets or eat after that. He died, too.” Halima smiled as if to ask whether Delana was following. “Cabriana and I talked a great deal before she died, and she told me about Salidar. She also told me a number of things she had learned about the White Tower’s plans for you here. And for the Dragon Reborn.” Another smile, a quick flash of white teeth, and she went back to her tea and her watching.

Delana had never been a woman to give up easily. She had bludgeoned kings into making peace when they wanted war, dragged queens by the scruff of the neck to sign treaties that had to be signed. True, she would have obeyed that hypothetical beggar if he had the proper signs and said the right things, but Halima’s hands had identified her as Black Ajah, which she clearly was not. Perhaps the woman thought that was the only way to make Delana acknowledge her, and perhaps she wanted to show off her forbidden knowledge as well. Delana did not like this Halima. “And I suppose I am supposed to make sure the Hall accepts your information,” she said gruffly. “It should be no problem so long as you know enough of Cabriana to support your tale. I can’t help you there; I never met her above twice. I suppose there is no chance of her appearing to spoil your story?”

“No chance at all.” Again that quick, mocking smile. “And I could recite Cabriana’s life. I know things she had forgotten herself.”

Delana only nodded to that. Killing a sister was always to be regretted, but what must be, must be. “Then there is no problem at all. The Hall will receive you as a guest, and I can make sure they listen.”

“A guest is not exactly what I had in mind. Something rather more permanent, I think. Your secretary, or better yet, your companion. I need to make sure your Hall is guided carefully. Beyond this tale of Cabriana’s news, from time to time I’ll have instructions for you.”

“Now you listen to me! I—!”

Halima cut her off without raising her voice. “I was told to mention a name to you. A name I use, sometimes. Aran’gar.”

Delana sat down heavily. That name had been mentioned in her dreams. For the first time in years, Delana Mosalaine was afraid.

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CHAPTER 31

Red Wax

The sound of the black gelding’s hooves was all but swallowed in the noise of Amador as Eamon Valda rode slowly through the crowded streets. Sweat oozed from his every pore, the more for his perfectly polished mail and breastplate, gleaming despite a layer of dust, and the snowy cloak spread over the gelding’s powerful rump, yet it might have been a fine spring day for all the notice he took. He did his best to ignore the dirty men and women, even children, with lost expressions and travelworn clothes. Even here. Even here.

For once in his life, the great stone walls of the Fortress of the Light, towered and bannered and impregnable, bastion of truth and right, did not lift his spirits. Dismounting in the main courtyard, he tossed his reins to a Child with grated instructions for caring for the animal; the man knew what to do, of course, but Valda wanted to snap at something. White cloaked men scurried everywhere in a great show of energy despite the heat. He hoped there was something more than show behind it.

Young Dain Bornhald came trotting across the courtyard, pressing fist to mailed chest in an eager salute. “The Light illumine you, my Lord Captain. You had a good ride from Tar Valon, yes?” His eyes were bloodshot, and a smell of brandy wafted from him. There was no excuse for drinking during the day.

“Fast, at least,” Valda growled, jerking off his gauntlets and stuffing them behind his sword belt.

It was not the brandy, though he would make a mark against the man for it. The journey had been fast, for that distance. He intended to give the legion a night in the city by way of reward, once they finished making camp outside the city. A fast journey, but he disapproved of the orders that called him back just when a strong push might have toppled the crippled Tower and buried the witches under the rubble. A ride to be remarked, yet every day had brought worse news. Al'Thor in Caemlyn. It did not really matter whether the man was a false Dragon or the real one; he could channel, and any man who did that had to be a Darkfriend. Dragonsworn rabble in Altara. This so-called Prophet and his scum in Ghealdan, in Amadicia itself.

He had managed to kill some of that filth, at least, though it was hard fighting foes who melted away more often than they stood, who could blend into the accursed streams of refugees, and worse, of brainless wanderers who seemed to think al'Thor had turned all order on its head. He had found a solution, however, if not a completely satisfactory one. The roads behind his legion were littered now, and the ravens fed to bursting. If it was not possible to tell the Prophet's trash from refugee trash, well then, kill whoever clogged the way. The innocent should have remained in their homes where they belonged; the Creator would shelter them anyway. As far as he was concerned, the wanderers were added plums on the cake.

"I heard in the city that Morgase is here," he said. He did not believe it—every other word in Andor had been speculation over who killed Morgase—so he was startled when Dain nodded.

Surprise turned to disgust as the young man babbled about Morgase's apartments and her hunting, how well she was treated, how she was sure to sign a treaty with the Children any day. Valda scowled openly. He should have expected no better from Niall. The man had been one of the best soldiers in his time, accounted a great captain, but he grew old and soft. Valda had known that as soon as his orders reached Tar Valon. Niall should have moved on Tear in strength with the first word of al'Thor. He would have gathered all the numbers he needed on the march; nations would have rallied to the Children against a false Dragon. They would have, then. Now al'Thor was in Caemlyn, and strong enough to frighten the fainthearted. But Morgase was here. If he had Morgase, she would sign that treaty the first day if somebody had to guide her hand to hold the pen. By the Light, he would teach her to leap when he said leap. If she balked at returning to Andor with the Children, he would lash her to a staff by her wrists. That would be a banner to lead the advance into Andor.

Dain ran down, waiting. No doubt hoping for an invitation to dinner this evening. As a junior, he could not issue one to an officer senior to him, but doubtless he hoped to talk with his old commander, about Tar Valon, perhaps even about his dead father. Valda had not thought much of Geofram

Bornhald; the man had been soft. “I will see you at the camp for dinner at six. I will see you sober, Child Bornhald.”

Bornhald surely was in drink; he gaped and stammered before making his salute and going. Valda wondered what had happened. Dain had been a fine young officer. One who worried too much over niceties, such as proof of guilt when there was no way to obtain it, yet still fine for all that. Not as weak as his father. A shame to see him waste himself in brandy.

Muttering under his breath—officers drinking in the very Fortress of the Light was another sign that Niall was rotting at the core—Valda went in search of his rooms. He intended to sleep in the camp, but a hot bath would not be amiss.

A square-shouldered young Child approached in the plain stone corridor, the scarlet shepherd’s crook of the Hand of the Light behind the flaring golden sun on his chest. Without stopping or even looking at Valda, the Questioner murmured respectfully, “My Lord Captain might wish to visit the Dome of Truth.”

Valda frowned after the man—he did not like Questioners; they did good work in their way, yet he could never escape the feeling that they had donned the crook because that way they would never have to face an armed foe—started to raise his voice and dress the fellow down, then stopped. Questioners were sloppy in their discipline, but a simple Child would never speak idly to a Lord Captain. Perhaps the bath could wait.

The Dome of Truth was a wonder that finally did restore some of his essence. Pure white outside, inside gold leaf cast down the light of a thousand hanging lamps. Thick white columns ringed the chamber, plain and polished to glistening, but the dome itself stretched a hundred paces across unsupported and rose fifty at its peak, above the simple white marble dais, centered on the white marble floor, where the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light stood to address the assembled Children in their most solemn moments, their most serious ceremonies. He would stand there, one day. Niall would not live forever.

Dozens of Children wandered about the vast chamber—it was a sight worth seeing, though none but the Children ever did, of course—yet that message had not come so he could admire the Dome. He was sure of it. Behind the great columns ran rows of smaller ones, just as simple and polished just as highly, and tall alcoves where scenes of the Children’s triumphs made frescoes of a thousand years. Valda strolled, looking into each recess. Finally he saw a tall, graying man studying one of the paintings, Serenia Latar being raised on the scaffold, the only Amyrlin the Children had ever managed to hang. She had been dead already, of course, live witches being somewhat hard to hang, but that was beside the point. Six hundred and ninety-three years ago, justice had been done according to the law.

“Are you troubled, my son?” The voice was soft, almost mild.

Valda stiffened slightly. Rhadam Asunawa might be the High Inquisitor, but he was still a Questioner. And Valda was a Lord Captain, Anointed of the Light, not “my son.” “Not that I have noticed,” he said flatly.

Asunawa sighed. His gaunt face was a picture of martyred suffering, so that his sweat might have been taken for tears, but his deep-set eyes seemed to burn with the heat that had boiled away all his spare flesh. His cloak bore only the crook, no flaring golden sun, as though he stood outside the Children. Or perhaps above. “The times are troubled. The Fortress of the Light harbors a witch.”

Valda suppressed a wry look before it formed. Cowards or not, Questioners could be dangerous even to a Lord Captain. The man might never be able to hang an Amyrlin, but he probably dreamed of being the first to hang a queen. Valda did not care whether Morgase died, provided it was not before all the use was wrung out of her. He said nothing, and Asunawa’s thick gray eyebrows drew down until he seemed to peer out of caverns.

“The times are troubled,” he said again, “and Niall must not be allowed to destroy the Children of the Light.”

For long minutes Valda examined the painting. Perhaps the artist had been good, perhaps not; he knew nothing of such things and cared even less. The fellow had gotten the weapons and armor right on the guards, though, and the rope and scaffold looked real. Those were things he knew. “I am prepared to listen,” he said finally.

“Then we will talk, my son. Later, where there are fewer eyes to see and ears to hear. The Light illumine you, my son.” Asunawa strode away without another word, white cloak billowing slightly and the sound of his boots echoing as if he was trying to drive every step into the stone. Some of the Children bowed deeply as he passed.

From a narrow window high above the courtyard Niall watched Valda dismount and speak to young Bornhald, then stalk away in a fury. Valda was always in a fury. Had there been some means to bring the Children home from Tar Valon and leave Valda there, Niall would have jumped at it. The man was a fair enough battle commander, but better suited to rousing mobs. His notion of tactics was the charge, and of strategy—the charge.

Shaking his head, Niall made his way to his audience chamber. He had more important things than Valda to concern him. Morgase was still resisting like an army on the heights with water and high morale. She refused to admit she held a valley floor with no way out, and it was her enemy who had the heights.

Balwer rose from his table as Niall entered the anteroom. "Omerna was here, my Lord. He left these for you." Balwer touched a sheaf of papers tied with a red ribbon on the table. "And this." Thin lips tightened as he drew a tiny bone tube from his pocket.

Niall took the tube with a mutter and stumped into the inner room. Omerna was becoming more useless every day, for some reason. Leaving his reports with Balwer was bad enough, nonsense as they were, but even Omerna knew better than to hand one of these tubes with three red stripes to anyone but Niall himself. He held the tube close to a lamp to examine the wax. Unbroken, before his thumbnail pierced it. He would have to light a fire under Omerna, put the fear of the Light into him. The fool was no good as a decoy unless he played the consummate spymaster as far as he was able.

The message was from Varadin again, Niall's private cipher in that mad, spidery scrawl on a strip of thin paper. He almost burned it unread; then something at the end caught his eye. Beginning at the beginning, he consciously worked the cipher in his mind. He wanted to be absolutely sure. Just as before, it was gibberish about Aes Sedai on leashes and strange beasts, but right at the last. . . . Varadin had helped Asidim Faisar find a hiding place in Tanchico; he would try to smuggle Faisar out, but the Forerunners kept such a guard that a whisper could not pass the walls without permission.

Niall rubbed his chin in thought. Faisar was one of those he had sent to Tarabon to see if anything could be salvaged. Faisar knew nothing of Varadin, and Varadin should know nothing of Faisar. The Forerunners kept a such a guard that not a whisper could pass the walls. A madman's scrawl.

Stuffing the paper into his pocket, he returned to the anteroom. “Balwer, what is the latest from the west?” Between them, “the west” always meant the border with Tarabon.

“No change from before, my Lord. Patrols that penetrate very deeply into Tarabon do not return. The worst trouble near the border is refugees trying to cross.”

Patrols that penetrated too deeply. Tarabon was a pit writhing with poisonous vipers and rabid rats, but. . . . “How quickly could you get a courier to Tanchico?”

Balwer did not even blink. The man would not show surprise if one day his horse spoke to him. “The problem will be fresh horses once he crosses the border, my Lord. Normally, I would say twenty days there and back, perhaps a few less with luck. Now, twice that, with luck. Maybe twice that just to reach Tanchico.” A pit that could swallow a courier and not even leave bones behind.

There would be no need for a return, but Niall kept that to himself. “Let it be arranged, Balwer. I will have a letter ready in an hour. I will speak to the courier myself.” Balwer bowed his head in assent, but dry-washed his hands at the same time, insulted. Let him be. There was a small chance this could be done without exposing Varadin. Unnecessary precaution if he was insane, of course, but if not. . . . Revealing him would not make anything happen faster.

Back in the audience chamber, Niall studied Varadin’s message once more before holding the slip in a lamp flame, watching it catch. He crumpled the ash between his fingers.

He had four rules concerning action and information. Never make a plan without knowing as much as you can of the enemy. Never be afraid to change your plans when you receive new information. Never believe you know everything. And never wait to know everything. The man who waited to know everything was still sitting in his tent when the enemy burned it over his head. Niall followed those rules. Only once in his life had he abandoned them to follow a hunch. At Jhamara, for no reason but a tickling at the back of his head, he had set a third of his army to watch mountains all said were impassable. While he maneuvered the rest of his forces to crush the Murandians and Altarans, an Illianer army that was supposed to be a hundred miles away came out of those “impassable” passes. The only reason he managed to withdraw without being crushed was a “feeling.” And now he felt that tickling again.

“I do not trust him,” Tallanvor said firmly. “He reminds me of a young sharp I saw at the fair once, a baby-faced fellow who could look you in the eye and grin while he was palming the pea from under its cup.”

For once Morgase had no difficulty holding her temper. Young Paitr had reported that his uncle had finally found a way to smuggle her out of the Fortress of the Light, her and the others. The others had been the rub; Torwyn Barshaw had claimed himself able to get her out alone long since, but she would not leave them behind to the mercies of the Whitecloaks. Not even Tallanvor.

“I will make a note of your feelings,” she said indulgently. “Just do not let them hinder you. Do you have a saying that fits, Lini? Something for young Tallanvor and his feelings?” Light, why did she take such a delight in taunting him? He came close to treason, but she was his Queen, not. . . . The rest of the thought would not come.

Lini sat near the windows, rolling a ball of blue yarn from the skein Breane held stretched on her hands. “Paitr minds me of that young undergroom, just before you went to the White Tower. The one who got two maids with child and was caught trying to sneak away from the manor with a sackful of your mother’s plate.”

Morgase’s jaw hardened, but nothing could spoil her pleasure, not even the glance Breane gave her, as if she should be allowed to state her opinion as well. Paitr had been overjoyed at Morgase’s impending escape. Of course, part of that was because he apparently expected some sort of reward from his uncle for his part—at least, a few of his comments suggested it; something about making up for a failure back home—but the young man practically danced when she agreed to the plan that would have them all out of the Fortress today and out of Amador by sunrise tomorrow. Away from Amador and on the road to Ghealdan, where soldiers would not come with strings to tie to Andor. Two days ago Barshaw himself came to unfold the scheme, disguised as a shopkeeper delivering knitting needles and yarn, a squat big-nosed man with a choleric eye and a sneering mouth, though the words came out respectfully enough. It was hard to believe him Paitr’s uncle, they looked so different, much less a merchant. Still, his plan was a marvel of simplicity, if hardly dignified, needing only enough people outside the Fortress to make it work. Morgase was going to ride out of the Fortress of the Light buried in the bottom of a cartload of kitchen refuse.

"Now, you all know what to do," she told them. So long as she herself was in her rooms, the rest could move about with considerable freedom. Everything depended on that. Well, not everything; but certainly every escape but her own. "Lini, you and Breane must be in the laundry yard when the bell sounds High." Lini nodded complacently, but Breane gave her a purse-lipped look. They had been over this twenty times. Even so, Morgase was not going to allow a mistake to result in anyone being left behind. "Tallanvor, you will leave your sword behind and wait at an inn called The Oak and Thorn." He opened his mouth, but she forestalled him firmly. "I have heard your arguments. You can find another sword. They'll believe you mean to return if you leave it." He grimaced, but finally nodded. "Lamgwin is to wait at The Golden Head, and Basel at—"

A hasty tap at the door, and it opened enough to admit Basel's balding head. "My Queen, there's a man . . . a Child. . . ." He glanced over his shoulder into the hall. "There's a Questioner, my Queen." Tallanvor's hands went to his sword hilt, of course, and he would not take them away until she had gestured twice and grimaced at him beside.

"Admit him." She managed a calm voice, but butterflies the size of foxes fluttered frantically in her belly. A Questioner? Was everything that suddenly had been going so well about to turn just as suddenly to disaster?

A tall hawk-nosed man pushed Basel out of the way and closed the door in his face. The white-and-gold tabard with the crimson crook on his shoulder gave his rank as Inquisitor. She had not met Einor Saren, but he had been pointed out to her. There was a set of unalterable certainty to his face. "You are summoned to the Lord Captain Commander," he said coldly. "You will come now."

Morgase's thoughts raced faster than the butterflies. She was used to being summoned—Niall did not come to her, now he had her in the Fortress—called before the man for another lecture on her duty to Andor or for what was supposed to be a friendly chat to show her that Niall had her best interests, and Andor's, at heart. Used to that, but not to this sort of messenger. If she was being given over to the Questioners, there would be no subterfuge. Asunawa would send enough men to drag her away, and everyone with her. Him, she had met briefly; he made her blood freeze.

Why had an Inquisitor been sent? She voiced the question, and Saren replied in the same icy tones.

“I was with the Lord Captain Commander, and I was coming this way. I have finished my business, and now I will take you back. After all, you are a queen, due respect.” That all sounded slightly bored, somewhat impatient, until the last, when a note of wry mockery entered. No warmth, though.

“Very well,” she said.

“Shall I accompany my Queen?” Tallanvor bowed formally; at least he made a display of deference when any outsider was around.

“No.” She would take Lamgwin instead. No, any of the men would make it seem she thought she needed bodyguards. Saren frightened her nearly as much as Asunawa did, and she would not let him catch even a hint of the fact. She put on a casual, tolerant smile. “Surely I need no protection here.”

Saren smiled too, or at least his mouth did. He seemed to be laughing at her.

Outside, with Basel and Lamgwin looking at her uncertainly, she almost changed her mind about attendants; she would have, had she not spoken inside. But two men could not protect her if this really was some elaborate trap, and changing her mind would be a show of weakness. Walking through the stone corridors beside Saren, she certainly felt weak, not like a queen at all. No. Maybe she would scream like anyone else if the Questioners had her in their dungeons—well, there was no maybe about it; she was not fool enough to believe royal flesh different from any other in that regard—but until then, she would be what she was. Deliberately, she set about flogging down those butterflies.

Saren led her into a small flagstone-paved courtyard where bare-chested men were hacking at wooden posts with swords. “Where are we going?” she demanded. “This is not the way I have gone to the Lord Captain Commander’s study before. Is he somewhere else?”

“I take the shortest way,” he replied curtly. “I have more important matters to see to than. . . .” He did not finish, and he did not slow, either.

She had no choice but to follow, down a corridor lined with long rooms full of narrow cots and men often bare-chested or in less. She kept her eyes fixed on Saren’s back, composing the blistering sentences she meant to deliver to Niall. Across a stableyard, the smell of horses and dung heavy in the air and a farrier shoeing horses in one corner, along another barracks hallway and then one with kitchens down one side and the thick smell of stew cooking, into another courtyard. . . . She stopped dead.

A long, high scaffold stood in the middle of the yard. Three women and over a dozen men filled every space, hands and feet bound, nooses snugged around their necks. Some wept piteously; most only looked terrified. The last two men on the far end were Torwyn Barshaw and Paitr, the boy in his shirtsleeves instead of the red-and-white coat she had had made for him. Paitr was not weeping, but his uncle was. Paitr appeared too horrified to think of tears.

"For the Light!" a Whitecloak officer called out, and another Whitecloak shoved a long lever at the end of the scaffold.

Trapdoors snapped opened with loud cracks, and the victims fell from sight. Some of the stretched ropes quivered as those at the end choked their lives away instead of dying quickly from a broken neck. Paitr's was one of those. And her fine escape died with him. Perhaps she should have had as much concern for him, but it was the escape she thought of, her way out of the trap she had walked into. Herself trapped, and Andor with her.

Saren was looking at her, plainly expecting her to faint or sick up.

"So many at once?" she said, proud of the steadiness in her voice. Paitr's rope had stopped jerking; it only swung slowly from side to side, now. No escape.

"We hang Darkfriends every day," Saren answered dryly. "Perhaps in Andor you release them with a lecture. We do not."

Morgase met his gaze. The shortest way? So this was Niall's new tactic. It did not surprise her that no mention had been made of her planned escape. Niall was too subtle for that. She was an honored guest, and Paitr and his uncle had been hanged by chance, for some crime that had nothing to do with her. Who would be the next to mount the gallows? Lamgwin or Basel? Lini or Tallanvor? Strange, but the image of Tallanvor with a rope around his neck hurt more than the image of Lini. The mind played peculiar tricks. Over Saren's shoulder she caught sight of Asunawa, at a window overlooking the scaffold. He was staring down at her. Maybe this was his doing, not Niall's. It made no difference. She could not let her people die for nothing. She could not let Tallanvor die. Very peculiar tricks.

Arching an eyebrow mockingly, she said, "If this has unhinged your knees, I suppose we can wait until you find your strength again." A light voice, not affected at all by what she saw. Light, let her not vomit.

Saren’s face darkened, and he turned on his heel and stalked away. She followed at a stately pace, not looking up at Asunawa’s window, trying not to think of the scaffold.

Perhaps it really was the shortest way, for in the next corridor Saren led her up steep flights of stairs, delivering her to Niall’s audience chamber more quickly than she remembered making the journey before. As usual Niall did not rise, and there was no chair for her to take, so she was forced to stand before him like a petitioner. He seemed distracted, sitting silent and staring at her, but not really seeing her.

He had won, and he did not even see her. That irritated her. Light, he had won. Perhaps she should return to her rooms. If she told Tallanvor and Lamgwin and Basel to carve a path for her, they would try. They would die, and so would she; she had never held a sword, but if she gave that command, she would take one up. She would die, and Elayne would ascend the Lion Throne. She would as soon as al’Thor could be pushed from it. The White Tower would see that Elayne got what was hers. The Tower. If the Tower secured the throne for Elayne. . . . It seemed mad, yet she trusted the Tower even less than she did Niall. No, she had to save Andor herself. But the cost. The cost must be paid.

She had to force the words out. “I am ready to sign your treaty.”

Niall hardly appeared to hear at first. Then he blinked, and suddenly laughed wryly and shook his head. That irritated her, too. Pretending surprise. She had not tried to escape. She was a guest. She wished she could see him on a gallows.

He moved into action so quickly that he almost dispelled the memory of his earlier apathy. In moments he had his dried-up little secretary in with a long parchment, everything already written out, and even a copy of the Seal of Andor she could not tell from the original.

Choice or no choice, she made a show of reading the terms. They were no different than she had expected. Niall would lead the Whitecloaks to regain her throne, but there was a price, if not named as such. A thousand Whitecloaks quartered in Caemlyn, with their own courts of law, outside Andoran law, in perpetuity. Whitecloaks to stand equal with the Queen’s Guards throughout Andor, in perpetuity. It might take her lifetime to undo signing this, and Elayne’s as well, but the alternative was al’Thor with the Lion Throne as a trophy. If any woman ever sat on it again, it would be

Elenia or Naean or one of that ilk, and as al'Thor's puppet. That, or Elayne as the Tower's puppet; she *could* not make herself trust the Tower.

She signed her name clearly, pressed the copied Seal into the red wax that Niall's secretary dripped at the foot of the sheet. The Lion of Andor surrounded by the Rose Crown. There, she was the first queen ever to accept foreign soldiers on Andoran soil.

"How soon . . . ?" It was harder to say than she had imagined. "How soon will your legions ride?"

Niall hesitated, glancing down the table. There was nothing there except pen and ink, a sand bowl and a freshly burned down stub of sealing wax, as if he had very recently written a letter. He finished scrawling his signature on the treaty and impressed his own seal, a flaring sun in golden wax, then handed the parchment to his secretary. "Put this in the document room, Balwer. I fear I cannot move as quickly as I had hoped, Morgase. There are developments I must consider. Nothing that need concern you. Simply a matter of how best to move in areas unrelated to Andor. I insist you take this as simply more time for me to enjoy your company."

Balwer bowed smoothly if somewhat prissily, yet she was almost certain his eyes nearly jerked toward Niall in surprise. She herself nearly gaped. He pressed her and pressed her, and now he had other matters to consider? Balwer scurried out as though afraid she might try to snatch back the treaty and tear it up, but that was the furthest thing from her mind. At least there would be no more hangings. The rest would be dealt with when it could be. One step at a time. Her dogged resistance had failed, but now she had time again, an unexpected gift not to be wasted. The pleasure of her company?

She put on a warm smile. "It seems as though a weight has lifted from my shoulders. Tell me, do you play stones?"

"I am accounted a fair player." His answering smile was surprised at first, then amused.

Morgase flushed, but managed to keep her face from showing anger. Perhaps it was best that he thought her broken now. No one watched a broken opponent too closely, or regarded them too highly, and if she was careful, with time she could begin recovering what she had given away before his soldiers left Amadicia. She had had a very good teacher in the Game of Houses.

“I will try not to provide too poor a match, if you would like to play.” She was well beyond fair, herself, perhaps even beyond good, but she would have to lose, of course, though not so badly that he grew bored. She hated losing.

Frowning, Asunawa drummed his fingers on the gilded arm of his chair. Above his head, the shepherd’s crook was worked in brilliant lacquer on a pure white disc. “The witch was taken aback,” he murmured.

Saren answered as though it was an accusation. “Some people are affected that way by hanging. The Darkfriends were rounded up yesterday; I’m told they were chanting some catechism to the Shadow when Trom broke down the door. I checked, but no one thought to ask if they had any connection to her.” At least he did not shift his feet; he stood as straight as any Hand of the Light should.

Asunawa dismissed explanations with a slight wave of his hand. Of course there was no connection, aside from the fact that she was a witch and they Darkfriends. The witch was in the Fortress of the Light, after all. Still, he was troubled.

“Niall sent me to fetch her as if I were a dog,” Saren grated. “I almost spewed up my stomach, standing so close to a witch. My hands wanted her throat.”

Asunawa did not bother to respond; he hardly heard. Of course Niall hated the Hand. Most men hated what they feared. No, his mind was on Morgase. She was not weak, by all accounts. She had certainly fended off Niall well enough; most people would have collapsed as soon as they were inside the Fortress. She would ruin some of his plans if she turned out to be weak after all. He had all the details in his mind, each day of her trial with ambassadors on hand from every land that could still produce one, until finally her dramatic confession, wrung from her so skillfully no one would ever find a mark, and then the ceremonies surrounding her execution. A special gallows just for her, to be preserved afterwards to mark the occasion.

“Let us hope she continues to resist Niall,” he said, with a smile that some would call mild and pious. Even Niall’s patience could not last forever; eventually he would have to hand her to justice.

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CHAPTER 32

Summoned in Haste

To Egwene, Rand's visit to Cairhien seemed like one of those grand Illuminators' fireworks displays she had heard of but never seen, exploding all through the city. The echoes seemed to reverberate without end.

She did not go near the palace again, of course, but Wise Ones that went every day to search for traps laid with *saidar* told her what went on. Nobles stared at one another with slitted eyes, Tairen and Cairhienin alike. Berelain seemed to have gone into hiding, refusing to see anyone she did not have to; Rhuarc apparently took her to task for neglecting her duties, with small effect. He appeared to be the only one unaffected in the whole palace. Even the servants jumped if you looked at them, though that might just have been having the Wise Ones themselves poking into every corner.

In the tents, things were no better, among the Wise Ones anyway. The rest of the Aiel were like Rhuarc, calm and solid. Their attitude made the Wise Ones' moodiness even more tense by comparison, not that it needed any. Amys and Sorilea came back from meeting Rand all but hissing. They did not say why, not where Egwene could hear, but the feeling spread through the Wise Ones as fast as thought, until every one of them stalked about like a bristling cat ready to claw anything that moved. Their apprentices stepped lightly and spoke softly, but still were scolded for what would have passed without notice before, and punished for what would have brought only a scolding.

Shaido Wise Ones appearing in the camp did not help. At least, Therava and Emerys were Wise Ones; the third was Sevanna herself, striding around self-importantly with her blouse unlaced enough to rival Berelain no matter how the dust blew. Therava and Emerys said Sevanna was a Wise One, and though Sorilea grumbled, there was no choice but to accept her as one. Egwene was sure they were spying, but Amys merely looked at her when she suggested it. Protected by custom, they had a free run of the tents, welcomed by all the Wise Ones—even Sorilea—as if close friends or first-sisters. Still, their presence honed the edge of everyone's mood. Especially Egwene's. That smirking cat Sevanna knew who she was, and took no pains to hide her delight in sending "the short apprentice girl" to fetch a cup of water or the like at any opportunity. Sevanna looked at her, too, a studying sort of gaze. It made Egwene think of someone studying a chicken, thinking how to cook it after they stole it. Worse than that, the Wise Ones would not tell her what they talked about; it was Wise Ones' business, and none of apprentices'. For whatever reason the Shaido were there, the mood among the other Wise Ones certainly interested them; more than once Egwene saw Sevanna, when she thought herself unobserved, smile as she watched Amys or Malindhe or Cosain stalk by talking to herself and needlessly adjusting her shawl. No one listened to Egwene, of course. Too many comments about the Shaido women finally earned her most of a day spent digging a hole "deep enough to stand in without being seen," and when she climbed out, all sweat and filth to begin filling it in, Sevanna was watching.

Two days after Rand left, Aeron and some, other Wise Ones talked three Maidens into sneaking over the wall of Arilyn's palace in the night to see what they could scout out, and that made everything worse. The three avoided Gawyn's guards, if with more difficulty than they expected, but the Aes Sedai were another matter; while they were still climbing from the roof into an attic, they were wrapped up in the Power and whisked inside. Fortunately Coiren and the others seemed to think they were there to steal, though the Maidens might not have thought it was so fortunate. They were tossed into the street, so bruised they could hardly walk and still struggling not to sniffle when they got back to the tents. The other Wise Ones took turns upbraiding Aeron and her friends, usually in private, though Sorilea appeared to make a point of confronting them before as many people as possible. Sevanna and her two companions sneered quite openly whenever they saw Aeron or one of the others, and speculated among themselves in very audible voices about what the Aes Sedai would do when they found out. Even Sorilea looked at them askance for that, but no one said anything, and Aeron and her friends began walking as small as the apprentices. The apprentices began trying to hide when not actually performing their duties or taking lessons. Sharp tempers became like razors.

Except for her hole, Egwene managed to avoid the worst of it, but only because she stayed away from the tents a good deal, largely to stay clear of Sevanna before she taught the woman a lesson. She had no doubt how that would end; Sevanna was accepted as a Wise One, no matter how many grimaces there might be when she was not around. Amys and Bair would probably let the Shaido woman set her punishment. At least staying away was not too difficult. She might be an apprentice, but only Sorilea made any effort to teach her the thousand things a Wise One had to know. Until Amys and Bair gave her final permission to return to *Tel'aran'rhiod*, her days and nights were largely her own, so long as she managed to escape being snapped up with Surandha and the rest to wash dishes or gather dung for the fires or the like.

She could not understand why the days seemed to pass so slowly; she thought it must be waiting on Amys and Bair. Gawyn was at The Long Man every morning. She became used to the fat innkeeper's suggestive smirks, though once or twice she did think of kicking the woman. Maybe three times; no more than that. Those hours went by in a flash. No sooner did she sit on his knee than it was time to straighten her hair and leave. Sitting on his knee no longer frightened her. Not that it had ever frightened her, exactly, but it had come to be more than pleasant. If she sometimes thought things she should not have, if those thoughts made her blush, well, he always brushed her face with his fingers when she blushed, and said her name in a way she could have spent a lifetime hearing. He let slip less about what was going on with the Aes Sedai than she learned elsewhere, and she could hardly make herself care.

It was the other hours that dragged out as though mired in mud. There was so little to do that she thought she might burst from frustration. Wise Ones keeping watch on Arilyn's mansion reported no more Aes Sedai. Chosen from those who could channel, the watchers said the Aes Sedai were still wielding the Power inside day and night without break, but Egwene did not dare go close, and if she had, she could have not told what they were doing without seeing the flows. Had the Wise Ones been less snappish, she might have tried to spend time reading in her tent, but the one time she touched a book except at night by lamplight, Bair muttered so about girls wasting their days lying about lazily that Egwene murmured that she had forgotten something and scurried out of the tent before she was found something more useful to do. A few moments' conversation with another apprentice could be as dangerous. Stopping to talk with Surandha, who was hiding in the shade cast by a tent belonging to some Stone Dogs, earned her an afternoon doing laundry when Sorilea found them. She might actually have been glad of chores, just for something to do, but Sorilea examined the perfectly clean wash hung inside the tent to keep off the ever-present dust, sniffed and told them to do it again. Twice she told them to do it again! Sevanna watched part of that too.

Being in the city always made Egwene look over her shoulder, yet on the third day, she picked her way down to the docks as cautiously as a mouse stealing from a cat. A wizened fellow with a narrow little boat scratched his thinning hair and demanded a silver mark to row her out to the Sea Folk ship. Everything was dear, but that was ridiculous. She fixed him with a level stare, told him he could have a silver penny—still far too much, really—and hoped the bargaining would not take her whole purse; she did not have much. Everybody jumped and flinched at the Aiel, but when it came to bargaining, they forgot all about *cadin'sor* and spears and fought like lions. He opened his toothless mouth, closed it, peered at her, then muttered under his breath and to her surprise told her she was stealing the bread out of his mouth.

“Get in,” he grumbled. “Get in. I cannot waste all day for a pittance. Browbeating a man. Stealing the bread.” He went on like that even after he began working the oars, pulling the tiny boat out onto the broad waters of the Alguenya.

Egwene did not know whether Rand had met this Wavemistress, but she hoped he had. According to Elayne, the Dragon Reborn was the Sea Folk Coramoor, the Chosen One, and all he had to do was appear to have them running at his beck and call. She hoped they did not grovel too much, though. Rand got more than enough of that already. Still, it was not Rand that sent her out with the muttering boatman. Elayne had actually met some of the Atha’an Miere, had traveled on one of their ships, and she said Sea Folk Windfinders could channel. Some of them anyway; maybe most. That was a secret the Atha’an Miere held close, but the Windfinder on Elayne’s vessel had been more than willing to share her knowledge once her secret was penetrated. Sea Folk Windfinder knew weather. Elayne claimed they knew more of weather than the Aes Sedai. She said the Windfinder on her ship had worked enormous flows to produce favorable winds. Egwene had no idea how much of that was true and how much enthusiasm, but learning a little about weather would certainly be better that twiddling her thumbs and wondering whether being caught by Nesune might be a relief from the Wise Ones and Sevanna. With what she knew now, she could not have made it rain if the skies were black except for lightning. At the moment, of course, the sun burned golden in a cloudless sky and heat shimmers danced over the dark water. At least the dust did not make it far onto the river.

When the boatman finally drew in his oars and let the small craft drift beside the ship, Egwene stood up, ignoring his mutters that she would have them both in the river. “Hello!” she called. “Hello? May I come aboard?”

She had been on several riverboats and was proud that she knew the right terms—shipfolk seemed touchy about the right words—but this vessel was outside her experience. She had seen river craft longer, a few, but none so tall. Some of the crew were in the rigging, or clambering up the slanted masts, dark bare-chested men, barefoot in wide, colorful trousers held up by bright sashes, dark women in bright blouses as well.

She was just at the point of shouting again, louder, when a rope ladder uncoiled down the side of the ship. No answering call came from the deck, yet that seemed invitation enough. Egwene climbed. It was difficult—not the climb, but keeping her skirts decently close; she could see why the Sea Folk women wore trousers—but finally she reached the rail.

Immediately her eyes fell on a woman not a span away on the deck. Her blouse and trousers were blue silk, with a darker sash. She wore three worked gold rings in each ear, and a fine chain that supported tiny glittering medallions ran from one to a ring in her nose. Elayne had described this, and even demonstrated using *Tel’aran’rhiod*, but seeing it in the flesh made Egwene wince. But there was something else. She could sense the ability to channel. She had found the Windfinder.

She opened her mouth, and a dark hand flashed in front of her eyes with a gleaming dagger. Before she could scream, the blade sliced through the ropes of the ladder. Still clinging to the useless thing, she plummeted.

She did scream then—for all of a heartbeat, before she went into the river feet first, plunging deep. Water rushed into her open mouth, drowning her scream; she thought she swallowed half the river. Frantically she struggled to unwrap her skirts from around her head and rid herself of the ladder. She was not in a panic. She was not. How far down had she gone? It was all muddy darkness around her. Which way was up? Iron bands gripped her chest, but she breathed out through her nose, watched the bubbles stream, as it seemed to her, down and to her left. Twisting, she stroked for the surface. How far? Lungs burning.

Her head broke through into daylight, and she sucked in air with a coughing gasp. To her surprise, the boatman reached down and hauled her into his boat by increments, muttering at her to stop thrashing before she upset them, adding that Sea Folk were a touchy lot. He leaned over again to reclaim her shawl before it sank once more. She snatched it from him, and he shied back as if he thought she meant to hit him with it. Her skirts hung heavily, her blouse and shift clung; her head scarf slanted across her forehead. A pool began to form in the bottom of the boat under her feet.

The boat had drifted maybe twenty paces from the ship. The Windfinder was at the railing now, and two more women, one in plain green silk, the other brocaded red worked with gold thread. Their earrings and nose rings and chains caught the sun.

"You are refused the gift of passage," the green-clad woman called, and the one in red shouted, "Tell the other, disguises do not fool us. You do not frighten us. You are all refused the gift of passage!"

The wizened boatman picked up his oars, but Egwene pointed a finger straight at his narrow nose. "Stop right where you are." He stopped. Dunking her. Not a word of common courtesy.

Drawing a deep breath, she embraced *saidar* and channeled four flows before the Windfinder could react. So she knew weather, did she? Could she divide her flows four ways? Not many Aes Sedai could. One flow was Spirit, a shield she shoved onto the Windfinder to keep her from interfering. If she knew how. Each of the other three was Air, woven almost delicately around each woman, binding her arms to her sides. Lifting them was not precisely difficult, but not easy either.

A clamor rose on the ship as the women floated into the air and out over the river. Egwene heard the boatman moaning. She was not interested in him. The three Sea Folk women did not even kick. With an effort she hoisted them higher, some ten or twelve paces above the surface; no matter how hard she strained, that seemed to be the limit. *Well, you don't want to actually hurt them*, she thought, and released the weaves. *They'll scream now.*

The Sea Folk women curled into balls as soon as they began to fall, spun, straightened with their arms thrust out before them. They entered the water with three quite small splashes. Moments later three dark heads broke the surface, and the women began swimming rapidly back toward the ship.

Egwene closed her mouth. *If I haul them up by their ankles and dunk their heads, they'll. . . .* What was she thinking? They had to scream because she had? She was no wetter than they. *I must look like a drowned rat!* She channeled carefully—working about yourself always took care; you could not see the flows clearly—and water rolled off her, oozed out of her garments. It made quite a puddle.

It was the boatman staring at her, mouth hanging open and eyes wide, that made her realize what she had done. Channeled, in the middle of the river, with nothing to hide her from any Aes Sedai who happened to be where she could see. Sun or no sun, she suddenly felt cold to the bone.

"You may take me back to shore now." No telling who was on the docks; at this distance she could not tell a man from a woman. "Not to the city. The riverbank." The fellow flung himself against his oars so hard she almost fell over backward.

He took her to a spot where the shore was all smooth rocks the size of her head. There was no one in sight, but she leaped out as soon as the boat grated onto the rocks, hoisted her skirts and darted up the sloping bank at a dead run she maintained all the way back to her tent where she collapsed in a panting pile of sweat. She did not go near the city again. Except to meet Gawyn, of course.

The days passed, and the now almost ceaseless wind carried waves of dust and grit day and night. On the fifth night, Bair accompanied Egwene into the World of Dreams, just a quick jaunt in the nature of a test, a walk in the part of *Tel'aran'rhiod* that Bair knew best, the Aiel Waste, a parched jagged land that made even drought-torn Cairhien seem lush and fair. A quick trip, and then Bair and Amys came to wake her and see whether it had had any ill effect. It had not. No matter how they made her run and jump, no matter how often they peered into her eyes and listened to her heart, they agreed, but agreement or not, the next night Amys took her for another short trip to the Waste, followed by another examination that made her glad to crawl onto her pallet and fall into a deep sleep.

Those two nights she did not return to the World of Dreams, but it was more exhaustion than anything else. Before that she had told herself every night she should stop—a fine thing if she was caught violating their strictures just when they were ready to lift them—but somehow she always decided that just a short trip would be all right, quick enough to reduce the chance of exposure. One thing she did avoid was the place between *Tel'aran'rhiod* and the waking world, the place where dreams floated. Especially she avoided it after she found herself thinking that if she was very careful she might be able to peek into Gawyn's dreams without being drawn in, and that even if she was pulled in, it would only be a dream. She reminded herself firmly that she was a grown woman, not a silly girl. She was just glad no one else knew what a snarl the man made of her thoughts. Amys and Bair would laugh till they cried.

On the seventh night, she prepared herself for bed carefully, putting on a fresh shift and brushing her hair till it shone. All useless so far as *Tel'aran'rhiod* was concerned, but it kept her from thinking about how her stomach was doing backflips. Tonight it would be Aes Sedai waiting in the Heart of the Stone, not Nynaeve or Elayne. That should make no difference, unless. . . . The ivory-backed hairbrush froze in midstroke. Unless one of the Aes Sedai revealed that she was only Accepted. Why had she not thought of that before? Light, but she wished she could talk with Nynaeve and Elayne. Only, she could not see what good it would do, and she was certain that dream of breaking things meant something would go badly wrong if she did speak to them.

Chewing her lip, she considered going to Amys and telling her she was not feeling well. Nothing serious, just an upset stomach, but she did not think she could visit the dream tonight. They were going to start her lessons again after tonight's meeting, but. . . . Another lie, and a coward's way to boot. She would not be a coward. Not everyone could be as brave as everyone else, but cowardice was despicable. Whatever happened tonight, she had to make herself face it, and that was that.

Firmly she put down the brush, blew out the lamp and crawled onto her pallet. She was tired enough that falling asleep presented no problem, though if necessary she knew how to put herself to sleep at any time now, or enter a light trance where she could be in the World of Dreams and still talk—well, mumble—to someone waiting by her body. The last thing before sleep came, she realized something surprising. Her stomach was not turning over anymore.

She stood in a great vaulted chamber forested with thick columns of polished redstone. The Heart of the Stone, in the Stone of Tear. Gilded lamps hung from chains overhead. Unlit, but there was of course light, coming from everywhere and nowhere. Amys and Bair were already there, looking no different than they had that morning, except that all their necklaces and bracelets sparkled a bit more than even gold really should have. They were talking quietly, and looking irritated. Egwene caught only a word here and there, but two of them were “Rand al’Thor.”

Abruptly she realized she was wearing an Accepted’s white dress with the banded hem. As soon as she did, it became a copy of the Wise Ones’ garb, without jewelry. She did not think the other two women had noticed, or would know what the dress meant if they did. There were times when surrender lost less *ji* and earned less *toh* than the alternatives, but no Aiel would ever consider it without even trying to fight.

“They are late again,” Amys said wryly, walking out into the open space beneath the chamber’s great dome. Driven into the floorstones there was what appeared to be a sword made of crystal, *Callandor* of prophecy, a male *sa’angreal* and one of the most powerful ever made. Rand had put it there to remind the Tairens of him, as if there was any chance of them forgetting, but Amys barely glanced at it. To others The Sword That Is Not a Sword might be a symbol of the Dragon Reborn; to her, it was a wetlander concern. “At least we can hope they will not try to pretend they know everything and we nothing. They were much better, last time.”

Bair’s snort would have made Sorilea blink. “They will never be better. The least they can do is be where they said they would be when they said they—” She cut off as seven women appeared suddenly on the other side of *Callandor.*

Egwene recognized them, including the young woman with the determined blue eyes she had seen before in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Who was she? Amys and Bair had mentioned the others—usually in acid tones—but never another. She wore a blue-fringed shawl; they all wore their shawls. Their dresses changed color and cut from moment to moment, but the shawls never flickered.

The Aes Sedai’s eyes focused immediately on Egwene. The Wise Ones might as well not have existed.

“Egwene al’Vere,” Sheriam said formally, “you are summoned before the Hall of the Tower.” Her tilted green eyes shone with some suppressed emotion. Egwene’s stomach sank; they knew she had been masquerading as a full sister.

“Ask not why you are summoned,” Carlinya said right behind Sheriam, her icy voice making the formality even harder. “It is yours to answer, not to question.” For some reason she had cut her dark hair short; that was the sort of unimportant detail that seemed to loom large in Egwene’s mind. She certainly did not want to think about what this all meant. The ceremonious phrases rolled on in a stately rhythm. Amys and Bair adjusted their shawls and frowned, their irritation beginning to turn to concern.

“Delay not in your coming.” Egwene had always thought Anaiya kindly, but the bluff-faced woman sounded as firm as Carlinya, and not all that much warmer in her formality. “It is yours to obey in haste.”

The three spoke in unison. “It is well to fear the summons of the Hall. It is well to obey in haste and humility, unasking. You are summoned to kneel before the Hall of the Tower and accept their judgment.”

Egwene controlled her breathing, at least enough that she managed not to pant. What was the penalty for what she had done? Not light, she suspected, not if all this ceremony went with it. They were all staring at her. She tried to read something on those Aes Sedai faces. Six showed only ageless serenity, with maybe a hint of intensity in the eyes. The young Blue had the cool calmness of one who had been Aes Sedai for years, but she could not hide a slight, satisfied smile.

They seemed to be waiting for something. “I will come as soon as I can,” she said. Maybe her stomach was down in her ankles, but she could match them with her voice. No cowardice. She *would* be Aes Sedai. If they let her, after this. “I don’t know how quickly, though. It’s a long way, and I do not know exactly where Salidar is. Just somewhere along the River Eldar.”

Sheriam exchanged glances with the others. Her dress went from pale blue silk to dark gray, with divided skirts. “We are sure there is a way to make the journey quickly. If the Wise Ones will help. Siuan is sure it will require no more than a day or two if you enter *Tel’aran’rhiod* physically—”

“No,” Bair snapped at the same instant Amys said, “We will not teach her such a thing. It was used for evil, it is evil, and whoever does it loses part of themselves.”

“You cannot be sure of this,” Beonin said patiently, “since it seems none of you have ever done it. But if you know of it, you must have some notion of how it is done. We may be able to work out what you do not know.”

Patience was exactly the wrong tone. Amys settled her shawl and stood up even straighter than usual. Bair planted fists on hips with a glare that showed teeth. In a moment there was going to be one of those eruptions the Wise Ones had hinted at. They were going to teach these Aes Sedai a few lessons about what could be done in *Tel’aran’rhiod* by way of showing them how little they knew. The Aes Sedai faced them quite calmly, full of confidence. Their shawls held steady, but their dresses flickered almost as fast as Egwene’s heartbeat. Only the young Blue’s garb had any semblance of holding, changing just once during that long silence.

She had to stop it. She had to go to Salidar, and it certainly would help nothing if she came as witness to the humiliation of these Aes Sedai. “I know how. I think I do. I’m willing to try.” If it did not work, she could always ride. “But I still have to know where. Better than I do now, anyway.”

Amys and Bair turned their attention from the Aes Sedai to her. Not even Carlinya could have equaled those cold stares, or Morvrin. Egwene’s heart sank after her stomach.

Sheriam immediately began giving directions—so many miles west of this village, so many leagues south of that—but the young Blue cleared her throat and said, “This may be more help.” The voice sounded familiar, but Egwene could not connect it to the face.

Perhaps she had little better control of her clothing than the others—soft green silk became deep blue as she spoke, a high, embroidered neck became a lace ruff in the Tairen style, a cap of pearls appeared on her head—but she did know something of *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Suddenly a large map hung in the air to one side, with a glowing red dot at one end labeled “Cairhien” in large letters and another as “Salidar” at the other. The map began to expand and change; suddenly the mountains were not just lines, but raised up, the forests took on shades of green and brown, the rivers glittered like blue water in sunlight. It grew until it made a wall hiding the entire side of the Heart. It was like looking down on the world.

Even the Wise Ones were impressed enough to ignore their disapproval, at least, until the woman’s Tairen gown turned to yellow silk with a silver-embroidered neckline. The young woman was not interested in them, though. For some reason she stared challengingly at the other Aes Sedai.

“That is splendid, Siuan,” Sheriam said after a moment.

Egwene blinked. Siuan? It must be a woman of the same name. This younger Siuan gave a self-satisfied sniff and a sharp nod very reminiscent of Siuan Sanche, but that was impossible. *You’re just trying to put it off,* she told herself firmly. “It’s certainly enough for me to find Salidar, whether or not I can. . . .” She glanced at Amys and Bair, so full of silent disapproval they could have been carved of winter stone. “Whether or not I can come here in the flesh. One way or another, I promise I will be in Salidar as soon as I can.” The map vanished. *Light, what are they going to do to me?*

Her mouth half-formed the question, and Carlinya cut her off sharply, deep in the ceremony again and even harder than before. “Ask not why you are summoned. It is yours to answer, not to question.”

“Delay not in your coming,” Anaiya said. “It is yours to obey in haste.”

The Aes Sedai exchanged glances and vanished so quickly she half-wondered whether they thought she would ask anyway.

That left her alone with Amys and Bair, but when she turned to them, uncertain whether to begin with an explanation or an apology or just a plea for understanding, they vanished too, leaving her there alone, surrounded by the redstone columns, with *Callandor* glittering beside her. There were no excuses in *ji’e’toh.*

Exhaling sadly, she stepped out of *Tel’aran’rhiod* back to her sleeping body.

She woke immediately; waking when you wished was as much a part of a dreamwalker’s training as going to sleep when you wished, and she had promised to go as quickly as she could. Channeling, she lit the lamps, all of them. She would need light. She made an effort to be brisk as she knelt beside one of the small chests that stood against the walls of the tent and began digging out clothes she had not worn since going to the Waste. A part of her life was over, but she would not cry over the loss. She would not.

As soon as Egwene disappeared, Rand stepped out from among the columns. He came here sometimes, to look at *Callandor.* The first visit had been after Asmodean taught him to invert his weaves. Then he had changed the traps laid around the *sa’angreal* so only he could see them. If the Prophecies could be believed, whoever drew it out would “follow after” him. He was not sure how much he did believe any longer, but there was no sense taking chances.

Lews Therin rumbled somewhere in the back of his head—he always did when Rand came close to *Callandor*—but tonight the gleaming crystal sword interested Rand not at all. He stared at where the huge map had hung. Not really a map, there at the end, but something more. What was this place? Was it simple chance that drew him here tonight instead of yesterday, or tomorrow? One of his *ta'veren* tugs on the Pattern? No matter. Egwene had accepted that summons meekly, and that she would never do if it came from the Tower and Elaida. This Salidar was where her mysterious friends were hiding. Where Elayne was. They had handed themselves to him.

Laughing, he opened a gateway to the reflection of the Palace in Caemlyn.

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CHAPTER 33

Courage to Strengthen

Kneeling in just her shift, Egwene frowned at the dark green silk riding dress she had worn into the Waste, what seemed a very long time ago. There was so much to do. She had given some time to writing a hasty note and rousing Cowinde from her blankets with instructions to leave it at The Long Man in the morning. It said little beyond the fact that she had to go away—she did not know much more—but she could not just disappear without telling Gawyn. A few of the phrases made her blush to remember—saying she loved him was one thing, but actually *asking* him to wait!—yet she had taken care of him as far as was possible. Now she had to ready herself, and she hardly knew for what.

The tent flap was thrown back, and Amys entered, then Bair and Sorilea. They stood in a line, looking down at her. Three faces stern with disapproval. It was very hard not to clutch the dress to her breast; in her shift, she felt very much at a disadvantage. In armor, she would have been at a disadvantage. A matter of knowing she was in the wrong. She was surprised it had taken them so long to come.

She took a deep breath. “If you’ve come to punish me, I don’t have time for carrying water or digging holes or any of it. I am sorry, but I said I would come as soon as I can, and I think they mean to count minutes.”

Amys’ pale eyebrows rose in surprise, and a puzzled look passed between Sorilea and Bair. “How should we punish you?” Amys asked. “You stopped being a pupil the moment your sisters summoned you. You must go to them as Aes Sedai.”

Egwene covered a wince by examining the riding dress again. It had gathered remarkably few wrinkles for having been rolled up in a chest all these months. She made herself face them again. “I know you’re angry with me, and you have cause—”

“Angry?” Sorilea said. “We are not angry. I thought you knew us better.” It was true she did not sound angry, yet censure still painted all their faces, including hers.

Egwene stared from one to another, especially Amys and Bair. "But you told me how wrong you think what I'm going to do is; you said I must not even think about it. I said I wouldn't, and then I went ahead and worked out how to do it."

Startlingly, a smile bloomed on Sorilea's leathery face. Her multitude of bracelets clattered as she shifted her shawl in a satisfied manner. "You see? I told you she would understand. She could be Aiel."

Some of the tightness faded from Amys, a little more from Bair, and Egwene understood. They were not angry that she meant to try entering *Tel'aran'rhiod* in the flesh. That was wrong in their eyes, but you had to do what you felt you had to do, and even if this worked it incurred no obligation except to herself. Not angry at all really, not yet. What dug at them was her lie. Her stomach fluttered. The lie she had admitted. Maybe her smallest lie.

Another deep breath was required to prime her throat for the words. "I lied about other things, too. I entered *Tel'aran'rhiod* alone after I promised I would not." Amys' face darkened again. Sorilea, not a dreamwalker, only shook her head ruefully. "I promised to obey as a pupil, but when you said the World of Dreams was too dangerous after I was injured, I went anyway." Bair folded her arms, expressionless. Sorilea muttered something about foolish girls, but it hardly sounded heated. A third long breath; this would be the hardest to say. Her middle was not fluttering anymore; it danced so hard she was surprised she was not shaking. "The worst of all is, I am not Aes Sedai. I'm only Accepted. You might call me an apprentice. I will not be raised to Aes Sedai for years, if I ever am, now."

Sorilea's head came up at that, thin lips compressed in a hard line, but still none of them said anything. It was up to Egwene to make matters right. They could never be exactly as before, but. . . .

You've admitted everything, a small voice whispered. *Now you'd better get on with finding out how fast you can reach Salidar. You can still be raised Aes Sedai one day, but not if you make them madder than they already are.*

Egwene lowered her eyes and stared at the colorful layered carpets, her mouth twisting with scorn. Scorn for that small voice. And shame that it could speak in her head, that she could think it. She was going away, but before she did, she had to put matters right. It was possible, under *ji'e'toh.*

You did what you had to do, then paid the cost. Long months ago, in the Waste, Aviendha had showed her how a lie was paid for.

Gathering every scrap of courage she could find, hoping it was enough, Egwene put the silk dress aside and stood. Strangely, beginning seemed to make going on easier. She still had to look up to meet their, eyes, but she did it proudly, head high, and she did not have to force the words at all. “I have *toh.*” Her stomach was not fluttering any longer. “I ask the favor, that you will help me meet my *toh.*” Salidar was going to have to wait.

Leaning on his elbow, Mat examined the game of Snakes and Foxes laid out on the tent floor. Occasionally a drop of sweat fell from his chin, just missing the board. It was not a board at all, really, just a piece of red cloth with the web of lines drawn in black ink, and arrows showing which lines allowed movement only one way and which both. Ten pale wooden discs each with an inked triangle were the foxes, ten with a wavy line the snakes. Two lamps set to either side gave more than enough light.

“We will win this time, Mat,” Olver said excitedly. “I know we will.”

“Maybe,” Mat said. Their two black-stained discs were nearly back to the circle in the middle of the board, but the next roll of the dice would be for the snakes and foxes. Most of the time you did not make it as far as the outer edge. “Roll the dice.” He never touched the dice cup himself, not since the day he had given it to the boy; if they were going to play the game, it might as well be without his luck taking a hand.

With a grin, Olver rattled the leather cup and spilled out the wooden dice his father had made. He groaned as he counted the pips; this time three dice showed faces marked with a triangle, the other three wavy lines. On their turn you had to move the snakes and foxes toward your own pieces by the shortest path, and if one landed on the point you occupied. . . . A snake touched Olver, a fox Mat, and Mat could see if the rest of the pips had been played, two more snakes would have reached him.

Only a child’s game, and one you would not win so long as you followed the rules. Soon Olver would be old enough to realize that, and like other children, stop playing. Only a child’s game, but Mat did not like the fox getting him, and even less the snakes. It brought back bad memories, even if one had nothing to do with the other.

“Well,” Olver muttered, “we almost won. Another game, Mat?” Not waiting for an answer, he made the sign that opened the game, a triangle and then a wavy line through it, then chanted the words. “ ‘Courage to strengthen, fire to blind, music to dazzle, iron to bind.’ Mat, why do we say that? There is no fire, no music and no iron.”

“I don’t know.” The line tickled something in the back of his head, but he could not bring it up. The old memories from the *ter’angreal* might as well have been chosen at random—they probably had been—and there were all those gaps in his own, all those fuzzy places. The boy was always asking questions he did not know the answer to, usually beginning with “why.”

Daerid ducked in out of the night and gave a start of surprise. Face shining with sweat, he still had his coat on, if hanging undone. His newest scar made a pink furrow across the white lines crisscrossing his face.

“I think it’s past your bedtime, Olver,” Mat said, pushing himself up. His wounds gave a few twinges, but only a few; they were healing just fine. “Put the board up.” He stepped close to Daerid and lowered his voice to a whisper. “If you ever tell about this, I’ll cut your throat.”

“Why?” Daerid asked dryly. “You are turning into a wonderful father. He shows a remarkable resemblance to you.” He seemed to be struggling with a grin, but a moment later it was gone. “The Lord Dragon is coming into camp,” he said, as serious as death.

Thoughts of punching Daerid in the nose vanished. Mat pushed the tent flap aside and ducked into the night in his shirtsleeves. Six of Daerid’s men, in a circle around the tent, stiffened when he appeared. Crossbowmen; pikes certainly would not be much good for guards. It was night, but not dark in the camp. The bright glow of a waxing three-quarter moon in a cloudless sky was washed out by the light of fires spaced among the rows of tents and men sleeping on the ground. Sentries stood every twenty paces all the way to the log palisade. Not the way Mat would have preferred it, but if an attack could pop out of the air. . . .

The land lay nearly flat here, so he had a clear view of Rand striding toward him. Not alone. Two veiled Aiel moved on their toes, heads swiveling every time one of the Band rolled over in his sleep or a sentry shifted his feet to watch them. That Aiel woman Aviendha was with him as well, a bundle across her back, stalking along as if she would go for the throat of anyone who got in her way. Mat did not understand why Rand kept her around. *Aielwomen are nothing but trouble*, he thought bleakly, *and I've never seen a woman more set to give trouble than that one.*

"Is that really the Dragon Reborn?" Olver asked breathlessly. Clutching the rolled-up game to his chest, he was almost bouncing.

"It is," Mat told him. "Now get off to bed. This is no place for boys."

Olver went, muttering reproachfully, but only as far as the next tent. Out of the corner of his eye Mat saw the boy dart out of sight; his face reappeared, peering around the corner.

Mat left him alone, though after getting a good look at Rand's face, he wondered whether this was any place for grown men, let alone a boy. That face could have been used to hammer down a wall, but some emotion struggled to break through, excitement or maybe eagerness; Rand's eyes held a fevered light. He had a wide piece of rolled parchment in one hand, while the other stroked his sword hilt unconsciously. The Dragon belt buckle glittered in the firelight; sometimes the head of one of the Dragons peeking out from his coatsleeves did too.

When he reached Mat, he wasted no time with greetings. "I need to talk to you. Alone. I need you to do something." The night was a black oven, and Rand wore a gold-embroidered green coat with a high collar, but he was not sweating a drop.

Daerid, Talmanes and Nalesean stood a few paces away in various states of undress, watching. Mat motioned them to wait, then nodded toward his tent. Following Rand in, he fingered the silver foxhead though his shirt. He had nothing to worry about, at least. He hoped he did not.

Rand had said alone, but apparently Aviendha did not think that applied to her. She stayed a firm two paces from him, no more and no less; mostly she watched Rand with an unreadable face, but now and then she glanced at Mat, frowning and eyeing him up and down. Rand paid her no attention, and for all his seeming haste before, he showed none now. He looked around the tent, though Mat wondered uneasily whether he was seeing it. There was not much to see. Olver had set the lamps back on the small folding table. The chair folded, too, and so did the washstand and the cot. All were black-lacquered, with lines of gilt; if a man had coin, he might as well spend it on something. The slits the Aiel had made in the tent wall had been mended neatly, but they still showed.

The silence dug at Mat. "What is this, Rand? I hope you haven't decided to change the plan at this late date." No answer, only a look as if

Rand had just remembered he was there. It made Mat nervous. Whatever Daerid and the rest of the Band thought, he worked hard at keeping clear of battles. Sometimes, though, being *ta'veren* worked against his luck; that was the way he saw it. He believed Rand had something to do with that; he was more strongly *ta'veren*, strong enough that at times Mat almost felt a pulling. When Rand put his finger in, Mat would not be surprised to find himself in the middle of a battle if he was asleep in a barn. "A few more days, and I'll be in Tear. The ferries will take the Band across the river, and a few days beyond that will see us with Weiramon. It's too bloody late to go meddling—"

"I want you to bring Elayne to . . . to Caemlyn," Rand broke in. "I want you to see her safe to Caemlyn, whatever happens. Don't leave her side until she's on the Lion Throne." Aviendha cleared her throat. "Yes," Rand said. For some reason his voice went as cold and hard as his face. But then, did he need reasons if he was going mad? "Aviendha is going with you. I think it's best."

"*You* think it is best?" she said indignantly. "If I had not wakened when I did, I would never have known you had found her. You do not send me anywhere, Rand al'Thor. I must speak with Elayne for my . . . my own reasons."

"I am very glad you've found Elayne," Mat said carefully. If he was Rand, he would leave the woman wherever she was. Light, Aviendha would be better! At least Aielwomen did not walk around with their noses in the air, or think you should jump just because they said so. Of course, some of their games were on the rough side, and they did have the habit of trying to kill you now and again. "I just don't understand why you need me. Jump through one of your gateways, give her a kiss, scoop her up and jump back." Aviendha fastened an outraged stare on him; you would have thought he had advised kissing her.

Rand unrolled the large parchment on the table, using the lamps to hold down the ends. "This is where she is." It was a map, a stretch of the River Eldar and maybe fifty miles or so to either side. An arrow had been drawn in blue ink, pointing into forest. "Salidar" was printed beside the arrow. Rand tapped near the eastern edge of the map. That was wooded, too; most of it was. "There is a large clearing here. You can see the nearest village is nearly twenty miles north. I'll put a gateway through to the clearing for you and the Band."

Mat managed to turn a wince into a grin. “Look, if it has to be me, why not just me? Make your gateway to this Salidar, I’ll toss her on a horse, and . . .” And what? Was Rand going to make a gateway from Salidar to Caemlyn as well? It was a long way to ride, from the Eldar to Caemlyn. A very long way, with only a snooty noblewoman and an Aiel for company.

“The Band, Mat,” Rand snapped. “You and the whole Band!” He drew a long shuddering breath, and his tone became milder. His face did not lose its rigidity, though, and his eyes were still feverish. Mat could almost believe he was sick, or in pain. “There are Aes Sedai in Salidar, Mat. I don’t know how many; hundreds, I’ve heard, but I won’t be surprised if it is closer to fifty. The way they go on about the Tower, whole and pure, I doubt you’ll see more. I mean to put you out two or three days away so they can learn you’re coming. No point in startling them—they might think you were a Whitecloak attack. They’re rebels against Elaida, and probably frightened enough that you won’t have to do more than loom a little and say Elayne has to be crowned in Caemlyn to make them let her go. If you think they can be trusted, offer your protection. And mine; they’re supposed to be on my side, and they might be glad of even my protection by now. Then you escort Elayne—and as many of the Aes Sedai as want to come—straight across Altara and Murandy to Caemlyn. Show my banners, announce what you’re doing, and I don’t think the Altarans or Murandians will give much trouble, not as long as you keep moving. If you find any Dragonsworn along the way, gather them in as well. Most will probably turn to bandits if I don’t tie a rope to them soon—I’ve heard a rumor or two already—but you will draw them, flying my banners.” His sudden grin showed teeth, but never touched those hot eyes. “How many birds with one stone, Mat? You ride through Altara and Murandy with six thousand men and draw the Dragonsworn out after you, and you may hand me both countries.”

There was so much in that to set Mat’s teeth on edge that he no longer cared whether Rand had ten sore teeth and both boots full of cockleburrs. Make Aes Sedai think he meant to attack them? Indeed not. And he was supposed to intimidate fifty of them? Aes Sedai did not frighten him, maybe not even five or six together, but fifty? He touched the foxhead through his shirt again before he realized it; he might just find out how lucky he really was. As for riding across Altara and Murandy, he could see it now. Every noble whose lands he crossed would swell up like a strutting rooster and try to peck him the moment his back was turned. If that *ta’veren* madness came into it, he would probably find some lord or lady gathering an army right in front of him.

He made one more try. “Rand, don’t you think this might draw Sammael’s eyes north? You want him looking east. That is why I’m here, remember? To make him look this way.”

Rand shook his head emphatically. “All he’ll see is a guard of honor escorting the Queen of Andor to Caemlyn, and that’s if he learns of it before you reach Caemlyn. How quickly can you be ready?”

Mat opened his mouth, then gave it up. He was not going to budge the man. “Two hours.” The Band could be booted and in their saddles faster, but he was in no hurry, and the last thing he wanted was the Band thinking they were moving on the attack.

“Good. I need an hour or so myself.” For what, he did not say. “Stay close to Elayne, Mat. Keep her safe. I mean, there’s no point to this if she doesn’t reach Caemlyn alive for her coronation.” Did Rand think he did not know about him and Elayne canoodling in every corner of the Stone the last time they were together?

“I’ll treat her like my own sister.” His sisters had done their best to make his life miserable. Well, he expected the same from Elayne, just in a different way. Maybe Aviendha would be a little better. “She won’t get out of my sight until I plunk her down in the Royal Palace.” *And if she tries Mistress Snoot on with me too often, I’ll bloody well kick her!*

Rand nodded. “That reminds me. Bodewhin is in Caemlyn. With Verin and Alanna, and some more Two Rivers girls. They’re on their way to train for Aes Sedai. I’m not sure where they will do it; I am certainly not letting them go to the Tower the way things are. Maybe the Aes Sedai you bring back will take care of it.”

Mat gaped. His sister, Aes Sedai? Bode, who used to run tell their mother every time he did anything that was fun?

“Another thing,” Rand went on. “Egwene may be in Salidar before you. I think somehow they found out she’s been calling herself Aes Sedai. Do what you can to get her out of it. Tell her I will get her back to the Wise Ones as soon as I can. She’ll probably be more than ready to go with you. Maybe not, though; you know how stubborn she’s always been. The main thing is Elayne. Remember, don’t leave her side till she reaches Caemlyn.”

“I promise,” Mat muttered. How under the Light could Egwene be somewhere on the Eldar? He was sure she had been in Cairhien when he left Maerone. Unless she had worked out Rand's trick with the gateways. In which case she could jump back any time she wished. Or jump to Caemlyn, and make a gateway for him and the Band at the same time. "Don't worry about Egwene, either. I'll drag her out of whatever trouble she's in, no matter how muley she behaves." It would not be the first time he had pulled her chestnuts off the hearth before they burned. Very likely he would get no thanks for it this time either. *Bode* was going to be Aes Sedai? *Blood and bloody ashes!*

"Good," Rand said. "Good." But he was staring intently at the map. He jerked his eyes away, and for an instant Mat thought he intended to say something to Aviendha. Instead, he turned away from her roughly. "Thom Merrilin should be with Elayne." Rand produced a letter from his pocket, folded and sealed. "See that he gets this." Shoving the letter into Mat's hands, he hurriedly left the tent.

Aviendha took a step after him, half-raising a hand, lips parted to speak. Just as suddenly her mouth snapped shut, and she buried her hands in her skirts and squeezed her eyes shut. So the wind came that way, did it? *And she wants to talk to Elayne.* How did Rand ever get himself in this pickle? Rand was always the one who knew how to handle women, Rand and Perrin.

Still, it was no concern of his. He turned the letter over in his hands. Thom's name was written in a feminine hand; the seal was one he did not recognize, a spreading tree topped by a crown. What noblewoman would be writing to a leathery old man like Thom? Not his concern either. Tossing the letter on the table, he picked up his pipe and pouch. "Olver," he said, stuffing the bowl with tabac, "ask Talmanes, Nalesean and Daerid to come to me."

There was a squeak just outside the door flap, then, "Yes, Mat," and the sound of scurrying feet.

Aviendha looked at him, folding her arms with a firm expression.

He forestalled her. "So long as you travel with the Band, you are under my command. I want no trouble, and I expect you to see there isn't any." Should she start anything, he would deliver her to Elayne tied to a packsaddle, if it took ten men to put her there.

"I know how to follow, battle leader." She punctuated that with a sharp sniff. "But you should know that not all women are wetlander soft. If you try putting a woman on a horse when she does not want to go, she may put a knife in your ribs."

Mat nearly dropped the pipe. He knew Aes Sedai could not read minds—if they could, his hide would have been hanging on a wall in the White Tower long since—but maybe Aiel Wise Ones. . . . *Of course not. It's just one of those tricks women pull.* He could figure out how she did it if he put his mind to it. He just did not care to put his mind to it.

Clearing his throat, he stuck the unlit pipe between his teeth and bent to study the map. The Band could probably cover the distance from the clearing to Salidar in a day if he pushed, even in that wooded terrain, but he intended to take two, or even three. Give the Aes Sedai plenty of warning; he did not want them any more frightened than they already were. A frightened Aes Sedai was almost a contradiction. Even wearing the medallion he was not eager to learn what a frightened Aes Sedai might do.

He felt Aviendha's eyes on the back of his neck, heard a rasping sound. Sitting cross-legged against the tent wall, she was drawing her belt knife along a honing stone and watching him.

When Nalesean entered with Daerid and Talmanes, he greeted them with, "We are going to tickle some Aes Sedai under the chin, rescue a mule, and put a snip-nosed girl on the Lion Throne. Oh, yes. That's Aviendha. Don't look at her crosswise, or she'll try to cut your throat and probably slit her own by mistake." The woman laughed as if he had made the funniest joke in the world. She did not stop sharpening her knife, though.

For a moment Egwene could not understand why the pain had stopped increasing. Then she pushed herself up from the carpets of her tent and stood, sobbing so hard she quivered. She wanted very much to blow her nose. She did not know how long she had been crying that hard; she only knew she felt on fire from the top of her hips to the backs of her knees. Standing still was a problem she barely mastered. The shift she had thought of as scant protection had been discarded some time back. Tears rolled down her face, and she stood there and bawled.

Sorilea and Amys and Bair regarded her soberly, and they were not the only ones, though most of the rest were sitting about on cushions or stretched out, talking and enjoying tea served by a slender *gai'shain*. A woman, thank the Light. They were all women, Wise Ones and apprentices, women Egwene had told she was Aes Sedai. She was grateful that just letting them think she was did not count; she could not have survived that! It was the telling, the spoken lie, but there had been surprises. Cosain, a lean yellow-haired Spine Ridge Miagoma, had said gruffly that Egwene had no *toh* toward her but she would stay for the tea, and so had Estair. Aeron, on the other hand, seemed to want to cut her in two, and Surandha. . . .

Trying to blink away the haze of tears, Egwene glanced toward Surandha. She was sitting with three Wise Ones, chatting and occasionally looking in Egwene's direction. Surandha had been absolutely merciless. Not that any of them had gone easy. The belt Egwene had found in one of her chests was thin and supple, but twice as wide as her hand, and these women all had strong arms. A half-dozen or so strokes from each added up.

Egwene had never felt so ashamed in her life. Not that she was naked and red-faced and weeping like a baby. Well, the weeping was part. Not even that they had all watched her strapped, when not taking their own turns. What shamed her was that she had taken it so badly. An Aiel child would have been more stoic. Well, a child would never have had to face it, but the principle was the simple truth.

"Is it over?" Was that thick, unsteady voice really hers? How these women would laugh if they knew how carefully she had gathered her courage.

"Only you know the worth of your honor," Amys said flatly. She held the belt dangling at her side, using the wide buckle as a handle. The murmur of conversation had ceased.

Egwene drew a long, shaking breath through her sobs. All she had to do was say it was done, and it was. She could have said enough after one blow from each woman. She could. . . .

Wincing, she knelt and stretched herself out on the carpets. Her hands went beneath Bair's skirts to grasp the woman's bony ankles through her soft boots. This time she *would* hold on to her courage. This time she would not cry out. This time she would not kick, or thrash about, or. . . . The belt had not hit her yet. Raising her head, she blinked her eyes clear to glare at them. "What are you waiting for?" Her voice still shook, but there was more than a note of anger too. Making her *wait* on top of everything else? "I have a journey to make tonight, in case you've forgotten. Get on with it."

Amys tossed the belt down beside Egwene's head. "This woman has no *toh* toward me."

"This woman has no *toh* toward me." That was Bair's thin voice.

“This woman has no *toh* toward me,” Sorilea said forcefully. Bending, she smoothed damp hair from Egwene’s face. “I knew you were Aiel in your heart. Do not be overproud now, girl. You have met your *toh.* Get up before we think you are boasting.”

Then they were helping her to her feet, hugging her and wiping away her tears, holding a handkerchief for her to finally blow her nose. The other women gathered around, each announcing that this woman had no *toh* toward her before adding her own hugs and smiles. It was the smiles that were the biggest shock; Surandha beamed at her as brightly as ever. But of course. *Toh* did not exist once it was met; whatever earned it might as well never have happened. A bit of Egwene that was not wrapped up in *ji’e’toh* thought that maybe what she had said at the end helped, too, as well as getting back down in the first place. Perhaps she had not faced it with the indifference of an Aiel in the beginning, but at the end, Sorilea was right. She had been Aiel in her heart. She thought a part of her heart always would be Aiel.

The Wise Ones and apprentices left slowly. Apparently they should remain the rest of the night or longer, all laughing and talking with Egwene, but that was just custom, not *ji’e’toh*, and with Sorilea’s help she managed to convince them that she just did not have the time. At last it was only her, Sorilea and the two dreamwalkers. All the hugs and smiles had slowed her tears to a trickle, and if her lips still trembled no matter what she did, she could still smile. In truth, she wanted to cry again, if for a different reason. Partly for a different reason; she *was* on fire.

“I am going to miss all of you so much.”

“Nonsense.” Sorilea snorted for emphasis. “If you have luck, they will tell you you can never be Aes Sedai now. Then you can return to us. You will be my apprentice. In three or four years, you will have your own hold. I even know the husband for you. My greatdaughter Amaryn’s youngest greatson, Taric. He will be a clan chief one day, I think, so you must watch for a sister-wife to be his roofmistress.”

“Thank you.” Egwene laughed. It seemed she had something to fall back on if the Hall in Salidar did send her away.

“And Amys and I will meet you in *Tel’aran’rhiod,*” Bair said, “and tell you what we know of events here, and with Rand al’Thor. You will go your own way in the World of Dreams now, but if you wish it, I will still teach you.”

"I do wish it." If the Hall let her anywhere near *Tel'aran'rhiod.* But then, they could not keep her out; whatever they did, they could not do that. "Please keep a close eye on Rand and the Aes Sedai. I don't know what he is playing, but I'm sure it is more dangerous than he thinks."

Amys said nothing about more teaching, of course. She had given her word on a course of action, and even meeting *toh* did not erase that. Instead, she said, "I know Rhuarc will regret not being here tonight. He has gone north to look at the Shaido for himself. Do not be afraid your *toh* toward him must go unmet. He will give you the opportunity when you meet once more."

Egwene gaped, and covered by blowing her nose for what seemed the tenth time. She had forgotten all about Rhuarc. Of course, nothing said she *had* to pay her obligation to him in the same way. Maybe her heart was at least partly Aiel, but for a moment her mind sought frantically for another method. There had to be one. And she would have plenty of time to find it before seeing him again. "I will be very grateful," she said faintly. And there was Melaine, too. And Aviendha. Light! She had thought she was done with it. Her feet kept shifting no matter how hard she tried to hold still. There had to be another way.

Bair opened her mouth, but Sorilea cut her off. "We must let her clothe herself. She has a journey to begin." Bair's thin neck stiffened, and Amys' mouth turned down. Clearly neither liked what Egwene was going to try any more than before.

Maybe they meant to stay and try talking her out of it, but Sorilea began muttering only half under her breath about fools who tried to stop a woman from doing what she thought she had to do. The younger pair straightened their shawls—Bair had to be seventy or eighty, but she certainly still was younger than Sorilea—gave Egwene a farewell hug and left with murmurs of, "May you always find water and shade."

Sorilea waited only a moment longer. "Think on Taric. I should have asked him to the sweat tent so you could see him. Until you can, remember this. We are always more afraid than we wish to be, but we can always be braver than we expect. Hold on to your heart, and the Aes Sedai cannot harm what is really you, your heart. They are not nearly so far above us as we believed. May you always find water and shade, Egwene. And always remember your heart."

Alone, Egwene merely stood for a time, staring at nothing and thinking. Her heart. Perhaps she did have more courage than she thought. She had done what she had to do here; she had been Aiel. In Salidar, she was going to need that. Aes Sedai methods differed from the Wise Ones’ in some respects, but they would not go easy if they knew she had called herself Aes Sedai. If they knew. She could not imagine why else they would summon her so coldly, but Aiel did not surrender before battle was joined.

With a start she came to herself. *If I’m not going to surrender before fighting*, she thought wryly, *I might as well get on to the battle*.

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CHAPTER 34

Journey to Salidar

Egwene washed her face. Twice. Then she found her saddlebags and filled them. Her ivory comb and brush and mirror went in, and her sewing box—a small, finely gilded casket that likely had held some lady’s jewels once—plus a white cake of rose-perfumed soap and clean stockings and shifts and handkerchiefs and a host of things, until the leather sides bulged and she could hardly buckle the flaps down. Several dresses and cloaks, an Aiel shawl, remained to make a bundle, which she tied neatly with a cord. That done, she looked around for anything else she might want to take. It was all hers. Even the tent had been given to her, but that was certainly too bulky, as were the carpets and cushions. Her crystal washbasin was beautiful, and far too heavy. The same for the chests, though several had beautiful work on the strapping and lovely carving.

Only then, thinking about the chests of all things, did she realize she was trying to put off the hardest bit of getting ready. “Courage,” she said dryly. “Heart of an Aiel.”

It turned out to be quite possible to put on stockings without sitting down, so long as you did not mind hopping around. Stout shoes followed, good if she had to walk far, and a silk shift, white and soft. Then the dark green riding dress, with its narrow divided skirts. Unfortunately that fit quite snugly over the hips, enough to remind her, unnecessarily, that she would not enjoy sitting for a while.

There was no point going outside. Bair and Amys were probably in their own tents, but she had no intention of risking the chance one of them might see her do this. It would be like slapping them. If it worked, that was. If not, she had a very long ride ahead of her.

Nervously rubbing her fingers over her palms, she embraced *saidar*, letting it fill her. And shifted her feet. *Saidar* made you more aware of everything, including your own body, which she would just as soon have missed right then. Trying something new, something no one had ever tried before that she knew, should have been done slowly and carefully, but for once she wanted to be rid of the Source. She channeled briskly, flows of Spirit, woven just so.

The air shimmered in the middle of the tent along her weave, cloaking the other side in mistiness. If she was right, she had just created a place where the interior of her tent was so similar to its reflection in *Tel'aran'rhiod* that there was no difference at all right there. One *was* the other. But there was only one way to be sure.

Tossing the saddlebags over her shoulder, she took the bundle under one arm and stepped through the weave, then let go of *saidar.*

She was in *Tel'aran'rhiod.* All it took to tell her was that the lamps that had been lit were no longer burning, yet there was a sort of light. Things moved slightly between one glance and the next, the washbasin, a chest. She was in *Tel'aran'rhiod* in the flesh. It felt no different than when she came in a dream.

She ducked outside. A three-quarter moon shone down on tents where no fire burned and no one moved, on a Cairhien that seemed oddly distant and clouded in shadow. All that remained was the problem of actually getting to Salidar. She had thought about that. A great deal depended on whether she had as much control in the flesh as when she was part of the World of Dreams.

Fixing in her mind what she would find, she walked around the tent—and smiled. There stood Bela, the short shaggy mare she had ridden out of the Two Rivers a lifetime ago. Only a dream-Bela, but the stout mare tossed her nose and whickered at sight of her.

Egwene dropped her burdens and flung her arms around the horse's head. "I'm glad to see you again, too," she whispered. That dark liquid eye looking at her *was* Bela's, reflection or no.

Bela wore the high-cantled saddle she had imagined, too. Comfortable for long travel normally, but not soft. Egwene eyed the thing askance, wondering how it would look padded; then she had a thought. You could change anything in *Tel'aran'rhiod* if you knew how, even yourself. If she had enough control to make Bela while in the flesh. . . . She concentrated on herself.

With a smile she fastened the saddlebags and bundle behind the saddle and climbed up herself, settling quite comfortably. “It isn’t cheating,” she told the mare. “They would not expect me to ride all the way to Salidar like that.” Well, come to think of it, maybe they would. Even so, Aiel heart or no Aiel heart, there were limits. Turning Bela, she heeled the mare’s ribs gently. “I need to be as quick as I can, so you will need to run like the wind.”

Before she had time to chuckle at the image that came to mind of plump Bela running like the wind, the mare was doing so. The landscape blurred, streaking by. For a moment Egwene clung to the pommel of the saddle, her mouth hanging open. It was as if Bela’s every trotting step carried them miles. With the first she had an instant to realize they were on the riverbank below the city, with ships floating out on the dark waters amid streaks of moonlight, and even as she tried to jerk at the reins, to stop Bela running headlong into the river, another step took them into thicketed hills.

Egwene threw back her head and laughed. This was marvelous! Except for the blurring, there was little real sensation of speed; her hair hardly had time to stream back in the wind of that rush before it was gone, only to come again a moment later. Bela’s gait felt the same plodding trot she recalled, but the sudden leap of everything around her was exhilarating, one moment a village street, moon-dark and silent, the next a country road winding through hills, the next a meadow with hay standing almost to Bela’s shoulders. Egwene only paused now and again to orient herself—no trouble at all with that marvelous map in her head, the one the woman with Siuan’s name had made—and otherwise let Bela trot. Villages and towns appeared and vanished in a blur, great cities—one she thought sure was Caemlyn, walls silvery white in the night—and once, in forested hills, the head and shoulders of a huge statue rearing out of the earth, a remnant of some land lost in history, appearing so suddenly at Bela’s side with a weathered grimace that Egwene nearly screamed, only it was gone before she could. The moon did not move at all between leaps, and hardly any as they sped along. A day or two to reach Salidar? That was what Sheriam had said. The Wise Ones were right. Everyone had believed for so long that Aes Sedai knew everything that Aes Sedai believed it, too. She was going to prove them wrong tonight, but it was not likely they would take any real notice of her proof. They *knew.*

After a time, when she was sure she was somewhere well into Altara, she began letting Bela make smaller jumps, reining her in more often, even riding normally for a bit, especially if there was a village nearby. Sometimes a night-shrouded inn had a sign that named the village, the Marella Inn or the Ionin Spring Inn, and moonlight added to the odd sense of light in *Tel'aran'rhiod* made reading them easy. Bit by bit she became absolutely certain where she was in relation to Salidar and began to take still smaller leaps, then none at all, only letting Bela trot normally through forest where tall trees had killed most of the undergrowth and drought most of the rest.

Still, she was surprised when a considerable village appeared suddenly, silent and dark in the moonlight. It had to be the right place, though.

At the edge of the thatch-roofed stone houses, she dismounted and took down her belongings. It was late, but people might still be about in the waking world. No need to startle them by popping out of the air. If an Aes Sedai saw that and mistook what she was, she might have no chance to face the Hall.

"You did run like the wind," she murmured, hugging Bela a last time. "I wish I could take you with me." A useless fancy, of course. What was made in *Tel'aran'rhiod* could exist only there. This was not really Bela, after all. Even so, she felt a twinge of regret as she turned her back—she would not stop imagining Bela; let her exist as long as she could—and wove her shimmering curtain of Spirit. Head high, she stepped through, ready to face whatever came with her Aiel heart.

One step she took, and came up short with a sharp, wide-eyed, "Oh!" The changes she had made in *Tel'aran'rhiod* existed in the real world no more than Bela did. The flames returned with a rush, and with them, it was almost as though Sorilea spoke to her. *If you take what you did to meet your* toh *and make it so it might as well never have happened, how have you met* toh? *Remember your Aiel heart, girl.*

Yes. She would remember. She was here to do battle whether the Aes Sedai knew it or not, ready to fight for the right to be Aes Sedai, ready to face. . . . Light, what?

There were people in the streets, a few moving between houses where lighted windows made golden pools. Walking a little gingerly, Egwene approached a wiry woman with a white apron and a harried expression. "Excuse me. My name is Egwene al'Vere. I am Accepted"—the woman gave her riding dress a sharp look—"and I've just arrived. Can you direct me to Sheriam Sedai? I need to find her." Very likely Sheriam was asleep already, but if she was, Egwene intended to wake her. She had been told to come as soon as possible, and Sheriam was going to know she was here.

"Everyone comes to me," the woman muttered. "Does anybody do anything for themselves? No, they want Nildra to do it. You Accepted are the worst of the lot. Well, I don't have all night. Follow me, if you're coming. If not, you can find her for yourself." Nildra strode off without so much as a backward glance.

Egwene followed silently. If she opened her mouth, she was afraid she would tell the woman what she thought, and that would hardly be the way to start her stay in Salidar. However short it might be. She wished her Aiel heart and her Two Rivers head could get together.

The distance was not long, up the hard-packed dirt street a little way and around the corner into another, narrower street. Sounds of laughter came from some of the houses. Nildra stopped at one that was silent, though light shone in the windows of the front room.

Pausing just long enough to knock on the door, she went in before there was any answer. Her curtsy was perfectly proper, if quick, and she spoke in a somewhat more respectful tone than before. "Aes Sedai, this girl says her name is Egwene, and she—" She got out no more.

They were all there, the seven from the Heart of the Stone, not a one looking ready for bed, though all but the young woman with Siuan's name wore robes. From the way their chairs were pulled together, it seemed that Egwene had walked in on a discussion. Sheriam was the first to leap from her chair, waving Nildra out. "Light, child! Already?"

No one paid any mind at all to Nildra's curtsy, or her put-upon sniff on going.

"We never expected," Anaiya said, taking Egwene's arms with a warm smile. "Not so soon. Welcome, child. Welcome."

"Were there any ill effects?" Morvrin demanded. She had not risen, and neither had Carlinya or the young Aes Sedai, but Morvrin leaned forward intently. All the others' robes were silk of various hues, sometimes brocaded or embroidered; hers was plain brown wool, though it did look soft and finely woven. "Do you feel any changes from the experience? We had precious little to go on. Frankly, I am surprised it worked."

"We shall have to see it work to know how well it does." Beonin paused for a sip of tea, then set cup and saucer down on a rickety-legged side table. The cup and saucer did not match, but then, none of the furniture matched, and most looked as lopsided as the small table. "If there are ill effects, she can be Healed, and they will be done with."

Egwene stepped away from Anaiya quickly, setting her belongings beside the door. "No, I'm quite well. Really, I am." She could have hesitated; Anaiya might well have Healed her without asking. That would have been cheating, though.

"She appears healthy enough," Carlinya said coolly. Her hair really was short, dark curls barely covering her ears; it had not been just something she did in *Tel'aran'rhiod.* She wore white, of course; even the embroidery was white. "We can have one of the Yellows check her thoroughly later, to be sure, if need be."

"Let her get her feet on the ground," Myrelle said with a laugh. Lush flowers in yellow and red so covered her robe that hardly any green showed. "She's just come a thousand leagues in a night. In hours."

"You've no time to let her find her feet," the young Aes Sedai put in firmly. She truly looked out of place in that gathering, in her yellow dress with the skirts slashed with blue and the deep round neckline blue-embroidered. That, and being the only one it was possible to put an age to. "Come morning, the Hall will swarm around her. If she's not ready, Romanda will gut her like a fat carp."

Egwene gaped. That voice registered more than the words. "You're Siuan Sanche. No, it's impossible!"

"Oh, it is possible, all right," Anaiya said dryly, giving the young woman a long-suffering look.

"Siuan is Aes Sedai again." Myrelle's look was more exasperated than long-suffering.

It had to be true—they *had* said so—but Egwene could hardly credit it even when Sheriam explained. Nynaeve had Healed *stilling*? Being *stilled* was why Siuan looked no older than Nynaeve? Siuan had always been a leather-faced taskmistress, and leather-hearted as well, not this pretty, creamy-cheeked woman with an almost delicate mouth.

Egwene watched Siuan while Sheriam talked. Those blue eyes were the same, though. How could she have seen that gaze, strong enough to drive nails, and not known? Well, the face was answer enough there. But

Siuan had always been strong in the Power, too. When a girl first began, it required testing to tell how strong she would be, but not once she had gained that strength. Egwene knew enough now to weigh another woman in moments. Sheriam was clearly the strongest woman in the room aside from Egwene herself, and Myrelle next, though it was hard to be certain; the rest all seemed close, except for Siuan. She was weakest by a fair margin.

“This truly is Nynaeve’s most remarkable discovery,” Myrelle said. “The Yellows are taking what she has done and making their own marvels, but she began it. Sit down, child. It is too long a story to hear standing.”

“I prefer to stand, thank you.” Egwene eyed the straight-backed chair with a wooden seat that Myrelle indicated, and barely repressed a shudder. “What about Elayne? Is she all right, too? I want to hear all about her and Nynaeve both.” Nynaeve’s *most* remarkable discovery? That implied more than one. It seemed she had fallen behind with the Wise Ones; she was going to have to run hard to catch up. At least she thought now that she would be allowed to. They would hardly have greeted her so warmly if she was going to be sent away in disgrace. She had not curtsied or called anyone Aes Sedai once—more because she had had no chance than for any other reason; defiance was no way to face Aes Sedai—yet no one had called her down. Maybe they did not know after all. But then, why?

“Except for a little trouble she and Nynaeve have with pots at the moment,” Sheriam began, but Siuan broke in harshly.

“Why are you all jabbering like brainless girls? It’s too late to be afraid of going on. It has begun; you began it. Either you finish, or Romanda will hang the lot of you in the sun to dry right alongside this girl, and Delana and Faiselle and the rest of the Hall will be there with her to stretch you out.”

Sheriam and Myrelle turned to face her almost together. All the Aes Sedai did, Morvrin and Carlinya twisting in their chairs. Cold Aes Sedai eyes stared from cold Aes Sedai faces.

At first Siuan met those stares with a challenging stare of her own, as Aes Sedai as they if seemingly much younger. Then her head fell a little, and spots of color entered her cheeks. She rose from her chair, eyes down. “I spoke in haste,” she muttered softly. Those eyes did not change—maybe the Aes Sedai failed to notice, but Egwene saw—yet that was still not like Siuan.

Egwene also saw that she did not know what was going on here at all. Not just Siuan Sanche meek as milk; if she was pushed to it, anyway. That least of all. What had they begun? Why would *she* be hung out to dry if they stopped?

The Aes Sedai exchanged looks as unreadable as Aes Sedai could make them. Morvrin was the first to nod.

“You have been summoned for a very special reason, Egwene,” Sheriam said solemnly.

Egwene’s heart began to beat faster. They did not know about her. They did not. But what?

“You,” Sheriam said, “are to be the next Amyrlin Seat.”

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CHAPTER 35

In the Hall of the Sitters

Egwene stared at Sheriam, wondering whether she was supposed to laugh. Maybe in her time with the Aiel she had forgotten what passed for humor among Aes Sedai. Sheriam stared back with that ageless, imperturbable face, tilted green eyes not seeming to blink. Egwene looked at the others. Seven faces with no expression, just an air of waiting. Siuan might have been smiling faintly, but the “smile” could as easily have been the natural curve of her lips. Wavering lamplight made their features suddenly strange and inhuman.

Egwene’s head felt light, her knees weak. Without thinking she let herself thump down in the straight-backed chair. She stood right up again, too. That certainly cleared her mind; a little, anyway. “I am not even Aes Sedai,” she said breathlessly. That seemed noncommittal enough. It had to be some sort of joke, or . . . or . . . or *some*thing.

“That can be gotten around,” Sheriam said firmly, jerking the bow of her pale blue sash tighter for emphasis.

Beonin’s honey-colored braids swayed as she nodded. “The Amyrlin Seat, she *is* Aes Sedai—the law is quite clear; several places it is stated, ‘the Amyrlin Seat as Aes Sedai’—but nowhere is it said that it is necessary to be Aes Sedai to become Amyrlin.” Any Aes Sedai would be familiar with Tower law, but as mediators, Grays had to know the law of every land, and Beonin took on a lecturing tone, as though explaining something that none knew as well as she. “The law that sets forth how the Amyrlin is to be chosen, it merely says ‘the woman who is summoned,’ or ‘she who stands before the Hall’ or the like. From beginning to end, the words ‘Aes Sedai’ are mentioned not once. Never. Some might say that the intent of the framers, it must be considered, but it is clear, whatever the intent of the women who wrote the law, that—” She frowned as Carlinya cut her off.

"No doubt they thought it was understood to such a degree that there was no need to state it. Logically, however, a law means what it says, whatever the framers thought they meant."

"Laws seldom have much concern with logic," Beonin said acidly. "In this case, however," she conceded after a moment, "you are quite correct." To Egwene, she added, "And the Hall, they see it so also."

They were all serious, even Anaiya, when she said, "You will be Aes Sedai, child, just as soon as you are raised Amyrlin Seat. That is the long and short of it." Even Siuan, despite that tiny smile. It was a smile.

"You can take the Three Oaths as soon as we are back in the Tower," Sheriam told her. "We considered having you speak them anyway, but without the Oath Rod, it might be taken for a sham. Best to wait."

Egwene almost sat down again before catching herself. Maybe the Wise Ones had been right; maybe traveling through *Tel'aran'rhiod* in the flesh had done something to her mind. "This, is madness," she protested. "I can't be Amyrlin. I'm . . . I'm. . . ." Objections piled up on her tongue in a tangle that let nothing out. She was too young; Siuan herself had been the youngest Amyrlin ever, and she was thirty when raised. She had barely begun her training, no matter what she knew about the World of Dreams; Amyrlins were knowledgeable and experienced. And wise; they were certainly supposed to be wise. All she felt was confounded and muddled. Most women spent ten years as a novice and ten as Accepted. True, some moved faster, even much faster. Siuan had. But she herself had been a novice less than a year, and Accepted an even shorter time. "It's impossible!" was the best she could manage finally.

Morvrin's snort reminded her of Sorilea. "Settle yourself down, child, or I'll see to it myself. This is no time for you to grow fluttery, or start fainting on us."

"But I wouldn't know what to do! Not the first thing!" Egwene drew a deep breath. It did not really calm her racing heart, but it helped. A little. Aiel heart. Whatever they did, she would not let them bully her. Eyeing Morvrin's bluff, hard face, she added, *She can skin me, but she can't bully me.* "This is ridiculous is what it is. I won't paint myself for a fool in front of everybody, and that is what I'd be doing. If this is why the Hall summoned me, I'll tell them no."

"I fear that is not an option," Anaiya sighed, smoothing her robe, a surprisingly frilly thing in rose silk, with delicate ivory lace bordering every edge. “You cannot refuse a summons to become Amyrlin any more than you could a summons for trial. The words of the summons are even the same.” *That* was heartening; oh, yes, it was.

“The choice is the Hall’s now.” Myrelle sounded a touch sad, which did nothing for Egwene’s spirits.

Suddenly smiling, Sheriam put an arm around Egwene’s shoulders. “Do not worry, child. We will help you, and guide you. That is why we are here.”

Egwene said nothing. She could think of nothing to say; maybe obeying the law was not being bullied, but it felt much the same. They took silence for assent, and she supposed it was. Without delay, Siuan was sent off, grumbling at being handed the task, to wake the Sitters personally and let them know Egwene had arrived.

The house became a whirlwind before Siuan made it out the door. Egwene’s riding dress came in for considerable discussion—none of which she was part of—and a plump serving woman was roused from her nap in a chair in a back room and sent off, with dire warnings if she breathed a word, to fetch every Accepted’s dress she could find that might come close to fitting Egwene. She tried on eight, right there in the front room, before finding one that did fit, after a fashion. It was too tight in the bosom, but thankfully loose in the hips. All the time the serving woman was bringing in dresses and Egwene was trying them on, Sheriam and the others took turns running out to dress themselves, and in between lectured her on what was going to happen, what she had to do and say.

They made her repeat everything back. The Wise Ones thought saying something once was sufficient, and woe to the apprentice who failed to listen and hear. Egwene remembered some of what she had to say from a novice lecture in the Tower, and she got it word perfect the first time, but the Aes Sedai went over everything again and again, and then again. Egwene could not understand. With anyone else but Aes Sedai, she would have said they were nervous, calm faces or no. She began to wonder whether she was making some mistake, and started emphasizing different words.

“Say them as you are told,” Carlinya snapped like a cracking icicle, and Myrelle, sounding hardly less cold, said, “You cannot afford a mistake, child. Not one!”

They put her through it five more times, and when she protested that she had given back every word correctly, listed who would stand where and who would say what just the way they had told her, she thought Morvrin might box her ears if Beonin or Carlinya did not first. In the event, their frowns were as hard as slaps, and Sheriam looked at her as if she were a novice being sulky. Egwene sighed and began yet again. "I enter with three of you escorting me. . . ."

It was a silent procession that made its way through the nearly empty, moon-shadowed streets. Few of the scattered people still out so much as glanced at them; six Aes Sedai with one lone Accepted in their midst might or might not be a common sight here, but apparently it was not odd enough to occasion comment. Windows that had been lit were dark now; quiet lay on the town so their footsteps sounded distinctly on the hard dirt. Egwene fingered the Great Serpent ring, firmly back in place on her left hand. Her knees were trembling. She had been prepared to face anything, but her list of "anything" had never included this.

In front of a rectangular three-story stone building, they stopped. The windows were all dark, but by moonlight it had the look of an inn. Carlinya, Beonin and Anaiya were to remain here, and the first two at least were not much pleased; they made no complaint, as they had not back at the house, but they adjusted their skirts unnecessarily and held their heads stiffly erect, not looking at Egwene.

Anaiya stroked Egwene's hair soothingly. "It will go well, child." She carried a bundle under her arm, the dress Egwene would put on after everything was over. "You are a quick study."

Inside the stone building a gong sounded deeply, once, twice, a third time. Egwene very nearly jumped. Silence for the space of a heartbeat; then the gong repeated its brazen song. Myrelle smoothed her dress unconsciously. Once more silence, followed by the triple call.

Sheriam opened the door, and Egwene followed her in with Myrelle and Morvrin on her heels. The way they surrounded her, Egwene could not help thinking, was like guards set to make sure she did not run away.

The large, high-ceilinged room inside was not dark, far from it. Lamps lined the mantels of four wide stone fireplaces, and more lined the stairs leading to the next floor and the railed walkway overlooking the room. A tall branched stand-lamp, mirrored to increase the light, stood in each corner of the room. Blankets tacked over the window kept all that light in.

Nine chairs made a row down either side of the room, facing inward in groups of three. The women in them, the Sitters for the six Ajahs represented in Salidar, wore their shawls and dresses in the colors of their Ajahs. Their heads swiveled toward Egwene, faces showing nothing but cool serenity.

At the far end of the room was another chair, standing on a small dais more like a flat box. A tall heavy chair, the legs and uprights carved in spirals, it had been painted in yellow and blue, green and white, gray and brown and red. A stole lay across the arms, striped with seven colors. It seemed miles from where Egwene stood to that stole.

"Who comes before the Hall of the Tower?" Romanda demanded in a high, clear voice. She sat just below the colorful chair, opposite the three Blue sisters. Sheriam stepped smoothly aside, revealing Egwene.

"One who comes obediently, in the Light," Egwene said. Her voice should have been shaking. Surely they were not really going to do this.

"Who comes before the Hall of the Tower?" Romanda demanded again.

"One who comes humbly, in the Light." Any moment this would turn into her trial for pretending to be Aes Sedai. No, not that; they would just have shielded her and locked her away until time if that was the case. But surely. . . .

"Who comes before the Hall of the Tower?"

"One who comes at the summons of the Hall, obedient and humble in the Light, asking only to accept the will of the Hall."

Among the Grays below Romanda a dark, slender woman stood. As the youngest Sitter, Kwamesa spoke the ritual question that dated to the Breaking of the World. "Are there any present save women?"

Romanda flung back her shawl deliberately and left it over the back of her chair as she stood. As eldest, she would answer first. Just as deliberately she unfastened her dress and pushed it down to her waist along with her shift. "I am a woman," she pronounced.

Carefully, Kwamesa laid her own shawl across her chair and stripped to the waist. "I am a woman," she said.

The others rose then and began baring themselves, each announcing, once she was showing proof, that she was a woman. Egwene struggled a little with the snug-bodiced Accepted's dress that had been found for her, and had to have Myrelle's help with the buttons, but quickly they four were as bare as anyone else.

"I am a woman," Egwene said with the others.

Kwamesa walked slowly around the room, pausing before each woman for an almost insultingly direct stare, then halted in front of her own chair again and announced that there were none present but women. The Aes Sedai sat and most began pulling up their bodices. Not in haste, exactly, but few wasting any time either. Egwene almost shook her head. She could not cover until later in the ceremony. Long ago, Kwamesa's question would have required more proof; in those days, formal ceremonies were held "clad in the Light," which was to say in nothing but your own skin. What would these women make of an Aiel sweat tent or a Shienaran bath?

There was no time for thought.

"Who stands for this woman," Romanda said, "and pledges for her, heart for heart, soul for soul, life for life?" She sat erect and supremely dignified, her plump bosom remaining bare.

"I so pledge," Sheriam said firmly, followed a moment later by the strong voices of Morvrin and Myrelle in turn.

"Come forward, Egwene al'Vere," Romanda commanded sharply. Egwene walked forward three paces and knelt; she felt numb. "Why are you here, Egwene al'Vere?"

She really was numb; she could not feel anything. She could not remember her responses, either, but somehow they rolled from her tongue. "I was summoned by the Hall of the Tower."

"What do you seek, Egwene al'Vere?"

"To serve the White Tower, nothing more and nothing less." Light, they *were* going to do it!

"How would you serve, Egwene al'Vere?"

"With my heart and my soul and my life, in the Light. Without fear or favor, in the Light."

"Where would you serve, Egwene al'Vere?"

Egwene breathed deeply. She *could* still stop this idiocy. She could not possibly be up to actually. . . . "In the Amyrlin Seat, if it pleases the Hall of the Tower." Her breath froze. Too late for turning back now. Maybe it had been too late in the Heart of the Stone.

Delana was the first to stand, then Kwamesa and Janya, more, until nine Sitters stood before their chairs, signifying acceptance. Romanda was still firmly in her seat. Nine of eighteen. The acceptance had to be unanimous—the Hall always sought consensus; in the end, all votes were unanimous, though it could take a great deal of talking to make it so—but there would be no talking aside from the ceremonial phrases tonight, and this was one short of outright rejection. Sheriam and the others had ridiculed her suggestion that that might happen, and did so so quickly that she might have worried if the whole thing was not so ridiculous, but they had warned her almost in passing that this could occur. Not a rejection, but a statement that the Sitters who remained in their chairs did not mean to be lapdogs. Only a gesture, a token, according to Sheriam, but looking at Romanda's stern face, and Lelaine's, scarcely less so above her bare chest, Egwene was not certain of that at all. They had said it might be as many as three or four, too.

Without a word the standing women retook their places. No one spoke, but Egwene knew what to do. Her numbness had vanished.

Rising, she moved toward the nearest Sitter, a sharp-faced Green named Samalin who had stayed in her chair. As Egwene went to her knees again in front of Samalin, Sheriam knelt beside her, a wide basin of water in her hands. Ripples danced on the surface of the water. Sheriam appeared cool and dry, while Egwene was beginning to glisten with sweat, but Sheriam's hands were trembling. Morvrin knelt and handed Egwene a cloth, Myrelle waiting at her side with lengths of toweling over her arm. Myrelle looked angry for some reason.

"Please allow me to serve," Egwene said. Looking straight ahead, Samalin raised her skirts to her knees. Her feet were bare. Egwene washed each foot and patted it dry, then moved to the next Green, a slightly plump woman named Malind. Sheriam and the others had given her all the Sitters' names. "Please allow me to serve." Malind had a pretty face with full lips and dark eyes that looked as if they liked to smile, but she was not smiling now. She was one of those who had stood, but her feet were bare too.

Every Sitters' feet were, all the way around the room. As Egwene washed all those feet, she wondered whether the Sitters had known how many would remain sitting. Plainly they had known some would, that this service would be required. She knew little more of how the Hall of the

Tower worked than had been in that novice lecture: For all practical purposes, she knew nothing. All she could do was go on.

She washed and dried the last foot—it belonged to Janya, who was frowning as if thinking of something else entirely; at least she had stood—and dropping the cloth in the washbasin, returned to her place at the foot of the rows and knelt. “Please allow me to serve.” One more chance.

Once again Delana was first to rise, but Samalin was right behind her this time. No one sprang to her feet, yet one by one they stood, until only Lelaine and Romanda remained sitting, looking at each other, not Egwene. Finally, Lelaine gave the ghost of a shrug, pulled up her bodice unhurriedly, and rose. Romanda turned her head and looked at Egwene. She stared so long that Egwene became conscious of the sweat running down between her breasts and along her ribs. At last, in stately slowness, Romanda reclothed herself and joined the others. Egwene heard a gasp of relief from behind her, where Sheriam and the others were waiting.

It was not over, of course. Romanda and Lelaine came together to lead her up to the brightly painted chair. She stood before it while they pulled up her bodice and draped the stole of the Amyrlin Seat around her shoulders while they and all the Sitters said, “You are raised to the Amyrlin Seat, in the glory of the Light, that the White Tower may endure forever. Egwene al’Vere, the Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat.” Lelaine removed Egwene’s Great Serpent ring from her left hand and gave it to Romanda, who slipped it onto Egwene’s right. “May the Light illumine the Amyrlin Seat and the White Tower.”

Egwene laughed. Romanda blinked, Lelaine gave a start, and they were not the only ones. “I just remembered something,” she said, then added, “daughters.” That was what the Amyrlin called Aes Sedai. What she had remembered was what came next. She could not help thinking it was payment for easing her way through *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Egwene al’Vere, the Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, managed to sit in that hard wooden chair without letting herself down gingerly, and without wincing. She considered both triumphs of will.

Sheriam and Myrelle and Morvrin glided forward—whoever had gasped, there was no telling now by their serene faces—and the Sitters formed a line behind them stretching toward the door. It was done in order of age, with Romanda at the very end.

Sheriam spread her skirts in a deep curtsy. “Please allow me to serve, Mother.”

“You may serve the Tower, daughter,” Egwene replied as gravely as she could. Sheriam kissed her ring and stepped aside, as Myrelle made her curtsy.

Down the line it went. There were some surprises in the arrangements. None of the Sitters were really young despite their Aes Sedai faces, but pale-haired Delana, whom Egwene had thought must be nearly as old as Romanda, stood less than halfway down the line, while Lelaine and Janya, both quite pretty women without a touch of gray in their dark hair, both came just ahead of the white-haired Yellow. Each made her curtsy and kissed Egwene’s ring with absolutely no expression—though some did glance at Egwene’s banded hem—and left the room by a rear door without another word. Normally there would have been more, but the rest of the ceremony was to wait on morning.

At last Egwene was alone with the three women who had pledged for her. She was still not sure what that meant. Myrelle went to let in the other three as Egwene stood. “What would have happened if Romanda hadn’t stood?” Supposedly there would have been one more chance, one more round of foot-washing and asking to be allowed to serve, but she was sure that if Romanda had voted no the second time, she would have the third.

“Then she very probably would have been raised Amyrlin herself in a few days,” Sheriam replied. “Her or Lelaine.”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Egwene said. “What would have happened to me? Would I just have gone back to being Accepted?” Anaiya and the others came hurrying up, smiling, and Myrelle began helping Egwene out of the banded white dress and into a pale green silk that she would wear only long enough to reach her bed. It was late, but the Amyrlin could not walk about in the dress of an Accepted.

“Very probably,” Morvrin answered after a moment. “I can’t say whether that would be luck or not, being an Accepted that every Sitter knew had almost had the Amyrlin Seat.”

“It has seldom happened,” Beonin said, “but a woman refused the Amyrlin Seat is usually exiled. The Hall strives for harmony, and she could not help being a source of disharmony.”

Sheriam looked straight into Egwene’s eyes as if to impress her words. “We surely would have been exiled. Myrelle and Morvrin and I for certain, since we stood pledge for you, and likely Carlinya and Beonin and Anaiya as well.” Her smile was abrupt. “But it did not happen that way. The new Amyrlin is supposed to spend her first night in contemplation and prayer, but once Myrelle finishes with those buttons, it might be best if we gave at least a little of it to telling you how matters stand in Salidar.”

They were all looking at her. Myrelle was behind her, doing up the last button, but she could feel the woman’s eyes. “Yes. Yes, I think that might be best.”

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CHAPTER 36

The Amyrlin Is Raised

Egwene raised her head from the pillows and looked around, for a moment surprised to find herself in a canopied bed in a large room. Early-morning light spilled in at the windows, and a plumply pretty woman in a simple gray wool dress was setting a large white pitcher of hot water on the washstand. Chesa had been introduced to her last night as her maid. The Amyrlin's maid. A covered tray already sat beside her comb and brush on a narrow table beneath a mirror with a silver-worked frame. The smell of hot bread and stewed pears drifted in the air.

Anaiya had prepared the room for Egwene's arrival. The furnishings still did not match, but they were the best Salidar had to offer, from the padded armchair upholstered in green silk to the stand-mirror in the corner with all its gilding intact to the ornately carved wardrobe where her belongings now hung. Unfortunately, Anaiya's taste seemed to run heavily to frothy lace and frills. Both thickly bordered the canopy of the bed and the drawn-back bed curtains, and one or the other decked the table and its stool, the arms and legs of the padded chair, the coverlet Egwene had tossed on the floor and the thin silk sheet that had followed. The curtains at the windows were lace, too. Egwene put her head back down. Lace edged the pillows as well. The room made her feel she might drown in lace.

There had been a great deal of talk after Sheriam and the others brought her here to what they called the Little Tower, almost all of it on their side. They were not really interested in what she thought Rand was up to, or what Coiren and the others might want. There was an embassy on its way to Caemlyn under Merana, who knew what to do, though they were rather vague about exactly what that was. For the most part, they did the talking, she the listening, her questions brushed aside. The answers to some were unimportant, she was told, for now anyway; those that were answered got a quick gloss before they went on to what was important. Embassies had been sent off to every ruler, each one named in turn, with an explanation of why he or she was absolutely vital to Salidar's cause, which it seemed every one was. They did not quite say everything would fail if even one ruler went against them, but the emphasis they laid on every one said it for them. Gareth Bryne was building an army that would eventually be strong enough to prosecute their—her—claims against Elaida, if it came to that. They did not seem to think it would, despite Elaida's demand that they return to the Tower; they seemed to believe that once word of Egwene al'Vere's elevation to the Amyrlin Seat was spread, Aes Sedai would come to her, even some of those in the Tower now, enough that Elaida would have no choice but to step down on demand. The Whitecloaks were twiddling their thumbs for some reason, so Salidar was as safe as anywhere for as long as was necessary. That Logain had been Healed as well as Siuan—and Leane; of course she would have been Healed if she was here; it was just a surprise to find out she was—came up almost in passing.

"Nothing to worry you there," Sheriam said soothingly. She stood over Egwene, who sat in the padded armchair, with the others in an arc around her. "The Hall will argue whether to gentle him again until old age relieves us of the problem."

Egwene tried to stifle another yawn—it was getting late—and Anaiya said, "We need to let her sleep. Tomorrow is almost as important as tonight was, child." Abruptly she laughed to herself softly. "Mother. Tomorrow is important too, Mother. We will send Chesa to help you get ready for bed."

Even after they left, going to bed was not easy. While Chesa was still undoing Egwene's dress, Romanda appeared with a number of suggestions for the Amyrlin, delivered in a firm no-nonsense voice, and no sooner did she go than Lelaine came, as if the Blue Sitter had been waiting for the Yellow's departure. Lelaine had her own helpful counsel, given with Egwene sitting up in bed after Chesa was gently but firmly put out of the room. It was not a bit like Romanda's advice—neither was much like Sheriam's—and came with a warm, even affectionate, smile, but with just as much certainty that Egwene would need a little guidance in her first months. Neither woman exactly said that she could guide Egwene to what was best for the Tower better than Sheriam, or that Sheriam and her little circle might try to tug in too many directions, or that they might give bad advice, but the strong implications were there. Romanda and Lelaine also each hinted that the other might have her own agenda, one that undoubtedly would cause untold misery.

By the time Egwene channeled the last lamp out, she expected a sleep full of nightmares. In fact there were only two that she remembered the next morning. In one she was Amyrlin—Aes Sedai, but without taking the oaths—and everything she did led to disaster. That wakened her bolt upright, just to get away, yet she was sure it was not a dream with meaning. It was much the same as one of her experiences inside the *ter'angreal* where she had been tested for Accepted; as far as anyone knew, those had no connection to reality. Not to this reality. The other was the sort of foolishness she expected; she knew enough about her own dreams now to know that, even if she had to wake herself finally to escape that one as well. Sheriam had snatched the stole from her shoulders, and then everyone was laughing at her and pointing at the fool who really believed a girl of barely eighteen years could be Amyrlin. Not just the Aes Sedai, but all the Wise Ones, and Rand and Perrin and Mat, Nynaeve and Elayne, almost everyone she had ever met, while she stood there naked, desperately trying to put on an Accepted's dress that might have fit a ten-year-old child.

"Now, you can't be lying abed all day, Mother."

Egwene opened her eyes.

Chesa had an expression of mock severity on her face and a twinkle in her eye. At least twice Egwene's age, at their first meeting she had fallen straight into the blend of respect and familiarity that could be expected of an old retainer. "The Amyrlin Seat can't be lying slugabed, not today of all days."

"The last thing in my mind." Scrambling stiffly from the bed, Egwene stretched before pulling off her sweaty shift. She could not wait until she had worked long enough with the Power to stop sweating. "I'll wear the blue silk with the white morning-stars along the neckline." She noticed Chesa very carefully not looking as the woman handed her a fresh shift. The effects of meeting her *toh* had faded somewhat, but she still appeared faintly bruised. "I had an accident before I got here," she said, hurriedly thrusting her head through the new shift.

Chesa nodded in sudden understanding. "Horses are wicked, untrustworthy beasts. You'll never get me on one, Mother. A good sturdy cart is ever so much safer. If I fell off a horse like that, I'd never let on to a soul. Nildra would say such things, and Kaylin. . . . Oh, you'd never believe the things some women can say the moment your back is turned. Of course, it’s different for the Amyrlin Seat, but that’s what I’d do.” Holding the wardrobe door open, she glanced sideways at Egwene to see whether she understood.

Egwene smiled at her. “People are people, low or high,” she said gravely.

Chesa beamed for an instant before bringing out the blue dress. Anaiya might have chosen her, but she was the Amyrlin Seat’s maid, and her loyalty was to the Amyrlin Seat. And she was right about today’s importance, too.

Eating quickly—despite Chesa’s murmurs to herself about how gulping food always upset the stomach; the warm milk with honey and spices was sovereign for settling a nervous stomach—Egwene scrubbed her teeth and washed hurriedly, let Chesa take a few licks at her hair with the brush and dressed as fast as the woman could get the blue silk over her head. Settling the seven-striped stole on her shoulders, she paused to look in the stand-mirror. Stole or no stole, she did not look very much like the Amyrlin Seat. *But I am. This is no dream.*

In the large room below, the tables stood as empty as they had in the night. Only the Sitters were there, wearing their shawls and clustered according to Ajah, and Sheriam standing alone. They quieted as Egwene descended the stair, curtsied when she reached the bottom. Romanda and Lelaine eyed her sharply, then turned away, very obviously not looking at Sheriam, and resumed their conversations. When Egwene remained silent, the others did the same. Occasionally one of them glanced at her. Even in whispers their voices sounded too loud. There was silence outside; utter stillness. Egwene plucked her handkerchief from her sleeve and patted her face. None of *them* sweated a drop.

Sheriam came to stand beside her. “It will go well,” she said softly. “Just remember what you are to say.” That was another thing they had gone over in detail last night; Egwene had a speech to deliver this morning.

Egwene nodded. It was strange. Her stomach should have been turning over, her knees shaking. They were not, and she could not understand.

“There is no need to be anxious,” Sheriam said. She sounded as if she thought Egwene was, and meant to soothe her, but before she could open her mouth again, Romanda spoke loudly.

“It is time.”

In a rustle of skirts the Sitters lined up according to age, with Romanda in the lead this time, and marched outside. Egwene moved to just short of the door. Still no flutters. Maybe Chesa was right about the warm milk.

Silence still, then Romanda's voice, too loud for nature. "We have an Amyrlin Seat."

Egwene stepped outside into a heat she would not have expected until later in the day. As her foot left the stoop, it landed on a platform woven of Air. The lines of Sitters stretched out to either side of her, each Sitter glowing with the light of *saidar.*

"Egwene al'Vere," Romanda intoned, her voice carried by weaves of the Power, "the Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat."

They lifted her high as Romanda spoke, raising the Amyrlin in truth, until she stood just below the thatched roof, standing on thin air it would seem to any but a woman who could channel.

There were plenty to see her outlined by the rising sun; a second weave made the light into a shimmering weave around her. Men and women packed the street. The crowd disappeared around corners. Every doorway was filled, every window, every rooftop except that of the Little Tower itself. A roar erupted that very nearly drowned out Romanda, waves of cheering that rolled across the village. Egwene scanned the crowd searching for Nynaeve and Elayne, but she could not find them in that sea of upturned faces. An age seemed to pass before there was quiet enough for her to speak. The weave that had carried Romanda's voice shifted to her.

They had prepared her speech, Sheriam and the others, a weighty exhortation she might have been able to deliver without blushing if she was twice her age, or better yet three times. She had made a few changes on her own. "We are gathered together in a quest for truth and justice that will not end until the false Amyrlin Elaida is removed from the place she usurped." The only change in that was "will not" for "cannot," but she thought it stronger and better. "As Amyrlin, I will lead you in that quest, and I will not falter, as I know you will not." And that was quite enough exhortation; in any case, she had no intention of remaining up here long enough to repeat everything they wanted said. It all amounted to what she already had said anyway. "As my Keeper of the Chronicles, I name Sheriam Bayanar."

That produced a much smaller cheer; a Keeper was not an Amyrlin, after all. Egwene glanced down, waiting until she saw Sheriam hurry outside, still draping her shoulders with the stole of the Keeper, blue to show she had been raised from the Blue Ajah. It had been decided not to make a copy of the Amyrlin's staff, topped with a golden flame, that the Keeper carried; until the true staff was recovered from the White Tower, they would have to do without. Sheriam had been expecting a much longer wait, and she looked at Egwene with open exasperation. In the lines of Sitters, Romanda and Lelaine wore no expression at all; each had had her own very strong suggestion for Keeper, and needless to say, neither had been Sheriam.

Egwene drew breath and turned back to the waiting crowd. "In honor of this day, I hereby decree that all Accepted and novices are absolved of penances and punishments." That was customary, and produced shouts of glee only from white-clad girls and a few Accepted who forgot themselves. "In honor of this day, I hereby decree that Theodrin Dabei, Faolain Orande, Nynaeve al'Meara and Elayne Trakand are from this moment raised to the shawl, full sisters and Aes Sedai." A sort of questioning silence greeted that, with here and there a murmur. It was not according to custom at all; far from it. But it was said, and a good thing Morvrin had happened to mention Theodrin and Faolain. Time to return to what they had written out for her. "I hereby decree this a day of feasting and celebration. Let no work be done but what is necessary for enjoyment. May the Light shine on you all, and the Creator's hand shelter you." That last was swallowed by a tumultuous roar that overwhelmed the weave carrying her words. Some people began dancing in the street right there and then, though there was hardly room for them to move.

The platform of Air descended perhaps a trifle more quickly than it had risen. The Sitters were staring at her when she stepped off, and the glow of *saidar* began winking out among them almost before she touched ground.

Sheriam darted up to take Egwene's arm, smiling at the stone-faced Sitters. "I must show the Amyrlin her study. Forgive me." Egwene would not exactly have said Sheriam hustled her inside, but then again, she would not exactly have said she did not. She did not think Sheriam would actually try to drag her, but it seemed best to gather her skirts with her free hand and take longer strides so as not to find out.

Her study, at the back of the waiting room, turned out to be somewhat smaller than her bedroom, with two windows, a writing table, a straight-backed chair behind it and two more in front. Nothing else. The beetle-riddled wall panels had been waxed to a dull shine, but the tabletop was quite bare. There was a piece of flowered carpet on the floor.

"Forgive me if I was abrupt, Mother," Sheriam said, releasing her arm, "but I thought we should speak privately before you spoke to any of the Sitters. They all had a hand in writing your speech, and—"

"I know I made a few changes," Egwene said with a bright smile, "but I felt such a mudgin standing up there with all that to say." *All* of them had a hand? No wonder it had sounded like a pompous old woman who could not stop talking. She almost laughed. "Anyway, I said what had to be said, the heart of it. Elaida must be removed, and I will lead them to do it."

"Yes," Sheriam said slowly, "but there might be a few questions about some of the other . . . changes. Theodrin and Faolain will certainly be raised Aes Sedai as soon as we have the Tower and the Oath Rod back, and very likely Elayne, but Nynaeve still can't light a candle unless she yanks her braid at people first."

"That was exactly the point I wished to raise," Romanda said, coming in without knocking. "Mother," she added after a distinct pause. Lelaine shut the door behind them, nearly in the faces of several other Sitters.

"It seemed necessary," Egwene said, widening her eyes. "I thought of it last night. I've been raised Aes Sedai without being tested or taking the Three Oaths, and if I was the only one, it would just point me out. With four others, I won't seem quite so odd anymore. Not to people here, at least. Elaida might try to make something of it when she hears, but most folk know so little about Aes Sedai, they won't know what to believe anyway. It is the people here who matter most. They must have confidence in me."

Anyone but Aes Sedai would have gaped at her. As it was, Romanda very nearly spluttered.

"That may be so," Lelaine began sharply, giving her blue-fringed shawl a jerk, then stopped. It was so. More, the Amyrlin Seat had publicly decreed those women Aes Sedai. The Hall might be able to keep them Accepted—or whatever Theodrin and Faolain were, in their cases—but the Hall could not erase memories, and it would not stop everyone knowing they had gone against the Amyrlin on her first day. A great deal that would do for confidence.

"I hope, Mother," Romanda said in a tight voice, "that you will consult the Hall first the next time. Going against custom can have unexpected consequences.”

“Going against law can have unfortunate ones,” Lelaine said bluntly, tacking on a belated, “Mother.” That was nonsense, or close to it. The conditions for being raised Aes Sedai were set in law, true, but the Amyrlin could decree almost anything she wished. Still, a wise Amyrlin did not jump into fights with the Hall when they could be avoided.

“Oh, I will consult in the future,” Egwene told them earnestly. “But it did seem the right thing to do. Please, would you excuse me now? I really do need to speak with the Keeper.”

They practically quivered. Their curtsies were slight, their parting words perfectly correct so far as the words went, but muttered in Romanda’s case, and in Lelaine’s, sharp enough to cut.

“You handled that very well,” Sheriam said when they were gone. She sounded surprised. “But you must remember the Hall can make problems for any Amyrlin. One reason I am your Keeper is so that I can advise you, and keep you away from that sort of problem. You should ask me about any decrees you want to make. And if I’m not at hand, Myrelle and Morvrin and the others. We are here to help you, Mother.”

“I understand, Sheriam. I promise to listen carefully to whatever you say. I’d like to see Nynaeve and Elayne, if that is possible.”

“It should be,” Sheriam said, smiling, “though I may have to pull Nynaeve away from a Yellow physically. Siuan is coming to teach you about the etiquette of being Amyrlin—there is a great deal of it to learn—but I’ll tell her to come a little later.”

Egwene stared at the door after Sheriam had gone. Then she turned and stared at the table. Absolutely bare. Not a report to be read, no records to study. Not so much as pen and ink to write a note, much less a decree. And Siuan coming to teach her etiquette.

When a timid tap came at the door, she was still standing there. “Come,” she said, wondering whether it was Siuan, or perhaps a servant with a snack of honeycakes, already cut into suitably small pieces.

Nynaeve poked her head in hesitantly, then was pushed into the room by Elayne. Side by side, they made perfect deep curtsies, spreading white, banded skirts wide and murmuring, “Mother.”

“Please don’t do that,” Egwene said. Actually, it was more of a wail. “You’re the only two friends I have, and if you start. . . .” Light, she was almost ready to cry!

Elayne reached her first by a hair, throwing her arms around her. Nynaeve was silent, fiddling nervously with a slim silver bracelet, but not Elayne. “We’re still your friends, Egwene, but you *are* the Amyrlin Seat. Light, remember I told you one day you’d be the Amyrlin when I was. . . .” Elayne grimaced faintly. “Well, in any case, you *are*. We can’t just walk up to the Amyrlin and say, ‘Egwene, does this dress make me look fat?’ It would not be proper.”

“Yes it would,” Egwene said stoutly. “Well, in private,” she allowed after a moment. “When we’re alone, I *want* you to tell me a dress makes me look fat, or . . . or whatever you want.” Smiling at Nynaeve, she tugged the woman’s thick braid gently. Nynaeve gave a start. “And I want you to pull that at me, if you feel like it. I need somebody who is Egwene’s friend and doesn’t see this . . . this *bloody* stole all the time, or I will go crazy. Speaking of dresses, why are you still in those? I thought sure you could be changed by now.”

Nynaeve did pull at her braid then. “That Nisao told me it must be some sort of mistake and dragged me off. She said she wasn’t going to waste her turn just for a celebration.” The sounds of it were beginning to rise outside, a general hum just loud enough to penetrate the stone walls, and a faint thread of music.

“Well, it was no mistake,” Egwene said. Nisao’s turn? Well, she was not going to ask now; Nynaeve was not happy about it, and Egwene wanted this to be as happy an occasion as it could. Dragging the chair from behind the table, she saw two plump patchwork cushions on the seat and smiled. Chesa. “We are going to sit here and talk, and then I will help you find the two best dresses in Salidar. Tell me about these discoveries of yours. Anaiya mentioned them, and Sheriam, but I could not make them hold still long enough to give me any details.”

Almost as one, the pair paused in the act of sitting and exchanged glances. Unaccountably, they seemed reluctant to talk of anything but Nynaeve’s Healing Siuan and Leane—Nynaeve repeated three times rather anxiously that Healing Logain had been an accident—and Elayne’s work with *ter’angreal*. Those were remarkable feats, especially Nynaeve’s, but there was only so much they could say, and there were only so many times Egwene could tell them how marvelous what they had done was and how much she envied them. Trying to demonstrate did not last long; Egwene had no real feel for Healing, especially not this complicated tapestry Nynaeve wove without thought, and though she had an affinity for metals and very good strength in both Fire and Earth, Elayne lost her almost immediately. Of course they wanted to know what life was like among the Aiel. From the startled blinks and shocked laughs, abruptly cut off, she was not sure they believed everything she told them, and she certainly did not tell everything. The Aiel led naturally into Rand. Both women stared all through her rendition of his meeting with the Aes Sedai. They agreed that he was wading waters deeper than he knew and needed someone to guide him before he stepped into a hole. Elayne thought Min might help with that, once the embassy reached Caemlyn—this was the first Egwene knew Min was with him, or had been in Salidar—though in truth, Elayne seemed rather halfhearted. And she muttered something truly peculiar, as if it were a truth she did not like hearing.

"Min is a better woman than I am." For some reason, that got a sympathetic look from Nynaeve. "I wish *I* were there," Elayne went on in a stronger voice. "To guide him, I mean." She looked from Egwene to Nynaeve, red touching her cheeks. "Well, that, too." Nynaeve and Egwene began laughing so hard they nearly fell out of their chairs, and Elayne joined in almost immediately.

"There's one good thing to tell, Elayne," Egwene said breathlessly, still trying to recover. Then she realized exactly what she was going to say, and why. Light, what a mire she had stepped into, and while laughing! "I'm sorry about your mother, Elayne. You don't know how I wished I could offer my condolences before this." Elayne looked confused, as well she might. "The point is, Rand means to give you the Lion Throne *and* the Sun Throne." To her surprise, Elayne sat up very straight.

"He does, does he?" she said in a cool flat voice. "He intends to give them to me." Her chin rose slightly. "I have some claim to the Sun Throne, and if I choose to make it, I will do so in my own right. As for the Lion Throne, Rand al'Thor has no right—none!—to *give* me what is mine already."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it that way," Egwene protested. *Did he?* "He loves you, Elayne. I know he does."

"If only it were that simple," Elayne muttered, whatever that was supposed to mean.

Nynaeve sniffed. "Men always say they didn't mean it that way. You would think they spoke a different language."

“When I put my hands on him again,” Elayne said firmly, “I will teach him to speak the right language. *Give* me!”

It was all Egwene could do not to laugh again. The next time Elayne laid hands on Rand she would be too busy hunting a secluded spot to teach him anything. This was very like old times. “Now you’re Aes Sedai, you can go to him any time you want. Nobody can stop you.” A quick look passed between the pair.

“The Hall isn’t letting anyone just pick up and leave,” Nynaeve said. “And even if she could, we found something I think is more important.”

Elayne nodded vigorously. “I think so, too. I’ll admit, the first thought I had when I heard you announced Amyrlin was that now maybe Nynaeve and I could go find it. Well, the second; the first was a sort of stunned joy.”

Egwene blinked in confusion. “You found something. But now you need to find it.” Leaning forward in their chairs, they answered eagerly and almost on top of one another.

“We found it,” Elayne said, “but only in *Tel’aran’rhiod*.”

“We used need,” Nynaeve added. “We certainly needed *something*.”

“It’s a bowl,” Elayne continued, “a *ter’angreal*, and I think it might be strong enough to change the weather.”

“Only, the bowl is somewhere in Ebou Dar, in an awful, tangled warren of streets with no signs or anything to help. The Hall sent a letter to Merilille, but she’ll never find it.”

“Especially since she is supposed to be busy convincing Queen Tylin that the *real* White Tower is here.”

“We told them it needed a man in the channeling.” Nynaeve sighed. “Of course, that was before Logain, though I don’t think they would trust him.”

“It doesn’t really need a man,” Elayne said. “We just wanted to make them believe they *needed* Rand. I don’t know how many women it does need; maybe a full circle of thirteen.”

“Elayne says it’s very powerful, Egwene. It could make the weather right again. I’d welcome that just to get my weather sense straight again.”

“The bowl *can* make it right, Egwene.” Elayne exchanged happy looks with Nynaeve. “All you have to do is send us to Ebou Dar.”

The flood receded, and Egwene leaned back in her chair. “I will do what I can. Maybe there’ll be no objection, now that you’re Aes Sedai.” She had the feeling there would be, though. Raising them had seemed such a bold stroke, but she was beginning to believe it was not quite so simple.

“What you can?” Elayne said incredulously. “You are the Amyrlin Seat, Egwene. You give a command, and Aes Sedai jump.” She flashed a quick grin. “Say ‘jump,’ and I’ll prove it.”

Grimacing, Egwene shifted on the cushions. “I’m the Amyrlin, but. . . . Elayne, Sheriam doesn’t have to think very hard to recall a novice named Egwene, staring goggle-eyed at everything and being sent to rake the New Garden walks for eating apples after bedtime. She means to lead me by the hand, or maybe push me by the scruff of my neck. Romanda and Lelaine both wanted to be Amyrlin, and they see that novice too. They intend to show me where to put my feet as much as Sheriam does.”

Nynaeve frowned worriedly, but Elayne was pure indignation. “You can’t let them get away with trying to . . . to *bully* you. You are the *Amyrlin.* The Amyrlin tells the Hall what to do, not the other way around. You have to stand up and make them *see* the Amyrlin Seat.”

Egwene’s laugh had a touch of bitterness. Had it only been last night that she was so defiant about being bullied? “That will take a little time, Elayne. You see, I finally understood why they chose me. Part is for Rand, I think. Maybe they believe he’ll be more amenable if he sees me wearing the stole. The other part is *because* they remember that novice. A woman—no; a girl!—who’s so used to doing as she’s told that there will be no trouble making her do as they want.” She fingered the striped stole around her neck. “Well, whatever their reasons, they chose me Amyrlin, and since they did, I mean to *be* Amyrlin, but I have to be careful, at first anyway. Maybe Siuan made the Hall jump every time she frowned”—she wondered whether that had ever been true—“but if I try that, I might just be the first Amyrlin ever deposed the day after she was raised.”

Elayne looked dumbfounded, but Nynaeve nodded slowly. Perhaps being Wisdom and dealing with the Women’s Circle back home had given her more insight into how the Amyrlin Seat and the Hall of the Tower actually worked together than all of Elayne’s training to be Queen.

“Elayne, once word spreads and rulers know about me, I can begin making the Hall realize they chose an Amyrlin, not a puppet, but until then, they really could take this stole away as fast as they gave it. I mean, if I’m not really Amyrlin, then it isn’t hard to push me aside. There might be a few mutters, but I have no doubt they could smooth those over fast enough. If anyone outside Salidar ever heard somebody named Egwene al’Vere was raised Amyrlin, it would just be one of those peculiar rumors that grow up around Aes Sedai.”

“What are you going to do?” Elayne asked quietly. “You are not going to accept it meekly.” That made Egwene smile wholeheartedly. It was not a question, but a firm statement of fact.

“No, I am not.” She had listened to a number of Moiraine’s lectures to Rand about the Game of Houses. Back then, she had thought the Game absurd, and worse than underhanded. Now she hoped she could remember everything she had heard. The Aiel always said, “Use the weapons you have.”

“It may help that they’re trying to fit me for three different leashes. I can pretend to be pulled by one or another, depending on which is closest to what I want to do. Once in a while I can just do what I want, the way I did raising you two, but not very often yet.” Squaring her shoulders, she met their gazes levelly. “I would like to say I raised you because you deserved it, but the truth is, I did it because you’re my friends, and because I hope as full sisters you can help me. I certainly don’t know who else I can trust except you two. I will send you to Ebou Dar as soon as I can, but before and after, you are who I can discuss things with. I know you will tell me the truth. That trip to Ebou Dar may not take as long as you might think. You two have made all sorts of discoveries, so I hear, but if I can puzzle a few things out, I may have one of my own.”

“That will be wonderful,” Elayne said, but she sounded almost absentminded.

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CHAPTER 37

When Battle Begins

The silence was very peculiar, and Egwene did not understand at all. Elayne looked at Nynaeve, then they both looked at Nynaeve's slim silver bracelet. Nynaeve shifted her gaze to Egwene, wide-eyed, and quickly put it on the floor.

"I have a confession," she said in a near whisper. Her voice never rose, but words spilled out in a rush. "I captured Moghedien." Without raising her eyes, she lifted her wrist with the bracelet. "This is an *a'dam*. We're holding her prisoner, and nobody knows. Except Siuan and Leane and Birgitte. And now you."

"We had to," Elayne said, leaning forward urgently. "They'd have executed her, Egwene. I know she deserves it, but her head is full of knowledge, things we hardly dream of. That's where all of our *discoveries* came from. Except Nynaeve's Healing Siuan and Leane and Logain, and my *ter'angreal*. They would have killed her without waiting to learn anything!"

Questions whirled through Egwene's head dizzyingly. They had captured one of the Forsaken? How? Elayne had made an *a'dam*? Egwene shivered, barely able to look at the thing. It looked nothing like the *a'dam* she knew far too well. Even with that, how had they managed to keep one of the Forsaken hidden among so many Aes Sedai? One of the Forsaken, prisoner. Not tried and executed. As suspicious as Rand had become, if he ever discovered that, he would never trust Elayne again.

"Bring her here," she managed to say hollowly. Nynaeve bounced out of her chair and ran. The noises of celebration, laughter and music and song, swelled for a moment before the door banged shut behind her. Egwene rubbed her temples. One of the Forsaken. "That is quite a secret to keep."

Elayne's cheeks colored. Why under the Light . . . ? Of course.

"Elayne, I have no intention of asking about . . . anybody I'm not supposed to know about."

The golden-haired woman actually jumped. "I . . . I may be able to talk. Later. Tomorrow. Maybe. Egwene, you have to promise me you won't say anything—not to anybody!—unless I say so. No matter what you . . . what you see."

"If that's what you want." Egwene did not understand why the other woman was so agitated. Not really. Elayne had a secret that Egwene shared, only Egwene had found out by accident, and ever since they had both been pretending it was still Elayne's secret alone. She had met with Birgitte, the hero out of legend, in *Tel'aran'rhiod*; maybe she still did. Wait, that was what Nynaeve had said. Birgitte knew about Moghedien. Did she mean the woman waiting in *Tel'aran'rhiod* for the Horn of Valere to call her back? *Nynaeve* knew the secret that Elayne had refused to admit to Egwene even when she was caught out? No. This was not going to turn into a round of accusations and denials.

"Elayne, I am the Amyrlin—really the Amyrlin—and I already have plans. The Wise Ones who channel handle a good many of their weaves differently from Aes Sedai." Elayne already knew about the Wise Ones, though come to think of it, Egwene did not know whether the Aes Sedai did; the other Aes Sedai, now. "Sometimes what they do is more complicated or more crude, but at times it's simpler than we were taught in the Tower and works just as well."

"You want Aes Sedai to study with the Aiel?" Elayne's mouth quirked in amusement. "Egwene, they'll *never* agree to that, not if you live a thousand years. I suppose they'll want to test Aiel girls for novices when they find out, though."

Shifting on her cushions, Egwene hesitated. Aes Sedai studying with the Wise Ones. As apprentices? It would never happen, but Romanda and Lelaine especially might benefit from a little *ji'e'toh*. And Sheriam, and Myrelle, and. . . . She found a more comfortable way to sit and gave up her fancies. "I doubt the Wise Ones will agree to Aiel girls becoming novices." They might have once, possibly, but certainly not now. Now it would be as much as Egwene could expect for them to speak civilly to Aes Sedai. "I thought some sort of association. Elayne, there are fewer than a thousand Aes Sedai. If you include those who remain in the Waste, I think there are more Wise Ones who can channel than there are Aes Sedai. Maybe many more. Anyway, they don't miss a one with the spark born in her." How many women had died on this side of the Dragonwall, because they suddenly could channel, maybe without realizing what they were doing at all, and had no one to teach them? "I want to bring in more women, Elayne. What about women who can learn, but no Aes Sedai found them before they were thought too old for novices? I say, if she wants to learn, let her try, even if she's forty or fifty or her grandchildren have grandchildren."

Elayne hugged herself laughing. "Oh, Egwene, the Accepted will just love teaching *those* novice classes."

"They'll have to learn how," Egwene said firmly. She did not see the problem. Aes Sedai had always said you could be too old for a novice, but if you wanted to learn. . . . They had changed their minds partway already; in the crowd she had seen faces older than Nynaeve's above novice white. "The Tower has always been severe about excluding people, Elayne. If you aren't strong enough, you're put out. Refuse to take a test, and you're sent away. Fail a test, and out. They should be allowed to stay if they want."

"But the tests are to make sure you're strong enough," Elayne protested. "Not just in the One Power; in yourself. Surely you don't want Aes Sedai who will break the first time they come under pressure? Or Aes Sedai who can barely channel?"

Egwene sniffed. Sorilea would have been put out of the Tower without ever being tested for Accepted. "Maybe they can't be Aes Sedai, but that doesn't mean they are useless. After all, they're already trusted to use the Power with at least some discretion, or they wouldn't be sent off into the world. My dream is for every woman who can channel to be connected to the Tower somehow. Every last one."

"The Windfinders?" Elayne winced when Egwene nodded.

"You didn't betray them, Elayne. I can't believe they kept their secret as long as they did."

Elayne sighed heavily. "Well, what's done is done. 'You can't put honey back in the comb.' But if your Aiel get special protection, the Sea Folk should too. Let the Windfinders teach their girls. No Sea Folk women bundled off by Aes Sedai whatever they will."

"Done." Egwene spat on her palm and held out her hand, and after a moment Elayne spat on hers and grinned as they clasped to seal the bargain.

Slowly that grin faded. "Is this about Rand and his amnesty, Egwene?"

"In part. Elayne, how could the man be so . . . ?" There was no way to finish that, and no answer anyway. The other woman nodded a touch sadly, in understanding or agreement or both.

The door opened, and a sturdy woman in dark wool appeared, a silver tray in her hands with three silver cups and a long-necked silver wine pitcher. Her face was worn, a farmwife's face, but her dark eyes glittered as she studied Egwene and Elayne with a shifting gaze. Egwene had just a moment to feel surprise that the woman wore a close-fitting silver necklace despite her drab dress, and then Nynaeve entered behind heir, shutting the door. She must have run like the wind, because she had found time to exchange the Accepted's dress for a dark blue silk embroidered with golden scrolls around the neckline and hem. It was not nearly so low-cut as what Berelain wore, but still considerably lower than Egwene expected to see on Nynaeve.

"This is 'Marigan,' " Nynaeve said, drawing her braid over her shoulder in a practiced motion. Her Great Serpent ring shone golden on her right hand.

Egwene started to ask why she emphasized the name so, then abruptly realized that "Marigan's" necklace was a match for the bracelet on Nynaeve's wrist. She could not help staring. The woman certainly did not look anything like she expected one of the Forsaken to look. She said as much, and Nynaeve laughed.

"Watch, Egwene."

She did more than watch; she nearly leaped out of her chair, and she did embrace *saidar*. As soon as Nynaeve spoke, the glow had surrounded "Marigan." Only for an instant, but before it faded, the woman in the plain wool dress changed completely. Actually they were rather small changes, but they added up to a different woman, handsome rather than beautiful but not at all worn, a woman who was proud, even regal. Only the eyes remained the same, glittering, but no matter how they shifted, Egwene could believe this woman was Moghedien.

"How?" was all she said. She listened carefully as Nynaeve and Elayne explained about weaving disguises and inverting weaves, but she watched Moghedien. She *was* proud, and full of herself, full of being herself again.

"Put her back," Egwene said when the explanations were done. Again the glow of *saidar* lasted only moments, and once it faded, there were no weaves that she could see. Moghedien was plain and worn again, a country woman who had led a hard life and looked older than her years. Those black eyes glittered at Egwene, filled with hate, and maybe self-loathing as well.

Realizing she still held *saidar*, Egwene felt foolish for a moment. Neither Nynaeve nor Elayne had embraced the Source. But then, Nynaeve was wearing that bracelet. Egwene stood, never taking her gaze from Moghedien, and held out her hand. If anything, Nynaeve seemed eager to have the thing off her wrist, which Egwene could understand.

Handing the bracelet over, Nynaeve said, “Put the tray on the table, Marigan. And be on your best behavior. Egwene has been living with the Aiel.”

Egwene turned the silver band over in her hands and tried not to shiver. Cunning work, segmented so cleverly it almost appeared solid. She had been on the other end of an *a’dam* once. A Seanchan device, with a silver leash connecting necklace and bracelet, but still the same. Her stomach roiled as it had not facing the Hall or the crowd; it stewed as though trying to make up for being still before. Deliberately she closed the length of silver around her wrist. She had some idea of what to expect, but she still almost jumped. The other woman’s emotions were laid out before her, her physical state, all gathered in one fenced-off portion of Egwene’s mind. Mainly there was pulsing fear, but the self-loathing she had thought she saw swelled nearly as strongly. Moghedien did not like her present appearance. Maybe she especially did not like it after a short return to her own.

Egwene thought of who it was she was looking at; one of the Forsaken, a woman whose name had been used to frighten children for centuries, a woman whose crimes deserved death a hundred times over. She thought of the knowledge in that head. She made herself smile. It was not a pretty smile; she did not mean it to be, but she did not think she could have made it one if she tried. “They’re right. I have been living with the Aiel. So if you expect me to be as gentle as Nynaeve and Elayne, put it out of your mind. Set just one foot wrong with me, and I’ll make you beg for death. Only, I won’t kill you. I will just find some way to make that face permanent. On the other hand, if you do more than put a foot wrong. . . .” She widened her smile, until it was just showing teeth.

The fear leaped so high it drowned everything else and bulged against the fence. Standing in front of the table, Moghedien clutched her skirts white-knuckle tight and trembled visibly. Nynaeve and Elayne were looking at Egwene as if they had never seen her before. Light, did they expect her to be polite to one of the Forsaken? Sorilea would stake the woman out in the sun to bring her to heel, if she did not simply slit her throat out of hand.

Egwene moved closer to Moghedien. The other woman was taller, but she cowered back against the table, knocking over the winecups on their tray and rocking the pitcher. Egwene made her voice cold; it did not have far to go. “The day I detect one lie out of you is the day I execute you myself. Now. I have considered traveling from one place to another by boring a hole, so to speak, from here to there. A hole through the Pattern, so there’s no distance between one end and the other. How well will that work?”

“Not at all, for you or any woman,” Moghedien said, breathless and quick. The fear that boiled inside was plain on her face now. “That is how men Travel.” The capital was plain; she was speaking of one of the lost Talents. “If you try, you will be sucked into. . . . I don’t know what it is. The space between the threads of the Pattern, maybe. I don’t think you would live very long. I know you would never come back.”

“Traveling,” Nynaeve muttered disgustedly. “We never thought of Traveling!”

“No, we didn’t.” Elayne sounded no more pleased with herself. “I wonder what else we never thought of.”

Egwene ignored them. “Then how?” she asked softly. A quiet voice was always better than shouting.

Moghedien flinched as though she had shouted anyway. “You make the two places in the Pattern identical. I can show you how. It takes a little effort, because of the . . . the necklace, but I can—”

“Like this?” Egwene said, embracing *saidar*, and wove flows of Spirit. This time she was not trying to touch the World of Dreams, but she expected something much the same if it worked. What she got was quite different.

The thin curtain she wove did not produce the shimmering effect, and it lasted only a moment before snapping together in a vertical line that was suddenly a slash of silvery blue light. The light itself widened quickly—or perhaps turned; it looked that way to her—into . . . something. There in the middle of the floor was a . . . a doorway, not at all the misty view she had had of *Tel'aran'rhiod* from her tent, a doorway opening onto a sunblasted land that made the worst of the drought here look lush. Stone spires and sharp cliffs loomed over a dusty yellow-clay plain cut by fissures and dotted with a few scrub bushes that had a thorny look even at a distance.

Egwene very nearly stared. That was the Aiel Waste halfway between Cold Rocks Hold and the valley of Rhuidean, a spot where it was very unlikely there would be anyone to see—or be hurt; Rand's precautions with his special room in the Sun Palace had suggested she take some too—but she had only hoped to reach it, and she had been sure it would be seen through a shimmering curtain.

"Light!" Elayne breathed. "Do you know what you've done, Egwene? Do you? I think I can do it. If you repeat the weave again, I know I'll remember."

"Remember what?" Nynaeve practically wailed. "How did she do it? Oh, curse this *cursed* block! Elayne, kick my ankle. Please?"

Moghedien's face had gone very still; uncertainty rolled through the bracelet almost as heavily as fear. Reading emotions was hardly like reading words on a page, but those two were clear. "Who . . . ?" Moghedien licked her lips. "Who taught you that?"

Egwene smiled as she had seen Aes Sedai smile; at least, she hoped it conveyed mystery. "Never be too sure I don't already know the answer," she said coolly. "Remember. Lie to me once." Suddenly it occurred to her how this must sound to Nynaeve and Elayne. They had captured the woman, held her captive in the most impossible circumstances, pried all sorts of information out of her. Turning to them, she gave a small, rueful laugh. "I *am* sorry. I didn't mean to just take over."

"Why should you be sorry?" Elayne wore a broad smile. "You are *supposed* to take over, Egwene."

Nynaeve gave her braid a yank, then glared at it. "Nothing seems to work! Why can't I get angry? Oh, you can keep her forever, for all of me. We couldn't take her to Ebou Dar, anyway. *Why* can't I get angry? Oh, blood and bloody ashes!" Her eyes went wide as she realized what she had said, and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

Egwene glanced at Moghedien. The woman was busily setting the winecups upright again and pouring wine with a smell of sweet spices, but something had come through the bracelet while Nynaeve was talking.

Shock, perhaps? Maybe she would prefer the mistresses she knew to one who threatened death in almost her first breath.

A firm knock sounded at the door, and Egwene hastily released *saidar*; the opening to the Waste vanished. “Come.”

Siuan took one step into the study and stopped, taking in Moghedien, the bracelet on Egwene’s wrist, Nynaeve and Elayne. Shutting the door, she made a curtsy as minimal as anything from Romanda or Lelaine. “Mother, I’ve come to instruct you in etiquette, but if you would rather I returned later . . . ?” Her eyebrows rose, calmly questioning.

“Go,” Egwene told Moghedien. If Nynaeve and Elayne were willing to let her run loose, the *a’dam* must limit her, if not as much as one with a leash. Fingering the bracelet—she hated the thing, but she intended to wear it day and night—she added, “But keep yourself available. I’ll treat trying to escape the same as a lie.” Fear gushed through the *a’dam* as Moghedien scurried out. That could be a problem. How had Nynaeve and Elayne lived with those torrents of dread? Still, that was for later.

Facing Siuan, she folded her arms beneath her breasts. “This won’t do, Siuan. I know everything. Daughter.”

Siuan tilted her head. “Sometimes knowing gives no advantage whatsoever. Sometimes it only means sharing the danger.”

“Siuan!” Elayne said, half-shocked and half-warning, and to Egwene’s surprise Siuan did something she had never expected to see Siuan Sanche do. She blushed.

“You can’t expect me to become somebody else overnight,” the woman muttered grumpily.

Egwene suspected Nynaeve and Elayne could help with what she had to do, but if she was really going to be Amyrlin, she had to do it alone. “Elayne, I know you want to get out of that Accepted’s dress. Why don’t you do that? And then see what you find out about lost Talents. Nynaeve, you do the same.”

A look passed between them, then they glanced at Siuan and rose to make perfect curtsies, respectfully murmuring, “As you command, Mother.” There was no evidence of any impression on Siuan; she stood watching Egwene with a wry expression while they left.

Egwene embraced *saidar* again, briefly, to slide her chair back into place behind the table, then adjusted her stole and sat. For a long moment she regarded Siuan silently. “I need you,” she said at last. “You know what it is to be Amyrlin, what the Amyrlin can and cannot do. You know the Sitters, how they think, what they want. I need you, and I mean to have you. Sheriam and Romanda and Lelaine may think I still wear novice white under this stole—maybe they all do—but you are going to help me show them differently. I'm not asking you, Siuan. I—will—have—your—help." All there was to do then was wait.

Siuan regarded her, then gave a slight shake of her head and laughed softly. "They made a very bad mistake, didn't they? Of course, I made it first. The plump little grunter for the table turns out to be a live silverpike as long as your leg." Spreading her skirts wide, she made a deep curtsy, inclining her head. "Mother, please allow me to serve, and advise."

"So long as you know it's only advice, Siuan. I have too many people already who think they can tie strings to my arms and legs. I won't put up with it from you."

"I'd as soon try tying strings to myself," Siuan said dryly. "You know, I never really liked you. Maybe it was because I saw too much of myself in you."

"In that case," Egwene said in just as dry a tone, "you can call me Egwene. When we're alone. Now sit down and tell me why the Hall is still sitting here, and how I can get them moving."

Siuan started to pull one of the chairs over before remembering she could move it with *saidar* now. "They are sitting because once they move, the White Tower really is broken. As for how to get them moving, my advice. . . ." Her advice took a long time. Some of it went along lines Egwene had already thought of, and all of it seemed good.

In her room in the Little Tower, Romanda poured mint tea for three other Sitters, only one a Yellow. The room was in the back, but the sounds of festival penetrated; Romanda ignored them studiously. These three had been ready to support her for the Amyrlin Seat; voting for the girl had been as much a way to keep Lelaine from being raised as anything else. Lelaine would burn if she ever knew that. Now that Sheriam had her child Amyrlin installed, these three were still willing to listen. Especially after the business of raising Accepted to the shawl by decree. That had to be Sheriam's doing; she and her little clique had pampered all four; it had been their notion to lift Theodrin and Faolain above the other Accepted, and they had suggested it for Elayne and Nynaeve as well at one time. Frowning, she wondered what was keeping Delana, but she began talking anyway, after sheathing the room in *saidar* against eavesdropping. Delana would just have to catch up when she came. The important thing was that Sheriam was going to learn she had not gained as much power as she thought by snatching the job of Keeper.

In a house halfway across Salidar, Lelaine was serving chilled wine to four Sitters, only one from her own Blue Ajah. *Saidar* laced the room against listeners. The sounds of celebration made her smile. The four women with her had suggested she try for the Amyrlin Seat herself, and she had not been reluctant, but a failure would have meant Romanda being raised instead, which would have pained Lelaine as much as being exiled. How Romanda would gnash her teeth if she ever learned they had all voted for the child just to keep the stole from Romanda's own shoulders. What they had gathered to discuss, though, was how to lessen Sheriam's influence now she had managed to grab the Keeper's stole. That farce of raising Accepted to Aes Sedai by the girl's decree! Sheriam's head must have swollen to madness. As the talk went on, Lelaine began to wonder where Delana was. She should have been there by now.

Delana sat in her room, staring at Halima perched on the edge of Delana's bed. The name Aran'gar was never to be used; sometimes Delana was afraid Halima would know if she even thought it. The ward against eavesdropping was small, enclosing just the pair of them. "That is madness," she managed at last. "Don't you understand? If I continue to try supporting every faction, they will catch me out sooner or later!"

"Everyone must take some risks." The firmness of the woman's voice belied the smile on that lush mouth. "And you will continue to press for gentling Logain again. That, or killing him." A slight grimace actually made the woman more beautiful somehow. "If they ever brought him out of that house, I would attend to it myself."

Delana could not imagine how, but she would not doubt the woman until she failed. "What I don't understand is why you are so afraid of a man with six sisters shielding him from sunup to sunup."

Halima's green eyes blazed as she leaped to her feet. "I am not afraid, and don't you ever suggest it! I want Logain severed or dead, and that is all you have to know. Do we understand one another?"

Not for the first time Delana considered killing the other woman, but as always she had a sinking certainty that she would be the one to die. Somehow Halima knew when she embraced *saidar*, even if Halima could not channel herself. The worst of it was the possibility that because Halima needed her, she would not kill her; Delana could not imagine what she might do instead, but the very vagueness of the threat made her shudder. She should be able to kill the woman right there, right then. “Yes, Halima,” she said meekly, and hated herself for it.

“So good of you,” Siuan murmured, holding her cup for Lelaine to add a small splash of brandy in her tea. The sun was sinking toward the horizon, giving the light a reddish cast, but the streets outside were still raucous. “You have no idea how tiring it is trying to teach that girl etiquette. She seemed to think as long as she behaves like a *Wisdom* from back home, everything will be fine. The Hall is supposed to be the Women’s Circle or some such thing.”

Lelaine made sympathetic noises over her own tea. “You say she was complaining about Romanda?”

Siuan shrugged. “Something about Romanda insisting we stay here instead of marching for Tar Valon, as near as I could make out. Light, the girl has a temper like a fisherbird in mating season. I almost wanted to take her by the shoulders and shake her, but of course, she does wear the stole, now. Well, once I finish my lectures I’m done with her. Do you remember . . . ?”

Smiling inside, Siuan watched Lelaine drinking it all in with the tea. Only the first sentence had really been important. The bit about a temper was her own addition, but it might make some of the Sitters walk a little more carefully around Egwene. Besides, she suspected it might be true. She would never be Amyrlin again herself, and she was fairly certain that trying to manipulate Egwene would be as futile as trying to manipulate herself had been, and as painful, yet teaching an Amyrlin to be Amyrlin. . . . She looked forward to that as much as she had anything in a long time. Egwene al’Vere would be an Amyrlin to make thrones tremble.

“But what about my block?” Nynaeve said, and Romanda frowned at her. They were in Romanda’s room in the Little Tower, and this was when

Romanda was supposed to have her according to the schedule the Yellows had set up. The music and laughter outside seemed to irritate the Yellow.

“You weren’t so eager earlier. I heard that you told Dagdara you were Aes Sedai too and she could find a lake and douse her head.”

Heat rose in Nynaeve’s face. Trust her temper to get in the way. “Maybe I just realized that being Aes Sedai doesn’t mean I can channel any more easily than before.”

Romanda sniffed. “Aes Sedai. You have a long way to go for that, whatever. . . . Very well, then. Something we haven’t tried before. Jump up and down on one foot. And talk.” She sat down in a carved armchair near the bed, still frowning. “Gossip, I think. Talk about light things. For instance, what was it the Amyrlin said Lelaine wanted to talk about?”

For a moment Nynaeve stared back indignantly. Jump on one foot? That was ridiculous! Still, she was not really here about her block anyway. Lifting her skirts, she began jumping. “Egwene . . . the Amyrlin . . . didn’t say much. Something about having to stay put in Salidar. . . .” This had better work, or Egwene was going to hear a few choice words, Amyrlin or no.

“I think this one will work better, Sheriam,” Elayne said, handing over a twisted blue-and-red flecked ring of what had been stone this morning. In truth, it was no different from any other she had made. They stood apart from the crowd, at the mouth of a narrow alley lit by the red sun. Behind them fiddles squealed and flutes sang.

“Thank you, Elayne.” Sheriam tucked the *ter’angreal* into her belt pouch without even looking at it. Elayne had caught Sheriam in a pause from dancing, her face a little flushed beneath all that cool Aes Sedai serenity, but the clear green gaze that had made Elayne’s knees shake as a novice was fixed on her face. “Why do I get the feeling this is not your only reason for coming to see me?”

Elayne grimaced, twisting the Great Serpent ring on her right hand. The right hand; she just had to remember she was Aes Sedai too, now. “It’s Egwene. The Amyrlin, I guess I should say. She’s worried, Sheriam, and I was hoping you could help her. You are the Keeper, and I did *not* know who else to go to. I don’t have the straight of it completely. You know how Egwene is; she wouldn’t complain if her *foot* was cut off. It’s Romanda, I think, though she did mention Lelaine. One or both have been at her, I think, about staying here in Salidar, about not moving yet because it’s too dangerous.”

“That is good advice,” Sheriam said slowly. “I don’t know about dangerous, but that is the advice I would give her myself.”

Elayne spread her hands in a helpless shrug. “I know. She told me you did, but. . . . She didn’t *say* it right out, but I think she’s a little afraid of those two. I *know* she’s Amyrlin now, but I think they make her feel a novice. I think she’s afraid if she does what they want—even if it *is* good advice—they will expect her to do the same next time. I think. . . . Sheriam, she is afraid she won’t be *able* to say no the next time if she says yes now. And . . . and I am afraid of it, too. Sheriam, she’s the Amyrlin *Seat*; she shouldn’t be under Romanda’s thumb, or Lelaine’s, or anybody’s. You are the *only* one who can help her. I do not know how, but you *are*.”

Sheriam was quiet so long that Elayne began to think the other woman was going to tell her every word was ludicrous. “I will do what I can,” Sheriam said at last.

Elayne stifled a relieved sigh before she realized it would not have mattered.

Leaning forward, Egwene rested her arms along the sides of the copper tub and let Chesa’s chatter flow over her as the woman scrubbed her back. She had dreamed of a real bath, but actually sitting in the soapy water, scented with a floral oil, felt strange after Aiel sweat tents. She had taken her first step as Amyrlin, marshaled her outnumbered army and begun her attack. She remembered hearing Rhuarc say once that when battle began, a battle leader no longer had any real control of events. Now all she could do was wait. “Even so,” she said softly, “I think the Wise Ones would be proud.”

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CHAPTER 38

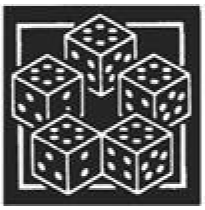

A Sudden Chill

The blazing sun still climbed behind him, and Mat was glad his broad-brimmed hat gave a little shade on his face. This Altaran forest was winter-bare and more than winter-brown, with pines and leatherleafs and other evergreens looking sere, and oak and ash and sweetgum naked. Noon yet to come, the worst heat beyond that, and already the day was like riding through an oven. His coat was slung atop his saddlebags, but sweat made his fine linen shirt cling. Pips’ hooves crunched on dead ferns and fallen leaves thick atop the leaf mold, and the Band moved in a crackle from the forest floor. Few birds appeared, quick flashes between the branches, and not a squirrel. There were flies, though, and bitemes, as if this were the heart of summer instead of less than a month to the Feast of Lights. No different from what he had seen back on the Erinin, really, but finding it here too made him uneasy. Was the whole world really burning up?

Aviendha strode along beside Pips with her bundle on her back, apparently unconcerned by dying trees or biting flies, and making considerably less noise than the horse despite her skirts. Her eyes scanned the surrounding trees as though she did not trust the Band’s scouts and flankers to keep them out of an ambush. She had not accepted a ride once, which he had not expected anyway, seeing how Aiel felt about riding, but she had made no trouble either, unless sharpening her knife every time they halted could be considered provocative. There had been the incident with Olver, of course. Riding the high-stepping gray gelding Mat had found him among the remounts, Olver kept a wary eye on her. He had tried to stick his belt knife in her the second night, shouting about Aiel killing his father. Of course, she only took it away from him, but even after Mat cuffed him and tried to explain the difference between Shaido and other Aiel—something Mat was not all that sure he understood himself—Olver glared at her constantly. He did not like Aiel. For Aviendha's part, Olver seemed to make her uneasy, which Mat did not understand at all.

The trees stood tall enough to have allowed a breeze to stir under the sparse canopy overhead, but the Red Hand banner hung limp, and so did the two he had dug out once Rand put them through that gateway into a night-covered meadow, a Dragon banner, the red-and-gold shape hidden in white folds, and one of those the Band called Al'Thor's Banner, the ancient Aes Sedai symbol also thankfully wrapped inside. A grizzled senior bannerman had the Red Hand, a fellow with narrow eyes and more scars than Daerid who insisted on actually carrying the banner a part of each day, which few bannermen did. Talmanes and Daerid had supplied second squadmen for the other two, fresh-faced young men who had shown themselves steady enough for a little responsibility.

Three days they had come across Altara, three days in forest without sight of a single Dragonsworn—or anyone else for that matter—and Mat hoped to stretch their loneliness at least through this fourth before reaching Salidar. Aside from Aes Sedai, there was the problem of how to keep Aviendha from Elayne's throat. He had few doubts why she kept sharpening that knife; the edge glittered like gemstones. He was very much afraid he was going to end taking the Aiel woman to Caemlyn under guard, with the bloody Daughter-Heir demanding he hang her every step of the way. Rand and his bloody women! In Mat's view, anything that slowed the Band and kept him from the stew he expected in Salidar was to the good. Halting early and marching late helped. So did the supply wagons at the rear, slow as they were in the forest. But the Band could ride only so slowly. All too soon Vanin was sure to find something.

As if thinking his name had been a summons, the fat scout appeared through the trees ahead with four riders. He had gone out before dawn with six.

Mat raised a clenched fist, signaling a halt, and murmurs passed down the column. His first order on leaving the gateway had been "no drums, no trumpets, no flutes and no bloody singing," and if there had been a few glum faces in the beginning, after the first day in that wooded terrain, where you could never see clearly more than a hundred paces and seldom so far, no one objected at all.

Resting his spear across his saddle, Mat waited until Vanin pulled up and casually knuckled his forehead. "You found them?"

The balding man leaned to one side in his saddle to spit through a gap in his teeth. He was sweating so much he looked to be melting. “I found them. Eight or ten miles west. There’s Warders in those woods. I saw one take Mar; just came out nothing in one of those cloaks and swept him out of the saddle. Roughed him considerably, but didn’t kill him, though. I expect Ladwin didn’t show up for the same reason.”

“So they know we’re here.” Mat breathed heavily through his nose. He did not expect either man would hold back anything from Warders, much less Aes Sedai. But then, the Aes Sedai had to know sooner or later. He had just wanted it to be later. He slapped at a bluefly, but it buzzed away leaving a spot of blood on his wrist. “How many?”

Vanin spat again. “More than I ever figured to see. I got into the village afoot, and there was Aes Sedai faces all over. Two, three hundred, maybe. Maybe four. I didn’t want to be too obvious, counting.” Before that shock had time to settle, the man delivered another. “They got an army, too. Camped to the north, mainly. More than you got. Maybe twice as many.”

Talmanes and Nalesean and Daerid had ridden up during that, sweating and swatting flies and bitemes. “Did you hear?” Mat asked, and they nodded soberly. His battle luck was all very well, yet being outnumbered two to one, with hundreds of Aes Sedai thrown into the bargain, could strain any luck. “We aren’t here to fight,” he reminded them, but their long faces remained. For that matter, the remark did not make him feel better either. What counted was whether the Aes Sedai wanted this army of theirs to fight.

“Prepare the Band to be attacked,” he ordered. “Clear as much ground as you can, and use the logs to make barricades.” Talmanes grimaced nearly as hard as Nalesean; they liked to be in the saddle and moving when they fought. “Think. There may be Warders watching us right now.” He was surprised to see Vanin nod and glance off to their right in a significant way. “If they see us readying to defend, then plainly we don’t mean to attack. It might make them decide to leave us alone, and if it doesn’t, at least we’re ready.” That got through, to Talmanes faster than Nalesean. Daerid had been nodding from the start.

Giving his oiled beard a twist, Nalesean muttered, “What do you intend to do then? Just sit and wait for them?”

“That’s what you’re going to do,” Mat told him. *Burn Rand and his “maybe fifty Aes Sedai”! Burn him and his “loom a little; intimidate them”!*

Waiting right there until somebody came out from the village to ask who they were and what they wanted seemed a very good idea. No *ta'veren* twisting this time. Any battle was going to have to come to him; he was not about to walk into it.

"They are that way?" Aviendha said, pointing. Without waiting for an answer, she settled her bundle on her back and began striding west.

Mat stared after her. *Bloody Aiel.* Some Warder would probably try to take her too, and have his head handed to him. Or maybe not, Warders being Warders; if she tried to put a knife in one of those, he might just hurt her. Besides which, if she got to Elayne and began hair-pulling over Rand, or worse, stuck a knife in *her*. . . . She was moving along quickly, almost trotting, eager to reach Salidar. *Blood and bloody ashes!*

"Talmanes, you have the command until I get back, but you don't stir unless somebody jumps on the Band with both boots. These four will tell you what you might have to face. Vanin, you're with me. Olver, stay close to Daerid, in case he needs messages carried. You can teach him to play Snakes and Foxes," he added with a grin at Daerid. "He tells me he'd like to learn." Daerid's jaw dropped, but Mat had already moved on. A fine thing if he ended up hauled into Salidar by a Warder with a lump on his head. How to reduce the chance of that? The banners caught his eye. "You stay here," he told the grizzled bannerman. "You other two come with me. And keep those things furled."

His strange little party caught up to Aviendha quickly. If anything could convince the Warders to let them through unhindered, one look should. No threat in a woman and four men, and obviously making no effort to avoid notice, not carrying two banners. He checked the second squadmen. There was still no breeze, but they held the banners clutched to the staffs. Their faces were tight. Only a fool would want to ride in among Aes Sedai and have those spread in a sudden breeze.

Aviendha glanced at him sideways, then tried to push his boot out of the stirrup. "Let me up," she ordered curtly.

Why under the Light did she want to ride now? Well, he was not going to have her scrambling up and very likely knocking him out of the saddle in the process; he had seen Aiel get on a horse once or twice.

Slapping another fly, he leaned down and caught her hand. "Hold on," he said, and heaved her up behind him with a grunt. She was nearly as tall as he was, and solid to boot. "Just put your arm around my waist." She only gave him a look and twisted about awkwardly until she sat astride, legs bared above the knee and not at all concerned with it. Nice legs, but he would not have involved himself with another Aiel woman even if she was not moonstruck over Rand.

After a time, she spoke to his back. “The boy, Olver. The Shaido killed his father?”

Mat nodded without looking around at her. Would he even see any Warders before it was too late? Leading the way, Vanin rode slumped like a sack of suet as always, but he had a sharp eye out.

“His mother died of hunger?” Aviendha asked.

“That, or maybe sickness.” Warders wore those cloaks that could blend into anything. You could walk past one without seeing him. “Olver wasn’t too clear, and I didn’t press him. He buried her himself. Why? Do you think you owe him something since Aiel cost him his family?”

“Owe?” She sounded startled. “I killed neither, and if I had, they were treekillers. How would I have *toh*?” Without a pause she went on as if continuing in the same line. “You do not care for him properly, Mat Cauthon. I know men know nothing about raising children, but he is too young to spend all of his time with grown men.”

Mat did look at her then, and blinked. She had her headkerchief off and was busily running a polished greenstone comb through her dark reddish hair. That seemed to be taking all her concentration. That and not falling off. She had donned an intricately worked silver necklace, too, and a wide bracelet of carved ivory.

Snaking his head, he went back to studying the forest. Aiel or not, they were all alike in some ways. *If the world is ending, a woman will want time to fix her hair. If the world’s ending, a woman will take time to tell a man something he’s done wrong.* It would have been enough to make him chuckle if he was not so busy wondering whether Warders were watching him right that moment.

The sun climbed to its zenith and tipped over by the time the forest gave way abruptly. Fewer than a hundred paces of cleared ground separated trees from village, and the ground looked as if it had not been cleared long. Salidar itself was a considerable village of gray stone buildings and thatched roofs, and the streets were full and busy. Mat shrugged into his coat; the finest green wool, embroidered with gold on cuffs and tall collar, it should be good enough to meet Aes Sedai in. He left it hanging open, though; even for Aes Sedai he would not die from heat.

No one tried to stop him as they rode in, but people paused and every eye turned to him and his strange little company. They knew, all right. Everyone knew. He gave up counting Aes Sedai faces after reaching fifty; that number was reached too quickly for any peace of mind. There were no soldiers in the crowd, unless you counted Warders, some in those color-shifting cloaks, some fingering a sword hilt as they watched him pass. No soldiers in the village simply meant they were all in the camps Vanin had mentioned. And all the soldiers being in the camps meant they were ready to do something. Mat hoped Talmanes was holding to his instructions. Talmanes had some sense, but he could be almost as eager to go off and charge somebody as Nalesean. He would have left Daerid in charge—Daerid had seen too many battles to be eager—but the noblemen would never have stood for it. There did not seem to be any flies in Salidar, either. *Maybe they know something I don't.*

A woman caught his eye, a pretty woman in odd clothes, wide yellow trousers and a short white coat, her golden hair in an elaborate braid to her waist. She was carrying a bow, of all things. Not many women took up the bow. She saw him looking and ducked down a narrow alleyway. Something about her tickled his memory, but he could not say what. That was one trouble with all those old memories; he was always seeing people who reminded him of somebody who turned out to be a thousand years dead when he finally figured it out. Maybe he had even really seen somebody who looked like her. Those holes in what he remembered of his own life were fuzzy around the edges. *Probably another Hunter for the Horn*, he thought wryly, and put her out of his head.

There was no point in riding about until somebody spoke, because it seemed nobody was going to. Mat reined in and nodded to a thin, dark-haired woman who looked up at him, coolly questioning. Pretty, but too skinny for his taste even without that ageless face. Who wanted to be poked by bones every time you gave a hug? "My name is Mat Cauthon," he said neutrally. If she wanted bowing and scraping, she could take a leap, but antagonizing her would just be foolish. "I'm looking for Elayne Trakand and Egwene al'Vere. And Nynaeve al'Meara, I suppose." Rand had not mentioned her, but she had gone off with Elayne, he knew.

The Aes Sedai blinked in surprise, yet serenity returned in a flash. She studied him and the others one by one, pausing on Aviendha, then looked at the squadmen so long Mat wondered whether she could see the Dragon and the black-and-white disc through the folded cloth. “Follow me,” she said finally. “I will see whether the Amyrlin Seat can see you.” Gathering her skirts, she started up the street.

As Mat heeled Pips to follow, Vanin let his dun drop back and muttered, “Asking Aes Sedai for anything is never a good notion. I could have shown you where to go.” He jerked his head toward a three-story stone cube ahead. “They call it the Little Tower.”

Mat shrugged uneasily. The Little Tower? And they had somebody here they called the Amyrlin Seat? He doubted the woman had meant Elaida. Rand was wrong again. This lot were not frightened. They were too puffed-up crazy to be frightened.

In front of the stone cube, the skinny Aes Sedai said peremptorily, “Wait here,” and vanished inside.

Aviendha slipped to the ground, and Mat followed quickly, ready to grab her if she tried to dart away. Even if it cost him a little blood he was not going to let her run off and slit Elayne’s throat before he even had a chance to talk to this so-called Amyrlin. But she only stood there, staring straight ahead with hands folded at her waist and shawl looped over her elbows. She looked completely at her ease, but he thought she might well be terrified out of her skull. If she had any sense, she was. They had collected a crowd.

Aes Sedai had begun gathering, closing them in against the front of their Little Tower, silently peering at him, and the arc of women thickened the longer he stood there. Actually, they seemed to peer at Aviendha as much as him, but he felt all of those cool, unreadable gazes. He barely stopped himself from fingering the silver foxhead hanging beneath his shirt.

A plain-faced Aes Sedai pushed to the front of the crowd, leading a slender young woman in white, with big eyes. He vaguely remembered Anaiya, but she hardly seemed interested in him at all. “Are you sure, child?” she asked the novice.

The young woman’s mouth tightened slightly, but she certainly let no irritation into her voice. “He still seems to glow, or shine. I really do see it. I just don’t know why.”

Anaiya gave her a delighted smile. “He’s *ta’veren*, Nicola. You’ve uncovered your first Talent. You can see *ta’veren.* Now back to the class with you. Quickly. You don’t want to fall behind.” Nicola bobbed a curtsy and, with a last glance at Mat, burrowed away through the encircling Aes Sedai.

Anaiya turned her gaze on him then, one of those Aes Sedai gazes that were meant to unsettle a man. It unsettled him right enough. Of course some Aes Sedai knew about him—some knew a good deal more than he could wish, and come to think it, he seemed to remember that Anaiya was one of those—but having things announced that way, in front of the Light knew how many women with those cool Aes Sedai eyes. . . . His hands stroked the carved haft of his spear. Foxhead or no foxhead, there were enough of them to simply lay hands on him and carry him off. *Bloody Aes Sedai! Bloody Rand!*

He only held Anaiya’s interest for a moment, though. Stepping up to Aviendha, she said, “And what is your name, child?” Her tone was pleasant, but it expected an answer and no delay about it.

Aviendha faced her squarely, a head taller and using every hair of it. “I am Aviendha, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel.” Anaiya’s mouth quirked toward a smile at the note of defiance.

Mat wondered who was going to win that staring match, but before he could make a bet with himself, another Aes Sedai joined them, a woman whose bony-cheeked face gave an impression of age despite smooth cheeks and glossy brown hair. “Do you be aware you can channel, girl?”

“I am,” Aviendha said curtly and snapped her mouth shut as if intending to say no more. She concentrated on adjusting her shawl, but she had said enough. Aes Sedai swarmed in around her, crowding Mat away.

“How old are you, child?”

“You have developed much strength, but you could learn very much as a novice.”

“Do many Aiel girls die of a wasting sickness when they are a few years younger than you?”

“How long have you . . . ?”

“You could. . . .”

“You really should. . . .”

“You must. . . .”

Nynaeve appeared in the doorway so suddenly she seemed to pop out of the air. Planting her fists on her hips, she stared at Mat. “What are you doing here, Matrim Cauthon? How did you get here? I suppose it’s too much to hope you have anything to do with this army of Dragonsworn that’s about to descend on us.”

“Actually,” he said dryly, “I am in command.”

“You . . . !” Nynaeve stood there with her mouth open, then gave herself a shake, tugging at her blue dress as if it had been disarrayed. It was cut lower than anything he remembered seeing her wear before, low enough to show cleavage, with yellow scrollwork around the neckline and hem. Altogether different from what she had worn back home. “Well, come with me,” she said sharply. “I’ll take you to the Amyrlin.”

“Mat Cauthon,” Aviendha called, a touch breathily. She was looking over and around Aes Sedai to find him. “Mat Cauthon.” Just that, but for an Aiel, she looked frantic.

The Aes Sedai surrounding her kept right on, voices calm, reasonable and relentless.

“For you, the best thing, it is to. . . .”

“You must consider. . . .”

“Much the best. . . .”

“You can hardly think of. . . .”

Mat grinned. She might pull her knife in a moment, but in that crowd he doubted it would do her much good. She would not be hunting up Elayne any time soon, that was for sure. Wondering whether he would return to find her wearing a white dress, he tossed his spear up to Vanin. “Lead on, Nynaeve. Let’s see this *Amyrlin* of yours.”

She gave him a tight frown and led him inside tugging at her braid and muttering only partly to herself. “This is Rand’s doing, isn’t it? I know it is. Somehow it is. Frightening everybody half out of their wits. You just watch your step, *Lord General* Cauthon, or I swear you will wish I’d caught you stealing blueberries again. Frightening people! Even a man should have more sense! You stop that grinning, Mat Cauthon. I do not know what she’s going to make of this.”

There were Aes Sedai at the tables inside—it had the feel of a common room to him, even with those careful Aes Sedai scribbling or handing out orders—but they hardly more than glanced at him and Nynaeve as they crossed the room. It only went to show what a raree-show they were running here. An Accepted stalking through muttering to herself, and not a one of those Aes Sedai said a word. He had stayed in the Tower as short a time as he could manage, but he knew that was not the way Aes Sedai ran things.

At the rear of the room, Nynaeve pushed open a door that had seen better days. Everything in the place seemed to have seen better days. Mat followed her in—and stopped dead. There was Elayne, pretty as anything with that golden hair, but playing at the grand lady with every inch of her, in green silk with a high lace neck, and one of those condescending smiles, and raised eyebrows. And there was Egwene, seated behind a table, a questioning smile on her face. And a seven-striped stole over her pale yellow dress. Taking a quick peek outside, he shoved the door to before any of the Aes Sedai could see in.

"Maybe you think this is funny," he growled, crossing the bit of carpet as fast as he could step, "but they'll have your hide if they find out. They'll *never* bloody let you go, any of you, if they—" Snatching the stole from Egwene's neck, he hauled her hurriedly out of the chair—and the silver foxhead went dead cold against his chest.

Giving Egwene a small shove away from the table, he glared at them. Egwene only looked puzzled, but Nynaeve's mouth was hanging open again, and Elayne's big blue eyes looked ready to pop out onto the floor. One of them had tried to use the Power on him. The only good thing that had come out of his trip into that *ter'angreal* was the foxhead medallion. He supposed it had to be a *ter'angreal* too, but he was grateful for it just the same. So long as it touched his skin, the One Power could not reach him. Not *saidar*, anyway; he had more proof of that than he cared for. It did go cold when someone tried, though.

Tossing the stole and his hat onto the table, he sat down, then hiked up from the seat to pull out some cushions and throw them on the floor. He rested a boot on the edge of the table and regarded the fool women. "You'll need those cushions if this so-called Amyrlin finds out about this little joke of yours."

"Mat," Egwene began in a firm voice, but he cut her off.

"No! If you wanted to talk, you should have talked instead of lashing out with your bloody Power. Now you can listen."

"How did you . . . ?" Elayne said wonderingly. "The flows just . . . vanished."

At almost the same instant, Nynaeve said in a threatening tone, “Mat Cauthon, you are making the biggest—”

“I said listen!” He poked a finger at Elayne. “You, I’m taking back to Caemlyn, if I can keep Aviendha from killing you. If you don’t want that pretty throat slit, you stay close to me and do what I say, no questions!” The finger shifted to Egwene. “Rand says he’ll send you back to the Wise Ones whenever you want, and if what I’ve seen so far is any indication what you get up to, my advice is to take him up on it *now*! It seems you know how to Travel”—Egwene gave a small start—“so you can make a gateway to Caemlyn for the Band. I don’t want any argument, Egwene! And you, Nynaeve! I ought to leave you here, but if you want to come, you can. Only, I’m warning you. You yank that braid at me just once, and I swear I’ll warm your bottom!”

They were staring at him as if he had sprouted horns like a Trolloc, but at least they were keeping their mouths shut. Maybe he had managed to get a little sense into their heads. Not that they would ever thank him for saving their hides. Oh, no; not them. As usual, they would say they would have worked everything out for themselves in just a little while longer. If a woman told you you were interfering when you pulled her out of a dungeon, what would she not say?

He drew a deep breath. “Now. When the poor blind fool they’ve chosen out for their Amyrlin gets here, I will do the talking. She can’t be very bright, or they’d never have been able to shove her into the job. Amyrlin Seat for a bloody village in the middle of bloody nowhere. You keep your mouths shut and curtsy for all you’re worth, and I’ll pull your bacon off the coals again.” They just stared. Good. “I know all about her army, but I have one too. If she’s crazy enough to think she can take the Tower away from Elaida . . . well, she probably won’t risk any losses just to hold on to you three. You make that gateway, Egwene, and I will have you in Caemlyn tomorrow, the next day latest, and these madwomen can run off and get themselves killed by Elaida. Maybe you’ll have some company. They cannot all be mad. Rand’s willing to offer sanctuary. A curtsy, a quick oath of fealty, and he’ll keep Elaida from putting their heads on pikes in Tar Valon. They can’t ask better than that. Well? Anything to say?” They did not even blink as far as he could see. “A simple ‘Thank you, Mat’ would do.” Not a word. Not a blink.

A timid tap on the door was followed by a novice, a pretty green-eyed girl who dropped a deep curtsy, all wide-eyed awe. “I was sent to see if you wanted anything, Mother. For the . . . the general, I mean. Wine, or . . . or. . . .”

“No, Tabiya.” Egwene pulled the striped stole from under his hat and settled it on her shoulders. “I want to talk with *General* Cauthon alone a little longer. Tell Sheriam I will send for her shortly, to advise me.”

“Close your mouth before you catch flies, Mat,” Nynaeve said in tones of deepest satisfaction.

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CHAPTER 39

Possibilities

Adjusting her stole, Egwene studied Mat. She expected him to look like a cornered bear, but he just looked poleaxed and sweaty. There were so many questions she wanted to ask—How did Rand know about Salidar? How could he possibly know she had worked out Traveling? What did Rand think he was doing?—but she was not going to ask them. Mat and his Band of the Red Hand had her head buzzing. Maybe Rand had handed her a gift from the sky.

“My chair?” she said quietly. She hoped he had noticed that she was not sweating, nor Elayne or Nynaeve; Nynaeve not very much anyway. Siuan had revealed the trick, nothing to do with the Power at all, just a matter of concentrating in a certain way. Nynaeve had been rather angry, small surprise, that Siuan had not taught it to them before, but Siuan just replied calmly that it was for Aes Sedai, not Accepted. So far Egwene had managed to hold her thoughts properly when there were sisters about, and a cool face instead of a sweaty did seem to help their attitudes a little. Some of them. It should do wonders for Mat. If he ever stopped staring and saw. “Mat? My chair?”

He gave a start, then rose and moved aside, wordlessly staring from her to Elayne to Nynaeve as though they were some sort of puzzle. Well, Nynaeve and Elayne were looking at him in much the same way, and they surely had better reason.

She dusted the cushions before replacing them in the chair with a fond thought for Chesa. After two days, she did not need them any longer, not really, but either she gave up bathing or accepted cushions until not a hint of a bruise showed. Chesa would remove the cushions if Egwene said to. Sweaty face or cool, Egwene was the Amyrlin Seat, before whom kings bowed and queens curtsied, even if none had yet, who would have Elaida tried and executed in short order and all put right with the White Tower, and thus with the world. Chesa would do it, and give Egwene such hurt, reproachful glances for not being allowed to take care of her that leaving the cushions there was much easier to bear.

Settling herself with her hands folded on the table, she said, “Mat—” He broke in immediately.

“This really is madness, you know,” he said quietly. Quietly, but quite firmly. “You will end with your head off, Egwene. All of you will. Your heads—cut—off.”

“Mat,” she said in a stronger tone, but he went right on.

“Listen, you can still get out of this. If they think you’re the Amyrlin, you can come out with me to . . . to inspect the Band. You make a gateway, and we’ll be gone before this bunch of goat-brained lunatics can blink.”

Nynaeve had seen *saidar* fail around him, but she had dealt with recalcitrant men long before she learned to channel. With a muttered growl of “Warm *my* bottom?” that Egwene did not think was intended to be heard, Nynaeve deftly hiked up her skirts and kicked Mat squarely in *his,* so hard that he staggered all the way to the wall before catching himself with a hand. Elayne burst into laughter, and suppressed it just as quickly, but she still quivered, and her eyes shone.

Egwene bit her lip to keep from laughing too. It really was comical. Mat turned his head slowly to stare at Nynaeve, all wide-eyed indignation and outrage. Then his brows lowered, and jerking his undone coat as if to straighten it, he began to stalk slowly toward her. Slowly because he was limping. Egwene covered her mouth. It really would not do to laugh.

Nynaeve drew herself up sternly, and then perhaps a few things occurred to her. She might be angry enough to channel, but *saidar* was apparently useless with him. Mat was tall for a Two Rivers man, considerably taller than she, considerably stronger, and there was a decidedly dangerous glint in his eye. She glanced at Egwene, and smoothed her dress, trying to maintain her stern face. Mat stalked nearer, face like thunder. Another hasty glance, worry beginning to show, was followed by a small step back.

“Mat,” Egwene said in a level tone. He did not stop. “Mat, stop cutting the fool. You are in quite a predicament, but I should be able to get you out of it, if you listen to reason.”

Finally he halted. With a glare and a warning shake of his finger at Nynaeve, he turned his back on her and planted his fists on the writing table. "*I* am in a predicament? Egwene, you've jumped out of a tree toward a bear pit, and you think everything is fine because you haven't landed yet!"

She smiled at him calmly. "Mat, not many here in Salidar think very well of Dragonsworn. Lord Bryne certainly doesn't, nor his soldiers. We have heard some very disturbing stories. And some sickening ones."

"Dragonsworn!" he yelped. "What do they have to do with me? I'm no bloody Dragonsworn!"

"Of course you are, Mat." She made it sound the most obvious thing in the world. Which it was, if you only thought. "You go where Rand sends you. What else are you but Dragonsworn? But if you listen to me, I can stop them from putting *your* head on a pike. Actually, I don't think Lord Bryne would use a pike—he always complains he doesn't have enough—but I am sure he would figure out something."

Mat looked at the other two women, and Egwene compressed her lips for an instant. She had made herself plain, but he appeared to be hunting for a clue to what she was talking about. Elayne gave him back a tight smile and a decisively confirming nod. She might not see where Egwene was going, yet she knew she was not talking for the sound of her voice. Nynaeve, still struggling to keep a severe face and tugging at her braid, only glared at him, but maybe that was even better. Though she was beginning to sweat; Nynaeve lost concentration when she grew angry.

"Now, listen, Egwene," Mat said. Then again, maybe neither response was really enough. He managed to combine a reasonable tone with indulgence in the most offensive way possible. "If you want to call yourself Amyrlin, you can call yourself Amyrlin. Rand would welcome you with open arms in Caemlyn even if you don't bring all these Aes Sedai to him, but I know he will be overjoyed if you do. Whatever your problems are with Elaida, he can work them out. She knows he's the Dragon Reborn. Light, you remember her letter. Why, you will have your White Tower all mended before you can say Jak o' the Wisps. No battles. No bloodshed. You know you don't want bloodshed, Egwene."

That she did not. Once the first blood was shed between Salidar and Tar Valon, it would be difficult to make the Tower whole again. Once the first Aes Sedai blood was shed, it might be impossible. Still, Elaida had to be brought down, and Egwene would do what she had to do. She just did not like it. And she did not like Mat telling her what she knew, liked it the less so for being right. Definitely the less so in that tone. It was a real effort to keep her hands still on the table. She wanted to stand and box his ears.

“However I deal with Rand,” she said coolly, “you can be sure it will not be by leading Aes Sedai to swear fealty to him or any other man.” Cool, and not at all arguing; a calm statement of simple facts. “How I deal with Elaida is my concern, and none of yours. If you have any sense at all, Mat, you will keep your mouth shut as long as you are in Salidar and walk small. You start telling other Aes Sedai what Rand is going to do just as soon they kneel to him, and you might not like the answers you get. Talk about carrying me off, or Nynaeve or Elayne, and you will be *very* lucky not to get a sword through you.”

He jerked upright with a glare. “I’ll talk to you again when you’re ready to listen to reason, Egwene. Is Thom Merrilin around?” She gave a curt nod. What did he want with Thom? Probably to douse himself in wine. Well, good luck to him finding a tavern here. “When you’re ready to listen,” he repeated grimly, and stalked—limped—to the door.

“Mat,” Elayne said, “I would not try to leave were I you. Getting into Salidar is much easier than getting out.”

He grinned at her insolently, and the way he eyed her up and down, he was lucky Elayne did not slap him hard enough to loosen all his teeth. “You, my fine Lady, I am taking back to Caemlyn if I have to tie you up in a package to hand to Rand, burn me if I don’t. And I will bloody well leave when I choose.” His bow was mocking, to Elayne and to Egwene. Nynaeve got only a glower and another shake of his finger.

“How *can* Rand have such a low, insufferable lout for a friend?” Elayne asked no one in particular before the door was well closed behind him.

“His language has certainly slipped downhill,” Nynaeve grumbled darkly, tossing her head so her braid swung over her shoulder. Egwene thought she might be afraid she would pull it out by the roots if she did not put it out of reach.

“I should have let him do as he wanted, Nynaeve. You have to remember you’re Aes Sedai now. You can’t go around kicking people, or boxing their ears, or thumping them with sticks.” Nynaeve stared at her, mouth working, face growing redder and redder. Elayne began assiduously studying the carpet.

With a sigh, Egwene folded the striped stole and laid it on the table to one side. That was her way of making sure Elayne and Nynaeve remembered they were alone; sometimes the stole made them start talking to the Amyrlin Seat instead of Egwene al'Vere. As usual, it worked. Nynaeve took a very deep breath.

Before she could speak, though, Elayne said, "Do you mean to join him and this Band of the Red Hand to Gareth Bryne?"

Egwene shook her head. The Warders said there were six or seven thousand in Mat's Band now, more than she remembered from Cairhien, and a considerable number, if not nearly so many as those two captured men claimed, but Bryne's soldiers truly would not take kindly to Dragonsworn. Besides, she had her own scheme, which she explained while they drew the other chairs to the table. It was very like sitting in a kitchen talking. She moved the stole farther over.

"That is brilliant." Elayne's grin said she meant it. But then, Elayne always said what she meant. "I didn't think the other would work either, but this really is *brilliant*."

Nynaeve sniffed irritably. "What makes you think Mat will go along? He'll stick a pole through the spokes just for the fun of it."

"I think he made a promise," Egwene said simply, and Nynaeve nodded. Slowly, reluctantly, but she nodded. Elayne looked lost, of course; she did not know him. "Elayne, Mat does exactly as he pleases; he always has."

"No matter how many turnips he had to peel for it," Nynaeve muttered, "or how often he was switched."

"Yes, that is Mat," Egwene sighed. He had been the most irresponsible boy in Emond's Field, maybe in the Two Rivers. "But if he gives his word, he keeps it. And I think he promised Rand to see you back in Caemlyn, Elayne. You notice he retreated to asking me"—in a way he had—"but you he never changed a hair on. I think he'll try to stay as close to you as your belt pouch. But we won't let him even see you unless he does as we want." She paused. "Elayne, if you want to go with him, you can. To Rand, I mean. As soon as we squeeze all of the good out of Mat and his Band."

Elayne hardly hesitated before shaking her head, and she shook it firmly. "No, Ebou Dar is too important." That had been one victory, surprisingly won with a mere suggestion. Elayne and Nynaeve were to join Merilille at Tylin's court. "At least if he stays close, I'll have a few days to try for a look at the *ter'angreal* he is carrying. It has to be that, Egwene. Nothing else could explain it."

Egwene could only agree. She had simply meant to wrap him up in Air where he stood, just a gentle reminder of who he was trying to manhandle, but the flows touched him, and melted. That was the only way to explain it. They ceased to exist where they touched him. She still felt the shock of that moment, remembering, and she realized she was not the only one suddenly adjusting skirts that needed no adjusting.

"We could have some Warders turn out his pockets." Nynaeve sounded more than satisfied with the image. "We'll see how Master Mat Cauthon likes that."

"If we take things away from him," Egwene said patiently, "don't you think he might balk when we start telling him what to do?" Mat had never taken orders very well, and his usual response to Aes Sedai and the One Power was to take the first chance to slip away. Maybe his promise to Rand would stop that—there *had* to be one; nothing else explained his behavior—but she was not going to risk it. Nynaeve nodded, rather grudgingly.

"Maybe. . . ." Tapping her fingers on the table, Elayne stared at nothing thoughtfully for a moment. "Maybe we could take him to Ebou Dar. That way, I might have a better chance at the *ter'angreal*. Though if it stops *saidar*, I can't see how I'll *ever* manage to study it."

"Take that young ruffian along!" Nynaeve sat up straight. "You can't mean it, Elayne. He would make every day a misery; he's very good at that. He'll never do what he's told. Besides, he will never stand still for it. He's so wrapped up in taking you to Caemlyn, you could not budge him from it with a prybar and a team of horses."

"But if he means to keep an eye on me until I reach Caemlyn," Elayne told her, "he'll have no choice but to go. It is perfect."

"It might not be a bad idea," Egwene put in while Nynaeve was searching for another argument. Sending them after the bowl still seemed right, but the more she thought of where they would have to search, the more she worried. "A few soldiers might be a very good idea, unless you've picked out Warders without letting me know. Thom and Juilin are all very well, and Birgitte, but it is a rough place you're going."

"A *few* soldiers might be well enough," Elayne said, coloring slightly. "So long as they know to follow orders."

Nynaeve did not quite glance at Elayne, but there was a distinct pause before she shook her head irascibly. “We’re hardly going to be fighting duels, Egwene, however touchy these Ebou Dari are. Thom and Juilin will do quite well enough. Myself, I think all these stories we’ve been hearing are just meant to make us decide to give it over.” Everybody had heard tales of Ebou Dar since word had spread that they were going; Chesa had heard several, each more pitiful and horrific than the last, strangers killed for a wrong glance before they could blink, women widowed and children orphaned over a word, *women* fighting in the streets with knives. “No, if we could survive Tanchico with just Thom and Juilin, and Liandrin and some of her Black sisters around in the bargain, we will do very well in Ebou Dar without Mat Cauthon or any soldiers either. Mat commanding soldiers! He never even remembered to milk his father’s cows unless he was put on the stool and handed the bucket.”

Egwene gave a faint sigh. Any mention of Birgitte did that; they started as if goosed, then either stammered around her or else went on as if she had not been mentioned at all. One look had convinced Egwene that the woman following Elayne and Nynaeve about—especially Elayne, for some reason—was the woman she had seen in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Birgitte of the legends, the archer who never missed, one of the dead heroes awaiting the call of the Horn of Valere. A dead hero, not a live woman walking the streets of Salidar, but the same woman nonetheless. Elayne still had provided no explanation, only a careful, embarrassed mumble about not being able to talk of what they had agreed not to talk of. Birgitte herself, the hero of legends, turned the other way or went down alleys if she saw Egwene coming. Ordering the woman to her study and demanding an explanation was out of the question; she had promised, after all, no matter how much a fool the situation made her feel. Anyway, there hardly seemed any harm. She just wished she knew the why of it. And the how.

Putting Birgitte out of her mind for the moment, she leaned across the table toward Nynaeve. “Perhaps we can’t make Mat take orders exactly, but wouldn’t it be fine to watch him smolder over having to be your bodyguard?”

“It would certainly be worthwhile,” Elayne said thoughtfully, “if Rand really has made him a general. Mother often said the best men were reluctant to take orders, and always worth teaching to. I can’t see Mat as one of the best—Lini says ‘Fools only listen to themselves’—but if we can teach him enough that he doesn’t make a *complete* fool of himself where there is nobody to rescue him, we will be doing Rand a large favor. Besides, I need *time* if I am to study that *ter’angreal*.”

Egwene tried not to smile; Elayne always caught on so quickly. Then again, she probably was going to try teaching Mat to sit up straight. That would be something to see. She liked Elayne, and admired her strength, but she would bet on Mat in that contest. By a whisker.

Nynaeve gave ground stubbornly. Mat was wrongheaded; he would say “down” if they said “up” just to spite them. He could make trouble nailed up inside a barrel. They constantly would have to be dragging him out of taverns and gambling dens. Toward the end she was reduced to claiming that Mat would probably pinch Elayne the first time her back was turned, and Egwene knew they were overcoming her objections. Mat certainly gave a lot of time to chasing after women, which Egwene could hardly approve, but Nynaeve surely knew as well as she that for all of looking when and how he should not, he seemed to have an uncanny knack for picking women who wanted to be chased, even the most unlikely. Unfortunately, just when she was sure that Nynaeve was about to give in, a knock at the door announced Sheriam.

Sheriam did not wait on permission to enter; she never did. Cool-eyed in her blue stole, she paused to gaze at Nynaeve and Elayne. Second to the Amyrlin or not, the Keeper had no real authority over Aes Sedai except what the Amyrlin chose to give her, and most assuredly none to dismiss anyone from the Amyrlin’s presence, yet that look was clearly a dismissal.

Elayne rose smoothly, making a deep formal curtsy to Egwene. “If you will excuse me, Mother, I should go find Aviendha.”

Nynaeve, on the other hand, locked eyes with Sheriam until Egwene cleared her throat and slipped the striped stole back into place on her shoulders.

Flushing, Nynaeve bobbed to her feet. “I should go, too. Janya said she would talk to me about lost Talents.”

The recovery of those Talents was not proving as easy as Egwene had hoped. The sisters were willing enough to talk; the problem was in making Moghedien understand what was meant by a vague description or sometimes only a name, then hoping she really knew something. All very well to know, for example, that Aligning the Matrix made metals stronger, but the woman knew less of metals than of Healing, and what under the Light was Spinning Earthfire, or for that matter, Milking Tears?

Moghedien seemed eager to help, desperate to, especially since Siuan taught the trick of ignoring heat. Apparently she had lied to Nynaeve and Elayne about that. Convinced Egwene would take that for her "one lie," the woman had groveled on her knees, weeping and begging, teeth chattering, kissing the hems of their skirts. Eager to help or not, it had raised her fear to new heights. The constant sickening rain of sniveling terror was just too much. Despite her intentions, the *a'dam* bracelet lay in Egwene's pouch now. She would have given it to Nynaeve now—and glad to be rid of it—but handing the thing back and forth in front of others would occasion comment sooner or later.

Instead, she said, "Nynaeve, it might be best for you to avoid Mat until his temper cools." She was not sure that Mat would really carry out his threat, but if anyone could goad him to it, Nynaeve could, and there would be no convincing her after that. "Or at least make sure you only talk to him with a great many people around. Perhaps a few Warders."

Nynaeve opened her mouth; then after a moment closed it again; her cheeks paled a little and she swallowed. "Yes. Yes, I think that might be best, Mother."

Sheriam watched the door close with a small frown that she still wore when she turned to Egwene. "There were hard words, Mother?"

"Only what you expect when old friends meet after a long time. Nynaeve remembers Mat as a scamp, but he isn't ten anymore, and he resents it." Bound by the Oath against lying, Aes Sedai had carried the half-truth, the quarter-truth and the implication to arts. Useful arts, in Egwene's opinion. Especially with Aes Sedai. The Three Oaths did no one any favors, least of all Aes Sedai.

"It's hard sometimes to remember that people change." Taking a chair without being asked, Sheriam arranged her blue silk skirts carefully. "I assume whoever commands the Dragonsworn sent young Mat with a message from Rand al'Thor? I hope you said nothings he might take as a promise, Mother. An army of Dragonsworn not ten miles distant faces us with a delicate situation. It will not help if their commander believes we are going back on pledges."

Egwene studied the other woman a moment. Nothing fazed Sheriam. Not that she let anyone see, at least. Sheriam knew quite a lot about Mat; so did several other sisters in Salidar. Could that be used to press him in the right direction, or would it make him bolt? *Mat for later*, she thought firmly. *Sheriam now.* "Would you ask someone to bring tea, Sheriam? I feel a trifle thirsty."

Sheriam's face altered only slightly, just a tightening around those tilted eyes so small that it barely disturbed her apparent serenity. Egwene could almost see the question wanting to pop out, though. What had she said to Mat that she did not want to talk about? What promises had she made that Sheriam was going to have to rescue her from without losing ground to Romanda or Lelaine?

All Sheriam did was say a few words to someone outside, and when she regained her seat, Egwene gave her no opportunity to open her mouth. Instead, she hit her right between the eyes. So to speak. "It seems Mat is the commander, Sheriam, and in a way, the army is the message. Apparently, Rand would like us all to come to him in Caemlyn. There was some mention of oaths of fealty."

Sheriam's head came up, eyes widening. Only partly in outrage at such a suggestion, though. There was a definite tinge of . . . well, in anyone but an Aes Sedai, Egwene would have called it fear. Very understandable, if so. If she had promised that—and she *was* from the same village; one of her *uses* as Amyrlin was that she had grown up with Rand—it would be a bottomless mire to get out of. Word would spread no matter what Sheriam did; some of the Hall might well blame it on her, or use it as a pretext, anyway. Romanda and Lelaine were not the only Sitters to have cautioned Egwene about following Sheriam's advice without consulting the Hall. In truth, Delana was the only one who really seemed to support Sheriam fully, but she counseled listening to Romanda and Lelaine as well, as if it were really possible to go in three directions at once. And even could the Hall be managed, once news of the promise reached Rand, and of its withdrawal, he would be ten times harder to handle. A hundred times.

Egwene only waited until Sheriam's lips parted, then spoke first again. "Of course, I told him it was ridiculous."

"Of course." Sheriam's voice was not quite as steady as it had been. Very good.

"But you are quite right. The situation is delicate. It's such a pity. Your advice on how to deal with Romanda and Lelaine was good, but I don't think increasing preparations to move will be enough now."

Romanda had cornered her and grimly lectured her on haste leading to ruin; Gareth Bryne's army must be made larger, large enough for news of its size to intimidate Elaida. And by the way, Romanda could not emphasize strongly enough once again that the embassies to rulers *must* be recalled; none but Aes Sedai should be allowed to learn any more of troubles in the Tower than could be avoided. Lelaine cared about neither Lord Bryne's army nor rulers—both were irrelevant—though she did counsel caution and waiting. The proper approaches to Aes Sedai still in the Tower would surely yield dividends; Elaida could be removed from the Amyrlin Seat and Egwene installed in such a fashion that none but a very few sisters would ever be certain what had actually happened. In time, the fact that the White Tower had ever been broken would be taken for no more than a country tale. It might even have worked, if they had had enough time. If waiting did not give Elaida just as much chance to work on sisters here.

The other difference with Lelaine was she had said everything with a smile that would have done very well for a pet novice or Accepted she was very proud of. Egwene's rediscovery of Traveling caused a lot of Aes Sedai to smile, though only a handful were strong enough to make a gateway larger than they could put an arm through and most not even that. Romanda wanted to use gateways to remove the Oath Rod and certain other items—Egwene was not told exactly what—from the Tower so they could make true Aes Sedai in Salidar while depriving Elaida of the ability; surely Egwene wanted to be truly Aes Sedai. Lelaine agreed about that last, but not about using gateways in the Tower; there was too much chance they might be detected, and if those in the Tower learned to Travel, too much advantage would be lost. Those points had carried considerable weight with the Hall, which did not please Romanda at all.

Sheriam had smiled too, over agreeing with Lelaine about something, but she was not smiling now. "Mother, I am not sure I understand," she said, much too tolerantly. "Preparations are certainly enough to show the Hall you will not be bullied. Moving before everything is in place could be disastrous."

Egwene managed to put on a disingenuous expression. "I understand, Sheriam. I don't know what I would do without your advice." How she looked forward to the day she could stop this. Sheriam would make a very good Keeper—she might even have made a good Amyrlin—but Egwene was going to enjoy the day she could teach the woman that she *was* Keeper, not Amyrlin. Sheriam *and* the Hall. "It's just that now Mat has this army of Dragonsworn on our doorstep. What will Lord Bryne do? Or some of his soldiers, on their own? Everybody talks about how he wanted to send men to hunt these Dragonsworn who are supposed to be burning villages. I know he has been told to keep a tight rein on them, but. . . ."

"Lord Gareth will do exactly as we—as you—command, and no more."

"Perhaps." He was not so happy with that tight rein as Sheriam believed. Siuan spent a great deal of time with Gareth Bryne for all her grumbling about the man, and he told her things. Egwene could not afford to give away Siuan's allegiance, though. "I hope the same can be said for every one of his soldiers. We cannot move west into Amadicia, but I thought perhaps we could go downriver, to Ebou Dar. Maybe by gateway. Surely Aes Sedai are welcome there. Lord Bryne could camp outside the city. Moving would emphasize that we aren't going to accept Rand's . . . offer, if it can be called that. And if we are going to make more preparations, I'm sure we would find everything much easier to accomplish in a large city, with roads and ships in and out of the harbor."

Sheriam's control slipped again, to the extent of a breathiness in her voice. "Ebou Dar is not so welcoming as that, Mother. A few sisters are quite different from a few hundred, with an army at their backs. Mother, even a hint of that might make Tylin think we meant to seize the city. Tylin, and a good many Altaran nobles who would like nothing better than an excuse to topple her and take the Throne of the Winds for themselves. A tangle of that kind would ruin us with every ruler. No, Mother, it is quite out of the question."

"But do we dare remain here now? Mat won't do anything, but all it needs is a handful of Lord Bryne's soldiers deciding to take matters into their own hands." Egwene frowned at her skirts, smoothed them as if thinking worriedly, then sighed. "The longer we sit and do nothing with an army of Dragonsworn staring at us, the worse it will be. I won't be surprised to hear rumors they mean to attack us, and people saying we should do for them first." If this did not work, there would be rumors. Nynaeve and Elayne and Siuan and Leane would see to that. It would be dangerous, but she could find some way to make Mat retreat before sparks flew if it came to that. "Why, the way rumors spread, I wouldn't be surprised if half of Altara thinks *we* are Dragonsworn in under a month."

That was one rumor she would have stopped if she knew how. The Hall no longer brought nobles to see Logain since he was Healed, but Bryne's recruiters still went out, and parties of Aes Sedai hunting new novices, and men to make the long trek to the nearest villages with their carts and wagons to buy food. A hundred paths for that rumor to take, and it only needed one. "Sheriam, I can't help feeling we are in a box, and if we don't get out of it, nothing good will come. Nothing at all good."

"The answer is to send the Dragonsworn away," Sheriam said, not so patiently as before. "I regret letting Mat out of our hands again, but I fear there's no answer for it. You've told him the *offer* is refused; tell him to go."

"I wish it were that simple. I don't think he will for asking, Sheriam. He implied he was to wait right where he is until something happens. He could be expecting orders from Rand, or even Rand himself. There was a rumor in Cairhien that he's taken to sometimes Traveling with some of those men he's gathered. The ones he's teaching to channel? I do not know what we will do if that happens."

Sheriam stared at her, breathing quite heavily for someone with such calm features.

A scratching at the door was followed by Tabiya with a beaten silver tray. Not catching the mood, she fussed about setting the green porcelain teapot and cups just so, the silver honeypot and small pitcher of cream and lace-edged linen napkins, until Sheriam finally snapped at her so fiercely to be about her work that Tabiya squeaked and dropped a wide-eyed curtsy that nearly put her head on the floor and ran.

For a moment Sheriam busied herself smoothing her skirts while she regained her composure. "Perhaps," she said finally, reluctantly, "it might be necessary for us to leave Salidar after all. Sooner than I could wish."

"But the only way left is north." Egwene widened her eyes. Light, but she hated this! "It will seem we're moving toward Tar Valon."

"I know that," Sheriam almost snapped. Drawing breath, she moderated her tone. "Forgive me, Mother. I feel a little. . . . I do not like being forced into things, and I fear Rand al'Thor has forced our hand before we are ready."

"I will speak quite severely when I see him," Egwene said. "I can hardly think what I would do without your advice." Perhaps she could find a way to send Sheriam to study with the Wise Ones as an apprentice. The thought of Sheriam after, say, half a year with Sorilea made her smile so that Sheriam actually smiled back. “Honey or bitter?” Egwene said, lifting the teapot.

* * *

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CHAPTER 40

Unexpected Laughter

"You have to help me talk some sense into them," Mat said around his pipestem. "Thom, are you listening?"

They were seated on upended kegs in the scant shade of a two-story house, smoking their pipes, and the lanky old gleeman seemed more interested in staring at the letter Rand had sent on to him. Now he stuffed it into his coat pocket with the blue-wax seal yet unbroken. The buzz of voices and squeak of axles from the street at the end of the alley seemed distant. Sweat dripped from both their faces. At least one thing was taken care of for the moment. Mat had come out of the Little Tower to find that a group of Aes Sedai had hauled Aviendha away somewhere; she would not be sticking a knife in anybody any time soon.

Thom took his pipe from his mouth. It was a long-stemmed thing, carved all over with oak leaves and acorns. "I once tried to rescue a woman, Mat. Laritha was a rose in bud, and married to a glowering brute of a bootmaker in a village where I broke my journey for a few days. A brute. He shouted at her if dinner wasn't ready when he wanted to sit down, and took a switch to her if he saw her say more than two words to another man."

"Thom, what in the Pit of Doom does this have to do with making those fool women see sense?"

"Just listen, boy. How he treated her was common knowledge in the village, but Laritha told me herself, all the while moaning over how she wished someone would rescue her. I had gold in my purse and a fine coach, a driver and a manservant. I was young and good-looking." Thom knuckled his white mustaches and sighed; it was hard to believe that leathery face had ever been good-looking. Mat blinked. A coach? When had a gleeman ever had a coach? "Mat, the woman's plight wrung my heart. And I won't deny her face tugged at it, too. As I said, I was young; I thought I was in love, a hero out of the stories. So one day, sitting beneath a flowering apple tree—well away from the bootmaker's house—I offered to take her away. I'd give her a maid and a house of her own, and court her with songs and verse. When she finally understood, she kicked me in the knee so hard I limped for a month, and hit me with the bench besides."

"They all seem to like kicking," Mat muttered, shifting his weight on the keg. "I suppose she didn't believe you, and who can blame her?"

"Oh, she believed. And was outraged that I thought she would ever leave her beloved husband. Her word; beloved. She ran back to the man as fast as her feet would go, and I had the choice of killing him or leaping into my coach. I had to leave behind almost every stitch I owned. I expect she's still living with him much as before. Holding the purse strings tight in her fist and cracking his head open with whatever lies to hand every time he stops into the inn for an ale. As she always had, so I learned later from a few discreet inquiries." He stuck the pipe back between his teeth as if he had made a point.

Mat scratched his head. "I don't see what that has to do with this."

"Just that you shouldn't think you know the whole story when you've heard part. For instance, do you know Elayne and Nynaeve will be leaving for Ebou Dar in a day or so? Juilin and I are to go along."

"Ebou . . . !" Mat barely caught his pipe before it fell into the dead weeds that carpeted the alley. Nalesean had told some stories about a visit to Ebou Dar, and even counting in the way he exaggerated when it came to women he had known and fights he had been in, the place sounded rough. So they thought they could slip Elayne away from him, did they? "Thom, you have to help me—"

"What?" Thom broke in. "Steal them away from the bootmaker?" He blew up a streamer of blue smoke. "I won't do that, boy. You still don't know the whole story. How do you feel about Egwene and Nynaeve? On second thought, make that just Egwene."

Mat frowned, wondering whether the man thought he could fuddle everything up by going around in circles long enough. "I like Egwene. I. . . . Burn me, Thom, she's Egwene; that's saying enough right there. That's why I am trying to save her fool neck for her."

"Save her from her bootmaker, you mean," Thom murmured, but Mat went right on.

"Her neck and Elayne's as well; even Nynaeve's, if I can stop from throttling her myself. Light! I only want to help them. Besides, Rand will break *my* neck if I let anything happen to Elayne."

"Have you ever thought of helping them do what they want instead of what you want? If I did what I wanted, I'd have Elayne on a horse and riding to Andor. She needs to do other things—*needs* to, I think—so I trot around after her, sweating day and night that somebody will manage to kill her before I can prevent it. She will go to Caemlyn when she's ready." He sucked at his pipe complacently, but there was a slight edge to his voice at the end, as if he did not like his words even as much as he pretended.

"It seems to me they want to hand their heads to Elaida." So Thom would have that silly wench on a horse, would he? A gleeman hauling the Daughter-Heir off to be crowned! He did have a grand sense of himself, Thom did.

"You aren't a fool, Mat," Thom said quietly. "You know better. Egwene. . . . It's hard to think of that child as Amyrlin . . ." Mat grunted sourly in agreement; Thom paid him no mind. ". . . yet I believe she has the backbone for it. It's too early to say whether a few things are just happenstance, but I'm beginning to believe she may have the brains as well. The question is, is she tough enough? If she lacks that, they will eat her alive—backbone, brains and all."

"Who will? Elaida?"

"Oh, her. If she has the chance; that one lacks nothing for toughness. But the Aes Sedai right here hardly think of Egwene as Aes Sedai; Amyrlin maybe, but not Aes Sedai, hard as that is to believe." Thom shook his head. "I don't understand, but it's true. The same for Elayne and Nynaeve. They try to keep it among themselves, but even Aes Sedai don't hide as much as they think, if you watch close and keep your wits about you." He pulled out that letter again, just turning it over in his hands without looking at it. "Egwene is walking the edge of a precipice, Mat, and three factions right here in Salidar—three that I'm sure of—might push her over if she makes one wrong step. Elayne will follow if that happens, and Nynaeve. Or maybe they'll push them over first to pull her down."

"Right here in Salidar," Mat said, flat as a planed board. Thom nodded calmly, and Mat could not stop his voice from rising. "And you want me to leave them here?"

"I want you to stop thinking you're going to *make* them do anything. They've decided what they are going to do, and you can't change it. But maybe—just maybe—you can help me keep them alive."

Mat jumped to his feet. In his head was an image of a woman with a knife stuck between her breasts; not one of the borrowed memories. He kicked the keg he had been sitting on, sending it rolling along the alley. Help a *gleeman* keep them alive? A faint memory stirred, something about Basel Gill, an innkeeper in Caemlyn, saying something about Thom, but it was like mist, gone as soon as he tried to hold it. "Who's the letter from, Thom? Another woman you rescued? Or did you leave her where she could get her head cut off?"

"I left her," Thom said softly. Rising, he walked away without another word.

Mat half reached out to stop him, started to speak. Only he could not think of what to say. *Crazy old man!* No, he was not crazy. Egwene was mule stubborn, and Nynaeve made her look biddable. Worse, either would climb a tree to see the lightning better. As for Elayne, noblewomen never had enough sense to come in out of the rain. And then they were indignant when they got wet.

Tapping out his pipe, he crushed the embers under heel before the dry weeds could catch, then caught up his hat from the ground and limped out to the street. He needed information from a better source than a gleeman who had delusions of grandeur from running around with that stuck-up chit of a Daughter-Heir. Down to his left he saw Nynaeve coming out of the Little Tower and started toward her, winding between loaded carts drawn by oxen or horses. She could tell him what he needed to know. If she would. His hip gave him a twinge. *Burn me, she owes me a few answers.*

Just then Nynaeve caught sight of him and stiffened visibly. For a moment she watched him approach, then abruptly hurried off in the other direction, plainly trying to avoid him. She looked over her shoulder twice before people and carts hid her.

He stopped, scowling, and pulled his hat low. First the woman kicked him for no reason; now she would not talk to him. They meant to let him stew, her and Egwene, until he would trot off meekly when they pointed a finger. *Well, they chose the wrong man for their game, burn their hides!*

Vanin and the others were outside a stable beside a stone building that had surely been an inn once. Aes Sedai streamed in and out of it now. Pips and the rest of their horses were tied to a hitching rail, and Vanin and the two scouts who had been captured were squatting against the wall. Mar and Ladwin were as different as men could be, one tall, lanky and rough-faced, the other short, stocky and mild-seeming, but both looked plain embarrassed when Mat walked up. Neither had gotten over the ease of his capture. The two squadmen stood stiffly, still holding the banners tight against their staffs as if there was any point to it now. They looked more than a little apprehensive. A battle was one thing; all these Aes Sedai were quite another. A man had a chance in battle. There were two Warders watching them. Not openly, and from across the stableyard, but they had not just picked that spot, standing in the full sun, to talk.

Mat stroked Pips' nose, then after a moment began to examine the horse's eyes. A fellow in a leather vest came out of the stable, shoving a dung barrow up the street. Vanin walked over to peer into Pips' eye. Not looking at him, Mat said, "Could you reach the Band?"

"Maybe." Vanin frowned and lifted Pips' eyelid. "With a little luck, maybe. Hate to leave my horse, though."

Mat nodded, looking closer at the eye. "Tell Talmanes I said to sit tight. I may be staying here a few days, and I don't want any bloody attempted rescue. Try to make it back here. Without being seen, if you can."

Vanin spat into the dust under Pips. "Man mixes with Aes Sedai, he's bridled himself and put a saddle on his back. I'll be back when I can." Shaking his head, he strolled off into the crowd, a fat rumpled man with a rolling walk who no one could suspect of being able to sneak.

One of the squadmen cleared his throat hesitantly and stepped closer. "My Lord, is everything . . . ? This is what you planned, isn't it, my Lord?"

"Right to the plan, Verdin," Mat said, patting Pips. He was headfirst in a sack, and the strings tied tight. He had promised Rand to see Elayne safe to Caemlyn, and he could not leave without her. And he could not go off and let Egwene stretch her neck on the chopping block, either. It might be—Light, how it rankled!—it might be that he was going to have to take Thom's advice. Try to keep those bloody women's bloody heads on their bloody shoulders by somehow helping them make this whole mad impossible scheme actually work. While trying to keep his own neck in one piece, incidentally. And that left out keeping Aviendha from Elayne's throat. Well, at the least, he could be around to get them away when it all fell apart. Small comfort that was. "Everything is just bloody fine."

Elayne expected to find Aviendha in the waiting room or maybe outside, but she hardly had to listen to discover why she was in neither place. There were two topics of conversation among the other Aes Sedai, and everyone was talking, with papers lying abandoned on the tables. Mat occupied most tongues; even the servants and novices bustling about the waiting room paused in running errands to exchange words about him. He was *ta'veren*. Was it safe to let a *ta'veren* remain in Salidar? Had he really been in the Tower and simply allowed to go? Was it true he commanded the Dragonsworn army? Was he to be arrested for the atrocities they had heard of? Was it true he came from the same village as the Dragon Reborn and the Amyrlin? There were rumors of *two ta'veren* connected to the Dragon Reborn; who was the second, and where could he be found? Maybe Mat Cauthon knew. There seemed to be as many opinions as there were people to give them.

There were two questions Elayne expected to hear and did not. What did Mat want in Salidar, and how had Rand known where to send him? Nobody asked them, but here an Aes Sedai suddenly shifted her shawl as if cold or gave a start when she realized someone had spoken to her, there a serving woman stared at nothing in the middle of the floor before coming to herself with a shake or a novice darted frightened glances at the sisters. Mat was not quite a cat set among the pigeons, but he came close. Just the fact that Rand knew where they were seemed enough to set a chill.

Aviendha occasioned less comment, but the sisters could not help talking about her, and not only to change the subject. It was not every day that a wilder simply appeared on her own two feet, especially with such remarkable strength, and an Aiel besides. That last truly fascinated every sister. No Aiel had ever trained in the Tower, and few Aes Sedai had ever entered the Aiel Waste.

A single question sufficed to learn where she was being held. Not held in name, but Elayne knew how Aes Sedai could be when they wanted a woman to become a novice.

"She will be in white by nightfall," Akarrin said confidently. A slim Brown, she nodded for emphasis with almost every word. The two sisters with her nodded just as surely.

*Tsk*ing under her breath, Elayne hurried into the street. Ahead of her she could see Nynaeve practically trotting, and looking over her shoulder so often that she was running into people. Elayne thought about catching up—she would not mind having company—but she was not about to run in this heat, concentration or no, and that seemed the only way. Even so, she did lift her skirts slightly and hurried.

Before she had gone fifty paces, she felt Birgitte coming closer and turned to see her running down the street. Areina was with her, but she stopped a little way off and folded her arms with a scowl. The woman was an impossible little wretch, and she certainly had not changed her opinions because Elayne really was Aes Sedai now.

"I thought you should know," Birgitte said quietly. "I just heard that when we leave for Ebou Dar, Vandene and Adeleas are going too."

"I see," Elayne murmured. It could be that the pair were going to join Merilille for some reason, though there were already three Aes Sedai at Tylin's court, or maybe they had a mission of their own in Ebou Dar. She did not believe either. Areina had her mind set, and so did the Hall. Elayne and Nynaeve were to be accompanied by two *real* Aes Sedai as chaperones. "She *does* understand *she* isn't going."

Birgitte glanced the way Elayne was staring, at Areina, then shrugged. "She understands; she is not happy over it. Myself, I can hardly wait to be gone."

Elayne hesitated only a moment. She had promised to keep secrets, which she did not like, but she had not promised to stop trying to convince the other woman there was no need, and no point. "Birgitte, Egwene—"

"No!"

"Why not?" Elayne had not had Birgitte for a Warder long before she decided that when she bonded Rand, she would somehow make him promise to do as he was told, at least when it was important. Lately she had decided on another provision. He was going to have to answer her questions. Birgitte answered when she chose, evaded when she chose and sometimes just put on a stubborn face, as she did now. "Tell me why not, and if it's a good reason, I'll never ask again."

At first Birgitte just glowered, but then she took Elayne's arm and very nearly hustled her to the mouth of an alley. No one passing by glanced at them twice, and Areina remained where she was, if darker of face than before, but Birgitte still looked around carefully and spoke in a whisper. "Always when the Wheel spun me out, I was born, lived and died without ever knowing I was bound to the Wheel. I only knew that in between, in

Tel'aran'rhiod. Sometimes I became known, even famous, but I was like everyone else, not somebody out of a legend. This time I was ripped out, not spun out. For the first time wearing flesh, I know who I am. For the first time, other people can know too. Thom and Juilin do; they say nothing, but I am sure. They don't look at me the way they do other people. If I said I was going to climb a glass mountain and kill a giant with my bare hands, they'd just ask if I needed any help on the way, and they would not expect me to."

"I don't understand," Elayne said slowly, and Birgitte sighed and let her head hang.

"I don't know that I can live up to that. In other lives, I did what I had to, what seemed to be right, enough for Maerion or Joana or any woman. Now, I'm *Birgitte* of the stories. Everyone who knows will *expect*. I feel like a feather-dancer walking into a Tovan conclave."

Elayne did not ask; when Birgitte mentioned things from past lives, the explanations were usually more confusing than ignorance. "That is nonsense," she said firmly, taking the other woman by the arms. "*I* know, and *I* certainly don't expect you to kill any giants. Egwene doesn't either. And she *already* knows."

"As long as I don't admit it," Birgitte muttered, "it is as if she didn't. Don't bother saying that's nonsense too; I know it is, but that changes nothing."

"Then what about this? She is the Amyrlin, and you are a Warder. She deserves your trust, Birgitte. She needs it."

"Are you done with her yet?" Areina demanded from a pace away. "If you're going to go away and leave me, the least you can do is help me with my archery the way you said you would."

"I will think on it," Birgitte told Elayne quietly. Turning to Areina, she caught the woman's braid at the base of her neck. "We will speak of archery," she said, pushing her up the street, "but first we will speak of manners."

Shaking her head, Elayne suddenly remembered Aviendha and hurried on. The house was not far.

It took her a moment to recognize Aviendha. Elayne was used to seeing her in *cadin'sor*, with her dark reddish hair cut short, not in skirt and blouse and shawl with hair below her shoulders and held back from her face by a folded kerchief. At first glance, she did not appear to be in any difficulty. Sitting rather awkwardly in a chair—Aiel were unused to chairs—she seemed to be peacefully sipping tea with five sisters in a circle in the sitting room. Houses that sheltered Aes Sedai had such things, though Elayne and Nynaeve were still in their cramped little room. At second glance, Aviendha was casting hunted looks at the Aes Sedai over the rim of her teacup. There was no time for a third glance; on sight of Elayne, Aviendha jerked to her feet and dropped her cup to the clean-swept floor. Elayne had seen few Aiel except in the Stone of Tear, but she did know they hid their emotions, and Aviendha did it very well. Only now, naked pain painted her face.

"I'm sorry," Elayne told the room smoothly, "but I must take her away from you for a little while. Perhaps you can talk to her later."

Several of the sisters hesitated on the brink of protest, though there should have been none. She was clearly the strongest in the room by far, except for Aviendha, and none of the Aes Sedai was a Sitter or part of Sheriam's council. She was very happy that Myrelle was not there, since she lived in this house. Elayne had made her choice of Green and been accepted, only to discover that Myrelle was the head of the Green Ajah in Salidar. Myrelle, who had not even been Aes Sedai fifteen years. From things that had been said, Elayne knew there were Greens in Salidar who had worn the shawl at least fifty, though not a one showed a gray hair. Had Myrelle been there, all Elayne's strength would have counted nothing if the head of her Ajah wanted to retain Aviendha. As it was, only Shana, a pop-eyed White who reminded Elayne of a fish, went as far as opening her mouth further, and she closed it again, though rather sullenly when Elayne arched an eyebrow at her.

The five were more than a bit tight-lipped, but Elayne ignored the tension. "Thank you," she said with a smile she did not feel.

Aviendha slung a dark bundle on her back, but hesitated until Elayne actually asked her to come. In the street, Elayne said, "I apologize for that. I'll see it does not happen again." She could manage that, she was sure. Or Egwene could, surely. "There are not many places to talk alone, I'm afraid. My room is rather hot this time of day. We could try to find some shade, or have some tea, if they haven't already filled you with it."

"Your room." It was not exactly curt, but plainly Aviendha did not want to talk, not yet. Abruptly she darted to a passing cart filled with firewood and snatched out a branch meant to be broken for kindling, longer than her arm and thicker than her thumb. Rejoining Elayne, she began peeling it with her belt knife; the sharp blade shaved away smaller branches like a razor. The pain was gone from her face. She seemed determined now.

Elayne eyed her sideways as they walked. She would not believe Aviendha meant her any harm, whatever that lout Mat Cauthon said. Then again. . . . She knew a little of *ji'e'toh*; Aviendha had explained some of it when they were in the Stone together. Maybe Rand had said or done something. Maybe that bewildering labyrinth of honor and obligation required Aviendha to. . . . It did not seem possible. But maybe. . . .

When they reached her room, she decided to bring it up first. Facing the other woman—and very deliberately not embracing *saidar*—she said, "Mat claims you have come here to kill me."

Aviendha blinked. "Wetlanders always put everything backwards," she said wonderingly. Laying the stick on the foot of Nynaeve's bed, she put the belt knife beside it carefully. "My near-sister Egwene asked me to watch Rand al'Thor for you, which I promised to do." Bundle and shawl went on the floor beside the door. "I have *toh* toward her, but greater to you." Unlacing her blouse, she pulled it over her head, then pushed her shift to her waist. "I love Rand al'Thor, and once I let myself lie with him. I have *toh*, and I ask that you help me meet it." Turning her back, she knelt in the small space available. "You may use the stick or the knife as you wish; the *toh* is mine, but the choice is yours." She tilted up her chin, stretching her neck. Her eyes were closed. "Whichever you choose, I accept."

Elayne thought her knees were going to buckle. Min had said the third woman would be dangerous, but Aviendha? *Wait! She said she. . . . With Rand!* Her hand twitched toward the knife on the bed, and she folded her arms, trapping her hands. "Get up. And put on your blouse. I am *not* going to hit you . . ." Just a few times? She tightened her arms to hold her hands where they were. ". . . and I am *certainly* not going to touch that knife. Please put it away." She would have handed it to the other woman, but she was not certain she was safe to touch a weapon right then. "You have no *toh* toward me." She believed that was the phrase. "I love Rand, but I don't care that you love him too." The lie burned her tongue. Aviendha had actually *lain* with him?

Twisting around on her knees, Aviendha frowned. "I am not certain I understand. Are you proposing that we share him? Elayne, we are friends, I think, but we must be as first-sisters if we are to be sister-wives. It will take time to know if we can be that.”

Realizing her mouth was hanging open, Elayne closed it. “I suppose it will,” she said faintly. Min kept saying they would share him, but certainly not that way! Even the thought was indecent! “It is a little more complicated than you know. There’s another woman who loves him, too.”

Aviendha was on her feet so fast she simply seemed to be one place then the other. “What is her name?” Her green eyes blazed, and she had the knife in her hand.

Elayne almost laughed. *One moment talking about sharing, the next as fierce as . . . as. . . . As fierce as me,* she finished, not at all pleased with the thought. This could have been worse, much worse. It could have been Berelain. Since it had to be somebody, it might as well be Aviendha. *And I might as well deal with it instead of kicking my skirts like a child.* Seating herself on the bed, she folded her hands in her lap. “Do sheathe that and sit down, Aviendha. And please put on your blouse. I have a great deal to tell you. There is a woman—my friend, my near-sister—named Min. . . .”

Aviendha did clothe herself, but a considerable time passed before she sat, and considerably more before Elayne could convince her that they should not combine to do Min in. She agreed to that, at least. Reluctantly, she finally said, “I must get to know her. I will not share him with a woman I cannot love as a first-sister.” That with a studying look at Elayne, who sighed.

Aviendha would consider sharing him with her. Min was ready to share him with her. Was she the only one of the three who was normal? By the map under her mattress, Min should be in Caemlyn soon, or maybe already was. She did not know what she wanted to have happen there, only that Min should use her viewings to help him. Which meant Min had to stay close to him. While Elayne went to Ebou Dar.

“Is anything in life ever simple, Aviendha?”

“Not when men are involved.”

Elayne was not sure which surprised her more, to find that she was laughing or that Aviendha was.

* * *

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CHAPTER 41

A Threat

Riding slowly through Caemlyn under a baking midmorning sun, Min really saw little of the city. She hardly noticed the people and sedan chairs, wagons and coaches, that clogged the streets except to guide her bay mare around them. One of her dreams had always been to live in a great city and travel to strange places, but today colorful towers covered in glittering tiles and sweeping vistas as the street rounded a hill passed all but unseen. Clumps of Aiel striding through the crowds with space opening around them got a second glance, and so did patrols of hawk-nosed, often bearded men on horseback, but only because they reminded her of the stories they had begun hearing while still in Murandy. Merana had been angered by those, and by the charred evidence of Dragonsworn they had come on twice, but Min thought some of the other Aes Sedai were worried. The less said about what they thought of Rand's amnesty, the better.

At the edge of the plaza in front of the Royal Palace, she drew Wildrose's rein and blotted her face carefully with a lace-edged handkerchief that she tucked back up her coatsleeve. Only a few people dotted the great oval, perhaps because Aiel guarded the open main gates of the palace. More Aiel stood on marble balconies or glided across high, colonnaded walks like leopards. The White Lion of Andor stirred in a breeze above the tallest of the palace domes. Another crimson flag flew from one of the spires, a little lower than the white dome, lifted just enough by the breeze for her to make out the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai, black-and-white.

Those Aiel made her glad she had refused the offer of a pair of Warders as escort; she suspected Aiel and Warders might strike sparks. Well, it had not been precisely an offer, and she had refused by sneaking away an hour beforetime by the clock on the inn mantelpiece. Merana was from Caemlyn, and when they arrived before dawn she took them straight to what she said was the finest inn in the New City.

It was not the Aiel who kept Min sitting there, however. Not entirely, though she had heard all sorts of terrible stories about black-veiled Aiel. Her coat and breeches were the finest, softest wool that could be found in Salidar, in a pale rose, with tiny blue-and-white flowers embroidered on lapels and cuffs and down the outsides of the legs. Her shirt was cut like a boy's too, but in cream silk. In Baerlon, after her father died, her aunts had tried to make her into what they called a decent proper woman, though maybe her Aunt Miren had understood that after ten years running about the mines in boys' clothes, it might be too late to stuff her into dresses. They had tried, even so, and she had fought them as stubbornly as she refused to learn to wield a needle. Aside from that unfortunate episode serving tables at The Miners' Rest—a rough place, but she had not stayed long; Rana, Jan *and* Miren had seen to that emphatically when they found out, and no matter that she was twenty then—aside from that one time, she had never worn a dress willingly. Now she was thinking that maybe she should have had one made instead of this coat and breeches. A dress in silk, cut snug at the bodice and low, and. . . .

He'll have to take me as I am, she thought, twitching the reins irritably. *I'm not changing for any man.* Only, her clothes would have been as plain as any farmer's not that long ago, her hair had not been in ringlets almost to her shoulders, and a small voice whispered, *You'll be whatever you think he wants you to be.* She kicked it down as hard as she had ever kicked any stableman who tried to cut rough, and heeled Wildrose only a little more gently. She hated the very idea of women being weak when it came to men. There was just one problem; she was fairly certain she was going to find out just what it was like very soon now.

Dismounting in front of the Palace gates, she patted the mare, to tell her she had not meant the kick, while eyeing the Aiel uncertainly. Half were women, all but one considerably taller than she. The men towered like Rand, most of them, and some even more. Every one was watching her—well, they seemed to be watching everything, but definitely her as well—and not one blinked that she could see. With those spears and bucklers, the bows on their backs and quivers at their hips, the heavy knives, they looked ready to kill. Those black strips of cloth hanging down onto their chests must be the veils. She had heard Aiel would not kill you without covering their faces. *I hope that's so.*

She addressed herself to the shortest of the women. Framed by bright red hair as short as Min's used to be, her tanned face might as well have been carved from wood, but she was even a little shorter than Min. "I've come to see Rand al'Thor," Min said, a trifle unsteadily. "The Dragon Reborn." Did none of them ever blink? "My name is Min. He knows me, and I have an important message for him."

The red-haired woman turned to the other Aiel, gesticulating quickly with her free hand. The rest of the women laughed as she turned back. "I will take you to him, Min. But if he does not know you, you will leave much faster than you go in." Some of the Aielwomen laughed at that too. "I am called Enaila."

"He knows me," Min told them, flushing. She had a pair of knives up her coatsleeves that Thom Merrilin had showed her how to use, but she had the feeling this woman could take them away and peel her with them. An image flickered above Enaila's head and was gone. A wreath of some sort; Min had no idea what it meant. "Am I supposed to take my horse in, too? I don't think Rand wants to see her." To her surprise, some of the Aiel chuckled, men and women, and Enaila's lips twitched as if she wanted to.

A man came to take Wildrose—Min thought he was Aiel too, despite the downcast eyes and white robe—and she followed Enaila through the gates, across a broad courtyard and into the Palace proper. It was something of a relief to see servants in red-and-white livery scurrying along the tapestry-lined corridors, warily eyeing the Aiel who also walked the halls, but no more so than they might a strange dog really. She had begun to think she would find the Palace filled with none but Aiel, Rand surrounded by them, maybe dressed in coat and breeches all in shades of brown and gray and green, staring at her without blinking.

Before tall wide doors, carved with lions and standing open, Enaila halted, wiggling her hand quickly at the Aiel on guard. They were all women. One, flaxen-haired and considerably taller than most men, waggled fingers back. "Wait here," Enaila said, and went in.

Min took one step after her, and a spear was casually held in her path by the flaxen-haired woman. Or perhaps not casually, but Min did not care. She could see Rand.

He sat on a great gilded throne that seemed made entirely of Dragons, in a red coat worked heavily with gold, holding some sort of green-and-white tasseled spearhead of all things. Another throne stood on a tall pedestal behind him, gilded also, but with a lion picked out in white gemstones against red. The Lion Throne, so the rumors said. At that moment, he could have been using it for a footstool for all she cared. He looked tired. He was so beautiful, her heart ached. Images danced around him continuously. With Aes Sedai and Warders, that deluge was something she tried to escape; she could not tell what they meant any more often than with anyone else, but they were *always* there. With Rand, she had to make herself see them, because otherwise she would just stare at his face. One of those images she had seen every time she saw him. Countless thousands of sparkling lights, like stars or fireflies, rushed into a great blackness, trying to fill it up, rushed in and were swallowed. There seemed to be more lights than she had ever seen before, but the darkness swallowed them at a greater rate, too. And there was something else, something new, an aura of yellow and brown and purple that made her stomach clench.

She tried viewing the nobles facing him—surely that was what they were, in all those fine embroidered coats and rich silk gowns—but there was nothing to see. That was true of most people most of the time, and when she did see something, most often she had no notion what it foretold. Even so, she narrowed her eyes, straining. If she could make out just one image, one aura, it might be a help to him. From the stories she had heard since entering Andor, he could use all the help he could find.

With a heavy sigh, she gave it up finally. Squinting and straining did no good unless there was something to see in the first place.

Suddenly she realized the nobles were withdrawing, Rand was on his feet, and Enaila was waving, motioning her to enter. Rand was smiling. Min thought her heart might burst out of her chest. So this was what it felt like for all those women she had laughed at, throwing themselves at a man's feet. No. She was not a giddy girl; she was older than he, she had had her first kiss while he still thought getting out of tending sheep was the most fun in the world, she. . . . *Light, please, don't let my knees give way.*

Tossing the Dragon Scepter down carelessly where he had been sitting, Rand bounded from the dais in one leap and rushed down the Grand Hall. As soon as he reached Min, he caught her under the arms and swung her into the air and around and around before Dyelin and the others were gone. Some of the nobles stared, and were welcome to, for all of him. “Light, Min, but it’s good to see your face,” he laughed. Considerably better than Dyelin’s stony features or Ellorien’s. But if Aemlyn and Arathelle and Pelivar and Luan and all of them had every one proclaimed their joy that Elayne was on her way to Caemlyn instead of staring at him with doubt or even “liar” in their eyes, he would have been as overjoyed to see Min.

When he put her feet back on the floor, she sagged against his chest, clutching his arms and breathing hard. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to make you dizzy. It’s just that I really am glad to see you.”

“Well, you did make me dizzy, you wool-headed sheepherder,” she mumbled against his chest. Pushing herself away, she glared up at him through long lashes. “I had a very long ride, I arrived in the middle of the night, or might as well, and you toss me around like a sack of oats. Did you never learn any manners?”

“Woolhead,” he laughed softly. “Min, you can name me liar, but I’ve actually missed hearing you call me that.” She did not call him anything; she merely peered up at him, the glare gone completely. Her eyelashes did seem longer than he remembered.

Realizing where they were, he took her hand. A throne room was no place for meeting old friends. “Come on, Min. We can have some cool punch in my sitting room. Somara, I am going to my apartments; you can send everybody away.”

Somara did not look happy about it, but she dismissed all the Maidens except for herself and Enaila. Both looked a bit sullen, which he did not understand. He had allowed Somara to gather so many inside the palace in the first place only because Dyelin and the others were coming. Bashere was out at his horsemen’s camp north of the city for the same reason. Maidens for a reminder, Bashere because there could be too many reminders. He hoped the two Maidens were not planning on any mothering. They took turns as his guards more than their share, it seemed to him, but Nandera was as adamant as Sulin had been when it came to him saying who specifically was to do what. He could command *Far Dareis Mai*, but he was not a Maiden, and the other was none of his business.

Min studied the tapestries as he led her along the corridor by the hand. She peered at inlaid chests and tables, at golden bowls and tall vases of Sea Folk porcelain in niches. She examined Enaila and Somara head to toe three times each. But she neither looked at him nor spoke a word. His hand engulfed hers, and he could feel the pulse in her wrist racing to beat horses. He hoped she was not really angry over being whirled about.

To his great relief, Somara and Enaila took places on either side of his door, though they both looked at him when he asked for punch, and he had to repeat himself. In the sitting room, he took off his coat and tossed it over a chair. "Sit, Min. Sit. Rest and relax. The punch will be here shortly. You have to tell me everything. Where you've been, how you got here, why you arrived in the night. It isn't safe traveling at night, Min. Now less than ever. I'll give you the best rooms in the Palace—well, the second-best; these are the best—and an Aiel escort to take you wherever you want. Any bullyboy or strongarm will doff his cap and duck his head, if he doesn't run right up the side of a building to get away."

For a moment he thought she might laugh, standing there by the door, but instead she drew a deep breath and took a letter from her pocket. "I can't tell you where I came from—I promised, Rand—but Elayne is there, and—"

"Salidar," he said, and smiled at the way her eyes widened. "I know a few things, Min. Maybe more than some think I do."

"I . . . see that you do," she said faintly. She pushed the letter into his hands then backed away again. Her voice firmed as she added, "I swore I would give that to you first off. Go ahead and read it."

He recognized the seal, a lily in dark yellow wax, and Elayne's flowing hand in his name, and he hesitated before opening it. Clean breaks were best, and he had made one, but with the letter in his hand, he could not stop himself. He read, then sat down atop his coat and read again. It was certainly short.

> *Rand,*
> *I have made my feelings clear to you. Know that they have not changed. I hope that you feel for me what I feel for you. Min can help you, if you will only listen to her. I love her like a sister, and hope you love her as I do.*
> *Elayne*

Her ink must have been running out, because the last lines were a hurried scrawl, quite unlike the elegance of the rest. Min had been sidling and twisting her head, trying to read the letter without being too obvious, but when he lifted himself to pull his coat out—the fat-little-man *angreal* was in the pocket—she scurried back again. “Do women all *try* to drive a man crazy?” he muttered.

“What!”

He stared at the letter, talking half to himself. “Elayne is so beautiful I can’t help staring, but half the time I don’t know whether she wants me to kiss her or kneel at her feet. Truth to tell, sometimes I did want to kneel . . . and worship, the Light help me. She says here I know how she feels. Two letters she’s written me before this, one full of love, the other saying she never wanted the sight of me again. The times I’ve sat wishing the first one was true and the other some sort of joke, or mistake, or. . . . And Aviendha. She’s beautiful too, but every day with her was a battle. No kisses from her, not anymore, and no doubts how she feels. She was even happier to get away from me than I was to see her go. Only, I keep expecting to see her when I turn around, and when she isn’t there, it’s as if something inside me is missing. I actually miss the battle, and there are moments when I find myself thinking, *There are things worth fighting for.*” Something in Min’s silence made him look up. She was staring at him with a face as blank as an Aes Sedai.

“Did nobody ever tell you it isn’t polite to talk to one woman about another?” Her voice was absolutely flat. “Much less two other women.”

“Min, you’re a friend,” he protested. “I don’t think of you as a woman.” It was the wrong thing to say; he knew it as soon as the words left his mouth.

“Oh?” Tossing back her coat, she placed her hands on her hips. It was not the all-too-familiar angry pose. Her wrists were twisted so her fingers pointed up, and somehow that made it very different. She stood with one knee bent, and that. . . . For the first time he really saw her; not just Min, but the way she looked. Not the usual plain brown coat and breeches, but pale red, and embroidered. Not the usual rough-cut hair that barely covered her ears, but ringlets brushing her neck. “Do I look like a boy?”

“Min, I—”

“Do I look like a man? A horse?” In one quick stride she reached him and plumped herself down in his lap.

“Min,” he said, aghast, “what are you doing?”

“Convincing you I’m a woman, woolhead. Don’t I look like a woman? Don’t I smell like a woman?” She smelled faintly of flowers, now that he noticed. “Don’t I feel—? Well, enough of that. Answer the question, sheepherder.”

It was the “sheepherder” and “woolhead” that stilled his alarm. The truth was, she felt remarkably nice sitting there. But she was Min, who thought he was a country boy with hay in his hair and not very much common sense. “Light, Min, I know you’re a woman. I didn’t mean any insult. You’re a friend, too. It’s just that I feel comfortable with you. It doesn’t matter if I look like a fool with you. I can say things to you I wouldn’t say to anybody else, not even Mat or Perrin. When I am around you, all the knots unwind, all the tightness in my shoulders I don’t even feel till it goes. Do you see, Min? I like being around you. I’ve missed you.”

Folding her arms, she looked at him sideways, frowning. Her leg twitched; if her foot had reached the floor, she would have been tapping it. “All that about Elayne. And this . . . Aviendha. Who is she, by the way? It sounds to me as if you love them both. Oh, stop jerking about. You owe me some answers. Saying I’m not—Just answer me. Do you love both of them?”

“Maybe I do,” he said slowly. “Light help me, I think maybe I do. Does that make me a lecher, Min, or just a greedy fool?” Her mouth opened and closed; she tossed her head angrily and compressed her lips. He hurried on before she could tell him which one she had picked to fit him; he did not really want to hear it from her. “It hardly matters now anyway. It is done with. I sent Aviendha away, and I will not let her come back. I won’t let myself within a mile of her or Elayne, ten miles if I can help it.”

“For the love of . . . ! Why, Rand? What gives you the right to make a choice like that for them?”

“Min, can’t you see? I am a target. Any woman I love becomes a target, too. Even if the arrow is aimed at me, it could hit her. It could be aimed at her.” Breathing out heavily, he leaned back with his arms on the rose-carved chair arms. She twisted a little, studying him with the most serious expression he had ever seen on her face. Min was always smiling, always a little amused by everything. Just as well she was not now; he was deadly serious himself. “Lan told me he and I are alike in some ways, and it’s true. He said there are men who radiate death. Himself. Me. When a man like that falls in love, the best gift he can give her is to put as much distance as possible between himself and her. You see that, don’t you?”

“What I see. . . .” She was silent for a moment. “Very well. I’m your friend, and I am glad you know it, but don’t bother thinking I will give up. I will convince you I am not a man or a horse.”

“Min, I said I—”

“Oh, no, sheepherder. Not good enough.” She wriggled round on his lap in a way that made him clear his throat, and pinned a finger against his chest. “I want tears in your eyes when you say it. I want drool on your chin and a stammer in your voice. You needn’t think I won’t make you pay.”

Rand could not help laughing. “Min, it really is good to have you here. All you see is a mudfoot from the Two Rivers, isn’t it?”

Her mood changed lightning quick. “I see you, Rand,” she said, strangely quiet. “I see you.” Clearing her throat, she arranged herself primly, hands on her knees. If it was possible to be prim sitting as she was, anyway. “I might as well get on with why I came. Apparently, you know about Salidar. That is going to raise a few eyebrows, I tell you. What you probably do not know is that I didn’t come alone. There’s an embassy from Salidar in Caemlyn, to see you.”

Lews Therin muttered, thunder in the distance. Mention of Aes Sedai always roused him since Alanna and the bonding, if not as much as being around Taim.

Even with Lews Therin grumbling, Rand very nearly smiled. He had suspected as soon as Min handed him the letter from Elayne. Confirmation was almost as good as proof that they were frightened, as he thought. What else could they be, rebels driven to hiding right on the edge of Whitecloak power? Very likely wishing they knew how to creep back into the White Tower, too, chewing their fingers over how to wriggle back into Elaida’s good graces. From what he knew of Elaida, they had small chance, and they had to know it better than he. If they had sent an embassy to the Dragon Reborn, to a man who could channel, then they must be all but ready to accept his protection. This was not like Elaida, who apparently thought he could be bought, and likely kept in a wicker cage like a song sparrow. Egwene’s nebulous promises of Aes Sedai who supported him were about to be fulfilled.

“Who came with you?” he asked. “Maybe I know her.” He did not really know any Aes Sedai except Moiraine, who was dead, but he had met a few. If she was one of those, it might make things a little harder. He really had been Min's farmboy back then, ready to flinch if an Aes Sedai looked at him.

"There's more than one, Rand. Actually, there are nine." He gave a start, and she went on quickly. "It is meant for an honor, Rand; three times what they'd send a king or queen. Merana—she's in charge; she's Gray Ajah—Merana will come here alone this afternoon, and no more than one at a time will come anywhere near you unless you feel comfortable. They took rooms at The Crown of Roses, in the New City; they practically took it over, with all the Warders and servants. Merana sent me first because I know you, to smooth the way. They don't mean you any harm, Rand. I am sure of it."

"A viewing, Min, or your opinion?" It seemed odd to be carrying on a serious conversation with a woman perched on his knee, but she was Min, after all. That made it different. He just had to keep reminding himself.

"My opinion," she admitted reluctandy. "Rand, I viewed every one of them every day, all the long way from Salidar. If they intended any harm, I would have to have seen something. I can't believe nothing would show in that time." Shifting, she gave him a worried look that quickly changed to a determined firmness. "I might as well tell you something else while I'm about it. I saw an aura around you in the throne room. Aes Sedai are going to hurt you. Women who can channel, anyway. It was all confused; I'm not sure about the Aes Sedai part. But it might happen more than once. I think that's why it seemed all scrambled." He looked at her silently, and she smiled. "I like that about you, Rand. You accept what I can do and what I cannot. You don't ask me if I'm sure, or when it's going to happen. You never ask for more than I know."

"Well, I am to ask one thing, Min. Can you be sure these Aes Sedai in your viewing aren't the Aes Sedai you came with?"

"No," she said simply. That was one thing *he* liked; she never tried to evade.

I have to be careful, Lews Therin whispered intently. *Even these half-trained girls can be dangerous with nine of them. I must—*

I must, Rand thought firmly. A moment of confusion from Lews Therin, and then he fled back to the shadowed recesses. He always did now, if Rand spoke to him. The only problem was that Lews Therin seemed to be seeing and hearing more, and intending to act on it. There had not been another incident of his trying to seize *saidin*, but Rand was careful now. The man wanted Rand's mind and body for his own, thought they were his own, and if he managed to gain control even once, Rand was not certain it would not be just that way. Lews Therin Telamon walking and speaking, while Rand al'Thor was only a voice in his head.

"Rand," Min said anxiously, "don't look at me like that. I am on your side, if it comes to sides. It might; a little. They think I'll tell them what you say. I won't, Rand. They just want to know how to deal with you, what to expect, but I'll not tell one word you don't want me to, and if you ask me to lie, I will. They do not know about my viewings. Those are yours, Rand. You know I will read anyone you say, including Merana and the rest."

He forced the snarl from his face, made sure his voice was mild. "Calm yourself, Min. I know you are on my side." That was simple truth. Suspecting Min would be like suspecting himself. Lews Therin was dealt with for the moment; it was time to deal with this Merana and her embassy. "Tell them they can come three at a time." That was what Lews Therin had advised in Cairhien; no more than three at once. The man seemed to believe he could handle three Aes Sedai. He seemed more than a little contemptuous of those who called themselves Aes Sedai now. But what had been a limit in Cairhien was different here. Merana wanted him calmed and smoothed down before even one Aes Sedai came near. Let her chew on an invitation for three to begin and think what it might mean. "Aside from that, none are to enter the Inner City without my permission. And they aren't to try channeling around me. Tell them that, Min. I'll know the moment they take hold of the Source, and I will not be pleased. Tell them."

"They aren't going to be very pleased either, sheepherder," she said dryly. "But I will tell them."

A crash whipped Rand's head around.

Sulin stood just inside the door in her red-and-white dress, her face so suffused with blood that the scar on her cheek stood out even paler than usual. Her white hair had grown since she put on the livery, but it was still shorter than any of the servants'. Mistress Harfor had had it made into a close cap of curls. Sulin hated that. At her feet was a silver tray bordered in worked gold, with silver-chased golden goblets lying on their sides. The wine pitcher rocked a last time as he looked, and miraculously stopped upright, though there appeared to be as much wine punch on tray and carpet as there could be remaining in the pitcher.

Min was halfway into scrambling to her feet when he caught her by the waist and pulled her back down. Time enough and more to drive home that he was done with Aviendha, and Min would not mind helping. In fact, after a moment of resistance, she leaned into him and put her head on his chest.

"Sulin," he said, "a good servant does not toss trays about. Now, pick it up and do as you're supposed to." Staring at him darkly, she all but quivered.

Figuring out how to let her meet her *toh* while discharging at least some of his obligation to her had been little short of brilliant. Sulin cared for his rooms now, and fetched and carried only for him. She hated it, of course, especially that he saw her doing it every day, but she no longer broke her back scrubbing floors all over the Palace or hauling endless streams of heavy water buckets for laundry. He suspected she would rather every Aiel this side of the Dragonwall saw her shame than allow him to, but he had eased her labors notably, eased his conscience somewhat, and if having to work for him made her decide her *toh* was met sooner, all to the good. Sulin belonged in *cadin'sor* carrying her spears, not in livery folding bed linens.

Picking up the tray, she stalked across the room and pushed it roughly onto an ivory-inlaid table. As she started to turn away, he said, "This is Min, Sulin. She's my friend. She doesn't know Aiel ways, and I would take it amiss should anything untoward happen to her." It had just occurred to him that the Maidens might have their own view of him sending away Aviendha and holding another woman almost as soon as she was gone. Their own view, and their own way of dealing with it. "In fact, if any harm comes to her, I'll consider it done to me."

"Why should any but Aviendha wish to harm this woman?" Sulin said grimly. "She gave too much time to dreaming over you, and not enough to teaching you what you should know." Giving herself a shake, she growled, "My Lord Dragon." He thought it was supposed to be a murmur. She nearly fell over twice in her curtsy before she was upright again, and she slammed the door on her way out.

Min twisted her head to look up at him. "I don't think I have ever seen a maid like—Rand, I believe she'd have stabbed you if she had a knife."

"Kick me, maybe," he chuckled, "but never stab. She thinks I am her long-lost brother." Confusion clouded Min's eyes; he could see a hundred questions rising. "It is a long story. I will tell you another time." Part of it, he would. Nobody was ever going to know what he had to put up with from Enaila and Somara and a few others. Well, the Maidens all knew already, but no one else.

Melaine entered in the Aiel way, which was to say she put her head in at the door, looked around, then followed with the rest of her. He had never puzzled out what would make an Aiel decide not to come in. Chiefs, Wise Ones and Maidens had walked in on him in his smallclothes, in his bed, his bath. Coming closer, the sun-haired Wise One settled herself cross-legged on the carpet a few paces in front of him in a clatter of bracelets and arranged her skirts around her with care. Green eyes regarded Min neutrally.

This time Min made no effort to get up. In fact, from the way she was lying against him, head pressed against his chest, breathing slowly, he was not sure she might not be falling asleep. After all, she had said she had reached Caemlyn in the night. Suddenly he became conscious of his hand fitted in the hollow of her waist, and moved it firmly to the arm of the chair. She sighed almost regretfully and snuggled against him. Going to sleep without a doubt.

"I have news," Melaine said, "and I am uncertain which is the most important. Egwene has gone from the tents. She goes to a place called Salidar, where there are Aes Sedai. These are the Aes Sedai who may uphold you. At her asking, we did not speak to you of them before, but now I will tell you they are froward, undisciplined, contentious and full of themselves beyond reason." Her tone was heated toward the end, and her head was thrust forward.

So one of the dreamwalkers in Cairhien had spoken to Melaine in her dreams. That was about all he knew of the dreamwalkers' skills, and while it could have been useful, they were seldom willing to put it at his disposal. What was different was all that about froward and so forth. Most Aiel behaved as if they thought Aes Sedai might strike them, believed they would deserve it if so, and intended to take the blow without flinching. Even Wise Ones spoke of Aes Sedai respectfully if at all. Clearly a few things had changed. All he said, though, was "I know." If Melaine had any intention of telling him why, she would without his asking. If she did not, asking would get no answers. "About Egwene, and Salidar too. There are nine from Salidar in Caemlyn right now. Min here came with them." Min stirred on his chest and murmured something. Lews Therin was grumbling again, just too low to make out, and Rand was glad of the distraction. Min felt . . . good. She would be offended to the sky if she knew. Then again, considering her promise to make him pay, she might laugh. Maybe. She could be quicksilver at times.

Melaine showed no surprise at his knowledge, not even shifting her shawl. Since marrying Bael she seemed to have—"calmed" was not quite the right word; it was much too placid for Melaine—grown less excitable. "That was my second news. You must be wary of them, Rand al'Thor, and use a firm hand. They will respect nothing else." Most definitely a change.

"You will have two daughters," Min murmured. "Twins like mirrors."

If Melaine had been unsurprised before, she made up for it now. Her eyes went wide, and she gave a start that nearly lifted her from the floor. "How could you . . . ?" she began incredulously, then stopped to gather herself. Even so, she went on in a breathless voice. "I myself was uncertain I was with child until this morning. How could you know?"

Min did get up then, giving him a look he knew all too well. It was his fault for some reason. She was not entirely without flaws, if small ones. Fussing with her coat, she looked everywhere except at Melaine, and when her gaze fell on him again, it was a variation of the first look. He had gotten her into this; it was up to him to get her out.

"It is all right, Min," he said. "She's a Wise One, and I expect she knows things that would curl your hair." Except that already was curly. How did women do that, anyway? "I am sure she will promise to keep your secret, and you can trust her promise." Melaine almost stumbled over her tongue promising.

Just the same, Rand received another look before Min sat down beside Melaine. Reproachful, maybe. How *did* she expect him to get her out of it? Melaine would not forget because he asked, but she would keep a promise, and a secret. She had kept enough from him.

For all her reluctance, once Min began she gave a much fuller explanation than she had ever given him at one time, perhaps helped by the other woman's constant questions, and Melaine's changing attitude as well. It was as if Melaine began to feel that Min's ability made her an equal of sorts, not at all a wetlander.

"It is remarkable," Melaine said at last. "Like interpreting the dream without dreaming. Two, you say? Both girls? Bael will be so pleased. Dorindha has given him three sons, but we both know he would like a daughter.” Min blinked and gave her head a hard shake. Of course; she could not know about sister-wives.

From there the two of them passed quickly on to childbirth itself. Neither had ever borne a child, but each had helped midwives.

Rand cleared his throat loudly. It was not that any of the details bothered him. He had helped ewes lamb, mares foal and cows calve. What was irritating was that they sat there with their heads together as though he had ceased to exist. Neither looked around until he cleared his throat again, loud enough that he wondered whether he had strained something.

Melaine leaned closer to Min and spoke in a whisper that could have been heard in the next room. “Men always faint.”

“And always at the worst possible time,” Min agreed in the same tone.

What would they think if they could have seen him in Mat’s father’s barn, blood and birthing fluids to his shoulders and three ribs cracked where he had been kicked because the mare had never foaled before and was frightened? A fine colt that had been, and the mare had not kicked at all the next time.

“Before I faint,” he said wryly, joining them on the carpet, “perhaps one of you would like to say some more about the Aes Sedai?” He would have stood up or sat on the floor before this had his lap not been full. Among the Aiel, only chiefs had chairs, and a chief’s chair was only used for things like pronouncing judgments or receiving the submission of an enemy.

Both women were suitably chastened. Neither said anything, but there was ample shifting of shawl, adjusting of coat and not quite meeting his eye. All that vanished once they got down to talking. Min held tenaciously to her opinion that the Aes Sedai from Salidar meant no harm to Rand and might give aid, suitably handled, which was with all respect in public and in private her reporting to Rand every whisper she overheard. “I’m not being a traitor, you understand, Melaine. I knew Rand before any Aes Sedai except Moiraine, really, and the truth of it is, he took my loyalty long before she died.”

Melaine did not think Min a traitor, quite the contrary, and seemed to think even better of her. Wise Ones did have their own version of the Aiel view of spies. But she argued that with notable exceptions, Aes Sedai could be trusted as far as Shaido, which was to say not until they had been taken captive and made *gai’shain*. She did not exactly suggest captivity for the

Aes Sedai at The Crown of Roses, but she did not miss far. “How can you trust them, Rand al’Thor? I think they have no honor, except for Egwene al’Vere, and she—” Melaine twitched her shawl again. “When an Aes Sedai shows me she has as much honor as Egwene, I will trust her, and not before.”

For his part, Rand listened more than spoke, and saying no more than a dozen or so words, learned a great deal. Answering Melaine’s arguments, Min ran through the embassy name by name, listing what each woman had said about support for Rand, and in truth admitting that all was not exactly rosy. Merana Ambrey and Kairen Stang, a Blue, were both Andoran, and for all that Aes Sedai supposedly forsook all allegiances save the White Tower, perhaps because they were estranged from the Tower, they worried that Rand sat in Caemlyn and might have murdered Morgase. Rafela Cindal, also Blue Ajah, might be pleased with the changes Rand had made in Tear, where once channeling had been outlawed and a girl found able to learn was hurried out of the country, but she said little, and Morgase worried her too. Seonid Traighan, a Green, mulled over every rumor from her native Cairhien and kept her own counsel, and Faeldrin Harella, the second Green sister, sometimes compared Dragonsworn atrocities in Altara and Murandy to what Dragonsworn had done in Tarabon, refusing even to talk about the fact that civil war had ripped her land apart before the first man had sworn to the Dragon there. No matter how Melaine pressed, though, Min insisted that every one of those Aes Sedai acknowledged Rand to be the Dragon Reborn and asked her most carefully, all through the journey from Salidar, what he was like and how he could best be approached without either offending or frightening him.

Rand grunted at that—that they were worried about frightening him—but Melaine began insisting that if most of the women in the embassy had so much reason to be against Rand, then the embassy as a whole surely could not be trusted far enough to fetch dung for the fire. Min spared him an apologetic grimace and rushed on. Arad Doman had seen as much of Dragonsworn as Tarabon, as well as its own civil war, but Demira Eriff, of the Brown Ajah, only talked of two things really: meeting Rand, and the rumor that he had started some sort of school in Cairhien; no man who started a school could be all bad in Demira’s eyes. Berenicia Morsad, a Yellow sister from Shienar, had heard from Shienarans in Salidar that Rand had been received in Fal Dara by the great captain Lord Agelmar Jagad, an honor that seemed to carry considerable weight with her; Lord Agelmar would hardly have received a ruffian, a fool or a scoundrel. It weighed almost as heavily with Masuri Sokawa; she was a Brown, from Arafel, which bordered Shienar. Finally there was Valinde Nathenos, who according to Min showed an eagerness very unlike the White Ajah to have Rand drive Sammael out of Illian; a promise of that, a promise even to try, and Min would not be surprised to see Valinde offer him an oath of fealty. Melaine expressed disbelief, even rolling her eyes; she had never seen an Aes Sedai with that much sense, an attitude Rand found more than surprising considering that she would probably laugh in his face if he asked for such an oath. Min maintained that it was true, though, whatever the other woman said.

“I will show them as much respect as I can without kneeling,” Rand told Min when she finally ran down. For Melaine, he added, “And until they show proof of goodwill, I’ll trust them not one jot.” He thought that should please them both, since each got what she wanted, but from the frowns he received, it pleased neither.

After all that arguing, he half-expected the pair to be at one another’s throats, but it seemed that Melaine’s pregnancy and Min’s viewing had created a bond. When they stood, the women were all smiles and hugs, and Melaine said, “I did not think I would like you, Min, but I do, and I will name one of the girls after you, because you knew of her first. I must go to tell Bael so he will not be jealous that Rand al’Thor knew before him. May you always find water and shade, Min.” To Rand, she added, “Watch these Aes Sedai closely, Rand al’Thor, and give Min your protection when she needs it. They will harm her if they learn she is sworn to you.” Of course, she left with exactly the ceremony with which she had arrived, a nod of the head.

Which left him alone with Min again. Which felt awkward for some reason.

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CHAPTER 42

The Black Tower

Rand and Min stood looking at one another, not moving, until finally he said, “Would you like to come out to the farm with me?”

She gave a little start at the sound of his voice. “The farm?”

“It’s a school, really. For the men who come for the amnesty.”

Min’s face paled. “No, I don’t think. . . . Merana will be waiting to hear from me. And I should let them know your rules as soon as possible. Any one of them could wander into the Inner City without knowing, and you wouldn’t want. . . . I really ought to go.”

He did not understand. Without meeting even one of the students, she was afraid of them, men who could channel, men who wanted to channel. In anyone else it would be understandable, but he could channel, and she was ready to rough his hair and poke his ribs and call him names to his face. “Do you want an escort back to The Crown of Roses? There really are footpads, even by daylight. Not many, but I would not like anything to happen to you.”

Her laugh was a bit unsteady. She truly was upset over the farm. “I took care of myself while you were tending sheep, farmboy.” Abruptly she had a knife in either hand; a flourish, and they went back up her sleeves, not quite so smoothly as they had come out. In a much more sober tone, she said, “You must take care of yourself, Rand. Rest. You look tired.” Startlingly, she went a-tiptoe and stretched her head up to brush his lips with a kiss. “It is good to see you too, sheepherder.” And with another laugh, this one delighted, she slipped out.

Muttering to himself, Rand put his coat back on and went into his bedchamber to fetch his sword from the back of the wardrobe, a dark, rose-carved thing tall enough and wide enough for four men’s clothes. He really was turning into a randy goat. Min was just having her fun. He wondered how long she intended to keep teasing him for one slip of the tongue.

A cloth bag of moderate size, clinking when he lifted it from under his stockings in a drawered chest inlaid with lapis, went into one coat pocket, and a much smaller, velvet bag went in atop his *angreal*. The silversmith who had made the contents of the larger had been more than happy to work for the Dragon Reborn and had tried to refuse payment for the honor of it. The goldsmith who had made the single piece in the other bag had required four times what Bashere said the work was worth, and a pair of Maidens to stand over him until it was done.

This trip to the farm had been in Rand's mind for some time already. He did not like Taim, and Lews Therin would surge around the man, but he could not go on avoiding the place. Especially not now. So far as he knew, Taim had done well at keeping the students out of the city—at least, Rand had heard of no incidents, and he would have—but news of Merana and the embassy would reach the farm eventually, by the supply carts or with new students, and in the way of rumors, nine Aes Sedai would become nine Red sisters, or ninety, hunting men to gentle. Whether the result of that would be students running off in the night or students coming into Caemlyn to strike the first blow, he had to quell it before it began.

Caemlyn held too many rumors of Aes Sedai already as it was, another reason he had planned to go out. Alanna and Verin and the Two Rivers girls had grown into half the Tower, by the word in the streets, and there were plenty of other tales of Aes Sedai sneaking into the city, sneaking through the gates in the night. That story of an Aes Sedai Healing stray cats was so prevalent he could almost believe in her himself, but all Bashere's efforts to track the tale down provided as much substance as the tale that the women who escorted the Dragon Reborn everywhere were really Aes Sedai in disguise.

Unconsciously Rand turned, staring at a wall banded with white reliefs of lions and roses, staring beyond it. Alanna was no longer at Culain's Hound. She was on edge; had she not been Aes Sedai, he would have said her nerves were jagged. Once last night he had wakened, sure she was weeping; the feel had been that strong. Sometimes he almost found himself forgetting she was there—until something like her waking him happened. He supposed you really could grow used to anything. This morning Alanna was . . . eager, as well; eager seemed the best word. He would wager all of Caemlyn that the plumb line from his eyes to her ran straight to The Crown of Roses. He would wager Verin was with her. Not nine Aes Sedai. Eleven.

Lews Therin murmured uneasily. It was the sound of a man wondering whether his back was against a wall. Rand wondered, too. Eleven, and thirteen could take him as easily as scoop up a child. If he gave them the chance. Lews Therin began laughing softly, a hoarse weeping sort of laugh; he had drifted again.

For a moment Rand considered Somara and Enaila, then opened a gateway right there above the blue-and-gold-patterned carpet in his bedchamber. Sullen as they were this morning, one of them was sure to blurt something before the visit to the farm was done, and remembering his previous visits, he did not want the students all looking over their shoulders for fear of twenty or so Maidens. That sort of thing did little for a man's confidence, and they needed confidence if they were to survive.

Taim was right on one point; holding on to *saidin*, a man knew he was alive, and it went beyond heightened senses. Despite the. Dark One's taint, despite the feel of oily offal staining your bones, when the Power was trying to melt you where you stood, freeze you till you shattered, when one misstep or one moment of weakness meant death—Light, you knew you were alive. Still, he pushed the Source away as soon as he was through the gateway, and not only to rid himself of the taint before his stomach emptied itself; it seemed worse than it had been, more vile, if that was possible. His real reason for abandoning the Power was that he did not think he dared face Taim with *saidin* in him and Lews Therin in his head.

The clearing was browner than he remembered, more leaves crackling under his boots and still fewer on the trees. Some of the pines were completely yellow, and a number of leatherleafs stood dead, gray and bare. But if the clearing had changed, the farm was altered almost beyond recognition.

The farmhouse looked in much better repair with its new thatch, and the barn had certainly been rebuilt entirely; it was much larger than before and did not lean at all. Horses filled a large corral beside the barn, and the pens of cows and sheep had been moved farther away. The goats were penned now as well, and neat rows of coops held the chickens. The forest had been cleared back. Over a dozen long white tents made a row beyond the barn, and nearby stood the frames for two buildings much larger than the farmhouse, where a cluster of women sat outside doing their sewing and watching a score of children roll hoops and toss balls and play with dolls. The biggest change was the students, most in close-fitting high-collared black coats and few sweating. There must have been well over a hundred, of all ages. Rand had had no idea Taim's recruiting trips had gone this well. The feel of *saidin* seemed to fill the air. Some men practiced weaves, setting fire to stumps or shattering stones or snaring each other in coils of Air. Others channeled to haul water, the buckets gripped with Air, or to push dung carts from the barn, or stack firewood. Not everyone was channeling. Henre Haslin had a line of bare-chested men under his eye, working the forms with practice swords. With only a fringe of white hair and a bulbous red nose, Haslin sweated more than his students, and doubtless was wishing for his wine, but he watched and corrected as sharply as when he was Master of the Sword for the Queen's Guards. Saeric, a gray-haired Red Water Goshien with no right hand, had two shirtless rows under his stony eyes. One was kicking as high as their heads, pivot and kick, then pivot and kick with the other foot, over and over; the other punched the air in front of them as fast they could. All in all, it was a far cry from the pitiful handful Rand had seen the last time.

A black-coated man just short of his middle years planted himself in front of Rand. He had a sharp nose and a sneering mouth. "And who are you?" he demanded in a Taraboner accent. "I suppose you have come to the Black Tower to learn, yes? You should have waited in Caemlyn for the wagon to bring you. You could have had another day to enjoy that fine coat."

"I am Rand al'Thor," Rand said quietly. Quietly so as not to let out a sudden surge of anger. Civility cost nothing, and if this fool did not decide it was cheap at the price soon. . . .

If anything, the sneer deepened. "So you are him, are you?" He looked Rand up and down insolently. "You do not look so grand to me. I think that I myself could—" A flow of Air solidified just before it clipped him under the ear, and he collapsed in a heap.

"Sometimes we need a hard discipline," Taim said, coming to stand over the man on the ground. His voice was almost jolly, but his dark tilted eyes stared close to murder at the man he had clubbed. "You cannot tell a man he has the power to make the earth shake, then expect him to walk small." The Dragons climbing the sleeves of his black coat glittered in the sunlight; thread-of-gold would do for the one, but what could make the blue shine so? Abruptly he raised his voice. "Kisman! Rochaid! Drag Torval away and douse him until he wakes. No Healing, mind you. Maybe an aching head will teach him to mind his tongue."

Two men in black coats, younger than Rand, came running and bent over Torval, then hesitated, glancing at Taim. After a moment, Rand felt *saidin* fill them; flows of Air lifted a limp Torval, and the pair trotted away with him floating between them.

I should have killed him long ago, Lews Therin panted. *I should have . . . should have. . . .* There was a stretching toward the Source.

No, burn you! Rand thought. *No, you don't! You're only a bloody voice!* With a fading wail Lews Therin fled.

Rand took a slow breath. Taim was looking at him, wearing that almost-smile. "You teach them Healing?"

"The little I know, first thing. Even before how not to sweat to death in this weather. A weapon loses its utility if it's going to be laid up with the first wound. As it is, I have had one kill himself drawing too deeply and three burn themselves out, but no one has died from a sword yet." He managed to put a good deal of contempt into the word "sword."

"I see," Rand said simply. One dead and three burned out. Did Aes Sedai lose that many in the Tower? But then, they went slowly. They could afford to go slowly. "What is this Black Tower the fellow was talking about? I don't like the sound of it, Taim." Lews Therin was mumbling and moaning again, just short of making words.

The hawk-nosed man shrugged, studying the farm and the students with a proprietory pride. "A name the students use. You could not go on calling this just 'the farm.' They certainly did not feel right about it; they wanted something more. The Black Tower to balance the White Tower." He tilted his head, looking at Rand almost sideways. "I can suppress it, if you wish. It is easy enough to take a word from men's lips."

Rand hesitated. Easy enough to take a word from their lips perhaps, but not from their minds. It did have to be called something. He had not thought of that. Why not the Black Tower? Though looking at the farmhouse and the framing—larger, but only wood—the name did make him smile. "Let it stand." Maybe the White Tower had begun as humbly. Not that the Black Tower would ever have time to grow into anything to rival the White. That erased his smile, and he looked at the children sadly. He was playing as much as they, pretending there was a chance of building something that might last. “Assemble the students, Taim. I have a few things to say to them.”

He had come expecting to gather them round him, and then seeing their numbers, maybe to speak from the back of the rickety cart that now seemed to have vanished. Taim had a platform for making addresses, though, a plain block of black stone dressed and polished so finely that it shone like a mirror in the sunlight, with two steps cut into the back. It stood in an open area beyond the farmhouse, the ground beaten bare and flat and hard around it. The women and children gathered to one side to watch and listen.

From the block, Rand had a chance to see clues to how far Taim’s recruiting had ranged. Jahar Narishma, whom Taim had pointed out, the young man with the spark, had dark eyes as big as a girl’s, a pale face filled with confidence, and hair in two long braids with silver bells on the ends. Actually, Taim had said he came from Arafel, but Rand recognized a Shienaran’s shaved head and topknot on another man, and two with the transparent veils often worn by men and women alike in Tarabon. There were tilted eyes from Saldaea and pale, short fellows from Cairhien. One old man had a beard oiled and cut to a point in imitation of a Tairen lord, which he assuredly was not with that creased leathery face, and no fewer than three wore beards that left their upper lips bare. He hoped Taim had not roused Sammael’s interest by recruiting into Illian. He had expected mainly younger men, but fresh faces like Eben’s and Fedwin’s were balanced by gray or balding heads, some even more grizzled than Damer. Now that he thought of it, though, there was no mystery, no reason there should not be as many grandfathers who could be taught as boys.

He did not know how to make speeches, but he had thought long and hard over what he wanted to say. Not the first part, but that was quickest done, with luck. “You’ve all probably heard stories that the Tower . . . the White Tower . . . has divided. Well, it’s true. There are some rebel Aes Sedai who might just decide to follow me, and they’ve sent emissaries. Nine of them, sitting in Caemlyn right now and waiting my pleasure. So when you hear about Aes Sedai in Caemlyn, don’t believe any rumors. You know why they are here, and you can laugh in the face of the fellow with the rumor.”

There was no reaction. They just stood there staring up at him, hardly seeming to blink. Taim looked wry, very wry. Touching the larger bag in his pocket, Rand went on with the part he had labored over.

“You need a name. In the Old Tongue, Aes Sedai means Servants of All, or something very close. The Old Tongue doesn’t translate easily.” For himself, he knew only a few words, some from Asmodean, a handful from Moiraine, some that had seeped through from Lews Therin. Bashere had provided what he needed, though. “Another word in the Old Tongue is *asha’man.* It means guardian, or guardians. Or defender, and maybe a couple of other things; I told you, the Old Tongue is very flexible. Guardian seems to be best, though. Not just any defender or guardian, though. You could not call a man who defended an unjust cause *asha’man*, and never one that was evil. An *asha’man* was a man who defended truth and justice and right for everyone. A guardian who would not yield even when hope was gone.” The Light knew, hope would go when Tarmon Gai’don came, if not before. “That is what you are here to become. When you finish your training, you will be Asha’man.”

Murmurs rustled like leaves in a breeze, the name being repeated, but they died quickly. Attentive faces peered up at him; he could almost see ears pricking for his next words. At least that was a little better than before. The cloth bag gave off a faint clinking as he took it from his coat pocket.

“Aes Sedai begin as novices, then become Accepted, then finally full Aes Sedai. You will have degrees, too, but not like theirs. There will be no putting out or sending away among us.” Send away? Light, he would do everything short of tying them hand and foot to stop anyone who wanted to go if he could channel at all. “When a man first comes to the Black Tower . . .” He did not like that name. “. . . he will be called a soldier, because that is what he becomes when he joins us, what you all became, a soldier to fight the Shadow, and not just the Shadow, but anyone who opposes justice or oppresses the weak. When a soldier reaches a certain stage in his skills, he will be called Dedicated, and wear this.” From the bag he took one of the badges the silversmith had made, a small gleaming silver sword, perfect with its long hilt and slanting quillons and slightly curved blade. “Taim.”

Taim walked to the block stiffly, and Rand bent to pin the silver sword to the tall collar of his coat. It seemed to shine even more brightly against the pitch-black wool. Taim’s face had as much expression as the stone beneath Rand’s boots. Rand handed him the bag, whispering, “Give these to whoever you think is ready. Just be sure they are.”

Straightening, he hoped there were enough; he really had not expected anywhere near so many men. “Dedicated who advance their skill far enough will be called Asha’man, and they will wear this.” Taking out the small velvet bag, he held up what it contained. Sunlight sparkled on finely crafted gold and rich red enamel. A sinuous form exactly like the one on the Dragon banner. That went onto Taim’s collar too, on the other side, so sword and Dragon shone at the sides of his throat. “I suppose I was the first Asha’man,” Rand told the students, “but Mazrim Taim is the second.” Taim’s face made stone look soft; what was wrong with the man? “I hope that all of you will become Asha’man eventually, but whether you do or not, remember that all of us are soldiers. There are many battles ahead, maybe not always the ones we expect, and at the end, the Last Battle. The Light send it is the last. If the Light shines on us, we will win. We will win because we must win.”

There should have been some sort of cheer when he stopped. He did not take himself for the sort of speaker who could make men jump and shout, but these men knew why they were here. Telling them they would win should have produced something, however feeble. There was only silence.

Rand jumped down from the stone block, and Taim snapped, “Disperse to lessons and chores.” The students—the soldiers—went their ways almost as silently as they had stood, with only a murmur of quiet words. Taim motioned toward the farmhouse. He was holding the bag of sword pins so tightly it was a wonder none of them stabbed him through the cloth. “If my Lord Dragon has time for a cup of wine?”

Rand nodded; he wanted to get to the bottom of this before returning to the Palace.

The front room of the farmhouse was just what might be expected, a bare floor swept spotless, mismatched ladder-back chairs arranged in front of a red brick fireplace so clean it seemed impossible it had ever held a fire. A white cloth edged with embroidered flowers covered a small table. Sora Grady entered silently and set a wooden tray atop the cloth, with a bright blue pitcher of wine and two white-glazed mugs. Rand had thought her gaze would not hurt after all this time, but the accusation in her eyes made him glad when she left. She had been sweating, he realized. Taim tossed the bag onto the tray and emptied a mug straight away.

“Don’t you teach the women that trick of concentrating?” Rand asked. “It’s cruel to make them sweat when their men don’t.”

“Most want no part of it,” Taim said curtly. “Their husbands and sweethearts try to teach them, but most refuse even to listen. It might have to do with *saidin*, you see.”

Rand peered into his mug at the dark wine. He had to feel his way here. No blowing up just because irritation prickled. “I’m pleased to see the recruiting going so well. You said you’d match the Tower . . . the White Tower . . .” White Tower; Black Tower. What would the stories make of that? If there were any. “. . . in less than a year, and if you keep on at this rate, you will. I don’t see how you find so many.”

“Sift enough sand,” Taim said stiffly, “and you will find a few grains of gold eventually. I leave that to others now, except for a trip or two. Damer, Grady, there are a dozen men I can trust alone for a day; they have enough years not to do anything stupid, and there are enough younger men with the strength to make a gateway, if not much more, to accompany the older who don’t. You will have your thousand before the year. What of those I send on to Caemlyn? Have you made an army of them yet? You have your thousand there, and times over.”

“I leave that to Bashere,” Rand said quietly. Taim’s mouth quirked derisively, and Rand set his mug down before it could break in his grip. Bashere was making what he could of them, he understood, in a camp somewhere west of the city; what he could considering that they were, as the Saldaean put it, a ragtag collection of penniless farmers, runaway apprentices and failed craftsmen who had never held a sword, ridden a horse with a saddle or been more than five miles from where they were born. Rand had too much to concern him to worry about the likes of that; he had told Bashere to do what he wanted with them and not bother him unless they ran riot.

Looking at Taim, who was making no effort to hide his disdain, he stuck his hands behind his back, where they clenched into fists. Lews Therin rumbled in the distance, an echo of his anger. “What has gotten into you? You’ve had a burr in your breeches ever since I put those badges on you. Is it something to do with them? If so, I don’t understand. Those men will think more of theirs for seeing you receive yours from the Dragon Reborn. For that matter, they’ll think more of you for it. Maybe you won’t have to keep discipline by clubbing men over the head. Well, what have you to say?” That began well enough, in a calm tone if not exactly mild—he had not intended it to be mild—but along the way his voice grew firmer and louder. Not to a shout, yet that final question cracked like a whip.

The most remarkable transformation came over the other man. Taim shook visibly—with rage, Rand would have said, not fear—but when the shaking stopped, he was his old self again. Not friendly certainly, a touch mocking, but very much relaxed and in control of himself. “Since you must know, what worries me are Aes Sedai, and you. Nine Aes Sedai come to Caemlyn, plus two, make eleven. Then there might just be one or two more. I haven’t been able to find them yet, but—”

“I told you to stay out of the city,” Rand said flatly.

“I found a few men to ask questions for me.” Taim’s tone was dry as dust. “I’ve been no closer than here since I saved you from that Gray Man.”

Rand let that pass. Barely. Almost. The voice in his head was too low to be understood, but cold thunder for that. “They’ll catch smoke with their fingers before they catch rumors.” That came out with all the contempt he felt—Taim had *saved* him?—and the man jerked. Outwardly he still appeared at his ease, yet his eyes could have been dark gemstones.

“And if they join with the Red Aes Sedai?” His voice was cool and amused, but his eyes glittered. “There are Red sisters in the countryside. Several parties of them, arrived in the last few days. Trying to intercept men coming here.”

I will kill him, Lews Therin shouted, and Rand felt that fumbling reach toward *saidin*.

Go away, he said firmly. The fumbling continued, and so did the voice.

I will kill him,and then them. They must serve him. It is plain; they must serve him.

Go away, Rand shouted back silently. *You are nothing but a voice!* Stretching toward the Source.

Oh, Light, I killed them all. All that I loved. If I kill him, it will be well, though. I can make it up, if I kill him finally. No, nothing can make up, but I must kill him anyway. Kill them all. I must. I must.

No! Rand screamed inside his head. *You’re dead, Lews Therin. I am alive, burn you, and you are dead! You are dead!*

Abruptly he realized he was leaning on the table, holding himself up with sagging knees. And muttering, “You are dead! I am alive, and you are dead!” But he had not seized *saidin.* And neither had Lews Therin.

Shivering, he looked at Taim and was surprised to see concern on the man's face.

"You must hold on," Taim said softly. "If sanity can be held, you must. The price is too high, if you fail."

"I won't fail," Rand said, pushing himself upright. Lews Therin was silent. There seemed to be nothing in his head but himself. And the feel of Alanna, of course. "Have these Reds taken anyone?"

"Not that I have heard." Taim was watching him cautiously, as if he expected another outburst. "Most of the students come through gateways now, and with all the people on the roads, it cannot be easy to pick out a man heading here unless he talks too freely." He paused, "They could be disposed of easily enough in any case."

"No." Was Lews Therin really gone? He wished it, and knew he would be a fool to believe. "If they start taking men, I'll have to do something, but as it is, they're no threat out in the country. And believe me, nobody Elaida sends is likely to join those Aes Sedai in the city. Either lot would probably welcome you before they did each other."

"What about those who are not in the countryside? Eleven of them? A few accidents could reduce that to a much safer number. If you don't want to soil your own hands, I am willing to—"

"No! How many times do I have to say, no! If I feel a man channel in Caemlyn, I will come for you, Taim. I swear I will. And don't think you can stay far enough from the Palace that I won't feel it and be safe. If one of those Aes Sedai keels over dead for no reason, I will know who to blame. Mark me!"

"You set wide boundaries," Taim said dryly. "If Sammael or Demandred decides to taunt you with a few dead Aes Sedai on your doorstep, my veins are opened?"

"They haven't so far, and you had better hope they do not start. Mark me, I say."

"I hear my Lord Dragon and obey, of course." The hawk-nosed man bowed slightly. "But I still say eleven is a dangerous number."

Rand laughed in spite of himself. "Taim, I intend to teach them to dance to my flute." Light, how long since he had played the flute? Where *was* his flute? Faintly, he heard Lews Therin chuckling.

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CHAPTER 43

The Crown of Roses

Merana’s hired coach swayed its slow way through the densely packed streets toward The Crown of Roses. Outwardly she was calm, at least, a dark-haired woman with cool hazel eyes, slim-fingered hands folded peacefully on her pale gray silk skirts. Inside, she was not so serene. Thirty-eight years ago she had been in place by chance to negotiate a treaty between Arad Doman and Tarabon that was supposed to put an end to the squabbling over Almoth Plain, with Domani and Taraboners dodging at every turn and three times nearly starting a war in the middle of the exchanges and all the while maintaining smiling faces of utter goodwill. By the time the signatures were dry, she felt as if she had been rolled over rough hills in a barrel full of splinters, and after all that, the treaty turned out to be worth considerably less than the wax and ribbons for its seals. She hoped what she had begun this afternoon at the Royal Palace ended better—it had to—but inside, she felt as though she had just climbed out of another barrel.

Min was sitting back with her eyes closed; the young woman seemed to take catnaps any time an Aes Sedai was not actually speaking to her. The other two sisters in the coach occasionally shot quick glances at the girl. Seonid, cool and reserved in her brocaded green. Masuri, slim and merry-eyed in brown embroidered with flowering vines around the hem. They had all dressed formally, in shawls and Ajah colors.

Merana was sure they had the same thought as herself when they looked at Min. Seonid should certainly understand, though who could be certain? Seonid was very methodical and practical about her Warders, almost like a woman with a pair of prize wolfhounds she felt some affection for. Masuri might understand. She did like to dance and even flirt, though she was liable to forget the poor man when she heard a rumor of an old manuscript hidden away. Merana herself had not been in love since well before that Fifth Treaty of Falme, but she did remember, and all it had taken was one glimpse of Min staring at al'Thor to see a woman who had tossed sense out the window and was riding her heart at a gallop.

Not proof that Min had ignored all their cautions, broken her promise and told al'Thor everything, but he knew about Salidar. He knew Elayne was there, and had been amused—amused!—at their evasions. Aside from whether Min had broken confidence—care would have to be used in what was said around her from now on in any case—it was frightening when taken with everything else. Merana was not used to being frightened. She had been, often, in the year after Basan died—she had never bonded another Warder, at least partly because she did not want to go through that again; and also partly because she was simply too busy to search out the right man—but that was the last time she had known anything more than apprehension, before the Aiel War. Now she felt fear, and she did not like it. Everything could still go well, nothing truly disastrous had happened, but al'Thor himself turned her knees to water.

The hired coach rocked to a stop in the stableyard of The Crown of Roses, stablemen in vests worked with roses rushing out to take bridles and open doors.

The common room suited the three stories of finely dressed white stone, all dark polished panels with tall fireplaces faced in white marble. One mantelpiece held a wide clock, with chimes for the hours and a few lines of gilding. The serving women wore blue dresses and white aprons embroidered with a ring of roses; they were all smiling, polite, efficient, and those not pretty were handsome. The Crown of Roses was a favorite of nobles in from the country who had no mansions of their own in Caemlyn, but now the tables held only Warders. And Alanna and Verin, seated at the rear; had Merana had her wishes, they would have been waiting in the kitchens with the servants. The rest of the sisters were all out. There was no time to waste.

"If you don't mind," Min said, "I would like to walk around. I'd like to see some of Caemlyn before dark."

Merana gave her assent and, as the young woman darted back outside, exchanged looks with Seonid and Masuri, wondering how long it would take Min to return to the Palace.

Mistress Cinchonine appeared at once, as round as any innkeeper Merana had ever seen, bobbing bows and dry-washing her pink hands. “Is there anything I can do for you, Aes Sedai? Anything I can fetch?” She had accommodated Merana often, and well, both before and after learning she was Aes Sedai.

“Berry tea,” Merana told her, smiling. “In the private sitting room upstairs.” The smile went as the innkeeper scurried away calling for one of the serving women. Merana motioned sharply for Alanna and Verin to join her on the stairs, and the five of them climbed in silence.

The sitting-room windows gave a good view of the street for those who wished it, which Merana did not particularly. She pulled in the windows that were open, to shut out some of the noise, and turned her back on them. Seonid and Masuri had taken chairs. Alanna and Verin remained standing, between the other two. Verin’s dark wool dress had an air of being rumpled, though it was not, and she had an inkstain on the tip of her nose, but her eyes were birdlike, sharp and watchful. Alanna’s eyes shone too, but very likely with anger, and now and then her hands quivered slightly, gripping the skirts of her yellow-bodiced blue silk dress; it looked as if she had slept in it. There was some excuse for her, of course. Some, but not enough.

“I do not know yet, Alanna,” Merana said firmly, “whether your actions have had any adverse effect. He did not bring up your bonding him —against his will—but he was sharp, very sharp, and—”

“Has he set further restrictions?” Verin broke in, tilting her head slightly. “All seems to be going well, to me. He did not fly away at news of you. He has received three; in some courtesy, at least, or you would be at thunderheads. He is a little frightened of us, which is to the good, or he would not have set limits, but unless he has set more, we still have as much freedom as before, so he is not terrified. Above all, we must not frighten him too far.”

The difficulty was that Verin and Alanna were not part of Merana’s delegation; she had no authority over them. They had heard the news of Logain and the Reds and agreed that Elaida could not be allowed to remain in the Amyrlin Seat, yet that meant nothing. Of course, Alanna was not really a problem, only potentially. She and Merana were so close in strength that the only way to say which had the greater would be an actual contest, the sort of thing novices did until they were caught. Alanna had been six years a novice, Merana only five, but more importantly, Merana had been Aes Sedai above thirty years the day the midwife laid Alanna at her mother's breast. That took care of that. Merana had precedence. No one actually thought in those terms unless something made them, but they both knew and adjusted automatically. Not that Alanna would take orders, yet instinctive deference would surely keep her in hand to some degree. That, and knowing what she had done.

Verin was the problem, the one who had Merana thinking of strengths and precedence. Merana let herself sense the other woman's strength in the Power again, though of course she knew what she would find. No way to tell which of them was stronger. Five years as novice for each, six as Accepted; that was one thing every Aes Sedai knew about every other if she knew nothing else. The difference was that Verin was older, maybe almost as much older than she as she was older than Alanna. The touch of gray in Verin's hair emphasized it. Had Verin been part of the embassy, there would have been no difficulty at all, but she was not, and Merana found herself listening attentively, deferring without thinking. Twice in the morning she had had to remind herself that Verin was not in charge. The only thing that made the situation tolerable was that Verin must feel she shared some of Alanna's guilt. Without that she surely would have been in a chair as soon as anyone else, not standing beside Alanna. If only there were some way to make her remain at Culain's Hound day and night to watch over that wonderful treasure of girls from the Two Rivers.

Seating herself so she, Seonid and Masuri surrounded the pair, Merana adjusted her skirts and shawl carefully. There was some moral ascendancy in being seated while the others remained standing. To her, what Alanna had done was little short of rape. "In fact, he has placed another restriction. It is all very well that you two have located his *school*, but now I strongly suggest you abandon whatever thoughts you may have had in that direction. He has . . . charged us . . . to stay away from his . . . men." She could see him still, leaning forward in that monstrosity of a throne with the Lion Throne on exhibit behind him and a carved piece of spear in his fist; no doubt an Aiel custom, that.

"Hear me, Merana Sedai," he said, quite pleasantly and quite firmly. "I want no trouble between Aes Sedai and Asha'man. I have told the soldiers to stay clear of you, but I do not mean them to be Aes Sedai meat. If

you go hunting at the Black Tower, you may be dinner yourself. We both want to avoid that."

Merana had been Aes Sedai long enough not to shiver every time a goose walked over her grave, but it was close this time. Asha'man. The Black Tower. Mazrim Taim! How could it have gone so far? Yet Alanna was certain there were over a hundred men, though she gave no details of how she knew, of course; no sister willingly exposed her eyes-and-ears. It did not matter. "If you pursue two hares, both will escape you," the old saying went, and al'Thor was the most important hare in the world. The others had to wait.

"Is he . . . ? Is he still here, or has he gone?" Verin and Alanna seemed to take it very calmly that al'Thor apparently could Travel; it still made Merana a trifle queasy. What else had he taught himself that Aes Sedai had forgotten? "Alanna? Alanna!"

The slender Green sister jerked, pulling herself back from wherever her mind had been. She seemed to drift quite often. "He is in the city. In the Palace, I think." She still sounded a little dreamy. "It was. . . . He has a wound in his side. An old wound, yet only half-healed. Every time I let myself dwell on it, I want to weep. How can he live with it?"

Seonid gave her a sharp look; any woman who had a Warder had felt his injuries. But she knew what Alanna was going through, having lost Owein, and when she spoke, her voice was almost gentle and only a little brisk. "Why, Teryl and Furen have taken wounds that almost made me faint, even feeling them as softly as we do, and they never slowed a step. Not one step."

"I think," Masuri said quietly, "we are going afield." She always spoke quietly, but unlike many Browns, always to the point.

Merana nodded. "Yes. I considered taking Moiraine's place with him. . . ."

A rap at the door announced a white-aproned woman with the tea tray. A silver teapot and porcelain cups; The Crown and Rose was used to the nobility. By the time the tray was settled and the serving woman gone, Alanna was no longer dreamy. Her dark eyes flashed with all the fire Merana had ever seen in them. Greens particularly were jealous of their Warders, and al'Thor belonged to her now, however she had bonded him. Deference went down the well when it came to that. Straight as a blade she stood, just waiting for Merana's next words to see whether to slash and cut.

Still, Merana waited until the blueberry tea was poured and everyone back in her chair. She even told Verin and Alanna to sit. The fool woman deserved a little upset, even atop Owein. Maybe it was not short of rape at all.

“I considered it,” she went on at last, “and rejected it. I might have done so if you had not done what you did, Alanna, but he is so suspicious of Aes Sedai now that he might well laugh in my face if I suggested it.”

“He is as arrogant as any king,” Seonid said curtly.

“Everything Elayne and Nynaeve said and more,” Masuri added, shaking her head. “Claiming that he knows when a woman channels. I almost embraced *saidar* to show him he was mistaken, but of course, whatever I did to show him might have alarmed him too much.”

“All those Aiel.” Seonid’s voice was tight; she *was* Cairhienin. “Men *and* women. I think they would have tried to spear us if we blinked too quickly. One, a sun-haired woman who was at least wearing skirts, made no effort at all to hide her dislike.”

At times, Merana thought, Seonid did not fully realize that al’Thor himself might be a danger.

Alanna unconsciously began chewing her underlip like a girl. It was good she had Verin to take care of her; she was not fit to be out alone in her state. Verin merely sipped her tea and watched; Verin’s eyes could be most disconcerting.

Merana found herself relenting. She remembered too well the fragile bundle of nerves she had been after Baran. “Fortunately, it seems there may be a good side to his suspicion. He has received emissaries from Elaida, in Cairhien. He was quite open about it. Suspicion will make him keep them at a long arm’s length, I believe.”

Seonid rested her cup in its saucer. “He thinks to play us one against the other.”

“And he might still,” Masuri said dryly, “except that we know more of him than Elaida possibly can. I think she must have sent her envoys to meet a shepherd, if a shepherd in a silk coat. Whatever he is, he is no longer that. Moiraine taught him well, it seems.”

“We were forearmed,” Merana said. “I think it unlikely they were.”

Alanna stared at them, blinking. “Then I have not ruined everything?” They all three nodded, and she took a deep breath, then smoothed at her skirts with a frown as if just noticing the wrinkles. “I may yet be able to make him accept me." The wrinkles were abandoned, and her face and voice became calmer and more confident by the word. "As for his amnesty, we may have to hold any plans in abeyance, but that doesn't mean we should not make them. That sort of danger cannot be ignored."

For a moment Merana regretted her relenting. The woman had done that to a man and all that truly worried her was whether it damaged their chances of success. Reluctantly, though, she admitted that had it made al'Thor biddable, she would have held her nose, and her tongue. "First we must bring al'Thor to heel, so to speak. The abeyance will last as long as it must, Alanna." Alanna's mouth tightened, but after a moment she nodded in acquiescence. Or at least assent.

"And how is he to be brought to heel?" Verin asked. "He must be handled delicately. A wolf on a leash one thread thick."

Merana hesitated. She had not meant to share everything with this pair, who had only the most tenuous allegiance to the Hall in Salidar. She dreaded what would happen if Verin tried to take over here, if in fact she did manage to take over. She herself knew how to handle this; she had been chosen because of a lifetime spent mediating sensitive disputes, negotiating treaties where the hatreds seemed implacable. That agreements were broken eventually and treaties violated was the nature of humanity, yet in eighty years, the Fifth Treaty of Falme was her only real failure. She knew all of that, but all of those years had ingrained some instincts deeply. "We are approaching certain nobles, who by good luck are all in Caemlyn now. . . ."

"My worry is Elayne," Dyelin said firmly. The more firmly for being alone in the sitting room with an Aes Sedai; Aes Sedai could press hard if you weakened when you were alone. Especially when no one else knew you were alone with her.

Kairen Sedai smiled, but neither smile nor cool blue eyes gave away anything. "It is quite possible the Daughter-Heir will yet be found to sit on the Lion Throne. What may seem insurmountable to others is seldom so to Aes Sedai."

"The Dragon Reborn says—"

"Men say many things, Lady Dyelin, but you know I do not lie."

Luan patted the Tairen stallion's gray neck, looking both ways in case one of the grooms came into the stables, and barely dodged a bite from wicked teeth. Rafela’s Warder would give warning, but Luan was not sure he trusted anyone of late. Especially not with a visit of this sort. “I am not sure I understand,” he said curtly.

“Unity is better than division,” Rafela said, “peace better than war, patience better than death.” Luan’s head jerked at the odd end to the platitudes, and the round-faced Aes Sedai smiled. “Will Andor not be better off if Rand al’Thor leaves the land in peace and unity, Lord Luan?”

Holding her robe shut, Ellorien stared at the Aes Sedai who had managed to reach her in her bath without being announced, possibly without being seen. The coppery-skinned woman looked back from the stool on the other side of the marble tub full of water as though this were all natural and ordinary. “Who,” Ellorien asked finally, “would have the Lion Throne then, Demira Sedai?”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills” was the reply, and Ellorien knew she would get no other.

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CHAPTER 44

The Color of Trust

Once Vanin was gone to tell the Band to sit tight, Mat found that not an inn remained in Salidar but was taken over by Aes Sedai, and the five stables were all full to bursting. Yet when he slipped a little silver to a narrow-jawed stableman, the fellow had the sacks of oats and bales of hay shifted from a stone-walled yard that was fine for six horses. He also showed Mat and the remaining four men of the Band places to sleep in the loft, which was little cooler than anywhere else.

“Ask for nothing,” Mat told his men as he divided the rest of his coins among them. “Pay for everything, and accept no gifts. The Band isn’t going to be beholden to anybody here.”

His false air of confidence communicated itself to them, and they did not even hesitate when he ordered them to fix the banners out the loft door so they hung down in front of the stable, crimson and white, the black-and-white disc and the Dragon plain to everybody. On the other hand, the stableman’s eyes bulged, and they almost danced as they demanded to know what Mat was doing.

He only grinned and tossed the narrow-jawed fellow a gold mark. “Just letting everybody know for sure who’s come to call.” He wanted Egwene to realize he was not going to be pushed around, and sometimes making people see that meant you had to act like jack-fool.

The trouble was, the banners had no effect. Oh, everybody who walked by gaped and pointed; a number of Aes Sedai came just to look, cool-eyed and expressionless, but he more than half expected an indignant demand to take them down, and that never materialized. When he returned to the Little Tower, an Aes Sedai who somehow managed to be prune-faced despite smooth ageless cheeks shifted her brown-fringed shawl and told him in no uncertain terms that the Amyrlin Seat was busy; perhaps she could see him in a day or two. Perhaps. Elayne appeared to have vanished, and so did Aviendha, but no one was crying murder yet; he suspected the Aiel might be somewhere having a white dress pulled over her head. All the same to him if it kept the peace; he did not want to be the one to tell Rand one had killed the other. He did catch a sight of Nynaeve, but she ducked around a corner and was gone by the time he reached it.

He spent most of the afternoon looking for Thom and Juilin; either one surely could tell him more of what was going on, and besides, he needed to apologize to Thom for his remarks about that letter. Unfortunately nobody seemed to know where they were either. Long before nightfall he concluded that they were being kept out of his way. Egwene really did mean for him to stew, but he intended to let her know he was not even simmering. In aid of that, he went dancing.

It seemed that celebrations over a new Amyrlin were supposed to go on for a month, and though everyone in Salidar seemed to be working at a run during the day, once darkness fell bonfires were lit at every street crossing, and fiddles and flutes appeared and even a dulcimer or two. Music and laughter filled the air, and festival reigned until bedtime. He saw Aes Sedai dancing in the streets with carters and stablemen still in their rough clothes, and Warders dancing with serving women and cooks who had put aside their aprons. No Egwene, though; the Amyrlin bloody Seat was not going to caper in the streets. No Elayne or Nynaeve, either, and no Thom or Juilin. Thom would not have missed a dance with both legs broken unless he was deliberately kept away. Mat settled down to enjoy himself, to let everybody see he had not a care in the world. It did not work exactly as he wished.

He danced a short time with the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life, a slim yet buxom armful who wanted to know all about Mat Cauthon. Very flattering, especially when she had asked him to step out. But after a while he noticed that Halima had a way of brushing against him, a way of leaning to look at something so he could not help seeing down her dress. He might have enjoyed it, if not for the fact that she glanced at his face every time with a sharp eye and an amused smile. She was not a very good dancer—she kept trying to lead, for one thing—and he finally begged off.

It should have been nothing, but before he had gone ten paces the fox head went icy cold on his chest. He spun around, looking furiously for anything at all. What he saw was Halima staring at him in the firelight. Only for an instant before she seized a tall Warder's arm and whirled back into the dance, but he was sure he had seen shock on that beautiful face.

The fiddles were wailing a tune he recognized. At least, one of his old memories did, not very much changed considering the passage of well over a thousand years. The words must have changed altogether, for the old words that echoed in his head would never have found favor here.

Give me your trust, said the Aes Sedai.
On my shoulders I support the sky.
Trust me to know and to do what is best,
And I will take care of the rest.
But trust is the color of a dark seed growing.
Trust is the color of a heart's blood flowing.
Trust is the color of a soul's last breath.
Trust is the color of death.

"Aes Sedai?" a plump young woman said contemptuously to his question. She was pretty, and he might have tried for a bit of kiss and cuddle in different circumstances. "Halima's just Delana Sedai's secretary. Always teasing the men, she is. Like a child with a new toy; teasing just to see if she can. She'd be in hot water to her neck ten times over if Delana didn't protect her."

Give me your trust, said the queen on her throne,
for I must bear the burden all alone.
Trust me to lead and to judge and to rule,
and no man will think you a fool.
But trust is the sound of the grave-dog's bark.
Trust is the sound of betrayal in the dark.
Trust is, the sound of a soul's last breath.
Trust is the sound of death.

Maybe he had been mistaken. Maybe she had just been shocked that he walked off. Not many men would walk away from a woman who looked like that, no matter how she teased or danced. That had to be it. But that left the question of who and why. He looked around, at the dancers, and the people watching from the edge of the shadows and waiting their turns. The golden-haired Hunter for the Horn who had seemed familiar went spinning by with a particularly lumpy-faced fellow, her braid almost standing out behind her. Mat could pick out Aes Sedai by their faces—most of them he could—but there was no way to tell which had tried to . . . whatever it was she had tried.

He strode on down the street to the next bonfire as much to get away from that song as anything, before it went on through “the king on high” and “the lady and lord” to “the love of your life” in his head. In that old memory he remembered writing that song, because of the love of his life. *Trust is the taste of death.* At that next corner a fiddler and a woman with a flute were playing what sounded like “Fluff the Feathers,” a good country dance.

How far could he trust Egwene? She was Aes Sedai now; she must be, if she was Amyrlin, even a ragtag Amyrlin in a ragtag village. Well, whatever she was, she was Egwene; he could not believe she would strike at him out of the dark that way. Of course, Nynaeve might, though not to injure him really. His hip still hurt, though; the bruise had made a knot. And the Light only knew what a woman like Elayne might do. They were still trying to chase him away, he decided. He could probably expect more attempts. The best thing was to ignore them; he almost hoped they did try again. They could not touch him with the Power, and the more they tried and failed, why, the more they would have to see he was not to be budged.

Myrelle came to stand beside him, watching the dancers. He remembered her, vaguely. He did not think she knew anything dangerous about him. He did not think so. She was not as beautiful as Halima, of course, but still much more than merely pretty. Flickering shadows washed her face so he could almost forget she was Aes Sedai.

“A warm night,” she said, smiling, and went on in such a casual way while he enjoyed looking at her that it took him some time to realize what she was getting at.

“I don’t think so,” he said politely when she gave an opening. This was what came of forgetting; Aes Sedai were Aes Sedai.

She only smiled. “There would be many advantages, and I would not try to pin you to my skirts. Many advantages. You’ve chosen a perilous life, or had it chosen for you. A Warder might have a better chance of survival.”

“I really don’t think so. No, but thank you for the offer.”

“Think on it, Mat. Unless. . . . Has the Amyrlin bonded you?”

"No." Egwene would not do that. Would she? She could not so long as he wore the medallion, but would she if he did not have it? "If you will excuse me?" He gave her a shallow bow and walked quickly to where a pretty, blue-eyed young woman was tapping her foot to the music. She had a sweet mouth, just right for kissing, and he bloody well wanted to enjoy himself. "I saw your eyes, and I couldn't help coming over. Will you dance?"

Too late he saw the Great Serpent ring on her right hand, and then that sweet mouth opened and a voice he recognized said dryly, "I asked you once whether you'd be there when the house was burning down, boy, but it seems you make a habit of jumping into fires. Now go away and find somebody who wants to dance with you."

Siuan Sanche! She was stilled and dead! She was glaring at him with some young woman's face she had stolen, was what she was, and wearing an Aes Sedai ring! He had asked *Siuan Sanche* to dance!

While he was still staring, a willowy young Domani woman swirled up in a pale green dress thin enough for the light of the bonfire to silhouette her through it. Giving Siuan a frosty look that was returned with interest, the Domani all but snatched him out among the dancers. She was as tall as an Aiel woman, dark eyes actually a little higher than his. "I am Leane, by the way," she said in a voice like a honeyed caress, "in case you did not recognize me." Her low laugh was almost a caress too.

He jumped and nearly fumbled the first turn. She also wore the ring. He moved by rote. Tall or not, she was a feather in his hands, a gliding swan, but that was certainly not enough to stop the question that kept popping in his head like an Illuminator's fireworks. How? How under the Light? To top it all, when the dance was done, she said, "You are a very good dancer," in that stroking voice, and then kissed him about as thoroughly as he had ever been kissed. He was so shocked he did not even try to get away. Sighing, she patted his cheek. "A very good dancer. Think of it as dancing next time, and you will do better." And off she went laughing, back into the dance with some fellow she snagged from the onlookers.

Mat decided he had had as much as one man could take in a night. He went back to the stable and went to sleep, with his saddle for a pillow. His dreams would have been pleasant, except that they all involved Myrelle and

Siuan and Leane and Halima. When it came to dreams, a man just naturally lacked the sense to pour water out of a boot.

The next day had to be better, he thought, especially when dawn found Vanin in the loft, asleep on his saddle. Talmanes understood and would hold where he was; Warders had been seen watching the Band's preparations, no doubt letting themselves be seen, but no one had come near the Band. A less pleasant surprise was finding Olver's gray in the yard behind the stable, and Olver himself curled up in his blankets in a corner.

"You need somebody to watch your back," he told Mat darkly. "She cannot be trusted." There was no need for him to name Aviendha.

Olver had no interest in playing with the children in the village, so Mat had to endure the stares and smiles as the boy trailed him around Salidar, doing his best to imitate a Warder's flowing stride and looking nine ways at once for Aviendha. Who was still nowhere to be seen, any more than Elayne or Nynaeve. And "the Amyrlin" was still busy. Thom and Juilin were also "busy." Vanin managed to hear a few things, but nothing that made Mat happy. If Nynaeve had really Healed Siuan and Leane, she would be worse than ever; she had always had a large opinion of herself, and after doing what could not be done, her head would be bigger than a dewmelon. Yet that was the mildest of it. Logain and the Red Ajah made Mat wince. That sounded the sort of thing no Aes Sedai would forgive. If Gareth Bryne was leading their army, it was no mob of farmers and street sweepings with a few Warders for stiffening. Add in the foodstuffs Vanin saw being wrapped or stuck in barrels for travel, and it sounded like trouble. The worst kind of trouble Mat could imagine, short of finding one of the Forsaken across the table from him and a dozen Trollocs coming in the door. None of it made them any less fools; it made them very dangerous fools. Thom and his "help them make it work." If the gleeman ever came out of hiding, maybe he could pull a "how" out of one of his tales.

In the evening Myrelle spoke to him again about becoming a Warder, and went a little tight around the eyes when he told her hers would be the fifth offer he had refused since sunup. He was not sure she believed him; she flounced off in as much of a huff as he had ever seen from an Aes Sedai. It was true, though. The very first, while he was still trying to eat breakfast, had been the very Delana that Halima worked for, a stout pale-haired woman with watery blue eyes who came close to trying to bully him into it. That night he stayed away from the dancing and went to sleep with music and laughter in his ears; they sounded sour this time.

It was midafternoon of his second full day in Salidar when a girl in a white dress, pretty and freckled and working very hard at an icy dignity that she almost reached, found him with a summons, and it was exactly that. "You will present yourself before the Amyrlin Seat at once." Full stop, and not another word. Mat motioned her to lead; it seemed proper, and she seemed to like doing it.

They were all there in that room in the Little Tower, Egwene and Nynaeve, Elayne and Aviendha, though he had to look twice to recognize the Aiel woman in a blue dress of fine wool with a lace collar and cuffs. At least neither Aviendha nor Elayne was trying to strangle the other, but they were both stony-faced. Which made them no different from Egwene and Nynaeve. Not a flicker of expression in the four, and all eyes on him. He managed to hold his tongue while Egwene laid out his choices as she saw them, sitting behind the table with that striped stole draped on her shoulders.

"Should you think you can do neither," she finished, "remember that I can have you tied to your horse and returned to your Band of the Hand. There is no room in Salidar for slackers and malingerers. I will not allow it. For you, Mat, it's either Ebou Dar with Elayne and Nynaeve, or off to see who you can impress with flags and banners."

Which really left no choice at all, of course. When he said so, nobody's expression changed. If anything, Nynaeve grew more wooden. And Egwene just said, "I'm glad that is done, Mat. Now, I have a thousand things to do. I will try to see you before you go." Dismissed like a stableboy; the Amyrlin was busy. The least she could have done was toss him a copper.

That was why Mat's third morning in Salidar found him just outside it, on the cleared ground between village and forest. "They may stay right here till I get back," he told Talmanes, glancing over his shoulder toward the houses. They would be coming soon, and he did not want any of this getting back to Egwene. She would try to drive a spike through it if she could. "I hope so, anyway. If they move, follow wherever they go, but never close enough to frighten. And if a young woman named Egwene shows up, you ask no questions, just take her and ride to Caemlyn if you have to cut a hole through Gareth Bryne." Of course, they might be intending to go to Caemlyn; there might be a chance. He was afraid it was Tar Valon they were aiming at, though; Tar Valon and the headsman's axe. "And take Nerim with you."

Talmanes shook his head. "If you are taking Nalesean, I will be offended if you do not let me send my man to care for your things." Mat wished Talmanes would smile once in a while; it would help to know when he was serious. He certainly sounded serious.

Nerim stood a little distance off, with Pips, and his own short plump brown mare towering over him, and two packhorses with wicker panniers stuffed to the top. Nalesean's man, a stout fellow named Lopin, only led one pack animal in addition to his hammer-nosed gelding and Nalesean's tall black stallion.

That was not all the party. No one seemed ready to tell him more than where to be and when, but in the middle of yet another talk about becoming a Warder, Myrelle had let him know it was now all right for him to communicate with the Band so long as he did not try to bring them nearer Salidar. That had been the last thing in his mind. Vanin was there this morning because he could probably spy out the lay of the land anywhere, and a dozen cavalrymen chosen from the Band for heavy shoulders and having kept order well as Redarms back in Maerone. From what Nalesean said, quick fists and cudgels should be able to quell any inconvenience Nynaeve and Elayne got into, at least long enough to spirit them away. Last of all was Olver on the gray he had named Wind, which the leggy animal might even deserve. Olver had been no hard choice. The Band might well find trouble if they actually had to follow that lot of madwomen. Maybe not trouble with Bryne, but enough nobles would bristle at two armies crossing their lands to provide nightly attempts at the horses and arrows flying from every second thicket. Any city had to be safer than that for a boy.

Still no sign of any Aes Sedai, and the sun beginning to bake above the treetops.

Mat jerked his hat down irritably. "Nalesean knows Ebou Dar, Talmanes." The Tairen grinned through his sweat and nodded. Talmanes' face did not change. "Oh, all right. Nerim comes." Talmanes inclined his head; maybe he had been serious.

At last there was a stir in the village, a group of women leading horses. Not just Elayne and Nynaeve, though he had not expected anyone else. Aviendha wore a gray riding dress, but she looked at her lean dun mare more than doubtfully. That Hunter with the golden braid showed more confidence with a heavy-haunched mouse-colored gelding and seemed to be trying to convince Aviendha of something about her mare. What was either of them doing there? There were two Aes Sedai, as well—other Aes Sedai besides Nynaeve and Elayne, he supposed he should say—slender women with white hair, which he had not seen on an Aes Sedai before. An old fellow trailed after them with a packhorse in addition to his own mount, a stringy man without much hair and that gray. It took Mat a moment to realize he was a Warder, with one of those color-shifting cloaks hanging down his back. That was what being a Warder meant; Aes Sedai worked you till your hair fell out, then probably worked your bones after you were dead.

Thom and Juilin came not far behind, and they had a packhorse too. The women stopped some fifty paces to the left with their aged Warder, not so much as looking at Mat and his men. The gleeman glanced at Nynaeve and the others, then spoke to Juilin, and they led their horses toward Mat, stopping short as if uncertain of their welcome. Mat went to them.

"I have to apologize, Mat," Thom said, knuckling his mustaches. "Elayne put it in no uncertain terms that I wasn't to talk with you further. She only relented this morning. In a weak moment some months back I promised to follow her orders, and she flings it in my face at the most awkward times. She wasn't very pleased that I had said as much as I did."

"Nynaeve threatened to punch my eye if I went near you," Juilin said glumly, leaning on his bamboo staff. He was wearing a red Taraboner cap that could not give much protection from the sun, and even that looked glum.

Mat looked toward the women. Nynaeve was peeking at him over her saddle, but when she saw him looking, she ducked behind her horse, a plump brown mare. He would not have thought even Nynaeve could beat Juilin down, but the dark thief-taker was a far cry from the man he had known briefly in Tear. That Juilin had been ready for anything; this Juilin, with a permanently furrowed brow, looked as if he never stopped worrying. "We will teach her some manners this trip, Juilin. Thom, I'm the one who has to apologize. What I said about the letter. It was the heat talking, and worry over fool women. I hope it was good news." Too late he remembered what Thom had said. He had left the woman who wrote that letter to die.

But Thom only shrugged. Mat did not know what to make of him without his gleeman's cloak. "Good news? I haven't puzzled that out yet.

Often you don’t know whether a woman is friend, enemy or lover until it is too late. Sometimes, she is all three.” Mat expected a laugh, but Thom frowned and sighed. “Women always seem to like making themselves mysterious, Mat. I can give you an example. Do you remember Aludra?”

Mat had to think. “The Illuminator we kept from getting her throat slit in Aringill?”

“The very one. Juilin and I met her during our travels, and she didn’t know me. Not that she failed to recognize me; you say things to a stranger you travel with, to get to know them. Aludra did not want to know me, and even if I didn’t know why, I saw no reason to impose. I met her a stranger and left her a stranger. Now, would you call her a friend or an enemy?”

“Maybe a lover,” Mat said dryly. He would not mind meeting Aludra again; she had given him some fireworks that proved very useful. “If you want to know about women, ask Perrin, not me. I don’t know anything at all. I used to think Rand knew, but Perrin surely does.” Elayne was talking with the two white-haired Aes Sedai under the Hunter’s watchful eye. One of the older Aes Sedai gazed in Mat’s direction consideringly. They had the same sort of bearing Elayne did, cool as a queen on her bloody throne. “Well, with luck I won’t have to put up with them long,” he muttered to himself. “With luck, whatever they’re doing won’t take long, and we can be back here in five or ten days.” With luck, he might be back before the Band had to begin shadowing the madwomen. Tracking not one army but two would be easy as stealing a pie, of course, but he did not look forward to any more days in Elayne’s company than necessary.

“Ten days?” Thom said. “Mat, even with this ‘gateway’ it will take five or six just to reach Ebou Dar. Better than twenty or so, but. . . .”

Mat stopped listening. Every shred of irritation that had been building since he first laid eyes on Egwene again came to a head at once. Snatching off his hat, he stalked to where Elayne and the others were. Keeping him in the dark was bad enough—how was he supposed to keep them out of trouble when they told him nothing?—but this was ridiculous. Nynaeve saw him coming and darted behind her mare for some reason.

“It will be interesting traveling with a *ta’veren*,” one of the white-haired Aes Sedai said. Up close, he still could not fasten any age to her, yet somehow her face conveyed an impression of long years. It must have been the hair. She could have used the other for a mirror; maybe they really were sisters. “I am Vandene Namelle.”

Mat was in no mood to talk about being *ta'veren*. He was never in that mood, but certainly not now. "What's this nonsense I hear about five or six days to reach Ebou Dar?" The old Warder straightened, staring hard, and Mat reevaluated him as well; stringy, but hard as old roots. It made no difference in his tone. "You can open a gateway in sight of Ebou Dar. We aren't any bloody army to scare anyone, and as for popping out of air, you're Aes Sedai. People expect you to pop out of air and walk through walls."

"I fear you are speaking to the wrong one of us," Vandene said. He looked at the other white-haired woman, who shook her head as Vandene said, "Nor Adeleas, I fear. It appears we are not strong enough for some of the new things."

Mat hesitated, then settled his hat low and turned to Elayne.

Her chin came up. "Apparently you know rather less than you believe, Master Cauthon," she said coolly. She was not sweating, he realized, no more than the two . . . the other two . . . Aes Sedai. The Hunter was staring at him challengingly. What had put a bee in her ear? "There are villages and farms around Ebou Dar for a hundred miles," Elayne went on, explaining the obvious to a fool. "A gateway is quite dangerous. I do not intend to kill some poor man's sheep or cows, much less the poor man himself."

He hated more than her tone. She was right, and he hated that too. He was not about to admit she was, though, not to her, and searching for a way to retreat, he saw Egwene coming out of the village with two dozen or more Aes Sedai, most wearing fringed shawls. Or rather, she came, and they followed. Head held high, she looked straight ahead, that striped stole hanging about her neck. The others strolled along behind her in little clumps. Sheriam, wearing the blue Keeper's stole, was talking with Myrelle and a bluff-faced Aes Sedai who managed to look motherly. Except for Delana, he recognized none of the others—one had gray hair in a bun; how old did Aes Sedai have to be for their hair to go completely gray or white?—but they were all talking among themselves, ignoring the woman they had named Amyrlin. Egwene might as well have been alone; she looked alone. Knowing her, she was trying very hard to be what they had named her, and they let her walk alone, with everybody watching.

To the Pit of Doom with them if they think they can treat a Two Rivers woman that way, he thought grimly.

Striding to meet Egwene, he swept off his hat and bowed, making the best leg he knew how, and he could flourish with the best when he had to. “Good morning, Mother, and the Light shine on you,” he said, loud enough to be heard in the village. Kneeling, he seized her right hand and kissed her Great Serpent ring. A quick glare and a grimace directed at Talmanes and the others, and hidden by Egwene from those behind her, had them all scrambling to kneel and call out, “The Light illumine you, Mother,” or some variation. Even Thom and Juilin.

Egwene looked startled at first, though she hid it quickly. Then she smiled, and said softly, “Thank you, Mat.”

For a moment he stared up at her, then cleared his throat and stood, brushing off his knees. Sheriam and all those others behind Egwene were staring at him. “I didn’t expect you out here,” he said in a low voice, “but then, it seems there are all sorts of things I didn’t expect. Does the Amyrlin always see people off on trips? You wouldn’t by any chance want to tell me what it’s all about now, would you?”

At first he thought she might; then her mouth tightened for an instant and she gave a slight shake of her head. “I will always see friends off, Mat. I’d have spoken with you before this if I was not so busy. Mat, do try to stay out of trouble in Ebou Dar.”

He stared indignantly. Here he went kneeling and kissing rings, and she told *him* to stay out of trouble, when the whole point was for him to keep Elayne and Nynaeve with whole skins. “I will try, Mother,” he said wryly, but not too. Sheriam and some of those might be close enough to hear. “If you will excuse me, I must see to my men.”

Another bow, and he backed away a few steps before stalking over to where Talmanes and the rest were still on their knees. “Do you mean to stay there till you take root?” he growled. “Mount up.” He followed his own order, and everyone but Talmanes scrambled into their saddles.

Egwene passed a few words with Elayne and Nynaeve, while Vandene and Adeleas went to speak to Sheriam, and then it was time, as quick as that after all their dawdling. Mat half-expected some sort of ceremony, with Egwene there in the Amyrlin’s stole, but she and the others who were not going merely withdrew a little distance. Elayne stepped out, and suddenly there was a slash of light in front of her, widening into a hole, the view through it, what seemed to be a low hilltop covered in brown grass, rotating to a halt. Just like when Rand did it. Almost.

“Dismount,” Mat ordered. Elayne looked quite pleased with herself—you would never suspect the sort of woman she was from that delighted smile, asking Nynaeve and Aviendha to share her pleasure—but pleased or not, the gateway was not as large as the one Rand had made for the Band. Of course, they were not nearly so many as the Band, but the least she could have done was make it tall enough to ride through.

On the other side, low rolling brown-grass hills ran as far as Mat could see even when he climbed back onto Pips, though a darkness to the south suggested forest. Dusty hills.

“We must not press the horses too hard in this,” Adeleas said, swinging quite easily onto her round bay mare as soon as the gateway vanished. The animal looked as if it would be more at home in a barn.

“Oh, indeed not,” Vandene said. Her mount was a slab-sided black gelding that had a light step. The pair of them started south, motioning everyone to follow. The old Warder rode right at their heels.

Nynaeve and Elayne exchanged irritated looks, then booted their mares to catch the older women, hooves beating up dust until they were level. The yellow-braided Hunter dogged them the way the Warder did the other pair.

Sighing, Mat undid the black kerchief around his neck and retied it over his nose and mouth. Much as he might enjoy seeing the older Aes Sedai teach those two to sit up straight, what he really wanted was an uneventful ride, a short stay in Ebou Dar, and a quick jump back to Salidar before Egwene did anything stupid and irretrievable. Women always gave him trouble; he did not understand it.

When the gateway winked out, Egwene sighed. Maybe Elayne and Nynaeve between them could keep Mat from getting into too much trouble. Keeping him out entirely was probably too much to ask. She felt a pang of regret for using him, but he might be some use where he was, and he had had to be gotten away from the Band. Besides, he deserved it. Maybe Elayne *would* teach him a few manners.

Turning to the others, the Hall and Sheriam and her circle, she said, “Now we must get on with what we’re about.”

All eyes went to the Cairhienin in the dark coat just now mounting his horse near the trees. Talmanes, Egwene thought Mat had said his name was;

she had not dared ask too many questions. He studied them for a moment and shook his head before riding into the forest.

“A man who means trouble if I ever saw one,” Romanda said.

Lelaine nodded. “It will be well to put miles between ourselves and that sort.”

Egwene did not let herself smile. Mat’s Band had served its first purpose, but a great deal depended on exactly what orders Mat had left with this Talmanes. She thought she could depend on Mat in this. Siuan said that man Vanin had rooted out things before she had a chance to put them under his nose. And if she was to “come to her senses” and run to the Band for protection, then the Band would have to be close to her. “Shall we go to our horses?” she said. “If we leave now, we should catch up to Lord Bryne well before sunset.”

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CHAPTER 45

A Bitter Thought

As Vilnar led his mounted patrol through the streets of the New City, not far from the tall outer city wall, its gray stone streaked with silver and white in the midday sun, he thought about shaving his beard. Some others already had shaved; even if everyone said the heat was unnatural, it must be cooler back in Saldaea.

Letting his thoughts roam was safe enough. He could guide his horse in his sleep, and only the most foolhardy cutpurse would ply his trade anywhere hear ten Saldaeans. They rode about at random so the fellows would not know where they were safe. In truth, more often than having to catch thieves, they merely arrested those who came to them. The toughest bullyboy in Caemlyn would come running for Saldaeans to take him up before the Aiel could. So Vilnar kept half an eye on the street and let his mind drift. He thought about the girl back home in Mehar he would like to marry; Teryane's father was a merchant, and wanted a soldier for a son perhaps more than Teryane wanted one for a husband. He thought about the game those Aielwomen had suggested; Maiden's Kiss sounded innocent enough, but there had been a gleam in their eyes he did not quite trust. Most of all, though, he thought about Aes Sedai.

Vilnar had always wanted to see an Aes Sedai, and certainly there could be no better place than Caemlyn now, unless he went to Tar Valon one day. Apparently there were Aes Sedai all over Caemlyn. He had ridden to Culain's Hound, where rumor had a hundred, but at the last moment he could not make himself go in. He was brave enough with a sword in his hand and a horse between his knees and men or Trollocs in front of him, but the thought of Aes Sedai turned him shy. Besides, the inn would not have accommodated a hundred women, and none of the girls he saw could possibly be Aes Sedai. He had gone to The Crown of Roses, too, and watched from across the street, but he was not sure any of the women he had seen was Aes Sedai, and that made him sure they were not.

He cocked an eye at a thin woman with a wide nose coming out of a tall house that must belong to a merchant; she stood frowning at the street before finally donning a wide-brimmed straw hat and hurrying off. Vilnar shook his head. He could not have said how old she was, but that was not enough. He knew how to recognize an Aes Sedai. Let Jidar claim they were so beautiful they could kill a man by smiling, and let Rissen insist they were all a foot taller than any man. Vilnar knew it was the face you could tell by, the timeless face of an immortal. It must be impossible to mistake that.

As the patrol came opposite the towered, vaulting arch of the Whitebridge Gate, Vilnar forgot about Aes Sedai. Outside, one of the farmer's markets stretched alongside the road, long open stone sheds roofed in red or purple tiles, pens full of calves and pigs and sheep, chickens and ducks and geese, stalls selling everything from beans to turnips. Usually those markets were a cacophony of farmers crying their wares, but now except for the clamor of the animals silence marched along the market toward the gate, beside one of the oddest processions Vilnar had ever seen.

A long column of farmers four abreast on horseback made the bulk of it, and there seemed to be wagons behind. Farmers for sure in those rough coats, but every one of them in Vilnar's sight had the longest bow he had ever seen slung across his back, a full quiver at one hip and a long knife or short sword at the other. Leading the procession was a white banner bordered in red with a red wolf's head, and a mix of people as odd as the column. There were three Aiel, afoot of course, two of them Maidens, and a fellow whose bright green-striped coat and virulent yellow breeches said he was a Tinker, except he had a sword on his back. He was leading a horse as big as a Nashun draft horse, with a saddle meant for a giant. The leader seemed to be a heavy-shouldered shaggy-haired fellow with a short beard and a wicked axe on his belt, and at his side rode a Saldaean woman in dark narrow divided skirts who kept looking up at him with the fondest. . . .

Vilnar sat forward in his saddle. He recognized that woman. He thought of Lord Bashere, in the Royal Palace right that moment. More, he thought of Lady Deira, and his heart sank; she was in the Palace too. If some Aes Sedai had waved her hand and turned that column into Trollocs, Vilnar would have been overjoyed. Maybe this was the price for daydreaming. Had he kept his mind on his duty, the patrol would have been long past here by now. Still, he had his orders.

Wondering whether Lady Deira would have his head for a ball, he deployed his men in the gate.

Perrin let his dun stallion walk within ten paces of the city gate before drawing rein. Stepper was as happy to stop; he did not like the heat. The mounted men blocking the gate were Saldaeans, by those bold noses and tilted eyes; some wore glossy black beards, some thick mustaches, and some were clean-shaven. Every man save one had a hand on his sword hilt. The air stirred from them, not quite a breeze; there was no fear smell. Perrin looked at Faile, but she was bent over Swallow's arched neck, intent on fiddling with the black mare's bridle; she smelled faintly of herbal soap and anxiety. They had heard news of Saldaeans in Caemlyn these last two hundred miles and more, led by Faile's father supposedly. That did not seem to worry Faile, but she was certain her mother would be in Caemlyn as well. She said that did not worry her either.

"We don't even need the bowmen," Aram said quietly, stroking the hilt that stuck up over his shoulder. His dark eyes seemed eager; he certainly smelled eager. "There are only ten. You and I could cut through them ourselves." Gaul had veiled himself, and almost certainly, Bain and Chiad had too, on the other side of Faile.

"No archers, and no cutting," Perrin said. "And no spears, Gaul." He did not say anything to Bain or Chiad; they only listened to Faile anyway. Who did not appear ready to look up or say a word any time soon. Gaul merely lowered his veil with a shrug; Aram frowned in disappointment.

Perrin kept his expression mild as he turned back to the Saldaeans. Yellow-gold eyes made some men nervous. "My name is Perrin Aybara. I think Rand al'Thor will want to see me."

The bearded fellow who had not touched his sword gave a small bow from the saddle. "I am Vilnar Barada, Lord Aybara, Underlieutenant sword-sworn to Lord Davram Bashere." He said that very loudly, and come to think of it, he had been avoiding looking at Faile. She sighed at mention of her father and scowled at Barada, the more so when he continued to ignore her. "Lord Bashere's orders," the man went on, adding as an afterthought, "and the Lord Dragon's, are that no noble can enter Caemlyn with more than twenty armed men or fifty servants."

Aram shifted on his horse. He was even more prickly about Perrin's supposed honor than Faile, which was saying something, but thank the Light, he would not unsheathe his sword unless Perrin said to.

Perrin spoke over his shoulder. "Dannil, take everybody back to that meadow we passed about three miles back and make camp. If a farmer shows up to complain, give him some gold and smooth him down. Let him know he'll be paid for any damage. Aram, you go with them."

Dannil Lewin, a beanpole of a man with a thick mustache that almost hid his mouth, knuckled his forehead despite all the times Perrin had told him a simple "all right" would do, and immediately began giving orders to turn everyone around. Aram stiffened, of course—he never liked being far from Perrin—but he said nothing, equally of course. Sometimes Perrin thought he had acquired a wolfhound in the former Tinker. Not good for a man to be that way, but he did not know what to do about it.

He expected Faile to say a good deal about sending everyone back—he expected her to bring up what was due his so-called position and insist on the twenty Barada had mentioned, and as close to the fifty as they could manage as well—but she was leaning out of her saddle to speak in whispers with Bain and Chiad. He made a point of not listening, though he could still make out parts of words. Something about men, sounding amused; women always seemed either amused or angry when they talked of men. Faile was the reason he had all these people trailing after him, and the banner to boot, though he had not yet figured out exactly how she had done it. There were *servants* back in the wagons, men and women wearing *livery* with a wolf's head on the shoulder. Even the Two Rivers folk had not complained; they seemed as proud of it as any of the refugees.

"Does that satisfy?" he asked Barada. "You can escort the rest of us to Rand, if you don't want us running loose."

"I think. . . ." Barada's dark eyes darted to Faile and away. "I think that would be best."

As Faile straightened, Bain and Chiad trotted to the line of horsemen and pushed through as if they were not there. The Saldaeans did not even look surprised, but then, they must be used to Aiel; all the rumors said Caemlyn was full of Aiel already.

"I must find my spear-brothers," Gaul said abruptly. "May you always find water and shade, Perrin Aybara." And away he darted after the women. Faile hid an amused smile behind a gray-gloved hand.

Perrin shook his head. Gaul wanted Chiad to marry him, but by Aiel custom, she had to ask him, and though according to Faile she was willing to become his lover, she would not give up the spear and marry. He seemed as affronted as a Two Rivers girl would have been in the same circumstance. Bain seemed to be part of it too, somehow; Perrin did not understand how. Faile professed not to know, if a bit too quickly, and Gaul grew sullen when asked. An odd people.

The Saldaeans made a way through the crowds, but Perrin paid little mind to crowds or city. He had seen Caemlyn once, some of it, and he did not much like cities anymore. Wolves seldom came close to a city; he had not sensed one for two days. What he did do was study his wife with sideways looks, trying not to let her notice. He might as well have stared. She always rode erect, but now she was stiff in her saddle, glaring at Barada's back. The man's shoulders were hunched as if he could feel her eyes. A falcon could not glare as well as Faile.

Perrin expected she was thinking of the same thing as he, though maybe not along the same lines. Her father. She might have a few explanations to make—she had run away, after all, to become a Hunter for the Horn—but Perrin was the one who had to face the Lord of Bashere, Tyr and Sidona and tell the man a blacksmith had married his daughter and heir. It was not something Perrin looked forward to. He did not think he was particularly brave—doing what you had to do was not bravery—but he had never really thought he might be a coward until now. The thought of Faile's father dried his mouth. Maybe he should see to setting up the camp. A letter sent to Lord Bashere could explain everything. A carefully composed letter might take two or three days to write. Maybe more. He was no hand with words.

A glimpse of the crimson banner waving lazily above the Royal Palace brought him back with a thump. The rumors had spoken of that. Perrin knew it was not the Dragon banner, whatever the rumors said—some claimed it meant the Aes Sedai served Rand; others that he served them—and he wondered why Rand was not flying the Dragon banner itself. Rand. He could still feel Rand pulling at him, greater *ta'veren* tugging at lesser. It did not tell him where Rand was; it was not that kind of pull. He had left the Two Rivers expecting to ride to Tear or maybe the Light alone knew where, and only a river of rumors and tales flowing west across Andor had brought him here. Some very disturbing tales and rumors. No, what he felt was more a need to be near Rand, or maybe Rand's need for him, like an itch between his shoulders he could not scratch. Now it was close to being scratched, and he almost wished it was not. He had a dream, one that Faile would laugh at, adventurous as she was. He dreamed of living in a small house with her, somewhere in the country, far from cities and strife. There was always strife around Rand. But Rand needed him, and he would do what he had to.

In a great, column-ringed courtyard overlooked by marble balconies and pointed spires, Perrin slung his belt, weighted by his axe, on the saddle—it was a relief to be rid of it for a while—and a white-robed man and woman took Stepper and Swallow. With a few words Barada turned Faile and him over to cold-eyed Aielmen, many wearing scarlet headbands marked with the black-and-white disc, who led them inside and with even fewer words handed them to Maidens who were just as frosty. Perrin did not recognize any of them from the Stone, and his efforts at making conversation were met with blank looks. Their hands flashed Maiden handtalk, and one was chosen out to take him and Faile deeper into the Palace, a lean sandy-haired woman he thought might be about Faile's age. She named herself Lerian, the only words she spoke except to warn them not to wander. He wished Bain or Chiad were there; a familiar face would have been pleasant. Faile glided down the corridors like the grand lady she was, yet at every crossing hallway she looked both ways quickly. Plainly she did not want to be surprised by her father.

Finally they reached a pair of doors, each carved with a lion, where two more Maidens rose from squatting on their heels and still more handtalk flickered before the sandy-haired Maiden went in without knocking.

Perrin was wondering whether it was always like this around Rand now, Aiel guards and nobody speaking, when suddenly the doors were flung open, and there was Rand in his shirtsleeves.

"Perrin! Faile! The Light shine on your wedding day," he laughed, kissing Faile lightly. "I wish I could have been there for it." She looked as confused as Perrin felt.

"How did you know?" he exclaimed, and Rand laughed again, clapping him on the shoulder

"Bode's here, Perrin. Bode and Jancy and all of them. In Caemlyn, anyway. This is as far as Verin and Alanna got them before they heard about the Tower." He looked tired, his eyes drawn, though his laughter did not sound it. "Light, Perrin, the things they told me you've been up to. Lord Perrin of the Two Rivers. What does Mistress Luhhan say to that?"

"She calls me Lord Perrin," Perrin muttered wryly. Alsbet Luhhan had smacked his bottom more often growing up than his mother had. "She curtsies, Rand. She actually curtsies." Faile eyed him askance. She said he embarrassed people when he tried to stop all the bowing and curtsying, as for his embarrassment when they did, she said it was part of the price he had to pay.

The Maiden who had gone in squeezed by Rand coming out, and he gave a start. "Light, I'm keeping you in the door. Come in; come in. Lerian, tell Sulin I need more punch. The melon. And tell her to hop." For some reason the three Maidens laughed as if Rand had said something funny.

One step inside the sitting room, a floral scent of perfume told Perrin there was another woman there before he saw her. When he did, he stared. "Min?" The hair in short curls, the embroidered blue coat and breeches were wrong, but the face was right. "Min, it is you!" Laughing, he caught her up in a hug. "We are gathering everybody, aren't we? Faile, this is Min. I told you about her."

That was when he realized what he was smelling from his wife, and put Min down while she was still grinning at him. Suddenly he was too much aware that those tight breeches showed the shape of Min's legs very well. Faile had very few faults, but she did have a slight tendency toward jealousy. He was not supposed to know she had chased Calle Coplin half a mile with a stick, as if he would ever look twice at another woman when he had her.

"Faile?" Min said, holding out her hands. "Any woman who can put up with this hairy lummox long enough to marry him has my admiration. I suppose he might make a good husband at that, once you house break him."

Faile took Min's hands smiling, but oh, that acrid, bristly scent. "I've not succeeded in the house breaking yet, Min, but I intend to keep him at least until I do."

"Mistress Luhhan curtsies?" Rand shook his head in disbelief. "I will have to see that to believe it. Where's Loial? Did he come? You didn't leave him outside?"

"He came," Perrin said, trying to keep an eye on Faile without being obvious, "but not all the way, not yet. He said he was tired, and needed a *stedding*, so I told him one I know of, an abandoned one north of the road from Whitebridge, and he set off for it afoot. He said he would be able to feel it once he was within ten miles or so."

"I suppose you know Rand and Perrin very well?" Faile asked, and Min glanced at Rand.

"For a while, anyway. I met them right after they first left the Two Rivers. They thought Baerlon was a grand city."

"On foot?" Rand said.

"Yes," Perrin said slowly. Faile's scent was changing, the thorny jealousy dwindling away. Why? "He would rather use his feet, you know. He bet me a gold crown he would be here in Caemlyn no more than ten days after us." The two women were looking at one another, Faile smiling and Min coloring slightly; Min smelled faintly embarrassed, Faile pleased. And surprised, though only a hint showed on her face. "I didn't want to take his coin—he has to go fifty miles or more out of his way—but he insisted. He wanted to make it five days."

"Loial always did say he could outrun a horse," Rand laughed, but there had been a pause. Laughter faded. "I hope he makes it safely," he said more seriously. He *was* tired, and different in other ways, too. The Rand Perrin had last seen in Tear had not been soft, far from it, but this Rand made that one look an innocent farmboy. He did not blink often enough, as if a blink might hide what he needed to see. Perrin recognized something of that look; he had seen it on the faces of Two Rivers men after the Trolloc attacks, after the fifth, the tenth, when it seemed hope was gone but you went on fighting because the cost of giving up was too great.

"My Lord Dragon," Faile said, startling Perrin; she had always called him Rand before, though they had been hearing the title since White-bridge, "if you will forgive me, I will just have a word with my husband then leave you two to talk."

She hardly waited for Rand's surprised assent to close on Perrin, turning him so her back was to Rand. "I will not go far, my dear heart. Min and I will have our own conversation about things that would very likely bore you." Fussing with his lapels, she began speaking hurriedly under her breath, so softly that anyone except him would have had to strain their ears. She did recall his hearing sometimes. "Remember he is not your boyhood friend any longer, Perrin. At least, not only that. He is the Dragon Reborn, the Lord Dragon. But you are Lord of the Two Rivers. I know you will stand up for yourself, and for the Two Rivers." The smile she gave him was full of love and confidence; he wanted to kiss her right there. "There," she said in a normal tone. "You are all straight again." She no longer gave off the slightest scent of jealousy.

Offering Rand a graceful curtsy and a murmur of "My Lord Dragon," she held out a hand to Min. "Come, Min." Min's curtsy was considerably less practiced, and made Rand start.

Before they reached the doorway, one of the doors banged open and a tall liveried woman entered with a silver tray holding goblets and a pitcher that gave off the smell of wine and honeymelon juice. Perrin almost stared. Despite the red-and-white dress, she could have been Chiad's mother, or maybe grandmother with that short curled white hair. Frowning at the departing women, she stalked to the nearest table and set down the tray, her face a mask of meekness that seemed frozen in place. "I was told four, my Lord Dragon," she said oddly; he thought she might be trying for humble respect but had something caught in her throat, "so I brought for four." Her curtsy made Min's look elegant, and she slammed the door on her way out.

Perrin looked at Rand. "Do you ever think women are . . . strange?"

"Why are you asking me? You are the married man." Rand filled a silver-chased goblet with punch and handed it to him. "If you don't know, you will have to ask Mat. I know less every day."

"So do I," Perrin sighed. The punch was certainly cooling, Rand did not seem to be sweating at all. "Where is Mat, anyway? If I had to guess, I would say in the nearest tavern, and odds or evens whether he has a dice cup in his hands or a girl on his knee."

"He had better have neither," Rand said grimly, setting down his punch untouched. "He is supposed to be bringing Elayne here to be crowned. And Egwene and Nynaeve, I hope. Light, there's so much to do before she gets here." His head swung like a bear's, at bay; then he fixed on Perrin. "Would you go to Tear for me?"

"Tear! Rand, I have been over two months on the road. My bottom's taken on the shape of the saddle."

"I can have you there tonight. Today. You can sleep in a general's tent, and stay away from saddles as long as you like."

Perrin stared at him; the man seemed serious. Suddenly he found himself wondering how Rand's sanity was holding. Light, it had to hold, at least until Tarmon Gai'don. He took a long swallow of the punch to wash the bitter thought out of his mouth. What a way to think about a friend. “Rand, if you could set me down in the Stone of Tear right now, I would still say no. I have to talk to someone here in Caemlyn. And I’d like to see Bode and the others.”

Rand did not seem to be listening. He flung himself into one of the gilded chairs and stared at Perrin bleakly. “You remember how Thom used to juggle all those balls and make it look easy? Well, I’m juggling now for all I am worth, and it isn’t easy. Sammael in Illian; the rest of the Forsaken the Light only knows where. Sometimes I don’t even think they are the worst of it. Rebels who think I’m a false Dragon. Dragonsworn who think they can burn villages in my name. Have you heard of the Prophet, Perrin? No matter; he’s no worse than the rest. I have allies who hate each other, and the best general I can name to face Illian wants nothing better than to charge off and be killed. Elayne should be here in maybe a month and a half with luck, but I may just have a rebellion on my hands here before then. Light, I want to give her Andor whole. I thought of going to get her myself, but that is the worst thing I could do.” He rubbed his face with both hands, speaking behind them. “The very worst.”

“What does Moiraine say?”

Rand’s hands came down far enough for him to look over them. “Moiraine is dead, Perrin. She killed Lanfear and died, and that’s an end to that.”

Perrin sat down. Moiraine? It did not seem possible. “If Alanna and Verin are here. . . .” He rolled the goblet between his palms. He could not really make himself trust either woman. “Have you asked their advice?”

“No!” Rand’s hand slashed a sharp cutting gesture. “They stay clear of me, Perrin; I made that plain.”

Perrin decided to ask Faile to find out what was going on from Alanna or Verin. The two Aes Sedai often made him vaguely uneasy, but Faile seemed to get on well with them. “Rand, you know as well as I do it’s dangerous to anger Aes Sedai. Moiraine came looking for us—for you, anyway—but there were times I thought she was ready to kill Mat, me *and* you.” Rand said nothing, but at least he seemed to be listening, with his head tilted. “If a tenth of the stories I’ve been hearing ever since Baerlon are even half-true, this might be the worst possible time to have Aes Sedai angry with you. I don’t pretend to know what’s going on in the Tower, but —”

Rand gave himself a shake and leaned forward. “The Tower’s split right down the middle, Perrin. Half think I am a pig to buy at market, and the other half. . . . I don’t know what they think, exactly. Three days in a row, I’ve met some of their embassy. I am supposed to meet again this afternoon, and I still cannot pin them down. They ask a sight more questions than they answer, and don’t seem much pleased I won’t give them any more answers than they give me. At least Elaida—she is the new Amyrlin, if you’ve not heard—at least her people say something, even if they do seem to think I’ll be so impressed by Aes Sedai curtsying that I won’t dig too deep.”

“Light,” Perrin breathed. “Light! You mean to say part of the Aes Sedai really have rebelled, and you’ve put yourself square between the Tower and the rebels? Two bears ready to fight, and you go picking cloudberries between them! Did you never think you might have enough trouble from Aes Sedai without that? I tell you true, Rand. Siuan Sanche made my toes curl up in my boots, but at least you knew where you stood with her. She made me feel like I was a horse and she was trying to decide whether I’d do for a long hard ride, but at least she made it plain she didn’t mean to saddle me herself.”

Rand’s laugh was too hoarse to hold any mirth. “Do you really think Aes Sedai would leave me alone just because I left them alone? Me? The Tower splitting is the best thing that could have happened for me. They’re too busy staring at one another to turn full attention on me. Without that, there’d be twenty Aes Sedai everywhere I turned. Fifty. I have Tear and Cairhien behind me, after a fashion, and a toehold here. Without the split, every time I opened my mouth, there’d be somebody saying, ‘Yes, but the Aes Sedai say.’ Perrin, Moiraine did her best to tie cords to me until I forced her to stop, and truth to tell, I’m not so sure she stopped then. When an Aes Sedai says she’ll advise you and let you decide, she means she knows what you should do and will make you do it if she can.” Taking up his goblet, he drank deeply. When he lowered it, he seemed calmer. “If the Tower was whole, I’d have so many strings tied to me by now, I could not move a finger without asking six Aes Sedai for permission.”

Perrin very nearly laughed himself, and no more in mirth than Rand. “So you think it’s better to—what?—play the rebel Aes Sedai off against the Tower? ‘Cheer the bull, or cheer the bear; cheer both, and you will be trampled and eaten.’ ”

“Not that simple, Perrin, though they don’t know it,” Rand said smugly, shaking his head. “There’s a third side, ready to kneel to me. If they make contact again. Light! This isn’t how we should be spending our first hour together again, talking about Aes Sedai. Emond’s Field, Perrin.” His face softened almost to the Rand Perrin remembered, and he grinned eagerly. “I only had a short time with Bode and the others, but they mentioned all kinds of changes. Tell me what’s changed, Perrin. Tell me what’s the same.”

For a long while they talked about the refugees and all the new things they had brought, new kinds of beans and squash, new varieties of pear and apple, the weaving of fine cloth and maybe carpets, making bricks and tiles, stonework and furniture more ornate than anything the Two Rivers had seen in a long time if ever. Perrin had grown used to the sheer numbers of people who had come across the Mountains of Mist, but it seemed to stun Rand. The advantages and disadvantages of the wall some wanted to put around Emond’s Field, and the other villages, were gone into in depth, and stone walls versus log. At times Rand sounded his old self, laughing over how all the women had been so hard against Taraboner or Domani dresses in the beginning, and now were divided into those who would wear nothing but good stout Two Rivers dresses and those who had cut up all theirs for rags. Or over how a number of the younger men were growing mustaches like Taraboners or Domani, occasionally with an Almoth Plain goatee as well, which made the unwise wearer look as though a small animal had latched on under his nose. Perrin did not bother to add to that beards like his own were even more popular.

It came as a shock, though, when Rand made it clear he had no intention of visiting the camp, though there were any number of men there he knew. “I can’t protect you or Mat,” he said softly, “but I can them.”

After that the conversation naturally lagged, until even Rand realized he had draped a blanket over it. Finally he stood with a sigh, scrubbing his hands through his hair and looking around in a disgruntled way. “You must want to wash and rest, Perrin. I should not keep you from it. I’ll have rooms set aside for you.” Seeing Perrin to the door, he suddenly added, “You will think about Tear, Perrin? I need you there. There is no danger involved. I will tell you the whole plan, if you decide to go. You’ll be only the fourth man to know the real plan.” Rand’s face hardened. “You must keep that to yourself, Perrin. Don’t tell even Faile.”

“I can hold my tongue,” Perrin said stiffly. And a little sadly. The new Rand was back. “And I will think on Tear.”

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CHAPTER 46

Beyond the Gate

Perrin paid scant attention as Rand instructed a Maiden, “Tell Sulin to prepare rooms for Perrin and Faile, and obey them as she would me.” The two Aielwomen took that as some sort of great joke, from the way they laughed and slapped thighs, but Perrin was staring at a slender man standing a little way down the tapestry-hung corridor. He had no doubt at all that the man was Davram Bashere. It was not just that he was Saldaean, and he surely looked nothing like Faile with those thick gray-streaked mustaches curving down to almost hide his mouth. He was no taller than Faile either, maybe a little shorter, but the way he stood, arms folded, face like a hawk staring down into a henyard, made Perrin certain. The man knew; that was certain, too.

Making last goodbyes to Rand, Perrin took a deep breath and walked up the hallway. He found himself wishing he had his axe; Bashere was wearing his sword. “Lord Bashere?” Perrin made a bow that was not returned. The man reeked of cold fury. “I am Perrin Aybara.”

“We will talk,” Bashere said curtly and turned on his heel. Perrin had no choice but to follow, and to take quick strides despite his longer legs.

Two turnings later, Bashere entered a small sitting room and closed the door behind them. Tall windows let in plenty of light, and even more heat than the high ceiling could handle. Two chairs with padded seats and high, scroll-carved backs had been placed facing each other. A silver pitcher with a tall neck and two silver cups stood on a lapis-inlaid table. Not punch, this time; strong wine, by the smell.

Bashere filled the cups and thrust one at Perrin, gesturing peremptorily to one of the chairs. He wore a smile behind his mustaches, but eyes and smile could have belonged to two different men. The eyes could have driven nails. “I suppose Zarine told you all about my estates before you . . .

married her. All about the Broken Crown. She was always talkative as a girl."

The man remained standing, so Perrin did as well. Broken crown? Faile had certainly never mentioned any broken crown. "First she told me you were a fur trader. Or maybe it was a lumber merchant first, and then a fur trader. You sold ice peppers, too." Bashere gave a start, repeating "Fur trader?" incredulously under his breath. "Her story changed," Perrin went on, "but once too often she repeated something you had said about how a general should behave, and I asked her straight out, and . . ." He peered into his wine, then made himself meet the other man's eyes. "When I found out who you were, I almost changed my mind about marrying her, only she had her mind set, and when Faile has her mind set, shifting her is like shifting a hitch of mules that have all decided to sit down at once. Besides, I loved her. I love her."

"Faile?" Bashere barked. "Who in the Pit of Doom is Faile? We are talking about my daughter Zarine, and what you've done to her!"

"Faile is the name she took when she became a Hunter for the Horn," Perrin said patiently. He had to make a good impression on this man; being at odds with your father-in-law was almost as bad as being at odds with your mother-in-law. "That was before she met me."

"A Hunter?" Pride shone in the man's voice, and his sudden grin. The scent of anger almost vanished. "The little minx never said a word to me about that. I must say, Faile suits her better than Zarine. That was her mother's notion, and I—" Suddenly he gave himself a shake, and Perrin a suspicious stare. Anger began scenting the air again. "Don't try changing the subject, boy. What we are about is you and my daughter and this supposed marriage of yours."

"Supposed?" Perrin had always been good at holding his temper; Mistress Luhhan said he never had one. When you were bigger and stronger than the other boys growing up, and might hurt somebody by accident, you learned to hold your temper. Right then he was having a little difficulty, though. "The Wisdom performed the ceremony, the same as everybody's been married in the Two Rivers since time out of mind."

"Boy, it wouldn't matter if you had the words said by an Ogier Elder with six Aes Sedai standing witness. Zarine *still* isn't old enough to marry without her mother's permission, which she never asked, much less received. She is with Deira right now, and if she doesn't convince her mother she's old enough to be married, she goes back to the camp, probably doing duty as her mother's saddle. And you. . . ." Bashere's fingers stroked the hilt of his sword, though he did not seem aware of it. "You," he said in an almost jolly tone, "I get to kill."

"Faile is mine," Perrin growled. Wine slopped over his wrist, and he looked down in surprise at the winecup, crushed in his fist. He set the twisted piece of silver on the table carefully, beside the pitcher, but he could do nothing about his voice. "Nobody can take her from me. Nobody! You take her back to your camp—or anywhere!—and I'll come for her."

"I have nine thousand men with me," the other man said in a surprisingly mild tone.

"Are they any harder to kill than Trollocs? Try taking her—try!—and we'll find out!" He was shaking, Perrin realized, his hands clenched into fists so hard they hurt. It shocked him; he had not been angry, really angry, in so long that he no longer remembered what it was like.

Bashere studied him up and down, then shook his head. "It might be a shame to kill you. We need some new blood. It's getting thin in the House. My grandfather used to say we were all becoming soft, and he was right. I'm half the man he was, and much as it shames me to say it, Zarine is terribly soft. Not weak, mind . . ." He frowned hard for a moment, nodding when he saw Perrin was not going to say Faile was weak. ". . . but soft, just the same."

And that shocked Perrin so, he sat down before he realized he had moved to the chair. He almost forgot to be angry. Was this man mad, changing about like that? And Faile, soft? She could be deliriously soft at times, true, but any man who thought she was soft in the way her father meant would probably have his head handed to him. Himself included.

Bashere picked up the crushed winecup, studied it, then replaced it and took the other chair. "Zarine told me a good bit about you before she went with her mother, all about Lord Perrin of the Two Rivers, Slayer of Trollocs. That's good, that. I like a man who can stand toe to toe with a Trolloc and not back up. Now I want to know what kind of man you are." He waited expectantly, sipping his wine.

Perrin wished he had some more of Rand's melon punch, or even his winecup undented. His throat had gone dry. He wanted to make that good impression, but he had to start with the truth. "The fact of it is, I am not really a lord. I'm a blacksmith. You see, when the Trollocs came. . . ." He trailed off because Bashere was laughing so hard the man had to wipe his eyes.

“Boy, the Creator never made the Houses. Some forget it, but go far enough back in any House, and you’ll find a commoner who showed uncommon courage or kept his head and took charge when everybody else was running around like plucked geese. Mind you, another thing some like to forget is the road down can be just as sudden. I’ve two maids in Tyr who would be ladies if their forebears two hundred years ago hadn’t been fools even a fool wouldn’t follow, and a woodcutter in Sidona who claims his ancestors were kings and queens before Artur Hawkwing. He might be telling the truth; he’s a good woodcutter. As many roads down as up, and the roads down as slippery as the others.” Bashere snorted hard enough to make his mustaches stir. “A fool moans when fortune takes him down, and it takes a true fool to moan when fortune takes him up. What I want to know about you isn’t what you were, or even so much what you are, as what you are inside. If my wife leaves Zarine with a whole hide, and I don’t kill you, do you know how to treat a wife? Well?”

Mindful of that good impression, Perrin decided not to explain that he would much rather be a blacksmith again. “I treat Faile as well as I know how,” he said carefully.

Bashere snorted again. “As well as you know how.” His flat tone became a growl. “You had better know well enough, boy, or I’ll. . . . You hear me. A wife isn’t a trooper to go running when you shout. In some ways, a woman is like a dove. You hold her half as hard as you think is necessary, or you might hurt her. You don’t want to hurt Zarine. You understand me?” He grinned suddenly, disconcertingly, and his voice grew almost friendly. “You might do very well for a son-in-law, Aybara, but if you make her unhappy. . . .” He was stroking his sword hilt again.

“I try to make her happy,” Perrin said seriously. “Hurting her is the last thing I’d want to do.”

“Good. Because it would be the last thing you do, boy.” That was delivered with a grin too, but Perrin had no doubts Bashere meant every word. “I think it’s time to take you to Deira. If she and Zarine haven’t finished their discussion by now, best we step in before one of them kills the other. They always did get a little carried away when they argued, and Zarine’s too big now for Deira to put an end to it by spanking her.” Bashere put his cup on the table, and went on as they started for the door. “One thing you have to be aware of. Just because a woman says she believes something, doesn't mean it is true. Oh, she'll believe it, but a thing is not necessarily true just because a woman believes it is. You keep that in mind."

"I will." Perrin thought he understood what the man meant. Faile sometimes had only a passing acquaintance with the truth. Never about anything important, or at least not what she considered important, but if she promised to do something she did not want to do, she always managed to leave herself a hole to wriggle through and keep the letter of the promise while doing exactly as she wished. What he did not understand was what that could have to do with meeting Faile's mother.

It was a long walk through the Palace, along colonnades and up flights of stairs. There did not seem to be many Saldaeans about, but a good many Aielmen and Maidens, not to mention red-and-white-liveried servants, who bowed or curtsied, and white-robed men and women like those who had taken the horses. Those last scurried along with trays or armloads of toweling, eyes down, and seemed to take no notice of anyone. With a start Perrin realized that a number of them wore the same length of scarlet cloth around their temples that many of the Aielmen did. They must be Aiel, too. He noticed a small thing as well. As many women as men in the white robes wore the headband, and men in the drab coats and breeches, but no Maidens that he saw. Gaul had told him a little about the Aiel, but he had never mentioned the headbands.

As he and Bashere entered a room with ivory-inlaid chairs and small tables set on a patterned carpet of red and gold and green, Perrin's ears picked up the muffled sound of women's voices raised in an inner room. He could not make out words through the thick door, but he could tell that one of them was Faile. Abruptly there was a slap, followed almost immediately by another, and he winced. Only a complete woolhead stepped between his wife and her mother when they were arguing—by what he had seen, usually they both rounded on the poor fool—and he knew very well that Faile could stand up for herself in normal circumstances. But then again, he had seen strong women, themselves mothers and even grandmothers, allow themselves to be treated like children by their own mothers.

Squaring his shoulders, he strode for the inner door, but Bashere was there before, rapping with his knuckles as if they had all the time in the world. Of course, Bashere could not hear what sounded to Perrin like two cats in a sack. Wet cats.

Bashere’s rap cut off the snarling as though with a knife. “You may come,” a composed voice said loudly.

It was all Perrin could do not to push past Bashere, and once he was inside, his eyes sought out Faile anxiously, where she sat in a wide-armed chair just where the light from the windows became less sharp. The carpet was mostly dark red in here, making him think of blood, and one of the two wall hangings showed a woman on horseback killing a leopard with a spear. The other was a furious battle swirling around a White Lion banner. Her scent was a jumble of emotions he could not separate, and her left cheek bore a red handprint, but she smiled at him, if faintly.

Faile’s mother made Perrin blink. With all Bashere’s talk of doves, he expected a fragile woman, but Lady Deira stood inches taller than her husband, and she was . . . statuesque. Not big like Mistress Luhhan, who was round, or like Daise Congar, who looked as if she could take over a blacksmith’s hammer. She was buxom, which a man certainly should not think of his mother-in-law, and he could see where Faile got her beauty. Faile’s face was her mother’s face, without the slash of white through her dark hair on her temples. If that was how Faile would look when she reached that age, he was a very fortunate man. On the other hand, that bold nose gave Lady Deira the look of an eagle as those dark tilted eyes fastened on him, a fiery-eyed eagle ready to sink talons deep into a particularly insolent rabbit. She smelled of fury and contempt. The real surprise, though, was the crimson handprint on her cheek.

“Father, we were just talking of you,” Faile said with an affectionate smile, gliding to him and taking his hands. She kissed his cheeks, and Perrin felt a sudden stab of disgruntlement; a father did not deserve all that when there was a husband standing right there with only one brief smile to sustain him.

“Should I ride away and hide then, Zarine?” Bashere chuckled. Oh, a very rich chuckle. The man did not even seem to see that his wife and daughter had hit each other!

“She prefers Faile, Davram,” Lady Deira said absently. Arms folded beneath that ample bosom, she eyed Perrin up and down without any effort to disguise it.

He heard Faile whisper softly to her father, “It depends on him, now.”

Perrin supposed it did, if she and her mother had come to blows. Squaring his shoulders, he prepared to tell Lady Deira that he would be as gentle with Faile as if she were a kitten, that he himself would be meek as a lamb. The last part would be a lie, of course—Faile would spit a meek man and roast him for dinner—but peace had to be maintained. Besides, he *did* try to be gentle with her. Maybe the Lady Deira was why Bashere talked so about gentleness; no man would have the nerve to be anything else with this woman.

Before he could open his mouth, Faile's mother said, "Yellow eyes do not make a wolf. Are you strong enough to handle my daughter, young man? From what she tells me, you're a milksop, indulging her every whim, letting her twine you around her fingers whenever she wants to play cat's cradle."

Perrin stared. Bashere had taken the chair Faile had been sitting in, and now he was complacently studying his boots, one propped atop the toe of the other. Faile, seated on the broad arm of her father's chair, gave her mother one indignant frown, then smiled at Perrin with all the confidence she had showed when telling him to stand up to Rand.

"I don't think she twists me around her finger," he said carefully. She tried, true, but he did not think he had ever let her. Except once in a while, to please her.

Lady Deira's sniff spoke volumes. "Weaklings never think so. A woman wants a strong man, stronger than she, here." Her finger poked his chest hard enough to make him grunt. "I'll never forget the first time Davram took me by the scruff of the neck and showed me he was the stronger of us. It was magnificent!" Perrin blinked; that was an image his mind could not hold. "If a woman is stronger than her husband, she comes to despise him. She has the choice of either tyrannizing him or else making herself less in order not to make him less. If the husband is strong enough, though . . ." She poked him again, even harder. ". . . she can be as strong as she is, as strong as she can grow to be. You will have to prove to Faile that you're strong." Another poke, harder still. "The women of my family are leopards. If you cannot train her to hunt on your command, Faile will rake you as you deserve. Are you strong enough?" This time her finger drove Perrin back a step.

"Will you stop that?" he growled. He refrained from rubbing his chest. Faile was giving no help at all, merely smiling at him encouragingly. Bashere was studying him with pursed lips and a cocked eyebrow. "If I indulge her sometimes, it's because I want to. I like to see her smile. If you expect me to trample on her, you can forget it." Maybe he had lost with that. Faile's mother began staring at him in a most peculiar way, and her scent was a tangle he could not make out, though anger was still in it, and icy disdain. But good impression or no, he was done with trying to say what Bashere and his wife wanted to hear. "I love her, and she loves me, and that's the whole of it as far as I'm concerned."

"He says," Bashere said slowly, "that if you take our daughter away, he will take her back. He seems to think nine thousand Saldaean horse no match for a few hundred Two Rivers bowmen."

His wife gazed at Perrin consideringly, then visibly took herself in hand, her head coming erect. "That is all very well, but any man can swing a sword. What I want to know is whether he can tame a willful, headstrong, disobedient—"

"Enough, Deira," Bashere cut in mildly. "Since you've obviously decided Zarine . . . Faile . . . is no longer a child, I think Perrin will do well enough."

To Perrin's surprise, Bashere's wife bowed her head meekly. "As you say, my heart." Then she glared at Perrin, not meekly at all, as if to say that was the way a man should handle a woman.

Bashere murmured something under his breath about grandchildren and making the blood strong again. And Faile? She smiled at Perrin with an expression he had never seen on her face before, an expression that made him decidedly uncomfortable. With her hands folded and her ankles crossed and her head tilted to one side, she somehow managed to look . . . submissive. Faile! Maybe he had married into a family where *every*one was mad.

Closing the door on Perrin, Rand finished his goblet of punch, then sprawled in a chair, thinking. He hoped Perrin got on well with Bashere. But then, if they struck sparks, maybe Perrin would be more amenable to Tear. He needed either Perrin or Mat there to convince Sammael that that was the true attack. The thought brought a soft, bitter laugh. Light, what a way to think about a friend. Lews Therin was giggling and muttering indistinctly about friends and betrayal. Rand wished he could sleep for a year.

Min entered without knocking or being announced, of course. The Maidens sometimes looked at her oddly, but whatever Sulin had said, or maybe Melaine, Min was now on the short list of those sent on in whatever he was doing. She took advantage, too; once already she had insisted on taking a stool beside his bathtub and talking as if nothing were out of the ordinary at all. Now she just paused to fill herself a goblet of punch and dropped into his lap with a little bounce. A faint sheen of sweat glistened on her face. She would not even try to learn how to ignore the heat, just laughing and saying she was not Aes Sedai and had no plans to be. He had become her favorite chair for these visits, it seemed, but he was certain if he merely pretended not to notice, she would give up her game sooner or later. That was why he had hid as best he could in his bathwater instead of blindfolding her with Air. Once she knew she was affecting him, she would never stop the joke. Besides, much as it shamed him to admit it about Min, having a girl on his knees did feel nice. He was not made of wood.

“Did you have a good talk with Faile?”

“It didn’t last long. Her father came and got her, and she was too busy flinging arms around his neck to notice me. I went for a little walk after.”

“You didn’t like her?” he said, and Min’s eyes widened, her lashes making them look even larger. Women never expected a man to see or understand anything they did not want him to.

“It isn’t that I dislike her exactly,” she said drawing the words out. “It’s just. . . . Well, she wants what she wants when she wants it, and she will not take no for an answer. I pity poor Perrin, married to her. Do you know what she wanted with me? To make sure I had no designs on her precious husband. You may not have noticed—men never see these things—” She cut off, looking up at him suspiciously through those long lashes. He had showed he could see some things, after all. Once she was satisfied he did not mean to laugh, or bring it up, she went on. “I could see at a glance he’s besotted with her, the poor fool. And she with him, for all the good it will do him. I don’t think he would even look twice at another woman, but she doesn’t believe it, not if the other woman looks first anyway. He’s found his falcon, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she kills him when the hawk appears.” Her breath caught, and she glanced up at him again then busied herself drinking from the goblet.

She would tell him what she meant if he asked. He remembered her as saying nothing of her viewings unless they concerned him, but if that was so, she had changed for some reason. She would view anyone he asked now, and tell him everything she saw. Yet doing so made her uncomfortable.

Shut up! he shouted at Lews Therin. *Go away! You're dead!* It had no effect; it often did not, now. That voice went on mumbling, maybe about being betrayed by friends, maybe about betraying them.

"Did you see anything that concerns me?" he asked.

With a grateful grin, Min settled companionably against his chest—well, she probably meant it to be companionable; or then again; very likely not—and began talking between sips of punch. "When you two were together, I saw those fireflies and the darkness stronger than ever. Um. I like melon punch. But with the two of you in the same room, the fireflies were holding their own instead of being eaten faster than they can swarm, the way they do when you're alone. And something else I saw when you were together. Twice he's going to have to be there, or you. . . ." She peered into her goblet so he could not see her face. "If he's not, something bad will happen to you." Her voice sounded small and frightened. "Very bad."

Much as he would have liked to know more—like when and where and what—she would have told him already had she known. "Then I'll just have to keep him around," he said, as cheerfully as he could. He did not like for Min to be frightened.

"I don't know that that will be enough," she mumbled into her punch. "It *will* happen if he is not there, but nothing I saw said it won't because he is. It will be very bad, Rand. Just thinking of that viewing makes me. . . ."

He turned her face up, and was surprised to see tears leaking from her eyes. "Min, I didn't know these viewings could hurt you," he said gently. "I am sorry."

"A fat lot you know, sheepherder," she muttered. Plucking a lace-edged handkerchief from her sleeve, she dabbed at her eyes. "It was just dust. You don't make Sulin dust in here often enough." The handkerchief went back with a flourish. "I should go back to The Crown of Roses. I just had to tell you what I saw about Perrin."

"Min, be careful. Maybe you shouldn't come so often. I can't think Merana would be easy on you if she discovered what you are doing."

Her grin looked very much her old self, and her eyes looked amused even if they did still shine from the tears. "You let me worry about me, sheepherder. They think I am gawking at the sights of Caemlyn like every other country simpleton. If I didn't come every day, would you know they are meeting with the nobles?" She had glimpsed that by chance on her way to the Palace yesterday, Merana appearing for an instant at the window of a palace Min had learned belonged to Lord Pelivar. There was as much chance that Pelivar and his guests were the only ones as there was that Merana had gone to clear Pelivar's drains.

"You be careful," he told her firmly. "I don't want you hurt, Min."

For a moment she studied him silently, then rose up enough to kiss him lightly on the lips. At least. . . . Well, it was light, but this was a daily ritual when she left, and he thought maybe those kisses were getting a little less light every day.

Despite all his promises to himself, he said, "I wish you wouldn't do that." Letting her sit on his knee was one thing, but kisses were carrying the joke too far.

"No tears yet, farmboy," she smiled. "No stammer." Ruffling his hair as if he were ten, she walked to the door, but as she sometimes did, she moved in a gracefully swaying fashion that might not have produced tears and stammer but certainly did make him stare however hard he tried not to. His eyes whipped to her face as she turned around. "Why, sheepherder, your face is flushed. I thought the heat never touched you now. Never mind. I wanted to tell you, I will be careful. I'll see you tomorrow. Be sure to put on clean stockings."

Rand let out a long breath once the door was firmly shut behind her. Clean stockings? He put on clean every day! There were only two choices. He could keep pretending she was having no effect until she quit, or he could resign himself to stammering. Or maybe to begging; she might stop if he begged, but then she would have that to tease him with, and Min did like teasing. The only other option—keeping their time together short, being cold and distant—was out of the question. She was a friend; he could as well have been cold toward. . . . Aviendha and Elayne were the names that came to mind, and they did not fit. Toward Mat or Perrin. The only thing he did not understand was why he still felt so comfortable around her. He should not, with her taunting him in this way, but he did.

Lews Therin's maundering had grown louder from the moment the Aes Sedai were mentioned, and now he said quite clearly, *If they are plotting with the nobles, I have to do something about them.*

Go away, Rand commanded.

Nine are too dangerous, even untrained. Too dangerous. Can't allow them. No. Oh, no.

Go away, Lews Therin!

I am not dead! the voice howled. *I deserve death, but I am alive! Alive! Alive!*

You are dead! Rand shouted back in his head. *You are dead, Lews Therin!*

The voice dwindled, still howling *Alive!* when it faded from hearing.

Shaking, Rand got up and refilled his goblet, draining the punch in one long swallow. Sweat dripped from his face, and his shirt clung to him. Finding the concentration again was an effort. Lews Therin was growing more persistent. One thing was certain. If Merana was plotting with the nobles, especially the nobles ready to declare rebellion if he did not produce Elayne soon enough to satisfy them, then he did have to do something. Unfortunately, he had no idea what.

Kill them, Lews Therin whispered. *Nine are too dangerous, but if I kill some, if I chase them away . . . kill them . . . make them fear me . . . I will not die again . . .*

I deserve death, but I want to live. . . . He began to weep, but the whispered rambling continued.

Rand filled his goblet again and tried not to listen.

When the Origan Gate into the Inner City came into sight, Demira Eriff slowed. A number of men in the crowded street eyed her admiringly as they squeezed past, and for perhaps the thousandth time she made a note to stop wearing dresses from her native Arad Doman, and for the thousandth time promptly forgot it. Dresses were hardly important—she had been having the same six duplicated for years—and if a man who did not realize she was Aes Sedai became too impudent, it was always a simple matter to let him know who he was being saucy to. That got them out of her hair quickly enough, usually as fast as they could run.

Right then all she was interested in was the Origan Gate, a great white marble arch in the gleaming white wall, the stream of people, carts and wagons passing through it watched by a dozen Aielmen she suspected were not so desultory as they appeared at first glance. They might recognize an Aes Sedai on sight. Surprising people did sometimes. Besides, she had been followed from The Crown of Roses; those coats and breeches made to fade into rock and brush stood out on a city street. So even had she wanted to enter the Inner City, even had she been willing to risk Merana's wrath by entering without first asking al'Thor's permission, she would not have.

How that did gall, Aes Sedai being required to ask a man’s *permission.* All she wanted was a sight of one Milam Harnder, Second Librarian in the Royal Palace, and her agent for nearly thirty years.

The library in the Palace here could not compare with that in the White Tower, or the Royal Library in Cairhien, or the Terhana Library in Bandar Eban, but she might as well wish to fly as for access to one of those. Still, if her message had reached Milam, he would have begun searching for the books she wanted. The Palace library might well have some information about the Seals on the Dark One’s prison, perhaps even cataloged sources, though that might be too much to hope. Most libraries had volumes lying in corners that should have been recorded long ago yet somehow had remained forgotten for a hundred years, or five hundred, sometimes even more. Most libraries held treasures even the librarians did not suspect.

She waited patiently, letting the crowd flow by her, attending only to the people coming out of the gate, but she did not see Milam’s bald head and round face. At last she sighed. Plainly he had not received her message; if he had, he would have made whatever excuse was necessary to be there at the appointed time. She was going to have to wait on her turn to accompany Merana to the Palace and hope young al’Thor would give her permission—permission again!—to search in the library.

Turning away from the gate, her eyes chanced to meet those of a tall, lean-faced fellow in a carter’s vest who was gazing at her much too admiringly. When their eyes met, he winked!

She was not going to put up with that all the way back to the inn. *I really must remember to have some plain dresses made*, she thought, wondering why she had never done it before. Luckily, she had been in Caemlyn before, some years ago, and Stevan would be waiting at The Crown of Roses, a beacon she could use to guide her if it came to that. She slipped into the narrow shaded gap between a cutler’s shop and a tavern.

The narrow alleyways of Caemlyn had been muddy the last time she was in them, but even dry, the deeper she went, the more unfortunate the smell. The walls were blank, with never a window and seldom a cramped door or narrow gate, and those with the look of not having been open in a long time. Scrawny cats peered at her silently from atop barrels and back walls, and stray dogs with knobby ribs laid back their ears, sometimes growling before they skulked off down a crossing run, as alleys were called here. She felt no worry about being scratched or bitten. Cats seemed to sense something about Aes Sedai; she had never heard of an Aes Sedai being scratched by even the most feral cat. Dogs were hostile, true, almost as if they thought Aes Sedai *were* cats, but they almost always slinked away after a little show.

There were far more dogs and cats in the runs than she remembered, and gaunter, but many fewer people. She had not seen anyone at all before she rounded a corner to find five or six Aielmen coming toward her, laughing and talking among themselves. They seemed startled to see her.

“Pardon, Aes Sedai,” one of them muttered, and they all pressed against the side of the run, though there was plenty of room.

Wondering if they were the same who had followed her—one of those faces looked familiar, that of a squat fellow with villainous eyes—she nodded and murmured thanks as she started past.

The spear going into her side was such a shock she did not even cry out. Frantically she reached for *saidar*, but something else pierced her side, and she was down in the dust. That remembered face was thrust into hers, black eyes mocking, growling something she ignored as she tried to reach *saidar*, tried to. . . . Darkness closed in.

When Perrin and Faile finally left the interminable interview with her parents, that odd serving woman, Sulin, was waiting for them in the hallway. Sweat drenched Perrin, making dark patches on his coat, and he felt as if he had run ten miles while being pummeled every stride. Faile had a smile on her face and a spring in her step; she looked radiant, beautiful, and as proud of herself as when she brought the Watch Hill men just as the Trollocs were about to overrun Emond’s Field. Sulin curtsied every time one of them looked at her, nearly falling over every single time; that leathery face with its scar down her cheek was fixed in an obsequious smile that seemed ready to shatter at a breath. Passing Maidens flashed handtalk at one another, and Sulin curtsied to them as well, though grinding her teeth loud enough for Perrin to hear clearly. Even Faile began to eye her warily.

Once the woman led them to their rooms, a sitting room and a bedchamber with a canopied bed big enough for ten and a long marble balcony overlooking a fountained courtyard, she insisted on explaining or showing them everything, even what they could see. Their horses had been stabled and curried. Their saddlebags were unpacked and hung in the wardrobe with Perrin’s axe belt, most of the scant contents laid in the drawers of a chest-on-chest in a precise array. Perrin's axe was propped beside the gray marble fireplace as though to chop kindling. One of the two silver pitchers glistening with condensation held cool tea flavored with mint, the other plum punch. Two gilt-framed mirrors on the wall were pointed out and touched, one over a table where Faile's ivory comb and brush were laid, and a great stand-mirror with carved uprights that a blind man could not have missed.

While Sulin was still explaining about bathwater being brought, and copper tubs, Perrin pressed a gold crown into her calloused palm. "Thank you," he said, "but if you will leave us now. . . ." For a moment he thought she was going to throw the fat coin at him, but instead he got another wavering curtsy and a slammed door as she departed.

"I suppose whoever trains the servants doesn't know her job," Faile said. "That was very good, by the way. Polite but firm. If you would only do that with *our* servants." As she turned her slim back, her voice dropped to a murmur. "Will you unbutton me?"

He always felt very thick-fingered undoing her small buttons, half-afraid he was going to pop them off or tear her dress. On the other hand, he did enjoy undressing his wife. She usually had a maid do it, because of lost buttons he was sure. "Did you mean any of that nonsense you told your mother?"

"Have you not tamed me, my husband," she said without looking at him, "and taught me to perch on your wrist when you call? Do I not run to please you? Am I not obedient to your smallest gesture?" She smelled amused. She certainly sounded amused. The only thing was, she sounded as if she meant it, too, the same as when she told her mother practically the same thing, head high and as proud as she could be. Women were strange, that was all there was to it. And her mother . . . ! For that matter, her father!

Maybe he should change the subject. What was that Bashere had mentioned? "Faile, what is a broken crown?" He was sure that had been it.

She made a vexed noise, and suddenly began to smell upset. "Rand is gone from the Palace, Perrin."

"And if he is?" Bending to peer at a tiny mother-of-pearl button, he frowned at her back. "How do you know?"

"The Maidens. Bain and Chiad taught me some of their handtalk. Don't let on, Perrin. From the way they behaved when they heard there were Aiel here, I think maybe they shouldn't have. Besides, it might be good to understand what the Maidens are saying without them knowing it. They seem thick around Rand.” She twisted around to give him a ro guish look and stroke his beard. “Those first Maidens we met thought you have nice shoulders, but they did not think much of this. Aielwomen do not know a good beard when they see one.”

Shaking his head, he waited until she turned again, then pocketed the button that had come off when she twisted. Maybe she would not notice; he had gone a week with a button missing from his coat, and had not known until she pointed it out. As for beards, from what Gaul said, Aiel always shaved clean; Bain and Chiad had thought his beard a subject for odd jokes. He had thought of shaving himself more than once in this heat. But Faile did like the beard. “What about Rand? Why should it matter if he’s left the Palace?”

“Just that you should know what he’s doing behind your back. Obviously you didn’t know he was going off. Remember, he *is* the Dragon Reborn. That is very like a king, a king of kings, and kings sometimes use up even friends, by accident and on purpose.”

“Rand wouldn’t do that. What are you suggesting, anyway? That I spy on him?”

He meant it as a joke, but she said, “Not you, my love. Spying is a wife’s work.”

“Faile!” Straightening so fast he nearly yanked another button loose, he took her shoulders and turned her to face him. “You are not going to spy on Rand, do you hear me?” She put on a dogged look, mouth drawing down, eyes narrowing—she practically reeked of stubbornness—but he could be dogged, too. “Faile, I want to see some of that obedience you were boasting about.” As far as he could see, she did what he said when she good and well pleased and otherwise not, and forget whether he was in the right or not. “I mean it, Faile. I want your promise. I’ll be no part of anyb—”

“I promise, my heart,” she said, placing her fingers over his mouth. “I promise I will not spy on Rand. You see, I am obedient to my lord husband. Do you remember how many grandchildren my mother said she expects?”

The sudden change of direction made him blink. But she had promised; that was the important thing. “Six, I think. I lost count when she started telling us which were to be boys and which girls.” Lady Deira had had some startlingly frank advice on how this was to be achieved; thankfully he had missed most of it from wondering whether he should leave the room till she finished. Faile had just nodded away as though it was the most natural thing in the world, with her husband and her father there.

"At least six," she said with a truly wicked grin. "Perrin, she will be looking over our shoulders unless I can tell her she can expect the first soon, and I thought, if you ever managed to undo the rest of my buttons. . . ." After months of marriage she still blushed, but that grin never faded. "The presence of a real bed after so many weeks makes me forward as a farmgirl at harvest."

Sometimes he wondered about these Saldaean farmgirls she was always bringing up. Blushes or no blushes, if they were as forward as Faile when he and she were alone, no crops would ever be harvested in Saldaea. He broke off two more buttons getting her dress undone, and she did not mind a bit. She actually managed to tear his shirt.

Demira was surprised to open her eyes, surprised to find herself lying on the bed in her own room in The Crown of Roses. She expected to be dead, not undressed and tucked under a linen sheet. Stevan was sitting on a stool at the foot of her bed, managing to look relieved, concerned and stern all at the same time. Her slender Cairhienin Warder was a head shorter than she and nearly twenty years younger for all the gray streaking his temples, but sometimes he tried to behave like a father, all but claiming she could not take care of herself without him holding her hand. She very much feared this incident would give him the high ground in that struggle for months to come. Merana was on one side of the bed looking grave, Berenicia on the other. The plump Yellow sister always looked grave, but now she looked absolutely somber.

"How?" Demira managed. Light, but she felt weak. Healing did that, but putting her arms outside the sheet was an effort. She must have been very close to death. Healing left no scars, but memories and weakness were quite enough.

"A man came into the common room," Stevan said, "claiming he wanted some ale. He said he had seen Aiel following an Aes Sedai—he described you exactly—and saying they were going to kill her. As soon as he spoke, I felt. . . ." He grimaced bleakly.

"Stevan asked me to come," Berenicia said, "he all but dragged me—and we ran the whole way. Truth, I was not certain we were in time until you opened your eyes just now."

“Of course,” Merana said in a flat voice, “it was all part of the same trap, the same warning. The Aiel and the man. A pity we let him get away, but we were so concerned over you that he managed to slip off before anyone thought to hold him.”

Demira had been thinking about Milam and how this was going to affect the search in the library, about how long it was going to take Stevan to calm down, and what Merana was saying did not really penetrate until the last. “Hold him? A warning? What are you talking about, Merana?” Berenicia muttered something about her understanding if they showed it to her in a book; Berenicia had an acid tongue at times.

“Have you seen anyone come into the common room for a drink since we arrived, Demira?” Merana asked patiently.

It was true; she had not. One or even two Aes Sedai made little difference to an inn’s custom in Caemlyn, but nine was another matter. Mistress Cinchonine had remarked on it openly of late. “Then it was intended you should know Aiel had killed me. Or maybe that I was to be found before I died.” She had just recalled what that villainous-faced fellow had growled at her. “I was told to tell you all to stay away from al’Thor. Exact words. ‘Tell the other witches to stay away from the Dragon Reborn.’ I could hardly deliver that message dead, could I? How were my wounds placed?”

Stevan shifted on his stool, darting a pained look at her. “Both missed any organ that would have killed you on the spot, but the amount of blood you lost—”

“What are we to do now?” Demira cut in, directing her question to Merana, before he could start in on how foolish she had been to let herself be caught that way.

“I say we should find the Aiel responsible,” Berenicia said firmly, “and make an example of them.” She came from the Border Marches of Shienar, and Aiel raids had been a feature of her growing up. “Seonid agrees with me.”

“Oh, no!” Demira protested. “I will not have my first chance to study the Aiel ruined. They’ll hardly say two words as it is. It was my blood, after all. Besides, unless the man who gave you warning was Aiel too, it seems obvious to me that they acted under orders, and I think there is only one man in Caemlyn who orders Aiel.”

“The rest of us,” Merana said, eyeing Berenicia firmly, “agree with you, Demira. I want to hear no more talk of wasting time and energy finding one pack of hounds among hundreds while the man who set them to hunt walks about grinning.” Berenicia bristled a little before bowing her head, but she always did.

“We must at least show al’Thor he cannot treat Aes Sedai in this fashion,” Berenicia said sharply. A glance from Merana moderated her tone, though she did not sound happy. “Yet not so sharply that it ruins everything we’ve planned, of course.”

Demira steepled her fingers against her lips and sighed. She did feel weak. “A thought occurs to me. If we charge him openly with what he’s done, he will deny it, of course, and we have no proof to fling in his face. Not only that, it might be wise to let it be learned that he feels free to hunt Aes Sedai like rabbits.” Merana and Berenicia exchanged glances and nodded quite firmly. Poor Stevan frowned furiously; he had never let anyone walk away from hurting her. “Might it not be better to say nothing? That will certainly make him ponder and sweat. Why haven’t we said anything? What are we going to do? I don’t know how much we can do, but we can at least make him look over his shoulder.”

“A valid point,” Verin said from the doorway. “Al’Thor has to respect Aes Sedai, or there will be no working with him.” She motioned Stevan to leave—he waited for Demira’s nod, of course—then took his stool. “I thought since you were the target—” She frowned at Merana and Berenicia. “Will you sit down? I do not mean to get a crick in my neck staring up at you.” Verin went on while they were still placing the room’s only chair and a second stool beside the bed. “Since you were the target, Demira, you should help decide how Master al’Thor is to be taught his lesson. And you seem to have made a beginning already.”

“What I think,” Merana began, but Verin cut her off.

“In a moment, Merana. Demira has the right to first suggestions.”

Demira’s breath caught as she waited for the explosion. Merana always seemed to want her decisions approved by Verin, which was natural enough under the circumstances, if awkward, but this was the first time Verin had simply taken charge. In front of others, at least. Yet all Merana did was stare at Verin for a moment, lips compressed, and then bow her head. Demira wondered whether this meant Merana was going to resign the embassy to

Verin; there did not seem anything else she could do, now. All eyes turned to Demira, waiting. Verin’s were particularly penetrating.

“If we want him to worry over what we intend to do, I suggest no one go to the Palace today. Perhaps without any explanation, or if that is too strong, with one he must see through.” Merana nodded. More importantly, as things were turning out, Verin did as well. Demira decided to venture a little more. “Maybe we should send no one for several days, to let him stew. I’m sure watching Min will tell us when he is nicely on the boil, and. . . .” Whatever they decided to do, she wanted to be part of it. It *had* been her blood, after all, and the Light only knew how long she would have to put off her researches in the library now. That last was almost as much reason to teach al’Thor a lesson as his forgetting who Aes Sedai were.

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CHAPTER 47

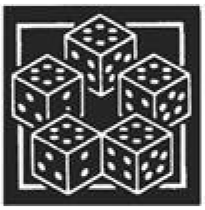

The Wandering Woman

Mat wanted a quiet ride to Ebou Dar, and he got one, in a way. But traveling with six women, four of them Aes Sedai, he had plenty of irritations.

They reached the distant forest that first day with the sun still fairly well up in the sky, and rode several hours beneath a high canopy of mostly bare branches, with dead leaves and dry branches crunching under the horses’ hooves, until making camp near a dwindling stream just before sunset. Lantern-jawed Harnan, the file leader with the hawk tattooed on his cheek, saw to getting the troopers from the Band settled, the horses curried and hobbled, sentries set and fires lit. Nerim and Lopin bustled about moaning over not having brought tents, and how was a man to know they would be spending nights on the ground when his master said nothing, and if his master caught his death of something, it was not his fault. Skinny and stout, they managed to sound like echoes. Vanin took care of himself, of course, though he did keep an eye on Olver and even curried the parts of Wind that the boy could not reach even using his saddle for a stool. Everybody took care of Olver.

The women shared the camp, but in a way their area was as separate as if it had been fifty paces away. An invisible line seemed to split the campsite in half, with invisible signs telling the troopers not to cross. Nynaeve and Elayne and the two white-haired women gathered around their own fire with Aviendha and the golden-haired Hunter, rarely even glancing toward where Mat and his men were laying out their blankets. The murmured conversation Mat heard, as much as he could make out, had to do with Vandene and Adeleas’ concern that Aviendha meant to lead her horse all the way to Ebou Dar instead of riding. Thom tried to get a word in with Elayne and received an absent pat on the cheek, of all things, before he was sent back to sit with Juilin and Jaem, the stringy old Warder, who belonged to Vandene and seemed to spend all of his time sharpening his sword.

Mat had no objection to the women staying apart. A tension he could not understand hung around them. At least, it did around Nynaeve and Elayne, and the Hunter seemed to be infected too. They sometimes stared at the Aes Sedai—the other Aes Sedai; he was not sure he would ever become used to thinking of Nynaeve and Elayne that way—a bit too intently, though Vandene and Adeleas appeared as oblivious as Aviendha. Whatever the reason, Mat wanted no part of it. It smelled like an argument burning to leap out, and whether it burst into flame or smoldered underground, a wise man stepped wide of women's arguments. Medallion or no medallion, a wise man stepped very wide if the women were Aes Sedai.

A small irritant that, and so was the next, which was his own fault. Food. The smell of lamb and some sort of soup quickly wafted from the Aes Sedai's fire. Expecting a quick arrival in Ebou Dar, he had said nothing about food to Vanin and the others, which meant they had a little dried meat and hard cakes of flatbread in their saddlebags. Mat had seen hardly a bird or squirrel, let alone sign of a deer, so hunting was out of the question. When Nerim set up a small folding table and stool for Mat—Lopin was putting up another for Nalesean—Mat told him to share out what he had tucked away in the packhorses' panniers. The result was not as good as he hoped.

Nerim stood by Mat's table, pouring water from a silver pitcher as if it were wine and mournfully watching delicacies vanish down the trooper's gullets. "Pickled quail eggs, my Lord," he would announce in a funereal tone. "They would have gone very well for my Lord's breakfast in Ebou Dar." And, "The best smoked tongue, my Lord. If my Lord only knew what I went through to find honey-smoked tongue in that wretched village, with no time to find anything and all the best taken by the Aes Sedai." Actually, his biggest grievance seemed to be that Lopin had found potted larks for Nalesean. Every time Nalesean crunched one between his teeth, Lopin's smug smile grew wider and Nerim's face grew longer. For that matter, it was plain from the way some of the men sniffed the air that they would rather have had a slice of lamb and a bowl of soup than any amount of honey-smoked tongue or goose-liver pudding. Olver stared at the women's fire with open wistfulness.

"You want to eat with them?" Mat asked him. "It's all right, if you do."

“I like kippered eel,” Olver said stoutly. In a darker tone, he added, “Anyway, she might put something in it.” His eyes followed Aviendha every time she shifted, and he seemed to have taken against the Hunter too, perhaps because she spent a good bit of time in obviously friendly chat with the Aiel woman. Aviendha at least must have felt the boy’s stare, because she glanced at him and frowned.

Wiping his chin and eyeing the Aes Sedai’s fire—come to think of it, he would rather have had lamb and soup himself—Mat noticed that Jaem was missing. Vanin grumped about being sent out again, but Mat sent him for the same reason he had had the man scout ahead during the day despite the fact that Jaem did too. He did not want to rely on what the Aes Sedai chose to tell him. He might have trusted Nynaeve—he did not think she would actually lie to him; as Wisdom, Nynaeve had always been death on anyone lying—but she kept peeping at him past Adeleas’ shoulder in a very suspicious way.

To his surprise, Elayne rose as soon as she finished eating and came gliding across that invisible line. Some women just seemed to skim over the ground. “Will you walk aside with me, Master Cauthon?” she asked coolly. Not polite, exactly, but not exactly rude either.

He motioned her to lead the way, and she floated out into the moon-shadowed trees beyond the sentries. That golden hair nestled about her shoulders, framing a face to make any man stare, and the moonlight softened her arrogance. If she had been anything but what she was. . . . And he did not mean just Aes Sedai, nor even that she belonged to Rand. Rand did seem to be tangling himself with the worst sort of woman for a man who had always known how to handle them. Then Elayne began talking, and he forgot everything else.

“You have a *ter’angreal*,” she said without preamble, and without looking at him. She just glided along, rustling the leaves on the ground, as if she expected him to heel like a hunting hound. “Some hold that *ter’angreal* are rightfully the property of Aes Sedai, but I do not require you to surrender it. No one will take it from you. Such things need study, however. For that reason, I want you to give the *ter’angreal* to me each evening when we stop. I will return it each morning before we start out.”

Mat gave her a sidelong look. She was serious, no doubt about it. “That’s very kind of you, letting me keep what’s mine. Only, what makes you think I have one of these . . . what did you call it? A ter-something?”

Oh, she did stiffen up at that, and looked at him too. He was surprised not to see fire leap from her eyes to light up the night. Her voice, on the other hand, was purest crystal ice. “You know very *well* what a *ter’angreal* is, Master Cauthon. I heard Moiraine speak of them to you in the Stone of Tear.”

“The Stone?” he said blandly. “Yes, I remember the Stone. A fine time we all had there. Do you remember something in the Stone that gives you a right to make demands of me? I don’t. I am just here to keep you and Nynaeve from getting holes poked in your hides in Ebou Dar. You can ask Rand about *ter’angreal* after I deliver you to him.”

For a long moment she stared at him as though meaning to beat him down by force of will, then turned on her heel without another word. He followed her back to the camp and was surprised to see her walk along the line of hobbled horses. She examined the fires and how the blankets were laid out, shook her head over the remains of the troopers’ meal. He had no idea what she was about until she returned to him with her chin raised.

“Your men have done very well, Master Cauthon,” she said, loud enough for everyone to hear. “In general I am more than satisfied. But if you had planned ahead properly, they would not have had to gorge themselves on foods that will at the very least keep them awake tonight. Still, on the whole, you have done well. I’m sure you will think ahead in future.” Cool as you please she strode back to her own fire before he could say a word, leaving him staring.

Had that been the whole of it, though, the bloody Daughter-Heir thinking he was one of her subjects, and her and Nynaeve tight-lipped around Vandene and Adeleas—had that been all, he would have danced a jig. Right after Elayne’s “inspection,” before he could even reach his blankets, the foxhead went cold.

He was so shocked that he stood there staring down at his chest before he even thought to look toward the Aes Sedai’s fire. There they stood in a row along that unseen dividing line, Aviendha as well. Elayne murmured something he could not make out and the two white-haired Aes Sedai nodded, Adeleas all the while hastily dipping a pen in an inkjar in a sort of scabbard at her belt and jotting notes in a small book. Nynaeve was tugging her braid and muttering to herself.

It only lasted a few moments altogether. Then the chill faded, and they returned to their fire talking softly among themselves. Now and then one of them would glance in his direction until he finally bedded himself down.

The second day they joined a road, and Jaem put his color-shifting cloak away. It was a broad stretch of hard-packed dirt where sometimes an edge of old paving stone still showed, but the highway did not make travel that much faster. For one thing, it curved through increasingly hilly forest. Some of those hills deserved the name of small mountain at least, jagged things with sheer cliffs and stony spires sticking up through the trees. For another, a thin yet steady stream of people drifted in both directions, mostly clumps of grubby blank-faced folk who barely seemed to have sense to step out of the way of a farmer's high-wheeled ox-cart, much less a merchant's train with its canvas-topped wagons clipping along behind teams of six or eight horses. Farmhouses and barns of pale stone appeared clinging to the slopes of the hills, and midway through the third day, they saw the first village of white-plastered buildings with flat roofs of pale reddish tile.

The pinpricks kept up, though. Elayne continued her evening inspections. When he told her sarcastically that he was glad she was pleased, in the second night's camp beside the road, she smiled one of those deliberate regal smiles and said, "You should be, Master Cauthon," sounding as if he had meant every word!

Once they began stopping at inns, she inspected the horses in the stables *and* the troopers' sleeping places in the lofts. Asking her not to brought a coolly arched eyebrow and no answer. Telling her not to brought not even the eyebrow; she just plain ignored him altogether. She told him to do things he had already decided to do—such as having all the horses' shoes checked at the first inn that had a farrier—and, more grating, things he would have seen to had he known of them before her. How she discovered Tad Kandel was trying to hide a boil on his bottom, Mat did not know, or that Lawdrin Mendair had no fewer than five flasks of brandy secreted in his saddlebags. Irritating did not begin to describe doing a thing after she told him to, but Kandel's boil had to be lanced—some of the Band had adopted Mat's attitude toward being Healed—and Mendair's brandy poured out, and a dozen things more.

Mat almost prayed for her to tell him to do something that did not need doing, just once, so he could tell her no. Emphatically, absolutely, no! Another demand for the *ter'angreal* would have been perfect, but she never mentioned it again. He explained to the troopers that they had no obligation to obey her, and he never actually caught one at it, but they began grinning in a pleased way at her compliments on how well they cared for their horses and puffed out their chests when she told them they looked like good soldiers to her. The day Mat saw Vanin knuckle his forehead to her, heard him murmur, “Thank you, my Lady,” without a trace of irony, that day Mat nearly swallowed his tongue.

He tried to be pleasant, but none of the women were having any, not just Elayne. Aviendha told him that he had no honor, of all things, and if he could not show more respect to Elayne, she herself would undertake to teach him respect. Aviendha! The woman he still suspected was waiting her chance to slit Elayne’s throat! She called Elayne her near-sister! Vandene and Adeleas peered at him as if he were a strange bug pinned to a board. He offered to shoot with the Hunter for coin or the fun of it—the bow she carried must have fevered her imagination; her name as a Hunter was Birgitte—but she just gave him a very odd look and declined. For that matter, she stayed clear of him after that. She stuck to Elayne’s side like a burr except when Elayne came near him. And Nynaeve. . . .

All the way from Salidar she avoided him as if he smelled bad. Their third night on the way, the first at an inn, a little place called The Marriage Knife, Mat saw her in the tile-roofed stable feeding a wizened carrot to her plump mare and decided that whatever else was going on, he could at least talk to her about Bode. It was not every day a man’s sister went off to become Aes Sedai, and Nynaeve would know what Bode was facing, “Nynaeve,” he said, striding toward her, “I want to talk to you—” He got no further.

She practically leaped straight up in the air, and came down shaking a fist at him, though she immediately hid it in a fold of her skirts. “You leave me alone, Mat Cauthon,” she all but shouted. “Do you hear me? You leave me alone!” And she scurried out, sidling past him and bristling so that he expected to see her braid stand up like a cat’s tail. After that, he not only smelled bad, he had some sickness that was both loathsome and catching. If he so much as tried to come near her, she hid behind Elayne and glared at him past the other woman’s shoulder for all the world as if she was about to stick her tongue out at him. Women were plain mad; that was all.

At least Thom and Juilin were willing to ride alongside him during the day, whenever Elayne did not demand their attention. She did sometimes, just to keep them away from him, he was sure, though he could not fathom the why. Once they found inns, the pair were more than happy to share a mug of ale or punch with him and Nalesean of an evening. They were country common rooms, brick-walled and quiet, where watching a brindle cat was the entertainment and the innkeeper herself served table, inevitably a woman with hips that looked as though a man's fingers might break trying a pinch. The talk was of Ebou Dar mainly, of which Thom knew a good deal despite never having been there. Nalesean was more than willing to recount his one visit there as often as asked, though he wanted to focus on duels he had seen and the gambling on horse races. Juilin had stories from men who knew men who had been there, if not three or four removed, that sounded beyond belief until Thom or Nalesean confirmed them. Men fought duels over women in Ebou Dar, and *women* over *men*, and in both cases the prize—that was the word used—agreed to go with the winner. Men gave women a knife when they married, asking her to use it to kill him if he displeased her—*displeased* her!—and a woman killing a man was considered justified unless it was proven differently. In Ebou Dar, men walked small around women, and forced a smile at what they would kill another man for. Elayne would love it. So would Nynaeve.

Something else came out in those talks. Mat had not imagined Nynaeve and Elayne's displeasure at Vandene and Adeleas, however they tried to hide it. Nynaeve apparently contented herself with glaring and mumbling under her breath. Elayne did not frown or mutter, but she did continually try to take charge; she seemed to think she was already Queen of Andor. However many years those Aes Sedai faces hid, Vandene and Adeleas had to be old enough to be the younger women's mothers if not grandmothers. Mat would not have been surprised to learn they were Aes Sedai when Nynaeve and Elayne were born. Even Thom could not fathom the tension, and he did seem to comprehend a great many things for a simple gleeman. Elayne had snapped Thom's nose off and *told* him he did not understand, and could not, when he tried to remonstrate with her gently. It seemed the two older Aes Sedai were remarkably tolerant. Adeleas often did not appear to register the fact when Elayne gave orders, and both she and Vandene seemed surprised when they did notice.

"Vandene said, 'Well, if you really want to, child, of course we will,' " Juilin muttered into his ale, recounting one incident. "You would think somebody who was only Accepted just a few days ago would be pleased. Elayne's eyes minded me of a winter storm. Nynaeve ground her teeth so hard, I thought they'd crack."

They were in the common room of The Marriage Knife. Vanin and Harnan and others occupied benches at other tables, together with a number of locals. The men were in long vests, some bright enough for a Tinker and often with no shirt, the women in pale dresses with deep narrow necklines, their skirts gathered up to the knee on one side to expose petticoats colorful enough to make the vests fade. Many of the men and all of the women wore large hoop earrings, and on their hands usually three or four rings sparkling with colored glass. Men and women alike fingered long curved knives stuck through their belts and eyed the strangers darkly. There were two merchant's trains from Amadicia stopped at The Marriage Knife, but the merchants had eaten in their rooms, and their drivers remained with the wagons. Elayne and Nynaeve and the rest of the women were upstairs too.

"Women are . . . different," Nalesean said, laughing, in response to Juilin, though he directed the words at Mat, fingering the point of his beard. He was not usually so stiff with commoners, but Juilin was a Tairen commoner, and that seemed to make a difference, especially since Juilin made a point of staring when he spoke to him. "There's a peasant saying in Tear. 'An Aes Sedai is ten women in one skin.' Peasants have a good bit of wisdom sometimes, burn my soul if they don't."

"At least no one has done anything, shall we say, drastic," Thom said, "though I thought it was close when Elayne let slip that she had made Birgitte her first Warder."

"The Hunter?" Mat exclaimed. Several of the locals looked at him hard, and he lowered his voice. "She's a Warder as well? Elayne's Warder?" That certainly explained a few things.

Thom and Juilin exchanged looks over the rims of their mugs.

"She will be gratified to know you puzzled out that she is a Hunter for the Horn," Thom said, wiping ale from his mustaches. "Yes, she is, and a right set-to it nearly caused, too. Jaem took to her right away like a younger sister, but Vandene and Adeleas. . . ." He sighed heavily. "Neither was very pleased Elayne had already chosen a Warder—apparently most Aes Sedai go years before finding one—and they especially were not pleased she chose a woman. And their not being pleased has Elayne's back up even more."

"They don't seem to like doing things that have not been done before," Juilin added.

“A woman Warder,” Nalesean muttered. “I knew everything would change with the Dragon Reborn, but a woman Warder?”

Mat shrugged. “I suppose she’ll do well enough as long as she really can shoot that bow. Down the wrong hole?” he asked Juilin, who had begun choking on his ale. “Give me a good bow over a sword any day. Better a quarterstaff, but a bow is just fine. I only hope she doesn’t try to get in my way when it’s time to take Elayne to Rand.”

“I think she can shoot it.” Thom leaned across the table to slap Juilin on the back. “I think she can, Mat.”

But if Nynaeve and the others had any thoughts of hair-pulling—and Mat would not want to be within ten miles of that, foxhead or no—they showed none of it to him. All he saw was a solid front, and more attempts to channel at him, beginning while he was saddling Pips the morning after the first attempt. Luckily, he was busy fending off Nerim, who thought saddling Mat’s horse was his job and implied he could do it better, and the flash of cold lasted only a moment, so Mat gave no outward indication that he had noticed anything at all. That, he determined, would be his response. No stares, no glares, no accusations. He would ignore them and let them cook in their own broth.

He had plenty of opportunity to ignore them. The silver medallion went cold twice more before they found the road, then several times more during the day, that evening, and every day and evening thereafter. Sometimes it came and went in two blinks of an eye, and sometimes he was sure it went on for an hour. He could never tell which one was responsible, of course. Or usually not. Once, when the heat had given him a rash on his back and the scarf around his neck seemed about to saw his head off, he caught Nynaeve looking at him when the medallion grew cold. She was scowling so hard that a passing farmer, who was poking his ox with a stick, trying to make the animal lumber faster, peered over his shoulder at her as though he feared that gaze might turn on him any moment and maybe kill his ox in the cart shafts. Only when Mat scowled back at her, she gave a jump and almost fell out of her saddle, and the chill vanished. For the rest, he just could not say. At times he might see two or three of them watching him, including Aviendha, who was still walking and leading her horse. Others, by the time he peeked, were talking among themselves or looking at an eagle drifting across the cloudless sky or a great black bear, half again as tall as a man, standing among the trees on a steep hillside in sight of the road. The only truly good thing in it was that he got the impression Elayne was not pleased. He did not know why, and he did not care. Inspecting his men. Patting him on the head with compliments. If he had been the kind of man to do that sort of thing, he would have kicked her.

In truth, though, he began to feel more than a little smug. Whatever they were doing, it had no effect on him that a touch of one of Nerim's ointments rubbed onto his chest could not cure. Nerim assured him it was not frostbite. He felt smug until the fourth afternoon. He was making his way from stabling Pips to The Southern Hoop, a scruffy two stories of white-plastered bricks in a scruffy village of white-plastered bricks and flies called So Tehar, when something soft hit him squarely between the shoulders. With the smell of horse dung in his nostrils he spun around, ready to chew a hole in a stableboy or one of So Tehar's sullen-eyed louts, knife or no knife. There was no stable-boy and no lout. Only Adeleas, busily scribbling away in her little book and nodding to herself. Her hands were quite clean.

Mat went inside and called for punch from the innkeeper, then changed his mind and had her bring brandy instead, a cloudy liquid the lanky woman insisted was made from plums, but which tasted as if it might remove rust. Juilin contented himself with a sniff, and Thom would not even do that. Even Nalesean only took one sip before asking for punch, and Nalesean would drink anything. Mat lost count of how many of the tiny pewter cups he emptied, but however many it was, it took Nerim and Lopin together to get him to bed. He had never really let himself think whether the foxhead had any limits. He had proof and more than enough that it would stop *saidar*, but if all they had to do was pick something up with the Power and throw it at him. . . . *Better than nothing*, he kept telling himself, lying on his lumpy mattress and watching moonshadows crawl across the ceiling. *A lot better than nothing*. But if he had been able to stand by himself, he would have gone back down for more brandy.

Which was why he was in a vile temper, with a tongue that seemed coated with feathers and a head that had drummers pounding away inside, and sweat pouring down him from the sun overhead, when the road topped a rise on the fifth day to reveal Ebou Dar spread out below, straddling the broad River Eldar with a great bay full of ships beyond.

His first impression of the city was white. White buildings, white palaces, white towers and spires. Domes like sharp white turnips or pears often bore bands of crimson or blue or gold, but mainly the city was white, and reflected sunlight till it almost hurt his eyes. The gate the road led to was a broad tall pointed arch in a white-plastered wall so thick that he rode in shade for twenty paces before emerging into the sun again. It seemed to be a city of squares and canals and bridges, large squares full of people with fountains or statues in the center, canals broad and narrow with men poling barges along them, bridges in every size, some low, some arching high, some big enough that shops lined their sides. Palaces with thick columned porticos stood alongside shops displaying rugs and cloth; houses of four stories with huge arched windows hidden behind louvered shutters stood beside stables and cutlers and fishmongers.

It was in one of those squares that Vandene drew rein to confer with Adeleas while Nynaeve frowned at them and Elayne stared as if icicles should have been hanging from her nose and chin. At Elayne's urging, Aviendha had climbed onto her lanky dun for the entry to the city, but now she scrambled down again as awkwardly as she had climbed on. She looked about almost as curiously as Olver, who had been wide-eyed since the city first came into view. Birgitte seemed to be trying to heel Elayne in imitation of Jaem with Vandene.

Mat took the opportunity to fan himself with his hat and look around.

The largest palace he had seen yet filled one entire side of the square, all domes and spires and colonnades three and four stories above the ground. The other three sides mixed great houses with inns and shops, each as white as the next. A statue of a woman in flowing robes, taller than an Ogier, stood on an even taller pedestal in the middle of the square, one arm raised to point south toward the sea. There were only a handful of people walking across the pale paving stones, and no wonder in that heat. A few were eating their midday meal on the lowest step of the pedestal, and pigeons and seagulls flocked about fighting for scraps. It was a picture of tranquility. Mat did not understand why he suddenly felt the dice rolling in his head.

He knew that sensation well. Sometimes he felt it when his luck was running strong in the gambling. It was always there when a battle was in the offing. And it seemed to come when there was a vital decision to make, the sort where the wrong choice might well get his throat cut.

"We will go in now, by one of the lesser gates," Vandene announced. Adeleas was nodding. "Merilille will see that we are given rooms to freshen.”

That must mean this was the Tarasin Palace, where Tylin Quintara of House Mitsobar sat on the Throne of the Winds and ruled in truth maybe as much as a hundred miles around Ebou Dar. One of the few things he had managed to learn about this trip was that the Aes Sedai were to meet one of their number in the palace, and of course Tylin. Aes Sedai would meet the Queen. Mat looked at that great heap of gleaming marble and white-plastered stone, and he thought what it would be like to stay in there. He liked palaces, usually; at least, he liked anywhere with servants and gold, and feather beds did not hurt. But a Royal Palace meant nobles every time you turned around. Mat preferred nobles a few at a time; even Nalesean could be irritating. A palace that size meant either constant wondering where Nynaeve and Elayne were or else an attempt to mount guard over them. He was not sure whether it would be worse if they let him tag along in there as a bodyguard or refused. He could almost hear Elayne saying in that cool voice, *Pray find some accommodation for Master Cauthon and my men. See they are fed and watered.* She would do it, too. She would pop in for her inspections and tell him to do whatever he was already about to. Yet if she and Nynaeve were safe from trouble anywhere, it would be inside a Queen’s Palace. Besides, what he wanted was somewhere he could put his feet up and drink punch with a girl on his knee to soothe his temples. Damp towels would be good. His head hurt. The prim-mouthed lecture Elayne had delivered that morning, about the evils of drink and setting an example, still rang in his ears. That was another reason he had to put his foot down. He had been too weak to reply, just out of bed and wondering whether he could heave himself onto Pips, and she had already gotten away with too much. If he did not put a stop to it now, she would have *him* knuckling his forehead.

All that ran through his mind in the time it took Vandene to turn her slab-sided bay gelding toward the palace. “I’ll take rooms at one of these inns for my men,” he said loudly. “If you or Elayne mean to go out in the streets, Nynaeve, you can send word, and I’ll bring a few men to walk you about.” They probably would not—nobody could top a woman for thinking she could take care of herself in a bear pit with her bare hands—but he would wager Vanin could figure out a way to know when they went out. And if not, then Juilin; a thief-catcher should know how. “That one will do.” Choosing at random, he pointed to a wide building across the square. A sign he could not make out swung over the arched doorway.

Vandene looked at Adeleas. Elayne looked at Nynaeve. Aviendha frowned at him.

He gave none of them a chance to speak, though. “Thom, Juilin, what do you say to a few mugs of punch?” Maybe water would be better; he had never drunk that much before in his life.

Thom shook his head. “Later perhaps, Mat. I should stay close in case Elayne needs me.” The almost fatherly smile he directed at her faded when he saw her staring nonplussed at Mat. Juilin did not smile—he seldom did anymore—but he too said he should stay close, maybe later.

“As you wish,” Mat said, replacing his hat. “Vanin. Vanin!” The fat man gave a start and stopped staring worshipfully at Elayne. He actually blushed! Light, the woman was a bad influence.

As Mat turned Pips, Elayne’s voice hit him in the back, even more prim than that morning. “You are not to let them drink to excess, Master Cauthon. Some men do not know when to stop. You should certainly not allow a young boy to see men in drink.”

He gritted his teeth and rode on across the square without looking back. Olver was looking at him. He was going to have to warn the men about getting drunk in front of the boy, especially Mendair. Light, but he hated her telling him what he should do!

The inn turned out to be called The Wandering Woman, but the sign over the door, and the common room, promised everything that Mat wanted. The high-ceilinged room was certainly cooler than outside, with its wide, arched windows screened behind wooden shutters carved into arabesques. There seemed to be more hole than wood, but they shaded the room. Outlanders sat among the locals, a lanky Murandian with curling mustaches, a stout Kandori with two silver chains across the chest of his coat, others Mat did not recognize offhand. A faint haze of pipe smoke filled the air, and two women playing shrill flutes and a fellow with a drum between his knees provided an odd sort of music. Best of all, the serving women were pretty, and men were tossing dice at four tables. The Kandori merchant was playing at cards.

The stately innkeeper introduced herself as Setalle Anan, though her hazel eyes had never been born in Ebou Dar. “Good my Lords . . .” Large gold hoops in her ears swayed as she bowed her head equally to Mat and Nalesean. “. . . may The Wandering Woman offer you her humble accommodation?”

She was pretty despite a touch of gray in her hair, but Mat watched her eyes. She wore a marriage knife hanging from a close-fitting necklace, the hilt set with red and white stones nestling in her generous cleavage, and she also had one of those curving knives in her belt. Still, he could not help grinning. “Mistress Anan, I feel like I’ve come home.”

The odd thing was, the dice had stopped rolling in his head.

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CHAPTER 48

Leaning on the Knife

Climbing out of the big copper tub with a length of white toweling wrapped around her head, Nynaeve dried slowly. The plump gray-haired serving woman tried to dress her, but Nynaeve sent her away, ignoring the startled looks and protests, and did it herself, with great care, examining the dark green dress with its wide collar of pale Merada lace in the tall narrow stand-mirror. Lan's heavy gold ring lay in her pouch—best not to think of that—alongside one of the twisted ring *ter'angreal*, and the Great Serpent gleamed golden around the third finger of her right hand. Her right hand. Best not to think of that either.

The high ceiling was quite pleasantly painted in blue sky and white clouds, and if the furnishings stood on disconcertingly large gilded lion feet and the slim bedposts and chair legs and everything else vertical had too much fluting and gilding for her taste, it was still a more comfortable room than she had stayed in for some considerable time. A pleasant room. Moderately cool. What she was trying to do was calm herself.

It did not work, of course. She had felt *saidar* being woven, and as soon as she stepped from her bedchamber she saw the ward against eavesdropping Elayne had made and tied off around the sitting room. Birgitte and Aviendha were already there as well, all of them freshly scrubbed and dressed.

In what Birgitte claimed was a rather ordinary arrangement here, four bedchambers flanked the one sitting room, which also had a ceiling painted as sky and clouds. Four tall arched windows opened onto a long balcony of white-painted wrought iron, so intricate they could peer down from it unseen at the Mol Hara Square in front of the palace. A faint breeze stirred through the windows, carrying the salt scent of the sea, and for a wonder it actually was a little cool. Anger interfered with her concentration, and

Nynaeve had been feeling the heat since shortly after arriving in the Tarasin Palace.

Thom and Juilin had been given a room somewhere deep in the servants' quarters, which in truth seemed to irritate Elayne more than it did either of the men. Thom had actually laughed. But then, he could afford to.

"Have some of this excellent tea, Nynaeve," Elayne said, laying a white napkin across gleaming blue silk skirts. Like everything else in the sitting room, her wide chair had gilded balls for feet, and more standing along the tall back above her head. Aviendha sat by her side, but on the floor, legs folded beneath the skirt of a high-necked dress that almost matched the pale green tile. Her labyrinthine silver necklace went very well with the dress. Nynaeve did not think she had seen the Aiel woman sit in a chair once. People had certainly stared at her in those two inns.

"Mint and cloudberries," Birgitte added to Elayne's offer, filling another delicate golden porcelain cup without waiting. Birgitte wore wide gray trousers and a short blue coat. She did wear dresses occasionally, but her taste made Nynaeve glad it was seldom. All three of them dressed and primped, and no one wanted them.

The silver pitcher glistened damply, and the tea was cool and refreshing. Nynaeve admired Elayne's face, cool and dry. She herself already felt moist again despite the breeze. "I must say," she muttered, "I expected a different reception."

"Did you really?" Elayne asked. "After the way Vandene and Adeleas treated us?"

Nynaeve sighed. "Very well, then, I hoped. I am finally Aes Sedai, really Aes Sedai, and nobody seems to believe it. I truly hoped leaving Salidar would make a difference."

Their meeting with Merilille Ceandevin had not gone well. Their presentation to her, in truth. Vandene's introduction had been almost perfunctory, and then they were dismissed, sent away so the real Aes Sedai could talk. Merilille had said she was sure they wanted to freshen up, but it was a dismissal, with a choice of going like obedient Accepted or refusing like sulky children. Just remembering ruined all Nynaeve's attempts at calm; sweat began to run down her face.

Being sent away was not the worst of it, really. Merilille was a slender, palely elegant Cairhienin with glossy black hair and large liquid eyes, a Gray who looked as if nothing had ever surprised her and nothing ever could. Only those dark eyes had gone wide when told Nynaeve and Elayne were Aes Sedai, and wider still on learning Egwene was the Amyrlin Seat. Birgitte as a Warder clearly astounded her, though by that time she managed to hold her reaction to one stare and a brief tightening of her lips. Aviendha came out of it the easiest; Merilille gave her only a murmur about how much she would enjoy being a novice. Then came the dismissal. And a suggestion, more in the nature of a command, that they spend several days *recuperating* from the *rigors* of their journey.

Nynaeve plucked her handkerchief from her sleeve and fanned her face uselessly with the lacy square. “I still think they’re hiding something.”

“Really, Nynaeve,” Elayne said, shaking her head. “I do *not* like how we’re treated any more than you, but you are trying to make a bull out of a mouse. If Vandene and Adeleas want to look for runaways, let them. Would you rather have them trying to take over looking for the bowl?” During the whole journey they had hardly mentioned the *ter’angreal* they sought, for fear the pair would do just that.

Whether they would have or not, Nynaeve still thought they were hiding things. Elayne just did not want to admit it. Adeleas had not realized that Nynaeve had overheard that remark about looking for runaways once they reached Ebou Dar, and when Nynaeve asked whether they really expected to find any, Vandene replied just a bit too quickly that they always kept an eye out for young women who had run from the Tower. It did not make sense. No one had ran away from Salidar, but novices did run sometimes—the life was hard, especially with years of obedience to look forward to before you could even think of thinking for yourself—and an occasional Accepted who had begun to despair of ever reaching the shawl tried to slip away, yet even Nynaeve knew that few made it off the island of Tar Valon and almost all were dragged back. You could be put out at any time, for not being strong enough to go on, for refusing or failing your test for Accepted or the test for Aes Sedai that she and Elayne had slipped by, but leaving was never your decision unless you wore the shawl.

So if successful runaways were so rare, why did Vandene and Adeleas think they might find one in Ebou Dar, and why had they shut up like mussels when she asked? She was afraid she knew the answer to the last, anyway. Not tugging her braid required considerable self-control. She thought she was becoming better at that.

“At least Mat finally knows we’re Aes Sedai,” she growled. At least she could deal with him now. Let him try anything, and he would see what it was like being thumped with everything she could wrap a flow around. “He had better.”

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding him like a Cheltan flinching from the tax collector?” Birgitte asked with a grin, and Nynaeve felt her face coloring. She thought she had hidden her feelings better than that.

“He is very irritating, even for a man,” Aviendha murmured. “You must have traveled very far, Birgitte. You often speak of places I have never heard of. One day I would like to travel the wetlands and see all these strange places. Where is this . . . Cheltan? Chelta?”

That wiped Birgitte’s grin right off; wherever it was, it might be dead a thousand years, or since an earlier Age altogether. Her and her slipping ancient places and things into the conversation. Nynaeve wished she had been there to see her admit to Egwene what Egwene already knew. Egwene had grown impressively forceful in her time with the Aiel, and put up with little she considered nonsense. Birgitte had actually come back looking chastened.

Even so, Nynaeve liked Birgitte rather better than she did Aviendha, who made her very uneasy at times with her hard stares and bloodthirsty talk. And however irritating Birgitte could be, Nynaeve had promised to help her keep her secret.

“Mat . . . threatened me,” she said hurriedly. It was the first way that came to mind to divert Aviendha and the last thing she wanted anyone else to know. Her cheeks heated all over again. Elayne actually smiled, though she had the grace to hide it in her teacup. “Not like that,” Nynaeve added when Aviendha began frowning and fingering her belt knife. The Aiel woman seemed to think the proper response to everything was a violent one. “It was just. . . .” Aviendha and Birgitte looked at her, all ears and interest. “He just said. . . .” As she had rescued Birgitte, Elayne rescued her.

“I really think that is enough about Master Cauthon,” Elayne said firmly. “He is only here to pull him out of Egwene’s hair, and I can puzzle out what to do about the *ter’angreal* later.” Her lips compressed for a moment. She had not been happy when Vandene and Adeleas began channeling at Mat without so much as a by-your-leave, and even less when he slipped off to that inn. There had been nothing she could do, of course. She claimed that by only telling him to do what he had to do anyway in the beginning, she could bring him into the habit. Well, good luck to her. “He is the least important part of this trip,” she said, even more firmly.

“Yes.” Nynaeve just kept the relief out of her voice. “Yes, the bowl is what’s important.”

“I suggest I scout about first,” Birgitte said. “Ebou Dar seems rougher than I remember, and the district you describe could be rougher than . . .” She did not quite glance at Aviendha. “. . . Than the rest of the city,” she finished with a sigh.

“If there is scouting to be done,” Aviendha put in eagerly, “I wish to be part of it. I have a *cadin’sor*.”

“A scout is supposed to blend in,” Elayne said gently. “I think we should find Ebou Dari dress for *all* of us; then we can all search together from the start, and none of us will stand out. Though Nynaeve will have the easiest time of it,” she added, smiling at Birgitte and Aviendha. The Ebou Dari they had seen so far all had dark hair, and most seemed to have nearly black eyes.

Aviendha exhaled glumly, and Nynaeve felt like echoing her, thinking of those deep necklines. Very deep, however narrow. Birgitte actually grinned; the woman had no shame at all.

Before the discussion could go any further, a woman with short black hair, in the livery of House Mitsobar, entered without knocking, which Nynaeve thought rude no matter what Elayne said was proper for servants. Her dress was white, the skirt sewn up to the knee on the left side to expose a green petticoat, with a snug bodice embroidered on the left breast with a green Anchor and Sword. Even the livery’s narrow neckline plunged as far as Nynaeve recalled. Plump and somewhere in her middle years, the woman hesitated, then curtsied and addressed herself to everyone. “Queen Tylin wishes to see the three Aes Sedai, if it pleases them.”

Nynaeve exchanged wondering looks with Elayne and the others.

“There are only two of us Aes Sedai here,” Elayne said after a moment. “Perhaps you meant to go to Merilille?”

“I was directed to this apartment . . . Aes Sedai.” The pause was barely long enough to notice, and the woman just missed turning the title into a question.

Elayne rose, smoothing her skirts; no stranger would suspect that that smooth face hid anger, but there was a hint of tightness at the corners of eyes and mouth. “Shall we go, then? Nynaeve? Aviendha? Birgitte?”

“I am not Aes Sedai, Elayne,” Aviendha said, and the serving woman put in hurriedly, “I was told only the Aes Sedai.”

“Aviendha and I could have a look around the city while you see the Queen,” Birgitte said before Elayne could open her mouth. Aviendha’s face lit up.

Elayne gave the pair of them a sharp look, then sighed. “Well, at least be careful. Nynaeve, are you coming, or do you want to see the city too?” That last was in a dry tone, with another glance at Birgitte.

“Oh, I would not miss it,” Nynaeve told her. “It will be good to finally meet someone who thinks. . . .” She could not finish it with the maid there. “We should not keep the Queen waiting.”

“Oh, no,” the liveried woman said. “It’d be as much as my ears are worth.”

However much her ears were worth, it took some time to walk through the palace corridors. As though to make up for all the white outside, the palace was full of color. In one corridor the ceiling was painted green and the walls blue, in another the walls were yellow and the ceiling pale rose. The floor tiles were diamonds of red and black and white, or blue and yellow, or almost any combination in any shade. There were very few tapestries, usually scenes of the sea, but a good many tall vases of golden Sea Folk porcelain stood in arched niches, and also large pieces of carved crystal, statuettes and vases and bowls, that caught Elayne’s eye as well as Nynaeve’s.

Of course servants scurried about everywhere, the men’s version of the livery entailing white breeches and a long green vest over a white shirt with wide, pleated sleeves, but before they had gone very far Nynaeve saw someone striding toward them who made her stop and catch Elayne’s arm. It was Jaichim Carridin. She did not take her eyes off the tall graying man as he strode on past them, those cruel deep-set eyes never turning in their direction, white cloak spreading behind him. Sweat covered his face, but he ignored it as he ignored them.

“What is he doing here?” Nynaeve demanded. That man had unleashed slaughter in Tanchico, and the Light only knew where else.

The serving woman looked at her quizzically. “Why, the Children of the Light sent an embassy too, months gone. The Queen . . . Aes Sedai?” Again, that hesitation.

Elayne managed to nod graciously, but Nynaeve could not blank the asperity from her own voice. “Then we should not keep her waiting.” One thing Merilille had let slip about this Tylin was that she was a punctilious woman, stiffly formal. But if she too started doubting they were Aes Sedai, Nynaeve was in just the mood to prove it.

The serving woman left them in a large room with a pale blue ceiling and yellow walls, where a row of tall triple-arched windows gave onto a long wrought-iron balcony and let in a quite comfortable salty breeze, and before the Queen Nynaeve and Elayne made their curtsies, proper for Aes Sedai to ruler, a slight dip, a tiny bow of the head.

Tylin was a most impressive woman. No taller than Nynaeve, she stood with a regal bearing that Elayne would have had to strain to match on her best day. She should have replied to their courtesies with the same, but she did not. Instead her large black eyes examined them with imperious intensity.

Nynaeve returned the favor as well as she could. Waves of glossy black hair, gray at the temples, hung well below Tylin’s shoulders, framing a face that was handsome if not unlined. Shockingly, there were two scars on the woman’s cheeks, fine and so old they had all but vanished. Of course, she did have one of those curved knives stuck through a belt of woven gold, with hilt and scabbard encrusted in gems, Nynaeve was sure it must be for show. Tylin’s blue silk dress was certainly nothing anyone could wear fighting a duel, with falls of snowy lace that would nearly hide her fingers if she lowered her hands, and skirts drawn up above her knees in front to expose layers of green and white silk petticoats and trailing behind her a pace or more. The bodice, trimmed in the same lace, was snug enough that Nynaeve was not sure whether sitting in it or standing would be more uncomfortable. A collar of woven gold fastened around the gown’s high neck, which put more lace under her chin, supported a white-sheathed marriage knife hanging hilt-down into an oval cut-out that easily equalled any of those deep necklines.

“You two must be Elayne and Nynaeve.” Tylin took a chair carved to resemble bamboo, though covered in gilt, and arranged her skirts carefully without taking her eyes from them. Her voice was deep, melodious and commanding. “I understood there was a third. Aviendha?”

Nynaeve exchanged glances with Elayne. There had been no invitation for them to sit, not so much as a flicker of eyes toward a chair. “She is not

Aes Sedai," Elayne began calmly.

Tylin spoke before she could say more. "And you are? You've seen eighteen winters at most, Elayne. And you, Nynaeve, staring at me like a cat with its tail caught, how many have you seen? Twenty-two? Twenty-three perhaps? Stab my liver! I visited Tar Valon once, and the White Tower. I doubt any woman your age has ever worn that ring on her right hand."

"Twenty-six!" Nynaeve snapped. With a good part of the Women's Circle back in Emond's Field thinking she was too young to be Wisdom, it had become habit with her to flourish every naming day she could claim. "I am twenty-six and an Aes Sedai of the Yellow Ajah." She still felt a thrill of pride saying that. "Elayne may be eighteen, but she is Aes Sedai as well, and Green Ajah. Do you think Merilille or Vandene would let us wear these rings as a joke? A good many things have changed, Tylin. The Amyrlin Seat, Egwene al'Vere, is no older than Elayne."

"Is she?" Tylin said in a flat voice. "I was not told that. When the Aes Sedai who counseled me from the day I took the throne, and my father before me, abruptly leaves for the Tower without explanation, and I then learn that rumors of a Tower divided are true; when Dragonsworn seem to spring out of the ground; when an Amyrlin is chosen to oppose Elaida and an army gathered under one of the great captains, inside Altara, before I hear of it—when all of that has happened, you cannot expect me to be enamored of surprises."

Nynaeve hoped her face did not look as sickly as she felt. Why could she not learn to hold her tongue occasionally? Abruptly she realized she could no longer sense the True Source; anger and embarrassment did not go together very well. It was probably to the good. If she could channel, she might make an even bigger fool of herself.

Elayne moved to smooth things over without a pause. "I know you have heard this before," she told Tylin, "but let me add my apologies to those of Merilille and the others. Gathering an army inside your borders without your permission was unconscionable. All I can say in mitigation is that events moved quickly and we in Salidar were caught up, but that is no excuse. I swear to you, no harm is intended to Altara, and no insult was meant to the Throne of the Winds. Even as we speak, Gareth Bryne leads that army north, out of Altara."

Tylin stared at her, unblinking. "I have heard no word of apology or excuse until yours. But any ruler of Altara must learn to swallow insult from greater powers without salt." Taking a deep breath, she gestured, lace waving. "Sit, sit. Both of you sit. Lean back on your knife and let your tongue go free." Her sudden smile was very close to a grin. "I don't know how you say it in Andor. Be at ease, and speak your mind as you wish."

Nynaeve was glad that Elayne's blue eyes widened in surprise, because she herself gasped aloud. This was the woman who Merilille had claimed required ceremony carved in polished marble? Nynaeve was more than glad to take a chair. Thinking of all the hidden currents in Salidar, she wondered whether Tylin was trying to . . . to what? She had come to expect everyone who was not a close friend to try manipulating her. Elayne sat on the very front of her chair, and stiffly.

"I mean what I say," Tylin insisted. "Whatever you say, I will hear no insult." From the way her fingers tapped the jeweled hilt at her waist, though, silence might be heard as one.

"I am not certain where to begin," Nynaeve said carefully. She did wish Elayne had not actually nodded at that; Elayne was supposed to know how to handle kings and queens. Why did she not say something?

"With why," the Queen said impatiently. "Why do four more Aes Sedai come to Ebou Dar from Salidar? It cannot be to outshine Elaida's embassy—Teslyn does not even call it that, and there are only her and Joline. . . . You did not know?" Falling back in her chair laughing, she pressed the fingers of one hand to her lips. "Do you know about the Whitecloaks? Yes?" Her free hand made a slashing gesture, and her mirth began to subside in small ripples. "That for Whitecloaks! But I must listen to all who court me, Lord Inquisitor Carridin as well as the others."

"But why?" Nynaeve demanded. "I am glad you don't like Whitecloaks, but in that case, why must you listen to a word Carridin says? The man's a butcher." She knew she had made another mistake. The way Elayne suddenly seemed to be studying the broad white fireplace, where the deep lintel was carved into towering waves, told her that even before the last vestige of Tylin's laughter snuffed out like a candle.

"You take me at my word," the Queen said quietly. "I said let your tongue go free, and. . . ." Those dark eyes went to the floor tiles, and she seemed to be gathering herself.

Nynaeve looked to Elayne, hoping for some hint of what she had done wrong, or better, how to make it right, but Elayne only gave her one sideways glance and the smallest shake of her head before returning to her study of the marble waves. Maybe she should avoid looking at Tylin, too? Yet the woman staring at the floor drew her eyes. With one hand Tylin stroked the hilt of her curved dagger, with the other fingered the smaller hilt nestled between her breasts.

The marriage dagger told quite a lot about Tylin; Vandene and Adeleas had been more than willing to explain some things concerning Ebou Dar, usually those that made the city seem unsafe for anyone not surrounded by a dozen armored guards. The white sheath meant the Queen was widowed and did not intend to remarry. The four pearls and one firedrop set in the gold-wrapped hilt said she had borne four sons and one daughter; the white-enameled setting of the firedrop and the red-enameled of three of the pearls said only one son survived. All had been at least sixteen when they died, and died in duels, or the settings would have been black. What must it be like to constantly carry a reminder of that sort! According to Vandene, women saw a red or white setting as a source of pride, whether her stones were pearls and firedrops or colored glass. Vandene said many Ebou Dari women removed the stones of their children past sixteen who refused a duel, and never acknowledged them again.

At long last Tylin raised her head. Her face was pleasant, and her hand left the dagger in her belt, but she continued to finger the marriage knife absently. “I want my son to follow me on the Throne of the Winds,” she said mildly. “Beslan is your age, Elayne. This would be a matter of course in Andor, though he would have to be a woman”—she actually grinned, in apparently genuine amusement—“or in any other land save Murandy, where matters are much the same as here in Altara. In the thousand years since Artur Hawkwing, only one House has held the throne for five generations, and Anarina’s fall was so precipitous that to this day House Todande is a lapdog for anyone who wants them. No other House has ever had more than two rulers in succession.

“When my father took the throne, other Houses had more of the city itself than Mitsobar. Had he stepped outside this palace without guards, he would have been sewn into a sack with rocks and tossed into the river. When he died, he gave me what I have now. Small, compared to other rulers. A man riding fresh horses could reach the end of my writ in one day’s hard ride. I have not been idle, though. When news of the Dragon Reborn came, I was certain I could hand on to Beslan twice what I hold, and allies of a sort beyond that. The Stone of Tear and *Callandor* changed everything. Now I thank Pedron Niall when he arranges for Illian to take a hundred-mile swathe of Altara instead of invading. I listen to Jaichim Carridin, and I do not spit in his eye, however many Altarans died in the Whitecloak War. I listen to Carridin, and to Teslyn, and to Merilille, and I pray that I can pass something to my son instead of being found drowned in my bath on the day Beslan meets with an accident hunting."

Tylin drew a long breath. The pleasant face remained, but an edge entered her voice. "Now. I have stood bare-breasted in the fishmarket for you. Answer me mine. Why do I have the honor of four more Aes Sedai?"

"We are here to find a *ter'angreal*," Elayne said, and as Nynaeve stared in amazement, she told everything from *Tel'aran'rhiod* to the dust in the room where the bowl was.

"To make the weather right again would be a miraculous blessing," Tylin said slowly, "but the quarter you describe sounds like the Rahad, across the river. Even the Civil Guard steps lightly there. Forgive me—I understand that you are Aes Sedai—but in the Rahad, you could have a knife in your back before you knew it. If the clothes are fine, they use a very narrow blade so there is little blood. Perhaps you should leave this search to Vandene and Adeleas. I think they have had a few more years than you to see such places."

"They told you about the bowl?" Nynaeve said with a frown, but the Queen shook her head.

"Only that they were here to search for something. Aes Sedai never tell a word more than they absolutely must." Once again that sudden grin flashed; it looked quite merry, though it did make her scars show as thin lines across her cheeks. "Until you two, at least. May the years not change you too much. I often wish Cavandra had not returned to the Tower; I could talk with her in this way." Standing, she motioned them to remain seated and glided across the room to tap a silver gong with an ivory mallet; it produced quite a loud chime for such a small cylinder. "I will send for cool mint tea, and we will talk. You will tell me how I can help—if I send soldiers into the Rahad, it will be the Wine Riots all over again—and perhaps you will even be able to explain why the bay is full of Sea Folk ships that neither dock nor trade. . . ."

A goodly time passed over tea and talk, mostly about the dangers of the Rahad and what Tylin could not do, and Beslan was brought in, a soft-spoken youth who bowed respectfully and stared with beautiful black eyes that perhaps held relief when his mother said he could go. He certainly never doubted they were Aes Sedai. Finally, though, the pair of them were finding their way back to their apartment through the brightly painted corridors.

“So they mean to take over the search too,” Nynaeve murmured, glancing about to make sure none of the liveried servants was close enough to hear. Tylin had known too much about them too soon. And however she grinned, she had been upset over the Aes Sedai in Salidar. “Elayne, do you think it was wise to tell her everything? She might decide the best way to make sure that boy gets the throne is to let us find the bowl and then tell Teslyn.” She remembered Teslyn slightly; a Red, and an unpleasant woman.

“I know how my mother felt about Aes Sedai traveling about Andor, never letting her know what they were doing. I know how I would feel. Besides, I finally remembered being taught about that phrase—lean back on your knife and the rest. The only way to insult somebody who says that to you is to lie.” Elayne’s chin rose slightly. “As for Vandene and Adeleas, they only think they’ve taken over. This Rahad may be dangerous, but I cannot think it is any worse than Tanchico, and we won’t have the Black Ajah to worry about. I wager in ten days we will have the bowl, I will know what makes Mat’s *ter’angreal* do what it should not be able to do and we will be on our way to join Egwene, with him knuckling his forehead as fast as Master Vanin, and Vandene and Adeleas will be left sitting here with Merilille *and* Teslyn trying to puzzle out what happened.”

Nynaeve could not help it; she laughed out loud. A lanky serving man shifting a large vase of golden porcelain stared at her, and she stuck out her tongue at him. He nearly dropped the vase. “I won’t take that wager, except about Mat. Ten days it is.”

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CHAPTER 49

The Mirror of Mists

Rand puffed contentedly on his pipe, sitting in his shirtsleeves with his back against one of the slender white columns that surrounded the small oval courtyard, and watched the water spray up in the marble fountain, sparkling like gems in the sunlight. The morning still left this part of the courtyard in pleasant shade. Even Lews Therin was still. “Are you sure you won’t reconsider Tear?”

Seated against the next column and also coatless, Perrin blew two smoke rings before replacing his pipe, a rather ornate thing carved with wolfheads. “What about what Min saw?”

Rand’s attempt at his own ring ran afoul of a sour grunt and came out just a puff of smoke. Min had had no right to bring that up where Perrin could hear. “Do you really want to be tied to my belt, Perrin?”

“What I want hasn’t seemed to count much since the first time we saw Moiraine back in Emond’s Field,” Perrin said dryly. He sighed. “You are who you are, Rand. If you fail, everything fails.” Suddenly he sat forward, frowning toward a wide doorway behind the columns to their left.

A long moment later Rand heard footsteps in that direction, too heavy for any human. The broad shape that ducked through the doorway and strode into the courtyard was more than twice as tall as the serving woman who was almost running to keep up with the Ogier’s long legs.

“Loial!” Rand exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. He and Perrin reached the Ogier together. The grin on Loial’s wide mouth really did almost split his huge face in two, but his long coat, spreading out above turned-down knee-high boots, still carried travel dust. The big pockets bulged with squarish shapes, too; Loial was never far from books. “Are you all right, Loial?”

“You look tired,” Perrin said, urging the Ogier toward the fountain. “Sit on the coping.”

Loial let himself be led, but his long dangling eyebrows rose and tufted ears quivered in puzzlement as he stared from one of them to the other. Sitting, he was as tall as Perrin standing. “All right? Tired?” His voice was a rumble like the earth moving. “Of course I am all right. And if I’m tired, I have walked a long way. I must say it felt good to be back on my own feet. You always know where your feet are taking you, but you never can be sure with a horse. Anyway, my feet are faster.” Abruptly he let out a thunderous laugh. “You owe me a gold crown, Perrin. You and your ten days. I will wager another crown you’ve not been here more than five days before me.”

“You’ll get your crown.” Perrin laughed. In an aside to Rand that had Loial’s ears vibrating indignantly, he added, “Gaul corrupted him. He dices now, and bets on horse races when he can barely tell one horse from another.”

Rand grinned. Loial always had looked at horses rather dubiously, and small wonder since his legs were longer than theirs. “Are you sure you’re all right, Loial?”

“Did you find that abandoned *stedding*?” Perrin asked around his pipestem.

“Did you stay long enough?”

“What are you two talking about?” Loial’s uncertain frown trailed the ends of his eyebrows down onto his cheeks. “I just wanted to see a *stedding* again, to feel one. I am ready for ten more years.”

“That isn’t what your mother says,” Rand said seriously.

Loial was on his feet before Rand finished, staring wildly in every direction, ears laid back and trembling. “My mother? Here? She is here?”

“No, she isn’t,” Perrin said, and Loial’s ears almost went limp with relief. “It seems she’s in the Two Rivers. Or was a month ago. Rand used some way of hopping about he has to take her and Elder Haman—What’s the matter?”

Halfway to sitting down again, Loial froze with his knees bent at Elder Haman’s name. Eyes closed, he lowered himself slowly the rest of the way. “Elder Haman,” he muttered, rubbing his face with a thick-fingered hand. “Elder Haman and my mother.” He peered at Perrin. He peered at Rand. In a voice that was low and much too casual, he asked, “Was anyone else with them?” Well, it was low for an Ogier; a giant bumblebee buzzing in a huge waterjar.

“A young Ogier woman named Erith,” Rand told him. “You—” That was as far as he got.

With a moan Loial leaped to his feet again. Servants’ heads appeared at doorways and windows to see what that vast noise was, and vanished again when they saw Rand. Loial began pacing back and forth, ears and eyebrows both drooping so much that he seemed to be melting. “A wife,” he mumbled. “It cannot mean anything else, not with Mother and Elder Haman. A wife. I’m too young to get married!” Rand hid a smile behind his hand; Loial might be young for an Ogier, but in his case that meant more than ninety. “She’ll drag me back to Stedding Shangtai. I know she won’t let me travel with you, and I still don’t have near enough notes for my book. Oh, you can smile, Perrin. Faile does whatever you say.” Perrin choked on his pipe, wheezing until Rand slapped his back. “It is different with us,” Loial went on. “It is considered very rude not to do as your wife says. Very rude. I know she’ll make me settle down to something solid and respectable, like treesinging or. . . .” Abruptly he frowned and stopped pacing. “Did you say Erith?” Rand nodded; Perrin seemed to be getting his breath back, but he was glaring at Loial in a sort of malevolent amusement. “Erith, daughter of Iva daughter of Alar?” Rand nodded again, and Loial sank back to his place on the fountain coping. “But I know her. You remember her, Rand. We met her at Stedding Tsofu.”

“That is what I was trying to tell you,” Rand said patiently. And with no little amusement himself. “She was the one who said you’re handsome. And gave you a flower, as I recall.”

“She might have said,” Loial muttered defensively. “She might have done; I cannot recall.” But one hand strayed toward a coat pocket full of books, where Rand would have wagered anything that flower was carefully pressed. The Ogier cleared his throat, a deep rumble. “Erith is very beautiful. I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful. And intelligent. She listened very attentively when I explained Serden’s theory—that is Serden, son of Kolom son of Radlin; he wrote about six hundred years ago—when I explained his theory of how the Ways. . . .” He trailed off as if he had just noticed their grins. “Well, she did listen. Attentively. She was very interested.”

“I’m sure she was,” Rand said noncommittally. Mention of the Ways made him think. Most of the Waygates were near *stedding*, and if Loial’s mother and Elder Haman were to be believed, the *stedding* were what Loial needed. Of course, he could not take Loial any closer than the edge of one; you could not channel into a *stedding* any more than you could channel inside one. “Listen, Loial. I want to put guards on all the Waygates, and I need somebody who can not only find them, but can talk to the Elders as well and get their permission.”

“Light,” Perrin growled disgustedly. He tapped out his pipe and ground the dottle into the courtyard paving stone under his boot heel. “Light! You send Mat off to face down Aes Sedai, you want to dump me into the middle of a war with Sammael and a few hundred Two Rivers men with me, some of them you know, and now you want to send Loial off when he’s only just arrived. Burn you, Rand, look at him! He needs rest. Is there anybody you won’t use? Maybe you want Faile to go hunt Moghedien or Semirhage. Light!”

Anger welled up in Rand, a tempest that made him shake. Those yellow eyes stared at him grimly, but he stared back like thunder. “I will use anybody I must. You said it yourself; I am who I am. And I’m using myself up, Perrin, because I have to. Just like I’ll use anybody I have to. We don’t have a choice anymore. Not me, not you, not anybody!”

“Rand, Perrin,” Loial murmured worriedly. “Be still, be calm. Don’t fight. Not you.” A hand the size of a ham patted each of them awkwardly on the shoulder. “You should both rest in a *stedding*. The *stedding* are very peaceful, very soothing.”

Rand stared at Perrin staring at him. Anger still flashed in him, lightning flashes in a storm that would not quite die. Lews Therin’s mutters rumbled fitfully, far off. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, meaning it for both.

Perrin made an offhand gesture, maybe meaning there was nothing to apologize for, maybe accepting the apology, but he did not offer one himself. Instead his head swung toward the columns again, toward the door Loial had come through. Once more moments passed before Rand heard running footsteps.

Min dashed into the courtyard at a dead run. Ignoring Loial and Perrin, she seized Rand’s arms. “They’re coming,” she panted. “They are on their way right now.”

“Easy, Min,” Rand said. “Calm yourself. I was beginning to think they were all taking to their beds like—what did you say her name is? Demira?” In truth, he felt considerable relief, though Lews Therin’s grumbling and wheezing laughter grew louder with the mention of Aes Sedai. For three days Merana had appeared with two sisters each afternoon as regular as the finest clockmaker's art, but the visits had suddenly stopped five days ago without a word of explanation. Min had no idea why. He had been worried that they had taken offense enough at his rules to leave.

But Min stared up at him with a face of anguish. She was trembling, he realized. "Listen to me! It is seven of them, not three, and they didn't send me to ask permission or let you know or anything. I slipped out ahead of them, and galloped Wildrose the whole way. They mean to be inside the Palace before you know they're here. I heard Merana talking to Demira when they didn't know I was there. They mean to reach the Grand Hall ahead of you, so you have to come to them."

"Is this your viewing, do you think?" he asked calmly. Women who could channel would hurt him badly, she had said. *Seven!* Lews Therin whispered hoarsely. *No! No! No!* Rand ignored him; there was little else he could do.

"I don't know," Min said in an agonized voice. Rand was startled to realize the shine in her dark eyes came from unshed tears. "Do you think I wouldn't tell you if I knew? All I know is, they are coming, and—"

"And there is nothing to be afraid of," he broke in firmly. The Aes Sedai must really have frightened her for Min to be near crying. *Seven,* Lews Therin groaned. *I cannot handle seven, not at once. Not seven.* Rand thought of the fat-little-man *angreal*, and the voice faded to murmurs; it still sounded uneasy, though. At least Alanna was not one of them; Rand could feel her at some distance, not moving, certainly not toward him. He was not sure he dared come face-to-face with her again. "There's no time to waste, either. Jalani?"

The plump-cheeked young Maiden popped out from behind a column so suddenly that Loial's ears shot straight up. Min seemed to see the Ogier for the first time, and Perrin; she gave a start too.

"Jalani," Rand said, "tell Nandera I am going to the Grand Hall, where I expect Aes Sedai shortly."

She tried to maintain a smooth face, but the beginnings of a self-satisfied grin made her cheeks seem even plumper. "Beralna has already gone to inform Nandera, *Car'a'carn*." Loial's ears flickered in surprise at the title.

"Then would you tell Sulin to meet me at the dressing rooms behind the Grand Hall with my coat? And the Dragon Scepter."

Jalani's grin widened openly. "Sulin has already gone running in her wetlander dress as fast as a gray-nosed hare that sat on *segade* spines."

"In that case," Rand said, "you can bring my horse to the Grand Hall." The young Maiden's jaw dropped, especially when Perrin and Loial doubled over laughing.

Min's fist in Rand's shortribs made him grunt. "This is no joking matter, you thick-skulled sheepfarmer! Merana and the rest were wrapping themselves in their shawls as though putting on armor. Now, listen to me. I will stand over to one side, behind the columns, so you can see and they cannot, and if I see anything, I'll make some sort of signal."

"You will stay here with Loial and Perrin," he told her. "I don't know what kind of signal you could make that I'd understand, and if they catch even a glimpse of you, they will know you warned me." She gave him one of those fists-on-hips, glaring-up-through-her-eyelashes, sullen stubborn stares. "Min?"

To his surprise, she sighed and said, "Yes, Rand," just as meek as milk-water. That sort of thing from her made him as suspicious as it would have from Elayne or Aviendha, but he had no time for digging if he was to be in the Grand Hall before Merana. Nodding, he hoped he did not look as uncertain as he felt.

Wondering whether he should have asked Perrin and Loial to keep her there—she would have loved that—he trotted all the way to the dressing rooms behind the Grand Hall with Jalani at his heels muttering about whether the horse had been a joke. Sulin was already there with a gold-embroidered red coat and the Dragon Scepter; the spearhead got an approving grunt, though no doubt she would have found it more acceptable without the green-and-white tassel and with a proper length of shaft and no carvings. Rand felt to be sure the *angreal* was in the pocket. It was, and he breathed more easily, though Lews Therin still seemed to be panting anxiously.

When Rand hurried through one of the lion-paneled dressing rooms into the Grand Hall, he discovered that everyone had been as quick as Sulin. Bael towered at one side of the throne dais with his arms folded, while Melaine stood on the other, calmly adjusting her dark shawl. What must have been a hundred or more Maidens lined the way from the doors on one knee, under Nandera's watchful gaze, complete with spears and bucklers, horn bows cased on their backs and full quivers at their hips. Only their eyes showed above black veils. Jalani ran to join one of those lines. Behind them more Aiel crowded among the thick columns, men and Maidens, though none appeared armed beyond their heavy-bladed knives. There were a number of grim faces, though. They could not be enjoying the thought of a confrontation with Aes Sedai, and not for fear of the Power. However Melaine and the other Wise Ones might speak of them now, most Aiel had that ancient failure of the Aiel firmly fixed in their heads.

Bashere was not there, of course—he and his wife were out at one of Bashere's training camps—and neither were any of the Andoran nobles who flocked around the Palace. Rand was sure that Naean and Elenia and Lir and that entire lot would have learned of this gathering as soon as it began. They never missed an audience from the throne unless he sent them away. Their absence could only mean that on their way to the Grand Hall, they had learned the reason too, and that meant the Aes Sedai were already in the Palace.

Indeed, Rand had no sooner seated himself on the Dragon Throne with the Dragon Scepter on his knee than Mistress Harfor scurried into the Grand Hall looking flustered, quite unusual for her. Staring at him and all the Aiel with equal amazement, she said, "I sent servants everywhere to find you. There are Aes Sedai—" That was as far as she got before seven Aes Sedai appeared in the wide doorway.

Rand felt Lews Therin reaching for *saidin*, touching the *angreal*, but Rand took hold of it himself, holding that raging torrent of fire and ice, filth and sweetness, as hard as he did the piece of Seanchan spear.

Seven, Lews Therin mumbled darkly. *I told them three, and seven come. I must be cautious. Yes. Cautious.*

I *said three,* Rand snapped back at the voice. *Me! Rand al'Thor!* Lews Therin fell silent, but then the distant muttering began again.

Glancing from Rand to the seven women in their fringed shawls, Mistress Harfor apparently decided between was no place to be. The Aes Sedai received her first curtsy, Rand the second, and she walked with a good show of calm to one side of the doorway. When the Aes Sedai entered, though, forming a line abreast, she did slip out behind them with just a touch of haste.

On each of her three visits Merana had brought different Aes Sedai, and Rand recognized all but one of these, from Faeldrin Harella on the right, her dark hair in a multitude of thin braids worked with brightly colored beads, to stout Valinde Nathenos on the left in her white-fringed shawl and white dress. They were all clothed in their Ajah colors. He knew who the one he did not recognize must be. That coppery skin made the gracefully beautiful woman in dark bronze silk Demira Eriff, the Brown sister who Min had reported had taken to her bed. But she stood in the center of the line, a pace ahead of the others, while Merana stood between Faeldrin and plump, round-faced Rafela Cindal, who looked even more serious today than she had when he saw her with Merana six days ago. They all looked very serious.

For one moment they paused, looking at him impassively, ignoring the Aiel; then they glided forward, first Demira, then Seonid and Rafela, then Merana and Masuri, forming an arrowhead pointed straight at Rand. He did not need the faint tingle in his skin to tell him they had embraced *saidar*. With every step each woman appeared noticeably taller than before.

They think to impress me spinning the Mirror of Mists? Lews Therin's incredulous laugh faded into mad giggles. Rand did not need the man's explanation; he had seen Moiraine do something like this once. Asmodean had called it the Mirror of Mists too, and also Illusion.

Melaine shifted her shawl irritably and sniffed loudly, but Bael suddenly looked as if he were facing, all alone, a charge by hundreds. He meant to stand against it, but he did not expect any good outcome. For that matter, some of the Maidens stirred until Nandera glared at them over her veil, and that did not stop the soft sound of shifting feet from the Aiel among the columns.

Demira Eriff began to speak, and plainly channeling was involved there too. She did not shout, but her voice filled the Grand Hall, seeming to come from everywhere. "Under the circumstances, it was decided that I should speak for all. We intend you no harm here today, but the strictures we accepted before, that you would feel safe, we must now reject. Obviously you have never learned the respect due Aes Sedai. You must learn it now. Henceforth we shall come and go as we please, saving only that at our choice, we will still inform you first in the future when we wish to speak with you. Your Aiel watchers around our inn must be removed, and no one is to watch or follow us. Any future insult to our dignity will be punished, though those we must punish are as children, and you will be responsible for their pain. This is how it must be. This is how it shall be. Know that we are Aes Sedai."

As that long arrowhead halted before the throne, Rand noticed Melaine glancing at him, frowning, no doubt wondering whether he was impressed. If he had not some notion of what was happening, he would have been; he was not sure he was not anyway. The seven Aes Sedai stood twice as tall as Loial, maybe more, heads nearly halfway to the vaulted ceiling with its colored-glass windows. Demira gazed down at him, cool and dispassionate, as if she might be contemplating picking him up in one hand, which she appeared big enough to do.

Rand made himself lean back casually, his mouth tightening when he realized that it had taken an effort, if not very great. Lews Therin chittered and screamed, but in the distance, something about not waiting, striking now. She had laid emphasis on certain words, as if he should understand the significance. Under what circumstances? They had accepted the restrictions before; why were they suddenly a breach of respect? Why did they suddenly decide that far from needing to make him feel safe, they could threaten? "The Tower emissaries in Cairhien accept the same constraints as you and do not seem offended." Well, not very offended. "Instead of vague threats, they offer gifts."

"They are not us. They are not here. We will not buy you."

The contempt in Demira's voice stung. Rand's knuckles ached from his grip on the Dragon Scepter. His anger had an echo from Lews Therin, and suddenly he realized the man was struggling again to reach the Source.

Burn you! Rand thought. He meant to shield them, but Lews Therin spoke, panting in near panic.

Not strong enough. Even with the angreal, *maybe not strong enough, not to hold seven. You fool! You waited too long! Too dangerous!*

Shielding anyone did take a fair amount of strength. With the *angreal*, Rand was sure he could make seven shields, even with them embracing *saidar* already; but if even one could break that shield. . . . Or more than one. He wanted to impress them with his strength, not give them a chance to overcome it. But there was another way. Weaving Spirit, Fire and Earth just so, he struck almost as if intending to shield.

Their Mirror of Mists shattered. Suddenly there were only seven normal women standing in front of him with stunned faces. Shock vanished behind Aes Sedai tranquility in an instant, however.

"You have heard our requirements," Demira said in a normal voice, but a commanding one, just as if nothing had happened at all. "We expect them to be met.”

Rand stared in spite of himself. What did he have to do to show them he would not be browbeaten? *Saidin* raged in him, a boiling fury. He did not dare release it. Lews Therin was screaming maniacally now, trying to claw the Source out of his grip. It was all he could do to hold on. Slowly he stood. With the extra height of the dais, he towered over them. Seven unruffled Aes Sedai faces looked up at him. “The restrictions stand,” he said quietly. “And one more requirement of my own. From now on I expect to see the respect I deserve from you. I am the Dragon Reborn. You may go now. The audience is at an end.”

For perhaps ten heartbeats they stood there, not even blinking, as though to show they would not move a single slipper at his command. Then Demira turned without so much as a nod of her head. As she passed Seonid and Rafela, they fell in behind her, and the others in turn, all gliding smoothly, without hurry, across the red and white tiles and out of the Grand Hall.

Rand stepped down from the dais as they vanished into the corridor.

“The *Car’a’carn* handled them well,” Melaine said, loudly enough to be heard in every corner. “They must be taken by the scruff of the neck and taught honor though they weep for it.” Bael did not quite manage to hide his discomfort, hearing Aes Sedai spoken of so.

“Perhaps it is the way to handle Wise Ones too?” Rand asked, managing a smile.

Melaine lowered her voice, shifting her shawl emphatically. “Do not be a complete fool, Rand al’Thor.”

Bael chuckled, though his wife glared at him. At least he had brought a chuckle. Rand did not feel the humor of the small joke, though, and not because of the buffering of the Void. He almost wished he had let Min come. There were too many undercurrents here he could not understand, and he was afraid there were some he did not even see. What were they really after?

Closing the small door of the dressing room, Min leaned back against a dark lion-carved wall panel and drew a very deep breath. Faile had come for Perrin, and however much Loial had protested that Rand wanted her to stay there, he had crumpled before the simple truth that Rand had no right to make her stay anywhere. Of course, if Loial had had any idea what she intended, he might have tucked her under his arm—quite gently, of course—and sat there in the courtyard reading to her.

The thing was, while she had heard everything, she had not seen very much, aside from Aes Sedai towering over throne and dais. They must have been channeling, which did tend to obscure the images and auras, but she had been so astounded she would not have noticed had any been present. By the time she recovered, they were no longer towering, and Demira's voice no longer boomed from every angle.

Chewing her underlip, she thought furiously. There were two problems, as she saw it. First, Rand and his demands for respect, whatever he meant by that. If he expected Merana to curtsy with her head to the floor, he was going to have a long wait, and in the meantime, he had surely put their backs up. There had to be some way she could smooth that over, if she could just see how. The second problem was the Aes Sedai. Rand seemed to think this was some sort of snit that he could end by putting his foot down. Min was not certain Aes Sedai had snits, but if they did, she was sure this was something more serious. The only place to find out, though, was The Crown of Roses.

Reclaiming Wildrose at the forecourt stable, she trotted the bay mare back to the inn and handed her over to a big-eared stableman with a request that the horse be rubbed down well and fed some oats. Her gallop to the Palace had been just that, and Wildrose deserved a reward for helping spike Merana and the others' scheme. From the cold fury in Rand's voice, she was not certain what would have happened had he suddenly learned out of a clear sky that seven Aes Sedai were awaiting him in the Grand Hall.

The common room of The Crown of Roses looked almost the same as when she had scuttled out through the kitchens earlier. Warders sat about at the tables, some playing dominoes or stones, others tossing dice. Almost as one they glanced up as she entered, and, recognizing her, went back to what they were doing. Mistress Cinchonine was standing in front of the wine-room door—no barrels of ale and wine stacked along the common-room wall in The Crown of Roses—with her arms folded and a sour expression on her face. The Warders were the only ones at the tables, and as a rule, Warders drank little and seldom. Any number of pewter mugs and cups stood on tables, but Min did not see one of them touched. She did see a man who might be willing to tell her a little.

Mahiro Shukosa sat at a table by himself working tavern puzzles, the two swords he usually wore on his back propped against the wall in easy reach. With graying temples and a noble nose, Mahiro was handsome in a rugged sort of way, though certainly only a woman in love would have called him beautiful. In Kandor he was a lord. He had visited the courts of almost every land, traveled with a small library, and won or lost gambling with the same easy smile. He could recite poetry and play the harp and dance like a dream. In short, except for being Rafela's Warder, he was exactly the sort of man she had liked before meeting Rand. Still liked, actually, when she could see them for thinking about Rand. Whether fortunately or unfortunately, Mahiro saw her in a way Min suspected might be peculiar to Kandor, as a sort of younger sister who occasionally needed someone to talk to and a little advice so she would not break her neck while sowing her wild oats. He told her she had pretty legs, would never think of touching them, and would break the neck of any man who did think of it without her permission.

Deftly slipping the intricate iron pieces back together, he placed the puzzle on a stack of those already worked and took up one from another stack as she sat down across from him. "So, cabbage," he said with a grin, "back with your neck unbroken, not kidnapped and not married." One day she was going to ask him what that meant; he always said it.

"Has anything happened since I went out, Mahiro?"

"You mean aside from the sisters returning from the Palace looking like a storm in the mountains." As usual, the puzzle came apart in his hands as though channeled.

"What upset them?"

"Al'Thor, I suppose." The puzzle went back together just as easily and joined the pile of discards; immediately one from the other pile did, too. "I worked that one years ago," he confided.

"But how, Mahiro? What happened?"

Dark eyes regarded her; a leopard's eyes would look like Mahiro's if they were nearly black. "Min, a yearling who puts her nose into the wrong den may have her ears bitten off."

Min winced. All too true. The fool things a woman did because she was in love. "That is what I would like to avoid, Mahiro. The only reason I'm here is to carry messages back and forth between Merana and the Palace, but I walk in there with no idea what I'm walking into. I don't know why the sisters stopped meeting him every day, or why they started back, or why a whole fistful went today instead of just three. I could get more than my ears bitten, not knowing. Merana isn't going to tell me. She doesn't tell me anything except go there, do that. Just a hint, Mahiro? Please?"

He began studying the puzzle, yet she knew he was thinking, because the interlocked pieces shifted about in his long fingers but nothing came loose.

A motion at the back of the common room caught her eye and she half-turned her head before her neck froze. Two Aes Sedai were coming back from the baths, by the freshly washed look of them. The last time she had seen that pair was months ago, before they were sent out from Salidar because Sheriam had a hunch Rand was in the Aiel waste somewhere. That was where Bera Harkin and Kiruna Nachiman had been headed; the Waste, not Caemlyn.

Except for her ageless face, Bera would have looked like a farmwife with her brown hair cut close around a square face, but at the moment that face was set in grim determination. Kiruna, elegant and statuesque, seemed every inch exactly what she was, sister to the King of Arafel and a powerful lady in her own right. Her large dark eyes gleamed as if she was about to order an execution and enjoy it. Images and auras flickered about them as always around Aes Sedai and Warders. One caught Min's eye when it flashed around both women at the same instant, brownish yellow and deep purple. The colors themselves meant nothing, but that aura made Min stop breathing.

The table was not far from the foot of the stairs, but the two women did not glance at Min as they turned to climb. Neither had ever given her more than two looks in Salidar, and now they were engrossed in their own conversation.

"Alanna should have brought him to heel long since." Kiruna's voice was low, yet close to open anger. "I would have. When she arrives, I will tell her so, and the Dark One take convention."

"He should be leashed," Bera agreed in a flat tone, "and before he can do more damage to Andor." She was Andoran. "The sooner, the better, I say."

As the pair sailed up the stairs, Min realized Mahiro was looking at her. "How did they get here?" she asked, and was surprised her voice sounded perfectly ordinary. Kiruna and Bera made thirteen. Thirteen Aes Sedai. And there was that aura.

“They followed word of al’Thor. They were halfway to Cairhien when they heard he was here. I would walk wide of them, Min. Their Gaidin tell me neither is in a good temper.” Kiruna had four Warders, and Bera three.

Min managed a smile. She wanted to dart out of the inn, but that would raise all sorts of suspicions, even in Mahiro. “That sounds good advice. What about my hint?”

He hesitated another moment, then set the puzzle down. “I will not say what is or is not, but a word in a good ear. . . . Maybe you should expect al’Thor to be upset. Maybe you should even consider asking if someone else can deliver any messages, perhaps one of us.” He meant the Warders. “Maybe the sisters have decided to teach al’Thor a small lesson in humility. And that, cabbage, is maybe a word more than I should have said. You will think on it?”

Min did not know whether the “small lesson” was what had happened at the Palace or something to come, but it all fit together. And that aura. “That sounds good advice too. Mahiro, if Merana comes looking for me to carry a message, will you tell her I am looking at the sights in the Inner City for the next few days?”

“A long journey,” he chuckled, gently mocking. “You will kidnap a husband yet if you are not careful.”

The big-eared ostler stared when Min insisted he root Wildrose out of her stall and saddle her again. She rode out of the stableyard at a walk, but as soon as the first turning hid The Crown of Roses, Min dug her heels and sent people leaping from her path as she galloped toward the Palace as fast as Wildrose could carry her.

“Thirteen,” Rand said flatly, and just saying it was enough for Lews Therin to try seizing control of *saidin* from him again. It was a wordless struggle with a snarling beast. When Min first said there actually were thirteen Aes Sedai in Caemlyn, Rand had barely managed to seize the Power before Lews Therin could. Sweat rolled down Rand’s face; there were dark patches on his coat. He only had room for concentrating on one thing. Keeping *saidin* away from Lews Therin. A muscle in his cheek jumped from the strain. His right hand trembled.

Min stopped pacing across his sitting-room carpet, and bounced on her toes. “It isn’t only that, Rand,” she said frantically. “It’s the aura. Blood, death, the One Power, those two women and you, all in the same place at the same time.” Her eyes were shining again, but this time tears leaked silently down her cheeks. “Kiruna and Bera do not like you, not at all! Remember what I saw around you? Women who can channel, hurting you. It is the auras, and the thirteen, and everything, Rand. It is too much!”

She always said her viewing always came true, though she could never tell whether in a day or a year or ten, and if he remained in Caemlyn, he thought it might be the day. Even with only a snarling in his head to go on, he knew Lews Therin wanted to strike at Merana and the others before they could strike at him. For that matter, the idea appealed uncomfortably to Rand. Maybe it was only happenstance, maybe his *ta’veren* twisting of chance had worked against him, but the fact remained. Merana had decided to challenge him on the very day the number of Aes Sedai reached thirteen.

Rising, he strode into his bedchamber long enough to fetch his sword from the back of the wardrobe and fasten the Dragon-shaped buckle. “You’re coming with me, Min,” he told her as he snatched up the Dragon Scepter and headed for the door.

“Coming where?” she demanded, wiping her cheeks with a handkerchief, but she did follow, and he was already in the hallway. Jalani bounced to her feet a touch more quickly than Beralna, a bony redhead with blue eyes and a feral grin.

With none but Maidens about, Beralna would stare at him as though considering whether to do him the great favor of doing as he asked, but he gave her a sharp stare of his own. The Void made his voice distant and cold. Lews Therin had subsided to muted whimpers, but Rand dared not relax. Not in Caemlyn; not anywhere near Caemlyn. “Beralna, find Nandera and tell her to meet me in Perrin’s rooms with however many Maidens she wants to take.” He could not leave Perrin behind, and not because of any viewing; when Merana found Rand gone, one of them might well bond Perrin the way Alanna had him. “I may not be coming back here. If anyone sees Perrin or Faile or Loial, tell them to meet me there too. Jalani, find Mistress Harfor. Tell her I need pen and ink and paper.” He had letters to write before he left. His hand trembled again, and he added, “Lots of paper. Well? Go! Go!” They exchanged one look, and went at a run. He headed in the opposite direction, with Min almost trotting to keep up.

“Rand, where are we going?”

“Cairhien.” With the Void around him, that came out cold as a slap in the face. “Trust me, Min. I won’t hurt you. I will cut off my arm before I hurt you.” She was silent, and he finally looked down to find her peering up at him with a strange expression.

“That’s very nice to hear, sheepherder.” Her voice was as odd as her face. The thought of thirteen Aes Sedai coming for him must have really frightened her, and small wonder.

“Min, if it comes down to facing them, I promise to send you away out of danger somehow.” How could any man face thirteen? The thought made Lews Therin surge again, screaming.

To his surprise, she flourished those knives out of her coatsleeves and opened her mouth, but then slid the blades back just as smoothly—she must have been practicing—before she spoke. “You can lead me by the nose to Cairhien or anywhere else, sheepherder, but you better dig deep and try hard if you think to send me anywhere at all.” For some reason, he was sure that was not what she had been going to say.

When they reached Perrin’s rooms, Rand found quite a gathering. At one side of the sitting room Perrin and Loial were in shirtsleeves, cross-legged on the blue carpet and smoking their pipes with Gaul, a Stone Dog Rand remembered from the fall of the Stone. On the other side of the room sat Faile, also on the floor, with Bain and Chiad, who had also been at the Stone. Through the open door to the other room, Rand could see Sulin changing bed linens, flinging them about as though she would rather rip them to shreds. Everyone looked up when he and Min entered, and Sulin came to the bedchamber door.

There was a good bit of scrambling about once he explained about the thirteen Aes Sedai and what Min had overheard. Not the viewings, though; some in the room knew, some might not, and he was not going to tell anyone unless she did. Which she did not. And not about Lews Therin, of course; not that he was afraid of what might happen to him in a city with thirteen Aes Sedai even if they sat on their hands. Let them think he was panicky if they wished; he was not sure he was not. Lews Therin had gone silent, but Rand could feel him, like heated eyes watching in the night. Anger and fear, and maybe panic too, crawled outside the Void like large spiders.

Perrin and Faile immediately began a hasty packing, and Bain and Chiad flickered fingers at one another before announcing that they meant to accompany Faile, whereupon Gaul announced that he was accompanying Perrin. Rand did not understand what was going on there, but it involved a great deal of Gaul not looking at Bain or Chiad and them not looking at him. Loial went running off, muttering under his breath, as he thought about Cairhien being much farther from the Two Rivers than Caemlyn and his mother being a famous walker. When he returned, he had a half-done bundle under one arm and huge saddlebags over his shoulder, shirts hanging out. Loial was ready to go on the spot. Sulin vanished as well, coming back with a bundle in her arms that seemed made out of red-and-white dresses. With her face fixed in that incongruous mildness, she growled at Rand that she had been commanded to serve him *and* Perrin *and* Faile, and only a sun-crazed lizard would think she could do that in Caemlyn when they were all in Cairhien. She even added a "my Lord Dragon" that sounded a curse, and a curtsy, amazingly without a single wobble. The latter seemed to amaze her too.

Nandera arrived at almost the same instant as Mistress Harfor, who was carrying a writing case with several steel-nibbed pens and enough paper and ink and sealing wax for fifty letters. Which turned out to be fortunate.

Perrin wanted to send word to Dannil Lewin telling him to follow with the rest of the Two Rivers men—he did not intend to leave any of them for the Aes Sedai, either—and he only refrained from telling Dannil to bring Bode and the other girls from Culain's Hound when both Rand and Faile pointed out that in the first place, the Aes Sedai were not going to let them go, and in the second, it was not very likely they would want to. Perrin and she had both been to the inn more than once, and even Perrin had to admit that the girls mainly seemed impatient to get on with becoming Aes Sedai.

Faile herself had two hasty letters to write, to her mother and father, so they would not worry, she said. Rand did not know which was which, but they were very different in tone, the one begun half a dozen times then torn up, and every word frowned over, the other dashed off with smiles and chuckles. He thought that must be to her mother. Min wrote to a friend named Mahiro at The Crown of Roses, and for some reason made a point of telling Rand he was an old man, though she blushed at saying it. Even Loial took pen in hand after some hesitation. His own pen; a human pen would have vanished in his huge hands. Sealing his note, he handed it to Mistress Harfor with a diffident request that she deliver it personally if the chance arose. A thumb the size of a fat sausage covered most of the recipient's name, in both human script and Ogier, but with the One Power sharpening his eyes, Rand noticed the name "Erith." Still, he showed no sign of wanting to wait and give it to her himself.

Rand's own letters were as difficult as Faile's, but for different reasons. Sweat dripping from his face made the ink run, and his hand shook so that he had to start over more than once for inkblots. He knew exactly what he wanted to say, though. To Taim, a warning about thirteen Aes Sedai and a reiteration of his orders to stay away from them. And to Merana, a different sort of warning, and an invitation of a kind; it was no use him trying to hide; Alanna could find him anywhere in the world eventually. It had to be on his terms, though, if he could manage that.

When he finally sealed them—the presence of a greenstone seal carved with a Dragon earned Mistress Harfor a stare, which she returned with the utmost blandness—Rand turned to Nandera. "Do you have your twenty Maidens outside?"

Nandera's eyebrows rose. "Twenty? Your message said however many I wanted, and that you might not return. I have five hundred, and would have more had I not drawn the line."

He only nodded. In his head was silence except for his own thoughts, but he could *feel* Lews Therin, inside the Void with him, waiting like a coiled spring. Not until he had passed everyone through the gateway to the chamber in Cairhien and let the hole close, cutting his sense of Alanna to that vague impression of somewhere west, not until then did Lews Therin seem to go away. It was as if, wearied by grappling with Rand, the man had gone to sleep. At last Rand pushed *saidin* away, and with that he realized how wearied he had been by the struggle. Loial had to carry him to his rooms in the Sun Palace.

Merana sat quietly by the sitting-room window, her back to the view of the street and Rand al'Thor's letter on her lap. She knew its contents by heart.

Merana, it began. Not Merana Aes Sedai, nor even Merana Sedai.

> *Merana,*
>
> *A friend of mine once told me that in most dice games, the number thirteen is considered nearly as unlucky as rolling the Dark One's Eyes. I also think thirteen is an unlucky number. I am going to Cairhien. You may follow me as you can with no more than five other sisters. That way you will be on an equal footing with the emissaries from the White Tower. I will be displeased if you try to bring more. Do not press me again. I have little trust left in me.*
>
> *Rand al'Thor*
> *The Dragon Reborn*

At the end, his pen had pressed so hard that it nearly tore the paper; the last two lines almost seemed a different hand from the rest.

Merana sat very quietly. She was not alone. The rest of the embassy, if it could still be called that, sat in chairs around the walls, in various states. Irritatingly, only Berenicia sat as small as Merana, plump hands folded in her lap, head bowed slightly and grave eyes watchful; she did not say a word unless spoken to. Faeldrin sat quite proudly and spoke when she wished, and so did Masuri and Rafela. For that matter, Seonid appeared scarcely less eager, sitting on the edge of her chair and often smiling determinedly. The rest were more like Valinde, almost placid. Everyone was there except Verin and Alanna, and Gaidin had been sent to find them. Kiruna and Bera, standing in the middle of the floor, were most definitely there.

"That anyone could send such a letter to Aes Sedai disgusts me." Kiruna did not thunder; her voice managed to be cool and calm and forceful all at once. But her dark eyes did provide lightning. "Demira, can your informant confirm that al'Thor has gone to Cairhien?"

"Traveling," Bera murmured in disbelief. "To think that he would rediscover that."

The bright beads in Faeldrin's braids clicked as she nodded. "We can think of no other thing it can be. It will be well to remember that he is perhaps more powerful even than Logain, or Mazrim Taim, yes?"

"Can nothing be done about Taim?" Rafela's round face, normally mild and pleasant, was quite stern, and her usually sweet voice flat. "There are at least one hundred men who can channel—one hundred!—not twenty miles from where we sit." Kairen nodded resolutely but did not speak.

“They must wait,” Kiruna said firmly. “Light and honor, I do not know how many sisters will be required to handle so many. Al’Thor is the important matter, and one we can handle. Demira?”

Demira had waited for the others to finish, of course. With a slight bow of her head, she said, “I know only that he is gone, apparently with a large number of Aiel, and possibly with Perrin Aybara as well.”

Verin had slipped into the room as Demira began, and she added, “There can be no doubt of Perrin. I sent Tomas to look at the Two Rivers men’s camp. It seems they have sent two men to the Palace for Perrin’s horse, and his wife’s. The rest have left the wagons and servants and are already riding east as hard as they can go. Behind Perrin’s wolfhead, and the Red Eagle of Manetheren.” A faint smile curved her lips as though she found that amusing. Kairen plainly did not; she gasped, then clamped her mouth shut in a hard line.

Merana did not find it amusing either, but it was such a small thing compared to the rest. A faint whiff of something spoiled when you already sat on a midden heap; a dog snarling at you when wolves already had hold of your skirts. To think that she had worried so over Verin, struggled so hard. Verin had hardly touched her own plans really, except for guiding Demira into suggesting today’s unfortunate confrontation. It had been done quite skillfully; Merana did not believe anyone but a Gray would have noticed. Yet she herself had agreed even with that. Facing al’Thor down—trying to face him down—was the least they could have done. She had worried about Verin, and then Kiruna and Bera appeared, neither with any tie to her authority, both at least as strong as Masuri or Faeldrin or Rafela.

“Now, that’s a rotten turnip tossed in the stew,” Bera muttered grimly. Kairen and a number of others nodded agreement.

“A small turnip,” Kiruna told her in a dry tone. Nearly everyone nodded, except Merana and Verin. Merana just sighed softly; Verin watched Kiruna with that birdlike gaze, her head tilted. “What is keeping Alanna?” Kiruna demanded of no one in particular. “I do not want to go over everything twice.”

Merana supposed she herself had begun it, deferring to Verin. She had still been the head of the delegation, everyone still followed her orders, even Masuri and Rafela and Faeldrin. But they all knew. She was not certain yet whether Kiruna or Bera had taken charge—that one was born on a farm and the other in a palace mattered not at all; that had nothing to do with being Aes Sedai—but the one thing Merana was sure of was that the embassy was crumbling around her. It was the sort of thing that would never have happened when the White Tower was whole, when an ambassador had the full power of the Tower and the Amyrlin Seat behind her, and no matter if she had taken thirty years to reach the shawl and barely had enough strength to keep from being sent away. They were only a collection of Aes Sedai now, slipping into their relative places without thought.

As if speaking her name had been a summons, Alanna appeared just as Bera was opening her mouth. She and Kiruna rounded on Alanna together. “Al’Thor claims to have gone to Cairhien,” Bera said baldly. “Can you add anything?”

Alanna faced them proudly, a dangerous gleam in her dark eyes. They were speaking of her Warder, after all. “He is somewhere to the east. That is all I know. It could be Cairhien.”

“If you had to bond a man without asking him,” Kiruna demanded in that commanding voice, “why, by the Light most holy, have you not used the bond to bend him to your will? Compared to the other, that is only slapping his wrist.”

Alanna still had small control of her emotions. Color actually flooded her cheeks, partly in anger by the way her eyes flashed, and assuredly partly in shame. “Has no one told you?” she asked, too brightly. “I suppose no one wants to think of it. I certainly do not.” Faeldrin and Seonid looked at the floor, and they were not the only ones. “I tried to compel him moments after I bonded him,” Alanna continued as if noticing none of it. “Have you ever attempted to uproot an oak tree with your bare hands, Kiruna? It was much the same.”

Kiruna’s only reaction was a slow widening of her eyes, a slow deep breath. Bera actually muttered, “That’s impossible. Impossible.”

Alanna threw back her head and laughed. Her hands on her hips made the laughter seem contemptuous, which tightened Bera’s mouth and brought a cold gleam to Kiruna’s eyes. Verin peered at them, reminding Merana uncomfortably of a robin peering at worms. Somehow Verin seemed to defer without deferring, though Merana could not understand how.

“No one ever before has bonded a man who can channel,” Alanna said when her mirth subsided. “Perhaps that has something to do with it.”

“Be that as it may,” Bera said firmly. Her gaze was just as firm. “Be that as it may. You can still locate him.”

“Yes,” Kiruna said. “You will come with us, Alanna.” Alanna blinked as though coming to herself. Her head bowed slightly in acquiescence.

It was time, Merana decided. If she was to hold the delegation together, this was her last chance. She stood, folding al’Thor’s letter to give her hands something to do. “When I brought this embassy to Caemlyn,” she began, to remind them all that she *was* the head; thank the Light that her voice was steady, “I was given great leeway, yet it seemed obvious what should be done, and we,” to remind them they were a delegation, “set about it with a fair expectation of success. Al’Thor was to be enticed out of Caemlyn so that we could return Elayne and see her crowned, placing Andor firmly behind us. Slowly al’Thor was to be brought to trust us, that we would not harm him. And he would have been brought to show a proper respect as well. Two or three of us, carefully selected, would have taken Moiraine’s place advising and guiding him. Including Alanna, of course.”

“How do you know he did not kill Moiraine,” Bera interrupted, “as he is said to have killed Morgase?”

“We have heard every sort of rumor concerning her death,” Kiruna added. “Some even say she died fighting Lanfear. Most say she was alone with al’Thor when she died.”

With an effort, Merana stopped herself from answering. If she allowed those ingrained instincts a word, they would take them all in the end. “All that was in hand,” she went on, “when you two arrived. Only by chance, I know, and only following your instructions to find him, yet you brought our number to thirteen. What man of al’Thor’s sort would not flee as fast as he could hearing of thirteen Aes Sedai together? The simple fact is, whatever damage has been done to our plans must be laid at your feet, Kiruna, and yours, Bera.” She could only wait then. If she had managed to gain any moral ascendancy at all. . . .

“Are you quite finished?” Bera said coolly.

Kiruna was even more blunt. She turned to the others. “Faeldrin, you will come with us to Cairhien, if you will. And you also, Masuri, Rafela.”

Merana trembled, the folded letter crumpling in her fist. “Don’t you see?” she shouted. “You talk as if we can go on as before, as if nothing has changed. There is an embassy from Elaida in Cairhien, from the White

Tower. That is how al’Thor must see it. We need him more than he needs us, and I fear he knows it!”

For a moment, shock covered every face save Verin’s. Verin only nodded thoughtfully, smiling a small, secretive smile. For a moment, every other face was full of wide eyes, stunned. Those words seemed to ring in the air. *We need him more than he needs us.* They did not need the Three Oaths to know it for truth.

Then Bera said quite firmly, “Sit down, Merana, and calm yourself.” Merana was sitting before she realized it; still trembling, still wanting to shout, but sitting with her hands clutched together around al’Thor’s missive.

Kiruna turned her back deliberately. “Seonid, you will come, of course. Another pair of Gaidin are always useful. And Verin, I think.” Verin nodded as if it were a request. “Demira,” Kiruna went on, “I know you have grievance against him, but we do not want to panic the man again, and someone must shepherd that extraordinary collection of girls from the Two Rivers to Salidar. You, Valinde, Kairen and Berenicia must assist Merana in that.”

The other four named murmured acceptance without the slightest hesitation, but Merana felt cold. The delegation was not crumbling; it was gone to dust.

“I. . . .” She trailed off as Bera’s gaze turned to her, and Kiruna’s. And Masuri’s and Faeldrin’s and Rafela’s as well. Gone to dust, and all her authority with it. “You may find some need for a Gray,” she said faintly. “There will certainly be negotiations, and. . . .” Words failed her again. This would *never* have happened when the Tower was whole.

“Very well,” Bera said at last, in such a tone that all Merana’s control only just kept her cheeks from going crimson in shame.

“Demira, you will see the girls to Salidar,” Kiruna said.

Merana sat very still. She prayed that the Hall had chosen an Amyrlin by now. Someone very strong, in the Power and in her heart. It would take another Deane, another Rashima, to make them once more what they had been. She prayed Alanna led them to al’Thor before he decided to acknowledge Elaida. Even another Rashima would not save them then.

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CHAPTER 50

Thorns

Rand spent the rest of that day in his apartments in the Sun Palace, a good part lying on his bed, a huge thing with four square blackwood posts thicker than his leg, polished till they shone between the inlaid ivory wedges. As if to contrast with all the gilding in the anteroom and sitting room, the bedchamber furnishings were all blackwood and ivory, if no less angular.

Sulin rushed in and out, fluffing his feather pillows and adjusting the linen sheet over him, grumbling that blankets on the floor were healthier, bringing him mint tea he did not ask for and punch he did not want, until he ordered her to stop. “As my Lord Dragon commands,” she growled through a sweet smile. She made her second perfect curtsy, but she still stalked out as though she might not bother to open the door.

Min also stayed with him, sitting on the mattress and holding his hand and frowning until he suspected she thought he was dying. Finally he chased her out too, long enough to put on a dark gray silk robe that he had always left in the wardrobe before. He found something else in there as well, way in the back. A narrow, plain wooden case holding a flute, a gift from Thom Merrilin in what seemed another lifetime. Sitting by one of the tall narrow windows, he tried playing. After so long, he produced more squeaks and silences than anything else at first. It was the odd sounds that drew Min back.

“Play for me,” she said, laughing in delight, or perhaps astonishment, and of course settled herself on his knee while he tried with small success to produce something near a recognizable tune. Which was how the Wise Ones walked in on him, Amys and Bair and Sorilea and a dozen or so more. Min scrambled up quickly enough blushing at that, tugging her coat straight to such an extent you would have thought they had been wrestling.

Bair and Sorilea were at his side before he could say a word.

"Look left," Sorilea commanded, thumbing back his eyelid and thrusting her leathery face into his, "Look right."

"Your pulse is too quick," Bair muttered, holding bony fingers against the side of his throat.

It seemed that Nandera had sent a Maiden running as soon as his knees gave way. It seemed that Sorilea had winnowed the small army of Wise Ones who had intended to descend on the palace into this smaller horde. And it seemed that Sorilea or no Sorilea, everyone wanted her turn at the *Car'a'carn*. When she and Bair were done, her place was taken by Amys, and Bair's by Colinda, a lean woman with penetrating gray eyes who looked short of her middle years yet had almost as strong a presence as Sorilea. But then, so did Amys, of course, and any number of them. He was poked, prodded, stared at, and called stubborn when he refused to jump up and down. They really seemed to think he would.

Min was not ignored while the Wise Ones were taking their turns with him; the others surrounded her, asking a hundred questions, all about her viewings. Which widened her eyes to say the least, and had her staring at them *and* Rand as if wondering whether her mind was being read. Amys and Bair explained—Melaine had not been able to keep the news of her daughters to herself—and instead of growing any wider, which they probably could not at that point, Min's eyes looked ready to fall out of her face. Even Sorilea seemed to accept Melaine's view that Min's ability put her on an equal footing of sorts with them, but Wise Ones being Wise Ones—very much in the manner of Aes Sedai being Aes Sedai—she had to repeat everything nearly as many times as there were Wise Ones, because those fussing over him at any given time wanted to be sure they had not missed anything.

Once Sorilea and the rest reluctantly concluded that all he needed was rest, and departed ordering him to see that he got it, Min made herself comfortable on his lap again. "They talk in *dreams*?" she said, shaking her head. "It doesn't seem possible, like something out of a story." A frown creased her forehead. "How old do you think Sorilea is? And that Colinda. I saw—No. No, it doesn't have anything to do with you. Maybe the heat is affecting me. When I know, I *always* know. It must be the heat." A mischievous light appeared in her eyes, and she slowly leaned closer, pursing her lips as if for a kiss. "If you put them like this," she murmured when they were almost touching his, "it might help. There were bits in that last piece that almost sounded like ‘Rooster in the Gumtree.’ ” It took him a moment to understand, with her eyes filling his vision, and when he did, his face must have been a sight, because she collapsed on his chest laughing.

A note arrived from Coiren a short time later, inquiring after his health, wishing he was not ill, and asking whether she might come to see him with two of her sisters; she offered Healing, should he desire. Lews Therin stirred as if rousing from sleep while Rand read, but his vague, discontented mumbling was hardly a patch on his rage in Caemlyn, and he seemed to go back to sleep when Rand put the short letter down.

It was a sharp contrast to how Merana had behaved. And a reminder that nothing happened in the Sun Palace at midday that Coiren did not know in full before sunset, if not sooner. He sent back polite thanks for her wishes, and a polite refusal. Out of bed or not, he still felt tired, and he wanted his wits about him when he faced any Aes Sedai. That was part of it.

In that same return note Rand also asked Gawyn to visit. He had only met Elayne’s brother once, but he liked the man. Gawyn never came, though, and he never replied. Sadly, Rand concluded that Gawyn believed the stories about his mother. That was hardly the sort of thing you could just ask a man to stop believing. It put him in a such a gray humor whenever he thought of it that even Min seemed to despair of cheering him; neither Perrin nor Loial would stay around him when he was like that.

Three days later another request came from Coiren, just as courteous, and a third three days after that, but he made excuses for those as well. In part that was because of Alanna. The feel of her was still distant and vague, but she was coming nearer by the hour. No surprise in that; he had been sure Merana would choose Alanna for one of the six. He had no intention of letting Alanna within a mile of him, or not within sight anyway, but he had said he would put them on an equal footing with Coiren, and he meant it. So Coiren would have to abide in patience for a little while. Besides, he was busy, one way and another.

A quick visit to the school in Barthanes’ onetime palace turned out not so quick. Idrien Tarsin was once again waiting at the door to show him all sorts of inventions and discoveries, often incomprehensible, and also the shops where various new plows and harrows and reapers were now being made for sale, but the difficulty was Herid Fel. Or maybe Min. Fel’s thoughts wandered as usual, his tongue Wandered after them, and he plainly forgot Min was there. He forgot her a good many times. But no sooner would Rand have the man aimed at a point, than Fel suddenly noticed her for the first time again and gave a great start. He was constantly apologizing to her for the half-smoked pipe he still never seemed to remember to light, constantly brushing ash from his stout belly, constantly smoothing his thin gray hair. Min seemed to enjoy it, though why she enjoyed a man forgetting her presence, Rand could not begin to say. She even kissed Fel on top of his head when she and Rand rose to go, which left the man looking poleaxed. It did not help a great deal with learning what Fel had puzzled out about the Seals on the Dark One's prison or the Last Battle.

The next day brought a note crammed onto a torn-off corner of parchment.

> *Belief and order give strength. Have to clear rubble before you can build. Will explain when see you next. Do not bring girl. Too pretty.*
>
> *Fel*

It was a hasty scrawl with the signature jammed into the point of the fragment, and to Rand it made no sense. When he tried to reach Fel again, though, it seemed that the man had told Idrien that he felt young again and was going fishing. In the middle of a drought. Rand wondered whether the old man's wits had finally cracked. Min certainly found the note amusing; she asked if she could have it, and several times he caught her grinning over it.

Cracked wits or whole, Rand decided that he would leave Min behind the next time, but in truth, it was difficult to keep her at his side when he wanted her. She seemed to spend more time with the Wise Ones than with him. He could not understand why that should irritate him so, but he noticed a tendency to snap at people when Min was out among the tents. It was a good thing she was not with him too often. People would notice. People would talk, and wonder. In Cairhien, where even the servants played their own version of the Game of Houses, it could be dangerous for her to have people wondering whether she was important. A good thing. He tried not to snap.

What he wanted Min for, of course, was to view the nobles who began coming to him one at a time, asking after his health—those sagging knees must have started rumors—smiling, inquiring how long he intended to remain in Cairhien this time, what his plans were if they might ask, smiling more, always smiling. The only one who did not smile at him so intently was Dobraine, still with the front of his head shaved like a soldier and the stripes across his coat worn by the breastplate he did not wear to the palace, and Dobraine was so glum in asking exactly the same questions that Rand was almost happier to see him go than any of the others.

Min did manage to be at those audiences, squeezing it in between whatever she was doing with the Wise Ones; Rand had no intention of asking. The problem was keeping her hidden.

"I could just pretend to be your lightskirt," Min laughed. "I could drape myself on you and feed you grapes—well, raisins; I haven't seen a grape in some time—and you could call me your little honey-lips. Nobody would wonder why I was there then."

"No," he snapped, and her face grew solemn.

"Do you really think the Forsaken would come after me just for that?"

"They might," he told her just as seriously. "A Darkfriend like Padan Fain would, if he's still alive. I won't risk that, Min. In any case, I won't have these filthy-minded Cairhienin thinking of you that way, or the Tairens either." The Aiel were different; they thought her teasing very funny, very amusing indeed.

Min certainly was changeable. She went straight from solemn to radiant with no in-between, all smiles that hardly faded for a moment. Until the audiences actually began.

A paneled screen of gilded fretwork set up in the corner of the anteroom was a failure. Maringil's dark glittering eyes avoided looking at it to such an extent that Rand knew the man would turn the Sun Palace end over end to find out who or what it hid. The sitting room turned out better, with Min peeping through cracked doors into the anteroom, but not everyone showed image or aura to her eyes during the audience with him, and what she did see, there and simply walking about in the hallways, was bleak. Maringil, white-haired and blade-slim and cool as ice, was going to die by poison. Colavaere, her more than handsome face calm and collected once she learned Aviendha was not with Rand this time, would die by hanging. Meilan, with his pointed beard and oily voice, would die by the knife. The future carried a heavy toll for the High Lords of Tear. Aracome and Maraconn and Gueyam were all going to die too, bloody deaths, in battle, Min thought. She said she had never seen death so often in one group of people.

By the time she saw blood covering Gueyam's broad face, their fifth day in Cairhien, she felt so ill at the thought that Rand made her lie down and had Sulin bring damp cloths to lay on her forehead. This time he was the one to sit on the mattress and hold her hand. She held on very tight.

She did not give up her teasing, though. The two times he could be absolutely sure she would be there were when he practiced the sword, dancing the forms with four or five of the best he could find among the Tairen and Cairhienin soldiers, and when he and Rhuarc or Gaul were tossing each other about and trying to kick each other in the head. Inevitably Min ran a finger across his bare chest and made some joke about sheepfarmers not sweating because they were used to having wool as thick as their sheep or the like. Sometimes she touched the half-healed, never-healing scar on his side, that circle of pale pink flesh, but differently, softly; she never made any jokes about that. She pinched his bottom—startling to say the least when other people were about; Maidens and Wise Ones nearly fell over laughing every single time he jumped; Sulin looked as if she might burst from not laughing—snuggled in his lap and kissed him at every opportunity, she even threatened to come scrub his back in his bath one of these nights. When he pretended to weep and stammer, she laughed and said it was not good enough.

Min did quit quickly enough if a Maiden stuck her head in to announce someone, especially Loial, who never stayed long and talked of the Royal Library the whole time, or Perrin, who stayed even more briefly and for some reason looked increasingly tired. Most especially Min leaped up if Faile happened to be with either one. The two times that happened, Min hastily found a book among those Rand had in the bedchamber and sat pretending to read, opening it somewhere in the middle as if she had been at it for some time. Rand did not understand the cool looks the two women exchanged. It was not precisely animosity, or even unfriendliness exactly, but Rand suspected that if either made a list of those she would just as soon not spend time with, the other's name would be prominent.

The amusing thing of it was, the second time, the book turned out to be the leather-bound first volume of Daria Gahand's *Essays on Reason*, which he had found heavy going and intended to send back to the Library the next time Loial stopped in. Min actually went on reading for a time after Faile left, and for all her frowning and muttering, that night Min took it back to her own rooms in the guest apartments.

If cool disinterest reigned between Min and Faile, between Min and Berelain animosity was not in it. When Somara announced Berelain on the second afternoon, Rand put on his coat, strode into the anteroom and took the tall gilded chair on the dais before telling Somara to admit her. Min was slow in reaching the sitting room, though. Berelain swept in, as beautiful as ever, in a soft blue dress cut as deeply as ever—and her eyes fell on Min, in her pale rose coat and breeches. For several long moments Rand might as well not have existed. Berelain openly eyed Min up and down. Min forgot about the sitting room; she put her hands on her hips and stood there with one knee bent, studying Berelain just as openly. They smiled at each other; Rand thought the hair on his head would stand up when they did that. He was minded of nothing so much as two strange cats who had just discovered they were shut up in the same small room. Apparently deciding there was no point hiding now, Min walked—undulated would have been a better word; she managed to make Berelain's way of walking look like a boy's!—and sat with one knee over the other, still smiling. Light, how those women did smile.

At last Berelain turned to Rand, spreading her skirts wide and bending low. He heard Lews Therin humming in his head, enjoying the sight of a very beautiful woman who was more than generous in displaying her charms. Rand appreciated what he was seeing too, despite wondering whether he should look away at least until she was erect again, but he had put himself on the dais for a reason. He tried to make his voice both reasonable and firm.

"Rhuarc let slip that you were neglecting your duties, Berelain. It seems you hid away in your rooms for days after I was last here. I gather he had to speak to you severely to make you come out." Rhuarc had not actually said so, but that had been the impression. Crimson bloomed in her cheeks, suggesting Rand had the right of it. "You know why you are in charge here and not him. You're supposed to listen to his advice, not leave everything to him. I don't need Cairhienin deciding to rebel because they think I've put an Aiel to rule them."

"I was . . . concerned, my Lord Dragon." Despite the hesitation, and the red cheeks, her voice was composed. "Since the Aes Sedai came, rumors grow like weeds. May I ask, who *do* you mean to rule here?"

"Elayne Trakand. The Daughter-Heir of Andor. The Queen of Andor, now." Soon, at least. "I don't know what rumors you mean, but you worry about putting Cairhien straight, and let me worry about the Aes Sedai. Elayne will be grateful for what you do here." Min sniffed quite loudly for some reason.

"She is a good choice," Berelain said thoughtfully. "The Cairhienin will accept her, I think, perhaps even the rebels in the hills." That was good to hear; Berelain was astute at judging political currents, maybe as good as any Cairhienin. She took a deep breath, making Lews Therin's hum pause. "As for the Aes Sedai . . . rumor says they have come to escort you to the White Tower."

"And *I* said, leave the Aes Sedai to me." It was not that he mistrusted Berelain. He trusted her to rule Cairhien until Elayne took the Sun Throne, he even trusted her not to have any ambitions for the throne herself. But he also knew that the fewer who were aware he had any plan at all regarding the Aes Sedai, the less chance that Coiren would learn he had a thought beyond her gold and jewels.

As soon as the doors closed behind Berelain, Min sniffed again. Actually, it was more of a snort this time. "I wonder she bothers to wear any clothes at all. Well, she'll be snubbed up sooner or later. I saw nothing of any use to you. Just a man in white who will make her fall head over heels. Some women have no shame at all!"

That very afternoon she asked him for coin to engage a whole roomful of seamstresses, since she had come away from Caemlyn with only what she stood in, and they proceeded to produce a stream of coats and breeches and blouses in silks and brocades of all colors. Some of the blouses seemed quite low-cut, even beneath a coat. Some of the breeches, he was not sure how she could get into. She also practiced throwing her knives every day. Once he saw Nandera and Enaila showing her their way of fighting with hands and feet, which differed significantly from how the men did it; the Maidens did not like him watching, and refused to go on until he left. Maybe Perrin would have understood it all, but Rand decided for the thousandth time that he himself did not understand women and never would.

Every day Rhuarc came to Rand's apartments or Rand went to the study Rhuarc shared with Berelain. Rand was pleased to see her hard at work over reports of grain shipments and resettlement of refugees and repairs to damage from what some Cairhienin were calling the Second Aiel War, in spite of every effort to name it the Shaido War. Rhuarc claimed to have decided to ignore the Cairhienin playing, as he called it, at *ji’e’toh*, though he still grumbled every time he saw a Cairhienin woman with a sword or young men and women garbed all in white. The rebels still seemed to be sitting in the hills waiting, their numbers growing, but they did not concern him either. What did concern him were the Shaido, and how many spears still moved south each day toward Tear. Scouts, those who returned, reported the Shaido stirring in Kinslayer’s Dagger. There was no sign of which direction they intended to move or when. Rhuarc actually mentioned the number of Aiel who still gave way to the bleakness and tossed down their spears, the number who refused to put off *gai’shain* white when their time was done, even those few who still headed north to join the Shaido. It was a sign of his unease. Surprisingly, Sevanna had been in the tents, even in the city itself, leaving the day after Rand arrived. Rhuarc only mentioned it in passing.

“Would it not have been better to seize her?” Rand asked. “Rhuarc, I know she is supposed to be a Wise One, but she can’t be, the way I understand it. I’d not be surprised if the Shaido turned reasonable without her.”

“I doubt that,” Rhuarc said dryly. He was seated on one of his cushions against the study wall, smoking his pipe. “Amys and the others pass looks behind Sevanna’s back, but they receive her as a Wise One. If the Wise Ones say Sevanna is a Wise One, then she is. I have seen chiefs I would not waste a waterskin on if I stood between ten pools, but they were still chiefs.”

Sighing, Rand studied the map spread on the table. Rhuarc truly did not seem to need it; without looking he could name any feature of the terrain the map showed. Berelain sat in her high-backed chair on the other side of the table, her feet curled up beneath her and a sheaf of papers on her lap. She had a pen in her hand, and an ink jar stood on the small table beside her chair. Every so often she glanced at him, but whenever she saw Rhuarc looking she would bend her head over the reports again. For some reason, Rhuarc frowned whenever he looked at her, and she always blushed and firmed her jaw stubbornly. Sometimes Rhuarc looked disapproving, which made no sense. She was taking care of her duties now.

“You will have to stop sending spears south,” Rand said at last. He did not like it. It was vital that Sammael see the biggest hammer in the world coming at him, but not at the cost of having to root the Shaido out of Cairhien again. “I don’t see any other way.”

The days passed, and every one filled somehow. He had smiling lords and ladies so cordial to one another that he was sure they were scheming against each other beneath the surface. Wise Ones counseled him on how to deal with Aes Sedai, whether from the Tower or Salidar; Amys and Bair made Melaine appear mild; Sorilea made his blood run cold. Young Cairhienin rioted in the streets against Rhuarc’s ban on dueling. Rhuarc handled it by giving them a taste of what it was really like to be made *gai’shain*; sitting naked in the sun all day under guard quenched their ardor somewhat, but Rhuarc was not about to go against custom so far as to put wetlanders in white, and those the Red Shields had caught actually began to swagger over the affair. Rand overheard Selande telling another young woman with a sword and her hair cut short, in a very self-important tone, that the other woman would never truly understand *ji’e’toh* until she had been captive to Aiel. It was uplifting, whatever that was supposed to mean.

But despite Shaido and nobles, Wise Ones and riot, despite wondering whether Fel was ever going to come back from fishing, those days seemed . . . pleasant. Refreshing. Maybe it was just because he had been so tired on arrival. And maybe it really was only by comparison with those last hours in Caemlyn, yet it did seem that Lews Therin was quieter. Rand even found himself enjoying Min’s teasing enough that once or twice he had to remind himself that it was only teasing. By the time he had been ten days in Cairhien, he thought this would not be such a bad way to spend the rest of his life. Of course, he knew it could not last.

For Perrin those ten days were not pleasant at all. Before very long he sought Loial’s company, but Loial had found a paradise in the Royal Library, where he spent the better part of every daylight. Perrin liked to read, and he might have enjoyed those seemingly endless rooms full of books to their high vaulted ceilings, but an Aes Sedai haunted those rooms, a slender dark-haired woman who seldom seemed to blink. She did not appear to notice him, but he had not been particularly trusting of Aes Sedai even before events in Caemlyn. With Loial’s company largely denied to him, Perrin went hunting a great deal with Gaul, and a few times with Rhuarc, who he had met in the Stone and liked. Perrin’s problem was his wife. Or maybe it was Berelain. Or both. If Rand had not been so busy, Perrin would have asked his advice. In a general sort of way; Rand knew women, but there were things a man simply could not talk about right out.

It began that very first day, when he had been in Cairhien scarcely long enough to be shown to rooms in the Sun Palace Faile went off with Bain and Chiad to explore, and he was stripped to the waist and washing when he suddenly smelled perfume, not heavy but strong to his nose, and a warm voice behind him said, “I always did think you must have a beautiful back, Perrin.”

He spun around so fast he nearly knocked over the washstand.

“I hear that you have come with . . . a wife?” Berelain stood in the door to the sitting room, smiling.

Yes, he had; a wife who would not be pleased at finding him alone and shirtless with any woman wearing that dress. Especially not the First of Mayene. Tugging a shirt over his head, he told Berelain that Faile was out, that he did not know when she would be back for visitors, and put *her* out into the hall as fast as he could without picking her up and tossing her. He thought it was done with; Berelain was gone, and he had managed to call Faile wife six times in as many sentences and say how much he loved her twice. Berelain knew he was married, knew he loved his wife, and that should have been that.

When Faile returned a short time later, she took two steps into the bedchamber and began radiating the smells of jealousy and rage, prickly and knife-sharp, a blend that should have made his nose bleed. Perrin did not understand; he could still smell Berelain’s perfume, but his sense of smell was nearly as acute as a wolf’s. Surely Faile could not. It was very strange. Faile smiled. Not one untoward word passed her lips. She was as loving as ever, and even more fierce than usual, raking deep furrows into his shoulders with her fingernails, which she had never done before.

Afterwards, examining the bleeding gouges by lamplight, she nipped his ear between her teeth, not at all lightly, and laughed. “In Saldaea,” she murmured, “we notch a horse’s ears, but I think that will do to mark you.” And the whole while she fairly reeked of jealousy and rage.

If that had been all, matters would have settled down. Faile’s jealousy might flare up like a forge fire roaring in a high wind, yet it always died just as fast as it caught, once she realized there was no cause. The very next morning, though, he saw her talking to Berelain down the corridor, both smiling to beat anything. His ears caught the last thing Berelain said before she turned away. “I always keep my promises.” An odd remark to send that acrid thorny smell leaping from Faile.

He asked Faile what promises Berelain was talking about, and maybe that was a mistake. She blinked—she did forget his hearing sometimes—and said, “I really do not remember. She’s the sort of woman who makes all sorts of promises she cannot keep.” His shoulders got a *second* set of furrows, and it was not even midmorning!

Berelain began stalking him. He did not think of it that way at first. The woman had flirted with him once, in the Stone of Tear, in a mild sort of way, not really meaning anything he was sure, and she knew he was married now. It was only a series of chance encounters in hallways, it seemed, a few innocuous words almost in passing. But after a while he knew either his being *ta’veren* was twisting chance completely out of shape or Berelain was arranging matters, unlikely as that seemed. He tried telling himself that was ridiculous. He tried telling himself he must think he was handsome as Wil al’Seen. Wil was the only man he had ever seen women chase after; they certainly never had after Perrin Aybara. There were just too many of those “chance” encounters, though.

She always touched him. Not blatantly, just fingers on his hand for a moment, on his arm, his shoulder. Hardly worth noticing. The third day a thought occurred that made the hair on the nape of his neck rise. When you were taming a horse that had never been ridden, you began with light touches, until the animal knew your touch would not hurt, until it stood still for your hand. After that came the saddlecloth, and later the saddle. The bridle was always last.

He began to dread the scent of Berelain’s perfume, wafting around a corner. He began to head in the opposite direction at the first whiff, only he could not give every moment to watching for it. For one thing, there seemed to be a great many swaggering young Cairhienin fools going in and out of the palace, most of them women. Women carrying swords! He walked around any number of men and women who planted themselves deliberately in his path. Twice he had to knock a fellow down when the idiot simply would not let him walk around, but kept dancing back in front of him. He felt bad about that—Cairhienin were nearly all considerably smaller than he—but you could not take chances with a man who had his hand on his sword hilt. Once a young woman tried that, and after he took her sword away, she made a nuisance of herself until he gave it back, which seemed to shock her, then shouted after him that he had no honor, until some Maidens led her off, talking to her fiercely.

For another thing, people knew he was Rand's friend. Even had he not arrived as he did, some of the Aiel and Tairens remembered him from the Stone, and word spread. Lords and ladies he had never seen in his life introduced themselves in hallways, and Tairen High Lords who had stared down their noses at him in Tear addressed him like an old friend in Cairhien. Most smelled of fear, and an odor he could not put a name to. They all wanted the same thing, he realized.

"I'm afraid the Lord Dragon doesn't always take me into his confidence, my Lady," he said politely to a cold-eyed woman named Colavaere, "and when he does, you wouldn't expect me to break that confidence." Her smile seemed to come from a great height; she seemed to be wondering how he would skin out for a lap rug. She had a strange smell, hard and smooth and somehow . . . high.

"I don't really know what Rand intends to do," he told Meilan. The man very nearly repeated his nose-staring, for all he smiled nearly as much as Colavaere. He had the smell too, just as potently. "Maybe you should ask him."

"If I did know, I'd hardly talk it all over the city," he told a white-haired weasel with too many teeth, a fellow called Maringil. By then he was growing tired of attempts to milk him. Maringil also gave off the smell, every bit as heavily as Colavaere or Meilan.

They three carried it far more than anyone else, a dangerous smell, he knew in his bones, like a dry mountain top before an avalanche.

Between keeping an eye out for young idiots and having that smell in his nose, he could not recognize Berelain's scent until she had crept close enough to pounce. Well, truth to tell, she glided up along the hallways, a swan on a smooth pond, but it certainly felt like being pounced on.

He mentioned Faile more times than he could count; Berelain did not seem to hear. He asked her to stop; Berelain asked him whatever did he mean? He told her to leave him alone; Berelain laughed and patted his cheek and asked what she was to stop doing. Which of course had to be the exact moment that Faile came out of the next crossing corridor, just the instant *before* he jerked back. It must have seemed to Faile that he moved away because he saw her. Without a moment's hesitation, Faile turned smoothly on her heel, her pace not a whit slower or faster.

He ran after her, caught up and walked alongside in pained silence. A man could hardly say what he had to say where people could hear. Faile smiled quite pleasantly all the way back to their rooms, but oh, that thorny, thorny, thorny scent in his nose.

"That wasn't what it looked like," he said as soon as the door was closed. Not a word out of her; her eyebrows just rose in a silent question. "Well, it was—Berelain patted my cheek—" Still smiling, but eyebrows lowered darkly, and sharp anger among the thorns. "—but she just did it. I didn't encourage her, Faile. She just did it." He wished Faile would say something; she only stared. He thought she was waiting, but for what? Inspiration took him by the throat, and as so often seemed to happen when he was talking to her, put a noose around it. "Faile, I'm sorry." Anger became a razor.

"I see," she said flatly, and glided out of the room.

So, both feet put wrong; straight into his mouth, it seemed, though he could not understand how. He had apologized, and he had not even done anything to apologize for.

That afternoon he overheard Bain and Chiad discussing whether they should help Faile beat him, of all things! No telling whether Faile had suggested it—she was fierce, but was she that fierce?—yet he suspected the pair meant him to hear, which made him angry. Plainly his wife was discussing affairs between him and her with them, matters which should have remained between husband and wife, which made him angrier. What other parts of their life did she chat about over tea? That night, as he watched in amazement, Faile put on a thick wool nightgown despite the heat. When he tried to kiss her cheek, almost timidly, she muttered that she had had a tiring day and rolled over with her back to him. She smelled furious, sharp enough to split a razor edgewise.

He could not sleep with that smell, and the longer he lay there beside her, studying the ceiling in the darkness, the angrier he became. Why was she doing this? Could she not see he loved her and only her? Had he not shown her time and again that what he wanted more than anything in life was to hold her forever? Was he to blame because some fool woman got a bee up her nose and wanted to flirt? What he ought to do was turn her upside down and smack her bottom till she saw sense. Only he had done that once before, when she thought she could hit him with her fist whenever she wanted to make a point. In the long run it had hurt him a lot more than it had her; he did not like even the thought of Faile being hurt. He wanted peace with her. With her and only her.

Which was why he made the decision he made lying there with gray first light of their sixth day in Cairhien showing in the windows. In the Stone, Berelain had flirted with a dozen men that he knew of; whatever had made her choose him as her quarry, she would settle on another if he was out of sight for very long. And once Berelain chose another victim, Faile would come to her senses. It seemed simple.

So as soon as he could throw on some clothes he went off to find Loial and breakfast with him, then accompanied him to the Royal Library. And once he saw that slender Aes Sedai and Loial told him she was there every day—Loial was diffident around Aes Sedai, but he did not mind fifty of them around him—Perrin sniffed out Gaul and asked whether he would like to go hunting. There were not many deer or rabbits in the hills close to the city, of course, and those few suffering as much from the drought as the people, yet Perrin's nose could have led them to any number they needed if meat had really been what he was after. He never even nocked an arrow, but he insisted on remaining out until Gaul asked whether he intended hunting bats by the light of the half-moon; sometimes Perrin forgot that other people could not see as well as he in the night. The next day he hunted into the darkness as well, and every day thereafter.

The problem of it was, his simple plan seemed to be falling on its nose. The first night when he returned to the Sun Palace, with his unstrung bow on his shoulder, pleasantly tired from all that walking, only a chance stir in the air brought Berelain's scent in time to stop him from walking into the main entry hall of the palace. Motioning the Aiel guards to silence, Perrin sneaked all the way around to a servants' door, where he had to pound to make a bleary-eyed fellow let him in. The next night Berelain was waiting in the hallway outside his rooms; he had to hide around a corner half the night before she gave up. Every night she was waiting somewhere, as if she could pretend a chance encounter when no one else was awake but a few servants. It was utter madness; why had she not gone on to someone else? And every night when he at last crept into his bedchamber with his boots in his hands, Faile was asleep in that bloody thick nightgown. Long before his sixth sleepless night in a row he was ready to admit he had blundered, though he still could not see how. It had seemed so bloody simple. All he wanted was one word from Faile, one hint of what he should say or do. All he got was the sound of his own teeth grinding in the darkness.

On the tenth day, Rand received another request from Coiren for an audience, just as politely, worded as the first three. For a time he sat rubbing the thick creamy parchment between thumb and forefinger, thinking. There was really no way to tell how far Alanna was yet from his sense of her, but comparing how strong it had been the first day with how strong it was now, he thought she might be halfway to Cairhien. If that was so, Merana was not dawdling. That was good; he wanted her eager. Penitent, at least a little, would help too, but as well wish for the moon; she was Aes Sedai. Ten more days until they reached Cairhien, if they kept that pace, and they should be able to. Time enough to meet twice more with Coiren, so he would have given each group three audiences. Let Merana consider that when she arrived. No advantage to her at all, the White Tower on the other side, and no need for her to know he would as soon stick his hand into a viper pit as go anywhere near the Tower, especially with Elaida as Amyrlin. Ten more days, and he would eat his boots if ten more passed beyond that before Merana agreed to throw Salidar's support to him, with no nonsense about guiding or showing the way. Then, at last, he could turn his full attention on Sammael.

As Rand sat to write Coiren that she could bring two of her sisters to the Sun Palace tomorrow afternoon, Lews Therin began muttering audibly. *Yes. Sammael. Kill him this time. Demandred and Sammael and all of them, this time. Yes, I will.*

Rand hardly noticed.

* * *

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CHAPTER 51

The Taking

Rand let Sulin hold his coat for him to put on for the simple reason that he would have had to rip it out of her hands physically to do otherwise. As usual, she tried to shove the garment onto him with no regard to details such as where his arms happened to be. The result was a small dance in the middle of his bedchamber. Lews Therin cackled with a sort of mad delight, just loud enough to be heard. *Sammael, oh, yes, but Demandred first. First of all I rid myself of him, then Sammael. Oh, yes*. If the man had had hands, he would have been rubbing them in glee. Rand ignored him.

“Be respectful,” Sulin muttered under her breath. “You did not show respect to those Aes Sedai in Caemlyn, and you saw what came of it. The Wise Ones. . . . I have heard the Wise Ones say things. . . . You must be respectful. My Lord Dragon,” she added, as an afterthought.

At last he managed to wrench the coat on the rest of the way. “Has Min come yet?”

“Do you see her? My Lord Dragon.” Picking imaginary lint from the red silk, Sulin began doing up his buttons. It was faster to put his hands down and let her. “Min will come when she comes, if she comes. Sorilea will be done with her in the tents when she is done.” Suddenly she peered up at him sharply. “What do you want with her? You hardly want your bottom pinched while the Aes Sedai are here.” There was no hidden smile this afternoon. “My Lord Dragon.”

It was very hard not to scowl. Everything was going so well, and now this. Sorilea knew he wanted Min today more than for any previous audience; a chance for her to view Coiren and two more of Elaida’s emissaries was not to be missed. Sorilea had promised to have her back. He moved away again, but Sulin followed, working at the buttons. “Sulin, I want you to go to Sorilea’s tent. Find Min and bring her here. No questions, Sulin. Just do it.”

She managed to smile and grind her teeth at the same time, a remarkable sight. “As my Lord Dragon commands.” A smooth curtsy spread red-and-white skirts wide and lowered her face halfway to the floor.

“How long?” he asked as she turned to go. There was no need to say until what; her hesitation showed that she understood.

At last she spoke, calmly and firmly, not grumbling at all. “Until my shame equals theirs.” She looked him straight in the eye for a moment, the Sulin of old, if with longer hair, but just as quickly the mask returned. “If my Lord Dragon will excuse me, I must run if I am to obey his command.” Which she did, lifting her skirts to her knees and darting out of the room. Rand shook his head and did up the last buttons himself.

In truth, he felt good. Except about Min, of course. Sorilea had promised. Min had promised. Once he fended off Coiren’s inevitable questions as to whether he had decided to return to Tar Valon with her, he was going to sit Min down and. . . . He was not sure what. But Alanna was another day closer. A short time of listening to Coiren, and he would go work the sword for an hour.

Demandred, Lews Therin snarled. *He wanted Ilyena!* As usual, the thought of Ilyena sent him off into distant weeping and moaning. *Ilyena! Oh, Light, Ilyena!*

Rand took the Dragon Scepter into the anteroom. Wondering who Coiren would bring, he sat in the tall chair on the dais to keep from pacing. Not over the Aes Sedai. Over Min. She knew he needed her. She knew that.

At last one of the doors opened just enough to admit a woman, but it was Chiad, not Min. “The Aes Sedai are here, *Car’a’carn*.” She said the title stiffly, still not sure about a wetlander as the chief of chiefs, and for that matter, still not certain how to see him as the son of a Maiden.

Rand nodded, shifting himself upright and standing the Dragon Scepter erect on his knee. “Send them in.” He was going to speak sharply to Min about this. Giving all her time to the Wise Ones.

Coiren glided in like a plump self-important swan, followed by Galina and another raven-haired, hard-eyed woman with an Aes Sedai face. They were all in shades of gray today, chosen he suspected because it would not show the dust. To his surprise, once more serving women with light dustcloaks hanging down their backs came behind the Aes Sedai, a full dozen laboring under the weight of two brass-bound chests, neither small. Some of the young women glanced at him, but most had their heads down, in concentration on their burdens or maybe in fear.

Rand's lip very nearly curled before he could stop it. They really did think they could buy him.

"A pity your *Green* sister is not here today," Galina said.

His eyes whipped from the serving women to her. All three Aes Sedai were staring at him intently. How could they possibly know about Alanna?

There was no time for wondering, though; almost at the same instant, his skin began to tingle.

Fury leaped inside him, and in Lews Therin too. Rand seized *saidin* nearly out of Lews Therin's teeth. White-hot rage roiled along the boundaries of the Void, and contempt, as he glared at Coiren and Galina and whoever the third was. Coiren's soft round jaw was set with determination; the other two actually smiled, eagerly and not at all pleasantly. They were as much fools as Merana and that lot.

The shield sliding between him and the True Source was like the closing of a sluice gate; the flow of *saidin* vanished, leaving only the filthy residue of the taint. Beside that, the air seeming to turn solid around him from his ankles to his head was as nothing. That shield made his eyes bulge; it was impossible. No three women could block him from the Source once he had taken hold of *saidin*, not unless they were as strong as Semirhage or Mesaana or. . . . He reached for the Source, battered at that invisible stone wall, harder, harder. Lews Therin was snarling like a beast, battering, clawing frantically. One of them had to be able to reach *saidin*; one of them had to be able to break a buffer held by only three.

The block had only been in place moments when one of the serving women stepped up beside Galina, and Rand felt the blood drain from his face. Four sets of eyes in four ageless faces examined him.

"It is a great pity that it came to this." In those calm, rolling tones, Coiren might better have been addressing a gathering than one man. "I very much wanted you to come to Tar Valon on your own, but it became obvious you only intended to put us off. I suppose that you have had some contact from those poor fools who fled after the Sanche woman was stilled. Did you really believe they could offer you anything? As against the White Tower?" She actually sounded disappointed in him.

His eyes were the only part of him that could move; they slid toward the serving women, busy around one of the chests. It stood open, and they were lifting out a shallow tray. Some of those faces looked young, but the others. . . . They were all Aes Sedai, he was sure, the five young women only new enough that they had not yet assumed the agelessness, five to look at him and lull his suspicions while the others hid their faces. Fifteen Aes Sedai. Thirteen to link and weave a shield no man could break, and two to bind him. Thirteen to. . . . Lews Therin fled screaming.

Galina plucked the Dragon Scepter from Rand's hand, shaking her head over it. "I am in charge now, Coiren." She never even looked at him; he might as well have been part of the chair. "It was agreed, if it came to this, the Red Ajah would take charge." Handing the Dragon Scepter to the other black-haired woman in gray, she said, "Put this somewhere, Katerine. It might make an amusing souvenir for the Amyrlin."

Red Ajah. Sweat oozed down Rand's face. If only the Maidens outside would walk in now, Wise Ones, Sulin, anybody who could scream a warning, rouse the palace. Thirteen Aes Sedai, and Red Ajah in charge. Had he been able to open his mouth, he would have howled.

Bain looked up in surprise when the doors opened—Rand al'Thor had received the Aes Sedai a very little while ago—and automatically averted her eyes when she saw the serving women bringing out the chests. One of the black-haired Aes Sedai planted herself in front of her, and Bain hurriedly straightened from her crouch by the door. She hardly knew what to make of the tale the other Maidens had told her in Caemlyn, the things only chiefs and Wise Ones had known once, but this woman's dark eyes seemed to know all about how the Aiel had failed so long ago. Those eyes held Bain's till she was only vaguely aware of the other night-haired Aes Sedai confronting Chiad, and the pompous one leading the women away down the corridor with the chests. Bain wondered whether the Aes Sedai facing her meant to kill her for the Aiel's failure. Surely they would have begun killing before now if they intended to—surely they knew—but this woman's dark eyes glittered with a hardness that surely presaged death. Bain was not afraid to die; she only hoped she would have time to veil first.

"It seems young Master al'Thor is accustomed to coming and going from Cairhien when he chooses," the Aes Sedai told her in a voice like stone. "We are not accustomed to anyone walking away from us rudely. If he returns to the palace in the next few days, we will return also. If not. . . . Our patience is not infinite.” She glided away, she and the other, after the women with the chests.

Bain exchanged quick looks with Chiad, and they hurried into Rand al’Thor’s chambers.

“What do you mean, he’s gone?” Perrin demanded. Loial’s ears twitched toward him, but the Ogier kept his eyes on the stones board as firmly as Faile did. She smelled. . . . Perrin could make out nothing in the jumble of scents from her; that jumble made him want to bite his hands.

Nandera only shrugged. “He does this sometimes.” She appeared calm enough, with her arms folded and her face impassive, but she smelled irritated, a scent like tiny burrs. “He slips away without even one Maiden to guard his back, sometimes for as long as half a day. He thinks we do not know. I thought you might know where he has gone.” Something in her voice made Perrin think that if she found out, she intended to follow.

“No,” he sighed. “I have no idea.”

“Pay attention to the game, Loial,” Faile murmured. “Surely you didn’t mean to put a stone there.”

Perrin sighed again. Today he had decided to stay every moment at Faile’s side. She would have to speak to him sooner or later, and besides, Berelain would surely leave him alone if he was with his wife. Well, at least Berelain had indeed left him alone, but as soon as Faile realized he was not going hunting again, she had collared Loial before he could run off to the Library, and they had been playing endless games of stones ever since. In silence, for all practical purposes. Perrin wished he were wherever Rand was.

Lying on his back on the bed, Rand stared up at the thick basement rafters, not really seeing them. The bed was not large, but it had two feather mattresses and goose-down pillows and good linen sheets. There was a sturdy chair, and a small table, plain yet well made. His muscles still ached from being transported here inside one of the chests. The Power had doubled him up easily, with his head between his knees; simple cords had sufficed to make a package of him.

Metal grating on metal made him turn his head. Galina had used a large iron key to unlock a flap in the iron cage that surrounded bed and table and chair. A graying woman with a wrinkled face thrust her arms inside the cage long enough to set a cloth-covered tray on the table, then all but leaped back.

“I intend to deliver you to the Tower in reasonable health,” Galina said coldly as she relocked the flap. “Eat, or you will be fed.”

Rand turned his eyes back to the rafters. Six Aes Sedai sat in chairs around the cage, sustaining the shield on him. He maintained the Void, in case they should slip, but he did not lunge at the barrier. When they first pushed him stumbling into the cage, he had; some of them had laughed, those who took any notice. Now he reached gingerly instead toward the fury of *saidin*, a storm of fire and ice still just out of sight beyond the corner of his eye. He reached, and felt at the invisible wall cutting him off from the Source, slid along it as though trying to find an edge. What he found was a place where the wall seemed to become six points; they stopped him as effectively, but they were six, not one, and definitely points.

How long had he been here? A gray bleakness had settled over him, blanketing time, blanketing him in lethargy. He had been here long enough to be hungry, but the Void made sensation distant, and even the smell of hot stew and warm bread coming from the covered tray sparked no interest. Rising seemed too much effort. So far, twelve Aes Sedai had taken turns around the cage, and not one a face he had seen before they appeared in the basement. How many were there in the house? That might be important later. Where was the house? He had no notion how far he had been carried in that chest, most of the way jolted about in a wagon or cart. Why had he forgotten Moiraine’s advice. Trust no Aes Sedai, not an inch, not a hair. Six Aes Sedai channeling enough of *saidar* to hold that shield should be felt outside by any woman who could channel. All he needed was Amys or Bair or some other to pass by in the street and wonder. They had to be thinking now that he had vanished when Coiren left the palace. If there was a street outside. All he needed. . . .

He felt at the shield again, softly, so they would not feel. Six points. Six *soft* points, somehow. That had to mean something. He wished Lews Therin would speak again, but the only sound in his head was his own thoughts sliding along the Void. Six points.

Hurrying along the dusk-covered street by the great stone house where the Aes Sedai were, Sorilea could barely sense them still channeling inside.

She could only just sense it because she could only just channel at all, but that was not why she ignored it. They had been channeling day and night in there since their arrival; none of the Wise Ones wasted thought on why any longer. Sorilea certainly had more important matters to think of now. Back at the treekiller’s palace, the Maidens were beginning to grow itchy over Rand al’Thor, muttering that the *Car’a’carn* would have some explaining to do when he returned this time. Sorilea had lived a great deal longer than any of those Maidens, longer than any other Wise One, weak in the Power or not, and she was uneasy. Like most men, Rand al’Thor went when he wished, where he wished—men were like cats in that—but this time, at the same time he was flitting off, Min had vanished somewhere between the tents and the palace. Sorilea did not like coincidences, no matter how many surrounded the *Car’a’carn*. Wrapping her shawl against a sudden feel of chill in her bones, she hurried on toward the tents.

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CHAPTER 52

Weaves of the Power

The men sitting around the table in the common room of The Wandering Woman were mainly local. Those who wore the long vest sported it in bright silk, often brocaded, over pale shirts with wide sleeves. Garnets or pearls adorned finger rings, hoop earrings were gold not gilded, and moonstones and sapphires sparkled on the pommels of curved knives stuck through belts. Several men had silk coats slung about their shoulders, with a chain of silver or gold strung between the narrow lapels embroidered with flowers or animals. The coats looked odd, really—too small to put on; never meant for anything but a cape—but their wearers carried long narrow swords as well as the curved dagger, and seemed equally willing to use either, for a wrong word, a wrong look, or because they happened to feel like it.

It was a varied crowd, altogether. Two Murandian merchants with curled mustaches and those ridiculous little beards on the point of the chin, and a Domani with hair below his shoulders and thin mustaches who wore a gold bracelet, a close-fitting gold necklace, and a large pearl in his left ear. A dark Atha’an Miere in a bright green coat, with tattooed hands and two knives thrust into a red sash, and a Taraboner with a transparent veil covering thick mustaches that almost hid his mouth, and a number of outlanders who might have been from anywhere. But every man had a pile of coins in front of him, though the size did vary. So close to the Tarasin Palace, The Wandering Woman attracted patrons with gold to spare.

Rattling the five dice in the leather cup, Mat spun them out on the table. They stopped with two crowns, two stars and a cup showing. A fair toss; no better. His luck ran in waves, and at the moment the wave seemed low, meaning he won no more than half his tosses at most. So far he had managed to lose ten in a row, an unusual run for him at any time. The dice passed to a blue-eyed outlander, a hard, narrow-faced man who seemed to have plenty of coin to fling about despite his plain brown coat.

Vanin bent to whisper in Mat's ear. "They're out again. Thom says he still doesn't know how." Mat directed a grimace at the fat man that made him straighten more quickly that you would think someone his size could.

Swallowing half the dewmelon punch in his silver cup, Mat frowned down the table. Again! The blue-eyed man's toss rolled across the table, and the dice stopped showing three crowns, a rose and a rod. Murmurs rounded the table at his win.

"Blood and ashes," Mat muttered. "Next, the Daughter of the Nine Moons is going to walk in and claim me." The blue-eyed fellow choked on his celebratory drink. "Do you know the name?" Mat asked.

"My punch went down the wrong way," the man said in a soft, slurring accent Mat did not recognize. "What name was that?"

Mat made a pacifying gesture; he had seen fights start over less. Scraping his gold and silver back into his purse, he stuffed it into his coat pocket as he rose. "I am done. The Light's blessing on all here." Everyone at the table repeated the benison, even the outlanders. People were very polite in Ebou Dar.

Even short of midmorning, the common room was fairly full, and another dice game added its share of laughter and groans. Two of Mistress Anan's younger sons were helping the serving girls hand out late breakfasts. The innkeeper herself was sitting at the back of the room near the railless white stone stairs, keeping an eye on everything, with a young, pretty woman whose big black eyes had a merry twinkle, as though she knew a joke no one else did. Her face was a perfect oval framed by glossy black hair, and the deep neckline of her red-belted gray dress showed a tantalizing view. The amusement in her eyes deepened as she smiled at Mat.

"With your luck, Lord Cauthon," Mistress Anan said, "my husband should ask you where to send his fishing boats." For some reason, her tone was very dry.

Mat accepted the title without a blink. In Ebou Dar, few would challenge a lord except other lords; it was a simple calculation of numbers to him. There were a lot fewer lords than commoners, which meant fewer chances somebody would try to stick a knife in him. Even so, he had had to crack three heads in the last ten days. "I'm afraid my luck doesn't run to things like that, Mistress."

Olver seemed to just pop up at his side. “Can we go horse-racing, Mat?” he demanded eagerly.

Frielle, Mistress Anan’s middle daughter, trotted up to catch the boy by the shoulders. “Your pardon, Lord Cauthon,” she said anxiously. “He just slipped away from me. Light’s truth, he did.” Soon to be married—the snug silver necklace for her marriage knife already encircled her slim throat—she had volunteered to look after Olver, laughing about how she wanted six sons of her own. Mat suspected she was beginning to hope for daughters.

It was Nalesean, coming down the stairs, who got Mat’s glare, hard enough to stop the Tairen in his tracks. It was Nalesean who had entered Wind in two races, with Olver riding—boys did the riding here—and Mat not knowing a thing till it was done. That Wind had proven as fast as his name did not help matters. Two victories gave Olver a taste for more. “Not your fault, Mistress,” Mat told Frielle. “Put him in a barrel if you must, with my blessing.”

Olver gave him an accusatory look, but a moment later he whipped around to give Frielle an insolent grin he had picked up somewhere. It looked odd with his big ears and wide mouth; he was never going to be a handsome lad. “I will sit quietly if I can look at your eyes. You have beautiful eyes.”

Frielle had a lot of her mother in her, and not just her looks. She laughed sweetly and chucked him under the chin, making him blush. Her mother and the big-eyed young woman smiled at the tabletop.

Shaking his head, Mat started up the stairs. He had to speak to the boy. He could not just grin like that at every woman he saw. And telling a woman she had beautiful eyes! At his age! Mat did not know where Olver got it.

As he came abreast of Nalesean, the man said, “They have sneaked away again, haven’t they.” It was not a question, and when Mat nodded, he gave his pointed beard a yank and cursed. “I’ll assemble the men, Mat.”

Nerim was fussing about Mat’s room, wiping the table with a cloth as if the maids had not dusted this morning already. He shared a smaller room next door with Olver, and rarely left The Wandering Woman. Ebou Dar was dissolute and uncivilized, he claimed.

“My Lord is going out?” Nerim said lugubriously as Mat picked up his hat. “In that coat? I fear there is a wine stain from last night on the shoulder. I would have removed it if my Lord had not donned the garment in haste this morning, and a gash in the sleeve—from a knife, I believe—that I would have mended."

Mat let him bring out a gray coat with silver scrolls embroidered on the cuffs and high collar and gave him the gold-embroidered green.

"I trust my Lord will at least try not to get blood on it today. Bloodstains are very difficult to remove."

It was a compromise they had worked out. Mat put up with Nerim's dismal face and gloomy observations, and let the man fetch, clean and hand him things he could just as easily pick up himself; in return Nerim agreed, reluctantly, not to try actually dressing him.

Checking the knives snugged up his sleeves, under his coat and in the turned-down tops of his boots, Mat left his spear leaning in the corner with his unstrung bow and went down to the front of the inn. That spear seemed to draw idiots who wanted to fight the way honey drew flies.

In spite of his hat, sweat beaded on Mat's face the moment he stepped from the shade and relative coolness of the inn. The morning sun would have done for high noon in midsummer in ordinary times, but Mol Hara Square was thronged with people. At first he stood frowning at the Tarasin Palace. With Juilin and Thom watching inside and Vanin out, how were they managing to leave without being seen? They went out almost every single day. After it happened three times, Mat had set men watching every way out of that domed heap of white stone and plaster, taking their places before dawn. There were just enough of them, with him and Nalesean. No one had seen hide nor hair, but just before midday Thom came out to say the women had gone somehow. The old gleeman seemed at his wits' end, ready to tear out his mustaches. Mat knew what was going on. They were doing it just to spite him.

Nalesean and the others were waiting in a glum sweating knot. Nalesean was fingering his sword hilt as though he would like an opportunity to use it today.

"We'll look across the river today," Mat said. Several of the Redarms exchanged uneasy glances; they had heard the stories.

Vanin shifted his feet, shook his head. "A waste of time," he said flatly. "Lady Elayne would never go anywhere like that. The Aiel woman maybe, or Birgitte, but not Lady Elayne."

Mat closed his eyes for a moment. How had Elayne managed to ruin a good man in so short a time? He kept hoping that enough time away from her influence would set Vanin right, but he was beginning to lose hope. Light, but he despised noblewomen. “Well, if we don’t see them today, we can forget the Rahad—they’ll stand out like painted larks in a flock of blackbirds over there—but I intend to find them if they’re hiding under a bed in the Pit of Doom. Search in pairs, as usual, and watch each other’s back. Now to find some boatmen to ferry us across. Burn me, I hope they’re not all out selling fruit to the Sea Folk ships.”

To Elayne the street looked as it had in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, brick buildings five and six stories high, covered patchily with flaking white plaster, crowded together and looming above uneven pavement. Only at this time of day, with the golden sun burning overhead, did shadows vanish completely from these narrow ways. Flies buzzed everywhere. The only differences from the World of Dreams were the laundry hanging from windows, the people—not many outdoors at the moment, of course—and the smell, a deep pungent miasma of decay that made her try not to breathe too deeply. Unfortunately, every street looked alike in the Rahad.

Halting Birgitte with a hand on her arm, she eyed a scabrous pile of brick with dingy washing dangling from half the windows. The thin wail of a baby crying came from somewhere inside. It had the right number of floors, six. She was certain it had been six. Nynaeve insisted on five.

“I don’t think we should stand staring,” Birgitte said softly. “People are looking.”

That was not quite true, just Birgitte worrying about her. Shirtless men in often ragged vests strutted down the street with sunlight glinting on their brass hoop earrings, and brass finger rings set with colored glass, or slunk along like the sort of cur dog that might snarl and might bite. For that matter, so did the women, in their usually worn dresses and *their* jewelry of brass and glass. Everyone had a curved knife stuck through a belt, and frequently a plain work knife as well.

In truth, no one gave her and Birgitte a second glance, though Birgitte’s aged face was often challenging and she herself was tall for an Ebou Dari woman. That was what they saw, by way of not so simple weaves of Air and Fire that Elayne had inverted and tied off herself. When Elayne looked at Birgitte, she saw a woman with fine wrinkles at the corners of black eyes and black hair touched with gray. The disguises were easier the closer you stayed to how a person really was, so the hair flowing down Birgitte's back, tied in four places with tattered green ribbon, was considerably longer than Ebou Dari women wore it, but then Elayne had not cut her hair either, and no one seemed to pay it any mind. It was a perfect disguise; she just wished she did not have to sweat as well. With the addition of the even more complex weave of Spirit that masked a woman's ability to channel, Elayne had walked right by Merilille on her way out of the palace that morning. She wore it still; they had seen Vandene and Adeleas on this side of the river more than once.

Their clothes were not part of the weaves, of course, but threadbare woolen dresses with frayed embroidery on the sleeves and around the deep narrow necklines. Their shifts and stockings were wool too, and Elayne's, at least, itched. Tylin had provided the garments, along with various pieces of advice, and the white-sheathed marriage knives. It seemed that married women were less likely to be challenged than unmarried, and widows who rejected another marriage least of all. Age helped, too. No one challenged a gray-haired grandmother, though she might you.

"I think we should go in," Elayne said, and Birgitte moved ahead of her, one hand on the knife in her coarse brown woolen belt, to push open the unpainted door. Inside was a dim hallway lined with rough doors, and a steep narrow stairway of chipped brick at the back. Elayne did not quite sigh in relief.

White sheaths or no white sheaths, walking into a building where you did not belong was one good way to end up in a knife fight here. So was asking questions, or being curious. Tylin had counseled against that, but on the first day they had visited inns, marked only by blue doors, planning to say they were buying things out of old storerooms to refurbish and sell. She had paired with Birgitte and set Nynaeve with Aviendha so they could cover more ground. The common rooms were dark, grimy places, and twice in as many stops, Birgitte had hustled her out, both of them with daggers in hand, just before serious trouble started. The second time, Elayne had to channel briefly, tripping a pair of women who came after them into the street, and even so Birgitte had been certain that someone *had* followed them the rest of the day. Nynaeve and Aviendha had the same sort of difficulty, except for being followed; Nynaeve had actually hit another woman with a stool. So even innocuous questions were abandoned, and they hoped they did not walk through a doorway into a knife.

Birgitte climbed the steep stairs ahead, though she often glanced behind, too. The smells of cooking blended with the general stench of the Rahad in a quite sickening fashion. The baby stopped crying, but somewhere in the building a woman began shouting. On the third floor a thick-shouldered man without shirt or vest opened a door just as they came up. Birgitte frowned at him, and he raised both hands, palms toward them, and backed out of the hallway again, kicking the door shut as he did. On the top floor, where the storeroom should have been if this was the right building, a gaunt woman in a coarse linen shift was sitting on a stool in the doorway, catching what little breeze was stirring while she sharpened her dagger. Her head swiveled toward them, and the blade stopped moving across the honing stone. She did not look away from them as they backed slowly down the stairway, and the soft rasp of metal on stone did not begin again until they reached the bottom of the flight. Elayne did let out a relieved breath then.

She was more than glad Nynaeve had not taken her wager. Ten days. She had been an optimistic fool. This was the eleventh day since her boast, eleven days when sometimes she thought she was on the same street in the evening as the morning, eleven days without a clue to the bowl. Sometimes they had remained in the palace just to clear their heads. It was all so frustrating. At least Vandene and Adeleas were having no luck either. As far as Elayne could see, no one in the Rahad would speak two willing words to Aes Sedai. People melted away as soon as they realized what they were; she had seen two women try to stab Adeleas, no doubt to rob the fool walking the Rahad in a silk dress, and by the time the Brown sister lifted the pair on flows of Air and stuffed them through a window two floors up, there was not another person in sight. Well, she was not going to allow those two to find her bowl and snatch it from under her nose.

Once back in the street, she had yet another reminder that there were worse things in the Rahad than frustration. Right in front of her, a slender man with blood all over his chest and a knife in his hand came leaping out of a doorway, spinning immediately to face another man who followed; the second was taller and heavier and bleeding down the side of his face. They circled each other, eyes locked, extended blades flickering and probing. A small crowd gathered to watch as though springing from the rough pavement; none came running, but no one passed by.

Elayne and Birgitte moved to the side of the street, but they did not leave. In the Rahad, leaving would attract attention, the last thing they wanted. Blending in meant watching, but Elayne managed to focus beyond the two men, seeing only vague blurs of quick motion until suddenly the motion slowed. She blinked and made herself look. The man with blood on his chest was parading about, grinning and gesturing with a blade that dripped red. The bigger man lay facedown in the street, giving harsh feeble coughs, not twenty paces from her.

Elayne moved instinctively—her minuscule ability in Healing was better than none when a man was bleeding to death, and to the Pit of Doom with what anyone here thought of Aes Sedai—yet before she took a second step, another woman was kneeling at the man's side. A little older than Nynaeve perhaps, she wore a red-belted blue dress in somewhat better repair than most in the Rahad. Elayne took her for the dying man's sweetheart at first, especially when the victor in the duel grew sober. No one moved to go; everyone watched silently as the woman turned the man onto his back.

Elayne gave a start as, far from tenderly wiping the blood from his lips, the woman pulled what seemed to be a handful of herbs from her pouch and hurriedly thrust some of them into the man's mouth. Before her hand left his face, the glow of *saidar* surrounded her, and she began to weave the flows of Healing more deftly than Elayne could have done. The man gasped hard enough to expel most of the leaves, shuddered—and lay still, half-open eyes staring at the sun.

"Too late, it seems." Standing, the woman faced the lean fellow. "You must tell Masic's wife you've killed her husband, Baris."

"Yes, Asra," Baris replied meekly.

Asra turned away without another glance at either man, and the thin crowd opened up before her. As she passed within a few paces of Elayne and Birgitte, Elayne noticed two things about her. One was her strength; Elayne felt for that on purpose. She expected to feel a fair amount, but Asra likely would never have been allowed to take the test for Accepted. Healing must have been her strongest Talent—perhaps her only one, since she must be a wilder—and very well honed from use. Maybe she even believed those herbs were necessary. The second thing Elayne noticed was the woman's face. It was not sun-dark, as she had supposed at first. Asra was most certainly Domani. What under the Light was a Domani wilder doing in the Rahad?

Elayne might have followed the woman, except that Birgitte drew her the other way. “I recognize that look in your eyes, Elayne.” Birgitte’s eyes scanned the street as if she expected some of the passersby to be eavesdroppers. “I don’t know why you want to chase after that woman, but she seems to be respected. Accost her, and you might have more blades drawn than you and I can handle together.”

That was simple truth, and so was the fact that Domani wilders were not what she had come to Ebou Dar to find.

Touching Birgitte’s arm, she nodded toward two men just rounding the corner ahead. In his satin-striped blue coat, Nalesean looked every inch the Tairen lord; the padded coat was done up to his neck, and his sweaty face glistened almost as much as his oiled beard. He glared at anyone who so much as glanced at him, to such an extent that he surely would have been in a fight by now except that he was caressing his sword hilt as if he would welcome one. Mat, on the other hand, did not grimace at all. He swaggered along, and except for an air of disgruntlement, he could have been enjoying himself. With his coat hanging open and his hat pulled low and that scarf tied around his neck, he looked as if he had spent the night crawling through taverns, which he might very well have. To her surprise, she realized she had not thought of him in days. She itched to lay hands on his *ter’angreal*, but the bowl was infinitely more important.

“It never struck me before,” Birgitte murmured, “but I think Mat is the more dangerous of those two. A N’Shar in Mameris. I wonder what they’re doing this side of the Eldar.”

Elayne stared at her. A what where? “They have probably drunk all the wine on the other side. Really, Birgitte, I do wish you’d keep your mind on what we are about.” This time she was *not* going to ask.

As Mat and Nalesean sauntered on past, Elayne put them out of her mind again and began to study the street. It would be wonderful to find the bowl today. Not least because the next time they came, she would be paired with Aviendha. She was beginning to like the woman—despite her extremely peculiar notions about Rand and them; extremely!—but she did have a tendency to encourage women who seemed ready to draw a knife. Aviendha even seemed disappointed that men dropped their eyes if she stared, instead of pulling out a blade the way the women would!

“That one,” Elayne said, pointing. Nynaeve could not be right about five stories. Could she? Elayne did hope Egwene had found a solution.

Egwene waited patiently while Logain drank some more water. His tent was not so spacious as his quarters had been in Salidar, but it was still larger than most in the camp. There had to be room for the six sisters sitting on stools, maintaining the shield on him. Egwene’s suggestion that it be tied off had been met with close to shock and not far from scorn; no one was willing to countenance it, particularly now, so soon after she had raised four women Aes Sedai without testing or Oath Rod, and perhaps not ever. Siuan had said they would not. Custom said six, though if he was as much reduced as Siuan and Leane, any three sisters in the camp could surely have held him, and custom said the shield on a man must be maintained, not tied. A single lamp gave a fitful illumination. She and Logain sat on blankets laid for rugs.

“Let me understand,” Logain said when he lowered the pewter cup. “You want to know what *I* think of al’Thor’s amnesty?” Some of the sisters shifted on their stools, maybe because he had omitted calling her “Mother,” but more likely because they despised the subject.

“I want your thoughts, yes. Surely you must have some. In Caemlyn with him, you would very likely be given a place of honor. Here, you may be gentled any day. Now. You’ve held off the madness six years, you say. How much chance is there, do you think, that any men who come to him might do as well?”

“Do they truly mean to gentle me again?” His voice was quiet, his tone injured and angry. “I’ve thrown my lot in with you I’ve done all that was asked. I’ve offered to swear any oath you name.”

“The Hall will decide soon. Some would as soon you died conveniently. If Aes Sedai tell your tale, all know Aes Sedai cannot lie. But I don’t believe you need fear that. You have served us too well for me to allow you to be harmed. And whatever happens, you can still serve, and see the Red Ajah punished, as you wish.”

Logain jerked up onto his knees, snarling, and she embraced *saidar* and had him wrapped securely in flows of Air in the space of a heartbeat. The sisters shielding him had all their strength directed into that—another custom; you must use every bit of your strength to shield a man—but several could split their weaves, and one might have diverted part to him if they thought he might harm her. She did not want to risk him being injured.

The flows held him there kneeling, but he seemed to ignore them. “You want to know what I think of al’Thor’s amnesty? I wish I were with him now! Burn you all! I have done everything you asked! The Light, burn you all!”

“Be calm, Master Logain.” Egwene was surprised her voice came out so steady. Her heart was racing, though certainly not for fear of him. “I swear this to you. I will never harm you, nor allow you to be harmed by any who follow me if I can help it, unless you turn against us.” The rage had gone from his face, replaced by woodenness. Was he listening? “But the Hall will do as it decides. Are you calm, now?” He nodded wearily, and she released the flows. He sank back to the ground, not looking at her. “I will speak with you about the amnesty when you are more composed. Perhaps in a day or two.” He nodded again, curtly, still not looking.

As she ducked out into the dusk, the two Warders standing guard outside bowed to her. At least the Gaidin did not care that she was eighteen, an Accepted raised Aes Sedai only because she was raised Amyrlin. To the Warders, an Aes Sedai was an Aes Sedai, and the Amyrlin was the Amyrlin. Still, she did not let herself exhale until she was far enough away for the two not to hear.

The camp was quite large, tents for hundreds of Aes Sedai spreading through the forest, for Accepted and novices and servants, carts and wagons and horses everywhere. The cooking smell of the evening meal hung thick in the air. Around it stretched the cookfires of Gareth Bryne’s army; most men there would be sleeping on the ground, not in tents. The so-called Band of the Red Hand lay camped no more than ten miles south; Talmanes never let that distance vary more than a mile or so either way, day or night for over two hundred miles. Already they had served part of her plan for them, as suggested by Siuan and Leane.

Gareth Bryne’s force had grown in the sixteen days since leaving Salidar. Two armies marching slowly northward through Altara, plainly not friendly toward each other, drew attention. Nobles flocked in with their levies to ally themselves with the stronger of the two. True, none of those lords and ladies would have sworn the oaths they had if they had known there would be no great battle in their own lands. True, given free choice, every last one would have ridden the moment they realized Egwene’s target was Tar Valon, not an army of Dragonsworn. But they *had* made those oaths, to *an* Amyrlin at least, before Aes Sedai who called themselves the Hall of the Tower, with hundreds more watching. Breaking that kind of vow came back to haunt you. Besides, even if Egwene's head ended on a pike in the White Tower, not a one of them believed Elaida would forget they had sworn. Trapped into alliance they might have been, and into fealty of a sort, but they would be among the most fervent of her supporters. Their only way out of that trap with their necks intact was to see Egwene wearing the stole in Tar Valon.

Siuan and Leane were quite set up over it. Egwene was not certain how she felt. If there had been some way to remove Elaida without a drop of blood being shed, she would have leaped at it. She did not think there was, though.

After a small dinner of goat, turnip and something she did not inquire after too closely, Egwene retired to her tent. Not the largest in the camp, but certainly the largest occupied by one person. Chesa was there, waiting to help Egwene undress, bubbling over the news that she had acquired some of the finest linen imaginable from an Altaran lady's maid, filmy material that would make the coolest shifts imaginable. Often Egwene let Chesa sleep in the tent with her for the company, though a pallet of blankets hardly equaled Chesa's own cot. Tonight she sent the woman away once she was ready for bed. Being Amyrlin entailed a few privileges. Such as a tent of her own for your maid. Such as sleeping alone on nights when it was necessary.

Egwene was not tired enough to go to sleep yet, but that was no trouble. Putting herself to sleep was a simple matter; she had been trained by Aiel dreamwalkers. She stepped into *Tel'aran'rhiod* . . .

. . . and was standing in the room that had been her study in the Little Tower for such a brief time. The table and chairs remained, of course. Furniture was not something you took away when you set out with an army. Any place felt empty in the World of Dreams, but those that really were more than most. Already the Little Tower felt . . . hollow.

Abruptly, she realized the Amyrlin's stole was draped around her neck. She made it vanish just in time. An instant later Nynaeve and Elayne were there, Nynaeve as solid as she, Elayne misty. Siuan had been reluctant to let go of the original ring *ter'angreal*; a firm order had been necessary. Elayne wore a green dress with lace spilling over her hands and outlining a narrow yet startlingly deep neckline that revealed a small knife dangling from a snug gold necklace, the hilt nestled between her breasts a mass of pearls and firedrops. Elayne always did seem to embrace the local fashions immediately wherever she went. Nynaeve, as expected, wore stout Two Rivers woolens, dark and plain.

“Success?” Egwene said hopefully.

“Not yet, but we will.” Elayne sounded so optimistic that Egwene almost stared; she had to really try to sound that way.

“I’m sure it will not be much longer,” Nynaeve said, sounding even more positive. They must be beating their heads against a wall.

Egwene sighed. “Maybe you should join me again. I’m sure you could find the bowl in a few more days, but I keep thinking about all these stories.” They could take care of themselves. She knew that, and it would be a fine thought to have over their graves. Siuan said that *none* of the stories they had told were exaggerations.

“Oh, no, Egwene,” Nynaeve protested. “The bowl is too important. You know it is. Everything is going to cook in its own juice if we don’t find it.”

“Besides,” Elayne added, “what kind of trouble can we fall into? We sleep every night in the Tarasin Palace, in case you’ve forgotten, and if Tylin doesn’t tuck us in, she is still there to talk.” Her dress was different, the cut unaltered, but the material was coarse and worn. Nynaeve wore a near copy of it, except that her knife had no more than nine or ten glass beads on the hilt. Hardly clothes for any palace. Worse, she was trying to look innocent. Nynaeve had no practice at that.

Egwene let it pass. The bowl *was* important, they *could* take care of themselves, and she knew very well they were not looking in the Tarasin Palace. She almost let it pass, anyway. “You are making use of Mat, aren’t you?”

“We—” Abruptly Elayne became aware of her dress and gave a start. For some reason, though, it seemed to be the small knife that truly startled her. Eyes popping, she clutched the hilt, a mass of large red and white glass beads, and her face went absolutely crimson. An instant later she was in a high-necked Andoran gown of green silk.

The funny thing was, Nynaeve realized what she was wearing only a heartbeat behind Elayne, and reacted exactly the same. Exactly. Except maybe that if Elayne blushed like a sunset, Nynaeve blushed for two. She was back into Two Rivers woolens even before Elayne changed.

Clearing her throat, Elayne said breathily, “Mat is quite useful, I’m sure, but we cannot allow him to get in our way, Egwene. You know how he is. You can be sure, though, if we do anything dangerous, we will have him and all his soldiers cheek to cheek around us.” Nynaeve was silent, and looking sour. Perhaps remembering Mat’s threat.

“Nynaeve, you won’t push at Mat too hard, will you?”

Elayne laughed. “Egwene, she is not pushing at him at all.”

“That’s the simple truth,” Nynaeve put in quickly. “I’ve not said a cross word to him since we arrived in Ebou Dar.”

Egwene nodded doubtfully. She could reach the bottom of this, but it would take. . . . She glanced down to make sure the stole had not reappeared, and saw only a flicker that even she could not recognize.

“Egwene,” Elayne said, “have you been able to speak with the dreamwalkers yet?”

“Yes,” Nynaeve said. “Do they know what the problem is?”

“I have.” Egwene sighed. “They don’t, not really.”

It had been an odd meeting, only a few days ago, begun by finding Bair’s dreams. Bair and Melaine had met her in the Stone of Tear; Amys had said she would not teach Egwene more, and she did not come. At first, Egwene felt awkward. She could not bring herself to tell them she was Aes Sedai, much less Amyrlin, afraid they might believe it another lie. There had certainly been no difficulty with the stole appearing then. And then there was her *toh* to Melaine. She brought it up, thinking all the while about how many miles she had to spend in a saddle the next day, but Melaine was so full of pleasure that she was going to have daughters—she rhapsodized over Min’s viewing—that she not only announced straight away that Egwene had no *toh* toward her, but said she was going to name one of the girls Egwene. That had been a small pleasure in a night full of futility and irritation.

“What they said,” she went on, “was that they had never heard of anyone trying to find something with need again after they had already found it. Bair thought maybe it was like trying to eat the same . . . apple twice.” The same *motai* was what Bair had said; a *motai* was a kind of grub found in the Waste. Quite sweet and crunchy—until Egwene found out what she was eating.

“You mean we just *can’t* go back to the storeroom?” Elayne sighed. “I was hoping we were doing something wrong. Oh, well. We’ll find it anyway.” She hesitated, and her dress changed again, though she did not seem to notice. It was still Andoran, but red, with the White Lions of Andor climbing the sleeves and marching across the bodice. A queen’s dress, even without the Rose Crown resting on her red-gold curls. But a queen’s dress with a close-fitting bodice that showed perhaps more cleavage than an Andoran queen would. “Egwene, did they say anything about Rand?”

“He’s in Cairhien, lolling about in the Sun Palace, it seems.” Egwene managed to not wince. Neither Bair nor Melaine had been very forthcoming, but Melaine muttered darkly about Aes Sedai while Bair said that they should all be beaten at regular intervals; whatever Sorilea said, a simple beating should be enough. Egwene was very much afraid that somehow Merana had managed to put a foot very wrong. At least he was putting Elaida’s emissaries off; she did not think he knew how to handle them nearly as well as he thought he did. “Perrin is with him. And Perrin’s wife! He married Faile!” That brought exclamations; Nynaeve said Faile was much too good for him, but said it smiling broadly; Elayne said she hoped they would be happy, but she sounded doubtful for some reason. “Loial is there, too. And Min. All it needs is Mat and the three of us.”

Elayne bit her underlip. “Egwene, would you pass a . . . a message to the Wise Ones for Min? Tell her. . . .” She hesitated, chewing her lip in thought. “Tell her I hope she can come to like Aviendha as much as she likes me. I know that sounds odd,” she laughed. “It’s a private matter between us.” Nynaeve looked at Elayne as oddly as Egwene knew she herself was.

“I will, of course. I don’t mean to talk with them again for some time, though.” There was not much point when they were as uncommunicative concerning Rand as they were. And as hostile toward Aes Sedai.

“Oh, that is fine,” Elayne said quickly. “It really isn’t important. Well, if we can’t use need, then we must use feet, and in Ebou Dar, mine are aching right now. If you don’t mind, I will go back to my body and get some real sleep.”

“You go ahead,” Nynaeve said. “I will be just a little while.” When Elayne vanished, she turned to Egwene. Her dress had changed too, and Egwene thought she knew very well why. It was a soft blue, cut low. There were flowers in her hair, and ribbons through her braid, as there would be for her wedding back home. Egwene’s heart went out to her. “Have you heard anything of Lan?” Nynaeve asked quietly.

“No, Nynaeve, I haven’t. I am so sorry; I wish I could tell you better. I know he’s still alive, Nynaeve. And I know he loves you as much as you love him.”

“Of course he is alive,” Nynaeve said firmly. “I won’t allow anything else. I mean to make him mine. He *is* mine, and I won’t let him be dead.”

When Egwene woke herself, Siuan was sitting beside her cot, dimly seen in the darkness. “Is it done?” Egwene asked.

The glow surrounded Siuan as she wove a small ward against eavesdropping around the pair of them. “Of the six sisters on duty beginning at midnight, only three have Warders, and those Gaidin will be on guard outside. They will have mint tea brought to them, with a small addition they shouldn’t taste.”

Egwene closed her eyes for a moment. “Am I doing the right thing?”

“You ask *me*?” Siuan choked out. “I did as I was commanded, Mother. I’d as soon jump into a school of feeding silverpike as help that man escape if it were up to me.”

“They will gentle him, Siuan.” Egwene had been over this with her, but she needed to go over it again for herself, to convince herself she was not making a mistake. “Even Sheriam doesn’t listen to Carlinya anymore, and Lelaine and Romanda are pressing for it. That or someone really will do what Delana has been hinting at. I won’t allow murder! If we cannot try a man and execute him, we have no right to *arrange* for him to die. I will not let him be murdered, and I cannot allow him to be gentled. If Merana really has put Rand’s back up somehow, that will be tossing fat-wood in the fire. I just wish I could be sure he will go to Rand and join him instead of running off the Light knows where, doing the Light knows what. At least that way there might be some way to control what he does.” She heard Siuan shift in the darkness.

“I always thought the stole weighed about as much as three good men,” Siuan said quietly. “The Amyrlin has few easy decisions to make, and fewer where she can be sure. Do what you must, and pay the price if you’re wrong. Sometimes if you are right, too.”

Egwene laughed softly. “It does seem to me I have heard that before.” After a while her mirth died. “Make sure he doesn’t hurt anyone leaving, Siuan.”

“As you command, Mother.”

“This is terrible,” Nisao muttered. “If it becomes known, the condemnation will be enough to drive you into exile, Myrelle. And me with you. Four hundred years ago, it might have been commonplace, but no one will think it so today. Some will call it crime.”

Myrelle was glad the moon was down already. It hid her grimace. She could handle the Healing herself, but Nisao had been studying how to deal with sicknesses of the mind, things the Power could not touch. Myrelle was not sure this counted as a sickness, but she would try whatever tool might work. Nisao could say what she would; Myrelle knew she would cut off her own hand rather than pass up this chance to further her studies.

She could feel him out there in the night, coming closer. They were well away from the tents, well beyond the soldiers, with only scattered trees round them. She had felt him from the moment his bond passed to her, the crime Nisao fretted over. A Warder’s bond passed from one Aes Sedai to another without his consent. Nisao was right in one point; they would have to keep this secret as long as they could. Myrelle could feel his wounds, some almost healed, some almost fresh. Some badly infected. He would not have gone aside to seek battle. He had to come to her, as surely as a boulder tipped down a mountain had to roll on to the bottom. He would not have moved one foot to stand aside from battle either. She had felt his journey in distance and blood; his blood. Across Cairhien and Andor, Murandy and now Altara, through lands infested with rebels and rogues, bandits and Dragonsworn, focused on her like an arrow speeding to the target, carving his way through any armed man who stood in his path. Even he could not do that unharmed. She toted up his injuries in her mind, and wondered that he was still alive.

The sound of a horse’s hooves came to her first, a steady walk, and only then did she make out the tall black war horse in the night. Night seemed to be the rider, too. He would be wearing his cloak. The horse stopped a good fifty paces from her.

“You shouldn’t have sent Nuhel and Croi out to find me,” the unseen rider called in a rough voice. “I almost killed them before I saw who they were. Avar, you might as well come out from behind that tree.” Off to the right, the night seemed to move; Avar wore his cloak too, and he would not have expected to be seen.

“This is madness,” Nisao muttered.

“Be quiet,” Myrelle hissed. In a louder voice, she called, “Come to me.” The horse did not move. A wolfhound mourning his dead mistress did not come to a new mistress willingly. Delicately she wove Spirit and touched the part of him that contained her bond; it had to be delicate, or he would be aware of it, and only the Creator knew what sort of explosion might result. “Come to me.”

This time the horse came forward, and the man swung down to stride the last paces, a tall man, moonshadows making his angular face seemed carved of stone. Then he was standing in front of her, standing over her, and as she stared up into Lan Mandragoran’s cold blue eyes, she saw death. The Light help her. How was she ever to keep him alive long enough?

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CHAPTER 53

The Feast of Lights

The people dancing in the streets of Cairhien exasperated Perrin; making a way through was near to impossible. A line-dance snaked past him behind a big-nosed fellow with a flute and no shirt; last in line pranced a round little woman who laughed merrily and took a hand from the waist of the man in front of her to try pulling Perrin in behind. He shook his head, and either his yellow eyes frightened her or his face looked as grim as he felt, because she swallowed her mirth and let the line lead her on, glancing back over her shoulder at him until the crowd hid her. A graying woman, still handsome, with slashes of color halfway to the waist of her dark silk dress, flung slender arms around Perrin's neck and stretched up her mouth hungrily toward his. She looked startled when he picked her up gently under the arms and set her down out of his way. A group of men and women his own age, capering to tambours, bumped into him, laughing gaily and plucking at his coat. They ignored his head-shaking until finally he pushed one of the men away hard and snarled a lead-wolf growl at the others. Laughter vanished in gaping astonishment for a moment, but they were roaring again, and trying to imitate his growl, before they frolicked away into the throng.

It was the first day of the Feast of Lights, the shortest day of the year, the last day of the year, and the city celebrated in ways Perrin could never have imagined. There would be dancing in the Two Rivers, but this . . . ! The Cairhienin seemed determined to make up for a year of staid reserve in the two days of the feast. Propriety had gone down the well and with it every barrier between common and noble, in public at least. Perspiring women in plain rough wool seized sweaty men in color-striped dark silks and pulled them into the dance; men in carters' coats and stablemen's vests whirled women whose dresses bore slashes of color sometimes to the waist.

Bare-chested men poured wine over themselves and anyone else close to them. Apparently any man could kiss any woman, any woman kiss any man, and they were doing so with great abandon everywhere Perrin looked. He tried not to look too closely. Some of the noblewomen with their hair in elaborate towers of curls were bare to the waist beneath light cloaks that they made little effort to keep closed. Among the commoners, few women who had abandoned blouses bothered with any sort of covering beyond their hair, and that seldom near long enough; they flung wine over themselves and everyone else as wildly as any man. Boisterous laughter warred with a thousand different tunes from flutes and drums and horns, zithers and bitterns and dulcimers.

The Women's Circle in Emond's Field would have had a screaming fit, and the Village Council swallowed their tongues in apoplexy, but the depraved goings-on were only a small burr added to Perrin's irritation. A few hours, Nandera had said, but Rand had been gone six days now. Min had either gone with him or was staying with the Aiel. And no one seemed to know anything. Except for the one called Sorilea, the Wise Ones were evasive as any Aes Sedai when Perrin managed to corner one; Sorilea told him bluntly to tend to his wife and keep his nose out of affairs that did not concern wetlanders. How Sorilea knew of the trouble between Faile and him, he had no idea, but he did not care. He could feel Rand's need like an itch everywhere under his skin, stronger every day. He was coming from Rand's school now, a last resort, but everyone there was as caught in drink, dance and debauchery as the rest of Cairhien. A woman named Idrien had been named to him as the head of the school, but after he managed, with some difficulty and no small embarrassment, to interrupt her kissing a man young enough to be her son, long enough to ask his question, all she could say was that maybe a man named Fel might know something, and Fel turned out to be dancing with three young women who could have been his granddaughters. With all three at once. Fel hardly seemed able to remember his own name, perhaps not surprising in the circumstances. Burn Rand! He had gone off without a word, when he knew about Min's viewing, knew he was going to need Perrin desperately. Even the Aes Sedai had grown disgusted, apparently. Just that morning Perrin had learned they were three days on their way back to Tar Valon, having said there was no further point in remaining. What was Rand up to? That itch had Perrin wanting to bite something.

When he reached the Sun Palace, every lamp was lit and candles burned everywhere one could be placed; the corridors glittered like gems in the sun. In the Two Rivers, too, every house would be illuminated, with every available lamp and candle, until sunrise the day after tomorrow. Most of the palace servants were out in the streets, and the few who remained seemed to laugh and dance and sing as much as work. Even here some women were bare to the waist, girls barely old enough to have their hair braided in the Two Rivers and gray-haired grandmothers. The Aiel in the corridors looked disgusted when they noticed, which in truth they did not seem to do very often. The Maidens in particular appeared furious, though Perrin suspected that had nothing to do with Cairhienin women exposing themselves; the Maidens had been more and more cats lashing their tails every day since Rand went.

Perrin strode through the hallways openly for a change. He almost wanted Berelain to pounce on him. The image that flashed in his mind was of him seizing the scruff of her neck in his teeth and shaking her until she was ready to run away with her tail curled under. Perhaps fortunately, he reached his rooms without seeing a hair of her.

Faile almost looked up from the stones board when he entered; Perrin was sure she did. The scent of jealousy still wafted from her, but it was not the strongest; anger was sharper, if not at its worst, and most powerful was a flat, dull odor he identified as disappointment. Why was she disappointed in him? Why would she not speak to him? One word even hinting at everything returning to how it had been, and he would be on his knees to accept blame for anything she wanted to pile on his head. But she only placed a black stone and murmured, “It is your turn, Loial. Loial?”

Loial’s ears were twitching uneasily, and his long eyebrows drooped. The Ogier might have no sense of smell to speak of—well, no better than Faile’s, say—but he could sense mood where no human would see anything. When Perrin and Faile were in the same room, Loial looked as though he wanted to cry. Now he just sighed like wind blowing through a cavern and put a white stone where he would begin trapping a large part of Faile’s stones if she did not notice. She probably would; she and Loial were evenly matched, far better players than Perrin.

Sulin came to the bedchamber door with a pillow in her arms, frowning at Faile and at Perrin. Her scent reminded Perrin of a she-wolf who had taken about all of cubs nipping her tail in play that she could stand.

She also smelled worried. And afraid, oddly. Though why a white-haired serving woman smelling afraid should be odd—even one with Sulin's scarred leathery face—Perrin did not understand.

Scooping up a book with a leather cover worked in gilt, Perrin sank into a chair and flung the volume open. Yet he did not read, or even see the book well enough to know which one he had picked up. He inhaled deeply, filtering out everything but Faile. Disappointment, anger, jealousy, and underneath that, underneath even the faint fresh herbal smell of her soap, was her. Perrin breathed her in hungrily. One word; that was all she had to say.

When a knock sounded at the door, Sulin stalked out of the bedroom, flouncing her red-and-white skirts and glaring at Perrin and Faile and Loial as if wondering why one of them had not answered it. She sneered quite openly when she saw Dobraine—she seemed to do that quite often since Rand left—but then took a deep breath as if steeling herself and visibly forced an almost cringing mildness. Her deep curtsy might have done to greet a king who enjoyed being his own headsman, and there she remained, her face nearly on the floor. Suddenly she began trembling. The smell of her anger melted, and even the worry was overwhelmed by a scent like thousands of hair-fine, needle-sharp splinters. Perrin had smelled shame from her before, but this time he would have said she might die from it. He smelled the bitter sweetness women gave off when they wept from emotion.

Of course, Dobraine never even glanced at her. Instead his deep-set eyes studied Perrin, his face sober, even somber, below his shaved and powdered forehead. Dobraine did not smell of drink even faintly, and he hardly looked as if he had been dancing. The one time Perrin had met him before, he had thought the man smelled wary; not afraid, but as though he was padding through tangled woods full of poisonous snakes. That smell was ten times stronger today. "Grace favor you, Lord Aybara," Dobraine said, inclining his head. "May I speak with you alone?"

Perrin set the book on the floor beside his chair and motioned to one opposite him. "The Light shine on you, Lord Dobraine." If the man wanted to be formal, Perrin could be formal. But there were limits. "Whatever you have to say, my wife can hear. I keep no secrets from her. And Loial is my friend."

He could feel Faile's gaze on him. The sudden scent of *her* nearly overpowered him. For some reason, he associated that with her loving him;

when she was at her tenderest, or when her kisses were fiercest, that aroma almost overwhelmed him. He thought about telling Dobraine to go—and Loial and Sulin too; if Faile smelled that way, surely he could make it all right somehow—but the Cairhien was already sitting.

“A man who has a wife he can trust, Lord Aybara, is favored of grace beyond wealth.” Still, Dobraine eyed her a moment before going on. “Today Cairhien has suffered two misfortunes. This morning, Lord Maringil was found dead in his bed, of poison it appears. And only a short while later High Lord Meilan apparently fell victim to a footpad’s blade in the streets. Most unusual during the Feast of Lights.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Perrin said slowly.

Dobraine spread his hands. “You are the Lord Dragon’s friend, and he is not here.” He hesitated, and when he went on, it seemed he was forcing words. “Last night, Colavaere dined with guests from a number of the smaller Houses. Daganred, Chuliandred, Annallin, Osiellin, others. Small by themselves, but numerous. The subject was alliance with House Saighan and support for Colavaere for the Sun Throne. She made little effort to hide the meeting.” Again he paused, weighing Perrin with his eyes. Whatever Dobraine saw, he seemed to think it called for more explanation. “This is most strange, because both Maringil and Meilan wanted the throne, and either would have had her smothered with her own pillows had they learned of it.”

At last Perrin understood, though not why the man needed to beat around the bush so. He wished Faile would speak up; she was so much better at this sort of thing than he. From the corner of his eye he could see her, head bent over the stones board, and watching him from the corner of her eye. “If you think Colavaere committed a crime, Lord Dobraine, you should go to . . . to Rhuarc.” He had been going to say Berelain, but even so, the thread of jealousy increased slightly in Faile’s scent.

“The Aiel savage?” Dobraine snorted. “Better to go to Berelain, and that not much. I admit the Mayener wench knows how to order a city, but she thinks every day is the Feast of Lights. Colavaere will have her sliced and cooked with peppers. You are the Dragon Reborn’s friend. Colavaere—” This time he stopped because he finally realized that Berelain had entered the room without knocking, something long and narrow and wrapped in a blanket cradled in her arms.

Perrin had heard the door latch click, and at the sight of her, with half her bosom exposed, fury almost washed everything else out of his head. The woman came *here*, to carry on her flirting in front of his *wife*? Rage drove him to his feet, and his hands slapped together with a thunder crack. “Out! Out, woman! Out, now! Or I will throw you out, and I will throw you so far you bounce twice!”

Berelain gave such a start at his first shout that she dropped her burden and took a wide-eyed step back, although she did not leave. By the last word, Perrin realized that everyone was looking at him. Dobraine’s face appeared impassive, but his scent was all astonishment, like one tall stone spike in the middle of a flat plain. Loial’s ears were as stiffly erect as that spike, and his jaw on his chest. And Faile, wearing that cool smile. . . . Perrin did not understand at all. He expected the waves of jealousy, with Berelain right there in the room, but why did she smell just as strongly of hurt?

Suddenly Perrin saw what Berelain had dropped. The blanket had fallen away to reveal Rand’s sword and the belt with the Dragon buckle. Would Rand have left that behind? Perrin liked to think things through; when you were hasty, you could hurt people without meaning to. But that sword lying there was like a strike of lightning. Fast was foolish, and sloppy, in forge work, but Perrin’s hackles rose, and a growl rumbled deep in his throat.

“They have taken him!” Sulin wailed suddenly, shockingly. Head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, she moaned at the ceiling, and the sound of her voice was enough to make Perrin shiver. “The Aes Sedai have taken my first-brother!” Her cheeks glistened with tears.

“Be calm, good woman,” Berelain said firmly. “Go into the next room, and be calm.” To Perrin and Dobraine she added, “We cannot allow her to spread word—”

“You do not recognize me,” Sulin broke in savagely, “wearing this dress and with my hair grown longer. Speak of me again as though I am not here, and I will give you what I hear Rhuarc gave you in the Stone of Tear, and should have since.”

Perrin exchanged confused glances with Dobraine and Loial, even with Faile before her eyes jerked away. Berelain, on the other hand, went pale and crimson by turns; her scent was pure mortification, shriveled and small.

Striding to the door, Sulin had flung it open before anyone could move; Dobraine at least started to, but a yellow-haired young Maiden passing by saw her and grinned in amusement. “Wipe your face, Luaine,” Sulin snapped. Her hands seemed to be moving, hidden from the room by her body. Luaine’s grin was indeed wiped away. “Tell Nandera she must come here at once. And Rhuarc. And bring me *cadin’sor*, and scissors to cut my hair properly. Run, woman! Are you *Far Dareis Mai* or *Shae’en M’taal*?” The yellow-haired Maiden darted away, and Sulin turned back to the room with a satisfied nod, slamming the door. Faile was gaping.

“Grace favors us,” Dobraine growled. “She told the Aiel nothing; the woman must be mad. We can decide what to tell them after we tie and gag her.” He moved as if to do it, even pulling a dark green scarf from his coat pocket, but Perrin caught his arm.

“She is Aiel, Dobraine,” Berelain said. “A Maiden of the Spear. I do not understand the livery.” Surprisingly, it was Berelain who received a warning glare from Sulin.

Perrin exhaled slowly. And he had wanted to protect the white-haired old woman from Dobraine. The Cairhienin looked at him questioningly, raised the hand holding the scarf a little; apparently he still favored binding and gagging. Perrin stepped between the two and picked up Rand’s sword.

“I want to be sure.” Suddenly he realized his steps had put him very close to Berelain. She glanced at Sulin uneasily and moved closer to him, as though seeking protection, but her scent was determined, not uneasy; she smelled like a hunter. “I don’t like leaping to conclusions,” he said, walking over to stand beside Faile’s chair. Not quickly; just a man going to stand by his wife. “This sword isn’t really proof of anything.” Faile rose and glided around the table to peer at the board past Loial’s shoulder; well, closer to his elbow, really. Berelain glided too, toward Perrin; she was still casting fearful looks at Sulin without the slightest fear scent, and her hand came up as if to take his arm. He moved after Faile, trying to appear casual. “Rand said three Aes Sedai could not harm him, if he was watchful.” Faile sailed around the other side of the table back to her chair. “I understand he never let more than three near him.” Berelain followed with piteous looks for him and plainly fearful ones for Sulin. “I was told only three came here the day he left.” He went after Faile, a little faster. She popped out of her chair again, returning to Loial’s side. Loial had his head in his hands and was moaning, softly for an Ogier. Berelain stalked after Perrin with her already big eyes wide, the very picture of a woman seeking protection. Light, she smelled determined!

Whirling to face her, Perrin shoved stiffened fingers against her chest hard enough to make her squeak. "Stop right there!" Abruptly he realized exactly where his fingers were nestled and snatched them away as if burned. He managed to keep his voice hard, though. "Stay right there!" He backed away from her, glaring hard enough to crack a stone wall. He could understand why Faile's jealousy was a cloud filling his nose, but why, why, why did she smell even more hurt than before?

"Few men can make me obey," Berelain laughed softly, "but I think you are one." Her face and tone—and more importantly, her scent—became serious. "I went searching in the Lord Dragon's apartments because I was afraid. Everyone knew the Aes Sedai had come to escort him to Tar Valon, and I could not understand why they had given up. I myself received no fewer than ten visits from various sisters, advising me on what I should do when he returned to the Tower with them. They seemed very certain." She hesitated, and though she did not look at Faile, Perrin got the impression she was considering whether to say something in front of her. In front of Dobraine as well, but more Faile. The hunter smell returned. "I received the strong impression that I should return to Mayene, and that if I did not, I might well be escorted there."

Sulin muttered under her breath, but Perrin's ears heard clearly. "Rhuarc is a fool. If she was truly his daughter, he would have no time to do anything else for having to beat her."

"Ten?" Dobraine said. "I had only one visit. I thought she was disappointed when I made it clear I had sworn fealty to the Lord Dragon. But whether ten or one, Colavaere is the key. She knows as well as any that the Lord Dragon means the Sun Throne for Elayne Trakand." He grimaced. "Elayne Damodred, she should be. Taringail should have insisted Morgase marry into Damodred instead of marrying into Trakand himself; she needed him enough to have done it. Well, Elayne Trakand or Elayne Damodred, she has as strong a claim to the throne as any, stronger than Colavaere's by far, yet I am convinced Colavaere had Maringil and Meilan killed to make her own way to the throne safe. She would never have dared had she thought the Lord Dragon would ever return."

"So that is why." A small, vexed frown creased Berelain's forehead. "I have proof she had a servant put poison in Maringil's wine—she was careless, and I brought two good thief-catchers with me—but I did not know why." She bowed her head slightly, acknowledging Dobraine's admiring look. "She will hang for that. If there is any way to get the Lord Dragon back. If not, I fear we must all look to how we are to stay alive."

Perrin's hand tightened on the boarhide scabbard. "I will get him back," he growled. Dannil and the other Two Rivers men could not be more than halfway to Cairhien yet, burdened with the wagons. But there were the wolves. "If I have to go alone, I'll get him back."

"Not alone," Loial said, as grimly as stone grinding. "Never alone while I am here, Perrin." Abruptly his ears shifted in embarrassment; he always seemed embarrassed when anyone saw him being brave. "After all, my book will not end very well if Rand is imprisoned in the Tower. And I can hardly write of his rescue if I am not there."

"You will not go alone, Ogier," Dobraine said. "I can have five hundred men I trust by tomorrow. What we can do against six Aes Sedai, I do not know, but I keep my oaths." Looking at Sulin, he fingered the scarf that he still held. "But how far can we trust the savages?"

"How far can we trust treekillers?" Sorilea demanded in a voice leathery and tough as she herself, striding in without knocking. A grim-smelling Rhuarc was with her, and Amys, her too-youthful face cool as any Aes Sedai's in that incongruous frame of white hair, and Nandera, reeking of murderous fury and carrying a bundle of gray and brown and green.

"You know?" Perrin said incredulously.

Nandera tossed the bundle at Sulin. "Past time you saw your *toh* as met. Almost four and a half weeks, an entire month and a half. Even *gai'shain* say your pride is too strong." The two women vanished into the bedchamber.

A smell of irritation had wafted from Faile as soon as Perrin spoke. "Maiden handtalk," she murmured, top softly for any ear but his to hear. He gave her a grateful look, but she appeared to be concentrating on the stones board. Why was she not taking part? She gave good advice, and he would be grateful for any she was willing to offer. She placed a stone and frowned at Loial, who was intent on Perrin and the others.

Trying not to sigh, Perrin said flatly, "I don't care who trusts who. Rhuarc, are you willing to send your Aiel against Aes Sedai? Six of them. A hundred thousand Aiel would give them pause though." The number coming out of his mouth made him blink—ten thousand men was a not inconsiderable army—but those were the numbers Rand had spoken of, and what Perrin had seen of the Aiel camp in the hills made him believe. To his surprise, Rhuarc smelled hesitant.

“So many are not possible,” the clan chief said slowly, and paused before going on. “Runners came this morning. The Shaido are moving south from Kinslayer’s Dagger in force, into the heart of Cairhien. I may have enough to stop them—they do not all seem to be coming—but if I take so many spears out of this land, all that we have done will have to be redone. At the least, the Shaido will have looted this city long before we return. Who can say how far they will have gone, into other lands even, and how many carried off claiming they are *gai’shain*.” A strong odor of contempt came from him at that last, but Perrin understood none of it. What did it matter how much land had to be reconquered—or even how many people died, though that thought came reluctantly, painfully—stacked against Rand, the Dragon Reborn, being taken prisoner to Tar Valon?

Sorilea had been studying Perrin. Wise Ones’ eyes often made Perrin feel as Aes Sedai’s did, that he had been weighed to the ounce and measured to the inch. Sorilea made him feel he had been disassembled like a broken plow, every pin hefted and examined to see whether it should be mended or replaced. “Tell him everything, Rhuarc,” she said sharply.

Amys laid a hand on Rhuarc’s arm. “He has the right to know, shade of my heart. He is Rand al’Thor’s near-brother.” Her voice was gentle, her smell quite firm.

Rhuarc gave the Wise Ones a hard look, and Dobraine a contemptuous one. Finally he straightened to his full height. “I can take only Maidens and *siswai’aman*.” By his tone and his smell, he would rather lose an arm than speak those words. “Too many of the others will not dance the spears with Aes Sedai.” Dobraine’s lip curled in contempt.

“How many Cairhienin will fight Aes Sedai?” Perrin asked quietly. “Six Aes Sedai, and we have nothing but steel.” How many of the Maidens and these sis-whatever could Rhuarc gather? No matter; there were always the wolves. How many wolves would die?

The curl went out of Dobraine’s lip. “I will, Lord Aybara,” he said stiffly. “I and my five hundred, if there were sixty Aes Sedai.”

Even Sorilea’s cackle was leathery. “Do not fear the Aes Sedai, treekiller.” Suddenly, shockingly, a tiny flame danced in the air before her. She could channel!

She let the flame vanish as they began planning, but it remained in Perrin's thoughts. Small, flickering weakly, somehow it had seemed a declaration of war stronger than trumpets, war to the knife.

"If you cooperate," Galina said conversationally, "life will be more pleasant for you."

The girl stared back sullenly and shifted on her stool, a little painfully yet. She was sweating freely, though her coat was off. The tent must be hot; Galina sometimes forgot temperature altogether. Not for the first time, she wondered about this Min, of Elmindreda, or whatever her real name was. The first time Galina had seen her, she had been garbed like a boy, keeping company with Nynaeve al'Meara and Egwene al'Vere. And Elayne Trakand as well, but the other two were tied to al'Thor. The second time, Elmindreda had been the sort of woman Galina hated, frilly and sighing, and as near under the personal protection of Siuan Sanche as made no difference. How Elaida had ever been fool enough to allow her to leave the Tower, Galina could not imagine. What knowledge was in this girl's head? Perhaps Elaida would not have her right away. Properly used in the Tower, the girl might enable Galina to net Elaida like a swallow. For all of Alviarin, Elaida had become one of those strong, capable Amyrlins who took every rein firmly into their own hands; caging her would surely weaken Alviarin. Properly used right now . . . .

A change in the flows she had been sensing made Galina sit up straight. "I will talk with you again when you have had time for thought, Min. Think carefully on how many tears a man is worth."

Once outside, Galina snapped at the stocky Warder on guard. "Watch her properly, this time." Carilo had not been on guard during the incident last night, but there was too much mollycoddling of the Gaidin. If they had to exist at all, they should be treated as soldiers and no more.

Ignoring his bow, she glided away from the tent, looking for Gawyn. That young man had been withdrawn since al'Thor was captured, and much too quiet. She was not about to have everything ruined by him trying to avenge his mother. But she saw Gawyn sitting his horse on the edge of the camp, talking to a knot of those boys who called themselves the Younglings.

They had stopped early of necessity today, and the afternoon sun made long shadows of the tents and wagons beside the road. Rolling plains and low hills surrounded the camp, with only a few scattered thickets in sight, most sparse and small. Thirty-three Aes Sedai added to the original six, with their servants—and Warders; nine were Green, only thirteen Red, and the rest White, Alviarin’s former Ajah—made a considerable encampment even without counting Gawyn and his soldiers. A number of sisters were standing outside or looking out of their tents, having felt what Galina had. The focus of attention was seven Aes Sedai, six seated on stools around a brass-bound chest set where it could catch whatever strength remained in the sun. The seventh was Erian; she had not been far from the chest since al’Thor was put back into it last night. He had been allowed out once they were away from Cairhien, but Galina suspected Erian was going to want him to make the rest of the journey inside that box.

The Green rounded on her as soon as she came close. Erian was quite beautiful usually, her face a pale exquisite oval, but now crimson suffused her cheeks, as it had almost constantly since the night before, and her lovely dark eyes were red-rimmed. “He did try to break through the shield again, Galina.” Wrath mingled with contempt for the man’s foolishness, making her voice thick and harsh. “He must be punished again. I do want to be the one to punish him.”

Galina hesitated. Much better would be to punish Min; that would quell al’Thor. He had certainly raged enough seeing her punished for her outburst last night, which had in turn come from seeing him punished. The entire incident had begun because al’Thor discovered Min was in the camp, after one of the Warders carelessly allowed her to walk in the darkness instead of keeping her closely confined in her tent. Who would have thought that al’Thor, shielded and surrounded, would have gone mad that way? Not just trying to break through the shield, but killing a Warder with his bare hands and severely wounding another with the dead man’s sword, to such an extent that the second died in the Healing. All that in the moments required for the sisters to overcome their shock and bind him with the Power.

For herself, Galina would have gathered the other Red sisters and gentled al’Thor days ago. Since that was prohibited, she would just as soon have delivered him to the Tower unmarked, so long as he was reasonably polite. Even now efficiency was what she cared for, and what would be efficient would be to bring Min out here and let him hear her wail and weep again, let him know that he was the cause of her pain. But by chance both the dead Warders belonged to Erian. Most of the sisters would feel she had the right. And Galina herself wanted the doll-like Illianer Green to rid herself of her rage as soon as possible. Much better to travel the rest of the way able to admire that porcelain face unruffled.

Galina nodded.

Rand blinked when light suddenly flooded into the chest. He could not help flinching too; he knew what was coming. Lews Therin fell silent, and still. Rand held the Void by a fingernail, yet he was all too aware of cramped muscles groaning as he was pulled upright. He clamped his teeth shut and tried not to squint against what seemed the brightness of noon. The air seemed wonderfully fresh; his sodden shirt clung to him, dripping with sweat. No cords held him, but he could not have moved a step for his life. If not held up with the Power, he would have fallen over. Until he saw how low the sun sat, he had no idea how long he had been in there with his head between his knees, in a puddle of his own sweat.

The sun got only a notice, though. Involuntarily his eyes went to Erian even before she placed herself squarely in front of him. The short slender woman peered up at him, dark eyes full of fury, and he almost flinched again. Unlike last night, she said nothing, only began.

The first unseen blow struck him across the shoulders, the second the chest, third the backs of his thighs. The Void shattered. Air. Only Air. It sounded softer, that way. Each blow felt a whip, though, wielded by an arm stronger than any man's. Before she began, bruised welts crisscrossed him from shoulders to knees. He had been aware of them, not so dimly as he could have wished; even inside the Void he had wanted to weep. After the Void went, he wanted to howl.

Instead he clenched his jaws. Sometimes a grunt escaped through his teeth, and when one did, Erian's efforts redoubled as if she wanted more. He refused to give it. He could not stop a shudder at each stroke of that invisible lash, but no more than that would he give her. He fixed his eyes on hers, refused to look away, to blink.

I killed my Ilyena, Lews Therin moaned every time a blow landed.

Rand had his own litany. Pain flailing his chest. *This comes of trusting Aes Sedai*. Fire striping his back. *Never again; not an inch; not a hair*. Like a razor's slash. *This comes of trusting Aes Sedai*.

They thought they could break him. They thought they could make him crawl to Elaida! He made himself do the hardest thing he had ever done in his life. He smiled. Certainly it touched nothing but his lips, yet he looked Erian in the eye, and he smiled. Her eyes widened, and she hissed. The scourges began to come from everywhere at once.

The world was pain and fire. He could not see, only feel. Agony and inferno. For some reason he was aware of his hands trembling uncontrollably in their invisible bonds, but he concentrated on holding his teeth shut. *This comes of—Won't cry out! I will not cry ou—! Never again; not an in—! Not an inch; not a hair! Never agai—! I will not! Never a—! Never! Never! NEVER!*

First there was a perception of breathing. Air, gulped hungrily through his nostrils. He throbbed—he was a pulsing flame—but the beating had stopped. It almost came as a shock, realizing that. The end of something that part of him had been convinced would never end. He tasted blood, and realized that his jaws hurt almost as much as the rest of him. Good. He had not cried out. The muscles of his face were locked in a knotted cramp; it would take effort to open his mouth even if he wanted to.

Sight was the last thing to return, and when it did, he wondered whether pain was making him hallucinate. Among the Aes Sedai stood a group of Wise Ones, shifting their shawls and staring at the Aes Sedai with all the arrogance they could muster. When he decided they were real—unless he was fantasizing Galina talking to one of his fancies—his first thought was rescue. Somehow the Wise Ones had . . . It was impossible, but somehow they would. . . . Then he recognized the woman speaking with Galina.

Sevanna strolled toward him, a smile on that plump greedy mouth. Those pale green eyes peered up at him from that beautiful face framed by hair like spun gold. Rand would as soon have looked into the face of a rabid wolf. There was something odd in the way she stood, leaning forward slightly, shoulders back. She was watching his eyes. Abruptly, as much as he hurt, he wanted to laugh; he would have, if he could have been sure what sound would emerge if he opened his mouth. Here he was, a prisoner, beaten within an inch of his life, welts burning, sweat stinging, and a woman who hated him, he was sure, who probably blamed him for the death of her lover, was trying to see whether he would look down the front of her blouse!

Slowly she ran a fingernail across his throat—in fact, as far around his neck as she could reach—as though imagining cutting off his head. Fitting, considering Couladin's fate. "I have seen him," she said with a satisfied sigh and a small shiver of pleasure. "You have kept your part of the bargain, and I have kept mine."

The Aes Sedai doubled him again then, shoved him back down into the chest with his head between his knees, crouching in that thin puddle of sweat. The lid closed, and darkness enclosed him.

Only then did he work his jaws until his mouth could open and let out a long shuddering breath. He had not been sure whether he might not whimper even now. Light, but he was on fire!

What was Sevanna doing there? What bargain? No. All very well to know there was some bargain between the Tower and the Shaido, but worrying about it was for later. Now was for Min. He had to get free. They had hurt her. That thought was so grim it almost dulled the pain. Almost.

Assuming the Void again was a labor of wading through a swamp of agony, but at last he was surrounded by emptiness, reaching out toward *saidin*. . . . Only to find Lews Therin there as soon as he was, like two sets of hands fumbling to grasp something only one could hold.

Burn you! Rand growled in his head. *Burn you! If you'd only work with me just once instead of against me!*

You work with me! Lews Therin snapped back.

Rand nearly lost the Void in shock. There could be no mistake this time; Lews Therin had heard him and answered. *We could work together, Lews Therin*. He did not want to work with the man; he wanted him out of his head. But there was Min. And how many days yet to Tar Valon. Somehow he was sure if they got him that far, there would be no more chances. Ever.

An uncertain, apprehensive laugh answered him. Then, *Together*? Another laugh, and this mad as a loon. *Together. Whoever you are*. And voice and presence vanished.

Rand shivered. Kneeling there, adding more sweat to the puddle his head rested in, he shivered.

Slowly he reached for *saidin* again. . . . And came against the shield, of course. The thing he had been seeking in any case. Slowly, ever so gently, he felt his way along it, to where a hard plane suddenly turned to six soft points.

Soft, Lews Therin said, panting. *Because they are there. Sustaining the buffer. Hard when they knot. Nothing to be done when they are soft, but I can unravel the web if they knot it. With time*. He paused so long Rand thought he was gone again, then he whispered, *Are you real?* And then he really was gone.

Gingerly Rand felt along the shield to the soft points. To six Aes Sedai. With time? If they tied it, which they had not so far in. . . . What was it? Six days? Seven? Eight? No matter. He could not afford to wait too long. Every day was one closer to Tar Valon. Tomorrow, he would try to break through the barrier again; it had been like beating his hands against stone, but he had beaten with all his strength. Tomorrow when Erian flogged him—he was sure it would be her—he would smile at her again, and when the pain built, he would let the screams come. The next day he would not more than brush the shield, maybe hard enough to let them feel it, but only that, and not again after whether they punished him or not. Maybe he would beg for water. They had given him some at dawn, but he was thirsty again; even if they let him drink more than once a day, begging would fit. If he was still in the box then, he might plead to be let out, too. He thought he would be; small chance of them allowing him out for long until they were sure he had learned his lesson. Cramped muscles twitched at the thought of two or three more days stuffed in here. There was no room to move anything, but his body tried. Two or three days, and they would be sure he was broken. He would look fearful and avoid meeting anyone’s gaze. A wretch they could safely let out of the chest. More importantly, a wretch they did not need to guard so closely. And then, perhaps, they would decide they did not need six to hold the shield, or that they could tie it off, or . . . or something. He needed some crack. Something!

It was a desperate thought, but he realized that he was laughing, and he could not stop. He could not stop feeling at the barrier, either, a blind man sliding his fingers desperately across a piece of smooth glass.

Galina frowned after the departing Aielwomen until they topped a rise and vanished down the other side. Every one of those women except Sevanna herself had been able to channel, several quite strongly. No doubt Sevanna had thought herself safer, surrounded by a dozen or so wilders. Amusing thought. These savages were an untrusting lot. In a few days she would make use of them again, in the second part of Sevanna’s “bargain.”

The regrettable death of Gawyn Trakand, and the better part of his Younglings.

Returning to the heart of the camp, she found Erian still standing over the chest containing al’Thor.

“He do be weeping, Galina,” she said fiercely. “Can you hear him? He do be—” Suddenly tears were sliding down Erian’s face; she simply stood there sobbing quietly, her hands fists clutching her skirts.

“Come to my tent,” Galina said soothingly. “I have some nice blueberry tea, and I will put a cool, damp cloth on your brow.”

Erian smiled through her tears. “Thank you, Galina, but I cannot. Rashan and Bartol will be waiting for me. They do suffer worse than I, I fear. They do not only feel my suffering, but do suffer because they *know* I do. I must comfort them.” One grateful squeeze of Galina’s hand, and she glided away.

Galina frowned at the chest. Al’Thor did seem to be weeping; either that or he was laughing, and she very much doubted that. She looked after Erian, just disappearing into her Warders’ tent. Al’Thor would weep. They had at least two weeks more to Tar Valon and Elaida’s planned triumphal entry; yes, at least twenty days more. From now on, whether Erian wished to do it or not, he was to be punished each day at dawn and at sunset. When she brought him into the White Tower, he would kiss Elaida’s ring, speak when spoken to and kneel in the corner when he was not wanted. Eyes tight, she went to drink her blueberry tea by herself.

As they entered the largish stand of trees, Sevanna turned to the others, thinking how remarkable it was that she should think of the trees so casually. Before crossing the Dragonwall, she had never seen so many trees. “Did you all see the means they used to hold him?” she asked, making it sound as if she had said “also” instead of “all.”

Therava looked at the others, who nodded. “We can weave all they have done,” Therava said.

Nodding, Sevanna fingered the small stone cube, with its intricate carvings, in her pouch. The strange wetlander who had given it to her had said she should use it now, when al’Thor was captive. Until she had actually looked on him, she had intended to; now she decided to throw the cube away. She was the widow of a chief who had been to Rhuidean and of a man who had been called chief without making that visit. Now she was going to be the wife of the *Car'a'carn* himself. Every spear of the Aiel would be grounded to her. Her finger still retained the feel of al'Thor's neck, where she had traced the line of the collar she would put on him.

"It is time, Desaine," she said.

Of course, Desaine blinked in surprise, and then she had time only to scream before the others began their work. Desaine had contented herself with grumbling about Sevanna's position. Sevanna had put her time to better use. Except for Desaine, every woman here was solidly behind her, and more beside.

Sevanna watched very closely what the other Wise Ones did; the One Power fascinated her, all those things done so miraculously, so effortlessly, and it was very important that it would be seen that what was done to Desaine could only have been done with the Power. She thought it quite astounding that a human body could be taken apart with so little blood.

* * *

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CHAPTER 54

The Sending

With the sun just a thin glowing slice on the horizon, the second day of the Feast of Lights saw the streets of Cairhien already filled with revelers. Indeed, they had never really emptied through the night. There was a frenzied air to the celebration, and few gave more than a glance to the curly-bearded man with the grim face and the axe on his hip, riding a tall bay down the arrow-straight streets toward the river. Some did look at his companions; an Aiel man was a common enough sight now, though they had abandoned the streets when the celebrations began, but it was not every day that you saw an Ogier, taller than the man on horseback, especially one carrying an axe propped across one shoulder, with a haft nearly as long as he was tall. The Ogier made the bearded man look jolly.

The ships on the Alguenya had all their lanterns lit, including the Sea Folk ship that occasioned so much rumor, for being in Cairhien at all, for remaining at anchor so long with barely any contact with the shore. By the rumors Perrin had heard, the Sea Folk disapproved of the carrying on in the city even more than the Aiel did, and he had thought Gaul would die from shock at all the men and women kissing. Whether or not the woman wore a blouse did not appear to bother Gaul nearly as much as the fact that they were kissing where they could be seen. That was indecent.

Long stone piers thrust out into the river between tall flanking walls, and boats of all sizes and types were tied along them, including ferries that could take one horse or fifty, but Perrin did not see more than one man on any of them. He reined in the bay as he came to a broad, mastless craft some six or seven spans long lashed to stone posts. Its ramp to the dock was in place. A stout, gray-haired man with no shirt was sitting on an up-ended cask on the deck, a gray-haired woman with half a dozen bright slashes across the bosom of her dark dress on his knees.

“We want to cross,” Perrin said loudly, trying to look only enough to see whether the pair took their arms from around each other. They did not. Perrin tossed an Andoran crown down onto the ferry, and the sound of the fat gold coin bouncing on the deck brought the fellow’s head around. “We want to cross,” Perrin said, hefting a second gold crown on his palm. After a moment, he added another.

The ferryman licked his lips. “I will have to find oarsmen,” he muttered, staring at Perrin’s hand.

Sighing, Perrin pulled two more from his purse; he could remember when his eyes would have fallen out at having one of those coins.

The ferryman leaped up, dropping the noblewoman onto her bottom with a thump, and scrambled up the ramp panting that he would be only moments, my Lord, only moments. The woman gave Perrin a very reproachful look, and glided away down the dock with a dignity somewhat spoiled by rubbing herself; before she had gone very far, though, she gathered her skirts and ran to join a group of dancers capering along the waterfront. Perrin could hear her laughing.

It took more than moments, but apparently the promise of gold was enough, for in not too long a time the ferryman had enough fellows gathered to man most of the long sweeps. Perrin stood stroking the bay’s nose as the vessel swung out into the river. He had not decided on a name, yet; the animal came from the Sun Palace stable. Well-shod, with white forefeet, the horse looked a stayer, though not a patch on Stepper.

His unstrung Two Rivers bow was thrust through the saddle girth on one side, and the full quiver hung in front of the high-cantled saddle, balancing a long, narrow, neatly wrapped bundle. Rand’s sword. Faile had tied that package herself and handed it to him without a word. She had said something, after he had turned away realizing he would receive no kiss.

“If you fall,” she whispered, “I will take up your sword.”

He was still not sure whether she meant him to hear or not. Her scent had been such a jumble he could make nothing out.

He knew he should be thinking of what he was about, but Faile always crept softly back into his mind. At one point he had been sure she was about to announce that she was coming with him, and his heart had clenched. Had she done so, he did not think he could have made himself refuse her—not that or anything, after all the hurt he had given her—but there were six Aes Sedai ahead, and blood and death. If Faile died, Perrin knew he would go mad. That point had come when Berelain said she would be leading her Mayener Winged Guards in this chase. Luckily, the moment had been gotten past quickly, if in an odd way.

“If you leave the city Rand al’Thor has given to you as his hand,” Rhuarc said quietly, “how many rumors will grow of it? If you send all of your spears, how many rumors? What will grow from those tales?” It sounded like advice, and then again it did not; something in the clan chief’s voice made it much stronger.

Berelain gazed at him, smelling stubborn and head high. Slowly the stubborn smell faded, and she muttered to herself, “Sometimes I think there are too many men who can. . . .” It was just audible to Perrin. Smiling, she spoke aloud, in a remarkably regal tone. “That is sound advice, Rhuarc. I think that I will take it.”

The most remarkable thing, however, had been the way their scents combined, Rhuarc’s and hers. To Perrin they had seemed he-wolf and near-grown cub; an indulgent father, fond of his daughter and she of him, though sometimes he still had to nip her nose to make her behave properly. But what was important was that Perrin could see the intention fading from Faile’s eyes. What was he to do? If he lived to see her again, what was he to do?

In the beginning the coarsely dressed, sometimes bare-chested oarsmen made rough jokes, not too unfriendly, about how any amount of gold was hardly worth what they were missing. They laughed as they strode back and forth along the deck, working the sweeps, and every one claimed he had been dancing with or kissing a noblewoman. One lanky fellow with a big chin even claimed he had a *Tairen* noblewoman on his knee before he came out to Manal’s shout, but no one believed that. Perrin certainly did not; the Tairen men had taken one look at what was going on and dived headfirst into the celebrations; the Tairen women had taken one look and shut themselves up in their rooms with guards on the doors.

Jokes and laughter did not last long. Gaul stood as near the center of the boat as he could, slightly wild eyes fixed on the far shore, up on his toes as though ready to leap. It was all that water, of course, but the boatmen could not know that. And Loial, leaning on the long-handled axe he had found in the Sun Palace, with its ornately engraved head like the head of a huge wood-axe, stood still as a statue with his broad face truly looking carved from granite. The ferrymen shut their mouths and worked their oars as hard as they could, hardly daring to look at their passengers. When the ferry finally pulled into a stone dock on the west bank of the Alguenya, Perrin gave the owner—come to think of it, he hoped the man was the owner—the rest of the gold and a handful of silver to pass around besides, to soothe them for being frightened by Loial and Gaul. The fat man flinched back from him in taking it, and bowed so deeply in spite of his bulk that his head nearly touched his knees. Perhaps Gaul and Loial did not have the only frightening faces.

Huge windowless buildings stood surrounded by wooden scaffolding, the stone blackened, and fallen in many places. The granaries had been burned in riots some time ago, and repairs were only now really taking hold, but there was no one in sight at all on the streets lined with granaries and stables, warehouses and wagon yards. Every last man who worked here was in the city. There was no one in sight until two men rode out of a side street.

"We are ready, Lord Aybara," Havien Nurelle said eagerly. The pink-cheeked young man, considerably taller than his companion, appeared gaudy in his red-painted breastplate and helmet, with a single slender red plume. He even smelled eager, and young.

"I began to think you were not coming," Dobraine muttered. Helmetless, he wore steel-backed gauntlets and a battered breastplate that retained remnants of once ornate gilding. He glanced at Perrin's face and added, "Under the Light, I meant no disrespect, Lord Aybara."

"We have a long way to go," Perrin said, turning the bay. Stayer? What was he to do about Faile? Rand's need seethed beneath his skin. "They've four days on us, now." He dug in his heels lightly and put Stayer to a steady walk. A long chase; it would not do to founder the horses. Neither Loial nor Gaul had any difficulty keeping up.

The widest of the straight streets abruptly became the Tar Valon Road—Cairhien's Tar Valon Road; there were others—a wide band of hard-packed earth winding west and north through forested hills lower than those the city stood on. A mile into the forest, they were joined by two hundred Mayener Winged Guards and five hundred armsmen of House Taborwin, all mounted on the best animals that could be found.

The Mayeners were all in red breastplates and helmets like rimmed pots that covered the nape of the neck, and their lances bore red streamers. Many of them seemed almost as eager as Nurelle. The shorter Cairhienin wore plain breastplates and helmets like bells cut away to expose hard faces, helmets and breastplates alike often dented. Their lances were unadorned, though here and there Dobraine's *con*, a small stiff square on a short staff, blue with two white diamonds, marked officers or minor lords of House Taborwin. None of them looked eager, only grim. They had seen fighting. In Cairhien, they called it "seeing the wolf."

That nearly made Perrin laugh. It was not time for the wolves yet.

Near midday, a small cluster of Aiel trotted out of the trees and down the slope to the road. Two Maidens loped at Rhuarc's shoulder, Nandera and, Perrin realized after a moment, Sulin. She looked very different in *cadin'sor*, with her white hair cut close except for the tail on the back of her neck. She looked . . . natural . . . which she never had in livery. Amys and Sorilea came with them, shawls looped over their arms, clattering with necklaces and bracelets of gold and ivory, holding up their bulky skirts on the slope, but matching the others stride for stride.

Perrin swung down to walk with them, ahead of everyone else. "How many?" was all he said.

Rhuarc glanced back to where Gaul and Loial were walking alongside Dobraine and Nurelle in advance of the column. Too far maybe for even Perrin to hear anything over the clump of hooves and jingle of bridles and creak of saddles, but Rhuarc held his voice low anyway. "Five thousand men from different societies; a few more than five. I could not bring many. Timolan was suspicious as it is that I did not go with him against the Shaido. If it becomes common knowledge that Aes Sedai hold the *Car'a'carn*, I fear the bleakness will swallow us all." Nandera and Sulin coughed loudly at the same time; the two women glared at one another, and after a moment Sulin looked away, blushing. Rhuarc spared them a glance—he smelled exasperated—and muttered, "I also have nearly a thousand Maidens. Had I not tightened my fist, I would have every last one of them running after me, carrying a torch to tell the world that Rand al'Thor is in danger." Abruptly his voice hardened. "Any Maiden I find following us will learn that I mean what I say."

Sulin and Nandera both went red, the color startling on those hard sun-dark faces. "I—" both began at the same instant. Again those glares passed, and again Sulin looked away, her face even more crimson. Perrin did not remember all this blushing from Bain and Chiad, the only two Maidens he really knew. “I have promised,” Nandera said stiffly, “and *every* Maiden has promised on pledge. It will be as the chief has commanded.”

Perrin forbore asking what the bleakness was, just as he did not ask how Rhuarc had gotten the Aiel across the Alguenya without ferries when water they could not step across was the only thing in the world that could give an Aiel pause. He would have liked to know, but the answers were unimportant. Six thousand Aiel, five hundred of Dobraine’s armsmen, and two hundred Winged Guards. Against six Aes Sedai, their Warders and some five hundred guards apparently, that should be enough. Except. The Aes Sedai held Rand. If they put a knife to his throat, would anyone dare lift a hand?

“There are also ninety-four Wise Ones,” Amys said. “They are the strongest in the One Power of those near the city.” That came out reluctantly—he had the idea Aielwomen did not like to admit they could channel—but her voice picked up. “We would not have brought so many, but all wanted to come.” Sorilea cleared her throat, and this time Amys blushed. He was going to have to ask Gaul. Aiel were so unlike anyone else he had ever met; maybe they began blushing when they grew older. “Sorilea leads us,” Amys finished, and the older woman gave a snort that sounded extremely satisfied. She certainly smelled satisfied.

For Perrin, he only just stopped from shaking his head. What he knew of the One Power could be stuffed into a thimble with room left for a fat thumb, but he had traveled with Moiraine, seen what Verin and Alanna could do, and he had seen that flame Sorilea had made. If she was one of the strongest in the Power among the Wise Ones, he was not sure six Aes Sedai would not wrap all ninety-four of them into a bundle. At this point, though, he would not have turned aside field mice.

“They must be seventy or eighty miles ahead of us,” he said. “Maybe as much as a hundred, if they’re pushing their wagons. We will have to press as hard as we can.” As he climbed back to his saddle, Rhuarc and the other Aiel were already trotting back up the hill. Perrin raised his hand, and Dobraine signaled the horsemen to advance. It never occurred to Perrin to wonder why men old enough to be his father, women old enough to be his mother, men and women used to command, were following him.

What he did wonder about, worry about, was how fast they could move. Aiel in *cadin’sor* could keep up with the horses, he knew, yet at first he had worried about Wise Ones in skirts, some maybe as old as Sorilea.

Skirts or no, white hair or no, the Wise Ones walked as quickly as anyone, keeping up with the horses while talking quietly in groups.

The road wound clear ahead; no one set out during the Feast of Lights, and few for days before, unless their business was as urgent as his. The sun climbed higher, and the hills grew lower, and by the time they made camp at twilight, he estimated they might have come as much as thirty-five miles. A good day's travel, excellent for so large a party; half again what the Aes Sedai could manage unless they were willing to kill the teams drawing their wagons. He no longer worried whether he could catch them before they reached Tar Valon, only what he could do once he did.

Lying on his blankets with his head pillowed on his saddle, Perrin smiled up at the waxing quarter-moon. With any clouds at all, the night would not have been nearly so bright. It was a good night for hunting. A good night for wolves.

In his mind he formed an image. A curly-haired young wild bull, proud, with horns that gleamed like polished metal in morning sunlight. His thumb ran across the axe lying beside him, with its wicked curving blade and sharp spike. The steel horns of Young Bull; that was what the wolves called him.

He let his mind quest, sent the image out into the night. There would be wolves, and they would know of Young Bull. News of a human able to speak with wolves would pass across the land like a rushing wind. Perrin had only met two. One a friend, the other a poor wretch who had not been able to hold on to humanity. He had heard tales from the refugees who trickled into the Two Rivers. They had old stories of men turning into wolves, stories few really believed, told to entertain children. Three claimed to have known men who became wolves and ran wild, though, and if the details had seemed wrong to Perrin, the uneasy way two of them had avoided his yellow eyes made confirmation of a sort. Those two, a woman from Tarabon and a man from Almoth Plain, would not go outdoors at night. They also kept giving him gifts of garlic for some reason, which he ate with great pleasure. But he no longer tried to find others like himself.

He felt wolves, and their names began coming to him. Two Moons and Wildfire and Old Deer and dozens more cascading into his head. They were not names as such, really, but images and sensations. Young Bull was a very simple image to name a wolf. Two Moons was really a night-shrouded pool, smooth as ice in the instant before the breeze stirred, with a tang of autumn in the air, and one moon hanging full in the sky and another reflected so perfectly on the water that it was difficult to tell which was real. And that was cutting it to the bone.

For a time there was only the exchanging of names and scents. Then he thought, *I seek people who are ahead of me. Aes Sedai and men, with horses and wagons*. That was not exactly what he thought, of course, any more than Two Moons was just two moons. People were “two-legs” and horses “hard-footed four-legs.” Aes Sedai were “two-leg shes who touch the wind that moves the sun and call fire.” Wolves did not like fire, and they were even more wary of Aes Sedai than of other humans; they thought it amazing that he could not tell an Aes Sedai; he had only learned they could by chance. They took the ability as much for granted as he took being able to pick out one white horse among a herd of black, certainly nothing to mention, and certainly nothing they could explain clearly.

In his head the night sky seemed to whirl, suddenly capping a camp of wagons and tents and campfires. They did not look quite right—wolves cared little for anything human, so the wagons and tents seemed vague; the campfires appeared to roar dangerously; the horses looked quite tasty—and this was passed from wolf to wolf before reaching him. The camp was larger than Perrin expected, but Wildfire was in no doubt. Her pack was even then skirting wide of where the “two-leg shes who touch the wind that moves the sun and call fire” were. Perrin tried asking how many, but wolves had no grasp of numbers; they told how many things there were by showing how many they had seen, and once Wildfire and her pack sensed Aes Sedai, they had no intention of going any closer.

How far? received a better answer, again passed wolf to wolf, if one that had to be puzzled out. Wildfire said she could walk to the hill where a sour male named Half Tail had his pack feeding on a deer while the moon moved so far across the sky, at that angle. Half Tail could reach Rabbit Nose—apparently a young and very fierce male—while the moon moved that far, at another angle. And so it went until Two Moons was reached. Two Moons maintained a dignified silence, suitable for an old male with a muzzle more white than not; he and his pack were not much beyond a mile from Perrin, and it would have been insulting to think Perrin did not know exactly where they sat.

Reasoning it out as best he could, Perrin came up with a figure of sixty or seventy miles. Tomorrow, he would be able to tell how fast he was closing on them. They surely could not be moving as fast as he with wagons.

Why? That was Half Tail, passed along and scent-marked.

Perrin hesitated before answering. He had dreaded this. He felt about the wolves as he did about Two Rivers people. *They have caged Shadowkiller*, he thought at last. That was what the wolves called Rand, but he had no idea whether they considered Rand important.

The shock filling his mind was answer enough, but howls filled the night, near and far, howls filled with anger and fear. In the camp horses whinnied fearfully, stamping their hooves as they shied against the picket ropes. Men ran to calm them, and others to peer into the darkness as if expecting a huge pack to come after the mounts.

We come, Half Tail replied at last. Only that, and then others answered, packs Perrin had spoken to and packs that had listened silently to the two-legs who could speak as the wolves did. *We come*. No more.

Rolling over, Perrin went to sleep, and dreamed he was a wolf running across endless hills. The next morning there was no sign of wolves—not even the Aiel reported seeing one—but Perrin could feel them, several hundred of them and more on the way.

The land flattened into rolling plains over the next four days, where the tallest rises hardly seemed to warrant the name hill compared to what had been around them back by the Alguenya. The forest thinned and faded into grassland, brown and sere, with thickets increasingly far between. The rivers and streams they crossed barely wet the horses' hooves, and would not have done much more before they had narrowed between banks of sun-hardened mud and stones. Each night the wolves told Perrin what they could of the Aes Sedai ahead, which was not much. Wildfire's pack shadowed, but well back. One thing did become clear. Perrin was covering as much ground each day as he had the first, and each day he sliced as much as ten miles from the Aes Sedai lead. But when he caught up, what then?

Before the wolves each night, Perrin would sit talking quietly with Loial, as they smoked their pipes together. It was the "what then" that Perrin wanted to talk about. Dobraine seemed to think they should charge in and die doing their best. Rhuarc only said that they must wait to see what the sun shone on tomorrow and that all men must wake from the dream, which was not so different from Dobraine. Loial might be a young Ogier, but he was still ninety-odd; Perrin suspected Loial had read more books than he himself had seen, and he often came out with surprising knowledge about Aes Sedai.

“There are several books about Aes Sedai dealing with men who can channel.” Loial frowned around his pipe; its leaf-carved bowl was as big as Perrin’s two fists. “Elora, daughter of Amar daughter of Coura, wrote *Men of Fire and Women of Air* in the early days of Artur Hawkwing’s reign. And Ledar, son of Shandin son of Koimal, wrote *A Study of Men, Women and the One Power Among Humans* only some three hundred years ago. Those are the two best, I think. Elora in particular; she wrote in the style of. . . . No. I will be brief.” Perrin doubted that, brevity was seldom numbered among Loial’s virtues when he spoke of books. The Ogier cleared his throat. “By Tower law, the man must be taken to the Tower for trial before he can be gentled.” For a moment Loial’s ears twitched violently, and his long eyebrows drew down grimly, but he patted Perrin’s shoulder in an effort at comfort. “I cannot think they mean to do that, Perrin. I hear they spoke of honoring him, and he is the Dragon Reborn. They know that.”

“Honor?” Perrin said quietly. “Maybe they’re letting him sleep on silk, but a prisoner is still a prisoner.”

“I am sure they are treating him well, Perrin. I am sure.” The Ogier did not sound sure, and his sigh was a hollow gale. “And he is safe until he does reach Tar Valon. What I do not understand is how they captured him.” That huge head swung in open puzzlement. “Perrin, both Elora and Ledar say that when Aes Sedai find a man of great power, they always gather thirteen to take him. Oh, they recount stories of four or five, and both mention Caraighan—she brought a man nearly two thousand miles to the Tower by herself after he killed both of her Warders—but. . . . Perrin, they wrote of Yurian Stonebow and Guaire Amalasan. Of Raolin Darksbane and Davian, as well, but the others are who worry me.” Those were four of the most powerful among the men who had called themselves the Dragon Reborn, all long ago, before Artur Hawkwing. “Six Aes Sedai tried to capture Stonebow, and he killed three and captured the others himself. Six tried to take Amalasan; he killed one and stilled two more. Surely Rand is as strong as Stonebow or Amalasan. Are there really only six ahead of us? It would explain much.”

Perhaps it did, but no comfort in it. Thirteen Aes Sedai might be able to beat off any attack Perrin could mount by themselves, without their Warders and guards. Thirteen Aes Sedai could threaten to gentle Rand if

Perrin attacked. Surely they would not—they did know Rand was the Dragon Reborn; they knew he had to be there at the Last Battle—but could Perrin risk it, Tower law or no Tower law? Who knew why Aes Sedai did anything? He had never been able to make himself trust even Aes Sedai who had tried to show themselves friends. They always held their secrets, and how could a man ever be sure when he could feel them moving behind his back, however much they smiled to his face? Who could say what Aes Sedai would do?

In truth, Loial did not know much that would help when the day came, and besides, he was much more interested in talking about Erith. Perrin knew he had left two letters with Faile, one addressed to his mother and the other to Erith, to be delivered when she could if anything untoward should happen. Which Loial had nearly bent over backward trying to assure her would not happen; he always worried terribly about worrying anyone else. Perrin had left his own letter for Faile; Amys had carried it out to leave with the Wise Ones in the Aiel camp.

“She is so beautiful,” Loial murmured, staring at the night as if seeing her. “Her face is so delicate, yet strong at the same time. When I looked at her eyes, it seemed I could see nothing else. And her ears!” Abruptly his own ears were vibrating wildly, and he choked on his pipe. “Please,” he gasped, “forget I mentioned. . . . I should not have spoken of. . . . You know I am not coarse, Perrin.”

“I’ve forgotten already,” Perrin said weakly. Her *ears*?

Loial wanted to know what it was like being married. Not that he had any intention of marrying yet, he was quick to add; he was too young, and he had his book to finish, and he was not ready to settle down to a life of never leaving the *stedding* except to visit another, which a wife would assuredly insist on. He was just curious. No more than that.

So Perrin spoke of life with Faile, how she had transplanted his roots before he knew it. Once the Two Rivers had been home; now home was wherever Faile was. The thought that she was waiting quickened his step. Her presence brightened a room, and at her smile, every trouble receded. Of course, he could not speak of how thinking of her made his blood leap, or looking at her his heart pound—it would not have been decent—and he certainly had no intention of mentioning the trouble she had planted in his bones. What was he to do? He really was ready to go on his knees to her, but a stubborn iron seed in him required that one word from her first. If only she would just say she wanted things to be as they had been.

“What about her jealousy?” Loial asked, and it was Perrin’s turn to choke. “Are wives all like that?”

“Jealousy?” Perrin said stoutly. “Faile is not jealous. Where did you get that idea? She is perfect.”

“Of course she is,” Loial said faintly, peering into his pipe bowl. “Do you have any more Two Rivers tabac? All I have after this is some sharp Cairhienin leaf.”

Had it all been like that, the journey would have been peaceful in a way, as much as such a chase could be. The land rolled by without another soul in sight. If the sun was molten gold, turning the air to an oven, hawks often wheeled in the cloudless blue sky. The wolves, not wanting humans coming out where they were, drove deer toward the road in such numbers that there were more than even such a large group needed, and it was not unusual to see a proud buck with a tall forked rack and his does and a few spike-horns standing in plain sight as the column passed. But there was an old saying. “The only man completely at peace is a man without a navel.”

The Cairhienin were not easy with the Aiel, of course, frequently frowning at them, or sneering openly. More than once Dobraine muttered about being outnumbered twelve to one. He respected their fighting abilities, but in the way you respected the dangerous qualities of a pack of rabid leopards. The Aiel did not glare or sneer; they just made it plain the Cairhienin were beneath notice. Perrin would not have been surprised to see one of them try to walk through a Cairhienin for refusing to admit he was there. Rhuarc said there would be no trouble, so long as the treekillers started none. Dobraine said there would be no trouble, so long as the savages kept out of his way. Perrin wished he could be certain they would not start killing one another before they even saw the Aes Sedai holding Rand.

He had some hope the Mayeners might be a bridge between the two, though at times he found himself regretting it. The men in red breastplates got on well with the shorter men in plain armor—there had never been a war between Mayene and Cairhien—and the Mayeners also got on with the Aiel. Except for the Aiel War, Mayeners had never fought Aiel. Dobraine was quite friendly with Nurelle, often sharing the evening meal, and Nurelle took to smoking a pipe with various of the Aiel. Especially Gaul. That was where the regret came from.

"I have been talking with Gaul," Nurelle said diffidently. It was the fourth day on the road, and he had come up from the Mayeners to ride beside Perrin at the head of the column. Perrin was only half-listening; Wild-fire had allowed one of the younger males in her pack to creep close soon after the Aes Sedai began moving that morning, and he had not smelled Rand. Every wolf knew the scent of Shadowkiller, it seemed. Still, for all the sketchiness of what Morning Clouds had seen, every wagon but one appeared to have a canvas cover on hoops. Rand was probably inside one of the others, and a good deal more comfortable out of the sun than Perrin was, with sweat rolling down his neck. "He was telling me of the Battle of Emond's Field," Nurelle went on, "and your Two Rivers Campaign. Lord Aybara, it would honor me greatly to hear of your battles from yourself."

Abruptly Perrin sat up stiff in his saddle, staring at the boy. No, not a boy, despite those pink cheeks and that open face. Nurelle was surely as old as he himself. But the man's scent, all bright and quivering slightly. . . . Perrin very nearly groaned. He had smelled that from young boys back home, but to be hero-worshiped by a man his own age was almost more than he could take.

If that had been the worst of it, though, he would hardly have minded. He expected the Aiel and the Cairhienin not to like one another. He should have expected a young man who had never seen a battle to look up to one who had fought Trollocs. It was the things he could not have foreseen that frayed his nerves. The unforeseen could bite you on the ankle when you least expected it and could least afford to be distracted.

Except for Gaul and Rhuarc, every Aiel man wore a strip of crimson cloth tied around his temples, with that black-and-white disc above his brows. Perrin had seen them in Cairhien, and in Caemlyn, but now when he asked Gaul, and then Rhuarc, if that marked them as this *siswai'aman* Rhuarc had spoken of, both men tried to pretend they did not know what he was talking about, as if they could not see red headbands on five thousand men. Perrin even asked the man who seemed to be in charge under Rhuarc, Urien, a Two Spires Reyn whom Perrin had met long ago, but Urien seemed not to understand either. Well, Rhuarc had said he could only bring *siswai'aman*, so that was how Perrin thought of them, even if he did not know what it meant.

What he did know was there might be trouble between the *siswai'aman* and the Maidens. When some of those men looked at the Maidens, Perrin caught a whiff of jealousy. When some of the Maidens looked at the *siswai'aman*, their scent made him think of a wolf hunkering over the carcass of a deer, not meaning to let any other of the pack have a bite if she choked to death swallowing it all. He could not begin to fathom why, but there it was, and sharp.

That was a "maybe" though, some time to come. Other things were not. For the first two days after leaving the city, Sulin and Nandera both put themselves forward whenever Rhuarc said anything concerning the Maidens; every time Sulin backed away, blushing, but she was right there the next time, every time. The second evening, when camp was made, they tried to kill each other with their bare hands.

At least, that was what it looked like to Perrin, kicking each other, hitting with fists, tossing each other to the ground, bending arms so that he was sure bones must break—until whoever was at a disadvantage managed to free herself with a twist or a blow. Rhuarc stopped him when he tried to interfere, and looked surprised that he wanted to. A good many of the Cairhienin and Mayeners gathered around to watch and place bets, but no Aiel so much as glanced at the fight, not even the Wise Ones.

Finally Sulin had Nandera facedown with an arm doubled painfully behind her; seizing Nandera's hair, she slammed the other woman's head against the ground until she lay limp. For a long time the older woman stood looking down at the one she had beaten. Then Sulin heaved the unconscious Nandera up onto her shoulders and staggered away with her.

Perrin assumed that Sulin would do the talking from then on, but such was not the case at all. She was still always there, but a bruised Nandera answered Rhuarc's questions and took his commands while an equally bruised Sulin kept silent, and when Nandera asked Sulin to do something, she did it without hesitation. Perrin could only scratch his head and wonder whether he actually had seen the fight end as he thought it had.

The Wise Ones always walked alongside the road in groups that varied in size and seemed to shift members constantly. By the end of the first day Perrin realized that all that shifting really centered around two women, Sorilea and Amys. By the end of the second, he was sure the two were urging very different view-pointers; there were too many glares and frowns. Now and then Perrin heard Aes Sedai mentioned; he caught snatches about “custom” and “battle,” but never enough to understand. Amys began backing down more slowly, and blushing considerably less. Sometimes Rhuarc smelled faintly anxious when he looked at his wife, but that was the only sign he saw anything. By the third camp out of the city, Perrin half-expected to see Sulin and Nandera’s fight repeated between Wise Ones.

Instead, the two women took a waterskin and went off a little distance, where they sat by themselves on the ground and removed their folded scarves so their long hair hung loose. He watched them into moonlit darkness, keeping far enough back that he would not eavesdrop even by accident, until he went to his own bed, but all they did was drink cups of water and talk. The next morning, the rest of the Wise Ones still shifted from group to group, but before the long column had covered three miles, Perrin realized that all centered on Sorilea now. Now and then she and Amys went off to one side of the road by themselves to talk, but there were no more glares. Had they been wolves, Perrin would have said a challenge to the pack leader had been defeated, but by their scents, Sorilea accepted Amys as almost an equal now, which did not fit wolves at all.

The seventh day out of Cairhien, riding beneath a broiling morning sun, he was worrying about what sort of surprise the Aiel were going to give him next, worrying about whether the Aiel and Cairhienin would stay away from each others’ throats another day, about what he was going to do when he caught the Aes Sedai in another three or four days.

All of that vanished at a sending from Half Tail. There was a large party of men—and women maybe; wolves sometimes had difficulty telling male humans from female—only a few miles to the west, and riding hard in the same direction Perrin was heading. It was the sketchy image of the two banners they rode behind that drew Perrin up.

He was surrounded quickly, by Dobraine and Nurelle, Rhuarc and Urien, Nandera and Sulin, Sorilea and Amys. “Keep on,” he told them, turning Stayer west. “We may have a few friends to join us, but we don’t want to lose any time.”

They did keep on as he rode away, but they did not let him go alone. Before he covered a quarter of a mile he was trailed by a dozen of the Winged Guards and as many Cairhienin, at least twenty Maidens led by Sulin and an equal number of *siswai’aman* behind a gray-haired man with green eyes and a face that appeared to have been used to break stone, Perrin was only surprised there was not a Wise One or two.

"Friends," Sulin murmured to herself, trotting at his stirrup. "Friends who appear suddenly, with no warning, and he suddenly just knows they are there." Looking up at him, she spoke louder. "I would not like to see you trip over a pillow and fall on your nose again."

Perrin shook his head, wondering what other cudgels he had given her while she masqueraded as a servant. Aiel were strange.

By the sun he rode for nearly an hour, guided by the wolves, as surely as arrow to target, and when he topped a low rise, he was not surprised by what he saw perhaps two miles ahead, mounted men in a long column of twos, Two Rivers men with his own Red Wolfhead banner at their head streaming on a light breeze. What did surprise him was that there really were women with them—nine, he counted—and a number of men he was sure were not Two Rivers folk. What tightened his jaw was the second banner. The Red Eagle of Manetheren. He could not say how many times he had told them not to take one of those out of the Two Rivers; one of the few things he had not been able to stop back home just by suggesting was the flying of that flag. Still, the wolves' imperfect sending of the banners had prepared him.

They saw him and his companions quickly, of course. There were good eyes in that band. They drew up, waiting, and some unlimbered bows from their backs, the great Two Rivers bows that could kill a man at three hundred paces and more.

"No one get in front of me," Perrin said. "They'll not shoot if they recognize me."

"It seems yellow eyes see far," Sulin said flatly. A number of the others were looking at him oddly.

"Just stay behind me," Perrin sighed.

As he rode closer at the head of his strange party, bows that had been raised were, lowered and arrows un-nocked. They had Stepper, he saw with delight, and with less delight, Swallow. Faile would never forgive him if he let her black mare be injured. It would be good to be back on his dun, but maybe he would keep Stayer as well; a lord could have two horses. Even a lord who might not have more than another four days to live.

Dannil rode out from the Two Rivers column, knuckling his thick mustaches, and Aram, and the women rode with them. Perrin recognized ageless Aes Sedai faces even before he picked out Verin and Alanna, both riding to the rear of the women. He did not know any of the others, but he was certain who they were, if not how they had gotten here. Nine. Nine Aes Sedai could be more than useful in three or four days now, yet how far could he trust them? They were nine, and Rand had told them only six could follow him. He wondered which one was Merana, their leader.

A square-faced Aes Sedai who looked like a farmer beneath her agelessness spoke before Dannil could. Her mount was a solid brown mare. "So you are Perrin Aybara. Lord Perrin, I should say. We've heard a great deal about you."

"It is a surprise to meet you here," an arrogant if beautiful woman said coolly, "with such odd companions." She rode a dark gelding with a fierce eye; Perrin would have wagered the animal was trained as a war horse. "We thought sure you would be ahead of us yet."

Ignoring them—one of those two must be Merana, and he was not certain what to say to her yet—Perrin looked at Dannil. "Not that I'm displeased, but how did you come here?"

Dannil glanced at the Aes Sedai and stroked his mustaches furiously. "We started out like you said, Lord Perrin, and as fast as we could. I mean, we left the wagons and all, since it seemed there must be some reason for you to leave so quick. Then Kiruna Sedai and Bera Sedai and the others caught us up, and they said Alanna could find Rand—the Lord Dragon, I mean—and since you went with him, I thought sure you'd be wherever he was, and no way to tell us if you'd gone from Cairhien, and. . . ." He drew a deep breath. "Anyway, it seems they were right, weren't they, Lord Perrin."

Perrin frowned, wondering how Alanna could find Rand. But she must be able to, or Dannil and the rest would not be here. She and Verin were continuing to stay back, with a slim, hazel-eyed woman who seemed to sigh often.

"I am Bera Harkin," the square-faced woman said, "and this is Kiruna Nachiman." She indicated her haughty companion. Apparently the others could do without introductions yet. "Will you tell us why you are here when young al'Thor—the Lord Dragon—is several days north?"

It did not take much consideration. If these nine meant to join the Aes Sedai ahead, there was little he could do to stop it. Nine Aes Sedai on his side, however. . . . "He's being held prisoner. An Aes Sedai named Coiren and at least five others are taking him to Tar Valon. At least, they mean to. I mean to stop them.” That caused considerable shock, with Dannil’s eyes widening and Aes Sedai all talking at once. Aram was the only one who did not appear affected, but then, he did not seem to care much about anything except Perrin and his sword. The smells from the Aes Sedai were all outrage and fear for all their calm faces.

“We have to stop them, Bera,” came from a woman with her hair in beaded Taraboner braids, just as a pale Cairhienin woman on a lanky bay mare said, “We cannot allow Elaida to have him, Bera.”

“Six?” the hazel-eyed woman said incredulously. “Six could not take him. I am sure of it.”

“I told you he was injured,” Alanna half-wept. Perrin knew her scent well enough to pick it out; she smelled of pain. “I told you.” Verin kept silent, but she smelled furious—and afraid.

Kiruna ran a dark, contemptuous gaze over Perrin’s party. “You mean to stop Aes Sedai with this, young man? Verin did not say you were a fool.”

“I have a few more than this back on the Tar Valon Road,” he said dryly.

“Then you may join them to us,” Kiruna told him, as though making a concession. “That will be all right, Bera, will it not?” Bera nodded.

He could not understand why Kiruna’s attitude grated at him so, but this was no time to try puzzling it out. “I also have three hundred Two Rivers archers I intend to take back to the road with me.” How could Alanna know whether Rand was hurt? “You Aes Sedai are welcome to come along.”

They did not like it, certainly. They rode off a dozen paces to one side to discuss it—even his ears heard nothing; they must have been using the Power somehow—and for a time, Perrin thought they were going to ride on alone.

In the end they did come, but Bera and Kiruna rode on either side of him all the way back to the road, taking turns telling him how dangerous and delicate this situation was, and he must do nothing that might endanger young al’Thor. Bera at least remembered to call Rand the Dragon Reborn sometimes. One thing they made quite clear was that Perrin was not to so much as put one foot in front of the other without asking them first. Bera began to seem a little vexed that he would not repeat her words back to her; Kiruna seemed to take them for said. Perrin began to wonder whether he had made a mistake asking them to come.

If the Aes Sedai were impressed by the collection of Aiel and Mayeners and Cairhienin marching along the road, they gave no sign to either eye or nose. They did add their little bit to the bubbling of the kettle, though. The Mayeners and Cairhienin seemed very heartened at the appearance of nine Aes Sedai and sixteen Warders, and they nearly bowed and scraped whenever one of the women came close. Maidens and *siswai'aman* looked at the Aes Sedai as though they expected the women to crush them underfoot, but though the Wise Ones kept faces as smooth as the Aes Sedai, Perrin smelled waves of pure fury from them. Except for a Brown named Masuri, the Aes Sedai ignored the Wise Ones entirely at first, but after Masuri had been rebuffed at least two dozen times over the next few days—she was persis tent, yet the Wise Ones avoided the Aes Sedai so smoothly that Perrin thought they must do it by instinct—after that, Bera and Kiruna and all the rest were constantly looking at the Wise Ones and talking among themselves behind some invisible barrier that kept Perrin from hearing what they said.

He would have eavesdropped if he could; they were hiding more than talk about the Aielwomen. For one thing, Alanna refused to tell him how she knew where Rand was—"There is knowledge that would burn any mind but Aes Sedai," she had told him, cool and mysterious, but she fairly reeked of anxiety and pain—and she would not even admit to having said he was injured in some way. Verin hardly said a word to him, only watched everything with those dark birdlike eyes and a small secret smile, yet she gave off waves of frustration and anger. By smell he would have said Bera or Kiruna was the leader; Bera, he thought, though it was close and sometimes seemed to shift the other way for a time. It was hard to say otherwise, though one or the other rode beside him a good hour every day, repeating variations of their original "advice" and generally assuming they were in charge. Nurelle seemed to think they were, taking their commands without so much as a glance at Perrin, and Dobraine did no more than glance first. For a full day and a half Perrin assumed Merana had remained in Caemlyn, and it came as a shock to hear the slim hazel-eyed woman addressed by that name. Rand had said she headed the embassy from Salidar, but for all that the Aes Sedai appeared equals on the surface, Perrin marked her as low wolf in the pack; dull resignation and anxiety filled her scent. No surprise that Aes Sedai kept secrets, of course, but he intended to rescue Rand from Coiren and the lot ahead, and he would have liked a hint as to whether he would have to rescue him from Kiruna and her friends.

At least it was good being reunited with Dannil and the others even if they were nearly as bad around the Aes Sedai as the Mayeners and Cairhienin. The Two Rivers men were so glad to see him that few even grumbled when he told them to put away the Red Eagle; it would come out again, Perrin was sure, but Dannil's brother Tell, who looked almost exactly like him except for a pickaxe nose and long thin mustaches in the Domani manner, folded it carefully into his saddlebags. They did not go on without banners, of course. For one thing, there was his own Red Wolfhead. They might have ignored him if he told them to pack that away, and for some reason, Kiruna's cool, disdainful gaze made him want to display it. But beside that, Dobraine and Nurelle produced banners, since one had been shown already. Not the Rising Sun of Cairhien or the Golden Hawk in flight of Mayene. Each had brought a pair of Rand's standards, the Dragon red-and-gold on white, and the black-and-white disc on crimson. The Aiel did not seem to care one way or another, and the Aes Sedai grew very cold, but they seemed fitting ensigns to go on behind.

On the tenth day, with the sun almost halfway to its peak, Perrin was feeling grim despite banners and Two Rivers men and Stepper under him. They should overtake the Aes Sedai wagons not long after noon, but he still did not know what to do after that. It was then that the sending came from the wolves. *Come now. Many two-legs. Many, many, many! Come now!*

* * *

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CHAPTER 55

Dumai's Wells

Gawyn tried to keep his mind on the landscape as he rode at the head of the column. This sort of rolling terrain with its scattered bunches of trees was just flat enough to make you think you could see a long way, when in truth some of those occasional long ridges and low hills were not quite so low as they seemed. The wind was gusting up waves of dust today, and dust could hide a lot, too. Dumai's Wells lay just off the road to his right, three stone wells in a small copse; the water barrels could stand topping, and it was at least four days to the next sure water, if the Alianelle Spring had not gone dry, but Galina had ordered no stopping. He tried to hold his attention where it should be, but he could not.

From time to time he twisted in his saddle, looking back at the long snake of wagons stretching along the road, with Aes Sedai and Warders riding alongside, and servants who were not in the wagons walking. Most of the Younglings were at the rear, where Galina had ordered them. He could not see the one wagon, in the center of the column with six Aes Sedai always riding beside it, that had no canvas cover. He would have killed al'Thor if he could, but this sickened him. Even Erian had refused to take part any longer after the second day, and the Light knew she had cause. Galina was adamant, though.

Putting his eyes firmly forward, he touched Egwene's letter in his coat pocket, where it lay carefully wrapped in layers of silk. Just a few words to say she loved him, that she must go; no more. He read it five or six times a day. She never mentioned his promise. Well, he had not raised a hand against al'Thor. He had been stunned to learn the man was a prisoner and had been for days when he heard of it. Somehow he must make her understand that. He had promised her not to raise his hand against the man, and he would not if he died for it, but he would not raise a hand to help him either. Egwene had to understand that. Light, she had to.

Sweat trickled down his face, and he wiped his eyes with his sleeve. Egwene he could do nothing about yet except pray. He could about Min. Somehow he had to. She did not deserve to be carried to the Tower a prisoner; he would not believe it. If the Warders would only slacken the guard on her, he could. . . . Suddenly Gawyn became aware of a horse galloping back down the road toward the wagons through sheets of dust, seemingly with no rider. “Jisao,” he ordered, “tell the wagon drivers to halt. Hal, tell Rajar to ready the Younglings.” Without a word they wheeled their horses and galloped. Gawyn waited.

That was Benji Dalfor’s steel-dust gelding, and as it came closer, Gawyn could see Benji doubled over and clinging to the gelding’s mane. The horse almost went past before Gawyn could seize the reins.

Benji turned his head without straightening, peered at Gawyn with glazed eyes. There was blood around his mouth, and he had one arm tight against his middle as if trying to hold himself together. “Aiel,” he mumbled. “Thousands. All sides, I think.” Suddenly he smiled. “Cold today, isn’t—” Blood gushed out of his mouth, and he toppled to the road, staring unblinking at the sun.

Gawyn spun his stallion around, galloping toward the wagons. There would be time for Benji later, if any of them were alive.

Galina rode to meet him, linen dustcloak flaring behind her, dark eyes blazing fury in that serene face. She had been furious constantly since the day after al’Thor tried to escape. “Who do you think you are, ordering the wagons stopped?” she demanded.

“There are thousands of Aiel closing on us, Aes Sedai.” He managed to keep his tone polite. The wagons were stopped at least, and the Younglings forming up, but wagon drivers fingered their reins impatiently, servants peered about fanning themselves, Aes Sedai chatted with Warders.

Galina’s lips writhed contemptuously. “You fool. No doubt those are the Shaido. Sevanna said she would give us an escort. But if you doubt, take your Younglings and see for yourself. These wagons will keep moving toward Tar Valon. It is time you learned that I give the orders here, not—”

“And if they are not your tame Aiel?” This was not the first time in the last few days that she had suggested he lead a scout himself; he suspected if he did, he would find Aiel, and not tame. “Whoever they are, they’ve killed one of my men." At least one; there were still six scouts out. "Maybe you should consider the possibility these are al'Thor's Aiel, come to rescue him. It will be too late when they start spitting us."

It was only then that he realized he was shouting, but Galina's anger actually faded. She looked up the road to where Benji lay, then nodded slowly. "Perhaps it would not be unwise to be cautious this once."

Rand labored for breath; the air inside the chest felt thick and hot. Luckily he could not smell it any longer. They sluiced him off with a bucket of water each night, but that was hardly a bath, and for a time after they closed the lid on him each morning and latched it, the stench added by yet another day exposed to the full blast of the sun assaulted his nose. Holding the Void was an effort. He was a mass of stripes; not an inch of him from shoulders to knees but burned even before sweat touched it, and those ten thousand flames flickered on the borders of emptiness, trying to consume it. The half-healed wound in his side throbbed in the distance, but the emptiness around him quivered with every throb. Alanna. He could feel Alanna. Close. No. He could not waste time thinking about her; even if she had followed, six Aes Sedai would not be able to free him. If they did not decide to join Galina. No trust. Never again trust for any Aes Sedai. Maybe he was imagining it anyway. Sometimes he did imagine things in here, cool breezes, walking. Sometimes he lost thought of anything else and hallucinated about walking free. Just walking. Hours lost in what was important. He labored for breath, and he felt his way across the ice-slick barrier that divided him from the Source. Again and again, fumbling to those six soft points. Soft. He could not stop. The fumbling was important.

Dark, Lews Therin moaned in the depths of his head. *No more dark. No more*. Over and over again. Not too badly, though. Rand just ignored him this time.

Suddenly he gasped; the chest was moving, grating loudly along the wagon bed. Was it night already? Welted flesh flinched involuntarily. There would be another beating before he was fed and doused with water and trussed like a goose to sleep however he could. But he would be out of the box. The darkness around him was incomplete, a deep dark gray. The tiny crack around the lid let in the smallest amount of light, though he could not see with his head jammed between his knees, and his eyes took as long each day to see anything but blackness as his nose did to grow deadened. Even so, it must be night.

He could not help groaning as the chest tilted; there was no room for him to slide, but he shifted, putting new strains on muscles sore beyond sore. His tiny prison thumped to the ground hard. The lid would open soon. How many days in the broiling sun? How many nights? He had lost count. Which one would it be this time? Faces spun through his head. He had marked down every woman when she took her turn at him. They were a jumble now; remembering which came where or when seemed beyond him. But he knew that Galina and Erian and Katerine had beaten him most often, the only ones to do so more than once. Those faces glowed in his mind with a feral light. How often did they want to hear him scream?

Abruptly it came to him that the chest should have been opened by now. They intended to leave him in here all night, and then there would be tomorrow's sun, and—Muscles too bruised and sore to move managed a frantic heave. "Let me out!" he shouted hoarsely. Fingers scrabbled painfully behind his back, futilely. "Let me out!" he screamed. He thought he heard a woman laugh.

For a time he wept, but then tears dried up in rage like a furnace. *Help me*, he snarled at Lews Therin.

Help me, the man groaned. *The Light help me*.

Muttering darkly, Rand returned to feeling blindly across that smooth plain to the six soft points. Sooner or later, they would let him out. Sooner or later, they would slacken their guard. And when they did. . . . He did not even know it when he began a rasping laugh.

Crawling up the gentle slope on his belly, Perrin peered over the crest into a scene from the Dark One's dreams. The wolves had given him some notion of what to expect, but notions paled beside reality. Perhaps a mile from where he lay beneath the midday sun, a huge milling mass of Shaido completely surrounded what seemed to be a ring of wagons and men centered on a small clump of trees not far from the road. A number of the wagons were bonfires, flames dancing. Balls of fire, small as a fist and large as boulders, hurtled into the Aiel, gouts of fire flared, turning a dozen at a time to torches; lightning fell from a cloudless sky, hurling earth and *cadin'sor*-clad figures into the air. But silver flashes of lightning struck at the wagons, too, and fire leaped from the Aiel. Much of that fire suddenly died or exploded short of any target, many of the lightning bolts stopped abruptly, but if the battle seemed slightly in favor of the Aes Sedai, the sheer number of Shaido had to prove overwhelming eventually.

“There must be two or three hundred women channeling down there, if not more.” Kiruna, lying beside him, sounded impressed. Sorilea, beyond the Green sister, certainly looked impressed. The Wise One smelled concerned; not afraid, but troubled. “I have never seen so many weaves at once,” the Aes Sedai went on. “I think there are at least thirty sisters in the camp. You have brought us to a boiling cauldron, young Aybara.”

“Forty thousand Shaido,” Rhuarc muttered grimly on Perrin’s other side. He even smelled grim. “Forty thousand at the least, and small satisfaction to know why they did not send more south.”

“The Lord Dragon is down there?” Dobraine asked, looking across Rhuarc. Perrin nodded. “And you mean to go in there and bring him out?” Perrin nodded again, and Dobraine sighed. He smelled resigned, not afraid. “We will go in, Lord Aybara, but I do not believe we will come out.” This time Rhuarc nodded.

Kiruna looked at the men. “You do realize there are not enough of us. Nine. Even if your Wise Ones can actually channel to any effect, we are not enough to match that.” Sorilea snorted loudly, but Kiruna kept her eyes where they were.

“Then turn around and ride south,” Perrin told her. “I’ll not let Elaida have Rand.”

“Good,” Kiruna replied, smiling. “Because I will not either.” He wished her smile did not make his skin crawl. Of course, had she seen the malevolent look Sorilea directed at the back of her head, her skin might have crawled too.

Perrin signaled to those at the bottom of the ridge, and Sorilea and the Green slid down until they could straighten, then hurried in opposite directions.

It was not much of a plan that they had. It boiled down to reaching Rand somehow, freeing him somehow, then hoping he was not injured too badly to make a gateway for as many as could to escape with him before either the Shaido or the camp’s Aes Sedai managed to kill them. Minor problems, no doubt, for a hero in a story or a gleeman’s tale, but Perrin wished there had been time for some sort of real planning, not just what he and Dobraine and Rhuarc had hammered out with the clan chief running as fast as he could between their horses. Time was one of many things they did not have, though. No telling if the Tower Aes Sedai would be able to hold off the Shaido for even another hour.

First to move were the Two Rivers men and the Winged Guards, divided into two companies, one surrounding Wise Ones afoot and the other mounted Aes Sedai and Warders. To left and right they crossed the ridge. Dannil had let them bring out the Red Eagle again, in addition to the Red Wolfhead. Rhuarc did not even glance toward where Amys walked not far from Kiruna's dark gelding, but Perrin heard him murmur, "May we see the sun rise together, shade of my heart."

At the end, the Mayeners and Two Rivers men were to cover the Wise Ones and Aes Sedai in retreat, or maybe it would be the other way around. In either case, Bera and Kiruna did not seem to like the plan; they very much wanted to be where Rand was.

"Are you sure you will not ride, Lord Aybara?" Dobraine asked from his saddle; to him, the notion of fighting on foot was anathema.

Perrin patted the axe hanging at his hip. "This is not much use from horseback." It was, in truth, but he did not want to ride Stepper or Stayer into what lay ahead. Men could choose whether they threw themselves into the midst of steel and death; he chose for his horses, and today he chose no. "Maybe you'll lend me a stirrup when the time comes." Dobraine blinked—Cairhienin made little use of foot soldiers—but he seemed to understand, and nodded.

"It is time for the pipers to play the dance," Rhuarc said, lifting his black veil, though today there would be no pipers playing, which some of the Aiel did not like. Many of the Maidens did not like the required strips of red cloth tied around their arms, to distinguish them from Shaido Maidens for the wetlanders; they seemed to think anyone should know at a glance.

Black-veiled Maidens and *siswai'aman* began trotting up the slope in a thick column, and Perrin walked with Dobraine to where Loial already stood at the head of the Cairhienin, gripping his axe in both hands and ears laid back. Aram was there, too, afoot and his sword bare; the former Tinker wore a dark smile of anticipation. Dobraine waved his arm for the advance, behind Rand's twin banners, and saddles creaked as a small forest of five hundred lances climbed beside the Aiel.

Nothing had changed in the battle, which surprised Perrin until he realized only moments had passed since he last saw it. The time had seemed much longer. The great mass of Shaido still pressed inward; wagons still burned, perhaps more than before; lightning still struck from the sky, and fire leaped in balls and billows.

The Two Rivers Men were almost to their position, with the Mayeners and Aes Sedai and Wise Ones, moving almost unhurriedly across the rolling plain. Perrin would have held them farther back, to give them a better chance at escape when the time came for that, but Dannil kept insisting they had to close to at least three hundred paces for their bows to be effective, and Nurelle had been just as anxious not to hang back. Even the Aes Sedai, who Perrin was sure only had to be near enough to see clearly, had insisted. None of the Shaido had looked around yet. At least, none were pointing at the threat moving slowly toward their backs; none were wheeling about to face it. All seemed fixed on rushing at the circle of wagons, falling back before fire and lightning, then rushing in again. All it would take would be one looking behind, but the inferno ahead held them.

Eight hundred paces. Seven hundred. The Two Rivers men dismounted, taking bows in hand. Six hundred. Five. Four.

Dobraine drew his sword, raised it high. “The Lord Dragon, Taborwin and victory!” he shouted, and the shout came from five hundred throats as lances snapped down.

Perrin had just time to seize hold of Dobraine’s stirrup before the Cairhienin were thundering forward. Loial’s long legs matched the horses pace for pace. Loping along, letting the horse pull him in long leaping strides, Perrin sent his mind out. *Come*.

Ground covered with brown grass, seemingly empty, suddenly gave birth to a thousand wolves, lean brown plains wolves, and some of their darker, heavier forest cousins, running low to hurl themselves into the backs of the Shaido with snapping jaws just as the first long Two Rivers shafts rained out of the sky beyond them. A second flight already arched high. New lightnings fell with the arrows, new fires bloomed. Veiled Shaido turning to fight wolves had only moments to realize they were not the only threat before a solid spear of Aiel stabbed into them alongside a hammer of Cairhienin lancers.

Snatching his axe free, Perrin hacked down a Shaido in his way and leaped over the man as he fell. They had to reach Rand; everything rested on that. Beside him Loial’s great axe rose and fell and swung, carving a path. Aram seemed to dance with his sword, laughing as he cut down everyone in his way. There was no time to think of anyone else. Perrin worked his axe methodically; he was hewing wood, not flesh; he tried not to see the blood that spurted, even when crimson sprayed his face. He had to reach Rand. He was slashing a path through brambles.

All he focused on was the man, in front of him—he thought of them as men even when height said it might be a Maiden; he was not sure he could swing that red-dripping half-moon blade if he let himself think it was a woman he swung at—he focused, but other things drifted across his vision as he cut his way forward. A silvery lightning strike hurled *cadin’sor*clad figures into the air, some wearing the scarlet headband, some not. Another bolt threw Dobraine from his horse; the Cairhienin labored to his feet, laying about him with his sword. Fire enveloped a knot of Cairhienin and Aiel, men and horses turned to screaming torches, those who could still scream.

These things passed before his eyes, but he did not let himself see them. There were only the men before him, the brambles, to be cleared by his axe and Loial’s, and Aram’s sword. Then he saw something that pierced his concentration. A rearing horse, a toppling rider being pulled from his saddle as Aiel spears stabbed him. A rider in a red breastplate. And there was another of the Winged Guards, and a clump of them, thrusting their lances, with Nurelle’s plume waving above his helmet. A moment later he saw Kiruna, face serenely unconcerned, striding like a queen of battles along a path carved for her by three Warders and the fires that leaped from her own hands. And there was Bera, and farther over, Faeldrin and Masuri and. . . . What under the Light were they all doing here? What were any of them doing? They were supposed to be back with the Wise Ones!

From somewhere ahead came a hollow boom, like a thunderclap cutting through the din of screams and shouts. A moment later, a slash of light appeared not twenty paces from him, slicing through several men and a horse like a huge razor as it widened into a gateway. A black-coated man with a sword jumped out of it, and went down with a Shaido spear through his middle, but a moment later eight or nine more sprang through as the gateway vanished, forming a circle around the fallen man with their swords. With more than swords. Some of the Shaido who rushed at them fell to a blade, but more simply burst into flame. Heads exploded like melons dropped onto stone from a height. Maybe a hundred paces beyond them, Perrin thought he saw another circle of men in black coats, surrounded by fire and death, but he had no time to wonder. Shaido were closing around him, too.

Setting himself back-to-back with Loial and Aram, he slashed and hacked desperately. There was no going forward now. It was all he could do to remain standing where he was. Blood pounded in his ears, and he could hear himself gasping for breath. He could hear Loial, too, panting like a huge bellows. Perrin knocked aside a stabbing spear with his axe, slashed at another Aiel with the spike on the backswing, caught a spearhead with his hand, unmindful of the bloody gash it made, split a black-veiled face. He did not think they were going to last much longer. Every part of him centered on staying alive for one heartbeat more. Almost every part. One corner of his mind held an image of Faile, and the sad thought that he would not be able to apologize for not coming back to her.

Doubled painfully inside the chest, panting, Rand fumbled at the shield between him and the Source. Moaning floated across the Void, grim fury and burning fear slid along the edge of it; he was no longer altogether certain which was his and which Lews Therin's. Suddenly his breath froze. Six points, but one was hard now. Not soft; hard. And then a second. A third. Rasping laughter filled his ears; that was his, he realized after a moment. A fourth knot became hard. He waited, trying to stifle what sounded uncomfortably like deranged giggling. The last two points remained soft. Those muffled cackles died.

They will feel it, Lews Therin groaned desperately. *They will feel it and call the others back*.

Rand licked cracked lips with a tongue nearly as dry; all the moisture in him seemed to have gone into the sweat that slicked him and bit his welts. If he tried and failed, there would never be another chance. He could not wait. There might never be another chance anyway.

Cautiously, blindly, he felt at the four hard points. There was nothing there, any more than the shield itself was anything he could feel or see, but somehow he could feel *around* this nothingness, feel a shape to it. Like knots. There was always space between the cords in a knot, however tightly pulled, gaps finer than a hair, where only air could go. Slowly, ever so slowly, he fumbled into one of those gaps, squeezing through infinitesimal spaces between what seemed not to be there at all. Slowly. How long before the others returned? If they took it up again before he found a way through this tortuous labyrinth. . . . Slowly. And suddenly he could feel the Source, like brushing it with a fingernail; the bare edge of a fingernail. *Saidin* was still beyond him—the shield was still there—but he could feel hope welling in Lews Therin. Hope and trepidation. Two Aes Sedai were still holding their part of the barrier, still aware of what they held.

Rand could not have explained what he did next, though Lews Therin had explained how; explained between drifting off into his own mad fancies, between towering rages and wailing over his lost. Ilyena, between gibbering that he deserved to die and shouting that he would not let them sever him. It was as if he flexed what he had extended through the knot, flexed it as hard as he could. The knot resisted. It trembled. And then it burst. There were only five. The barrier thinned. He could feel it grow less. An invisible wall only five bricks thick now instead of six. The two Aes Sedai would have felt it, too, though they might not understand exactly what had happened, or how. Please, Light, not now. Not yet.

Quickly, almost frantically, he attacked the remaining knots in turn. A second went; the shield thinned. It was quicker now, quicker with each, as if he were learning the path through, though it was different each time. The third knot gone. And a third soft point appeared; maybe the Aes Sedai did not know what he was doing, but they would not simply sit while the shield grew less and less. Truly frantic, Rand hurled himself at the fourth knot. He had to unravel it before a fourth sister came into the shield; four might be able to hold it whatever he did. Almost weeping, he struggled through the complex windings, slipping between nothingness. Frenziedly, he flexed, bursting the knot. The shield remained, but held by only three now. If he could only move fast enough.

When he reached for *saidin*, the invisible barrier was still there, but it no longer seemed stone or brick. It gave as he pressed, bending under his pressure, bending, bending. Suddenly it tore apart before him like rotted cloth. The Power filled him, and as it did, he seized at those three soft points, crushing them ruthlessly in fists of Spirit. Aside from that, he still could only channel where he could see, and all he could see, dimly, was the inside of the chest, what he could glimpse of it with his head forced between his knees. Before he even finished with the fists of Spirit, he channeled Air. The chest exploded away from him with a loud boom.

Free, Lews Therin breathed, and it was an echo of Rand’s thought. *Free*. Or maybe the other way around.

They will pay, Lews Therin growled. *I am the Lord of the Morning*.

Rand knew he had to move even more quickly now, move quickly and violently, but at first he struggled to move at all. Muscles beaten twice a day for he did not know how long, crammed into a chest every day, those muscles screamed as he gritted his teeth and slowly pushed up to hands and knees. It was a distant screaming, someone else's body in pain, but he could not make that body move faster however strong *saidin* made him feel. Emptiness buffered emotion, but something close to panic tried to wriggle creepers into the Void.

He was in a large clump of scattered trees, with broad shafts of sunlight filtering through nearly leafless branches; he was shocked to realize it was still daylight, maybe even midday. He had to move; more Aes Sedai would be coming. Two lay on the ground near him, apparently unconscious, one with a nasty gash bleeding across her forehead. The third, an angular woman, was on her knees staring at nothing, clutching her head in both hands and screaming. She seemed untouched by all the splinters and pieces of the chest. He did not recognize any of them. An instant of regret that it was not Galina or Erian he had stilled—he was not sure he had intended to do that; Lews Therin had gone on at length about how he intended to sever every one of them who had imprisoned him; Rand hoped it had been his own idea, however hasty—an instant, and he saw another shape stretched out on the ground beneath bits of the chest. In rose-colored coat and breeches.

The angular woman did not look at him or stop shrieking even when he knocked her over against the low stone coping of a well as he crawled past. Desperately he wondered why no one came to her screams. Halfway to Min he became aware of lightning bolts lancing out of the sky and fireballs exploding overhead. He could smell wood burning, hear men shouting and screaming, the clash of metal, the cacophony of battle. He did not care if it was Tarmon Gai'don. If he had killed Min. . . . Gently he turned her over.

Big dark eyes stared up at him. "Rand," she breathed. "You're alive. I was afraid to look. There was an awful roar, and pieces of wood everywhere, and I recognized part of the chest, and . . ." Tears began spilling down her cheeks. "I thought they had. . . . I was afraid you were. . . ."Scrubbing at her face with bound hands, she drew a deep breath. Her ankles were bound too. "Will you untie me, sheepherder, and make one of your gateways away from here? Or don't bother with untying. Just toss me over your shoulder and go."

Deftly he wielded Fire, parting the cords that held her. "It isn't that simple, Min." He did not know this place at all; a gateway opened from here might go anywhere, if it opened at all. If he could open one at all. Pain and weariness shaved at the borders of the Void. He was not sure how much of the Power he could draw. Suddenly he realized he could feel *saidin* being channeled in every direction. Through the trees, beyond burning wagons, he could see Aiel fighting Warders and Gawyn's green-coated soldiers, being driven back by Aes Sedai fire and lightning, yet coming on again. Somehow Taim had found him and brought Asha'man soldiers and Aiel. "I cannot go just yet. I think some friends have come for me. Don't worry; I will protect you."

A jagged silver blaze split a tree on the edge of the copse, close enough to make Rand's hair stir. Min gave a start. "Friends," she muttered, rubbing her wrists.

He motioned her to stay where she was—except for that one errant bolt, the thicket appeared untouched—but when he shoved himself to his feet, she was right there, holding him up on one side. Staggering to the sparse tree line, he was grateful for her support, but he made himself straighten and stop leaning on her. How could she believe he would protect her if he needed her not to fall on his face? A hand on the shattered trunk of the lightning-struck tree helped. Tendrils of smoke rose from it, but it had not caught fire.

The wagons made a great ring around the trees. Some of the servants seemed to be trying to keep the horses together—the teams were all still harnessed—but most huddled wherever they could in hope of avoiding the fury falling from above. In truth, except for that one bolt, it all seemed aimed at the wagons and men fighting. Maybe at the Aes Sedai too. Each sat her horse a little way back from the whirl of spears and swords and flame, but not too far, sometimes standing in her stirrups for a better view.

Rand spotted Erian quickly, slender and dark-haired on a pale gray mare. Lews Therin snarled, and Rand struck almost without thinking. He felt the other man's disappointment as he did. Spirit to shield her, with the slight resistance that told of slicing through her connection of *saidar*, and even as that was tied, a club of Air to knock her unconscious from the saddle. If he decided to still her, he wanted her to know who was doing it and why. One of the Aes Sedai shouted for someone to tend Erian, but no one looked toward the trees. No one out there could feel *saidin*; they thought she had been felled by something from outside the wagons.

His eyes searched among the other mounted women, stopped on Katerine, wheeling her long-legged bay gelding back and forth, fire blazing wherever she looked among the Aiel. Spirit and Air, and she fell limply, one foot tangled in a stirrup.

Yes, Lews Therin laughed. *And now Galina. Her I want especially*.

Rand squeezed his eyes shut. What was he doing? It was Lews Therin who wanted those three so badly he could think of nothing else. Rand wanted to repay them for what they had done to him, but there was battle going on, men dying while he hunted for particular Aes Sedai. Maidens dying too, no doubt.

He took the next Aes Sedai, twenty paces to Katerine's left, with Spirit and Air, then moved to another tree and put Sarene Nemdahl on the ground, unconscious and shielded. Slowly he staggered along the edge of the thicket, striking like a cutpurse time and again. Min stopped trying to hold him up, though her hands hovered, ready to catch him.

"They're going to see us," she muttered. "One of them is going to look around and see us."

Galina, Lews Therin growled. *Where is she?*

Rand ignored him, and Min. Coiren fell, and two more whose names he did not know. He had to do what he could.

The Aes Sedai had no way of telling what was happening. Steadily along the ringwall of wagons, sisters toppled from their horses. Those still conscious spread themselves out more, trying to cover the whole perimeter, an air of anxiety suddenly in the way they handled their horses, the redoubled fury with which fire blazed into the Aiel and lightning struck from the sky. It had to be something from outside, but Aes Sedai fell, and they did not know how or why.

Their numbers dwindled, and the effects began to tell. Fewer lightning bolts fizzled abruptly in midair, and more struck among the Warders and soldiers. Fewer balls of fire suddenly vanished or exploded before reaching the wagons. Aiel began pressing through the gaps between wagons; wagons were heaved over. In moments there were black-veiled Aiel everywhere, and chaos. Rand stared in amazement.

Warders and green-coated soldiers fought in clumps against Aiel, and Aes Sedai surrounded themselves with rains of fire. But there were Aiel fighting Aiel as well; men with the scarlet *siswai'aman* headband and Maidens with red strips tied to their arms fighting Aiel without. And Cairhienin lancers in their bell-shaped helmets and Mayeners in red breastplates were suddenly among the wagons too, striking at Aiel as well as Warders. Had he finally gone mad? He was conscious of Min, pressed against his back and trembling. She was real. What he was seeing must be real.

A dozen or so Aielmen, each as tall as he or taller, started trotting toward him. They wore no red. He watched them curiously until, within a pace of him, one raised a reversed spear like a cudgel. Rand channeled, and fire seemed to shoot out of the dozen everywhere. Charred and twisted bodies tumbled at his feet.

Suddenly Gawyn was reining a bay stallion up not ten steps in front of him, sword in hand and twenty or more green-coated men riding at his heels. For a moment they stared at one another, and Rand prayed he would not have to harm Elayne's brother.

"Min," Gawyn grated, "I can take you out of here."

She peeked past Rand's shoulder to shake her head; she was holding on to him so tightly, he did not think he could have pried her loose had he wanted to. "I'm staying with him, Gawyn. Gawyn, Elayne loves him."

With the Power in him, Rand could see the man's knuckles go white on his sword hilt. "Jisao," he said in a flat voice. "Rally the Younglings. We are cutting a way out of here." If his voice had been flat before, now it went dead. "Al'Thor, one day I will see you die." Digging his heels in, he galloped away, he and all the others shouting "Younglings!" at the top of their lungs, and more men in green coats cutting a way to join them with every stride.

A man in a black coat darted in front of Rand, staring after Gawyn, and the ground erupted in a gout of fire and earth that toppled half a dozen horses as they reached the wagons. Rand saw Gawyn sway in the saddle in the instant before he beat the black-coated man to the ground with a mace of Air. He did not know the hard-faced young man who snarled at him, but the fellow wore both the sword and Dragon on his high collar, and *saidin* filled him.

In an instant, it seemed, Taim was there, blue-and-gold Dragons twined around the sleeves of his black coat, staring down at the fellow. His collar bore neither pin. “You would not strike at the Dragon Reborn, Gedwyn,” Taim said, at once soft and steely, and the hard-faced man scrambled to his feet, saluting with fist to heart.

Rand looked toward where Gawyn had been, but all he could see was a large group of men with a White Boar banner slashing their way deeper into the surrounding Aiel, with more green-coated men fighting to join them.

Taim turned to Rand, that almost-smile on his lips. “Under the circumstances, I trust you will not hold it against me, violating your command about confronting Aes Sedai. I had reason to visit you in Cairhien, and. . . .”He shrugged. “You look the worse for wear. You will allow me to—” The slight twist of his lips flattened as Rand stepped back from his outstretched hand, pulling Min with him. She hung on tighter than ever.

Lews Therin had begun ranting about killing as he always did when Taim appeared, rambling madly about the Forsaken and killing everybody, but Rand stopped listening, walled the man off to the buzzing of a fly. It was a trick he had learned inside the chest, when there was nothing to do but feel at the shield and listen to a voice in his head that was insane more often than not. Yet even without Lews Therin, he did not want to be Healed by the man. He thought if Taim ever touched him with the Power, however innocently, he would kill him.

“As you wish,” the hawk-nosed man said wryly. “I have the campsite secured, I believe.”

That seemed true enough. Bodies littered the ground, but in only a few places did men still fight inside the ring of wagons. A dome of Air suddenly covered the entire camp, smoke from the fires sliding up to a hole left in the top. It was not one solid weave of *saidin*; Rand could see where individual weaves butted one against another to make it. He thought there might have been as many as two hundred black-coated men beneath the dome. A hail of lightning and fire struck that barrier and exploded harmlessly. The sky itself seemed to crackle and burn; the constant roar of it filled the air. Maidens with strips of red dangling from their arms and *siswai’aman* stood along the wall they could not see, mingled with Mayeners and Cairhienin, many of them afoot as well. On the other side, a solid mass of Shaido stared at the invisible barricade keeping them from their enemies, sometimes stabbing at it with spears or hurling themselves against it bodily. Spears stopped short, and bodies bounced back.

Inside the dome, the last fighting died even as Rand looked. Under the eyes of a scant handful of red-marked men and Maidens, disarmed Shaido were removing their garments with stolid faces; taken in battle, they would wear *gai'shain* white for a year and a day even if the Shaido somehow succeeded in overrunning the camp. Cairhienin and Mayeners provided guards for a large knot of angry Warders and Younglings mixed with fearful servants, almost as many guards as prisoners. Nearly a dozen Aes Sedai were being shielded by an equal number of Asha'man wearing sword and Dragon. The Aes Sedai looked sick and frightened. Rand recognized three, though Nesune was the only one he could name. He did not recognize any of their Asha'man jailers. A number of the women Rand had shielded and rendered unconscious were laid out with those prisoners, some of them beginning to stir, while black-coated soldiers and Dedicated with the silver sword on their collars were using *saidin* to drag others across the ground and lay them in that row. Some of them brought the two unconscious Aes Sedai and the angular woman out of the copse; she was still screaming. When they were added to the cluster, some of the Aes Sedai abruptly turned away and vomited.

There were other Aes Sedai present, surrounded by Warders and watched by black-coated men though not shielded, watching the Asha'man as uneasily as did the women under guard. They stared at Rand, too, and plainly would have come to him if not for the Asha'man. Rand glared back. Alanna was there; he had not been hallucinating. He did not recognize all of her companions, but enough. They were nine altogether. Nine. Sudden rage stormed outside the Void, and Lews Therin's fly-buzz grew louder.

At that point it seemed no surprise at all to see Perrin stagger up, face and beard bloody, followed by a limping Loial with a huge axe, and a bright-eyed fellow who looked a Tinker in a red-striped coat, except for the sword he carried, blade crimson from end to end. Rand almost looked around to see whether Mat was also there somehow. He did see Dobraine, on foot with a sword in one hand and the staff of Rand's crimson banner in the other. Nandera joined Perrin, letting her veil drop, and another Maiden Rand almost did not recognize at first. It was good to see Sulin in *cadin'sor* once more.

“Rand,” Perrin gasped, “thank the Light you’re still alive. We meant for you to make a gateway for us to escape, but it’s all fallen to pieces. Rhuarc and most of the Aiel are still out among the Shaido, most of the Mayeners and Cairhienin too, and I don’t know what has happened to the Two Rivers folk, or the Wise Ones. The Aes Sedai were supposed to stay with them, but. . . .” Putting the head of his axe on the ground, he leaned on the shaft panting; he looked as if he might fall without the support.

Along the barrier, mounted men were appearing, as well as Aielmen in red headbands and Maidens with strips of red dangling from their arms. The barrier held them out as well. Wherever they appeared, Shaido swarmed over them, swallowed them up.

“Let the dome go,” Rand ordered. Perrin sighed in relief, of all things. Had he thought Rand would let his own people be slaughtered? But Loial sighed too. Light, what did they think of him? Min began rubbing his back, murmuring under her breath in a soothing tone. For some reason, Perrin gave her a very surprised look.

Taim might have been surprised, but he was certainly not relieved. “My Lord Dragon,” he said in a tight voice, “I would say there are still several hundred Shaido women out there, some not insignificant it seems. And that is not to mention some thousands of Shaido with spears. Unless you truly want to find out whether you are immortal, I suggest waiting a few hours until we know this place well enough to make gateways with some certainty where they will come out, then leaving. There are casualties in battle. I lost several soldiers today, nine men who will be harder to replace than any number of renegade Aiel. Whoever dies out there, dies for the Dragon Reborn.” If he had been paying any attention to Nandera or Sulin, he might have moderated his tone and chosen his words more carefully. Handtalk flashed between them; they looked ready to strike him down on the spot.

Perrin pushed himself upright, yellow eyes fixed on Rand, firm and anxious at the same time. “Rand, even if Dannil and the Wise Ones held back the way they were supposed to, they’ll not leave as long as they see this.” He gestured to the dome overhead, where fire and lightning made a continuous sheet of light. “If we sit here for hours, the Shaido will turn on them sooner or later, if they haven’t already. Light, Rand! Dannil and Ban and Wil and Tell . . . Amys is out there, and Sorilea, and . . . ! Burn you, Rand, more have died for you already than you know!” Perrin drew a deep breath. “At least let me out. If I can make it that far, I can let them know that you’re alive and they can retreat before they get killed.”

“Two of us can slip out,” Loial said quietly, hefting that huge axe. “Two will stand a better chance.” The Tinker only smiled, but almost eagerly.

“I will have a place opened in the barrier,” Taim began, but Rand broke in on him sharply.

“No!” Not for the Two Rivers folk. He could not appear to worry over them any more than over the Wise Ones. Truth to tell, he had to seem to worry less. Amys was out there? The Wise Ones never took part in battle; they walked untouched through battles and blood feuds. They had ripped apart custom if not law to come for him. He would as soon let Perrin go back into that maelstrom as abandon them. But it could not be for the Wise Ones or the Two Rivers folk. “Sevanna wants my head, Taim. Apparently she thought she could take it today.” The emotionless quality the Void gave to his voice, was appropriate. It did seem to worry Min, though; she was stroking his back as though to calm him. “I mean to let her know her mistake. I told you to make weapons, Taim. Show me just how deadly they are. Disperse the Shaido. Break them.”

“As you command.” If Taim had been stiff before, he was stone now.

“Put my standard up where they can see it,” Rand commanded. At least that would tell everyone outside who held the camp. Maybe the Wise Ones and Two Rivers folk would pull back when they saw that.

Loial’s ears wriggled uneasily, and Perrin grabbed Rand’s arm as Taim walked away. “I saw what they do, Rand. It’s. . . .” With his bloody face and bloody axe, he still sounded disgusted.

“What would you have me do?” Rand demanded. “What else can I do?”

Perrins’s hand fell away, and he sighed. “I do not know. I do not have to like it, though.”

“Grady, raise the Banner of Light!” Taim called, and the Power made his voice boom. On flows of Air, Jur Grady lifted the crimson banner out of a surprised Dobraine’s hand and raised it all the way through the hole in the top of the dome. Fire burst around it and lightning flashed as brilliant red lifted amid the smoke billowing up from the burning wagons. Rand recognized a number of the men in black coats, but he knew only a few names aside from Jur’s. Damer and Fedwin and Eben, Jahar and Torval; of those, only Torval wore the Dragon on his collar.

“Asha’man, form line of battle!” Taim boomed.

Black-coated men rushed to place themselves between the barrier and everyone else, all of them except Jur and those watching Aes Sedai. Except for Nesune, who peered intently at everything, the Tower lot had sunk listlessly to their knees, not even looking at the men who had them shielded, and even Nesune still looked on the point of sicking up. The Salidar group stared coldly at the Asha’man guarding them for the most part, though now and then they turned those icy eyes on Rand. Alanna stared only at Rand. His skin was tingled faintly, he realized; for him to feel it at that distance, all nine must be embracing *saidar*. He hoped they had enough sense not to channel; the stony men facing them held *saidin* to bursting, and they looked as tense as the Warders fingering their swords.

“Asha’man, raise the barricade two spans!” At Taim’s command, the edges of the dome rose all around. Surprised Shaido who had been pushing at what they could not see stumbled forward. They recovered instantly, a black-veiled mass surging forward, but they had time for only a stride before Taim’s next shout. “Asha’man, kill!”

The front rank of the Shaido exploded. There was no other way to put it. *Cadin’sor*-clad shapes burst apart in sprays of blood and flesh. Flows of *saidin* reached through that thick mist, darting from figure to figure in the blink of an eye, and the next row of Shaido died, then the next, and the next, as though they were running into an enormous meat grinder. Staring at the slaughter, Rand swallowed. Perrin bent over to empty his stomach, and Rand understood fully. Another rank died. Nandera put a hand over her eyes, and Sulin turned her back. The bloody ruins of human beings began to make a wall.

No one could stand up to that. Between one blast of death and the next, the Shaido in front were suddenly struggling the other way, forcing themselves back into the mass fighting to get forward. The milling tangle itself began to explode, and then all of them were falling back. No, running. The rain of fire and lightning against the dome faltered.

“Asha’man,” Taim’s voice rang out, “rolling ring of Earth and Fire!”

Beneath the feet of the Shaido nearest the wagons the ground suddenly erupted in fountains of flame and dirt, hurling men in every direction. While bodies still hung in the air, more gouts of flame roared from the ground, and more, in an expanding ring all the way around the wagons, pursuing the Shaido for fifty paces, a hundred, two hundred. There was nothing but panic and death out there now. Spears and bucklers were cast aside. The dome above stood clear except for the smoke rising from the burning wagons.

“Stop!” The roar of explosions swallowed Rand’s shout as well as it did men’s screams. He wove the flows Taim had used. “Stop it, Taim!” His voice crashed like thunder over everything.

One more ring of eruptions, and Taim called, “Asha’man, rest!”

For a moment a deafening silence seemed to fill the air. Rand’s ears rang. Then he could hear screams and moans. Wounded heaved among the piles of dead. And beyond them the Shaido ran, leaving behind scattered clusters of *siswai’aman* and Maidens with red armcloths, Cairhienin and Mayeners, some still on their horses. Almost hesitantly those began to move toward the wagons, some of the Aiel lowering their veils. With Power enhancing his eyes, he could make out Rhuarc, limping, one arm dangling, but on his feet. And well beyond him, a large group of women in dark bulky skirts and pale blouses, with an escort of men in Two Rivers coats carrying longbows. They were too far for him to make out faces, but from the way the Two Rivers men at least were staring at the fleeing Shaido, they were as stunned as anyone else.

A great sense of relief welled up inside Rand, though not enough to still the distant churning in his stomach. Min had her face pressed against his shirt; she was weeping. He smoothed her hair. “Asha’man”—he had never been more glad of the Void draining emotion from his voice—“you have done well. I congratulate you, Taim.” He turned away so he would not have to see the carnage anymore, hardly hearing the cheers of “Lord Dragon!” and “Asha’man!” that thundered from the black-coated men.

When he turned, he found Aes Sedai. Merana was all the way at the back, but Alanna stood almost face-to-face with him beside two Aes Sedai he did not recognize.

“You have done well,” the square-faced one of the pair said. A farmer, with an ageless face and eyes just holding on to serenity, ignoring the Asha’man around her. Obviously ignoring them. “I am Bera Harkin, and this is Kiruna Nachiman. We came to rescue you—with Alanna’s aid”—that was an obvious addition, at Alanna’s sudden frown—“though it seems you had small need of us. Still, intentions do count, and—”

“Your place is with them,” Rand said, pointing to the Aes Sedai shielded and under guard. Twenty-three, he saw, and Galina not among them. The buzzing of Lews Therin swelled, but he refused to listen. Now was no time for insane rages.

Kiruna drew herself up proudly. Whatever she was, she was certainly no farmer. “You forget who we are. They may have mistreated you, but we—”

“I forget nothing, Aes Sedai,” Rand said coldly. “I said six could come, but I count nine. I said you would be on an equal footing with the Tower emissaries, and for bringing nine, you will be. They are on their knees, Aes Sedai. Kneel!”

Coldly serene faces stared back at him. He felt Asha’man readying shields of Spirit. Defiance grew on Kiruna’s face, on Bera’s, on others. Two dozen black-coated men made a ring around Rand and the Aes Sedai.

Taim appeared as close to a smile as Rand had ever seen him. “Kneel and swear to the Lord Dragon,” he said softly, “or you will be knelt.”

As stories do, the tale spread, across Cairhien and north and south, by merchant train and peddler and simple traveler gossiping at an inn. As stories do, the tale changed with every telling. The Aiel had turned on the Dragon Reborn and killed him, at Dumai’s Wells or elsewhere. No, the Aes Sedai had saved Rand al’Thor. It was Aes Sedai who had killed him—no, gentled him—no, carried him to Tar Valon where he languished in a dungeon beneath the White Tower. Or else where the Amyrlin Seat herself knelt to him. Unusually for stories, it was something very close to truth that was most often believed.

On a day of fire and blood, a tattered banner waved above Dumai’s Wells, bearing the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai.

On a day of fire and blood and the One Power, as prophecy had suggested, the unstained tower, broken, bent knee to the forgotten sign.

The first nine Aes Sedai swore fealty to the Dragon Reborn, and the world was changed forever.

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EPILOGUE

The Answer

The man only paused long enough to rest his hand on the door of the sedan chair, and was away as soon as Falion took the note from his fingers. Her rap had the two bearers moving almost before the fellow in Tarasin Palace livery stepped back into the crowd of the square.

There was only one word on the small square of paper. *Gone*. She crumpled it in her fist. Somehow they had slipped out again without her people inside seeing. Months of futile search had convinced her there was no cache of *angreal*, whatever Moghedien believed. She had even considered putting a Wise Woman or two to the question; one of them might know its whereabouts, if it existed. And horses might fly. All that kept her here in this wretched city was the simple fact that when one of the Chosen gave a command, you obeyed until it was changed. Anything else was a short road to a painful death. Yet if Elayne and Nynaeve were here. . . . They had ruined everything in Tanchico. Whether or not they really were full sisters—impossible as that seemed—Falion would not take their presence as coincidence. Maybe there was a cache. For the first time she was glad that Moghedien had ignored her since giving her her orders so many months ago in Amadicia. What had felt like abandonment might yet be a chance for advancement in the Chosen's eyes. That pair might yet lead her to the cache, and if not, if there was no cache. . . . Moghedien had seemed to have interest in Elayne and Nynaeve themselves. Delivering them would certainly be better than nonexistent *angreal*.

Leaning back, she let the sway of the chair soothe her. She did hate this city—she had come here as a runaway, when she was a novice—but perhaps this visit would end pleasantly after all.

Sitting in his study, Herid was peering into his pipe and wondering whether he had the means of lighting it at hand when the *gholam* squeezed under the door. Of course, even if Fel had been paying attention, he would not have believed, and once the *gholam* was inside the room, few men would have stood any chance.

When Idrien came to Fel's study later, she stared at what was piled none too neatly on the floor beside the table. It took her a moment to realize what it was, and when she did, she fainted before she could get a scream out. However many times she heard of someone torn limb from limb, she had never seen it before.

The rider turned his horse at the top of the hill for a last look back at Ebou Dar, gleaming white in the sun. A good city for looting, and from what he had learned of the local people, they would resist, so the Blood would allow looting. They would resist, but he hoped the other eyes were bringing back reports of disunity such as he had seen. Resistance would not last long, where a so-called queen ruled a tiny patch of ground, and that combined the best possibilities. Wheeling his mount, he rode west. Who knew? Perhaps that fellow's comment had been an omen. Perhaps the Return would come soon, and the Daughter of the Nine Moons with it. Surely that would be the greatest omen of victory.

Lying on her back in the night, Moghedien stared at the roof of the tiny tent she was allowed to herself as one of the Amyrlin's servants. From time to time her teeth ground, but as soon as she realized it, she stilled them again, very conscious of the *a'dam* necklace tight around her neck. This Egwene al'Vere was harder than Elayne or Nynaeve had been; she tolerated less and demanded more. And when she passed the bracelet to Siuan or Leane, especially Siuan. . . . Moghedien shivered. That must be what it would be like if Birgitte could wear the bracelet.

The tent flap moved aside, admitting just enough moonlight for her to make out a woman ducking in.

"Who are you?" Moghedien demanded roughly. When they sent for her in the night, whoever came always brought a lantern.

"Call me Aran'gar, Moghedien," an amused voice said, and a small light bloomed inside the tent.

Her own name clove Moghedien's tongue to the roof of her mouth; that name meant death here. She was struggling to speak, to say her name was Marigan, when suddenly she became truly aware of the light. A small glowing white ball, pale, hanging in the air near her head. With the *a'dam* on her, she could not do more than think of *saidar* without permission, but she could still feel it channeled, see the webs woven. This time she felt nothing, saw nothing. Just a tiny ball of pure light.

She stared at the woman who had called herself Aran'gar, recognizing her now. Halima, she thought; secretary to one of the Sitters, she believed. But a woman certainly, if one who looked as though she had been designed by a man. A woman. But that ball of light had to be *saidin*! "Who are you?" Her voice shook slightly, and she was surprised it was so steady.

The woman smiled at her—a very amused smile—as she settled beside the pallet. "I told you, Moghedien. My name is Aran'gar. You will learn that name in the future, if you are lucky. Now, listen to me carefully, ask no more questions. I will tell you what you need to know. In a moment I will remove your pretty necklace. When I do, you will vanish as quickly and silently as Logain did. If you do not, you will die here. And that will be a shame, because you are summoned to Shayol Ghul this very night."

Moghedien licked her lips. Summoned to Shayol Ghul. That could mean eternity in the Pit of Doom, or immortality ruling the world, or anything in between. Little chance it meant being named Nae'blis, not if the Great Lord knew enough of how she had spent the past months to send someone to free her. Yet it was a summons she could not refuse. And it meant an end to the *a'dam* at last. "Yes. Remove it. I will go immediately." There was no point to delaying anyway; she was stronger than any woman in the camp, but she did not intend to give a circle of thirteen a chance at her.

"I thought you would see it so," Halima—or Aran'gar—chuckled richly. She touched the necklace, flinching slightly, and Moghedien wondered again about a woman who apparently channeled *saidin* and was hurt, however faintly, by touching what should only hurt a man who could channel. Then the necklace was off, being slipped hastily into the woman's pouch. "Go, Moghedien. Go, now."

When Egwene reached the tent and put her head and lantern in, she found only disturbed blankets. She withdrew slowly.

"Mother," Chesa fussed behind her, "you should not be out in the night air. Night air is bad air. If you wanted Marigan, I could have fetched her."

Egwene looked around. She had felt the necklace come off, and felt the flash of pain that meant a man who could channel had brushed the link.

Most people were already asleep, but a few still sat outside their tents around low fires, and some not far. It might be possible to find out which man had come to “Marigan’s” tent.

“I think she has run away, Chesa,” she said. Chesa’s angry mutterings about women who deserted their mistresses followed her back to her own tent. It could not have been Logain, could it? He would not have come back, could not have known. Could he?

Demandred knelt in the Pit of Doom, and for once he did not care that Shaidar Haran watched his trembling with that eyeless, impassive gaze. “Have I not done well, Great Lord?”

The Great Lord’s laughter filled Demandred’s head.

* * *

The unstained tower breaks and bends knee to the forgotten sign.
The seas rage, and stormclouds gather unseen.
Beyond the horizon, hidden fires swell, and serpents nestle in the bosom.
What was exalted is cast down; what was cast down is raised up.
Order burns to clear his path.

—*The Prophecies of the Dragon*
translation by Jeorad Manyard
Governor of the Province of Andor for
the High King, Artur Paendrag Tanreall

The End
of the Sixth Book of
The Wheel of Time

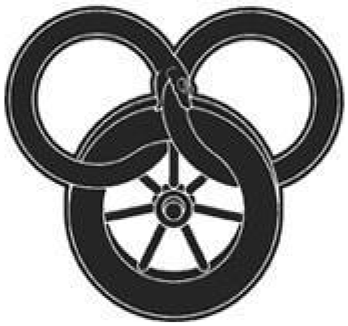

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Accepted: Young women in training to be Aes Sedai who have reached a certain level of power and passed certain tests. It normally takes five to ten years to be raised from novice to Accepted. Somewhat less confined by rules than novices, they are allowed to choose their own areas of study, within limits. Accepted wear a Great Serpent ring on the third finger of the left hand. When an Accepted is raised Aes Sedai, she chooses her Ajah, gains the right to wear the shawl, and may wear the ring on any finger or not at all if circumstances warrant. *See also* Aes Sedai.

a'dam (AYE-dam): A device for controlling a woman who can channel, usable only by either a woman who can channel or a woman who can be taught to channel, and having no effect on any woman who cannot channel. It creates a link between the two women. The Seanchan version consists of a collar and bracelet linked by a leash, all of silvery metal. If a man who can channel is linked to a woman by an *a'dam*, the likely result is death for both. Simply touching an *a'dam* can result in pain for a man who can channel when the *a'dam* is being worn by a woman who can channel. *See also* linking; Seanchan.

Aes Sedai (EYEZ seh-DEYE): Wielders of the One Power. Since the Breaking of the World ended, all are women. Respected and honored by many, yet widely distrusted and feared, even hated. Also widely blamed for the Breaking of the World, and thought to meddle in the affairs of nations. At the same time, few rulers are without an Aes Sedai advisor, even where such a connection must be secret. Apparently after some years of channeling the One Power, Aes Sedai take on an ageless quality, so that one old enough to be a grandmother may show no signs of age except perhaps a few gray hairs. *See also* Ajah; Amyrlin Seat; Breaking of the World.

Age of Legends: Age ended by the War of the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. A time when Aes Sedai performed wonders now only dreamed of. *See also* Breaking of the World; War of the Shadow.

Aiel (eye-EEL): The people of the Aiel Waste. Fierce and hardy. They veil their faces before they kill. Deadly warriors with weapons or bare hands, they will not touch a sword even on the point of death, nor ride a horse unless pressed. Aiel call battle "the dance," and "the dance of spears." They are divided into twelve clans: the Chareen, the Codarra, the Daryne, the Goshien, the Miagoma, the Nakai, the Reyn, the Shaarad, the Shaido, the Shiande, the Taardad, and the Tomanelle. Each clan is divided into septs. Sometimes they speak of a thirteenth clan, the Clan That Is Not, the Jenn, who were the builders of Rhuidean. All know that Aiel supposedly once failed the Aes Sedai and were banished to the Aiel Waste for that sin, and that they will be destroyed if they ever fail the Aes Sedai again. *See also* Aiel warrior societies; Aiel Waste; *gai'shain*; bleakness; Rhuidean.

Aiel War (976–78 NE): When King Laman (LAY-mahn) of Cairhien cut down *Avendoraldera*, four clans of the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World. They looted and burned the capital city of Cairhien as well as many other cities and towns, and the conflict extended into Andor and Tear. By the conventional view, the Aiel were finally defeated at the Battle of the Shining Walls, before Tar Valon; in fact, Laman was killed in that battle, and having done what they came for, the Aiel re-crossed the Spine. *See also Avendoraldera*; Cairhien; Spine of the World.

Aiel warrior societies: Aiel warriors are all members of one of twelve societies. These are Black Eyes (*Seia Doon*), Brothers of the Eagle (*Far Aldazar Din*), Dawn Runners (*Rahien Sorei*), Knife Hands (*Sovin Nai*), Maidens of the Spear (*Far Dareis Mai*), Mountain Dancers (*Hama N'dore*), Night Spears (*Cor Darei*), Red Shields (*Aethan Dor*), Stone Dogs (*Shae'en M'taal*), Thunder Walkers (*Sha'mad Conde*), True Bloods (*Tain Shari*), and Water Seekers (*Duadhe Mahdi'in*). Each has its own customs, and sometimes specific duties. For example, Red Shields act as police, and Stone Dogs are often used as rear guards during retreats, while Maidens are often scouts. Aiel clans frequently raid and battle one another, but members of the same society will not fight each other even if their clans do so. Thus there are always lines of contact between the clans, even during open warfare. *See also* Aiel; Aiel Waste; *Far Dareis Mai.*

Aiel Waste: Harsh, rugged and all-but-waterless land east of the Spine of the World. Called the Three-fold Land by the Aiel. Few outsiders enter; the Aiel consider themselves at war with all other peoples and do not welcome strangers. Only peddlers, gleemen, and the Tuatha'an are allowed safe entry, although Aiel avoid all contact with the Tuatha'an, whom they call "the Lost Ones." No maps of the Waste itself are known to exist.

Ajah (AH-jah): Societies among the Aes Sedai, seven in number and designated by colors: Blue, Red, White, Green, Brown, Yellow and Gray. All Aes Sedai except the Amyrlin Seat belong to one. Each follows a specific philosophy of the use of the One Power and the purposes of the Aes Sedai. The Red Ajah bends its energies to finding men who can channel, and to gentling them. The Brown forsakes the mundane world and dedicates itself to seeking knowledge, while the White, largely eschewing both the world and the value of worldly knowledge, devotes itself to questions of philosophy and truth. The Green Ajah (called the Battle Ajah during the Trolloc Wars) holds itself ready for Tarmon Gai'don, the Yellow concentrates on the study of Healing, and Blue sisters involve themselves with causes and justice. The Gray are mediators, seeking harmony and consensus. A Black Ajah, dedicated to serving the Dark One, is officially and vehemently denied.

Altara (al-TAH-rah): A nation on the Sea of Storms, though in truth little unifies it except a name. The people of Altara think of themselves as inhabitants of a town or village, or as this lord's or that lady's people, first, and only second if at all as Altaran. Few nobles pay taxes to the crown or offer more than lip service, and that often slight. The ruler of Altara (currently Queen Tylin Quintara of House Mitsobar; TIE-lihn quin-TAHR-ah; MIHT-soh-bahr) is seldom more than the most powerful noble in the land, and at times has not even really been that. The Throne of the Winds holds so little power that many powerful nobles have scorned to take it when they could have.

Amyrlin Seat (AHM-ehr-lihn SEAT): (1) Leader of the Aes Sedai. Elected for life by the Hall of the Tower, which consists of three representatives (called Sitters, as in "a Sitter for the Green") from each Ajah. The Amyrlin Seat has, theoretically, supreme authority among the Aes Sedai, and ranks as the equal of a king or queen. A slightly less formal usage is "the Amyrlin." (2) The throne on which the leader of the Aes Sedai sits.

Amys (ah-MEESE): Wise One of Cold Rocks Hold, and a dreamwalker. An Aiel of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel. Wife of Rhuarc, sister-wife to Lian (lee-AHN), who is roofmistress of Cold Rocks Hold. Amys is sister-mother to Aviendha.

angreal (ahn-gree-AHL): Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow anyone capable of channeling to handle a greater amount of the Power than is safe or even possible unaided. Some were made for use by women, others by men. Rumors of *angreal* usable by both men and women have never been confirmed. Their making is no longer known, and few remain in existence. *See also* channel; *sa'angreal*; *ter'angreal*.

Arad Doman (AH-rad do-MAHN): Nation on the Aryth Ocean. Presently racked by civil war and simultaneously by wars against those who have declared for the Dragon Reborn and against Tarabon. Domani women are famous—or infamous—for their beauty, seductiveness and scandalous clothes.

Artur Hawkwing: Legendary king, Artur Paendrag Tanreall (AHR-tuhr PAY-ehn-DRAG tahn-REE-ahl). Ruled FY 943–94. United all lands west of the Spine of the World. Sent armies across the Aryth Ocean (FY 992), but contact with these was lost at his death, which set off the War of the Hundred Years. His sign was a golden hawk in flight. *See also* War of the Hundred Years.

Atha'an Miere (ah-thah-AHN mee-EHR): *See* Sea Folk.

Avendoraldera (AH-ven-doh-ral-DEH-rah): Tree grown in the city of Cairhien from a sapling of *Avendesora*, a gift from the Aiel in 566 NE, although no record shows any connection between the Aiel and the legendary Tree of Life.

Bair (BAYR): A Wise One of the Haido sept of the Shaarad Aiel. A dreamwalker. She cannot channel. *See also* dreamwalker.

Berelain sur Paendrag (BEH-reh-lain suhr PAY-ehn-DRAG): First of Mayene, Blessed of the Light, Defender of the Waves, High Seat of House Paeron (pay-eh-ROHN). A beautiful and willful young woman, and a skillful ruler. *See also* Mayene.

Birgitte (ber-GEET-teh): Hero of legend and story, renowned for her beauty almost as much as for her bravery and skill at archery. Supposedly carried a silver bow and silver arrows with which she never missed. One of the heroes to be called back when the Horn of Valere is sounded. Always linked with the hero-swordsman Gaidal Cain. Except for her beauty and skill with a bow, she is little like the stories of her. *See also* Horn of Valere.

Bleakness, the: Term given by the Aiel to the effects on many of learning that rather than having always been fierce warriors, their ancestors were strict pacifists forced into defending themselves during the Breaking of the World and the years following. Many feel that this was their failure of the Aes Sedai. Some throw down their spears and run away. Others refuse to put off *gai'shain* white when their time is up. Still others deny the truth of this, and with it deny necessarily that Rand al'Thor is truly the *Car'a'carn*; these either return to the Aiel Waste or go to join the Shaido opposing him. *See also* Aiel; Aiel Waste; *Car'a'carn; gai'shain.*

Blight, the: *See* Great Blight.

Borderlands: The nations bordering the Great Blight: Saldaea, Arafel, Kandor, and Shienar. Their history is one of unending raids and war against Trollocs and Myrddraal. *See also* Great Blight.

Breaking of the World: During the Time of Madness, male Aes Sedai who had gone insane changed the face of the earth. They leveled mountain ranges and raised new mountains, lifted dry land where seas had been and made oceans cover once dry land. Much of the world was completely depopulated, the survivors scattered like dust on the wind. This destruction is remembered in stories, legends, and history as the Breaking of the World.

Bryne, Gareth (BRIHN, GAH-rehth): Once Captain-General of the Queen's Guards in Andor. Exiled by Queen Morgase. Considered one of the greatest generals living. The sigil of House Bryne is a wild bull, the rose crown of Andor around its neck. Gareth Bryne's personal sigil is three golden stars, each of five rays.

cadin'sor (KAH-dihn-sohr): Garb of Aiel warriors; coat and breeches in browns and grays that fade into rock or shadow, along with soft, laced knee-high boots. In the Old Tongue, "working clothes," though this is of course an imprecise translation.

Cairhien (KEYE-ree-EHN): Both a nation along the Spine of the World and the capital city of that nation. The city was burned and looted during the Aiel War, as were many other towns and villages. The abandonment of farmland near the Spine of the World after the war made necessary the importation of grain. The assassination of King Galldrian (998 NE) resulted in war for succession to the Sun Throne, disrupting grain shipments and bringing famine. The city was besieged by the Shaido in what some now call the Second Aiel War; this siege was lifted by other Aiel under the command of Rand al’Thor. The banner of Cairhien is a many-rayed golden sun rising on a field of sky blue. *See also* Aiel War.

calendar: There are 10 days to the week, 28 days to the month and 13 months to the year. Several feast days are not part of any month; these include Sunday (the longest day of the year), the Feast of Thanksgiving (once every four years at the spring equinox), and the Feast of All Souls Salvation, also called All Souls Day (once every ten years at the autumn equinox).

Callandor (CAH-lahn-DOOR): The Sword That Is Not a Sword, the Sword That Cannot Be Touched. Crystal sword once held in the Stone of Tear. A powerful male *sa’angreal*. Its removal from the chamber called the Heart of the Stone was, along with the fall of the Stone, a major sign of the Dragon’s Rebirth and the approach of Tarmon Gai’don. Replaced in the Heart, driven into the stone, by Rand al’Thor. *See also* Dragon Reborn; *sa’angreal*; Stone of Tear.

Car’a’carn: In the Old Tongue, “chief of chiefs.” According to Aiel prophecy, a man who would come from Rhuidean at dawn, marked with two Dragons, and lead them across the Dragonwall. The Prophecy of Rhuidean says that he will unite the Aiel and destroy them, all but a remnant of a remnant. *See also* Aiel; Rhuidean.

Caraighan Maconar (kah-RYE-gihn mah-CON-ahr): Legendary Green sister (212 AB–373 AB), the heroine of a hundred adventures credited with exploits that even some Aes Sedai consider improbable despite their inclusion in the records of the White Tower, such as single-handedly putting down a rebellion in Mosadorin and quelling the Comaidin Riots at a time when she had no Warders. Considered by the Green Ajah to be the archetype of a Green sister. *See also* Aes Sedai; Ajah.

Carridin, Jaichim (CAHR-ih-dihn, JAY-kim): An Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light, a high officer of the Children of the Light and a Darkfriend.

Cauthon, Abell (CAW-thon, AY-bell): A farmer in the Two Rivers. Father of Mat Cauthon. Wife: Natti (NAT-tee). Daughters: Eldrin (EHL-drihn), and Bodewhin (BOHD-wihn), called Bode.

channel (verb): To control the flow of the One Power. *See also* One Power.

Children of the Light: Society of strict ascetic beliefs, owing allegiance to no nation and dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years to proselytize against an increase in Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military society. Extremely rigid in beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. Consider Aes Sedai and any who support them to be Darkfriends. Known disparagingly as Whitecloaks. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white. *See also* Questioners.

Darkfriends: Adherents of the Dark One. They believe they will gain great power and rewards, even immortality, when he is freed. Among themselves, they sometimes use the ancient name Friends of the Dark.

Dark One: Most common name, used in every land, for Shai'tan (SHAY-ih-TAN). The source of evil, antithesis of the Creator. Imprisoned by the Creator in Shayol Ghul at the moment of Creation. An attempt to free him brought about the War of the Shadow, the tainting of *saidin*, the Breaking of the World and the end of the Age of Legends. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Daughter-Heir: Title of the heir to the Lion Throne of Andor. Without a surviving daughter, the throne goes to the nearest female blood relation of the Queen. Dissension over exactly who was nearest by blood has several times led to power struggles, the latest being “the Succession”—so called in Andor and “the Third War of Andoran Succession” elsewhere—which brought Morgase of House Trakand to the throne.

Deane Aryman (dee-AHN-eh AH-rih-mahn): Amyrlin Seat who saved the White Tower from the damage done by Bonwhin in attempting to control Artur Hawkwing. Born circa FY 920 in the village of Salidar, in Shiota, she was raised Amyrlin from the

Blue Ajah in FY 992. Credited with convincing Souran Maravaile to raise the siege of Tar Valon (which had begun in FY 975) at Hawkwing's death. Deane restored the Tower's prestige, and it is believed that at the time of her death in FY 1084, in a fall from a horse, she was on the point of convincing the nobles warring over the remains of Hawkwing's empire to accept the leadership of the White Tower as a means of restoring unity to the land. *See also* Amyrlin Seat; Artur Hawkwing.

Dragon, false: Name given to various men who have claimed to be the Dragon Reborn. Some began wars that involved many nations. Over the centuries most were unable to channel, but a few could. All, however, either disappeared or were captured or killed without fulfilling any of the Prophecies of the Dragon. Among those who could channel, the most powerful were Raolin Darksbane (335–36 AB), Yurian Stonebow (circa 1300–1308 AB), Davian (FY 351), Guaire Amalasan (FY 939–43), Logain (997 NE) and Mazrim Taim (998 NE). *See also* Dragon Reborn.

Dragon, Prophecies of the: Little known except among the well-educated and seldom spoken of, the Prophecies, given in *The Karaethon Cycle* (ka-REE-ah-thon), foretell that the Dark One will be freed again, and that Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, will be Reborn to fight Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle against the Shadow. He will, say the Prophecies, save the world—and Break it again. *See also* Dragon, the.

Dragon, the: Name by which Lews Therin Telamon was known during the War of the Shadow, some three thousand or more years ago. In the madness that overtook all male Aes Sedai, Lews Therin killed everyone who carried any of his blood, as well as everyone he loved, thus earning the name Kinslayer. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the; Dragon Reborn.

Dragon Reborn: According to the Prophecies of the Dragon, the man who is the Rebirth of Lews Therin Kinslayer. Most people, but not all, acknowledge Rand al'Thor as the Dragon Reborn. *See also* Dragon, false; Dragon, Prophecies of the; Dragon, the.

Dreadlords: Men and women able to channel, who went over to the Shadow during the Trolloc Wars, acting as generals over armies of Trollocs and Darkfriends. Occasionally confused with the Forsaken by the less well educated.

Dreamer: *See* Talents.

dreamwalker: Aiel name for a woman able to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod*, interpret dreams and speak to others in their dreams. Aes Sedai also use the term, referring to Dreamers, but rarely, and they capitalize it—Dreamwalker. *See also* Talents; *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan (eh-LY-da dob. AHV-rih-nee ah-ROY-han): An Aes Sedai, formerly of the Red Ajah, now raised to the Amyrlin Seat. Once advisor to Queen Morgase of Andor. She sometimes has the Foretelling.

Far Dareis Mai (FAHR DAH-rize MY): In the Old Tongue, literally, "Of the Spear Maidens." Aiel warrior society which, unlike any other, admits women and only women. A Maiden may not marry and remain in the society, nor may she fight while carrying a child. Any child born to a Maiden is given to another woman to raise, in such a way that no one knows the child's mother. ("You may belong to no man, nor may any man belong to you, nor any child. The spear is your lover, your child and your life.") *See also* Aiel; Aiel warrior societies.

first-sister; first-brother: Aiel kinship term meaning having the same mother. Among the Aiel, having the same mother means a closer relationship than having the same father.

Five Powers: There are threads to the One Power, named according to the sorts of things that can be done using them—Earth, Air (sometimes called Wind), Fire, Water and Spirit, which are called the Five Powers. A wielder of the Power will have a greater strength with one, possibly two but rarely more, and lesser with the others. In the Age of Legends, Spirit was found equally in men and in women, but great ability with Earth and/or Fire occurred much more often among men, ability with Water and/or Air among women. Despite exceptions, it was so often so that

Earth and Fire came to be regarded as male Powers, Air and Water as female.

Flame of Tar Valon: Symbol of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, and the Aes Sedai. A stylized representation of a flame; a white teardrop, point upward.

Forsaken, the: Name given to thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends, thus among the most powerful ever known, who went over to the Dark One during the War of the Shadow in return for the promise of immortality. Their own name for themselves was "the Chosen." According to both legend and fragmentary records, they were imprisoned along with the Dark One when his prison was reseated. The names given to them are still used to frighten children. They were: Aginor (AGH-ih-nohr), Asmodean (ahs-MOH-dee-an), Balthamel (BAAL-thah-mell), Be'lal (BEH-lahl), Demandred (DEE-man-drehd), Graendal (GREHN-dahl), Ishamael (ih-SHAH-may-EHL), Lanfear (LAN-feer), Mesaana (meh-SAH-nah), Moghedien (moh-GHEH-dee-ehn), Rahvin (RAAV-ihn), Sammael (SAHM-may-EHL) and Semirhage (SEH-mih-RHAHG).

Gaidin (GYE-deen): In the Old Tongue, "Brother to Battles." A title used by Aes Sedai for the Warders. *See also* Warder.

gai'shain (GYE-shain): In the Old Tongue, "Pledged to Peace in Battle" is as close a translation as is possible. An Aiel taken prisoner by other Aiel during raid or battle is required by *ji'e'toh* to serve his or her captor humbly and obediently for one year and a day, touching no weapon and doing no violence. A Wise One, a blacksmith, a child or a woman with a child under the age of ten may not be made *gai'shain*. *See also* Bleakness, the.

Galad (gah-LAHD): Lord Galadedrid Damodred (gah-LAHD-eh-drihd DAHM-oh-drehd). Half-brother to Elayne and Gawyn, sharing the same father, Taringail (TAH-rihn-gail) Damodred. His sign is a winged silver sword, point down.

Game of Houses: Name given the scheming, plots and manipulations for advantage by noble Houses. Great value is given to subtlety, to aiming at one thing while seeming to aim at another, and to achieving ends with the least visible effort. Also known as the Great Game, and sometimes by its name in the Old Tongue: *Does Daemar* (DAH-ess day-MAR).

Gawyn (GAH-wihn) of House Trakand (trah-KAND): Queen Morgase's son, and Elayne's brother, who will be First Prince of the Sword when Elayne ascends to the throne. Half-brother to Galad. His sign is a white boar.

gentling: The act, performed by Aes Sedai, of shutting off a male who can channel from the One Power. Necessary because any man who channels will go insane from the taint on *saidin* and almost certainly do horrible things with the Power in his madness before the taint kills him. One who has been gentled can still sense the True Source, but cannot touch it. Whatever madness has come before gentling is arrested but not cured, and if it is done soon enough death can be averted. A man who is gentled, however, inevitably gives up wanting to live; those who do not succeed in committing suicide usually die anyway within a year or two. *See also* One Power; stilling.

gleeman: A traveling storyteller, musician, juggler, tumbler and all-around entertainer. Known by trademark cloaks of many-colored patches, gleemen perform mainly in the villages and smaller towns.

Gray Man: One who has voluntarily surrendered his or her soul in order to become an assassin serving the Shadow. Gray Men are so ordinary in appearance that the eye can slide right past without noticing them. The vast majority of Gray Men are indeed men, but a small number are women. Also called the Soulless.

Great Blight, the: A region in the far north, entirely corrupted by the Dark One. A haunt of Trollocs, Myrddraal and other creatures of the Shadow.

Great Lord of the Dark: Name by which Darkfriends refer to the Dark One, claiming that to speak his true name would be blasphemous.

Great Serpent: A symbol for time and eternity, ancient before the Age of Legends began, consisting of a serpent eating its own tail. A ring in the shape of the Great Serpent is awarded to women who have been raised to the Accepted among the Aes Sedai.

High Lords of Tear: Acting as a council, the High Lords are historically the rulers of the nation of Tear, which has neither king nor queen. Their numbers are not fixed, and have varied from as many as twenty to as few as six. Not to be confused with the Lords of the Land, who are lesser Tairen lords.

Horn of Valere (vah-LEER): The legendary object of the Great Hunt of the Horn, it can call back dead heroes from the grave to fight against the Shadow. A new Hunt of the Horn has been called, and sworn Hunters for the Horn can now be found in many nations.

Illian (IHL-lee-an): A great port on the Sea of Storms, capital city of the nation of the same name.

Juilin Sandar (JUY-lihn sahn-DAHR): A thief-catcher from Tear.

Lan (LAN); al'Lan Mandragoran (AHL-LAN man-DRAG-or-an): Uncrowned King of Malkier, a land swallowed by the Blight in the year he was born (953 NE), Dai Shan (Battle Lord), and the last surviving Malkieri lord. At the age of sixteen he began a one-man war against the Blight and the Shadow, which continued until he was bonded as a Warder by Moiraine in 979 NE. *See also* Warder; Moiraine.

length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1,000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Lews Therin Telamon; Lews Therin Kinslayer: *See* Dragon, the.

Lini (LIHN-nee): Childhood nurse to the Lady Elayne, and before her to Elayne's mother, Morgase, as well as to Morgase's mother. A woman of vast inner strength, considerable perception, and a great many sayings.

linking: The ability of women who can channel to combine their flows of the One Power. While the combined flow is not as great as the sum total of the individual flows, it is directed by the person who leads the link and that can be used much more precisely and to far greater effect than the individual flows could be. Men cannot link their abilities without the presence of a woman or women in the circle. Up to thirteen women can link without the presence of a man. With the addition of one man, the circle can increase to twenty-six women. Two men can take the circle to include thirty-four women, and so on until the limit of six men and sixty-six women is reached. There are links that include more men and fewer women, but except in the linking of one man and one woman, one woman and two men, or of course, two men and two women, there must always be at least one more woman in the circle than there are men. In most circles, either a man or a woman can control the link, but a man must control in the circle of seventy-two as well as in mixed circles of fewer than thirteen. Although men are in general stronger in the Power than women, the strongest circles are those which contain as near as possible to equal numbers of men and women. *See also* Aes Sedai.

Logain (loh-GAIN): A man who once claimed to be the Dragon Reborn. Captured after carrying war across Ghealdan, Altara and Murandy, he was carried to the White Tower and gentled, later escaping in the confusion after Siuan Sanche was deposed. A man who yet has greatness ahead of him.

Manetheren (mahn-EHTH-ehr-ehn): One of the Ten Nations that made the Second Covenant. Also the capital city of that nation. Both city and nation were utterly destroyed in the Trolloc Wars. The sign of Manetheren was a Red Eagle in flight. *See also* Trolloc Wars.

Mayene (may-EHN): City-state on the Sea of Storms, hemmed in and historically oppressed by Tear. The ruler of Mayene is styled the First, which was once the First Lord or Lady; Firsts claim to be descendants of Artur Hawkwing. The title of Second, once held by a single lord or lady, has in the last four hundred years or so been held by as many as nine at once. The banner of Mayene is a golden hawk in flight on a field of blue.

Mazrim Taim (MAHZ-rihm tah-EEM): A false Dragon who raised havoc in Saldaea until he was defeated and captured. Not only able to channel, but of great strength. *See also* Dragon, false.

Melaine (meh-LAYN): A Wise One of the Jhirad sept of Goshien Aiel. A dreamwalker. Moderately strong in the One Power. Married to Bael, clan chief of the Goshien. Sister-wife to Dorindha, roof mistress of Smoke Springs Hold. *See also* dreamwalker.

Moiraine Damodred (mwah-RAIN DAHM-oh-drehd): Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. Born 956 NE in the Royal Palace of Cairhien. After coming to the White Tower as a novice in 972 NE, her rise was meteoric, being raised Accepted in just three years and Aes Sedai only three more after that, at the end of the Aiel War. From that time she began a search for the young man who had (according to Gitara Morose, an Aes Sedai with the Foretelling) been born on the slopes of Dragonmount during the Battle of the Shining Walls and who would be the Dragon Reborn. It was she who took Rand al’Thor, Mat Cauthon, Perrin Aybara and Egwene al’Vere out of the Two Rivers. She vanished into a *ter’angreal* in Cairhien while battling Lanfear, apparently killing both herself and the Forsaken.

Morgase (moor-GAYZ): By the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Trakand. Now in exile and believed dead, murdered by the Dragon Reborn, so many think. Her sign is three golden keys. The sign of House Trakand is a silver keystone.

Myrddraal (MUHRD-draal): Creatures of the Dark One, commanders of the Trollocs. Twisted offspring of Trollocs in which the human stock used to create the Trollocs has resurfaced, but tainted by the evil that made the Trollocs. They have no eyes, but can see like eagles in light or dark. They have certain powers stemming from the Dark One, including the ability to cause paralyzing fear with a look, and to vanish wherever there are shadows. Among Myrddraal’s known weaknesses is that they are reluctant to cross running water. Mirrors reflect them only mistily. In different lands they are known by many names, among them Halfman, the Eyeless, Shadowman, Lurk, Fetch and Fade.

near-sister; near-brother: Aiel kinship terms meaning friend as close as first-sisters or first-brothers. Near-sisters often adopt one another formally as first-sisters. Near-brothers almost never do.

Oaths, Three: The oaths taken by an Accepted on being raised to Aes Sedai. Spoken while holding the Oath Rod, a *ter'angreal* that makes oaths binding. They are: (1) To speak no word that is not true. (2) To make no weapon with which one man may kill another. (3) Never to use the One Power as a weapon except against Darkfriends or Shadowspawn, or in the last extreme of defense of her own life, or that of her Warder or another Aes Sedai. The second oath was the first adopted after the War of the Shadow. The first oath, while held to the letter, is often circumvented by careful speaking. It is believed that the last two are inviolable.

Ogier (OH-gehr): (1) A nonhuman race, characterized by great height (ten feet is average for adult males), broad, almost snoutlike noses and long, tufted ears. They live in areas called *stedding*, which they rarely leave, and they typically have little contact with humankind. Knowledge of them among humans is sparse, and many believe Ogier to be only legends, though they are wondrous stonemasons and built most of the great cities constructed after the Breaking. Although they are thought to be a pacific people and extremely slow to anger, some old stories say they fought alongside humans in the Trolloc Wars, and call them implacable enemies. By and large, they are extremely fond of knowledge, and their books and stories often contain information lost to humans. A typical Ogier life span is at least three to four times that of a human. (2) Any individual of that nonhuman race. *See also* Breaking of the World; *stedding.*

Old Tongue: The language spoken during the Age of Legends. It is generally expected that nobles and the educated can speak it, but most know only a few words. Translation is often difficult, as it is a language capable of many subtly different meanings. *See also* Age of Legends.

One Power: The power drawn from the True Source. The vast majority of people are completely unable to learn to channel the One Power. A very small number can be taught to channel, and an even tinier number have the ability inborn. These few have no need to be taught; eventually they will channel whether they want to or not, often without even realizing what they are doing. This inborn ability usually manifests itself in late adolescence or early adulthood. If control is not taught, or self-learned (extremely difficult, with a success rate of only one in four), death is certain. Since the Time of Madness, no man has been able to channel the Power without eventually going completely, horribly mad, and then, even if he has learned some control, dying from a wasting sickness that causes the sufferer to rot alive, a sickness caused, as is the madness, by the Dark One's taint on *saidin. See also* Aes Sedai; Breaking of the World; channel; Five Powers; True Source.

Padan Fain (PAD-an FAIN): Once a peddler trading into the Two Rivers, and a Darkfriend, he was transformed at Shayol Ghul not only to enable him to find the young man who would become the Dragon Reborn as a hound finds prey for the hunter, but to ingrain the need to find him. The pain of this induced in Fain a hatred both of the Dark One and of Rand al'Thor. While following al'Thor, he encountered the trapped soul of Mordeth in Shadar Logoth, and this soul tried to take Fain's body. Because of what had been made of Fain, though, the result was an amalgamation which was mostly Fain and which has abilities beyond what either man had originally, though Fain does not understand them fully yet. Most men feel fear at a Myrddraal's eyeless gaze; Myrddraal feel fear at Fain's gaze.

Pattern of an Age: The Wheel of Time weaves the threads of human lives into the Pattern of an Age, often called simply the Pattern, which forms the substance of reality for that Age. *See also ta'veren.*

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. Avowed purposes are to discover the truth in disputations and uncover Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is torture, their normal manner that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. Refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light, the Hand that digs out truth, and at times act as if they were entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the Questioners is the High Inquisitor, who sits on the Council of the Anointed. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd's crook. *See also* Children of the Light.

Rashima Kerenmosa (rah-SHE-mah keh-rehn-MOH-sah): Called the Soldier Amyrlin. Born circa 1150 AB. Raised Amyrlin from the Green Ajah in 1251 AB. Personally leading the Tower armies, she won innumerable victories, most notably Kaisin Pass, the Soralle Step, Larapelle, Tel Norwin and Maighande, where she died in 1301 AB. Her body was discovered after the battle surrounded by her five Warders and a vast wall of Trollocs and Myrddraal which contained the corpses of no fewer than nine Dreadlords. *See also* Aes Sedai; Ajah; Amyrlin Seat; Dreadlords; Warders.

Rhuidean (RHUY-dee-ahn): A great city, the only one in the Aiel Waste and totally unknown to the outside world. Abandoned for nearly three thousand years. Once men among the Aiel were allowed to enter Rhuidean only once, in order to be tested inside a great *ter'angreal* for fitness to become clan chief (only one in three survived), and women only twice, for testing to become Wise Ones, the second time in the same *ter'angreal,* though with a considerably higher survival rate than the men. Now the city is inhabited again, by Aiel, and a great lake occupies one end of the valley of Rhuidean, fed by an underground ocean of fresh water and in turn feeding the only river in the Waste. *See also* Aiel.

sa'angreal (SAH-ahn-GREE-ahl): Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow channeling much more of the One Power than is otherwise possible or safe. A *sa'angreal* is similar to, but more powerful than, an *angreal.* The amount of the Power that can be wielded with a *sa'angreal* compares to the amount that can be handled with an *angreal* as the Power wielded with the aid of an *angreal* does to the amount that can be handled unaided. The making of them is no longer known. As with *angreal,* there are male and female *sa'angreal.* Only a handful remain, far fewer even than *angreal.*

saidar (sah-ih-DAHR);

saidin (sah-ih-DEEN): *See* True Source.

Sea Folk: More properly, the Atha'an Miere, the People of the Sea. A secretive people. Inhabitants of islands in the Aryth (AH-rihth) Ocean and the Sea of Storms, they spend little time ashore, living most of their lives on their ships. Most seaborne trade is carried by Sea Folk ships.

Seanchan (SHAWN-CHAN): (1) Descendants of the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean, who conquered the lands there. They believe that any woman who can channel must be controlled for the safety of everyone else, and any man who can channel must be killed for the same reason. (2) The land from which the Seanchan come.

Shayol Ghul (SHAY-ol GHOOL): A mountain in the Blasted Lands, beyond the Great Blight. Site of the Dark One's prison.

sister-wife: Aiel kinship term. Aielwomen who are near-sisters or first-sisters who discover they love the same man, or who simply do not want a man to come between them, will both marry him, thus becoming sister-wives. Women who love the same man will sometimes try to find out whether they can become near-sisters and adopted first-sisters, a first step to becoming sister-wives.

Sorilea (soh-rih-LEE-ah): The Wise One of Shende Hold, a Jarra Chareen. Barely able to channel, she is the oldest living Wise One, though not by as much as many think.

Spine of the World: A towering mountain range, with few passes, which separates the Aiel Waste from the lands to the west. Also called the Dragonwall.

stedding (STEHD-ding): An Ogier (OH-gehr) homeland. Many *stedding* have been abandoned since the Breaking of the World. They are shielded in some way, no longer understood, so that within them no Aes Sedai can channel the One Power, nor even sense the True Source. Attempts to wield the One Power from outside a *stedding* have no effect inside the *stedding* boundary. No Trolloc will enter a *stedding* unless driven, and even Myrddraal will do so only at the greatest need and with the greatest reluctance. Even Darkfriends, if truly dedicated, feel uncomfortable within a *stedding*.

stilling: The removal of a woman's ability to channel. A woman who has been stilled can sense but not touch the True Source. Officially, stilling is the result of trial and sentence for a crime. Novices in the White Tower are required to learn the name and crimes of all women who have suffered stilling. When the ability to channel is lost accidentally, it is called being burned out, though "stilling" is often used for that also. Women who are stilled, however it occurs, seldom survive long; they seem to simply give up and die unless they find something to replace the emptiness left by the One Power.

Stone of Tear: A great fortress in the city of Tear, said to have been made with the One Power soon after the Breaking of the World. Attacked and besieged unsuccessfully countless times, it fell in a single night to the Dragon Reborn and a few hundred Aiel, thus fulfilling two parts of the Prophecies of the Dragon. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the.

Talents: Abilities in the use of the One Power in specific areas. Aptitude in various Talents varies widely from individual to individual and is seldom related to the strength of the individual's ability to channel. There are major Talents, the best known and most widespread of which is Healing. Other examples are Cloud Dancing, the control of weather, and Earth Singing, which involves controlling movements of the earth—for example, preventing, or causing, earthquakes or avalanches. There are also minor Talents, seldom given a name, such as the ability to see *ta'veren* or to duplicate the chance-twisting effect of *ta'veren*, though in a very small and localized area rarely covering more than a few square feet. Many Talents are now known only by their names and sometimes vague descriptions. Some, such as Traveling (the ability to shift from one place to another without crossing the intervening space) are only now being re-discovered.

Others, such as Foretelling (the ability to foretell future events, but in a general way) and Delving (the location of ores and possibly their removal from the ground), are found rarely. Another Talent long thought lost is Dreaming, interpreting the Dreamer's dreams to foretell future events in more specific fashion than Foretelling. Some Dreamers had the ability to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the World of Dreams, and (it is said) even other people's dreams. The last acknowledged Dreamer previously was Corianin Nedeal (coh-ree-AHN-ihn neh-dee-AHL), who died in 526 NE, but there is now another. *See also Tel'aran'rhiod.*

Tallanvor, Martyn (TAL-lahn-vohr, mahr-TEEN): Guardsman-Lieutenant of the Queen's Guards who loves his queen more than life or honor.

Tam al'Thor (TAM al-THOR): A farmer and shepherd in the Two Rivers. As a young man, he left to become a soldier, returning with a wife (Kari, now deceased) and a child (Rand).

Tarabon (TAH-rah-BON): Nation on the Aryth Ocean. Once a great trading nation, a source of rugs, dyes and fireworks produced by the Guild of Illuminators, among other things. Little news has come out of Tarabon since the land became racked by anarchy and civil war compounded by simultaneous wars against Arad Doman and the Dragonsworn, people who have sworn to follow the Dragon Reborn.

Tarmon Gai'don (TAHR-mohn GAY-dohn): The Last Battle. *See also* Dragon, Prophecies of the; Horn of Valere.

ta'veren (tah-VEER-ehn): A person around whom the Wheel of Time weaves all surrounding life-threads, perhaps ALL life-threads. *See also* Pattern of an Age.

Tear (TEER): A nation on the Sea of Storms. Also the capital city of that nation, a great seaport. The banner of Tear is three white crescent moons slanting across a field half-red, half-gold. *See also* Stone of Tear.

Telamon, Lews Therin (TEHL-ah-mon, LOOZ THEH-rihn): *See* Dragon, the.

Tel'aran'rhiod (tel-AYE-rahn-rhee-ODD): In the Old Tongue, "the Unseen World," or "the World of Dreams." A world or place, glimpsed in dreams, which was believed by the ancients to permeate and surround all other possible worlds. Many can touch *Tel'aran'rhiod* for a few moments in their dreams, but few have ever had the ability to enter it at will, though some *ter'angreal* confer that ability. Unlike other dreams, what happens to living things in the World of Dreams is real; a wound taken there will still exist on awakening, and one who dies there does not wake at all. Otherwise, though, nothing done there affects the waking world in any way. *See also ter'angreal.*

ter'angreal (TEER-ahn-GREE-ahl): Remnants of the Age of Legends that use the One Power. Unlike *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, each *ter'angreal* was made to do a particular thing. Some *ter'angreal* are used by Aes Sedai, but the original purposes of many are unknown. Some require channeling, while others may be used by anyone. Some will kill or destroy the ability to channel of any woman who uses them. Like *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, the making of them has been lost since the Breaking of the World. *See also angreal; sa'angreal.*

Thom Merrilin (TOM MER-rih-lihn): A not-so-simple gleeman and traveler. *See also* Game of Houses; gleeman.

Tinkers: Properly, the Tuatha'an (too-AH-thah-AHN), also called the Traveling People. A wandering folk who live in brightly painted wagons and follow a totally pacifist philosophy called the Way of the Leaf. They are among the few who can cross the Aiel Waste unmolested, for the Aiel strictly avoid all contact with them. Very few people even suspect that the Tuatha'an are descended from Aiel who broke away during the Breaking of the World in an attempt to find a way back to the time of peace. *See also* Aiel.

Trollocs (TRAHL-lohks): Creatures of the Dark One, created during the War of the Shadow. Huge of stature, they are a twisted blend of animal and human stock. Vicious by nature, they kill for the pure pleasure of killing. Deceitful in the extreme, they cannot be trusted unless coerced by fear. They will eat anything—or anyone. *See also* Trolloc Wars.

Trolloc Wars: A series of wars, beginning about 1000 AB and lasting more than three hundred years, during which Trolloc armies ravaged the world under the command of Myrddraal and

Dreadlords. Eventually the Trollocs were driven back into the Great Blight, but some nations ceased to exist, and others that survived were almost depopulated. All records of the time are fragmentary. *See also* Dreadlords; Myrddraal; Trollocs.

True Source: The driving force of the universe, which turns the Wheel of Time. Divided into a male half (*saidin*) and a female half (*saidar*), which work at the same time with and against each other. Only a man can draw on *saidin*, only a woman on *saidar.* For more than three thousand years, *saidin* has been tainted by the Dark One's touch. *See also* One Power.

Warder: A warrior bonded to an Aes Sedai. The bonding is a thing of the One Power: by it he gains such gifts as quick healing, the ability to go long periods without food, water, or rest and the ability to sense the taint of the Dark One at a distance. So long as a Warder lives, the Aes Sedai to whom he is bonded knows he is alive however far away he is, and when he dies she will know the moment and manner of his death. While most Ajahs believe an Aes Sedai may have one Warder bonded to her at a time, the Red Ajah refuses to bond any Warders at all, and the Green Ajah believes an Aes Sedai may bond as many as she wishes. Ethically the Warder must accede to the bonding voluntarily, but it has been known to be done against the Warder's will. What the Aes Sedai gain from the bonding is a closely held secret. *See also* Aes Sedai.

War of Power: *See* War of the Shadow.

War of the Hundred Years (FY 994–FY 1117): A series of overlapping wars among constantly shifting alliances, precipitated by the death of Artur Hawkwing and the resulting struggle for his empire. The War of the Hundred Years depopulated large parts of the lands between the Aryth Ocean and the Aiel Waste, from the Sea of Storms to the Great Blight. So great was the destruction that only fragmentary records of the time remain. The empire of Artur Hawkwing was pulled apart, and the nations of the present day were formed. *See also* Hawkwing, Artur.

War of the Shadow: Also known as the War of Power. Began shortly after the attempt to free the Dark One, and soon involved the whole world. In a world where even the memory of war had been forgotten, every facet of war was rediscovered, often twisted by the Dark One's touch on the world, and the One Power was used as a weapon. The war was ended by the resealing of the Dark One into his prison in a strike led by Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon, and one hundred male Aes Sedai called the Hundred Companions. The Dark One's counterstroke tainted *saidin* and drove Lews Therin and the Hundred Companions insane, thus beginning the Time of Madness and the Breaking of the World. *See also* Dragon, the; One Power, the.

weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Wheel of Time, the: Time is a wheel with seven spokes, each spoke an Age. As the Wheel turns, Ages come and go, each leaving memories that fade to legend, then to myth, and are forgotten by the time that Age comes again. The Pattern of an Age is slightly different each time an Age comes, and each time it is subject to greater change.

Whitecloaks: *See* Children of the Light.

White Tower: The center and heart of Aes Sedai power, located in the heart of the great island city of Tar Valon.

wilder: A woman who has learned to channel the One Power on her own; only one in four survive this. Such women usually build barriers against knowing what it is they are doing, but if these can be broken down, wilders are among the most powerful of channelers. The term is often used in derogatory fashion.

Wisdom: In villages, a woman chosen by the Women's Circle for her knowledge of such things as healing and foretelling the weather, as well as common good sense. Generally considered the equal of the Mayor, and in some villages his superior. She is chosen for life, and it is very rare for a Wisdom to be removed from office before her death. Depending on the land, she may instead have another title, such as Guide, Healer, Wise Woman or Seeker, among others.

Wise One: Among the Aiel, Wise Ones are women chosen by other Wise Ones and trained in healing, herbs and other things, much like Wisdoms. They have great authority and responsibility, as well as great influence with sept and clan chiefs, though these men often accuse them of meddling. A good many Wise Ones can channel to one degree or another; they find every Aiel woman born with the spark in her and most of those who can learn. The fact that Wise Ones can channel is not spoken of among Aiel, by custom. Also by custom, Wise Ones avoid all contact with Aes Sedai, even more so than other Aiel. Wise Ones stand outside all feuds and battle, and according to *ji'e'toh* may not be harmed or impeded in any way. For a Wise One to take part in a battle would be a great violation of custom and tradition. Three Wise Ones now living are dreamwalkers, with the ability to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod* and to speak to other people in their dreams among other things. *See also* dreamwalker; *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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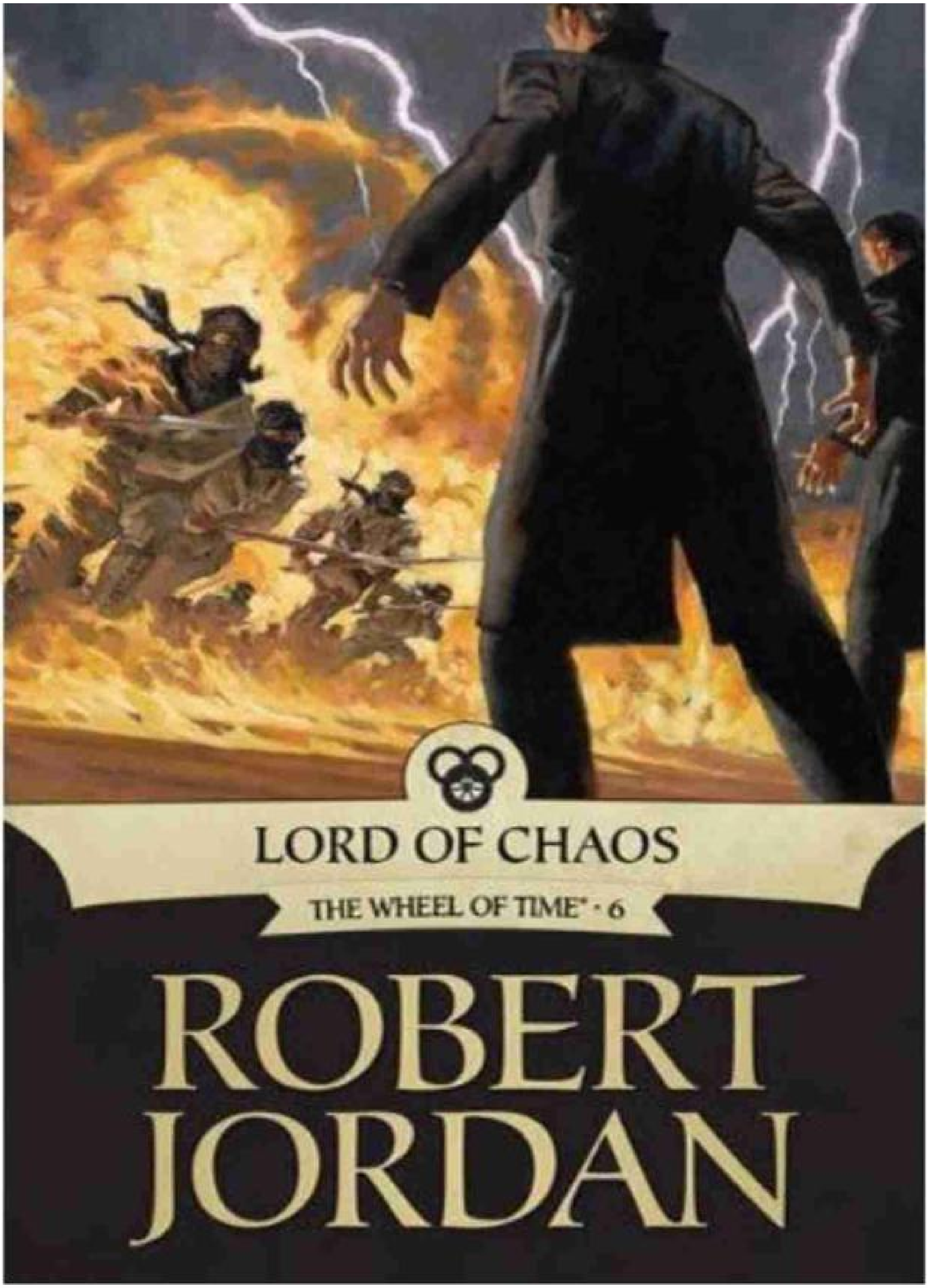
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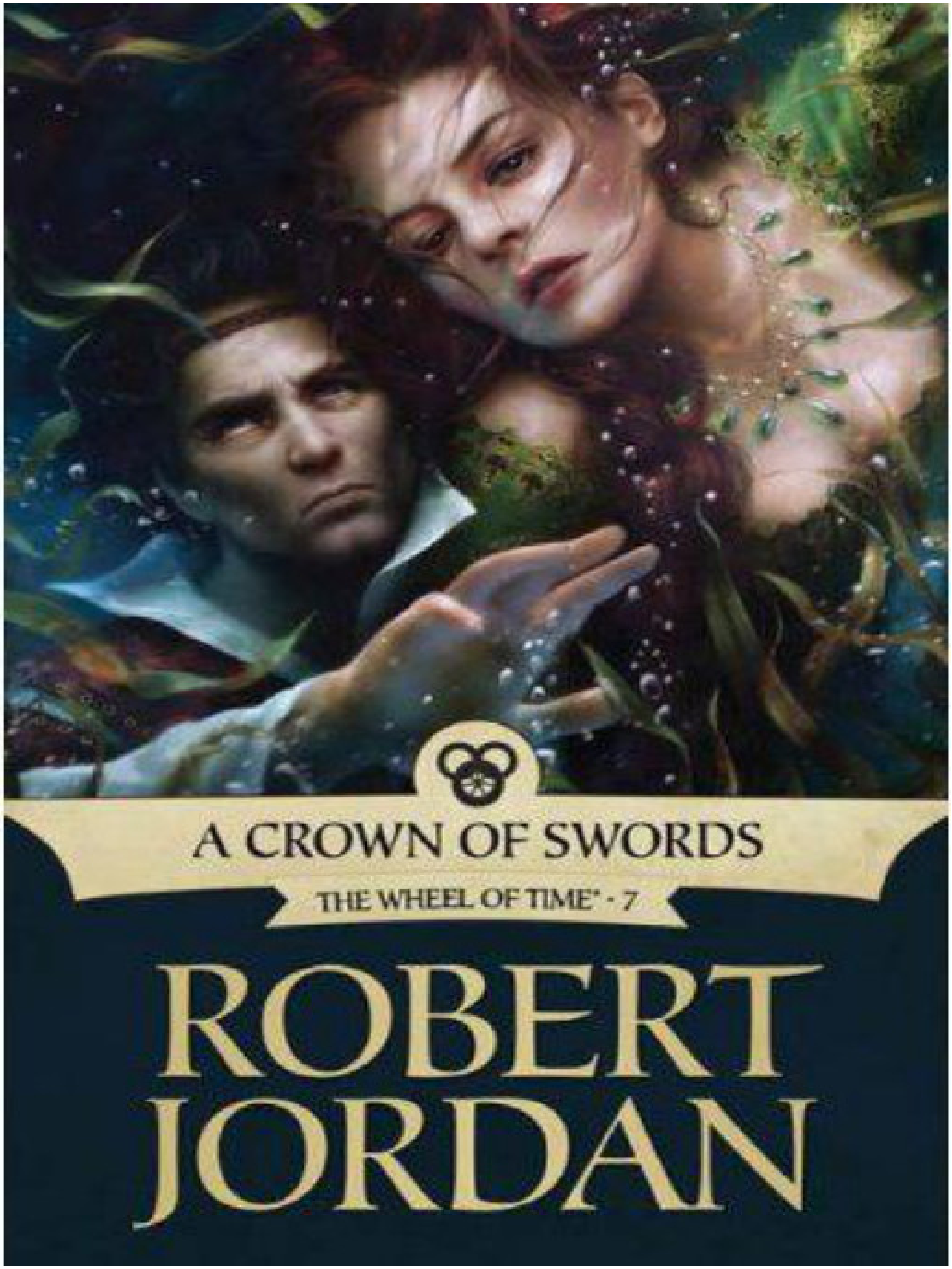
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To Harriet,
who deserves the credit
once again

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There can be no health in us, nor any good thing grow, for the land is one with the Dragon Reborn, and he one with the land. Soul of fire, heart of stone, in pride he conquers, forcing the proud to yield. He calls upon the mountains to kneel, and the seas to give way, and the very skies to bow. Pray that the heart of stone remembers tears, and the soul of fire, love.

—From a much-disputed translation of
The Prophecies of the Dragon by the poet
Kyera Termendal, of Shiota, believed to
have been published between FY 700 and
FY 800

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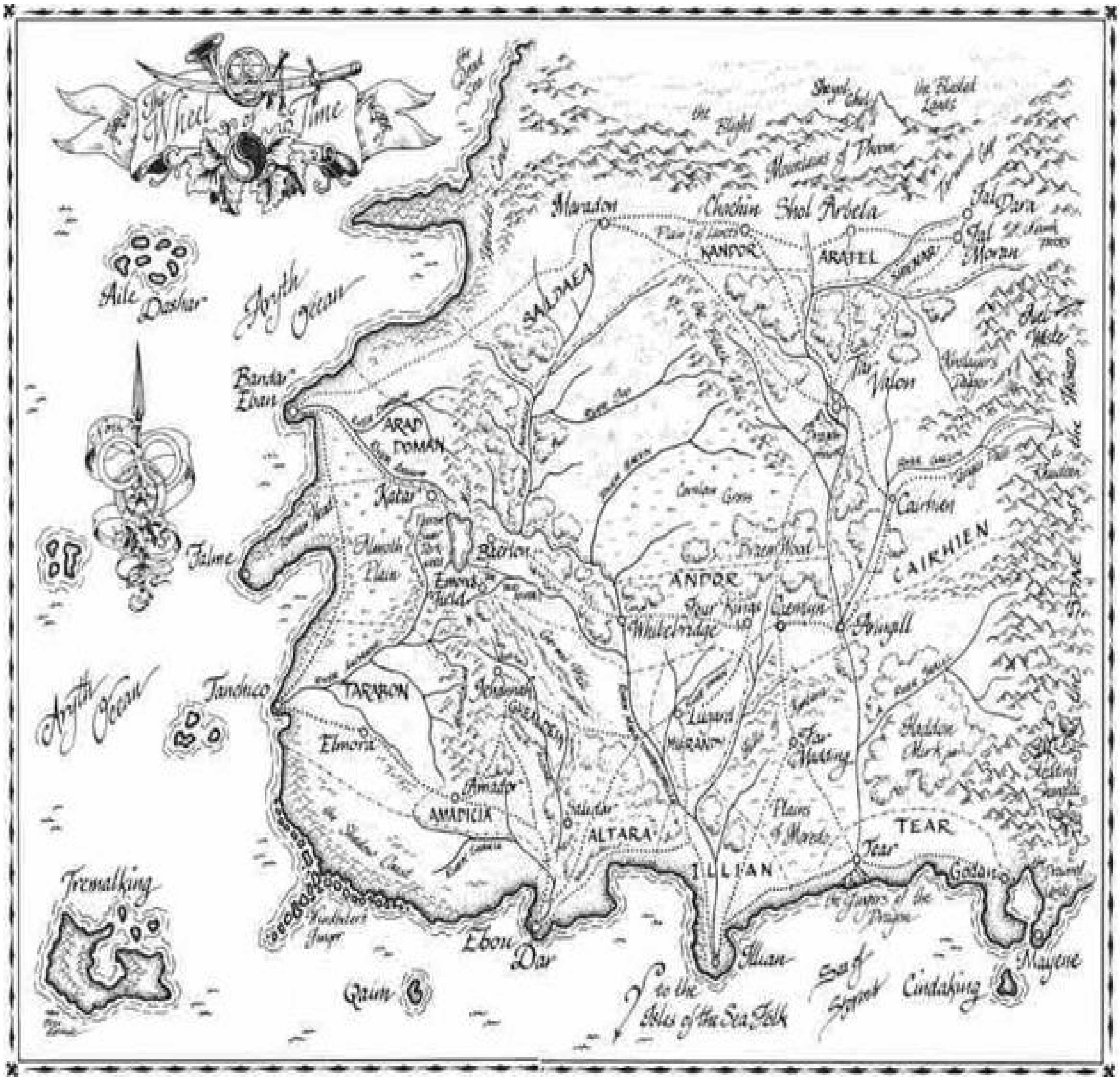
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PROLOGUE

Lightnings

From the tall arched window, close onto eighty spans above the ground, not far below the top of the White Tower, Elaida could see for miles beyond Tar Valon, to the rolling plains and forests that bordered the broad River Erinin, running down from north and west before it divided around the white walls of the great island city. On the ground, long morning shadows must have been dappling the city, but from this prominence all seemed clear and bright. Not even the fabled “topless towers” of Cairhien had truly rivaled the White Tower: Certainly none of Tar Valon’s lesser towers did, for all that men spoke far and wide of them and their vaulting sky-bridges.

This high, an almost constant breeze lessened the unnatural heat gripping the world. The Feast of Lights past, snow should have covered the ground deep, yet the weather belonged in the depths of a hard summer. Another sign that the Last Battle approached and the Dark One touched the world, if more were needed. Elaida did not let the heat touch her even when she descended, of course. The breeze was not why she had had her quarters moved up here, despite the inconvenience of so many stairs, to these simple rooms.

Plain russet floor tiles and white marble walls decorated by a few tapestries could not compare with the grandeur of the Amyrlin’s study and the rooms that went with it far below. She still used those rooms occasionally—they held associations with the power of the Amyrlin Seat in some minds—but she resided here, and worked here more often than not. For the view. Not of city or river or forests, though. Of what was beginning in the Tower grounds. Great diggings and foundations spread across what had been the Warders’ practice yard, tall wooden cranes and stacks of cut marble and granite. Masons and laborers swarmed over the workings like ants, and endless streams of wagons trailed through the gates onto the Tower grounds, bringing more stone. To one side stood a wooden “working model," as the masons called it, big enough for men to enter crouching on their heels and see every detail, where every stone should go. Most of the workmen could not read, after all—neither words nor mason's drawn plans. The "working model" was as large as some manor houses.

When any king or queen had a palace, why should the Amyrlin Seat be relegated to apartments little better than those of many ordinary sisters? Her palace would match the White Tower for splendor, and have a great spire ten spans higher than the Tower itself. The blood had drained from the chief mason's face when he heard that. The Tower had been Ogier-built, with assistance from sisters using the Power. One look at Elaida's face, however, set Master Lerman bowing and stammering that of course all would be done as she wished. As if there had been any question.

Her mouth tightened with exasperation. She had wanted Ogier masons again, but the Ogier were confining themselves to their *stedding* for some reason. Her summons to the nearest, Stedding Jentoine, in the Black Hills, had been met with refusal. Polite, yet still refusal, without explanation, even to the Amyrlin Seat. Ogier were reclusive at best. Or they might be withdrawing from a world full of turmoil; Ogier stayed clear of human strife.

Firmly Elaida dismissed the Ogier from her mind. She prided herself on separating what could be from what could not. Ogier were a triviality. They had no part in the world beyond the cities they had built so long ago and seldom visited now except to make repairs.

The men below, crawling beetle-like over the building site, made her frown slightly. Construction went forward by inches. Ogier might be out of the question, yet perhaps the One Power could be used again. Few sisters possessed real strength in weaving Earth, but not that much was required to reinforce stone, or bind stone to stone. Yes. In her mind, the palace stood finished, colonnaded walks and great domes shining with gilt and that one spire reaching to the heavens. . . . Her eyes rose to the cloudless sky, to where the spire would peak, and she let out a long sigh. Yes. The orders would be issued today. The towering case clock in the room behind her chimed Third Rise, and in the city gongs and bells pealed the hour, the sound faint here, so high above. With a smile, Elaida left the window, smoothing her red-slashed dress of cream silk and adjusting the broad, striped stole of the Amyrlin Seat on her shoulders.

On the ornately gilded clock, small figures of gold and silver and enamel moved with the chimes. Horned and snouted Trollocs fled from a cloaked Aes Sedai on one level; on another a man representing a false Dragon tried to fend off silver lightning bolts that had obviously been hurled by a second sister. And above the clockface, itself above her head, a crowned king and queen knelt before an Amyrlin Seat in her enameled stole, with the Flame of Tar Valon, carved from a large moonstone, atop a golden arch over her head.

She did not laugh often, but she could not help a quietly pleased chuckle at the clock. Cemaile Sorenthaine, raised from the Gray, had commissioned it dreaming of a return to the days before the Trolloc Wars, when no ruler held a throne without the Tower's approval. Cemaile's grand plans came to naught, however, as did Cemaile, and for three centuries the clock sat in a dusty storage room, an embarrassment no one dared display. Until Elaida. The Wheel of Time turned. What was once, could be again. Would be again.

The case clock balanced the door to her sitting room, and her bedchamber and dressing room beyond. Fine tapestries, colorful work from Tear and Kandor and Arad Doman, with thread-of-gold and thread-of-silver glittering among the merely dyed, hung each exactly opposite its mate. She had always liked order. The carpet covering most of the tiles came from Tarabon, patterned in red and green and gold; silk carpets were the most precious. In each corner of the room a marble plinth carved in unpretentious verticals held a white vase of fragile Sea Folk porcelain with two dozen carefully arranged red roses. To make roses bloom now required the One Power, especially with the drought and heat; a worthwhile use, in her opinion. Gilded carving covered both the only chair—*no* one sat in her presence now—and the writing table, but in the stark style of Cairhien. A simple room, really, with a ceiling barely two spans high, yet it would do until her palace was ready. With the view, it would.

The tall chairback held the Flame of Tar Valon picked out in moonstones above her dark head as she sat. Nothing marred the polished surface of the table except for three boxes of Altaran lacquerwork, arranged just so. Opening the box covered with golden hawks among white clouds, she removed a slim strip of thin paper from atop the pile of reports and correspondence inside. For what must have been the hundredth time, she read the message come from Cairhien by pigeon twelve days ago. Few in the Tower knew of its existence. None but she knew its contents, or would have a glimmer of what it meant if they did. The thought almost made her laugh again.

> *The ring has been placed in the bull's nose. I expect a pleasant journey to market.*

No signature, yet she needed none. Only Galina Casban had known to send that glorious message. Galina, whom Elaida trusted to do what she would have trusted to no one else save herself. Not that she trusted anyone fully, but the head of the Red Ajah more than any other. She herself had been raised from the Red, after all, and in many ways still thought of herself as Red.

> *The ring has been placed in the bull's nose.*

Rand al'Thor—the Dragon Reborn, the man who had seemed on the point of swallowing the world, the man who had swallowed entirely too much of it—Rand al'Thor was shielded and in Galina's control. And none who might support him knew. Even a chance of that, and the wording would have been different. By various earlier messages, it seemed he had rediscovered how to Travel, a Talent lost to Aes Sedai since the Breaking, yet that had not saved him. It had even played into Galina's hands. Apparently he had a habit of coming and going without warning. Who would suspect that this time he had not gone, but been taken? Something very like a giggle rose in her.

Inside another week, two at most, al'Thor would be in the Tower, closely supervised and guided safely until Tarmon Gai'don, his ravaging of the world stopped. It was madness to allow any man who could channel to run free, but most of all the man prophecy said must face the Dark One in the Last Battle, the Light send that it lay years off yet in spite of the weather. Years would be needed to arrange the world properly, beginning with undoing what al'Thor had done.

Of course, the damage he had wrought was nothing beside what he could have caused, free. Not to mention the possibility that he might have gotten himself killed before he was needed. Well, that troublesome young man would be wrapped in swaddling and kept safe as an infant in his mother's arms until time to take him to Shayol Ghul. After that, if he survived. . . .

Elaida’s lips pursed. The Prophecies of the Dragon seemed to say he would not, which undeniably would be for the best.

“Mother?” Elaida almost gave a start as Alviarin spoke. Entering without so much as a knock! “I have word from the Ajahs, Mother.” Slim and cool-faced, Alviarin wore the Keeper’s narrow stole in white, matching her dress, to show she had been raised from the White, but in her mouth “Mother” became less a title of respect and more an address to an equal.

Alviarin’s presence was enough to dent Elaida’s good mood. That the Keeper of Chronicles came from the White, not the Red, always served as a biting reminder of her weakness when she was first raised. Some of that had been dispelled, true, but not all. Not yet. She was tired of regretting that she had so few personal eyes-and-ears outside Andor. And that her predecessor and Alviarin’s had escaped—been helped to escape; they must have had help!—escaped before the keys to the Amyrlin’s great network could be wrested out of them.

She more than wanted the network that was hers by right. By strong tradition the Ajahs sent to the Keeper whatever dribbles from their own eyes-and-ears they were willing to share with the Amyrlin, but Elaida was convinced the woman kept back some of even that trickle. Yet she could not ask the Ajahs for information directly. Bad enough to be weak without going begging to the world. The Tower, anyway, which was as much of the world as really counted.

Elaida kept her own face every bit as cool as the other woman’s, acknowledging her only with a nod while she pretended to examine papers from the lacquered box. Slowly she turned them over one by one, returned them to the box slowly. Without really seeing a word. Making Alviarin wait was bitter, because it was petty, and petty ways were all she had to strike at one who should have been her servant.

An Amyrlin could issue any decree she wished, her word law and absolute. Yet as a practical matter, without support from the Hall of the Tower, many of those decrees were wasted ink and paper. No sister would disobey an Amyrlin, not directly at least, yet many decrees required a hundred other things ordered to implement them. In the best of times that could come slowly on occasion so slowly it never happened, and these were far from the best.

Alviarin stood there, calm as a frozen pond. Closing the Altaran box, Elaida kept out the strip of paper that announced her sure victory.

Unconsciously she fingered it, a talisman. “Has Teslyn or Joline finally deigned to send more than word of their safe arrival?”

That was meant to remind Alviarin that no one could consider herself immune. Nobody cared what happened in Ebou Dar, Elaida least of all; the capital of Altara could fall into the sea, and except for the merchants, not even the rest of Altara would notice. But Teslyn had sat in the Hall nearly fifteen years before Elaida had commanded her to resign her chair. If Elaida could send a Sitter—a *Red* Sitter—who had supported her rise off as ambassador to a flyspeck throne with no one sure why but a hundred rumors flowering, then she could come down on anyone. Joline was a different matter. She had held her chair for the Green only a matter of weeks, and everyone was sure the Greens had selected her to show they would not be cowed by the new Amyrlin, who had handed her a fearsome penance. That bit of insolence could not be allowed to pass, of course, and had not been. Everyone knew that, too.

It was meant to remind Alviarin that she was vulnerable, but the slim woman merely smiled her cool smile. So long as the Hall remained as it was, she *was* immune. She riffled through the papers in her hand, plucking one out. “No word from Teslyn or Joline, Mother, no, though with the news you have received so far from the thrones. . . .” That smile deepened into something dangerously close to amusement. “They all mean to try their wings, to see if you are as strong as . . . as your predecessor.” Even Alviarin had enough sense not to speak the Sanche woman’s name in her presence. It was true, though; every king and queen, even mere nobles, seemed to be testing the limits of her power. She must make examples.

Glancing at the paper, Alviarin went on. “There is word from Ebou Dar, however. Through the Gray.” Had she emphasized that, to drive the splinter deeper? “It appears Elayne Trakand and Nynaeve al’Meara are there. Posing as full sisters, with the blessings of the rebel . . . *embassy* . . . to Queen Tylin. There are two others, not identified, who may be doing the same. The lists of who is with the rebels are incomplete. Or they may just be companions. The Grays are uncertain.”

“Why under the Light would they be in Ebou Dar?” Elaida said dismissively. Certainly Teslyn would have sent news of *that*. “The Gray must be passing along rumors, now. Tarna’s message said they are with the rebels in Salidar.” Tarna Feir had reported Siuan Sanche there, too. And Logain Ablar, spreading those vicious lies no Red sister could lower herself to acknowledge, much less deny. The Sanche woman had a hand in that obscenity, or the sun would rise in the west tomorrow. Why could she not simply have crawled away and died, decently out of sight, like other stilled women?

It required effort not to draw a deep breath. Logain could be hanged quietly as soon as the rebels were dealt with; most of the world thought him dead long since. The filthy slander that the Red Ajah had set him up as a false Dragon would die with him. When the rebels were dealt with, the Sanche woman could be made to hand over the keys to the Amyrlin's eyes-and-ears. And name the traitors who had helped her escape. A foolish hope to wish that Alviarin would be named among them. "I can hardly see the al'Meara girl running to Ebou Dar claiming to be Aes Sedai, much less Elayne, can you?"

"You did order Elayne found, Mother. As important as putting a leash on al'Thor, you said. When she was among three hundred rebels in Salidar, it was impossible to do anything, but she will not be so well protected in the Tarasin Palace."

"I have no time for gossip and rumors." Elaida bit off each word with contempt. Did Alviarin know more than she should, mentioning al'Thor, and leashing? "I suggest you read Tarna's report again, then ask yourself whether even *rebels* would allow Accepted to pretend to the shawl."

Alviarin waited with visible patience for her to finish, then examined her sheaf again and pulled out four more sheets. "The Gray agent sent sketches," she said blandly, proffering the pages. "He is no artist, but Elayne and Nynaeve are recognizable." After a moment, when Elaida did not take the drawings, she slipped them under the rest.

Elaida felt the color of anger and embarrassment rising in her cheeks. Alviarin had led her down this path deliberately by not bringing out those sketches at the first. She ignored that—anything else would only be more embarrassing still—but her voice became cold. "I want them taken, and brought to me."

The lack of curiosity on Alviarin's face made Elaida wonder again how much the woman knew that she was not supposed to. The al'Meara girl might well provide a handle on al'Thor, coming from the same village. All the sisters knew that, just as they knew that Elayne was Daughter-Heir of Andor, and that her mother was dead. Vague rumors linking Morgase to the Whitecloaks were so much nonsense, for she would never have gone to the

Children of the Light for help. She was dead, leaving not even a corpse behind, and Elayne would be Queen. If she could be wrested away from the rebels before the Andoran Houses put Dyelin on the Lion Throne instead. It was not widely known what made Elayne more important than any other noble with a strong claim to a throne. Aside from the fact that she would be Aes Sedai one day, of course.

Elaida had the Foretelling sometimes, a Talent many thought lost before her, and long ago she had Foretold that the Royal House of Andor held the key to winning the Last Battle. Twenty-five years gone and more, as soon as it became clear that Morgase Trakand would gain the throne in the Succession, Elaida had fastened herself to the girl, as she was then. How Elayne was crucial, Elaida did not know, but Foretelling never lied. Sometimes she almost hated the Talent. She hated things she could not control.

“I want all four of them, Alviarin.” The other two were unimportant, certainly, but she would take no chances. “Send my command to Teslyn immediately. Tell her—*and* Joline—that if they fail to send regular reports from now on, they will wish they had never been born. Include the information from the Macura woman.” Her mouth twisted around that last.

The name made Alviarin shift uneasily, too, and no wonder. Ronde Macura’s nasty little infusion was something to make any sister uncomfortable. Forkroot was not lethal—at least you woke, if you drank enough to sleep—but a tea that deadened a woman’s ability to channel seemed aimed too directly at Aes Sedai. A pity the information had not been received before Galina went; if fork-root worked on men as well as it seemed to on women, it would have made her task considerably easier.

Alviarin’s ill ease lasted only a moment; a mere instant and she was all self-possession again, unyielding as a wall of ice. “As you wish, Mother. I am sure they will leap to obey, as of course they should.”

A sudden flash of irritation swept Elaida like fire in dry pasture. The fate of the world in her hands, and petty stumbling blocks kept rising beneath her feet. Bad enough that she had rebels and recalcitrant rulers to handle, but too many Sitters still brooded and grumbled behind her back, fertile ground for the other woman to plow. Only six were firmly under her own thumb, and she suspected as many at least listened closely to Alviarin before they voted. Certainly nothing of importance passed through the Hall unless Alviarin agreed to it. Not open agreement, not with any ac-know ledgment that Alviarin bore a shred more influence or power than a Keeper should, but if Alviarin opposed. . . . At least they had not gone so far as to reject anything Elaida sent them. They simply dragged their feet and too often let what she wanted starve on the floor. A pitifully small thing for which to be happy. Some Amyrlins had become little more than puppets once the Hall acquired a taste for rejecting what they put forward.

Her hands clenched, and a tiny crackle came from the strip of paper.

The ring has been placed in the bull's nose.

Alviarin looked as composed as a marble statue, but Elaida no longer cared. The shepherd was on his way to her. The rebels would be crushed and the Hall cowed, Alviarin forced to her knees and every fractious ruler brought to heel, from Tenobia of Saldaea, who had gone into hiding to avoid her emissary, to Mattin Stepaneos of Illian, who was trying to play all sides at once again, trying to agree with her *and* the Whitecloaks, and with al'Thor for all she knew. Elayne would be placed on the throne in Caemlyn, without her brother to get in the way and with a full knowledge of who had set her there. A little time back in the Tower would make the girl damp clay in Elaida's hands.

"I want *those men* rooted out, Alviarin." There was no need to say who she meant; half the Tower could talk of nothing but *those men* in their *Black* Tower, and the other half whispered about them in corners.

"There are disturbing reports, Mother." Alviarin looked through her papers once more, but Elaida thought it was only for something to do. She did not pluck out any more pages, and if nothing else disturbed the woman for long, this unholy midden outside Caemlyn must.

"*More* rumors? Do you believe the tales of thousands flocking to Caemlyn in answer to that obscene *amnesty*?" Not the least of what al'Thor had done, but hardly cause for worry. Just a pile of filth that must be safely cleared before Elayne was crowned in Caemlyn.

"Of course not, Mother, but—"

"Toveine is to lead; this task belongs properly to the Red." Toveine Gazal had been fifteen years away from the Tower, until Elaida summoned her back. The other two Red Sitters who had resigned and gone into a "voluntary" retreat at the same time were nervous-eyed women now, but unlike Lirene and Tsutama, Toveine had only hardened in her solitary exile. "She is to have fifty sisters." There could not be more than two or three men at this *Black* Tower actually able to channel, Elaida was certain. Fifty sisters could overwhelm them easily. Yet there might be others to deal with. Hangers-on, camp followers, fools full of futile hopes and insane ambitions. “And she is to take a hundred—no, two hundred—of the Guard.”

“Are you certain that is wise? The rumors of thousands are certainly madness, but a Green agent in Caemlyn claims there are over four hundred in this Black Tower. A clever fellow. It seems he counted the supply carts that go out from the city. And you are aware of the rumors Mazrim Taim is with them.”

Elaida fought to keep her features smooth, and barely succeeded. She had forbidden mention of Taim’s name, and it was bitter that she did not dare—did not dare!—impose the penalty on Alviarin. The woman looked her straight in the eyes; the absence of so much as a perfunctory “Mother” this time was marked. And the *temerity* of asking whether her actions were *wise*! She was the Amyrlin Seat! Not first among equals; the Amyrlin Seat!

Opening the largest of the lacquered boxes revealed carved ivory miniatures laid out on gray velvet. Often just handling her collection soothed her, but more, like the knitting she enjoyed, it let whoever was attending her know their place, if she seemed to give more attention to the miniatures than to what they had to say. Fingering first an exquisite cat, sleek and flowing, then an elaborately robed woman with a peculiar little animal, some fantasy of the carver, almost like a man covered in hair, crouched on her shoulder, at length Elaida chose out a curving fish, so delicately carved that it seemed nearly real despite the aged yellow of the ivory.

“Four hundred rabble, Alviarin.” She felt calmer already, for Alviarin’s mouth had thinned. Just a fraction, but she savored any crack in the woman’s façade. “If there are that many. Only a fool could believe that more than one or two can channel. At most! In ten years, we have found only six men with the ability. Just twenty-four in the last twenty years. And you know how the land has been scoured. As for Taim. . . .” The name burned her mouth; the only false Dragon ever to escape being gentled once in the hands of Aes Sedai. Not a thing she wanted in the Chronicles under her reign, certainly not until she decided how it should be recorded. At present the Chronicles told nothing after his capture.

She stroked her thumb along the fish’s scales. “He is dead, Alviarin, else we would have heard from him long since. And not serving al’Thor.

Can you think he went from claiming to be the Dragon Reborn to *serving* the Dragon Reborn? Can you think he could be in Caemlyn without Davram Bashere at least trying to kill him?” Her thumb moved faster on the ivory fish as she reminded herself that the Marshal-General of Saldaea was in Caemlyn taking orders from al’Thor. What *was* Tenobia playing at? Elaida held it all inside, though, presenting a face as calm as one of her carvings.

“Twenty-four is a dangerous number to speak aloud,” Alviarin said with an ominous quiet, “as dangerous as two thousand. The Chronicles record only sixteen. The last thing needed now is for those years to rear up again. Or for sisters who know only what they were told to learn the truth. Even those you brought back hold their silence.”

Elaida put on a bemused look. So far as she knew, Alviarin had learned the truth of those years only on being raised Keeper, but her own knowledge was more personal. Not that Alviarin could be aware of that. Not for certain, anyway. “Daughter, whatever comes out, I have no fear. Who is going to impose a penance on *me*, and on what charge?” That skirted truth nicely, but apparently it impressed the other woman not at all.

“The Chronicles record a number of Amyrlins who took on public penance for some usually obscure reason, but it has always seemed to me that is how an Amyrlin might have it written if she found herself with no choice except—”

Elaida’s hand slapped down on the table. “Enough, daughter! I *am* Tower law! What has been hidden will remain hidden, for the same reason it has for twenty years—the good of the White Tower.” Only then did she feel the bruise beginning on her palm; she lifted her hand to reveal the fish, broken in two. How old had it been? Five hundred years? A thousand? It was all she could do not to quiver with rage. Her voice certainly thickened with it. “Toveine is to lead fifty sisters and two hundred of the Tower Guards to Caemlyn, to this Black Tower, where they will gentle any man they find able to channel and hang him, along with as many others as they can take alive.” Alviarin did not even blink at the violation of Tower law. Elaida had spoken the truth as she meant it to be; with this, with everything, she *was* Tower law. “For that matter, hang up the dead as well. Let them be a warning to any man who thinks of touching the True Source. Have Toveine attend me. I will want to hear her plan.”

“It will be as you command, Mother.” The woman’s reply was as cool and smooth as her face. “Though if I may suggest, you might wish to reconsider sending so many sisters away from the Tower. Apparently the rebels found your offer wanting. They are no longer in Salidar. They are on the march. The reports come from Altara, but they must be into Murandy by now. And they have chosen themselves an Amyrlin.” She scanned the top sheet of her sheaf of papers as if searching for the name. “Egwene al’Vere, it seems.”

That Alviarin had left this, the most important piece of news, until now, should have made Elaida explode in fury. Instead, she threw back her head and laughed. Only a firm hold on dignity kept her from drumming her heels on the floor. The surprise on Alviarin’s face made her laugh harder, till she had to wipe her eyes with her fingers.

“You do not see it,” she said when she could speak between ripples of mirth. “As well you are Keeper, Alviarin, not a Sitter. In the Hall, blind as you are, within a month the others would be holding you in a cabinet and taking you out when they needed your vote.”

“I see enough, Mother.” Alviarin’s voice held no heat; if anything, it should have coated the walls with frost. “I see three hundred rebel Aes Sedai, perhaps more, marching on Tar Valon with an army led by Gareth Bryne, acknowledged a great captain. Discounting the more ridiculous reports, that army may number over twenty thousand, and with Bryne to lead they will gain more at every village and town they pass. I do not say they have hope of taking the city, of course, but it is hardly a matter for laughter. High Captain Chubain should be ordered to increase recruiting for the Tower Guard.”

Elaida’s gaze fell sourly on the broken fish, and she stood and stalked to the nearest window, her back to Alviarin. The palace under construction took away the bitter taste, that and the slip of paper she still clutched.

She smiled down on her palace-to-be. “Three hundred rebels, yes, but you should read Tarna’s account again. At least a hundred are on the point of breaking already.” She trusted Tarna to some extent, a Red with no room in her head for nonsense, and she said the rebels were ready to jump at shadows. Quietly desperate sheep looking for a shepherd, she said. A wilder, of course, yet still sensible. Tarna should be back soon, and able to give a fuller report. Not that it was needed. Elaida’s plans were already working among the rebels. But that was her secret.

“Tarna has always been sure she could make people do what it was clear they would not.” Had there been an emphasis in that, a significance of tone? Elaida decided to ignore it. She had to ignore too much from Alviarin, but the day would come. Soon.

“As for their army, daughter, she says two or three thousand men at most. If they had more, they would have made sure she saw them, to overawe us.” In Elaida’s opinion, eyes-and-ears always exaggerated, to make their information seem more valuable. Only sisters could be truly trusted. Red sisters, anyway. Some of them. “But I would not care if they did have twenty thousand, or fifty, or a hundred. Can you even begin to guess why?” When she turned, Alviarin’s face was all smooth composure, a mask over blind ignorance. “You seem to be conversant with all the aspects of Tower law. What penalty do rebels face?”

“For the leaders,” Alviarin said slowly, “stilling.” She frowned slightly, skirts swaying just barely as her feet shifted. Good. Even Accepted knew this, and she could not understand why Elaida asked. Very good. “For many of the rest, too.”

“Perhaps.” The leaders might themselves escape that, most of them, if they submitted properly. The minimum penalty in law was to be birched in the Grand Hall before the assembled sisters, followed by at least a year and a day in public penance. Yet nothing said the penance must be served all at once; a month here, a month there, and they would still be atoning their crimes ten years from now, constant reminders of what came of resisting her. Some would be stilled, of course—Sheriam, a few of the more prominent so-called Sitters—but only sufficient to make the rest fear putting a foot wrong again, not enough to weaken the Tower. The White Tower had to be whole, and it had to be strong. Strong, and firmly in her grasp.

“Only one crime among those they have committed *demands* stilling.” Alviarin opened her mouth. There had been ancient rebellions, buried so deep that few among the sisters knew; the Chronicles stood mute, the lists of stilled and executed confined to records open only to Amyrlin, Keeper and Sitters, aside from the few librarians who kept them. Elaida allowed Alviarin no opportunity to speak. “Any woman who falsely claims the title of Amyrlin Seat *must* be stilled. If they believed they had any chance of success, Sheriam would be their *Amyrlin*, or Lelaine, or Carlinya, or one of the others.” Tarna reported that Romanda Cassin had come out of her retirement; Romanda surely would have seized the stole with both hands if she saw the tenth part of a chance. “Instead, they have plucked out an *Accepted*!”

Elaida shook her head in wry amusement. She could quote every word of the law setting out how a woman was chosen Amyrlin—she had made good use of it herself, after all—and never once did it require that the woman be a full sister. Obviously she *must* be, so those who framed the law never stated it, and the rebels had squirmed through that crack. “They know their cause is hopeless, Alviarin. They plan to strut and bluster, try to dig out some protection against penalty for themselves, then yield the girl as a sacrifice.” Which was a pity. The al’Vere girl was another possible handle on al’Thor, and when she reached her full strength in the One Power, she would have been one of the strongest in a thousand years or more. A true pity.

“Gareth Bryne and an army hardly sound like strutting to me. It will take their army five or six months to reach Tar Valon. In that time, High Captain Chubain could increase the Guard—”

“Their *army*,” Elaida sneered. Alviarin was such a fool; for all her cool exterior, she was a rabbit. Next she would be spouting the Sanche woman’s nonsense about the Forsaken being loose. Of course, she did not know the secret, but just the same. . . . “Farmers carrying pikes, butchers with bows and tailors on horseback! And every step of the way, thinking of the Shining Walls, that held Artur Hawkwing at bay.” No, not a rabbit. A weasel. Yet soon or late, she would be weasel-fur trim on Elaida’s cloak. The Light send it soon. “Every step of the way, they will lose a man, if not ten. I would not be surprised if our rebels appear with nothing more than their Warders.” Too many people knew of the division in the Tower. Once the rebellion was broken, of course, it could be made to seem all a ploy, a part of gaining control of young al’Thor perhaps. An effort of years, that, and generations before memories faded. Every last rebel would pay for that on her knees.

Elaida clenched her fist as though she held all the rebels by the throat. Or Alviarin. “I mean to break them, daughter. They will split open like a rotten melon.” Her secret assured that, however many farmers and tailors Lord Bryne hung on to, but let the other woman think as she would. Suddenly the Foretelling took hold of her, a certainty about things she could not see stronger than if they had been laid out before her. She would have been willing to step blindly over a cliff on that certainty. “The White Tower will be whole again, except for remnants cast out and scorned, whole and stronger than ever. Rand al'Thor will face the Amyrlin Seat and know her anger. The Black Tower will be rent in blood and fire, and sisters will walk its grounds. This I Foretell."

As usual, the Foretelling left her trembling, gasping for breath. She forced herself to stand still and straight, to breathe slowly; she never let anyone see weakness. But Alviarin. . . . Her eyes were wide as they could open, lips parted as if she had forgotten the words she meant to speak. A paper slid from the sheaf in her hands and almost fell before she could catch it. That recalled her to herself. In a flash she regained her serene mask, a perfect picture of Aes Sedai calm, but she definitely had been jolted to her heels. Oh, very good. Let her chew on the certain surety of Elaida's victory. Chew and break her teeth.

Elaida drew a deep breath and seated herself behind her writing table again, putting the broken ivory fish to one side where she did not have to look at it. It was time to exploit her victory. "There is work to be done today, daughter. The first message is to go to the Lady Caraline Damodred. . . ."

Elaida spun out her plans, enlarging on what Alviarin knew, revealing some that she did not, because at the last an Amyrlin did have to work through her Keeper, however much she hated the woman. There was a pleasure in watching Alviarin's eyes, watching her wonder what else she still did not know. But while Elaida ordered, divided and assigned the world between the Aryth Ocean and the Spine of the World, in her mind frolicked the image of young al'Thor on his way to her like a caged bear, to be taught to dance for his dinner.

The Chronicles could hardly record the years of the Last Battle without mentioning the Dragon Reborn, but she knew that one name would be written larger than all others. Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan, youngest daughter of a minor House in the north of Murandy, would go down in history as the greatest and most powerful Amyrlin Seat of all time. The most powerful woman in the history of the world. The woman who saved humankind.

The Aiel standing in a deep fold in the low, brown-grass hills seemed carved figures, ignoring sheets of dust sweeping ahead of a gusting wind. That snow should have been deep on the ground this time of year did not bother them; none had ever seen snow, and this oven heat, with the sun still well short of its peak, was less than where they came from. Their attention remained fixed on the southern rise, waiting for the signal that would announce the arrival of the destiny of the Shaido Aiel.

Outwardly, Sevanna looked like the others, though a ring of Maidens marked her out, resting easily on their heels, dark veils already hiding their faces to the eyes. She also waited, and more impatiently than she let on, but not to the exclusion of everything else. That was one reason why she commanded and the rest followed. The second was that she saw what could be if you refused to let outworn custom and stale tradition tie your hands.

A slight flicker of her green eyes to the left showed twelve men and one woman, each with round bull-hide buckler and three or four short spears, garbed in gray-and-brown *cadin'sor* that blended as well with the terrain here as in the Three-fold Land. Efalin, short graying hair hidden by the *shoufa* wrapped around her head, sometimes glanced Sevanna's way; if a Maiden of the Spear could be said to be uneasy, Efalin was. Some Shaido Maidens had gone south, joining the fools capering around Rand al'Thor, and Sevanna did not doubt others talked of it. Efalin must be wondering whether providing Sevanna with an escort of Maidens, as if she had been *Far Dareis Mai* once herself, was enough to balance that. At least Efalin had no doubts where true power lay.

Like Efalin, the men led Shaido warrior societies, and they eyed one another between watching the rise. Especially blocky Maeric, who was *Seia Doon*, and scar-faced Bendhuin, of *Far Aldazar Din*. After today, no longer would anything hold back the Shaido from sending a man to Rhuidean, to be marked as the clan chief if he survived. Until that happened, Sevanna spoke as the clan chief since she was the widow of the last chief. Of the last two chiefs. And let those who muttered that she carried bad luck choke on it.

Gold and ivory bracelets clattered softly as she straightened the dark shawl over her arms and adjusted her necklaces. Most of those were gold and ivory too, but one was a mass of pearls and rubies that had belonged to a wetlander noblewoman—the woman now wore white and hauled and fetched alongside the other *gai'shain* back in the mountains called Kinslayer's Dagger—with a ruby the size of a small hen's egg nestled between her breasts. The wetlands held rich prizes. A large emerald on her finger caught sunlight in green fire; finger rings were one wetlander custom worth adopting, no matter the stares often aimed at hers. She would have more, if they matched this one for magnificence.

Most of the men thought Maeric or Bendhuin would be first to receive the Wise Ones' permission to try Rhuidean. Only Efalin in that group suspected that none would, and she only suspected; she also was astute enough to voice her suspicions circumspectly to Sevanna and not at all to anyone else. Their minds could not encompass the possibility of shedding the old, and in truth, if Sevanna was impatient to don the new, she was also aware that she must bring them to it slowly. Much had changed already in the old ways since the Shaido crossed the Dragonwall into the wetlands—still wet, compared to the Three-fold Land—yet more would change. Once Rand al'Thor was in her hands, once she had wed the *Car'a'carn*, the chief of chiefs of all the Aiel—this nonsense of the Dragon Reborn was wetlander foolishness—there would be a new way of naming clan chiefs, and sept chiefs as well. Perhaps even the heads of the warrior societies. Rand al'Thor would name them. Pointing where she told him, of course. And that would be only the beginning. The wetlander notion of handing down rank to your children, and their children, for instance.

The wind swept higher for a moment, blowing south. It would cover the sound of the wetlanders' horses and wagons.

She shifted her shawl again, then suppressed a grimace. At all costs she must not appear nervous. A glance to the right stilled worry as soon as begun. Over two hundred Shaido Wise Ones clustered there, and normally at least some would be watching her like vultures, but their eyes were all on the rise. More than one adjusted her shawl uneasily or smoothed bulky skirts. Sevanna's lip curled. Sweat beaded on some of those faces. Sweat! Where was their honor that they showed nerves before every gaze?

Everyone stiffened slightly as a young *Sovin Nai* appeared above them, lowering his veil as he scrambled down. He came straight to her, as was proper, but to her irritation he raised his voice enough for all to hear. "One of their forward scouts escaped. He was wounded, but still on his horse."

The society leaders began to move before he finished speaking. That would never do. They would lead in the actual fighting—Sevanna had never more than held a spear in her life—but she would not let them forget for a moment who she was. "Throw every last spear against them," she ordered loudly, "before they can ready themselves." They rounded on her as one.

"Every spear?" Bendhuin demanded incredulously. "You mean except for the screens—"

Glowering, Maeric spoke right on top of him. “If we keep no reserve, we can be—”

Sevanna cut them both off. “Every spear! These are Aes Sedai we dance with. We must overwhelm them immediately!” Efalin and most of the others schooled their faces to stillness, but Bendhuin and Maeric frowned, ready to argue. Fools. They faced a few dozen Aes Sedai, a few hundred wetlander soldiers, yet with the more than forty thousand *algai’d’siswai* they had insisted on, they still wanted their screens of scouts and their spears in reserve as if they faced other Aiel or a wetlander army. “I speak as the clan chief of the Shaido.” She should not have to say that, but a reminder could do no harm. “They are a handful.” She weighted every word with contempt now. “They can be run down if the spears move quickly. You were ready to avenge Desaine this sunrise. Do I smell fear now? Fear of a few wetlanders? Has honor gone from the Shaido?”

That turned their faces to stone, as intended. Even Efalin showed eyes like polished gray gems as she veiled; her fingers moved in Maiden handtalk, and as the society leaders sprinted up the rise, the Maidens around Sevanna followed. *That* was not what she had intended, but at least the spears were moving. Even from the bottom of the fold she could see what had seemed bare ground disgorging *cadin’sor*-clad figures, all hurrying south with the long strides that could run down horses. There was no time to waste. With a thought to have words with Efalin later, Sevanna turned to the Wise Ones.

Chosen from the strongest of the Shaido Wise Ones who could wield the One Power, they were six or seven for every Aes Sedai around Rand al’Thor, yet Sevanna saw doubt. They tried to hide it behind stony faces, but it was there, in shifting eyes, in tongues wetting lips. Many traditions fell today, traditions old and strong as law. Wise Ones did not take part in battles. Wise Ones kept far from Aes Sedai. They knew the ancient tales, that the Aiel had been sent to the Three-fold Land for failing the Aes Sedai, that they would be destroyed if ever they failed them again. They had heard the stories, what Rand al’Thor had claimed before all, that as part of their service to the Aes Sedai, the Aiel had sworn to do no violence.

Once Sevanna had been sure those stories were lies, but of late she believed the Wise Ones knew them for truth. None had told her so, of course. It did not matter. She herself had never made the two journeys to Rhuidean required to become a Wise One, but the others had accepted her, however reluctant some had been. Now they had no choice but to go on accepting. Useless traditions would be carved into new.

“Aes Sedai,” she said softly. They leaned toward her in a muted clatter of bracelets and necklaces, to catch her low words. “They hold Rand al’Thor, the *Car’a’carn*. We must take him from them.” There were scattered frowns. Most believed she wanted the *Car’a’carn* taken alive in order to avenge the death of Couladin, her second husband. They understood that, but they would not have come here for it. “Aes Sedai,” she hissed angrily. “We kept our pledge, but they broke theirs. We violated nothing, but they have violated everything. You know how Desaine was murdered.” And of course they did. The eyes watching her were suddenly sharper. Killing a Wise One ranked with killing a pregnant woman, a child or a blacksmith. Some of those eyes were *very* sharp. Therava’s, Rhiale’s, others’. “If we allow these women to walk away from that, then *we* are less than animals, *we* will have no honor. *I* hold my honor.”

On that she gathered her skirts with dignity and climbed the slope, head high, not looking back. She was certain the others would follow. Therava and Norlea and Dailin would see to that, and Rhiale and Tion and Meira and the rest who had accompanied her a few days past to see Rand al’Thor beaten and put back into his wooden chest by the Aes Sedai. Her reminder had been for those thirteen even more than the others, and they dared not fail her. The truth of how Desaine had died tied them to her.

Wise Ones with their skirts looped over their arms to free their legs could not keep up with the *algai’d’siswai* in *cadin’sor* however hard they ran, though race they did. Five miles across those low rolling hills, not a long run, and they topped a crest to see the dance of spears already begun. After a fashion.

Thousands of *algai’d’siswai* made a huge pool of veiled gray-and-brown surging around a circle of wetlander wagons, which itself surrounded one of the small clumps of trees that dotted this region. Sevanna drew an angry breath. The Aes Sedai had even had time to bring all of their horses inside. The spears encircled the wagons, pressed in on them, showered arrows toward them, but those at the front seemed to push against an invisible wall. At first the arrows that arched highest passed over this wall, but then they too began striking something unseen and bouncing back. A low murmur rose among the Wise Ones.

“You see what the Aes Sedai do?” Sevanna demanded, as though she also could see the One Power being woven. She wanted to sneer; the Aes Sedai were fools, with their vaunted Three Oaths. When they finally decided they must use the Power as a weapon instead of just to make barriers, it would be too late. Provided the Wise Ones did not stand too long staring. Somewhere in those wagons was Rand al’Thor, perhaps still doubled into a chest like a bolt of silk. Waiting for her to pick him up. If the Aes Sedai could hold him, then she could, with the Wise Ones. And a promise. “Therava, take your half to the west now. Be ready to strike when I do. For Desaine, and the *toh* the Aes Sedai owe us. We will make them meet *toh* as no one ever has before.”

It was a foolish boast to speak of making someone meet an obligation they had not acknowledged, yet in the angry mutters from the other women, Sevanna heard other furious promises to make the Aes Sedai meet *toh*. Only those who had killed Desaine on Sevanna’s orders stood silent. Therava’s narrow lips tightened slightly, but finally she said, “It will be as you say, Sevanna.”

At an easy lope, Sevanna led her half of the Wise Ones to the east side of the battle, if it could be called that yet. She had wanted to remain on a rise where she could have a good view—that was how a clan chief or battle leader directed the dance of spears—but in this one thing she found no support even from Therava and the others who shared the secret of Desaine’s death. The Wise Ones made a sharp contrast with the *algai’d’siswai* as she lined them up in their white *algode* blouses and dark wool skirts and shawls, their glittering bracelets and necklaces and their waist-length hair held back by dark folded scarves. For all their decision that if they were to be in the dance of the spears, they would be in it, not on a rise apart, she did not believe they yet realized that the true battle today was theirs to fight. After today, nothing would be the same again, and tethering Rand al’Thor was the smallest part.

Among the *algai’d’siswai* staring toward the wagons only height quickly told men from Maidens. Veils and *shoufa* hid heads and faces, and *cadin’sor* was *cadin’sor* aside from the differences of cut that marked clan and sept and society. Those at the outer edge of the encirclement appeared confused, grumbling among themselves as they waited for something to happen. They had come prepared to dance with Aes Sedai lightning, and now they milled impatiently, too far back even to use the horn bows still in leather cases on their backs. They would not have to wait much longer if Sevanna had her way.

Hands on hips, she addressed the other Wise Ones. “Those to the south of me will disrupt what the Aes Sedai are doing. Those to the north will attack. Forward the spears!” With the command, she turned to watch the destruction of the Aes Sedai who thought they had only steel to face.

Nothing happened. In front of her the mass of *algai’d’siswai* seethed uselessly, and the loudest sound was the occasional drumming of spears on bucklers. Sevanna gathered her anger, winding it like thread from the spinning. She had been so sure they were ready after Desaine’s butchered corpse was displayed to them, but if they still found attacking Aes Sedai unthinkable, she would chivvy them to it if she had to shame them all till they demanded to put on *gai’shain* white.

Suddenly a ball of pure flame the size of a man’s head arched toward the wagons, sizzling and hissing, then another, dozens. The knot in her middle loosened. More fireballs came from the west, from Therava and the rest. Smoke began to rise from burning wagons, first gray wisps, then thickening black pillars; the murmurs of the *algai’d’siswai* changed pitch, and if those directly in front of her moved little, there was a sudden sense of pressing forward. Shouts drifted from the wagons, men yelling in anger, bellowing in pain. Whatever barriers the Aes Sedai had made were down. It had begun, and there could be only one ending. Rand al’Thor would be hers; he would give her the Aiel, to take all of the wetlands, and before he died he would give her daughters and sons to lead the Aiel after her. She might enjoy that; he was quite pretty, really, strong and young.

She did not expect the Aes Sedai to go down easily, and they did not. Fireballs fell among the spears, turning *cadin’sor*-clad figures to torches, and lightnings struck from a clear sky, hurling men and earth into the air. The Wise Ones learned from what they saw, though, or perhaps they already knew and had hesitated before; most channeled so seldom, especially where anyone besides Wise Ones could see, that only another Wise One knew whether any given woman could. Whatever the reason, no sooner did lightning begin to fall among the Shaido spears than more struck toward the wagons.

Not all reached its target. Balls of fire streaking through the air, some large as horses now, silver lightning stabbing toward the ground like spears from the heavens, sometimes suddenly darted aside as if striking an invisible shield, or erupted violently in midair, or simply vanished altogether. Roars and crashes filled the air, warring with shouts and screams. Sevanna stared at the sky in delight. It was like the Illuminators' displays she had read about.

Suddenly the world turned white in her eyes; she seemed to be floating. When she could see again, she was flat on the ground a dozen paces from where she had stood, aching in every muscle, struggling for breath and covered with a scattering of dirt. Her hair wanted to lift away from her. Other Wise Ones were down as well, around a ragged hole a span across torn in the ground; thin tendrils of smoke rose from the dresses of some. Not everyone had fallen—the battle of fire and lightning continued in the sky—but too many. She had to throw them back into the dance.

Forcing herself to breathe, she scrambled to her feet, not bothering to brush off the dirt. "Push spears!" she shouted. Seizing Estalaine's angular shoulders, she started to drag the woman to her feet, then realized from her staring blue eyes that she was dead and let her fall. She pulled a dazed Dorailla erect instead, then seized up a spear from a fallen Thunder Walker and waved it high. "Forward the spears!" Some of the Wise Ones seemed to take her literally, plunging into the mass of *algai'd'siswai*. Others kept their heads better, helping those who could rise, and the storm of fire and lightning continued as she raged up and down the line of Wise Ones, waving her spear and shouting. "Push spears! Forward the spears!"

She felt like laughing; she did laugh. With dirt all over her and the battle raging, she had never been so exhilarated before in her life. Almost she wished she had chosen to become a Maiden of the Spear. Almost. No *Far Dareis Mai* could ever be clan chief, any more than a man could be a Wise One; a Maiden's route to power was to give up the spear and become a Wise One. As wife of a clan chief she had been wielding power at an age when a Maiden was barely trusted to carry a spear or a Wise One's apprentice to fetch water. And now she had it all, Wise One and clan chief, though it would take some doing yet to have that last title in truth. Titles mattered little so long as she had the power, but why should she not have both?

A sudden scream made her turn, and she gaped at the sight of a shaggy gray wolf ripping Dosera's throat out. Without thought she plunged her spear into its side. Even as it twisted to snap at the spear haft, another waist-tall wolf bounded past her to hurl itself onto the back of one of the *algai'd'siswai*, then another wolf, and more, tearing into *cadin'sor*-clad figures wherever she looked.

Superstitious fear lanced through her as she pulled her spear free. The Aes Sedai had called wolves to fight for them. She could not take her gaze from the wolf she had killed. The Aes Sedai had. . . . No. No! It could change nothing. She would not let it.

Finally she managed to pull her eyes away, but before she could shout encouragement to the Wise Ones again, something else stilled her tongue and made her stare. A knot of wetlander horsemen in red helmets and breastplates, laying about them with swords, thrusting with long lances, in the middle of the *algai'd'siswai*. Where had *they* come from?

She did not realize she had spoken aloud until Rhiale answered her. "I tried to tell you, Sevanna, but you would not listen." The flame-haired woman eyed her bloody spear distastefully; Wise Ones were not supposed to carry spears. She ostentatiously laid the weapon in the crook of her elbow, the way she had seen chiefs do, as Rhiale went on. "Wetlanders have attacked from the south. Wetlanders and *siswai'aman*." She imbued the word with all the scorn proper for those who would name themselves Spears of the Dragon. "Maidens as well. And. . . . And there are Wise Ones."

"Fighting?" Sevanna said incredulously before realizing how it sounded. If she could toss out decayed custom, surely those sun-blinded fools to the south who still called themselves Aiel could as well. She had not expected it, though. No doubt Sorilea had brought them; that old woman reminded Sevanna of a landslide plunging down a mountain, carrying all before it. "We must attack them at once. They will not have Rand al'Thor. Or ruin our vengeance for Desaine," she added when Rhiale's eyes widened.

"They are Wise Ones," the other woman said in a flat tone, and Sevanna understood bitterly. Joining the dance of spears was bad enough, but Wise One attacking Wise One was more than even Rhiale would countenance. She had agreed that Desaine must die—how else could the other Wise Ones, not to mention the *algai'd'siswai*, be brought to attack Aes Sedai, which they must do to put Rand al'Thor in their hands, and with him all the Aiel?—yet that was done in secret, surrounded by like-minded women. This would be before everyone. Fools and cowards, all of them!

“Then fight those enemies you can bring yourself to fight, Rhiale.” She bit off every word with as much scorn as she could, but Rhiale merely nodded, adjusted her shawl with another glance at the spear on Sevanna’s arm and returned to her place in the line.

Perhaps there was a way to make the other Wise Ones move first. Better to attack by surprise, but better anything than that they should snatch Rand al’Thor from her very hands. What she would not give for a woman who could channel and would do as she was told without balking. What she would not give to be on a rise, where she could see how the battle went.

Keeping her spear ready and a wary eye out for wolves—those she could see were either killing men and women in *cadin’sor* or were dead themselves—she returned to shouting encouragement. To the south more fire and lightning fell among the Shaido than before, but it made no difference that she could tell. That battle, with its explosions of flame and earth and people, continued unabated.

“Push spears!” she shouted, waving hers. “Push spears!” Among the churning *algai’d’siswai* she could not make out any of the fools who had tied a bit of red cloth around their temples and named themselves *siswai’aman*. Perhaps they were too few to alter the course of events. The knots of wet-landers certainly seemed few and far between. Even as she watched, one was swarmed under, men and horses, by stabbing spears. “Push spears! Push spears!” Exultation filled her voice. If the Aes Sedai called ten thousand wolves, if Sorilea had brought a thousand Wise Ones and a hundred thousand spears, the Shaido would still emerge victorious today. The Shaido, and herself. Sevanna of the Jumai Shaido would be a name remembered forever.

Suddenly a hollow boom sounded amid the roar of battle. It seemed to come from the direction of the Aes Sedai wagons, but nothing told her whether they had caused it, or the Wise Ones. She disliked things she did not understand, yet she was not about to ask Rhiale or the others and flaunt her ignorance. And her lack of the ability all here had, save her. It counted for nothing among themselves, but another thing she did not like was for others to have power she did not.

A flicker of light among the *algai’d’siswai*, a sense of something turning, caught the corner of her eye, but when she turned to look, there was nothing. Again the same thing happened, a flash of light seen on the edge of vision, and again when she looked there was nothing to see. Too many things she did not understand.

Shouting encouragement, she eyed the line of Shaido Wise Ones. Some appeared bedraggled, head scarves gone and long hair hanging loose, skirts and blouses covered with dirt or even singed. At least a dozen lay stretched out in a row, groaning, and seven more were still, shawls laid over their faces. It was those on their feet that interested her. Rhiale, and Alarys with her rare black hair all awry. Someryn, who had taken to wearing her blouse unlaced to show even more generous cleavage than Sevanna herself, and Meira, with her long face yet more grim than usual. Stout Tion, and skinny Belinde, and Modarra, as tall as most men.

One of them should have told her if they did something new. The secret of Desaine bound them to her; even for a Wise One, revelation of that would lead to a lifetime of pain—and worse, shame—trying to meet *toh,* if the one revealed was not simply driven naked into the wilderness to live or die as she could, likely to be killed like a beast by any who found her. Even so, Sevanna was sure they took as much delight as the rest in concealing things from her, the things that Wise Ones learned during their apprenticeships, and in the journeys to Rhuidean. Something would have to be done about that, but later. She would not display weakness by asking what they did now.

Turning back to the battle, she found the balance changing, and in her favor it appeared. To the south fireballs and lightning bolts plummeted as heavily as ever, but not in front of her, and it seemed not to the west or north either. What struck toward the wagons still failed to reach the ground more often than not, yet there was a definite slackening of the Aes Sedai's efforts. They had been forced onto the defensive. She *was* winning!

Even as the thought flushed through her like pure heat, the Aes Sedai went silent. Only to the south did fire and lightning still fall among the *algai'd'siswai*. She opened her mouth to shout victory, and another realization silenced her. Fire and lightning stormed down toward the wagons, stormed down and crashed against some unseen obstruction. Smoke from burning wagons was beginning to outline the shape of a dome as it streamed up and finally billowed from a hole in the top of the invisible enclosure.

Sevanna whirled to confront the line of Wise Ones, her face such that several flinched back from her, and maybe from the spear in her hand. She knew she looked ready to use it; she was ready. “Why have you let them do this?” she raged. “Why? You were to obstruct whatever they did, not allow them to make more walls!”

Tion looked ready to empty her stomach, but she planted her fists on broad hips and faced Sevanna directly. “It was not the Aes Sedai.”

“Not the Aes Sedai?” Sevanna spat. “Then who? The other Wise Ones? I told you we must attack them!”

“It was not women,” Rhiale said, her voice faltering. “It was not—” Face pale, she swallowed.

Sevanna turned slowly to stare at the dome, only then remembering to breathe again. Something had risen through the hole where the smoke gushed out. One of the wetlander banners. The smoke was not enough to obscure it completely. Crimson, with a disc half white and half black, the colors divided by a sinuous line, just like the piece of cloth the *siswai’aman* wore. Rand al’Thor’s banner. Could he possibly be strong enough to have broken free, overwhelmed all the Aes Sedai and raised that? It had to be.

The storm still battered at the dome, but Sevanna heard murmurs behind her. The other women were thinking of retreat. Not her. She had always known that the easiest path to power lay through conquering men who already possessed it, and even as a child she was sure she had been born with the weapons to conquer them. Suladric, clan chief of the Shaido, fell to her at sixteen, and when he died, she chose out those most likely to succeed. Muradin and Couladin each believed he alone had captured her interest, and when Muradin failed to return from Rhuidean, as so many men did, one smile convinced Couladin that he had overwhelmed her. But the power of a clan chief paled beside that of the *Car’a’carn*, and even that was nothing beside what she saw before her. She shivered as if she had just seen the most beautiful man imaginable in the sweat tent. When Rand al’Thor was hers, she would conquer the whole world.

“Press harder,” she commanded. “Harder! We will humble these Aes Sedai for Desaine!” And she would have Rand al’Thor.

Abruptly there was a roar from the front of the battle, men shouting, screaming. She cursed that she could not see what was happening. Again she shouted for the Wise Ones to press harder, but if anything, it seemed the fall of flame and lightning against the dome lessened. And then there was something she could see.

Close to the wagons, *cadin'sor*-clad figures and earth erupted into the air with a thunderous crash, not in one place, but in a long line. Again the ground exploded, and again, again, each time a little farther from the encircled wagons. Not a line, but a solid ring of exploding ground and men and Maidens that she had no doubt ran all the way around the wagons. Again and again and again, ever expanding, and suddenly *algai'd'siswai* were pushing past her, buffeting through the line of Wise Ones, running.

Sevanna beat at them with her spear, flailing at heads and shoulders, not caring when the spearhead came away redder then before. “Stand and fight! Stand, for the honor of the Shaido!” They rushed by unheeding. “Have you no honor! Stand and fight!” She stabbed a fleeing Maiden in the back, but the rest just trampled over the fallen woman. Abruptly she realized that some of the Wise Ones were gone, and others picking up the injured. Rhiale turned to run, and Sevanna seized the taller woman’s arm, threatening her with the spear. She did not care that Rhiale could channel. “We must stand! We can still have him!”

The other woman’s face was a mask of fear. “If we stand, we die! Or else we end chained outside Rand al’Thor’s tent! Stay and die if you wish, Sevanna. I am no Stone Dog!” Ripping her arm free, she sped eastward.

For a moment more, Sevanna stood there, letting the men and Maidens push her this way and that as they streamed by in panic. Then she tossed down the spear and felt her belt pouch, where a small cube of intricately carved stone lay. Well that she had hesitated over throwing that away. She had another cord for her bow yet. Gathering her skirts to bare her legs, she joined in the chaotic flight, but if all the rest fled in terror, she ran with plans whirling through her head. She *would* have Rand al’Thor on his knees before her, and the Aes Sedai as well.

Alviarin finally left Elaida’s apartments, as cool and collected as ever on the surface. Inside, she felt wrung out like a damp cloth. She managed to keep her legs steady down the long curving flights of stairs, marble even in the very heights. Liveried servants bowed and curtsied as they scurried about their tasks, seeing only the Keeper in all her Aes Sedai serenity. As she went lower, sisters began to appear, many wearing their shawls, fringed in the colors of their Ajahs, as if to emphasize by formality that they *were* full sisters. They eyed her as she passed, uneasy often as not. The only one to ignore her was Danelle, a dreamy Brown sister. She had been part of bringing down Siuan Sanche and raising Elaida, but lost in her own thoughts, a solitary with no friends even in her own Ajah, she seemed unaware that she had been shoved aside. Others were all too aware. Berisha, a lean and hard-eyed Gray, and Kera, with the fair hair and blue eyes that appeared occasionally among Tairens and all the arrogance so common to Greens, went so far as to curtsy. Norine made as if to, then did not; big-eyed and nearly as dreamy as Danelle at times, and as friendless, she resented Alviarin; if the Keeper came from the White, in her eyes it should have been Norine Dovarna.

The courtesy was not required toward the Keeper, not from a sister, but no doubt they hoped she might intercede with Elaida should that become necessary. The others merely wondered what commands she carried, whether another sister was to be singled out today for some failure in the Amyrlin's eyes. Not even Reds went within five levels of the Amyrlin's new apartments unless summoned, and more than one sister actually hid when Elaida came below. The very air seemed heated, thick with a fear that had nothing to do with rebels or men channeling.

Several sisters tried to speak, but Alviarin brushed past, barely polite, hardly noticing worry bloom in their eyes when she refused to pause. Elaida filled her mind as much as theirs. A woman of many layers, Elaida. The first look at her showed a beautiful woman filled with dignified reserve, the second a woman of steel, stern as a bared blade. She overwhelmed where others persuaded, bludgeoned where others tried diplomacy or the Game of Houses. Anyone who knew her saw her intelligence, but only after a time did you realize that for all her brains, she saw what she wanted to see, would try to make true what she wanted to be true. Of the two indisputably frightening things about her, the lesser was that she so often succeeded. The greater was her Talent for Foretelling.

So easy to forget that, erratic and infrequent; it had been so long since the last Foretelling that the very unpredictability made it strike like a thunderbolt. No one could say when it would come, not even Elaida, and no one could say what it would reveal. Now Alviarin almost felt the woman's shadowy presence following and watching.

It might be necessary to kill her yet. If so, Elaida would not be the first she had killed in secret. Still, she hesitated to take that step without orders, or at least permission.

She entered her own apartments with a sense of relief, as though Elaida's shade could not cross the threshold. A foolish thought. If Elaida had a suspicion of the truth, a thousand leagues would not keep her from Alviarin's throat. Elaida would expect her to be hard at work, personally penning orders for the Amyrlin's signature and seal—but which of those orders were actually to be carried out had yet to be decided. Not by Elaida, of course. Nor by herself.

The rooms were smaller than those Elaida occupied, though the ceilings reached higher, and a balcony looked over the great square in front of the Tower from a hundred feet up. Sometimes she went out on the balcony to see Tar Valon spread out before her, the greatest city in the world, filled with countless thousands who were less than pieces on a stone's board. The furnishings were Domani, pale striped wood inlaid with pearlshell and amber, bright carpets in patterns of flowers and scrolls, brighter tapestries of forest and flowers and grazing deer. They had belonged to the last occupant of these rooms, and if she retained them for any reason beyond not wanting to waste time choosing new, it was to remind herself of the price of failure. Leane Sharif had dabbled in schemes and failed, and now she was cut off from the One Power forever, a helpless refugee dependent on charity, doomed to a life of misery until she either ended it or simply put her face to the wall and died. Alviarin had heard of a few stilled women who managed to survive, but she would doubt those stories until she met one. Not that she had the slightest desire to do so.

Through the windows she could see the brightness of early afternoon, yet before she was halfway across her sitting room, the light suddenly faded into dim evening. The darkness did not surprise her. She turned and went to her knees immediately. "Great Mistress, I live to serve." A tall woman of dark shadow and silver light stood before her. Mesaana.

"Tell me what happened, child." The voice was crystal chimes.

On her knees, Alviarin repeated every word that Elaida had said, though she wondered why it was necessary. In the beginning she had left out unimportant bits, and Mesaana knew every time, demanded *every* word, every gesture and facial expression. Plainly she eavesdropped on those meetings. Alviarin had tried to work out the logic of it and failed. Some things did work to logic, though.

She had met others of the Chosen, whom fools called the Forsaken. Lan-fear had come within the Tower, and Graendal, imperious in their strength and knowledge, making it clear without words that Alviarin was far beneath them, a scullery maid to run errands and wriggle with pleasure if she received a kind word. Be’lal had snatched Alviarin away in the night while she slept—to where she still did not know; she had wakened back in her own bed, and that had terrified her even more than being in the presence of a man who could channel. To him she was not even a worm, not even a living thing, just a piece in a game, to move at his command. First had been Ishamael, years before the others, plucking her out of the hidden mass of the Black Ajah to place her at its head.

To each she had knelt, saying that she lived to serve and meaning it, obeying as they commanded, whatever the command. After all, they stood only a step below the Great Lord of the Dark himself, and if she wanted the rewards of her service, the immortality it seemed they already possessed, it was well to obey. To each she knelt, and only Mesaana had appeared with an inhuman face. This cloak of shadow and light must be woven with the One Power, but Alviarin could see no weave. She had felt the strength of Lanfear and Graendal, had known from the first instant how much stronger in the Power they were than she, but in Mesaana she sensed . . . nothing. As if the woman could not channel at all.

The logic was clear, and stunning. Mesaana hid herself because she might be recognized. She must reside in the Tower itself. On the face of it, that seemed impossible, yet nothing else fit. Given that, she must be one of the sisters; surely she was not among servants, bound to labor and sweat. But who? Too many women had been out of the Tower for years before Elaida’s summons, too many had no close friends, or none at all. Mesaana must be one of those. Alviarin very much wanted to know. Even if she could make no use of it, knowledge was power.

“So our Elaida has had a Foretelling,” Mesaana chimed, and Alviarin realized with a start that she had reached the end of her recital. Her knees hurt, but she knew better than to rise without permission. A finger of shadow tapped silver lips thoughtfully. Had she seen any sister make that gesture? “Strange that she should be so clear and so erratic at the same time. It was always a rare Talent, and most who had it spoke so only poets could understand. Usually until it was too late to matter, at least. Everything always became clear then.” Alviarin kept silent. None of the Chosen conversed; they commanded or demanded. “Interesting predictions. The rebels breaking—like a rotten melon?—was that part of it?”

“I am not certain, Great Mistress,” she said slowly—had it been?—but Mesaana only shrugged.

“Either it is or it is not, and either way can be used.”

“She is dangerous, Great Mistress. Her Talent could reveal what should not be revealed.”

Crystalline laughter answered her. “Such as? You? Your Black Ajah sisters? Or perhaps you think to safeguard me? You are a good girl sometimes, child.” That silvery voice was amused. Alviarin felt her face heat and hoped that Mesaana read the shame, not the anger. “Do you suggest that our Elaida should be disposed of, child? Not yet, I think. She has her uses still. At least until young al’Thor reaches us, and very likely after. Write out her orders and see to them. Watching her play her little games is certainly amusing. You children almost match the *ajah* at times. Will she succeed in having the King of Illian and the Queen of Saldaea kidnapped? You Aes Sedai used to do that, didn’t you, but not for—what?—two thousand years? Who will she try to put on the throne of Cairhien? Will the offer of being king in Tear overcome the High Lord Darlin’s dislike of Aes Sedai? Will our Elaida choke on her own frustration first? A pity she resists the idea of a larger army. I’d have thought her ambitions would leap at that.”

The interview was coming to a close—they never lasted longer than for Alviarin to report and be given her own orders—but she had a question yet to ask. “The Black Tower, Great Mistress.” Alviarin wet her lips. She had learned much since Ishamael appeared to her, not least that the Chosen were neither omnipotent nor all-knowing. She had risen because Ishamael killed her predecessor in his wrath at discovering what Jarna Malari had begun, yet it had not ended for another two years, after the death of another Amyrlin. She often wondered whether Elaida had had any hand in the death of that one, Sierin Vayu; certainly the Black Ajah had not. Jarna had had Tamra Ospenya, the Amyrlin before Sierin, squeezed like a bunch of grapes—obtaining little juice, as it turned out—and made her appear to have died in her sleep, but Alviarin and the other twelve sisters of the Supreme Council had paid in pain before they could convince Ishamael they had no responsibility for it. The Chosen were not all-powerful, and they did not know everything, yet sometimes they knew what no one else did. Asking could be dangerous, though. “Why” was the most dangerous; the Chosen never liked to be asked why. “Is it safe to send fifty sisters to deal with them, Great Mistress?”

Eyes glowing like twin full moons regarded her in silence, and a chill slid up Alviarin’s spine. Jarna’s fate flashed into her mind. Publicly Gray, Jarna had never shown any interest in the *ter’angreal* no one knew a use for—until the day she became snared in one untried for centuries. How to activate it remained a mystery still. For ten days no one could reach her, only listen to her throat-wrenching shrieks. Most of the Tower thought Jarna a model of virtue; when what could be recovered was buried, every sister in Tar Valon and every one who could reach the city in time attended the funeral.

“You have curiosity, child,” Mesaana said finally. “That can be an asset, properly directed. Wrongly directed. . . .” The threat hung in the air like a gleaming dagger.

“I will direct it as you command, Great Mistress,” Alviarin breathed hoarsely. Her mouth was dry as dust. “Only as you command.” But she would still see that no Black sisters went with Toveine. Mesaana moved, looming over her so she had to crane her neck to look up at that face of light and shadow, and suddenly she wondered whether the Chosen knew her thoughts.

“If you would serve me, child, then you must serve and obey me. Not Semirhage or Demandred. Not Graendal or anyone else. Only me. And the Great Lord, of course, but me above all save him.”

“I live to serve you, Great Mistress.” That came out in a croak, but she managed to emphasize the added word.

For a long moment silvery eyes stared down at her unblinking. Then Mesaana said, “Good. I will teach you, then. But remember that a pupil is not a teacher. I choose who learns what, and I decide when they can make use of it. Should I find you have passed on the smallest scrap or used even a hair of it without my direction, I will extinguish you.”

Alviarin worked moisture back into her mouth. There was no anger in those chimes, only certainty. “I live to serve you, Great Mistress. I live to obey you, Great Mistress.” She had just learned something about the Chosen that she could hardly credit. Knowledge was power.

“You have a little strength, child. Not much, but enough.”

A weave appeared seemingly from nowhere.

“This,” Mesaana chimed, “is called a gateway.”

Pedron Niall grunted as Morgase placed a white stone on the board with a smile of triumph. Lesser players might set two dozen more stones each yet, but he could see the inevitable course now, and so could she. In the beginning the golden-haired woman seated on the other side of the small table had played to lose, to make the game close enough to be interesting for him, but it had not taken her long to learn that that led to obliteration. Not to mention that he was clever enough to see through the subterfuge and would not tolerate it. Now she plied all her skill and managed to win nearly half their games. No one had beaten him so often in a good many years.

"The game is yours," he told her, and the Queen of Andor nodded. Well, she would be Queen again; he would see to that. In green silk, with a high lace collar brushing her chin, she looked every inch a queen despite the sheen of perspiration on her smooth cheeks. She hardly appeared old enough to have a daughter Elayne's age, though, much less a son Gawyn's.

"You did not realize I saw the trap you were laying from your thirty-first stone, Lord Niall, and you took my feint from the forty-third stone to be my real attack." Excitement sparkled in her blue eyes; Morgase liked to win. She liked playing to win.

It was all meant to lull him, of course, the playing at stones, the politeness. Morgase knew she was a prisoner in the Fortress of the Light in all but name, albeit a luxuriously pampered prisoner. And a secret one. He had allowed stories of her presence to spread, but issued no proclamations. Andor had too strong a history of opposing the Children of the Light. He would announce nothing until legions moved into Andor, with her their figurehead. Morgase certainly knew that, as well. Very probably she also knew he was aware of her attempts to soften him. The treaty she had signed gave the Children rights in Andor they had never possessed anywhere except here in Amadicia, and he expected that she already planned how to lighten his hand on her land, how to remove his hand altogether as soon as she could. She had only signed because he backed her into a corner, yet confined in that corner, she fought on as skillfully as she maneuvered on a stones board. For one so beautiful, she was a tough woman. No, she was tough, and that was that. She did let herself be caught up in the pure pleasure of the game, but he could not count that a fault when it gave him so many pleasant moments.

Had he been even twenty years younger, he might have played more to her true game. Long years as a widower stretched behind him, and the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light had little time for pleasantries with women, little time for anything except *being* Lord Captain Commander. Had he been twenty years younger—well, twenty-five—and she not trained by the Tar Valon witches. It was easy to forget that, in her presence. The White Tower was a sink of iniquity and the Shadow, and she touched deeply by it. Rhadam Asunawa, the High Inquisitor, would have tried her for her months in the White Tower and hanged her without delay, had Niall allowed it. He sighed regretfully.

Morgase kept her victorious smile, but those big eyes studied his face with an intelligence she could not hide. He filled her goblet and his own with wine from the silver pitcher sitting in a bowl of cool water that had been ice a little while ago.

“My Lord Niall. . . .” The hesitation was just right, the slim hand half-stretched across the table toward him, the added respect in how she addressed him. Once she had called him simply Niall, with more contempt than she would have handed a drunken groom. The hesitation would have been just right had he not had the measure of her. “My Lord Niall, surely you can order Galad to Amador so I may see him. Just for a day.”

“I regret,” he replied smoothly, “that Galad’s duties keep him in the north. You should be proud; he is one of the best young officers among the Children.” Her stepson was a lever to use on her at need, one best used now by keeping him away. The young man *was* a good officer, perhaps the best to join the Children in Niall’s time, and there was no need to put strains on his oath by letting him know his mother was here, and a “guest” only by courtesy.

No more than a slight tightening of her mouth, quickly gone, betrayed her disappointment. This was not the first time she had made that request, nor would it be the last. Morgase Trakand did not surrender just because it was plain she was beaten. “As you say, my Lord Niall,” she said, so meekly that he nearly choked on his wine. Submissiveness was a new tactic, one she must have worked up with difficulty. “It is just a mother’s—”

“My Lord Captain Commander?” a deep, resonant voice broke in from the doorway. “I fear I have important news that cannot wait, my Lord.” Abdel Omerna stood tall in the white-and-gold tabard of a Lord Captain of the Children of the Light, bold face framed by wings of white at his temples, dark eyes deep and thoughtful. From head to toe he was fearless and commanding. And a fool, though that was not apparent at a glance.

Morgase drew in on herself at the sight of Omerna, so small a motion most men would not have noticed. She believed him spymaster for the Children, as everyone did, a man to be feared almost as much as Asunawa, perhaps more. Even Omerna himself did not know he was but a decoy to keep eyes away from the true master of spies, a man known only to Niall himself. Sebban Balwer, Niall's dry little stick of a secretary. Yet decoy or not, something useful did pass through Omerna's hands on occasion. On rare occasions, something dire. Niall had no doubts what the man had brought; nothing else except Rand al'Thor at the gates would have sent him barging in this way. The Light send it was all a rug merchant's madness.

"I fear our gaming is done for this morning," Niall told Morgase, standing. He offered her a slight bow as she rose, and she acknowledged it by inclining her head.

"Until this evening, perhaps?" Her voice still held that almost docile tone. "That is, if you will dine with me?"

Niall accepted, of course. He did not know where she was leading with this new tactic—not where an oaf might suppose, he was sure—but it would be amusing to find out. The woman was full of surprises. Such a pity she was tainted by the witches.

Omerna advanced as far as the great sunflare of gold, set in the floor, that had been worn by feet and knees over centuries. It was a plain room aside from that and the captured banners that lined the walls high beneath the ceiling, age-tattered and worn. Omerna watched her skirt around him without really acknowledging his presence, and when the door closed behind her, he said, "I have not yet found Elayne or Gawyn, my Lord."

"Is *that* your important news?" Niall demanded irritably. Balwer reported Morgase's daughter in Ebou Dar, still mired to her neck with the witches; orders concerning her had already been sent to Jaichim Carridin. Her other son still toiled with the witches as well, it seemed, in Tar Valon, where even Balwer possessed few eyes-and-ears. Niall took a long swallow of cool wine. His bones felt old and brittle and cold of late, yet the Shadow-spawned heat made his skin sweat enough, and dried his mouth.

Omerna gave a start. "Ah . . . no, my Lord." He fumbled in a pocket of his white undercoat and pulled out a tiny bone cylinder with three red stripes running its length. "You wanted this brought as soon as the pigeon arrived in the—" He cut off as Niall snatched the tube.

This was what he had been waiting for, the reason a legion was not already on its way to Andor with Morgase riding at its head, if not leading. If it was not all Varadin's madness, the ravings of a man unbalanced by watching Tarabon collapse into anarchy, Andor would have to wait. Andor, and maybe more.

"I . . . I have confirmation that the White Tower truly has broken," Omerna went on. "The . . . the Black Ajah has seized Tar Valon." No wonder he sounded nervous, speaking heresy. There was no Black Ajah; all of the witches were Darkfriends.

Niall ignored him and broke the wax sealing the tube with his thumbnail. He had used Balwer to start those rumors, and now they came back to him. Omerna believed every rumor his ears caught, and his ears caught them all.

"And there are reports that the witches are conferring with the false Dragon al'Thor, my Lord."

Of course the witches were conferring with him! He was their creation, their puppet. Niall shut out the fool's blather and moved back to the gaming table while he drew a slim roll of paper from the tube. He never let anyone know more of these messages than that they existed, and few knew that much. His hands trembled as they unrolled the thin paper. His hands had not trembled since he was a boy facing his first battle, more than seventy years ago. Those hands seemed little more than bone and sinew now, but they still possessed enough strength for what he had to do.

The writing was not that of Varadin, but of Faisar, sent to Tarabon for a different purpose. Niall's stomach twisted into a knot as he read; it was in clear language, not Varadin's cipher. Varadin's reports had been the work of a man on the brink of madness if not over, yet Faisar confirmed the worst of it and more. Much more. Al'Thor was a rabid beast, a destroyer who must be stopped, but now a second mad animal had appeared, one that might be even more dangerous than the Tar Valon witches with their tame false Dragon. But how under the Light could he fight both?

"It . . . it seems that Queen Tenobia has left Saldaea, my Lord. And the . . . the Dragonsworn are burning and killing across Altara and Mu-randy. I have heard the Horn of Valere has been found, in Kandor."

Still half-distracted, Niall looked up to find Omerna at his side, licking his lips and wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. No doubt he hoped for a glance at what was in the message. Well, everyone would know soon enough.

“It seems one of your wilder fancies wasn’t so wild after all,” Niall said, and that was when he felt the knife go in under his ribs.

Shock froze him long enough for Omerna to pull the dagger free and plunge it in again. Other Lord Captain Commanders had died this way before him, yet he had never thought it would be Omerna. He tried to grapple with his killer, but there was no force in his arms. He hung on to Omerna with the man supporting him, the pair of them eye to eye.

Omerna’s face was red; he looked ready to weep. “It had to be done. It had to be. You let the witches sit there in Salidar unhindered, and. . . .” As if suddenly realizing that he had his arms around the man he was murdering, he pushed Niall away.

Strength had gone from Niall’s legs now as well as his arms. He fell heavily against the gaming table, turning it over. Black and white stones scattered across the polished wooden floor around him; the silver pitcher bounced and splashed wine. The cold in his bones was leaching out into the rest of him.

He was not certain whether time had slowed for him or everything really did happen so quickly. Boots thudded across the floor, and he lifted his head wearily to see Omerna gaping and wide-eyed, backing away from Eamon Valda. Every bit as much the picture of a Lord Captain as Omerna in his white-and-gold tabard and white undercoat, Valda was not so tall, not so plainly commanding, but the dark man’s face was hard, as ever, and he had a sword in his hands, the heron-mark blade he prized so highly.

“Treason!” Valda bellowed, and drove the sword through Omerna’s chest.

Niall would have laughed if he could; breath came hard, and he could hear it bubbling in the blood in his throat. He had never liked Valda—in fact, he despised the man—but someone had to know. His eyes shifted, found the slip of paper from Tanchico lying not far from his hand; it might be missed there, but not if his corpse clutched it. And that message had to be read. His hand seemed to crawl across the floorboards so slowly, brushing the paper, pushing it as he fumbled to take hold. His vision was growing misty. He tried to force himself to see. He had to. . . . The fog was thicker. Part of him tried to shake that thought; there was no fog. The fog was thicker, and there was an enemy out there, unseen, hidden, as dangerous as al'Thor or more. The message. What? What message? It was time to mount and out sword, time for one last attack. By the Light, win or die, he was coming! He tried to snarl.

Valda wiped his blade on Omerna's tabard, then suddenly realized the old wolf still breathed, a rasping, bubbling sound. Grimacing, he bent to make an end—and a gaunt, long-fingered hand caught his arm.

“Would you be Lord Captain Commander now, my son?” Asunawa's emaciated face belonged on a martyr, yet his dark eyes burned with a fervor to unnerve even those who did not know who he was. “You may well be, after I attest that you killed Pedron Niall's assassin. But not if I must say that you ripped open Niall's throat as well.”

Baring teeth in what could pass for a smile, Valda straightened. Asunawa had a love of truth, a strange love; he could tie it into knots, or hang it up and flay it while it screamed, but so far as Valda knew, he never actually lied. A look at Niall's glazed eyes, and the pool of blood spreading beneath him, satisfied Valda. The old man was dying.

“May, Asunawa?”

The High Inquisitor's gaze burned hotter as Asunawa stepped back, moving the snowy cloak away from Niall's blood. Even a Lord Captain was not supposed to be that familiar. “I said may, my son. You have been oddly reluctant to agree that the witch Morgase must be given to the Hand of the Light. Unless you give that assurance—”

“Morgase is needed yet.” Breaking in gave Valda considerable pleasure. He did not like Questioners, the Hand of the Light as they called themselves. Who could like men who never met an enemy not disarmed and in chains? They held themselves apart from the Children, separate. Asunawa's cloak bore only the scarlet shepherd's crook of the Questioners, not the flaring golden sun of the Children that graced his own tabard. Worse, they seemed to think their work with racks and hot irons was the only true work of the Children. “Morgase gives us Andor, so you cannot have her before we have it. And we cannot take Andor until the Prophet's mobs are crushed.” The Prophet had to be first, preaching the coming of the Dragon Reborn, his mobs burning villages too slow to proclaim for al'Thor. Niall's chest barely moved, now. “Unless you want to trade Amadicia for Andor, instead of holding both? I mean to see al'Thor hung and the White Tower ground to dust, Asunawa, and I did not go along with your plan just to see you toss it all on the midden.”

Asunawa was not taken aback; he was no coward. Not here, with hundreds of Questioners in the Fortress and most of the Children wary of putting a foot wrong around them. He ignored the sword in Valda's hands, and that martyr's face took on a look of sadness. His sweat seemed to be tears of regret. "In that case, since Lord Captain Canvele believes that the law must be obeyed, I fear—"

"*I* fear Canvele agrees with me, Asunawa." Since dawn he did, since he realized that Valda had brought half a legion into the Fortress. Canvele was no fool. "The question is not whether I will be Lord Captain Commander when the sun sets today, but who will guide the Hand of the Light in its digging for truth."

No coward, Asunawa, and even less a fool than Canvele. He neither flinched nor demanded how Valda thought to bring this about. "I see," he said after a moment, and then, mildly, "Do you mean to flout the law entirely, my son?"

Valda almost laughed. "You can examine Morgase, but she is not to be put to the question. You can have her for that when I am done with her." Which might take a little time; finding a replacement for the Lion Throne, one who understood her proper relationship to the Children as King Ailron did here, would not happen overnight.

Perhaps Asunawa understood and perhaps not. He opened his mouth, and there was a gasp from the doorway. Niall's pinch-faced secretary stood there, purse-mouthed and knobby, narrow eyes trying to stare at everything except the bodies stretched out on the floor.

"A sad day, Master Balwer," Asunawa intoned, his voice sorrowful iron. "The traitor Omerna has slain our Lord Captain Commander Pedron Niall, the Light illumine his soul." Not an advance on the truth; Niall's chest no longer moved, and killing him had been treason. "Lord Captain Valda entered too late to save him, but he did slay Omerna in the full depth of his sin." Balwer gave a start and began dry-washing his hands.

The birdlike fellow made Valda itch. "Since you are here, Balwer, you may as well be useful." He disliked useless people, and the scribbler was the very form of uselessness. "Carry this message to each Lord Captain in the Fortress. Tell them the Lord Captain Commander has been murdered, and I call for a meeting of the Council of the Anointed." His first act on being named Lord Captain Commander would be to boot the dried-up little man out of the Fortress, boot him so far he bounced twice, and choose a secretary who did not twitch. “Whether Omerna was bought by the witches or the Prophet, I mean to see Pedron Niall avenged.”

“As you say, my Lord.” Balwer’s voice was dry and narrow. “It shall be as you say.” He apparently found himself able to look on Niall’s body at last; as he bowed himself out jerkily, he hardly looked at anything else.

“So it seems you will be our next Lord Captain Commander after all,” Asunawa said once Balwer was gone.

“So it seems,” Valda answered dryly. A tiny slip of paper lay next to Niall’s outstretched hand, the sort used in sending messages by pigeon. Valda bent and picked it up, then exhaled in disgust. The paper had been sitting in a puddle of wine; whatever had been written on it was lost, the ink a blur.

“And the Hand will have Morgase when your need for her is done.” That was not in the slightest a question.

“I will hand her to you myself.” Perhaps a little something might be arranged to sate Asunawa’s appetite for a while. It might make sure Morgase remained amenable, too. Valda dropped the bit of rubbish on Niall’s corpse. The old wolf had lost his cunning and his nerve with age, and now it would be up to Eamon Valda to bring the witches and their false Dragon to heel.

Flat on his belly on a rise, Gawyn surveyed disaster beneath the afternoon sun. Dumai’s Wells lay miles to the south now, across rolling plain and low hills, but he could still see the smoke from burning wagons. What had happened there after he led what he could gather of the Younglings in breaking out, he did not know. Al’Thor had seemed well in charge, al’Thor and those black-coated men who appeared to be channeling, taking down Aes Sedai and Aiel alike. It had been the realization that sisters were fleeing that told him it was time to go.

He wished he could have killed al’Thor. For his mother, dead by the man’s doing; Egwene denied it, but she had no proof. For his sister. If Min had spoken the truth—he should have made her leave the camp with him, whatever she wanted; there was too much he should have done differently today—if Min was right, and Elayne loved al’Thor, then that dreadful fate was reason enough to kill. Maybe the Aiel had done the work for him. He doubted it, though.

With a sour laugh he raised the tube of his looking glass. One of the golden bands bore an inscription. “From Morgase, Queen of Andor, to her beloved son, Gawyn. May he be a living sword for his sister and Andor." Bitter words, now.

There was not much to see beyond sere grass and small, scattered clumps of trees. The wind still gusted, raising waves of dust. Occasionally a flash of movement in a crease between squat ridges spoke of men on the move. Aiel, he was sure. They blended with the land too well to be green-coated Younglings. The Light send that more had escaped than those he had brought out.

He was a fool. He should have killed al'Thor; he had to kill him. But he could not. Not because the man was the Dragon Reborn, but because he had promised Egwene not to raise a hand against al'Thor. As a lowly Accepted, she had vanished from Cairhien, leaving Gawyn only a letter that he had read and reread until the paper was ready to tear along the folds, and he would be unsurprised to learn she had gone to aid al'Thor in some way. He could not break his word, least of all to the woman he loved. Never his word to her. Whatever the cost to himself. He hoped she would accept the compromise he had made with his honor; he had raised not a hand to harm, but none to help, either. The Light send she never asked that of him. It was said that love addled men's brains, and he was the proof.

Suddenly he pressed the looking glass to his eye as a woman galloped a tall black horse into the open. He could not make out her face, but no servant would be wearing a dress divided for riding. So at least one Aes Sedai had managed to escape. If sisters had made it out of the trap alive, maybe more of the Younglings had too. With luck, he could find them before they were killed in small groups by the Aiel. First there was the matter of this sister, though. In many ways he would rather have gone on without her, but leaving her alone, maybe to take an arrow she never saw coming, was not an option he could allow himself. As he started to rise and wave to her, though, the horse stumbled and fell, pitching her over its head.

He cursed, then again when the looking glass showed him an arrow standing up from the black's side. Hastily he scanned the hills, and bit down on another curse; maybe two dozen veiled Aiel stood on a crest staring toward downed horse and rider, less than a hundred paces from the Aes Sedai. Quickly he glanced back. The sister rose unsteadily to her feet. If she kept her wits and used the Power, there should be no way a few Aiel could harm her, especially if she took shelter against more arrows behind the fallen horse. Even so, he would feel better when he had gathered her in.

Rolling away from the crest to lessen the chances of the Aiel seeing him, he slid down the reverse slope until he could stand. He had brought five hundred and eighty-one Younglings south, almost every one who was far enough along in training to leave Tar Valon, but fewer than two hundred waited on their horses in the hollow. Before disaster struck at Dumai's Wells, he was certain there had been a plot afoot to see that he and the Younglings died without returning to the White Tower. Why, he did not know, nor whether the scheme came from Elaida or Galina, but it had succeeded well enough, if not exactly in the way its devisers had thought. Small wonder that he would have preferred to go on without Aes Sedai, had he any choice.

He stopped beside a tall gray gelding with a young rider. Young, as indeed all the Younglings were—many did not need to shave beyond every third day, and a few still only pretended even that—but Jisao wore the silver tower on his collar, marking him a veteran of the fighting when Siuan Sanche was deposed, and scars beneath his clothes from fighting since. He was one of those who could skip the razor most mornings; his dark eyes belonged to a man thirty years older, though. What did his own eyes look like Gawyn wondered.

"Jisao, we have a sister to pull out of the—"

The hundred or so Aiel who came trotting over the low rise to the west recoiled in surprise at finding the Younglings below, but neither surprise nor the Younglings' superior numbers held them back. In a flash they veiled and plunged down the slope, darting in with spears stabbing at horses as often as riders, working in pairs. Yet if the Aiel knew how to fight men on horseback, the Younglings had recently had rough lessons in how to fight Aiel, and slow learners did not live long in their ranks. Some carried slender lances, ending in a foot and a half of steel with a crossguard to prevent the head penetrating too deeply, and all could use their swords as well as any but a blademaster. They fought in twos and threes, each man watching another's back, keeping their mounts moving so the Aiel could not hamstring the animals. Only the quickest Aiel managed to get inside those circles of flashing steel. The war-trained horses themselves were weapons, splitting skulls with their hooves, seizing men with their teeth and shaking them like dogs worrying rats, jaws tearing away half a man's face. The horses screamed as they fought, and men grunted with effort, shouted with the fever that over-took men in battle, the fever that said they were alive and would live to see another sunrise if they had to wade waist-deep in blood. They shouted as they killed, shouted as they died; there seemed little difference.

Gawyn had no time to watch or listen, though. The only Youngling afoot, he attracted attention. Three *cadin'sor*-clad figures dodged through the horsemen, rushing at him with spears ready. Perhaps they thought him easy meat, three on one. He disabused them. His sword left the scabbard smoothly, as smoothly as he flowed from The Falcon Stoops to The Creeper Embraces the Oak to The Moon Rises Over the Lakes. Three times he felt the shock in his wrists of blade meeting flesh, and that quickly three veiled Aielmen were down; two still moving weakly, but they were out of the fight as much as the other. The next to confront him was a different matter.

A lean fellow, overtopping Gawyn by a hand, he moved like a snake, spear flickering while his buckler darted and slanted to deflect sword strokes with a force Gawyn could feel to his shoulders. The Wood Grouse Dances became Folding the Air became The Courtier Taps His Fan, and the Aiel man met each of them at the cost of a slash along his ribs, while Gawyn took a gash on his thigh that only a quick twist kept from being a stab clean through.

They circled one another, oblivious to whatever happened around them. Blood oozed hot down Gawyn's leg. The Aiel man feinted, hoping to draw him off balance, feinted again; Gawyn shifted from stance to stance, sword now high, now low, hoping the man would extend one of those half-thrusts just a little too far.

In the end, it was chance that decided matters. The Aiel man abruptly stumbled a step, and Gawyn ran him through the heart before he even saw the horse that had backed into the man.

Once he would have felt regret; he had grown up believing that if two men must fight, the duel should proceed honorably and cleanly. More than half a year of battles and skirmishes had taught him better. He put a foot on the Aiel man's chest and wrenched his blade free. Ungallant, but fast, and in battle, slow was often dead.

Only, when his sword was free, there was no need for speed. Men were down, Younglings and Aielmen, some groaning, some still, and the rest of the Aiel streaming away to the east, harried by two dozen Younglings, including some who should know better. “Hold!” he shouted. If the idiots allowed themselves to become separated, the Aiel would cut them to dogmeat. “No pursuit! Hold, I said! Hold, burn you!” The Younglings pulled up reluctantly.

Jisao reined his gelding around. “They just thought to cut a path through us on the way wherever they’re going, my Lord.” His sword dripped red from half its length. Gawyn caught the reins of his own bay stallion and swung into the saddle, not waiting to clean or sheath his blade. No time to see who was dead, who might live. “Forget them. That sister is waiting for us. Hal, keep your half-troop to look after the wounded. And watch those Aiel; just because they’re dying doesn’t mean they have quit. The rest, follow me.” Hal saluted with his sword, but Gawyn was already digging in his spurs.

The skirmish had not lasted long, yet too long however short. When Gawyn reached the crest, only the dead horse was to be seen, its saddlebags turned out. Scanning through his looking glass revealed not a sign of the sister, the Aiel or anything else living. All that moved was windblown dust and a dress on the ground near the horse, stirring in the gusts. The woman must have sprinted to be so completely out of sight so quickly.

“She can’t have gone far, even running,” Jisao said. “We can find her if we fan out.”

“We’ll search after we see to the wounded,” Gawyn replied firmly. He was not about to split up his men with Aiel roaming loose. Only a few hours yet till sunset, and he wanted a tight camp on high ground before then. It might be as well if he did manage to find a sister or two; someone was going to have to explain this catastrophe to Elaida, and he would as soon it was an Aes Sedai facing her wrath, not him.

Turning his bay with a sigh, he rode back down to see what the butcher’s bill had been this time. That had been his first real lesson as a soldier. You always had to pay the butcher. He had a feeling there would be bigger bills due soon. The world would forget Dumai’s Wells in what was coming.

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CHAPTER
1

High Chasaline

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the great forest called Braem Wood. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

North and east the wind blew as the searing sun rose higher in a cloudless sky, north and east through parched trees with brown leaves and bare branches, through scattered villages where the air shimmered from the heat. The wind brought no relief, no hint of rain, much less snow. North and east it blew, past an ancient arch of finely worked stone that some said had been a gateway to a great city and others a monument to some long forgotten battle. Only weathered, illegible remnants of carving remained on the massive stones, mutely recalling the lost glories of storied Coremanda. A few wagons trundled by in sight of the arch, along the Tar Valon Road, and folk afoot shielded their eyes from dust raised by hooves and wagon wheels and driven by the wind. Most had no idea where they were going, only that the world seemed to turn somersaults, all order ending where it was not gone already. Fear drove some on, while others were drawn by something they could not quite see and did not understand, and most of them were afraid, too.

Onward the wind traveled, across the gray-green River Erinin, heeling ships that still carried trade north and south, for there had to be trade even in these days, though none could be sure where it was safe to trade. East of the river, the forests began to thin, giving way eventually to low rolling hills covered in brown, tinder-dry grass and dotted sparsely with small clumps of trees. Atop one of those hills stood a circle of wagons, many with the canvas scorched or else completely burned away from the iron hoops. On a makeshift flagstaff, trimmed from a young tree dead in the drought and lashed to a bare wagon hoop for more height, waved a crimson banner, a black-and-white disc in its heart. The Banner of Light, some called it, or al'Thor's Banner. Others had darker names, and shivered as they spoke them in whispers. The wind shook the banner hard and was gone quickly, as if glad to be away.

Perrin Aybara sat on the ground with his broad back against a wagon wheel, wishing the wind lingered. It had been cooler for a moment. And the wind from the south had cleared the scent of death from his nostrils, a scent that reminded him where he was supposed to be, the last place he wanted to be. Much better here, inside the wagon circle, his back to the north, where he could forget after a fashion. The surviving wagons had been hauled up to the hilltop yesterday, in the afternoon, once men could find strength to do more than thank the Light they still breathed. Now the sun climbed again, and the heat with it.

Irritably, he scratched at his short curly beard; the more he sweated, the more it itched. Sweat rolled down the face of every man he could see except the Aiel, and water lay nearly a mile away to the north now. But so did the horrors, and the smells. Most considered it a fair trade. He should have been doing his duty, yet the touch of guilt did not move him. Today was High Chasaline, and back home in the Two Rivers there would be feasting all day and dancing all night; the Day of Reflection, when you were supposed to remember all the good things in your life and anyone who voiced a complaint could find a bucket of water upended over his head to wash away bad luck. Not something anybody wanted when the weather was cold, as it should be; a bucket of water would be a pleasure now. For a man lucky to be alive, he found it remarkably hard to pull up any good thoughts. He had learned things about himself yesterday. Or maybe it had been this morning, after it was all done.

He could sense a few of the wolves still, a handful of those that survived and were now on their way elsewhere, far from here, far from men. The wolves were still the talk of the camp, uneasy speculation over where they had appeared from and why. A few believed Rand had called them. Most thought the Aes Sedai had. The Aes Sedai did not say what they thought. No blame came from the wolves—what had happened, had happened—but he could not match their fatalism. They had come because he called them. Shoulders wide enough to make him seem shorter than he was slumped under the weight of responsibility. Now and then he heard other wolves, that had not come, speak with scorn to those that had: This was what came of mixing with the two-legs. Nothing else could be expected.

It was a strain to keep his thoughts to himself. He wanted to be home, in the Two Rivers. Small chance of that, perhaps ever again. He wanted to howl that the scornful ones were right. He wanted to be with his wife anywhere at all, and everything the way it was before. The chances of which seemed little better, maybe worse. Far more than the yearning for home, more even than the wolves, worry about Faile ate inside him like a ferret trying to burrow out of his middle. She had actually seemed glad to see him leave Cairhien. What was he to do about her? He could not think of words to describe how much he loved his wife, and needed her, but she was jealous where she had no cause, hurt where he had done nothing, angry where he could not see why. He must do something, but what? The answer eluded him. Careful thought was all he had, while Faile was flashing quicksilver.

"The Aiel should put some clothes on them," Aram muttered primly, scowling at the ground. He squatted nearby, patiently holding the reins of a rangy gray gelding; he seldom went far from Perrin. The sword strapped to his back jarred with his green-striped Tinker coat, hanging undone for the heat. A rolled kerchief tied around his forehead kept sweat from his eyes. Once Perrin had thought him almost too good-looking for a man. A bleak darkness had settled in him, though, and now he wore a scowl as often as not. "It isn't decent, Lord Perrin."

Perrin put aside thoughts of Faile reluctantly. With time, he could puzzle it out. He had to. Somehow. "It is their way, Aram."

Aram grimaced as if he might spit. "Well, it isn't a decent way. It keeps them under control, I suppose—nobody would run far or make trouble like that—but it isn't decent."

There were Aiel all over the place, of course. Tall, aloof men in grays and browns and greens, their only bit of color the scarlet strip of cloth tied around their temples, with the black-and-white disc on their foreheads. *Siswai'aman*, they called themselves. Sometimes that word tickled the edge of his memory, like a word he should know. Ask one of the Aielmen, and he looked as if you had babbled nonsense. But then, they ignored the strips of cloth, too. No Maiden of the Spear wore the scarlet headband. Whether white-haired or looking barely old enough to leave her mother, every Maiden stalked about giving the *siswai'aman* challenging stares that seemed somehow self-satisfied, while the men looked back flat-eyed, with a smell almost of hunger, a matter of jealousy by the scent of all of them, though over what Perrin could not begin to imagine. Whatever it was, it was not new, and it did not seem likely to come to blows. A few of the Wise Ones were inside the wagons as well, in bulky skirts and white blouses, wearing their dark shawls in defiance of the heat, glittering bracelets and necklaces of gold and ivory making up for the plainness of the rest of their clothes. Some appeared amused by the Maidens and the *siswai'aman*, and others exasperated. All of them—Wise Ones, Maidens and *siswai'aman*—ignored the Shaido the way Perrin would have a stool or a rug.

The Aiel had taken two hundred or so Shaido prisoners yesterday, men and Maidens—not many, considering the numbers involved—and they moved about freely. In a manner of speaking. Perrin would have been a lot more comfortable had they been guarded. And clothed. Instead, they fetched water and ran errands, naked as the day they were born. With other Aiel, they were meek as mice. Anyone else received a proudly defiant stare for noticing them. Perrin was not the only one who tried *not* to notice them, and Aram not the only one to mutter. A good many of the Two Rivers men in camp did one or both. A good many of the Cairhienin nearly had apoplexy whenever they saw one of the Shaido. The Mayeners just shook their heads as though it were all a joke. And ogled the women. They had as little shame as the Aiel, the Mayeners.

"Gaul explained it to me, Aram. You know what a *gai'shain* is, don't you? About *ji'e'toh* and serving a year and a day and all that?" The other man nodded, which was a good thing. Perrin did not know much himself. Gaul's explanations of Aiel ways often left him more confused. Gaul always thought it all self-evident. "Well, *gai'shain* aren't allowed to wear anything one of the *algai'd'siswai* might wear—that means 'spear fighters,' " he added at Aram's questioning frown. Suddenly he realized he was looking straight at one of the Shaido as she trotted in his general direction, a tall young woman, golden-haired and pretty despite a long thin scar down her cheek and other scars elsewhere. Very pretty and very naked. Clearing his throat roughly, he pulled his eyes away. He could feel his face heating. "Anyway, that is why they are . . . the way they are. *Gai'shain* wear white robes, and they don’t have any here. It’s just their way.” *Burn Gaul and burn his explanations*, he thought. *They could cover them with something!*

“Perrin Goldeneyes,” said a woman’s voice, “Carahuin sends to know whether you wish water.” Aram’s face went purple, and he jerked himself around in his squat, presenting his back to her.

“No, thank you.” Perrin did not need to look up to know it was the golden-haired Shaido woman. He kept peering off at nothing in another direction. Aiel had a peculiar sense of humor, and Maidens of the Spear—Carahuin was a Maiden—had the most peculiar. They had quickly seen how the wetlanders reacted to the Shaido—they would have needed to be blind not to—and suddenly *gai’shain* were being sent to wetlanders left and right, and Aiel all but rolling on the ground at the blushes and stammers and even the shouting. He was sure that Carahuin and her friends were watching now. This was at least the tenth time one of the *gai’shain* women had been sent to ask him whether he wanted water or had a spare whet-stone or some such bloody fool thing.

Abruptly a thought struck him. The Mayeners were seldom bothered this way. A handful of Cairhienin plainly enjoyed looking, if not so openly as the Mayeners, and some of the older Two Rivers men, who should have known better. The point was, none of them had had a second spurious message that he knew of. Those who reacted the most, on the other hand. . . . Cairhienin, who had shouted the loudest about indecency, and two or three of the younger Two Rivers men, who stammered and blushed so hard they looked ready to melt, had been pestered until they fled the wagons entirely. . . .

With an effort Perrin looked up at the *gai’shain’s* face. At her eyes. *Focus on her eyes*, he thought frantically. They were green, and large, and not at all meek. Her scent was pure fury. “Thank Carahuin for me, and tell her you could oil my spare saddle, if she doesn’t mind. And I don’t have a clean shirt. If she wouldn’t mind you doing some laundry?”

“She will not mind,” the woman said in a tight voice, then turned and trotted off.

Perrin whipped his eyes away, though the image did stay in his head. Light, Aram was right! But with luck, he might just have stopped any more visitations. He would have to point this out to Aram, and the Two Rivers men. Maybe the Cairhienin would listen too.

“What are we going to do about them, Lord Perrin?” Still looking away, Aram no longer spoke of *gai’shain*.

“That is Rand’s to decide,” Perrin said slowly, satisfaction fading. It might be odd to think of people wandering about naked as a small problem, but this was definitely a bigger. And one he had been avoiding as hard as he had what lay to the north.

On the far side of the wagon circle, nearly two dozen women sat on the ground. All well-dressed for travel, many wore silk, most with light linen dustcloaks, but not a bead of sweat showed on any face. Three appeared young enough that he might have asked them for a dance before he married Faile.

If they weren’t Aes Sedai, anyway, he thought wryly. Once he had danced with an Aes Sedai, and nearly swallowed his tongue when he realized who he swung about. And she had been a friend, if that word applied to Aes Sedai. *How new does an Aes Sedai have to be for me to put an age to her?* The others looked ageless, of course; maybe in their twenties, maybe their forties, changing from one glance to the next, always uncertain. That was what their faces said, though several showed gray in their hair. You just could not tell with Aes Sedai. About anything.

“At least those are no danger anymore,” Aram said, jerking his head toward three of the sisters a little apart from the rest.

One wept, face on her knees; the other two stared haggardly at nothing, one of them plucking aimlessly at her skirt. They had been much the same since yesterday; at least none was screaming any longer. If Perrin had the straight of it, which he was not sure he did, they had been stilled somehow when Rand broke free. They would never channel the One Power again. To Aes Sedai, it was probably better to be dead.

He would have expected the other Aes Sedai to comfort them, care for them somehow, but most ignored the three entirely, although a little too studied in looking anywhere and everywhere else. For that matter, the stilled Aes Sedai refused to acknowledge the rest, either. In the beginning, at least, a few of the other sisters had approached, each by herself, calm to the eye yet smelling sharply of aversion and reluctance, but they got nothing for their pains, not word or glance. None had gone near this morning.

Perrin shook his head. The Aes Sedai seemed to do a lot of ignoring of what they did not want to admit. For instance, the black-coated men standing over them. There was an Asha'man for each sister, even the three who had been stilled, and they never seemed to blink. For their part, the Aes Sedai looked past the Asha'man, or through them; they might as well not have existed.

It was quite a trick. He could not make himself disregard the Asha'man, and he was not under their guard. They ranged from fuzz-cheeked boys to gray-haired, balding gansers, and it was not their grim, high-collared black coats or the sword each wore at his hip that made them dangerous. Every Asha'man could channel, and somehow they were keeping the Aes Sedai from channeling. Men who could wield the One Power, a thing of nightmares. Rand could, of course, but he was Rand, and the Dragon Re-born besides. These fellows made Perrin's hackles rise.

The captive Aes Sedai's surviving Warders sat some distance off, under their own guard. Thirty or so of Lord Dobraine's armsmen in bell-shaped Cairhienin helmets and as many Mayener Winged Guards in red breast-plates, each sharp-eyed as if guarding leopards. A good attitude, under the circumstances. More Warders than there were Aes Sedai; a number of the prisoners were Green Ajah, apparently. More guards than Warders, a good many more, and maybe few enough at that.

"The Light send we don't see any more grief from that lot," Perrin muttered. Twice during the night the Warders had tried to break free. In truth, those outbreaks had been suppressed more by the Asha'man than by the Cairhienin or Mayeners, and they had not been gentle. None of the Warders had been killed, but at least a dozen nursed broken bones none of the sisters had yet been allowed to Heal.

"If the Lord Dragon cannot make the decision," Aram said quietly, "maybe it should be made by somebody else. To protect him."

Perrin gave him a sidelong look. "What decision? The sisters told them not to make another attempt, and they'll obey their Aes Sedai." Broken bones or no, unarmed as they were, hands tied behind their backs, the Warders still looked like a wolfpack awaiting the lead wolf's command to attack. None would rest easy until his Aes Sedai was free, maybe until all of the sisters were free. Aes Sedai and Warders; a stack of well-aged oak, ready for a flame. But even Warders and Aes Sedai had proved no match for Asha'man.

"I did not mean the Warders." Aram hesitated, then shuffled closer to Perrin and lowered his voice further, to a hoarse whisper. "The Aes Sedai kidnapped the Lord Dragon. He can't trust them, not ever, but he won't do what he has to, either. If they died before he knew it—"

"What are you saying?" Perrin almost choked as he sat bolt upright. Not for the first time, he wondered whether there was any Tinker left in the other man. "They're helpless, Aram! Helpless women!"

"They are Aes Sedai." Dark eyes met Perrin's golden stare levelly. "They cannot be trusted, and they cannot be turned loose. How long can Aes Sedai be held against their will? They've been doing what they do far longer than the Asha'man. They must know more. They're a danger to the Lord Dragon, and to you, Lord Perrin. I have seen them look at you."

Across the wagon circle, the sisters were talking among themselves in whispers even Perrin could not hear, mouths held close to ears. Now and again one did look at him and Aram. At him, not Aram. He had caught a double handful of names. Nesune Bihara. Erian Boroleos and Katerine Alruddin. Coiren Saeldain, Sarene Nemdahl and Elza Penfell. Janine Pavlara, Beldeine Nyram, Marith Riven. Those last were the young sisters, but young or ageless, they watched him with faces so serene it seemed they had the upper hand despite the Asha'man. Defeating Aes Sedai was not easy; making them admit defeat lay on the far side of impossible.

He forced his hands to unknot and rest on his knees, giving an appearance of calm he was nowhere near feeling. They knew he was *ta'veren*, one of those few the Pattern would shape itself around for a time. Worse, they knew he was tied to Rand in some way nobody understood, least of all himself or Rand. Or Mat; Mat was in that tangle, too, another *ta'veren*, though neither of them as strongly as Rand. Given half a chance those women would have him—and Mat—inside the White Tower as fast as they would Rand, tethered like goats until the lion came. And they had kidnapped Rand, mistreated him. Aram was right about one thing; they could not be trusted. But what Aram suggested—he would not—could not!—countenance such a thing. The thought made him queasy.

"I'll hear no more of that," he growled. The onetime Tinker opened his mouth, but Perrin cut him off. "Not a word, Aram, do you hear me? Not one word!"

"As my Lord Perrin commands," Aram murmured, inclining his head.

Perrin wished he could see the man's face. There was no anger in the smell of him, no resentment. That was the worst of it. There had been no anger scent even when Aram suggested murder.

A pair of Two Rivers men climbed up on the wheels of the next wagon, peering across the wagon bed and down the hill toward the north. Each wore a bristling quiver on his right hip and a stout, long-bladed knife, almost a short-sword, on his left. A good three hundred men from home had followed Perrin here. He cursed the first to call him Lord Perrin, cursed the day he had stopped trying to quash it. Even with the murmurs and noises usual in a camp this size, he had no trouble hearing the pair.

Tod al'Caar, a year younger than Perrin, let out a long breath, as if seeing what lay below for the first time. Perrin could almost sense the lanky man's lantern jaw working. Tod's mother had willingly let him go only for the honor of her son following Perrin Goldeneyes. "A famous victory," Tod said finally. "That's what we won. Wasn't it, Jondyn?"

Grizzled Jondyn Barran, gnarled as an oak root, was one of the few older men among the three hundred. A better bowshot than anyone in the Two Rivers except Master al'Thor and a better hunter than anyone at all, he was one of the Two Rivers' less distinguished residents. Jondyn had not worked a day more than he had to since he was old enough to leave his father's farm. The forests and the hunt were all he cared about, that and drinking too much at feastdays. Now he spat loudly. "If you say so, boy. Was those bloody Asha'man won it, anyway. And welcome to it, I say. Too bad they don't take it and go someplace else to celebrate."

"They aren't so bad," Tod protested. "I wouldn't mind being one myself." That sounded more boast and bluff than truth. Smelled it, too; without looking, Perrin was sure he was licking his lips. Likely Tod's mother had used tales of men who could channel to frighten him not so many years ago. "I mean to say, Rand—that is, the Lord Dragon—it still sounds odd, doesn't it, Rand al'Thor being the Dragon Reborn and all?" Tod laughed, a short, uneasy sound. "Well, he can channel, and it doesn't seem so—he doesn't—I mean. . . ." He swallowed loudly. "Besides, what could we have done about all those Aes Sedai without them?" That came out in a whisper. He smelled afraid now. "Jondyn, what are we going to do? I mean, Aes Sedai *prisoners*?"

The older man spat again, louder than before. He did not bother to lower his voice, either. Jondyn always said what he thought no matter who heard, another reason for his bad repute. "Better for us if they'd all died yesterday, boy. We'll pay for that before it's done. Mark me, we'll pay large."

Perrin shut out the rest, no easy task with his ears. First Aram, and now Jondyn and Tod, if not so directly. *Burn Jondyn!* No, the man might make Mat look industrious, but if he spoke it, others thought it. No Two Rivers man would willingly harm a woman, but who else wished the Aes Sedai prisoners dead? And who might try to achieve the wish?

He scanned the wagon circle uneasily. The thought that he might have to protect the Aes Sedai prisoners was not pleasant, but he did not shirk it. He had little fondness for any Aes Sedai, least of all for these, but he had grown up in the unspoken certainty that a man would put himself at risk to protect a woman as far she allowed; whether he liked her or even knew her was beside the point. True, an Aes Sedai could tie any man she chose into a knot nine ways from next feastday, but cut off from the Power, they became like anyone else. That was the struggle whenever he looked at them. Two dozen Aes Sedai. Two dozen women who might not know how to defend themselves without the Power.

For a bit he studied the Asha'man guards, every one wearing a face like grim death. Except the three overseeing the stilled women. They tried to appear as somber as the rest, but under the attempt lay something else. Satisfaction, maybe. If only he was close enough to catch a scent of them. Any Aes Sedai was a threat to the Asha'man. Perhaps the reverse was true, too. Perhaps they would only still them. From the little he had picked up, stilling an Aes Sedai amounted to a killing that just took a few years for the corpse to lie down.

Whatever the case, he decided reluctantly, he had to leave the Asha'man to Rand. They spoke only to each other and the prisoners, and Perrin doubted they would listen to anyone but Rand. The question was, what would Rand say? And what could Perrin do if he said the wrong thing?

Putting that problem aside, he scratched his beard with one finger. The Cairhienin were too nervous about Aes Sedai to consider harming them, and the Mayeners too respectful, but he would keep an eye on them anyway. Who would have thought Jondyn would go as far as he had? Among the Cairhienin or Mayeners, he possessed some influence, though it would surely vanish if they once thought. He was really just a blacksmith, after all. That left the Aiel. Perrin sighed. He was not certain how much influence even Rand truly had with the Aiel.

It was difficult picking out individual scents with so many people around, but he had grown used to telling as much by smells as by what his eyes told him. The *siswai'aman* who came close enough smelled calm but alert, a smooth, strong scent. They hardly appeared to notice the Aes Sedai. The Maidens' aromas were spiky with suppressed fury and grew spikier when they looked at the prisoners. And the Wise Ones. . . . Every Wise One who had come here from Cairhien was able to channel, though none had the ageless face. He supposed they used the One Power too seldom. Still, smooth-cheeked like Edarra or as leathery-faced as white-haired Sorilea, they carried themselves with a self-possession easily matching the Aes Sedai's. Graceful women for the most part, most of them tall, as nearly all Aiel were, they seemed to ignore the sisters completely.

Sorilea's eyes passed across the prisoners without pausing, and she went right on talking softly to Edarra and another Wise One, a lean, yellow-haired woman he did not know by name. If only he could make out what they were saying. They walked by, not a line changing on those three unruffled faces, but their scents were another matter. When Sorilea's gaze swept over the Aes Sedai, the smell of her went cold and distant, grim and purposeful, and as she spoke to the other two, their scents changed to match hers.

"A fine bloody stew," he growled.

"Trouble?" Aram asked, sitting up straighter on his heels, right hand poised to dart for the wolfhead-pommeled sword hilt jutting above his shoulder. He had become very good with that sword in a very short time, and he was never loath to use it.

"There's no trouble, Aram." That was not quite a lie. Jolted out of his glum brooding, Perrin really looked at the others for the first time. At all of them together. He did not like what he saw, and the Aes Sedai were only part.

Cairhienin and Mayeners watched Aiel suspiciously, which was no more than the Aiel's return suspicion, especially toward the Cairhienin. No real surprise there. Aiel did have a certain reputation, after all, for being none too friendly to anyone born this side of the Spine of the World, Cairhienin least of all. Simple truth was, Aiel and Cairhienin hated each other about as hard as it was possible to hate. Neither side had really put their enmity aside—the best that could be said was that it was on a loose leash—yet up to now he had been convinced they would hold it in. For

Rand's sake if no other reason. A mood hung in the camp, though, a tension that had wound everyone tight. Rand was free now, and temporary alliances were just that, after all; temporary. Aiel hefted their spears when they looked at the Cairhienin, and the Cairhienin grimly fingered their swords. So did the Mayeners; they had no quarrel with the Aiel, had never fought them except for the Aiel War when everybody had, but if it came to a fight, there was little doubt which side they would be on. The Two Rivers men, too, probably.

The dark mood had settled deepest into the Asha'man and the Wise Ones, though. The black-coated men paid no more heed to the Maidens and the *siswai'aman* than to Cairhienin or Mayeners or Two Rivers men, but they studied the Wise Ones with faces almost as dark as those they directed at the Aes Sedai. Very likely they made small distinction between one woman who could wield the Power and another. Any could be an enemy and dangerous; thirteen together were deadly dangerous, and there were better than ninety Wise Ones in the camp or nearby. Fewer than half the number of Asha'man, but still enough to do damage if they chose. Women who could channel, yet they seemed to follow Rand; they seemed to follow Rand, yet they were women who could channel.

The Wise Ones looked at the Asha'man only a trifle less coldly than they did the Aes Sedai. The Asha'man were men who could channel, but they followed Rand; they followed Rand, but. . . . Rand was a special case. According to Gaul, his channeling was not mentioned in the prophecies about their *Car'a'carn*, but the Aiel seemed to pretend that inconvenient fact did not exist. The Asha'man were not in those prophecies at all, though. It must be like discovering you had a pride of rabid lions fighting on your side. How long would they remain loyal? Maybe it would be better to put them down now. His head fell back against the wagon wheel, eyes closed, and his chest heaved in silent, mirthless laughter. Think of the good things on High Chasaline. *Burn me,* he thought wryly, *I should have gone with Rand*. No, it was best to know, and better soon than late. But what in the Light was he to do? If the Aiel and the Cairhienin and Mayeners turned on one another, or worse, the Asha'man and the Wise Ones. . . . A barrel full of snakes, and the only way to find out which were vipers was to stick your hand in. *Light, I wish I was home, with Faile, and a forge to work, and nobody calling me bloody lord*.

“Your horse, Lord Perrin. You didn’t say whether you wanted Stepper or Stayer, so I saddled—” At Perrin’s golden-eyed glare, Kenly Maerin shied back into the dun stallion he was leading.

Perrin made a soothing gesture. Not Kenly’s fault. What could not be mended had to be endured. “Easy, lad. You did right. Stepper will do just fine. You chose well.” He hated speaking to Kenly that way. Short and stocky, Kenly was barely old enough to marry or leave home—and certainly not old enough for the patchy beard he was trying to cultivate in imitation of Perrin—yet he had fought Trollocs at Emond’s Field and done well yesterday. But he grinned broadly at praise from Lord Perrin bloody Goldeneyes.

Rising, Perrin took his axe from where he had propped it under the wagon, out of sight and for a little while out of mind, and thrust the haft through the loop on his belt. A heavy half-moon blade balanced by a thick curving spike; a thing made for no other purpose than killing. The axe haft felt too familiar to his hands for comfort. Did he even remember what a good forge-hammer felt like? There were other things besides “Lord Perrin” that it might be too late to change. A friend had once told him to keep the axe until he began to like using it. The thought made him shiver in spite of the heat.

He swung into Stepper’s saddle, shadowed by Aram with the gray, and sat facing south, into the wagon circle. At least half again as tall as even the tallest of the Aiel, Loial was just stepping carefully over crossed wagon tongues. With the size of him, he did look as though he might break one of the heavy wooden shafts with a heedless step. As usual, the Ogier had a book in his hand, a thick finger marking his place, and the capacious pockets of his long coat bulged with more. He had spent the morning in a tiny clump of trees he called restful and shady, but whatever the shade among those trees, the heat was affecting him, too. He looked tired, and his coat was undone, his shirt unlaced, and his boots rolled down below his knees. Or maybe it was more than the heat. Just inside the wagons Loial paused, peering at the Aes Sedai and the Asha’man, and his tufted ears quivered uneasily. Eyes big as teacups rolled toward the Wise Ones, and his ears vibrated again. Ogier were sensitive to the mood of a place.

When he saw Perrin, Loial came striding across the camp. Sitting his saddle, Perrin was two or three hands shorter than Loial standing. “Perrin,” Loial whispered, “this is all wrong. It isn’t right, and it is dangerous besides.” For an Ogier it was a whisper. He sounded like a bumblebee the size of a mastiff. Some of the Aes Sedai turned their heads.

“Could you speak a little louder?” Perrin said almost under his breath. “I think somebody in Andor didn’t hear. In the west of Andor.”

Loial looked startled, then grimaced, long eyebrows brushing his cheeks. “I do know how to whisper, you know.” This time it was unlikely anyone could hear clearly more than three paces away or so. “What are we going to do, Perrin? It is wrong holding Aes Sedai against their will, wrong and wrongheaded, too. I have said that before, and I will again. And that isn’t even the worst. The feel here. . . . One spark, and this place will erupt like a wagonload of fireworks. Does Rand know about this?”

“I don’t know,” Perrin said to both questions, and after a moment the Ogier nodded reluctantly.

“Someone has to know, Perrin. Someone has to do something.” Loial looked north, over the wagons behind Perrin, and Perrin knew there was no putting it off longer.

Unwillingly he turned Stepper. He would rather have worried over Aes Sedai and Asha’man and Wise Ones till his hair fell out, but what had to be done, had to be done. Think of the good on High Chasaline.

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CHAPTER

2

The Butcher's Yard

At first Perrin did not look downslope toward where he would ride, where he should have gone with Rand this morning. Instead he sat his saddle at the edge of the wagons and sent his eyes anywhere else, though the view everywhere made him want to sick up. It was like being hit in the belly with a hammer.

Hammerstroke. Nineteen fresh graves atop a squat hill to the east; nineteen Two Rivers men who would never see home again. A blacksmith seldom had to see people die because of his decisions. At least the Two Rivers men had obeyed his orders. There would have been more graves, otherwise. Hammerstroke. Rectangles of newly turned earth blanketed the next slope over from that, as well, near to a hundred Mayeners, and more Cairhienin, who had come to Dumai's Wells to die. Never mind causes or reasons; they had followed Perrin Aybara. Hammerstroke. The ridge-face to the west seemed solid graves, maybe a thousand or more. A thousand Aiel, buried standing upright, to face each sunrise. A thousand. Some were Maidens. The men tied his stomach into knots; the women made him want to sit down and cry. He tried telling himself that they all had chosen to be here, that they had *had* to be here. Both things were true, but he had given the orders, and that made the responsibility for those graves his. Not Rand's, not the Aes Sedai's; his.

The living Aiel had only stopped singing over their dead a short while ago, haunting songs, sung in parts, that lingered in the mind.

Life is a dream—that knows no shade.
Life is a dream—of pain and woe.
A dream from which—we pray to wake.
A dream from which—we wake and go.

Who would sleep—when the new dawn waits?
Who would sleep—when the sweet winds blow?
A dream must end—when the new day comes.
This dream from which—we wake and go.

They appeared to find comfort in those songs. He wished he could, too, but as far as he could see, the Aiel truly did not seem to care whether they lived or died, and that was mad. Any sane man wanted to live. Any sane man would run as far as he could from a battle, run as hard as he could.

Stepper tossed his head, nostrils flaring at the smells from below, and Perrin patted the dun's neck. Aram was grinning as he looked at what Perrin tried to block out. Loial's face had so little expression it might have been carved from wood. His lips moved slightly, and Perrin thought he heard, "Light, let me never see the like again." Drawing a deep breath, he made his eyes follow theirs, to Dumai's Wells.

In some ways it was not as bad as the graves—he had known some of those people since he was a child—but it all crashed down on him at once anyway, like the scent in his nose made solid and smashing him between the eyes. The memories he wanted to forget came rushing back. Dumai's Wells had been a killing ground, a dying ground, but now it was worse. Less than a mile away, the charred remains of wagons stood around a small copse of trees nearly hiding the low stone copings of the wells. And surrounding that. . . .

A seething sea of black, vultures and ravens and crows in tens of thousands, swirling up in waves and settling again, concealing the broken earth. For which Perrin was more than grateful. The Asha'man's methods had been brutal, destroying flesh and ground with equal impartiality. Too many Shaido had died to bury in less than days, even had anyone cared to bury them, so the vultures gorged, and the ravens, and the crows. The dead wolves were down there, too; he had wanted to bury them, but that was not the wolves' way. Three Aes Sedai corpses had been found, their channeling unable to save them from spears and arrows in the madness of battle, and half a dozen dead Warders, too. They were buried in the clearing near the wells.

The birds were not alone with the dead. Far from it. Black-feathered waves rose around Lord Dobraine Taborwin and over two hundred of his mounted Cairhienin armsmen, and Lord Lieutenant Havien Nurelle with all that remained of his Mayeners aside from the guards on the Warders. *Con* with two white diamonds on blue picked out the Cairhienin officers, all but Dobraine himself, and the Mayeners' red armor and red-streamered lances made a brave show amid the carnage, but Dobraine was not the only one who held a cloth to his nose. Here and there a man leaned from the saddle trying to empty a stomach already emptied earlier. Mazrim Taim, almost as tall as Rand, was afoot in his black coat with the blue-and-gold Dragons climbing the sleeves, and maybe a hundred more of the Asha'man. Some of them heaved up their bellies, too. There were Maidens by the score, more *siswai'aman* than Cairhienin and Mayeners and Asha'man combined, and several dozen Wise Ones to boot. All supposedly in case the Shaido returned, or perhaps in case some of the dead were only shamming, though Perrin thought anyone who pretended at being a corpse here would soon go insane. All centered around Rand.

Perrin should have been down there with the Two Rivers men. Rand had asked for them, spoken about trusting men from home, but Perrin had made no promises. *He'll have to settle for me, and late,* he thought. In a little bit, when he managed to steel himself to the butcher's yard below. Only, butcher knives did not mow down people, and they were tidier than axes, tidier than vultures.

The black-coated Asha'man faded into the sea of birds, death swallowed by death, and ravens and crows surging up hid the others, but Rand stood out in the tattered white shirt he had been wearing when rescue came. Though perhaps he hardly needed deliverance by that time. The sight of Min, close beside Rand in pale red coat and snug breeches, made Perrin grimace. That was no place for her, or anyone, but she stayed closer to Rand since the rescue than even Taim did. Somehow Rand had managed to free both himself and her well before Perrin broke through, or even the Asha'man, and Perrin suspected she saw Rand's presence as the only real safety.

Sometimes as he strode across that charnel ground, Rand patted Min's arm or bent his head as if speaking to her, but not with his main attention. Dark clouds of birds billowed around them, the smaller darting away to feed elsewhere, the vultures giving ground reluctantly, some refusing to take wing, extending featherless necks and squawking defiantly as they waddled back. Now and then Rand stopped, bending over a corpse. Sometimes fire darted from his hands to strike down vultures that did not give way. Every time, Nandera, who led the Maidens, or Sulin, her second, argued with him. Sometimes Wise Ones did, too, from the way they tugged at the body’s coat as if demonstrating something. And Rand would nod and move on. Not without backward glances, though. And only until another body caught his attention.

“What is he doing?” demanded a haughty voice at Perrin’s knee. By scent he knew her before he looked down. Statuesque and elegant in a green silk riding dress and thin linen dust-cloak, Kiruna Nachiman was sister to King Paitar of Arafel and a powerful noble in her own right, and becoming Aes Sedai had done nothing to dampen her manner. Trapped in what he was watching, he had not heard her approach. “Why is he down in that? He should not be.”

Not all the Aes Sedai in the camp were prisoners, though those who were not had been keeping out of sight since yesterday, talking among themselves, Perrin suspected, and trying to figure out what had happened at the last. Maybe trying to figure some way around it. Now they were out in force. Bera Harkin, another Green, stood at Kiruna’s shoulder, a farm-wife by looks despite her ageless face and fine woolen dress, but every scrap as proud as Kiruna in her own way. This farmwife would tell a king to scrape his boots before coming into her house, and be sharp about it. She and Kiruna together led the sisters who had come to Dumai’s Wells with Perrin, or perhaps passed leadership back and forth between them. It was not exactly clear, which was hardly unusual with Aes Sedai.

The other seven stood in a covey not far away. Or maybe in a pride, lionesses, not quail, by their air of being in charge. Their Warders were arrayed behind them, and if the sisters were all outward serenity the Warders made no bones of their feelings. They were disparate men, some in those color-shifting cloaks that seemed to make parts of them disappear, but whether short or tall, thick or thin, just standing there they looked like violence on a frayed leash.

Perrin knew two of those women well, Verin Mathwin and Alanna Mosvani. Short and stout and almost motherly at times in a distracted way, when she was not studying you like a bird studying a worm, Verin was Brown Ajah. Alanna, slim and darkly pretty though a little haggard around the eyes of late for some reason, was Green. Altogether, five of the nine were Green. Once, some time ago, Verin had told him not to trust Alanna too far, and he more than took her at her word. Nor did he trust any of the others, including Verin. Neither did Rand, for all they had fought on his side yesterday, and despite what had happened at the end. Which Perrin still was not sure he believed, even though he had seen it.

A good dozen Asha'man lounged by a wagon about twenty paces from the sisters. A cocky fellow named Charl Gedwyn had charge of them this morning, a hard-faced man who swaggered standing still. All wore a pin in the shape of a silver sword on their tall coat collars, and four or five besides Gedwyn had a Dragon in gold-and-red enamel fastened on the other side. Perrin supposed that had to do with rank in some way. He had seen both on some of the other Asha'man. Not precisely guards, they managed to be wherever Kiruna and the others were. Just taking their ease. And keeping a sharp eye open. Not that the Aes Sedai took any notice, not that you could see. Even so, the sisters smelled wary, and puzzled, and infuriated. Part of that had to be because of the Asha'man.

"Well?" Kiruna's dark eyes flashed impatience. He doubted that many people kept her waiting.

"I don't know," he lied, patting Stepper's neck again. "Rand doesn't tell me everything."

He understood a little—he thought he did—but he had no intention of telling anyone. That was Rand's to reveal, if he chose. Every body that Rand looked at belonged to a Maiden; Perrin was convinced of it. A Shaido Maiden without a doubt, but he was not sure how much difference that made to Rand. Last night he had walked away from the wagons to be by himself, and as the sound of men laughing because they were alive faded behind him, he found Rand. The Dragon Reborn, who made the world tremble, sitting on the ground, alone in the dark, his arms wrapped around himself, rocking back and forth.

To Perrin's eyes, the moon was nearly as good as the sun, but right then he wished for pitch blackness. Rand's face was drawn and twisted, the face of a man who wanted to scream, or maybe weep, and was fighting it down with every scrap of his fiber. Whatever trick the Aes Sedai knew to keep the heat from touching them, Rand and the Asha'man knew, too, but he was not using it now. The night's heat would have done for a more-than-warm summer day, and sweat slid down Rand's cheeks as much as Perrin's.

He did not look around, though Perrin's boots rustled loudly in the dead grass, yet he spoke hoarsely, still rocking. "One hundred and fifty-one, Perrin. One hundred and fifty-one Maidens died today. For me. I promised *them, you see. Don't argue with me! Shut up! Go away!" Despite his sweat, Rand shivered. "Not you, Perrin; not you. I have to keep my promises, you see. Have to, no matter how it hurts. But I have to keep my promise to myself, too. No matter how it hurts."*

Perrin tried not to think about the fate of men who could channel. The lucky ones died before they went mad; the unlucky died after. Whether Rand was lucky or unlucky, everything rested on him. Everything. "Rand, I don't know what to say, but—"

Rand seemed not to hear. Back and forth he rocked. Back and forth. "Isan, of the Jarra Sept of the Chareen Aiel. She died for me today. Chuonde of the Spine Ridge Miagoma. She died for me today. Agirin of the Shelan Daryne. . . ."

There had been nothing for it but to settle on his heels and listen to Rand recite all one hundred and fifty-one names in a voice like pain stretched to breaking, listen and hope Rand was holding on to sanity.

Whether or not Rand was still completely sane, though, if a Maiden who came to fight for him had been missed down there somehow, Perrin was sure that not only would she be buried decently with the others on the ridge, there would be one hundred and fifty-two names in that list. And that was none of Kiruna's business. Not that, or Perrin's doubts. Rand had to stay sane, or sane enough anyway, and that was that. Light, send it so!

And the Light burn me for thinking it so coldly, Perrin thought.

From the corner of his eye he saw her full mouth tighten momentarily. She liked not knowing everything about as well as being made to wait. She would have been beautiful, in a grand sort of manner, except that hers was a face used to getting what it wanted. Not petulant, just absolutely certain that whatever she wanted was right and proper and must be. "With so many crows and ravens in one place, there are certainly hundreds, perhaps thousands, ready to report what they've seen to a Myrddraal." She made no effort to mask her irritation; she sounded as though he had brought every bird there himself. "In the borderlands, we kill them on sight. You have men, and they have bows."

It was true, a raven or crow was all too likely to be a spy for the Shadow, but disgust welled up in him. Disgust and weariness. "To what point?" With that many birds, the Two Rivers men and the Aiel could shoot every arrow they had and spies would still report. Most times there was no way to tell whether the bird you killed was the spy or the one that flew away. “Hasn’t there been enough killing? There will be more soon enough. Light, woman, even the *Asha’man* are sated!”

Eyebrows rose among the onlooking clutch of sisters. No one spoke to Aes Sedai that way, not a king or a queen. Bera gave him a look that said she was considering hauling him out of the saddle and boxing his ears. Still peering toward the shambles below, Kiruna smoothed her skirts, her face coldly determined. Loial’s ears trembled. He had a deep but uneasy respect for Aes Sedai; close to twice as tall as most of the sisters, sometimes he behaved as though one might step on him without noticing if he got in her way.

Perrin gave Kiruna no chance to speak. Give an Aes Sedai a finger, and she took your whole arm, unless she decided to take more. “You’ve been staying clear of me, but I have a few things to say to you. You disobeyed orders yesterday. If you want to call it changing the plan,” he pushed on when she opened her mouth, “then call it that. If you think that makes it better.” She and the other eight had been told to stay with the Wise Ones, well back from the actual fighting, guarded by the Two Rivers men and the Mayeners. Instead they had plunged right into the thick of it, wading in where men were trying to cut one another into dogmeat with swords and spears. “You took Havien Nurelle with you, and half the Mayeners died for it. You don’t go your own way with no regard anymore. I won’t see men die because you suddenly think you see a better way, and the Dark One take whateveryone else thinks. Do you understand me?”

“Are you finished, farmboy?” Kiruna’s voice was dangerously calm. The face she turned up to him might have been carved from some dark ice, and she reeked of affront. Standing on the ground, she somehow made it seem that she was looking down at him. Not an Aes Sedai trick, that; he had seen Faile do it. He suspected most women knew how. “I will tell you something, though the meanest intelligence should be able to reason it out. By the Three Oaths, no sister may use the One Power as a weapon except against Darkfriends or Shadowspawn or in defense of her life, or that of her Warders or another sister. We could have stood where you would have had us and watched until Tarmon Gai’don without ever being able to do anything effective. Not until we were in danger ourselves. I do not like having to explain my actions, farmboy. Do not make me do it again. Do *you* understand?”

Loial’s ears wilted, and he stared straight ahead so hard that it was plain he wished he were anywhere but here, even with his mother, who wanted to marry him off. Aram’s mouth hung open, and he always tried to pretend Aes Sedai did not impress him at all. Jondyn and Tod climbed down from their wagon wheel just a touch too casually; Jondyn managed to stroll away, but Tod ran, looking back over his shoulder.

Her explanation sounded reasonable; it was probably the truth. No, by another of the Three Oaths, it *was* the truth. There were loopholes, though. Like not speaking the whole truth, or talking around it. The sisters might well have put themselves in danger so they could use the Power as a weapon, but Perrin would eat his boots if they had not also been thinking they could reach Rand before anybody else. What would have happened then was anyone’s guess, but he was certain their plans had not included anything like what actually happened.

“He’s coming,” Loial said suddenly. “Look! Rand is coming.” Dropping to a whisper, he added, “Be careful, Perrin.” For an Ogier, it truly was a whisper. Aram and Kiruna probably heard quite clearly, and maybe Bera, but certainly no one besides. “They did not swear anything to you!” His voice went back to its normal boom. “Do you think he might talk to me about what went on inside the camp? For my book.” He was writing a book about the Dragon Reborn, or at least taking notes for one. “I really didn’t see much once the . . . the fighting began.” He had been at Perrin’s side in the thick of it, wielding an axe with a haft nearly as long as he was tall; it was hard to take note of much else when you were trying to stay alive. If you listened to Loial, you would think he was always somewhere else when things became dangerous. “Do you think he might, Kiruna Sedai?”

Kiruna and Bera exchanged looks, then without a word glided across the ground to Verin and the others. Peering after them, Loial heaved a sigh, a wind through caverns.

“You really should have a care, Perrin,” he breathed. “You’re always so hasty with your tongue.” He sounded like a bumblebee the size of a cat instead of a mastiff. Perrin thought he might learn to whisper yet, if they spent enough time around Aes Sedai. He motioned the Ogier to be quiet, though, so he could listen. The sisters began talking right away, but not a sound reached Perrin’s ears. Clearly they had erected a barrier with the One Power.

Clear to the Asha'man as well. They went from lounging to up on their toes in a heartbeat, every line of them focused on the sisters. Nothing said they had taken hold of *saidin*, the male half of the True Source, but Perrin would have wagered Stepper they had. By Gedwyn's angry sneer, he was ready to use it, too.

Whatever obstruction the Aes Sedai had raised, they must have dropped it. They folded their hands, turning to look down the slope in silence. Glances passed among the Asha'man, and finally Gedwyn waved them back to apparent indolence. He looked disappointed. Growling irritably, Perrin turned back to look beyond the wagons.

Rand was strolling up the slope with Min on his arm, patting her hand and talking with her. Once he threw back his head and laughed, and she ducked hers to do the same, brushing back dark ringlets that hung to her shoulders. You might have thought him a countryman out with his girl. Except that he had belted on his sword, and sometimes he ran his hand down the long hilt. And except for Taim right at his other shoulder. And the Wise Ones following almost as close behind. And the rings of Maidens and *siswai'aman*, Cairhienin and Mayeners that completed the procession.

What a relief that he would not have to ride down into that shambles after all; but he needed to warn Rand about all the tangled enmities he had seen this morning. What would he do if Rand did not listen? Rand had changed since leaving the Two Rivers, most of all since being kidnapped by Coiren and that lot. No. He *had* to be sane.

When Rand and Min entered the wagon circle, most of the procession remained outside, though they hardly came alone, but with quite an assembly in its own right.

Taim shadowed Rand, of course, dark and slightly hook-nosed and what Perrin supposed most women would consider good-looking. A number of the Maidens had certainly given him second looks, and third; they were forward about that sort of thing. As Taim stepped inside, he glanced to Gedwyn, who shook his head just a hair. A grimace flashed across Taim's face, gone as soon as it appeared.

Nandera and Sulin were right at Rand's heels, equally of course, and Perrin wondered they did not bring twenty more Maidens. They hardly seemed to let Rand bathe without Maidens guarding the tub, that Perrin could see. He did not understand why Rand put up with it. Each had her *shoufa* draped around her shoulders, baring short hair cut with a tail at the back. Nandera was a sinewy woman, hair more gray than yellow, but her tough features managed to be handsome if not beautiful. Sulin—wiry, scarred, leathery and white-haired—made Nandera look pretty and almost soft. They glanced at the Asha'man, too, without exactly seeming to, then scanned both groups of Aes Sedai just as circumspectly. Nandera's fingers flashed Maiden handtalk. Not for the first time, Perrin wished he could understand it, but a Maiden would give up the spear to marry a toad before teaching their handtalk to a man. A Maiden Perrin had not noticed, sitting on her heels against a wagon a few paces from Gedwyn, answered the same way, and so did another who until that moment had been playing at cat's cradle with a spear-sister near the prisoners.

Amys brought the Wise Ones in and took them aside to confer with Sorilea and a few of the others who had stayed inside the wagons. Despite a face too young for her waist-long white hair, Amys was an important woman, second among the Wise Ones to Sorilea. They used no One Power tricks to shield their talk, but seven or eight Maidens immediately encircled them and began singing softly to themselves. Some sat, some stood, some squatted on their heels, each by herself, and all happenstance. If you were a fool.

It seemed to Perrin that he sighed a great deal since he became mixed up with Aes Sedai and Wise Ones. Maidens, too. Women in general just seemed to give him fits of late.

Dobraine and Havien, leading their horses and minus their soldiers, brought up the rear. Havien had finally seen a battle; Perrin wondered whether he would be so eager to see the next. About the same age as Perrin, he did not look as young today as the day before yesterday. Dobraine, with the front of his long, mostly gray hair shaved in the style of Cairhienin soldiers, definitely was not young, and yesterday definitely had not been his first battle, yet the truth was, he looked older too, and worried. So did Havien. Their eyes sought out Perrin.

Another time, he would have waited to see what they wanted to talk about, but now he slipped from his saddle, tossed Stepper's reins to Aram, and went to Rand. Others were there ahead of him. Only Sulin and Nandera held their silence.

Kiruna and Bera had moved the moment Rand stepped inside the wagons, and as Perrin approached, Kiruna was saying grandly to Rand, "You refused Healing yesterday, but anyone can see you are still in pain, even if Alanna was not ready to leap out of her—” She cut off as Bera touched her arm, but she picked up again almost without pause. “Perhaps you are ready to be Healed now?” That had the sound of “Perhaps you have come to your fool senses?”

“The matter of the Aes Sedai must be settled without any more delay, *Car’a’carn*,” Amys said formally, right atop Kiruna.

“They should be given into our care, Rand al’Thor,” Sorilea added at the same time that Taim spoke.

“The Aes Sedai problem does need to be settled, my Lord Dragon. My Asha’man know how to handle them. They could be held at the Black Tower easily.” Dark, slightly tilted eyes flickered toward Kiruna and Bera, and Perrin realized with a shock that Taim meant *all* the Aes Sedai, not just those who were prisoners now. For that matter, though Amys and Sorilea frowned at Taim, the looks they directed at the two Aes Sedai meant the same.

Kiruna smiled at Taim, at the Wise Ones, a thin smile to fit her lips. It was maybe a fraction harder when directed at the man in the black coat, but she seemed not to realize his intent yet. It was enough that he was who he was. What he was. “Under the circumstances,” she said coolly, “I am certain that Coiren Sedai and the others will give me their parole. You have no more need to worry—”

The others spoke all at once.

“These women have no honor,” Amys said contemptuously, and this time it was clear she included all of them. “How could their parole mean anything? They—”

“They are *da’tsang*,” Sorilea said in a grim voice, as though pronouncing sentence, and Bera frowned at her. Perrin thought that was something in the Old Tongue—again, the word seemed almost something he should recognize—but he did not know why it should make the Aes Sedai scowl. Or why Sulin should suddenly nod agreement with the Wise One, who went on like a boulder rumbling downhill. “They deserve no better than any other—”

“My Lord Dragon,” Taim said, as if belaboring the obvious, “surely you want the Aes Sedai, all of them, in charge of those you trust, those you know can deal with them, and who better—?”

“Enough!” Rand shouted.

They fell silent as one, but their reactions were very different. Taim's features went blank, though he smelled of fury. Amys and Sorilea exchanged glances and adjusted their shawls in near unison; their scents were identical, too, and matched their faces in pure determination. They wanted what they wanted and intended to have it, *Car'a'carn* or no. Looks passed between Kiruna and Bera, as well, speaking such volumes that Perrin wished he could read them the way his nose read scent. His eyes saw two serene Aes Sedai, in command of themselves and anything else they wished to be in command of; his nose smelled two women who were anxious, and more than a little afraid. Of Taim, he was sure. They still seemed to think they could deal with Rand, one way or another, and with the Wise Ones, but Taim and the *Asha'man* put the fear of the Light into them.

Min tugged at Rand's shirtsleeve—she had been studying everybody at once, and the scent of her was almost as worried as the sisters'. He patted her hand while glaring hard at everyone else. Including Perrin, when he opened his mouth. Everybody in the camp was watching, from the Two Rivers men to the Aes Sedai prisoners, though only a few Aiel stood close enough to hear anything. People might watch Rand, but they tended to stay clear of him, too, if they could.

"The Wise Ones will take charge of the prisoners," Rand said at last, and Sorilea suddenly smelled so satisfied that Perrin knuckled his nose vigorously. Taim shook his head in exasperation, but Rand rounded on him before he could speak. He had tucked a thumb behind the buckle of his sword belt, a Dragon etched and gilded, and his knuckles were white from gripping it; his other hand worked on the dark boarhide of his sword hilt. "The Asha'man are supposed to train—and recruit—not stand guard. Especially on Aes Sedai." Perrin's hackles stirred as he realized what aroma wafted from Rand when he looked at Taim. Hatred, touched with fear. Light, he had to be sane.

Taim gave a short, reluctant nod. "As you command, my Lord Dragon." Min glanced uneasily at the black-coated man and moved closer to Rand.

Kiruna smelled of relief, but with one last glance at Bera, she drew herself up in stubborn certainty. "These Aiel women are quite worthy—some might have done well, had they come to the Tower—but you cannot simply hand *Aes Sedai* over to them. It is unthinkable! Bera Sedai and I will —”

Rand raised a hand, and her words stopped in their tracks. Maybe it was his stare, like blue-gray stone. Or maybe it was what showed clearly through his torn sleeve, one of the red-and-gold Dragons that wound around his forearms. The Dragon glittered in the sunlight. “Did you swear fealty to me?” Kiruna’s eyes popped as though something had struck her in the pit of her stomach.

After a moment, she nodded, however unwillingly. She looked as disbelieving now as she had the day before, when she knelt down there by the wells at battle’s end and swore beneath the Light and by her hope of salvation and rebirth to obey the Dragon Reborn and serve him until the Last Battle had come and gone. Perrin understood her shock. Even without the Three Oaths, had she denied it, he would have doubted his own memories. Nine Aes Sedai on their knees, faces aghast at the words coming out of their mouths, reeking of disbelief. Right now Bera’s mouth was puckered up as though she had bitten a bad plum.

An Aiel man joined the small group, a tall man about the same height as Rand, with a weathered face and touches of gray in his dark red hair, who nodded to Perrin and touched Amys’ hand lightly. She might have pressed his hand for a moment in return. Rhuarc was her husband, but that was about as much affection as Aiel displayed in front of others. He was also clan chief of the Taardad Aiel—he and Gaul were the only two men who did not wear the *siswai’aman* headband—and since last night he and a thousand spears had been out scouting in force.

A blind man in another country could have sensed the temper around Rand, and Rhuarc was no fool. “Is this the right moment, Rand al’Thor?” When Rand motioned him to speak, he went on. “The Shaido dogs are still fleeing east as fast as they can run. I saw men with green coats on horses to the north, but they avoided us, and you said to let them go unless they gave trouble. I think they were hunting any Aes Sedai who escaped. There were several women with them.” Cold blue eyes glanced at the two Aes Sedai, anvil flat and anvil hard. Once, Rhuarc had walked lightly around Aes Sedai —any Aiel had—but that had ended yesterday, if not before.

“Good news. I’d give almost anything to have Galina, but still, good news.” Rand touched the hilt of his sword again, eased the blade in its dark scabbard. The action seemed unconscious. Galina, a Red, had been in charge of the sisters who held him prisoner, and if he was calm about her today, yesterday he had been in a fury that she had gotten away. Even now his calm was icy, the sort that could hide smoldering rage, and his scent made Perrin's skin crawl. "They are going to pay. Every one of them." There was nothing to say whether Rand meant the Shaido or the Aes Sedai who had escaped or both.

Bera moved her head uneasily, and he turned his attention back to her and Kiruna. "You swore fealty, and I trust that." He held up his hand, thumb and forefinger nearly touching to show how far. "Aes Sedai always know better than anybody else, or so they think. So I trust you to do what I say, but you won't so much as take a bath without my permission. Or a Wise One's."

This time it was Bera who looked as though she had been struck. Her light brown eyes swiveled to Amys and Sorilea with astonished indignation, and Kiruna quivered with the effort of not doing the same. The two Wise Ones merely shifted their shawls, but once again their aromas were identical. Contentment rolled off of them in waves, a very grim contentment. Perrin thought it a good thing the Aes Sedai did not have his nose, or they would have been ready to go to war right then and there. Or maybe run, and dignity be hanged. That was what he would have done.

Rhuarc stood there idly examining the point of one of his short spears. This was Wise Ones' business, and he always said he did not care what the Wise Ones did so long as they kept their fingers out of clan chiefs' business. But Taim. . . . He made a show of not caring, folding his arms and looking around the camp with a bored expression, yet his scent was strange, complex. Perrin would have said the man was amused, definitely in a better humor than before.

"The oath we took," Bera said at last, planting her hands on her ample hips, "is sufficient to hold anyone but a Darkfriend." The twist she gave to "oath" was almost as bleak as the one she gave "Darkfriend." No, they did not like what they had sworn to. "Do you dare to accuse us—?"

"If I thought that," Rand snapped, "you would be on your way to the Black Tower with Taim. You swore to obey. Well, obey!"

For a long moment Bera hesitated, then in an instant was as regal from head to toe as any Aes Sedai could be. Which was saying something. An Aes Sedai could make a queen on her throne look a slattern. She curtsied slightly, stiffly inclining her head a fraction.

Kiruna, on the other hand, made a visible effort to take hold of herself, the calm she assumed hard and brittle as her voice. “Must we then request *permission* of these *worthy* Aielwomen to ask whether you are willing to be Healed yet? I know Galina treated you harshly. I know you are welts from shoulders to knees. Accept Healing. Please.” Even “please” sounded part of an order.

Min stirred at Rand’s side. “You should be grateful for it, as I was, sheepherder. You don’t like hurting. *Some*body has to do it, or else . . .” She grinned mischievously, very nearly the Min Perrin remembered from before she was kidnapped. “. . . or else you won’t be able to sit a saddle.”

“Young men and fools,” Nandera said suddenly to no one in particular, “sometimes bear pain they do not have to as a badge of their pride. And their foolishness.”

“The *Car’a’carn*,” Sulin added dryly, also to the air, “is not a fool. I think.”

Rand smiled back at Min fondly, and gave Nandera and Sulin wry looks, but when he raised his eyes to Kiruna again, they were stone once more. “Very well.” As she started forward, he added, “But not from you.” Her face grew so stiff it appeared ready to crack. Taim’s mouth quirked in a wry almost-smile, and he stepped toward Rand, but without taking his eyes from Kiruna, Rand flung out a hand behind him. “From her. Come here, Alanna.”

Perrin gave a start. Rand had pointed straight to Alanna with never so much as a glance. That prickled something in the back of his head, but he could not make out what. It seemed to catch Taim, as well. The man’s face became a bland mask, yet dark eyes flickered between Rand and Alanna, and the only name Perrin could put to the scent that writhed in his nose was “puzzled.”

Alanna gave a start, too. For whatever reason, she had been on edge ever since joining Perrin on his way here, her serenity at best a thin veneer. Now she smoothed her skirts, shot a defiant stare at Kiruna and Bera of all people, and glided around in front of Rand. The other two sisters watched her, like teachers intending to make sure a pupil performed well and still not convinced she would. Which made no sense. One of them might be the leader, yet Alanna *was* Aes Sedai, the same as they. It all deepened Perrin’s suspicion. Mixing with Aes Sedai was too much like wading the streams in the Waterwood near to the Mire. However peaceful the surface, currents beneath could snatch you off your feet. More undercurrents seemed to appear here every moment, and not all from the sisters.

Shockingly, Rand cupped Alanna’s chin, turning her face up. There was a hiss of indrawn breath from Bera, and for once, Perrin agreed. Rand would not have been so forward with a girl at a dance back home, and Alanna was no girl at a dance. Just as surprising, her reaction was to blush and smell of uncertainty. Aes Sedai did not blush, in Perrin’s experience, and they were *never* uncertain.

“Heal me,” Rand said, a command, not a request. The red in Alanna’s, face deepened, and anger touched her scent. Her hands trembled as she reached up to take his head between them.

Unconsciously Perrin rubbed the palm of his hand, the one a Shaido spear had laid open yesterday. Kiruna had Healed several gashes in him, and he had had Healing before, too. It felt like being plunged headfirst into a freezing pond; it left you gasping and shaking and weak-kneed. Hungry, too, usually. The only sign Rand gave that anything had been done, though, was a slight shiver.

“How do you stand the pain?” Alanna whispered at him.

“It’s done, then,” he said, removing her hands. And turned from her without a word of thanks. Seeming on the point of speaking, he paused, half-turning to look back toward Dumai’s Wells.

“They have all been found, Rand al’Thor,” Amys said gently.

He nodded, then again, more briskly. “It’s time to be gone. Sorilea, will you name Wise Ones to take over the prisoners from the Asha’man? And also as companions for Kiruna and . . . my other liegewomen.” For an instant, he grinned. “I wouldn’t want them to err through ignorance.”

“It shall be done as you say, *Car’a’carn*.” Adjusting her shawl firmly, the leather-faced Wise One addressed the three sisters. “Join your friends until I can find someone to hold your hands.” It was not unexpected that Bera would frown indignantly, or Kiruna become frost personified. Alanna gazed at the ground, resigned, almost sullen. Sorilea was having none of it. Clapping hands sharply, she made brisk shooing motions. “Well? Move! Move!”

Reluctantly, the Aes Sedai let themselves be herded, making it seem they simply were going where they wished. Joining Sorilea, Amys whispered something that Perrin did not quite catch. The three Aes Sedai apparently did, though. They stopped dead, three *very* startled faces looking back at the Wise Ones. Sorilea just clapped her hands again, louder than before, and shooed even more briskly.

Scratching his beard, Perrin met Rhuarc's eyes. The clan chief smiled faintly and shrugged. Wise Ones' business. That was all very well for him; Aiel were fatalistic as wolves. Perrin glanced at Gedwyn. The fellow was watching Sorilea lecture the Aes Sedai. No, it was the sisters he watched, a fox staring at hens in a coop just out of his reach. *The Wise Ones have to be better than the Asha'man*, Perrin thought. *They have to be*.

If Rand noticed the byplay, he ignored it. "Taim, you take the Asha'man back to the Black Tower as soon as the Wise Ones have charge of the prisoners. As soon as. Remember to keep an eye out for any man who learns too fast. And remember what I said about recruiting."

"I can hardly forget, my Lord Dragon," the black-coated man replied dryly. "I will handle that trip personally. But if I may bring it up again. . . . You need a proper honor guard."

"We have been over that," Rand said curtly. "I have better uses for the Asha'man. If I need an honor guard, those I *am* keeping will do. Perrin, will you—?"

"My Lord Dragon," Taim broke in, "you need more than a few Asha'man around you."

Rand's head turned toward Taim. His face matched any Aes Sedai for giving nothing away, but his scent made Perrin's ears try to lie back. Razor-sharp rage abruptly vanished in curiosity and caution, the one thin and probing, the other foglike; then slashing, murderous fury consumed both. Rand shook his head just slightly, and his smell became stony determination. Nobody's scent changed that fast. Nobody's.

Taim had only his eyes to go by, of course, and all they could tell him was that Rand had shaken his head, if just barely. "Think. You have chosen four Dedicated and four soldiers. You should have Asha'man." Perrin did not understand that; he thought they were *all* Asha'man.

"You think I can't teach them as well as you?" Rand's voice was soft, the whisper of a blade sliding in its sheath.

"I think the Lord Dragon is too busy for teaching," Taim replied smoothly, yet the anger smell rose again. "Too important. Take men who need the least of it. I can choose the furthest along—"

"One," Rand cut in. "And I will choose." Taim smiled, spreading his hands in acquiescence, but the scent of frustration nearly overwhelmed anger. Again Rand pointed without looking. “Him.” This time, he seemed surprised to find he was pointing directly at a man in his middle years sitting atop an upturned cask on the other side of the wagon circle, paying no attention to the gathering around Rand. Instead, elbow on his knee and chin propped on his hand, he was frowning at the Aes Sedai prisoners. The sword and Dragon glittered on the high collar of his black coat. “What is his name, Taim?”

“Dashiva,” Taim said slowly, studying Rand. He smelled even more surprised than Rand did, and irritated, too. “Corlan Dashiva. From a farm in the Black Hills.”

“He will do,” Rand said, but he did not sound sure himself.

“Dashiva is gaining his strength rapidly, but his head is in the clouds often as not. Even when it isn’t, he is not always entirely there. Maybe he’s just a daydreamer, and maybe the taint on *saidin* is touching his brain already. Better for you to chose Torval or Rochaid or—”

Taim’s opposition seemed to sweep away Rand’s uncertainty. “I said Dashiva will do. Tell him he’s to come with me, then turn the prisoners over to the Wise Ones and go. I don’t intend to stand here all day arguing. Perrin, ready everyone to move. Find me when they are.” Without another word he strode off, Min clinging to his arm, and Nandera and Sulin like shadows. Taim’s dark eyes glittered; then he was stalking away himself, shouting for Gedwyn and Rochaid, Torval and Kisman. Black-coated men came running.

Perrin grimaced. With everything he had to tell Rand, he had not opened his mouth once. At that, maybe it would come better away from the Aes Sedai and the Wise Ones. And Taim.

Really there was not much for him to do. He was supposed to be in charge since he had brought the rescue, but Rhuarc knew what needed doing better than he ever would, and a word to Dobraine and Havien was sufficient for the Cairhienin and Mayeners. They still wanted to say something, though they held back until they were alone and Perrin asked what it was.

Then Havien burst out, “Lord Perrin, it’s the Lord Dragon. All that searching through the corpses—”

“It seemed a little . . . excessive,” Dobraine interrupted smoothly. “We worry for him, as you can understand. A great deal depends on him.” He might look a soldier, and he was, but he was a Cairhienin lord, too, and steeped in the Game of Houses, with all its careful talk, like any other Cairhienin.

Perrin was not steeped in the Game of Houses. “He’s still sane,” he said bluntly. Dobraine simply nodded, as if to say of course, shrugged to say he had never intended to question, but Havien went bright red. Watching them go to their men, Perrin shook his head. He hoped he was not lying.

Gathering the Two Rivers men, he told them to saddle their horses and ignored all the bowing, most of which looked spur-of-the-moment. Even Faile said that sometimes Two Rivers people carried bowing too far; she said they were still working out how to behave with a lord. He thought about shouting “I am not a lord” at them, but he had done that before, and it never worked.

When all the others rushed for their animals, Dannil and Tell Lewin remained behind. Brothers, both were beanpoles and they looked much alike, except that Dannil affected mustaches like downturned horns in the Taraboner style, while Tell wore narrow lines of dark hair, in the fashion of Arad Doman, under a nose like a pickaxe. Refugees had brought a lot of new things into the Two Rivers.

“Those Asha’man coming with us?” Dannil asked. When Perrin shook his head, he exhaled so hard in relief that his thick mustaches stirred.

“What about the Aes Sedai?” Ban said anxiously. “They’ll go free, now, won’t they? I mean, Rand is free. The Lord Dragon, that is. They can’t stay prisoners, not Aes Sedai.”

“You two just have everybody ready to ride,” Perrin said. “Leave worrying about Aes Sedai to Rand.” The pair even winced alike. Two fingers rose to scratch worriedly at mustaches, and Perrin jerked his hand away from his chin. A man looked as if he had fleas when he did that.

The camp was abustle in no time. Everyone had been expecting to move soon, yet everyone had things left undone. The captive Aes Sedai’s servants and wagon drivers hurriedly loaded the last items into the wagons and began hitching teams with a jingle of harness. Cairhienin and Mayeners seemed to be everywhere, checking saddles and bridles. Unclothed *gai’shain* went running every which way, though there did not seem to be much for the Aiel to ready.

Flashes of light outside the wagons announced the departure of Taim and the Asha’man. That made Perrin feel better. Of the nine who remained, another besides Dashiva was in his middle years, a stocky fellow with a farmer's face, and one, with a limp and a fringe of white hair, might easily have been a grandfather. The rest were younger, some little more than boys, yet they watched all the hubbub with the self-possession of men who had seen as much a dozen times. They did keep to themselves, though, and together except for Dashiva, who stood a few paces apart staring at nothing. Remembering Taim's caution about the fellow, Perrin hoped he was daydreaming.

He found Rand seated on a wooden crate with his elbows on his knees. Sulin and Nandera squatted easily to either side of Rand, both studiously avoiding looking at the sword at his hip. Holding their spears and bull-hide bucklers casually, here in the midst of people loyal to Rand, they kept a watch on anything that moved near him. Min sat on the ground at his feet with her legs tucked under, smiling up at him.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Rand," Perrin said, shifting the axe haft so he could drop to his heels. No one was close enough to hear except for Rand and Min and the two Maidens. If Sulin or Nandera went running to the Wise Ones, so be it. Without more preamble he launched into what he had seen so far this morning. What he had smelled, too, though he did not say that, Rand was not among the few who knew about him and wolves; he made it all seem what he had seen and heard. The Asha'man and the Wise Ones. The Asha'man and the Aes Sedai. The Wise Ones and the Aes Sedai. The whole tangle of tinder that might burst into flame any moment. He did not spare the Two Rivers men. "They're worried, Rand, and if they are sweating, you can be sure some Cairhienin is thinking about doing something. Or a Tairen. Maybe just helping the prisoners escape, maybe something worse. Light, I could see Dannil and Tell and fifty more besides helping them get away, if they knew how."

"You think something else would be that much worse?" Rand said quietly, and Perrin's skin prickled.

He met Rand's gaze directly. "A thousand times," he said in just as quiet a voice. "I won't be part of murder. If you will be, I'll stand in your way." A silence stretched, unblinking blue-gray eyes meeting unblinking golden.

Frowning at each of them in turn, Min made an exasperated sound in her throat. "You two woolheads! Rand, you know you'll never give an order like that, or let anyone else give it, either. Perrin, you know he won't. Now the pair of you stop acting like two strange roosters in a pen."

Sulin chuckled, but Perrin wanted to ask Min how certain she was, although that was not a question he could voice here. Rand scrubbed his fingers through his hair, then shook his head, for all the world like a man disagreeing with somebody who was not there. The sort of voice that madmen heard.

"It's never easy, is it?" Rand said after a time, looking sad. "The bitter truth is, I can't say which would be worse. I don't have any good choices. They saw to that themselves." His face was despondent, but rage boiled in his scent. "Alive or dead, they're a millstone on my back, and either way, they could break it."

Perrin followed his gaze to the Aes Sedai prisoners. They were on their feet now, and all together, though even so they managed to put a little distance between the three who had been stilled and the rest. The Wise Ones around them were being curt with their orders, by the gestures they made and the tight faces on the sisters. Maybe the Wise Ones were better than Rand keeping them, too. If only he could be sure.

"Did you see anything, Min?" Rand said.

Perrin gave a start and directed a warning glance at Sulin and Nandera, but Min laughed softly. Leaning against Rand's knee, she really did look the Min he knew, for the first time since finding her at the wells. "Perrin, they know about me. The Wise Ones, the Maidens, maybe all of them. And they don't care." She had a talent she kept hidden much as he did the wolves. Sometimes she saw images and auras around people, and sometimes she knew what they meant. "You can't know what that's like, Perrin. I was twelve when it started, and I didn't know to make a secret of it. Everybody thought I was just making things up. Until I said a man on the next street was going to marry a woman I saw him with, only he was already married. When he ran off with her, his wife brought a mob to my aunts' house claiming I was responsible, that I'd used the One Power on her husband or given the two of them some kind of potion." Min shook her head. "She wasn't too clear. She just had to blame somebody. There was talk of me being a Darkfriend, too. There had been some Whitecloaks in town earlier, trying to stir people up. Anyway, Aunt Rana convinced me to say I had just overheard them talking, and Aunt Miren promised to spank me for spreading tales, and Aunt Jan said she'd dose me. They didn't, of course—

they knew the truth—but if they hadn't been so matter-of-fact about it, about me just being a child, I could have been hurt, or even killed. Most people don't like somebody knowing things about their future; most people don't really want to know it themselves, not unless it's good anyway. Even my aunts didn't. But to the Aiel, I am sort of a Wise One by courtesy."

"Some can do things others cannot," Nandera said, as if that was enough explanation.

Min laughed again and reached out to touch the Maiden's knee. "Thank you." Settling her feet beneath her, she looked up at Rand. Now that she was laughing again, she seemed radiant. That held even after she became serious. Serious, and not very pleased. "As for your question, nothing of any use. Taim has blood in his past and blood in his future, but you could guess that. He's a dangerous man. They seem to be gathering images like Aes Sedai." A sidelong look through lowered eyelashes at Dashiva and the other Asha'man said who she meant. Most people had few images around them, but Min said Aes Sedai and Warders always did. "The problem is, what I can see is all blurry. I think it's because they're holding the Power. That often seems true with Aes Sedai, and it's worse when they're actually channeling. Kiruna and that lot have all sorts of things around them, but they stay so close together that it all . . . well . . . jumbles together most of the time. It's even muddier with the prisoners."

"Never mind the prisoners," Rand told her. "That's what they'll stay."

"But Rand, I keep feeling there is something important, if I could only pick it out. You need to know."

" 'If you don't know everything, you must go on with what you do know,' " Rand quoted wryly. "It seems I never do know everything. Hardly enough, most of the time. But there's no choice but to go on, is there." That was not at all a question.

Loial strode up, bubbling with energy despite his obvious weariness. "Rand, they say they're ready to go, but you promised to talk to me while it's fresh." Abruptly his ears twitched with embarrassment, and that booming voice became plaintive. "I am sorry; I know it can't be enjoyable. But I must know. For the book. For the Ages."

Laughing, Rand got to his feet and tugged at the Ogier's open coat. "For the Ages? Do writers all talk like that? Don't worry, Loial. It will still be fresh when I tell you. I won't forget." A grim, sour scent flashed from him despite the smile, and was gone. “But back in Cairhien, after we all have a bath and sleep in a bed.” Rand motioned for Dashiva to come closer.

The man was not skinny, yet he moved in a hesitant, creeping way, hands folded at his waist, that made him seem so. “My Lord Dragon?” he said, tilting his head.

“Can you make a gateway, Dashiva?”

“Of course.” Dashiva began dry-washing his hands, flicking at his lips with the tip of his tongue, and Perrin wondered whether the man was always this jittery, or just when speaking to the Dragon Reborn. “That is to say, the M’hael teaches Traveling as soon as a student shows himself strong enough.”

“The M’Hael?” Rand said, blinking.

“The Lord Mazrim Taim’s title, my Lord Dragon. It means ‘leader.’ In the Old Tongue.” The fellow’s smile managed to be nervous and patronizing at the same time. “I read a great deal on the farm. Every book the peddlers brought by.”

“The M’Hael,” Rand muttered disapprovingly. “Well, be that as it may. Make me a gateway to near Cairhien, Dashiva. It’s time to see what the world has been up to while I was away, and what I have to do about it.” He laughed then, in a rueful way, but the sound of it made Perrin’s skin prickle.

* * *

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CHAPTER

3

Hill of the Golden Dawn

On a wide low hilltop some miles north and east of the city of Cairhien, well away from any road or human habitation, a thin vertical slash of pure light appeared, taller than a man on a horse. The ground sloped away in every direction, undulating gently; nothing more than occasional brush obscured the view for more than a mile, all the way to the surrounding forest. Brown grass fell as the light seemed to rotate, widening into a square opening in midair. A number of the dead stems were slit lengthwise, sliced finer than any razor could have. By a hole in the air.

The instant the gateway was fully open, veiled Aiel poured out, men and Maidens, spreading in every direction to encircle the hill. Almost hidden in the torrent, four sharp-eyed Asha’man took up positions around the gateway itself, peering toward the encircling woodland. Nothing stirred except with the wind, dust, tall grass and branches in the distance, yet each Asha’man studied the vista with the fervor of a starving hawk searching for a rabbit. A rabbit watching for a hawk might have been as intent, but never with that air of menace.

There was really no break in the flow. One moment it was a flood of Aiel, the next, mounted Cairhienin armsmen galloping out two by two, the crimson Banner of Light going up at their head as soon as it cleared the gateway. Without a pause Dobraine drew his men aside and began forming them up a little down the slope, helmeted and gauntleted in precise ranks, lances raised to the same angle. Seasoned campaigners, they were ready to wheel and charge in any direction at his gesture.

On the heels of the last Cairhienin, Perrin rode Stepper through, the dun passing in one stride from the hill below Dumai’s Wells to the hill in Cairhien, and ducked in spite of himself. The upper edge of the thing stood well above his head, but he had seen the damage a gateway could do and had no wish to test whether they were safer standing still. Loial and Aram followed close behind—the Ogier, afoot with his long-hafted axe on his shoulder, bent his knees—and then the Two Rivers men, crouching on their saddles well beyond the gateway. Rad al'Dai carried the Red Wolfhead banner, Perrin's because everyone said it was, and Tell Lewin the Red Eagle.

Perrin tried not to look at those, especially the Red Eagle. The Two Rivers men wanted things both ways. He was a lord, so he had to have banners. He was a lord, but when he told them to get rid of those bloody banners, they never vanished for long. The Red Wolfhead named him something he was not and did not want to be, while the Red Eagle. . . . More than two thousand years after Manetheren died in the Trolloc Wars, close to a thousand after Andor swallowed part of what once had been Manetheren, that banner was still as good as an act of rebellion for an Andorman. Legends still walked in some men's minds. Of course it had been a few generations since Two Rivers folk had had any notion that they were Andormen, but Queens' minds did not change so easily.

He had met the new Queen of Andor what seemed a long time ago, in the Stone of Tear. She had not been Queen then—and was not yet, really, until she was crowned in Caemlyn—but Elayne seemed a pleasant young woman, and pretty, though he was not partial to fair-haired women. A bit taken with herself, of course, as Daughter-Heir. Taken with Rand, too, if snuggling in corners meant anything. Rand meant to give her not only the Lion Throne of Andor, but the Sun Throne of Cairhien. Surely she would be grateful enough to let the flying of a flag pass when it did not really mean anything. Watching the Two Rivers men deploy behind those banners, Perrin shook his head. It was a worry for another day, in any case.

There was nothing like armsmen's precision in the Two Rivers men, most boys like Tod, farmers' sons and shepherds, yet they knew what to do. Every fifth man took the reins of four more horses while the other riders hurriedly dismounted, longbows already strung and in hand. Those on the ground straggled together in rough lines, looking around with more interest than anything else, but they checked their quivers with practiced gestures and handled their bows with familiarity, the great Two Rivers bows, even when strung nearly as tall as the men who drew them. With those bows, not a man of them but could shoot farther than anyone outside the Two Rivers would believe. And hit what he aimed at.

Perrin hoped there would be none of that today. Sometimes he dreamed of a world where there never was. And Rand. . . .

“Do you believe my enemies have been asleep while I was . . . away?” Rand had said suddenly as they stood waiting for Dashiva to open the gateway. He had on a coat rooted out of the wagons, well-cut green wool, but hardly what he usually wore now. Short of taking the coat off a Warder’s back or a cadin’sor *from an Aielman, it was the only garment in the camp to fit him. Truth, you would have thought he insisted on silk and fine embroidery, the way he had had those wagons searched top to bottom, yesterday and this morning.*

The wagons stretched out in line, teams hitched, canvas covers and iron hoops taken down. Kiruna and the rest of the sworn sisters sat packed into the lead wagon, and not happy. They had ceased their protests as soon as they saw that protesting did no good, but Perrin could still hear coldly angry mutters. At least they rode. Their Warders surrounded the wagon afoot, silent and stony, while the Aes Sedai prisoners stood in a rigid, sullen cluster ringed by every Wise One who was not with Rand, which was to say all but Sorilea and Amys. The prisoners’ Warders glowered in another clump a hundred paces off, cold death waiting despite their injuries and siswai’aman *guards. Except for Kiruna’s big black, its reins held by Rand, and a mouse-colored mare with fine ankles for Min, the Aes Sedai’s and Warders’ horses not assigned to Asha’man—or used to fill out wagon teams;* that *had caused a commotion worse than making their owners walk!—were all tied to long lead lines fastened to the wagons’ tailgates.*

“Do you believe it, Flinn? Grady?”

One of the Asha’man waiting to go through first, the stocky fellow with a farmer’s face, looked at Rand uncertainly, then at the leathery old man with the limp. Each wore a silver-sword pin on his collar, but not the Dragon. “Only a fool thinks his enemies stand still when he isn’t looking, my Lord Dragon,” the old man said in a gruff voice. He sounded like a soldier.

“What about you, Dashiva?”

Dashiva gave a start, surprised to be addressed. “I . . . grew up on a farm.” He tugged his sword belt straight, which it did not need. Supposedly they trained with the swords as much as with the Power, but Dashiva did not seem to know one end from the other. “I don’t know much about having *enemies." Despite his awkwardness, there was a kind of insolence to him. But then, the whole lot seemed weaned on arrogance*.

"If you stay near me," Rand said softly, "you will." His smile made Perrin shiver. He smiled while he gave orders to go through the gateway as though they would be attacked on the other side. There were enemies everywhere, he told them. Always remember that. There were enemies everywhere, and you never knew who.

The exodus continued unabated. Wagons rumbled from Dumai's Wells to Cairhien, the sisters in the first like statues of ice being lurched about. Their Warders trotted alongside, hands gripping sword hilts and eyes never resting on one spot; clearly they thought their Aes Sedai needed protection as much from those already on the hill as from anyone who might appear. The Wise Ones marched through herding their charges; a number used sticks to prod the Aes Sedai along, though the sisters made a good job pretending there were neither Wise Ones nor prods. The Shaido *gai'shain* came, trotting in a column four wide under the gaze of a single Maiden; she pointed to a place out of the way before darting to join the other *Far Dareis Mai*, and the *gai'shain* knelt there in lines, naked as jaybirds and proud as eagles. The remaining Warders followed under their guard, radiating a massed fury that Perrin could smell over everything else, then Rhuarc with the rest of the *siswai'aman* and Maidens, and four more Asha'man, each leading a second horse for one of the first four, and Nurelle and his Winged Guards with their red-streamered lances.

The Mayeners were puffed up over being the rear guard, laughing and shouting boasts to the Cairhienin of what they would have done had the Shaido returned, though in fact they were not last. Last of all came Rand on Kiruna's gelding, and Min on her mare. Sorilea and Amys strode along to one side of the tall black horse, Nandera and half a dozen Maidens to the other, and Dashiva led a placid-looking bay mare at their heels. The gateway winked out, and Dashiva blinked at where it had been, smiling faintly, then scrambled clumsily into the mare's saddle. He seemed to be talking to himself, but it was probably because his sword tangled in his legs and he nearly fell. Surely he was not mad already.

An army covered the hill, all arrayed for an attack that plainly was not coming. A small army, only a few thousand, though it would have seemed fair-sized before the Aiel brought their numbers across the Dragonwall. Guiding his horse slowly toward Perrin, Rand scanned the countryside. The two Wise Ones followed closely, talking softly and watching him; Nandera and the Maidens followed, watching everything else. Had Rand been a wolf, Perrin would have said he was testing the air. He carried the Dragon Scepter across his high saddlebow, a two-foot length of spearhead decorated with a green-and-white tassel and carved with Dragons, and now and then he weighed it lightly in his hand as if to remind himself of it.

When Rand reined in, he studied Perrin as intently as he had the surrounding country. “I trust you,” he said finally, nodding. Min stirred in her saddle, and he added, “And you, Min, of course. And you, too, Loial.” The Ogier shifted uncertainly, with a hesitant glance for Perrin. Rand looked around the hillside, at the Aiel and the Asha’man and all the rest. “So few I can trust,” he whispered tiredly. His scent was jumbled enough for two men, anger and fear, determination and despair. And woven through it all, weariness.

Be sane, Perrin wanted to tell him. *Hold on*. A wash of guilt held his tongue, though. Because it was the Dragon Reborn he wanted to say it to, not his friend since childhood. He wanted his friend to stay sane; the Dragon Reborn *had* to stay sane.

“My Lord Dragon,” one of the Asha’man called abruptly. He looked little more than a boy, with dark eyes as big as any girl’s and neither sword nor Dragon on his collar, but pride in his bearing. Narishma, Perrin had heard him called. “To the southwest.”

A figure had appeared, running out from the trees a mile or more away, a woman with skirts hiked to her thighs. To Perrin’s eyes she was clearly Aiel. A Wise One, he thought, though there was no real way to tell at sight. He was just certain. The sight of her brought back all his edginess. Somebody out here, just where they happened to come out of the gateway, could not be good news. The Shaido had been troubling Cairhien again when he set off after Rand, but to the Aiel, a Wise One was a Wise One, whatever her clan. They visited like neighbors over for tea while their clans killed one another. Two Aiel trying to kill each other would step back to let a Wise One pass between. Maybe yesterday had changed that and maybe not. He exhaled wearily. At best she could not be good news.

Nearly everyone on the hill seemed to feel the same. Ripples of motion ran everywhere, spears hefted, arrows nocked. Cairhienin and Mayeners shifted in their saddles, and Aram drew his sword, eyes shining with anticipation. Loial leaned on his tall axe and fingered the edge regretfully.

The head was shaped like that of a huge wood-axe, but engraved with leaves and scrolls and inlaid with gold. The inlay was a trifle scuffed from the axe's late use. If he had to use it again, he would, but with as much reluctance as Perrin used his and for many of the same reasons.

Rand simply sat his horse and watched, face unreadable. Min edged her mare close enough to stroke his shoulder like someone trying to soothe a mastiff with its hackles up.

The Wise Ones also gave no sign of disturbance, but neither did they stay still. Sorilea gestured, and a dozen of the women guarding the Aes Sedai broke off to join her and Amys, well away from Rand and out of even Perrin's hearing. Few had any gray in their hair, and Sorilea's was the only lined face, but then, there was hardly a gray hair to be seen on any of the Wise Ones here. The fact was, not many Aiel lived to have much gray hair. These women had position, though, or influence, however Wise Ones decided such things. Perrin had seen Sorilea and Amys confer with the same lot before, though confer was not quite the word. Sorilea spoke, with an occasional word from Amys, and the others listened. Edarra raised a protest, but Sorilea smothered it, apparently without breaking stride, then pointed out two of their number, Sotarin and Cosain. Immediately, they gathered their skirts over their arms and sped off toward the newcomer, legs flashing.

Perrin patted Stepper's neck. No more killing. Not yet.

The three Wise Ones met nearly half a mile from the hill and stopped. They spoke, just for a moment, and then all came on at a run, back to the hill. And straight to Sorilea. The newcomer, a youngish, long-nosed woman with a mass of incredibly red hair, spoke hurriedly. Sorilea's face grew stonier by the word. Finally the red-haired woman finished—or rather Sorilea cut her short with a few words—and the lot turned to face Rand. None made a move toward him, though. They waited, hands folded at their waists and shawls looped over their arms, inscrutable as any Aes Sedai.

"The *Car'a'carn*," Rand muttered dryly under his breath. Swinging a leg over, he slid from his saddle, then helped Min to the ground.

Perrin climbed down too, and led Stepper after them to the Wise Ones. Loial trailed along, and Aram followed on his horse, not dismounting until Perrin motioned him to. Aiel did not ride, not unless it was absolutely necessary anyway, and they considered it rude for anyone to face them from horseback. Rhuarc joined them, and Gaul, who wore a scowl for some reason. It went without saying that Nandera and Sulin and the Maidens came too.

The red-haired newcomer began as soon as Rand drew near. “Bair and Megana set watches every way you might possibly come back to the treekillers’ city, *Car’a’carn*, but in truth, no one thought this would be—”

“Feraighin,” Sorilea said, sharply enough to draw blood. The red-haired woman’s teeth clicked as she snapped her mouth shut, and she stared fixedly at Rand with brilliant blue eyes, avoiding Sorilea’s glare.

Finally Sorilea took a breath and turned her attention to Rand. “There is trouble in the tents,” she said in a flat voice. “Rumors began among the treekillers that you have gone to the White Tower with the Aes Sedai who came, gone to bend knee to the Amyrlin Seat. None who know the truth dared speak, or the result would have been worse.”

“And what is the result?” Rand asked quietly. He exuded tension, and Min began stroking his shoulder again.

“Many believe you have abandoned the Aiel,” Amys told him just as quietly. “The bleakness has returned. Every day a thousand or more throw down their spears and vanish, unable to face our future, or our past. Some may be going to the Shaido.” For a moment disgust tinged her voice. “There have been whispers that the true *Car’a’carn* would not give himself to the Aes Sedai. Indirian says if you have gone to the White Tower, it cannot be willingly. He is ready to take the Codarra north, to Tar Valon, and dance the spears with any Aes Sedai he finds. Or any wetlander; he says you must have been betrayed. Timolan mutters that if the tales are true, you have betrayed us, and he will take the Miagoma back to the Three-fold Land. After he sees you dead. Mandelain and Janwin hold their counsel, but they listen to Indirian and Timolan both.” Rhuarc grimaced, sucking air between his teeth; for an Aiel, that was as much as tearing his hair in despair.

“It’s not good news,” Perrin protested, “but you make it sound a death sentence. Once Rand shows himself, the rumors are done.”

Rand scrubbed a hand through his hair. “If that was so, Sorilea wouldn’t look like she had swallowed a lizard.” For that matter, Nandera and Sulin looked as though their lizards were still alive on the way down. “What haven’t you told me yet, Sorilea?”

The leather-faced woman gave him a thin, approving smile. “You see beyond what is said. Good.” Her tone stayed flat as worked stone, though.

"You return with Aes Sedai. Some will believe that means you did bend knee. Whatever you say or do, they will believe you wear an Aes Sedai halter. And that is before it is known you were a prisoner. Secrets find crevices a flea could not slip through, and a secret known by so many has wings."

Perrin eyed Dobraine and Nurelle, watching with their men, and swallowed queasily. How many of those who followed Rand did so because he had the weight of the Aiel massed behind him? Not all, certainly, but for every man who had chosen because Rand was the Dragon Reborn, five or even ten had come because the Light shone brightest on the strongest ranks. If the Aiel broke away, or splintered. . . .

He did not want to think about that possibility. Defending the Two Rivers had stretched his abilities as far as they would go, maybe farther. *Ta'veren* or not, he had no illusions he was one of those men who ended up in the histories; that was for Rand. Village-sized problems were his limit. Yet he could not help himself. His mind churned. What to do if the worst came? Lists ran up in his head: who would remain loyal and who might try to slip away. The first list was sufficiently short and the second sufficiently long to dry his throat. Too many people still schemed for advantage as if they had never heard of the Prophecies of the Dragon or the Last Battle. He suspected some still would the day after Tarmon Gai'don began. The worst of it was, most would not be Darkfriends, just people looking out for their own interests first. Loial's ears hung limp; he saw it, too.

No sooner did Sorilea finish speaking to Rand than her eyes whipped to one side in a glare to bore holes in iron. "You were told to remain in the wagon." Bera and Kiruna came to an abrupt halt, and Alanna nearly stumbled into them. "You were told not to touch the One Power without permission, but you listened to what was said here. You will learn that I mean what I say."

Despite Sorilea's auguring stare, the three held their ground, Bera and Kiruna with icy dignity, Alanna with smoldering defiance. Loial's huge eyes rolled toward them, then toward the Wise One; if his ears had been limp before, now they wilted completely, and his long eyebrows dropped to his cheeks. Poring uneasily over his mental lists, Perrin wondered absently how far the Aes Sedai intended to push. Eavesdropping with the Power! They might find a reaction from the Wise Ones worse than Sorilea's bark. From Rand, too.

Not this time, however. Rand seemed unaware of them. He looked right through Sorilea. Or maybe listened to something nobody else could hear again. “What of the wetlanders?” he said finally. “Colavaere has been crowned queen, hasn’t she?” It was not really a question.

Sorilea nodded, thumb tapping the hilt of her belt knife, but her attention never left the Aes Sedai. Who was chosen king or queen among the wetlanders was of small concern to Aiel, especially among the treekilling Cairhienin.

An icicle stabbed into Perrin’s chest. That Colavaere of House Saighan wanted the Sun Throne was no secret; she had schemed for it from the day Galldrian Riatin was assassinated, before Rand had even declared himself the Dragon Reborn, and kept scheming after it became public knowledge that Rand meant the throne for Elayne. Few knew she was a cold-blooded murderer, however. And Faile was in the city. At least she was not alone. Bain and Chiad would be close to her. They were Maidens and her friends, maybe almost what the Aiel called near-sisters; they would not let her be harmed. The icicle would not go away, though. Colavaere hated Rand, and by extension anyone close to Rand. Such as, perhaps, the wife of a man who was Rand’s friend. No. Bain and Chiad would keep her safe.

“This is a delicate situation.” Moving closer to Rand, remarkably, Kiruna ignored Sorilea. For such a scrawny woman, the Wise One had eyes like hammers. “Whatever you do can have serious repercussions. I—”

“What has Colavaere said about me?” Rand asked Sorilea in a too-casual tone. “Has she harmed Berelain?” Berelain, the First of Mayene, was who Rand had left in charge of Cairhien. Why did he not ask about Faile?

“Berelain sur Paendrag is well,” Sorilea murmured, without stopping her study of the Aes Sedai. Outwardly Kiruna stayed calm despite being interrupted and ignored, but the gaze she fixed on Rand could have frozen a forge-fire solid with the bellows pumping. For the rest, Sorilea gestured to Feraighin.

The red-haired woman gave a start and cleared her throat; plainly she had not expected to be allowed a word. She put dignity back on like a hastily donned garment. “Colavaere Saighan says you have gone to Caemlyn, *Car’a’carn*, or maybe to Tear, but wherever you have gone, all must remember that you are the Dragon Reborn and must be obeyed.” Feraighin sniffed; the Dragon Reborn was no part of Aiel prophecies, only the *Car’a’carn*. “She says you will return and confirm her on the throne.

She speaks often to the chiefs, encouraging them to move the spears south. In obedience to you, she says. She does not see the Wise Ones, and hears only the wind when we speak." This time her sniff was a fair approximation of Sorilea's. No one told the clan chiefs what to do, but angering the Wise Ones was a bad way to start convincing the chiefs of anything.

It made sense to Perrin, though, to the part of him that could think of anything besides Faile. Colavaere probably had never paid enough attention to the "savages" to realize the Wise Ones did more than dispense herbs, but she would want every last Aiel out of Cairhien. The question was, given the circumstances, had any of the chiefs listened to her? But the question Rand asked was not the obvious.

"What else has happened in the city? Anything you've heard, Feraighin. Maybe something that might only seem important to a wetlander."

She tossed her red mane contemptuously. "Wetlanders are like sandflies, *Car'a'carn*: who can know what they find important? Strange things sometimes happen in the city, so I have heard, as they do among the tents. People sometimes see things that cannot be, only for a time, what cannot be, is. Men, women, children have died." Perrin's skin prickled: he knew she meant what Rand called "bubbles of evil," rising from the Dark One's prison like froth in a fetid swamp, drifting along the Pattern till they burst. Perrin had been caught in one once; he never wanted to see another. . . . "If you mean what the wetlanders do," she went on, "who has time to watch sandflies? Unless they bite. That minds me of one thing. I do not understand it, but perhaps you do. These sandflies will bite sooner or later."

"What sandflies? Wetlanders? What are you talking about?"

Feraighin was not as good as Sorilea at that level look, yet no Wise One that Perrin had seen appreciated others' impatience. Not even the chief of chiefs'. Thrusting her chin up, she gathered her shawl and answered. "Three days ago the treekillers Caraline Damodred and Toram Riatin approached the city. They issued a proclamation that Colavaere Saighan is a usurper, but they sit in their camp south of the city and do nothing except send a few people into the city now and then. Away from their camp, a hundred of them will run from one *algai'd'siswai*, or even a *gai'shain*. The man called Darlin Sisnera and other Tairens arrived by ship below the city yesterday and joined them. They have been feasting and drinking ever since, as if celebrating something. Treekiller soldiers gather in the city at Colavaere Saighan's command, yet they watch our tents more than they do the other wetlanders' or the city itself. They watch, and do nothing. Perhaps you know the why of all this, *Car'a'carn*, but I do not, nor does Bair or Megana, or anyone else in the tents."

Lady Caraline and Lord Toram led the Cairhienin who refused to accept that Rand and the Aiel had conquered Cairhien, just as High Lord Darlin led their counterparts in Tear. Neither revolt amounted to much; Caraline and Toram had been sitting in the foothills of the Spine of the World for months, making threats and claims, and Darlin the same down in Haddon Mirk. But not any longer, it seemed. Perrin found himself running a thumb lightly along the edge of his axe. The Aiel were in danger of slipping away, and Rand's enemies were coming together in one place. All it needed now was for the Forsaken to appear. And Sevanna with her Shaido. That would put the cream on the honeycake. Yet none of it was any more important than whether somebody saw a nightmare walking. Faile had to be safe; she just had to be.

"Better watching than fighting," Rand murmured thoughtfully, listening to something unseen again.

Perrin agreed with Rand wholeheartedly—just about anything was better than fighting—but Aiel did not see it that way, not when it came to enemies. From Rhuarc to Sorilea, Feraighin to Nandera and Sulin, they stared as though Rand had said sand was better to drink than water.

Feraighin drew herself up practically on tiptoe. She was not particularly tall for an Aiel woman, not quite to Rand's shoulder, but she appeared to be trying to put herself nose-to-nose. "There are few more than ten thousand in that wetlander camp," she said reprovingly, "and fewer in the city. They can be dealt with easily. Even Indirian remembers that you commanded no wetlander killed except in self-defense, but they will make trouble left to themselves. It does not help that there are Aes Sedai in the city. Who can know what they—"

"Aes Sedai?" The words came out cold, Rand's knuckles white on the Dragon Scepter. "How many?" At the smell of him the skin between Perrin's shoulders crawled; suddenly he could *feel* the Aes Sedai prisoners watching, and Bera and Kiruna and the rest.

Sorilea lost all interest in Kiruna. Her hands planted themselves on her hips and her mouth narrowed. "Why did you not tell me this?"

“You gave me no chance, Sorilea,” Feraighin protested a touch breathily, shoulders hunching. Blue eyes swung to Rand, and her voice firmed. “There may be as many as ten or more, *Car’a’carn*. We avoid them, of course, especially since. . . .” Back to Sorilea and breathiness. “You did not want to hear about the wetlanders, Sorilea. Only our own tents. You said so.” To Rand, her back straightening. “Most of them stay beneath the roof of Arilyn Dhulaine, *Car’a’carn*, and seldom leave it.” To Sorilea, hunching. “Sorilea, you know I would have told you everything. You cut me short.” As she realized how many were watching, and how many beginning to smile, among the Wise Ones anyway, Feraighin’s eyes grew wild, and her cheeks reddened. Her head swung between Rand and Sorilea, and her mouth worked but no sound came out. Some of the Wise Ones began laughing behind their hands; Edarra did not bother with a hand. Rhuarc threw back his head and roared.

Perrin certainly did not feel like laughing. An Aiel could find something funny in having a sword stuck through him. Aes Sedai on top of everything else. Light! He cut straight through to what was important. “Feraighin? My wife, Faile, is she well?”

She gave him a half-distracted stare, then visibly pulled together the tatters of her poise. “I think Faile Aybara is well, *Sei’cair*,” she said with cool composure. Or almost. She tried to sneak glances at Sorilea from the corner of her eye. Sorilea was not amused, or anything close to it; arms folded, she gave Feraighin a perusal that made the one she had given Kiruna seem mild.

Amys put a hand on Sorilea’s arm. “She is not at fault,” the younger woman murmured, too softly to reach any ears but the leathery Wise One’s and Perrin’s. Sorilea hesitated, then nodded; the flaying glare faded to her usual cantankerousness. Amys was the only one Perrin had seen able to do that, the only one Sorilea did not trample down when she got in her way. Well, she did not trample Rhuarc, but with him it was more a boulder ignoring a thunderstorm; Amys could make it stop raining.

Perrin wanted more of Feraighin—she *thought* Faile was well?—but before he could open his mouth, Kiruna bulled in with her usual tact.

“Now, listen to me carefully,” she told Rand, gesturing emphatically under his nose. “I called the situation delicate. It is not. The situation is complex beyond your imagining, so fragile a breath could shatter it. Bera and I will accompany you to the city. Yes, yes, Alanna; and you, as well.”

She waved away the slender Aes Sedai impatiently. Perrin thought she was trying that looming trick. She did seem to be peering down her nose at Rand, though tall as she was, he stood head and shoulders taller. “You must let yourself be guided by us. One wrong move, one wrong word, and you may deliver to Cairhien the same disaster you gave Tarabon and Arad Doman. Worse, you can do incalculable damage to matters about which you know almost nothing.”

Perrin winced. The whole speech could not have been better designed to inflame Rand. But Rand simply listened till she was done, then turned to Sorilea. “Take the Aes Sedai to the tents. All of them, for now. Make sure everyone knows they’re Aes Sedai. Let it be seen that they hop when you say toad. Since you hop when the *Car’a’carn* says it, that should convince everybody I’m not wearing an Aes Sedai leash.”

Kiruna’s face grew bright red; she smelled of outrage and indignation so strongly that Perrin’s nose itched. Bera tried to calm her, without much success, while shooting you-ignorant-young-lout looks at Rand, and Alanna bit her lip in an effort not to smile. Going by the odors drifting from Sorilea and the others, Alanna had no reason to be pleased.

Sorilea gave Rand a slash of smile. “Perhaps, *Car’a’carn*,” she said dryly. Perrin doubted that she hopped for anyone. “Perhaps it will.” She did not sound convinced.

With another shake of his head, Rand stalked off with Min, shadowed by the Maidens and issuing orders as to who was to go with him and who with the Wise Ones. Rhuarc began ordering the *siswai’aman*. Alanna followed Rand with her eyes. Perrin wished he knew what was going on there. Sorilea and the others watched Rand, too, and they smelled anything but gentle.

Feraighin was standing alone, he realized. Now was his chance. But when he tried to catch her up, Sorilea and Amys and the rest of the “council” surrounded her, neatly shouldering him away. They moved some distance before they began showering her with questions, the sharp looks directed at Kiruna and the other two sisters leaving no doubt they would tolerate no further eavesdropping. Kiruna appeared to be considering it, glowering till it seemed a wonder her dark hair was not standing on end. Bera was speaking to her firmly, and without trying Perrin heard “sensible” and “patience,” “cautious” and “foolish.” Which applied to whom was not evident.

“There will be fighting when we reach the city.” Aram sounded eager.

“Of course not,” Loial said stoutly. His ears twitched, and he peered uncomfortably at his axe. “There won’t be, will there, Perrin?”

Perrin shook his head. He did not know. If only the other Wise Ones would leave Feraighin alone, just for a few moments. What did they have to talk about that was so important?

“Women,” Gaul muttered, “are stranger than drunken wetlanders.”

“What?” Perrin said absently. What would happen should he simply push through the circle of Wise Ones? As if she had read his mind Edarra gave him a pointed frown. So did some of the others; sometimes it did seem women could read men’s minds. Well. . . .

“I said women are strange, Perrin Aybara. Chiad told me she would not lay a bridal wreath at my feet; she actually *told* me.” The Aiel man sounded scandalized. “She said she would take me for a lover, her and Bain, but no more.” Another time that would have shocked Perrin, though he had heard it before; Aiel were incredibly . . . free . . . about such things. “As if I am not good enough for a husband.” Gaul snorted angrily. “I do not like Bain, but I would marry her to make Chiad happy. If Chiad will not make a bridal wreath, she should stop trying to entice me. If I cannot catch her interest well enough for her to marry me, she should let me go.”

Perrin frowned at him. The green-eyed Aiel man was taller than Rand, nearly a head taller than he. “What are you talking about?”

“Chiad, of course. Have you not been listening? She avoids me, but every time I see her, she pauses long enough to make sure I have seen her. I do not know how you wetlanders do it, but with us, that is one of the ways a woman uses. When you least expect her, she is in your eyes, then gone. I did not even know she was with the Maidens until this morning.”

“You mean she’s here?” Perrin whispered. That icicle was back, now a blade, hollowing him out. “And Bain? Here, too?”

Gaul shrugged. “One is seldom far from the other. But it is Chiad’s interest I want, not Bain’s.”

“Burn their bloody interest!” Perrin shouted. The Wise Ones turned to look at him. In fact, people all over the hillside did. Kiruna and Bera were staring, faces entirely too thoughtful. With an effort he managed to lower his voice. He could do nothing about the intensity, though. “They were supposed to be protecting her! She’s in the city, in the Royal Palace, with

Colavaere—with Colavaere!—and they were supposed to be protecting her.”

Scratching his head, Gaul looked at Loial. “Is this wetlander humor? Faile Aybara is out of short skirts.”

“I know she’s not a child!” Perrin drew a deep breath. It was very hard keeping a level tone with his belly full of acid. “Loial, will you explain to this . . . to Gaul, that our women don’t run around with spears, that Colavaere wouldn’t offer to fight Faile, she’d just order somebody to cut her throat or throw her off a wall or. . . .” The images were too much. He was going to empty his stomach in a moment.

Loial patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. “Perrin, I know you’re worried. I know how I’d feel if I thought anything happened to Erith.” The tufts on his ears quivered. He was a fine one to talk; he would run as hard as he could to avoid his mother and the young Ogier woman she had chosen for him. “Ah. Well. Perrin, Faile is waiting for you, safe and sound. I know it. And you know she can care for herself. Why, she could care for herself and you and me, and Gaul, as well.” His booming laugh sounded forced, and it quickly faded to grave seriousness. “Perrin. . . . Perrin, you know you can’t always be there to protect Faile, however much you want to. You are *ta’veren*; the Pattern spun you out for a purpose, and it will use you for that purpose.”

“Burn the Pattern,” Perrin growled. “It can all burn, if it keeps her safe.” Loial’s ears went rigid with shock, and even Gaul looked taken aback.

What does that make me? Perrin thought. He had been scornful of those who scribbled and scrabbled for their own ends, ignoring the Last Battle and the Dark One’s shadow creeping over the world. How was he different from them?

Rand reined the black in beside him. “Are you coming?”

“I’m coming,” Perrin said bleakly. He had no answer for his own questions, but he knew one thing. To him, Faile *was* the world.

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CHAPTER

4

Into Cairhien

Perrin would have set a harder pace than Rand did, though he knew the horses could not have stood it long. Half the time they rode at a trot, the other half ran alongside their animals. Rand seemed unaware of anyone else, except that he always had a hand for Min if she stumbled. For the rest, he was lost in some other world, blinking in surprise when he noticed Perrin, or Loial. Truth to tell, nobody was any better. Dobraine’s men and Havien’s stared straight ahead, chewing their own worries over what they would find. The Two Rivers men had soaked in Perrin’s dark mood. They liked Faile—truth be told, some worshipped her—and if she had been hurt in any way. . . . Even Aram’s eagerness grew bleak once he realized that Faile might be in danger. Every man focused on the leagues before them, toward the city ahead. Except for the Asha’man, anyway; close behind Rand like a cluster of ravens, they studied the country the column crossed, still wary of an ambush. Dashiva slumped in his saddle like a sack, and muttered darkly to himself when he had to run; he glared as if he hoped there was an ambush.

Small chance of that. Sulin and a dozen *Far Dareis Mai* trotted ahead of the column in Perrin’s sight, with as many more farther ahead, probing the way, and an equal number on the flanks. Some had thrust their short spears into the harnesses that held their bow cases on their backs, so the spear-heads bobbed above their heads; the short horn bows were out, arrows nocked. They kept equally sharp watch for anything that might threaten the *Car’a’carn* and on Rand himself, as though they suspected he might vanish again. If any trap waited, any danger approached, they would find it.

Chiad was one of the Maidens with Sulin, a tall woman with dark reddish hair and gray eyes. Perrin stared at her back, willing her to drop behind the others and speak to him. Now and then she spared him a glance, but she avoided him as if he had three diseases, all catching. Bain was not with the column; most of the Maidens followed much the same route with Rhuarc and the *algai'd'siswai*, but moving more slowly because of the wagons and prisoners.

Faile's black mare trotted behind Stepper, her reins tied to his saddle. The Two Rivers men had brought Swallow from Caemlyn when they joined him before Dumai's Wells. Every time he looked at the mare prancing along behind him, his wife's face swelled in his thoughts, her bold nose and generous mouth, flashing dark eyes tilted above high cheekbones. She loved the animal, maybe almost as much as she did him. A woman as proud as she was beautiful, as fiery as she was proud. Davram Bashere's daughter would not hide, or even hold her tongue, not for the likes of Colavaere.

Four times they stopped to rest the mounts, and he ground his teeth at the delay. Taking good care of horses was second nature to him; he checked Stepper absently, gave the stallion a little water by rote. Swallow he was more careful with. If Swallow reached Cairhien safely. . . . A notion had planted itself in his mind. If he brought her mare to Cairhien, Faile would be all right. It was ludicrous, a boy's fancy, a *small* boy's *foolish* fancy, and it would not go away.

At each of those stops, Min tried to reassure him. With a bantering grin, she said he looked like death on a winter morning, just waiting for somebody to shovel his grave full. She told him if he approached his wife with a face like that, Faile would slam the door on him. But she had to admit that none of her viewings promised that Faile was unharmed.

"Light, Perrin," she said at last in exasperated tones, snugging her gray riding gloves, "if anyone tries to harm the woman, she'll make him wait out in the hall till she has time for him." He very nearly growled at her. It was not that the two disliked each other, exactly.

Loial reminded Perrin that Hunters for the Horn could take care of themselves, that Faile had survived Trollocs unscathed. "She is well, Perrin," he boomed heartily, trotting beside Stepper with his long axe across his shoulders. "I know she is." But he said the same twenty times, and each time he sounded a little less hearty.

The Ogier's final attempt at heartening went further than Loial intended. "I am sure Faile can look after herself, Perrin. She is not like Erith. I can hardly wait for Erith to make me her husband so I can tend her; I think I'd die if she changed her mind." At the end of that, his mouth remained open, and his huge eyes popped; ears fluttering, he stumbled over his own boots and nearly fell. “I never meant to say that,” he said hoarsely, striding along beside Perrin’s horse once more. His ears still trembled. “I am not sure I want to—I’m too young to get—” Swallowing hard, he gave Perrin an accusing look, and spared one for Rand up ahead, too. “It is hardly safe to open your mouth with *two ta’veren* about. Anything at all might come out!” Nothing that might not have come off his tongue anyway, as he well knew, though it might have happened one time in a thousand, or a thousand times a thousand, without *ta’veren* there. Loial knew that also, and the fact of it seemed to frighten him as much as anything Perrin had ever seen. Some considerable time passed before the Ogier’s ears stopped shaking.

Faile filled Perrin’s mind, but he was not blind, not completely. What he at first saw without seeing, as they rode south and west, began to seep in at the edges. The weather had been hot when he headed north from Cairhien, less than two weeks ago, yet it seemed the Dark One’s touch had gained a harder hold, grinding the land more desperately than before. Brittle grass crackled beneath the horses’ hooves, shriveled brown creepers spiderwebbed rocks on the hillsides, and naked branches, not merely leafless but dead, cracked when the arid wind gusted. Evergreen pine and leatherleaf stood brown and yellow often as not.

Farms had begun appearing after a few miles, plain structures of dark stone laid out in squares, the first in isolated clearings in the forest, then coming more thickly as the woodland thinned to trees hardly deserving the name. A cart road straggled there, running over the shoulders and crests of hills, accommodating stone-walled fields more than the terrain. Most of those early farms looked deserted, here a ladderback chair lying on its side in front of a farmhouse, there a rag doll by the roadside. Slat-ribbed cattle and lethargic sheep dotted pastures where frequently ravens squabbled over carcasses; hardly a pasture but had a carcass or two. Streams ran in trickles down channels of dried mud. Cropland that should have been blanketed with snow looked ready to crumble to dust, where it was not dust already, blowing away.

A tall plume of dust marked the passage of the column, until the narrow dirt way joined the broad stone-paved road that led from Jangai Pass. Here there were people, though few, and those often lethargic, dull-eyed. With the sinking sun almost halfway down to the horizon now, the air was an oven. The occasional ox-cart or horse-drawn wagon hurried off the road, down narrow tracks or even into fields, out of the way. The drivers, and the handful of farm folk in the open, stood blank-faced as they watched the three banners pass.

Close to a thousand armed men was reason enough to stare. A thousand armed men, heading somewhere in a hurry, with a purpose. Reason enough to stare, and be thankful when they passed out of sight.

At last, when the sun had less than twice its own height yet to fall, the road topped a rise, and there two or three miles before them lay Cairhien. Rand drew rein, and the Maidens, all together now, dropped to their heels where they were. They kept those sharp eyes out, though.

Nothing could be seen moving on the nearly treeless hills around the city, a great mass of gray stone sinking toward the River Alguenya on the west, square-walled, square-towered and stark. Ships of all sizes lay anchored in the river, and some tied to the docks of the far bank, where the granaries were; a few vessels moved under sail or long sweeps. They gave an impression of peace and prosperity. With not a cloud in the sky, the light was sharp, and the huge banners flying from the city’s towers stood plain enough to Perrin when the wind unfurled them. The scarlet Banner of Light and the white Dragon Banner with its serpentine creature scaled scarlet and gold, the wavy-rayed Rising Sun of Cairhien, gold on blue. And a fourth, given equal prominence with the rest. A silver diamond on a field checked yellow and red.

Lowering a small looking glass from his eye, a scowling Dobraine stuffed it into a worked-leather tube tied to his saddle. “I hoped the savages had it wrong somehow, but if House Saighan flies with the Rising Sun, Colavaere has the throne. She will have been distributing gifts in the city every day; coin, food, finery. It is traditional for the Coronation Festival. A ruler is never more popular than for the week after taking the throne.” He eyed Rand sideways; the strain of speaking straight out hollowed his face. “The commoners could riot if they dislike what you do. The streets could run with blood.”

Havien’s gray gelding danced his rider’s impatience, and the man himself kept looking from Rand to the city and back. It was not his city; he had made it clear earlier that he cared little what ran in the streets, so long as his own ruler was safe.

For long moments Rand studied the city. Or seemed to, anyway; whatever he saw, his face was bleak. Min studied him, worriedly, maybe pityingly. “I will try to see they don’t,” he said at last. “Flinn, remain here with the soldiers. Min—”

She broke in on him sharply. “No! I am going where you go, Rand al’Thor. You need me, and you know it.” The last sounded more plea than demand, but when a woman planted her fists on her hips that way and fixed her eyes to you, she was not begging.

“I am going, too,” Loial added, leaning on his long-hafted axe. “You always manage to lo things when I’m somewhere else.” His voice took on a plaintive edge. “It won’t do, Rand. It will not do for the book. How can I write about things if I am not there?”

Still looking at Min, Rand half-raised a hand toward her, then let it fall. She met his gaze levelly.

“This is . . . madness.” Holding his reins stiffly, Dashiva booted the plump mare closer to Rand’s black. Reluctance twisted his features; perhaps even Asha’man worried at being too near Rand. “All it needs is one man with a . . . a bow, or a knife, and you don’t see him in time. Send one of the Asha’man to do what needs doing, or more, if you think it’s necessary. A gateway to the palace, and it can be done before anyone knows what has happened.”

“And sit here past dark,” Rand cut in, reining his gelding around to face Dashiva, “until they know this place well enough to open one? That way brings bloodshed for sure. They’ve seen us from the walls, unless they’re blind. Sooner or later they will send somebody to find out who we are, and how many.” The rest of the column remained hidden behind the rise, and the banners were down there, too, but men sitting their horses on a ridge with Maidens for company would indeed attract curiosity. “I will do this my way.” His voice rose in anger, and he smelled of cold fury. “Nobody dies unless it can’t be avoided, Dashiva. I’ve had a bellyful of death. Do you understand me? Nobody!”

“As my Lord Dragon commands.” The fellow inclined his head, but he sounded sour, and he smelled. . . .

Perrin rubbed his nose. The smell . . . skittered, dodging wildly through fear and hate and anger and a dozen more emotions almost too quickly to make out. He no longer doubted the man was mad, however good a face the fellow put on. Perrin no longer really cared, either. This close. . . .

Digging his heels into Stepper's flanks, he started for the city and Faile, not waiting for the rest, barely noticing Aram close behind. He did not have to see Aram to know he would be there. All he could think of was Faile. If he got Swallow safely into the city. . . . He made himself keep Stepper at no more than a quick walk. A galloping rider drew eyes, and questions, and delays. At that pace, the others caught up with Aram and him fast enough, those who were coming. Min had gotten her way, it seemed, and so had Loial. The Maidens fanned out ahead, some giving Perrin sympathetic looks as they trotted by. Chiad studied the ground until she was beyond him.

"I still don't like this plan," Havien muttered on one side of Rand. "Forgive me, my Lord Dragon, but I do not."

Dobraine, on Rand's other side, grunted. "We have been over that, Mayener. If we did as you want, they would close the gates on us before we covered a mile." Havien growled something under his breath and danced his horse a few paces. He had wanted every man to follow Rand into the city.

Perrin glanced over his shoulder, past the Asha'man. Damer Flinn, recognizable by his coat, and a few of the Two Rivers men were visible on the ridge, standing and holding their horses. Perrin sighed. He would not have minded having the Two Rivers men along. But Rand was probably right, and Dobraine had backed him up.

A few men could enter where a small army could not. If the gates were shut, the Aiel would have to besiege the city, if they still would, and then the killing began anew. Rand had stuffed the Dragon Scepter into one of the geldings' saddlebags so just the carved butt stuck out, and that plain coat looked like nothing the Dragon Reborn would wear. For the Asha'man, nobody in the city had any idea what a black coat meant. A few men were easier to kill than a small army, too, even if most of them could channel. Perrin had seen an Asha'man take a Shaido spear through his belly, and the man had died no harder than any other.

Dashiva grumbled under his breath; Perrin caught "hero" and "fool" in equally disparaging tones. Without Faile, he might have agreed. Once Rand peered toward the Aiel encampment sprawled over the hills two or three miles east of the city, and Perrin held his breath, but whatever thoughts Rand had, he kept on the road. Nothing mattered more than Faile. Nothing, whether or not Rand saw it so.

A good half-mile short of the gates, they rode into another camp, one that made Perrin frown. It was big enough for a city itself, a thick band of ramshackle brush huts and rickety tents made from scraps, on burned-over ground, clinging to the high gray walls as far as he could see. This had been called Foregate once, warren of twisting streets and alleys, before the Shaido burned it. Some of the people stared in silence as the strange party passed, at an Ogier, and Aiel Maidens, but most scuttled about their business with wary, sullen faces and a care to notice nothing that was not right in front of them. The bright colors and often tattered cast-off finery worn by Foregaters mingled with the somber garb more usual for Cairhienin, the plain dark clothes of villagers and farmers. The Foregaters had been in the city when Perrin left, along with thousands of refugees from deeper inside the country. Many of those faces bore bruises and worse, cuts and slashes, often unbandaged. Colavaere must have put them out. They would not have left the shelter of the walls on their own; Foregaters and refugees alike feared the return of the Shaido the way a man who had been seared to the bone feared hot iron.

The road ran straight through the camp to the Jangai Gates, three tall square arches flanked by towers. Helmeted men lounged up on the battlements, peering down through the gaps in the stone teeth. Some stared off toward the men on the hilltop, and here and there an officer with a *con* held a looking glass to his eye. Rand’s small party drew inquiring glances. Men ahorseback and Aiel Maidens; not common companions. Crossbows showed atop the serrated wall, but no one raised a weapon. The iron-bound gates stood open. Perrin held his breath. He wanted very much to gallop for the Sun Palace and Faile.

Just inside the gates sat a squat stone guard house, where strangers to the city were supposed to register before entering. A square-faced Cairhienin officer watched them pass with a disgruntled frown, eyeing the Maidens uneasily. He just stood there, watching.

“As I told you,” Dobraine said once they were by the guard house. “Colavaere gave free access to the city for Coronation Festival. Not even someone under order of arrest can be denied or detained. It is tradition.” He sounded relieved, though. Min sighed audibly, and Loial let out a breath that could have been heard two streets over. Perrin’s chest was still too tight for sighing. Swallow was inside Cairhien. Now, if he could only get her to the Royal Palace.

Up close, Cairhien carried out what it had promised from afar. The highest of the hills lay inside the walls, but terraced and faced with stone till they no longer seemed hills at all. Broad, crowded streets met at right angles. In this city, even the alleys made a grid. The streets rose and fell reluctantly with the hills, often simply cutting through. From shops to palaces, the buildings were all stark squares and severe rectangles, even the great buttressed towers, each wrapped in scaffolding on a hilltop, the once-fabled topless towers of Cairhien, still being rebuilt after burning in the Aiel War. The city seemed harder than stone, a bruising place, and shadows stretching across everything heightened the effect. Loial's tufted ears twitched almost without stopping; a worried frown creased his forehead, and his dangling eyebrows brushed his cheek.

There were few signs of Coronation Festival, or High Chasaline. Perrin had no notion what the Festival might entail, but in the Two Rivers, the Day of Reflection was a time of merriment and forgetting the bleakness of winter. Here, a near hush hung in the air, despite the number of people. Anywhere else, Perrin might have thought it the unnatural heat dragging people's spirits down, but except for Foregaters, Cairhienin were a sober, austere lot. On the surface, at least; what lay underneath, he would as soon not think about. The hawkers and cart-peddlers he remembered were gone from the streets, the musicians and tumblers and puppet shows. Those people would be in the ragtag camp outside the walls. A few closed, dark-painted sedan chairs threaded through the quiet throngs, some with House banners a little larger than *con* standing stiffly above. They moved as slowly as the ox-carts with goad-wielding drivers walking alongside, axles squealing in the stillness. Outlanders stood out, no matter how little color they wore, because few except outlanders rode. The almost inevitably shorter natives looked like pale-faced crows in their dark garb. Aiel stood out too, of course. Whether one alone or ten together, they walked in clearings through the crowds; eyes darted away and space just opened up around them wherever they went.

Aiel faces turned toward the party as it made its slow way through the crowds. Even if not all recognized Rand in his green coat, they knew who a tall wetlander escorted by Maidens must be. Those faces sent a chill down Perrin's spine: considering. They made him thankful Rand had left all of the Aes Sedai behind. Aside from the Aiel, the Dragon Reborn moved through a river of unconcern that parted for the Maidens and closed in again behind the Asha’man.

The Royal Palace of Cairhien, the Sun Palace, the Palace of the Rising Sun in Splendor—Cairhienin were great ones for names, each more extravagant than the last—stood atop the highest hill in the city, a dark mass of square stone with stepped towers looming over everything. The street, the Way of the Crown, became a long broad ramp rising toward the palace, and Perrin drew a deep breath as they started up. Faile was up there. She had to be, and safe. Whatever else, she had to be safe. He touched the knot holding Swallow’s reins to a ring on his pommel, stroked the axe at his waist. The horses’ shod hooves rang loudly on the paving stones. The Maidens made no sound at all.

The guards on the great, open bronze gates watched their slow approach and exchanged glances. They were colorful for Cairhienin soldiers, ten men with the Rising Sun in gold on their dark breastplates and scarves in House Saighan’s colors tied below the heads of their halberds. Perrin could have written out their thoughts. Thirteen men on horseback, but in no hurry, and only two wearing armor, one in Mayener red. Any trouble would come from Caraline Damodred and Toram Riatin, and Mayeners had no place in that. And there was a woman, and an Ogier. Surely they intended no trouble. Still, three dozen or so Maidens trotting ahead of the horses hardly looked as though they were coming for tea. For an instant all hung balanced. Then a Maiden veiled herself. The guards jerked as if goosed, and one slanted his halberd and darted for the gates. Two steps he took, and stopped, rigid as a statue. Every guard stood stiff; nothing moved but their heads.

“Good,” Rand murmured. “Now tie off the flows and leave them for later.”

Perrin shrugged uncomfortably. The Asha’man had spread out behind, taking up most of the width of the ramp; they must be using the Power. Very likely the eight of them could tear the whole palace apart. Maybe Rand could have by himself. But if those towers began spewing crossbow bolts, they would die with everyone else, caught in the open on this ramp that no longer seemed so wide.

Nobody sped up. Any eyes at the tall narrow windows of the palace, on the colonnaded walks high above, must see nothing out of the ordinary. Sulin flashed Maiden hand-talk, and the one who had veiled lowered the black cloth hurriedly, face flushing. A slow walk, up the stone ramp. Some of the guards' helmeted heads shook wildly, eyes rolling; one seemed to have fainted, slumping upright with his chin on his chest. Their mouths strained, open, but no sound came out. Perrin tried not to think about what had gagged them. A slow walk, through the open bronze gates, into the main courtyard.

There were no soldiers here. The stone balconies around the courtyard stood empty. Liveried servants rushed out with downcast eyes to take the horses' reins and hold stirrups. Stripes of red and yellow and silver ran down the sleeves of otherwise dark coats and dresses, and each had the Rising Sun small on the left breast. That was more color than Perrin had seen on a Cairhienin servant before. They could not see the guards outside, and likely would have done little different if they had. In Cairhien, servants played their own version of *Daes Dae'mar*, the Game of Houses, but they pretended to ignore the doings of those above them. Taking too much notice of what happened among your betters—or at least, being seen to take notice—might mean being caught up in it. In Cairhien, maybe in most lands, ordinary folk could be crushed unnoticed where the mighty walked.

A blocky woman led Stepper and Swallow away without really looking at him. Swallow was inside the Sun Palace, and it made no difference. He still did not know whether Faile was alive or dead. A fool boy's fool fancy.

Shifting his axe at his hip, he followed Rand up the broad gray stairs at the far end of the courtyard, and nodded when Aram reached over his shoulder again to ease his sword. Liveried men swung open the great doors at the head of the stairs, bronze like the outer gates and marked large with the Rising Sun of Cairhien.

Once, the entry hall would have stunned Perrin with its grandeur. Thick square columns of dark marble held a square-vaulted ceiling ten paces above floor tiles that alternated dark blue and deep gold. Gilded Rising Suns marched around the cornices, and friezes carved in the walls showed Cairhienin triumphs in battle. The hall was empty, save for a handful of young men clustered beneath one of the friezes who fell silent when Perrin and the rest entered.

Not all men, he realized. All wore swords, but four of the seven were women, in coats and snug breeches much like Min's, their hair cut short as the men's. Not that that was particularly short; men and women alike had it gathered in a kind of tail that reached their shoulders, tied with a dark ribbon. One of the women wore green a little paler than normal for Cairhienin, and another bright blue; all the rest were in dark colors, with a few bright stripes across their chests. They studied Rand's party—with an especial view for himself, Perrin realized; his yellow eyes took people aback, although he hardly noticed it anymore unless somebody jumped, or made a commotion—studied in silence until the last of the Asha'man was in and the doors swung shut. The boom of the closing covered a moment of fierce whispering; then they came swaggering closer, the women strutting even more arrogantly than the men, which took some doing. Even the way they knelt was arrogant.

The green-clad woman glanced at the one in blue, who had her head down, and said, "My Lord Dragon, I am Camaille Nolaisen. Selande Darengil leads our society. . . ." She blinked at a fierce look from the woman in blue. Despite the glare, Selande smelled afraid to her bones, if Perrin was making out who was who properly. Clearing her throat, Camaille went on, "We did not think—We did not expect you to return—so soon."

"Yes," Rand said softly. "I doubt anyone thought I would return—so soon. None of you has any reason to be afraid of me. None at all. If you believe anything, believe that." Surprisingly, he looked right at Selande when he said that. Her head whipped up, and as she stared at him, the fear smell faded. Not completely, but down to a tatter. How had Rand known it was there? "Where is Colavaere?" Rand asked.

Camaille opened her mouth, but it was Selande who answered. "In the Grand Hall of the Sun." Her voice grew stronger as she spoke, the scent of her fear growing weaker. Oddly, a slight tinge of jealousy touched it once, just for an instant, when she glanced at Min. Sometimes his sense of smell was more confusing than enlightening. "It is the third Sunset Convocation," she went on. "We are not important enough to attend. Besides, I think we of the societies make her uneasy."

"The third," Dobraine muttered. "The ninth sunset after her coronation already. She wasted no time. At least they will all be together. No one of any rank or pretension will miss it, Cairhienin or Tairen."

Drawing herself up on her knees, Selande managed to make it seem she was meeting Rand eye-to-eye. "We are ready to dance the blades for you, my Lord Dragon." Sulin shook her head, wincing, and another Maiden groaned audibly; several looked and smelled ready to do some violence then and there. The Aiel could not decide what to make of these young wetlanders. The problem in Aiel eyes were that they were trying to be Aiel, in a way, to follow *ji'e'toh*, their version of it, anyway. These seven were not the lot; hundreds of the idiots, at least, could be found all over the city, organized into societies in imitation of the Aiel. Half the Aiel Perrin had heard mention them wanted to help; the other half wanted to strangle them.

For himself, he did not care whether they mangled *ji'e'toh* to mincemeat. “Where is my wife?” he demanded. “Where is Faile?” The young fools exchanged guarded looks. Guarded!

“She is in the Grand Hall of the Sun,” Selande said slowly. “She—she is one of Queen—of Colavaere's lady *attendants*.”

“Put your eyes back in your head, Perrin,” Min whispered. “She must have a good reason. You know she must.”

Shrugging inside his coat, Perrin tried to gather himself. One of Colavaere's attendants? Whatever her reason, it must be good. That much he was sure of. But what could it be?

Selande and the others were passing those guarded looks about again. One of the men, a young fellow with a pointed nose, whispered fierce and low, “We swore not to tell anyone! Not anyone! On water oath!”

Before Perrin could demand to be told Rand spoke. “Selande, lead the way to the Grand Hall. There will be no blades. I am here to see justice done, to all who deserve it.”

Something in his voice made Perrin's hackles rise. A hardness grim as a hammer's face. Faile *did* have a good reason. She had to.

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CHAPTER

5

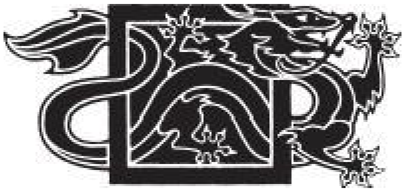

A Broken Crown

Wide and tall as the corridors were, they felt close, and dim despite tall gilded stand-lamps with mirrors on every branch, lit wherever daylight could not penetrate. Tapestries hung few and far between on the walls, scenes of hunt or battle with people and animals arranged more precisely than ever nature had. Scattered niches held bowls and vases and now and then a small statue, in gold or silver or alabaster, but even the statues seemed to emphasize that they were stone or metal, as if the sculptors had tried to banish curves.

The city's hush was magnified here. The sound of their boots on the floor tiles echoed, a hollow foreboding march, and Perrin did not think it was so to his ears alone. Loial's quivered at every other step, and he peered down crossing corridors as though wondering what might leap out. Min held herself stiffly and took ginger steps, grimacing ruefully when she glanced at Rand; she seemed to make an effort not to walk closer to him, and not particularly pleased with herself over it. The young Cairhienin started off swaggering like peacocks, but that arrogance faded as the drumming of their heels reverberated. Even the Maidens felt it; Sulin was the only one whose hand did not sometimes rise toward the veil hanging down her chest.

There were servants everywhere, of course, pale, narrow-faced men and women in dark coats and dresses with the Rising Sun on the left breast and sleeves striped in Colavaere's colors. Some gaped in recognition as Rand passed by; a handful dropped to their knees, heads bowed. Most went on about their tasks after a small pause for deep bow or curtsy. It was just as in the courtyard. Show proper respect to your betters, whoever they are; obey them and otherwise ignore what they do, and perhaps you will not be entangled in it. It was a way of thinking that set Perrin's teeth on edge. Nobody should have to live that way.

Two fellows in Colavaere's livery, standing before the gilt-covered doors to the Grand Hall of the Sun, frowned at sight of the Maidens, and maybe at the young Cairhienin. Older folk usually looked askance at the young-lings' carrying on every bit as much as the Aiel did. More than one parent had tried to put an end to it, had ordered sons or daughters to give over, instructed armsmen and servants to chase off others' like-minded sons and daughters like common vagrants or street ruffians. Perrin would not have been surprised if these doormen slanted their gilded staffs to stop Selande and her friends from going through the open doorways, nobility or not, and perhaps even the Maidens. Few Cairhienin still dared call Aiel savages, not where they could be heard, but most thought it. The pair gathered themselves, drew deep breaths—and saw Rand over the Maidens' heads. Their eyes nearly popped out of their faces. Each man glanced sideways at the other, and then they were on their knees. One stared fixedly at the floor; the other squeezed his eyes shut, and Perrin heard him praying under his breath.

"So am I loved," Rand said softly. He hardly sounded himself. Min touched his arm, her face pained. Rand patted her hand without looking at her, and for some reason that seemed to pain her even more.

The Grand Hall of the Sun was immense, with an angle-vaulted ceiling a full fifty paces high at its peak and great golden lamps hung on gilded chains thick enough to move the gates of a fortress. It was immense, and it was full, people crowding among massive square columns of blue-black veined marble that stood in two rows to either side of the center aisle. The folk at the rear noticed the newcomers first. In long coats and short, some in bright colors or embroidered, some travel-worn, they stared curiously. Intently. The few women in the back of the hall wore riding dresses and had faces as hard as the men, gazes as direct.

Hunters for the Horn, Perrin thought. Dobraine had said that every noble who could be there would, and most Hunters were nobly born, or claimed to be. Whether or not they recognized Rand, they sensed something, hands feeling for swords and daggers that were not there this evening. More Hunters than not sought adventure and a place in the histories along with the Horn of Valere. Even if they did not know the Dragon Re-born, they knew danger when they saw it.

The others in the Grand Hall were less attuned to danger, or rather, more to intrigues and plots than to open hazard. Perrin was a third of the way down the long center aisle, close on Rand's heels, before gasps ran through the chamber like a wind. Pale Cairhienin lords with colorful slashes across the chests of their dark silk coats, some with the front of their heads shaved and powdered; Cairhienin ladies with stripes on their dark high-necked gowns and lace falls covering their hands, their hair in intricate towers that often added a good foot of height. Tairen High Lords and Lords of the Land with oiled beards trimmed to points, in velvet hats and coats of red and blue and every color, with puffy, satin-striped sleeves; Tairen ladies in even more colorful gowns, with wide lace ruffs and close caps studded with pearls and moonstones, firedrops and rubies. They knew Perrin, and they knew Dobraine and even Havien and Min, but most importantly, they knew Rand. A ripple of knowing that kept pace up the Hall with him. Eyes widening, jaws dropping, they went so stiff Perrin almost thought the Asha'man had bound them like the guards outside the palace. The chamber was a sea of sweet perfumes, and beneath that under-currents of salty sweat, but through it oozed fear, a quivering sort of smell.

His attention was all on the far end of the Hall, though, on the deep blue marble dais where the Sun Throne stood, shining like its namesake with gilt, the wavy-rayed Rising Sun huge atop the high back. Colavaere rose slowly, peering down the aisle over Rand's head. Her nearly black dress bore not a single stripe of nobility, but the great mass of curls rising above her head had to have been dressed around the crown she wore, the Rising Sun in gold and yellow diamonds. Seven young women flanked the Sun Throne in dark-bodiced gowns with lace snugged under their chins and skirts striped vertically in Colavaere's yellow and red and silver. It seemed that Cairhienin fashion was different for the Queen, and for the Queen's attendants.

A flicker of motion behind the throne picked out an eighth woman, hidden, but Perrin cared about neither Colavaere nor anyone else except the woman to her immediate right. Faile. Her slightly tilted eyes fastened on him, dark liquid moons, yet not a line altered of her coolly decorous expression. If anything, her face grew tighter. His nose strained for the scent of her, but the perfume was too strong, and the fear. She had a reason for being there on the dais, a good reason. She did.

Rand touched Sulin's sleeve. "Wait here," he said. Scowling, the scar on her leathery face standing out as white as her hair, she scanned his face, then nodded with obvious reluctance. Her free hand gestured anyway, and another gasp ran through the chamber as the Maidens veiled. It was almost laughable; the eight men in black coats, trying to watch everywhere at once, could probably kill them all before the first Maiden drove home a spear, but no one knew who or what they were. No one looked at them twice, a handful of men with their swords sheathed. Only at the Maidens. And Rand. Hadn't they noticed that not a one of those men sweated a drop more than Rand? Perrin felt as if he were bathing in his.

Stepping past the Maidens with Min still close beside him, Rand stopped as first Perrin, then Dobraine and Havien joined him. And Aram, of course, like Perrin's shadow. Rand studied them each in turn, nodding slowly. He studied Perrin longest, and took the longest time to nod. The gray-haired Cairhienin and the young Mayener wore faces like death. Perrin did not know how his own looked, but his jaw was locked tight. No one was going to harm Faile, no matter what she had done, no matter why. No matter what he had to do to stop it.

Their boots drummed loud in the silence as they crossed the huge golden mosaic of the Rising Sun in the blue-tiled floor and approached the throne. Hands gripping her skirts, Colavaere wet her lips, and her eyes darted between Rand and the doors behind him.

"Looking for Aes Sedai?" Rand's voice echoed. He smiled unpleasantly. "I sent them to the Aiel camp. If the Aiel can't teach them manners, no one can." A shocked murmur rose, and fell raggedly. Fear became stronger than the perfumes in Perrin's nose.

Colavaere gave a start. "Why would I—?" Drawing a deep breath, she gathered dignity. A more than handsome woman in her middle years, without a touch of gray in her dark hair, she bore a regal presence that had nothing to do with the crown. She had been born to command; to reign, so she thought. And her eyes, weighing and measuring, betrayed a hard intelligence. "My Lord Dragon," she said, making a curtsy so deep it nearly mocked itself, "I welcome you back. Cairhien welcomes you back." The way she said it, she seemed to be repeating herself.

Slowly Rand climbed the steps of the dais. Min half-made to follow him, then folded her arms. Perrin did follow, to be nearer Faile, but only partway. It was her gaze that stopped him. A gaze that probed every bit as much as Colavaere's. At him as much as at Rand. Perrin wished he could smell her. Not to try discovering why or what, just for the smell of her. The wash of perfumes and fright was too great. Why did she not speak? Why did she not come to him? Or smile? Just a smile.

Colavaere stiffened a splinter's worth, but only that. Her head came no more than level with Rand's chest, though her towered hair rose almost as tall as he. His eyes slid from her face and along the women lined up on either side of the throne. He might have paused on Faile. Perrin could not be sure.

Rand rested his hand on one heavy arm of the Sun Throne. "You know I mean this for Elayne Trakand." His voice was emotionless.

"My Lord Dragon," Colavaere replied smoothly, "Cairhien had been too long without a ruler. A Cairhienin ruler. You yourself said you have no interest in the Sun Throne for yourself. Elayne Trakand would have had some claim," a small, quick gesture dismissed such a claim, "if she were alive. Rumor says she is dead, like her mother." A dangerous thing to say. A good many rumors said Rand had killed both mother and daughter. The woman was no coward.

"Elayne is alive." The words were still flat as a planed board, but Rand's eyes burned. Perrin could not pick out his smell any more than Faile's, but he did not need his nose to know rage bottled right in front of him. "She will have the crowns of Andor, and of Cairhien."

"My Lord Dragon, what is done cannot be undone. If anything has offended you—"

For all her dignity, all her courage, Colavaere made a visible effort not to flinch as Rand reached out and took hold of the Sun Crown. There was a loud crack of metal snapping, and the crown flexed, hardly disarraying her tower of curls as it pulled away, slowly straightening. A few of the brilliant yellow stones popped from their settings and fell. He held up the stretched arc of metal, and slowly it bent back on itself until the ends met, and. . . . Maybe the Asha'man could see what happened, could understand, but to Perrin, one moment the crown was broken, the next it was whole again. No one among the nobles made a sound, not even a shuffling of boots; Perrin thought they might be afraid to. To his nose, stark terror was stronger than any other scent now. It did not quiver; it spasmed wildly.

"Whatever can be done," Rand said softly, "can be undone."

Colavaere's face drained of blood. The few wisps of hair that had escaped her coiffure made her seem wild, at bay. Swallowing, she opened her mouth twice before any words came out. "My Lord Dragon. . . ." It was a breathy whisper, but as she went on, her voice became stronger. And edged with desperation. She seemed to forget anyone else was present. "I have kept the laws you made, maintained your policies. Even those that go against the ancient laws of Cairhien, against all custom." She probably meant the laws that had let a noble kill a farmer or craftsman and walk away. "My Lord Dragon, the Sun Throne is yours to give. I . . . know that. I—I was wrong to take it without your leave. But I have the right to it, by birth and blood. If I must have it from your hand, then give it to me, by your hand. I have the right!" Rand only looked at her; he said nothing. He seemed to be listening, but not to her.

Perrin cleared his throat. Why was Rand dragging this out? It was done, or nearly. Let whatever else had to be done, be done. Then he could take Faile away, where they could talk. "Did you have the right to murder Lord Maringil and High Lord Meilan?" Perrin demanded. There was no doubt in his mind she had had it done; they had been her biggest rivals for the throne. Or she, and they, thought they were, anyway. Why was Rand just standing there? He knew all of this. "Where is Berelain?"

Before the name was off his tongue he wanted to call it back. Faile only glanced at him, her face still a cool mask of propriety, but that glance could have set water aflame. "A jealous wife is like a hornets' nest in your mattress," the saying went. No matter how you twitched, you got stung.

"You dare accuse me of so vile a crime?" Colavaere demanded. "There is no proof. There can be no proof! Not when I am innocent." Abruptly she seemed to become aware of where she was, of the nobles crowded shoulder-to-shoulder among the columns, watching and listening. Whatever else could be said of her, she did have courage. Standing straight, she did her best to stare Rand in the eye without tilting her head too far back. "My Lord Dragon, eight days ago at sunrise I was crowned Queen of Cairhien according to the laws and usages of Cairhien. I will keep my oath of fealty to you, but I *am* Queen of Cairhien." Rand only stared at her, silent. And troubled, Perrin would have said. "My Lord Dragon, I am Queen, unless you would rip all our laws away." Still silence from Rand, and an unblinking stare.

Why doesn't he end it? Perrin wondered.

"These charges against me are false. They are mad!" Only that silent stare for answer. Colavaere moved her head uneasily. "Annoura, advise me. Come, Annoura! Advise me!"

Perrin thought she spoke to one of the women with Faile, but the woman who stepped from behind the throne did not wear the striped skirts of an attendant. A broad face with a wide mouth and a beak of a nose regarded Rand from beneath dozens of long thin dark braids. An ageless face. To Perrin's surprise, Havien made a sound in his throat and began grinning. His own hackles were standing straight.

"I cannot do this, Colavaere," the Aes Sedai said in a Taraboner accent, shifting her gray-fringed shawl. "I fear I have allowed you to misperceive my relationship to you." Drawing a deep breath, she added, "There . . . there is no need for this, Master al'Thor." Her voice became slightly unsteady for a moment. "Or my Lord Dragon, if you prefer. I assure you, I harbor no ill intentions toward you. If I did, I would have struck before you knew I was here."

"You might well have died if you had." Rand's voice was icy steel; his face made it seem soft. "I'm not who has you shielded, Aes Sedai. Who are you? Why are you here? Answer me! I don't have much patience with . . . your kind. Unless you want to be hauled out to the Aiel camp? I wager the Wise Ones can make you speak freely."

This Annoura was not slow-witted. Her eyes darted to Aram, then to the aisle where the Asha'man stood. And she knew. They had to be who he meant, in their black coats, grim faces dry when every other but hers and Rand's glistened. Young Jahar was watching her like a hawk watching a rabbit. Incongruously, Loial stood in the midst of them with his axe propped against his shoulder. One big hand managed to hold an ink bottle and an open book, pressed awkwardly against his chest, while the other scribbled as fast as he could dip a pen fatter than Perrin's thumb. He was taking notes. Here!

The nobles heard Rand as well as Annoura did. They had been watching the veiled Maidens uneasily; now they crowded back from the Asha'man, pressing together like fish in a barrel. Here and there someone sagged in a faint, held up by the throng.

Shivering, Annoura adjusted her shawl, and regained all the vaunted Aes Sedai composure. "I am Annoura Larisen, my Lord Dragon. Of the Gray Ajah." Nothing about her said that she was shielded, and in the presence of men who could channel. She seemed to answer as a favor. "I am the advisor to Berelain, First of Mayene." So that was why Havien was grinning like a madman; he had recognized the woman. Perrin did not feel like grinning at all. “This has been kept secret, you understand,” she went on, “because of the attitude of Tear both toward Mayene and toward Aes Sedai, but I think me the time for secrets, it is past, yes?” Annoura turned to Colavaere, and her mouth firmed. “I let you think what you would think, but Aes Sedai do not become advisors simply because someone tells them they are. Most especially when they already advise someone else.”

“If Berelain confirms your story,” Rand said, “I will parole you to her custody.” Looking at the crown, he seemed to realize for the first time that the spray of gold and gems was still in his hand. Very gently he set it on the silk-covered seat of the Sun Throne. “I don’t think every Aes Sedai is my enemy, not entirely, but I won’t be schemed against, and I won’t be manipulated, not anymore. It’s your choice, Annoura, but if you make the wrong one, you will go to the Wise Ones. If you live long enough. I won’t hobble the Asha’man, and a mistake could cost you.”

“The Asha’man,” Annoura said calmly. “I quite understand.” But she touched her lips with her tongue.

“My Lord Dragon, Colavaere plotted to break her oath of fealty.” Perrin had wished so hard for Faile to speak that he jumped when she did, stepping out of the line of attendants. Choosing her words carefully, she confronted the would-be queen like a stooping eagle. Light, but she was beautiful! “Colavaere swore to obey you in all things and uphold your laws, but she has made plans to rid Cairhien of the Aiel, to send them south and return all to as it was before you came. She also said that if you ever returned, you would not dare change anything she had done. The woman she told these things, Maire, was one of her attendants. Maire vanished soon after telling me. I have no proof, but I believe she is dead. I believe Colavaere regretted revealing too much of her mind, too soon.”

Dobraine strode up the steps to the dais, his helmet under his arm. His face might have been cold iron. “Colavaere Saighan,” he announced in a formal voice that carried to every corner of the Grand Hall, “by my immortal soul, under the Light, I, Dobraine, High Seat of House Taborwin, do arraign and censure you of treason, the penalty for which is death.”

Rand’s head went back, eyes closed. His mouth moved slightly, but Perrin knew that only he and Rand heard what was said. “No. I cannot. I will not.” Perrin understood the delay now. Rand was searching for a way out. Perrin wished he could see one.

Colavaere certainly did not hear, but she wanted a way out, too. She looked around wildly, to the Sun Throne, to her other attendants, to the assembled nobility, as though they might step forward to defend her. Their feet could as well have been set in cement; a sea of carefully blank, sweaty faces confronted her, and eyes that avoided hers. Some of those eyes rolled toward the Asha'man, but not too openly. The already considerable space between nobles and Asha'man widened noticeably.

"Lies!" she hissed, hands knotted in her skirts. "All lies! You sneaking little—!" She took a step toward Faile. Rand stretched his arm between them, though Colavaere appeared not to see it, and Faile looked as though she wished he had not. Anyone who attacked her was in for a surprise.

"Faile does not lie!" Perrin growled. Well, not about something like this.

Once again Colavaere recovered herself. Slight as her height was, she drew up every inch of it. Perrin almost admired her. Except for Meilan, and Maringil, and this Maire, and the Light alone knew how many others. "I demand justice, my Lord Dragon." Her voice was calm, stately. Royal. "There is no proof of any of this . . . this filth. A claim that someone who is no longer in Cairhien says I spoke words I never did? I demand the Lord Dragon's justice. By your own laws, there must be proof."

"How do you know she is no longer in Cairhien?" Dobraine demanded. "Where is she?"

"I assume she has gone." She addressed her answer to Rand. "Maire left my service, and I replaced her with Reale, there." She gestured toward the third attendant on the left: "I have no idea where she is. Bring her forward if she is in the city, and let her make these ridiculous charges to my face. I will fling her lies in her face." Faile looked murder at her. Perrin hoped she would not produce one of those knives she kept hidden about her; she had a habit of doing that when she became angry enough.

Annoura cleared her throat. She had been studying Rand much too closely for Perrin's comfort. She reminded him of Verin suddenly, that look of a bird examining a worm. "May I speak, Master . . . ah . . . my Lord Dragon?" At his curt nod, she went on, adjusting her shawl. "Of young Maire, I know nothing except that one morning she was here, and before nightfall, she was nowhere to be found and none knew where she had gone. But Lord Maringil and High Lord Meilan, they are a different matter. The First of Mayene, she brought with her two most excellent thief-catchers, men experienced in ferreting out crimes. They have brought before me two of the men who waylaid the High Lord Meilan in the streets, though both insist they only held his arms while others did the stabbing. Also they brought me the servant who put poison in the spiced wine Lord Maringil liked to drink at bedtime. She also protests her true innocence; her invalid mother would have died, and she herself, had Lord Maringil not. So she says, and in her case, I believe she speaks truly. Her solace at confession was not false, I think. Both the men and the woman agree in this: the orders for their actions came from the mouth of Lady Colavaere herself."

Word by word the defiance leached out of Colavaere. She still stood, yet it seemed a wonder; she appeared as limp as a damp rag. "They promised," she mumbled to Rand. "They promised you would never return." Too late, she clamped both hands over her mouth. Her eyes bulged. Perrin wished he could not hear the sounds coming from her throat. No one should make sounds like that.

"Treason and murder." Dobraine sounded satisfied. Those whimpered screams did not touch him. "The penalty is the same, my Lord Dragon. Death. Except, by your new law, it is hanging for murder." For some reason, Rand looked at Min. She returned his gaze with profound sadness. Not for Colavaere. For Rand. Perrin wondered whether a viewing was involved.

"I—I demand the headsman," Colavaere managed in a strangled voice. Her face sagged. She had become old on the spot, and her eyes were mirrors of stark terror. But with nothing left, she fought on, for the scraps. "It is—it is my right. I will not be . . . hanged like some commoner!"

Rand seemed to struggle with himself, shaking his head in that disturbing way. When he spoke at last, his words were winter cold and anvil hard. "Colavaere Saighan, I strip you of your titles." He drove the words like nails. "I strip of you of your lands and estates and possessions, of everything but the dress you stand in. Do you own—did you own a farm? A small farm?"

Each sentence staggered the woman. She swayed drunkenly on her feet, soundlessly mouthing the word "farm" as if she had never heard it before. Annoura, Faile, everyone stared at Rand in amazement or curiosity or both. Perrin not least. A farm? If there had been silence in the Grand Hall before, now it seemed that no one even breathed.

"Dobraine, did she own a small farm?"

"She owns . . . owned . . . many farms, my Lord Dragon," the Cairhienin replied slowly. Clearly he understood no more than Perrin did. "Most are large. But the lands near the Dragonwall have always been divided into smallholdings, less than fifty hides. All of the tenants abandoned them during the Aiel War."

Rand nodded. "Time to change that. Too much land has lain fallow too long. I want to move people back there, to farm again. Dobraine, you will find out which farm of those Colavaere owned near the Dragonwall is the smallest. Colavaere, I exile you to that farm. Dobraine will see you're provided with what is needed to make a farm work, and with someone to teach you how to till the soil. And with guards to see that you never go farther from it than you can walk in a day, so long as you live. See to it, Dobraine. In a week I want her on her way." A bewildered Dobraine hesitated before nodding. Perrin could catch murmurs from the assembly behind him now. This was unheard of. None understood why she was not to die. And the rest! Estates had been confiscated before, but never all, never nobility itself. Nobles had been exiled, even for life, but never to a *farm*.

Colavaere's response was immediate. Eyes rolling up in her head, she collapsed, crumpling backward toward the steps.

Perrin darted to catch her, but someone was ahead of him. Before he had taken a full step, her fall simply stopped. She slumped in midair, slanting over the steps to the dais, head dangling. Slowly, her unconscious form rose, swung around and settled gently in front of the Sun Throne. Rand. Perrin was sure the Asha'man would have let her fall.

Annoura *tsk*ed. She did not appear surprised, or perturbed, except that her thumbs rubbed her forefingers nervously. "I suspect she would have preferred the headsman. I will see to her if you have your man, your . . . Asha'man. . . ."

"She's not your concern," Rand said roughly. "She is alive, and. . . . She is alive." He drew a long, ragged breath. Min was there before he let it out; she only stood near him, yet she looked as if she wanted to do something more. Slowly his face firmed. "Annoura, you will take me to Berelain. Release her, Jahar; she'll be no trouble. Not with one of her and nine of us. I want to find out what has been going on while I was away, Annoura. And what Berelain means bringing you here behind my back. No, don't speak. I'll hear it from her. Perrin, I know you want some time with Faile. I—"

Rand’s gaze swept slowly around the hall, over all the nobles waiting silently. Under his stare, none dared move a muscle. The scent of fear far outweighed any other, convulsing sharply. Except for the Hunters, everyone there had given him the same oath as had Colavaere. Perhaps just being in this gathering was treason, too? Perrin did not know.

“This audience is at an end,” Rand said. “I will forget every face that departs now.”

Those at the front, the highest-ranking, the most powerful, began their progress toward the doors without too much haste, avoiding the Maidens and the Asha’man standing in the aisle, while the rest waited their turn. Every mind must have been turning over what Rand had said, though. What precisely did he mean by “now”? Purposeful strides quickened, skirts were lifted. Hunters, nearest the doors, began slipping out, first one at a time, then in a flood, and seeing them, lesser nobles among the Cairhienin and Tairens darted ahead of the higher. In moments it was a milling mass at the doors, men and women pushing and elbowing to get out. Not one looked back at the woman stretched out before the throne she had held so briefly.

* * *

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CHAPTER

6

Old Fear, and New Fear

Rand passed through the struggling mob without any difficulty, of course. Maybe it was the presence of the Maidens and the Asha'man, or maybe Rand or one of the black-coated fellows did something with the Power, but the crowd parted for him, with Min holding to his arm, and a very subdued Annoura attempting to speak to him, and Loial, who was still trying with some difficulty to write in his book *and* carry his axe. Staring at one another, Perrin and Faile missed their chance to join them before the crowd closed up again.

She said nothing for a time, and neither did he, not what he wanted to say, not with Aram there, staring at them like some worshipful hound. And Dobraine, frowning down at the unconscious woman put in his charge. No one else remained on the dais. Havien had gone with Rand, to find Berelain, and as soon as Rand went, the other attendants had darted away toward the doors without a second glance at Perrin or Faile. Or Colavaere. Without the first glance, for that matter. They just lifted their striped skirts and ran. Grunts and curses drifted from the pack, not all in men's voices. Even with Rand gone, those people wanted to be elsewhere, and now. Perhaps they thought Perrin stayed to watch and report, though had any glanced back, they would have seen his eyes were not on them.

Climbing the rest of the way, he took Faile's hand and breathed in the scent of her. This close, the lingering perfumes did not matter. Anything else could wait. She produced a red lace fan from somewhere, and before spreading it to cool herself, touched first her cheek, then his. There was a whole language of fans in her native Saldaea. She had taught him a little. He wished he knew what the cheek-touching meant; it must be something good. On the other hand, her scent carried a spiky shading he knew too well.

“He should have sent her to the block,” Dobraine muttered, and Perrin shrugged uncomfortably. From the man’s tone, it was not clear whether he meant that that was what the law called for or that it would have been more merciful. Dobraine did not understand. Rand could have sprouted wings first.

Faile’s fan slowed to barely moving, and she eyed Dobraine sideways over the crimson lace. “Her death might be best for everyone. That is the prescribed penalty. What will you do, Lord Dobraine?” Sidelong or not, it still managed to be very direct, a very meaningful gaze.

Perrin frowned. Not a word for him, but questions for Dobraine? And there was that undertone of jealousy in her aroma, making him sigh.

The Cairhienin gave her a level look in return while thrusting his gauntlets behind his sword belt. “What I was commanded to do. I keep my oaths, Lady Faile.”

The fan snapped open and shut, faster than thought. “He actually sent Aes Sedai to the Aiel? As prisoners?” Disbelief tinged her voice.

“Some, Lady Faile.” Dobraine hesitated. “Some swore fealty on their knees. This I saw with my own eyes. They went to the Aiel, too, but I do not think they can be called prisoners.”

“I saw it, too, my Lady,” Aram put in from his place on the steps, and a wide smile split his face when she glanced at him.

Red lace described a fluttering hitch. What she did with the fan seemed almost unconscious. “You both saw.” The relief in her voice—and in her scent—was so strong that Perrin stared.

“What did you think, Faile? Why would Rand lie, especially when everyone would know in a day?”

Instead of answering immediately, she frowned down at Colavaere. “Is she still under? Not that it matters, I suppose. She knows more than I would say here. Everything we worked so hard to keep hidden. She let that slip to Maire, too. She knows too much.”

Dobraine thumbed one of Colavaere’s eyes open none too gently. “As if hit with a mace. A pity she did not break her neck on the steps. But she will go to her exile and learn to live as a farmer.” A brief, jaggedy, vexed smell wafted from Faile.

Abruptly it hit Perrin what his wife had been proposing so obliquely; what Dobraine had rejected just as indirectly. Every hair on his body tried to stand. From the start he had known that he had married a very dangerous woman. Just not how dangerous. Aram was peering at Colavaere, his lips pursed in dark thought; the man would do anything for Faile.

"I don't think Rand would like it if anything prevented her reaching that farm," Perrin said firmly, eyeing Aram and Faile in turn. "*I* wouldn't like it, either." He felt rather proud of himself. That was talking around the point as well as any of them.

Aram bowed his head briefly—he understood—but Faile tried to look innocent above her gently fluttering fan, with no notion what he was talking about. Suddenly he realized not all the fear scent came from the people still milling at the door. A thin, quivering thread of it wafted from her. Fear under control, yet it was there.

"What's the matter, Faile? Light, you'd think Coiren and that lot had won instead of. . . ." Her face did not change, but the thread grew thicker. "Is that why you didn't say anything at first?" he asked softly. "Were you afraid we had come back as puppets, and them pulling the strings?"

She eyed the rapidly diminishing crowd across the Grand Hall. The nearest of them was a long way, and all making a good deal of noise, but she lowered her voice even so. "Aes Sedai can do that sort of thing, I've heard. My husband, no one knows more than I that even Aes Sedai would find hard times trying to make you dance for a puppet, much harder than a man who's just the Dragon Reborn, but when you walked in here, I was more afraid than at any time since you left." Amusement trickled through in the first of that, like tiny bubbles in his nose, and warm fondness, and love, the smell of her, clear and pure and strong, but all of those faded by the end, leaving that thin trembling thread.

"Light, Faile, it's true. Every word Rand said. You heard Dobraine, and Aram." She smiled, and nodded, and worked her fan. That thread still quivered in his nostrils, though. *Blood and ashes, what does it take to convince her?* "Would it help if he had Verin dance the *sa'sara*? She will, if he tells her to." He meant it for a joke. All he knew of the *sa'sara* was that it was scandalous—and that Faile had once admitted knowing how to dance it, though recently she sidestepped and all but denied it. He meant it for a joke, but she closed her fan and tapped it on her wrist. He knew that one: *I am giving your suggestion serious thought*.

"I don't know what would be enough, Perrin." She shivered slightly. "Is there anything an Aes Sedai would not do, or put up with, if the White Tower told her to? I have studied my history, and I was taught to read between the lines. Mashera Donavelle bore seven children for a man she loathed, whatever the stories say, and Isebaille Tobanyi delivered the brothers she loved to their enemies and the throne of Arad Doman with them, and Jestian Redhill. . . .” She shivered again, not so slightly.

“It’s all right,” he murmured, wrapping her in his arms. He had studied several books of history himself, but he had never seen those names. The daughter of a lord received a different education from a blacksmith’s apprentice. “It really is true.” Dobraine averted his eyes, and so did Aram, though with a pleased grin.

She resisted at first, but not very hard. He could never be sure when she would avoid a public embrace and when welcome it, only that if she did not want one, she made it clear in no uncertain terms, with or without words. This time she snuggled her face into his chest and hugged him back, squeezing harder.

“If any Aes Sedai ever harms you,” she whispered, “I will kill her.” He believed her. “You belong to me, Perrin t’Bashere Aybara. To me.” He believed that, too. As her hug grew fiercer, so did the thorny scent of jealousy. He almost chuckled. It seemed the right to put a knife in him was reserved to her. He would have chuckled, except that filament of fear remained. That, and what she had said about Maire. He could not smell himself, but he knew what was there. Fear. Old fear, and new fear, for the next time.

The last of the nobles forced their way from the Grand Hall, without anyone being trampled. Sending Aram off to tell Dannil to bring the Two Rivers men into the city—and wondering how he was going to feed them—Perrin offered Faile his arm and led her out, leaving Dobraine with Colavaere, who was finally showing signs of awakening. He had no wish to be around when she woke, and Faile, with her hand on his wrist, seemed not to either. They walked quickly, eager to reach their rooms, if not necessarily for the same reasons.

The nobles apparently had not stopped their flight once they were out of the Grand Hall. The corridors were empty except for servants who kept their eyes down and moved at a silent rush, but before they had gone very far, Perrin caught the sound of footsteps and realized they were being followed. It seemed unlikely that Colavaere had any open supporters still, but if there were any, they might think to strike at Rand through his friend, walking alone with his wife while the Dragon Reborn was elsewhere.

Only, when Perrin spun about, hand to his axe, he stared instead of drawing the weapon. It was Selande and her friends from the entry hall, with eight or nine new faces. They gave a start when he turned, and exchanged abashed glances. Some were Tairens, including a woman who stood taller than all but one of the Cairhienin men. She wore a man’s coat and tight breeches, just like Selande and the rest of the women, with a sword on her hip. He had not heard that this nonsense had spread to the Tairens.

“Why are you following us?” he demanded. “If you try to make me any of your woolhead trouble, I vow I’ll kick the lot of you from here to Bel Tine!” He had had problems before with these idiots, or some just like them, anyway. All they thought about was their honor, and fighting duels, and taking one another *gai’shain*. That last really set the Aiel’s teeth on edge.

“Attend my husband and obey,” Faile put in sharply. “He is not a man to be trifled with.” Gawking stares vanished, and they backed away, bowing, competing over flourishes. They were still at it when they vanished around a turn.

“Bloody young buffoons,” Perrin muttered, offering Faile his wrist again.

“My husband is wise in his years,” she murmured. Her tone was utterly serious; her smell was something else again.

Perrin managed not to snort. True, a few of them might be a year or two older than he, but they all were like children with their playing at Aiel. Now, with Faile in a good mood, seemed as good a time as any to begin what they had to talk about. What he had to talk about. “Faile, how did you come to be one of Colavaere’s attendants?”

“The servants, Perrin.” She spoke softly; nobody two steps away could have heard a word. She knew all about his hearing, and the wolves. That was nothing a man could keep from his wife. Her fan touched her ear, admonishing caution in speech. “Too many people forget servants are there, but servants listen too. In Cairhien, they listen far too much.”

None of the liveried people he saw were doing any listening. The few who did not duck down side corridors when they saw him and Faile went by at a near run, gazes on the floor and gathered in on themselves. Any sort of news spread quickly in Cairhien. Events in the Grand Hall would have flown. The word was in the streets by now, probably on its way out of the city already. Without any doubt there were eyes-and-ears in Cairhien for the Aes Sedai, and the Whitecloaks, and likely more thrones than not.

In that hushed voice, she went on despite her caution to him. "Colavaere could not be fast enough to take me in, once she learned who I am. My father's name impressed her as much as my cousin's." She finished with a little nod, as if she had answered everything.

It was a good enough answer. Almost. Her father was Davram, High Seat of House Bashere, Lord of Bashere, Tyr and Sidona, Guardian of the Blightborder, Defender of the Heartland, and Marshal-General to Queen Tenobia of Saldaea. Faile's cousin was Tenobia herself. More than reason for Colavaere to leap at Faile for one of her attendants. But he had had time to mull things over now, and he prided himself that he was becoming used to her ways. Married life taught a man about women; or about one woman, anyway. The answer she had not given, confirmed something. Faile had no concept of danger, not where she herself was concerned.

He could not speak of it there in the corridor, of course. Whisper how he would, she did not have his ears, and doubtless she would insist every servant within fifty paces was listening. Holding his patience, he walked on with her until they reached the rooms that had been set aside for them what seemed an age ago now. The lamps had been lit, making shimmers on the dark polished walls, each tall wooden panel carved in concentric rectangles. In the square stone fireplace the hearth was swept bare and laid with a few pitiful branches of leatherleaf. They were almost green.

Faile went straight to a small table where two golden pitchers stood beaded with moisture on a tray. "They have left us blueberry tea, my husband, and wine punch. The wine is from Tharon, I think. They cool the punch in the cisterns beneath the palace. Which would you prefer?"

Perrin unbuckled his belt and tossed belt and axe on a chair. He had planned out what he had to say very carefully on the way here. She could be a prickly woman. "Faile, I missed you more than I can say, and worried about you, but—"

"Worried about me!" she snapped, spinning to face him. She stood straight and tall, eyes fierce as those of her falcon namesake, and her fan made a coring motion toward his middle. Not part of the language of fans; she made the same gesture with a knife sometimes. "When almost the first words from your mouth were to ask after that . . . that *woman*!"

His jaw dropped. How could he have forgotten the smell filling his nostrils? He nearly put a hand up to see whether his nose was bleeding. “Faile, I wanted her thief-catchers. Be—” No, he was not stupid enough to repeat that name. “She said she had proof of the poison before I left. You heard her! I just wanted the proof, Faile.”

It did no good. That spiky stench softened not a whit, and the thin, sour smell of hurt joined it. What under the Light had he said to hurt her?

“*Her* proof! What *I* gathered went for nothing, but *her* proof put Colavaere’s head on the block. Or should have.” That was his opening, but she was not about to let him push a word in edgewise. She advanced on him, looking daggers, her fan darting like one. All he could do was back away. “Do you know what story that woman put about?” Faile almost hissed. A black viper could not have dripped so much venom. “Do you? She said the reason you were not here was that you were at a manor not far from the city. Where she could *visit* you! I told the story I prepared—that you were hunting, and the Light knows you spent enough days hunting!—but everyone believed I was putting a good face on you and her! Together! Colavaere delighted in it. I could believe she only took that Mayener strumpet as an attendant to throw the two of us together. ‘Faile, Berelain, come lace my gown.’ ‘Faile, Berelain, come hold the mirror for the hairdresser.’ ‘Faile, Berelain, come wash my back.’ So she could amuse herself waiting for us to claw one another’s eyes out! That is what I have put up with! For you, you hairy-eared—!”

His back thumped against the wall. And something snapped inside him. He had been frightened spitless for her, terrified, ready to face down Rand or the Dark One himself. And he had done nothing, had never encouraged Berelain, had done everything in his wits to chase the woman away. For which his thanks was this.

Gently he took her by the shoulders and lifted her until those big tilted eyes were level with his. “You listen to me,” he said calmly. He tried to make his voice calm, at least; it came out more of a growl in his throat. “How dare you speak to me like that? How *dare* you? I worried myself near to death for fear you’d been hurt. I love you, and nobody else but you. I want no other woman but you. Do you hear me? Do you?” Crushing her to his chest, he held her, wanting to never let her go. Light, he had been so afraid. He shook even now, for what might have been. “If anything happened to you, I’d die, Faile. I would lie down on your grave and die! Do you think I don't know how Colavaere found out who you are? You made sure she found out." Spying, she had told him once, was a wife's work. "Light, woman, you could have ended like Maire. Colavaere knows you're my wife. *My* wife. Perrin Aybara, Rand al'Thor's friend. Did it ever occur to you she might be suspicious? She could have. . . . Light, Faile, she could have. . . ."

Abruptly he realized what he was doing. She was making sounds against his chest, but no words he could recognize. He wondered that he did not hear her ribs creaking. Berating himself for an oaf, he let her go, arms springing apart, but before he could apologize, her fingers clutched his beard.

"So you love me?" she said softly. Very softly. Very warmly. She was smiling, too. "A woman likes to hear that said the right way." She had dropped the fan, and her free hand drew fingernails down his cheek, not far from hard enough to draw blood, but her throaty laugh held heat, and the smoldering in her eyes was as far from anger as possible. "A good thing you didn't say you never looked at another woman, or I would think you had gone blind."

He was too stunned for words, too stunned even to gape. Rand understood women, Mat understood women, but Perrin knew he never would. She was always as much kingfisher as falcon, changing direction faster than he could think, yet this. . . . That thorny scent was gone completely, and in its place was another smell of her he knew well. A smell that *was* her, pure and strong and clean. Add that to her eyes, and any moment she was going to say something about farmgirls at harvest. They were notorious, apparently, Saldaean farmgirls.

"As for you lying down on my grave," she went on, "if you do, my soul will haunt yours, I promise you. You will mourn me a decent time, and then you'll find yourself another wife. Someone I'd approve of, I hope." With a soft laugh, she stroked his beard. "You really aren't fit to take care of yourself, you know. I want your promise."

Best not to crack his teeth on that. Say he would not, and this wonderful mood might be swallowed in a firestorm. Quicksilver was not in it, really. Say he would. . . . By the smell of her, every word was the Light's pure truth, but he would believe that when horses roosted in trees. He cleared his throat. "I need to bathe. I haven't seen soap in I don't know how long. I must smell like an old barn."

Leaning against his chest, she drew a deep breath. "You smell wonderful. Like you." Her hands moved on his shoulders. "I feel as—" The door banged open.

"Perrin, Berelain isn't—I'm sorry. Forgive me." Rand stood shifting his feet, not at all like the Dragon Reborn. There were Maidens in the hallway outside. Min put her head around the doorframe, took one look, grinned at Perrin and ducked back out of sight.

Faile stepped away so smoothly, so stately, that no one would ever have guessed what she had been saying a moment before. Or what she had been about to say. There were spots of color in her cheeks, though, bright and hot. "So kind of you, my Lord Dragon," she said coolly, "to drop in so unexpectedly. I apologize for not hearing your knock." Maybe those blushes were as much anger as embarrassment.

It was Rand's turn to blush, and scrub a hand through his hair. "Berelain isn't in the palace. She's spending the night on that Sea Folk ship anchored in the river, of all things. Annoura didn't tell me till I was nearly to Berelain's apartments."

Perrin tried very hard not to wince. Why did he have to keep saying the woman's name? "You wanted to talk to me about something else, Rand?" He hoped he had not put too much emphasis in that, yet he hoped Rand caught it. He did not look at Faile, but he tested the air gingerly. No jealousy, not yet. A good deal of anger, however.

For a moment Rand stared at him, looked through him. Listening to something else. Perrin folded his arms to stop from shuddering.

"I need to know," Rand said finally. "Are you still unwilling to command the army against Illian? I have to know now."

"I'm no general," Perrin said raggedly. There would be battles in Illian. Images flashed in his head. Men all around him, and the axe in his hands spinning, hewing his way through. Always more men, however many he cut down, in endless ranks. And in his heart, a seed growing. He could not face that again. He would not. "Besides, I thought I was supposed to stay close to you." That was what Min had said, from one of her viewings. Twice Perrin had to be there, or Rand would go down to disaster. Once had been Dumai's Wells, maybe, but there was still another to come.

"We all must take risks." Rand's voice was very quiet. And very hard. Min peered around the doorframe again, looking as if she wanted to come to him, but she glanced at Faile and stayed outside.

“Rand, the Aes Sedai. . . .” A smart man would let this lie, probably. He had never claimed to be particularly smart, though. “The Wise Ones are ready to skin them alive, or near enough. You can’t let them be harmed, Rand.” In the corridor, Sulin turned to study him through the doorway.

The man he thought he knew laughed, a wheezing sound. “We all have to take risks,” he repeated.

“I won’t let them be hurt, Rand.”

Cold blue eyes met his gaze. “*You* won’t let it?”

“*I* won’t,” Perrin told him levelly. He did not flinch from that stare, either. “They are prisoners, and no threat. They’re women.”

“They are Aes Sedai.” Rand’s voice was so like Aram’s back at Dumai’s Wells that it nearly took Perrin’s breath.

“Rand—”

“I do what I have to do, Perrin.” For a moment he was the old Rand, not liking what was happening. For a moment he looked tired to death. A moment only. Then he was the new Rand again, hard enough to mark steel. “I won’t harm any Aes Sedai who doesn’t deserve it, Perrin. I can’t promise more. Since you don’t want the army, I can use you elsewhere. Just as well, really. I wish I could let you rest longer than a day or two, but I can’t. There’s no time. No time, and we must do what we must. Forgive me for interrupting you.” He sketched a bow, one hand on the hilt of his sword. “Faile.”

Perrin tried to catch his arm, but he was out of the room, the door closing behind him, before Perrin could move. Rand was not really Rand anymore, it seemed. A day or two? Where in the Light did Rand mean him to go, if not to the army gathering down on the Plains of Maredo?

“My husband,” Faile breathed, “you have the courage of three men. And the sense of a child on leading strings. Why is it that as a man’s courage goes up, his sense goes down?”

Perrin grunted indignantly. He refrained from mentioning women who set themselves to spy on people who had committed murders and almost certainly knew they were spying. Women always talked about how logical they were compared to men, but for himself, he had seen precious little of it.

“Well, perhaps I don’t really want the answer even if you know it.” Stretching with her arms over her head, she gave a throaty laugh. “Besides, I don’t mean to let him spoil the mood. I still feel as forward as a farmgirl at

—Why are you laughing? Stop laughing at me, Perrin t’Bashere Aybara! Stop it, I say, you uncouth oaf! If you don’t—”

The only way to put an end to it was to kiss her. In her arms he forgot Rand and Aes Sedai and battles. Where Faile was, was home.

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CHAPTER
7

Pitfalls and Tripwires

Rand felt the Dragon Scepter in his hand, felt every line of the carved Dragons against his heron-branded palm as clearly as if he were running his fingers over them, yet it seemed someone else’s hand. If a blade cut it off, he would feel the pain—and keep going. It would be another’s pain.

He floated in the Void, surrounded by emptiness beyond knowing, and *saidin* filled him, trying to grind him to dust beneath steel-shattering cold and heat where stone would flash to flame, carrying the Dark One’s taint on its flow, forcing corruption into his bones. Into his soul, he feared sometimes. It did not make him feel so sick to his stomach as it once had. He feared that even more. And larded through that torrent of fire, ice and filth—life. That was the best word. *Saidin* tried to destroy him. *Saidin* filled him to overflowing with vitality. It threatened to bury him, and it enticed him. The war for survival, the struggle to avoid being consumed, magnified the joy of pure life. So sweet even with the foulness. What would it be like, clean? Beyond imagining. He wanted to draw more, draw all there was.

There lay the deadly seduction. One slip, and the ability to channel would be seared out of him forever. One slip and his mind was gone, if he was not simply destroyed on the spot, and maybe everything around him too. It was not madness, focusing on the fight for existence; it was like highwalking blindfolded over a pit full of sharpened stakes, basking in so pure a sense of life that thinking of giving it up was like thinking of a world forever in shades of gray. Not madness.

His thoughts whirled through his dance with *saidin*, slid across the Void. Annoura, peering at him with that Aes Sedai gaze. What was Berelain playing at? She had never mentioned an Aes Sedai advisor. And those other Aes Sedai in Cairhien. Where had they come from, and why? The rebels outside the city. What had emboldened them to move? What did they intend now? How could he stop them, or use them? He was becoming good at using people; sometimes he made himself sick. Sevanna and the Shaido. Rhuarc already had scouts on the way to Kinslayer's Dagger, but at best they could only find out where and when. The Wise Ones who could find out why, would not. There were a lot of why's connected to Sevanna. Elayne, and Aviendha. No, he would not think of them. No thoughts of them. None. Perrin, and Faile. A fierce woman, falcon by name and nature. Had she really attached herself to Colavaere just to gather evidence? She would try to protect Perrin if the Dragon Reborn fell. Protect him from the Dragon Reborn, should she decide it necessary; her loyalties were to Perrin, but she would decide for herself how to meet them. Faile was no woman to do meekly as her husband told her, if such a woman existed. Golden eyes, staring challenge and defiance. Why was Perrin so vehement about the Aes Sedai? He had been a long time with Kiruna and her companions on the road to Dumai's Wells. Could Aes Sedai really do with him what everybody feared? Aes Sedai. He shook his head without being aware. Never again. Never! To trust was to be betrayed; trust was pain.

He tried to push that thought away. It came a little too close to raving. Nobody could live without giving trust somewhere. Just not to Aes Sedai. Mat, Perrin. If he could not trust them. . . . Min. Never a thought of not trusting Min. He wished she were with him, instead of snugged in her bed. All those days a prisoner, days of worry—more for him than herself, if he knew her—days of being questioned by Galina and ill-treated when her answers failed to please—unconsciously he ground his teeth—all of that, and the strain of being Healed on top of it, had caught up with her at last. She had stayed by his side until her legs gave way, and he had to carry her to her bedchamber, with her sleepily protesting all the way that he needed her with him. No Min here, no comforting presence to make him laugh, make him forget the Dragon Reborn. Only the war with *saidin*, and the whirlwind of his thoughts, and. . . .

They must be done away with. You must do it. Don't you remember the last time? That place by the wells was a pittance. Cities burned whole out of the earth were nothing. We destroyed the world! DO YOU HEAR ME? THEY HAVE TO BE KILLED, WIPED FROM THE FACE . . . !

Not his, that voice shouting inside his skull. Not Rand al'Thor. Lews Therin Telamon, more than three thousand years dead. And talking in Rand al'Thor's head. The Power often drew him out of his hiding place in the shadows of Rand's mind. Sometimes Rand wondered how that could be. He was Lews Therin reborn, the Dragon Reborn, no denying that, but everybody was someone reborn, a hundred someones, a thousand, more. That was how the Pattern worked; everyone died and was reborn, again and again as the Wheel turned, forever without end. But nobody else talked with who they used to be. Nobody else had voices in their heads. Except madmen.

What about me, Rand thought. One hand tightened on the Dragon Scepter, the other on his sword hilt. *What about you? How are we different from them?*

There was only silence. Often enough, Lews Therin did not answer. Maybe it had been better when he never had.

Are you real? the voice said at last, wonderingly. That denial of Rand's existence was as usual as refusing to answer. *Am I? I spoke to someone. I think I did. Inside a box. A chest*. Wheezing laughter, soft. *Am I dead, or mad, or both? No matter. I am surely damned. I am damned, and this is the Pit of Doom. I am . . . d-damned, wild, that laughing, now, and t-this—is the P-Pit of—*

Rand muted the voice to an insect's buzz, something he had learned while cramped into that chest. Alone, in the dark. Just him, and the pain, and the thirst, and the voice of a long-dead madman. The voice had been a comfort sometimes, his only companion. His friend. Something flashed in his mind. Not images, just flickers of color and motion. For some reason they made him think of Mat, and Perrin. The flashes had begun inside the chest, them and a thousand more hallucinations. In the chest, where Galina and Erian and Katerine and the rest stuffed him every day after he was beaten. He shook his head. No. He was not in the chest anymore. His fingers ached, clenched around scepter and hilt. Only memories remained, and memories had no force. He was not—

"If we must make this journey before you eat, let us make it. The evening meal is long finished for everyone else."

Rand blinked, and Sulin stepped back from his stare. Sulin, who would stand eye-to-eye with a leopard. He smoothed his face, tried to. It felt a mask, somebody else's face.

"Are you well?" she asked.

"I was thinking." He made his hands unknot, shrugged inside his coat. A better-fitting coat than the one he had worn from Dumai's Wells, dark blue and plain. Even after a bath he did not feel clean, not with *saidin* in him. “Sometimes I think too much.”

Nearly twenty more Maidens clustered at one end of the windowless, dark-paneled room. Eight gilded stand-lamps against the walls, mirrored to increase the light, provided illumination. He was glad of that; he did not like dark places anymore. Three of the Asha’man were there, too, the Aiel women to one side of the chamber, the Asha’man to the other. Jonan Adley, an Altaran despite his name, stood with his arms folded, working eyebrows like black caterpillars in deep thought. Perhaps four years older than Rand, he was intent on earning the silver sword of the Dedicated. Eben Hopwil carried more flesh on his bones and fewer blotches on his face than when Rand had first seen him, though his nose and ears still seemed the biggest part of him. He fingered the sword pin on his collar as if surprised to find it there. Fedwin Morr would have worn the sword as well, had he not been in a green coat suitable for a well-to-do merchant or a minor noble, with a little silver embroidery on cuffs and lapels. Of an age with Eben, but stockier and with almost no blotches, he did not look happy that his black coat was stuffed into the leather scrip by his feet. They were the ones Lews Therin had been raving about, them and all the rest of the Asha’man. Asha’man, Aes Sedai, anyone who could channel set him off, often as not.

“Think too much, Rand al’Thor?” Enaila gripped a short spear in one hand and her buckler and three more spears in the other, yet she sounded as if she were shaking a finger at him. The Asha’man frowned at her. “Your trouble is, you do not think at all.” Some of the other Maidens laughed softly, but she was not making a joke. Shorter than any other Maiden there by at least a hand, she had hair as fiery as her temper, and an odd view of her relationship to him. Her flaxen-haired friend Somara, who stood head and shoulders taller, nodded agreement; she held the same peculiar view.

He ignored the comment, but could not stop a sigh. Somara and Enaila were the worst, yet none of the Maidens could decide whether he was the *Car’a’carn*, to be obeyed, or the only child of a Maiden ever known to the Maidens, to be cared for as a brother, bullied as a son for a few. Even Jalani there, not many years from playing with dolls, seemed to think he was her *younger* brother, while Corana, graying and nearly as leather-faced as Sulin, treated him like an older. At least they only did that around themselves, not often where other Aiel could hear. When it counted, he would be the

Car'a'carn. And he owed it to them. They died for him. He owed them whatever they wanted.

"I don't intend to spend all night here while you lot play Kiss the Daisies," he said. Sulin gave him one of those looks—in dresses or in *cadin'sor*, women tossed those looks about like farmers scattering seed—but the Asha'man abandoned staring at the Maidens and slung the straps of their scrips over their shoulders. Push them hard, he had told Taim, make them weapons, and Taim had delivered. A good weapon moved as the man who held it directed. If only he could be sure it would not turn in his hand.

He had three destinations tonight, but one of those the Maidens could not be allowed to know. No one but himself. Which of the other two came first he had decided earlier, yet he hesitated. The journey would be known soon enough, yet there were reasons to keep it secret as he could.

When the gateway opened there in the middle of the room, a sweetish smell familiar to any farmer drifted through. Horse dung. Wrinkling her nose as she veiled, Sulin led half the Maidens through at a trot. After a glance to him, the Asha'man followed, drawing deeply on the True Source as they went, as much as they could hold.

Because of that, he could feel their strength as they passed him. Without that, it took some effort to tell a man could channel, longer still unless he cooperated. None were near as strong as he. Not yet, anyway; there was no saying how strong a man would be until he stopped growing stronger. Fedwin stood highest of the three, but he had what Taim called a bar. Fedwin did not really believe he could affect anything at a distance with the Power. The result was that at fifty paces his ability began to fade, and at a hundred he could not weave even a thread of *saidin*. Men gained strength faster than women, it seemed, and a good thing. These three were all strong enough to make a gateway of useful size, if just barely in Jonan's case. Every Asha'man was that he had kept.

Kill them before it is too late, before they go mad, Lews Therin whispered. *Kill them, hunt down Sammael, and Demandred, and all the Forsaken. I have to kill them all, before it is too late!* A moment of struggle as he attempted to wrest the Power away from Rand and failed. He seemed to try that more often of late, or to seize *saidin* on his own. The second was a bigger danger than the first. Rand doubted that Lews Therin could take the True Source away once Rand held it; he was not certain he could take it from Lews Therin, either, if the other reached it first.

What about me? Rand thought again. It was nearly a snarl, and no less vicious for falling short. Wrapped in the Power as he was, anger spider-webbed across the outside of the Void, a fiery lace. *I can channel, too. Madness waits for me, but it already has you! You killed yourself, Kinslayer, after you murdered your wife and your children and the Light alone knows how many others. I won't kill where I don't have to! Do you hear me, Kinslayer?* Silence answered.

He drew a deep, uneven breath. That web of fire flickered, lightning in the distance. He had never spoken to the man—it was the man, not just a voice; a man, entire with memories—never spoken to him like that before. Perhaps it might drive Lews Therin away for good. Half the man's mad rantings were tears over his dead wife. Did he want to drive Lews Therin away? His only friend in that chest.

He had promised Sulin to count to one hundred before following, but he did it by fives, then stepped more than a hundred and fifty leagues to Caemlyn.

Night had closed down on the Royal Palace of Andor, moonshadows cloaking delicate spires and golden domes, but a gentle breeze did nothing to break the heat. The moon hung above, still almost full, giving some light. Veiled Maidens scurried around the wagons lined up behind the largest of the palace stables. The odor of the stable muck the wagons hauled away every day had long since soaked into the wood. The Asha'man had hands to their faces, Eben actually pinching his nose shut.

"The *Car'a'carn* counts quickly," Sulin muttered, but she lowered her veil. There would be no surprises here. No one would stay near those wagons who did not have to.

Rand let the gateway close as soon as the remaining Maidens came through, right behind him, and as it winked out of existence, Lews Therin whispered, *She is gone. Almost gone*. There was relief in his voice; the bond of Warder and Aes Sedai had not existed in the Age of Legends.

Alanna was not really gone, no more than she had been any time since bonding Rand against his will, but her presence had lessened, and it was the lessening that made Rand truly aware. You could become used to anything, begin taking it for granted. Near to her, he walked around with her emotions nestled in the back of his head, her physical condition as well, if he thought about it, and he knew exactly where she was as well as he knew his own his hand's place, but just as with his hand, unless he thought about it, it just was. Only distance had any effect, but he could still *feel* that she was somewhere east of him. He wanted to be aware of her. Should Lews Therin fall silent and all the memories of the chest somehow be wiped from his head, he would still have the bond to remind him, "Never trust Aes Sedai."

Abruptly he realized that Jonan and Eben still held *saidin* too. "Release," he said sharply—that was the command Taim used—and he felt the Power vanish from them. Good weapons. So far. *Kill them before it's too late*, Lews Therin murmured. Rand released the Source deliberately, and reluctantly. He always hated letting go of the life, the enhanced senses. Of the struggle. Inside, though, he was tense, a jumper ready to leap, ready to seize it once more. He always was, now.

I have to kill them, Lews Therin whispered.

Shoving the voice back, Rand sent one of the Maidens, Nerilea, a square-faced woman, into the palace and began pacing alongside the wagons, thoughts spinning again, faster than before. He should not have come here. He should have sent Fedwin, with a letter. Spinning. Elayne. Aviendha. Perrin. Faile. Annoura. Berelain. Mat. Light, he should not have come. Elayne and Aviendha. Annoura and Berelain. Faile and Perrin and Mat. Flashes of color, quick motion just out of sight. A madman muttering angrily in the distance.

Slowly he became aware of the Maidens talking among themselves. About the smell. Implying that it came from the Asha'man. They wanted to be heard, or they would have been using handtalk; there was moonlight enough for that. Moonlight enough to see the color in Eben's face, too, and how Fedwin's jaw was set. Maybe they were not boys any longer, not since Dumai's Wells certainly, but they were still only fifteen or sixteen. Jonan's eyebrows had drawn down so far they seemed to be sitting on his cheeks. At least nobody had seized *saidin* again. Yet.

He started to step over to the three men, then raised his voice instead. Let them all hear. "If I can put up with foolishness from Maidens, so can you."

If anything, the color in Eben's face deepened. Jonan grunted. All three saluted Rand with fist to chest; then they turned to one another. Jonan said something in a low voice, glancing at the Maidens, and Fedwin and Eben laughed. The first time they saw Maidens they had stumbled between wanting to goggle at these exotic creatures they had only read about and wanting to run before the murderous Aiel of the stories killed them. Nothing much frightened them anymore. They needed to relearn fear.

The Maidens stared at Rand, and began talking with their hands, sometimes laughing softly. Wary of the Asha'man they might be, yet Maidens being Maidens—Aiel being Aiel—risk only made taunts more fun. Somara murmured aloud about Aviendha settling him down, which earned firm nods of approval. Nobody's life was ever this tangled in the stories.

As soon as Nerilea returned saying that she had found Davram Bashere and Bael, the clan chief leading the Aiel here in Caemlyn, Rand took off his sword belt, and so did Fedwin. Jalani produced a large leather bag for the swords and the Dragon Scepter, holding it as if the swords were poisonous snakes, or perhaps long dead and rotten. Though in truth she would not have held it so gingerly in either case. Putting on a hooded cloak that Corana handed him, Rand held his wrists together behind his back, and Sulin bound them with a cord. Tightly, muttering to herself.

"This is nonsense. Even wetlanders would call it nonsense."

He tried not to wince. She was strong, and using every ounce of it. "You have run away from us too often, Rand al'Thor. You have no care for yourself." She considered him a brother of an age with herself, but irresponsible at times. "*Far Dareis Mai* carries your honor, and you have no care."

Fedwin glowered while his own wrists were tied, though the Maiden binding him hardly put out much effort. Watching, Jonan and Eben frowned deeply. They disliked this plan as much as Sulin did. And understood it as little. The Dragon Reborn did not have to explain himself, and the *Car'a'carn* seldom did. No one said anything, though. A weapon did not complain.

When Sulin stepped around in front of Rand, she took one look at his face, and her breath caught. "They did this to you," she said softly, and reached for her heavy-bladed belt knife. A foot or more of steel, it was almost a short-sword, though none but a fool would say that to an Aiel.

"Pull up the hood," Rand told her roughly. "The whole point of this is that no one recognize me before I reach Bael and Bashere." She hesitated, peering into his eyes. "I said, pull it up," he growled. Sulin could kill most men with her bare hands, but her fingers were gentle settling the hood around his face.

With a laugh, Jalani snatched the hood down over his eyes. “Now you can be sure no one will know you, Rand al’Thor. You must trust us to guide your feet.” Several Maidens laughed.

Stiffening, he barely stopped short of seizing *saidin*. Barely. Lews Therin snarled and gibbered. Rand forced himself to breathe normally. It was not total darkness. He could see moonlight below the edge of the hood. Even so, he stumbled when Sulin and Enaila took his arms and led him forward.

“I thought you were old enough to walk better than that,” Enaila murmured in mock surprise. Sulin’s hand moved. It took him a moment to realize she was stroking his arm.

All he could see was what lay just before him, the moonlit flagstones of the stableyard, then stone steps, floors of marble by lamplight, sometimes with a long runner of carpet. He strained his eyes at the movement of shadows, felt for the telltale presence of *saidin*, or worse, the prickling that announced a woman holding *saidar*. Blind like this, he might not know he was under attack until too late. He could hear the whisper of a few servants’ feet as they hurried on nighttime chores, but no one challenged five Maidens apparently escorting two hooded prisoners. With Bael and Bashere living in the palace and policing Caemlyn with their men, doubtless stranger sights had been seen in these corridors. It was like walking a maze. But then he had been in one maze or another since leaving Emond’s Field, even when he had thought that he walked a clear path.

Would I know a clear path if I saw one? he wondered. *Or have I been at this so long I’d think it was a trap?*

There are no clear paths. Only pitfalls and tripwires and darkness. Lews Therin’s snarl sounded sweaty, desperate. The way Rand felt.

When Sulin finally led them into a room and shut the door, Rand tossed his head violently to throw back the hood—and stared. Bael and Davram he had expected, but not Davram’s wife, Deira, nor Melaine, nor Dorindha.

“I see you, *Car’a’carn*.” Bael, the tallest man Rand had ever seen, sat cross-legged on the green-and-white floor tiles in his *cadin’sor*, an air about him even at ease that said he was ready to move in a heartbeat. The clan chief of the Goshien Aiel was not young—no clan chief was—and there was gray in his dark reddish hair, but anyone who thought him soft with age was in for a sad surprise. “May you always find water and shade. I stand with the *Car’a’carn,* and my spears stand with me.”

“Water and shade may be all very well,” Davram Bashere said, hooking a leg over the gilded arm of his chair, “but myself I would settle for chilled wine.” Little taller than Enaila, he had his short blue coat undone, and sweat glistened on his dark face. Despite his apparent indolence, he looked even harder than Bael, with his fierce tilted eyes, and his eagle’s beak of a nose above thick gray-streaked mustaches. “I offer congratulations on your escape, and your victory. But why do you come disguised as a prisoner?”

“I prefer to know whether he is bringing Aes Sedai down on us,” Deira put in. A large woman gowned in gold-worked green silk, Faile’s mother stood as tall as any Maiden there except Somara, long black hair slashed with white at the temples, her nose only a little less bold than her husband’s. Truth, she could give him lessons in looking fierce, and she was very like her daughter in one respect. Her loyalty was to her husband, not Rand. “You’ve taken Aes Sedai *prisoner*! Are we now to expect the entire White Tower to descend upon our heads?”

“If they do,” Melaine said sharply, adjusting her shawl, “they will be dealt with as they deserve.” Sun-haired, green-eyed and beautiful, no more than a handful of years older than Rand by her face, she was a Wise One, and married to Bael. Whatever had caused the Wise Ones to change their view of Aes Sedai, Melaine, Amys and Bair had changed the most.

“What I wish to know,” the third woman said, “is what you will do about Colavaere Saighan.” While Deira and Melaine had presence, great presence, Dorindha outshone both, though it was difficult to see how exactly. The roofmistress of Smoke Springs Hold was a solid, motherly woman, much nearer handsome than pretty, with creases at the corners of her blue eyes and as much white in her pale red hair as Bael had gray, yet of the three women, any eye with a brain behind it would have said she held sway. “Melaine says that Bair considers Colavaere Saighan of little importance,” Dorindha went on, “but Wise Ones can be as blind as any man when it comes to seeing the battle ahead and missing the scorpion underfoot.” A smile for Melaine robbed the words of their sting; Melaine’s answering smile certainly said she took none. “A roofmistress’s work is finding those scorpions before anyone is stung.” She also was Bael’s wife, a fact that still disconcerted Rand, for all it had been her choice and

Melaine’s. Perhaps partly *because* it had been theirs; among Aiel, a man had little say if his wife chose a sister-wife. It was not a common arrangement even among them.

“Colavaere has taken up farming,” Rand growled. They blinked at him, wondering whether that was a joke. “The Sun Throne is empty again, and waiting for Elayne.” He had considered weaving a ward against listeners, but a ward could be detected by anyone searching, man or woman, and its presence would announce that something interesting was being said. Well, everything said here would be known from the Dragonwall to the sea soon enough.

Fedwin was already rubbing his wrists, while Jalani sheathed her knife. No one looked at them twice; all eyes were on Rand. Frowning at Nerilea, he waggled his bound hands until Sulin sliced the cords. “I didn’t realize this was to be a family gathering.” Nerilea looked a trifle abashed, maybe, but no one else did.

“After you marry,” Davram murmured with a smile, “you will learn you must choose very carefully what to keep from your wife.” Deira glanced down at him, pursing her lips.

“Wives are a great comfort,” Bael laughed, “if a man does not tell them too much.” Smiling, Dorindha ran her fingers into his hair—and gripped for a moment as though she meant to tug his head off. Bael grunted, but not for Dorindha’s fingers alone. Melaine wiped her small belt knife on her heavy skirt and sheathed it. The two women grinned at one another over his head while he rubbed at his shoulder, where a small spot of blood stained his *cadin’sor*. Deira nodded thoughtfully; it seemed she had just gotten an idea.

“What woman could I hate enough to marry her to the Dragon Reborn?” Rand said coldly. That caused a silence solid enough to touch.

He tried to take rein on his anger. He should have expected this. Melaine was not just a Wise One, she was a dreamwalker, as were Amys and Bair. Among other things, they could talk to one another in their dreams, and to others; a useful skill, though they had only used it for him once. It was Wise Ones’ business. No wonder at all that Melaine was abreast of everything that had happened. No wonder that she told Dorindha everything, Wise Ones’ business or no; the two women were best friends and sisters rolled into one. Once Melaine let Bael know of the kidnapping, of course he had told Bashere; expecting Bashere to keep that from his wife was like expecting him to keep it secret that their house was on fire. Inch by inch he drew the anger in, forced it down.

“Has Elayne arrived?” He tried to make his voice casual, and missed. No matter. There were reasons everyone knew for him to be anxious. Andor might not be as unquiet as Cairhien, but Elayne on the throne was the fastest way to settle both lands. Maybe the only way.

“Not yet.” Bashere shrugged. “But tales have come north of Aes Sedai with an army somewhere in Murandy, or maybe Altara. That could be young Mat and his Band of the Red Hand, with the Daughter-Heir and the sisters who fled the Tower when Siuan Sanche was deposed.”

Rand rubbed his wrists where the cords had chafed. All that “captive” rigmarole had been on the chance Elayne was here already. Elayne, and Aviendha. So he could come and go without them learning of it till he was gone. Maybe he would have found a way to peek at them. Maybe. . . . He was a fool, and no maybe about that.

“Do you mean those sisters to swear oath to you, too?” Deira’s tone was icy as her face. She did not like him; as she saw it, her husband had set off down a road that likely would end with his head on a pike over a gate in Tar Valon, and Rand had put his feet on that road. “The White Tower will not hold still for your coercing Aes Sedai.”

Rand made her a small bow, and burn her if she took it for mocking. Deira ni Ghaline t’Bashere never gave him a title, never even used his name; she could as well have been talking to a footman, and not a very intelligent or trustworthy one. “Should they choose to swear, I’ll accept their oaths. I doubt many are exactly eager to return to Tar Valon. If they choose otherwise, they can go their own way, so long as they don’t put themselves against me.”

“The White Tower has put itself against you,” Bael said, leaning forward with his fists on his knees. His blue eyes made Deira’s voice seem warm. “An enemy who comes once, will come again. Unless they are stopped. My spears will follow wherever the *Car’a’carn* leads.” Melaine nodded, of course; she very likely wanted every last Aes Sedai shielded and kneeling under guard if not bound hand and foot. But Dorindha nodded as well, and Sulin, and Bashere knuckled his mustaches thoughtfully. Rand did not know whether to laugh or weep.

“Don’t you think I’ve enough on my plate without a war against the White Tower? Elaida grabbed my throat and was slapped down.” The ground erupting in fire and torn flesh. Ravens and vultures gorging. How many dead? Slapped down. “If she has sense enough to stop there, I will too.” So long as they did not ask him to trust. The chest. He was shaking his head, half-aware of Lews Therin suddenly moaning about the dark and the thirst. He could ignore, he had to ignore, but not forget, or trust.

Leaving Bael and Bashere arguing over whether Elaida did have sense enough to stop, now that she had begun, he moved to a map-covered table against the wall, beneath a tapestry of some battle where the White Lion of Andor stood prominent. Apparently Bael and Bashere used this room for their planning. A little rooting around found the map he needed, a large roll displaying all of Andor from the Mountains of Mist to the River Erinin, and parts of the lands to the south as well, Ghealdan and Altara and Murandy.

“The women held captive in the treekillers’ lands are allowed to cause no trouble, so why should any others?” Melaine said, apparently in answer to something he had not heard. She sounded angry.

“We will do what we must, Deira t’Bashere,” Dorindha said calmly; she was seldom anything but. “Hold to your courage, and we will arrive where we must go.”

“When you leap from a cliff,” Deira replied, “it is too late for anything but holding to your courage. And hoping there’s a haywain at the bottom to land in.” Her husband chuckled as though she was making a joke. She did not sound it.

Spreading the map out and weighting the corners with ink jars and sand bottles, Rand measured off distances with his fingers. Mat was not moving very fast if rumor placed him in Altara or Murandy. He took pride in how fast the Band could march. Maybe the Aes Sedai were slowing him, with servants and wagons. Maybe there were more sisters than he had thought. Rand realized his hands were clenched into fists and made them straighten. He needed Elayne. To take the throne here and in Cairhien; that was why he needed her. Just that. Aviendha. . . . He did not need her, not at all, and she had made it clear she had no need for him. She was safe, away from him. He could keep them both safe by keeping them as far from him as possible. Light, if he could only look at them. He needed Mat, though, with Perrin being stubborn. He was not sure how Mat had suddenly become expert on everything to do with battle, but even Bashere respected Mat’s opinions. About war, anyway.

“They treated him as *da’tsang,*” Sulin growled, and some of the other Maidens growled wordlessly in echo.

“We know,” Melaine said grimly. “They have no honor.”

“Will he truly hold back after what you describe?” Deira demanded in disbelieving tones.

The map did not extend far enough south to show Illian—no map on the table showed any part of that country—but Rand’s hand drifted down across Murandy, and he could imagine the Doirlon Hills, not far inside Illian’s borders, with a line of hillforts no invading army could afford to ignore. And some two hundred and fifty miles to the east, across the Plains of Maredo, an army such as had not been seen since the nations gathered before Tar Valon in the Aiel War, maybe not since Artur Hawkwing’s day. Tairen, Cairhienin, Aiel, all poised to smash into Illian. If Perrin would not lead, then Mat must. Only there was not enough time. There was never enough time.

“Burn my eyes,” Davram muttered. “You never mentioned that, Melaine. Lady Caraline and Lord Toram camped right outside the city, and High Lord Darlin as well? They didn’t come together by chance, now right at this time, they did not. That’s a pit of vipers to have on your doorstep, whoever you are.”

“Let the *algai’d’siswai* dance,” Bael replied. “Dead vipers bite no one.”

Sammael had always been at his best defending. That was Lews Therin’s memory, from the War of the Shadow. With two men inside one skull, maybe it was to be expected that memories would drift between them. Had Lews Therin suddenly found himself recalling herding sheep, or cutting firewood, or feeding the chickens? Rand could hear him faintly, raging to kill, to destroy; thoughts of the Forsaken almost always drove Lews Therin over the brink.

“Deira t’Bashere speaks truly,” Bael said. “We must stay on the path we have begun until our enemies are destroyed, or we are.”

“That was not how I meant it,” Deira said dryly. “But you are right. We have no choice, now. Until our enemies are destroyed, or we are.”

Death, destruction and madness floated in Rand’s head as he studied the map. Sammael would be at those forts soon after the army struck, Sammael with the strength of a Forsaken and the knowledge of the Age of Legends. Lord Brend, he called himself, one of the Council of Nine, and

Lord Brend they called him who refused to admit the Forsaken were loose, but Rand knew him. With Lews Therin's memory, he knew Sammael's face, knew him to the bone.

"What does Dyelin Taravin intend with Naean Arawn and Elenia Sarand?" Dorindha asked. "I confess I do not understand this shutting people away."

"What she does there is hardly important," Davram said. "It is her meetings with those Aes Sedai that concern me."

"Dyelin Taravin is a fool," Melaine muttered. "She believes the rumors about the *Car'a'carn* kneeling to the Amyrlin Seat. She will not brush her hair unless those Aes Sedai give her permission."

"You mistake her," Deira said firmly. "Dyelin is strong enough to rule Andor; she proved that at Aringill. Of course she listens to the Aes Sedai—only a fool ignores Aes Sedai—but to listen is not to obey."

The wagons that had been brought from Dumai's Wells would have to be searched again. The fat-little-man *angreal* had to be there somewhere. None of the sisters who escaped could have had a clue what it was. Unless, perhaps, one had stuck a souvenir of the Dragon Reborn in her pouch. No. It had to be in the wagons somewhere. With that, he was more than a match for any of the Forsaken. Without it. . . . Death, destruction and madness.

Suddenly what he had been hearing rushed forward. "What was that?" he demanded, turning from the ivory-inlaid table.

Surprised faces turned toward him. Jonan straightened from where he had been slouching against the doorframe. The Maidens, squatting easily on their heels, suddenly appeared alert. They had been talking idly among themselves; even they were wary around him now.

Fingering one of her ivory necklaces, Melaine shared a decided look between Bael and Davram, then spoke before anyone else. "There are nine Aes Sedai at an inn called The Silver Swan, in what Davram Bashere calls the New City." She said the word "inn" in an odd way, and "city" as well; she had only known them from books before coming across the Dragonwall. "He and Bael say we must leave them alone unless they do something against you. I think you have learned about waiting for Aes Sedai, Rand al'Thor."

"My fault," Bashere sighed, "if fault there is. Though what Melaine expects to do, I can't say. Eight sisters stopped at The Silver Swan almost a month ago, just after you left. Now and then a few more come or go, but there are never more than ten at one time. They keep to themselves, cause no trouble, and ask no questions that Bael or I can learn. A few Red sisters have come into the city, as well; twice. Those at The Silver Swan all have Warders, but these never do. I'm sure they are Reds. Two or three appear, ask after men heading for the Black Tower, and after a day or so, they leave. Without learning much, I'd say. That Black Tower is as good as a fortress for holding in secrets. None of them has made trouble, and I would rather not trouble them until I know it is necessary."

"I didn't mean that," Rand said slowly. He sat down in a chair opposite Bashere, gripping the carved arms till his knuckles hurt. Aes Sedai gathering here, Aes Sedai gathering in Cairhien. Happenstance? Lews Therin rumbled like thunder on the horizon about death and betrayal. He would have to warn Taim. Not about the Aes Sedai at The Silver Swan—Taim certainly knew already; why had he not mentioned it?—about staying away from them, keeping the Asha'man away. If Dumai's Wells was to be an end, there could be no new beginnings here. Too many things seemed to be spinning out of control. The harder he tried to gather them all in, the more there were and the faster they spun. Sooner or later, everything was going to fall, and shatter. The thought dried his throat. Thom Merrilin had taught him to juggle a little, but he had never been very good. Now he had to be very good indeed. He wished he had something to wet his throat.

He did not realize he had spoken that last aloud until Jalani straightened from her crouch and strutted across the room to where a tall silver pitcher stood on a small table. Filling a hammered silver goblet, she brought it back to Rand with a smile, her mouth opening as she proffered it. He expected something rude, but a change came over her face. All she said was, *"Car'a'carn,"* then went back to her place with the other Maidens, so dignified it seemed she was imitating Dorindha, or maybe Deira. Somara gestured in handtalk, and suddenly every Maiden was red-faced and biting her lips to keep from laughing. Every Maiden but Jalani, who was just red-faced.

The wine punch tasted of plums. Rand could remember fat sweet plums from the orchards across the river when he was young, climbing the trees to pick them himself. . . . Tilting his head back, he drained the goblet. There were plum trees in the Two Rivers, but no orchards of them, and certainly not across any river. *Keep your bloody memories to yourself,* he snarled at Lews Therin. The man in his head laughed at something, giggling quietly to himself.

Bashere frowned at the Maidens, then glanced at Bael and his wives, all impassive as stone, and shook his head. He got on well with Bael, but Aiel in general mystified him. “Since no one is bringing me any drink,” he said, rising, and went to pour his own. He took a long swallow that wet his heavy mustaches. “Now, that’s cooling. Taim’s way of enrolling men seems to sweep up every fellow who’d like to follow the Dragon Reborn. He has delivered a goodly army to me, men who lack whatever it is your Asha’man need. They all talk wide-eyed about walking though holes in the air, but none has been anywhere near the Black Tower. I’m trying out a few thoughts young Mat had.”

Rand waved that away with the empty goblet. “Tell me about Dyelin.” Dyelin of House Taravin would be next in line for the throne should anything happen to Elayne, but he had told her he was having Elayne brought to Caemlyn. “If she thinks she can take the Lion Throne, I can find a farm for her, too.”

“Take the throne?” Deira said incredulously, and her husband laughed out loud.

“I have no understanding of wetlander ways,” Bael said, “but I do not think that is what she has done.”

“Far from it.” Davram carried the pitcher over to pour more punch for Rand. “Some lesser lords and ladies who thought to curry favor proclaimed for her at Aringill. She moves quickly, Lady Dyelin. Within four days she had the two leaders hanged, for treason to the Daughter-Heir Elayne, and ordered another twenty flogged.” He chuckled approvingly. His wife sniffed. Likely she would have had the road lined with gibbets all the way from Aringill to Caemlyn.

“Then what was that about her ruling Andor?” Rand demanded. “And imprisoning Elenia and Naean.”

“They are the ones who tried to claim the throne,” Deira said, dark eyes sparkling angrily.

Bashere nodded. He was much calmer. “Only three days ago. When word arrived of Colavaere’s coronation, and the rumors from Cairhien that you had gone to Tar Valon began to sound more real. With trade beginning again, there are so many pigeons in the air between Cairhien and Caemlyn, you could walk on their backs.” Putting the pitcher back, he returned to his chair. “Naean proclaimed for the Lion Throne in the morning, Elenia before midday, and by sunset Dyelin, Pelivar and Luan had arrested them both. They announced Dyelin as Regent the next morning. In Elayne’s name, until Elayne returns. Most of the Houses of Andor have declared support for Dyelin. I think some would like her to take the throne herself, but Aringill keeps even the most powerful careful of their tongues.” Closing one eye, Bashere pointed at Rand. “You, they do not mention at all. Whether that is good or bad, it will take a wiser head than mine to say.”

Deira offered a cool smile, looking down that nose of hers. “Those . . . lickspittles . . . you allowed to make free of the palace have all fled the city, it seems. Fled Andor, some of them, according to rumor. You should know, they were all behind either Elenia or Naean.”

Rand carefully set his full goblet on the floor beside his chair. He had only let Lir and Arymilla and the rest remain in order to try pushing Dyelin and those who supported her into cooperation with him. They would never have left Andor to the likes of Lord Lir. With time and Elayne’s return, it might yet work. But everything was whirling faster and faster, whirling away from his fingers. There were a few things he could control, though.

“Fedwin, there, is an Asha’man,” he said. “He can bring messages to me in Cairhien, if there’s need.” That with a glare for Melaine, who returned the blandest sort of look. Deira studied Fedwin as she might a dead rat some overeager dog had dropped on her rug. Davram and Bael were more considering; Fedwin tried to stand straighter under their gaze. “Don’t let anyone know who he is,” Rand went on. “No one. That’s why he isn’t wearing black. I am taking two more to Lord Semaradrid and High Lord Weiramon tonight. They’ll have need when they face Sammael in the Doirlon Hills. I will be busy chewing on Cairhien for a while yet, it seems.” And maybe Andor, too.

“Does this mean you will send the spears forward at last?” Bael said. “You give the orders tonight?”

Rand nodded, and Bashere gave a great hoot of laughter. “Now, that calls for a good wine. Or it would if it wasn’t hot enough to make a man’s blood thick as porridge.” Laughter slid into a grimace. “Burn me, but I wish I could be there. Still, I suppose holding Caemlyn for the Dragon Reborn is no small thing.”

“You always want to be where the swords are bared, my husband.” Deira sounded quite fond.

“The fifth,” Bael said. “You will allow the fifth in Illian, when Sammael has fallen?” Aiel custom allowed taking the fifth part of all that was in a place taken by force of arms. Rand had forbidden it here in Caemlyn; he would not give Elayne a city looted even that much.

“They will have the fifth,” Rand said, but it was not of Sammael or Illian that he thought. *Bring Elayne quickly, Mat*. It ran wild in his head, across Lews Therin’s cackling. *Bring her quickly, before Andor and Cairhien both erupt in my face*.

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CHAPTER
8

The Figurehead

We must stop here tomorrow.” Egwene shifted carefully on her folding chair; it had a tendency to fold on its own, sometimes. “Lord Bryne says the army is running short of food. Our camp is certainly short of everything.”

Two stubby tallow candles burned on the wooden table in front of her. That folded, too, for easy packing, but it was sturdier than the chair. The candles in the tent that served as her study were supplemented by an oil lantern hanging from the centerpole up near the peak. The dim yellow light flickered, making faint shadows dance on patched canvas walls that were a far cry from the grandeur of the Amyrlin’s study in the White Tower, but that did not upset her. Truth be known, she herself was some considerable distance short of the grandeur normally associated with the Amyrlin Seat. She knew very well that the seven-striped stole on her shoulders was the only reason any stranger would believe her Amyrlin. If they did not think it an extremely foolish joke. Odd things had happened in the White Tower’s history—Siuan had told her secret details of some of them—yet surely nothing so odd as her.

“Four or five days would be better,” Sheriam mused, studying the sheaf of papers in her lap. Slightly plump, with high cheekbones and tilted green eyes, in her dark green riding dress she managed to look elegant and commanding despite her perch on one of the two precarious stools in front of the table. Exchange her narrow blue stole of the Keeper of the Chronicles for the Amyrlin’s, and anyone would think she wore it by right. Sometimes she certainly seemed to believe the striped stole rested on her own shoulders. “Or perhaps longer. It would not hurt to build our stores up once more.”

Siuan, atop the other rickety stool, shook her head slightly, but Egwene did not need the hint. “One day.” She might be just eighteen and well short of a true Amyrlin’s grandeur, but she was no fool. Too many of the sisters seized on any excuse for a halt—too many of the Sitters, as well—and if they stopped too long, it might be impossible to start them moving again. Sheriam opened her mouth.

“One, daughter,” Egwene said firmly. Whatever Sheriam thought, the fact was that Sheriam Bayanar was the Keeper and Egwene al’Vere the Amyrlin. If only Sheriam could be brought to realize that. And the Hall of the Tower; they were worse. She wanted to snarl or snap or maybe throw something, but after close to a month and half, she already had a lifetime’s practice in keeping her face and voice smooth at far greater provocation than this. “Any longer, and we’ll begin to strip the countryside bare. I won’t leave people to starve. On the practical side, if we take too much from them, even paid for, they’ll give us a hundred problems in return.”

“Raids on the herds and flocks and thieves at the store-wagons,” Siuan murmured. Studying her divided gray skirts, not looking at anyone, she seemed to be thinking aloud. “Men shooting at our guards at night, maybe setting fire to whatever they can reach. A bad business. Hungry people become desperate in a hurry.” Those were the same reasons Lord Bryne had given Egwene, in very nearly the same words.

The fiery-haired woman shot Siuan a hard look. Many sisters had a difficult time with Siuan. Her face was probably the best known in the camp, young enough to have looked proper above an Accepted’s dress, or a novice’s for that matter. That was a side effect of being stilled, though not many had known it; Siuan could hardly walk a step without sisters staring at her, the once Amyrlin Seat, deposed and cut off from *saidar,* then Healed and restored to at least some ability, when everyone knew that was impossible. Many welcomed her back warmly as a sister once more, for herself and for the miracle that held out hope against whatevery Aes Sedai feared beyond death, but just as many or more offered lukewarm toleration or condescension or both, blaming her for their present situation.

Sheriam was one of those who thought Siuan should instruct the new young Amyrlin in protocol and the like, which everyone believed she hated, and keep her mouth closed unless she was called upon. She was less than she had been, no longer Amyrlin and no longer anywhere near so strong in the Power. It was not cruelty as Aes Sedai saw it. The past was past; what was now, was, and must be accepted. Anything else only brought greater pain. By and large, Aes Sedai admitted change slowly, but once they did, for most it was as if things had always been that way. “One day, Mother, as you say,” Sheriam sighed at last, bowing her head slightly. Less in submission, Egwene was sure, than to hide a grimace over her stubbornness. She would accept the grimace if the acquiescence came with it. For the time being, she had to.

Siuan bowed her head, too. To hide a smile. Any sister might be appointed to any post, but the social pecking order was quite rigid, and Siuan stood a long way further down than she had. That was one reason.

The papers on Sheriam’s lap were duplicated on Siuan’s, and on the table in front of Egwene. Reports on everything from the number of candles and sacks of beans remaining in the camp to the state of the horses, and the same for Lord Bryne’s army. The army’s camp encircled the Aes Sedai’s, with a ring perhaps twenty steps wide between, but in many ways they might as well have been a mile apart. Surprisingly, Lord Bryne insisted on that as much as the sisters. The Aes Sedai did not want soldiers wandering among their tents, a lot of unwashed, illiterate ruffians with light fingers often as not, and it seemed the soldiers did not want Aes Sedai wandering among them either—though, perhaps wisely, they held their reasons close. They marched toward Tar Valon to pull down a usurper to the Amyrlin Seat and raise Egwene in her place, yet few men were truly comfortable around Aes Sedai. Few enough women, either.

As Keeper, Sheriam would have been all too happy to take these minor matters out of Egwene’s hands. She had said as much, explaining how minor they were, how the Amyrlin Seat should not be burdened with day-to-day trifles. Siuan, on the other hand, said a good Amyrlin paid attention to just those, not trying to duplicate the work of dozens of sisters and clerks, yet checking on something different every day. That way she had a good idea of what was happening and what needed doing before someone came running to her with a crisis already breaking into shards. A feel for how the wind was blowing, Siuan called it. Making sure these reports reached her had required weeks, and Egwene was sure that once she let them pass to Sheriam’s control, she would never again learn anything until it was long dealt with. If then.

A silence stretched as they began reading the next paper in each stack.

They were not alone. Chesa, seated on cushions to one side of the tent, spoke. “Too little light is bad for the eyes,” she murmured almost to herself, holding up one of Egwene’s silk stockings that she was darning. “You’ll never catch me ruining my eyes over words in this little light.” Just short of stout, with a twinkle in her eyes and a merry smile, Egwene’s maid was always trying to slip advice to the Amyrlin as though talking about herself. She could have been in Egwene’s service twenty years instead of less than two months, and three times as old as Egwene instead of barely twice. Tonight, Egwene suspected that she talked to fill silences. There was a tension in the camp since Logain had escaped. A man who could channel, shielded and under close guard, yet he had slipped away like fog. Everyone walked on edge wondering how, wondering where he was, what he intended to do now. Egwene wished harder than most that she could be sure she knew where Logain Ablar was.

Giving her papers a firm snap of her wrists, Sheriam frowned at Chesa; she did not understand why Egwene let her maid be present at these meetings, much less let her chatter away freely. It probably never occurred to her that Chesa’s presence and her unexpected chatter frequently unsettled her just enough to help Egwene sidestep advice she did not want to take and postpone decisions she did not want to make, at least not the way Sheriam wanted them made. Certainly the notion had never occurred to Chesa; she smiled apologetically and returned to her darning, occasionally murmuring to herself.

“If we continue, Mother,” Sheriam said coolly, “we may finish before dawn.”

Staring at the next page, Egwene rubbed her temples. Chesa might be right about the light. She had another headache coming on. Then again, it might be the page, detailing what money was left. The stories she had read never mentioned how much coin was required to keep an army. Pinned to the sheet were notes from two of the Sitters, Romanda and Lelaine, suggesting the soldiers be paid less frequently, paid less in fact. More than suggesting, really, just as Romanda and Lelaine were more than simply two Sitters in the Hall. Other Sitters followed where they led, if not all by any means, while the only Sitter Egwene could count on was Delana, and her not far. It was rare that Lelaine and Romanda agreed on anything, and they could hardly have chosen a worse. Some of the soldiers had sworn oaths, yet most were there for their pay, and maybe the hope of loot.

“The soldiers are to be paid as before,” Egwene muttered, crumpling the two notes. She was not going to let her army melt away, any more than she would allow looting.

“As you command, Mother.” Sheriam’s eyes sparkled with pleasure. The difficulties must be clear to her—anyone who thought her less than very intelligent was in deep trouble—but she did have a blind spot. If Romanda or Lelaine said the sun was coming up, Sheriam most likely would claim it was going down; she had had almost as much sway with the Hall as they did now, perhaps more, until they put a halt to it between them. The opposite was true, as well; those two would speak against anything Sheriam wanted before they stopped to think. Which had its uses, all in all.

Egwene’s fingers tapped on the tabletop, but she made them stop. The money had to be found—somewhere, somehow—but she did not have to let Sheriam see her worry.

“That new woman will work out,” Chesa murmured over her sewing. “Tairens always carry their noses high, of course, but Selame does know what’s required of a lady’s maid. Meri and I will settle her down soon enough.” Sheriam rolled her eyes irritably.

Egwene smiled to herself. Egwene al’Vere with three maids waiting on her; as unbelievable as the stole itself. But the smile lasted only a heartbeat. Maids had to be paid, too. A tiny sum, balanced against thirty thousand soldiers, and the Amyrlin could hardly do her own laundry or mend her own shifts, but she could have managed splendidly with Chesa alone. And would have, had she any choice in it. Less than a week earlier Romanda had decided that the Amyrlin needed another servant and found Meri among the refugees who huddled in every village until they were chased away, and not to be outdone, Lelaine produced Selame from the same source. The two women were crowded into Chesa’s small tent before Egwene knew either existed.

The principle of the thing was wrong: *three* maids when there was not enough silver to pay the army halfway to Tar Valon, servants chosen for her without any say; and then there was the fact that she had yet another, if one who received not a copper. Everyone believed Marigan was the Amyrlin’s maidservant, anyway.

Beneath the edge of the table she felt her belt pouch, felt the bracelet inside. She should wear it more; it was a duty. Keeping her hands low, she dug the bracelet out and slipped it around her wrist, a band of silver made so the catch was invisible once closed. Made with the One Power, the bracelet snapped shut beneath the table, and she very nearly snatched it off again.

Emotion flooded into a corner of her mind, emotion and awareness, a little pocket, as if she were imagining it. Not imagination, though; all too real. Half of an *a'dam*, the bracelet created a link between her and the woman who wore the other half, a silver necklace the wearer could not remove herself. They were a circle of two without embracing *saidar*, Egwene always leading by virtue of the bracelet. "Marigan" was asleep now, her feet sore from walking all day and days past, but even sleeping, fear oozed though most strongly; only hate ever came near fear in the stream that flowed through the *a'dam*. Egwene's reluctance came from the constant gnawing of the other woman's terror, from having worn the necklace end of an *a'dam* once, and from knowing the woman on the far end. She hated sharing any part of her.

Only three women in the camp knew that Moghedien was a prisoner, hidden in the midst of Aes Sedai. If it came out, Moghedien would be tried, stilled and executed in short order. If it came out, Egwene might not be far behind her, and Siuan and Leane, as well. They were the other two who knew. At best she would have the stole stripped away.

For hiding one of the Forsaken from justice, she thought grimly, *I'll be lucky if they just stick me back with the Accepted*. Unconsciously she thumbed the golden Great Serpent ring on the first finger of her right hand.

Then again, however just such a punishment might be, it was unlikely. She had been taught that the wisest of the sisters was chosen Amyrlin Seat, yet she had learned better. The choosing of an Amyrlin was as hotly contested as electing a mayor in the Two Rivers, and maybe more; no one bothered to stand against her father in Emond's Field, but she had heard about elections in Deven Ride and Taren Ferry. Siuan had only been raised Amyrlin because the three before her each had died after just a few years on the Amyrlin Seat. The Hall had wanted someone young. Speaking of age to a sister was at least as rude as slapping her face, yet she had begun to get some idea how long Aes Sedai lived. Rarely was anyone chosen Sitter before she had worn the shawl seventy or eighty years at least, and Amyrlins generally longer. Often *much* longer. So when the Hall deadlocked between four sisters raised Aes Sedai less than fifty years before, and Seaine Herimon of the White suggested a woman who had worn the shawl only *ten* years, it might have been as much exhaustion as Siuan's qualifications in administration that brought the Sitters to stand for her.

And Egwene al'Vere, who in many eyes should still have been a novice? A figurehead, easily directed, a *child* who had grown up in the same village with Rand al'Thor. That last definitely had its part in the decision. They would not take back the stole, but she would find the little authority she had managed to accumulate gone. Romanda, Lelaine and Sheriam might actually come to blows over which would march her about by the scruff of her neck. "That looks much like a bracelet I saw Elayne wearing." The papers on Sheriam's lap crackled as she leaned forward for a better look. "And Nynaeve. They shared it, as I recall."

Egwene gave a start. She had been careless. "It's the same. A remembrance gift, when they left." Twisting the silver circlet around her wrist, she felt a stab of guilt that was all her own. The bracelet appeared segmented, but so cunningly you could not see how exactly. She had hardly thought of Nynaeve and Elayne since their departure for Ebou Dar. Perhaps she should call them back. Their search was not going well, it seemed, though they denied it. Still, if they could find what they were after. . . . Sheriam was frowning, whether or not at the bracelet, Egwene could not say. She could not allow Sheriam to start thinking too much on that bracelet, though; if she ever noticed that the necklace "Marigan" wore was a match, there might be painfully awkward questions.

Rising, Egwene smoothed her skirt as she moved around the table. Siuan had acquired several pieces of information today; one could be put to good use now. She was not the only one with secrets. Sheriam looked surprised when she stopped too close for the other woman to stand.

"Daughter, I've learned that a few days after Siuan and Leane arrived in Salidar, ten sisters left, two from each Ajah there except the Blue. Where did they go, and why?"

Sheriam's eyes narrowed a fraction, but she wore serenity as comfortably as her dress. "Mother, I can hardly recall every—"

"No dancing around, Sheriam." Egwene moved a little closer, until their knees almost touched. "No lies by omission. The truth."

A frown creased Sheriam's smooth forehead. "Mother, even if I knew, you cannot trouble yourself with every little—"

"The truth, Sheriam. The whole truth. Must I ask before the entire Hall why I cannot have the truth from my Keeper? I will have it, daughter, one way or another. I *will* have it."

Sheriam's head swiveled as though she was looking for a way to escape. Her eyes fell on Chesa, hunched over her sewing, and she all but gasped with relief. "Mother, tomorrow, when we are alone, I am sure I can explain everything to your satisfaction. I must speak with a few of the sisters first."

So they could work up what Sheriam was to tell her tomorrow. "Chesa," Egwene said, "wait outside, please." For all that she seemed focused on her work to the exclusion of everything else, Chesa bounded to her feet in a flash and very nearly ran from the tent. When Aes Sedai were at odds, anyone with half a brain went elsewhere. "Now, daughter," Egwene said. "The truth. All that you know. This is as private as you will be," she added when Sheriam glanced at Siuan.

For a moment Sheriam adjusted her skirts, plucking at them really, avoiding Egwene's eyes, no doubt still working out evasions. But the Three Oaths trapped her. She could not speak an untrue word, and whatever she thought of Egwene's true position, slipping behind her back was a long way from denying her authority to her face. Even Romanda maintained the proper courtesies, if only by a hair at times.

Drawing a deep breath, Sheriam folded her hands in her lap and spoke to Egwene's chest, matter-of-fact. "When we learned the Red Ajah was responsible for setting Logain up as a false Dragon, we felt something had to be done."

"We" certainly meant the small coterie of sisters she had gathered around her; Carlinya and Beonin and the rest held as much real sway as most Sitters, if not actually in the Hall. "Elaida was sending out demands for every sister to return to the Tower, so we chose ten sisters to do just that, by the fastest means they could manage. They all should be there long since. Quietly making sure that every sister in the Tower understands the truth of what the Reds did with Logain. Not—" She hesitated, then finished in a rush. "Not even the Hall knows of them."

Egwene stepped away, rubbing her temples again. Quietly making sure. In the hope that Elaida would be deposed. Not exactly a bad scheme, really; it might even work, eventually. It might take years, too. But then, for most sisters, the longer they could go without truly *doing* anything, the better. With enough time, they could convince the world that the White Tower had never really broken. It had been broken before, even if only a handful knew it. Maybe, with enough time, they could find a way to adjust everything so it had not, really. “Why keep it from the Hall, Sheriam? Surely you don’t think any of them would betray your plan to Elaida.” Half the sisters eyed the other half askance for fear of Elaida’s sympathizers. Partly for fear of that.

“Mother, a sister who decided that what we do is a mistake would hardly let herself be chosen a Sitter. Any such would have taken herself away long since.” Sheriam had not relaxed, but her voice took on the patient, instructing tone she seemed to think had the greatest effect on Egwene. Usually, though, she was more adroit at changing the subject. “Those suspicions are the worst problem we face for the time being. No one really trusts anyone. If we could only see how to—”

“The Black Ajah,” Siuan cut in quietly. “That’s what chills your blood like a silverpike up your skirts. Who can say for sure who is Black, and who can say what a Black sister might do?”

Sheriam darted another hard look at Siuan, but after a moment the force went out of her. Or rather, one sort of tension replaced another. She glanced at Egwene, then nodded, reluctantly. By the sour twist to her mouth, she would have made another evasion had it not been plain Egwene would not stand for it. Most sisters in the camp believed now, but after more than three thousand years denying the Black Ajah’s existence, it was a queasy belief. Almost no one would open her mouth on that topic, no matter what they believed.

“The question, Mother,” Siuan went on, “is what happens when the Hall does find out.” She seemed to be thinking aloud again. “I can’t see any Sitter accepting the excuse that she couldn’t be told because she might be on Elaida’s side. And as for the possibility she might be Black Ajah. . . . Yes, I think they will be quite upset.”

Sheriam’s face paled slightly. It was a wonder she did not go dead white. “Upset” did not begin to cover it. Yes, Sheriam would face *much* more than upset if this came out.

Now was the time to drive home her advantage, but another question occurred to Egwene. If Sheriam and her friends had sent—what were they? Not spies. Ferrets, maybe, sent into the walls after rats—if Sheriam had sent ferrets into the White Tower, could . . . ?

A sudden stab of pain through that pocket of sensations in the back of her head sent everything else flying. Had she felt it directly, it would have been numbing. As it was, her eyes bulged in shock. A man who could channel was touching the necklace around Moghedien's neck; this was one link no man could be brought into. Pain, and something unheard of from Moghedien. Hope. And then it was all gone, the awareness, the emotions. The necklace was off.

"I . . . need some fresh air," she managed. Sheriam started to rise, and Siuan, but she waved them back down. "No, I want to be alone," she said hastily. "Siuan, find out everything Sheriam knows about the ferrets. Light, I mean the ten sisters." They both stared at her, but thank the Light, neither followed as she snatched the lantern from its hook and hurried out.

It would not do for the Amyrlin to be seen running, yet she came close, hoisting her divided skirts as well as she could with her free hand and very nearly trotting. A cloudless sky made the moonlight bright, dappling the tents and wagons with shadows. Most people in the camp were asleep, but low fires still burned here and there. A handful of Warders were about, a few servants. Too many eyes to see if she ran. The last thing she wanted was someone offering help. She realized she was panting, but from alarm, not exertion.

Thrusting her head and the lantern into "Marigan's" tiny tent, she found it empty. The blankets that made up the pallet on the ground lay in a sprawl, tossed aside by someone in a hurry.

And what if she had still been here? she wondered. *With the necklace off, and maybe whoever freed her?* Shivering, she withdrew slowly. Moghedien had good reason to dislike her, very personally, and the only sister who could match one of the Forsaken alone, when she could channel at all, was in Ebou Dar. Moghedien could have killed Egwene without anyone noticing; even had a sister felt her channel, there would be nothing remarkable in that. Worse, Moghedien might not have killed her. And no one would have known anything until they found the pair of them gone.

"Mother," Chesa fussed behind her, "you should not be out in the night air. Night air is bad air. If you wanted Marigan, I could have fetched her."

Egwene very nearly jumped. She had not been aware of Chesa following her. She studied the people at the nearest fires. They had gathered for companionship, not warmth in this unholy heat, and they were not close, but maybe someone had seen who went into "Marigan's" tent. She certainly had few visitors. And no men among them. A man might well have been remarked. "I think she has run away, Chesa."

“Why, that wicked woman!” Chesa exclaimed. “I always said she had a mean mouth and a sneaking eye. Slinking away like a thief after you took her in. She’d be starving by a road, if not for you. No gratitude at all!”

She followed all the way back to the tent where Egwene slept, nattering on about wickedness in general, the thanklessness of “Marigan” in particular, and how that sort should be handled, which seemed to jump between switching them till they settled down and tossing them out before they could run away, tucked around cautions that Egwene check her jewelry to be sure it was all still there.

Egwene barely heard. Her mind spun. It could not have been Logain, could it? He could not have known about Moghedien, much less come back to rescue her. Could he? Those men Rand was gathering, those Asha’man. Rumor in every village carried whispers of Asha’man and the Black Tower. Most of the sisters tried to pretend they were unaffected by dozens of men who could channel gathering in one spot—the worst of the tales had to be inflated; rumor always exaggerated—but Egwene’s toes wanted to curl under with fright whenever she thought of them. An Asha’man could have. . . . But why? How would he have known, any more than Logain?

She was trying to avoid the only reasonable conclusion. Something far worse than Logain come back, or even Asha’man. One of the Forsaken had freed Moghedien. Rahvin was dead by Rand’s hand, according to Nynaeve, and he had killed Ishamael as well, or so it seemed. And Aginor and Balthamel. Moiraine had killed Be’lal. That left only Asmodean, Demandred and Sammael among the men. Sammael was in Illian. No one knew where the others were, or any of the women who survived. Moiraine had done for Lanfear too, or they had done for each other, but all the other women were still alive, so far as anyone knew. Forget the women. It had been a man. Which? Plans had been laid long since in case one of the Forsaken struck at the camp. No one sister here could equal any of the Forsaken by herself, but linked in circles was another matter, and any Forsaken who stepped into their camp would find circles forming on every side of him. Or her. Once they realized who she was. The Forsaken showed no signs of agelessness, for some reason. Maybe it was some effect of being connected to the Dark One. They. . . .

This was dithering. She had to start thinking clearly.

“Chesa?”

“. . . . look like you need your head rubbed for the ache again is what, is what you. . . . Yes, Mother?”

“Find Siuan and Leane. Tell them to come to me. But don’t let anyone hear you.”

Grinning, Chesa dropped a curtsy and scampered out. She could hardly avoid knowing the currents that swirled around Egwene, yet she found all the plotting and scheming fun. Not that she knew more than surface, and little enough of that. Egwene did not doubt her loyalty, but Chesa’s opinion of what was exciting might change if she learned the depth of those swirls.

Channeling the oil lamps inside the tent alight, Egwene blew out the lantern and set it carefully in a corner. Maybe she had to think clearly, but she still felt as if she was stumbling in the dark.

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CHAPTER

9

A Pair of Silverpike

Egwene was sitting in her chair—one of the few real chairs in the camp, with a little plain carving like a farmer's best armchair, roomy and comfortable enough that she felt only a touch of guilt about taking up valuable wagon space for it—she was sitting there trying to pull her thoughts together when Siuan swept aside the entry flaps and ducked into the tent. Siuan was not happy.

"Why in the Light did you run off?" Her voice had not changed with her face, and she chided with the best even when she did it in respectful tones. Barely respectful. Her blue eyes remained the same, too; they could have done for a saddlemaker's awls. "Sheriam brushed me aside like a fly." That surprisingly delicate mouth twisted bitterly. "She was gone almost as soon as you were. Don't you realize she handed herself to you? She certainly does. Her, and Anaiya and Morvrin and the lot of them. You can be sure they'll spend tonight trying to bail water and patch holes. They could manage it. I don't see how, but they might."

Almost as the last word left her mouth, Leane entered. A tall, willowy woman, her coppery face was as youthful as Siuan's, and for the same reason; she also was more than old enough to be Egwene's mother, in truth. Leane took one look at Siuan and threw up her hands as much as the roof of the tent would allow. "Mother, this is a foolish risk." Her dark eyes went from dreamy to flashing, but her voice had a languorous quality even when she was irritated. Once, it had been brisk. "If anyone sees Siuan and me together this way—"

"I don't care if the whole camp learns your squabbling is a fraud," Egwene broke in sharply, weaving a small barrier against eavesdropping around the three of them. It could be worked through with time, but not without detection, so long as she held the weave instead of tying it off.

She did care, and perhaps she should not have called them both, but her first half-coherent thought had been to summon the two sisters she could count on. No one in the camp so much as suspected. Everyone knew the former Amyrlin and her former Keeper detested one another every bit as much as Siuan detested being tutor to her successor. Should any sister uncover the truth, they might well find themselves doing penance for a long time to come, and not an easy one—Aes Sedai appreciated being made fools of even less than other people; *kings* had been made to pay for that—but in the meanwhile their supposed animosity resulted in a certain leverage with the other sisters, including Sitters. If *they* both said the same thing, it must be so. Another incidental effect of being stilled was very useful, one no one else knew about. The Three Oaths no longer held them; they could lie like wool merchants, now.

Schemes and deceptions on every side. The camp was like some fetid swamp where strange growths sprouted unseen in mists. Maybe anywhere Aes Sedai gathered was like that. After three thousand years of plotting, however necessary, it was hardly surprising that scheming had become second nature to most sisters and only a breath away for the rest. The truly horrible thing was that she found herself beginning to enjoy all the machinations. Not for their own sake, but as puzzles, though no twisted bits of iron could intrigue her a quarter so much. What that said about her, she did not want to know. Well, she *was* Aes Sedai, whatever anyone thought, and she had to take the bad of it with the good.

“Moghedien has escaped,” she went on without pause. “A man removed the *a’dam* from her. A man who can channel. I think one of them took the necklace away; it wasn’t in her tent, that I saw. There might be some way to find it using the bracelet, but if there is, I don’t know it.”

That took the starch right out of them. Leane’s legs gave way, and she dropped like a sack onto the stool Chesa sometimes used. Siuan sat down on the cot slowly, back very straight, hands very still on her knees. Incongruously, Egwene noticed that her dress had tiny blue flowers embroidered in a wide Tairen maze around the bottom, a band that made the divided skirts seem one when she was still. Another band curved becomingly across the bodice. Concern for her clothes, that they be pretty instead of just suitable, was certainly a small change, looking at it one way—she never took it to extremes—yet in another, it was as drastic as her face. And a puzzle. Siuan resented the changes, and resisted them. Except for this one.

Leane, on the other hand, in true Aes Sedai fashion embraced what had changed. A young woman again—Egwene had overheard a Yellow exclaiming in wonder that both were prime childbearing age, by everything she could find—she might never have been Keeper, never have had any other face. The very image of practicality and efficiency became the ideal of an indolent and alluring Domani woman. Even her riding dress was cut in the style of her native land, and no matter that its silk, so thin it barely seemed opaque, was as impractical as the pale green color for traveling dusty roads. Told that having been stilled had broken all ties and associations, Leane had chosen the Green Ajah over a return to the Blue. Changing Ajahs was not done, but then, no one had been stilled and then Healed before, either. Siuan had gone right back into the Blue, grumbling over the idiotic need to "entreat and appeal for acceptance" as the formal phrase went.

"Oh, Light!" Leane breathed as she thumped onto the stool with considerably less than her usual grace. "We should have turned her over for trial the first day. Nothing we've learned from her is worth letting her loose on the world again. Nothing!" It was a measure of her shock; she did not normally go about stating the obvious. Her brain had not grown indolent, whatever her outward demeanor. Languid and seductive Domani women might be on the outside, but they were still known as the sharpest traders anywhere.

"Blood and bloody—! We should have had her watched," Siuan growled through her teeth.

Egwene's eyebrows rose. Siuan must be as shaken as Leane. "By who, Siuan? Faolain? Theodrin? They don't even know you two are of my party." A party? Five women. And Faolain and Theodrin were hardly eager adherents, especially Faolain. Nynaeve and Elayne could be counted too, of course, and Birgitte certainly, even if she was not Aes Sedai, but they were a long way off. Stealth and cunning were still her major strengths. Plus the fact that no one expected them of her. "How should I have explained to *anyone* why they were supposed to watch my serving woman? For that matter, what good would it have done? It had to be one of the Forsaken. Do you really think Faolain and Theodrin together could have stopped him? I'm not sure I could have, even linked with Romanda and Lelaine." They were the next two strongest women in the camp, as strong in the Power as Siuan used to be.

Siuan visibly forced a scowl from her face, but even so, she snorted. She often said that if she could no longer be Amyrlin, then she would teach Egwene how to be the best Amyrlin ever, yet the transition from lion on a hill to mouse underfoot was difficult. Egwene allowed her no little latitude because of that.

"I want the two of you to ask about among those near the tent Moghedien was sleeping in. Someone must have seen the man. He had to come afoot. Anybody opening a gateway inside a space that little risked cutting her in two, however small he wove it."

Siuan snorted, louder than the first time. "Why bother?" she growled. "Do you mean to go chasing after like some fool hero in a gleeman's fool story and bring her back? Maybe tie up all the Forsaken at one go? Win the Last Battle while you're at it? Even if we get a description head to toe, nobody knows one Forsaken from another. Nobody here, anyway. It's the most bloody useless barrel of fish guts I ever—!"

"Siuan!" Egwene said sharply, sitting up straighter. Latitude was one thing, but there were limits. She did not put up with this even from Romanda.

Color bloomed slowly in Siuan's cheeks. Struggling to master herself, she kneaded her skirts and avoided Egwene's eyes. "Forgive me, Mother," she said finally. She almost sounded as if she meant it.

"It has been a difficult day for her, Mother," Leane put in with an impish smile. She was very good at those, though she generally used them to set some man's heart racing. Not promiscuously, of course; she possessed discrimination and discretion in ample supply. "But then, most are. If she could only learn not to throw things at Gareth Bryne every time she gets angry—"

"Enough!" Egwene snapped. Leane was only trying to take a little of the pressure from Siuan, but she was in no mood for it. "I want to know anything I can learn about whoever freed Moghedien, even if it's just whether he was short or tall. Any scrap that makes him less a shadow creeping in the dark. If that's not more than I have a right to ask." Leane sat quite still, staring at the flowers in the carpet in front of her toes.

The redness spread to cover nearly Siuan's whole face; with her fair skin, it made her look like a sunset. "I . . . humbly beg your pardon, Mother." This time, she did sound penitent. Her difficulty meeting Egwene's gaze was obvious. "Sometimes it's hard to. . . . No, no excuses. I humbly beg pardon."

Egwene fingered her stole, letting the moment set itself as she looked at Siuan without blinking. That was something Siuan herself had taught her, but after a bit she shifted uneasily on the cot. When you knew you were in the wrong, silence pricked, and the pricks drove home that you were wrong. Silence was a very useful tool in a number of situations. "Since I can't recall what I should forgive," she said at last, quietly, "there seems to be no need. But, Siuan. . . . Don't let it happen again."

"Thank you, Mother." A hint of wry laughter curled the corners of Siuan's mouth. "If I may say so, I seem to have taught you very well. But if I may suggest . . . ?" She waited for Egwene's impatient nod. "One of us should carry your order to Faolain or Theodrin to ask the questions, very sulky at being made a messenger. They'll occasion a deal less comment than Leane or I. Everyone knows you are their patron."

Egwene agreed immediately. She still was not thinking clearly, or she would have seen that for herself. The headachy feeling was back again. Chesa claimed it came from too little sleep, but sleeping was difficult when your head felt taut as a drumhead. It would take a larger head than hers not to feel tight, stuffed with as many worries as she had. Well, at least now she could pass on the secrets that had kept Moghedien hidden, how to weave disguises with the Power and how to mask your ability from other women who could channel. Revealing those had been too risky when they might have led to unmasking Moghedien.

A bit more acclaim, she thought wryly. There had been great petting and exclaiming when she announced the once-lost secret of Traveling, which at least had been her own, and more praise since for every one of the secrets she had wrenched out of Moghedien, like pulling a back tooth each time. None of the acclaim made an ounce of difference in her position, though. You could pat a talented child on the head without forgetting she was a child.

Leane departed with a curtsy and a dry comment that she was not sorry somebody else would have less than a full night's rest for once. Siuan waited; no one could be allowed to see her and Leane leaving together. For a time Egwene merely studied the other woman. Neither spoke; Siuan seemed lost in thought. Finally she gave a start and stood, straightening her dress, plainly preparing to go.

"Siuan," Egwene began slowly, and found herself uncertain how to continue.

Siuan thought she understood. "You were not only right, Mother," she said, looking Egwene straight in the eye, "you were lenient. Too lenient, though I say it who shouldn't. You are the Amyrlin Seat, and no one may be insolent or impertinent to you. If you'd given me a penance that made even Romanda feel sorry for me, it would have been no more than I deserved."

"I will remember that next time," Egwene said, and Siuan bowed her head as if in acceptance. Maybe it was. Unless the changes in her ran deeper than seemed possible, there almost certainly would be a next time, and more after that. "But what I want to ask about is Lord Bryne." All expression vanished from Siuan's face. "Are you sure you wouldn't like me to . . . intervene?"

"Why would I want that, Mother?" Siuan's voice was blander than cold water soup. "The only duties I have are teaching you the etiquette of your office and handing Sheriam reports from my eyes-and-ears." She still retained some of her former network, though it was doubtful any knew who their reports went to now. "Gareth Bryne hardly requires enough of my time to interfere with that." She almost always referred to him that way, and even when she used his title, she put a bite into it.

"Siuan, a burned barn and a few cows couldn't cost that much." Not compared with paying and feeding all those soldiers, certainly. But she had offered before, and the stiff reply was the same.

"I thank you, Mother, but no. I won't have him saying I break my word, and I swore to *work* the debt off." Abruptly, Siuan's stiffness dissolved in laughter, rare when she spoke about Lord Bryne. Scowls were much more common. "If you need to worry about somebody, worry about him, not me. I need no help handling Gareth Bryne."

And that was the strange part. Weak she might be in the One Power, now, but not so weak that Siuan had to keep on as his servant, spending hours up to her elbows in hot soapy water with his shirts and smallclothes. Perhaps she did so in order to have someone at hand on whom she could loose the temper she was otherwise forced to keep in a sack. Whatever the reason, it occasioned no little talk, and confirmed her oddness in many eyes; she *was* Aes Sedai, after all, if rather far down. His methods of dealing with her temper—once she threw plates and boots, anyway—outraged her and provoked threats of dire consequences, yet though she could have wrapped him up unable to stir a finger, Siuan never touched *saidar* around him, not to do his chores and not even when it meant being turned over his knee. That fact she had kept hidden from most so far, but some things slipped out when she was in a rage, or when Leane was in a humor. There seemed to *be* no explanation. Siuan was not weak-spirited or a fool, she was neither meek nor afraid, she was not. . . .

"You might as well be on your way, Siuan." Clearly, some secrets were not going to be revealed tonight. "It's late, and I know you want your bed."

"Yes, Mother. And, thank you," she added, though Egwene could not have said for what.

After Siuan left, Egwene rubbed her temples once more. She wanted to pace. The tent would not do; it might be the largest in the camp occupied by just one person, but that meant less than two spans by two, and it was crowded with cot and chair and stool, washstand and stand-mirror and no fewer than three chests full of clothes. Chesa had seen to those last, and Sheriam, and Romanda and Lelaine and a dozen more Sitters. They kept seeing to them; a few more gifts of silk shifts or stockings, one more dress grand enough to receive a king, and there would be need for a fourth chest. Maybe Sheriam and the Sitters hoped all the fine dresses would blind her to anything else, but Chesa just thought the Amyrlin Seat had to be clothed suitably for her station. Servants, it seemed, believed in following the correct rituals as much as the Hall ever did. Shortly Selame would be there; it was her turn to undress Egwene for bed, another ritual. Only, between her head and her restless feet, she was not ready for bed yet.

Leaving the lamps burning, she hurried out before Selame could arrive. Walking would clear her head, and maybe tire her enough that she could sleep soundly. Putting herself to sleep would be no problem—the Wise One dreamwalkers had taught her that skill early on—yet finding any rest in it was another matter. Especially when her mind boiled with a list of worries that began with Romanda and Lelaine and Sheriam, then ran through Rand, Elaida, Moghedien, the weather and on out of sight.

She avoided the area near Moghedien's tent. If she asked questions herself, too much importance would be given to a servant running away. Discretion had become part of her. The game she played allowed few slips, and being careless where you knew it did not matter could lead to being careless where it did. Worse, you could discover you had been wrong about where it mattered. *The weak must be bold cautiously*. That was Siuan again; she truly did her best to teach, and she knew this particular game very well.

There were no more people out and about in the moon-shadowed camp than had been there before, handfuls slouched wearily around low fires, exhausted by their evening's labors after a hard day's journey. Those who saw her rose tiredly to make their courtesies as she passed, murmuring "The Light shine on you, Mother" or something like, occasionally asking her blessing, which she gave with a simple "The Light bless you, my child." Men and women old enough to be her grandparents sat back down beaming from that, yet she wondered what they actually believed about her, what they knew. All the Aes Sedai presented an unbroken front to the outside world, including their own servants. But Siuan said that if you believed a servant knew twice what he should, you only knew half the truth. Still, those bows and curtsies and murmurs followed her from one clump of people to the next, comforting her with the possibility that there were some at least who did not see her as a child the Hall brought out when they needed her.

As she passed an open area surrounded by ropes tied to posts driven into the ground, a gateway's silver slash of light flashed vivid in the darkness as it rotated open. It was not really light, though; it cast no shadows. She paused to watch beside a corner post. No one at the nearby fires even looked up; they were used to this by now. A dozen or more sisters, twice as many servants and a number of Warders bustled out, returning with messages and wicker cages of pigeons from the dovecotes in Salidar, a good five hundred miles west and south as the goose flew.

They began scattering before the gateway closed, carrying their burdens to Sitters, to their Ajahs, a few back to their own tents. Most nights, Siuan would have been with them; she seldom trusted anyone else to fetch messages destined for her even if most were in codes or ciphers. Sometimes the world seemed to hold more networks of eyes-and-ears than it did Aes Sedai, though most were severely truncated by circumstance. The majority of agents for the various Ajahs seemed to be lying low until the "difficulties" in the White Tower subsided, and a good many of the individual sisters' eyes-and-ears had no idea where the woman they served was at present.

Several of the Warders saw Egwene and made careful bows, with a respect proper to the stole; sisters might eye her askance, but the Hall had raised her Amyrlin and the Gaidin needed no more. A number of the servants offered bows or curtsies, too. Not one of the Aes Sedai hurrying away from the gateway so much as glanced in her direction. Perhaps they did not notice her. Perhaps.

In a way, that anybody could still hear from any of their eyes-and-ears at all was one of Moghedien's "gifts." The sisters with the strength to make gateways had all been in Salidar long enough to know it well. Those who could weave a gateway of useful size were able to Travel almost anywhere from there, and land right on the spot. Trying to Travel *to* Salidar, however, would have meant spending half of each night learning the new roped-off patch of ground, more for some, every time they made camp. What Egwene had pried from Moghedien was a way to journey from a place you did not know well to one you did. Slower than Traveling, Skimming was not one of the lost Talents—no one had ever heard of it—so even the name was credited to Egwene. Anyone who could Travel could Skim, so every night sisters Skimmed to Salidar, checking the dovecotes for birds that had returned to where they had been hatched, then Traveled back.

The sight should have pleased her—the rebel Aes Sedai had gained Talents the White Tower thought lost forever, as well as learned new ones, and those abilities would help cost Elaida the Amyrlin Seat before all was done—yet instead of pleasure, Egwene felt sourness. Being snubbed had nothing to do with it, or not much, anyway. As she walked on, the fires grew farther between, then faded behind; all around her lay the dark shapes of wagons, most with canvas tops stretched over iron hoops, and tents glowing palely in the moonlight. Beyond, the army's campfires climbed the surrounding hills all around, the stars brought to ground. The silence from Caemlyn tied her middle into knots, whatever anyone else thought.

The very day they left Salidar a message had arrived, though Sheriam had not bothered to show it to her until a few days ago, and then with repeated warnings on the need to keep the contents secret. The Hall knew, but no one else must. More of the ten thousand secrets that infested the camp. Egwene was sure she never would have seen it if she had not kept going on about Rand. She could recall every carefully chosen word, written in a tiny hand on paper so thin it was a wonder the pen had not torn through.

> We are well settled at the inn of which we spoke, and we have met with the wool merchant. He is a *very* remarkable young man, everything that Nynaeve told us. Still, he was courteous. I think he is somewhat afraid of us, which is to the good. It will go well.
>
> You may have heard rumors about men here, including a fellow from Saldaea. The rumors are all too true, I fear, but we have seen none of them and will avoid them if we can. If you pursue two hares, both will escape you.
>
> Verin and Alanna are here, with a number of young women from the same region as the wool merchant. I will try to send them on to you for training. Alanna has formed an attachment to the wool merchant which may prove useful, though it is troubling too. All will go well, I am sure.
>
> Merana

Sheriam emphasized the good news, as she saw it. Merana, an experienced negotiator, had reached Caemlyn and been well received by Rand, the "wool merchant." Wonderful news, to Sheriam. And Verin and Alanna would be bringing Two Rivers girls to become novices. Sheriam was sure they must be coming down the same road they themselves were headed up. She seemed to think Egwene would be all aglow at the expectation of seeing faces from home. Merana would handle everything. Merana knew what she was doing.

"That's a bucket of horse sweat," Egwene muttered at the night. A gap-toothed fellow carrying a large wooden bucket gave a start and gaped at her, so amazed he forgot to bow.

Rand, *courteous*? She had seen his first meeting with Coiren Saeldain, Elaida's emissary. "Overbearing" summed it up nicely. Why should he be different with Merana? And Merana thought he was afraid, thought that was good. Rand was seldom afraid even when he should be, and if he was now, Merana should remember that fear could make the mildest man dangerous, remember that Rand was dangerous just being who he was. And what was this attachment Alanna had formed? Egwene did not entirely trust Alanna. The woman did extremely odd things at times, maybe impetuously and maybe with some deeper motive. Egwene would not put it past her to find a way into Rand's bed; he would be clay in the hands of a woman like her. Elayne would break Alanna's neck if that was so, but that was the least of it.

Worst of all, no more of the pigeons Merana had taken with her had appeared in the Salidar dovecotes.

Merana should have had some word to send, if only that she and the rest of the embassy had gone to Cairhien. Lately the Wise Ones did little more than acknowledge Rand was alive, yet it seemed he was there, sitting on his hands as far as she could make out. Which should have been a warning beacon. Sheriam saw it differently. Who could say why any man did what he did? Probably not even the man himself, most of the time, and when it came to one who could channel. . . . Silence proved all was well; Merana surely would have reported any real difficulty. She must be on her way to Cairhien, if not there already, and there was no need to report further until she could send word of success. For that matter, Rand in Cairhien *was* success of a sort. One of Merana's goals, if not the most important, had been to ease him out of Caemlyn so that Elayne could return there safely and take the Lion Throne, and the dangers of Cairhien had dissipated. Incredible as it seemed, the Wise Ones said Coiren and her embassy had left the city on their way back to Tar Valon. Or maybe not so incredible. It all made a sort of sense, given Rand, given the way Aes Sedai did things. Even so, to Egwene, it all felt . . . wrong.

"I have to go to him," she muttered. One hour, and she could straighten everything out. Underneath, he was still Rand. "That's all there is to it. I have to go to him."

"That isn't possible, and you know it."

If Egwene had not had herself on a tight rein, she would have jumped a foot. As it was, her heart pounded even after she made out Leane by the light of the moon. "I thought you were . . ." she said before she could stop herself, and only just managed not to say Moghedien's name.

The taller woman fell in beside her, keeping a careful watch for other sisters as they walked. Leane did not have Siuan's excuse for spending time with her. Not that being seen together once should cause any harm, but . . .

"Should not" isn't always "will not," Egwene reminded herself. Slipping the stole from her shoulders, she folded it to carry in one hand. At a glance, from a distance, Leane might well be taken for an Accepted despite her dress; many Accepted lacked enough of the banded white dresses to wear one all the time. From a distance, Egwene might be taken for one, too. Not the most pacifying thought.

“Theodrin and Faolain are asking around near Marigan’s tent, Mother. They weren’t especially pleased. I did a fine sulk over carrying messages, if I do say so. Theodrin had to stop Faolain dressing me down for it.” Leane’s laughter was quiet and breathy. Situations that grated Siuan’s teeth usually amused her. She was cosseted by most of the other sisters for how well she had adjusted.

“Good, good,” Egwene said absently. “Merana misstepped somehow, Leane, or he wouldn’t be staying in Cairhien, and she wouldn’t be keeping quiet.” Off in the distance, a dog bayed at the moon, then others, until they were abruptly silenced by shouts that, perhaps luckily, she could not quite understand. A number of the soldiers had dogs tagging along; there were none in the Aes Sedai camp. Any number of cats, but no dogs.

“Merana does know what she is doing, Mother.” It sounded very like a sigh. Leane and Siuan both agreed with Sheriam. Everyone did, except her. “When you give someone a task, you have to trust it to them.”

Egwene sniffed and folded her arms. “Leane, that man could strike sparks from a damp cloth, if it wore the shawl. I don’t know Merana, but I’ve never seen an Aes Sedai who qualified as a damp cloth.”

“I’ve met one or two,” Leane chuckled. This time her sigh was plain. “But not Merana, true. Does he really believe he has friends inside the Tower? Alviarin? That might make him difficult for Merana, I suppose, but I can hardly see Alviarin doing anything to risk her place. She was always ambitious enough for three.”

“He has a letter supposedly from her.” She could still see Rand gloating over receiving letters from Elaida and Alviarin both, back before she herself left Cairhien. “Maybe her ambitions make her think *she* can replace Elaida with him on her side. That’s if she really wrote it. He thinks he’s clever, Leane—maybe he is—but he doesn’t believe he needs anyone.” Rand would go on thinking he could handle anything by himself right up until one of those anythings crushed him. “I know him inside and out, Leane. Being around the Wise Ones seems to have infected him, or maybe he infected them. Whatever the Sitters think, whatever any of you think, an Aes Sedai’s shawl doesn’t impress him any more than it does the Wise Ones. Sooner or later he’ll exasperate a sister until she does something about it, or one of them will push him the wrong way, not realizing how strong he is, and what his temper is now. After that there might be no going back. I’m the only one who can deal with him safely. The only one.”

“He can hardly be as . . . irritating . . . as those Aielwomen,” Leane murmured wryly. Even she found it difficult to be amused by her experiences with the Wise Ones. “But it hardly matters. ‘The Amyrlin Seat being valued with the White Tower itself. . . .’ ”

A pair of women appeared between the tents ahead, moving slowly as they talked. Distance and shadows obscured their faces, yet it was clear they were Aes Sedai from the way they carried themselves, an assurance that nothing hiding in any darkness could harm them. No Accepted on the brink of the shawl could manage quite that degree of confidence. A queen with an army at her back might not. They were coming toward her and Leane. Leane quickly turned in to the deeper dimness between two wagons.

Scowling with frustration, Egwene nearly pulled her out again and marched on. Let it all come into the open. She would stand before the Hall and tell them it was time they realized the Amyrlin’s stole was more than a pretty scarf. She would. . . . Following Leane, she motioned the other woman to walk on. What she would not do was throw everything on the midden heap in a fit of pique.

Only one Tower law specifically limited the power of the Amyrlin Seat. A fistful of irritating customs and a barrel full of inconvenient realities, but only one law, yet it could not have been a worse for her purposes. “The Amyrlin Seat being valued with the White Tower itself, as the very heart of the White Tower, she must not be endangered without dire necessity, therefore unless the White Tower be at war by declaration of the Hall of the Tower, the Amyrlin Seat shall seek the lesser consensus of the Hall of the Tower before deliberately placing herself in the way of any danger, and she shall abide by the consensus that stands.” What rash incident by an Amyrlin had inspired that, Egwene did not know, but it had been law for something over two thousand years. To most Aes Sedai, any law that old attained an aura of holiness; changing it was unthinkable.

Romanda had quoted that . . . that *bloody* law as though lecturing a half-wit. If the Daughter-Heir of Andor could not be allowed within a hundred miles of the Dragon Reborn, how much more they must preserve the Amyrlin Seat. Lelaine sounded almost regretful, most likely because she was agreeing with Romanda. That had nearly curdled both their tongues. Without them, both of them, the lesser consensus lay as far out of reach as the greater. Light, even that declaration of war only required the lesser consensus! So if she could not obtain permission. . . . Leane cleared her throat. “You can hardly do much if you go in secret, Mother, and the Hall will find out, soon or late. I think you would find it difficult to have an hour to yourself after that. Not that they’d dare put a guard on you, precisely, but there are ways. I can quote examples from . . . certain sources.” She never mentioned the hidden records directly unless they were behind a ward.

“Am I so transparent?” Egwene asked after a moment. There were only wagons around them here, and beneath the wagons the dark mounds of sleeping wagon drivers and horse handlers and all the rest needed to keep so many vehicles moving. It was remarkable just how many conveyances over three hundred Aes Sedai required, when few would condescend to ride even a mile in wagon or cart. But there were tents and furnishings and foodstuffs, and a thousand things needed to keep the sisters and those who served them. The loudest sounds here were snores, a chorus of frogs.

“No, Mother,” Leane laughed softly. “I just thought what I would do. But it’s well known I’ve lost all my dignity and sense; the Amyrlin Seat can hardly take me for a model. I think you must let young Master al’Thor go as he will, for a time anyway, while you pluck the goose that’s in front of you.”

“His way may lead us all to the Pit of Doom,” Egwene muttered, but it was not an argument. There had to be a way to pluck that goose and still keep Rand from making dangerous mistakes, but she could not see it now. Not frogs; those snores sounded like a hundred saws cutting logs full of knots. “This is as bad a spot for a soothing walk as I’ve ever visited. I think I might as well go to bed.”

Leane tilted her head. “In that case, Mother, if you will forgive me, there’s a man in Lord Bryne’s camp. . . . After all, whoever heard of a Green without even one Warder?” From the sudden quickening in her voice, you might have thought she was off to meet a lover. Considering what Egwene had heard about Greens, perhaps there was not that much difference.

Back among the tents, the last of the fires had been doused with dirt; no one took risks with fire when the countryside was tinder dry. A few tendrils of smoke rose lazily in the moonlight where the job had not been well done. A man murmured drowsily in his sleep inside a tent, and here and there a cough drifted out or a rasping snore, but otherwise the camp lay silent and still. Which was why Egwene was surprised when someone stepped from the shadows in front of her, especially someone wearing the simple white dress of a novice.

“Mother, I need to speak to you.”

“Nicola?” Egwene had made a point of fixing name to face for every novice, no easy chore given how sisters hunted all along the army’s path for girls and young women who could learn. Active search was still not well thought of—custom was to wait for the girl to ask, best of all to wait for her to come to the Tower—but ten times as many novices studied in the camp now as the White Tower had held in years. Nicola was one to be remembered, though, and besides, Egwene had often noticed the young woman staring at her. “Tiana won’t be pleased if she finds you up this late.” Tiana Noselle was the Mistress of Novices, known equally for a comforting shoulder when a novice needed to cry and an unyielding stance when it came to rules.

The other woman shifted as if to hurry away, then straightened her back. Sweat glistened on her cheeks. The darkness was cooler than the light had been, but not what anyone would call cool, and the simple trick of ignoring heat or cold came only with the shawl. “I know I’m supposed to ask to see Tiana Sedai and then ask her to see you, Mother, but she’d never let a novice approach the Amyrlin Seat.”

“About what, child?” Egwene asked. The woman was older by six or seven years at least, but that was the proper address for a novice.

Fidgeting with her skirt, Nicola stepped closer. Large eyes met Egwene’s perhaps more directly than a novice’s should have. “Mother, I want to go as far as I can.” Her hands plucked at her dress, but her voice was cool and self-possessed, fit for an Aes Sedai. “I won’t say they are holding me back, but I am sure I can become stronger than they say. I just know I can. You were never held back, Mother. No one has ever gained so much of her strength as fast as you. All I ask is the same chance.”

Movement in the shadow behind Nicola turned into another sweaty-faced woman, this one in short coat and wide trousers, carrying a bow. Her hair hung to her waist in a braid tied with six ribbons, and she wore short boots with raised heels.

Nicola Treehill and Areina Nermasiv seemed an odd pair to be friends. Like many of the older novices—women with nearly ten years on Egwene were tested now, though many sisters still grumbled that they were ten years too old to accept novice discipline—like many of those older women, Nicola was ferocious in her desire to learn, by all reports, and she had a potential bettered only by Nynaeve, Elayne and Egwene herself among living Aes Sedai. In fact, Nicola apparently was making great strides, often great enough that her teachers had to slow her down. Some said she had begun picking up weaves as if she already knew them. Not only that, but she already demonstrated two Talents, although the ability to "see" *ta'veren* was minor, while the major Talent, Foretelling, emerged so that no one understood what she had Foretold. She herself did not remember a word she said. All in all, Nicola was already marked by the sisters as someone to watch despite her late start. The begrudging agreement to test women older than seventeen or eighteen probably could be laid at Nicola's feet.

Areina, on the other hand, was a Hunter for the Horn who swaggered as much as a man and sat around talking of adventures, those she had had and those she would, when she was not practicing with her bow. Very likely she had picked that weapon up from Birgitte, along with her manner of dress. She certainly seemed to have no interest in anything beside the bow, except flirting occasionally, in a rather forward manner, though not lately. Perhaps long days on the road left her too tired for it, if not for archery. Why she was still traveling with them, Egwene could not understand; it was hardly likely that Areina believed the Horn of Valere would turn up along their march, and impossible that she even suspected it was hidden away inside the White Tower. *Very* few people knew that. Egwene was not certain even Elaida did.

Areina seemed a posturing fool, but Egwene felt a certain sympathy for Nicola. She understood the woman's discontent, understood wanting to know it all now. She had been that way, too. Maybe she still was. "Nicola," she said gently, "we all have limits. I'll never match Nynaeve Sedai, for example, whatever I do."

"But if I could only have the chance, Mother." Nicola actually wrung her hands in pleading, and there was a touch of it in her voice, yet her eyes still met Egwene's levelly. "The chance you had."

"What I did—because I had no choice, because I didn't know better—is called forcing, Nicola, and it is dangerous." She had not heard that term until Siuan apologized for doing it to her; that was one time Siuan truly had seemed repentant. "You know if you try to channel more of *saidar* than you're ready to handle, you risk burning yourself out before you ever come close to your full strength. Best you learn to be patient. The sisters won't let you be anything else until you are ready, anyway."

“We came to Salidar on the same riverboat as Nynaeve and Elayne,” Areina said suddenly. Her gaze was more than direct; it was challenging. “And Birgitte.” For some reason, she said the name bitterly.

Nicola made shushing motions. “There’s no need to bring that up.” Oddly, she did not sound as if she meant it.

Hoping she was keeping her face half so smooth as Nicola’s, Egwene tried to quell a sudden uneasiness. “Marigan” had come to Salidar on that boat, too. An owl hooted, and she shivered. Some people thought hearing an owl in moonlight meant bad news was coming. She was not superstitious, but. . . . “No need to bring up what?”

The other two women exchanged looks, and Areina nodded.

“It was on the walk from the river to the village.” For all her supposed reluctance, Nicola peered straight into Egwene’s eyes. “Areina and I heard Thom Merrilin and Juilin Sandar talking. The gleeman, and the thief-taker? Juilin said if there were Aes Sedai in the village—we weren’t sure, yet—and they learned Nynaeve and Elayne had been pretending to be Aes Sedai, then we were all jumping into a school of silverpike, which I take it isn’t very safe.”

“The gleeman saw us and hushed him,” Areina put in, fingering the quiver at her waist, “but we heard.” Her voice was hard as her stare.

“I know they’re both Aes Sedai now, Mother, but wouldn’t they still be in trouble if anyone found out? The sisters, I mean? Anybody who pretends to be a sister is in trouble if they find out, even years later.” Nicola’s face did not change, but her gaze suddenly seemed to be trying to fix Egwene’s. She leaned a little forward, intent. “Anybody at all. Isn’t that so?”

Emboldened by Egwene’s silence, Areina grinned. An unpleasant grin in the night. “I hear Nynaeve and Elayne were sent out of the Tower on some task by the Sanche woman back when she was Amyrlin. I hear you were sent off by her, too, at the same time. Got into all sorts of trouble when you came back.” Sly insinuation slithered into her voice. “Do you remember them playing at Aes Sedai?”

They stood there looking at her, Areina leaning insolently on her bow, Nicola so expectant the air should have crackled.

“Siuan Sanche is Aes Sedai,” Egwene said coldly, “and so are Nynaeve al’Meara and Elayne Trakand. You will show them proper respect. To you, they are Siuan Sedai, Nynaeve Sedai and Elayne Sedai.” The pair blinked in surprise. Inside, her stomach quivered. With outrage. After everything she had been through tonight, she was confronted with *blackmail* from these . . . ? She could not think of a word bad enough. Elayne could have; Elayne listened to stablemen and wagon drivers and every sort, memorizing the words she should have refused to hear. Unfolding the striped stole, Egwene draped it carefully across her shoulders.

"I don't think you understand, Mother," Nicola said hastily. Not fearfully, however; just attempting to force her point. "I merely worried that if anyone found out that you had—" Egwene gave her no chance to go further.

"Oh, I understand, child." The fool woman *was* a child, however old she was. Any number of the older novices gave trouble, usually in the form of insolence toward Accepted set to teach them, but even the silliest had sense enough to avoid impertinence to the sisters. It fanned her anger to white heat, that the woman had the gall to try this on with her. They were both taller than she, if not by much, but she planted her fists on her hips and drew herself up, and they shrank away as though she loomed. "Do you have any notion how serious it is to bring charges against a sister, especially for a novice? Charges based on a conversation you claim to have heard between men now a thousand miles away! Tiana would skin you alive and put you to scrubbing pots the rest of your natural life." Nicola kept trying to push a word in—apologies, they sounded like this time, and more protests that Egwene did not understand, frantic attempts to change everything—but Egwene ignored her and rounded on Areina. The Hunter took another step back, wetting her lips and looking remarkably uncertain. "You needn't think you would walk away clear, either. Even a Hunter could be hauled to Tiana for a thing like this. If you're lucky enough not to be flogged at a wagon tongue, the way they do soldiers caught stealing. Either way, you'll be tossed out by the road with your welts for company."

Drawing a deep breath, Egwene folded her hands at her waist. Clutched together, they would not tremble. All but cowering, the pair looked suitably chastened. She hoped those downcast eyes and slumped shoulders and shifting feet were not feigned. By rights, she should send them to Tiana right now. She had no idea what the penalty might be for trying to blackmail the Amyrlin Seat, but it seemed likely that being turned out of the camp would be the least of it. In Nicola's case, the turning out would have to wait until her teachers were satisfied she knew enough of channeling not to hurt herself or others by accident. Nicola Treehill would never be Aes Sedai, though, once that charge was laid against her; all that potential would go for nothing.

Except. . . . Any woman caught pretending to be Aes Sedai was set down so hard she would still be whimpering years later, and an Accepted caught might very well consider the other woman fortunate, but surely Nynaeve and Elayne were safe now they really were sisters. Herself, as well. Only, it might take no more than a whisper of this to erase any chance of making the Hall acknowledge her truly the Amyrlin Seat. As well jaunt off to Rand, and then tell the Hall to their faces. She dared not allow these two to see her doubt, or even suspect.

“I will forget this,” she said sharply. “But if I hear so much as a whisper of it again, from anyone. . . .” She drew a ragged breath—if she heard *shouts* of it, there might be little she could do—but by the way they jumped, they read a threat that pricked deep. “Get to your beds before I change my mind.”

In an instant they became a flurry of curtsies, of “Yes, Mother” and “No, Mother” and “As you command, Mother.” They scurried away looking back over their shoulders at her, every step faster than the last, until they were running. She had to walk on sedately, but she wanted to run too.

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CHAPTER

10

Unseen Eyes

Selame was waiting when Egwene got back to her tent, a rail-thin woman with dark Tairen coloring and a nearly impervious self-assurance. Chesa was right; she did carry her long nose raised, as though recoiling from a bad smell. Yet if her manner with the other maids was arrogant, she was in reality quite different around her patroness. As Egwene entered, Selame folded herself into a curtsy so deep her head nearly brushed the carpet, skirts spread as wide as they would go in the cramped quarters. Before Egwene had taken her second step inside, the woman leaped up, fussing over her buttons. And fussing over her, too. Selame had very little sense.

“Oh, Mother, you went out with your head uncovered again.” As if she had ever worn any of those beaded caps the woman favored, or the embroidered velvet things Meri favored, or Chesa’s plumed hats. “Why, you’re shivering. You should never go walking out-of-doors without a shawl and parasol, Mother.” How was a parasol supposed to stop shivering? With sweat trickling down her own cheeks however fast she dabbed with her handkerchief, Selame never thought to ask *why* she shivered, which was perhaps just as well. “And you went alone, in the night. It just isn’t proper, Mother. Besides, there are all those soldiers, rough men, with no decent respect for any woman, even Aes Sedai. Mother, you simply mustn’t. . . .”

Egwene let the foolish words wash over her in the same way she let the woman undress her, paying less than half a mind. Ordering her to be quiet would only produce so many hurt looks and abused sighs that it made little difference. Except for the brainless chatter, Selame performed her duties diligently, if with so many flourishes they became a dance of grand gestures and obsequious curtsies. It seemed impossible that anyone could be as silly as Selame, always concerned with appearances, always worrying over what people would think. To her, people were Aes Sedai and the nobility, and their upper servants. By her book, no one else mattered; perhaps no one else thought, by her book. It probably *was* impossible. Egwene was not about to forget who had found Selame in the first place, any more than she did who had found Meri. True, Chesa was a gift from Sheriam, but Chesa had shown her loyalties to Egwene more than once. Egwene wanted to tell herself the tremors that the other woman took for shivers were quivers of rage, yet she knew a worm of fear writhed in her belly. She had come too far, had too much to do yet, to allow Nicola and Areina to put a spoke through her wheels.

As her head popped through the top of a clean shift, she caught a bit of the skinny woman's prattle and stared. "Did you say ewe's milk?"

"Oh, yes, Mother. Your skin is so soft, and nothing will keep it that way like bathing in ewe's milk."

Maybe she really was an idiot. Hustling a protesting Selame out, Egwene brushed her own hair, turned down her own cot, placed the now useless *a'dam* bracelet in the small carved ivory box where she kept her few pieces of jewelry, then extinguished the lamps. *All by myself*, she thought sarcastically in the darkness. *Selame and Meri will have conniptions*.

Before retiring, however, she padded to the entrance and opened a small gap in the doorflaps. Outside was moonlit stillness and silence, broken by a night heron's cry that suddenly cut off in a shriek. There were hunters abroad in the darkness. After a moment something moved in the shadows beside a tent across the way. It looked like a woman.

Perhaps idiocy did not disqualify Selame any more than dour-faced gloom eliminated Meri. It could be either one. Or someone else entirely. Even Nicola or Areina, however unlikely. She let the tentflap fall shut with a smile. Whoever the watcher was would not see where she went tonight.

The way the Wise Ones had taught her to put herself to sleep was simple. Eyes closed, feeling each part of the body relax in turn, breathing in time with her heartbeat, mind unfocused and drifting, all but one tiny corner, drifting. Sleep swept over her in moments, but it was the sleep of a dreamwalker.

Formless, she floated deep within an ocean of stars, infinite points of light glimmering in an infinite sea of darkness, fireflies beyond counting flickering in an endless night. Those were dreams, the dreams of everyone sleeping anywhere in the world, maybe of everyone in all possible worlds, and this was the gap between reality and *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the space separating the waking world from the World of Dreams. Wherever she looked ten thousand fireflies vanished as people woke, and ten thousand new were born to replace them. A vast ever-changing array of sparkling beauty. She did not waste time in admiration, though. This place held dangers, some deadly. She was sure she knew how to avoid those, but one peril in this place aimed straight at her if she lingered too long, and being caught in it would be embarrassing to say the least. Keeping a wary eye out—well, it would have been a wary eye had she had eyes here—she moved. She had no sense of motion. It seemed she stood still and that glittering ocean swirled around her until one light settled before her. Every twinkling star looked exactly like every other, yet she knew this was Nynaeve's dream. *How* she knew was another matter; not even the Wise Ones understood that recognition.

She had considered trying to find Nicola's dreams, and Areina's. Once she unearthed them, she knew exactly how to sink the fear of the Light into their bones, and she did not give a fig that every bit of it was proscribed. Practicality sent her here instead, not fear of the forbidden. She had done what was not done before, and she was certain she would again should it become necessary. Do what you must, then pay the price for it, was what she had been taught, by the same women who had marked off those forbidden areas. It was refusal to admit the debt, refusal to pay, that often turned necessity to evil. But even if that pair were asleep, locating someone's dreams the first time was arduous at best, without guarantees. Days of efforts—nights of it, rather—were more likely to deliver nothing. This was at least sure.

Slowly she moved closer through everlasting darkness, though once again it seemed that she stayed still and the pinpoint of light grew, to a glowing pearl, an iridescent apple, a full moon, until it filled her vision entirely with brightness, all the world. She did not touch it, though, not yet. A space finer than a hair remained between. Ever so gently, she reached across that gap. With what, lacking a body, was as much a mystery as how she knew one dream from another. Her will, the Wise Ones said, but she still did not understand how that could be. As though laying a finger to a soap bubble, she kept her touch very delicate indeed. The shining wall shimmered like spun glass, pulsed like a heart, delicate and alive. A little firmer touch, and she would be able to "see" inside, "see" what Nynaeve was dreaming. A bit firmer still, and she could actually step inside and be a part of the dream. That carried hazards, especially with anyone of a strong mind, but either looking in or stepping in could be mortifying. For example, if the dreamer happened to be dreaming of a man she was particularly interested in. Apologies alone took half the night when you did that. Or, with a hooking sort of motion, like rolling a fragile bead across a tabletop, she could snatch Nynaeve out, into a dream of her own making, a part of *Tel'aran'rhiod* itself, where she was in complete control. She was sure that would work. Of course, that was one of the forbidden things, and she did not think Nynaeve would appreciate it.

NYNAEVE, THIS IS EGWENE. UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES ARE YOU TO RETURN UNTIL YOU FIND THE BOWL, NOT UNTIL I CAN SETTLE A PROBLEM WITH AREINA AND NICOLA. THEY KNOW YOU WERE PRETENDING. I WILL EXPLAIN MORE WHEN I SEE YOU NEXT IN THE LITTLE TOWER. BE CAREFUL. MOGHEDIEN HAS ESCAPED.

The dream winked out, the soap bubble pricked. Despite the message, she would have giggled had she possessed a throat. A disembodied voice in your dream could have a startling effect. Especially if you were afraid the speaker might be peeking. Nynaeve was not one to forget even when it was an accident.

That light-spangled sea whirled about her once more until she settled on another sparkling pinpoint. Elayne. The two women very likely slept no more than a dozen paces apart in Ebou Dar, but distance had no meaning here. Or perhaps it had a different meaning.

This time when she delivered her message, the dream pulsed and changed. It still appeared exactly the same as every other, but even so, to her it was transformed. Had the words drawn Elayne into another dream? They would remain, however, and she would remember on waking.

With Nicola and Areina's bowstrings dampened a little more, it was time to turn her attention to Rand. Unfortunately, finding his dreams would be as useless as finding an Aes Sedai's. He shielded his somewhat as they did theirs, although apparently a man's shield differed from a woman's. An Aes Sedai's shield was a crystal carapace, a seamless sphere woven of Spirit, but however transparent it appeared, it might as well have been steel. She could not recall how many fruitless hours she had frittered away trying to peer through his. Where a sister's shielded dream seemed brighter, close up, his were dimmer. It was like staring into muddy water; some-times you had the impression that something had moved deep in those gray-brown swirls, but you could never tell what.

Again the endless array of lights spun and settled, and she approached a third woman's dream. Gingerly. So much lay between her and Amys that it seemed akin to approaching her mother's dreams. In truth, she had to admit, she wanted to emulate Amys in many ways. She desired Amys' respect every bit as greatly as she did the Hall's. Maybe, if she had to choose, she would choose Amys'. Certainly, there was no Sitter she esteemed as highly as she did Amys. Pushing away a sudden diffidence, she tried to make her "voice" softer, to no avail. AMYS, THIS IS EGWENE. I MUST SPEAK WITH YOU.

We will come, a voice murmured to her. Amys' voice.

Startled, Egwene backed away. She felt like laughing at herself. Perhaps it was just as well to be reminded that the Wise Ones had long years' more experience at this. There were times she was afraid she might have been spoiled by not having to work harder for her abilities with the One Power. Then again, as if to make up for it, sometimes everything else seemed like trying to climb a cliff in a rainstorm.

Abruptly she caught movement at the very edge of her field of vision. One of those points of light slid through the sea of stars, drifting toward her of its own volition, growing larger. Only one dream would do that, one dreamer. In a panic, she fled, wishing she had a throat to scream, or curse, or just shout. Especially at the tiny corner of her that wanted to stay where she was and wait.

Not even the stars moved this time. They simply disappeared, and she was leaning against a thick redstone column, panting as though she had sprinted a mile, heart beating fit to burst. After a moment, she looked down at herself and began to laugh a trifle unsteadily, trying to catch her breath. She had on a full-skirted gown of shimmering green silk, worked in thread-of-gold in wide, ornate bands across the bodice and along the hem. That bodice also showed *considerably* more bosom than she ever would waking, and a broad cinched belt of woven gold made her waist seem smaller than it really was. Then again, maybe it was smaller. Here in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, you could be however you wanted, whatever you wanted. Even when the wanting was unconscious, if you were not careful. Gawyn Trakand had unfortunate effects on her, *very* unfortunate.

That tiny part of her still wished she had waited to be overtaken by his dream. Overtaken and absorbed by it. If a dreamwalker loved somebody to distraction, or hated them beyond reason, most especially if the emotion was returned, she could be pulled into that person's dream; she drew the dream, or it drew her, as a lodestone drew iron filings. She certainly did not hate Gawyn, but she could not afford to be trapped in his dream, not tonight, trapped until he wakened, being as he saw her. Which was a good deal more beautiful than she truly was; oddly, *he* appeared less beautiful than he was in life. There was no question of a strong mind or concentration when love or hate that strong was involved. Once you were in that dream, there you remained until the other person stopped dreaming about you. Remembering what he dreamed of doing with her, what they had done in his dreams, she felt a fiery blush suffusing her face.

"A good thing none of the Sitters can see me now," she muttered. "They'd never take me for anything but a girl, then." Grown women did not flutter and moon over a man this way; she was certain of that. Not women with any sense, anyway. What he dreamed of would come, but at a time of her choosing. Obtaining her mother's permission might be difficult, yet surely she would not withhold it even if she had never laid eyes on Gawyn. Marin al'Vere trusted her daughters' judgment. Now it was time for her youngest daughter to show a little of that judgment and put these fancies away until a better time.

Looking around, she almost wished she could go on letting Gawyn fill her thoughts. More massive columns ran in every direction, supporting a soaring, vaulted ceiling and a great dome. None of the gilded lamps hanging from golden chains overhead were lit, yet there was light of a sort, light that was just there, without source, neither bright nor dim. The Heart of the Stone, inside the great fortress called the Stone of Tear. Or rather its image in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, an image as real as the original in many ways. This was where she had met the Wise Ones before, their choice. A strange one for Aiel, it seemed to her. She would have expected Rhuidean, now that it was open, or somewhere else in the Aiel Waste, or simply wherever the Wise Ones happened to be. Every place except Ogier *stedding* had its reflection in the World of Dreams—even the *stedding* did, really; but they could not be entered, just as Rhuidean had once been closed. The Aes Sedai camp was out of the question, of course. A number of the sisters now had access to *ter'angreal* that allowed them to enter the World of Dreams, and since none really knew what they were doing, they often began their ventures by appearing in the camp of *Tel’aran’rhiod* as though setting out on a normal journey.

Like *angreal* and *sa’angreal*, by Tower law *ter’angreal* were the property of the White Tower, no matter who happened to possess them for the present. Very seldom did the Tower insist, at least when possession lay somewhere like the so-called Great Holding in this very Stone of Tear—eventually they would come to the Aes Sedai, and the White Tower had always been good at waiting when it needed to—but those actually in Aes Sedai hands were in the gift of the Hall, of individual Sitters. The loan, really; they were almost never given. Elayne had learned to duplicate dream *ter’angreal*, and she and Nynaeve had taken two with them, but the rest were in the Hall’s possession now, along with the other sorts Elayne had made. Which meant that Sheriam and her little circle could use them whenever they wished, and most assuredly Lelaine and Romanda, though it was likely those two sent others instead of entering *Tel’aran’rhiod* themselves. Until quite recently, no Aes Sedai had walked the dream in centuries, and they still had considerable difficulties, most of which stemmed from a belief that they could learn by themselves. Even so, the last thing Egwene wanted was any of their followers spying on this meeting tonight.

As though the thought of spies had made her more sensitive, she became aware of being watched by unseen eyes. That sensation was always present in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, and not even the Wise Ones knew why, but although hidden eyes always seemed to be there, actual watchers might be present as well. It was not Romanda or Lelaine on her mind, now.

Trailing her hand against the column, she walked all the way around it slowly, studying the redstone forest as it ran away in deepening shadows. The light surrounding her was not real; anybody in one of those shadows would see the same light around them while shadows hid her. People did appear, men and women, flickering images that rarely lasted more than a few heartbeats. She had no interest in those who touched the World of Dreams in their sleep; anyone might do that by happenstance, but luckily for them, only for moments, seldom long enough to face any of the dangers. The Black Ajah possessed dream *ter’angreal*, too, stolen from the Tower. Worse, Moghedien knew *Tel’aran’rhiod* as well as any dreamwalker.

Perhaps better. She could control this place and anyone in it as easily as turning her hand.

For a moment Egwene wished she had spied on Moghedien's dreams while the woman was prisoner, just once, just enough to be able to distinguish them. But even identifying her dreams would not reveal where she was now. And there had been the possibility of being drawn in against her will. She certainly despised Moghedien enough, and the Forsaken most assuredly hated her without bounds. What happened in there was not real, not even as real as in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, but you remembered it as if it was. A night in Moghedien's power would have been a nightmare she likely would have relived every time she went to sleep for the rest of her life. Maybe awake, too.

Another circuit. What was that? A dark, regally beautiful woman in pearl-covered cap and lace-ruffed gown strode from the shadows and vanished. A Tairen woman dreaming, a High Lady or dreaming herself as one. She might be plain and dumpy, a farmwife or a merchant, awake.

Better to have spied on Logain than Moghedien. She still would not know where he was, but she might have some idea of his plans. Of course, being pulled into his dream might not have been much more pleasant than being drawn into Moghedien's. He hated all Aes Sedai. Arranging his escape had been one of those necessary things; she just hoped the price would not be too high. Forget Logain. Moghedien was the danger, Moghedien who might come after her, even here, especially here, Moghedien who. . . . Suddenly she became aware of how heavily she was moving, and made a vexed sound in her throat, very nearly a groan. The beautiful gown had become a full set of plate-and-mail armor like that of Gareth Bryne's heavy cavalry. An open-faced helmet rested on her head, with a crest in the shape of the Flame of Tar Valon, by the feel. It was very irritating. She was beyond this sort of lack of control.

Firmly she changed the armor to what she had worn meeting the Wise Ones before. It was just a matter of thought. Full skirt of dark wool and loose white *algode* blouse, just as she had worn while studying with them, complete with a fringed shawl so green it was nearly black and a folded head scarf to hold her hair back. She did not duplicate their jewelry, of course, all the multitudes of necklaces and bracelets. They would laugh at her for that. A woman built her collection over the years, not in the blink of a dream.

“Logain is on his way to the Black Tower,” she said aloud; she certainly hoped he was; at least there would be some check on him then, or so she hoped, and if he was caught and gentled again, Rand could not blame any sister following her, “and Moghedien has no way of knowing where I am.” That, she tried to make sound a certainty.

“Why should you fear the Shadowsouled?” asked a voice behind her, and Egwene tried to climb into the air. This being *Tel’aran’rhiod*, and she a dreamwalker, she was more than her own height above the floorstones before she came to herself. *Oh, yes* she thought, floating, *I’m far beyond all those beginner’s mistakes*. If this went on, next she would be jumping when Chesa gave her good morning.

Hoping she was not blushing too badly, she let herself settle slowly; perhaps she could retain a little dignity.

Perhaps, yet Bair’s aged face had more creases than usual from a grin that seemed nearly to touch her ears. Unlike the other two women with her, she could not channel, but that had nothing to do with dreamwalking. She was as skilled as either, more in some areas. Amys was smiling too, if not so broadly, but sun-haired Melaine threw back her head and roared.

“I have never seen anyone . . .” Melaine just managed to get out. “Like a rabbit.” She gave a little hop and lifted a full pace into the air.

“I recently caused Moghedien some hurt.” Egwene was quite proud of her poise. She liked Melaine—the woman was much less thorny since she was with child; with twins, actually—but at the moment Egwene could have strangled her cheerfully. “Some friends and I damaged her pride, if not much more. I think she would like the opportunity to repay me.” On impulse, she changed her clothes once more, to the sort of riding dress she wore every day now, in lustrous green silk. The Great Serpent encircled her finger with gold. She could not tell them everything, but these women were friends too, and they deserved to know what she could tell.

“Wounds to the pride are remembered long after wounds to the flesh.” Bair’s voice was thin and high, yet strong, a reed of iron.

“Tell us about it,” Melaine said, with an eager smile. “How did you shame her?” Bair’s was just as enthusiastic. In a cruel land, you either learned to laugh at cruelty or spent your life weeping; in the Three-fold Land, the Aiel had learned to laugh long since. Besides, shaming an enemy was considered an art.

Amys studied Egwene’s new clothes for a moment, then said, “That can come later, I think. We are to talk, you said.” She gestured to where the Wise Ones liked to talk, out beneath the vast dome at the heart of the chamber.

Why they chose that spot was another mystery Egwene could not puzzle out. The three women settled themselves cross-legged, spreading their skirts neatly, only a few paces from what seemed to be a sword made of gleaming crystal, rising hilt-first from where it had been driven into the floor-stones. They paid it no mind whatsoever—it was no part of their prophecies—any more than they did the people who flashed into existence around the great chamber, but here was always where they came.

Fabled *Callandor* would indeed function as a sword despite its appearance, but in truth it was a male *sa’angreal*, one of the most powerful ever made in the Age of Legends. She felt a little shiver, thinking of male *sa’angreal*. It had been different when there was only Rand. And the Forsaken, of course. But now there were these Asha’man. With *Callandor*, a man could draw enough of the One Power to level a city in a heartbeat and devastate everything for miles. She walked wide around it, holding her skirts aside reflexively. From the Heart of the Stone Rand had drawn *Callandor* in fulfillment of the Prophecies, then returned it for his own reasons. Returned it, and snared it round with traps woven in *saidin*. They would have their reflection, too, one that might trigger as decisively as the original should the wrong weaves be tried nearby. Some things in *Tel’aran’rhiod* were all too real.

Trying not to think of the Sword That Is Not a Sword, Egwene placed herself before the three Wise Ones. Fastening their shawls around their waists, they unlaced their blouses. That was how Aiel women sat with friends, in their tents beneath a hot sun. She did not sit, and if that made her seem a supplicant or on trial, so be it. In a way, in her heart, she was. “I’ve not told you why I was summoned away from you, and you have not asked.”

“You will tell us when you are ready,” Amys said complacently. She looked of an age with Melaine despite hair white as Bair’s tumbling to her waist—her hair had begun turning when she was little older than Egwene—but she was the leader among the three, not Bair. For the first time, Egwene wondered just how old she was. Not a question you asked a Wise One, any more than an Aes Sedai.

“When I left you, I was one of the Accepted. You know about the division in the White Tower.” Bair shook her head and grimaced; she knew, but she did not understand. None of them did. To Aiel, it was as unreal as clan or warrior society dividing against itself. Perhaps it was also affirmation in their eyes that Aes Sedai were less than they should be. Egwene went on, surprised that her voice was collected, steady. “The sisters who oppose Elaida have raised me as their Amyrlin. When Elaida is pulled down, I will sit on the Amyrlin Seat, in the White Tower.” She added the striped stole to her clothes and waited. Once she had lied to them, a serious transgression under *ji’e’toh*, and she was not sure how they would react to learning this truth she had hidden. If only they believed, at least. They merely looked at her.

“There is a thing children do,” Melaine said carefully after a time. Her pregnancy did not show yet, but already she had the inner radiance, making her even more beautiful than usual, and an inward, unshakable calm. “Children all want to push spears, and they all want to be the clan chief, but eventually they realize that the clan chief seldom dances the spears himself. So they make a figure and set it on a rise.” Off to one side the floor suddenly mounded up, no longer stone tiles but a ridge of sun-baked brown rock. Atop it stood a shape vaguely like a man, made of twisted twigs and bits of cloth. “This is the clan chief who commands them to dance the spears from the hill where he can see the battle. But the children run where they will, and their clan chief is only a figure of sticks and rags.” A wind whipped the cloth strips, emphasizing the hollowness of the shape, and then ridge and figure were gone.

Egwene drew a deep breath. Of course. She had atoned for her lie according to *ji’e’toh*, by her own choice, and that meant it was as if the lie had never been spoken. She should have known better. But they had struck to the heart of her situation as though they had been weeks in the Aes Sedai camp. Bair studied the floor, not wanting to witness her shame. Amys sat with chin in hand, sharp blue gaze trying to dig to her heart.

“Some see me so.” Another deep breath, and she pushed the truth out. “All but a handful do. Now. By the time we finish our battle, they will know I *am* their chief, and they will run as *I* say.”

“Return to us,” Bair said. “You have too much honor for these women. Sorilea already has a dozen young men picked out for you to view in the sweat tents. She has a great desire to see you make a bridal wreath.”

“I hope she will be there when I wed, Bair”—to Gawyn, she hoped; that she would bond him, she knew from interpreting her dreams, but only hope and the certainty of love said they would wed—“I hope all of you will, but I’ve made my choice.”

Bair would have argued further, and Melaine too, but Amys raised a hand, and they fell silent, if not pleased. “There is much *ji* in her decision. She will bend her enemies to her will, not run from them. I wish you well in your dance, Egwene al’Vere.” She had been a Maiden of the Spear, and often thought as one still. “Sit. Sit.”

“Her honor is her own,” Bair said, frowning at Amys, “but I have another question.” Her eyes were an almost watery blue, yet when they turned on Egwene, they were sharp as ever Amys’ had been. “Will you bring these Aes Sedai to kneel to the *Car’a’carn*?”

Startled, Egwene nearly fell the last foot to the floorstones rather than sitting. There was no hesitation in her answer, though. “I can’t do that, Bair. And would not if I could. Our loyalty is to the Tower, to the Aes Sedai as a whole, above even the lands we were born in.” That was true, or was supposed to be, though she wondered how the claim squared in their minds with her and the others’ rebellion. “Aes Sedai don’t even swear fealty to the Amyrlin, and certainly not to any man. That would be like one of you kneeling to a clan chief.” She made an illustration the way Melaine had, by concentrating on its reality; *Tel’aran’rhiod* was infinitely malleable if you knew how. Beyond *Callandor* three Wise Ones dropped to their knees before a clan chief. The man strongly resembled Rhuarc, the women the three in front of her. She only held it for an instant, but Bair glanced at it and sniffed loudly. The notion *was* preposterous.

“Do not compare those women to us.” Melaine’s green eyes sparkled with something very like their old sharpness; her tone was honed like a razor.

Egwene held her tongue. The Wise Ones seemed to despise Aes Sedai, all except her, or perhaps better to say they were contemptuous. She thought they might actually resent the prophecies that linked them to Aes Sedai. Before she had been summoned by the Hall to be raised Amyrlin, Sheriam and her circle of friends had met here regularly with these three, but that had ended as much because the Wise Ones refused to hide their contempt as because Egwene finally had been called. In *Tel’aran’rhiod*, a confrontation with someone more familiar with the place could be mortifying in the extreme. Even with Egwene, there was a distance now, and certain matters they would not discuss, such as whatever they knew of Rand’s plans. Before, she had been one with them, a student in dream-walking; after, she was Aes Sedai, even before they learned what she had just told them.

“Egwene al’Vere will do as she must,” Amys said. Melaine gave her a long look and rearranged her shawl ostentatiously, shifted several long necklaces in a clatter of ivory and gold, but said nothing. Amys seemed even more the leader than she had been. The only Wise One Egwene had ever seen make other Wise Ones defer to her so easily was Sorilea.

Bair had imagined tea before her, as it might be in the tents, a golden teapot worked with lions from one country, a silver tray edged in ropework from another, tiny green cups of delicate Sea Folk porcelain. The tea tasted real, of course, felt real going down. Despite a hint of some sweet berry or herb she did not recognize, it was too bitter for Egwene’s tongue. She imagined a little honey in it and took another sip. Too sweet. A touch less honey. Now it tasted right. That was something you could not do with the Power. Egwene doubted that anyone had the skill to weave threads of *saidar* fine enough to remove honey from tea.

For a moment she sat peering into her teacup, thinking about honey and tea and fine threads of *saidar*, but that was not what held her silent. The Wise Ones wanted to guide Rand no less than Elaida or Romanda or Lelaine, or very likely any other Aes Sedai. Of course, they only wanted to direct the *Car’a’carn* in a way that was best for the Aiel, yet those sisters wanted to direct the Dragon Reborn toward what was best for the world, as they saw it. She did not spare herself. Helping Rand, keeping him from putting himself at odds with Aes Sedai beyond recovery, those meant guiding him, too. *Only, I’m right*, she reminded herself. *Whatever I do is as much for his own good as for anybody else’s. None of the others ever think about what’s right for him*. But it was best to remember that these women were more than simply her friends and followers of the *Car’a’carn*. No one was ever simply anything, she was learning.

“I do not think you wished only to tell us you are now a woman chief among the wetlanders,” Amys said over her teacup. “What troubles your mind, Egwene al’Vere?”

“What troubles me is what always does.” She smiled to lighten the mood. “Sometimes I think Rand is going to give me gray hairs before my time.”

“Without men, no woman would have gray hairs.” Normally, that would have been a joke on Melaine’s tongue, and Bair would have made another over the vast knowledge of men Melaine had gained in just a few months of marriage, but not this time. All three women simply watched Egwene and waited.

So. They wished to be serious. Well, Rand was serious business. She just wished she could be sure they saw it anything at all the way she did. Balancing her cup on her fingertips, she told them everything. About Rand, anyway, and her fears since learning of the silence from Caemlyn. “I don’t know what he’s done—or what she has; everybody tells me how experienced Merana is, but she’s had none with the likes of him. When it comes to Aes Sedai, if you hid this cup in a meadow, he’d still manage to step on it inside three paces. I know I could do better than Merana, but. . . .”

“You could return,” Bair suggested again, and Egwene shook her head firmly.

“I can do more where I am, as Amyrlin. And there are rules even for the Amyrlin Seat.” Her mouth twisted for an instant. She did not like admitting that, especially not to these women. “I can’t even visit him without the Hall’s permission. I’m Aes Sedai now, and I have to obey our laws.” That came out more fiercely than she intended. It was a stupid law, but she had not yet found a way around it. Besides, they wore so little expression she was sure they were snickering incredulously inside. Not even a clan chief had the right to say when or where a Wise One could go. The three women across from her exchanged long looks. Then Amys set her teacup down and said, “Merana Ambrey and other Aes Sedai followed the *Car’a’carn* to the treekillers’ city. You need have no fear he will put his foot wrong with her, or any of your sisters with her. We will see that there is no difficulty between him and any Aes Sedai.”

“That hardly sounds like Rand,” Egwene said doubtfully. So Sheriam had been right about Merana. But why was she still silent?

Bair cackled with laughter. “Most parents have more trouble with their children than lies between the *Car’a’carn* and the women who came with Merana Ambrey.”

“So long as he isn’t the child,” Egwene chuckled, relieved that someone was amused at something. The way these women felt about Aes Sedai, they would have been spitting nails if they thought any sister was gaining influence with him. On the other hand, Merana had to gain some, or she might as well leave now. “But Merana should have sent a report. I don’t understand why she hasn’t. You’re certain there isn’t any—?” She could not think of how to finish. There was no way that Rand could have stopped Merana from sending off a pigeon.

“Perhaps she sent a man on a horse.” Amys grimaced faintly; as much as any Aiel, she found riding repugnant. Your own legs were good enough. “She brought none of the birds that wetlanders use.”

“That was foolish of her,” Egwene muttered. Foolish did not come close. Merana’s dreams would be shielded, so there was no point trying to talk to her there. Even if they could be found. Light, but it was vexing! She leaned forward intently. “Amys, promise me you won’t try to stop him from talking with her, or make her so angry she does something foolish.” They were quite capable of that; more than capable. They had putting an Aes Sedai’s back up perfected to a Talent. “She’s just supposed to convince him that we mean him no harm. I’m sure Elaida has some nasty surprise hidden behind her skirts, but we don’t.” She would see to that, if anyone had different notions. Somehow, she would. “Promise me?”

They passed unreadable looks back and forth. They could not like the idea of letting a sister near Rand, certainly not unhindered. Doubtless one of them would contrive to be present whenever Merana was, but she could live with that so long as they did not hinder too much.

“I promise, Egwene al’Vere,” Amys said finally, in a voice flat as worked stone.

Probably she was offended that Egwene had required a pledge, but Egwene felt as though a weight had lifted. Two weights. Rand and Merana were not at each other’s throats, and Merana would have a chance to do what she had been sent to do. “I knew I’d have the unvarnished truth from you, Amys. I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear it. If anything were wrong between Rand and Merana. . . . Thank you.”

Startled, she blinked. For an instant, Amys wore *cadin’sor*. She made some sort of small gesture, too. Maiden handtalk, perhaps. Neither Bair nor Melaine, sipping their tea, gave any sign that they had noticed. Amys must have been wishing she were somewhere else, away from the tangle Rand had made of everybody’s life. It would be embarrassing, shaming, for a Wise One dream-walker to lose control of herself in *Tel’aran’rhiod* even for an instant. To the Aiel, shame hurt far worse than pain, but it had to be witnessed to *be* shame. If it was not seen, or those who saw refused to admit it, then it might as well never have happened. A strange people, but she certainly did not want to shame Amys. Composing her face, she went on as if nothing had happened.

“I must ask a favor. An important favor. Don’t tell Rand—or anybody—about me. About this, I mean to say.” She lifted an end of her stole. Their faces made an Aes Sedai’s best calm look maniacal. Stone was not in it. “I don’t mean lie,” she added hastily. Under *ji’e’toh*, asking someone to lie was little better than telling one yourself. “Just don’t bring it up. He’s already sent somebody to ‘rescue’ me.” *And won’t he be furious when he finds out I shuffled Mat off to Ebou Dar with Nynaeve and Elayne,* she thought. She had had to do it, though. “I don’t need rescuing, and I don’t want it, but he thinks he knows better than everybody. I’m afraid he might come hunting for me himself.” Which frightened her more—that he might appear in the camp alone, raging, with three hundred or so Aes Sedai around him? Or that he might come with some of the Asha’man? Either way, a disaster.

“That would be . . . unfortunate,” Melaine murmured, though she was seldom one for understatement, and Bair muttered, “The *Car’a’carn* is head-strong. As bad as any man I have ever known. And a few women, for that matter.”

“We will hold your confidence close, Egwene al’Vere,” Amys said gravely.

Egwene blinked at the quick agreement. But perhaps it was not so surprising. To them, the *Car’a’carn* was only another chief, just more so, and Wise Ones had certainly been known to keep things from a chief they thought he should not know.

After that there was not much to say, though they talked a while longer over more cups of tea. She longed for a lesson in walking the dream, but could not ask with Amys there. Amys would go, and she wanted her company more than learning. The closest the Wise Ones came to telling her anything Rand was actually doing was when Melaine grumbled that he should finish the Shaido and Sevanna now, and both Bair and Amys frowned at her so, she turned bright red. After all, Sevanna was a Wise One, as Egwene knew quite bitterly. Not even the *Car’a’carn* would be allowed to interfere with even a Shaido Wise One. And she could not give them details of her own circumstances. That they had leaped right to the most shaming part did nothing to lessen the shame she would feel talking about it

—it was very hard not to drop back into behaving, even thinking, as the Aiel did when she was around them; for that matter, she thought it might have shamed her had she never met an Aiel—and the only sort of advice they had about dealing with Aes Sedai lately was of a nature that Elaida herself would not try to follow. An Aes Sedai riot, unlikely as it sounded, might result. Worse, they already thought badly enough of Aes Sedai without her adding wood to the fire. Some day she wanted to forge a link between the Wise Ones and the White Tower, but that would never happen unless she managed to dampen that fire down. Another thing she had no idea how to do, as yet.

“I must go,” she said at last, standing. Her body lay asleep in her tent, but there was never quite enough rest in sleep while you were in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. The others rose with her. “I hope you will all be very careful. Moghedien hates me, and she would certainly try to hurt anyone who’s my friend. She knows a great deal about the World of Dreams. At least as much as Lanfear did.” That was as close as she could come to warning them without saying right out that Moghedien might know more than they. Aiel pride could be prickly. They took her meaning, though, and without offense.

“If the Shadowsouled meant to threaten us,” Melaine said, “I think they would have by now. Perhaps they believe we are no threat to them.”

“We have glimpsed those who must be dreamwalkers, including men.” Bair shook her head incredulously: no matter what she knew about the Forsaken, she considered male dreamwalkers about as common as legs on snakes. “They avoid us. All of them.”

“I think we are as strong as they,” Amys added. In the One Power, she and Melaine were no stronger than Theodrin and Faolain—far from weak, indeed stronger than most Aes Sedai, but far from a Forsaken’s strength, too—yet in the World of Dreams, knowledge of *Tel’aran’rhiod* was often as powerful as *saidar*, more at times. Here, Bair was the equal of any sister. “But we will take care. It is the enemy you underestimate who kills you.”

Egwene took Amys’ hand and Melaine’s, and would have Bair’s had there been a way. Instead, she included her with a smile. “I’ll never be able to tell you what your friendship means to me, what you mean to me.” Despite everything, that was simple truth. “The whole world seems to be changing every time I blink. You three are one of the few firm spots in it.”

“The world does change,” Amys said, sadly. “Even mountains are worn away by the wind, and no one can climb the same hill twice. I hope we will always be friends in your eyes, Egwene al’Vere. May you always find water and shade.” And with that, they were gone, back to their own bodies.

For a time she stood frowning at *Callandor* but not seeing it, until suddenly she gave herself an exasperated shake. She had been thinking about that endless field of stars. If she waited there long, Gawyn’s dream would find her again, swallow her the way his arms would shortly thereafter. A pleasant way to spend the rest of the night. And a childish waste of time.

Firmly she made herself step back to her sleeping body, but not to ordinary sleep. She never did that anymore. That one corner of her brain remained fully aware, cataloging her dreams, filing away those that foretold the future, or at any rate gave glimpses of the possible course it might take. At least she could tell that much now, though the only one she had been able to interpret so far was the dream that told of Gawyn becoming her Warder. Aes Sedai called this Dreaming, and the women who could do it Dreamers, all long dead but her, yet it had no more to do with the One Power than dreamwalking did.

Perhaps it was inevitable she should dream first of Gawyn, because she had been thinking of him.

She stood in a vast, dim chamber where everything was indistinct. Everything except Gawyn, slowly coming toward her. A tall, beautiful man—had she ever thought his half-brother Galad was more beautiful?—with golden hair and eyes of the most wonderful deep blue. He had some distance to cover yet, but he could see her; his gaze was fixed on her like an archer’s on the target. A faint sound of crunching and grating hung in the air. She looked down. And felt a scream building in her. On bare feet, Gawyn walked across a floor of broken glass, shards breaking at every slow step. Even in that faint light she could see the trail of blood left by his slashed feet. She flung out a hand, tried to shout for him to stop, tried to run to him, but just that quickly she was elsewhere.

In the way of dreams she floated above a long, straight road across a grassy plain, looking down upon a man riding a black stallion. Gawyn. Then she was standing in the road in front of him, and he reined in. Not because he saw her, this time, but the road that had been straight now forked right where she stood, running over tall hills so no one could see what lay beyond. She knew, though. Down one fork was his violent death, down the other, a long life and a death in bed. On one path, he would marry her, on the other, not. She knew what lay ahead, but not which way led to which. Suddenly he did see her, or seemed to, and smiled, and turned his horse along one of the forks. . . . And she was in another dream. And another. Another. And again.

Not all had any bearing on the future. Dreams of kissing Gawyn, of running in a cool spring meadow with her sisters the way they had as children, slid by along with nightmares where Aes Sedai with switches chased her through endless corridors, where misshapen things lurched through shadows all around, where a grinning Nicola denounced her to the Hall and Thom Merrilin came forward to give evidence. Those she discarded; the others she tucked away, to be prodded and poked later in the hope she might understand what they meant.

She stood before an immense wall, clawing at it, trying to tear it down with her bare hands. It was not made of brick or stone, but countless thousands of discs, each half white and half black, the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai, like the seven seals that had once held the Dark One's prison shut. Some of those seals were broken now, though not even the One Power could break *cuendillar*, and the rest had weakened somehow, but the wall stood strong however she beat at it. She could not tear it down. Maybe it was the symbol that was important. Maybe it was the Aes Sedai she was trying to tear down, the White Tower. Maybe. . . .

Mat sat on a night-shrouded hilltop, watching a grand Illuminator's display of fireworks, and suddenly his hand shot up, seized one of those bursting lights in the sky. Arrows of fire flashed from his clenched fist, and a sense of dread filled her. Men would die because of this. The world would change. But the world *was* changing; it always changed.

Straps at waist and shoulder held her tightly to the block, and the headsman's axe descended, but she knew that somewhere someone was running, and if they ran fast enough, the axe would stop. If not. . . . In that corner of her mind, she felt a chill.

Logain, laughing, stepped across something on the ground and mounted a black stone; when she looked down, she thought it was Rand's body he had stepped over, laid out on a funeral bier with his hands crossed at his breast, but when she touched his face, it broke apart like a paper puppet.

A golden hawk stretched out its wing and touched her, and she and the hawk were tied together somehow; all she knew was that the hawk was female. A man lay dying in a narrow bed, and it was important he not die, yet outside a funeral pyre was being built, and voices raised songs of joy and sadness. A dark young man held an object in his hand that shone so brightly she could not see what it was.

On and on they came, and she sorted feverishly, desperately tried to understand. There was no rest in it, but it must be done. She would do what must be done.

* * *

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CHAPTER

11

An Oath

You asked to be wakened before the sun, Mother.”

Egwene’s eyes popped open—she had set herself a time to wake only moments from now—and despite herself she started back against her pillow from the face above her. Stern through a sheen of perspiration, it was not a pleasant sight first thing in the morning. Meri’s manner was perfectly respectful, but a pinched nose, a permanently downturned mouth and dark eyes sharp with censure said she had never seen anyone half as good as they should be or pretended to be, and her flat tone turned every meaning head to heels.

“I hope you slept well, Mother,” she said, while her expression managed a fair accusation of sloth. Her black hair, in tight coils over her ears, seemed to pull her face painfully. The unrelieved drab dark gray she always wore, however it made her sweat, only added to the gloom.

It was a pity she had not managed a little real rest. Yawning, Egwene rose from her narrow cot and scrubbed her teeth with salt, washed her face and hands while Meri laid out her clothes for the day, donned stockings and a clean shift, then suffered herself to be dressed. “Suffered” was the word.

“I fear some of these knots will pull, Mother,” the cheerless woman murmured, drawing the brush through Egwene’s hair, and Egwene very nearly told her she had not deliberately tangled it in her sleep.

“I understand we will rest here today, Mother.” Bone idleness, seethed Meri’s reflection in the stand-mirror.

“This shade of blue will set off your coloring nicely, Mother,” Meri said as she did up Egwene’s buttons, her face an accusation of vanity.

Filled with relief that she would have Chesa tonight, Egwene donned the stole and fled almost before the woman finished.

Not even a rim of the sun showed above the hills to the east. The land humped up all around in long ridges and irregular mounds, sometimes hundreds of feet high, that often looked as though monstrous fingers had squeezed them. Shadows like twilight bathed the camp lying in one of the broad valleys between, but it was well awake in the heat that never really lifted. Smells of breakfast cooking filled the air, and people bustled about, though there was none of the rush that would have meant a day's marching ahead. White-clad novices darted about at a near run; a wise novice always carried out her chores as quickly as she could. Warders never seemed hurried, of course, but even servants carrying the morning meal to Aes Sedai appeared to stroll this morning. Well, almost. In comparison to the novices. The whole camp was taking advantage of the halt. A clatter and curses as a jack-lever slipped announced wagonwrights making repairs, and a distant tapping of hammers told of farriers reshoeing horses. A dozen candlemakers had their molds lined up already, and the kettles heating to melt the carefully hoarded drippings and tag-ends of every candle that had been burned. More big black kettles stood on fires to boil water for baths and laundry, and men and women were heaping clothes up nearby. Egwene gave little notice to any of the activity.

The thing of it was, she was certain Meri did not do it apurpose; she could not help her face. Even so, she was as bad as it would be to have Romanda for a maid. The thought made her laugh out loud. Romanda as lady's maid would have her mistress toeing the line in no time; no doubt as to who would run and fetch in *that* pair. A gray-haired cook paused in raking coals from atop an iron oven to give her a grin of shared amusement. For a moment, anyway. Then he realized he was grinning at the Amyrlin Seat, not just some young woman walking by, and the grin melted crookedly as he jerked a bow before bending back to his work.

If she sent Meri off, Romanda would only find a new spy. And Meri would again be starving her way from village to village. Adjusting her dress—she really had gone before the woman was quite finished—Egwene's fingers found a small linen bag, the strings tucked behind her belt. She did not have to lift it all the way to her nose to smell rose petals and a blend of herbs with a cool scent. It made her sigh. A face like a headsman's, spying for Romanda without any doubt, and trying to perform her duties as well as she could. Why were these things never easy?

Approaching the tent she used as a study—many called it the Amyrlin's study, as if it were rooms in the Tower—a solemn satisfaction replaced worry over Meri. Whenever they halted for a day, Sheriam would be there before her with fat sheaves of petitions. A laundress imploring clemency on a charge of theft when she had been caught with the jewelry sewn into her dress, or a blacksmith begging a testimonial for his work, which he could not use unless he intended to leave, and likely not then. A harness maker asking the Amyrlin’s prayers for her to give birth to a daughter. One of Lord Bryne’s soldiers requesting the Amyrlin’s personal blessing to his wedding a seamstress. There was always a slew from older novices, appealing visits to Tiana and even extra chores. Anyone had the right to petition the Amyrlin, but those in service to the Tower seldom did, and never novices. Egwene suspected that Sheriam worked to dig up petitioners, something to butter the cat’s paws, to keep her out of Sheriam’s hair while the Keeper took care of what she considered important. This morning, Egwene thought she might make Sheriam eat those petitions for her breakfast.

When she entered the tent, though, Sheriam was not there. Which perhaps should not have been a surprise, given the night before. The tent was not empty, however.

“The Light illumine you this morning, Mother,” Theodrin said, making a deep curtsy that set the brown fringe of her shawl swaying. She had all the fabled Domani grace, though her high-necked dress was really quite modest. Domani women were not known for modesty. “We did as you commanded, but no one saw anybody near Marigan’s tent last night.”

“Some of the men remembered seeing Halima,” Faolain added sourly, with a much briefer bend of her knees, “but aside from that, they hardly recalled whether they went to sleep.” Many women disapproved of Delana’s secretary, but it was her next remark that made Faolain’s round face darker than usual. “We met Tiana while we were roaming about. She told us to go to bed and be quick about it.” Unconsciously she stroked the blue fringe on her shawl. New Aes Sedai almost always wore their shawls more often than they needed to, so Siuan said.

Giving them a smile she hoped was welcoming, Egwene took her place behind the small table. Carefully; the chair tilted for a moment anyway, until she reached down and pulled the leg straight. An edge of folded parchment peeked out from beneath the stone inkwell. Her hands twitched toward it, but she made them be still. Too many sisters saw little need for courtesy. She would not be one of those. Besides, these two had a claim on her.

“I am sorry for your difficulties, daughters.” Made Aes Sedai by her decree on being raised Amyrlin, they faced the same predicament as she, but lacking the added shield of the Amyrlin’s stole, small shield that that had proved. Most sisters behaved as though they were still only Accepted. What went on inside the Ajahs was seldom known outside, but it was rumored that they truly had had to beg admittance, and that guardians had been named to oversee their behavior. No one had ever heard the like, but everyone took it for fact. She had done them no favor. Another thing that had been necessary, though. “I will speak to Tiana.” It might do some good. For a day, or an hour.

“Thank you, Mother,” Theodrin said, “but there is no need to bother yourself.” Still, she also touched her shawl, hands lingering. “Tiana wanted to know why we were up so late,” she added after a moment, “but we didn’t tell her.”

“There was no need for secrecy, daughter.” A pity they had not found a witness, though. Moghedien’s rescuer would remain a shadow half-glimpsed. Always the most frightening sort. She glanced at the tiny corner of parchment, itching to read it. Maybe Siuan had discovered something. “Thank you both.” Theodrin recognized a dismissal and made her manners to go, but stopped when Faolain remained where she was.

“I wish I had held the Oath Rod already,” Faolain told Egwene in tones of frustration, “so you could know what I say is true.”

“This isn’t the time to bother the Amyrlin,” Theodrin began, then folded her hands and turned her attention to Egwene. Patience blended with something else on her face. Clearly the stronger of the two in the Power, she always took the lead, yet this time she was prepared to step back. In aid of what, Egwene wondered.

“It isn’t the Oath Rod that makes a woman Aes Sedai, daughter.” Whatever some believed. “Speak the truth to me, and I will believe it.”

“I don’t like you.” Faolain’s mop of dark curls swayed as she shook her head for emphasis. “You must know that. You probably think I was mean when you were a novice, when you came back to the White Tower after running away, but I still believe you didn’t get half the punishment you should have. Maybe my admitting it will help you know I speak the truth. It isn’t as though we have no choice even now. Romanda offered to take us under her protection, and so did Lelaine. They said they’d see we were tested and raised properly as soon we return to the Tower." Her face grew angrier, and Theodrin rolled her eyes and broke in.

"Mother, what Faolain is fumbling all around without getting to the point is that we didn't attach ourselves to you because we had no choice. And we didn't do it in gratitude for the shawl." She pursed her lips as if thinking that raising them Aes Sedai in the manner Egwene had was not really a gift to inspire much gratitude.

"Then why?" Egwene asked, leaning back. The chair shifted, but held.

Faolain jumped in before Theodrin could more than open her mouth. "Because you are the Amyrlin Seat." She still sounded angry. "We can see what happens. Some of the sisters think you're Sheriam's puppet, but most believe Romanda or Lelaine tells you where and when to step. It is not right." Her face was twisted in a scowl. "I left the Tower because what Elaida did wasn't right. They raised you Amyrlin. So I am yours. If you will have me. If you can trust me without the Oath Rod. You must believe me."

"And you, Theodrin?" Egwene said quickly, schooling her face. Knowing how the sisters felt was bad enough; hearing it again was . . . painful.

"I am yours, too," Theodrin sighed, "if you'll have me." She spread her hands disparagingly: "We are not much, I know, but it looks as though we are all you have. I must admit I was hesitant, Mother. Faolain is the one who kept insisting we do this. Frankly. . . ." She settled her shawl again unnecessarily, and her voice firmed. "Frankly, I do not see how you can win out over Romanda and Lelaine. But we are trying to behave as Aes Sedai, even though we aren't really, yet. We will not be that, Mother, whatever you say, until the other sisters see us as Aes Sedai, and that won't happen until we have been tested and have sworn the Three Oaths."

Plucking the folded scrap of parchment out from under the inkwell, Egwene fingered it while she thought. Faolain was the driving force behind this? That seemed as unlikely as a wolf befriending the shepherd. She suspected "dislike" was a mild word for what Faolain felt for her, and the woman must know Egwene hardly saw her as a potential friend. If they had accepted either Sitter's arrangement, mentioning the offer might be a good means of disarming her suspicions.

"Mother," Faolain said, and stopped, looking surprised at herself. It was the first time she had addressed Egwene so. Drawing a deep breath, she went on. “Mother, I know you must have a hard time believing us, since we’ve never held the Oath Rod, but—”

“I wish you would stop bringing that up,” Egwene said. It was well to be careful, but she could not afford to refuse every offer of help for fear of plots. “Do you think everybody believes Aes Sedai because of the Three Oaths? People who know Aes Sedai know a sister can stand truth on its head and turn it inside out if she chooses to. Myself, I think the Three Oaths hurt as much as they help, maybe more. I will believe you until I learn you’ve lied to me, and I will trust you until you show you don’t deserve it. The same way everybody else does with one another.” Come to think of it, the Oaths did not really change that. You still had to take a sister on trust most of the time. The Oaths just made people warier about it, wondering whether and how they were being manipulated. “Another thing. You two *are* Aes Sedai. I don’t want to hear any more about having to be tested, or hold the Oath Rod, or any of it. Bad enough you have to face that nonsense without parroting it yourselves. Have I made myself clear?”

The two women standing on the other side of the table murmured hastily that she had, then exchanged long looks. This time, it was Faolain who appeared indecisive. Finally, Theodrin glided around to kneel beside Egwene’s chair and kiss her ring. “Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I, Theodrin Dabei, swear fealty to you, Egwene al’Vere, to faithfully serve and obey on pain of my life and honor.” She looked at Egwene questioningly.

It was all Egwene could do to nod. This was no part of Aes Sedai ritual; this was how noble swore to ruler. Even some rulers did not receive so strong an oath. Yet no sooner had Theodrin risen with a relieved smile than Faolain took her place.

“Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I, Faolain Orande. . . .”

All that she could have wished for and more. From any other sisters, at least, who were not just as likely to be sent to fetch another’s dustcloak if the wind rose.

When Faolain finished, she remained kneeling, but stiffly upright. “Mother, there is the matter of my penance. For what I said to you, about not liking you. I will set it myself, if you wish, but it is your right.” Her voice was as rigid as her posture, yet not at all fearful. She looked ready to stare down a lion. Eager to, in fact.

Biting her lip, Egwene nearly laughed aloud. Keeping her face smooth took effort; maybe they would take it for a hiccough. However much they claimed they were not really Aes Sedai, Faolain had just proved how much of one she was. Sometimes sisters set themselves penances, in order to maintain the proper balance between pride and humility—that balance was much prized, supposedly, and the only reason given usually—but certainly none sought to have one imposed. Penance set by another could be quite harsh, and the Amyrlin was supposed to be harder in this than the Ajahs. Either way, though, many sisters made a haughty display of submission to the greater will of the Aes Sedai, an arrogant showing of their lack of arrogance. The pride of humility, Siuan called it. She considered telling the woman to eat a handful of soap just to see her expression—Faolain had a mean tongue—but instead. . . .

“I don’t hand out penance for telling the truth, daughter. Or for not liking me. Dislike to your heart’s content, so long as you keep your oath.” Not that anyone except a Darkfriend would break that particular oath. Still, there were ways around almost anything. But weak sticks were better than none, when you were fending off a bear.

Faolain’s eyes widened, and Egwene sighed as she motioned the woman to rise. Had their positions been reversed, Faolain would have put her nose firmly in the dust.

“I’m setting you two tasks to begin, daughters,” she went on.

They listened carefully, Faolain not even blinking, Theodrin with a thoughtful finger to her lips, and this time when she dismissed them, they said, “As you command, Mother,” in unison as they curtsied.

Egwene’s good mood was fleeting, though. Meri arrived with her breakfast on a tray as Theodrin and Faolain departed, and when Egwene thanked her for the rose-petal pomander, she said, “I had a few spare moments, Mother.” By her expression, that could have been an accusation that Egwene worked her too hard, or that she herself did not work hard enough. Not a pleasant spice for the stewed fruit. For that matter, the woman’s face might sour the mint tea and turn the warm crusty bun hard as a rock. Egwene sent her away before eating. The tea was weak anyway. Tea was one of the things in short supply.

The note that had been under the inkwell proved no better seasoning. “Nothing of interest in the dream,” said Siuan’s fine script. So Siuan had been in *Tel’aran’rhiod* last night too; she did a good deal of spying there. It mattered little whether she had been hunting some sign of Moghedien, though that would have been insanely foolish, or something else; nothing was nothing.

Egwene grimaced, and not just for the “nothing.” Siuan in *Tel’aran’rhiod* last night meant a visit from Leane sometime today, complaining. Siuan most definitely no longer was allowed any of the dream *ter’angreal*, not since she had tried to teach some of the other sisters about the World of Dreams. It was not so much that she knew little more than they, or even that few sisters believed they actually needed a teacher to learn anything, but Siuan possessed a tongue like a rasp and no patience. Usually she managed to hold her temper, but two outbursts of shouting and fist-shaking, and she had been fortunate just to find herself denied access to the *ter’angreal*. Leane was given one whenever she asked, though, and frequently Siuan used it in secret. That was one of the few real bones of contention between them; both would have been in *Tel’aran’rhiod* every night if they could.

With a grimace Egwene channeled the tiniest spark of Fire to set a corner of the parchment alight and held it until it burned nearly to her fingers. Nothing left to be found by anyone rooting through her belongings and reported where it would rouse suspicions.

Breakfast almost done, she was still alone, and that was not usual. Sheriam might well be avoiding her, but Siuan should have been there. Popping a last bit of the bun into her mouth and washing it down with a final swallow of tea, she rose to go find her, only to have the object of her intended search stalk into the tent. Had Siuan had a tail, she would have been lashing it.

“Where have you been?” Egwene demanded, weaving a ward against listeners.

“Aeldene pulled me out of my blankets first thing,” Siuan growled, dropping onto one of the stools. “She still thinks she’ll pump the Amyrlin’s eyes-and-ears out of me. No one gets that! No one!”

When Siuan had first arrived in Salidar, a stilled woman on the run, a deposed Amyrlin the world thought dead, the sisters might well not have let her stay except that she knew not only the Amyrlin Seat’s network of agents, but also that of the Blue Ajah, which she had run before being raised to the stole. That had given her a certain influence, just as Leane’s agents inside Tar Valon had given her some. The arrival of Aeldene Stone-bridge, who had taken her place with the Blue eyes-and-ears, had changed matters for Siuan. Aeldene had been outraged that reports from the handful of Blue agents Siuan had managed to reach had been handed to women outside the Ajah. That Aeldene's own position had been revealed—only two or three sisters were supposed to know, even within the Blue—infuriated her to near apoplexy. She not only snatched back control of the Blue network, not only upbraided Siuan in a voice that might have been heard a mile off, she very nearly went for Siuan's throat. Aeldene was from an Andoran mining village in the Mountains of Mist, and it was said her crooked nose came from fighting with her fists when she was a girl. Aeldene's actions had started others thinking.

Egwene returned to her unsteady chair and pushed her breakfast tray aside. "Aeldene won't take it away from you, Siuan, and neither will anyone else." When Aeldene reclaimed the Blue eyes-and-ears, others had begun thinking that the Blue should not have the Amyrlin's as well. No one suggested that it should be in Egwene's control. The Hall was to have it. So Romanda said, and Lelaine. Each intended to be the one in charge, of course, the one those reports came to first, for being first to know had advantages. Aeldene thought those agents should be added to the Blue network since Siuan was Blue. At least Sheriam was content simply to be handed all the reports Siuan received. Which she usually was. "They can't make you give it up."

Egwene filled her teacup again, setting it and the blue-glazed honey-pot on the corner of the table nearest Siuan, but the other woman only stared at them. The anger had gone out of her. She slumped on the stool. "You never really think about strength," she said, half to herself. "You're aware of it, whether you're stronger than somebody else, but you don't think about it. You just know that she defers to you, or you to her. There was no one stronger than me, before. No one, since . . ." Her eyes dropped to her hands, stirring uneasily on her lap. "Sometimes, when Romanda is hammering at me, or Lelaine, it suddenly hits me like a gale. They're so far above me now, I should be holding my tongue until they give me permission to speak. Even Aeldene is, and she's no more than middling." She forced her head upright, mouth tight and voice bitter. "I suppose I'm adjusting to reality. That's ingrained in us, too, driven deep before you ever test for the shawl. But I don't like it. I don't!"

Egwene picked up her pen from beside the inkwell and the sand jar, fiddling with it while she chose words. “Siuan, you know how I feel about what needs to be changed. There’s too much we do because Aes Sedai have always done it that way. But things are changing, no matter who believes it will all go back to how it was. I doubt anyone else was ever raised Amyrlin without being Aes Sedai first.” That should have elicited a comment on the White Tower’s hidden records—Siuan often said there was *nothing* that had not occurred at least once in the Tower’s history, though this did seem to be a first—but Siuan sat there disheartened, like a sack. “Siuan, the Aes Sedai way isn’t the only way, and not even always the best. I intend to make sure we follow the best way, and whoever can’t learn to change, or won’t, had better learn to live with it.” Leaning across the table, she tried to make her expression encouraging. “I never did figure out how Wise Ones determine precedence, but it isn’t strength in the Power. There are women who can channel who defer to women who can’t. One, Sorilea, would never have made it to Accepted, yet even the strongest jump when she says toad.”

“Wilders,” Siuan said dismissively, but it lacked force.

“Aes Sedai, then. I wasn’t raised Amyrlin because I am the strongest. The wisest women are chosen for the Hall or to be ambassadors or advisors, the most skillful anyway, not those with the most strength.” Best not to say skillful in what, though Siuan certainly possessed those particular skills too.

“The Hall? The Hall might send me for tea. They might have me sweep out when they’ve finished sitting.”

Sitting back, Egwene threw down the pen. She wanted to shake the woman. Siuan had kept going when she could not channel at all, and *now* her knees began to fold? Egwene was on the point of telling her about Theodrin and Faolain—that should get some rise, and approval—when she saw an olive-skinned woman ride past the open tent flaps looking lost in thought beneath the wide gray hat she wore to keep off the sun.

“Siuan, it’s Myrelle.” Letting the ward go, she rushed outside. “Myrelle,” she called. Siuan needed a victory to wash the taste of being bullied out of her mouth, and this might be just the thing. Myrelle was one of Sheriam’s lot, and apparently with a secret all her own.

Reining in her sorrel gelding, Myrelle looked around, and gave a start when she saw Egwene. By her expression, the Green sister had not realized what part of the camp she was passing through. A thin dustcloak hung down the back of her pale gray riding dress. “Mother,” she said hesitantly, “if you will forgive me, I—”

“I will not forgive you,” Egwene cut in, making her flinch. Any doubt vanished that Myrelle had heard about last night from Sheriam. “I will talk with you. Now.”

Siuan had come outside too, but instead of watching the sister climb uneasily from her saddle, she stared down the rows of tents toward a stocky, graying man with a battered breastplate strapped over his buff-colored coat, leading a tall bay in their direction. His presence was a surprise. Lord Bryne usually communicated with the Hall by messenger, and his rare visits mostly finished before Egwene learned he had come. Siuan assumed such a look of Aes Sedai serenity it nearly made you forget her youthful face.

Glancing briefly at Siuan, Bryne made a leg, handling his sword with a spare grace. A weathered man, he was only moderately tall, but the way he carried himself made him seem taller. There was nothing flashy about him; the sweat on his broad face made him seem to be about a job of work. “Mother, may I speak with you? Alone?”

Myrelle turned as if to go, and Egwene snapped, “You stay right there! Right where you are!” Myrelle’s mouth dropped open. Her surprise seemed as much for her own obedience as Egwene’s decisive tone, and it faded into bitter resignation that she quickly hid behind a cool façade. One belied by the way she twiddled her reins.

Bryne did not even blink, though Egwene was sure he at least had an inkling of her situation. She suspected that very little surprised him, or unsettled him. Just the sight of him had made Siuan ready to fight back, for all it was apparently she who started most of their arguments. Already her fists rested on her hips and her gaze was fixed on him, an auguring stare that should have made anyone uneasy even had it not come from an Aes Sedai. Myrelle offered more than helping Siuan, though. Perhaps. “I intended to ask you to come this afternoon, Lord Bryne. I ask now.” She had questions to put to him. “We can talk then. If you will forgive me.”

Instead of accepting her dismissal, he said, “Mother, one of my patrols found something just before dawn, something I think you should see for yourself. I can have an escort ready in—”

“No need for that,” she broke in quickly. “Myrelle, you will come with us. Siuan, would you ask someone to bring my horse, please? Without delay.”

Riding out with Myrelle would be better than confronting her here, if Siuan's patched-together clues really pointed at anything, and on a ride she could ask Bryne her questions, but neither fueled her haste. She had just spotted Lelaine striding toward her through the tentrows, Takima at her side. With one exception, all the women who had been Sitters before Siuan was deposed had drifted to either Lelaine or Romanda. Most of the newly chosen Sitters went their own way, which was slightly better in Egwene's view. Just slightly.

Even at a little distance the set of Lelaine's shoulders was evident. She looked ready to walk through whatever got in her way. Siuan saw her as well and darted off without pausing for so much as a curtsy, yet there was no time to make a clean escape short of leaping onto Lord Bryne's horse.

Lelaine planted herself in front of Egwene, but it was Bryne she fixed with eyes sharp as tacks, considering, calculating what he was doing there. She had larger fish to put on the fire, though. "I must speak with the Amyrlin," she said peremptorily, pointing toward Myrelle. "You will wait; I will talk to you after." Bryne bowed, not too deeply, and led his horse where she pointed. Men who had any brains at all soon learned arguments did little good with Aes Sedai, and with Sitters the tally was usually none.

Before Lelaine could open her mouth, Romanda was suddenly there, radiating command so strongly that at first Egwene did not even notice Varilin with her, and the slender, red-haired Sitter for the Gray was inches taller than most men. The only surprise was that Romanda had not appeared sooner. She and Lelaine watched one another like hawks, neither allowing the other near Egwene alone. The glow of *saidar* surrounded both women at the same instant, and each wove a ward around the five of them to stop eavesdropping. Their eyes clashed, challenging in faces utterly cool and collected, but neither let her ward drop.

Egwene bit her tongue. In a public place, it was up to the strongest sister present to decide whether a conversation should be warded, and protocol said the Amyrlin made that decision wherever she was present. She had no desire for the not-quite apologies mentioning it would bring, though. If she pressed, they would accede, of course. While behaving as though soothing a petulant toddler. She bit her tongue, and boiled inside. Where *was* Siuan? That was not fair—getting horses saddled required more than moments—but she wanted to grip her skirts to keep her hands away from her head.

Romanda dropped the staring match first, though not in defeat. She rounded on Egwene so suddenly that Lelaine was left staring past her and looking foolish. “Delana is making trouble again.” Her high-pitched voice was almost sweet, but it held a sharpness that emphasized the lack of any title of respect. Romanda’s hair was completely gray, gathered in a neat bun on the nape of her neck, but age had certainly not softened her. Takima, with her long black hair and aged ivory complexion, had been almost nine years a Brown Sitter, as forceful in the Hall as in the classroom, yet she stood a meek pace back, hands folded at her waist. Romanda led her faction as firmly as Sorilea. She was one to whom strength was indeed all-important, and in truth, Lelaine seemed not far behind.

“She plans to lay a proposal before the Hall,” Lelaine put in sourly, refusing to look at Romanda at all, now. Agreeing with the other woman certainly pleased her as little as speaking second. Aware that she had gained an edge, Romanda smiled, a faint curving of her lips.

“About what?” Egwene asked, playing for time. She was certain she knew. It was very hard not to sigh. It was very hard not to rub her temples.

“Why the Black Ajah, of course, Mother,” Varilin replied, lifting her head as if surprised at the question. Well she might be; Delana was rabid on the subject. “She wants the Hall to condemn Elaida openly as Black.” She stopped abruptly when Lelaine raised a hand. Lelaine allowed her followers more leeway than Romanda, or maybe she just did not have as tight a grip.

“You must speak with her, Mother.” Lelaine had a warm smile when she chose to use it. Siuan said they had been friends once—Lelaine had accepted her back with some version of welcome—yet Egwene thought that smile a practiced tool.

“And say what?” Her hands ached to soothe her head. These two each made sure the Hall passed only what she wanted, certainly little that Egwene suggested, with the result that nothing much at all was passed, and they wanted *her* to intercede with a Sitter? Delana did support her proposals, true—when they suited her. Delana was a weathervane, turning with the last breath of air to pass, and if she turned in Egwene’s direction a great deal of late, it did not mean very much. The Black Ajah seemed her only fixed point. What was keeping Siuan?

“Tell her she must stop, Mother.” Lelaine’s smile and tone made her seem to be counseling a daughter. “This foolishness—worse than foolishness—has everyone at daggers’ points. Some of the sisters are even beginning to believe, Mother. It will not be long before the notion spreads to the servants, and the soldiers." The look she directed toward Bryne was full of doubt. Bryne appeared to be attempting to chat with Myrelle, who was staring at the warded group and running her reins uneasily through her gloved hands.

"Believing what is plain is hardly foolish," Romanda barked. "Mother . . ." In her mouth, that sounded entirely too much like "girl."

". . . the reason Delana must be stopped is she does no good and considerable harm. Perhaps Elaida is Black—though I have strong doubts, whatever secondhand gossip that trollop Halima brought; Elaida is wrongheaded to a fault, but I cannot believe her evil—yet even if she is, trumpeting it will make outsiders suspicious of every Aes Sedai and drive the Black into deeper hiding. There are methods to dig them out, if we don't frighten them into flight."

Lelaine's sniff bordered on a snort. "Even were this nonsense true, no self-respecting sister would submit to your *methods*, Romanda. What you've suggested is close to being put to the question." Egwene blinked in confusion; neither Siuan nor Leane had brought her a whisper of this. Luckily, the Sitters were not paying her enough mind to notice. As usual.

Planting her fists on her hips, Romanda squared around on Lelaine. "Desperate days demand desperate actions. Some might ask why anyone would put her dignity ahead of exposing the Dark One's servants."

"That sounds dangerously near an accusation," Lelaine said, eyes narrowing.

Romanda was the one smiling now, a cold flinty smile. "I will be the first to submit to my *methods*, Lelaine, if you are the second."

Lelaine actually growled, taking half a step toward the other woman, and Romanda leaned toward her, chin thrust out. They looked ready to begin pulling hair and rolling in the dirt, and Aes Sedai dignity be hanged. Varilin and Takima glared at one another like two maidservants supporting their mistresses, a long-legged wading bird in a scowling match with a wren. The whole lot of them seemed to have forgotten Egwene entirely.

Siuan came running up in a broad straw hat, leading a fat dun mare with white-stockinged hind legs, and skidded to a halt when she saw the warded gathering. One of the grooms was with her, a lanky fellow in a long, frayed vest and a patched shirt, holding the reins of a tall roan. The wards were invisible to him, but *saidar* did not hide the faces. His eyes went very wide, and he began licking his lips. For that matter, passersby walked wide around the tent and pretended to see nothing, Aes Sedai, Warders and servants alike. Bryne alone frowned and studied them as though wondering what was hidden from his ears. Myrelle was retying her saddlebags, plainly on the point of leaving.

“When you have decided what I should say,” Egwene announced, “then I can decide what to do.” They really had forgotten her. All four stared at her in amazement as she walked between Romanda and Lelaine and out through the doubled wards. There was nothing to feel as she brushed by the weave, of course; they had never been made to stop anything as solid as a human body.

When she scrambled onto the roan, Myrelle drew a deep breath and emulated her in resignation. The wards had vanished, though the glow still enveloped the two Sitters, each more the image of frustration than the other as they stood watching. Hurriedly Egwene donned the thin linen dust-cloak that had been draped in front of her gelding’s saddle, and the riding gloves that were tucked into a small pocket in the cloak. A wide-brimmed hat hung from the saddle’s high pommel, deep blue to match her dress, with a spray of white plumes pinned slanting across the front that shouted of Chesa’s hand. Heat she could ignore, but the glare of the sun was another matter. Removing plumes and pin, she tucked them into the saddlebags, put the hat on her head and tied the ribbons beneath her chin.

“Shall we go, Mother?” Bryne asked. He was already mounted, the helmet that had been hanging from his saddle now obscuring his face behind steel bars. It looked quite natural on him, as though he had been born for armor.

She nodded. There was no attempt to stop them. Lelaine would not stoop to shouting halt in public, of course, but Romanda. . . . Egwene felt a sense of relief as they rode away, yet her head seemed to be splitting. What was she to do about Delana? What could she do?

The main road in this area, a wide stretch of dirt packed so hard nothing could raise dust from it, ran through the army’s camp and along the gap between that and the Aes Sedai’s. Bryne angled across it, through the rest of the army on the other side.

Although the army camp held thirty times or more as many people as the Aes Sedai camp, there seemed to be few more tents than for the sisters and those who served them, all scattered out across the flats and up the hillsides. Most of the soldiers slept in the open. But then, it was hard to remember the last time rain had fallen, and there certainly was not a cloud to be seen. Strangely, there were more women than in the sisters' camp, though they seemed fewer at first glance, among so many men. Cooks tended kettles and laundresses attacked great heaps of clothing, while some worked with the horses or wagons. A fair number appeared to be wives; at least, they sat about knitting or darning dresses or shirts or stirring small cookpots. Armorers had set up almost anywhere she looked, hammers making steel ring on their anvils, and fletchers adding arrows to bundles by their feet, and farriers checking horses. Wagons of every sort and size stood everywhere, hundreds, perhaps thousands; the army seemed to scoop up every one it found along its path. Most of the foragers were already out, but a few high-wheeled carts and lumbering wagons still trundled away in search of farms and villages. Here and there soldiers raised a cheer as they rode by. "Lord Bryne!" and "The Bull! The Bull!" That was his sigil. Nothing about Aes Sedai or the Amyrlin Seat.

Egwene twisted around in her saddle to make sure Myrelle was still close behind. She was, letting her horse follow on its own, a far-off, slightly sickly expression on her face. Siuan had taken a position at the rear, shepherd to their lone sheep. Then again, she might just have been afraid to urge her mount ahead. The dun was positively a butterball, but Siuan would probably treat a pony like a warhorse.

Egwene felt a stab of irritation at her own animal. His name was Daishar; Glory, in the Old Tongue. She would much rather be riding Bela, a shaggy little mare not much slimmer than Siuan's dun that she had ridden out of the Two Rivers. Sometimes she thought she must look a doll, perched atop a gelding that could be taken for a warhorse, but the Amyrlin had to have a proper mount. No shaggy cart horses. Even if this rule was of her own making, she felt as confined as a novice.

Turning in the saddle, she said, "Do you expect any opposition ahead, Lord Bryne?"

He glanced at her sideways. She had asked the same once before leaving Salidar and twice while crossing Altara. Not enough to rouse suspicions, she thought.

"Murandy is like Altara, Mother. Neighbor too busy scheming against neighbor, or outright fighting him, to band together for anything short of a war, and not to any great degree then." His tone was very dry. He had been

Captain-General of the Queen’s Guards in Andor, with years of border skirmishes against the Murandians behind him. “Andor will be another matter, I fear. I am not looking forward to that.” He turned another way, climbing a gentle slope to avoid three wagons rumbling over rocks in the same direction.

Egwene tried not to grimace. Andor. Before, he had just said no. These were the tail end of the Cumbar Hills, somewhat south of Lugard, the capital of Murandy. Even if they were lucky, the border of Andor lay at least ten days ahead.

“And when we reach Tar Valon, Lord Bryne. How do you plan to take the city?”

“No one has asked me that yet, Mother.” She had only thought his voice was dry before; *now* it was dry. “By the time we reach Tar Valon, the Light willing, I’ll have two or three times as many men as I do now.” Egwene winced at the idea of paying so many soldiers; he did not seem to notice. “With that, I will lay siege. The hardest part will be finding ships, and sinking them to block Northharbor and Southharbor. The harbors are as much the key as holding the bridge towns, Mother. Tar Valon is larger than Cairhien and Caemlyn together. Once food stops going in. . . .” He shrugged. “Most of soldiering is waiting, when it isn’t marching.”

“And if you don’t have that many soldiers?” She had never thought of all those people going hungry, women and children. She had never really thought of anyone being involved except the Aes Sedai, and the soldiers. How could she have been so foolish? She had seen the results of war in Cairhien. Bryne seemed to take it so lightly. But then, he was a soldier; privation and death must be everyday to soldiers. “What if you only have . . . say . . . what you do now?”

“Siege?” Apparently some of what they had been saying had finally broken into whatever Myrelle was thinking. She booted the sorrel forward, making a number of men jump aside, some falling on their faces. A few opened their mouths angrily, then saw her ageless features and shut their jaws again, glowering. They might as well not have existed for all of her. “Artur Hawkwing besieged Tar Valon for twenty years and failed.” Abruptly she realized ears were about and lowered her voice, but it was still acid. “Do you expect us to wait twenty years?”

That acid washed over Gareth Bryne without leaving a stain. “Would you prefer a direct assault right off, Myrelle Sedai?” He could have been asking whether she wanted her tea sweet or bitter. “Several of Hawkwing’s generals tried, and their men were slaughtered. No army has ever managed to breach Tar Valon’s walls.”

That was not strictly true, Egwene knew. In the Trolloc Wars, an army of Dreadlord-led Trollocs had actually plundered and burned a part of the White Tower itself. At the end of the War of the Second Dragon, an army trying to rescue Guaire Amalasan before he was gentled had reached the Tower, too. Myrelle could not know, though, much less Bryne. Access to those secret histories, hidden deep in the Tower library, was set out in a law that was itself secret, and revealing the existence of either records or law was treason. Siuan said if you read between the lines, you found hints of things that had not been recorded even there. Aes Sedai were very good at hiding truth when they thought it necessary, even from themselves.

“With a hundred thousand or what I have now,” Bryne continued, “I will be the first. If I can block the harbors. Hawkwing’s generals never managed that. The Aes Sedai always raised those iron chains in time to stop the ships getting into the harbor mouth and sank them before they could be placed to hinder trade. Food and supplies got in. It will come to your assault eventually, but not until the city’s weakened, if I have my way.” His voice was still . . . ordinary. A man discussing an outing. His head turned toward Myrelle, and though his tone did not change, the intensity in his eyes was evident even behind his faceguard. “And you all agreed I would, when it came to the army. I won’t throw men away.”

Myrelle opened her mouth, then closed it slowly. Plainly she wanted to say something but did not know what. They *had* given their word, she and Sheriam and those who had been running things when he appeared in Salidar, however much giving it galled. However much the Sitters tried to get round it. *They* had given no word. Bryne acted as though they had, though, and so far he had managed to get away with it. So far.

Egwene felt ill. She *had* seen war. Images flashed in her head, men fighting, killing their way through the streets of Tar Valon, dying. Her eyes fell on a square-jawed fellow chewing his tongue while he sharpened a pikehead. Would he die in those streets? The grizzled, balding man running his fingers so carefully down each arrow before sliding the shaft into his quiver? And there. That lad swaggering in his high riding boots. He looked too young to shave. Light, so many were boys. How many would die? For her. For justice, for the right, for the world, but at the heart, for her. Siuan raised her hand, but did not complete the gesture. Had she been close enough, she could not pat the Amyrlin Seat on the shoulder where everyone could see.

Egwene straightened her back. “Lord Bryne,” she said in a tight voice, “what is it you want me to see?” She thought he half-glanced at Myrelle before answering.

“Better you see it for yourself, Mother.”

Egwene thought her head might break open. If Siuan’s clues led to anything at all, she might just skin Myrelle. If they did not, she might skin Siuan. And she might throw Gareth Bryne in for good measure.

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CHAPTER
12

A Morning of Victory

The crooked hills and ridges surrounding the camp showed every sign of the drought and unseasonable heat. The unholy heat in truth; even the dullest scullion scrubbing pots saw the Dark One's touch on the world. The true forest lay behind them to the west, but twisted oaks grew out of the rocky slopes, sourgums and pines of unfamiliar shape, and trees Egwene had no names for, brown and yellow and bare-branched. Not winter-bare or brown. Starved for moisture and coolness. Dying, if the weather did not change soon. Beyond the last of the soldiers a river ran off south and west, the Reisendrelle, twenty paces wide and flanked on either side by hard-baked mud studded with stones. Swirling around rocks that might have made crossing hazardous in other days, the water rose short of the horses' knees as they forded. Egwene felt her own problems dwindle in size. Despite her head, she offered a small prayer for Nynaeve and Elayne. Their search was as important as anything she did. More. The world would live if she failed, but they had to succeed.

They traveled southward at an easy canter, slowing when the hillside slant of the land grew too great or the horses had to climb any distance through trees and sparse scrub, but keeping to the lowland as much as possible and covering ground quickly. Bryne's big-nosed gelding, sure-footed and strong, hardly seemed to mind which way the ground tilted or whether smooth or rough, yet Daishar kept pace easily. Sometimes Siuan's plump animal labored, though she might just have been picking up her rider's anxiety. No amount of practice could make Siuan anything but a terrible rider, nearly throwing her arms around the mare's neck climbing upslope, almost falling from the saddle going down, awkward as a duck afoot on the flats and not far from wide-eyed as the horse. Myrelle actually regained some of her humor watching Siuan. Her own white-footed sorrel picked her way in delicate swoops like a swallow, and Myrelle rode with an assurance and flare that made Bryne appear stolid and workmanlike.

Before they had gone very far, riders appeared atop a high ridge to the west, perhaps a hundred men in column, the rising sun glinting off breastplates and helmets and lance points. At their head streamed a long white pennant Egwene could not make out, but she knew it bore the Red Hand. She had not expected to see them so close to the Aes Sedai camp.

“Dragonsworn animals,” Myrelle muttered, watching the horsemen parallel their route. Her gloved hands tightened on her reins—with fury, not fear.

“The Band of the Red Hand puts out patrols,” Bryne said placidly. With a glance at Egwene, he added, “Lord Talmanes seems concerned about you, Mother, last I spoke to him.” He put no more emphasis on that than the other.

“You’ve *spoken* with him?” Every vestige of Myrelle’s serenity vanished. The anger she had to hold in with Egwene, she could safely unleash on him. She all but shook with it. “That is very close to treason, Lord Bryne. It might well *be* treason!” Siuan had been dividing her attention between her horse and the men on the ridge, and she did not look at Myrelle, but she stiffened. No one had tied the Band and treason together before.

They rounded a bend in the hill valley. A farm clung to a hillside, or what had been a farm once. One wall of the small stone house had collapsed, and a few charred timbers stuck up beside the soot-coated chimney like grimy fingers. The roofless barn was a blackened hollow box of stone, and scattered ash marked where sheds might once have stood. All across Altara they had seen as bad and worse, entire villages sometimes, the dead lying in the streets, food for ravens and foxes and feral dogs that fled when people came close. Stories of anarchy and murder in Tarabon and Arad Doman suddenly had flesh and bones. Many men seized any excuse to turn bandit or settle old grudges—Egwene hoped fervently it was so—but the name on every survivor’s lips was Dragonsworn, and the sisters blamed Rand as surely as if he had carried the torches himself. They would use him still if they could, though, control him if they found a way. She was not the only Aes Sedai to believe in doing what she must even when she had to hold her nose.

Myrelle’s anger affected Bryne as little as rain affected a boulder. Egwene had a sudden image of storms whirling about his head and floodwaters swirling around his knees while he just kept striding ahead. “Myrelle Sedai,” he said with the calm she should have shown, “when ten thousand men or more are shadowing my backtrail, I want to know what their intentions are. Especially this particular ten thousand or more.”

This was a dangerous topic. However happy Egwene was that they were past questions of Talmanes’ concern over her, she should have been grinding her teeth that he had mentioned her at all, but she was so startled she sat bolt upright in her saddle. “Ten thousand? Are you sure?” The Band had had little more than half that when Mat brought it to Salidar hunting her and Elayne.

Bryne merely shrugged. “I gather recruits as I go, and so does he. Not as many, but some men have notions about serving Aes Sedai.” More people than not would have been distinctly uneasy, saying that to three sisters; he said it with a wry smile. “Besides, it seems the Band has a certain reputation from the fighting in Cairhien. The tale is, *Shen an Calhar* never loses, whatever the odds.” That was what drove men to join, here as back in Altara, the thought that two armies must mean a battle. Trying to stand aside might end as hard as choosing the wrong side; at best there would be no pickings for neutrals. “I’ve had a few deserters to my ranks from Talmanes’ newlings. Some seem to think the Band’s luck is tied up in Mat Cauthon and can’t be there without him.”

Something close to a sneer twisted Myrelle’s lips. “These fool Murandians’ fears are certainly useful, but I did not think you were a fool, too. Talmanes follows us because he fears we might turn against his precious Lord Dragon, but if he truly intended to attack, don’t you think he would have by now? These Dragonsworn can be dealt with once more important matters are done. Communicating with him, however . . . !” Giving herself a shake, she managed to regain her serenity. On the surface, at least. Her tone could still have scorched wood. “You mark me, Lord Bryne. . . .”

Egwene let Myrelle’s words pass her by. Bryne had looked at her when he mentioned Mat. The sisters thought they knew the situation with the Band, and Mat, and did not think on it much, but Bryne apparently did. Tilting her head so the brim of her hat obscured her face, she studied him from the corner of her eye. He was oathbound to build the army and lead it until Elaida was brought down, but why had he sworn? Surely he could have found some lesser oath, and it surely would have been accepted by sisters who only thought to use all those soldiers as a Foolday mask to frighten Elaida. Having him on their side was comforting; even the other Aes Sedai seemed to feel that. Like her father, he was the sort of man who made you believe there was no cause for panic whatever the situation. Having him oppose her, she realized suddenly, might be as bad as having the Hall against her, and never mind the army. The one approving comment Siuan had ever had of him was that he was formidable, even if she did try to change her remark immediately to mean something else. Any man Siuan Sanche thought formidable was one to be mindful of.

They splashed across a tiny stream, a rivulet that barely wet the horses' hooves. A bedraggled crow, feeding on a fish that had stranded itself in water too shallow to swim, fluttered its tattered wings on the edge of flight, then settled back to its meal.

Siuan also was studying Bryne—the mare made much easier going when she forgot to saw at the reins or dig her heels in at just the wrong moment. Egwene had asked her about Lord Bryne's motives, but Siuan's own tangled connection to the man left her little except acid when it came to him. She either hated Gareth Bryne to his bootsoles or loved him, and imagining Siuan in love was like imagining that crow swimming.

The ridgeline where the Band's soldiers had been showed only cockeyed lines of dead conifers now. She had not noticed them going. Mat had a reputation as a *soldier*? Crows swimming did not come close. She had believed he commanded only because of Rand, and that had been hard enough to swallow. *Believing because you think you know is dangerous*, she reminded herself, eying Bryne.

". . . should be flogged!" Myrelle's voice still burned. "I warn you, if I hear that you've met with this Dragonsworn again . . . !"

Rain washing over that boulder as far as Bryne was concerned, or so it seemed. He rode easily, occasionally murmuring "Yes, Myrelle Sedai" or "No, Myrelle Sedai" without any hint of distress and without lessening the watch he kept on the countryside. No doubt *he* had seen the soldiers leave. However he mustered the patience—Egwene was sure fear was no part of it—she was in no mood to listen to that.

"Be quiet, Myrelle! No one is going to do anything to Lord Bryne." Rubbing her temple, she thought of asking one of the sisters back in the camp for Healing. Neither Siuan nor Myrelle had much ability there. Not that Healing would do any good if it was just lack of sleep and worry. Not that she wanted whispers spreading that the strain was growing too great for her. Besides, there were other ways to deal with headaches than Healing, although not here.

Myrelle's mouth tightened only for an instant. With a toss of her head, she turned her face away, color in her cheeks, and Bryne suddenly appeared absorbed in examining a red-winged hawk wheeling off to their left. Even a brave man could know when to be discreet. Folding its wings, the hawk plummeted toward unseen prey behind a stand of bedraggled leatherleafs. Egwene felt that way, swooping on targets she could not see, hoping she had chosen the right one, hoping there was a target there.

She drew breath, wishing it were steadier. "Just the same, Lord Bryne, I think it's best you don't meet Talmanes again. Surely you know as much of his intentions as you need by this time." Light send Talmanes had not said too much already. A pity she could not send Siuan or Leane to caution him, if he would take it, but given feelings among the sisters, she might as well risk going to see Rand.

Bryne bowed in his saddle. "As you command, Mother." There was no mockery in his tone; there never was. He had obviously learned to school his voice around Aes Sedai. Siuan hung back, frowning at him. Perhaps she could dig out where his loyalties lay. For all her animosity, she spent a great deal of time in his company, much more than she absolutely had to.

With an effort, Egwene kept her hands on Daishar's reins, away from her head. "How much further, Lord Bryne?" Keeping impatience from her voice was more difficult.

"Just a little way, Mother." For some reason, he halfway turned his head to look at Myrelle. "Not far, now."

Increasingly, farms dotted the region, as many clinging to hillsides as on the flats, though the Emond's Fielder in Egwene said that made no sense, low gray stone houses and barns, and unfenced pastures with a few slat-ribbed cows and sad-looking black-tailed sheep. Not all had been burned by far, only one here and one there. Supposedly the burnings were to let the others know what would happen if they did not declare for the Dragon Reborn.

At one farm, she saw some of Lord Bryne's foragers with a wagon. That they were his was plain as much by the way he eyed them and nodded as by the lack of a white pennant. The Band always flaunted itself; aside from the banners, some had of late taken to wearing a red scarf tied around the arm. Half a dozen cattle and maybe two dozen sheep lowed and baaed under the guard of men on horseback, and other men toted sacks from barn to wagon past a slump-shouldered farmer and his family, a sullen lot in dark rough woolens. One of the little girls, wearing a deep bonnet like the others, had her face pressed to her mother's skirts, apparently crying. Some of the boys had their fists clenched, as if they wanted to fight. The farmer would be paid, but if he could not really spare what was taken, if he had had a mind to resist close on twenty men in breastplates and helmets, those burned farms would have given him pause. Quite often Bryne's soldiers found charred corpses in the ruins, men and women and children who had died trying to get out. Sometimes the doors and windows had been sealed up from outside.

Egwene wondered whether there was any way to convince the farmers and villagers that there was a difference between the brigands and the army. She wanted to, very much, but she did not see how, short of letting her own soldiers go hungry until they deserted. If the sisters could see no difference between the brigands and the Band, there seemed no hope for the country folk. As the farm dwindled behind them, she resisted the urge to twist around in her saddle and look back. Looking would change nothing.

Lord Bryne was as good as his word. Perhaps three or four miles from the camp—three or four in a straight line; twice that over the country they had crossed—they rounded the shoulder of a hill spotted with brush and trees, and he drew rein. The sun stood almost halfway to its crest, now. Another road ran below, narrower and much more winding than the one through the camp. "They had the idea traveling by night would take them safe past the bandits," he said. "Not a bad notion, as it turns out, or else they've just had the Dark One's own luck. They've come from Caemlyn."

A merchant train of some fifty large wagons behind teams of ten or so lay stretched out along the road, halted under the eyes of more of Bryne's soldiers. A few of the soldiers were afoot, supervising the transfer of barrels and bags from the merchants' wagons to half a dozen of their own. One woman in a plain dark dress waved her arms and pointed vigorously to this item or that, either protesting or bargaining, but her fellows stood in a glum silent knot. A short way farther up the road, grim fruit decorated the spreading limbs of an oak, men hanging by the neck from every bare branch. Bare except for crows, almost enough to make the tree seem leaved in black. They had larger than fish to feed on, these birds. Even at a distance it was not a sight to ease Egwene's head, or her stomach.

"This what you wanted me to see? The merchants, or the bandits?" She could not see a dress on any of those dangling corpses, and when the bandits hanged people, they included women and children. Anyone could have put the corpses there, Bryne's soldiers, the Band—that the Band hanged any of the so-called Dragonsworn they caught made little difference to the sisters—or even some local lord or lady. Had the Murandian nobles worked together, all the brigands might have hung from trees by now, but that was like asking cats to dance. Wait. He had said Caemlyn. "Is it something to do with Rand? Or the Asha'man?"

This time he looked from her to Myrelle and back quite openly. Myrelle's hat cast shadows on her face. She appeared sunk in gloom, sagging in her saddle and not at all the confident rider she had been earlier. He seemed to reach a decision. "I thought you should hear before anybody else did, but perhaps I misunderstood. . . ." He eyed Myrelle again.

"Hear what, you hairy-eared lump?" Siuan growled, thumping the fat mare closer with her heels.

Egwene made a soothing gesture toward her. "Myrelle can hear anything I do, Lord Bryne. She has my complete trust." The Green sister's head jerked around. From her stricken look, anyone would doubt they had heard Egwene correctly, but after a moment Bryne nodded.

"I see that matters have . . . changed. Yes, Mother." Removing his helmet, he set it on the pommel of his saddle. He still seemed reluctant, picking his words with care. "Merchants carry rumors the way dogs do fleas, and that lot down there has a fine crop. I don't say any of it is true, of course, but. . . ." It was odd, seeing him so hesitant. "Mother, one tale that caught them up on the road is that Rand al'Thor has gone to the White Tower and sworn fealty to Elaida."

For a moment Myrelle and Siuan looked much alike, blood draining from their faces as they envisioned catastrophe. Myrelle actually swayed in her saddle. For a moment Egwene could only stare at him. Then she startled herself, and the others, by bursting out laughing. Daishar danced in surprise, and settling him on the rocky slope settled her nerves as well. "Lord Bryne," she said, patting the gelding's neck, "that isn't so, believe me. I know it for a fact, as of last night."

Siuan heaved an instant sigh, and Myrelle was only a heartbeat behind. Egwene felt like laughing again, at their expressions. So incredibly relieved they were wide-eyed. Children who had been told the Shadowman was *not* under the bed. Aes Sedai calm indeed.

"That's good to hear," Bryne said flatly, "but even if I sent away every man down there, the tale will still reach my ranks. It will go through the army like wildfire crossing these hills." That cut her mirth short. That could be disaster, left alone.

"I will have sisters announce the truth to your soldiers tomorrow. Will six Aes Sedai who know of themselves be enough? Myrelle, here, and Sheriam. Carlinya and Beonin, Anaiya and Morvrin." Those sisters would not like having to meet with the Wise Ones, but they would not be able to refuse her, either. Would not want to, really, to stop this tale spreading. Should not want to, at least. Myrelle's tiny wince was followed by a resigned twist of her mouth.

Leaning an elbow on his helmet, Bryne studied Egwene and Myrelle. He never so much as peeked at Siuan. His bay stamped a hoof on the rocks, and a covey of some sort of dove with bright blue wings whirred into the air from beneath bushes a few paces away, making Daishar and Myrelle's roan start skittishly. Bryne's mount did not stir. He had heard of the gateways, without doubt, though he surely knew nothing of what they were—Aes Sedai did keep secrets by habit, and had some hope of keeping that one from Elaida—and he certainly knew nothing at all about *Tel'aran'rhiod*—that vital secret was easier to guard with no manifestations anyone could see—yet he did not ask how. Perhaps he was accustomed to Aes Sedai and secrets by now.

"So long as they say the words straight," he said at last. "If they hedge even a hair. . . ." His stare was not an attempt to intimidate, just to drive the point home. He seemed satisfied by what he saw in her face. "You do very well, it appears, Mother. I wish you continued success. Set your time for this afternoon, and I will come. We should confer regularly. I will come whenever you send for me. We should begin making firm plans how to put you on the Amyrlin Seat once we reach Tar Valon."

His tone was guarded—very likely he still was not entirely sure what was going on, or how far he could trust Myrelle—and it took her a moment to realize what he had done. It made her breath catch. Maybe she was just becoming too used to the way Aes Sedai shaded words, but. . . . Bryne had just said the army was hers. She was sure of it. Not the Hall's, and not Sheriam's; hers.

"Thank you, Lord Bryne." That seemed little enough, especially when his careful nod, his eyes steady on hers, seemed to confirm her belief. Suddenly she had a thousand more questions. Most of which she could not ask even were they alone. A pity she could not take him into her confidence completely. *Caution until you're sure, and then a little more caution*. An old saying that applied very well to any dealings that brushed against Aes Sedai. And even the best men would talk things over with their friends, perhaps especially when things were supposed to be secret. "I'm sure you have a thousand details to see to, what's left of the morning," she said, gathering her reins. "You go on back. We will ride a little more."

Bryne protested, of course. He almost sounded like a Warder, talking of the impossibility of watching every way at once and how an arrow in the back could kill an Aes Sedai as quickly as it could anyone else. The next man who told her that, she decided, was going to pay for it. Three Aes Sedai were surely the equal of three hundred men. In the end, for all his grumbles and grimaces, he had no choice but to obey. Donning his helmet, he started his horse down the uneven slope toward the merchant train, instead of back the way they had come, but that was even better from her point of view.

"Will you lead the way, Siuan," she said when he was a dozen strides below.

Siuan glared after him as though he had been badgering her the whole time. With a snort, she tugged her straw hat straight, wheeled her mare around—well, dragged her around—and heeled the stout animal to a walk. Egwene motioned Myrelle to follow. Like Bryne, the woman had no choice.

At first Myrelle directed sidelong glances at her, plainly expecting her to bring up the sisters sent to the White Tower, plainly gathering excuses for why they had to be kept secret even from the Hall. The longer Egwene rode in silence, the more uneasily the other shifted in her saddle. Myrelle began wetting her lips, fine cracks spreading in that Aes Sedai calm. A *very* useful tool, silence.

For a time the only sounds were their horses' hooves and the occasional cry of a bird in the brush, but as Siuan's direction became clear, angling a little west from the path back to the camp, Myrelle's shifting increased until she might have been sitting on nettles. Maybe there was something to those bits and pieces Siuan had gathered after all.

When Siuan took another turn westward, between two misshapen hills that bent toward each other, Myrelle drew rein. “There. . . . There is a waterfall in that direction,” she said, pointing east. “Not very large, even before the drought, but quite pretty even now.” Siuan stopped too, looking back with a small smile.

What could Myrelle be hiding? Egwene was curious. Glancing at the Green sister, she gave a start at a single bead of perspiration on the woman’s forehead, glistening in the shadow just at the edge of her wide gray hat. She most certainly wanted to know what could shake an Aes Sedai enough to make her sweat.

“I think Siuan’s way will offer even more interesting sights, don’t you?” Egwene said, turning Daishar, and Myrelle seemed to fold in on herself. “Come along.”

“You know everything, don’t you?” Myrelle muttered unsteadily as they rode between the leaning hills. More than one drop of sweat decorated her face now. She was shaken to her core. “Everything. How could you . . . ?” Suddenly she jerked upright in her saddle, staring at Siuan’s back. “Her! Siuan’s been your creature from the beginning!” She sounded almost indignant. “How could we have been so blind? But I still don’t understand. We were so circumspect.”

“If you want to keep something hidden,” Siuan said contemptuously over her shoulder, “don’t try to buy coin peppers this far south.”

What in the world were coin peppers? And what were they talking about? Myrelle shuddered. It was a measure of how upset she was that Siuan’s tone brought no quick snap to put the other woman in her place. Instead, she licked her lips as though they were suddenly very dry.

“Mother, you have to understand why I did it, why we did it.” The frantic edge to her voice was fit for confronting half the Forsaken, and her in her shift. “Not just because Moiraine asked, not just because she was my friend. I hate letting them die. I hate it! The bargain we make is hard on us, sometimes, but harder on them. You must understand. You must!”

Just when Egwene thought she was about to reveal everything, Siuan halted her round mare again and faced them. Egwene could have slapped her. “It might go easier with you, Myrelle, if you lead the rest of the way,” she said coldly. Disgustedly, in fact. “Cooperation might mean mitigation. A little.”

“Yes.” Myrelle nodded, hands working incessantly on the reins. “Yes, of course.”

She looked on the point of tears as she took the lead. Siuan, falling in behind, appeared relieved for just an instant. Egwene thought she herself was going to burst. What bargain? With whom? Letting who die? And who was “we”? Sheriam and the others? But Myrelle would have heard, and exposing her own ignorance hardly seemed advisable at this point. *An ignorant woman who keeps her mouth shut will be thought wise*, the saying went. And there was another: *Keeping the first secret always means keeping ten more*. There was nothing for it but to follow, holding everything in. Siuan was going to get a talking-to, though. The woman was *not* supposed to be keeping secrets from *her*. Grinding her teeth, Egwene tried to appear patient, unconcerned. Wise.

Almost back to the road the camp was on, a few miles to the west, Myrelle led the way up a low flat-topped hill covered with pine and leatherleaf. Two huge oaks kept anything else from growing in the wide depression on the crown. Beneath thick intertwined branches stood three peaked tents of patched canvas, and a picket line of horses, with a cart nearby, and five tall warhorses each carefully picketed away from the others. Nisao Dachen, in a simply cut bronze-colored riding dress, waited under the awning in front of one of the tents as if to welcome guests, with Sarin Hoigan at her side in the olive green coat so many of the Gaidin wore. A bald-headed stump of a man with a thick black beard, Nisao’s Warder still stood taller than she. A few paces away, two of Myrelle’s three Gaidin warily watched them descend into the hollow, Croi Makin, slender and yellow-haired, and Nuhel Dromand, dark and bulky, with a beard that left his upper lip bare. No one looked surprised in the least. Obviously one of the Warders had been keeping guard and given warning. Nothing in sight warranted all the secrecy, though, or Myrelle’s lip-licking. For that matter, if Nisao waited in welcome, why did her hands keep stroking her divided skirts? She looked as if she would rather face Elaida while shielded.

Two women peering around a corner of one of the tents ducked back hurriedly, but not before Egwene recognized them. Nicola and Areina. Suddenly she felt very uneasy. What had Siuan brought her to?

Siuan showed no nervousness at all as she dismounted. “Bring him out, Myrelle. Now.” She was getting her own back with a vengeance; her tone made a file seem smooth. “It’s too late for hiding.”

Myrelle barely managed a frown at being addressed so, and it appeared an effort. Visibly pulling herself together, she jerked her hat from her head and climbed down without a word, glided to one of the tents and vanished inside. Nisao's already big eyes followed her, growing wider by the moment. She seemed frozen to the spot.

No one but Siuan was near enough to overhear. "Why did you break in?" Egwene demanded softly as she got down. "I'm sure she was about to confess . . . whatever it is . . . and I still don't have a clue. Coin peppers?"

"Very popular in Shienar, and Malkier," Siuan said just as quietly. "I only heard that after I left Aeldene this morning. I had to make her lead the way; I didn't know it, not exactly. It would hardly have done much good to let her discover that, now would it? I didn't know about Nisao, either. I thought they hardly ever spoke to one another." She glanced at the Yellow sister and gave her head an irritated shake. A failure to learn something was a failure Siuan did not tolerate well in herself. "Unless I've gone blind *and* stupid, what these two. . . ." Grimacing as though she had a mouthful of something rotten, she spluttered trying to find a name to fit. Abruptly she caught Egwene's sleeve. "Here they come. Now you'll see for yourself."

Myrelle left the tent first, then a man in just boots and breeches who had to duck low through the doorflaps, a bared sword in his hand and scars crisscrossing his lightly furred chest. He was head and shoulders and more taller than her, taller than any of the other Warders. His long dark hair, held by a braided leather cord around his temples, was more streaked with gray than when Egwene has seen him last, but there was nothing at all soft in Lan Mandragoran. Pieces of the puzzle suddenly clicked into place, yet it still would not come apart for her. He had been Warder to Moiraine, the Aes Sedai who had brought her and Rand and the rest out of the Two Rivers what seemed an Age ago, but Moiraine was dead killing Lanfear, and Lan had gone missing in Cairhien right after. Maybe it was all clear to Siuan; to her, it was mostly mud.

Murmuring something to Lan, Myrelle touched his arm. He flinched slightly, like a nervous horse, but his hard face never turned from Egwene. Finally, though, he nodded and pivoted on his heel, strode farther away beneath the branches of the oaks. Gripping the sword hilt in both hands above his head, blade slanted down, he rose onto the ball of one booted foot and stood motionless.

For a moment, Nisao frowned at him as though she, too, saw a puzzle. Then her gaze met Myrelle's, and together their eyes swept to Egwene. Instead of coming to her, they went to each other, exchanging hasty whispers. At least, it was an exchange at first. Then Nisao merely stood there, shaking her head in disbelief or denial. "You dropped me into this," she groaned aloud at last. "I was a blind fool to listen to you."

"This should be . . . interesting," Siuan said as they finally turned toward her and Egwene. The twist she gave the word made it sound decidedly unpleasant.

Myrelle and Nisao hurriedly touched hair and dresses as they crossed the short distance, making certain everything was in order. Perhaps they had been caught out—*In what?* Egwene wondered—but apparently they intended to put the best face they could on matters.

"If you will step inside, Mother," Myrelle said, gesturing to the nearest tent. Only the slightest tremor in her voice betrayed her cool face. The sweat was gone. Wiped away, of course, but it had not returned.

"Thank you, no, daughter."

"Some wine punch?" Nisao asked with a smile. Hands clasped at her breast, she looked anxious anyway. "Siuan, go tell Nicola to bring the punch." Siuan did not move, and Nisao blinked in surprise, her mouth thinning. The smile returned in an instant, though, and she raised her voice a little. "Nicola? Child, bring the punch. Made with dried blackberries, I fear," she confided to Egwene, "but quite restorative."

"I don't want punch," Egwene said curtly. Nicola emerged from behind the tent, yet she showed no sign of running to obey. Instead, she stood staring at the four Aes Sedai, chewing her underlip. Nisao flashed a glare of what could only be called distaste, but said nothing. Another piece of the puzzle snapped into place, and Egwene breathed a trifle easier. "What I want, daughter, what I require, is an explanation."

Best face or no, it was a thin veneer. Myrelle stretched out a pleading hand. "Mother, Moiraine did not choose me just because we were friends. Two of my Warders belonged first to sisters who died. Avar and Nuhel. No other sister has saved more than one in centuries."

"I only became involved because of his mind," Nisao said hastily. "I have some interest in diseases of the mind, and this must rightly be called one. Myrelle practically dragged me into it."

Smoothing her skirts, Myrelle directed a dark look at the Yellow that was returned with interest. “Mother, when a Warder’s Aes Sedai dies, it is as though he swallows her death and is consumed by it from the inside. He —”

“I know that, Myrelle,” Egwene broke in sharply. Siuan and Leane had told her a good bit, though neither knew she had asked because she wanted to know what to expect with Gawyn. A poor bargain, Myrelle had called it, and perhaps it was. When a sister’s Warder died, grief enveloped her; she could control it somewhat, sometimes, hold it in, but sooner or later it gnawed a way out. However well Siuan managed when others were around, she still wept alone many nights for her Alric, killed the day she was deposed. Yet what were even months of tears, compared with death itself? The stories were full of Warders dying to avenge their Aes Sedai, and indeed it was very often the case. A man who wanted to die, a man looking for what could kill him, took risks not even a Warder could survive. Perhaps the most horrible part of it, to her, was that they knew. Knew what their fate would be if their Aes Sedai died, knew what drove them when she did, knew nothing they did could change it. She could not imagine the courage required to accept the bargain, knowing.

She stepped aside, so she could see Lan clearly. He still stood motionless, not even seeming to breathe. Apparently forgetting the tea, Nicola had seated herself cross-legged on the ground to watch him. Areina squatted on her heels at Nicola’s side with her braid pulled over her shoulder, staring even more avidly. Much more avidly, actually, since Nicola sometimes darted furtive glances at Egwene and the others. The rest of the Warders made a small cluster, pretending to watch him too while keeping a close eye on their Aes Sedai.

A more than warm breeze stirred, ruffling the dead leaves that carpeted the ground, and with shocking suddenness, Lan was moving, shifting from stance to stance, blade a whirling blur in his hands. Faster and faster, till he seemed to sprint from one to the next, yet all as precise as the movements of a clock. She waited for him to stop, or at least slow, but he did not. Faster. Areina’s mouth slowly dropped open, eyes going wide with awe, and for that matter, so did Nicola’s. They leaned forward, children watching candy set to dry on the kitchen table. Even the other Warders really divided their attention between their Aes Sedai and him now, but in contrast to the two women, they watched a lion that might charge any moment.

“I see you are working him hard,” Egwene said. That was part of the method for saving a Warder. Few sisters were willing to make the attempt, given the rate of failure, and the cost of it to themselves. Keeping him from risks was another. And bonding him again; that was the first step. Without doubt Myrelle had taken care of that little detail. Poor Nynaeve. She might well strangle Myrelle, when she learned. Then again, she might countenance anything that kept Lan alive. Maybe. For Lan’s part, he deserved the worst he received, letting himself be bonded by another woman when he knew Nynaeve was pining for him.

She thought she had kept her voice clear, but something of what she felt must have crept through, because Myrelle began trying to explain again.

“Mother, passing a bond is not that bad. Why, in point of fact, it’s no more than a woman deciding who should have her husband if she dies, to see he is in the right hands.”

Egwene stared at her so hard that she stepped back, almost tripping over her skirts. It was only shock, though. Every time she thought she had heard of the strangest possible custom, another popped up stranger still.

“We aren’t all Ebou Dari, Myrelle,” Siuan said dryly, “and a Warder isn’t a husband. For most of us.” Myrelle’s head came up defiantly. Some sisters did marry a Warder, a handful; not many married at all. No one inquired too closely, but rumor said she had married all three of hers, which surely violated custom and law even in Ebou Dar. “Not that bad, you say, Myrelle? Not that bad?” Siuan’s scowl matched her tone; she sounded as if she had a vile taste in her mouth.

“There is no law against it,” Nisao protested. To Egwene, not Siuan. “No law against passing a bond.” Siuan received a frown that should have made her step back and shut her mouth. She was having none of it, though.

“That’s not the point, is it?” she demanded. “Even if it hasn’t been done in—what? four hundred years or more?—even if customs *have* changed, you might have escaped with a few stares and a little censure if all you and Moiraine had done was pass his bond between you. But he wasn’t asked, was he? He was given no choice. You might as well have bonded him against his will. In fact, you bloody well did!”

At last the puzzle came clear for Egwene. She knew she should feel the same disgust as Siuan. Aes Sedai put bonding a man against his will on a level with rape. He had as much chance to resist as a farmgirl would if a man the size of Lan cornered her in a barn. If three men the size of Lan did.

Sisters had not always been so particular, though—a thousand years earlier, it would hardly have been remarked—and even today an argument could sometimes be made as to whether a man had actually known what he was agreeing to. Hypocrisy was a fine art among Aes Sedai sometimes, like scheming or keeping secrets. The thing was, she knew he had resisted admitting his love for Nynaeve. Some nonsense about how he was bound to be killed sooner or later and did not want to leave her a widow; men always did spout drivel when they thought they were being logical and practical. Would Nynaeve have let him walk away unbonded, had she had the chance, whatever he said? Would she herself let Gawyn? He had said he would accept, yet if he changed his mind . . . ?

Nisao's mouth worked, but she could not find the words she wanted. She glared at Siuan as though it were all her fault, yet that was nothing alongside the scowl she directed at Myrelle. "I should *never* have listened to you," she growled. "I must have been *mad*!"

Somehow, Myrelle still managed to maintain a smooth face, but she wavered a little, as though her knees had gone weak. "I did not do it for myself, Mother. You must believe that. It was to save him. As soon as he is safe, I will pass him on to Nynaeve, the way Moiraine wanted, just as soon as she's—"

Egwene flung up a hand, and Myrelle stopped as if she had clapped it over her mouth. "You mean to pass his bond to Nynaeve?"

Myrelle nodded uncertainly, Nisao much more vigorously. Scowling, Siuan muttered something about doubling a wrong making it three times as bad. Lan *still* had not slowed. Two grasshoppers whirred up from the leaves behind him, and he spun, sword flicking them out of the air without a pause.

"Are your efforts succeeding? Is he any better? How long have you had him, exactly?"

"Only two weeks," Myrelle replied. "Today is the twentieth. Mother, it could require months, and there is no guarantee."

"Perhaps it is time to try something different," Egwene said, more to herself than anyone else. More to convince herself than for any other reason. In his circumstances, Lan was hardly an easy present to hand anyone, but bond or no bond, he belonged to Nynaeve more than he ever would to Myrelle.

When she crossed the hollow to him, though, doubts sprang up strong. He whirled to face her in his dance, sword streaking toward her. Someone gasped as the blade halted abruptly only inches from her head. She was relieved that it had not been her.

Brilliant blue eyes regarded her intently from beneath lowered brows, in a face all planes and angles that might have been carved from stone. Lan lowered his sword slowly. Sweat coated him, yet he was not even breathing hard. “So you are the Amyrlin now. Myrelle told me they had raised one, but not who. It seems you and I have a good deal in common.” His smile was as cold as his voice, as cold as his eyes.

Egwene stopped herself from adjusting her stole, reminding herself that she was Amyrlin and Aes Sedai. She wanted to embrace *saidar*. Until this moment, she had not realized exactly how dangerous he was. “Nynaeve is Aes Sedai now, too, Lan. She’s in need of a good Warder.” One of the other women made a noise, but Egwene held her gaze on him.

“I hope she finds a hero out of legend.” He barked a laugh. “She’ll need the hero just to face her temper.”

The laugh convinced her, icy hard as it was. “Nynaeve is in Ebou Dar, Lan. You know what a dangerous city that is. She is searching for something we need desperately. If the Black Ajah learns of it, they’ll kill her to get it. If the Forsaken find out. . . .” She had thought his face bleak before, but the pain that tightened his eyes at Nynaeve’s danger confirmed her plan. Nynaeve, not Myrelle, had the right. “I am sending you to her, to act as her Warder.”

“Mother,” Myrelle said urgently behind her.

Egwene flung out a hand to silence her. “Nynaeve’s safety will be in your hands, Lan.”

He did not hesitate. Or even glance at Myrelle. “It will take at least a month to reach Ebou Dar. Areina, saddle Mandarb!” On the point of turning away, he paused, lifting his free hand as if to touch her stole. “I apologize for ever helping you leave the Two Rivers. You, or Nynaeve.” Striding away, he vanished into the tent he had come out of earlier, but before he had gone two steps, Myrelle and Nisao and Siuan were all clustered around her.

“Mother, you don’t understand what you are proposing,” Myrelle said breathlessly. “You might as well give a child a lighted lantern to play with in a haybarn. I began readying Nynaeve as soon as I felt his bond pass to me. I thought I had time. But she was raised to the shawl in a blink. She isn’t ready to handle him, Mother. Not him, not the way he is.”

With an effort Egwene made herself be patient. They still did not understand. “Myrelle, even if Nynaeve could not channel a lick . . .” She could not, actually, unless she was angry. “. . . that would make no difference, and you know it. Not in whether she can handle him. There’s one thing you haven’t been able to do. Give him a task so important that he has to stay alive to carry it out.” That was the final element. Supposedly it worked better than the rest. “To him, Nynaeve’s safety is that important. He loves her, Myrelle, and she loves him.”

“That explains . . .” Myrelle began softly, but Nisao burst out incredulously atop her.

“Oh, surely not. Not him. She might love him, I suppose, or think she does, but women have been chasing Lan since he was a beardless boy. And catching him, for a day or a month. He was quite a beautiful boy, however hard that might be to believe now. Still, he does appear to have his attractions.” She glanced sideways at Myrelle, who frowned slightly, tiny spots of color blooming in her cheeks. She did not react any further, but that was more than enough. “No, Mother. Any woman who thinks she has leashed Lan Mandragoran will find she has collared only air.”

Egwene sighed in spite of herself. Some sisters believed there was one more part of saving a Warder whose bond was broken by death; putting him into the arms—into the bed—of a woman. No man could focus on death then, the belief ran. Myrelle, it seemed, had taken care of that herself, too. At least she had not actually married him, not if she meant to pass him on. It would be just as well if Nynaeve never found out.

“Be that as it may,” she told Nisao absently. Areina was fastening the girths on Mandarb’s saddle with a brisk competence, the tall black stallion standing with head high but allowing it. Plainly this was not the first time she had been around the animal. Nicola stood close by the thick bole of the farther oak, arms crossed beneath her breasts, staring at Egwene and the others. She looked ready to run. “I don’t know what Areina has squeezed out of you,” Egwene said quietly, “but the extra lessons for Nicola stop now.”

Myrelle and Nisao jumped, mirror images of surprise. Siuan’s eyes grew to the size of teacups, but luckily she recovered before anyone noticed. “You really do know everything,” Myrelle whispered. “All Areina wants is to be around Lan. I think she believes he’ll teach her things she can use as a Hunter. Or maybe that he’ll go off on the Hunt with her.”

"Nicola wants to be another Caraighan," Nisao muttered caustically. "Or another Moiraine. I think she had some notion she could make Myrelle give Lan's bond to her. Well! At least we can deal with that pair as they deserve, now that he's out in the open. Whatever happens to me, it will be a joy to know they'll be squealing from here to year's end."

Siuan finally realized what had been going on, and outrage warred on her face with the wondering looks she directed at Egwene. That someone else had puzzled matters out first probably upset her as much as Nicola and Areina blackmailing Aes Sedai. Or perhaps not. Nicola and Areina were not Aes Sedai themselves, after all. That drastically changed Siuan's view of what was allowed. But then, it did the same for any sister.

With so many eyes turned her way, and not a friendly gaze in the lot, Nicola backed up against the oak tree and seemed to be trying to back further. Stains on that white dress would put her in hot water when she returned to the camp. Areina was still absorbed in Lan's horse, unaware of what was crashing down on her head.

"That would be justice," Egwene agreed, "but not unless you two face full justice yourselves."

Nobody was looking at Nicola anymore. Myrelle's eyes filled her face, and Nisao's opened wider yet. Neither seemed to dare crack her teeth. Siuan wore grim satisfaction like another skin; by her lights, they deserved no mercy at all. Not that Egwene intended to give much.

"We will speak further when I come back," she told them as Lan reappeared, his sword buckled on over a green coat undone to reveal an unlaced shirt, bulging saddlebags draped over his shoulder. The color-shifting Warder cloak hanging down his back wrenched the eye as it swirled behind him.

Leaving the stunned sisters to stew in their own juices, Egwene went to meet him. Siuan would keep them on a fine simmer, should they show any sign of falling off. "I can have you in Ebou Dar sooner than a month," she said. He only nodded impatiently and called for Areina to bring Mandarb. His intensity was unnerving, an avalanche poised to fall, held back by a thread.

Weaving a gateway where he had been practicing the sword, a good eight feet by eight, she stepped through onto what seemed to be a ferry, floating in darkness that stretched forever. Skimming required a platform, and though it could be anything you chose to imagine, every sister seemed to have one she preferred. For her that was this wooden barge, with stout railings. If she fell off, she could make another barge beneath her, although where she came out then would be something of a question, but for anyone who could not channel, that fall would be as endless as the black that ran off in every direction. Only at the near end of the barge was there any light, the gateway giving a constricted view of the hollow. That light did not penetrate the darkness at all, yet there was light of a sort. At least, she could see quite clearly, as in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Not for the first time she wondered whether this actually was some part of the World of Dreams.

Lan followed without needing to be told, leading his horse. He examined the gateway as he came through, studied the darkness as his boots and the stallion's hooves thudded across the deck planks to her. The only question he asked was "How quickly will this take me to Ebou Dar?"

"It won't," she said, channeling to swing the gate shut, then closing the gateway. "Not right to the city." Nothing moved that anyone could have seen; there was no wind or breeze, nothing to feel. They were in motion, though. And fast; faster than she could imagine anything moving. It must be six hundred miles or more they had to go. "I can put you out five, maybe six days north of Ebou Dar." She had seen the gateway woven when Nynaeve and Elayne Traveled south, and she remembered enough for Skimming to the same place.

He nodded, peering ahead as though he could see their destination. He reminded her of an arrow in a drawn bow.

"Lan, Nynaeve is staying at the Tarasin Palace, a guest of Queen Tylin. She might deny she's in any danger." Which she certainly would, indignantly if Egwene knew Nynaeve, and rightfully so. "Try not to make a point of it—you know how stubborn she is—but you mustn't pay that any mind. If necessary, just protect her without letting her know." He said nothing, did not glance at her. She would have had a hundred questions in his place. "Lan, when you find her, you must tell her that Myrelle will give your bond to her as soon as you three can be together." She had thought of passing that information along herself, but it seemed better not to let Nynaeve know he was coming. She was as besotted with him as . . . as. . . . *As I am with Gawyn*, she thought ruefully. If Nynaeve knew he was on his way, there would be little room in her head for anything else. With the best will in the world, she would let the search fall on Elayne. Not that she would curl up and daydream, but any searching she did would be with dazzled eyes. “Are you listening to me, Lan?”

“Tarasin Palace,” he said in flat voice, without shifting his gaze. “Guest of Queen Tylin. Might deny she’s in danger. Stubborn, as if I didn’t know already.” He looked at her then, and she almost wished he had not. She was full of *saidar*, full of the warmth and the joy and the power, the sheer life, but something stark and primal raged in those cold blue eyes, a denial of life. His eyes were terrifying; that was all there was to it. “I will tell her everything she needs to know. You see, I listen.”

She made herself meet his stare without flinching, but he only turned away again. There was a mark on his neck, a bruise. It might—just might—be a bite. Perhaps she should caution him, tell him he did not have to be too . . . detailed . . . in any explanations about himself and Myrelle. The thought made her blush. She tried not to see the bruise, but now she had noticed it, she could not seem to see anything else. Anyway, he would not be that foolish. You could not expect a man to be sensible, but even men were not that scatterbrained.

In silence they floated, moving without moving. She had no fears of the Forsaken suddenly appearing here, or anyone else. Skimming had its oddities, some of which made for safety, and privacy. If two sisters wove gateways on the same spot only moments apart, aiming to Skim to the same place, they would not see one another, not unless it was *exactly* the same spot, with the weaves *exactly* identical, and neither precision was as easy to achieve as it might seem.

After a time—it was hard to tell how long exactly, but she thought well under half an hour—the barge stopped suddenly. Nothing altered in the feel, nor in the weaves she held. She simply knew that one moment they were speeding through the blackness, and the next standing still. Opening a gateway just at the barge’s bow—she was not sure where one opened at the stern would lead, and not anxious to find out, frankly; Moghedien had found the very idea frightening—she motioned Lan to go ahead. The barge only existed so long as she was present, another thing like *Tel’aran’rhiod*.

He swung back the ferry gate, leading Mandarb out, and when she followed, he was already in the saddle. She left the gateway open for her return. Low rolling hills ran off in every direction, covered in withered grass. There was not a tree to be seen, nothing more than patches of shriveled scrub brush. The stallion’s hooves kicked up little spurts of dust.

The morning sun in that cloudless sky baked even hotter here than in Murandy. Long-winged vultures circled over something to the south, and in another place to the west.

“Lan,” she began, meaning to make sure he understood what he was to tell Nynaeve, but he forestalled her.

“Five or six days, you said,” he said, peering south. “I can make it faster. She will be safe, I promise.” Mandarb danced, impatient as his rider, but Lan held him easily. “You’ve come a very long way since Emond’s Field.” Looking down at her, he smiled. Any warmth in it was swallowed by his eyes. “You have a hold on Myrelle and Nisao, now. Don’t let them argue with you again. By your command, Mother. The watch is not done.” With a small bow, he dug in his heels, walking Mandarb just far enough to put her clear of the dust before setting the horse to a gallop.

Watching him speed southward, she closed her mouth. Well. He had noticed in the middle of all that sword practice, noticed and done the sums correctly. Apparently including sums he could not have suspected before seeing her with the stole. Nynaeve had better take care; she always did think men were dimmer than they actually were.

“At least they can’t get into any real trouble,” she told herself aloud. Lan topped a hill and vanished over the other side. Had there been any real danger in Ebou Dar, Elayne or Nynaeve would have said something. They did not meet often—she just had too much to do—but they had worked out a way to leave messages in the Salidar of *Tel’aran’rhiod* whenever there was need for one.

A wind that might have come from an open oven gusted up sheets of dust. Coughing, she covered her mouth and nose with a corner of the Amyrlin’s striped stole and hurriedly retreated through the gateway to her ferry. The journey back was silent and boring, leaving her to worry whether she had done the right thing sending Lan, whether it was right to keep Nynaeve in the dark. *It’s done,* she kept telling herself, but that did not help.

When she stepped once more into the hilltop hollow beneath the oak trees, Myrelle’s third Warder, Avar Hachami, had joined the others, a hawk-nosed man with thick, gray-streaked mustaches like down-curving horns. All four Gaidin were hard at work, the tents down and nearly folded. Nicola and Areina trotted back and forth loading all the camp paraphernalia into the cart, everything from blankets to cookpots and black iron washkettle. They really did trot, not pausing, but at least half their attention was on

Siuan and the other two sisters, over near the treeline. For that matter, the Warders gave the three Aes Sedai much more than half their consideration. Their ears might as well have been up in points. Who was simmering who seemed to be a question.

“. . . not speak to me in that manner, Siuan,” Myrelle was saying. Not only loud enough to be heard across the clearing, but cold enough to take the edge off the weather. Arms folded tightly beneath her breasts, she was drawn up to every inch of height, imperious to the point of bursting. “Do you hear me? You will not!”

“Are you lost to all propriety, Siuan?” Nisao’s hands were knotted in her skirts in a vain attempt to keep herself from quivering, and the heat in her voice easily matched the ice in Myrelle’s. “If you’ve forgotten simple manners completely, you can be taught again!”

Facing them with her hands on her hips, Siuan moved her head jerkily, struggling both to keep a glare on her face and to keep it fixed on the other two. “I. . . . I am only. . . .” When she saw Egwene approaching, her relief bloomed like a flower in spring. “Mother . . .” That was almost a gasp. “. . . I was explaining possible penalties.” She drew a long breath, and went on more definitely. “The Hall will have to invent them as they go, of course, but I think they might well start with making these two pass their Warders to others, since they seem so fond of it.”

Myrelle squeezed her eyes shut, and Nisao turned to look at the Warders. Her expression never changed, calm if a touch flushed, but Sarin stumbled to his feet and took three quick steps toward her before she raised a hand to stop him. A Warder could sense his Aes Sedai’s presence, her pain, her fear and anger, every bit as much as Egwene could feel Moghedien’s when she wore the *a’dam*. No wonder all the Gaidin moved on their toes and looked ready to spring at something; they might not know what had driven their Aes Sedai to the brink of despair, but they knew the two women were at that brink.

Which was exactly where Egwene wanted them. She did not like this part of it. All the maneuvering was like a game, but this. . . . *I do what I must*, she thought, unsure whether that was an attempt to stiffen her backbone or an attempt to excuse what she was about to do. “Siuan, please send Nicola and Areina back to the camp.” What they did not see, they could not tell. “We can’t have their tongues flapping, so make sure they know what will happen to them. Tell them they have one more chance, because the Amyrlin is feeling merciful, but they'll never get another."

"I think I can manage that much," Siuan replied, and gathering her skirts, she stalked off. No one could stalk like Siuan, yet she seemed more eager to be away from Myrelle and Nisao than anything else.

"Mother," Nisao said, choosing her words, "before you left, you said something—indicated there might be some way—for us to avoid—some way we might not have to—" She glanced at Sarin again. Myrelle would have been a study in Aes Sedai serenity as she examined Egwene, except that her fingers were laced together so tightly that her knuckles strained the thin leather of her gloves. Egwene motioned them to wait.

Nicola and Areina, turning away from the cart, saw Siuan coming and went stiff as posts. Which was no wonder, considering that Siuan advanced as though she intended to walk right over them *and* the cart. Areina's head swiveled, searching, but before she could think to actually run, Siuan's hands darted out and caught each of them by an ear. What she said was too low to carry, yet Areina stopped trying to pry her ear free. Her hands stayed on Siuan's wrist, but she almost seemed to be using it to hold herself up. A look of such horror oozed across Nicola's face that Egwene wondered whether Siuan might be going too far. But then, maybe not, under the circumstances; they *were* going to walk free of their crime. A pity she could not find a way to harness such a talent for ferreting out what was hidden. A way to harness it safely.

Whatever Siuan said, when she loosed their ears, the pair immediately turned toward Egwene and dropped into curtsies. Nicola's was so low it nearly put her face on the ground, and Areina came close to falling on hers. Siuan clapped hands sharply, and the two women bounded to their feet, scrambled to untie a pair of shaggy wagon horses from the picket line. They were astride bareback and galloping out of the hollow so quickly, it was a wonder they did not have wings.

"They won't even talk in their sleep," Siuan said sourly when she returned. "I can still handle novices and scoundrels, at least." Her eyes stayed on Egwene's face, avoiding the other two sisters entirely.

Suppressing a sigh, Egwene turned to Myrelle and Nisao. She had to do something about Siuan, but first things first. The Green sister and the Yellow eyed her warily. "It is very simple," she said in a firm voice. "Without my protection, you will very likely lose your Warders, and almost certainly wish you'd been skinned alive by the time the Hall finishes with you. Your own Ajahs may have a few choice words for you, as well. It may be years before you can hold your heads up again, years before you don't have sisters looking over your shoulder every minute. But why should I protect you from justice? It puts me under an obligation; you might do the same again, or worse." The Wise Ones had their part in this, though it was not exactly *ji'e'toh*. "If I'm to take on that responsibility, then you must have an obligation too. I must be able to trust you utterly, and I can only see one way to do that." The Wise Ones, and then Faolain and Theodrin. "You must swear fealty."

They had been frowning, wondering where she was headed, but wherever they thought, it was not where she ended. Their faces were a study. Nisao's jaw dropped, and Myrelle looked as though she had been hit between the eyes with a hammer. Even Siuan gaped in disbelief.

"Im-p-possible," Myrelle spluttered. "No sister has ever—! No Amyrlin has required—! You can't really think—!"

"Oh, do be quiet, Myrelle," Nisao snapped. "This is all your fault! I should never have listened—! Well. Done is done. And what is, is." Peering at Egwene from beneath lowered brows, she muttered, "You are a dangerous young woman, Mother. A very dangerous woman. You may break the Tower more than it already is, before you're done. If I was sure of that, if I had the courage to do my duty and face whatever comes—" Yet she knelt smoothly, pressing her lips to the Great Serpent ring on Egwene's finger. "Beneath the Light and by my hope of rebirth and salvation. . . ."Not the same wording as Faolain and Theodrin, but every scrap as strong. More. By the Three Oaths, no Aes Sedai could speak a vow she did not mean. Except the Black Ajah, of course; it seemed obvious they must have found a way to lie. Whether either of these women was Black was a problem for another time, though. Siuan, eyes popping and mouth working without sound, looked like a fish stranded on a mudbank.

Myrelle tried another protest, but Egwene just thrust out her right hand with the ring, and Myrelle's knees folded in jerks. She gave the oath in bitter tones, then looked up. "You've done what has never been done before, Mother. That is always dangerous."

"It won't be the last time," Egwene told her. "In fact. . . . My first order to you is that you will tell no one that Siuan is anything but whateverybody thinks. My second is, you will obey any order she gives as if it came from me.”

Their heads turned toward Siuan, faces unruffled. “As you command, Mother,” they murmured together. It was Siuan who looked ready to faint.

She was still staring at nothing when they reached the road and turned their horses east toward the Aes Sedai camp and the army. The sun still climbed toward its zenith, still well short. It had been a morning eventful as most days. Most weeks, for that matter. Egwene let Daishar amble.

“Myrelle was right,” Siuan mumbled finally. With her rider’s mind elsewhere, the mare moved with something close to a smooth gait; she actually made Siuan appear a competent rider. “Fealty. No one has ever done that. No one. There isn’t so much as a hint in the secret histories. And *them*, obeying *me*. You aren’t just changing a few things, you’re rebuilding the boat while sailing a storm! Everything is changing. And Nicola! In my day, a novice would have wet herself if she even thought of blackmailing a sister!”

“Not their first attempt,” Egwene told her, relating the facts in as few words as possible.

She expected Siuan to explode in a fury at the pair, but instead the woman said, quite calmly, “I fear our two adventurous lasses are about to meet with accidents.”

“No!” Egwene reined in so suddenly that Siuan’s mare ambled another half-dozen paces before she could bring the animal under control and turn her, all the while muttering imprecations under her breath. She sat there giving Egwene a patient look that outdid Lelaine at her worst.

“Mother, they have a club over your head, if they’re ever smart enough to think it out. Even if the Hall doesn’t force you into a penance, you can watch any hope you have with them sail right over the horizon.” She shook her head disgustedly. “I knew you would do it when I sent you out—I knew you’d have to—but I never thought Elayne and Nynaeve were witless enough to bring back anyone who knew. Those two girls deserve all they’ll catch if this gets out. But you can’t afford to let it out.”

“Nothing is to happen to Nicola or Areina, Siuan! If I approve killing them for what they know, who’s next? Romanda and Lelaine, for not agreeing with me? Where does it stop?” In a way, she felt disgusted with herself. Once, she would not have understood what Siuan meant. It was always better to know than to be ignorant, but sometimes ignorance was much more comfortable. Heeling Daishar on, she said, “I won’t have a day of victory spoiled with talk of murder. Myrelle wasn’t even the beginning, Siuan. This morning, Faolain and Theodrin were waiting. . . .” Siuan brought the plump mare in closer to listen as they rode.

The news did not relieve Siuan’s concern over Nicola and Areina, but Egwene’s plans certainly put a sparkle in her eye and a smile of anticipation on her lips. By the time they reached the Aes Sedai camp, she was eager to take on her next task. Which was to tell Sheriam and the rest of Myrelle’s friends that they were expected in the Amyrlin’s study at midday. She could even say quite truthfully that nothing would be required of them that other sisters had not done before.

For all her talk of victory, Egwene did not feel so zestful. She barely heard blessings and calls for blessings, acknowledging them with only a wave of her hand, and was sure she missed more than she did hear. She could not countenance murder, but Nicola and Areina would bear watching. *Will I ever reach a place where the difficulties don’t keep piling up?* she wondered. Somewhere a victory did not seem to have to be matched by a new danger.

When she walked into her tent, her mood sank right to her feet. Her head throbbed. She was beginning to think she should just stay away from the tent altogether.

Two carefully folded sheets of parchment sat neatly atop the writing table, each sealed with wax and each bearing the words “Sealed to the Flame.” For anyone other than the Amyrlin, breaking that seal was accounted as serious as assaulting the Amyrlin’s person. She wished she did not have to break them. There was no doubt in her mind who had written those words. Unfortunately, she was right.

Romanda suggested—“demanded” was a better word—that the Amyrlin issue an edict “Sealed to the Hall,” known only to the Sitters. The sisters were all to be summoned one by one, and any who refused was to be shielded and confined as a suspected member of the Black Ajah. What they were to be summoned for was left rather vague, but Lelaine had more than hinted this morning. Lelaine’s own missive bore her manner all over it, mother to child, what should be done for Egwene’s own good and everyone’s. The edict she wanted was only to be “Sealed to the Ring”; any sister could know, and in fact, in this case they would have to. Mention of the Black Ajah was to be forbidden as fomenting discord, a serious charge under Tower law, with appropriate penalties.

Egwene dropped onto her folding chair with a groan, and of course the legs shifted and nearly deposited her on the carpet. She could delay and sidestep, but they would keep coming back with these idiocies. Sooner or later one would introduce her modest proposal to the Hall, and that would put the fox in the henyard. Were they blind? Fomenting *discord*? Lelaine would have every sister convinced not just that there was a Black Ajah, but that Egwene was part of it. The stampede of Aes Sedai back to Tar Valon and Elaida could not be far behind. Romanda just meant to set off a mutiny. There were six of those hidden in the secret histories. Half a dozen in more than three thousand years might not be very many, but each had resulted in an Amyrlin resigning, and the entire Hall as well. Lelaine knew that, and Romanda. Lelaine had been a Sitter for nearly forty years, with access to all the hidden records. Before resigning to go into a country retreat, as many sisters did in age, Romanda had held a chair for the Yellow so long that some said she had had as much power as any Amyrlin she sat under. Being chosen to sit a second time was nearly unheard of, but Romanda was not one to let power reside anywhere outside her own hands if she could manage.

No, they were not blind; just afraid. Everybody was, including her, and even Aes Sedai did not always think clearly when they were afraid. She refolded the pages, wanting to crumple them up and stamp her feet on them. Her head *was* going to burst.

“May I come in, Mother?” Halima Saranov swayed into the tent without waiting for an answer. The way Halima moved always drew every male eye from age twelve to two days past the grave, but then, if she hid herself in a heavy cloak from the shoulders down, men still would stare. Long black hair, glistening as if she washed it every day in fresh rainwater, framed a face that made sure of that. “Delana Sedai thought you might want to see this. She’s putting it before the Hall this morning.”

The Hall was sitting without so much as informing her? Well, she had been away, but custom if not law said the Amyrlin must be informed before the Hall *could* sit. Unless they were sitting to depose her, anyway. At that moment, she would almost have taken it as a blessing. She eyed the folded sheet of paper Halima laid on her table much as she would a poisonous snake. Not sealed; the newest novice could read it, so far as Delana was concerned. The declaration that Elaida was a Darkfriend, of course. Not quite as bad as Romanda or Lelaine, but if she heard the Hall had broken up in a riot, she would hardly blink.

“Halima, I could wish you’d gone home when Cabriana died.” Or at least that Delana had had the sense to seal the woman’s information to the Hall. Or even to the Flame. Instead of telling every sister she could collar.

“I could hardly do that, Mother.” Halima’s green eyes flashed with what seemed challenge or defiance, but she only had two ways to look at anyone, a wide, direct stare that dared and a lidded gaze that smoldered. Her eyes caused a lot of misunderstanding. “After Cabriana Sedai told me what she’d learned about Elaida? And her plans? Cabriana was my friend, and friend to you, to all of you opposing Elaida, so I had no choice. I only thank the Light she mentioned Salidar, so I knew where to come.” She put her hands on a waist as small as Egwene’s had been in *Tel’aran’rhiod* and tilted her head to one side, studying Egwene intently. “Your brain is hurting again, isn’t it? Cabriana used to have such pains, so bad they made her toes cramp. She had to soak in hot water till she could bear to put on clothes. It took days, sometimes. If I hadn’t come, yours could have gotten that bad eventually.” Moving around behind the chair, she began kneading Egwene’s scalp. Halima’s fingers possessed a skill that melted pain away. “You could hardly ask another sister for Healing as often as you have these aches. It’s just tightness, anyway. I can feel it.”

“I suppose I couldn’t,” Egwene murmured. She rather liked the woman, whatever anyone said, and not just for her talent in smoothing away headaches. Halima was earthy and open, a country woman however much time she had spent gaining a skim of city sophistication, balancing respect for the Amyrlin with a sort of neighborliness in a way Egwene found refreshing. Startling, sometimes, but enlivening. Even Chesa did not do better, but Chesa was always the servant, even if friendly, while Halima never showed the slightest obsequiousness. Yet Egwene really did wish she had gone back to her home when Cabriana fell from that horse and broke her neck.

It might have been useful had the sisters accepted Cabriana’s belief that Elaida intended to still half of them and break the rest, but everyone was sure Halima had garbled that somehow. It was the Black Ajah they latched on to. Women unused to being afraid of anything had taken what they had always denied and terrified themselves half-witless with it. How was she to root the Darkfriends out without scattering the other sisters like a frightened covey of quail? How to stop them scattering sooner or later anyway? Light, how?

“Think on looseness,” Halima said softly. “Your face is loose. Your neck is loose. Your shoulders. . . .” Her voice was almost hypnotic, a drone that seemed to caress each part of Egwene’s body she wanted to relax.

Some women disliked her just for the way she looked, of course, as though a particularly lascivious man had dreamed her, and a good many claimed she flirted with anything in breeches, which Egwene could not have approved of, but Halima admitted she liked looking at men. Her worst critics never claimed she had done more than flirt, and she herself became indignant at the suggestion. She was no fool—Egwene had known that at their first conversation, the day after Logain escaped, when the headaches had begun—not at all the brainless flipskirt. Egwene suspected it was much as with Meri. Halima could not help her face or her manner. Her smile seemed inviting or teasing because of the shape of her mouth; she smiled the same at man or woman or child. It was hardly her fault that people thought she was flirting when she was only looking. Besides, she had never mentioned the headaches to anyone. If she had, every Yellow sister in the camp would be laying siege. That indicated friendship, if not loyalty. Egwene’s eyes fell on the papers on the writing table, and her thoughts drifted under Halima’s stroking fingers. Torches ready to be tossed into the haystack. Ten days to the border of Andor, unless Lord Bryne was willing to push without knowing why, and no opposition before. Could she hold those torches back ten days? Southharbor. Northharbor. The keys to Tar Valon. How could she be sure of Nicola and Areina, short of Siuan’s suggestion? She needed to arrange for every sister to be tested before they reached Andor. She had the Talent for working with metals and ores, but it was rare among Aes Sedai. Nicola. Areina. The Black Ajah.

“You’re tensing again. Stop worrying over the Hall.” Those soothing fingers paused, then began once more. “This would do better tonight, after you’ve had a hot bath. I could work your shoulders and back, everywhere. We haven’t tried that, yet. You’re stiff as a stake; you should be supple enough to bend backwards and put your head between your ankles. Mind and body. One can’t be limber without the other. Just put yourself in my hands.”

Egwene teetered on the brink of sleep. Not a dream-walker’s sleep; just sleep. How long since she had done that? The camp would be in an uproar once Delana’s proposal got out, which it would soon enough, and that was before she had to tell Romanda and Lelaine she had no intention of issuing their edicts. But there was one thing yet today to look forward to, a reason to remain awake. “That will be nice,” she murmured, meaning more than the promised massage. Long ago she had pledged that one day she would bring Sheriam to heel, and today was the day. At last she was beginning to *be* the Amyrlin, in control. “Very nice.”

* * *

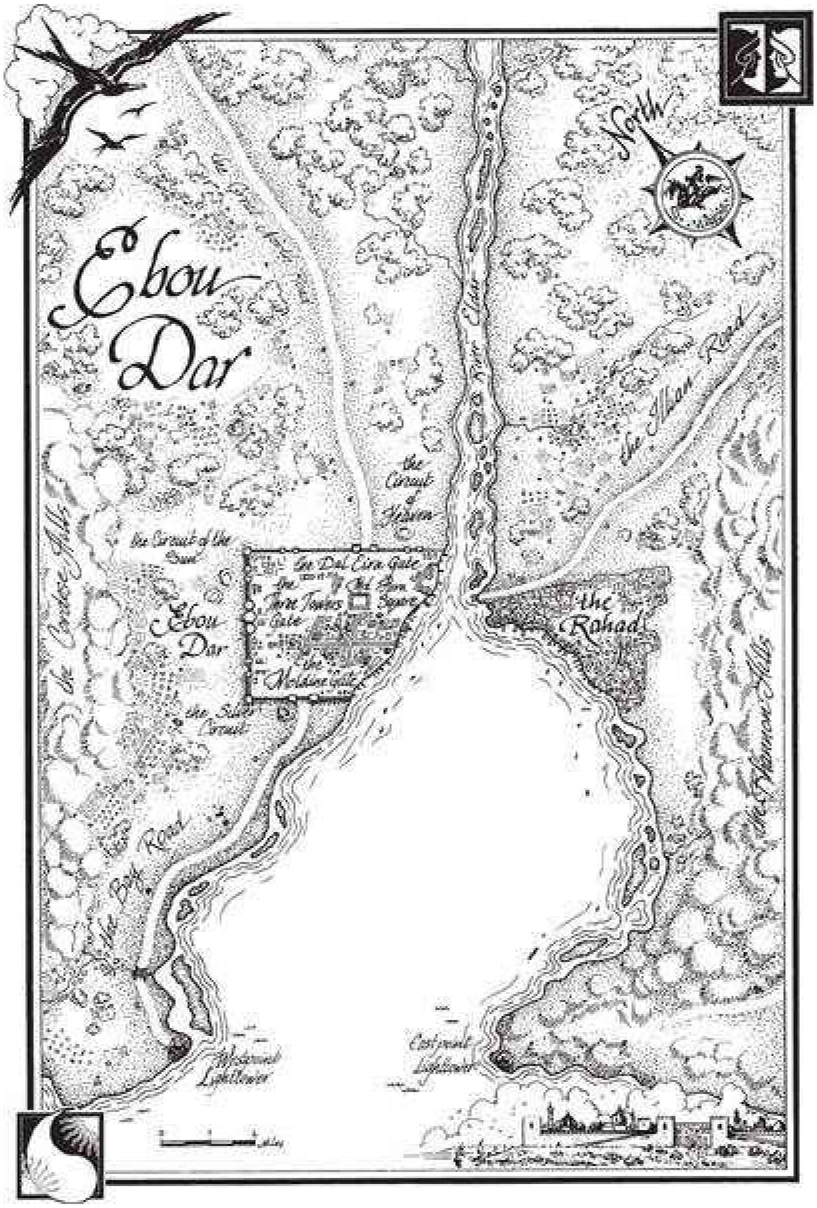
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the Rahad
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the Silver Circuit
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CHAPTER

13

The Bowl of the Winds

Aviendha would have sat on the floor, but three other women occupying the boat’s small room left not quite enough space, so she had to be content with folding her legs atop one of the carved wooden benches built against the walls. That way, it was not so much like sitting in a chair. At least the door was shut, and there were no windows, only fanciful carved scrollwork piercing the walls near the ceiling. She could not see the water outside, but the piercings let in the smell of salt and the slap of waves against the hull and the splash of the oars. Even the shrill hollow cries of some sort of birds shouted of vast expanses of water. She had seen men die for a pool they might have stepped across, but this water was bitter beyond belief. Reading of it was not at all the same as tasting it. And the river had been at least half a mile wide where they boarded this boat with its two oddly leering oarsmen. Half a *mile* of water, and not a drop fit for drinking. Who could imagine useless water?

The motion of the boat had changed, to a rocking back and forth. Were they out of the river, yet? Into what was called “the bay”? That was wider still, far wider, so Elayne said. Aviendha locked her hands on her knees and tried desperately to think of anything else. If the others saw her fear, the shame would follow her to the end of her days. The worst of it was, she had suggested this, after hearing Elayne and Nynaeve talk of the Sea Folk. How could she have known what it would be like?

The blue silk of her dress felt incredibly smooth, and she latched on to that. She was barely used to skirts at all—she still yearned for the *cadin’sor* the Wise Ones had made her burn when she began training with them—and here she wore a *silk* dress—of which she now owned four!—and silk stockings instead of stout wool, and a silk shift that made her aware of her skin in a way she never had been before. She could not deny the beauty of the dress, no matter how odd it was to find herself wearing such things, but silk was precious, and rare. A woman might have a scarf of silk, to be worn on feastdays and envied by others. Few women had two. It was different among these wetlanders, though. Not everyone wore silk, yet sometimes it seemed to her every second person did. Great bolts and even bales of it came by ship from the lands beyond the Three-fold Land. By ship. On the ocean. Water stretching to the horizon, with many places where, if she understood correctly, you could not see land at all. She came close to shivering at the impossible thought. None of the others looked as if they wished to talk. Elayne absently twisted the Great Serpent ring on her right hand and peered at something not to be seen inside the four walls. These worries often overtook her. Two duties confronted her, and if one lay nearer her heart, she had chosen the one she considered more important, more honorable. It was her right and duty to become the chief, the queen, of Andor, but she had chosen to continue hunting. In a way, however important their search, that was like putting something before clan or society, yet Aviendha felt pride. Elayne's view of honor was as peculiar at times as the notion of a woman being a chief, or her becoming chief just because her mother had been, but she followed it admirably. Birgitte, in the wide red trousers and short yellow coat Aviendha envied, sat toying with her waist-long braid, lost in thought as well. Or maybe sharing part of Elayne's worries. She was Elayne's first Warder, which upset the Aes Sedai back in the Tarasin Palace no end, though it did not seem to bother their Warders. Wetlander customs were so curious they hardly bore thinking about.

If Elayne and Birgitte seemed to deflect any thought of talk, Nynaeve al'Meara, directly opposite Aviendha by the door, rebuffed it firmly. Nynaeve; not Nynaeve al'Meara. Wetlanders liked to be called by only half their names, and Aviendha was trying to remember, however much it felt like using a honey-name. Rand al'Thor was the only lover she had ever had, and she did not think even of him so intimately, but she had to learn their ways if she was to wed one of them.

Nynaeve's deep brown eyes stared through her. Her knuckles were white on a thick braid as dark as Birgitte's was golden, and her face had gone beyond pale to a faint green. From time to time she emitted a tiny muted groan. She did not usually sweat; she and Elayne had taught Aviendha the trick. Nynaeve was a puzzle. Brave to the point of madness sometimes, she moaned over her supposed cowardice, and here she displayed her shame for all to see without a care. How could the *motion* disturb her so, when all that water did not?

Water again. Aviendha shut her eyes to avoid seeing Nynaeve's face, but that only made the sounds of the birds and the lapping water fill her head.

"I have been thinking," Elayne said suddenly, then paused. "Are you all right, Aviendha? You. . . ." Aviendha's cheeks reddened, but at least Elayne did not say aloud that she had jumped like a rabbit at the sound of her voice. Elayne seemed to realize how close she had come to revealing Aviendha's dishonor; color flushed her own cheeks as she continued. "I was thinking about Nicola, and Areina. About what Egwene told us last night. You don't suppose they can cause *her* any trouble, do you? What is she to do?"

"Rid herself of them," Aviendha said, drawing a thumb across her neck. The relief of speaking, of hearing voices, was so great that she almost gasped. Elayne appeared shocked. She was remarkably softhearted at times.

"It might be for the best," Birgitte said. She had revealed no more name than that. Aviendha thought her a woman with secrets. "Areina could have made something of herself with time, but—Don't look at me that way, Elayne, and stop going all prim and indignant in your head." Birgitte often slipped back and forth between the Warder who obeyed and the older first-sister who instructed whether or not you wished to learn. Right then, waving an admonishing finger, she was the first-sister. "You two wouldn't have been warned to stay away if it was a difficulty the Amyrlin could solve by having them set to work with the laundresses or the like."

Elayne gave a sharp sniff in the face of what she could not deny, and adjusted her green silk skirts where they were drawn up in front to expose layers of blue and white petticoats. She was wearing the local fashion, complete with creamy lace at her wrists and around her neck, a gift from Tylin Quintara, as was the close-fitting necklace of woven gold. Aviendha did not approve. The upper half of the dress, the bodice, fitted as snugly as that necklace, and a missing narrow oval of cloth revealed the inner slopes of her breasts. Walking about where all could see was not the same as the sweat tents; people in the streets of the city were not *gai'shain*. Her own dress had a high neck that brushed her chin with lace and no parts of it missing.

“Beside,” Birgitte went on, “I would think *Marigan* would worry you more. She frightens me spitless.”

That name got through to Nynaeve, as well it might. Her groaning ceased, and she sat up straight. “If she comes after us, we will just settle for her again. We’ll . . . we’ll. . . .” Drawing breath, she stared at them pointedly, as if they were arguing with her. What she said, in a faint voice, was. “Do you think she will?”

“Fretting will do no good,” Elayne told her, much more calmly than Aviendha could have managed if she thought one of the Shadowsouled had marked her out. “We will just have to do as Egwene said and be careful.” Nynaeve muttered something inaudible, which was probably just as well.

Silence descended again, Elayne settling to a browner study than before, Birgitte propping her chin on one hand as she frowned at nothing. Nynaeve kept right on grumbling under her breath, but she had both hands pressed to her middle now, and from time to time she paused to swallow. The splashing of water seemed louder than ever, and the cries of the birds.

“I have been thinking too, near-sister.” She and Elayne had not reached the point of adopting each other as first-sisters yet, but she was sure they would, now. Already they brushed each other’s hair, and every night in the dark shared another secret never told to anyone else. This Min woman, though. . . . That was for later, when they were alone.

“About what?” Elayne asked absently.

“Our search. We prepare for success, but we are as far away as when we began. Does it make sense not to use every weapon at hand? Mat Cauthon is *ta’veren*, yet we work to avoid him. Why not take him with us? With him, we might find the bowl at last.”

“Mat?” Nynaeve exclaimed incredulously. “As well stuff your shift full of nettles! I would not endure the man if he had the bowl in his coat pocket.”

“Oh, *do* be quiet, Nynaeve,” Elayne murmured, without any heat. She shook her head wonderingly, taking no notice of the other’s sudden glower. “Prickly” only began to describe Nynaeve, but they were all used to her ways. “*Why* didn’t I think of that? It is so *obvious*!”

“Maybe,” Birgitte murmured dryly, “you had Mat the scoundrel set so hard in your mind, you couldn’t see he had any use.” Elayne gave her a cool stare, chin raised, then abruptly grimaced, and nodded reluctantly. She did not accept criticism easily.

"No," Nynaeve said in a voice that somehow managed to be sharp and weak at the same time. The sickly cast of her face had deepened, but it no longer seemed caused by the boat's heaving. "You cannot possibly mean it! Elayne, you know what a torment he can be, how stubborn he is. He'll insist on bringing those soldiers of his like a feastday parade. Try finding anything in the Rahad with soldiers at your shoulder. Just try! Inside two steps, he'll try to take charge, flaunting that *ter'angreal* at us. He's a thousand times worse than Vandene or Adeleas, or even Merilille. The way he behaves, you would think we'd walk into a bear's den just to see the bear!"

Birgitte made a noise in her throat that might have been amusement, and received a darted glare. She returned such a look of bland innocence that Nynaeve began to sound as if she were choking.

Elayne was more soothing; she probably would try to make peace in a water-feud. "He is *ta'veren*, Nynaeve. He alters the Pattern, alters *chance*, just being there. I'm ready to admit we need luck, and a *ta'veren* is more than luck. Besides, we can snare two birds at once. We should not have been letting him run loose all this time, no matter how busy we were. That's done no one any good, him least of all. He needs to be made fit for decent company. We will put him on a short rein from the start."

Nynaeve smoothed her skirts with considerable vigor. She claimed to have no more interest in dresses than Aviendha—in what they looked like, anyway; she was always muttering about good plain wool being fine enough for anybody—yet her own blue dress was slashed with yellow on the skirts and sleeves, and she herself had chosen its design. Every stitch she owned was silk or embroidered or both, all cut with what Aviendha had learned to recognize as fine care.

For once Nynaeve appeared to understand she would not get her way. Sometimes she threw amazing tantrums until she did, not that she would admit that was what they were. The glower faded to a grumpy sulk. "Who will ask him? Whoever does, he will make her beg. You know he will. I'd sooner marry him!"

Elayne hesitated, then said firmly, "Birgitte will. And she won't beg; she will tell him. Most men will do as you say if you use a firm, confident voice." Nynaeve looked doubtful, and Birgitte jerked erect on her bench, startled for the first time Aviendha had ever seen. With anyone else, Aviendha might have said she looked a little afraid, too. Birgitte would have done very well as *Far Dareis Mai*, for a wetlander. She had remarkable skill with a bow.

“You are the clear choice, Birgitte,” Elayne went on quickly. “Nynaeve and I are Aes Sedai, and Aviendha might as well be. We cannot *possibly* do it. Not and maintain proper dignity. Not with him. You *know* what he is like.” What had happened to all that talk of a firm, confident voice? Not that Aviendha had ever noticed that working for anyone except Sorilea. It surely had not so far on Mat Cauthon that she had seen. “Birgitte, he *can’t* have recognized you. If he had, he would have said something by now.”

Whatever that meant, Birgitte leaned back against the wall and laced her fingers over her stomach. “I should have known you’d get back at me ever since I said it was a good thing your bottom wasn’t any—” She stopped, and a faint satisfied smile appeared on her lips. Nothing changed in Elayne’s expression, but plainly Birgitte thought she had gained a measure of revenge. It must have been something felt through the Warder bond. How Elayne’s bottom entered into anything, though, Aviendha could not puzzle out. Wetlanders were so . . . *odd* . . . at times. Birgitte continued, still wearing that smile. “What I don’t understand is why he starts chafing as soon as he sees you two. It can’t be that you snagged him off here. Egwene was as deep in that as you, but I saw him treat her with more respect than most of the sisters do. Besides, the times I’ve glimpsed him coming out of The Wandering Woman, he looked to be enjoying himself.” Her smile became a grin that made Elayne sniff disapprovingly.

“That is one thing we need to change. A decent woman cannot be in the room with him. Oh, do wipe that smirk off your face, Birgitte. I vow, you are as bad as he, sometimes.”

“The man was born just to be a trial,” Nynaeve muttered sourly.

Suddenly Aviendha was forcibly reminded that she was on a boat as everything lurched, swaying and swinging around to a halt. Rising and straightening dresses, they gathered the light cloaks they had brought. She did not don hers; the sunlight here was not so bright that she needed the hood to keep it from her eyes. Birgitte only draped hers over one shoulder and pushed open the door, following up the three steps after Nynaeve had rushed past her with a hand clapped over her mouth.

Elayne paused to tie her cloak ribbons and arrange the hood around her face, red-gold curls peeking out all around. “You did not say much, near-sister.”

"I said what I had to say. The decision was yours."

"The key thought was yours, though. Sometimes I think the rest of us are turning into half-wits. Well." Half turning to the steps, not quite looking at her, Elayne paused. "Distances bother me, sometimes, over water. I think I will look only at the ship, myself. Nothing else." Aviendha nodded—her near-sister had a fine delicacy—and they went up.

On the deck, Nynaeve was just shaking off Birgitte's offer of help and pushing herself up from the railing. The two oarsmen looked on in amusement as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Shirtless fellows with a brass hoop in each ear, they must have had frequent use for the curved daggers shoved behind their sashes. Most of their attention went to working their pairs of long sweeps, though, walking back and forth on the deck to hold the heaving boat in place near a ship that almost took Aviendha's breath with its size, looming above their suddenly very tiny vessel, its three great masts reaching taller than most trees she had seen even here in the wetlands. They had chosen it because it was the largest of the hundreds of Sea Folk ships anchored in the bay. On a ship that big, surely it must be possible to forget all the surrounding water. Except. . . .

Elayne had not really acknowledged her shame, and if she had, a near-sister could know your deepest humiliation without it mattering, but. . . . Amys said she had too much pride. She made herself turn and look away from the boat.

She had never seen so much water in her life, not if every drop seen before had been gathered in one place, all of it rolling gray-green and here and there frothing white. Her eyes darted, trying to avoid taking it in. Even the sky seemed larger here, immense, with a liquid gold sun crawling up from the east. A gusting wind blew, somewhat cooler than on the land and never failing entirely. Clouds of birds flurried in the air, gray and white and sometimes splotched with black, giving those shrill cries. One, all black except for its head, skimmed along the surface with its long lower beak slicing through the water, and a slanted line of ungainly brown birds—pelicans, Elayne had named them—suddenly folded their wings one by one and plummeted with great splashes, bobbing back to the top, where they floated, tilting up beaks of incredible size. There were ships everywhere, many almost as large as the one behind her, not all belonging to the Atha'an Miere, and smaller vessels with one or two masts moving under triangular sails. Smaller ships still, mastless like the boat she was on, with a high sharp peak at the front and a low flat house at the back, spidered across the water on oars, one pair or two, or sometimes three. One long, narrow boat that must have had twenty to a side looked like a hundred-legs skittering along. And there was land. Maybe seven or eight miles distant, sunlight gleamed off the white-plastered buildings of the city. Seven or eight miles of water.

Swallowing, she turned back more swiftly than she had turned away. She thought her cheeks must be greener than Nynaeve's had been. Elayne was watching her, trying to keep a smooth face, but wetlanders showed their emotions so plainly her concern was visible. "I am a fool, Elayne." Even with her, using no more of her name made Aviendha feel uneasy; when they were first-sisters, when they were sister-wives, it would be easier. "A wise woman listens to wise advice."

"You are braver than I will ever be," Elayne replied, quite seriously. She was another who kept denying that she had any courage. Maybe that was also a wetlander custom? No, Aviendha had heard wetlanders speak of their own bravery; these Ebou Dari, for one, seemed unable to utter three words without boasting. Elayne drew a deep breath, steeling herself. "Tonight we will talk about Rand."

Aviendha nodded, but she did not see how that followed from talk of courage. How could sister-wives manage a husband if they did not talk of him in detail? That was what the older women told her, anyway, and the Wise Ones. They were not always so forthcoming, of course. When she complained to Amys and Bair that she must be ill because she felt as though Rand al'Thor was carrying some part of her around with him, they had fallen down laughing. *You will learn*, they cackled at her, and, *You would have learned sooner had you grown up in skirts*. As if she had ever wanted any life but that of a Maiden, running with her spear-sisters. Maybe Elayne felt something of the same emptiness. Speaking of him did seem to make the hollowness grow even while filling it.

For some time she had been aware of voices rising, and now she heard the words.

". . . you earringed buffoon!" Nynaeve was shaking her fist at a very dark man peering down at her from over the tall side of the ship. He looked calm, but then, he could not see the glow of *saidar* surrounding her. "We are not after the gift of passage, so it doesn't matter whether you refuse it to Aes Sedai! You let down a ladder this instant!" The men at the oars were missing their grins. Apparently they had failed to see the serpent rings back at the stone landing, and they did not look pleased to learn they had Aes Sedai aboard.

“Oh, dear,” Elayne sighed. “I must retrieve this, Aviendha, or we’ve wasted the morning just so she could lose her breakfast porridge.” Gliding across the *deck*—Aviendha was proud of knowing the proper names for things on boats—Elayne addressed the man up on the ship. “I am Elayne Trakand, Daughter-Heir of Andor and Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. My companion is quite truthful. We do not seek the gift of passage. But we must speak with your Windfinder on a matter of urgency. Tell her we know of the Weaving of Winds. Tell her we know of Windfinders.”

The man above frowned down at her, then abruptly vanished without a word.

“The woman will probably think you mean to blab her secrets,” Nynaeve muttered, jerking her cloak into place. She tied the ribbons fiercely. “You know how afraid they are that Aes Sedai will haul them all off to the Tower, if it’s known most can channel. Only a ninny thinks she can threaten people, Elayne, and still get anywhere.”

Aviendha burst out laughing. By the startled look Nynaeve gave her, she did not see the joke she had made on herself. Elayne’s lips quivered, though, however she tried to hold them. You could never be sure about wetlander humor; they found strange things funny and missed the best.

Whether or not the Windfinder felt threatened, by the time Elayne had paid the boatmen and cautioned them to wait for their return—with Nynaeve grumbling over the amount and telling them she would box their ears if they left, and how she was to manage that nearly set Aviendha laughing again—by the time all that was done, it seemed a decision had been reached to allow them on. No ladder was lowered, but instead a flat piece of wood, the two ropes it hung from becoming one and running up to a thick pole swung out over the side from one of the masts. Nynaeve took her place sitting on the board with dire warnings for the boatmen if they even thought of trying to look up her skirts, and Elayne blushed and held hers tightly around her legs, hunched over so she appeared ready to fall off headfirst as she wobbled into the air and disappeared from sight onto the ship. One of the fellows looked upward anyway, until Birgitte struck him on the nose with her fist. They certainly did not watch *her* ascent.

Aviendha’s belt knife was small, with a blade not half a foot long, but the oarsmen frowned worriedly when she drew it. Her arm went back, and they fell sprawling to the deck as the knife whirled over their heads to sink with a solid thunk into the thick wooden post at the front of the boat. Looping the cloak over her arms like a shawl, she hoisted her skirts well above her knees so she could climb over the oars and retrieve her blade, then took her place on the dangling board. She did not replace the knife in its sheath. For some reason the two men exchanged confused looks, but they kept their eyes down as she was lifted up. Perhaps she was beginning to get a feel for wetlander customs.

Settling onto the great ship’s deck, she gaped, almost forgetting to climb off the narrow seat. She had read of the Atha’an Miere, but reading and seeing was as different as reading of saltwater and tasting it. They were all dark, for one thing, much darker than the Ebou Dari, even darker than most Tairens, with straight black hair and black eyes and tattooed hands. Bare-chested, barefoot men with bright narrow sashes holding up baggy breeches of some dark cloth that had an oily look to it, and women in blouses as brilliantly colored as their sashes, all with a sway to their movements, gliding gracefully with the rocking of the ship. Sea Folk women had very strange customs when it came to men, according to what she had read, dancing with no more than a single scarf for covering and worse, but it was the earrings that made her stare. Most had three or four, often with polished stones, and several actually had a small ring in one side of their noses! The men did, too, the earrings at least, and just as many heavy gold and silver chains around their necks. Men! Some wetlander men wore rings in their ears, true—most Ebou Dari men seemed to—but so many! And necklaces! Wetlanders did have strange ways. The Sea Folk never left their ships—never—so she had read, and supposedly they ate their dead. She had not been quite able to credit that, but if the men wore necklaces, who could say what else they did?

The woman who came to meet them wore breeches and blouse and sash like the others, but hers were of brocaded yellow silk, the sash knotted intricately with ends trailing to her knee, and one of her necklaces bore a small golden box of intricate piercework. A sweetly musky scent surrounded her. Gray streaked her hair heavily, and she had a grave face. Five small fat golden rings decorated each of her ears, and a fine chain connected one to a similar ring in her nose. Tiny medallions of polished gold dangling from the chain flashed in the sunlight as she studied them.

Aviendha pulled her hand down from her own nose—to wear that chain, always tugging!—and barely managed to suppress a laugh. Wetlander customs were odd beyond belief, and surely no one deserved the name better than the Sea Folk.

"I am Malin din Toral Breaking Wave," the woman said, "Wavemistress of Clan Somarin and Sailmistress of *Windrunner*." A Wavemistress was important, like a clan chief, yet she seemed at a loss, looking from one face to the next, until her eye fell on the Great Serpent rings Elayne and Nynaeve wore, and then she exhaled in resignation. "If it pleases you to come with me, Aes Sedai?" she said to Nynaeve.

The back of the ship was raised, and she led the way inside that by a door, then down a hallway to a large room—a *cabin*—with a low ceiling. Aviendha doubted Rand al'Thor would have been able to stand upright beneath one of the thick beams. Except for a few lacquered chests, everything seemed to have been built in place, cabinets along the walls, even the long table that ran half the length of the room and the armchairs that surrounded it. It was difficult to think of something the size of this ship being made of wood, and even after all her time in the wetlands, the sight of all that polished wood nearly made her gasp. It glowed almost as much as the gilded lamps, hanging unlit in some sort of cage so they remained upright as the ship moved with the waves. In truth, the ship hardly seemed to move at all, at least in comparison with the boat they had been on, but unfortunately the back of the cabin, of the ship, was a line of windows with the painted and gilded shutters standing open, giving a splendid view of the bay. Worse, there was no land in sight out those windows. No land at all! Her throat seized. She could not have spoken. She could not have screamed, although that was what she wanted to do.

Those windows and what they showed—what they did not show—had caught her eyes so quickly that it took her a moment to realize people were there already. A fine thing! Had they wished, they could have killed her before she knew. Not that they showed any sign of hostility, but you could never be too careful with wetlanders.

A spindly old man with deep-set eyes was sitting at his ease atop one of the chests; what little hair remained to him was white, and his dark face had a kindly look, though a full dozen earrings altogether and a number of thick gold chains around his neck gave his expression a strange twist in her eyes. Like the men above, he was barefoot and bare-chested, but his breeches were a dark blue silk, and his long sash a bright red. An ivory-hilted sword was thrust through that sash, she noted with disdain, as well as two curved daggers to match.

The slender, handsome woman with her arms folded and a grimly foreboding frown was more worthy of notice. She wore only four earrings in each ear, and fewer medallions on her chain than Malin din Toral, and her clothing was all in reddish-yellow silk. She could channel; Aviendha knew that, this close. She must be the woman they had come for, the Wind-finder. And yet it was another who held Aviendha's eye. And for that matter, Elayne's and Nynaeve's and Birgitte's.

The woman who had looked up from an unrolled map on the table might have been as old as the man by her white hair. Short, no taller than Nynaeve, she looked like someone who had once been stocky and was beginning to go stout, but her jaw thrust forward like a hammer, and her black eyes spoke of intelligence. And power. Not the One Power, just that of someone who said "go" and knew that people would go, yet she had it strongly. Her breeches were brocaded green silk, her blouse blue, and her sash red like the man's. The stout-bladed knife in a gilded sheath tucked behind that sash had a round pommel covered with red and green stones; firedrops and emeralds, Aviendha thought. Twice as many medallions hung from her nose chain as from Malin din Toral's, and another, thinner gold chain connected the six rings in each of her ears. Aviendha barely kept her hand from going to her own nose again.

Without a word the white-haired woman came to stand in front of Nynaeve, rudely examining her from head to toe, frowning in particular at Nynaeve's face and the Great Serpent ring on her right hand. She took no time about it, and with a grunt moved on from her ruffled object of study to give Elayne the same quick, intense scrutiny, and then Birgitte. At last she spoke. "You are not an Aes Sedai." Her voice sounded like rocks tumbling.

"By the nine winds and Stormbringer's beard, I am not," Birgitte replied. Sometimes she said things even Elayne and Nynaeve seemed not to understand, but the white-haired woman jumped as if she had been goosed, and stared a long moment before turning to frown up at Aviendha.

"You are not Aes Sedai, either," she grated after the same examination.

Aviendha drew herself to her full height, feeling as though the woman had rummaged through her garments and twirled her about to look at her better. “I am Aviendha, of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel.”

The woman gave twice the start she had for Birgitte, black eyes going wide. “You are not garbed as I expected, girl” was all she said, though, and strode back to the far end of the table, where she planted her fists on her hips and studied them all again, much as she might have some strange animal she had never seen before. “I am Nesta din Reas Two Moons,” she said at last, “Mistress of the Ships to the Atha’an Miere. How do you know what you know?”

Nynaeve had been working on a scowl since the woman first looked at her, and now she snapped, “Aes Sedai know what they know. And we expect more in the way of manners than I’ve seen so far! I certainly saw more the last time I was on a Sea Folk ship. Maybe we should find another, where the people don’t all have sore teeth.” Nesta din Reas’ face grew darker, but Elayne of course stepped into the breech, removing her cloak and laying it over the edge of the table.

“The Light illumine you and your vessels, Shipmistress, and send the winds to speed you all.” Her curtsy was moderately deep; Aviendha had become a judge of these things, for all she thought it looked the most awkward thing any woman could ever do. “Forgive us if there have been words in haste. We mean no disrespect to one who is as a queen to the Atha’an Miere.” That with a speaking look for Nynaeve. Nynaeve only shrugged, though.

Elayne introduced herself again, and the rest of them, to strange reactions. That Elayne was Daughter-Heir produced none, though that was a high position among the wetlanders, and that she was Green Ajah and Nynaeve Yellow received sniffs from Nesta din Reas and sharp looks from the spindly old man. Elayne blinked, taken aback, but she went on smoothly. “We have come for two reasons. The lesser is to ask how you mean to aid the Dragon Reborn, who according to the Jendai Prophecy you call the Coramoor. The greater is to request the help of this vessel’s Windfinder. Whose name,” she added gently, “I regret I do not yet know.”

The slender woman who could channel reddened. “I am Dorile din Eiran Long Feather, Aes Sedai. I may help, if it pleases the Light.”

Malin din Toral looked abashed, too. “The welcome of my ship to you,” she murmured, “and the grace of the Light be upon you until you leave his decks."

Not so Nesta din Reas. "The Bargain is with the Coramoor," she said in a hard voice, and made a sharp cutting gesture. "The shorebound have no part of it, except where they tell of his coming. You, girl, Nynaeve. What ship gave you the gift of passage? Who was his Windfinder?"

"I can't recall." Nynaeve's airy tone was at odds with the stony smile she wore. She had a deathgrip on her braid, too, but at least she had not embraced *saidar* again. "And I am Nynaeve Sedai, Nynaeve Aes Sedai, not girl."

Putting her hands flat on the table, Nesta din Reas directed a stare at her that reminded Aviendha of Sorilea. "Perhaps you are, but I will know who revealed what should not have been revealed. She has lessons of silence to learn."

"A split sail is split, Nesta," the old man said suddenly, in a deep voice much stronger than his bony limbs suggested. Aviendha had taken him for a guard, but his tone was that of an equal. "It might be well to ask what aid Aes Sedai would have of us, in days when the Coramoor has come, and the seas rage in endless storms, and the doom of the Prophecy sails the oceans. If they are Aes Sedai?" That with a raised eyebrow to the Wind-finder.

She answered quietly, in a respectful voice. "Three can channel, including her." She pointed at Aviendha. "I have never met anyone so strong as they. They must be. Who else would dare wear the ring?"

Waving her to silence, Nesta din Reas turned that same iron gaze on the man. "Aes Sedai never ask aid, Baroc," she growled. "Aes Sedai never *ask* anything." He met her gaze mildly, but after a moment she sighed as though he had stared her down. The eyes she aimed at Elayne were no whit softer, though. "What would you have of us . . ." She hesitated. ". . . Daughter-Heir of Andor?" Even that sounded skeptical.

Nynaeve gathered herself, ready to launch into an attack—Aviendha had had to listen to more than one tirade sparked by the Aes Sedai back in the Tarasin Palace and their habit of forgetting that she and Elayne were Aes Sedai too; someone not even Aes Sedai denying it might bring the shedding of blood—Nynaeve gathered herself up and opened her mouth. . . . And Elayne silenced her with a touch on the arm and a whisper too low for Aviendha to hear. Nynaeve's face was still crimson, and she looked about to pull her braid out slowly by the roots, yet she held her tongue. Maybe Elayne *could* make peace in a water-feud.

Of course, Elayne could not be pleased, when not only her right to be called Aes Sedai but her right to the title of Daughter-Heir was doubted so openly. Most would have thought her quite calm, but Aviendha knew the signs. The raised chin spoke of anger; add eyes open as wide as they would go, and Elayne was a torch to overwhelm Nynaeve's ember. Besides, Birgitte was on her toes, face like stone and eyes like fire. She did not usually mirror Elayne's emotions, except when they were very strong. Wrapping her fingers around the hilt of her belt knife, Aviendha readied herself to embrace *saidar*. She would kill the Windfinder first; the woman was not weak in the Power, and she would be dangerous. They could find others with so many ships about.

"We seek a *ter'angreal*." Except that her tone was cool, anyone who did not know her would think Elayne was absolutely serene. She faced Nesta din Reas, but she addressed everyone, perhaps especially the Windfinder. "With it, we believe we can remedy the weather. It must trouble you as much as it does the land. Baroc spoke of endless storms. You must be able to see the Dark One's touch, the Father of Storms' touch, on the sea just as we do on the land. With this *ter'angreal*, we can change that, but we cannot do it alone. It will require many women working together, perhaps a full circle of thirteen. We think those women should include Windfinders. No one else knows so much of weather, not any Aes Sedai living. That is the aid we ask."

Dead silence met her speech, until Dorile din Eiran said carefully, "This *ter'angreal*, Aes Sedai. What is it called? How does it look?"

"It has no name, that I know," Elayne told her. "It is a thick crystal bowl, shallow but something over two feet across, and worked inside with clouds. When it is channeled into, the clouds move—"

"The Bowl of the Winds," the Windfinder broke in excitedly, stepping toward Elayne as if she did not realize it. "They have the Bowl of the Winds."

"You truly have it?" The Wavemistress's eyes were fixed on Elayne eagerly, and she also took an involuntary step.

"We are *looking* for it," Elayne said. "But we know it is in Ebou Dar. If it is the same—"

"It must be," Malin din Toral exclaimed. "By your description, it must!"

“The Bowl of the Winds,” Dorile din Eiran breathed. “To think it would be found again after two thousand years here! It must be the Coramoor. He must have—”

Nesta din Reas’ hands slapped together loudly. “Do I see a Wavemistress and her Windfinder, or two deckgirls at their first shipmeet?” Malin din Toral’s cheeks reddened with a proud anger, and she bent her head stiffly, pride in that as well. Twice as flushed, Dorile din Eiran bowed, touching fingertips to forehead, lips and heart.

The Shipmistress frowned at them a moment, before going on. “Baroc, summon the other Wavemistresses who hold this port, and the First Twelve as well. With their Windfinders. And let them know you will hoist them by their toes in their own rigging if they do not hurry.” As he rose, she added, “Oh. And have tea sent down. Working out the terms of this bargain will be thirsty.”

The old man nodded; that he might dangle Wavemistresses by their toes and that he must send tea were accepted equally. Eyeing Aviendha and the others, he sauntered out with that rolling walk. She changed her opinion when she saw his eyes close up. It might have been a fatal mistake to kill the Windfinder first.

Someone must have been awaiting orders of the sort, because Baroc was only gone moments before a slim, pretty young man with a single thin ring in each ear entered carrying a wooden tray that bore a square blue-glazed teapot with a golden handle and large blue cups of thick pottery. Nesta din Reas waved him out—“He will spread enough tales as it is, without hearing what he should not,” she said when he was gone—and directed Birgitte to pour. Which she did, to Aviendha’s surprise, and maybe her own.

The Shipmistress settled Elayne and Nynaeve in chairs at one end of the table, apparently intent on beginning her bargaining. Aviendha refused a chair—at the other end of the table—but Birgitte took one, swinging the arm out, then latching it back when she was seated. The Wavemistress and the Windfinder were excluded from that discussion, too, if discussion it could be called. The words were too low to hear, but Nesta din Reas emphasized everything she said with a finger driven like a spear, Elayne had her chin so high she seemed to be looking down her nose, and if Nynaeve for once was managing to keep her face calm, she seemed to be trying to climb her own braid.

"If it pleases the Light, I will speak with both of you," Malin din Toral said, looking from Aviendha to Birgitte, "but I think I must hear your story first." Birgitte began to look alarmed as the woman sat down across from her.

"Which means I can speak first with you, if it pleases the Light," Dorile din Eiran told Aviendha. "I have read of the Aiel. If it pleases you, tell me, if an Aiel woman must kill a man every day, how are there any men left among you?"

Aviendha did her best not to stare. How could the woman believe such nonsense?

"When did you live among us?" Malin din Toral said over her teacup at the near end of the table. Birgitte was leaning away from her as though she wanted to climb over the back of the chair.

At the far end of the table, Nesta din Reas' voice rose for a moment. ". . . came to me, not I to you. *That* sets the basis for our bargain, even if you are Aes Sedai."

Slipping into the room, Baroc paused between Aviendha and Birgitte. "It seems your shoreboat departed as soon as you came below, but have no worry; *Windrunner* has boats to put you on the shore." Walking on down the cabin, he took a chair below Elayne and Nynaeve and joined right in. When they looked at whichever was speaking, the other could observe them unnoticed. They had lost an advantage, one they needed. "Of course the bargain is on our terms," he said in tones of disbelief that it could be otherwise, while the Shipmistress studied Elayne and Nynaeve as a woman might two goats she meant to skin for a feast. Baroc's smile was almost fatherly. "Who asks must of course pay highest."

"But you must have lived among us to know those ancient oaths," Malin din Toral insisted.

"Are you well, Aviendha?" Dorile din Eiran asked. "Even here, the motion of a ship sometimes affects shorefolk—No? And my questions do not offend? Then tell me. Do Aiel women truly tie a man down before you—I mean, when you and he—when you—" Cheeks reddened, she broke off with a weak smile. "Are many Aiel women as strong in the One Power as you?"

It was not the Windfinder's foolish fumbling about that had made the blood drain from Aviendha's face, or that Birgitte appeared ready to run once she could manage to unlatch the chair arm again, or even that Nynaeve and Elayne were apparently discovering they were two bright-eyed girls at a fair, in the hands of well-seasoned traders. They would all blame her, and rightly. She was the one who had said if they could not take the *ter'angreal* back to Egwene and the other Aes Sedai once found, why not secure these Sea Folk women they spoke of? Time could not be wasted, waiting for Egwene al'Vere to say they could return. They would blame her, and she would meet her *toh*, but she was remembering the boats she had seen on the deck, stacked upside down atop one another. Boats without any shelter on board. They would blame her, but whatever debt she owed she was going to repay a thousandfold in shame by the time she was taken across seven or eight miles of water in an open boat.

"Do you have a bucket?" she asked the Windfinder faintly.

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CHAPTER
14

White Plumes

The Silver Circuit was misnamed at first glance, but Ebou Dar liked grand names, and sometimes it seemed that the worse they fit, the better. The grimiest tavern Mat had seen in the city, smelling of very old fish, bore the name of The Queen's Glory in Radiance, while The Golden Crown of Heaven graced a dim hole across the river in the Rahad with only a blue door to mark it, where black stains from old knife fights splotched the grimy floor. The Silver Circuit was for racing horses.

Removing his hat, he fanned himself with the broad brim, and went so far as to loosen the black silk scarf he wore to hide the scar around his neck. The morning air shimmered with heat already, yet crowds packed the two long earthen banks that flanked the course where the horse would run up and back. That was all there was to the Silver Circuit. The murmur of voices almost drowned out the cries of the gulls overhead. There was no charge to watch, so saltworkers in the white vest of their guild and gaunt-faced farmers who had fled from the Dragonsworn inland rubbed shoulders with ragged Taraboners wearing transparent veils across their thick mustaches, weavers in vests with vertical stripes, printers in horizontal stripes and dyers with hands stained to the elbow. The unrelieved black of Amadician countrymen, buttoned to the neck though the wearers seemed about to sweat to death, stood alongside Murandian village dresses with long colorful aprons so narrow they must be only for show, and even a handful of copper-skinned Domani, the men in short coats if they wore one, the women in wool or linen so thin it clung like silk. There were apprentices, and laborers from the docks and warehouses, tanners who had a small space around them in the crowd because of the smell of their work, and filthy-faced street children watched closely because they would steal whatever they could lay hand to. There was little silver among the working people, though.

All of them were above the thick hemp ropes strung on posts. Below was for those who did have silver, and gold; the well-born, the well-dressed and the well-to-do. Smug menservants poured punch into silver cups for their masters, fluttery maids waved feathered fans to cool their mistresses, and there was even a capering fool with white-painted face and jingling brass bells on his black-and-white hat and coat. Haughty men in high-crowned velvet hats strutted with slender swords on their hips, their hair brushing silk coats slung across their shoulders and held by gold or silver chains between the narrow, embroidered lapels. Some of the women had hair shorter than the men and some longer, arranged in as many ways as there were women; they wore wide hats with plumes or sometimes fine netting to obscure their faces, and gowns usually cut to show bosom whether in the local style or from elsewhere. The nobles, beneath brightly colored parasols, glittered with rings and earrings, necklaces and bracelets in gold and ivory and fine gems as they stared down their noses at everyone else. Well-fed merchants and moneylenders, with just a touch of lace and perhaps one pin or a ring bearing a fat polished stone, humbly bowed or curtsied to their betters, who very likely owed them vast sums. Fortunes changed hands at the Silver Circuit, and not just in wagers. It was said lives and honor changed hands, too, below the ropes.

Replacing his hat, Mat raised his hand, and one of the bookers came—a hatchet-faced woman, with a nose like an awl—spreading bony hands as she bowed, murmuring the ritual “As my Lord wishes to wager, so shall I write truly.” The Ebou Dari accent managed to be soft despite clipping the ends off some words. “The book is open.” Like the saying, the open book embroidered on the breast of her red vest came from a time long past, when the wagers were written into a book, but he suspected he was the only one there who knew that. He remembered many things he had never seen, from times long gone to dust.

With a quick glance at the odds for the morning’s fifth race, chalked on the slate the poleman held up behind the red-vested woman, he nodded. Wind was only the third favorite, despite his victories. He turned to his companion. “Put it all on Wind, Nalesean.”

The Tairen hesitated, fingering the point of his oiled black beard. Sweat glistened on his face, yet he kept his coat with its fat, blue-striped sleeves fastened to the top and wore a square cap of blue velvet that did nothing to keep the sun off. “All of it, Mat?” He spoke softly, trying to keep the woman from hearing. The odds could change any time until you actually offered your wager. “Burn my soul, but that little piebald looks fast, and so does that pale dun gelding with the silvery mane.” They were the favorites today, new to the city and like all things new, of great expectation.

Mat did not bother to glance toward the ten horses entered in the next race that were parading at one end of the course. He had already taken a good look while putting Olver up on Wind. “All of it. Some idiot clubbed the piebald’s tail; he’s already half mad from the flies. The dun is showy, but he has a bad angle to his fetlocks. He may have won some in the country, but he’ll finish last today.” Horses were one thing he knew on his own; his father had taught him, and Abell Cauthon had a sharp eye for horseflesh.

“He looks more than showy to me,” Nalesean grumbled, but he was not arguing any more.

The booker blinked as Nalesean, sighing, pulled purse after fat purse from his bulging coat pockets. At one point she opened her mouth to protest, but the Illustrious and Honored Guild of Bookers always claimed it would take any wager in any amount. They even wagered with ship-owners and merchants as to whether a ship would sink or prices change; rather, the guild itself did, not individual bookers. The gold went into one of her iron-strapped chests, each carried by a pair of fellows with arms as thick as Mat’s legs. Her guards, hard-eyed and bent-nosed in leather vests that showed arms still thicker, held long brass-bound cudgels. Another of her men handed her a white token bearing a detailed blue fish—every booker had a different sigil—and she wrote the wager, the name of the horse and a symbol indicating the race on the back with a fine brush that she took from a lacquered box held by a pretty girl. Slim, with big dark eyes, the girl directed a slow smile at Mat. The hatchet-faced woman certainly did not smile. Bowing again, she slapped the girl casually and walked off whispering to her poleman, who hastily wiped his slate with a cloth. When he held it up again, Wind was listed at the shortest odds. Rubbing her cheek surreptitiously, the girl scowled back at Mat as though the slap had been his fault.

“I hope your luck is in,” Nalesean said, holding the token carefully for the ink to dry. Bookers could be touchy about paying on a token with smeared ink, and no one was touchier than an Ebou Dari. “I know you don’t lose often, but I've seen it happen, burn me but I have. There's a lass I mean to step out with at the dancing tonight. Just a seamstress . . ." He was a lord, though not a bad fellow really, and such things seemed important to him. ". . . but pretty enough to dry your mouth. She likes trinkets. Golden trinkets. She likes fireworks, too—I hear some Illuminators are setting up for tonight; you'll be interested in that—but it's trinkets make her smile. She won't be friendly if I cannot afford to make her smile, Mat."

"You'll make her smile," Mat said absently. The horses were still walking in a circle above the starting poles. Olver sat proudly on Wind's back, broad mouth grinning to split his more-than-plain face from jug-ear to jug-ear. In Ebou Dari races, all the riders were boys; a few miles inland, they used girls. Olver was the smallest here today, the lightest, not that the leggy gray gelding needed the advantage. "You'll make her laugh till she can't stand up." Nalesean gave him a frown he barely noticed. The man should know gold was one thing Mat never had to worry about. He might not always win, but close enough. His luck had nothing to do with whether Wind won anyway. Of that he was sure.

Gold did not concern him, but Olver did. There was no rule against the boys using their switches on each other instead of their mounts. In every race so far, Wind had broken to the lead and stayed there, but if Olver took any hurt, even just a bruise, Mat would never hear the end. Not from Mistress Anan, his innkeeper, not from Nynaeve or Elayne, not from Aviendha or Birgitte. The onetime Maiden of the Spear and the peculiar woman Elayne had taken as a Warder were the last he would have expected to gush with maternal feelings, yet they had already tried to move the boy out of The Wandering Woman behind his back and into the Tarasin Palace. Anywhere with so many Aes Sedai was the last place for Olver, or for anybody, but one bump and instead of telling Birgitte and Aviendha they had no right to take the boy, Setalle Anan would likely hustle him off there herself. Olver would probably cry himself to sleep if he was not allowed to race anymore, but women never understood these things. For about the thousandth time, Mat cursed Nalesean for sneaking Olver and Wind to those first races. Of course, they had to find something to fill all the idle hours on their hands, but they could have found something else. Cutting purses could have been no worse in the women's eyes.

"Here's the thief-catcher," Nalesean said, stuffing the token into his coat. He did not quite sneer. "Much good he's done so far. We'd have done better to bring another fifty soldiers instead."

Juilin strode though the crowd purposefully, a dark, hard man using a slender bamboo staff as tall as himself for a walking stick. With a flat-topped conical red Taraboner cap on his head and a plain coat, tight to the waist then flaring to his boot tops, well-worn and plainly not the coat of someone rich, he normally would not have been allowed below the ropes, but he made out to study the horses and ostentatiously bounced a fat coin on his palm. Several of the bookers' guards looked at him suspiciously, but the gold crown let him pass.

"Well?" Mat said sourly, tugging his hat low, once the thief-catcher reached him. "No, let me tell you. They slipped out of the palace again. No one saw them go, again. Nobody has any bloody idea where they are, again."

Juilin tucked the coin carefully into his coat pocket. He would make no wager; he seemed to save every copper that came into his hands. "All four of them took a closed coach from the palace to a landing on the river, where they hired a boat. Thom hired another to follow and see where they're going. Nowhere dark or unpleasant, I'd say, by their clothes. But it is true, nobles wear silk to crawl in the mud." He grinned at Nalesean, who folded his arms and pretended to be engrossed in the horses. The grin was a mere baring of teeth. They were both Tairen, but the gap between noble and common stood wide in Tear, and neither man liked the other's company.

"Women!" Several finely dressed specimens nearby turned to eye Mat askance from beneath bright parasols. He frowned right back, though two were pretty, and they set to laughing and chattering among themselves as though he had done something amusing. A woman would do a thing until you were sure she always would, then do something else just to fuddle you. But he had promised Rand to see Elayne safely to Caemlyn, and Nynaeve and Egwene with her. And he had promised Egwene to see the other two safe on this trip to Ebou Dar, not to mention Aviendha; that was the price of getting Elayne to Caemlyn. Not that they had told him why they needed to be here; oh, no. Not that they had spoken twenty words to him since arriving in the bloody city!

"I'll see them safe," he muttered under his breath, "if I have to stuff them into barrels and haul them to Caemlyn in a cart." He might be the only man in the world who could say that about Aes Sedai without looking over his shoulder, maybe even including Rand and those fellows he was gathering. He touched the foxhead medallion hanging under his shirt to make sure it was there, though he never took it off, even to bathe. It did have flaws, but a man liked to be reminded. “Tarabon must be terrible now for a woman not used to taking care of herself,” Juilin murmured. He was watching three veiled men in tattered coats and baggy once-white trousers scramble up the bank ahead of a pair of bookmen’s guards waving their clubs. No rule said the poor could not come below the ropes, but the bookers’ guards did. The two pretty women who had eyed Mat appeared to be making a private wager on whether the Taraboners would outrun the guards.

“We’ve more than enough women right here without sense to come in out of the rain,” Mat told him. “Go back to that boat landing and wait for Thom. Tell him I need him as soon as possible. I want to know what those fool bloody women are up to.”

Juilin’s look did not quite call *him* a fool. They had, after all, been trying to find out exactly that for over a month now, ever since coming here. With a last glance at the fleeing men, he sauntered back the way he had come, once more bouncing the coin in his hand.

Frowning, Mat peered across the race course. It was barely fifty paces to the crowd on the other side, and faces leaped out at him—a bent, white-haired old man with a hooked nose, a sharp-faced woman under a hat that seemed mostly plumes, a tall fellow who looked like a stork in green silk and gold braid, a nicely plump, full-mouthed young woman who appeared about to come out of her dress at the top. The longer the heat continued, the fewer and thinner garments women in Ebou Dar wore, but for once he hardly gave them any notice. Weeks had gone by since he so much as glimpsed the women who concerned him now.

Birgitte certainly needed no one to hold her hand; a Hunter for the Horn, anyone who troubled her would be in a deep hole by his estimation. And Aviendha. . . . All she needed was someone to keep her from stabbing everybody who looked at her crossways. As far as he was concerned, she could knife whoever she wanted so long as it was not Elayne. For all the bloody Daughter-Heir walked about with her nose in the air, she turned moon-eyed around Rand, and for all Aviendha behaved as if she would stab any man who glanced her way, she did the same. Rand usually knew how to deal with women, but he had jumped into a bear pit letting that pair come together. It was a short road to disaster, and why ruin had not happened was beyond Mat.

For some reason his eyes drifted back to the sharp-faced woman. She was pretty, if vulpine. About Nynaeve's age, he estimated; it was hard to tell at the distance, but he could judge women as well as he could horses. Of course, women could fool you faster than any horse. Slim. Why did she make him think of straw? What he could see of her hair beneath the plumed hat was dark. No matter.

Birgitte and Aviendha could do without his shepherding, and normally he would have said the same of Elayne and Nynaeve, however wrong-headed, conceited and downright pushy they could be. That they had been sneaking out all this time said differently, though. Wrongheadedness was the key. They were the sort who berated a man for meddling and chased him away, then berated him again for not being there when he was needed. Not that they would admit he was needed, even then, not them. Raise a hand to help and you were interfering, do nothing and you were an untrustworthy wastrel.

The fox-faced woman across the way popped into his view again. Not straw; a stable. Which made no more sense. He had had fine times in stables with many a young woman and some not so young, but she wore modestly cut blue silk with a high neck right under her chin trimmed in snowy lace, and more spilling over her hands. A lady, and he avoided noblewomen like death. Playing haughty like a harp, expecting a man always to be at their beck and call. Not Mat Cauthon. Strangely, she was fanning herself with a spray of white plumes. Where was her maid? A knife. Why should she make him think of a knife? And . . . fire? Something burning, anyway.

Shaking his head, he tried to focus on what was important. Other men's memories, of battles and courts and lands vanished centuries ago, filled holes in his own, places where his own life suddenly went thin or was not there at all. He could remember fleeing the Two Rivers with Moiraine and Lan quite clearly for example, but almost nothing more until reaching Caemlyn, and there were gaps before and after, as well. If whole years of his own growing up lay beyond recall, why should he expect to recollect every woman he had met? Maybe she reminded him of some woman dead a thousand years or more; the Light knew that happened often enough. Even Birgitte sometimes tickled his memory. Well, there were four women here and now who had his brain tied in knots. They were what was important.

Nynaeve and the others were avoiding him as if he had fleas. Five times he had been to the palace, and the once they would see him, it was to say they were too busy for him and send him away like an errand boy. It all added up to one thing. They thought he would interfere with whatever they were up to, and the only reason he would do that was if they were putting themselves in danger. They were not complete fools; idiots often, but not complete fools. If they saw danger, there was danger. Some places in this city, being a stranger or showing a coin could bring a knife in your ribs, and not even channeling would stop it if they did not see in time. And here he was, with Nalesean and a dozen good men from the Band, not to mention Thom and Juilin, who actually had rooms in the servants' quarters of the palace, all left to twiddle their thumbs. Those thick-skulled women were going to get their throats cut yet. "Not if I can help it," he growled. "What?" Nalesean said. "Look. They're lining up, Mat. The Light burn my soul, I hope you're right. That piebald doesn't look half-crazed to me; he looks eager."

The horses were prancing, taking their places between tall poles stuck in the ground, with streamers tailing from the tops of them in a warm breeze, blue and green and every color, some striped. Five hundred paces down the track of hard-beaten red clay an identical number of streamered poles made another row. Each rider had to round the same-colored streamer as floated to his right at the start and then return. A booker stood at either end of the line of horses, just to the front, a round woman and a rounder man, each with a white scarf held overhead. The bookers took turns at this, and were not allowed to accept wagers on a race they started.

"Burn me," Nalesean muttered. "Light, man, be easy. You'll tickle your seamstress under the chin yet." A roar drowned the last word as the scarves came down, and the horses surged forward, even the sound of their hooves submerged in the noise of the crowd. In ten strides Wind had the lead, Olver lying close on his neck, with the silver-maned dun only a head back. The piebald trailed in the pack, where the riders' switches already rose and fell frantically.

"I told you the dun was dangerous," Nalesean moaned. "We shouldn't have wagered everything."

Mat did not bother to answer. He had another purse in his pocket and loose coins besides. He called the purse his seed; with that, with even a few of the coins in it, and a game of dice, he could repair his fortunes whatever happened this morning. Halfway down the course, Wind still held the lead, the dun clinging close a full length ahead of the next horse. The pie-bald was running fifth. After the turn would come the hazard; boys on trailing animals were known to slash at those who rounded the stakes ahead of them.

Following the horses, Mat's eyes swept across the sharp-faced woman again . . . and snapped back. The shouts and screams of the crowd faded. The woman was shaking her fan at the horses and jumping excitedly, but suddenly he saw her in pale green and a rich gray cloak, her hair caught in a frothy net of lace, skirts held up delicately as she picked her way across a stable not far from Caemlyn.

Rand still lay there moaning in the straw, even if the fever seemed gone; at least he was not shouting anymore at people who were not there. Mat eyed the woman suspiciously as she knelt beside Rand. Maybe she could help as she claimed, but Mat did not trust as he once had. What was a fine lady like this doing in a village stable? Caressing the ruby-tipped hilt of the dagger hidden by his coat, he wondered why he had ever trusted. It never paid. Never.

". . . weak as a day-old kitten," she was saying as she reached beneath her cloak. "I think. . . ."

A knife appeared in her hand so suddenly, streaking for Mat's throat, that he would have been dead if he had not been ready. Dropping flat, he seized her wrist, just pushing it away from him, the curved Shadar Logoth blade sweeping out to lie against her slim white neck. The woman froze, trying to look down at the sharp edge dimpling her skin. He wanted to slice. Especially when he saw where her own dagger had stabbed into the stable wall. Around the slim blade a black circle of char grew, and a thin gray tendril of smoke rose from wood about to burst into flame.

Shivering, Mat rubbed a hand across his eyes. Just carrying that Shadar Logoth knife had nearly killed him, eating those holes in his memories, but how could he forget a woman who tried to kill him? A Darkfriend—she had admitted as much—who tried to kill him with a dagger that set a bucket of water near boiling when they tossed it in after securing her in the tackroom. A Darkfriend who had been hunting Rand and him. What chance she was in Ebou Dar when he was, at the races on the same day? *Ta'veren* might be the answer—he liked thinking of that about as much he did the Horn of bloody

Valere—but the fact was, the Forsaken knew his name. That stable had not been the last time Darkfriends tried putting an end to Mat Cauthon.

He staggered as Nalesean suddenly began pounding his back. “Look at him, Mat! Light of heaven, look at him!”

The horses had rounded the far poles and were well on their way back. Head stretched out, mane and tail flying behind, Wind streaked down the course with Olver clinging to his back like a part of the saddle. The boy rode as if he had been born there. Four lengths behind, the piebald pounded furiously, rider working his switch in a futile effort to close. Just like that they slashed across the finish line, with the next nearest horse another three lengths back. The white-maned dun came last. The moans and mutters of losing bettors overwhelmed the shouts of winners. Losing tokens made a shower of white onto the track, and dozens of the bookers’ servants rushed out to clear them away before the next race. “We have to find that woman, Mat. I’d not put it past her to run off without paying out so much as she owes us.” From what Mat had heard, the bookers’ guild was more than harsh the first time one of its members tried anything of the sort, and deadly the second, but they were commoners, and that was enough for Nalesean.

“She’s standing right over there in plain view.” Mat gestured without taking his eyes from the fox-faced Darkfriend. Glaring at a token, she hurled it to the ground, and even lifted her skirts to stamp on it. Plainly not a wager on Wind. Still grimacing, she began threading her way through the crowd. Mat stiffened. She was leaving. “Gather our winnings, Nalesean, then take Olver back to the inn. If he misses his reading lesson, you’ll kiss the Dark One’s sister before Mistress Anan lets him out for another race.”

“Where are you going?”

“I saw a woman who tried to kill me,” Mat said over his shoulder.

“Give her a trinket next time,” Nalesean shouted after him. Following the woman was no trouble, with that white-plumed hat for a banner bobbing through the crowd on the other side. The earthen banks gave way to a large open area where brightly lacquered coaches and sedan chairs waited under the watchful eyes of drivers and bearers. Mat’s horse Pips was one of scores being guarded by members of the Ancient and Worshipful Guild of Stablemen. There was a guild for most things in Ebou Dar, and woe to anyone who trespassed on their ground. He paused, but she walked on by the conveyances that had brought those with position or money. No maid, and now not even a chair. No one walked in this heat who had money to ride. Had my Lady come on hard times?

The Silver Circuit lay just south of the tall white-plastered city wall, and she strolled up the hundred paces or so of road to the broad pointed arch of the Moldine Gate and in. Trying to appear casual, Mat followed. The gateway was ten spans of dim tunnel, but her hat stood out among the folk passing through. People who had to walk seldom wore plumes. She seemed to know where she was going on the other side. The plumes wove through the crowds ahead of him, unhurried but always moving forward.

Ebou Dar shone white in the morning sun. White palaces with white columns and screened wrought-iron balconies cheek-by-jowl with white-plastered weavers' shops and fishmongers and stables, great white houses with louvered shutters hiding their arched windows beside white inns with painted signs hanging in front and open markets under long roofs where live sheep and chickens, calves and geese and ducks made a barnyard din alongside their fellows already butchered and hanging. All white, stone or plaster, except here and there bands of red or blue or gold on turnip-shaped domes and pointed spires that had balconies running around them. There were squares everywhere, always with a statue larger than life on a pedestal or a splashing fountain that only emphasized the heat, always packed with people. Refugees filled the city, and merchants and traders of every sort. Never a trouble but brought profit to somebody. What Saldaea had once sent into Arad Doman now came downriver to Ebou Dar, and so did what Amadicia had traded into Tarabon. Everyone scurried, for a coin or a thousand, for a bite to eat today. The aroma that hung in the air was equal parts perfume, dust and sweat. Somehow, it all smelled desperate.

Barge-filled canals sliced through the city, crossed by dozens of bridges, some so narrow that two people would have to squeeze past one another, others large enough that shops actually lined them, hanging out over the water. On one of those, he suddenly realized that the white-plumed hat had stopped. People flowed around him as he did, too. The shops here were really just open wooden nooks, with heavy plank shutters that could be let down to close them off at night. Raised overhead now, the shutters displayed signs for the shops. The one above the plumed hat showed a golden scale and hammer, sign of the goldsmiths' guild, though plainly not of a particularly prosperous member. Through a momentary gap in the crowd, he saw her look back, and turned hurriedly to the narrow stall to his right. On the wall at the back hung finger rings, and boards displaying stones cut in all sorts of designs.

“My Lord wishes a new signet ring?” the birdlike fellow behind the counter asked, bowing and dry-washing his hands. Skinny as a rail, he had no worry of anyone stealing his goods. Cramped into a corner on a stool sat a one-eyed fellow who might have had trouble standing upright inside the cubicle, with a long cudgel studded with nail heads propped between his massive knees. “I can cut any design, as my Lord can see, and I have tryrings for the size, of course.”

“Let me see that one.” Mat pointed at random; he needed some reason to stand here until she went on. It might be a good time to decide exactly what he was going to do.

“A fine example of the long style, my Lord, much in favor now. Gold, but I work in silver, as well. Why, I think the size is right. If my Lord would care to try it on? My Lord may wish to examine the fine detail of the carving? Does my Lord prefer gold or silver?”

With a grunt that he hoped might be taken for answer to some of that, Mat shoved the proffered ring onto the second finger of his left hand and pretended to examine the dark oval of carved stone. All he really saw was that it was as long as the joint of his finger. Head down, he studied the woman from the corner of his eye the best he could through gaps that opened in the throng. She was holding a wide, flat gold necklace up to the light.

There was a Civil Guard in Ebou Dar, but not a very efficient one, seldom to be seen on the streets. If he denounced her, it would be his word against hers, and even if he was believed, a few coins might let her walk free even on that charge. The Civil Guard was cheaper than a magistrate, but either could be bought unless someone powerful was watching, and then if enough gold lay in the offer.

A swirl in the crowd suddenly turned into a Whitecloak, conical helmet and long mail shirt gleaming like silver, snowy cloak with the flaring golden sun billowing as he strode along confident that a path would clear for him. Which it certainly did; few willingly put themselves in the way of the Children of the Light. Yet for every eye that slid away from the stone-faced man, another beamed on him approvingly. The sharp-faced woman not only looked at him openly, she smiled. A charge laid against her might or might not put her in prison, but it could be the spark to ignite a city full of tales about Darkfriends in the Tarasin Palace. Whitecloaks were good at whipping up mobs, and to them, Aes Sedai *were* Darkfriends. As the Child of the Light passed her, she laid down the necklace, apparently regretful, and turned to go.

"Does the style suit my Lord?"

Mat gave a start. He had forgotten the skinny man and the ring, too. "No, I don't want—" Frowning, he tugged at the ring again. It would not budge!

"No need to pull; you might crack the stone." Now that he was no longer a potential customer, Mat was no longer my Lord, either. Sniffing, the fellow kept a sharp eye on him lest he try to run. "I have some grease. Deryl, where's that grease-pot?" The guard blinked and scratched his head as if wondering what a grease-pot was. The white-plumed hat was halfway to the end of the bridge already.

"I'll take it," Mat snapped. No time for haggling. Hauling a fistful of coins from his coat pocket, he slapped them down on the counter, mostly gold and a little silver. "Enough?"

The ringmaker's eyes bulged. "A little too much," he quavered uncertainly. His hands hesitated above the coins, then two fingers pushed a pair of silver pennies toward Mat. "So much?"

"Give them to Deryl," Mat growled as the bloody ring slipped from his finger. The skinny man was hurriedly raking up the rest of the coins. Too late to try backing out of the purchase. Mat wondered by just how much he had overpaid. Stuffing the ring into his pocket, he hastened after the Darkfriend. The hat was nowhere to be seen.

Twinned statues decorated the end of the bridge, pale marble women over a span tall, each with one breast bared and a hand raised to point toward something in the sky. In Ebou Dar, a bare chest symbolized openness and honesty. Ignoring stares, he climbed up beside one of the women, steadying himself with an arm around her waist. A street ran along the canal, and two more split off at angles ahead, all full of people and carts, sedan chairs and wagons and coaches. Someone shouted in a rough voice about real women being warmer, and a number in the crowd laughed. White plumes appeared from behind a blue-lacquered coach on the left-hand fork.

Leaping down, he pushed up the street after her, ignoring the curses of those he bumped. It was an odd chase. In the mass of people, with wagons and coaches constantly getting in his way, he could not keep a clear sight of the hat from the street. Scampering up the broad marble steps of a palace, he got another glimpse, then scurried back down to shove ahead. The rim of a tall fountain gave him yet another view, then an upended barrel against a wall, and a crate that had just been unloaded from an oxcart. Once he clung to the side of a wagon until the driver threatened him with her whip. With all the climbing and looking, he did not narrow the Darkfriend’s lead very much. But then, he still had no notion what to do if he caught her. Suddenly, when he hoisted himself up onto the narrow coping along the face of one of the big houses, she was not there anymore.

Frantically he looked up and down the street. The white plumes no longer waved through the crowd. In easy sight were half a dozen houses much like the one he was clinging to, several palaces of various sizes, two inns, three taverns, a cutler’s shop with a knife and a pair of scissors on its sign, a fishmonger with a board painted in fifty kinds of fish, two rugweavers with unrolled carpets spread on tables beneath awnings, a tailor’s shop and four cloth sellers, two shops displaying lacquerware, a goldsmith, a silversmith, a livery stable. . . . The list was too long. She could have gone into any of them. Or none. She might have taken a turn he had not seen.

Jumping down, he settled his hat, muttering under his breath . . . and saw her, almost at the top of the wide stairs leading to a palace nearly across from him, already half-hidden by the tall fluted columns out front. The palace was not large, with only two slim spires and a single pear-shaped dome banded in red, but Ebou Dari palaces always gave the ground floor to servants and kitchens and the like. The better rooms were high, to catch the breezes. Doormen liveried in black and yellow bowed deeply and swung the carved doors wide before she reached them. A servant inside curtsied, apparently saying something, and immediately turned to lead her deeper. She was known. He would have wagered everything on it.

For a while after the doors closed, he stood there studying the palace. Not the richest in the city by far, but only a noble would dare build its like. “But who in the Pit of Doom lives there?” he muttered finally, plucking off his hat to fan himself. Not her, not when she had to walk. A few questions in the taverns along the street would tell him. And word of his queries would seep to the palace, sure as dirt soiled your hands.

Someone said, “Carridin.” It was a scrawny, white-haired fellow lounging nearby in the shade. Mat looked at him questioningly, and he grinned, showing gaps in his teeth. His stooped shoulders and sad weathered face did not fit his fine gray coat. Despite a bit of lace at his neck, he was the very picture of hard times. “You asked who lived there. The Chelsaine Palace is let to Jaichim Carridin.”

Mat’s hat paused. “You mean the Whitecloak ambassador?”

“Aye. And Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light.” The old man tapped a gnarled finger against the side of his beak of a nose. Both looked to have been broken several times. “Not a man to bother unless you must, and then I’d think three times.”

Unconsciously Mat hummed a bit of “Storm from the Mountains.” Not a man to bother indeed. Questioners were the nastiest of the Whitecloaks. A Whitecloak Inquisitor who had a Darkfriend come to call.

“Thank you—” Mat gave a start. The fellow was gone, swallowed up in the crowd. Strange, but he had looked familiar. Maybe another long-dead acquaintance drifting out of those old memories. Maybe. . . . It hit him like an Illuminator’s nightflower exploding inside his head. A white-haired man with a hooked nose. That old man had been at the Silver Circuit, standing not far from the woman who had just gone into Carridin’s rented palace. Turning his hat in his hands, he frowned uneasily at the palace. The Mire never held a bog like this one. He could feel the dice tumbling in his head suddenly, and that was always a bad sign.

* * *

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CHAPTER

15

Insects

Carridin did not look up immediately from the letter he was writing when the Lady Shiaine, as she called herself, was shown in. Three ants struggled futilely in the wet ink, trapped. Everything else might be dying, but ants and cockroaches and every sort of vermin seemed to thrive. Carefully he pressed the blotter down. He was not about to begin again for a few ants. A failure to send this report, or a report of failure, might doom him as surely as those mired insects, yet it was fear of a different failure that tightened his guts.

He had no worry of Shiaine reading what he wrote. It was in a cipher known to only two men beside himself. So many bands of “Dragonsworn” at work, each stiffened by a core of his most trusted men, so many more who might be bandits or even truly sworn to that filth, al’Thor. Pedron Niall might not like that last, but his command had been to plunge Altara and Murandy into blood and chaos from which only Niall and the Children of the Light could rescue them, a madness clearly to be laid at the feet of this so-called Dragon Reborn, and that he had done. Fear held both countries by the throat. Tales that the witches marched across the same country were an added reward. Tar Valon witches and Dragonsworn, Aes Sedai carrying off young women and setting up false Dragons, villages in flames and men nailed to the doors of their barns—it was all one in half the street rumors, now. Niall would be pleased. And send more orders. How he expected Carridin to snatch Elayne Trakand out of the Tarasin Palace was beyond reason. Another ant skittered across the ivory-inlaid table onto the page, and his thumb stabbed down, destroying it. And smearing a word to illegibility. The entire report would need to be redone. He wanted a drink very badly. There was brandy in a crystal flask on the table by the door, but he did not want the woman to see him drinking. Suppressing a sigh, he shoved the letter aside and pulled a kerchief from his sleeve to wipe his hand. “So, Shiaine, do you finally have progress to report? Or have you just come for more money?”

She smiled at him lazily from a tall carved armchair. “There are expenses associated with a search,” she said in almost the accents of an Andoran noble. “Especially when we want no questions asked.”

Most people would have been unsettled by the sight of Jaichim Carridin, even cleaning a pen nib, with his steely face and deep-set eyes, the white tabard over his coat bearing the golden sunburst of the Children of the Light impressed upon the crimson shepherd’s crook of the Hand. Not Mili Skane. That was her real name, though she did not know he knew. A saddler’s daughter from a village near Whitebridge, she had gone to the White Tower at fifteen, another thing she thought secret. It was hardly the best start, becoming a Friend of the Dark because the witches told her she could not learn to channel, but before that year was out she had not only found a circle in Caemlyn but made her first kill. In the seven years since, she had added nineteen more. She was one of the best assassins available, and a hunter who could find anyone or anything. That much he had been told when she was sent to him. A circle reported to her now. Several of them actually were nobles and almost all were older, but neither thing mattered among those who served the Great Lord. Another circle working for Carridin was led by a gnarled beggar with one eye, no teeth and a habit of bathing only once in the year. Had circumstances been different, Carridin himself would have knelt to Old Cully, the only name the stinking villain admitted to. Mili Skane surely groveled for Old Cully, and so did every last companion of her circle, noble or not. It irritated Carridin that “Lady Shiaine” would be on her knees in a flash if the straggly-haired old beggar entered the room, but for him sat with her legs crossed, smiling and twitching her slippered foot as if impatient to be done. She had been ordered to obey him absolutely, by one even Old Cully would grovel for, and besides, he had a desperate need of success. Niall’s schemes could go to dust, but not this.

“Many things can be excused,” he said, laying the pen on its ivory stand and shoving back his chair, “for those who accomplish the tasks they are given.” He was a tall man, and he loomed threateningly. He was well aware that the gilt-framed mirrors on the wall showed a figure of strength, a dangerous man. “Even dresses and baubles and gambling, paid for with coin that was to go for information.” That twitching foot froze for instant, then began again, but her smile was forced, her face pale. Her circle obeyed her instantly, but they would string her up by the heels and skin her alive if he spoke the word. “You have not accomplished very much, have you? In fact, you do not seem to have accomplished anything.”

“There are difficulties, as you well know,” she said breathily. She managed to meet his eyes squarely, though.

“Excuses. Tell me of difficulties surmounted, not those you stumble over and fall. You can fall a long way if you fail in this.” Turning his back, he strode to the nearest window. He could fall a long way, too, and he did not want to risk her seeing anything in his eyes. Sunlight slanted through the ornate stone screen. The high-ceilinged room, with its green-and-white-tiled floor and bright blue walls, stayed comparatively cool behind the thick walls of the palace, but the heat outside seeped in near the windows. He could almost feel the brandy across the room. He could not wait for her to be gone.

“My Lord Carridin, how can I have anyone ask too openly about objects of the Power? That *will* cause questions, and there are Aes Sedai in the city, you will recall.”

Peering down at the street through the scroll-carvings, he wrinkled his nose at the smell. Every sort was jammed together down there. An Arafellin with his hair in two long braids and a curved sword on his back tossed a coin to a one-armed beggar, who scowled at the gift before tucking it under his rags and resuming his piteous cries to the passersby. A fellow in a torn, bright red coat and even brighter yellow breeches came running from a shop clutching a bolt of cloth to his chest, pursued by a shouting pale-haired woman who had her skirts pulled above her knees and was outpacing the burly guard who lumbered behind her waving his truncheon. The driver of a red-lacquered coach with the moneylenders’ gold coins and open hand on the door shook his whip at the driver of a canvas-covered wagon whose team had become entangled with the coach’s, the pair filling the street with curses. Grimy street urchins crouched behind a dilapidated cart while they snatched puny, shriveled fruit brought in from the country. A Taraboner woman pushed her way through the crowd, veiled, her dark hair in thin braids, drawing every male eye in her dusty red dress that shaped itself to her form shamelessly.

“My Lord, I must have time. I *must*! I cannot do the impossible, certainly not in days.”

Trash, all of them. Grubbers for gold and Hunters for the Horn, thieves, refugees, even Tinkers. Scum. Riots would be easy to start, a purge for all this filth. Outlanders were always the first targets, always to blame for whatever was wrong, along with neighbors who had the misfortune to be on the wrong side of grudges, women who peddled herbs and cures, and folk with no friends, especially if they lived alone. Properly guided, as carefully as such things could be, a good riot might well burn the Tarasin Palace down around that useless jade Tylin and the witches as well. He glared at the swarm below. Riots did tend to get out of hand; the Civil Guard might stir itself, and inevitably a handful of true Friends would be snapped up. He could not afford the chance that some of those might be from the circles he had hunting. For that matter, even a few days of rioting would disrupt their work. Tylin was not important enough for that; she did not matter at all, in truth. No, not yet. Niall, he could afford to disappoint, but not his true master.

“My Lord Carridin. . . .” A note of defiance had entered Shiaine’s voice. He had let her stew too long. “My Lord Carridin, some of my circle question why we are looking for. . . .”

He started to turn, to put her down hard—he needed success, not excuses, not questions!—but her voice dwindled to nothing as his eyes fell on a young man standing diagonally across the street, in a blue coat with enough red-and-gold embroidery on the sleeves and lapels for two nobles. Taller than most, he was fanning himself with a broad-brimmed black hat and adjusting his neck scarf as he spoke to a stooped, white-haired man. Carridin recognized the young man.

Suddenly he felt as though a knotted rope had been fastened around his head and was being drawn ever tighter. For an instant a face hidden behind a red mask filled his vision. Night-dark eyes stared at him, and then were endless caverns of flame, and still staring. Within his head, the world exploded in fire, cascading images that battered him and swept him beyond screaming. The forms of three young men stood unsupported in air, and one of them began to glow, the form of the man in the street, brighter and brighter till it must have seared any living eyes to ash, brighter still, burning. A curled golden horn sped toward him, its cry pulling his soul, then flashed into a ring of golden light, swallowing him, chilling him until the last fragment of him that recalled his name was sure his bones must splinter. A ruby-tipped dagger hurdled straight at him, curved blade striking him between the eyes and sinking in, in, until gold-wrapped hilt and all was gone, and he knew agony that washed away all thought that what had gone before was pain. He would have prayed to a Creator he had long abandoned if he remembered how. He would have shrieked if he remembered how, if he remembered that humans shrieked, that he was human. On and on, more and more. . . .

Raising a hand to his forehead, he wondered why it trembled. His head ached, too. There had been something. . . . He gave a start at the street below. Everything was changed in the blink of an eye, the people different, wagons moved, colorful coaches and chairs replaced by others. Worse, Cauthon was gone. He wanted to swallow that whole flask of brandy in one gulp.

Suddenly he realized that Shiaine had stopped talking. He turned, ready to continue putting her in her place.

She was leaning forward in the act of rising, one hand on the arm of her chair, the other raised in a gesture. Her narrow face was fixed in petulant defiance, but not at Carridin. She did not move. She did not blink. He was not sure she breathed. He barely noticed her.

“Ruminating?” Sammael said. “Can I at least hope that it is about what you are here to find for me?” He stood only a little taller than average, a muscular, solid man in a coat of the high-collared Illianer style, so covered with gold-work it was hard to tell the cloth was green, but more than being one of the Chosen gave him stature. His blue eyes were colder than winter’s heart. A livid scar burned down his face from golden hairline to the edge of golden, square-cut beard, and it seemed a suitable decoration. Whatever got in his way was brushed aside, trampled or obliterated. Carridin knew Sammael would have turned his bowels to water if the man had been just someone met by chance.

Hurriedly moving from the window, he dropped to his knees before the Chosen. He despised the Tar Valon witches; indeed, he despised anyone who used the One Power, meddling with what had broken the world once, wielding what mere mortals should not touch. This man used the Power, too, but the Chosen could not be called mere mortals. Perhaps not mortals at all. And if he served well, neither would he be. “Great Master, I saw Mat Cauthon.”

“Here?” Oddly, for a moment, Sammael seemed taken aback. He murmured something under his breath, and the blood drained from Carridin’s face at one caught word.

“Great Lord, you know I would never betray—”

“You? Fool! You haven’t the stomach. Are you certain it was Cauthon you saw?”

“Yes, Great Master. In the street. I know I can find him again.”

Sammael frowned down at him, stroking his beard, looking through and beyond Jaichim Carridin. Carridin did not like feeling insignificant, especially when he knew it was true.

“No,” Sammael said finally. “Your search is the most important thing, the *only* thing, so far as you are concerned. Cauthon’s death would be convenient, certainly, but not if it draws attention here. If it appears that attention is already here, should he take an interest in your search, then he dies, but otherwise, he can wait.”

“But—”

“Did you mishear me?” Sammael’s scar pulled his smile into a snarl on one side. “I saw your sister Vanora recently. She did not look well, at first. Screaming and weeping, twitching constantly and pulling at her hair. Women do suffer worse than men from the attentions of Myrddraal, but even Myrddraal must find their pleasures somewhere. Don’t worry that she suffered too long. The Trollocs are always hungry.” The smile faded; his voice was stone. “Those who disobey can find themselves over a cookfire, too. Vanora seemed to be smiling, Carridin. Do you think you would smile, turning on a spit?”

Carridin swallowed in spite of himself, and quelled a pang for Vanora, with her ready laugh and her skill with horses, daring to gallop where others feared to walk. She had been his favorite sister, yet she was dead and he was not. If there were any mercies in the world, she had not learned why. “I live to serve and obey, Great Master.” He did not believe he was a coward, but no one disobeyed one of the Chosen. Not more than once.

“Then find what I want!” Sammael roared. “I know it’s hidden somewhere in this *kjasic* flyspeck of a city! *Ter’angreal, angreal,* even *sa’angreal*! I have tracked them, traced them! Now you find them, Carridin. Do not make me grow impatient.”

“Great Master. . . .” He worked his mouth to find moisture. “Great Master, there are witches . . . Aes Sedai . . . here. I cannot be sure how many. If they hear a whisper. . . .”

Waving him to silence, Sammael paced a few quick steps, three times up and back, hands clasped behind his back. He did not look worried, only . . . considering. Finally he nodded. “I will send you . . . someone . . . to deal with these *Aes Sedai*.” He barked a short laugh. “I almost wish I could see their faces. Very well. You have a little while longer. Then perhaps someone else will have a chance.” He lifted a strand of Shiaine’s hair with a finger; she still did not move; her eyes stared unblinking. “This child would certainly leap at the opportunity.” Carridin fought down a stab of fear. The Chosen cast down as quickly as they raised up, and as often. Failure never went unpunished. “Great Master, the favor I asked of you. If I might know. . . . Have you . . . will you—?”

“There is very little luck in you, Carridin,” Sammael said with another smile. “You had better hope you have more carrying out my orders. It seems that someone is making sure at least some of Ishamael’s commands are still carried out.” He was smiling, but he seemed far from amused. Or perhaps it was just the scar. “You failed him, and you’ve lost your entire family for it. Only my hand protects you, now. Once, long ago, I saw three Myrddraal make a man give them his wife and his daughters one by one, then beg them to cut off his right leg, then the left, then his arms, and burn out his eyes.” The perfectly ordinary conversational tone made the recitation worse than any shouts or snarls ever could have. “It was a game with them, you understand, to see how much they could make him beg them to take. They left his tongue for last, of course, but there wasn’t a great deal of him remaining by then. He had been quite powerful, handsome and famous. Envied. No one would ever envy what they finally tossed to the Trollocs. You wouldn’t believe the sounds it made. Find what I want, Carridin. You will not like it if I withdraw my hand.”

Abruptly there was a vertical line of light in the air before the Chosen. It seemed to turn in some fashion, widening as it did into a square . . . hole. Carridin gaped. He was staring through a hole in the air, at somewhere full of gray columns and thick mist. Sammael stepped through, and the opening snapped shut, a brilliant bar of light that vanished, leaving only a purple afterimage glowing in Carridin’s eyes.

Unsteadily, he pushed himself to his feet. Failure was always punished, but no one survived disobeying one of the Chosen.

Suddenly Shiaine moved, completing her halted rise from the chair. “You mark me, *Bors*,” she began, then cut off, staring at the window where he had been standing. Her eyes darted, found him, and she jumped. He could have been one of the Chosen himself from the way those eyes bulged.

No one survived disobeying the Chosen. He pressed his hands against his temples. His head felt tight to bursting. “There is a man in the city, Mat Cauthon. You will—” She gave a small start, and he frowned. “You know him?”

“I have heard the name,” she said warily. And angrily, he would have said. “Few linked to al’Thor remain unknown for long.” As he stepped closer, she crossed her arms protectively in front of herself, and held her place with an obvious effort. “What is a seedy farmboy doing in Ebou Dar? How did he—?”

“Don’t bother me with foolish questions, Shiaine.” His head had never hurt like this; never. It felt as though a dagger was being driven into his skull between his eyes. No one survived. . . . “You will put your circle to locating Cauthon immediately. All of them.” Old Cully was coming tonight, slipping in through the back of the stables; she did not need to know there would be others. “Nothing else is to get in the way.”

“But I thought—”

She broke off with a gasp as he seized her neck. A slim dagger appeared in her hand, but he wrenched it away. She twisted and jerked, but he drove her face down onto the table, her cheek smudging still-damp ink on the discarded letter to Pedron Niall. The dagger, stabbing down just in front of her eyes, froze her. By chance, the blade piercing the paper had caught an ant by the tip of one leg. It struggled as vainly as she had.

“You are an insect, Mili.” The pain in his head made his voice rasp. “It is time you understand that. One insect is much like another, and if one won’t do. . . .” Her eyes followed his thumb down, and when it flattened on the ant, she flinched.

“I live to serve and obey, master,” she breathed. She had said that to Old Cully every time he saw them together, but never before to him.

“And this is how you will obey. . . .” No one survived disobedience. No one.

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CHAPTER
16

A Touch on the Cheek

The Tarasin Palace was a mass of shining marble and white plaster, with screened balconies of white-painted wrought iron and columned walks as much as four stories above the ground. Pigeons wheeled around pointed domes and tall, balcony-wreathed spires banded in red and green tiles, glittering in the sun. Sharp-arched gates in the palace itself led to various courtyards, and more pierced the high wall hiding the gardens, but deep, snowy white steps ten spans wide climbed on the side facing Mol Hara Square to great doors carved in coiling patterns like the balcony screens and covered with beaten gold.

The dozen or so guards lined up before those doors, sweating in the sun, wore gilded breastplates over green coats and baggy white trousers stuffed into dark green boots. Green cords secured thick twists of white cloth around glittering golden helmets, with the long ends hanging down their backs. Even their halberds and the scabbards of their daggers and short swords shone with gold. Guards for being looked at, not fighting. But then, when Mat reached the top, he could see swordsmen’s calluses on their hands. Always before he had entered through one of the stableyards, to peruse the palace horses in passing, but this time he was going in the way a lord would.

“The Light’s blessing on all here,” he said to their officer, a man not much older than he. Ebou Dari were polite people. “I’ve come to leave a message for Nynaeve Sedai and Elayne Sedai. Or to give it to them, if they’ve returned.” The officer stared at him, looked at the stairs in consternation. Gold cord as well as green on his pointed helmet signified some rank Mat did not know, and he carried a gilded rod instead of a halberd, with a sharp end and a hook like an ox-goad. By his expression, no one had ever come up that way before. Studying Mat’s coat, he mulled it over visibly, and at last decided he could not tell him to go away. With a sigh, the man murmured a benison in return and asked Mat's name, pushed open a small door in one of the larger and ushered him into a grand entry hall encircled by five stone-railed balconies beneath a domed ceiling painted like the sky, complete with clouds and a sun.

The guard's snapping fingers summoned a slim young serving woman in a white dress, sewn up on the left to show green petticoats and embroidered on the left breast with a green Anchor and Sword. She scurried across the red-and-blue marble floor looking startled, curtsying to Mat and the officer each. Short black hair framed a sweetly pretty face, with silken olive skin, and her livery had the deep narrow neckline common to all women except nobles in Ebou Dar. For once, Mat did not really notice. When she heard what he wanted, her big black eyes widened even more. Aes Sedai were not unpopular in Ebou Dar, exactly, but most Ebou Dari would go a long distance out of their way to avoid one.

"Yes, Sword-Lieutenant," she said, bobbing again. "Of course, Sword-Lieutenant. May it please you to follow me, my Lord?" It did.

Outside, Ebou Dar sparkled white, but inside, color ran wild. There seemed to be miles of broad corridor in the palace, and here the high ceiling was blue and the walls yellow, there the walls pale red and the ceiling green, changing with every turn, combinations to jar any eye but a Tinker's. Mat's boots sounded loud on floor tiles that made patterns of two or three or sometimes four colors in diamonds or stars or triangles. Wherever hallways crossed the floor was a mosaic of tiny tiles, intricate swirls and scrolls and loops. A few silk tapestries displayed scenes of the sea, and arched niches held carved crystal bowls and small statues and yellow Sea Folk porcelain that would fetch a fine penny anywhere. Occasionally a liveried servant hurried along silently, often as not carrying a silver tray, or a golden.

Normally, displays of wealth made Mat feel comfortable. For one thing, where there was money, some might stick to his fingers. This time he felt impatient, more so by the step. And anxious. The last time he had felt the dice rolling so hard in his head was just before he found himself with three hundred of the Band, a thousand of Gaebril's White Lions on a ridge to his front and another thousand coming hard up the road behind him, when all he had been trying to do was ride away from the entire mess. That time he had avoided the chop by the grace of other men's memories and more luck than he had a right to. The dice almost always meant danger, and something else he had not figured out yet. The prospect of having his skull cracked was not enough, and once or twice there had been no possibility of such, yet the upcoming likelihood of Mat Cauthon dead in some spectacular fashion seemed the most usual cause. Unlikely, maybe, in the Tarasin Palace, but unlikely did not make the dice go away. He was going to leave his message, grab Nynaeve and Elayne by the scruff of the neck if he had an opportunity, give them a talking-to that made their ears glow, and then get out.

The young woman glided ahead of him until they reached a short, bullish man a little older than she, another servant, in tight white breeches, a white shirt with wide sleeves, and a long green vest with the Anchor and Sword of House Mitsobar in a white disc. “Master Jen,” she said, curtsying once more, “this is Lord Mat Cauthon, who wishes to leave a message for the honored Elayne Aes Sedai and the honored Nynaeve Aes Sedai.”

“Very good, Haesel. You may go.” He bowed to Mat. “May it please you to follow me, my Lord?”

Jen led him as far as a dark, grim-faced woman short of her middle years, and bowed. “Mistress Carin, this is Lord Mat Cauthon, who wishes to leave a message for the honored Elayne Aes Sedai and the honored Nynaeve Aes Sedai.”

“Very good, Jen. You may go. May it please you to follow me, my Lord?”

Carin took him up a sweeping flight of marble stairs, the risers painted yellow and red, to a skinny woman named Matilde, who handed him over to a stout fellow named Bren, who led him to a balding man named Madic, each a little older than the one before. Where five corridors met like the spokes of a wheel, Madic left him with a round woman called Laren, who had a touch of gray at her temples and a stately carriage. Like Carin and Matilde, she wore what the Ebou Dari called a marriage knife, hanging hilt down from a close-fitting silver necklace between more than plump breasts. Five white stones in the hilt, two set in red, and four red stones, one surrounded by black, said three of her nine children were dead, two sons in duels. Rising out of her curtsy to Mat, Laren began to float up one of the hallways, but he hurried to catch her arm.

Dark eyebrows rose slightly as she glanced at his hand. She had no dagger except the marriage knife, but he released her immediately. Custom said she could only use that on her husband, yet there was no point in pushing. He did not soften his voice, though. “How far do I have to go to leave a note? Show me to their rooms. A pair of Aes Sedai shouldn’t be that hard to find. This isn’t the bloody White Tower.”

“Aes Sedai?” a woman said behind him in a heavy Illianer accent. “If you do seek two Aes Sedai, you have found two.”

Laren’s face did not change, or almost not. Her nearly black eyes darted past him, and he was sure they tightened with worry.

Doffing his hat, Mat turned wearing an easy smile. With that silver foxhead around his neck, Aes Sedai did not put him off at all. Well, not very much. It had those flaws. Maybe the smile was not that easy.

The two women confronting him could not have been more different. One was slender, with a fetching smile, in a green-and-gold dress that showed a hint of what he judged to be a fine bosom. Except for that ageless face, he might have thought to strike up a conversation. It was a pretty face, with eyes large enough for a man to sink into. A pity. The other had the agelessness too, but seeing it took him a moment. He thought she was scowling until he realized that must be her normal expression. Her dark, almost black, dress covered her to the wrists and chin, for which he was grateful. She looked scrawny as an old bramble. She looked as if she ate brambles for breakfast.

“I’m trying to leave a message for Nynaeve and Elayne,” he told them. “This woman—” He blinked, looking down each of the corridors. Servants hurried by, but Laren was nowhere in sight. He would not have thought she could move so fast. “Anyway, I want to leave a note.” Suddenly cautious, he added, “Are you friends of theirs?”

“Not exactly,” the pretty one said. “I am Joline, and this is Teslyn. And you are Mat Cauthon.” Mat’s stomach tightened. Nine Aes Sedai in the palace, and he had to walk into the two who followed Elaida. And one of them Red. Not that he had anything to fear. He lowered his hand to his side before it could touch the foxhead under his clothes.

The one who ate brambles—Teslyn—stepped closer. She was a Sitter, according to Thom, though what a Sitter was doing here even Thom did not understand. “We would be their friends if we could. They do need friends, Master Cauthon, as do you.” Her eyes tried to dig holes in his head.

Joline moved to flank him, laying a hand on his lapel. He would have considered that smile inviting from another woman. She was Green Ajah. “They are on dangerous ground and blind to what lies beneath their feet. I know you are their friend. You might show it by telling them to abandon this nonsense before it is too late. Foolish children who go too far can find themselves punished quite severely."

Mat wanted to back away; even Teslyn stood close enough to be almost touching him. Instead he put on his most insolent grin. It had always landed him in trouble back home, but it seemed appropriate. Those dice in his head could have nothing to do with this pair, or they would have stopped spinning. And he did have the medallion. "They see pretty well, I'd say." Nynaeve badly needed to be snatched down a peg or six, and Elayne even more, but he was not about to stand by and listen to this woman talk Nynaeve down. If that meant defending Elayne too, so be it. "Maybe you should abandon your nonsense." Joline's smile vanished, but Teslyn replaced it with one of her own, a razored smile.

"We do know about you, Master Cauthon." She looked a woman who wanted to skin something, and whoever was handy would do. "*Ta'veren*, it do be said. With dangerous associations of your own. That do be more than hearsay."

Joline's face was ice. "A young man in your position who wished to be assured of his future could do much worse than seek the protection of the Tower. You should never have left it."

His stomach clenched tighter. What else did they know? Surely not about the medallion. Nynaeve and Elayne knew, and Adeleas and Vandene, and the Light only knew who they had told, but surely not this pair. There was worse than *ta'veren* or the foxhead, though, or even Rand, as far as he was concerned. If they knew about the bloody Horn. . . . Abruptly he was yanked away from them so hard that he stumbled and nearly dropped his hat. A slender woman with a smooth face and nearly white hair gathered at the back of her neck had him by sleeve and lapel. Reflexively Teslyn seized him the same way on the other side. He recognized the straight-backed newcomer in her plain gray dress, in a way. She was either Adeleas or Vandene, two sisters—real sisters, not just Aes Sedai—who might as well have been twins; he never could tell them apart for certain. She and Teslyn stared at one another, chill and serene, two cats with a paw on the same mouse.

"No need to tear my coat off," he growled, trying to shrug free. "My coat?" He was not sure they heard. Even wearing the foxhead he was not prepared to go as far as prying their fingers free—unless he had to.

Two other Aes Sedai accompanied whichever sister it was, though one, a dark, stocky woman with inquisitive eyes, was marked by no more than the Great Serpent ring and the brown-fringed shawl she wore, displaying the white Flame of Tar Valon among vines on her back. She appeared to be just a little older than Nynaeve, which made her Sareitha Tomares, only two years or so Aes Sedai.

"Do you stoop to kidnapping men in the halls now, Teslyn?" the other said. "A man who cannot channel can hardly be of interest to you." Short and pale in lace-trimmed gray slashed with blue, she was all cool ageless elegance and confident smile. A Cairhienin accent identified her. He had certainly attracted the top dogs in the yard. Thom had not been sure whether Joline or Teslyn was in charge of Elaida's embassy, but Merilille led the one from those idiots who had tricked Egwene into becoming their Amyrlin.

Mat could have shaved with Teslyn's return smile. "Do no dissemble with me, Merilille. Mat Cauthon do be of considerable interest. He should no be running loose." As if he was not standing there listening!

"Don't fight over me," he said. Tugging his coat was not making anyone let go. "There's enough to go around."

Five sets of eyes made him wish he had kept his mouth shut. Aes Sedai had no sense of humor. He pulled a little harder, and Vandene—or Adeleas—jerked back hard enough to pull the coat out of *his* hand. Vandene, he decided. She was Green, and he had always thought she wanted to turn him upside down and shake the secret of the medallion out of him. Whichever she was, she smiled, part knowing, part amused. He saw nothing funny. The others did not look at him long. He might as well have vanished.

"What he needs," Joline said firmly, "is to be taken into custody. For his own protection, and more. Three *ta'veren* coming out of a single village? And one of them the Dragon Reborn? Master Cauthon should be sent to the White Tower immediately." And he had thought her pretty.

Merilille only shook her head. "You overestimate your situation here, Joline, if you think I will simply allow you to take the boy."

"You overestimate yours, Merilille." Joline stepped closer, until she was looking down at the other woman. Her lips curved, superior and condescending. "Or do you understand that it's only a wish not to offend Tylin that keeps us from confining all of you on bread and water until you can be returned to the Tower?"

Mat expected Merilille to laugh in her face, but she shifted her head slightly as if she really wanted to break away from Joline's gaze.

"You would not dare." Sareitha wore Aes Sedai tranquility like a mask, face smooth and hands calmly adjusting her shawl, but her breathy voice shouted that it was a mask.

"These are children's games, Joline," Vandene murmured dryly. Surely that was who she was. She was the only one of the three who really did appear unruffled.

Faint splashes of color blossomed on Merilille's cheeks as if the white-haired woman had spoken to her, but her own gaze steadied. "You can hardly expect us to go meekly," she told Joline firmly, "and there are five of us. Seven, counting Nynaeve and Elayne." The last was a clear afterthought, and reluctant at that.

Joline arched an eyebrow. Teslyn's bony fingers did not loosen their grip any more than Vandene's, but she studied Joline and Merilille with an unreadable expression. Aes Sedai were a country of strangers, where you never knew what to expect until it was too late. There were deep currents here. Deep currents around Aes Sedai could snatch a man to his death without them so much as noticing. Maybe it was time to start prying at fingers.

Laren's sudden reappearance saved him the effort. Struggling to control her breath as if she had been running, the plump woman spread her skirts in a curtsy markedly deeper than she had given him. "Forgiveness for disturbing you, Aes Sedai, but the Queen summons Lord Cauthon. Forgiveness, please. It's more than my ears are worth if I don't bring him straight away."

The Aes Sedai looked at her, all of them, till she began to fidget; then the two groups stared at one another as if trying to see who could out–Aes Sedai who. And then they looked at him. He wondered whether anybody was going to move.

"I can't keep the Queen waiting, now can I?" he said cheerily. From the sniffs, you would have thought he had pinched somebody's bottom. Even Laren's brows drew down in disapproval.

"Release him, Adeleas," Merilille said finally.

He frowned as the white-haired woman complied. Those two ought to wear little signs with their names, or different-color hair ribbons or something. She gave him another of those amused, knowing smiles. He hated that. It was a woman’s trick, not just Aes Sedai, and they usually did not know anything at all like what they wanted you to believe. “Teslyn?” he said. The grim Red still had hold of his coat with both hands. She peered up at him, ignoring everyone else. “The Queen?”

Merilille opened her mouth and hesitated, obviously changing what she had been going to say. “How long do you intend to stand here holding him, Teslyn? Perhaps you will explain to Tylin why her summons is disregarded.”

“Consider well who you do tie yourself to, Master Cauthon,” Teslyn said, still looking only at him. “Wrong choices can lead to an unpleasant future, even for a *ta’veren.* Consider well.” Then she let go.

As he followed Laren, he did not allow himself to show his eagerness to be away, but he did wish the woman would walk a little faster. She glided along ahead of him, regal as any queen. Regal as any Aes Sedai. When they reached the first turning, he looked over his shoulder. The five Aes Sedai were still standing there, staring after him. As if his look had been a signal, they exchanged silent glances and went, each in a different direction. Adeleas came toward him, but a dozen steps before reaching him she smiled at him again and disappeared through a doorway. Deep currents. He preferred swimming where his feet could touch the bottom of the pond.

Laren was waiting around the corner, hands on broad hips and her face much too smooth. Beneath her skirts, he suspected, her foot was tapping impatiently. He gave her his most winning smile. Giggling girls or gray-haired grandmothers, women softened for that one; it had won him kisses and eased him out of predicaments more often than he could count. It was almost as good as flowers. “That was neatly done, and I thank you. I’m sure the Queen doesn’t really want to see me.” If she did, he did not want to see her. Everything he thought about nobles was tripled for royalty. Nothing he had found in those old memories changed that, and some of those fellows had spent considerable time around kings and queens and the like. “Now, if you will just show me where Nynaeve and Elayne stay. . . .”

Strangely, the smile did not seem to have any effect. “I would not lie, Lord Cauthon. It would be more than my ears are worth. The Queen is waiting, my Lord. You are a very brave man,” she added, turning, then said something more under her breath. “Or a very great fool.” He doubted he had been supposed to hear that.

A choice between going to see the Queen and wandering miles of corridor until he stumbled on somebody who would tell him what he wanted to know? He went to see the Queen.

Tylin Quintara, by the Grace of the Light, Queen of Altara, Mistress of the Four Winds, Guardian of the Sea of Storms, High Seat of House Mitsobar, awaited him in a room with yellow walls and a pale blue ceiling, standing before a huge white fireplace with a stone lintel carved into a stormy sea. She was well worth seeing, he decided. Tylin was not young—the shiny black hair cascading over her shoulders had gray at the temples, and faint lines webbed the corners of her eyes—nor was she exactly pretty, though the two thin scars on her cheeks had nearly vanished with age. Handsome came closer. But she was . . . imposing. Large dark eyes regarded him majestically, an eagle's eyes. She had little real power—a man could ride beyond her writ in two or three days and still have a lot of Altara ahead—but he thought she might make even an Aes Sedai step back. Like Isebele of Dal Calain, who had made the Amyrlin Anghara come to her. That was one of the old memories; Dal Calain had vanished in the Trolloc Wars.

"Majesty," he said, sweeping his hat wide in a bow and flourishing an imaginary cloak, "by your summons do I come." Imposing or not, it was hard to keep his eyes away from the not small lace-trimmed oval where her white-sheathed marriage-knife hung. A very nicely rounded sight indeed, yet the more bosom a woman displayed, the less she wanted you to look. Openly, at least. White-sheathed; but he already knew she was a widow. Not that it mattered. He would as soon tangle himself with that fox-faced Darkfriend as with a queen. Not looking at all was difficult, but he managed. Most likely she would call guards rather than draw the gem-encrusted dagger thrust behind a woven-gold belt to match the collar her marriage knife hung from. Maybe that was why the dice were still rolling in his head. The possibility of an encounter with the headsman would set them spinning if anything did.

Layered silk petticoats rippled white and yellow as she crossed the room and walked slowly all the way around him. "You speak the Old Tongue," she said once she stood in front of him again. Her voice was low-pitched and musical. Without waiting for a reply, she glided to a chair and sat, adjusting her green skirts. An unconscious gesture; her gaze remained fixed on him. He thought she could probably tell when his smallclothes had been washed last. “You wish to leave a message. I have what is necessary.” A lace fall at her wrist swayed as she gestured to a small writing table standing beneath a gilt-framed mirror. All the furnishings were gilded and carved like bamboo.

Tall triple-arched windows opening onto a wrought-iron balcony admitted a sea breeze that was surprisingly pleasant, if not exactly cool, yet Mat felt hotter than in the street, and it had nothing to do with her stare. *Deyeniye, dyu ninte concion ca’lyet ye.* That was what he had said. The bloody Old Tongue popping out of his mouth again without him knowing it. He had thought he had that little bother under control. No telling when those bloody dice would stop or for what. Best to keep his eyes to himself and his mouth shut as much as possible. “I thank you, Majesty.” He made very sure of those words.

Thick sheets of pale paper already waited on the slanted table, at a comfortable height for writing. He propped his hat against the table leg. He could see her in the mirror. Watching. Why had he let his tongue run loose? Dipping a golden pen—what else would a queen have?—he composed what he wanted to write in his head before bending over the paper with an arm curled around it. His hand was awkward and square. He had no love of writing.

> *I followed a Darkfriend to the palace Jaichim Carridin is renting. She tried to kill me once, and maybe Rand as well. She was greeted like an old friend of the house.*

For a moment he studied that, biting the end of the pen before realizing he was scoring the soft gold. Maybe Tylin would not notice. They needed to know about Carridin. What else? He added a few more reasonably worded lines. The last thing he wanted was to put their backs up.

> *Be sensible. If you have to go traipsing around, let me send a few men along to keep you from having your heads split open. Anyway, isn’t it about time I took you back to Egwene? There’s nothing here but heat and flies, and we can find plenty of those in Caemlyn.*

There. They could not ask for pleasanter than that.

Blotting the page carefully, he folded it four times. Sand in a small golden bowl covered a coal. He puffed on it till it glowed, then used it to light a candle and picked up the stick of red wax. As the sealing wax dripped onto the edges of the paper, it suddenly struck him that he had a signet ring in his pocket. Just something the ringmaker had carved to show his skill, but better than a plain lump. The ring was slightly longer than the pool of solidifying wax, yet most of the sigil took.

For the first time he got a good look at what he had bought. Inside a border of large crescents, a running fox seemed to have startled two birds into flight. That made him grin. Too bad it was not a hand, for the Band, but appropriate enough. He certainly needed to be crafty as a fox to keep up with Nynaeve and Elayne, and if they were not exactly flighty, well. . . . Besides, the medallion had made him fond of foxes. He scrawled Nynaeve's name on the outside, and then Elayne's, as an afterthought. One or the other, they should see it soon.

Turning with the sealed letter held in front of him, he gave a start as his knuckles brushed against Tylin's bosom. He stumbled back against the writing table, staring and trying not to turn red. Staring at her face; just her face. He had not heard her approach. Best to simply ignore the brushing, not embarrass her any further. She probably thought he was a clumsy lout as it was. "There is something in this you should know, Majesty." Insufficient room remained between them to lift the letter. "Jaichim Carridin is entertaining Darkfriends, and I don't mean arresting them."

"You are certain? Of course you are. No one would make that charge without being certain." A furrow creased her forehead, but she gave her head a shake and the frown disappeared. "Let us speak of more pleasant things."

He could have yelped. He told her the Whitecloak ambassador to her court was a Darkfriend, and all she did was grimace?

"You are Lord Mat Cauthon?" There was just a hint of question in the title. Her eyes minded him more than ever of an eagle's. A queen could not like someone coming to her pretending to be a lord.

"Just Mat Cauthon." Something told him she would hear a lie. Besides, letting people think he was a lord was just a ruse, one he would rather have managed without. In Ebou Dar you could find a duel any time you turned around, but few challenged lords except other lords. As it was, in the last month he had cracked a number of heads, bloodied four men and run half a mile to escape a woman. Tylin's stare made him nervous. And those dice still rattled about in his skull. He wanted out of there. “If you’ll tell me where to leave the letter, Majesty . . . ?”

“The Daughter-Heir and Nynaeve Sedai seldom mention you,” she said, “but one learns to hear what is not said.” Casually she reached up and touched his cheek; he half-raised his own hand uncertainly. Had he smeared ink there, chewing the pen? Women did like to tidy things, including men. Maybe queens did, too. “What they do not say, but I hear, is that you are an untamed rogue, a gambler and chaser after women.” Her eyes held his, expression never altering a hair, and her voice stayed firm and cool, but as she spoke, her fingers stroked his other cheek. “Untamed men are often the most interesting. To talk to.” A finger outlined his lips. “An untamed rogue who travels with Aes Sedai, a *ta’veren* who, I think, makes them a little afraid. Uneasy, at the least. It takes a man with a strong liver to make Aes Sedai uneasy. How will you bend the Pattern in Ebou Dar, just Mat Cauthon?” Her hand settled against his neck; he could feel his pulse throbbing against her fingers.

His mouth fell open. The writing table behind his back rattled against the wall as he tried to back away. The only way out was to push her aside or climb over her skirts. Women did not behave this way! Oh, some of those old memories suggested they did, but it was mainly memories of memories that that woman had done this or this woman had done that; the things he recalled clearly were battles for the most part, and no help here at all. She smiled, a faint curl of her lips that did not lessen the predatory gleam in her eyes. The hair on his head tried to stand up.

Her eyes flickered over his shoulder to the mirror, and she turned abruptly, leaving him gaping at her back as she moved away. “I must arrange to speak with you again, Master Cauthon. I—” She cut off as the door swung all the way open, apparently surprised, but then he realized she had seen it begin moving in the mirror.

A slender young man entered, limping slightly, a dark lad with sharp eyes that flicked by Mat with barely a pause. Black hair hung to his shoulders, and he wore one of those coats that was never meant to be worn normally draped across his shoulders, green silk, with a gold chain across his chest and gold leopards worked on the lapels. “Mother,” he said, bowing to Tylin and touching his lips with his fingers.

“Beslan.” She filled the name with warmth, and kissed him on both cheeks and his eyelids. The firm, even icy, tone she had used with Mat might as well have never been. “It went well, I see.”

“Not as well as it might.” The boy sighed. Despite his eyes, he had a mild manner to him, and a soft voice. “Nevin nicked my leg on the second pass, then slipped on the third so I ran him through the heart instead of his sword-arm. The offense was not worth killing, and now I must pay condolences to his widow.” He seemed to regret that as much as this Nevin’s death.

Tylin’s beaming face hardly seemed right on a woman whose son had just told her he had killed a man. “Just be sure your visit is brief. Stab my eyes, but Davindra will be one of those widows who wants comforting, and then you will either have to marry her or kill her brothers.” By her tone, the first alternative was much the worse, the second merely a nuisance. “This is Master Mat Cauthon, my son. He is *ta’veren.* I hope you will make a friend of him. Perhaps you two will go to the Swovan Night dances together.”

Mat jumped. The last thing he wanted was to go anywhere with a fellow who fought duels and whose mother wanted to stroke Mat Cauthon’s cheek. “I am not much for balls,” he said quickly. Ebou Dari liked festivals beyond reason. Here High Chasaline was just past, and they had five more in the next week, two all-day affairs, not just the simpler evening feasts. “I do my dancing in taverns. The rougher sort, I’m afraid. Nothing you’d like.”

“I favor taverns of the rougher sort,” Beslan said with a smile, in that soft voice. “The balls are for older people, and their pretties.”

After that, it was all downhill on crumpling shingle. Before Mat knew what was happening, Tylin had him sewed up in a sack. He and Beslan would be attending the festivals together. All of the festivals. Hunting, Beslan called it, and when Mat said hunting for girls without thinking—he would never have said that in front of somebody’s mother had he thought—the boy laughed and said, “A girl or a fight, pouting lips or a flashing blade. Whichever dance you’re dancing at the moment is always the most fun. Wouldn’t you say so, Mat?” Tylin smiled at Beslan fondly.

Mat managed a weak laugh. This Beslan was mad, him and his mother both.

* * *

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CHAPTER

17

The Triumph of Logic

Mat stalked out of the palace when Tylin finally let him go, and had he thought it would do any good, he would have run. The skin between his shoulder blades prickled so, he almost forgot the dice dancing in his head. The worst moment—the very worst of a dozen bad—had been when Beslan teased his mother, saying she should find herself a pretty for the balls, and Tylin laughingly claimed a queen had no time for young men, all the while looking at Mat with those bloody eagle's eyes. Now he knew why rabbits ran so fast. He stumped across Mol Hara Square not seeing anything. Had Nynaeve and Elayne been cavorting with Jaichim Carridin and Elaida in the fountain beneath that statue of some long-dead queen, two spans or more tall and pointing to the sea, he would have passed by without a second look.

The common room of The Wandering Woman was dim and comparatively cool after the bright heat outside. He took off his hat gratefully. A faint haze of pipesmoke hung in the air, but the arabesque-carved shutters across the wide arched windows let in more than enough light. Some bedraggled pine branches had been tied above the windows for Swovan Night. In one corner, two women with flutes and a fellow with a small drum between his knees provided a shrill, pulsing sort of music that Mat had come to like. Even at this time of the day there were a few patrons, outland merchants in moderately plain woolens with a sprinkling of Ebou Dari, most in the vests of various guilds. No apprentices or even journeymen here; so close to the palace, The Wandering Woman was hardly an inexpensive place to drink or eat, much less sleep.

The rattle of dice at a table in the corner echoed the feel in his head, but he turned the other way, to where three of his men sat on benches around another table. Corevin, a thickly muscled Cairhienin with a nose that made his eyes seem even smaller than they were, sat stripped to the waist, holding his tattooed arms over his head while Vanin wound strips of bandage around his middle. Vanin was three times Corevin's size, but he looked like a balding sack of suet overflowing his bench. His coat appeared to have been slept in for a week; it always did, even an hour after one of the serving women ironed it. Some of the merchants eyed the three uneasily, but none of the Ebou Dari; men or women, they had seen the same or worse, often.

Harnan, a lantern-jawed Tairen file leader with a crude tattoo of a hawk on his left cheek, was berating Corevin. ". . . don't care what the flaming fish-seller said, you goat-spawned toad, you use your bloody club and don't go accepting flaming challenges just because—" He cut off when he saw Mat, and tried to look as if he had not been saying what he had. He just looked as if he had a toothache.

If Mat asked, it would turn out Corevin had slipped and fallen on his own dagger or some such foolery Mat was supposed to pretend to believe. So he just leaned his fists on the table as if he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Truth to tell, it was not that out of the ordinary. Vanin was the only man who had not been in two dozen scrapes already; for some reason, men looking for trouble walked as wide of Vanin as they did Nalesean. The only difference was that Vanin seemed to like it that way. "Has Thom or Juilin been here yet?"

Vanin did not look up from tying the bandages. "Haven't seen hide, hair nor toenail. Nalesean was in for a bit, though." There was no "my lord" nonsense from Vanin. He made no bones about not liking nobles. With the unfortunate exception of Elayne. "Left an iron-strapped chest up in your room, and went out babbling about trinkets." He made as if to spit through the gap in his teeth, then glanced at one of the serving women and did not. Mistress Anan was death on anybody spitting on her floors, or tossing bones, or even tapping out a pipe. "The boy's out back in the stable," he went on before Mat could ask, "with his book and one of the innkeeper's daughters. Another of the girls spanked his bottom for pinching hers." Finishing the last knot, he gave Mat an accusatory look, as if it had been his fault in some way.

"Poor little mite," Corevin muttered, twisting to see whether the bandages would stay in place. He had a leopard and a boar inked on one arm, a lion and a woman on the other. The woman did not seem to be wearing much except her hair. "Sniveling, he was. Though he did brighten when Leral let him hold her hand." The men all looked after Olver like a gaggle of uncles, though certainly the sort no mother would want near her son.

"He'll live," Mat said dryly. The boy was probably picking up these habits from his "uncles." Next, they would give him a tattoo. At least Olver had not sneaked out to run with the street children; he seemed to enjoy that almost as much as he did making himself a nuisance to grown women. "Harnan, you wait here, and if you see Thom or Juilin, collar them. Vanin, I want you to see what you can learn around the Chelsaine Palace, over near the Three Towers Gate." Hesitating, he looked over the room. Serving women drifted in and out of the kitchens with food and, more often, drink. Most of the patrons seemed intent on their silver cups, though a pair of women in weaver's vests argued quietly, ignoring their wine punch and leaning across the table at one another. Some of the merchants appeared to be haggling, waving hands and dipping fingers in their drinks to scribble numbers on the table. The music should mask his words from eavesdroppers, but he lowered his voice anyway.

News that Jaichim Carridin had Darkfriends coming to call screwed Vanin's round face into a scowl, as if he might spit no matter who saw. Harnan muttered something about filthy Whitecloaks, and Corevin suggested denouncing Carridin to the Civil Guard. That got such disgusted looks from the other two that he buried his face in a cup of ale. He was one of the few men Mat knew who could drink Ebou Dari ale in this heat. Or drink it at all, for that matter.

"Be careful," Mat warned when Vanin stood. It was not that he was worried, really. Vanin moved with surprising lightness for such a fat man. He was the best horsethief in two countries at the least, and could slip by even a Warder unseen, but. . . . "They're a nasty lot. Whitecloaks or Darkfriends, either one." The man only grunted and motioned for Corevin to gather his shirt and coat and come along.

"My Lord?" Harnan said as they left. "My Lord, I heard there was a fog in the Rahad yesterday."

On the point of turning away, Mat stopped. Harnan looked worried, and nothing much worried him. "What do you mean, a fog?" In this heat, fog thick as porridge would not last a heartbeat.

The file leader shrugged uncomfortably and peered into his mug. "A fog. I heard there was . . . things . . . in it." He looked up at Mat. "I heard people just disappeared. And some was found eaten, parts of them." Mat managed not to shiver. “The fog’s gone, isn’t it? You weren’t in it. Worry when you are. That’s all you can do.” Harnan frowned doubtfully, but that was the pure truth. These bubbles of evil—that was what Rand called them, what Moiraine had—burst where and when they chose, and there did not seem to be anything even Rand could do to stop them. Worrying about it did as much good as worrying whether a roof tile would fall on your head in the street tomorrow. Less, since you could decide to stay indoors.

There was something that was worth worrying over, though. Nalesean had left their winnings sitting upstairs. Bloody nobles tossed gold around like water. Leaving Harnan studying his mug, Mat headed for the railless stairs at the back of the room, but before he reached them, one of the serving women accosted him.

Caira was a slender, full-lipped girl with smoky eyes. “A man came in looking for you, my Lord,” she said, twisting her skirts from side to side and looking up at him through long lashes. There was a certain smokiness in her voice, too. “Said he was an Illuminator, but he looked seedy to me. He ordered a meal, and left when Mistress Anan wouldn’t give it. He wanted you to pay.”

“Next time, pigeon, give the meal,” he told her, slipping a silver mark into the plunging neck of her dress. “I’ll speak to Mistress Anan.” He did want to find an Illuminator—a real one, not some fellow selling fireworks full of sawdust—but it hardly mattered now. Not with the gold lying unguarded. And fogs in the Rahad, and Darkfriends, and Aes Sedai, and bloody Tylin taking leave of her senses, and. . . .

Caira giggled and twisted like a stroked cat. “Would you like me to bring some punch to your room, my Lord? Or anything?” She smiled hopefully, invitingly.

“Maybe later,” he said, tapping her nose with a fingertip. She giggled again; she always did. Caira would have her skirt sewn to show petticoats to the middle of her thigh or higher had Mistress Anan allowed it, but the innkeeper looked after her serving women almost as closely as she did her daughters. Almost. “Maybe later.”

Trotting up the wide stone stairs, he put Caira out of his mind. What was he to do about Olver? The boy would find himself in real trouble one day if he thought he could treat women that way. He was going to have to keep him away from Harnan and the others as much as possible, he supposed. They were a bad influence on a boy. To have this on top of everything else! He had to get Nynaeve and Elayne out of Ebou Dar before something worse went wrong.

His room was at the front, with windows overlooking the square, and as he reached for the door, the hallway floor behind him squeaked. In a hundred inns, it would not even have registered, but the floors in The Wandering Woman did not squeak.

He looked back—and spun just in time to drop his hat and catch the descending truncheon with his left hand instead of his skull. The blow stung his hand to numbness, but he held on desperately as thick fingers dug into his throat, forcing him back against the door to his room. His head hit with a thump. Silver-rimmed black spots danced in his vision, obscuring a sweating face. All he could really see was a big nose and yellow teeth, and those seemed hazy. Suddenly he realized he was on the far edge of consciousness; those fingers were closing off blood to his brain along with air. His free hand went beneath his coat, fumbling over the hilts of his knives as though his fingers no longer remembered what they were for. The cudgel wrenched free. He could see it rising, feel it rising to smash his skull. Focusing everything, he jerked a knife from its scabbard and thrust.

His attacker let out a high-pitched scream, and Mat was vaguely aware of the club bouncing off his shoulder as it fell to the floor, but the man did not let go of his throat. Stumbling, Mat drove him back, tearing at the clutching fingers with one hand, driving his knife repeatedly with the other.

Abruptly the fellow fell, sliding from Mat's blade. The knife nearly followed him to the floor. So did Mat. Gulping breath, sweet air, he clung to something, a doorway, to hold himself on his feet. From the floor a plain-faced man stared up at him with eyes that would never see anything again, a heavyset fellow with curled Murandian mustaches, in a dark blue coat fit for a small merchant or a prosperous shopkeeper. Not the look of a thief about him at all.

Abruptly he realized they had stumbled through an open door in their fight. It was a smaller room than Mat's, windowless, a pair of oil lamps on small tables beside the narrow bed providing a murky illumination. A lanky, pale-haired man straightened from a large open chest, staring oddly at the corpse. The chest took up most of the free space in the room.

Mat opened his mouth to apologize for intruding so roughly, and the lanky man snatched a long dagger from his belt, a cudgel from the bed, and leaped over the chest at him. That had not been the look you gave a dead stranger. Clinging unsteadily to the doorframe, Mat threw under-handed, the hilt no sooner leaving his hand than he was scrabbling under his coat for another. His knife stuck squarely in the other man's throat, and Mat almost fell again, this time from relief, as the man clutched himself, blood spurting between his fingers, and toppled backward into the open chest.

"It's good to be lucky," Mat croaked.

Staggering, he retrieved his knife, wiping it clean on the fellow's gray coat. A better coat than the other; still wool, but of a better cut. A lesser lord would not have been ashamed to wear it. Andoran, by the collar. He sank onto the bed, frowning at the man sprawled in the chest. A noise made him look up.

His manservant was in the doorway, trying unsuccessfully to hide a large black iron frying pan behind his back. Nerim kept a full set of pots, and everything else he thought a lord's servant might need traveling, in the small room he shared with Olver next to Mat's. He was short even for a Cairhienin, and skinny to boot. "My Lord has blood on his coat again, I fear," he murmured in melancholy tones. The day he sounded anything else, the sun would rise in the west. "I do wish my Lord would be more careful of his clothes. It is so hard to remove blood without a stain, and the insects hardly need any encouragement to eat holes. This place has more insects than I have ever seen, my Lord." No mention at all of two dead men, or what he had intended with the frying pan.

That scream had drawn other attention; The Wandering Woman was not the sort of inn where screams passed unremarked. Feet pounded in the hallway, and Mistress Anan pushed Nerim firmly out of her way and raised her skirts to step around the corpse on the floor. Her husband followed her in, a square-faced, gray-haired man with the double earring of the Ancient and Honorable League of the Nets dangling from his left ear. The two white stones on the lower hoop said he owned other boats besides the one he captained. Jasfer Anan was part of the reason Mat was careful not to smile too much at any of Mistress Anan's daughters. The man wore a work knife stuffed behind his belt and a longer, curved blade too, and his long blue-and-green vest revealed arms and chest crisscrossed with dueling scars. He was alive, though, and most of the men who had given those scars were not.

The other reason for caution was Setalle Anan herself. Mat had never before let himself be turned off a girl because of her mother, even if that mother owned the inn where he was staying, but Mistress Anan had a way about her. Large gold hoops in her ears swung as she surveyed the dead men without a flinch. She was pretty despite a touch of gray in her hair, and her marriage knife nestled in roundness that normally would have drawn his eyes like moths to a candle, yet looking at her that way would have been like looking at. . . . Not his mother. At an Aes Sedai, maybe—though he had done that, of course, just to look—or at Queen Tylin, the Light help him there. Putting a finger on why was not easy. She simply had a way about her. It was just difficult to think of doing anything that would offend Setalle Anan.

"One of them jumped me in the hall." Mat kicked the chest lightly; it made a hollow sound despite the dead man slumped inside with his arms and legs dangling out. "This is empty except for him. I think they meant to fill it with whatever they could steal." The gold, perhaps? Not likely they could have heard of that, won only hours ago, but he would ask Mistress Anan about a safer place to keep it.

She nodded calmly, hazel eyes serene. Men knifed in her inn did not ruffle her feathers. "They insisted on carrying it up themselves. Their stock, so they claimed. They took the room just before you came in. For a few hours, they said, to sleep before traveling on toward Nor Chasen." That was a small village on the coast to the east, but it was unlikely they would have told the truth. Her tone implied as much. She frowned at the dead men as though wishing she could shake them alive to answer questions. "They were picky about the room, though. The pale-haired man was in charge. He turned down the first three he was offered, then accepted this, that was meant for a single servant. I thought he was being stingy with a coin."

"Even a thief can be tightfisted," Mat said absently. This could have qualified to start those dice rolling in his head—a head that would have been cracked open for sure without the luck of that fellow stepping on the one board in the whole inn that would squeak—but the bloody things were still tumbling. He did not like it.

"You think it was chance then, my Lord?"

"What else?"

She had no answer, but she frowned at the corpses again. Maybe she was not so sanguine as he had thought. She was not native to Ebou Dar, after all.

“Too many roughs in the city of late.” Jasfer had a deep voice, and speaking normally he seemed to be barking commands on a fishing boat. “Maybe you ought to think on hiring guards.” All Mistress Anan did was lift an eyebrow at her husband, but his hands rose defensively. “Peace be on you, wife. I spoke without thinking.” Ebou Dari women were known to express displeasure with a husband in a sharp fashion. It was not beyond possibility that a few of his scars came from her. The marriage knife had several uses.

Thanking the Light he was not married to an Ebou Dari, Mat replaced his own knife in its sheath alongside the others. Thank the Light he was not married at all. His fingers brushed paper.

Mistress Anan was not letting her husband off easily. “You frequently do, husband,” she said, fingering the hilt between her breasts. “Many women would not let it pass. Elynde always tells me I am not firm enough when you speak out of line. I need to provide a good example for my daughters.” Acerbity melted into a smile, if a small one. “Consider yourself chastised. I will refrain from telling you who should haul which net on which boat.”

“You are too kind to me, wife,” he replied dryly. There was no guild for innkeepers in Ebou Dar, but every inn in the city was in the hands of a woman; to Ebou Dari, bad luck of the worst sort would dog any inn owned by a man or any vessel owned by a woman. There were no women in the fishermen’s guild.

Mat pulled out the paper. It was snowy white, expensive and stiff, and folded small. The few lines on it were printed in square letters like those Olver might use. Or an adult who did not want the hand recognized.

> ELAYNE AND NYNAEVE ARE PUSHING TOO FAR. REMIND THEM THEY ARE STILL IN DANGER FROM THE TOWER. WARN THEM TO BE CAREFUL, OR THEY WILL BE KNEELING TO ASK ELAIDA’S PARDON YET.

That was all; no signature. *Still* in danger? That suggested it was nothing new, and somehow it did not fit with them being snared up by the rebels. No, that was the wrong question. Who had slipped him this note? Obviously somebody who thought they could not simply hand it to him. Who had had the opportunity since he put the coat on this morning? It had not been there then, for sure. Somebody who had gotten close.

Somebody. . . . Unbidden, he found himself humming a snatch of “She Dazzles My Eyes and Clouds My Mind.” Around here the tune had different words; they called it “Upside Down and ’Round and ’Round.” Only Teslyn or Jo-line fit, and that was impossible.

“Bad news, my Lord?” Mistress Anan asked.

Mat stuffed the note into his pocket. “Does any man ever get to understand women? I don’t mean just Aes Sedai. Any women.”

Jasfer roared, and when his wife directed a meaning gaze his way, he only laughed harder. The look she gave Mat would have shamed an Aes Sedai for its perfect serenity. “Men have it quite easy, my Lord, if they only looked or listened. Women have the difficult task. We must try to understand men.” Jasfer took hold of the doorframe, tears rolling down his dark face. She eyed him sideways, tilting her head, then turned, all cool calmness—and punched him under the ribs with her fist so hard that his knees buckled. His laughter took on a wheeze without stopping. “There is a saying in Ebou Dar, my Lord,” she said to Mat over her shoulder. “ ‘A man is a maze of brambles in darkness, and even he does not know the way.’ ”

Mat snorted. Fat lot of help she was. Well, Teslyn or Joline or somebody else—it must have been somebody else, if he could only think who—the White Tower was a long way away. Jaichim Carridin was right here. He frowned at the two corpses. And so were a hundred other scoundrels. Somehow he would see those two women safely out of Ebou Dar. The trouble was, he did not have a clue how. He wished those bloody dice would stop, and be done with it.

The apartments Joline shared with Teslyn were quite spacious, including a bedchamber for each of them, plus one apiece for their maids and another that would have done quite well for Blaeric and Fen, if Teslyn could have stood to have her Warders with them. The woman saw every man as a potentially rabid wolf, and there was no gainsaying her when she truly wanted something. As inexorable as Elaida, she ground down whatever lay in her path. They stood as equals in every real way, certainly, but not many managed to prevail over Teslyn without a clear advantage. She was at the writing table in the sitting room when Joline entered, her pen making an awful *scritch-scritch.* She was always parsimonious with the ink.

Without a word, Joline swept by her and out onto the balcony, a long cage of white-painted iron. The scrollwork was so tight that the men working in the garden three stories below would have a difficult time seeing that there was anyone within. Flowers in this region ordinarily thrived in heat, wild colors to outshine the interior of the palace, but nothing bloomed down there. Gardeners moved along the gravel walks with buckets of water, yet nearly every leaf was yellow or brown. She would not have admitted it under torture, but the heat made her afraid. The Dark One was touching the world, and their only hope a boy who was running wild.

"Bread and water?" Teslyn said suddenly. "Send the Cauthon boy off to the Tower? If there do be changes in what we did plan, you will please inform me before telling others."

Joline felt a touch of heat in her cheeks. "Merilille needed to be set down. She lectured when I was a novice." So had Teslyn; a severe teacher who held her classes with an iron grip. Just the way she spoke was a reminder, a marked warning not to go against her, equal or not. Merilille, though, stood lower. "She used to make us stand in front of the class, and she would dig and dig for the answer she wanted, until we stood there in front of everyone, weeping with frustration. She pretended to sympathize, or perhaps she really did, but the more she patted us and told us not to cry, the worse it was." She cut off abruptly. She had not intended to say all that. It was Teslyn's fault, always looking at her as if she were about to be upbraided for a spot on her dress. But she should understand; Merilille had taught her, too.

"You have remembered that all this time?" Stark incredulity painted Teslyn's voice. "The sisters who did teach us did only do their duty. Sometimes I do think what Elaida did say of you do be right." The annoying *scritch-scritch* resumed.

"It . . . simply came to mind when Merilille began as if she were truly an ambassador." Instead of a rebel. Joline frowned at the garden. She despised every one of those women who had broken the White Tower, and flaunted the break before all the world. Them and anyone who aided them. But Elaida had blundered too, horribly. The sisters who were rebels now could have been reconciled, with a little effort. "What did she say of me? Teslyn?" The sound of the pen continued, like fingernails scraping across a slate. Joline went back inside. "What did Elaida say?"

Teslyn laid another sheet atop her letter, either to blot or to shield it from Joline's eyes, but she did not answer immediately. She scowled at Joline—or perhaps just looked; it was difficult to say with her at times—and at last sighed. “Very well. If you must know. She did say you still do be a child.”

“A *child*?” Joline’s shock had no effect on the other woman.

“Some,” Teslyn said calmly, “do change little from the day they do put on novice white. Some do change no at all. Elaida does believe you have no grown up yet and never will.”

Joline tossed her head angrily, unwilling to let herself speak. To have that said by someone whose *mother* had been a child when she herself gained the shawl! Elaida had been petted too much as a novice, made over too much for her strength and the remarkable speed of her learning. Joline suspected that was why she was in such a fury about Elayne and Egwene and the wilder Nynaeve; because they were stronger than she, because they had spent far less time as novices, no matter that they had been pushed ahead too fast. Why, Nynaeve had never been a novice at all, and that was completely unheard of.

“Since you did bring it up,” Teslyn went on, “perhaps we should try to take advantage of the situation.”

“What do you mean?” Embracing the True Source, Joline channeled Air to lift the silver pitcher on the turquoise-inlaid side table and fill a silver goblet with punch. As always, the joy of embracing *saidar* thrilled her, soothing even as it exhilarated.

“It do be obvious, I should think. Elaida’s orders do still stand. Elayne and Nynaeve are to be returned to the Tower as soon as found. I did agree to wait, but perhaps we should wait no longer. A pity the al’Vere girl does no be with them. But two will put us back in Elaida’s good graces, and if we can add the Cauthon boy. . . . I do think those three will make her welcome us as if we did come with al’Thor himself. And this Aviendha will make a fine novice, wilder or no.”

The goblet floated into Joline’s hand on Air, and she reluctantly released the Power. She had never lost the ardor she felt the first time she touched the Source. Dewmelon punch was a poor substitute for *saidar.* The worst part of her penance before leaving the Tower had been losing the right to touch *saidar.* Almost the worst part. She had set it all herself, but Elaida had made it clear that if she did not make it harsh, Elaida would. She had no doubt the result would have been much worse, then. “Her good graces? Teslyn, she humiliated us for no more reason than to show the others that she could. She sent us to this fly-ridden hole as far from everything important as she could, short of the other side of the Aryth Ocean, ambassadors to a queen with less power than a dozen of her own nobles, any one of whom could snatch the throne from her tomorrow if they could be bothered to. And you want to wheedle your way back into Elaida's favor?"

"She do be the Amyrlin Seat." Teslyn touched the letter with the page lying atop it, moving the sheets a bit this way then a bit that, as if framing her thoughts. "Remaining silent for a time did let her know we are no lapdogs, but remaining silent too long could be seen as treason."

Joline sniffed. "Ridiculous! When they're returned they'll only be punished for running away, and now for pretending to be full sisters." Her mouth tightened. They were both guilty there, and those who allowed them to, as well, but it made a sharp difference when one of them claimed her own Ajah. By the time the Green Ajah finished with Elayne for that, it would be a very chastened young woman indeed who took the throne of Andor. Though it might be best if Elayne secured the Lion Throne first. Her training had to be completed, either way. Joline did not intend to see Elayne lost to the Tower, whatever she had done.

"Do no forget joining with the rebels."

"Light, Teslyn, they were probably scooped up just like the girls the rebels took out of the Tower. Does it really matter a whit whether they begin mucking out stalls tomorrow or next year?" That was surely as much as the novices and Accepted with the rebels would have to face. "Even the Ajahs can wait to have them in hand, really. It is not as if they aren't safe. They are Accepted, after all, and they certainly seem content to stay where we can reach them whenever we choose. I say, let us sit where Elaida put us, and continue to fold our hands and hold our tongues. Until she asks nicely to find out what we are doing." She did not say that she was prepared to wait until Elaida found herself deposed as Siuan had been. The Hall surely would not put up with the bullying and bungling forever, but Teslyn *was* Red, after all, and would not appreciate hearing that.

"I suppose there do be no urgency," Teslyn said slowly, the unspoken "but" all but shouting itself.

Drawing a ball-footed chair to the table with another flow of Air, Joline settled herself to convincing her companion that silence remained the best policy. Still a child, was she? If she had her way, Elaida would not get so much as a word out of Ebou Dar until she begged for it.

The woman on the table arched up as far as her bonds would allow, eyes bulging, throat corded with a piercing scream that went on and on. Abruptly the scream was a loud choking rasp instead, and she convulsed, shaking from wrists to ankles, then collapsed in silence. Wide-open eyes stared sightlessly at the cobwebbed basement ceiling.

Giving vent to curses was irrational, but Falion could have turned the air as blue as any stableman. Not for the first time she wished she had Temaile here instead of Ispan. Questions were answered eagerly for Temaile, and nobody died until she was ready. Of course, Temaile enjoyed the work entirely too much, but that was beside the point.

Channeling once more, Falion gathered the woman’s clothes from the filthy floor and dropped them atop the body. The red leather belt fell off, and she snatched it up by hand and slapped it back onto the pile. Perhaps she should have used other methods, but straps and pincers and hot irons were so . . . messy. “Leave the body in an alley somewhere. Slit the throat so it looks as if she was robbed. You can keep the coins in her purse.”

The two men squatting on their heels against the stone wall exchanged looks. Arnin and Nad might have been brothers by their appearance, all black hair and beady eyes and scars, with more muscles than any three men could need, but they did have sufficient brains to carry out simple orders. Usually. “Forgiveness, Mistress,” Arnin said hesitantly, “but no one will believe—”

“Do as you are told!” she snapped, channeling to haul him to his feet and slam him back against the stones. His head bounced, yet that surely could do him no damage.

Nad rushed to the table, babbling, “Yes, Mistress. As you command, Mistress.” When she released Arnin, he did not babble, but he staggered over without any more objections to help gather up the body like so much rubbish and carry it out. Well, it was so much rubbish, now. She regretted the outburst. Letting temper take control was irrational. It did seem to be effective at times, though. After all these years, that still surprised her.

“Moghedien, she will not like this,” Ispan said as soon as the men had gone. The blue and green beads that were worked into her many slim black braids clacked as she shook her head. She had remained in the shadows the whole time, in a corner, with a small ward woven so she could not hear.

Falion managed not to glare. Ispan was the last companion she would have chosen for herself. She was Blue, or had been. Perhaps she still was.

Falion did not really think herself any less White Ajah because she had joined the Black. Blues were too fervent, tying emotion around what should be viewed with utter dispassion. Rianna, another White, would have been her choice. Though the woman did have odd, unsound notions on several points of logic. “Moghedien has forgotten us, Ispan. Or have you received some private word from her? In any case, I am convinced this cache does not exist.”

“Moghedien, she says that it does.” Ispan began firmly, but her voice quickly grew warm. “A store of *angreal*, and *sa’angreal,* and *ter’angreal*. We will have some part of them. *Angreal* of our very own, Falion. Perhaps even *sa’angreal*. She has promised.”

“Moghedien was wrong.” Falion watched shock widen the other woman’s eyes. The Chosen were only people. Learning that lesson had stunned Falion too, but some refused to learn. The Chosen were vastly stronger, infinitely more knowledgeable, and quite possibly they had already received the reward of immortality, but by all evidence they schemed and fought each other as hard as two Murandians with one blanket. Ispan’s shock quickly gave way to anger. “There are others looking. Would they all look for nothing? There are Friends of the Dark looking; they must have been sent by others of the Chosen. If the Chosen look, can you still say there is nothing?” She would not see. If a thing could not be found, the most obvious reason was that it was not there.

Falion waited. Ispan was not stupid, only awestruck, and Falion did believe in making people teach themselves what they should already be aware of. Lazy minds needed to be exercised.

Ispan paced, swishing her skirts and frowning at the dust and old cobwebs. “This place smells. And it is filthy!” She shuddered as a large black cockroach went skittering up the wall. The glow surrounded her for a moment; a flow squashed the beetle with a popping sound. Making a face, Ispan wiped her hands on her skirts as if she had used them instead of the Power. She had a delicate stomach, though fortunately not when she could remove herself from the actual deed. “I will not report the failure to one of the Chosen, Falion. She would make us envy Liandrin, yes?”

Falion did not quite shiver. She did, however, cross the basement and pour herself a cup of plum punch. The plums had been old, and the punch was too sweet, but her hands remained steady. Fear of Moghedien was perfectly sensible, but yielding to fear was not. Perhaps the woman was dead. Surely she would have summoned them by now else, or snatched them sleeping into *Tel'aran'rhiod* again to tell her why they had not yet carried out her commands. Until she saw a body, though, the only logical choice was to continue as if Moghedien would appear any moment. "There is a way."

"How? Put every Wise Woman in Ebou Dar to the question? How many are there? A hundred? Two hundred perhaps? The sisters in the Tarasin Palace, they would notice this, I think."

"Forget your dreams of owning a *sa'angreal*, Ispan. There is no long-hidden store house, no secret basement beneath a palace." Falion spoke in cool, measured tones, perhaps more measured the more agitated Ispan became. She had always enjoyed mesmerizing a class of novices with the sound of her voice. "Almost all of the Wise Women are wilders, highly unlikely to know what we wish to learn. No wilder has ever been found keeping an *angreal*, much less a *sa'angreal*, and they surely would have been found. On the contrary, by every record, a wilder who discovers any object tied to the Power rids herself of it as soon as possible, for fear of attracting the wrath of the White Tower. Women who are put out of the Tower, on the other hand, seem not to have the same fear. As you well know, when they are searched before leaving, fully one in three has secreted something about her person, an actual object of the Power or something she believes is one. Of the few Wise Women who qualify at present, Callie was the perfect choice. When she was put out four years ago, she tried to steal a small *ter'angreal*. A useless thing that makes images of flowers and the sound of a waterfall, but still an object tied to *saidar*. And she tried to discover all the other novices' secrets, succeeding more often than not. If there was even a single *angreal* in Ebou Dar, not to speak of a vast store house, do you think she could have been four years here without locating it?"

"I *do* wear the shawl, Falion," Ispan said with extraordinary asperity. "And I *do* know all of that as well as you. You said there was another way. What way?" She simply would not apply her brain.

"What would please Moghedien as greatly as the cache?" Ispan simply stared at her, tapping her foot. "Nynaeve al'Meara, Ispan. Moghedien abandoned us to go chasing after her, but obviously she escaped somehow. If we give Nynaeve—and the Trakand girl, for that matter—to Moghedien, she would forgive us a hundred *sa'angreal*." Which clearly demonstrated that the Chosen could be irrational, of course. It was best, of course, to be extremely careful with those who were both irrational and more powerful than you. Ispan was not more powerful.

"We should have killed her as I wanted, when she first appeared," she spat. Waving her hands, she stalked up and down, grime crunching loudly beneath her slippers. "Yes, yes, I know. Our sisters in the palace, they might have become suspicious. We do not wish to draw their eyes. But have you forgotten Tanchico? And Tear? Where those two girls appear, disaster follows. Me, I think if we cannot kill them, we should remain as far from Nynaeve al'Meara and Elayne Trakand as we can. As far as we can!"

"Calm yourself, Ispan. Calm yourself." If anything, Falion's soothing tone only seemed to agitate the other woman more, but Falion was confident. Logic must prevail over emotion.

Sitting on an upended barrel in the sparse coolness of a narrow, shaded alley, he studied the house across the busy street. Suddenly he realized he was touching his head again. He did not have a headache, but his head felt . . . peculiar . . . sometimes. Most often when he thought of what he could not remember.

Three stories of white plaster, the house belonged to a goldsmith who supposedly was being visited by two friends she had met on a journey north some years ago. The friends had only been glimpsed on arrival and not seen since. Finding that out had been easy, finding out they were Aes Sedai only a trifle more difficult.

A lean young man in a torn vest, whistling his way down the street with no good on his mind, paused when he glimpsed him sitting on the barrel. His coat and his location in the shadows—and the rest of him, he admitted ruefully—probably looked tempting. He reached under his coat. His hands no longer possessed the strength or flexibility for swordwork, but the two long knives he had carried for well over thirty years had surprised more than one swordsman. Maybe something showed in his eyes, because the lean young man thought better of it and whistled his way on.

Beside the house, the gate that led back to the goldsmith's stable swung open, and two burly men appeared pushing a barrow piled high with soiled straw and muck. What were they up to? Arnin and Nad were hardly the lads to be mucking out stables.

He would stay here until dark, he decided, then see whether he could find Carridin's pretty little killer again.

Once again he pulled his hand down from his head. Sooner or later, he would remember. He did not have much time left, but it was all he did have. He remembered that much.

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CHAPTER

18

As the Plow Breaks the Earth

Seizing *saidin* long enough to unknot the ward he had woven across one corner of the anteroom, Rand raised his small silver-mounted cup and said, “More tea.” Lews Therin muttered angrily in the back of his head.

Carved chairs heavy with gilt stood in paired lines to either side of a golden Rising Sun, two paces wide, set into the polished stone floor, and another tall chair so gilded it seemed entirely gold topped a small dais that was just as elaborate, but he sat cross-legged on a carpet spread for the occasion, green and gold and blue in a Tairen maze. The three clan chiefs seated across from him would have disliked him receiving them from a chair even if they were offered their own. They were another maze, to be trod warily. He was in his shirt, sleeves pushed up his forearms to expose the red-and-gold Dragon that curled around each, glittering metallically. The Aielmen’s *cadin’sor* covered theirs, on the left arm alone. Perhaps the reminder of who he was—that he too had been to Rhuidean when the journey meant death for most men who entered—perhaps it was unnecessary. Perhaps.

Those three faces gave away little as they watched Merana come from the corner where she had been sealed off. Janwin’s creased face could have been carved from old wood, but it always looked that way, and if his blue-gray eyes seemed stormy, so did they always too. Even his hair looked like storm clouds. He was an even-tempered man, though. Indirian and one-eyed Mandelain might have been thinking of something else, except that their unblinking gazes followed her. Lews Therin suddenly went silent, as if he too watched, through Rand’s eyes.

Merana’s ageless features revealed even less than the clan chiefs’. Smoothing her pale gray skirts under, she knelt beside Rand and lifted the teapot. A massive ball of gold-washed silver, with leopards for feet and handle and another crouched on the lid, it required both of her hands and wavered a little as she carefully filled Rand's cup. Her manner seemed to say she did this because she wanted to, for reasons of her own that none of them could begin to understand; her manner shouted Aes Sedai louder than her face did. Was that to the good, or the bad?

"I do not allow them to channel without permission," he said. The clan chiefs kept silent. Merana rose and moved to kneel beside each in turn. Mandelain covered his cup with a broad hand to indicate he wanted no more. The other two held out theirs, blue-gray eyes and green alike studying her. What did they see? What more could he do?

Replacing the heavy teapot on the thick leopard-handled tray, she remained on her knees. "May I serve my Lord Dragon in any way else?"

Her voice was self-possession itself, but after he motioned her back to her corner, after she had risen and turned, slim hands clutched at her skirts for an instant. Yet that might have been because turning brought her to face Dashiva and Narishma. The two Asha'man—to be precise, Narishma was still only a soldier, the lowest level of Asha'man, with neither the sword nor the Dragon on his collar—the Asha'man stood impassively between two of the tall golden-framed mirrors that lined the walls. At least, the younger man looked impassive, at first glance. Thumbs tucked behind his sword belt, he ignored Merana and paid little more attention to Rand or the Aielmen, yet at a second glance you saw that his dark too-big eyes never rested, as if he expected the unexpected to leap out of the air any moment. And who could say it would not? Dashiva appeared to have his head in the clouds; his lips moved soundlessly, and he blinked and frowned at nothing.

Lews Therin snarled when Rand looked at the Asha'man, but it was Merana who occupied the dead man inside Rand's head. *Only a fool thinks a lion or a woman can truly be tamed.*

Irritably, Rand suppressed the voice to a muted buzz. Lews Therin could break through, but not without effort. Grabbing hold of *saidin*, he rewove the ward that shut Merana away from their voices. Releasing the Source again increased his irritation, the hissing in his head, the water drops on red coals. An echo pulsing in time with Lews Therin's mad, distant rage.

Merana stood behind the barrier she could neither see nor feel, head high and hands folded at her waist as if a shawl were looped over her arms. Aes Sedai to her toenails. She watched him and the clan chiefs with cool eyes, light brown flecked with yellow. *My sisters do not all realize how very much we need you*, she had told him this morning in this very room, *but all* *of us who swore will do whatever you ask that would not violate the Three Oaths.* He had just wakened when she came with Sorilea escorting her. Neither seemed to care at all that he was still in a robe, with only one bite taken from his breakfast bread. *I have more than a little skill in negotiation and mediation. My sisters have other skills. Let us serve you, as we pledged. Let me serve you. We need you, but you have some need of us, too.*

Ever present, Alanna lay nestled in a corner of his brain. She was weeping again. He could not understand why she wept so often. He had forbidden her to come near him unless summoned, or leave her room without an escort of Maidens—the sisters who had sworn to him had been found rooms last night, in the Palace where he could keep an eye on them—but he had sensed tears from the moment she bonded him, tears and a raw grief like being ripped by claws. Sometimes it was less, sometimes more, yet always there. Alanna also had told him he needed the sworn sisters, screamed it at him finally, with her face red and tears rolling down her cheeks, before literally running from his presence. And she had spoken of serving, too, though he doubted that Merana's present tasks were what either had in mind. Perhaps some sort of livery would make it clear?

The clan chiefs watched Merana watch them. Not so much as the flicker of an eyelash betrayed their thoughts.

"The Wise Ones have told you where the Aes Sedai stand," Rand said bluntly. Sorilea had told him they knew, but the fact would have been clear from the lack of surprise when they first saw Merana fetch and curtsy. "You've seen her bring the tray and pour your tea. You've seen her come and go as I say. If you want, I'll have her dance a jig." Convincing the Aiel that he was not on the end of an Aes Sedai leash was the most needed service any of the sisters could do him right now. He would have them all doing jigs, if necessary.

Mandelain adjusted the gray-green patch over his right eye, the way he did when he wanted a moment to think. A thick puckered scar ran up his forehead from behind the leather patch and halfway across his mostly bald head. When he finally spoke, it was only a little less blunt than Rand. "Some say an Aes Sedai will do anything to have what she wants."

Indirian lowered heavy white eyebrows and peered down his long nose at his tea. Of only average height for an Aiel man, he was shorter than Rand by half a hand, yet everything about him seemed long. The heat of the Waste appeared to have melted away every spare ounce of flesh and a few more besides. His cheekbones stood out sharp, and his eyes were emeralds set in caves. “I do not like speaking of Aes Sedai.” His deep, rich voice was always a shock, coming from that gaunt face. “What is done, is done. Let the Wise Ones deal with them.”

“Better to speak of the Shaido dogs,” Janwin said mildly. Which was almost as great a shock, coming from his fierce face. “Within a few months, less than half a year at most, every Shaido who can be will be dead—or made *gai’shain.*” Just because his voice was soft did not mean he was. The other two nodded; Mandelain smiled eagerly.

They still seemed unconvinced. The Shaido had been the professed reason for this meeting, and no less important for not being the most important. Not unimportant—the Shaido had made trouble long enough—just not on the same page with the Aes Sedai in his book. They did present problems, though. Three clans joining Timolan’s Miagoma, already near Kinslayer’s Dagger, might well be able to do as Janwin said, but there were those who could not be made *gai’shain* and could not be killed. Some were more critical than others. “What of the Wise Ones?” he asked.

For a moment their faces became unreadable; not even Aes Sedai could do that so well as Aiel. Facing the One Power did not frighten them, not where it showed, at least; no one could outrun death, so Aiel believed, and a hundred Aes Sedai in a rage could not make a lone Aiel lower the veil once raised. But learning that Wise Ones had taken part in the fighting at Dumai’s Wells had hit them like watching the sun rise by night and the moon by day in a blood-red sky.

“Sarinde tells me almost all of the Wise Ones will run with the *algai’d’siswai*,” Indirian said at last, reluctantly. Sarinde was the Wise One who had followed him from Red Springs, clan hold of the Codarra. Or perhaps “followed” was not the right word; Wise Ones seldom did. In any case, most of the Codarra Wise Ones, and the Shiande and the Daryne, would go north with the spears. “The Shaido Wise Ones will be . . . dealt with . . . by Wise Ones.” His mouth twisted with disgust.

“All things change.” Janwin’s voice was even softer than usual. He believed, but he did not want to. Wise Ones taking part in battle violated custom as old as the Aiel.

Mandelain set his cup down with exaggerated care. “Corehuin wishes to see Jair again before the dream ends, and so do I.” Like Bael and Rhuarc, he had two wives; the other chiefs had only one each, except Timolan, but a widowed chief seldom remained so long. The Wise Ones saw to that if he did not. “Will any of us ever see the sun rise again in the Three-fold Land?”

“I hope so,” Rand said slowly. *As the plow breaks the earth shall he break the lives of men, and all that was shall be consumed in the fire of his eyes. The trumpets of war shall sound at his footsteps, the ravens feed at his voice, and he shall wear a crown of swords.* The Prophecies of the Dragon gave little hope for anything except victory over the Dark One, and only a chance of that. The Prophecy of Rhuidean, the Aiel Prophecy, said he would destroy them. The bleakness swept through the clans because of him and ancient customs were ripped apart. Even without the Aes Sedai, small wonder if some chiefs pondered whether they were right to follow Rand al’Thor, Dragons on his arms or no. “I hope so.”

“May you always find water and shade, Rand al’Thor,” Indirian said.

After they left, Rand sat frowning into his cup, finding no answers in the dark tea. Finally he set it beside the tray and pushed his sleeves down. Merana’s eyes were intent on him, as if trying to pull out his thoughts. There was a hint of impatience about her, too. He had told her to stay in the corner unless she could hear voices. Doubtless she saw no reason why she should not come out now the clan chiefs were gone. Come out, and dig out what had been said.

“Do you think they believe I dance on Aes Sedai strings?” he said.

Young Narishma gave a start. In truth, he was a little older than Rand, but he had the look of a boy five or six years younger. He glanced at Merana as though she had the answer, and shifted his shoulders uncomfortably. “I . . . do not know, my Lord Dragon.”

Dashiva blinked and stopped murmuring to himself. Tilting his head, bird-like, he eyed Rand sideways. “Does it matter, so long as they obey?”

“It matters,” Rand said. Dashiva shrugged, and Narishma frowned thoughtfully; neither seemed to understand, yet maybe Narishma could come to.

Maps littered the stone floor behind the throne on its dais, rolled or folded or spread out where he had left them. He shifted some with the toe of his boot. So much to be juggled at once. Northern Cairhien and the mountains called Kinslayer’s Dagger, and the region around the city. Illian and the Plains of Maredo out to Far Madding. The island of Tar Valon and all the surrounding towns and villages. Ghealdan and part of Amadicia. Movement and color in his head. Lews Therin moaned and laughed in the distance, faint mad mutters of killing the Asha’man, killing the Forsaken. Killing himself. Alanna stopped weeping, cutting anguish subdued beneath a thin thread of anger. Rand scrubbed his hands through his hair, pressing hard against his temples. What had it been like to be alone inside his own skull? He could not recall.

One of the tall doors opened to admit one of the Maidens who were standing guard in the corridor. Riallin, with vivid yellow-red hair and a grin for everything, actually managed to appear plump. For a Maiden, anyway. “Berelain sur Paendrag and Annoura Larisen wish to see the *Car’a’carn*,” she announced. Her voice went from warm and friendly on the first name to cold and flat on the second without disturbing her grin.

Rand sighed and opened his mouth to let them enter, but Berelain did not wait. She stormed in, a somewhat calmer Annoura at her heels. The Aes Sedai shied slightly at the sight of Dashiva and Narishma, and stared curiously when she saw Merana standing in her corner. Not so Berelain.

“What is the meaning of this, my Lord Dragon?” she demanded, brandishing the letter he had had delivered to her this morning. She stalked across the floor to shake it under his nose. “Why am I to return to Mayene? I have governed well here in your name, and you know it. I could not stop Colavaere having herself crowned, but at least I stopped her changing the laws you made. Why am I to be sent away? And why am I told by letter? Not to my face. By letter! Thanked for my services and dismissed like a clerk who’s done collecting the taxes!”

Even furious, the First of Mayene was one of the most beautiful women Rand had ever seen. Black hair fell in shining waves to her shoulders, framing a face to make a blind man stare. A man could easily drown in her dark eyes. Today she wore shimmering silver silk, thin and clinging and more suited to entertaining a lover in private. In fact, had the neckline been a hair lower, she would not have been able to wear the dress in public. As it was, he was not sure she should. He had told himself when writing that letter that it was because he had too much to do and no time for arguing with her. The truth was, he enjoyed looking at her too much; for some reason, he had begun feeling that that was—not exactly wrong, but almost.

As soon as she appeared, Lews Therin gave over ranting to hum softly, the way he did when admiring a woman. Abruptly Rand realized he was thumbing his earlobe, and felt a shock. Instinctively, he knew that was something else Lews Therin did without thinking, like the humming. He pushed his hand to his side, but for an instant it wanted to rise to his ear again.

Burn you, this is my body! The thought was a snarl. *Mine!* Lews Therin's hum stopped in surprise, and confusion; without a sound, the dead man fled, back into the deepest shadows of Rand's brain.

Rand's silence had an effect. Berelain lowered the letter, and her anger receded. A little. Eyes fixed on his, she drew a deep breath that heated his cheeks. "My Lord Dragon—"

"You know why," he cut in. Looking only at her eyes was not easy. Oddly, he found himself wishing Min were there. Very odd. Her viewings would be no help now. "When you returned from that Sea Folk ship this morning, there was a fellow waiting on the dock with a knife."

Berelain tossed her head contemptuously. "He came no closer than three steps. I was accompanied by a dozen of the Winged Guards and Lord Captain Gallenne." Nurelle had led some of the Winged Guards to Dumai's Wells, but Gallenne commanded the Guards as a whole. She had eight hundred of them in the city aside from those who returned with Nurelle. "You expect me to turn tail because of a cutpurse?"

"Don't play the fool," he growled. "A cutpurse, with a dozen soldiers around you?" Color flared in her cheeks; she knew, all right. He gave her no chance for protests or explanations or any other foolishness. "Dobraine tells me he's already heard whispers in the palace that you betrayed Colavaere. Those who supported her might be afraid to say boo to me, but they'll pay to have a knife stuck into you." And Faile, too, according to Dobraine; that was being taken care of. "But they won't have a chance, because you are going back to Mayene. Dobraine will take your place here until Elayne claims the Sun Throne."

She spluttered as if he had dumped cold water down her dress. Her eyes grew dangerously large. He had been glad when she stopped being afraid of him, but now he was not so sure. As she opened her mouth to explode, Annoura touched her arm, and her head whipped around. They exchanged a long look, and Berelain's sputters subsided. She smoothed her skirts and vigorously squared her shoulders. Rand looked away hastily.

Merana hovered at the edge of the ward. He wondered whether she had stepped across and dodged back—how else could she stand right on top of what she could not possibly detect? When his head turned, she moved backward until she almost touched the walls, her eyes never leaving him. By her face, she would have poured his tea every day for ten years to hear what was being said.

“My Lord Dragon,” Berelain said, smiling, “there is still the matter of the Atha’an Miere.” Her voice was warm honey; the curve of her lips would have sparked thoughts of kisses in a stone. “The Wavemistress Harine is not pleased to be left sitting on her ship so long. I have visited with her a number of times. I can smooth the difficulties there, which I hardly think Lord Dobraine can. I believe the Sea Folk are vital to you whether or not the Prophecies of the Dragon mention them. You are crucial in their prophecies, though they seem reluctant to say exactly how.”

Rand stared. Why was she struggling so hard to keep a difficult job that had offered few thanks from Cairhienin even before some began wanting to kill her? She was a ruler, used to dealing with rulers and embassies, not street thugs and knives in the dark. Warm honey or no warm honey, it was not for any desire to stay near Rand al’Thor. She had . . . well, offered herself to him . . . once, but the hard fact was that Mayene was a small country, and Berelain used her beauty as a man would a sword, to keep her land from being swallowed by its more powerful neighbor, Tear. And there, simple as that, he had it. “Berelain, I don’t know what else I can do to guarantee Mayene for you, but I will write out any—” Colors swirled so strongly in his head that his tongue froze. Lews Therin cackled. *A woman who knows the danger and isn’t afraid is a treasure only a madman would spurn.*

“Guarantees.” Bleakness engulfed honey, and anger bubbled again, cold this time. Annoura plucked at Berelain’s sleeve, but she paid the Aes Sedai no heed. “While I sit in Mayene with your guarantees, others will serve you. They will ask their rewards, and the service I did here will be faded and old, while theirs is bright and new. If the High Lord Weiramon gives you Illian and asks Mayene in return, what will you say? If he gives you Murandy, and Altara, and everything clear to the Aryth Ocean?”

“Will you serve if it still means leaving?” he asked quietly. “You will be out of my sight, but not out of my mind.” Lews Therin laughed again, in such a way that Rand nearly blushed. He enjoyed looking, but sometimes the things Lews Therin thought. . . .

Berelain considered him with stubborn eyes, and he could all but see the questions being toted up behind Annoura’s, the careful choosing of which to ask.

The door opened again for Riallin. “An Aes Sedai has come to see the *Car’a’carn.*” She managed to sound cold and uncertain at the same time. “Her name is Cadsuane Melaidhrin.” A strikingly handsome woman swept in right behind her, iron-gray hair gathered in a bun atop her head and decorated with dangling gold ornaments, and it seemed everything happened at once.

“I thought you were dead,” Annoura gasped, eyes nearly starting out of her head.

Merana darted through the ward, hands outstretched. “No, Cadsuane!” she screamed. “You mustn’t harm him! You must not!”

Rand’s skin tingled as someone in the room embraced *saidar*, perhaps more than one, and swiftly moving well clear of Berelain, he seized hold of the Source, flooding himself with *saidin*, feeling it fill the Asha’man. Dashiva’s face twitched as he glared from one Aes Sedai to another. Despite the Power he held, Narishma grasped his sword hilt with both hands and assumed the stance called Leopard in the Tree, on the brink of drawing. Lews Therin snarled of killing and death, kill them all, kill them now. Riallin raised her veil, shouting something, and suddenly a dozen Maidens were in the room, veiling, spears ready. It was hardly surprising that Berelain stood gaping as if everyone had gone mad.

For someone who had caused all that, this Cadsuane seemed remarkably unaffected. She looked at the Maidens and shook her head, golden stars and moons and birds swaying gently. “Trying to grow decent roses in northern Ghealdan may be near to death, Annoura,” she said dryly, “but it is not quite the grave. Oh, do calm down, Merana, before you frighten someone. One would think you would have grown a little less excitable since putting off novice white.”

Merana opened and closed her mouth, looking abashed of all things, and the tingling vanished abruptly. Rand did not release *saidin*, though, nor did the Asha’man.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What Ajah?” Red, by Merana’s reaction, but for a Red sister simply to walk in like this, alone, would require suicidal courage. “What do you want?”

Cadsuane’s gaze lingered on him for no more than a moment, and she did not answer. Merana’s lips parted, but the gray-haired woman looked at her, raising one eyebrow, and that was that. Merana actually reddened and lowered her eyes. Annoura was still staring at the newcomer as if at a ghost. Or a giant.

Without a word, Cadsuane swept across the room to the two Asha'man, dark green divided skirts swishing. Rand was beginning to get the feeling that she always moved in that rushing glide, graceful yet wasting no time and allowing nothing to impede her. Dashiva stared her up and down, and sneered. Although looking him straight in the face, she did not seem to notice, any more than she appeared to notice Narishma's hands on his sword when she put a finger under his chin, moving his head from side to side before he could jerk back.

"What lovely eyes," she murmured. Narishma blinked uncertainly, and Dashiva's sneer turned to a grin, but a nasty one that made his former smirk lighthearted in comparison.

"Do nothing," Rand snapped. Dashiva had the gall to glower at him before sullenly pressing a fist to his chest in the salute the Asha'man used. "What do you want here, Cadsuane," Rand went on. "Look at me, burn you!"

She did, turning just her head. "So you are Rand al'Thor, the Dragon Reborn. I'd have thought even a child like Moiraine could have taught you a few manners."

Riallin put the spear from her right hand with those clutched behind her buckler and flashed Maiden handtalk. For once, none laughed. For once, Rand was sure the talk was not a joke about him. "Be easy, Riallin," he said, raising a hand. "All of you, be easy."

Cadsuane ignored the byplay too, directing a smile to Berelain. "So this is your Berelain, Annoura. She is more beautiful than I had heard." The curtsy she made, bowing her head, was quite deep, yet somehow without any suggestion of obeisance, no hint that she was in any way less. It truly was a courtesy, no more. "My Lady First of Mayene, I must speak with this young man, and I would retain your advisor. I've heard you have undertaken many duties here. I would not keep you from them." It was as clear a dismissal as could be, short of holding the door open.

Berelain inclined her head graciously, then smoothly turned to Rand and spread her skirts in a curtsy so deep that he worried whether she would remain even as clothed as she was. "My Lord Dragon," she intoned, "I ask your kind permission to withdraw."

Rand's return bow was not so practiced. "Granted, my Lady First, as you wish." He offered her a hand, to help her rise. "I hope you will consider my proposal."

"My Lord Dragon, I will serve you wherever and however you desire." Her voice was all honey again. For Cadsuane's benefit, he supposed. There was certainly no flirtation on her face, only determination. "Remember Harine," she added in a whisper.

When the door closed behind Berelain, Cadsuane said, "It's always good to see children play, don't you think, Merana?" Merana goggled, head swiveling between Rand and the gray-haired sister. Annoura looked as though only willpower held her upright.

Most of the Maidens followed Berelain, apparently deciding there was to be no killing, but Riallin and two others remained before the door, still veiled. It might have been coincidence that there was one for each Aes Sedai. Dashiva also seemed to think any danger past. He leaned back against the wall with a foot propped, lips moving silently, arms folded, apparently watching the Aes Sedai.

Narishma frowned questioningly at Rand, but Rand only shook his head. The woman was deliberately trying to provoke him. The question was, why provoke a man she must know could still her, or kill her, without exerting himself? Lews Therin muttered the same thing. *Why? Why?* Stepping onto the dais, Rand took up the Dragon Scepter from the throne and sat, waiting to see what would happen. The woman was not going to succeed.

"Rather ornate, wouldn't you say?" Cadsuane said to Annoura, looking around. Aside from all the other gold, broad bands of it ran around the walls above the mirrors, and the cornices were nearly two feet of golden scales. "I've never known whether Cairhienin or Tairens overdo worse, but either can make an Ebou Dari blush, or even a Tinker. Is that a tea tray? I would like some, if it's fresh, and hot."

Channeling, Rand scooped up the tray, half expecting to see the metal corrode from the taint, and wafted it to the three women. Merana had brought extra cups, and four still stood unused on the tray. He filled three, replaced the teapot and waited. It floated in midair, supported by *saidin.*

Three very different women in appearance, and three distinctly different reactions. Annoura looked at the tray much as one might a coiled viper, gave a tiny shake of her head, and took a small step back. Merana drew a deep breath and slowly picked up a cup with a hand that trembled slightly. Knowing a man could channel and being forced to see it were not at all the same. Cadsuane, though, took her cup and sniffed the vapors with a pleased smile. Nothing could tell her which of the three men had poured the tea, yet she looked across her cup straight at Rand, lounging with one leg over the arm over his chair. “That’s a good boy,” she said. The Maidens passed shocked looks above their veils.

Rand quivered. No. She would not provoke him. For whatever reason, that was what she wanted, and she would not! “I will ask one more time,” he said. Strange, that his voice could be that cold; inside, he was hotter than the hottest fires of *saidin*. “What do you want? Answer, or leave. By the door or a window; your choice.”

Again Merana began to speak, and again Cadsuane silenced her, this time by a sharp gesture without looking away from him. “To see you,” she said calmly. “I am Green Ajah, not Red, but I have worn the shawl longer than any other sister living, and I have faced more men who could channel than any four Reds, maybe than any ten. Not that I hunted them, you understand, but I seem to have a nose.” Calmly, a woman saying she had been to market once or twice in her life. “Some fought to the bitter end, kicking and screaming even after they were shielded and bound. Some wept and begged, offering gold, anything, their very souls, not to be taken to Tar Valon. Still others wept from relief, meek as lambs, thankful finally to be done with it. Light’s truth, they all weep, at the end. There is nothing left for them but tears at the end.”

The heat inside him erupted in rage. Tray and massive teapot hurtled across the room, smashing a mirror with a thunderous crash and bouncing back in a shower of glass, half-flattened pot spraying tea, tray spinning across the floor bent double. Everyone jumped except Cadsuane. Rand leaped from the dais, clutching the Dragon Scepter so hard his knuckles hurt. “Is that supposed to frighten me?” he growled. “Do you expect me to beg, or to be thankful? To weep? Aes Sedai, I could close my hand and crush you.” The hand he held up shook with fury. “Merana knows why I should. The Light only knows why I don’t.”

The woman looked at the battered tea things as if she had all the time in the world. “Now you know,” she said at last, calm as ever, “that I know your future, and your present. The Light’s mercy fades to nothing for a man who can channel. Some see that and believe the Light denies those men. I do not. Have you begun to hear voices, yet?"

"What do you mean?" he asked slowly. He could feel Lews Therin listening.

The tingle returned to his skin, and he very nearly channeled, but all that happened was that the teapot rose and floated to Cadsuane, turning slowly in the air for her to examine. "Some men who can channel begin to hear voices." She spoke almost absently, frowning at the flattened sphere of silver and gold. "It is a part of the madness. Voices conversing with them, telling them what to do." The teapot drifted gently to the floor by her feet. "Have you heard any?"

Startlingly, Dashiva gave a raucous laugh, shoulders shaking. Narishma wet his lips; he might not have been afraid of the woman before, but now he watched her closely as a scorpion.

"I will ask the questions," Rand said firmly. "You seem to forget. I am the Dragon Reborn." *You* are *real, aren't you?* he wondered. There was no answer. Lews Therin? Sometimes the man did not answer, but Aes Sedai always drew him. *Lews Therin?* He was not mad; the voice was real, not imagination. Not madness. A sudden desire to laugh did not help.

Cadsuane sighed. "You are a young man who has little idea where he is going or why, or what lies ahead. You seem overwrought. Perhaps we can speak when you are more settled. Have you any objection to my taking Merana and Annoura away for a little while? I've seen neither in quite some time."

Rand gaped at her. She swooped in, insulted him, threatened him, casually announced she knew about the voice in his head, and with that she wanted to leave and talk with Merana and Annoura? *Is* she *mad?* Still no answer from Lews Therin. The man was real. He was!

"Go away," he said. "Go away, and. . . ." He was not mad. "All of you, get out! Get out!"

Dashiva blinked at him, tilting his head, then shrugged and started for the door. Cadsuane smiled in such a way that he half-expected her to tell him again he was a good boy, then gathered up Merana and Annoura and herded them toward the Maidens, who were lowering their veils and frowning worriedly. Narishma looked at him too, hesitating until Rand gestured sharply. Finally they were all gone, and he was alone. Alone.

Convulsively he hurled the Dragon Scepter. The spear-point stuck quivering in the back of one the chairs, the tassels swaying.

"I am not mad," he said to the empty room. Lews Therin had told him things; he would never have escaped Galina's chest without the dead man's voice. But he had used the Power before he ever heard the voice; he had figured out how to call lightning and hurl fire and form a construct that had killed hundreds of Trollocs. But then, maybe that had been Lews Therin, like those memories of climbing trees in a plum orchard, and entering the Hall of the Servants, and a dozen more that crept up on him unawares. And maybe those memories were all fancies, mad dreams of a mad mind, just like the voice.

He realized he was pacing, and could not stop. He felt as if he had to move or his muscles would tear him apart in spasms. "I am not mad," he panted. Not yet. "I am not—" The sound of the door opening made him whirl, hoping for Min.

It was Riallin again, supporting a short stocky woman in a dark blue dress, with hair more gray than not and a blunt face. A haggard, red-eyed face.

He wanted to tell them to go away, to leave him alone. Alone. Was he alone? Was Lews Therin a dream? If only they would leave him. . . . Idrien Tarsin was the head of the school he had founded here in Cairhien, a woman so practical he was not sure she believed in the One Power since she could neither see nor touch it. What could reduce her to this state?

He made himself turn toward her. Mad or not, alone or not, there was no one else to do what had to be done. Not even this small duty. Heavier than a mountain. "What is the matter?" he asked, making his voice as gentle as he could.

Suddenly weeping, Idrien stumbled to him and collapsed against his chest. When she was coherent enough to tell her story, he felt like weeping too.

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CHAPTER

19

Diamonds and Stars

Merana followed closely as she dared on Cadsuane's heels, a hundred questions bubbling on her tongue, but Cadsuane was not a woman whose sleeve you plucked. She decided who she noticed, and when. Annoura held her silence, too, the pair of them drawn along in the other's wake down the palace corridors, down flights of stairs, polished marble at first, then plain dark stone. Merana exchanged glances with her sister Gray, and felt a moment's pang. She did not know the woman, really, but Annoura wore the steely look of a girl on her way to the Mistress of Novices, determined to be brave. They were not novices. They were not children. She opened her mouth—and closed it, intimidated by the gray bun bobbing ahead of her with its dangling moons and stars and birds and fish. Cadsuane was . . . Cadsuane.

Merana had met her once before, or at least listened to her and been spoken to, when she was a novice. Sisters had come from every Ajah to see the woman, filled with an awe they could not hide. Once Cadsuane Melaidhrin had been the standard by which every new entry into the novice book was judged. Until Elayne Trakand, none had come to the White Tower in her lifetime who could match that standard, much less surpass it. In more ways than one, her like had not walked among Aes Sedai for a thousand years. A refusal to accept selection as a Sitter was unheard of, yet it was said she had refused, and at least twice. It was said she had spurned being raised head of the Green Ajah, too. It was said she once vanished from the Tower for ten years because the Hall intended to raise her Amyrlin. Not that she had ever spent a day more in Tar Valon than absolutely necessary. Word of Cadsuane came to the Tower, stories to make sisters gape, adventures to make those who dreamed of the shawl shiver. She would end a legend among Aes Sedai. If she was not already. The shawl had graced Merana's shoulders for over twenty-five years when Cadsuane announced her retirement from the world, her hair already solid gray, and everyone assumed her long dead when the Aiel War erupted another twenty-five years on, but before the fighting was three months old, she reappeared, accompanied by two Warders, men long in the tooth yet still hard as iron. It was said Cadsuane had had more Warders over the years than most sisters had shoes. After the Aiel retreated from Tar Valon, she retired once more, but some said, more than half-seriously, that Cadsuane would never die so long as even a spark of adventure remained in the world.

And that is the sort of nonsense that novices babble, Merana reminded herself firmly. *Even we die eventually.* Yet Cadsuane was still Cadsuane. And if she was not one of those sisters who had appeared in the city after al'Thor was taken, the sun would not set tonight. Merana moved her arms to adjust her shawl and realized it was hanging on a peg in her room. Ridiculous. She needed no reminders of who she was. If only it had been someone other than Cadsuane. . . . A pair of Wise Ones standing in the mouth of a crossing corridor watched them pass, cold pale eyes in stony faces beneath their dark head scarves. Edarra and Leyn. Both could channel, and quite strongly; they might have risen high had they gone to the Tower as girls. Cadsuane went by without seeming to notice the wilders' disapprobation. Annoura did, frowning and muttering, slender braids swaying as she shook her head. Merana kept her own eyes on the floor tiles.

Undoubtedly it would fall to her now, explaining to Cadsuane the . . . compromise . . . that had been worked out with the Wise Ones last night, before she and the others were brought to the palace. Annoura did not know—she was no part of it—and Merana had small hope that Rafela or Verin would appear, or anyone else she might somehow foist the duty onto. It *was* a compromise, in a way, and perhaps the best that could be expected under the circumstances, yet she strongly questioned whether Cadsuane would see it so. She wished she did not have to be the one to convince her. Better to pour tea for those cursed men for a month. She wished she had not been so free with her tongue with young al'Thor. Knowing why he had made her serve tea was no balm for being sealed off from every advantage she might have gained from it. She would rather think she had been caught in some *ta'veren* swirling of the Pattern than believe that a young man's eyes, like polished blue-gray gems, had set her babbling from pure fright, but either way, she had handed all the advantage to him on a tray. She wished. . . .

Wishing was for children. She had negotiated countless treaties, many of which had actually accomplished what was intended; she had ended three wars and stopped two dozen more before they began, faced kings and queens and generals and made them see reason. Even so. . . . She found herself promising that she would not utter one word of complaint no matter how often that man made her play the maidservant if only Seonid would pop around the next corner, or Masuri, or Faeldrin, or anyone at all. Light! If only she could blink her eyes and find that everything since leaving Salidar had been a bad dream.

Surprisingly, Cadsuane led them straight to the small room that Bera and Kiruna shared, deep in the bowels of the palace. Where the servants lived. A tight window, set high in the wall yet level with the paving stones of a courtyard outside, let in a little stream of light, but the room seemed murky. Cloaks and saddlebags and a few dresses hung from pegs in the cracked, yellowing plaster walls. Gouges marred the bare wooden floor, though some effort had been made to smooth them. A tiny battered round table stood in one corner, and an equally beaten washstand in another, with a chipped basin and pitcher. Merana eyed the small bed. It did not look that much narrower than the one she was forced to share with Seonid *and* Masuri, two doors farther down. That room was larger by perhaps a pace each way, but not meant for three. Coiren and the others still held in the Aiel tents probably were much more comfortable as prisoners.

Neither Bera nor Kiruna was present, but Daigian was, a plump, pale woman who wore a thin silver chain in her long black hair, with a round moonstone dangling in the middle of her forehead. Her dark Cairhienin dress bore four thin stripes of color across the bodice, and she had added slashes in the skirts, white for her Ajah. A younger daughter of one of the lesser Houses, she had always minded Merana of a pouter pigeon. When Cadsuane entered, Daigian rose on her toes expectantly.

There was only one chair in the room, little more than a stool with an excuse of a back. Cadsuane took that and sighed. “Tea, please. Two sips of what that boy poured, and I could have used my tongue to sole a shoe.”

The glow of *saidar* immediately surrounded Daigian, though faintly, and a dented tin teapot rose from the table, flows of Fire heating the water as she opened a small brass-bound tea chest.

With no other choice for place to sit, Merana settled onto the bed, adjusting her skirts and shifting on the lumpy mattress while she tried to order her thoughts. This might well be as important a negotiation as she had ever undertaken. After a moment, Annoura joined her, perching on the lip of the mattress.

“I take it by your presence, Merana,” Cadsuane said abruptly, “that tales of the boy submitting to Elaida are false. Don’t look so surprised, child. Did you think I didn’t know your . . . associations?” She gave that word such a twist, it sounded as filthy as any soldier’s expletive. “And you, Annoura?”

“I am here only to advise Berelain, though the truth of it is, she ignored my advice by coming in the first place.” The Taraboner woman held her head up, voice confident. She was rubbing her thumbs for all she was worth, though. She could not do well at the negotiating table if she was that transparent. “For the rest,” she said carefully, “I have reached no decision as yet.”

“A *wise* decision, that,” Cadsuane murmured, with a pointed look at Merana. “It seems that in the last few years far too many sisters have forgotten they possess brains, or discretion. There was a time when Aes Sedai reached their decisions after calm deliberation, with the good of the Tower always in the front of their thoughts. Just remember what the Sanche girl got from meddling with al’Thor, Annoura. Walk too near a forge-fire, and you can be burned badly.”

Merana lifted her chin, working her neck to ease its tightness. Realizing what she was doing, she made herself stop. The woman did not stand that far above her. Not really. Just higher than any other sister. “If I may ask . . .” Too diffident, but worse to stop and start over. “. . . what are your intentions, Cadsuane?” She struggled to maintain dignity. “Obviously, you have been . . . holding yourself aside . . . until now. Why have you decided to . . . approach . . . al’Thor at this particular time? You were . . . rather undiplomatic . . . with him.”

“You might as well have slapped his face,” Annoura put in, and Merana colored. Of the two of them, Annoura should have been having the harder time with Cadsuane by far, but she was not the one stumbling over her words.

Cadsuane shook her head in pitying style. “If you want to see what a man is made of, push him from a direction he doesn’t expect. There’s good metal in that boy, I think, but he’s going to be difficult.” Steepling her fingers, she peered across them at the wall, musing to herself. “He has a rage in him fit to burn the world, and he holds it by a hair. Push him too far off balance. . . . Phaw! Al'Thor's not so hard yet as Logain Ablar or Mazrim Taim, but a hundred times as difficult, I fear." Hearing those three names together clove Merana's tongue to the roof of her mouth.

"You have seen Logain and Taim both?" a staring Annoura said. "Taim, he is following al'Thor, so I hear." Merana managed to swallow a relieved sigh. Tales of Dumai's Wells had not had time to spread yet. They would, though.

"I do have ears to catch rumors, too, Annoura," Cadsuane said acerbically. "Though I could wish I didn't, for what I hear of that pair. All my work thrown away to be done over. Others' as well, but I did my share. And then there are these blackcoats, these Asha'man." Taking a cup from Daigian, she smiled warmly and murmured thanks. The round-cheeked White seemed ready to curtsy, though all she did was retreat to a corner and fold her hands. She had been longer a novice, and Accepted, than anyone in living memory, barely allowed to remain in the Tower, gaining the ring by a fingernail and the shawl by an eyelash. Daigian was always self-effacing around other sisters.

Breathing the steam from her teacup, Cadsuane went on, suddenly chatting pleasantly. "It was Logain, practically on my doorstep, that lured me away from my roses. Phaw! A scuffle at a sheep fair could have lured me from those Light-cursed plants. What's the point if you use the Power, but do it without, and you grow ten thousand thorns for every—Phaw! I actually considered taking the oath as a Hunter, if the Council of Nine would allow it. Well. It was a nice few months, chasing down Logain, but once he was taken, escorting him to Tar Valon appealed as much as the roses. I wandered a bit, to see what I could find, perhaps a new Warder, though it's a bit late for that in any fairness to the man, I suppose. Then I heard of Taim, and I was off to Saldaea as fast I could ride. There's nothing for a bit of excitement like a man who can channel." Abruptly her voice hardened, and her gaze. "Were either of you involved in that . . . vileness . . . right after the Aiel War?"

Despite herself, Merana gave a confused start. The other woman's eyes spoke of the block and the headsman's axe. "What vileness? I don't know what you are talking about."

That accusing glare hit Annoura so hard, she almost fell off the bed. "The Aiel War?" she gasped, steadying herself. "The years after, I spent trying to make the so-called Grand Coalition more than a name."

Merana looked at Annoura with interest. A good many of the Gray Ajah had scurried from capital to capital after the war, in a futile effort to hold together the alliance that had formed against the Aiel, but she had never known Annoura was one of them. She could not be that bad a negotiator if she was. "So did I," she said. Dignity. Since setting out after al'Thor from Caemlyn, she had not retained much of that. The few scraps remaining were too precious to lose. She made her voice calm, and firm. "What vileness do you mean, Cadsuane?"

The gray-haired woman simply waved the question away, as though she had never spoken the word.

For a moment, Merana wondered whether Cadsuane's wits might be wandering. She had never heard of it happening to a sister, but most Aes Sedai did go into retreat at the close of their lives, far from the stratagems and turbulence that none but sisters ever knew. Far from everyone, often as not. Who could say what befell them before the end? One look at the clear, steady gaze regarding her over that teacup quickly disabused her of any such notion. Anyway, twenty-year-old vileness, whatever it had been, certainly could not hold a candle to what the world confronted now. And Cadsuane still had not answered her original questions. What did she intend? And why now?

Before Merana could ask again, the door opened and Bera and Kiruna were herded in by Corele Hovian, a boyishly slim Yellow with thick black eyebrows and a mass of raven hair that gave her something of a wild appearance no matter how neatly she dressed, and she always dressed for a country dance, with masses of embroidery on her sleeves and bodice and up the sides of her skirts. There was barely room to move, with so many people in this confined space. Corele never failed to seem amused, whatever happened, but now she wore a wide smile somewhere between disbelief and outright laughter. Kiruna's eyes flashed in a face of frozen arrogance, while Bera fumed, mouth tight and forehead creased. Until they saw Cadsuane. Merana supposed that for them, it must be as if she had found herself face to face with Alind Dyfelle or Sevlana Meseau or even Mabriam en Shereed. Their eyes bulged. Kiruna's jaw dropped.

"I thought you were dead," Bera breathed.

Cadsuane sniffed irritably. "I am growing tired of hearing that. The next imbecile I hear it from is going to yelp for a week." Annoura began studying the toes of her slippers.

“You’ll never guess where I found these two,” Corele said in her lilting Murandian accent. She tapped the side of her upturned nose, the way she did when about to tell a joke, or what she saw as one. Spots of color appeared in Bera’s cheeks, and larger in Kiruna’s. “Bera there was sitting meek as a mouse under the eyes of half a dozen of those Aiel wilders, who told me bold as you please that she couldn’t come with me until Sorilea—oh, now that woman’s a harridan to give you nightmares, she is—I couldn’t have Bera until Sorilea was done with her private chat with the *other* apprentice. Our darling Kiruna, there.”

It was no longer a matter of spots. Kiruna and Bera reddened to their hair, refusing to meet anyone’s eye. Even Daigian stared at them.

Relief surged through Merana in wonderful waves. She would not have to be the one to explain how the Wise Ones had interpreted that wretched al’Thor’s orders that the sisters were to obey them. They were not really apprentices; there were no lessons involved, of course. What could a great lot of wilders, savages at that, teach Aes Sedai? It was just that the Wise Ones liked to know where everyone fit. Just? Bera or Kiruna could tell how al’Thor had laughed—laughed!—and said it made no difference to him and he expected them to be *obedient* pupils. No one was having an easy time bending her neck, least of all Kiruna.

Yet Cadsuane did not demand explanations. “I expected a dog’s dinner,” she said dryly, “but not a bucket from the midden. Let me see if I have the straight of it. You children who stand in rebellion against a lawfully raised Amyrlin have now somehow associated yourselves with the al’Thor boy, and if you are taking orders from these Aiel women, I assume you take his as well.” Her grunt was disgusted enough for a mouthful of rotten plums. Shaking her head, she peered into her teacup, then fixed the pair again. “Well, what’s one treason more or less? The Hall can put you on your knees from here to Tarmon Gai’don for penance, but they can only take your heads once. What of the rest, out in the Aiel camp? All Elaida’s, I suppose. Have they also . . . *apprenticed* . . . themselves? None of us have been allowed as close as the first row of tents. These Aiel seem to have no love of Aes Sedai.”

“I do not know, Cadsuane,” Kiruna answered, so red-faced she appeared about to catch fire. “We have been kept apart.” Merana’s eyes widened. She had never before heard Kiruna sound deferential.

Bera, on the other hand, drew a deep breath. She already stood straight, yet she seemed to straighten herself for an unpleasant task. “Elaida is not—” she began heatedly.

“Elaida is overambitious, as near as I can make out,” Cadsuane broke in, leaning forward so abruptly that Merana and Annoura both started back on the bed, though she was not looking at them, “and she may be a catastrophe simmering, but she is still the Amyrlin Seat, raised by the Hall of the Tower in full accordance with the laws of the Tower.”

“If Elaida is a lawful Amyrlin, why have you not obeyed her order to return?” All that betrayed Bera’s lack of composure was the stillness of her hands on her skirts. Only a marked effort to keep from clutching or smoothing could hold them so motionless.

“So one of you has a little backbone.” Cadsuane laughed softly, but her eyes did not look mirthful at all. Leaning back, she sipped her tea. “Now sit down. I have a great many more questions.”

Merana and Annoura rose, offering their places on the bed, but Kiruna simply stood peering at Cadsuane worriedly, and Bera glanced at her friend, then shook her head. Corele rolled her blue eyes, grinning broadly for some reason, but Cadsuane did not seem to care.

“Half the rumors I hear,” she said, “concern the Forsaken being loose. It would hardly be a surprise, with all else, but do you have any evidence, for or against?”

Before very long, Merana was glad to be sitting; before very long, she knew what laundry felt going through the laundress’s mangle. Cadsuane did all the questioning, dodging from topic to topic so you never knew what was coming next. Corele held her peace except for chuckling now and then or shaking her head, and Daigian did not even do that, of course. Merana caught the worst, her and Bera and Kiruna, yet Annoura was certainly not spared. Every time Berelain’s advisor relaxed, thinking she was in the clear, Cadsuane skewered her anew.

The woman wanted to know everything, from the al’Thor boy’s authority with the Aiel to why a Sea Folk Wavemistress was anchored in the river, from whether Moiraine truly was dead to whether the boy really had rediscovered Traveling and whether Berelain had bedded him or had any intention of it. What Cadsuane thought of the answers was impossible to say, except once, when she learned that Alanna had bonded al’Thor, and how. Her mouth compressed to a thin line and she frowned a hole though the wall, but while everyone else expressed disgust, Merana thought of Cadsuane saying she had considered taking another Warder herself.

The answer was ignorance entirely too often to suit, but saying you did not know failed to quench Cadsuane's appetite; she required every last shred and particle you did know, even if you did not know you knew it. They managed to keep a little back, most of what had to be kept back, yet a few surprising things came out that way, some *very* surprising, even from Annoura, who, it turned out, had been receiving detailed letters from Berelain almost from the day the girl rode north. Cadsuane demanded answers, but gave none, and that worried Merana. She watched faces grow dogged and defensive and apologetic, and wondered whether her own looked the same.

"Cadsuane." She had to make one more effort. "Cadsuane, why have you decided to take an interest in him now?" An unblinking gaze met hers for a moment, then Cadsuane turned her attention to Bera and Kiruna.

"So they actually managed to kidnap him right out of the palace," the gray-haired woman said, holding out her empty cup for Daigian to refill. No one else had been offered tea. Cadsuane's expression and tone were so neutral that Merana wanted to tear her own hair. Al'Thor would not be pleased if he learned Kiruna had revealed the kidnapping, however inadvertently; Cadsuane used any slip of your tongue to pry out more than you meant to say. At least the details of his treatment had not come out. He had made plain how displeased he would be if that happened. Merana thanked the Light that the woman was not staying with any one subject for long.

"You are sure it was Taim? And you are sure these blackcoats didn't arrive on horses?" Bera answered reluctantly, and Kiruna sullenly; they were as certain as they could be; no one had actually seen the Asha'man come or depart, and the . . . hole . . . that brought them all here could have been made by al'Thor. Which did not satisfy at all, of course.

"Think! You aren't silly girls any longer, or shouldn't be. Phaw! You must have noticed something."

Merana felt ill. She and the others had spent half the night arguing over what their oath meant before deciding it meant exactly what they had said, with no loopholes to wriggle through. At last even Kiruna conceded that they must defend and support al'Thor as well as obey, that standing aside in the slightest was not permitted. What that might mean when it came to

Elaida and the sisters loyal to her really concerned no one. At least, no one admitted any concern. The mere fact of what they had decided was stunner enough. But Merana wondered whether Bera or Kiruna had yet realized what she had. They might just find themselves opposing a legend, not to mention whatever sisters besides Corele and Daigian had chosen to follow her. Worse. . . . Cadsuane's eyes rested on her for a moment, giving away nothing, demanding everything. Worse, Merana was sure that Cadsuane knew that very well.

Hurrying along the palace corridors, Min ignored greetings from half a dozen Maidens she knew, just trotted right by without a word in return, never considering that she was being rude. Trotting was not easy in heeled boots. The fool things women did for men! Not that Rand had asked her to wear the boots, but she put them on the first time with him in mind, and she had seen him smile. He liked them. Light, what was she doing, thinking about boots! She should never have gone to Colavaere's apartments. Shivering, blinking back unshed tears, she began to run.

As usual, a number of Maidens were squatting on their heels beside the tall doors worked with gilded rising suns. Their *shoufa* hung about their shoulders and their spears lay across their knees, yet there was nothing casual about them. They were leopards, waiting for something to kill. Usually Maidens made Min uneasy, for all they were friendly enough. Today, she would not have cared if they were veiled.

"He is in a foul temper," Riallin warned, but made no move to stop her. Min was one of the few allowed to enter Rand's presence without being announced. She straightened her coat and tried to settle herself. She was not sure why she had come. Except that Rand made her feel safe. Burn him! She had never needed anyone to feel safe before.

Just inside the room, she stopped, aghast. Automatically, she pushed the door shut behind her. The place was a shambles. A few glittering shards clung to some of the mirror frames, but most of the glass lay scattered across the floor. The dais was on its side, the throne that had stood atop it just gilded flinders where it had been smashed against a wall. One of the stand-lamps, heavy iron beneath the gilt, had been twisted into a hoop. Rand sat in one of the smaller chairs in his shirtsleeves, arms dangling and head back, staring at the ceiling. Staring at nothing. Images danced about him and colored auras flickered and flared; he was like Aes Sedai in that. She had no need of Illuminators when Rand or an Aes Sedai was in sight.

He did not move as she walked farther into the room. He did not seem aware of her at all. Shattered bits of mirror crunched beneath her boots. A foul temper, indeed.

Even so, she felt no fear. Not of him; she could not begin to imagine Rand harming her. For him, she felt enough to nearly purge the memory of Colavaere's apartments from her head. She had long since reconciled herself to being hopelessly in love. Nothing else mattered, not that he was an unsophisticated countryman, younger than she, not who or what he was, not that he was doomed to go mad and die if he was not killed first. *I don't even mind having to share him*, she thought, and knew how tightly she was caught if she could lie to herself. That, she had forced herself to accept; Elayne had a part of him, a claim on him, and so did this Aviendha woman she had yet to meet. What could not be mended must be lived with, so her Aunt Jan always said. Especially when your brains had gone soft. Light, she had always prided herself on keeping her wits.

She stopped beside one of the chairs, where the Dragon Scepter had driven into the thick wooden back so hard that the point stood out nearly a hand behind. In love with a man who did not know, who would send her away should he ever become aware. A man she was sure was in love with her. And with Elayne, and this Aviendha, too; that, she rushed by. What could not be mended. . . . He was in love with her and refused to admit it. Did he think that just because mad Lews Therin Telamon had killed the woman he loved, he was fated to as well?

"I'm glad you came," he said suddenly, still staring at the ceiling. "I've been sitting here alone. Alone." He gave a bitter bark of a laugh. "Herid Fel is dead."

"No," she whispered, "not that sweet little old man."

Her eyes stung. "He was torn apart." Rand's voice was so tired. So empty. "Idrien fainted when she found him. She lay in a stupor half the night, and was nearly incoherent when finally roused. One of the other women at the school gave her something to make her sleep. She was embarrassed about that. When she came to me, she started crying again and. . . . It had to be Shadowspawn. What else could tear a man limb from limb?" Without raising his head, he smacked a fist down on the chair arm so hard the wood creaked. "But why? Why was he killed? What could he have told me?"

Min tried to think. She truly did. Master Fel was a philosopher; he and Rand discussed everything from the meaning of parts of the Prophecies of the Dragon to the nature of the hole into the Dark One’s prison. He let her borrow books, fascinating books, especially where she had to work to puzzle out what it was they said. He had been a philosopher. He would never lend her a book again. Such a gentle old man, wrapped up in a world of thought and startled when he noticed anything outside it. She treasured a note he had written to Rand. He had said she was pretty, that she distracted him. And now he was dead. Light, she had had too much of death.

“I shouldn’t have told you, not like that.”

She gave a start; she had not heard Rand cross the room. His fingers brushed her cheek. Wiping away tears. She was crying.

“I’m sorry, Min,” he said, softly. “I am not a very nice person anymore. A man is dead because of me, and all I can do is worry why he was killed.”

Flinging arms around him, she buried her face against his chest. She could not stop crying. She could not stop trembling. “I went to Colavaere’s apartments.” Images flashed in her head. The empty sitting room, all the servants gone. The bedchamber. She did not want to remember, but now she had begun, she could not stop the words tumbling out. “I thought, since you’d exiled her, maybe there was some way around the viewing I had of her.” Colavaere had been wearing what must have been her finest gown, dark silk that glistened, with falls of delicate aged-ivory Sovarra lace. “I thought for once it didn’t have to be that way. You’re *ta’veren*. You can change the Pattern.” Colavaere had donned a necklace and bracelets of emeralds and firedrops, and rings with pearls and rubies, surely her best pieces, and yellow diamonds had been arranged in her hair, a fair imitation of the crown of Cairhien. Her face. . . . “She was in her bedchamber. Hanging from one of the bedposts.” Bulging eyes and protruding tongue in a blackened, swollen face. Toes a foot above the overturned stool. Sobbing helplessly, Min sagged against him.

His arms went around her slowly, gently. “Oh, Min, you have more pain than pleasure from your gift. If I could take your pain, I would, Min. I would.”

Slowly it penetrated that he was trembling, too. Light, he tried so hard to be iron, to be what he thought the Dragon Reborn must, but it cut him when somebody died because of him, Colavaere probably no less than Fel. He bled for everyone harmed, and tried to pretend he did not.

“Kiss me,” she mumbled. When he did not move, she looked up. He blinked at her uncertainly, eyes now blue, now gray, a morning sky. “I’m not teasing.” How often had she teased him, sitting on his lap, kissing him, calling him sheepherder because she dared not say his name for fear he might hear the caress? He put up with it because he thought she *was* teasing and would stop if she believed it did not affect him. Hah! Aunt Jan and Aunt Rana said you should not kiss a man unless you intended to marry him, but Aunt Miren seemed to know a little more of the world. She said you should not kiss a man too casually because men fell in love so easily. “I’m cold inside, sheepherder. Colavaere, and Master Fel. . . . I need to feel warm flesh. I need. . . . Please?”

His head lowered so slowly. It was a brother’s kiss, at first, mild as milk-water, soothing, comforting. Then it became something else. Not at all soothing. Jerking upright, he tried to pull away. “Min, I can’t. I have no right—”

Seizing two handfuls of his hair, she pulled his mouth back down, and after a little while, he stopped fighting. She was not certain whether her hands began tearing at the laces of his shirt first or his at hers, but of one thing she was absolutely sure. If he even tried to stop now, she was going to fetch one of Riallin’s spears, all of them, and stab him.

On her way out of the Sun Palace, Cadsuane studied the Aiel wilders she saw as well as she could without being obvious. Corele and Daigian followed in silence; they knew her well enough by now not to disturb her with chatter, which could not be said of all those who paused a few days at Arilyn’s little palace before she sent them on. A great many wilders, every one staring at the Aes Sedai as if at flea-ridden curs covered with running sores, tracking mud over a new rug. Some people looked at Aes Sedai with awe or adoration, others with fear or hate, but Cadsuane had never seen contempt before, not even from Whitecloaks. Even so, any people who produced so many wilders should be sending a river of girls to the Tower.

That would have to be seen to eventually, and to the Pit of Doom with custom if need be, but not now. The al’Thor boy needed to be kept intrigued enough that he allowed her near him, and off-balance enough that she could nudge him where she wanted without him realizing. One way or another, anything that might interfere with that must be controlled or suppressed.

Nothing could be allowed to influence him, or upset him, in the wrong way. Nothing.

The shiny black coach was waiting in the courtyard behind a patient team of six matched grays. A serving man rushed to open the door painted with a pair of silver stars atop red and green stripes, bowing to the three of them till his bald head was nearly level with his knees. He was in shirtsleeves and breeches. Since coming to the Sun Palace, she had not noticed anyone in livery yet, except a few wearing Dobraine’s colors. No doubt the servants were unsure what to wear and afraid to make a mistake.

“I may skin Elaida when I can lay hands on her,” she said as the coach lurched into motion. “That fool child has made my task nearly impossible.”

And then she laughed so abruptly that Daigian stared before she could control her eyes. Corele’s smile widened in anticipation. Neither understood, and she did not try to explain. All of her life, the fastest way to interest her in anything had been to tell her it was impossible. But then, over two hundred and seventy years had passed since she last encountered a task she could not perform. Any day now might be her last, but young al’Thor would be a fitting end to it all.

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CHAPTER
20

Patterns Within Patterns

Contemptuously Sevanna studied her dusty companions, seated in a circle with her in the small clearing. The nearly leafless branches overhead provided a bit of cool shade, and the place where Rand al'Thor had hurled death lay more than a hundred miles to the west, yet the other women's eyes shifted with an air of looking over shoulders. Without sweat tents, none had been able to clean herself properly, no more than a hasty washing of face and hands at day's end. Eight small silver cups, all different, sat by her side on the dead leaves, and a silver pitcher, filled with water, that had been dented in the retreat.

"Either the *Car'a'carn* is not following," she said abruptly, "or he has been unable to find us. Either contents me."

Some of them actually jumped. Tion's round face paled, and Modarra patted her shoulder. Modarra would have been pretty if she was not so tall, if she did not always try to mother everyone within reach. Alarys became much too intent on straightening skirts already neatly spread around her, attempting to ignore what she did not want to see. Meira's thin mouth drew down, but who could say whether for the others' open fear of the *Car'a'carn* or her own? They had reason to be afraid.

Two full days since the battle, and fewer than twenty thousand spears had grouped around Sevanna. Therava and most of the Wise Ones who had been to the west were still absent, including all the rest who were tied to her. Some of the missing surely were making their way back to Kinslayer's Dagger, but how many would never again see the sun rise? No one remembered such a slaughter, so many dead in so short a time. Even the *algai'd'siswai* were not truly ready to dance the spears again so soon. Reason to be afraid, yet none for showing it, displaying heart and soul on your face like a wetlander, open and naked for all to see. Rhiale at least seemed to realize that much. “If we are to do this thing, let us do it,” she muttered, stiff with embarrassment. She was one who had jumped.

Sevanna took the small gray cube from her pouch and placed it atop the brown leaves in the middle of the circle. Someryn put her hands on her knees, leaning over to examine it until she appeared in danger of falling out of her blouse. Her nose nearly touched the cube. Intricate patterns covered every side, and close up you could see smaller patterns within the larger, and still smaller inside those, and a hint of what seemed smaller yet. How they could have been made, the tiniest so fine, so precise, Sevanna had no idea. Once she had thought the cube stone, but she was no longer certain. Yesterday she had dropped it accidentally on some rocks without marring one line of the carving. If it *was* carving. The thing must be a *ter’angreal*; that they knew.

“The smallest flow possible of Fire must be touched lightly there, on what looks like a twisted crescent moon,” she told them, “and another there on the top, on that mark like a lightning bolt.” Someryn straightened very quickly.

“What will happen then?” Alarys asked, combing her hair with her fingers. It seemed an absentminded gesture, but she always found ways to remind everyone that her hair was black instead of common yellow or red.

Sevanna smiled. She enjoyed knowing what they did not. “I will use it to summon the wetlander who gave it to me.”

“That much you told us already,” Rhiale said in a sour voice, and Tion bluntly asked, “How will it summon him?” She might fear Rand al’Thor, but not a great deal else. Certainly not Sevanna. Belinde lightly stroked the cube with one bony finger, her sun-bleached eyebrows drawn down.

Maintaining a smooth face, Sevanna irritably prevented her hands from fingering a necklace or adjusting her shawl. “I have told you all you need know.” Considerably more than they needed, in her opinion, but it had been necessary. Otherwise they would all be back with the spears and the other Wise Ones, eating hard bread and dried meat. Or rather they would all be on the move eastward, watching for any sign of other survivors.

Watching for any sign of pursuit. With a late start, they might still cover fifty miles before halting. “Words will not skin the boar, much less kill it. If you have decided to creep back to the mountains and spend your lives running and hiding, then go. If not, then do what you must, and I will do my part.”

Rhiale’s blue eyes stared flat defiance, and Tion’s gray. Even Modarra looked doubtful, and she and Someryn lay the most solidly in her grasp.

Sevanna waited, outwardly calm, unwilling to tell them again or ask. Inside, her stomach churned with anger. She would not be beaten because these women had pale hearts.

“If we must,” Rhiale sighed at last. Excepting the absent Therava, she resisted most often, but Sevanna had hopes of her. The spine that refused to bend at all was often the most malleable once it gave way. That was as true for women as men. Rhiale and the others turned their eyes to the cube, some frowning.

Sevanna saw nothing, of course. In fact, she realized that if they did nothing, they could claim the cube failed to work, and she would never know.

Abruptly, though, Someryn gasped, and Meira almost whispered, “It draws more. Look.” She pointed. “Fire there and there, and Earth, and Air and Spirit, filling the runnels.”

“Not all of them,” Belinde said. “They could be filled many ways, I think. And there are places where the flows . . . twist . . . around something that is not there.” Her forehead furrowed. “It must be drawing the male part, as well.”

Several drew back a little, shifting shawls, brushing skirts as though to rub away dirt. Sevanna would have given anything to see. Almost anything. How could they be such cowards? How could they let it show?

Finally Modarra said, “I wonder what would happen if we touched it with Fire elsewhere.”

“Power the callbox too much or in the wrong way, and it may melt,” a man’s voice said out of the air. “It could even ex—”

The voice cut off as the other women surged to their feet, peering in among the trees. Alarys and Modarra went so far as to draw their belt knives, though they had no need of steel when they had the One Power. Nothing moved among the sun-streaked shadows, not so much as a bird.

Sevanna did not stir. She had believed perhaps a third of what of the wetlander had told her, not including this, in truth, but she recognized Caddar’s voice. Wetlanders always had more names, but that was all he had given. A man of many secrets, she suspected. “Take your places again,” she ordered. “And put the flows back where they were. How can I summon him if you fear words?”

Rhiale swung around, mouth gaping and eyes incredulous. Undoubtedly wondering how she knew they had stopped channeling; the woman was not thinking clearly. Slowly, uneasily, they settled in the circle again. Rhiale donned a flatter face than anyone else.

“So you are back,” Caddar’s voice said from the air. “Do you have al’Thor?”

Something in his tone warned her. He could not know. But he did. She abandoned all she had prepared to say. “No, Caddar. But we still must talk. I will meet you in ten days where we first met.” She could reach that valley in Kinslayer’s Dagger sooner, but she needed time to prepare. How did he know?

“Well that you told the truth, girl,” Caddar murmured dryly. “You will learn I do not like being lied to. Maintain the wayline for location, and I will come to you.”

Sevanna stared at the cube in shock. *Girl?* “What did you say?” she demanded. *Girl!* She could not believe her ears. Rhiale very pointedly did not look at her, and Meira’s mouth twisted in a smile, awkward because so seldom used.

Caddar’s sigh filled the clearing. “Tell your Wise One to continue doing exactly what she is doing—nothing else—and I will come to you.” The forced patience in his tone scraped like a grist-stone. When she had what she wanted from the wetlander, she would dress him in *gai’shain* white. No, in black!

“What do you mean, you will come, Caddar?” Silence answered. “Caddar, where are you?” Silence. “Caddar?”

The others exchanged uneasy glances.

“Is he mad?” Tion said. Alarys muttered that he must be, and Belinde angrily demanded to know how long they were to continue this nonsense.

“Until I say to stop,” Sevanna said softly, staring at the cube. A prickle of hope wormed through her chest. If he could do this, then surely he could deliver what he had promised. And maybe. . . . She would not hope too much. She looked up through the branches that nearly met above the clearing. The sun still had a way to climb to its peak. “If he has not come by midday, we will go.” It was too much to expect they would not grumble.

“So we sit here like stones?” Alarys tossed her head in a practiced way, sweeping all of her hair over one shoulder. “For a wetlander?”

“Whatever he promised you, Sevanna,” Rhiale said with a scowl, “it cannot be worth this.”

“He is mad,” Tion growled.

Modarra nodded toward the cube. “What if he can still hear?”

Tion sniffed dismissively, and Someryn said, “How should we care if a man hears what we say? But I do not relish waiting for him.”

“What if he is like those wetlanders in black coats?” Belinde compressed her lips till they nearly matched Meira’s.

“Do not be ridiculous,” Alarys sneered. “Wetlanders kill such men on sight. Whatever the *algai’d’siswai* claim, that must have been the work of the Aes Sedai. And Rand al’Thor.” That name produced a pained silence, but it did not last.

“Caddar must have a cube like this one,” Belinde said. “He must have a woman with the gift to make it work.”

“An Aes Sedai?” Rhiale made a noise of disgust in her throat. “If there are ten Aes Sedai with him, let them come. We will deal with them as they deserve.”

Meira laughed, a dry sound as narrow as her face. “I think you almost begin to believe they did kill Desaine.”

“Watch your tongue!” Rhiale snarled.

“Yes,” Someryn murmured anxiously. “Careless words might be heard by the wrong ears.”

Tion’s laugh was short and unpleasant. “The lot of you has less courage than one wetlander.” Which made Someryn snap back, of course, and Modarra too, and Meira spoke words that would have brought a challenge had they not been Wise Ones, and Alarys spoke harsher, and Belinde. . . . Their squabbling irritated Sevanna, though it guaranteed they would not conspire against her. But that was not why she raised a hand for silence. Rhiale frowned at her, opening her mouth, and in that moment they heard what she did. Something rustled in the dead leaves among the trees. No Aiel would make so much noise, even if any would approach Wise Ones unbidden, and no animal would come so near people. This time, she rose to her feet with the others.

Two shapes appeared, a man and a woman, breaking enough branches underfoot to wake a stone. Just short of the clearing, they stopped, and the man bent his head slightly to speak to the woman. It was Caddar, in a nearly black coat with lace at his neck and wrists. At least he did not wear a sword.

They seemed to be arguing. Sevanna should have been able to hear something of their words, yet the silence was complete. Caddar stood nearly a hand taller than Modarra—tall for a wetlander, or even for an Aiel—and the woman's head reached no higher than his chest. As dark of face and hair as he, and beautiful enough to tighten Sevanna's mouth, she wore bright red silk, cut to expose even more of her bosom than Someryn showed.

As if thinking of the woman called her, Someryn drew close to Sevanna. "The woman has the gift," she whispered without taking her eyes from the pair. "She weaves a barrier." Pursing her lips, she added, reluctantly, "She is strong. Very strong." From her, that meant something indeed. Sevanna had never been able to understand why strength in the Power did not count among Wise Ones—while being thankful that it did not, for her own sake—but Someryn prided herself that she had never encountered a woman near as strong as she. By her tone, Sevanna suspected this woman was stronger.

Right then, she did not care whether the woman could move mountains or barely light a candle. She must be Aes Sedai. She did not have the face, yet some Sevanna had seen did not. That must be how Caddar could put his hand on *ter'angreal*. That was how he could find them and come. So soon; so quickly. Possibilities unfolded, and hope grew. But between him and her, who commanded?

"Stop channeling into that," she ordered. He might still be able to hear through it.

Rhiale gave her a look that did not stop short of pity. "Someryn already did, Sevanna."

Nothing could spoil her mood. She smiled and said, "Very well. Remember what I said. Let me do all of the talking." Most of the others nodded; Rhiale sniffed. Sevanna kept her smile. A Wise One could not be made *gai'shain*, but so many worn-out customs had been set aside already that others might follow.

Caddar and the woman started forward, and Someryn whispered again. "She still holds the Power."

"Sit next to me," Sevanna told her hastily. "Touch my leg if she channels." How that galled. But she must know.

She sat, folding her legs under, and the others joined her, leaving a space for Caddar and the woman. Someryn sat close enough that their knees touched. Sevanna wished she had a chair.

“I see you, Caddar,” she said formally, in spite of his insult. “Sit, you and your woman.”

She wanted to see how the Aes Sedai reacted, but all she did was arch an eyebrow and smile lazily. Her eyes were as black as his, as black as a raven’s. The other Wise Ones let a little coldness show. Had the Aes Sedai at the wells not allowed Rand al’Thor to break free, they surely would have killed or captured every one. This Aes Sedai must be aware of that, since Caddar plainly knew what had happened, yet she looked anything but afraid.

“This is Maisia,” Caddar said, lowering himself to the ground, a little short of the space left for him. For some reason, he did not like to come within arm’s reach. Perhaps he feared knives. “I told you to use a single Wise One, Sevanna, not seven. Some men might be suspicious.” For some reason, he seemed amused.

The woman, Maisia, paused in the act of smoothing her skirts under when he gave her name, glaring at him with a fury that should have stripped his hide away. Perhaps she had thought to keep her identity hidden. She said nothing, though. After a moment she sat beside him, her smile returning so suddenly it might never have gone. Not for the first time, Sevanna was thankful that wetlanders wore their emotions on their faces.

“You have brought the thing that can control Rand al’Thor?” She did not even glance at the pitcher of water. When he was so rude, why should she continue the forms? She did not remember him being so when they met before. Perhaps the Aes Sedai emboldened him.

Caddar gave her a quizzical look. “Why, when you do not have him?”

“I will,” she said levelly, and he smiled. So did Maisia.

“When you do, then.” His smile shouted of doubt and disbelief. The woman’s mocked. A black robe could be found for her, too. “What I have will control him once he is taken, but it cannot overcome him. I won’t risk him finding out about me until you have him secure.” He did not appear shamed in the slightest by the admission.

Sevanna forced down a stab of disappointment. One hope gone, but others remained. Rhiale and Tion folded their hands and stared straight ahead, beyond the circle, beyond him; he was no longer worth listening to. Of course, they did not know everything.

“What of Aes Sedai? Can this thing control them?” Rhiale and Tion stopped peering beyond the trees. Belinde’s eyebrows twitched, and Meira actually looked at her. Sevanna could have cursed their lack of self-control.

Caddar was as blind as all wetlanders, though. He threw back his head and laughed. “Do you mean to say you missed al’Thor but captured Aes Sedai? You grabbed at the eagle and caught a few larks!”

“Can you provide the same for Aes Sedai?” She wanted to grind her teeth. Surely he had been properly courteous before.

He shrugged. “Perhaps. If the price is right.” It was dust to him, of no moment. For that matter, Maisia showed no concern either. Strange, if she was Aes Sedai. But she must be.

“Your tongue tosses bright colors on the wind, wetlander,” Tion said in a flat voice. “What proof of them have you?” For once, Sevanna did not mind that she had spoken out of turn.

Caddar’s face tightened for all the world as if he were a clan chief, as if he had heard the insult, but in an instant he was all smiles once more. “As you wish. Maisia, play with the callbox for them.”

Someryn shifted her skirts, pressing her knuckles against Sevanna’s thigh as the gray cube rose a pace into the air. It bounced back and forth as though tossed from hand to hand, then tilted and spun on one corner like a top, faster and faster, until it blurred.

“Would you like to see her balance it on her nose?” Caddar asked with a toothy grin.

Tight-eyed, the dark woman stared straight ahead, her smile clearly forced now. “I think I have *demonstrated* quite enough, Caddar,” she said coldly. But the cube—the callbox?—continued whirling.

Sevanna waited a slow count of twenty before saying, “That is sufficient.”

“You may stop now, Maisia,” Caddar said. “Put it back where it was.” Only then did the cube slowly descend, nestling gently on its original spot. Dark as she was, the woman looked pale. And furious.

Had she been alone, Sevanna would have laughed, and danced. As it was, she had difficulty maintaining a smooth face. Rhiale and the others were too busy staring disdainfully at Maisia to notice. What worked on one woman with the gift would work on another. No need with Someryn and Modarra, perhaps, but Rhiale, and Therava. . . . She could not appear too eager, not when the others knew there were no Aes Sedai captives.

“Of course,” Caddar went on, “it will take a little time to provide you with what you wish.” He took on a sly look, trying to hide it; perhaps another wetlander would not have seen. “I warn you, the price will not be small.”

In spite of herself, Sevanna leaned forward. “And the way you traveled here so quickly? How much to make her teach us that?” She managed to keep eagerness from her voice, but she was afraid the contempt she felt came through. Wetlanders would do anything for gold.

Perhaps the man heard it; his eyes certainly widened in surprise before he could regain control. Such as it was. He studied his hands, and his mouth curled faintly. Why should his smile seem pleased? “That is not something she does,” he said in a voice as smooth as his palms, “not by herself. It is like the callbox. I can provide you with several, but the price of those is even higher. I doubt what you’ve gleaned from Cairhien will be enough. Fortunately, you can use the . . . traveling boxes to take your people to richer lands.”

Even Meira was hard-pressed to keep her expression from becoming too avid. Richer lands, and no need to make a way through those fools following Rand al’Thor.

“Tell me more,” Sevanna said coolly. “Richer lands might be of some interest.” Not enough to make her forget the *Car’a’carn*, though. Caddar would give her everything he had promised before she declared him *da’tsang*. As well that he seemed to like wearing black. There would be no need to give him any gold then.

The watcher ghosted through the trees, making no sound. It was wonderful what you could learn with a callbox, especially in a world where there seemed to be only two others. That red dress was easy to follow, and they never looked back even to see whether some of those so-called Aiel were trailing them. Graendal maintained the Mirror of Mists that hid her true form, but Sammael had dropped his, golden-bearded again and just head and shoulders taller than she. He had let the link between them dissolve, too. The watcher wondered whether that was wise, under the circumstances. He had always wondered how much of Sammael’s vaunted bravery was really stupidity and blindness. But the man did hold *saidin*; perhaps he was not completely unaware of his danger.

The watcher followed and listened. They had no idea. The True Power, drawn directly from the Great Lord, could neither be seen nor detected except by who wielded it. Black flecks floated across his vision. There was a price, to be sure, one that grew with each use, but he had always been willing to pay the price when it was necessary. Being filled with the True Power was almost like kneeling beneath Shayol Ghul, basking in the Great Lord's glory. The glory was worth the pain.

"Of course I had to have you with me," Sammael growled, stumbling over a dead vine. He had never really been at home away from the cities. "You answered a hundred questions for them just being there. I can hardly believe that silly girl herself actually suggested what I wanted." He barked a laugh. "Perhaps I'm *ta'veren* myself."

A branch that partially blocked Graendal's path flexed away until it snapped with a sharp crack. For a moment it hung in the air as if she intended to strike her companion. "That silly girl will cut out your heart and eat it, given half a chance." The branch flew aside. "I have a few questions of my own. I never thought you would keep your truce with al'Thor any longer than you must, but this . . . ?"

The watcher's eyebrows rose. A truce? A claim as risky as it was false, by all evidence.

"I didn't arrange his kidnapping." Sammael gave her what he probably thought was a wry look; his scar made it more a snarl. "Mesaana had a hand in it, though. Maybe Demandred and Semirhage as well, despite how it ended, but Mesaana certainly. Perhaps you ought to reconsider what you think the Great Lord means about leaving al'Thor unharmed."

Graendal considered that, so much so that she tripped. Sammael caught her by the arm, keeping her on her feet, but as soon as she regained her balance, she jerked free. Interesting, even given what had happened back in that clearing. Graendal's real interest was always the most beautiful plucked from among the most powerful, but she would have flirted, just to pass an hour, with a man she intended to kill or one who wanted to kill her. The only men she never flirted with were those of the Chosen who stood above her for a time. She never accepted being the lesser of any pair.

"Then why continue with them?" Her voice dripped molten lava, although normally she had exquisite control over her emotions. "Al'Thor in Mesaana's hands is one thing; al'Thor in this savage's is something else. Not that she'll have much chance at him if you really intend sending them off to loot. *Traveling* boxes? What is your game there? Do they hold captives? If you think I will teach them Compulsion, erase it from your mind. One of those women was not negligible. I will not risk strength and skill residing together, in her, or in someone she teaches. Or do you have a binder hidden away with your other toys? For that matter, where were you earlier? I do not like having to wait!"

Sammael stopped, glancing behind them. The watcher stood very still. Swathed in fancloth except for his eyes, he had no worry that he would be seen. Over the years he had learned expertise in many areas Sammael scorned. In some he favored, too.

The gateway opening suddenly, slicing away half of a tree, made Graendal jump. The split trunk leaned drunkenly. Now she also knew Sammael held to the Source.

"Did you think I was telling them the truth?" Sammael said mockingly. "Small increases in chaos are as important as large. They will go where I send them, do as I wish, and learn to be satisfied with what I give them. As will you, Maisia."

Graendal let her Illusion fade and stood golden-haired as he, as fair as she had been dark. "If you call me that again, I will kill you." Her voice held even less expression than her face. She meant it. The watcher tensed. If she tried, one of the two would die. Should he interfere? Black flecks sped across his eyes, faster, faster.

Sammael met her stare with one just as hard. "Remember who will be Nae'blis, Graendal," he said, and stepped through his gateway.

For a moment she stood looking at the opening. A vertical silver slash appeared off to one side, but before her gateway began to align, she let go the weave, slowly, the streak shrinking to a point before winking out. The prick-ling vanished from the watcher's skin as she released *saidar* as well. With a fixed face, she followed Sammael, and his gateway closed behind her.

The watcher smiled crookedly behind his fancloth skulker's mask. Nae'blis. That explained what had brought Graendal to heel, what had stayed her from killing Sammael. Even she would be blinded by that. An even greater risk for Sammael than claiming truce with Lews Therin, though. Unless, of course, it was true. The Great Lord delighted in setting his servants one against another, to see who was stronger. Only the strongest could stand near his glory. But today's truth need not be tomorrow's. The watcher had seen truth change a hundred times between a single sunrise and sunset. More than once he had changed it himself. He considered going back and killing the eight women in the clearing. They would die easily; he doubted they knew how to form a true circle. The black flecks filled his eyes, a horizontal blizzard. No, he would let that run its course. For now.

To his ears, the world screamed as he used the True Power to rip a small hole and step outside the Pattern. Sammael did not know how truly he spoke. Small increases in chaos could be every bit as important as large.

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CHAPTER

21

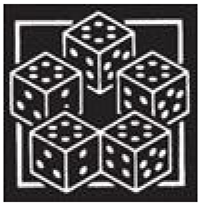

Swovan Night

Night came slowly over Ebou Dar, the glow of the white buildings resisting darkness. Small knots and bunches of Swovan Night revelers with little sprigs of evergreen in their hair danced in the streets beneath a bright three-quarter moon, few carrying so much as a lantern as they gamboled to the music of flutes and drums and horns that drifted from inns and palaces, dancing their way from one set of festivities to another, but for the most part the streets lay empty. A distant dog barked, and another, closer, answered furiously until it suddenly yelped and fell silent.

Balanced on his toes, Mat listened, eyes searching the moonshadows. Only a cat moved, slinking along the street. The slap of running bare feet faded. The owner of one pair should be staggering, and the other bleeding. As he bent, his foot kicked a club as long as his arm on the paving stones; heavy brass studs shone in the moonlight. That would have broken his skull for sure. Shaking his head, he wiped his knife on the ragged coat worn by the man at his feet. Open eyes stared at the night sky from a dirty, creased face. A beggar, by the look and smell of him. Mat had not heard of beggars attacking people, but maybe times were harder than he thought. A large jute sack lay near one outstretched hand. The fellows certainly had been optimistic about what they would find in his pockets. The thing could have covered him from head to knees.

To the north, above the city, light suddenly burst in the sky with a hollow boom as glittering streaks of green expanded in a ball, and then another eruption showered red sparkles through the first, then a blue, and a yellow. Illuminators' nightflowers, not as spectacular as they would have been in a moonless, cloudy sky, yet still they took his breath. He could watch fireworks till he fell over from hunger. Nalesean had spoken of an Illuminator—Light, was that only this morning?—but no more nightflowers came. When Illuminators made the sky bloom, as they said, they planted more than four flowers. Plainly someone with coin had made a purchase for Swovan Night. He wished he knew who. An Illuminator who would sell nightflowers would sell more than that.

Slipping the knife back up his sleeve, he gathered his hat from the pavement and walked away hurriedly, his boots echoing, a sound empty as the street. Most shuttered windows here showed not a glimmer of light. A better place for murder probably could not be found in the city. The entire encounter with the three beggars had lasted only a minute or two and had been seen by no one. In this city, you could find three or four fights in a day if you were not careful, but the odds of facing two sets of robbers in one day seemed about as great as the odds of the Civil Guard refusing a bribe. What was happening to his luck? If only those bloody dice would stop rolling in his head. He did not run, but he did not dawdle either, one hand on a hilt beneath his coat and an eye open for anyone moving in the shadows. He saw nothing but a few clumps of people cavorting along the street, though.

In the common room of The Wandering Woman, the tables had been cleared away except for a few near the walls. The flutists and the drummer made shrill music for four laughing lines of people doing what appeared to be half pattern-dance and half jig. Watching, he copied a step. Outland merchants in fine woolens leaped right along with locals in brocaded silk vests or those useless coats slung on their shoulders. He marked out two of the merchants for the way they moved, one slender and one not, yet both with a light grace, and several local women wearing their best, the deep necklines outlined by a little lace or a great deal of embroidery, but none in silk. Not that he would refuse to dance with a woman in silk, of course—he had never turned down a dance with any woman of any age or station—but the rich were in the palaces tonight, or the homes of the wealthier merchants and moneylenders. Those folk near the walls, catching their breath for the next dance, had their faces buried in mugs often as not, or were snatching fresh mugs from trays carried by scurrying serving women. Mistress Anan likely would sell as much wine tonight as in an ordinary week. Ale, too; the local folk must have no taste to their tongues.

Trying another step of the dance, he caught Caira as she tried to hurry by with a tray, pitching his voice loud above the music to ask a few questions and finishing with an order for his dinner, gilded fish, a tangy dish that Mistress Anan’s cook prepared to perfection. A man needed his strength to keep up in the dance.

Caira flashed a sultry smile at a fellow in a yellow vest who grabbed a mug from her tray and dropped his coin on it, but for once she had no smile for Mat. In fact, she managed to compress her mouth to a thin line, no small feat. “Your little rabbit, am I?” With a telling sniff, she went on impatiently. “The boy is tucked into his bed, where he should be, and I don’t know where Lord Nalesean is, or Harnan, or Master Vanin, or anybody else. And Cook said she won’t fix anything but soup and bread for those as are drowning their tongues in wine. Though why my Lord wants gilded fish when he has a gilded woman waiting in his room, I’m sure I couldn’t say. If my Lord will excuse me, some people need to work for their crust.” She swooped away, proffering her tray and smiling fit to split her face at every man in sight.

Mat frowned after her. A gilded woman? In his room? The chest of gold rested now in a small hollow beneath the kitchen floor, in front of one of the stoves, but the dice in his head drummed like thunder suddenly.

The sounds of merriment faded a little as he slowly climbed the stairs. In front of his door, he paused, listening to the dice. Two attempts to rob him so far today. Twice his skull could have been broken. He was sure that Darkfriend had not seen him, and no one could call her gilded, but. . . . He fingered a hilt under his coat, then took his hand away as a woman flared in his thoughts, a tall woman falling with the hilt of a knife protruding between her breasts. His knife. Luck would just have to be with him. Sighing, he pushed open the door.

The Hunter that Elayne had made her Warder turned, hefting his unstrung Two Rivers bow, her golden braid drawn over her shoulder. Her blue eyes fastened on him purposefully, and her face fixed itself in determination. She looked ready to drub him with the bow if she did not get what she wanted.

“If this is about Olver,” he began, and suddenly a twist of memory unfolded, a mist thinned over one day, one hour in his life.

There was no hope, with Seanchan to the west and Whitecloaks to the east, no hope and only one chance, so he raised the curled Horn and blew, not really knowing what to expect. The sound came golden as the Horn, so sweet he did not know whether to laugh or cry. It echoed, and the earth and heavens seemed to sing. While that one pure note hung in the air, a fog *began to rise, appearing from nowhere, thin wisps, thickening, billowing higher, until all was obscured as if clouds covered the land. And down the clouds they rode, as though down a mountainside, the dead heroes of legend, bound to be called back by the Horn of Valere. Artur Hawkwing himself led, tall and hook-nosed, and behind came the rest, little more than a hundred. So few, but all those the Wheel would spin out again and again to guide the Pattern, to make legend and myth. Mikel of the Pure Heart, and Shivan the Hunter behind his black mask. He was said to herald the end of Ages, the destruction of what had been and the birth of what was to be, he and his sister Calian, called the Chooser, who rode red-masked at his side. Amaresu, with the Sword of the Sun glowing in her hands, and Paedrig, the golden-tongued peacemaker, and there, carrying the silver bow with which she never missed. . . .*

He pushed the door shut trying to lean against it. He felt dizzy, dazed. “You are she. Birgitte, for true. Burn my bones to ash, it’s impossible. How? How?”

The woman of legend gave a resigned sigh and propped his bow back in the corner next to his spear. “I was ripped out untimely, Hornsounder, cast out by Moghedien to die and saved by Elayne’s bonding.” She spoke slowly, studying him as if to be sure he understood. “I feared you might remember who I used to be.”

Still feeling hit between the eyes, he flung himself scowling into the armchair beside his table. Who she used to be, indeed. Fists on hips, she confronted him challengingly, no whit different from the Birgitte he had seen ride out of the sky. Even her clothes were the same, though this short coat was red and the wide trousers yellow. “Elayne and Nynaeve know and kept it from me, true? I weary of secrets, Birgitte, and they harbor secrets as a grain barn harbors rats. They’ve become Aes Sedai, eyes and hearts. Even Nynaeve is twice a stranger, now.”

“You have your own secrets.” Folding her arms under her breasts, she sat on the foot of his bed. The way she looked at him, you would have thought he was a tavern puzzle. “For one, you’ve not told them you blew the Horn of Valere. The smallest of your secrets from them, I think.”

Mat blinked. He had assumed they had told her. After all, she was Birgitte. “What secrets do I have? Those women know my toenails and dreams.” She was Birgitte. Of course. He leaned forward. “Make them see reason. You’re Birgitte Silverbow. You can make them do as you say. This city has a pit-trap at every crossing, and I fear the stakes grow sharper by the day. Make them come away before it's too late."

She laughed. Put a hand over her mouth and laughed! "You have the wrong end, Hornsounder. I do not command them. I am Elayne's Warder. I obey." Her smile became rueful. "Birgitte Silverbow. Faith of the Light, I'm not sure I still am that woman. So much of what I was and knew has faded like mist beneath the summer sun since my strange new birth. I'm no hero now, only another woman to make my way. And as for your secrets. What language do we speak, Hornsounder?"

He opened his mouth . . . and stopped, really hearing what she had just asked. *Nosane iro gavane domorakoshi, Diynen'd'ma'purvene?* Speak we what language, Sounder of the Horn? The hair on his neck tried to stand. "The old blood," he said carefully. Not in the Old Tongue. "An Aes Sedai once told me the old blood runs strong in—What are you bloody well laughing at now?"

"You, Mat," she managed while trying not to double over. At least she was not speaking the Old Tongue any more either. She knuckled a tear from the corner of her eye. "Some people speak a few words, a phrase or two, because of the old blood. Usually without understanding what they say, or not quite. But you. . . . One sentence you're an Eharoni High Prince and the next a First Lord of Manetheren, accent and idiom perfect. No, don't worry. Your secret is safe with me." She hesitated. "Is mine with you?"

He waved a hand, still too flabbergasted to be offended. "Do I look like my tongue flaps?" he muttered. Birgitte! In the flesh! "Burn me, I could use a drink." Before that was out of his mouth he knew it was the wrong thing to say. Women never—

"That sounds the right notion to me," she said. "I could use a pitcher of wine, myself. Blood and ashes, when I saw you'd recognized me, I nearly swallowed my tongue."

He sat up straight as if he had been jerked, staring.

She met his gaze with a merry twinkle and a grin. "There's enough noise in the common room, we could talk without being overheard. Besides, I wouldn't mind sitting and looking a bit. Elayne preaches like a Tovan councilor if I ogle a man for longer than a heartbeat."

He nodded before he thought. Other men's memories told him Tovans were a stark and disapproving people, abstemious to the point of pain; at least they had been, a thousand years gone and more. He was not sure whether to laugh or groan. On the one hand, a chance to talk with Birgitte—Birgitte! he doubted he would ever get over the shock—but on the other, he doubted he would be able to hear the music downstairs for the noise of those dice rattling in his skull. She must be a key to it, somehow. A man with any brains would climb out the window right now. “A pitcher or two sounds fine to me,” he told her.

A stiff salt breeze up from the bay carried a touch of coolness, for a wonder, but the night felt oppressive to Nynaeve. Music and snatches of laughter drifted into the palace, and faintly from within as well. She had been invited to the ball by Tylin herself, and Elayne and Aviendha too, but all declined, with varying degrees of politeness. Aviendha had said there was only one dance she was willing to do with wetlander men, which made Tylin blink uncertainly. For herself, Nynaeve would have liked to go—only a fool passed up any chance to dance—yet she knew if she had, she would have done exactly what she was doing, sat somewhere worrying and trying not to chew her knuckle to a nub.

So there they all were, closeted in their apartments with Thom and Juilin, anxious as caged cats, while everyone else in Ebou Dar made merry. Well, she was, anyway. What could be keeping Birgitte? How long did it take to tell a man to present himself first thing in the morning? Light, the whole effort was useless, and it was long past time for bed. Long past. If she could only sleep, she could put away memories of the morning’s horrible journeys by boat. Worst of all, her weather sense told her a storm was on the way, told her the wind should be howling outside and the rain sheeting down so thick no one could see ten feet. It had taken her some time to understand about the times she Listened to the Wind and seemed to hear lies. At least, she thought she understood. Another kind of storm was coming, not wind or rain. She had no proof, but she would eat her slippers if Mat Cauthon was not part of it somehow. She wanted to sleep for a month, a year, to forget worries until Lan wakened her with a kiss like the Sun King with Talia. Which was ridiculous, of course; that was only a story, and a very improper one at that, and anyway, she was not about to become any man’s pet, not even Lan’s. She would find him, though, somehow, and bond him hers. She would. . . . Light! If she had not thought the others would stare at her, she would have paced the soles out of her slippers!

The hours wore on. She read and re-read the short letter Mat had left with Tylin. Aviendha sat quietly beside her high-backed chair, cross-legged on the pale green floor tiles as usual, an ornately gilded leather-bound copy of *The Travels of Jain Farstrider* open on her knees. No anxiety there, not to see, but then the woman would not turn a hair if someone stuffed a viper down her dress. Since returning to the palace she had donned the intricate silver necklace she wore nearly day and night. Except on the boat trip; she had said she did not want to risk it, then. Idly, Nynaeve wondered why she no longer wore her ivory bracelet. There had been an overheard conversation, something about not wearing it until Elayne had its like, which made little sense. And mattered as little as the bracelet, of course. The letter called from her lap. The sitting-room stand-lamps made reading easy, though Mat's unformed, boyish hand did present difficulties. It was the contents that clenched Nynaeve's middle into knots.

> *There's nothing here but heat and flies, and we can find plenty of those in Caemlyn.*

"Are you sure you didn't tell him anything?" she demanded.

Across the room, Juilin paused with his hand over the stones board, giving her a look of outraged innocence. "How often must I say so?" Outraged innocence was one of the things men did best, especially when they were guilty as foxes in the henyard. Interesting that the carving around the board's rim was of foxes.

Thom, seated across the lapis-inlaid table from the thief-catcher, looked as little the gleeman in his finely cut coat of bronze wool, as he did the man who had once been Queen Morgase's lover. Gnarled and white-haired, with long mustaches and thick eyebrows, he was frustrated patience from his sharp blue eyes to his boot soles. "I can't see how we could have, Nynaeve," he said dryly, "given that you told us next to nothing until tonight. You should have sent Juilin and me."

Nynaeve sniffed loudly. As if those two had not been running around like chickens with their heads off ever since they arrived, prying into her and Elayne's affairs on Mat's say-so. Those three could not be together two minutes without gossiping, either. Men never could. They. . . . The truth of it was, she admitted reluctantly, using the men had never occurred to them. "You'd have gone off carousing and drinking with him," she muttered. "Don't tell me you would not." That must be where Mat was, leaving Birgitte to cool her feet at the inn. That man would find some way to set the whole scheme awry.

"And what if they had?" Leaning beside one of the tall arched windows, peering out at the night through the white-painted iron balcony, Elayne giggled. She was tapping her foot, though how she could make out one tune from all those floating in the darkness was a wonder. "It is a night for . . . carousing."

Nynaeve frowned at her back. Elayne had been increasingly peculiar all night. If she had not known better, she would have suspected the other woman had been sneaking out to snatch sips of wine. Gulps of it, actually. Even if Elayne had not been under her eye, though, that was impossible. Each of them had had a rather unfortunate experience with too much wine, and neither had again let herself have more than a single cup at a time.

"It is Jaichim Carridin who interests me," Aviendha said, closing the book and setting it beside her. She refused to consider how odd she looked, sitting on the floor in a blue silk dress. "Among us, Shadowrunners are killed as soon as found, and not clan, sept, society or first-sister will raise a hand in protest. If Jaichim Carridin is a Shadow-runner, why does Tylin Mitsobar not kill him? Why do we not?"

"Matters are a little more complex here," Nynaeve told her, though she had wondered the same. Not why Carridin was not killed, of course, but why he was still allowed to come and go as he wished. She had seen him in the palace that very day, after she had been handed Mat's letter, after she had told Tylin what it contained. He had spoken with Tylin above an hour and departed with as much honor as when he arrived. She had meant to discuss it with Elayne, but the question of what Mat knew, and how, kept intruding. That man would make trouble. He would, somehow. This business was going to go wrong no matter what anyone said. Bad weather was coming.

Thom cleared his throat. "Tylin is a weak queen, and Carridin the ambassador of a power." Placing a stone, he kept his eyes on the board. He sounded as though he was thinking aloud. "By definition, a Whitecloak Inquisitor cannot be a Darkfriend; at least, that's how it is defined in the Fortress of the Light. If she arrests him, or even charges him, she'll find a Whitecloak legion in Ebou Dar before she can blink. They might leave her the throne, but she'd be a puppet from then on, strings pulled from the Dome of Truth. Aren't you ready to concede yet, Juilin?" The thief-catcher glared at him, then bent to a furious study of the board.

“I did not think her a coward,” Aviendha said disgustedly, and Thom gave her an amused smile.

“You have never faced something you could not fight, child,” he said gently, “something so strong your only choice is to flee or be consumed alive. Try to hold judgment on Tylin till you have.” For some reason, Aviendha’s face reddened. Normally, she hid her emotions so well her face was like stone. “I know,” Elayne said suddenly. “We’ll find proof even Pedron Niall must accept.” She skipped back into the room. No, she danced. “We will disguise ourselves and follow him.”

Suddenly, it was no longer Elayne standing there in a green Ebou Dari gown, but a Domani woman in thin clinging blue. Nynaeve leaped up before she could stop, and her mouth tightened with exasperation at herself. Just because she could not see the weaves at the moment was no reason to be startled by Illusion. She darted a glance at Thom and Juilin. Even Thom’s mouth hung open. Unconsciously she took a firm grip on her braid. Elayne was going to reveal everything! What was the matter with her?

Illusion worked best the closer you stayed to what was there before, in shape and size at least, so bits of the Ebou Dari dress flashed through the Domani garment as Elayne whirled to examine herself in one of the room’s two large mirrors. She laughed and clapped her hands. “Oh, he will never recognize me. Or you, near-sister.” Abruptly a Taraboner woman sat beside Nynaeve’s chair, with brown eyes and yellow braids strung with red beads just the shade of her snug-fitting dress of folded silk. She watched Elayne quizzically. Nynaeve’s hand tightened on her braid. “And we can’t forget you,” Elayne babbled on. “I know *just* the thing.”

This time, Nynaeve saw the glow around Elayne. She was furious. Seeing the flows being woven about herself did not tell her what image Elayne gave her, of course. It took looking into one of the mirrors to do that. A Sea Folk woman stared back at her, aghast, with a dozen begemmed rings in her ears and twice as many golden medallions dangling from the chain running to her nose ring. Aside from the jewelry, she wore wide trousers of brocaded green silk and not a stitch else, the way women of the Atha’an Miere did out of sight of land. It was just Illusion. She was still decently clothed under the weaving. But. . . . Beside her reflection she saw those of Thom and Juilin, both fighting grins.

A strangled squawk erupted from her throat. “Close your eyes!” she shouted at the men and began leaping about, waving her arms, anything to make her dress show through. “Close them, burn you!” Oh. They had. Bristling with indignation, she stopped capering. They were not fighting those grins anymore, though. For that matter, Aviendha was laughing quite openly, rocking to and fro.

Nynaeve gave her skirts a jerk—in the mirror, the Sea Folk woman seemed to pluck at her trousers—and fixed Elayne with a glare. “Stop this, Elayne!” The Domani woman stared back, mouth open and eyes wide with incredulity. Only then did Nynaeve realize how angry she was; the True Source beckoned from just beyond the edge of sight. Embracing *saidar*, she slammed a shield between Elayne and the Source. Or rather, she tried to. Shielding someone who already held the Power was not easy even when you were the stronger. Once, as a girl, she had swung Master Luhhan’s hammer against his anvil as hard as she could, and the shiver of it ran all the way to her toes. This was about twice that. “Love of the Light, Elayne, are you drunk?”

The glow around the Domani woman faded away, and so did the Domani woman. Nynaeve knew the weave was gone from around herself, but she still glanced at the mirror and drew a relieved breath to see Nynaeve al’Meara there in yellow-slashed blue.

“No,” Elayne said slowly. Color burned in her face, but it was not embarrassment, or not entirely. Her chin rose, and her voice frosted. “I am not.”

The door to the corridor banged open, and Birgitte staggered in with a broad smile. Well, perhaps she did not quite stagger, but she was decidedly unsteady. “I did not expect you all to remain awake for me,” she said brightly. “Well, you’ll be interested to hear what I have to say. But first. . . .”

With the too steady steps of someone carrying considerable drink inside, she vanished into her room.

Thom stared at her door with a bemused grin, Juilin with an incredulous one. They knew who she was, the truth of it. Elayne just glared down her nose. From Birgitte’s bedchamber came a splashing, as if a pitcher had been upended on the floor. Nynaeve exchanged puzzled looks with Aviendha.

Birgitte reappeared with her face and hair dripping and her coat soaked from shoulders to elbows. “Now my wits are clearer,” she said, settling into one of the ball-footed chairs with a sigh. “That young man has a hollow leg and a hole in the bottom of his foot. He even out-drank Beslan, and I was beginning to think wine was water to that lad."

"Beslan?" Nynaeve said, her voice rising. "Tylin's son? What was he doing there?"

"Why did you allow it, Birgitte?" Elayne exclaimed. "Mat Cauthon will corrupt the boy, and his mother will blame us."

"The *boy* is the same age as you," Thom told her in stuffy tones.

A baffled look passed between Nynaeve and Elayne. What was his point? Everyone knew that a man did not achieve his proper wits, such as they were, until ten years later than a woman.

The puzzlement faded from Elayne's face, replaced by firmness and no little anger as she focused on Birgitte again. Words were going to be said, words both women might regret tomorrow.

"If you and Juilin will leave us now, Thom," Nynaeve said quickly. It was extremely unlikely they would see the need on their own. "You need your sleep to be fresh first thing in the morning." They sat there, gaping at her like belled fools, so she made her tone firmer. "Now?"

"This game was done twenty stones ago," Thom said, glancing at the board. "What do you say we go down to our own room and start another? I'll spot you ten stones to place as you will any time during the game."

"Ten stones?" Juilin yelped, scraping back his chair. "Will you offer me fish broth and milk-bread, as well?"

They argued all the way out, but at the door, each of them glanced back in sullen resentment. She would not put it past them to remain awake all night just because she had sent them to bed.

"Mat won't corrupt Beslan," Birgitte said dryly as the door closed behind the men. "I doubt nine feather dancers with a shipload of brandy could corrupt him. They wouldn't know where to begin."

Nynaeve was relieved to hear it, though something was odd about the woman's tone—likely the drink—but Beslan was not at all the issue. She said so, and Elayne added, "No, he isn't. You got *drunk*, Birgitte! And *I* felt it. I *still* feel tipsy if I don't concentrate. The bond is *not* supposed to work that way. Aes Sedai don't fall over giggling if their Warders drink too much." Nynaeve threw up her hands.

"Don't look at me that way," Birgitte said. "You know more than I do. Aes Sedai and Warders have always been men and women before. Maybe that's the difference. Maybe we are too alike." Her grin was skewed slightly. There had not been near enough water in that pitcher. “That might be embarrassing, I suppose.”

“If we could stay with what is important?” Nynaeve said tightly. “Such as Mat?” Elayne had her mouth open for a retort to Birgitte, but she closed it quickly, the red spots in her cheeks most definitely chagrin this time. “Now,” Nynaeve went on. “Will Mat be here in the morning, or is he in the same revolting state as you?”

“He might come,” Birgitte said, taking a cup of mint tea from Aviendha, who of course sat down on the floor. Elayne frowned at her a moment, then, of all things, folded up her legs and sat beside her!

“What do you mean, he might?” Nynaeve demanded. She channeled, and the chair she had been sitting in floated over to her, and if it banged to the floor, she meant it to. Drinking too much, sitting on the floor. What was next? “If he expects us to come to him on hands and knees . . . !”

Birgitte took a sip of the tea with a grateful murmur, and oddly, when she looked at Nynaeve again, she did not seem so intoxicated. “I talked him out of that. I don’t think he was really serious. All he wants now is an apology and thanks.”

Nynaeve’s eyes popped. She had talked him *out* of that? Apologize? To Matrim Cauthon? “Never,” she growled.

“For what?” Elayne wanted to know, as if that mattered. She pretended not to see Nynaeve’s glare.

“The Stone of Tear,” Birgitte said, and Nynaeve’s head whipped around. The woman no longer sounded intoxicated at all. “He says he went into the Stone, him and Juilin, to free the pair of you from a dungeon you couldn’t escape on your own.” She shook her head slowly, in wonder. “I don’t know that I would have done that for anyone short of Gaidal. Not the Stone. He says you gave him a backhanded thanks and made him feel he ought to be grateful you didn’t kick him.”

It was true, in a way, but all distorted. There Mat had been with that mocking grin of his, saying he was there to pull their chestnuts off the fire or some such. Even then he had thought he could tell them what to do. “Only one of the Black sisters was on guard in the dungeon,” Nynaeve muttered, “and we had taken care of her.” True, they hadn’t yet been able to figure out how to open the door, shielded. “Be’lal wasn’t really interested in us, anyway—it was just to lure Rand. Moiraine may already have killed him, by then, for all we know.”

“The Black Ajah.” Birgitte’s voice was flatter than the floor tiles. “And one of the Forsaken. Mat never mentioned them. You owe him thanks on your knees, Elayne. Both of you do. The man deserves it. And Juilin, as well.”

Blood rushed to Nynaeve’s face. He had never mentioned . . . ? That despicable, despicable man! “I will not apologize to Matrim Cauthon, not on my deathbed.”

Aviendha leaned toward Elayne, touching her knee. “Near-sister, I will say this delicately.” She looked and sounded about as delicate as a stone post. “If this is true, you have *toh* toward Mat Cauthon, you and Nynaeve. And you have made it worse since, just by the actions I have seen.”

“Toh!” Nynaeve exclaimed. Those two were always talking about this *toh* foolery. “We aren’t Aiel, Aviendha. And Mat Cauthon is a thorn in the foot to everybody he meets.”

But Elayne was nodding. “I see. You are right, Aviendha. But what must we *do*? You will have to help me, near-sister. I don’t intend to try to become Aiel, but I . . . I want you to be proud of me.”

“We will *not* apologize!” Nynaeve snapped.

“I have pride in knowing you,” Aviendha said, touching Elayne’s cheek lightly. “An apology is a beginning, yet not enough to meet *toh*, now.”

“Are you listening to me?” Nynaeve demanded. “I said, I will—not—apologize!”

They went right on talking. Only Birgitte looked at her, and the woman wore a smile not far from outright laughter. Nynaeve throttled her braid with both hands. She had known that they should have sent Thom and Juilin.

* * *

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CHAPTER

22

Small Sacrifices

Squinting up at the sign above the inn’s arched door, a crudely drawn woman with a walking staff peering hopefully into the distance, Elayne wished she were back in her bed instead of up with the sun. Not that she could have slept. Mol Hara Square stood empty behind her except for a few creaking ox-and donkey-carts on their way to the markets, a scattering of women balancing huge baskets on their heads. A one-legged beggar sat with his bowl at a corner of the inn, the first of many who would dot the square later; she had already given him a silver mark, enough to feed him for a week even now, but he tucked it under his ragged coat with a toothless grin and waited on. The sky was still gray, yet the day already promised to scorch. Keeping concentration well enough to ignore the heat was a problem this morning.

The last remnants of Birgitte’s morning-after head remained in the back of her own, dwindling but not yet gone. If only her small ability with Healing had not proved too small. She hoped Aviendha and Birgitte would manage to learn something useful about Carridin this morning, in their Illusion disguises. Not that Carridin would know any of them from a shoemaker, of course, but it was best to be careful. She felt pride that Aviendha had not asked to come along here, had in fact been surprised at the suggestion. Aviendha did not believe she needed anyone to watch her, to make sure she did what was needful.

With a sigh, she straightened her dress, though there was no need. Blue and cream, with a bit of cream-colored Vandalra lace, the garment did make her feel just a touch . . . exposed. The only time she had balked at donning a local fashion was while she and Nynaeve traveled to Tanchico with the Sea Folk, but in its own way, Ebou Dari fashion was almost. . . . She sighed again. She was just trying to delay. Aviendha should have come to lead her by the hand.

“I will not apologize,” Nynaeve said suddenly at her shoulder. She clutched her own gray skirts with both hands, staring at The Wandering Woman as though Moghedien herself waited inside. “I won’t!”

“You should have worn white after all,” Elayne murmured, earning a suspicious sideways glance. After a moment, she added, “You did say it was the color for funerals.” Which produced a satisfied nod, though it was not what she had meant at all. This *would* be disaster if they could not keep peace among themselves. Birgitte had had to settle for an infusion of herbs this morning, and a particularly bitter mix at that, because Nynaeve claimed she was not angry enough to channel. She had gone on in the most dramatic manner about funeral white being the only suitable color, insisted she was not coming, until Elayne dragged her out of their apartments, and announced at least twenty times since that she would not apologize. Peace had to be kept, but. . . . “You agreed to this, Nynaeve. No, I don’t want to hear any more about the rest of us bullying you. You agreed. So stop sulking.”

Nynaeve spluttered, eyes going wide with outrage. She was not to be diverted, though, despite one fiercely incredulous *“Sulking?”* under her breath. “We need to discuss this further, Elayne. There is no need to be so hasty. There must be a thousand reasons why this won’t work, *ta’veren* or no *ta’veren*, and Mat Cauthon is nine hundred of them.”

Elayne gave her a level look. “Did you deliberately choose the bitterest herbs that would work this morning?” Wide-eyed outrage turned to wide-eyed innocence, but red stained Nynaeve’s cheeks. Elayne pushed open the door. Nynaeve followed, muttering. Elayne would not have been surprised if she stuck out her tongue, too. Sulky was not even in it, this morning.

The smell of breads baking wafted from the kitchens, and all the shutters were open to air out the common room. A plump-cheeked serving woman standing atop a tall stool stretched on tiptoes to take down bedraggled evergreen branches from above the windows, while others replaced tables and benches and chairs that must have been taken away for the dancing. This early, no one else was about, except for a skinny girl in a white apron, sweeping half-heartedly with a brush-broom. She might have been pretty if her mouth had not seemed set in a constant pout. There was surprisingly little mess, considering that inns were supposed to be riotous, even licentious, during festivals. A part of her wished she could have seen it, though.

“Could you direct me to Master Cauthon’s rooms?” she asked the skinny girl with a smile, proffering two silver pennies. Nynaeve sniffed. *She* was tight as the skin on a fresh apple; she had given the beggar one *copper*!

The girl eyed them sullenly—and surprisingly, the coins as well—and mumbled something sour that sounded like, “A gilded woman last night and ladies this morning.” She gave directions grudgingly. For a moment Elayne thought she intended to scorn the pennies, but on the point of turning away, the girl snatched the silver from her hand without so much as a word of thanks, pausing only to tuck them into the neck of her dress, of all places, before she set to swinging her broom as if to beat the floor to death. Perhaps she had a pocket sewn in there.

“You see,” Nynaeve grumbled under her breath. “You mark me, he tried to push his attentions on that young woman. That’s the sort of man you want me to apologize to.”

Elayne said nothing, only led the way up the railless steps at the back of the room. If Nynaeve did not stop complaining. . . . The first hallway on the right, the girl had said, and the last door on the left, but in front of it, she hesitated, biting her lower lip.

Nynaeve brightened. “You see it’s a bad idea now, don’t you? We aren’t Aiel, Elayne. I like the girl well enough, for all she’s forever fondling that knife of hers, but just think of the absolute drivel she talked. It’s impossible. You must know it is.”

“We did not agree to anything impossible, Nynaeve.” Keeping her voice firm took an effort. Some of what Aviendha had suggested, apparently in all seriousness. . . . She actually had suggested letting the man *switch* them! “What we did agree to is quite possible.” Barely. She rapped loudly on the paneled door with her knuckles. There was a fish carved on the door, a round thing with stripes and a snout. All of the doors had different carvings, most of fish. There was no answer.

Nynaeve puffed out a breath she must have been holding. “Perhaps he has gone out. We’ll just have to come back another time.”

“At this hour?” She rapped once more. “You say he always lies abed when he can.” Still no sound from inside.

“Elayne, if Birgitte is any indication, Mat got himself juicy as a fiddler last night. He won’t thank us for waking him. Why don’t we just go away and—”

Elayne lifted the latch and went in. Nynaeve followed with a sigh that could have been heard back in the Palace.

Mat Cauthon was sprawled on his bed atop the knitted red coverlet, a folded cloth lying over his eyes and dripping onto the pillow. The room was not very tidy despite the absence of dust. A boot stood on the washstand—the washstand!—next to a white basin full of unused water, the stand-mirror sat askew, as if he had stumbled into it and simply left it tilted back sharply, and his wrinkled coat lay tossed across a ladder-back chair. He wore everything else, including that black scarf he seemed never to take off, and the other boot. The silver foxhead dangled from his unlaced shirt.

The medallion made her fingers itch. If he really was lying there sodden with drink, she might be able to remove it unfelt. One way or another, she intended to find out how the thing absorbed the Power. Finding out how almost anything worked was a fascination to her, but that foxhead was all the puzzles in the world rolled into one.

Nynaeve caught her sleeve and jerked her head toward the door, silently mouthing “asleep” and something else she could not make out. Probably another plea to go.

“Leave me alone, Nerim,” he mumbled suddenly. “I told you before; I don’t want anything but a new skull. And close the door softly, or I’ll pin your ears to it.”

Nynaeve jumped, and tried to pull her toward the door, but she stood her ground. “It is not Nerim, Master Cauthon.”

Raising his head from the pillow, he used both hands to lift the cloth a trifle and squinted at them with reddened eyes.

Grinning, Nynaeve made no effort at all to hide her pleasure at his wretched state. What Elayne could not understand at first was why she wanted to grin, too. Her one experience with drinking too much had left her with nothing but pity and sympathy for anyone so snared. In the back of her mind she felt Birgitte’s head throbbing still, and it came to her. Certainly she could not like Birgitte drowning herself in drink, whatever the reason, but neither could she like the thought that anyone could do anything at all better than her first Warder. A ridiculous thought. Embarrassing. But satisfying, too.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded hoarsely, then winced and lowered his voice. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“It’s morning,” Nynaeve said sharply. “Don’t you remember talking with Birgitte?”

“Could you not be so loud?” he whispered, closing his eyes. The next instant, they popped open again. “Birgitte?” Sitting up abruptly, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. For a time he just sat there, peering at the floorboards, elbows on his knees and the medallion swinging from its thong around his neck. At last he turned his head to look at them balefully. Or perhaps his eyes just made it seem so. “What did she tell you?”

“She informed us of your demands, Master Cauthon,” Elayne said formally. This must be how it felt to stand before the headsman’s block. There was nothing for it but to keep her head high and face whatever came proudly. “I wish to thank you from my heart for rescuing me from the Stone of Tear.” There, she had begun, and it had not hurt. Not very much.

Nynaeve stood there, glowering, her lips growing tighter and tighter. The woman was *not* going to leave her to do this alone. Elayne embraced the Source almost before she thought, and channeled a thin flow of Air that flicked Nynaeve’s earlobe like a snapping finger. The woman clapped a hand to her ear and glowered, but Elayne simply turned coolly back to Master Cauthon and waited.

“I thank you, too,” Nynaeve mumbled sullenly at last. “From the heart.”

Elayne rolled her eyes in spite of herself. Well, he had asked them to speak more softly. And he did seem to hear. Strangely, he shrugged with embarrassment.

“Oh, that. It was nothing. Likely thing, you’d have gotten yourself free in another tick without me.” His head sank to his hands, and he pressed the damp cloth to his eyes once more. “On your way out, would you ask Caira to bring me some wine-punch? A slender girl, pretty, with a warm eye.”

Elayne quivered. *Nothing?* The man *demanded* an apology, she *humbled* herself to give it, and now it was *nothing*? He was not deserving of sympathy or pity! She still held *saidar*, and she considered thumping him with a much thicker flow than she had used on Nynaeve. Not that that would do any good so long as he wore the foxhead. Then again, it hung loose, not touching him. Did it offer the same protection when it was not . . . ?

Nynaeve ended her speculation by lunging for him, fingers clawed. Elayne managed to put herself between them and seize the other woman by the shoulders. For a stretched moment they stood nose-to-nose except for the difference in their heights; with a grimace, Nynaeve finally relaxed, and Elayne felt it was safe to release her.

The man still had his head bowed, all unaware. Whether the medallion protected him or not, she could snatch his bowstave from the corner and beat him till he howled. She felt heat rise in her face: She had stopped Nynaeve from ruining everything, only to think of ruining it herself. Worse, by the smirky, self-satisfied little smile the other woman gave her, she knew very well what had been in her head.

“There is more, Master Cauthon,” she announced, squaring her shoulders. The smile vanished from Nynaeve’s face. “We also wish to apologize for delaying so long in giving you your much deserved thanks. And we apologize . . . humbly . . .” She stumbled a little on that. “. . . for the way we have treated you since.” Nynaeve stretched out a beseeching hand that she ignored. “To show the depth of our regret, we undertake the following promises.” Aviendha had said an apology was only a beginning. “We will not belittle or demean you in any way, nor shout at you for any reason, nor . . . nor attempt to give you orders.” Nynaeve winced. Elayne’s mouth tightened too, but she did not stop. “Recognizing your due concern for our safety, we will not leave the palace without telling you where we are going, and we will listen to your advice.” Light, she had no wish to be Aiel, no wish to do any of this, but she wanted Aviendha’s respect. “If you . . . if you decide that we are . . .” Not that she had any intention of becoming a sister-wife—the very *idea* was indecent!—but she did like her. “. . . are putting ourselves in needless danger . . .” It was not Aviendha’s fault that Rand had caught both their hearts. And Min’s as well. “. . . we will accept bodyguards of your choosing . . .” Fate or *ta’veren* or whatever, what was, was. She loved both women like sisters. “. . . and keep them with us as long as possible.” *Burn* the man for doing this to her! It was not Mat Cauthon she meant. “This I swear by the Lion Throne of Andor.” She breathed in as if she had run a mile. Nynaeve wore a face like a cornered badger.

His head swiveled toward them ever so slowly, and he lowered the cloth just enough to expose one red-streaked eye. “You sound like you have an iron rod down your throat, my Lady,” he said mockingly. “You have my permission to call me Mat.” Odious man! He would not know civility if it bit him on the nose! That sanguine eye slanted toward her. “What about you, Nynaeve? I heard a lot of ‘we’ from her, but not a word from you.”

“I won’t shout at you,” Nynaeve shouted. “And all the rest, too. I promise, you . . . you . . . !” She gobbled on the edge of swallowing her tongue as she realized she could not call him one of the names he warranted without breaking the promise already. And yet, the effect of her shout was most gratifying.

With a cry, he shuddered and dropped the cloth, clutched his head with both hands. His eyes bulged. “Flaming dice,” he whimpered, or something very like. It suddenly struck Elayne that he would be a very good source of pithy language. Stablemen and the like always seemed to scrape their tongues clean the moment they saw her. Of course, she had promised herself to civilize him, to make him useful to Rand, but that need not interfere too much with his language. In fact, she realized there was a good deal she had not promised not to do. Pointing that out should settle Nynaeve considerably.

After a long moment, he spoke in a hollow voice. “Thank you, Nynaeve.” He paused to swallow hard. “I thought you two must be somebody else in disguise, there for a bit. Since I still seem to be alive, we might as well take care of the rest of it. I seem to recall that Birgitte said you wanted me to find something for you. What?”

“You won’t find it,” Nynaeve told him in a firm voice. Well, perhaps more hard than firm, but Elayne did not think of calling her down. He merited every wince. “You will accompany us, and we will find it.”

“Backtracking already, Nynaeve?” Somehow, he managed a derisive sneer, especially hideous with his eyes. “You just finished promising to do as I say. If you want a tame *ta’veren* on a leash, go ask Rand or Perrin and see what answer you get.”

“We promised no such thing, Matrim Cauthon,” Nynaeve snapped, going up on her toes. “I promised no such thing!” She looked about to fling herself at him again. Even her braid seemed to bristle.

Elayne kept a better rein on her temper. They would get nowhere bludgeoning him. “We will *listen* to your advice, and accept it if it is reasonable, Master . . . Mat,” she chided gently. Surely he could not really believe they had promised to. . . . Looking at him, though, she saw that he did. Oh, Light! Nynaeve was right. He *was* going to be trouble.

She held that rein firmly. Channeling again, she lifted his coat from the chair to a proper place on one of the pegs on the wall so she could sit, back straight, arranging her skirts carefully. Keeping her promises to Master

Cauthon—Mat—and to herself was going to be difficult, but nothing he said or did could touch her. Nynaeve eyed the only other place to sit, a low carved wooden footstool, and remained standing. One hand moved toward her braid, before she folded her arms. Her foot tapped ominously.

"The Atha'an Miere call it the Bowl of the Winds, Master . . . Mat. It is a *ter'angreal*. . . ."

By the end, a light of excitement shone through his sickliness. "Now, that would be a thing to find," he murmured. "In the Rahad." He shook his head, and flinched. "I'll tell you this now. Neither of you is setting foot on the other side of the river without four or five of my Redarms each. Not outside the palace, for that matter. Did Birgitte tell you about the note that was stuffed in my coat? I'm sure I told her. And there's Carridin and his Darkfriends; you can't tell me he isn't up to something."

"Any sister who supports Egwene as Amyrlin is in danger from the Tower." Bodyguards everywhere? Light! A dangerous light shone in Nynaeve's eyes, and her foot tapped faster. "We cannot hide, Mast . . . Mat, and we will not. Jaichim Carridin will be taken care of in due course." They had not promised to tell him everything, and they could not let him be diverted. "There are more important matters afoot."

"Due course?" he began, voice rising in disbelief, but Nynaeve cut him short.

"Four or five each?" she said sourly. "That's ridic—" Her eyes shut for a moment, and her tone became milder. Slightly milder. "I mean to say, it isn't sensible. Elayne and me, Birgitte and Aviendha. You don't have that many soldiers. Anyway, all we really need is you." That last came out as though dragged. It was much too much an admission.

"Birgitte and Aviendha don't need minders," he said absently. "I suppose this Bowl of the Winds is more important than Carridin, but. . . . It doesn't seem right, letting Darkfriends walk loose."

Slowly Nynaeve's face turned purple. Elayne checked her own in the stand-mirror, relieved to see she was maintaining her composure. On the outside, anyway. The man was reprehensible! Minders? She was not sure which would be worse: that he had flung that offhand insult on purpose, or that he had done so without realizing. She eyed herself in the mirror again and lowered her chin a trifle. Minders! She was poise itself.

He studied them with those bloodshot eyes, but saw nothing, apparently. "Was that all Birgitte told you?" he asked, and Nynaeve snapped back, “That was quite enough, I’d think, even for you.” Inexplicably, he looked surprised, and quite pleased.

Nynaeve gave a start, then folded her arms around herself tighter. “Since you’re in no condition to go anywhere with us now—don’t scowl at me, Mat Cauthon; that isn’t demeaning, it’s simple truth!—you can spend the morning moving yourself into the palace. And you needn’t think we’ll help carry your things. I didn’t promise to be a packhorse.”

“The Wandering Woman is plenty good enough,” he began angrily, then stopped, a wondering expression spreading over his face. A horrified expression, Elayne would have said. That should teach him to growl when he had a head like a melon. At least, that was what hers had felt like, the time she drank too much. Of course he would not learn from it. Men kept sticking their hands in the fire thinking this time it would not burn, so Lini always said.

“You can hardly expect we’ll find the Bowl the first time we try,” Nynaeve went on, “*ta’veren* or no. Going out each day will be much simpler if you don’t have to come across the square.” If they did not have to wait for him every morning, was what she meant. According to her, drunkenness was not the only excuse he could find for lying in bed till all hours, far from it.

“Besides,” Elayne added, “that way, you can keep an eye on us.” Nynaeve made a sound in her throat, very close to a groan. Did she not see that he must be enticed? It was not as if she had promised to actually *allow* him to keep an eye on them.

He seemed not to have heard her or Nynaeve. Haggard eyes stared right through her. “Why did they bloody well have to stop now?” he moaned, so softly she barely heard. What under the Light did he mean by that?

“The rooms are fit for a king, Master . . . Mat. Tylin herself chose them, just down from her own. She has taken a very personal interest. Mat, you wouldn’t have us offend the Queen, would you?”

One look at his face, and Elayne hurriedly channeled to push open the window and empty the washbasin through it. If she had ever seen a man about to lose the contents of his stomach, he was staring red-eyed at her right that minute.

“I don’t see why you’re making such a fuss,” she said. Actually, she supposed she did. Some of the serving women here probably let him paw them, but she doubted many in the palace would, if any. He would not be able to drink and gamble his nights away, either. Tylin surely would not allow a bad example for Beslan. “We all must make sacrifices.” With an effort she stopped there, not telling him that his was small and only right, theirs monstrous and unjust, no matter what Aviendha said. Nynaeve had certainly railed against *any* sacrifice.

He put his head in his hands again, making strangled noises while his shoulders shook. He was laughing! She hefted the basin on a flow of Air, considering hitting him with it. When he raised his eyes again, though, he looked outraged for some reason. “Sacrifices?” he snarled. “If I asked you to make the same, you’d box every ear in sight and pull the roof down on my head!” Could he still be drunk?

She decided to ignore his frightful glare. “Speaking of your head, if you would like Healing, I’m sure Nynaeve would oblige.” If she had ever been angry enough to channel, she was now.

Nynaeve gave a small jerk and glanced at her from the corner of one eye. “Of course,” she said hurriedly. “If you want.” The color in her cheeks confirmed all of Elayne’s suspicions about that morning.

Gracious as ever, he sneered. “You just forget my head. I do very well without Aes Sedai.” And then, just to confuse matters she was sure, he added in a hesitant voice, “I thank you for asking, though.” Almost as if he meant it!

Elayne managed not to gape. Her knowledge of men was limited to Rand and what Lini and her mother had told her. Was Rand going to be as confusing as Mat Cauthon?

Last thing before going, she remembered to secure a promise that he would start moving to the palace immediately. He kept his word once given, so Nynaeve had made clear, however reluctantly, but leave one crack, and he could find a hundred ways to slip through. *That* she had been all too eager to emphasize. He gave his promise with a bleak, resentful grimace; or maybe that was just his eyes again. When she set the basin down at his feet, he actually looked grateful. She would not feel sympathy. She would not.

Once back in the corridor, with the door to Mat’s room closed, Nynaeve shook her fist at the ceiling. “That man could try the patience of a stone! I’m glad he wants to cuddle with his head! Do you hear me? Glad! He will make trouble. He will.”

“You two will make more trouble for him than he ever could.” The speaker stalked down the hall toward them, a woman with a touch of gray in her hair, a strong face and a commanding voice. She also wore a frown little short of a scowl. Despite the marriage knife hanging into her cleavage, she was too fair for an Ebou Dari. “I couldn’t believe it when Caira told me. I doubt I’ve ever seen so much foolishness poured into just two dresses.”

Elayne eyed the woman up and down. Not even as a novice had she gotten used to being addressed in that tone. “And who might you be, my good woman?”

“I might be and am Setalle Anan, the owner of this inn, child” was the dry reply, and with that, the woman flung open a door across the hallway, seized them each by an arm, and hustled them through so fast Elayne thought her slippers had left the floor.

“You seem under some misapprehension, Mistress Anan,” she said coolly as the woman released them to shut the door.

Nynaeve was in no mood for niceties. Holding her hand so her Great Serpent ring was plain, she said heatedly, “Now, you look here—”

“Very pretty,” the woman said, and pushed each of them so hard they found themselves sitting side-by-side on the bed. Elayne’s eyes popped in disbelief. This Anan woman confronted them, grim-faced, fists on her hips, for all the world like a mother about to castigate her daughters. “Flaunting that just shows how silly you are. That young man will dandle you on his knee—one on each, I shouldn’t wonder, if you allow—he’ll take a few kisses and as much else as you’re willing to give, but he won’t harm you. You can harm him, though, if you keep on with this.”

Harm him? The woman thought they—she thought he had *dandled*—she thought—Elayne did not know whether to laugh or cry, but she stood up, straightening her skirts. “As I said, Mistress Anan, you are under a misapprehension.” Her voice became smoother as she went on, confusion giving way to calm. “I am Elayne Trakand, Daughter-Heir of Andor and Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. I don’t know what you think—” Her eyes nearly crossed as Mistress Anan pushed a finger to the tip of her nose.

“Elayne, if that is your name, all that keeps me from dragging you down to the kitchen and washing your mouth out, yours and that other foolish girl’s there, is the possibility that you actually can channel somewhat. Or are you silly enough to wear that ring when you can’t even do that? I warn you, it will make no difference to the sisters over in the

Tara-sin Palace. Do you even know about them? If you do, frankly, you are not foolish, you're blind stupid."

Elayne's temper grew by the word. Foolish girl? Blind stupid? She would not put up with it, especially not right after being forced to crawl to Mat Cauthon. Dandle? Mat Cauthon? She maintained her outward composure, though, but not so Nynaeve.

She glared in a fury, and the glow of *saidar* enveloped her as she bounded to her feet. Flows of Air wrapped mistress Anan from shoulders to ankles, crushing her skirts and petticoats against her legs, just short of tight enough to topple her. "I happen to be one of those sisters in the palace. Nynaeve al'Meara of the Yellow Ajah, to be exact. Now would you like me to carry *you* down to the kitchens? I know something of how to wash out a mouth." Elayne stepped away from the innkeeper's outstretched arm.

The woman had to feel the pressure of the flows, and even a half-wit would have known what those invisible bonds must be, yet she did not blink! Her green-flecked eyes narrowed, no more. "So one of you can channel, at least," she said calmly. "I should let you drag me downstairs, child. Whatever you do to me, you would be in the hands of real Aes Sedai by noon; I'll wager that."

"Didn't you hear me?" Nynaeve demanded. "I—!"

The Anan woman did not even pause. "You'll not only spend the next year blubbering, you will do part of it in front of anyone you told that you are Aes Sedai. Be sure, they'll make you tell. They will turn your liver to water. I should let you go blundering on your way, or else run across to the palace as soon as you loose me. The only reason I don't is that they'll make an example of Lord Mat nearly as much as of you, if they even suspect he's helped you, and as I said, I like the young man."

"I'm telling you—" Nynaeve tried again, but *still* the innkeeper gave her no chance to tell anything. Tied like a bundle, the woman was a boulder rolling downhill. She was the whole hillside falling, flattening whatever lay in its path.

"Trying to keep up the lie does no good, Nynaeve. You look to be, oh, twenty-one give or take a year, so you might be as much as ten years older if you've already reached the slowing. You might even have worn the shawl four or five years. Except for one thing." Her head, the only part of her she could move, swiveled toward Elayne. "You, child, aren't old enough to have slowed yet, and no woman has ever worn the shawl as young as you.

Never in the history of the Tower. If you ever were in the Tower, I'll wager you wore white and squeaked every time the Mistress of Novices glanced your way. You had some goldsmith make that ring for you—there are some fool enough, I hear—or maybe Nynaeve stole it for you, if she has any right to hers. Either way, since you can't be a sister, neither can she. No Aes Sedai would travel with a woman who was pretending."

Elayne frowned, not noticing that she was chewing her lower lip. Slowed. Slowing. How did an innkeeper in Ebou Dar know those words? Maybe Setalle Anan had gone to the Tower as a girl, though she would not have remained long, since she clearly could not channel. Elayne would have known even if her ability had been as small as her own mother's, and Morgase Trakand had had an ability so small she would have been sent away in a matter of weeks probably, had she not been heir to a strong House.

"Release her, Nynaeve," she said, smiling. She truly did feel more well-disposed toward the woman, now. It must have been terrible to make that journey to Tar Valon only to be turned away. There was no reason the woman *had* to believe them—something tickled at that, but she could not say what—no reason at all, but if she had made the trip to Tar Valon, maybe she would walk across the Mol Hara. Merilille, or any of the other sisters, could set her straight.

"Release her?" Nynaeve yelped. "Elayne?"

"Release her. Mistress Anan, I see the only way to convince you is—"

"The Amyrlin Seat and three Sitters couldn't convince me, child." Light, did she ever let anyone finish a sentence? "Now, I don't have time for any more games. I can help the pair of you. I know those who can, anyway, some women who take in strays. You can thank Lord Mat that I'm willing to take you to them, but I must know. Were you ever in the Tower, or are you wilders? If you were there, were you put out, or did you run away? The truth. They handle each in a different way."

Elayne shrugged. They had done what they came for; she was more than ready to stop wasting time and get on with what needed doing next. "If you won't be convinced, then that's all there is to it. Nynaeve? It is past time we were on our way."

The flows around the innkeeper vanished, and the glow around Nynaeve too, but Nynaeve stood there watching the woman warily, hopefully. She wet her lips. “You know a group of women who can help us?”

“Nynaeve?” Elayne said. “We don’t need any help. We *are* Aes Sedai, remember?”

With a wry glance in her direction, Mistress Anan gave her skirts a shake to straighten them and bent to smooth her exposed petticoats. Her real attention was on Nynaeve; Elayne had never felt so completely shunted aside in her life. “I know a few women who take in the occasional wilder or runaway or woman who failed her test for Accepted or the shawl. There must be at least fifty of them, altogether, though the number changes. They can help you find a life without the risk of a real sister making you wish she’d just skin you and be done. Now, don’t lie to me. Were you ever in the Tower? If you’ve run away, you might as well decide to go back. The Tower managed to find most runaways even during the War of the Hundred Years, so you needn’t think this little bother now will stop them. In truth, my suggestion then would be to go across the square and throw yourself on a sister’s mercy. It will be a small mercy, I’m afraid, but you can believe me, it’s more than you’ll find if they have to drag you back. You won’t even think of so much as leaving the Tower *grounds* without permission after that.”

Nynaeve drew a deep breath. “We were told to leave the Tower, Mistress Anan. I will swear to that however you ask.”

Elayne stared in disbelief. “Nynaeve, what are you *saying*? Mistress Anan, we *are* Aes Sedai.”

The Anan woman laughed. “Child, let me talk with Nynaeve, who at least seems old enough to have sense. You tell the Circle that, and they will not take it kindly. They won’t care you can channel; they can, too, and they’ll smack your bottom or toss you out in the street on your nose if you play the fool.”

“Who is this *Circle*?” Elayne demanded. “We *are* Aes Sedai. You come across to the Tarasin Palace, and you will see.”

“I’ll keep her in hand,” Nynaeve had the gall to say, all the while frowning and grimacing at Elayne as if she were the one who had gone mad.

The Anan woman merely nodded. “Good. Now take off those rings and put them away. The Circle doesn’t allow that sort of pretending. They’ll have them melted down to give you a start. Though by the look of your dresses, you have coin. If you stole it, don’t let Reanne know. One of the first rules you’ll have to learn is, don’t steal even if you are starving. They don’t want to draw attention.”

Elayne made a fist and thrust it behind her back. And watched Nynaeve meekly slip her ring off and tuck it into her belt pouch. Nynaeve, who howled every time Merilille or Adeleas or any of them forgot she was a full sister!

“Trust me, Elayne,” Nynaeve said.

Which Elayne would have had an easier time of if she had any notion what the woman was up to. Still, she did trust her. Mostly. “A small sacrifice,” she muttered. Aes Sedai did go without their rings when the need arose, and she had too, while passing for a sister, but it was hers by right, now. Removing that band of gold almost hurt physically.

“Talk to your friend, child,” the Anan woman told Nynaeve impatiently. “Reanne Corly won’t put up with all this sulky pouting, and if you make me waste my morning for nothing. . . . Come along, come along. It’s lucky for you I like Lord Mat.”

Elayne held on to cool composure by a fingernail. Sulky pouting? Sulky *pouting*? When she had the chance, she was going to kick Nynaeve where it hurt!

* * *

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CHAPTER
23

Next Door to a Weaver

Nynaeve did want to talk to Elayne, away from the innkeeper's ears, but she did not find the chance right away. The woman marched them out of the room doing a fine imitation of a guard on prisoners, her stony impatience undented by the wary look she cast at Mat's door. At the back of the inn a set of unrailed stone steps led down into a large hot kitchen full of baking smells, where the roundest woman Nynaeve had ever seen was wielding a large wooden spoon like a scepter, directing three others in sliding crusty brown loaves from the ovens and replacing them with rolls of pale dough. A large pot of the coarse white porridge that was eaten for breakfast hereabout bubbled gently on one of the white-tiled stoves.

"Enid," Mistress Anan addressed the round woman, "I am going out for a little while. I need to take these two children to someone who has time to mother them properly."

Wiping broad, floury hands on a piece of white toweling, Enid studied Nynaeve and Elayne disapprovingly. Everything about her was round, her sweaty olive-skinned face, her dark eyes, all of her; she seemed made of very large balls stuffed into a dress. The marriage knife she wore hanging outside her snowy apron sparkled with a full dozen stones. "Is this the pair of barkers Caira was chattering about, Mistress? Fancy bits for the young Lord's taste, I'd have said. He likes them with a bit of wiggle." That amused her, by her tone. The innkeeper shook her head in vexation. "I told that girl to hold her tongue. I won't let that sort of rumor touch The Wandering Woman. Remind Caira for me, Enid, and use your spoon to get her attention, if need be." The gaze she turned on Nynaeve and Elayne was so disparaging that Nynaeve nearly gasped. "Would anyone with half their wits believe these two were Aes Sedai? Spent all their coin on dresses to impress the man, and now they'd starve unless they smile for him. Aes Sedai!" Giving Enid no chance to answer, she seized Nynaeve's ear with her right hand, Elayne's with her left, and in three quick steps had them out into the stableyard.

That was as long as Nynaeve's shock held. Then she pulled free, or tried to, because the woman let go at the same instant and she stumbled half a dozen paces, glaring indignantly. She had not bargained for being dragged about. Elayne's chin rose, her blue eyes so cold Nynaeve would not have been surprised to see frost forming in her curls.

Hands on hips, Mistress Anan seemed not to notice. Or perhaps she simply did not care. "I can hope no one in there believes Caira after that," she said calmly. "If I could have been sure you had the wits to keep your mouths shut, I'd have said and done more, and made certain." She was calm, but not at all pleasant or soft; they had troubled her morning. "Now follow me and don't get lost. Or if you do, do not show your faces anywhere near my inn again, or I'll send somebody to the palace to tell Merilille *and* Teslyn. They are two of the real sisters, and they'll probably rip you each down the middle and share you out."

Elayne shifted her gaze from the innkeeper to Nynaeve. Not a glare, or a frown, yet a very meaning look just the same. Nynaeve wondered whether she was going to be able to go through with this. The thought of Mat convinced her; any chance was better than that.

"We won't lose ourselves, Mistress Anan," she said, striving for meekness. She thought she did fairly well, considering how foreign meekness was to her. "Thank you for helping us." Smiling at the innkeeper, she did her best to ignore Elayne, whose stare became more meaningful, hard as that was to credit. Looks or no looks, she had to make sure the woman continued to think them worth the trouble. "We are truly grateful, Mistress Anan."

Mistress Anan eyed her askance, then sniffed and shook her head. When this was done, Nynaeve decided, she was going to drag the innkeeper to the palace, if need be, and *make* the other sisters acknowledge her in Mistress Anan's presence.

This early, the stableyard was empty save for a lone boy of ten or twelve with a bucket and a sieve who sprinkled water to dampen the hard-packed ground against dust. The white plastered stable's doors were wide open, and a barrow sat in front with a dung-fork resting across it. Sounds like a huge frog being stepped on floated out; Nynaeve decided it was a man singing. Would they have to ride to reach their destination? Even a short journey would not be pleasant; walking only across the square and meaning to be back before the sun rose very high, they had brought neither hats nor parasols nor hooded cloaks.

Mistress Anan led them through the stableyard, however, down a narrow alleyway between the stable and a high wall that had drought-bedraggled trees poking above the top. Someone's garden, no doubt. A small gate at the end let into a dusty alley so cramped dawn had not completely reached it yet.

"You children keep up now, mind you," the innkeeper told them, starting away down the dim alley. "You lose yourselves, and I vow I'll go to the palace myself."

Nynaeve took a grip on her braid with both hands as she followed, to keep them from the Anan woman's throat. How she yearned for her first gray hairs. First the other Aes Sedai, then the Sea Folk—Light, she did not want to think about them!—and now an innkeeper! No one took you seriously until you had at least a little gray; even an Aes Sedai's ageless face could not possibly do as well in her estimation.

Elayne was lifting her skirts out of the dust, though their slippers still kicked up little puffs that settled on the hems of their dresses. "Let me see," Elayne said softly, looking straight ahead. Softly, but coolly. Very coolly, in fact. She had a way of slashing someone to tatters without letting her tone heat that Nynaeve admired. Usually. Now, it just made her want to box the other woman's ears. "We could be back in the palace drinking blueberry tea and enjoying the breezes while we waited for Master Cauthon to move his belongings. Perhaps Aviendha and Birgitte might return with something useful. We could finally be settling exactly what to do with the man. Do we simply follow him along the streets of the Rahad and see what happens, or take him into buildings that look likely, or let him choose? There must be a hundred worthwhile uses for this morning, including deciding whether it's safe to go back to Egwene—ever—after that bargain the Sea Folk wrung out of us. We have to talk about that sooner or later; ignoring it won't help. Instead, we are off on a walk of who knows what length, squinting into the sun the whole way if we keep on as we are, to visit women who feed runaways from the Tower. Myself, I don't have much interest in catching runaways this morning or any morning. But I'm sure you can explain it so I will understand. I do so want to understand, Nynaeve. I would hate to think I'm going to kick you the length of the Mol Hara for nothing."

Nynaeve's eyebrows drew down. Kick her? Elayne really was becoming violent, spending so much time with Aviendha. Someone ought to slap some sense into that pair. "The sun isn't high enough to make us squint yet," she muttered. It would be soon, unfortunately. "Think, Elayne. *Fifty* women who can channel, helping wilders and women put out of the Tower." She felt guilty sometimes, using the term wilders; in the mouths of most Aes Sedai, it was an insult, but she intended to make them speak it as a badge of pride one day. "And she called them 'the Circle.' That doesn't sound like a few friends to me. It sounds organized." The alley meandered between high walls and the backs of buildings, many showing bare brick through the plaster, between palace gardens and shops where an open back door revealed silversmiths or tailors or woodcarvers at work. Every so often Mistress Anan looked over her shoulder to make sure they still followed. Nynaeve gave her smiles and nods she hoped would convey eagerness.

"Nynaeve, if *two* women who could channel made a society, the Tower would fall on them like a pack of wolves. How would Mistress Anan know whether they can or not, anyway? Women who can and aren't Aes Sedai do not go about making a show of themselves, you know. Not for very long, anyway. In any case, I can't see it makes a difference. Egwene might want to bring every woman who can channel into the Tower somehow, but that is not what we are about here." The frosty patience in Elayne's voice tightened Nynaeve's hands on her braid. How could the woman be so dense? She bared her teeth again for Mistress Anan, and managed not to scowl at the innkeeper's back when her head turned forward once more.

"Fifty women isn't two," Nynaeve whispered fiercely. They could channel; they must be able to; everything hinged on that. "It's beyond reason that this Circle can be in the same city with a storeroom packed full of *angreal* and such without at least knowing of it. And if they do . . ." She could not keep satisfaction from honeying her voice. ". . . we'll have found the Bowl without Master Matrim Cauthon. We can forget those absurd promises."

"They were not a bribe, Nynaeve," Elayne said absently. "I will keep them, and so will you, if you have any honor, and I know you do." She was spending entirely too much time with Aviendha. Nynaeve wished she knew why Elayne had begun thinking they all had to follow this preposterous Aiel *ji*-whatever-it-was.

Elayne bit her underlip, frowning. All that iciness seemed to have vanished; she was herself again, apparently. Finally she said, “We would never have gone to the inn without Master Cauthon, so we’d never have met the remarkable Mistress Anan or been taken to this Circle. So if the Circle does lead us to the Bowl, we have to say he was the root cause.”

Mat Cauthon; his name *boiled* in her head. Nynaeve stumbled over her own feet and let go of her braid to lift her skirts. The alley was hardly as smooth as a paved square much less a palace floor. At times, Elayne in a taking was better than Elayne thinking clearly. “Remarkable,” she muttered. “I’ll ‘remarkable’ her till her eyes cross. No one has ever treated us this way, Elayne, not even people who doubted, not even the Sea Folk. Most people would step wary if a ten-year-old said she was Aes Sedai.”

“Most people don’t really know what an Aes Sedai’s face looks like, Nynaeve. I think she went to the Tower once; she knows things she couldn’t, otherwise.”

Nynaeve snorted, glowering at the back of the woman striding ahead. Setalle Anan might have been to the Tower ten times, a hundred, but she was going to acknowledge Nynaeve al’Meara as Aes Sedai. And apologize. And learn what it was like to be hauled about by her ear, too! Mistress Anan glanced back, and Nynaeve flashed her a rigid smile, nodded as if her neck was a hinge. “Elayne? If these women do know where the Bowl is. . . . We don’t have to tell Mat how we found it.” That was not quite a question.

“I do not see why,” Elayne replied, then dashed all her hopes by adding, “But I’ll have to ask Aviendha to be sure.”

If she had not thought the Anan woman might abandon them on the spot, Nynaeve would have screamed.

The wandering alley gave way to a street, and there was no talking then to amount to anything. The sun’s thin rim glared blindingly above the rooftops ahead; Elayne shaded her eyes with one hand very ostentatiously. Nynaeve refused to. It was not that bad. She barely had to squint at all, really. A clear blue sky mocked her weather sense, that still told her a storm was right on top of the city.

Even this early a few brightly lacquered coaches were about in the winding streets, and a double fistful of brighter sedan chairs, two or sometimes four barefoot bearers in green-and-red striped vests to each, trotting because they carried passengers hidden behind the grilled wooden screens. Carts and wagons rumbled over the paving stones, and people began to fill the streets as shop doors opened and awnings went up, vested apprentices hurrying on errands and men with great rolled carpets balanced on their shoulders, tumblers and jugglers and musicians readying themselves at likely corners and hawkers with their trays of pins or ribbons or shabby fruit. The open-sided fish-and meat-markets had long since been in full cry; all the fishmongers were women, and most of the butchers, too, except those dealing in beef.

Dodging through the crowds, past the coaches and sedan chairs and wagons that seemed to think they had no reason to slow, Mistress Anan set a fast pace to make up for interruptions. There were plenty of those. She seemed to be a well-known woman, hailed by shopkeepers and craftsmen and other innkeepers standing in their doorways. The shopkeepers and craftsmen received a few words, a pleasant nod, but she always stopped to chat a moment with the innkeepers. After the first, Nynaeve wished fervently that she would not again; after the second, she prayed for it. After the third she stared straight ahead and tried in vain not to hear. Elayne's face grew tighter and tighter, colder and colder; her chin rose till it was a wonder she could see to walk.

There was a reason, Nynaeve had to admit grudgingly. In Ebou Dar, someone wearing silk might stroll the length of a square, maybe, but no further. Everybody else in sight wore wool or linen, seldom with much embroidery, except for an occasional beggar who had acquired a cast-off silk garment, frayed on every edge and more hole than cloth. She just wished Mistress Anan had chosen some other explanation for why she was leading the pair of them through the streets. She wished she did not have to listen one more time to a tale of two flighty girls who had spent all their money on fine clothes to impress a man. Mat came out of it well, burn him. A fine young fellow, if Mistress Anan had not been married, a beautiful dancer with just a touch of the rogue. All of the women laughed. Not her or Elayne, though. Not the brainless little honeykissers—that was the word she used; Nynaeve could guess what it meant!—honeykissers penniless from chasing after a man and their purses full of brass bits and tin to fool fools, witless loobies who would have been reduced to beggary or theft had Mistress Anan not known someone who might give them work in the kitchen.

"She doesn't have to stop at every inn in the city," Nynaeve growled as she stalked away from The Stranded Goose, three broad stories with an innkeeper who wore large garnets at her ears despite the humble name. Mistress Anan hardly even glanced back to see they followed, now. “Do you realize we’ll never be able to show our own faces in any of those places!”

“I suspect that is exactly the point.” Every word out of Elayne’s mouth was chipped from ice. “Nynaeve, if you’ve sent us running after a wild pig. . . .” There was no need to complete the threat. With Birgitte and Aviendha to help, and they would, Elayne could make her life miserable until she was satisfied.

“They will take us right to the Bowl,” she insisted, flapping her hands to shoo a beggar with a horrible purple scar that obliterated one eye; she could recognize flour paste dyed with bluewort when she saw it. “I know they will.” Elayne sniffed in an offensively expressive manner.

Nynaeve lost count of the number of bridges they crossed, large and small, with barges poling beneath. The sun climbed its own height above the rooftops, then twice. The Anan woman did not follow even so straight a line as she might have—she really did seem to be going out of her way to find inns—but they continued generally east, and Nynaeve thought they must be nearing the river when the hazel-eyed woman suddenly rounded on them.

“You watch your tongues, now. Speak when you’re spoken to and not else. You embarrass me, and. . . .” With a final frown and a mutter half under her breath that she was probably making a mistake, she jerked her head for them to follow again, to a flat-roofed house right opposite.

It was not a large house, two stories without one balcony, cracked plaster and brick showing in several places, and hardly in an agreeable location, with the loud rattling of a weaver’s looms to one side and the acrid stinks of a dyer’s shop to the other. A maid answered the door, though, a graying woman with a square jaw, shoulders like a blacksmith, and a steely eye unsoftened by the sweat on her face. As Nynaeve followed Mistress Anan in, she smiled. Somewhere in that house, a woman was channeling.

The square-jawed maid obviously knew Setalle Anan on sight, but her reaction was odd. She curtsied with a very real respect, yet she was plainly surprised to see her, and obviously doubtful about her being there. She almost fluttered before letting them in. Nynaeve and Elayne were greeted with no ambivalence, though. They were shown to a sitting room one flight up, and the maid told them firmly, “Don’t stir a toe and don’t touch anything, or you’ll catch the old what-for,” then vanished.

Nynaeve looked at Elayne.

“Nynaeve, one woman channeling doesn’t mean—” The feel changed, swelling for a moment, then subsiding, lower than before. “Even two women doesn’t mean anything,” Elayne protested, but she sounded doubtful. “That was the most ill-mannered maid I’ve ever seen.” She took a tall-backed red chair, and after a moment Nynaeve sat too, but she perched on the edge. From eagerness, not nerves. Not nerves at all.

The room was not grand, but the blue-and-white floor tiles glistened, and the pale green walls looked freshly painted. No trace of gilt showed anywhere, of course, yet fine carving covered the red chairs arrayed along the walls and several small tables of a darker blue than the tiles. The lamps hanging from sconces were clearly brass, polished till they shone. Carefully arranged evergreen branches filled the swept hearth, and the lintel above the fireplace was carved, not plain stonework. The carving seemed an odd choice—what people around Ebou Dar called the Thirteen Sins; a man with eyes that nearly filled his whole face for Envy, a fellow with his tongue hanging to his ankles for Gossip, a snarling, sharp-toothed man clutching coins to his chest for Greed, and so on—but all in all, it satisfied her very much. Whoever could afford that room could afford fresh plaster outside, and the only reason not to put it up was to keep low, avoiding notice.

The maid had left the door open, and suddenly voices coming up the hall drifted through.

“I cannot believe you brought them here.” The speaker’s tone was tight with incredulity and anger. “You know how careful we are, Setalle. You know more than you should, and you surely know that.”

“I am very sorry, Reanne,” Mistress Anan answered stiffly. “I suppose I didn’t think. I . . . submit myself, both to stand surety for these girls’ behavior and to your judgment.”

“Of course not!” Reanne’s tone was high with shock, now. “That is to say. . . . I mean, you shouldn’t have, but. . . . Setalle, I apologize for raising my voice. Say you forgive me.”

“You have no reason to apologize, Reanne.” The innkeeper managed to sound rueful and reluctant at the same time. “I did wrong to bring them.”

“No, no, Setalle. I shouldn’t have spoken to you so. Please, you must forgive me. Please do.”

The Anan woman and Reanne Corly entered the sitting room, and Nynaeve blinked in surprise. From the exchange, she had expected someone younger than Setalle Anan, but Reanne had hair more gray than not and a face full of what might have been smile lines, though they were creased in worry now. Why would the older woman humble herself so to the younger, and why would the younger allow it, however halfheartedly? Customs were different here, the Light knew, some more different than she liked to think about, yet not this much, surely. Of course, she had never gone very far toward being humble with the Women's Circle back home, but this. . . .

Of course, Reanne could channel—she had expected that; hoped for it, anyway—but she had not expected the strength. Reanne was not as strong as Elayne, or even Nicola—burn that wretched girl!—but she easily equaled Sheriam, say, or Kwamesa or Kiruna. Not many women possessed so much strength, and for all she herself bettered it by a fair margin, she was surprised to find it here. The woman must be one of the wilders; the Tower would have found a way to keep its hands on a woman like this if they had to hold her in a novice dress her whole life.

Nynaeve rose as they came through the doorway, smoothing her skirts. Not from nervousness, certainly; certainly not. Oh, but if only this came out right. . . .

Reanne's sharp blue eyes studied the two of them with the air of someone who had just found a pair of pigs in her kitchen, fresh from the sty and dripping mud. She dabbed at her face with a tiny handkerchief, though the interior of the house was cooler than outside. "I suppose we'll have to do something with them," she murmured, "if they are what they claim." Her voice was quite high even now, musical and almost youthful. As she finished speaking she gave a small start for some reason and eyed the innkeeper sideways, which set off another round of Mistress Anan's reluctant apologies and Mistress Corly's flustered attempts to deflect them. In Ebou Dar, when folk were truly being polite, apologies back and forth could flow for an hour.

Elayne had risen too, wearing a slightly fixed smile. She raised an eyebrow at Nynaeve, cupped her elbow in one hand and laid a finger against her cheek.

Nynaeve cleared her throat. "Mistress Corly, my name is Nynaeve al'Meara, and this is Elayne Trakand. We are looking for—"

"Setalle has told me all about you," the blue-eyed woman cut in ominously. However many gray hairs on her head, Nynaeve suspected she was also hard as a stone fence. "Abide with patience, girl, and I'll deal with you directly." She turned back to Setalle, blotting her cheeks with the handkerchief. Barely suppressed diffidence once more tinged her voice. "Setalle, if you will please excuse me, I must question these girls, and—"

"Look who is returned after all these years," a short, stout woman in her middle years blurted as she barged into the room, nodding at her companion. Despite her red-belted Ebou Dari dress and a tanned face that glistened damply, her accents were pure Cairhienin. Her equally sweaty companion, in the dark, plainly cut woolens of a merchant, was a head taller, no older than Nynaeve, with dark tilted eyes, a strongly hooked nose, and a wide mouth. "It's Garenia! She—" The flow of words terminated abruptly in confusion as the stout woman realized others were present.

Reanne clasped her hands as if in prayer, or perhaps because she wanted to hit someone. "Berowin," she said with an edge, "one day you will run right off a cliff before you see it under your feet."

"I am sorry, Eld—" Blushing, the Cairhienin lowered her eyes. The Saldaean became intent on fiddling with a circle of red stones pinned at her breast.

For Nynaeve's part, she gave Elayne a triumphant look. Both newcomers could channel, and *saidar* was still being wielded somewhere in the house. Two more, and while Berowin was not very strong, Garenia stood even above Reanne; she could match Lelaine or Romanda. Not that that mattered, of course, yet this made at least five. Elayne's chin set stubbornly, but then she sighed and gave a small nod. Sometimes it took the most incredible effort to convince her of anything.

"Your name is Garenia?" Mistress Anan said slowly, frowning at the woman in question. "You look very much like someone I met once. Zarya Alkaese."

Dark tilted eyes blinked in surprise. Plucking a lace-trimmed handkerchief from her sleeve, the Saldaean merchant touched her cheeks. "That is my grandmother's sister's name," she said after a moment. "I'm told I favor her strongly. Was she well when you saw her? She forgot her family completely after she went off to become Aes Sedai."

"Your grandmother's sister." The innkeeper laughed softly. "Of course. She was well when I saw her, but that was a long time ago. I was younger than you are now."

Reanne had been hovering at her side, all but grabbing her elbow, and now she leaped in. "Setalle, I truly am sorry, but I really must ask you to excuse us. You will forgive me not showing you to the door?"

Mistress Anan made her own apologies, as if she was at fault because the other woman could not escort her down, and departed with a last, very dubious look at Nynaeve and Elayne.

"Setalle!" Garenia exclaimed as soon as the innkeeper was gone. "That was Setalle Anan? How did she—? Light of Heaven! Even after seventy years, the Tower would—"

"Garenia," Mistress Corly said in an extremely sharp tone. Her stare was sharper still, and the Saldaean's face reddened. "Since you two are here, we can make up the three for questioning. You girls stay where you are and keep silent." That last was for Nynaeve and Elayne. The other women withdrew to a corner in a huddle and began conversing in soft murmurs.

Elayne moved nearer Nynaeve. "I did not like being treated as a novice when I was a novice. How long do you intend to continue this farce?"

Nynaeve hissed at her for quiet. "I'm trying to listen, Elayne," she whispered.

Using the Power was out of the question, of course. The three would have known on the instant. Fortunately, they wove no barriers, perhaps not knowing how, and sometimes their voices rose just enough.

". . . said they may be wilders," Reanne said, and shock and revulsion bloomed on the other women's faces.

"Then we show them the door," Berowin said. "The back door. Wilders!"

"I still want to know who this Setalle Anan is," Garenia put in.

"If you can't keep your mind on the straight," Reanne told her, "perhaps you should spend this turn on the farm. Alise knows how to concentrate a mind wonderfully. Now. . . ." The words dropped back to a buzz.

Another maid appeared, a slender woman, pretty except for a sullen expression, with a rough gray woolen dress and a long white apron. Setting a green-lacquered tray on one of the small tables, she surreptitiously wiped her cheeks with a corner of her apron and began fussing with blue-glazed cups and a matching teapot. Nynaeve's eyebrows rose. This woman could channel, too, if not to any high degree. What was she doing as a servant?

Garenia glanced over her shoulder, and gave a start. "What did Derys do to earn penance? I thought fish would sing the day she cracked a rule, much less broke one."

Berowin sniffed loudly, but her reply was barely audible. "She wanted to marry. She will advance a turn and go with Keraille the day after the Feast of the Half Moon. That will settle for Master Denal."

"Perhaps you both wish to hoe the fields for Alise?" Reanne spoke dryly, and the voices fell again.

Nynaeve felt a rush of exultation. She did not care much for rules, at least for other people's rules—other people rarely saw the situation as clearly as she, and thus made stupid rules; why should that woman, Derys, not marry if she wished, for example?—but rules and penances spoke of a society. She *was* right. And another thing. She nudged Elayne until the other woman bent her head.

"Berowin's wearing a red belt," she whispered. That indicated a Wise Woman, one of Ebou Dar's fabled healers, their care known far and wide as the next best to being Healed by an Aes Sedai, curing just about anything. Supposedly it was all done with herbs and knowledge, but. . . . "How many Wise Women have we seen, Elayne? How many could channel? How many were Ebou Dari, or even Altaran?"

"Seven, counting Berowin" was the slow answer, "and only one I was sure was from here." Hah! The others plainly had not been. Elayne took a deep breath, though she went on softly. "*None* had anywhere near these women's strength, though." At least she had not suggested they were mistaken somehow; all of those Wise Women had been able. "Nynaeve, are you really suggesting that the Wise Women . . . *all* the Wise Women . . . are . . . ? That would be *beyond* incredible."

"Elayne, this city has a guild for the men who sweep the squares every night! I think we've just found the Ancient Muckety-muck Sisterhood of Wise Women."

The stubborn woman shook her head. "The Tower would have had a hundred sisters here years ago, Nynaeve. Two hundred. Anything of the sort would have been squashed flat in short order."

"Maybe the Tower doesn't know," Nynaeve said. "Maybe the guild keeps low enough that the Tower never thought they were worth troubling.

There's no law against channeling if you aren't Aes Sedai, only against claiming to be Aes Sedai, or misusing the Power. Or bringing discredit." That meant doing anything that might possibly cast a bad light on real Aes Sedai, should anyone happen to think you were one, which was going pretty far, to her way of thinking. The real trouble, though, was that she did not believe it. The Tower seemed to know everything, and they probably would break up a quilting circle if the women in it could channel. Yet there had to be some explanation for. . . . Only half-aware, she felt the True Source being embraced, but suddenly she became very aware. Her mouth fell open as a flow of Air snared her braid right at the base of her skull and ran her across the room on her toes. Elayne ran right beside her, red-faced with fury. The worst of it was, they were both shielded.

The short run ended when they were allowed to settle their heels in front of Mistress Corly and the other two, all three seated against the wall in red chairs, all surrounded by the glow of *saidar*.

"You were told to be quiet," Reanne said firmly. "If we decide to help you, you will have to learn that we expect strict obedience no less than the White Tower itself." She imbued those last words with a tone of reverence. "I will tell you that you would have been treated more gently if you had not come to us in this irregular fashion." The flow gripping Nynaeve's braid vanished. Elayne tossed her head angrily as she was released.

Appalled astonishment became fiery outrage as Nynaeve realized that Berowin held her shield. Most Aes Sedai she had met stood above Berowin; nearly all. Gathering herself, she strained to reach the Source, expecting the weaves to shatter. She would at least show these women she would not be. . . . The weaves . . . stretched. The round Cairhienin woman smiled, and Nynaeve's face darkened. The shield stretched further, further, bulging like a ball. It would not break. That was impossible. Anyone could block her from the Source if they caught her by surprise, of course, and someone weaker could hold the shield once woven, but not *this* much weaker. And a shield did not bend that far without breaking. It was impossible!

"You could burst a blood vessel if you keep at that," Berowin said, almost companionably. "We do not try to reach above our station, but skills are honed with time, and this was always nearly a Talent with me. I could hold one of the Forsaken."

Scowling, Nynaeve gave over. She could wait. Since she had no choice, she could.

Derys came bearing her tray, distributing cups of dark tea. To the three seated women. She never so much as glanced at Nynaeve or Elayne before making a perfect curtsy and returning to her table.

"We could have been drinking blueberry tea, Nynaeve," Elayne said, shooting such a look at her that she came close to stepping back. Maybe it would be best not to wait too long.

"Be quiet, girl." Mistress Corly's tone might be calm, but she patted her handkerchief to her face angrily. "Our report of you says you both are froward and contentious, that you chase after men and lie. To which I add that you cannot follow simple instructions. All of which must change if you seek our help. All of it. This is most irregular. Be grateful we're willing to speak to you."

"We do seek your help," Nynaeve said. She wished Elayne would stop glaring so. It was worse than the Corly woman's hard stare. Well, as bad, anyway. "We desperately need to find a *ter'angreal*—"

Reanne Corly broke in as if she had been standing there silent. "Usually, we know the girls brought to us beforehand, but we must make certain you are what you say. How many doors to the Tower Library may a novice use, and which?" She took a sip of tea, waiting.

"Two." The word dripped venom from Elayne's mouth. "The main door to the east, when a sister sends her, or the small door at the southwest corner, called the Novice Door, when she goes for herself. How long, Nynaeve?"

Garenia, who held Elayne's shield, channeled another slender flow of Air, not gently. Elayne quivered, then again, and Nynaeve winced, wondering that she did not grab at the back of her skirt. "A civil tongue is another requirement," Garenia murmured wryly into her cup.

"That is the right answer," Mistress Corly said, as if nothing else had happened. Although she did eye the Saldaean woman briefly over her tea. "Now, how many bridges in the Water Garden?"

"Three," Nynaeve snapped, mainly because she knew. She had not known about the library, having never been a novice. "We need to know—" Berowin could not spare anything to channel a flow of Air, but Mistress Corly could, and did. Barely keeping her face smooth, Nynaeve knotted her hands in her skirts to hold them still. Elayne had the gall to give her a small, chilly smile. Chilly, but satisfied.

A dozen more questions hammered at them, from how many floors the novice quarters contained—twelve—to under what circumstances a novice was allowed into the Hall of the Tower—to carry messages or to be expelled from the Tower for a crime; no others—hammered without Nynaeve getting in more than two words, and those two answered silently by the horrible Corly woman. She began to feel like a novice in the Hall; they were not allowed to speak a word either. That was one of the few answers she knew, but luckily Elayne responded promptly when she did not. Nynaeve might have done better had they asked about Accepted, a little better at least, but it was what a novice should know that interested them. She was just glad Elayne was willing to go along, though by her pale cheeks and raised chin, that could not last much longer.

"I suppose Nynaeve was really there," Reanne said finally, exchanging glances with the other two. "If Elayne taught her to pass, I think she would have done a better job. Some people live in perpetual fog." Garenia sniffed, then nodded slowly. Berowin's nod came entirely too promptly for Nynaeve's liking.

"Please," she said politely. She could be polite when there was reason, whatever anyone said. "We truly need to find a *ter'angreal* the Sea Folk call the Bowl of the Winds. It's in a dusty old storeroom somewhere in the Rahad, and I think your guild, your Circle, must know where. Please help us." Three suddenly stony faces stared at her.

"There is no *guild*," Mistress Corly said coolly, "only a few friends who found no place in the White Tower . . ." Again, that reverential tone. ". . . and who are foolish enough occasionally to reach out a hand where it's needed. We have no truck with *ter'angreal*, or *angreal*, or *sa'angreal* either. We are not Aes Sedai." "Aes Sedai" echoed with veneration, as well. "In any case, you are not here to ask questions. We have more for you, to see how far you've gone, after which you will be taken to the country and given into the care of a friend. She will keep you until we decide what to do next. Until we can be sure the sisters are not looking for you. You have a new life ahead of you, a new chance, if you can only let yourself see it. Whatever held you back in the Tower does not apply here, whether a lack of dexterity or fear or anything else. No one will push you to learn or do what you cannot. What you are is sufficient. Now."

"Enough," Elayne said in a wintery voice. "Long *enough*, Nynaeve. Or do you intend to wait in the country for however long? They do *not* have it, Nynaeve." Removing her Great Serpent ring from her belt pouch, she thrust the circle of gold onto her finger. From the way she looked at the seated women, no one would believe her shielded. She was a queen out of patience. She was Aes Sedai to her hair was what she was. "I am Elayne Trakand, High Seat of House Trakand. I am Daughter-Heir of Andor and Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah, and I *demand* you release me immediately." Nynaeve groaned.

Garenia grimaced with disgust, and Berowin's eyes widened in horror. Reanne Corly shook her head ruefully, but when she spoke, her voice was iron. "I had hoped Setalle had changed your mind concerning that particular lie. I know how hard it is, to set out proudly for the White Tower then find yourself faced with returning home to admit failure. But that is never said, even in joke!"

"I made no joke," Elayne said lightly. Snow was light.

Garenia leaned forward with a scowl, a flow of Air already forming until Mistress Corly raised her hand. "And you, Nynaeve? Do you persist in this . . . madness, too?"

Nynaeve filled her lungs. These women had to know where the Bowl was; they just had to!

"Nynaeve!" Elayne said peevishly. She was not going to let her forget this even if they did have to effect an escape. She had a way of harping on every little misstep in a manner that cut the ground right from under your feet.

"I am an Aes Sedai of the Yellow Ajah," Nynaeve said wearily. "The true Amyrlin Seat, Egwene al'Vere, raised us to the shawl in Salidar. She's no older than Elayne; you must have heard." Not a glimmer of change in those three hard faces. "She sent us to find the Bowl of the Winds. With it, we can mend the weather." Not a flicker of change. She tried to hold her anger down; she truly did. It just oozed up despite her. "You must want that! Look around you! The Dark One is strangling the world! If you have even a hint of where the Bowl might be, tell us!"

Mistress Corly motioned for Derys, who came and took the cups, casting fearful, wide-eyed looks at Nynaeve and Elayne. When she scurried away, out of the room in fact, the three women stood slowly, standing like grim magistrates pronouncing sentence.

"I regret that you will not accept our help," Mistress Corly said coldly. "I regret this whole affair." Reaching into her pouch, she pressed three silver marks into Nynaeve's hand and another three into Elayne's. "These will take you a little way. You can also get something for those dresses, I should think, if not what you paid. Those are hardly suitable garments for a journey. By tomorrow sunrise, you will be gone from Ebou Dar."

"We aren't going anywhere," Nynaeve told her. "Please, if you know—" She might as well have kept silent. The measured flow of words did not slow.

"At that time we will begin circulating your descriptions, and we will make certain they reach the sisters in the Tarasin Palace. If you are seen after sunrise, we will see that the sisters know where you are, and the White-cloaks as well. Your choice then will be to run, surrender to the sisters, or die. Go, do not return, and you should live long if you give over this repulsive and dangerous ruse. We are done with you. Berowin, see to them, please." Brushing between them, she went from the room without looking back.

Sullenly, Nynaeve let herself be herded down to the front door. A struggle would not achieve anything except maybe being thrown out bodily, but she did not like giving up. Light, she did not! Elayne marched, frozen determination to leave and be done shining in every line of her.

In the small entry hall, Nynaeve decided to try once more. "Please, Garenia, Berowin, if you have any hint, tell us. Any clue at all. You must see how important this is. You must!"

" 'The blindest are those who keep their eyes shut,' " Elayne quoted, not quite under her breath.

Berowin hesitated, but not Garenia. She put her face right in Nynaeve's. "Do you think we're fools, girl? I'll tell you this. If I had my way, we would bundle you out to the farm no matter what you say. A few months of Alise's attentions, and you'd learn to guard your tongue and be grateful for the help you spit on." Nynaeve considered hitting her on the nose; she did not need *saidar* to use her fist.

"Garenia," Berowin said sharply. "Apologize! We do not hold anyone against her will, and you know it well. Apologize immediately!"

And wonder of wonders, the woman who would have stood very close to the top had she been Aes Sedai looked sideways at the woman who would have stood near the bottom, and blushed crimson. "I ask forgiveness," Garenia mumbled at Nynaeve. "My temper gets the better of me sometimes, and I say what I have no right to. I humbly ask forgiveness."

Another side-long glance at Berowin, who nodded, producing a sigh of open relief.

While Nynaeve was still gaping, the shields were released, and she and Elayne were pushed into the street, the door slamming shut behind them.

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CHAPTER

24

The Kin

Incredible, Reanne thought, watching from a window as the two strange girls vanished down the street among the tradesmen and beggars and occasional sedan chairs. She had returned to the meeting room as soon as the pair was escorted from it. She did not know what to make of them, and their persistent claims in the face of all reason were only part of her confusion.

“They did not perspire,” Berowin whispered at her shoulder. “Yes?” She would have arranged for the news to reach the Tarasin Palace in the next hour if she had not given her word. And if not for the danger. Fear bubbled in her middle, the same panic that had overtaken her after one passage through the silver arches when she went to test for Accepted. Just as she had every time it had stirred in the years since, she took a fresh grip on herself; in truth, she did not realize that the fear she might run screaming again had long since conquered any possibility that she would. She prayed that those girls would abandon their insanity. She prayed that if they did not, they were caught far from Ebou Dar and either kept silent or were not believed. Precautions would have to be taken, safeguards carried out that had not been used in years. Aes Sedai were as near omnipotent as made no difference, though. That, she knew in her bones.

“Eldest, could it be possible that the older of the two really is . . . ? We channeled, and. . . .”

Berowin trailed off miserably, but Reanne did not need to consider, not even setting aside the younger girl. Why would any Aes Sedai pretend to be less, so much less? Besides, any real Aes Sedai would have put them all on their knees begging mercy, not stood there so submissively.

“We did not channel in front of an Aes Sedai,” she said firmly. “We broke no rule.” Those rules applied to her as strictly as anyone else; the very first was that they were all one, even those set above for a time. How could it have been otherwise, when those who were above must eventually step down? Only through movement and change could they remain hidden.

“But some of the rumors do mention a girl as Amyrlin, Eldest. And she knew—”

“Rebels.” Reanne put into that all the outraged disbelief she felt. That anyone should *dare* to rebel against the White Tower! It was hardly strange for unbelievable tales to attach to anyone like that.

“What about Logain, and the Red Ajah?” Garenia demanded, and Reanne fixed her with a stare. The woman had gotten herself another cup of tea before coming back up, and she managed to sip defiantly.

“Whatever the truth, Garenia, it is not our place to criticize anything Aes Sedai might do.” Reanne’s mouth tightened. That hardly squared with what she felt toward the rebels, but how could any Aes Sedai do such a thing?

The Saldaean bent her neck in acquiescence, though, and perhaps to hide the sullen twist of her mouth. Reanne sighed. She herself had given up dreams of the Green Ajah long long ago, but there were those like Berowin who believed, secretly they thought, that somehow they might one day return to the White Tower, somehow yet become Aes Sedai. And then there were women like Garenia, almost as poor at keeping their wishes secret, though those wishes were ten times as forbidden. They actually would have accepted wilders, and even gone out to find girls who could be taught!

Garenia was not done; she always skirted the edges of discipline, and frequently stepped over. “What of this Setalle Anan, then? Those girls know about the Circle. The Anan woman must have told them, though how she knows. . . .” She shuddered in a way that would have been entirely too ostentatious for most others, but she had never been able to conceal her emotions. Even when she should. “Whoever betrayed us to her must be found, and her betrayal punished too. She’s an innkeeper, and she must be taught to guard her tongue!” Berowin gasped, wide-eyed with shock, and dropped into a chair so hard she nearly bounced.

“Remember who she is, Garenia,” Reanne said sharply. “If Setalle had betrayed us, we would be crawling to Tar Valon, begging forgiveness the whole way.” When she first came to Ebou Dar, she had been told the story of a woman made to crawl to the White Tower, and nothing she had seen since of Aes Sedai made her question it in the least. “She has kept the few secrets she knows from gratitude, and I doubt that has faded. She would have died in her first childbirth if the Kin had not helped her. What she knows comes from careless tongues, when it was thought she could not hear, and the owners of those tongues were punished more than twenty years ago.” Still, she wished there was some way she could bring herself to ask Setalle to be more circumspect. She must have spoken carelessly in front of those girls.

The woman bowed her head again, but her mouth was set stubbornly. At least part of this turn, Reanne decided, Garenia would spend at the retreat, and she would have special instructions to relay with her own stubborn mouth. Alise seldom required more than a week to make a woman decide stubbornness did not pay.

Before she could inform Garenia, though, Derys was curtsying in the doorway, announcing Sarainya Vostovan. As usual, Sarainya swept right in before Reanne could say to admit her. In some ways, the strikingly handsome woman made Garenia appear supple, despite keeping the form of every rule exactly. Reanne was sure she would have worn her hair in braids and bells given the choice, and never mind how that would have looked with her red belt. But then, given the choice she would not have served even one turn with the belt.

Sarainya did curtsy at the door, of course, and kneel before her, head lowered, but fifty years had not made her forget that she would have been a woman of considerable power had she been able to make herself return home to Arafel. Curtsy and the rest all were concessions. When she spoke, in that husky, forceful voice, whether the woman would ever reconcile herself and the problem of Garenia left Reanne’s mind!

“Callie is dead, Eldest Sister. Her throat was cut and she apparently had been robbed even of her stockings, but Sumeko says that it was the One Power killed her.”

“That is impossible!” Berowin burst out. “No Kinswoman would do such a thing!”

“An Aes Sedai?” Garenia said, hesitant for once. “But how? The Three Oaths. Sumeko must be wrong.”

Reanne raised a hand for silence. Sumeko was never wrong, not in this area. She would have been Yellow Ajah had she not broken down completely while testing for the shawl, and although it was forbidden, despite countless penances, she worked to learn more whenever she thought no one was watching. No Aes Sedai could have done this, obviously, and no Kins-woman would have, but. . . . Those girls, so insistent, knowing what they should not. The Circle had lasted too long, offered succor to too many women, to be destroyed now.

"This is what must be done," she told them. That flutter of fear began again, but for once she hardly noticed.

Nynaeve stalked away from the small house in outrage. It was incredible! Those women did have a guild; she knew they did! Whatever they said, she was sure they knew where the Bowl was, too. She would have done whatever was necessary to bring them to tell her. Pretending docility before them for a few hours would have been a deal easier than putting up with Mat Cauthon for the Light knew how many days.

I could have been as acquiescent as they wanted, she thought irritably. *They'd have thought I was a pliable old slipper! I could have. . . .* That was a lie, and it did not take a foul, remembered taste to convince her. Given half a chance, she would have shaken every one of those women till they told her what she wanted to know. She would have given them Aes Sedai till they squeaked!

She scowled sideways at Elayne. The other woman seemed lost in thought. Nynaeve wished she did not know what the woman was thinking about. A wasted morning, and not far short of complete humiliation. She did not like being in the wrong. She was not yet used to admitting she was, really. And now she was going to have to apologize to Elayne. She *truly* hated apologizing. Well, it would be bad enough back in their rooms. With Birgitte and Aviendha still out, it was to be hoped. She was not about to begin in the street, with who knew who streaming by. The throng had thickened, though the sun hardly seemed much higher through the wheeling clouds of seabirds that cried overhead.

Finding their way was not easy, after all those twists and turns. Nynaeve had to ask directions half a dozen times, while Elayne stared in another direction, pretending indifference. She stalked along across bridges, ducked around wagons and carts, jumped out of the way of racing sedan chairs that wove through the crowds, wished Elayne would say something. Nynaeve knew how to nurse a grudge, and the longer she herself kept silent, the worse it was when she spoke, so the longer Elayne walked without speaking, the darker became the image in her mind of how it was going to be back in their rooms. That made her furious. She had admitted she was wrong, if only to herself. Elayne had no right to make her suffer this way. She began wearing such a face that even people who did not notice their rings gave them a clear path. People who did notice usually seemed to find an urgent need to be a street away. Even some sedan-chair bearers skirted around her.

“How old did Reanne look to you?” Elayne asked suddenly. Nynaeve nearly jumped. They were almost back to Mol Hara.

“Fifty years. Maybe sixty. I don’t see it matters.” She ran her eyes over the crowd to see if anyone was close enough to hear. A passing hawker, her tray displaying a bitter little yellow fruit called a lemon, tried to swallow her cry in midshout when Nynaeve’s gaze rested on her for a moment, with the result that she doubled over her tray coughing and choking. Nynaeve sniffed. The woman probably had been eavesdropping, if not planning to cut a purse. “They *are* a guild, Elayne, and they *do* know where the Bowl is. I just know they do.” That was not what she had intended to say at all. If she apologized for dragging Elayne into this now, maybe it would not be so bad.

“I suppose they are,” Elayne said absently. “I suppose they might. How is it that she can have aged so?”

Nynaeve stopped dead in the middle street. After all that arguing, after getting them thrown out, she *supposed*? “Well, *I* suppose she aged the same way as the rest of us, a day at a time. Elayne, if you believed, why did you announce who you were like Rhiannon at the Tower?” She rather liked that; according to the story, what Queen Rhiannon got was far from what she had wanted.

The question did not seem to register with Elayne, for all her education. She pulled Nynaeve to one side as a curtained green carriage rumbled past—the street was not very wide there—over to the front of a seam-stress’s shop with a wide doorway showing several dressmaker’s forms clothed in half-done dresses.

“They were not going to tell us anything, Nynaeve, not if you got down on your knees and begged.” Nynaeve opened her mouth indignantly, then snapped it shut. She had never said anything about begging. Anyway, why should she have been the only one? Better any woman at all than Mat Cauthon. Elayne had a fly up her nose, though, and was not to be distracted. “Nynaeve, she must have slowed like everyone else. How old is she, to look fifty or sixty?”

"What are you talking about?" Without thinking Nynaeve noted the location in a corner of her mind; the seamstress's work looked quite good, worth closer examination. "She probably doesn't channel any more than she can help, afraid as she is of being mistaken for a sister. She wouldn't have wanted her face too smooth, after all."

"You never listened in class, did you?" Elayne murmured. She saw the plump seamstress beaming in the doorway, and drew Nynaeve toward the corner of the building. Considering the amount of lace the seamstress wore on her own dress, the bodice buried in it and paces of it drooping over her exposed petticoats, she would bear close watching if Nynaeve did order anything. "Forget clothes for one moment, Nynaeve. Who is the oldest Accepted you remember?"

She gave Elayne a very level look. The woman made it sound as if she never thought of anything else! And she had too listened. Sometimes. "Elin Warrel, I think. She's a few years older than me." Of course, the seamstress's own dress would look fine with a more modest neckline and much less lace. In green silk. Lan liked green, though she certainly was not going to choose her dresses for him. He liked blue, as well.

Elayne barked such a laugh that Nynaeve wondered whether she had spoken aloud. Coloring fiercely, she tried to explain—she was sure she could; by Bel Tine—but the other woman gave her no opportunity for a word. "Elin's sister came to visit her just before you first arrived at the Tower, Nynaeve. Her *younger* sister. The woman had *gray* hair. Well, some of it was. She must have been over *forty*, Nynaeve."

Elin Warrel was past forty? But . . . ! "What are you saying, Elayne?"

No one was close enough to listen, and no one seemed to be giving them a second glance except the still hopeful seamstress, but Elayne lowered her voice to a whisper. "We *slow*, Nynaeve. Somewhere between twenty and twenty-five, we begin aging more slowly. How much depends on how strong we are, but when doesn't. Any woman who can channel does it. Takima said she thought it was the beginning of achieving the ageless look, though I don't think anyone has ever reached that until they've worn the shawl at *least* a year or two, sometimes five or more. Think. You *know* any sister with gray hair is *old*, even if you aren't supposed to mention it. So if Reanne slowed, and she must have, how old is she?"

Nynaeve did not care how old Reanne was. She wanted to cry. No wonder everyone refused to believe her age. It explained why the Women's

Circle back home had looked over her shoulder as if unsure she was old enough to be trusted fully. Achieving a sister's ageless face was all very well, but how long before she had her gray hairs?

Blinking, she turned away angrily. And something struck her a glancing blow on the back of the head. Staggering, she rounded on Elayne in astonishment. Why had the woman hit her? Only, Elayne lay in a heap, eyes closed and a nasty purple lump rising on her temple. Groggily, Nynaeve fell to her knees and gathered her friend into her arms.

"Your friend must be taken ill," a long nosed woman said, kneeling beside them, careless of a yellow dress that showed far too much bosom even by Ebou Dari standards. "Let me help."

A tall fellow, handsome in his embroidered silk vest except for a rather oily grin, bent to take Nynaeve's shoulders. "Here, I have a carriage. We'll take you somewhere more comfortable than a paving stone."

"Go away," Nynaeve told them politely. "We don't need your help."

The man kept trying to raise her to her feet, though, to guide her toward a red carriage, where a startled-appearing woman in blue beckoned vigorously. The long-nosed woman actually tried to lift Elayne, thanking the man for his help and chattering how his carriage sounded a fine idea. A crowd of onlookers seemed to have gathered out of air in a semicircle, women murmuring sympathy about fainting from the heat, men offering to help carry the ladies. A scrawny fellow, bold as you please, reached for Nynaeve's purse almost right under her nose.

Her head still swam enough to make embracing *saidar* difficult, but if all those nattering folk had not fueled her temper, what she saw lying in the street would have. An arrow with a blunt stone head. The one that had grazed her or the one that had struck Elayne. She channeled, and the scrawny cutpurse doubled over, clutching himself and squealing like a pig in briars. Another flow, and the long-nosed woman fell over backward with a shriek twice as high. The man in the silk vest apparently decided they did not need his help after all, because he turned and ran for the carriage, but she gave him a dose anyway. He out-bellowed any outraged bull as the woman in the carriage hauled him in by his vest.

"Thank you, but we don't need any help," Nynaeve shouted. Politely.

Few remained to hear. Once it became clear that the One Power was being used—and folk suddenly leaping about and yelling for no visible cause made it clear enough to most—they hurried elsewhere. The long-nosed woman gathered herself up and actually jumped onto the back of the red carriage, clinging precariously as the dark-vested driver whipped the horses away through the crowd, people leaping aside. Even the cutpurse hobbled off as fast as he could.

Nynaeve could not have cared less had the earth opened and swallowed the whole lot. Chest aching, she ran fine flows of Wind and Water, Earth, Fire and Spirit mixed and blended, through Elayne. It was a simple weave, no bother despite her faint dizziness, and the result let her breathe again. The bruise was not serious; the bones of Elayne's skull were unbroken. Normally, she would have redirected those same flows into much more complex weaves, the Healing she had discovered herself. At the moment, simpler weaves were all she could manage, though. With just Spirit, Wind and Water, she wove the Healing that Yellows had used since time immemorial.

Elayne's eyes shot open wide, and with a gasp that seemed to take all the air in her, she convulsed like a netted trout, slippered heels drumming on the pavement. That only lasted a moment, of course, but in that moment the bruise shrank and vanished.

Nynaeve helped her to her feet—and a woman's hand appeared, holding a pewter cup full of water. "Even an Aes Sedai might be thirsty after that," the seamstress said.

Elayne reached for it, but Nynaeve laid fingers on her wrist. "No, thank you." The woman shrugged, and as she turned away, Nynaeve added in a different tone, "Thank you." It seemed to come easier the more you said it; she was not sure she liked that.

That ocean of lace heaved as the seamstress shrugged again. "I make dresses for anyone. I can do better for your coloring than that." She vanished back into her shop. Nynaeve frowned after her.

"What happened?" Elayne demanded. "Why wouldn't you let me take a drink? I'm thirsty *and* hungry."

With a last frown for the seamstress, Nynaeve bent to pick up the arrow.

The other woman needed no explanations. *Saidar* shone around her in a flash. "Teslyn and Joline?"

Nynaeve shook her head; the slight wooziness seemed to be fading. She did not think those two would stoop to this. She did not think so. "What about Reanne?" she said quietly. The seamstress was back in the doorway, still hopeful. “She might want to make sure we leave. Or worse, maybe Garenia.” That was almost as chilling as Teslyn and Joline. And twice as infuriating.

Somehow Elayne managed to look pretty while scowling. “Whoever it was, we will settle them. You’ll see.” The scowl faded. “Nynaeve, if the Circle does know where the Bowl is, we can find it, but. . . .” She bit her lip, hesitating. “I only know one way to be sure.”

Nynaeve nodded slowly, though she would rather have eaten a handful of dirt. Today had seemed so bright for a time, but then it had spiraled into darkness, from Reanne to. . . . Oh, Light, how long before she had her gray hair?

“Don’t cry, Nynaeve. Mat can’t possibly be that bad. He’ll find it for us in a few days, I know.”

Nynaeve only cried harder.

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CHAPTER

25

Mindtrap

Moghedien did not want to dream the dream again, but wanting to wake, wanting to scream, did no good. Sleep held her faster than any manacles. The beginning went by quickly, a sketchy blur. No mercy; she would have to relive the rest that much sooner.

She barely recognized the woman who entered the tent where she was held prisoner. Halima, secretary to one of these fools who called themselves Aes Sedai. Fools, yet they held her tightly enough by the band of silver metal around her neck, held her and made her obey. Fast movement, though she prayed for slowness. *The woman channeled to make a light, and Moghedien saw only the light. It had to be* saidin—*among the living, only the Chosen knew how to tap the True Power*—the Power that came from the Dark One—*and few were fool enough to except in direst need—but that was impossible!* Blurring quickness. *The woman named herself Aran'gar and called Moghedien by name, she gave summons to the Pit of Doom and removed the* a'dam *necklace, flinching at pain no woman should have felt. Again*—how many times had she done this?—*again Moghedien wove a small gateway in the tent. She Skimmed to give herself time to think in the endless dark, but no sooner did she step onto her platform, like a small enclosed marble balcony complete with a comfortable chair, than she arrived on the black slopes of Shayol Ghul, forever shrouded in twilight, where vents and tunnels emitted steam and smoke and harsh vapors, and a Myrddraal came to her in its dead black garb, like a slug-white, eyeless man, but taller, more massive than any other Halfman. It regarded her arrogantly, and gave its odd name unbidden, and commanded her to come; these were not things Myrddraal did with the Chosen*. Now she screamed in the depths of her mind for the dream to move faster, to blur beyond seeing, beyond knowing, but *now, as she followed Shaidar Haran's back into the* *entrance to the Pit of Doom, now all flowed at its normal pace and seemed more real than* Tel'aran'rhiod *or the waking world*.

Tears leaked from Moghedien's eyes, down cheeks that already glistened. She twitched on her hard pallet, arms and legs jerking as she fought desperately, futilely, to wake. She was no longer aware that she dreamed—all seemed real—but deep memories remained, and in those depths, instinct shrieked and clawed for escape.

She was well familiar with the sloping tunnel ceilinged in stone daggers like fangs, the walls glowing with pale light. Many times she had made this downward journey since the day so long ago when she first came to make obeisance to the Great Lord and pledge her soul, but never as now, never with her failure known in all its magnitude. Always before she had managed to hide failures even from the Great Lord. Many times. Things could be done here that could be done nowhere else. Things could happen here that could happen nowhere else.

She gave a start as one of the stone fangs brushed her hair, then gathered herself as best she could. Those spikes and blades still cleared the strange, too-tall Myrddraal easily, but though it overtopped her by head and shoulders and more, she was forced to move her head around their points now. Reality was clay to the Great Lord here, and he often made his displeasure known so. A stone tooth struck her shoulder, and she ducked to go under another. There was no longer enough height in the tunnel for her to straighten as she walked. She bent lower, scurrying crouched in the Myrddraal's wake, trying to get closer. Its stride never changed, but no matter how quickly she scuttled, the interval between them did not lessen. The ceiling descended, the Great Lord's fangs to rend traitors and fools, and Moghedien dropped to hands and knees, crawling, then flattened to elbows and knees. Light flared and flickered in the tunnel, cast from the entrance to the Pit itself, just ahead, and Moghedien slithered on her belly, pulled herself along with her hands, pushed with her feet. Stone points dug at her flesh, caught at her dress. Panting, she wriggled the last distance to the sound of ripping wool.

Staring back over her shoulder, she shivered convulsively. Where the tunnel mouth should have been stood a smooth stone wall. Perhaps the Great Lord had timed it all exactly, and perhaps, had she been slower. . . .

The ledge on which she lay projected above a black-mottled red lake of molten rock where flames the size of men danced and died and reappeared.

Overhead, the cavern rose roofless through the mountain to a sky where wild clouds raced, striated red and yellow and black, as if on the winds of time themselves. It was not the dark-clouded sky seen outside on Shayol Ghul. None of that earned a second glance, and not just because she had seen it many times. The Bore into the Great Lord's place of imprisonment was no closer here than anywhere else in the world, but here she could feel it, here she could bathe in the radiant glory of the Great Lord. The True Power washed around her, so strong here that attempting to channel it would fry her to a cinder. Not that she had any desire to pay the price elsewhere either.

She started to push up to her knees, and something struck her between the shoulder blades, driving her down hard onto the stone ledge, crushing the air from her lungs. Stunned, she struggled for breath, then stared back up over her shoulder. The Myrddraal stood with one massive boot planted firmly on her back. Almost, she embraced saidar, *though channeling here without express permission was a good way to die. The arrogance on the slopes above was one thing, but this!*

"Do you know who I am?" she demanded. "I am Moghedien!" That eyeless gaze watched her as it might an insect; she had often seen Myrddraal look at ordinary humans that way.

MOGHEDIEN. That voice inside her head flushed away all thought of the Myrddraal; it nearly flushed away all thought. Beside this, any human lover's deepest embrace was a drop of water beside the ocean. HOW DEEP IS YOUR FAILURE, MOGHEDIEN? THE CHOSEN ARE ALWAYS THE STRONGEST, BUT YOU LET YOURSELF BE CAPTURED. YOU TAUGHT THOSE WHO WOULD OPPOSE ME, MOGHEDIEN.

Eyelids fluttering, she fought for coherence. "Great Lord, I taught them only small things, and I fought them as I could. I taught them a supposed way to detect a man channeling." She managed to laugh. "Practicing it gives them such headaches they cannot channel for hours." Silence. Perhaps as well. They had given up trying to learn that long before her rescue, but the Great Lord did not need to know that. "Great Lord, you know how I have served you. I serve in the shadows, and your enemies never feel my bite until my venom is working." She did not quite dare say she had deliberately let herself be captured, to work from within, but she could suggest. "Great Lord, you know how many of your enemies I brought *down in the War of Power. From the shadows, unseen, or if seen, ignored because I could not possibly be a threat.” Silence. And then. . . .*

MY CHOSEN ARE ALWAYS THE STRONGEST. MY HAND MOVES.

That voice reverberating in her skull turned her bones to boiling honey and her brain to fire. The Myrddraal had her chin in its hand, forcing her head up before her vision cleared enough to see the knife in its other hand. All her dreams were to end here in a slit throat, her body going to feed the Trollocs. Perhaps Shaidar Haran would save a choice cut for itself. Perhaps. . . .

No. She knew she was going to die, but this Myrddraal would not eat one shred of her! She reached to embrace saidar, *and her eyes bulged. There was nothing there. Nothing! It was as if she had been severed! She knew she had not—it was said that tearing was the deepest pain anyone could know, beyond any power to deaden—but—!*

In those stunned moments, the Myrddraal forced her mouth open, scraped the blade along her tongue, then nicked her ear. And as it straightened with her blood and saliva, she knew, even before it produced what appeared to be a tiny, fragile cage of gold wire and crystal. Some things could only be done here, some only to those who could channel, and she had brought a number of men and women for this very purpose.

“No,” she breathed. Her eyes could not leave the cour’souvra. *“No, not me! NOT ME!”*

Ignoring her, Shaidar Haran scraped the fluids from the knife onto the cour’souvra. *The crystal turned a milky pink, the first setting. With a flick of its wrist, it tossed the mind-trap out over the lake of molten stone for the second. The gold-and-crystal cage arched through the air and suddenly stopped, floating at the very spot where it seemed the Bore was, the place where the Pattern lay thinnest of all*.

Moghedien forgot the Myrddraal. She flung out her hands toward the Bore. “Mercy, Great Lord!” She had never noticed that the Great Lord of the Dark possessed any mercy, but had she been bound in a cell with rabid wolves or with a darath *in moult, she would have begged the same. In the right circumstances, you begged even for the impossible. The* cour’souvra *hung in midair, turning slowly, glittering in the light of leaping fires below. “I have served you with all my heart, Great Lord. I beg mercy. I beg! MERCYYYYYYY!”*

YOU MAY SERVE ME STILL.

The voice flung her into ecstasy beyond knowing, but at the same instant the sparkling mindtrap suddenly glowed like the sun, and in the midst of rapture, she knew pain as if she had been immersed in the fiery lake. They blended, and she howled, thrashing like a mad thing, thrashing in endless pain, endless, until after Ages, after nothing remained but agony and the memory of agony, the tiny mercy of darkness overwhelmed her.

Moghedien stirred on the pallet. Not again. Please.

She barely recognized the woman who entered the tent where she was held prisoner.

Please, she shrieked in the depths of her mind.

The woman channeled to make a light, and Moghedien saw only the light.

Deep in sleep, she quivered, vibrating from head to toe. Please!

The woman named herself Aran'gar and called Moghedien by name, she gave summons to the Pit of Doom and—

"Wake, woman," said a voice like rotted bone crumbling, and Moghedien's eyes popped open. She almost wished for the dream back.

No door or window broke the featureless stone walls of her small prison, and there were no glowbulbs or even lamps, but light came from somewhere. She did not know how many days she had been there, only that tasteless food appeared at irregular intervals, that the single bucket serving for sanitation was emptied at even more irregular times, and soap and a bucket of perfumed water were somehow left for her to clean herself. She was not sure whether that was a mercy or not; the glad thrill at seeing a bucket of water reminded her how far she had fallen. Shaidar Haran was in the cell with her now.

Hurriedly rolling from her pallet, she knelt and put her face to the bare stone floor. She had always done whatever was necessary for survival, and the Myrddraal had been all too glad to teach her what was necessary. "I greet you eagerly, *Mia'cova*." The lashed-together title burned on her tongue. "One Who Owns Me," it meant, or simply, "My Owner." The strange shield Shaidar Haran had used on her—Myrddraal could not, but it did—the shield was not in evidence, yet she did not consider channeling. The True Power was denied her, of course—that could be drawn only with the Great Lord's blessing—but the Source tantalized, though the glow just beyond sight seemed somehow odd. She still did not consider it. Every time the Myrddraal visited, it displayed her mindtrap. Channeling too near your own *cour'souvra* was extremely painful, the nearer, the more the pain; this close, she did not think she would survive a simple touch on the Source. And that was the least of the mindtrap's dangers.

Shaidar Haran chuckled, a rasp of dried, cracked leather. That was another difference about this Myrddraal. Far more cruel than Trollocs, who were merely bloodthirsty, Myrddraal were cold and dispassionate in it. Shaidar Haran often showed amusement, though. So far she felt lucky to have only bruises. Most women would have been on the brink of madness by now, if not beyond.

"And are you eager to obey?" that rustling, grating voice asked.

"Yes, I am eager to obey, *Mia'cova*." Whatever was necessary to survive. But she still gasped when cold fingers suddenly tangled in her hair. She scrambled to her feet on her own as much as possible, but still was hauled up. At least this time her feet remained on the floor. The Myrddraal studied her, expressionless. Remembering past visits, it required an effort not to flinch, or scream, or simply reach for *saidar* and make an end.

"Close your eyes," it told her, "and keep them closed until you are commanded to open them."

Moghedien's eyes snapped shut. One of Shaidar Haran's lessons had been instant obedience. Besides, with her eyes closed, she could try to pretend that she was somewhere else. Whatever was necessary.

Abruptly the hand in her hair rushed her forward, and she screamed in spite of herself. The Myrddraal meant to run her into the wall. Her hands went up for protection, and Shaidar Haran released her. She staggered at least ten steps—but her cell was not ten paces corner to corner. Wood smoke; she smelled a faint touch of wood smoke. She kept her eyelids firmly closed, though. She meant to continue with no more than bruises, and as few bruises as possible, for as long as she could manage.

"You can look now," a deep voice said.

She did, cautiously. The speaker was a tall, broad-shouldered young man in black boots and breeches and a flowing white shirt unlaced at the top, who watched her with startlingly blue eyes from a deep, cushioned armchair in front of a marble fireplace where flames danced along long logs. She stood in a wood-paneled room that might have belonged to a wealthy merchant or noble of moderate rank in this time, the furniture lightly carved and touched with gilt, the rugs woven in red-and-gold arabesques. She did not doubt it was somewhere close by Shayol Ghul, though; it did not have the feel of *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the only other possibility. Swiveling her head hastily, she drew a deep breath. The Myrddraal was nowhere to be seen. Tight bands of *cuande* seemed to vanish from around her chest.

"Did you enjoy your time in the vacuole?"

Moghedien felt icy fingers dig into her scalp. She was no researcher or maker, but she knew that word. She did not even think to ask how a young man of this time did, too. Sometimes there were bubbles in the Pattern, though someone like Mesaana would say that was too simple an explanation. Vacuoles could be entered, if you knew how, and manipulated much like the rest of the world—researchers had often done great experiments in vacuoles, so she vaguely remembered hearing—but they were outside the Pattern really, and sometimes they closed up, or perhaps broke off and drifted away. Even Mesaana could not say what happened—except that anything in them at the time was gone forever.

"How long?" She was surprised her voice was so steady. She rounded on the young man, who sat there showing her white teeth. "I said, how long? Or don't you know?"

"I saw you arrive. . . ." He paused, lifting a silver goblet from the table beside his chair, eyes smiling at her over the rim as he drank. ". . . the night before last."

She could not hide a relieved gasp. The only reason anyone would want to enter a vacuole was that time flowed differently there, sometimes slower, sometimes faster. Sometimes much faster. She would not have been entirely surprised to learn that the Great Lord had really imprisoned her for a hundred years, or a thousand, to emerge into a world already his, to make her way feeding among carrion while the other Chosen stood at the pinnacle. She was still one of the Chosen, in her own mind, at least. Until the Great Lord himself said she was not. She had never heard of anyone being released once a mindtrap was set, but she would find a way. There was always a way for those who were cautious, while those fell who called caution cowardice. She herself had carried a few of that so-called brave sort to Shayol Ghul to be fitted with *cour'souvra*.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that this fellow knew a great deal for a Friend of the Dark, especially one not many years past twenty. He swung one leg over an arm of the chair, lounging insolently under her scrutiny. Graendal might have snatched him, if he had any position or power; only too strong a chin kept him from being pretty enough. She did not think she had ever seen eyes so blue. With his insolence in her very face and what she had had to endure at Shaidar Haran's hands so fresh, with the Source calling her and the Myrddraal gone, she considered teaching this young Friend of the Dark a sharp lesson. The fact that her clothes were grimy added their part; she herself smelled faintly of the perfume in the wash water, but she had had no way to clean the rough woolen dress in which she fled Egwene al'Vere, with its rips from her journey down to the Pit. Prudence prevailed—this room must be close to Shayol Ghul—but barely.

"What is your name?" she demanded. "Do you have any idea who you are speaking to?"

"Yes, I do, Moghedien. You may call me Moridin."

Moghedien gasped. Not for the name; any fool could call himself Death. But a tiny black fleck, just large enough to see, floated straight across one of those blue eyes and then across the other in the same line. This Moridin had tapped into the True Power, and more than once. Much more. She knew that some men who could channel survived in this time aside from al'Thor—this fellow was much of a size with al'Thor—but she had not expected the Great Lord to allow one that particular honor. An honor with a bite, as any of the Chosen knew. In the long run, the True Power was far more addictive than the One Power; a strong will could hold down the desire to draw more *saidar* or *saidin*, but she herself did not believe the will existed strong enough to resist the True Power, not once the *saa* appeared in your eyes. The final price was different, but no less terrible.

"You have been given distinction greater than you know," she told him. As though her filthy dress was the finest streith, she took the armchair opposite him. "Bring me some of that wine, and I will tell you. Only twenty-nine others have ever been granted—"

To her shock, he laughed. "You misapprehend, Moghedien. You still serve the Great Lord, but not quite as you once did. The time for playing your own games has passed. If you had not managed to do some good by accident, you would be dead now."

"I am one of the Chosen, boy," she said, fury burning through caution. She sat up straight, facing him with all the knowledge of an Age that made his little different from times of mud huts. As much of that knowledge as she had, anyway, and in some areas, concerning the One Power, no one outstripped her. She almost embraced the Source no matter how close

Shayol Ghul lay. “Your mother probably used my name to frighten you not so many years gone, but know that grown men who could crumple you like a rag sweated when they heard it. You will watch your tongue with me!”

He reached into the open neck of his shirt, and her own tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Her eyes fixed on the small cage of gold wire and blood-red crystal that he drew out dangling on a cord. She thought vaguely that he tucked another just like it back in, but she had eyes only for her own. It definitely was hers. His thumb stroked, and she felt that caress across her mind, her soul. Breaking a mindtrap did not require much more pressure than he was using. She could be on the other side of the world or farther, and it would not matter a hair. The part of her that was *her* would be separated; she would still see with her eyes and hear with her ears, taste what crossed her tongue and feel what touched her, but helpless within an automaton that was utterly obedient to whoever held the *cour’souvra*. Whether or not there was any way to get free of it, a mindtrap was just what its name implied. She could feel the blood draining from her face.

“You understand now?” he said. “You still serve the Great Lord, but now it will be by doing as I say.”

“I understand, *Mia’cova*,” she said automatically.

Again he laughed, a deep rich sound that mocked her as he put the mindtrap away beneath his shirt. “There is no need for that, now you’ve had your lesson. I will call you Moghedien, and you will call me Moridin. You are still one of the Chosen. Who is there to replace you?”

“Yes, of course, Moridin,” she said tonelessly. Whatever he said, she knew that she was owned.

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CHAPTER 26

The Irrevocable Words

Morgase lay awake, staring at the ceiling through the moonlit darkness, and tried to think of her daughter. A single pale linen sheet covered her, but despite the heat she sweated in a thick woolen sleeping gown, laced tightly to the neck. Sweat hardly mattered; no matter how many times she bathed, no matter how hot the water, she did not feel clean. Elayne must be safe in the White Tower. At times it seemed years since she could make herself trust Aes Sedai, yet whatever the paradox, the Tower was surely the safest place for Elayne. She tried to think of Gawyn—he would be in Tar Valon with his sister, full of his pride for her, so earnest in his desire to be her shield when she needed one—and of Galad—why would they not let her see him? She loved him as much as if he had come out of her own body, and in so many ways he needed it more than the other two. She tried to think of them. It was difficult to think of anything except. . . . Wide eyes stared up into the darkness, glistening with unshed tears.

She had always thought she was brave enough to do whatever needed doing, to face whatever came; she had always believed she could pick herself up and continue to fight. In one endless hour, without leaving more than a few bruises that were already fading, Rhadam Asunawa had begun teaching her differently. Eamon Valda had completed her education with one question. The bruise her answer had left on her heart had not faded. She should have gone back to Asunawa herself and told him to do his worst. She should have. . . . She prayed that Elayne was safe. Perhaps it was not fair to hope more for Elayne than for Galad or Gawyn, but Elayne would be the next Queen of Andor. The Tower would not miss the chance to put an Aes

Sedai on the Lion Throne. If only she could see Elayne, see all her children once more.

Something rustled in the dark bedchamber, and she held her breath, fought against trembling. The faint moonlight barely let her make out the bedposts. Valda had ridden north from Amador yesterday, him and Asunawa, with thousands of Whitecloaks to face the Prophet, but if he had come back, if he. . . . A shape in the darkness resolved into a woman, too short for Lini. “I thought you might still be awake,” Breane’s voice said softly. “Drink this; it will help.” The Cairhienin woman tried to put a silvery cup into Morgase’s hand. It gave off a slightly sour smell.

“Wait until you’re summoned to bring me drink,” she snapped, pushing the cup away. Warm liquid spilled onto her hand, onto the linen sheet. “I was almost asleep when you came stamping in,” she lied. “Leave me!”

Instead of obeying, the woman stood looking down at her, face shadowed. Morgase did not like Breane Taborwin. Whether Breane truly was nobly born and come down in the world, as she sometimes claimed, or merely a servant who had learned to counterfeit her betters, she obeyed when and as she chose and let her tongue run entirely too free. As she proved now.

“You moan like a sheep, Morgase Trakand.” Even kept low, her voice seethed in anger. She set the cup on the small bedside table with a thump; more of the contents splashed onto the tabletop. “Bah! Many others have seen far worse. You are alive. None of your bones are broken; your wits are whole. Endure; let the past pass, and go on with your life. You have been so much on edge that the men walk on their toes, even Master Gill. Lamgwin has hardly slept a wink these three nights.”

Morgase flushed with annoyance; even in Andor, servants did not speak so. She caught the woman’s arm in a tight grip, but anxiety warred with displeasure. “They don’t know, do they?” If they did, they would try to avenge her, rescue her. They would die. Tallanvor would die.

“Lini and I drape linen over their eyes for you,” Breane sneered, pulling her hand away and flinging it back at her. “If I could save Lamgwin, I would let them know you for the bleating sheep you are. He sees the Light made flesh in you; I see a woman without courage to accept the day. I will not let you destroy him with your cowardice.”

Cowardice. Outrage welled up in Morgase, yet no words came. Her fingers knotted in the sheet. She did not think she could have decided in cold blood to lie with Valda, but had she, she could have lived with it. She thought she could. Another matter entirely to say yes because she feared facing Asunawa's knotted cords and needles again, feared worse what he would have gotten to eventually. However she had screamed under Asunawa's ministrations, Valda was the one who had showed her the true borders of her courage, so far short of where she had believed. Valda's touch, his bed, could be forgotten, with time, but she would never be able to wash the shame of that "yes" from her lips. Breane hurled the truth in her face, and she did not know how to reply.

She was spared the need by a rush of boots in the outer room. The bedchamber door flung open, and a running man stopped a pace inside.

"So you're awake; good," Tallanvor's voice said after a moment. Which allowed her heart to start beating again, allowed her to breathe. She tried to release Breane's hand—she did not remember clasping it—but to her surprise, the woman squeezed once before letting go.

"Something is happening," Tallanvor went on, striding to the lone window. Standing to one side as if to avoid being seen, he peered into the night. Moonlight outlined his tall form. "Master Gill, come and tell what you saw."

A head appeared in the doorway, bald top shining in the darkness. Behind, in the other room, a hulking shadow moved; Lamgwin Dorn. When Basel Gill realized she was still in bed, that faint shining from his scalp jerked as he directed his eyes elsewhere, though he probably had difficulty making out more than the bed itself. Master Gill was even wider than Lamgwin, but not nearly as tall. "Forgive me, my Queen. I didn't mean to. . . ." He cleared his throat violently, and his boots scraped on the floor, shifting. Had he had a cap, he would have been turning it in his hands, or wadding it nervously. "I was in the Long Corridor, on my way to . . . to. . . ." To the jakes, was what he could not bring himself to say to her. "Anyway, I glanced out one of the windows, and I saw a . . . a big bird, I think . . . land on top of the South Barracks."

"A bird!" Lini's thin voice drove Master Gill to leap into the room, clearing the doorway. Or maybe it was a sharp poke in his stout ribs. Lini usually took every advantage her gray hair offered. She stalked by him still belting her nightrobe. "Fools! Ox-brained lummoxes! You woke my ch—!"

She stopped with a fierce cough; Lini never forgot that she had been Morgase's nurse, and her mother's as well, but she never slipped in front of others. She would be cross that she had now, and it showed in her voice. "You woke your Queen for a *bird*!" Patting her hairnet, she automatically tucked in a few strands that had escaped in her sleep. "Have you been drinking, Basel Gill?" Morgase wondered that herself.

"I don't know it was a bird," Master Gill protested. "It didn't look like any bird, but what else flies, except bats? It was big. Men climbed off its back, and there was another still on its neck when it took off again. While I was slapping my face to wake up, another of the . . . things . . . landed, and more men climbed down, and then another came, and I decided it was time to tell Lord Tallanvor." Lini did not sniff, but Morgase could almost feel her stare, and it was not directed at her. The man who had abandoned his inn to follow her certainly felt it. "The Light's own truth, my Queen," he insisted.

"Light!" Tallanvor announced like an echo. "Something. . . . Something just landed atop the North Barracks." Morgase had never heard him sound shaken before. All she wanted was to make them all go away and leave her alone in her misery, but there seemed no hope. Tallanvor was worse than Breane in many ways. Much worse.

"My robe," she said, and for once Breane was quick to hand her one. Master Gill hastily turned his face to the wall while she climbed from the bed and put on the silk robe.

She strode to the window, tying the sash. The long North Barracks loomed across the wide courtyard, four hulking floors of flat-roofed dark stone. Not a light showed, there or anywhere in the Fortress. All was stillness and silence. "I see nothing, Tallanvor."

He drew her back. "Just watch," he said.

Another time she would have regretted his hand leaving her shoulder, and been irritated at her own regret as well as his tone. Now, after Valda, she felt relief. And irritation at the relief as well as his tone. He was too disrespectful by miles, far too stubborn, too young. Not much older than Galad.

Shadows moved as the moon did, but nothing else stirred. Off in the city of Amador, a dog bayed, answered by more. Then, as she opened her mouth to dismiss Tallanvor and all of them, darkness atop the massive barracks humped up and hurled itself off the roof.

Something, Tallanvor had called it, and she had no better name. An impression of a long body that seemed thicker than a man was tall; great ribbed wings like a bat's sweeping down as the creature fell toward the courtyard; a figure, a man, sitting just behind a sinuous neck. And then the wings caught air, and the . . . something . . . soared up, blocking the moonlight as it swept over her head trailing a long, thin tail.

Morgase closed her mouth slowly. The only thought that came to her was Shadowspawn. Trollocs and Myrddraal were not the only Shadow-twisted creatures in the Blight. She had never been taught of anything like this, but her tutors in the Tower said that things lived there no one had ever seen clearly and lived to describe. How could it be so far south, though?

Abruptly a flash of light flared with a great boom in the direction of the main gates, and then again, at two more places along the great outer wall. Those were gates too, she believed.

"What in the Pit of Doom was that?" Tallanvor muttered in a moment of silence before alarm gongs began resounding in the darkness. Shouts rose, and screams, and hoarse cries like some sort of horn. Fire leaped with a crash of thunder, then again elsewhere.

"The One Power," Morgase breathed. She might not be able to channel, or as well as not, but she could tell that. Notions of Shadowspawn fled. "It . . . it must be Aes Sedai." She heard someone's breath catch behind her; Lini or Breane. Basel Gill excitedly murmured "Aes Sedai," and Lamgwin murmured back too low for her to understand. Off in the darkness, metal clashed on metal; fire bellowed, and lightning streaked from the cloudless sky. Faintly through the din came alarm bells from the city at last, but strangely few.

"Aes Sedai." Tallanvor sounded doubtful. "Why now? To rescue you, Morgase? I thought they couldn't use the power against men, only Shadowspawn. Besides, if that winged creature wasn't Shadowspawn, I will never see one."

"You don't know what you are talking about!" she said, confronting him heatedly. "You—!" A crossbow bolt clashed against the windowframe in a spray of stone chips; air stirred against her face as it ricocheted between them and planted itself in one of the bedposts with a solid *tchunk*. A few inches to the right, and all her troubles would have been ended.

She did not move, but Tallanvor pulled her away from the window with an oath. Even by moonlight, she could see his frown as he studied her.

For a moment she thought he might touch her face; if he did, she did not know whether she would weep or scream or order him to leave her forever or. . . . Instead, he said, “More likely it’s some of those men, those Shamin or whatever they call themselves.” He insisted on accepting the strange, impossible tales that had seeped even into the Fortress. “I think I can get you out, right now; everything will be confusion. Come with me.”

She did not correct him; few people knew anything about the One Power, much less the differences between *saidar* and *saidin*. His idea had its attractions. They might be able to escape in the bedlam of a battle.

“Take her out into that!” Lini screeched. Flaring lights drowned the moon at the window; crashes and thunders drowned the din of men and swords. “I thought you had more wits, Martyn Tallanvor. ‘Only fools kiss hornets or bite fire.’ You heard her say it’s Aes Sedai. Do you think she doesn’t know? Do you?”

“My Lord, if it is Aes Sedai. . . .” Master Gill trailed off.

Tallanvor’s hands fell away from her, and he grumbled under his breath, wishing he had a sword. Pedron Niall had allowed him to keep his blade; Eamon Valda was not so trusting.

For an instant, disappointment swelled in her breast. If only he had insisted, had dragged her. . . . What was the matter with her? Had he tried to drag her anywhere for any reason, she would have had his hide. She needed to take hold of herself. Valda had dented her confidence—no, he had casually ripped it to shreds—but she must cling to those shreds and knit them up again. Somehow. If the tatters were worth knitting up again.

“At least I can find out what is happening,” Tallanvor growled, striding for the door. “If it isn’t your Aes Sedai—”

“No! You will remain here. Please.” She was very glad of the pale darkness, hiding her furiously flushing face. She would have bitten her tongue off before saying that last word, but it had slipped out before she knew. She went on in firmer tones. “You will remain here, guarding your Queen as you should.”

In the dim light, she could see his face, and his bow seemed quite proper, but she would have wagered her last copper both were angry. “I will be in your anteroom.” Well, there was no doubt about his voice. For once, though, she cared neither how angry he was nor how little he hid it. Very possibly she might kill the infuriating man with her own hands, but he was not going to die tonight, cut down by soldiers with no way to tell which side he was on.

There was no hope of sleep now even had she been able. Without lighting any lamps, she washed her face and teeth. Breane and Lini helped her dress, in blue silk slashed with green, with spills of snowy lace at her wrists and beneath her chin. It would do very well for receiving Aes Sedai. *Saidar* raged in the night. They had to be Aes Sedai. Who else could it be?

When she joined the men in the anteroom, they were sitting in darkness except for the moonlight through the windows, and the occasional flash of Power-wrought fire. Even a candle might attract unwanted attention. Lamgwin and Master Gill sprang from their chairs respectfully; Tallanvor stood more slowly, and she needed no light to know he regarded her with a sullen frown. Furious that she had to ignore him—she was his Queen!—furious and barely able to keep it from her voice, she ordered Lamgwin to bring more of the tall wooden chairs further from the windows. In silence, they sat and waited. At least, silence on their part. Outside thunderous crashes and roars still echoed, horns cried and men shouted, and through it she felt *saidar* surge and fall and surge again.

Slowly, after at least an hour, the battle dwindled and died. Voices still shouted incomprehensible orders, wounded screamed, and sometimes those strange hoarse horns gave voice, but no more did steel ring on steel. *Saidar* faded; she was sure women still held it inside the Fortress, but she did not think any channeled now. All seemed close to peaceful after the clamor and commotion.

Tallanvor stirred, but she waved him back before he could rise; for a moment she thought he would not obey. Night weakened, and sunlight crept in through the windows, shining on Tallanvor's glower. She held her hands still in her lap. Patience was but one of the virtues that young man needed to learn. Patience stood second only to courage as a noble virtue. The sun rose higher. Lini and Breane began whispering together in increasingly worried tones, shooting glances in her direction. Tallanvor scowled, dark eyes smoldering, sitting rigid in that dark blue coat that fit him so well. Master Gill fidgeted, running first one hand then the other across his gray-fringed head, mopping his pink cheeks with a handkerchief. Lamgwin slouched in his chair, the onetime street tough's heavy-lidded eyes making him seem half asleep, but whenever he glanced at Breane a smile flickered on his scarred, broken-nosed face. Morgase focused on her breathing, almost like the exercises she had done during her months in the Tower. Patience. If someone did not come soon, she was going to have sharp words to say, Aes Sedai or not!

Despite herself, she jumped at an abrupt pounding on the door to the hallway. Before she could tell Breane to see who was there, the door swung open, banging against the wall. Morgase stared at who entered.

A tall, dark, hook-nosed man stared back at her coldly, the long hilt of a sword rising above his shoulder. Strange armor covered his chest, overlapping plates lacquered glistening gold and black, and he held a helmet on his hip that looked like an insect's head, black and gold and green, with three long, thin green plumes. Two more armored like him came at his heels wearing their helmets, though without plumes; their armor seemed painted rather than lacquered, and they carried crossbows ready. Still more stood in the hall outside, with gold-and-black tasseled spears.

Tallanvor and Lamgwin and even stout Master Gill scrambled to their feet, placing themselves between her and her peculiar visitors. She had to push a way through.

The hook-nosed man's eyes went straight to her before she could demand an explanation. "You are Morgase, Queen of Andor?" His voice was harsh, and he drawled his words so badly she barely understood.

He stepped on her reply. "You will come with me. Alone," he added as Tallanvor, and Lamgwin, and Master Gill, all moved forward. The crossbowmen presented their weapons; the heavy quarrels looked made to punch holes in armor; a man would hardly slow one down.

"I have no objection to my people remaining here until I return," she said a good more calmly than she felt. Who were these people? She was familiar with the accents of every nation, familiar with their armor. "I am sure you will see to my safety very well, Captain . . . ?"

He did not supply a name, only motioned curtly for her to follow. To her vast relief, Tallanvor made no fuss despite his hot gaze. To her vast irritation, Master Gill and Lamgwin looked to him before stepping back.

In the hallway, the soldiers formed around her, the hook-nosed officer and the two crossbowmen in the lead. A guard of honor, she tried to tell herself. This soon after a battle, wandering around unprotected was worse than foolish; there might be holdouts who would seize a hostage, or kill any who saw them. She wished she believed that.

She tried questioning the officer, but he never spoke a word, never slackened his stride or turned his head, and she stopped trying. None of the soldiers so much as glanced at her; they were hard-eyed men of the kind she knew from her own Queen's Guards, men who had seen fighting before, more than once. But who were they? Their boots struck the floor-stones as one in an ominous drumbeat emphasized by the stark Fortress corridors. There was little color, nothing for beauty except scattered tapestries showing Whitecloaks in bloody battle.

She realized they were taking her toward the Lord Captain Commander's quarters, and a queasiness settled in the pit of her stomach. She had grown almost pleasantly accustomed to the way while Pedron Niall lived; she had come to dread it in the few days since he died—but as they rounded a corner, she started at the sight of some two dozen archers marching behind their own officer, men in baggy trousers and boiled leather breastplates painted in horizontal stripes of blue and black. Each man wore a conical steel cap, with a veil of gray steel mail covering his face to the eyes; here and there the ends of mustaches dangled below the veils. The archers' officer bowed to the one leading her guard, who merely raised his hand in reply.

Taraboners. She had not seen a Taraboner soldier in a good many years, but those men were Taraboners in spite of those stripes, or she would eat her slippers. Yet that made no sense. Tarabon was chaos come to life, a hundred-sided civil war between pretenders to the throne and Dragonsworn. Tarabon could never have launched this attack on Amador itself. Unless, incredibly, one claimant had won out over the rest, and over the Dragonsworn, and. . . . It was impossible, and it did not explain these strangely armored soldiers, or that winged beast, or. . . . She thought she had seen strangeness. She thought she had known queasiness. Then she and her guard turned another corner and encountered two women.

One was slender, short as any Cairhienin and darker than any Tairen, in a blue dress that stopped well short of her ankles; silver lightning forked across red panels on her breast and the sides of her wide, divided skirts. The other woman, in drab dark gray, stood taller than most men, with golden hair to her shoulders that had been brushed till it glistened and frightened green eyes. A silver leash connected a silver bracelet on the shorter woman's wrist to a necklace worn by the taller.

They stood aside for Morgase's guard, and when the hook-nosed officer murmured *"Der'sul'dam"*—Morgase thought that was it; his slurred accent made understanding difficult—when he murmured in tones nearly but not quite to an equal, the dark woman bowed her head slightly, twitched at the leash, and the golden-haired woman sank to the floor, folding herself with her head on her knees and her palms flat on the floorstones. As Morgase and her guards passed by, the dark woman bent to pat the other fondly on the head, as she might a dog, and worse, the kneeling woman looked up with pleasure and gratitude.

Morgase made the necessary effort to keep walking, to keep her knees from folding, to keep her stomach from emptying itself. The sheer servility was bad enough, but she was certain the woman being patted on the head could channel. Impossible! She walked in a daze, wondering whether this could be a dream, a nightmare. Praying that it was. She had a vague awareness of stopping for more soldiers, these in red-and-black armor, then. . . . Pedron Niall's audience chamber—Valda's now, or rather whoever had taken the fortress—was changed. The great golden sunburst remained, set in the floor, but all Niall's captured banners, which Valda had kept as if they were his, were gone, and so were the furnishings, except for the plainly carved high-backed chair Niall and then Valda had used, flanked now by two tall, luridly painted screens. One showed a white-crested black bird of prey with a cruel beak, its white-tipped wings spread wide, the other a black-spotted yellow cat with one paw on a dead, deerlike creature half its size, with long, straight horns and white stripes.

There were a number of people in the room, but that was all she had time to notice before a sharp-faced woman in blue robes stepped forward, one side of her head shaved and the remaining hair in a long brown braid that hung in front of her right shoulder. Her blue eyes, full of contempt, could have done for the eagle's or the cat's. "You are in the presence of the High Lady Suroth, who leads Those Who Come Before, and succors The Return," she intoned in that same slurring accent.

Without warning, the hook-nosed officer seized the back of Morgase's neck and bore her down prostrate beside him. Stunned, not least because the breath was knocked out of her, she saw him kiss the floor.

"Release her, Elbar," another woman drawled angrily. "The Queen of Andor is not to be treated so."

The man, Elbar, rose as far as his knees, head bent. “I abase myself, High Lady. I beg forgiveness.” His voice was as cold and flat as that accent allowed.

“I have small forgiveness for this, Elbar.” Morgase looked up. Suroth took her aback. The sides of her head were shaved, leaving a glossy black crest across the top of her head and a mane that flowed down her back. “Perhaps when you are punished. Report yourself now. Leave me! Go!” A sweeping gesture flashed fingernails at least an inch long, the first two on each hand a glistening blue.

Elbar bowed on his knees, then rose smoothly, backing away through the door. For the first time Morgase realized none of the other soldiers had followed them in. She realized something else, as well. He gave her one final glance before he vanished, and instead of flickering resentment for the one who had caused his punishment, he . . . considered. There would be no punishment; the entire exchange had been arranged beforehand.

Suroth swept toward Morgase, carefully holding her pale blue robe to keep her skirts exposed, snow-white, with hundreds of tiny pleats. Embroidered vines and lush red and yellow flowers spread across the robe. For all her sweeping, Morgase noticed the woman did not reach her until she had regained her feet on her own.

“You are unharmed?” Suroth asked. “If you are harmed, I will double his punishment.”

Morgase brushed at her dress so she would not have to look at the false smile that never touched the woman’s eyes. She took the opportunity to look around the room. Four men and four women knelt against one wall, all young and more than good-looking, all wearing. . . . She jerked her eyes away. Those long white robes were very nearly transparent! At the far sides of the screens two more pairs of women knelt, one of each in the gray dress, one in the blue embroidered with lightning, bound by the silvery leash from wrist to neck. Morgase was not close enough to say for sure, but she had the sick-making certainty that the gray-clad women could channel. “I am quite all right, thank—” A huge reddish brown shape lay sprawled on the floor—a heap of tanned cowskins, perhaps. Then it heaved. “What is *that*?” She managed not to gape, but the question popped from her tongue before she could stop it.

“You admire my *lopar*?” Suroth swept away a good deal quicker than she had come. The enormous shape raised a great round head for her to stroke it under the chin with a knuckle. The creature put Morgase in mind of a bear, though it was easily half again as big as the largest bear she had ever heard tell of, and hairless to boot, with no muzzle to speak of and heavy ridges surrounding its eyes. “Almandaragal was given to me as a pup, for my first true-name day; he foiled the first attempt to kill me that same year, when he was only a quarter grown.” There was real affection in the woman’s voice. The . . . *lopar’s* . . . lips peeled back to reveal thick pointed teeth as she stroked; its forepaws flexed, claws sheathing and unsheathing from six long toes on each. And it began to purr, a bass rumble fit for a hundred cats.

“Remarkable,” Morgase said faintly. True-name day? How many attempts had there been to kill this woman that she could speak of “the first” so casually?

The *lopar* whined briefly when Suroth left it, but quickly settled with its head on its paws. Disconcertingly, its eyes did not follow her, but settled mainly on Morgase, now and then flicking toward the door or the narrow, arrow-slit windows.

“Of course, however loyal a *lopar*, it cannot match *damane*.” No affection touched Suroth’s voice now. “Pura and Jinjin could slay a hundred assassins before Almandaragal blinked his eye.” At the mention of each name, one of the blue-clad women twitched her silvery leash, and the woman at the other end doubled herself as the one in the corridor had. “We have many more *damane* since returning than before. This is a rich hunting ground for *marath’damane*. Pura,” she added casually, “was once a . . . woman of the White Tower.”

Morgase’s knees wobbled. Aes Sedai? She studied the bent back of the woman called Pura, refusing to believe. No Aes Sedai could be made to cringe like that. But any woman who could channel, not just an Aes Sedai, should be able to take that leash and strangle her tormentor. Anyone at all should be able to. No, this Pura could not be. Morgase wondered if she dared ask for a chair. “That is very . . . interesting.” At least her voice was steady. “But I do not think you asked me here to speak of Aes Sedai.” Of course, she had not been asked. Suroth stared at her, not a muscle moving except that the long-nailed fingers of her left hand twitched.

“Thera!” the sharp-faced woman with half her head shaved barked suddenly. “Kaf for the High Lady and her guest!”

One of the women in diaphanous robes, the eldest but still young, leaped gracefully to her feet. Her rosebud mouth had a petulant look to it, but she darted behind the tall screen painted with the eagle, and in moments reappeared bearing a silver tray with two small white cups. Kneeling sinuously before Suroth, she bowed her dark head as she raised the tray, so her offering stood higher than she. Morgase shook her head; any servant in Andor asked to do that—or wear that robe!—would have stormed off in a dudgeon.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?"

Suroth raised one of the cups on her fingertips, inhaling the steam rising from it. Her nod was entirely too much permission for Morgase's liking, but she took a cup anyway. One sip, and she stared into her drink in amazement. Blacker than any tea, the liquid was also more bitter. No amount of honey would make it drinkable. Suroth put her own cup to her lips and sighed with enjoyment.

"There are many things we must speak of, Morgase, yet I will be brief at this first talk. We Seanchan return to reclaim what was stolen from the heirs of the High King, Artur Paendrag Tanreall." Pleasure over the kaf became a different pleasure in her voice, both expectation and certainty, and she watched Morgase's face closely. Morgase could not take her eyes away. "What was ours, will be ours again. In truth, it always has been; a thief gains no ownership. I have begun the recovery in Tarabon. Many nobles of that land have already sworn to obey, await and serve; it will not be long before all have. Their king—I cannot recall his name—died opposing me. Had he lived, in rebellion against the Crystal Throne and not even of the Blood, he would have been impaled. His family could not be found to be made property, but there is a new King and a new Panarch who have sworn their fealty to the Empress, may she live forever, and the Crystal Throne. The bandits will be eradicated; no longer will there be strife or hunger in Tarabon, but the people will shelter beneath the wings of the Empress. Now I begin in this Amadicia. Soon all will kneel to the Empress, may she live forever, the direct descendant of the great Artur Hawk-wing."

If the serving woman had not gone with the tray, Morgase would have put her cup back. No tremor disturbed the dark surface of the kaf, but much of what the woman spouted was meaningless to her. Empress? Sean-chan? There had been wild rumors a year or more ago about Artur Hawk-wing's armies come back from across the Aryth Ocean, but only the most credulous could have believed, and she doubted that the worst gossipmonger in the markets still told the tale. Could it have been truth? In any case, what she did understand was more than enough.

“All honor the name of Artur Hawkwing, Suroth. . . .” The sharp-faced woman opened her mouth angrily, subsiding at the move of a blue-nailed finger by the High Lady. “. . . but his time is long past. Every nation here has an ancient lineage. No land will surrender to you or your Empress. If you have taken some part of Tarabon . . .” Suroth’s indrawn breath hissed, and her eyes glittered, “. . . remember that it is a troubled land, divided against itself. Amadicia will not fall easily, and many nations will ride to her aid when they learn of you.” *Could* it be true? “However many you are, you will find no easy game for your spit. We have faced great threats before, and overcome them. I advise you to make peace before you are crushed.” Morgase remembered *saidar* raging in the night, and avoided looking at the—*damane*, had she called them? By strong effort, she managed not to wet her lips.

Suroth smiled that mask’s smile again, eyes shining like polished stones. “All must make choices. Some will choose to obey, await and serve, and will rule their lands in the name of the Empress, may she live forever.”

She took a hand from her cup to gesture, a slight movement of long fingernails, and the sharp-faced woman barked, “Thera! Poses of the Swan!”

For some reason, Suroth’s mouth tightened. “Not the Swan, Alwhin, you blind fool!” she hissed, half under her breath, though her accent made understanding difficult. The frozen smile returned in an instant.

The serving woman rose from her place at the wall again, running out to the middle of the floor in an odd way, on tiptoe, with her arms swept back. Slowly, atop the flaring golden sun, symbol of the Children of the Light, she began a sort of stylized dance. Her arms unfolded to the sides like wings, then folded back. Twisting, she slid her left foot out, lowering herself over the bending knee, both arms outstretched as if appealing, until arms and body and right leg made a straight, slanted line. Her sheer white robe made the whole thing scandalous. Morgase felt her cheeks growing hot as the dance, if it could be called that, continued.

“Thera is new and not well trained yet,” Suroth murmured. “The Poses are most often done with ten or twenty *da’covale* together, men and women chosen for the clean beauty of their lines, but sometimes it is pleasant to view only one. It is very pleasant to own beautiful things, is it not?”

Morgase frowned. How could anyone own a person? Suroth had spoken earlier about “making someone property.” She knew the Old Tongue, and the word *da’covale* was not familiar to her, but thinking it out she came up with “Person Who Is Owned.” It was disgusting. Horrendous! “Incredible,” she said dryly. “Perhaps I should leave you to enjoy the . . . dance.”

“In one moment,” Suroth said, smiling at the posturing Thera. Morgase avoided looking. “All have choices to make, as I said. The old King of Tarabon chose to rebel, and died. The old Panarch was captured, yet refused the Oath. Each of us has a place where we belong, unless raised by the Empress, but those who reject their proper place can also be cast down, even to the depths. Thera has a certain grace. Strangely, Alwhin shows great promise in teaching, so I expect that before many years, Thera will learn the skill in the Poses to go with her grace.” That smile swiveled toward Morgase, that glittering gaze.

A very significant gaze, but why? Something to do with the dancer? Her name, mentioned so often, as if to highlight it. But what . . . ? Morgase’s head whipped around, and she stared at the woman, up on her toes and slowly pivoting in one spot with her hands flat together and arms stretched up as high as they would go. “I don’t believe it,” she gasped. “I won’t!”

“Thera,” Suroth said, “what was your name before you became my property? What title did you hold?”

Thera froze in her up-stretched posture, quivering, shooting a look half panic, half terror at sharp-faced Alwhin, a look of pure terror at Suroth. “Thera was called Amathera, if it pleases the High Lady,” she said breathily. “Thera was the Panarch of Tarabon, if it pleases the High Lady.”

The cup dropped from Morgase’s hand, smashing to bits on the floor, spraying the black kaf. It had to be a lie. She had never met Amathera, but she had heard a description, once. No. Many women of the right age could have large dark eyes and a petulant mouth. Pura had never been Aes Sedai, and this woman. . . . “Pose!” Alwhin snapped, and Thera flowed on without so much as one more glance at Suroth or anyone. Whoever she was, clearly the foremost thought in her head now was an urgent desire not to make a mistake. Morgase concentrated on not vomiting.

Suroth stepped very close, face cold as midwinter. “All confront choices,” she said quietly. Her voice could have marked steel. “Some of my prisoners say that you spent time in the White Tower. By law, no *marath’damane* may escape the leash, but I pledge to you that you, who named me to my eyes and called lie on my word, you will not face *that* fate.” The emphasis made quite clear that her pledge covered no other possible fate. The smile that never reached her eyes returned. “I hope that you will choose to swear the oath, Morgase, and rule Andor in the name of the Empress, may she live forever.” For the first time, Morgase was absolutely certain the woman lied. “I will speak to you again tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, if I have time.”

Turning away, Suroth glided past the lone dancer to the high-backed chair. As she sat, spreading her robe gracefully, Alwhin barked again. She did not seem to have any other voice. “All! Poses of the Swan!” The young men and women kneeling against the wall leaped forward to join Thera, joining her movements exactly in a line before Suroth’s chair. Only the *lopar’s* gaze still acknowledged Morgase’s existence. She did not believe she had ever been dismissed so thoroughly in her life. Gathering her dignity with her skirts, she left.

She did not go far alone of course. Those red-and-black armored soldiers stood in the anteroom like statues with red-and-black tasseled spears, faces impassive in their lacquered helmets, hard eyes seeming to stare from behind the mandibles of monstrous insects. One, not much taller than she, fell in at her shoulder without a word and escorted her back to her rooms, where two Taraboners with swords flanked her door, these in steel breast-plates, but still painted in horizontal stripes. They bowed low, hands on their knees, and she thought it was for her until her escort spoke for the first time.

“Honor met,” he said in a harsh, dry voice, and the Taraboners straightened, never glancing at her until he said, “Watch her well. She has not given the Oath.” Dark eyes flickered toward her above steel veils, but their short bows of assent were for the Seanchan.

She tried not to hurry inside, but once the door was closed behind her, she leaned against it attempting to settle her whirling thoughts. Seanchan and *damane*, Empresses and oaths and people owned. Lini and Breane stood in the middle of the room looking at her.

"What did you learn?" Lini asked patiently, in much the tone in which she had questioned the child Morgase about a book read.

"Nightmares and madness," Morgase sighed. Suddenly she stood up straight, looking around the room anxiously. "Where is—? Where are the men?"

Breane answered the unasked question in a dryly mocking tone. "Tallanvor went to see what he could find out." Her fists planted themselves on her hips, and her face became deadly serious. "Lamgwin went with him, and Master Gill. What did *you* find out? Who are these . . . *Seanchan*?" She said the name awkwardly, frowning around it. "We heard that much for ourselves." She affected not to notice Lini's biting stare. "What are we to do now, Morgase?"

Morgase brushed between the women, crossing to the nearest window. Not as narrow as those in the audience chamber, it looked down twenty feet or more to the stone paving of the courtyard. A dispirited column of bareheaded, disheveled men, some with blood-stained bandages, shambled across the courtyard under the watchful gaze of Taraboners carrying spears. Several Seanchan stood atop a nearby tower, peering into the distance between the crenellations. One wore a helmet decorated with three slender plumes. A woman appeared in a window across the court, the lightning-embroidered red panel plain on her breast, frowning down at the Whitecloak prisoners. Those stumbling men looked stunned, unable to believe what had happened.

What were they to do? A decision Morgase dreaded. It seemed that she had not made so much as a decision on fruit for breakfast in months without it leading to disaster. A choice, Suroth had said. Aid these Seanchan in taking Andor, or. . . . One last service she could do for Andor. The tail end of the column appeared, followed by more Taraboners, who were joined by their countrymen they passed. A twenty-foot fall, and Suroth lost her lever. Maybe it was the coward's way out, but she had already proved herself that. Still, the Queen of Andor should not die so.

Under her breath, she spoke the irrevocable words that had been used only twice before in the thousand-year history of Andor. "Under the Light, I relinquish the High Seat of House Trakand to Elayne Trakand. Under the Light, I renounce the Rose Crown and abdicate the Lion Throne to Elayne, High Seat of House Trakand. Under the Light, I submit myself to the will of

Elayne of Andor, her obedient subject.” None of that made Elayne Queen, true, but it cleared the way.

“What are you smiling at?” Lini asked.

Morgase turned slowly. “I was thinking of Elayne.” She did not think her old nurse had been close enough to hear what no one really needed to.

Lini’s eyes widened, though, and her breath caught. “You come away from there now!” she snapped, and suiting actions to words, seized her arm and physically pulled her from the window.

“Lini, you forget yourself! You stopped being my nurse a long—!” Morgase drew a deep breath and softened her tone. Meeting those frightened eyes was not easy; nothing frightened Lini. “What I do is for the best, believe me,” she told her gently. “There’s no other way—”

“No other way?” Breane broke in angrily, gripping her skirts till her hands shook. Clearly she would rather have had them wrapped around Morgase’s throat. “What fool nonsense are you spouting now? What if these Seanchan think we killed you?” Morgase compressed her lips; had she become so transparent?

“Shut up, woman!” Lini never got angry, either, or raised her voice, but she did both now, her withered cheeks red. She raised a bony hand. “You hold your mouth, or I’ll slap you sillier than you are!”

“Slap her if you want to slap someone!” Breane shouted back so fiercely that spittle flew. “*Queen* Morgase! She will send you and me and my Lamgwin to the gallows, and her precious Tallanvor too, because she lacks the belly of a *mouse*!”

The door opened to admit Tallanvor and put an abrupt end to it. No one was about to shout in front of him. Lini pretended to examine Morgase’s sleeve as though it might need mending as Master Gill and Lamgwin followed Tallanvor in. Breane put on a bright smile and smoothed her skirts. The men noticed nothing, of course.

Morgase noticed a great deal. For one thing, Tallanvor had a sword belted on, and so did Master Gill, and even Lamgwin, though his was a short-sword. She had always had the feeling he was more comfortable with his fists than any other weapons. Before she could ask how, the skinny little man who brought up the rear closed the door carefully behind him.

“Majesty,” Sebban Balwer said, “forgive the intrusion.” Even his bow and his smile seemed dry and precise, but as his eyes flicked from her to the other women, Morgase decided that whether the other men noticed the atmosphere in the room or not, Pedron Niall's onetime secretary did.

"I am surprised to see you, Master Balwer," she said. "I heard there was some unpleasantness with Eamon Valda." What she had heard was that Valda had said if he laid eyes on Balwer, he would kick him over one of the Fortress walls. Balwer's smile tightened; he knew what Valda had said.

"He has a plan to take us all out of here," Tallanvor broke in. "Today. Now." He gave her a look not that of subject to queen. "We are accepting his offer."

"How?" she said slowly, forcing her legs to remain straight. What help could this prissy little stick of a man offer? Escape. She wanted very much to sit down, but she was not going to, not with Tallanvor looking at her in that fashion. Of course, she was not his Queen, now, but he did not know that. Another question occurred. "Why? Master Balwer, I'll not shun any true offer of help, but why would you risk yourself? These Seanchan will make you regret it, should they find out."

"I laid my plans before they came," he said carefully. "It seemed . . . imprudent . . . to leave the Queen of Andor in Valda's hands. Consider it my way of repaying him. I know I am not much to look at, Majesty . . ." He hid a self-deprecating cough behind his hand. ". . . but the plan will work. These Seanchan actually make it easier; I would not have been ready for days yet without them. For a newly conquered city, they allow remarkable freedom to anyone willing to say their Oath. Not an hour after sunrise, I obtained a pass allowing myself and up to ten more who have taken the Oath to depart Amador. They believe I intend to buy wine, and wagons to carry it, in the east."

"It must be a trap." The words tasted bitter. Better the window than falling into some snare. "They won't allow you to carry word of them ahead of their army."

Balwer's head tilted to one side, and he began dry-washing his hands, then stopped abruptly. "In truth, Majesty, I considered that. The officer who gave me the pass said it did not matter. His exact words: 'Tell who you will what you have seen, and let them know they cannot stand against us. Your lands will know soon enough anyway.' I have seen several merchants take the Oath this morning and depart with their wagons."

Tallanvor moved close to her. Too close. She could almost feel his breath. She could feel his eyes. "We are accepting his offer," he said for her ears alone. “If I must bind and gag you, I think he can find a way even so. He seems a very resourceful little fellow.”

She met him stare for stare. The window or . . . a chance. If Tallanvor had only held his tongue it would have been much easier to say, “I accept with gratitude, Master Balwer,” but she said it. She stepped away as if to see Balwer without having to crane past Tallanvor. It was always disturbing being so near to him. He was too young. “What is to do first? I doubt those guards at the door will accept your pass for us.”

Balwer bowed his head as if acknowledging her foresight. “I fear they must meet with accidents, Majesty.” Tallanvor eased his dagger in its scabbard, and Lamgwin flexed his hands like the *lopar* flexing its claws.

She did not believe it could be so easy, even after they had packed up what they could carry and the two Taraboners had been stuffed beneath her bed. At the main gates, holding her linen dust-cloak close awkwardly because of the bundle on her back, she bowed, hands on her knees the way Balwer had shown her, while he told the guards that they had all sworn to obey, await and serve. She thought of how to make sure she was not taken alive. It was not until they were actually riding out of Amador, past the last guards, on the horses Balwer had had waiting, that she began to believe. Of course, Balwer probably expected some fine reward for rescuing the Queen of Andor. She had not told anyone that that was done with beyond going back; she knew she had spoken the words, and no one else needed to know. Regretting them was useless. Now she would see what sort of life she could find without a throne. A life far from a man who was much too young and much too disturbing.

“Why is your smile so sad?” Lini asked, reining her slab-sided brown mare closer. The animal looked motheaten. Morgase’s bay was no better; none of the horses were. The Seanchan might have been willing to let Balwer go with his pass, but not with decent mounts.

“There is a long road ahead, yet,” Morgase told her, and thumped her mare into some semblance of a trot after Tallanvor.

* * *

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CHAPTER

27

To Be Alone

Slipping the haft of his axe through the loop on his belt opposite his quiver, Perrin took his unstrung longbow from the corner, slung his saddlebags over his shoulder and left the rooms he had shared with Faile without a backward look. They had been happy there—most of the time. He did not think he would ever be back. Sometimes he wondered whether being happy somewhere with Faile meant he would never return there. He hoped not.

The servants he saw in the palace corridors wore unrelieved black livery; perhaps Rand had ordered it, and perhaps the servants themselves had simply adopted it. They had been uneasy without livery, as though they did not know where they belonged, and black seemed safe as Rand’s color because of the Asha’man. Those who saw Perrin scampered away as fast as they could, not waiting for any bows or curtsies. Fear scent drifted behind them.

For once his yellow eyes had nothing to do with anyone being afraid. It might not be safe to loiter near a man at whom the Dragon Reborn had unleashed his rage so publicly this very morning. Perrin eased the shoulder under his saddlebags. A long while had passed since anyone had been able to pick him up and throw him. Of course, no one had ever used the Power to try, before. One moment in particular stuck with him.

He pushed himself up holding his shoulder, sliding his back up the square column that had stopped his flight. He thought a few ribs might have cracked. Around the Grand Hall of the Sun, a scattering of nobles who had come to appeal one thing or another to Rand tried to look anywhere else, tried to pretend they were anywhere else. Only Dobraine watched, shaking his gray head, as Rand stalked across the throne room. “I will deal with the Aes Sedai as I choose!” Rand shouted. “Do you hear me, Perrin? As I *choose!”*

“You’ve just handed them over to the Wise Ones,” he growled back, shoving away from the column. “You don’t know whether they’re sleeping on silk or had their throats cut! You are not the Creator!”

With a snarl of rage, Rand threw his head back. “I am the Dragon Reborn!” he cried. “I don’t care how they’re treated! They deserve a dungeon!” Perrin’s hackles stirred as Rand’s eyes lowered from the vaulted ceiling. Blue ice would have been warm and soft beside them, the more so because they stared from a face twisted with pain. “Get out of my sight, Perrin. Do you hear me? Get out of Cairhien! Today! Now! I never want to see you again!” Pivoting on his heel, he strode away with nobles all but throwing themselves to the floor as he passed.

Perrin thumbed a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. For one moment there, he had been sure Rand was going to kill him.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the thought, he rounded a corner and nearly ran into Loial. With a large bundle strapped to his back and a scrip big enough to hold a sheep slung on his shoulder, the Ogier was using his long-handled axe as a walking staff. The capacious pockets of his coat bulged with the shapes of books.

Loial’s tufted ears perked up at the sight of him, then suddenly drooped. His whole face drooped, eyebrows hanging on his cheeks. “I heard, Perrin,” he boomed sadly. “Rand should not have done that. Quick words make long troubles. I know he’ll reconsider. Tomorrow, maybe.”

“It’s all right,” Perrin told him. “Cairhien is too . . . polished . . . for me, anyway. I’m a blacksmith, not a courtier. By tomorrow, I’ll be a long way gone.”

“You and Faile could come with me. Karldin and I are going to visit the *stedding*, Perrin. All of them, about the Waygates.” A narrow-faced, pale-haired young fellow standing behind Loial stopped frowning at Perrin to frown at the Ogier. He had a scrip and a bundle, too, and a sword on his hip. Despite the blue coat, Perrin recognized one of the Asha’man. Karldin did not look pleased to recognize Perrin; besides, his smell was cold and angry. Loial peered down the hallway behind Perrin. “Where is Faile?”

“She’s . . . meeting me in the stables. We had words.” That was simple truth; Faile seemed to *like* shouting, sometimes. He lowered his voice. “Loial, I wouldn’t talk about that where anyone could hear. The Waygates, I mean.”

Loial snorted hard enough to make a bull jump, but he did drop his tone. “I don’t see anyone but us,” he rumbled. No one more than two or three paces beyond Karldin could have heard clearly. His ears . . . lashed was the only word . . . and laid back angrily. “Everyone’s afraid to be seen near you. After all you’ve done for Rand.”

Karldin tugged at Loial’s sleeve. “We have to go,” he said, glaring at Perrin. Anyone the Dragon Reborn shouted at was outside the gates so far as he was concerned. Perrin wondered whether he was holding the Power right then.

“Yes, yes,” Loial murmured, waving a ham-sized hand, but he leaned on his axe, frowning pensively. “I don’t like this, Perrin. Rand chases you away. He sends me off. How I’m to finish my book. . . .” His ears twitched, and he coughed. “Well, that’s neither here nor there. But you, me, and the Light only knows where Mat is. He’ll send Min away next. He hid from her, this morning. He sent me out to tell her he wasn’t there. I think she knew I was lying. He’ll be alone, then, Perrin. ‘It’s terrible to be alone.’ That’s what he said to me. He is planning to send all of his friends away.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” Perrin said. Loial blinked at that echo of Moiraine. Perrin had been thinking of her a lot recently; she had been a restraining influence on Rand. “Farewell, Loial. Keep safe, and don’t trust anyone you don’t have to.” He did not quite look at Karldin.

“You don’t mean that, Perrin.” Loial sounded shocked; he seemed to trust everyone. “You cannot. Come with me, you and Faile.”

“We’ll meet again, one day,” Perrin told him gently, and hurried past before he had to say more. He did not like lying, especially not to a friend.

In the north stable things were much the same as inside the palace. Grooms saw him walk in, and dropped dung forks and curry combs, crowding out through small doors at the back. Rustles in the loft high above that might have escaped another’s ears told of folk hiding there; he could hear anxious, fearful breaths. He brought Stepper out of a green-streaked marble stall, slipped on his bridle and tied the dun stallion to a gilded hitching ring. He went to fetch blanket and saddle from a marble tack room where half the saddles were mounted with silver or gold. The stable fit very well in a palace, with tall square marble columns and a marble floor, even under the straw in the stalls. He rode out glad to see the back of grandeur.

North of the city he followed the road he had come down so desperately with Rand just a few days before, rode until folds in the land hid Cairhien. Then he turned off to the east, where a fair patch of forest remained, running down one tall hill and over the next, taller one. Just inside the trees, Faile booted Swallow to meet him, Aram heeling her like a hound on his own horse. Aram's face brightened at the sight of him, though that was not saying much; he merely divided his faithful hound looks between him and Faile.

"Husband," she said. Not too coolly, but razor-sharp anger and spiky jealousy still threaded through the clean scent of her and her herbal soap. She was garbed for travel, with a thin dust-cloak hanging down her back and red gloves that matched the boots peeking out beneath the dark narrow riding skirts she favored. No fewer than four sheathed daggers were tucked behind her belt.

Movement behind her turned into Bain and Chiad. And Sulin, with a dozen more Maidens. Perrin's eyebrows rose. He wondered what Gaul thought of that; the Aiel man had said he was looking forward to getting Bain and Chiad alone. Even more surprising were Faile's other companions.

"What are they doing here?" He nodded toward a small cluster who held their horses back. He recognized Selande and Camaille and the tall Tairen woman, all still in men's clothes and wearing swords. The blocky fellow in a fat-sleeved coat who had kept his beard oiled and trimmed to a point despite wearing his hair tied back with a ribbon also looked familiar. The other two men, both Cairhienin, he did not know, but he could guess, by their youth and the ribbon tying their hair if nothing else, that they were part of Selande's "society."

"I took Selande and a few of her friends into my service." Faile spoke lightly, but suddenly she gave off foggy waves of caution. "They would have gotten themselves into trouble in the city, sooner or later. They need someone to give them direction. Think of them as charity. I won't let them get under your feet."

Perrin sighed and scratched his beard. A wise man did not tell his wife to her face that she was hiding things. Especially when that wife was Faile; she was going to be as formidable as her mother. If she was not already. Under his feet? How many of these . . . puppies . . . had she taken on? "Is everything ready? Pretty soon some idiot back there will decide he can curry favor by bringing Rand my head. I'd like to be gone before that." Aram growled in his throat.

"No one is going to take your head, husband." Faile showed white teeth, and went on in a whisper she knew he would catch. "Except perhaps me." In a normal voice, she said, "All is ready."

In a clear, fairly flat hollow beyond the trees, the Two Rivers men stood beside their horses, a column of twos that wound out of sight around the side of the hill. Perrin sighed again. The red wolfhead banner and the Red Eagle of Manetheren stirred slightly in a hot breeze at the head of the column. Maybe another dozen Maidens squatted on their heels near the banners; on the other side, Gaul wore as close to a sullen expression as Perrin had ever seen on an Aiel.

As he dismounted, two black-coated men came to him, saluting with fist pressed to heart. "Lord Perrin," Jur Grady said. "We've been here since last night. We are ready."

Grady's weathered farmer's face made Perrin almost comfortable with him, but Fager Neald was another matter. Maybe ten years younger than Grady, he might have been a farmer too for all Perrin knew, but he affected airs and graces, and wore his pitiful mustache waxed to a semblance of points. Where Grady was one of the Dedicated, he was a Soldier, without the silver sword pinned to his collar, but that did not hold him back from speaking. "Lord Perrin, is it really necessary to take those women with us? They'll be nothing but trouble, they will, the whole lot of them, and you know it well."

Some of the women he was talking about stood not far from the Two Rivers men, shawls looped over their arms. Edarra appeared the eldest of the six Wise Ones impassively watching the two women Neald had nodded to. In truth, that pair worried Perrin as well. Seonid Traighan, all coolness and reserve in green silk, had been haughtily trying to ignore the Aielwomen—most Cairhienin who were not pretending to be Aiel despised them—but when she saw Perrin, she shifted her bay's reins to the other hand and gave Masuri Sokawa a nudge in the ribs. Masuri started—Browns seemed to go off in daydreams fairly often—stared at the Green sister blankly, then directed her stare at Perrin. This one was more the sort she might have given some peculiar and perhaps dangerous animal, one she intended to be sure of before she was done. They had sworn to obey Rand al'Thor, but how would they do obeying Perrin Aybara? Giving orders to Aes Sedai seemed unnatural. But better than the other way around, at least.

“Everybody comes,” Perrin said. “Let’s be gone before we are seen.” Faile sniffed.

Grady and Neald saluted again and strode out to the middle of the treeless area. Perrin had no idea which of them did what was necessary, but suddenly the now-familiar silvery vertical flash in the air rotated into a gateway not quite tall enough to ride through. Trees showed beyond the opening, not that much different from those on the surrounding hills. Grady strode through immediately, but even so he was nearly knocked down by Sulin and a small horde of veiled Maidens. They seemed to have taken the honor of being first through a gateway for themselves, and were not about to let anyone usurp it.

Foreseeing a hundred problems he had not thought of, Perrin led Stepper through into a land not so hilly. There was no clearing, but it was not so thickly treed as the hollow back in Cairhien, either. The scattered trees were taller, but just as sere, even the pines. He did not recognize much else except for oak and leatherleaf. The air seemed a little hotter.

Faile followed him, but when he turned to the left, she took Swallow right. Aram’s head swung worriedly between them until Perrin nodded toward his wife. The onetime Tinker hauled his gelding after her, but quick as he was, he was not before Bain and Chiad, still veiled, and, for all Perrin’s orders that the Two Rivers men were to be next, Selande and a good two dozen young Cairhienin and Tairens poured out of the gateway drawing their horses along. Two dozen! Shaking his head, Perrin stopped beside Grady, who turned this way and that, studying the sparse woodland.

Gaul came stalking up as Dannil finally began leading the Two Rivers men out at a run, pulling their horses. Those bloody banners appeared right behind Dannil, going up as soon as they were clear. The man ought to shave those fool mustaches.

“Women are beyond any belief,” Gaul muttered.

Perrin opened his mouth to defend Faile before he realized it must be Bain and Chiad the man was glaring at. To cover, he said, “Do you have a wife, Grady?”

“Sora,” Grady answered absently, his attention still on the surrounding trees. Perrin would have wagered he held the Power now, for sure. Anyone could see a long way in this, compared to any woods back home, but someone could still sneak up on you. “She’s missing me,” Grady went on, almost to himself. “You learn to recognize that one right off. I wish I knew why her knee hurts, though.”

“Her knee hurts,” Perrin said flatly. “Right this minute, it hurts.”

Grady seemed to realize he was staring, and Gaul was too. He blinked, but went right back to his study. “Forgive me, Lord Perrin. I need to keep a watch.” For a long moment he said nothing, then began slowly, “It’s something a fellow named Canler worked out. The M’Hael doesn’t like us trying to figure out things on our own, but once it was done. . . .” His slight grimace said perhaps Taim had not been all that easy about it even then. “We think maybe it’s something like the bond between Warders and Aes Sedai. Maybe one in three of us is married; anyway, that’s how many wives stayed instead of running off when they learned what their husbands were. This way, when you’re apart from her, you know she’s all right, and she knows you are. A man likes to know his wife’s safe.”

“That he does,” Perrin said. What was Faile up to with those fools? She was mounted on Swallow now, and they were all standing close around, looking up at her. He would not put it past her to leap into this *ji’e’toh* nonsense herself.

Seonid and Masuri glided behind the last of the Two Rivers men with the three Warders they had between them, and the Wise Ones right behind them, which was no surprise. They were along to keep an eye on the Aes Sedai. Seonid gathered her reins as if to mount, but Edarra said something in a low voice, pointing to a fat lopsided oak, and the two Aes Sedai looked at her, heads swiveling as one, then exchanged glances and led their horses to the tree. Matters would go a deal smoother if that pair was always so meek—well, not meek exactly; Seonid’s neck was stiff as a rod.

After that came the remounts, a herd of spare horses tied ten to a lead, under the watchful eyes of folk from Dobraine’s estates who supposedly knew what they were about. Perrin automatically picked out Stayer, on a lead by himself; the woman taking care of him better know what she was doing. A great many high-wheeled supply carts came through, drivers tugging the horses and shouting as if they feared the gateway might close on them—a great many because carts could not carry as much as wagons, and carts because a wagon and team would not fit through the gateway. It seemed neither Neald nor Grady could make one as big as Rand could, or Dashiva.

When the last cart finally trundled out on a squealing axle, Perrin considered ordering the gateway closed right then, but Neald was the man holding the thing open, and him on the other side of it back in Cairhien. A moment later, it was too late.

Berelain strode through leading a mare as white as Swallow was black, and he offered up small thanks that her gray riding dress had a neck right to her chin. On the other hand, from the waist up, it fit as snugly as any Taraboner dress. Perrin groaned. With her came Nurelle and Bertain Gallenne, the Lord Captain of her Winged Guards, a gray-haired fellow who wore his red eyepatch as another man might a plume in his hat, and then the red-armored Winged Guards themselves, more than nine hundred of them. Nurelle and the rest who had been at Dumai's Wells wore a yellow cord tied high on the left arm.

Climbing onto her mare, Berelain rode off to one side with Gallenne while Nurelle formed the Winged Guards among the trees. There must have been fifty paces between her and Faile, and dozens of trees, but she placed herself where they could stare at each other. Stare with so little expression that Perrin's skin crawled. Putting Berelain at the rear, as far from Faile as he could manage, had seemed a good notion, but he was going to face this every bloody evening. Burn Rand!

Now Neald popped out of the gateway, stroking his ridiculous mustache and preening for anyone who might be watching as the opening vanished. No one was, and he climbed onto his horse with a disgruntled expression.

Mounting Stepper, Perrin rode to a slight rise. Not everyone could see him because of the trees, but it was enough they could hear. A stir ran through the assemblage as he reined in, people shifting for a better look.

"As far as anyone's eyes-and-ears back in Cairhien know," he said loudly, "I've been banished, the First of Mayene is on her way back home, and the rest of you have just disappeared like fog in the sun."

To his surprise, they laughed. A cry of "Perrin Golden-eyes" went up, and not just from the Two Rivers folk. He waited for it to quiet; that took a while. Faile neither laughed nor shouted, nor did Berelain. Each woman shook her head; neither believed he should tell as much as he intended to. Then they saw each other, and those shaking heads froze as if trapped in amber. They did not like agreeing. It was no surprise when their eyes swung to him with identical expressions. There was an old saying in the Two

Rivers, though how you said it and what you meant depended on circumstance and who you were. “It’s always a man’s fault.” One thing, he had learned, women were better at than anything else: teaching a man to sigh.

“Some of you may be wondering where we are, and why,” he went on when silence fell at last. A smaller ripple of laughter. “This is Ghealdan.” Murmurs of awe, and maybe disbelief, at having crossed fifteen hundred miles or more in a step. “The first thing we have to do is convince Queen Alliandre we aren’t here to invade.” Berelain was supposed to talk to Alliandre, and Faile was going to give him fits for it. “Then we’re going to find a fellow who calls himself the Prophet of the Lord Dragon.” That would not be much pleasure, either; Masema had been no joy before he tipped over the edge. “This Prophet has been causing some problems, but we’re going to let him know Rand al’Thor doesn’t want anybody frightened into following him, and we’ll take him and any of his people who want to come back to the Lord Dragon.” *And we’ll frighten the breeches off Masema to do it if need be*, he though wryly.

They cheered. They whooped and shouted that they would march this Prophet back to Cairhien for the Lord Dragon till Perrin hoped this spot was even farther from any village than it was supposed to be. Even the cart drivers and horse handlers joined in. More than that, he prayed that everything went smoothly, and quickly. The sooner he could put as much distance as possible between Berelain and himself and Faile, the better. No surprises, that was what he wanted once they rode south. It was about time his being *ta’veren* showed itself good for something.

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CHAPTER

28

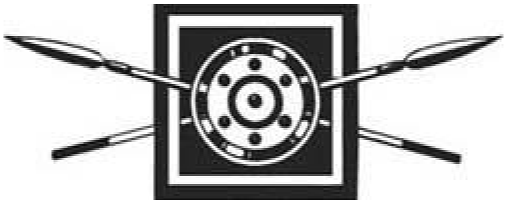

Bread and Cheese

Mat knew he was in trouble from the day he moved into the Tara-sin Palace. He could have refused. Just because the flaming dice started or stopped did not mean he had to *do* anything; usually when they stopped spinning, it was too late not to do something. The problem was, he wanted to know why. Before very many days, he wished he had taken his curiosity by the throat and throttled it.

After Nynaeve and Elayne left his room, once he could manage to reach his feet without his head falling off, he spread the word among his men. Nobody seemed to see the disadvantages. He just wanted to prepare them, but nobody listened.

“Very good, my Lord,” Nerim murmured, tugging Mat’s boot onto his foot. “My Lord will finally have decent rooms. Oh, very good.” For a moment, he seemed to lose his mournful expression. For just a moment. “I will brush the red silk coat for my Lord; my Lord has stained the blue rather badly with wine.” Mat waited impatiently, put on the coat, and headed down the hall.

“Aes Sedai?” Nalesean muttered as his head popped out at the top of a clean shirt. His round-bellied manservant, Lopin, was hovering behind him. “Burn my soul, I don’t much like Aes Sedai, but. . . . The Tarasin Palace, Mat.” Mat winced; bad enough the man could drink a barrel of brandy with no effect the next morning, but did he have to grin so? “Ah, Mat, now we can forget dice, and play cards with our own kind.” He meant nobles, the only ones who could afford to play except for well-to-do merchants who would not remain well-to-do long if they began betting for the stakes nobles did. Nalesean rubbed his hands briskly while Lopin tried to settle his laces; even his beard seemed eager. “Silk sheets,” he murmured. Whoever heard of silk *sheets*? Those old memories nudged, but Mat refused to listen.

“Full of nobles,” Vanin growled downstairs, pursing his lips to spit. His glance searching for Mistress Anan was automatic now; he decided instead to swallow from the mug of rough wine that was his breakfast. “Be good to see the Lady Elayne again, though,” he mused. His free hand rose as if to knuckle his forehead; he did not seem aware of the gesture. Mat groaned. That woman had ruined a good man. “You want me to look in on Carridin again?” Vanin went on as if the rest was unimportant. “His street’s so full of beggars, it’s hard to see anything, but he has an awful lot of folk come to call.” Mat told him that would be fine. No wonder Vanin did not care whether the palace was full of nobles and Aes Sedai; he would spend the day sweating in the sun and jostled by the crowds. Much more comfortable.

There was no point trying to warn Harnan and the rest of the Redarms, all shoveling down white porridge and tiny black sausages while they nudged one another in the ribs and laughed about the serving women in the palace, who, they had heard, were all chosen for their beauty and remarkably free with their favors. A true fact, they kept assuring themselves.

Things did not get any better when he went into the kitchens searching for Mistress Anan to settle the bill. Caira was there, but with all her bad temper of the night before doubled; she stuck out her lower lip, glowering at him, and stalked out the door to the stableyard rubbing the back of her skirt. Maybe she had gotten herself into some misery or other, but how she could blame Mat Cauthon was beyond him.

Mistress Anan was out, it seemed—she was always organizing soup kitchens for refugees or leaping into some other good work—but Enid was waving a long wooden spoon at her scurrying helpers and ready to take his coin in her stout hand. “You squeeze too many melons, my young Lord, and you shouldn’t be surprised when a rotten one breaks in your hand,” she said darkly for some reason. “Or two,” she added after a moment, nodding. She leaned close, tilting up her sweating round face with an intent stare. “You’ll only make trouble for yourself if you say a word. You won’t.” That did not sound like a question.

“Not a word,” Mat said. What in the Light was she talking about? It seemed the right response, though, because she nodded and waddled away waving that spoon twice as vigorously as before. For a moment, he had thought she meant to thump him with it. The pure truth was, women all had a violent streak, not just some of them.

One thing and another, it was a relief when Nerim and Lopin got into a shouting match over whose master's baggage would be carried over first. Smoothing their feathers required a good half an hour from him and Nalesean both. A manservant with his dander ruffled could make your life miserable. Then he had to settle which of the Redarms were to have the honor of lugging the chest of gold across and which were to take the horses. Anyway, it was that much longer outside the bloody Tarasin Palace.

Once he was ensconced in his new rooms, though, he almost forgot troubles at first. He had a large sitting room and a small, what they called a sulking room hereabouts, and an immense bedchamber with the biggest bed he had ever seen, the massive bedposts carved with entwined flowers of all things, and painted red. Most of the furniture was bright red or bright blue, where it was not layered with gilt. A small door near the bed led to a cramped room for Nerim, which the fellow seemed to think was excellent despite a narrow bed and no window. Mat's rooms all had tall arched windows letting onto white wrought-iron balconies that overlooked the Mol Hara. The stand-lamps were gilded, and so were the mirror frames; there were two mirrors in the sulking room, three in the sitting room, and *four* in the bedchamber. The clock—a clock!—on the marble mantel above the fireplace in the sitting room sparkled with gilt, as well. The washbasin and pitcher were red Sea Folk porcelain. He was almost disappointed to discover that the chamber pot under the bed was only plain white pottery. There was even a shelf in the large sitting room with a full dozen books. Not that he read much.

Even given the jarring colors of walls and ceilings and floor tiles, the rooms shouted rich. Any other time, he would have danced a jig. Any time when he was not aware that a woman with chambers right down the hall wanted to stick him in hot water and put a bellows to the fire. If Teslyn or Merilille or one of that lot did not manage it first despite his medallion. Why *had* the dice in his head stopped tumbling as soon as Elayne mentioned these bloody rooms? Curiosity. He had heard a saying on several women's lips back home, usually when he had done something that looked fun at the time. "Men teach cats curiosity, but cats keep sense for themselves."

"I'm no bloody cat," he muttered, stalking out of the bedchamber into the sitting room. He just had to know; that was all.

"Of course you're not a cat," Tylin said. "You're a succulent little duckling, is what you are."

Mat gave a start and stared. Duckling? And a *little* duckling, at that! The woman stood well short of his shoulder. Indignation or no indignation, he managed an elegant bow anyway. She was the Queen; he had to remember that. "Majesty, thank you for these wonderful apartments. I'd love to talk with you, but I have to go out and—"

Smiling, she advanced across the red-and-green floor tiles, layered blue and white silk petticoats swishing, large dark eyes fixed on him. He had no desire at all to look at the marriage knife nestled in her generous cleavage. Or the larger, gem-studded dagger thrust behind an equally gem-studded belt. He backed away.

"Majesty, I have an important—"

She started humming. He recognized the tune; he had hummed it to a few girls lately. He was wise enough not to try actually singing with his voice, and besides, the words they used in Ebou Dar would have singed his ears. Around here, they called it "I Will Steal Your Breath with Kisses."

Laughing nervously, he tried to put a lapis-inlaid table between them, but she somehow got around it first without seeming to increase her speed. "Majesty, I—"

She laid a hand flat on his chest, back-heeled him into a high-backed chair, and plumped herself down on his lap. Between her and the chair arms, he was trapped. Oh, he could have picked her up and set her on her feet quite easily. Except that she did have that bloody big dagger in her belt, and he doubted his manhandling her would be as acceptable to her as her manhandling him seemed to be. This was Ebou Dar, after all, where a woman killing a man was justified until proven otherwise. He could have picked her up easily, except. . . .

He had seen fishmongers in the city selling peculiar creatures called squid and octopus—Ebou Dari actually ate the things!—but they had nothing on Tylin. The woman possessed ten hands. He thrashed about, vainly trying to fend her off, and she laughed softly. Between kisses, he breathlessly protested that someone might walk in, and she just chuckled. He babbled his respect for her crown, and she chortled. He claimed betrothal to a girl back home who held his heart in her hands. She really laughed at that.

"What she does not know cannot harm her," she murmured, her twenty hands not slowing for an instant.

Someone knocked at the door.

Prying his mouth free, he shouted, "Who is it?" Well, it was a shout. A high-pitched shout. He was out of breath, after all.

Tylin was off his lap and three paces away so fast it seemed she was just here then there. The woman had the nerve to give him a reproachful look! And then she made a kiss at him.

That barely left her lips before the door opened, and Thom stuck his head in. "Mat? I wasn't sure that was you. Oh! Majesty." For a scrawny old gleeman with pretensions, Thom could flourish a bow with the best in spite of his limp. Juilin could not, but he snatched off his ridiculous red hat and did what he could. "Forgive us. We won't disturb—" Thom began, but Mat broke in hurriedly.

"Come in, Thom!" Snatching his coat back all the way on, he started to stand, then realized that somehow the bloody woman had untied the waist of his *breeches* without him noticing. These two might miss that his shirt was undone to his belly, but they would not miss his breeches falling off. Tylin's blue dress was not mussed at all! "Juilin, come in!"

"I am glad you find the rooms acceptable, Master Cauthon," Tylin said, dignity incarnate. Except for her eyes, anyway, when she stood so Thom and Juilin could not see them. Her eyes laced innocuous words with added meaning. "I look forward to having your company with pleasure; I shall find it interesting, having a *ta'veren* where I can reach out and touch him at will. But I must leave you to your friends, now. No, do not stand; please." That with just the hint of a mocking smile.

"Well, boy," Thom said, knuckling his mustaches when she was gone, "there's luck for you, being welcomed with open arms by the Queen herself." Juilin became very interested in his cap.

Mat eyed them warily, mentally daring them to say a word more—just one word!—but once he asked after Nynaeve and Elayne, he quit worrying what they suspected. The women were not back. He almost leaped up, breeches or no. They were trying to wiggle out of their agreement already; he had to explain what he meant in between their outbursts of incredulity, in between expressing his opinions of Nynaeve bloody al'Meara and Elayne bloody Daughter-Heir. Not much chance they would have gone off to the Rahad without him, but he would not put it past them to try their hand spying on Carridin. Elayne would demand a confession and expect the man to break down; Nynaeve would try to beat one out of him.

“I doubt they are bothering Carridin,” Juilin said, scratching behind his ear. “I believe Aviendha and Birgitte are taking a look at him, from what I heard. We didn’t see them go. I do not think you need to worry about him knowing what he’s seeing even if he walks right by them.” Thom, pouring himself a golden goblet of the wine punch that Mat had found waiting, took up the explanation.

Mat put a hand over his eyes. Disguises made with the Power; no wonder they had slipped away like snakes whenever they wanted. Those women were going to make trouble. That was what women did best. It hardly surprised him to learn that Thom and Juilin knew less about this Bowl of the Winds than he did.

After they left to ready themselves for a trip to the Rahad, he had time to set his clothes to rights before Nynaeve and Elayne came back. He had time to check on Olver, in his room one floor down. The boy’s skinny frame had fleshed out somewhat, with Enid and the rest of the cooks at The Wandering Woman stuffing him, but he would always be short even for a Cairhienin, and if his ears shrank to half their size and his mouth to half its width, his nose would still stop him well short of handsome. No fewer than three serving women fussed over him while he sat cross-legged on his bed.

“Mat, doesn’t Haesel have the most beautiful eyes?” Olver said, beaming at the big-eyed young woman Mat had met the last time he came to the palace. She beamed back and ruffled the boy’s hair. “Oh, but Alis and Loya are so sweet, I could never choose.” A plump woman just short of her middle years looked up from unpacking Olver’s saddlebags to give him a broad grin, and a slender girl with bee-stung lips patted the towel she had just put on his washstand, then flung herself onto the bed to tickle Olver’s ribs till he fell over laughing helplessly.

Mat snorted. Harnan and that lot were bad enough, but now these *women* were encouraging the boy! How was he ever going to learn to behave if women did that? Olver ought to be playing in the streets like any other ten-year-old. He had had no serving women falling over him in his rooms. Tylin had seen to that, he was sure.

He had time to check on Olver, and to look in on Harnan and the rest of the Redarms, sharing a long room lined with beds not far from the stables, and to saunter down to the kitchens for some bread and beef—he had not been able to face that porridge back at the inn. Still Nynaeve and Elayne had not returned. He finally looked over the books in his sitting room and began reading *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*, though he barely made out a word for worrying. Thom and Juilin came in just as the women finally bustled in exclaiming over finding him there, as if they thought *he* would not keep his word.

He closed the book gently, set it gently on the table beside his chair. “Where have you been?”

“Why, we went for a walk,” Elayne said brightly, blue eyes wider than he remembered seeing before. Thom frowned and produced a knife from his sleeve, rolling it back and forth through his fingers. He very markedly did not so much as glance at Elayne.

“We had tea with some women your innkeeper knows,” Nynaeve said. “I won’t bore you with talk about needlework.” Juilin started to shake his head, then stopped before she noticed.

“Please, don’t bore me,” Mat said dryly. He supposed she knew one end of a needle from the other, but he suspected she would as soon stick one through her tongue as talk about needlework. Neither woman cracked her teeth about civility, confirming his worse suspicions. “I’ve told off two fellows to walk out with each of you this afternoon, and there will be two more tomorrow and every day. If you’re not inside the palace or under my nose, you’ll have bodyguards. They know their turns already. They’ll stay with you at all times—*all* times—and you will let me know where you’re headed. No more making me worry till my hair falls out.”

He expected indignation and argument. He expected weaseling over what they had or had not promised. He expected that demanding this whole loaf might get him a slice at the end; a butt slice, if his luck was in. Nynaeve looked at Elayne; Elayne looked at Nynaeve.

“Why, bodyguards are a *wonderful* idea, Mat,” Elayne exclaimed, her cheek dimpling in a smile. “I suppose you were right about that. It’s very smart of you to have your men already to a schedule.”

“It *is* a wonderful notion,” Nynaeve said, nodding enthusiastically. “Very smart of you, Mat.”

Thom dropped the knife with a muffled curse and sat sucking on a nicked finger, staring at the women.

Mat sighed. Trouble; he had known it. And that was before they told him to forget the Rahad for the time being.

Which was how he found himself on a bench in front of a cheap tavern not far from the riverfront called The Rose of the Eldar, drinking from one of the dented tin cups chained to the bench. At least they washed the cups out for each new patron. The stink from a dyer's shop across the way only raised the style of the Rose. Not that it was a shabby neighborhood really, though the street was too narrow for carriages. A fair number of brightly lacquered sedan chairs swayed through the crowd. If far more passersby wore wool and perhaps a guild vest than silk, the wool was as often well cut as frayed. The houses and shops were the usual array of white plaster, and if most were small and even run-down, the tall house of a wealthy merchant stood on a corner to his right and on the left a diminutive palace—smaller than the merchant's house, at least—with a single green-banded dome and no spire. A pair of taverns and an inn in plain sight looked cool and inviting. Unfortunately, the Rose was the only one where a man could sit outside, the only one in just the right spot. Unfortunately.

"I doubt I've ever seen such splendid flies," Nalesean grumbled, waving away several choice specimens from his cup. "What is it we're doing again?"

"You are swilling that foul excuse for wine and sweating like a goat," Mat muttered, tugging his hat to shade his eyes better. "I'm being *ta'veren*." He glared at the dilapidated house, between the dyer's and a noisy weaver's establishment, that he had been told to watch. Not asked—told—that was what it came to, however they phrased it, squirming around their pledges. Oh, they made it sound like asking, made it sound like pleading at the end, which he would believe when dogs danced, but he knew when he had been bullied. "Just be *ta'veren*, Mat," he mimicked. "I know you'll just *know* what to do. Bah!" Maybe Elayne bloody Daughter-Heir and her bloody dimple knew, or Nynaeve with her bloody hands twitching to yank her bloody braid, but he would be burned if he did. "If the pig-kissing Bowl is in the Rahad, how am I supposed to find it on this flaming side of the river?"

"I do not remember them saying," Juilin said wryly, and took a long swallow of some drink made from a yellow fruit grown in the countryside.

"You've asked that fifty times, at least." He claimed the pale drink was refreshing in the heat, but Mat had taken a bite of one of those lemons, and he was not about to swallow anything made from them. With his head still throbbing faintly, he himself drank tea. It tasted as if the tavernkeeper, a scrawny fellow with beady suspicious eyes, had been dumping new leaves and water in yesterday's leavings since the founding of the city. The taste suited his mood.

"What interests me," Thom murmured over steepled fingers, "is why they asked so many questions about your innkeeper." He did not seem very upset at the women still keeping secrets; sometimes, he was decidedly odd. "What do Setalle Anan and these women have to do with the Bowl?"

Women did pass in and out of the dilapidated house. A steady stream of women, just about, some well dressed if none in silks, and not one man. Three or four wore the red belt of a Wise Woman. Mat had considered following some of them when they left, but it felt too planned. He did not know how *ta'veren* worked—he had never really seen any sign of it in himself—but his luck was always best when everything was random. Like with dice. Most of those little iron tavern puzzles eluded him, however lucky he felt.

He ignored Thom's question; Thom had asked it at least as often as Mat had asked how he was to find the Bowl here. Nynaeve had told him to his face she had not promised to tell him every last thing she knew; she said she would tell him whatever he needed to know; she said. . . . Watching her nearly choke from not calling him names was not nearly enough vengeance.

"I suppose I should take a walk down the alley," Nalesean sighed. "In case one of those women decides to climb over the garden wall." The narrow gap between the house and the dyer lay in full view for its whole length, but another alleyway ran along behind the shops and houses. "Mat, tell me again why we're doing this instead of playing cards."

"I'll do it," Mat said. Maybe he would find out how *ta'veren* worked behind the garden wall. He went, and found out nothing.

By the time twilight began creeping over the street and Harnan came with a bald-headed, narrow-eyed Andoran named Wat, the only possible effect of being *ta'veren* he had seen was that the tavernkeeper brewed a fresh pot of tea. It tasted almost as bad as the old.

Back in his rooms in the palace, he found a note, an invitation of sorts, elegantly lettered on thick white paper that smelled like a garden of flowers.

> *My little rabbit, I expect to have you for dinner tonight in my apartments.*

No signature, but he hardly needed one. Light! The woman had no shame at all! There was a red-painted iron lock on the door to the corridor; he found the key and locked it. Then, for good measure, he jammed a chair under the latch on the door to Nerim's room. He could do well enough without dinner. Just as he was about to climb into bed, the lock rattled; out in the hall, a woman laughed at finding the door secured.

He should have been able to sleep soundly then, but for some reason he lay there listening to his belly grumble. Why was she doing this? Well, he knew why, but why him? Surely she had not decided to toss all decency over the barn just to bed a *ta'veren.* He was safe now, anyway. Tylin would not batter down the door, after all. Would she? Not even most birds could get in through the wrought-iron arabesques screening the balconies. Besides, she would need a long ladder to reach that high. And men to carry it. Unless she climbed down from the roof on a rope. Or she could. . . . The night passed, his stomach rumbled, the sun rose, and he never closed his eyes or had a decent thought. Except that he did make a decision. He thought of a use for the sulking room. He certainly never sulked.

At first light, he sneaked out of his rooms and found another of the palace servants he remembered, a balding fellow named Madic, with a smug, self-satisfied air and a shy twist to his mouth that said he was not satisfied at all. A man who could be bought. Though the startled look that flashed across his square face, and the smirk he barely bothered to hide, said he knew exactly why Mat was slipping gold into his hand. Blood and ashes! How many people knew what Tylin was up to?

Nynaeve and Elayne did not seem to, thank the Light. Though that did mean they chided him about missing dinner with the Queen, which they had learned about when Tylin inquired whether he was ill. And worse. . . . "Please," Elayne said, smiling almost as if the word did not pain her, "you must put your best foot forward with the Queen. Don't be nervous. You'll enjoy an evening with her."

"Just don't do anything to offend her," Nynaeve muttered. There was no doubt with her that being civil hurt; her brows drew down in concentration, her jaw tightened, and her hands trembled to pull her braid. "Be accommodating for once in your—I mean to say, remember she's a decent woman, and don't try any of your—Light, you know what I mean."

Nervous. Ha! Decent woman. Ha!

Neither seemed the least concerned that he had wasted a whole afternoon. Elayne patted his shoulder sympathetically and asked him please to try another day or two; it certainly was better than tramping through the Rahad in this heat. Nynaeve said the exact same thing, the way women did, but without the shoulder pat. They admitted right out that they intended to spend the day trying to spy on Carridin with Aviendha, though they evaded his question of who it was they thought they might recognize. Nynaeve let that slip, and Elayne gave her such a look he thought he might see Nynaeve's ears boxed for once. They meekly accepted his stricture not to lose sight of their bodyguards, and meekly let him see the disguises they intended to wear. Even after Thom's description, seeing the pair suddenly turn into Ebou Dari women in front of his eyes was almost as big a shock as their meekness. Well, Nynaeve made a sickly stab at meekness, growling when she realized he had meant what he said about the Aielwoman needing no bodyguard, but she came close. Either one of these women folding her hands and answering submissively made him nervous. Both of them together—with Aviendha nodding *approvingly*!—and he was happy to send them on their way. Just to be sure, though, he ignored their suddenly flat mouths and made them demonstrate their disguises for the men he was sending along first. Vanin leaped at the chance to be one of Elayne's guards, knuckling his forehead right and left like a fool.

The fat man had not learned much watching on his own. Just as on the day before, a surprising number of people had come to call on Carridin, including some in silk, but that was not proof they were all Darkfriends. All said and done, the man was the Whitecloak ambassador; more folk who wanted to trade into Amadicia probably went to him than to the Amadician ambassador, whoever he or she was. Vanin did say two women had definitely been watching Carridin's palace, too—the look on his face when Aviendha suddenly turned into a third Ebou Dari woman was a wonder—and also an old man, he thought, though the fellow proved surprisingly spry. Vanin had not managed to get a good look at him despite spotting him three times. Once Vanin and the women left, Mat sent off Thom and Juilin to see what they could uncover concerning Jaichim Carridin and a bent, white-haired old man with an interest in Darkfriends. If the thief-catcher could not discover a way to trip Carridin on his face, it did not exist, and Thom seemed to have a way of putting together all the gossip and rumor in a place and filtering out the truth. All that was the easy part, of course.

For two days he sweated on that bench, with an occasional stroll down the alley beside the dyer’s, and the only thing that changed was that the tea got worse again. The wine was so bad, Nalesean began drinking ale. The first day, the tavernkeeper offered fish for a midday meal, but by the smell they had been caught last week. The second day, he offered a stew of oysters; Mat ate five bowls of that despite the bits of shell. Birgitte declined both.

He had been surprised when she caught up to him and Nalesean hurrying across the Mol Hara that first morning. The sun barely made a rim above the rooftops, but already people and carts dotted the square. “I must have blinked,” she laughed. “I was waiting the way I thought you’d come out. If you don’t mind company.”

“We move fast sometimes,” he said evasively. Nalesean looked at him sideways; of course, he had no idea why they had crept out through a tiny side door near the stables. It was not that Mat thought Tylin would actually leap on him in the halls in broad daylight, but then again, it never hurt to be careful. “Your company is welcome any time. Uh. Thanks.” She just shrugged and murmured something he did not catch and fell in on the other side of him.

That was the beginning with her. Any other woman he had ever known would have demanded to know thanks for what, and then explained why none were necessary at such length that he wanted to cover his ears, or upbraided him at equal length for thinking they were, or sometimes made it clear she expected something more substantial than words. Birgitte just shrugged, and over the next two days, something startling occurred in his head.

Normally, to him, women were to admire and smile at, to dance with and kiss if they would allow, to snuggle with if he was lucky. Deciding which women to chase was almost as much fun as chasing them, if not nearly so much as catching them. Some women were just friends, of course. A few. Egwene, for one, though he was not sure how that friendship would survive her becoming Amyrlin. Nynaeve was sort of a friend, in a way; if she could forget for one hour that she had switched his bottom more than once and remember he was not a boy anymore. But a woman friend was different from a man; you always knew her mind ran along other paths than yours, that she saw the world with different eyes.

Birgitte leaned toward him on the bench. “Best be wary,” she murmured. “That widow is looking for a new husband; the sheath on her marriage knife is blue. Besides, the house is over there.”

He blinked, losing sight of the sweetly plump woman who rolled her hips so extravagantly as she walked, and Birgitte answered his sheepish grin with a laugh. Nynaeve would have flayed him with her tongue for looking, and even Egwene would have been coolly disapproving. By the end of the second day on that bench, he realized he had sat all that time with his hip pressed against Birgitte’s and never once thought of trying to kiss her. He was sure she did not want to be kissed by him—frankly, considering the dog-ugly men she seemed to enjoy looking at, he might have been insulted if she had—and she was a hero out of legend whom he still half-expected to leap over a house and grab a couple of the Forsaken by the neck on the way. But that was not it: He would as soon have thought of kissing Nalesean. The same as the Tairen, just exactly the same as, he *liked* Birgitte.

Two days on that bench, up and down to trot down the alley beside the dyer and stare at the tall wall of bare brick at the back of the house’s garden. Birgitte could have climbed it, but even she might have broken her neck if she tried wearing a dress. Three times he decided on the spur of the moment to follow a woman coming out of the house, two wearing the red belt of a Wise Woman. Random chance did seem to invoke his luck.

One of the Wise Women went around the corner and bought a bunch of shriveled turnips before going back; the other walked two streets over to buy a pair of big, green-striped fish. The third woman, tall and dark in neat gray wool, maybe a Tairen, crossed two bridges before entering a large shop where she was greeted with smiles by a skinny bowing fellow and began supervising the loading of lacquered boxes and trays into sawdust-filled baskets that were then loaded into a wagon. By what he heard, she hoped to fetch a pretty piece of silver with them in Andor. Mat barely managed to escape without buying a box. So much for random luck. No one else had any either. Nynaeve and Elayne and Aviendha made their pilgrimages to the streets around Carridin’s small palace without seeing anyone they recognized, which frustrated them no end. They still refused to say who; it hardly mattered, since the people were not to be seen. That was what they said, showing him enough teeth for six women. The grimaces were supposed to be smiles, he thought. It was a shame Aviendha seemed to have fallen in with the other two so thoroughly, but there was a moment when he was pressing them for an answer, and Elayne snapped at him, staring down her nose, and the Aiel woman whispered something in her ear.

"Forgive me, Mat," Elayne said earnestly, her face going so red her hair seemed to pale. "I humbly beg pardon for speaking so. I . . . will beg on my knees, if you wish." No surprise that her voice faltered at the end.

"No need for that," he said faintly, trying not to goggle. "You're forgiven; it was nothing." The oddest thing, though; Elayne looked at Aviendha the whole time she spoke to him and did not twitch an eyelid when he replied, but she heaved a great sigh of relief when Aviendha nodded. Women were just strange.

Thom reported that Carridin gave to beggars frequently, and aside from that, every scrap of word about him in Ebou Dar was the kind to be expected, depending on whether the speaker thought Whitecloaks were murderous monsters or the true saviors of the world. Juilin learned that Carridin had purchased a plan of the Tarasin Palace, which might indicate some Whitecloak intention toward Ebou Dar and might indicate that Pedron Niall wanted a palace for himself and intended to copy the Tarasin. If he still lived; rumors had sprung up in the city that he was dead, but then, half said Aes Sedai had killed him and half said Rand had, which showed their worth. Neither Juilin or Thom had scuffed up a pebble concerning a white-haired old man with a much-worn face.

Frustration with Carridin, frustration with watching the bloody house, and as far as the palace went. . . .

Mat found out how things were to go that first night when he finally got back to his rooms. Olver was there, already fed and curled up in a chair with *The Travels of Jain Farstrider* by the light of the stand-lamps, and not at all upset over being moved out of his own room. Madic had been as good as his word; as good as the gold he stuffed in his pouch, anyway. The sulking room now held Olver's bed. Just let Tylin try anything with a child watching her! The Queen had not been idle either, though. He sneaked down to the kitchens like a fox, slipping from corner to corner, flashing down stairs—and found there was no food to be had.

Oh, the smell of cooking permeated the air, roasts turning on spits in the big fireplaces, pots bubbling atop the white-tiled stoves, and cooks kept popping open ovens to prod this or that. There was just no food for Mat

Cauthon. Smiling women in pristine white aprons ignored his own smiles and put themselves in his way so he could not get near the sources of those wonderful smells. They smiled and rapped his knuckles when he tried to snatch a loaf of bread or just a bit of honey-glazed turnip. They smiled and told him he must not spoil his appetite if he was to eat with the Queen. They knew. Every last one of them knew! His own blushes as much as anything else drove him back to his rooms, bitterly regretting that odorous fish at midday. He locked the door behind him. A woman who would starve a man might try anything.

He was lying on a green silk carpet playing Snakes and Foxes with Olver when the second note was slipped under his door.

> *I have been told it is more sporting to take a pigeon on the wing, to watch it flutter, but sooner or later, a hungry bird will fly to the hand.*

"What is it, Mat?" Olver asked.

"Nothing." Mat crumpled the note. "Another game?"

"Oh, yes." The boy would play the fool game all day, given a chance. "Mat, did you try any of that ham they cooked tonight? I never tasted anything—"

"Just throw the dice, Olver. Just throw the bloody dice."

Coming back for his third night in the palace, he bought bread and olives and ewe's milk cheese on the way, which was just as well. The kitchen still had its orders. The bloody women actually laughed out loud while they wafted steaming platters of meats and fishes just beyond his reach and told him not to spoil his bloody appetite.

He maintained his dignity. He did not grab a platter and run. He made his finest leg, flourishing an imaginary cloak. "Gracious ladies, your warmth and hospitality overwhelm me."

His withdrawal would have gone a deal better if one of the cooks had not cackled at his back, "The Queen will feast on roast duckling soon enough, lad." Very droll. The other women roared so hard, they must have been rolling on the floor. Very bloody droll.

Bread and olives and salty cheese made a fine meal, with a little water from his washstand to wash it down. There had not been any wine punch in his room since that first day. Olver tried to tell him about some sort of roasted fish with mustard sauce and raisins; Mat told him to practice his reading.

Nobody slipped a note under his door that night. Nobody rattled the lock. He began to think things might turn for the better. Tomorrow was the Festival of Birds. From what he had heard of the costumes some people wore, men and women both, it might be possible Tylin would find herself a new duckling to chase after. Somebody might come out of that bloody house across from The Rose of the Eldar and hand him the bloody Bowl of the Winds. Things just had to turn for the better.

When he woke for his third morning in the Tarasin Palace, the dice were rolling in his head.

* * *

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CHAPTER
29

The Festival of Birds

Waking to the dice, Mat considered going back to sleep until they went away, but at last he got up feeling grumpy. As if he did not have more than enough on his plate already. He chased Nerim away and dressed himself, eating the last of the bread and cheese from the night before while he did, then went to check on Olver. The boy flashed between bursts of yanking on his clothes in a hurry to be out and stopping entirely with boot or shirt in hand to spout dozens of questions that Mat answered with half a mind. No, they would not go racing today, and never mind the rich races at the Circuit of Heaven, north of the city. Maybe they could go see the menagerie. Yes, Mat would buy him a feathered mask for the festival. If he ever got dressed. That sent him into a flurry.

What really occupied Mat's thoughts were those bloody dice. Why had they started up again? He still did not know why they had before!

When Olver was finally clothed, he followed Mat into the sitting room bubbling with half-heard questions—and bumped him from behind when he stopped dead. Tylin replaced the book Olver had been reading the night before on the table.

"Majesty!" Mat's eyes darted to the door he had locked last night, now standing wide open. "What a surprise." He pulled Olver around in front of him, between him and the woman's mocking smile. Well, maybe it was not really mocking, but it surely seemed so right then. She was certainly pleased with herself. "I was about to take Olver out. To see the festival. And some traveling menagerie. He wants a feathered mask." He snapped his mouth shut to stop babbling and started edging toward the door, using the boy as a shield.

"Yes," Tylin murmured, watching through her eyelashes. She made no move to intervene, but her smile deepened, as if she was just waiting for his foot to land in the snare. "Much better if he has a companion, instead of running with the urchins, as I hear he does. One hears a good deal about your lad. Riselle?"

A woman appeared in the doorway, and Mat gave a start. A fanciful mask of swirling blue and golden feathers hid most of Riselle's face, but the feathers on the rest of her costume did not hide very much else. She possessed the most spectacular bosom he had ever seen.

"Olver," she said, sinking to her knees, "would you like to walk out with me at festival?" She held up a mask like a red-and-green hawk, just the right size for a boy.

Before Mat could open his mouth, Olver broke free and rushed to her. "Oh, yes, please. Thank you." The ungrateful little lout laughed as she tied the hawk mask on his face and hugged him to her bosom. Hand in hand, they ran out, leaving Mat gaping.

He recovered himself quickly enough when Tylin said, "Well for you I am not a jealous woman, my sweet." She produced the long iron key to his door from behind her gold-and-silver belt, and then another just like it, waggling the pair at him. "People always keep keys in a box near the door." That was where he had left his. "And no one ever thinks there might be a second key." One key went back behind her belt; the other was turned in the lock with a loud click before joining its fellow. "Now, lambkin." She smiled.

It was too much. The woman hounded him, tried to starve him; now she locked them in together like . . . like he did not know what. Lambkin! Those bloody dice were bouncing around in his skull. Besides, he had important business to see to. The dice had never had anything to do with finding something, but. . . . He reached her in two long strides, seized her arm, and began fumbling in her belt for the keys. "I don't have bloody time for—" His breath froze as the sharp point of her dagger beneath his chin shut his mouth and drove him right up onto his toes.

"Remove your hand," she said coldly. He managed to look down his nose at her face. She was not smiling now. He let go of her arm carefully. She did not lessen the pressure of her blade, though. She shook her head. "*Tsk, tsk.* I do try to make allowances for you being an outlander, gosling, but since you wish to play roughly. . . . Hands at your sides. Move." The knifepoint gave a direction. He shuffled backward on tiptoe rather than have his neck sliced.

“What are you going to do?” he mumbled through his teeth. A stretched neck put a strain in his voice. A stretched neck among other things. “Well?” He could try grabbing her wrist; he was quick with his hands. “What are you going to do?” Quick enough, with the knife already at his throat? That was the question. That, and the one he asked her. If she intended to kill him, a shove of her wrist right there would drive the dagger straight up into his brain. “Will you answer me!” That was not panic in his voice. He was not in a panic. “Majesty? Tylin?” Well, maybe he was in a bit of a panic, to use her name. You could call any woman in Ebou Dar “duckling” or “pudding” all day, and she would smile, but use her name before she said you could, and you found a hotter reception than you would for goosing a strange woman on the street anywhere else. A few kisses exchanged were never enough for permission, either.

Tylin did not answer, only kept him tiptoeing backward, until suddenly his shoulders bumped against something that stopped him. With that flaming dagger never easing a hair, he could not move his head, but eyes that had been focused on her face darted. They were in the bedchamber, a flower-carved red bedpost hard between his shoulder blades. Why would she bring him . . . ? His face was suddenly as crimson as the bedpost. No. She could not mean to. . . . It was not decent! It was not possible!

“You can’t do this to me,” he mumbled at her, and if his voice was a touch breathy and shrill, he surely had cause.

“Watch and learn, my kitten,” Tylin said, and drew her marriage knife.

Afterward, a considerable time later, he irritably pulled the sheet up to his chest. A silk sheet; Nalesean had been right. The Queen of Altara hummed happily beside the bed, arms twisted behind her to do up the buttons of her dress. All he had on was the foxhead medallion on its cord—much good *that* had done—and the black scarf tied around his neck. A ribbon on her present, the bloody woman called it. He rolled over and snatched his silver-mounted pipe and tabac pouch from the small table on the other side from her. Golden tongs and a hot coal in a golden bowl of sand provided the means for lighting. Folding his arms, he puffed away as fiercely as he frowned.

“You should not flounce, duckling, and you shouldn’t pout.” She yanked her dagger from where it was driven into a bedpost beside her marriage knife, examining the point before sheathing it. “What is the matter? You know you enjoyed yourself as much as I did, and I. . . .” She laughed suddenly, and oh so richly, resheathing the marriage knife as well. “If that is part of what being *ta’veren* means, you must be very popular.” Mat flushed like fire.

“It isn’t natural,” he burst out, yanking the pipestem from between his teeth. “I’m the one who’s supposed to do the chasing!” Her astonished eyes surely mirrored his own. Had Tylin been a tavern maid who smiled the right way, he might have tried his luck—well, if the tavern maid lacked a son who liked poking holes in people—but *he* was the one who chased. He had just never thought of it that way before. He had never had the need to, before.

Tylin began laughing, shaking her head and wiping at her eyes with her fingers. “Oh, pigeon. I do keep forgetting. You are in Ebou Dar, now. I left a little present for you in the sitting room.” She patted his foot through the sheet. “Eat well today. You are going to need your strength.”

Mat put a hand over his eyes and tried very hard not to weep. When he uncovered them, she was gone.

Climbing out of the bed, he tucked the sheet around him; for some reason, the notion of walking around bare felt uncomfortable. The bloody woman might leap out of the wardrobe. The garments he had been wearing lay on the floor. *Why bother with laces,* he thought sourly, *when you can just cut somebody’s clothes off!* She had no call to slice up his red coat that way, though. She had just enjoyed peeling him with her knife.

Not quite holding his breath, he pulled open the tall red-and-gilt wardrobe. She was not hiding inside. His choices were limited; Nerim had most of his coats for cleaning or mending. Dressing quickly, he chose a plain coat of dark bronze silk, then stuffed the sliced rags as far under the bed as he could reach until he could dispose of them without Nerim seeing. Or anyone else, for that matter. Too many people already knew entirely too much of what was going on between him and Tylin; there was no way he could face anybody knowing this.

In the sitting room, he lifted the lid of the lacquerware box by the door, then let it fall with a sigh; he had not really expected Tylin to replace the key. He leaned against the door. The unlocked door. Light, what was he going to do? Move back to the inn? Burn why the dice had stopped before. Only, he would not put it past Tylin to bribe Mistress Anan and Enid, or the innkeeper wherever he went. He would not put it past Nynaeve and Elayne to claim he had broken some agreement and put an end to their promises. Burn all women!

A large parcel elaborately wrapped in green paper sat on one of the tables. It contained an eagle mask in black and gold and a coat covered with feathers to match. There was also a red silk purse holding twenty gold crowns and a note that smelled of flowers.

> *I would have bought you an earring, piglet, but I noticed your ear is not pierced. Have it done, and buy yourself something nice.*

He nearly wept again. *He* gave *women* presents. The world was standing on its head! *Piglet?* Oh, Light! After a minute, he did take the mask; she owed him that much, for his coat alone.

When he finally reached the small, shaded courtyard where they had been meeting each morning beside a tiny round pool of lily pads and brightly spotted white fish, he found Nalesean and Birgitte ready for the Festival of Birds, too. The Tairen had contented himself with a plain green mask, but Birgitte's was a spray of yellow-and-red with a crest of plumes, her golden hair hung loose, with feathers tied all down its length, and she wore a dress with a wide yellow belt, diaphanous beneath more red and yellow feathers. It did not reveal nearly as much as Riselle's, yet it seemed about to every time she moved. He had never thought of her wearing a dress like other women.

"Sometimes it's fun to be looked at," she said, poking him in the ribs, when he commented. Her grin would have done for Nalesean saying how much fun it was to pinch serving girls. "There's a lot more to it than feather dancers wore, but not enough to it to slow me down, and anyway, I cannot see we'll have to move quickly on this side of the river." The dice rattled in his head. "What kept you?" she went on. "You didn't make us wait so you could tickle a pretty girl, I hope." He hoped he was not blushing.

"I—" He was not certain what excuse he would have made, but just then half a dozen men wearing feathered coats strolled into the courtyard, all with those narrow swords on their hips, all but one wearing an elaborate mask with colorful crest and beak that represented no bird ever seen by human eyes. The exception was Beslan, twirling his mask by its ribbon. "Oh, blood and bloody ashes, what's he doing here?"

"Beslan?" Nalesean folded his hands on the pommel of his sword and shook his head in disbelief. "Why, burn my soul, he says he intends to spend the festival in your company. Some promise you two made, he says. I told him it would be deadly boring, but he wouldn't believe me."

"I cannot think it is ever boring around Mat," Tylin's son said; his bow took them all in, but his dark eyes especially lingered on Birgitte. "I've never had so much fun as I did drinking with him and the Lady Elayne's Warder on Swovan Night, though truth, I remember little." He did not seem to recognize that Warder. Strangely, considering the taste she had shown in men—Beslan was fine-looking, maybe a little too fine, not at all her sort—strangely, she smiled slightly, and preened under his scrutiny.

Right then, Mat did not care how out of character she behaved. Obviously Beslan suspected nothing, or that sword of his likely would already be out, but the last thing under the Light Mat wanted was a day in company with the man. It would be excruciating. He had some sense of decency, even if Beslan's mother did not.

The only problem was Beslan, who took that bloody promise to attend all the festivals and feastdays together very seriously. The more Mat agreed with Nalesean that the day they had planned would be dull beyond belief, the more determined Beslan grew. After a bit, his face began to darken, and Mat began to think that sword might be unsheathed yet. Well, a promise was a promise. When he and Nalesean and Birgitte left the palace, half a dozen feathered fools strutted along. Mat was sure it would not have happened had Birgitte been wearing her proper clothes. The whole lot of them kept eyeing her and smiling.

"What was all that twisting around while he was spilling his eyes all over you?" he muttered as they crossed the Mol Hara. He tugged the ribbon holding the eagle mask tighter.

"I did not twist, I moved." Her primness was so blatantly false, he would have laughed some other time. "Slightly." Abruptly her grin was back, and she lowered her voice for his ear alone. "I told you sometimes it's fun to be looked at; just because they're all too pretty doesn't mean I cannot enjoy them looking. Oh, you'll want to look at her," she added, pointing to a slender woman who went running by in a blue owl mask and rather fewer feathers than Riselle had worn.

That was one of the things about Birgitte; she would nudge him in the ribs and point out a pretty girl for his eye as readily as any man he had ever known, and expect him to point out in turn what she liked to see, which was generally the ugliest man in sight. Whether or not she chose to go half-naked today—a quarter, anyway—she was . . . well, a friend. A strange world, it was turning out to be. One woman he was beginning to think of as a drinking companion, and another after him as intently as he had ever pursued any pretty woman, in those old memories or his own. More intently; he had never chased any woman who let him know she did not want to be chased. A very strange world.

The sun stood little more than halfway to its peak, but already celebrants filled the streets and squares and bridges. Tumblers and jugglers and musicians with feathers sewn about their clothes performed at every street corner, the music often drowned in laughter and shouting. For the poorer folk a few feathers laced into their hair sufficed, pigeon feathers gathered from the pavement for the street children dodging about and the beggars, but masks and costumes grew more elaborate as purses grew heavier. More elaborate, and frequently more scandalous. Men and women alike were often decked in feathers that revealed more skin than Riselle *or* that woman back in the Mol Hara. No commerce moved in the streets or canals today, though a number of shops seemed to be open—along with every tavern and inn, of course—but here and there a wagon made its way through the throng or a barge was poled along supporting a platform where young men and women posed in bright bird masks that covered their entire heads, with spreading crests sometimes rising a full pace, moving long colorful wings in such a way that the rest of their costumes were exposed only in flashes. Which was just as well, considering.

According to Beslan, these settings, as they were called, were usually presented in guild halls and private palaces and houses. The entire festival normally took place indoors for the most part. It did not snow properly in Ebou Dar even when the weather was as it should be—Beslan said he would like to see this snow, one day—but apparently ordinary winter was cold enough to keep people from running around outdoors all but unclothed. With the heat, everything was spilling into the streets. Wait until night fell, Beslan said; then Mat would really see something. As sunlight faded, so did inhibitions.

Staring at a tall slender woman gliding along through the crowd in mask and feathered cloak and beyond that, six or seven feathers, Mat wondered what inhibitions some of these folk had left to shed. He almost shouted at her to cover herself with that cloak. She was pretty, but out in the *street*, before the Light and everybody?

Those wagons carrying the settings attracted followers, of course, thick knots of men and women who shouted and laughed as they tossed coins, and sometimes folded notes, onto the wagons and squeezed everyone else in the street aside. He became used to fleeing ahead until they could duck down a crossing street, or waiting until the setting went by to cross an intersection or bridge. While waiting, Birgitte and Nalesean tossed coins to filthy urchins and dirtier beggars. Well, Nalesean tossed; Birgitte concentrated on the children, and pressed each coin into a grubby hand like a gift.

In one of those waits, Beslan suddenly put a hand on Nalesean's arm, raising his voice above the crowd and a cacophony of music coming from at least six different places. "Forgive me, Tairen, but not him." A ragged man edged back into the throng, warily; gaunt-cheeked and bony, he seemed to have lost whatever pitiful feathers he might have found for his hair.

"Why not?" Nalesean demanded.

"No brass ring on his little finger," Beslan replied. "He's not in the guild."

"Light," Mat said, "a man can't even beg in this city without belonging to a guild?" Maybe it was his tone. The beggar leaped for his throat, a knife appearing in his grimy fist.

Without thinking, Mat grabbed the man's arm and spun, slinging him away into the crowd; some people cursed at Mat, some at the sprawling beggar. Some tossed the fellow a coin.

From the corner of his eye, Mat saw a second skinny man in rags try to push Birgitte out of the way to reach him with a long knife. It was a foolish mistake to underestimate the woman because of her costume; from somewhere among those feathers she produced a knife and stabbed him beneath the arm.

"Look out!" Mat shouted at her, but there was no time for warnings; even as he shouted, he drew from his coat-sleeve and threw sidearmed. The blade streaked past her face to sink into the throat of yet another beggar flaunting steel before he could plant it in her ribs.

Suddenly there were beggars everywhere with knives, and clubs studded with spikes; screams and shouts rose as people in masks and costumes scrambled to get out of the way. Nalesean slashed a man in rags across the face, sending him reeling; Beslan ran another through the middle, while his costumed cronies fought still others.

Mat had no time to see more; he found himself back-to-back with Birgitte and facing his own adversaries. He could feel her shifting against him, hear her mutter curses, but he was barely conscious of it; Birgitte could take care of herself, and watching the two men in front of him, he was not sure he could do the same. The hulking fellow with the toothless sneer had only one arm and a puckered socket where his left eye had been, but his fist held a club two feet long, encircled by iron bands that sprouted spikes like steel thorns. His rat-faced little companion still had both eyes and several teeth, and despite sunken cheeks and arms that seemed all bone and sinew, he moved like a snake, licking his lips and flicking a rusty dagger from hand to hand. Mat aimed the shorter knife in his own hand first at one, then the other. It was still long enough to reach a man's vitals, and they danced and shuffled, each waiting for the other to leap at him first.

"Old Cully won't like this, Spar," the bigger man growled, and rat-face darted forward, rusty blade flashing from hand to hand.

He did not count on the knife that suddenly appeared in Mat's left hand and sliced across his wrist. The dagger clattered to the paving stones, but the fellow flung himself at Mat anyway. As Mat's other blade stabbed into his chest, he squealed, eyes going wide, arms wrapping around Mat convulsively. The bald fellow's sneer widened, his club rising as he stepped in.

The grin vanished as two beggars swarmed over him, snarling and stabbing.

Staring incredulously, Mat shoved rat-face's corpse away. The street was clear for fifty paces except for combatants, and everywhere beggars rolled on the pavement, two or three or sometimes four stabbing at one, beating him with clubs or rocks.

Beslan caught Mat's arm. There was blood on his face, but he was grinning. "Let's get out of here and let the Fellowship of Alms finish its business. There's no honor in fighting beggars, and besides, the guild won't leave any of these interlopers alive. Follow me." Nalesean was scowling—doubtless he saw no honor in fighting beggars either—and Beslan's friends, several with their costumes awry and one with his mask off so another could dab at a cut across his forehead. The man with the cut was grinning, too. Birgitte bore not a scratch that Mat could see, and her costume looked as neat as it had back in the palace. She made her knife disappear; there was no way she could hide a blade under those feathers, but she did.

Mat made no protest at being drawn away, but he did growl, “Do beggars always go around attacking people in this . . . this city?” Beslan might not appreciate hearing it called a bloody city.

The man laughed. “You are *ta’veren*, Mat. There’s always excitement around *ta’veren*.”

Mat smiled back with gritted teeth. Bloody fool, bloody city, and bloody *ta’veren*. Well, if a beggar slit his throat, he would not have to go back to the palace and let Tylin peel him like a ripe pear. Come to think of it, she had called him her little pear. Bloody everything! The street between the dyer’s shop and The Rose of the Eldar had its share of revelers, though not many scantily clad. Apparently you had to have coin to go near naked. Though the acrobats in front of the merchant’s house on the corner came close, the men barefoot and bare-chested in tight, brightly colored breeches, the women in even tighter breeches and thin blouses. They all had a few feathers in their hair, as did the capering musicians playing in front of the small palace at the far corner, a woman with a flute, another blowing on a tall, twisted black tube covered with levers, and a fellow beating a tambour for all he was worth. The house they had come to watch looked shut up tight.

The tea at The Rose was as bad as ever, which meant it was much better than the wine. Nalesean stuck to the sour local ale. Birgitte said thanks without saying for what, and Mat shrugged it off silently; they grinned at each other and tapped cups. The sun rose, and Beslan sat balancing first one boot on the toe of the other, then the other way around, but his companions began growing restive, no matter how often he pointed out that Mat was *ta’veren*. A scuffle with beggars was hardly proper excitement, the street was too narrow for any settings to pass, the women were not as pretty as elsewhere, and even looking at Birgitte seemed to pall once they realized that she did not intend to kiss even one of them. With protestations of regret that Beslan would not come, they hurried off to find somewhere more exhilarating. Nalesean took a stroll down the alley beside the dyer’s, and Birgitte vanished into The Rose’s murky interior to find, she said, whether there was anything at all fit to drink hidden in some forgotten corner.

“I never expected to see a Warder garbed like that,” Beslan said, changing his boots around.

Mat blinked. The fellow had sharp eyes. She had not removed her mask once. Well, as long as he did not know about—

"I think you will be good for my Mother, Mat."

Choking, Mat sprayed tea into the passersby. Several glared at him angrily, and one slender woman with a nice little bosom gave him a coy smile from beneath a blue mask he thought was meant to be a wren. She stamped a foot and stalked off when he did not smile back. Luckily, no one was angry enough to take it beyond glares before they too went on their way. Or maybe unluckily. He would not have minded if six or eight piled on him right then.

"What do you mean?" he said hoarsely.

Beslan's head whipped around in wide-eyed surprise. "Why, her choosing you for her pretty, of course. Why is your face so red? Are you angry? Why—?" Suddenly he slapped his forehead and laughed. "You think I will be angry. Forgive me, I forget you're an outlander. Mat, she's my mother, not my wife. Father died ten years ago, and she has always claimed to be too busy. I am just glad she chose someone I like. Where are you going?"

He did not realize he was on his feet until Beslan spoke. "I just . . . need to clear my head."

"But you're drinking tea, Mat."

Dodging around a green sedan chair, he half saw the door of the house open and a woman with a blue-feathered cloak over her dress slip out. Unthinkingly—his head was spinning too much to think clearly—he fell in behind her. Beslan *knew*! He *approved*! His own mother, and he. . . .

"Mat?" Nalesean shouted behind him. "Where are you going?"

"If I'm not back by tomorrow," Mat shouted back absently over his shoulder, "tell them they'll have to find it for themselves!" He walked on after the woman in a daze, not hearing if Nalesean or Beslan shouted again. The man *knew*! He remembered once thinking that Beslan and his mother were both mad. They were worse! All of Ebou Dar was mad! He was hardly aware of the dice still spinning inside his skull.

From a window of the meeting room, Reanne watched Solain disappear down the street toward the river. Some fellow in a bronze coat followed in her wake, but if he tried to impede her, he would find out soon enough that Solain had no time for men, and no patience with them.

Reanne was not sure why the urge had grown so strong today. For days it had come on almost with the morning and faded with the sun, and for days she had fought—by the strict rules they did not quite dare call laws, that order was given at the half moon, still five nights off—but today. . . . She had spoken the order before she thought and been unable to make herself retract until the proper time. It would be well. No one had seen any sign of those two young fools calling themselves Elayne and Nynaeve anywhere in the city; thank the Light, there had been no need to take dangerous chances.

Sighing, she turned to the others, who waited until she took her chair before seating themselves. It would be well, as it always had been. Secrets would be kept, as they always had been. But, still. . . . She had no touch of Foretelling or anything of that sort, yet perhaps that overwhelming urge had been telling her something. Twelve women watched her expectantly. “I think we should consider moving everyone who does not wear the belt to the farm for a little while.” There was little discussion; they were the Elders, but she was the Eldest. In that, at least, there was no harm in behaving as Aes Sedai did.

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CHAPTER
30

The First Cup

I do not understand this,” Elayne protested. She had not been offered a chair; in fact, when she started to sit, she had been told curtly to remain standing. Five sets of eyes were focused on her, five women with set, grim faces. “You are behaving as if we’ve done something *terrible* when what we have *done* is find the Bowl of the Winds!” At least they were on the brink of it, she hoped; the message Nalesean had come running back with was none too clear. Mat had gone off shouting that he had found it. Or something very like, Nalesean allowed; the longer he talked, the more he bounced between absolute certainty and doubt. Birgitte had remained watching Reanne’s house; she seemed to be sweaty and bored. In any case, matters were in motion. Elayne wondered how Nynaeve was getting on. Better than herself, she hoped. She had certainly never expected this when she revealed their success.

“You have endangered a secret kept close by every woman to wear the shawl for over two thousand years.” Merilille sat stiff-backed, serenity almost abandoned on the tight-lipped brink of apoplexy. “You must have been insane! Only madness could excuse this!”

“What secret?” Elayne demanded.

Vandene, flanking Merilille with her sister, adjusted pale green silk skirts irritably and said, “Time enough for that when you’ve been properly raised, child. I thought you had some sense.” Adeleas, in a dark gray wool with deep brown trim, nodded, mirroring Vandene’s disapproval.

“The child cannot be faulted for revealing a secret she did not know,” Careane Fransi said from Elayne’s left, shifting her bulk in her green-and-gilt armchair. She was not stout, but almost, with shoulders as wide and arms as thick as most men.

“Tower law does not allow for excuses,” Sareitha put in quickly, in somewhat self-important tones, her normally inquisitive brown eyes stern. “Once mere excuses are allowed, inevitably lesser and lesser excuses will become acceptable, until law itself is gone.” Her high-backed chair stood to the right. Only she wore her shawl, but Merilille’s sitting room had been arranged as a court, though no one called it that. So far, no one had. Merilille, Adeleas and Vandene confronted Elayne like judges, Sareitha’s chair was placed where the Seat of Rebuke would be, and Careane’s the Seat of Pardon, but the Domani Green who would have been her defender nodded thoughtfully as the Tairen Brown who would have been her prosecutor continued. “She has admitted guilt from her own mouth. I recommend that the child be confined to the palace until we leave, with some good hard work to occupy her mind and her hands. I also recommend a firm dose of the slipper at regular intervals to remind her not to go behind sisters’ backs. And the same for Nynaeve, as soon as she can be found.”

Elayne swallowed. Confined? Perhaps they did not need to name this a trial for it to be one. Sareitha might not yet have achieved the ageless face, but the weight of the other women’s years pressed at Elayne. Adeleas and Vandene with their hair nearly all white, even their ageless faces echoing years. Merilille’s hair was glossy black, yet Elayne would not have been surprised to learn she had worn the shawl as long or longer than most women not Aes Sedai lived. For that matter, Careane might have, as well. Not one of them approached her own strength in the Power, but. . . . All that experience as Aes Sedai, all that knowledge. All that . . . authority. A heavy reminder that she was only eighteen and had been in novice white a year ago.

Careane made no move to rebut Sareitha’s suggestions. Perhaps she best go on defending herself. “Plainly this secret you speak of has something to do with the Circle, but—”

“The Kin are no concern of yours, child,” Merilille broke in sharply. Drawing a deep breath, she smoothed gold-slashed skirts of silvery gray. “I propose to pass sentence,” she said in a cold voice.

“I concur, and defer to your decision,” Adeleas said. She gave Elayne a disappointed frown and shook her head.

Vandene waved her hand dismissively. “I concur and defer. But I agree with the Seat of Rebuke.” Careane’s look might have contained a sliver of sympathy. Maybe a sliver.

Merilille opened her mouth.

The timid knock at the door sounded quite loud in the momentary, thunderous silence.

"What under the Light?" Merilille muttered angrily. "I told Pol not to let anyone disturb us. Careane?"

Not the youngest, but the lowest in strength, Careane stood and glided to the door. Despite her heft, she always moved like a swan.

It was Pol herself, Merilille's maid, who popped in curtsying left and right. A slender, gray-haired woman usually possessed of a dignity to rival that of her mistress, she wore an anxious frown now, as well she might, barging in after Merilille's instructions. Elayne had not been so glad to see anyone since . . . since Mat Cauthon appeared in the Stone of Tear. A horrendous thought. If Aviendha did not say she had met *toh* sufficiently soon, she might just see if asking the man to beat her after all could end the agony.

"The Queen brought this herself," Pol announced breathily, proffering a letter sealed with a large red lump of wax. "She said if I didn't give it to Elayne right away, she'd bring it in herself. She said it's about the child's mother." Elayne almost ground her teeth. The sisters' serving women had all picked up their mistresses' way of talking about Nynaeve and her, if seldom where they could hear.

Furious, she snatched the letter without waiting for Merilille to say she could—if that was what she would have said—and broke the seal with her thumb.

> My Lady Elayne,
>
> I greet the Daughter-Heir of Andor with joyous news. I have but just learned that your mother, Queen Morgase, lives and is at present the guest of Pedron Niall in Amador, and wishes above all to be reunited with you so that you may return to Andor together in triumph. I offer escort through the bandits now infesting Altara, so that you may reach your mother's side in safety and all speed. Forgive these few poor words, scribbled in haste, but I know you would wish to learn the wondrous news as soon as possible. Until I can leave you at your mother's side.
>
> Sealed in the Light,
> Jaichim Carridin

The paper crumpled in her fist. How *dare* he? The pain of her mother's death, without even a body to be buried, was only beginning to fade, and Carridin *dared* mock her this way? Embracing the True Source, she hurled the foul lies away from her and channeled; fire flared in midair, so hot that only a dust of ash fell to the blue-and-gold floor tiles. *That* for Jaichim Carridin. And as for these . . . women! The pride of a thousand years of Andoran queens put steel into her backbone.

Merilille surged to her feet. "You were not given permission to channel! You will release the—!"

"Leave us, Pol," Elayne said. "Now." The serving woman stared, but Elayne's mother had taught her well the voice of command, the voice of a Queen from her throne. Pol bobbed a curtsy and was moving before she realized. Once under way, she hesitated only an instant before hurrying out and closing the door behind her. Whatever was about to happen plainly was for Aes Sedai alone.

"What has gotten into you, child?" Pure fury submerged the remnants of Merilille's regathered calm. "Release the Source immediately, or I vow, I'll fetch a slipper myself this minute!"

"I am Aes Sedai." The words came out like winter stone, and Elayne meant them to. Carridin's lies, and these women. Merilille threatened to *slipper* her? They *would* acknowledge her rightful place as a sister. She and Nynaeve had found the Bowl! As good as, anyway, and the arrangements for its use were under way. "You propose to punish me for endangering a secret apparently known only to sisters, but no one bothered to tell me this secret when I attained the shawl. You suggest punishing me like a novice or Accepted, but I am Aes Sedai. I was raised to the shawl by Egwene al'Vere, the Amyrlin you claim to serve. If you deny that Nynaeve and I are Aes Sedai, then you deny the Amyrlin Seat who sent me to find the Bowl of the Winds, which we have done. I will not have it! I call you to account, Merilille Ceandevin. Submit to the will of the Amyrlin Seat, or *I* will call judgment on *you* as a rebellious traitor!"

Merilille's eyes bulged, and her mouth hung open, but she appeared composed beside Careane or Sareitha, who looked about to choke to death on incredulity. Vandene seemed mildly taken aback, a thoughtful finger pressed to her lips beneath slightly widened eyes, while Adeleas sat forward, studying Elayne as if seeing her for the first time.

Channeling, Elayne floated one of the tall armchairs to her and sat, composing her skirts. “You may as well sit, too, Merilille.” She still used the voice of command—apparently it was the only way to make them listen—but she was startled when Merilille actually sank back down slowly, staring at her pop-eyed.

Outside, she maintained a calm, cool façade, but inside, anger bubbled. No, it *boiled.* Secrets. She had always thought Aes Sedai kept too many secrets, even from each other. Especially from each other. True, she kept some herself, but only at necessity, and not from anyone who needed to know. And these women had thought to punish *her*! “Your authority comes from the Hall of the Tower, Merilille; Nynaeve’s and mine from the Amyrlin Seat. Ours supersedes yours. From now on, you will take your instructions from Nynaeve or me. We will of course listen carefully to any advice you might offer.” She had thought Merilille’s eyes bulged before, but now. . . .

“Impossible,” the Gray spluttered. “You are—”

“Merilille!” Elayne said sharply, leaning forward. “Do you still deny the authority of your Amyrlin? Do you still *dare*?” Merilille’s mouth worked soundlessly. She wet her lips. She shook her head jerkily. Elayne felt a thrill of exultation; all that about Merilille taking direction was stuff and nonsense, of course, but she *would* be acknowledged. Thom and her mother both said you must begin by asking for ten to get one. Still, that was not enough to damp her anger. She had half a mind to fetch a slipper herself and see how far she could push this. Except, that would shatter everything. They would remember her age fast enough then, and how short a time ago she had put off a novice dress; they might even begin thinking of her as a foolish child again. Which thought stoked her fury anew. But she contented herself with, “While you think quietly on what else I should be told as Aes Sedai, Merilille, Adeleas and Vandene will instruct me in this secret I endangered. Do you mean to tell me the Tower has known of the Circle—these Kin, as you call them—all along?” Poor Reanne and her hopes to avoid Aes Sedai notice.

“As near as they could make themselves come to sisters, I suppose,” Vandene replied. Carefully. She studied Elayne as intently as her sister did, now. Though a Green, she had many of the same mannerisms as Adeleas. Careane and Sareitha looked stunned, disbelieving eyes swinging from a silent, red-cheeked Merilille to Elayne and back.

“Even during the Trolloc Wars, women failed their tests, or lacked the strength, or were sent away from the Tower for any of the usual reasons.” Adeleas had adopted a lecturing tone, but not offensively. Browns often did when expounding. “Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a number feared to go off into the world alone, nor that they might flee to Barashta, as the city that existed here then was called. Though the main part of Barashta was, of course, where the Rahad now stands. Not that a stone of Barashta remains. The Trolloc Wars did not truly envelope Eharon until late, but in the end, Barashta fell as completely as Barsine, or Shaemal, or. . . .”

“The Kin . . .” Vandene broke in gently; Adeleas blinked at her, then nodded. “. . . The Kin persisted even after Barashta fell, in the same way they had before, taking in wilders and women put out of the Tower.” Elayne frowned; Mistress Anan had said the Kin took in wilders, too, but Reanne’s biggest anxiety had seemed to be making her and Nynaeve prove they were not.

“None ever remained long,” Adeleas added. “Five years, perhaps ten; then, I suppose, as now. Once they realize that their little group is no replacement for the White Tower, they go off and become village Healers or Wisdoms or the like, or sometimes simply forget the Power, stop channeling, and take up a craft or trade. In any case, they vanish, so to speak.” Elayne wondered how anyone could forget the One Power that way; the urge to channel, the temptation of the Source, was always there, once you learned how. Aes Sedai did seem to believe some women could just put it behind them, though, once they found out they would not be Aes Sedai.

Vandene took up the explanation again; the sisters frequently spoke almost in alternating sentences, each carrying on smoothly where the other left off. “The Tower has known of the Kin from nearly the beginning, perhaps from the very beginning. At first, no doubt, the Wars took precedence. And despite calling themselves the *Kin*, they have done just what we want such women to do. They remain hidden, even the fact that they can channel, draw no attention whatsoever to themselves. Over the years, they have even passed along word—secretly, of course; carefully—when one of them found a woman falsely claiming the shawl. You said something?”

Elayne shook her head. “Careane, is there any tea in that pot?” Careane gave a small start. “I think Adeleas and Vandene might like to wet their throats." The Domani woman did not quite look at a still-staring Merilille before going to the table where the silver teapot and cups were. "That doesn't explain why," Elayne went on. "Why is knowledge of them such a deep secret? Why haven't they been scattered long ago?"

"Why, the runaways, of course." Adeleas made it sound the most obvious thing in the world. "It is a fact that other gatherings have been broken up as soon as found—the last about two hundred years ago—but the Kin do keep themselves small, and quiet. That last group called themselves the Daughters of Silence, yet they were hardly silent. Only twenty-three of them altogether, wilders gathered and trained after a fashion by a pair of former Accepted, but they—"

"Runaways," Elayne prompted, taking a cup from Careane with a smile of thanks. She had not asked one for herself, but she realized absently that the woman had offered her the first. Vandene and her sister had talked quite a bit about runaways on the way to Ebou Dar.

Adeleas blinked, and pulled herself back to the topic. "The Kin help runaways. They always have two or three women in Tar Valon keeping watch. For one thing, they approach almost every woman put out, in a very circumspect way, and for another, they manage to find every runaway, whether novice or Accepted. At least, none has made it off the island without their help since the Trolloc Wars."

"Oh, yes," Vandene said as Adeleas paused to take a cup from Careane. It had been offered to Merilille first, but Merilille sat slumped and staring bleakly at nothing. "If anyone does manage to escape, why, we know right where to look, and she nearly always ends up back in the Tower wishing her feet had never itched. As long as the Kin don't know we know, anyway. Once that happens, it will be back to the days before the Kin, when a woman running from the Tower might go in any direction. The numbers were larger then—Aes Sedai, Accepted, novices *and* runaways—and some years two out of three escaped clean, others three out of four. Using the Kin, we retake at least nine of ten. You can see why the Tower has preserved the Kin and their secret like precious jewels."

Elayne could. A woman was not done with the White Tower until it was done with her. Besides, it could not hurt the Tower's reputation for infallibility that it always caught runaways. Almost always. Well, now she knew.

She stood, and to her astonishment, Adeleas did also, and Vandene, waving away Careane's offered tea, and Sareitha. Even Merilille, after a moment. They all looked at her expectantly, even Merilille.

Vandene noticed her surprise, and smiled. "Another thing you might not know. We are a contentious lot in many ways, we Aes Sedai, each jealous of her place and prerogatives, but when someone is placed above us or stands above us, we tend to follow her fairly meekly for the most part. However we might grumble about her decisions in private."

"Why, so we do," Adeleas murmured happily, as if she had just discovered something.

Merilille took a deep breath, absorbing herself for a moment in straightening her skirts. "Vandene is right," she said. "You stand above us in yourself, and I must admit, you apparently have been placed above us. If our behavior calls for penance. . . . Well, you will tell us if it does. Where are we to follow you? If I may ask?" There was no sarcasm in any of that; if anything, her tone was more polite than Elayne had heard out of her before.

She thought any Aes Sedai who ever lived would have been proud to control her features as well as she did right then. All she had wanted was for them to admit she really was Aes Sedai. She fought a momentary urge to protest that she was too young, too inexperienced. "You can never put honey back in the comb," so Lini used to say when she was a girl. Egwene was no older.

Drawing breath, she smiled warmly. "The first thing to recall is that we *are* all sisters, in every meaning of the word. We must work together; the Bowl of the Winds is too important for anything less." She hoped they would all nod so enthusiastically when she told them what Egwene intended. "Perhaps we should sit again." They waited for her before folding themselves back into their seats. She hoped Nynaeve was getting on a tenth so well. When she found out about this, Nynaeve was going to faint from shock. "I have something of my own to tell you about the Kin."

Fairly soon it was Merilille who looked ready to faint from shock, and even Adeleas and Vandene were not far from it. But they went right on saying, "Yes, Elayne," and "If you say so, Elayne." Perhaps it would all go smoothly from now on.

The sedan chair was rocking through the crowds of revelers along the quay when Moghedien spotted the woman. She was being handed down from a coach at one of the boat landings by a footman in green and white. A wide feathered mask covered her face more completely than Moghedien's did, but she would have known that determined stride, known that woman, from any angle in any light. The carved screens that served as windows in the closed chair were certainly no hindrance. Two fellows with swords on their hips scrambled from the coach roof to follow the masked woman.

Moghedien thumped a fist against the side of the chair, shouting, "Stop!" The bearers halted so quickly she was almost flung forward.

The crowd jostled past, some shouting curses at her bearers for blocking the way, some shouting more good naturedly. Down here by the river, the throng ran thin enough for her to watch through the gaps. The boat that pulled away from the landing seemed quite distinctive; the roof of the low cabin in the rear was painted red; she did not see that affectation on any of the others waiting at the long stone dock.

She wet her lips, shivering. Moridin's instructions had been explicit, the price of disobedience made excruciatingly clear. But a slight delay would not hurt. Not if he never learned of it, anyway.

Flinging open the door, she climbed out into the street and looked about hastily. There; that inn, right overlooking the docks. And the river. Lifting her skirts, she hurried away without the slightest fear anyone might hire her chair; until she untied the webs of Compulsion on them, the bearers would tell anyone who asked that they were engaged, and stand there until they died of hunger. A path opened ahead of her, men and women in feathered masks leaping aside before she reached them, leaping with squeals and cries as they clutched where they thought they had been stabbed. As they had; there was no time to spin subtle webs on so many minds, but a flurry of needles woven of Air did as well here.

The stout innkeeper at The Oarsman's Pride nearly leaped, too, at the sight of Moghedien striding into her common room in gloriously scarlet silk worked with thread-of-gold and black silk that glistened as richly as the gold. Her mask was a great spray of pitch black feathers with a sharp black beak; a raven. That was Moridin's joke, his command, as was the dress, in fact. His colors were black and red, he said, and she would wear them while she served him. She was in livery, however elegant, and she could have killed everyone who saw her.

Instead, she spun a hasty web on the round-cheeked innkeeper that jerked her up straight and made her eyes pop. No time for subtlety. At Moghedien's command to show her the roof, the woman *ran* up the railless stairs at the side of the room. It was unlikely any of the feather-draped drinkers saw anything unusual in the innkeeper's behavior, Moghedien thought with a small laugh. The Oarsman's Pride probably had never seen a patron of her quality before.

On the flat roof, she quickly weighed the dangers of letting the innkeeper live versus those of killing her. Corpses had a way of pointing a finger, eventually. If you wished to remain quietly hidden in the shadows, you did not kill unless you absolutely had to. Hastily, she adjusted the web of Compulsion, told the woman to go down to her room, to go to sleep and forget ever having seen her. With the haste, it was possible the innkeeper might lose the whole day, or wake somewhat slower of wits than she had been—so much in Moghedien's life would have been so much easier had she possessed a better Talent for Compulsion—but in any case, the woman scurried away, eager to obey, and left her alone.

As the door thumped down flat into the dirty white-tiled roof, Moghedien gasped at the sudden feel of fingers stroking her mind, palping her soul. Moridin did that sometimes; a reminder, he said, as if she needed any more. She almost looked around for him; her skin pebbled as though at a sudden icy breeze. The touch vanished, and she shivered again. Coming or going, it did remind her. Moridin himself could appear anywhere at any time. Haste.

Speeding to the low wall that surrounded the roof, she searched the river spread out below. Scores of boats of every size swept along on their oars between larger vessels, anchored or under sail. Most of the cabins of the sort she sought were plain wood, but there she saw a yellow roof, and there a blue, and there, in midriver and heading southward fast. . . . Red. It had to be the right one; she could not take any more time here.

She raised her hands, but as balefire launched itself, something flashed around her and she jerked. Moridin *had* come; he *was* there, and he would. . . . She stared at the pigeons fluttering away. Pigeons! She nearly spewed the contents of her stomach across the roof. A glance at the river, made her snarl.

Because she had jerked, the balefire she meant to slice through cabin and passenger instead had sliced diagonally through the middle of the boat, about where the oarsmen had stood, and the bodyguards. Because the rowers had been burned out of the Pattern *before* the balefire struck, the two halves of the craft were now a good hundred paces back up the river. Then again, perhaps it was not a complete disaster. Because that slice from the boat's center had gone at the same time the boatmen really died, the river had had minutes to rush in. The two parts of the boat sank out of sight in a great froth of bubbles even as her eyes shifted to them, carrying their passenger to the depths.

Suddenly, what she had done struck her. She had always moved in the dim places, always kept herself hidden, always. . . . Any woman in the city who could channel would know someone had drawn a great deal of *saidar*, if not for what, and any eye watching had seen that bar of liquid white fire sear across the afternoon. Fear gave her wings. Not fear. Terror.

Gathering her skirts, she ran back down the stairs, ran through the common room bumping into tables and careering off people trying to get out her way, ran into the street too frightened to think, battering a path through the crowd with her hands.

"Run!" she shrieked, hurling herself into the sedan chair. Her skirts caught in the door; she ripped them free. "Run!"

The bearers flung themselves into motion, tossing her about, but she did not care. She braced herself with fingers laced through the carved window screens, and shook uncontrollably. He had not forbidden this. He might forgive, or even ignore her independent action here, if she carried out his instructions swiftly, efficiently. That was her only hope. She was going to make Falion and Ispan *crawl*!

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CHAPTER

31

Mashiara

As the boat swept away from the landing, Nynaeve tossed her mask down beside her on the cushioned bench and slumped back with arms folded and braid gripped firmly, scowling at nothing. Scowling at everything. Listening to the Wind still told her a fierce storm was on the way, the kind that tore off roofs and flattened barns, and she almost wished the river would begin to kick up in waves right that minute.

“If it isn’t the weather, Nynaeve,” she mimicked, “then you should be the one to go. The Mistress of the Ships might be insulted if we didn’t send the strongest of us. They know Aes Sedai put great store in that. Bah!” That had been Elayne. Except for the “bah.” Elayne just thought putting up with any amount of nonsense from Merilille would be preferable to facing Nesta again. Once you began badly with someone, it was hard to recover—Mat Cauthon was proof enough of that!—and if they had gotten off any worse with Nesta din Reas Two Moons, she would be sending the lot of them to fetch and carry.

“Horrible woman!” she grumbled, shifting around on the seat cushions. Aviendha had been no better when Nynaeve suggested she go to the Sea Folk; those people had been fascinated by her. She pitched her voice high and finicky, not at all like Aviendha’s, but the mood fit. “We will learn of this trouble when we learn, Nynaeve al’Meara. Perhaps I will learn something watching Jaichim Carridin today.” If not for the fact that nothing whatsoever frightened the Aiel woman, she would have thought Aviendha fearful from her eagerness to spy on Carridin. A day standing in a hot street jostled by crowds was not amusing, and today would be worse, with the festival. Nynaeve would have thought the woman would enjoy a nice refreshing boat ride.

The boat lurched. A nice refreshing boat ride, she told herself. Nice cool breezes on the bay. Moist breezes, not dry. The boat rolled. “Oh, blood and ashes!” she moaned. Appalled, she clapped a hand over her mouth and drummed her heels against the front of the bench in righteous outrage. If she had to endure those Sea Folk for long, she would have as much filth coming off of her tongue as Mat did. She did not want to think about him. One more day folding her hands for that . . . that *man* . . . and she would yank every hair out of her head! Not that he had demanded anything unreasonable so far, but she kept waiting for him to, and his manner . . . !

“No!” she said firmly. “I want to settle my stomach, not rile it.” The boat had begun a slow rocking. She tried to concentrate on her clothes. She was not fixated on clothes the way Elayne sometimes seemed to be, but thinking about silks and laces was soothing.

Everything had been chosen to impress the Mistress of the Ships, to try regaining a little lost ground, for all the good it might do. Green silk slashed with yellow in the skirts, embroidered in gold down the sleeves and across the bodice, with golden lace along the hem, and at her wrists, and just bordering the neckline. Perhaps that should have been higher, to be taken seriously, but she did not own anything higher. Considering Sea Folk customs, it was more than modest. Nesta would have to take her as she was; Nynaeve al’Meara did not go changing herself for anyone.

The yellow opal pins stuck in her braid were her own—a present from the Panarch of Tarabon, no less—but Tylin had provided the gold necklace that fanned emeralds and pearls down to her bosom. A richer piece than she had ever dreamed of owning; a gift for bringing Mat, Tylin had called it, which made no sense at all, but maybe the Queen thought she needed some excuse for such a valuable present. Both gold-and-ivory bracelets came from Aviendha, who had a surprising little stock of jewelry for a woman who so seldom wore more than that one silver necklace. Nynaeve had asked to borrow that pretty roses-and-thorns ivory bracelet that the Aiel woman never wore; surprisingly, Aviendha had snatched it to her bosom as if it was her most precious possession, and of all things, Elayne began comforting her. Nynaeve would not have been surprised to see the pair fall weeping on one another’s shoulder.

There was something odd going on there, and if she had not known those two were too sensible for such nonsense, she would have suspected a man at the root of it. Well, Aviendha was too sensible; Elayne did still yearn for Rand, though Nynaeve could hardly fault her for—

Suddenly she felt weaves of *saidar* almost atop her in huge amounts, and . . .

. . . she floundered in salty water over her head, flailing upward to find air, tangled in her skirts, flailing. Her head broke surface, and she gasped for breath amid floating cushions, staring in astonishment. After a moment, she recognized the slanting shape above her as one of the cabin seats, and a bit of the cabin wall. She was inside a trapped pocket of air. Not large; she could have touched both sides without stretching her arms out fully. But how . . . ? An audible thud announced the bottom of the river; the upside-down cabin, lurched, tilted. She thought the air pocket shrank a little.

The first order of business, before wondering about anything, was getting out before she used up the air. She knew how to swim—she had splashed in the Waterwood ponds often enough back home—it was just when the water started rocking her about that she minded. Filling her lungs, she doubled over and swam down toward where the door must be, kicking awkwardly because of her skirts. It might help to shed the dress, but she was not about to bob to the surface of the river in nothing but shift and stockings and jewels. She was not about to leave those behind, either. Besides, she could not get out of the dress without loosing her belt pouch, and she would drown before losing what was in there.

The water was black, lightless. Her outstretched fingers struck wood, and she felt across the piercework carving until she found the door, scrabbled down the edge of that—and found a hinge. Muttering imprecations in her head, she cautiously felt her way to the other side. Yes! The latch handle! She lifted it, pushed outward. The door moved maybe two inches—and stopped.

Lungs straining, she swam back up to the pocket, but only long enough to fill them again. This time, finding the door came faster. She stuck her fingers through the crack to find what held the door shut. They sank into mud. Maybe she could dig away a little hillock, or. . . . She felt higher. More mud. Increasingly frantic, she worked her fingers from the bottom of the crack to the top, and then, refusing to believe, from the top to the bottom. Mud, solid gooey mud, all the way.

This time when she swam back up to the pocket, she grabbed hold of the edge of the seat above her and hung from it, panting, heart beating wildly. The air felt . . . thicker.

“I will not die here,” she muttered. “I will not die here!”

She hammered a fist against the seat until she felt it bruise, fighting for the anger that would allow her to channel. She would not die. Not here. Alone. No one would know where she had died. No grave, just a corpse rotting at the bottom of the river. Her arm fell with a splash. She labored for breath. Flecks of black and silver danced in her eyes; she seemed to be looking down a tube. No anger, she realized dimly. She kept trying to reach for *saidar*, but without any belief that she would touch it, now. She was going to die here after all. No hope. No Lan. And with hope gone, flickering on the edge of consciousness like a guttering candle flame, she did something she had never done before in her life. She surrendered completely.

Saidar flowed into her, filled her.

She was only half-aware of the wood above her suddenly bulging outward, bursting. In rushing bubbles of air she drifted up, out through the hole in the hull into darkness. Vaguely, she knew she should do something. She could almost remember what. Yes. Her feet kicked weakly; she tried to move her arms to swim. They seemed to just float.

Something seized her dress, and panic roused her in thoughts of sharks, and lionfish, and the Light alone knew what else that might inhabit these black depths. A spark of consciousness spoke of the Power, but she flailed desperately with fists and feet, felt her knuckles land solidly. Unfortunately, she also screamed, or tried to. A great quantity of water rushing down her throat washed away scream, *saidar*, and very nearly her final scraps of awareness.

Something tugged on her braid, then again, and she was being towed . . . somewhere. She was no longer conscious enough to struggle, or even to be very much afraid of being eaten.

Abruptly her head broke surface. Hands encircled her from behind—hands; not a shark, after all—squeezed hard against her ribs in a most familiar way. She coughed—water spewed from her nose—coughed again, painfully. And drew a shuddering breath. She had never tasted anything so sweet in her life.

A hand cupped her chin, and suddenly she was being towed again. Lassitude washed through her. All she could do was float on her back, and breathe, and stare up at the sky. So blue. So beautiful. The stinging in her eyes was not all from the salty river.

And then she was being pushed upward against the side of a boat, a rude hand beneath her bottom shoving her higher, until two lanky fellows with brass rings in their ears could reach down and haul her aboard. They helped her walk a step or two, but as soon as they let go to help her rescuer, her legs collapsed like towers of soggy mush.

On unsteady hands and knees, she stared blankly at a sword and boots and green coat someone had thrown down on the deck. She opened her mouth—and emptied herself of the River Eldar. The entire river, it seemed, plus her midday meal, and her breakfast; it would not have surprised her at all to see a few fish, or her slippers. She was wiping her lips with the back of her hand when she became aware of voices.

“My Lord is all right? My Lord was down for a very long time.”

“Forget me, man,” said a deep voice. “Get something to wrap around the lady.” Lan’s voice, that she dreamed every night of hearing.

Wide-eyed, Nynaeve barely bit back a wail; the horror she had felt when she thought she was going to die was nothing alongside what flashed through her now. Nothing! This was a nightmare. Not now! Not like this! Not when she was a drowned rat, kneeling with the contents of her stomach spread out before her!

Without thought she embraced *saidar* and channeled. Water fell away from her clothes, her hair, in a rush and washed all evidence of her little mishap out through a scupper hole. Scrambling to her feet, she hurriedly pulled her necklace aright and did her best to straighten her dress and hair, but the soaking in salt water and then the rapid drying had left several stains on the silk and a number of creases that would require a knowledgeable hand with a hot iron to remove. Wisps of hair wanted to fly away from her scalp, and the opals in her braid seemed to dot the bristling tail of an angry cat.

It did not matter. She was calmness itself, cool as an early spring breeze, self-possessed as. . . . She spun around before he could come on her from behind and startle her into disgracing herself completely.

She only realized how quickly she had moved when she saw that Lan was just then taking his second step from the railing. He was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. Soaking wet in shirt and breeches and stockings, he was gorgeous, with his dripping hair clinging to the angles of his face, and. . . . A split purple bruise was rising on his face, as from a blow. She clapped a hand to her mouth, remembering her fist connecting.

"Oh, no! Oh, Lan, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to!" She was not really aware of crossing the space between them; she was just there, stretching up on toetips to lay fingers gently on his injury. A deft weave of all Five Powers, and his tanned cheek was unblemished. But he might have been hurt elsewhere. She spun the weaves to Delve him; new scars made her wince inside, and there was something odd, but he seemed healthy as a prime bull. He was also very wet, from saving her. She dried him as she had herself; water splashed around his feet. She could not stop touching him. Both hands traced his hard cheeks, his wonderful blue eyes, his strong nose, his firm lips, his ears. She combed that silky black hair into place with her fingers, adjusted the braided leather band that held it. Her tongue seemed to have a life of its own, too. "Oh, Lan," she murmured. "You really are here." Somebody giggled. Not her—Nynaeve al'Meara did not giggle—but somebody did. "It isn't a dream. Oh, Light, you're here. How?"

"A servant at the Tarasin Palace told me you'd gone to the river, and a fellow at the landing said what boat you had taken. If Mandarb hadn't lost a shoe, I would have been here yesterday."

"I don't care. You're here now. You're here." She did not giggle.

"Maybe she is Aes Sedai," one of the boatmen murmured, not quite low enough, "but I still say she's one duckling who means to stuff herself in that wolf's jaws."

Nynaeve's face flashed pure scarlet, and she snatched her hands to her sides, her heels thumping to the deck. Another time, she would have given the fellow what for, and no mistake. Another time, when she could think. Lan crowded everything else out of her head. She seized his arm. "We can talk more privately in the cabin." Had one of the oarsmen snickered?

"My sword and—"

"I'll bring it," she said, snatching up his things from the deck on flows of Air. One of those louts *had* snickered. Another flow of Air pulled open the cabin door, and she hustled Lan and his sword and the rest inside and slammed it behind them.

Light, she doubted if even Calle Coplin back home had ever been as bold as this, and as many merchants' guards knew Calle's birthmark as knew her face. But it was not the same at all. Not at all! Still, no harm in being just a tad less . . . eager. Her hands went back to his face—only to straighten his hair some more; just that—and he caught her wrists gently in his big hands.

“Myrelle holds my bond, now,” he said quietly. “She is lending me to you until you find a Warder of your own.”

Calmly pulling her right hand free, she slapped his face as hard as she could swing. His head hardly moved, so she freed the other hand and slapped him harder with that. “How could you?” For good measure, she punctuated the question with another slap. “You knew I was waiting!” One more seemed called for, just to drive the point home. “How could you do such a thing? How could you let her?” Another slap. “Burn you, Lan Mandragoran! Burn you! Burn you! Burn you to the Pit of Doom! Burn you!”

The man—the *bloody* man!—did not say one word. Not that he could, of course; what defense could he offer? He just stood there while she rained blows at him, making no move, unblinking eyes looking peculiar, as well they might with the way she reddened his cheeks for him. If her slaps made little impression on him, though, the palms of her hands began to sting like fury.

Grimly, she clenched a fist and punched him in the belly with all her might. He grunted. Slightly.

“We will talk this over calmly and rationally,” she said, stepping back from him. “As adults.” Lan just nodded and sat down and pulled his boots over to him! Pushing bits of hair out of her face with her left hand, she stuck the right behind her so she could flex her sore fingers without him seeing. He had no right being that hard, not when she wanted to hit him. Too much to hope she had cracked a rib in him.

“You should thank her, Nynaeve.” How could the man sound so calm! Stamping his foot firmly into one boot, he bent to pick up the other, not looking at her. “You wouldn’t want me bonded to you.”

The flow of Air seized a handful of his hair and bent his head up painfully. “If you dare—if you even dare—to spout that drivel about not wanting to give me a widow’s weeds, Lan Mandragoran, I’ll . . . I’ll. . . .” She could not think of anything strong enough. Kicking him was not near enough. Myrelle. Myrelle and her Warders. Burn him! Removing his hide in strips would not be enough!

He might as well not have been bent over with his neck craned. He just rested his forearms across his knees, and watched her with that odd look in his eyes, and said, “I thought about not telling you, but you have a right to know.” Even so, his tone became hesitant; Lan was never hesitant. “When

Moiraine died—when a Warder's bond to his Aes Sedai is snapped—there are changes. . . ."

As he continued, her arms snaked around herself, hugging tightly to keep her from shivering. Her jaw ached, for she kept it clamped shut. She released the flow holding him as if a hand springing away, released *saidar*, but he only straightened and went on relating this horror without so much as a flinch, went on watching her. Suddenly she understood his eyes, colder than winter's heart. The eyes of a man who knew he was dead and could not make himself care, a man waiting, almost eager, for that long sleep. Her own eyes stung with not weeping.

"So you see," he concluded with a smile that touched only his mouth; an accepting smile, "when it's done, she will have a year or more of pain, and I will still be dead. You are spared that. My last gift to you, *Mashiara."* *Mashiara*. His lost love.

"You are to be my Warder until I find one?" Her voice startled her with its levelness. She could not break down in tears now. She would not. Now, more than ever before, she had to gather all her strength.

"Yes," he said cautiously, tugging on his other boot. He had always seemed something of a half-tame wolf, and his eyes made him seem much less than half tame now.

"Good." Adjusting her skirts, she resisted the urge to cross the cabin to him. She could not let him see her fear. "Because I have found him. You. I waited and wished with Moiraine; I won't with Myrelle. She is going to give me your bond." Myrelle would, if she had to drag the woman to Tar Valon and back by her hair. For that matter, she might drag her just for the principle of it. "Don't say anything," she said sharply when he opened his mouth. Her fingers brushed her belt pouch, where his heavy gold signet ring lay wrapped in a silk handkerchief. With an effort, she moderated her tone; he was ill, and harsh words never helped sickness. It was an effort, though; she wanted to berate him up one side and down the other, wanted to pull her braid out by the roots every time she thought of him and that woman. Fighting to keep her voice calm, she went on.

"In the Two Rivers, Lan, when somebody gives another a ring, they are betrothed." That was a lie, and she half-expected him to jump to his feet in outrage, but he only blinked warily. Besides, she had read about the notion in a story. "We have been betrothed long enough. We are going to be married today."

"I used to pray for that," he said softly, then shook his head. "You know why it can't be, Nynaeve. And even if it could, Myrelle—"

Despite all her promises to keep her temper, to be gentle, she embraced *saidar* and stuffed a gag of Air into his mouth before he could confess what she did not want to hear. So long as he did not confess, she could pretend nothing had happened. When she got hold of Myrelle, though! Opals pressed hard into her palm, and her hand leaped from her braid as if burned. She occupied her fingers with brushing his hair again while he glared at her indignantly above his gaping mouth. "A small lesson for you in the difference between wives and other women," she said lightly. Such a struggle. "I would appreciate it very much if you did not mention Myrelle's name again in my presence. Do you understand?"

He nodded, and she released the flow, but as soon as he had worked his jaw a moment, he said, "Naming no names, Nynaeve, you know she's aware of everything I feel, through the bond. If we were man and wife. . . ."

She thought her face might burst into flame. She had never thought of that! Bloody Myrelle! "Is there any way to make sure she knows it is me?" she said finally, and her cheeks nearly did flash to fire. Especially when he fell back against the cabin wall laughing in astonishment.

"Light, Nynaeve, you are a hawk! Light! I haven't laughed since. . . ." His mirth faded, the coldness that had dimmed in his eyes for an instant returning. "I do wish it could be, Nynaeve, but—"

"It can and will," she broke in. Men always seemed to get the upper hand if you let them talk too long. She plumped herself down on his knees. They were not married yet, true, but he was softer than the unpadded benches on this boat. She shifted a bit to make herself more comfortable. Well, no harder than the benches, anyway. "You might as well reconcile yourself, Lan Mandragoran. My heart belongs to you, and you've admitted yours belongs to me. *You* belong to me, and I will not let you go. You will be my Warder, and my husband, and for a very long time. I will not let you die. Do you understand *that*? I can be as stubborn as I have to be."

"I hadn't noticed," he said, and her eyes narrowed. His tone sounded awfully . . . dry.

"As long as you do now," she said firmly. Twisting her neck, she peered through the piercework in the hull behind him, then craned around to peer through the carving at the front of the cabin. Long stone docks thrusting out from the stone quay passed by; all she could see ahead were more docks, and the city gleaming white in the afternoon sun. “Where are we going?” she muttered.

“I told them to put us ashore as soon as I had you aboard,” Lan said. “It seemed best to get off the river as fast as possible.”

“You . . . ?” She clamped her teeth shut. He had not known where she was headed or why; he had done the best he could with what he did know. And he *had* saved her life. “I can’t go back to the city yet, Lan.” Clearing her throat, she changed her tone. However gentle she had to be with him, that much syrup would make her sick up all over again. “I have to go to the Sea Folk ships, to *Windrunner*” Much better; light, but not too light, and firm.

“Nynaeve, I was right behind your boat. I saw what happened. You were fifty paces ahead of me, and then fifty paces behind, sinking. It had to be balefire.” He did not need to say more; she said it for him, and with more knowledge than he had.

“Moghedien,” she breathed. Oh, it could have been another of the Forsaken, or one of the Black Ajah perhaps, but she knew. Well, she had beaten Moghedien not once, but twice. She could do so a third time, if necessary. Her face must not have shared her confidence.

“Don’t be afraid,” Lan said, touching her cheek. “Don’t ever be afraid while I’m near. If you have to face Moghedien, I’ll make sure you are angry enough to channel. I seem to have some talent in that direction.”

“You’ll never make me angry again,” she began, and stopped, staring at him wide-eyed. “I’m not angry,” she said slowly.

“Not now, but when you need to be—”

“I’m not angry,” she laughed. She kicked her feet in delight, and pounded her fists on his chest, laughing, *Saidar* filled her, not just with life and joy, but this time, with awe. With feathery flows of Air, she stroked his cheeks. “I am not angry, Lan,” she whispered.

“Your block is gone.” He grinned, sharing her delight, but the grin put no warmth into his eyes.

I will take care of you, Lan Mandragoran, she promised silently. *I will not let you die.* Leaning on his chest, she thought of kissing him, and even. . . . *You are not Calle Coplin,* she told herself firmly.

A sudden, horrible thought struck her. All the more horrible because it had not come earlier. “The boatmen?” she said quietly. “My bodyguards?” Wordlessly, he shook his head, and she sighed. Bodyguards. Light, they had needed her protection, not the other way around. Four more deaths to lay at Moghedien's feet. Four on top of thousands, but these were personal, as far she was concerned. Well, she was not about to settle Moghedien this moment.

Getting to her feet, she began seeing what she could do about her clothes. "Lan, will you turn the boatmen around? Tell them to row for all they have." As it was, she would not see the palace again before nightfall. "And find out if one of them has such a thing as a comb." She could not face Nesta like this.

He picked up his coat and sword and gave her a bow. "As you command, Aes Sedai."

Pursing her lips, she watched the door close behind him. Laughing at her, was he? She would wager someone on *Windrunner* could perform a marriage. And from what she had seen of the Sea Folk, she would wager Lan Mandragoran would find himself promising to do as he was told. They would see who laughed then.

Lurching and rolling, the boat began to swing around, and her stomach lurched with it.

"Oh, Light!" she groaned, sinking onto the bench. Why could she not have lost that along with her block? Holding *saidar*, aware of every touch of the air on her skin, only made it worse. Letting go did not help. She was not going to sick up again. She was going to make Lan hers once and for all. This was going to be a wonderful day yet. If only she could stop feeling that storm on the way.

The sun sat luridly just above the rooftops by the time Elayne rapped on the door with her knuckles. Revelers danced and cavorted in the street behind her, filling the air with laughter and song and the scent of perfume. Idly, she wished she had had a chance really to enjoy the festival. A costume like Birgitte's might have been fun. Or even one like that she had seen on the Lady Riselle, one of Tylin's attendants, first thing this morning. As long as she could have kept her mask on. She rapped again, harder.

The gray-haired, square-jawed maid opened the door, fury suddenly painting her face when Elayne lowered her green mask. "You! What are you doing back—?" Fury turned to ghastly paleness as Merilille removed her mask, and Adeleas and the others did the same. The woman jerked with each ageless face revealed, and even with Sareitha's. By that time, maybe she saw what she expected to see.

With a sudden cry, the maid tried to push the door shut, but Birgitte darted past Elayne, her feathered shoulder knocking it back open. The servant staggered a few steps, then gathered herself, but whether to run or shout, Birgitte was there beforetime, gripping her arm just below the shoulder.

"Easy," Birgitte said firmly. "We don't want any fuss or shouting, now do we?" It did seem she was only holding the woman's arm, almost supporting her, but the maid stood very straight indeed and very still. Staring wide-eyed at her captor's plume-crested mask, she shook her head slowly.

"What is your name?" Elayne asked, as everyone crowded into the entry hall behind her. The closing door muted the noise from outside. The maid's eyes darted from one face to the next as if she could not bear to gaze at any one for long.

"C-c-cedora."

"You will take us to Reanne, Cedora." This time, Cedora nodded; she looked about to cry.

Cedora stiffly led the way upstairs with Birgitte still holding her arm. Elayne considered telling her to release the woman, but the last thing she wanted was a shouted alarm and everyone in the house fleeing in all directions. That was why Birgitte used muscle instead of Elayne herself channeling. She thought Cedora was more frightened than hurt, and everybody was to be at least a little frightened this evening.

"In th-there," Cedora said, nodding to a red door. The door to the room where Nynaeve and she had had that unfortunate interview. She opened it and went in.

Reanne was there, seated with the fireplace carved with the Thirteen Sins at her back, and so were another dozen women Elayne had never seen before, occupying all of the chairs against the pale green walls, sweating with the windows tight and curtains drawn. Most wore Ebou Dari dresses, though only one possessed the olive skin; most had lines on their faces and at least a touch of gray; and every last woman of them could channel to one degree or another. Seven wore the red belt. She sighed in spite of herself. When Nynaeve was right, she let you know it until you wanted to scream.

Reanne bounded to her feet in the same red-faced fury Cedora had shown, and her first words were almost identical as well. "You! How dare you show your face . . . ?" Words and fury drained away together for the same reason, too, as Merilille and the others entered on Elayne's heels. A yellow-haired woman in red belt and plunging neckline made a faint sound as her eyes rolled up in her head and she slid bonelessly from her red chair. No one moved to help her. No one even glanced at Birgitte as she escorted Cedora to a corner and planted her there. No one seemed to breathe. Elayne felt a great desire to shout "boo" just to see what would happen.

Reanne swayed, white-faced, and visibly tried to gather herself with slight success. It took her only a moment to scan the five cool-faced Aes Sedai lined up before the door and decide who must be in charge. She wobbled across the floortiles to Merilille and sank to her knees, head bowed. "Forgive us, Aes Sedai." Her voice was worshipful, and only a little steadier than her knees had been. She babbled, in fact. "We are only a few friends. We have done nothing, certainly nothing to bring discredit to Aes Sedai. I swear that, whatever this girl has told you. We would have told you of her, but we were afraid. We only meet to talk. She has a friend, Aes Sedai. Did you catch her, too? I can describe her for you, Aes Sedai. Whatever you wish, we will do. I swear, we—"

Merilille cleared her throat loudly. "Your name is Reanne Corly, I believe?" Reanne flinched and whispered that it was, still peering at the floor at the Gray sister's feet. "I fear you must address yourself to Elayne Sedai, Reanne."

Reanne's head jerked up in a *most* satisfactory way. She stared at Merilille, then by slow increments turned eyes as big as her face to Elayne. She licked her lips. She drew a deep, long breath. Twisting around on her knees to face Elayne, she bowed her head once more. "I beg your forgiveness, Aes Sedai," she said leadenly. "I did not know. I could not—" Another long, hopeless breath. "Whatever punishment you decree, we accept humbly, of course, but please, I beg you to believe that—"

"Oh, stand up," Elayne broke in impatiently. She had wanted to make this woman acknowledge her as much as she had Merilille or any of the others, but the groveling sickened her. "That's right. Stand on your feet." She waited until Reanne complied, then walked over and sat in the woman's chair. There was no need for cringing, but she wanted no doubts who was in charge. "Do you still deny knowledge of the Bowl of the Winds, Reanne?"

Reanne spread her hands. "Aes Sedai," she said guilelessly, "none of us would ever use a *ter'angreal*, much less an *angreal* or *sa'angreal*." Guileless, and wary as a fox in a city. "I assure you, we make no pretense of being anything even near to Aes Sedai. We are just these few friends you see, tied together by once having been allowed to enter the White Tower. That is all."

"Just these few friends," Elayne said dryly over steepled fingers. "And Garenia, of course. And Berowin, and Derys, and Alise."

"Yes," Reanne said reluctantly. "And them."

Elayne shook her head very slowly. "Reanne, the White Tower knows about your Kin. The Tower has *always* known." A dark woman with a Tairen look to her, though wearing a blue-and-white silk vest with the sigil of the goldsmith's guild, gave a strangled scream and pressed both plump hands to her mouth. A lean, graying Saldaean wearing the red belt crumpled with a sigh to join the yellow-haired woman on the floor, and two more swayed as if they might.

For her part, Reanne looked to the sisters in front of the door for confirmation, and saw it, as she thought. Merilille's face was more icy than serene, and Sareitha grimaced before she could stop herself. Vandene and Careane were both tight-lipped, and even Adeleas seemed included, turning her head this way and that to study the women along the walls as she might have insects previously unknown to her. Of course, what Reanne saw and what was were not the same. They had all accepted Elayne's decision, but no amount of "Yes, Elayne . . ." could make them like it. They would have been here two hours ago if not for a great deal of "But, Elayne . . ." tossed in. Sometimes leading meant herding.

Reanne did not faint, but fear filled her face, and she raised pleading hands. "Do you mean to destroy the Kin? Why now, after so long? What have we done that you should come down on us now?"

"No one will destroy you," Elayne told her. "Careane, since nobody else is going to help those two, would you, please?" Jumps and blushes ran around the room, and before Careane could move, two women were crouching over each one who had fainted, lifting her up and waving smelling salts under her nose. "The Amyrlin Seat desires every woman who can channel to be connected to the Tower," Elayne went on. "The offer is open to any of the Kin who wish to accept."

Had she woven flows of Air around every one of those women, she could not have frozen them more still. Had she squeezed those flows tight, she could not have produced more bulging eyes. One of the women who had fainted suddenly gasped and coughed, pushing away the tiny vial of salts that had been held still too long. That broke everyone free in a deluge of voices.

"We can become Aes Sedai after all?" the Tairen in the goldsmith's vest asked excitedly, at the same time that a round-faced woman with a red belt at least twice as long as anyone else's burst out with, "They will let us learn? They will teach us again?" A deluge of painfully eager voices. "We can really . . . ?" and "They will let us . . . ?" from every side.

Reanne rounded on them fiercely. "Ivara, Sumeko, all of you, you forget yourselves! You speak in front of Aes Sedai! You speak in—front of—Aes Sedai." She passed a hand over her face, trembling. An embarrassed silence descended. Eyes fell and blushes rose. With all those lined faces, all that gray and white hair, Elayne still was minded of nothing so much as a group of novices having a pillow-fight after Last had tolled when the Mistress of Novices walked in.

Hesitantly, Reanne looked at her across her fingertips. "We truly will be allowed to return to the Tower?" she mumbled into her hand.

Elayne nodded. "Those who can learn to become Aes Sedai will have the chance, and there will be a place for all. For any woman who channels."

Unshed tears shone in Reanne's eyes. Elayne was not sure, but she thought the woman whispered, "I can be Green." It was hard not to rush over and throw her arms around her.

None of the other Aes Sedai showed any signs of giving way to emotion, and Merilille certainly was of sterner stuff. "If I may ask a question, Elayne? Reanne, how many . . . of you will we be taking in?" Doubtless that pause covered a change from "how many wilders and failures."

If Reanne noticed or suspected, she ignored it or did not care. "I cannot believe there are any who would refuse the offer," she said breathlessly. "It may take some time to send word to everyone. We remain spread out, you see, so. . . ." She laughed, a touch nervously and still not far from tears. ". . . so Aes Sedai would not notice us. At present there are one thousand seven hundred and eighty-three names on the roll."

Most Aes Sedai learned to cover shock with an outward show of calm, and only Sareitha allowed her eyes to widen. She also mouthed silent words, but Elayne knew her well enough to read her lips. *Two thousand wilders! Light help us!* Elayne made a great show of adjusting her skirts until she was sure her own face was under control. Light help them, indeed.

Reanne misunderstood the silence. “You expected more? Accidents do take some every year, or natural deaths, as with everyone else, and I fear the Kin have grown fewer in the last thousand years. Perhaps we have been too cautious in approaching women when they leave the White Tower, but there has always been the fear that one of them might report being questioned, and . . . and. . . .”

“We are not disappointed in the least,” Elayne assured her, making soothing gestures. Disappointed? She very nearly giggled hysterically. There were nearly twice as many Kinswomen as there were Aes Sedai! Egwene could never say she had not done her part to bring women who could channel to the Tower. But if the Kin refused wilders. . . . She must stick to the point; conscripting the Kin had only been incidental. “Reanne,” she said gently, “do you think perhaps you might happen to recall where the Bowl of the Winds is, now?”

Reanne blushed a sunset. “We’ve never touched them, Elayne Sedai. I don’t know why they were gathered. I’ve never heard of this Bowl of the Winds, but there is a storeroom such as you describe over—”

Belowstairs, a woman channeled briefly. Someone screamed in purest terror.

Elayne was on her feet in a flash, as were they all. From somewhere in that feathered dress, Birgitte produced a dagger.

“That must have been Derys,” Reanne said. “She’s the only other one here.”

Elayne darted forward and caught her arm as she started for the door. “You aren’t Green yet,” she murmured, and was rewarded with a lovely dimpled smile, surprised and pleased and diffident all at once. “We will handle this, Reanne.”

Merilille and the others arrayed themselves to either side, ready to follow Elayne out, but Birgitte was at the door before any of them, grinning as she put hand to latch. Elayne swallowed and said nothing. That was the Warder’s honor, so the Gaidin said; first to go in, last to come out. But she still filled herself with *saidar*, ready to crush anything that threatened her Warder.

The door opened before Birgitte could lift the latch.

Mat sauntered in, pushing the slender maid Elayne remembered ahead of him. “I thought you might be here.” He grinned insolently, ignoring Derys’ glares, and went on, “When I found a bloody great lot of Warders drinking at my least favorite tavern. I've just come back from following a woman to the Rahad. To the top floor of a house with nobody living on it, to be precise. After she left, the floor was so dusty, I could see right away which room she'd gone to. There's a flaming big rusted lock on the door, but I'll bet a thousand crowns to a kick in the bottom, your Bowl is behind it." Derys aimed a kick at him, and he pushed her away, pulling a small knife from his belt to bounce on his palm. "Will one of you tell this wildcat watchdog whose side I'm on? Women with knives make me uneasy, these days."

"We already know all about that, Mat," Elayne said. Well, they had been just about to learn all about it, and the stunned look on his face was *priceless*. She felt something from Birgitte. The other woman gazed at her without any particular expression, but that little knot of emotion in the back of Elayne's head radiated disapproval. Aviendha probably would not think much of it, either. Opening her mouth was one of the most difficult things Elayne had ever done. "I must thank you, though, Mat. It is entirely due to you that we have found what we were looking for." His gaping astonishment was almost worth the agony.

He closed his mouth quickly, though opening it again to say, "Then let's hire a boat and fetch this bloody Bowl. With any luck, we can leave Ebou Dar tonight."

"That is ridiculous, Mat. And don't tell me I'm demeaning you. We are not crawling about the Rahad in the dark, and we are not leaving Ebou Dar until we have used the Bowl."

He tried to argue, of course, but Derys took the opportunity of his attention being elsewhere to try kicking him again. He dodged around Birgitte, yelping for somebody to help him, while the slender woman darted after him.

"He is your Warder, Elayne Sedai?" Reanne asked doubtfully.

"Light, no! Birgitte is." Reanne's mouth fell open. Having answered a question, Elayne asked one, a question she could not have brought herself to ask another sister. "Reanne, if you don't mind telling me, how old are you?"

The woman hesitated, glancing at Mat, but he was still dodging to keep a grinning Birgitte between him and Derys. "My next naming day," Reanne said as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world, "will be my four hundred and twelfth."

Merilille fainted dead away.

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CHAPTER
32

Sealed to the Flame

Elaida do Avriny a’Roihan sat regally in the Amyrlin Seat, the tall vinecarved chair painted now in only six colors instead of seven, a six-striped stole on her shoulders, and ran her gaze around the circular Hall of the Tower. The Sitters’ painted chairs had been rearranged along the stair-fronted dais that encircled the chamber beneath the great dome, spaced out to account for only six Ajahs instead of seven now, and eighteen Sitters stood obediently. Young al’Thor knelt quietly beside the Amyrlin Seat; he would not speak unless given leave, which he would not receive today. Today, he was merely another symbol of her power, and the twelve most favored Sitters glowed with the link that she herself controlled to keep him safe.

“The greater consensus is achieved, Mother,” Alviarin said meekly at her shoulder, bowing humbly against the Flame-topped staff.

Down on the floor, below the dais, Sheriam screamed wildly and had to be restrained by the Tower Guard at her side. The Red sister shielding her sneered in contempt. Romanda and Lelaine clung to a cold outward dignity, but most of the others shielded and guarded on the floor wept quietly, perhaps in relief that only four women had been given the ultimate penalty, perhaps in fear of what else was to come. The most ashen faces belonged to the three who had dared sit in a rebel Hall for the now-dissolved Blue. Every rebel had been cast out from her Ajah until Elaida granted permission to request reacceptance, but the onetime Blues knew they confronted difficult years working their way into her good graces, years before they would be allowed to enter any Ajah at all. Until then, they lay in the palm of her hand.

She stood, and it seemed the One Power flowing through her from the circle was a manifestation of her power. “The Hall concurs with the will of *the Amyrlin Seat. Let Romanda be the first to be birched." Romanda's head jerked; let her see how much dignity she could retain until her stilling. Elaida gestured curtly. "Take the prisoners away, and bring in the first of the poor deluded sisters who followed them. I will accept their submission."*

There was a cry among the prisoners, and one tore free from the guard gripping her arm. Egwene al'Vere threw herself onto the steps at Elaida's feet, hands outstretched, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Forgive me, Mother!" the girl wept. "I repent! I will submit; I do submit. Please, do not still me!" Brokenly, she sagged facedown, shoulders shaking with sobs. "Please, Mother! I repent! I do!"

"The Amyrlin Seat can show mercy," Elaida said exultantly. The White Tower had to lose Lelaine and Romanda and Sheriam as examples, but she could keep this girl's strength. She was *the White Tower. "Egwene al'Vere, you have rebelled against your Amyrlin, but I will show mercy. You will be dressed in novice white again, until I myself judge you ready to be raised further, but this very day you shall be the first to take a Fourth Oath on the Oath Rod, of fealty and obedience to the Amyrlin Seat."*

The prisoners began falling on their knees, crying out to be allowed to take that oath, to prove their true submission. Lelaine was one of the first, and neither Romanda nor Sheriam the last. Egwene crawled up the steps to kiss the hem of Elaida's dress.

"I yield myself to your will, Mother," she murmured through her tears. "Thank you. Oh, thank you!"

Alviarin seized Elaida's shoulder, shook her. "Wake up, you fool woman!" she growled.

Elaida's eyes popped open to the dim light of a single lamp held by Alviarin, bending over her bed with a hand on her shoulder. Still only half-awake, she mumbled, "What did you say?"

"I said, 'Please wake up, Mother,' " Alviarin replied coolly. "Covarla Baldene has returned from Cairhien."

Elaida shook her head, trying to clear away the tag end of the dream. "So soon? I did not expect them for another week at least. Covarla, you say? Where is Galina?" Foolish questions; Alviarin would not know what she meant.

But in that cool crystalline tone, the woman said, "She believes Galina dead or a prisoner. I fear the news is . . . not good."

What Alviarin should or should not know rushed out of Elaida's head. "Tell me," she demanded, throwing off the silk sheet, but as she rose and belted a silk robe over her nightdress, she heard only snatches. A battle. Hordes of Aiel women channeling. Al'Thor gone. Disaster. Distractedly, she noticed that Alviarin was neatly garbed in a silver-embroidered white dress, with the Keeper's stole around her neck. The woman had waited till she clothed herself to bring her this!

The case clock in her study softly chimed Second Low as she entered the sitting room. The small hours of the morning; the worst time to receive dire news. Covarla rose hastily from one of the red-cushioned armchairs, her implacable face sagging with weariness and worry, and knelt to kiss Elaida's ring. Her dark riding dress still bore the dust of travel, and her pale hair needed a brush, but she had donned the shawl she had worn as long as Elaida had been alive.

Elaida barely waited for the woman's lips to touch the Great Serpent before pulling her hand away. "Why were you sent?" she said curtly. Snatching up her knitting from where she had left it in a chair, she sat and began to work the long ivory needles. Knitting served many of the same purposes as fondling her carved ivory miniatures, and she surely needed soothing now. Knitting helped her think, too. She had to think. "Where is Katerine?" If Galina was dead, Katerine should have taken charge ahead of Coiren; Elaida had made it clear that once al'Thor was taken, the Red Ajah was in charge.

Covarla stood slowly, as if uncertain she should. Her hands tightened on the red-fringed shawl looped over her arms. "Katerine is among the missing, Mother. I stand highest among those who. . . ." Her words trailed off as Elaida stared at her, fingers frozen in the act of passing wool over one of the needles. Covarla swallowed and shifted her feet.

"How many, daughter?" Elaida asked finally. She could not believe her voice was so calm.

"I cannot say how many escaped, Mother," Covarla said hesitantly. "We dared not wait to make a thorough search, and—"

"How many?" Elaida shouted. With a shudder, she made herself concentrate on her knitting; giving way to anger was weakness. Loop the yarn, pull through and push down. Soothing motions.

"I—I brought eleven other sisters with me, Mother." The woman paused, breathing hard, and then, when Elaida said nothing, rushed on.

"Others may be making their way back, Mother. Gawyn refused to wait longer, and we dared not remain without him and his Younglings, not with so many Aiel about, and the. . . ."

Elaida did not hear. Twelve returned. Had any more escaped, they would have sped back to Tar Valon, would have been here as soon as Covarla, surely. Even if one or two were injured, traveling slowly. . . . Twelve out of thirty-nine. The Tower had not suffered a disaster of this magnitude even during the Trolloc Wars.

"These Aiel wilders must be taught a lesson," she said, trampling over whatever Covarla was babbling. Galina had thought she could use Aiel to divert Aiel; what a fool the woman had been! "We will rescue the sisters they hold prisoner, and teach them what it means to defy Aes Sedai! And we will take al'Thor again." She would not let him get away, not if she had to personally lead the entire White Tower to take him! The Foretelling had been certain. She *would* triumph!

Casting an uneasy glance at Alviarin, Covarla shifted her feet again. "Mother, those men—I think—"

"Do not think!" Elaida snapped. Her hands clasped the knitting needles convulsively, and she leaned forward so fiercely that Covarla actually raised a hand as though to fend off an attack. Alviarin's presence had slipped from Elaida's mind. Well, the woman knew what she knew, now; that could be dealt with later. "You have maintained secrecy, Covarla? Aside from informing the Keeper?"

"Oh, yes, Mother," Covarla said hastily. Her head bobbed with eagerness, glad that she had done something right. "I entered the city alone, and hid my face until I reached Alviarin. Gawyn meant to accompany me, but the bridge guards refused to let any member of the Younglings pass."

"Forget Gawyn Trakand," Elaida ordered sourly. That young man remained alive to trouble her plans, it seemed. If Galina did turn out to be alive still, she would pay for failing in that, on top of letting al'Thor escape. "You will leave the city as circumspectly as you entered, daughter, and keep yourself and the others well hidden in one of the villages beyond the bridge towns until I send for you. Dorlan will do nicely." They would have to sleep in barns in that tiny hamlet, which had no inn; the least their bungling deserved. "Go, now. And pray that someone above you does arrive soon. The Hall will demand amends for this unparalleled catastrophe, and at the moment, it seems you stand highest among those at fault. Go!"

Covarla’s face went white. She tottered so making her curtsy to leave, Elaida thought she might fall. Bunglers! She was surrounded by fools, traitors and bunglers!

As soon as Elaida heard the outer door close, she hurled down her knitting and sprang to her feet, rounding on Alviarin. “Why have I not heard of this before? If al’Thor escaped—what was it you said? seven days ago?—if he escaped seven days ago, someone’s eyes-and-ears must have seen him. Why was I not informed?”

“I can only pass on to you what the Ajahs pass to me, Mother.” Alviarin adjusted her stole calmly, not a whit ruffled. “Do you really mean to court a third debacle by attempting to rescue the captives?”

Elaida sniffed dismissively. “Do you really believe wilders can stand before Aes Sedai? Galina let herself be surprised; she must have.” She frowned. “What do you mean, a *third* debacle?”

“You didn’t listen, Mother.” Shockingly, Alviarin sat without being given permission, crossing her knees and serenely arranging her skirts. “Covarla thought they might have held out against the wilders—though I believe she is nowhere near as certain as she tried to pretend—but the men were another matter. Several hundred of them in black coats, all channeling. She was very certain of that, and so are the others, apparently. Living weapons, she called them. I think she nearly soiled herself just remembering.”

Elaida stood as if poleaxed. Several hundred? “Impossible. There can’t be more than—” She walked to a table that seemed all ivory and gilt, and poured herself a goblet of wine punch. The lip of the crystal pitcher rattled against the crystal goblet, and almost as much punch went onto the golden tray.

“Since al’Thor can Travel,” Alviarin said suddenly, “it seems logical at least that some of these men can, too. Covarla is quite sure that was how they arrived. I suppose he is rather upset at his treatment. Covarla seemed somewhat uneasy about it; she implied that a number of the sisters were. He might feel he owes you something. It would not be pleasant to have those men suddenly stepping out of thin air right here in the Tower, would it?”

Elaida practically tossed the punch down her throat. Galina had been instructed to begin making al’Thor supple. If he came for revenge. . . . If there really were hundreds of men who could channel, or even one hundred. . . . She had to think!

“Of course, if they were coming, I believe they would have by now. They would not have wasted surprise. Perhaps even al’Thor doesn’t wish to confront the full Tower. I suppose they have all returned to Caemlyn, to their Black Tower. Which means, I fear, that Toveine has a most unpleasant shock awaiting her.”

“Pen an order for her to return immediately,” Elaida said hoarsely. The punch did not seem to help. She turned, and gave a start to find Alviarin right in front of her. Maybe there were not even one hundred—not *even* one hundred? at sunset, *ten* would have seemed madness—but she could not take the chance. “Write it out yourself, Alviarin. Now; right now.”

“And how is it to be gotten to her?” Alviarin tilted her head, icily curious. For some reason, she wore a faint smile. “None of us can Travel. The ships will put Toveine and her party ashore in Andor any day now, if they have not already. You told her to divide into small groups and avoid villages, so as to give no warning. No, Elaida, I am afraid Toveine will regather her forces near Caemlyn and attack the Black Tower without any word from us reaching her.”

Elaida gasped. The woman had just called her by name! And before she could begin to splutter with outrage, worse came.

“I think you are in great trouble, Elaida.” Cold eyes stared into Elaida’s and cold words slid smoothly from Alviarin’s smiling lips. “Sooner or later, the Hall will learn of the disaster with al’Thor. Galina might have satisfied the Hall, possibly, but I doubt Covarla will; they will want someone . . . higher . . . to pay. And sooner or later, we will all learn Toveine’s fate. It will be difficult to keep this on your shoulders then.” Casually, she adjusted the Amyrlin’s stole around Elaida’s neck. “In fact, it will be impossible if they learn any time soon. You will be stilled, made an example, the way you wanted to make Siuan Sanche. But there might be time to recover, if you listen to your Keeper. You must take good advice.”

Elaida’s tongue felt frozen. The threat could not have been clearer. “What you have heard tonight is Sealed to the Flame,” she said thickly, but she knew that the words were useless before they were out of her mouth.

“If you mean to reject my advice. . . .” Alviarin paused, then began to turn away.

“Wait!” Elaida pulled down the hand she had stretched out unaware. Stripped of the stole. Stilled. Even after that, they would make her howl.

“What—?” She had to stop and swallow. “What advice does my Keeper offer?” There had to be some way to stop this.

Sighing, Alviarin came close again. Closer, in fact; much too near for anyone to stand to the Amyrlin, their skirts almost touching. “First, I fear you must abandon Toveine to whatever comes, for the moment at least. And also Galina and whoever else was taken prisoner, whether by the Aiel or the Asha’man. Any attempted rescue now must mean discovery.”

Elaida nodded slowly. “Yes. I can see that.” She could not take her horrified eyes away from the other woman’s demanding gaze. There had to be a way! This could not be happening!

“And I think it is time to reconsider your decision about the Tower Guard. Don’t you really think the Guard should be increased after all?”

“I—can see my way clear to do that.” Light, she had to think!

“So good,” Alviarin murmured, and Elaida flushed with helpless rage. “Tomorrow, you will personally search Josaine’s rooms, and Adelorna’s.”

“Why under the Light would I—?”

The woman tugged her striped stole again, roughly this time, almost as if to yank it off or saw through her neck with it. “It seems that Josaine found an *angreal* some years ago and never turned it in. Adelorna did worse, I fear. She removed an *angreal* from one of the storerooms without permission. When you have found them, you will announce their punishment immediately. Something quite stiff. And at the same time you will hold up Doraise, Kiyoshi and Farellien as models of preserving the law. You will give each a present; a fine new horse will do.”

Elaida wondered whether her eyes were going to pop right out of her face. “Why?” From time to time a sister kept an *angreal* to herself in defiance of the law, but the penance was seldom more than a stern slap on the knuckles. Every sister knew the temptation. And the rest! The effect was obvious. Everyone would believe Doraise and Kiyoshi and Farellien had exposed the other two. Josaine and Adelorna were Green, the others Brown, Gray and Yellow respectively. The Green Ajah would be furious. They might even try to get back at the others, which would incite those Ajahs, and. . . . “Why do you want to do this, Alviarin?”

“Elaida, it should be enough for you that it is my advice.” Mocking, honeyed ice suddenly turned to cold iron. “I want to hear you say that you will do as you are told. There’s no point in me working to keep the stole on your neck, otherwise. Say it!”

"I—" Elaida tried to look away. Oh, Light, she had to think! Her belly was clenched in a knot. "I will—do—as I—am told."

Alviarin smiled that chilly smile. "You see, that did not hurt very much." Suddenly she stepped back, spreading her skirts in a moderate curtsy. "With your permission, I will withdraw and let you find some sleep in what remains of the night. You have an early morning ahead, with orders to issue for High Captain Chubain and apartments to search. We have to decide when to let the Tower know about the Asha'man, too." Her tone made it clear that she would decide. "And perhaps we should begin planning our next move against al'Thor. It is about time the Tower stood openly and called him to heel, don't you think? Think well. I give you good night, Elaida."

Dazed, wanting to sick up, Elaida watched her go. Stand openly? That would invite attack by these—what had the woman called them?—these Asha'man. This could not be happening to her. Not to her! Before she realized what she was doing, she hurled the goblet across the room to shatter against a tapestry of flowers. Seizing the pitcher with both hands, she raised it overhead with a shriek of fury and flung that too, in a spray of punch. The Foretelling had been so certain! She would . . . !

Abruptly she stopped, frowning at the tiny shards of crystals clinging to the tapestry, the larger pieces scattered across the floor. The Foretelling. Surely that had spoken of her triumph. *Her* triumph! Alviarin might have her minor victory, but the future belonged to Elaida. As long as Alviarin could be gotten rid of. But it had to be done quietly, in some way so that even the Hall would want silence. A way that would not point to Elaida until it was too late, should Alviarin's sails gain wind. And suddenly the why came to her. Alviarin would not believe if she was told. No one would.

Could Alviarin have seen her smile then, the woman's knees would have turned to jelly. Before she was done, Alviarin would envy Galina, alive or dead.

Pausing in the hallway outside Elaida's apartments, Alviarin studied her hands by the light of the stand-lamps. They did not shake, which surprised her. She had expected the woman to fight harder, to resist longer. But it was begun, and she had nothing to fear. Unless Elaida learned that no fewer than five Ajahs had passed mention of al'Thor to her in the last few days; the deposing of Colavaere had sent every Ajah's agent in Cairhien flying for a pen. No, if Elaida did learn, she was safe enough, with the hold she had on the woman now. And with Mesaana as patron. Elaida, though, was finished whether she realized or not. Even if the Asha'man failed to trumpet their crushing of Toveine's expedition—and she was sure they would crush it, after what Mesaana had told her of events of Dumai's Wells—all the eyes-and-ears in Caemlyn truly would gain wings once they learned. Lacking a miracle, such as the rebels appearing at the gates, Elaida would suffer Siuan Sanche's fate in a matter of weeks. In any case, it had begun, and if she wished she knew what "it" was, all she really had to do was obey. And watch. And learn. Perhaps she would wear the seven-striped stole herself when all was done.

In the early morning sunlight streaming through her windows, Seaine dipped the pen, but before she could write the next word, the door to the hall opened and the Amyrlin swept in. Seaine's thick black eyebrows rose; she would have expected anyone else at all before Elaida, perhaps not excluding Rand al'Thor himself. Still, she set the pen down and rose smoothly, pulling down the silver-white sleeves she had pushed up to keep clear of the ink. She made the degree of curtsy proper to the Amyrlin Seat from a Sitter in her own apartments.

"I do hope you haven't found any White sisters hiding away *angreal*, Mother." She did hope it, quite fervently. Elaida's descent on the Greens a few hours ago, while most of them slept, was probably still producing wails and gnashing of teeth. In living memory no one had been ordered birched for keeping back an *angreal*, and now there were to be two. The Amyrlin must have been in one of her infamous cold furies.

But if she had been then, no sign of it remained now. For a moment she regarded Seaine silently, cool as a winter pond in her red-slashed silks, then glided to the carved sideboard where painted ivory miniatures of Seaine's family stood. All years dead, but she still loved every one.

"You did not stand to raise me Amyrlin," Elaida said, picking up the picture of Seaine's father. She set it down hastily and took up her mother instead.

Seaine's eyebrows almost rose again, but she tried to make it a rule not to let herself be surprised more than once in a day. "I was not informed that the Hall was sitting until afterward, Mother." After all these years, a touch of Lugard still clung to her voice.

"Yes, yes." Abandoning the paintings, Elaida glided to the fireplace. Seaine had always had a fondness for cats, and carved wooden cats of every sort crowded the mantelpiece, some in amusing poses. The Amyrlin frowned at the display, then squeezed her eyes shut and gave her head a tiny shake. “But you remained,” she said, turning quickly. “Every Sitter who was not informed fled the Tower and joined the rebels. Except you. Why?”

Seaine spread her hands. “What else could I do but stay, Mother? The Tower must be whole.” *Whoever the Amyrlin,* she added to herself. *And what’s wrong with my cats, if I may ask?* Not that she ever would aloud, of course. Sereille Bagand had been a fierce Mistress of Novices before being raised Amyrlin Seat, the very year she herself earned the shawl, and a fiercer Amyrlin than Elaida could be with a sore tooth. Seaine had had the proprieties driven into her too hard and deep for mere years to shift, or any dislike for the woman who wore the stole. One did not have to like an Amyrlin.

“The Tower must be whole,” Elaida agreed, rubbing her hands together. “It must be whole.” Now, why was she nervous? She had ninety-nine kinds of temper, all hard as a knife and twice as sharp, but nervous the woman was not. “What I say to you now is Sealed to the Flame, Seaine.” Her mouth twisted wryly, and she shrugged, giving her stole an irritable twitch. “If I knew how to make the seal stronger, I would,” she said, dry as yesterday’s dust.

“I will hold your words in my heart, Mother.”

“I want you—I command you—to undertake an inquiry. And you must indeed hold it in your heart. The wrong ear hearing of it might mean death, and disaster for the whole Tower.”

Seaine’s eyebrows twitched. Death and disaster for the whole Tower? “In my heart,” she said again. “Will you sit yourself, Mother?” That was proper, in her own apartments. “May I pour you some mint tea? Or plum punch?”

Waving away the offer of refreshment, Elaida took the most comfortable chair, carved by Seaine’s father as a gift when she received the shawl, though of course the cushions had been replaced many times since. The Amyrlin made the country chair seem a throne, all stiff back and iron countenance. Most ungraciously, she did not give permission for Seaine to sit, too, so Seaine folded her hands and remained standing.

“I have thought long and hard on treason, Seaine, since my predecessor and her Keeper were allowed to escape. Helped to escape.

Treason must have been at the core of that, and I fear only a sister, or sisters, could have effected it."

"That would certainly be a possibility, Mother."

Elaida frowned at the interruption. "We can never be sure who has the shadow of treason in her heart, Seaine. Why, I suspect that someone arranged for an order of mine to be countermanded. And I have reason to believe that someone has communicated privately with Rand al'Thor; to what end, I cannot say, but that surely is treason against me, and against the Tower."

Seaine waited for more, but the Amyrlin only looked back at her, slowly smoothing her red-slashed skirts. "Exactly what inquiry do you wish me to make, Mother?" she asked cautiously.

Elaida bounded to her feet. "I charge you to follow the stench of treason, no matter where it leads or how high, even to the Keeper herself. Yes, even to her. What you find, whoever it leads to, you will bring before the Amyrlin Seat alone, Seaine. No one else must know. Do you understand me?"

"I understand your commands, Mother."

Which, she thought, once Elaida had departed even more swiftly than she had come, was about all she did understand. In order to think she took the chair the Amyrlin had vacated, fists pressed beneath her chin in just the way her father had always sat thinking. Everything fell to logic, eventually.

She would not have stood against Siuan Sanche—she had proposed the girl as Amyrlin in the first place!—but once it was done and all the forms were followed, however sparely, aiding her escape certainly had been treason, and deliberately countermanding an Amyrlin's order just as much. Possibly communicating with al'Thor was, too; that depended on what was communicated, with what intent. Finding who had changed the Amyrlin's command would be difficult without knowing what command. At this late date learning who might have helped Siuan escape stood about as much chance of success as learning who might be writing to al'Thor. So many pigeons flew into and out of the Tower cotes every day that at times the sky seemed to be raining feathers. If Elaida knew more than she had said, she had certainly gone around the barn. This all made very little sense. Treason ought to make Elaida boil with rage, but she had not been angry. She had been nervous. And anxious to be gone. And secretive, as if she did not want to tell everything she knew or suspected. Almost as though she was afraid to. What kind of treason would make Elaida nervous or afraid? Death and disaster for the whole Tower.

Like the pieces of a blacksmith’s puzzle, all fell into place, and Seaine’s eyebrows tried to climb onto her scalp. It fit; it all fit. She felt the blood draining from her face; her hands and feet were suddenly icy. Sealed to the Flame. She had said she would keep this in her heart, but everything had changed since she spoke those words. She only let herself be afraid when it was logical to be, and right then, she was terrified. She could not face this alone. But who? Under the circumstances, who? This answer came much more easily. Gathering herself took a little time, but she hurried from her rooms and out of the White quarters walking a good deal faster than she usually did.

Servants scurried through the corridors as always, though she walked so quickly that she was past most before they could begin bow or curtsy, but there seemed fewer sisters about than the early hour could account for. Many fewer. Yet if most were staying close to their quarters for some reason, the few she saw made up for it in one way. Sisters swanned along the tapestry-hung hallways, faces all serenity, and their eyes seemed to have steam behind them. Here and there two or three women spoke together, with sharp eyes darting to see who might be listening. Always two or three of the same Ajah. Even yesterday, she was sure she had still seen women sharing friendship between Ajahs. Whites were supposed to put emotion away entirely, but she had never seen the reason for blinding herself, as some did. Suspicion made the air in the Tower like hot jelly. Not a new thing, unfortunately—the Amyrlin had begun it with her harsh measures, and the rumors about Logain had only exacerbated the situation—but this morning seemed worse than ever.

Talene Minly came around a corner ahead of her, her shawl not just across her shoulders, but spread down her arms as though to display the green fringe. For that matter, she realized that every Green she had seen this morning wore her shawl. Talene, golden-haired and statuesque and lovely, had stood to depose Siuan, but she had come to the Tower while Seaine was Accepted, and that decision had not dented their long friendship. Talene had had reasons Seaine accepted if not agreed with. Today, her friend stopped, watching her warily. So many sisters seemed to watch one another that way of late. Another time, she would have stopped, but not with what made her head want to burst open like a spoiled melon. Talene was a friend, and she thought she could be sure of her, but thinking was not enough for this. Later, if possible, she would approach Talene. Hoping it would be possible, she hurried past with only a nod.

In the Red quarters, the mood was even worse, the air thicker. As with the other Ajahs, there were many more rooms than there were sisters to fill them now—that had been so long before the first rebel fled—but the Red was the largest of the Ajahs, and sisters filled the levels still in use. Reds frequently wore their shawls when there was no need, but now every last woman sported her red fringe like a banner. Conversations stopped as Seaine approached, and cold eyes followed her in a bubble of icy silence. She felt an invader deep in enemy country as she crossed those peculiar floor tiles, white with the teardrop Flame of Tar Valon in red. But then, any part of the Tower might be enemy country. Looking another way, those scarlet flames might be taken for red Dragon's Fangs. She had never believed those irrational tales about the Reds and false Dragons, but. . . . Why would none of them deny it?

She had to ask directions. "I will not disturb her if she is busy," she said. "We were close friends, once, and I would like us to be again. Now more than ever, the Ajahs cannot afford to drift apart." All true, though the Ajahs seemed to splitting apart rather than drifting, but the Domani woman listened with a face that could have been cast in copper. There were not many Domani Reds, and those few usually meaner than snakes caught in a fence.

"I will show you, Sitter," the woman said at last, and not very respectfully. She led the way, then watched while Seaine knocked on the door, as though she could not be trusted here alone. The door panels were carved with the Flame, too, lacquered the color of fresh blood.

"Come!" a brisk voice called from within. Seaine opened the door hoping she was right.

"Seaine!" Pevara exclaimed cheerfully. "What brings you here this morning? Come! Shut the door and sit!" It was as if all the years since they were novice and Accepted together had melted away. Quite plump and not tall—in truth, for a Kandori, she was short—Pevara was also quite pretty, with a merry twinkle in her dark eyes and a ready smile. It was sad that she had chosen Red, no matter how good her reasons, because she still liked men. The Red did attract women who were naturally suspicious of men, of course, but others chose it because the task of finding men who could channel was important. Whether they liked men, or disliked them, or did not care one way or the other in the beginning, however, not many women could belong to the Red for long without taking a jaundiced view of all men. Seaine had reason to believe Pevara had served a penance shortly after attaining the shawl for saying that she wished she had a Warder; since reaching the safer heights of the Hall, she had openly said Warders would make the Red Ajah's work easier. Not that that had any part in Seaine trusting her. Of all the sisters in the Tower, though, Pevara was the one she was sure she *could* trust with this.

"I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you," Pevara said once they were ensconced in armchairs carved in the spirals popular in Kandor a hundred years ago, with delicate, butterfly-painted cups of blueberry tea in hand. "I've often thought how I should go to you, but I admit to fearing what you would say after I gave you the cut direct so many years ago. Sworn on the blade, Seaine, I'd not have done it, except Tesien Jorhald practically had me by the scruff of my neck, and I was too new to the shawl to have much backbone yet. Can you forgive me?"

"Of course, I can," Seaine replied. "I understood." The Red firmly discouraged friendships outside the Ajah. Quite firmly, and quite efficiently. "We cannot go against our Ajahs when we are young, and later, it seems impossible to retrace our steps. A thousand times I've remembered us whispering together after Last—oh, and the pranks! do you recall when we dusted Serancha's shift with powdered itchoak?—but I'm shamed to say it took being terrified out of my wits to stir my feet. I do want us to be friends again, but I need your help, too. You are the only one I'm sure I can trust."

"Serancha was a prig then, and still is." Pevara laughed. "The Gray is a good place for her. But I can't believe you terrified at anything. Why, you never decided it was logical to be afraid until we were back in our beds. Short of a promise to stand in the Hall without knowing what for, whatever help I can give is yours, Seaine. What do you need?"

Brought to the point, Seaine hesitated, sipping her tea. Not that she had any doubts about Pevara, but pushing the words out of her mouth was . . . difficult. "The Amyrlin came to see me this morning," she said finally. "She instructed me to make an inquiry, Sealed to the Flame." Pevara frowned slightly, but she did not say that in that case Seaine should not be speaking of it. Seaine might have planned how to carry out most of their pranks as girls, but Pevara had been the one with the audacity to think most of them up, and she had provided most of the nerve to go through with them. "She was very circumspect, but after a little thought, it was clear to me what she wanted. I am to hunt out . . ." At the last, courage failed her tongue. ". . . Darkfriends in the Tower."

Pevara's eyes, as dark as her own were blue, became stone, and swept to the mantel above her fireplace, where miniatures of her own family made a precise line. They had all died while she was a novice, parents, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles and all, murdered in a quickly suppressed uprising of Darkfriends who had become convinced the Dark One was about to break free. That was why Seaine had been sure she could trust her. That was why Pevara had chosen Red—though Seaine still thought she could have done as well and been happier as a Green—because she believed a Red hunting men who could channel had the best chance of finding Darkfriends. She had been very good at it; that plump exterior covered a core of steel. And she possessed the courage to say calmly what Seaine had been unable to bring herself to utter.

"The Black Ajah. Well. No wonder Elaida would be circumspect."

"Pevara, I know she's always denied its existence harder than any three other sisters combined, but I'm certain sure that's what she meant, and if she is convinced. . . ."

Her friend waved her off. "You have no need to convince me, Seaine. I have been sure the Black Ajah exists for. . . ." Strangely, Pevara became hesitant, peering into her teacup like a fortune-teller at a fair. "What do you know of events right after the Aiel War?"

"Two Amyrlins dying suddenly in the space of five years," Seaine said carefully. She assumed the other woman meant events in the Tower. Truth to tell, until being raised a Sitter nearly fifteen years ago, just a year after Pevara, she had not given much attention to anything outside the Tower. And not that much inside, really. "A great many sisters died in those years, as I recall. Do you mean to say you think the . . . the Black Ajah had a hand in that?" There; she had said it, and the name had not burned her tongue.

"I don't know," Pevara said softly, shaking her head. "You've done well to wrap yourself deep in philosophy. There were . . . things . . . done then, and Sealed to the Flame." She drew a troubled breath.

Seaine did not press her; she herself had committed something akin to treason by breaking that same seal, and Pevara would have to decide on her own. "Looking at reports will be safer than asking questions with no idea who we’re really asking. Logically, a Black sister must be able to lie despite the Oaths.” Otherwise, the Black Ajah would have been revealed long since. That name seemed to be coming more easily with use. “If any sister wrote that she did one thing when we can prove she did another, then we have found a Darkfriend.”

Pevara nodded. “Yes. Perhaps the Black Ajah has no hand in the rebellion, but I cannot think they would let this turmoil pass without taking advantage. We must look closely at this last year, I think.”

To that, Seaine agreed reluctantly. There would be fewer pieces of paper to read and more questions to ask concerning recent months. Deciding who else to make part of the inquiry was even harder. Especially after Pevara said, “You were very brave coming to me, Seaine. I’ve known Dark-friends to kill brothers, sisters, parents, to try hiding who they are and what they’ve done. I love you for it, but you were very brave indeed.”

Seaine shivered as if a goose had walked on her grave. Had she wanted to be brave, she would have chosen Green. She almost wished Elaida had gone to someone else. There was no turning back now, though.

* * *

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CHAPTER

33

A Bath

The days after sending Perrin away seemed endless to Rand, and the nights longer. He retreated to his rooms and stayed there, telling the Maidens to allow no one to enter. Only Nandera was allowed past the doors with the gilded suns, bringing his meals. The sinewy Maiden would set down a covered tray and list those who had asked to see him, then give him a look of rebuke when he repeated that he would see no one. Often he heard disapproving comments from the Maidens outside before she pulled the door shut behind her; he was intended to hear, else they would have used handtalk. But if they thought to chivy him out by claiming that he was sulking. . . . The Maidens did not understand, and might not if he explained. If he could have brought himself to.

He picked at the meals without appetite, and tried to read, but his favorite books could divert him for only a few pages even in the beginning. At least once every day, though he had promised himself he would not, he lifted the massive wardrobe of polished blackwood and ivory in his bed-chamber, floated it aside on flows of Air and carefully unraveled the traps he had set and the Mirror of Mists that made the wall seem smooth, all inverted so no other eyes but his could see. There, in a niche hollowed out with the Power, stood two small statues of white stone about a foot tall, a woman and a man, each in flowing robes and holding a clear crystal sphere overhead in one hand. The night he set the army in motion toward Illian he had gone to Rhuidean alone to fetch these *ter'angreal*: if he needed them, he might not have much time. That was what he had told himself. His hand would stretch toward the bearded man, the only one of the pair a man could use, stretch out and stop, shaking. One finger touching, and more of the One Power than he could imagine could be his. With that, no one could defeat him, no one stand against him. With that, Lanfear had said once, he could challenge the Creator.

"It is mine by right," he muttered each time, with his hand trembling just short of the figure. "Mine! I am the Dragon Reborn!"

And each time he made himself draw back, reweaving the Mirror of Mists, reweaving the invisible traps that would burn anyone to a cinder who tried to pass them without the key. The huge wardrobe wafted back into place like a feather. He was the Dragon Reborn. But was that enough? It would have to be.

"I am the Dragon Reborn," he whispered at the walls sometimes, and sometimes shouted at them. "I am the Dragon Reborn!" Silently and aloud he raged at those who opposed him, the blind fools who could not see and those who refused to see, for ambition or avarice or fear. He was the Dragon Reborn, the only hope of the world against the Dark One. And the Light help the world for it.

But his rages and thoughts of using the *ter'angreal* were only attempts to escape other things, and he knew it. Alone, he picked at his meals, though less every day, and tried to read, though seldom, and attempted to find sleep. That he tried more often as the days passed, not caring whether the sun was down or high. Sleep came in fitful snatches, and what harrowed his waking thoughts also stalked his dreams and chased him awake too soon for any rest. No amount of shielding could keep out what was already inside. He had the Forsaken to face, and sooner or later the Dark One himself. He had fools who fought him or ran away when their only hope was to stand behind him. Why would his dreams not let him be? From one dream he always sprang awake before it more than began, to lie there filled with self-loathing and muddled with lack of sleep, but the others. . . . He deserved them all, he knew.

Colavaere confronted him sleeping, her face black and the scarf she had used to hang herself still buried in the swollen flesh of her neck. Colavaere, silent and accusing, with all the Maidens who had died for him arrayed behind her in silent staring ranks, all the women who died because of him. He knew every face as well as his own, and every name but one. From those dreams, he woke weeping.

A hundred times he hurled Perrin across the Grand Hall of the Sun, and a hundred times he was overwhelmed by blazing fear and rage. A hundred times, he killed Perrin in his dreams and woke to his own screams. Why had the man chosen the Aes Sedai prisoners to use for their argument? Rand tried not to think about them; he had done his best to ignore their existence from the beginning. They were too dangerous to keep long as captives, and he had no idea what to do with them. They frightened him. Sometimes he dreamed of being bound inside the box again, of Galina and Erian and Katerine and the rest taking him out to beat him, dreamed and woke whimpering even after he convinced himself his eyes were open and he was outside. They frightened him because he feared he might give way to the fear and the anger, and then. . . . He tried not to think of what he might do then, but sometimes he dreamed it, and woke shaking in a cold sweat. He would not do that. Whatever he had done, he would not do that.

In dreams he gathered the Asha'man to attack the White Tower and punish Elaida; he leaped from a gateway filled with righteous anger and *saidin*—and learned that Alviarin's letter had been a lie, saw her stand alongside Elaida, saw Egwene beside her, too, and Nynaeve, and even Elayne, all with Aes Sedai faces, because he was too dangerous to let run free. He watched the Asha'man destroyed by women who had years of studying the One Power behind them, not just a few months of harsh tutoring, and from those dreams, he could never wake until every man in a black coat was dead, and he stood alone to face the might of the Aes Sedai. Alone.

Again and again Cadsuane spoke those words about madmen hearing voices, till he flinched at them as at blows of a whip, flinched in his sleep when she appeared. In dreams and waking, he called to Lews Therin, shouted at him, screamed for him, and only silence answered. Alone. That small bundle of sensations and emotions in the back of his head, the sense of Alanna's almost touch, slowly became a comfort. In many ways, that frightened him most of all.

On the fourth morning, he woke groggily from a dream of the White Tower, flinging up a hand to shield grainy eyes from what he thought was a flare of *saidar*-wrought fire. Dust motes sparkled in the sunlight streaming through the window to reach his bed, with its great square blackwood bedposts inlaid with ivory wedges. Every piece of furnishing in the room was polished blackwood and ivory, square and stark and heavy enough to suit his mood. For a moment he lay there, but if sleep returned, it would only bring another dream.

Are you there, Lews Therin? he thought without any hope of answer, and wearily pushed himself to his feet, tugging his wrinkled coat straight. He had not changed his clothes since first shutting himself away.

When he staggered into the anteroom, at first he thought he was dreaming again, the dream that always woke him straight off in shame and guilt and loathing, but Min looked up at him from one of the tall gilded chairs, a leather-bound book on her knees, and he did not wake. Dark ringlets framed her face, big dark eyes so intent he almost felt her touch. Her breeches of brocaded green silk fit her like a second skin, and her coat of matching silk hung open, a cream-colored blouse rising and falling with her breath. He prayed to wake. It had not been fear, or anger, or guilt over Colavaere, or Lews Therin's disappearance that drove him to shut himself away.

"There's a feast of sorts in four days," she said brightly, "at the half moon. The Day of Repentance, they call it for some reason, but there will be dancing that night. Sedate dancing, I hear, but any dancing is better than none." Carefully tucking a thin strip of leather into the book, she placed it on the floor beside her. "That's just time to have a dress made, if I set the seamstress to work today. That is, if you mean to dance with me."

He pulled his gaze away from her, and it fell on a cloth-covered tray beside the tall doors. Just the thought of food made him queasy. Nandera was not supposed to let anyone in, burn her! Least of all Min. He had not mentioned her by name, but he had said no one! "Min, I—I don't know what to say. I—"

"Sheepherder, you look like what the dogs fought over. Now I understand why Alanna was so frantic, even if I don't see how she knew. She practically begged me to speak to you, after the Maidens turned her away for about the fifth time. Nandera wouldn't have let *me* in if she wasn't in a lather about you not eating, and even so, I had to do a little begging myself. You owe me, country boy."

Rand flinched. Images of himself flashed in his head; him tearing at her clothes, forcing himself on her like a mindless beast. He owed her more than he could ever pay. Raking a hand through his hair, he made himself turn to face her. She had tucked her feet up so she sat cross-legged in the chair, leaning her fists on her knees. How could she look at him so calmly? "Min, there's no excuse for what I did. If there was any justice, I'd go to the gallows. If I could, I'd put the rope around my neck myself. On oath, I would." The words tasted bitter. He was the Dragon Reborn, and she would have to wait on justice until the Last Battle. What a fool he had been to want to live past Tarmon Gai'don. He did not deserve to.

"What are you talking about, sheepherder?" she said slowly.

"I'm talking about what I did to you," he groaned. How could he have done that, to anyone, but most of all to her? "Min, I know how hard it is for you to be in the same room with me." How could he recall the soft feel of her so, the silkiness of her skin? After he had torn her clothes off. "I never thought I was an animal, a monster." But he was. He loathed himself for what he had done. And loathed himself worse because he wanted to do it again. "The only excuse I have is madness. Cadsuane was right. I did hear voices. Lews Therin's voice, I thought. Can you—? No. No, I have no right to ask you to forgive me. But you have to know how sorry I am, Min." He was sorry. And his hands ached to run down her bare back, over her hips. He *was* a monster. "Bitterly sorry. At least know that."

She sat there motionless, staring at him as if she never before had seen his like. Now, she could stop pretending. Now, she could say what she really thought of him, and however vile it was, it would not be half vile enough.

"So that's why you've been keeping me away," she said finally. "You listen to me, you wooden-headed numbskull. I was ready to cry myself to dust because I'd seen one death too many, and you, you were about to do the same for the same reason. What we did, my innocent lamb, was comfort one another. Friends comfort one another at times like that. Close your mouth, you Two Rivers hay-hair."

He did, but only to swallow. He thought his eyes were going to fall onto the floorstones. He nearly spluttered getting words out. "*Comforted?* Min, if the Women's Circle back home heard what we did called comforting, they'd be lining up to peel our hides if we were *fifty*!"

"At least it's 'we,' now, instead of 'I,' " she said grimly. Rising smoothly, she advanced toward him shaking a furious finger. "Do you think I'm a doll, farmboy? Do you think I am too dimwitted to let you know if I didn't want your touch? Do you think I couldn't let you know in no uncertain terms?" Her free hand produced a knife from under her coat, gave it a flourish and tucked it back without slowing the torrent. "I remember ripping your shirt off your back because you couldn't pull it over your head fast enough to suit me. That's how little I wanted your arms around me! I did with you what I've never done with any man—and don't you think I was never tempted!—and you say it was all you! As if I wasn't even there!"

The back of his legs hit a chair, and he realized he had been backing away from her. Frowning up at him, she muttered, “I don’t think I *like* you looking down at me right now.” Abruptly she kicked him hard on the shin, planted both hands on his chest, and shoved. He toppled into the chair so hard it nearly went over backward. Ringlets swayed as she gave her head a toss and adjusted her brocaded coat.

“That’s as may be, Min, but—”

“That’s as *is*, sheepherder,” she cut in firmly, “and if you say different again, you had best shout for the Maidens and channel for all you’re worth, because I’ll thump you around this room till you squeal for mercy. You need a shave. And a bath.”

Rand took a deep breath. Perrin had such a serene marriage, with a smiling, gentle wife. Why was it that he always seemed drawn to women who spun his head like a top? If only he knew the tenth part of what Mat did about women, he would have known what to say to all that, but as it was, all he could do was blunder on. “In any case,” he said cautiously, “there’s only one thing I can do.”

“And what might that be?” She folded her arms tight beneath her breasts, and her foot began tapping ominously, but he knew this was the right thing to do.

“Send you away.” Just as he had Elayne, and Aviendha. “If I had any self-control, I wouldn’t have—” That foot started tapping faster. Maybe better to leave that alone. Comforted? Light! “Min, anyone close to me is in danger. The Forsaken aren’t the only ones who would harm somebody near me just on the chance it might harm me, too. And now there’s me, as well. I can’t control my temper anymore. Min, I nearly killed Perrin! Cadsuane was right. I’m going mad, or there already. I have to send you away so you’ll be safe.”

“Who is this Cadsuane?” she said, so calmly that he gave a start at noticing that her foot was still tapping. “Alanna mentioned that name as if she was the Creator’s sister. No, don’t tell me; I don’t care.” Not that she gave him one hair of a gap to tell anything. “I don’t care about Perrin, either. You would hurt me as soon as him. I think that great public fight of yours was a fake, is what I think. I don’t care about your temper, and I don’t care whether you’re mad. You can’t be very mad, or you’d not be worrying about it so. What I do care about. . . .”

She bent until those very big, very dark eyes were level with his, not a great distance away, and suddenly there was such a light glaring in them that he seized *saidin*, ready to defend himself. “Send me away to be safe?” she growled. “How dare you? What right do you think you have to send me anywhere? You need me, Rand al’Thor! If I told you half the viewings I’ve had about you, half your hair would curl and the rest fall out! You dare! You let the Maidens face any risk they want, and you want to send me away like a child?”

“I don’t love the Maidens.” Floating deep in the emotionless Void, he heard those words spring from his tongue, and shock shattered the emptiness and sent *saidin* flying.

“Well,” Min said, straightening. A small smile added more curve to her lips. “That’s out of the way.” And she sat down on his lap.

She had said he would not hurt Perrin any more than he would her, but he had to hurt her now. He had to, for her own good. “I love Elayne, too,” he said brutally. “And Aviendha. You see what I am?” For some reason, that did not seem to faze her at all.

“Rhuarc loves more than one woman,” she said. Her smile seemed almost of Aes Sedai serenity. “So does Bael, and I never noticed any Trolloc’s horns on either. No, Rand, you love me, and you can’t back out of that. I ought to string you up on tenterhooks for what you’ve put me through, but. . . . Just so you’ll know, I love you, too.” The smile faded in a frown of internal struggle, and finally she sighed. “Life would be a deal easier sometimes if my aunts hadn’t brought me up to be fair,” she muttered. “And to be fair, Rand, I have to tell you that Elayne loves you, too. So does Aviendha. If both of Mandelain’s wives can love him, I suppose three women can manage to love you. But I’m here, and if you try to send me away, I’ll tie myself to your leg.” Her nose wrinkled. “Once you start bathing again, anyway. But I won’t go, no matter what.”

Just exactly like a top, his head spun. “You—*love* me?” he said incredulously. “How do you know what Elayne feels? How you know anything about Aviendha? Light! Mandelain can do what he likes, Min; I’m not Aiel.” He frowned. “What was that you said about telling me half of what you see? I thought you told me everything. And I am too sending you somewhere safe. And stop doing your nose like that! I don’t smell!” He jerked the hand he had been scratching with from under his coat.

Her arched eyebrow spoke volumes, but of course her tongue had to have its bit, too. “You dare take that tone? Like you don’t believe it?” Suddenly her voice began to rise by the word, and she augured a finger against his chest as though she meant to drive it through him. “Do you think I’d go to *bed* with a man I did not love? Do you? Or maybe you think you aren’t worth loving? Is that it?” She made a sound like a stepped-on cat. “So I’m some little bit of fluff without a brain in her head, falling in love with a worthless lout, am I? You sit there gaping like a sick ox and slander my wits, my taste, my—”

“If you don’t quiet down and talk sense,” he growled, “I swear, I’ll smack your bottom!” That leaped out of nowhere, out of sleepless nights and confusion, but before he could begin to form an apology, she smiled. The woman smiled!

“At least you’re not sulking anymore,” she said. “Don’t ever whine, Rand; you are no good at it. Now, then. You want sense? I love you, and I will not go. If you try to send me away, I’ll tell the Maidens you ruined me and cast me aside. I’ll tell everybody who will listen. I will—”

He raised his right hand and studied the flat of his palm, where the branded heron stood clear, then looked at her. She eyed his hand warily and shifted herself on his knees, then conspicuously ignored everything except his face.

“I won’t go, Rand,” she said quietly. “You need me.”

“How do you do it?” he sighed, slumping back in the chair. “Even when you stand me on my head, you make all my troubles shrink.”

Min sniffed. “You need to be stood on your head more often. Tell me. This Aviendha. I don’t suppose there is any chance she’s bony and scarred, like Nandera.”

He laughed in spite of himself. Light, how long since he had laughed with pleasure? “Min, I’d say she is as pretty as you, but how can you compare two sunrises?”

For a moment she stared at him with a small smile, as if she could not decide whether to be surprised or delighted. “You are a very dangerous man, Rand al’Thor,” she murmured, leaning toward him slowly. He thought he might fall into her eyes and be lost. All those times before when she sat on his lap and kissed him, all those times he had thought she was only teasing a country boy, he had nearly crawled out of his skin wanting to kiss her forever. Now, if she kissed him again now. . . .

Taking her firmly by the arms, he stood and set her on her feet. He loved her, and she loved him, but he had to remember that he wanted to kiss Elayne forever when he thought about her, and Aviendha. Whatever Min said about Rhuarc or any Aiel man, she had made a poor bargain the day she fell in love with him. “You said half, Min,” he said quietly. “What viewings haven’t you told me?”

She looked up at him with what almost might have been frustration, except of course that it could not have been. “You’re in love with the Dragon Reborn, Min Farshaw,” she grumbled, “and best you remember it. Best you did, too, Rand,” she added, pulling away. He let her go reluctantly, eagerly; he did not know which. “You’ve been back in Cairhien half a week, and you still have done nothing about the Sea Folk. Berelain thought you might drag your feet again. She left me a letter, asking me to keep reminding you, only you wouldn’t let me—Well, never mind that. Berelain thinks they’re important to you somehow; she says you’re the fulfillment of some prophecy of theirs.”

“I know all about that, Min. I—” He had thought to leave the Sea Folk out of being tangled with him; they were not mentioned in the Prophecies of the Dragon that he could find. But if he was going to let Min stay near him, let her risk the dangers. . . . She had won, he realized. He had watched Elayne walk away with his heart sinking, watched Aviendha go with his stomach in knots. He could not do it again. Min stood there waiting. “I’ll go to their ship. I’ll go today. The Sea Folk can kneel to the Dragon Reborn in all his splendor. I don’t suppose there was ever any hope for anything else. Either they’re mine, or they’re my enemies. That is how it always seems to be. Will you tell me about those viewings, now?”

“Rand, you should study what they’re like before you—”

“The viewings?”

She folded her arms and frowned up at him through her lashes. She chewed her lip and frowned at the door. She shook her head and muttered under her breath. At last she said, “There is only one, really. I was exaggerating. I saw you and another man. I couldn’t make out either face, but I knew one was you. You touched, and seemed to merge into one another, and. . . .” Her mouth tightened worriedly, and she went on in a very small voice. “I don’t know what it means, Rand, except that one of you dies, and one doesn’t. I—Why are you grinning? This isn’t a joke, Rand. I do not know which of you dies.”

"I'm grinning because you've given me very good news," he said, touching her cheek. The other man had to be Lews Therin. *I'm not just insane and hearing voices*, he thought, jubilant. One lived and one died, but he had known for a long time that he was going to die. At least he was not mad. Or not as far mad as he had feared. There was still the temper he could barely control. "You see, I—"

Suddenly he realized that he had gone from touching her cheek to cupping her face in both hands. He pulled them away as if burned. Min pursed her lips and gave him a reproving look, but he was not going to take advantage of her. It would not be fair to her. Luckily, his stomach rumbled loudly.

"I need something to eat, if I'm going to see the Sea Folk. I saw a tray. . . ."

Min made a sound more snort than sniff as he turned away, but the next moment she was sailing toward the tall doors. "You need a bath, if we're going to the Sea Folk."

Nandera was delighted, nodding enthusiastically and sending Maidens running. Though she did lean close to Min and say, "I should have let you in the first day. I wanted to kick him, but it is not done, kicking the *Car'a'carn*." By her tone, it should have been done. She spoke softly, yet not so softly he could not hear. He was sure that was deliberate; she directed too sharp a glare at him for it not to be.

Maidens lugged in the big copper tub themselves, flashing handtalk once they set it down, laughing and too excited to let the Sun Palace servants do the work, or bring in the stream of buckets filled with hot water, either. Rand had a hard time taking his own clothes off. For that matter, he had a hard time washing himself, and he could not escape Nandera lathering his hair. Flaxen-haired Somara and fiery-haired Enaila insisted on shaving him as he sat chest-deep in the tub, concentrating so intently they seemed afraid they might cut his throat. He was used to that from other times they had refused to let him handle brush and razor himself. He was used to the Maidens who stood around watching, offering to scrub his back or his feet, hands flickering in silent chatter and still more than half-scandalized at the sight of someone *sitting* in water. Besides, he managed to get rid of some, at least, by sending them off carrying orders.

What he was not used to was Min, sitting cross-legged on the bed with her chin on her hands, watching the whole thing in very evident fascination.

In all the crowd of Maidens, he had not realized she was there until he was naked, and all there was to do then was sit down as fast as he could, splashing water over the sides of the tub. The woman would have done very well as a Maiden herself. She discussed him with the Maidens quite openly, with never a blush! He was the one who blushed.

“Yes, he is very modest,” she said, agreeing with Malindare, a woman more rounded than most Maidens, with the darkest hair Rand had seen on any Aiel. “Modesty is a man’s crowning glory.” Malindare nodded soberly, but Min wore a grin that nearly split her cheeks.

And, “Oh, no, Domeille; it would be a shame to spoil such a pretty face with a scar.” Domeille, grayer than Nandera, leaner, and with a thrusting chin, insisted that he was not pretty enough to do without a scar to set off what beauty he had. Her words. The rest was worse. The Maidens had always seemed to enjoy making his face red. Min certainly did.

“You have to dry off sooner or later, Rand,” she said, holding up a long piece of white toweling with both hands. She stood a good three paces from the tub, and the Maidens had all backed into a watching ring. Min’s smile was so innocent any magistrate would have found her guilty on that alone. “Come and get dry, Rand.”

He had never been so relieved to pull on clothes in his life.

By that time, all his orders had been carried out, and everything was in readiness. Rand al’Thor might have been routed in a bathtub, but the Dragon Reborn was going to the Sea Folk in a style that would send them plummeting to their knees with awe.

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CHAPTER

34

Ta’veren

All was ready as Rand had ordered in the courtyard at the front of the Sun Palace. Or almost all. The morning sun slanted shadows from the stepped towers, so only ten paces in front of the tall bronze gates lay in full light. Dashiva and Flinn and Narishma, the three Asha’man he had retained, waited beside their horses, even Dashiva resplendent with the silver sword and red-and-gold Dragon on his black collar, though he still touched the sword at his hip as if constantly surprised to find it there. A hundred of Dobraine’s armsmen sat their mounts behind Dobraine himself with two long banners that hung down in the still air, their dark armor newly lacquered so it glistened in the sun, and silk streamers of red and white and black tied below the heads of their lances. They raised a cheer when Rand appeared, his sword belt with its gilded Dragon buckle strapped over a red coat heavy with gold.

“Al’Thor! Al’Thor! Al’Thor!” filled the courtyard. People crowding the archers’ balconies joined in, Tairen and Cairhienin in their silks and laces who just a week before had no doubt cheered Colavaere as loudly. Men and women who would as soon he had never returned to Cairhien, some of them, waving their arms and giving voice. He raised the Dragon Scepter to acknowledge them, and they roared louder.

A thunderous roll of drums and a blare of trumpets rose through the cheers, produced by a dozen more of Dobraine’s men who wore crimson tabards with the black-and-white disc on the chest, half carrying long trumpets draped in identical cloths, the other half with kettle drums also decorated slung on either side of the horses. Five Aes Sedai in their shawls came to meet him as he descended the broad stairs. At least, they glided toward him. Alanna gave him one searching look with those big dark penetrating eyes; the tiny knot of emotions in his skull said she was calmer, more relaxed, than he ever remembered. Then she made a small motion, and Min touched his arm and went aside with her. Bera and the others made small curtsies, inclining their heads slightly, as Aiel streamed out of the palace behind him. Nandera led two hundred Maidens—they were not about to be outshone by the "oathbreakers"—and Camar, a rangy Bent Peak Daryne grayer than Nandera and half a head taller than Rand, led two hundred *Seia Doon* who would not be outshone by *Far Dareis Mai*, let alone Cairhienin. They swung past on either side of him and the Aes Sedai to ring the courtyard. Bera like a proud farmwife and Alanna like some darkly beautiful queen, in their green-fringed shawls, and plump Rafela, even darker wrapped in her blue, watching him anxiously, and cool-eyed Faeldrin, yet another Green, her thin braids worked with colored beads, and slim Merana in her gray, whose frown made Rafela seem a picture of Aes Sedai serenity. Five.

"Where are Kiruna and Verin?" he demanded. "I called for all of you."

"So you did, my Lord Dragon," Bera answered smoothly. She made another curtsy, too; only the slightest dip, but it took him aback. "We could not find Verin; she is somewhere in the Aiel tents. Questioning the . . ." Her smooth tone faltered for one instant. ". . . the prisoners, I believe, in an attempt to learn what was planned once they reached Tar Valon." Once he reached Tar Valon; she knew enough not to blurt that where anyone could hear. "And Kiruna is . . . consulting with Sorilea on a matter of protocol. But I'm quite certain she will be more than happy to join us if you send a personal summons to Sorilea. I could go myself, if you—"

He waved that away. Five should be enough. Perhaps Verin could learn something. Did he want to know? And Kiruna. A matter of *protocol*? "I'm glad you are getting on with the Wise Ones." Bera started to speak, then closed her mouth firmly. Whatever Alanna was saying to Min, scarlet spots had flared in Min's cheeks and she had raised her chin, though oddly, she seemed to be replying calmly enough. He wondered whether she would tell him. One thing he was sure of about women was that every last one had secret places in her heart, sometimes shared with another woman but never with a man. The only thing he was sure of about women.

"I didn't come out here to stand all day," he said irritably. The Aes Sedai had arranged themselves with Bera in the lead, the others half a step back. If it had not been her, it would have been Kiruna. Their own arrangements, not his. He did not really care so long as they held to their oaths, and he might have left it alone if not for Min and Alanna. “Merana will speak for you from now on; you will take your orders from her.”

By the suddenly widened eyes, you would have thought he had slapped every one of them. Including Merana. Even Alanna’s head whipped around. Why should they be startled? True, Bera or Kiruna had done almost all the talking since Dumai’s Wells, but Merana had been the ambassador sent to him at Caemlyn.

“If you are ready, Min?” he said, and without waiting for a reply strode out into the courtyard. The big, fiery-eyed black gelding he had ridden back from Dumai’s Wells had been brought out for him, with a high-cantled saddle all worked in gold and a crimson saddlecloth embroidered with the disc of black-and-white at each corner. The trappings suited the animal, and his name. Tai’daishar; in the Old Tongue, Lord of Glory. Horse and trappings both suited the Dragon Reborn.

As he mounted, Min led up the mouse-colored mare she had ridden back, snugging on her riding gloves before swinging into the saddle. “Seiera’s a fine animal,” she said, patting the mare’s arched neck. “I wish she was mine. I like her name, too. We call the flower a blue-eye around Baerlon, and they grow everywhere in the spring.”

“She’s yours,” Rand said. Whichever Aes Sedai the mare belonged to would not refuse to sell to him. He would give Kiruna a thousand crowns for Tai’daishar; she could not complain then; the finest stallion of Tairen blood stock never cost a tenth of that. “Did you have an interesting conversation with Alanna?”

“Nothing that would interest you,” she said offhandedly. But a faint touch of red stained her cheeks.

He snorted softly, then raised his voice. “Lord Dobraine, I’ve kept the Sea Folk waiting long enough, I think.”

The procession drew crowds along the broad avenues and filled the windows and rooftops as word raced ahead. Twenty of Dobraine’s lancers led, to clear the way, along with thirty Maidens and as many Black Eyes, then drummers, booming away—*droom, droom, droom, DROOM-DROOM*—and the trumpeters punctuating that with flourishes. Shouts from the onlookers nearly drowned drums and trumpets alike, a wordless roar that could have been rage as easily as approbation. The banners streamed out, just ahead of Dobraine and behind Rand, the white Dragon Banner and the scarlet Banner of the Light, and veiled Aiel trotted alongside the lancers, whose streamers also floated in the air. Now and then a few flowers were hurled at him. Maybe they did not hate him. Maybe they only feared. It had to do.

“A train worthy of any king,” Merana said loudly, to be heard.

“Then it’s enough for the Dragon Reborn,” he replied sharply. “Will you stay back? And you, too, Min.” Other rooftops had held assassins. The arrow or crossbow bolt meant for him would not find its target in a woman today.

They did fall behind his big black, for all of three paces, and then they were right beside him again, Min telling him what Berelain had written about the Sea Folk on the ships, about the Jendai Prophecy and the Coramoor, and Merana adding what she knew of the prophecy, though she admitted that was not very much, little more than Min.

Watching the rooftops, he listened with half an ear. He did not hold *saidin*, but he could feel it in Dashiva and the other two, right behind him. He did not feel the tingle that would announce the Aes Sedai embracing the Source, but he had told them not to, without permission. Perhaps he should change that. They did seem to be keeping their oath. How could they not? They were Aes Sedai. A fine thing if he took an assassin’s blade while one of the sisters tried to decide whether serving meant saving him or obeying meant not channeling.

“Why are you laughing?” Min wanted to know. Seiera pranced closer, and she smiled up at him.

“This is no laughing matter, my Lord Dragon,” Merana said acidly on the other side. “The Atha’an Miere can be very particular. Any people grow fastidious when it comes to their prophecies.”

“The world is a laughing matter,” he told her. Min laughed along with him, but Merana sniffed and went right back to the Sea Folk as soon as he stopped.

At the river, the high city walls ran out into the water, flanking long gray stone docks that stretched out from the quay. Riverships and boats and barges of every kind and size were tied everywhere, the crews on deck to see the commotion, but the vessel Rand sought stood ready and waiting, lashed end-on to the end of a dock where all the laborers had already been cleared off. A longboat, it was called, a low narrow splinter without any masts, just one staff in the bow, four paces tall, topped by a lantern, and another at the stern. Nearly thirty paces in length and lined with as many long oars, it could not carry the cargo a sailing vessel the same size would, but it had no need of the wind, either, and with a shallow draft, it could travel day and night, using rowers in shifts. Longboats ran the rivers with cargoes of importance and urgency. It had seemed appropriate.

The captain bowed repeatedly as Rand came down the boarding ramp with Min on his arm and the Aes Sedai and Asha'man at his heels. Elver Shaene was even skinnier than his craft in a yellow coat of Murandian cut that hung to his knees. “It's an honor to be carrying you, my Lord Dragon,” he murmured, mopping his bald head with a large handkerchief. “An honor, it is. An honor, indeed. An honor.”

Plainly the man would rather have had his ship brim full of live vipers. He blinked at the Aes Sedai's shawls and stared at their ageless faces and licked his lips, eyes flickering back to Rand uneasily. The Asha'man dropped his mouth open once he put their black coats together with rumor, and thereafter he avoided so much as a glance in their direction. Shaene watched Dobraine lead the men with the banners aboard, and the trumpeters, and the drummers lugging their drums, then eyed the horsemen lining the dock as if he suspected they might want to board, too. Nandera, with twenty Maidens, and Camar with twenty Black Eyes, all with *shoufa* wrapped around their heads though unveiled, made the captain step hastily to put the Aes Sedai between him and them. The Aiel wore scowls, for the heartbeat that needing to veil might slow them, but the Sea Folk might well know what a veil meant, and it would hardly do for them to think they were under attack. Rand thought Shaene's handkerchief might yet rub away what thin gray fringe of hair he had left.

The longboat swept away from the dock on its long oars, the two banners rippling in the bows, and the drums pounding, and the trumpets blaring. Out in the river, people appeared on the decks of ships to watch, even climbed into the rigging. On the Sea Folk ship they came out, too, many in bright colors unlike the drab clothing on crews of the other vessels. The *White Spray* was a larger craft than most of the rest, yet somehow sleeker as well, with two tall masts raked back sharply and spars laid across them squarely where nearly all the other ships had slanting spars longer than the masts to hold most of their sails. Everything about it spoke of difference, but in one thing, Rand knew, the Atha'an Miere had to be like everyone else. They could either agree to follow him on their own or be forced to it; the Prophecies said he would bind together the people of every land—“The north shall he tie to the east, and the west shall be bound to the south,” it said—and no one could be allowed to stand aside. He knew that, now.

Sending out orders from his bath, he had not had an opportunity to give details of what he intended on reaching *White Spray*, so he announced them now. The details produced grins among the Asha’man, as expected—well, Flinn and Narishma grinned; Dashiva blinked absently—and frowns among the Aiel, also as expected. They did not like being left behind. Dobraine merely nodded; he knew he was only here for show today. What Rand did not expect was the Aes Sedai reaction.

“It shall be as you command, my Lord Dragon,” Merana said, making one of those small curtsies. The other four exchanged glances, but they were curtsying and murmuring “as you command” right behind her. Not one protest, not one frown, not a single haughty stare or recital of why it should be done any way but what he wanted. Could he begin to trust them? Or would they find some Aes Sedai way to wriggle around their oath as soon as his back was turned?

“They will keep their word,” Min murmured abruptly, just as if she had read his thoughts. With an arm wrapped around his and both hands holding his sleeve, she kept her voice for his ears alone. “I just saw these five in your hand,” she added in case he did not understand. He was not sure he could fix his mind around that, even if she had seen it in a viewing.

He did not have long to try. The longboat flew through the water, and in no time at all was backing oars some twenty paces from the much taller *White Spray.* Drums and trumpets fell silent, and Rand channeled, making a bridge of Air laced with Fire that connected the longboat’s railing to that of the Sea Folk ship. With Min on his arm, he started across, to every eye but that of an Asha’man, walking upward on nothing.

He half expected Min to falter, at least at first, but she simply walked at his side as though there were stone beneath her green-heeled boots.

“I trust you,” she said quietly. She smiled, too, partly a comforting smile, and partly, he thought, because she was amused at reading his mind once more.

He wondered how much she would trust if she knew that this was as far as he could weave a bridge like this. One pace farther, one foot, and the whole thing would have given way at the first step. At that point it became like trying to lift yourself with the Power, an impossibility; even the

Forsaken did not know why, any more than they knew why a woman could make a longer bridge than a man even if she was not as strong. It was not a matter of weight; any amount of weight could cross any bridge.

Just short of *White Spray*'s railing, he stopped, standing in midair. For all Merana's descriptions, the people staring back at him were a shock. Dark women and bare-chested men with colorful sashes that dangled to the knee, and gold or silver chains around their necks and rings in their ears, in their noses of all places on some of the women, who wore a rainbow of blouses above their dark, baggy breeches. None had any more expression than an Aes Sedai who was trying hard. Four of the women, despite being barefoot like the rest, wore bright silks, two of them brocades, and they had more necklaces and earrings than anyone else as well, with a chain strung with gold medallions running from an earring to a ring in the side of the nose. They said nothing, only stood together watching him, sniffing at small, lacy golden boxes that hung from chains around their necks. He addressed himself to them.

"I am the Dragon Reborn. I am the Coramoor."

A collective sigh ran through the crew. Not among the four women, though.

"I am Harine din Togara Two Winds, Wavemistress to Clan Shodein," announced the one with the most earrings, a handsome, full-mouthed woman in red brocade wearing five fat little gold rings in each ear. There were white streaks through her straight black hair, and fine lines at the corners of her eyes. She had an impressive dignity. "I speak here for the Mistress of the Ships. If it pleases the Light, the Coramoor may come aboard." For some reason she gave a start, and so did the three with her, but that sounded entirely too much like permission. Rand stepped onto the deck with Min wishing he had not waited.

He let the bridge go, and *saidin*, but immediately felt another bridge replace it. In short order the Asha'man and the Aes Sedai were with him, the sisters no more flustered than Min had been, though perhaps one or two did straighten her skirts a bit more than necessary. They were still not so easy around the Asha'man as they pretended.

The four Sea Folk women took one look at the Aes Sedai and immediately gathered in a close huddle, whispering. Harine did a lot of the talking, and so did a young, pretty woman in green brocade with eight earrings altogether, but the pair in plain silk put in occasional comments.

Merana coughed delicately, and spoke softly into the hand she used to cover it. "I heard her name you the Coramoor. The Atha'an Miere are great bargainers, I've heard, but I think she gave away something, then." Nodding, Rand glanced down at Min. She was squinting at the Sea Folk women, but as soon as she noticed his look, she shook her head ruefully; she saw nothing yet that might help him.

Harine turned so calmly there might never have been any hasty conference. "This is Shalon din Togara Morning Tide, Windfinder to Clan Shodein," she said with a small bow toward the woman in green brocade, "and this is Derah din Selaan Rising Wave, Sailmistress of *White Spray.*" Each woman bowed slightly as she was named, and touched fingers to her lips.

Derah, a handsome woman a little short of her middle years, wore plain blue and also eight earrings, though her earrings, nose ring, and the chain that ran between was finer than Harine's or Shalon's. "The welcome of my ship to you," Derah said, "and the grace of the Light be upon you until you leave his decks." She made a small bow toward the fourth woman, in yellow. "This is Taval din Chanai Nine Gulls, Windfinder of *White Spray.*" Only three rings hung from each of Taval's ears, fine like those of the Sail-mistress. She looked younger than Shalon, no older than himself.

Harine took it up again, gesturing toward the raised stern of the ship. "We will speak in my cabin, if it pleases you. A soarer is not a large vessel, Rand al'Thor, and the cabin is small. If it pleases you to come alone, all here stand surety for your safety." So. From the Coramoor to plain Rand al'Thor. She would take back what she had given, if she could.

He was about to open his mouth and agree—anything to get this done; Harine was already moving that way, still gesturing for him to follow, the other women with her—when Merana gave another tiny cough.

"The Windfinders can channel," she murmured hastily into her hand. "You should take two sisters with you, or they'll feel they've gained the upper hand."

Rand frowned. The upper hand? He *was* the Dragon Reborn, after all. Still. . . . "I will be pleased to come, Wavemistress, but Min here goes everywhere with me." He patted Min's hand on his arm—she had not let go an instant—and Harine nodded. Taval was already holding the door open; Derah made one of those small bows, gesturing him toward it.

"And Dashiva, of course." The man gave a start at his name, as if he had been asleep. At least he was not staring wide-eyed around the deck like Flinn and Narishma. Staring at the women. Stories spoke of the alluring beauty and grace of Sea Folk women, and Rand could certainly see that—they walked as if they would begin dancing on the next step, swaying sinuously—but he had not brought the men here to ogle. "Keep your eyes open!" he told them harshly. Narishma colored, jerking himself stiffly erect, and pressed fist to chest. Flinn simply saluted, but both seemed more alert. For some reason, Min looked up at him with the tiniest wry smile.

Harine nodded a little more impatiently. A man stepped out from the crew, in baggy green silk breeches and with an ivory-hilted sword and dagger thrust behind his sash. More white-haired than she, he also wore five fat little rings in each ear. She waved him away even more impatiently. "As it please you, Rand al'Thor," she said.

"And of course," Rand added, as though an afterthought, "I must have Merana, and Rafela." He was not certain why he chose the second name—perhaps because the plump Tairen sister was the only one not Green except Merana—but to his surprise, Merana smiled in approval. For that matter, Bera nodded, and so did Faeldrin, and Alanna.

Harine did not approve. Her mouth tightened before she could control it. "As it pleases you," she said, not quite so pleasantly as before.

Once he was inside the stern cabin, where everything except a few brass-bound chests seemed built into the walls, Rand was not so sure the woman had not gained whatever she wanted just bringing him there. For one thing, he was forced to stand hunched over, even between the roof beams, or whatever they were called on a ship. He had read several books about ships, but none mentioned that. The chair he was offered at the foot of the narrow table would not pull out, being fastened to the deck, and once Min showed him how to unlatch the chair arm and swing it out so he could sit, his knees hit the bottom of the table. There were only eight chairs. Harine sat at the far end, her back to the stern's red-shuttered windows, with her Windfinder to her left and the Sailmistress to her right and Taval below her. Merana and Rafela took the chairs below Shalon, while Min sat to Rand's left. Dashiva, with no chair, took a place beside the door, standing upright quite easily, though the roof beams almost brushed his head, too. A young woman in a bright blue blouse, with one thin earring in each ear, brought thick cups of tea, brewed black and bitter.

"Let's be done with this," Rand said testily as soon as the woman left with her tray. He left his cup on the table after one sip. He could not stretch out his legs. He hated being confined. Thoughts of being doubled inside the chest flashed in his head, and it was all he could do to rein his temper. "The Stone of Tear has fallen, the Aiel have come over the Dragonwall, all the parts of your Jendai Prophecy have come to pass. I am the Coramoor."

Harine smiled across her cup, a cool smile with no amusement in it. "That may be so, as it pleases the Light, but—"

"It *is* so," Rand snapped despite a warning glance from Merana. She went so far to nudge his leg with her foot. He ignored that, too. The cabin walls seemed closer, somehow. "What is it that you don't believe, Wavemistress? That Aes Sedai serve me? Rafela, Merana." He gestured sharply.

All he wanted was for them to come to him and be seen to come, but they set down their cups and rose gracefully, glided to either side of him—and knelt. Each took one of his hands in both of hers and pressed her lips to the back of it, right on the shining golden-maned head of the Dragon that wound around his forearm. He just managed to conceal his shock, not taking his eyes from Harine. Her face went a little gray.

"Aes Sedai serve me, and so will the Sea Folk." He motioned the sisters back to their seats. Oddly, they looked a touch surprised. "That is what the Jendai Prophecy says. The Sea Folk will serve the Coramoor. I am the Coramoor."

"Yes, but there is the matter of the Bargain." That word was plainly capitalized in Harine's tone. "The Jendai Prophecy says you will bring us to glory, and all the seas of the world will be ours. As we give to you, you must give to us. If I do not make the Bargain well, Nesta will hang me naked in the rigging by my ankles and call the First Twelve of Clan Shodein to name a new Wavemistress." A look of utter horror stole across her face as those words came out of her mouth, and her black eyes went wider and wider by the word with disbelief. Her Windfinder goggled at her, and Derah and Taval tried so hard not to, their eyes fastened to the table, that it seemed their faces might break.

And suddenly, Rand understood. *Ta'veren.* He had seen the effects, the sudden moments when the least likely thing happened because he was near, but he had never known what was going on before until it was finished. Easing his legs as best he could, he leaned his arms on the table. "The Atha'an Miere will serve me, Harine. That is given."

“Yes, we will serve you, but—” Harine half-reared out her chair, spilling her tea. “What are you doing to me, Aes Sedai?” she cried, trembling. “This is not fair bargaining!”

“We do nothing,” Merana said calmly. She actually managed to drink a swallow of that tea without wincing.

“You are in the presence of the Dragon Reborn,” Rafela added. “The Coramoor your prophecy calls you to serve, as I believe.” She laid a finger to one round cheek. “You said you speak for the Mistress of the Ships. Does that mean your word is binding on the Atha’an Miere?”

“Yes,” Harine whispered hoarsely, falling back in her seat. “What I say binds every ship, and all to the Mistress of the Ships herself.” It was impossible for one of the Sea Folk to go white in the face, yet staring at Rand, she came as near as she could.

He smiled at Min, to share the moment. At last a people would come to him without fighting every step of the way, or splitting apart like the Aiel. Maybe Min thought he wanted her help to clinch matters, or maybe it was *ta’veren.* She leaned toward the Wavemistress. “You will be punished for what happens here today, Harine, but not so much as you fear, I think. At least, one day you will be the Mistress of the Ships.”

Harine frowned at her, then glanced to her Windfinder.

“She is not Aes Sedai,” Shalon said, and Harine seemed caught between relief and disappointment. Until Rafela spoke.

“Several years ago, I heard reports of a girl with a remarkable ability to see things. Are you she, Min?”

Min grimaced into her cup, then nodded reluctantly; she always said that the more people knew what she could do, the less good came of it. Glancing across the table at the Aes Sedai, she sighed. Rafela only nodded, but Merana was staring at her, hazel eyes avid in a mask of serenity. No doubt she expected to corner Min as soon as possible and find out what this talent was and how it worked, and no doubt Min expected it too. Rand felt a prickle of irritation; she should have known he would protect her from being bothered. A prickle of irritation, and a warmth that he could protect her from that, at least.

“You may trust what Min says, Harine,” Rafela said. “The reports I heard say that what she sees always seems to come true. And even if she does not realize it, she has seen something else.” Her round face tilted to one side, and a smile curved her mouth. “If you will be punished for what happens here, then it must mean you will agree to whatever your Coramoor wants."

"Unless I agree to nothing," Harine blustered. "If I make no Bargain. . . ." Her fists clenched on the tabletop. She had already admitted she had to make the Bargain. She had admitted the Sea Folk would serve.

"What I require of you is not onerous," Rand said. He had thought about this since deciding to come. "When I want ships to carry men or supplies, the Sea Folk will give them. I want to know what is happening in Tarabon and Arad Doman, and in the lands between. Your ships can learn—will learn—what I want to know; they call in Tanchico and Bandar Eban and a hundred fishing villages and towns between. Your ships can travel farther out to sea than anyone else's. The Sea Folk will keep watch as far west in the Aryth Ocean as they can sail. There is a people, the Sean-chan, who live beyond the Aryth Ocean, and one day, they will come to try to conquer us. The Sea Folk will let me know when they come."

"You require much," Harine muttered bitterly. "We know of these Seanchan, who come from the Islands of the Dead, it seems, from which no ship returns. Some of our ships have encountered theirs; they use the One Power as a weapon. You require more than you know, Coramoor." For once, she did not pause at the title. "Some dark evil has descended upon the Aryth Ocean. No ship of ours has come from there in many months. Ships that sail west, vanish."

Rand felt a chill. He turned the Dragon Scepter, made from part of a Seanchan spear, in his hands. Could they have returned already? They had been driven back once, at Falme. He carried the spearhead to remind him that there were more enemies in the world than those he could see, but he had been sure it would take the Seanchan years to recover from their defeat, driven into the sea by the Dragon Reborn and the dead heroes called back by the Horn of Valere. Was the Horn still in the White Tower? He knew it had been taken there.

Suddenly he could not bear the confines of the cabin any longer. He fumbled with the latch on the chair arm. It would not open. Gripping the smooth wood, he tore the arm off in splinters with one convulsive heave. "We've agreed the Sea Folk will serve me," he said, pushing himself up. The low ceiling made him hunch over the table threateningly. The cabin did feel smaller. "If there is any more to your Bargain, Merana and Rafela here will see to it with you.” Without waiting for an answer, he spun for the door, where Dashiva appeared to be muttering to himself again.

Merana caught him there, caught his sleeve and spoke swiftly and low. “My Lord Dragon, it would be for the best if you remained. You have seen what your being *ta’veren* has done already. With you here, I believe she will continue to reveal what she wants to hide and give agreement before we give anything.”

“You are Gray Ajah,” he told her harshly. “Negotiate! Dashiva, come with me.”

On deck, he drew deep breaths. The cloudless sky was open overhead. Open.

It took him a moment to notice Bera and the other two sisters, watching him expectantly. Flinn and Narishma kept to what they were supposed to do, a quarter of an eye on the ship and the rest on the riverbanks, the city on one side and the half-rebuilt granaries on the other. A ship in mid-river was a vulnerable place to be if one of the Forsaken decided to strike. For that matter, anywhere was a dangerous place then. Rand could not understand why one of them had not at least tried to destroy the Sun Palace around his ears.

Min took his arm, and he gave a start.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have left you.”

“That’s all right,” she laughed. “Merana is already setting to work. I think she means to get you Harine’s best blouse, and maybe her second best as well. The Wavemistress looked like a rabbit caught between two ferrets.”

Rand nodded. The Sea Folk were his, or as good as. What matter whether the Horn of Valere was in the White Tower? He was *ta’veren*. He was the Dragon Reborn, and the Coramoor. The golden sun still burned well short of its noon peak. “The day is young yet, Min.” He could do anything. “Would you like to see me settle the rebels? A thousand crowns to a kiss, they’re mine before sunset.”

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CHAPTER
35

Into the Woods

Sitting cross-legged on Rand’s bed, Min watched him, in his shirt-sleeves, rooting through the coats in the huge ivory-inlaid wardrobe. How could he sleep in this room, with all its black, heavy furniture? A part of her thought absently about moving everything out, replacing it with some carved pieces she had seen in Caemlyn, lightly touched with gilding, and pale draperies and linens that he would find less oppressive. Odd; she had never cared one way or another about furniture, or linens. But that one tapestry of a battle, of a lone swordsman surrounded by enemies and about to be overwhelmed—that definitely had to go. Mostly, though, she just watched him.

There was such an intent look in his morning-blue eyes, and the snowy shirt tightened across the broad of his back when he turned to reach deep into the wardrobe’s interior. He had very good legs, and marvelous calves, shown off well in dark close-fitting breeches, with his boots turned down. Sometimes he frowned, combing fingers through dark reddish hair; no amount of brushing could make it ruly; it always curled slightly around his ears and on the nape of his neck. She was not one of those fool women who tossed their brains at a man’s feet along with their hearts. It was just that sometimes, near him, thinking clearly became a trifle difficult. That was all.

Coat after embroidered silk coat came out and was tossed to the floor atop the one he had worn to the Sea Folk ship. Could the negotiations still be going half so well without his *ta’veren* presence? If only she had a really useful viewing of the Sea Folk. As always to her eyes, images and colorful auras flickered around him, most gone too quickly to make out, all but one meaningless to her at the moment. That one viewing came and went a hundred times a day, and whenever Mat or Perrin were present, it encompassed them, too, and sometimes others. A vast shadow lurked over him, swallowing up thousands upon thousands of tiny lights like fireflies that hurled themselves into it in an attempt to fill up the darkness. Today, there seemed to be countless tens of thousands of fireflies, but the shadow seemed larger, too. Somehow that viewing represented his battle with the Shadow, but he almost never wanted to know how it stood. Not that she could really say, except that the shadow always seemed to be winning, to one degree or another. She sighed with relief to see the image go.

A tiny stab of guilt made her shift her seat on the coverlet. She had not really lied when he asked what viewings she had kept back. Not really. What good to tell him he would almost certainly fail without a woman who was dead and gone? He became bleak too easily as it was. She had to keep his spirits up, make him remember to laugh. Except. . . .

"I don't think this is a good idea, Rand." Saying that might be a mistake. Men were strange creatures in so many ways; one minute they took reasonable advice, and the next did just the opposite. Deliberately did the opposite, it seemed. For some reason, though, she felt . . . protective . . . toward this towering man who could probably lift her with either hand. And that without his channeling.

"It is a wonderful idea," he said, tossing down a blue coat with silver embroidery. "I'm *ta'veren*, and today it seems to be working in my favor for a change." A green coat with gold embroidery went to the floor.

"Wouldn't you rather comfort me again?"

He stopped dead, staring at her with a silver-worked red coat hanging forgotten in his hands. She hoped she was not blushing. Comforting. *Where did that idea ever come from?* she wondered silently. The aunts who had raised her were gentle, kind women, but they had strong notions of proper behavior. They had disapproved of her wearing breeches, disapproved of her working in stables, the job she loved best, since it brought her into contact with horses. There was no question what they would think of *comforting*, with a man she was not married to. If they ever found out, they would ride all the way from Baerlon just to skin her. And him, too, of course.

"I . . . need to keep moving while I'm sure it is still working," he said slowly, then turned quite quickly back to the wardrobe. "This will do," he exclaimed, pulling out a plain coat of green wool. "I didn't know this was in there."

It was the coat he had worn coming back from Dumai's Wells, and she could see his hands tremble as he remembered. Trying to be casual, she got up and went to put her arms around him, crushing the coat between them as she laid her head against his chest.

"I love you" was all she said. Through his shirt she could feel the round, half-healed scar on his left side. She could recall when he got it as if it were yesterday. That had been the first time she ever held him in her arms, while he lay unconscious and near death.

His hands pressed against her back, squeezing her tight, squeezing the breath out of her, but then, disappointingly, they fell away. She thought he muttered something about "not fair" under his breath. Was he thinking about the Sea Folk while she hugged him? He should be, really. Merana was a Gray, yet it was said the Sea Folk could make a Domani sweat. He should be, but. . . . She thought about kicking his ankle. Gently he moved her away and began pulling on the coat.

"Rand," she said firmly, "you can't be sure it will have any effect, just because it did on Harine. If you being *ta'veren* always affected everything, you'd have every ruler kneeling at your feet by now, and the Whitecloaks, too."

"I'm the Dragon Reborn," he replied haughtily, "and today I can do anything." Scooping up his sword belt, he fastened it around his waist. It bore a plain brass buckle, now. The gilded Dragon lay atop the coverlet on the bed. Gloves of thin black leather went on to cover the golden-maned heads on the backs of his hands and the herons branded on his palms. "But I don't look like him, do I?" He spread his arms, smiling. "They won't know until it's too late."

She almost threw up her hands. "You don't look much like a fool, either." And let him take that how he would. The idiot eyed her askance, as if he was not sure. "Rand, as soon as they see the Aiel, they will either run or start fighting. If you won't take any of the Aes Sedai, at least take those Asha'man. One arrow, and you're dead, whether you're the Dragon Reborn or a goatherd!"

"But I *am* the Dragon Reborn, Min," he said seriously. "And *ta'veren*. We are going alone; just you and me. That is, if you still want to come."

"You're not going anywhere without me, Rand al'Thor." She stopped herself from saying he would trip over his own feet if he did. This euphoria was almost as bad as the dark bleakness. "Nandera won't like this." She did not know exactly what went on between him and the Maidens—something very peculiar indeed, by the things she had seen—but any hope that that might stop him guttered out when he grinned like a small boy evading his mother.

"She won't know, Min." He even had a twinkle in his eye! "I do this all the time, and they never know." He held out a gloved hand, expecting her to jump when he called.

There really was nothing to do but straighten her green coat, glance into the stand-mirror to make sure of her hair—and take his hand. The trouble was, she *was* ready to leap if he crooked a finger; she just wanted to make sure he never found out.

In the anteroom, he made a gateway atop the golden Rising Sun set in the floor, and she let him lead her through onto a hilly forest floor carpeted with dead leaves. A bird flashed away, flaring red wings. A squirrel appeared on a branch and chittered at them, lashing a furry white-tipped tail.

It was hardly the sort of woods she remembered from near Baerlon; there were not many real forests anywhere close to the city of Cairhien. Most of the trees stood four or five or even ten paces apart, tall leatherleafs and pines, taller oaks and trees she did not know, running across the flat she and Rand stood on and up a slope that began only a few spans off. Even the undergrowth seemed thinner than back home, the bushes and vines and briars spread out in patches, though some of those were not small. Everything was brown and dry. She plucked a lace-edged handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at the sweat that suddenly seemed to pop out on her face.

"Which way do we go?" she asked. By the sun, north lay over the slope, the direction she would choose. The city should lie about seven or eight miles in that direction. With luck, they could walk all the way back without encountering anyone. Or better, given her heeled boots and the terrain, not to mention the heat, Rand could decide to give up and make another gateway back to the Sun Palace. The palace rooms were cool compared to this.

Before he could answer, crackling brush and leaves announced someone coming. The rider who appeared on a long-legged gray gelding with bright-fringed bridle and reins was a Cairhienin woman, short and slender in a dark blue, nearly black, silk riding dress, horizontal slashes of red and green and white running from her neck to below her knees. The sweat on her face could not diminish her pale beauty, or make her eyes less than large dark pools. A small clear green stone hung on her forehead from a fine golden chain fastened in black hair that fell in waves to her shoulders.

Min gasped, and not for the hunting crossbow the woman carried casually raised in one green-gloved hand. For a moment, she was sure it was Moiraine. But. . . .

“I do not recall seeing either of you in the camp,” the woman said in a throaty, almost sultry, voice. Moiraine’s voice had been crystal. The crossbow lowered, still quite casually, until it pointed rock-steady at Rand’s chest.

He ignored it. “I thought I might like to take a look at your camp,” he said with a slight bow. “I believe you are the Lady Caraline Damodred?” The slender woman inclined her head, acknowledging the name.

Min sighed regretfully, but it was not as if she had really expected Moiraine to turn up alive. Moiraine was the only viewing of hers that had ever failed. But Caraline Damodred herself, one of the leaders of the rebellion against Rand here in Cairhien, and a claimant to the Sun Throne. . . . He really was pulling all the threads of the Pattern around him, to have her appear.

Lady Caraline slowly raised the crossbow to one side; the cord made a loud snap, launching the broadhead bolt into the air.

“I doubt one would do any good against you,” she said, walking her gelding slowly toward them, “and I would not like you to think I was threatening you.” She looked once at Min—just a glance that ran head to toe, though Min was sure everything about her was filed away—but aside from that, Lady Caraline kept her eyes on Rand. She drew rein three paces away, just far enough so he could not reach her afoot before she could dig in her heels. “I can only think of one gray-eyed man with your height who might suddenly appear out of nowhere, unless perhaps you are an Aiel in disguise, but perhaps you will be so kind as to supply a name?”

“I am the Dragon Reborn,” Rand said, every bit as arrogant as he had been with the Sea Folk, yet if any *ta’veren* swirling of the Pattern was at work, the woman on the horse gave no evidence.

Rather than leaping down to fall to her knees, she merely nodded, pursing her lips. “I have heard so very much about you. I have heard you went to the Tower to submit to the Amyrlin Seat. I have heard you mean to give the Sun Throne to Elayne Trakand. I have also heard that you killed Elayne, and her mother."

"I submit to no one," Rand replied sharply. He stared up at her with eyes fierce enough to snatch her out of the saddle by themselves. "Elayne is on her way to Caemlyn as we speak, to take the throne of Andor. After which, she will have the throne of Cairhien as well." Min winced. Did he have to sound like a pillow stuffed full of haughty? She had hoped he had calmed down a bit after the Sea Folk.

Lady Caraline laid her crossbow across the saddle in front of her, running a gloved hand along it. Perhaps regretting that loosed bolt? "I could accept my young cousin on the throne—better she than some, at least—but. . . ." Those big dark eyes that had seemed so liquid suddenly became stone. "But I am not sure I can, accept you in Cairhien, and I do not mean only your changes to laws and customs. You . . . change fate by your very presence. Every day since you came, people die in accidents so bizarre no one can believe them. So many husbands abandon their wives, and wives their husbands, that no one even comments upon it now. You will tear Cairhien apart just by remaining here."

"Balance," Min broke in hastily. Rand's face was so dark, he looked ready to burst. Maybe he had been right to come after all. Certainly there was no point letting him throw this meeting away in a tantrum. She gave no one a chance to speak. "There is always a balance of good against bad. That's how the Pattern works. Even he doesn't change that. As night balances day, good balances harm. Since he came, there hasn't been a single stillbirth in the city, not one child born deformed. There are more marriages some days than used to be in a week, and for every man who chokes to death on a feather, a woman tumbles head over heels down three flights of stairs and, instead of breaking her neck, stands up without a bruise. Name the evil, and you can point to the good. The turning of the Wheel requires balance, and he only increases the chances of what might have happened anyway in nature." Suddenly she colored, realizing they were both looking at her. Staring, more like.

"Balance?" Rand murmured, eyebrows lifting.

"I've been reading some of Master Fel's books," she said faintly. She did not want anyone to think she was pretending to be a philosopher. Lady Caraline smiled at her tall saddlebow and toyed with her reins. The woman was *laughing* at her. She would show this woman what she could laugh at!

Abruptly a tall black gelding with the look of a warhorse came crashing through the undergrowth, ridden by a man well into his middle years, with close-cropped hair and a pointed beard. Despite his yellow Tairen coat, the fat sleeves striped with green satin, eyes of a startling pretty blue looked out of his damp, dark face, like pale polished sapphires. Not a particularly pretty man, but those eyes made up for a too-long nose. He carried a crossbow in one leather-gauntleted hand, and brandished a broad-head bolt in the other.

"This came down inches from my face, Caraline, and it has your markings! Just because there's no game is no reason—" He became aware of Rand and Min just then, and his drawn crossbow lowered toward them. "Are these strays, Caraline, or did you find spies from the city? I've never believed al'Thor would continue to let us sit here unhindered."

Half a dozen more riders appeared behind him, sweating men in fat-sleeved coats with satin stripes and perspiring women in riding dresses with wide, thick lace collars. All carrying crossbows. The last of those riders had not halted, horses stamping and tossing heads, before twice as many came struggling through the brush from another direction and pulled up near Caraline, slight, pale men and women in dark clothes with stripes of color sometimes to below the waist. All with crossbows. Servants afoot came after, laboring and panting with the heat, the men who would dress and carry any downed game. It hardly seemed to matter that none had more than a skinning knife at his belt. Min swallowed, and unconsciously began patting her cheeks with her handkerchief a little more vigorously. If even one person recognized Rand before he knew it. . . .

Lady Caraline did not hesitate. "Not spies, Darlin," she said, turning her horse to face the Tairen newcomers. The High Lord Darlin Sisnera! All that was needed now was Lord Toram Riatin. Min wished Rand's *ta'veren* tugging at the Pattern could be just a little less complete. "A cousin and his wife," Caraline went on, "come from Andor to see me. May I present Tomas Trakand—from a minor branch of the House—and his wife Jaisi." Min almost glared at her; the only Jaisi she had ever known had been a dusty prune before she was twenty, and sour and bad-tempered to boot.

Darlin's gaze swept over Rand again, lingered a moment on Min. He lowered his crossbow and bowed his head just a hair, a High Lord of Tear to a minor noble. "You are welcome, Lord Tomas. It takes a brave man to join us in our present circumstances. Al'Thor may loose the savages on us any day.” The Lady Caraline gave him an exasperated look that he made a show of not seeing.

He noted that Rand’s return bow was no more than his, however; noted, and frowned. A darkly handsome woman in his retinue muttered angrily under her breath—she had a long hard face, well-practiced in anger—and a stout fellow, scowling and sweating in a red-striped coat of pale green, heeled his horse forward a few steps as if thinking to ride Rand down.

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” Rand said coolly, as though he noticed nothing. The Dragon Reborn to. . . . The Dragon Reborn to just about anybody, was what it was. Arrogance on a mountaintop. “Not much happens as we expect. For instance, I heard you were in Tear, in Haddon Mirk.”

Min wished she dared speak up, dared say something to soothe him. She settled for stroking his arm. Casually. A wife—now there was a word that suddenly sounded fine—a wife idly patting her husband. Another fine word. Light, it was hard being fair! It was hardly *fair*, having to be fair.

“The High Lord Darlin is but lately come by longboat with a few of his close friends, Tomas.” Caraline’s throaty tone never changed, but her gelding suddenly pranced, no doubt at a sharp heel, and under cover of regaining control she turned her back to Darlin and shot Rand a brief warning frown. “Do not trouble the High Lord, Tomas.”

“I do not mind, Caraline,” Darlin said, slinging his crossbow from his saddle by a loop. He rode a little closer and rested an arm on his tall saddlebow. “A man should know what he is stepping into. You may have heard the tales about al’Thor going to the Tower, Tomas. I came because Aes Sedai approached me months ago with suggestions that might happen, and your cousin informed me she had received the same. We thought we might put her on the Sun Throne before Colavaere could take it. Well, al’Thor is no fool; never believe he is. Myself, I think he played the Tower like a harp. Colavaere is hanged, he sits secure behind Cairhien’s walls—without an Aes Sedai halter, I’ll wager, no matter what rumor says—and until we find some way to extricate ourselves, we sit in his hand, waiting for him to make a fist.”

“A ship brought you,” Rand said simply. “A ship could take you away.” Abruptly Min realized he was gently patting her hand on his arm. Trying to soothe her!

Startlingly, Darlin threw back his head and laughed. A great many women would forget his nose for those eyes and that laugh. “So it would, Tomas, but I’ve asked your cousin to marry me. She will not say yes or no, but a man cannot abandon even a possible wife to the mercies of the Aiel, and she will not leave.”

Caraline Damodred drew herself up on her saddle, face cold enough to shame an Aes Sedai, but suddenly auras of red and white flashed around her and Darlin, and Min knew. The colors never seemed to matter, but she knew that they would marry—after Caraline had led him a merry chase. More, to her eyes a crown suddenly appeared on Darlin’s head, a simple golden circlet with a slightly curved sword lying on its side above his brows. The king’s crown he would wear one day, though of what country, she could not say. Tear had High Lords instead of a king.

Image and auras vanished as Darlin pulled his horse around to face Caraline. “There’s no game to be found today. Toram has already returned to camp. I suggest we do the same.” Those blue eyes scanned the surrounding trees quickly. “It seems your cousin and his wife have lost their horses. They will wander, in a careless moment,” he added to Rand, in a kindly tone. He knew very well they had no horses. “But I’m sure Rovair and Ines will give up their mounts. A walk in the air will do them good.”

The stout man in the red-striped coat swung down from his tall bay immediately, with a toadying smile for Darlin and one markedly less warm if just as greasy for Rand. The angry-faced woman was a moment later in climbing stiffly from her silver-gray mare. She did not look pleased.

Neither was Min. “You mean to go into their camp?” she whispered as Rand led her to the horses. “Are you mad?” she added before thinking.

“Not yet,” he said softly, touching her nose with the tip of one finger. “Thanks to you, I know that.” And he boosted her onto the mare, then climbed into the bay’s saddle and heeled the animal up beside Darlin.

Heading north and a little toward the west, across the slope, they left Rovair and Ines standing beneath the trees frowning at one another sourly. As they fell in behind with the Cairhienin, the other Tairens shouted laughing wishes that the pair would enjoy the walk.

Min would have ridden alongside Rand, but Caraline put a hand on her arm, drawing her in back of the two men. “I want to see what he does,” Caraline said quietly. Which one, Min wondered. “You are his lover?” Caraline asked.

“Yes,” Min told her defiantly, once she could catch a breath. Her cheeks felt like fire. But the woman only nodded, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Maybe it was, in Cairhien. Sometimes she realized that all the sophistication she had picked up talking to worldly people was about as thick as her blouse.

Rand and Darlin rode knee to knee just ahead, the younger man half a head taller than the older, each wrapped in pride like a cloak. But talking, just the same. Listening was not easy. They spoke quietly, and the dead leaves rustling under the horses’ hooves, fallen branches cracking, often was enough to muffle their words. The cry of a hawk overhead or the chattering of a squirrel in a tree drowned them. Still, it was possible to overhear snatches.

“If I may say so, Tomas,” Darlin said at one point, as they headed down after the first rise, “and under the Light I offer no disrespect, you are fortunate in having a beautiful wife. The Light willing, I will have one as beautiful myself.”

“Why do they not speak of something important?” Caraline muttered.

Min turned her head to hide a small smile. The Lady Caraline did not look half as displeased as she sounded. She herself had never cared whether anyone thought her pretty or not. Well, until she met Rand, anyway. Maybe Darlin’s nose was not all that long.

“I would have let him take Callandor from the Stone,” Darlin said some time later, as they climbed a sparsely treed slope, “but I could not stand aside when he brought Aiel invaders into Tear.”

“I’ve read the Prophecies of the Dragon,” Rand said, leaning forward on the bay’s neck and urging the animal on. A fine glossy appearance the horse had, but no more bottom than his owner, Min suspected. “The Stone had to fall before he could take Callandor,” Rand continued. “Other Tairen lords follow him, so I hear.”

Darlin snorted. “They cringe and lick his boots! I could have followed, if that was what he wanted, if. . . .” With a sigh, he shook his head. “Too many ifs, Tomas. There is a saying in Tear. ‘Any quarrel can be forgiven, but kings never forget.’ Tear has not been under a king since Artur Hawkwing, but I think the Dragon Reborn is very like a king. No, he has attainted me with treason, as he calls it, and I must go on as I began. The Light willing, I may see Tear sovereign on its own land once more before I die.”

It had to be *ta'veren* work, Min knew. The man would never have spoken this way to someone casually met, Caraline Damodred's supposed cousin or not. But what did Rand think? She could hardly wait to tell him about the crown.

Topping that hill, they suddenly came on a knot of spearmen, some with a dented breastplate or helmet, most without either, who bowed as soon they saw the party. To left and right through the trees, Min could see other groups of sentries. Below, the camp lay spread out in what seemed a permanent haze of dust, down a nearly treeless slope and across the hillvalley and up the next hill. Each of the few tents was large, with some noble's banner hanging limply on a staff above the peak. Almost as many horses stood tied to picket lines as there were people, and thousands of men and a handful of women wandered among the cookfires and wagons. None raised a cheer as their leaders rode in.

Min studied them over the handkerchief she pressed to her nose against the dust, not caring whether Caraline saw what she was doing. Dispirited faces watched them pass, and grim faces, people who knew they were in a trap. Here and there a House's *con* stood stiffly above some man's head, yet most seemed to be wearing whatever they could find, bits and pieces of armor that often neither matched nor fitted very well. A good many, though, men too tall for Cairhien, wore red coats under their battered breastplates. Min eyed a nearly obscured white lion worked on a filthy red sleeve. Darlin could only have brought a few people with him on a longboat, perhaps no more than his hunting party. Caraline looked to neither side as they rode through the camp, but whenever they came near those men in red coats, her mouth tightened.

Darlin dismounted before a tremendous tent, the largest Min had ever seen, larger than any she had ever imagined, a great red-striped oval, shining in the sunlight like silk, with no fewer than four high conical peaks, each with the Rising Sun of Cairhien stirring above in a lazy breeze, gold on blue. The strumming of harps drifted out amid the murmur of voices, like the sounds of geese. As servants took away the horses, Darlin offered his arm to Caraline. After a very long pause, she laid her fingers lightly on his wrist with no expression whatsoever, letting him escort her inside.

"My Lady wife?" Rand murmured with a smile, extending his arm.

Min sniffed and put her hand atop his. She would rather have hit him. He had no right to make a joke of that. He had no right to bring her here, *ta'veren* or no *ta'veren*. He could be killed here, burn him! But did he care if she spent the rest of her life weeping? She touched one of the striped door-flaps as they went in, and shook her head in wonder. It *was* silk. A *silk* tent!

No sooner were they inside than she felt Rand stiffen. Darlin's shrunken retinue, and Caraline's, jostled around them with insincere murmurs of apology. Between the four main tentpoles, long trestle tables groaning with food and drink stood about the colorful carpets that had been laid for a floor, and there were people everywhere, Cairhienin nobles in their finery, a few soldiers with the fronts of the heads shaved and powdered, plainly men of high rank by the fine cut of their coats. A handful of bards strolled playing through the crowd, picked out as much by a loftier air than any noble as by the carved and gilded harps they carried. Yet Min's eyes flew as if pulled to the sure source of Rand's worry, three Aes Sedai talking together in shawls fringed green and yellow and gray. Images and colors flashed around them, but not a thing she could make sense of. A swirl in the crowd revealed another, a comfortably round-faced woman. More images, more flaring colors, but all Min needed was the red-fringed shawl looped over her plump arms.

Rand tucked her hand under his arm and patted it. "Don't worry," he said softly. "Everything is going well." She would have asked him what they were doing there, but she was afraid he would tell her.

Darlin and Caraline had vanished into the crowd along with their followers, yet as a bowing serving man with stripes of red, green and white on his dark cuffs offered a tray of silver goblets to Rand and Min, she reappeared, shaking off the importunings of a hatchet-faced fellow in one of those red coats. He glared at her back as she took a goblet of punch and waved the servant away, and Min's breath caught at the aura that suddenly flashed around him, bruised hues so dark they seemed nearly black.

"Don't trust that man, Lady Caraline." She could not stop herself. "He will murder anyone he thinks is in his way; he'll kill for a whim, kill anybody." She clamped her teeth shut before saying more.

Caraline glanced over her shoulder as the hatchet-faced man turned away abruptly. "I could believe it easily of Daved Hanlon," she said wryly. "His White Lions fight for gold, not Cairhien, and loot worse than the Aiel. Andor became too hot for them, it seems." That with an arch glance at

Rand. “Toram has promised him a great deal of gold, I think, and estates I know.” She tilted her eyes up to Min. “Do you know the man, Jaisi?”

Min could only shake her head. How to explain what she did know about Hanlon now, that his hands would be red with more rapes and murders before he died? If she had known when or who. . . . But all she knew was that he would. Anyway, telling about a viewing never changed it; what she saw happened, no matter who she warned. Sometimes, before she had learned better, it had happened because she warned.

“I’ve heard of the White Lions,” Rand said coldly. “Look among them for Darkfriends, and you won’t be disappointed.” They had been some of Gaebril’s soldiers; Min knew that much, and little more, except that Lord Gaebril had really been Rahvin. It stood to reason that soldiers serving one of the Forsaken would include Darkfriends.

“What of him?” Rand nodded toward a man across the tent whose long dark coat had as many stripes as Caraline’s dress. Very tall for a Cairhienin, perhaps less than a full head shorter than Rand, he was slender except for broad shoulders, and strikingly good-looking, with a strong chin and just a touch of gray at his dark temples. For some reason, Min’s eyes were drawn to his companion, a skinny little fellow with a large nose and wide ears, in a red silk coat that did not fit him very well. He kept fingering a curved dagger at his belt, a fancy piece with a golden sheath and a large red stone capping the hilt that seemed to catch the light darkly. She saw no auras around him. He seemed vaguely familiar. They were both looking at her and Rand.

“That,” Caraline breathed in a tight voice, “is Lord Toram Riatin himself. And his constant companion these past days, Master Jeraal Mordeth. Odious little man. His eyes make me want to take a bath. They both make me feel unclean.” She blinked, surprised at what she had said, but recovered quickly. Min had the feeling little put Caraline Damodred off her stride for long. In that, she was very like Moiraine. “I would be careful were I you, Cousin Tomas,” she went on. “You may have wrought some miracle or *ta’veren*-work on me—and perhaps even on Darlin—though I cannot say what it might come to—I make no promises—but Toram hates you with a passion. It was not so bad before Mordeth joined him, yet since. . . . Toram would have us attack the city immediately, in the night. With you dead, he says, the Aiel would go, but I think it is you dead he seeks now even more than he does the throne.”

“Mordeth,” Rand said. His eyes were locked to Toram Riatin and the skinny fellow. “His name is Padan Fain, and there are one hundred thousand golden crowns on his head.”

Caraline nearly dropped her goblet. “Queens have been ransomed for less. What did he do?”

“He ravaged my home because it was my home.” Rand’s face was frozen, his voice ice. “He brought Trollocs to kill my friends because they were my friends. He is a Darkfriend, and a dead man.” Those last words came through clenched teeth. Punch splashed to the carpet as the silver goblet bent in his gloved fist.

Min felt sick for him, for his pain—she had heard what Fain had done in the Two Rivers—but she put a hand on Rand’s chest in near panic. If he gave way now, channeled with who knew how many Aes Sedai around. . . . “For the Light’s sake, take hold of yourself,” she began, and a woman’s voice spoke pleasantly behind her.

“Will you present me to your tall young friend, Caraline?”

Min looked over her shoulder, right into an ageless face, cool-eyed beneath iron-gray hair pulled up into a bun from which dangled small golden ornaments. Swallowing a squeak, Min coughed. She had thought Caraline had taken her in in one glance, but these cool eyes seemed to know things about her she herself had forgotten. The Aes Sedai’s smile, as she adjusted her green-fringed shawl, was not nearly so pleasant as her voice.

“Of course, Cadsuane Sedai.” Caraline sounded shaken, but she smoothed her tone well before she finished introducing her visiting “cousin” and his “wife.” “But I fear Cairhien is no place for them at present,” she said, all self-possession once more, smiling regret that she could not keep Rand and Min longer. “They have agreed to take my advice and return to Andor.”

“Have they?” Cadsuane said dryly. Min’s heart sank. Even if Rand had not spoken of her, it was clear from the way she looked at him that she knew him. Tiny golden birds and moons and stars swayed as she shook her head. “Most boys learn not to stick their fingers into the pretty fire the first time they are burned, Tomas. Others need to be spanked, to learn. Better a tender bottom than a seared hand.”

“You know I’m no child,” Rand told her sharply.

“Do I?” She eyed him from head to toe, and made it seem no very great distance. “Well, it seems I shall soon see whether or not you need spanking." Those cool eyes drifted to Min, to Caraline, and with a final hitch to her shawl, Cadsuane herself drifted away into the crowd.

Min swallowed the lump in her throat, and was pleased to see Caraline do the same, self-possession or no. Rand—the blind fool!—stared after the Aes Sedai as though intending to go after her. This time it was Caraline who laid a hand on Rand's chest.

"I take it you know Cadsuane," she said breathily. "Be careful of her; even the other sisters stand in awe of her." Her throaty tones took on a note of gravity. "I have no idea what will come of today, but whatever it is, I think it is time you were gone, 'Cousin Tomas.' Past time. I will have horses—"

"This is your cousin, Caraline?" said a deep, rich man's voice, and Min jumped in spite of herself.

Toram Riatin was even better-looking close up than at a distance, with the sort of strong male beauty and air of worldly knowledge that would have attracted Min before she met Rand. Well, she still found them attractive, just not as much as she did Rand. His firm-lipped smile was quite appealing.

Toram's gaze fell to Caraline's hand, still on Rand's chest. "The Lady Caraline is to be my wife," he said lazily. "Did you know that?"

Caraline's cheeks reddened angrily. "Do not say that, Toram! I have told you I will not, and I will not!"

Toram smiled at Rand. "I think women never know their minds until you show them. What do you think, Jeraal? Jeraal?" He looked around, scowling. Min stared at him in amazement. And he was so pretty, with just the right air of. . . . She wished she could call up viewings at will. She very much wanted to know what the future held for this man.

"I saw your friend scurry off that way, Toram." Mouth twisted with distaste, Caraline gave a vague wave of her hand. "You will find him near the drink, I think, or else bothering the serving girls."

"Later, my precious." He tried to touch her cheek, and looked amused when she stepped back. Without a pause he transferred his amusement to Rand. And the sword at his side. "Would you care for a little sport, cousin? I call you that because we will be cousins, once Caraline is my wife. With practice swords, of course."

"Certainly not," Caraline laughed. "He is a boy, Toram, and scarce knows one end of that thing from the other. His mother would never forgive me, if I allowed—”

“Sport,” Rand said abruptly. “I might as well see where this leads. I agree.”

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CHAPTER
36

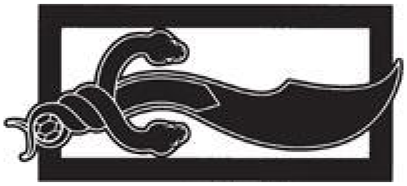

Blades

Min did not know whether to groan or shout or sit down and cry. Caraline, staring wide-eyed at Rand, seemed in the same quandary.

With a laugh, Toram began rubbing his hands together. “Listen, everyone,” he shouted. “You are going to see some sport. Clear a space. Clear a space.” He strode off, waving people away from the center of the tent.

“Sheepherder,” Min growled, “you’re not wool-brained. You don’t have *any* brains!”

“I would not put it quite so,” Caraline said in a *very* dry voice, “but I suggest you leave, now. Whatever . . . tricks . . . you think you might use, there are seven Aes Sedai in this tent, four of them Red Ajah lately arrived from the south on their way to Tar Valon. Should one of them so much as suspect, I very much fear that whatever might have come of today, never will. Leave.”

“I won’t use any . . . tricks.” Rand unbuckled his sword belt and handed it to Min. “If I’ve touched you and Darlin in one way, maybe I can touch Toram in another.” The crowd was pushing back, opening up an area twenty paces across between two of the great centerpoles. Some looked to Rand, and there was a great deal of rib nudging and sly laughter. The Aes Sedai were offered pride of place, of course, Cadsuane and her two friends on one side, four ageless women in Red Ajah shawls on the other. Cadsuane and her companions were eyeing Rand with open disapproval and as close to irritation as any Aes Sedai ever let show, but the Red sisters looked more concerned with those three. At least, although they stood directly opposite, they managed to seem oblivious of the presence of any other sisters. No one could be that blind without trying.

“Listen to me, *cousin.*” Caraline’s low voice almost crackled with urgency. She stood very close, her neck craned to look up at him. Barely reaching his chest, she seemed ready to box his ears. “If you use none of your *special* tricks,” Caraline went on, “he can hurt you badly, even with practice swords, and he will. He has never liked another touching what he thinks is his, and he suspects every pretty young man who speaks to me of being my lover. When we were children, he pushed a friend—a friend!—down the stairs and broke his back because Derowin rode his pony without asking. Go, cousin. No one will think less; no one expects a boy to face a blade-master. Jaisi . . . whatever your real name is . . . help me convince him!”

Min opened her mouth—and Rand laid a finger across her lips. “I am who I am,” he smiled. “And I don’t think I could run from him if I wasn’t. So, he’s a blademaster.” Unbuttoning his coat, he strode out into the cleared area.

“Why must they be so stubborn when you least wish it?” Caraline whispered in tones of frustration. Min could only nod in agreement.

Toram had stripped to shirt and breeches, and carried two practice swords, their “blades” bundles of thin lathes tied together. He raised an eyebrow at the sight of Rand with his coat simply hanging open. “You will be confined in that, cousin.” Rand shrugged.

Without warning, Toram tossed one of the swords; Rand caught it out of the air by the long hilt.

“Those gloves will slip, cousin. You want a firm grip.”

Rand took the hilt in both hands and turned slightly sideways, blade down and left foot forward.

Toram spread his hands as if to say he had done all he could. “Well, at least he knows how to stand,” he laughed, and on the last word darted forward, practice sword streaking for Rand’s head with all his might behind it.

With a loud clack, bundled lathes met bundled lathes. Rand had moved nothing except his sword. For a moment, Toram stared at him, and Rand looked back calmly. Then they began to dance.

That was all Min could call it, that gliding, flowing movement, wooden blades flickering and spinning. She had watched Rand practice the sword against the best he could find, often against two or three or four at once, but that had been nothing to this. So beautiful, and so easy to forget that had those lathes been steel, blood could have flowed. Except that no blade, steel or lathes, touched flesh. Back and forth they danced, circling one another, swords now probing, now slashing, Rand attacking, now defending, and every movement punctuated by those loud clacks.

Caraline gripped Min's arm hard without taking her eyes from the contest. "He is also a blademaster," she breathed. "He must be. Look at him!"

Min was looking, and hugging Rand's sword belt and scabbarded blade as if they were him. Back and forth in beauty, and whatever Rand thought, Toram clearly wished his blade was steel. Cold rage burned on his face, and he pressed harder, harder. Still no blade touched anything but another, yet now Rand backed away constantly, sword darting to defend, and Toram moved forward, attacking, eyes glittering with icy fury.

Outside, someone screamed, a wail of utter horror, and suddenly the huge tent snapped up into the air, vanishing into a thick grayness that hid the sky. Fog billowed on every side, filled with distant shrieks and bellows. Thin tendrils wafted into the clear inverted bowl left by the tent. Everyone stared in amazement. Almost everyone.

Toram's lathe blade smashed into Rand's side with a bone-crack sound, doubling him over. "You are dead, cousin," Toram sneered, lifting his sword high to strike again—and froze, staring, as part of the heavy gray mist overhead . . . solidified. A tentacle of fog, it might have been, a thick three-toed arm, reaching down, closed around the stout Red sister, snatching her into the air before anyone had a chance to move.

Cadsuane was the first to overcome shock. Her arms rose, shaking back her shawl, her hands made a twist, and a ball of fire seemed to shoot upward from each palm, streaking into the mist. Above, something suddenly burst into flame, one violent gout that vanished immediately, and the Red sister fell back into sight, dropping with a thud facedown on the carpets near where Rand knelt on one knee clutching his side. At least, she would have been facedown had her head not been twisted around so her dead eyes stared up into the fog.

whatever scraps of composure remained in the tent fled with that. The Shadow had been given flesh. Screaming people fled in every direction, knocking over tables, nobles clawing past servants and servants past nobles. Buffeted, Min fought her way to Rand with fists and elbows and his sword as a club.

"Are you all right?" she asked, pulling him to his feet. She was surprised to see Caraline on the other side, helping him, too. For that matter, Caraline looked surprised.

He took his hand from beneath his coat, fingers thankfully free of blood. That half-healed scar, so tender, had not broken open. “I think we best move,” he said, taking his sword belt. “We have to get out of this.” The inverted bowl of clear air was noticeably smaller. Almost everyone else had fled. Out in the fog, screams rose, most cutting off abruptly but always replaced by new.

“I agree, Tomas,” Darlin said. Sword in hand, he planted himself with his back to Caraline, between her and the fog. “The question is, in which direction? And also, how far do we have to go?”

“This is his work,” Toram spat. “Al’Thor’s.” Hurling down his practice sword, he stalked to his discarded coat and calmly donned it. Whatever else he was, he was no coward. “Jeraal?” he shouted at the fog as he fastened his sword belt. “Jeraal, the Light burn you, man, where are you? Jeraal!” Mordeth—Fain—did not answer, and he went on shouting.

The only others still there were Cadsuane and her two companions, faces calm but hands running nervously over their shawls. Cadsuane herself might have been setting out for a stroll. “I should think north,” she said. “The slope lies closer that way, and climbing may take us above this. Stop that caterwauling, Toram! Either your man’s dead, or he can’t hear.” Toram glared at her, but he did stop shouting. Cadsuane did not appear to notice or care, so long as he was silent. “North, then. We three will take care of anything your steel can’t handle.” She looked straight at Rand when she said that, and he gave a whisker of a nod before buckling his sword belt and drawing his blade. Trying not to goggle, Min exchanged glances with Caraline; the other woman’s eyes looked as large as teacups. The Aes Sedai knew who he was, and she was going to keep anyone else from knowing.

“I wish we had not left our Warders back in the city,” the slim Yellow sister said. Tiny silver bells in her dark hair chimed as she tossed her head. She had almost as commanding an air as Cadsuane, enough that you did not realize how pretty she was at first, except that that toss of her head seemed . . . well . . . a touch petulant. “I wish I had Roshan here.”

“A circle, Cadsuane?” the Gray asked. Head turning this way and that to peer at the fog, she looked like a plump, pale-haired sparrow with her sharp nose and inquisitive eyes. Not a frightened sparrow, but one definitely ready to take wing. “Should we link?”

"No, Niande," Cadsuane sighed. "If you see something, you must be B able to strike at it without waiting to point it out for me. Samitsu, stop worrying about Roshan. We have three fine swords here, two of them heron-mark, I see. They will do."

Toram showed his teeth on seeing the heron engraved on the blade Rand had unsheathed. If it was a smile, it held no mirth. His own bared blade bore a heron, too. Darlin's did not, but he gave Rand and his sword a weighing look, then a respectful nod that was considerably deeper than he had offered plain Tomas Trakand, of a minor branch of the House.

The gray-haired Green had taken charge, clearly, and she kept it despite attempted protests from Darlin, who like many Tairens seemed not to relish Aes Sedai a great deal, and Toram, who just seemed to dislike anyone giving orders but himself. For that matter, so did Caraline, but Cadsuane ignored her frowns as completely as she did the men's voiced complaints. Unlike them, Caraline appeared to realize complaints would do no good. Wonder of wonders, Rand meekly let himself be placed to Cadsuane's right as she quickly arranged everyone. Well, not exactly meekly—he stared down his nose at her in a way that would have made Min slap him if he did it to her; Cadsuane just shook her head and muttered something that reddened his face—but at least he kept his mouth shut. Right then, Min almost thought he would announce who he was. And maybe expect the fog to vanish in fear of the Dragon Reborn. He smiled at her as though fog in this weather was nothing, even a fog that snatched tents and people.

They moved into the thick mist in a formation like a six-pointed star, Cadsuane herself in the lead, an Aes Sedai at each of two other points, a man with a sword at three. Toram, of course, protested loudly at bringing up the rear until Cadsuane mentioned the honor of the rear guard or some such. That quieted him down. Min had no objection whatsoever to her own position with Caraline in the center of the star. She carried a knife in either hand, and wondered whether they would be any use. It was something of a relief to see the dagger in Caraline's fist tremble. At least her own hands were steady. Then again, she thought she might be too frightened to shake.

The fog was cold as winter. Grayness closed around them in swirls, so heavy it was difficult to see the others clearly. Hearing was all too easy, though. Shrieks drifted through the murk, men and women crying out, horses screaming. The fog seemed to deaden sound, make it hollow, so that thankfully, those awful sounds seemed distant. The mist ahead began to thicken, but fireballs immediately shot from Cadsuane's hands, sizzling through the icy gray, and the thickening erupted in one roaring flare of flame. Roars behind, light flashing against the fog like lightning against clouds, spoke of the other two sisters at work. Min had no desire to look back. What she could see was more than enough.

Past trampled tents half obscured by gray haze they moved, past bodies and sometimes parts of bodies not nearly obscured enough. A leg. An arm. A man who was not there from the waist down. Once a woman's head that seemed to grin from where it sat on the corner of an overturned wagon. The land began to slope upward, steeper. Min saw her first living soul besides them, and wished she had not. A man wearing one of the red coats staggered toward them, waving his left arm feebly. The other was gone, and wet white bone showed where half his face had been. Something that might have been words bubbled though his teeth; and he collapsed. Samitsu knelt briefly beside him, putting her fingers against the bloody ruin of his forehead. Rising, she shook her head, and they moved on. Upslope, and up, until Min began wondering whether they were climbing a mountain instead of a hill.

Right in front of Darlin, the fog suddenly began to take on form, a man-high shape, but all tentacles and gaping mouths full of sharp teeth. The High Lord might have been no blademaster, but he was not slow either. His blade sliced through the middle of the still-coalescing shape, looped and slashed it top to bottom. Four clouds of fog, thicker than the surrounding mist, settled to the ground. "Well," he said, "at least we know steel can cut these . . . creatures."

The thicker chunks of fog oozed together, began to rise once more.

Cadsuane stretched out a hand, droplets of fire falling from her fingertips; one bright flash of flame seared the solidifying fog from existence. "But no more than cut, so it seems," she murmured.

Ahead to their right, a woman suddenly appeared in the swirling gray, silk skirts held high as she half ran, half fell down the slope toward them. "Thank the Light!" she screamed. "Thank the Light! I thought I was alone!" Right behind her the fog drew together, a nightmare all teeth and claws, looming above her. Had it been a man, Min was sure Rand would have waited.

His hand rose before Cadsuane could move, and a bar of . . . something . . . liquid white fire brighter than the sun . . . shot out over the running woman's head. The creature simply vanished. For a moment there was clear air where it had been, and along the line that the bar had burned, until the fog began closing in. A moment while the woman froze where she stood. Then, shrieking at the top of her lungs, she turned and ran from them, still downslope, fleeing what she feared more than nightmares in these mists.

"You!" Toram roared, so loudly that Min spun to face him with her knives raised. He stood pointing his sword at Rand. "You are him! I was right! This is your work! You will not trap me, al'Thor!" Suddenly he broke away at an angle, scrambling wildly up the slope. "You will not trap me!"

"Come back!" Darlin shouted after him. "We must stick together! We must. . . ." He trailed off, staring at Rand. "You *are* him. The Light burn me, you are!" He half-moved as if to place himself between Rand and Caraline, but at least he did not run.

Calmly, Cadsuane picked her way across the slope to Rand. And slapped his face so hard his head jerked. Min's breath caught in shock. "You will not do that again," Cadsuane said. There was no heat in her voice, just iron. "Do you hear me? Not balefire. Not ever."

Surprisingly, Rand only rubbed his cheek. "You were wrong, Cadsuane. He's real. I'm certain of it. I know he is." Even more surprisingly, he sounded as if he very much wanted her to believe.

Min's heart went out to him. He had mentioned hearing voices; he must mean that. She raised her right hand toward him, forgetting for the moment that it held a knife, and opened her mouth to say something comforting. Though she was not entirely sure she would ever be able to use that particular word innocuously again. She opened her mouth—and Padan Fain seemed to leap out of the mists behind Rand, steel gleaming in his fist.

"Behind you!" Min screamed, pointing with the knife in her outstretched right hand as she threw the one in her left. Everything seemed to happen at once, half-seen in wintery fog.

Rand began to turn, twisting aside, and Fain also twisted, to lunge for him. For that twist, her knife missed, but Fain's dagger scored along Rand's left side. It hardly seemed to more than slice his coat, yet he screamed. He screamed, a sound to make Min's heart clench, and clutching his side, he fell against Cadsuane, catching at her to hold himself up, pulling both of them down.

“Move out of my way!” one of the other sisters shouted—Samitsu, Min thought—and suddenly, Min’s feet jerked out from under her. She landed heavily, grunting as she hit the slope together with Caraline, who snapped a breathless, “Blood and fire!”

Everything at once.

“Move!” Samitsu shouted again, as Darlin lunged for Fain with his sword. The bony man moved with shocking speed, throwing himself down and rolling beyond Darlin’s reach. Strangely, he cackled with laughter as he scampered to his feet and ran off, swallowed in the murk almost immediately.

Min pushed herself up shaking.

Caraline was much more vigorous. “I will tell you now, Aes Sedai,” she said in a cold voice, brushing at her skirts violently, “I will not be treated so. I am Caraline Damodred, High Seat of House. . . .”

Min stopped listening. Cadsuane was sitting on the slope above, holding Rand’s head in her lap. It had only been a cut. Fain’s dagger could not have more than touched. . . . With a cry, Min threw herself forward. Aes Sedai or no, she pushed the woman away from Rand and cradled his head in her arms. His eyes were closed, his breathing ragged. His face felt hot.

“Help him!” she screamed at Cadsuane, like an echo of the distant screams in the mist. “Help him!” A part of her said that did not make much sense after pushing her away, but his face seemed to burn her hands, to burn sense.

“Samitsu, quickly,” Cadsuane said, standing and rearranging her shawl. “He’s beyond my Talent for Healing.” She laid a hand on the top of Min’s head. “Girl, I will hardly let the boy die when I haven’t taught him manners, yet. Stop crying, now.”

It was very strange. Min was fairly sure the woman had done nothing to her with the Power, yet she believed. Teach him manners? A fine tussle that would be. Unfolding her arms from around his head, not without reluctance, Min backed away on her knees. Very strange. She had not even realized that she was crying, yet Cadsuane’s reassurance was enough to stop the flow of tears. Sniffing, she scrubbed at her cheeks with the heel of her hand as Samitsu knelt beside him, placing fingertips on his forehead. Min wondered why she did not take his head in both hands, the way Moiraine did.

Abruptly Rand convulsed, gasping and thrashing so hard that a flailing arm knocked the Yellow over on her back. As soon as her fingers left him, he subsided. Min crawled nearer. He breathed more easily, but his eyes were still closed. She touched his cheek. Cooler than it had been, but still too warm. And pale.

"Something is amiss," Samitsu said peevishly as she sat up. Pulling Rand's coat aside, she gripped the slice in his bloodstained shirt and ripped a wide gap in the linen.

The cut from Fain's dagger, no longer than her hand and not deep, ran right across the old round scar. Even in the dim light, Min could see that the edges of the gash looked swollen and angry, as if the wound had gone untended for days. It was no longer bleeding, but it should have been gone. That was what Healing did: wounds knitted themselves up right before your eyes.

"This," Samitsu said in a lecturing tone, lightly touching the scar, "seems like a cyst, but full of evil instead of pus. And this . . ." She drew the finger down the gash. ". . . seems full of a different evil." Suddenly she frowned at the Green standing over her, and her voice became sullen and defensive. "If I had the words, Cadsuane, I would use them. I have never seen the like. Never. But I will tell you this. I think if I had been one moment slower, perhaps if you had not tried first, he would be dead now. As it is. . . ." With a sigh, the Yellow sister seemed to deflate, her face sagging. "As it is, I believe he will die."

Min shook her head, trying to say no, but she could not seem to make her tongue move. She heard Caraline murmuring a prayer. The woman stood gripping one of Darlin's coatsleeves with both hands. Darlin himself frowned down at Rand as though trying to make sense of what he saw.

Cadsuane bent to pat Samitsu's shoulder. "You are the best living, perhaps the best ever," she said quietly. "No one has the Healing to compare with you." With a nod, Samitsu stood, and before she was on her feet, she was all Aes Sedai serenity once more. Cadsuane, scowling down at Rand with her hands on her hips, was not. "Phaw! I will not allow you to die on me, boy," she growled, sounding as though it were his fault. This time, instead of touching the top of Min's head, she rapped it with a knuckle. "Get to your feet, girl. You're no milksop—any fool can see that—so stop pretending. Darlin, you will carry him. Bandages must wait. This fog is not leaving us, so we had better leave it."

Darlin hesitated. Maybe it was Cadsuane's peremptory frown, and maybe the hand Caraline half-raised to his face, but abruptly, he sheathed his sword, muttering under his breath, and hoisted Rand across his shoulders with arms and legs dangling.

Min took up the heron-mark blade and carefully slid it into the scabbard hanging from Rand's waist. "He will need it," she told Darlin, and after a moment, he nodded. A lucky thing for him he did; she had bundled all her confidence into the Green sister, and she was not about to let anyone think differently.

"Now be careful, Darlin," Caraline said in that throaty voice once Cadsuane made their marching order clear. "Be sure to stay behind me, and I will protect you."

Darlin laughed till he wheezed, and was still chuckling when they began climbing through the cold fog and the distant shrieks once more, with him carrying Rand in the center and the women in a circle around him.

Min knew she was only another pair of eyes, just like Caraline on the other side of Cadsuane, and she knew the knife she carried unsheathed was no use against the mist-shapes, but Padan Fain might still be alive out there. She would not miss again. Caraline carried her dagger too, and by the looks she cast over her shoulder at Darlin staggering uphill under Rand's weight, maybe she also intended to protect the Dragon Reborn. And then again, maybe it was not him. A woman could forgive any amount of nose for that laugh.

Shapes still formed in the mist and died by fire, and once a huge something tore a shrieking horse in two off to their right before any Aes Sedai could slay it. Min was quite noisily sick after that, and not a bit ashamed; people were dying, but at least the people had come here by their own choice. The meanest soldier could have run away yesterday had he chosen, but not that horse. Shapes formed and died, and people died, screaming always in the distance, it seemed, though they still stumbled past torn carrion that had been human an hour gone. Min began to wonder whether they would ever see daylight again.

With shocking suddenness and no warning, she stumbled into it, one moment surrounded by gray, the next with the sun burning golden high overhead in a blue sky, all so bright she had to shade her eyes. And there, perhaps five miles across all but treeless hills, Cairhien rose solid and square on its own prominences. Somehow, it did not look quite real anymore.

Staring back at the edge of the fog, she shivered. It was an edge, a billowing wall, stretching through the trees on this hilltop, and far too straight, with no eddies or thinning. Just clear air here, and there, thick gray. A little more of a tree right in front of her became visible, and she realized the mist was creeping back, perhaps being burned off by the sun. But far too slowly to make the retreat natural. The others stared at it just as hard as she, even the Aes Sedai.

Twenty paces off to their left, a man suddenly scrambled into the clear air on all fours. The front of his head was shaved, and by the battered black breastplate he wore, he was a common soldier. Staring about wildly, he did not appear to see them, and went scrambling on down the hillside, still on hands and knees. Farther to the right, two men and a woman appeared, all running. She had stripes of color across the front of her dress, but how many was hard to say since she had gathered her skirts as high as she could to run faster, and she matched the men stride for stride. None of them looked to either side, only launched themselves down the hill, falling, tumbling and coming back to their feet running again.

Caraline studied the slim blade of her dagger for a moment, then thrust it hard into it sheath. “So vanishes my army,” she sighed.

Darlin, with Rand still unconscious across his shoulders, looked at her. “There is an army in Tear, if you call.”

She glanced at Rand, hanging like a sack. “Perhaps,” she said. Darlin turned his head toward Rand’s face with a troubled frown.

Cadsuane was all practicality. “The road lies that way,” she said pointing west. “It will be faster than walking cross-country. An easy stroll.”

Easy was not what Min would have called it. The air seemed twice as hot after the fog’s cold; sweat rolled out of her, and seemed to drain her strength. Her legs wobbled. She tripped over exposed roots and fell flat on her face. She tripped over rocks and fell. She tripped over her own heeled boots and fell. Once her feet just went out from under, and she slid a good forty paces down the hillside on the seat of her breeches, arms flailing until she managed to snag a sapling. Caraline went sprawling as many times, and maybe more; dresses were not made for this sort of travel, and before long—after a tumble head over heels ended with her skirts around her ears—she was asking Min the name of the seamstress who made her coat and breeches. Darlin did not fall. Oh, he stumbled and tripped and skidded every bit as much as they, but whenever he started to fall, something seemed to catch him, to steady him on his feet. In the beginning he glared at the Aes Sedai, all proud Tairen High Lord who would carry Rand out without any help. Cadsuane and the others affected not to see. They never fell; they simply walked along, chatting quietly among themselves, and caught Darlin before he could. By the time they reached the road, he looked both grateful and hunted.

Standing in the middle of the broad road of hard-packed earth, in sight of the river, Cadsuane flung up a hand to stop the first conveyance that appeared, a rickety wagon drawn by two moth-eaten mules and driven by a skinny farmer in a patched coat who hauled on his reins with alacrity. What did the toothless fellow think he had run into? Three ageless Aes Sedai, complete with shawls, who might have stepped down from a coach a moment before. A sweat-soaked Cairhienin woman, of high rank by the stripes on her dress; or maybe a beggar who had clothed herself from a noblewoman's rag closet, by the state of that dress. An obvious Tairen nobleman, with sweat dripping from his nose and pointed beard and carrying another man across his shoulders like a sack of grain. And herself. Both knees out of her breeches, and another tear in the seat that her coat covered, thank the Light, though one sleeve hung by a few threads. More stains and dust than she wanted to think about.

Not waiting for anyone else, she drew a knife from her sleeve—popping most of those few threads—and gave it a flourish the way Thom Merrilin had taught her, hilt snaking through her fingers so the blade flashed in the sun. "We require a ride to the Sun Palace," she announced, and Rand himself could not have done better. There were times when being peremptory saved argument.

"Child," Cadsuane said chidingly, "I'm sure Kiruna and her friends would do everything they could, but there isn't a Yellow among them. Samitsu and Corele really are two of the best ever. Lady Arilyn has very kindly lent us her palace in the city, so we will take him—"

"No." Min had no idea where she found the courage to say that word to this woman. Except. . . . It was Rand, they were talking about. "If he wakes. . . ." She stopped to swallow; he *would* wake. "If he wakes in a strange place surrounded by strange Aes Sedai again, I can't imagine what he might do. You don’t want to imagine it.” For a long moment she met that cool gaze, and then the Aes Sedai nodded.

“The Sun Palace,” Cadsuane told the farmer. “And as fast as you make these fleabags move.”

Of course, it was not quite so simple, even for Aes Sedai. Ander Tol had a wagonload of scraggly turnips he intended to sell in the city, and no intention of going anywhere near the Sun Palace, where, he told them, the Dragon Reborn ate people, who were cooked on spits by Aiel women ten feet tall. Not for any number of Aes Sedai would he venture within a mile of the palace. On the other hand, Cadsuane tossed him a purse that made his eyes pop when he looked inside, then told him she had just bought his turnips and hired him and his wagon. If he did not like the notion, he could give the purse back. That with her fists on her hips and a look on her face that said he might just eat his wagon on the spot if he tried giving the purse back. Ander Tol was a reasonable man, it turned out. Samitsu and Niande unloaded the wagon, turnips simply flying into the air to land in a tidy pile by the roadside. By their icy expressions, this was in no way a use to which they had ever expected to put the One Power. By Darlin’s expression, standing there with Rand still on his shoulders, he was relieved they had not called on him to do it. Ander Tol sat in the wagon seat with his jaw trying to reach his knees, fingering the purse as though wondering whether it was enough after all.

Once they were settled in the wagon bed, with the straw that had been beneath the turnips all gathered to make a bed for Rand, Cadsuane faced Min across him. Master Tol was flapping his reins and finding a surprising turn of speed in those mules. The wagon lurched and jounced horribly, the wheels not only shaking but apparently out of round. Wishing she had kept just a little of the straw for herself, Min was amused to see Samitsu and Niande growing tighter in the face as they were bounced up and down. Caraline smiled at them quite openly, the High Seat of House Damodred not bothering to hide her pleasure that the Aes Sedai were for once riding rough. Though in truth, slight as she was, she bounced higher and came down with harder thumps than they. Darlin, holding on to the side of the wagon, appeared unaffected however hard he was shaken; he kept frowning and looking from Caraline to Rand.

Cadsuane was another who apparently did not care whether her teeth rattled. “I expect to be there before nightfall, Master Tol,” she called, producing more flapping if no more speed. “Now tell me,” she said, turning to Min. “Exactly what happened the *last* time this boy woke surrounded by strange Aes Sedai?” Her eyes caught Min’s and held them.

He wanted it kept secret, if it could be, for as long as it could be. But he was dying, and the only chance he had that Min saw rested in these three women. Maybe knowing could not help. Maybe knowing could at least make them understand something of him. “They put him in a box,” she began.

She was not sure how she went on—except that she had to—or how she kept from bursting into tears—except that she was not going to break down again when Rand needed her—but somehow she continued through the confinement and the beatings without a tremor in her voice, right to Kiruna and the rest kneeling to swear fealty. Darlin and Caraline looked stunned. Samitsu and Niande looked horrified. Though not for the reason she would have supposed, it turned out.

“He . . . *stilled* three sisters?” Samitsu said shrilly. Suddenly she slapped a hand over her mouth and twisted around to lean over the side of the swaying wagon and retch loudly. Niande joined her almost before she began, the pair of them hanging there, emptying their bellies.

And Cadsuane. . . . Cadsuane touched Rand’s pale face, brushed strands of hair from his forehead. “Do not be afraid, boy,” she said softly. “They made my task harder, and yours, but I will not hurt you more than I must.” Min turned to ice inside.

Guards at the city gates shouted at the racing wagon, but Cadsuane told Master Tol not to stop, and he flailed at his mules all the harder. People in the streets leaped out of the way to avoid being run down, and the wagon’s progress left behind shouts and curses, overturned sedan chairs, and coaches run into street vendors’ stalls. Through the streets and up the broad ramp to the Sun Palace, where guards in Lord Dobraine’s colors spilled out as though preparing to fight off hordes. While Master Tol was squealing at the top of lungs that Aes Sedai made him do it, the soldiers saw Min. Then they saw Rand. Min had thought she was in a whirlwind before, but she had been wrong.

Two dozen men tried to reach into the wagon at once to lift Rand out, and those who managed to lay hands on him, handled him as gently as a babe, four to either side with their arms beneath. Cadsuane must have repeated a thousand times that he was not dead as they hurried into the palace and along corridors that seemed longer than Min remembered, with more Cairhienin soldiers crowding along behind. Nobles began appearing from every doorway and crossing hall, it seemed, faces bloodless, staring as Rand passed. She lost track of Caraline and Darlin, realized she could not remember seeing them since the wagon, and, wishing them well, forgot them. Rand was the only thing she cared about. The only thing in the world.

Nandera was with the *Far Dareis Mai* guarding the doors to Rand's rooms, with their gilded Rising Suns. When the graying Maiden saw Rand, stone-faced Aiel composure shattered. "What has happened to him?" she wailed, eyes going wide. "What has happened?" Some of the other Maidens began to moan, a low, hair-raising sound like a dirge.

"Be quiet!" Cadsuane roared, slapping her hands together in a thunder-crack. "You, girl. He needs his bed. Hop!" Nandera hopped. Rand was stripped and in his bed in a twinkling, with Samitsu and Niande both hovering over him, the Cairhienin chased out and Nandera at the door repeating Cadsuane's instructions that he was not to be disturbed by anyone, all so fast Min felt dizzy. She hoped one day to see the confrontation between Cadsuane and the Wise One Sorilea; it had to come, and it would be memorable.

Yet if Cadsuane thought her instructions were really going to keep everyone out, she was mistaken. Before she had more than moved a chair, floating it on the Power, to sit beside Rand's bed, Kiruna and Bera strode in like the two faces of pride, ruler of a court and ruler of her farmhouse.

"What is this I hear about—?" Kiruna began furiously. She saw Cadsuane. Bera saw Cadsuane. To Min's amazement, they stopped there with their mouths hanging open.

"He is in good hands," Cadsuane said. "Unless one of you has suddenly found more Talent for Healing than I recall?"

"Yes, Cadsuane," they said meekly. "No, Cadsuane." Min closed her own mouth.

Samitsu took an ivory-inlaid chair against the wall, spreading her dark yellow skirts, and sat with her hands folded, watching Rand's chest rise and fall beneath the sheet. Niande went to Rand's bookshelf and selected a book before she sat near the windows. *Reading!* Kiruna and Bera started to sit, then actually looked to Cadsuane and waited for her impatient nod before they sat down.

"Why aren't you doing something?" Min shouted.

"That is what I might ask," Amys said, walking into the room. The youthful, white-haired Wise One stared at Rand for a moment, then shifted her deep brown shawl and turned to Kiruna and Bera. "You may go," she said. "And Kiruna, Sorilea wishes to see you again."

Kiruna's dark face paled, but the pair of them rose and curtsied, murmuring, "Yes, Amys," even more meekly than for Cadsuane before leaving with embarrassed glances at the Green sister.

"Interesting," Cadsuane said when they were gone. Her dark eyes locked with Amys' blue, and Cadsuane, at least, seemed to like what she saw. At any rate, she smiled. "I should like to meet this Sorilea. She is a strong woman?" She seemed to emphasize the word "strong."

"The strongest I have ever known," Amys said simply. Calmly. You would never have thought Rand lay senseless in front of her. "I do not know your Healing, Aes Sedai. I trust that you have done what can be done?" Her tone was flat; Min doubted how much Amys did trust.

"What can be done, has been," Cadsuane sighed. "All we can do now is wait."

"While he dies?" a man's harsh voice said, and Min jumped.

Dashiva strode into the room, his plain face contorted in a scowl. "Flinn!" he snapped.

Niande's book thudded to the floor from apparently nerveless fingers; she stared at the three men in black coats as she would have at the Dark One himself. Pale-faced, Samitsu muttered something that sounded like a prayer.

At Dashiva's command, the grizzled Asha'man limped to the bed on the opposite side from Cadsuane and began running his hands along the length of Rand's still body a foot above the sheet. Young Narishma stood frowning by the door, fingering the hilt of his sword, those big dark eyes trying to watch all three Aes Sedai at once. The Aes Sedai, and Amys. He did not look afraid; just a man confidently waiting for those women to show themselves his enemies. Unlike the Aes Sedai, Amys ignored the Asha'man except for Flinn. Her eyes followed him, smooth face utterly expressionless. But her thumb ran along the haft of her belt knife in a very expressive manner.

"What are you doing?" Samitsu demanded, leaping up from her chair. Whatever her unease about Asha'man, concern for her unconscious patient had overcome it. "You, Flinn or whoever you are." She started toward the bed, and Narishma flowed to block her. Frowning, she tried to go around, and he put a hand on her arm.

"Another boy with no manners," Cadsuane murmured. Of the three sisters, only she displayed no alarm whatsoever at the Asha'man. Instead, she studied them over steepled fingers.

Narishma flushed at her comment and removed his hand, but when Samitsu tried to go around him again, he once more stepped in front of her.

She settled for glaring past his shoulder. "You, Flinn, what are you doing? I won't have you killing him with your ignorance! Do you hear me?" Min practically danced from foot to foot. She did not think an Asha'man would kill Rand, not on purpose, but. . . . He trusted them, but. . . . Light, even Amys did not seem sure, frowning from Flinn to Rand.

Flinn stripped the sheet down to Rand's waist, exposing the wound. The gash looked neither better nor worse than she remembered, a gaping, angry, bloodless wound slicing across the round scar. He appeared to be sleeping.

"He can't do any worse than Rand already is," Min said. Nobody paid her any mind.

Dashiva made a guttural sound, and Flinn looked at him. "You see something, Asha'man?"

"I have no Talent for Healing," Dashiva said, twisting his mouth wryly. "You're the one who took my suggestion and learned."

"What suggestion?" Samitsu demanded. "I insist that you—"

"Be quiet, Samitsu," Cadsuane said. She seemed to be the only one in the room who was calm aside from Amys, and from the way the Wise One kept stroking her knife hilt, Min was not certain about her. "I think the last thing he wants to do is harm the boy."

"But, Cadsuane," Niande began urgently, "that man is—"

"I said, be quiet," the gray-haired Aes Sedai told her firmly.

"I assure you," Dashiva said, managing to sound oily and harsh at the same time, "Flinn knows what he is about. Already he can do things you *Aes Sedai* never dreamed of." Samitsu sniffed; loudly. Cadsuane merely nodded and sat back in her chair.

Flinn traced his finger along the puffy gash in Rand's side and across the old scar. That did seem more tender. "These are alike, but different, as if there's two kinds of infection at work. Only it isn't infection; it's . . . darkness. I can't think of a better word." He shrugged, eyeing Samitsu's

Yellow-fringed shawl as she frowned at him, but it was a considering look she gave him now.

"Get on with it, Flinn," Dashiva muttered. "If he dies. . . ." Nose wrinkled as though at a bad smell, he seemed unable to look away from Rand. His lips moved as he talked to himself, and once he made a sound, half sob, half bitter laugh, without his face changing one line.

Drawing a deep breath, Flinn looked around the room, at the Aes Sedai, at Amys. When he caught sight of Min, he gave a start, and his leathery face reddened. Hastily he rearranged the sheet to cover Rand to his neck, leaving only the old wound and the new exposed.

"I hope nobody minds if I talk," he said, beginning to move callused hands above Rand's side. "Talking seems to help a mite." He squinted, focusing on the injuries, and his fingers writhed slowly. Very much as though he was weaving threads, Min realized. His tone was almost absent, only part of his mind on the words. "It was Healing made me go to the Black Tower, you might say. I was a soldier, till I took a lance in my thigh; couldn't grip a saddle proper after that, or even walk far. That was the fifteenth wound I took in near forty years in the Queen's Guards. Fifteen that counted, anyway; it don't if you can walk or ride, after. I seen a lot of friends die in them forty years. So I went, and the M'Hael taught me Healing. And other things. A rough sort of Healing; I was Healed by an Aes Sedai once—oh, nigh on thirty years back now—and this hurts, compared to that. Works as well, though. Then one day, Dashiva here—pardon; Asha'man Dashiva—says he wonders why it's all the same, no matter if a man's got a broke leg or a cold, and we got to talking, and. . . . Well, he's got no feel for it, himself, but me, seems I got the knack you might say. The Talent. So I started thinking, what if I . . . ? There. Best I can do."

Dashiva grunted as Flinn abruptly sat back on his heels and wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. Sweat beaded on his face, the first time Min had seen an Asha'man perspire. The slash in Rand's side was not gone, yet it seemed a little smaller, less red and angry. He still slept, but his face seemed less pale.

Samitsu darted past Narishma so quickly he had no chance to intervene. "What did you do?" she demanded, laying fingers on Rand's forehead. Whatever she found with the Power, her eyebrows climbed halfway to her hair, and her tone leaped from imperious to incredulous. "What did you do?"

Flinn shrugged his shoulders regretfully. “Not much. I couldn’t really touch what’s wrong. I sort of sealed them away from him, for a time, anyhow. It won’t last. They’re fighting each other, now. Maybe they’ll kill off each other, while he heals himself the rest of the way.” Sighing, he shook his head. “On the other hand, I can’t say that they won’t kill him. But I think he has a better chance than he did.”

Dashiva nodded self-importantly. “Yes; he has a chance, now.” You would have thought he had done the Healing himself.

To Flinn’s evident surprise, Samitsu rounded the bed to help him rise. “You will tell me what you did,” she said, regal tone at strong odds with the way her quick fingers straightened the old man’s collar and smoothed his lapels. “If only there was some way you could *show* me! But you will describe it. You must! I will give you all the gold I possess, bear your child, whatever you wish, but you *will* tell me all that you can.” Apparently not sure herself whether she was commanding or begging, she led a very bemused Flinn over by the windows. He opened his mouth more than once, but she was too busy trying to make him talk to see it.

Not caring what anyone thought, Min climbed onto the bed and lay so she could tuck Rand’s head under her chin and wrap her arms around him. A chance. Furtively she studied the three people gathered around the bed. Cadsuane in her chair, Amys standing opposite, Dashiva leaning against one of the square bedposts at the foot, all with unreadable auras and images dancing around them. All with their eyes intent on Rand. No doubt Amys saw some disaster for the Aiel if Rand died, and Dashiva, the only one with any expression, a dark yet worried scowl, disaster for the Asha’man. And Cadsuane. . . . Cadsuane, who was not only known to Bera and Kiruna, but made them jump like girls for all their oaths to Rand. Cadsuane, who would not hurt Rand “any more than she had to.”

Cadsuane’s gaze met Min’s for a moment, and Min shivered. Somehow, she would protect him while he could not protect himself, from Amys, and Dashiva, and Cadsuane. Somehow. Unconsciously, she began to hum a lullaby, rocking Rand gently. Somehow.

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CHAPTER

37

A Note from the Palace

The day after the Festival of Birds dawned to strong winds off the Sea of Storms that actually cut the heat in Ebou Dar. A sky without a cloud and the red-gold dome of the sun on the horizon gave promises for once the wind died, though. Mat hurried down through the Tarasin Palace with his green coat undone and his shirt only half-laced in anticipation. He did not quite jump at every sound, but he did give a start, considerably more wide-eyed than he liked, whenever one of the serving women passed, swishing her petticoats and smiling at him. Every last one of them smiled, in a particularly . . . knowing . . . way. It was all he could do not to run.

At the last, he slowed, easing onto the shaded walk bordering the stableyard almost on tiptoe. Between the fluted columns of the walk, yellowish reedy plants in big red pottery bowls and vines with wide, red-striped leaves dangling from metal baskets on chains formed a thin screen. Unconsciously, he tugged his hat lower to obscure his face. His hands ran along his spear—an *ashandarei*, Birgitte called it—unthinkingly fingering the haft as if he might need to defend himself. The dice tumbled inside his head fiercely, yet that had nothing to do with his uneasiness. The source of that was Tylin.

Six closed coaches with the green Anchor and Sword of House Mitsobar lacquered on the doors already waited in line before the tall arched outer gates with teams hitched and liveried drivers mounted. He could see Nalesean yawning in a yellow-striped coat on the far side of them, and Vanin sat slumped atop an upended barrel not far from the stable doors, apparently asleep. Most of the other Redarms were squatting patiently on the stableyard flagstones; a few tossed dice in the shadow of the huge white stables. Elayne stood between Mat and the coaches, just the other side of the screen of plants. Reanne Corly was with her, and close by, seven more of the women who were at that peculiar meeting he had burst into the evening before; Reanne was the only one not wearing the red belt of a Wise Woman. He had half-expected them not to appear this morning. They had the features of women used to ordering their own lives and other's, and most had at least a bit of gray in their hair, yet they watched fresh-faced Elayne with an air of expectation, seemingly on their toes, as though ready to jump at her command. The whole lot caught less than half his attention, though; none of them was the woman who had him ready to jump out of his skin. Tylin made him feel . . . well . . . helpless was the only word that seemed to fit, however ridiculous it seemed.

"We do not need them, Mistress Corly," Elayne said. The Daughter-Heir sounded like a woman patting a child on the head. "I've told them to remain here until we return. We will attract less attention, especially across the river, without anyone recognizably Aes Sedai." Her notion of what to wear visiting the roughest part of the city without attracting attention was a wide green hat with green-dyed plumes, a light dustcloak of green linen worked in golden scrolls hanging down her back, and a high-necked green silk riding dress with gold embroidery climbing the divided skirts and thickly emphasizing the oval that exposed half her bosom. She even wore one of those necklaces for a marriage knife. That broad band of woven gold would make every thief's hand in the Rahad itch. She carried no weapon beyond a small belt knife. But as to that, what weapon did a woman who could channel need? Of course, every one of those red belts had a curved dagger tucked behind it. So did Reane's belt of plain worked leather.

Reanne removed a large blue straw hat, frowned at it, then put it back on and retied the ribbons. Elayne's tone did not seem to be what was bothering her. She put on a diffident smile with the hat, and a timid tone. "But why does Merilille Sedai think we are lying, Elayne Sedai?"

"They all do," one of the red-belts said breathlessly. All of them wore Ebou Dari dresses in sober colors, with narrow plunging necklines and skirts sewn up on one side to expose layered petticoats, but only this one, bone-lean and with more white than black in her long hair, had the olive skin and dark eyes of an Ebou Dari. "Sareitha Sedai called me liar to my face, about our numbers, about—" She cut off short at a frown and a "Be quiet, Tamarla" from Reanne; Mistress Corly might be ready to curtsy and simper for a child if the child was Aes Sedai, but she kept a tight rein on her companions.

Mat frowned up at the windows overlooking the stableyard, those he could see from where he stood. Elaborate white wrought-iron screens covered some, white wooden screens of intricately carved piercework others. Not likely Tylin was up there; not likely she would appear in the stable-yard. He had been very careful not to wake her getting dressed. Besides, she would not try anything here. At least, he did not think she would. Then again, was anything past the woman who had had half a dozen serving women seize him in the halls last night and drag him into her apartments? The bloody woman treated him like a toy! He was not going to put up with it anymore. He was not. Light, who was he trying to fool? If they did not grab this Bowl of the Winds and get out of Ebou Dar, Tylin would be pinching his bottom and calling him her little pigeon again tonight.

"It's your ages, Reanne." Elayne did not exactly sound hesitant—she never did that—but her tone became very careful. "It is considered rude among Aes Sedai to speak of age, but. . . . Reanne, apparently no Aes Sedai since the Breaking has lived as long as any of you in the Knitting Circle claim." That was the odd name these Kin gave their ruling council. "In your own case, not by over a hundred years." The red-belts gasped, going wide-eyed. A slender brown-eyed woman with pale honey hair gave a nervous giggle and instantly covered her mouth at Reanne's whip-quick "Famelle!"

"That can't be possible," Reanne said faintly to Elayne. "Surely, Aes Sedai must—"

"Good morning," Mat said, stepping past the screen of plants. The whole discussion was idiotic; everyone knew Aes Sedai lived longer than anybody else. Instead of wasting time, they should be on their way to the Rahad. "Where are Thom and Juilin? And Nynaeve." She had to have come back last night, or Elayne would have been in a swivet. "Blood and ashes, I don't see Birgitte either. We need to be on our way, Elayne, not standing around. Is Aviendha coming?"

She frowned at him slightly, with just a flicker of her eyes toward Reanne, and he knew she was deciding what performance to give him. Wide-eyed innocence might damage her standing with these women as much as flashing her dimple at him would; Elayne always expected that dimple to work where all else failed. Her chin rose slightly. "Thom and Juilin are helping Aviendha and Birgitte watch Carridin's palace, Mat." It was to be the Daughter-Heir in near full-bloom. Not the whole flowering, since she surely knew how he would react to that, but a voice full of certainty, cool blue eyes demanding, and that pretty face chill if not exactly frozen with arrogance. Was there any woman in the world who was just one person? “Nynaeve will be down shortly, I’m sure. There is no reason for you to come, you know, Mat. Nalesean and your soldiers are a more than adequate bodyguard. You could enjoy yourself right here in the palace until we return.”

“Carridin!” he cried. “Elayne, we aren’t staying in Ebou Dar to settle Jaichim Carridin. We are getting the Bowl, then you or Nynaeve is going to make a gateway, and we are leaving. Is that clear? And I’m going with you to the Rahad.” Enjoy himself! The Light only knew what Tylin would get up to if he remained in the palace all day. The very thought made him want to laugh hysterically.

Icy stares stabbed at him from the Wise Women; stout Sumeko pursed her lips angrily, and Melore, a plump Domani in her middle years whose bosom he had enjoyed eyeing yesterday, planted fists on hips with a face like a thunderhead. They should have known from yesterday that he was not intimidated by Aes Sedai, yet even Reanne gave him such a scowl he half thought she might try to box his ears. Apparently, if they were going to fall all over themselves around Aes Sedai, then everybody else had to as well.

Elayne struggled with herself visibly. Her lips compressed, but one thing he had to give her; she was too smart to go on with what obviously would not work. On the other hand, she was snooty to the bone however she tried. And the other women were watching. “Mat, you know we cannot leave until we have used the Bowl.” That haughty chin remained high, and her tone was at best halfway between explaining and telling. “It might require days for us to be sure of how to use it, perhaps even half a week or more, and we might as well finish Carridin if we can in that time.” Such a crackle entered her voice on the Whitecloak’s name that you might have thought she bore the man a personal grudge, but something else leaped out and clamped a fist on his thoughts.

“Half a week!” Feeling strangled, he put a finger behind the scarf knotted around his neck and tugged to ease it. Tylin had used that length of black silk to tie his hands last night before he knew what she was doing. Half a week. Or more! Despite his best efforts, his voice became a touch frantic. “Elayne, surely you can use the Bowl anywhere. It doesn’t have to be here. Egwene must want you back as soon as possible; she can use a friend or two, I’ll wager.” By the last he had seen, she could use a few hundred. Maybe once he got these women back, Egwene would be ready to give up that nonsense about being Amyrlin and let him take her to Rand along with Elayne and Nynaeve and Aviendha. “And what about Rand, Elayne? Caemlyn. The Lion Throne. Blood and ashes, you know you want to reach Caemlyn quick as you can so Rand can give you the Lion Throne.” For some reason, her face grew darker almost by the word, and her eyes flashed. He would have said she was indignant, except of course that she had no cause.

She opened her mouth angrily to argue as soon as he finished, and he set himself, ready to list her promises and to the Pit of Doom with what that did to her in the eyes of Reanne and the rest. By their faces, they would have snubbed him short already in her place.

Before anyone could say anything, though, a round graying woman in House Mitsobar livery was curtsying, first to Elayne, then to the women wearing red belts, and finally to him. “Queen Tylin sends this, Master Cauthon,” Laren said, holding out a basket with a striped cloth over the contents and small red flowers woven around the handle. “You did not breakfast, and you must maintain your strength.”

Mat’s cheeks warmed. The woman merely looked at him, but she had seen considerably more of him than when she first showed him into Tylin’s presence. Considerably more. She had brought supper on a tray last night, while he tried to hide under the silk bedsheet. He did not understand it. These women had him jumping about and blushing like a girl. He just could not understand.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather remain here?” Elayne asked. “I’m sure Tylin would enjoy your company for breakfast. The Queen said she finds you wonderfully entertaining and courteously compliant,” she added in a doubtful tone.

Mat fled for the coaches with the basket in one hand and his *ashandarei* in the other.

“Are all northern men so shy?” Laren said.

He risked a glance over his shoulder without stopping, and heaved a sigh of relief. The serving woman was already gathering her skirts, turning to walk though the screen of plants, and Elayne was motioning Reanne and the Wise Women into a circle close around her. Even so, he shivered. Women were going to be the death of him yet.

Rounding the nearest coach, he nearly dropped the basket at the sight of Beslan seated on the coach step, sunlight gleaming along the narrow blade of his sword as he examined the edge. “What are you doing here?” Mat exclaimed.

Beslan slid the sword into its sheath, a grin splitting his face. “Coming with you to the Rahad. I suspect you’ll find more fun for us.”

“There had better be some fun,” Nalesean yawned into his hand. “I didn’t get very much sleep last night, and now you drag me off when there are Sea Folk women about.” Vanin sat up on his barrel, looked around, found nothing moving, and settled himself back again with his eyes shut.

“There’ll be no *fun* if I can help it,” Mat muttered. *Nalesean* had not gotten much sleep? Hah! The whole lot of them had been out enjoying themselves at the festival. Not that he had not enjoyed himself in patches, but only when he could forget he was with a woman who thought he was some sort of bloody doll. “What Sea Folk women?”

“When Nynaeve Sedai returned last night, she brought a dozen or more, Mat.” Beslan blew out his breath, and his hands made swaying motions. “The way they move, Mat. . . .”

Mat shook his head. He was not thinking clearly; Tylin was scrambling his brains. Nynaeve and Elayne had told him about the Windfinders, reluctantly and in sworn secrecy, after trying to hold back even where Nynaeve wanted to go, much less why. And not a single blush at the effort, either. “Women keep promises in their own way,” so the saying went. Come to think of it, Lawtin and Belvyn were not with the rest of the Red-arms. Maybe Nynaeve thought to make up for the other by keeping them with her now. “. . . In their own way.” But if she had the Windfinders already in the palace, surely it would not take half a week to use the Bowl. Light, please not!

As if thinking of her had been a summons, Nynaeve came strolling through the screen of plants into the stableyard. Mat’s jaw dropped. The tall man in a dark green coat on her arm was Lan! Or rather, she was on his, clinging to it with both hands, smiling up at him. With any other woman, Mat would have said she was moon-eyed and dreaming, but this was Nynaeve.

She gave a start once she realized where she was, and took a hasty step to one side, though she still held on to Lan’s hand for a moment. Her choice of dresses was no better than Elayne’s, all blue silk and green embroidery, cut low enough to show a heavy gold ring that would have rattled on her two thumbs together, dangling into her cleavage on a thin gold chain. The wide hat she carried by its ribbons was trimmed with blue plumes, her dustcloak green linen embroidered in blue. She and Elayne made the other women drab by comparison in their woolens.

In any case, whether or not she had been calf-eyes a moment before, she was all herself now, shifting her braid around. “Join the other men now, Lan,” she said peremptorily, “and we can go. The last four coaches are for the men.”

“As you say,” Lan replied, bowing with a hand on his sword hilt.

She watched him stride toward Mat with an expression of wonder, probably unable to believe he was obeying so meekly, then gave herself a shake and recovered her bristly self again. Gathering up Elayne and the other women, she herded them toward the first two coaches like a woman shooing geese. By the way she shouted for someone to open the stableyard gates, no one would have known she had been the one delaying their departure. She shouted at the drivers, too, setting them to snatching up their reins and flourishing their long whips; it was a marvel they waited for anyone to climb aboard.

Scrambling awkwardly after Lan and Nalesean and Beslan into the third coach, Mat propped his spear across the door and sat down hard with the basket on his lap as the coach lurched forward. “Where did you come from, Lan?” he burst out as soon as introductions were out of the way. “You’re the last man I expected to see. Where have you been? Light, I thought you were dead. I know Rand’s afraid you are. And letting Nynaeve order you around. Why in the Light would you do that?”

The stone-faced Warder seemed to consider which question to answer. “Nynaeve and I were married last night by the Mistress of the Ships,” he said finally. “The Atha’an Miere have several . . . unusual . . . marriage customs. There were surprises for both of us.” A small smile touched his mouth, if nothing else. He shrugged slightly; seemingly that was all the answer he intended to give.

“The blessing of the Light be upon you and your bride,” Beslan murmured politely with as much of a bow as the confines of the coach would allow, and Nalesean mumbled something, though it was plain from his expression that he thought Lan must be mad. Nalesean had had a good bit of Nynaeve’s company.

Mat just sat there swaying with the coach’s motion and staring. Nynaeve *married*? *Lan* married to *Nynaeve*? The man *was* mad. No wonder his eyes looked so bleak. Mat would as soon have stuffed a rabid fox down his own shirt. Only a fool married, and only a madman would marry Nynaeve.

If Lan noticed that not everyone was overjoyed, he gave no sign. Except for his eyes, he looked no different than Mat remembered. Maybe a little harder, if that was possible. “There is something more important,” Lan said. “Nynaeve doesn’t want you to know, Mat, but you need to hear it. Your two men are dead, killed by Moghedien. I am sorry, but if it is any consolation, they truly were dead before they knew. Nynaeve thinks Moghedien must be gone, or she’d have tried again, but I am not so certain. It seems she has a personal enmity toward Nynaeve, although Nynaeve managed to avoid telling me why.” Again the smile; Lan seemed unaware of it. “Not all of it, at least, and it does not matter. Best you know what might be facing us beyond the river, though.”

“Moghedien,” Beslan breathed, eyes shining. The man was probably seeing *fun.*

“Moghedien,” Nalesean breathed, but in his case, it was more of a groan, and he gave his pointed beard a fitful jerk.

“Those bloody flaming women,” Mat muttered.

“I hope you don’t include my wife,” Lan said coldly, one hand gripping the hilt of his sword, and Mat quickly raised his own hands.

“Of course not. Just Elayne and . . . and the Kin.”

After a moment, Lan nodded, and Mat breathed a small sigh of relief. It would be just like Nynaeve to get him killed by her husband—her husband!—when sure as bread was brown, she would have hidden the fact that one of the Forsaken might be in the city. Even Moghedien did not really frighten him, not so long as he had the foxhead around his neck, but the medallion could not protect Nalesean or any of the rest. No doubt Nynaeve thought she and Elayne would do that. They let him bring along the Redarms, all the while laughing up their sleeves at him while they—

“Aren’t you going to read my mother’s note, Mat?”

Until Beslan mentioned it, he had not realized there was a sheet of paper, folded small, tucked in between the basket and the striped cloth. Just enough showed to reveal the green seal impressed with the Anchor and Sword.

He broke the wax with his thumb and unfolded the page, holding it so Beslan could not see what was written. As well he did; or then again, considering how the other man saw things, maybe it did not matter. Either way, Mat was just as glad no eyes but his saw those words. His heart sank deeper by the line.

> *Mat, my sweet,*
>
> *I am having your things moved to my apartments. So much more convenient. By the time you return, Riselle will be in your old rooms to look after young Olver. He seems to enjoy her company.*
>
> *I have seamstresses coming to measure you. I will enjoy watching that. You must wear shorter coats. And new breeches, of course. You have a delightful bottom. Duckling, who is this Daughter of the Nine Moons I made you think of? I have thought of several delicious ways to make you tell me.*
>
> *Tylin*

The others were all looking at him expectantly. Well, Lan was simply looking, but his gaze was more unnerving than the rest; that stare seemed almost . . . dead.

“The Queen thinks I need new clothes,” Mat said, stuffing the note into his coat pocket. “I think I’ll take a nap.” He pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes, but he did not close them, staring out the window, where the tied-back curtain let in occasional eddies of dust. It also let in the wind, though, which was considerably better than the heat of a closed coach.

Moghedien and Tylin. Of the two, he would rather confront Moghedien. He touched the foxhead hanging in the open neck of his shirt. At least he had some protection against Moghedien. Against Tylin, he had no more than he did against the Daughter of the bloody Nine Moons, whoever she was. Unless he could find some way to make Nynaeve and Elayne leave Ebou Dar before tonight, everybody was going to know. Sullenly, he tugged his hat lower. These flaming women really were making him act like a girl. In another minute, he was afraid, he might just start crying.

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CHAPTER

38

Six Stories

Mat would have gotten out and pulled the coach himself, if he could. He thought they might have moved faster. The streets were already full with the sun not all the way up, wagons and carts wending their way nosily through the crowds and windblown dust to shouts and curses both from drivers and those forced to get out of the way. So many barges slid along the canals on the bargemen’s poles that a man almost could have walked the canals like streets, stepping from one barge to the next. A noisy hum hung over the gleaming white city. Ebou Dar seemed to be trying to make up for time lost yesterday, not to mention at High Chasaline and the Feast of Lights, and well it might, considering that tomorrow night was the Feast of Embers, with Maddin’s Day, celebrating the founder of Altara, two days after that, and the Feast of the Half Moon the following night. Southerners had a reputation for industry, but he thought it was because they had to work so hard to make up for all the festivals and feastdays. The wonder was that they had the strength for it.

Eventually the coaches did reach the river, drawing up at one of the long stone landings that jutted out into the water, all lined with steps for boarding the boats tied alongside. Sticking a wedge of dark yellow cheese and a butt end of bread into his pocket, he stuffed the basket well under the seat. He was hungry, but someone in the kitchens had been in too much of a hurry; most of the basket was filled by a clay pot full of oysters, but the kitchens had forgotten to cook them.

Scrambling down behind Lan, he left Nalesean and Beslan to help Vanin and the others down from the last coaches. Nearly a dozen men, and not even the Cairhienin really small, they had been jammed in like apples in a barrel and clambered out stiffly. Mat strode ahead of the Warder toward the lead coach, the *ashandarei* slanted across his shoulder. Nynaeve and Elayne were both going to get a piece of his mind no matter who was listening. Trying to keep Moghedien hidden! Not to mention two of his men dead! He was going to—! Suddenly very conscious of Lan towering behind him like a stone statue with that sword on his hip, he amended his thoughts. The Daughter-Heir at least was going to hear about keeping that sort of secret.

Nynaeve was standing on the landing, tying on her blue-plumed hat and talking back up into the coach when he reached it. ". . . Will work out, of course, but who would think the Sea Folk, of all people, would demand such a thing, even just in private?"

"But, Nynaeve," Elayne said as she stepped down with her green-plumed hat in her hand, "if last night was as glorious as you say, how can you complain about—?"

That was when they became aware of him and Lan. Of Lan, really. Nynaeve's eyes opened wider and wider, filling her face as it reddened to shame two sunsets. Maybe three. Elayne froze with one foot still on the coach step, giving the Warder such a frown you would have thought he had sneaked up on them. Lan gazed down at Nynaeve, though, with no more expression than a fence post, and for all Nynaeve appeared ready to crawl under the coach and hide, she stared up at Lan as if no one else existed in the world. Realizing her frown was wasted there, Elayne took her foot off the step and moved out of the way of Reanne and the two Wise Women who had shared the coach, Tamarla and a graying Saldaean woman named Janira, but the Daughter-Heir did not give up; oh, no. She transferred that scowl to Mat Cauthon, and if it altered a whit, it was to deepen. He snorted and shook his head. Usually when a woman was in the wrong, she could find so many things to blame on the nearest man that he wound up thinking maybe he really was at fault. In his experience, old memories or new, there were only two times a woman admitted she was wrong: when she wanted something, and when it snowed at midsummer.

Nynaeve seized at her braid, but not as if her heart was in it. Her fingers fumbled and fell away, and she started wringing her hands instead. "Lan," she began unsteadily, "you mustn't think I would talk about—"

The Warder cut in smoothly, bowing and offering her his arm. "We are in public, Nynaeve. Whatever you want to say in public, you may. May I escort you to the boat?"

"Yes," she said, nodding so vigorously that her hat nearly fell off. She straightened it hurriedly with both hands. "Yes. In public. You will escort me." Taking his arm, she regained some measure of composure, at least insofar as her face went. Gathering her dust-cloak in her free hand, she practically dragged him across the quay toward the landing.

Mat wondered whether she might be ill. He rather enjoyed seeing Nynaeve dropped a peg or six, but she hardly ever let it last two breaths. Aes Sedai could not Heal themselves. Maybe he should suggest to Elayne that she deal with whatever was wrong with Nynaeve. He avoided Healing like death or marriage himself, but it was different for other people as he saw it. First, though, he had a few choice words to say about secrets.

Opening his mouth, he raised an admonitory finger . . . .

. . . and Elayne poked him in the chest with hers, her scowl beneath that plumed hat so cold it made his toes hurt. "Mistress Corly," she said in the icy voice of a queen pronouncing judgment, "explained to Nynaeve and me the significance of those red flowers on the basket, which I see you at least have shame enough to have hidden."

His face went redder than Nynaeve's had thought of. A few paces away, Reanne Corly and the other two were tying on hats and adjusting dresses the way women did every time they stood up, sat down or moved three steps. Yet despite giving their attention to their clothes, they had enough left over for glances in his direction, and for once they were neither disapproving nor startled. He had not known the bloody flowers meant anything! Ten sunsets would not have done for his face.

"So!" Elayne's voice was low, for his ears alone, but it dripped disgust and contempt. She gave her cloak a twitch, to keep it from touching him. "It's true! I could not *believe* it of you, not even you! I'm *sure* Nynaeve couldn't. Any promise I made to you is *abolished*! I will not keep any promise to a man who could *force* his attentions on a woman, on *any* woman, but *especially* on a Queen who has offered him—"

"*Me* force *my* attentions on *her*!" he shouted. Or rather, he tried to shout; choking made it come out in a wheeze.

Seizing Elayne's shoulders, he pulled her away from the carriages a little distance. Shirtless dockmen in stained green leather vests hurried by, carrying sacks on their shoulders or rolling barrels along the quay, some pushing low barrows loaded with crates, all giving the coaches a wide berth. The Queen of Altara might not have much power, but her sigil on a coach door ensured that commoners would give it room. Nalesean and Beslan were chatting as they led the Redarms onto the landing, Vanin bringing up the rear and staring gloomily at the choppy river; he claimed to have a tender belly when it came to boats. The Wise Women from both coaches had gathered around Reanne, watching, but they were not close enough to overhear. He whispered hoarsely just the same.

"You listen to me! That woman won't take no for an answer; I say no, and she *laughs* at me. She's starved me, bullied me, chased me down like a stag! She has more hands than any six women I ever met. She threatened to have the serving women undress me if I didn't let her—" Abruptly, what he was saying hit him. And who he was saying it to. He managed to close his mouth before he swallowed a fly. He became very interested in one of the dark metal ravens inlaid in the haft of the *ashandarei*, so he would not have to meet her eyes. "What I mean to say is, you don't understand," he muttered. "You have it all backwards." He risked a glance at her under the edge of his hatbrim.

A faint blush crept into her cheeks, but her face became solemn as a marble bust. "It . . . appears that I may have misunderstood," she said soberly. "That is . . . very *bad* of Tylin." He thought her lips twitched. "Have you considered practicing different smiles in a mirror, Mat?"

Startled, he blinked. "What?"

"I have heard reliably that that is what young women do who attract the eyes of kings." Something cracked the sobriety of her voice, and this time her lips definitely twitched. "You might try batting your eyelashes, too." Catching her lower lip with her teeth, she turned away, shoulders shaking, dust-cloak streaming behind as she hurried toward the landing. Before she darted beyond hearing, he heard her chortle something about "a taste of his own medicine." Reanne and the Wise Women scurried in her wake, a flock of hens following a chick instead of the other way around. The few bare-chested boatmen up out of their boats stopped coiling lines or whatever they were doing and bowed their heads respectfully as the procession went by.

Snatching off his hat, Mat considered throwing it down and jumping on it. Women! He should have known better than to expect sympathy. He would like to throttle the bloody Daughter-Heir. And Nynaeve, too, on general principle. Except, of course, that he could not. He had made promises. And those dice were still using his skull for a dice cup. And one of the Forsaken might be around somewhere. Settling the hat squarely back on his head, he marched down the landing, brushed past the Wise Women and caught up to Elayne. She was still trying to fight down giggles, but every time she cut her eyes his way, the color in her cheeks renewed itself and so did the giggles.

He stared straight ahead. Bloody women! Bloody promises. Removing his hat long enough to pull the leather cord from around his neck, he reluctantly shoved it in her direction. The silver foxhead dangled beneath his fist. "You and Nynaeve will have to decide which of you wears this. But I want it back when we leave Ebou Dar. You understand? The moment we leave—"

Suddenly he realized he was walking alone. Turning, he found Elayne standing stock still two paces back, staring at him with Reanne and the rest clustered behind her.

"What's the matter now?" he demanded. "Oh. Yes, I know all about Moghedien." A skinny fellow with red stones on his brass-hoop earrings, bending over a mooring line, jerked around so fast at that name that he pitched over the side with a loud yell and a louder splash. Mat did not care who heard. "Trying to keep her secret—and two of my men dead!—after you promised. Well, we'll talk about that later. I made a promise, too; I promised to keep the pair of you alive. If Moghedien shows up, she'll go after you two. Now, here." He pushed the medallion at her again.

She shook her head slowly in puzzlement, then turned to murmur to Reanne. Only after the older women were on their way toward where Nynaeve stood beckoning them at the head of a flight of boat stairs did Elayne take the foxhead, turning it over in her fingers.

"Do you have any notion what I would have done to have this for study?" she said quietly. "Any notion at all?" She was tall for a woman, but she still had to look up at him. She might never have seen him before. "You are a troublesome man, Mat Cauthon. Lini would say I was repeating myself, but *you* . . . !" Expelling her breath, Elayne reached up to pull his hat off and slip the cord over his head. She actually tucked the foxhead into his shirt and patted it before handing him his hat. "I won't wear that while Nynaeve doesn't have one, or Aviendha, and I think they feel the same. You wear it. After all, you can hardly keep your promise if Moghedien kills *you*. Not that I think she's still here. I think she believes she killed Nynaeve, and I would not be surprised if that was all she came for. You must be careful, though. Nynaeve says there's a storm coming, and she doesn't mean this wind. I. . . ." That faint blush returned to her cheeks. "I am sorry I laughed at you." She cleared her throat, looking away. "Sometimes I forget my duty to my subjects. You are a worthy subject, Matrim Cauthon. I will see that Nynaeve understands the right of . . . of you and Tylin. Perhaps we can help."

"No," he spluttered. "I mean, yes. I mean. . . . That is. . . . Oh, kiss a flaming goat if I know what I mean. I almost wish you didn't know the truth." Nynaeve and Elayne sitting down to discuss him with Tylin over tea. Could he ever live that down? Could he ever again look any of them in the eye afterward? But if they did not. . . . He was between the wolf and the bear with nowhere to run. "Oh, sheep swallop! Sheep swallop and bloody buttered onions!" He nearly wished she would call him down for his language the way Nynaeve would, just to change the subject.

Her lips moved silently, and for an instant he had the strange impression that she was repeating what he had just said. Of course not. He was seeing things; that was all. Aloud, she said, "I understand." Sounding just as if she did. "Come along, now, Mat. We can't waste time standing in one spot."

Gaping, he watched her lift skirts and cloak to make her way along the landing. She understood? She understood, and not one acid little comment, not one cutting remark? And he was her subject. Her *worthy* subject. Fingering the medallion, he followed. He had been sure the fight would be to ever get it back. If he lived as long as *two* Aes Sedai, he still would never understand women, and noblewomen were purely the worst.

When he reached the steps Elayne had gone down, the boat's two brass-earringed oarsmen were already using their long sweeps to push the vessel away. Elayne was herding Reanne and the last of the Wise Women into the cabin, and Lan stood up in the bows with Nynaeve. A shout from Beslan called him on to the next boat, which held all of the men except the Warder.

"Nynaeve said there wasn't room for any of us," Nalesean said as the boat rocked its way out into the Eldar. "She said we'd crowd them." Beslan laughed, looking around their own boat. Vanin sat beside the cabin door with his eyes closed, trying to pretend he was somewhere else. Harnan and Tad Kandel, an Andoran despite being as dark as either of the boatmen, had climbed atop the cabin; the rest of the Redarms hunkered about the deck, trying to keep out of the way of the rowers. Nobody went into the cabin, all apparently waiting to see whether Mat and Nalesean and Beslan wanted it.

Mat put himself beside the tall bowpost, peering after the other boat, crawling on its sweeps just ahead. The wind whipped the dark choppy waters, and his scarf as well, and he had to hold on to his hat. What was Nynaeve up to? The other nine women on the second boat were all in the cabin, leaving the deck to her and Lan. They stood up in the bows, Lan with his arms folded, Nynaeve gesturing as though explaining. Except that Nynaeve seldom explained anything. Better say never than seldom.

whatever she was doing, it did not last long. There were whitecaps out in the bay, where Sea Folk rakers and skimmers and soarers heaved at their anchors. The river was not so bad, but the boat still wallowed more than Mat remembered from any previous trip. Before long, Nynaeve was draped over the railing, losing her breakfast while Lan held her. That reminded Mat of his own belly; tucking his hat under his arm so it could not blow away, he pulled out the wedge of cheese.

“Beslan, is this storm likely to break before we can come back from the Rahad?” He took a bite of the sharp-tasting cheese; they had fifty different sorts in Ebou Dar, all good. Nynaeve was still hanging over the side. How much had the woman eaten this morning? “I don’t know where we’ll shelter if we’re caught.” He could not think of a single inn he had seen in the Rahad that he would take the women into.

“No storm,” Beslan said, seating himself on the railing. “These are the winter trade winds. The trades come twice a year, in late winter and late summer, but they have to blow much harder before it comes to storm.” He directed a sour look out toward the bay. “Every year those winds bring—brought—ships from Tarabon, and Arad Doman. I wonder whether they ever will again.”

“The Wheel weaves,” Mat began, and choked on a crumb of cheese. Blood and ashes, he was starting to sound like some gray-hair resting his aching joints in front of the fireplace. Worrying about taking the women into a rough inn. A year ago, half a year, he would have taken them, and laughed when their eyes popped, laughed at every prim sniff. “Well, maybe we’ll find you some fun in the Rahad, anyway. At the least, somebody will try to cut a purse, or pull Elayne’s necklace off.” Maybe that was what he needed to clean the taste of sobriety from his tongue. Sobriety. Light, what a word to apply to Mat Cauthon! Tylin must be scaring him more than he thought, if he was shriveling up this way. Maybe he needed some of

Beslan's sort of fun. That was crazy—he had never seen the fight he would not rather walk around—but maybe. . . .

Beslan shook his head. "If anyone can find it, you can, but. . . . We'll be with seven Wise Women, Mat. Seven. With just one at your side, you could slap a man, even in the Rahad, and he would swallow his tongue and walk away. And the women. What's the fun of kissing a woman without the risk she'll decide to stick a knife in you?"

"Burn my soul," Nalesean muttered into his beard. "It sounds as though I've dragged myself from bed for a dull morning."

Beslan nodded in commiseration. "If we're lucky, though. . . . The Civil Guard does send patrols to the Rahad occasionally, and if they're after smugglers, they always dress like anyone else. They seem to think nobody will notice a dozen or so men together carrying swords, whatever they wear, and they're always surprised when the smugglers ambush them, which is what nearly always happens. If Mat's *ta'veren* luck works for us, we might be taken for the Civil Guard, and some smugglers might attack us before they see the red belts." Nalesean brightened and began rubbing his hands together.

Mat glared at them. Maybe Beslan's sort of fun was not what he needed. For one thing, he had more than enough of women with knives. Nynaeve still hung over the side of the boat ahead; that would teach her to gorge herself. Wolfing down the last of the cheese, he began on the bread and tried to ignore the dice in his head. An easy trip with no trouble did not sound bad at all. A quick trip, with a quick departure from Ebou Dar.

The Rahad was everything he remembered, and everything Beslan feared. The wind made climbing the cracked gray stone steps at the boat landing into a perilous feat, and after that, it grew worse. Canals ran everywhere, just as across the river, but here the bridges were plain, the grimy stone parapets broken and crumbling; half the canals were so silted that boys waded waist-deep in them, and hardly a barge was to be seen. Tall buildings stood crowded together, blocky structures with scabrous once-white plaster gone in huge patches to reveal rotting red brick, bordering narrow streets with broken paving stones. In those streets where even the fragments had not been ripped up. Morning did not really reach into the shadows of the buildings. Dingy laundry hung drying from every third window, except where a structure stood empty. Some did, and those windows gaped liked eye sockets in a skull. A sour-sweet smell of decay permeated the air, last month’s chamber pots and ancient refuse moldering wherever it had been flung, and for every fly on the other side of the Eldar, a hundred buzzed here in clouds of green and blue. He spotted the peeling blue door of The Golden Crown of Heaven and shuddered at the thought of taking the women in there if the storm broke, despite what Beslan said. Then he shuddered again for having shuddered. Something was happening to him, and he did not like it.

Nynaeve and Elayne insisted on taking the lead, with Reanne between them and the Wise Women close behind. Lan stayed at Nynaeve’s shoulder like a wolfhound, hand on sword hilt, eyes constantly searching, radiating menace. In truth, he was probably enough protection for two dozen pretty sixteen-year-old girls carrying sacks of gold, even here, but Mat insisted that Vanin and the rest keep their eyes open. In fact, the former horsethief and poacher kept so close to Elayne that anyone could have been forgiven for thinking he was her Warder, if a rather fat and rumpled one. Beslan rolled his eyes expressively at Mat’s instructions, and Nalesean irritably stroked his beard and muttered that he could still be in bed.

Men strutted arrogantly along the streets with often ragged vests and no shirts, wearing great brass hoops in their ears and brass finger rings set with colored glass, one knife or sometimes two stuck behind their belts. Hands hovering near those knives, they stared as though daring someone to give the wrong twist to a look. Others skulked from corner to corner, doorway to doorway with hooded eyes, imitating the slat-ribbed dogs that sometimes snarled from a dark alleyway barely wide enough for a man to squeeze into. Those men hunched over their knives, and there was no way to tell which would run and which stab. By and large, the women made any of the men appear humble, parading in worn dresses and twice as much brass jewelry as the men. They carried knives too, of course, and their bold dark eyes sent ten sorts of challenge in every glance. In short, the Rahad was the sort of place where anyone wearing silk could hardly hope to walk ten steps without being cracked over the head. After which they had best hope to wake stripped to the skin and tossed onto a pile of rubbish in an alley, since the alternative was not to wake at all. But. . . .

Children darted from every second door with chipped pottery cups of water, sent by their mothers in case the Wise Women wished a drink. Men with scarred faces and murder etched into their eyes stared openmouthed at seven Wise Women together, then bobbed jerky bows and inquired politely if they could be of assistance, was there anything that required carrying? Women, sometimes with as many scars and always eyes to make Tylin flinch, curtsied awkwardly and breathlessly asked whether they might supply directions, had anyone made a bother of themselves to bring so many Wise Women? If so, the strong implication was, Tamarla and the rest had no need of troubling themselves if they would just supply the name.

Oh, they glared at the soldiers as hotly as ever, though even the hardest flinched away from Lan after a single look. And, oddly enough, from Vanin. A few of the men growled at Beslan and Nalesean whenever they gazed too long at a woman's deep neckline. Some growled at Mat, though he could not understand why; unlike those two, he was never in danger of his eyeballs falling down the front of a woman's dress. He knew how to look discreetly. Nynaeve and Elayne were ignored, for all their finery, and so was Reanne in her red wool dress; they did not have the red belt. But they did have the protection of those belts. Mat realized that Beslan had been right. He could empty his purse on the ground, and no one would pick up a copper, at least so long as the Wise Women remained. He could pinch the bottom of every woman in sight, and even if she had apoplexy, she would walk away.

"What a pleasant walk," Nalesean said dryly, "with such interesting sights and smells. Did I tell you I didn't get much sleep last night, Mat?"

"Do you want to die in bed?" Mat grumbled. They might as well all have stayed in bed; they were bloody useless here, that was for sure. The Tairen snorted indignantly. Beslan laughed, but he probably thought Mat meant something else.

Across the Rahad they marched, until Reanne finally stopped in front of a building exactly like every other, all flaking plaster and crumbling brick, the same Mat had followed another woman to yesterday. No laundry hung from these windows; only rats lived in there. "In here," she said.

Elayne's eyes climbed slowly to the flat roof. "Six," she murmured in tones of great satisfaction.

"Six," Nynaeve sighed, and Elayne patted her arm as though sympathizing with her.

"I wasn't really sure," she said. So Nynaeve smiled and patted her. Mat did not understand a word of it. So the building had six floors. Women behaved very strangely sometimes. Well, most of the time.

Inside, a long hallway carpeted with dust ran dimly to the back, the far end lost in shadows. Few of the doorways held doors, and those were rough planks. One opening, almost a third of the way down the hall, led to a narrow flight of steep stone-faced steps climbing upward. That was the way he had gone the day before, following footprints in the dust, but he thought some of those other openings must be crossing corridors. He had not taken time to look around then, but the building was too deep and too wide for this floor to be served by only the one they saw. It was too big for only one way in.

"Really, Mat," Nynaeve said when he told off Harnan and half the Redarms to find any back way in and guard it. Lan kept so close to her side, he might have been glued there. "Don't you see by now there's no need?"

Her tone was so mild that Elayne must have passed on the truth about Tylin, but if anything, that only soured his mood further. He did not want *anyone* to know. Bloody useless! But those dice were still rattling around in his head. "Maybe Moghedien likes back doors," he said dryly. Something chittered in the dark end of the hall, and one of the men with Harnan cursed loudly about rats.

"You told him," Nynaeve breathed furiously at Lan, one hand snapping shut on her braid.

Elayne made an exasperated sound. "This is no time to stop for an argument, Nynaeve. The Bowl is upstairs! The Bowl of the Winds!" A small ball of light suddenly appeared, floating in front of her, and without waiting to see whether or not Nynaeve was coming, she gathered her skirts and darted up the stairs. Vanin dashed after her with a startling turn of speed for his bulk, followed by Reanne and most of the Wise Women. Round-faced Sumeko and Ieine, tall and dark and pretty despite the lines at the corners of her eyes, hesitated, then remained with Nynaeve.

Mat would have gone, too, if Nynaeve and Lan had not been in his way. "Would you let me by, Nynaeve?" he asked. He deserved to be there, at least, when this fabulous bloody Bowl was uncovered. "Nynaeve?" She was so focused on Lan she seemed to have forgotten anyone else. Mat exchanged glances with Beslan, who grinned and squatted easily with Corevin and the remaining Redarms. Nalesean leaned against the wall and yawned ostentatiously. Which was a mistake with all that dust about; the yawn turned into a coughing fit that darkened his face and doubled him over.

Even that did not distract Nynaeve. Carefully, she took her hand away from her braid. “I am not angry, Lan,” she said.

“Yes, you are,” he replied calmly. “But he had to be told.”

“Nynaeve?” Mat said. “Lan?” Neither one so much as flickered an eye his way.

“I would have told him when I was ready, Lan Mandragoran!” Her mouth clamped shut, but her lips writhed as though she were talking to herself. “I will not be angry with you,” she went on in a much milder tone, and that sounded addressed to herself as well. Very deliberately she tossed her braid back over her shoulder, jerked that blue-plumed hat straight, and clasped her hands at her waist.

“If you say so,” Lan said mildly.

Nynaeve quivered. “Don’t you take that tone with me!” she shouted. “I tell you, I’m not angry! Do you hear me?”

“Blood and ashes, Nynaeve,” Mat growled. “He doesn’t think you’re angry. I don’t think you’re angry.” A good thing women had taught him to lie with a straight face. “Now could we go upstairs and fetch this bloody Bowl of the Winds?”

“A marvelous idea,” said a woman’s voice from the door to the street. “Shall we go up together and surprise Elayne?” Mat had never seen the two women who walked into the hall before, but their faces were Aes Sedai faces. The speaker’s was long and cold as her voice, her companion’s framed by scores of thin dark braids worked with colored beads. Nearly two dozen men crowded in behind them, bulky fellows with heavy shoulders, clubs and knives in hand. Mat shifted his grip on the *ashandarei*; he knew trouble when he saw it, and the foxhead on his chest was cool, almost cold against his skin. Somebody was holding the One Power.

The two Wise Women nearly fell over dropping curtsies as soon as they saw those ageless features, but Nynaeve certainly knew trouble, too. Her mouth worked soundlessly as the pair came down the hallway, her face all consternation and self-recrimination. Behind him, Mat heard a sword leaving its scabbard, but he was not about to look back to see whose. Lan just stood there, which meant of course that he looked like a leopard ready to pounce.

“They’re Black Ajah,” Nynaeve said at last. Her voice started faint and gained strength as she went on. “Falion Bhoda and Ispan Shefar. They committed murder in the Tower, and worse since. They're Darkfriends, and . . ." Her voice faltered for an instant. ". . . they have me shielded."

The newcomers continued to advance serenely. "Have you ever heard such nonsense, Ispan?" the long-faced Aes Sedai asked her companion, who stopped grimacing at the dust long enough to smirk at Nynaeve. "Ispan and I come from the White Tower, while Nynaeve and her friends are rebels against the Amyrlin Seat. They'll be punished severely for that, and so will anyone who helps them." With a shock, Mat realized the woman did not know; she thought that he and Lan and the others were just hired strongarms. Falion directed a smile at Nynaeve; it made a blizzard warm by comparison. "There's someone who will be overjoyed to see you when we take you back, Nynaeve. She thinks you are dead. Better the rest of you go now. You don't want to meddle in Aes Sedai affairs. My men will see you to the river." Without taking her eyes from Nynaeve, Falion motioned for the men behind her to come forward.

Lan moved. He did not draw his sword, and against Aes Sedai he should have had no chance if he had, no chance in any case, but one moment he was standing still and the next he had thrown himself at the pair. Just before he struck, he grunted as though hit hard, but he crashed into them, carrying both Black sisters to the dusty floor. That opened the sluicegates wide.

Lan pushed himself to hands and knees, shaking his head groggily, and one of the bulky fellows raised an iron-strapped club to smash his skull. Mat stabbed the fellow in the belly with his spear as Beslan and Nalesean and the five Redarms rushed to meet the Darkfriends' shouting charge. Lan staggered to his feet, sword sweeping out to open a Darkfriend from crotch to neck. There was not much room to work sword or *ashandarei* in the corridor, but the tight quarters were what allowed them to face odds of two to one or worse without being overcome in the first moment. Grunting men struggled with them face-to-face, elbowing each other for room to stab or swing a club at them.

Small spaces remained clear around the Black sisters, and around Nynaeve; they saw to that themselves. A wiry Andoran Redarm almost bumped into Falion, but at the last instant he jerked into the air and flew across the hallway, knocking down two of the heavy-shouldered Darkfriends in his flight before smacking into the wall and sliding down, the back of his head leaving a bloody smear on the cracked, dusty plaster. A bald-headed Darkfriend squeezed through the line of defenders and rushed at Nynaeve with out-stretched knife; he yelled as his feet were suddenly jerked back from him, a yell that cut off when his face hit the floor so hard that his head bounced.

Obviously Nynaeve was no longer shielded, and if the chilly silver fox-head sliding around Mat's chest as he fought was not enough indication that she and the Black sisters were in some sort of struggle, the way they glared at her and she at them, ignoring the battle around them, shouted the fact. The two Wise Women looked on in horror; they had their curved knives in their fists, but they huddled against the wall, staring from Nynaeve to the other two with eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

"Fight," Nynaeve snapped at them. She turned her head just a fraction, so she could see them as well as Falion and Ispan. "I cannot do it alone; they're linked. If you don't fight them, they will kill you. You know about them, now!" The Wise Women gaped at her as though she had suggested spitting in the Queen's face. In the midst of shouts and grunts, Ispan laughed melodiously. In the midst of shouts and grunts, a shrill scream echoed down the stairs.

Nynaeve's head swung that way. Suddenly she staggered, and her head swung back like a wounded badger's, with a scowl that should have made Falion and Ispan leave right then if they had any sense. Nynaeve spared an agonized glance for Mat, though. "There was channeling upstairs," she said through her teeth. "There's trouble."

Mat hesitated. More likely, Elayne had seen a rat. More likely. . . . He managed to knock aside a dagger thrust at his ribs, but there was no room to stab back with the *ashandarei* or use the haft like a quarterstaff. Beslan stabbed past him and took his attacker through the heart.

"Please, Mat," Nynaeve said tightly. She never begged. She would cut her own throat first. "Please."

With a curse, Mat pulled himself out of the fight and dashed up the steep, narrow stairs, taking all six flights in the dark stairwell at a dead run. There was not a single window to give light. If it was just a rat, he was going to shake Elayne till her teeth. . . . He burst out onto the top floor, not much brighter than the stairwell with only one window at the street end, burst into a scene from nightmare.

Women lay sprawled everywhere. Elayne was one, half on her back against the wall, eyes closed. Vanin crouched on his knees, blood streaming from nose and ears, feebly trying to pull himself up against the wall. The last woman on her feet, Janira, fled toward Mat as soon as she saw him. He had thought of her as a hawk, with her hooked beak of a nose and sharp cheekbones, but her face was pure terror now, those dark eyes wide and stark.

“Help me!” she screamed at him, and a man caught her from behind. He was an ordinary-looking fellow, maybe a little older than Mat, of the same height and slender in a plain gray coat. Smiling, he took Janira’s head between his hands and twisted sharply. The sound of her neck breaking was like a dry branch snapping. He let her drop in a boneless heap and gazed down at her. For a moment, his smile looked . . . rapturous.

By the light of a pair of lanterns, a small knot of men just beyond Vanin were prying open a door to the squeal of rusted hinges, but Mat hardly noticed. His eyes went from Janira’s crumpled corpse to Elayne. He had promised to keep her safe for Rand. He had promised. With a cry, he launched himself at the killer, *ashandarei* extended.

Mat had seen Myrddraal move, but this fellow was quicker, hard as that was to believe. He just seemed to flow from in front of the spear, and seizing the haft, he pivoted, flinging Mat past him five paces down the hall.

Breath left when he hit the floor in a small cloud of dust. So did the *ashandarei*. Struggling for air, he pushed himself up, foxhead dangling from his open shirt. Dragging a knife from under his coat, he flung himself at the man again just as Nalesean appeared at the head of the stairs, sword in hand. Now they had him, however quick he. . . .

The man made a Myrddraal seem stiff. He slid around Nalesean’s thrust as though there was not a bone in his body, right hand shooting out to seize Nalesean’s throat. His hand came away with a liquid, ripping sound. Blood fountained past Nalesean’s beard. His sword dropped, ringing on the dusty stone floor, and he clutched both hands to his ruined neck, red running through his fingers as he fell.

Mat crashed into the killer’s back, and they all three hit the floor together. He had no compunctions against stabbing a man in the back when it was necessary, especially a man who could tear somebody’s throat out. He should have let Nalesean stay in bed. The thought came sadly as he drove the blade home hard, then a second time, a third.

The man twisted in his grip. It should not have been possible, but somehow the fellow rolled over beneath him, pulling the knife hilt out of his hand. Nalesean’s staring eyes and bloody throat were a reminder right before his eyes. Desperately he grabbed the man’s wrists, one hand slipping a little in the blood that ran down the fellow’s hand.

The man smiled at him. With a knife sticking out of his side, he smiled! “He wants you dead as much as he wants her,” he said softly. And as if Mat was not holding him at all, his hands moved toward Mat’s head, driving Mat’s arms back.

Mat pushed frantically, threw all of his weight against the fellow’s arms to no avail. Light, he might as well have been a child fighting a grown man. The fellow was making a game of it, taking his bloody time. Hands touched his head. Where was his flaming luck? He gave a heave with what seemed his last strength—and the medallion fell against the man’s cheek. The man screamed. Smoke rose around the edges of the foxhead, and a sizzle like bacon frying. Convulsively, he hurled Mat away with hands and feet both. This time, Mat flew ten paces and slid.

When he scrambled to his feet, half-dazed, the man was already up, hands trembling at his face. A raw red brand marked where the foxhead had fallen. Gingerly, Mat fingered the medallion. It was cool. Not the cool of someone channeling nearby—maybe they were still at it below, but that was too far off—just the cool of silver. He had no notion what this fellow was, except that he certainly was not human, but between that burn and three stab wounds, with the knife hilt still jutting out beneath his arm, he had to be slowed enough for Mat to get past him to the stairs. Avenging Elayne was all very well, and Nalesean too, but it was not going to happen today, apparently, and there was no call to supply a reason for avenging Mat Cauthon.

Jerking the knife out of his side, the man hurled it at him. Mat snagged it out of the air without thinking. Thom had taught him to juggle, and Thom said he had the quickest hands he had ever seen. Flipping the knife around so he held it properly, pointed slanted up, he noticed the gleaming blade, and his heart sank. No blood. There should have been at least a smear of red, but the steel shone, bright and clean. Maybe even three stab wounds were not going to slow this—whatever he was.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. The other men were streaming out of that door they had pried open, the door those footprints had led him to yesterday, but their arms seemed full of rubbish, small half-rotted chests, a cask with cloth-wrapped objects bulging through missing staves, even a broken chair and a cracked mirror. They must have had orders to take everything. Paying no attention whatever to Mat, they hurried toward the far end of the hall and vanished around a corner. There had to be another set of stairs back there. Maybe he could follow them down at a distance. Maybe. . . . Just before the doorway they had come out of, Vanin made another effort to stand, and fell back. Mat bit back a curse. Lugging Vanin was going to slow him, but if his luck was in. . . . It had not saved Elayne, but maybe. . . . From the corner of his eye, he saw her move, lifting a hand to her head.

The man in the gray coat saw it, too. With a smile, he turned toward her.

Sighing, Mat tucked the useless knife into its scabbard. “You can’t have her,” he said loudly. Promises. One jerk broke the leather cord around his neck; the silver foxhead dangled a foot below his fist. It made a low hum as he whirled it in a double loop. “You can’t bloody have her.” He started forward, keeping the medallion spinning. The first step was the hardest, but he had a promise to keep.

The fellow’s smile faded. Watching the flashing foxhead warily, he backed away on his toes. The same light that glittered on the whirling silver, from the single window, made a halo around him. If Mat could drive him that far, maybe he could see whether a six-story drop would do what a knife could not.

Brand livid on his face, the fellow backed away, sometimes half-reaching as if to try grabbing past the medallion. And suddenly, he darted to one side, into one of the rooms. This one had a door that he pulled shut behind him. Mat heard the bar drop.

Maybe he should have left it there, but without thinking, he raised a foot and slammed the heel of his boot against the center of the door. Dust leaped off the rough wood. A second kick, and rotten bar-catches gave way, along with a rusted hinge. The door fell in, hanging at a slanted angle.

The room was not entirely dark. A little light reached it from the window at the end of the hall, just one door away, and a broken triangle of mirror leaning against the far wall spread a faint illumination. That mirror let him see everything without going in. Aside from that and a piece of a chair, there was nothing else to see. The only openings were the doorway and a rathole beside the mirror, but the man in the gray coat was gone.

"Mat," Elayne called faintly. He hurried away from the room as much as toward her. There was shouting somewhere below, but Nynaeve and the rest would have to take care of themselves for the moment.

Elayne was sitting up, working her jaw and wincing, when he knelt beside her. Dust covered her dress, her hat hung askew, some of the plumes broken, and her red-gold hair looked as if she had been dragged by it. "He hit me so hard," she said painfully. "I don't think anything is broken, but. . . ." Her eyes latched on to his, and if he had ever thought she looked at him as if he were a stranger, he saw it for true now. "I saw what you did, Mat. With him. We might as well have been chickens in a box with a weasel. Channeling wouldn't touch him; the flows melted the way they do with your. . . ." Glancing at the medallion still hanging from his fist, she drew a breath that did interesting things to that oval cut-out. "Thank you, Mat. I apologize for everything I ever did or thought." She sounded as though she really meant it. "I keep building up *toh* toward you," she smiled ruefully, "but I am *not* going to let you beat me. You are going to have to let me save you at least once to balance matters."

"I'll see what I can arrange," he said dryly, stuffing the medallion into a coat pocket. *Toh?* Beat her? Light! The woman was definitely spending too much time with Aviendha.

Once he helped her to her feet, she looked at the hallway, at Vanin with his blood-smeared face, and the women lying where they had fallen, and she grimaced. "Oh, Light!" she breathed. "Oh, blood and bloody flaming ashes!" Despite the situation, he gave a start. It was not just that he had never expected to hear those words out of her mouth; they seemed peculiar, as if she knew the sounds but not the meanings. Somehow, they made her sound younger than she looked.

Shaking off his arm, she discarded her hat, just tossing it aside, and hurried to kneel beside the nearest Wise Woman, Reanne, and take her head in both hands. The woman lay limp, face down and arms stretched out as though she had been tripped up running. Toward the room everyone had been after, toward her attacker, not away.

"This is beyond me," Elayne muttered. "Where is Nynaeve? Why didn't she come up with you, Mat? Nynaeve!" she shouted toward the stairs.

"No need to shriek like a cat," Nynaeve growled, appearing in the stairwell. She was looking back over her shoulder down the stairs, though.

"You hold her tight, you hear me?" she shrieked like a cat. She carried her hat, and shook it at whoever she was shouting at. "You let her get away, too, and I'll box your ears till you hear bells next year!"

She turned, then, and her eyes nearly bulged out of her head. "The Light shine on us," she breathed, hurrying to bend over Janira. One touch, and she straightened, wincing painfully. He could have told her the woman was dead. Nynaeve seemed to take death personally. Giving herself a shake, she went on to the next, Tamarla, and this time it appeared there was something she could Heal. It also appeared Tamarla's injuries were not simple, because she knelt over her, frowning. "What happened here, Mat?" she demanded without looking around at him. Her tone made him sigh; he might have known she would decide it was his fault. "Well, Mat? What happened? Will you speak up, man, or do I have to—" He never learned what threat she intended to offer.

Lan had followed Nynaeve out of the stairwell, of course, with Sumeko right at his heels. The stout Wise Woman took one look at the hall and immediately lifted her skirts and ran to Reanne. She did give Elayne one worried glance before lowering herself to her knees and beginning to move her hands over Reanne in an odd way. That was what pulled Nynaeve up short.

"What are you doing?" she said sharply. Not halting what she was doing to Tamarla, she spared the round-faced woman only short glances, but they were as piercing as her voice. "Where did you learn that?"

Sumeko gave a start, but her hands did not stop. "Forgive me, Aes Sedai," she said in a breathless, disjointed rush. "I know I'm not supposed to. . . . She'll die if I don't. . . . I know I wasn't supposed to keep trying to. . . . I just wanted to learn, Aes Sedai. Please."

"No, no, go on," Nynaeve said absently. Most of her attention was fixed on the woman under her hands, but not all. "You seem to know a few things even I—That is to say, you have a very interesting way with the flows. I suspect you'll find that a great many sisters want to learn from you." Half under her breath, she added, "Maybe now they'll leave me alone." Sumeko could not have heard that last, but what she did hear dropped her chin to her considerable chest. Her hands barely paused, though.

"Elayne," Nynaeve went on, "would you look for the Bowl, please? I suspect that door is the one." She nodded to the correct door, standing open like half a dozen others. That made Mat blink until he saw two tiny cloth-wrapped bundles lying in front of it where the looters must have dropped them.

“Yes,” Elayne muttered. “Yes, I can do that much, at least.” Half-raising a hand toward Vanin, still on his knees, she let it fall with a sigh and strode through the doorway, which almost immediately emitted a cloud of dust and the sound of coughing.

The more-than-plump Wise Woman had not been the only one following Nynaeve and Lan. Ieine stalked out of the stairwell, forcing the Taraboner Darkfriend in front of her by means of an arm twisted up into her back and a fist clutching the back of her neck. Ieine’s jaw was set, her mouth tight; her face was half frightened certainty that she would be skinned alive for manhandling an Aes Sedai, and half determination to hold on no matter what. Nynaeve had that effect on people, sometimes. The Black sister was wide-eyed with terror, sagging so she surely would have fallen except for Ieine’s grip. She must have been shielded, certainly, and with equal surety she probably would have chosen being skinned to whatever was going to happen to her. Tears began leaking from her eyes, and her mouth sagged in silent sobs.

Behind them came Beslan, who gave a sad sigh at the sight of Nalesean and a sadder for the women, and then Harnan and three of the Redarms, Fergin and Gorderan and Metwyn. Three who had been at the front of the building. Harnan and two of the others had bloody gashes in their coats, but Nynaeve must have Healed them below. They did not move as if they still had injuries. They looked very subdued, though.

“What happened at the back?” Mat asked quietly.

“Burn me if I know,” Harnan replied. “We walked right into a knot of shoulderthumpers with knives in the dark. There was one, moved like a snake. . . .” He shrugged, touching the bloodstained hole in his coat absentmindedly. “One of them got a knife into me, and the next I remember is opening my eyes with Nynaeve Sedai bending over me and Mendair and the others dead as yesterday’s mutton.”

Mat nodded. One who moved like a snake. And got out of rooms like one, too. He looked around the hallway. Reanne and Tamarla were on their feet—straightening their dresses, of course—and Vanin, peering into the room where Elayne was apparently trying out some more curses, seemingly with no more success than earlier. It was hard to tell because of the coughing. Nynaeve stood, helping up Sibella, a scrawny yellow-haired woman, and Sumeko was still working on Famelle, with her pale-honey hair and big brown eyes. But he was never going to admire Melore’s bosom again; Reanne knelt to straighten her limbs and close her eyes, while Tamarla performed the same service for Janira. Two Wise Women dead, and six of his Redarms. Killed by a . . . man . . . the Power would not touch.

“I’ve found it!” Elayne shouted excitedly. She strode back out into the hall holding a wide round bundle of rotted cloth she would not let Vanin take from her. Coated in gray from head to toe, she looked as if she had lain down and rolled in the dust. “We have the Bowl of the Winds, Nynaeve!”

“In that case,” Mat announced, “we are bloody well getting out of here now.” Nobody argued. Oh, Nynaeve and Elayne insisted on all the men making sacks out of their jackets for things they rooted out of the room—they even loaded the Wise Women down, and themselves—and Reanne had to go down and recruit men to carry their dead down the boat landing, but nobody argued. He doubted if the Rahad had ever seen as odd a procession as made its way to the river, or one that moved more quickly.

* * *

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CHAPTER
39

Promises to Keep

We are bloody well getting out of here now,” Mat said again later, and this time there was argument. There had been argument for the past half-hour, near enough. Outside, the sun was past its noon peak. The trade winds cut the heat a little; stiff yellow curtains fastened over the tall windows bulged and snapped at gusts. Three hours back in the Tarasin Palace, the dice still bouncing in his head, and he wanted to kick something. Or somebody. He tugged at the scarf tied around his neck; it felt as though the rope that had given him the scar under that scarf was back and tightening slowly. “Love of the Light, are you all blind? Or just deaf?”

The room Tylin had provided was large, with green walls and high blue ceiling, and no furnishings but gilded chairs and small tables set with pearlshell, yet it was crowded even so. It seemed so, anyway. Tylin herself sat before one of the three marble fireplaces with her knees crossed, watching him with those dark eagle’s eyes and a small smile, idly kicking her layered blue and yellow petticoats, idly toying with the jeweled hilt of her curved knife. He suspected Elayne or Nynaeve had spoken to her. They were there, too, seated to either side of the Queen, somehow in clean dresses and apparently even bathed, though they had only been out of his sight for minutes at a stretch since returning to the palace. They almost matched Tylin for regal dignity in their bright silks; he was not sure who they wanted to impress, with all that lace and elaborate embroidery. They looked ready for a royal ball, not a journey. He himself was still in his muck, with his dusty green coat hanging open and the silver foxhead caught in the neck of his half-undone shirt. Knotting the leather cord had shortened it, but he wanted the medallion touching his skin. He was around women who could channel, after all.

Truth, those three women could probably have crowded the room by themselves. Tylin could have done it by herself, so far as he was concerned; if Nynaeve or Elayne *had* spoken to her, it was a very good thing that he was going. They three could have done it alone, but. . . .

"This is preposterous," Merilille announced. "I've never heard of any Shadowspawn called a *gholam*. Have any of you?" That was directed to Adeleas and Vandene, Sareitha and Careane. Facing Tylin, the cool-eyed Aes Sedai serenity of all five made a fair job of turning their high-backed armchairs into thrones. He could not understand why Nynaeve and Elayne just sat like lumps, coolly serene too, but absolutely silent. They knew, they understood, and for some reason, Merilille and that lot slathered their tongues with meekness for them, now. Mat Cauthon, on the other hand, was a hairy-eared lout who needed to be kicked, and from Merilille on down, they were all ready to do the kicking.

"I saw the thing," he snapped, "Elayne saw the thing, Reanne and the Wise Women saw it. Ask any of them!"

Gathered at one end of the room, Reanne and the five surviving Wise Women shrank back like huddling hens, afraid of actual questions. All but Sumeko, anyway; thumbs tucked behind her long red belt, the round woman kept frowning at the Aes Sedai, then shaking her head, frowning, then shaking her head. Nynaeve had had a considerable talk with her in the privacy of the cabin on the boat coming back, and Mat thought that had something to do with her newfound attitude. He had caught mention of Aes Sedai more than once; not that he had been trying to eavesdrop. The rest seemed to be wondering whether they should offer to fetch tea. Only Sumeko had even appeared to consider the offer of a chair. Sibella, flapping bony arms in shock, had nearly fainted.

"No one denies the word of Elayne Aes Sedai, Master Cauthon," said Renaile din Calon Blue Star in a cool deep voice. Even had the dignified woman in silks to match the red-and-yellow floor tiles not been named to him earlier, the old memories meshed into his own would have identified her as Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships by the ten fat gold rings in her earlobes, those in each ear connected by a golden chain and half-hidden by the narrow wings of white in her straight black hair. The medallions clustered along the finer chain that ran to her nose ring would tell him what clan she came from among other things. So would the tattoos on her slim dark hands. “What we question is the danger,” she continued. “We do not like leaving the water without good cause.”

Nearly twenty Sea Folk women stood gathered behind her chair, a riot of colorful silks and earrings and medallions on chains for the most part. The first odd thing he had noticed about them was their attitude toward the Aes Sedai. They were perfectly respectful, on the surface at any rate, but he had never before seen anyone look at Aes Sedai *smugly.* The second odd thing came from those other men’s memories; he did not know a great deal about the Sea Folk from them, but enough. Every Atha’an Miere, man or woman, began as the lowest deckhand whether they were destined one day to become the Master of the Blades or the Mistress of the Ships herself, and every step of the way between, the Sea Folk were sticklers for rank to make any king or Aes Sedai look a sloven. The women behind Renaile were a peculiar lot by any measure—Windfinders to Wavemistresses rubbing shoulders with Windfinders from soarers, by their medallions—but two wore bright blouses of plain wool above the dark oily breeches of deckhands, each with a single thin ring in her left ear. A second and third ring in the right indicated they were being trained as Windfinders, but with two more to earn, not to mention the nose ring, it would be a long while yet that either would find herself called to haul sail whenever the deckmaster needed her, and find the deckmaster’s flail across her rump if she did not move quickly enough. Those two did not belong in this gathering by any memory he had; normally, the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships would not even have spoken to one of them.

“Very much as I said, Renaile,” Merilille said, icily condescending. She had certainly noticed those smug glances. That tone did not change as she shifted her attention to him. “Do not grow petulant, Master Cauthon. We are willing to listen to reason. If you have any.”

Mat gathered patience; he hoped he could find enough. Maybe if he used both hands and both feet. “*Gholam* were created in the middle of the War of the Power, during the Age of Legends,” he began from the beginning. Almost from the beginning of what Birgitte had told him. He turned, facing each group of women as he spoke. Burn him if he was going to let one bunch think they were more important. Or that he was bloody pleading with them. Especially since he was. “They were made to assassinate Aes Sedai. No other reason. To kill people who could channel. The One Power won’t help you; the Power won’t touch a *gholam.* In fact, they can sense the ability to channel, if they're within, say, fifty paces of you. They can feel the power in you, too. You won't know the *gholam* until it's too late. They look just like anybody else. On the outside. Inside. . . . *Gholam* have no bones; they can squeeze themselves under a door. And they're strong enough to rip a door off steel hinges with one hand." Or rip out a throat. Light, he should have let Nalesean stay in bed.

Suppressing a shiver, he pressed on. The women, all of them, watched him, almost not appearing to blink. He would not let them see him shiver. "There were only six *gholam* made—three male and three female; at least, that's what they look like. Apparently even the Forsaken were a little uneasy about them. Or maybe they just decided six was enough. Either way, we know one is in Ebou Dar, probably kept alive since the Breaking in a stasis-box. We don't know if any others were put into that box, but one is more than enough. Whoever sent him—and it had to be one of the Forsaken—knew to follow us across the river. He had to have been sent after the Bowl of the Winds, and by what he said to me, to kill Nynaeve or Elayne, maybe both." He spared them a quick look, soothing and sympathetic; nobody could feel easy knowing that thing was after them. In return he received a puzzled frown from Elayne, just the smallest wrinkling of her forehead, and from Nynaeve a slight wave of the hand, an impatient wave, to get on with it.

"To continue," he said, shooting the pair of them a glare. It was very hard not to sigh, dealing with women. "Whoever sent the *gholam* has to know the Bowl is here in the Tarasin Palace, now. If he, or she, sends the *gholam* here, some of you are going to die. Maybe a lot of you. I can't protect all of you at once. Maybe he'll get the Bowl, too. And that's on top of Falion Bhoda; small chance she's alone, even with Ispan a prisoner, so that means we have the Black Ajah to worry about, as well. Just in case the Forsaken and *gholam* aren't enough for you." Reanne and the Wise Women drew themselves up even more indignantly than Merilille and her friends at mention of the Black Ajah, and the Aes Sedai, stiffening and gathering skirts, looked ready to stalk out in a huff. Press on; that was all he could do. "Now. Now do you see why you all have to leave the palace and take the Bowl somewhere the *gholam* doesn't know about? Somewhere the Black Ajah doesn't know? Do you see why it has to be done now?"

Renaile's sniff would have startled geese in the next room. "You merely repeat yourself, Master Cauthon. Merilille Sedai says she has never heard of this *gholam*. Elayne Sedai says there was a strange man, a creature, but little else. What is this . . . *stasis*-box? You have not explained that. How do you know what you claim to know? Why should we go any further from the water than we are on the word of a man who creates fables from air?"

Mat looked to Nynaeve and Elayne, though with little hope. If they would only open their mouths, this could been have been finished long since, but they gazed back at him, practicing expressionless Aes Sedai masks till their jaws must be creaking. He could not understand their silence. A bare-bones account of events in the Rahad had been all they gave, and he was willing to bet they would not have mentioned the Black Ajah at all had there been any other way to explain showing up in the palace with an Aes Sedai bound and shielded. Ispan was being held in another part of the palace, her presence known only to a handful. Nynaeve had forced some concoction down her throat, a foul-smelling mix of herbs that bulged the woman's eyes going down and had her giggling and stumbling in short order, and the rest of the Knitting Circle occupied the room with her for guards. Unwilling guards, but very assiduous; Nynaeve had made it extremely clear that should they let Ispan get away, they had best start running before she laid hands on them again.

He very carefully did not look toward Birgitte, standing beside the door with Aviendha. The Aiel woman wore an Ebou Dari dress; not the plain wool she had returned in, but a silver-gray silk riding dress that jarred with her plain-sheathed horn-handled belt knife. Birgitte had been quick to shed her own dress for her usual short coat and wide trousers, these dark blue and dark green. A quiver already hung at her hip. She was the source of everything he knew about *gholam*—and stasis-boxes—except what his eyes had seen in the Rahad. And he would not have revealed that on a hot grill.

"I read a book once that talked about—" he began, and Renaile cut him off.

"A book," she sneered. "I will not abandon the salt for a book Aes Sedai do not know."

Suddenly it struck Mat that he was the only man present. Lan had gone off at Nynaeve's command, gone as tamely as Beslan had at his mother's. Thom and Juilin were packing to leave. Had probably finished packing by now. If there was any use to it; if they ever did leave. The only man, surrounded by a wall of women who apparently intended to let him beat his head against that wall till his brains were scrambled. It made no sense. None. They looked at him, waiting.

Nynaeve, in yellow-slashed lace-trimmed blue, had pulled her braid over her shoulder so it hung down between her breasts, but that heavy gold ring—Lan's ring, he had learned—was carefully positioned to show anyway. Her face was smooth, and her hands rested in her lap, yet sometimes her fingers twitched. Elayne, in green Ebou Dari silk that made Nynaeve seem covered up despite the smoky lace collar under her chin, gazed back at him with eyes like cool pools of deep blue water. Her hands lay in her lap too, but now and again she would begin to trace the thread-of-gold embroidery that covered her skirts, then immediately stop. Why did they not say something? Were they trying to get back at him? Was it just a case of "Mat wants to be in charge so much, let him see how well he can do without us"? He might have believed it of Nynaeve, any time but this anyway, but not of Elayne, not anymore. So why?

Reanne and the Wise Women did not huddle away from him as they did from the Aes Sedai, but their manner toward him had changed. Tamarla gave him a decently respectful nod. Honey-haired Famelle went so far as a friendly smile. Strangely, Reanne blushed, a pale stain. But they did not count as opposition, really. The six women had not said a dozen unprompted words between them since entering this room. Every one would jump if Nynaeve or Elayne snapped her fingers, and keep jumping until told to stop.

He turned to the rest of the Aes Sedai. Faces infinitely calm, infinitely patient. Except. . . . Merilille's eyes flickered past him toward Nynaeve and Elayne for one instant. Sareitha began slowly smoothing her skirts under his gaze, seemingly unaware of doing so. A dark suspicion bloomed in his mind. Hands moving on skirts. Reanne's blush. Birgitte's ready quiver. A murky suspicion. He did not really know of what. Just that he had been going about this the wrong way. He gave Nynaeve a stern look, and Elayne a sterner. Butter would not have melted on their bloody tongues.

Slowly he walked toward the Sea Folk. He just walked, but he heard someone with Merilille sniff, and Sareitha muttered, "Such insolence!" Well, he was about to show them insolence. If Nynaeve and Elayne did not like it, they should have taken him into their confidence. Light, but he hated being used. Especially when he did not know how, or why.

Stopping in front of Renaile's chair, he studied the dark faces of the Atha'an Miere women behind it before looking down to her. She frowned, stroking a knife set with moonstones thrust behind her sash. She was a handsome woman rather than pretty, somewhere in her middle years, and under different circumstances he might have enjoyed looking at her eyes. They were large black pools a man could spend an evening just gazing into. Under different circumstances. Somehow, the Sea Folk were the fly in the cream pitcher, and he had not a clue how to pluck it out. He managed to keep his irritation under control. Barely. What to bloody do?

"You can all channel, I understand," he said quietly, "but that doesn't mean much to me." As well be straight from the start. "You can ask Adeleas or Vandene how much I care whether a woman can channel."

Renaile looked past him toward Tylin, but it was not to the Queen she spoke. "Nynaeve Sedai," she said dryly, "I believe there was no mention in your bargain of my having to listen to this young oakum picker. I—"

"I don't bloody care about your bargains with anybody else, you daughter of the sands," Mat snapped. So his irritation was not that well under control. A man could only take so much.

Gasps rose among the women behind her. Something over a thousand years ago a Sea Folk woman had called a Shiotan soldier a son of the sands just before trying to plant a blade in his ribs; the memory lay tucked inside Mat Cauthon's head, now. It was not the worst insult among the Atha'an Miere, but it came close. Renaile's face gorged with blood; hissing, eyes bulging in fury, she leaped to her feet, that moonstone-studded dagger flashing in her fist.

Mat snatched it out of her hand before the blade could reach his chest and shoved her back into her chair. He did have quick hands. He could still hold on to his temper, too. No matter how many women thought they could dance him for a puppet, he could—"You listen to me, you bilge stone." All right; maybe he could not hold it. "Nynaeve and Elayne need you, or I'd leave you for the *gholam* to crack your bones and the Black Ajah to pick over what's left. Well, as far as you're concerned, I'm the Master of the Blades, and my blades are bare." What that meant exactly, he had no idea, except for having once heard, "When the blades are bare, even the Mistress of the Ships bows to the Master of the Blades." "This is the bargain between you and me. You go where Nynaeve and Elayne want, and in return, I won't tie the lot of you across horses like packsaddles and haul you there!"

That was no way to go on, not with the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships. Not with a bilgeboy off a broken-backed darter, for that matter. Renaile quivered with the effort of not going for him with her bare hands, and never mind her dagger in his hand. "It is agreed, under the Light!" she growled. Her eyes nearly started out of her head. Her mouth worked, confusion and disbelief suddenly chasing one another across her face. This time, the gasps sounded as if the wind had ripped the curtains down.

"It is agreed," Mat said quickly, and touching fingers to his lips, he pressed them to hers.

After a moment, she did the same, fingers trembling against his mouth. He held out the dagger, and she stared dully at it before taking it from him. The blade went back into its jeweled sheath. It was not polite to kill someone you had sealed a bargain with. At least, not until the terms were fulfilled. Murmurs began among the women behind her chair, rising, and Renaile stirred herself to clap her hands once. That silenced Windfinders to Wavemistresses as quickly as the two deckhands in training.

"I think I have just made a bargain with a *ta'veren*," she said in that cool, deep voice. The woman could teach Aes Sedai how to pull themselves together quickly. "But one day, Master Cauthon, if it pleases the Light, I think you will walk a rope for me."

He did not know what that meant, except that she made it sound unpleasant. He made his best leg. "All things are possible, if it pleases the Light," he murmured. Courtesy paid, after all. But her smile was disturbingly hopeful.

When he turned back to the rest of the room, you would have thought he had horns and wings, for the stares. "Is there any further argument?" he asked in a wry tone, and did not wait for answers. "I thought not. In that case, I suggest you pick out some spot well away from here, and we can be on our way as soon as you bundle up your belongings."

They made a show of discussion. Elayne mentioned Caemlyn, sounding at least half-serious, and Careane suggested several remote villages in the Black Hills, all easily reached by gateway. Light, anywhere was easily reached by gateway. Vandene spoke of Arafel, and Aviendha suggested Rhuidean, in the Aiel Waste, with the Sea Folk women growing glummer the farther from the sea were the places named. All a show. To

Mat, at least, that was clear by Nynaeve's impatient fiddling with her braid despite the suggestions coming hot and fast.

"If I may speak, Aes Sedai?" Reanne said timidly at last. She even raised her hand. "The Kin maintain a farm on the other side of the river, a few miles north. Everyone knows it is a retreat for women who need contemplation and quiet, but no one connects it to us. The buildings are large and quite comfortable, if there's any need to stay long, and—"

"Yes," Nynaeve broke in. "Yes, I think that sounds just the thing. What do you say, Elayne?"

"I think it sounds wonderful, Nynaeve. I know Renaile will appreciate staying close to the sea." The other five sisters practically piled on top of her saying how agreeable it sounded, how superior to any other suggestion.

Mat rolled his eyes to the heavens. Tylin was a study in not seeing what lay under her nose, but Renaile snapped at it like a trout taking a lacewing. Which was the point, of course. For some reason she was not to know that Nynaeve and Elayne had had everything arranged beforehand. She led the rest of the Sea Folk women out to gather whatever belongings they had brought before Nynaeve and Elayne could change their minds.

Those two would have followed Merilille and the other Aes Sedai, but he crooked a finger at them. They exchanged glances—he would have had to talk an hour to say as much as passed in those looks—then, somewhat to his surprise, came to him. Aviendha and Birgitte watched from the door, Tylin from her chair.

"I am very sorry to have used you," Elayne said before he could get a word out. Her smile flashed that dimple at him. "We did have reasons, Mat; you must believe that."

"Which you do not need to know," Nynaeve put in firmly, flipping her braid back over her shoulder with a practiced toss of her head that made the gold ring bounce on her bosom. Lan *must* be insane. "I must say, I never expected you to do what you did. Whatever in the world made you think of trying to *bully* them? You could have ruined everything."

"What's life if you don't take a chance now and then?" he said blithely. As well by him if they thought it was planned instead of temper. But they had used him again without telling him, and he wanted a bit back for that. "Next time you have to make a bargain with the Sea Folk, let me make it for you. Maybe that way, it won't turn out as badly as the last one." Spots of color blooming in Nynaeve's cheeks told him he had hit the mark squarely. Not bad shooting blindfolded.

Elayne, though, just murmured "A most *observant* subject" in tones of rueful amusement. Being in her good books might turn out less comfortable than being in her bad.

They swept toward the door without letting him say more. Well, he had not really thought they would explain anything. Both were Aes Sedai to the bone. A man learned to live with what he had to.

Tylin had all but slipped from his mind, but he had not from hers. She caught him up before he took two steps. Nynaeve and Elayne paused at the door with Aviendha and Birgitte, watching. So they saw when Tylin pinched his bottom. Some things, nobody could learn to live with. Elayne put on a face of commiseration, Nynaeve of glowering disapproval. Aviendha fought laughter none too successfully, while Birgitte wore her grin openly. They *all* bloody knew.

"Nynaeve thinks you are a little boy needing protection," Tylin breathed up at him. "I know you are a grown man." Her smoky chuckle made that the dirtiest comment he had ever heard. The four women by the door got to watch his face turn beet red. "I will miss you, pigeon. What you did with Renaile was magnificent. I do so admire masterful men."

"I'll miss you, too," he muttered. To his shock, that was simple truth. He was leaving Ebou Dar just in time. "But if we meet again, I'll do the chasing."

She chortled at him, and those dark eagle's eyes almost glowed. "I admire masterful men, duckling. But not when they try being masterful with me." Seizing his ears, she pulled his head down where she could kiss him.

He never saw Nynaeve and the others go, and he walked out on unsteady legs, tucking his shirt back in. He had to return to fetch his spear from the corner, and his hat. The woman had no shame. Not a scrap of it.

He found Thom and Juilin, coming out of Tylin's apartments, followed by Nerim and Lopin, Nalesean's stout man, who each lugged a large wicker pannier made for a packsaddle. Loaded with his belongings, he realized. Juilin carried Mat's unstrung bow and had his quiver slung on one shoulder. Well, she had said she was moving him.

"I found this on your pillow," Thom said, tossing him the ring he had bought what seemed a year ago. "A parting gift, it seems; there were lovers-knots and some other flowers strewn over *both* pillows."

Mat jammed the ring onto his finger. “It’s mine, burn you. I paid for it myself.”

The old gleeman knuckled his mustaches and coughed in a failed effort to stifle a sudden wide grin. Juilin snatched off that ridiculous Taraboner hat and became engrossed in studying the inside of it.

“Blood and flaming—!” Mat drew a deep breath. “I hope you two spared a moment for your own belongings,” he said levelly, “because as soon as I grab Olver, we’re on our way, even if we happen to leave a moldy harp or a rusty sword-breaker behind.” Juilin tugged at the corner of his eye with one finger, whatever that was supposed to mean, but Thom actually frowned. Insults to Thom’s flute or his harp were insults to himself.

“My Lord,” Lopin said mournfully. He was a dark, balding man, rounder than Sumeko, and his black Tairen commoner’s coat, tight to the waist then flaring, like Juilin’s, fit very tightly indeed. Normally almost as solemn as Nerim, now he had reddened eyes, as though he had been weeping. “My Lord, is there any chance I might remain to see Lord Nalesean buried? He was a good master.”

Mat hated saying no. “Anybody left behind might be left for a long time, Lopin,” he said gently. “Listen, I’ll need someone to help look after Olver. Nerim has his hands full with me. For that matter, Nerim will go back to Talmanes, you know. If you’d like, I will take you on myself.” He had grown used to having a manservant, and these were hard times for a man hunting work.

“I would like that very much, my Lord,” the fellow said lugubriously. “Young Olver reminds me much of my youngest sister’s son.”

Only, when they entered Mat’s former rooms, the Lady Riselle was there, much more decently clothed than when he had last seen her, and quite alone.

“Why should I have kept him tied to me?” she said, that truly marvelous bosom heaving with emotion as she planted her fists on her hips. The Queen’s duckling, it seemed, was not supposed to take a snappish tone with the Queen’s attendants. “Clip a boy’s wings too far, and he will never grow to a proper man. He read his pages aloud sitting on my knee—he might have read all day, had I allowed it—and did his numbers, so I let him go. Why are you in such a bother? He promised to return by sunset, and he seems to set a great store by his promises.”

Propping the *ashandarei* in its old corner, Mat told the other men to drop their burdens and go find Vanin and the remaining Redarms. Then he left Riselle's spectacular bosom and ran all the way to the rooms Nynaeve and the other women shared. They were all there, in the sitting room, and so was Lan, with his Warder's cloak already draped down his back and saddlebags on his shoulders. His saddlebags, and Nynaeve's, it seemed. A good many bundles of dresses and not-so-small chests stood about the floor. Mat wondered if they would make Lan carry those, too.

"Of course you have to go find him, Mat Cauthon," Nynaeve said. "Do you think we would just abandon the child?" To hear her, you would have thought that was exactly what *he* had intended.

Suddenly he was deluged with offers of help, not just Nynaeve and Elayne proposing to put off going to the farm, but Lan and Birgitte and Aviendha offering to join the search. Lan was stone cold about it, grim as ever, but Birgitte and Aviendha. . . .

"My heart would break if anything happened to that boy," Birgitte said, and Aviendha added, just as warmly, "I have always said you do not care for him properly." Mat ground his teeth. In the streets of the city, Olver might well elude eight men until he appeared back at the palace at sunset. He did keep his promises, but small chance he would give up one moment of freedom he did not have to. More eyes would mean a quicker search, especially if all of the Wise Women were brought into it. For the space of three heartbeats he hesitated. He had his own promises to keep, though he was wise enough not to put it that way.

"The Bowl is too important," he told them. "That *gholam* is still out there, and maybe Moghedien, and the Black Ajah for sure." The dice thundered in his head. Aviendha would not appreciate being lumped in with Nynaeve and Elayne, but he did not care right then. He addressed Lan and Birgitte. "Keep them safe until I can reach you. Keep all of them safe."

Startlingly, Aviendha said, "We will. I promise." She fingered the hilt of her knife. Apparently she did not understand she was one of those to be kept safe.

Nynaeve and Elayne did. Nynaeve's sudden glare tried to bore a hole through his skull; he expected her to yank on her braid, but strangely, her hand only fluttered toward it before being put firmly to her side. Elayne contented herself with raising her chin, those big blue eyes frosty. No dimple here.

Lan and Birgitte understood, too.

"Nynaeve is my life," Lan said simply, putting a hand on her shoulder. The odd thing was, she suddenly looked very sad, and then just as suddenly, her jaw set as though she was preparing to walk through a stone wall and make a large hole.

Birgitte gave Elayne a fond look, but it was to Mat she spoke. "I will," she said. "Honor's truth."

Mat tugged at his coat uncomfortably. He still was not sure how much he had told her while drunk. Light, but the woman could soak it up like dry sand. Even so, he gave the proper response for a Barashandan lord, accepting her pledge. "The honor of blood; the truth of blood." Birgitte nodded, and from the startled looks he received from Nynaeve and Elayne, she still kept his secrets close. Light, if any Aes Sedai ever found out about those memories, they might as well know he had blown the Horn as well; foxhead or no foxhead, they would stretch him out till they dug out every last why and how.

As he was turning to go, Nynaeve caught his sleeve. "Remember the storm, Mat. It's going to break soon; I know it. You take care of yourself, Mat Cauthon. Do you hear me? Tylin has directions for the farm, when you get back with Olver."

Nodding, he made his escape, the dice in his head like echoes of his running boots. Was it during the search that he was supposed to take care of himself, or while getting the directions from Tylin? Nynaeve and her Listening to the Wind. Did she think a little rain was going to melt him? Come to think, once they used the Bowl of the Winds, it would rain again. It seemed years since rain last fell. Something tugged at his thoughts, something about the weather, and Elayne, which made no sense, but he shrugged it off. One thing at a time, and the one thing right now was Olver.

The men were all waiting in the Redarms' long room near the stables, everyone on their feet except Vanin, who lay sprawled on one of the beds with his fingers laced over his belly. Vanin said a man had to take rest when he could. He swung his boots over and sat up when Mat entered, though. He cared about Olver as much as any of the others; Mat was just afraid the man was going to start teaching him how to steal horses and poach pheasants. Seven sets of eyes focused on Mat intently.

"Riselle said Olver's wearing his red coat," he told them. "He gives them away, sometimes, but any urchin you see in a good red coat probably knows where Olver last was. Everybody goes in a different direction. Make loops out from the Mol Hara, and try to be back after about an hour. Wait till everybody is back before you go out again. That way, if somebody finds him, the rest of us won't still be looking tomorrow. Does everybody understand?" They nodded.

Sometimes it amazed him. Lanky Thom with his white hair and mustaches, who had been a Queen's lover once, and more willingly than himself, not to mention more than a lover, if you believed half he said. Square-jawed Harnan with that tattoo on his cheek and more elsewhere, who had been a soldier all his life. Juilin with his bamboo staff and his sword-breaker on his hip, who thought himself as good as any lord even if the idea of carrying a sword himself still made him uneasy, and fat Vanin, who made Juilin look a bootlicker by comparison. Skinny Fergin, and Gorderan, nearly as wide in the shoulders as Perrin, and Metwyn, whose pale Cairhienin face still looked like a boy's despite being years older than Mat. Some of them followed Mat Cauthon because they thought he was lucky, because his luck might keep them alive when the swords were out, and some for reasons he was not really sure of, but they followed. Not even Thom had ever more than protested an order of his. Maybe Renaile had been more than luck. Maybe his being *ta'veren* did more than dump him in the middle of trouble. Suddenly he felt . . . responsible . . . for these men. It was an uncomfortable feeling. Mat Cauthon and responsibility did not go together. It was unnatural.

"Take care of yourselves, and look sharp," he said. "You know what's out there. There's a storm coming." Now why had he said that? "Move. We're wasting light."

The wind still blew strongly, sweeping dust across the Mol Hara Square with its statue of a long-dead queen posing above the fountain, but there was no other sign of a storm. Nariene had been noted for her honesty, but not enough to have been depicted completely bare-chested. The afternoon sun burned high in a sky without a cloud, but people rushed through the square as quickly as they had in the morning cool. That was gone, wind or no, down here on the ground. The paving stones seemed a griddle under his boots.

Glaring across the square at The Wandering Woman, Mat headed toward the river. Olver had not gone off with the street urchins half as often while they were staying at the inn; he had been too content ogling the serving girls and Setalle Anan's daughters. So much for the dice telling him he had to move into the palace. Anything he had done since leaving—anything he wanted to do, he amended, thinking of Tylin and her eyes; and her hands—any of it could have been done just as well from there. Those dice spun now, and he wished they would just go away.

He tried to move quickly, dodging impatiently around trundling carts and wagons, cursing at lacquered sedan chairs and coaches that nearly ran him down, eyes darting in search of a red coat close to the ground, but the bustle in the streets slowed him to a meander. Which was just as well, in truth. No point dashing by the boy without seeing him. Wishing he had brought Pips out of the palace stables, he frowned at the people streaming past; a man on horseback could have moved no faster in the throng, but up in the saddle, he could have seen farther. Then again, asking questions from a saddle would have been awkward; not many folk actually rode inside the city, and some people had a tendency to shy away from anyone on a horse.

Always the same question. The first time he asked was at a bridge just below the Mol Hara, of a fellow selling honey-baked apples from a tray hanging from a strap around his neck. "Have you seen a boy, about so high, in a red coat?" Olver liked sweets.

"Boy, my Lord?" the fellow said, sucking his few remaining teeth. "Seen a thousand boys. Don't remember no coat, though. Would my Lord like one apple, or two?" He scooped up two with bony fingers and pushed them at Mat; the way they gave under his fingers, they were softer than any baking could account for. "Did my Lord hear about the riot?"

"No," Mat said sourly, and pushed on. At the other end of the bridge, he stopped a plump woman with a tray of ribbons. Ribbons held no fascination for Olver, but her red petticoats flashed beneath a skirt sewn up nearly to her left hip, and the cut of her bodice revealed rounded cleavage to equal Riselle's. "Have you seen a boy . . . ?"

He heard about the riot from her, too, and from half the people he asked. That rumor, he suspected had begun with events at a certain house in the Rahad that very morning. A wagon driver with her long whip coiled around her neck even told him the riot had been across the river, once she allowed as how she never noticed boys unless they ran under her mules. A square-faced man who sold honeycomb—incredibly dry-looking honeycomb—said the riot had been down near the light tower at the end of the Bay Road, on the eastern side of the mouth of the bay, which was about as likely a place for rioting as the middle of the bay itself. There were always a thousand rumors in any city, if you listened, and he was forced to listen to snatches of all of them, it seemed. One of the most remarkably pretty women he had ever seen, standing outside a tavern—Maylin was a serving girl at The Old Sheep, but her only task seemed to be standing outside to attract customers, which she certainly did—told him there had been a battle that morning, in the Cordese Hills west of the city, she thought. Or maybe in the Rhannon Hills, across the bay. Or maybe. . . . Remarkably pretty, Maylin, but not very bright; Olver might have watched her for hours, so long as she never opened her mouth. But she could not remember seeing any boy in a. . . . What color coat had he said, again? He heard about riots and battles, he heard about enough strange things seen in the sky or the hills to populate the Blight. He heard that the Dragon Reborn was about to descend on the city with thousands of men who could channel, that the Aiel were coming, an army of Aes Sedai—no, it was an army of Whitecloaks; Pedron Niall was dead, and the Children intended to avenge him, though why in Ebou Dar was not exactly clear. You might have thought the city would be hip-deep in panic with all the tales floating around, but the fact was, even those who told a tale usually only half-believed it. So, he heard all sorts of nonsense, but not a word about any boy in a red coat.

A few streets from the river, he began hearing thunder, great hollow booms that seemed to roll in from the sea. People looked up curiously at the cloudless sky, scratched their heads, and went on about their business. So did he, questioning every seller of sweets or fruit he saw, and every pretty woman afoot. All to no avail. Reaching the long stone quay that ran the whole length of the river side of the city, he paused, studying the gray docks stretching out into the river and the ships tied to them. The wind blew strong, heaving vessels at their mooring lines, grinding them against the stone docks despite the bags stuffed with wool hung down between for fenders. Unlike horses, ships did not interest Olver except as a way to go from here to there, and ships were men’s business in Ebou Dar even if the lading they carried often was not. Women on these docks would either be merchants keeping an eye on their goods or hard-armed members of the cargo-loader’s guild, and there would be no sweet-sellers here.

About to turn away, he realized almost no one was moving. The docks usually bustled, yet on every ship he could see, crewmen lined the rails and had climbed into the rigging to stare toward the bay. Barrels and crates stood abandoned while shirtless men and wiry women in green leather vests crowded together at the ends of the docks to peer between the ships, south, toward the thunder. Down that way, black smoke rose in thick towering columns, slanting sharply north on the wind.

Hesitating only a moment, he trotted out along the nearest dock. At first, ships tied to the long fingers of stone to the south blocked his view of anything except the smoke. Because of the way the shoreline lay, though, each dock stuck out farther than the next down; once he pushed into the murmuring crowd at the end, the broad river made an open path of choppy green water to the wave-tossed bay.

At least two dozen ships were burning out on the wide expanse of the bay, maybe more, engulfed in flame from end to end. A number of others had already settled, only a bow or stern still above water and that sliding under. Even as he looked, the bow of a broad two-masted ship flying a large banner of red and blue and gold, the banner of Altara, suddenly flew apart with a roar, a boom like thunder, and fast-thickening tendrils of smoke wafted away on the wind as the vessel began settling by the head. Hundreds of vessels were in motion, every craft in the bay, three-masted Sea Folk rakers and skimmers and two-masted soarers, coastal ships with their triangular sails, riverships under sail or sweep, some fleeing upriver, most trying to beat out to sea. Scores of other ships swanned into the bay before the wind, great bluff-bowed vessels as tall as any of the rakers, crashing through the rolling waves, throwing aside spray. His breath caught as he suddenly made out square, ribbed sails.

“Blood and bloody ashes,” he muttered in shock. “It’s the flaming Seanchan!”

“Who?” demanded a stern-faced woman crowded next to him. A dark blue woolen dress of fine cut marked her a merchant as much as did the leather folder she carried for her bills of lading or the guild pin over one breast, a silver quill pen. “It’s the Aes Sedai,” she announced in tones of conviction. “I know channeling when I see it. The Children of the Light will do for them, just as soon as they arrive. You’ll see.”

A lanky, gray-haired woman in a grimy green vest twisted around to confront her, fingering the wooden hilt of her dagger. “Hold your tongue about Aes Sedai, you flaming penny-grubber, or I’ll peel you and stuff a Whitecloak down your bleeding gullet!”

Mat left them waving their arms and shouting at one another, and pushed clear of the crowd, running for the quay. Already he could see three—no, four—huge creatures circling over the city to the south on great pinions like those of a bat. Figures clung to the creatures' backs, apparently in some sort of saddles. Another flying creature appeared, and more. Below them, flame suddenly fountained above the rooftops with a roar.

People ran now, buffeting Mat as he struggled through the streets. "Olver!" he shouted, hoping to be heard above other shouts from every side, and the screams. "Olver!"

Abruptly, everybody seemed to be heading the other way, battering past him. Stubbornly he forced on against the tide. And came to a street where what all those folk fled from was made plain.

A Seanchan column rushed by, a hundred or more men in helmets like insects' heads and armor of overlapping plates, all riding animals like cats the size of horses, but covered in bronze scales rather than fur. Leaning forward in their saddles, blue-streamered lances slanted, they galloped toward the Mol Hara without looking to either side. Though "gallop" was not quite the word for the way those creatures moved; the speed was right, but they . . . flowed. It was time to be gone; past time. As soon as he found—

As the end of column went by a flash of red, waist high, caught his eye among the crowd in the street beyond the intersection. "Olver!" He darted across almost on the heels of the last scaled creature, pushing into the crowd in time to see a wide-eyed woman snatch up a little girl in a red dress and run with the child clutched to her bosom. Wildly, Mat pressed ahead, shouldering people aside when they bumped into him, bumping into more than a few himself. "Olver! Olver!"

Twice more he saw a column of fire rise briefly above the rooftops, and smoke drifted to the sky in a dozen places. Several times he heard those booming roars, much closer than the bay, now. Inside the city, he was sure; more than once the ground quivered beneath his boots.

And then the street was clearing again, people fleeing in every direction, down alleys and into houses and shops, for Seanchan on horses were coming. Not all were armored men; near the head of that small thicket of lances rode a dark woman in a blue dress. Mat knew the large red panels on her skirts and bosom were worked with silver lightning. A silver leash, gleaming in the sun, ran from her left wrist to the neck of a woman in gray, a *damane*, who trotted beside the *sul'dam's* horse like a pet dog. He had seen more of Seanchan at Falme than he wanted to, but unconsciously he paused at the mouth of an alleyway, watching. The roars and fires had showed that somebody in the city was trying to fight back, at least, and now he was going to see such an attempt.

The Seanchan were not the only reason everyone else had gotten out of sight. At the other end of the street, a good hundred mounted men swung long-pointed lances down. They wore baggy white breeches and green coats, and the gold cords on the officer's helmet glittered. With a collective shout, a hundred or more of Tylin's soldiers hurled themselves toward the city's attackers. They outnumbered the Seanchan in front of them by at least two to one.

"Bloody fools," Mat muttered. "Not like that. That *sul'dam* will—"

The only movement among the Seanchan was the woman in the lightning-marked dress raising her hand to point, as one might launch a hawk, or send off a hound. The golden-haired woman at the other end of the silvery leash took a small step forward. The foxhead medallion cooled against his chest.

Underneath the head of the Ebou Dari charge, the street suddenly erupted, paving stones and men and horses flying into the air with a deafening roar. The concussion knocked Mat flat on his back, or maybe it was the way the ground seemed to leap from under his feet. He pulled himself up in time to see the front of an inn across the way suddenly collapse into the street in a cloud of dust, exposing the rooms within.

Men and horses lay everywhere, pieces of men and horses, those still alive thrashing, around a hole in the ground half as wide as the street. Screams from the wounded filled the air. Fewer than half the Ebou Dari staggered to their feet, dazed and stumbling. Some seized up the reins of horses as wobbly-legged as they, heaving themselves into saddles, kicking the animals into some semblance of a run. Others just ran afoot. All away from the Seanchan. Steel they could face, but not this.

Running, Mat realized, seemed a particularly fine idea right then. A glance back down the alley showed dust and rubble piled at least a story high. He darted down the street ahead of the fleeing Ebou Dari, keeping as close to the walls as possible, hoping none of the Seanchan would think he was one of Tylin's soldiers. He should never have worn a green coat.

The *sul’dam* apparently was not satisfied. The foxhead went cool again, and from behind another roar hammered him to the pavement, pavement that jumped up to meet him. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard masonry groan. Above him, the white-plastered brick wall began leaning outward.

“What happened to my bloody luck?” he shouted. He had time for that. And just time to realize, as brick and timbers crashed down on him, that the dice in his head had just stopped dead.

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CHAPTER

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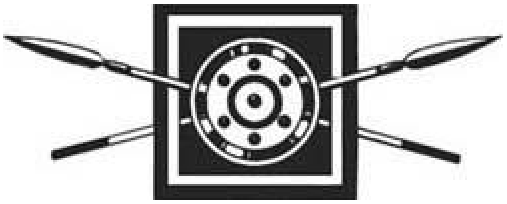

Spears

Mountains rose all around Galina Casban, little more than large hills behind but snowcapped peaks ahead and higher peaks beyond those, yet she really saw none of them. The stones of the slope bruised her bare feet. She panted, lungs laboring already. The sun baked overhead as it had for seemingly endless days, burning the sweat out of her in rivers. Anything other than putting one foot in front of the other seemed beyond her. Strange that with all the sweat coming out of her, she could not find any moisture in her mouth.

She had been Aes Sedai fewer than ninety years, her long black hair untouched as yet by gray, but for nearly twenty of those she had been head of the Red Ajah—called the Highest by other Red sisters, in private; considered by other Reds equal to the Amyrlin Seat—and for all but five of the years she had worn the shawl, she had been of the Black Ajah, in truth. Not to the exclusion of her duties as a Red, but superior to them. Her place on the Supreme Council of the Black Ajah was next to that of Alviarin herself, and she was one of only three who knew the name of the woman who led their hooded meetings. She could speak any name in those meetings—a king's—and know that name belonged to the dead. It had happened, with a king and with a queen. She had helped to break two Amyrlins, twice helped turn the most powerful woman in the world into a squealing wretch eager to tell all she knew, had helped make it seem that one of those had died in her sleep and had seen the other deposed and stilled. Such things were a duty, like the need to exterminate men with the ability to channel, not actions she took pleasure in beyond that of tasks well done, but she had enjoyed leading the circle that stilled Siuan Sanche. Surely all those things meant that Galina Casban was herself among the mightiest of the world, among the most powerful. Surely they did. They must. Her legs wavered like springs that had lost their tempering, and she fell heavily, unable to catch herself with arms and elbows tightly bound behind her. The once-white silk shift, the only garment left to her, tore again as she slid on the loose rocks, scraping her welts. A tree stopped her. Face pressed against the ground, she began to sob. "How?" she moaned in a thick voice. "How can this happen to me?"

After a time she realized that she had not been pulled to her feet; no matter how often she fell, she had never before been allowed a moment's respite. Blinking away tears, she raised her head.

Aiel women covered the mountainside, several hundred of them scattered among the barren trees with their spears, the veils they could raise in an instant hanging down their chests. Galina wanted to laugh. Maidens; they called these monstrous women Maidens. She wished she could laugh. At least there were no men present, a small mercy. Men made her skin crawl, and if one could see her now, less than half-clothed. . . .

Anxiously, her eyes sought for Therava, but most of the seventy or so Wise Ones stood together looking at something farther up the slope, blocking her view. There seemed to be a murmur of voices from the front of them. Maybe the Wise Ones were conferring about something. Wise Ones. They had been brutally efficient in teaching her the correct names; never just Aiel woman, and never wilder. They could smell contempt however she hid it. Of course, you did not have to try hiding what had been seared out of you.

Most of the Wise Ones were looking away, but not all. The glow of *saidar* surrounded a young, pretty, red-haired woman with a delicate mouth who watched Galina with large, intent blue eyes. Perhaps as a sign of their own disdain, they had chosen the weakest of their number to shield her this morning. Micara was not truly weak in the Power—none of them were that—but even smarting from shoulders to knees as she was, Galina could have broken Micara's shield with little effort. A muscle in her cheek spasmed uncontrollably; it always did when she thought of another escape attempt. The first had been bad enough. The second. . . . Shuddering, she fought not to sob again. She would not make the attempt again until she was sure of complete success. Very sure. Absolutely sure.

The mass of Wise Ones parted, turning to follow Therava with their eyes as the hawk-faced woman strode toward Galina. Suddenly panting once more, with apprehension, Galina tried to struggle to her feet. Hands bound and muscles watery, she had only reached her knees when Therava bent over her, necklaces of ivory and gold clattering softly. Seizing a handful of Galina's hair, Therava forced her head back sharply. Taller than most men, the woman did that even when they were standing, craning Galina's neck painfully to make her look up into the Wise One's face. Therava was somewhat stronger in the Power than she, which relatively few women were, but that was not what made Galina tremble. Cold deep blue eyes stabbed into her own, held her more tightly than Therava's rough hand; they seemed to strip her soul naked as easily as the Wise One handled her. She had not begged yet, not when they made her walk all day with hardly a drop of water, not when they forced her to keep up as they ran for hours, not even when their switches made her howl. Therava's cruel hard face, staring down at her impassively, made her want to beg. Sometimes she woke at night, stretched out tight between the four stakes where they bound her, woke whimpering from dreams that her whole life would be lived under Therava's hands.

"She is collapsing already," the Wise One said in a voice like stone. "Water her, and bring her." Turning away, she adjusted her shawl, Galina Casban forgotten until there was need to recall her; to Therava, Galina Casban was less important than a stray dog.

Galina did not try to rise; she had been "watered" often enough by now. It was the only way they let her drink. Aching for moisture, she did not resist when a blocky Maiden took her by the hair as Therava had and pulled her head back. She just opened her mouth as far as she could. Another Maiden, with a puckered scar slanting across nose and cheek, tilted a waterskin and slowly poured a trickle into Galina's waiting mouth. The water was flat and warm; it was delicious. She swallowed convulsively, awkwardly, holding her jaws wide. Almost as much as water to drink, she wanted to move her face under that thin stream, to let it run over her cheeks and forehead. Instead she kept her head very steady, so that every drop went down her throat. Spilling water was cause for another beating; they had thrashed her in sight of a creek six paces wide for spilling a mouthful over her chin.

When the waterskin was finally taken away, the blocky Maiden hauled her to her feet by her bound elbows. Galina groaned. The Wise Ones were gathering their skirts over their arms, exposing their legs well above soft knee-high boots. They could not be going to run. Not again. Not in these mountains.

The Wise Ones loped forward as easily as if on level ground. An unseen Maiden cut Galina across the back of her thighs with a switch, and she stumbled to a semblance of a run, half-dragged by the blocky Maiden. The switch slashed her legs whenever they faltered. If this run continued the rest of the day, they would take turns, one Maiden wielding the stick and another dragging. Laboring up slopes and nearly sliding down, Galina ran. A tawny mountain cat, striped in shades of brown and heavier than a man, snarled at them from a rocky ledge above; a female, lacking the tufts on her ears and the wide cheeks. Galina wanted to shout at her to flee, to run before Therava caught her. The Aiel ran on by the snarling animal, unconcerned, and Galina wept with jealousy for the cat's freedom.

She would be rescued eventually, of course; she knew that. The Tower would not allow a sister to remain in captivity. Elaida would not allow a Red to be held. Surely Alviarin would send rescue. Someone would, anyone, to save her from these monsters, especially from Therava. She would promise anything for that deliverance. She would even keep those promises. She had been broken free of the Three Oaths on joining the Black Ajah, replacing them with a new trinity, but at that moment she truly believed she would keep her word, if it brought rescue. Any promise, to anyone who would free her. Even a man.

By the time low tents appeared, their dark colors fading into the forested mountainsides as well as the cat had, Galina had two Maidens supporting her, pulling her along. Shouts rose from every side, glad cries of greeting, but Galina was dragged on behind the Wise Ones, deeper into the camp, still running, stumbling.

Without warning the hands left her arms. She pitched forward on her face and lay there with her nose in the dirt and dead leaves, sucking air through her gaping mouth. She coughed on a piece of leaf, but she was too weak to turn her head. The blood pounded her ears, but voices came to her and slowly began to make sense.

". . . Took your time, Therava," a familiar-sounding woman's voice said. "Nine days. We have been back long since."

Nine days? Galina shook her head, scrubbing her face on the ground. Since the Aiel had shot her horse from under her, memory blended all the days into a melange of thirst and running and being beaten, but surely it had been longer ago than nine days. Weeks, certainly. A month or more.

"Bring her in," the familiar voice said impatiently.

Hands pulled her up, shoved her forward, bending her to go under the edge of a large tent with the sides raised all around. She was thrown down on layered carpets, the edge of a red-and-blue Tairen maze overlapping gaudy flowers beneath her nose. With difficulty, she raised her head.

At first, she saw nothing but Sevanna, seated on a large yellow-tasseled cushion in front of her. Sevanna with her hair like fine spun gold, her clear emerald eyes. Treacherous Sevanna, who had given her word to distract attention by raiding into Cairhien, then broken her pledge by trying to free al'Thor. Sevanna, who at the least might take her from Therava's clutches.

She struggled up onto her knees, and for the first time realized there were others in the tent. Therava sat on a cushion to Sevanna's right, at the head of a curving line of Wise Ones, fourteen women who could channel in all, though Micara, who still held the shield on her, stood at the foot of the line rather than sitting. Half of them had been among the Wise Ones who captured her with such scornful ease. She would never again be so careless about Wise Ones; never again. Short, pale-faced men and women in white robes moved behind the Wise Ones, wordlessly offering trays of gold or silver with small cups, and more did the same on the other side of the tent, where a gray-haired woman in an Aiel coat and breeches of brown and gray sat to Sevanna's left, at the head of a line of twelve stone-faced Aielmen. Men. And she wore nothing but her shift, ripped and gaping in a number of places. Galina clamped her teeth shut to stifle a scream. She forced her back stiff to keep from trying to burrow into the rugs and hide from those cold male eyes.

"It seems that Aes Sedai can lie," Sevanna said, and the blood drained from Galina's face. The woman could not know; she could not. "You made pledges, Galina Casban, and broke them. Did you think you could murder a Wise One and then run beyond the reach of our spears?"

For a moment, relief froze Galina's tongue. Sevanna did *not* know about the Black Ajah. Had she not abandoned the Light long ago, she would have thanked the Light. Relief stilled her tongue, and a tiny spark of indignation. They *attacked* Aes Sedai and were angry when some of them died? A tiny spark was all she could manage. After all, what was Sevanna's twisting facts alongside days of beatings and Therava's eyes? A pained, croaking laugh bubbled up at the absurdity of it. Her throat was so dry.

"Be thankful some of you still live," she managed past her laughter. "Even now it is not too late to rectify your mistakes, Sevanna." With an effort, she swallowed rueful mirth before it turned to tears. Just before. "When I return to the White Tower, I will remember those who assist me, even now." She would have added, "and those who do otherwise," but Therava's unwavering stare set fear fluttering in her middle. For all she knew, Therava still might be allowed to do whatever she wished. There had to be some way to induce Sevanna to . . . take charge of her. That tasted bitter, yet anything was better than Therava. Sevanna was ambitious, and greedy. In the midst of frowning at Galina, she had caught sight of her own hand and directed a brief, admiring smile at rings set with large emeralds and firedrops. She wore rings on half her fingers, and necklaces of pearls and rubies and diamonds fit for any queen draped across the swell of her bosom. Sevanna could not be trusted, but perhaps she could be bought. Therava was a force of nature; as well try to buy a flood or an avalanche. "I trust that you will do what is right, Sevanna," she finished. "The rewards of friendship with the White Tower are great."

For a long moment, there was silence except for the whisper of the white robes as the servants moved with their trays. Then. . . .

"You are *da'tsang*," Sevanna said. Galina blinked. She was a *despised* one? Certainly they had displayed their contempt plainly, but why—?

"You are *da'tsang*," a round-faced Wise One she did not know intoned, and a woman a hand taller than Therava repeated, "You are *da'tsang*."

Therava's hawklike face might have been carved from wood, yet her eyes, fixed on Galina, glittered accusingly. Galina felt nailed to the spot where she knelt, unable to move a muscle. A hypnotized bird watching a serpent slither nearer. No one had ever made her feel that way. No one.

"Three Wise Ones have spoken." Sevanna's satisfied smile was almost welcoming. Therava's face was stark. The woman did not like whatever had just happened. Something *had* happened, even if Galina did not know what. Except that it appeared to have delivered her from Therava. That was more than enough for the moment. More than enough.

When Maidens cut her bounds and stuffed her into a black wool robe, she was so grateful she almost did not care that they tore off the remnants of her shift first, in front of those ice-eyed men. The thick wool was hot and itchy and scratchy on her welts, and she welcomed it as though it were silk. Despite Micara still shielding her, she could have laughed as the Maidens led her out of the tent. It did not take long for that desire to vanish entirely. It did not take her long to begin wondering whether begging on her knees before Sevanna would do any good. She would have done it, could she have gotten to the woman, except that Micara made it plain she was not going anywhere she was not told to go, or speak a word unless spoken to.

Arms folded, Sevanna watched the Aes Sedai, the *da'tsang*, stagger down the mountainside and stop, beside a Maiden squatting on her heels with a switch, to drop the head-shaped stone she had been carrying in her hands. The black hood turned in Sevanna's direction for a moment, but the *da'tsang* quickly bent to pick up another large stone and turned to labor back up the fifty paces to where Micara waited with another Maiden. There she dropped that stone, picked up another, and started back down. *Da'tsang* were always shamed with useless labor; unless there was great need, the woman would not be allowed to carry even a cup of water, yet toil without purpose would fill her hours till she burst of shame. The sun had a long way to climb yet, and many more days lay ahead.

"I did not think she would condemn herself out of her own mouth," Rhiale said at Sevanna's shoulder. "Efalin and the others are all but sure she openly admitted killing Desaine."

"She is mine, Sevanna." Therava's jaw tightened. She might have taken the woman, but *da'tsang* belonged to no one. "I intended to dress her in *gai'shain* robes of silk," she muttered. "What is the purpose of this, Sevanna? I expected to have to argue against cutting her throat, not this."

Rhiale tossed her head, casting a sidelong glance at Sevanna. "Sevanna intends to break her. We have had long talks of what to do should we capture any Aes Sedai. Sevanna wants a tame Aes Sedai to wear white and serve her. An Aes Sedai in black will do well enough, though."

Sevanna shifted her shawl, irritated by the woman's tone. Not quite mocking, but all too aware that she wanted somehow to use the Aes Sedai's channeling as though it were Sevanna's own. It would be possible. Two *gai'shain* passed the three Wise Ones, carrying a large brass-strapped chest between them. Short and pale-faced, husband and wife, they had been Lord and Lady in the treekillers' lands. The pair bowed their heads more meekly than any Aiel in white ever could have managed; their dark eyes were tight with fear of a harsh word, much less a switch. Wetlanders could be tamed like horses.

"The woman is tamed already," Therava grumbled. "I have looked into her eyes. She is a bird fluttering in the hand and afraid to fly."

"In nine days?" Rhiale said incredulously, and Sevanna shook her head vigorously.

"She is Aes Sedai, Therava. You saw her face go pale with fury when I accused her. You heard her laugh as she spoke of killing Wise Ones." She made a vexed, angry sound. "And you heard her threaten us." The woman had been as slippery as the treekillers, speaking of rewards and letting the threat if no rewards came shout silently. But what else could be expected of Aes Sedai? "It will take long to break her, but this Aes Sedai will beg to obey if it takes a year." Once she did that. . . . Aes Sedai could not lie, of course; she had expected Galina to deny her accusation. Once she swore to obey. . . .

"If you want to make an Aes Sedai obey you," a man's voice said behind her, "this might help."

Incredulous, Sevanna spun about to find Caddar standing there, and beside him the woman—the Aes Sedai—Maisia, both dressed in dark silk and fine lace as they had been six days ago, each with a bulging sack hanging incongruously from one shoulder by a strap. Caddar held out a smooth white rod about a foot long in one dark hand.

"How did you come here?" she demanded, then compressed her lips in anger. Plainly he had come as he had before; she was just surprised at him appearing here, in the middle of the camp. She snatched the white rod he offered, and as always he stepped back beyond arm's reach. "Why have you come?" she amended. "What is this?" A little slimmer than her wrist, the rod was smooth except for a few odd, flowing symbols incised on one flat end. It felt not quite like ivory, not quite like glass. Very cool to the touch.

"You might call it an Oath Rod," Caddar said, showing teeth in what was doubtless meant for a smile. "It only came into my hands yesterday, and I immediately thought of you."

Sevanna clamped her hands tight around the rod to keep from hurling it away. Everyone knew what the Aes Sedai's Oath Rod did. Trying not even to think, much less speak, she thrust it behind her belt and took her hands away.

Rhiale frowned at the rod at Sevanna's waist, and her eyes rose slowly, coldly, to Sevanna's face. Therava adjusted her shawl in a clatter of bracelets, and gave a hard, thin smile. There would never be any chance of one of them touching the rod and maybe no chance of any other Wise One doing so either. But there was still Galina Casban. One day she would break.

Raven-eyed Maisia, a little behind Caddar, smiled almost as faintly as Therava. She had seen, and understood. She was observant, for a wetlander.

“Come,” Sevanna told Caddar. “We will drink tea in my tent.” She certainly would not share water with him. Lifting her skirts, she started up the slope.

To her surprise, Caddar was also observant. “All you need do is have your Aes Sedai”—walking easily beside her on his long legs, he grinned suddenly, toothily, at Rhiale and Therava—“or any woman who can channel hold the rod and speak whatever promises you wish while someone channels a little Spirit into the number. The marks on the end of the rod?” he added, raising his eyebrows insultingly. “You can use it to release her, too, but that is more painful. Or so I understand.”

Sevanna’s fingers touched the rod lightly. More glass than ivory, and very cool. “It only works on women?” She ducked into the tent ahead of him. The Wise Ones and the leaders of the warrior societies were gone, but the dozen treekiller *gai’shain* remained, kneeling patiently to one side. No one person had ever kept a dozen *gai’shain* before, and she possessed more. There would have to be a new name for them, though, since they would never put off the white.

“Women who can channel, Sevanna,” Caddar said, following her in. The man’s tone was incredibly insolent. His dark eyes shone with open amusement. “You will have to wait until you have al’Thor before I give you what will control him.”

Removing the sack from his shoulder, he sat. Not on a cushion near hers, of course. Maisia was not afraid of a blade in her ribs; she lounged on an elbow almost at Sevanna’s side. Sevanna eyed her sideways, then casually undid another lace of her own blouse. She did not recall the woman’s bosom being as round as that. For that matter, her face seemed even more beautiful, as well. Sevanna tried not to grind her teeth.

“Of course,” Caddar went on, “if you mean some other man—There is a thing called a binding chair. Binding people who cannot channel is more difficult than binding those who can. Perhaps a binding chair survived the Breaking, but you will have to wait while I find it.”

Sevanna touched the rod again, then impatiently ordered one of the *gai'shain* to bring tea. She could wait. Caddar was a fool. Sooner or later he would give her everything she wanted of him. And now the rod could break Maisia free of him. Surely then the woman would not protect him. For his insults, he would wear black. Sevanna took a small green porcelain cup from the tray the *gai'shain* held and gave it to the Aes Sedai with her own hands. "It is flavored with mint, Maisia. You will find it refreshing."

The woman smiled, but those black eyes. . . . Well, what could be done to one Aes Sedai could be done to two. Or more.

"What of the traveling boxes?" Sevanna demanded curtly.

Caddar waved the *gai'shain* away and patted the sack beside him. "I brought as many *nar'baha*—that is what they were called—as many as I could find. Enough to transport all of you by nightfall, if you hurry. And I would, if I were you. Al'Thor means to finish you, it seems. Two clans are coming up from the south, and two more are moving to come down from the north. With their Wise Ones, all ready to channel. Their orders are to stay until every last one of you is dead or a prisoner."

Therava sniffed. "A reason to move, certainly, wetlander, but not to run. Even four clans cannot sweep Kinslayer's Dagger in a day."

"Didn't I say?" Caddar's smile was not at all pleasant. "It seems al'Thor has bound some Aes Sedai to him, too, and they have taught the Wise Ones how to Travel without a *nar'baha*, over short distances, at least. Twenty or thirty miles. A recent rediscovery, it seems. They could be here—well, today. All four clans."

Maybe he lied, yet the risk. . . . Sevanna could imagine all too well being in Sorilea's grip. Not allowing herself to shiver, she sent Rhiale to inform the other Wise Ones. Her voice betrayed nothing.

Reaching into his bag, Caddar drew out a gray stone cube, smaller than the callbox she had used to summon him, and much plainer, with no marking but a bright red disc set in one face. "This is a *nar'baha*," he said. "It uses *saidin*, so none of you will see anything, and it has limits. If a woman touches it, it won't work for days afterward, so I will have to hand them out myself, and it has other limits. Once opened, the gateway will remain for a fixed time, sufficient for a few thousand to go through if they don't waste time, and the *nar'baha* needs three days to recover afterward. I have enough extra to carry us where we need to go today, but. . . ."

Therava leaned forward so intently she looked about to fall over, but Sevanna hardly listened. She did not doubt Caddar, exactly; he would not dare betray them, not while he hungered for the gold the Shaido would give him. There were small things, though. Maisia seemed to study him over her tea. Why? And if there was such need for speed, why was there no urgency in his voice? He would not betray, but she would take precautions anyway.

Maeric frowned at the stone cube the wetlander had given him, then at the . . . hole . . . that had appeared when he pressed the red spot. A hole, five paces wide and three high, in midair. Beyond lay rolling hills, not low, covered with brown grass. He did not like things to do with the One Power, especially with the male part of it. Sevanna stepped through another, smaller, hole with the wetlander and a dark woman, following the Wise Ones Sevanna and Rhiale had chosen out. Only a handful of Wise Ones remained with the Moshaine Shaido. Through that second hole, he could see Sevanna talking with Bendhuin. The Green Salts sept would find themselves with few Wise Ones, too; Maeric was sure of it.

Dyrele touched his arm. “Husband,” she murmured, “Sevanna said it would only remain open a short while.”

Maeric nodded. Dyrele always saw straight to the point. Veiling himself, he ran forward and leaped through the hole he had made. Whatever Sevanna and the wetlander said, he would send none of his Moshaine through before he knew it was safe.

He landed heavily on a slope covered with dead grass and nearly pitched head-over-heels down the hill before he caught himself. For a moment he stared back up at the hole. On this side, it hung more than a foot above the ground.

“Wife!” he shouted. “There is a drop!”

Black Eyes leaped through, veiled and spears ready, and Maidens, also. As well try to drink sand as try to keep Maidens from being among the first. The rest of the Moshaine followed at a run, *algai’d’siswai* and wives and children, jumping down on the fly, craftsfolk and traders and *gai’shain*, most pulling heavily loaded packhorses and mules, near to six thousand altogether. His sept, his people. They still would be once he went to Rhuidean; Sevanna could not keep him from becoming clan chief for much longer.

Scouts began spreading out immediately, while the sept still rushed out of the hole. Lowering his veil, Maeric shouted orders that sent a screen of *algai'd'siswai* toward the crests of the surrounding hills while everyone else remained concealed below. There was no telling who or what lay beyond those hills. Rich lands, the wetlander claimed, but this part did not look rich to him.

The rush of his sept became a flood of *algai'd'siswai* he did not really trust, men who had fled their own clans because they did not believe Rand al'Thor was truly the *Car'a'carn*. Maeric was not sure what he himself believed, but a man did not abandon sept and clan. These men called themselves *Mera'din*, the Brotherless, a fitting name, and he had two hundr—

The hole suddenly snapped into a vertical slash of silver that sliced through ten of the Brotherless. Pieces of them fell onto the slope, arms, legs. The front half of a man slid almost to Maeric's feet.

Staring at the place where the hole had been, he stabbed at the red spot with his thumb. Useless, he knew, but. . . . Darin, his eldest son, was one of the Stone Dogs waiting as a rear guard. They would have been the last through. Suraile, his eldest daughter, had remained with the Stone Dog for whom she was thinking of giving up the spear.

His eyes met Dyrele's, as green and beautiful as the day she had laid the wreath at his feet. And threatened to cut his throat if he did not pick it up. "We can wait," he said softly. The wetlander had said three days, but maybe he was wrong. His thumb stabbed the red spot again. Dyrele nodded calmly; he hoped there would be no need to cry in one another's arms once they could be alone.

A Maiden came skittering down the slope from above, hurriedly lowering her veil, and actually breathing hard. "Maeric," Naeise said, not even waiting for him to see her, "there are spears to the east, only a few miles and running straight at us. I think they are Reyn. At least seven or eight thousand of them."

He could see other *algai'd'siswai* running toward him. A young Brother to the Eagle, Cairdin, slid to a stop, speaking as soon as Maeric saw him. "I see you, Maeric. There are spears no more than five miles to the north, and wetlanders on horses. Perhaps ten thousand of each. I do not think any of us broke the crest, but some of the spears have turned toward us."

Maeric knew before the grizzled Water Seeker named Laerad opened his mouth. "Spears coming over a hill three or four miles to the south. Eight thousand or more. Some of them saw one of the boys." Laerad never wasted words, and he would never say which boy, who in truth could be anyone without gray hair, to Laerad.

There was no time for wasting words, Maeric knew. "Hamal!" he shouted. No time for proper courtesy to a blacksmith, either.

The big man knew something was wrong; he scrambled up the slope, likely moving faster than he had since first picking up a hammer.

Maeric handed him the stone cube. "You must press the red spot and keep pressing it, no matter what happens, no matter how long it takes for that hole to open. That is the only way out for any of you." Hamal nodded, but Maeric did not even wait for him to say that he would. Hamal would understand. Maeric touched Dyrele's cheek, careless of how many eyes were on them. "Shade of my heart, you must prepare to put on white." Her hand strayed toward the hilt of her belt knife—she had been a Maiden when she made his wreath—but he shook his head firmly. "You must live, wife, roofmistress, to hold together what remains." Nodding, she pressed fingers to his cheek. He was astonished; she had always been very reserved in public.

Raising his veil, Maeric shoved one spear high above his head. "Moshaine!" he roared. "We dance!"

Up the slope they followed him, men and Maidens, nearly a thousand strong counting the Brotherless. Perhaps they could be counted among the sept. Up the slope and west; that way lay the nearest and the fewest. Perhaps they might buy enough time, though he did not really believe that. He wondered whether Sevanna had known of this. Ah, the world had grown very strange since Rand al'Thor came. Some things could not change, though. Laughing, he began to sing.

"Wash the spears, while the sun climbs high.
Wash the spears, while the sun climbs high.
Wash the spears, while the sun falls low.
Wash the spears; who fears to die?
Wash the spears; no one I know!"

Singing, the Moshaine Shaido ran to dance their deaths.

Frowning, Graendal watched the gateway close behind the last of the Jumai Shaido. The Jumai and a great many Wise Ones. Unlike with the others, Sammael had not simply knotted this web so it would fall apart eventually. At least, she assumed he held it to the last; the closing, right on the heels of the last brown-and-gray-clad men, was too fortuitous otherwise. Laughing, Sammael tossed away the bag, still holding a few of those useless bits of stone. Her own empty sack was long since discarded. The sun sat low behind the mountains to the west, half of a glowing red ball.

"One of these days," she said dryly, "you will be too smart for your own good. A *fool* box, Sammael? Suppose one of them had understood?"

"None did," he said simply, but he kept rubbing his hands together and staring at where the gateway had been. Or maybe at something beyond. He still held the Mirror of Mists, giving him the illusion of added height. She had dropped hers as soon as the gateway closed.

"Well, you certainly managed to put a panic into them." Around them lay the evidence: a few low tents still standing, blankets, a cookpot, a rag doll, all sorts of rubbish lying where it had fallen. "Where did you send them? Somewhere ahead of al'Thor's army, I suppose?"

"Some," he said absently. "Enough." His staring introspection vanished abruptly, and his disguise as well. The scar across his face seemed especially livid. "Enough to cause trouble, particularly with their Wise Ones channeling, but not so many that anyone will suspect me. The rest are scattered from Illian to Ghealdan. As to how or why? Maybe al'Thor did it, for his own reasons, but I certainly wouldn't have wasted most of them if it was my work, now would I?" He laughed again; caught up in his own brilliance.

She adjusted the bodice of her dress to cover a start. Competing that way was remarkably silly—she had told herself that ten thousand times, and never listened once—remarkably silly, and now the dress felt as if it might fall off. Which had nothing to do with her start. He did not know Sevanna had taken every Shaido woman who could channel with her. Was it finally time to abandon him? If she threw herself on Demandred's mercy. . . .

As if reading her thoughts, he said, "You're tied to me as tightly as my belt, Graendal." A gateway opened, revealing his private rooms in Illian. "The truth doesn't matter anymore, if it ever has. You rise with me, or fall with me. The Great Lord rewards success, and he's never cared how it was achieved."

“As you say,” she told him. Demandred had no mercy. And Semirhage. . . . “I rise or fall with you.” Still, something would have to be worked out. The Great Lord rewarded success, but she would not be pulled down if Sammael failed. She opened a gateway to her palace in Arad Doman, to the long columned room where she could see her pets frolicking in the pool. “But what if al’Thor comes after you himself? What then?”

“Al’Thor isn’t going after anyone,” Sammael laughed. “All I have to do is wait.” Still laughing, he stepped into his gateway and let it close.

The Myrddraal moved from the deeper shadows, becoming visible. In its eyes, the gateways had left a residue—three patches of glowing mist. It could not tell one flow from another, but it could distinguish *saidin* from *saidar* by the smell. *Saidin* smelled like the sharp edge of a knife, the point of a thorn. *Saidar* smelled soft, but like something that would grow harder the harder it was pressed. No other Myrddraal could smell that difference. Shaidar Haran was like no other Myrddraal.

Picking up a discarded spear, Shaidar Haran used it to upend the bag Sammael had discarded, and then to stir the bits of stone that fell out. Much was happening outside the plan. Would these events churn chaos, or. . . .

Angry black flames raced down the spear haft from Shaidar Haran’s hand, the hand of the Hand of the Shadow. In an instant the wooden haft was charred and twisted; the spearhead dropped off. The Myrddraal let the blackened stick fall and dusted soot from its palm. If Sammael served chaos, then all was well. If not. . . .

A sudden ache climbed the back of its neck; a faint weakness washed along its limbs. Too long away from Shayol Ghul. That tie had to be severed somehow. With a snarl, it turned to find the edge of shadow that it needed. The day was coming. It would come.

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CHAPTER
41

A Crown of Swords

Tossing, Rand dreamed, wild dreams where he argued with Perrin and begged Mat to find Elayne, where colors flashed just beyond sight and Padan Fain leaped at him with a flashing blade, and sometimes he thought he heard a voice moaning for a dead woman in the heart of a fog, dreams where he tried to explain himself to Elayne, to Aviendha, to Min, to all three at once, and even Min looked at him with scorn.

“. . . not to be disturbed!” Cadsuane’s voice. Part of his dreams?

The voice frightened him; in his dream he shouted for Lews Therin, and the sound echoed through a thick mist where shapes moved and people and horses died screaming, a fog where Cadsuane followed him implacably while he ran, panting. Alanna tried to soothe him, but she was afraid of Cadsuane, too; he could feel her fear as strongly as his own. His head hurt. And his side; the old scar was fire. He felt *saidin.* Someone held *saidin.* Was it him? He did not know. He struggled to wake.

“You’ll kill him!” Min shouted. “I won’t let you kill him!”

His eyes opened, staring up at her face. Not looking at him, she had his head wrapped in her arms and was glaring at someone away from the bed. Her eyes were red. She had been crying, but no longer. Yes, he was in his own bed, in his rooms in the Sun Palace. He could see a heavy square blackwood bedpost set with wedges of ivory. Coatless in a cream silk blouse, Min lay curled around him protectively, atop the linen sheet that covered him to the neck. Alanna was afraid; that lay shivering in the back of his head. Afraid for him. For some reason, he was sure of that.

“I think he is awake, Min,” Amys said gently.

Min looked down, and her face, framed in dark ringlets, beamed with a sudden smile.

Carefully—because he felt weak—he removed her arms and sat up. His head whirled dizzily, but he forced himself not to lie back again. His bed was ringed.

To one side stood Amys, flanked by Bera and Kiruna. Amys' too-youthful features bore no expression at all, but she brushed back her long white hair and shifted her dark shawl as though tidying herself after a struggle. Outwardly the two Aes Sedai were serene, yet with determined serenity, a queen ready to fight for her throne, a country woman ready to fight for her farm. Oddly, if he had ever seen three people stand together—and not just physically—it was those three, shoulder-to-shoulder as one.

On the opposite side of the bed, Samitsu, with those silver bells in her hair, and a slender sister with thick black eyebrows and a wild look to her raven hair stood with Cadsuane, who had her fists planted on her hips. Samitsu and the raven-haired Aes Sedai wore yellow-fringed shawls and had jaws set every bit as firmly as Bera or Kiruna, yet Cadsuane's stern stare made all four appear hesitant. The two groups of women were not staring at one another, but at the men.

At the foot of the bed were Dashiva with the silver sword and red-and-gold Dragon glittering his collar, and Flinn and Narishma, all grim-faced, trying to watch the women on both sides of the bed at once. Jonan Adley stood beside them, his black coat looking singed on one sleeve. *Saidin* filled all four men, to overflowing it seemed. Dashiva held almost as much as Rand could have. Rand looked to Adley, who nodded slightly.

Abruptly, Rand realized that he was not wearing anything beneath the sheet that had fallen to his waist, and nothing above except a Bandage wound around his middle. "How long have I been asleep?" he asked. "How is it I'm alive?" He touched the pale Bandage gingerly. "Fain's dagger came from Shadar Logoth. Once I saw it kill a man in moments with a scratch. He died fast, and he died hard." Dashiva muttered a curse with Padan Fain's name in it.

Samitsu and the other Yellow exchanged startled looks, but Cadsuane merely nodded, the golden ornaments around her iron-gray bun swaying. "Yes; Shadar Logoth; that would explain several matters. You can thank Samitsu that you're alive, and Master Flinn." She did not glance toward the A grizzled man with his fringe of white hair, but he grinned as though she had given him a bow; in truth, surprisingly, the Yellows did nod to him. "And Corele, here, of course," Cadsuane went on. "Each has done a part, including some things I think have not been done since the Breaking." Her voice turned grim. "Without all three, you would be dead by now. You still may die unless you let yourself be guided. You must rest, without exertion." His stomach rumbled suddenly, loudly, and she added, "We've only been able to get a little water and broth down you since you were hurt. Two days is a long time without food for a sick man."

Two days. Only two. He avoided looking at Adley. "I'm getting up," he said.

"I won't let them kill you, sheepherder," Min said with an obstinate glint in her eyes, "and I won't let you kill you, either." She put her arms around his shoulders as if to hold him where he was.

"If the *Car'a'carn* wishes to rise," Amys said flatly, "I will have Nandera bring in the Maidens from the corridor. Somara and Enaila will be especially happy to give him just the assistance he needs." The corners of her mouth twitched toward a smile. Once a Maiden herself, she knew close enough to everything of that situation. Neither Kiruna nor Bera smiled; they frowned at him as at an absolute fool.

"Boy," Cadsuane said dryly, "I've already seen more of your hairless bottomcheeks than I wish to, but if you want to flaunt them in front of all six of us, perhaps someone will enjoy the show. If you fall on your face, though, I may just spank you before I put you back to bed." By Samitsu's face, and Corele's, they would be happy to assist her.

Narishma and Adley stared at Cadsuane in shock, while Flinn tugged at his coat as though arguing with himself. Dashiva, though, barked a rough laugh. "If you want us to clear the women out. . . ." The plain-faced man began preparing flows; not shields, but complex weaves of Spirit and Fire that Rand suspected would put anyone they were laid on in too much pain to think of channeling.

"No," he said quickly. Bera and Kiruna would obey a simple order to go, and if Corele and Samitsu had helped keep him alive, he owed them more than pain. But if Cadsuane thought nakedness would hold him where he was, she was in for a surprise. He was not sure the Maidens had left him any modesty at all. With a smile for Min, he unwound her arms, tossed back the sheet, and climbed out of the bed on Amys' side.

The Wise One's mouth tightened; he could almost see her considering whether to call for the Maidens. Bera gave Amys an agonized, uncertain look, while Kiruna hurriedly turned her back, her cheeks darkening. Slowly he walked to the wardrobe. Slowly because he expected he might give Cadsuane her chance if he tried to move quickly.

“Phaw!” she muttered behind him. “I vow, I *should* smack the stubborn boy’s bottom.” Someone grunted what might have been agreement, or just disapproval of what he was doing.

“Ah, but it’s such a pretty bottom, now isn’t it that?” someone else said in a lilting Murandian accent. That must have been Corele.

A good thing he had his head inside the wardrobe. Maybe the Maidens had not peeled away as much modesty as he thought. Light! His face felt hot as a furnace. Hoping the motions of dressing would cover any wobbles, he climbed into his clothes hurriedly. His sword stood propped in the back of the wardrobe, sword belt wound around the dark boarhide scabbard. He touched the long hilt, then took his hand away.

Barefoot, he turned back to the others while still tying the laces of his shirt. Min still sat cross-legged on the bed in her snug green silk breeches, by her expression unable to decide between approval and frustration. “I need to talk with Dashiva and the other Asha’man,” he said. “Alone.”

Min scrambled off the bed and ran to hug him. Not tightly; she was very careful of his Bandaged side. “I’ve waited too long to see you awake again,” she said, sliding an arm around his waist. “I need to be with you.” She emphasized that just a tad; she must have had a viewing. Or maybe she just wanted to help steady his legs; that arm seemed to offer support. Either way, he nodded; he was not all that steady. Laying a hand on her shoulder, he suddenly realized that he did not want the Asha’man to know how weak he was any more than Cadsuane or Amys.

Bera and Kiruna made reluctant curtsies and started for the door, then hesitated when Amys did not move right away. “So long as you do not intend to leave these rooms,” the Wise One said, not in the slightest as though speaking to her *Car’a’carn.*

Rand raised a naked foot. “Do I look as though I’m going anywhere?” Amys sniffed, but with a glance at Adley, she gathered up Bera and Kiruna and departed.

Cadsuane and the other two were only a moment more in going. The gray-haired Green glanced at Adley, too. It could not be much of secret that he had been gone from Cairhien for days. At the door, she paused. “Don’t do anything foolish, boy.” She sounded like a stern aunt cautioning a shiftless nephew, without much expectation he would listen. Samitsu and Corele followed her out, dividing their frowns between him and the

Asha'man. As they vanished, Dashiva laughed, a sharp wheeze, shaking his head; he actually sounded amused.

Rand stepped away from Min to fetch his boots from beside the wardrobe and take a rolled pair of stockings from inside. "I'll join you in the anteroom as soon as I'm booted, Dashiva."

The plain-faced Asha'man gave a start. He had been frowning at Adley. "As you command, my Lord Dragon," he said, pressing fist to heart.

Waiting until the four men were gone, Rand sat down in a chair with a feeling of relief and began pulling on his stockings. He was sure his legs felt stronger just for being up and moving. Stronger, but they still did not want to support him very well.

"Are you sure this is wise?" Min said, kneeling beside his chair, and he gave her a startled look. If he had talked in his sleep during those two days, the Aes Sedai would have known. Amys would have had Enaila and Somara and fifty more Maidens waiting when he woke.

He tugged the stocking the rest of the way up. "Do you have a viewing?"

Min sat back on her heels, folded her arms beneath her breasts and gave him a firm look. After a moment, she decided it was not working and sighed. "It's Cadsuane. She is going to teach you something, you and the Asha'man. All the Asha'man, I mean. It's something you have to learn, but I don't know what it is, except that none of you will like learning it from her. You aren't going to like it at all."

Rand paused with a boot in hand, then stuffed his foot in. What could Cadsuane, or any Aes Sedai, teach the Asha'man? Women could not teach men, or men women; that was as hard a fact as the One Power itself. "We will see" was all he said.

Plainly that did not satisfy Min. She knew it would happen, and so did he; she was never wrong. But what *could* Cadsuane possibly teach him? What would he let her teach him? The woman made him unsure of himself, uneasy in a way he had not felt since before the Stone of Tear fell.

Stamping his foot to settle it in the second boot, he fetched his sword belt from the wardrobe, and a red coat worked in gold, the same he had worn to the Sea Folk. "What bargain did Merana make for me?" he asked, and she made an exasperated sound in her throat.

"None, as of this morning," she said impatiently. "She and Rafela haven't left the ship since we did, but they've sent half a dozen messages asking if you're well enough to return. I don't think the bargaining has gone well for them without you. I suppose it's too much to hope that's where you're going."

"Not yet," he told her. Min said nothing, but she said it very loudly, fists on her hips and one eyebrow raised high. Well, she would know most of it soon enough.

In the anteroom, all the Asha'man except Dashiva sprang out of their chairs when Rand appeared with Min. Staring at nothing and talking to himself, Dashiva did not notice until Rand reached the Rising Sun set in the floor, and then he blinked several times before rising.

Rand addressed himself to Adley while fastening the Dragon-shaped buckle of his sword belt. "The army's reached the hillforts in Illian already?" He wanted to take one of the gilded armchairs, but would not let himself. "How? It should have been several more days at the best. At best." Flinn and Narishma looked as startled as Dashiva; none of them had known where Adley and Hopwil had gone—or Morr. Deciding who to trust was always the difficulty, and trust a razor's edge.

Adley drew himself up. There was something about his eyes, beneath those thick eyebrows. He had seen the wolf, as they said in Cairhien. "The High Lord Weiramon left the foot behind and pressed forward with the horse," he said, reporting stiffly. "The Aiel kept up, of course." He frowned. "We encountered Aiel yesterday. Shaido; I don't know how they got there. There were maybe nine or ten thousand, altogether, but they didn't seem to have any Wise Ones who could channel with them, and they didn't really slow us down. We reached the hillforts at noon today."

Rand wanted to snarl. Leaving the foot behind! Did Weiramon think he was going to take palisaded forts on hilltops with horsemen? Probably. The man probably would have left the Aiel behind too, if he could have outrun them. Fool nobles and their fool honor! Still, it did not matter. Except to the men who died because the High Lord Weiramon was contemptuous of anyone who did not fight from horseback.

"Eben and I began destroying the first palisades soon as we arrived," Adley went on. "Weiramon didn't much like that; I think he would have stopped us, but he was afraid to. Anyway, we began setting fire to the logs and blowing holes in the walls, but before we more than started, Sammael came. A man channeling *saidin*, at least, and a lot stronger than Eben or me. As strong as you, my Lord Dragon, I'd say."

“He was there right away?” Rand said incredulously, but then he understood. He had been sure Sammael would stay safe in Illian behind defenses woven of the Power if he thought he had to face Rand; too many of the Forsaken had tried, and most were dead now. In spite of himself, Rand laughed—and had to hug his side; laughing hurt. All that elaborate deception to convince Sammael he would be anywhere but with the invading army, to bring the man out of Illian, and all made unnecessary by a knife in Padan Fain’s hand. Two days. By this time, everybody who had eyes-and-ears in Cairhien—which certainly included the Forsaken—knew that the Dragon Reborn lay on the edge of death. As well toss wet wood on the fire as think otherwise. “Men scheme and women plot, but the Wheel weaves as it will”; that was how they said it in Tear. “Go on,” he said. “Morr was with you last night?”

“Yes, my Lord Dragon; Fedwin comes every night, just like he’s supposed to. Last night, it was plain as Eben’s nose we’d reach the forts today.”

“I don’t understand any of this.” Dashiva sounded upset; a muscle in his cheek was twitching. “You’ve lured him out, but to what purpose? As soon as he feels a man channel with anything near your strength, he’ll flee back to Illian and whatever traps and alarms he has woven. You won’t get at him there; he will know as soon as a gateway opens within a mile of the city.”

“We can save the army,” Adley burst out, “that’s what we can do. Weiramon was still sending charges against that fort when I left, and Sammael cuts every one to rags despite anything Eben or I can do.” He shifted the arm with the singed sleeve. “We have to strike back and run immediately, and even so, he nearly burned us where we stood, more than once. The Aiel are taking casualties too. They’re only fighting the Illianers who come out—the other hillforts must be emptying, so many were coming when I left—but any time Sammael sees fifty of us together, Aiel or anybody, he rips them apart. If there were three of him, or even two, I’m not sure I’d find anybody alive when I go back.” Dashiva stared at him as if at a madman, and Adley shrugged suddenly, as though feeling the lightness of his bare black collar compared with the sword and Dragon on the older man’s. “Forgive me, Asha’man,” he muttered, abashed, then added in a still lower voice, “But we can at least save them.”

“We will,” Rand assured him. Just not the way Adley expected. “You’re all going to help me kill Sammael today.” Only Dashiva looked startled; the other men just nodded. Not even the Forsaken frightened them anymore.

Rand expected argument out of Min, maybe a demand to come along, but she surprised him. “I expect you would as soon no one found out you’re gone before they have to, sheepherder.” He nodded and she sighed. Perhaps the Forsaken had to depend on pigeons and eyes-and-ears just like anyone else, but being too sure could be fatal.

“The Maidens will want to come if they know, Min.” They would want to, and he would be hard-pressed to refuse. If he could refuse. Yet the disappearance even of Nandera and whoever she had on guard might be too much.

Min sighed again. “I suppose I could go talk to Nandera. I might be able to keep them out in the hallway for an hour, but they won’t be pleased with me when they find out.” He almost laughed again before he remembered his side; they definitely would not be pleased with her, or with him. “More to the point, farmboy, Amys won’t be pleased. Or Sorilea. The things I let you get me into.”

He opened his mouth to tell her he had not asked her to do anything, yet before he could utter a word, she moved very close. Looking up at him through long lashes, she put a hand on his chest, tapping her fingers. She smiled warmly and kept her voice soft, but the fingers were a giveaway. “If you let anything happen to you, Rand al’Thor, I’ll give Cadsuane a hand whether she needs one or not.” Her smile brightened for a moment, almost cheerily, before she turned for the doors. He watched her go; she might make his head spin sometimes—nearly every woman he had ever met had done that at least a time or two—but she did have a way of walking that made him want to watch.

Abruptly he realized Dashiva was watching as well. And licking his lips. Rand cleared his throat loudly enough to be heard over the sound of the door closing behind her. For some reason, the plain-faced man raised his hands defensively. It was not as though Rand glared at him; he could not go around glaring at men just because Min wore tight breeches. Surrounding himself with the emptiness of the Void, he seized *saidin* and forced frozen fire and molten filth into the weaves for a gateway. Dashiva leaped back as it opened. Maybe having a hand sliced off would teach the man not to lick his lips like a goat. Something crooked and red spiderwebbed across the outside of the Void.

He stepped through onto bare dirt, with Dashiva and the others right behind, releasing the Source as soon as the last stepped clear. A sense of loss rushed in as *saidin* left, as awareness of Alanna dwindled. The loss had not seemed so great while Lews Therin was there; not so huge.

Overhead, the golden sun was more than halfway down to the horizon. A gust of wind swept dust from under his boots without leaving any coolness behind. The gateway had opened in a cleared area, marked off by a rope strung between four wooden posts. At each corner stood a pair of guards in short coats and baggy trousers stuffed into their boots, swords that appeared slightly serpentine hanging at their sides. Some had heavy mustaches that hung to their chins or thick beards, and all had bold noses and dark eyes that seemed tilted. As soon as Rand appeared, one of them went running.

"What are we doing here?" Dashiva said, looking about incredulously.

Around them stretched hundreds of sharp-peaked tents, gray and dusty white, tents and picket-lines of already saddled horses. Caemlyn lay not many miles away, hidden behind the trees, and the Black Tower not much farther, but Taim would not know of this unless he had a spy watching. One of Fedwin Morr's tasks had been to listen—to feel—for anyone trying to spy. In a ripple of murmurs spreading outward from the ropes, men with bold noses and serpentine swords rose from their heels and turned to stare expectantly toward Rand. Here and there women stood as well; Saldaean women often rode to the wars with their husbands, at least among the nobles and officers. There would be none of that today, though.

Ducking under the rope, Rand strode directly to a tent no different from any other except for the banner on the staff in front, three simple red blossoms on a field of blue. The kingspenny did not die back even in Saldaean winters, and when fires blackened the forests, those red flowers were always the first to reappear. A blossom nothing could kill: the sign of House Bashere.

Inside the tent, Bashere himself was already booted and spurred, and his sword on his hip. Ominously, Deira was with him, in a riding dress the same shade as her husband's gray coat, and if she wore no sword, the long dagger at her belt of heavy silver rondels would do to go on with. The leather gauntlets tucked behind that belt spoke of someone meaning to ride hard.

“I hadn’t expected this for days yet,” Bashere said, rising from a folding camp chair. “Weeks, I hoped, in truth. I had hoped to have most of Taim’s leavings armed the way young Mat and I planned—I’ve gathered every maker of crossbows I could find into a manufactory, and they’re starting to produce them like a sow dropping piglets—but as it is, no more than fifteen thousand have crossbows and know what to do with them.” With a questioning look, he lifted a silver pitcher from atop the maps spread out on his folding table. “Do we have time for punch?”

“No punch,” Rand said impatiently. Bashere had spoken before about the men Taim found who could not learn to channel, but he had scarcely listened. If Bashere thought he had trained them well enough, that was all that mattered. “Dashiva and three more Asha’man are waiting outside; as soon as Morr joins them, we’ll be ready.” He eyed Deira ni Ghaline t’Bashere, towering over her diminutive husband with her hawk’s beak of a nose and her eyes that made a hawk’s look mild. “No punch, Lord Bashere. And no wives. Not today.”

Deira opened her mouth, her dark eyes all but glowing suddenly.

“No wives,” Bashere said, knuckling his heavy gray-streaked mustaches. “I will pass the order.” Turning to Deira, he held out his hand. “Wife,” he said mildly. Rand winced, mild tone or no, and waited for the eruption.

Deira’s mouth thinned. She scowled down at her husband, a hawk ready to stoop on a mouse. Not that Bashere looked anything like a mouse, of course; just a much smaller hawk. She drew a deep breath; Deira could make drawing a deep breath seem a thing that should cause the earth to tremble. And unhooking her sheathed dagger from her belt, she laid it in her husband’s hand. “We will talk of this later, Davram,” she said. “At length.”

One day when he had time, Rand decided, he was going to make Bashere explain how he did that. If there ever was time.

“At length,” Bashere agreed, grinning through his mustaches as he stuffed the dagger behind his own belt. Maybe the man was simply suicidal.

The rope had been taken down outside, and Rand stood waiting with Dashiva and the other Asha’man while nine thousand Saldaean light horse arrayed themselves behind Bashere in a column of threes. Somewhere behind them, fifteen thousand men who called themselves the Legion of the Dragon would be gathering afoot. Rand had glimpsed them, every one in a blue coat made to button up the side so the red-and-gold Dragon across the chest would not be broken. Most carried steel-armed crossbows; some bore heavy unwieldy shields instead, but not one carried a pike. Whatever odd notion Mat and Bashere had cooked up, Rand hoped it would not lead a lot of this legion to death.

Morr grinned eagerly while he waited, all but bouncing on his toes. Perhaps he was simply glad to be back in his black coat with the silver sword on his collar, yet Adley and Narishma wore almost identical grins, and for that matter, Flinn's was not far off. They knew where they were going now, and what to do there. Dashiva scowled at nothing as usual, his lips moving silently. As usual. Also silent, scowling, were the Saldaean women gathered behind Deira, watching from one side. Eagles and falcons, feathers ruffled and furious. Rand did not care how they grimaced and frowned; if he could face Nandera and the rest of the Maidens after keeping them back from this, then the Saldaean men could put up with any number of lengthy discussions. Today, the Light willing, no women would die because of him.

So many men could not be lined up in a minute, even when they had been awaiting the order, but in a remarkably short time, Bashere raised his sword and called, "My Lord Dragon!"

A shout rippled down the great column behind him. "The Lord Dragon!"

Seizing the Source, Rand made a gateway between the posts, four paces by four, and ran through as he tied off the weave, filled with *saidin* and the Asha'man on his heels, into a great open square surrounded by huge white columns, each topped with a marble wreath of olive branches. At the two ends of the square stood nearly identical purple-roofed palaces of columned walks and high balconies and slender spires. Those were the King's Palace and the slightly smaller Great Hall of the Council, and this was the Square of Tammaz, in the heart of Illian.

A skinny man in a blue coat, with a beard that left his upper lip bare, stood gaping at the sight of Rand and the black-coated Asha'man leaping out of a hole in midair, and a stout woman, in a green dress cut high enough to show green slippers and her ankles in green stockings, pressed both hands to her face and stood rooted right in front of them, her dark eyes popping. All the people were stopping to stare, hawkers with their trays, carters halting their oxen, men and women and children with their mouths hanging open.

Rand thrust his hands high and channeled. “I am the Dragon Reborn!” The words boomed across the square, amplified by Air and Fire, and flames shot up from his hands a hundred feet. Behind him, the Asha’man filled the sky with balls of fire streaking in every direction. All save Dashiva, who made blue lightnings crackle in a jagged web above the square.

No more was needed. A shrieking flood of humanity fled in all directions, away from the Square of Tammaz. They fled just in time. Rand and the Asha’man darted aside from the gateway, and Davram Bashere led his wildly screaming Saldaeans into Illian, a flood of horsemen waving their swords as they poured out. Straight ahead Bashere led the center line of the column, just as they had planned what seemed so long ago, while the other two lines peeled off to either side. They streamed away from the gateway, breaking apart into smaller groups, galloping into the streets leading out of the square.

Rand did not wait to see the last of the horsemen exit. With well under a third out of the gateway, he immediately wove another, smaller opening. You did not need to know a place at all to Travel if you only intended to go a very short distance. Around him he felt Dashiva and the rest weaving their gateways, but he was already stepping through his own, letting it close behind him atop one of the slender towers of the King’s Palace. Absently he wondered whether Mattin Stepaneos den Balgar, the King of Illian, was somewhere below him at that moment.

The top of the spire stretched no more than five paces across, surrounded by a wall of red stone not quite chest-high on him. At fifty paces, it was the highest point in all of the city. From there he could see across rooftops glittering beneath the afternoon sun, red and green and every color, to the long earthen causeways that cut through the vast tall-grass marsh surrounding city and harbor. A sharp tang of salt hung in the air. Illian had no need of walls, with that all-enveloping marsh to stop an attacker. Any attacker who could not make holes in the air. But then, walls would have done no good either.

It was a pretty city, the buildings mainly of pale dressed stone, a city crisscrossed by as many canals as streets, like traceries of blue-green from this height, but he did not stop to admire it. Low across the roofs of taverns and shops and spired palaces he directed flows of Air and Water, Fire and Earth and Spirit, turning as he did so. He did not try to weave the flows, simply swept them out over the city and a good mile out over the marsh. From five other towers came flows sweeping low, and where they touched one another uncontrolled, light flashed and sparks flared and clouds of colored steam burst, a display any Illuminator might have envied. A better way to frighten people under their beds and out of the way of Bashere's soldiers, he could not imagine, though that was not the reason for it.

Long ago he had decided that Sammael must have wards woven throughout the city, set to give an alarm should anyone channel *saidin.* Wards inverted so no one except Sammael himself could find them, wards that would tell Sammael exactly where that man was channeling so he could be destroyed on the instant. With luck, every one of those wards was being triggered now. Lews Therin had been sure Sammael would sense them wherever he was, even at a distance. That was why the wardings should be useless now; that sort had to be remade once triggered. Sammael would come. Never in his life had he relinquished anything he considered his, however shaky his claim, not without a fight. All that from Lews Therin. If he was real. He had to be. Those memories had too much detail. But could not a madman dream his fancies in detail, too?

Lews Therin! he called silently. The wind blowing across Illian answered.

Below, the Square of Tammaz stood deserted and silent, empty except for a few abandoned carts. Edge-on, the gateway was invisible except for the weaves.

Reaching down to those weaves, Rand untied the knot and, as the gateway winked from existence, reluctantly released *saidin.* All the flows vanished from the sky. Maybe some of the Asha'man still held on to the Source, but he had told them not to. He had told them that any man he felt channeling in Illian once he himself stopped, he intended to kill without warning. He did not want to find out afterward that the channeler had been one of them. He leaned on the wall, waiting, wishing he could sit. His legs ached and his side burned however he stood, yet he might need to see as well as feel a weave.

The city was not entirely quiet. From several directions he could hear distant shouts, the faint clash of metal. Even moving so many men to the border, Sammael had not left Illian entirely unprotected. Rand turned, trying to watch in every direction. He thought Sammael would come to the King's Palace or that other at the far end of the square, but he could not be certain. Down one street he saw a band of Saldaeans clashing with an equal number of mounted men in shining breastplates; more Saldaeans suddenly galloped in from one side, and the fight vanished from his sight behind buildings. In another direction he spotted some of the Legion of the Dragon, marching across a canal's low bridge. An officer marked by a tall red plume on his helmet strode ahead of some twenty men carrying wide shields as tall as their shoulders, followed by perhaps two hundred more with heavy crossbows. How would they fight? Shouts and steel ringing on steel in the distance, the faint screams of dying men.

The sun slid downward, and shadows lengthened across the city. Twilight, and the sun a low crimson dome in the west. A few stars appeared. Had he been wrong? Would Sammael simply go elsewhere, find another land to master? Had he been listening to anything other than his own mad ramblings?

A man channeled. For a moment, Rand froze, staring at the Great Hall of the Council. That had been enough of *saidin* for a gateway; he might not have felt a much smaller channeling, the length of the square. It had to be Sammael.

In an instant he had seized the Source, woven a gateway and leaped through with lightning ready to fly from his hands. It was a large room, lit by huge mirrored golden stand-lamps and others hanging on chains from the ceiling, with snowy marble walls carved in friezes showing battles, and ships crowding the marsh-bordered harbor of Illian itself. At the far end of the room, nine heavily carved and gilded armchairs stood like thrones atop a high stair-fronted white dais, the center chair with a back higher than any other. Before he could release the gateway behind him, the towertop where he had stood exploded. He felt the wash of Fire and Earth even as a storm of stone fragments and dust struck through the gateway, knocking him down on his face. Pain stabbed his side as he landed, a sharp red lance digging into the Void where he floated, and that as much as anything else made him release the gateway. Someone else's pain; someone else's weakness. He could ignore them, in the Void.

He moved, forcing another man's muscles to work, pushed himself up and scrambled away in a lurching run toward the dais just as hundreds of red filaments burned down through the ceiling, burned through the sea-blue marble floor in a wide circle all around where the residue of his gateway was still fading. One stabbed through the heel of his boot, through his heel, and he heard himself cry out as he fell. Not his pain, in side or foot. Not his.

Rolling onto his back, he could see the remnants of those burning red wires still, fresh enough to make out Fire and Air woven in a way he had not known. Enough to make out exactly the direction they had come from. Black holes in the floor and ornately worked white plaster ceiling high overhead hissed and crackled loudly at the touch of the air.

His hands rose, and he wove balefire. Began to weave it. Someone else's cheek stung from a remembered slap, and Cadsuane's voice hissed and crackled in his head like the holes the red filaments had made. *Never again, boy; you wilt never do that again.* It seemed that he heard Lews Therin whimpering in distant fear of what he was about to loose, what had almost destroyed the world once. Every flow but Fire and Air fell away, and he wove as he had seen. A thousand fine hairs of red blossomed between his hands, fanning out slightly they shot upward. A circle of the ceiling two feet across fell in stone chips and plaster dust.

Only after he had done it did he think that there might be someone between him and Sammael. He intended to see Sammael dead this day, but if he could do it without killing anyone else. . . . The weaves vanished as he pulled himself to his feet once more and limped hurriedly to the doors in the side of the hall, tall things with every panel set with nine golden bees the size of his fist.

A small flow of Air pushed one door open before he reached it, too small to be detected at any distance. Hobbling into the corridor, he sank to one knee. That other man's side was fire, his heel agony. Rand pulled his sword up and leaned on it, waiting. A clean-shaven fellow with plump pink cheeks peered around a corner down the way; enough of his coat showed to name him a servant. At least, a coat green on one side and yellow on the other looked like livery. The fellow saw Rand and, very slowly, as though he might not be noticed if he moved slowly enough, slid back out of sight. Sooner or later, Sammael would have to. . . .

"Illian belongs to me!" The voice boomed in the air, from every direction, and Rand cursed. That had to be the same weave he himself had used in the square, or something very like; it required so little of the Power he might not have felt the actual flows had he been within ten paces of the man. "Illian is mine! I won't destroy what belongs to me killing you, and

I won’t let you destroy it, either. You had the nerve to come after me here? Do you have the courage to follow me again?” A sly mocking tone entering that thundering voice. “Do you have the courage?” Somewhere above, a gateway opened and closed; Rand had no doubt that was what it was.

The courage? Did he have the *courage*? “I’m the Dragon Reborn,” he muttered, “and I’m going to kill you.” Weaving a gateway, he stepped through, to a place floors above.

It was another hallway, lined with wall hangings showing ships at sea. At the far end, the last crimson sliver of the sun shone through a colonnaded walk. The residue of Sammael’s gateway hung in the air, the dissipating flows like faintly glowing ghosts. Not so faint Rand could not make them out, though. He began to weave, then stopped. He had leaped up here without a thought of a trap. If he copied what he saw exactly, he would step out wherever Sammael had, or so close as made no difference. But with just a slight alteration; no way to be sure whether the change was fifty feet or five hundred, yet either was close enough.

The vertical silver slash began to rotate open, revealing the shadow-cloaked ruins of greatness, not quite as dark as the hallway. Seen through the gateway, the sun was a slightly thicker slice of red, half-hidden by a shattered dome. He knew that place. The last time he had gone there, he had added a name to that list of Maidens in his head; the first time, Padan Fain had followed and become more than a Darkfriend, worse than a Darkfriend. That Sammael had fled to Shadar Logoth seemed like coming full circle in more ways that one. There was no time to waste now that he was opening the way. Before the gateway stopped widening, he ran through into the ravaged city that once had been called Aridhol, ran limping, letting the weave go as he ran, boots crunching on broken paving stones and dead weeds.

The first corner he came to, he ducked around. The ground shook under his feet as roars sounded back the way he had come, light flashing atop flash in the twilight darkness; he felt the wash of Earth and Fire and Air. Shrieks and bellows rose through the thunderous crashes. *Saidin* pulsing inside him, he hobbled away without looking back. He ran, and with the Power filling him, even in the dark shadows he could see clearly.

All around the great city lay huge marble palaces each with four and five domes of different shapes painted crimson by the setting sun, bronze fountains and statues at every intersection, great stretches of columns running to towers that soared across the sun. They soared when intact, at least; more ended in abrupt jaggedness than not. For every dome that stood whole, ten were broken eggshells with the top hacked off or one side gone. Statues lay toppled in fragments, or stood with missing arms, or heads. Swiftly deepening darkness raced across sprawling hills of rubble, the few stunted trees clinging to their slopes twisted shapes like broken fingers against the sky.

A fan of bricks and stone spread across the way from what might have been a small palace; half its front missing, the rest of the columned façade leaned drunkenly toward the street. He stopped in the middle of the street, just short of the fan, waiting, feeling for another to use *saidin*. Clinging to the sides of the street was not a good idea, and not simply because any building might fall at any time. A thousand unseen eyes seemed to watch from windows like gouged eye sockets, to watch with a nearly palpable sense of anticipation. Distantly he felt the new wound in his side throbbing, a slash of flame, echoing the evil that clung to the very dust of Shadar Logoth. The old scar clenched like a fist. The pain of his foot seemed very distant indeed. Closer, the Void itself pulsated around him, the Dark One's taint on *saidin* beating in time with the knife slash across his ribs. A dangerous place by daylight, Shadar Logoth. By night. . . .

Down the street, beyond a spired monument miraculously standing straight, something moved, a shadowed shape darting across the way in the darkness. Rand almost channeled, but he could not believe Sammael would go scuddling that way. When he first stepped into the city, when Sammael tried to destroy everything around his gateway, he had heard horrible screams. They had barely registered, then. Nothing lived in Shadar Logoth, not even rats. Sammael must have brought henchmen, fellows he did not mind killing in an attempt to reach Rand. Maybe one of them could lead Rand to Sammael. He hurried forward as fast as he could, as soundlessly as he could. Shattered pavement crunched under his boots with a sound like bones snapping. He hoped it was loud only to his *saidin*-enhanced ears.

Stopping at the base of the spire, a thick stone needle covered with flowing script, he peered ahead. Whoever had moved was gone; only fools or the madly brave went inside in Shadar Logoth at night. The evil that stained Shadar Logoth, the evil that had murdered Aridhol, had not died with Aridhol. Farther along the street, a tendril of silver-gray fog wavered out of a window, creeping toward another that came to meet it from a wide gap in a high stone wall. The depths of that gap shone as though a full moon lay inside. With the night, Mashadar roamed its city prison, a vast presence that could appear in a dozen places at once, a hundred. Mashadar's touch was not a pleasant way to die. Inside Rand, the taint on *saidin* beat harder; the distant fire in his side flickered like ten thousand lightnings, one on top of the last. Even the ground seemed to pound beneath his boots.

He turned, half-thinking to leave now. Very likely, Sammael had gone, now that Mashadar was out. Very likely the man had lured him here in the hope he would search the ruins until Mashadar killed him. He turned, and stopped, crouching against the spire. Two Trollocs were creeping down that street, bulky shapes in black mail, half again as tall as he, or more. Spikes stood out on the shoulders and elbows of their armor, and they carried spears with long black points and wicked hooks. To his *saidin*-filled eyes, their faces stood out clearly, one distorted by an eagle's beak where mouth and nose should have been, the other by a boar's tusked snout. Every line of their creeping shouted fear; Trollocs loved killing, loved blood, but Shadar Logoth terrified them. There would be Myrddraal about; no Trolloc would have entered this city without Myrddraal to drive it. No Myrddraal would have entered without Sammael driving. All of which meant Sammael must still be here, or these Trollocs would be running for the gates, not hunting. And they were hunting. That boar's snout was snuf-fling the air for a scent.

Abruptly a figure in rags leaped from a window above the Trollocs, falling on them with spear already stabbing. An Aiel, a woman, *shoufa* wrapped around her head but veil hanging. The eagle-beaked Trolloc shrieked as her spearpoint stabbed deep into its side, stabbed again. As its companion fell, kicking, boar-snout spun with snarl, thrusting viciously, but she ducked low under the black hooked point and stabbed up into the creature's stomach, and it went down in a thrashing heap with the other.

Rand was on his feet and running before he thought. "Liah!" he shouted. He had thought her dead, abandoned here by him, dead for him. Liah, of the Cosaida Chareen; that name blazed on the list in his head.

She whirled to confront him, spear ready in one hand, round bull-hide buckler in the other. The face he remembered as pretty despite scars on both cheeks was contorted with rage. "Mine!" she hissed threateningly through her teeth. "Mine! No one may come here! No one!"

He stopped in his tracks. That spear waited, eager to seek his ribs too. "Liah, you know me," he said softly. "You know me. I'll take you back to the Maidens, back to your spear-sisters." He held out his hand.

Her rage melted into a twisted frown. She tilted her head to one side. "Rand al'Thor?" she said slowly. Her eyes widened, falling to the dead Trollocs, and a look of horror spread across her face. "Rand al'Thor," she whispered, fumbling the black veil into place across her face with the hand that held her spear. "The *Car'a'carn*!" she wailed. And fled.

He hobbled after her, scrambling over piles of rubble spread across the street, falling, ripping his coat, falling again and nearly ripping it off, rolling and picking himself up on the run. The weakness of his body was distant, and the pain of it, but even floating deep in the Void, he could only push that body so hard. Liah vanished into the night. Around the next black-shadowed corner, he thought.

He limped around that as fast as he could. And nearly ran into four black-mailed Trollocs and a Myrddraal, inky cloak hanging unnaturally still down its back as the Fade moved. The Trollocs snarled in surprise, yet shock lasted less than a heartbeat. Hooked spears and scythe-curved swords rose; the Myrddraal's dead-black blade was in its fist, a blade that gave wounds almost as deadly as Fain's dagger.

Rand did not even try to draw the heron-mark sword at his side. Death in a tattered red coat, he channeled, and a sword of fire was in his hands, pulsing darkly with the throb of *saidin*, sweeping an eyeless head from its shoulders. Simpler to have destroyed them all the way he had seen the Asha'man kill at Dumai's Wells, but changing the weaves now, trying to change, might take a fatal moment. Those swords could kill even him. He danced the forms in a darkness lit by the flame in his hands, shadows flying across faces above him, faces with wolves' muzzles and goats', faces contorted in screams as his fiery blade sliced through black mail and the flesh beneath as if they were water. Trollocs depended on numbers and overwhelming ferocity; facing him, and that sword of the Power, they might as well have stood stock-still, unarmed.

The sword vanished from his hands. Still poised at the end of the form called Twisting the Wind, he stood among death. The last Trolloc to fall still thrashed, goat horns scraping on the fragmented pavement. The headless Myrddraal yet flung its arms about, of course, booted feet scrabbling wildly; Halfmen did not die quickly, even headless.

No sooner did the sword disappear than silver lightning lanced down from the cloudless, starry sky.

The first bolt struck with a deafening roar not four paces away. The world turned white, and the Void collapsed. The ground bounced under him as another bolt struck, and another. He had not realized he was on his face until then. The air crackled. Dazed, he pushed himself up, half falling as he ran from a hail of lightning that ripped the street apart to a thunder of collapsing buildings. Straight ahead he staggered, not caring where, so long as it was away.

Suddenly his head cleared enough for him to see where he was, reeling across a vast stone floor covered with tumbled chunks of stone, some as big as he. Here and there, dark uneven holes gaped in the floorstones. All around rose high walls, and tier upon tier of deep balconies that ran all the way around. Only a small portion of what had once been a vast roof remained, at one corner. Stars shone bright overhead.

He lurched another step, and the floor gave way beneath him. Desperately he flung out his hands; with a jolt, the right hand caught hold of a rough edge. He dangled into pitch blackness. The fall beneath his boots might be a few spans into a basement, or a mile for all he could tell. He could latch bands of Air to the jagged rim of the hole above his head to help pull himself out, except. . . . Somehow, Sammael had sensed the relatively small amount of *saidin* used in the sword. There had been a delay before the lightnings struck, but he could not say how long he had taken killing the Trollocs. A minute? Seconds?

With a heave, he swung his left arm up, trying to catch the edge of the hole. Pain no longer buffered by the Void stabbed through his side like a dagger going in. Spots danced in his vision. Worse, his right hand slipped on crumbling stone, and he could feel his fingers weakening. He was going to have to. . . .

A hand grabbed his right wrist. “You are a fool,” a man’s deep voice said. “Count yourself lucky I don’t care to see you die today.” The hand began drawing him up. “Are you going to help?” the voice demanded. “I don’t intend to carry you on my shoulders, or kill Sammael for you.”

Shaking off his shock, Rand reached up and grabbed the rim of the hole, pulling despite the agony of his side. Despite the agony, he managed to acquire the Void again, too, and seize *saidin*. He did not channel, but he wanted to be ready.

His head and shoulders came above the floor, and he could see the other man, a big fellow little older than he, with hair black as the night and a coat black as an Asha'man's. Rand had never seen him before. At least he was not one of the Forsaken; those faces he knew. He thought he did, anyway. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Still heaving, the man barked a laugh. "Just say I'm a wanderer passing through. Do you really want to talk now?"

Saving his breath, Rand struggled upward, getting his chest over the lip, his waist. Abruptly he realized that a glow bathed the floor around them like the glow of a full moon.

Twisting to look over his shoulder, he saw Mashadar. Not a tendril, but a shining silver-gray wave rolling out of one of the balconies, arching over their heads. Descending.

Without a thought, his free hand rose, and balefire shot upward, a bar of liquid white fire slicing across the wave sinking toward them. Dimly he was aware of another bar of pale solid fire rising from the other man's hand that was not clasping his, a bar slashing the opposite way from his. The two touched.

Head ringing like a struck gong, Rand convulsed, *saidin* and the Void shattering. Everything was doubled in his eyes, the balconies, the chunks of stone lying about the floor. There seemed to be a pair of the other man overlapping one another, each clutching his head between two hands. Blinking, Rand searched for Mashadar. The wave of shining mist was gone; a glow remained in the balconies above, but dimming, receding, as Rand's eyes began to clear. Even mindless Mashadar fled balefire, it seemed.

Unsteadily, he got to his feet and offered a hand. "I think we best move quickly. What happened there?"

The other man pushed himself up with a grimace at Rand's proffered hand. He was easily as tall as Rand, rare except among the Aiel. "I don't know what happened," he snarled. "Run, if you want to live." He suited his own words immediately, dashing toward a row of open arches. Not in the nearest wall. Mashadar had come from that one.

Fumbling for the Void, Rand limped after him as fast as he could, but before they were completely across the floor, the lightnings fell again, a storm of silver arrows. The two of them darted through the archways pursued by the thunder of walls and floor collapsing behind them, by clouds of dust and a hail of stones. Shoulders hunched and an arm across his face, Rand ran coughing through a broad room where trembling arches supported the ceiling and bits of stone rained down.

He burst out into a street before he knew it, stumbling three steps before stopping. The pain in his side made him want to bend over, but he thought his legs might give way if he did. His wounded foot throbbed; it seemed a year ago that that red wire of Fire and Air had stabbed his heel. His rescuer stood watching him; covered with dust head to toe, the fellow managed to look a king.

"Who are you?" Rand asked again. "One of Taim's men? Or did you teach yourself? You can go to Caemlyn, you know, to the Black Tower. You don't have to live afraid of Aes Sedai." For some reason, saying that made him frown; he could not understand why.

"I have never been afraid of Aes Sedai," the man snapped, then drew a deep breath. "You probably should leave here now, but if you intend to stay and kill Sammael, you had better try thinking like him. You have shown you can. He always liked destroying a man in sight of one of that man's triumphs, if he could. Lacking that, somewhere the man had marked as his would do."

"The Waygate," Rand said slowly. If he could be said to have marked anything in Shadar Logoth, it had to be the Waygate. "He's waiting near the Waygate. And he has traps set." Wards as well, it seemed, like those in Illian, to detect a man channeling. Sammael had planned this well.

The man laughed wryly. "You can find the way, it seems. If you're led by the hand. Try not to stumble. A great many plans will have to be relaid if you let yourself be killed now." Turning, he started across the street for an alleyway just ahead of them.

"Wait," Rand called. The fellow kept on, not looking back. "Who are you? What plans?" The man vanished into the alley.

Rand teetered after him, but when he reached the mouth of the narrow alley, it was empty. Unbroken walls ran a good hundred paces to another street, where a glow told of yet another part of Mashadar abroad, but the man was gone. Which was purely impossible. The fellow had had time to make a gateway, of course, if he knew how, but the residue would have been visible, and besides, that much of *saidin* being woven so near would have shouted at him.

Suddenly he realized that he had not felt *saidin* when the man made balefire, either. Just thinking of that, of the two streams touching, made his vision double again. Just for an instant, he could see the man's face again, sharp where everything else blurred. He shook his head until it cleared.

“Who in the Light are you?” he whispered. And after a moment, “What in the Light are you?”

Whoever or whatever, the man was gone, though. Sammael was still in Shadar Logoth. With an effort he managed to regain the Void once more. The taint on *saidin* vibrated now, humming its way deep into him; the Void itself vibrated. But the weakness of watery muscles and the pain of injuries faded. He *was* going to kill one of the Forsaken before this night was done.

Limping, he ghosted through the dark streets, placing his feet with great care. He still made noise, but the night was full of noise now. Shrieks and guttural cries sounded in the distance. Mindless Mashadar killed whatever it found, and Trollocs were dying in Shadar Logoth tonight as they had once long, long ago. Sometimes down a crossing street he saw Trollocs, two or five or a dozen, occasionally with a Halfman but most often not. None saw him, and he did not bother them. Not simply because Sammael would detect any channeling. Those Trollocs and Myrddraal that Mashadar did not kill were still dead. Sammael had almost certainly brought them by the Ways, but apparently he did not realize just how Rand had marked the Waygate here.

Well short of the square where the Waygate lay, Rand stopped and looked around. Nearby, a tower stood seemingly whole. Not nearly as tall as some, its top still rose more than fifty paces above the ground. The dark doorway at its base was empty, the wood long rotted away and the hinges gone to dust. Through blackness relieved only by faint starlight through the windows, he climbed the winding stairs slowly, small clouds puffing up beneath his boots, every second step a stab of pain up his leg. Distant pain. On the towertop, he leaned against the smooth parapet to catch his breath. The idle thought came that he would never hear the end if Min learned of this. Min, or Amys, or Cadsuane for that matter.

Across missing rooftops, he could see the great square that had been one of the most important in Aridhol. Once an Ogier grove had covered this part of the land, but within thirty years after the Ogier who had built the oldest parts of the city departed, the residents had cut down the trees to make room for expanding Aridhol. Palaces and the remains of palaces surrounded the huge square, the glow of Mashadar shining deep inside a few windows, and a huge mound of rubble covered one end, but in the center stood the Waygate, apparently a tall broad piece of stone. He was not close enough to see the delicately carved leaves and vines that covered it, but he could make out the toppled pieces of high fence that had once surrounded it. Power-wrought metal lying in a heap, they gleamed untarnished in the night. He could also see the trap he had woven around the Waygate, inverted so no eye but his could see it. No way to tell by looking whether the Trollocs and Halfmen really had passed through it, yet if they had, they would die before long. A nasty thing. Whatever traps Sammael had made down there were invisible to him, but that was expected. Likely they were not very pleasant either.

At first, he could not see Sammael, but then someone moved among the fluted, flaring columns of a palace. Rand waited. He wanted to be sure; he had only one chance. The figure stepped forward, out of the columns and a pace into the square, head swinging this way and that. Sammael, with snowy lace shining at his throat, waiting to see Rand walk into the square, into the traps. Behind him, the glow in the windows of the palace brightened. Sammael peered into the darkness lying across the square, and Mashadar oozed out of the windows, thick billows of silver-gray fog sliding together, merging as they loomed above his head. Sammael walked a little to one side, and the wave began to descend, slowly picking up speed as it fell.

Rand shook his head. Sammael was his. The flows needed for balefire seemed to gather themselves, despite the far echo of Cadsuane's voice. He raised his hand.

A scream tore the darkness, a woman shrieking in agony beyond knowing. Rand saw Sammael turn to stare toward the great mound of rubble even as his own eyes flashed that way. Atop the mound a shape stood outlined against the night sky in coat and breeches, a single thin tendril of Mashadar touching her leg. Arms outstretched, she thrashed about, unable to move from the spot, and her wordless wail seemed to call Rand's name.

"Liah," he whispered. Unconsciously he reached out, as though he could stretch his arm across the intervening distance and pull her away. Nothing could save what Mashadar touched, though, no more than anything could have saved him had Fain's dagger plunged into his heart. "Liah," he whispered. And balefire leaped from his hand.

For less than a heartbeat, the shape of her still seemed to be there, all in stark blacks and snowy whites, and then she was gone, dead before her agony began.

Screaming, Rand swept the balefire down toward the square, the rubble collapsing on itself, swept down death out of time—and let *saidin* go before the bar of white touched the lake of Mashadar that now rolled across the square, billowing past the Waygate toward rivers of glowing gray that flowed out from another palace on the other side. Sammael had to be dead. He had to be. There had not been time for him to run, no time to weave a gateway, and if he had, Rand would have felt *saidin* being worked. Sammael was dead, killed by an evil almost as great as himself. Emotion raced across the outside of the Void; Rand wanted to laugh, or perhaps cry. He had come here to kill one of the Forsaken, but instead he had killed a woman he had abandoned here to her fate.

For a long time he stood on the towertop while the waning moon crossed the sky, almost at its half, stood watching Mashadar fill the square completely, till only the very top of the Waygate rose above the surface of the fog. Slowly it began to ebb away, hunting elsewhere. If Sammael had been alive, he could have killed the Dragon Reborn easily then. Rand was not sure that he would have cared. Finally he opened a gateway for Skimming and made a platform, a railless disc, half white and half black. Skimming was slower than Traveling; it took him at least half an hour to reach Illian, and the whole way, he burned Liah's name into his mind again and again, flailing himself with it. He wished he could cry. He thought he had forgotten how.

They were waiting for him in the King's Palace, in the throne room. Bashere, and Dashiva and the Asha'man. It was exactly like the room he had seen at the other end of the square, down to the stand-lamps and the scenes carved into the marble walls and the long white dais. Exactly the same except for being slightly larger in every dimension, and instead of nine chairs on the dais, there was only a great gilded throne with leopards for its arms and nine fist-sized golden bees that would stand above the head of whoever sat in it. Wearily Rand sat himself down on the steps at the front of the dais.

"I take it Sammael is dead," Bashere said, looking him up and down in his ragged coat and dust.

"He's dead," Rand said. Dashiva sighed loudly with relief.

"The city is ours," Bashere went on. "Or I should say, yours." He laughed suddenly. "The fighting stopped quick enough once the right people found out it was you. Not much to it, in the end." Dried blood made a black stain down one torn sleeve of his coat. “The Council has been waiting eagerly for you to come back. Anxiously, you might say,” he added with a wry grin.

Eight sweating men had been standing at the far end of the throne room since Rand came in. They wore dark silk coats with gold or silver embroidery on the lapels and sleeves, and falls of lace at their throats and wrists. Some wore a beard that left the upper lip shaved clean, but every one had a broad sash of green silk slanted across his chest, with nine golden bees marching up it.

At Bashere’s gesture they came forward, bowing to Rand at about every third step, for all the world as though he wore the finest garments sewn. A tall man seemed to be the leader, a round-faced fellow with one of those beards, with a natural dignity that appeared strained by worry. “My Lord Dragon,” he said, bowing again and pressing both hands to his heart. “Forgive me, but Lord Brend do be nowhere to be found, and—”

“He won’t be,” Rand said flatly.

A muscle in the man’s face jumped at Rand’s tone, and he swallowed. “As you do say, my Lord Dragon,” he murmured. “I do be Lord Gregorin den Lushenos, my Lord Dragon. In Lord Brend’s absence, I do speak for the Council of Nine. We do offer you. . . .” A hand at his side waved vigorously at a shorter, beardless man, who stepped forward bearing a cushion draped with a length of green silk. “. . . we do offer you Illian.” The shorter man whipped the cloth away, revealing a heavy gold circlet, two inches wide, of laurel leaves. “The city do be yours, of course,” Gregorin went on anxiously. “We did put an end to all resistance. We do offer you the crown, and the throne, and all of Illian.”

Rand stared at the crown on its cushion, not moving a muscle. People had thought he meant to make himself a king in Tear, feared he would in Cairhien and Andor, but no one had *offered* him a crown before. “Why? Is Mattin Stepaneos so willing to give up his throne?”

“King Mattin did disappear two days ago,” Gregorin said. “Some of us do fear. . . . We do fear Lord Brend may have something to with it. Brend does have. . . .” He stopped to swallow. “Brend did have a great deal of influence with the king, some might say too much, but he did be distracted in recent months, and Mattin had begun to reassert himself.”

Strips of grimy coatsleeve and pieces of shirtsleeve dangled as Rand reached to pick up the Laurel Crown. The Dragon wound around his forearm glittered in the lamplight as brightly as the golden crown. He turned it in his hands. “You still haven’t said why. Because I conquered you?” He had conquered Tear, and Cairhien too, but some turned on him in both lands still. Yet it seemed to be the only way.

“That do be part,” Gregorin said dryly. “Even so, we might have chosen one of our own; kings have come from the Council before. But the grain you did order sent from Tear has your name on every lip with the Light. Without that, many would be dead of starvation. Brend did see every stick of bread go to the army.”

Rand blinked, and snatched one hand from the crown to suck on a pricked finger. Almost buried among the laurel leaves of the crown were the sharp points of swords. How long ago had he commanded the Tairens to sell grain to their ancient enemy, sell it or die for refusing? He had not realized they kept on after he began preparations to invade Illian. Maybe they feared to bring it up, but they had feared to stop, too. Maybe he had earned some right to this crown.

Gingerly he set the circle of laurel leaves on his head. Half those swords pointed up, half down. No head would wear this crown casually or easily.

Gregorin bowed smoothly. “The Light illumine Rand al’Thor, King of Illian,” he intoned, and the seven other lords bowed with him, murmuring, “The Light illumine Rand al’Thor, King of Illian.”

Bashere contented himself with a bow of his head—he was uncle to a queen, after all—but Dashiva cried out, “All hail Rand al’Thor, King of the World!” Flinn and the other Asha’man took it up.

“All hail Rand al’Thor, King of the World!”

“All hail the King of the World!”

That had a good sound to it.

The story spread as stories will, and changed as stories change with time and distance, spreading out from Illian by coasting ships, and merchant trains of wagons, and pigeons sent in secret, spreading in ripples that danced with other ripples and made new. An army had come to Illian, the stories said, an army of Aiel, of Aes Sedai appearing from thin air, of men who could channel riding winged beasts, even an army of Saldaeans, though not many believed that one. Some tales said the Dragon Reborn had been presented the Laurel Crown of Illian by the Council of Nine, and others by Mattin Stepaneos himself on bended knee. Some said the Dragon

Reborn had wrenched the crown from Mattin’s head, then stuck that head on a spike. No, the Dragon Reborn had razed Illian to the ground and buried the old king in the rubble. No, he and his army of Asha’man had burned Illian out of the earth. No, it was Ebou Dar he had destroyed, after Illian.

One fact, though, turned up again and again in those tales. The Laurel Crown of Illian had been given a new name. The Crown of Swords.

And for some reason, men and women who told the tales often found a need to add almost identical words. The storm is coming, they said, staring southward in worry. The storm is coming.

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Master of the lightnings, rider on the storm,
wearer of a crown of swords, spinner-out of fate.
Who thinks he turns the Wheel of Time,
may learn the truth too late.

—From a fragmentary translation of *The Prophecies of the Dragon*, attributed to Lord Mangore Kiramin, Sword-bard of Aramaelle and Warder to Caraighan Maconar, into what was then called the vulgar tongue (circa 300 AB).

The End
of the Seventh Book of
The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

a'dam (AYE-dam): A device for controlling a woman who can channel, usable only by either a woman who can channel or a woman who can be taught to channel, and having no effect on any woman who cannot channel. It creates a link between the two women. The Seanchan version consists of a collar and bracelet connected by a leash, all of silvery metal, but one example of a version without the leash has been made, and another, unique, variant is believed to exist which allows a woman to control a man who can channel. If such a man is linked by an ordinary *a'dam* to a woman who can channel, the likely result is death for both. When an *a'dam* is worn by a woman who can channel, simply touching the *a'dam* results in pain for a man who also can. *See also* linking, Seanchan.

Age of Legends: Age ended by the War of the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. A time when Aes Sedai performed wonders now only dreamed of.

Aiel War (976–78 NE): When King Laman (LAY-mahn) of Cairhien cut down *Avendoraldera*, four clans of the Aiel crossed the Spine of the World. They looted and burned the capital city of Cairhien as well as many other cities and towns, and the conflict extended into Andor and Tear. By the conventional view, the Aiel were finally defeated at the Battle of the Shining Walls, before Tar Valon; in fact, Laman was killed in that battle, and having done what they came for, the Aiel recrossed the Spine. *See also* Cairhien; Spine of the World.

Ajah (AH-jah): Societies among the Aes Sedai, seven in number and designated by colors: Blue, Red, White, Green, Brown, Yellow and Gray. All Aes Sedai except the Amyrlin Seat belong to one. Each follows a specific philosophy of the use of the One Power and the purposes of the Aes Sedai. The Red Ajah bends its energies to finding men who can channel, and to gentling them. The Brown forsakes the mundane world and dedicates itself to seeking knowledge, while the White, largely eschewing both the world and the value of worldly knowledge, devotes itself to questions of philosophy and truth. The Green Ajah (called the Battle Ajah during the Trolloc Wars) holds itself ready for Tarmon Gai'don, the Yellow concentrates on the study of Healing, and Blue sisters involve themselves with causes and justice. The Gray are mediators, seeking harmony and consensus. A Black Ajah, dedicated to serving the Dark One, is officially and vehemently denied.

algai'd'siswai: In the Old Tongue, "fighters of the spear," or "spear fighters." The name given to those Aiel who carry the spear and regularly take part in battle as opposed to those who follow crafts.

Altara (al-TAH-rah): A nation on the Sea of Storms, though in truth little unifies it except a name. The people of Altara think of themselves as inhabitants of a town or village, or as this lord's or that lady's people, first, and only second if at all as Altaran. Few nobles pay taxes to the crown or offer more than lip service, and that often slight. The ruler of Altara (currently Queen Tylin Quintara of House Mitsobar; TIE-lihn quin-TAHR-ah; MIHT-soh-bahr) is seldom more than the most powerful noble in the land, and at times has not even really been that. The Throne of the Winds holds so little power that many powerful nobles have scorned to take it when they could have. The banner of Altara is two golden leopards on a field checked four-by-four in red and blue. The sigil of House Mitsobar is a green anchor and sword, crossed. *See also* Wise Woman.

Amys (ah-MEESE): Wise One of Cold Rocks Hold, and a dreamwalker. An Aiel of the Nine Valleys sept of the Taardad Aiel. Wife of Rhuarc (ROARK), sister-wife to Lian (lee-AHN), who is roofmistress of Cold Rocks Hold. Amys is sister-mother to Aviendha.

angreal (ahn-gree-AHL): Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow anyone capable of channeling to handle a greater amount of the Power than is safe or even possible unaided. Some were made for use by women, others by men. Rumors of *angreal* usable by both men and women have never been confirmed. Their making is no longer known, and few are known to remain in existence. *See also sa'angreal; ter'angreal.*

Asha'man (AH-shah-mahn): (1) In the Old Tongue, "Guardian" or "Defender," with a strong implication that this is a defender of truth and justice. (2) The name taken by followers of the Dragon Reborn, men who have come to what is now being called the Black Tower in order to learn how to channel. Some have dreamed of channeling despite all the dire risks, while others remain only because passing the test for the ability to learn has itself started them on the road to channeling, and they now must learn to control it before it kills them. They train not only in using the One Power, but in the use of the sword and in fighting with hands and feet. The Asha'man, who wear distinctive black coats, are divided according to the level of knowledge they have achieved, the lowest being a Soldier. The next level is a

Dedicated, marked by a pin in the shape of a silver sword worn on the coat collar. The highest level is called simply an Asha'man, marked by a red-and-gold enameled pin in the shape of a Dragon worn on the coat collar opposite the silver sword. Unlike Aes Sedai, who go to great lengths to make sure that those they train are not allowed to move dangerously fast, the Asha'man are pushed hard from the beginning, most especially in learning to use the Power as a weapon. As a result, where the death or stilling of a novice of the White Tower during her training would be something spoken of with horror for years, at the Black Tower it is expected that a certain number of Asha'man Soldiers will die or be burned out attempting to learn. The existence of the Asha'man, and their connection to the Dragon Reborn, has caused a reevaluation among some Aes Sedai of the immediate necessity for gentling, but many have not changed their view at all. *See also* gentling, stilling.

Asunawa, Rhadam (ah-soo-NAH-wah, RAH-dam): High Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light. In his eyes, meddling with the One Power is usurping the Creator's power and is the cause of all the world's ills. He wants more than anything else to destroy anyone and everyone who can channel or even wishes to; they must confess their sin under the ministrations of the Hand of the Light, and then die. *See also* Questioners.

Atha'an Miere (ah-thah-AHN mee-EHR): See Sea Folk.

Band of the Red Hand: (1) A legendary band of heroes *(Shen an Calhar)* from the Trolloc Wars who died at the Battle of Aemon's Field, when Manetheren fell. (2) A military formation which gathered to follow Mat Cauthon, and which is currently shadowing the rebel Aes Sedai and their army with orders to carry Egwene al'Vere to Rand al'Thor and safety, should she express a wish to flee from her current situation, and also any other sisters who might wish to join her.

Berelain sur Paendrag (BEH-reh-lain suhr PAY-ehn-DRAG): First of Mayene, Blessed of the Light, Defender of the Waves, High Seat of House Paeron (pay-eh-ROHN). A beautiful and willful young woman, and a skillful ruler. *See also* Mayene.

Birgitte (ber-GEET-teh): Warder to Elayne Trakand, believed to be possibly the first female Warder ever, a fact that causes a number of difficulties, few of them expected. Birgitte is in truth the legendary hero of that name, who was one of those bound to be called back by the Horn of Valere, but she was ripped out of *Tel'aran'rhiod* into the world of the flesh during a struggle with Moghedien and was only saved from death by being bonded by Elayne. Except for her beauty and skill with a bow, she is little like the stories of her. *See also* Forsaken; Horn of Valere; Warder.

Bryne, Gareth (BRIHN, GAH-rehth): Once Captain-General of the Queen's Guards in Andor, now commanding an army for those Aes Sedai in rebellion against the authority of Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan. Considered one of the greatest generals living. His relationship with Siuan Sanche troubles him nearly as much as it does her. The sigil of House Bryne is a wild bull, the rose crown of Andor around its neck. Gareth Bryne's personal sigil is three golden stars, each of five rays.

cadin'sor *(KAH-dihn-sohr):* Garb of Aiel *algai'd'siswai:* coat and breeches in browns and grays that fade into rock or shadow, along with soft, laced knee-high boots. In the Old Tongue, "working clothes," though this is of course an imprecise translation. *See also algai'd'siswai.*

Cadsuane Melaidhrin (CAD-soo-ain meh-LIE-drihn): An Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah who has approached legendary status among Aes Sedai while still alive, though in truth most sisters believe she must be years dead by now. Thought to have been born around 705 NE in Ghealdan, which would make her the oldest living Aes Sedai, she was also the strongest in the Power found for a thousand years or more until the advent of Nynaeve, Elayne and Egwene and even they do not far out-step her. Although a Green, over the years she has confronted and captured more men who could channel by far than any other living sister; a little-known oddity is that the men she brought to the White Tower tended to live markedly longer after being gentled than those brought by other sisters.

Cairhien (KEYE-ree-EHN): Both a nation along the Spine of the World and the capital city of that nation. Savaged during the Aiel War, the nation of Cairhien was in no way fully recovered when the assassination of King Galldrian (998 NE) plunged the country into a war for the succession which was itself interrupted by the invasion of the Shaido Aiel in what many call the Second Aiel War, although the city itself was saved by Aiel intervention under Rand al'Thor. Subsequently most nobles of Cairhien, along with many from Tear, swore fealty to the Dragon Reborn, but in a land where the Game of Houses has been raised to an art, it is hardly surprising that even many who swore are ready to maneuver for whatever advantage they can find. The banner of Cairhien is a many-rayed golden sun rising on a field of sky blue. **calendar:** There are 10 days to the week, 28 days to the month and 13 months to the year. Several feastdays are not part of any month; these include Sunday (the longest day of the year), the Feast of Thanksgiving (once every four years at the spring equinox), and the Feast of All Souls Salvation, also called All Souls Day (once every ten years at the autumn equinox). While many feasts and festivals are celebrated everywhere (such as the Feast of the Lights, which ends the old year and begins the new), every land has its own as well, and in many instances so do individual towns and villages. In general, the Borderlands have the fewest festivals and feastdays, while the cities of Illian and Ebou Dar have the most.

Caraighan Maconar (kah-RYE-gihn mah-CON-ahr): Legendary Green sister (212 AB–373 AB), the heroine of a hundred adventures, credited with exploits that even some Aes Sedai consider improbable despite their inclusion in the records of the White Tower, such as single-handedly putting down a rebellion in Mosadorin and quelling the Comaidin Riots at a time when she had no Warders. Considered by the Green Ajah to be the archetype of a Green sister. *See also* Ajah.

Children of the Light: Society of strict ascetic beliefs, owing allegiance to no nation and dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years to proselytize against an increase in

Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military society. Extremely rigid in beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. Consider Aes Sedai and any who support them to be Darkfriends. Known disparagingly as Whitecloaks. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white. *See also* Questioners.

Darkfriends: Adherents of the Dark One. They believe they will gain great power and rewards, even immortality, when he is freed. Secretive of necessity, they organize into groups called “circles,” with members of one circle rarely if ever known to members of another. Rank in the outside world has no bearing on rank with the circles; a king or queen who was a Darkfriend would be expected to obey a beggar who gave the proper signs. Among themselves, they sometimes use the ancient name Friends of the Dark.

Dragonsworn: General term used for supporters of the Dragon Reborn, usually by those who either oppose him or at least think to remain neutral. In fact, many given that name have never sworn any sort of oath, and it is frequently applied to brigands as well, some of whom claim the name in the hope that it will quell resistance. A great many atrocities have been committed by people claiming to be Dragonsworn.

Ebou Dar: The capital city of Altara. One of the great ports, and a city with many odd customs for an outsider to assimilate. *See also* Altara.

Elaida do Avriny a’Roihan (eh-LY-da doh AHV-rih-nee ah-ROY-han): An Aes Sedai, formerly of the Red Ajah, now raised to the Amyrlin Seat, though opposed by another claiming that title. Once advisor to Queen Morgase of Andor. She sometimes has the Foretelling.

Flame of Tar Valon: Symbol of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, and the Aes Sedai. A stylized representation of a flame; a white teardrop, point upward.

Forsaken, the: Name given to thirteen of the most powerful Aes Sedai of the Age of Legends, thus among the most powerful ever known, who went over to the Dark One during the War of the Shadow in return for the promise of immortality and were imprisoned along with the Dark One when his prison was resealed. Their own name for themselves was “the Chosen.” The names given to them are still used to frighten children. They were: Aginor (AGH-ih-nohr), Asmodean (ahs-MOH-dee-an), Balthamel (BAAL-thah-mell), Be’lal (BEH-lahl), Demandred (DEE-man-drehd), Graendal (GREHN-dahl), Ishamael (ih-SHAH-may-EHL), Lanfear (LAN-feer), Mesaana (meh-SAH-nah), Moghedien (moh-GHEH-dee-ehn), Rahvin (RAAV-ihn), Sammael (SAHM-may-EHL), and Semirhage (SEH-mih-RHAHG). It is believed by those with some current knowledge that only Demandred and Sammael survive among the men, and only Graendal, Mesaana, Moghedien and Semirhage among the women. A number of strange encounters, however, suggest the possibility either that several new Chosen have been selected by the Dark One or that Lord of the Grave has in some cases reached beyond death.

Gaidin (GYE-deen): In the Old Tongue, “Brother to Battles.” A title used by Aes Sedai for the Warders. *See also* Warder.

gai’shain (GYE-shain): In the Old Tongue, “Pledged to Peace in Battle” is as close a translation as is possible. An Aiel taken prisoner by other Aiel during raid or battle is required by *ji’e’toh* to serve his or her captor humbly and obediently for one year and a day, touching no weapon and doing no violence. A Wise One, a blacksmith, a child, or a woman with a child under the age of ten may not be made *gai’shain.* Since the revelation that the ancestors of the Aiel were in fact pacifist followers of the Way of the Leaf, a good many *gai’shain* refuse to put off white when their time ends. Additionally, although by tradition as strong as law no one who does not follow *ji’e’toh* can be made *gai’shain*, the Shaido Aiel have begun putting Cairhienin and other prisoners into *gai’shain* robes, and many have come to believe that since these people do not follow *ji’e’toh*, there is no need to release them at the end of the year and a day.

Gawyn (GAH-wihn) **of House Trakand** (trah-KAND): Queen Morgase's son, and Elayne's brother, who will be First Prince of the Sword when Elayne ascends to the throne. Half-brother to Galad Damodred. A man caught in more than one cleft stick; he depises Aes Sedai yet has sworn to serve them, and he hates Rand al'Thor yet has sworn not to raise a hand against him, all because he loves Egwene al'Vere beyond reason. He does not know that Egwene herself has not only become Aes Sedai, but the Amyrlin Seat opposing the Amyrlin he recognizes. His sign is a white boar.

gentling: The removal of a man's ability to channel. Considered necessary by most people because any man who channels will go insane from the taint on *saidin* and almost certainly commit atrocities with the Power in his madness before the taint kills him. One who has been gentled can still sense the True Source, but cannot touch it. Whatever madness has come before gentling is arrested but not cured, and if it is done soon enough, the rotting death brought by the taint can be averted. A man who is gentled, however, inevitably stops wanting to live; those who do not succeed in committing suicide usually die anyway within a year or two. Once believed permanent, gentling is now known by some to be susceptible to a highly specialized form of Healing. *See also* stilling.

Great Lord of the Dark: Name by which Darkfriends refer to the Dark One, claiming that to speak his true name would be blasphemous.

Hall of the Tower, the: The legislative body of the Aes Sedai, traditionally consisting of three Sitters in the Hall from each of the seven Ajahs. At present, there is a Hall sitting in the White Tower, which contains no Sitters for the Blue, and a Hall among those Aes Sedai who oppose Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan. This rebel Hall contains no Red Sitters. While the Amyrlin Seat is by law the absolute power in the White Tower, in fact her power has always depended on how well she could lead, manage or intimidate the Hall, as there are many ways that the Hall can balk any Amyrlin's plans. There are two levels of agreement that may be required for items to pass the Hall, the lesser consensus and the greater consensus. The greater consensus requires that every sister who is present must stand, and that a minimum of eleven Sitters be present; the presence of at least one Sitter from each Ajah is also required, except when the matter before the Hall is the removal of an Amyrlin or Keeper, in which case the Ajah from which she was raised will not be informed of the vote until after it has been taken. The lesser consensus also requires a quorum of eleven Sitters, but only two-thirds of those present need stand for an item to pass. Another difference is that there is no requirement for all Ajahs to be represented in the lesser consensus except in the case of a declaration of war by the White Tower, one of several matters left to the lesser consensus which many might think would require the greater. The Amyrlin Seat may call for any Sitter to resign her chair, or indeed for all to, and that call must be heeded. This is seldom done, however, as nothing stops an Ajah from returning the same Sitter or Sitters except a custom that sisters not serve again in the Hall after leaving it. As an indication of how serious such a call for a mass resignation would be, it is reliably believed that it has happened exactly four times in the more than three-thousand-year history of the White Tower, and that while two of those resulted in the selection of an entirely, or nearly, new Hall, the other two resulted in the resignation and exile of the Amyrlin involved.

Horn of Valere (vah-LEER): The legendary object of the Great Hunt of the Horn, it can call back dead heroes from the grave to fight against the Shadow. A new Hunt of the Horn has been called, and sworn Hunters for the Horn can now be found in many nations. Few even among Aes Sedai know that the Horn has actually been found and used, or that it is now hidden in the White Tower.

Illian (IHL-lee-an): A great port on the Sea of Storms, capital city of the nation of the same name. An ancient enemy of Tear. The banner of Illian is nine golden bees on a field of green.

Juilin Sandar (JUY-lihn sahn-DAHR): A thief-catcher from Tear. A man in love with perhaps the very last woman he would ever have thought he could be.

length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Lini (LIHN-nee): Childhood nurse to the Lady Elayne, and before her to Elayne’s mother, Morgase, as well as to Morgase’s mother. A woman of vast inner strength, considerable perception, and a great many sayings, who has never quite admitted that any of her charges has grown up completely.

linking: The ability of women who can channel to combine their flows of the One Power. While the combined flow is not as great as the sum total of the individual flows, it is directed by the person who leads the link and can be used much more precisely and to far greater effect than the individual flows could be. Men cannot link their abilities without the presence of a woman or women in the circle. Entering a link is normally a voluntary act, requiring at least acquiesence, but under certain circumstances, a sufficent circle already formed can bring another woman forcibly into the circle as long as no man is part of it. Insofar as is known, a man cannot be forced into a circle, no matter how large. Up to thirteen women can link without the presence of a man. With the addition of one man, the circle can increase to twenty-six women. Two men can take the circle to include forty-three women, and so on until the limit of six men and sixty-six women is reached. There are links that include more men and fewer women, but except in the linking of one man and one woman, two men and one woman or two men and two women, there must always be at least one more woman in the circle than there are men. In most circles, either a man or a woman can control the link, but a man must control in the circle of seventy-two as well as in mixed circles of fewer than thirteen but more than four. Although men are in general stronger in the Power than women, the strongest circles are those which contain as near as possible to equal numbers of men and women.

Logain Ablar (loh-GAIN): Born 972 NE in Ghealdan, once claimed to be the Dragon Reborn. Captured after carrying war across Ghealdan, Altara and Murandy, he was taken to the White Tower and gentled, later escaping in the confusion after Siuan Sanche was deposed. The accidental restoration of his ability to channel was the first indication that such a loss was not permanent. Confined after his Healing, he escaped again, and his present whereabouts are unknown. *See also* gentling; stilling.

Mayene (may-EHN): City-state on the Sea of Storms, hemmed in and historically oppressed by Tear. The ruler of Mayene is styled the First, which title was once the First Lord or Lady; Firsts claim to be descendants of Artur Hawkwing. The banner of Mayene is a golden hawk in flight on a field of blue.

Mazrim Taim (MAHZ-rihm tah-EEM): A man who raised havoc in Saldaea until he was defeated and captured, although he later escaped, apparently with the aid of some of his followers. Not only able to channel, but of great strength, he is now the M’Hael (MA’kHAIL; “leader,” in the Old Tongue) of the Asha’man. *See also* Asha’man.

Melaine (meh-LAYN): A Wise One of the Jhirad sept of Goshien Aiel. A dreamwalker. Moderately strong in the One Power. Married to Bael (BAYL), clan chief of the Goshien. Sister-wife to Dorindha (dohr-IHN-dah), roof-mistress of Smoke Springs Hold.

Moiraine Damodred (mwah-RAIN DAHM-oh-drehd): An Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah, born into the then-reigning House of Cairhien, who vanished into a *ter’angreal* in Cairhien while battling Lanfear, apparently killing both herself and the Forsaken. Since she had already located the Dragon Reborn and killed the Forsaken Be’lal, she is already looked upon as one of those near-mythical sisters who are held as legendary heroes. *See also* Forsaken.

Morgase (moor-GAYZ): By the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Trakand. Now in exile and believed dead, murdered by the Dragon Reborn, or so many think. Her sign is three golden keys. The sign of House Trakand is a silver keystone.

near-sister; near-brother: Aiel kinship terms meaning friends as close as first-sisters or first-brothers. Near-sisters often adopt one another formally as first-sisters in an elaborate ceremony carried out before Wise Ones, after which they are recognized by other Aiel as truly born twins, though a pair of twins with two mothers. Near-brothers almost never do this.

Oaths, Three: The oaths taken by an Accepted on being raised to Aes Sedai. Spoken while holding the Oath Rod, a *ter'angreal* that makes oaths binding. They are: (1) To speak no word that is not true. (2) To make no weapon with which one man may kill another. (3) Never to use the One Power as a weapon except against Darkfriends or Shadow-spawn, or in the last extreme of defense of her own life, or that of her Warder or another Aes Sedai. The second oath was the first adopted after the War of the Shadow. The first oath, while held to the letter, is often circumvented by careful speaking. It is believed that the last two are inviolable.

Old Tongue: The language spoken during the Age of Legends. It is generally expected that nobles and the educated can speak it, but most actually know only a few words. Translation is often difficult, as it is a language capable of many subtly different meanings. *See also* Age of Legends.

Padan Fain (PAD-an FAIN): Once a peddler trading into the Two Rivers, and a Darkfriend, he was transformed at Shayol Ghul, not only to enable him to find the young man who would become the Dragon Reborn as a hound finds prey for the hunter, but to ingrain the need to find him. The pain of this transformation induced in Fain a hatred both of the Dark One and of Rand al'Thor. While following al'Thor, he encountered the trapped soul of Mordeth in Shadar Logoth, and this soul tried to take Fain's body. Because of what had been made of Fain, though, the result was an amalgamation that was mostly Fain and that has abilities beyond what either man had originally, though Fain does not understand them fully yet. Most men feel fear at a Myrddraal's eyeless gaze; Myrddraal feel fear at Fain's gaze.

Prophet, the: More elaborately, the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. Title claimed by Masema Dagar, a onetime Shienaran soldier, who preaches the rebirth of the Dragon Reborn. He has achieved a great following in Ghealdan and northern Amadicia, in part because of spreading knowledge that the Dragon has indeed been Reborn and in part because of the extreme brutality his followers visit not only on anyone who refuses to acknowledge the Dragon Reborn, but on those who refuse to acknowledge the authority of the Prophet as the hand and voice of the Dragon Reborn.

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. Avowed purposes are to discover the truth in disputations and uncover Dark-friends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is torture; their normal manner that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. They refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light, the Hand that digs out truth, and at times act as if they were entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the Questioners is the High Inquisitor, who sits on the Council of the Anointed. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd's crook. *See also* Children of the Light.

Rhuidean (RHUY-dee-ahn): A great city, the only one in the Aiel Waste and totally unknown to the outside world. Abandoned for nearly three thousand years. Once men among the Aiel were allowed to enter Rhuidean only once, in order to be tested inside a great *ter'angreal* for fitness to become clan chief (only one in three survived), and women only twice, for testing to become Wise Ones, the second time in the same *ter'angreal*, though with a considerably higher survival rate than the men. Now the city is inhabited again, by Aiel, and a great lake occupies one end of the valley of Rhuidean, fed by an underground ocean of fresh water and in turn feeding the only river in the Waste.

sa'angreal (SAH-ahn-GREE-ahl): Remnants of the Age of Legends that allow channeling much more of the One Power than is otherwise possible or safe. A *sa'angreal* is similar to, but more powerful than, an *angreal*. The amount of the Power that can be wielded with a *sa'angreal* compares to the amount that can be handled with an *angreal* as the Power wielded with the aid of an *angreal* does to the amount that can be handled unaided. The making of them is no longer known. As with *angreal*, there are male and female *sa'angreal*. Only a handful remain, far fewer even than *angreal*.

Sea Folk, the: More properly, the Atha'an Miere (AH-thah-AHN MEE-air), the People of the Sea. They live most of their lives on their ships and strongly dislike going any distance from the ocean. Relatively little is known of their customs, giving rise to an air of exotic mystery and often to fanciful tales. Most seaborne trade is carried by Sea Folk ships, which include the fastest by far and most of the largest, and they are considered by the inhabitants of port cities to be bargainers who outstrip the more widely known Domani. As survival at sea often depends on instant obedience, it should be no surprise that the Atha'an Miere stick strictly to their hierarchy, though there are surprising fluidities at some points. The Atha'an Miere are divided into numerous clans, both large and small, each headed by a Wavemistress. Below her are the Sailmistresses, the ships' captains of the clan. A Wavemistress has vast authority, yet she is elected to that position by the twelve senior clan Sailmistresses, who are referred to as the First Twelve of that clan, and she can be removed by the order of the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere. The Mistress of the Ships has a level of authority any shorebound king or queen would envy, yet she also is elected, for life, by unanimous vote of the twelve senior Wavemistresses, who are called the First Twelve of the Atha'an Miere. (The term "the First Twelve" is also used for the twelve senior Wavemistresses or Sailmis-tresses present in any gathering.) The position of Master of the Blades is held by a man who may or may not be the husband of the Mistress of the Ships. His responsibilities are the defense and the trade of the Sea Folk, and below him are the Swordmasters of Wavemistresses and the Cargomasters of Sailmistresses, who hold like positions and duties; for each of them, any authority outside these areas is held only as delegated by the woman he serves. Where any vessel sails and when is always up to the Sailmistress, but since trade and finances are totally in the hands of the Cargomaster (or, at higher levels, of the Swordmaster or the Master of the Blades), a close degree of cooperation is required. Every Sea Folk vessel, however small, and also every Wavemistress, has a Windfinder, a woman who is almost always able to channel and skilled in Weaving the Winds, as the Atha'an Miere call the manipulation of weather. The Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships has authority over the Windfinders to the Wavemistresses, who in turn have authority over Windfinders to the Sailmistresses of their clans. One peculiarity of the Sea Folk is that all must begin at the very lowest rank and work their way up, and that anyone other than the Mistress of the Ships can be demoted by those above, even to the very bottom again in extreme instances.

Seanchan (SHAWN-CHAN): (1) Descendants of the armies Artur Hawkwing sent across the Aryth Ocean, who conquered the lands there. They believe that any woman who can channel must be controlled for the safety of everyone else, and any man who can channel must be killed for the same reason. (2) The land from which the Sean-chan come.

Shayol Ghul (SHAY-ol GHOOL): A mountain in the Blasted Lands, beyond the Great Blight. Site of the Dark One's prison.

sister-wife: Aiel kinship term. Aiel women who are near-sisters or first-sisters, and who discover they love the same man or simply do not want a man to come between them, will both marry him, thus becoming sister-wives. Women who love the same man will sometimes try to find out whether they can become near-sisters and adopted first-sisters, a first step to becoming sister-wives. An Aiel man faced with this situation has the choice of marrying both women or neither; if he has a wife who decides to take a sister-wife, he finds himself with a second wife.

siswai'aman: In the Old Tongue: “spears of the dragon,” with a strong implication of ownership. The name taken by a good many men among the Aiel, but no women. These men do not actually acknowledge the name—nor do any others, in fact—but they wear a strip of red cloth wound around the forehead with a disc, half black and half white, above the brows. Although *gai'shain* normally are prohibited from wearing anything that would be worn by an *algai'd'siswai*, a large number of *gai'shain* have taken to wearing the headband. *See also gai'shain.*

Sorilea (soh-rih-LEE-ah): The Wise One of Shende Hold, a Jarra Chareen. Barely able to channel, she is also the oldest living Wise One, though not by as much as many think.

Spine of the World: A towering mountain range, with few passes, which separates the Aiel Waste from the lands to the west. Also called the Dragonwall.

stilling: The removal of a woman's ability to channel. A woman who has been stilled can sense but not touch the True Source. Officially, stilling is the result of trial and sentence for a crime, and was last carried out in 859 NE. Novices have always been required to learn the name and crimes of all women who have suffered judicial stilling. When the ability to channel is lost accidentally, it is called being burned out, though “stilling” is often used for that also. Women who are stilled, however it occurs, seldom survive long; they seem to simply give up and die unless they find something to replace the emptiness left by the One Power. While it has always been believed that stilling was permanent, lately a method of Healing it has been discovered, though there appear to be limits to this which are yet to be explored.

Stone of Tear: A great fortress in the city of Tear, said to have been made with the One Power soon after the Breaking of the World. Attacked and besieged unsuccessfully countless times, it fell in a single night to the Dragon Reborn and a few hundred Aiel, thus fulfilling two parts of the Prophecies of the Dragon.

Talents: Abilities in the use of the One Power in specific areas. Aptitude in various Talents varies widely from individual to individual and is seldom related to the strength of the individual's ability to channel. There are major Talents, the best-known and most widespread of which is Healing. Other examples are Cloud Dancing, the control of weather, and Earth Singing, which involves controlling movements of the earth, for example preventing, or causing, earthquakes or avalanches. There are also minor Talents, seldom given a name, such as the ability to see *ta'veren* or to duplicate the chance-twisting effect of *ta'veren*, though in a very small and localized area rarely covering more than a few square feet. Many Talents are now known only by their names and sometimes vague descriptions. Some, such as Traveling (the ability to shift from one place to another without crossing the intervening space) are only now being rediscovered. Others, such as Foretelling (the ability to foretell future events, but in a general way), and Delving (the location of ores and possibly their removal from the ground, although the term is now also used for the variant of Healing which is used to examine someone's health and physical condition) are found rarely. Another Talent long thought lost is Dreaming, interpreting the Dreamer's dreams to foretell future events in more specific fashion than Foretelling. Some Dreamers had the ability to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the World of Dreams, and (it is said) even other people's dreams. The last acknowledged Dreamer previously was Corianin Nedeal (coh-ree-AHN-ihn neh-dee-AHL), who died in 526 NE, but there is now another.

Tallanvor, Martyn (TAL-lahn-vohr, mahr-TEEN): Former Guardsman-Lieutenant of the Queen's Guards, who loves Morgase more than life or honor. *See also* Morgase.

ta'veren (tah-VEER-ehn): A person around whom the Wheel of Time weaves all surrounding life-threads, perhaps ALL life-threads. This weaving is little understood except that it seems in many ways an alteration of chance; what might happen, but only rarely, does. The effect can at times be quite localized. Someone influenced by a *ta'veren* may say or do what they would only have said or done one time in a million under those circumstances. Events occur of seeming impossibility, such as a child falling a hundred feet from a tower unharmed. At other times the effect seems to extend to influencing history itself, though often by means of the localized effects. This, it is believed, is the real reason that *ta'veren* are born, in order to shift history and restore a balance to the turning of the Wheel.

Tear (TEER): A nation on the Sea of Storms. Also the capital city of that nation, a great seaport. The banner of Tear is three white crescent moons slanting across a field half red, half gold. *See also* Stone of Tear.

ter'angreal (TEER-ahn-GREE-ahl): Remnants of the Age of Legends that use the One Power. Unlike *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, each *ter'angreal* was made to do a particular thing. Some *ter'angreal* are used by Aes Sedai, but the original purposes of many are unknown. Some require channeling, while others may be used by anyone. Some will kill, or destroy the ability to channel of any woman who uses them. Like *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, the making of them has been lost since the Breaking of the World. *See also angreal; sa'angreal*.

Thom Merrilin (TOM MER-rih-lihn): A not-so-simple gleeman and traveler.

Tinkers: Properly, the Tuatha'an (too-AH-thah-AHN), also called the Traveling People. A wandering folk who follow a totally pacifist philosophy called the Way of the Leaf, which allows no violence for any reason. Tuatha'an who fall away from this belief are called "the Lost," and are no longer acknowledged by any others.

treekillers: Disparaging term used by the Aiel for Cairhienin, along with "oathbreakers." Both refer to King Laman's cutting down of *Avendoraldera*, a gift from the Aiel, an act which violated the oaths given at the time the gift was given. To the Aiel, both terms rank with the worst that anyone can be called. *See also* Aiel War.

Valda, Eamon (VAHL-dah, AY-mon): An impatient Lord Captain of the Children of the Light, a man who believes you can't make dinner without breaking eggs and sometimes it is necessary to burn down the barn to get rid of the rats. He sees himself as a pragmatist, and will take whatever advantage offers itself. He is sure that Rand al'Thor is only a puppet of the White Tower and very likely cannot even channel. Hatred of Darkfriends (which of course include Aes Sedai) is the central pillar of his life. *See also* Children of the Light.

Warder: A warrior bonded to an Aes Sedai. The bonding is a thing of the One Power: by it he gains such gifts as quick healing, the ability to go long periods without food, water, or rest, and the ability to sense the taint of the Dark One at a distance. Warder and Aes Sedai share certain physical and emotional knowledge of one another through the bond. So long as a Warder lives, the Aes Sedai to whom he is bonded knows he is alive however far away he is, and when he dies she will know the moment and manner of his death. While most Ajahs believe an Aes Sedai may have one Warder bonded to her at a time, the Red Ajah refuses to bond any Warders at all, and the Green Ajah believes an Aes Sedai may bond as many as she wishes. Ethically the Warder must accede to the bonding voluntarily, but it has been known to happen against the Warder's will. What the Aes Sedai gain from the bonding is a closely held secret. By all known historical records, Warders have always been men, but recently a woman has been bonded, revealing certain differences in the effects. *See also* Birgitte.

weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

wilder: A woman who has learned to channel the One Power on her own; only one in four survive this. Such women usually build barriers against knowing what it is they are doing, but if these can be broken down, wilders are frequently among the most powerful of channelers. The term is often used in derogatory fashion.

Wise One: Among the Aiel, Wise Ones are women chosen by other Wise Ones and trained in healing, herbs and other things. They have great authority and responsibility, as well as great influence with sept and clan chiefs, though these men often accuse them of meddling. A good many Wise Ones can channel to one degree or another; they find every Aiel woman born with the spark in her and most of those who can learn. The fact that Wise

Ones can channel is not spoken of among Aiel, by custom; as a result many Aiel do not know for sure which Wise Ones can and which cannot. Also by custom, Wise Ones avoid all contact with Aes Sedai, even more so than other Aiel. Traditionally, Wise Ones have stood outside all feuds and battle, but this custom has recently been shattered, perhaps beyond mending. What this may do to the protections accorded Wise Ones under the Aiel belief of *ji'e'toh* has yet to be seen.

Wise Woman: One of the fabled healers of Ebou Dar, distinguished by the wearing of a red belt. Their abilities with herbs and their medical knowledge are spoken of as far away as the Borderlands as being the next best to actual Healing by an Aes Sedai. Although Ebou Dar is a cosmopolitan city where outlanders frequently join the city's many guilds, the oddity has been noted that Wise Women who actually are Ebou Dari are in truth quite rare.

* * *

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with "V" and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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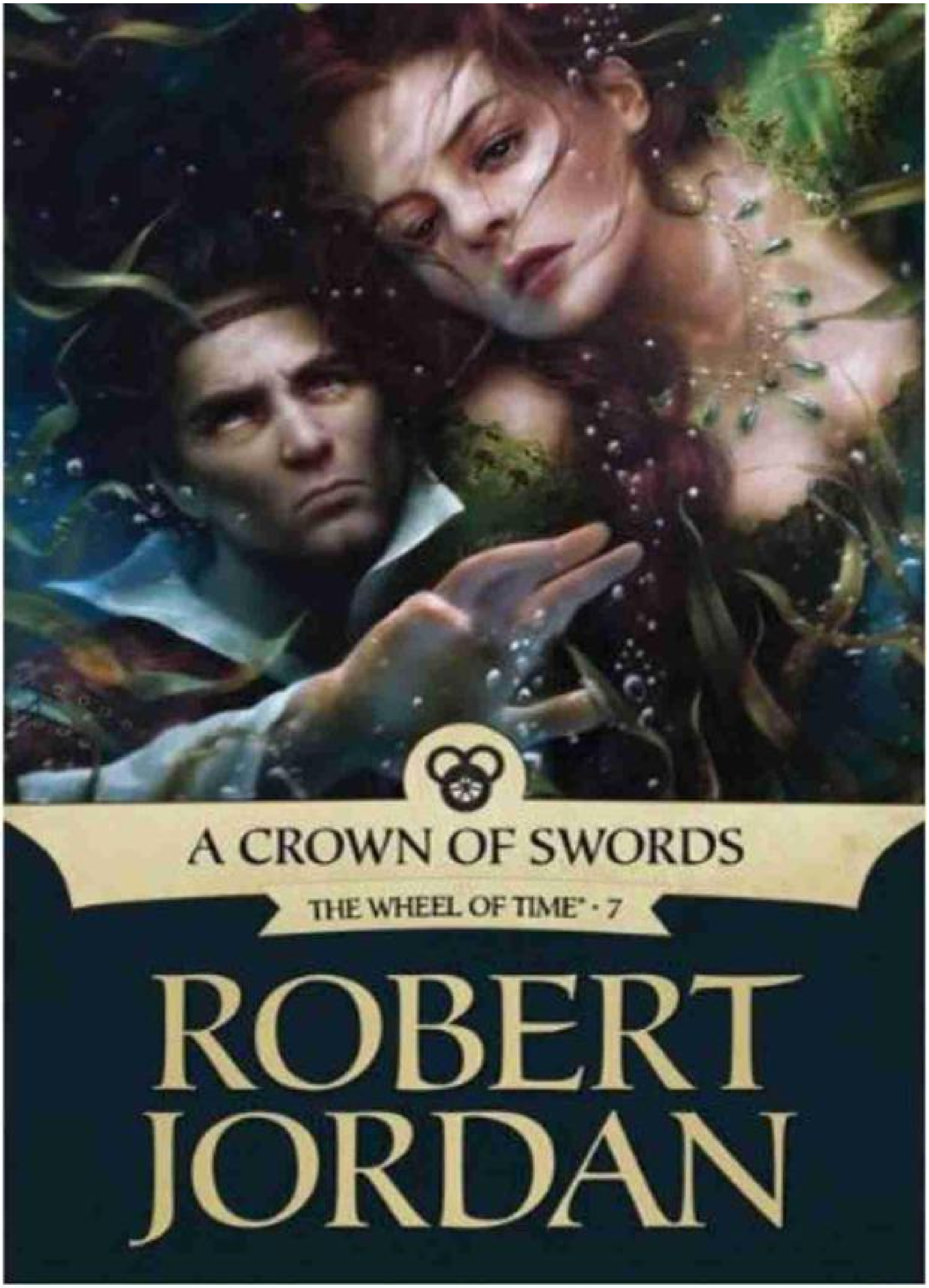
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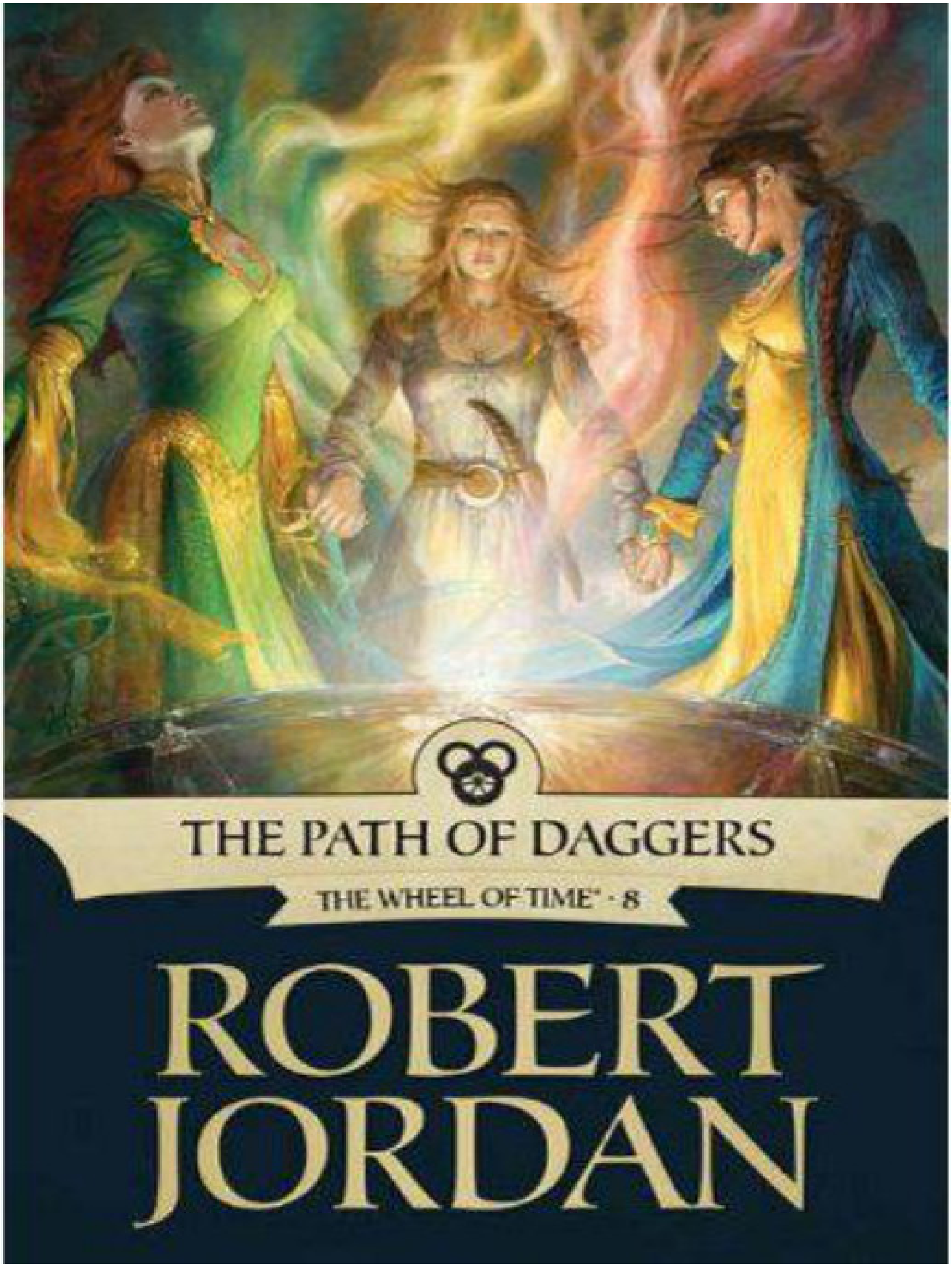
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For Harriet
My light, my life, my heart,
forever

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Who would sup with the mighty must climb the path of daggers.

—Anonymous notation found inked in the margin of a manuscript history (believed to date to the time of Artur Hawkwing) of the last days of the Tovan Conclaves

On the heights, all paths are paved with daggers.

—Old Seanchan saying

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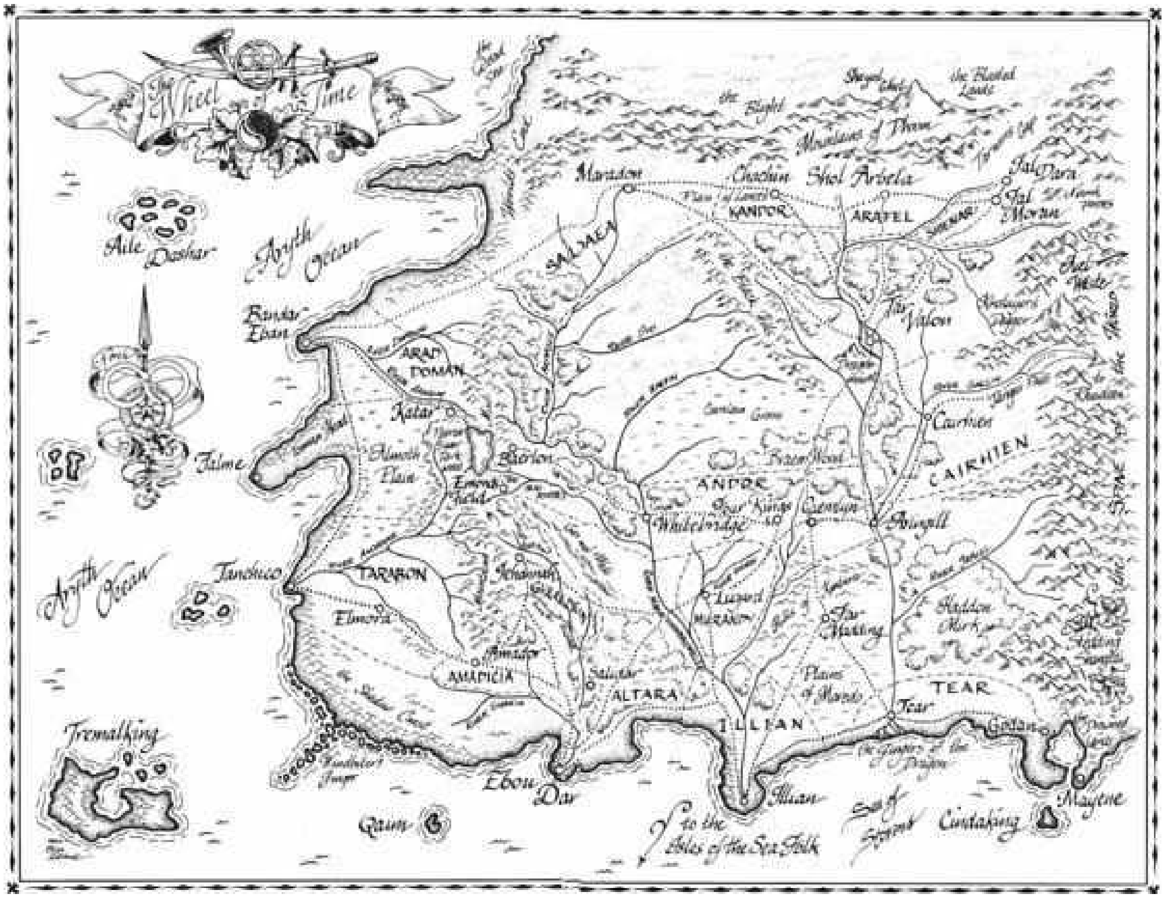
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PROLOGUE

Deceptive Appearances

Ethenielle had seen mountains lower than these misnamed Black Hills, great lopsided heaps of half-buried boulders, webbed with steep twisting passes. A number of those passes would have given a goat pause. You could travel three days through drought-withered forests and brown-grassed meadows without seeing a single sign of human habitation, then suddenly find yourself within half a day of seven or eight tiny villages, all ignorant of the world. The Black Hills were a rugged place for farmers, away from the trade routes, and harsher now than usual. A gaunt leopard that should have vanished at the sight of men watched from a steep slope, not forty paces away, as she rode past with her armored escort. Westward, vultures wheeled patient circles like an omen. Not a cloud marred the blood-red sun, yet there were clouds of a sort. When the warm wind blew, it raised walls of dust.

With fifty of her best men at her heels, Ethenielle rode unconcernedly, and unhurriedly. Unlike her near-legendary ancestor Surasa, she had no illusion that the weather would heed her wishes just because she held the Throne of the Clouds, while as for haste. . . . Their carefully coded, closely guarded letters had agreed on the order of march, and that had been determined by each person’s need to travel without attracting notice. Not an easy task. Some had thought it impossible.

Frowning, she considered the luck that had let her come this far without having to kill anyone, avoiding those flyspeck villages even when it meant days added to the journey. The few Ogier *stedding* presented no problem—Ogier paid little heed to what happened among humans, most times, and less than usual of late, it seemed—but the villages. . . . They were too small to hold eyes-and-ears for the White Tower, or for this fellow who claimed to be the Dragon Reborn—perhaps he was; she could not decide which way would be worse—too small, yet peddlers did pass through, eventually. Peddlers carried as much gossip as trade goods, and they spoke to people who spoke to other people, rumor flowing like an ever-branching river, through the Black Hills and into the world outside. With a few words, a single shepherd who had escaped notice could light a signal fire seen five hundred leagues off. The sort of signal fire that set woods and grasslands aflame. And cities, maybe. Nations.

"Did I make the right choice, Serailla?" Vexed at herself, Ethenielle grimaced. She might not be a girl any longer, but her few gray hairs hardly counted her old enough to let her mindless tongue flap in the breeze. The decision was made. It had been on her mind, though. Light's truth, she was not so unconcerned as she wanted to be.

Ethenielle's First Councilor heeled her dun mare closer to the Queen's sleek black gelding. Round face placid, dark eyes considering, Lady Serailla could have been a farmwife suddenly stuck into a noblewoman's riding dress, but the mind behind those plain, sweaty features was as sharp as any Aes Sedai's. "The other choices only carried different risks, not lesser," she said smoothly. Stout yet as graceful in her saddle as she was at dancing, Serailla was always smooth. Not oily, or false; just completely unflappable. "Whatever the truth, Majesty, the White Tower appears to be paralyzed as well as shattered. You could have sat watching the Blight while the world crumbled behind you. You could have if you were someone else."

The simple need to act. Was that what had brought her here? Well, if the White Tower would not or could not do what had to be done, then someone must. What good to guard the Blight if the world did crumble behind her?

Ethenielle looked to the slender man riding at her other side, white streaks at his temples giving him a supercilious air, the ornately sheathed Sword of Kirukan resting in the crook of one arm. It was called the Sword of Kirukan, at any rate, and the fabled warrior Queen of Aramaelle might have carried it. The blade was ancient, some said Power-wrought. The two-handed hilt lay toward her as tradition demanded, though she herself was not about to try using a sword like some fire-brained Saldaean. A queen was supposed to think, lead, and command, which no one could manage while trying to do what any soldier in her army could do better. “And you, Swordbearer?” she said. “Do you have any qualms at this late hour?”

Lord Baldhere twisted in his gold-worked saddle to glance back at the banners carried by horsemen behind them, cased in tooled leather and embroidered velvet. “I don’t like hiding who I am, Majesty,” he said fussily, straightening around. “The world will know us soon enough, and what we’ve done. Or tried to do. We’ll end dead or in the histories or both, so they might as well know what names to write.” Baldhere had a biting tongue, and he affected to care more for music and his clothes than anything else—that well-cut blue coat was the third he had worn already today—but as with Serailla, appearances deceived. The Swordbearer to the Throne of the Clouds bore responsibilities much heavier than that sword in its jeweled scabbard. Since the death of her husband some twenty years ago, Baldhere had commanded the armies of Kandor for her in the field, and most of her soldiers would have followed him to Shayol Ghul itself. He was not counted among the great captains, but he knew when to fight and when not, as well as how to win.

“The meeting place must be just ahead,” Serailla said suddenly, just as Ethenielle saw the scout Baldhere had sent forward, a sly fellow named Lomas who wore a foxhead crest on his helmet, rein in atop the peak of the pass ahead. With his lance slanted, he made the arm gesture for “assembly point in sight.”

Baldhere swung his heavy-shouldered gelding and bellowed a command for the escort to halt—he could bellow, when he had a mind to—then spurred the bay to catch up to her and Serailla. It was to be a meeting between long-standing allies, but as they rode past Lomas, Baldhere gave the lean-faced man a curt order to “Watch and relay”; should anything go wrong, Lomas would signal the escort forward to bring their queen out.

Ethenielle sighed faintly when Serailla nodded approval at the command. Allies of long standing, yet the times bred suspicion like flies on a midden. What they were about stirred the heap and set the flies swirling. Too many rulers to the south had died or vanished in the last year for her to feel any comfort in wearing a crown. Too many lands had been smashed as thoroughly as an army of Trollocs could have achieved. Whoever he was, this al'Thor fellow had much to answer for. Much.

Beyond Lomas the pass opened into a shallow bowl almost too small to be named a valley, with trees too widely spaced to be called a thicket. Leatherleaf and blue fir and three-needle pine held to some green along with a few oaks, but the rest were sheathed in brown if not bare-branched. To the south, however, lay what had made this spot a good choice for meeting. A slender spire like a column of gleaming golden lace lay slanting and partly buried in the bare hillside, a good seventy paces of it showing above the treetops. Every child in the Black Hills old enough to run off leading strings knew of it, but there was not a village inside four days' travel, nor would anyone come within ten miles willingly. The stories of this place spoke of mad visions, of the dead walking, and death at touching the spire.

Ethenielle did not consider herself fanciful, yet she shivered slightly. Nianh said the spire was a fragment from the Age of Legends, and harmless. With luck, the Aes Sedai had no reason to recall that conversation of years ago. A pity the dead could not be made to walk, here. Legend said Kirukan had beheaded a false Dragon with her own hands, and borne two sons by another man who could channel. Or maybe the same one. She might have known how to go about their purpose and survive.

As expected, the first pair of those Ethenielle had come to meet was waiting, each with two attendants. Paitar Nachiman had many more creases in his long face than the stunningly handsome older man she had admired as a girl, not to mention too little hair and most of that gray. Fortunately he had relinquished the Arafellin fashion for braids and wore his hair cut short. But he sat his saddle straight-backed, his shoulders needed no padding in that embroidered green silk coat, and she knew he still could wield the sword at his hip with vigor and skill. Easar Togita, square-faced and his scalp shaved except for a white topknot, his plain coat the color of old bronze, was a head shorter than the King of Arafel, and slighter, yet he made Paitar look almost soft. Easar of Shienar did not scowl—if anything, a touch of sadness seemed permanent in his eyes—but he might have been made from the same metal as the long sword on his back. She trusted both men—and hoped their familial connections helped secure that trust. Alliances by marriage had always bound the Borderlands together as much as their war against the Blight did, and she had a daughter wed to Easar's third son and a son to Paitar's favorite granddaughter, as well as a brother and two sisters married into their Houses.

Their companions appeared as different as their kings. As always, Ishigari Terasian looked just risen from a stupor after a drunken feast, as fat a man as she had ever seen in a saddle; his fine red coat was rumpled, his eyes bleary, his cheeks unshaven. By contrast, Kyril Shianri, tall and lean, and nearly as elegant as Baldhere despite the dust and sweat on his face, with silver bells on his boot tops and gloves as well as fastened to his braids; he wore his usual expression of dissatisfaction and had a way of always peering coolly down his prominent nose at anyone but Paitar. Shianri really was a fool in many ways—Arafellin kings rarely made much pretense of listening to councilors, relying instead on their queens—but he was more than he appeared at a glance. Agelmar Jagad could have been a larger version of Easar, a simple, plainly garbed man of steel and stone with more weapons hung about him than Baldhere carried, sudden death waiting to be unleashed, while Alesune Chulin was as slim as Serailla was stout, as pretty as Serailla was plain, and as fiery as Serailla was calm. Alesune seemed born to her fine, blue silks. It was well to remember that judging Serailla by her surface was a mistake, too.

"Peace and the Light favor you, Ethenielle of Kandor," Easar said gruffly as Ethenielle reined in before them, and at the same time Paitar intoned, "The Light embrace you, Ethenielle of Kandor." Paitar still had a voice to make women's hearts beat faster. And a wife who knew he was hers to his bootsoles; Ethenielle doubted that Menuki had ever had a jealous moment in her life, or cause for one.

She made her own greetings just as short, ending with a direct "I hope you've come this far without detection."

Easar snorted and leaned on his cantle, eyeing her grimly. A hard man, but eleven years widowed and still mourning. He had written poetry for his wife. There was always more than the surface. "If we've been seen, Ethenielle," he grumbled, "then we might as well turn back now."

"You speak of turning back already?" Between his tone and a flip of his tasseled reins, Shianri managed to combine disdain with barely enough civility to forestall a challenge. Even so, Agelmar studied him coldly, shifting in his saddle slightly, a man recalling where each of his weapons was placed. Old allies in many battles along the Blight, but those new suspicions swirled.

Alesune made her mount dance, a gray mare as tall as a warhorse. The thin white streaks in her long black hair suddenly seemed crests on a helmet, and her eyes made it easy to forget that Shienaran women neither trained with weapons nor fought duels. Her title was simply *shatayan* of the royal household, yet whoever believed any *shatayan's* influence stopped at ordering the cooks and maids and victualers made a grave error. “Foolhardiness is not courage, Lord Shianri. We leave the Blight all but unguarded, and if we fail, maybe even if we succeed, some of us could find our heads on spikes. Perhaps all of us will. The White Tower may well see to it if this al’Thor does not.”

“The Blight seems almost asleep,” Terasian muttered, whiskers rasping as he rubbed his fleshy chin. “I’ve never seen it so quiet.”

“The Shadow never sleeps,” Jagad put in quietly, and Terasian nodded as if that, too, was something to consider. Agelmar was the best general of them all, one of the best to be found anywhere, but Terasian’s place at Paitar’s right hand had not come because he was a good drinking companion.

“What I’ve left behind can guard the Blight short of the Trolloc Wars coming again,” Ethenielle said in a firm voice. “I trust you’ve all done as well. It hardly matters, though. Does anyone believe we truly can turn back now?” She made that last question dry, expecting no answer, but she received one.

“Turn back?” a young woman’s high voice demanded behind her. Tenobia of Saldaea galloped into the gathering, drawing her white gelding up so that he reared flamboyantly. Thick lines of pearls marched down the dark gray sleeves of her narrow-skirted riding habit, while red-and-gold embroidery swirled thickly to emphasize the narrowness of her waist and the roundness of her bosom. Tall for a woman, she managed to be pretty if not beautiful despite a nose that was overbold at best. Large tilted eyes of a dark deep blue certainly helped, but so did a confidence in herself so strong that she seemed to glow with it. As expected, the Queen of Saldaea was accompanied only by Kalyan Ramsin, one of her numerous uncles, a scarred and grizzled man with the face of an eagle and thick mustaches that curved down around his mouth. Tenobia Kazadi tolerated the counsel of soldiers, but no one else. “I will not turn back,” she went on fiercely, "whatever the rest of you do. I sent my *dear* Uncle Davram to bring me the head of the false Dragon Mazrim Taim, and now he and Taim *both* follow this al'Thor, if I can believe half what I hear. I have close to fifty thousand men behind me, and whatever you decide, *I* will not turn back until my uncle and al'Thor learn exactly who rules Saldaea."

Ethenielle exchanged glances with Serailla and Baldhere while Paitar and Easar began telling Tenobia that they also meant to keep on. Serailla gave her head the smallest shake, made the slightest shrug. Baldhere rolled his eyes openly. Ethenielle had not exactly hoped Tenobia might decide at the last to stay away, but the girl would surely make difficulties.

Saldaeans were a strange lot—Ethenielle had often wondered how her sister Einone managed so well married to yet another of Tenobia's uncles—yet Tenobia carried that strangeness to extremes. You expected showiness from any Saldaean, but Tenobia took delight in shocking Domani and making Altarans seem drab. Saldaean tempers were legendary; hers was wildfire in a high wind, and you could never tell what would provide the spark. Ethenielle did not even want to think of the difficulty in getting the woman to listen to reason when she did not want to; only Davram Bashere had ever been able to do that. And then there was the question of marriage.

Tenobia was still young, though years past the age she should have wed—marriage was a duty for any member of a ruling House, the more so for a ruler; alliances had to be made, an heir provided—yet Ethenielle had never considered the girl for any of her own sons. Tenobia's requirements for a husband were on a level with everything else about her. He must be able to face and slay a dozen Myrddraal at once. While playing the harp *and* composing poetry. He must be able to confound scholars while riding a horse down a sheer cliff. Or perhaps up it. Of course he would have to defer to her—she was a queen, after all—except that sometimes Tenobia would expect him to ignore whatever she said and toss her over his shoulder. The girl wanted *exactly* that! And the Light help him if he chose to toss when she wanted deference, or to defer when she wanted the other. She never said any of this right out, but any woman with wits who had heard her talk about men could piece it together in short order. Tenobia would die a maiden. Which meant her uncle Davram would succeed, if she left him alive after this, or else Davram's heir.

A word caught Ethenielle's ear and jerked her upright in her saddle. She should have been paying attention; too much was at stake. "Aes

Sedai?" she said sharply. "What about Aes Sedai?" Save for Paitar's, their White Tower advisors had all left at news of the troubles in the Tower, her own Nianh and Easar's Aisling vanishing without a trace. If Aes Sedai had gained a hint of their plans. . . . Well, Aes Sedai always had plans of their own. Always. She would dislike discovering that she was putting her hands into two hornet's nests, not just one.

Paitar shrugged, looking a trifle embarrassed. That was no small trick for him; he, like Serailla, let nothing upset him. "You hardly expected me to leave Coladara behind, Ethenielle," he said in soothing tones, "even if I could have kept the preparations from her." She had not; his favorite sister was Aes Sedai, and Kiruna had given him a deep fondness for the Tower. Ethenielle had not expected it, but she had hoped. "Coladara had visitors," he continued. "Seven of them. Bringing them along seemed prudent, under the circumstances. Fortunately, they require little convincing. None, in truth."

"The Light illumine and preserve our souls," Ethenielle breathed, and heard near echos from Serailla and Baldhere. "Eight sisters, Paitar? Eight?" The White Tower surely knew every move they intended, now.

"And I have five more," Tenobia put in as if announcing she had a new pair of slippers. "They found me just before I left Saldaea. By chance, I'm sure; they appeared as surprised as I was. Once they learned what I was doing—I still don't know how they did, but they did—once they learned, I was sure they'd go scurrying to find Memara." Her brows furrowed in a momentary glare. Elaida had miscalculated badly in sending a sister to try bullying Tenobia. "Instead," she finished, "Illeisien and the rest were more intent on secrecy than I."

"Even so," Ethenielle insisted. "Thirteen sisters. All that is needed is for one of them to find some way to send a message. A few lines. A soldier or a maid intimidated. Does any of you think you can stop them?"

"The dice are out of the cup," Paitar said simply. What was done, was done. Arafellin were almost as odd as Saldaeans, in Ethenielle's book.

"Farther south," Easar added, "it may be well to have thirteen Aes Sedai with us." That brought a silence while the implications hung in the air. No one wanted to voice them. This was far different from facing the Blight.

Tenobia gave a sudden, shocking laugh. Her gelding tried to dance, but she settled him. "I mean to press south as fast as I can, but I invite you all to dine with me in my camp tonight. You can speak with Illeisien and her friends, and see whether your judgment matches mine. Perhaps tomorrow night we can all gather in Paitar's camp and question his Coladara's friends." The suggestion was so sensible, so obviously necessary, that it brought instant agreement. And then Tenobia added, as if an afterthought, "My uncle Kalyan would be honored if you allowed him to sit beside you tonight, Ethenielle. He admires you greatly."

Ethenielle glanced toward Kalyan Ramsin—the fellow had sat his horse silently behind Tenobia, never speaking, hardly seeming to breathe—she merely glanced at him, and for an instant that grizzled eagle unhooded his eyes. For an instant, she saw something she had not seen since her Brys died, a man looking not at a queen, but at a woman. The shock of it was a blow taking her breath. Tenobia's eyes darted from her uncle to Ethenielle, her tiny smile quite satisfied.

Outrage flared in Ethenielle. That smile made it all clear as spring water, if Kalyan's eyes had not. This chit of a girl thought to marry off this fellow to *her*? This *child* presumed to . . . ? Suddenly, ruefulness replaced fury. She herself had been younger when she arranged her widowed sister Nazelle's wedding. A matter of state, yet Nazelle had come to love Lord Ismic despite all her protests in the beginning. Ethenielle had been arranging others' marriages for so long that she had never considered that her own would make a very strong tie. She looked at Kalyan again, a longer look. His leathery face was all proper respect once more, yet she saw his eyes as they had been. Any consort she chose would have to be a hard man, but she had always demanded a chance of love for her children's marriages, if not her siblings', and she would do no less for herself.

"Instead of wasting daylight on chatter," she said, more breathless than she could have wished, "let us do what we came for." The Light sear her soul, she was a woman grown, not a girl meeting a prospective suitor for the first time. "Well?" she demanded. This time, her tone was suitably firm.

All of their agreements had been made in those careful letters, and all of their plans would have to be modified as they moved south and circumstances changed. This meeting had only one real purpose, a simple and ancient ceremony of the Borderlands that had been recorded only seven times in all the years since the Breaking. A simple ceremony that would commit them beyond anything words could do, however strong. The rulers moved their horses closer while the others drew back.

Ethenielle hissed as her belt knife slashed across her left palm. Tenobia laughed at cutting hers. Paitar and Easar might as well have been plucking splinters. Four hands reached out and met, gripped, heart's blood mingling, dripping to the ground, soaking into the stony dirt. "We are one, to the death," Easar said, and they all spoke with him. "We are one, to the death." By blood and soil, they were committed. Now they had to find Rand al'Thor. And do what needed to be done. Whatever the price.

Once she was sure that Turanna could sit up on the cushion unaided, Verin rose and left the slumped White sister sipping water. Trying to sip, anyway. Turanna's teeth chattered on the silver cup, which was no surprise. The tent's entryway stood low enough that Verin had to duck in order to put her head out. Weariness augered into her back when she bent. She had no fear of the woman shivering behind her in a coarse black woolen robe. Verin held the shield on her tight, and she doubted Turanna possessed enough strength in her legs at the moment to contemplate leaping on her from behind, even if such an incredible thought occurred to her. Whites just did not think that way. For that matter, in Turanna's condition, it was doubtful she would be able to channel a hair for several hours yet, even if she were not shielded.

The Aiel camp covered the hills that hid Cairhien, low earth-colored tents filling the space between the few trees left standing this close to the city. Faint clouds of dust hung in the air, but neither dust nor heat nor the glare of an angry sun bothered the Aiel at all. Bustle and purpose filled the camp to equal any city. Within her sight were men butchering game and patching tents, sharpening knives and making the soft boots they all wore, women cooking over open fires, baking, working small looms, looking after some of the few children in the camp. Everywhere white-robed *gai'shain* darted about carrying burdens, or stood beating rugs, or tended packhorses and mules. No hawkers or shopkeepers. Or carts and carriages, of course. A city? It was more like a thousand villages gathered in one spot, though men greatly outnumbered women and, except for the blacksmiths making their anvils ring, nearly every man not in white carried weapons. Most of the women did, as well.

The numbers certainly equaled one of the great cities', more than enough to envelope a few Aes Sedai prisoners completely, yet Verin saw a black-robed woman plodding away not fifty paces off, struggling to pull a waist-high pile of rocks behind her on a cowhide. The deep cowl hid her face, but no one in the camp except the captive sisters wore those black robes. A Wise One strolled along close to the hide, glowing with the Power as she shielded the prisoner, while a pair of Maidens flanked the sister, using switches to urge her on whenever she faltered. Verin wondered whether she had been meant to see. That very morning she had passed a wild-eyed Coiren Saeldain, sweat streaming down her face, with a Wise One and two tall Aielmen for escort and a large basket heaped with sand bending her back as she staggered up a slope. Yesterday it had been Sarene Nemdahl. They had set her moving handfuls of water from one hide bucket to another beside it, switched her to move faster, then switched her for every drop spilled when the water spilled because they were switching her to move faster. Sarene had stolen a moment to ask Verin why, though not as if she expected any answer. Verin certainly had not been able to supply one before the Maidens drove Sarene back to her useless labor.

She suppressed a sigh. For one thing, she could not truly like seeing sisters treated so, whatever the reasons or need, and for another, it was obvious that a fair number of the Wise Ones wanted. . . . What? For her to know that being Aes Sedai counted for nothing here? Ridiculous. That had been made abundantly clear days ago. Perhaps that she could be put into a black robe, too? For the time she thought she was safe from that, at least, but the Wise Ones hid a number of secrets she had yet to puzzle out, the smallest of them how their hierarchy worked. Very much the smallest, yet life and a whole skin lay wrapped inside that one. Women who gave commands sometimes took them from the very women they had been commanding earlier, and then later it was turned about again, all without rhyme or reason that she could see. No one ever ordered Sorilea, though, and in that might lie safety. Of a sort.

She could not help a surge of satisfaction. Early this morning in the Sun Palace, Sorilea had demanded to know what shamed wetlanders most. Kiruna and the other sisters did not understand; they made no real efforts to see what was happening out here, perhaps fearing what they might learn, fearing the strains knowledge might put on their oaths. They still struggled to justify taking the path fate had pushed them down, but Verin already had reasons for the path she followed, and purpose. She also had a list in her pouch, ready to hand to Sorilea when they were alone. No need to let the others know. Some of the captives she had never met, but she thought that for most women, that list summed up the weaknesses Sorilea was seeking.

Life was going to grow much more difficult for the women in black. And her own efforts would be aided no end, with luck.

Two great hulking Aielmen, each an axe handle wide across the shoulders, sat right outside the tent, seemingly absorbed in a game of cat’s cradle, but they had looked around immediately when her head appeared through the tentflaps. Coram had risen like a serpent uncoiling for all of his size, and Mendan waited only to tuck the string away. Had she been standing straight, her head barely would have reached the chest of either. She could have turned them both upside down and paddled them, of course. Had she dared. She had been tempted from time to time. They were her assigned guides, her protection against misunderstandings in the camp. And doubtless they reported everything she said or did. In some ways she would have preferred to have Tomas with her, but only some. Keeping secrets from your Warder was far more difficult than keeping them from strangers.

“Please tell Colinda that I’m done with Turanna Norill,” she told Coram, “and ask her to send Katerine Alruddin to me.” She wanted to deal first with the sisters who had no Warders. He nodded once before trotting off without speaking. These Aielmen were not much for civility.

Mendan settled into a crouch, watching her with startlingly blue eyes. One of them stayed with her no matter what she said. A strip of red cloth was tied around Mendan’s temples and marked with the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai. Like the other men who wore that, like the Maidens, he seemed to be waiting for her to make a mistake. Well, they were not the first, and a great way from the most dangerous. Seventy-one years had passed since she had last made a serious mistake.

She gave Mendan a deliberately vague smile and started to pull back into the tent, when suddenly something caught her eye and held her like a vise. If the Aielman had tried to cut her throat right then, she might not have noticed.

Not far from where she stood stooped over in the mouth of the tent, nine or ten women knelt in a row, rolling the grindstones on flat stone handmills much like those on any isolated farms. Other women brought grain in baskets and took away the coarse flour. The nine or ten women knelt in dark skirts and pale blouses, folded scarves holding their hair back. One, noticeably shorter than the rest, the only one with hair that did not hang to her waist or below, wore not even a single necklace or bracelet. She glanced up, the resentment on her sun-pinkened face sharpening as she met

Verin's gaze. Only for an instant, though, before she cringed hurriedly to her task.

Verin jerked back into the tent, her stomach roiling queasily. Irgain was Green Ajah. Or rather, had been Green, before Rand al'Thor stilled her. Being shielded dulled and fuzzed the bond to your Warder, but being stilled snapped it as surely as death. One of Irgain's two apparently had fallen over dead from the shock, and the other had died trying to kill thousands of Aiel without making any effort to escape. Very likely Irgain wished she also were dead. Stilled. Verin pressed both hands to her middle. She would *not* sick up. She had seen worse than a stilled woman. Much worse.

"There's no hope, is there?" Turanna muttered in a thick voice. She wept silently, staring into the silver cup in her trembling hands at something distant and horrifying. "No hope."

"There is always a way if you only look for it," Verin said, absently patting the woman's shoulder. "You must always look."

Her thoughts raced, and none touched Turanna. Irgain's stilling made her belly feel full of rancid grease, the Light knew. But what was the woman doing grinding grain? And dressed like the Aiel women! Had she been put to work just there so Verin could see? Foolish question; even with a *ta'veren* as strong as Rand al'Thor only a few miles away, there was some limit to the number of coincidences she would accept. Had she miscalculated? At worst, it could not be a large error. Only, small mistakes sometimes proved as fatal as large. How long could she hold out if Sorilea decided to break her? A distressingly short time, she suspected. In some ways, Sorilea was as hard as anyone she had ever met. And not a thing she could say that would stop it. A worry for another day. There was no point getting ahead of herself.

Kneeling, she put a little effort into comforting Turanna, but not too much. Soothing words that sounded as hollow to her as they did to Turanna, judging by the bleakness in her eyes. Nothing could change Turanna's circumstances except Turanna, and that had to come from within herself. The White sister just wept harder, making no sound as her shoulders shook, tears streaming down her face. The entry of two Wise Ones and a pair of young Aielmen who could not straighten up inside the tent was something of a relief. For Verin, anyway. She rose and curtsied smoothly, but none of them had any interest in her.

Daviena was a green-eyed woman with yellow-red hair, Losaine gray-eyed with dark hair that only showed glints of red in the sun, both head-and-shoulders taller than she, both wearing the expressions of women given a grimy task they wished on someone else. Neither could channel strongly enough to have any certainty of holding Turanna by herself, but they linked as though they had been forming circles all their lives, the light of *saidar* around one seeming to blend with that around the other despite the fact that they stood apart. Verin forced her face into a smile to keep from frowning. Where *had* they learned that? She would have wagered all she possessed that they had not known how only a few days ago.

Everything went quickly then, and smoothly. As the crouching men lifted Turanna to her feet by the arms, she let the silver cup fall. Empty, luckily for her. She did not struggle, which was just as well, considering that either could have carried her off under one arm like a sack of grain, but her mouth hung open, emitting a wordless keening. The Aiel paid no heed. Daviena, focusing the circle, assumed the shield, and Verin let go of the Source completely. None of them trusted her enough to let her hold *saidar* without a known reason, no matter what oaths she had sworn. Neither appeared to notice, but they surely would have had she held on. The men hauled Turanna away, her bare feet dragging across the layered carpets that floored the tent, and the Wise Ones followed them out. And that was that. What could be done with Turanna had been done.

Letting out a long breath, Verin sagged onto one of the bright, tasseled cushions. A fine golden ropework tray sat on the carpets next to her. Filling one of the mismatched silver cups from a pewter pitcher, she drank deeply. This was thirsty work, and tiring. Hours of daylight remained, yet she felt as if she had carried a heavy chest twenty miles. Over hills. The cup went back onto the tray, and she pulled the small, leather-bound notebook from behind her belt. It always took a little time for them to fetch those she asked for. A few moments to peruse her notes—and make some—would not be amiss.

There was no need for notes about the captives, but the sudden appearance of Cadsuane Melaidhrin, three days ago now, gave cause for concern. What *was* Cadsuane after? The woman's companions could be dismissed, but Cadsuane herself was a legend, and even the believable parts of the legend made her very dangerous indeed. Dangerous and unpredictable. She took a pen from the small wooden writing case she always carried, reached toward the stoppered ink bottle in its scabbard. And another Wise One entered the tent.

Verin scrambled to her feet so quickly that she dropped her notebook. Aeron could not channel at all, yet Verin made a much deeper curtsy for the graying woman than she had for Daviena and Losaine. At the bottom of her dip, she let go of her skirts to reach for her book, but Aeron's fingers reached it first. Verin straightened, calmly watching the taller woman thumb through the pages.

Sky blue eyes met hers. A winter sky. "Some pretty drawings and a great deal about plants and flowers," Aeron said coldly. "I see nothing concerning the questions you were sent to ask." She thrust the book at Verin more than handed it to her.

"Thank you, Wise One," Verin said meekly, tucking the book back safely behind her belt. She even added another curtsy for good measure, just as deep as the first. "I have the habit of noting down what I see." One day she would have to write out the cipher she used in her notebooks—a lifetime's worth of them filled cupboards and chests in her rooms above the White Tower library—one day, but she hoped not soon. "As for the . . . um . . . prisoners, so far they all say variations of the same thing. The *Car'a'carn* was to be housed in the Tower until the Last Battle. His . . . um . . . mistreatment . . . began because of an escape attempt. But you know that already, of course. Never fear, though; I'm sure I will learn more." All true, if not all of the truth; she had seen too many sisters die to risk sending others to the grave without a very good reason. The trouble was deciding what might cause that risk. The manner of young al'Thor's kidnapping, by an embassy supposedly treating with him, enraged the Aiel to the point of murder, yet what she called his "mistreatment" barely angered them at all as far as she could tell.

Gold and ivory bracelets clattered softly as Aeron adjusted her dark shawl. She peered down as though trying to read Verin's thoughts. Aeron seemed to stand high among the Wise Ones, and while Verin occasionally had seen a smile crease those dark-tanned cheeks, a warm and easy smile, it was never directed at an Aes Sedai. *We never suspected that* you *would be the ones to fail*, she had told Verin somewhat murkily. There had been nothing unclear in the rest of it, however. *Aes Sedai have no honor. Give me one hair of suspicion, and I will strap you till you cannot stand, with my own hands. Give me two hairs, and I will stake you out for the vultures and* *the ants*. Verin blinked up at her, trying to appear open. And meek; she must not forget meek. Docile, and compliant. She did not feel fear. In her time she had faced harder stares, from women—and men—without so much as Aeron's slim compunction about ending her life. But a good deal of effort had gone into being sent to ask those questions. She could not afford to waste it now. If only these Aiel let more show on their faces.

Abruptly she became aware that they were no longer alone in the tent. Two flaxen-haired Maidens had entered with a black-robed woman a hand shorter than either. They were half-holding her upright. At one side stood Tialin, a lanky redhead wearing a grim expression behind the light of *saidar*, shielding the black-robed prisoner. The sister's hair hung in sweat-soaked ringlets to her shoulders and strands that clung to her face, which bore so much dirt that Verin did not recognize her at first. High cheekbones, but not very high, a nose with just the hint of a hook to it, and the slightest tilt to the brown eyes. . . . Beldeine. Beldeine Nyram. She had instructed the girl in a few novice classes.

"If I may ask," she said carefully, "why was she brought? I asked for another." Beldeine had no Warder despite being Green—she had been raised to the shawl barely three years ago, and Greens were often especially choosy about their first—but if they started bringing whoever they selected, the next might have two or three Warders. She thought she could deal with two more today, but not if either had even one Warder. And she doubted they would give her a second chance at any of them.

"Katerine Alruddin escaped last night," Tialin nearly spat, and Verin *gasped*.

"You let her *escape?*" she burst out without thinking. Tiredness gave no excuse, but the words spilled from her tongue before she could stop them. "How could you be so foolish? She's Red! And neither a coward nor weak in the Power! The *Car'a'carn* could be in danger! Why were we not told of this when it happened?"

"It was not discovered until this morning," one of the Maidens growled. Her eyes could have been polished sapphires. "A Wise One and two *Cor Darei* were poisoned, and the *gai'shain* who brought them drink was found with his throat cut."

Aeron arched an eyebrow at the Maiden coldly. "Did she speak to you, Carahuin?" Both Maidens suddenly became engrossed in the task of keeping Beldeine on her feet. Aeron merely glanced at Tialin, but the red-haired Wise One lowered her gaze. Verin was the next recipient of those attentions. “Your concern for Rand al’Thor does you . . . honor,” Aeron said grudgingly. “He will be guarded. You have no need to know more. Or so much.” Abruptly her tone hardened. “But apprentices do not use that tone with Wise Ones, Verin Mathwin *Aes Sedai*.” The last words were a sneer.

Smothering a sigh, Verin all but fell into another deep curtsy, a part of her wishing she were even as slim as she had been on arriving in the White Tower. She was not really constructed for all this bending and bobbing. “Forgive me, Wise One,” she said humbly. Escaped! The circumstances made everything plain, to her if not to the Aiel. “Apprehension must have loosened my wits.” A pity she had no way to make sure Katerine met with a fatal accident. “I will do my best to remember in the future.” Not so much as the flicker of an eyelash told whether Aeron accepted that. “May I assume her shield, Wise One?”

Aeron nodded without looking at Tialin, and Verin quickly embraced the Source, taking up the shield Tialin released. It never ceased to amaze her that women who could not channel gave orders so freely to women who could. Tialin was not much weaker in the Power than Verin, yet she watched Aeron nearly as warily as the Maidens did, and when the Maidens hurried out of the tent at a gesture of Aeron’s hand, leaving Beldeine wavering where she stood, Tialin was only a step behind.

Aeron did not go, however, not immediately. “You will not speak of Katerine Alruddin to the *Car’a’carn*,” she said. “He has enough to occupy his thoughts without giving him trifles to worry over.”

“I will say nothing to him about her,” Verin agreed quickly. Trifles? A Red with Katerine’s strength was no trifle. Perhaps a note. It needed thought.

“Be certain to hold your tongue, Verin Mathwin, or you will use it to howl.”

There seemed nothing to say to that, so Verin concentrated on meekness and docility, making yet another curtsy. Her knees wanted to groan.

Once Aeron departed, Verin allowed herself a sigh of relief. She had been afraid Aeron intended to remain. Gaining permission to be alone with the prisoners had required nearly as much effort as getting Sorilea and Amys to decide they needed to be questioned, and by someone intimate with the White Tower. If they ever learned they had been guided to that decision. . . . It was a worry for another day. She seemed to be piling up a great many of those.

“There’s enough water to wash your face and hands, at least,” she told Beldeine mildly. “And if you wish, I will Heal you.” Every sister she had interviewed had carried at least a few welts. The Aiel did not beat the prisoners except for spilling water or balking at a task—the haughtiest words of defiance earned only scornful laughter, if that—but the black-robed women were herded like animals, a tap of the switch for go or turn or stop, and a harder tap if they did not obey quickly enough. Healing made other things easier, too.

Filthy, sweaty, wavering like a reed in the wind, Beldeine curled her lip. “I would rather bleed to death than be Healed by you!” she spat. “Maybe I should have expected to see you groveling to these wilders, these savages, but I never thought you would stoop to revealing Tower secrets! That ranks with treason, Verin! With rebellion!” She grunted contemptuously. “I suppose if you didn’t shy at that, you’ll stop at nothing! What else have you and the others taught them besides linking?”

Verin clicked her tongue irritably, not bothering to set the young woman straight. Her neck ached from looking up at Aiel—for that matter, even Beldeine stood a hand or more taller than she—her knees ached from curtsying, and entirely too many women who should know better had flung blind contempt and foolish pride at her today. Who should know better than an Aes Sedai that a sister had to wear many faces in the world? You could not always overawe people, or bludgeon them, either. Besides, far better to behave as a novice than be punished like one, especially when it earned you only pain and humiliation. Even Kiruna had to see the sense of that eventually.

“Sit down before you fall down,” she said, suiting her own words. “Let me guess what you’ve been doing today. By all that dirt, I’d say digging a hole. With your bare hands, or did they let you use a spoon? When they decide it’s finished, they will just make you fill it again, you know. Now, let me see. Every part I can see of you is grubby, but that robe is clean, so I expect they had you digging in your skin. Are you sure you don’t want Healing? Sunburn can be painful.” She filled another cup with water and wafted it across the tent on a flow of Air to hover in front of Beldeine. “Your throat must be parched.”

The young Green stared unsteadily at the cup for a moment; then suddenly her legs gave way and she collapsed onto a cushion with a bitter laugh. “They . . . *water* me frequently.” She laughed again, though Verin could not see the joke. “As much as I want, so long as I swallow it all.” Studying Verin angrily, she paused, then went on in a tight voice. “That dress looks very nice on you. They burned mine; I saw them. They stole everything except this.” She touched the golden Great Serpent around her left forefinger, a bright golden gleam among the dirt. “I suppose they couldn’t find quite enough nerve for that. I know what they’re trying to do, Verin, and it won’t work. Not with me, not with any of us!”

She was still on her guard. Verin set the cup down on the flowered carpet beside Beldeine, then took up her own and sipped before speaking. “Oh? What are they trying to do?”

This time, the other woman’s laugh was brittle as well as harsh. “Break us, and you know it! Make us swear oaths to al’Thor, the way you did. Oh, Verin, how could you? Swearing fealty! And worse, to a *man*, to *him!* Even if you could bring yourself to rebel against the Amyrlin Seat, against the White Tower . . .” She made the two sound much the same. “. . . how could you do *that*!”

For a moment Verin wondered whether things would be better if the women now held in the Aiel camp had been caught up as she had been, a woodchip in the millrace of Rand al’Thor’s *ta’veren* swirl, words pouring from her mouth before they had time to form in her brain. Not words she could never have said on her own—that was not how *ta’veren* affected you—but words she might possibly have said one time in a thousand under those circumstances, one time in ten thousand. No, the arguments had been long and hot over whether oaths given in that way had to be kept; and the arguments over how to keep them still continued. Much better as it was. Absently she fingered a hard shape inside her belt pouch, a small brooch, a translucent stone carved into what appeared to be a lily with too many petals. She never wore it, but it had not been out of her reach in nearly fifty years.

“You are *da’tsang*, Beldeine. You must have heard that.” She did not need Beldeine’s curt nod; telling the despised one was part of Aiel law, like pronouncing sentence. That much she knew, if very little more. “Your clothes, and anything else that would burn, were put to the fire because no Aiel would own anything that once belonged to a *da’tsang*. The rest was hacked to pieces or hammered into scrap, even the jewelry you had with you, and buried under a pit dug for a jakes."

"My . . . ? My horse?" Beldeine asked anxiously.

"They didn't kill the horses, but I don't know where yours is." Being ridden by someone in the city, probably, or perhaps given to an Asha'man. Telling her that might do more harm than good. Verin seemed to recall that Beldeine was one of those young women who had very deep feelings for horses. "They let you keep the ring to remind you of who you were, and increase your shame. I don't know whether they would let you swear to Master al'Thor if you begged. It would take something incredible on your part, I think."

"I won't! Never!" The words rang hollow, though, and Beldeine's shoulders slumped. She was shaken, but not sufficiently.

Verin put on a warm smile. A fellow had once told her that her smile made him think of his dear mother. She hoped he had not been lying about that, at least. He had tried to slide a dagger between her ribs a little later, and her smile had been the last thing he ever saw. "I can't think of the reason you would. No, I fear what you have to look forward to is useless labor. That's shaming, to them. Bone shaming. Of course, if they realize you don't see it that way. . . . Oh, my. I'll wager you didn't like digging without any clothes on, even with Maidens for guards, but think of, say, standing in a tent full of men that way?" Beldeine flinched. Verin prattled on; she had developed prattling to something of a Talent. "They'd only make you stand there, of course. *Da'tsang* aren't allowed to do anything useful unless there's great need, and an Aielman would as soon put his arm around a rotting carcass as. . . . Well, that's not a pleasant thought, is it? In any case, that's what you have to look forward to. I know you'll resist as long as you can, though I'm not sure what there is to resist. They won't try to get information out of you, or anything that people usually do with prisoners. But they won't let you go, not ever, until they're sure the shame is so deep in you there's nothing else left. Not if it takes the rest of your life."

Beldeine's lips moved soundlessly, but she might as well have spoken the words. *The rest of my life*. Shifting uncomfortably on her cushion, she grimaced. Sunburn or welts or simply the ache of unaccustomed work. "We will be rescued," she said finally. "The Amyrlin won't leave us. . . . We'll be rescued, or we'll—We *will* be rescued!" Snatching up the silver cup from beside her, she tilted her head back to gulp until it was empty, then thrust it out for more. Verin floated the pewter pitcher over and set it down so the young woman could pour for herself.

"Or you'll escape?" Verin said, and Beldeine's dirty hands jerked, splashing water down the sides of the cup. "Really, now. You have as much chance of that as you do of rescue. You're surrounded by an army of Aiel. And apparently al'Thor can call up a few hundred of those Asha'man whenever he wants, to hunt you down." The other woman shivered at that, and Verin nearly did. That little mess should have been stopped as soon as it started. "No, I fear you must make your own way, somehow. Deal with things as they are. You are quite alone in this. I know they don't let you speak to the others. Quite alone," she sighed. Wide eyes stared at her as they might have at a red adder. "There's no need to make it worse than it must be. Let me Heal you."

She barely waited for the other woman's pitiful nod before moving to kneel beside her and place hands on Beldeine's head. The young woman was almost as ready as she could be. Opening herself to more of *saidar*, Verin wove the flows of Healing, and the Green gasped and quivered. The half-filled cup dropped from her hands, and a flailing arm knocked the pitcher onto its side. Now she *was* as ready as she could be.

In the moments of confusion that gripped anyone after being Healed, while Beldeine still blinked and tried to come back to herself, Verin opened herself further, opened herself through the carved-flower *angreal* in her pouch. Not a very powerful *angreal*, but enough, and she needed every bit of the extra Power it gave her for this. The flows she began weaving bore no resemblance to Healing. Spirit predominated by far, but there was Wind and Water, Fire and Earth, the last of some difficulty for her, and even the skeins of Spirit had to be divided again and again, placed with an intricacy to boggle a weaver of fine carpets. Even if a Wise One poked her head into the tent, with the smallest of luck she would not possess the rare Talent needed to realize what Verin was doing. There would still be difficulties, perhaps painful difficulties one way and another, but she could live with anything short of true discovery.

"What . . . ?" Beldeine said drowsily. Her head would have lolled except for Verin's grip, and her eyelids were half-closed. "What are you . . . ? What is happening?"

“Nothing that will harm you,” Verin told her reassuringly. The woman might die inside the year, or in ten, as a result of this, but the weave itself would not harm her. “I promise you, this is safe enough to use on an infant.” Of course, that depended on what you did with it.

She needed to lay the flows in place thread by thread, but talking seemed to help rather than hinder. And too long a silence might rouse suspicion, if her twin guardians were listening. Her eyes darted frequently to the dangling doorflaps. She wanted some answers she had no intention of sharing, answers none of the women she questioned were likely to give freely even if they knew them. One of the smaller effects of this weave was to loosen the tongue and open the mind as well as any herb ever could, an effect that came on quickly.

Dropping her voice almost to a whisper, she continued. “The al’Thor boy seems to think he has supporters of some kind inside the White Tower, Beldeine. In secret, of course; they must be.” Even a man with his ear pressed to the fabric of the tent should be able to hear only that they were talking. “Tell me anything you know about them.”

“Supporters?” Beldeine murmured, attempting a frown that seemed beyond her ability. She stirred, though it hardly deserved the word agitation, feeble and uncoordinated. “For him? Among the sisters? It can’t be. Except for those of you who. . . . How could you, Verin? Why didn’t you fight it?”

Verin *tsked* vexedly. Not for the foolish suggestion that she should have fought a *ta’veren*. The boy seemed so certain. Why? She kept her voice low. “Do you have no suspicions, Beldeine? Did you hear no rumors before you left Tar Valon? No whispers? No one who hinted at approaching him differently? Tell me.”

“No one. Who could . . . ? No one would. . . . I admired Kiruna so.” There was a hint of loss in Beldeine’s sleepy voice, and tears leaking from her eyes made tracks through the dirt. Only Verin’s hands kept her sitting upright.

Verin continued to lay down the threads of her weaving, eyes flashing from her work to the doorflaps and back. She felt a little like sweating herself. Sorilea might decide she needed help with the questioning. She might bring out one of the sisters from the Sun Palace. Should any sister learn of this, stilling was a very real possibility. “So you were going to deliver him to Elaida neatly washed and well-behaved,” she said in a slightly louder tone. The quiet had gone on too long. She did not want that pair outside reporting that she was whispering with the prisoners.

“I couldn’t . . . speak out . . . against Galina’s decision. She led . . . by the Amyrlin’s command.” Beldeine shifted again, weakly. Her voice was still dreamy, but it picked up an agitated edge. Her eyelids fluttered. “He had to . . . be made . . . to obey! He had to be! Shouldn’t have been . . . treated so harshly. Like putting . . . him to . . . question. Wrong.”

Verin snorted. Wrong? Disastrous was more like it. A disaster from the first. Now the man looked at any Aes Sedai almost the way Aeron did. And if they had succeeded in carrying him to Tar Valon? A *ta’veren* like Rand al’Thor actually inside the White Tower? A thought to make a stone tremble. However it had turned out, disaster would surely have been too mild a word. The price paid at Dumai’s Wells was small enough, for avoiding that.

She went on asking questions in a tone that could be heard clearly by anyone listening outside. Asking questions she already had answers for, and avoiding those too dangerous to be answered. She paid little heed to the words coming out of her mouth or to Beldeine’s replies. Mainly she concentrated on her weaving.

A great many things had captured her interest over the years, not all strictly approved of by the Tower. Almost every wilder who came to the White Tower for training—both true wilders, who really had begun teaching themselves, and girls who merely had started touching the Source because the spark born in them had quickened on its own; for some sisters, there was no real difference—nearly every one of those wilders had created at least one trick for herself, and those tricks almost invariably fell under one of two headings. A way to listen in on other people’s conversations, or a way of making people do as they wanted.

The first, the Tower did not care much about. Even a wilder who had gained considerable control on her own quickly learned that as long as she wore novice white, she was not to so much as touch *saidar* without a sister or one of the Accepted standing over her. Which did tend to limit eavesdropping rather sharply. The other trick, however, smelled too akin to forbidden Compulsion. Oh, it was just a way to make Father give her dresses or trinkets he did not want to buy, or make Mother approve of young men she ordinarily ran off, things of that nature, but the Tower rooted the trick out most effectively. Many of the girls and women Verin had spoken to over the years could not make themselves form the weaves, much less use them, and a fair number could not even make themselves remember how. From bits and pieces and scraps of half-remembered weaves created by untrained girls for very limited purposes, Verin had reconstructed a thing forbidden by the Tower since its founding. In the beginning it had been simple curiosity on her part. *Curiosity*, she thought wryly, working at the weave on Beldeine, *has made me climb into more than one pickling kettle*. Usefulness came later.

“I suppose Elaida meant to keep him down in the open cells,” she said conversationally. The grill-walled cells were intended for men who could channel, as well as initiates of the Tower under close arrest, wilders who had claimed to be Aes Sedai, and anyone else who must be both confined and blocked off from the Source. “Not a comfortable place for the Dragon Reborn. No privacy. Do you believe he is the Dragon Reborn, Beldeine?” This time she paused to listen.

“Yes.” The word was a long hiss, and Beldeine rolled frightened eyes toward Verin’s face. “Yes . . . but he must . . . be kept . . . safe. The world . . . must be . . . safe . . . from him.”

Interesting. They had all said the world had to be kept safe from him; what was interesting was those who thought he needed protection, too. Some who had said that, surprised her.

To Verin’s eyes, the weave she had made resembled nothing so much as a haphazard tangle of faintly glowing transparent threads all bundled around Beldeine’s head, with four threads of Spirit trailing out of the mess. Two of those, opposite one another, she pulled, and the tangle collapsed slightly, falling inward, into something on the edge of order. Beldeine’s eyes shot open wide, staring into the far distance.

In a firm, low voice, Verin gave her instructions. More like suggestions, though she phrased them as commands. Beldeine would have to find reasons within herself to obey; if she did not, then all this had been so much wasted effort.

With the final words, Verin pulled the other two threads of Spirit, and the tangle collapsed further. This time, though, it fell into what seemed perfect order, a pattern more precise, more complicated than the most intricate lace, and complete, tied off by the same action that began its shrinking. This time, it continued to fall inward on itself, inward around Beldeine’s head. Those faintly glowing threads sank into her, vanished. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she began to thrash, limbs quivering. Verin held her as gently as she could, but Beldeine's head still whipped from side to side, and her bare heels drummed on the carpets. Soon, only the most careful Delving would tell that anything had been done, and not even that would identify the weave. Verin had tested that carefully, and if she did say so herself, none surpassed her at Delving.

Of course the thing was not truly Compulsion as ancient texts described it. The weaving went with painful slowness, cobbled together as it was, and there was that need for a reason. It helped a great deal if the object of the weave was emotionally vulnerable, but trust was absolutely essential. Even catching someone by surprise did no good if they were suspicious. That fact cut down its usefulness with men considerably; *very* few men lacked suspicion around Aes Sedai.

Distrust aside, men were very bad subjects, unfortunately. She could not understand why. Most of those girls' weaves had been intended for their fathers or other men. Any strong personality might begin to question his own actions—or even forget doing them, which led to another set of problems—but all things being equal, men were much more likely to. Much more likely. Perhaps it was the suspicion again. Why, once a man had even remembered the weaves being woven on him, if not the instructions she had given him. Such a lot of bother *that* caused! Not something she would risk again.

At last Beldeine's convulsions lessened, stopped. She raised a filthy hand to her head. "What—? What happened?" she said, almost inaudibly. "Did I faint?" Forgetfulness was another good point about the weave, not unexpectedly. After all, Father must not remember that you somehow made him buy that expensive dress.

"The heat is very bad," Verin said, helping her to sit up again. "I have felt light-headed myself once or twice today." From weariness, not heat. Handling that much of *saidar* took it out of you, especially when you had already done it four times today. The *angreal* did nothing to buffer the effects once you stopped using it. She could have used a steadying hand herself. "I think that's about enough. If you're fainting, perhaps they'll find something for you to do out of the sun." The prospect did not seem to cheer Beldeine at all.

Rubbing the small of her back, Verin stuck her head out of the tent. Coram and Mendan stopped their game of cat's cradle once more; there was no sign that either had listened, but she would not wager her life on it. She told them that she was finished with Beldeine and, after a moment's thought, added that she needed another pitcher of water since Beldeine had overturned hers. Both men's faces darkened beneath their tans. That would be passed along to the Wise One who came for Beldeine. It would serve as something more to help her reach her decision.

The sun still had a long way to fall to the horizon, but the ache in her back told her it was time to stop for the day. She could still do one more sister, but if she did, by morning she would feel it in every muscle. Her eyes fell on Irgain, now with the women carrying baskets to the handmills. How would her life have gone if she had not been so curious, Verin wondered. For one thing, she would have married Eadwin and remained in Far Madding instead of going to the White Tower. She would be long dead, for another, and the children she had never had, and her grandchildren, too.

With a sigh, she turned back to Coram. "When Mendan returns, would you go tell Colinda that I would like to see Irgain Fatamed?" The pain in her muscles tomorrow would be a small penance for Beldeine's suffering over that spilled water, but that was not why she did it, or even her curiosity, really. She still had a task. Somehow, she had to keep young Rand alive until it was time for him to die.

The room might have been in a grand palace, except that it had neither windows nor doors. The fire on a golden marble hearth gave no heat, and the flames did not consume the logs. The man seated at a table with gilded legs, centered on a silk carpet woven with glittering threads of gold and silver, cared little for the trappings of this Age. They were necessary to impress; no more. Not that he really needed more than himself to overawe the stiffest pride. He called himself Moridin, and surely no one had ever had more right to name himself Death.

From time to time he idly stroked one of the two mindtraps that hung on plain silken cords around his neck. At his touch, the blood-red crystal of the *cour'souvra* pulsed, swirls moving in endless depths like the beating of a heart. His real attention was on the game laid out before him on the table, thirty-three red pieces and thirty-three green arrayed across a playing surface of thirteen squares by thirteen. A re-creation of the early stages of a famous game. The most important piece, the Fisher, black-and-white like the playing surface, still waited in its starting place on the central square. A complex game, *sha'rah*, ancient long before the War of Power. *Sha'rah*, *tcheran*, and *no'ri*, the game now called simply "stones," each had adherents who claimed it encompassed all the subtleties of life, but Moridin had always favored *sha'rah*. Only nine people living even remembered the game. He had been a master of it. Much more complex than *tcheran* or *no'ri*. The first object was capture of the Fisher. Only then did the game truly begin.

A servant approached, a slim graceful young man clad all in white, impossibly handsome, bowing as he presented a crystal goblet on a silver tray. He smiled, but it did not touch his black eyes, eyes more lifeless than simply dead. Most men would have felt uncomfortable having that gaze on them. Moridin merely took the goblet and motioned the servant away. The vintners of this time produced some excellent wines. He did not drink, though.

The Fisher held his attention, baiting him. Several pieces had varying moves, but only the Fisher's attributes altered according to where it stood; on a white square, weak in attack yet agile and far-ranging in escape; on black, strong in attack but slow and vulnerable. When masters played, the Fisher changed sides many times before the end. The green-and-red goal-row that surrounded the playing surface could be threatened by any piece, but only the Fisher could move onto it. Not that he was safe, even there; the Fisher was never safe. When the Fisher was yours, you tried to move him to a square of your color behind your opponent's end of the board. That was victory, the easiest way, but not the only one. When your opponent held the Fisher, you attempted to leave him no choice for the Fisher but to move onto your color. Anywhere at all along the goal-row would do; holding the Fisher could be more dangerous than not. Of course, there was a third path to victory in *sha'rah*, if you took it before letting yourself be trapped. The game always degenerated in a bloody melee, then, victory coming only with complete annihilation of your enemy. He had tried that, once, in desperation, but the attempt had failed. Painfully.

Fury boiled suddenly in Moridin's head, and black flecks swam across his eyes as he seized the True Power. Ecstasy that amounted to pain thundered through him. His hand closed around the two mindtraps, and the True Power closed around the Fisher, snatching it into the air, a hair from crushing it to powder, crushing the powder out of existence. The goblet shattered in his hand. His grip bordered on crushing the *cour'souvra*. The *saa* were a blizzard of black, but they did not hinder his sight. The Fisher was always worked as a man, a bandage blinding his eyes and one hand pressed to his side, a few drops of blood dripping through his fingers. The reasons, like the source of the name, were lost in the mist of time. That troubled him sometimes, enraged him, what knowledge might be lost in the turnings of the Wheel, knowledge he needed, knowledge he had a right to. A right!

Slowly he set the Fisher back on the board. Slowly his fingers uncurled from around the *cour'souvra*. There was no need for destruction. Yet. Icy calm replaced rage in the blink of an eye. Blood and wine dripped from his gashed hand, unnoticed. Perhaps the Fisher did come from some dim remnant of a memory of Rand al'Thor, the shadow of a shadow. It did not matter. He realized he was laughing, and made no effort to stop. On the board, the Fisher stood waiting, but in the greater game, al'Thor moved already to his wishes. And soon, now. . . . It was very hard to lose a game when you played both sides of the board. Moridin laughed so hard that tears rolled down his face, but he was not aware of them.

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CHAPTER 1

To Keep the Bargain

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose above the great mountainous island of Tremalking. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

East the wind blew across Tremalking, where the fair-skinned Amayar farmed their fields, and made fine glass and porcelain, and followed the peace of the Water Way. The Amayar ignored the world beyond their scattered islands, for the Water Way taught that this world was only illusion, a mirrored reflection of belief, yet some watched the wind carry dust and deep summer heat where cold winter rains should be falling, and they remembered tales heard from the Atha'an Miere. Tales of the world beyond, and what prophecy said was to come. Some looked to a hill where a massive stone hand rose from the earth, holding a clear crystal sphere larger than many houses. The Amayar had their own prophecies, and some of those spoke of the hand and the sphere. And the end of illusions.

Onward the wind blew into the Sea of Storms, eastward beneath a searing sun in a sky abandoned by clouds, whipping the tops of green sea swells, battling winds from the south and westward winds, shearing and swirling as the waters below heaved. Not yet the storms of winter's heart, though winter should have been half gone, much less the greater storms of a dying summer, but winds and currents that could be used by ocean-faring folk to coast around the continent from World's End to Mayene and beyond, then back again. Eastward the wind howled, over rolling ocean where the great whales rose and sounded, and flying fish soared on outstretched fins two paces and more across, eastward, now whirling north, east and north, over small fleets of fishing ships dragging their nets in the shallower seas. Some of those fishermen stood gaping, hands idle on the lines, staring at a huge array of tall vessels and smaller that purposefully rode the wind's hard breath, shattering swells with bluff bows, slicing swells with narrow, their banner a golden hawk with talons clutching lightning, a multitude of streaming banners like portents of storm. East and north and on, and the wind reached the broad, ship-filled harbor of Ebou Dar, where hundreds of Sea Folk vessels rode as they did in many ports, awaiting word of the Coramoor, the Chosen One.

Across the harbor the wind roared, tossing small ships and large, across the city itself, gleaming white beneath the unfettered sun, spires and walls and color-ringed domes, streets and canals bustling with the storied southern industry. Around the shining domes and slender towers of the Tarasin Palace the wind swirled, carrying the tang of salt, lifting the flag of Altara, two golden leopards on a field of red and blue, and the banners of ruling House Mitsobar, the Sword and Anchor, green on white. Not yet the storm, but a harbinger of storms.

Skin prickled between Aviendha's shoulder blades as she strode ahead of her companions through palace hallways tiled in dozens of pleasing bright hues. A sense of being watched that she had last felt while still wed to the spear. *Imagination,* she told herself. *Imagination and knowing there are enemies about I cannot face!* Not so long ago that crawling sensation had meant someone might be intending to kill her. Death was nothing to fear—everyone died, today or on another—but she did not want to die like a rabbit kicking in a snare. She had *toh* to meet.

Servants scurried by close along the walls, bobbing bows and curtsies, dropping their eyes almost as if they understood the shame of the lives they lived, yet surely it could not be *them* that made her want to twist her shoulders. She had tried schooling herself to see servants, but even now, with the skin creeping on her back, her gaze slid around them. It had to be imagination, and nerves. This was a day for imagination and nerves.

Unlike the servants, rich silk tapestries snagged at her eye, and the gilded stand-lamps and ceiling lamps lining the corridors. Paper-thin porcelain in reds and yellows and greens and blues stood in wall niches and tall open-work cabinets alongside ornaments of gold and silver, ivory and crystal, scores upon scores of bowls and vases and caskets and statuettes. Only the most beautiful truly caught her gaze; whatever wetlanders thought, beauty held more worth than gold. There was much beauty here. She would not have minded taking her share of the fifth from this place.

Vexed with herself, she frowned. That was not an honorable thought beneath a roof that had offered her shade and water freely. Without ceremony, true, but also without debt or blood, steel or need. Yet better that than thinking about a small boy alone somewhere out in this corrupt city. Any city was corrupt—of that much she was certain, now, having seen some part of four—but Ebou Dar was the last where she would have let a child run loose. What she could not understand was why thoughts of Olver came unless she worked to avoid them. He was no part of the *toh* she had to Elayne, and to Rand al'Thor. A Shaido spear had taken his father, starvation and hardship his mother, yet had it been her own spear that took both, the boy was still a treekiller, Cairhienin. Why should she fret over a child from that blood? Why? She attempted to concentrate on the weave she was to make, but although she had practiced under Elayne's eye until she could have formed it sleeping, Olver's wide-mouthed face intruded. Birgitte worried about him even more than she, but Birgitte's breast held a strangely soft heart for small boys, especially ugly ones.

Sighing, Aviendha gave up trying to ignore her companions' conversation behind her, though irritation crackled through it like heat lightning. Even that was better than upsetting herself over a son of treekillers. Oathbreakers. A despised blood the world would be better off without. No concern or worry of hers. None. Mat Cauthon would find the boy in any case. He could find anything, it seemed. And listening settled her, somehow. The prickling faded away.

"I don't like it one bit!" Nynaeve was muttering, continuing an argument begun back in their rooms. "Not a bit, Lan, do you hear me?" She had announced her dislike at least twenty times already, but Nynaeve never surrendered just because she had lost. Short and dark-eyed, she strode fiercely, kicking her divided blue skirts, one hand rising to hover near her thick, waist-long braid, then thrust down firmly before rising again. Nynaeve kept a tight hold on anger and irritation when Lan was around. Or tried to. An inordinate pride filled her about marrying him. The close-fitting embroidered blue coat over her yellow-slashed silk riding dress hung open, showing far too much bosom in the wetlander way, just so she could display his heavy gold finger ring on a fine chain around her neck. “You have no right to promise to *take care* of me like that, Lan Mandragoran,” she went on firmly. “I am not a porcelain figurine!”

He paced at her side, a man of proper size, towering head and shoulders and more above her, the eye-wrenching cloak of a Warder hanging down his back. His face seemed hacked from stone, and his gaze weighed the threat in every servant who passed, examined every crossing corridor and wall niche for hidden attackers. Readiness radiated from him, a lion on the brink of his charge. Aviendha had grown up around dangerous men, but never one to match *Aan’allein*. Had death been a man, she would have been him.

“You are Aes Sedai, and I am a Warder,” he said in a deep, level voice. “Taking care of you is my duty.” His tone softened, conflicting sharply with his angular face and bleak, never-changing eyes. “Besides, caring for you is my heart’s desire, Nynaeve. You can ask or demand anything of me, but never to let you die without trying to save you. The day you die, I die.”

That last he had not said before, not in Aviendha’s hearing, and it hit Nynaeve like a blow to the stomach; her eyes started half out of her head, and her mouth worked soundlessly. She appeared to recover quickly, though, as always. Pretending to resettle her blue-plumed hat, a ridiculous thing like a strange bird roosting atop her head, she shot a glance at him from beneath the wide brim.

Aviendha had begun to suspect that the other woman often used silence and supposedly significant looks to cover ignorance. She suspected. Nynaeve knew little more about men, about dealing with one man, than she did herself. Facing them with knives and spears was much easier than loving one. Much easier. How did women manage being married to them? Aviendha had a desperate need to learn, and no idea how. Married to *Aan’allein* only a day, Nynaeve had changed much more than simply in trying to control her temper. She seemed to flit from startlement to shock, however much she attempted to hide it. She fell into dreaminess at odd moments, blushed at innocuous questions, and—she denied this fiercely, even when Aviendha had seen her—she giggled over nothing at all. There was no point in trying to learn anything from Nynaeve.

"I suppose *you're* going to tell me about Warders and Aes Sedai again, as well," Elayne said coolly to Birgitte. "Well, you and I aren't married. I expect you to *guard* my back, but I will *not* have you making promises about me *behind* it." Elayne wore garments as inappropriate as Nynaeve's, a gold-embroidered Ebou Dari riding dress of green silk, suitably high-necked but with an oval opening that bared the inner slopes of her breasts. Wetlanders spluttered at the mention of a sweat tent or being unclothed in front of *gai'shain*, then walked about half-exposed where any stranger could see. Aviendha did not really mind for Nynaeve, but Elayne was her near-sister. And would be more, she hoped.

The raised heels of Birgitte's boots made her almost a hand taller than Nynaeve, if still shorter than Elayne or Aviendha. In dark blue coat and wide green trousers, she carried herself with much of the same warily confident readiness as Lan, though it seemed more casual in her. A leopard lying on a rock, and not nearly so lazy as she appeared. There was no arrow nocked in the bow Birgitte carried, but for all her stroll and smiles, she could have a shaft out of the quiver at her waist before anyone could blink, and be loosing her third before anybody else could have fitted a second to bowstring.

She gave Elayne a wry grin and a shake of her head that swung a golden braid as long and thick as Nynaeve's dark one. "I promised to your face, not behind your back," she said dryly. "When you've learned a little more, I won't have to tell you about Warders and Aes Sedai." Elayne sniffed and lifted her chin haughtily, busying herself with the ribbons of her hat, which was covered with long green plumes and worse than Nynaeve's. "Perhaps a great deal more," Birgitte added. "You're tying another knot in that bow."

Had Elayne not been her near-sister, Aviendha would have laughed at the crimson that flooded her cheeks. Tripping someone who tried to walk too high was always fun, or watching it done, and even a short fall was worth a laugh. As it was, she leveled a firm stare at Birgitte, a promise that more might bring retribution. She liked the woman despite all her secrets, but the difference between a friend and a near-sister was a thing these wetlanders seemed unable to comprehend. Birgitte only smiled, glancing from her to Elayne, and murmured under her breath. Aviendha caught the word "kittens." Worse, it sounded *fond*. Everyone must have heard. Everyone!

"What's gotten into you, Aviendha?" Nynaeve demanded, prodding her shoulder with a stiff finger. "Do you intend to stand there blushing all day? We *are* in a hurry."

Only then did Aviendha realize by the heat in her face that she must be as red as Elayne. And standing still as stone besides, when they had need for haste. Cut by a word, like a girl newly wedded to the spear and unused to the banter among Maidens. She had almost twenty years, and she was behaving like a child playing with her first bow. That added flames to her cheeks. Which was why she all but leaped around the next turning and very nearly ran headlong into Teslyn Baradon.

Skidding awkwardly on red-and-green floor tiles, Aviendha half-fell backward, catching herself against Elayne and Nynaeve. This time she managed not to blush herself to fire, but she wanted to. She was shaming her near-sister as much as herself. Elayne always held her composure, no matter what. Luckily, Teslyn Baradon took the encounter little better.

The sharp-faced woman recoiled in surprise, gaping before she could stop herself, then shifting her narrow shoulders irritably. Gaunt cheeks and a narrow nose hid the ageless quality of the Red sister's features, and her red dress, brocaded in a blue that was nearly black, only made her appear bonier, yet she quickly gathered a clan roofmistress's self-possession, dark brown eyes as cool as deep shadows. They slid past Aviendha dismissively, ignoring Lan like a tool she had no use for, burned a brief moment at Birgitte. Most Aes Sedai disapproved of Birgitte being a Warder, though none could give a reason beyond sour mutters about tradition. Elayne and Nynaeve, however, the woman fixed by turns. Aviendha could have tracked yesterday's wind before reading anything on Teslyn Baradon's face now.

"I did already tell Merilille," she said in a thick Illianer accent, "but I may as well put your minds at rest, also. Whatever . . . mischief . . . you do be about, Joline and I will no interfere. I did see to that. Elaida may never learn of it, if you do have some care. Stop gaping at me like carp, children," she added with a grimace of distaste. "I be neither blind nor deaf. I do know of Sea Folk Windfinders in the palace, and secret meetings with Queen Tylin. And other things." That thin mouth tightened, and though her tone remained serene, her dark gaze flared with anger. "You will pay dearly yet for those other things, you and those who do allow you to play at being Aes Sedai, but I will look aside for now. Atonement can wait."

Nynaeve took a tight grip on her braid, back straight, head high, and her own eyes blazed. Under different circumstances Aviendha might have found some sympathy for the target of the tongue-lashing plainly about to erupt. Nynaeve's tongue carried more spines than a hair-needle *segade*, and sharper ones. Coldly, Aviendha considered this woman who thought she could look right through her. A Wise One did not stoop to thrashing someone with her fists, but she was still only an apprentice; perhaps it would not cost her *ji* if she just bruised this Teslyn Baradon a little. She opened her mouth to give the Red sister a chance to defend herself at the same instant Nynaeve opened hers, yet Elayne spoke first.

"What we are *about*, Teslyn," she said in a chill voice, "is none of your business." She, too, stood straight, her eyes blue ice; a chance ray of light from a high window caught her golden-red curls, seeming to set them afire. Right then, Elayne could have made a roof-mistress seem a goatherd with too much *oosquai* in her belly. It was a skill she honed well. She delivered each word with cold crystal dignity. "You have no right to interfere in anything we do, in anything that *any* sister does. No right whatsoever. So pull your nose out of our coats, you summer ham, and be glad we do not choose to take issue with *you* supporting a usurper on the Amyrlin Seat."

Perplexed, Aviendha glanced sideways at her near-sister. Pull her *nose* out of their *coats?* She and Elayne, at least, were not wearing coats. A summer ham? What did *that* mean? Wetlanders often said peculiar things, but the other women all looked as puzzled as she. Only Lan, staring at Elayne askance, appeared to understand, and he seemed . . . startled. And perhaps amused. It was difficult to tell; *Aan'allein* controlled his features well.

Teslyn Baradon sniffed, pinching her face even tighter. Aviendha was trying hard to call these people by only part of their names the way they themselves did—when she used a whole name, they thought she was upset!—but she could not begin to imagine being so intimate with Teslyn Baradon. "I will leave you foolish children to your *business,"* the woman growled. "Be sure you do no get *your* noses caught in a worse crack than they already do be."

As she turned to go, gathering her skirts grandly, Nynaeve caught her arm. Wetlanders usually let emotion gild their faces, and Nynaeve's was the image of conflict, anger struggling to break through fixed determination. “Wait, Teslyn,” she said reluctantly. “You and Joline may be in danger. I told Tylin, but I think she may be afraid to tell anyone else. Unwilling, anyway. It’s nothing anybody really wants to talk about.” She drew a long, deep breath, and if she was thinking of her own fears in the matter, she had cause. There was no shame in feeling fear, only in giving way to it, or letting it show. Aviendha felt a flutter in her own belly as Nynaeve went on. “Moghedien has been here in Ebou Dar. She might still be. And maybe another of the Forsaken, too. With a *gholam*, a kind of Shadowspawn the Power won’t touch. It looks like a man, but it was made, and made to kill Aes Sedai. Steel doesn’t seem to hurt it either, and it can squeeze through a mousehole. The Black Ajah is here, as well. And there’s a storm coming, a bad storm. Only it isn’t a storm, not weather. I can feel it; that’s a skill I have, a Talent, maybe. There’s danger headed for Ebou Dar, and trouble worse than any wind or rain or lightning.”

“The Forsaken, a storm that is no a storm, *and* some Shadowspawn I did never hear of before,” Teslyn Baradon said wryly. “Not to mention the Black Ajah. Light! The Black Ajah! And the Dark One himself, perhaps?” Her twisted smile was razor thin. She plucked Nynaeve’s hand from her sleeve contemptuously. “When you do be back in the White Tower where you belong, in white as you all truly belong, you will learn no to waste your hours with wild fancies. Or to carry your tales to sisters.” Running her eyes over them, and once more skipping past Aviendha, she gave a loud sniff and marched off down the hallway so quickly that servants had to leap from her path.

“That woman has the nerve to . . . !” Nynaeve spluttered, glaring after the retreating woman and strangling her braid with both hands. “After I *made* myself . . . !” She almost choked on her spleen. “Well, I tried.” And now regretted the attempt, by the sound.

“You did,” Elayne agreed with a sharp nod, “and more than she deserves. Denying that we’re Aes Sedai! I won’t put up with that anymore! I won’t!” Her voice had only seemed cold before; now it was cold, and grim.

“Can one like that be trusted?” Aviendha muttered. “Maybe we should be sure she cannot interfere.” She examined her fist; Teslyn Baradon would see *that*. The woman deserved to be caught by the Shadowsouled, by Moghedien or another. Fools deserved whatever their foolishness brought.

Nynaeve appeared to consider the suggestion, but what she said was "If I didn't know better, I'd think she was ready to turn on Elaida." She clicked her tongue in exasperation.

"You can dizzy yourself trying to read the currents in Aes Sedai politics." Elayne did not say Nynaeve should know that by now, but her tone did. "Even a Red *might* be turning against Elaida, for some reason we can't begin to imagine. Or she could be trying to make us lower our guard, so she can somehow trick us into putting ourselves into Elaida's hands. Or —"

Lan coughed. "If any of the Forsaken are coming," he said in a voice like polished stone, "they could be here any moment. Or that *gholam* could. In either case, it would be best to be elsewhere."

"With Aes Sedai, always a little patience," Birgitte murmured as though quoting. "But the Windfinders don't seem to have any," she continued, "so you might do well to forget Teslyn and remember Renaile."

Elayne and Nynaeve turned stares on the Warders cold enough to give ten Stone Dogs pause. Neither liked running from the Shadowsouled and this *gholam*, for all they were the ones who had decided there was no choice. Certainly neither liked being reminded that they needed to run to meet the Windfinders almost as much as to escape the Forsaken. Aviendha would have studied those looks—Wise Ones did with a glance or a few words what she had always needed the threat of spear or fist for, only they usually did it faster and with more success—she would have studied Elayne and Nynaeve, except that their glares had no visible effect on the pair at all. Birgitte grinned and cut her eyes toward Lan, who shrugged back at her with obvious forbearance.

Elayne and Nynaeve gave over. Unhurriedly, and unnecessarily, straightening their skirts, they each took one of Aviendha's arms before setting off again without so much as a glance to see that the Warders followed. Not that Elayne needed to, with the Warder bond. Or Nynaeve, if not for the same reason; *Aan'allein's* bond might belong to another, but his heart hung alongside his ring on that chain around her neck. They made a great show of strolling casually, unwilling to let Birgitte and Lan think they had been brought to hurry, yet the truth was, they did walk faster than before.

As if to make up for that, they chatted with deliberate idleness, choosing the most frivolous subjects. Elayne regretted not having a chance to truly see the Festival of Birds, just yesterday, and never gave a blush for the scant garments many people had worn. Nynaeve did not blush either, but she quickly began talking about the Feast of Embers, to be held that night. Some of the servants claimed there would be fireworks, supposedly made by a refugee Illuminator. Several traveling shows had come to the city with their strange animals and acrobats, which interested both Elayne and Nynaeve, since they had spent some time with such a show. They talked of seamstresses, and the varieties of lace available in Ebou Dar, and the different qualities of silk and linen that could be bought, and Aviendha found herself responding with pleasure to comments on how well her gray silk riding dress looked on her, and the other garments given to her by Tylin Quintara, fine woolens and silks, and the stockings and shifts to go with them, and jewelry. Elayne and Nynaeve also had received extravagant gifts. All together their presents filled a number of chests and bundles that had been carried down to the stables by servants, along with their saddlebags.

“Why are you scowling, Aviendha?” Elayne asked, giving her a pat on the arm and a smile. “Don’t worry. You know the weave; you will do just fine.”

Nynaeve leaned her head close and whispered, “I’ll fix you a tea when I have a chance. I know several that will soothe your stomach. Or any woman’s troubles.” She patted Aviendha’s arm, too.

They did not understand. No comforting words or teas would cure what ailed her. She was *enjoying* talk of *lace* and *embroidery!* She did not know whether to growl in disgust or wail in despair. She was growing soft. Never before in her life had she looked at a woman’s dress except to think where it might be hiding a weapon, never to notice the color and cut, or think how it would look on her. It was past time to be away from this city, away from wetlander palaces. Soon she would start simpering. She had not seen Elayne or Nynaeve do that, but everyone knew wetlander women simpered, and it was obvious she had become as weak as any milk-water wetlander. Strolling arm-in-arm, chatting about *lace!* How was she to reach her belt knife if someone attacked them? A knife might be useless against the likeliest assailants, but she had had faith in steel long before she knew she could channel. Should anyone try to harm Elayne or Nynaeve—especially Elayne, but she had promised Mat Cauthon to protect them both as surely as Birgitte and *Aan’allein* had—should anyone try, she would plant steel in their hearts. Lace! As they walked, she wept inside at how soft she had become.

Huge, paired stable doors fronted three sides of the palace’s largest stableyard, the doorways crowded by servants in green-and-white livery. Behind them in the white stone stables waited horses, saddled or loaded with wicker panniers. Seabirds wheeled and cried overhead, an unpleasant reminder of how much water lay nearby. Heat shimmered up from pale paving stones, but it was tension that thickened the air. Aviendha had seen blood spilled where there was less strain.

Renaile din Calon, in red and yellow silks, arms crossed arrogantly beneath her breasts, stood before nineteen more barefoot women with tattooed hands and brightly colored blouses, most in trousers and long sashes just as brilliant. Sweat glistening on dark faces did not lessen their grave dignity. Some sniffed at lacy gold boxes, filled with heavy scent, that hung about their necks. Five fat gold rings pierced each of Renaile din Calon’s ears, a chain from one dripping medallions as it ran across her left cheek to a ring in her nose. The three women close behind her each wore eight earrings and slightly fewer bits of dangling gold. That was how the Sea Folk marked rank among themselves, with the women at least. All deferred to Renaile din Calon, Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha’an Miere, but even the two apprentices at the rear, in dark trousers and linen blouses instead of silk, added their own golden shimmers to the air. When Aviendha and the others appeared, Renaile din Calon ostentatiously looked to the sun, past its noon peak. Her eyebrows climbed as she directed her gaze back to them, eyes black as her white-winged hair, a demanding stare of impatience so loud she might as well have shouted.

Elayne and Nynaeve stopped short, dragging Aviendha to an abrupt halt. They exchanged worried glances past her, and deep sighs. She did not see how they were to escape. Obligation bound her near-sister and Nynaeve hand and foot, and they themselves had tied the knots tight.

“I’ll see to the Knitting Circle,” Nynaeve muttered under her breath, and Elayne said, a little more stoutly, “I’ll make sure the sisters are ready.”

Releasing her arms, they went in opposite directions, holding their skirts up to step quickly and followed by Birgitte and Lan. That left her facing Renaile din Calon’s gaze alone, the eagle stare of a woman who knew she held the high ground and could not be dislodged. Fortunately, the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships quickly turned to her companions, so quickly that the ends of her long yellow sash swung wide. The other Windfinders gathered around her, intent on her quiet words. Hitting her even once would surely ruin everything. Aviendha tried not to glare at them, but as much she attempted to look elsewhere, her eyes returned. No one had the right to catch her near-sister in a cleft stick. Nose rings! A good grip on that chain, and Renaile din Calon Blue Star would wear a very different expression.

Clustered together at one end of the stableyard, tiny Merilille Ceandevin and four more Aes Sedai also regarded the Windfinders, most with annoyance ill-concealed behind cool serenity. Even slender white-haired Vandene Namelle and her mirror-image first-sister Adeleas, who usually looked the most imperturbable of them all. Now and then one or another adjusted a thin linen dust-cloak or brushed at divided silk skirts. Sudden gusts did raise a little dust and stir the color-shifting cloaks of the five Warders just at their backs, yet clearly annoyance moved their hands. Only Sareitha, standing guard over a large white disc-shaped bundle, did not twitch, but she frowned. Merilille's . . . maid . . . Pol, scowled from behind them. The Aes Sedai heatedly disapproved of the bargain that had brought the Atha'an Miere from their ships and given them a right to stare at Aes Sedai with demanding impatience, but that bargain tied the sisters' tongues and choked them on their own irritation. Which they tried to hide; they might have succeeded with the wetlanders. The third group of women, in a tight knot at the opposite end of the yard, earned almost as much of their study.

Reanne Corly and the other ten survivors of the Kin's Knitting Circle stirred uneasily under that disapproving scrutiny, dabbing their sweaty faces with embroidered handkerchiefs, adjusting their broad, colorful straw hats, smoothing sober woolen skirts sewn up on one side to expose layers of petticoats as bright as the Sea Folk's garb. In part it was the stares of the Aes Sedai that had them shifting from foot to foot; fear of the Forsaken and the *gholam* added to it, and so did other things. The narrow, plunging necklines of those dresses should have been enough. Most of these women showed at least a few lines on their cheeks, yet they looked like girls caught with their hands full of stolen nutbread. All but stout Sumeko, fists planted on broad hips, who met the Aes Sedai stare for stare. A bright glow of *saidar* surrounded one of their number, Kirstian, who kept glancing over her shoulder. With a pale face perhaps ten years older than Nynaeve's, she appeared out of place among the others. That face grew whiter every time her black eyes met those of an Aes Sedai.

Nynaeve hurried to the women who led the Kin, her face beaming encouragement, and Reanne and the others smiled with visible relief. Marred a little, true, by the sidelong glances they directed at Lan; him they regarded as the wolf he resembled. Nynaeve, however, was the reason Sumeko did not wilt like the rest whenever an Aes Sedai glanced in her direction. She had vowed to teach those women that they possessed backbones, though Aviendha did not completely understand why. Nynaeve was Aes Sedai herself; no Wise One would ever tell anyone to stand up to Wise Ones.

However well that might be working with respect to the other Aes Sedai, even Sumeko wore a slightly fawning air for Nynaeve. The Knitting Circle found it strange, to say the least, that women as young as Elayne and Nynaeve gave orders to the other Aes Sedai and were obeyed. Aviendha herself found it peculiar; how could strength in the Power, something you were born with as surely as your eyes, weigh more heavily than the honor that years could bring? Yet the older Aes Sedai did obey, and for the Kinswomen, that was enough. Ieine, nearly as tall as Aviendha herself and almost as dark as the Sea Folk, returned Nynaeve's every glance with an obsequious smile, while Dimana, white streaking her bright red hair, ducked her head constantly under Nynaeve's eyes, and yellow-haired Sibella hid nervous giggles behind a hand. Despite their Ebou Dari garments, only Tamarla, lean and olive-skinned, was Altaran, and not even from the city.

They parted as soon as Nynaeve came close, revealing a woman on her knees, wrists bound behind her, a leather sack covering her head, and her fine clothes torn and dusty. She was as much the reason for their uneasiness as Merilille's frowns or the Forsaken. Perhaps more.

Tamarla dragged the hood off, leaving the woman's thin, bead-studded braids tangled; Ispan Shefar tried to rise, and managed to reach an awkward crouch before she staggered and sank back down, blinking and giggling foolishly. Sweat ran down her cheeks, and a few bruises from her capture marred her ageless features. She had been treated too gently for her crimes, to Aviendha's mind.

The herbs Nynaeve had forced down the woman's throat still fogged her wits as well as weakening her knees, but Kirstian held a shield on her with every shred of the Power she could summon. There was no chance the Shadowrunner might escape—even had she not been dosed, Kirstian was as strong in the Power as Reanne, stronger than most Aes Sedai Aviendha had met—yet even Sumeko plucked her skirts nervously and avoided looking at the kneeling woman.

"Surely the sisters should have her, now." Reanne's high-pitched voice carried, unsteady enough to belong to the Black sister Kirstian shielded. "Nynaeve Sedai, we . . . we should not be guar—uh—in charge of . . . an Aes Sedai."

"That's right," Sumeko put in quickly. And anxiously. "The Aes Sedai should have her, now." Sibella echoed her, and nods and murmurs of agreement rippled through the Kinswomen. They believed in their bones that they stood far below Aes Sedai; very likely they would have chosen guarding Trollocs over holding an Aes Sedai.

The disapproving stares from Merilille and the other sisters changed once Ispan Shefar's face was revealed. Sareitha Tomares, who had worn her brown-fringed shawl only a few years and still did not have the ageless appearance, glared with a disgust that should have flayed the Shadowrunner at fifty paces. Adeleas and Vandene, hands tightening on their skirts, appeared to struggle with hatred for the woman who had been their sister and betrayed them. Yet the stares they gave the Knitting Circle were not that much better. They, too, knew in their hearts that the Kin stood a very long way below them. There was much more to it than that, but the betrayer had been one of their own, and no one but they had the right to her. Aviendha agreed. A Maiden who betrayed her spear-sisters did not die quickly or unshamed.

Nynaeve pulled the sack back down over Ispan Shefar's head with some force. "You've done well so far, and you'll continue to do well," she told the Kinswomen firmly. "If she shows signs of coming round, pour some more of that mixture down her. It'll keep her giddy as a goat full of ale. Hold her nose, if she tries not to swallow. Even an Aes Sedai will swallow if you hold her nose and threaten to box her ears."

Reanne's jaw dropped and her eyes sprang wide, like most of her companions'. Sumeko nodded, but slowly, and goggled nearly as much as the others. When Kinswomen said Aes Sedai, they might have been naming the Creator. The thought of holding an Aes Sedai's nose, even a Shadowrunner's, painted their faces with horror.

By the popping eyes among the Aes Sedai, they liked the notion even less. Merilille opened her mouth, staring at Nynaeve, but just then Elayne reached her, and the Gray sister rounded on her instead, sparing barely a single disapproving frown for Birgitte. It was a measure of her agitation that her voice rose rather than dropping; normally Merilille was very discreet. "Elayne, you must speak to Nynaeve. Those women are confused and frightened out of their wits already. It won't help if she upsets them even more. If the Amyrlin Seat really does intend to allow them to go to the Tower," she shook her head slowly, trying to deny that, and perhaps a great deal else, "if she does mean to, they must have a clear picture of their places, and—"

"The Amyrlin does," Elayne cut her off. From Nynaeve, a firm tone was a fist shaken under your nose; from Elayne, it was calm certainty. "They will have their chance to try again, and if they fail, they still will not be sent away. No woman who can channel will be cut off from the Tower again. They will all be a part of the White Tower."

Fingering her belt knife idly, Aviendha wondered about that. Egwene, Elayne's Amyrlin Seat, said much the same. She was a friend, too, but she had wrapped her heart around being Aes Sedai. Aviendha herself did not want to be part of the White Tower. She very much doubted that Sorilea or any other Wise One did, either.

Merilille sighed and folded her hands, yet for all her outward acceptance, she still forgot to lower her voice. "As you say, Elayne. But about Ispan. We simply cannot allow—"

Elayne raised a hand sharply. Command replaced mere certainty. "Cease, Merilille. You have the Bowl of the Winds to watch. That is enough for anyone. It *will* be enough for you."

Merilille opened her mouth, then closed it again and bowed her head slightly in acquiescence. Under Elayne's steady gaze, the other Aes Sedai bent theirs, too. If some displayed reluctance, however small, not all did. Sareitha hurriedly picked up the disc-shaped bundle, wrapped in layers of white silk, that had been lying by her feet. Her arms barely went all the way around as she held the Bowl of the Winds to her bosom, smiling anxiously at Elayne as if to show that she really was keeping a close eye on it.

The Sea Folk women stared hungrily at the bundle, almost leaning forward. Aviendha would not have been surprised to see them leap across the stones to seize the Bowl. The Aes Sedai saw the same, plainly. Sareitha clutched the white parcel more tightly, and Merilille actually stepped between her and the Atha'an Miere. Smooth Aes Sedai faces tightened with the effort of remaining expressionless. They believed the Bowl should belong to them; *all* things that used or manipulated the One Power belonged to the White Tower in their eyes, no matter who happened to possess them at the moment. But there was the bargain.

"The sun moves, Aes Sedai," Renaile din Calon announced loudly, "and danger threatens. So you maintain. If you think to worm free in some fashion by delaying, think twice and again. Try to break the bargain, and by my father's heart, I will return to the ships at once. And claim the Bowl for redress. It was ours from the Breaking."

"You watch your tongue with Aes Sedai," Reanne barked, scandalized indignation from her blue straw hat to the stout shoes peeking from beneath her green-and-white petticoats.

Renaile din Calon's mouth curled into a sneer. "The jellyfish have tongues, it seems. A surprise they can use them, though, when no Aes Sedai gave permission."

In an instant the stableyard was full of shouted insults flying between Kin and Atha'an Miere, "wilder" and "spineless" and growing worse, strident cries that buried Merilille's attempts to hush Reanne and her companions on one hand and soothe the Sea Folk on the other. Several Windfinders stopped fingering the daggers thrust behind their sashes and gripped hilts instead. The glow of *saidar* sprang up around first one then another of the brightly clad women. The Kinswomen looked startled, though it did not slow their tirade, but Sumeko embraced the Source, then Tamarla, then willowy, doe-eyed Chilares, and soon every one of them and every one of the Windfinders shone while words flew and tempers boiled.

Aviendha wanted to groan. Any moment blood would begin to flow. She would follow Elayne's lead, but her near-sister was glaring cold fury at Windfinders and Knitting Circle alike. Elayne had small patience with stupidity, in herself or others, and shouting insults when an enemy might be coming was the worst sort. Aviendha took a firm grip on her belt knife, then after a moment embraced *saidar*; life and joy filled her to near weeping. Wise Ones only used the Power when words had failed, but neither words nor steel would do here. She wished she had some idea of who to kill first.

"Enough!" Nynaeve's piercing shriek sliced the words short on every tongue. Astonished faces swiveled toward her. Her head swung dangerously, and she stabbed a finger at the Knitting Circle. "Stop behaving like children!" Although she had moderated her tone, it was by hairs. "Or do you mean to squabble until the Forsaken come to scoop up the Bowl *and* us? And you," that finger thrust at the Windfinders, "stop trying to wriggle out of your agreement! You won't get the Bowl until you've met every last word! Don't think you will!" Nynaeve swung round on the Aes Sedai. "And you . . . !" Met by cool surprise, her flow of words tapered off into a sour grunt. The Aes Sedai had not joined in the shouting except to try quieting it. None shone with the light of *saidar*.

That was not enough to calm Nynaeve completely, of course. She tugged fiercely at her hat, plainly still full of anger she wanted to loose. But the Kinswomen were staring at the paving stones in red-faced chagrin, and even the Windfinders appeared a little abashed—a little—muttering to themselves yet refusing quite to meet Nynaeve's glare. The glow winked out around one woman after another, until only Aviendha still held to the Source.

She gave a start as Elayne touched her arm. She *was* getting soft. Letting people sneak up on her, jumping at a touch.

"This crisis seems to be weathered," Elayne murmured. "Perhaps it's time to go before the next breaks out." A touch of color in her cheeks was the only sign that she had ever been angry. And a bit in Birgitte's; the two reflected one another in some ways since the bonding.

"Past time," Aviendha agreed. Much longer, and she would *be* a milk-hearted wetlander.

Every eye followed as she walked out into the open space in the center of the stableyard, to the spot she had studied and felt until she knew it with her eyelids closed. There was a joy in holding the Power, a joy in working *saidar*, that she could not have put into words. To contain *saidar*, to be contained by it, was to seem alive beyond any other time. A delusion, the Wise Ones said, as false and dangerous as a mirage of water in the Termool, yet it seemed more real than the paving stones beneath her feet. She fought the urge to draw more; already she held nearly as much as she could. Everyone crowded close as she began to weave the flows.

That there were things many Aes Sedai could not do still startled Aviendha, after all she had seen. Several of the Knitting Circle were strong enough, but only Sumeko and, surprisingly, Reanne openly studied what she was doing. Sumeko went so far as to shrug off the encouraging pats

Nynaeve tried to give her—which earned a look of startled indignation from Nynaeve that Sumeko, her gaze fixed on Aviendha, never saw. All of the Windfinders had sufficient strength. They watched as hungrily as they had stared at the Bowl. The bargain gave them every right.

Aviendha focused, and the flows wove together, creating identity between this place and the place she and Elayne and Nynaeve had chosen on a map. She gestured as though opening tentflaps. That was no part of the weave Elayne had taught her, but it was almost all she could recall of what she herself had done, long before Egwene made her first gateway. The flows coalesced into a silvery, vertical slash that rotated and became an opening in the air, taller than a man and just as wide. Beyond lay a large clearing surrounded by trees twenty or thirty feet high, miles north of the city, on the far side of the river. Knee-high brown grass came right up to the gateway, swaying through in a small breeze; it had not truly turned, only seemed to. Some of those blades were sliced cleanly, though, some lengthwise. The edges of an opening gateway made a razor seem dull.

The gateway filled her with dissatisfaction. Elayne could make this weave with only a part of her strength, yet for some reason it required all but a fraction of Aviendha's. She was sure she could have woven a larger, as large as Elayne could, using the weaves she had made without thought while trying to escape Rand al'Thor what seemed a very long time ago, but no matter how often she tried, only scraps came back to her. She felt no envy—rather, she took pride in her near-sister's accomplishments—but her own failure made shame surge in her heart. Sorilea or Amys would be hard on her, if they knew that. About the shame. Too much pride, they would call it. Amys should understand; she had been a Maiden. There *was* shame in failing at what you should be able to do. If she had not had to hold the weave, she would have run away so no one could see her.

The departure had been carefully planned, and the whole stableyard sprang into motion as soon as the gateway opened fully. Two of the Knitting Circle pulled the hooded Shadowrunner to her feet, and the Windfinders hurriedly formed a line behind Renaile din Calon. The servants began bringing horses out of the stables. Lan, Birgitte, and one of Careane's Warders, a lanky man called Cieryl Arjuna, immediately darted through the gateway, one behind the other. Like *Far Dareis Mai*, Warders always claimed the right to scout ahead. Aviendha's feet itched to run after them, but there was no point. Unlike Elayne, she could not move more than five or six steps without this weave beginning to weaken, and the same if she tried to tie it off. It was very frustrating.

This time there was no real expectation of danger, so the Aes Sedai followed immediately, Elayne and Nynaeve as well. Farms dotted that treed area thickly, and a wandering shepherd or a young couple seeking privacy might need guidance away from seeing too much, but no Shadowsouled or Shadowrunner could know that clearing; only she, Elayne, and Nynaeve did, and they had not spoken in the choosing, for fear of eavesdroppers. Standing in the opening, Elayne gave Aviendha a questioning look, but Aviendha motioned her to go on. Plans were meant to be followed unless there was reason to change them.

The Windfinders began filing slowly through to the clearing, each suddenly irresolute as she approached this thing she had never dreamed of, taking a breath before she entered. And abruptly, the prickling returned.

Aviendha's eyes rose to the windows overlooking the stableyard. Anyone might be hidden behind the white screens of intricate wrought iron and piercework carving. Tylin had ordered the servants to stay away from those windows, but who would stop Teslyn, or Joline, or. . . . Something made her look higher, to the domes and towers. Narrow walks ringed some of those slim spires, and on one, very high, was a black shape haloed by a sharp nimbus from the sun behind. A man.

Her breath caught. Nothing in his stance, hands on the stone railing, spoke of danger, yet she knew he was the one who put that crawling between her shoulder blades. One of the Shadowsouled would not stand there simply watching, but that creature, that *gholam*. . . . Ice formed in her belly. He could be just a palace servant. He could be, but she did not believe it. No shame in knowing fear.

Anxiously she glanced at the women still edging through the gateway with agonizing slowness. Half the Sea Folk were gone, and the Knitting Circle waited behind the rest with the Shadowrunner firmly in hand, their own unease at the passage warring with resentment that the Sea Folk women were allowed to go first. If she voiced her suspicions, the Kinswomen surely would run—mere mention of the Shadowsouled dried their mouths and turned their bowels to water—while the Windfinders might well try to claim the Bowl straightaway. With them, the Bowl stood above anything else. But only a blind fool stood scratching herself while a lion crept up on the herd she had been set to guard. She caught one of the Atha’an Miere by a red silk sleeve.

“Tell Elayne—” A face like smooth black stone turned to her; the woman somehow made full lips seem thin; her eyes were black pebbles, flat and hard. What message could she send that would not bring down all the troubles she feared from them? “Tell Elayne and Nynaeve to be wary. Tell them enemies always come when you least want them. You must say this to her, without fail.” The Windfinder nodded with barely concealed impatience, but surprisingly, she waited for Aviendha to release her before making her hesitant way through the gateway.

The walk up on the tower stood empty. Aviendha felt no relief. He could be anywhere. Making his way down to the stableyard. Whoever he was, whatever he was, he *was* dangerous; this was *not* a dust-funnel dancing in her imagination. The last four Warders had formed a square around the gateway, a guard who would be last to leave, and much as she despised their swords, she was grateful that someone there besides herself knew the use of sharp metal. Not that they would have any more chance against a *gholam*, or worse, one of the Shadowsouled, than the servants waiting with the horses. Or than she herself.

Grimly she drew the Power, until the sweetness of *saidar* grew near to pain. A hair beyond, and pain would almost become blinding agony for the moments needed to die or lose the ability completely. Would those shuffling women quicken their feet! No shame in feeling fear, but she was very much afraid that hers was painted on her face.

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CHAPTER 2

Unweaving

Elayne stepped to one side as soon as she was through the gateway, but Nynaeve trampled across the clearing, kicking up brown grasshoppers from the dead grass and peering this way and that for evidence of the Warders. Of one Warder, anyway. A bright red bird flashed across the clearing and was gone. Nothing else moved except the sisters; a squirrel barked somewhere in the mostly leafless trees, and then there was silence. To Elayne it seemed impossible those three could have passed this way without leaving paths as wide as that behind Nynaeve, yet she could not make out any sign that they had been there at all.

She sensed Birgitte somewhere off to her left, roughly southwest she thought, and feeling quite content, clearly in no immediate danger. Careane, part of a protective circle gathered around Sareitha and the Bowl, cocked her head almost as if listening. Apparently her Cieryl was to the southeast. Which meant Lan was north. Oddly enough, north was the direction Nynaeve had settled down to watch, all the while muttering under her breath. Perhaps being married had created some sense of him in her. More likely, she had noticed a track that escaped Elayne. Nynaeve was as skilled at woodscraft as she was with herbs.

From where Elayne stood at first, Aviendha was clearly visible through the gateway, studying the palace rooftops as if she expected an ambush. By her stance, she could have been carrying spears, ready to leap into battle in her riding dress. She made Elayne smile, hiding how distressed she was about her problems with the gateway, so much braver than she herself. But at the same time she could not help worrying. Aviendha *was* brave, and no one Elayne knew was better able to keep her head. She also might decide that *ji'e'toh* required her to fight when there was no chance except in running. The light around her shone so brightly it was obvious she could not draw much more of *saidar*. If one of the Forsaken did appear. . . .

I should have stayed with her. Elayne rejected the thought immediately. Whatever excuse she gave, Aviendha would know the truth, and she was touchy as a man, sometimes. Most of the time. Especially when it bore upon her honor. With a sigh, Elayne let the Atha'an Miere crowd her farther from the gateway as they filed through. She stayed close enough to hear any shout on the other side, though. Close enough to leap to Aviendha's aid in a heartbeat. And for another reason.

The Windfinders came through in order of rank, striving to keep their faces smooth, but even Renaile relaxed tight shoulders once her bare feet were beating down the tall brown grass. Some gave a little shiver, quickly suppressed, or glanced back with round eyes at the opening hanging in midair. One and all, they stared at Elayne suspiciously as they stepped by her, and two or three opened their mouths, perhaps to ask what she was doing, perhaps to ask—or tell—her to move. She was just as glad that they hurried on in obedience to Renaile's curt urgings. They would have their chance to tell Aes Sedai what to do soon enough; it did not have to start with her.

That thought made her stomach sink, and the number of them made her shake her head. They had the knowledge of weather to use the Bowl properly, yet even Renaile agreed—if reluctantly—that the more Power directed through the Bowl, the better the chances of being able to heal the weather. It must be directed with a precision impossible except for one woman alone or a circle, though. A full circle of thirteen it had to be. That thirteen certainly would include Nynaeve and Aviendha and Elayne herself, and probably a few of the Kin, but Renaile plainly intended to jump on the part of the bargain that said they would be allowed to learn any abilities the Aes Sedai could teach. The gateway had been the first, and forming a circle would be the second. A wonder she had not brought every Windfinder in the harbor. Imagine trying to deal with three or four hundred of these women! Elayne offered a small prayer of thanks that there were only twenty.

She was not standing there to count them, though. As each Windfinder passed, barely more than a pace away, she let herself feel the woman’s strength in the Power. Earlier there had been time to get close enough to only a handful, what with all the trouble of convincing Renaile to come at all. Apparently achieving rank among the Windfinders had nothing to do with either age or strength; Renaile was far from the strongest even in the first three or four, while one woman toward the rear, Senine, had weathered cheeks and thickly grayed hair. Strangely, by the marks in her ears it seemed that Senine might once have worn more than six earrings, and thicker ones than she did now.

Elayne sorted and stored away faces and the names she knew with a growing sense of complacency. The Windfinders might have secured an upper hand of sorts, and she and Nynaeve might be in deep trouble, very deep, with both Egwene and the Hall of the Tower once the terms of their bargain became known, but none of these women would stand particularly high among Aes Sedai. Certainly not low, but not high. She told herself not to feel smug—it changed nothing in what they had agreed—yet it was very hard not to. These were the best the Atha’an could produce, after all. Here in Ebou Dar, anyway. And if they had been Aes Sedai, every one of them, from Kurin, with her stony black stare, to Renaile herself, would have listened when she spoke and stood when she entered a room. If they were Aes Sedai and behaving as they should.

And then the end of the line appeared, and she gave a start as a young Windfinder off one of the smaller ships passed her, a round-cheeked woman called Rainyn, in plain blue silks, with barely a half-dozen ornaments hanging from her nose chain. The two apprentices, boyishly slim Talaan and big-eyed Metarra, scurried at the very tail with harried expressions. They had not earned the nose ring yet, much less the chain, and only a single thin gold earring in the left ear balanced the three in the right. Her eyes followed the three of them just short of staring. Perhaps not short of it, at that.

The Atha’an Miere clustered with Renaile again, most, like her, glaring hungrily at the Aes Sedai and the Bowl. The last three women stood at the rear, the apprentices with the air of those uncertain whether they had a right to be there at all, Rainyn folding her arms in imitation of Renaile, yet doing little better than the other two. The Windfinder on a darter, the least of the Sea Folk vessels, likely seldom found herself in company with the Windfinder to her clan Wavemistress, not to mention the Windfinder to the

Mistress of the Ships. Rainyn was easily as strong as Lelaine or Romanda, and Metarra on a level with Elayne herself, while Talaan. . . . Talaan, so meek in her red linen blouse, with eyes that seemed permanently downcast, came very close to Nynaeve. Very close. More, Elayne knew she herself had not yet reached her full potential, and neither had Nynaeve. How close were Metarra and Talaan? She had grown accustomed to knowing that only Nynaeve and the Forsaken were stronger than she. Well, Egwene, but she had been forced, and her own potential, and Aviendha's, matched Egwene's. *So much for complacency,* she told herself ruefully. Lini would have said it was what she deserved for taking things for granted.

Laughing softly at herself, Elayne turned back to check on Aviendha, but the Knitting Circle stood rooted to one spot in front of the gateway, twitching at cold stares from Careane and Sareitha. All but Sumeko, and she did not move away either for all that she had met the sisters' gazes. Kirstian appeared ready to burst into tears.

Suppressing a sigh, Elayne herded the Kinswomen out of the way of the stable folk waiting to bring the horses through. The Knitting Circle went along like sheep—she was the shepherd, Merilille and the rest the wolves—and they would have moved faster if not for Ispan.

Famelle, one of only four among the Knitting Circle without a touch of gray or white in her hair, and Eldase, a fierce-eyed woman when she was not looking at an Aes Sedai, held Ispan by the arms. They could not seem to decide between holding her firmly enough to keep her upright and not clutching her too tightly, with the result that the Black sister moved in a bobbing fashion, sagging halfway to her knees when they loosened their grips, then pulled back up just before she fell completely.

"Forgive me, Aes Sedai," Famelle kept murmuring to Ispan with a faint Taraboner accent. "Oh, I am sorry, Aes Sedai." Eldase winced and gave a little moan every time Ispan stumbled. Just as if Ispan had not helped murder two of their number and the Light alone knew how many others. They were fussing over a woman who was going to die. The killings in the White Tower that Ispan had conspired at were enough to condemn her by themselves.

"Take her over there somewhere," Elayne told them, waving away from the gateway into the clearing. They obeyed, bobbing curtsies and nearly dropping Ispan, murmuring apologies to Elayne and to the hooded prisoner. Reanne and the rest scurried along, anxiously eyeing the sisters around Merilille.

Almost immediately the war of glares started up again, the Aes Sedai at the Kinswomen, the Knitting Circle at the Windfinders, and the Atha'an Miere at anybody their eyes fell on. Elayne clamped her teeth shut. She was *not* going to shout at them. Nynaeve always got better results with yells, anyway. But she did want to shake some sense into every one of them, shake them until their teeth rattled. Including Nynaeve, who was supposed to be getting everyone organized instead of staring into the trees. But what if it had been Rand who was going to die unless she could find a way to save him?

Suddenly tears trembled on the edge of falling, stinging her eyes. Rand *was* going to die, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. *Peel the apple in your hand, girl, not the one on the tree*, Lini's thin voice seemed to whisper in her ear. *Tears are for after; they just waste time before*.

"Thank you, Lini," Elayne murmured. Her old nurse was an irritating woman sometimes, never admitting that any of her charges had really grown up, but her advice was always good. Just because Nynaeve was slacking her duties was no reason for Elayne to slack hers.

Servants had started trotting horses through right on the heels of the Knitting Circle, beginning with the packhorses. None of those first animals carried anything so frivolous as clothes. They could walk if the riding horses needed to be abandoned on the other side of the gateway, and wear what they stood up in if the rest of the pack animals had to be left behind, but what was on those first horses could not be left for the Forsaken. Elayne motioned the leather-cheeked woman leading the very first to follow her aside, out of the way of the others.

Untying and tossing back the stiff canvas cover on one of the wide wicker panniers revealed a great heap of what appeared to be rubbish stuffed in every which way, right up to the top, some of it wrapped in cloth that was falling to pieces. The greater part of it probably was rubbish. Embracing *saidar*, Elayne began sorting. A rusted breastplate quickly went onto the ground, along with a broken table leg, a cracked platter, a badly dented pewter pitcher, and a bolt of rotted, unidentifiable cloth that almost broke apart in her hands.

The storeroom where they found the Bowl of the Winds had been stuffed full, things that should have been on a refuse heap jumbled in with more objects of the Power than just the Bowl, some in beetle-riddled casks or chests, some carelessly stacked. For hundreds and hundreds of years the Kin had hidden away all things they found that were connected to the Power, fearful of using them and fearful of delivering them to Aes Sedai. Until that very morning. This was the first chance Elayne had had to see what was worth keeping. The Light send that the Darkfriends had not gotten away with anything important; they had taken some, but certainly less than a quarter of what the room had held, rubbish included. The Light send she found something they could use. People had died to bring these things out of the Rahad.

She did not channel, just held the Power as she lifted each item. A chipped clay cup, three broken plates, a child's moth-eaten dress, and an old boot with a hole worn through the side all fell to the ground. A stone carving a little larger than her hand—it *felt* like stone; it *might* have been a carving, though it did not exactly look carved, for some reason—all deep blue curves vaguely like roots. It seemed to warm faintly at her touch; it held a . . . resonance . . . to *saidar*. That was the closest word she could think of. What it was meant to do, she had no idea, but it was a *ter'angreal* without any doubt. It went on the other side of her, away from the pile of rubbish.

The heap of refuse continued to grow, but so did the other, if more slowly, things that had nothing in common except the faint warmth and the sense of echoing the Power. A small box that felt like ivory, covered in wavering red and green stripes; she set it down carefully without opening the hinged lid. You could never tell what might trigger a *ter'angreal*. A black rod no thicker than her little finger, a pace in length, stiff yet so flexible she thought she could have doubled it into a circle. A tiny stoppered vial that might have been crystal, with a dark red liquid inside. The figure of a stout, bearded man with a jolly smile, holding a book; two feet tall, it appeared to be age-darkened bronze and took both of her hands to move. Other things. Most was trash, though. And none was what she truly wanted. Not yet.

"Is this the time to be doing that?" Nynaeve asked. She straightened hastily from the small cluster of *ter'angreal*, grimacing and rubbing her hand on her skirt. "That rod feels like . . . pain," she muttered. The hard-faced woman holding the packhorse's head blinked at the rod and edged away.

Elayne eyed the rod—Nynaeve's occasional impressions about objects she touched could be useful—but she did not stop sorting. There had been too much pain lately to need any more, surely. Not that what Nynaeve sensed was always that straightforward. The rod might have been present when a great deal of pain was caused without being the cause in itself. The pannier was almost empty; some of what was on the other side of the horse would have to be shifted to balance the weight. "If there's an *angreal* in this somewhere, Nynaeve, I would like to find it before Moghedien taps one of us on the shoulder."

Nynaeve grunted sourly, but she peered into the wicker basket.

Dropping another table leg—that made *three,* none of which matched—Elayne spared a glance for the clearing. All of the packhorses were out, and the mounts were coming through the gateway, now, filling the open space between the trees with bustle and confusion. Merilille and the other Aes Sedai already sat their saddles, barely concealing their impatience to be off, while Pol fussed hurriedly with her mistress's saddlebags, but the Windfinders.

Graceful afoot, graceful on their ships, they were unused to horses. Renaile was trying to mount from the wrong side, and the gentle bay mare chosen for her danced slow circles around the liveried man who was gripping the bridle with one hand while tugging his hair in frustration with the other and vainly trying to correct the Windfinder. Two of the stablewomen were attempting to hoist Dorile, who served the Wavemistress of Clan Somarin, into her saddle, while a third, holding the gray's head, wore the tight face of someone trying not to laugh. Rainyn was on the back of a *leggy* brown gelding, but somehow without either foot in the stirrups or the reins in her hands and having considerable trouble finding any of them. And those three seemed to be having the easiest time of it. Horses whinnied and danced and rolled their eyes, and Windfinders shouted curses in voices that could have been heard over a gale. One of them knocked a serving man flat with her fist, and three more stable folk were trying to catch mounts that had gotten free.

There was also what she had expected to see, if Nynaeve was no longer keeping her private watch. Lan stood by his black warhorse, Mandarb, dividing his gaze between the treeline, the gateway, and Nynaeve. Birgitte came striding out of the woods shaking her head, and a moment later, Cieryl, trotted from the trees, but with no sense of urgency. There was nothing out there to threaten or inconvenience them.

Nynaeve was watching her, eyebrows raised high.

"I didn't say anything," Elayne said. Her hand closed on something small, wrapped in rotting cloth that might have been white once. Or brown. She knew immediately what was inside.

"A good thing for you," Nynaeve grumbled, not quite far enough under her breath. "I can't abide women who poke their noses into other people's business." Elayne let it pass without so much as a start; she was proud that she did not have to bite her tongue.

Stripping away the decayed cloth revealed a small amber brooch in the shape of a turtle. It looked like amber, anyway, and it might have been amber once, but when she opened herself to the Source through it, *saidar* rushed into her, a torrent compared to what she could draw safely on her own. Not a strong *angreal*, but far better than nothing. With it, she could handle twice as much of the Power as Nynaeve, and Nynaeve herself would do better still. Releasing the extra flow of *saidar*, she slipped the brooch into her belt pouch with a smile of delight and went back to searching. Where there was one, there might be more. And now that she had one to study, she might be able to reason out how to *make* an *angreal*. That was something she had wished for. It was all she could do not to take the brooch out again and begin probing it right there.

Vandene had been eyeing Nynaeve and her for some time, and now she heeled her slab-sided gelding over to them and dismounted. The groom at the packhorse's head managed a decent if awkward curtsy, more than she had for Elayne or Nynaeve. "You're being careful," Vandene said to Elayne, "and that's very good. But it might be better to leave these things alone until they're in the Tower."

Elayne's mouth tightened. In the Tower? Until they could be examined by someone else, was what she meant. Someone older and supposedly more experienced. "I *do* know what I'm doing, Vandene. I have *made ter'angreal*, after all. Nobody else living has done *that*." She had taught the basics to some sisters, but no one had managed the trick of it by the time she left for Ebou Dar.

The older Green nodded, flipping her reins idly against the palm of her riding glove. "Martine Janata also knew what she was doing, so I understand," she said casually. "She was the last sister to really make a business of studying *ter'angreal*. She did it for over forty years, almost from the time she reached the shawl. She was careful, too, so I was told. Then one day, Martine's maid found her unconscious on the floor of her sitting room. Burned out." Even in a conversational tone, those words were a sharp slap. Vandene's voice did not alter a hair, though. "Her Warder was dead from the shock. Not unusual in cases like that. When Martine came to, three days later, she couldn't recall what she had been working with. She couldn't remember the preceding week at all. That was more than twenty-five years ago, and no one since has had the nerve to touch any of the *ter'angreal* that were in her rooms. Her notes mentioned every last one, and everything she had discovered was innocuous, innocent, even frivolous, but. . . ." Vandene shrugged. "She found something she wasn't expecting."

Elayne peeked at Birgitte, and found Birgitte looking back at her. She did not need to see the worried frown on the other woman's face; it was mirrored in her mind, in the small patch of her mind that *was* Birgitte and in the rest. Birgitte felt her worry, and she felt Birgitte's, until sometimes it was hard to say which was which. She risked more than herself. But she *did* know what she was doing. More than anyone else there, at least. And even if none of the Forsaken appeared, they *needed* all the *angreal* she could find.

"What happened to Martine?" Nynaeve asked quietly. "Afterward, I mean." She could seldom hear of anyone being hurt without wanting to Heal them; she wanted to Heal everything.

Vandene grimaced. She might have been the one to bring up Martine, but Aes Sedai did not like talking about women who had been burned out or stilled. They did not like remembering them. "She vanished once she was well enough to slip out of the Tower," she said hurriedly. "The important thing to remember is that she was cautious. I never met her, but I've been told she treated every *ter'angreal* as if she had no idea what it might do next, even the one that makes the cloth for Warders' cloaks, and nobody has ever been able to make that do anything else. She was careful, and it did her no good."

Nynaeve laid an arm across the nearly empty pannier. "Maybe you really should," she began.

"No-o-o-o!" Merilille shrieked.

Elayne spun, instinctively opening herself through the *angreal* again, only half conscious of *saidar* flooding into Nynaeve and Vandene. The glow of the Power sprang up around every woman in the clearing who could embrace the Source. Merilille was straining forward in her saddle, eyes bulging, one hand reaching toward the gateway. Elayne frowned. There was nothing there except Aviendha, and the last four Warders, startled in the middle of walking away, searching for the threat with swords half-drawn. Then she realized what Aviendha was doing and nearly lost *saidar* in her shock.

The gateway trembled as Aviendha carefully picked apart the weave that had made it. It shivered and flexed, the edges wavering. The last flows came loose, and instead of winking out, the opening shimmered, the view through it of the courtyard fading away until it evaporated like mist in the sun.

"That is impossible!" Renaile said incredulously. An astonished murmur of agreement broke out among the Windfinders. The Kinswomen gaped at Aviendha, mouths working soundlessly.

Elayne nodded slowly in spite of herself. Clearly it *was* possible, but one of the first things she had been told as a novice was that never, ever, under any circumstances was she to try what Aviendha had just done. Picking apart a weave, any weave, rather than simply letting it dissipate, could not be done, she had been told, not without inevitable disaster. Inevitable.

"You fool girl!" Vandene snapped, her face a thunderhead. She strode toward Aviendha dragging her gelding behind. "Do you realize what you almost did? One slip—one!—and there's no saying what the weave will snap into, or what it will do! You could have completely destroyed everything for a hundred paces! Five hundred! Everything! You could have burned yourself out and—"

"It was necessary," Aviendha cut in. A babble erupted from the mounted Aes Sedai crowding around her and Vandene, but she glared at them and raised her voice over theirs. "I know the dangers, Vandene Namelle, but it was necessary. Is this another thing you Aes Sedai cannot do? The Wise Ones say any woman can learn, if she is taught, some women more and some less, but any woman, if she can pick out embroidery." She did not quite sneer. Not quite.

"This is *not* embroidery, girl!" Merilille's voice was deep winter ice. "Whatever so-called training you received among your people, you cannot possibly know what you are *playing* with! You will promise me—swear to me!—that you will never do this again!"

"Her name should be in the novice book," Sareitha said firmly, glaring across the Bowl still held firmly to her bosom. "I've always said it. She should be entered in the book." Careane nodded, her stern gaze measuring Aviendha for a novice dress.

"That might not be necessary for the moment," Adeleas told Aviendha, leaning forward in her saddle, "but you must let yourself be guided by us." The Brown sister's tone was much milder than the others', yet she was not making a suggestion.

A month or so earlier, Aviendha might have begun to wilt under all that Aes Sedai disapproval, but not now. Elayne hurriedly pushed in among the horses before her friend decided to draw the knife she was fondling. Or to do something worse. "Maybe somebody should ask *why* she thought it was necessary," she said, slipping an arm around Aviendha's shoulders as much to keep her arms at her sides as for comfort.

Aviendha did not quite include her in the exasperated look she gave the other sisters. "This leaves no residue," she said patiently. Too patiently. "The residues of a weave this large might be read two days from now."

Merilille snorted, a very strong sound to come from that slight body. "That is a rare Talent, girl. Neither Teslyn nor Joline has it. Or do you Aiel wilders all learn that as well?"

"Few can do it," Aviendha admitted calmly. "But I can." That produced a different sort of stare, from Elayne as well; it was a *very* rare Talent. She did not seem to notice. "Do *you* claim that none of the Shadowsouled can?" she went on. The tightness of her shoulder under Elayne's hand said she was not so cool as she pretended. "Are you such fools that you leave tracks for your enemies to follow? Any who could read the residues could make a gateway to this spot."

That would have taken great dexterity, very great dexterity, but the suggestion was enough to leave Merilille blinking. Adeleas opened her mouth, then closed it without speaking, and Vandene frowned thoughtfully. Sareitha simply looked worried. Who could say what Talents the Forsaken had, what skill?

Strangely, all the fierceness drained out of Aviendha. Her eyes fell, her shoulders loosened. "Perhaps I should not have taken the risk," she muttered. "With that man watching me, I could not think clearly, and when he disappeared. . . .” A little of her spirit returned, but not a great deal. “I do not think a man could read my weaves,” she said to Elayne, “but if he was one of the Shadowsouled, or even the *gholam*. . . . The Shadowsouled know more than any of us. If I was wrong, I have great *toh*. But I do not think I was. I do not think it.”

“What man?” Nynaeve demanded. Her hat had been knocked askew in pushing among the horses, and that, with the tight frown she directed at everyone impartially, made her look ready for a fight. Perhaps she was. Careane’s gelding accidentally nudged her with a shoulder, and she swatted the blue dun’s nose.

“A servant,” Merilille said dismissively. “Whatever orders Tylin gave, Altaran servants are an independent lot. Or perhaps her son; that boy is too curious by half.”

The sisters around her nodded, and Careane said, “One of the Forsaken would hardly have stood and watched. You said so yourself.” She was patting her gelding’s neck and frowning accusingly at Nynaeve—Careane was one of those who gave her horse the sort of affection most people reserved for infants—she was frowning at Nynaeve, and Nynaeve took the words for her, too.

“Maybe it was a servant, and maybe it was Beslan. Maybe.” Nynaeve’s sniff said she did not believe it. Or that she wanted them to believe she did not; she could tell you to your face that you were a blind idiot, yet let anyone else say it, and she would defend you until she went hoarse. Of course, she did not seem ready to decide whether she liked Aviendha, but she definitely did not like the older Aes Sedai. She tugged her hat almost straight, and her frown swept across them, then started over. “Whether it was Beslan or the Dark One, there’s no call to stand here all day. We need to get ready and move on to the farm. Well? Move!” She clapped her hands sharply, and even Vandene gave a little start.

There was little preparation left to do when the sisters moved their horses away. Lan and the other Warders had not sat on their heels once they realized there was no danger. Some of the servants had gone back through the gateway before Aviendha disposed of it, but the rest stood with the three dozen or so packhorses, occasionally glancing at the Aes Sedai, clearly wondering what marvel they might produce next. The Windfinders were all mounted, if awkwardly, and holding their reins as though expecting their horses to bolt any moment, or perhaps sprout wings and take flight. So were the Knitting Circle, with a good deal more grace, unconcerned that their skirts and petticoats were pushed up past their knees, and with Ispan still hooded and tied across a saddle like a sack. She could not possibly have sat upright on a horse, yet even Sumeko's eyes popped whenever they touched her.

Glaring about her, Nynaeve looked ready to tongue-lash everybody into doing what they had already done, but only until Lan handed her the reins of her plump brown mare. She had adamantly refused the gift of a better horse from Tylin. Her hand trembled a little when it touched Lan's, and her face changed color as she swallowed the anger she had been about to unleash. When he offered a hand for her foot, she stared at him for a moment as if wondering what he was about, then colored again when he boosted her to her saddle. Elayne could only shake her head. She hoped she did not turn into an idiot when she married. If she married.

Birgitte brought her silvery-gray mare and the yellow dun Aviendha rode, but she seemed to understand that Elayne wanted a private word with Aviendha. She nodded almost as if Elayne had spoken, swung up onto her mouse-colored gelding, and rode to where the other Warders were waiting. They greeted her with nods and began discussing something in low voices. By the glances directed at the sisters, the "something" had to do with taking care of Aes Sedai whether Aes Sedai wanted care taken or not. Including herself, Elayne noted grimly. There was no time now for that, though. Aviendha stood fiddling with her horse's reins, staring at the animal like a novice staring at a kitchen full of greasy pots. Very likely, Aviendha saw small difference between having to scrub pots and having to ride.

Snugging her green riding gloves, Elayne casually shifted Lioness to block them from the others' view, then touched Aviendha's arm. "Talking to Adeleas or Vandene might help," she said gently. She had to be very careful here, as careful as with any *ter'angreal*. "They're old enough to know more than you might suspect. There has to be a reason you've been . . . having trouble . . . with Traveling." That was a mild way of putting it. Aviendha almost had failed to make the weave work at all, in the beginning. Careful. Aviendha was far more important than any *ter'angreal* ever could be. "They might be able to help."

"How can they?" Aviendha stared stiffly at the saddle on her gelding. "They cannot Travel. How could any of them know how to help?" Abruptly her shoulders slumped, and she turned her head to Elayne. Shockingly, unshed tears glistened in her green eyes. “That isn’t the truth, Elayne. Not the whole truth. They cannot help, but. . . . You are my near-sister; you have the right to know. They think I panicked at a servant. If I ask for help, it must all come out. That I Traveled once to run from a man, a man I hoped in my soul would catch me. To run like a rabbit. To run, wanting to be caught. How could I let them know such shame? Even if they really could help, how could I?”

Elayne wished she did not know. About the catching part, at least. About the fact that Rand *had* caught her. Snatching the flecks of jealousy that suddenly were floating through her, she pushed them into a sack and stuffed it into the back of her head. Then she jumped up and down on it for good measure. *When a woman plays the fool, look for the man*. That was one of Lini’s favorites. Another was, *Kittens tangle your yarn, men tangle your wits, and it’s simple as breathing for both*. She drew a deep breath. “No one will know from me, Aviendha. I’ll help you as much as I can. If I can figure out how.” Not that there was much she could think to do. Aviendha was remarkably quick at seeing how weaves were formed, much quicker than she herself.

Aviendha merely nodded and scrambled clumsily into her saddle, showing a bit more grace than the Sea Folk. “There was a man watching, Elayne, and he was no servant.” Looking Elayne right in the eye, she added, “He frightened me.” An admission she likely would have made to no one else in the world.

“We’re safe from him now, whoever he was,” Elayne said, turning Lioness to follow Nynaeve and Lan from the clearing. In truth, it very likely had been a servant, but she would never tell that to anyone, Aviendha least of all. “We’re safe, and in a few more hours, we will reach the Kin’s farm, we’ll use the Bowl, and the world will be right again.” Well, somewhat. The sun seemed lower than it had in the stableyard, but she knew that was only imagination. For once, they had gained a clear jump on the Shadow.

From behind a screen of white wrought iron, Moridin watched the last of the horses vanish through the gateway, and then the tall young woman and the four Warders. It was possible they were carrying away some item he could use—an *angreal* attuned to men, perhaps—but the chances were small. For the rest, the *ter’angreal*, the greatest likelihood was that they would kill themselves trying to puzzle out how to use them. Sammael was a fool to have risked so much to seize a collection of no one knew what. But then, Sammael had never been half as clever as he thought. He himself would not disrupt his own plans merely on the off chance, to see what scraps of civilization he could find. Only idle curiosity had brought him here. He liked to know what others thought important. But it was dross.

He was about to turn away when the outlines of the gateway suddenly began to flex and tremble. Transfixed, he watched until the opening simply—melted. He had never been a man to give way to obscenities, but several rose in his mind. What had the woman done? These barbarous rustics offered too many surprises. A way to Heal being severed, however imperfectly. That was impossible! Except that they had done it. Involuntary rings. Those Warders and the bond they shared with their Aes Sedai. He had known of that for a long, long time, but whenever he thought he had the measure of them, these *primitives* revealed some new skill, did something that no one in his own Age had dreamed of. Something the pinnacle of civilization had not known! What had the girl done?

"Great Master?"

Moridin barely turned his head from the window. "Yes, Madic?" Her soul be damned, what had the girl done?

The balding man in green-and-white who had slipped into the small room bowed deeply before falling to his knees. One of the upper servants in the palace, Madic, with his long face, possessed a pompous dignity that he tried to maintain even now. Moridin had seen men who stood far higher do far worse. "Great Master, I have learned what the Aes Sedai brought to the palace this morning. It is said they found a great treasure hidden in ancient days, gold and jewels and heartstone, artifacts from Shiota and Eharon and even the Age of Legends. There are said to be things among them that use the One Power. It is said that one can control the weather. No one knows where they are going, Great Master. The palace is aquiver with talk, but ten tongues name ten different destinations."

Moridin went back to studying the stableyard below as soon as Madic spoke. Ridiculous tales of gold and *cuendillar* held no interest. Nothing would make a gateway behave that way. Unless. . . . Could she actually have *unraveled* the web? Death held no fear for him. Coldly he considered the possibility that he had been within sight of an unraveling web. One that had been unmade successfully. Another impossibility casually offered up by these . . .

Something Madic had said caught his ear. “The weather, Madic?” The shadows of the palace spires had barely lengthened from their bases, but there was not a cloud to shield the baking city.

“Yes, Great Master. It is called the Bowl of the Winds.”

The name meant nothing to him. But . . . a *ter’angreal* to control the weather. . . . In his own Age, weather had been carefully regulated with the use of *ter’angreal*. One of the surprises of this Age—one of the smaller, it had seemed—was that there were those who could manipulate weather to a degree that should have required one of those *ter’angreal*. One such device should not be enough to affect even a large part of a single continent. But what could these women do with it? What? If they used a ring?

He seized the True. Power without thought, the *saa* billowing black across his sight. His fingers tightened in the wrought-iron grille across the window; the metal groaned, twisting, not from his grip but from the tendrils of the True Power, drawn from the Great Lord himself, that wreathed around the grillework, flexing as he flexed his hand in anger. The Great Lord would not be pleased. He had strained from his prison to touch the world enough to fix the seasons in place. He was impatient to touch the world more, to shatter the void that contained him, and he would not be pleased. Rage enveloped Moridin, blood pounding in his ears. A moment past, he had not cared where those women went, but now. . . . Somewhere far from here. People fleeing ran as far and as fast as they could. Somewhere they felt safe. No use sending Madic to ask questions, no use squeezing anyone here; they would not have been fool enough to leave anyone behind alive who knew their destination. Not to Tar Valon. To al’Thor? To that band of rebel Aes Sedai? In all three places he had eyes, some that did not know they served him. All would serve him, before the end. He would not allow chance slips to spoil his plans now.

Abruptly he heard something other than the thundering drumbeat of his own fury. A bubbling sound. He looked at Madic curiously, and stepped back from the spreading puddle on the floor. It seemed that in his anger he had seized at more than the wrought-iron screen with the True Power. Remarkable how much blood could be squeezed from a human body.

He let what remained of the man fall without regret; indeed, thinking only that when Madic was found, the Aes Sedai would surely be blamed. A small addition to the chaos growing in the world. Ripping a hole in the fabric of the Pattern, he Traveled with the True Power. He had to find those women before they used this Bowl of the Winds. And failing that. . . . He disliked people meddling with his carefully laid plans. Those who did so and lived, lived to pay.

* * *

> The *gholam* stepped into the room cautiously, nostrils already twitching with the scent of still hot blood. The livid burn on its cheek seemed like a live coal. The *gholam* appeared to be merely a slender man, a little taller than average in this time, yet it had never encountered anything that could harm it. Until that man with the medallion. What might have been smile or snarl bared its teeth. Curious, it peered around the room, but there was nothing beyond the crushed corpse on the floor tiles. And a . . . feel . . . of something. Not the One Power, but something that made it . . . itch, if not quite in the same way. Curiosity had brought it here. Parts of the grille over the window were crushed, pulling the whole thing loose at the sides. The *gholam* seemed to remember something that made it itch in that manner, yet so much of what it recalled was fogged and dim. The world had changed, as it seemed, in the blink of an eye. There had been a world of war and killing on a huge scale, with weapons that reached across miles, across thousands of miles, and then there was . . . this. But the *gholam* had not changed. It was still the most dangerous weapon of all.

Its nostrils flared again, though it was not by scent that it tracked those who could channel. The One Power had been used below, and miles to the north. To follow, or not? The man who had wounded it was not with them; it had made sure of that before leaving the high vantage place. The one who commanded it wanted the man who had wounded it dead perhaps as much as he did the women, but the women were an easier target. The women had been named, too, and for the time being, it was constrained. For its entire existence it had been compelled to obey one or another human, but its mind held the concept of not being constrained. It must follow the women. It wanted to follow. The moment of death, when it felt the ability to channel vanish along with life, produced ecstasy. Rapture. But it was hungry, too, and there was time. Where they could run, it could follow. Settling fluidly beside the mangled body, it began to feed. Fresh blood, hot blood, was a necessity, but human blood always held the sweetest savor.

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CHAPTER 3

A Pleasant Ride

Farms and pastures and olive groves covered most of the land around Ebou Dar, but many small forests stretched a few miles across as well, and while the ground was much flatter than the Rhannon Hills to the south, it rolled and sometimes rose in a prominence of a hundred feet or higher, sufficient to cast deep shadows in the afternoon sun. All in all, the country provided more than enough cover to keep unwanted eyes from what might have passed as some odd merchant's pack train, nearly fifty people mounted and almost as many afoot, especially when it had Warders to find unfrequented paths through the undergrowth. Elayne did not sight a mark of human habitation beyond a few goats cropping on some of the hills.

Even plants and trees used to heat were beginning to wither and die, yet at any other time she might have enjoyed merely seeing the countryside. It could have been a thousand leagues from the land she had seen riding down the other bank of the Eldar. The hills were strange, knobby shapes, as though squeezed together by huge, careless hands. Flocks of brilliantly hued birds soared up at their passing, and a dozen sorts of hummingbirds flitted away from the horses, hovering jewels on blurred wings. Thick vines hung like ropes in some places, and there were trees with bundles of narrow fronds at the top for foliage, and things that looked like green feather dusters as tall as a man. A handful of plants, fooled by the heat, struggled to put out blossoms, bright reds and vivid yellows, some twice as wide as her two hands. Their perfume was lush and—"sultry" came to mind. She saw some boulders she would have wagered had once been toes on a statue, though why anyone would make a statue that large with bare feet she could not imagine, and another time the way led through a forest of thick fluted stones among the trees, the weathered stumps of columns, many toppled and all long since mined almost to the ground for their stone by local farmers. A pleasant ride despite the dust the horses' hooves raised from parched soil. The heat did not touch her, of course, and there were not very many flies. All the dangers lay behind them; they had outrun the Forsaken, and no chance any of them or their servants could catch up now. It *could* have been a pleasant ride, except. . . .

For one thing, Aviendha learned that the message she had sent about enemies coming when least expected had not been delivered. At first Elayne felt relief at anything to change the topic from Rand. It was not the jealousy come back; rather, more and more she found herself wanting what Aviendha had shared with him. Not jealousy. Envy. She would almost have preferred the other. Then she began really hearing what her friend was saying in a low monotone, and the hair on the back of her neck tried to stand.

"You can't do that," she protested, reining her horse closer to Aviendha's. Actually, she supposed Aviendha would not have much trouble drubbing Kurin, or tying her up, or any of the rest. If the other Sea Folk women stood still for it, anyway. "We can't start a war with them, certainly not before we use the Bowl. And not over this," she added hastily. "Not at all." They certainly were not going to start a war before or after the Bowl was used. Not just because the Windfinders were behaving more high-handedly by the hour. Not just because. . . . Drawing breath, she hurried on. "If she *had* told me, I would not have known what you meant. I understand why you couldn't speak more clearly, but you do see, don't you?"

Aviendha glared ahead at nothing, absently brushing flies away from her face. "Without fail, I told her," she grumbled. "Without fail! What if he had been one of the Shadowsouled? What if he had managed to get by me through the gateway, and you with no warning? What if . . . ?" She turned a suddenly forlorn gaze on Elayne. "I will bite my knife," she said sadly, "but my liver may burst for it."

Elayne was about to say that swallowing her anger was the right thing to do and she could pitch as large a fit as she wanted so long as she did not hurl it at the Atha'an Miere—that was what all that about knives and livers meant—but before she could open her mouth, Adeleas brought her rangy gray up on her other side. The white-haired sister had acquired a new saddle in Ebou Dar, a gaudy thing worked with silver on pommel and cantle. The flies seemed to avoid her, for some reason, though she wore a scent as strong as any of the flowers.

"Pardon me. I could not help overhearing that last." Adeleas did not sound at all apologetic, and Elayne wondered just how much she had overheard. She felt her cheeks coloring. Some of what Aviendha had said about Rand had been remarkably frank and straightforward. Some of what she had said had been, too. It was one thing to talk that way with your nearest friend, quite another to suspect someone else had been listening. Aviendha seemed to feel the same way; she did not blush, but the sour look she shot at the Brown would have done Nynaeve proud.

Adeleas merely smiled, a vague smile as bland as water soup. "It might be best if you gave your friend there free rein with the Atha'an Miere." She peered past Elayne at Aviendha, blinking. "Well, a loose rein. Putting the fear of the Light into them ought to be sufficient. They're almost there already, in case you haven't noticed. They're much more wary of the 'savage' Aiel—forgive me, Aviendha—than they are of Aes Sedai. Merilille would have suggested it, but her ears are still burning."

Aviendha's face rarely gave much away, but right then she looked as puzzled as Elayne felt. Elayne twisted in her saddle to frown behind her. Merilille rode abreast with Vandene, Careane, and Sareitha not far back, all very studiously looking at anything except Elayne. Beyond the sisters were the Sea Folk, still in single file, and then would come the Knitting Circle, keeping themselves out of sight for the moment just ahead of the packhorses. They were threading their way through the glades of truncated columns. Fifty or a hundred long-tailed red-and-green birds winged over their heads, filling the air with chattering cries.

"Why?" Elayne asked curtly. It seemed foolish to add to the turmoil already bubbling just below the surface—and sometimes on the surface—but she had seen no hint of the fool in Adeleas. The Brown sister's eyebrows rose in apparent surprise. Maybe she was surprised; Adeleas usually thought anyone should see what she saw. Maybe.

"Why? To restore a little balance, that is why. If the Atha'an Miere feel they need us to protect them from an Aiel, it might be a useful balance against. . . .” Adeleas paused slightly, suddenly absorbed in adjusting her pale gray skirts. “. . . other things.”

Elayne’s face tightened. Other things. The bargain with the Sea Folk was what Adeleas meant. “You may ride with the others,” she said coolly.

Adeleas made no protest, no attempts to press her argument. She just inclined her head and let her horse fall back. Her small smile never altered a whit. The older Aes Sedai accepted that Nynaeve and Elayne stood above them and spoke with Egwene’s authority at their backs, but the truth was, that changed little beyond the surface. Perhaps nothing. They were outwardly respectful, they obeyed, and yet. . . .

After all was said and done, Elayne, at least, was Aes Sedai at an age when most initiates of the Tower still wore novice white and very few had reached the Accepted. And she and Nynaeve had agreed to that bargain, hardly a display of wisdom and acumen. Not just the Sea Folk getting the Bowl, but twenty sisters going to the Atha’an Miere, subject to their laws, required to teach anything the Windfinders wanted to learn and unable to leave until others came to replace them. Windfinders allowed to enter the Tower as guests, allowed to learn whatever they wished, leave whenever they wished. Those alone would make the Hall scream, and probably Egwene as well, yet the rest. . . . Every last one of the older sisters thought she would have found a way around making that bargain. Perhaps they really could have. Elayne did not believe it, but she was not sure.

She did not say anything to Aviendha, but after a few moments, the other woman spoke. “If I can serve honor and help you at the same time, I do not care whether it serves some Aes Sedai end.” She never seemed to take it in that Elayne was also Aes Sedai, not completely.

Elayne hesitated, then nodded. Something had to be done to temper the Sea Folk. Merilille and the others had displayed a remarkable forbearance so far, but how long would that last? Nynaeve might explode, once she actually turned her attentions to the Windfinders. Matters had to be kept as smooth as possible for as long as possible, but if the Atha’an Miere went on believing they could stare down any Aes Sedai, there would be trouble. Life was more complex than she had imagined back in Caemlyn, no matter how many lessons she had received as Daughter-Heir. So much more complicated since she entered the Tower.

“Just don’t be too . . . emphatic,” she said softly. “And please have a care. There are twenty of them, after all, and only one of you. I wouldn’t want anything to happen before I could help you.” Aviendha gave her a grin with a good bit of wolf in it and drew her dun mare off at the edge of the stones to wait for the Atha’an Miere.

From time to time Elayne glanced back, but all she saw through the trees was Aviendha riding next to Kurin, speaking quite calmly and not even looking at the Sea Folk woman. Certainly not glaring, though Kurin seemed to stare at her with considerable astonishment. When Aviendha thumped her horse back up to join Elayne, flapping her reins—she would never be a horsewoman—Kurin rode forward to speak with Renaile, and a short time later Renaile angrily sent Rainyn to the head of the column.

The most junior of the Windfinders sat her horse even more awkwardly than Aviendha, whom she pretended to ignore on Elayne’s other side just as she ignored the small green flies buzzing around her dark face. “Renaile din Calon Blue Star,” she said stiffly, “demands that you snub in the Aiel woman, Elayne Aes Sedai.” Aviendha grinned toothily at her, and Rainyn must have been watching at least a little, because her cheeks reddened beneath the sheen of sweat.

“Tell Renaile that Aviendha is not Aes Sedai,” Elayne replied. “I will ask her to be careful,” no lie there; she had, and would again, “but I can’t *make* her do anything.” On impulse, she added, “You know how Aiel are.” The Sea Folk had some very odd ideas of how the Aiel were. Rainyn stared wide-eyed at a still-grinning Aviendha, her face going gray, then jerked her horse around and galloped back to Renaile, bouncing in her saddle.

Aviendha gave a pleased chuckle, but Elayne wondered whether the whole notion had been a mistake. Even with a good thirty paces between them, she could see Renaile’s face swell up at Rainyn’s report, and the others began to buzz like bees. They did not look frightened, they looked angry, and the glares they directed at the Aes Sedai ahead of them grew baleful. Not at Aviendha, at the sisters. Adeleas nodded thoughtfully when she saw that, and Merilille just barely failed to hide a smile. At least they were pleased.

If that had been the only incident during the ride it would have taken the edge off any enjoyment of flowers and birds, but it was not even the first. Beginning shortly after leaving the clearing, the Knitting Circle had made their way forward to Elayne one by one, all but Kirstian, and no doubt she would have come too had she not been ordered to keep Ispan shielded. One by one they came, each hesitant, smiling timorously until Elayne wanted to tell them to act their ages. They certainly made no demands, and they were too smart to ask straight out for what already had been denied, but they found other paths.

“It occurred to me,” Reanne said brightly, “that you must want to question Ispan Sedai quite urgently. Who can say what else she was up to in the city besides trying to find the storeroom?” She pretended to just be making conversation, but from time to time she darted quick looks at Elayne to see how she was taking it. “I’m sure we’ll take over an hour to reach the farm, the way we’re going, perhaps two, and you certainly don’t want to waste two hours. The herbs Nynaeve Sedai gave her make her quite talkative, and I’m sure she would sit up for sisters.”

The bright smile faded when Elayne said that questioning Ispan could wait and would. Light, did they really expect anyone to ask questions riding through forests on paths that barely deserved the name? Reanne rode back to the other Kinswomen muttering to herself.

“Forgiveness, Elayne Sedai,” Chilares murmured a short time later, the traces of Murandy clinging to her accent. Her green straw hat matched some of her layered petticoats exactly. “Your forgiveness, if I intrude.” She did not wear the red belt of a Wise Woman; most of the Knitting Circle did not. Ivara was a goldsmith, and Eldase supplied lacquerware to the merchants for export; Chilares was a rug seller, while Reanne herself arranged shipping for small traders. Some worked at simple tasks—Kirstian ran a tiny weaver’s shop, and Dimana was a seamstress, though a prosperous one—but then, in the course of their lives, they had all followed many crafts. And used many names. “Ispan Sedai appears to be unwell,” Chilares said, shifting uneasily in her saddle. “Perhaps the herbs are affecting her more than Nynaeve Sedai thought. It would be terrible if anything happened to her. Before she can be questioned, I mean. Perhaps the sisters would look at her? Healing, you know. . . .” She trailed off, blinking those big brown eyes nervously. As well she might, with Sumeko among her companions.

A glance back showed the stout woman standing in her stirrups to peer past the Windfinders, until she saw Elayne looking and sat back down hurriedly. Sumeko, who knew more of Healing than any sister except Nynaeve. Perhaps *more* than Nynaeve. Elayne simply pointed to the rear until Chilares colored and reined her mount around.

Merilille joined Elayne only moments after Reanne left, and the Gray sister made a much better pretense at simple chat than the Kinswoman had. In her manner of speaking, at least, she was poise itself. What she had to say was another matter. “I wonder how trustworthy those women are, Elayne.” Her lips pursed in distaste as she brushed dust from her divided blue skirts with a gloved hand. “They say they do not take in wilders, but Reanne herself may well be a wilder, whatever she claims about failing her test for Accepted. Sumeko, as well, and certainly Kirstian.” A slight frown for Kirstian, a dismissive shake of her head. “You must have noticed how she leaps at any mention of the Tower. She knows no more than she might have picked up in conversation with someone who really was put out.” Merilille sighed, regretting what she had to say; she really was very good. “Have you considered that they may be lying about other things? They could be Darkfriends, for all we know, or dupes of Darkfriends. Perhaps not, but they are hardly to be trusted very far. I believe there is a farm, whether they really use it for a retreat or not, or I would not have agreed to this, but I will not be surprised to find a few ramshackle buildings and a dozen or so wilders. Well, not ramshackle—they do seem to have coin—but the principle is the same. No, they are simply not trustworthy.”

Elayne began a slow burn as soon as she realized the direction Merilille was taking, and it grew hotter. As this slipping around, all this “may” and “could” so the woman could insinuate things she herself did not believe. Darkfriends? The Knitting Circle had *fought* Darkfriends. Two had died. And without Sumeko and Ieine, Nynaeve might be dead instead of Ispan a prisoner. No, the reason they were not to be trusted was not because Merilille feared they were sworn to the Shadow, or she would have said so. They were not to be trusted because if they were not trusted, then they could not be allowed to hold Ispan.

She swatted a big green fly that had settled on Lioness’s neck, punctuating Merilille’s last word with a loud crack, and the Gray sister jerked in surprise. “How dare you?” Elayne breathed. “They faced Ispan and Falion in the Rahad, and the *gholam*, not to mention two dozen or more toughs with swords. *You* weren’t there.” That was hardly fair. Merilille and the rest had been left behind because Aes Sedai in the Rahad, obvious Aes Sedai, might as well be trumpets and drums for the attention they attracted. She did not care. Her anger grew by the moment, and her voice rose by the word. “You will *never* suggest such a thing to me again. *Never*! Not without hard evidence! Not without *proof*! If you do, I'll set you a penance that will make your eyes pop!" No matter how high she stood above the other woman, she had no authority to set her any penance at all, but she did not care about that, either. "I'll make you *walk* the rest of the way to Tar Valon! Eating nothing but bread and water the entire way! I'll put *you* in their charge, and tell them to slap you down if you say boo to a *goose*!"

It dawned on her that she was shouting. Some sort of gray-and-white birds went flittering past overhead in a broad band, and she was drowning out their cries. Drawing a deep breath, she tried to calm herself. She did not have a voice for shouting; it always came out as a shriek. Everyone was looking at her, most in astonishment. Aviendha nodded approvingly. Of course, she would have done the same had Elayne plunged a knife into Merilille's heart. Aviendha stood beside her friends no matter what. Merilille's Cairhienin paleness had become dead white.

"I mean what I say," Elayne told her, in a much cooler tone. It seemed to make even more blood leave Merilille's face. She did mean every word; they could not afford that sort of rumor floating among them. One way or another she would see it done, though the Knitting Circle very likely would faint.

She hoped that was the end of it. It should have been. But when Chilares left, Sareitha replaced her, and she too had a reason the Kinswomen were not to be trusted. Their ages. Even Kirstian claimed to be older than any living Aes Sedai, while Reanne was over a hundred years more than that and not even the oldest of the Kin. Her title of Eldest went to the oldest of them in Ebou Dar, and the rigid schedule they followed to avoid notice had a number of still older women off in other places. It was obviously impossible, Sareitha maintained.

Elayne did not shout; she very carefully did not shout. "We will learn the truth eventually," she told Sareitha. She did not doubt the Kinswomen's word, but there had to be a reason why the Kinswomen looked neither ageless nor anything near the ages they claimed. If she could only puzzle it out. Something told her it was obvious, but nothing leaped up that said what. "Eventually," she added firmly when the Brown opened her mouth again. "That will be enough, Sareitha." Sareitha nodded uncertainly and fell back. Not ten minutes later, Sibella replaced her.

Every time one of the Kinswomen came to make her roundabout plea to be relieved of Ispan, one of the sisters came soon after to offer the same plea. All save Merilille, who still blinked whenever Elayne looked at her. Perhaps shouting did have its uses. Certainly no one else tried to be so straightforward in attacking the Kin.

For instance, Vandene began with discussing the Sea Folk and how to counter the effects of the bargain made with them, why it was necessary to counter them as much as possible. She was quite matter-of-fact, with never a word or gesture to lay any blame. Not that she needed any; the subject did that, however delicately handled. The White Tower, she said, maintained its influence in the world not by force of arms, or persuasion, or even by plotting or manipulation, though those two she brushed past lightly. Rather the White Tower controlled or influenced events to whatever extent they did because everyone saw the Tower as standing apart and above, more even than kings or queens. That in turn depended on every Aes Sedai being seen that way, as mysterious and apart, different from everyone else. A different flesh. Historically, Aes Sedai who could not manage that—and there were a few—were kept out of public view as much as possible.

It took Elayne a little while to realize that the thrust of the conversation had shifted away from the Sea Folk, and to see where it was headed. A different flesh, mysterious and apart, could not have a sack thrust over its head and be tied across a saddle. Not where anyone who was not Aes Sedai could see, anyway. In truth, the sisters would be rougher on Ispan than the Knitting Circle could possibly make themselves be, just not in public. The argument might have borne more weight had it come first, but as it was, Elayne sent Vandene packing as quickly as she did anyone else. And saw her replaced by Adeleas, right after Sibella was told that if none of the Knitting Circle could understand what Ispan was mumbling, then none of the sisters was likely to either. Mumbling! Light! The Aes Sedai took their repeated turns, and even knowing what they were up to, sometimes it was hard to see the connection at first. By the time Careane began by telling her that those boulders really had been toes once, supposedly on a statue of some warrior queen nearly two hundred feet high. . . .

“Ispan stays where she is,” she told Careane coolly without waiting for more. “Now, unless you really want to tell me why the Shiotans thought of putting up a statue like that. . . .” The Green said ancient records claimed it had worn little more than armor, and not a great deal of that! A queen! “No? Then, if you don’t mind, I’d like to talk with Aviendha alone. Thank you so much.” Even being curt did not stop them, of course. She was surprised they did not send Merilille’s *maid* to take a turn.

None of this would have happened had Nynaeve been where she was meant to be. At least, Elayne was sure that Nynaeve could have quelled the Knitting Circle and the sisters both, in short order. She was a great one for quelling. The problem was that Nynaeve had glued herself tight to Lan’s side before they left the first clearing. The Warders scouted ahead and to both sides of their path, and sometimes to the rear, only riding back to the column long enough to report what they had seen or give directions on how to avoid a farm or a shepherd. Birgitte ranged far, never spending more than moments with Elayne. Lan ranged farther. And where Lan went, Nynaeve went.

“No one’s making any trouble, are they?” she demanded with a dark stare for the Sea Folk, the first time she followed Lan back. “Well, that’s all right, then,” she said before Elayne had a chance to open her mouth. Spinning her round-bellied mare like a racer, she flicked the reins and galloped after Lan holding her hat on with one hand, catching up to him just as he vanished around the flank of the hill ahead. Of course, then there really was nothing to complain about. Reanne had made her visit, and Merilille hers, and everything seemed settled.

By the next time Nynaeve appeared, Elayne had suffered through a number of disguised attempts to have Ispan turned over to the sisters, Aviendha had spoken to Kurin, and the Windfinders were on a slow boil, but when Elayne explained, Nynaeve simply looked around, frowning. Of course, right at that moment everyone had to be where they belonged. The Atha’an Miere wore glares, true, but the Knitting Circle were all behind them, and as for the other sisters, no group of novices could have appeared more well-behaved and innocent. Elayne wanted to shriek!

“I’m sure you can handle everything, Elayne,” Nynaeve said. “You *have* had all that training to be a queen. This can’t be anywhere near so—Drat the man! He’s going again! You can handle it.” And off she went, galloping that poor mare as though it were a warhorse.

That was when Aviendha chose to discuss how Rand seemed to like kissing the sides of her neck. And incidentally how much she had liked it. Elayne had liked that when he did it to her, too, but however used to discussing this sort of thing she had become—uncomfortably used to it—she did not want to talk about it right then. She was angry with Rand. It was unfair, but if not for him, she could have told Nynaeve to stop treating Lan like a child who might trip over his own feet and attend to her own duties. She almost wanted to blame him for the way the Knitting Circle was behaving, too, and the other sisters, and the Windfinders. *It's one of the things men are for, taking the blame*, she remembered Lini saying once, and laughing while she did. *They usually deserve it, even if you don't know exactly how*. Not fair, yet she wished he were there long enough for her to box his ears, just once. Long enough to kiss him, to have him kiss the sides of her neck softly. Long enough to. . . .

"He will listen to advice, even when he doesn't like hearing it," she said abruptly, her face reddening. Light, for all her talk about shame, in some areas Aviendha had none. And it seemed that she herself no longer had any, either! "But if I tried to push him, he dug in his heels even when it was plain that I was right. Was he that way with you?"

Aviendha glanced at her and appeared to understand. Elayne was not sure whether she liked that or not. At least there was no more talk of Rand and kissing. For a while, anyway. Aviendha had some knowledge of men—she had traveled with them as a Maiden of the Spear, fought beside them—but she had never wanted to be anything but *Far Dareis Mai*, and there were . . . gaps. Even with her dolls as a child she had always played at the spears and raiding. She had never flirted, did not understand it, and she did not understand why she felt the way she did when Rand's eyes fell on her, or a hundred other things Elayne had begun learning the first time she noticed a boy looking at her differently than he did at the other boys. She expected Elayne to teach her all of it, and Elayne tried. She really could talk to Aviendha about anything. If only Rand had not been the example used quite so often. If he had been there, she *would* have boxed his ears. And kissed him. Then boxed his ears again.

Not a pleasant ride at all. A miserable ride.

Nynaeve made several more brief visits, before finally coming to announce that the Kin's farm lay just ahead, out of sight around a low rounded hill that appeared ready to fall on its side. Reanne had been pessimistic in her estimate; the sun had not fallen nearly two hours' worth.

"We'll be there very quickly, now," Nynaeve told Elayne, not seeming to notice the sullen stare Elayne gave in return. "Lan, fetch Reanne up here, please. Best if they see a familiar face right off." He whirled his horse away, and Nynaeve turned in her saddle briefly to fix the sisters with a firm eye.

"I don't want you frightening them, now. You hold your tongues until we have a chance to explain what's what. And hide your faces. Pull up the hoods of your cloaks." Straightening without waiting for any reply, she gave a satisfied nod. "There. All settled, and all right. I vow, Elayne, I don't know what you were moaning so about. Everyone's doing exactly as they should, so far as I can see."

Elayne ground her teeth. She wished they were in Caemlyn already. That was where they were heading once this was done. She had duties long overdue in Caemlyn. All she had to deal with there was convincing the stronger Houses that the Lion Throne was hers despite her long absence, that and handling a rival claimant or two. There might not have been any had she been there when her mother vanished, when she died, but the history of Andor said there would be by now. Somehow, it seemed ever so much easier than this.

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CHAPTER

4

A Quiet Place

The Kin's farm lay in a broad hollow surrounded by three low hills, a sprawling affair of more than a dozen large, white-plastered buildings with flat roofs, gleaming in the sun. Four great barns were built right into the slope of the highest hill, a flat-topped thing with one side that fell away in steep cliffs beyond the barns. A few tall trees that had not lost all of their leaves provided a modicum of shade in the farmyard. To the north and east, olive groves marched away and even up the sides of the hills. A sort of slow bustle enveloped the farm, with easily over a hundred people in evidence despite the afternoon heat, carrying on all the everyday tasks but none quickly.

It might almost have passed for a small village instead of a farm, except that there was not a man or a child to be seen. Elayne did not expect any. This was a waypoint for Kinswomen passing through Ebou Dar to elsewhere, so there would not be too many in the city itself at one time, but that was a secret matter, as secret as the Kin themselves. Publicly this farm was known for two hundred miles or more as a retreat for women, a place for contemplation and escape from the cares of the world for a time, a few days, a week, sometimes longer. Elayne could almost feel serenity in the air. She might have regretted bringing the world into this quiet place, except that she also brought new hope.

The first appearance of the horses coming around the leaning hill produced far less stir than she expected. A number of the women stopped to watch, but no more than that. Their clothing varied widely—Elayne even saw a sheen of silk here and there—but some carried baskets and others buckets, or great white bundles of what had to be wash. One held a pair of bound ducks by the feet in either hand. Noblewoman and craftswoman, farmer and beggar, all were equally welcome here, but everyone did a share of the work during her stay. Aviendha touched Elayne's arm, then pointed to the top of one of the hills, a thing like an inverted funnel skewed to one side. Elayne added a hand to the shade of her hat and after a moment saw movement. Small wonder no one was surprised. Lookouts up there could see anyone coming from a long way.

A middling woman walked out to meet them short of the farm buildings. Her dress was in the Ebou Dari style, with a deep narrow neckline, but her dark skirts and brightly colored petticoats were short enough that she did not need to hold them up out of the dust. She did not wear a marriage knife; the Kin's rules prohibited marriage. The Kin had too many secrets to keep.

"That's Alise," Reanne murmured, reining in between Nynaeve and Elayne. "She runs the farm this turn. She's very intelligent." Almost like an afterthought, she added, even more quietly, "Alise does not suffer fools gladly." As Alise approached, Reanne drew herself up in her saddle, squaring her shoulders as though for an ordeal.

Middling was exactly how Elayne thought of Alise, not someone to give Reanne pause, certainly, even had she not been the Eldest of the Knitting Circle. Straight-backed, Alise appeared to be somewhere in her middle years, neither slender nor stout, tall nor short, a little gray flecking dark brown hair that was tied back with a piece of ribbon, but in a very practical manner. Her face was unremarkable, though pleasant enough, a mild face, perhaps a little long in the jaw. When she saw Reanne, she gave a fleeting look of surprise, then smiled. That smile transformed everything. It did not make her beautiful or even pretty, but Elayne felt warmed by it, comforted.

"I hardly expected to see you . . . Reanne," Alise said, barely hesitating over the name. Obviously she was unsure whether to use Reanne's rightful title in front of Nynaeve and Elayne and Aviendha. She studied them with quick glances as she spoke. There seemed to be a bit of Tarabon in her voice. “Berowin brought word of trouble in the city, of course, but I didn’t think it was so bad you would have to leave. Who are all these. . . .” Her words trailed off, and her eyes widened, staring beyond them.

Elayne glanced back, nearly loosing a few of the choice phrases she had picked up in various places, most recently from Mat Cauthon. She did not understand all of them, not most of them really—nobody ever wanted to explain what they meant exactly—but they did have a way of relieving emotion. The Warders had doffed their color-shifting cloaks, and the sisters had drawn up the hoods of their dust-cloaks as instructed, even Sareitha, who had no need to hide her youthful face, but Careane had not pulled hers forward far enough. It simply framed her ageless features. Not everyone would know what they were seeing, yet anyone who had been in the Tower surely would. Careane jerked the hood forward at Elayne’s glare, but the damage was done.

Others at the farm beside Alise possessed sharp eyes. “Aes Sedai!” a woman howled in tones suitable for announcing the end of the world. Perhaps she was, for her world. Shrieks spread like dust blown on the wind, and that quickly, the farm became a kicked anthill. Here and there a woman simply fainted dead away, but most ran wildly, screaming, dropping what they carried, bumping into one another, falling down and scrambling up to run on. Flapping ducks and chickens and short-horned black goats darted wildly to avoid being trampled. In the midst of it all, some women stood gaping, plainly those who had come to the retreat with no knowledge of the Kin, though a few of them began to move hurriedly, too, caught up in the frenzy.

“Light!” Nynaeve barked, yanking her braid. “Some of them are running into the olive groves! Stop them! The last thing we want is a panic! Send the Warders! Quick, quick!” Lan raised a questioning eyebrow, but she waved a peremptory hand at him. “Quick! Before they *all* run away!” With a nod that seemed to begin as a shake of his head, he sent Mandarb galloping after the other men, curving to avoid the spreading pandemonium among the buildings.

Elayne shrugged at Birgitte, then motioned her to follow. She agreed with Lan. It seemed a bit late to try stopping a panic, and Warders on horseback attempting to herd frightened women probably was not the best way. But she could not see how to change matters now, and there was no point letting them run off into the countryside. They would all want to hear the news she and Nynaeve brought.

Alise gave no sign of running, or even fidgeting. Her face paled slightly, but she stared up at Reanne with a steady gaze. A firm gaze. “Why?” she breathed. “Why, Reanne? I could not have imagined you doing this! Did they give you bribes? Offer immunity? Will they let you walk free while we pay the price? They probably won’t allow it, but I vow I’ll ask them to let me call you down. Yes, you! The rules apply even to you, *Eldest*! If I can find a way to manage it, I vow you won’t walk away from this smiling!” A very firm gaze. Steely, in fact.

“It isn’t what you think,” Reanne said hurriedly, dismounting and dropping her reins. She caught both of Alise’s hands in hers despite the other woman’s efforts to free them. “Oh, I did not want it to be like this. They know, Alise. About the Kin. The Tower has *always* known. Everything. Almost everything. But that isn’t what is important.” Alise’s eyebrows tried to climb onto her scalp at that, but Reanne rushed on, beaming eagerly from under her large straw hat. “We can go back, Alise. We can try again. They *said* we can.” The farm buildings seemed to be emptying as well, women rushing out to learn what the commotion was, then joining the flight without a pause for more than hiking skirts. Shouts from the olive groves said the Warders were at work, but not how much they were achieving. Perhaps not a great deal. Elayne sensed growing frustration from Birgitte, and irritation. Reanne eyed the turmoil and sighed. “We must gather them in, Alise. We can go back.”

“That’s all very well for you and some of the others,” Alise said doubtfully. “If it’s true. What about the rest of us? The Tower would not have let me stay as long as I did had I been quicker to learn.” She darted a frown at the now well-hooded sisters, and the stare she returned to Reanne held no little anger. “What would we go back *for*? To be told again we aren’t strong enough and be sent on our way? Or will they just keep us as novices the rest of our lives? Some might accept that, but I won’t. What for, Reanne? What for?”

Nynaeve climbed down, tugging her mare forward at the end of her reins, and Elayne imitated her, though leading Lioness more easily. “To be part of the Tower, if that’s what you wish,” Nynaeve said impatiently before even reaching the two Kinswomen. “Maybe to be Aes Sedai. Myself, I don’t know why you have to be a certain strength, if you can pass the fool tests. Or don't go back; run away, for all I care. Once I'm done here, anyway." Planting her feet, she pulled off her hat and planted her fists on her hips. "This is wasting time, Reanne, and we have work to do. Are you sure there's anybody here we can use? Speak up. If you're not sure, then we might as well get on with it. The hurry might be out of the way, but now we have the thing, I'd as soon it was over and done with."

When she and Elayne were introduced as Aes Sedai, the Aes Sedai who had given the promises, Alise made a choked sound and began smoothing her woolen skirts as though her hands wanted to latch on to Reanne's throat. Her mouth opened angrily—then snapped shut without a sound when Merilille joined them. That stern gaze did not fade completely, but it became mixed with a touch of wonder. And more than a touch of wariness.

"Nynaeve Sedai," Merilille said calmly, "the Atha'an Miere are . . . impatient . . . to be off their horses. I think some may ask for Healing." A brief smile flickered across her lips.

That settled that question, though Nynaeve grumbled extravagantly about what she was going to do to the next person who doubted her. Elayne might have said a few choice words herself, but the truth was, Nynaeve looked more than a little silly carrying on that way with Merilille and Reanne both waiting attentively for her to finish and Alise staring at all three. That settled it, or perhaps it was the Windfinders, afoot and pulling their horses behind them. Every shred of grace had vanished during the ride, worn away by hard saddles—their legs seemed as stiff as their faces—yet no one could mistake them for anything but who they were.

"If there are twenty Sea Folk this far from the sea," Alise muttered, "I'll believe anything." Nynaeve snorted but said nothing, for which Elayne was grateful. The woman seemed to be having a hard enough time accepting even with Merilille naming them Aes Sedai. Neither tirade nor tantrum would help.

"Then Heal them," Nynaeve told Merilille. Their eyes went to the hobbling women together, and Nynaeve added, "If they ask. Politely." Merilille smiled again, but Nynaeve had already abandoned the Sea Folk and gone back to frowning at the now all but empty farm. A few goats still trotted around a farmyard littered with dropped wash and rakes and brooms, spilled buckets and baskets, not to mention the crumpled forms of Kinswomen who had fainted, and a handful of chickens had gone back to scratching and pecking, but the only conscious women still in sight among the farm buildings were plainly not of the Kin. Some wore embroidered linen or silk and some rough country woolens, yet the fact that they had not run spoke that much of them. Reanne said that at any given time as many as half those at the farm might fall into that group. Most appeared stunned.

Despite her grumbling, Nynaeve wasted no time taking charge of Alise. Or perhaps Alise took charge of Nynaeve. It was difficult to tell, since the Kinswoman showed little of the deference toward Aes Sedai that the Knitting Circle did. Perhaps she was still just too numbed by the sudden turn of events. In any case, they moved off together, Nynaeve leading her mare and gesturing with the hat in her other hand, instructing Alise on how to bring in the scattered women and what to do with them once they were collected. Reanne had been sure that at least one woman strong enough to join the circle was there, Garenia Rosoinde, and possibly two more. In truth, Elayne was hoping they had all gone. Alise alternated between nodding and giving Nynaeve very level looks that Nynaeve seemed not to notice.

Now, in the wait while the gathering was done, seemed a good time to do a bit more searching through the panniers, but when Elayne turned toward the packhorses, which were just beginning to be led toward the farm buildings, she noticed the Knitting Circle, Reanne and the whole lot of them, making their own way into the farm on foot, some hurrying toward women lying on the ground, others toward those standing about gaping. The whole lot of them, and no sign of Ispan. It took only a glance to find her, though. Between Adeleas and Vandene, each holding an arm as they half-dragged her along, their dust-cloaks streaming behind.

The white-haired sisters were linked, the glow of *saidar* somehow encompassing them both without including Ispan. There was no way to tell which led the small circle and held the shield on the Darkfriend, but not even one of the Forsaken could have broken it. They stopped to speak to a stout woman in plain brown wool, who gaped at the leather sack covering Ispan's head but still curtsied and pointed toward one of the white-plastered buildings.

Elayne exchanged angry glances with Aviendha. Well, hers was angry, anyway. Sometimes Aviendha gave away no more than a stone. Handing their horses over to two of the palace stablemen, they hurried after the three. Some of the women who were not of the Kin tried to question them about what was happening, a few in rather overbearing fashion, but Elayne gave them short shrift, leaving behind a wake of indignant sniffs and snorts. Oh, what she would not give to have the ageless face already! That tweaked a thread in the back of her thoughts, but it vanished as soon as she tried to examine it.

When she pushed open the plain wooden door where the trio had vanished, Adeleas and Vandene had Ispan seated in a ladder-back chair with her head bare, the sack lying atop a narrow trestle table with their linen cloaks. The room possessed only one window, set in the ceiling, but with the sun still high it let in a good light. Shelves lined the walls, stacked with large copper pots and big white bowls. By the smell of bread baking, the only other door led into a kitchen.

Vandene looked around sharply at the sound of the door, but seeing them, she smoothed her face to a total lack of expression. “Sumeko said the herbs Nynaeve gave her were wearing off,” she said, “and it seemed best to question her a little before fuzzing her brain again. We do seem to have time, now. It would be good to know what the . . . the Black Ajah,” her mouth twisted in distaste, “was up to in Ebou Dar. And what they know.”

“I doubt they are aware of this farm, since we were not,” Adeleas said, tapping a finger thoughtfully on her lips as she studied the woman in the chair, “but it is better to be sure than to weep later, as our father used to say.” She might have been examining an animal she had never seen before, a creature she could not fathom existing.

Ispan’s lip curled. Sweat rolled down her bruised face, and her dark, beaded braids were disheveled and her clothing all disarrayed, but despite bleary eyes, she was not nearly so woozy as she had been. “The Black Ajah, it is a fable, and a filthy one,” she sneered, a trifle hoarsely. It must have been very hot inside that leather sack, and she had had no water since leaving the Tarasin Palace. “Me, I am surprised that you will give it voice. And to cast the charge on me! What I have done, I have done on the orders of the Amyrlin Seat.”

“Elaida?” Elayne spat incredulously. “You have the nerve to claim that *Elaida* ordered you to murder sisters and steal from the Tower? *Elaida* ordered what you did in Tear and Tanchico? Or do you mean Siuan? Your lies are pathetic! You’ve forsaken the Three Oaths, somehow, and that names you Black Ajah.”

“I do not have to answer the questions from you,” Ispan said sullenly, hunching her shoulders. “You are rebels against the lawful Amyrlin Seat. You will be punished, perhaps stilled. Especially if you harm me. I serve the true Amyrlin Seat, and you will be punished severely if you harm me.”

“You will answer any questions my near-sister asks.” Aviendha tested her belt knife on a thumbnail, but her eyes were on Ispan’s. “Wetlanders fear pain. They do not know how to embrace it, accept it. You will answer as you are asked.” She did not glare or snarl, she just spoke, but Ispan shrank back in the chair.

“I fear that is proscribed, even were she not an initiate of the Tower,” Adeleas said. “We are forbidden to shed blood in questioning, or to allow others to do so in our name.” She sounded reluctant, though whether over the prohibition or over admitting that Ispan was an initiate, Elayne could not say. She herself had not really considered that Ispan might still be considered one. There was a saying that no woman was finished with the Tower until it was finished with her, but truthfully, once the White Tower touched you, it never was finished.

Her brow furrowed as she studied the Black sister, so bedraggled, and still so sure of herself. Ispan sat up a little straighter, and darted glances full of amused contempt at Aviendha—and Elayne. She had not been so poised earlier, when she thought it was Nynaeve and Elayne alone who had her; regained composure had come with remembering that there were older sisters present. Sisters who would hold White Tower law as part of themselves. That law forbade not only shedding blood, but breaking bones and a number of other things that any Whitecloak Questioner would be more than ready to do. Before any session began, Healing had to be given, and if the questioning started after sunrise, it had to end before sundown; if after sunset, then before sunrise. The law was even more restrictive when it came to initiates of the Tower, the sisters and Accepted and novices, banning the use of *saidar* in questioning, punishment, or penance. Oh, a sister might flick a novice’s ear with the Power if she was exasperated, or even give her a swat on the bottom, but not very much more. Ispan smiled at her. Smiled! Elayne took a deep breath.

“Adeleas, Vandene, I want you to leave Aviendha and me alone with Ispan.” Her stomach tried to tie itself into a knot. There had to be a way to press the woman sufficiently to learn what was needed without breaking Tower law. But how? People who were to be questioned by the Tower usually began talking before a finger was laid on them—everyone *knew* that no one held out against the Tower; *no* one!—but they were very seldom initiates. She could hear another voice, not Lini's this time, but her mother's. *What you order done, you must be willing to do with your own hand. As a queen, what you order done, you* have *done*. If she did break the law. . . . Her mother's voice again. *Even a queen cannot be above the law, or there is no law*. And Lini's. *You can do whatever you wish, child. So long as you're willing to pay the price*. She dragged her hat off without untying the ribbons. Keeping her voice steady took an effort. "When we are—when we are done talking with her, you can take her back to the Knitting Circle." Afterward, she would submit herself to Merilille. Any five sisters could sit in judgment to set a penance, if they were asked.

Ispan's head swung, swollen eyes going from Elayne to Aviendha and back, slowly widening until the whites showed all the way around. She was not so sure of herself now.

Silent glances passed between Vandene and Adeleas, in the manner of people who had spent so much time together they hardly needed to speak aloud any longer; then Vandene took Elayne and Aviendha each by an arm. "If I may speak with you outside a moment," she murmured. It sounded a suggestion, but she was already urging them to the door.

Outside in the farmyard, perhaps two dozen or so Kinswomen were huddled together like sheep. Not all wore Ebou Dari clothes, but two had the red belts of Wise Women, and Elayne recognized Berowin, a stout little woman who normally showed a pride far greater than her strength in the Power. Not now. Like the rest, her face was frightened, her eyes darting, despite the entire Knitting Circle surrounding them and talking urgently. Down the way, Nynaeve and Alise were trying to herd perhaps twice as many women inside one of the larger buildings. "Trying" did seem to be the word.

". . . don't care *what* estates you hold," Nynaeve was shouting at a proud-necked woman in pale green silk. "You get in there and stay in there, out of the way, or I'll *kick* you inside!"

Alise simply seized the green-clad woman by the scruff of the neck and ran her through the doorway despite voluble and heated protests. There was a loud squawk like a huge goose being stepped on, then Alise reappeared, dusting her hands. The others seemed to give no trouble after that.

Vandene released them, studying their eyes. The glow still enveloped her, yet Adeleas must have been focusing their combined flows. Vandene could have maintained the shield, once woven, without being able to see it, but had she been the one, it was much likelier that Adeleas would have brought them out. Vandene could have gone several hundred paces before the link began to attenuate—it would not break if she and Adeleas went to opposite corners of the earth, though it would have been useless long before that—but she remained close to the door. She seemed to sort words in her head.

"I've always thought it best if women with experience handle this sort of thing," she said finally. "The young can easily be caught up in hot blood. Then they do too much. Or sometimes, they realize they can't bring themselves to do enough. Because they haven't really seen enough, yet. Or worst of all, they find a . . . taste for it. Not that I believe either of you has that flaw." She gave Aviendha a weighing glance without pausing; Aviendha hastily sheathed her belt knife. "Adeleas and I have seen enough to know why we must do what must be done, and we left hot blood behind long ago. Perhaps you will leave this to us. Much better that way, all around." Vandene seemed to take the recommendation as accepted. She nodded and turned back toward the door.

No sooner had she disappeared behind it, than Elayne felt the use of the Power within, a weave that must have blanketed the room inside. A ward against eavesdropping, certainly. They would not want stray ears to catch whatever Ispan said. Then another use hit her, and suddenly the silence from within was more ominous than any shrieks that ward would contain.

She crushed her hat back onto her head. The heat she could not feel, but the sun's glare suddenly made her queasy. "Maybe you'll help me look over what the packhorses are carrying," she said breathily. She had not ordered it done—whatever *it* was—but that did not seem to change anything. Aviendha nodded with surprising quickness; she seemed to want to be away from that silence, too.

The Windfinders were waiting not far from where the servants had the pack animals, waiting impatiently and staring about imperiously, arms folded beneath their breasts, copying Renaile. Alise marched up to them, marking Renaile out as the leader after one sweeping glance. Elayne and Aviendha she ignored.

“Come with me,” she said in brisk tones that brooked no argument. “The Aes Sedai say you will want to be out of the sun until matters are more settled.” The words “Aes Sedai” held as much bitterness as they did the awe Elayne was used to from Kinswomen. Maybe more. Renaile stiffened, her dark face growing darker, but Alise plowed on. “You wilders can sit out here and sweat if that’s what you want, for all of me. If you *can* sit.” It was obvious none of the Atha’an Miere had received Healing for their saddle soreness; they stood like women who wanted to forget they existed below the waist. “What you will not do is keep me waiting.”

“Do you know who I am?” Renaile demanded in a tight fury, but Alise was already walking away and not looking back. Struggling with herself visibly, Renaile dashed sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, then angrily ordered the other Windfinders to leave the “shore-cursed” horses and follow her. They made a spraddle-legged line wobbling along after Alise, everyone but the two apprentices muttering to herself—Alise included.

Instinctively, Elayne began to plan how to smooth matters over, how to get the Atha’an Miere’s pains Healed without them having to ask. Or a sister having to offer too strenuously; Nynaeve had to be appeased, too, and the other sisters. To her surprise, she suddenly realized that for once in her life she had no real desire to smooth anything. Watching the Windfinders limp toward one of the farm buildings, she decided that matters were fine just as they were. Aviendha wore a large, open grin as she watched the Atha’an Miere. Elayne snatched the much smaller smile from her own face and turned to the packhorses. They did deserve it, though. Not grinning was very hard.

With Aviendha’s help, the searching went more quickly than before, though Aviendha did not recognize what they were after as quickly as she did. Not a great surprise. A few of the sisters Elayne had trained showed a greater skill in this than she did herself, but most came nowhere near. Still, two sets of hands found more than one, and there was a great deal to be found. Liveried stablemen and women carried away the rubbish, while a collection of *ter’angreal* grew on the broad stone lid of a square cistern.

Four more horses were unloaded quickly, and they accumulated a selection that would have caused a celebration, brought into the Tower. Even with no one studying *ter’angreal*. They took every form imaginable. Cups and bowls and vases, no two the same size or design or in the same material. A flat, worm-eaten box, half-falling apart and whatever had lined it long since gone to dust, held pieces of jewelry—a necklace and bracelets set with colored stones, a slim gem-studded belt, several finger rings—and there were spaces for more. Every single one was a *ter'angreal*, and they all matched, meant to be worn together, though Elayne could not imagine why any woman would want to carry so many about her at one time. Aviendha found a dagger with gold wire wrapped around a hilt of rough deer-horn; the blade was dull, and by all evidence, always had been. She kept turning that over and over in her fingers—her hands actually began to tremble—until Elayne took it away from her and put it with the others on the cistern's lid. Even then Aviendha stood for a time, looking at it and licking her lips as though they had gone dry. There were finger rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets and buckles, many of very peculiar pattern indeed. There were statuettes and figures of birds and animals and people, several knives that did have edges, half a dozen large medallions in bronze or steel, most worked with strange patterns and not one carrying an image Elayne could really understand, a pair of peculiar hats seemingly made of metal, too ornate and too thin to be helmets, and any number of items she could not think what to call. A rod, as thick as her wrist, bright red and smooth and rounded, firm rather than hard for all that it seemed to be stone; it did not warm slightly in her hand, it almost felt hot! Not real heat any more than the warmth was real, but still! What about a set of metal basketwork balls, one inside the other? Any movement produced a faint musical chime, a different tone every time, and she had the feeling that no matter how hard she looked into it, there would always be a still smaller ball waiting to be discovered. A thing that looked like a blacksmith's puzzle made of glass? It was heavy enough that she dropped it, and it broke a chip off the edge of the cistern cover. A collection to stir amazement in any Aes Sedai. More important, they found two more *angreal*. Those Elayne set very carefully aside, within arm's reach.

One was an odd piece of jewelry, a golden bracelet attached by four flat chains to finger rings, every bit of it engraved in an intricate mazelike pattern. That was the stronger of the two, stronger than the turtle still in her pouch. It was made for a smaller hand than hers or Aviendha's. Strangely, the bracelet had a tiny lock, complete with a minuscule, tubular key dangling from a fine chain that was obviously made to be removed. Along with the key! The other was a seated woman in age-darkened ivory, her legs folded in front of her, her exposed knees bare, but with hair so long and luxuriant she could not have been more muffled in the heaviest cloak. It was not even as strong as the turtle, but she found it very appealing. One hand rested on a knee, palm up and fingers arranged so the thumb touched the tips of the middle two fingers, while the other hand was lifted, the first two fingers raised and the others folded. The whole figure carried an air of supreme dignity, yet the delicately worked face showed amusement and delight. Maybe it had been made for a particular woman? It seemed personal, somehow. Perhaps they had done that, in the Age of Legends. Some *ter'angreal* were immense, needing men and horses, or even the Power, to move, but most *angreal* were small enough to carry about your person; not all, but most.

They were tossing back the canvas covers on another set of wicker panniers when Nynaeve came striding up. The Atha'an Miere began filing out of one of the farm buildings, no longer limping. Merilille was talking with Renaile, or rather, the Windfinder was talking and Merilille listening. Elayne wondered what had happened in there. The slim Gray did not look so satisfied anymore. The huddle of Kinswomen had grown larger, but even as Elayne looked up, three more came hesitantly into the farmyard, and another two stood at the edge of the olive trees, peering about indecisively. She could sense Birgitte, somewhere out among the groves and only a little less irritated than earlier.

Nynaeve glanced at the display of *ter'angreal* and gave her braid a tug. Her hat had gone missing somewhere. "That can wait," she said, sounding disgusted. "It's time."

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CHAPTER

5

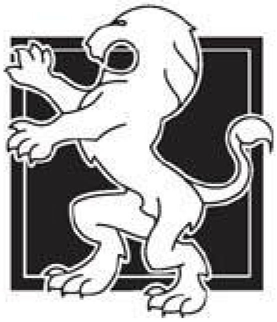

The Breaking Storm

The sun stood little more than halfway down toward the horizon by the time they clambered up the well-worn, snaking path to the top of the steep-sided hill above the barns. That was the spot Renaile had chosen. It did make sense from what Elayne knew of working weather, all learned from a Sea Folk Windfinder, to be sure. Changing anything beyond your immediate vicinity required working over long distances, which meant being able to *see* a long distance, much easier on the ocean than on land. Except from a mountain or hilltop. It also needed a deft hand to avoid causing torrential rains or whirlwinds or the Light alone knew what elsewhere. Whatever you did, the effects spread like ripples from a stone tossed into a pond. She had no desire whatsoever to lead the circle that would use the Bowl.

The top of the hill was clear of brush and flat, if far from level, a rough stone table, fifty paces long and broad, with plenty of room for everybody who needed to be there, and some who did not, strictly speaking. From at least fifty paces above the farm, the spectacular view stretched for miles over a patchwork quilt of farms and pastures, forests and olive groves. Far too many browns and sere yellows were mixed in with a hundred shades of green, crying the need for what they were to do, yet even so, the beauty of it struck Elayne. Despite dust in the air like a faint mist, she could see so *far*!

The land really was quite flat here except for those few hills. Ebou Dar lay just out of sight to the south even if she embraced the Power, yet it seemed she should be able to see it, by straining just a little. Surely with a little effort she could see the River Eldar. A marvelous view. Not everyone was interested.

“An hour wasted,” Nynaeve grumbled, glaring sideways at Reanne. And at just about everyone else. With Lan not there, it seemed she might take the opportunity to unleash her temper. “Almost an hour. Maybe more. Completely wasted. Alise is capable enough, I suppose, but you’d think Reanne would *know* who was there! Light! If that fool woman faints on me again . . . !” Elayne hoped she held on a little longer. It looked to be quite a storm once she let it break.

Reanne tried to keep a cheerful, eager face, yet her hands were never still on her skirts, constantly plucking and smoothing. Kirstian simply clutched hers and sweated, appearing ready to empty her stomach any minute; when anyone looked at her, anyone at all, she shivered. The third Kinswoman, Garenia, was a Saldaean merchant with a strong nose and a wide mouth, a short slim-hipped woman, stronger than the other two, who looked not that much older than Nynaeve. A greasy dampness glistened on her pale face, and her dark eyes grew wider whenever they fell on an Aes Sedai. Elayne thought she might soon discover whether someone’s eyes actually *could* pop out of her head. At least Garenia had stopped moaning, which she had done all the way up the hill.

There really had been another pair who might have been strong enough —possibly; the Kin did not pay much attention to that—but the last had gone on her way three days past. No one else at the farm even came close. Which was why Nynaeve was still disgusted. One reason. The other was that Garenia had been one of the very first found, passed out in the farmyard. For that matter, she fainted again the first two times she was roused, as soon as her eyes fell on one of the sisters. Of course, Nynaeve being Nynaeve, she was not about to admit that she should have done anything so simple as ask Alise who was still at the farm. Or even tell Alise what she was looking for before the woman inquired. Nynaeve never expected anyone to have sense to know up from down. Except herself.

“We could be done by now!” Nynaeve growled. “We could be shut of —!” She almost quivered with the effort of not scowling at the Sea Folk as they gathered near the east end of the stone table. Renaile, gesturing emphatically, appeared to be giving instructions. Elayne would have given a pretty to hear those.

Nynaeve’s glares certainly took in Merilille and Careane and Sareitha, who still clutched the silk-wrapped Bowl tightly. Adeleas and Vandene had remained below, sequestered with Ispan. The three sisters stood chatting together, not paying any mind to Nynaeve unless she spoke to them directly, but Merilille’s gaze sometimes slipped to the Windfinders, then jerked away; her mask of serenity faltered slightly, and she licked her lips with the tip of her tongue.

Had she made some mistake down below while Healing them? Merilille had negotiated treaties and mediated disputes between nations; few in the White Tower were better than she. But Elayne remembered hearing a story once, a joke of sorts, about a Domani merchant, a Sea Folk Cargomaster and an Aes Sedai. Not many people told jokes involving Aes Sedai; telling one might not be entirely safe. The merchant and the Cargomaster found an ordinary rock on the shore and proceeded to sell it back and forth between them, somehow making a profit each time. Then an Aes Sedai came along. The Domani convinced the Aes Sedai to buy the simple stone for twice what she herself had last paid. After which the Atha’an Miere convinced the Aes Sedai to buy the *same* rock from him for twice that again. Only a joke, but it showed what people believed. Maybe the older sisters would *not* have done any better bargaining with the Sea Folk.

Aviendha strode straight to the edge of the cliffs as soon as she reached the hilltop, and stood staring north, motionless as a statue. After a moment, Elayne realized that she was not admiring the view; Aviendha was simply staring. Gathering her skirts a bit awkwardly with the three *angreal* in hand, she joined her friend.

The cliff fell in fifty-foot steps to olive groves, steep swathes of ridged gray stone, bare except for a few small, dying bushes. The drop was not really bothersome, but it was hardly the same as looking at the ground from the top of a tree, either. Strangely, looking down made Elayne feel a trifle dizzy. Aviendha did not seem to notice that the edge was right at her toes.

“Is something troubling you?” Elayne asked quietly.

Aviendha kept her gaze on the distance. “I have failed you,” she said finally. Her voice was flat, empty. “I cannot form the gateway properly, and all saw me shame you. I thought a servant was one of the Shadowwrought, and behaved worse than foolishly. The Atha'an Miere ignore me and glare at the Aes Sedai, as if I am an Aes Sedai dog yapping at their command. I pretended I could make the Shadowrunner talk for you, but no *Far Dareis Mai* is allowed to question prisoners until she has been wed to the spear for twenty years, or even to watch until she has carried it ten. I am weak and soft, Elayne. I cannot bear to shame you further. If I fail you again, I will die."

Elayne's mouth went dry. That sounded too close to a promise. Gripping Aviendha's arm firmly, she drew her back from the edge. Aiel could be almost as peculiar as the Sea Folk thought they were. She did not really think Aviendha would jump off—not really—but she was not about to take any chances. At least the other woman did not try to resist.

Everyone else seemed to be engrossed in themselves, or in each other. Nynaeve had begun speaking to the Atha'an Miere, both hands tight on her braid and her face almost as dark as theirs from the strain of not shouting, while they listened with contemptuous arrogance. Merilille and Sareitha still guarded the Bowl, but Careane was attempting to talk with the Kinswomen, without much success. Reanne answered, if blinking uneasily and licking her lips, but Kirstian stood trembling and silent, while Garenia's eyes were squeezed shut. Elayne kept her voice low anyway; this was none of their business.

"You haven't failed anyone, least of all me, Aviendha. Nothing you've done has *ever* shamed me, and nothing you do ever could." Aviendha blinked at her doubtfully. "And you're about as weak and soft as a stone." That had to be the oddest compliment she had ever paid anyone, yet Aviendha actually looked gratified. "I'll bet the Sea Folk are scared silly of you, too." Another strange one; it made Aviendha smile, if only faintly. Elayne drew a breath. "As for Ispan. . . ." She did not like even thinking about this. "I thought I could do what was necessary, too, but just letting my mind dwell on it makes my hands sweat and my stomach roil. I'd throw up if I even tried. So we share that."

Aviendha made the Maiden handtalk sign for "You startle me"; she had started teaching some of them to Elayne, though she said it was forbidden. Apparently, being near-sisters who were learning to be more changed that. Except that it did not, really. Aviendha seemed to think her explanation had been perfectly clear. "I did not mean I could not," she said aloud, "only that I do not know how. Likely I would have killed her, trying." Suddenly she smiled, much wider and warmer than before, and lightly touched Elayne's cheek. "We both have weakness in us," she whispered, "but it brings no shame so long as only we two know."

"Yes," Elayne said weakly. She just did not know *how!* "Of course it doesn't." This woman contained more surprises than any gleeman. "Here," she said, pressing the woman-wrapped-in-her-hair into Aviendha's hand. "Use this in the circle." Letting the *angreal* go was not easy. She had intended to use it herself, but smiles or no smiles, her friend's spirits—her near-sister's spirits—needed raising. Aviendha turned the small ivory figure over in her hands; Elayne could almost see her trying to decide how to give it back. "Aviendha, you know how it feels when you hold as much of *saidar* as you can? Think of holding almost twice as much. *Really* think of it. I want you to use it. Please?"

Perhaps Aiel did not show a great deal on their faces, but Aviendha's green eyes widened. They had discussed *angreal*, considering their search, but she probably never had thought what it would be like to use one before this. "Twice as much," she murmured. "To hold all that. I can barely make myself imagine. This is a very great gift, Elayne." She touched Elayne's cheek again, pressing her fingertips; that was the Aiel equivalent of a kiss and a hug.

Whatever Nynaeve had to say to the Sea Folk, it did not take long. She stalked away from them twitching at her skirts furiously. Approaching Elayne, she frowned equally at Aviendha and at the edge of the cliff. Usually she denied her poor head for heights, but she kept them between herself and the drop. "I have to talk to you," she muttered, guiding Elayne a little distance along the hilltop. And farther from the edge. A little way, but far enough from anyone to avoid being overheard. She drew several deep breaths before beginning, in a low voice, and she did not look at Elayne.

"I. . . . I've been behaving like a fool. It's that bloody man's fault! When he's not right in front of me, I can hardly think of anything else, and when he is, I can hardly think at all! You . . . you have to tell me when I . . . when I'm acting the fool. I depend on you, Elayne." Her voice stayed low, but her tone became almost a wail. "I can't afford to lose my wits in a man, not now."

Elayne was so shocked, she could not speak for a moment. Nynaeve, admitting she had been a fool? She almost looked to see whether the sun had turned green! "It isn't Lan's fault, and you know it, Nynaeve," she said at last. She pushed away memories of her own recent thoughts about Rand. This was not the same. And the opportunity was a gift of the Light. Tomorrow, Nynaeve would likely try to box her ears if she said Nynaeve was being foolish. “Take hold of yourself, Nynaeve. Stop behaving like a giddy girl.” Definitely not thoughts of Rand! *She* had not been mooning over him *that* badly! “You’re an Aes Sedai, and you are supposed to be leading us. Lead! And think!”

Folding her hands at her waist, Nynaeve actually hung her head. “I’ll try,” she mumbled. “I will, truly. You don’t know what it’s like, though. I. . . . I’m sorry.”

Elayne nearly swallowed her tongue. Nynaeve, *apologizing* on top of the other? Nynaeve, *abashed?* Maybe she was ill.

It did not last, of course. Abruptly frowning at the *angreal*, Nynaeve cleared her throat. “You gave one to Aviendha, did you?” she said briskly. “Well, I suppose she’s all right. A pity we have to let the Sea Folk use one. I’ll wager they try to hang on to it! Well, just let them try! Which one is mine?”

With a sigh, Elayne handed her the bracelet-and-rings, and she stalked away, fumbling the piece of jewelry onto her left hand and calling loudly for everyone to take their places. Sometimes, it was difficult to tell Nynaeve leading from Nynaeve bullying. As long as she *did* lead, though.

The Bowl of the Winds sat atop its unfolded white wrappings in the center of the hilltop, a shallow, heavy disc of clear crystal two feet across, worked inside with thick swirling clouds. An ornate piece, yet simple when you thought of what it could do. What they hoped it could do. Nynaeve took up her place nearby, the *angreal* finally clicking shut on her wrist. She worked her hand, looking surprised that the chains did not seem to inconvenience her; it fit as if made for her hand. The three Kinswomen were already there, Kirstian and Garenia huddling at Reanne’s back and appearing more frightened than ever, if that was possible. The Windfinders still stood arrayed behind Renaile, almost twenty paces away.

Lifting her divided skirts, Elayne met Aviendha at the Bowl and eyed the Sea Folk suspiciously. Did they intend to create a fuss? She had been afraid of exactly that from the first mention of women at the farm who might be strong enough to join the link. The Atha’an Miere were sticklers for rank enough to shame the White Tower, and Garenia’s presence meant that Renaile din Calon Blue Star, Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere, would not be part of the circle. Should not be.

Renaile frowned searchingly at the women around the Bowl. She seemed to be weighing them, judging their capabilities. "Talaan din Gelyn," she barked suddenly, "take your station!" It was like a whip-crack! Even Nynaeve jumped.

Talaan bowed low, touching her heart, then ran to the Bowl. As soon as she moved, Renaile barked again. "Metarra din Junalle, take your station!" Metarra, plump yet solid, sped on Talaan's heels. Neither apprentice was old enough to have earned what the Sea Folk called a "salt name."

Once begun, Renaile rattled off names quickly, sending Rainyn and two other Windfinders, all of whom moved quickly, yet not so fast as the apprentices. By the number of their medallions, Naime and Rysael were higher in rank than Rainyn, dignified women with a quiet air of command, but markedly weaker. Then Renaile paused, only for a heartbeat, yet in that rapid listing it stood out. "Tebreille din Gelyn South Wind, take your station! Caire din Gelyn Running Wave, assume the command!"

Elayne felt a moment of relief that Renaile had not named herself, but it lasted about as long as Renaile's pause had. Tebreille and Caire exchanged one look, Tebreille grim and Caire smug, before moving to the Bowl. Eight earrings and a multitude of overlapping medallions marked each Windfinder to a Clan Wavemistress. Only Renaile stood above them; only Dorile among the Sea Folk on the hilltop was their equal. In brocaded yellow silks, Caire was slightly the taller, Tebreille in brocaded green somewhat sterner of face, both more than handsome women, and it did not take their names to know them blood sisters. They had the same big, almost black eyes, the same straight nose, the same strong chin. Caire silently pointed to a spot at her right side; Tebreille did not speak either, nor did she hesitate in standing where her sister pointed, but her face was stone. With her, a circle of thirteen women surrounded the Bowl nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. Caire's eyes almost sparkled. Tebreille's were leaden. Elayne was reminded of another of Lini's sayings. *No knife is sharper than a sister's hate*.

Caire glared around the circle of women surrounding the Bowl, not yet truly a circle, as though trying to fix each face in her mind. Or maybe to fix her scowl in theirs. Remembering herself, Elayne hurriedly passed the last *angreal*, the small amber turtle, to Talaan and started to explain how it was used. The explanation was simple, yet anyone who tried without knowing how could fumble for hours. She was not given the chance for five words.

“Silence!” Caire roared. Tattooed fists on her hips and bare feet apart, she belonged on the deck of a ship going into battle. “There will be no talking on station without my permission. Talaan, report yourself immediately on returning to your ship.” Nothing in Caire’s tone suggested that she was speaking to her own daughter. Talaan bowed deeply, touching her heart, and murmured something inaudible. Caire snorted contemptuously—and gave Elayne a glare that suggested a wish that she could order her to report herself to someone as well—before going on in a voice that might have been heard at the base of the hill. “Today, we shall do what has not been done since the Breaking of the World, when our ancestors fought wind and wave gone mad. By the Bowl of the Winds and the mercy of the Light, they survived. Today, we will use the Bowl of the Winds, lost to us for more than two thousand years, and now returned. I have studied the ancient lore, studied the records of the days when our foremothers first learned the sea and the Weaving of the Winds, and the salt entered our blood. What is known of the Bowl of the Winds, I know, more than anyone else.” Her eyes cut toward her sister, a satisfied glance that Tebreille did not acknowledge. Which seemed to satisfy Caire even more. “What the Aes Sedai cannot do, I will do today, if it pleases the Light. I expect every woman to stand her station to the last. I will not accept failure.”

The rest of the Atha’an Miere seemed to accept that speech as expected and proper, but the Kinswomen gaped at Caire in astonishment. In Elayne’s opinion, grandiose did not begin to describe it; plainly Caire fully expected that the Light *would* be pleased, and *she* would be most displeased if it was not! Nynaeve rolled her eyes to the heavens and opened her mouth. Caire forestalled her.

“Nynaeve,” the Windfinder announced loudly, “you will now demonstrate your skill at linking. Be about it, woman, and quickly!”

In response, Nynaeve shut her eyes tight. Her lips . . . writhed. She looked about to burst a blood vessel. “I assume that means I have *permission* to speak!” she murmured. Fortunately too low to be heard by Caire, on the far side of the circle. Opening her eyes, she put on a smile that was quite horrible when added to the rest of her expression. She was a sour stomach and several other complaints rolled into one.

“The first thing is to embrace the True Source, Caire.” The light of *saidar* suddenly shone bright around Nynaeve; she was using the *angreal* on her hand already, by what Elayne could feel. “I assume you know how to do that, of course.” Ignoring the abrupt tightening of Caire’s mouth, Nynaeve went on. “Elayne will now assist me in the *demonstration*. If we have your *permission?”*

“I prepare myself to embrace the Source,” Elayne put in quickly, before Caire could erupt, “but I don’t actually embrace it.” She opened herself, and the Windfinders leaned forward, peering at her, though there really was nothing to see yet. Even Kirstian and Garenia forgot their fear enough to show interest. “While I’m at this point, the rest is up to Nynaeve.”

“Now I will reach out to her. . . .” Nynaeve paused, looking at Talaan. Elayne had not had a chance to tell her anything, really. “It’s much the same as with an *angreal,”* Nynaeve said, addressing the slender apprentice. Caire growled, and Talaan tried to watch Nynaeve with her head down. “You open yourself to the Source *through* an *angreal*, just as I will through Elayne. As though you mean to embrace the *angreal* and the Source at the same time. It isn’t very difficult, really. Watch, and you’ll see. When it’s time to bring you into the circle, just put yourself on the brink. That way, when I embrace through you, I’ll embrace through the *angreal* as well.”

Concentration or no concentration, sweat began to bead on Elayne’s forehead. But then, the heat had nothing to do with it. The True Source beckoned; it throbbed, and she throbbed with it. It demanded. The longer she hung just a hairsbreadth from touching the Power, the worse the desire, the need, would grow. Hanging, she began to tremble slightly. Vandene had told her that the longer you channeled, the worse that anticipation grew.

“Watch with Aviendha,” Nynaeve told Talaan. “She knows how to—” She caught sight of Elayne’s face and finished hurriedly. “Watch!”

It was not exactly the same as using an *angreal*, though very close. It was not meant to be done hurriedly, either; Nynaeve did not have a soft touch, at best. Elayne felt as though she were being shaken; nothing happened physically, but inside her head she seemed to be bouncing around, tumbling wildly downhill. Worse, she was jostled toward embracing *saidar* with excruciating slowness. It took less than a heartbeat, and seemed to take hours, days. She wanted to howl, but she could not breathe. Abruptly, like a dam bursting, the One Power flowed through her, a rush of life and joy, of bliss, and breath left her in a long gasp of pleasure and relief so overwhelming that her legs wobbled. It was all she could do to keep from panting. Tottering, pulling herself up, she gave Nynaeve a stern look, and Nynaeve shrugged apologetically. Twice in one day! The sun *had* to be turning green.

“I now control the flow of *saidar* from her as well as my own,” Nynaeve went on, not quite meeting Elayne’s eyes, “and will until I let her go. Now, don’t fear that whoever leads the circle,” she shot a frown at Caire and sniffed, “can make you draw too much. This really is a great deal like an *angreal*. The *angreal* buffers you against the extra Power, and in somewhat the same way, in a circle you can’t be made to draw too much. In fact, in a circle you can’t draw quite as much as you can otherwi—”

“This is dangerous!” Renaile broke in, shouldering roughly between Caire and Tebreille. Her scowl took in Nynaeve, Elayne, and the sisters standing off from the circle as well. “You say that one woman can simply seize another, hold her captive, use her? How long have you Aes Sedai known this? I warn you, if you try to use it on one of us—” It was her turn to be cut off.

“It doesn’t work that way, Renaile.” Sareitha touched Garenia, and she and Kirstian leaped apart to make room. The young Brown eyed Nynaeve uncertainly, then folded her hands and took on a lecturing tone, as if addressing a class. With it came composure; perhaps she did see Renaile as a pupil right then. “The Tower studied this for many years, long before the Trolloc Wars. I have read every page that survives in the Tower Library of those studies. It was proven conclusively that one woman cannot form a link with another against her will. It simply cannot be done; nothing happens. A willing surrender is necessary, just as in embracing to *saidar* itself.” She sounded absolutely definite, but Renaile still frowned; too many people knew how Aes Sedai could sidestep the Oath against lying.

“And why did they study it?” Renaile demanded. “Why was the White Tower so interested in such a thing? Perhaps you Aes Sedai still study?”

“That is ridiculous.” Exasperation dripped from Sareitha’s voice. “If you must know, it was the problem of men who can channel that drew them to it. The Breaking of the World was a living memory to some, then. I don’t suppose even very many sisters remember—it hasn’t been part of the required instruction since before the Trolloc Wars—but men can be brought into a circle, too, and as the circle doesn’t break even if you go to sleep. . . .

Well, you can see the advantages. That was an utter failure, unfortunately. More to the point here, I say again that it is impossible to force a woman into a circle. If you doubt, try it yourself. You will see."

Renaile nodded, accepting at last; there was very little else to do when an Aes Sedai made a simple statement of fact. Yet Elayne wondered. What was in the pages that had *not* survived? She had noticed a slight change in Sareitha's inflection at one point. She had questions. For later, when there were fewer ears around.

When Renaile and Sareitha withdrew, Nynaeve twitched her divided skirts straight, plainly irritated at the interruption, and opened her mouth again.

"Continue your demonstration, Nynaeve," Caire commanded harshly. Her dark face might have been smooth as a frozen pond, but she was not very pleased, either.

Nynaeve's mouth worked before she could make any sound come out, and when it did, she went on in a rush, as though afraid someone else might break in.

The next part of the lesson was passing control of the circle. That had to be done voluntarily, too, and even as she reached out toward Nynaeve, Elayne held her breath until she felt the subtle shift that meant she now controlled the Power flowing into her. And that flowing through Nynaeve, of course. She had not been sure it would work. Nynaeve could form a circle easily, if not with any finesse, but passing guidance also involved a form of surrender; Nynaeve had *considerable* difficulties relinquishing control or being brought into a circle, just as she had once had difficulty surrendering to *saidar*. Which was why Elayne kept the guidance for now. It would have to be passed to Caire, and Nynaeve might not be able to manage letting go twice. Those apologies must have been much easier for her.

Elayne linked next with Aviendha, so Talaan could actually see how it was done with an *angreal*, as much as there was to see, and it went perfectly; Aviendha was a very quick study, blending in easily. Talaan was quick as well, it turned out, adding her still greater *angreal* aided flow without a hitch. One by one, Elayne brought them in, and she herself almost shivered at the river of the Power that streamed into her. No one yet was drawing nearly as much as she could, but it added up, especially with *angreal* involved. Elayne's awareness climbed higher with each addition of *saidar*. She could smell the heavy scents in the lacework gold boxes that the Windfinders wore around their necks, and separate one from another. She could make out each fold and crease in everyone's clothes as sharply as if she had her nose pressed to the cloth, more sharply. She was aware of the faintest movement of the air against her hair and skin, caresses she never would have noticed without the Power.

That was not the whole of her awareness, of course. The link had a certain kinship to the Warder bond, just as intense and somehow even more intimate. She knew that a tiny blister from climbing the hill made a spot of pain on Nynaeve's right heel; Nynaeve always talked about good stout shoes, but she had a weakness for slippers with a great deal of embroidery. Nynaeve wore a fixed frown, directed at Caire, her arms were crossed, her fingers wearing the *angreal* played on the braid pulled over her right shoulder, every line of her of a piece, yet inside she was a maelstrom of emotions. Fear, worry, anticipation, irritation, wariness and impatience bounced over each other, and washing through it all, sometimes submerging the rest, ripples of warmth and waves of heat that threatened to burst into flame. Those last Nynaeve suppressed quickly, especially the heat, but they always returned. Elayne almost thought she could recognize them, but it was like something glimpsed from the corner of your eye that was gone when you turned your head.

Surprisingly, Aviendha felt fear, too, but small and tightly contained, and all but swallowed by determination. Garenia and Kirstian, shaking visibly, were nearly pure terror, so strong it was amazing that they could even have begun to embrace the Source. What filled Reanne to overflowing was eagerness, and no matter her skirt smoothing. As for the Atha'an Miere. . . . Even Tebreille exuded a wary alertness, and it did not take the quick darting of Metarra's eyes, and Rainyn's, to know the focus was Caire, watching them all, impatient and commanding.

Her, Elayne left to last, and it was no real surprise that she had to make four tries—four!—to bring the woman into the circle. Caire was no better at yielding than Nynaeve. Elayne desperately hoped the woman had been chosen for ability, not rank.

"I will now pass the circle to you," she told the Windfinder when it finally was done. "If you recall what I did with Ny—" Words froze momentarily in her throat as guidance of the circle was torn from her surrender, a sensation like having a sudden burst of wind rip all of her clothes off or yank the bones out of her. She exhaled fiercely, and if it sounded close to spitting, well, so be it.

"Good," Caire said, rubbing her hands together. "Good." Her attention focused on the Bowl, her head twisting this way and that as she studied it. Well, perhaps not all her attention. Reanne started to sit down, and without looking up, Caire snapped, "Hold your station, woman! This isn't a fish lolly! Stand till you're told to move!"

Startled, Reanne jerked back to her feet, muttering under her breath, but she might as well have ceased to exist as far as Caire was concerned. The Windfinder's eyes remained on the flattened crystal shape. Elayne felt resolve in her great enough to move a mountain. And something else, tiny and quickly stamped out. Uncertainty. Uncertainty? If after all of this, the woman really did not know what to do—

At that moment, Caire drew deeply. *Saidar* flooded through Elayne, almost as much as she could hold; an unbroken ring of light blazed into being, joining the women in the circle, brighter wherever one used an *angreal*, but nowhere faint. She watched closely as Caire channeled, forming a complex weave of all Five Powers, a four-pointed star that she laid atop the Bowl with what Elayne somehow was sure was exquisite precision. The star touched, and Elayne gasped. Once, she had channeled a trickle into the Bowl—in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, to be sure, and only a reflection of the Bowl, though still a dangerous thing to do—and that clear crystal had turned a pale blue, and the carved clouds moved. Now, the Bowl of the Winds *was* blue, the bright blue of a summer sky, and fleecy white clouds billowed across it.

The four-point star became five-pointed, the composition of the weave altered slightly, and the Bowl was a green sea with great heaving waves. Five points became six, and it was another sky, a different blue, darker, winter perhaps, with purple clouds heavy with rain or snow. Seven points, and a gray-green sea raged in storm. Eight points and sky. Nine and sea, and suddenly, Elayne felt the Bowl itself drawing *saidar*, a wild torrent far greater than all the circle together could manage.

The changes continued unabated inside the Bowl, sea to sky, waves to clouds, but a writhing, braided column of *saidar* shot up from that flattish crystal disc, Fire and Air, Water and Earth and Spirit, a column of intricate lace as wide as the Bowl, climbing up and up into the sky, until its top rose out of sight. Caire continued her weaving, sweat streaming down her face;

she paused seemingly only to blink salty drops away from her eyes as she examined the images in the Bowl, then laid a new weave. The pattern of the braiding in the thick column altered with every weave, subtly echoing what Caire wove.

It was a very good thing she had not wanted to focus the flows for this circle, Elayne realized; what the woman was doing required *years* more study than she had. Many years more. Suddenly, she realized something else. That ever-changing lacework of *saidar* bent itself around something else, something unseen that made the column solid. She swallowed, hard. The Bowl was drawing *saidin* as well as *saidar*.

Her hope that no one else had puzzled that out vanished with one glance at the other women. Half stared at the twisting column with a revulsion that should have been reserved for the Dark One. Fear grew stronger among the emotions shared in her head. Some were approaching the level of Garenia and Kirstian, and it was a wonder those two had not fainted. Nynaeve was a hair from sicking up, for all her suddenly too smooth face. Aviendha appeared just as calm outwardly, but inside, that tiny fear quivered and pulsed, trying to grow.

From Caire came only determination, as steely hard as her expression. Nothing was going to stand in Caire’s way, certainly not the mere presence of Shadow-tainted *saidin* mixed into her weaving. Nothing was going to stop her. She worked the flows, and abruptly spiderwebs of *saidar* blossomed from the unseen top of the column, like uneven spokes of a wheel, almost a solid fan to the south, sparser fans reaching north and northwest, single lacy spokes stretching in other directions. They changed as they grew, never the same from one moment to the next, spreading across the sky, farther and farther, until the ends of the pattern also passed out of sight. Not just *saidar* there either, Elayne was certain; in places that spiderweb caught and curved around something she could not see. Still Caire wove, and the column danced to her bidding, *saidar* and *saidin* together, and the spiderweb altered and flowed like a lopsided kaleidoscope spinning across the heavens, vanishing into the distance, on and on and on.

Without warning, Caire straightened, knuckling her back, and released the Source completely. Column and spiderweb evaporated, and she collapsed as much as sat down, breathing hard. The Bowl turned clear again, but small patches of *saidar* flashed and crackled around its edges. “It is done, the Light willing,” she said tiredly.

Elayne hardly heard. That was *not* the way to end a circle. When Caire let go in that way, the Power disappeared from every woman simultaneously. Elayne's eyes popped. For one instant, it was as though she stood atop the highest tower in the world, and suddenly the tower was not there anymore! Just an instant, yet hardly pleasant. She felt tired, if not anywhere near what she would have had she actually done anything beyond serve as a conduit, but what she felt most was loss. Letting go of *saidar* was bad enough; having it simply vanish out of you went beyond thinking about.

Others had suffered far worse than she. As the glow joining the circle winked out, Nynaeve sat down right where she stood as though her legs had melted, sat stroking the bracelet-and-rings, staring at it and panting. Sweat rolled down her face. "I feel like a kitchen sieve that just had the whole mill poured through it," she murmured. Carrying that much of the Power had its cost even if you did nothing, even with an *angreal*.

Talaan wavered, a reed in the wind, casting surreptitious glances at her mother, plainly afraid to sit. Aviendha stood straight, her fixed expression saying that willpower had as much to do with that as anything else. She gave a slight smile, though, and made a gesture in Maiden handtalk—worth the price—and then another—more—right behind. More than worth the price. Everyone looked weary, if not so much as those who had used *angreal*. The Bowl of the Winds went quiet at last, just a wide bowl of clear crystal, but decorated now with towering waves. *Saidar* still seemed to be there, though, not being wielded by anyone, not visible, but in dimly felt flashes like those that had played around the Bowl at the end.

Nynaeve raised her head to glower at the cloudless sky, then lowered her gaze to Caire. "All that, for what? Did we do anything, or not?" A breath of air stirred across the hilltop, warm as the air in a kitchen.

The Windfinder struggled to her feet. "Do you think Weaving the Winds is like throwing the helm over on a darter?" she demanded contemptuously. "I just moved the rudder on a skimmer with a beam as broad as the world! He will take time to turn, time to know he is *supposed* to turn. That he *must* turn. But when he does, not the Father of Storms himself will be able to stand in his way. I have done it, Aes Sedai, and the Bowl of the Winds is ours!"

Renaile moved into the circle, kneeling beside the Bowl. Carefully she began folding the white silk around it. "I will take this to the Mistress of the

Ships," she said to Nynaeve. "We have fulfilled our part of the bargain. Now, you Aes Sedai must fulfill the rest of yours." Merilille made a sound in her throat, but when Elayne glanced at her, the Gray appeared a study in composure.

"Maybe you've done your part," Nynaeve said, rising unsteadily. "Maybe. We'll see when this . . . this *skimmer* of yours turns. If it turns!" Renaile stared hard at her across the Bowl, but Nynaeve ignored her. "Strange," she muttered, rubbing her temple. The bracelet-and-rings caught in her hair, and she grimaced. "I can almost feel an echo of *saidar*. It must be this thing!"

"No," Elayne said slowly. "I can feel it, too." Not just the dimly perceived crackling in the air, and not an echo, exactly. More the shadow of an echo, so faint that it was as if she were feeling someone use *saidar* at a. . . . She turned. On the horizon to the south, lightning flashed, dozens of bolts vivid silver-blue against the afternoon sky. Very near to Ebou Dar.

"A rainstorm?" Sareitha said eagerly. "The weather must be righting itself already." But there were no clouds in the sky even where the lightning forked and fell. Sareitha was not strong enough to sense *saidar* being wielded at that distance.

Elayne shivered. *She* was not strong enough. Unless someone was using as much as they had on this hilltop. Fifty or even a hundred Aes Sedai, all channeling at once. Or. . . . "Not one of the Forsaken," she murmured. Someone behind her moaned.

"One couldn't do that," Nynaeve agreed quietly. "Maybe they didn't feel us the way we do them, maybe, but they'll have seen, unless they're all blind. The Light burn our luck!" Quiet or not, she was agitated; she often called Elayne down for using language like that. "Take everyone who will go to Andor with you, Elayne. I'll. . . . I'll meet you there. Mat's in the city. I have to go back for him. Burn the boy; he came for me, and I have to."

Elayne wrapped her arms around herself and drew a deep breath. Queen Tylin she left to the mercies of the Light; Tylin would survive if it was possible. But Mat Cauthon, her very strange, very instructive subject; her most unlikely rescuer. He had come for her, too, and offered more. And Thom Merrilin; dear Thom, who she sometimes still wished would turn out to be her real father, and the Light burn what that would make of her mother. And the boy, Olver, and Chel Vanin, and. . . . She had to think like a queen. *The Rose Crown is heavier than a mountain*, her mother had told her, *and duty will make you weep, but you must bear and do what must be done*.

“No,” she said, then more firmly, “No. Look at you, Nynaeve; you can hardly stand. Even if we all went, what could we do? How many of the Forsaken are there? We’d die, or worse, for no gain. The Forsaken have no reason to look for Mat or the others. It’s us they will be after.”

Nynaeve gaped at her, stubborn Nynaeve with sweat running down her face and her legs unsteady. Wonderful, gallant, foolish Nynaeve. “You’re saying leave him, Elayne? Aviendha, talk to her. Tell her about that honor you’re always going on about!”

Aviendha hesitated, then shook her head. She was almost as sweaty as Nynaeve, and from the way she moved, just as tired. “There are times to fight without hope, Nynaeve, but Elayne is right. The Shadowsouled will not be looking for Mat Cauthon; they will be after us, and the Bowl. He may have left the city already. If we go, we risk giving them what can undo what we have done. Wherever we send the Bowl, they will be able to make us tell them who we sent it with and where.”

Nynaeve’s face crumpled in pain. Elayne reached to put her arms around her.

“Shadowspawn!” someone screamed, and suddenly women were embracing *saidar* all over the hilltop. Balls of fire shot up from Merilille’s hands, from Careane’s and Sareitha’s, as fast as they could throw. A huge winged shape enveloped in flame tumbled out of the sky trailing oily black smoke, falling just beyond the cliff.

“There’s another one!” Kirstian shouted, pointing. A second winged creature dove away from the hill, body as big as a horse, ribbed wings spanning thirty paces or more, long neck stretched out before and longer tail streaming behind. Two figures crouched low on its back. A storm of fire rained after it, quickest of all from Aviendha and the Sea Folk, who made no throwing gesture as part of their weaving. A hail of fire so thick it seemed that Fire must be forming itself out of the air, and the thing dodged behind the hill on the other side of the farm and appeared to vanish.

“Did we kill it?” Sareitha asked. Her eyes shone bright, and she breathed hard in agitation.

“Did we even hit it?” one of the Atha’an Miere growled disgustedly.

“Shadowspawn,” Merilille murmured in amazement. “Here! At least that proves it’s the Forsaken in Ebou Dar.”

“Not Shadowspawn,” Elayne said hollowly. Nynaeve’s face was a picture of anguish; she knew, too. “They call it a *raken*. It’s the Seanchan. We must go, Nynaeve, and take every woman at the farm with us. Whether we killed that thing or not, more will come. Anyone we leave behind will be wearing a *damane* leash by tomorrow morning.” Nynaeve nodded, slowly, painfully; Elayne thought she murmured, “Oh, Mat.”

Renaile strode up with the Bowl in her arms, once more swathed in its white covering. “Some of our ships have encountered these Seanchan. If they are in Ebou Dar, then the ships beat to sea. My ship fights for his life, and I am not on his deck! We go now!” And she formed the weave for a gateway, right there.

It tangled uselessly, of course, flared bright for an instant then collapsed into nothing, but Elayne squeaked in spite of herself. Right there in the middle of them! “You aren’t going anywhere from here unless you mean to stay long enough to learn this hilltop!” she snapped. She hoped none of the women who had been in the circle tried the weave; holding *saidar* was the fastest way to learn a place. She could have made it work here, and very likely so could they. “You aren’t going to a moving ship from *anywhere;* I don’t think it’s *even possible!”* Merilille nodded, though that meant little; Aes Sedai believed a great many things to be true, and some of them actually were. As well if the Sea Folk believed it proven, in any case. Nynaeve, haggard and staring, was in no condition to do any leading at the moment, so Elayne went on. She hoped she managed to do her mother’s memory proud. “But most of all, you aren’t going anywhere except with us, because our bargain isn’t complete; the Bowl of the Winds is not yours until the weather is right.” Not precisely true unless you twisted the words of the bargain a little, and Renaile opened her mouth, but Elayne plowed on. *“And* because you made a bargain with Matrim Cauthon, my subject. You go voluntarily where I want you to, or you go tied to a packsaddle. Those were the choices you accepted. So, get down this hill now, Renaile din Calon Blue Star, before the Seanchan sweep down on us with an army and a few hundred women who can channel and would like nothing better than to see us collared alongside them. Now! Run!”

To her astonishment, they ran.

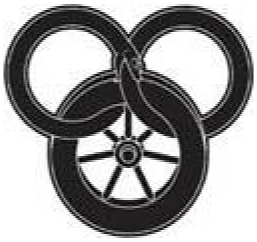

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CHAPTER 6

Threads

Elayne ran, too, of course, holding her skirts up, and quickly took the lead on the well-worn dirt path. Only Aviendha stayed close, though she seemed to have no idea how to run in a dress, divided or not; tired as she was, she certainly would have passed Elayne otherwise. Everyone else strung out behind them along the narrow, winding track. None of the Atha’an Miere would push by Renaile, and despite her silk trousers she could not move very fast carrying the Bowl hugged to her chest. Nynaeve had no such compunctions, elbowing past and running hard, shouting for people to get out of her way when she stumbled into them whether they were Windfinders, Kinswomen, or Aes Sedai.

Bounding down the hillside, tripping and catching herself, Elayne wanted to laugh despite the urgency. Despite the danger. Lini and her mother had been death on running and climbing trees from the time she was twelve, but it was not just the sheer pleasure of running again that made delight bubble up in her middle. She had behaved as a queen was supposed to behave, and it had worked *exactly* as it was supposed to! She had taken charge, to lead people out of danger, and they *followed!* Her whole life had been training for this. It was satisfaction that made her laugh, and the hot glow of pride seemed about to burst through her skin like the radiance of *saidar*.

Rounding the last curve, she pounded down the final straight beside one of the tall white-plastered barns. And her toe caught an almost buried stone. She pitched forward heavily, windmilling her arms, and suddenly she was somersaulting head-over-heels through the air. No time even to yell. With a thump that jarred her teeth and took all the wind out of her, she landed hard at the foot of the path, sitting right in front of Birgitte. For an instant she could not even think, and when she could, little satisfaction remained. So much for queenly dignity. Brushing her hair out of her face, she tried to catch her breath as she waited for Birgitte's cutting comment. This was a chance for the other woman to play the older and wiser sister with a vengeance, and she seldom let an opportunity pass.

To Elayne's surprise, Birgitte heaved her to her feet even before Aviendha could reach her, and without so much as the faint grin on Aviendha's face. All Elayne could feel from her Warder was a sense of . . . focus; she thought an arrow nocked on a drawn bowstring might feel that way. "Do we run or fight?" Birgitte asked. "I recognized those Seanchan fliers from Falme, and truth for true, I suggest running. My bow is the ordinary sort, today." Aviendha gave her a slight frown, and Elayne sighed; Birgitte *had* to learn to guard her tongue if she really intended to hide who she was.

"Of course we run," Nynaeve panted, laboring down the final stretch of path. "Fight or run! Fool question! Do you think we're utter—? Light! What are they doing?" Her voice started climbing and kept right on. "Alise! Alise, where are you? Alise! Alise!"

With a start, Elayne realized the farm was boiling as badly as it had when Careane's face was recognized. Maybe worse. A hundred and forty-seven Kinswomen inhabited the place at present, Alise had reported, including fifty-four red-belted Wise Women sent out days ago and a number of others who had been passing through the city; now it looked as though every last one was running somewhere, and a good many of the other women, too. Most of the Tarasin Palace servants in their green-and-white livery dashed this way and that carrying burdens. Ducks and chickens darted through the tumult, flapping and squawking, adding to the apparent confusion. Elayne even saw a *Warder*, Vandene's grizzled Jaem, trot by with his wiry arms wrapped around a big jute sack!

Alise appeared as though from the air, poised and collected despite the perspiration on her face. Every strand of her hair was in place, and her dress looked as if she were merely out for a stroll. “There’s no need to screech,” she said calmly, planting hands on hips. “Birgitte told me what those big birds are, and I thought we might be leaving sooner rather than later, especially with all of you galloping down the hill like the Dark One himself was after you. I told everybody to collect one clean dress apiece, three changes of shift and stockings, soap, mending baskets, and all the coin they have. That, and no more. The last ten to finish will do the washing-up till we get where we’re going; that will speed their feet. I told those servants to gather all the food they could, too, just in case. And your Warders. Sensible fellows, most of them. Surprisingly sensible, for men. Does being a Warder do something to them?”

Nynaeve stood there with her jaw hanging, ready to issue orders and none left to give. Emotions played across her face too fast to catch. “Very good,” she mumbled finally. And sourly. Suddenly she brightened. “The women who aren’t Kin. Yes! They have to be—”

“Calm yourself,” Alise broke in, making a soothing gesture. “They are already gone, for the most part. Mainly those with husbands or families they’re worried about. I couldn’t have held those back had I wanted. But a good thirty think those birds really are Shadowspawn, and want to stay as close to Aes Sedai as they can get.” A sharp sniff said what she thought of that. “Now, you just gather yourself. Drink some cool water; not too fast. Put a little on your face. I have to keep an eye on things.” Casting her eye over the bustle, everybody running in bounds, Alise shook her head. “Some would slack off if Trollocs were coming over the hill, and most of the noblewomen never really do get used to our rules. For sure, I’ll need to remind two or three before we go.” With that, she waded serenely back into the turmoil of the farmyard and left Nynaeve gaping.

“Well,” Elayne said, brushing her skirt, “you did say she was a very capable woman.”

“I never said that,” Nynaeve snapped. “I never said ‘very’ Hmmph! Where did my hat get to? Thinks she knows everything. I’ll wager she doesn’t know *that!*” She flounced off in a different direction than Alise.

Elayne stared after her. Her *hat?* She would have liked to know where her own hat had gone to—it was a beautiful thing—but really! Maybe being in a circle working that much of the Power, using an *angreal* doing it, had unsettled Nynaeve’s wits temporarily. She still felt a trifle odd, herself, as though she could pluck little bits of *saidar* out of the air around her. In any case, she had other matters to worry about right then. Like being ready to get away before the Seanchan descended. From what she had seen in Falme, they really might bring a hundred *damane*, or more, and based on the little Egwene would let herself say of her captivity, most of those women really would be eager to help collar others. She said that what had turned her stomach most had been the sight of *damane* from Seanchan laughing with their *sul'dam*, fawning and playing with them, well-trained hounds with their affectionate handlers. Egwene said some of the women collared in Falme had been that way, too. It made Elayne's blood run cold. She would die before letting them put that leash on her! And she would as soon let the Forsaken have what she had found as the Seanchan. She went running to the cistern, Aviendha at her side breathing almost as hard as she was herself.

It seemed Alise really had thought of everything, though. The *ter'angreal* were already stowed away on the packhorses. The unsearched panniers remained full of jumbled odds and ends and the Light knew what, but those she and Aviendha had emptied now bulged with coarse sacks of flour and salt, beans and lentils. A handful of stablefolk minded the packanimals instead of running about with their arms full. Doing Alise's bidding, no doubt. Even Birgitte went trotting off at the woman's call with no more than a rueful grin!

Elayne lifted canvas covers to examine the *ter'angreal* as well as she could without unloading them again. Everything appeared to be there, a bit tumbled together in two panniers, not enough to fill them, but nothing broken. Not that anything short of the One Power itself *could* break most *ter'angreal*, yet even so. . . .

Aviendha took a seat cross-legged on the ground, blotting sweat from her face with a large, plain linen handkerchief that seemed very much at odds with her pretty silk riding dress. Even she was beginning to show weariness. "What are you muttering about, Elayne? You sound like Nynaeve. This Alise has only saved us the trouble of packing those things ourselves."

Elayne colored faintly. She had not meant to speak aloud. "I just don't want anyone handling them who doesn't know what they are doing, Aviendha." Some *ter'angreal* could trigger even for people unable to channel, if they did the wrong thing, but the truth was, she did not want *anyone* handling them. They were hers! The Hall was *not* going to hand these over to some other sister just because she was older and more *experienced*, or hide them away because studying *ter'angreal* was too dangerous. With this many examples to study, maybe she could finally figure out how to make *ter'angreal* that worked every time; there had been far too many failures and half-successes. "They need someone who knows what she's doing," she said, lashing the stiff canvas back in place.

Order began to appear out of pandemonium more rapidly than Elayne expected, though not as fast as she could have wished. Of course, she admitted reluctantly, nothing slower than instantaneous could have matched her wishes. Unable to keep her eyes off the sky, she sent Careane running back to the top of the hill to watch toward Ebou Dar. The stocky Green grumbled a bit under her breath before curtsying, and even frowned at the Kinswomen dashing about as if on the point of suggesting one of them instead, but Elayne wanted someone who would not faint at the sight of "Shadowspawn" approaching, and Careane stood lowest among the sisters. Adeleas and Vandene brought out Ispan between them, firmly shielded and the leather sack back over her head. She walked quite easily, and nothing visible said that anything at all had been done to her, except. . . . Ispan kept her hands folded at her waist, never so much as trying to raise the sack for a peek, and when she was boosted into a saddle, she held out her wrists to be corded to the pommel without being told. If she was that amenable, perhaps they had learned something from her. Elayne just did not want to contemplate how the learning might have been achieved.

There were . . . bumps, of course, of sorts, even with what might be rushing toward them. What surely was rushing toward them. Nynaeve getting her blue-plumed hat back was not really a bump, though it almost turned into one; Alise *had* found it, and handed it back telling Nynaeve she needed to shield her face from the sun if she wanted to keep that smooth pretty skin. An openmouthed Nynaeve watched the graying woman hurry off to deal with one of the numerous small problems, then ostentatiously shoved the hat under a strap of her saddlebags.

From the beginning Nynaeve set about flattening the real bumps, but Alise was nearly always there first, and where Alise met a bump, the bump flattened itself. Several noblewomen demanded help packing their belongings, only to be informed in no uncertain terms that she had meant what she said and if they did not hop to it, they could live in what they stood in. They hopped. Some, and not only nobles, changed their minds about going when they learned the destination was Andor, and were literally chased away. Afoot, and told to keep running as long as they could. Every horse was needed, but they had to be well away before the Seanchan appeared; at the very least they could be expected to put anyone near the farm to the question. As should have been expected, Nynaeve got into a shouting match with Renaile over the Bowl, and the turtle Talaan had used, which Renaile apparently had tucked behind her sash. Hardly had they reached the stage of waving arms, however, than Alise was right there, and in short order the Bowl was back in Sareitha’s care and the turtle in Merilille’s. Following which, Elayne was treated to the sight of Alise shaking her finger under the astonished nose of the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha’an Miere, delivering a tongue-lashing on the subject of theft that left Renaile spluttering indignantly. Nynaeve did a little spluttering, too, stalking away empty-handed, yet Elayne thought she had never seen anyone look so forlorn.

All in all, it did not take very long, though. The remaining women who had been at the farm gathered under the watchful eyes of the Knitting Circle—and of Alise, who carefully noted the last ten to arrive, all but two in fine embroidered silks, not much different from Elayne’s. Definitely not Kinswomen. Elayne felt sure they really would do the washing-up anyway; Alise would not let a little thing like noble birth stand in her way. The Windfinders lined up with their horses, surprisingly silent except for Renaile, who muttered imprecations whenever she saw Alise. Careane was summoned back from the hilltop. The Warders brought the sisters their mounts. Almost everyone kept an eye on the sky, and *saidar* made halos around all of the older Aes Sedai and most of the Windfinders. Around a few of the Kin, as well.

Leading her mare to the head of the line, at the cistern, Nynaeve fingered the *angreal* still on her hand as if she were going to be the one to make the gateway, ridiculous as the very idea might be. For one thing, though she had washed her face—and donned her hat; strangely, all things considered—she still tottered whenever her self-control slipped. Lan stayed practically at her shoulder, stone-faced as always, but if ever there was a man ready to catch a woman when she fell, it was he. Even with the bracelet-and-rings, Nynaeve might not be able to manage enough to weave a gateway. More important, she had been dashing about the farm ever since they first arrived; Elayne had spent a considerable time holding *saidar* right where they now stood. She knew that spot. Nynaeve scowled sulkily when Elayne embraced the Source, but at least she had sense enough to say nothing.

Right from the first Elayne wished that she had asked Aviendha for the woman-cloaked-in-her-own-hair; she was weary, too, and all the *saidar* she could draw was barely enough to form the weave so it would work. The flows wavered in her grasp almost as if trying to twist free, then snapped into place so suddenly that she jumped; channeling when you were tired was not at all like other times, but this was the worst ever. At least the familiar vertical slash of silver appeared as it should, and widened into an opening right alongside the cistern. An opening no bigger than the one Aviendha had made, and at that, Elayne was grateful it was large enough to fit a horse through. At the last, she had not been certain it would be. Gasps rose from the Kinswomen, seeing a view of an upland meadow suddenly standing between them and the familiar gray bulk of the cistern.

"You should have let me try," Nynaeve said softly. Softly, but with a sharp point even so. "You nearly fubbed it altogether."

Aviendha gave Nynaeve a flat look that almost made Elayne grab her arm. The longer they remained near-sisters, the more she seemed to think she had to defend Elayne's honor; if they did become first-sisters, Elayne could see having to keep her away from Nynaeve, and Birgitte, completely!

"It's done, Nynaeve," she said quickly. "That's all that counts." Nynaeve directed a flat look at her and muttered something about the day being prickly, as if *Elayne* were the one showing her snappish side.

Birgitte was the first through, grinning impudently at Lan, leading her horse with her bow already in her other hand. Elayne could sense eagerness in her, a touch of satisfaction, perhaps that this time she had the lead instead of Lan—there was always a bit of rivalry between Warders—and a small measure of wariness. Very small. Elayne knew that meadow well; Gareth Bryne had taught her to ride not far from there. About five miles over those first sparsely treed hills lay the manor house of one of her mother's estates. One of *her* estates; she had to get used to that. The seven families who tended the house and its grounds would be the only people for half a day's journey in any direction.

Elayne had chosen that destination because they could reach Caemlyn in two weeks from there. And because the estate was so isolated, she might be entering Caemlyn before anyone knew she was in Andor. That could be a very necessary precaution; at various times in Andor's history, rivals for the Rose Crown had been kept as "guests" until they relinquished their claims. Her mother had kept two, until she took the throne. With luck, she could have a solid base established by the time Egwene and the others arrived.

Lan took Mandarb right behind Birgitte's brown gelding, and Nynaeve lurched as if to rush after the black warhorse, then pulled herself up short with a level stare that dared Elayne to say a word. Fiddling furiously with her reins, she made a visible effort to look anywhere except through the gateway after Lan. Her lips moved. After a moment, Elayne realized that she was *counting*.

"Nynaeve," she said quietly, "we really don't have time for—"

"Move along," Alise called from the rear, the sound of her hands clapping a sharp punctuating crack. "No pushing or shoving, now, but I'll have no laggards either! Move along."

Nynaeve's head swung wildly, pained indecision painting her face. For some reason she touched her wide hat, a few of its blue plumes broken and drooping, before pulling her hand away. "Oh, that goat-kissing old . . . !" she growled, the rest lost as she dragged her mare through the gateway. Elayne sniffed. And Nynaeve had the *nerve* to speak to anybody about *their* language! She wished she could have heard the rest, though; she already knew the first bit.

Alise continued her urging, but there really did not seem to be much need after the first. Even the Windfinders hurried, glancing worriedly over their shoulders at the sky. Even Renaile, who mumbled something about Alise that Elayne noted in the back of her head. Though calling someone "a fish-loving scavenger" did seem rather mild. She would have expected the Sea Folk to eat fish all the time.

Alise herself brought up the very rear, except for the remaining Warders, as if to herd even the packhorses along. She paused long enough to hand Elayne her green-plumed hat. "You'll want to keep the sun off that sweet face of yours," she said with a smile. "Such a pretty girl. No need to turn to leather before your time."

Aviendha, sitting on the ground nearby, fell over backward and kicked her heels laughing.

"I think I'll ask her to find *you* a hat. With lots of plumes, and big bows," Elayne said in dulcet tones before quickly following the Kinswoman. That certainly cut off Aviendha's laughter.

The gently rolling meadow was broad and nearly a mile long, surrounded by hills taller than those she had left behind, and by trees she knew, oak and pine and blackwood, sourgum and leatherleaf and fir, thick forest with good, tall timber to south and west and east, though there might not be any cutting this year. Most of the more scattered trees to the north, toward the manor, were better suited for firewood. Small gray boulders dotted the thick brown grass here and there, and not even a withered stalk marked the death of a wildflower. That was not so different from the south.

For once Nynaeve was not peering at the surrounding countryside trying to find Lan. He and Birgitte would not be gone long anyway, not here. Instead she strode briskly among the horses, ordering people to mount in a loud, commanding voice, chivvying the servants with the pack animals, curtly telling some of the Kinswomen who had no horses that any child could walk five miles, shouting at a slender Altaran noblewoman with a scar on her cheek and carrying a bundle nearly as big as herself that if she had been fool enough to bring all of her dresses then she could carry them. Alise had gathered the Atha’an Miere around her and was instructing them on how to mount a horse. For a wonder, they actually appeared to be paying attention. Nynaeve glanced her way and seemed pleased to see Alise standing in one spot. Until Alise smiled encouragingly and motioned her to go on with what she was doing.

For an instant Nynaeve stood stock-still, staring at the woman. Then she came striding through the grass to Elayne. Reaching up to her hat with both hands, she hesitated, glowering up at it through her lashes before giving it a twitch straight. “I’ll just let her take care of everything this time,” she said in a suspiciously reasonable tone. “We’ll just see how well she does with those . . . Sea Folk. Yes, we will.” Too reasonable a tone by half. Abruptly she frowned at the still-open gateway. “Why are you holding it? Let go.” Aviendha was frowning, too.

Elayne drew a deep breath. She had thought about this, and there was no other way, but Nynaeve would try to argue her out of it, and there was no time for arguing. Through the gateway, the farmyard stood empty, even the chickens finally frightened away by the hubbub, yet how long before it filled up again? She studied her weave, melded together so snugly that only a few threads remained distinct. She could see every flow, of course, but except for those few, they appeared inseparably combined. “Take everyone to the manor house, Nynaeve,” she said. The sun did not have very much farther to fall; perhaps two hours of light remained. “Master Hornwell will be surprised at so many visitors arriving at dark, but tell him you’re guests of the girl who cried over the redbird with the broken wing; he’ll remember that. I will be along as soon as I can.”

“Elayne,” Aviendha began in a surprisingly anxious voice, and at the same time, Nynaeve said sharply, “Just what do you think you’re—”

There was only one way to stop it. Elayne plucked one of the discernible threads free of the weave; it wavered and flailed like a living tentacle; it fuzzed and spluttered, tiny fluffs of *saidar* breaking off and fading away. She had not noticed that when Aviendha unmade her weave, but she had only seen the tail of that, really. “Go on,” she told Nynaeve. “I’ll wait for the rest until you are all out of sight.” Nynaeve stared out, her jaw hanging. “It has to be done,” Elayne sighed. “The Seanchan will be at the farm in hours, for sure. Even if they wait until tomorrow, what if one of the *damane* has the Talent to read residues? Nynaeve, I won’t give Traveling to the Seanchan. I won’t!”

Nynaeve growled something under her breath about the Seanchan that must have been particularly pithy, judging by her tone. “Well, *I* won’t let you burn yourself out!” she said aloud. “Now, put that back! Before the whole thing explodes the way Vandene said. You could kill all of us!”

“It cannot be put back,” Aviendha said, laying a hand on Nynaeve’s arm. “She has begun, and now she must finish. You must do as she says, Nynaeve.”

Nynaeve’s brows drew down. “Must” was a word she did not like hearing one bit, not applied to her. She was not a fool, though, so after a bit of glaring—at Elayne, at the gateway, at Aviendha, at the world in general—she flung her arms around Elayne in a hug that made her ribs creak.

“You be careful, you hear me,” she whispered. “If you get yourself killed, I swear I’ll skin you alive!” In spite of everything, Elayne burst out laughing. Nynaeve snorted, pushing her out to arm’s length by her shoulders. “You know what I mean,” she grumbled. “And don’t think I don’t mean it, because I do! I do,” she added in a softer voice. “You take care.”

It took Nynaeve a moment to gather herself, blinking and pulling her blue riding gloves tight. There seemed to be a hint of moisture in her eyes, though that could not have been; Nynaeve made other people cry, she did not cry herself. “Well, then,” she said loudly. “Alise, if you don’t have everyone ready yet—” Turning, she cut off with a strangled croak.

Those who were supposed to be mounted were, even the Atha’an Miere. The Warders were all gathered around the other sisters; Lan and Birgitte had returned, and Birgitte watched Elayne worriedly. The servants had the pack animals in a line, and the Kinswomen were waiting patiently, most afoot except for the Knitting Circle. A number of horses that could have been used for riding were loaded with sacks of food and bundles of belongings. Women who had brought more than Alise allowed—none of them Kin—carried their bundles on their own backs. The slender noble with the scar was bent at an awkward angle beneath hers, and glaring at anyone but Alise. Every woman who could channel was staring at the gateway. And every woman who had been there to hear Vandene tell of the dangers watched that one whipping filament as she would have a red adder.

It was Alise herself who brought Nynaeve her horse. And straightened the blue-plumed hat as Nynaeve put a foot in the stirrup. Nynaeve turned the plump mare north with Lan riding Mandarb at her side and a look of utter mortification on her face. Why she did not just set Alise down, Elayne did not understand. To hear Nynaeve tell it, she had been putting women older than herself in their place since she was little more than a girl. And she was Aes Sedai, now, after all; that should carry mountains of weight with any Kinswoman.

As the column began to wend its way toward the hills, Elayne looked at Aviendha and Birgitte. Aviendha simply stood there with her arms folded beneath her breasts; she had the woman-wrapped-in-her-own-hair *angreal* clutched in one hand. Birgitte took Lioness’s reins from Elayne, adding them to those of her own horse and Aviendha’s, then walked over to a small boulder twenty paces away and sat down.

“You two must,” Elayne began, then coughed when Aviendha’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. Sending Aviendha out of danger was impossible without shaming her. Perhaps impossible altogether. “I want you to go with the others,” she told Birgitte. “And take Lioness. Aviendha and I can take turns riding her gelding. I’d like a walk before bedtime.”

“If you ever treat a man half as well as you do that horse,” Birgitte said dryly, “he’ll be yours for life. I think I’ll just sit awhile; I’ve ridden long enough today. I’m not at your beck and call all the time. We can play that game in front of the sisters and the other Warders, to spare your blushes, but you and I know better.” Despite the mocking words, what Elayne felt from her was affection. No; stronger than affection. Her own eyes stung suddenly. Her death would hurt Birgitte to the bone—the Warder bond made that certain—but it was friendship that made her stay now.

“I am thankful to have two friends such as you,” she said simply. Birgitte grinned at her as if she had said something silly.

Aviendha, however, blushed furiously and stared at Birgitte, wide-eyed and flustered, as though the Warder’s presence were to blame for her fiery cheeks. Hurriedly she shifted her gaze to the people still short of the first hill, perhaps half a mile distant. “Best to wait until they are out of sight,” she said, “but you cannot wait too long. Once you have started the unweaving, the flows begin to grow . . . slick . . . after a time. Letting one slip free before it is out of the weave is the same as letting go of the weave; it will fall into whatever it wishes, then. But you must not hurry, either. Each thread must be pulled free as far as it will go. The more that come loose, the easier others will be to see, but you must always pick the thread that is easiest to see.” Smiling warmly, she pressed her fingers firmly against Elayne’s cheek. “You will do well, if you are careful.”

It did not sound that difficult. She just had to be careful. It seemed to take a long time for the last woman to vanish over the hill, the slender noble bent under the bulk of her dresses. The sun barely appeared to settle any at all, but it seemed like hours. What did Aviendha mean precisely by “slick”? She could not explain beyond variations on the word; they became difficult to hold, that was all.

Elayne found out as soon as she began again. “Slick” was what you would get if you coated a live eel with grease. She gritted her teeth just holding on to that first thread, and that was on top of trying to pull it free. All that stopped her from gasping in relief when the thread of Air began whipping about, finally loose, was that there were more to go. If they became much more “slick,” she was not sure she could manage it. Aviendha watched closely, but did not say another word, though she always had an encouraging smile when Elayne needed one. Elayne could not see Birgitte—she did not dare look away from her work—yet she could feel her, a small knot of rock-solid confidence in her own head, enough confidence to fill her.

Sweat slid down her face, down her back and belly, until she began to feel “slick” herself. A bath tonight would be *most* welcome. No, she could not think of that. All attention on the weaves. They *were* getting harder to handle, quivering in her grip as soon as she touched one, but they still came free, and every time one thread began to lash about, another seemed to leap out of the mass, to suddenly be clearly perceptible where there had only been solid *saidar* before. To her eye the gateway resembled some monstrous, distorted hundred-heads on the bottom of a pond, surrounded by flailing tendrils, every one thickly haired with threads of the Power that grew and writhed and vanished only to be replaced by new. The opening visible to anyone flexed along its edges, changing shape and even size continuously. Her legs began to tremble; strain stung her eyes as much as sweat did. She did not know how much longer she could go on. Gritting her teeth, she fought. One thread at a time. One thread at a time.

A thousand miles away, less than a hundred paces away through the shuddering gateway, dozens of soldiers swept around the white farm buildings, short men carrying crossbows, in brown breastplates and painted helmets that looked like the heads of huge insects. Behind them came a woman with red panels bearing silver lightning on her skirts, a bracelet on her wrist linked by a silvery leash to the collar around the neck of a woman in gray, and then another *sul'dam* and her *damane*, then another pair. One of the *sul'dam* pointed at the gateway, and the glow of *saidar* abruptly enveloped her *damane*.

"Get down!" Elayne screamed, falling backward, out of sight of the farmyard, and silver-blue lightning shot through the gateway with a roar that filled her ears, forking savagely in every direction. Her hair lifted, every strand trying to stand on its own, and thunderous fountains of earth erupted wherever one of the forks struck. Dirt and pebbles rained down on her.

Hearing returned suddenly, and a man's voice from the other side of the opening, a slurred, drawling accent that made her skin crawl as much as the words. ". . . must take them alive, you fools!"

Abruptly one of the soldiers was leaping into the meadow right in front of her. Birgitte's arrow punched through the clenched fist embossed on his leather breastplate. A second Seanchan soldier stumbled over the first as he fell, and Aviendha's belt knife stabbed into his throat before he could recover. Arrows flew from Birgitte's bow like hail; with one boot on the horses' reins, she grinned grimly as she shot. The trembling horses tossed their heads and danced as if they would jerk free and run, but Birgitte simply stood and shot as fast as she could draw. Shouts from beyond the gateway said Birgitte Silverbow still struck home with every shaft she loosed. Answer came, quick as bad thought, black streaks, crossbow bolts. So quick, all happening so fast. Aviendha fell, blood running over the fingers clutching her right arm, but she let go of her wound immediately, crawling clear, scrabbling on the ground for the *angreal*, her face set. Birgitte cried out; dropping her bow, she grabbed her thigh where a quarrel stuck out. Elayne felt the stab of agony as sharply as if it were her own.

Desperately, she seized another thread from where she lay half on her back. And realized to her horror after one tug that it was all she could do to hold on. Had the thread moved? Had it slipped free any at all? If it had, she did not dare let go. The thread trembled greasily in her grasp.

"Alive, I said!" that Seanchan voice roared. "Anyone who kills a woman gets no share of the taking gold!" The flurry of crossbow bolts ceased.

"You wish to take me?" Aviendha shouted. "Then come and dance with me!" *Saidar's* glow abruptly surrounded her, dim even with the *angreal*, and balls of fire sprang into being in front of the gateway and sprayed through again and again. Not very large balls, but the blasts as they burst back in Altara sounded in a steady stream. Aviendha panted with effort, though; her face glistened with sweat. Birgitte had recovered her bow; she looked every inch the hero of legend, blood streaming down her leg, barely able to stand, but an arrow half drawn, searching for a target.

Elayne tried to control her breathing. She could not embrace one shred more of the Power, nothing to help. "The two of you must get away," she said. She could not believe how she sounded, calm as ice; she knew she should have been wailing. Her heart was trying to pound through her ribs. "I don't know how much longer I can hold this." That held true for the entire weave as much as for that single thread. Was it sliding? Was it? "Go, as fast as you can. The other side of the hills should be safe, but every span you can cover gains something. Go!"

Birgitte growled in the Old Tongue, but nothing that Elayne knew. It sounded like phrases she would like to learn. If there was ever a chance. Birgitte went on in words Elayne could understand. "You let that bloody thing go before I tell you, and you won't have to worry about waiting for Nynaeve to skin you; I'll do it myself. And then let her have a turn. Just be quiet and hang on! Aviendha, get around here—behind that thing!—can you keep that up from behind it?—get around here and on one of these bloody horses."

"As long as I can see where to weave," Aviendha replied, staggering to her feet. She wobbled sideways and barely caught herself short of falling. Blood flowed down her sleeve from a wicked gash. "I think I can." She vanished behind the gateway, and the fireballs continued. You could see through a gateway from the other side, though it appeared to be a heat haze hanging in the air. You could not walk through from that side, though—the attempt would be extremely painful—and when Aviendha reappeared, she was stumbling well wide. Birgitte helped her mount her gelding, but *backward*, of all things!

When Birgitte motioned fiercely to her, Elayne did not bother with shaking her head. For one thing, she feared what might happen if she did. "I'm not certain I can hold on if I try to get up." In truth, she was not certain she *could* get up; tired was no longer in it; her muscles were water. "Ride as fast as you can. I'll hold on as long as I'm able. Please, go!"

Muttering curses in the Old Tongue—they had to be; nothing else ever had the sound!—Birgitte shoved the horses' reins into Aviendha's hands. Nearly falling twice, she hobbled to Elayne and bent to take her by the shoulders. "You can hang on," she said, her voice filled with the same conviction Elayne felt from her. "I never met a Queen of Andor before you, but I've known queens like you. A backbone of steel and a lion's heart. You can do it!"

Slowly she pulled Elayne up, not waiting for an answer, her face tight, every stab in her leg echoing in Elayne's head. Elayne quivered with the effort of holding the weave, holding that one thread; she was surprised to find herself erect. And alive. Birgitte's leg throbbed madly in her head. She tried not to lean on Birgitte, but her own trembling limbs would not support her completely. As they lurched toward the horses, each half leaning on the other, she kept looking back over her shoulder. She could hold a weave without looking at it—she could normally—but she needed to reassure herself that she really did still have a grip on that one thread, that it was not slipping. The gateway now appeared like no weave she had ever seen, twisting wildly, wreathed with fuzzed tentacles.

With a groan, Birgitte heaved her into her saddle more than helped her. Backward, just like Aviendha! "You have to see," she explained, limping to her gelding; holding the reins of all three horses, she pulled herself up painfully. Without a sound, but Elayne felt the agony. “You do what needs doing and leave where we’re going to me.” The horses leaped away, perhaps as much from eagerness to be gone as from Birgitte’s heel in her own mount’s flank.

Elayne hung on to the high cantle of her saddle as grimly as she did to the weave, to *saidar* itself. The galloping horse flung her about, and it was all she could do to remain in the saddle. Aviendha used her saddle’s cantle as a prop to keep herself upright; her mouth hung open, sucking air, and her eyes seemed fixed. The glow surrounded her, though, and that stream of fireballs continued. Not as fast as before, true, and some shot wide of the gateway, streaking trails of flame through the grass or exploding on the ground beyond, but they still formed and flew. Elayne took strength, made herself take strength; if Aviendha could keep on when she looked ready to fall on her face, she could, too.

At a gallop, the gateway began to dwindle, brown grass stretching out between them and the opening, and then the ground was slanting upward. They were climbing the hill! Birgitte was again the arrow in the bow, all focus, fighting down the agony in her legs, urging her horses for more speed. All they had to do was reach the crest, reach the other side.

With a gasp, Aviendha sagged onto her elbows, bouncing on her saddle like a loose sack; the light of *saidar* flickered around her and was gone. “I cannot,” she panted. “I cannot.” That was all she could get out. Seanchan soldiers began leaping into the meadow almost as soon as the hail of fire ceased.

“It’s all right,” Elayne managed. Her throat was sand; all the moisture that had been in her now coated her skin and soaked her clothes. “Using an *angreal* is tiring. You did well, and they can’t catch us now.”

As if to mock her, a *sul’dam* appeared in the meadow below; even at half a mile there was no mistaking the two women. The sun, low in the west, still flashed glints off the *a’dam* linking them. Another pair joined them, then a third, and a fourth. A fifth.

“The crest!” Birgitte shouted joyfully. “We made it! It’s good wine and a well set-up man tonight!”

In the meadow, a *sul’dam* pointed, and time seemed to slow for Elayne. The glow of the One Power sprang up around the woman’s *damane*. Elayne could see the weave forming. She knew what it was. And there was no way to stop it. “Faster!” she shouted. The shield struck her. She should have been too strong for it—she should have been!—but exhausted as she was, barely clinging to *saidar* as she was, it sliced between her and the Source. Down in the meadow, the weave that had been a gateway fell in on itself. Haggard, looking as though she could not possibly move, Aviendha hurled herself from her saddle at Elayne, carrying them both off. Elayne had just time to see the far slope of the hill below her as she fell.

The air turned white, blanking her sight. There was sound—she knew there was sound, a great roar—but it lay beyond hearing. Something struck her, as if she had fallen from a rooftop onto hard pavement, from a tower top.

Her eyes opened, staring at the sky. The sky looked, strange somehow, blurry. For a moment she could not move, and when she did, she gasped. She hurt everywhere. Oh, Light, she hurt! Slowly she raised a hand to her face; her fingers came away red. Blood. The others. She had to help the others. She could feel Birgitte, feel pain as bad as what gripped her, but at least Birgitte was alive. And determined, and angry apparently; she could not be injured too badly. Aviendha.

With a sob, Elayne rolled over, then pushed up to hands and knees, her head spinning, agony stabbing her side. Vaguely she recalled that moving with even one broken rib could be dangerous, but the thought was as hazy as the hillside. Thinking seemed . . . difficult. Blinking appeared to help her sight, though. Some. She was almost to the bottom of the hill! High above, a haze of smoke rose from the meadow beyond. Unimportant, now. Not important at all.

Thirty paces up the slope, Aviendha was on her hands and knees, too, almost falling over when she raised a hand to wipe away blood that poured down her face, but searching anxiously. Her gaze fell on Elayne, and she froze, staring. Elayne wondered how bad she looked. Surely no worse than Aviendha herself; half of the other woman’s skirt was gone, her bodice torn nearly off, and everywhere skin showed, there seemed to be blood.

Elayne crawled to her. With her head, it seemed much easier than trying to stand and walk. As she came close, Aviendha gave a relieved gasp.

“You are all right,” she said, touching bloody fingers to Elayne’s cheek. “I was so afraid. So afraid.”

Elayne blinked in surprise. What she could see of herself appeared in every bit as bad shape as Aviendha. Her own skirts remained intact, but half of her bodice was ripped away entirely, and she seemed to be bleeding from two dozen gashes. Then it struck her. She had not been burned out. She shivered at the thought. “We are both all right,” she said softly.

Well off to one side, Birgitte wiped her belt knife on the mane of Aviendha’s gelding and straightened from the still horse. Her right arm dangled, her coat was gone, along with one boot, and the rest of her garments torn; as much blood stained her skin and clothes as either of theirs. The crossbow bolt standing out from her thigh seemed to be the worst of her injuries, but the rest certainly added up to as much again. “His back was broken,” she said, gesturing to the horse at her feet. “Mine’s well, I think, but the last I saw of him, he was running fit to win the Wreath of Megairil. I always thought he had a turn of speed. Lioness.” She shrugged, and winced. “Elayne, Lioness was dead when I found her. I’m sorry.”

“We are alive,” Elayne said firmly, “and that is what counts.” She would weep for Lioness later. The smoke above the hilltop was not thick, but it rose over a wide area. “I want to see exactly what it was that I did.”

It took clinging to one another for all three of them to stand, and laboring up the hillside was an effort of panting and groans, even from Aviendha. They sounded as though they had been thrashed within an inch of their lives—which Elayne supposed they had been—and looked as though they had wallowed in a butcher’s shambles. Aviendha still carried the *angreal* tight in her fist, but even if she or Elayne had possessed more than their small Talent with Healing, neither could have managed to embrace the Source, much less channel. At the top of the hill, they stood leaning on each other and stared at devastation.

Fire ringed the meadow, but the heart of it was blackened, smoldering and swept clear even of boulders. Half the trees on the surrounding slopes were broken or leaning away from the meadow. Hawks began to appear, riding the hot air rising from the fire; hawks often hunted so, looking for small animals chased into the open by the flames. Of the Seanchan there was no sign. Elayne wished there were bodies, so she could be certain they were all dead. Especially all of the *sul’dam*. Gazing down at the burned, smoking ground, though, she was suddenly glad there was no evidence. It had been a terrible way to die. *The Light have mercy on their souls,* she thought. *On all of their souls*.

“Well,” she said aloud, “I did not do as well as you, Aviendha, but I suppose it worked out for the best, considering. I will try to do better next time.”

Aviendha glanced at her sideways. There was a gash on her cheek, and another across her forehead, as well as a long one laying open her scalp. “You did much better than I, for a first try. I was given a simple knot tied in a flow of Wind the first time. It took me fifty tries to unweave even that without having a clap of thunder in my face, or a blow that made my ears ring.”

“I suppose I should have started with something simpler,” Elayne said. “I have a habit of leaping in over my head.” Over her head? She had leaped before looking to see whether there was *water*! She stifled a chuckle, but not before it sent a stab through her side. So instead of chuckling, she moaned through her teeth. She thought some of them might be loose. “At least we’ve found a new weapon. Perhaps I should not be happy about that, but with the Seanchan back again, I am.”

“You do not understand, Elayne.” Aviendha gestured toward the center of the meadow, where the gateway had been. “That could have been no more than a flash of light, or even less. You cannot tell until it happens. Is a flash of light worth the risk of burning out yourself and every woman closer to you than a hundred paces or more?”

Elayne stared at her. She had stayed, knowing that? To risk your life was one thing, but to risk losing the ability to channel. . . . “I want us to adopt each other as first-sisters, Aviendha. As soon as we can find Wise Ones.” What they were to do about Rand, she could not imagine. The very idea that they would *both* marry him—and Min, too!—was worse than ridiculous. But of this, she was sure. “I don’t need to know any more about you. I want to be your sister.” Gently, she kissed Aviendha’s blood-stained cheek.

She had only thought Aviendha blushed fiercely before. Even Aiel lovers did not kiss where anyone could see. Fiery sunsets paled beside Aviendha’s face. “I want you for my sister, too,” she mumbled. Swallowing hard—and eyeing Birgitte, who was pretending to ignore them—she leaned over and quickly pressed her lips to Elayne’s cheek. Elayne loved her as much for that gesture as for the rest.

Birgitte had been gazing behind them, over her shoulder, and perhaps she had not been pretending after all, because she suddenly said, “Someone’s coming. Lan and Nynaeve, unless I miss my guess.”

Awkwardly, they turned, hobbling and stumbling and groaning. It seemed quite ludicrous; heroes in stories never got hurt so they could barely stand. In the distance to the north, two riders appeared briefly through the trees. Briefly, but long enough to make out a tall man on a tall horse, galloping hard, and a woman on a shorter animal running just as hard at his side. Gingerly, the three of them sat down to wait. That was another thing heroes in stories never did, Elayne thought with a sigh. She hoped she could be a queen to make her mother proud, but it was clear that she would never make a hero.

Chulein moved the reins slightly, and Segani banked smoothly, turning on a ribbed wing. He was a well-trained *raken*, swift and agile, her favorite, though she had to share flying him. There were always more *morat'raken* than *raken*; a fact of life. Down in the farm below, balls of fire were leaping out of the air apparently, scattering in every direction. She tried to pay no attention; her job was to watch for trouble approaching from the area around the farm. At least the smoke had stopped rising from where Tauan and Macu had died in the olive grove.

A thousand paces above the ground, she had a very long view. All the other *raken* were off scouting the countryside; any woman who ran would be marked for checking, to see whether she was one of those who had caused all the excitement, though truth for sure, anyone in these lands who saw a *raken* in the air likely would run. All Chulein had to do was watch for approaching trouble here. She wished she did not feel an itch between her shoulder blades; it always meant trouble *was* on the way. The wind of Segani's flight was not bad at this speed, but she drew the drawstring of her waxed linen hood tighter under her chin, tested the leather safety straps that held her in the saddle, adjusted her crystal goggles, snugged her gauntlets.

Over a hundred Fists of Heaven were on the ground already, and more important, six *sul'dam* with *damane* and another dozen carrying shoulder bags full of spare *a'dam*. The second flight would be lifting from the hills to the south with reinforcements. Better if more had come in the first strike, but there were few enough *to'raken* with the Hailene, and strong rumor had it that many of those had been given the task of ferrying the High Lady Suroth and her entire entourage down from Amadicia. Bad to think ill of the Blood, yet she wished more *to'raken* had been sent to Ebou Dar. No *morat'raken* could think well of the huge, ungainly *to'raken*, fit only to carry burdens, but they could have put more Fists of Heaven on the ground faster, more *sul'dam*.

“Rumor says there are hundreds of *marath’damane* down there,” Eliya said loudly against her back. In the sky, you had to speak loudly, over the rush of wind. “Do you know what I’m going to do with my share of the taking gold? Buy an inn. This Ebou Dar looks a likely place, what I saw of it. Maybe I’ll even find a husband. Have children. What do you think of that?”

Chulein grinned behind her wind-scarf. Every flier talked of buying an inn—or a tavern, sometimes a farm—yet who could leave the sky? She patted the base of Segani’s long, leathery neck. Every woman flier—three in four were women—talked of a husband and children, but children meant an end to flying, too. More women left the Fists of Heaven in a month than left the sky in half a year.

“I think you should keep your eyes open,” she said. But there was no harm in a little talk. She could have seen a child move in the olive groves below, much more anything that might threaten Fists of Heaven. The most lightly armored of soldiers, they were about as hard as the Deathwatch Guard; some said harder. “I’ll use my share to buy a *damane* and hire a *sul’dam.*” If there were half as many *marath’damane* down there as rumor claimed, her share would buy two *damane*. Three! “A *damane* trained to make Sky Lights. When I leave the sky, I’ll be as rich as one of the Blood.” They had something called “fireworks” here—she had seen some fellows vainly trying to interest the Blood in Tanchico—but who would watch such a pitiful thing compared to the Sky Lights? Those fellows had been bundled out and dumped in the road outside the city.

“The farm!” Eliya shouted, and suddenly something hit Segani hard, harder than the worst storm gust Chulein had ever felt, tumbling him wing over wing.

Down the *raken* plunged, screaming his raucous cry, spinning so fast that Chulein was pulled tight against her safety straps. She left her hands on her thighs, tensed on the reins but still. Segani had to pull out of this himself; any twitch on the reins would only hinder him. Rolling like a gambling wheel, they fell. *Morat’raken* were taught not to watch the ground if a *raken* fell, whatever the reason, but she could not help estimating her height every time a whiplike tumble brought the ground into sight. Eight hundred paces. Six hundred. Four. Two. The Light illumine her soul, and the infinite mercy of the Creator protect her from—

With a snap of his broad wings that jerked her sideways and rattled her teeth, Segani leveled out, the tips of his pinions brushing treetops as they swept down. With a calmness born of hard training, she checked the motion of his wings for strain. Nothing, but she would have a *der'morat'raken* examine him thoroughly anyway. A tiny thing that might slip by her eyes would not escape a master.

"It seems we've escaped the Lady of the Shadows one more time, Eliya." Turning to look over her shoulder, she let her words trail off. A length of broken safety strap trailed back from the empty seat behind her. Every flier knew that the Lady waited at the bottom of the long fall, but knowing never made seeing easier.

Offering a quick prayer for the dead, she firmly pushed herself back to duty and urged Segani to climb. A slow, spiraling climb, in case of some hidden strain, but as quick as she thought safe. Maybe a little quicker than safe. Smoke rising from beyond the knobby hill ahead made her frown, but what she saw as she cleared the crest dried her mouth. Her hands stilled on the reins, and Segani continued to climb on powerful sweeps of his wings.

The farm was . . . gone. Foundations scoured clean of the white buildings that had stood on them, the big structures built into a hillside smashed heaps of rubble. Gone. Everything was blackened and burned. Fire raged through the undergrowth on the slopes and made fans a hundred paces long into the olive groves and the forest, stretching from the spaces between the hills. Beyond lay broken trees for another hundred or more, all leaning away from the farm. She had never seen anything like it. Nothing could be alive down there. Nothing could have lived through that. Whatever it had been.

Quickly she came to herself and turned Segani south. In the distance she could make out *to'raken,* each one crowded with a dozen Fists of Heaven over this short distance, Fists of Heaven and *sul'dam,* coming too late. She began composing her report in her head; there was certainly no one else to make one. Everyone said this was a land full of *marath'damane* waiting to be collared, but with this new weapon, these women who called themselves Aes Sedai were a true danger. Something had to be done about them, something decisive. Perhaps, if the High Lady Suroth was on her way to Ebou Dar, she would see the need, too.

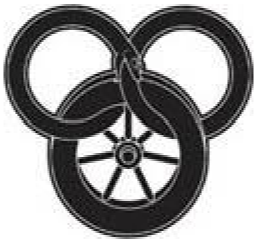

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CHAPTER 7

A Goatpen

The Ghealdanin sky was cloudless, the forested hills hammered by a fierce morning sun. Even short of midday, the land sweltered. Pines and leatherleaf were yellowing in the drought, and others Perrin suspected also were evergreens. Not a whisper of air stirred. Sweat dripped down his face, ran into his short beard. His curly hair was matting on his head. He thought he heard thunder somewhere to the west, but he had almost stopped believing it would ever rain again. You hammered the iron that lay on your anvil instead of daydreaming about working silver.

From the vantage of his sparsely treed ridge, he studied the walled town of Bethal through a brass-bound looking glass. Even his eyes could use help over this distance. It was a good-sized town of slate-roofed buildings, with half a dozen tall stone structures that might have been minor nobles' palaces or the homes of well-to-do merchants. He could not make out the scarlet banner hanging limply atop the tallest tower of the largest palace, the only flag in sight, but he knew who it belonged to. Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, Queen of Ghealdan, far from her capital in Jehannah.

The town gates stood open, with a good twenty guards at each, yet no one came out, and the roads he could see were empty except for a lone rider galloping hard toward Bethal from the north. The soldiers were on edge, some shifting pikes or bows at sight of the horseman as though he waved a blood-dripping sword. More soldiers on watch crowded the wall towers or marched the walls between. Plenty of nocked arrows up there, too, and raised crossbows. Plenty of fear.

A storm had swept over this part of Ghealdan. It still did. The Prophet's bands created chaos, bandits took advantage, and Whitecloaks raiding across the border from Amadicia might easily strike this far. A few scattered columns of smoke farther south probably marked burning farms, Whitecloak work or the Prophet's. Bandits seldom bothered with burning, and the other two left little for them in any case. Adding to the jumble, rumor in every village he had passed the last few days said that Amador had fallen, to the Prophet or Taraboners or Aes Sedai, depending on who told the tale. Some claimed Pedron Niall himself was dead in the fighting to defend the city. All in all, reason enough for a queen to be concerned for her own safety. Or the soldiers could be down there because of him. Despite his best efforts, his passage south had hardly gone unnoticed.

He scratched his beard, considering. A pity the wolves in the surrounding hills could not tell him anything, but they seldom paid heed to men's doings except to stay clear of them. And since Dumai's Wells he had not felt right in asking any more of them than he absolutely had to. It might be best after all if he rode in alone, with just a few of the Two Rivers men.

He often thought Faile could read his mind, usually when he least wanted her to, and she proved it now, heeling her night-black mare Swallow close to his dun. Her narrow-skirted riding dress was nearly as dark as the mare, yet she seemed to be taking the heat better than he. She smelled faintly of herbal soap and clean perspiration, of herself. Of determination. Her tilted eyes were very determined, and with her bold nose, she was very much her namesake falcon.

"I would not like to see holes in that fine blue coat, husband," she said softly, for his ears alone, "and those fellows look as if they might just shoot at a group of strange men before asking who they are. Besides, how will you reach Alliandre without announcing your name to the world? This must be done quietly, remember." She did not say that she should be the one to go, that the gate guards would take a woman alone for a refugee from the troubles, that she could reach the Queen using her mother's name without exciting too much comment, but she did not need to. He had had all that and more from her every night since entering Ghealdan. He was here in part because of Alliandre's cautious letter to Rand, offering. . . . Support? Allegiance? Her desire for secrecy had been paramount, in any case.

Perrin doubted that even Aram, sitting his leggy gray a few paces behind them, could have heard a word Faile said, yet before she finished speaking, Berelain brought her white mare up on his other side, sweat glistening on her cheeks. She also smelled determined, through a cloud of rose perfume. To him, it seemed a cloud. For a wonder, her green riding dress showed no more flesh than it had to.

Berelain's two companions stayed back, though Annoura, her Aes Sedai advisor, studied him with an unreadable expression from beneath her cap of thin shoulder-long beaded braids. Not him and the two women at his sides; him in particular. No sweat there. He wished he were close enough to smell the beak-nosed Gray sister; unlike the other Aes Sedai, she had made no promises to anyone. For whatever those promises were worth. Lord Gallenne, commander of Berelain's Winged Guards, was seemingly busy examining Bethal through a looking glass raised to his one eye, and fiddling with his reins in a way Perrin had come to know meant that he was deep in calculations. Probably how to take Bethal by force; Gallenne always saw the worst possibility first.

"I still think I should be the one to approach Alliandre," Berelain said. This, too, Perrin had heard every day. "It is why I came, after all." That was one of the reasons. "Annoura will be granted an audience at once, and take me in with none the wiser save Alliandre." A second wonder. There had not been a hint of flirtation in her voice. She seemed to be paying as much attention to smoothing her red leather gloves as to him.

Which one? The trouble was, he did not want to choose either.

Seonid, the second Aes Sedai who had come to the ridgeline, stood beside her bay gelding a little way off, near a tall drought-withered blackwood, looking not at Bethal but the sky. The two pale-eyed Wise Ones with her made a sharp contrast, faces sun-dark to her pale complexion, fair-haired to her dark, tall to her short, not to mention their dark skirts and white blouses contrasting to her fine blue wool. Necklaces and bracelets of gold and silver and ivory draped Edarra and Nevarin, while Seonid wore only her Great Serpent ring. They were young to her ageless. The Wise Ones matched the Green sister for self-possession, though, and they were studying the sky, too.

"Do you see something?" Perrin asked, putting off the decision.

"We see the sky, Perrin Aybara," Edarra said calmly, her jewelry making a soft clatter as she adjusted the dark shawl looped over her elbows.

The heat seemed to touch the Aiel as little as it did the Aes Sedai. “If we saw more, we would tell you.” He hoped they would. He thought they would. At least, if it was something they believed Grady and Neald might see, too. The two Asha’man would not keep it secret. He wished they were there instead of back in the camp.

More than half a week ago, now, a lace of the One Power streaking high across the sky had created quite a stir among the Aes Sedai and Wise Ones. And with Grady and Neald. Which fact had made a bigger stir still, as close to panic as any Aes Sedai was likely to come. Asha’man, Aes Sedai and Wise Ones *all* claimed they could still feel the Power faintly in the air long after that bar of lace vanished, but nobody knew what it meant. Neald said it made him think of wind, though he could not tell why. No one would voice more of an opinion than that, yet if both the male and female halves of the Power were visible, it had to be the Forsaken at work, and on a huge scale. Wondering what they were up to had kept Perrin awake late most nights since.

In spite of himself, he glanced to the sky. And saw nothing, of course, except a pair of pigeons. Abruptly a hawk plummeted into his sight, and one of the pigeons was gone in a spray of feathers. The other winged on frantically toward Bethal.

“Have you reached a decision, Perrin Aybara?” Nevarin asked, a touch sharply. The green-eyed Wise One appeared even younger than Edarra, perhaps no older than he was, and she did not quite have the blue-eyed woman’s serenity. Her shawl slid down her arms as she planted hands on hips, and he half expected her to shake a finger at him. Or a fist. She reminded him of Nynaeve, though they surely looked nothing alike. Nevarin would have made Nynaeve look plump. “What use our advice if you will not listen?” she demanded. “What use?”

Faile and Berelain sat straight in their saddles, both as proud as they could be, both smelling expectant and uncertain at the same time. And irritated at being uncertain; neither liked that one speck. Seonid was too far to send her scent, but compressed lips gave her mood well enough. Edarra’s command not to speak unless spoken to infuriated her. Still, she certainly wanted him to take the Wise Ones’ counsel; she stared at him intently, as though the pressure of her eyes could push him the way they wanted him to go. In truth, he wanted to choose her, yet he hesitated. How far did her oath of fealty to Rand truly hold? Further than he would have believed, by the evidence seen so far, but still, how far could he trust an Aes Sedai? The arrival of Seonid's two Warders spared him for another few minutes.

They rode up together, though they had gone out separately, keeping their horses well back into the trees along the ridgeline so they would not be seen from the town. Furen was a Tairen, nearly as dark as good soil, with gray streaking his curly black hair, while Teryl, a Murandian, was twenty years younger, with dark reddish hair, curled mustaches, and eyes bluer than Edarra's, yet they were stamped from the same mold, tall and lean and hard. They dismounted smoothly, cloaks shifting colors and vanishing in a queasy-making way, and made their reports to Seonid, deliberately ignoring the Wise Ones. And Perrin.

"It's worse than back north," Furen said disgustedly. A few drops of sweat beaded on his forehead, but neither man appeared much affected by the heat. "The local nobles are shut up in their manors or the town, and the Queen's soldiers keep inside the town walls. They've abandoned the countryside to the Prophet's men. And the bandits, though those seem scarce around here. The Prophet's people are all over. I think Alliandre will be happy to see you."

"Rabble," Teryl snorted, slapping his reins on his palm. "I never saw more than fifteen or twenty in one place, armed with pitchforks and boar spears mainly. Ragged as beggars, they were. Fit for scaring farmers, to be sure, but you'd think the lords would be rooting them out and hanging them in bunches. The Queen will kiss your hand to see a sister."

Seonid opened her mouth, then glanced up at Edarra, who nodded. If anything, gaining permission to speak tightened the Green's mouth more. Her tone was mild as butter, though. "There is no more reason to put off your decision, Lord Aybara." She emphasized that title a bit, knowing exactly how much right he had to it. "Your wife can claim a great House, and Berelain is a ruler, yet Saldaean Houses count little here, and Mayene is the smallest of nations. An Aes Sedai for an emissary will put the weight of the White Tower behind you in Alliandre's eyes." Perhaps recalling that Annoura would do for that as well as she, she hurried on. "Besides, I have been in Ghealdan before, and my name is well known. Alliandre will not only receive me immediately, she will listen to what I say."

"Nevarin and I will go with her," Edarra said, and Nevarin added, "We will make sure she says nothing she should not." Seonid ground her teeth audibly, to Perrin's ears, and busied herself smoothing her divided skirts, eyes carefully down. Annoura made a sound, very nearly a grunt, and turned her head from the sight; she herself stayed away from the Wise Ones, and did not like seeing the other sisters with them.

Perrin wanted to groan. Sending the Green would lift him off a spike, yet the Wise Ones trusted Aes Sedai less than he did and kept Seonid and Masuri on short leashes. There had been tales about Aiel in the villages recently, too. None of those folk had ever seen an Aiel, but rumors about the Aiel following the Dragon Reborn drifted in the air, half of Ghealdan was sure there were Aiel just a day or two away, and each story was stranger and more horrible than the last. Alliandre might be too frightened to let him near her once she saw a pair of Aiel women telling an Aes Sedai when to hop. And Seonid was hopping, however much she ground her teeth! Well, he was not about to risk Faile without more assurance of her greeting than a vaguely worded letter received months ago. That spike dug deeper, right between his shoulder blades, yet he had no choice at all.

“A small party will get through those gates easier than a large,” he said finally, stuffing the looking glass into his saddlebags. It would set fewer tongues wagging, as well. “That means just you and Annoura, Berelain. And maybe Lord Gallenne. Likely they’ll take him for Annoura’s Warder.”

Berelain chortled in delight, leaning to clasp his arm with both hands. She did not leave it at that, of course. Her fingers squeezed caressingly, and she flashed a heated smile of promise, then straightened before he could move, her face suddenly innocent as a babe’s. Expressionless, Faile focused on pulling her gray riding gloves snug. By her scent, she had not noticed Berelain’s smile. She hid her disappointment well.

“I’m sorry, Faile,” he said, “but—”

Outrage flared in the smell of her like thorns. “I am certain you have matters to discuss with the First before she goes, husband,” she said calmly. Her tilted eyes were pure serenity, her scent sand burrs. “Best you see to her now.” Pulling Swallow around, Faile walked the mare over to a plainly fuming Seonid and the tight-faced Wise Ones, but she did not dismount or speak to them. Instead she frowned down at Bethal, a falcon staring from her eyrie.

Perrin realized he was feeling at his nose and pulled his hand down. There was no blood, of course; his nose only felt as if there should be.

Berelain needed no last-minute instructions—the First of Mayene and her Gray advisor were all impatience to be off, all certainty they knew what to say and do—yet Perrin stressed caution anyway, and emphasized that Berelain and only Berelain was to speak with Alliandre. Annoura gave him one of those cool Aes Sedai looks and nodded. Which might have been agreement or might not; he doubted he could get more out of her with a prybar. Berelain's lips curled in amusement, though she agreed with everything he said. Or said she did. He suspected she would say anything to get what she wanted, and those smiles in all the wrong places bothered him. Gallenne had put his looking glass away, but he was still playing with his reins, no doubt calculating how to carve a way out of Bethal for the two women. Perrin wanted to growl.

He watched them ride down to the road with worry. The message Berelain carried was simple. Rand understood Alliandre's caution, but if she wanted his protection she must be willing to announce support for him openly. That protection would come, soldiers and Asha'man to make it plain to everyone, and even Rand himself if need be, once she agreed to make the announcement. Berelain had no reason to change the message a hair, despite her smiles—he thought they might be another way of flirting—but Annoura. . . . Aes Sedai did what they did, and the Light alone knew why half the time. He wished he knew some way to reach Alliandre without using a sister or rousing talk. Or risking Faile.

The three riders reached the gates with Annoura in the lead, and guards quickly raised pikes, lowered bows and crossbows, no doubt as soon as she named herself Aes Sedai. Not many people had the nerve to challenge that particular claim. There was barely a pause before she was leading the way into the town. In fact, the soldiers seemed eager to hurry them through, out of sight of anyone watching from the hills. Some peered at the distant heights, and Perrin did not need to smell them to sense their unease over who might be hidden up there, who might, improbably, have recognized a sister.

Turning north, toward their camp, Perrin led the way along the ridge until they were out of sight from Bethal's towers, then slanted down to the hard-packed road. Scattered farms lined the road, thatch-roofed houses and long narrow barns, withered pastures and stubbled fields and high-walled stone goatpens, but there was little livestock to be seen and fewer people. Those few watched the riders warily, geese watching foxes, stopping chores where they stood until the horses passed on. Aram kept as close an eye on them in return, sometimes fingering the sword hilt rising above his shoulder, perhaps wishing to find more than farmfolk. Despite his green-striped coat, little Tinker remained in him.

Edarra and Nevarin walked beside Stepper, seemingly out for a stroll yet keeping pace easily despite their bulky skirts. Seonid heeled them on her gelding, Furen and Teryl at her own back. The pale-cheeked Green pretended that she simply wanted to ride a careful two paces behind the Wise Ones, but the men scowled openly. Warders often had a greater care for their Aes Sedai's dignity than the sister did herself, and Aes Sedai had enough for queens.

Faile kept Swallow on the far side of the Aiel women, riding in silence, apparently studying the drought-scarred landscape. Slim and graceful, she made Perrin feel a little clumsy at the best of times. She was quicksilver, and he loved it in her, usually, but. . . . A slight breath of air had begun to stir, enough to keep her scent mingled with the rest. He knew he should be thinking about Alliandre and what her answer would be, or better still, the Prophet and how to find him once Alliandre replied, however she did, but he could not find room in his head.

He had expected Faile to be angry when he chose Berelain, for all that Rand supposedly had sent her for the purpose. Faile knew he did not want to send her into danger, into any risk of danger, a fact she disliked more than she did Berelain. Yet her scent had been soft as a summer morning—until he tried to apologize! Well, apologies usually stoked her anger if she already was angry—except when they melted her temper, anyway—but she had not *been* angry! Without Berelain, everything ran smooth as silk satin between them. Most of the time. But explanations that he did nothing to encourage the woman—far from it!—earned only a curt "Of course you don't!" in tones that called him a fool for bringing it up. But she still grew angry—with him!—every time Berelain smiled at him or found an excuse to touch him, no matter how brusquely he put her off, and the Light knew he did that. Short of tying her up, he did not know what more he could do to discourage her. Ginger attempts to find out from Faile what he was doing wrong received a light "Why do you think you've done anything?" or a not-so-light "What do *you* think you've done?" or a flat "I do not want to talk about it." He *was* doing something wrong, but he could not puzzle out what! He had to, though. Nothing was more important than Faile. Nothing!

"Lord Perrin?"

Aram's excited voice cut into his brown study. "Don't call me that," he muttered, following the direction of the man's pointing finger, to yet another abandoned farm some distance ahead, where fire had taken the roof from house and barn. Only rough stone walls stood. An abandoned farm, but not deserted. Angry shouts rose up there.

A dozen or more rough-clad fellows carrying spears and pitchforks were trying to force their way over the chest-high stone wall of a goatpen, while a handful of men within tried to keep them out. Several horses ran loose inside, frightened at the noise and dodging about, and there were three women mounted. They were not simply waiting to see how it would all turn out, though; one of the women appeared to be hurling rocks, and even as he looked, another dashed close to the wall to lash out with a long cudgel while the third reared her horse, and a tall fellow toppled back off the wall to get clear of flashing hooves. But there were too many attackers, too much wall to defend.

"I advise you to ride wide," Seonid said. Edarra and Nevarin turned grim stares on her, but she plowed on, hurry overwhelming her matter-of-fact tone. "Those are surely the Prophet's men, and killing his people is a bad way to begin. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, may die if you fail with him. Is it worth risking that to save a handful?"

Perrin did not intend to kill anyone if he could help it, but he did not intend to look the other way either. He wasted no time in explanations, though. "Can you frighten them?" he asked Edarra. "Just frighten?" He remembered all too well what the Wise Ones had done at Dumai's Wells. And the Asha'man. Maybe as well Grady and Neald were not there.

"Perhaps," Edarra replied, studying the crowd around the pen. She half-shook her head, shrugged a fraction. "Perhaps." That would have to be good enough.

"Aram, Furen, Teryl," he snapped, "with me!" He dug in his heels, and as Stepper leaped forward, he was relieved to see the Warders following closely. Four men charging made a better show than two. He kept his hands on the reins, away from his axe.

He was not so pleased when Faile galloped Swallow up alongside him. He opened his mouth, and she arched an eyebrow at him. Her black hair was beautiful, streaming in the wind of their rush. She was beautiful. An arched eyebrow; no more. He changed what he had been about to say. "Guard my back," he told her. Smiling, she produced a dagger from somewhere. With all the blades she carried hidden away, sometimes he wondered how he missed being stabbed just trying to hug her.

As soon as she looked ahead again, he gestured frantically to Aram, trying to keep the motion where she could not see. Aram nodded, but he was leaning forward, sword bared, ready to skewer the first of the Prophet's folk he reached. Perrin hoped the man understood he was to guard Faile's back, and the rest of her, if they actually came to grips with those fellows.

None of the ruffians had noticed them yet. Perrin shouted, but they seemed not to hear over their own yelling. A man in a coat too big for him managed to scramble atop the wall, and two others appeared about to get over. If the Wise Ones were going to do anything, it was past—

A thunderclap nearly over their heads almost deafened Perrin, a mountainous crack that made Stepper stumble before regaining his pace. The attackers certainly noticed that, staggering and looking around wildly, some clapping hands over their ears. The man on the wall overbalanced and fell off outside. He leaped up immediately, though, angrily gesturing to the enclosure, and some of his companions leaped back at it. Others saw Perrin then and pointed, their mouths working, but still no one ran. A few hefted weapons.

Suddenly a horizontal wheel of fire appeared above the goatpen, as wide as a man was tall, flinging off sputtering tufts of flame as it spun with a moan that rose and fell, mournful groan to keening wail and back.

The rough-clad men broke in every direction like scattering quail. For a moment longer the man in a too-big coat waved his arms and shouted at them, then with one last glance at the fiery wheel, he too darted away.

Perrin almost laughed. He would not have to kill anyone. And he would not have to worry about Faile getting a pitchfork through her ribs.

Apparently the people in the pen were as frightened as those outside, one of them at least. The woman who had reared her horse at the attackers slipped open the gate and kicked her mount to an awkward gallop. Up the road, away from Perrin and the others.

"Wait!" Perrin shouted. "We won't harm you!" Whether she heard or not, she kept whipping her reins. A bundle tied behind her saddle bounced wildly. Those men might be running as hard as they could now, but if she went off by herself, even two or three could do her injury. Lying flat on Stepper's neck, Perrin dug in his heels, and the dun shot forward like an arrow.

He was a big man, yet Stepper had earned his name for more than prancing feet. Besides, by its lumbering run, the woman's mount was hardly fit for a saddle. With every stride Stepper closed the gap, nearer, nearer, until Perrin was able to reach out and seize the other horse's bridle. Up close, her hammer-nosed bay was little better than crowbait, lathered and worn out more than the short run could account for. Slowly he drew both horses to a halt.

"Forgive me if I frightened you, Mistress," he said. "Truly, I mean you no harm."

For the second time that day an apology did not get the response he expected. Angry blue eyes glared at him from a face surrounded by long red-gold curls, a face as regal as any queen's for all that it was plastered with sweat and dust. Her dress was plain wool, travel-stained and as dusty as her cheeks, but her face was furious as well as queenly. "I do not need," she began in chill tones, trying to jerk her horse free, then cut off as another of the women, white-haired and bony, galloped up on a slab-sided brown mare in worse condition than the bay. They had been riding hard for some time, these folk. The older woman was just as worn and dust-covered as the younger.

She alternated between beaming at Perrin and scowling at the woman whose bridle he still held. "Thank you, my Lord." Her voice, thin but strong, gave a hitch as she noticed his eyes, but golden-yellow eyes on a man slowed her only an instant. Not a woman fazed by much. She still carried the stout stick she had been using for a weapon. "A most timely rescue. Maighdin, whatever were you thinking? You could have gotten yourself killed! And the rest of us, too! She's a headstrong girl, my Lord, always leaping before she looks. Remember, child, a fool abandons friends, and gives up silver for shiny brass. We do thank you, my Lord, and Maighdin will, too, when she comes to her senses."

Maighdin, a good ten years older than Perrin, could only be called a girl in comparison to the older woman, but despite weary grimaces that matched her scent, frustration tinged with anger, she accepted the tirade, only pulling once more in a halfhearted attempt to free her horse, then giving up. Letting her hands rest on her cantle, she frowned at Perrin accusingly, then blinked. The yellow eyes again. Yet despite that strangeness, she still did not smell afraid. The old woman did, but Perrin did not think it was of him.

Another of Maighdin's companions, an unshaven man mounted on yet another bedraggled horse, this a knob-kneed gray, approached while the old woman was talking, but kept back. He was tall, as tall as Perrin if not nearly so wide, in a travel-worn dark coat with a sword belted over. Like the women, he had a bundle tied on behind his saddle. That tiny breeze swirled to bring Perrin his scent. He was not afraid; he was wary. And if the way he looked at Maighdin was any guide, it was she he was wary of. Maybe this was not so simple as rescuing travelers from a gang of ruffians after all.

"Perhaps you should all come to my camp," Perrin said, finally releasing the bridle. "You'll be safe from . . . brigands . . . there." He half expected Maighdin to make a break for the nearest tree line, but she turned her horse with his, back toward the goatpen. She smelled . . . resigned.

Even so, she said, "I thank you for the offer, but I . . . we . . . must continue our journey. We will go on, Lini," she added firmly, and the older woman frowned at her so sternly that he wondered whether they were mother and daughter despite her use of the woman's name. They certainly looked nothing alike. Lini was narrow-faced and parchment-skinned, all sinew, while Maighdin might be beautiful under that dust. If a man liked fair hair.

Perrin glanced over his shoulder at the man trailing after. A hard-looking fellow, in need of a razor. Perhaps he liked fair hair. Perhaps he liked it too much. Men had made trouble for themselves as well as others for that reason before this.

Ahead, Faile was sitting Swallow and peering over the wall of the pen at the people inside. Perhaps one of them had been hurt. Seonid and the Wise Ones were nowhere in sight. Aram had understood, apparently; he was close to Faile, though looking impatiently toward Perrin. The danger was clearly past, though.

Before Perrin was halfway to the goatpen, Teryl appeared with a narrow-eyed, stubble-cheeked man stumbling along beside his roan, the collar of his coat gripped in the Warder's fist. "I thought we should catch one of them," Teryl said with a hard grin. "Always best to hear both sides, whatever you thought you saw, my old da always said." Perrin was surprised; he had thought Teryl could not think beyond the end of his sword.

Even hiked up as it was, the stubble-cheeked fellow's frayed coat was plainly too big for him. Perrin doubted anyone else had been able to see well enough at the distance, but he recognized that thrusting nose, too. This man had been the last to run, and he was not cowed now, either. His sneer took them all in. “You’re all in deep muck, for this,” he rasped. “We was doing the Prophet’s bidding, we was. The Prophet says if a man bothers a woman as doesn’t want him, he dies. This lot was chasing after her”—he jerked his chin at Maighdin—“and she was running hard. The Prophet’ll have your ears for this!” He spat for emphasis.

“That is ridiculous,” Maighdin announced in a clear voice. “These people are my friends. This man completely misunderstood what he saw.”

Perrin nodded, and if she thought he was agreeing with her, all well and good. But putting what this fellow said alongside what Lini had. . . . Not simple at all.

Faile and the others joined them, followed by the rest of Maighdin’s traveling companions, three more men and another woman, all leading worn-down horses with few miles left in them. Not that they had been prime horseflesh in some years, if ever. A finer collection of buck knees, bow hocks, spavins, and swaybacks, Perrin could not recall. As always, his gaze went first to Faile—his nostrils strained for her scent—but Seonid snagged his eyes. Slumped in her saddle, flushing scarlet, she wore a sullen glower, and her face looked odd, her cheeks puffed out and her mouth not quite closed. There was something, a bit of red-and-blue. . . . Perrin blinked. Unless he was seeing things, she had a wadded-up *scarf* stuffed into her mouth! Apparently when Wise Ones told an apprentice to be quiet, even an Aes Sedai apprentice, they meant it.

He was not the only one with sharp eyes; Maighdin’s mouth fell open when she saw Seonid, and she gave him a long, considering look as if he were responsible for the scarf. So she knew an Aes Sedai on sight, did she? Uncommon, for the country woman she appeared. She did not sound like one, though.

Furen, riding behind Seonid, wore a thunderhead for a face, but it was Teryl who made everything even less simple by tossing something to the ground. “I found this behind him,” he said, “where he might have dropped it, running.”

At first, Perrin did not know what he was looking at, a long loop of rawhide thickly strung with what appeared to be tags of shriveled leather. Then he did know, and his teeth bared in a snarl. “The Prophet would have our ears, you said.”

The stubble-cheeked man stopped gaping at Seonid and licked his lips. “That . . . that’s Hari’s work!” he protested. “Hari’s a mean one. He likes to keep count, take trophies, and he . . . uh. . . .” Shrugging in his captive coat, he sank in on himself like a cornered dog. “You can’t tie that to me! The Prophet’ll hang you if you touch me! He’s hanged nobles before, fine lords and ladies. I walk in the Light of the blessed Lord Dragon!”

Perrin walked Stepper to the man, careful to keep the dun’s hooves clear of the . . . thing . . . on the ground. He wanted nothing less than to have the fellow’s scent in his nose, but he bent down, putting his face closer. Sour sweat warred with fear, panic, a tinge of anger. A pity he could not sniff out guilt. “Might have dropped” was not “had dropped.” Close-set eyes widened, and the man pressed back against Teryl’s gelding. Yellow eyes had their uses.

“If I *could* tie that to you, you’d hang from the nearest tree,” he growled. The fellow blinked, began to brighten as he understood what that meant, but Perrin gave him no time to regain his bluster. “I’m Perrin Aybara, and your precious Lord Dragon *sent* me here. You spread the word. He sent me, and if I find a man with . . . *trophies* . . . he hangs! If I find a man burning a farm, he hangs! If one of you looks at me cross-eyed, he hangs! And you can tell Masema I said so, too!” Disgusted, Perrin straightened. “Let him go, Teryl. If he isn’t out of my sight in two shakes . . . !”

Teryl’s hand opened, and the fellow dashed off at a dead run for the nearest trees, never so much as glancing back. Part of Perrin’s disgust was for himself. Threatening! If one of them looked at him cross-eyed? But if the nameless man had not cut off ears himself, he had watched it and done nothing.

Faile was smiling, pride shining through the sweat on her face. Her look washed away some of Perrin’s revulsion. He would walk barefoot through fire for that look.

Not everyone approved, of course. Seonid’s eyes were squeezed shut, and her gloved fists quivered on her reins as though she desperately wanted to yank that scarf from her mouth and tell him what she thought. He could guess anyway. Edarra and Nevarin had gathered their shawls around them and were eyeing him darkly. Oh, yes; he could guess.

“I thought it was to be all secrecy,” Teryl said casually, watching the stubble-cheeked man run. “I thought Masema wasn’t to know you were here till you spoke in his pink ear.”

That had been the plan. Rand had suggested it as a precaution, Seonid and Masuri had insisted on it every chance they got. After all, Prophet of the Lord Dragon or no, Masema might not *want* to come face-to-face with someone Rand sent, considering the things he was said to have allowed. Those ears were not the worst, if the tenth part of rumor was to be believed. Edarra and the other Wise Ones saw Masema as a possible enemy, to be ambushed before he could set his own trap.

“I’m supposed to stop . . . that,” Perrin said, gesturing angrily to the rawhide string on the ground. He had heard the rumors, and done nothing. Now he had seen. “I might as well start now.” And if Masema decided *he* was an enemy? How many thousands followed the Prophet, out of belief or fear? It did not matter. “It stops, Teryl. It stops!”

The Murandian nodded slowly, eyeing Perrin as though seeing him for the first time.

“My Lord Perrin?” Maighdin said. He had forgotten all about her and her friends. The others had gathered with her a little way off, most still afoot. There were three men aside from the fellow who had followed Maighdin, and two of those were hiding behind their horses. Lini appeared the wariest of all, eyes focused on him worriedly; she had her horse close to Maighdin’s and seemed ready to seize the bridle herself. Not to stop the younger woman bolting, but to bolt herself and take Maighdin with her. Maighdin herself appeared completely at ease, but she also studied Perrin. Little wonder, after all that talk of the Prophet and the Dragon Reborn, on top of his eyes. Not to mention an Aes Sedai gagged. He expected her to say that they wanted to go now, immediately, but what she said instead was “We will accept your kind offer. A day or two resting in your camp might be just the thing.”

“As you say, Mistress Maighdin,” he said slowly. Masking his surprise was difficult. Especially since he had just recognized the two men trying to keep their horses between them and him. *Ta’veren* work, to bring them here? A strange twist in any case. “It might be just the thing at that.”

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CHAPTER 8

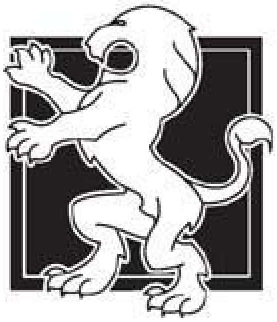

A Simple Country Woman

The camp lay about a league farther on, well back from the road among low, wooded hills, just beyond a stream that was ten paces' width of stones and only five of water never deeper than a man's knees. Tiny green and silver fish darted away from the horses' hooves. Casual passersby were unlikely to come on them here. The nearest inhabited farm was over a mile away, and Perrin had checked personally to make sure those folk took their animals to water elsewhere.

He truly had been trying to avoid notice as much as possible, traveling by back roads and the smallest country paths when they could not keep to the forests. A futile effort, really. The horses could be pastured wherever there was grass, but they required at least some grain, and even a small army had to buy food, and a lot of it. Every man needed four pounds a day, in flour and beans and meat. Rumors must have been floating all over Ghealdan, though with luck, no one suspected who they were. Perrin grimaced. Perhaps they had not, until he went and opened his mouth. Still, he would have done nothing differently.

It was three camps really, close to one another and none far from the stream. They traveled together, all following him, obeying him supposedly, but there were too many personalities involved, and no one was entirely sure the others aimed at the same goal. Some nine hundred or so Winged

Guards had their cook fires crowded between rows of picketed horses in a broad meadow of trampled brown grass. He tried to close his nose to the mingled smells of horses, sweat, dung and boiling goat meat, an unpleasant combination on a hot day. A dozen mounted sentries rode a slow circuit in pairs, their long, red-streamered lances all at precisely the same angle, but the rest of the Mayeners had shed breastplates and helmets. Coatless and often shirtless in the sun, they lay sprawled on their blankets or diced as they waited on the food. Some looked up as Perrin passed, a number straightened from what they were doing to study the additions to his party, but none came running, so the patrols were still out. Small patrols, without lances, who could see without being seen. Well, that was the hope. It had been.

A handful of *gai'shain* moved at various chores among the Wise Ones' low gray-brown tents on the sparsely wooded crest of the hill above the Mayeners. At this distance, the white-robed figures appeared harmless, eyes downcast and meek. Up close, they would look the same, but most were Shaido. The Wise Ones claimed *gai'shain* were *gai'shain*; Perrin did not trust any Shaido out of his sight. Off to one side on the slope, beneath a bedraggled sourgum, perhaps a dozen Maidens in *cadin'sor* knelt in a circle around Sulin, the toughest of them despite her white hair. She had sent out scouts, too, women who could move as fast afoot as the Mayeners on their horses and were much more likely to escape unwanted attention. None of the Wise Ones up there were in the open, but a slender woman stirring a large stew kettle straightened, knuckling her back as she watched Perrin and the others pass. A woman in a green silk riding dress.

He could see the glare on Masuri's face. Aes Sedai did not stir kettles, nor perform twenty other tasks the Wise Ones had her and Seonid doing. Masuri laid it at Rand's feet, but he was not here, and Perrin was. Given half a chance, she would peel his hide for him.

Edarra and Nevarin turned up that way, even in those bulky skirts barely disturbing the layers of dead leaves that carpeted the ground. Seonid followed, her cheeks still bulging around that scarf. She twisted in her saddle, peering back at Perrin. If he could have believed an Aes Sedai looking anxious, that was what he would have called her. Riding behind her, Furen and Teryl wore scowls.

Masuri saw them coming and hastily bent back to the black kettle, stirring with renewed vigor, trying to make out that she had never stopped.

So long as Masuri stayed in the Wise Ones' charge, Perrin thought he did not have to worry about his hide. The Wise Ones seemed to keep a very short leash.

Nevarin looked back over her shoulder at him, another of those dark stares he had been getting from her and Edarra since sending his warning, his threat, by the stubble-cheeked fellow. Perrin exhaled in exasperation. He did not have to worry about his pelt unless the Wise Ones decided *they* wanted it. Too many personalities. Too many goals.

Maighdin rode at Faile's side, seemingly paying no attention to what they passed, but he would not have wagered a split copper on it. Her eyes had widened a hair at sight of the Mayener sentries. She knew what red breastplates and helmets like rimmed pots meant, as surely as she had recognized an Aes Sedai face. Most people would not have known either, especially not folk dressed as she was. She was a mystery, this Maighdin. For some reason, she seemed vaguely familiar.

Lini and Tallanvor—that was what he had heard Maighdin call the fellow who had ridden after her; "young" Tallanvor, though there could not have been more than four or five years between them if that—stayed as close behind Maighdin as possible, with Aram in the way trying to heel Perrin. So did a little stick of a fellow with a pursed mouth, called Balwer, who seemed to pay less heed to their surroundings than Maighdin pretended. Even so, Perrin thought Balwer saw more than she did. He could not say why, precisely, but the few times he had caught the bony little man's scent, he had been minded of a wolf testing the air. Strangely, there was no fear in Balwer, only quickly suppressed ridges of irritation shot through with the quivery smell of impatience. The remainder of Maighdin's companions trailed along well back. The third woman, Breane, was whispering fiercely to a hulking fellow who kept his eyes down and sometimes nodded silently, sometimes shook his head. A shoulderstriker and street tough if ever there was one, but the short woman had an edge of toughness about her, too. The last man sheltered behind those two, a stout man with a battered straw hat pulled low to hide his face. On him, the sword the men all wore looked as strange as it did on Balwer.

The third part of the camp, spread out among the trees just around the curve of the hill from the Mayeners, covered as much ground as the Winged Guards' though it held far fewer people. Here, the horses were picketed well away from the cook fires, so the unblemished smell of dinner filled the air.

Roasting goat, this time, and hard turnips the farmers probably had intended to feed to their pigs even with times as hard as they were. Close on to three hundred Two Rivers men who had followed Perrin away from home were tending meat on spits, mending clothes, checking over arrows and bows, all scattered in haphazard clumps of five or six friends around a fire. Nearly every one of them waved and shouted greetings, though there was too much of “Lord Perrin” and “Perrin Goldeneyes” to suit him. Faile had a right to the titles they gave her.

Grady and Neald, unsweating in their night-black coats, did not cheer; standing beside the cook fire they had built a little away from everyone else, they merely looked at him. Expectant looks, he thought. Expecting what? That was the question he always asked himself about them. The Asha’man made him uneasy, more than Aes Sedai or Wise Ones. Women channeling the Power was natural, if not exactly anything a man could be comfortable around. Plain-faced Grady appeared a farmer despite his coat and sword, and Neald a popinjay with his curled mustaches, yet Perrin could not forget what they were, what they had done at Dumai’s Wells. But then, he had been there, too. The Light help him, he had. Pulling his hand from the axe at his belt, he dismounted.

Servants, men and women from Lord Dobraine’s estates in Cairhien, came running from the lines where the horses were picketed, to take their mounts. None stood taller than Perrin’s shoulder, country-clad folk, forever bowing and curtsying obsequiously. Faile said he just upset them when he tried to make them stop, or at least not to bob around him so often; in truth, that was how they smelled when he did, and they always went back to bobbing in an hour or two. Others, nearly as many as the Two Rivers men, were working with the horses or around the long rows of high-wheeled carts that hauled all their supplies. A few were darting in and out of a large red-and-white tent.

As usual, that tent made Perrin grunt gloomily. Berelain had a larger one back in the Mayener part of the camp, plus one for her two maids and another for the pair of thief-catchers she had insisted on bringing. Annoura had a tent of her own, and Gallenne as well, but only he and Faile possessed one here. For himself, he would have slept under the sky like the other men from home. They had nothing over them at night but a blanket. There was certainly no fear of rain. The Cairhienin servants bedded down beneath the carts. He could not ask Faile to do that, though, not when Berelain had a tent. If only he could have left Berelain in Cairhien. But then he would have had to send Faile into Bethal.

A pair of banners on tall, fresh-cut poles in the middle of a clear space near the tent soured his mood further. The breeze had picked up a trifle, though it was still too warm; he thought he heard that thunder again, faint in the west. The flags unfolded in slow waves, collapsed of their own weight, rippled open again. His crimson-bordered Red Wolfhead and the Red Eagle of long-dead Manetheren, out in the open again despite his orders. Perhaps he had stopped trying to hide, after a fashion, but what was now Ghealdan had been part of Manetheren; Alliandre would not be soothed by hearing of *that* banner! He managed a pleasant face and a smile for the stocky little woman who curtsied deeply and took Stepper away, but it was a near thing. Lords were supposed to be obeyed, and if he was supposed to be a lord, well, he seemed to be making a poor job of it.

Fists on her hips, Maighdin stood studying those rippling flags as her horse was taken off with the rest. Surprisingly, Breane had both their bundles, held awkwardly; she wore a petulant scowl, directed at the other woman. “I have heard about banners like those,” Maighdin said suddenly. And angrily; there was no anger in her voice, and her face was smooth as ice, but her fury filled Perrin’s nose. “They were raised by men in Andor, in the Two Rivers, who rebelled against their lawful ruler. Aybara is a Two Rivers name, I think.”

“We don’t know much about lawful rulers in the Two Rivers, Mistress Maighdin,” he growled. He was going to skin whoever had put them up this time. If stories about rebellion had spread this far. . . . He faced too many complications already without adding more. “I suppose Morgase was a good queen, but we had to fend for ourselves, and we did.” Abruptly he knew who she reminded him of. Elayne. Not that it meant anything; he had seen men a thousand miles from the Two Rivers who could have belonged to families he knew back home. Still, she had to have some reason for anger. Her accent could be Andoran. “Things aren’t as bad in Andor as you might have heard,” he told her. “Caemlyn was quiet, last I was there, and Rand—the Dragon Reborn—means to put Morgase’s daughter Elayne on the Lion Throne.”

Far from being mollified, Maighdin rounded on him, blue eyes blazing. “He intends to *put* her on the throne? *No* man *puts* a queen on the Lion Throne! Elayne will claim the throne of Andor by her *right!*”

Scratching his head, Perrin wished Faile would stop watching the woman so calmly and say something. But all she did was tuck her riding gloves behind her belt. Before he could think of what to say, Lini darted in, seizing Maighdin's arm and giving her a shake fit to rattle her teeth.

"You apologize!" the old woman barked. "This man saved your life, Maighdin, and you forget yourself, a simple country woman speaking so to a lord! Remember who you are, and don't let your tongue land you in hotter water! If this young lord was at odds with Morgase, well, everyone knows she's dead, and it's none of your affair in any event! Now apologize before he grows angry!"

Maighdin stared at Lini, her mouth working, even more startled than Perrin. Again she surprised him, though. Instead of erupting at the white-haired woman, she slowly drew herself up, shoulders squared, and looked him in the eye. "Lini is entirely right. I have no right to speak to you so, Lord Aybara. I apologize. Humbly. And I ask your pardon." Humble? Her jaw was stubborn, her tone proud enough for an Aes Sedai, and her scent said she was ready to chew a hole in something.

"You have it," Perrin said hastily. Which did not seem to placate her one bit. She smiled, and maybe she intended gratitude, but he could hear her teeth grinding. Were women *all* crazy?

"They are hot and dirty, husband," Faile said, putting a hand in at last, "and the last few hours have been trying for them, I know. Aram can show the men where to clean themselves. I will take the women with me. I'll have damp cloths brought to wash your hands and faces," she told Maighdin and Lini. Gathering up Breane with a gesture, she began herding them toward the tent. At a nod from Perrin, Aram motioned the men to follow him.

"As soon as you finish your wash, Master Gill, I'd like to talk with you," Perrin said.

He might as well have made that spinning wheel of fire. Maighdin whipped around to gape at him, and the other two women froze in their tracks. Tallanvor was suddenly gripping his sword hilt again, and Balwer rose on his toes, peering over his bundle, head tilting this way then that. Not a wolf, perhaps; some sort of bird, watching for cats. The stout man, Basel Gill, dropped his belongings and leaped a foot in the air.

"Why, Perrin," he stammered, snatching off the straw hat. Sweat made tracks in the dust on his cheeks. He bent to pick up his bundle, changed his mind and straightened again hastily. “I mean, Lord Perrin. I . . . ah . . . I thought it was you, but . . . but with them calling you lord, I wasn’t sure you’d want to know an old innkeeper.” Scrubbing a handkerchief across his nearly bald head, he laughed nervously. “Of course, I’ll talk to you. Washing can wait a little longer.”

“Hello, Perrin,” the hulking man said. With his heavy-lidded eyes, Lamgwin Dorn appeared lazy despite his muscles and the scars on his face and hands. “We heard about young Rand being the Dragon Reborn, Master Gill and me. Should have figured you’d have come up in the world, too. Perrin Aybara’s a good man, Mistress Maighdin. I think you could trust him with anything you’ve a mind to.” He was not lazy, and he was not stupid, either.

Aram jerked his head impatiently, and Lamgwin and the other two followed, but Tallanvor and Balwer dragged their feet, casting wondering glances back at Perrin and Master Gill. Concerned glances. And at the women. Faile had them moving again, as well, though with plenty of darted looks at Perrin and Master Gill, at the men trailing Aram. Suddenly they were not so pleased at being separated.

Master Gill mopped his forehead and smiled uneasily. Light, why did he smell afraid? Perrin wondered. Of him? Of a man tied to the Dragon Reborn, calling himself lord and leading an army, however small, threatening the Prophet. Might as well throw gagging Aes Sedai into it, too; he would take the blame for that, one way or another. *No*, Perrin thought wryly; *nothing in that to frighten anybody*. The whole lot of them were probably afraid he might murder them all.

Trying to put Master Gill at ease, he led the man to a large oak a hundred paces from the red-and-white tent. Most of the great tree’s leaves were gone and half those left were brown, but massive limbs spreading low provided a little shade, and some of the gnarled roots stood high enough to serve as benches. Perrin had used one for just that, twiddling his thumbs while camp was being set. Whenever he tried to do anything useful, there were always ten hands snatching it away from him.

Basel Gill was not eased, however much Perrin asked after the Queen’s Blessing, his inn in Caemlyn, or recalled his own visit there. But then, perhaps Gill was remembering that that visit was not the thing to calm a man, with Aes Sedai and talk of the Dark One and a flight in the night. He paced anxiously and hugged his bundle to his chest, shifted it from one arm to the other and answered in a bare handful of words, licking his lips between.

“Master Gill,” Perrin told him finally, “stop calling me Lord Perrin. I’m not. It’s complicated, but I’m not a lord. You know that.”

“Of course,” the round man replied, at last seating himself on one of the oak roots. He appeared reluctant to set his bundled things down, drawing his hands from them slowly. “As you say, Lord Perrin. Ah, Rand . . . the Lord Dragon . . . he really means the Lady Elayne to have the throne? Not that I doubt your word, of course,” he added hurriedly. Pulling off his hat, he began mopping his forehead again. Even for such a round man, he seemed to be sweating twice as much as the heat called for. “I’m sure the Lord Dragon will do just as you say.” His laugh was shaky. “You wanted to talk to me. And not about my old inn, I’m sure.”

Perrin exhaled wearily. He had thought nothing could be worse than old friends and neighbors bowing and scraping, but at least they forgot sometimes and spoke their minds. And none of them was afraid of him. “You’re a long way from home,” he said in a gentle voice. No need to go too fast, not with a man ready to jump out of his skin. “I wondered what brought you here. Not troubles of any kind, I hope.”

“You tell him right, Basel Gill,” Lini said sharply, marching up to the oak. “No embroidery, mind.” She had not been gone very long, yet somehow she had found time to wash her face and hands and work her hair into a neat white bun on the back of her head. And to beat most of the dust from her plain woolen dress. Bobbing a perfunctory curtsy in Perrin’s direction, she turned to shake a gnarled finger at Gill. “ ‘Three things annoy to distraction: a tooth that aches, a shoe that pinches, and a man that chatters.’ So you hold to the point and don’t go telling the young lord more than he wants to hear.” For a moment she held the gaping innkeeper with an admonitory stare, then abruptly gave Perrin another quick curtsy. “He does love the sound of his own voice—most men do—but he’ll tell it to you properly, now, my Lord.”

Master Gill glowered at her, and muttered under his breath when she waved sharply for him to speak. “Bony old . . .” was what Perrin heard. “What happened—the *simple* and *straight* of it—” The round man glared at Lini again, but she did not appear to notice, “was that I had some business down to Lugard. A chance to import wine. But you’re not interested in that. I took Lamgwin along, of course, and Breane, because she won’t let him out of her sight an hour she doesn’t have to. Along the way, we met Mistress Dorlain, Mistress Maighdin as we call her, and Lini, and Tallanvor. And Balwer, of course. On the road. Near to Lugard.”

“Maighdin and I were in service in Murandy,” Lini put in impatiently. “Until the troubles. Tallanvor was an armsman to the House, and Balwer the secretary. Bandits burned the manor, and our lady couldn’t afford to keep us, so we decided to travel together for protection.”

“I was telling it, Lini,” Master Gill grumbled, scratching behind his ear. “The wine merchant had left Lugard for the country, for some reason, and . . .” He shook his head. “It’s all too much to go into, Perrin. Lord Perrin, I mean. Forgive me. You know there’s trouble everywhere nowadays, one kind or another. Seems like every time we ran from one kind, we found another, and always getting farther from Caemlyn. Till here we are, tired and grateful for a rest. And that’s the short of it.”

Perrin nodded slowly. That could be simple truth, though he had learned that people had a hundred reasons for lying, or just shading the truth. Grimacing, he raked fingers through his hair. Light! He was becoming suspicious as a Cairhienin, and the deeper Rand tangled him, the worse it got. Why on earth would Basel Gill, of all people, lie to him? A lady’s maid, accustomed to privilege and fallen on hard times; that explained Maighdin. Some things were simple.

Lini’s hands were folded at her waist, but she watched with a keen eye, no little like a falcon herself, and Master Gill began fidgeting as soon as he stopped talking. He seemed to take Perrin’s grimace as a demand for more. He laughed, more on edge than amused. “I haven’t seen so much of the world since the Aiel War, and I was considerably skinnier, then. Why, we’ve been as far as Amador. Of course, we left after those Seanchan took the city, but truth, they aren’t any worse than the Whitecloaks, that I could—” He cut off as Perrin leaned forward abruptly and seized his lapel.

“Seanchan, Master Gill? Are you sure of that? Or is it one of those rumors, like the Aiel, or Aes Sedai?”

“I saw them,” Gill replied, exchanging uncertain looks with Lini. “And that’s what they call themselves. I’m surprised you don’t know. Word’s been running ahead of us all the way from Amador. These Seanchan want people to know what they’re about. Strange people, with strange creatures.” His voice picked up intensity. “Like Shadowspawn. Big leathery things that fly, and carry men, and these things like lizards, only they're big as horses, and they have three eyes. I saw them! I did!"

"I believe you," Perrin said, releasing the man's coat. "I've seen them, too." At Falme, where a thousand Whitecloaks died in minutes and it had taken dead heroes of legend, called by the Horn of Valere, to throw the Seanchan back. Rand had said they would return, but how could they have so soon? Light! If they held Amador, they had to have Tarabon as well, or most of it. Only a fool killed a deer when he knew there was a wounded bear behind his back. How much had they taken? "I can't send you to Caemlyn right away, Master Gill, but if you stay with me a while longer, I'll see you there safely." If staying with him any length of time was safe. The Prophet, Whitecloaks, and now maybe Seanchan added in.

"I think you're a good man," Lini said suddenly. "I'm afraid we didn't tell you the whole truth, and maybe we should."

"Lini, what are you saying?" Master Gill exclaimed, bounding to his feet. "I think the heat's getting to her," he told Perrin. "And all the travel. She has strange fancies, sometimes. You know how old folks can get. Hush, now, Lini!"

Lini slapped away the hand he was trying to put over her mouth. "You mind yourself, Basel Gill! I'll 'old' you! Maighdin *was* running from Tallanvor, in a manner of speaking, and he *was* chasing her. We all were, four days now, and near killing us and the horses both. Well, it's no wonder she doesn't know her own mind half the time; you men snarl up a woman's wits so she can hardly think, then you pretend you've done nothing at all. The lot of you ought to have your ears boxed on general principle. The girl's afraid of her own heart! Those two should be married, and the quicker the better."

Master Gill gaped at her, and Perrin was not sure his own mouth might not be hanging open. "I'm not certain I understand what it is you want of me," he said slowly, and the white-haired woman leaped in before he was well finished.

"Don't pretend to be dense. I won't believe it in you for a moment. I can see you have more wits than most men. That's the worst habit you men have, making believe you don't see what's plain under your noses." What had happened to all those curtsies? Folding thin arms across her chest, she eyed him sternly. "Well, if you must pretend, I'll set it out for you. This Lord Dragon of yours does whatever he wants, the way I hear. Your Prophet picks out people and marries them on the spot. Very well; you snatch up Maighdin and Tallanvor and marry them. He'll thank you, and so will she. When her mind settles."

Stunned, Perrin glanced at Master Gill, who shrugged and made a sickly grin. "If you will forgive me," Perrin told the frowning woman, "I have some matters I must see to." He hurried away, only looking back once. Lini was shaking a finger at Master Gill, berating him despite his protests. The breeze was wrong for Perrin to hear what they were saying. In truth, he did not want to. They *were* all crazy!

Berelain might have her two maids and her thief-catchers, but Faile had her own attendants, of a sort. Close on twenty young Tairens and Cairhienin were sitting cross-legged near the tent, the women in coats and breeches with swords belted on just like the men. None wore their hair longer than the shoulder, and men and women both had it tied back with a ribbon, imitating the Aiel tail. Perrin wondered where the rest were; they seldom strayed far from the sound of Faile's voice. Not causing trouble, he hoped. She had taken them under her wing to keep them *out* of trouble, she said, and the Light knew they would have gotten into it, left back in Cairhien with a great lot of young fools just like them. In Perrin's opinion, the whole lashing of them needed a swift kick in the bottom to knock some sense into them. Dueling, playing at *ji'e'toh*, pretending to be some sort of Aiel. Idiocy!

Lacile rose to her feet as Perrin came closer, a pale little woman with red ribbons pinned to her lapels, small gold hoops in her ears, and a challenging stare that sometimes made the Two Rivers men think she might like a kiss despite her sword. Right then, the challenge was stony hard. A moment behind her, Arrela stood too, tall and dark, with her hair cut short as a Maiden's and her clothes plainer than most of the men's. Unlike Lacile, Arrela made it clear she would as soon kiss a dog as any man. The pair made as if to move in front of the tent, to block Perrin's way, but a square-chinned fellow in a puffy-sleeved coat barked an order and they sat again. Reluctantly. For that matter, Parelean thumbed that block of a chin as though he might be reconsidering. He had worn a beard the first time Perrin saw him—several of the Tairen men had had them—but Aiel did not wear beards.

Perrin muttered about foolishness under his breath. They were Faile's to the bone, and the fact that he was her husband meant little. Aram might be jealous of his attentions, yet Aram at least shared his affections with Faile. He could feel the young idiots' eyes on him as he strode inside. Faile would skin him if she ever learned that he hoped they would keep *her* from trouble.

The tent was tall and spacious, with a flowered carpet for a floor and sparse furnishings that folded for storage on a cart, most of them. The heavy stand-mirror certainly could not. Except for brass-bound chests draped with embroidered cloths and doubling as extra tables, straight lines of bright gilt decorated everything down to the washstand and its mirror. A dozen mirrored lamps made the interior nearly as bright as outside, if considerably cooler, and there were even a pair of silk hangings dangling from the roof poles, too ornate for Perrin's taste. Too rigid, with the birds and flowers marching in lines and angles. Dobraine had set them up to travel like Cairhienin nobles, though Perrin had managed to "lose" the worst of it. The huge bed, for one, a ridiculous thing to travel with. It had taken up almost a whole cart to itself.

Faile and Maighdin were sitting alone together, worked silver cups in hand. They had the air of women feeling one another out, all smiles on the outside yet with a hint of sharpness to the eyes, a hint of listening for something behind the words, and not a clue as to whether they would hug in the next instant or draw knives. Well, he thought most women would not actually go as far as knives, but Faile could. Maighdin appeared much less travel-worn than she had, washed and combed, the dust brushed from her dress. A small mosaic-topped table between them held more cups and a tall sweating silver pitcher that gave off the minty scent of herb tea. Both women looked around at his entrance, and for an instant, they had almost exactly the same expression, coolly wondering who was barging in and not at all pleased with the interruption. At least Faile softened hers immediately with a smile.

"Master Gill told me your story, Mistress Dorlain," he said. "You've faced hard days, but you can be sure you're safe here till you decide to leave." The woman murmured thanks over the rim of her cup, but she smelled wary, and her eyes tried to read him like a book.

"Maighdin also told me their story, Perrin," Faile said, "and I have an offer to make her. Maighdin, you and your friends have had trying months behind, and you tell me of no prospects ahead. Enter my service, all of you. You will still have to journey, but the circumstances will be much better. I pay well, and I am not a harsh mistress.” Perrin voiced his approval immediately. If Faile wanted to indulge her fancy for taking in strays, at least he wanted to help this lot, too. Maybe they would be safer with him than wandering around alone at that.

Choking on her tea, Maighdin nearly dropped her cup. She blinked at Faile, dabbing at the damp on her chin with a lace-edged linen handkerchief, and her chair creaked faintly as she turned, strangely, to study Perrin. “I . . . thank you,” she said at last, slowly. “I think. . . .” Another moment’s perusal of Perrin, and her voice picked up. “Yes, I thank you, and I accept your kind offer gratefully. I must tell my companions.” Rising, she hesitated in setting her cup on the tray, then straightened only to spread her skirts in a curtsy suitable for any palace. “I will try to give good service, my Lady,” she said levelly. “May I withdraw?” At Faile’s assent, she curtsied again and backed away two steps before turning to go! Perrin scratched his beard. Somebody else who would be bobbing at him every time she turned around.

No sooner had the tentflap dropped behind Maighdin than Faile put her cup down and laughed, drumming her heels on the carpet. “Oh, I like her, Perrin. She has spirit! I’ll wager she would have singed your beard over those banners if I hadn’t saved you. Oh, yes. Spirit!”

Perrin grunted. Just what he needed; another woman to singe his beard. “I promised Master Gill to look after them, Faile, but. . . . Can you guess what that Lini asked? She wanted me to marry Maighdin to that fellow Tallanvor. Just stand them up and marry them whatever they said! She claimed they want it.” He filled a silver cup with tea and dropped into the chair Maighdin had vacated, ignoring its alarming groans under his sudden weight. “In any case, that nonsense is the least of my worries. Master Gill says it was the Seanchan took Amador, and I believe him. Light! The Seanchan!”

Faile tapped her fingertips together, staring across them at nothing. “That might be just the thing,” she mused. “Most servants do better married than not. Perhaps I should arrange it. And for Breane, too. The way she went running out of here to check on that big fellow as soon as her face was clean, I suspect they should be already. There was a gleam in her eye. I won’t have that kind of behavior in my servants, Perrin. It just leads to tears and recriminations and sulking. And Breane will be worse than he is.”

Perrin stared at her. “Did you hear me?” he said slowly. “The Seanchan have captured Amador! The Seanchan, Faile!”

She gave a start—she really had been thinking about marrying off those women!—then smiled at him, amused. “Amador is a long way, yet, and if we do meet with these Seanchan, I’m sure you will deal with them. After all, you taught me to perch on your wrist, didn’t you?” That was what she claimed, though he had never seen any sign of it.

“They might be a touch more difficult than you were,” he said dryly, and she smiled again. She smelled extremely pleased, for some reason. “I’m thinking about sending Grady or Neald to warn Rand, no matter what he said.” She shook her head fiercely, smiles evaporating, but he pushed on. “If I knew how to find him, I would. There has to be some way to get word to him without anyone learning of it.” Rand had insisted on that more than he had on secrecy about Masema. Perrin had been exiled from Rand’s presence, and no one was to know anything remained between them except enmity.

“He knows, Perrin. I’m sure of it. Maighdin saw pigeoncotes everywhere in Amador, and apparently the Seanchan didn’t look at them twice. By this time, any merchant who has business with Amador has heard, and so has the White Tower. Believe me, Rand must have, too. You have to trust that he knows best. In this, he does.” She was not always so certain of that.

“Maybe,” Perrin muttered irritably. He tried not to worry about Rand’s sanity, but Rand made Perrin at his most suspicious look like a child skipping in a meadow. How much did Rand trust even him? Rand kept things back, had plans he never let on.

Exhaling, Perrin settled back in the chair, gulped a swallow of tea. The truth of it was, mad or sane, Rand *was* right. If the Forsaken caught a suspicion of what he was up to, or the White Tower did, they would find some way to overturn the anvil on his feet. “At least I can give the Tower’s eyes-and-ears less to talk about. This time, I’m *burning* that bloody banner.” And the Wolfhead, too. He might have to play at being a lord, but he could do it without a bloody flag!

Faile’s full lips pursed judiciously, and she shook her head slightly. Slipping from her chair, she knelt beside him, took his wrist in her hands. Perrin met her level gaze warily. When she looked at him so intently, so seriously, she was about to tell him something important. That, or pull the wool over his eyes and spin him around till he did not know front from back. Her scent told him nothing. He tried to stop smelling her; it was all too easy to lose himself in that, and then she *would* pull the wool over his eyes. One thing he had learned since marrying: a man needed all of his wits dealing with a woman. Too often even that was not enough; women did what they wanted as surely as Aes Sedai.

"You might want to reconsider, husband," she murmured. A tiny smile quirked her mouth as if she once again knew what he was thinking. "I doubt anyone who's seen us since we entered Ghealdan knew what the Red Eagle is. Around a town the size of Bethal, some will, though. And the longer we have to hunt for Masema, the greater the chance."

He did not bother with saying that was all the more reason to get rid of the banner. Faile was no fool, and she thought much faster than he. "Then why keep it," he asked slowly, "when all it'll do is draw eyes to the idiot everybody will think is trying to pull Manetheren out of the grave?" Men had tried that in the past, and women, too; the name of Manetheren carried powerful memories, and it was convenient for anyone who wanted to start a rebellion.

"Because it *will* draw eyes." She leaned toward him intently. "To a man trying to raise up Manetheren again. Lesser folk will smile to your face, hope you ride on soon, and try to forget you as soon as you do. As for the greater, they've too much in front of their faces right now to look twice unless you pinch their noses. Compared to the Seanchan, or the Prophet, or the Whitecloaks, a man trying to raise Manetheren is small turnips. And I think it's safe to say the Tower won't look twice either, not now." Her smile widened, and the light in her eyes said she was about to make her most telling point. "But most important, no one will think that man is doing anything else." Abruptly her smile vanished; she stuck a finger against his nose, hard. "And don't call yourself an idiot, Perrin t'Bashere Aybara. Not even sideways, like that. You aren't, and I do not like it." Her scent was tiny spikes, not true anger but definitely displeased.

Quicksilver. A kingfisher flashing by faster than thought. Certainly faster than his thoughts. It would never have occurred to him to hide so . . . flagrantly. But he could see the sense. It was like concealing the fact that you were a murderer by claiming to be a thief. Yet it might work.

Chuckling, he kissed her fingertip. "The banner stays," he said. He supposed that meant the Wolfhead did, too. Blood and bloody ashes!

"Alliandre has to know the truth, though. If she thinks Rand means to set me up as King of Manetheren and take her lands. . . ."

Faile rose so suddenly, turning away, that he was afraid he had made a mistake bringing up the Queen. Alliandre could lead to Berelain all too easily, and Faile smelled . . . prickly. Wary. But what she said, over her shoulder, was "Alliandre won't be a bit of trouble for Perrin Goldeneyes. That bird's as good as netted, husband, so it's time to put our minds on how to find Masema." Kneeling gracefully beside a small chest against the tent wall, the only chest without draperies, she lifted the lid and began removing rolled maps.

Perrin hoped she was right about Alliandre, because he did not know what to do if she was wrong. If only he were half what she thought him. Alliandre was a netted bird, the Seanchan would fall over like dolls for Perrin Goldeneyes, and he would snatch up the Prophet and take him to Rand if Masema had ten thousand men around him. Not for the first time he realized that however much her anger hurt and confused him, it was her disappointment he feared. If he ever saw that in her eyes, it would rip the heart out of his chest.

He knelt beside her and helped her spread out the largest map, covering the south of Ghealdan and the north of Amadicia, and studied it as though Masema's name would leap off the parchment at him. He had more reason than Rand to want to succeed. Whatever else, he could not fail Faile.

Faile lay in the darkness, listening until she was sure that Perrin's breath had the deep rhythm of sleep, then slipped out from the blankets they shared. Rueful amusement touched her as she pulled her linen nightdress up over her head. Did he really think she would not find out that he had hidden the bed deep in a copse one morning while the carts were being loaded? Not that she minded; not a great deal, at least. She was sure she had slept on the ground as often as he. She had pretended surprise, of course, and made light of it. Anything else, and he would have apologized, perhaps even gone back to fetch the bed. Managing a husband was an art, so her mother said. Had Deira ni Ghaline ever found it so difficult?

Scuffing her bare feet into slippers, she shrugged into a silk robe, then hesitated, looking down at Perrin. He would be able to see her clearly, if he woke, but to her, he was just a shadowed mound. She wished her mother were there, now, to advise her. She loved Perrin with every fiber of her being, and he confused every fiber. Actually understanding men was impossible, of course, but he was so unlike anyone she had grown up with. He never swaggered, and instead of laughing at himself, he was . . . modest. She had not believed a man *could* be modest! He insisted that only chance had made him a leader, claimed he did not know how to lead, when men who met him were ready to follow after an hour. He dismissed his own thinking as slow, when those slow, considering thoughts saw so deeply that she had to dance a merry jig to keep any secrets at all. He was a wonderful man, her curly-haired wolf. So strong. And so gentle. Sighing, she tiptoed from the tent. His ears had caused her difficulties before.

The camp lay quiet beneath a gibbous moon that gave as much light in a cloudless sky as it normally would have full, a brightness that washed out the stars. Some sort of night-bird cried shrilly, then fell silent at an owl’s deep hoot. There was a small breeze, and for a wonder, it actually seemed a little cool. Probably her imagination. The nights were cool only in comparison to the days.

Most of the men were asleep, dark humps among the shadows beneath the trees. A few remained awake, talking around the handful of fires still burning. She made no effort to hide, but none noticed her. Some appeared half asleep where they sat, heads nodding. If she had not known how well the men on sentry duty would be keeping watch, she might have thought the camp could be surprised by a herd of wild cattle. Of course, the Maidens would be on guard in the night, too. But it did not matter if they saw her, either.

The high-wheeled carts made long, shadowed rows, the servants already snug and snoring beneath. Most of the servants. One fire still crackled there. Maighdin and her friends sat around it. Tallanvor was talking, gesturing fiercely, but only the other men seemed to be paying him any mind, though he appeared to be addressing himself to Maighdin. That they had had better garb in their bundles than those near rags was not surprising, but their former mistress must have had a very free hand to give out silk to her people, and Maighdin wore finely cut silk indeed, in a muted blue. None of the others was dressed so well, so perhaps Maighdin had been their lady’s favorite.

A twig snapped under Faile’s foot, and heads whipped around, Tallanvor starting to his feet, half drawing his sword before he saw her gathering her robe in the moonlight. They were more alert than the Two Rivers men behind her. For an instant the lot of them just stared at her; then

Maighdin rose gracefully and made a deep curtsy, and the others hastily followed her example with varying degrees of skill. Only Maighdin and Balwer appeared at all at ease. A nervous smile split Gill's round face.

"Go on with what you were doing," Faile told them kindly. "But don't stay up too late; tomorrow will be full." She walked on, but when she glanced back, they were still standing, still peering after her. Their travels must have made them wary as rabbits, always watching for a fox. She wondered how well they would fit in. Over the next few weeks, she would be busy training them to her ways, learning theirs. One was as important as the other for a well-run household. The time would have to be found.

They did not stay long in her thoughts tonight. Soon she was beyond the carts, not quite out to where Two Rivers men would be keeping sharp watch from up in the trees. Nothing larger than a mouse would get by them unseen—even some of the Maidens had been spotted upon occasion—but they were watching for anyone attempting to sneak in. Not for those who had a right to be there. In a small moonlit clearing, her people were waiting.

Some of the men bowed, and Parelean nearly went to one knee before stopping himself. Several women instinctively made curtsies that looked quite peculiar in men's garb, then dropped their eyes or shifted in embarrassment at realizing what they had done. The manners of the court had been bred into them, though they tried very hard to adopt Aiel customs. What they believed were Aiel customs, at least. Sometimes they horrified the Maidens with what they believed. Perrin called them fools, and they were in some ways, but they had sworn fealty to her, these Cairhienin and Tairens—water oath, they named it, copying the Aiel, trying to—and that made them hers. Among themselves they had taken to calling their "society" *Cha Faile*, the Falcon's Talon, though they had seen the necessity of keeping that quiet. They were not fools in all ways. In fact, around the edges anyway, they were not too unlike the young men and women she had grown up with.

Those she had sent off early that morning had just returned, for the women among them were still changing out of the dresses they had worn of necessity. Even one woman dressed as a man would have roused notice in Bethal, not to mention five. The clearing was a great flurry of skirts and shifts, coats and shirts and breeches. The women made believe they did not mind being unclothed in front of others, including men, since the Aiel apparently did not, but haste and labored breathing gave them the lie. The men were all shifting feet and turning heads, torn between looking away decently and watching, as they thought the Aiel did, while pretending they were not looking at half-dressed women. Faile held her robe close over her nightdress; she could not have dressed further without waking Perrin for sure, but she made no pretense at comfort. She was no Domani, to receive her retainers in her bath.

"Forgive us for being late, my Lady Faile," Selande panted, tugging her coat on. The accents of Cairhien were sharp in the short woman's voice. Even for a Cairhienin, she was not tall. She managed a credible swagger, though, a suitable boldness in the tilt of her head and the set of her shoulders. "We would have returned sooner, but the gate guards made a bother letting us out."

"A bother?" Faile said sharply. If only she could have seen with her own eyes, on top of theirs; if only Perrin had let her go instead of that trollop. No, she would not think about Berelain. It was not Perrin's fault. She repeated that to herself twenty times a day, like a prayer. But why was the man so blind? "What kind of bother?" She drew a chagrined breath. Troubles with your husband should never affect your tone with your vassals.

"Nothing of note, my Lady." Selande buckled her sword belt and settled it on her hips. "They let some fellows ahead of us drive their wagons through without a second look, but they were worried about letting women go out into the night." Some of the other women laughed. The five men who had gone into Bethal stirred irritably, no doubt because they had not been thought enough protection. The rest of *Cha Faile* made a thick semicircle behind those ten, watching Faile closely, listening closely. Moonlight shadowed their faces.

"Tell me what you saw," Faile commanded in a calmer tone. Much better.

Selande made her report concisely, and for all Faile's wishes that she had gone herself, she had to admit they had seen almost as much as she could have wished. The streets of Bethal were nearly empty even at the busiest hours of the day. People stayed to their own homes as much as possible. A little commerce trickled in and out, but few merchants ventured into this part of Ghealdan, and barely enough food came in from the countryside to keep everyone fed. Most of the townspeople seemed stunned, afraid of what lay outside the walls, sinking deeper and deeper into apathy and despair. Everyone kept their mouths closed for fear of the Prophet’s spies, and their eyes as well, for fear of being taken for spies. The Prophet had a deep effect. For instance, however many bandits roamed the hills, cutpurses and footpads had vanished from Bethal. It was said the Prophet’s penalty for a thief was to cut off the man’s hands. Though that did not seem to apply to his own people.

“The Queen tours the city every day, showing herself to keep spirits up,” Selande said, “but I do not think it helps much. She is making a progress here in the south to remind people they have a Queen; maybe she has had more success elsewhere. The Watch has been added to the wall guards, and all but a handful of her soldiers, too. Perhaps it makes the townsfolk feel safer. Until she moves on. Unlike everyone else, Alliandre herself apparently feels no fear the Prophet will come storming over the walls. She walks alone in the gardens of Lord Telabin’s palace, morning and evening, and keeps only a few soldiers, who spend most of their time in the kitchens. Everybody in the city seems as concerned with food, with how long there will be enough, as they are with the Prophet. In truth, my Lady, for all the guards on the walls, I think if Masema appeared at the gates alone, they might give him the town.”

“They would,” Meralda put in contemptuously, buckling her own sword round her waist, “and beg for mercy.” Dark and stocky, Meralda was as tall as Faile, but the Tairen woman ducked her head at a frown from Selande and murmured an apology. There were no doubts who led *Cha Faile*, after Faile herself.

She had been pleased there was no need to change the precedence they had established. Selande was the brightest of them except perhaps for Parelean, and only Arrela and Camaille were quicker. And Selande had something extra, a steadiness, as if she had already faced the worst fear in her life and nothing could ever be that bad again. Of course, she wanted a scar like those some of the Maidens had. Faile possessed several small scars, badges of honor most of them, but actually seeking one was idiocy. At least the woman was not too very eager in the matter.

“We made a map, as you required, my Lady,” the diminutive woman finished with a last, warning glance at Meralda. “We marked out Lord Telabin’s palace on the back as much as we could, but I fear that is not much more than the gardens and stables.”

Faile did not try to make out the lines on the paper she unfolded in the moonlight. A pity she had not been able to go herself; she could have mapped the interior, too. No. Done was done, as Perrin liked to say. And it was enough. “You are certain no one searches wagons leaving the city?” Even in the pale light, she could see confusion on many of the faces in front of her. None knew why she had sent some of them into Bethal.

Selande did not look confused. “Yes, my Lady,” she said calmly. Quite bright, and more than quick enough.

The wind gusted for a moment, rustling leaves on the trees, rustling dead leaves on the ground, and Faile wished she had Perrin’s ears. His nose and eyes, too. It did not matter if anyone saw her here with her retainers, but eavesdroppers would be something else. “You’ve done very well, Selande. All of you have.” Perrin knew the dangers here, as real as any farther south; he knew, but like most men, he thought with his heart as often as his head. A wife had to be practical, to keep her husband out of trouble. That had been her mother’s very first piece of advice on married life. “At first light, you will return to Bethal, and if you receive word from me, this is what you will do. . . .”

Even Selande’s eyes widened in shock as she went on, but no one murmured the slightest protest. Faile would have been surprised if anyone had. Her instructions were to the point. There would be some danger, but under the circumstances, not nearly what might have been.

“Are there any questions?” she said finally. “Does everyone understand?”

With one voice, *Cha Faile* answered. “We live to serve our Lady Faile.” And that meant they would serve her beloved wolf, whether he wanted them to or not.

Maighdin shifted in her blankets on the hard ground, sleep eluding her. That was her name, now; a new name for a new life. Maighdin, for her mother, and Dorlain, for a family on an estate that had been hers. A new life for an old life gone, but ties of the heart could not be cut. And now. . . . Now. . . .

A faint crackle of dead leaves brought her head up, and she watched a dim shape pass through the trees. The Lady Faile, returning to her tent from wherever she had gone. A pleasant young woman, kindhearted and well spoken. Whatever her husband’s stock, she almost certainly was nobly born. But young. Inexperienced. That might be a help.

Maighdin let her head fall back on the cloak she had wadded up for a pillow. Light, what was she doing here? Taking service as a lady’s maid! No. She would hold on to her confidence in herself, at least. She could still find that. She could. If she dug deeply. Her breath caught at the sound of footsteps close by.

Tallanvor knelt gracefully at her side. He was shirtless, moonlight gleaming on the smooth muscles of his chest and shoulders, his face in shadows. A slight breeze ruffled his hair. “What madness is this?” he asked softly. “Entering *service*? What are you up to? And don’t tell me that nonsense about making a new life; I don’t believe it. No one does.”

She tried to turn away, but he laid a hand on her shoulder. He exerted no pressure, yet it stopped her as surely as a halter. Light, please let her not tremble. The Light did not listen, but at least she managed to keep her voice steady. “If you haven’t noticed, I must make my way in the world, now. Better as a lady’s maid than a tavern maid. You may feel free to go on alone if service here doesn’t suit.”

“You didn’t abdicate your wits or your pride when you gave up the throne,” he muttered. Burn Lini for revealing that! “If you mean to pretend that you did, I suggest you avoid letting Lini get you alone.” The man chuckled at her! He chuckled, oh, so richly! “She wants a word with Maighdin, and I suspect she won’t be as gentle with Maighdin as she was with Morgase.”

Angrily she sat up, brushing his hand away. “Are you blind, and deaf as well? The Dragon Reborn has *plans* for Elayne! Light, I wouldn’t like it if he simply knew her name! It must be more than chance that brought me to one of his henchmen, Tallanvor. It has to be!”

“Burn me, I knew it must be that. I hoped I was wrong, but. . . .” He sounded as angry as she. He had no right to be angry! “Elayne is safe in the White Tower, the Amyrlin Seat won’t let her anywhere near a man who can channel, even if he is the Dragon Reborn—especially if he is!—and Maighdin Dorlain can do nothing about the Amyrlin Seat, the Dragon Reborn, *or* the Lion Throne. All she can do is get her neck snapped, or her throat cut, or—!”

“Maighdin Dorlain can watch!” she broke in, at least partly to stop that awful litany. “She can listen! She can . . . !” Irritably, she trailed off. What *could* she do? Suddenly she realized she was sitting there in a thin shift and hurriedly folded her blankets around her. The night actually seemed a little cool. Or maybe the goose bumps on her skin were from Tallanvor's unseen eyes on her. The thought roused a flush in her cheeks she hoped he could not see. Luckily, it put a heat in her voice, too. She was not a girl, to go blushing because a man looked at her! "I will do what I can, whatever that is. The chance will come to learn something or do something that will help Elayne, and I will take it!"

"A dangerous decision," he told her calmly. She wished she could make out his face in the darkness. Only to read his expression, of course. "You heard him threaten to hang anyone who looked at him the wrong way. I can believe it, in a man with those eyes. Like a beast. I was surprised he let that fellow go; I thought he'd rip his throat out! If he discovers who you are, who you used to be. . . . Balwer might betray you. He never really explained why he helped us escape Amador. Maybe he thought Queen Morgase would give him a new position. Now he knows there's no chance of that, and he might want to curry favor with his new master and mistress."

"Are you afraid of *Lord* Perrin Goldeneyes?" she demanded contemptuously. Light, the man frightened her! Those eyes belonged on a wolf. "Balwer knows enough to hold his tongue. Anything he says will reflect on him; he came with me, after all. If you're afraid, then ride on!"

"You always fling that in my face," he sighed, settling back on his heels. She could not see his eyes, but she could feel them. "Ride on if you wish, you say. Once, there was a soldier loved a queen from afar, knowing it was hopeless, knowing he could never dare speak. Now the queen is gone, and only a woman remains, and I hope. I burn with hope! If you want me to leave, Maighdin, say it. One word. 'Go!' A simple word."

She opened her mouth. *A simple word,* she thought. *Light, it's only one word! Why can't I say it! Light, please*! For the second time that night, the Light failed to hear. She sat there huddled in her blankets like a fool, her mouth open, her face growing hotter and hotter.

If he had chuckled again, she would have put her belt knife in him. If he had laughed, or given any sign of triumph. . . . Instead, he leaned forward and gently kissed her eyes. She made a sound deep in her throat; she could not seem to move. Wide-eyed, she watched him stand. He loomed in the moonlight. She was a queen—she had been a queen—used to command, used to hard decisions in hard times, but right then the pounding of her heart drummed thought from her head.

“Had you said ‘go,’ ” he told her, “I’d have buried hope, but I could never leave you.”

Not until he was back in his own blankets could she make herself lie down and draw hers around her. She breathed as if she had been running. The night *was* cool; she was shivering, not trembling. Tallanvor was too young. Too young! Worse, he was right. Burn him for that! A lady’s maid could do nothing to affect events, and if the Dragon Reborn’s wolf-eyed killer learned that he had Morgase of Andor in his hands, she could be used against Elayne instead of helping her. He had no right to be right when she wanted him to be wrong! The illogic of that thought infuriated her. There *was* a chance she might do some good! There had to be!

In the back of her head, a small voice laughed. *You can’t forget that you’re Morgase Trakand,* it told her scornfully, *and even after she’s abdicated her throne, Queen Morgase can’t stop trying her hand in the affairs of the mighty, no matter how much ruin she’s made of it so far. And she can’t tell a man to go away, either, because she can’t stop thinking how strong his hands are, and how his lips curve when he smiles, and—*

Furious, she pulled the blanket over her head, trying to shut out the voice. She was *not* staying because she could not walk away from power. As for Tallanvor. . . . She would set him firmly in his place. This time she would! But. . . . What was his place, with a woman who was no longer a queen? She tried to put him out of her mind and tried to ignore that mocking voice that would not be quiet, yet when sleep finally came, she could still feel the pressure of his lips on her eyelids.

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CHAPTER 9

Tangles

Perrin woke before first light as usual, and as usual, Faile was already up and about. She could make a mouse seem noisy when she wanted to, and he suspected that if he woke an hour after lying down, she would still manage to be up first. The door-flaps were tied back, the side panels raised a little at the bottom, and a stir of air rose through the venthole in the peak, enough to create an illusion of coolness. Perrin actually shivered while searching for his shirt and breeches. Well, it was supposed to be winter, even if the weather did not know it.

He dressed in the dark and scrubbed his teeth with salt, needing no lamps, and when he left the tent, stamping his feet into his boots, Faile had her new servants gathered around her in the deep grayness of early morning, some holding lighted lanterns. A lord’s daughter needed servants; he should have arranged for it before this. There were Two Rivers folk in Caemlyn that Faile had trained herself, but with the need for secrecy there had been no way to fetch them along. Master Gill would want to go home as soon as possible, and Lamgwin and Breane with him, but maybe Maighdin and Lini would stay.

Aram straightened from where he had been sitting cross-legged beside the tent, and waited silently on Perrin. If Perrin had not stopped him, Aram would have slept across the entrance. This morning his coat was striped red-and-white, though the white was a trifle dingy, and even here that wolfhead-pommeled sword hilt rose over his shoulder. Perrin had left his axe in the tent, and grateful to be rid of it. Tallanvor still wore his sword belted over his coat, but not Master Gill or the other two.

Faile must have been watching, because no sooner did Perrin come out than she gestured toward the tent, clearly issuing orders. Maighdin and Breane came bustling past him and Aram with lanterns, their jaws set, smelling of determination for some reason. Neither curtsied, a pleasant surprise. Lini did, a quick bend of the knee before she darted after the other two muttering about “knowing their place.” Perrin suspected Lini was one of those women who saw her “place” as being in charge. Come to think of it, most women did. That was the way of the world, it seemed, not just the Two Rivers.

Tallanvor and Lamgwin followed close behind the women, and Lamgwin was as serious about bowing as Tallanvor, who was almost grim. Perrin sighed and bowed back, and they both gave a start, gaping at him. A curt shout from Lini jerked them into the tent.

With only a quickly flashed smile for him, Faile strode off toward the carts, talking alternately to Basel Gill on one side of her and Sebban Balwer on the other. The men each held a lantern out to light her way. Of course, a double handful of those idiots kept pace where they could hear if she raised her voice, strutting and stroking sword hilts and staring about in the dimness as though they expected an attack or hoped for one. Perrin tugged at his short beard. She always found plenty of work to fill her hours, and nobody took it out of her hands. Nobody would dare.

Not so much as the first fingers of dawn showed on the horizon yet, but the Cairhienin were beginning to stir around the carts, and moving more quickly the closer Faile came. By the time she reached them, they appeared to be trotting, their lanterns bobbing and swinging in the dimness. The Two Rivers men, used to farmers’ days, were already making breakfast, some laughing and roughhousing around their cook fires, some grumping, but most getting the work done. A few tried to stay in their blankets and were unceremoniously tumbled out. Grady and Neald were up, too, as always off by themselves, shadows in black coats among the trees. Perrin could not recall seeing them without those coats, always buttoned to the neck, always clean and unwrinkled come sunrise, whatever they had looked like the night before. Stepping through the forms in unison, the pair were practicing the sword as they did every morning. That was better than their evening practice, when they would sit cross-legged, hands on knees, staring at some distant nothing. They never did anything then that anyone could see, yet not a man in the camp but knew what they were about and kept as far off as possible. Not even the Maidens would step into their line of sight then.

Something was missing, Perrin realized with a start. Faile always had one of the men meet him first thing with a bowl of the thick porridge they breakfasted on, but it seemed she had been too busy this morning. Brightening, he hurried toward the cook fires, hoping at least to be able to dip up his own porridge for once. A small hope.

Flann Barstere, a lanky fellow with a dent in his chin, met him halfway and shoved a carved bowl into his hands. Flann was from up toward Watch Hill, and Perrin did not know him well, but they had been hunting together a time or two, and once Perrin had helped him dig one of his father's cows out of a boghole in the Waterwood. "The Lady Faile told me to bring this to you, Perrin," Flann said anxiously. "You won't tell her I forgot, will you? You won't tell? I found some honey, and I put in a good dollop." Perrin tried not to sigh. At least Flann had remembered his name.

Well, maybe he could not get away with doing the simplest chores for himself, but he was still responsible for the men eating beneath the trees. Without him, they would be with their families, getting ready for the day's chores around the farm, milking cows and cutting firewood instead of wondering whether they might have to kill or be killed before sunset. Gulping down the honeyed porridge quickly, he told Aram to take his ease over breakfast, but the man looked so miserable that he relented, so Aram followed as he made his way around the camp. The journey was not one Perrin enjoyed.

Men put down their bowls when he approached, or even stood until he passed. He gritted his teeth whenever somebody he had grown up with, or worse, a man who had sent him on errands as a boy, called him Lord Perrin. Not everyone did, but too many. Far too many. After a time, he gave up telling them to stop out of sheer weariness; all too often the reply was "Oh! Whatever you say, Lord Perrin." It was enough to make a man howl!

Despite that, he made himself pause to speak a word or two to every man. Mainly, though, he kept his eyes open. And his nose. They all knew enough to keep their bows in good repair and tend the fletching and points on their arrows, but some would wear the soles out of their boots or the bottom out of their breeches without noticing, or let blisters fester because they could not be bothered to do anything about them just yet. Several had the habit of picking up brandy when they could, and two or three of those had no head for it at all. There had been a small village the day before reaching Bethal that held no fewer than three inns.

It was very strange. Having Mistress Luhhan or his mother tell him he needed new boots or his breeches mended had always been embarrassing, and he was sure he would have been irritated at the same from anybody else, but from grizzled old Jondyn Barran on down, the Two Rivers men just said “Why, right you are, Lord Perrin; I’ll see to it straightaway” or some such. He caught a number of them grinning at one another when he moved on. And they smelled pleased! When he rooted a clay jar of pear brandy out of Jori Congar’s saddlebags—a skinny fellow who ate twice as much as anyone else and always looked as if he had not had a bite in a week, Jori was a good shot with a bow, but given a chance he would drink until he could not stand, and he had light fingers besides—Jori gave him a wide-eyed look and spread his hands as if he did not know where the jar had come from. But as Perrin walked on, emptying the brandy onto the ground, Jori laughed, “You can’t put anything over on Lord Perrin!” He sounded proud! Sometimes, Perrin thought he was the only sane person left.

Another thing, he noticed. One and all, they were very interested in what he did not say. Man after man cast an eye toward the two banners that occasionally flapped atop their poles in a brief gust, Red Wolfhead and Red Eagle. They eyed the banners and watched him, waiting for the order he had given every time the things had come out since reaching Ghealdan. And often enough before that. Except that he had said nothing yesterday, and he said nothing today, and he saw speculation blooming on men’s faces. He left behind clusters of men peering at the banners and at him, murmuring excitedly among themselves. He did not try to listen. What would they say if he was wrong, if the Whitecloaks or King Ailron decided they could look away from the Prophet and the Seanchan long enough to snuff out a supposed rebellion? They were his responsibility, and he had already gotten too many of them killed.

The sun was more than peeking above the horizon, spreading a sharp morning light, by the time he finished, and over at the tent, Tallanvor and Lamgwin were lugging out chests under Lini’s direction, while Maighdin and Breane appeared to be sorting the contents out on a broad patch of dead grass, blankets and linens mainly, and long bright swaths of silk satin that had been intended to drape the bed he had misplaced. Faile must have been inside, because that gaggle of idiots were cooling their heels not far off. No carrying and hauling for them. Useful as rats in the barn.

Perrin thought about taking a look at Stayer and Stepper, but when he glanced through the trees at the horselines, he was seen. No fewer than three of the farriers stepped out anxiously, watching him. They were blocky men in leather aprons, alike as eggs in a basket, though Falton had only a fringe of white around his head, Aemin was graying, and Jerasid had not yet come into his middle years. Perrin growled at the sight of them. They would hover if he laid a hand on either horse, and goggle if he lifted a hoof. The one time he had tried to change a worn shoe, on Stayer, all *six* farriers had darted about grabbing up tools before he could touch them, nearly knocking the bay over in their rush to do the work themselves.

"They're afraid you don't trust them," Aram said suddenly. Perrin looked at him in surprise, and Aram shifted his shoulders in his coat. "I've talked to them, some. They think if a lord tends his own horses, it must be because he doesn't trust them. You might send them off, with no way to get home." His tone said they were fools to think that, but he gave Perrin a sideways glance and shrugged again, uncomfortably. "I think they're embarrassed, too. If you don't behave the way they think a lord should, it reflects on them, as they see it."

"Light!" Perrin muttered. Faile had said the same—about them being embarrassed, anyway—but he had believed it just a lord's daughter talking. Faile had grown up surrounded by servants, yet how could a lady know the thoughts of a man who had to work for his bread? He frowned toward the horselines. Five of the farriers stood together watching him, now. Embarrassed that he wanted to look after his own horses, and upset that he did not want them pulling wool and scratching gravel all over the place. "Do *you* think I ought to act like a fool in silk smallclothes?" he asked. Aram blinked, and began studying his boots. "Light!" Perrin growled.

Spotting Basel Gill hurrying from the direction of the carts, Perrin moved to meet him. He did not think he had done very well at making Gill feel at ease yesterday. The stout man was talking to himself and once more mopping his head with a kerchief, sweating away in a rumpled dark gray coat. The day's heat was beginning to take hold already. He did not see Perrin until Perrin was nearly on him, and then he gave a jump, stuffing the kerchief into a coat pocket and making a bow. He looked curried and brushed fit for a feastday.

“Ah. My Lord Perrin. Your Lady told me to take a cart into Bethal. She says I’m to find you some Two Rivers tabac, if I can, but I don’t know that’s possible. Two Rivers leaf has always been dear, and trade isn’t what it was.”

“She’s sending you for tabac?” Perrin said, frowning. He supposed secrecy had gone down the well, but still. “I bought three casks, two villages back. Enough for everybody.”

Gill shook his head firmly. “Not Two Rivers leaf, and your Lady says you like that above any other. The Ghealdanin leaf will do for your men. I’m to be your *shambayan*, she called it, and keep you and her supplied with what you need. Not much different from what I did running the Blessing, really.” The similarity seemed to amuse him; his belly shook with quiet chuckles. “I have quite a list, though I can’t say how much of it I’ll find. Good wine, herbs, fruit, candles and lamp oil, oilcloth and wax, paper and ink, needles, pins, oh, all sorts of things. Tallanvor and Lamgwin and I are going, with some of your Lady’s other retainers.”

His Lady’s other retainers. Tallanvor and Lamgwin were bringing out yet another chest for the women to sort through. They had to pass by the squatting clump of young fools, who never offered to lend a hand. In fact, the layabouts ignored them completely.

“You keep an eye on that lot,” Perrin cautioned. “If one of them starts any trouble—if he even looks as if he will—you have Lamgwin crack his head.” And if it was one of the women? They were just as likely, maybe more so. Perrin grunted. Faile’s “retainers” were going to tie his belly into permanent knots yet. Too bad she could not be satisfied with the likes of Master Gill and Maighdin. “You didn’t mention Balwer. Has he decided to go on alone?” Just then, a shift in the breeze brought him Balwer’s scent, an alert smell very much at odds with the fellow’s almost desiccated exterior.

Even for so reedy a man, Balwer made surprisingly little noise on the dried leaves underfoot. In a sparrow-brown coat, he offered a quick bow, and his tilted head added to the image of a bird. “I am staying, my Lord,” he said cautiously. Or maybe that was just his manner. “As your gracious Lady’s secretary. And yours, if it pleases you.” He stepped closer, very nearly a hop. “I am well versed, my Lord. I possess a good memory and write a good hand, and my Lord can be assured that whatever he confides in me will never pass my lips to another. The ability to keep secrets is a primary skill of a secretary. Don’t you have pressing duties for our new mistress, Master Gill?”

Gill frowned at Balwer, opened his mouth, then closed it with a snap. Spinning on his heel, he trotted away toward the tent.

For a moment Balwer watched him go, head to one side, lips pursed thoughtfully. “I can offer other services, as well, my Lord,” he said finally. “Knowledge. I overheard some of my Lord’s men speaking, and I understand that my Lord may have had some . . . difficulties . . . with the Children of the Light. A secretary learns many things. I know a surprising amount about the Children.”

“With any luck I can avoid Whitecloaks,” Perrin told him. “Better if you knew where the Prophet is. Or the Seanchan.” He did not expect any of that, of course, but Balwer surprised him.

“I cannot be certain, of course, but I think the Seanchan have not spread far beyond Amador as yet. Fact is difficult to sift from rumor, my Lord, but I keep my ears open. Of course, they do seem to move with unexpected suddenness. A dangerous people, with large numbers of Taraboner soldiers. I believe from Master Gill that my Lord knows of them, but I observed them closely in Amador, and what I saw is at my Lord’s disposal. As to the Prophet, there are as many rumors concerning him as the Seanchan, but I believe I can say reliably that he was recently at Abila, a largish town some forty leagues south of here.” Balwer smiled thinly, a brief self-satisfied smile.

“How can you be so sure?” Perrin said slowly.

“As I said, my Lord, I keep my ears open. The Prophet reportedly closed a number of inns and taverns, and tore down those he considered too disreputable. Several were mentioned, and by chance, I happen to know there are inns of those names in Abila. I think there is little chance another town would have inns with the same names.” He flashed another narrow smile. He certainly, smelled pleased with himself.

Perrin scratched his beard thoughtfully. The man just happened to remember where some inns that Masema supposedly had torn down were located. And if Masema turned out not to be there after all, well, these days rumors sprouted like mushrooms after rain. Balwer sounded a man trying to build up his own importance. “Thank you, Master Balwer. I’ll keep that to mind. If you hear any more, be sure to tell me." As he turned to go, the man caught his sleeve.

Balwer's skinny fingers leaped away immediately, as though burned, and he made one of those birdlike bows, dry-washing his hands. "Forgive me, my Lord. I hesitate to press, but do not take the Whitecloaks too lightly. Avoiding them is wise, but it may not be possible. They are much closer than the Seanchan. Eamon Valda, the new Lord Captain Commander, led most of their numbers toward northern Amadicia before Amador fell. He was hunting the Prophet, also, my Lord. Valda is a dangerous man, and Rhadam Asunawa, the Grand Inquisitor, makes Valda seem pleasant. And I fear neither has any love for your own Lord. Forgive me." He bowed again, hesitated, then went on smoothly. "If I may say so, my Lord's display of Manetheren's banner is inspired. My Lord will be more than a match for Valda and Asunawa, if he takes care."

Watching him bow himself away, Perrin thought he knew part of Balwer's story now. Clearly, he also had run afoul of the Whitecloaks. That could take no more than being on the same street with them, a frown at the wrong time, but it seemed Balwer had a grudge. A sharp mind, too, seeing right away about the Red Eagle. And a sharp tongue with Master Gill.

Gill was on his knees beside Maighdin, talking rapidly despite Lini's effort to hush him. Maighdin had turned to stare after Balwer as the fellow hurried through the trees toward the carts, but now and then her gaze swung to Perrin. The rest of them clustered close to her, peering now at Balwer, now at Perrin. If he had ever seen a group of people worried about what somebody else had said, it was they. But what were they worried he might have heard? Backbiting, probably. Tales of resentments and misdeeds, real or imagined. People cooped up together tended to start pecking at one another. If that was it, maybe he could put a stop before somebody drew blood. Tallanvor was fondling his sword hilt again! What did Faile intend to do with the fellow?

"Aram, I want you to go talk to Tallanvor and that lot. Tell them what Balwer said to me. Just slide it into the talk, but tell everything." That should soothe fears of tale-bearing. Faile said servants needed to be made to feel at home. "Make friends with them if you can, Aram. But if you decide to moon over one of the women, be sure it's Lini. The other two are taken."

The man had a smooth tongue for any pretty woman, but he managed to look surprised and offended, both. "As you wish, Lord Perrin," he muttered sulkily. “I’ll catch you up quickly.”

“I will be over with the Aiel.”

Aram blinked. “Ah. Yes. Well, it might take a while, at that, if I’m to make friends with them. They don’t look like they much want friends, to me.” This from a fellow who stared suspiciously at anyone except Faile who came near Perrin and never smiled for anyone not wearing a skirt.

Nevertheless, he went over and squatted on his heels where he could speak to Gill and the others. Even from a distance their standoffishness was plain. They continued with their work, only now and then saying a word to Aram, and they looked at each other as often as at him. Skittish as green quail in summer, when the foxes were teaching the cubs to hunt. But at least they were talking.

Perrin wondered what mischief Aram had gotten up to with the Aiel—there did not seem to have been any time for it!—but he did not wonder long. Any serious trouble with Aiel usually meant someone dead, and not the Aiel. In truth, he was not so eager to meet the Wise Ones himself. He walked around the curve of the hill, but instead of climbing the slope, his feet carried him all the way to the Mayeners. He had stayed away from their camp as much as possible, too, and not simply because of Berelain. There were disadvantages to having too keen a nose.

Fortunately, a freshening breeze was carrying most of the stink away, though it did little for the heat. Sweat rolled down the faces of the mounted sentries in their red armor. At the sight of him, they sat up even more rigidly in their saddles, which was saying something. Where the Two Rivers men rode like fellows heading out to the fields, the Mayeners usually were statues on horseback. They could fight, though. The Light send there was no need.

Havien Nurelle came running, buttoning up his coat, before Perrin was well past the sentries. The dozen or so other officers followed at Nurelle’s heels, all coated and some fastening the straps of their red breastplates. Two or three carried helmets with thin red plumes tucked under their arms. Most were years older than Nurelle, some twice his age, graying men with hard, scarred faces, but Nurelle’s reward for helping to rescue Rand had been to be named Gallenne’s second, his First Lieutenant, they called it.

“The First hasn’t returned, yet, Lord Perrin,” Nurelle said, making a bow mirrored by the others. A tall slender man, he did not look as young as he had before Dumai’s Wells. There was an edge to his eyes, which had seen more blood than most veterans of twenty battles. But if his face was harder, there was still an eagerness to please in his scent. To Havien Nurelle, Perrin Aybara was a man who could fly or walk on water as he chose. “The morning patrols saw nothing, those that are back. I would have reported, otherwise.”

“Of course,” Perrin told him. “I . . . just wanted to look about a bit.”

He simply meant to walk around until he could work up his nerve to face the Wise Ones, but the young Mayener followed him with the rest of the officers, anxiously watching for Lord Perrin to find some flaw in the Winged Guards, wincing whenever they came on bare-chested men tossing dice on a blanket or some fellow snoring away with the sun on the climb. He need not have bothered; to Perrin, the camp looked laid out with a plumb line and level. Each man had his blankets, and his saddle for a pillow, not more than two paces from where his horse was tied to one of the long ropes drooping between chest-high poles set upright in the ground. A cook fire stood every twenty paces, with lances stacked in steel-tipped cones between. The whole made a sort of box around five peaked tents, one striped gold-and-blue and larger than the other four combined. All very different from the Two Rivers men’s every-which-way arrangement.

Perrin walked along briskly, trying not to look too much a fool. He was not sure how much success he was having. He itched to stop and look over a horse or two—just to be able to pick up a hoof without somebody practically fainting—but mindful of what Aram had said, he kept his hands to himself. Everyone seemed as startled as Nurelle at his pace. Tough-eyed bannermen chivvied men to their feet only to have Perrin stride by with a nod before they were all upright. A puzzled murmur trailed in the air behind him, and his ears caught a few comments about officers, lords in particular, that he was just as glad Nurelle and the others missed. Finally, he found himself on the verge of the camp, staring up the brushy slope toward the Wise Ones’ tents. Only a few of the Maidens were visible among the scattered trees up there, and some of the *gai’shain*.

“Lord Perrin,” Nurelle said hesitantly. “The Aes Sedai. . . . He stepped closer and lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. “I know they swore to the Lord Dragon, and. . . . I’ve seen things, Lord Perrin. They do *camp chores!* Aes Sedai! This morning, Masuri and Seonid came down to fetch water! And yesterday, after you returned. . . . Yesterday, I thought I heard someone up there . . . crying out. It couldn’t have been one of the sisters, of course,” he added hurriedly, and laughed to show how ridiculous the idea was, a very shaky laugh. “You. . . . You will see that everything is . . . all right . . . with them?” He had ridden into forty thousand Shaido leading two hundred lancers, but talking about this had him hunching his shoulders and shifting his feet. Of course, he had ridden into forty thousand Shaido because an Aes Sedai wanted him to.

“I’ll do what I can,” Perrin muttered. Maybe matters were worse than he had thought. Now he had to stop them getting worse still. If he could. He would rather have faced the Shaido again.

Nurelle nodded as though Perrin had promised all he asked and more. “That is well, then,” he said, sounding relieved. Casting sideways glances at Perrin, he worked himself up to say something else, but apparently this was not so touchy as the Aes Sedai. “I heard that you let the Red Eagle stay.”.

Perrin very nearly jumped. Even for just around the hill, news had traveled fast. “It seemed the thing to do,” he said slowly. Berelain would have to know the truth, yet if too many knew, that truth would spread from the next village they passed, the next farm. “This used to be part of Manetheren,” he added, as if Nurelle did not know that perfectly well. Truth! He had gotten so he could bend truth like an Aes Sedai, and to men on his side. “Not the first time that flag’s been raised around here, I’ll warrant, but none of those fellows had the Dragon Reborn behind him.” And if that did not set the necessary seeds, he did not know how to plow a furrow.

Abruptly he realized that what seemed every last one of the Winged Guards was watching him with their officers. No doubt wondering what he was saying, after all but running through that way. Even the lean balding old soldier Gallenne called his dogrobber had come out to stare, and Berelain’s maids, a pair of plump plain-faced women garbed to match their mistress’s tent. Perrin had hardly seen a thing, but he knew he had to give some sort of praise.

Raising his voice enough to carry, he said, “The Winged Guards will do Mayene proud if we ever face another Dumai’s Wells.” Those were the first words that came to mind, but he winced at saying them.

To his shock, shouting rose straightaway among the soldiers, cheering, “Perrin Goldeneyes!” and “Mayene for Goldeneyes!” and “Goldeneyes and Manetheren!” Men danced and capered, and some snatched lances from the stacks to shake them so the red streamers waved in the breeze. Grizzled bannermen watched them with arms folded, nodding approval. Nurelle beamed, and not only him. Officers with gray in their hair and scars on their faces grinned like boys praised at their lessons. Light, he *was* the only sane man left! He *prayed* never to see another battle!

Wondering whether this was going to cause trouble with Berelain, he made his goodbyes with Nurelle and the others and tramped up the slope through dead or dying brush, none of it waist-high. Brown weeds crackled beneath his boots. Shouting still filled the Mayener camp. Even after she learned the truth, the First might not be pleased to have her soldiers cheering him this way. Of course, that could have good points. Maybe she would be angry enough to stop pestering him.

Short of the crest, he paused, listening to the cheers finally fade away. No one was going to cheer him here. All of the side flaps were down on the Wise Ones' low gray-brown tents, closing them in. Only a few of the Maidens were in sight, now. Squatting easily on their heels beneath a leatherleaf that still showed some green, they eyed him curiously. Their hands moved quickly in that way they had of talking among themselves with signs. After a moment Sulin rose, shifting her heavy belt knife, and strode in his direction, a tall, wiry woman with a pink scar across her sun-dark cheek. She glanced back down the way he had come and seemed relieved that he was alone, though it was often hard to tell with Aiel.

"This is good, Perrin Aybara," she said quietly. "The Wise Ones have not been pleased that you make them come to you. Only a fool displeases Wise Ones, and I have not taken you for a fool."

Perrin scrubbed at his beard. He had been keeping clear of the Wise Ones—and the Aes Sedai—as much as possible, but he had had no intention of forcing them to come to him. He just found their company uncomfortable. To put it mildly. "Well, I need to see Edarra now," he told her. "About the Aes Sedai."

"Perhaps I was mistaken after all," Sulin said dryly. "But I will tell her." Turning, she paused. "Tell me something. Teryl Wynter and Furen Alharra are close to Seonid Traighan—like first-brothers with a first-sister; she does not like men as men—yet they offered to take her punishment for her. How could they shame her so?"

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. A pair of *gai'shain* appeared from the reverse slope, each leading two of the Aiel's pack mules; the white-robed men passed within a few paces, heading down toward the stream. He could not be sure, but he thought both were Shaido. The pair kept their eyes meekly down, barely looking up enough to see where they were going. They had had every opportunity to run away, doing chores like that without anyone to watch. A peculiar people.

“I see you are shocked, too,” Sulin said. “I had hoped you could explain. I will tell Edarra.” As she started for the tents, she added over her shoulder, “You wetlanders are very strange, Perrin Aybara.”

Perrin frowned after her, and when she vanished into one of the tents, he turned to frown at the two *gai’shain* leading the horses to water. *Wetlanders* were strange? Light! So Nurelle had been right in what he heard. It was beyond time to stick his nose into what was going on between the Wise Ones and the Aes Sedai. He should have before this. He wished he did not think it would be the same as sticking his nose into a hornet’s nest.

It seemed to take a long time for Sulin to reappear, and she did little to help his mood when she did. Holding the tentflap for him, she flicked his belt knife contemptuously with a finger as he ducked through. “You should be better armed for this dance, Perrin Aybara,” she said.

Inside, he was surprised to find all six Wise Ones sitting cross-legged on colorful tasseled cushions, their shawls tied around their waists and their skirts making carefully arranged fans across the layered rugs. He had hoped for just Edarra. None looked to be more than four or five years older than he, some no older at all, yet somehow they always made him feel as if he were facing the oldest members of the Women’s Circle, the ones who had spent years learning to sniff out whatever you wanted to hide. Separating one woman’s scent from another’s was all but impossible, but he hardly needed to. Six sets of eyes latched on to him, from Janina’s pale sky blue to Marline’s purple twilight, not to mention Nevarin’s sharp green. Every eye could have been a skewer.

Edarra brusquely motioned him to take a cushion himself, which he did with gratitude, though it put him facing them all in a semicircle. Maybe Wise Ones had designed these tents, to make men bend their necks if they wanted to stand upright. Strangely, it was cooler in the dim interior, but he still felt like sweating. Maybe he could not pick one from another, yet these women smelled like wolves studying a tethered goat. A square-faced *gai’shain* who was half again as big as he was knelt to offer a golden cup of dark wine-punch on an elaborate silver tray. The Wise Ones already held mismatched silver cups and goblets. Unsure what it meant that he was being offered gold—maybe nothing, yet who could say, with Aiel?—Perrin took it cautiously. It gave off the scent of plums. The fellow bowed meekly enough when Edarra clapped her hands, and bent himself out of the tent backward, but the half-healed slash down his hard face had to date from Dumai's Wells.

"Now that you are here," Edarra said as soon as the tentflap dropped behind the *gai'shain*, "we will explain again why you must kill the man called Masema Dagar."

"We should not have to explain again," Delora put in. Her hair and eyes were nearly the same shade as Maighdin's, but no one would call her pinched face pretty. Her manner was pure ice. "This Masema Dagar is a danger to the *Car'a'carn*. He must die."

"The dreamwalkers have told us, Perrin Aybara." Carelle certainly was pretty, and though her fiery hair and piercing eyes made her look as though she had a temper, she was always mild. For a Wise One. And certainly not soft. "They have read the dream. The man must die."

Perrin took a swallow of plum punch to gain a moment. Somehow, the punch was cool. It was always the same with them. Rand had not mentioned any warning from the dreamwalkers. The first time, Perrin had mentioned that. Only the once; they had thought he was casting doubt on their word, and even Carelle had gone hot-eyed. Not that Perrin thought they would lie. Not exactly. He had not caught them in one, anyway. But what they wanted for the future and what Rand wanted—what he himself wanted, for that matter—might be very different things. Maybe it was Rand who was keeping secrets. "If you could just give me some idea what this danger is," he said, finally. "The Light knows, Masema's a madman, but he *supports* Rand. A fine thing, if I go around killing people on our side. That will certainly convince people to join Rand."

Sarcasm was lost on them. They looked at him, unblinking. "The man must die," Edarra said at last. "It is enough that three dreamwalkers have said so, and six Wise Ones tell you." The same as always. Maybe they did not know any more than that. And maybe he should get on with why he had come.

"I want to talk about Seonid and Masuri," he said, and six faces turned to frost. Light, these women could stare down a stone! Setting the winecup beside him, he leaned toward them stubbornly. "I'm supposed to show people Aes Sedai sworn to Rand." He was supposed to show Masema, actually, but this did seem a good time to mention that. “They aren’t going to be very cooperative if you lot beat them! Light! They’re Aes Sedai! Instead of making them haul water, why don’t you learn from them? They must know all sorts of things you don’t.” Too late, he bit his tongue. The Aiel women did not take offense, though; not that it showed, anyway.

“They know some things we do not,” Delora told him firmly, “and we know some they do not.” As firmly as a spearpoint in the ribs.

“We learn what there is to learn, Perrin Aybara,” Marline said calmly, combing nearly black hair with her fingers. She was one of the few Aiel he had seen with such dark hair, and she often toyed with it. “And we teach what there is to teach.”

“In any event,” Janina said, “it is none of your affair. Men do not interfere between Wise Ones and apprentices.” She shook her head over his foolishness.

“You may stop listening outside and come in, Seonid Traighan,” Edarra said suddenly. Perrin blinked in surprise, but none of the women batted an eye.

There was a moment of silence, then the tentflap twitched aside, and Seonid ducked inside, kneeling quickly on the rugs. That vaunted Aes Sedai serenity was shattered in her. Her mouth was a thin line, her eyes tight, her face red. She smelled of anger, frustration, and a dozen more emotions all whirling about so quickly that Perrin could barely separate any out. “May I speak to him?” she asked in a stiff voice.

“If you take care what you say,” Edarra told her. Sipping her wine, the Wise One watched over the rim of her cup. A teacher watching a pupil? A hawk watching a mouse? Perrin could not be sure. Except that Edarra was very sure of *her* place, whatever the pairing. So was Seonid. But that did not carry over to him.

She twisted around to face him on her knees, back going straight, eyes heated. Anger raged in the smell of her. “Whatever you know,” she said angrily, “whatever you *think* you know, you will forget!” No, there was not a shred of serenity left in her. “Whatever is between the Wise Ones and us is for us alone! You will stand aside, avert your eyes, and keep your mouth closed!”

Amazed, Perrin raked his fingers through his hair. “Light, you’re upset because I know you got a switching?” he said incredulously. Well, he would have been, too, but not alongside the rest. “Don’t you know these women would as soon cut your throat as look at you? Slit your throat and leave you by the side of the road! Well, I promised myself I wouldn't let that happen! I don't like you, but I promised to protect you from the Wise Ones, or the Asha'man, or Rand himself, so come down off that high horse!" Realizing that he was shouting, he drew a deep, embarrassed breath and settled back on his cushion, snatched up his winecup and took a long drink.

Seonid went stiffer by the word with indignation, and her lip curled well before he finished. "You promised?" she sneered. "You think Aes Sedai need *your* protection? You—?"

"Enough," Edarra said quietly, and Seonid's jaw snapped shut, though her hands made white-knuckled fists clutching her skirts.

"What makes you think we would kill her, Perrin Aybara?" Janina asked curiously. Aiel seldom showed much on their faces, but the others frowned at him or looked with open incredulity.

"I know how you feel," he replied slowly. "I've known since I saw you with the sisters after Dumai's Wells." He was not about to explain that he had smelled their hatred, their contempt, every time a Wise One looked at an Aes Sedai back then. He did not smell it now, but no one could maintain that level of fury for long without bursting. That did not mean it was gone, only that it had sunk deep, maybe into the bone.

Delora snorted, a sound like linen ripping. "First you say they must be coddled because you need them, and now because they are Aes Sedai and you have promised to protect them. Which is truth, Perrin Aybara?"

"Both." Perrin met Delora's hard gaze for a long moment, then eyed each of the others in turn. "Both are true, and I mean both."

The Wise Ones exchanged glances, the sort where every flicker of an eyelid held a hundred words and no man could make out a one. Finally, in a shifting of necklaces and readjusting of tied shawls, they appeared to reach agreement.

"We do not kill apprentices, Perrin Aybara," Nevarin said. She sounded shocked at the idea. "When Rand al'Thor asked us to apprentice them, perhaps he thought it was just to make them obey us, but we do not speak empty words. They *are* apprentices, now."

"They will remain so until five Wise Ones agree they are ready to be more," Marline added, sweeping her long hair over her shoulder. "And they are treated no differently than any others."

Edarra nodded over her winecup. “Tell him the advice you would give him concerning Masema Dagar, Seonid Traighan,” she said.

The kneeling woman had practically writhed during Nevarin and Marline’s short speeches, gripping her skirt until Perrin thought the silk might rip, but she wasted no time complying with Edarra’s instructions. “The Wise Ones are right, whatever their reasons. I do not say this because they wish it.” She drew herself up again, smoothing her features with a visible effort. A touch of heat still flared in her voice, though. “I saw the work of so-called Dragonsworn before I ever met Rand al’Thor. Death and destruction, to no purpose. Even a faithful dog must be put down if it begins to foam at the mouth.”

“Blood and ashes!” Perrin grumbled. “How can I even let you in sight of the man after that? You swore fealty to Rand; you know that isn’t what he wants! What about that ‘thousands will die if you fail’?” Light, if Masuri felt the same, then he had to put up with Aes Sedai and Wise Ones for nothing! No, worse. He would have to guard Masema from them!

“Masuri knows Masema for rabid as well as I,” Seonid replied when he put the question to her. All of her serenity had returned. She regarded him with a cool, unreadable face. Her scent was sharply alert. Intent. As if he needed his nose, with her eyes fixed on his, big and dark and bottomless. “I swore to serve the Dragon Reborn, and the best service I can give him now is to keep this animal from him. Bad enough that rulers know Masema supports him; worse if they see him embrace the man. And thousands *will* die if you fail—to get close enough to Masema to kill him.”

Perrin thought his head would spin. Again an Aes Sedai whirled words about like a top, made it seem she had said black when she meant white. Then the Wise Ones added their bit.

“Masuri Sokawa,” Nevarin said calmly, “believes the rabid dog can be leashed and bound so he may be used safely.” For an instant, Seonid looked as surprised as Perrin felt, but she recovered quickly. Outside, she did; her scent was suddenly wary, as if she sensed a trap where she had not expected one.

“She also wishes to fit you for a halter, Perrin Aybara,” Carelle added, even more casually. “She thinks you must be bound also, to make you safe.” Nothing on her freckled face told whether she agreed.

Edarra raised a hand toward Seonid. “You may go, now. You will not listen further, but you may ask Gharadin again to let you Heal the wound on his face. Remember, if he still refuses, you must accept it. He is *gai'shain*, not one of your wetlander servants." She invested that last word with depths of scorn.

Seonid stared icy augers at Perrin. She looked at the Wise Ones, her lips trembling on the brink of speech. In the end, though, all she could do was go with as good a grace as she could muster. Outwardly, that was considerable, an Aes Sedai being Aes Sedai fit to shame a queen. But the scent she trailed behind her was frustration sharp enough to cut.

As soon as she was gone, the six Wise Ones focused on Perrin again.

"Now," Edarra said, "you can explain to us why you would put a rabid animal next to the *Car'a'carn*."

"Only a fool obeys another's command to push him over a cliff," Nevarin said.

"You will not listen to us," Janina said, "so we will listen to you. Speak, Perrin Aybara."

Perrin considered making a break for the doorflaps. But if he did, he would leave behind one Aes Sedai who might possibly be of some doubtful help, and another, along with six Wise Ones, who were all set to ruin everything he had come to do. He put his winecup down again, and settled his hands on his knees. He needed a clear head if he was to show these women he was no tethered goat.

* * *

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CHAPTER 10

Changes

When Perrin left the Wise Ones’ tent, he considered removing his coat to see whether his hide was still attached and whole. Not a tethered goat, maybe, but a stag with six she-wolves on his heels, and he was unsure what fast feet had gained him. For certain, none of the Wise Ones had changed her mind, and their promises not to take any action on their own had been vague at best. About the Aes Sedai, there had been no promises, even foggy ones.

He looked for either of the sisters, and found Masuri. A narrow rope had been tied between two trees and a fringed red-and-green rug draped over it. The slender Brown was flailing away with a bent-wood beater, raising thin clouds of dust motes that floated glittering in the midmorning sun. Her Warder, a compact man with dark receding hair, sat on a fallen tree trunk nearby, watching her glumly. Rovair Kirklin normally had a ready grin, but it was buried deep today. Masuri caught sight of Perrin, and with barely a pause in her rug-beating shot him a look of such frozen malevolence that he sighed. And she was the one who thought as he did. As close to it as he was likely to find, anyway. A red-tailed hawk passed overhead, riding rising currents of hot air from hill to hill without flapping its outstretched wings. It would be very nice to soar away from all this. The iron in front of him, not dreams of silver.

Nodding to Sulin and the Maidens, who might have taken root under that leatherleaf, Perrin turned to go, and stopped. Two men were climbing the hill, one an Aiel in the grays and browns and greens of the *cadin'sor*, his cased bow on his back, a bristling quiver at his belt, and his spears and round hide buckler in hand. Gaul was a friend, and the only man among the Aiel who did not wear white. His companion, a head shorter in a broad-brimmed hat and coat and breeches of a plain dull green, was no Aiel. He had a full quiver at his belt, too, and a knife even longer and heavier than the Aielman's, but he carried his bow, much shorter than a Two Rivers longbow though longer than the horn bows of the Aiel. Despite his clothes, he did not have the look of a farmer, or a city man either. Perhaps it was the graying hair tied at the nape of his neck and hanging to his waist, the beard fanning across his chest, or perhaps just the way he moved, much like the man at his side, slipping around the brush on the hill so that you were sure no twig snapped in his passing, no weeds broke under his foot. Perrin had not seen him in what seemed a very long time.

Reaching the hilltop, Elyas Machera regarded Perrin, golden eyes shining faintly in the shadow of his hat brim. His eyes had been that way years before Perrin's; Elyas had introduced Perrin to the wolves. He had been dressed in hides, then. "Good to see you again, boy," he said quietly. Sweat glistened on his face, but little more than on Gaul's. "You give away that axe, finally? I didn't think you'd ever stop hating it."

"I still do," Perrin said just as quietly. A long time ago the onetime Warder had told him to keep the axe until he stopped hating to use it. Light, but he still hated it! And he had added new reasons, now. "What are you doing in this part of the world, Elyas? Where did Gaul find you?"

"He found me," Gaul said. "I did not know he was behind me until he coughed." He spoke loudly enough to be heard by the Maidens, and the sudden stillness among them was solid as a touch.

Perrin expected at least a few cutting comments—Aiel humor could near draw blood, and the Maidens seized any chance to dig at the green-eyed man—but instead, some of the women took up spears and bucklers to rattle them together in approbation. Gaul nodded approval.

Elyas grunted ambiguously and tugged his hat down, yet he smelled pleased. The Aiel did not approve of much this side of the Dragonwall. "I like to keep moving," he told Perrin, "and I just happened to be in Ghealdan when some mutual friends told me you were traveling with this parade." He did not name the mutual friends; it was unwise to speak openly about talking to wolves. “Told me a lot of things. Told me they smell a change coming. They don’t know what. Maybe you do. I hear you’ve been running with the Dragon Reborn.”

“I don’t know,” Perrin said slowly. A change? He had not thought to ask the wolves anything more than where large groups of men were, so he could go around them. Even here in Ghealdan, sometimes he felt blame among them for the wolves dead at Dumai’s Wells. What kind of change? “Rand is surely changing things, but I couldn’t say what they mean. Light, the whole world is turning somersaults, and never mind him.”

“All things change,” Gaul said dismissively. “Until we wake, the dream drifts on the wind.” For a moment he studied Perrin and Elyas, comparing their eyes, Perrin was sure. He said nothing about them, though; the Aiel seemed to take golden eyes as just one more peculiarity among wetlanders. “I will leave you two to talk alone. Friends long separated need to talk by themselves. Sulin, are Chiad and Bain about? I saw them hunting yesterday, and thought I might show them how to draw a bow before one of them shoots herself.”

“I was surprised to see you come back today,” the white-haired woman replied. “They went out to set snares for rabbits.” Laughter rippled through the Maidens, and fingers flickered rapidly in handtalk.

Sighing, Gaul rolled his eyes ostentatiously. “In that case, I think I must go cut them loose.” Almost as many Maidens laughed at that, including Sulin. “May you find shade this day,” he told Perrin, a casual farewell between friends, but he clasped forearms formally with Elyas and said, “My honor is yours, Elyas Machera.”

“Odd fellow,” Elyas murmured, watching Gaul lope back down the hill. “When I coughed, he turned around ready to kill me, I think, then he just started laughing instead. You have any objections to going somewhere else? I don’t know the sister who’s trying to murder that rug, but I don’t like taking chances with Aes Sedai.” His eyes narrowed. “Gaul says there are three with you. You don’t expect to be meeting up with any more, do you?”

“I hope not,” Perrin replied. Masuri was glancing their way between slashes with the beater; she would learn about Elyas’ eyes soon enough and start trying to ferret out what else linked him to Perrin. “Come on; it’s time I was back in my own camp anyway. Are you worried about meeting an Aes Sedai who knows you?” Elyas’ days as a Warder had ended when it was learned he could talk to wolves. Some sisters thought it a mark of the Dark One, and he had had to kill other Warders to get away.

The older man waited until they were a dozen paces from the tents before he replied, and even then, he spoke quietly, as though he suspected someone behind them might have ears as good as theirs. “One who knows my name will be bad enough. Warders don’t run off often, boy. Most Aes Sedai will free a man who really wants to go—most will—and anyway, she can track you down however far you run if she decides to hunt. But any sister who finds a renegade will spend her idle moments making him wish he’d never been born.” He shivered slightly. His smell was not fear, but anticipation of pain. “Then she’ll turn him over to his own Aes Sedai to drive the lesson home. A man’s never quite the same after that.” At the edge of the slope, he looked back. Masuri did seem to be trying to kill the carpet, focusing all her rage on attempting to beat a hole through it. Elyas shivered again, though. “Worse thing would be to run into Rina. I’d rather be caught in a forest fire with both legs broken.”

“Rina’s your Aes Sedai? But how could you run into her? The bond lets you know where she is.” That nudged something in Perrin’s memory, but whatever it was melted away at Elyas’ reply.

“A fair number can fuzz the bond, in a manner of speaking. Maybe they all can. You don’t know much more than she’s still alive, and I know that anyway, because I haven’t gone crazy.” Elyas saw the question on his face and barked a laugh. “Light, man, a sister’s flesh-and-blood, too. Most are. Think about it. Would you want somebody inside your head while you cuddled up with a likely wench? Sorry; I forgot you were married, now. No offense meant. I was surprised to hear you’d married a Saldaean, though.”

“Surprised?” Perrin had never considered *that* about the Warder bond. Light! For that matter, he had never really thought about Aes Sedai that way. It seemed about as possible as . . . as a man talking to wolves. “Why surprised?” They started down through the trees on this side of the hill, not hurrying and making little noise. Perrin had always been a good hunter, accustomed to the forests, and Elyas hardly disturbed the leaves underfoot, gliding smoothly through the undergrowth without shifting a branch. He might have slung his bow on his back now, but he still carried it ready. Elyas was a wary man, especially around people.

“Why, because you’re a quiet sort, and I thought you’d marry somebody quiet, too. Well, you know by now Saldaeans aren’t quiet. Except with strangers and outsiders. Set the sun on fire one minute, and the next, it's all blown away and forgotten. Make Arafellin look stolid and Domani downright dull." Elyas grinned suddenly. "I lived a year with a Saldaean, once, and Merya shouted my ears off five days in the week, and maybe heaved the dishes at my head, too. Every time I thought about leaving, though, she'd want to make up, and I never seemed to get to the door. In the end, she left me. Said I was too restrained for her taste." His rasping laugh was reminiscent, but he rubbed at a faint, age-faded scar along his jaw reminiscently, too. It looked to have been made by a knife.

"Faile's not like that." It sounded like being married to Nynaeve! Nynaeve with sore teeth! "I don't mean she doesn't get angry now and then," he admitted reluctantly, "but she doesn't shout and throw things." Well, she did not shout very often, and instead of flaring hot and vanishing, her anger started hot and dragged on till it turned cold.

Elyas glanced at him sideways. "If I ever smelled a man trying to dodge hail. . . . You've been giving her soft words all the time, haven't you? Mild as milk-water and never lay your ears back? Never raise your voice to her?"

"Of course not!" Perrin protested. "I love her! Why would I shout at her?"

Elyas began muttering under his breath, though Perrin could hear every word, of course. "Burn me, a man wants to sit on a red adder, it's his affair. Not my business if a man wants to warm his hands when the roof's on fire. It's his life. Will he thank me? No, he bloody well won't!"

"What are you going on about?" Perrin demanded. Catching Elyas' arm, he pulled him to a stop beneath a winterberry tree, its prickly leaves still mostly green. Little else nearby was, except for some struggling creepers. They had come less than halfway down the hill. "Faile isn't a red adder *or* a roof on fire! Wait until you meet her before you start talking like you know her."

Irritably, Elyas raked fingers through his long beard. "I know Saldaeans, boy. That year wasn't the only time I've been there. I've only ever met about five Saldaean women I'd call meek, or even mild-mannered. No, she isn't an adder; what she is is a leopard, I'll wager. Don't growl, burn you! I'll bet my boots she'd smile to hear me say it!"

Perrin opened his mouth angrily, then closed it again. He had not realized he was growling deep in his throat. Faile *would* smile at being called a leopard. “You can’t be saying she wants me to shout at her, Elyas.”

“Yes, I am. Most likely, anyway. Maybe she’s the sixth. Maybe. Just hear me out. Most women, you raise your voice, and they go bulge-eyed or ice, and next thing you know, you’re arguing about you being angry, never mind what put the ember down your back in the first place. Swallow your tongue with a Saldaean, though, and to her, you’re saying she isn’t strong enough to stand up to you. Insult her like that, and you’re lucky she doesn’t feed you your own gizzard for breakfast. She’s no Far Madding wench, to expect a man to sit where she points and jump when she snaps her fingers. She’s a leopard, and she expects her husband to be a leopard, too. Light! I don’t know what I’m doing. Giving a man advice about his wife is a good way to get your innards spilled.”

It was Elyas’ turn to growl. He jerked his hat straight unnecessarily and looked around the slope frowning, as though considering whether to vanish back into the forests, then poked a finger at Perrin. “Look here. I always knew you were more than a stray, and putting what the wolves told me together with you just happening to be heading toward this Prophet fellow, I thought maybe you could use a friend to watch your back. Of course, the wolves didn’t mention you were *leading* those pretty Mayener lancers. Neither did Gaul, till we saw them. If you’d like me to stay, I will. If not, there’s plenty of the world I haven’t seen yet.”

“I can always use another friend, Elyas.” *Could* Faile really *want* him to shout? He had always known he might hurt somebody if he was not careful, and he always tried to keep a tight rein on his temper. Words could hurt as hard as fists, the wrong words, words you never meant, let loose in a temper. It had to be impossible. It just stood to reason. No woman would stand for that, from her husband or any man.

A bluefinch’s call brought Perrin’s head up, ears pricking. It was just at the edge of hearing even for him, but a moment later the trill was repeated closer, then again, nearer still. Elyas cocked an eyebrow at him; he would know the call of a Borderland bird. Perrin had learned it from some Shienarans, Masema among them, and taught the Two Rivers men.

“We have visitors coming,” he told Elyas.

They came quickly, four riders at a fast canter, arriving before he and Elyas reached the bottom of the hill. Berelain led the way, splashing across the stream with Annoura and Gallenne close behind and a woman in a pale, hooded dust-cloak at her side. They swept right by the Mayener camp without a glance, not drawing rein until they were in front of the red-and-white striped tent. Some of the Cairhienin servants rushed to take bridles and hold stirrups, and Berelain and her companions were inside before the dust of their arrival settled.

All in all, the arrival created quite a stir. A buzz rose among the Two Rivers men that Perrin could only call anticipatory. The inevitable gathering of Faile's young fools scratched their heads and stared at the tent, chattering excitedly among themselves. Grady and Neald watched the tent through the trees, too, now and then leaning together to talk though nobody was close enough to hear anything they said.

"Looks like your visitors are more than casual," Elyas said quietly. "Watch Gallenne; he could be trouble."

"You know him, Elyas? I'd like you to stay, but if you think he might tell one of the sisters who you are. . . ." Perrin shrugged in resignation. "I might be able to stop Seonid and Masuri"—he thought he could—"but I think Annoura will do whatever she wants." And what did *she* really think about Masema?

"Oh, Bertain Gallenne doesn't know the likes of Elyas Machera," Elyas replied with a wry grin. " 'More fools know Jak Fool than Jak Fool knows.' I know him, though. He won't go against you or behind your back, but Berelain has the brains between them. She's kept Tear out of Mayene by playing the Tairens against the Illianers since she was sixteen. Berelain knows how to maneuver; all Gallenne knows is attack. He's good at it, but he never sees anything else, and sometimes he doesn't stop to think."

"I'd figured that out about both of them," Perrin muttered. At least Berelain had brought a messenger from Alliandre. She would not have come rushing in that way with a new maid. The only question was why Alliandre's reply needed a messenger. "I had best find out whether the news is good, Elyas. Later, we'll talk about what lies south. And you can meet Faile," he added before turning away.

"The Pit of Doom lies south," the other man called after him, "or as close to it as I expected to see below the Blight." Perrin imagined he heard that faint thunder in the west again. Now, that would be a pleasant change.

In the tent, Breane was carrying a silver tray about with a bowl of rose-scented water and cloths for washing faces and hands, curtsying stiffly as she presented it. With even stiffer curtsies, Maighdin was offering a tray holding cups of wine-punch—made with the last of the dried blueberries, by the smell—while Lini folded the newcomer’s dust-cloak. There seemed something odd in the way Faile and Berelain stood to either side of the new woman, and Annoura hovered behind them, all focused on her. Somewhere in her middle years, with a cap of green net gathering dark hair that fell almost to her waist, she might have been pretty if her nose had not been so long. And if she had not carried it so high. Shorter than Faile or Berelain either one, she still managed to look down that nose at Perrin, coolly examining him from hair to boots. She did not blink at sight of his eyes, although nearly everyone did.

“Majesty,” Berelain pronounced in a formal voice as soon as Perrin entered, “may I present Lord Perrin Aybara of the Two Rivers, in Andor, the personal friend and emissary of the Dragon Reborn.” The long-nosed woman nodded carefully, coolly, and Berelain went on with scarcely a pause. “Lord Aybara, give greetings and welcome to Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, Queen of Ghealdan, Blessed of the Light, Defender of Garen’s Wall, who is pleased to receive you in person.” Gallenne, standing near the tent wall, adjusted his eyepatch and raised his winecup to Perrin with a smile of triumph.

For some reason Faile shot Berelain a hard look. Perrin’s mouth nearly dropped open. Alliandre herself? He wondered whether he should kneel, then settled for a bow after too long a pause. Light! He had no notion how to deal with a queen. Especially one who turned up out of the blue with no escort, without a jewel in sight. Her dark green riding dress was plain wool, lacking a single stitch of embroidery.

“After the recent news,” Alliandre said, “I thought I should come to you, Lord Aybara.” Her voice was calm, her face smooth, her eyes aloof. And observant, or he was a Taren Ferry man. Best to step warily till he knew how the path lay. “You may not have heard,” she continued, “but four days ago Illian fell to the Dragon Reborn, blessed be his name in the Light. He has taken the Laurel Crown, though I understand it is now called the Crown of Swords.”

Faile, taking a cup from Maighdin’s tray, whispered under her breath, “And seven days gone, the Seanchan took Ebou Dar.” Even Maighdin did not notice.

If Perrin had not already taken hold of himself, he truly would have gaped. Why did Faile tell him this way instead of waiting for it to come from the woman who must have told her? In a voice that everyone could hear, he repeated her words. A hard voice, but that was the only way to keep it from shaking. Ebou Dar, too? Light! And seven days ago? The day Grady and the others had seen the One Power in the sky. Coincidence, maybe. But would he *rather* it had been the Forsaken?

Annoura frowned over her cup, pursing her lips, before he finished speaking, and Berelain gave him a startled look that vanished quickly. They knew he had not known about Ebou Dar when they rode into Bethal.

Alliandre merely nodded, every bit as self-possessed as the Gray. "You seem remarkably well informed," she said, coming closer to him. "I doubt the first rumors are reaching Jehannah with the river trade, yet. I myself learned of it only a few days ago. Several of the merchants keep me abreast of events. I believe," she added dryly, "that they hope I can intercede for them with the Prophet of the Lord Dragon, if such becomes necessary."

At last he could pick out her scent, and his opinion of her changed, though not for the worse. Outwardly, the Queen was all cool reserve, but uncertainty shot through with fear filled the smell of her. He did not believe he could have held his face so calm had he felt that.

"Always best to know as much as you can," he told her, half distracted. *Burn me*, he thought, I have *to let Rand know about* this!

"In Saldaea we find merchants useful for information, too," Faile said. Implying that was how Perrin knew about Ebou Dar. "They seem to learn what happened a thousand miles off weeks before the rumors begin."

She did not look at Perrin, but he knew she spoke to him as much as Alliandre. Rand knew, she was saying. And anyway, there *was* no way to get word to him in secret. *Could* Faile really want him to . . . ? No, it was unthinkable. Blinking, he realized he had missed something Alliandre had said. "Your pardon, Alliandre," he said politely. "I was thinking about Rand—the Dragon Reborn." Of course it was unthinkable!

Everyone stared at him, even Lini and Maighdin and Breane. Annoura's eyes had gone wide, and Gallenne's mouth hung open. Then it hit him. He had just called the Queen by name. He took a cup from Maighdin's tray, and she rose from her curtsy so quickly that she nearly knocked it from his hand. Waving her away absently, he wiped his damp hand on his coat. He had to concentrate here, not let his mind wander in nine directions. No matter what Elyas thought he knew, Faile would never. . . . No! Concentrate!

Alliandre recovered her equilibrium quickly. In truth, she had appeared the least surprised of anyone, and her scent never wavered. “I was saying that coming to you in secret seemed the wisest course, Lord Aybara,” she said in that cool voice. “Lord Telabin believes I am keeping private in his gardens, which I left by a seldom-used gate. Passing out of the city, I was Annoura Sedai’s maid.” Brushing fingertips across one skirt of her riding dress, she gave a small laugh. Even that about her was cool, so at odds with what his nose told him. “A number of my own soldiers saw me, but with the hood of my cloak pulled up, none knew me.”

“Times being what they are, that probably was wisest,” Perrin said carefully. “But you will have to come into the open sooner or later. One way or another.” Polite and to the point, that was the thing. A queen would not want to waste time with a man who blathered. And he did not want to disappoint Faile by acting the hayfoot again. “Why come at all? All you had to do was send a letter, or just tell Berelain your answer. Will you declare for Rand or not? Either way, have no fear about getting back to Bethal safely.” A good point, that. Whatever else frightened her, being here alone must.

Faile was watching him, pretending not to, sipping her punch and directing her smiles at Alliandre, but he caught the quick flickers of her eyes in his direction. Berelain made no pretense, watching quite openly, eyes slightly narrowed and never leaving his face. Annoura was just as intent, just as thoughtful. Did they *all* believe he was going to trip over his own tongue again?

Instead of answering the important question, Alliandre said, “The First told me a great deal about you, Lord Aybara, and about the Lord Dragon Reborn, blessed be his name in the Light.” That last sounded by rote, an addition she no longer had to think about. “I cannot see him before I make my decision, so I wished to see you, to take a measure of you. It’s possible to tell much about a man by those he chooses to speak for him.” Tilting her face down toward the cup in her hands, she peered at him through her lashes. From Berelain, that would have been flirtatious, but Alliandre was cautiously watching a wolf sure as he was standing in front of her. “I also saw your banners,” she said quietly. “The First did not mention them.”

Perrin scowled before he could stop himself. Berelain had told her a great deal about him? What had she said? “The banners are meant to be seen.” Anger put a roughness in his voice that required some effort to force down. Now, Berelain was a woman who *needed* shouting at. “Believe me, there are no plans to set up Manetheren again.” There; his tone was as cool as Alliandre’s. “What is your decision? Rand can have ten thousand soldiers, a hundred thousand, here in the blink of an eye, or near enough.” And he might have to. The Seanchan in Amador *and* Ebou Dar? Light, how many were they?

Alliandre sipped delicately at her wine-punch before speaking, and again she dodged the question. “There are a thousand rumors, as you must know, and even the wildest is believable when the Dragon is Reborn, strangers appear claiming to be Artur Hawkwing’s armies returned, and the Tower itself is broken by rebellion.”

“A matter for Aes Sedai,” Annoura said sharply. “It concerns no one else.” Berelain flashed an exasperated look at her, which she affected not to notice.

Alliandre flinched and turned her shoulder to the sister. Queen or not, no one wanted to hear that tone from an Aes Sedai. “The world is turned upside down, Lord Aybara. Why, I’ve even had reports of Aiel sacking a village right here in Ghealdan.” Abruptly Perrin realized there was more here than anxiety over offending Aes Sedai. Alliandre watched him, waiting. But for what? Reassurance?

“The only Aiel in Ghealdan are with me,” he told her. “The Seanchan may be descendants of Artur Hawkwing’s army, but Hawkwing is a thousand years dead. Rand dealt with them once already, and he will again.” He remembered Falme as clearly as Dumai’s Wells, though he had tried forgetting. Surely there had not been enough of them there to take Amador *and* Ebou Dar, even with their *damane*. Balwer claimed they had Taraboner soldiers, too. “And it might cheer you to hear that those rebel Aes Sedai support Rand. They will, soon, at least.” That was what Rand said, a handful of Aes Sedai with nowhere to go except to him. Perrin was not so sure. Rumor in Ghealdan put an army with those sisters. Of course, the same rumors counted more Aes Sedai in that handful than there were in the world, but still. . . . Light, he wished someone would reassure him! “Why don’t we sit,” he said. “I’ll answer any questions you have, to help you make your decision, but we might as well be comfortable.” Drawing one of the folding chairs to him, he remembered at the last instant not to just drop into it, but it creaked under him just the same.

Lini and the other two servants rushed about, pulling chairs into a circle with his, but none of the other women moved toward them. Alliandre stood looking at him, and the rest looked at her. Except for Gallenne, who merely poured himself another cup of punch from the silver pitcher.

It came to Perrin that Faile had not opened her mouth since speaking of the merchants. He was as grateful for Berelain's silence as he was that she had not decided to flutter her lashes at him in front of the Queen, but he could have used some help from Faile right then. A little advice. Light, she knew ten times what he did about what he should say and do here.

Wondering whether he should stand with the others, he set his wine-punch on one of the small tables and asked her to speak to Alliandre. "If anyone can make her see the right way to go, you can," he said. Faile gave him a pleased smile, but held her tongue.

Abruptly Alliandre put out her cup to one side without looking, as if expecting a tray to be there. One was, barely in time to catch the cup, and Maighdin, who held it, muttered something Perrin hoped Faile had not heard. Faile was death on servants using that sort of language. He started to rise as Alliandre approached him, but to his shock, she knelt gracefully in front of him, catching his hands with hers. Before he knew what she was doing, she twisted so her hands were back-to-back between his palms. She clung so hard her hands must have hurt; for sure, he was not certain he could loose himself without hurting her.

"Under the Light," she said firmly, looking up at him, "I, Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, pledge my fealty and service to Lord Perrin Aybara of the Two Rivers, now and for all time, save that he chooses to release me of his own will. My lands and throne are his, and I yield them to his hand. So I do swear."

For an instant there was a silence broken only by Gallenne's gasp and the muted thud of his winecup hitting the rug.

Then Perrin heard Faile, once more whispering so softly no one next to her could have made out her words. "Under the Light, I do accept your pledge and will defend and protect you and yours through battle's wrack and winter's blast and all that time may bring. The lands and throne of Ghealdan, I give to you as my faithful vassal. Under the Light, I do accept. . . ." That must have been the Saldaean manner of accepting. Thank the Light she was too busy concentrating on him to see Berelain nodding at him furiously, urging the same. The pair of them looked almost as if they had expected this! Annoura, though, with her mouth hanging open, appeared as stunned as he, like a fish who had just seen the water vanish.

"Why?" he asked gently, ignoring Faile's frustrated hiss and Berelain's exasperated grunt alike. *Burn me*, he thought, *I'm* a *bloody blacksmith*! Nobody swore fealty to blacksmiths. Queens did not swear fealty to anyone! "I've been told I'm *ta'veren*; you might want to reconsider this in an hour."

"I hope you are *ta'veren*, my Lord." Alliandre laughed, but not in amusement, and gripped his hands even more tightly, as though fearful he might pull away. "With all my heart, I hope it. I fear nothing less will save Ghealdan. I all but reached this decision as soon as the First told me why you are here, and meeting you only confirmed me in it. Ghealdan needs protection I cannot give, so duty demands I find it. You can give it, my Lord, you and the Lord Dragon Reborn, blessed be his name in the Light. In truth, I would swear directly to him if he were here, but you are his man. Swearing to you, I also swear to him." Drawing a deep breath, she forced out another word. "Please." She smelled desperate, now, and her eyes shone with fear.

Still, he hesitated. This was everything Rand could want and more, but Perrin Aybara was just a blacksmith. He was! Could he still tell himself that if he did this thing? Alliandre stared up at him pleadingly. Did *ta'veren* work on themselves, he wondered. "Under the Light, I, Perrin Aybara, accept your pledge. . . ." His throat was dry by the time he finished the words Faile had whispered. Too late to stop and think now.

With a gasp of relief, Alliandre kissed his hands. Perrin did not think he had ever been so embarrassed in his life. Standing hurriedly, he drew her to her feet. And realized he did not know what to do next. A proudly beaming Faile whispered no further hints. Berelain smiled, too, relief so strong on her face she might have just been pulled from a fire.

He was sure Annoura would speak—Aes Sedai always had plenty to say, especially when it gave an opportunity to take charge—but the Gray sister was holding out a winecup for Maighdin to refill. Annoura watched him with an unreadable expression, and for that matter, so did Maighdin, so much so that she continued tilting her pitcher until punch slopped over onto the Aes Sedai's wrist. At which Annoura gave a start, staring at the cup in her hand as though she had forgotten it was there. Faile frowned, and Lini frowned even harder, and Maighdin scurried for a cloth to dry the sister's hand, all the while muttering under her breath again. Faile was going to have fits if she ever heard those mutters.

Perrin knew he was taking too long. Alliandre licked her lips anxiously; she expected more, but what? "Now that we're done here, I have to find the Prophet next," he said, and winced. Too abrupt. He had no feel for dealing with nobles, much less queens. "I suppose you'll want to get back to Bethal before anyone learns you're gone."

"The last I heard," Alliandre told him, "the Prophet of the Lord Dragon was in Abila. That's a largish town in Amadicia, perhaps forty leagues south of here."

In spite of himself, Perrin frowned, though he smoothed his brow quickly. So Balwer had been right. Right in one thing did not mean right in all, but it might be worthwhile hearing what the man had to say about the Whitecloaks. And the Seanchan. How many Taraboners?

Faile glided to his side, laying a hand on his arm and directing a warm smile at Alliandre. "You cannot mean to send her away now, my heart. Not when she has just arrived. Leave us to talk here out of the sun before she must face the ride back. I know you have important matters to see to."

He managed not to stare, with a little effort. What could be more important than the Queen of Ghealdan? Certain sure, nothing anyone would let him lay hand to. Clearly she wanted to talk with Alliandre without him. With luck, she would tell him why later. With luck, she would tell him all of it. Elyas might think he knew Saldaeans, but Perrin had learned on his own that only a fool tried to root out all of his wife's secrets. Or let her know about those he had unearthed already.

Leaving Alliandre should no doubt involve as much ceremony as meeting her, but he managed a credible leg and made his bow, asking her pardon for going off, and she curtsied deeply, murmuring that he honored her too much, and that was that. Except for jerking his head at Gallenne to follow him. He doubted that Faile would send him off and want that one to stay. What *did* she want to talk about alone?

Outside, the one-eyed man gave Perrin a clap on the shoulder that would have staggered a smaller man. "Burn me, I've never heard of the like! Now I can say I've seen a *ta'veren* at work for true. What did you want with me?" And what was he to say to that?

Just then, he heard shouting from the Mayener camp, the sound of arguing, loud enough that Two Rivers men stood to peer through the trees, though the side of the hill hid everything.

“First let’s see what all that is about,” Perrin replied. That would give him time to think. About what to say to Gallenne, and other things.

Faile waited a few moments after Perrin left before telling the servants that she and the others would see to themselves. Maighdin was so busy staring at Alliandre that Lini had to pluck at her sleeve before she moved. That would have to be handled later. Setting her cup down, Faile followed the three women to the door of the tent as if hurrying them, but she paused there.

Perrin and Gallenne were striding off through the trees toward the Mayener camp. Good. Most of *Cha Faile* was squatting not far off. Catching Parelean’s eye, she gestured low in front of her waist, where no one behind her could see. A quick circular motion followed by a clenched fist. Immediately the Tairens and Cairhien broke apart in groups of two or three and spread out. Far less elaborate than Maiden handtalk, *Cha Faile’s* signals sufficed. In moments a scattered ring of her people had surrounded the tent, apparently at random, talking idly or playing at cat’s cradle. But no one would come nearer than twenty paces without her receiving warning before they reached the threshold.

It was Perrin who worried her most. She had expected something momentous as soon as Alliandre appeared in the flesh, if not what came, but he had been stunned by her vow. If he took it into his head to return, to take another stab at making Alliandre feel comfortable in her decision. . . . Oh, he did think with his heart when he should use his head. And with his head when he should use his heart! Guilt pricked her at the thought.

“Peculiar servants you found by the side of the road,” Berelain said in tones of mock sympathy at her side, and Faile gave a start. She had not heard the woman come up behind her. Lini and the others were walking toward the carts, Lini shaking a finger at Maighdin, and Berelain shifted her gaze from Faile to them. She kept her voice low, but the mocking tone remained. “The oldest at least seems to know her duties instead of simply having heard about them, but Annoura tells me the youngest is a wilder. Very weak, Annoura says, negligible, but wilders always cause problems. The others will carry tales about her, if they know, and sooner or later, she will run away. Wilders always do, I hear. That’s what comes of picking up your maids like stray dogs.”

“They suit me well enough,” Faile replied coolly. Still, a long conversation with Lini was definitely needed. A wilder? Even if weak, that might prove useful. “I always thought you were fit for hiring servants.” Berelain blinked, uncertain what that meant, and Faile carefully did not let her satisfaction show. Turning away, she said, “Annoura, will you make us private with a ward against listeners?”

There seemed little chance that Seonid or Masuri would find any opportunity to eavesdrop using the Power—she was waiting for the explosion when Perrin found out just how tightly the Wise Ones had that pair haltered—yet the Wise Ones themselves might have learned. Faile was sure Edarra and the others were wringing Seonid and Masuri dry.

The Gray sister’s beaded braids clicked softly as she nodded. “It is done, Lady Faile,” she said, and Berelain’s lips compressed briefly. Quite satisfying. The temerity of making the presentations here in Faile’s own tent! She deserved more than having someone step between her and her advisor, but it was satisfying.

Childishly satisfying, Faile admitted, when she should be focused on the matter at hand. She almost bit her lip in aggravation. She did not doubt her husband’s love, but she could not treat Berelain as the woman deserved, and that forced her, against her will, to play a game with Perrin too often as the gaming board. And the prize, so Berelain believed. If only Perrin did not sometimes behave as if he might be. Firmly she put all that out of her head. There was a wife’s work to be done here. The practical side.

Alliandre glanced thoughtfully at Annoura when a ward was mentioned—she had to realize it meant serious talk—but what she said was “Your husband is a formidable man, Lady Faile. I mean no offense when I say his bluff exterior belies a shrewd mind. With Amadicia on our doorstep, we in Ghealdan play *Daes Dae’mar* of necessity, but I do not think I have ever been danced so swiftly or so deftly to a decision as your Lord did. The hint of a threat here, a frown there. A very formidable man.”

This time hiding her smile took some effort on Faile’s part. These southlanders set a great store by the Game of Houses, and she did not think Alliandre would appreciate learning that Perrin simply said what he believed—too freely by half, at times—and people with devious minds saw calculation in his honesty. “He spent some time in Cairhien,” she said. Let Alliandre make of that what she would. “We can speak freely here, safe behind Annoura Sedai’s warding. It is plain you do not want to return to

Bethal yet. Is your oath to Perrin, and his to you, not enough to tie him to you?" Some here in the south had peculiar ideas of what fealty entailed.

Berelain silently took a position to Faile's right, and a moment later Annoura did the same on her left, so that Alliandre found herself confronted by all three. It surprised Faile that the Aes Sedai fell in with her plan without knowing what it was—without doubt Annoura had her own reasons, and Faile would have given a pretty to know what they were—but she felt no surprise that Berelain did so. One casual mocking sentence could spoil everything, especially about Perrin's skill in the Great Game, yet she was sure it would not come. In a way, that irritated her. Once she had despised Berelain; she still hated her, deep and hot, but grudging respect had replaced contempt. The woman knew when their "game" had to be put aside. If not for Perrin, Faile thought she might actually have *liked* her! Briefly, to extinguish that hateful thought, she pictured herself shaving Berelain bald. She was a jade and a trull! And not something Faile could allow to divert her now.

Alliandre studied each of the women in front of her in turn, but she gave no evidence of nervousness. Taking up her winecup again, she sipped casually and spoke with sighs and rueful smiles as if her words were not really as important as they sounded. "I mean to keep my oath, of course, but you must understand that I hoped for more. Once your husband goes, I am left as I was. Worse, perhaps, until some tangible aid comes from the Lord Dragon, blessed be his name in the Light. The Prophet could ruin Bethal or even Jehannah itself as he did Samara, and I cannot stop him. And if he somehow learns of my oath. . . . He says he has come to show us how to serve the Lord Dragon in the Light, but *he* is the one who shows that way, and I cannot think he will be pleased with anyone who finds another."

"It is good that you will keep your oath," Faile told her dryly. "If you want more of my husband, perhaps you should do more. Perhaps you should accompany him when he goes south to meet the Prophet. Of course, you will want your own soldiers with you, but I suggest no more than the First has with her. Shall we sit?" Taking the chair Perrin had vacated, she motioned Berelain and Annoura to those on either side, and only then gestured toward another for Alliandre.

The Queen sat slowly, staring wide-eyed at Faile, not nervous but astounded. "Why in the Light would I do that?" she exclaimed. "Lady Faile, the Children of the Light will take any excuse to increase their depredations in Ghealdan, and King Ailron might decide to send an army north as well. It’s impossible!”

“The wife of your liege lord asks it of you, Alliandre,” Faile said firmly.

It didn’t seem possible that Alliandre’s eyes could widen farther, yet they did. She looked to Annoura and found only imperturbable Aes Sedai calm looking back. “Of course,” she said after a moment. Her voice was hollow. Swallowing, she added, “Of course, I will do as you . . . ask . . . my Lady.”

Faile hid her relief behind a gracious nod of acceptance. She had expected Alliandre to balk. That Alliandre could swear fealty without realizing what that meant—that she felt it necessary to say that she intended to keep her oath!—had only confirmed Faile’s belief that the woman could not be left behind. By all accounts, Alliandre had dealt with Masema by yielding to him. Slowly, to be sure, with little other choice and only when she had to, yet submission could become a habit. Back in Bethal, with nothing visible changed, how soon before she would decide to hedge with a warning to Masema? She had felt the weight of her oath; now Faile could lighten her burden.

“I am happy that you will be accompanying us,” she said warmly. And truly, she was. “My husband does not forget those who render him service. One such service would be to write to your nobles, telling them that a man in the south has raised the banner of Manetheren.” Berelain’s head half jerked around in surprise, and Annoura went so far as to blink.

“My Lady,” Alliandre said urgently, “half of them will send word to the Prophet as soon as they receive my letter. They are terrified of him, and the Light alone knows what he might do.” Just the response Faile had hoped for.

“Which is why you will write him also, saying that you have gathered a few soldiers to deal with this man personally. After all, the Prophet of the Lord Dragon is too important to have to turn his attention to such a minor matter.”

“Very good,” Annoura murmured. “No one will know who is who.”

Berelain laughed in delighted approval, burn her!

“My Lady,” Alliandre breathed, “I said that my Lord Perrin is formidable. May I add that his wife is every bit as formidable?”

Faile tried not to bask too visibly. Now she had to send word to her people in Bethal. In a way, she regretted that. Explaining to Perrin would have been more than difficult, but even he could not have kept his temper if she had kidnapped the Queen of Ghealdan.

Most of the Winged Guards appeared to be gathered on the edge of their camp, surrounding ten of their number on horseback. The absence of lances said the riders were scouts. The men afoot milled and pushed, trying to get closer. Perrin thought he heard thunder again, not so distant, but it only touched the edge of awareness.

As he prepared to push his way through, Gallenne roared, “Make way, you mangy hounds!” Heads whipped around, and men wriggled sideways in the mass, opening a narrow path. Perrin wondered what would happen if he called the Two Rivers men mangy hounds. Probably earn him a punch in the nose. It might be worth a try.

Nurelle and the other officers were with the scouts. So were seven men afoot with their hands tied behind them and lead ropes around their necks, all shuffling their feet and hunching their shoulders and scowling defiance or fear or both. Their clothes were stiff with old filth, though some had been fine once. Strangely, they smelled heavily of woodsmoke. For that matter, some of the mounted soldiers had soot on their faces, and one or two seemed to be nursing burns. Aram stood studying the prisoners, frowning slightly.

Gallenne took a stance with his feet apart and fists on his hips, his one eye doing as good a job of glaring as most men’s two. “What happened?” he demanded. “My scouts are supposed to bring back information, not rag-pickers!”

“I will let Ortis report, my Lord,” Nurelle said. “He was there. Squad-man Ortis!”

A soldier in his middle years scrambled down from his saddle to bow, gauntleted hand pressed to heart. His helmet was plain, without the thin plumes and wings that were worked in the sides of officers’ helmets. Beneath the rim, a livid burn stood out plainly on his face. The other cheek had a scar that pulled up the corner of his mouth. “My Lord Gallenne, my Lord Aybara,” he said in a gravelly voice. “We came on these turnip-eaters about two leagues to the west, my Lords. Burning a farm, with the farm folk inside. A woman tried to get out a window, and one of these scum bashed her head in. Knowing how Lord Aybara feels, we put a stop to it. We were too late to save anybody, but we caught these seven. The rest got away.”

“People are often tempted to slide back into the Shadow,” one of the prisoners said suddenly. “They must be reminded of the cost.” A tall, lean man with a stately air, his voice was smooth and educated, but his coat was as dirty as any of the others, and he had not shaved in two or three days. The Prophet did not seem to approve of wasting time on things like razors. Or washing. With his hands bound and a rope around his neck, he glared at his captors without the least bit of fear. He was all supercilious defiance. “Your soldiers do not impress me,” he said. “The Prophet of the Lord Dragon, blessed be his name in the Light, has destroyed greater armies by far than your tag end. You may kill us, but we will be avenged when the Prophet spills your blood on the ground. None of you will survive us long. He will triumph in fire and in blood.” He finished on a ringing tone, his back straight as an iron rod. Murmurs ran through the listening soldiers. They knew very well that Masema had destroyed larger armies than theirs.

“Hang them,” Perrin said. Again, he heard that thunder.

Having given the order, he made himself watch. Despite the murmurs, there was no lack of ready hands. Some of the prisoners began to weep as their lead ropes were thrown over tree limbs. A once-fat man whose wattles hung in folds shouted that he repented, that he would serve any master they named. A bald-headed fellow who looked as tough as Lamgwin thrashed and screamed until the rope cut off his howls. Only the smooth-voiced man did not kick or fight, even when the noose drew tight on his neck. To the end he glared defiance.

“At least one of them knew how to die,” Gallenne growled as the last body went limp. He frowned at the men decorating the trees as if regretting they had not put up more fight.

“If those people were serving the Shadow,” Aram began, then hesitated. “Forgive me, Lord Perrin, but will the Lord Dragon approve of this?”

Perrin gave a start and stared at him, aghast. “Light, Aram, you heard what they did! Rand would’ve put the ropes on their necks himself!” He thought Rand would have, hoped he would have. Rand was fixed on welding the nations together before the Last Battle, and he had done little counting of cost to do so.

Men’s heads jerked up as thunder pealed loud enough for all to hear, then closer, and again closer still. A wind gusted, fell, rose again, tugging Perrin’s coat as it slashed this way and that. Lightning forked in a cloudless sky. In the Mayener camp, horses whinnied and reared at their ties. Thunder tolled repeatedly, and lightning writhed in silver-blue snakes, and beneath a burning sun, rain fell, fat scattered drops that splashed fountains of dust where they hit bare ground. Perrin wiped one from his cheek and peered at damp fingers in amazement.

In moments the storm was gone, thunder and lightning rolling on eastward. Thirsty ground absorbed the raindrops that had fallen, the sun baked as fiercely as ever, and only flickering lights in the sky and fading booms said that anything had happened. Soldiers stared at each other uncertainly. Gallenne pried his fingers from the hilt of his sword with an obvious effort.

“This . . . this can’t be the Dark One’s work,” Aram said, and flinched. No one had ever seen a natural storm like that. “It means the weather is changing, doesn’t it, Lord Perrin? The weather is going to be right again?”

Perrin opened his mouth to tell the man not to call him that, but he closed it again with a sigh. “I don’t know,” he said. What was it Gaul had said? “Everything changes, Aram.” He had just never thought that he would have to change, too.

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CHAPTER 11

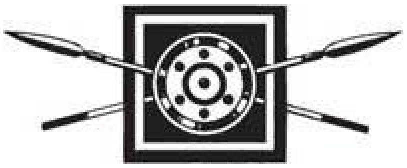

Questions and an Oath

The air in the huge stable smelled of old hay and horse dung. And blood, and burned flesh. With all the doors closed, the air felt thick. Two lanterns gave little light, and shadows filled most of the interior. In the long rows of stalls, horses whickered nervously. The man hanging by his wrists from a roof beam gave a low moan, then a ragged cough. His head fell down on his chest. He was a tall man, well-muscled, if rather the worse for wear.

Abruptly Sevanna realized that his chest no longer moved. The gem-studded rings on her fingers glittered red and green as she gestured curtly to Rhiale.

The flame-haired woman pushed the man’s head up and thumbed back one eyelid, then pressed an ear to his chest, careless of the still-smoldering splinters that peppered him. With a sound of disgust, she straightened. “He is dead. We should have left this to the Maidens, Sevanna, or the Black Eyes. I do not doubt we killed him by ignorance.”

Sevanna’s mouth tightened, and she shifted her shawl in a clatter of bracelets. They ran nearly to her elbows, a noticeable weight in gold and ivory and gems, yet she would have worn every one she owned if she could. None of the other women said anything. Putting prisoners to the question was *not* the work of Wise Ones, but Rhiale knew why they had to do this themselves. The lone survivor of ten mounted men who thought they could defeat twenty Maidens because they rode horses, the man had also been the first Seanchan captured in the ten days since their arrival in this land.

"He would have lived if he had not fought the pain so hard, Rhiale," Someryn said finally, shaking her head. "A strong man for a wetlander, but he could not accept pain. Still, he told us much."

Sevanna eyed her sideways, trying to see whether she hid sarcasm. As tall as most men, Someryn wore more bracelets and necklaces than any woman there except Sevanna herself, layers of firedrops and emeralds, rubies and sapphires, almost concealing a too-full bosom that otherwise would have been half bared with her blouse undone almost to her skirt. Her shawl, tied around her waist, hid nothing. At times it was difficult for Sevanna to tell whether Someryn was copying her or competing with her.

"Much!" Meira exclaimed. In the light of the lantern she held, her long face was grimmer than usual, though that hardly seemed possible. Meira could find the dark side of the noonday sun. "That his people lie two days west in the city called Amador? We knew that. All he has told us are wild tales. Artur Hawkwing! Bah! The Maidens should have kept him and done what was needed."

"Would you . . . risk letting everyone learn too much too soon?" Sevanna bit her lip in vexation. She had almost called them "you fools." Too many already knew too much, in her opinion, Wise Ones among them, but she could not risk offending these women. That knowledge grated on her! "The people are frightened." There was no need to hide her contempt for that, at least. What shocked her, outraged her, was not that they were afraid, but how few made any effort to hide the fact. "Black Eyes, or Stone Dogs, or even Maidens, would have talked of what he said. You know they would! His lies would only have spread more fear." They had to be lies. In Sevanna's mind a sea was like the lakes she had seen in the wetlands, but with its far side beyond sight. If hundreds of thousands more of his people were coming, even from the other side of so large a body of water, the other prisoners she had questioned would have known of them. And no prisoner was questioned without her present.

Tion raised the second lantern and regarded her with unblinking gray eyes. Nearly a head shorter than Someryn, Tion was still taller than Sevanna. And twice as wide. Her round face often appeared placid, but thinking her so was a mistake. "They are right to fear," she said in a stony voice. "I am afraid, and take no shame in it. The Seanchan are many if they are no more than took Amador, and we are few. You have your sept around you, Sevanna, but where is *my* sept? Your wetlander friend Caddar and his tame Aes Sedai sent us through his holes in the air to die. Where are the rest of the Shaido?"

Rhiale moved to stand defiantly beside Tion, and they were quickly joined by Alarys, even now toying with her black hair to draw attention to it. Or perhaps it was to avoid meeting Sevanna's eyes. After a moment, a scowling Meira added herself to the cluster, and then Modarra. Modarra might have been called slim if she were not even taller than Someryn; as it was, lean was the best that could be said of her. Sevanna had thought Modarra as firmly in her grasp as any of the rings on her fingers. As firmly in her grasp as. . . . Someryn looked at her and sighed, looked at the others. Slowly she walked over to stand beside them.

Sevanna was left standing on the very edge of the lantern's light. Of all the women tied to her by the killing of Desaine, she trusted these most. Not that she trusted anyone very far, of course. But Someryn and Modarra she had been sure were hers as tightly as if they had sworn water oath to follow where she led. And now they dared face her with accusing eyes. Even Alarys looked up from playing with her hair.

Sevanna met their stares with a cool smile just short of a sneer. Now, she decided, was not the time to remind them of the crime that bound their fates together. Not the bludgeon, this time. "I suspected Caddar might try to betray us," she said instead. Rhiale's blue eyes widened at the admission, and Tion opened her mouth. Sevanna went on, not leaving them room to speak. "Would you rather have remained in Kinslayer's Dagger to be destroyed? To be hunted like animals by four clans whose Wise Ones know how to make those holes without the traveling boxes? Instead, we are in the heart of a rich, soft land. Richer even than the lands of the tree-killers. Look at what we have taken in only ten days. How much more will we take in a wetlander city? You fear the Seanchan because they have numbers? Remember that I brought every Shaido Wise One who can channel with me." That she could not channel herself seldom occurred to her, now. Soon that lack would be remedied. "We are as strong as any force these wetlanders can send against us. Even if they do have flying lizards." She sniffed forcefully to show what she thought of those! None of them had seen one, nor any of the scouts, but nearly every prisoner had been full of the ridiculous tales. "After we find the other septs, we will take this land for our own. *All* of it! We will extract a tenfold repayment from the Aes Sedai. And we will find Caddar and make him die screaming for mercy."

That should have rallied them, restored their hearts as she had had to do before. Not one woman's face changed. Not one.

"And there is the *Car'a'carn,*" Tion said calmly. "Unless you have given up your plan to marry him."

"I have given up nothing," Sevanna replied irritably. The man—and more important, the power that came with him—would be hers someday. Somehow. Whatever it took. Smoothing her voice, she went on. "Rand al'Thor is hardly of consequence now." At least to these blind simpletons. With him in her hands, anything would be possible for her. "I do not intend to stand here all day discussing my bridal wreath. I have matters to see to that *are* important."

As she stalked away from them through the gloom, toward the doors of the stable, an unpleasant thought suddenly occurred to her. She was alone with these women. How far *could* she trust them, now? Desaine's death remained all too vivid in her mind; the Wise One had been . . . butchered . . . using the One Power. By the women behind her, among others. The thought twisted her belly tight. She listened for the faint rustle of straw that would announce feet following her and heard nothing. Were they just standing there watching? She refused to look over her shoulder. Keeping the same slow pace required only a little effort—*she* would not display fear and shame herself!—yet when she pushed one of the tall doors open on its well-oiled hinges and stepped into bright midday light, she could not stop from drawing a relieved breath.

Efalin was pacing outside, *shoufa* draped around her neck, bow cased on her back, spears and buckler in hand. The gray-haired woman turned abruptly, the worry on her face fading only a little at sight of Sevanna. The leader of all the Shaido Maidens, and she let her distress show! She was not Jumai, but she had come with Sevanna using the excuse that Sevanna spoke as the chief until a new chief of the Shaido could be chosen. Sevanna was sure that Efalin suspected that would never happen. Efalin knew where the power lay. And when to keep her mouth closed.

"Bury him deeply and hide the grave," Sevanna told her.

Efalin nodded, signaling the Maidens ringing the stable to their feet, and they vanished inside behind her. Sevanna studied the building, with its sharp-peaked red roof and blue walls, then turned to the field in front of it. A low stone fence with a single opening, right before the stable, enclosed a circle of hard-packed dirt perhaps a hundred paces across. The wetlanders had used it for training horses. Why it had been placed so far from everything else, surrounded by trees so tall that Sevanna still sometimes stared at them, she had not thought to ask the former owners, but the isolation served her purposes. The Maidens with Efalin were those who had captured the Seanchan. No one not here knew he existed. Or would know. Were the other Wise Ones talking in there? About her? In front of the Maidens? What were they saying? She would not wait on them or anyone!

They came out of the stable just as she started off toward the forest, Someryn and the others, and followed her into the trees arguing among themselves about the Seanchan, and Caddar, and where the rest of the Shaido had been sent. Not about her, but then, they would not where she could listen. What she did hear made her grimace. There were over three hundred Wise Ones with the Jumai, and it was the same whenever three or four started talking. Where were the rest of the septs, and had Caddar been a spear hurled by Rand al'Thor, and how many Seanchan were there, and even did they really ride lizards? Lizards! These women had been with her from the first. She had guided their feet step by step, but they believed they had helped plan every move, believed they knew the destination. If she was losing them now. . . .

The forest gave way to a huge clearing that could have swallowed the circle back at the stable fifty times over, and Sevanna felt ill temper slipping away as she stopped to look. Low hills rose to the north, and mountains a few leagues beyond them were capped with clouds, great masses of white streaked with dark gray. She had never seen so many clouds in her life. Closer at hand, thousands of Jumai went about the day's work. The ring of hammer on anvil rose from blacksmiths, and sheep and goats were being slaughtered for the evening meal, their bleating mixed with the laughter of the children as they ran at play. Given more time to prepare for their flight from Kinslayer's Dagger than the other septs, the Jumai had brought the flocks gathered in Cairhien, and added to them here.

Many people had set up their tents, but there was no need. Colorful structures nearly filled the clearing like a large wetlander village, tall barns and stables, a large forge and the squat roofs that had sheltered servants, all painted red and blue, surrounding the great roof itself. The manor house that was called, three floors high beneath a dark green tile roof, all of it a paler green trimmed with yellow, atop a broad man-made stone hill ten paces tall.

Jumai and *gai'shain* climbed the long ramp that led to the great building's door and walked the ornately carved balconies that ringed it.

The stone walls and palaces she had seen in Cairhien had not impressed her half so much. This one was painted like a wagon of the Lost Ones, but even so, marvelous. She should have realized that with so many trees, these people could afford to build *anything* of wood. Could no one but she see how fat this land was? More white-clad *gai'shain* scurried about their tasks than any twenty septs had ever had before, nearly half as many as there were Jumai! No one complained about making wetlanders *gai'shain* anymore. They were so docile! A wide-eyed young man in rough-sewn white hurried past clutching a basket, gaping at the people around him and stumbling over the hem of his robe. Sevanna smiled. That one's father had called himself the lord of this place and blustered that she and her people would be hunted down—by children, of all things!—for this outrage, yet now he wore white and worked as hard as his son, as did his wife and his daughters and his other sons. The women had possessed many fine gems and beautiful silks, and Sevanna had only taken the first pick for herself. A fat land, so soft it oozed rich oils.

The women behind her had stopped short to talk among themselves at the edge of the trees. She caught what they were saying, and it turned her mood again.

". . . how many Aes Sedai fight for these Seanchan," Tion was saying. "We must learn that." Someryn and Modarra murmured agreement.

"I do not think it matters," Rhiale put in. At least her contrariness extended to the others, too. "I do not think they will fight unless we attack them. Remember, they did nothing until we moved against them, not even to defend themselves."

"And when they did," Meira said sourly, "twenty-three of us died. And more than ten thousand *al-gai'd'siswai* did not return either. Here, we have little more than a third of that number even counting the Brotherless." She soaked the last word in scorn.

"That was Rand al'Thor's work!" Sevanna told them sharply. "Instead of thinking what he did against us, think what we can do when he is ours!" *When he is mine*, she thought. The Aes Sedai had been able to take and hold him as long as they had, and she had something the Aes Sedai had not, else they would have used it. "Remember instead that we had the Aes Sedai beaten until he took their side. Aes Sedai are nothing!"

Once again her effort to strengthen their hearts produced no visible effect. All they could remember was that the spears had been broken trying to capture Rand al'Thor, and they with them. Modarra might have been staring into the grave of all her sept, and even Tion frowned uneasily, doubtless recalling that she, too, had run like a frightened goat.

"Wise Ones," a man's voice said behind Sevanna, "I have been sent to ask for your judgment."

Instantly every woman's face regained its equanimity. What she could not do, he had done with his very presence. No Wise One would allow any but another Wise One to see her out of countenance. Alarys stopped stroking her hair, which she had pulled over her shoulder. Plainly none of them recognized him. Sevanna thought she did.

He regarded them gravely, with green eyes much older than his smooth face. He had full lips, but there was a set to his mouth, as if he had forgotten how to smile. "I am Kinhuin, of the *Mera'din*, Wise Ones. The Jumai say we may not take our full share from this place because we are not Jumai, but it is because they will have less since we are two for every Jumai *algai'd'siswai*. The Brotherless ask your judgment, Wise Ones."

Now that they knew who he was, some could not hide their dislike of the men who had abandoned clan and sept to come to the Shaido rather than follow Rand al'Thor, a wetlander and no true *Car'a'carn*, as they thought. Tion's face merely went flat, but Rhiale's eyes flashed, and Meira teetered on the edge of a scowl. Only Modarra showed concern, but then, she would have tried to settle a dispute between treekillers.

"These six Wise Ones will give judgment after hearing both sides," Sevanna told Kinhuin with a graveness to match his.

The other women looked at her, barely concealing their surprise that she intended to stand aside. It had been she who arranged for ten times the number of *Mera'din* to accompany the Jumai as went with any other sept. She really had suspected Caddar, if not of what he had done, and she had wanted as many spears around her as possible. Besides, they could always die in place of Jumai.

She affected surprise at the others' surprise. "It would not be fair for me to take part since my own sept is involved," she told them before turning back to the green-eyed man. "They will give fair judgment, Kinhuin. And I am certain they will speak in favor of the *Mera'din*."

The other women gave her hard looks before Tion motioned abruptly for Kinhuin to lead the way. He had to tear his eyes away from Sevanna to comply. Wearing a faint smile—he had been staring at her, not Someryn—she watched them vanish into the mass of people moving about the manor grounds. For all their misliking the Brotherless—and her making predictions to the man about their decision—the chances were they *would* decide that way. Either Way, Kinhuin would remember and tell the others of his so-called society. The Jumai were already in her belt pouch, but anything that tied the *Mera'din* to her was welcome.

Turning, Sevanna strode back into the trees, though not toward the stable. Now that she was alone, she could see to something much more important than the Brotherless. She checked what she had tucked into her skirt at the small of her back, where her shawl hid it. She would have felt if it slipped a hair, but she wanted to touch its smooth length with her fingers. No Wise One would dare think her less than they, once she used that, perhaps today. And one day, it would give her Rand al'Thor. After all, if Caddar had lied in one thing, maybe he had lied in others.

Through a blur of tears Galina Casban glared at the Wise One shielding her. As if there were any need for the slender woman's shield. Right then she could not have so much as embraced the Source. Sitting cross-legged on the ground between two squatting Maidens, Belinde adjusted her shawl and gave a thin smile, as if she knew Galina's thoughts. Her face was narrow and foxlike, and her hair and eyebrows had been bleached nearly white by the sun. Galina wished she had crushed her skull instead of merely slapping her.

It had not been an attempt at escape, merely more frustration than she could bear. Her days began and ended with exhaustion, every day more than the last. She could not remember how long since they had stuffed her into that coarse black robe; the days ran together like an everlasting stream. A week? A month? Maybe not that long. Surely not more. She wished she had never touched Belinde. If the woman had not stuffed rags into her mouth to silence her sobbing, she would have begged to be allowed to carry rocks again, or move a pile of pebbles stone by stone, or any of the tortures they filled her hours with. Anything rather than this.

Only Galina's head stuck out of the leather sack that hung suspended from the stout limb of an oak. Directly beneath the sack, coals glowed in a bronze brazier, a slow burn, heating the air inside the sack. She huddled in that sweltering heat with her thumbs tied to her toes, sweat slicking her nakedness. Her hair clung damply to her face, and she panted, nostrils flaring for air, when she was not sobbing. Even so, this would have been better than the endless, senseless, backbreaking labor they subjected her to except for one thing. Before snugging the neck of the sack beneath her chin, Belinde had emptied a pouch of some fine powder over her, and as she had begun to sweat, it had begun to burn like pepper flung in the eyes. It seemed to coat her from the shoulders down, and, oh, Light, it burned!

That she called on the Light measured her desperation, but they had not broken her for all their trying. She *would* get free—she would!—and once she did, she would make these savages pay in blood! Rivers of blood! Oceans! She would have them all skinned alive! She would . . . ! Flinging back her head, she howled; the wadded rags in her mouth muffled the sound, but she howled, and she did not know whether it was a shriek of rage or a scream for mercy.

When her howls died and her head fell forward, Belinde and the Maidens were on their feet, and Sevanna was with them. Galina attempted to stifle her sobbing in front of the golden-haired woman, but she could as soon have plucked the sun from the sky with her fingers.

“Listen to her whine and snivel,” Sevanna sneered, coming to look up at her. Galina tried to put an equal contempt in her own stare. Sevanna decked herself with enough jewelry for ten women! She wore her blouse unlaced to nearly bare her bosom, except for all those mismatched necklaces, and breathed deep when men looked at her! Galina tried, but contempt was hard to manage with tears rolling down her cheeks along with her sweat. She shook with weeping, making the sack sway.

“This *da’tsang* is tough as an old ewe,” Belinde cackled, “but I always found even the toughest old ewe was made tender if cooked slowly, with the right herbs. When I was a Maiden, I softened Stone Dogs with enough cooking.” Galina closed her eyes. *Oceans* of blood, to pay for . . . !

The sack lurched, and Galina’s eyes popped open as it began to settle. The Maidens had undone the rope running over the limb, and the pair of them were lowering her slowly. Frantically she thrashed about, trying to look down, and almost began sobbing anew, with relief, when she saw that the brazier had been moved aside. With Belinde’s talk of cooking. . . . That would be Belinde’s fate, Galina decided. Tied to a spit and turned over a fire until her juices dripped! That to begin!

With a thud that made Galina grunt, the leather bag hit the ground and toppled over. As unconcerned as if they were handling a sack of potatoes, the Maidens tumbled her out onto the brown weeds, sliced the cords that held her thumbs and toes, plucked the gag from between her teeth. Dirt and dead leaves stuck to the sweat coating her.

She very much wanted to stand, to meet them all eye-to-eye and glare-for-glare. Instead, she rose only as far as hands and knees, then dug her fingers into the mulch of the forest floor, dug her toes in. Any farther, and she would not be able to stop her hands from flying to soothe her red, flaming skin. Her sweat felt like the juice of ice peppers. All she could do was crouch there and quiver, try to work some moisture back into her mouth and daydream of what she would do to these savages.

“I believed you were stronger than this,” Sevanna said above her in thoughtful tones, “but perhaps Belinde is right. Perhaps you are soft enough, now. If you swear to obey me, you can stop being *da’tsang*. Perhaps you will not even have to be *gai’shain*. Will you swear to obey me in all things?”

“Yes!” The hoarse word flew from Galina’s tongue without hesitation, though she had to swallow before speaking more. “I will obey you! I swear it!” And so she would obey. Until they gave the opening she needed. Was this all that had been necessary? An oath she would have made the first day? Sevanna would learn what it was like to hang over hot coals. Oh, yes, she. . . .

“Then you will not object to swearing your oath on this,” Sevanna said, tossing something down in front of her.

Galina’s scalp crawled as she stared at it. A white rod like polished ivory, a foot long and no thicker than her wrist. Then she saw the flowing marks carved into the end toward her, numerals used in the Age of Legends. One hundred eleven. She had thought it was the Oath Rod, somehow stolen from the White Tower. That also was marked, but with the numeral three, which some thought stood for the Three Oaths. Maybe this was not what it seemed. Maybe. Yet no hooded viper from the Drowned Lands coiled there could have frozen her so still.

“A fine oath, Sevanna. When did you intend to tell the rest of us?”

That voice jerked Galina’s head up. It could have pulled her eyes away from a hooded viper, too.

Therava appeared among the trees leading a dozen cold-faced Wise Ones. When they stopped behind her, confronting Sevanna, every woman present except for the Maidens had been there when Galina was sentenced to wear the black robe. A word from Therava, a short nod from Sevanna, and the Maidens departed swiftly. Sweat still oozed from Galina, but suddenly the air seemed cold.

Sevanna glanced at Belinde, who avoided her eye. Sevanna's lip curled, half sneer, half snarl, and she planted fists on hips. Galina did not understand where she found the nerve, a woman who could not channel at all. Some of these women possessed not inconsiderable strength. No, she could not afford to think of them only as wilders if she was to escape and have her revenge. Therava and Someryn were stronger than any woman in the Tower, and any of them could have been Aes Sedai easily.

But Sevanna faced them defiantly. "It seems you rendered justice quickly," she said in a voice dry as dust.

"The matter was simple," Tion replied calmly. "The *Mera'din* received the justice they deserved."

"And they were told they received it in *spite* of your attempt to sway us," Rhiale added with some heat. Sevanna nearly *did* snarl at that.

Therava would not be diverted from her purpose, though. In one swift step she reached Galina, gripped a handful of her hair and jerked her up to her knees, bent her head back. Therava was not the tallest of these women by at least a head, yet she loomed taller than most men, staring down with a hawk's eyes, driving away every thought of revenge or defiance. The white streaks touching her dark red hair only made her face more commanding. Galina's hands clenched into fists on her thighs, nails digging into her palms. Even the burning of her skin paled under that stare. She had daydreamed about breaking every one of these women, making them plead for death, laughing as she denied their begging. About every one except Therava. At night, Therava filled her dreams and all Galina could do was try to flee; the only escape was to wake screaming. Galina had broken strong men and strong women, but she stared up at Therava wide-eyed and whined.

"This one has no honor to shame." Therava almost spat the words. "If you want her broken, Sevanna, let me have her. When I am done, she will obey without the need for your friend Caddar's toy."

Sevanna spoke up heatedly, denying friendship with this Caddar, whoever he was, and Rhiale barked that Sevanna had brought him to the others, and others began arguing about whether the “binder” would work any better than the “traveling box.”

A small part of Galina’s mind seized on mention of the traveling box. She had heard it spoken of before, longed to lay hands on it if only for a moment. With a *ter’angreal* that enabled her to Travel, however imperfectly it seemed to work, she would be able to. . . . Even hope of escape could not stand against thoughts of what Therava would do to her if the others decided to give in to the woman’s request. When the hawk-eyed Wise One loosed her hair to join the argument, Galina hurled herself at the rod, landing flat on her belly. Anything, even having to obey Sevanna, was better than being handed over to Therava. If she had not been shielded, she would have channeled to operate the rod herself.

No sooner did her fingers close on the smooth rod than Therava’s foot came down on it hard, trapping her hands painfully against the ground. None of the Wise Ones so much as glanced at her where she lay writhing, trying futilely to pull free. She could not make herself pull too hard; dimly she could recall making rulers pale with fear, but she did not dare disturb this woman’s foot.

“If she is to swear,” Therava said, staring hard at Sevanna, “it should be to obey all of us here.” The others nodded, some voicing agreement, all but Belinde, and she pursed her lips thoughtfully.

Sevanna stared back just as hard. “Very well,” she acceded finally. “But me first among us. I am not only a Wise One; I speak as the clan chief.”

Therava smiled thinly. “So you do. Two among us first, Sevanna. You and I.” Not a whisper of defiance faded from Sevanna’s face, but she nodded. Grudgingly. Only then did Therava move her foot. The light of *saidar* surrounded her, and a flow of Spirit touched the numerals at the end of the rod in Galina’s hands. Just as was done with the Oath Rod.

For an instant, Galina hesitated, flexing mashed fingers. It felt the same as the Oath Rod, too; not quite like ivory, not quite like glass, distinctly cool on her palms. If it was a second Oath Rod, it could be used to remove any oath she swore now. If she were given the opportunity. She did not want to take the chance, did not want to swear to Therava in any case. Always before this in her life, *she* had commanded; life since her capture had been misery, but Therava would make her a lapdog! Yet if she did not, would they let Therava break her? She could not find the smallest particle of doubt that the woman would do just that. Utterly.

"Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth"—she no longer believed in the Light or a hope of salvation, and there was no need to speak more than a simple promise, but they expected a strong oath—"I swear to obey every Wise One present here in all things, and first among them, Therava and Sevanna." The last hope that this "binder" was something else vanished as Galina felt the oath settle on her, as if she suddenly wore a garment that covered her far too tightly from her scalp to the soles of her feet. Throwing back her head, she screamed. In part that was because it suddenly seemed as if the burning of her skin was being pressed deep into her flesh, but mainly, it was pure despair.

"Be quiet!" Therava said sharply. "I do not want to listen to you wailing!" Galina's teeth clicked shut, nearly biting her tongue, and she struggled to swallow her sobs. Nothing but obedience was possible, now. Therava frowned at her. "Let us see if this truly works," she muttered, bending closer. "Have you planned violence against any Wise One here? Answer truthfully, and ask to be punished if you have. The penalty for violence against a Wise One," she added like an afterthought, "can be to be killed like an animal." She drew a finger expressively across her throat then gripped her belt knife with the same hand.

Gulping air in horrified panic, Galina shied back from the woman. She could not take her eyes away from Therava's, though, and she could not stop the words that chattered through her teeth. "I d-did, ag-g-gainst all of you! P-please p-punish me f-for it!" Would they kill her, now? After all of this, was she to die here?

"It seems this binder does as your friend claimed after all, Sevanna." Plucking the rod from Galina's limp hands, Therava tucked it behind her belt as she straightened. "It also seems that you will wear white after all, Galina Casban." For some reason, she gave a pleased smile at that. But she issued other commands, too. "You will behave meekly, as a *gai'shain* should. If a *child* tells you to jump, you will jump unless one of us has said otherwise. And you will not touch *saidar* or channel unless one of us tells you. Release the shield on her, Belinde."

The shield vanished, and Galina knelt there, staring hollowly. The Source shone just out of sight, tantalizing. And she could have sprouted wings as easily as she could stretch out for it.

Bracelets clattered as Sevanna shifted her shawl in anger. “You take too much on yourself, Therava. That is mine; give it to me!” She held out her hand, but Therava merely folded her arms beneath her breasts.

“There have been meetings among the Wise Ones,” the stern-eyed woman told Sevanna. “We have reached certain decisions.” The women who had come with her gathered behind her, all of them facing Sevanna, and Belinde hurried to join them.

“Without me?” Sevanna snapped. “Do any of you dare reach a decision without me?” Her tone remained as strong as ever, but her eyes flickered to the rod in Therava’s belt, and Galina thought there was a touch of uneasiness there. Another time, she would have been delighted to see it.

“One decision had to be reached without you,” Tion said in a flat voice.

“As you so often point out, you speak as the clan chief,” Emerys added, a mocking light in her big gray eyes. “Sometimes, Wise Ones must talk without a clan chief listening. Or someone who speaks as a chief.”

“We decided,” Therava said, “that just as a clan chief must have a Wise One to advise him, so must you have a Wise One’s advice. I will advise you.”

Gathering her shawl around her, Sevanna studied the women confronting her. Her expression was unreadable. How did she do it? They could crush her like an egg beneath a hammer. “And what *advice* do you offer me, Therava?” she said at last in an icy voice.

“My strong advice is that we move without delay,” Therava replied, as cool as Sevanna. “These Seanchan are too close and too many. We should move north into these Mountains of Mist and establish a hold. From there, we can send parties to find the other septs. It may take long to reunite the Shaido, Sevanna. Your wetlander friend may have scattered us to the nine corners of the world. Until we do that, we are vulnerable.”

“We will move tomorrow.” If Galina had not been sure she knew Sevanna inside and out, she would have thought the woman sounded petulant as well as angry. Those green eyes flashed. “But east. That also is away from the Seanchan, and the lands to the east are in turmoil, ripe for plucking.”

There was a long silence, then Therava nodded. “East.” She said the word softly, the softness of silk laid over steel. “But remember that clan chiefs have lived to regret rejecting a Wise One's advice too often. You may, as well." The threat on her face was plain as that in her voice, yet Sevanna laughed!

"*You* remember, Therava! All of you remember! If I am left for the vultures, so will you be! I have made assurance of that."

The other women exchanged worried glances, all but Therava, and Modarra and Norlea frowned.

Slumped on her knees, whimpering and trying in vain to soothe her skin with her hands, Galina found herself wondering what these threats meant. It was a small thought, worming its way through bitterness and self-pity. Anything she could use against these women would be welcome. If she dared use it. A bitter thought.

Abruptly she realized that the sky was turning dark. Billowing clouds were rolling down from the north, streaked gray and black, obscuring the sun. And beneath the clouds fell flurries of snow, swirling in the air. None reached the ground—few fell as far as the treetops—but Galina gaped. Snow! Had the Great Lord loosened his grip on the world for some reason?

The Wise Ones stared at the sky, too, mouths hanging open as if they had never seen clouds, much less snow.

"What is this, Galina Casban?" Therava demanded. "Speak if you know!" She did not look away from the sky until Galina told her it was snow, and when she did it was to laugh. "I always thought the men who ran down Laman Treekiller lied about snow. This could not hamper a mouse!"

Galina clamped her jaws shut on explaining about snowfalls, aghast that her instinct had been to curry favor. Aghast as well at the small pang of pleasure that keeping the information back gave. *I am the Highest of the Red Ajah*! she reminded herself. *I sit on the Supreme Council of the Black Ajah*! They sounded like lies. This was not fair!

"If we are done here," Sevanna said, "I will take the *gai'shain* back to the great roof and see her put in white. You can remain and stare at the snow if you wish." Her tone was so smooth, like butter in the tub, that no one would have thought her at daggers' points only moments earlier. She looped her shawl over her elbows and adjusted some of her necklaces; nothing in the world concerned her more.

"We will take care of the *gai'shain*," Therava told her just as smoothly. "Since you speak as the chief, you have a long day and most of the night ahead of you if we are to move tomorrow." For an instant, Sevanna's eyes flashed again, but Therava merely snapped her fingers and gestured sharply at Galina before turning to go. “Come with me,” she said. “And stop pouting.”

Head down, Galina scrambled to her feet and scurried after Therava and the other women who could channel. Pouting? She might have been scowling, but never pouting! Her thoughts scrabbled like rats in a cage, finding no hope of escape. There had to be one! There had to be! One thought that surfaced in the middle of that turmoil almost made her begin weeping again. Were *gai’shain* robes softer than the scratchy black wool she had been forced to wear so far? There had to be a way out! A hasty glance back through the trees showed Sevanna still standing there, glaring after them. Overhead, the clouds swirled, and the falling snow melted like Galina’s hopes.

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CHAPTER 12

New Alliances

Graendal wished there had been even a simple transcriber among the things she had removed from Illian after Sammael’s death. This Age was frightful usually, primitive and uncomfortable. Still, some of it suited her. In a large bamboo cage at the far end of the room a hundred brightly plumaged birds sang melodiously, almost as beautiful in their multicolored flitting as her two pets in transparent robes who waited on either side of the door, their gazes locked on her, eager to serve her pleasure. If oil lamps did not give the same light as glowbulbs, aided by large mirrors on the walls they produced a certain barbaric splendor with the gilded fish-scale ceiling. It would have been nice to need only speak the words, but actually putting them on paper with her own hand produced a pleasure akin to that she felt in sketching. The script of this Age was quite simple, and learning to duplicate another’s style had been no more difficult.

Signing with a flourish—not her own name, of course—she sanded the thick page, then folded it and sealed it with one of the signet rings of various sizes that made a decorative line across the writing table. The Hand and Sword of Arad Doman impressed on an irregular circle of blue-and-green wax.

“Take this to Lord Ituralde with all speed,” she said, “and say only what I told you.”

“As fast as horses can carry me, my Lady.” Nazran bowed as he took the letter, one finger stroking thin black mustaches above a winning smile. Square and deeply brown in a well-fitting blue coat, he was handsome; just not sufficiently handsome. “I received this from the Lady Tuva, who died of her wounds after telling me that she was a courier from Alsalam and had been attacked by a Gray Man.”

“Make sure there is human blood on it,” she admonished. She doubted anyone in this time could tell human blood from any other, but she had found too many surprises to take an unnecessary chance. “Enough for realism; not enough to spoil what I wrote.”

His black eyes lingered warmly on her as he bowed again, but as soon as he straightened he hurried to the door, boots thudding on the pale yellow marble floor. He did not notice the servants with their eyes fixed ardently on her, or affected not to notice, though he had once been a friend of the young man. Only a touch of Compulsion had been needed to make Nazran nearly as avid to obey as they, not to mention certain that he might yet taste her charms again. She laughed softly. Well, he believed he had tasted them; just a little prettier, and he might have. Of course, he would have been useless for anything else then. He would ride horses to death reaching Ituralde, and if that message, delivered by Alsalam’s close cousin, supposedly coming from the King himself and with Gray Men trying to stop it, did not satisfy the Great Lord’s command to increase chaos, nothing would, short of balefire. And it would serve her own ends very nicely as well. Her own ends.

Graendal’s hand went to the only ring on the table that was not a signet, a plain golden band too small for any but her little finger. It had been a pleasant surprise to find an *angreal* attuned to women among Sammael’s possessions. A pleasant surprise to have time to find much of anything useful with al’Thor and those puppies who called themselves Asha’man constantly in and out of Sammael’s chambers in the Great Hall of the Council. They had stripped it bare of what she had not taken. Dangerous puppies, all of them, especially al’Thor. And she had not wanted to risk *anyone* being able to draw a line from Sammael to her. Yes, she must increase the pace of her own plans, and distance herself from Sammael’s disaster.

Abruptly a vertical slash of silver appeared at the far end of the room, bright against the tapestries hanging between the heavy gilded mirrors, and a crystalline chime rang loud. Her eyebrows rose in surprise. Someone remembered the courtesies of a more civilized Age, it seemed. Standing, she forced the plain band of gold down against the ruby ring on her smallest finger and embraced *saidar* through it before channeling the web that would sound an answering chime for whoever wanted to open a gateway. The *angreal* did not offer much, yet anyone who thought they knew her strength would find a shock.

The gateway opened, and two women in nearly identical red-and-black silk dresses stepped through warily. At least, Moghedien moved cautiously, dark eyes flickering in search of traps, hands smoothing her wide skirts; the gateway winked out after a moment, but she held on to *saidar*. A sensible precaution, though Moghedien had always been a great one for precautions. Graendal did not let go of the Source, either. Moghedien's companion, a short young woman with long silver hair and vivid blue eyes, stared about her coldly, hardly more than glancing in Graendal's direction. By her demeanor, she might have been a Prime Counselor forced to endure the company of common laborers and intent on ignoring their existence. A foolish girl, to imitate the Spider. Red and black did not suit her coloring, and she should have made better use of such an impressive bosom.

"This is Cyndane, Graendal," Moghedien said. "We are . . . working together." She did not smile when she named the haughty young woman, but Graendal did. A pretty name for a more than pretty girl, but what twist of fate had led some mother of this time to give her daughter a name that meant "Last Chance"? Cyndane's face remained cold and smooth, but her eyes flared. A beautiful doll carved from ice, with hidden fires. It seemed she knew the meaning and did not like it.

"What brings you and your friend, Moghedien?" Graendal asked. The Spider was the very last she had expected to come out from the shadows. "Have no fear of speaking in front of my servants." She gestured, and the pair by the door sank to their knees, pressed their faces to the floor. They would not quite fall dead by her simple command, but close.

"What interest can you find in them when you destroy anything that might make them interesting?" Cyndane demanded, striding arrogantly across the floor. She held herself very straight, striving for every hair of height. "Do you know that Sammael is dead?"

Graendal kept her own face smooth, with a little effort. She had supposed this girl some Friend of the Dark whom Moghedien had picked up to run errands, perhaps a noble who thought her title counted, but now that she was close. . . . The girl was stronger in the One Power than she herself! Even in her own Age, that had been uncommon among men, and very rare indeed among women. On the instant, on instinct, she changed her intention to deny any contact with Sammael.

"I suspected," she replied, directing a false smile over the young woman's head at Moghedien. How much did she know? Where had the Spider found a girl so much stronger than she, and why was she traveling with her? Moghedien had always been jealous of anyone with more strength. Or more of anything. "He used to visit me, importuning my help in one mad plan or another. I never rejected him outright; you know Sammael is—was a dangerous man to reject. He appeared every few days without fail, and when he stopped, I assumed something dire had happened to him. Who is this girl, Moghedien? A remarkable find."

The young woman stepped closer, staring up at her with eyes like blue fire. "She told you my name. That is all you need know." The girl knew she spoke to one of the Chosen, and yet her tone remained frost. Even given her strength, this was no simple Friend of the Dark. Unless she was insane. "Have you paid attention to the weather, Graendal?"

Abruptly, Graendal realized that Moghedien was letting the girl do all the talking. Hanging back until a weakness became apparent. And Graendal had been letting her! "I do not suppose you came to tell me of Sammael's death, Moghedien," she said sharply. "Or to talk about weather. You know I seldom go outside." Nature was unruly, lacking order. There were not even windows in this room, nor in most that she used. "What do you want?" The dark-haired woman was edging sideways along the wall; the glow of the One Power still surrounded her. Graendal stepped casually so that both remained in her sight.

"You make a mistake, Graendal." A chilly smile barely curved Cyndane's full lips; she was enjoying this. "I lead between us. Moghedien is in a bad odor with Moridin for *her* recent mistakes."

Wrapping her arms around herself, Moghedien shot the silver-haired little woman a scowl as good as any spoken confirmation. Suddenly Cyndane's big eyes opened even wider, and she gasped, shuddering.

Moghedien's glare turned malicious. "You lead for the moment," she sneered. "Your place in his eyes is not far better than mine." And then *she* gave a start and shivered, biting her lip.

Was she being toyed with, Graendal wondered. The pure hatred for each other on the two women's faces seemed unfeigned. Either way, she would see how they enjoyed being played. Unconsciously rubbing her hands together, rubbing the *angreal* on her finger, she moved to a chair without taking her eyes from the pair. The sweetness of *saidar* flowing into her was a comfort. Not that she needed comfort, but there was something odd here. The high straight back, thickly carved and gilded, made the chair seem a throne, though it was no different from any other in the room. Such things affected even the most sophisticated on levels they never knew consciously.

She sat leaning back with her legs crossed, one foot kicking idly, the picture of a woman at her ease, and made her voice bored. "Since you lead, child, tell me, when this man who calls himself Death is in his skin, who is he? What is he?"

"Moridin is Nae'blis." The girl's voice was calm and cold and arrogant. "The Great Lord has decided it is time for you to serve the Nae'blis, too."

Graendal jerked upright. "This is preposterous." She could not keep the anger from her voice. "A man I've never *heard* of has been named the Great Lord's Regent on Earth?" She did not mind when others tried to manipulate her—she always found a way to turn their schemes against them—but Moghedien must take her for a half-wit! She had no doubt that Moghedien was directing this obnoxious girl, whatever they claimed, whatever looks they stabbed at each other. "I serve the Great Lord and myself, no other! I think the two of you should go, now, and play your little game elsewhere. Demandred might be diverted by it. Or Semirhage? Be careful how you channel in leaving; I have set a few inverted webs, and you would not want to trigger one."

That was a lie, but a very believable one, so it came as a shock when Moghedien suddenly channeled and every lamp in the room went out, plunging them into darkness. Instantly Graendal flung herself from the chair so as not to be where they had last seen her, and she also channeled even as she moved, weaving a web of light that hung to one side, a sphere of pure white that cast lurid shadows about the room. And revealed the pair clearly. Without hesitation, she channeled again, drawing the full strength of the little ring. She did not need it all, or even most, but she wanted every advantage she could find. Attack her, would they! A net of Compulsion tightened on each of them before they could twitch.

She had spun the nets strong, for anger's sake, nearly strong enough to do harm, and the women stood staring at her adoringly, eyes wide and mouths hanging open in adulation, intoxicated with worship. They were hers to command, now. If she told them to cut their own throats, they would. Suddenly Graendal realized that Moghedien was no longer embracing the Source. This much Compulsion might have shocked her into letting go. The servants by the door had not moved, of course.

"Now," she said a touch breathlessly, "you will answer my questions." She had a number, including who was this Moridin fellow, if there was such a man, and where had Cyndane come from, but one piqued her more than the rest. "What did you hope to gain by this, Moghedien? I may decide to knot those webs on you. You can pay for your game by serving *me*."

"No, please," Moghedien groaned, wringing her hands. She actually began to weep! "You will kill us all! Please, you must serve the Nae'blis! That is what we came for. To bring you to Moridin's service!" The silver-haired little woman's face was a shadowed mask of terror in the pale light, her bosom heaving as she gulped breath.

Suddenly uneasy, Graendal opened her mouth. This made less and less sense by the moment. She opened her mouth, and the True Source vanished. The One Power vanished from her, and blackness swallowed the room again. Abruptly the caged birds broke into a frenzy of chirruping; their wings fluttered frantically against the bamboo bars.

Behind her, a voice rasped like rock being ground to dust. "The Great Lord thought you might not take their word, Graendal. The time when you could go your own way has passed." A ball of . . . something . . . appeared in the air, a dead black globe, but a silver light filled the room. The mirrors did not shine; they seemed to dull in that light. The birds went still, silent; somehow, Graendal knew they had frozen in terror.

She gaped at the Myrddraal standing there, pale and eyeless and clothed in black deeper than the ball, but larger than any she had ever seen. It had to be the reason she could not sense the Source, but that was impossible! Except. . . . Where had that strange sphere of black light come from if not from it? She had never felt the same fear others did at a Myrddraal's gaze, not to the same degree, yet her hands rose on their own, and she had to snatch them down to keep from covering her face. Glancing toward Moghedien and Cyndane, she flinched. They had adopted the same pose as her servants, crouching on their knees, heads to the floor toward the Myrddraal.

She had to work moisture into her mouth. “You are a messenger from the Great Lord?” Her voice was steady, but weak. She had never heard of such a thing, the Great Lord sending a message by Myrddraal, and yet. . . . Moghedien was a physical coward, but still one of the Chosen, and she groveled as assiduously as the girl. And there was the light. Graendal found herself wishing her dress were not cut so low. Ridiculous, of course; Myrddraal’s appetites for women were well known, but she was one of the. . . . Her eyes drifted to Moghedien once more.

The Myrddraal strode by her sinuously, seeming not to pay her any heed. Its long black cloak hung undisturbed by its movements. Aginor had thought the creatures were not quite in the world in the same way everything else was; “slightly out of phase with time and reality,” he had called it, whatever that meant.

“I am Shaidar Haran.” Stopping by her servants, the Myrddraal bent to grip them by the backs of their necks, one hand to each. “When I speak, you may consider that you hear the voice of the Great Lord of the Dark.” Those hands tightened to the surprisingly loud sound of cracking bone. The young man spasmed as he died, kicking out; the young woman merely went limp. They had been two of her prettiest. The Myrddraal straightened from the corpses. “I am his hand in this world, Graendal. When you stand before me, you stand before him.”

Graendal considered carefully, if quickly. She was afraid, an emotion she was far more used to inspiring in others, but she knew how to control her fear. While she had never commanded armies as some of the others had, she was neither a stranger to hazard nor a coward, yet this was more than a mere threat. Moghedien and Cyndane still knelt with their heads to the marble floor, Moghedien actually trembling visibly. Graendal believed this Myrddraal. Or whatever it truly was. The Great Lord *was* taking a more direct hand in events, as she had feared. And if he learned of her scheming with Sammael. . . . If he chose to take action, that was; betting that he did not know was a foolish wager at this point.

She knelt smoothly before the Myrddraal. “What would you have me do?” Her voice had regained its strength. A necessary flexibility was not cowardice; those who did not bend for the Great Lord were bent. Or snapped in two. “Should I call you Great Master, or would you prefer another title? I would not feel comfortable addressing even the Great Lord’s hand as I would him.”

Shockingly, the Myrddraal laughed. It sounded like ice crumbling. Myrddraal never laughed. “You are braver than most. And wiser. Shaidar Haran will do for you. So long as you remember who I am. So long as you do not let bravery overcome your fear too far.”

As it issued its commands—a visit to this Moridin was first, it seemed; she would need to be on her guard against Moghedien, and perhaps Cyndane also, taking revenge for her brief use of Compulsion; she doubted the girl was any more forgiving than the Spider—she decided to keep to herself the letter she had sent to Rodel Ituralde. Nothing she was told indicated that her actions would be displeasing to the Great Lord, and she still had to consider her own position. Moridin, whoever he was, might be Nae’blis today, but there was always tomorrow.

* * *

Bracing herself against the rocking of Arilyn’s coach, Cadsuane moved one of the leather window curtains far enough to see out. A light rain fell on Cairhien from a gray sky full of blustering clouds and rough, swirling winds. Not only the sky was full of wind. Howling gusts rocked the coach more than did its forward motion. Tiny droplets stung her hand, cold as ice. If the air cooled a little more, there would be snow. She drew her woolen cloak closer; she had been pleased to find it, shoved to the bottom of her saddlebags. The air would cool.

The city’s steep slate roofs and stone-paved streets glistened wetly, and though the rain was not hard, few were willing to brave the strong winds. A woman guiding an ox-cart with taps of a long goad moved as patiently as her ox, but most people afoot clutched cloaks tightly, hoods pulled down, and stepped quickly as the bearers of a sedan chair rushed by, its stiff *con* fluttering. Others beside the woman and her ox saw no reason for haste, though. In the middle of the street a towering Aielman stood gaping at the sky in disbelief while the drizzle soaked him, so absorbed that a daring cutpurse sliced away his belt pouch and darted off unnoticed by his victim. A woman whose elaborately curled, high-piled hair marked her as noble walked along slowly, her cloak flapping wildly, and its long hood as well. This might have been the first time ever that she had actually walked in the streets, but she was laughing as the rain slicked her cheeks. From the doorway of a perfumer’s shop, the shopkeeper stared out disconsolately; she would do little business today. Most of the hawkers had vanished for the same reason, but a handful still hopefully cried hot tea and meat pies from barrows beneath makeshift awnings. Though anyone who bought a meat pie in the street these days deserved the bellyache she would get.

A pair of starving dogs ran out from an alley, stiff-legged and hackles up, barking and snarling at the coach. Cadsuane let the curtain fall. Dogs seemed to know women who could channel as easily as cats did, but dogs appeared to think the women *were* cats, if unnaturally large ones. The pair of women seated across from her were still in conversation.

“Forgive me,” Daigian was saying, “but the logic is inescapable.” She ducked her head apologetically, making the moonstone dangling on a fine silver chain from her long black hair sway across her forehead. Her fingers plucked the white slashes in her dark skirts, and she spoke rapidly, as though afraid of being interrupted. “If you accept that the lingering heat was the Dark One’s work, the change must be by some other agency. He would not have relented. You might say that he has decided to freeze or drown the world instead of baking it, but why? Had the heat continued through spring, the dead might well have outnumbered the living, no different than if snow falls into the summer. Therefore, logically, some other hand is at work.” The plump woman’s diffidence was trying at times, but as always, Cadsuane found her logic impeccable. She just wished she knew whose hand and to what end.

“Peace!” Kumira muttered. “I would rather an ounce of hard proof than a hundredweight of your White Ajah logic.” She was Brown, herself, though little given to their usual failings. A handsome woman with shortcut hair, she was hardheaded and practical, a keen observer, and never lost herself so deeply in thought that she lost sight of the world around her as well. No sooner had Kumira spoken than she patted Daigian’s knee with a graceful hand, and gave a smile that changed her blue eyes from sharp to warm. Shienarans were a polite people, by and large, and Kumira took care not to offend. By accident, at least. “Put your mind to what we can do about the sisters held by the Aiel. I know you’ll reason out something if anyone can.”

Cadsuane snorted. “They deserve whatever happens to them.” She had not been allowed near the Aiel tents herself, nor had any of her companions, but some of the fools who had sworn fealty to the al’Thor boy had ventured out to the sprawling encampment and come back white-faced and torn between outrage and sicking up. Normally, she also would have been furious over the affront to Aes Sedai dignity, whatever the circumstances; not now. To achieve her goal, she would have run the entire White Tower through the streets naked. How could she concern herself with the discomfort of women who might have ruined everything?

Kumira opened her mouth to protest despite knowing her feelings, but Cadsuane went on, calm yet relentless. “Perhaps they’ll weep enough to atone for the dog’s dinner they made of matters, but I doubt it. They are out of our hands, and if they were in mine, I might just *give* them to the Aiel. Forget them, Daigian, and put that fine mind of yours on the track I set you.”

The Cairhienin woman’s pale cheeks flushed red at the compliment. Thank the Light she was not this way except with other sisters. Kumira sat silently, very smooth-faced, her hands in her lap. She might be subdued now, but little could subdue Kumira for long. They were exactly the pair Cadsuane wanted with her today.

The coach tilted as the team started up the long ramp leading to the Sun Palace. “Remember what I told you,” she told the other two firmly. “And have a care!”

They murmured that they would, as well they might, and she nodded. If need demanded, she would use them both for mulch, and others too, but she did not intend to lose either because they grew careless.

There was no bother or delay in letting the coach through the Palace gates. The guards recognized Arilyn’s sigil on the doors, and they knew who would be riding inside. That coach had been to the Palace often enough in the past week. The moment the horses halted, an anxious-eyed footman in unadorned black opened the coach door, holding out a broad flat parasol of dark oiled cloth. Rain dripped from the edge onto his bare head, but then, it was not intended for his shelter.

Quickly touching the ornaments dangling from the bun atop her head to be sure they were all there—she had never lost one, but that was because she was careful of them—Cadsuane gathered the handles of her square wicker sewing basket from beneath her seat and stepped down. Half a dozen footmen stood waiting behind the first, parasols at the ready. So many passengers would have crowded the coach beyond comfort, but the footmen were not about to be caught short, and the extra did not hurry away until it was plain there were only the three of them.

Obviously the coach had been seen coming. Dark-garbed serving men and women made a neat array on the deep blue and gold tiles of the great entry hall with its square-vaulted ceiling five spans high. They leaped forward, taking cloaks, offering small, warm linen towels in case anyone needed to dry face or hands, proffering Sea Folk porcelain goblets of mulled wine that gave off a heady scent of spices. A winter drink, yet the sudden drop in temperature made it suitable. And after all, it *was* winter. Finally.

Three Aes Sedai stood waiting to one side among the massive square columns of dark marble, in front of tall, pale friezes depicting battles no doubt important to Cairhien, but Cadsuane ignored the women for the time being. One of the young serving men had a small red-and-gold figure embroidered on the left breast of his coat, what people were calling a Dragon. Corgaide, the grave-faced, gray-haired woman who ordered the servants in the Sun Palace, wore no ornament save for the large ring of heavy keys at her waist. Nor did anyone else have any decoration on their clothes, and despite the young man’s apparent enthusiasm, it was Corgaide, the Holder of the Keys, who would set the mood among the servants. Still, she had allowed the young fellow his embroidery; a point to remember. Cadsuane spoke to her quietly, asking after a room where she might work her embroidery hoop undisturbed, and the woman did not blink at the request. But then, doubtless she had heard stranger, serving in this place.

As the servants with the cloaks and trays bowed and curtsied themselves off, Cadsuane finally turned to the three sisters among the columns. They were all looking at her, ignoring Kumira and Daigian. Corgaide remained, but she stayed well back, giving the Aes Sedai privacy. “I hardly expected to find you strolling about at your ease,” Cadsuane said. “I thought the Aiel worked their apprentices hard.”

Faeldrin barely reacted, merely a slight jerk of her head that softly rattled the colored beads in her thin braids, but Merana colored with embarrassment, and her hands clenched in her skirts. Events had shaken Merana so deeply that Cadsuane was unsure she would ever recover. Bera, of course, was very nearly unflappable.

“Most of us were given a freeday because of the rain,” Bera replied calmly. A sturdy woman in plain wool—fine and well-cut, but decidedly plain—you might have thought her more at home on a farm than in a palace. You might if you were a fool; Bera had a keen mind, a strong will, and Cadsuane did not believe she ever made the same mistake twice. Like most sisters, she had not entirely gotten over meeting Cadsuane Melaidhrin, alive and in the flesh, yet she did not let awe rule her. After only the slightest of deep breaths, she went on. “I cannot understand why you keep coming back, Cadsuane. Clearly, you want something from us, but unless you tell us what it is, we cannot help you. We know what you did for the Lord Dragon”—she stumbled a little over the title; they still were not quite sure what to call the boy—“but it’s obvious you came to Cairhien because of him, and until you tell us why and what you intend, you must understand that you’ll find no aid from us.” Faeldrin, another Green, gave a start at Bera’s bold tone, but she was nodding agreement before Bera finished.

“You must understand this, too,” Merana added, her serenity regained. “If we decide we must oppose you, we will.” Bera’s face did not change, but Faeldrin’s mouth tightened briefly. Perhaps she disagreed, and perhaps she did not want to reveal too much.

Cadsuane favored them with a thin smile. Tell them why and what? If *they* decided? So far they had managed to stuff themselves into young al’Thor’s saddlebags tied hand and foot, even Bera. Small recommendation for letting them decide so much as what to wear in the morning! “I did not come to see you,” she said. “Though I suppose Kumira and Daigian would enjoy a visit, since you have a freeday. You will excuse me.”

Motioning Corgaide to lead on, she followed the woman across the entry hall. She only glanced back once. Bera and the others had already gathered up Kumira and Daigian and were hustling them away, but hardly like welcome guests. More like herded geese. Cadsuane smiled. Most sisters considered Daigian little better than a wilder and treated her little better than a servant. In that company, Kumira hardly stood much higher. The most suspicious could not think they were there to try to convince anyone of anything. So Daigian would pour the tea and sit quietly except when addressed—and apply her excellent mind to everything she heard. Kumira would let everyone except Daigian speak before her—and sort and file away every word, every gesture and grimace. Bera and the rest would keep their oaths to the boy, of course—that went without saying—but how assiduously was another question. Even Merana might be unwilling to go too far beyond bare obedience. That was bad enough, yet it left considerable room for them to maneuver. Or be maneuvered.

Dark-liveried servants hurrying at their tasks along the broad, tapestry-hung hallways darted aside for Cadsuane and Corgaide, and the two of them progressed to a flurry of deep bows and curtsies made over baskets and trays and armloads of towels. From the way eyes watched Corgaide, Cadsuane suspected the deference was as much for the Holder of the Keys as for an Aes Sedai. There were a few Aiel about, too, huge men like cold-eyed lions and women like colder-eyed leopards. Some of those gazes followed her icily enough to bring on the snow threatened by the rain outside, but other Aiel nodded to her gravely, and here and there one of the fierce-eyed women went so far as to smile. She had never claimed to be responsible for saving their *Car'a'carn*, but tales became twisted in retelling, and the belief granted her more respect than any other sister, and certainly more freedom of movement around the Palace. She wondered how they would feel if they knew that had she had the boy in front of her right then, she would have been hard-pressed to stop herself from blistering his hide for him! Barely more than a week since he nearly, got himself killed, and not only had he managed to elude her completely, he had made her task even more difficult, if half what she heard was true. A pity he had not been raised in Far Madding. But then, that might have led to its own catastrophe.

The room Corgaide took her to was comfortably warm, with fires blazing in marble fireplaces at either end of the chamber and lamps lit, mirrored flames in glass towers that chased the day's gloom. Plainly Corgaide had sent orders ahead to prepare while she was waiting in the entry hall. A serving woman appeared almost as soon as they, with both hot tea and spiced wine on a tray, and small cakes glazed with honey.

"Will there be anything else, Aes Sedai?" Corgaide asked as Cadsuane set her sewing basket beside the tray on a table with edge and legs thickly gilded. Rigidly carved, too, as was the wide cornice, also covered with gilt. Cadsuane always felt she was in a golden fish weir when she visited Cairhien. Despite the light and warmth inside, rain dripping outside the tall narrow windows and the gray sky outside heightened the sensation.

"The tea will do nicely," she said. "If you will, tell Alanna Mosvani that I want to see her. Tell her, without delay."

Corgaide’s keys jingled as she curtsied, murmuring respectfully that she would find “Alanna Aes Sedai” herself. Her grave expression never altered as she left. Very likely she was examining the request for subtleties. Cadsuane preferred to be direct, when possible. She had tripped up any number of clever people who had not believed she meant exactly what she said.

Opening the lid of her sewing basket, she took out her embroidery hoop with a less than half-done piece of work wrapped around it. The basket had pockets woven inside to hold items that had nothing to do with sewing. Her ivory hand mirror and hairbrush and comb, a pen case and tightly stoppered ink bottle, a number of things that she had found useful to have at hand over the years, including some that would have surprised anyone with nerve enough to search the basket. Not that she often left it out of her sight. Setting the polished silver thread box carefully on the table, she selected the skeins she needed and sat with her back to the door. The major image on her piece of embroidery was finished, a man’s hand clutching the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai. Cracks ran across the black-and-white disc, and there was no telling whether the hand was trying to hold it together or crush it. She knew what she intended, but time would tell what was truth.

Threading a needle, she set to work on one of the surrounding images, a bright red rose. Roses and star-blaze and sunburst alternated with daisies and hearts-blush and snowcap, all separated by bands of stark nettles and long-thorned briars. It would be a disturbing piece, when completed.

Before she had finished half a petal on the rose, a flash of motion reflected on the flat lid of the thread box caught her eye. It had been carefully placed to reflect the doorway. She did not raise her head from the hoop. Alanna stood there glaring at her back. Cadsuane continued the slow work of her needle, but she watched that reflection from the corner of her eye. Twice Alanna half turned as if to go, then finally drew herself up, visibly steeling herself.

“Come in, Alanna.” Still not raising her head, Cadsuane pointed to a spot in front of her. “Stand there.” She smiled wryly as Alanna jumped. There were advantages to being a legend; people seldom noticed the obvious when dealing with a legend.

Alanna stalked into the room in a swish of silk skirts and took the place Cadsuane had indicated, but there was a sulky twist to her mouth.

"Why do you persist in badgering me?" she demanded. "I cannot tell you any more than I have. And if I could, I don't know that I would! He belongs to—!" She cut off abruptly, biting her lower lip, but she might as well have finished. The al'Thor boy belonged to her; her Warder. She had the gall to think that!

"I have kept your crime to myself," Cadsuane said quietly, "but only because I saw no reason to complicate matters." Lifting her eyes to the other woman, she kept her voice soft. "If you think that means I won't core you like a cabbage, think again."

Alanna stiffened. The light of *saidar* suddenly shone around her.

"If you wish to be truly foolish." Cadsuane smiled, a cold smile. She made no move to embrace the Source herself. One of her dangling hair ornaments, intertwined golden crescents, was cool on her temple. "You keep a whole hide at present, but my sufferance is not infinite. In fact, it dangles by a thread."

Alanna struggled with herself, unconsciously smoothing blue silk. Abruptly the glow of the Power winked out, and she turned her head away from Cadsuane so swiftly that her long black hair swung. "I don't know any more to tell." The sullen words rushed out of her breathily. "He was injured, and then not, but I don't think a sister Healed him. The wounds no one could Heal are still there. He leaps about, Traveling, but he's still in the south. Somewhere in Illian, I think, but at this distance, he could be in Tear for all I know. He's full of rage, and pain, and suspicion. There isn't any more, Cadsuane. There isn't!"

Careful of the silver pitcher's heat, Cadsuane poured a cup of tea, testing the thin green porcelain cup for warmth. As might have been expected in silver, the tea had cooled quickly. Channeling briefly, she heated it again. The dark tea tasted too much of mint; Cairhienin used mint entirely too freely in her opinion. She did not offer a cup to Alanna. Traveling. How *could* the boy have rediscovered what had been lost to the White Tower since the Breaking? "You will keep me fully informed, however, won't you, Alanna." That was not a question. "Look at me, woman! If you *dream* of him, I want every detail!"

Unshed tears glistened in Alanna's eyes. "In my place, you would have done the same!"

Cadsuane scowled over the cup at her. She might have. There was no difference between what Alanna had done and a man forcing himself on a woman, but, the Light help her, she might have, had she believed it would help her reach her goal. Now, she no longer considered even making Alanna pass the bond to her. Alanna had proved how useless that was in controlling him.

"Do not keep me waiting, Alanna," she said in an icy tone. She had no sympathy for the other woman. Alanna was another in a line of sisters, from Moiraine to Elaida, who had bungled and worsened what they should have been mending. While she herself had been off chasing first Logain Ablar and then Mazrim Taim. Which did not soothe her mood.

"I will keep you fully informed," Alanna sighed, pouting like a girl. Cadsuane itched to slap her. Alanna had worn the shawl over twenty years; she should have grown up more than this. Of course, she was Arafellin. In Far Madding, few girls of twenty sulked and pouted as much as an Arafellin could on her aged deathbed.

Abruptly, Alanna's eyes widened in alarm, and Cadsuane saw another face reflected in the lid of her thread box. Setting the cup back on the tray and her embroidery hoop on the table, Cadsuane stood and turned to the door. She did not hurry, but she did not dally or play games as she had with Alanna, either.

"Are you done with her, Aes Sedai?" Sorilea asked, stepping into the room. The leathery, white-haired Wise One spoke to Cadsuane, but her eyes remained on Alanna. Ivory and gold clicked softly at her wrists as she planted hands on her hips, and her dark shawl slid to her elbows.

When Cadsuane said that she was indeed done, Sorilea gestured curtly to Alanna, who stalked from the room. Flounced might have been a better word, with sullen irritation on her face. Sorilea frowned after her. Cadsuane had encountered the woman before, and interesting encounters they had been, if brief. She had not met many people she considered formidable, but Sorilea was one. Perhaps even a match for herself, in some ways. She also suspected the woman was as old as she was, maybe older, and that, she had never expected to find.

No sooner had Alanna vanished than Kiruna appeared in the doorway, kicking gray silk skirts in her hurry and peering down the hall in the direction Alanna had gone. And carrying an intricately worked golden tray that held an even more elaborate golden pitcher with a high neck, and, incongruously, two small, white-glazed pottery cups. "Why is Alanna running?" she said. "I would have been faster, Sorilea, but—" She saw

Cadsuane then, and her cheeks went the deepest possible crimson. Embarrassment looked quite odd on the statuesque woman.

“Put the tray on the table, girl,” Sorilea said, “and go to Chaelin. She will be waiting to give you your lessons.”

Stiffly, Kiruna set her burden down, avoiding Cadsuane’s eyes. As she turned to go, Sorilea caught her chin in sinewy fingers. “You have begun to make a true effort, girl,” the Wise One told her firmly. “If you continue, you will do very well. Very well. Now, go. Chaelin is not as patient as I.”

Sorilea waved toward the corridor, but Kiruna stood staring at her for a long moment, a strange expression on her face. If Cadsuane had had to make a wager, she would have called Kiruna pleased at the praise and surprised at being pleased. The white-haired woman opened her mouth, and Kiruna gave herself a shake and hurried from the room. A remarkable show.

“Do you really think she will learn your ways of weaving *saidar*?” Cadsuane asked, hiding her incredulity. Kiruna and the others had told her of these lessons, but many of the Wise Ones’ weaves were very different from those taught in the White Tower. The first way you learned the weave for a particular thing imprinted itself on you; learning a second was all but impossible, and even when you could learn, the second-learned weave almost never worked nearly as well. That was one reason some sisters did not welcome wilders to the Tower at any age; too much might have been learned already, and could not be unlearned.

Sorilea shrugged. “Perhaps. Learning a second way is hard enough without all the hand-waving you Aes Sedai do. The main thing Kiruna Nachiman must learn is that she owns her pride; it does not own her. She will be a very strong woman once she learns that.” Pulling a chair around to face the one Cadsuane had been sitting in, she eyed it doubtfully, then sat down. She appeared almost as stiff and uncomfortable as Kiruna had, but she motioned authoritatively for Cadsuane to sit, a strong-willed woman used to command.

Cadsuane swallowed a rueful chuckle as she took her chair. It was well to be reminded that, wilders or not, the Wise Ones were far from ignorant savages. Of course they would know the difficulties. As for hand-waving. . . . Few had channeled where she could see, but she had noticed that they created some weaves without the gestures that sisters used. The hand movements were not truly part of the weave, but in a way they were, because they had been part of learning the weave. Perhaps, once, there had been Aes Sedai who could, say, hurl a ball of fire without some sort of throwing motion, but if so, they were long dead, and their teachings with them. Today, some things just could not be done without the appropriate gestures. There were sisters who claimed they could tell who had taught another sister by which motions she used for which weaves.

"Teaching any of our new apprentices anything has been difficult at best," Sorilea went on. "I do not speak to offend, but you Aes Sedai give oath, it seems, and immediately try to find a way around it. Alanna Mosvani is particularly difficult." Suddenly her clear green eyes were very sharp on Cadsuane's face. "How can we punish her willful failings if it means harming the *Car'a'carn*?"

Cadsuane folded her hands in her lap. Masking surprise was not easy. So much for the secret of Alanna's crime. But why had the woman let her know that she knew? Perhaps one revelation called for another. "The bond does not work in that fashion," she said. "If you kill her, he will die, then or soon after. Short of that, he will be aware of what happens to her, but he will not really feel it. As far away as he is now, he will only be vaguely aware, at that."

Sorilea nodded slowly. Her fingers touched the golden tray on the table, then came away. Her expression was as hard to read as the face of a statue, but Cadsuane suspected that Alanna would find an unpleasant surprise the next time she let her temper flare, or threw one of her Arafellin sulks. That was unimportant, though. Only the boy was important.

"Most men will take what is offered, if it seems attractive and pleasant," Sorilea said. "Once, we thought of Rand al'Thor so. Unfortunately, it is too late to change the path we walk. Now, he suspects whatever is offered freely. Now, if I wanted him to accept something, I would pretend I did not want him to have it. If I wanted to stay close to him, I would pretend indifference to whether I ever saw him again." Once more, those eyes focused on Cadsuane, green augers. Not trying to see what lay inside her head. The woman knew. Some, at least. Enough, or too much.

Still, Cadsuane felt a rising thrill of possibility. If she had had any doubts that Sorilea wanted to feel her out, they were gone. And you did not feel out someone in this manner unless you hoped for some agreement. "Do you believe a man must be hard?" she asked. She was taking a chance. "Or strong?" By her tone, she left no doubt she saw a difference.

Again Sorilea touched the tray; the smallest of smiles might have quirked her lips for an instant. Or not. “Most men see the two as one and the same, Cadsuane Melaidhrin. Strong endures; hard shatters.”

Cadsuane drew breath. A chance she would have scoured anyone else for taking. But she was not anyone else, and sometimes chances had to be taken. “The boy confuses them,” she said. “He needs to be strong, and makes himself harder. Too hard, already, and he will not stop until he is stopped. He has forgotten how to laugh except in bitterness; there are no tears left in him. Unless he finds laughter and tears again, the world faces disaster. He must learn that even the Dragon Reborn is flesh. If he goes to Tarmon Gai’don as he is, even his victory may be as dark as his defeat.”

Sorilea listened intently, and kept silent even after Cadsuane finished. Those green eyes studied her. “Your Dragon Reborn and your Last Battle are not in our prophecies,” Sorilea said at last. “We have tried to make Rand al’Thor know his blood, but I fear he sees us as only another spear. If one spear breaks in your hand, you do not pause to mourn before taking up another. Perhaps you and I aim at targets not too far apart.”

“Perhaps we do,” Cadsuane said cautiously. Targets even a hand apart might be not at all alike.

Abruptly, the glow of *saidar* surrounded the leather-faced woman. She was weak enough to make Daigian look at least moderately strong. But then, Sorilea’s strength did not lie in the Power. “There is a thing you may find useful,” she said. “I cannot make it work, but I can weave the flows to show you.” She did just that, laying feeble skeins that fell into place and melted, too poor to do what they were intended for. “It is called Traveling,” Sorilea said.

This time, Cadsuane’s jaw dropped. Alanna and Kiruna and the rest denied teaching the Wise Ones how to link, or a number of other skills they suddenly seemed to have, and Cadsuane had assumed the Aiel had managed to wring them out of the sisters held in the tents. But this was. . . .

Impossible, she would have said, yet she did not believe Sorilea was lying. She could hardly wait to try the weave herself. Not that it was of much use immediately. Even if she knew exactly where the wretched boy was, she had to make him come to her. Sorilea was right about that. “A very great gift,” she said slowly. “I have nothing I can give you to compare.”

This time, there was no doubt of the brief smile that flashed across Sorilea’s lips. She knew very well that Cadsuane was in her debt. Taking up the heavy golden pitcher with both hands, she carefully filled the small white cups. With plain water. She did not spill a drop.

“I offer you water oath,” she said solemnly, picking up one of the cups. “By this, we are bound as one, to teach Rand al’Thor laughter and tears.” She sipped, and Cadsuane imitated her.

“We are bound as one.” And if their targets turned out not to be the same at all? She did not underestimate Sorilea as ally or opponent, but Cadsuane knew which target had to be struck, at any cost.

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CHAPTER 13

Floating Like Snow

The northern horizon was purple with the fierce rain that had hammered the east of Illian through the night. Overhead, a morning sky of dark boiling clouds threatened, and strong winds flung cloaks about, made banners snap and crack like whips on the crest of the ridge, the white Dragon Banner and the crimson Banner of Light, and the bright standards of nobility from Illian and Cairhien and Tear. The nobles kept to their own kind, three widely spaced knots awash in gilt and silver-plated steel, silks and velvets and laces, but in common they looked around uneasily. Even the best-trained of their horses tossed heads and stamped hooves on the muddy ground. The wind was cold, and colder seeming for the heat it had replaced so abruptly, just as the rain had been a shock after so long without. From whatever nation, they had prayed for the baking drought to break, but none knew what to make of unrelenting storms in answer to their prayers. Some glanced at Rand when they thought he would not notice. Perhaps wondering if *he* had answered them so. The thought made him laugh softly, bitterly.

He patted his black gelding's neck with a leather-gauntleted hand, glad that Tai'daishar did not show nerves. The massive animal might have been a statue, awaiting the pressure of reins or knees to move. It was good that the Dragon Reborn's horse seemed as cold as he did, as though they floated in the Void together. Even with the One Power raging through him, fire and ice and death, he was barely aware of the wind, though it flailed his gold-embroidered cloak about and cut through his coat, green silk thickly worked with gold and not intended for wear in such weather. The wounds in his side ached and throbbed, the old and the new cutting across it, the wounds that would never heal, but that was distant, too, another man's flesh. The Crown of Swords might have been pricking someone else's temples with the sharp points of the tiny blades among its golden laurel leaves. Even the filth woven through *saidin* seemed less obtrusive than it once had; still vile, still loathsome, but no longer worth notice. The nobles' eyes on his back were palpable, though.

Shifting his sword hilt, he leaned forward. He could see the tight cluster of low, wooded hills half a mile to the east as clearly as if he were using a looking glass. The land was flat, here, the only prominences those forested hills and this long ridge, thrusting up from the heath. The next thicket dense enough to truly deserve the name lay close to ten miles off. Only storm-battered half-leafless trees and tangles of undergrowth were visible on the hills, but he knew what they hid. Two, perhaps three thousand of the men Sammael had gathered to try to stop him from taking Illian.

That army had disintegrated once they learned that the man who had summoned them was dead, that Mattin Stepaneos had vanished, perhaps into the grave as well, and that there was a new king in Illian. Many had scattered back to their homes, yet just as many clung together. Usually no more than twenty here, thirty there, but a great army if they came together again, and countless armed bands otherwise. Either way, they could not be allowed to roam the countryside. Time weighed down on his shoulders like lead. There was never enough time, but maybe this once. . . . Fire and ice and death.

What would you do? he thought. *Are you there*? And then, doubtfully, hating the doubt, *Were you ever there*? Silence answered, deep and dead in the emptiness that surrounded him. Or was there mad laughter somewhere in the recesses of his mind? Did he imagine it, like the feel of someone looking over his shoulder, someone just on the brink of touching his back? Or the colors that swirled just out of sight, more than colors, and were gone? A thing of madmen. His gloved thumb slid along the carvings that serpentined the Dragon Scepter. The long green-and-white tassels below the polished spear-point fluttered in the wind. Fire and ice, and death would come.

“I will go talk to them myself,” he announced. Which produced a furor.

Lord Gregorin, the green sash of the Council of Nine slanted across his ornately gilded breastplate, hurried his fine-ankled white gelding forward from the Illianers, followed closely by Demetre Marcolin, First Captain of the Companions, on a solid bay. Marcolin was the only man among them without silk or a speck of lace, the only man in plain if brightly burnished armor, though the conical helmet resting on his saddle’s high pommel did bear three thin golden plumes. Lord Marac lifted his reins, then let them fall uncertainly when he saw no others of the Nine move. A wide man with a stolid manner, and new to the Council, he often seemed more craftsman than lord despite the rich silks beneath his lavish armor and the falls of lace spilling over. High Lords Weiramon and Tolmeran spurred together from the Tairens, as crusted with gold and silver as any of the Nine, and Rosana, newly raised to High Lady and wearing a breastplate worked with the Hawk-and-Stars of her House. There, too, others half made as if to follow then hung back, looking worried. Blade-slender Aracome and blue-eyed Maraconn and bald-headed Gueyam were dead men; they did not know that, but however much they wanted to be at the center of power, they feared Rand would kill them. Only Lord Semaradrid came from the Cairhienin, on a gray that had seen better days, his armor battered, its gilding chipped. His face was gaunt and hard, the front of his head shaved and powdered like a common soldier, and his dark eyes shone with contempt for the taller Tairens.

There was plenty of contempt to go around. Tairens and Cairhienin hated one another. Illianers and Tairens despised each other. Only Cairhienin and Illianers got along to any degree, and there was a certain amount of prickle even there. Their two nations might not have near the long history of bad blood shared by Tear and Illian, yet the Cairhienin still were foreigners, armed and armored on Illian’s soil, welcomed halfheartedly at best and only that much because they followed Rand. But despite all the frowning and bristling and trying to talk at once as they milled about Rand in a flurry of windblown cloaks, they had a common goal now. After a fashion.

“Majesty,” Gregorin said hastily, bowing in his gold-tooled saddle, “I do beg you let me go in your stead, or First Captain Marcolin.” The square-cut beard that left his upper lip bare framed a round face creased with worry. “These men must know you are King—the proclamations do be read in every village, at every crossroads, as we do speak—yet they may no show proper respect for your crown.” Lantern-jawed Marcolin, clean-shaven, studied Rand with dark, deep-set eyes, giving no hint what lay behind his impassive face. The Companions’ loyalty was to the crown of Illian, and Marcolin was old enough to remember when Tarn al’Thor had been Second Captain over him, but only he knew what he thought of Rand al’Thor as King.

“My Lord Dragon,” Weiramon intoned as he made his bow, not waiting for Gregorin to finish. The man always intoned, and even on horseback he seemed to strut. His worked velvets and striped silks and falls of lace almost overwhelmed his armor, and his pointed gray beard gave off a flowery scent of perfumed oils. “This rabble is too petty to concern the Lord Dragon personally. Set dogs to catch dogs, I say. Let the Illianers root them out. Burn my soul, they’ve done nothing so far to serve you but talk.” Trust him to turn agreement with Gregorin into an insult. Tolmeran was lean enough to make Weiramon appear bulky and somber enough to dim the luster of his garb; he was no fool, and rival to Weiramon besides, yet he nodded slowly in agreement. No love lost there for Illianers, at all.

Semaradrid curled a lip at the Tairens but addressed himself to Rand, cutting in hard on Weiramon’s heels. “This gathering is ten times as large as any other we have found so far, my Lord Dragon.” He cared nothing for the King of Illian, and little enough for the Dragon Reborn, except that the throne of Cairhien was Rand’s to give, and Semaradrid hoped it would be given to one he could follow instead of fight. “Their loyalties must be to Brend, or so many would not have held together. I fear talking to them is a waste of time, but if you must talk, let me ring their position openly with steel so they know the price of putting a foot out of line.”

Rosana glared right back at Semaradrid, a lean woman, not tall yet nearly as tall as he, with eyes like blue ice. She did not wait for him to finish, either, and she, too, spoke to Rand. “I’ve come too far and invested too much in you to see you die now, for nothing,” she said bluntly. No more a fool than Tolmeran, Rosana had claimed a place in the councils of the High Lords, though Tairen High Ladies seldom did, and blunt was the word for her. Despite the armor most of the noblewomen wore, none actually led their armsmen into battle, yet Rosana carried a flanged mace on her saddle, and sometimes Rand thought she would like a chance to use it. “I doubt those Illianers lack for bows," she said, "and it takes only one arrow to kill even the Dragon Reborn." Pursing his lips thoughtfully, Marcolin nodded before catching himself, then exchanged startled looks with Rosana, each more surprised than the other to find themselves of like mind with an ancient enemy.

"These peasants could never have found the mettle to stay under arms without encouragement," Weiramon continued smoothly, ignoring Rosana. He was skilled at ignoring who, and what, he did not want to see or hear. He *was* a fool. "May I suggest my Lord Dragon look to these so-called Nine for the source?"

"I do protest this Tairen pig's insults, Majesty!" Gregorin growled right atop him, one hand darting to his sword. "I do protest most heartily!"

"There are too many this time," Semaradrid said at the same instant. "Most will turn against you as soon as your back is to them in any case." By his pointed frown, he might have been speaking of the Tairens as well as the men on the wooded hills. Perhaps he was. "Better to kill them and be done!"

"Did I ask for opinions?" Rand snapped harshly. Babble became silence, except for the crack of cloaks and banners flapping in the wind. Suddenly expressionless faces regarded him, more than one going gray. They did not know he held the Power, but they knew him. Not all of what they knew was truth, but it was just as well they believed. "You will come with me, Gregorin," he said in a more normal voice. Still hard, though. Steel was all they understood; go soft, and they *would* turn on him. "And you, Marcolin. The rest stay here. Dashiva! Hopwil!"

Everyone not named reined their horses back hurriedly as the two Asha'man rode to join Rand, and the Illianers eyed the black-coated men as though they would have liked to remain behind, too. Aside from anything else, Corlan Dashiva was glowering and muttering under his breath as he so often did. Everyone was aware that *saidin* drove men mad sooner or later, and plain-faced Dashiva certainly looked the part, lank untrimmed hair flying in the wind, licking his lips and shaking his head. For that matter, Eben Hopwil, just sixteen and still with a few scattered blotches on his cheeks, wore a staring frown that gazed beyond anything in sight. At least Rand knew the why of that.

As the Asha'man drew near, Rand could not help cocking his head to listen, though what he listened for was inside his head. Alanna was there, of course; neither the Void nor the Power altered that a whisker. Distance wore that awareness down to just that—awareness that she existed, somewhere far to the north—yet there was something more today, something he had felt several times recently, dim and barely on the edge of notice. A whisper of shock, perhaps, or outrage, a breath of something sharp he could not quite grasp. She must feel whatever it was very strongly for him to be even that conscious of it at this distance. Maybe she was missing him. A wry thought. He did not miss her. Ignoring Alanna was easier than it had been once. She was there, but not the voice that used to shout of death and killing whenever an Asha’man came into sight. Lews Therin was gone. Unless that feel of someone staring at the back of his head, brushing his shoulder blades with a finger, was him. *Was* there a madman’s hoarse laughter deep in his thoughts? Or was it his own? The man *had* been there! He had!

He became aware of Marcolin staring at him, and Gregorin trying very hard not to. “Not yet,” he told them wryly, and almost laughed when they clearly understood right away. Relief was too plain on their faces for anything else. He was not insane. Yet. “Come,” he told them, and started Tai’daishar down the slope at a trot. Despite the men following, he felt alone. Despite the Power, he felt empty.

Between the ridge and the hills lay patches of thick scrub and long stretches of dead grass, a glistening mat of brown and yellow beaten flat by the rain. Only a few days ago the ground had been so parched that he had thought it could drink a river without changing. Then the torrents came, sent by the Creator finding mercy at last, or maybe by the Dark One in a fit of black humor; he did not know which. Now the horses’ hooves splashed mud at every second step. He hoped this did not take long. He had some time, by what Hopwil had reported, but not forever. Perhaps weeks, if he was lucky. He needed months. Light, he needed years he would never have!

His hearing heightened by the Power, he could make out some of what the men behind him were saying. Gregorin and Marcolin rode knee-to-knee, trying to hold their cloaks against the wind and speaking in low tones about the men ahead, about their fears the men might fight. Neither doubted they would be crushed if they resisted, but they feared the effect on Rand, and his on Illian, if Illianers fought him now that Brend was dead. They still could not bring themselves to give Brend his true name, Sammael. The very notion that one of the Forsaken had ruled in Illian frightened them even more than the fact that the Dragon Reborn ruled there now.

Dashiva, slumped in his gray’s saddle like a man who had never seen a horse before, muttered angrily under his breath. In the Old Tongue, which he spoke and read as fluently as a scholar. Rand knew a little, though not enough to understand what the fellow was mumbling. Probably complaints about the weather; despite being a farmer, Dashiva disliked being out-of-doors unless the skies were clear.

Only Hopwil rode in silence, frowning at something beyond the horizon, his hair and cloak whipping about as wildly as Dashiva’s. Now and then he clutched the hilt of his sword unconsciously. Rand had to speak three times, the last sharply, before Hopwil gave a surprised jerk and booted his lanky dun up beside Tai’daishar.

Rand studied him. The young man—not a boy any longer, no matter his age—had filled out since Rand first saw him, though his nose and ears still seemed made for a bigger man. A Dragon, red-enameled gold, now balanced the silver Sword on his high collar, just like Dashiva’s. Once, he had said he would laugh a year for joy when the Dragon was his, but he stared unblinking at Rand as though looking through him.

“What you learned was good news,” Rand told him. Only an effort kept him from trying to crush the Dragon Scepter in his fist. “You did well.” He had expected the Seanchan to return, but not so soon. He had hoped not so soon. And not leaping out of nowhere, swallowing cities at a gulp. When he found out that merchants in Illian had known for days before any of them thought to inform the Nine—the Light forbid they should lose a chance at profit because too many knew too much!—he had been within a hair of scouring the city to its foundations. But the news was good, or as good as it could be in the circumstances. Hopwil had Traveled to Amador, to the countryside nearby, and the Seanchan appeared to be waiting. Perhaps digesting what they had consumed. The Light send they choked on it! He forced his grip to loosen on the length of Dragon-carved spearhead. “If Morr brings half as good, I have time to settle Illian before dealing with them.” Ebou Dar, as well! The Light burn the Seanchan! They were a distraction, one he did not need and could not afford to ignore.

Hopwil said nothing, only looked.

“Are you upset because you had to kill women?” *Desora, of the Musara Reyn, and Lamelle, of the Smoke Water Miagoma, and. . . .* Rand forced down the instinctive litany even as it began floating across the Void. New names had appeared on that list, names he did not remember adding.

Laigin Arnault, a Red sister who had died trying to take him a prisoner to Tar Valon. Surely she had no right to a place, but she had claimed one. Colavaere Saighan, who had hanged herself rather than accept justice. Others. Men had died in thousands, by his order or by his hand, but it was the faces of the women that haunted his dreams. Each night, he made himself confront their silently accusing eyes. Maybe it was their eyes he had felt of late.

"I told you about *damane* and *sul'dam,"* he said calmly, but inside of him, rage flared, fire spiderwebbing around the emptiness of the Void. *The Light burn me, I've killed more women than all your nightmares could hold! My hands are* black *with the blood of women!* "If you hadn't wiped out that Seanchan patrol, they'd have killed you for sure." He did not say that Hopwil should have avoided them, avoided the need to kill them. Too late for that. "I doubt that *damane* even knew how to shield a man. You had no choice." And better they were all dead than some escaping with word of a man who could channel, scouting them.

Absently, Hopwil touched his left sleeve, where the black color disguised fire-scarred wool. The Seanchan had not died easily or fast. "I piled the bodies in a hollow," he said in a flat voice. "The horses, everything. I burned it all to ash. White ash that floated in the wind like snow. It didn't bother me at all."

Rand heard the lie on the man's tongue, but Hopwil had to learn. After all, he had. They were what they were, and that was all there was to it. All there was. Liah, of the Cosaida Chareen, a name written in fire. Moiraine Damodred, another name that seared to the soul rather than merely burning. A nameless Darkfriend, represented only by a face, who had died by his sword near. . . .

"Majesty," Gregorin said loudly, pointing ahead. A lone man came out of the trees at the foot of the nearest hill to stand waiting in an attitude of defiance. He carried a bow, and wore a pointed steel cap and a belted mail shirt that hung nearly to his knees.

Rand spurred Tai'daishar to meet him seething with the Power. *Saidin* could protect him from men.

Up close, the bowman did not make so brave a sight. Rust streaked his helmet and mail, and he looked sodden, mud to his thighs, damp hair trailing down a narrow face. Coughing hollowly, he scrubbed at a long nose with the back of his hand. His bowstring appeared taut, though; that, he had protected from the rain. And the fletchings on the arrows in his quiver looked dry, too.

"Are you the leader here?" Rand demanded.

"You might say I do speak for him," the narrow-faced man replied warily. "Why?" As the others galloped up behind Rand, he shifted his feet, dark eyes like a cornered badger's. Badgers were dangerous, cornered.

"Watch your tongue, man!" Gregorin snapped. "You do speak to Rand al'Thor, the Dragon Reborn, Lord of the Morning and King of Illian! Kneel to your King! What do your name be?"

"He do be the Dragon Reborn?" the fellow said doubtfully. Eyeing Rand from the crown on his head to his boots, lingering a moment on the gilded Dragon buckling his sword belt, the man shook his head as if he had expected someone older, or grander. "And Lord of the Morning, you do say? Our King did never style himself so." He made no move toward kneeling, or giving his name. Gregorin's face darkened at the man's tone, and maybe at the man's oblique denial of Rand as King. Marcolin gave a slight nod, as though he had expected no more.

Damp rustlings stirred in the undergrowth among the trees. Rand heard easily, and abruptly he felt *saidin* fill Hopwil. No longer staring at nothing, Hopwil studied the woodline intently, a wild light in his eyes. Dashiva, silent, raking dark hair out of his face, looked bored. Leaning forward in his saddle, Gregorin opened his mouth angrily. Fire and ice, but not yet death.

"Peace, Gregorin." Rand did not raise his voice, but he wove flows to carry his words, Air and Fire, so they boomed against the wall of trees. "My offer is generous." The long-nosed man staggered at the sound, and Gregorin's horse shied. Those hidden men would hear clearly. "Lay down your arms, and those who want to return home, can. Those who want to follow me instead, can do that. But no man leaves here under arms unless he *does* follow me. I know most of you are good men, who answered the call of your King and the Council of Nine to defend Illian, but *I* am your King, now, and I'll not have anyone tempted to turn bandit." Marcolin nodded grimly.

"What about your Dragonsworn burning farms?" a man's frightened voice shouted from the trees. "They do be flaming bandits!"

"What about your Aiel?" another called. "I do hear they carry off whole villages!" More voices from unseen men joined in, all shouting the same things, Dragon-sworn and Aiel, murderous brigands and savages. Rand ground his teeth.

When the shouting faded, narrow-face said, “You do see?” He paused to cough, then hawked and spat, maybe for his chest and maybe for emphasis. A pitiful sight, all wet and rust, but his backbone was as tight as his bowstring. He ignored Rand’s glare as easily as he did Gregorin’s. “You do ask us to go home unarmed, unable to defend ourselves or our families, while your people do burn and steal and kill. They do say the storm be coming,” he added, and looked surprised that he had, surprised and confused for a moment.

“The Aiel you’ve heard about are my enemies!” Not spiderwebs of flame this time, but solid sheets of fury that wrapped tight around the Void. Rand’s voice was ice, though; it roared like the crack of winter. The storm was coming? Light, he *was* the storm! “*My* Aiel are hunting them down. My Aiel hunt the Shaido, and they and Davram Bashere and most of the Companions hunt bandits, whatever they call themselves! I am the King of Illian, and I will allow no one to disrupt the peace of Illian!”

“Even if what you say do be true,” narrow-face began.

“It is!” Rand snapped. “You have until midday to decide.” The man frowned uncertainly; unless the roiling clouds cleared, he might have a difficult time knowing midday. Rand gave him no relief. “Decide wisely!” he said. Whirling Tai’daishar about, he spurred the gelding to a gallop back toward the ridge without waiting for the others.

Reluctantly he let go of the Power, forced himself not to hang on like a man clutching salvation with his fingernails as life and filth drained from him together. For an instant, he saw double; the world seemed to tilt dizzily. That was a recent problem, and he worried it might be part of the sickness that killed men who channeled, but the dizziness never lasted more than moments. It was the rest of letting go that he regretted. The world seemed to dull. No, it did dull, and became somehow less. Colors were washed-out, the sky smaller, compared to what they had been before. He wanted desperately to seize the Source again and wring the One Power out of it. Always it was so when the Power left him.

No sooner had *saidin* gone, though, than rage bubbled in its place, white-hot and searing, nearly as hot as the Power had been. The Seanchan were not enough, and brigands hiding behind his name? Deadly distractions he could not afford. Was Sammael reaching out from the grave? Had he sown the Shaido to sprout like thorns wherever Rand laid a hand? Why? The man could not have *believed* he would die. And if half the tales Rand heard were true, there were more in Murandy and Altara and the Light alone knew where! Many among the Shaido already taken prisoner had spoken of an Aes Sedai. Could the *White Tower* be involved somehow? Would the White Tower never give him peace? Never? Never.

Battling fury, he was blind to Gregorin and the rest catching up. When they topped the ridge among the waiting nobles, he drew rein so abruptly that Tai'daishar reared, pawing the air and flinging mud from his hooves. The nobles edged their mounts back, from his gelding, from him.

"I gave them to midday," he announced. "Watch them. I don't want this lot breaking into fifty smaller bands and slipping away. I'll be in my tent." Except for wind-tossed cloaks they might have been stone, rooted to one spot as if he meant the command to watch for them personally. At that moment, he did not care if they stayed there till they froze or melted.

Without another word he trotted down the back slope of the ridge, followed by the two black-coated Asha'man and his Illianer banner-bearers. Fire and ice, and death was coming. But he was steel. He was steel.

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CHAPTER 14

Message from the M’Hael

A mile west of the ridge, the camps began, men and horses and cook fires, wind-flailed banners and a few scattered tents clumped by nationality, by House, each camp a lake of churned mud separated from the others by stretches of brushy heath. Men mounted and afoot watched Rand’s streaming banners pass, and peered toward other camps to gauge reactions. When the Aiel had been present, these men had made a single huge camp, driven together by one of the few things they truly shared in common. They were not Aiel, and feared them however much they denied it. The world would die unless he succeeded, but he had no illusions that they shared any loyalty to him, or even believed that the fate of the world could not be made to accommodate their own concerns, their own desires for gold or glory or power. A handful did, perhaps, a bare handful, but for the most part, they followed because they feared him far more than they did the Aiel. Maybe more than they did the Dark One, in whom some did not really believe, not in the depths of their hearts, not that he could and would touch the world harder than he had already. Rand stood before their faces, and they believed in that. He accepted it, now. He had too many battles ahead of him to waste effort on one he could not win. So long as they followed and obeyed, it had to be enough.

The largest of the camps was his own, and here Illianer Companions in green coats with yellow cuffs rubbed shoulders with Tairen Defenders of the Stone in fat-sleeved coats striped black-and-gold and an equal number of Cairhienin drawn from forty-odd Houses, in dark colors, some with *con* stiff above their heads. They cooked at different fires, slept apart, picketed their horses apart, and eyed one another warily, but they mingled. The safety of the Dragon Reborn was their responsibility, and they took the job seriously. Any of them might betray him, but not while the others were there to watch. Old hatreds and new dislikes would bring betrayal of any plot before the betrayer stopped to think.

A ring of steel stood guard around Rand's tent, a huge peaked thing of green silk embroidered all over with bees in thread-of-gold. It had belonged to his predecessor, Mattin Stepaneos, and had come with the crown, in a manner of speaking. Companions in burnished conical helmets stood side by side with Defenders in helmets ridged and rimmed, and Cairhienin in bell-shaped helms, ignoring the wind, barred faceguards hiding their features, halberds slanted precisely. Not one moved a hair when Rand drew rein, but a bevy of servants came running to attend to him and the Asha'man. A bony woman in the green-and-yellow vest of a groom from the Royal Palace in Illian took his bridle, while his stirrup was held by a bulbous-nosed fellow in the black-and-gold livery of the Stone of Tear. They tugged forelocks to him, and cast only one sharp look at one another. Boreane Carivin, a stout pale little woman in a dark dress, self-importantly offered him a silver tray of damp cloths from which steam rose. Cairhienin, she watched the other two, though more as if making sure they did their tasks properly than with the animosity for each other they barely hid. But with care, still. What worked with the soldiers worked with the servants as well.

Drawing off his gauntlets, Rand waved away Boreane's tray. Damer Flinn had risen from an ornately carved bench in front of the tent as Rand dismounted. Bald except for a ragged white fringe, Flinn looked more a grandfather than an Asha'man. A leather-tough grandfather with a stiff leg, who had seen more of the world than a farm. The sword at his hip looked as if it belonged, as well it should on a former soldier of the Queen's Guard. Rand trusted him more than most. Flinn had saved his life, after all.

Flinn saluted, fist to chest, and when Rand acknowledged him with a nod, limped closer and waited until the grooms left with the horses before speaking in a low voice. “Torval’s here. Sent by the M’Hael, he says. He wanted to wait in the council tent. I told Narishma to watch him.” That had been Rand’s command, though he was not sure why he had given it; no one who came from the Black Tower was to be left alone. Hesitating, Flinn fingered the Dragon on his black collar. “He wasn’t happy to hear you’d raised all of us.”

“Wasn’t he, now,” Rand said softly, tucking his gloves behind his sword belt. And because Flinn still looked uncertain, he added, “You all earned it.” He had been about to send one of the Asha’man to Taim—the Leader, the M’Hael, as the Asha’man all called him—but now Torval could carry the message. In the council tent? “Have refreshments sent,” he told Flinn, then motioned Hopwil and Dashiva to follow.

Flinn saluted again, but Rand was already striding away, black mud squelching around his boots. No cheers rose for him in the blustering wind. He could recall when there had been. If that was not one of Lews Therin’s memories. If Lews Therin had ever been real. A flash of color just beyond the edge of sight, the feel of someone about to touch him from behind. With an effort, he focused himself.

The council tent was a large red-striped pavilion that had once sat on the Plains of Maredo, now pitched in the middle of Rand’s encampment, surrounded by thirty paces of bare ground. There were never guards here, not unless Rand was meeting with the nobles. Anyone trying to slip in would have been seen instantly by a thousand prying eyes. Three banners on tall poles formed a triangle around the tent, the Rising Sun of Cairhien, the Three Crescents of Tear, and the Golden Bees of Illian, and above the crimson roof, higher than the rest, stood the Dragon Banner, and the Banner of Light. The wind made them all stand out, rippling and snapping, and the tent walls shivered in the gusts. Inside, colorful, fringed carpets made a floor, and the only furniture was a huge table, thickly carved and gilded, inlaid with ivory and turquoise. A jumble of maps almost hid the tabletop.

Torval lifted his head from the maps, plainly ready to give the rough side of his tongue to whoever had barged in on him. Close to his middle years and tall beside anyone save Rand or an Aiel, he stared coldly down a sharp nose that practically quivered with indignation. The Dragon and the Sword glistened on his coat collar in the light of the stand-lamps. A silk coat, shining black, cut fine enough for a lord. His sword had silver mountings washed with gold, and a glittering red gem capped the hilt.

Another gleamed darkly on a finger ring. You could not train men to be weapons without expecting a certain amount of arrogance, yet Rand did not like Torval. But then, he had no need of Lews Therin's voice to be suspicious of any man in a black coat. How far did he truly trust even Flinn? Yet he had to lead them. The Asha'man were his making, his responsibility.

When Torval saw Rand, he straightened casually and saluted, but his expression barely changed. He had had a sneering mouth the first time Rand ever saw him. "My Lord Dragon," he said in the accents of Tarabon, and he might have been greeting an equal. Or being gracious to an inferior. His swaggering bow took in Hopwil and Dashiva as well. "I give congratulations on the conquest of Illian. A great victory, yes? There would have been wine to greet you, but this young . . . Dedicated . . . does not seem to understand orders."

In the corner, silver bells on the ends of Narishma's two long dark braids made a faint sound as he shifted. He had tanned darkly in the southern sun, but some things about him had not changed. Older than Rand, his face made him seem younger than Hopwil, but the red that rose in his cheeks was anger, not embarrassment. His pride in the new-won Sword on his collar was quiet, yet deep. Torval smiled at him, a slow smile both amused and dangerous. Dashiva laughed, a short bark, and was still.

"What are you doing here, Torval?" Rand asked roughly. He tossed the Dragon Scepter and his gauntlets down atop the maps and followed them with his sword belt and scabbarded sword. The maps that Torval had no reason to be studying. No need of Lews Therin's voice.

With a shrug, Torval produced a letter from his coat pocket and handed it to Rand. "The M'Hael, he sent this." The paper was snowy white and thick, the seal a dragon impressed in a large oval of blue wax that glittered with golden flecks. It might almost have been thought to come from the Dragon Reborn. Taim did think well of himself. "The M'Hael said to tell you the tales of Aes Sedai in Murandy with an army, they are true. Rumor says they are rebels against Tar Valon"—Torval's sneer thickened with disbelief—"but they are marching toward the Black Tower. Soon, they may become a danger, yes?"

Rand cracked the magnificent seal to bits between his fingers. "They're going to Caemlyn, not the Black Tower, and they're no threat. My orders were clear. Leave Aes Sedai alone unless they come after you."

“But how can you be sure they are not a threat?” Torval persisted. “Perhaps they are going to Caemlyn, as you say, but if you are wrong, we’ll not know before they attack us.”

“Torval might be right,” Dashiva put in thoughtfully. “I can’t say I’d trust women who put me in a box, and these haven’t sworn any oaths. Or have they?”

“I said leave them alone!” Rand slapped the tabletop, hard, and Hopwil jumped in surprise. Dashiva frowned with irritation before hurriedly smoothing it over, but Rand was not interested in Dashiva’s moods. By chance—he was sure it was chance—his hand had come down on the Dragon Scepter. His arm trembled with the desire to take it up and stab Torval through the heart. No need for Lews Therin at all. “The Asha’man are a weapon to be aimed where I say, not to flutter around like hens every time Taim gets frightened over a handful of Aes Sedai having dinner at the same inn. If I must, I can come back to make myself clearer.”

“I am sure there is no need of that,” Torval said quickly. At last something had wiped the wry twist from his mouth. Eyes tight, he spread his hands, close to diffident, very nearly apologetic. And plainly frightened. “The M’Hael, he merely wanted you informed. Your orders are read aloud every day at Morning Directives, after the Creed.”

“That’s good, then.” Rand kept his voice cool, kept a scowl from his face by main effort. It was his precious M’Hael the man feared, not the Dragon Reborn. Afraid Taim would take it amiss if something he had said brought Rand’s anger on Taim’s head. “Because I’ll kill any one of you who goes near those women in Murandy. You cut where I direct.”

Torval bowed rigidly, murmuring, “As you say, my Lord Dragon.” His teeth were bared in an attempted smile, but his nose was pinched, and he struggled to avoid meeting anyone’s eyes while seeming to avoid nothing. Dashiva yelped another laugh, and Hopwil wore a small grin.

Narishma was not enjoying Torval’s discomfort, though, or paying it attention. He looked at Rand without blinking, as though he sensed deep currents that the rest missed. Most women and no few men thought him just a pretty boy, but those too-big eyes sometimes seemed more knowing than any others.

Rand pulled his hand from the Dragon Scepter and smoothed open the letter. His hands did not quite shake. Torval smiled weakly, sourly, noticing nothing. Against the tent wall, Narishma shifted, relaxing.

The refreshments arrived, then, borne by a stately procession following Boreane, a line of Illianers and Cairhienin and Tairens in their various liveries. There was a servant bearing a silver tray and pitcher for each kind of wine, and two more with trays of silver mugs for hot punch and spiced wines and fine blown goblets for the others. A pink-faced fellow in green-and-yellow carried a tray on which to do the pouring, and a dark woman in black-and-gold was there to actually handle the pitchers. There were nuts and candied fruits, cheeses and olives, each sort requiring a serving man or woman. Under Boreane's direction, they flowed in a formal dance, bowing, curtsying, one giving way to another as they made their offerings.

Accepting spiced wine, Rand hoisted himself onto the edge of the table and sat the steaming mug beside him untouched as he busied himself with the letter. There was no address, no preamble of any kind. Taim hated giving Rand any sort of title, though he tried to hide the fact.

> *I have the honor to report that twenty-nine Asha'man, ninety-seven Dedicated and three hundred twenty-two Soldiers are now enrolled at the Black Tower. There have been a handful of deserters, unfortunately, whose names have been stricken, but losses in training remain acceptable.*
>
> *I now have as many as fifty recruiting parties in the field at any given time, with the result that three or four men are added to the rolls almost every day. In a few months, the Black Tower will equal the White, as I said it would. In a year, Tar Valon will tremble at our numbers.*
>
> *I harvested that blackberry bush myself. A small bush, and thorny, but a surprising number of berries for the size.*
>
> *Mazrim Taim*
> *M'Hael*

Rand grimaced, putting the . . . the blackberry bush . . . out of his mind. What had to be done, had to be done. The whole world paid a price for his existence. He would die for it, but the whole world paid.

There were other things to grimace over, anyway. Three or four new men a day? Taim was optimistic. In a few months, at that rate, there would be more men who could channel than Aes Sedai, true, but the newest sister had years of training behind her. And part of that specifically taught how to deal with a man who could channel. He did not want to contemplate any encounter between Asha'man and Aes Sedai who knew what they were facing; blood and regret could be the only outcome, whatever happened. The Asha'man were not aimed at the White Tower, though, no matter what Taim thought. It was a convenient belief, however, if it made Tar Valon step warily. An Asha'man only needed to know how to kill. If there were enough to do that at the right place and time, if they lived long enough to, that was all they had been created for.

"How many deserters, Torval?" he said quietly. He picked up the wine mug and took a swallow, as if the answer were unimportant. The wine should have been warming, but the ginger and sweet serrel and mace tasted bitter on his tongue. "How many losses in training?"

Torval was recovering himself over the refreshments, rubbing his hands and arching an eyebrow at the choice of wines, making a great show of knowing the best, making a show of lording it. Dashiva had accepted the first offered, and stood glowering into his twist-stemmed goblet as though it held swill. Pointing to one of the trays, Torval cocked his head thoughtfully, but he had the words ready on his tongue. "Nineteen deserters, so far. The M'Hael, he has ordered them killed whenever they are found, and their heads brought back for examples." Plucking a bit of glazed pear from the proffered tray, he popped it into his mouth and smiled brightly. "Three heads hang like fruit on the Traitor's Tree at this moment."

"Good," Rand said levelly. Men who ran now could not be trusted not to run later, when lives depended on them standing. And these men could not be allowed to go their own way; those fellows back on the hills, if they escaped in a body, were less dangerous than one man trained in the Black Tower. The Traitor's Tree? Taim was a great one for naming things. But men needed the trappings, the symbols and the names, the black coats and the pins, to help hold them together. Until it was time to die. "The next time I visit the Black Tower, I want to see every deserter's head."

A second piece of candied pear, halfway to Torval's mouth, dropped from his fingers and streaked the front of his fine coat. "It might interfere with recruiting, making that sort of effort," he said slowly. "The deserters, they do not announce themselves."

Rand held the other man's gaze until it fell. "How many losses in training?" he demanded. The sharp-nosed Asha'man hesitated. "How many?"

Narishma leaned forward, staring intently at Torval. So did Hopwil. The servants continued their smooth, silent dance, offering their trays to men who no longer saw them. Boreane took advantage of Narishma's preoccupation to make sure his silver mug held more hot water than spiced wine.

Torval shrugged, too casually. "Fifty-one, all told. Thirteen burned out, and twenty-eight dead where they stood. The rest. . . . The M'Hael, he adds something to their wine, and they do not wake." Abruptly his tone turned malicious. "It can come suddenly, at any time. One man began screaming that spiders were crawling beneath his skin on his second day." He smiled viciously at Narishma and Hopwil, and nearly so at Rand, but it was to the other two he addressed himself, swinging his head between them. "You see? Not to worry if you slide into madness. You'll not hurt yourselves or a soul. You go to sleep . . . forever. Kinder than gentling, even if we knew how. Kinder than leaving you insane *and* cut off, yes?" Narishma stared back, taut as a harpstring, his mug forgotten in his hand. Hopwil was once more frowning at something only he could see.

"Kinder," Rand said in a flat voice, setting the mug back beside him on the table. Something in the wine. My *soul is black with blood, and damned*. It was not a hard thought, not biting or edged; a simple statement of fact. "A mercy any man might wish for, Torval."

Torval's cruel smile faded, and he stood breathing hard. The sums were easy; one man in ten destroyed, one man in fifty mad, and more surely to come. Early days yet, and no way till the day you died to know you had beaten the odds. Except that the odds would beat you, one way or another, in the end. Whatever else, Torval stood under that threat, too.

Abruptly Rand became aware of Boreane. It took a moment before he recognized the expression on her face, and when he did, he bit back cold words. How dare she feel pity! Did she think Tarmon Gai'don could be won without blood? The Prophecies of the Dragon demanded blood like rain!

"Leave us," he told her, and she quietly gathered the servants. But she still carried compassion in her eyes as she herded them out.

Casting around for a way to change the mood, Rand found nothing. Pity weakened as surely as fear, and they had to be strong. To face what they had to face, they *all* must be steel. His making, his responsibility.

Lost in his own thoughts, Narishma peered into the steam rising from his wine, and Hopwil still tried to stare through the side of the tent. Torval cast sideways glances at Rand and struggled to put the scornful twist back on his mouth. Dashiva alone appeared unaffected, with his arms folded, studying Torval as a man might study a horse offered for sale.

Into the painfully stretching silence burst a husky, windblown young man in black, with the Sword and Dragon on his collar. Of an age with Hopwil, still not old enough to marry most places, Fedwin Morr wore intensity more closely than his shirt; he moved on his toes, and his eyes had the look of a hunting cat that knew itself hunted in turn. He had been different, once, and not so long ago. “The Seanchan will move from Ebou Dar soon,” he said as he saluted. “They mean to come against Illian next.” Hopwil gave a start and a gasp, jolted out of his dark study. Once again, Dashiva’s response was to laugh, mirthlessly this time.

Nodding, Rand took up the Dragon Scepter. After all, he carried it for remembrance. The Seanchan danced to their own tune, not the song he wished for.

If Rand received the announcement in silence, Torval did not. Finding his sneer, he raised a contemptuous eyebrow. “Did they tell you all that, now?” he said mockingly. “Or have you learned to read minds? Let me tell you something, boy. I have fought, against Amadicians and Domani both, and no army takes a city then packs itself up to march a thousand miles! More than a thousand miles! Or do you think they can Travel?”

Morr met Torval’s derision calmly. Or if it unsettled him at all, the only sign he gave was running a thumb down his long sword hilt. “I did talk to some of them. Most were Taraboners, and more landing by ship every day, or near enough.” Shouldering past Torval to the table, he favored the Taraboner with a level look. “All stepping right quick whenever anybody with a slurring way of speech opened a mouth.” The older man opened his, angrily, but the younger pressed on hurriedly, to Rand. “They’re putting soldiers all along the Venir Mountains. Five hundred, sometimes a thousand together. All the way to Arran Head already. And they’re buying or taking every wagon and cart within twenty leagues of Ebou Dar, and the animals to draw them.”

“Carts!” Torval exclaimed. “Wagons! Is it that they mean to hold a market fair, do you think? And what fool would march an army through mountains when there are perfectly good roads?” He noticed Rand watching him, and cut off with a small frown, suddenly uncertain.

"I told you to stay low, Morr." Rand let anger touch his voice. The young Asha'man had to step back as he jumped down from the table. "Not to go asking the Seanchan their plans. To look and stay low."

"I was careful; I didn't wear my pins." Morr's eyes did not change for Rand, still hunter and hunted in one. He seemed to be boiling inside. Had Rand not known better, he would have thought Morr held the Power, struggling to survive *saidin* even as it gave him life ten times over. His face seemed to want to sweat. "If any of the men I talked to knew where they're going next, they didn't say, and I didn't ask, but they were willing to complain over a mug of ale about marching all the time and never standing still. In Ebou Dar, they were soaking up all the ale in the city as fast as they could, because they say they have to march again. And they're gathering wagons, just like I said." That all came out in a rush, and he clamped his teeth at the end as though to trap more words that wanted to fly from his tongue.

Smiling suddenly, Rand clapped him on the shoulder. "You did well. The wagons would have been enough, but you did well. Wagons are important," he added, turning to Torval. "If an army feeds off the country, it eats what it finds. Or not, if it doesn't." Torval had not flickered an eyelid at hearing of Seanchan in Ebou Dar. If that tale had reached the Black Tower, why had Taim not mentioned it? Rand hoped his smile did not look a snarl. "It's harder to arrange supply trains, but when you have one you know there's fodder for the animals and beans for the men. The Seanchan organize everything."

Sorting through the maps, he found the one he wanted and spread it out, weighted at one side with his sword and at the other with the Dragon Scepter. The coast between Illian and Ebou Dar stared up at him, rimmed for most of its length by hills and mountains, dotted with fishing villages and small towns. The Seanchan did organize. Ebou Dar had been theirs barely more than a week, but the merchants' eyes-and-ears wrote of repairs well under way on the damage done to the city in its taking, of clean sick-houses set up for the ill, of food and work arranged for the poor and those driven from their homes by troubles inland. The streets and the surrounding countryside were patrolled so that no one need fear footpads or bandits, day or night, and while merchants were welcome, smuggling had been cut to a trickle if not less. Those honest Illianer merchants had been surprisingly glum about the smuggling. What were the Seanchan organizing now?

The others gathered around the table as Rand perused the map. There were roads hard along the coast, but poor straggling things, marked as little more than cart paths. The broad trade roads lay inland, avoiding the worst of the terrain and the worst of what the Sea of Storms had to offer. “Men raiding out of those mountains could make passage difficult for anyone trying to use the inland roads,” he said finally. “By controlling the mountains, they make the roads safe as a city street. You’re right, Morr. They are coming to Illian.”

Leaning on his fists, Torval glared at Morr, who had been right when he was wrong. A grievous sin, perhaps, in Torval’s book. “Even so, it will be months before they can trouble you here,” he said sullenly. “A hundred Asha’man, fifty, placed in Illian, could destroy any army in the world before one man crosses the causeways.”

“I doubt an army with *damane* is destroyed as easily as one kills Aiel committed to an attack and caught by surprise,” Rand said quietly, and Torval stiffened. “Besides, I have to defend all of Illian, not just the city.”

Ignoring the man, Rand traced lines across the map with a finger. Between Arran Head and the city of Illian lay a hundred leagues of open water, across the mouth of Kabal Deep, where, ship captains in Illian said, their longest sounding lines could find no bottom just a mile or so from the shore. The waves there could overturn ships as they surged north to pound the coast with breakers fifteen paces high. In this weather, it would be worse. Marching around the Deep was a route of two hundred leagues to reach the city, even keeping to the shortest ways, but if the Seanchan pressed on from Arran Head, they could reach the border in two weeks despite the rainstorms. Maybe less. Better to fight where he chose, not where they did. His finger slid along the south coast of Altara, along the Venir range, until the mountains dwindled to hills short of Ebou Dar. Five hundred here, a thousand there. A tantalizing string of beads dropped along the mountains. A sharp rap might roll them back to Ebou Dar, might even pen them there while they tried to figure out what he was up to. Or. . . .

“There was something else,” Morr said abruptly, rushing again. “There was talk about some sort of Aes Sedai weapon. I found where it was used, a few miles from the city. The ground was all burned over, seared clean in the middle, a good three hundred paces wide or more, and ruined orchards further. The sand was melted to sheets of glass. *Saidin* was worst, there.”

Torval waved a hand at him dismissively. “There could have been Aes Sedai near when the city fell, yes? Or maybe the Seanchan themselves did it. One sister with an *angreal* could—”

Rand cut in. “What do you mean, *saidin* was worst there?” Dashiva moved, eyeing Morr oddly, reaching as though to seize the young man. Rand fended him off roughly. “What do you mean, Morr?”

Morr stared, mouth shut tight, running his thumb up and down the length of his sword hilt. The heat inside of him seemed ready to burst out. There really was sweat beading on his face now. *“Saidin* was . . . strange,” he said hoarsely. His words came in rapid bursts. “Worst there—I could . . . feel it . . . in the air all around me—but strange everywhere around Ebou Dar. And even a hundred miles away. I had to fight it; not like always; different. Like it was alive. Sometimes. . . . Sometimes, it didn’t do what I wanted. Sometimes, it . . . did something else. It did. I’m not mad! It did!” The wind gusted, howling for a moment, shivering and snapping the tent walls, and Morr fell silent. Narishma’s bells chimed at a jerk of his head, then were still.

“That isn’t possible,” Dashiva muttered into the silence, but nearly under his breath. “It is not possible.”

“Who knows what’s possible?” Rand said. “I don’t! Do you?” Dashiva’s head came up in surprise, but Rand turned to Morr, moderating his tone. “Don’t worry, man.” Not a mild tone—he could not manage that—yet heartening, he hoped. His making, his responsibility. “You’ll be with me to the Last Battle. I promise it.”

The young man nodded, and scrubbed at his face with his hand as though surprised to find it damp, but he glanced at Torval, who had gone as still as stone. Did Morr know about the wine? It *was* a mercy, given the alternatives. A small and bitter mercy.

Rand picked up Taim’s missive, folded the page, and thrust it into his coat pocket. One in fifty mad already, and more to come. Was Morr next? Dashiva was surely close. Hopwil’s stares took on a new meaning, and even Narishma’s habitual quiet. Madness did not always mean screaming about spiders. He had asked once, warily, where he knew the answers would be true, how to cleanse the taint from *saidin*. And got a riddle for answer. Herid Fel had claimed the riddle stated “sound principles, in both high philosophy and natural philosophy,” but he had not seen any way to apply it to the problem at hand. Had Fel been killed because he might have puzzled out the riddle? Rand had a hint at the answer, or thought he might, a guess that could be disastrously wrong. Hints and riddles were not answers, yet he had to do something. If the taint was not cleansed somehow, Tarmon Gai'don might find a world already ruined by madmen. What had to be done, had to be done.

"That would be wondrous," Torval said in a near whisper, "but how could anyone short of the Creator or . . . ?" He trailed off uneasily.

Rand had not realized he had spoken any of his thoughts aloud. Narishma's eyes, and Morr's, and Hopwil's, belonged in one face, shining with sudden hope. Dashiva looked poleaxed. Rand hoped he had not said too much. Some secrets had to be kept. Including what he would do next.

In short order, Hopwil was running for his horse to ride to the ridge with orders for the nobles, Morr and Dashiva to find Flinn and the other Asha'man, and Torval was striding off to Travel back to the Black Tower with commands for Taim. Narishma was last, and thinking of Aes Sedai and Seanchan and weapons, Rand sent him away as well, with careful instructions that made the young man's mouth tighten.

"Speak to no one," Rand finished softly, gripping Narishma's arm hard. "And don't fail me. Not by a hair."

"I won't fail," Narishma said, unblinking. With a quick salute, he was gone, too.

Dangerous, a voice whispered in Rand's head. *Oh, yes, very dangerous, maybe too dangerous. But it might work; it might. In any event, you must kill Torval now. You must.*

Weiramon entered the council tent, shouldering aside Gregorin and Tolmeran, trying to shoulder aside Rosana and Semaradrid, the lot of them eager to tell Rand that the men in the trees had decided wisely after all. They found him laughing till tears rolled down his face. Lews Therin had come back. Or else he really was mad already. Either way, it was reason to laugh.

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CHAPTER 15

Stronger Than Written Law

In the dim, cold dark of deep night, Egwene woke groggily from restless sleep and troubling dreams, the more troubling because she could not remember them. Her dreams were always open to her, as clear as printed words on a page, yet these had been murky and fearful. She had had too many of those, lately. They left her wanting to run, to escape, never able to recall what from, but always queasy and uncertain, even trembling. At least her head was not hurting. At least she could recall the dreams she knew must be significant, though not how to interpret them. Rand, wearing different masks, until suddenly one of those false faces was no longer a mask, but him. Perrin and a Tinker, frenziedly hacking their way through brambles with axe and sword, unaware of the cliff that lay just ahead. And the brambles screamed with human voices they did not hear. Mat, weighing two Aes Sedai on a huge set of balance scales, and on his decision depended. . . . She could not say what; something vast; the world, perhaps. There had been other dreams, most tinged with suffering. Recently, all of her dreams about Mat were pale and full of pain, like shadows cast by nightmares, almost as though Mat himself were not quite real. That made her afraid for him, left behind in Ebou Dar, and gave her agonies of grief for sending him there, not to mention poor old Thom Merrilin. But the unremembered dreams were worse, she was sure.

The sound of low voices arguing had wakened her, and the full moon was still up outside, casting enough light for her to make out two women confronting one another at the tent's entrance.

"The poor woman's head pains her all day, and she gets little rest at night," Halima whispered fiercely, fists on her hips. "Let this wait till morning."

"I don't propose to argue with you." Siuan's voice was winter itself, and she tossed back her cloak with a mittened hand as though preparing to fight. She was dressed for the weather, in stout wool no doubt worn over as many shifts as she could fit underneath. "You stand aside, and right quick, or I'll have your guts for bait! And put on some decent clothes!"

With a soft laugh, Halima drew up and if anything planted herself more squarely in Siuan's way. Her white nightgown clung, but was decent enough for its purpose. Though it did seem a wonder she evaded freezing in that thin silk. The coals in the tripod braziers had died down long since, and neither much-mended tent canvas nor layered carpets on the ground held in warmth any longer. Both women's breath was pale mist.

Throwing off the blankets, Egwene sat up wearily on her narrow cot. Halima was a country woman with a skim of sophistication, and often she did not seem to realize the deference due to Aes Sedai, or indeed seem to think she need defer to anyone. She spoke to Sitters as she might to the good-wives in her own village, with a laugh and a level eye and a straightforward earthiness that sometimes shocked. Siuan spent her days giving way to women who had jumped at her word a year earlier, smiling and curtsying for nearly every sister in the camp. Many still laid much of the Tower's troubles at her feet and thought she had hardly suffered enough to atone. Sufficient to keep anyone's pride at a stiff prickle. Together, the pair were a lantern tossed into the back of an Illuminator's wagon, but Egwene hoped to avoid an explosion. Besides, Siuan would not have come in the middle of the night unless it was necessary.

"Go back to bed, Halima." Smothering a yawn, Egwene bent to fumble her shoes and stockings from beneath the cot. She did not channel a lamp alight. Better if no one noticed that the Amyrlin was awake. "Go on; you need your rest."

Halima protested, perhaps more strongly than she should have to the Amyrlin Seat, but soon enough she was back on the tiny cot that had been squeezed into the tent for her. Very little room remained to move in, with a washstand, a stand-mirror and a real armchair, plus four large chests stacked atop one another. Those held the constant flow of clothes from Sitters who had not yet realized that however young Egwene might be, she was not young enough to be dazzled or diverted by silks and laces. Halima lay curled up, watching in the darkness, while Egwene hastily dragged an ivory comb through her hair, donned stout mittens, and pulled a fox-lined cloak over her nightgown. A thick woolen nightgown, and she would not have minded thicker in this weather. Halima's eyes seemed to pick up the faint moonlight and shine darkly, unblinking.

Egwene did not think the woman jealous of her place near the Amyrlin Seat, casual as it was, and the Light knew she did not carry gossip, but Halima had an innocent curiosity about everything, whether or not it was any of her business. Reason enough to hear Siuan out elsewhere. Everyone knew now that Siuan had thrown in her lot with Egwene, after a fashion, as they thought, sullenly and grudgingly. A figure of some amusement and occasional pity, Siuan Sanche, reduced to attaching herself to the woman who held the title once hers, and that woman no more than a puppet once the Hall finished fighting over who would pull her cords. Siuan was human enough to harbor sparks of resentment, but so far they had managed to keep secret that her advice was far from grudging. So she endured pity and snickers as best she could, and everyone believed her as changed by her experiences as her face. That belief had to be maintained, or Romanda and Lelaine and very likely the rest of the Hall, too, would find ways to separate her—and her advice—from Egwene.

The cold outside slapped Egwene in the face and flooded under her cloak; her nightgown might as well have been Halima's for all the protection it offered. Despite stout leather and good wool, her feet felt as if they were bare. Tendrils of frosty air curled around her ears, mocking the thick fur lining her hood. Yearning for her bed as she was, ignoring the iciness took all the concentration she could muster. Clouds scudded across the sky, and moonshadows floated over the gleaming white that covered the ground, a smooth sheet broken by the dark mounds of tents and the taller shapes of canvas-topped wagons that now had long wooden runners in place of wheels. Many of the wagons were no longer parked apart from the tents, but left where they had been unloaded; no one had the heart to make the wagon drivers put out even that much extra effort at the end of the day. Nothing moved except those pale sliding shadows. The wide runnels that had been trampled through the camp for paths lay empty. The silence was crisp and so deep that she almost regretted breaking it.

"What is it?" she asked softly, casting a wary glance at the small tent nearby shared by her maids, Chesa, Meri, and Selame. That was as still and dark as the others. Exhaustion made as thick a blanket over the camp as the snow. "Not another revelation like the Kin, I hope." She clicked her tongue in vexation. She was spent, too, by long freezing days in the saddle and not enough real sleep, or she would not have said that. "I'm sorry, Siuan."

"No need to apologize, Mother." Siuan kept her voice down as well, and glanced about to see whether anyone might be watching from the shadows besides. Neither wanted to find herself discussing the Kin with the Hall. "I know I should have told you beforehand, but it seemed a small thing. I never expected those girls to even speak to one of them. There's so much to tell you. I have to try to pick and choose what's important."

With an effort, Egwene managed not to sigh. That was almost word for word the apology Siuan had offered before. Several times. What she meant was that she was trying to force-feed Egwene over twenty years of experience as Aes Sedai, more than ten of that as Amyrlin, and do it in months. At times Egwene felt like a goose being fattened for market. "Well, what's important tonight?"

"Gareth Bryne's waiting in your study." Siuan did not raise her voice, but it took on an edge, as always when she spoke of Lord Bryne. She tossed her head angrily inside the deep hood of her cloak, and made a sound like a cat spitting. "The man came in dripping snow, scooped me out of my bedding, and barely gave me time to dress before hauling me up behind his saddle. He told me nothing; just tossed me down at the edge of camp and sent me to fetch you like I was a serving girl!"

Firmly, Egwene stifled a rising hope. There had been too many disappointments, and whatever had brought Bryne in the middle of the night was much more likely to be a potential disaster than what she wished for. How far yet to the border with Andor? "Let's see what he wants."

Starting off toward the tent everyone named the Amyrlin's Study, she held her cloak close. She did not shiver, but refusing to let heat or cold touch you did not make them go away. You could ignore them right up to the moment sunstroke cooked your brain or frostbite rotted your hands and feet. She considered what Siuan had said.

"You weren't sleeping in your own tent here?" she said carefully. The other woman's relation to Lord Bryne *was* that of a servant, in a very peculiar way, but Egwene hoped Siuan was not letting her stubborn pride lead her into letting him take advantage. She could not imagine it, of him or her, yet not so long ago she could not have imagined Siuan accepting any part of the situation. She still could not understand why.

Snorting loudly, Siuan kicked her skirts, and nearly fell as her shoes skidded. Snow beaten down by countless feet had quickly become a rough sheet of ice. Egwene was picking her own way cautiously. Every day brought broken bones that travel-weary sisters had to Heal. Half abandoning her cloak, she offered an arm as much for the support she might receive as give. Siuan took it, muttering.

"By the time I finished cleaning the man's spare boots and second saddle, it was too late to tramp back through this. Not that he offered more than blankets in a corner; not Gareth Bryne! Made me dig them out of the chest myself, while *he* went off the Light knows where! Men are a trial, and that one the worst!" Without a pause for breath, she changed the subject. "You shouldn't let that Halima sleep in your tent. She's another pair of ears you have to be careful of, and snoopy with it. Besides, you're lucky you don't walk in to find her *entertaining* some soldier."

"I am very glad that Delana can spare Halima nights," Egwene said firmly. "I need her. Unless you think Nisao's Healing might do better with my headaches a second time around." Halima's fingers seemed to draw the pain out through her scalp; without that, she would not be able to sleep at all. Nisao's effort had had no effect whatsoever, and she was the only Yellow Egwene dared approach with the problem. As for the rest. . . . She made her voice sterner still. "I am surprised you're still listening to that gossip, daughter. The fact that men like looking at a woman doesn't mean she invites it, as you should know well. I've seen more than a few looking at you and grinning." Taking that tone came easier than it once had.

Siuan gave her a startled sidelong glance and, after a moment, grumbled an apology. It might have been sincere. Egwene accepted it, either way. Lord Bryne was very bad for Siuan's temper, and tossing Halima into the bargain, Egwene thought it a good job she was not pushed into taking a stricter stance. Siuan herself had said that she should not put up with nonsense, and she surely could not afford to put up with it from Siuan, of all people.

Trudging arm-in-arm, they went on in silence, the cold fogging their breath and seeping through their flesh. The snow was a curse and a lesson. She could still hear Siuan going on about what she called the Law of Unintended Consequences, stronger than any written law. *Whether or not what you do has the effect you want, it will have three at least you never expected, and one of those usually unpleasant*.

The first, feeble rains had brought astonishment, for all Egwene had already informed the Hall that the Bowl of the Winds had been found and used. That was almost as much as she could risk letting them know of what Elayne had told her in *Tel'aran' rhiod;* too much of what had happened in Ebou Dar was just the thing to cut her feet out from under her here, and her position was precarious enough as it was. An explosion of joy erupted at those first sprinkles. They had halted the march at midday, and there had been bonfires and feasting in the drizzle, prayers of thanksgiving among the sisters and dancing among the servants and the soldiers. For that matter, some of the Aes Sedai had danced, too.

A few days later, the soft rains became downpours, and then howling tempests. The temperature slid downward, plummeted, and tempests became blizzards. Now, the distance once covered in a day, with Egwene gritting her teeth over how slowly they moved, took five when the sky held only clouds, and when the snows fell, they did not move at all. Easy enough to think of three unintended consequences, or more, and the snow might well be the least unpleasant.

As they approached the small, patched tent called the Amyrlin's Study, a shadow moved beside one of the tall wagons, and Egwene's breath caught. The shadow became a figure who slipped back her hood enough to reveal Leane's face, then pulled back into darkness.

"She'll keep a watch and let us know if anybody comes," Siuan said softly.

"That's good," Egwene muttered. The woman *could* have told her in advance. She had half been afraid it was Romanda or Lelaine!

The Amyrlin's Study was dark, but Lord Bryne stood waiting patiently inside, wrapped in his cloak, a shadow among shadows. Embracing the Source, Egwene channeled, not to light the lantern hanging from the center-pole or one of the candles, but to make a small sphere of pale light that she suspended in the air over the folding table she used as a writing desk. Very small, and very pale; unlikely to be noticed from outside, and quick as thought to extinguish. She could not afford discovery.

There had been Amyrlins who reigned in strength, Amyrlins who managed an even balance with the Hall, and Amyrlins who had had as little power as she, or less upon rare occasions, well-hidden in the secret histories of the White Tower. Several had frittered away power and influence, falling from strength to weakness, but in over three thousand years, precious few had managed to move in the other direction. Egwene very much wished she knew how Myriam Copan and the rest of that bare handful had managed. If anyone had ever thought to write that down, the pages were long lost.

Bowing respectfully, Bryne showed no surprise at her caution. He knew what she put at hazard, meeting him secretly. To a very large degree, she trusted this sturdy, heavily graying man with the bluff, weathered face, and not only because she had to. His cloak was thick red wool, lined with marten and bordered with the Flame of Tar Valon, a gift from the Hall, yet he had made plain a dozen times in the past weeks that whatever the Hall thought—and he was not blind enough to have missed that!—she was the Amyrlin, and he followed the Amyrlin. Oh, he had never said so right out, but with carefully worded hints that left no doubts. Expecting more would have been expecting too much. There were nearly as many undercurrents in the camp as there were Aes Sedai, some strong enough to pull him down. Several strong enough to mire her deeper than she was, if the Hall learned of this meeting. She trusted him further than anyone except Siuan and Leane, or Elayne and Nynaeve, maybe further than any of the sisters who had sworn fealty to her in secret, and she wished she had the courage to trust him more. The ball of white light cast weak, fitful shadows.

“You have news, Lord Bryne?” she asked, stifling hope. She could think of a dozen possible messages that might bring him in the night, each with its own set of pitfalls and snares. Had Rand decided to add more crowns to that of Illian, or the Seanchan somehow captured still another city, or the Band of the Red Hand suddenly moved on its own instead of shadowing the Aes Sedai, or. . . .

“An army lies north of us, Mother,” he replied calmly. His leather-gauntleted hands rested lightly atop his long sword hilt. An army to the north, a little more snow, all the same. “Andorans, mainly, but with a goodly number of Murandians. My deep scouts brought the news less than an hour ago. Pelivar leads, and Arathelle is with him, the High Seats of two of the strongest Houses in Andor, and they've brought twenty more at least. They're pushing south hard, it seems. If you keep on as you are, which I advise against, we should meet head-on in two days, three at the outside."

Egwene kept her face smooth, suppressing her relief. What she had been hoping for, waiting for; what she had begun to fear might never come. Surprisingly, it was Siuan who gasped, and clapped a mittened hand over her mouth too late. Bryne cocked an eyebrow at her, but she recovered quickly, putting on Aes Sedai serenity so thick you almost forgot her youthful face.

"Do you have qualms at fighting your fellow Andorans?" she demanded. "Speak up, man. I'm not your washwoman here." Well, there was a small crack in that serenity.

"As you command, Siuan Sedai." Bryne's tone held no scrap of mockery, yet Siuan's mouth began to tighten, her outward coolness evaporating fast. He made her a small bow, workmanlike but acceptable. "I will fight whoever the Mother wishes me to fight, of course." Even here, he would not be more forthcoming. Men learned caution around Aes Sedai. So did women. Egwene thought caution had become a second skin for her.

"And if we don't keep on?" she said. So much planning, just her and Siuan and sometimes Leane, and now she still had to feel out each step as carefully as on those icy paths outside. "If we stop here?"

He did not hesitate. "If you have a way to bring them around without fighting, all well and good, but some time tomorrow they'll reach an excellent position to defend, one flank held by the River Armahn, the other by a large peat bog, and small streams in front to break up attacks. Pelivar will settle in there to wait; he knows the work. Arathelle will have her part if there's talking, but she'll leave the pikes and swords to him. We can't reach it ahead of him, and anyway, the terrain is no use to us there, with him to the north. If you mean to fight, I advise making for that ridge we crossed two days back. We can reach it in good order ahead of them if we start at dawn, and Pelivar would think twice about coming at us there if he had three times the numbers he does."

Wriggling near-frozen toes inside her stockings, Egwene let out an annoyed sigh. There was a difference between not letting cold touch you and not feeling it. Picking her way carefully, not letting herself be distracted by the chill, she asked, "*Will* they talk, offered the chance?"

“Probably, Mother. The Murandians hardly count; they’re just there for whatever advantage they can wring out of the situation, same as their countrymen under me. It’s Pelivar and Arathelle who matter. If I had to wager, I’d say they only mean to keep you out of Andor.” He shook his head grimly. “But they’ll fight if they have to, if they must, maybe even if it means facing Aes Sedai instead of just soldiers. I expect they’ve heard the same tales we have about that battle out east somewhere.”

“Fish guts!” Siuan growled. So much for calm. “Half-baked rumors and raw gossip are no proof there *was* any battle, you lummox, and if there was, sisters wouldn’t have gotten themselves mixed up in it!” The man truly was an occasion of sin for her.

Strangely, Bryne smiled. He often did when Siuan showed her temper. Anywhere else, on anyone else, Egwene would have called the smile fond. “Better for us if they believe,” he told Siuan mildly. Her face darkened so, you might have thought he had sneered at her.

Why did a normally sensible woman let Bryne get under her skin? Whatever the reason, Egwene had no time for it tonight. “Siuan, I see someone forgot to take away the mulled wine. It can’t have soured in this weather. Warm it for us, please.” She did not like setting the other woman down in front of Bryne, but she had to be reined in, and this seemed the gentlest way to do it. Really, they should not have left the silver pitcher on her table.

Siuan did not quite flinch, but from her stricken expression, quickly smoothed over, you would never have believed she washed the man’s small-clothes. Without comment she channeled slightly to reheat the wine in the silver pitcher, quickly filled two clean worked-silver cups, and handed the first to Egwene. She kept the second, staring at Lord Bryne as she sipped and leaving him to pour for himself.

Warming her mittened fingers on her own cup, Egwene felt a flash of irritation. Maybe it was part of Siuan’s long-delayed reaction to the death of her Warder. She still became weepy for no visible reason now and then, though she tried to hide it. Egwene put the matter out of her head. Tonight, that was an anthill beside mountains.

“I want to avoid a battle if I can, Lord Bryne. The army is for Tar Valon, not fighting a war here. Send to arrange a meeting as soon as possible for the Amyrlin Seat with Lord Pelivar and Lady Arathelle and anyone else you think you should be present. Not here. Our ragged camp won’t impress them very much. As soon as possible, mind. I wouldn’t object to tomorrow, if it could be set.”

“That’s sooner than I can manage, Mother,” he said mildly. “If I send riders out as soon as I return to camp, I doubt they can be back with an answer much before tomorrow night.”

“Then I suggest you return quickly.” Light, but her hands and feet felt cold. And the pit of her stomach, too. But her voice kept its calm. “And I want you to keep that meeting, and the existence of their army, from the Hall as long as possible.”

This time, she was asking him to take as great a risk as she did. Gareth Bryne was one of the best generals living, but the Hall chafed that he did not run the army to suit them. They had been grateful for his name in the beginning, for it helped draw soldiers to their cause. Now the army had more than thirty thousand armed men, with more coming even since the snows had started, and they thought that maybe they did not need Lord Gareth Bryne any longer. And of course, there were those who believed they never had needed him. They would not simply send him away for this. If the Hall chose to act, he might well go to the headsman for treason.

He did not blink, and he did not ask questions. Perhaps he knew she would not give answers. Or maybe he thought he knew them. “There isn’t much traffic between my camp and yours, but too many men know already to keep a secret long. I will do what I can, though.”

As simple as that. The first step down a road that would see her on the Amyrlin Seat in Tar Valon, or else deliver her firmly into the grasp of the Hall, with nothing left to decide except whether it was Romanda or Lelaine who told her what to do. Somehow, such a pivotal moment should have been accompanied by fanfares of trumpets, or at the least, thunder in the sky. It was always that way in stories.

Egwene let the ball of light vanish, but as Bryne turned to leave, she caught his arm. It was like catching a thick tree branch through his coat. “A thing I have been meaning to ask you, Lord Bryne. You can’t want to take men worn down by marching right into a siege of Tar Valon. How long would you want to rest them before you began?”

For the first time, he paused, and she wished she still had the light to see his face. She thought he frowned. “Even leaving people in the pay of the Tower out of it,” he said at last, slowly, “news of an army flies as fast as a falcon. Elaida will know to the day when we’ll arrive, and she won’t give us an hour. You know she's increasing the Tower Guard? To fifty thousand men, apparently. But a month, if I could, to rest and recover. Ten days would do, but a month would be better."

She nodded, releasing him. That casual question about the Tower Guard hurt. He was aware that the Hall and the Ajahs told her what they wanted her to know and no more. "I suppose you're right," she said evenly. "There'll be no time for rest once we reach Tar Valon. Send your fastest riders. There won't be any difficulty, will there? Pelivar and Arathelle will hear them out?" She did not feign the touch of anxiety. More than her plans might be ruined if they had to fight now.

Bryne's tone did not alter a whit that she could tell, but somehow, he sounded soothing. "So long as there is light enough for them to see the white feathers, they'll recognize a truce and listen. I'd better go, Mother. It's a long way and hard riding, even for men with extra horses."

As soon as the tentflap fell behind him, Egwene let out a long breath. Her shoulders were tight, and she expected her head to start aching any moment. Bryne usually made her feel relaxed, absorbing his sureness. Tonight, she had had to manipulate him, and she thought he knew it. He was very observant for a man. But too much was at stake to trust him more, until he made an open declaration. Maybe an oath like the one Myrelle and the others had given. Bryne followed the Amyrlin, and the army followed Bryne. If he thought she was going to throw men away uselessly, a few words from him could hand her to the Hall trussed like a pig on a platter. She drank deeply, feeling the warmth of the spiced wine spread through her.

"Better for us if they believed," she muttered. "I wish there was something *for* them to believe. If I do nothing else, Siuan, I hope at least I can free us from the Three Oaths."

"No!" Siuan barked. She sounded scandalized. "Even trying could be disastrous, and if you succeeded. . . . The Light help us, if you succeeded, you would destroy the White Tower."

"What are you talking about? I try to follow the Oaths, Siuan, since we're stuck with them—for now—but the Oaths won't help us against the Seanchan. If sisters have to be in danger of their lives before they can fight back, it's only a matter of time before we are all dead or collared." For a moment she could feel the *a'dam* around her throat again, turning her into a dog on a leash. A well-trained and obedient dog. She was glad of the darkness, now, hiding her trembles. Shadows obscured Siuan’s face, save for a soundlessly working jaw.

“Don’t you look at me like that, Siuan.” It was easier to be angry than afraid, easy to mask fear in anger. She would *never* be collared like that again! “You’ve taken every advantage since you were freed from the Oaths. If you hadn’t lied in your teeth, we’d all be in Salidar, without an army, sitting on our hands and waiting for a miracle. Well, you would be. They’d never have summoned me to be Amyrlin without your lie about Logain and the Reds. Elaida would reign supreme, and in a year, nobody would remember how she usurped the Amyrlin Seat. *She’d* destroy the Tower, for sure. You know she’d mishandle everything about Rand. I would not be surprised if she had tried to kidnap him by now, except that she’s concerned with us. Well, maybe not kidnap, but she’d have done something. Likely, Aes Sedai would be fighting Asha’man today, and never mind Tarmon Gai’don waiting over the horizon.”

“I have lied when it seemed necessary,” Siuan breathed. “When it seemed expedient.” Her shoulders hunched, and she sounded as though she were confessing crimes she did not want to admit to herself. “Sometimes I think it’s become too easy for me to decide that it’s necessary and expedient. I’ve lied to almost everyone. Except you. But don’t think it hasn’t occurred to me. To nudge you toward a decision, or away from one. It wasn’t wanting to keep your trust that stopped me.” Siuan’s hand stretched out in the dark, pleading. “The Light knows what your trust and friendship mean to me, but it wasn’t that. It wasn’t knowing that you’d have the hide off me in strips, or send me away, if you found out. I realized that I had to hold on to the Oaths with somebody, or I’d lose myself completely. So I don’t lie to you, or to Gareth Bryne, whatever it costs. And as soon I can, Mother, I will swear the Three Oaths on the Oath Rod again.”

“Why?” Egwene asked quietly. Siuan had considered lying to her? She *would* have had her hide for that. But her anger was gone. “I don’t condone lying, Siuan. Not normally. It’s just that sometimes, it really is necessary.” Her time with the Aiel flashed through her mind. “So long as you’re willing to pay for it, anyway. I’ve seen sisters take on penance for smaller things. You are one of the first of a new sort of Aes Sedai, Siuan, free and unbound. I believe you when you say you won’t lie to me.” Or to Lord Bryne? Odd, that. “Why give up your freedom?”

"Give up?" Siuan laughed. "I'll be giving up nothing." Her back straightened, and her voice began to gain strength, and then passion. "The Oaths are what make us more than simply a group of women meddling in the affairs of the world. Or seven groups. Or fifty. The Oaths hold us together, a stated set of beliefs that bind us all, a single thread running through every sister, living or dead, back to the first to lay her hands on the Oath Rod. *They* are what make us Aes Sedai, not *saidar*. Any wilder can channel. Men may look at what we say from six sides, but when a sister says, 'This is so,' they *know* it's true, and they trust. Because of the Oaths. Because of the Oaths, no queen fears that sisters will lay waste to her cities. The worst villain knows he's safe in his life with a sister unless he tries to harm her. Oh, the Whitecloaks call them lies, and some people have strange ideas about what the Oaths entail, but there are very few places an Aes Sedai cannot go, and be listened to, because of the Oaths. The Three Oaths are what it is to *be* Aes Sedai, the *heart* of being Aes Sedai. Throw that on the rubbish heap, and we'll be sand washing away in the tide. Give up? I will be gaining."

Egwene frowned. "And the Seanchan?" What it was to be Aes Sedai. Almost from the day she first arrived in Tar Valon, she had worked to be Aes Sedai, but she had never really thought about what it was that *made* a woman Aes Sedai.

Once more Siuan laughed, though this time it was a touch wry, and weary. She shook her head, and darkness or no, looked tired. "I don't know, Mother. The Light help me, I don't. But we survived the Trolloc Wars, and Whitecloaks, and Artur Hawkwing, and everything in between. We can find a way to deal with these Seanchan. Without destroying ourselves."

Egwene was not so sure. Many of the sisters in camp thought the Seanchan were such a danger that besieging Elaida should wait. As if waiting would not cement Elaida on the Amyrlin Seat. Many others seemed to think that simply uniting the White Tower again, at whatever price, would make the Seanchan vanish. Survival lost some of its attraction if it was survival on a leash, and Elaida's would not be much less confining than the Seanchan's. What it was to *be* Aes Sedai.

"There's no need to keep Gareth Bryne at arm's length," Siuan said suddenly. "The man's a walking tribulation, it's true. If he doesn't count as penance for my lies, being flayed alive wouldn't do. One of these days, I'll box his ears every morning and twice at evenings, on general principle, but you can tell him everything. It would help, if he understood. He's taking *you* on trust, and it ties his stomach in knots, wondering whether you know what you're doing. He doesn't let on, but I see."

Suddenly, pieces clicked in Egwene's mind like a blacksmith's puzzle coming undone. Shocking pieces. Siuan was in *love* with the man! Nothing else made sense. Everything she knew between them altered. Not necessarily for the better. A woman in love often put her brains on the shelf when she was around the man in question. As she herself was all too well aware. Where *was* Gawyn? Was he well? Was he warm? Enough of that. Too much, in light of what she had to say. She put on her best Amyrlin's voice, sure and in command. "You can box Lord Bryne's ears or bed him, Siuan, but you *will* watch yourself with him. You will *not* let slip things he mustn't know yet. Do you understand me?"

Siuan jerked stiffly erect. "I'm not in the habit of letting my tongue flap like a torn sail, Mother," she said heatedly.

"I'm very glad to hear it, Siuan." Despite their looking only a few years apart, Siuan was old enough to be her mother yet at that moment Egwene felt as though their ages had been reversed. This might be the first time that Siuan had ever had to manage with a man not as Aes Sedai, but as a woman. *A few years of thinking I loved Rand,* Egwene thought wryly, *a few months of dangling by my toes for Gawyn, and I know all there is to know*.

"I think we're done here," she went on, slipping an arm through Siuan's. "Almost. Come."

The walls of the tent had seemed little protection, yet stepping outside brought a renewed assault by winter's teeth. The moonlight was almost bright enough to read by, reflected off the snow, but that glow seemed cold. Bryne had vanished as if he had never been. Leane appeared long enough to say she had seen no one, her slimness swallowed in layers of wool, then hurried off into the night looking about her. No one knew of any connection between Leane and Egwene, and everyone thought Leane and Siuan were practically at daggers' points.

Gathering her cloak as best she could one-handed, Egwene focused on ignoring the icy chill as she and Siuan walked in the opposite direction from Leane. Ignoring the chill, and keeping an eye out for anyone who happened to be out. Not that anyone who was outside now was likely to be there by happenstance.

“Lord Bryne was right,” she told Siuan, “about it being better if Pelivar and Arathelle believed those stories. Or at least if they were uncertain. Too uncertain to fight, or do anything except talk. Do you think they would welcome a visit from Aes Sedai? Siuan, are you listening to me?”

Siuan gave a start, and stopped staring into the distance ahead of them. She had been walking ahead without missing a step, but now she slipped and nearly sat down in the frozen path, barely regaining her balance in time to keep from pulling Egwene down. “Yes, Mother. Of course I’m listening. They might not be exactly welcoming, but I doubt they’ll turn sisters away.”

“Then I want you to wake Beonin, Anaiya, and Myrelle. They are to ride north inside the hour. If Lord Bryne expects a reply as soon as tomorrow evening, time is short.” A pity she had not found out exactly where this other army was located, but asking Bryne might have roused suspicion. Finding it should not be too hard for Warders, and those three sisters had five between them.

Siuan listened in silence to her instructions. Not only those three were to be rooted out of their sleep. Come dawn, Sheriam and Carlinya, Morvrin and Nisao would all know what to say over breakfast. Seeds had to be planted, seeds that could not have been placed earlier for fear of them sprouting too soon, but now they had all too little time to grow.

“It will be a pleasure to haul them out of their blankets,” Siuan said when she was done. “If I have to tramp around in this. . . .” Releasing Egwene’s arm, she started to turn away, then stopped, her face serious, even grim. “I know you want to be a second Gerra Kishar—or maybe Sereille Bagand. You have it in you to match either. But be careful you don’t turn out to be another Shein Chunla. Good night, Mother. Sleep well.”

Egwene stood watching her go, a cloak-shrouded figure sometimes skidding on the path and muttering angrily almost loud enough to make out. Gerra and Sereille were remembered as among the greatest Amyrlins. Both had raised the influence and prestige of the White Tower to levels seldom equaled since before Artur Hawkwing. Both controlled the Tower itself, too, Gerra by skillfully playing one faction in the Hall against another, Sereille by the sheer force of her will. Shein Chunla was another matter, one who had squandered the power of the Amyrlin Seat, alienating most of the sisters in the Tower. The world believed that Shein had died in office, close on four hundred years ago, but the deeply hidden truth was that she had been deposed and sent into exile for life. Even the secret histories treaded lightly in certain areas, yet it was fairly obvious that, after the fourth plot to restore her to the Amyrlin Seat was uncovered, the sisters guarding Shein had smothered her in her sleep with a pillow. Egwene shivered, and told herself it was the cold.

Turning, she began making her slow way back to her tent alone. Sleep well? The fat moon hung low in the sky, and there were hours yet till sunrise, but she was not sure she was going to be able to sleep at all.

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CHAPTER

16

Unexpected Absences

Before the sun made a rim on the horizon the next morning, Egwene convened the Hall of the Tower. In Tar Valon, that would have been accompanied by considerable ceremony, and even since leaving Salidar they had held to some despite the difficulties of travel. Now, Sheriam simply went from Sitter's tent to Sitter's tent while it was still dark to announce that the Amyrlin Seat had called the Hall to Sit. In fact, they did not sit at all. In the grayness just before true sunrise, eighteen women stood in a semicircle on the snow to hear Egwene, all bundled against the cold that misted their breath.

Other sisters began appearing behind them to listen, only a few at the start, but when no one told them to leave, the group thickened and spread out to a soft buzz of talk. A very muted buzz. Few sisters would risk bothering a lone Sitter, much less the entire Hall. The Accepted in banded dresses and cloaks who had appeared behind the Aes Sedai were quieter, of course, and even quieter the gathering novices who had no chores, though there were a good many more of them. The camp now held half again as many novices as sisters, so many that few possessed a proper white cloak and most made do with a simple white skirt instead of a novice dress. Some sisters still believed they should go back to the old ways and let girls seek them out, but most regretted the lost years, when Aes Sedai numbers dwindled. Egwene herself almost shivered whenever she thought of what the Tower could have been. This was one change not even Siuan could object to.

In the midst of all the gathering, Carlinya came around the corner of a tent and stopped short at the sight of Egwene and the Sitters. Normally composure to her toenails, the White sister gaped, and her pale face reddened before she hurried away, looking back over her shoulder. Egwene stifled a grimace. Everyone was too concerned with what she herself was about this morning to have noticed, but sooner or later, someone was going to, and wonder.

Flinging back her delicately embroidered cloak to reveal the narrow blue stole of the Keeper, Sheriam made Egwene as much of a formal curtsy as her bulky garments allowed before taking a place at her side. Wrapped in layers of fine wool and silk, the flame-haired woman was the very picture of equanimity. At Egwene's nod, she took one step forward to intone the ancient formula in a clear, high voice.

"She comes; she comes! The Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat. Attend you all, for she comes!" It seemed a little out of place here, and besides, she was already there, not coming. The Sitters stood in silence, waiting. A few frowned impatiently, or fiddled restlessly with cloaks or skirts.

Egwene pushed back her own cloak, uncovering the seven-striped stole draped around her neck. These women needed any reminder she could give that she was indeed the Amyrlin Seat. "Everyone is weary from travel in this weather," she announced, not quite so loudly as Sheriam, but loud enough that everyone could hear. She felt a tingle of anticipation, an almost light-headed thrill. It was not much different from being queasy. "I have decided to stop here for two days, perhaps three." That brought heads up and sparked interest. She hoped Siuan was in the listening crowd. She did try to hold to the Oaths. "The horses need rest, too, and many of the wagons badly need repairs. The Keeper will see to the necessary arrangements." It truly was begun, now.

She expected neither argument nor discussion, and there was none. What she had told Siuan was no exaggeration. Too many sisters hoped for a miracle, so they would not have to march on Tar Valon with the world watching. Even among those convinced in their souls that Elaida must be ousted for the good of the Tower, despite everything they had done, too many would grasp any chance of delay, any chance for that miracle to appear.

One of those last, Romanda, did not wait for Sheriam to speak the closing lines. As soon as Egwene finished speaking, Romanda, looking quite youthful with her tight gray bun hidden by her hood, simply strode away. Cloaks flapping, Magla, Saroiya, and Varilin scurried after her. As well as anyone could scurry, when every other step sank ankle-deep. They did a good job of it anyway; Sitters or no, they hardly seemed to breathe without Romanda's permission. When Lelaine saw Romanda leaving, she gathered up Faiselle, Takima, and Lyrelle from the semicircle with a gesture and went without a backward glance, like a swan with three anxious goslings. If they were not so firmly in Lelaine's grasp as the other three were in Romanda's, they did not fall far short. For that matter, the rest of the Sitters barely waited on the final "Depart now in the Light" to leave Sheriam's lips. Egwene turned to go with her Hall of the Tower already scattering in every direction. That tingle was stronger. And *very* like being queasy.

"Three days," Sheriam murmured, offering Egwene a hand to help her down into one of the rutted paths. The corners of her tilted green eyes crinkled quizzically. "I'm surprised, Mother. Forgive me, but you dug in your heels nearly every time I wanted to stop for more than one."

"Speak to me again after you've talked to the wheelwrights and farriers," Egwene told her. "We'll not go far with horses dropping dead and wagons falling apart."

"As you say, Mother," the other woman replied, not precisely meekly, but in perfect acceptance.

The footing was no better now than it had been the night before, and their steps sometimes slid. Linking arms, they walked on slowly. Sheriam offered more support than Egwene required, but she did so almost surreptitiously. The Amyrlin Seat should not fall on her bottom in the full view of fifty sisters and a hundred servants, but neither should she seem propped up like an invalid.

Most of the Sitters who had sworn to Egwene, Sheriam included, had done so out of simple fear, really, and self-preservation. If the Hall learned they had sent sisters to sway the Aes Sedai in Tar Valon, and worse, kept the fact from the Hall for fear of Darkfriends among the Sitters, they surely and certainly would spend the rest of their lives in penance and exile. So the women who had believed they could somehow twitch Egwene about like a puppet, after the greater part of their influence with the Hall melted, instead found themselves sworn to obey her. That was rare even in the secret histories; sisters were expected to obey the Amyrlin, but swearing fealty was something else again. Most still seemed unsettled by it, though they did obey. Few were as bad as Carlinya, but Egwene had actually heard Beonin's teeth chatter the first time she saw Egwene with Sitters after swearing. Morvrin looked astonished anew whenever her eyes fell on Egwene, as if she still did not quite believe, and Nisao hardly seemed to stop frowning. Anaiya clicked her tongue over the secrecy, and Myrelle often flinched, though for more reason than taking an oath. But Sheriam simply had settled into the role of Egwene's Keeper of the Chronicles in truth, not just name.

"May I suggest using this opportunity to see what the surrounding country offers in way of food and fodder, Mother? Our stocks are low." Sheriam frowned anxiously. "Especially tea and salt, though I doubt we'll find those."

"Do what you can," Egwene said in a soothing tone. Odd now, to think that once she had gone in awe of Sheriam, and in no little fear of her displeasure. Strange as it seemed, now that she was no longer Mistress of Novices, no longer trying to tug and push Egwene to do as she wished, Sheriam actually seemed happier. "I have every confidence in you, Sheriam." The woman positively beamed at the compliment.

The sun still did not show above the tents and wagons to the east, but the camp was already bustling. In a manner of speaking. Breakfast done, the cooks were cleaning up, helped by a horde of novices. From the vigor they put into it, the young women seemed to find some warmth in scrubbing kettles with snow, but the cooks moved laboriously, knuckling their backs, stopping to sigh and sometimes to pull their cloaks close and stare bleakly at the snow. Shivering serving men, wearing most of the clothes they owned, had begun striking tents and loading wagons automatically as soon as they finished their hasty meal, and were now stumbling about to raise the tents and haul chests out of the wagons. Animals that had been being harnessed were now being led away by weary horsehandlers who walked with heads down. Egwene heard a few grumbles from men who failed to notice there were sisters nearby, but the greater number seemed too tired to voice a complaint.

Most of the Aes Sedai whose tents were up had vanished inside, but a good many still directed workers, and others hurried along the sunken paths on errands of their own. Unlike everyone else, they showed as little outward weariness as the Warders, who somehow managed to appear as if they had had all the sleep they needed for this fine spring day. Egwene suspected that was a real part of how a sister drew strength from her Warder, quite aside from what she could do with the bond. When your Warder would not admit to himself that he was cold or tired or hungry, you just had to bear up as well.

On one of the crossing paths, Morvrin appeared, clutching Takima's arm. Perhaps it was for support, though Morvrin was wide enough to make the shorter woman seem more diminutive than she actually was. Perhaps it was to keep Takima from escaping; Morvrin was dogged once she set a goal. Egwene frowned. Morvrin might well be expected to seek out a Sitter for her Ajah, the Brown, yet Egwene would have thought Janya or Escaralde more likely. The two passed out of sight behind a canvas-topped wagon on runners, Morvrin bending to talk in her companion's ear. There was no way to tell whether Takima was paying any mind.

"Is something the matter, Mother?"

Egwene put on a smile that felt tight. "No more than usual, Sheriam. No more than usual."

At the Amyrlin's Study, Sheriam departed to see to the tasks Egwene had given her, and Egwene went in to find everything in readiness. She would have been surprised at anything else. Selame was just setting a tea tray on the writing table. Brightly colored beadwork ran across the rail-thin woman's bodice and down her sleeves, and with her long nose carried high, she hardly seemed a servant at first glance, but she had seen to what needed doing. Two braziers full of glowing coals had taken some of the chill off the air, though most of the heat rushed out through the smoke hole. Dried herbs sprinkled on the coals gave a pleasant scent to the smoke that did not escape, the tray from the night before was gone, and the lantern and tallow candles had been trimmed and lit. No one was about to leave a tent open enough to let in light from outside.

Siuan was already there, too, with a stack of papers in her hands, a harried expression on her face, and a smudge of ink on her nose. The post of secretary provided the two of them another reason to be seen talking, and Sheriam had not minded at all giving up the work. Siuan herself grumbled frequently, however. For a woman who had seldom left the Tower since entering as a novice, she had a remarkable dislike for staying inside. At the moment she was the picture of a woman being patient and wanting everyone to know it.

For all her high nose, Selame simpered and bobbed so many curtsies that taking Egwene's cloak and mittens turned into an elaborate little ceremony. The woman nattered on about the Mother putting her feet up, and perhaps she should fetch the Mother a lap robe, and maybe she should stay in case the Mother wanted anything else, until Egwene practically chased her out. The tea tasted of mint. In this weather! Selame was a trial, and she could hardly be called loyal, but she did try.

There was no time for lounging and sipping tea, though. Egwene straightened her stole and took her place behind the writing desk, absentmindedly giving a yank to the leg of her chair so it would not fold beneath her as it often did, Siuan perched atop a rickety stool on the other side of the table, and the tea cooled. They did not speak of plans, or Gareth Bryne, or hopes; what could be done there for now, had been. Reports and problems piled up when they were on the move and weariness overcame attempts to deal with them, and now that they were stopped, all had to be gone through. An army ahead did not change that.

At times, Egwene wondered how so much paper could be found when everything else seemed so difficult. The reports Siuan handed her detailed shortages and little else. Not simply those Sheriam had mentioned, but coal and nails and iron for the farriers and wheelwrights, leather and oiled thread for the harnessmakers, lamp oil and candles and a hundred other things, even soap. And whatever was not running out was wearing out, from shoes to tents, all listed in Siuan's bold hand, which grew more aggressive the more glaring the need she wrote about. Her account of the coin remaining looked to have been slashed onto the paper in a positive fury. And not a thing to be done about it.

Among Siuan's papers were several addresses from Sitters suggesting ways to solve the problem of money. Or rather, informing Egwene what they intended to lay before the Hall. There were few advantages to any of the schemes, however, and many pitfalls. Moria Karentanis proposed stopping the soldiers' pay, a notion Egwene thought the Hall had already realized would cause the army to melt away like dew under a midsummer sun. Malind Nachenin presented an appeal to nearby nobles that sounded more a demand and might well turn the whole countryside against them, as would Salita Toranes' intention to levy a tax on the towns and villages they passed.

Crumpling the three addresses together in her fist, Egwene shook them at Siuan. She wished it were three Sitters' throats she was gripping. "Do they *all* think everything has to go the way they wish, and never mind realities? Light, *they're* the ones behaving like children!"

"The Tower has managed to make its wishes become realities often enough," Siuan said complacently. "Remember, some would say you're ignoring reality, too."

Egwene sniffed. Luckily, whatever the Hall voted, none of the proposals could be carried forward without a decree from her. Even in her straitened circumstances, she had a little power. Very little, but that was more than none. "Is the Hall always this bad, Siuan?"

Siuan nodded, shifting slightly to try to find a better balance. No two of her stool's legs were the same length. "But it could be worse. Remind me to tell you about the Year of the Four Amyrlins; that was about a hundred and fifty years after the founding of Tar Valon. In those days, the normal workings of the Tower nearly rivaled what's happening today. Every hand tried to snatch the tiller, if they could. There were actually two rival Halls of the Tower in Tar Valon for part of that year. Almost like now. Just about everyone came to grief in the end, including a few who thought they were going to save the Tower. Some of them might have, if they hadn't stepped in quicksand. The Tower survived anyway, of course. It always does."

A great deal of history grew up in over three thousand years, much suppressed, hidden from all but a few eyes, yet Siuan seemed to have every detail at her fingertips. She must have spent a good part of her years in the Tower *burying* herself in those secret histories. Of one thing, Egwene was certain. She would avoid Shein's fate if she could, but she would not remain as she was, little better off than Cemaile Sorenthaine. Long before the end of her reign, the most important decision left to Cemaile's discretion was what dress to wear. She *was* going to have to ask Siuan to tell her about the Year of the Four Amyrlins, and she did not look forward to it.

The shifting beam of light from the smoke hole in the roof showed morning toward midday, but Siuan's stack of papers seemed hardly diminished. Any interruption at all would have been welcome, even premature discovery. Well, maybe not that.

“What’s next, Siuan?” she growled.

A flicker of movement caught Aran’gar’s eye, and she peered through the trees toward the army’s camp, an obscuring ring around the tents of the Aes Sedai. A line of wagon-sledges was moving slowly east, escorted by men on horseback. The pale sun glinted from armor and the points of lances. She could not help sneering. Spears and horses! A primitive rabble that could move no faster than a man could walk, led by a man who did not know what was happening a hundred miles away. Aes Sedai? She could destroy the lot of them, and even dying they would never suspect who was killing them. Of course, she would not survive them long. That thought made her shiver. The Great Lord gave very few a second chance at life, and she was not about to throw away hers.

Waiting until the riders moved out of sight into the forest, she started back toward the camp, thinking idly of tonight’s dreams. Behind her, smooth snow would hide what she had buried until the spring thaw, more than long enough. Ahead, some of the men in the camp finally noticed her and straightened from their tasks to watch. In spite of herself, she smiled and smoothed her skirt over her hips. It was difficult now to really remember what life had been like as a man; had she been such an easily manipulated fool, then? Getting through that swarm with a corpse unseen had been difficult, even for her, but she enjoyed the walk back.

The morning went on in a seemingly endless wading through paper, until what Egwene had known would happen, did. Certain daily events were sure. There would be bitter cold, there would be snow, there would be clouds, and gray skies, and wind. And there would be visits from Lelaine and Romanda.

Weary of sitting, Egwene was stretching her legs when Lelaine swept into the tent with Faolain at her heels. Frigid air rolled in with them before the tentflap fell shut. Looking around with a faintly disapproving air, Lelaine plucked off blue leather gloves, while allowing Faolain to remove the lynx-lined cloak from her shoulders. Slender and dignified in deep blue silk, with penetrating eyes, she might have been in her own tent. At a casual gesture, Faolain retreated deferentially to a corner with the garment, merely shrugging her own cloak back. Plainly, she was ready to go on the instant at another wave of the Sitter’s hand. Her dark features wore a cast of resigned meekness, not very much like her.

Lelaine's reserve cracked for a moment, in a surprisingly warm smile for Siuan. They had been friends, once, years ago, and she had even offered something like the patronage that Faolain had accepted, a Sitter's protection and sheltering arm against the sneers and accusations of other sisters. Touching Siuan's cheek, Lelaine softly murmured something that sounded sympathetic. Siuan blushed, a startling uncertainty flashing across her face. It was not pretense, Egwene was sure. Siuan found it difficult to deal with what really had changed in her, and more, with how easily she was adapting.

Lelaine eyed the stool in front of the writing table and, as usual, visibly rejected such an unsteady seat. Only then did she acknowledge Egwene's presence, with the barest dip of her head. "We need to speak of the Sea Folk, Mother," she said in a tone a bit firm to be directed at the Amyrlin Seat.

Not until Egwene's heart sank down from her throat did she realize she had been afraid that Lelaine already knew what Lord Bryne had told her. Or even the meeting he was arranging. The next instant, her heart leaped back again. The Sea Folk? Surely the Hall could not have learned of the insane bargain Nynaeve and Elayne had made. She could not imagine what had led them into such a disaster, or how she was to deal with it.

Her stomach roiling, she took her place behind the table without revealing anything of what she felt. And that fool chair leg folded, nearly dropping her onto the carpets before she could jerk it straight again. She hoped her cheeks were not coloring. "The Sea Folk in Caemlyn, or in Cairhien?" Yes; that sounded suitably calm and collected.

"Cairhien." Romanda's high voice rang like sudden chimes. "Definitely Cairhien." Her entry made Lelaine's seem almost diffident, the force of her personality abruptly filling the tent. There were no warm smiles in Romanda; handsome as her face was, it did not seem made for them.

Theodrin followed her in, and Romanda swung her cloak off with a flourish and tossed it to the slim, apple-cheeked sister with a peremptory gesture that sent Theodrin hurrying to a corner opposite Faolain. Faolain was distinctly subdued, but Theodrin's tilted eyes were very wide, as though she was permanently startled, and her lips seemed ready to gasp. Like Faolain, her proper place in the hierarchy of Aes Sedai demanded better employment, but neither was likely to receive it soon.

Romanda's compelling gaze rested a moment on Siuan, as if considering whether to send her to a corner as well, then brushed past Lelaine almost dismissively before settling on Egwene. "It seems that young man has been talking with the Sea Folk, Mother. The Yellow eyes-and-ears in Cairhien are most excited about it. Do you have any idea what might interest him in the Atha'an Miere?"

Despite the title, Romanda hardly sounded as if she were addressing the Amyrlin Seat, but then, she never did. There was no doubt who "that young man" was. Every sister in the camp accepted that Rand was the Dragon Reborn, but anyone who heard them talk would have believed they were speaking of an unruly young lout who might come to dinner drunk and throw up on the table.

"She can hardly know what's in the boy's head," Lelaine said before Egwene could open her mouth. Her smile was not at all warm this time. "If an answer is to be found, Romanda, it will be in Caemlyn. The Atha'an Miere there are not sequestered on a ship, and I seriously doubt that high ranking Sea Folk came so far from the sea on different errands. I've never heard of them doing so for any reason. It may be they have an interest in him. They must know who he is by now."

Romanda smiled back, and frost should have appeared on the tent walls. "There's hardly need to state the obvious, Lelaine. The first question is how to find out."

"I was about to resolve that when you barged in, Romanda. The next time the Mother encounters Elayne or Nynaeve in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, she can pass on instructions. Merilille can discover what the Atha'an Miere want, or maybe what the boy does, when she reaches Caemlyn. A pity the girls didn't think to set a regular schedule, but we must work around that. Merilille can meet with a Sitter in *Tel'aran'rhiod* when she knows." Lelaine made a small gesture; plainly, she herself was the intended Sitter. "I thought Salidar might be a suitable place."

Romanda snorted with amusement. Even in that, there was no warmth. "Easier to instruct Merilille than to see she obeys, Lelaine. I expect she knows she faces sharp questions. This Bowl of the Winds should have been brought to us for study first. None of the sisters in Ebou Dar had much ability in Cloud Dancing, I believe, and you can see the result, all this hurly-burly and suddenness. I have a thought to call a question before the Hall concerning everyone involved." Abruptly the gray-haired woman's voice became smooth as butter. “As I recall, you supported the choice of Merilille.”

With a jerk, Lelaine drew herself up. Her eyes flashed. “I supported who the Gray put forward, Romanda, and no more,” she said indignantly. “How could I have imagined she would decide to use the Bowl there? And to include Sea Folk wilders in the circle! How could she believe they know as much of working weather as Aes Sedai?” Abruptly her ire slipped. She was defending herself to her fiercest adversary in the Hall, her only real adversary. And, no doubt worse in her view, she was agreeing with her about the Sea Folk. There was no question that she did agree, but giving the fact voice was another matter.

Romanda let her cold smile deepen as Lelaine’s face paled with fury. She straightened her bronze-colored skirts with meticulous care as Lelaine searched for a way to turn matters about. “We will see how the Hall stands, Lelaine,” she said finally. “Until the question is called, I think it best if Merilille does *not* meet with any of the Sitters involved in her selection. Even a suggestion of collusion would be looked at askance. I’m sure you will agree I should be the one to speak with her.”

Lelaine’s face paled differently. She was not afraid, not visibly, yet Egwene could almost see her counting who might stand for her, or against. Collusion was almost as serious as a charge of treason, and required only the lesser consensus. Likely, she could avoid that, but the arguments would be deep and acrimonious. Romanda’s faction might even increase. That would cause untold problems whether or not Egwene’s own plans bore fruit. And there was nothing she could do to stop it, short of revealing what really had happened in Ebou Dar. As well ask them to let her accept the same offer Faolain and Theodrin had.

Egwene drew breath. At least she might be able to prevent the use of Salidar as a meeting place in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. That was where she met Elayne and Nynaeve, now. When she did, anyway; she had not in days. With Sitters popping in and out of the World of Dreams, finding anywhere you could be sure they would not appear was difficult. “The next time I encounter Elayne or Nynaeve, I will pass on your instructions regarding Merilille. I can let you know when she’s ready to meet you.” Which would be never, once she was done with those instructions.

The Sitters’ heads whipped around, and two sets of eyes stared at her. They had forgotten she was there! Struggling to keep her face smooth, she realized her foot was tapping irritably, and stopped it. She had to go along with what they thought of her a while longer, yet. A little while longer. At least she no longer felt nauseated. Just angry.

Into that moment of silence, Chesa came bustling with Egwene's midday meal on a cloth-covered tray. Dark-haired, plump and pretty in her middle years, Chesa managed to convey a proper respect without cringing. Her curtsy was as simple as her dark gray dress, with just a touch of plain lace at the throat. "Forgive me for intruding, Mother, Aes Sedai. I *am* sorry this is late, Mother, but Meri seems to have wandered off." She clicked her tongue in exasperation as she set the tray in front of Egwene. Wandering seemed very unlike the misnamed Meri. That dour woman was as disapproving of faults in herself as she was of those in others.

Romanda frowned, but she said nothing. After all, she could hardly show too much interest in one of Egwene's maids. Especially when the woman was her spy. Just as Selame was Lelaine's. Egwene avoided looking at Theodrin or Faolain, both still standing dutifully in their corners like Accepted, rather than Aes Sedai themselves.

Chesa half-opened her mouth, but closed it again, perhaps intimidated by the Sitters. Egwene was relieved when she dipped another curtsy and left with a murmured "By your leave, Mother." Chesa's advice was always indirect enough for any sister when anyone else was present, but right then, the last thing Egwene wanted was even a circumspect reminder to eat while her food was hot.

Lelaine took up as if there had been no interruption. "The important thing," she said firmly, "is to learn what the Atha'an Miere want. Or what the boy does. Maybe he wants to be their king, too." Holding out her arms, she allowed Faolain to restore her cloak, which the dark young woman did with care. "You will remember to let me know if you have any thoughts on it, Mother?" That was just barely a request.

"I will think hard," Egwene told her. Which was not to say she would share her thoughts. She wished she had a glimmer of the answer. That the Atha'an Miere believed Rand was their prophesied Coramoor, she knew, though the Hall did not, but what he wanted from them, or them from him, she could not begin to imagine. According to Elayne, the Sea Folk with them had no clue. Or said not. Egwene almost wished one of the handful of sisters who had come from the Atha'an Miere was in the camp. Almost. One way or another, those Windfinders *were* going to cause trouble.

At a wave of Romanda's hand, Theodrin leaped forward with the Sitter's cloak as though goosed. By Romanda's expression, Lelaine's recovery did not best please her. "You will remember to tell Merilille I wish to speak with her, Mother," she said, and that was not a request at all.

For a brief moment the two Sitters stood staring at each other, Egwene forgotten again in their mutual animosity. They departed without a word to her, very nearly jostling for precedence before Romanda slipped out first, drawing Theodrin in her wake. Baring her teeth, Lelaine practically pushed Faolain from the tent ahead of her.

Siuan heaved a hearty sigh, and made no attempt to hide her relief.

"By your leave, Mother," Egwene muttered mockingly. "If you please, Mother. You may go, daughters." Letting out a long breath, she settled back in her chair. Which promptly pitched her onto the carpets in a heap. She picked herself up slowly and jerked her skirts straight, put her stole to rights. At least it had not happened in front of those two. "Go get something to eat, Siuan. And bring it back. We've a long day, yet."

"Some falls hurt less than others," Siuan said as if to herself before ducking outside. It was a good thing she went so quickly, or Egwene might have given her an earful.

She returned soon, though, and they ate hard rolls and lentil stew laced with tough carrot and scraps of meat Egwene did not look at closely. There were only a few interruptions, intrusions where they fell silent and pretended to study reports. Chesa came to take away the tray, and later to replace the candles, a task she grumbled over, which was not like her.

"Who'd expect Selame to go missing, too?" she muttered, half to herself. "Off canoodling with the soldiers, I expect. That Halima's a bad influence."

A skinny young fellow with a dripping nose renewed the already dead coals in the braziers—the Amyrlin got more warmth than most, but that was not a great deal—and he stumbled over his own boots and gaped at Egwene in a manner quite gratifying after the two Sitters. Sheriam appeared to ask whether Egwene had any further instructions, of all things, and then seemed to want to stay. Perhaps the few secrets she knew made her nervous; her eyes certainly darted uneasily.

That was the lot, and Egwene was not sure whether it was because no one bothered the Amyrlin without cause, or because everyone knew the real decisions were made in the Hall.

"I don't know about this report of soldiers moving south out of Kandor," Siuan said as soon as the tentflap fell behind Sheriam. "There's just the one, and Borderlanders seldom go far from the Blight, but every fool knows that, so it's hardly the kind of tale anyone would make up." She was not reading from a page, now.

Siuan had managed to keep very tenuous control of the Amyrlin's network of eyes-and-ears so far, and reports, rumors, and gossip flowed to her in steady streams, to be studied before she and Egwene decided what to pass on to the Hall. Leane had her own network, to add to the flow. Most of it was passed on—some things the Hall had to know, and there was no guarantee that the Ajahs would pass on what their own agents learned—but it all had to be sieved for what might be dangerous, or serve to divert attention from the real goal.

Few of those streams carried anything good, of late. Cairhien had produced any number of rumors of Aes Sedai allied with Rand, or, worse, serving him, yet at least those could be dismissed out of hand. The Wise Ones would not say much at all about Rand or anyone connected to him, but according to them, Merana was awaiting his return, and certainly sisters in the Sun Palace, where the Dragon Reborn kept his first throne, were more than seed enough to grow those tales. Others were not easily ignored, even when it was hard to know what to make of them. A printer in Illian asserted that he had proof Rand had killed Mattin Stepaneos with his own hands and destroyed the body with the One Power, while a laborer on the docks there claimed she had seen the former King carried, bound and gagged and rolled in a rug, aboard a ship that had sailed in the night with the blessings of the captain of the Port Watch. The first was far more likely, but Egwene hoped none of the Ajahs' agents had picked up the same tale. There were already too many black marks against Rand's name in the sisters' books.

It went on like that. The Seanchan seemed to be taking a firm hold in Ebou Dar, against very little resistance. That might have been expected in a land where the Queen's true rule ended a few days' ride from her capital, yet it was hardly heartening. The Shaido seemed to be everywhere, though word of them always came from someone who had heard from someone who had heard. Most sisters seemed to believe the scattered Shaido were Rand's work despite the Wise Ones' denials, carried by Sheriam. No one wanted to probe the Wise Ones' supposed lies too closely, of course. There were a hundred excuses, but no one was willing to meet them in *Tel'aran'rhiod* except the sisters sworn to Egwene, and they had to be ordered. Anaiya dryly called the encounters "quite compact lessons in humility," and she did not seem at all amused.

"There can't *be* that many Shaido," Egwene muttered. No herbs had been added to the second batch of charcoal, which was dying down in faint embers, and her eyes ached from the smoke that hung thin in the air. Channeling to get rid of it would disperse the last warmth, too. "Some of this must be bandits' work." After all, who could tell a village emptied by people fleeing brigands from one emptied by Shaido? Especially at third hand, or fifth. "There are certainly enough bandits around to account for some of it." Most calling themselves Dragonsworn, which was no help at all. She worked her shoulders to loosen a few of the knots in her muscles.

Abruptly she realized that Siuan was staring at nothing so intently that she appeared ready to slip off of her stool. "Siuan, are you falling asleep? We may have worked most of the day, but it's still light out." There was light at the smoke hole, though it did appear to be fading.

Siuan blinked. "I'm sorry. I've been thinking about something lately, and trying to decide whether to share it with you. About the Hall."

"The Hall! Siuan, if you know something about the Hall—!"

"I don't *know* anything," Siuan cut in. "It's what I suspect." She clicked her tongue in annoyance. "Not even suspect, really. At least, I don't know what to suspect. But I see a pattern."

"Then you had best tell me about it," Egwene said. Siuan had shown herself very skilled at detecting patterns where others saw only a jumble.

Shifting on her stool, Siuan leaned forward intently. "It's this. Aside from Romanda and Moria, the Sitters chosen in Salidar are . . . they're too young." Much had changed in Siuan, but speaking of other sisters' ages clearly made her uncomfortable. "Escaralde is the oldest, and I'm sure she isn't much past seventy. I can't be certain without going into the novice book in Tar Valon, or her telling us, but I'm as sure as I can be. It isn't often the Hall has held more than one Sitter under a hundred, and here we have eight!"

"But Romanda and Moria *are* new," Egwene said gently, resting her elbows on the table. It had been a long day. "And neither is young. Maybe we should be grateful the others are, or they might not have been willing to raise me." She could have pointed out that Siuan herself had been chosen

Amyrlin at less than half Escaralde's age, but the reminder would have been cruel.

"Maybe," Siuan said stubbornly. "Romanda was certain for the Hall as soon as she showed up. I doubt there's a Yellow would dare speak against her for a chair. And Moria. . . . She doesn't cling to Lelaine, but Lelaine and Lyrelle probably thought she would. I don't know. Mark me, though. When a woman is raised too young, there's a reason." She took a deep breath. "Including when I was." The pain of loss flashed across her face, the loss of the Amyrlin Seat certainly, maybe of all the losses she had suffered. It was gone almost as soon as it came. Egwene did not think she had ever known a woman as strong as Siuan Sanche. "This time, there were more than enough sisters of proper age to choose from, and I can't see five Ajahs deadlocking on all of them. There is a pattern, and I mean to pick it out."

Egwene did not agree. Change hung in the air whether Siuan wanted to see it or not. Elaida had broken custom, come very close to breaking law, in usurping Siuan's place. Sisters had fled the Tower and let the world know of it, and that last certainly had never happened before. Change. Older sisters were more likely to be tied to the old ways, but even some of them had to see that everything was shifting. Surely that was why younger women, more open to the new, had been chosen. Should she order Siuan to stop wasting her time with this? Siuan had enough else to do. Or would it be a kindness to let her continue? She wanted so deeply to prove that the change she saw was not really occurring at all.

Before Egwene could make a decision, Romanda ducked into the tent and stood holding the tentflap open. Long shadows stretched across the snow outside. Evening was coming fast. Romanda's face was as dark as those shadows. She fixed Siuan with a stern gaze and snapped one word. "Out!"

Egwene gave an infinitesimal nod, but Siuan was already on her feet. She missed a step, then all but ran from the tent. A sister who stood where Siuan did was expected to obey any sister of Romanda's strength in the Power, not just a Sitter.

Throwing down the tentflap, Romanda embraced the Source. The glow of *saidar* surrounded her, and she wove a ward against eavesdropping around the inside of the tent without so much as a pretense of asking Egwene's permission. "You are a fool!" she grated. "How long did you think you could keep this a secret? Soldiers talk, child. Men always talk! Bryne will be lucky if the Hall doesn't put his head on a pike."

Egwene stood slowly, smoothing her skirt. She had been waiting for this, but she still needed to be careful. The game was far from played out, and everything could still turn against her in a flash. She had to pretend innocence, until she could afford to stop pretending. "Must I remind you that rudeness to the Amyrlin Seat is a crime, daughter," she said instead. She had been pretending so long, and she was so close.

"The Amyrlin Seat." Romanda strode across the carpets to within arm's reach of Egwene, and by her glare, the thought of reaching more crossed her mind. "You're an infant! Your bottom still remembers the last switching it had as a novice! After this, you'll be lucky if the Hall doesn't put you in a corner with a few play pretties. If you want to avoid that, you will listen to me, and do as I tell you. Now, sit down!"

Egwene seethed inside, but she sat. It was too soon.

With a sharp, satisfied nod, Romanda planted her fists on her hips. She stared down at Egwene like a stern aunt lecturing a misbehaving niece. A very stern aunt. Or a headsman with a toothache. "This meeting with Pelivar and Arathelle has to go forward, now it's been arranged. They expect the Amyrlin Seat, and they will see her. You will attend with all the pomp and dignity your title deserves. And you will tell them I am to speak for you, after which, you will hold your tongue! Getting them out of our way will require a firm hand, and someone who knows what she's about. No doubt Lelaine will be here any minute, trying to put herself forward, but you just remember the trouble she's in. I've spent the day speaking with other Sitters, and it appears very likely that Merilille and Merana's failures will be quite firmly attached to Lelaine when the Hall sits next. So, if you have any hope of gaining the experience you'll need to grow into that stole, it lies with me! Do you understand me?"

"I understand perfectly," Egwene said, in what she hoped was a meek voice. If she let Romanda speak in her place, there would no longer be any doubts. The Hall and the whole world would know who held Egwene al'Vere by the scruff of her neck.

Romanda's eyes seemed to bore into her head before the woman gave a curt nod. "I hope that you do. I intend to remove Elaida from the Amyrlin Seat, and I won't see that ruined because a child thinks she knows enough to find her way across the street without her hand held." With a snort, she flung her cloak around her and flung herself out of the tent. The ward vanished as she did.

Egwene sat and frowned at the tent's entrance. A child? Burn the woman, she was the Amyrlin Seat! Whether they liked it or not, they had raised her, and they were going to have to live with it! Eventually. Snatching up the stone inkwell, she hurled it at the tentflap.

Lelaine dodged back, barely avoiding the splash. "Temper, temper," she chided, coming on in.

No more asking permission than Romanda had, she embraced the Source and wove a ward to stop anyone overhearing what she had to say. Where Romanda had been in a fury, Lelaine appeared pleased with herself, rubbing her gloved hands and smiling.

"I don't suppose I need tell you your little secret is out. Very bad of Lord Bryne, but I think he's too valuable to kill. A good thing for him I do. Let me see. I suppose Romanda told you that there will be a meeting with Pelivar and Arathelle, but you are to let her do all the talking. Am I right?" Egwene stirred, but Lelaine waved a hand at her. "No need to answer. I know Romanda. Unfortunately for her, I learned about this before she did, and instead of running to you straightaway, I've been polling the other Sitters. Do you want to know what they think?"

Egwene balled her fists in her lap, where she hoped they would not be noticed. "I expect you're going to tell me."

"You are in no position to take that tone with me," Lelaine said sharply, but the next instant, her smile returned. "The Hall is displeased with you. Very displeased. Whatever Romanda has threatened you with—and it's easy enough to imagine—I can deliver. Romanda, on the other hand, has upset a number of Sitters with her bullying. So, unless you want to find yourself with less authority than the little you have now, Romanda is going to be surprised tomorrow when you name me to speak for you. It's hard to believe Arathelle and Pelivar were foolish enough to put a thing like this in motion, but they'll slink away with their tails between their legs once I'm done with them."

"How do I know you won't carry out those threats anyway?" Egwene hoped her angry mutter sounded like sullenness. Light, but she was tired of this!

"Because I say I won't," Lelaine snapped. "Don't you know by now that you aren't really in charge of anything? The Hall is, and that is between

Romanda and me. In another hundred years, you may grow into the stole, but for now, sit quietly, fold your hands, and let someone who knows what she is about see to pulling Elaida down."

After Lelaine left, Egwene once more sat staring. This time, she was not letting anger boil. *You may grow into the stole*. Almost the same thing Romanda had said. *Someone who knows what she is about*. *Was* she deceiving herself? A child, ruining what a woman with experience could handle easily?

Siuan slipped into the tent and stood looking worried. "Gareth Bryne just came to tell me the Hall knows," she said dryly. "Under cover of asking about his shirts. Him and his bloody shirts! The meeting is set for tomorrow, at a lake about five hours to the north. Pelivar and Arathelle are already on the way. Aemlyn, too. That's a third strong House."

"That's more than Lelaine or Romanda saw fit to tell me," Egwene said, just as dryly. No. A hundred years of being led by the hand, pushed by the scruff of her neck, or fifty years, or five, and she would be fit for nothing more. If she had to grow, she had to grow *now*.

"Oh, blood and bloody ashes," Siuan groaned. "I can't stand it! What did they say? How did it go?"

"About as we expected." Egwene smiled with a wonder that touched her voice, too. "Siuan, they couldn't have handed me the Hall better if I had told them what to do."

The last light was failing as Sheriam approached her tiny tent, smaller even than Egwene's. If she had not been Keeper, she would have had to share. Ducking inside, she had only time to realize she was not alone when she was shielded and flung facedown on her cot. Stunned, she tried to cry out, but a corner of one of her blankets wadded itself into her mouth. Dress and shift burst away from her body like a pricked bubble.

A hand stroked her head. "You were supposed to keep me informed, Sheriam. That girl is up to something, and I want to know what."

It took a long time to convince her questioner that she had already told all she knew, that she would never hold back a word, not a whisper. When she was left alone at last, it was to lie curled up and whimpering from her welts, bitterly wishing that she had never in her life spoken to a single sister in the Hall.

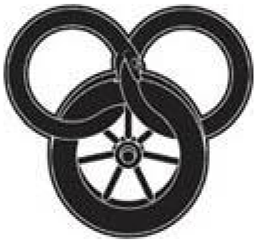

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CHAPTER 17

Out on the Ice

The next morning, a column rode north from the Aes Sedai camp well before dawn, near silent except for the creak of saddles and the crunch of hooves breaking through the snow’s crisp crust. Occasionally a horse snorted, or metal jingled and was quickly muffled. The moon was already down, the sky glistening with stars, but the pale blanket lying over everything below lightened the darkness. When the first glimmers of day appeared in the east, they had been riding a good hour or more. Which was not to say they had traveled far. Over some open stretches, Egwene could let Daishar go at a slow canter that sprayed white like splashing water, but for the most part, the horses walked, and not quickly, through sparse forest where the snow made deep drifts below and clung to branches overhead. Oak and pine, sourgum and leatherleaf and trees she did not recognize all looked even more be draggled than they had in the heat and drought. Today was the Feast of Abram, but there would be no prizes baked in honeycakes. The Light send some people found surprises in the day, though.

The sun rose and climbed, a pale golden ball that gave no warmth. Every breath still bit the throat and produced a puff of mist. A sharp wind blew, not hard, but cutting, and to the west dark clouds rolled north on their way to Andor. She felt a touch of pity for whoever would know the burden of those clouds. And relief that they were heading away. Waiting another day would have been maddening. She had been unable to sleep at all, for fidgety restlessness, not headaches. Restlessness, and tendrils of fear that had crept in like cold air under the edges of the tent. She was not tired, though. She felt like a compressed spring, a tight-wound clock, full of energy that wanted desperately to find release. Light, everything could still go horribly wrong.

It was an impressive column, behind the standard of the White Tower, the white Flame of Tar Valon centered on a spiral of seven colors, one for each Ajah. Sewn secretly in Salidar, it had lain in the bottom of a chest ever since, with the keys in the keeping of the Hall. She did not think they would have produced it except for this morning's need for pomp. A thousand heavy cavalry in plate-and-mail provided a close escort, a panoply of lances, swords, maces and axes seldom seen south of the Borderlands. Their commander was a one-eyed Shienaran with a vividly painted eyepatch, a man she had met once, what seemed an Age ago. Uno Nomesta glared at the trees through the steel bars of his helmet's faceguard as if he expected every last one to hide an ambush, and his men seemed nearly as watchful, erect in their saddles.

Almost out of sight ahead through the trees rode a knot of men who wore helmets, breast- and backplates, but no other armor. Their cloaks whipped about freely; a gauntleted hand for the reins and a hand for the short bow they each carried left nothing to grasp at warmth. There were more farther on, and beyond sight to left and right and behind, another thousand altogether, to scout and screen. Gareth Bryne did not expect trickery from the Andorans, but he had been wrong before, so he said, and the Murandians were another matter. And then there was the possibility of assassins in Elaida's pay, or even Darkfriends. The Light alone knew when a Darkfriend might decide to kill, or why. For that matter, though the Shaido were supposedly far away, no one ever seemed to know they were there until the killing began. Even bandits might have tried their hand with too small a party. Lord Bryne was not a man to take chances unnecessarily, and Egwene was very glad. Today, she wanted as many witnesses as possible.

She herself rode ahead of the banner, with Sheriam and Siuan and Bryne. The others appeared caught in their own thoughts. Lord Bryne sat his saddle easily, the mist of his even breath forming a light frost on his faceguard, yet Egwene could see him calmly marking terrain in his mind. In case he had to fight over it. Siuan rode so stiffly that she would be sore long before reaching their destination, but she stared north as though she could already see the lake, and sometimes she nodded to herself, or shook her head. She would not have done that unless she was uneasy. Sheriam knew no more of what was to come than the Sitters did, yet she appeared even more nervous than Siuan, shifting constantly in her saddle and grimacing. Anger shone in her green eyes, too, for some reason.

Close behind the banner came the entire Hall of the Tower in double column, wearing embroidered silks and rich velvets and furs and cloaks with the Flame large on the back. Women who seldom wore more ornaments than the Great Serpent ring were decked today in the finest gems the camp’s jewelry caskets could supply. Their Warders made a more splendid display simply by wearing their color-shifting cloaks; parts of the men seemed to vanish as the disquieting cloaks swirled in the stiff breeze. Servants followed, two or three for every sister, on the best horses that could be found for them. They might have passed for lesser nobility themselves if a number had not been leading pack animals; every chest in the camp had been ransacked to outfit them in bright colors.

Perhaps because she was one of the Sitters without a Warder, Delana had brought Halima along, on a spirited white mare. The two rode almost knee-to-knee. Sometimes Delana would lean toward Halima to speak privately, though Halima appeared too excited to listen. Supposedly, Halima was Delana’s secretary, but everyone believed it a case of charity, or possibly friendship, however unlikely, between the dignified, pale-haired sister and the hot-natured, raven-haired country woman. Egwene had seen Halima’s hand, and it had the unformed look of a child’s just learning her letters. Today, she was in garments as fine as any sister’s, with gems that easily equaled Delana’s, who must have been their source. Whenever a gust opened her velvet cloak, she displayed a shocking amount of bosom, and she always laughed and took her time about gathering it around her again, refusing to admit that she felt the cold any more than the sisters did.

For once, Egwene was glad of all the gifts of clothing she had been given, allowing her to surpass the Sitters. Her green-and-blue silk was slashed with white and worked with seed pearls. Pearls even decorated the backs of her gloves. At the last minute a cloak lined with ermine had been provided by Romanda, and a necklace and earrings of emeralds and white opals by Lelaine. The moonstones in her hair came from Janya. The Amyrlin had to be resplendent today. Even Siuan appeared ready for a ball, in blue velvets and cream lace, with a wide band of pearls at her throat and more laced through her hair.

Romanda and Lelaine led the Sitters, riding so closely behind the soldier bearing the banner that he glanced over his shoulder nervously and sometimes edged his horse nearer the riders ahead of him. Egwene managed not to look back more than once or twice, yet she could feel their eyes pressing between her shoulder blades. Each thought her tied in a neat bundle, but each had to be wondering whose cords had done the binding. Oh, Light, this could not go wrong. Not now.

Other than the column, little moved in all that snow-covered landscape. A broad-winged hawk wheeled overhead against the cold blue sky for a time before winging eastward. Twice Egwene saw black-tailed foxes trotting in the distance, still in their summer fur, and once, a large deer with tall forked antlers ghosted away and vanished amid the trees. A hare, starting up right under Bela's hooves and bounding off, made the shaggy mare toss her head, and Siuan yelped and grabbed at the reins as if she expected Bela to bolt. Of course, Bela only gave a reproachful snort and plodded onward. Egwene's tall roan gelding shied more, and the hare had not gone near him.

Siuan began grumbling under her breath after the hare scampered away, and it took quite some time before she eased Bela's reins. Being on a horse always made her grumpy—she traveled in one of the wagons whenever possible—but she was seldom this bad. There was no need to look further than Lord Bryne, or her fierce glances at him, to know why.

If he noticed Siuan's looks, he gave no sign. The only one not in fine array, he looked as he always did, plain and slightly battered. A rock that had weathered storms and would outlast more to come. For some reason, Egwene was glad he had resisted their efforts to dress him in finer garb. They truly did need to make an impression, yet she thought he made an excellent one as he was.

"It's a fine morning to be in the saddle," Sheriam said after a time. "Nothing like a good ride in the snow to clear the head." Her voice was not low, and she cut her eyes at the still-muttering Siuan with a tiny smile.

Siuan did not say anything—she hardly could do that in front of so many eyes—but she did give Sheriam a hard look that promised sharp words for later. The fire-haired woman twisted away abruptly with very close to a wince. Wing, her dappled gray mare, pranced a few steps, and Sheriam settled her down with almost too firm a hand. She had shown little gratitude to the woman who had named her Mistress of Novices, and like most in that position, she found reasons to blame Siuan. It was the only flaw Egwene had found in her since the swearing. Well, she had protested that, as Keeper, she should not have to take orders from Siuan the way the others who had sworn did, but Egwene had seen right away where that would lead. This was not the first time Sheriam had tried to plant a barb. Siuan insisted on handling Sheriam herself, and her pride was too fragile for Egwene to deny the request unless matters got out of hand.

Egwene wished there were some way to make more speed. Siuan went back to her grumbling, and Sheriam was obviously thinking of something else to say that would not quite bring a rebuke. All that muttering and cutting of eyes began to find their way under Egwene's skin. After a while, even Bryne's levelheaded poise began to wear. She found herself thinking of things she might say that would shake his aplomb. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—she did not believe anything could. But if she had to wait much longer, she thought she might burst from sheer impatience.

The sun climbed toward midday, the painfully slow miles passed behind, and at last one of the riders ahead turned and raised his hand. With a hasty apology to Egwene, Bryne galloped forward. It was really more of a lumber through the snow for his sturdy bay gelding, Traveler, but he caught up to the outriders, exchanged a few words, then sent them on through the trees and waited for Egwene and the others to reach him.

As he fell in beside her once more, Romanda and Lelaine joined them. The two Sitters barely acknowledged Egwene's presence, fixing Bryne with the cool serenity that had shaken so many men facing Aes Sedai. Except that now and then, each glanced sideways at the other in a considering way. They hardly seemed to realize what they were doing. Egwene hoped they were half as nervous as she; she would be satisfied with that.

Coolly serene stares washed over Bryne like rain over that rock. He made slight bows to the Sitters, but he spoke to Egwene. "They've already arrived, Mother." That had been expected. "They brought almost as many men as we did, but they're all on the north side of the lake. I've put scouts out to make sure nobody tries circling around, but in truth, I don't expect it."

“Let us hope you’re right,” Romanda told him sharply, and Lelaine added in a much colder tone, “Your judgment has not been all it should be, of late, Lord Bryne.” A frigid, cutting tone.

“As you say, Aes Sedai.” He made another slight bow without really turning from Egwene. Like Siuan, he was tied to her openly now, at least so far as the Hall was concerned. If only they did not know how tightly. If only she could be sure how tightly. “One thing more, Mother,” he went on. “Talmanes is there at the lake, too. There are about a hundred of the Band on the east side. Not enough to cause trouble even if he wanted to, and small chance he would, I think.”

Egwene merely nodded. Not enough to cause trouble? Talmanes alone might be enough! She tasted bile. It—could—not—go—wrong—now!

“Talmanes!” Lelaine exclaimed, serenity shattering. She *must* have been as much on edge as Egwene. “How did he find out? If you’ve included Dragonsworn in your scheming, Lord Bryne, you truly will learn what going too far means!”

Right on top of her, Romanda growled, “This is disgraceful! You say you’ve only learned of his presence now? If that’s so, your reputation is puffed up like a boil!” Aes Sedai calm was a thin layer for some today, it seemed.

They continued in that vein, but Bryne rode on, only murmuring the occasional “As you say, Aes Sedai,” when he had to say something. He had received worse in Egwene’s hearing this morning, and reacted no more. It was Siuan who finally snorted, and then blushed crimson when the Sitters looked at her in surprise. Egwene almost shook her head. Siuan was very definitely in love. And she *very* definitely needed talking to! For some reason, Bryne smiled, but that might just have been because he was no longer the object of the Sitters’ attention.

Trees gave way to another open space, larger than most, and there was no more time for frivolous thoughts.

Aside from a wide rim of tall brown reeds and cattails poking through the snow, nothing named this a lake. It could have been a big meadow, flat and very roughly oval in shape. Some distance from the treeline, on the frozen lake, stood a large blue canopy on tall poles, with a small crowd of people milling about it and dozens of horses held by servants behind. The breeze ruffled a bright thicket of pennants and banners, and carried muffled shouts that could only have been orders. More servants darted about hastily.

Apparently, they had not been there long enough to finish their preparations.

Perhaps a mile away the trees began again, and the feeble sunlight glinted off metal there. Quite a lot of metal, stretching the length of the far shore. To the east, almost as close as the pavilion, the hundred men of the Band made no effort at concealment, standing beside their mounts just short of where the cattails began. A few of them pointed when the flag of Tar Valon appeared. The people at the pavilion stopped to look.

Egwene did not pause before riding out onto the snow-covered ice. She did imagine herself a rosebud opening to the sun, though, that old novice exercise. She did not actually embrace *saidar*, but the calm that came was very welcome.

Siuan and Sheriam followed, and the Sitters with their Warders, and the servants. Lord Bryne and the banner-man were the only two soldiers who went. Shouts rising behind her told of Uno putting his armored horsemen into position along the shoreline. The more lightly armored men were arrayed to either side, those not off guarding against treachery. One reason the lake had been chosen was that the ice was thick enough to hold a fair number of horses, but not hundreds, much less thousands. That cut down on the chance of chicanery. Of course, a pavilion beyond bowshot was not beyond the range of the One Power, not if it could be seen. Except that the worst man in the world knew himself safe from that unless he threatened a sister. Egwene exhaled sharply, and began acquiring calm all over again.

A proper greeting for the Amyrlin Seat should have had servants rushing forward with warm drinks and cloths wrapped around hot bricks, and the lords and ladies themselves to take reins and offer a kiss in token of Abram. Any visitor of rank at all would have had the servants, but no one stirred from the pavilion. Bryne himself dismounted and came to hold Daishar’s bridle, and the same lanky young man who had come with fresh charcoal the day before ran to hold Egwene’s stirrup. His nose still dripped, but in a red velvet coat only a little too large for him and a bright blue cloak, he outshone any of the nobles who stood staring from under the canopy. They appeared to be in stout woolens for the most part, with not much embroidery and very little silk or lace. Likely they had had to scramble to find suitable clothes once the snows began, and them already on the march. Though the simple truth was that the young man might have outshone a Tinker.

Carpets had been laid to floor the pavilion, and braziers lit, though the breeze carried away heat and smoke alike. Chairs stood in two facing lines for the delegations, eight in each. They had not expected so many sisters. Some of the waiting nobles exchanged looks of consternation, and a number of their servants actually wrung their hands, wondering what to do. They need not have.

The chairs were a mismatched miscellany, but they were all alike in size, and none was noticeably more worn or battered than another. None had noticeably more or less gilded carving. The lanky young man and a number of others trotted in and under the frowns of the nobles, without so much as a by-your-leave, carried those meant for Aes Sedai out into the snow, then rushed to help with unloading the packhorses. Still, no one spoke a word.

Quickly, seats were set up sufficient for the entire Hall, and Egwene. Only simple benches, though polished till they gleamed, but each stood on a wide box covered with cloth in the color of the Sitter’s Ajah, in a long row as wide as the canopy. The box placed in front, for Egwene’s bench, was striped like her stole. There had been a great flurry of activity in the night, beginning with finding beeswax for polish and good cloth of the right colors.

When Egwene and the Sitters took their places, they sat a foot higher than anyone else. She had had her doubts about that, but the lack of any word of welcome had settled those. The meanest farmer would have offered a cup and a kiss to a vagabond on the Feast of Abram. They were not supplicants, and they were not equals. They were Aes Sedai.

Warders stood behind their Aes Sedai, and Siuan and Sheriam flanked Egwene. The sisters ostentatiously flung back cloaks and tucked gloves away to emphasize that the cold did not touch them, a sharp contrast to the nobles clutching their own cloaks close. Outside, the Flame of Tar Valon lifted in the stiffening breeze. Only Halima, lounging beside Delana’s chair on the edge of the gray-covered box, at all spoiled the grand image, and her big green eyes stared at the Andorans and Murandians so challengingly that she did not spoil it much.

There were a few stares when Egwene took the seat in front, but only a few. No one really looked surprised. I *suppose they’ve heard all about the* girl *Amyrlin*, she thought dryly. Well, there had been queens younger, including queens of Andor and Murandy. Calmly, she nodded, and Sheriam gestured to the line of chairs. No matter who had arrived first or provided the pavilion, there was no doubt who had called this meeting. Who was in charge.

Her action was not well received, of course. There was a moment of silent hesitation while the nobles cast their minds about for some way to regain an equal footing, and no few grimaces as they realized it could not be done. Grim-faced, eight of them sat down, four men and four women, with much angry gathering of cloaks and adjusting of skirts. Those of lesser rank stood behind the chairs, and clearly there was little love lost between Andoran and Murandian. For that matter, the Murandians, men and women alike, muttered and jostled one another for precedence as fiercely as they did their "allies" from the north. The Aes Sedai received a good many dark looks as well, and a few folk spared scowls for Bryne, who stood off to one side with his helmet under his arm. He was well known on both sides of the border, and respected even by most of those who would have liked to see him dead. At least, that had been the case before he turned up leading the Aes Sedai's army. He ignored their acid glares as he had the Sitters' acid tongues.

Another man did not join with either party. A pale man, less than a hand taller than Egwene, in a dark coat and breastplate, he wore the front of his head shaved, and there was a long red scarf tied around his left arm. His deep gray cloak had a large red hand worked on the breast. Talmanes stood opposite Bryne, leaning against one of the pavilion's poles with an arrogant casualness, and watched without revealing a hint of his thoughts. Egwene wished she knew what he was doing there. She wished she knew what he had said before she arrived. In any case, she had to speak with him. If it could be managed without a hundred ears listening.

A lean, weathered man in a red cloak, sitting in the middle of the row of chairs, leaned forward and opened his mouth, but Sheriam forestalled him in a clear, carrying voice.

"Mother, may I present to you, of Andor, Arathelle Renshar, High Seat of House Renshar. Pelivar Coelan, High Seat of House Coelan. Aemlyn Carand, High Seat of House Carand, and her husband, Culhan Carand." They acknowledged their names sourly, with bare nods and no more. Pelivar was the lean man; he was losing his dark hair from the front.

Sheriam went on without pause; it was a good thing Bryne had been able to supply the names of those who had been chosen to speak. “May I present, of Murandy, Donel do Morny a’Lordeine. Cian do Mehon a’Macansa. Paitr do Fearna a’Conn. Segan do Avharin a’Roos.” The Murandians seemed to feel the lack of titles even more than the Andorans. Donel, wearing more lace than most of the women, twisted his curled mustaches fiercely, and Paitr appeared to be trying to yank his loose. Segan pursed full lips and her dark eyes caught fire, while Cian, a stocky, graying woman, snorted quite loudly. Sheriam took no notice. “You are beneath the eyes of the Watcher of the Seals. You are before the Flame of Tar Valon. You may present your supplications to the Amyrlin Seat.”

Well. They did not like that, not in the least. Egwene had thought them sour before, but now they looked stuffed full of green persimmons. Perhaps they had believed they could pretend she was not the Amyrlin at all. They would learn. Of course, first she had to teach the Hall.

“There are ancient ties between Andor and the White Tower,” she said, loudly and firmly. “Sisters have always expected welcome in Andor or Murandy. Why then do you bring an army against Aes Sedai? You meddle where thrones and nations fear to step. Thrones have fallen, meddling in the affairs of Aes Sedai.”

That sounded suitably threatening, whether or not Myrelle and the others had managed to prepare her way. With luck, they were well on their way back to the camp, with no one the wiser. Unless one of these nobles spoke the wrong name. That would lose her an advantage against the Hall, but alongside everything else, it was a straw beside a hayloft.

Pelivar exchanged looks with the woman seated beside him, and she stood. Creases in her face could not disguise the fact that Arathelle had been a beautiful, fine-boned woman when young; now, gray threaded thickly through her hair, and her gaze struck as hard as any Warder’s. Her red-gloved hands gripped the edges of her cloak at her sides, but plainly not in worry. Mouth compressed to a thin line, she scanned the line of Sitters, and only then spoke. Past Egwene, to the sisters behind her. Gritting her teeth, Egwene put on an attentive expression.

“We are here precisely because we do not want to become entangled in the White Tower’s affairs.” Arathelle’s voice held tones of authority, unsurprising in the High Seat of a powerful House. There was no hint of the diffidence that might have been expected, even from a powerful High Seat, facing so many sisters, not to mention the Amyrlin Seat. “If all we’ve heard is true, then at best, allowing you to pass through Andor unhindered may seem like giving aid, or even alliance, in the eyes of the White Tower. Failure to oppose you might mean learning what the grape learns in the winepress.” Several of the Murandians turned their scowls on her. No one in Murandy had tried to hinder the sisters’ passage. Very likely, no one had considered the possibilities beyond the day they passed onto another’s lands.

Arathelle continued as if she had not noticed, but Egwene doubted that. “At worst. . . . We have heard . . . reports . . . of Aes Sedai making their way into Andor in secret, and Tower Guards. Rumors might be a better word, but they come from many places. None of us would like to see a battle between Aes Sedai in Andor.”

“The Light preserve and protect us!” Donel burst out, red-faced. Paitr nodded encouragement, sliding to the edge of his seat, and Cian looked ready to jump in herself. “No one wants to see it here, either!” Donel spat. “Not between Aes Sedai! For sure, we’ve heard what happened out east! And those sisters—!”

Egwene breathed a little more easily when Arathelle stepped on him firmly. “If you please, Lord Donel. You will have your turn to speak.” She turned back to Egwene—to the Sitters once more, really—without waiting on his reply, leaving him spluttering and the other three Murandians glowering. She herself looked quite undisturbed, simply a woman laying out the facts. Laying them out, and meaning that they should be seen as she saw them.

“As I was saying. That is the worst we fear, if the tales are true. And also if they are not. Aes Sedai may be gathering secretly in Andor, with Tower Guards. Aes Sedai with an army are ready to enter Andor. Often enough the White Tower has seemed to aim at one target, only for the rest of us to learn later it was aiming at another all along. I can hardly imagine even the White Tower going this far, but if ever there was a target you might twist yourselves into a knot for, it’s the Black Tower.” Arathelle shivered slightly, and Egwene did not think it was the cold. “A battle between Aes Sedai might ruin the land for miles around. *That* battle might ruin half of Andor.”

Pelivar sprang to his feet. “The plain of it is, you must go another way.” His voice was surprisingly high, but no less firm than Arathelle’s. “If

I must die to defend my lands and my people, then better here than where my lands and people die, too."

He subsided at Arathelle's soothing gesture, sinking back into his chair. Hard-eyed, he did not look mollified. Aemlyn, a plump woman wrapped in dark wool, nodded agreement with him, as did her square-faced husband.

Donel stared at Pelivar as though he had never had this thought either, and he was not the only one. Some of the standing Murandians began to argue out loud until others quieted them. Sometimes with a shaken fist. Whatever had possessed these people to join forces with the Andorans?

Egwene drew breath. A rosebud, opening to the sun. They had not acknowledged her as the Amyrlin Seat—Arathelle had come as close to ignoring her as was possible without pushing her aside!—yet they had given her everything else she could have wished for. Calm. Now was when Lelaine and Romanda would be expecting her to name one of them to handle the negotiations. She hoped their stomachs were tied in knots with wondering which of them it would be. There would be no negotiations. There could be none.

"Elaida," she said levelly, eyeing Arathelle and the seated nobles in turn, "is a usurper who has violated what lies at the very heart of the White Tower. I am the Amyrlin Seat." She was surprised at how stately she managed to sound, how cool. But not as surprised as she once would have been. The Light help her, she *was* the Amyrlin Seat. "We go to Tar Valon to remove Elaida and try her, but that is the White Tower's business, and none of yours except to know the truth. This so-called Black Tower also is our business; men who can channel have always been the White Tower's affair. We will deal with them as we choose, when the time is ripe, but I assure you, that time is not now. More important matters must take precedence."

She heard movement among the Sitters behind her. An actual shifting on benches and the crisp swishing of divided skirts being adjusted. At least some must be severely agitated. Well, several had suggested that the Black Tower might be dealt with in passing. Not one believed there could be more than a dozen or so men there at most, no matter what they heard; after all, it simply was not possible that *hundreds* of men would *want* to channel. Then again, it might have been the realization that Egwene was not going to name either Romanda or Lelaine.

Arathelle frowned, perhaps catching a hint of something in the air. Pelivar moved, on the point of rising again, and Donel drew himself up querulously. There was nothing for it but to press on. There never had been.

"I understand your concerns," she continued in the same formal tone, "and I will address them." What was that strange call to arms the Band used? Yes. It was time to toss the dice. "I give you this assurance as the Amyrlin Seat. For one month we will stay here, resting, and then we will leave Murandy, but we will not cross the border into Andor. Murandy will be troubled by us no more after that, and Andor will not be troubled at all. I'm certain," she added, "the Murandian lords and ladies here will be happy to supply our wants in exchange for good silver. We will pay fair prices." There was no point mollifying the Andorans if it meant Murandians raiding the horses and supply trains.

The Murandians, looking around uneasily, appeared decidedly torn in any case. There was coin to be made, and a great deal of it supplying an army so large, but on the other hand, who could haggle successfully with whatever an army so large offered? Donel actually seemed ready to sick up, while Cian seemed to be doing sums in her head. Mutters rose among the onlookers. More than mutters; nearly loud enough for Egwene.

She wanted to look over her shoulder. The silence from the Sitters was deafening. Siuan was staring straight ahead and gripping her skirts as if to keep herself looking forward by main force. At least she had known what was coming. Sheriam, who had not, eyed the Andorans and Murandians regally, calmly, as though she had expected every word.

Egwene needed to make them forget the girl they saw before them, and hear a woman with the reins of power firmly in hand. If they were not in her hands now, they would be! She firmed her voice. "Mark me well. I have made my decision; it is for you to accept it. Or face what surely will come from your failure." As she fell silent, the wind gusted to a brief howl, rattling the canopy, tugging at garments. Egwene straightened her hair calmly. Some of the watching nobles shivered and twitched their cloaks around them, and she hoped their shivers came from more than the weather.

Arathelle exchanged looks with Pelivar and Aemlyn, and all three studied the Sitters before slowly nodding. They believed she was merely mouthing words the Sitters had put on her tongue! Even so, Egwene very nearly sighed with relief.

“It will be as you say,” the hard-eyed noblewoman said. Again, to the Sitters. “We do not doubt the word of Aes Sedai, of course, but you will understand if we also remain. Sometimes, what you hear isn’t what you think you heard. Not that that’s the case here, I’m sure. But we will stay while you do.” Donel truly looked ready to empty himself. Very likely his lands lay nearby. Andoran armies in Murandy had seldom been known to pay for anything.

Egwene stood, and she could hear the rustle of the Sitters rising behind her. “It is agreed, then. We must all depart soon, if we are to return to our own beds before dark, but we should spare a few moments. Getting to know one another a little better now might avoid misunderstandings later.” And talk might give her a chance to reach Talmanes. “Oh. One other thing you should all be aware of. The novice book is now open to any woman, whatever her age, if she tests true.” Arathelle blinked. Siuan did not, yet Egwene thought she heard a faint grunt. This was not part of what they had discussed, but there would never be a better time. “Come. I’m sure you would all like to speak with the Sitters. Let formality go.”

Without waiting for Sheriam to offer a hand, she stepped down. She almost felt like laughing. Last night she had been afraid she might never reach her goal, but she was halfway there, almost halfway, and it had not been nearly as difficult as she had feared. Of course, the other half remained.

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CHAPTER 18

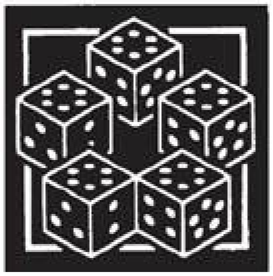

A Peculiar Calling

For a moment after Egwene descended, no one else moved. And then the Andorans and Murandians headed for the Sitters, almost as one. Apparently, a girl Amyrlin—a girl puppet and figurehead!—held no interest, not with ageless faces in front of them that at least said they actually were speaking to Aes Sedai. Two or three lords and ladies clustered around each Sitter, some thrusting their chins demandingly, others diffidently bending their necks, yet every one insistent on being heard. The sharp breeze whisked away the mist of their breath and fluttered cloaks forgotten in the importance of asking their questions. Sheriam was buttonholed too, by red-faced Lord Donel, who blustered and jerked bows by turns.

Egwene pulled Sheriam away from the narrow-eyed man. “Find out discreetly all you can about these sisters and Tower Guards in Andor,” she whispered hastily. As soon as she released the woman, Donel reclaimed her. Sheriam actually looked put-upon, but her frown disappeared quickly. Donel blinked uneasily as she began questioning *him*.

Romanda and Lelaine gazed at Egwene through the crowd with faces carved from ice, but each had acquired a pair of nobles who wanted. . . . Something. Reassurance that there was no hidden trick in Egwene’s words, perhaps. How they would hate doing that, but dodge and duck as they would—and they would!—there was no way to really avoid that reassurance without repudiating her on the spot. Even those two would not go that far. Not here, not publicly.

Siuan slipped close to Egwene, features set in meekness. Except that her eyes darted, maybe looking for Romanda or Lelaine coming to seize them where they stood, and forget law, custom, propriety *and* who was watching. “Shein Chunla,” she all but hissed in a whisper.

Egwene nodded, but *her* eyes searched for Talmanes. Most of the men and some of the women were tall enough to hide him. With everyone shifting about. . . . She went up on her toes. Where had he gone to?

Segan planted herself in front of her, fists on her hips, eyeing Siuan doubtfully. Egwene let her heels down hurriedly. The Amyrlin could not bob about like a girl at a dance looking for a boy. A rosebud unfolding. Calm. Serenity. Drat all men!

A slender woman with long dark hair, Segan seemed to have been born petulant, her full mouth fixed in a pout. Her dress was good blue wool and made for warmth, but it had far too much vivid green embroidery across her bosom, and her gloves were bright enough for a Tinker. She looked Egwene up and down, pursing her lips, with as much incredulity on her face as she had given Siuan. “What you said about the novice book,” she said abruptly. “Were you meaning any woman of any age at all? Any can become Aes Sedai, then?”

A question close to Egwene’s heart, and an answer she dearly wanted to give—along with a box on the ear for the doubt—but just then a small gap in the flow of people showed her Talmanes near the back of the pavilion. Talking with Pelivar! They stood stiffly, mastiffs not quite ready to show teeth, yet they were keeping a watch to make sure no one came close enough to overhear what they had to say. “Any woman of any age at all, daughter,” she agreed absently. Pelivar?

“Thank you,” Segan said, and haltingly added, “Mother.” She sketched a curtsy, the barest hint of one, before hurrying off. Egwene stared after her. Well, it was a beginning.

Siuan snorted. “I don’t mind sailing the Fingers of the Dragon in the dark if I must,” she muttered half under her breath. “We discussed that; we weighed the dangers, and anyway, there doesn’t seem to be a gull’s last dinner for choice. But you have to set a fire on deck just to make things interesting. Netting lion-fish isn’t enough for you. You have to stuff a prickleback down your dress, too. You aren't content trying to wade a school of silverpike—"

Egwene broke in. "Siuan, I think I should tell Lord Bryne you're head over heels in love with him. It's only fair that he know, don't you agree?" Siuan's blue eyes bulged, and her mouth worked, but all that came out was a sort of gobbling. Egwene patted her shoulder. "You're Aes Sedai, Siuan. Try to maintain at least a little dignity. And try to find out about those sisters in Andor." The crowd parted again. She saw Talmanes in a different place, but still on the edge of the pavilion. And alone, now.

Trying not to hurry, she walked in his direction, leaving Siuan still gobbling. A pretty, black-haired serving man, whose bulky woolen breeches could not quite hide neatly turned calves, offered Siuan a steaming silver cup from a tray. Other servants were moving about with other silver trays. Refreshment was being offered, if a bit late. It was much too late for the kiss of peace. She did not hear what Siuan said as she snatched a cup, but from the way the fellow jerked and started bobbing bows, he had received sharp shards of her temper at the least. Egwene sighed.

Talmanes stood with arms folded, observing the goings-on with an amused smile that did not reach his eyes. He seemed poised to explode into motion, but his eyes were tired. At her approach, he made a respectful leg, but there was a wry touch to his voice when he said, "You changed a border today." He gathered his cloak against the icy breeze. "It has always been . . . fluid . . . between Andor and Murandy, no matter what maps say, but Andor has never come south in such numbers before. Except for the Aiel War, and the Whitecloak War, anyway, but they were only passing through, then. Once they have been here a month, new maps will show a new line. Look at the Murandians scramble, fawning over Pelivar and his companions as much as they do the sisters. They are hoping to make new friends for the new day."

To Egwene, trying to conceal her careful watch on those who might be watching her, it seemed that all of the nobles, Murandian and Andoran, were intent on the Sitters, crowding around them. In any case, she had slightly more important matters in mind than borders. To her, if not to the nobles. Except for brief moments, none of the Sitters were visible beyond the tops of their heads. Only Halima and Siuan seemed to notice her, and a babble like that of a flock of excited geese filled the air. She lowered her voice, and chose her words carefully.

“Friends are always important, Talmanes. You’ve been a good friend to Mat, and I think to me. I hope that hasn’t changed. I hope you’ve not told anyone what you shouldn’t.” Light, she *was* anxious, or she would not have been so direct. Next, she would come right out and ask what he and Pelivar had been talking about!

Luckily, he did not laugh at her for a blunt-tongued village woman. Though he might have been thinking it. He studied her seriously before speaking. In a soft voice. He also knew caution. “Not all men gossip. Tell me, when you sent Mat south, did you know what you would do here today?”

“How could I know that two months ago? No, Aes Sedai aren’t omniscient, Talmanes.” She had hoped for something that would put her in the place she was, had planned for it, but she had not known, not back then. She also hoped he did not gossip. Some men did not.

Romanda started toward her with a firm stride and a frozen face, but Arathelle intercepted her, catching the Yellow Sitter’s arm and refusing to be put off despite Romanda’s astonishment.

“Will you at least tell me where Mat is?” Talmanes asked. “On his way to Caemlyn with the Daughter-Heir? Why are you surprised? A serving woman will speak to a soldier when fetching water from the same stream. Even when he is a horrible Dragonsworn,” he added dryly.

Light! Men really were . . . inconvenient . . . at times. The best of them found ways to say exactly the wrong thing at the wrong moment, to ask the wrong question. Not to mention inveigling serving women into prattle. So much easier if she could just lie, but he had given her plenty of room within the Oaths. Half the truth would suffice, and keep him from haring off to Ebou Dar. Maybe less than half.

Over in the far corner of the pavilion, Siuan stood conversing with a tall young redhead with curled mustaches who was eyeing her as dubiously as Segan had. Nobles usually knew the look of Aes Sedai. But he held only a part of Siuan’s attention. Her gaze constantly flickered toward Egwene. It seemed to shout, loud as conscience. Easier. Expedient. What it was to be Aes Sedai. She had *not* known about today, only hoped! Egwene expelled an irritated breath. Burn the woman!

“He was in Ebou Dar, the last I heard,” she muttered. “But he must be hurrying north as fast as he can by now. He still thinks he has to save me, Talmanes, and Matrim Cauthon wouldn't miss the chance to be on the spot so he can say I told you so."

Talmanes did not look at all surprised. "I thought it might be so," he sighed. "I have . . . felt . . . something, for weeks now. Others in the Band have, too. Not urgent, but always there. As if he needed me. As if I should look south, anyway. It can be peculiar, following a *ta'veren*."

"I suppose it can," she agreed, hoping none of her incredulity showed. It was strange enough to think of Mat the wastrel as leader of the Band of the Red Hand, much less as *ta'veren*, but surely a *ta'veren* had to be present, nearby at least, to have any effect.

"Mat was wrong about you needing rescue. You never had any intention of coming to me for help, did you?"

He still spoke softly, but she looked around hurriedly anyway. Siuan was still watching them. And so was Halima. Paitr stood much too close to her, puffing and preening and stroking his mustaches—from the way he stared down her dress, he had not mistaken her for a sister, that was certain!—but she was giving him only half her mind, darting sidelong glances in Egwene's direction while she smiled up at him warmly. Everyone else appeared occupied, and no one stood close enough to hear.

"The Amyrlin Seat could hardly go running for sanctuary, now could she? But there have been times it's been a comfort knowing you were there," she admitted. Reluctantly. The Amyrlin Seat was hardly supposed to need a bolt-hole, but it could do no harm so long as none of the Sitters knew. "You *have* been a friend, Talmanes. I hope that continues. I truly do."

"You have been more . . . open . . . with me than I expected," he said slowly, "so I will tell you something." His face did not change—to any watcher, he must have seemed as casual as before—but his voice dropped to a whisper. "I have had approaches from King Roedran about the Band. It seems he has hopes of being Murandy's first real king. He wants to hire us. I would not have considered it, normally, but there is never enough coin, and with this . . . this *feel* of Mat needing us. . . . It might be better if we remain in Murandy. Clear as good glass, you are where you want to be and have everything in hand."

He fell silent as a young serving woman curtsied to offer mulled wine. She wore finely embroidered green wool and a cloak plush with spotted rabbit. Other servants from the camp were helping out now, as well, no doubt for something to do besides stand and shiver. The young woman's round face was decidedly pinched from the cold.

Talmanes waved her off and pulled his cloak back around him, but Egwene took a silver cup to gain a moment for thought. Truly there was little need for the Band any longer. Despite all the muttering, the sisters took their presence as a matter of course now, Dragon-sworn or not; they no longer feared an attack, and there had been no real need to use the Band's presence to prod them into moving since leaving Salidar. The only true purpose *Shen an Calhar* served now was to draw recruits into Bryne's army, men who thought two armies meant a battle and wanted to be on the side with the greatest numbers. She had no need of them, but Talmanes had acted as a friend. And she was Amyrlin. Sometimes friendship and responsibility pushed in the same direction.

As the serving woman moved off, Egwene laid a hand on Talmanes' arm. "You must not do that. Even the Band can't conquer all of Murandy by itself, and every hand will be against you. You know very well the one thing that makes Murandians stand together is foreigners on their soil. Follow us to Tar Valon, Talmanes. Mat will come there; I have no doubt of that." Mat would not really believe she was the Amyrlin until he saw her wearing the stole in the White Tower.

"Roedran is no fool," he said placidly. "All he wants us to do is sit and wait, a foreign army—without Aes Sedai—and nobody knowing what it is up to. He should not have much trouble uniting the nobles against us. Then, so he says, we quietly slip across the border. He thinks he can hold on to them afterward."

She could not stop a touch of heat entering her voice. "And what is to stop him betraying you? If the threat goes away without a fight, his dream of a united Murandy might, too." The fool man seemed *amused*!

"I am not a fool either. Roedran cannot be ready before spring. This lot would never have stirred from their manors if the Andorans had not come south, and they were on the march before the snows began. Before then, Mat will find us. If he is coming north, he must hear of us. Roedran will have to be satisfied with whatever he has managed by then. So if Mat does intend to go to Tar Valon, I may see you there yet."

Egwene made a vexed sound. It was a remarkable plan, the sort of thing Siuan might devise, and hardly a scheme she thought Roedran Almaric do Arreloa a'Naloy could carry off. The fellow was said to be so dissolute he made Mat look wholesome. But then, it was hardly a scheme she would have believed Roedran could think up. The only certainty was that Talmanes had made up his mind.

"I want your word, Talmanes, that you won't let Roedran pull you into a war." Responsibility. The narrow stole around her neck seemed to weigh ten times more than her cloak. "If he moves sooner than you think, you will leave whether or not Mat has joined you."

"I wish I could promise, but it is not possible," he protested. "I expect the first raid against my foragers three days at most after I start moving away from Lord Bryne's army. Every lordling and farmer will think he can pick up a few horses in the night, give me a pinprick, and run off to hide."

"I'm not talking about defending yourself, and you know it," she said firmly. "Your word, Talmanes. Or I will not allow your agreement with Roedran." The only way to stop it was to betray it, but she would not leave a war in her wake, a war she had started by bringing Talmanes here.

Staring at her as if for the first time, he finally bent his head. Strangely, that seemed more formal than his bow had. "It will be as you say, Mother. Tell me, are you sure you are not *ta'veren,* too?"

"I am the Amyrlin Seat," she replied. "That is quite enough for anyone." She touched his arm again. "The Light shine on you, Talmanes." His smile nearly touched his eyes this time.

Inevitably, despite their whispers, their talk had been noticed. Maybe because of their whispers. The girl who claimed to be Amyrlin, a rebel against the White Tower, in conversation with the leader of ten thousand Dragonsworn. Had she made Talmanes' scheme with Roedran harder, or easier? Was war in Murandy less likely, or more? Siuan and her bloody Law of Unintended Consequences! Fifty gazes followed her, then darted away, as she moved through the crowd warming her fingers on her cup. Well, most darted away. The Sitters' faces were all ageless Aes Sedai serenity, but Lelaine might have been a brown-eyed crow watching a fish struggle in the shallows, while Romanda's slightly darker eyes could have drilled holes through iron.

Trying to keep a watch on the sun outside, she made a slow circuit through the pavilion. The nobles were still importuning Sitters, but they moved from one to another as if seeking better answers, and she began to notice small things. Donel paused on his way from Janya to Moria, bowing low to Aemlyn, who acknowledged him with a gracious nod. Cian, turning away from Takima, curtsied deeply to Pelivar and received a slight bow in return. There were others, always a Murandian deferring to an Andoran who responded just as formally. The Andorans tried to ignore Bryne except for the odd scowl, but any number of Murandians sought him out, one by one and well away from everyone else, and from the directions their eyes went, it was plain they were discussing Pelivar, or Arathelle, or Aemlyn. Perhaps Talmanes had been right.

She received bows and curtsies, too, though none so deep as those given Arathelle and Pelivar and Aemlyn, much less the Sitters. Half a dozen women told her how thankful they were that matters had been resolved peacefully, though in truth, almost as many made noncommittal noises or shrugged uneasily when she expressed the same sentiment, as though they were uncertain it all *would* end peacefully. Her assurances that it would were met with a fervent "The Light send it so!" or a resigned "If the Light wills." Four called her Mother, one without hesitating first. Three others said that she was quite lovely, that she had beautiful eyes, and that she had a graceful carriage, in that order; suitable compliments perhaps for Egwene's age but not her station.

At least she found one unalloyed pleasure. Segan was not alone in being intrigued by her announcement concerning the novice book. Plainly that was why most of the women spoke to her in the first place. After all, the other sisters might be in rebellion against the Tower, but she claimed to be the Amyrlin Seat. Their interest had to be strong to overcome that, though no one wanted to let it show. Arathelle made the inquiry with a frown that put more creases in her cheeks. Aemlyn shook her graying head at the answer. Blocky Cian asked, followed by a sharp-faced Andoran lady named Negara, then a pretty, big-eyed Murandian called Jennet, and others. None wanted to know for herself—several made that clear quickly, especially the younger women—but before long, every single noblewoman there had asked, and several servants as well, under cover of offering more spiced wine. One, a wiry woman named Nildra, had come from the Aes Sedai camp.

Egwene felt quite pleased with the seed she had planted there. She was not so pleased with the men. A few spoke to her, but only when they came face-to-face and seemed to have no other choice. A murmured word about the weather, either praising the end of the drought or deploring the sudden snows, a muttered hope that the bandit problem would end soon, perhaps with a significant look toward Talmanes, and they slipped away like greased pigs. A bear of an Andoran by the name of Macharan tripped over his own boots to avoid her. In a way, it was hardly surprising. The women had the justification, if only to themselves, of the novice book, but the men had only the thought that being seen conversing with her might tar them with the same brush.

It was really quite discouraging. She did not care what the men thought about novices, but she very much wanted to know if they were as fearful as the women that this would come to blows in the end. Fears like that could fulfill themselves very easily. At last, she decided there was only one way to find out.

Pelivar turned from taking a fresh cup of wine from a tray and started back, with a muffled oath, to keep from bumping into her; had she stood any closer, she would have had to stand on his boots. Hot wine splashed over his gloved hand and ran down under his coatsleeve, producing a curse not so muted. Tall enough to loom over her, he made a good job of it. His scowl belonged on a man wanting to send an annoying young woman briskly out of his way. Or on a man who had nearly stepped on a red adder. She held herself erect and focused on an image of him as a small boy up to no good; that always helped; most men seemed to feel it. He muttered something—it might have been a polite greeting, or another oath—and dipped his head slightly, then tried to step around her. She side-stepped to stay in front of him. He moved back, and she followed. He began to look hunted. She decided to try putting him at ease before pressing the important question. She wanted answers, not more mumbling.

“You must be pleased to hear that the Daughter-Heir is on her way to Caemlyn, Lord Pelivar.” She had heard several of the Sitters mention that.

His face went blank. “Elayne Trakand has a right to put in her claim to the Lion Throne,” he replied in a flat voice.

Egwene’s eyes widened, and he stepped back again, uncertainly. Perhaps he thought her angry over the absence of her title, but she barely noticed that. Pelivar had supported Elayne’s mother in her claim for the throne, and Elayne had been sure he would support her, too. She spoke of Pelivar fondly, like a favorite uncle.

“Mother,” Siuan murmured at her elbow, “we must leave if you want to be sure of reaching the camp before sunset.” She managed to put considerable urgency into those quiet words. The sun had passed its peak.

“This is no weather to be in the open at nightfall,” Pelivar said hurriedly. “If you will excuse me, I must make ready to leave.” Shoving his cup onto the tray of a passing servant, he hesitated before halfway making a leg, and stalked off with the air of a man who had wriggled free of a trap.

Egwene wanted to grind her teeth with frustration. What *did* the men think of their agreement? If it could be called that, the way she had forced it on them. Arathelle and Aemlyn had more power and influence than most of the men, yet it was Pelivar and Culhan and the like who rode with the soldiers; they could still make this flare up in her face like a barrel of lamp oil.

“Find Sheriam,” she growled, “and tell her to get everyone mounted *now*, no matter what it takes!” She could not give the Sitters a night to think about what had happened today, to plan and plot. They *had* to be back in camp before the sun went down.

* * *

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CHAPTER 19

The Law

Getting the Sitters to their mounts proved no bother; they were as eager to be away as Egwene, especially Romanda and Lelaine, both cold as the wind and with eyes like thunderclouds. The rest were the very image of cool-eyed Aes Sedai serenity, giving off composure like a heavy scent, yet they glided to their horses so quickly that the nobles were left gaping and the brightly clad servants scrambled in loading the packhorses to catch up as best they could.

Egwene had Daishar set a hard pace in the snow, and with no more than a look and a nod from her Lord Bryne made sure the armored escorts moved as fast. Siuan on Bela and Sheriam on Wing rushed to join her. For long stretches they churned through fetlock-deep cover, the horses stepping high at near to a trot, the Flame of Tar Valon rippling in the icy breeze, and even when it was necessary to slow, when the horses were sinking knee-deep through the snow crust, they kept to a fast walk.

The Sitters had no choice except to keep up, and their speed cut down their opportunity to talk on the way. At that tiring pace, a lack of attention to your horse could bring a broken leg for the animal and a broken neck for you. Even so, Romanda and Lelaine each managed to gather her coterie around her, and those two knots floundered through the snow surrounded by wards against eavesdropping. The pair seemed to be delivering tirades. Egwene could imagine the topic. For that matter, other Sitters managed to ride together for a time, exchanging a few words quietly and casting cool glances sometimes at her and sometimes at the sisters wrapped around by *saidar*. Only Delana never joined one of those brief conversations. She stayed close beside Halima, who at last admitted that she was cold. Face tight, the country woman held her cloak close around her, but she still tried to comfort Delana, whispering to her almost constantly. Delana seemed to need comforting; her brows were drawn down, putting a crease in her forehead that actually made her seem aged.

She was not the only one worried. The others masked the feeling rigidly, radiating absolute poise, but the Warders rode like men expecting the worst to leap out of the snow at the next step, eyes shifting in an unceasing watch, disquieting cloaks streaming in the wind to leave hands free. When an Aes Sedai worried, her Warder worried, and the Sitters were too absorbed to think of calming the men. Egwene was just as glad to see it. If the Sitters were troubled, they had not yet made up their minds.

When Bryne rode out to confer with Uno, she took the opportunity to ask what the two women had learned about Aes Sedai and Tower Guards in Andor.

“Not much,” Siuan replied in a tight voice. Shaggy Bela did not seem to be having any difficulty with the pace, but Siuan did, gripping her reins tightly in one hand and the pommel of her saddle with the other. “As near as I can make out, there are fifty rumors and no facts. It’s a likely sort of tale to spring up, but it might still be true.” Bela lurched, her front hooves sinking deep, and Siuan gasped. “The Light burn all horses!”

Sheriam had learned no more. She shook her head, and sighed irritably. “It sounds all feathers and nonsense to me, Mother. There are *always* rumors of sisters sneaking about. Didn’t you ever learn to ride, Siuan?” she added, her voice suddenly dripping derision. “By tonight, you’ll be too sore to walk!” Sheriam’s nerves must have been ragged for her to burst out so openly. From the way she kept shifting in her saddle, she had already achieved her prediction for Siuan.

Siuan’s eyes hardened, and she opened her mouth already half snarling, never mind who was watching from behind the banner.

“Be still, both of you!” Egwene snapped. She took a deep, calming breath. She was a bit ragged herself. Whatever Arathelle believed, any force Elaida sent to interfere with them would be too large for sneaking. That left the Black Tower, a disaster in the making. You got further plucking the chicken in front of you than trying to start on one up a tree. Especially when the tree was in another country and there might not even be another chicken.

Still, she bit off her words in giving Sheriam instructions for once they reached the camp. She was the Amyrlin Seat, and that meant *all* Aes Sedai were her responsibility, even those following Elaida. Her voice was rock steady, though. It was too late to be frightened once you grabbed the wolf by the ears.

Sheriam's tilted eyes went wide at the orders. "Mother, if I may ask, why . . . ?" She trailed off under Egwene's level gaze, and swallowed. "It will be as you say, Mother," she said slowly. "Strange. I remember the day you and Nynaeve came to the Tower, two girls who couldn't decide whether to be excited or frightened. So much has changed since then. Everything."

"Nothing stays the same forever," Egwene told her. She gave Siuan a significant look, but Siuan refused to see. She appeared to be sulking. Sheriam looked sick.

Lord Bryne returned then, and he must have sensed the mood among them. Aside from saying that they were making good time, he kept his mouth shut. A wise man.

Making good time or not, the sun was sitting almost on the treetops when they finally rode through the army's sprawling camp. Wagons and tents cast long shadows across the snow, and a number of men were hard at work building yet more low shelters out of brush. There were not nearly enough tents, even for all the soldiers, and the camp held almost as many harnessmakers and laundresses and fletchers and the like, all those who inevitably followed any army. The ringing of anvils spoke of farriers and armorers and blacksmiths still at their labors. Cook fires were burning everywhere, and the cavalry peeled away, eager for warmth and hot food as soon as their wearily plodding animals were cared for. Surprisingly, Bryne rode on at Egwene's side after she dismissed him.

"If you will allow, Mother," he said, "I thought I might accompany you a while longer." Sheriam actually twisted in her saddle to stare in astonishment. Siuan stared, too, straight ahead, as if not daring to turn her suddenly wide eyes toward him.

What did he think he could do? Act as her bodyguard? Against *sisters?* That fellow with the drippy nose would do as well. Reveal just how completely he was on her side? Tomorrow was time enough for that, if all went well tonight; that revelation now might easily stampede the Hall in directions she hardly dared contemplate.

“Tonight is for Aes Sedai business,” she told him firmly. But, silly as the suggestion was, he had offered to put himself at risk for her. There was no telling his reasons—who knew why a man did *anything?—yet* she owed him for that. Among other things. “Unless I send Siuan to you tonight, Lord Bryne, you should leave before morning. If blame for today attaches itself to me, it might reflect on you, too. Staying could prove dangerous. Even fatal. I don’t think they would need much excuse.” No need to name who “they” were.

“I gave my word,” he replied quietly, patting Traveler’s neck. “To Tar Valon.” Pausing, he glanced toward Siuan. It was less a hesitation than a consideration. “Whatever tonight’s business is,” he said finally, “remember that you have thirty thousand men and Gareth Bryne behind you. That should count for something, even among Aes Sedai. Until tomorrow, Mother.” Reining his big-nosed bay around, he called over his shoulder, “I expect to see you tomorrow, too, Siuan. *Nothing* changes that.” Siuan stared at his back as he rode away. There was anguish in her eyes.

Egwene could not help staring, too. He had never been so open before, not nearly. Why now, of all times?

Crossing the forty or fifty paces that separated the army’s camp from the Aes Sedai’s, she nodded to Sheriam, who drew rein at the first tents. She and Siuan rode on. Behind them, Sheriam’s voice rose, surprisingly clear and steady. “The Amyrlin Seat calls the Hall to sit this day in formal session. Let preparations be made with all speed.” Egwene did not look back.

At her tent, a bony groom kicking her layered woolen skirts came running to take Daishar and Bela. Her face was pinched, and she barely ducked her head before hurrying away with the horses as quickly as she had come. The warmth of the glowing braziers inside was like a fist closing down. Egwene had not realized how cold it was outside until then. Or how cold she was.

Chesa took her cloak, and exclaimed when she felt her hands. “Why, you’re ice to the bone, Mother.” Chattering away, she bustled around folding Egwene’s cloak and Siuan’s, smoothing the neatly turned-down blankets on Egwene’s cot, touching a tray set on one of the chests that had been pulled down from the stack. “I’d jump right into bed, with hot bricks all around, if I was that chilled. As soon as I'd eaten, anyway. Warm outside does only so much good without warm inside. I'll fetch a few extra bricks to tuck under your feet while you sup. And for Siuan Sedai, of course. Oh, if I was as hungry as you must be, I know I'd be tempted to gulp my food, but that always gives me pains in the stomach." Pausing by the tray, she eyed Egwene, and nodded with satisfaction when she said that she would not eat too fast.

Making a sober answer was not easy. Chesa was always refreshing, but after today, Egwene almost laughed with pleasure. There were no complications to Chesa. Two white bowls of lentil stew stood on the tray, along with a tall pitcher of spiced wine, two silver cups, and two large rolls. Somehow, the woman had known Siuan would be eating with her. Steam rose from the bowls and pitcher. How often had Chesa had to change that tray to make sure warm food greeted Egwene straightaway? Simple and uncomplicated. And as caring as a mother. Or a friend.

"I must forgo bed for now, Chesa. I've work yet tonight. Would you leave us?"

Siuan shook her head as the tentflap fell behind the plump woman. "Are you sure she hasn't been in your service since you were a babe?" she muttered.

Taking one of the bowls, a roll, and a spoon, Egwene settled into her chair with a sigh. She also embraced the Source and warded the tent against listeners. Unfortunately, *saidar* made her all that much more aware of half-frozen hands and feet. The bits in between were not much warmer. The bowl seemed almost too warm to handle, and the roll, as well. Oh, how she would have loved to have those hot bricks.

"Is there anything more we can do?" she asked, and promptly gulped down a spoonful of stew. She was ravenous, and no wonder, with nothing since breakfast and that early. Lentils and woody carrots tasted like her mother's finest cooking. "I can't think of anything, but can you?"

"What can be done, has been. There isn't anything else, short of the Creator putting a hand in." Siuan took the other bowl and dropped onto the low stool, but then she sat staring into her stew and stirring it with her spoon. "You wouldn't really tell him, would you?" she said finally. "I couldn't bear if he knew."

"Why on earth not?"

“He’d take advantage,” Siuan said darkly. “Oh, not *that*. I don’t think *that*.” She was quite prudish in some areas. “But the man would make my life the Pit of Doom!” And washing his smallclothes and polishing his boots and his saddle every day was not?

Egwene sighed. How *could* such a sensible, intelligent, capable woman turn into a scatterbrain over this one subject? Like a hissing viper, an image rose in her head. Herself, sitting on Gawyn’s knee playing kissing games. In a tavern! She shoved it away, hard. “Siuan, I need your experience. I need your brain. I can’t afford to have you half-witted because of Lord Bryne. If you can’t pull yourself together, I’ll pay him what you owe, and forbid you to see him. I will.”

“I said I’d work off the debt,” Siuan said stubbornly. “I have as much honor as Lord Gareth bloody Bryne! As much and more! He keeps his word, and I keep mine! Besides, Min told me I have to stay close to him or we’ll both die. Or something like that.” A pinkness in her cheeks gave her away, though. Her honor and Min’s viewing notwithstanding, she was simply willing to put up with anything to be near the man!

“Very well. You’re besotted, and if I tell you to stay away from him, you’ll either disobey or mope and wrap the rest of your brains in a cloud. What are you going to do about him?”

Scowling indignantly, Siuan went on for some little time, growling what she would like to do about Gareth bloody Bryne. He would have enjoyed none of it. Some, he might not have survived.

“Siuan,” Egwene said warningly. “You deny one more time what’s plain as your nose, and I’ll tell him *and* give him the money.”

Siuan pouted sullenly. She pouted! Sullenly! Siuan! “I don’t have time to be in love. I barely have time to think, between working for you *and* him. And even if everything goes right tonight, I’ll have twice as much to do. Besides. . . .” Her face fell, and she shifted on the stool. “What if he doesn’t . . . return my feelings?” she muttered. “He’s never even tried to kiss me. All he cares about is whether his shirts are clean.”

Egwene scraped her spoon through her bowl, and was surprised when it came up empty. Nothing remained of the roll but a few crumbs on her dress. Light, her middle still felt hollow. She eyed Siuan’s bowl hopefully; the woman seemed to have little interest in anything but drawing circles in the lentils.

A sudden thought occurred to her. Why had Lord Bryne insisted that Siuan work off her debt even after learning who she was? Just because she had said she would? It was a preposterous arrangement. Except that it did keep her close to him when nothing else would have. For that matter, she herself had often wondered why Bryne had agreed to build the army. He had to have known there was a very good chance he was laying his head on the chopping block. And why he had offered that army to her, a girl Amyrlin with no real authority and not a friend among the sisters except Siuan, as far as he knew? Could the answer to all of those questions be as simple as . . . he loved Siuan? No; most men were frivolous and flighty, but that was *truly* preposterous! Still, she offered the suggestion, if only to amuse Siuan. It might cheer her a little.

Siuan snorted in disbelief. It sounded odd, coming from that pretty face, but no one could put quite so much expression into a snort as she did. "He's not a total idiot," she said dryly. "In fact, he has a good head on his shoulders. He thinks like a woman, most of the time."

"I still haven't heard you say you'll straighten up, Siuan," Egwene persisted. "You have to, one way or another."

"Well, of course I will. I don't know what's been the matter with me. It isn't as if I never kissed a man before." Her eyes narrowed suddenly, as if she expected Egwene to challenge her on that. "I haven't spent my *whole* life in the Tower. This is ridiculous! Chattering about *men*, tonight of all nights!" Peering into her bowl, she seemed to realize for the first time that it held food. She filled her spoon, gesturing with it at Egwene. "You have to be careful of your timing, more now than ever. If Romanda or Lelaine grabs the tiller, you'll never get your hands on it."

Ridiculous or not, something certainly had restored Siuan's appetite. She went through her stew faster than Egwene had hers, and not a crumb of the roll escaped her. Egwene found that she had drawn her fingers through her own empty bowl. There was nothing for it then but to lick off the last few lentils, of course.

Discussing what was to happen tonight served no real point. They had honed and refined what Egwene was to say, and when, so many times that she was surprised she had not dreamed of it. She certainly could have done her part in her sleep. Siuan insisted anyway, skirting very near the point where Egwene would have to call her down, going over it again and again, bringing up possibilities they had discussed before a hundred times.

Strangely, Siuan had found herself a very good mood. She even essayed a little humor, unusual for her of late, though some was on the gallows side.

“You know Romanda wanted to be Amyrlin herself once,” she said at one point. “I’ve heard it was Tamra getting the stole and staff that made her stalk off into retirement like a gull with her tail feathers clipped. I’ll lay a silver mark I don’t have to a fish scale that her eyes bulge twice as much as Lelaine’s.”

And later. “I wish I could be there to hear them howl. Somebody’s going to before much longer, and I’d rather it was them than us. I never had the voice for singing.” She actually sang a little snatch about staring across the river at a boy and having no boat. She was right; her voice was pleasant in its fashion, but she could not carry a tune in a bucket.

And later still. “A good thing I have such a sweet face now. If this goes badly, they’ll dress the pair of us for dolls and sit us on a shelf to admire. Of course, we might have ‘accidents’ instead. Dolls do get broken. Gareth Bryne will have to find someone else to bully.” She *really* laughed at that.

Egwene felt considerable relief when the tentflap bulged inward briefly, announcing someone who knew enough not to enter where there was a ward. She really did not want to hear where Siuan’s humor went from there!

As soon as she released the ward, Sheriam stepped inside, accompanied by a rush of air that seemed ten times as cold as earlier. “It’s time, Mother. Everything is ready.” Her tilted eyes were wide, and she licked her lips with the tip of her tongue.

Siuan bounded to her feet and seized her cloak from Egwene’s cot, but she paused in the act of draping it on her shoulders. “I *have* sailed the Fingers of the Dragon in the dark, you know,” she said seriously. “And netted a lionfish once, with my father. It can be done.”

Sheriam frowned as Siuan darted out, letting in more cold. “Sometimes, I think,” she began, but whatever she sometimes thought, she did not share. “Why are you doing this, Mother?” she asked instead. “All of it, today at the lake, calling the Hall tonight. Why did you have us spend all day yesterday talking about Logain to everybody we met? I’d think you might share it with me. I *am* your Keeper. I *did* swear fealty.”

“I tell you what you need to know,” Egwene said, swinging her cloak around her shoulders. There was no need to say that she trusted a forced oath only so far, even a sister’s. And Sheriam might find a reason to let a word slip into the wrong ear despite that oath. After all, Aes Sedai were noted for finding loopholes in what they had said. She did not really believe that would happen, but just as with Lord Bryne, she could not take even small chances unless she had to.

“I have to tell you,” Sheriam said bitterly, “I think tomorrow Romanda or Lelaine will be your Keeper of the Chronicles, and I’ll be serving a penance for not warning the Hall. And I think you might envy me.”

Egwene nodded. All too possible. “Shall we go?”

The sun made a red dome on the treetops to the west, and a lurid light shone off the snow. Servants marked Egwene’s passage along the deep paths with silent bows and curtsies. Their faces were troubled or else blank; servants could pick up the moods of those they served almost as quickly as Warders.

Not a sister was to be seen, at first, and then they all were, in a great gathering three deep around a pavilion set up in the only open space in the camp large enough, the area used by sisters Skimming to the dovecotes in Salidar and Traveling back with reports from the eyes-and-ears. A large much-mended piece of heavy canvas, not a patch on the splendor of the canopy at the lake, it had been a great deal of effort to set up. Most often in the past two months, the Hall had convened much as they had yesterday morning, or perhaps squeezed into one of the larger tents. The pavilion had been erected only twice since leaving Salidar. Both times for a trial.

Noticing Egwene and Sheriam’s approach, sisters in the back murmured to those ahead, and a gap opened to let them through. Expressionless eyes watched the pair of them, giving not a clue to whether the watching sisters knew or even suspected what was happening. Not a clue to what they thought. Butterflies stirred in Egwene’s stomach. A rosebud. Calm.

She stepped onto the layered carpets, woven in bright flowers and a dozen different patterns, and moved through the ring of braziers set up around the canopy’s rim, and Sheriam began. “She comes; she comes. . . .” If she sounded a little less grand than usual, a touch nervous, it was small wonder.

The polished benches and cloth-covered boxes from the lake were in use again. They made a much more formal sight than the mismatched gaggle of chairs that had been used previously, two slanting lines of nine, grouped by threes; Green, Gray and Yellow to one side, White, Brown and

Blue to the other. At the wide end, farthest from Egwene, stood the striped box and bench for the Amyrlin Seat. Sitting there, she would be the focus of every eye, very much aware that she was one facing eighteen. As well she had not changed her clothes; every Sitter still wore her finery from the lake, only adding her shawl. A rosebud. Calm.

One of the benches was empty, though only for a moment longer. Delana came running in just as Sheriam finished her litany. Looking breathless and flustered, the Gray Sitter scrambled up to her seat, between Varilin and Kwamesa, with little of her usual grace. She wore a sickly grin, and toyed nervously with the firedrops around her neck. Anyone might have thought she was the one on trial. Calm. No one was on trial. Yet.

Egwene started slowly across the carpets, between the two rows, with Sheriam close behind, and Kwamesa stood. The light of *saidar* suddenly shone around the dark slender woman, youngest of the Sitters. Tonight there would be no skimping of the formalities. “What is brought before the Hall of the Tower is for the Hall alone to consider,” Kwamesa announced. “Whosoever intrudes unbidden, woman or man, initiate or outsider, whether they come in peace or in anger, I will bind according to the law, to face the law. Know that what I speak is true; it will and shall be done.”

That formula was older than the oath against speaking untruth, from a time when almost as many Amyrlins died by assassination as by all other causes put together. Egwene continued her measured tread. It was an effort not to touch her stole, for a reminder. She tried to concentrate on the bench ahead.

Kwamesa resumed her seat, still shining with the Power, and among the Whites, Aledrin rose, the glow surrounding her as well. With her dark golden hair and big pale brown eyes, she was quite lovely when she smiled, but tonight a stone had more expression than she. “There are those within earshot who are not of the Hall,” she said in a cool voice strong with the accents of Tarabon. “What is spoken in the Hall of the Tower is for the Hall alone to hear, until and unless the Hall decides otherwise. I will make us private. I will seal our words to our ears only.” Weaving a ward that walled the entire pavilion, she sat. There was a stir among the sisters outside, who now must watch the Hall move in utter silence.

Strange, that so much among Sitters depended on age, when distinction by age was next to anathema among the rest of Aes Sedai. *Could* Siuan have seen a pattern in the Sitters’ ages? No. Focus. Calm, and focus.

Gripping the edges of her cloak, Egwene stepped up onto the brightly striped box and turned. Lelaine was already on her feet, blue-fringed shawl looped across her arms, and Romanda was rising, without even waiting for Egwene to sit. She dared not let either seize the tiller. “I call a question before the Hall,” she said in a loud, firm voice. “Who will stand to declare war against the usurper Elaida do Avriny a’Roihan?”

And then she sat, throwing off her cloak and letting it fall across the bench. Standing beside her on the carpets, Sheriam appeared quite cool and collected, but she made a small sound, almost a whimper. Egwene did not think anyone else had heard. She hoped not.

There was a brief moment of shock, women frozen on their seats, staring at her in amazement. Perhaps as much because she had asked at all as what she had asked. No one put a question before the Hall before sounding out the Sitters; it just was not done, for practical reasons as much as tradition.

At last Lelaine spoke. “We do not declare war on *individuals*,” she said in a dry voice. “Not even on traitors like Elaida. In any case, I call to shelve your question while we deal with more immediate matters.” She had had time to gather herself since the ride back; her face was merely hard now, not thunderous. Brushing blue-slashed skirts as if brushing away Elaida—or perhaps Egwene—she turned her attention to the other Sitters. “What brings us to sit tonight is. . . . I was about to say simple, but it isn’t. Open the novice book? We would have *grandmothers* clamoring to be tested. Remain here a month? I hardly need list the difficulties, beginning with spending half our gold without coming a foot nearer Tar Valon. And as for not crossing into Andor—”

“My sister Lelaine, in her anxiety, has forgotten who has the right to speak first,” Romanda cut in smoothly. Her smile managed to make Lelaine appear merry. Still, she took her time adjusting her shawl just as she wanted, a woman with all the time in the world. “I have two questions to call before the Hall, and in the second I will address Lelaine’s concerns. Unfortunately for her, my first question concerns Lelaine’s own fitness to continue in the Hall.” Her smile widened without growing the slightest bit warmer. Lelaine sat slowly, her scowl quite open.

A question of war cannot be shelved,” Egwene said in a carrying tone. “It must be answered before any question called after it. That is the law.”

Quick, questioning glances passed between Sitters.

"Is that so?" Janya said finally. Squinting thoughtfully, she twisted on her bench to address the woman next to her. "Takima, you remember everything you read, and I'm sure I remember you saying you had read the Law of War. Is that what it says?"

Egwene held her breath. The White Tower had sent soldiers to any number of wars over the last thousand years, but always in response to a plea for help from at least two thrones, and it always had been their war, not the Tower's. The last time the Tower itself actually declared war had been against Artur Hawkwing. Siuan said that now only a few librarians knew much more than that there *was* a Law of War.

Short, with long dark hair to her waist and skin the color of aged ivory, Takima often reminded people of a bird, tilting her head in thought. Now she looked like a bird that wanted to take flight, shifting on her seat, adjusting her shawl, unnecessarily straightening her cap of pearls and sapphires. "It is," she said finally, and clamped her mouth shut.

Egwene quietly started breathing again.

"It seems," Romanda said in a clipped tone, "that Siuan Sanche has been teaching you well. Mother. How speak you in support of declaring war? On a woman." She sounded as if she were trying to push something disagreeable out of her way, and she dropped onto her seat waiting for it to depart.

Egwene nodded graciously anyway, and rose. She met the Sitters' gazes one by one, levelly, firmly. Takima avoided her eyes. Light, the woman knew! But she had not said anything. Would she hold silent long enough? It was too late to change plans.

"Today we find ourselves confronted by an army, led by people who doubt us. That army would not be there otherwise." Egwene wanted to put passion into her voice, to let it burst out, but Siuan had advised utter coolness, and finally she had agreed. They needed to see a woman in control of herself, not a girl being ridden by her heart. The words came from her heart, though. "You heard Arathelle say she did not want to become entangled in Aes Sedai affairs. Yet they were willing to bring an army into Murandy and stand in our way. Because they are not certain who we are, or what we are about. Did any of you feel that they truly believe you are Sitters?" Malind, round-faced and fierce-eyed, shifted on her bench among the Greens, and so did Salita, twitching her yellow-fringed shawl, though her dark face managed to hide any expression. Berana, another

Sitter chosen in Salidar, frowned thoughtfully. Egwene did not mention the reaction to her as Amyrlin; if that thought was not already in their heads, she did not want to plant it.

“We’ve listed Elaida’s crimes to countless nobles,” she went on. “We’ve told them we intend to remove her. But they doubt. They think that maybe—maybe—we are what we say. And maybe there’s a trick in our words. Perhaps we are only Elaida’s hand, weaving some elaborate scheme. Doubt leaves people floundering. Doubt gave Pelivar and Arathelle the nerve to stand before Aes Sedai and say, ‘You cannot go further.’ Who else will stand in our way, or interfere, because they aren’t certain, and uncertainty leads them to act in a cloud of confusion? There’s only one way for us to dispel their confusion. We have already done everything else. Once we declare ourselves at war with Elaida, there can be no doubts. I don’t say that Arathelle and Pelivar and Aemlyn will march away as soon as we do so, but they and everyone else will know who we are. No one will dare again to show doubt so openly when you say you are the Hall of the Tower. No one will dare stand in our way, meddling in the affairs of the Tower through uncertainty and ignorance. We have walked to the door and put our hands on the latch. If you are afraid to walk through, then you all but ask the world to believe that you are nothing but Elaida’s puppets.”

She sat, surprised at how calm she felt. Beyond the two rows of Sitters, sisters outside stirred, putting their heads together. She could imagine the excited murmurs that Aledrin’s ward blocked off. Now if only Takima kept her mouth shut long enough.

Romanda grunted impatiently, and stood only long enough to say, “Who stands for declaring war against Elaida?” Her gaze returned to Lelaine, and her cold, smug smile returned. It was clear what she considered important, once this nonsense was done with.

Janya rose immediately, the long brown fringe on her shawl swaying. “We might as well,” she said. She was not supposed to speak, but her set jaw and sharp gaze dared anyone to call her down. She was not normally so forceful, but as usual, her words nearly tripped over one another. “Mending what the world knows won’t be any harder than it is for this. Well? Well? I don’t see the point of waiting.” On the other side of Takima, Escaralde nodded and stood.

Moria all but bounded to her feet, frowning down at Lyrelle, who gathered her skirts as if to rise, then hesitated and looked at Lelaine questioningly. Lelaine was too busy frowning across the carpets at Romanda to notice.

Among the Greens, Samalin and Malind stood together, and Faiselle looked up with a jerk. A stocky, copper-skinned Domani, Faiselle was not a woman startled by much, but she looked startled now, her square face swinging wide-eyed from Samalin to Malind and back.

Salita rose, carefully adjusting the yellow fringe of her shawl and just as carefully avoiding Romanda's sudden frown. Kwamesa stood, and then Aledrin, drawing Berana up by her sleeve. Delana twisted completely around on her bench, peering at the sisters outside. Even in silence the spectators' excitement communicated itself in constant shifting, heads going together, eyes darting toward the Sitters. Delana rose slowly, both hands pressed to her middle, looking ready to sick up on the spot. Takima grimaced and stared at her hands on her knees. Saroiya studied the other two White Sitters, tugging at her ear the way she did when deep in thought. But no one else moved to stand.

Egwene felt bile rising in her own throat. Ten. Just ten. She had been so sure. Siuan had been so sure. Logain alone should have been enough, given their ignorance of the law involved. Pelivar's army and Arathelle refusing to admit that they *were* Sitters should have primed them like a pump.

"For the love of the Light!" Moria burst out. Rounding on Lyrelle and Lelaine, she planted her fists on her hips. If Janya's speaking had gone against custom, this tied it in a knot. Displays of anger were strictly forbidden in the Hall, but Moria's eyes blazed, and her Illianer accent was thick with it. "Why do you wait? Elaida did steal the stole and the staff! Elaida's Ajah did make Logain a false Dragon, and only the Light knows how many other men! No woman in the history of the Tower did ever deserve this declaration more! Stand, or hold silent from now about your *resolve* to remove her!"

Lelaine did not quite stare, but by her expression you might have thought she had found herself attacked by a sparrow. "This is hardly worth a vote, Moria," she said in a tight voice. "We will speak later about decorum, you and I. Still, if you need a demonstration of resolve. . . ." With a sharp sniff, she rose, and gave a jerk of her head that pulled Lyrelle to her feet like strings. Lelaine seemed surprised that it did not pull up Faiselle and Takima, too.

Far from standing, Takima grunted as if struck. Disbelief bright on her face, she ran her eyes along the women on their feet, obviously counting. And then did it again. Takima, who remembered *everything* the first time.

Egwene breathed deep in relief. It was done. She could hardly believe. After a moment, she cleared her throat, and Sheriam actually jumped.

Green eyes as big as teacups, the Keeper cleared her throat, too. "The lesser consensus standing, war is declared against Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan." Her voice was none too steady, but it sufficed. "In the interest of unity, I ask for the greater consensus to stand."

Faiselle half-moved, then clenched her hands in her lap. Saroiya opened her mouth, then closed it without speaking, her face troubled. No one else stirred.

"You won't get it," Romanda said flatly. The sneer she directed across the pavilion at Lelaine was as good as a statement of why she, at least, would not stand. "Now that little business is finished, we can go on with—"

"I don't think we can," Egwene cut in. "Takima, what does the Law of War say about the Amyrlin Seat?" Romanda was left with her mouth hanging open.

Takima's lips writhed. The diminutive Brown looked more than ever a bird wishing to take flight. "The Law . . . ." she began, then took a deep breath and sat up straight. "The Law of War states, 'As one set of hands must guide a sword, so the Amyrlin Seat shall direct and prosecute the war by decree. She shall seek the advice of the Hall of the Tower, but the Hall shall carry out her decrees with all possible speed, and for the sake of unity, they shall. . . ." She faltered, and had to visibly force herself to go on. ". . . they shall and must approve any decree of the Amyrlin Seat regarding prosecution of the war with the greater consensus."

A long silence stretched. Every eye seemed to be goggling. Turning abruptly, Delana vomited onto the carpets behind her bench. Kwamesa and Salita both climbed down and started toward her, but she waved them off, plucking a scarf from her sleeve to wipe her mouth. Magla and Saroiya and several others still seated looked as though they might follow her example. No others who had been chosen in Salidar, though. Romanda appeared ready to bite through a nail.

"Very clever," Lelaine said at last in clipped tones, and after a deliberate pause, added, "Mother. Will you tell us what the great wisdom of your vast experience tells you to do? About the war, I mean. I want to make myself clear.”

“Let me make myself clear, too,” Egwene said coldly. Leaning forward, she fixed the Blue Sitter sternly. “A certain degree of respect is *required* toward the Amyrlin Seat, and from now on, I *will* have it, daughter. This is no time for me to have to unchair you and name a penance.” Lelaine’s eyes crept wider and wider with shock. Had the woman really believed everything would continue as before? Or after so long not daring to show more than the tiniest backbone, had Lelaine simply believed she had none? Egwene really did not want to unchair her; the Blues would almost certainly return the woman, and she still had to deal with the Hall on matters that could not be convincingly disguised as part of the war against Elaida.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a smile pass across Romanda’s lips at seeing Lelaine set down. Small profit if all she did was raise Romanda’s stock with the others. “That holds for everyone, Romanda,” she said. “If need be, Tiana can find two birches as easily as one.” Romanda’s smile vanished abruptly.

“If I may speak, Mother,” Takima said, rising slowly. She attempted a smile, but she still looked decidedly ill. “I myself think you have begun well. There may be benefits to stopping here a month. Or longer.” Romanda’s head jerked around to stare at her, but for once, Takima did not appear to notice. “Wintering here, we can avoid worse weather farther north, and also plan carefully—”

“There’s an end to delays, daughter,” Egwene cut in. “No more dragging our feet.” Would she be another Gerra, or another Shein? Either was still possible. “In one month, we will Travel from here.” No; she was Egwene al’Vere, and whatever the secret histories would say of her faults and virtues, the Light only knew, but they would be hers, not copies of some other woman’s. “In one month, we will begin the siege of Tar Valon.”

This time, the silence was broken only by the sound of Takima weeping.

* * *

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CHAPTER

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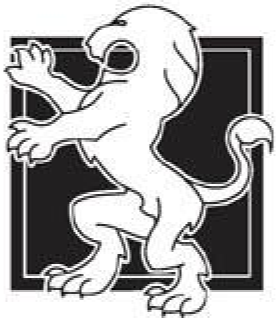

Into Andor

Elayne hoped that the journey to Caemlyn would go smoothly, and in the beginning, it seemed to do so. She thought that even as she and Aviendha and Birgitte sat bone-weary and huddled in the rags that remained of their clothing, filthy with dirt and dust and the blood of the injuries they had received when the gateway exploded. In two weeks at most, she would be ready to present her claims to the Lion Throne. There on the hilltop, Nynaeve Healed their numerous hurts and spoke barely a word, certainly not berating them. Surely that was a pleasant sign, if unusual. Relief at finding them alive battled worry on her face.

Lan's strength was necessary to remove the Seanchan crossbow bolt from Birgitte's thigh before she could be Healed of that wound, but although her face drained of blood and Elayne felt a stab of agony through the bond, agony that made her want to cry out, her Warder barely groaned through her gritted teeth.

"*Tai'shar* Kandor," Lan murmured, tossing the pile-head quarrel, made to punch through armor, aside on the ground. True blood of Kandor. Birgitte blinked, and he paused. "Forgive me, if I erred. I assumed from your clothes you were Kandori."

"Oh, yes," Birgitte breathed. "Kandori." Her sickly grin might have been from her injuries; Nynaeve was impatiently shooing Lan out of the way so she could lay hands on her. Elayne hoped the woman knew more of Kandor than the name; when Birgitte had last been born, there had been no Kandor. She should have taken it as an omen.

For the five miles to the small slate-roofed manor house, Birgitte rode behind Nynaeve on the latter's stout brown mare—named Loversknot, of all things—and Elayne and Aviendha rode Lan's tall black stallion. At least, Elayne sat Mandarb's saddle with Aviendha's arms around her waist while Lan led the fiery-eyed animal. Trained warhorses were as much weapons as a sword, and dangerous mounts for strange riders. *Be sure of yourself, girl*, Lini had always told her, *but not* too *sure*, and she did try. She should have realized events were no more in her control than Mandarb's reins.

At the three-story stone house, Master Hornwell, stout and grayhaired, and Mistress Hornwell, slightly less round and slightly less gray but otherwise resembling her husband remarkably, had every last person who worked the estates, and Merilille's maid, Pol, and the green-and-white liveried servants who had come from the Tarasin Palace as well, all bustling to find sleeping accommodations for over two hundred people, most women, who had appeared out of nowhere with dark near to falling. The work went with surprising swiftness, in spite of the estates' people stopping to gawk at an Aes Sedai's ageless face, or a Warder's shifting cloak making parts of him vanish, or one of the Sea Folk with all of her bright silks, her earrings and nosering and medallioned chain. Kinswomen were deciding that now it was safe to be frightened and cry no matter what Reanne and the Knitting Circle said to them; Windfinders were snarling over how far from the salt they had come, against their will as Renaile din Calon loudly claimed; and nobles and craftswomen who had been all too willing to flee whatever lay back in Ebou Dar, willing to carry their bundled possessions on their backs, were now balking at being shown a hayloft for a bed.

All that was going on when Elayne and the others arrived with the sun red on the western horizon, a great upheaval and milling all about the house and thatch-roofed outbuildings, but Alise Tenjile, smiling pleasantly and implacable as an avalanche, seemed to have everything more in hand than even the capable Hornwells. Kinswomen who wept harder for all of Reanne's attempts at comfort dried their tears at a murmur from Alise and began moving with the purposeful air of women who had been caring for themselves in a hostile world for many years. Haughty nobles with marriage knives dangling into the oval cutouts in their lace-trimmed bodices and craftswomen who displayed almost as much arrogance and nearly as much bosom, if not in silk, flinched at the sight of Alise approaching, and went scurrying for the tall barns hugging their bundles and announcing loudly that they had always thought it might be amusing to sleep on straw. Even the Windfinders, many of them important and powerful women among the Atha'an Miere, muffled their complaints when Alise came near. For that matter, Sareitha, still lacking the Aes Sedai agelessness, eyed Alise askance and touched her brown-fringed shawl as if to remind herself it was there. Merilille—unflappable Merilille—watched the woman go about her work with a blend of approval and open amazement.

Clambering down from her saddle at the front door of the house, Nynaeve glared toward Alise, gave her dark braid one deliberate, measured tug that the other woman was far too busy to notice, and stalked inside, stripping off her blue riding gloves and muttering to herself. Watching her go, Lan chuckled softly, then stifled his laughter immediately when Elayne dismounted. Light, but his eyes were cold! For Nynaeve's sake, she hoped the man could be saved from his fate, yet looking into those eyes, she did not believe it.

"Where is Ispan?" she murmured, helping Aviendha scramble down. So many of the women knew an Aes Sedai—a Black sister—was being held prisoner that the news was bound to spread through the estates like fire in dry grass, but better if the manor's folk had a little preparation.

"Adeleas and Vandene took her to a small woodcutter's hut about half a mile away," he replied just as quietly. "In all this, I don't think anyone noticed a woman with a sack over her head. The sisters said they would stay there with her tonight."

Elayne shivered. The Darkfriend was to be questioned again once the sun went down, it seemed. They were in Andor, now, and that made her feel more deeply as if she had given the order for it.

Soon she was in a copper bathtub, luxuriating in perfumed soap and clean skin again, laughing and splashing water at Birgitte, who lolled in another tub except when she was splashing back, both of them giggling over the wincing horror Aviendha could not quite conceal at sitting up to her breasts in water. She thought it was a very good joke on herself, though, and told a most improper story about a man getting *segade* spines in his bottom. Birgitte told one still more improper, about a woman getting her head caught between the slats of a fence, that made even Aviendha blush. They *were* funny, though. Elayne wished she knew one to tell.

She and Aviendha combed and brushed each other's hair—a nightly ritual for near-sisters—and then they snuggled tiredly into the canopied bed in a small room. She and Aviendha, Birgitte and Nynaeve, and lucky there were no more. Larger rooms had cots and pallets covering the floors, including the sitting rooms, the kitchens, and most of the halls. Nynaeve muttered half the night about the indecency of making a woman sleep apart from her husband, and for the other half, her elbows seemed to wake Elayne every time she dropped off. Birgitte flatly refused to change places, and she could not ask Aviendha to endure the woman's sharp prodding, so she did not get a great deal of sleep.

Elayne was still groggy when they prepared to depart the next morning, with the rising sun a molten ball of gold. The manor had few animals to spare unless she stripped the estates bare, so while she rode a black gelding named Fireheart, and Aviendha and Birgitte had new mounts, those who had been afoot when they fled the Kin's farm remained afoot. That included most of the Kinswomen themselves, the servants leading the pack animals, and the twenty-odd women who plainly were beyond regretting their visit to the Kin's farm in hopes of peace and contemplation. The Warders rode ahead to scout the way across rolling hills covered in drought-starved forest, and the rest of them stretched out in a most peculiar snake, with Nynaeve and herself and the other sisters at the head. And Aviendha, of course.

It was hardly a group that could escape notice, so many women traveling with so few men for guards, not to mention twenty dark Windfinders, awkward on their horses and as bright as exotically plumaged birds, and eight Aes Sedai, five of them recognizably so to anyone who knew what to look for. Though one did ride with a leather sack over her head, of course. As if that would not attract eyes by itself. Elayne had hoped to reach Caemlyn unnoticed, but that no longer seemed possible. Still, there was no reason that anyone would suspect that the Daughter-Heir, Elayne Trakand herself, was one of this group. In the beginning, she thought that the greatest difficulty they might face would be someone who opposed her claims learning of her presence, sending armed men to try taking her into custody until the succession was settled.

In truth, she expected the first trouble to come from the footsore craftswomen and nobles, proud women all, and none used to tramping dusty hills. Especially since Merilille’s maid had her own plump mare to ride. The few farmwives among them did not seem to mind too much, but nearly half their number were women who possessed lands and manors and palaces, and most of the rest could have afforded to buy an estate if not two or three. They included two goldsmiths, three weavers who owned over four hundred looms between them, a woman whose manufactories produced a tenth of all the lacquerware Ebou Dar produced, and a banker. They walked, their possessions strapped to their backs, while their horses bore packsaddles laden with food. There was real need. Every last coin in everyone’s purse had been pooled together and given into Nynaeve’s tightfisted keeping, but all might not be sufficient to buy food, fodder and lodgings for so large a party all the way to Caemlyn. They did not seem to understand. They complained loudly and incessantly through the first day’s march. Loudest of all was a slim lady with a thin scar on one cheek, a stern-faced woman named Malien, who was nearly bent double under the weight of a huge bundle containing a dozen or more dresses and all the changes that went with them.

When they made camp that first night, with their cook fires glowing in the twilight and everyone full of beans and bread if not entirely satisfied with them, Malien gathered the noblewomen around her, their silks more than travel-stained. The craftswomen joined in, too, and the banker, and the farmers stood close. Before Malien could say a word, Reanne strode into the group. Her face full of smile lines, in plain brown woolens with her skirts sewn up on the left to expose bright layered petticoats, she might have been one of the farm women.

“If you wish to go home,” she announced in that surprisingly high voice, “you may do so at any time. I regret that we must keep your horses, though. You will be paid for them as soon as can be arranged. If you choose to remain, please remember that the rules of the farm still apply.” A number of the women around her gaped. Malien was not alone in opening her mouth angrily.

Alise just seemed to appear at Reanne’s side, fists planted on her hips. She was not smiling now. “I said the last ten to be ready would do the washing up,” she told them firmly. And she named them off; Jillien, a plump goldsmith; Naiselle, the cool-eyed banker; and all eight of the nobles. They stood staring at her until she clapped her hands and said, “Don’t make me invoke the rule on failure to do your share of the chores.”

Malien, wide-eyed and muttering in disbelief, was the last to dart off and begin gathering dirty bowls, but the next morning she pared her bundle down, leaving lace-trimmed silk dresses and shifts to be trampled on the hillside as they departed. Elayne continued to expect an explosion, but Reanne kept a firm hand on them, Alise kept a firmer, and if Malien and the others glared and muttered over the grease stains that grew on their clothes day by day, Reanne had only to speak a few words to send them to their work. Alise only had to clap her hands.

If the rest of the journey could have gone as smoothly, Elayne would have been willing to join those women in their greasy labors. Long before reaching Caemlyn, she knew that for a fact.

Once they reached the first narrow dusty road, little more than cart track, farms began to appear, thatched stone houses and barns clinging to the hillsides or nestled in hollows. From then on, whether the land was hilly or flat, forested or cleared, they rarely spent many hours beyond sight of a farm or a village. At each of those, while the local folk goggled at the very strange strangers, Elayne tried to learn how much support House Trakand had, and what concerned the people most. Addressing those concerns would be important in making her claim to the throne strong enough to stand, as important as the backing of other Houses. She heard a great deal, if not always what she wished to hear. Andorans claimed the right to speak their minds to the Queen herself; they were hardly shy with a young noblewoman, no matter how peculiar her traveling companions.

In a village called Damelien, where three mills sat beside a small river shrunken to leave their tall water-wheels dry, the square-jawed innkeeper at The Golden Sheaves allowed as how he thought Morgase had been a good queen, the best that could be, the best that ever was. “Her daughter might’ve been a good ruler, too, I suppose,” he muttered, thumbing his chin. “Pity the Dragon Reborn killed them. I suppose he had to—the Prophecies or some such—but he had no call to dry up the rivers, now did he? How much grain did you say your horses need, my lady? It’s dreadful dear, mind.”

A hard-faced woman, in a worn brown dress that hung on her as if she had lost weight, surveyed a field surrounded by a low stone wall, where the hot wind sent sheets of dust marching into the woods. The other farms around Buryhill looked as bad or worse. “That Dragon Reborn’s got no right to do this to us, now has he? I ask you!” She spat and frowned up at Elayne in her saddle. “The throne? Oh, Dyelin’s as good as any, now Morgase and her girl are dead. Some around here still speak up for Naean or Elenia, but I’m for Dyelin. Any lookout, Caemlyn’s a long way off. I’ve got crops to worry about. If I ever make another crop.”

“Oh, it’s true, my lady, so it is; Elayne’s alive,” a gnarled old carpenter told her in Forel Market. He was bald as a leather egg, his fingers twisted with age, but the work standing among the shavings and sawdust that littered his shop looked as fine as any Elayne had seen. She was the only person in the shop besides him. From the look of the village, half the residents had left. “The Dragon Reborn is having her brought to Caemlyn so he can put the Rose Crown on her head himself,” he allowed. “The news is all over. ’Tisn’t right, if you ask me. He’s one of them black-eyed Aielmen, I hear. We ought to march on Caemlyn and drive him and all them Aiel back where they come from. Then Elayne can claim the throne her own self. If Dyelin lets her keep it, anyway.”

Elayne heard a great deal about Rand, rumors ranging from him swearing fealty to Elaida to him being the King of Illian, of all things. In Andor, he was blamed for everything bad that happened for the last two or three years, including stillbirths and broken legs, infestations of grasshoppers, two-headed calves, and three-legged chickens. And even people who thought her mother had ruined the country and an end to the reign of House Trakand was good riddance still believed Rand al’Thor an invader. The Dragon Reborn was supposed to fight the Dark One at Shayol Ghul, and he should be driven out of Andor. Not what she had hoped to hear, not a bit of it. But she heard it all again and again. It was not a pleasant journey at all. It was one long lesson in one of Lini’s favorite sayings. *It isn’t the stone you see that trips you on your nose*.

She thought a number of things beside the nobles might cause trouble, some sure to be explosions as great as the gateway. The Windfinders, smug in the bargain made with Nynaeve and herself, behaved in an irritatingly superior manner toward the Aes Sedai, especially after it came out that Merilille had let herself agree to be one of the first sisters to go on the ships. Yet if the sizzling there continued like the burning of an Illuminator’s fuse-cord, the explosion never quite came. The Windfinders and the Kinswomen, in particular the Knitting Circle, seemed as certain to blow up. They cut one another dead when not sneering openly, the Kin at “Sea Folk wilders getting above themselves,” the Windfinders at “cringing sandlappers kissing Aes Sedai feet.” But it never went beyond lips curled or daggers caressed.

Ispan certainly presented problems that Elayne was sure would grow, yet after a few days, Vandene and Adeleas let her ride unhooded if not unshielded, a silent figure with colored beads in her thin braids, ageless face turned down and hands still on her reins. Renaile told everyone who would listen that among the Atha’an Miere, a Darkfriend was stripped of his or her names as soon as proven guilty, then thrown over the side tied to ballast stones. Among the Kinswomen, even Reanne and Alise paled every time they saw the Taraboner woman. But Ispan grew meeker and meeker, eager to please and full of ingratiating smiles for the two white-haired sisters no matter what it was they did to her when they carried her away from the others at night. On the other hand, Adeleas and Vandene grew more and more frustrated. Adeleas told Nynaeve in Elayne’s hearing that the woman spilled out volumes about old plots of the Black Ajah, those she had not been involved in much more enthusiastically than those she was, yet even when they pressed her hard—Elayne could not quite make herself ask how they pressed—and she let slip the names of Darkfriends, most were certainly dead and none was a sister. Vandene said they were beginning to fear she had taken an Oath—the capital was audible—against betraying her cohorts. They continued to isolate Ispan as much as possible and continued with their questions, but it was plain they were feeling their way blindly, now, and carefully.

And there was Nynaeve, and Lan. Most definitely Nynaeve and Lan, with her near to bursting at the effort of holding her temper around him, mooning over him when they had to sleep apart—which was nearly always, the way accommodations divided up—and torn between eager and afraid when she could sneak him off to a hayloft. It was her own fault for choosing a Sea Folk wedding, in Elayne’s estimation. The Sea Folk believed in hierarchy as they did in the sea, and they knew a woman and her husband might be promoted one past the other many times in their lives. Their marriage rites took that into account. Whoever had the right to command in public, must obey in private. Lan never took advantage, so Nynaeve said—“not really,” whatever that was supposed to mean! She always blushed when she said it—but she kept waiting for him to do so, and he just seemed to grow more and more amused. This amusement, of course, screwed

Nynaeve's temper to a fever pitch. Nynaeve did erupt, out of all the explosions Elayne had expected. She snapped at anyone and everyone who got in her way. Except at Lan; with him, she was all honey and cream. And not at Alise. She came close once or twice, but even Nynaeve could not seem to make herself snap at Alise.

Elayne had hopes, not worries, about the things brought out of the Rahad along with the Bowl of the Winds. Aviendha helped her search, and so did Nynaeve once or twice, but she was entirely too slow and ginger about it and showed little skill at finding what they were searching for. They found no more *angreal*, yet the collection of *ter'angreal* grew; once all the rubbish had been thrown away, objects that used the One Power filled five entire panniers on the packhorses.

Careful as Elayne was, though, her attempts to study them did not go so well. Spirit was the safest of the Five Powers to use in this—unless, of course, Spirit happened to be what triggered the thing!—yet at times she had to use other flows, as fine as she could weave. Sometimes her delicate probing did nothing, but her first touch at the thing that looked like a blacksmith's puzzle made of glass left her dizzy and unable to sleep for half the night, and a thread of Fire touching what looked like a helmet made of fluffy metal feathers gave everyone within twenty paces a blinding headache. Except for herself. And then there was the crimson rod that felt hot; hot, in a way.

Sitting on the edge of her bed at an inn called The Wild Boar, she examined the smooth rod by the light of two polished brass lamps. Wrist-thick and a foot long, it looked like stone, but felt firm rather than hard. She was alone; since the helmet, she had tried to do her studying away from the others. The heat of the rod made her think of Fire. . . .

Blinking, she opened her eyes and sat up in the bed. Sunlight streamed in at the window. She was in her shift, and Nynaeve, fully dressed, stood frowning down at her. Aviendha and Birgitte were watching from beside the door.

"What happened?" Elayne demanded, and Nynaeve shook her head grimly.

"You don't want to know." Her lips twitched.

Aviendha's face gave away nothing. Birgitte's mouth might have been a little tight, but the strongest emotion Elayne felt from her was a combination of relief and—hilarity! The woman was doing her utmost not to roll on the floor laughing!

The worst of it was, *no* one would tell what had happened. What she had said, or done; she was sure it was that, by the quickly hidden grins she saw, from Kinswomen and Windfinders as well as sisters. But no one would tell her! After that, she decided to leave studying the *ter'angreal* to somewhere more comfortable than a inn. Somewhere definitely more private!

Nine days after their flight from Ebou Dar, scattered clouds appeared in the sky and a sprinkling of fat raindrops splashed dust in the road. An intermittent drizzle fell the next day, and the day after, a deluge kept them huddled in the houses and stables of Forel Market. That night, the rain turned to sleet, and by morning, thick flurries of snow drifted from a cloud-dark sky. More than halfway to Caemlyn, Elayne began to wonder whether they could make it in two weeks from where they stood.

With the snow, clothes became a worry. Elayne blamed herself for not thinking of the fact that everyone might need warm clothes before they reached their destination. Nynaeve blamed herself for not thinking of it. Merilille thought she was at fault, and Reanne thought she was. They actually stood in the main street of Forel Market that morning with snowflakes drifting down on their heads, arguing over who could claim the blame. Elayne was not sure which of them saw the absurdity first, who was the first to laugh, but all were laughing as they settled around a table in The White Swan to decide what to do. A solution turned out to be no laughing matter. Providing one warm coat or cloak for everyone would take a large bite out of their coin, if so many could be found. Jewelry could be sold or traded, of course, but no one in Forel Market seemed to be interested in necklaces or bracelets, however fine.

Aviendha solved that difficulty by producing a small sack that bulged with clear, perfect gemstones, some quite large. Strangely, the same folk who had said with bare politeness that they had no use for be-gemmed necklaces went round-eyed at the unset stones rolling about in Aviendha's palm. Reanne said they saw one as frippery, the other as wealth, but whatever their reasons, in return for two rubies of moderate size, one large moonstone, and a small firedrop, the people of Forel Market were more than willing to provide as many thick woolens as their visitors desired, some of them hardly worn.

“Very generous of them,” Nynaeve muttered sourly as people began rooting clothes out of their chests and attics. A steady stream marched into the inn with their arms full. “Those stones could buy the whole village!” Aviendha shrugged slightly; she would have surrendered a handful of the gems if Reanne had not intervened.

Merilille shook her head. “We have what they want, but they have what we need. I’m afraid that means they set the price.” Which was entirely too much like the situation with the Sea Folk. Nynaeve looked positively ill.

When they were alone, in a hallway of the inn, Elayne asked Aviendha where she had gotten such a fortune in jewels, and one she seemed eager to be rid of. She expected her near-sister to say they were her takings from the Stone of Tear, or perhaps Cairhien.

“Rand al’Thor tricked me,” Aviendha muttered sullenly. “I tried to buy my *toh* from him. I know that is the least honorable way,” she protested, “but I could see no other. And he stood me on my head! Why is it, when you reason things out logically, a man always does something completely illogical and gains the upper hand?”

“Their pretty heads are so fuzzy, a woman can’t expect to follow how they skitter,” Elayne told her. She did not inquire what *toh* Aviendha had tried to buy, or how the attempt had ended with her near-sister possessing a sack full of rich gems. Talking about Rand was hard enough without where *that* might lead.

Snow brought more than a need for warm clothing. At midday, with the snow flurries falling thicker by the minute, Renaile strode down the stairs into the common room, proclaimed that her part of the bargain had been met, and demanded not only the Bowl of the Winds, but Merilille. The Gray sister stared in consternation, and so did a great many others. The benches were filled with Kinswomen taking their turn at the midday meal, and serving men and women ran to serve this third lot of meals. Renaile did not keep her voice down, and every head in the common room swiveled toward her.

“You can begin your teaching, now,” Renaile told the wide-eyed Aes Sedai. “Up the ladder with you to my quarters.” Merilille started to protest, but face suddenly cold, the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships planted fists on her hips. “When I give a command, Merilille Ceandevin,” she said icily, “I expect every hand on deck to jump. Now jump!”

Merilille did not precisely jump, but she did gather herself and go, with Renaile practically chivvying her up the stairs from behind. Given her promise, she had no other choice. Reanne's face was aghast. Alise and stout Sumeko, still wearing her red belt, watched thoughtfully.

In the days that followed, whether laboring along a snow-covered road on their horses, walking the streets of a village, or trying to find room for everyone at a farm, Renaile kept Merilille at her heels except when she told her off to follow another Windfinder. The glow of *saidar* surrounded the Gray sister and her escort almost constantly, and Merilille demonstrated weaves unceasingly. The pale Cairhienin was markedly shorter than any of the dark Sea Folk women, but at first Merilille managed to stand taller by the sheer force of Aes Sedai dignity. Soon, though, she began to wear a permanently startled expression. Elayne learned that when they all had beds to sleep in, which they did not always, Merilille was sharing with Pol, her maid, and the two apprentice Windfinders, Talaan and Metarra. What that said of Merilille's status, Elayne was not sure. Clearly, the Windfinders did not put her on a level with the apprentices. They just expected her to do as she was told, when she was told, with no delays or equivocations.

Reanne remained appalled at the turn of events, but Alise and Sumeko were not the only ones among the Kin to watch closely, not the only ones to nod thoughtfully. And suddenly, another problem came to Elayne's notice. The Kinswomen saw Ispan made more and more malleable in her captivity, but she was the prisoner of other Aes Sedai. The Sea Folk were not Aes Sedai, and Merilille not a prisoner, yet she was starting to jump when Renaile issued a command, or, for that matter, when Dorile, or Caire, or Caire's blood-sister Tebreille did. Each of those was Windfinder to a clan Wavemistress, and none of the others made her hop with such alacrity, but that was enough. More and more of the Kin slid from horrified gaping to thoughtful observation. Perhaps Aes Sedai were not a different flesh after all. If Aes Sedai were just women like themselves, why should they subject themselves once more to the rigors of the Tower, to Aes Sedai authority and Aes Sedai discipline? Had they not survived very well on their own, some for more years than any of the older sisters were quite ready to believe? Elayne could practically see the idea forming in their heads.

When she mentioned it to Nynaeve, though, Nynaeve just muttered, "About time some of the sisters learned what it's like trying to teach a woman who thinks she knows more than her teacher. Those who have a chance at a shawl will still want it, and for the rest, I don't see why they shouldn't grow some backbone." Elayne refrained from mentioning Nynaeve's complaints about Sumeko, who had certainly grown backbone; Sumeko had criticized several of Nynaeve's Healing weaves as "clumsy," and Elayne had thought Nynaeve was going to have apoplexy on the spot. "In any case, there's no need to tell Egwene about this. If she's there. Any of it. She has enough on her plate." Without doubt, "any of it" referred to Merilille and the Windfinders.

They were in their shifts, seated on their bed on the second floor of The New Plow, with the twisted-ring dream *ter'angreal* hanging about their necks, Elayne's on a simple leather cord, Nynaeve's alongside Lan's heavy signet ring on a narrow golden chain. Aviendha and Birgitte, still fully dressed, sat on two of their clothing chests. Standing guard, they called it, until she and Nynaeve returned from the World of Dreams. Both wore their cloaks until they could climb under the blankets. The New Plow was definitely not new; cracks spidered across the plastered walls, and unfortunate drafts crept in everywhere.

The room itself was small, and the chests and stacked bundles left room for little beyond the bed and washstand. Elayne knew she had to present herself properly in Caemlyn, but sometimes she felt guilty, with her belongings on pack animals when most others had to make do with what they could carry on their backs. Nynaeve certainly never showed any regrets over *her* chests. They had been sixteen days on the road, the full moon outside the narrow window shone on a white blanket of snow that would make traveling tomorrow slow even if the sky remained clear, and Elayne thought another week to Caemlyn was an optimistic estimate.

"I have enough sense not to remind her," she told Nynaeve. "I don't want my nose snapped off again."

That was a mild way of putting it. They had not been in *Tel'aran'rhiod* since informing Egwene, the night after leaving the estate, that the Bowl had been used. Reluctantly, they also had told her of the bargain they had been forced into with the Sea Folk, and found themselves facing the Amyrlin Seat with the striped stole on her shoulders. Elayne knew it was necessary and right—a Queen's closest friend among her subjects knew she was the Queen as well as a friend, *had* to know—but she had not enjoyed her friend telling them in a heated voice that they had behaved like witless loobies who might have brought ruin down on all their heads. Especially when she herself agreed. She had not liked hearing that the only reason Egwene did not set them both a penance that would curl their hair was that she could not afford to have them waste the time. Necessary and right, though; when she sat on the Lion Throne, she would still be Aes Sedai, and subject to the laws and rules and customs of Aes Sedai. Not for Andor—she would not give her land to the White Tower—but for herself. So, unpleasant as it had been, she accepted her castigation calmly. Nynaeve had writhed and stammered with embarrassment, protested and all but pouted, then apologized so profusely that Elayne hardly believed it was the same woman she knew. Quite rightly, Egwene had remained the Amyrlin, cool in her displeasure even while giving pardon for their mistakes. At best, tonight could not be pleasant or comfortable if she was there.

But when they dreamed themselves into the Salidar of *Tel'aran'rhiod*, into the room in the Little Tower that had been called the Amyrlin's Study, she was not there, and the only sign she had visited since their meeting was some barely visible words roughly scratched on a beetle-riddled wall panel, as if by an idle hand that did not want to spend the effort to carve deeply.

STAY IN CAEMLYN

And a few feet away:

KEEP SILENT AND BE CAREFUL

Those had been Egwene's final instructions to them. Go to Caemlyn, and stay there until she could puzzle out how to keep the Hall from salting all of them down and nailing them into a barrel. A reminder they had no way to erase.

Embracing *saidar*, Elayne channeled to leave her own message, the number fifteen seemingly scratched on the heavy table that had been Egwene's writing desk. Inverting the weave and tying it off meant that only someone who ran her fingers across the numerals would realize they were not really there. Perhaps it would not take fifteen days to reach Caemlyn, but more than a week, she was certain.

Nynaeve strode to the window and peered out both ways, careful not to put her head out through the open casement. It was night out there as in the waking world, a full moon gleaming on bright snow, though the air did not feel cold. No one else should be there except them, and if anyone was, it was someone to avoid. "I hope she isn't having trouble with her plans," she muttered.

“She told us not to mention those even to each other, Nynaeve. ‘A secret spoken finds wings.’ ” That had been another of Lini’s many favorites.

Nynaeve grimaced over her shoulder, then returned to peering down the narrow alley. “It’s different for you. I tended her as a child, changed her swaddling, smacked her bottom a time or two. And now I have to leap when she snaps her fingers. It’s hard.”

Elayne could not help herself. She snapped her fingers.

Nynaeve spun so fast that she blurred, her face popeyed with horror. Her dress blurred, too, from blue riding silks to an Accepted’s banded white to what she referred to as good, stout Two Rivers wool, dark and thick. When she realized Egwene was not there, had not been listening, she almost fainted with relief.

When they stepped back to their bodies and woke long enough to tell the others they could come to bed, Aviendha certainly thought it a good joke, and Birgitte laughed as well. Nynaeve had her revenge, though. The next morning, she woke Elayne with an icicle. Elayne’s shrieks woke everybody else in the whole village.

Three days later, the first explosion came.

* * *

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CHAPTER

21

Answering the Summons

The great winter tempests called the cemaros continued to roll up out of the Sea of Storms, harsher than any in memory. Some said this year the cemaros was trying to make up for the months of delay. Lightning crackled across the skies, enough to make the darkness patchy at night. Wind lashed the land and rain flailed it, turning all but the hardest roads to rivers of mud. Sometimes the mud froze after nightfall, but sunrise always brought a thaw, even under a gray sky, and the ground became bogs once more. Rand was surprised at how much all that hampered his plans.

The Asha'man he had sent for came quickly, at midmorning the next day, riding out of a gateway into a driving downpour that obscured the sun so, it might as well have been twilight. Through the hole in the air, snow fell back in Andor, fat white flakes swirling about thickly and hiding what lay behind them. Most of the men in the short column were bundled in heavy black cloaks, but the rain seemed to slip around them and their horses. It was not obvious, yet anyone who noticed would look twice, if not three times. Keeping dry required only a simple weave, so long as you did not mind flaunting what you were. But then, the black-and-white disc worked on a crimson circle on the breast of their cloaks did that. Even half-hidden by the rain, there was a pride about them, an arrogance in the way they sat their saddles. A defiance. They gloried in what they were.

Their commander, Charl Gedwyn, was a few years older than Rand, of middling height and wearing the Sword and Dragon, like Torval, on a very well cut, high-collared coat of the best black silk. His sword was mounted lushly with silver, his silver-worked sword belt fastened with a silver buckle shaped in a clenched fist. Gedwyn termed himself Tsorovan'm'hael; in the Old Tongue, Storm Leader, whatever that was supposed to mean. It seemed appropriate to the weather, at least.

Even so, he stood just inside the entrance to Rand's ornate green tent and scowled out at the cascading rain. A guard of mounted Companions encircled the tent, no more than thirty paces away, yet they were barely visible. They might have been statues, ignoring the torrent.

"How do you expect me to find anyone in this?" Gedwyn muttered, glancing back over his shoulder at Rand. A tick late, he added, "My Lord Dragon." His eyes were hard and challenging, but they always were, whether looking at a man or a fencepost. "Rochaid and I brought eight Dedicated and forty Soldiers, enough to destroy an army or cow ten kings. We might even make an Aes Sedai blink," he said wryly. "Burn me, the pair of us could do a fair job alone. Or you could. Why do you need anyone else?"

"I expect you to obey, Gedwyn," Rand said coldly. Storm Leader? And Manel Rochaid, Gedwyn's second, called himself Baijan'm'hael, Attack Leader. What was Taim up to, creating new ranks? The important thing was that the man made weapons. The important thing was that the weapons stayed sane long enough to be used. "And I don't expect you to waste time questioning my orders."

"As you command, my Lord Dragon," Gedwyn muttered. "I'll send men out immediately." With a curt salute, fist to chest, he strode out into the storm. The deluge bent away from him, sheeting down the small shield he wove around himself. Rand wondered whether the man suspected how close he had come to dying when he seized *saidin* without warning.

You must kill him before he kills you, Lews Therin giggled. *They will, you know. Dead men can't betray anyone*. The voice in Rand's head turned wondering. *But sometimes they don't die. Am I dead? Are you?*

Rand pushed the words down to a fly's buzzing, just on the edge of notice. Since his reappearance inside Rand's head, Lews Therin seldom went silent unless forced. The man seemed madder than ever most of the time, and usually angrier as well. Stronger sometimes, too. That voice invaded Rand's dreams, and when he saw himself in a dream, it was not always himself at all that he saw. It was not always Lews Therin, either, the face he had come to recognize as Lews Therin's. Sometimes it was blurred, yet vaguely familiar, and Lews Therin seemed startled by it, too. That was an indication how far the man's madness went. Or maybe his own.

Not yet, Rand thought. *I can't afford to go mad yet.*

When, then? Lews Therin whispered before Rand could mute him again.

With the arrival of Gedwyn and the Asha'man, his plan to sweep the Seanchan westward got under way. Got under way, and crept forward as slowly as a man laboring along one of those mired roads. He shifted his own camp at once, making no effort to hide his movements. There was little point to straining for secrecy. Word traveled slowly by pigeon, and far slower by courier, once the cemaros came, yet he had no doubts he was watched, by the White Tower, by the Forsaken, by anyone who saw gain or loss in where the Dragon Reborn went and could afford to slip coin to a soldier. Maybe even by the Seanchan. If he could scout them, why not they him? But not even the Asha'man knew why he was moving.

While Rand was idly watching men fold his tent onto a high-wheeled cart, Weiramon appeared on one of his many horses, a prancing white gelding of the finest Tairen bloodstock. The rain had cleared, though gray clouds still veiled the noonday sun and the air felt as if you could squeeze water out of it with your hands. The Dragon Banner and the Banner of Light hung limp and sodden on their tall staffs.

Tairen Defenders had replaced the Companions, and as Weiramon rode through their mounted ring, he frowned at Rodrivar Tihera, a lean fellow, dark even for a Tairen, with a short beard trimmed to a very sharp point. A very minor noble who had had to rise through his abilities, Tihera was punctilious in the extreme. The fat white plumes bobbing on his rimmed helmet added embellishment to the elaborate bow he gave Weiramon. The High Lord's frown deepened.

There was no need for the Captain of the Stone to be personally in charge of Rand's bodyguard, but he frequently was, just as Marcolin often commanded the Companions himself. An often bitter rivalry had grown up between Defenders and Companions, centering on who should guard Rand. The Tairens claimed the right because he had ruled longer in Tear, the Illianers because he was, after all, King of Illian. Perhaps Weiramon had heard some of the mutters among the Defenders that it was time Tear had a king of its own, and who better than the man who had taken the Stone?

Weiramon more than agreed with the need, but not with the choice of who should wear the crown. He was not the only one.

The man smoothed his features as soon as he saw Rand looking, and swung down from his gold-tooled saddle to offer a bow that made Tihera's seem simple. Iron-spined as he was, he could puff up and strut in his sleep. Though he did grimace slightly at putting his polished boot into the mud. He wore a rain cape, to keep the mist off his fine clothes, but even that was encrusted with gold embroidery and had a collar of sapphires. For all of Rand's coat of deep green silk, with golden bees climbing the sleeves and lapels, anyone might have been forgiven for thinking the Crown of Swords belonged on the other's head, not his.

"My Lord Dragon," Weiramon intoned. "I cannot express how happy I am to see you guarded by Tairens, my Lord Dragon. Surely the world would weep if anything untoward happened." He was too intelligent to come out and call the Companions untrustworthy. By a hair, he was.

"Sooner or later it would," Rand said dryly. After a good part of it finished celebrating. "I know how hard you'd cry, Weiramon."

The fellow actually preened, stroking the point of his gray-streaked beard. He heard what he wanted to hear. "Yes, my Lord Dragon, you can be assured of my constancy. Which is why I'm concerned by the orders your man brought me this morning." That was Adley; many of the nobles thought pretending the Asha'man were merely Rand's servants would somehow make them less dangerous. "Wise of you to send away most of the Cairhienin. And the Illianers, of course; that goes without saying. I can even understand why you limit Gueyam and the others." Weiramon's boots squelched in the mud as he stepped nearer, and his voice took on a confiding tone. "I do believe some of them—I wouldn't say *plotted* against you, but I think perhaps their loyalty has not always been without question. As mine is. Without question." His voice shifted again, to strong and confident, a man concerned only with the needs of the one he served. The one who surely would make *him* the first King of Tear. "Allow me to bring all of my armsmen, my Lord Dragon. With them, and the Defenders, I can assure the honor of the Lord of the Morning, and his safety."

In all of the individual camps across the heath, wagons and carts were being loaded, horses saddled. Most tents were already down. The High Lady Rosana was riding north, her banner heading a column large enough to raise havoc among the bandits and at least give the Shaido pause. But not enough to plant notions in her head, especially not when half were Gueyam's and Maraconn's retainers mixed with Defenders of the Stone. Much the same applied to Spiron Narettin, riding eastward over the tall ridge with as many Companions and men sworn to others of the Council of Nine as his own liegemen, not to mention a hundred more tailing behind on foot, some of the fellows who had surrendered in the woods beyond that ridge the day before. A surprising number had chosen to follow the Dragon Reborn, but Rand did not trust them enough to leave them together. Tolmeran was just starting south with the same kind of blend, and others would be marching off as soon as they had their carts and wagons loaded. Each in a different direction, and none able to trust the men at their backs far enough for them to do more than follow the orders Rand had given. Bringing peace to Illian was an important task, yet every last lord and lady regretted being sent away from the Dragon Reborn, plainly wondering whether it meant they had slipped in his trust. Though a few might have considered why he chose to keep those he did under his eye. Rosana had certainly looked thoughtful.

"Your concern touches me," Rand told Weiramon, "but how many bodyguards does one man need? I'm not off to start a war." A fine point, perhaps, yet this war was well under way. It had begun at Falme, if not before. "Get your people ready."

How many have died for my pride? Lews Therin moaned. *How many have died for my mistakes?*

"May I at least ask *where* we are going?" Weiramon's question, not quite exasperated, came right atop the voice in Rand's head.

"The City," Rand snapped. He did not know how many had died for his mistakes, but none for his pride. He was sure of that.

Weiramon opened his mouth, plainly confused as to whether he meant Tear or Illian, or maybe even Cairhien, but Rand gestured him away with the Dragon Scepter, a sharp stabbing motion that made the green-and-white tassel swing. He half wished he could stab Lews Therin with it. "I don't intend to sit here all day, Weiramon! Go to your men!"

Less than an hour later he took hold of the True Source and prepared to make a gateway for Traveling. He had to fight the dizziness that gripped him lately whenever he seized or loosed the Power; he did not quite sway in Tai'daishar's saddle. What with the molten filth floating on *saidin*, the frozen slime, touching the Source came close to emptying his stomach.

Seeing double, even for only a few moments, made weaving flows difficult if not impossible, and he could have told Dashiva or Flinn or one of the others to do it, but Gedwyn and Rochaid were holding their horses' reins in front of a dozen or so black-coated Soldiers, all who had not been out to search. Just standing there patiently. And watching Rand. Rochaid, no more than a hand shorter than Rand and maybe two years younger, was also full Asha'man, and his coat, too, was silk. A small smile played on his face, as if he knew things others did not and was amused. What did he know? About the Seanchan, surely, if not Rand's plans for them. What else? Maybe nothing, but Rand was not about to show any weakness in front of that pair. The dizziness faded quickly, the twinned sight a little more slowly, as it always did, these last few weeks, and he completed the weave, then, without waiting, dug in his heels and rode through the opening that unfolded before him.

The City he had meant was Illian, though the gateway opened to the north of that city. Despite Weiramon's supposed concerns, he hardly went unprotected and alone. Nearly three thousand men rode through that tall square hole in the air, into rolling meadowland not far from the broad muddy road that led down to the Causeway of the Northern Star. Even when every lord had only been allowed a handful of armsmen—to men accustomed to leading a thousand if not thousands, a hundred or so were a handful—they added up. Tairens and Cairhienin and Illianers, Defenders of the Stone under Tihera and Companions under Marcolin, Asha'man heeling Gedwyn. The Asha'man who had come with him, anyway. Dashiva and Flinn and the rest kept their horses close behind Rand. All but Narishma. Narishma had not come back yet. The man knew where to find him, but Rand did not like it.

Each kind kept to themselves as much as possible. Gueyam and Maraconn and Aracome rode with Weiramon, all eyeing Rand more than where they were going, and Gregorin Panar with three others of the Council of Nine, leaning in their saddles to speak softly and uneasily among themselves. Semaradrid, with a knot of tight-faced Cairhienin lords behind him, watched Rand almost as closely as the Tairens did. Rand had chosen those who came with him as carefully as those he sent away, not always for the reasons others might have used.

Had there been any onlookers, it would have been a brave display, with all their bright banners and pennants, and small *con* rising from some of the Cairhienin's backs. Bright and brave and very dangerous. Some *had* plotted against him, and he had learned that Semaradrid's House Maravin had old alliances with House Riatin, which stood in open rebellion against him in Cairhien. Semaradrid did not deny the connection, but he had not mentioned it before Rand heard, either. The Council of Nine were just too new to him to risk leaving them all behind. And Weiramon was a fool. Left to his own devices, he might well try to gain the Lord Dragon's favor by marching an army against the Seanchan, or Murandy, or the Light alone knew who or where. Too stupid to leave behind, too powerful to shove aside, so he rode with Rand and thought himself honored. It was almost a pity he was not stupid enough to do something that would get him executed.

Behind came the servants and carts—no one understood why Rand had sent all of the wagons with the others, and he was not about to explain; who owned the next pair of ears that would hear?—and then the long strings of spare mounts led by horse handlers, and straggling files of men in battered breastplates that did not quite fit or leather jerkins sewn with rusty steel discs, carrying bows or crossbows or spears, and even a few pikes; more of the fellows who had obeyed "Lord Brend's" summons and decided against going home unarmed. Their leader was the runny-nosed man Rand had spoken to on the edge of the woods, Eagan Padros by name and much brighter than he looked. It was difficult for a commoner to rise very far, most places, but Rand had marked Padros out. The fellow gathered his men off to one side, but the whole lot of them milled about, elbowing one another aside for a better view southward.

The Causeway of the Northern Star stretched arrow-straight through the miles of brown marsh that surrounded Illian, a wide road of hard-packed dirt broken by flat stone bridges. A wind from the south carried sea salt and a hint of tanneries. Illian was a sprawling city, easily as large as Caemlyn or Cairhien. Brightly colored roof tiles and hundreds of thrusting towers, gleaming in the sun, were just visible across that sea of grass where long-legged cranes waded and flocks of white birds flew low uttering shrill cries. Illian had never needed walls. Not that walls would have done the City any good against him.

There was considerable disappointment that he did not mean to enter Illian, though no one spoke a complaint, at least not where he could hear. Still, there were plenty of glum faces and sour mutters as hasty camps began going up. Like most of the great cities, Illian had a name for exotic mystery, free-handed tapsters, and willing women. At least among men who had never been there, even when it was their own capital. Ignorance always inflated a city's reputation for such things. As it was, only Morr galloped off across the causeway. Men straightened from hammering tent pegs or setting picket lines for the horses, and followed him with jealous eyes. Nobles watched curiously, while trying to pretend they were not.

The Asha'man with Gedwyn paid Morr no mind as they made their own camp, which consisted of a pitch-black tent for Gedwyn and Rochaid and a space where damp brown grass and mud were squeezed flat and dry, for the rest to sleep wrapped in their cloaks. That was done with the Power, of course; they did everything with the Power, not even bothering to build cook fires. A few in the other camps stared at them, wide-eyed, as the tent seemed to spring up of its own accord and hampers floated away from packsaddles, but most looked anywhere else at all once they realized what was going on. Two or three of the black-coated Soldiers appeared to be talking to themselves.

Flinn and the others did not join Gedwyn's lot—they had a pair of tents that went up not far from Rand's—but Dashiva wandered over to where the "Storm Leader" and the "Attack Leader" were standing at their ease, and occasionally issuing a sharp order. A few words, and he wandered back shaking his head and muttering angrily under his breath. Gedwyn and Rochaid were not a friendly pair. As well they were not.

Rand took to his tent as soon as it was pitched, and sprawled fully clothed on his cot, staring at the sloped ceiling. There were bees embroidered on the inside as well, on a false roof made of silk. Hopwil brought a steaming pewter mug of mulled wine—Rand had left his servants behind—but the wine grew cold on his writing table. His mind worked feverishly. Two or three more days, and the Seanchan would have been dealt a blow that knocked them on their heels. Then it was back to Cairhien to see how negotiations with the Sea Folk had gone, to learn what Cadsuane was after—he owed her a debt, but she was after something!—maybe to put a final end to what remained of the rebellion there. Had Caraline Damodred and Darlin Sisnera slipped away in the confusion? The High Lord Darlin in his hands might finish the rebellion in Tear, as well. Andor. If Mat and Elayne were in Murandy, the way it appeared, it would be weeks more at best before Elayne could claim the Lion Throne. Once that happened, he would have to stay clear of Caemlyn. But he had to talk to Nynaeve. *Could* he cleanse *saidin?* It might work. It might destroy the world, too. Lews Therin gibbered at him in stark terror. Light, where *was* Narishma?

A cemaros storm swept in, all the fiercer this near the sea. Rain beat his tent like a drum. Lightning flashes filled the entrance with blue-white light, and thunder rumbled, the sound like mountains tumbling across the land.

Out of that, Narishma stepped into the tent, dripping wet, dark hair plastered to his head. His orders had been to avoid notice at all cost. No flaunting for him. His sodden coat was plain brown, and his dark hair was tied back, not braided. Even without bells, near waist-length hair on a man attracted eyes. He wore a scowl, too, and under his arm he carried a cylindrical bundle tied with cord, fatter than a man's leg, like a small carpet.

Springing from the cot, Rand snatched the bundle before Narishma could proffer it. "Did anyone see you?" he demanded. "What took you so long? I expected you last night!"

"It took a while to figure out what I had to do," Narishma replied in a flat voice. "You didn't tell me everything. You nearly killed me."

That was ridiculous. Rand *had* told him everything he needed to know. He was sure of it. There was no point to trusting the man as far as he had, only to have him die and ruin everything. Carefully he tucked the bundle beneath his cot. His hands trembled with the urge to strip the wrappings away, to make sure they held what Narishma had been sent for. The man would not have dared return if they did not. "Get yourself into a proper coat before you join the others," he said. "And Narishma. . . . Rand straightened, fixing the other man with a steady gaze. "You tell anyone about this, and I *will* kill you."

Kill the whole world, Lews Therin laughed, a moan of derision. Of despair. I *killed the world, and you can, too, if you try hard*.

Narishma struck himself hard on the chest with his fist. "As you command, my Lord Dragon," he said sourly.

Bright and early the next morning, a thousand men of the Legion of the Dragon marched out of Illian, across the Causeway of the Northern Star, stepping to the steady beat of drums. Well, it was early, anyway. Thick gray clouds roiled across the sky, and a stiff sea breeze sharp with salt whipped cloaks and banners, muttering of another storm on the way. The Legion attracted a good bit of attention from the armsmen already in the camp, with their blue-painted Andoran helmets and their long blue coats worked on the chest with a red-and-gold Dragon. A blue pennant bearing the Dragon and a number marked each of the five companies. The Legionmen were different in many ways. For instance, they wore breastplates, but beneath their coats, so as not to hide the Dragons—the same reason the coats buttoned up one side—and every man carried a short-sword at his hip and a steel-armed crossbow, every one shouldered exactly the same as every other. The officers walked, each with a tall red plume on his helmet, just ahead of drum and pennant. The only horses were Morr's mouse-colored gelding, at their head, and pack animals at the rear.

"Foot," Weiramon muttered, slapping his reins on a gauntleted hand. "Burn my soul, they're no good, foot. They'll scatter at the first charge. Before." The first of the column strode off the causeway. They had helped take Illian, and they had not scattered.

Semaradrid shook his head. "No pikes," he muttered. "I have seen well-led foot hold, with pikes, but without. . . ." He made a sound of disgust in his throat.

Gregorin Panar, the third man sitting his saddle near Rand to watch the new arrivals, said nothing. Perhaps he had no prejudice against infantry—though if he did not, he would be one of only a handful of noblemen Rand had met without it—but he tried hard not to frown and almost succeeded. Everyone knew by now that the men with the Dragon on their chests bore arms because they had chosen to follow Rand, chosen to follow the Dragon Reborn, for no other reason than that they wanted to. The Illianer had to be wondering where they were going that Rand wanted the Legion and the Council of Nine was not trusted to know. For that matter, Semaradrid eyed Rand sideways. Only Weiramon was too stupid to think.

Rand turned Tai'daishar away. Narishma's package had been rewrapped, into a thinner bundle, and tied beneath his left stirrup leather. "Strike the camp; we're moving," he told the three nobles.

This time, he let Dashiva weave the gateway to take them all away. The plain-faced fellow frowned at him and mumbled to himself—Dashiva actually seemed affronted, for some reason!—and Gedwyn and Rochaid, their horses shoulder-by-shoulder, watched with sardonic smiles as the silvery slash of light rotated into a hole in nothing. Watched Rand more than Dashiva. Well, let them watch. How often could he seize *saidin* and risk falling dizzily on his face before he really did fall? It could not be where they could see.

This time, the gateway took them to a wide road carved through the low, brushy foothills of mountains to the west. The Nemarellin Mountains. Not the equals of the Mountain of Mist, and not a patch on the Spine of the World, but they rose dark and severe against the sky, sharp peaks that walled the west coast of Illian. Beyond them lay Kabal Deep, and beyond that. . . .

Men began to recognize the peaks soon enough. Gregorin Panar took one look around and nodded in sudden satisfaction. The other three Councilors and Marcolin reined close to him to talk while horsemen were still pouring through the gateway. Semaradrid required only a bit longer to puzzle it out, and Tihera, and they also looked as if they understood now.

The Silver Road ran from the City to Lugard, and carried all of the inland trade for the west. There was a Gold Road, too, that led to Far Madding. Roads and names alike dated from before there had been an Illian. Centuries of wagon wheels, hooves and boots had beaten them hard, and the cemaros could only skim them with mud. They were among the few reliable highways in Illian for moving large groups of men in winter. Everyone knew about the Seanchan in Ebou Dar by this time, though a good many of the tales Rand had heard among the armsmen made the invaders seem Trollocs' meaner cousins. If the Seanchan intended to strike into Illian, the Silver Road was a good place to gather for defense.

Semaradrid and the others thought they knew what he planned: he must have learned that the Seanchan were coming, and the Asha'man were there to destroy them when they did. Given the stories about the Seanchan, no one seemed too upset that that left little for them to do. Of course, Weiramon had to have it explained to him finally, by Tihera, and he *was* upset, though he tried to mask it behind a grand speech about the wisdom of the Lord Dragon and the military genius of the Lord of the Morning, along with how he, personally, would lead the first charge against these Seanchan. A pure bull-goose fool. With luck, anyone else who learned of a gathering on the Silver Road would at least not be too much brighter than Semaradrid or Gregorin. With luck, no one who mattered would learn before it was too late.

Settling in to wait, Rand thought it would only be another day or so, but as the days stretched out, he began to wonder whether he might be nearly as big a fool as Weiramon.

Most of the Asha'man were out searching across Illian and Tear and the Plains of Maredo for the rest of those Rand wanted. Searching through the cemaros. Gateways and Traveling were all very well, but even Asha'man took time to find who they sought when downpours hid anything fifty paces away and quagmires dragged rumor to a near halt. Searching Asha'man passed within a mile of their quarry in ignorance, and turned only to learn the men had moved on again. Some had farther to go, seeking people not necessarily eager to be found. Days passed before the first brought news.

The High Lord Sunamon joined Weiramon, a fat man with an unctuous manner—toward Rand, at least. Smooth in his fine silk coat, always smiling, he was voluble in his declarations of loyalty, but he had plotted against Rand so long that he probably did so in his sleep. The High Lord Torean came, with his lumpy farmer's face and his vast wealth, stammering about the honor of riding once more at the Lord Dragon's side. Gold concerned Torean more than anything else, except possibly the privileges Rand had taken away from the nobles in Tear. He seemed particularly dismayed to learn there were no serving girls in the camp, and not so much as a village nearby where compliant farmgirls might be found. Torean had schemed against Rand every bit as often as Sunamon. Maybe even more than Gueyam, or Maraconn, or Aracome.

There were others. There was Bertome Saighan, a short, ruggedly handsome man with the front of his head shaved. He supposedly did not mourn the death of his cousin Colavaere too greatly, both because that made him the new High Seat of House Saighan and because rumor said Rand had executed her. Or murdered her. Bertome bowed and smiled, and his smile never reached his dark eyes. Some said he had been very fond of his cousin. Ailil Riatin came, a slim dignified woman with big dark eyes, not young but quite pretty, protesting that she had a Lance-captain to lead her armsmen and no desire to take the field in person. Protesting her loyalty for the Lord Dragon, too. But her brother Toram claimed the throne Rand meant for Elayne, and it was whispered that she would do anything for Toram, anything at all. Even join with his enemies; to hamper or to spy or both, of course. Dalthanes Annallin came, and Amondrid Osiellin, and Doressin Chuliandred, lords who had supported Colavaere's seizure of the Sun Throne when they thought Rand would never return to Cairhien.

Cairhienin and Tairen, they were brought in one by one, with fifty retainers, or at most a hundred. Men and women he trusted even less than he did Gregorin or Semaradrid. Most were men, not because he thought the women any less dangerous—he was not *that* big a fool; a woman would kill you twice as fast as a man, and usually for half the reason!—but because he could not bring himself to take any woman except the most dangerous, where he was going. Ailil could smile warmly while she calculated where to plant the knife in your ribs. Anaiyella, a willowy simpering High Lady who gave a fair imitation of a beautiful goosebrain, had returned to Tear from Cairhien and openly begun talking of herself for the as-yet-nonexistent throne of Tear. Perhaps she *was* a fool, but she had managed to gain a great deal of support, both among nobles and in the streets.

So he gathered them in, all the folk who had been too long out from under his eye. He could not watch all of them all the time, but he could not afford to let them forget that he *did* watch sometimes. He gathered them, and he waited. For two days. Gnashing his teeth, he waited. Five days. Eight.

Rain was beating a diminishing drum on his tent when the last man he was waiting for finally arrived.

Shaking a small torrent from his oiled-cloth cape, Davram Bashere blew out his thick, gray-streaked mustaches in disgust and tossed the cape over a barrel chair. A short man with a great hooked beak of a nose, he seemed larger than he was. Not because he strutted, but because he assumed that he was as tall as any man present, and other men took him so. Wise men did. The wolf-headed ivory baton of the Marshal-General of Saldaea, tucked carelessly behind his sword belt, had been earned on scores of battlefields and at as many council tables. He was one of the very few men Rand would trust with his life.

“I know you don’t like explaining,” Bashere muttered, “but I could use a little illumination.” Adjusting his serpentine sword, he sprawled in another chair and flung a leg over the arm of it. He always seemed at his ease, but he could uncoil faster than a whip. “That Asha’man fellow wouldn’t say more than you needed me yesterday, yet he said not to bring more than a thousand men. I only had half that with me, but I brought them. It can’t be a battle. Half the sigils I saw out there belong to men who’d bite their tongues if they saw a fellow behind you with a knife, and most of the rest to men who'd try to hold your attention. If they hadn't paid the knife man in the first place."

Seated behind his writing table in his shirtsleeves, Rand wearily pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. With Boreane Carivin left behind, the lamp wicks needed proper trimming, and a faint haze of smoke hung in the air. Besides, he had been awake most of the night poring over the maps scattered across the table. Maps of southern Altara. No two agreed on very much.

"If you're going to fight a battle," he told Bashere, "who better to pay the butcher's bill than men who want you dead? Anyway, it isn't soldiers who'll win this battle. All they have to do is keep anybody from sneaking up on the Asha'man. What do you think of that?"

Bashere snorted so hard that his heavy mustaches stirred. "I think it's a deadly stew, is what I think. Somebody's going to choke to death on it. The Light send it isn't us." And then he laughed as if that were a fine joke.

Lews Therin laughed, too.

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CHAPTER 22

Gathering Clouds

Under a steady drizzle Rand's small army formed columns across the low folded hills facing the Nemarellin peaks, dark and sharp against the western sky. There was no real need to face the direction you intended to Travel, but it always felt askew to Rand otherwise. Despite the rain, rapidly thinning gray clouds let through startlingly bright sunshine. Or maybe the day only seemed bright, after all the recent gloom.

Four of the columns were headed by Bashere's Saldaeans, bandy-legged unarmored men in short coats standing patiently beside their mounts beneath a small forest of shining lance heads, the other five by blue-coated men with the Dragon on their chests, commanded by a short stocky fellow named Jak Masond. When Masond moved, it was always with surprising quickness, but he was utterly still now, feet planted astride and hands folded behind his back. His men were in place, and so were the Defenders and Companions, grumpy about being behind infantry. It was the nobles and their folk, mainly, who milled about as if unsure where to go. Thick mud sucked at hooves and boots, and mired cart wheels; shouted curses rose. It took time to line up nearly six thousand soaked men, getting wetter by the minute. And that was not counting the supply carts, and the remounts.

Rand had donned his finest, so he would stand out at a glance. A lick with the Power had polished the Dragon Scepter's spearhead to mirror brightness, and another had burnished the Crown of Swords so the gold gleamed. The gilded Dragon buckle of his sword belt caught the light, and so did the thread-of-gold embroidery that covered his blue silk coat. For a moment, he regretted giving away the gems that once had decked his sword's hilt and scabbard. The dark boarhide was serviceable, but any armsman could have worn that. Let men know who he was. Let the Seanchan know who had come to destroy them.

Sitting Tai'daishar on a broad flat, he impatiently watched the nobles roil about on the hills. A little way off on the flat, Gedwyn and Rochaid sat their saddles in front of their men, all formed into a precise box, Dedicated in the front rank, Soldiers lined up behind. They looked ready to parade. As many had gray hair or nearly none as were young—several were as young as Hopwil or Morr—but every one was strong enough to make a gateway. That had been a requirement. Flinn and Dashiva waited behind Rand in a casual cluster with Adley and Morr, Hopwil and Narishma. And a rigid pair of mounted bannermen, one Tairen and one Cairhienin, their breastplates and helmets and even their steel-backed gauntlets buffed and polished till they shone. The crimson Banner of Light and the long white Dragon Banner hung limp and dripping. Rand had assumed the Power in his tent, where his momentary stagger would not be seen, and the sparse rain failed by an inch to touch him or his horse.

The taint on *saidin* felt especially heavy today, a thick foul oil that oozed into his pores and stained his bones deep. Stained his soul. He had thought himself accustomed to the vileness, after a fashion, yet today it was nauseating, stronger than the frozen fire and molten cold of *saidin* itself. He held on to the Source as often as possible now, accepting the vileness to avoid the new sickness of seizing it. It could be deadly, if he let sickness distract him from *that* struggle. Maybe it was connected to the dizzy spells, somehow. Light, he could not go mad yet, and he could not die. Not yet. There was too much still to be done.

He pressed his left leg against Tai'daishar's flank just to feel the long bundle strapped between stirrup leather and scarlet saddle cloth. Every time he did that, something wriggled across the outside of the Void. Anticipation, and maybe a touch of fear. Well trained, the gelding started to turn left, and Rand had to rein him back. When *would* the nobles sort themselves out? He ground his teeth in impatience.

He could remember as a boy hearing men laugh that when rain fell in sunshine the Dark One was beating Semirhage. Some of that laughter had been uneasy, though, and scrawny old Cenn Buie would always snarl that Semirhage would be smarting and angry after that, and come for small boys who did not keep out of their elders’ way. That had been enough to send Rand running, when he was little. He wished Semirhage *would* come for him now, right that instant. He would make her weep.

Nothing makes Semirhage weep, Lews Therin muttered. *She gives tears to others, but she has none herself.*

Rand laughed softly. If she came today, he *would* make her weep. Her and the rest of the Forsaken together, if they came today. Most assuredly he would make the Seanchan weep.

Not everyone was pleased with the orders he had given. Sunamon’s oily smile vanished when he thought Rand did not see. Torean had a flask in his saddlebags, no doubt brandy, or maybe several flasks, because he drank steadily and never appeared to run dry. Semaradrid and Marcolin and Tihera each appeared in front of Rand to protest the numbers with somber faces. A few years before, close on six thousand men would have been army enough for any war, but they had seen armies in the tens of thousands, now, hundreds of thousands, as in Artur Hawkwing’s day, and to go against the Seanchan, they wanted far more. He sent them away disgruntled. They did not understand that fifty-odd Asha’man were as big a hammer as anyone could wish for. Rand wondered what they would have said had he told them *he* was hammer enough by himself. He had considered doing this by himself. It might come to that yet.

Weiramon came; he did not like having to take orders from Bashere, or the fact that they were going into mountains—very hard to mount a decent charge in mountains—or several other things—Rand was certain there were at least several more—that Rand did not let him utter.

“The Saldaean seems to believe I should ride on the right flank,” Weiramon muttered disparagingly. He twisted his shoulders as though the right flank were a great insult, for some reason. “And the foot, my Lord Dragon. Really, I think—”

“*I* think you should get your men ready,” Rand said coldly. Part of the chill was the effect of floating in emotionless emptiness. “Or you won’t be on *any* flank.” He meant that he would leave the man behind if he was not ready in time. Surely such a fool could not make much trouble left in this remote spot with only a few armsmen. Rand would be back before he could ride to anything larger than a village.

Blood drained from Weiramon’s face, though. “As my Lord Dragon commands,” he said, briskly for him, and was whirling his horse away before the words were well out of his mouth. His mount was a tall deep-chested bay, today.

The pale Lady Ailil reined to a stop in front of Rand, accompanied by the High Lady Anaiyella, a strange pair to be in company, and not just because their nations hated one another. Ailil was tall for a Cairhienin woman, if only for a Cairhienin, and everything about her was dignity and precision, from the arch of her eyebrow to the turn of her red-gloved wrist to the way her pearl-collared rain cape lay spread across the rump of her smoke-gray mare. Unlike Semaradrid or Marcolin, Weiramon or Tihera, she did not so much as blink at the sight of raindrops sliding down nothing around him. Anaiyella did blink. And gasp. And titter behind her hand. Anaiyella was willowy and darkly beautiful, her rain cape collared with rubies and embroidered with gold besides, but there any resemblance to Ailil ended. Anaiyella was all mincing elegance and simpers. When she bowed, her white gelding did, too, bending its forelegs. The prancing animal was showy, but Rand suspected it had no bottom. Like its mistress.

“My Lord Dragon,” Ailil said, “I must make one more protest against my inclusion in this . . . expedition.” Her voice was coolly neutral, if not exactly unfriendly. “I will send my retainers where you command and when, but I have no desire at all to be in the thick of a battle.”

“Oh, no,” Anaiyella added, with a delicate shudder. Even her tone simpered! “Nasty things, battles. So my Master of the Horse says. Surely you won’t really make us go, my Lord Dragon? We’ve heard you have a particular care for women. Haven’t we, Ailil?”

Rand was so astonished that the Void collapsed, and *saidin* vanished. Raindrops began to trickle through his hair and seep through his coat, but for a moment, clutching his saddle’s high pommel to hold himself upright, seeing four women instead of two, he was too stunned to notice. How much did they know? They had *heard?* How many people knew? How did anyone know? Light, rumor had him killing Morgase, Elayne, Colavaere, a hundred women probably, and each in a worse way than the last! He swallowed against the urge to sick up. That was only partly *saidin’s* fault. *Burn me, how many spies* are *there watching me?* The thought was a growl.

The dead watch, Lews Therin whispered. *The dead never close their eyes*. Rand shivered.

“I do try to be careful of women,” he told them when he could speak. Faster than a man, and for half the reason. “That’s why I want to keep you close the next few days. But if you really dislike the idea so much, I could tell off one of the Asha’man. You’d be safe at the Black Tower.” Anaiyella squeaked prettily, but her face went gray.

“Thank you, no,” Ailil said after a moment, absolutely calm. “I suppose I had best confer with my lance-captain about what to expect.” But she paused in turning her mare away, and regarded Rand with a sidelong look. “My brother Toram is . . . impetuous, my Lord Dragon. Even rash. I am not.”

Anaiyella smiled much too sweetly at Rand, and actually wriggled slightly before following, but once she faced away from him, she dug in her heels and worked her jewel-handled quirt, quickly passing the other woman. That white gelding showed a surprising turn of speed.

At last all was ready, the columns formed, snaking back over the low hills.

“Begin,” Rand told Gedwyn, who wheeled his horse and began barking orders to his men. The eight Dedicated rode forward and dismounted on the ground they had memorized, facing the mountains. One of them looked familiar, a grizzled fellow whose pointed Tairen beard appeared odd on his wrinkled countryman’s face. Eight vertical lines of sharp blue light turned and became openings that showed slightly different views of a long, sparsely wooded mountain valley rising to a steep pass. In Altara. In the Venir Mountains.

Kill them, Lews Therin wept pleadingly. *They’re too dangerous to live!* Without thought, Rand suppressed the voice. Another man channeling often brought that reaction from Lews Therin, or even a man who could. He no longer wondered why.

Rand muttered a command, and Flinn blinked in surprise before hurrying to join the line and weave a ninth gateway. None was as large as Rand could make, but any would pass a cart, if closely. He had intended to do that himself, but he did not want to chance seizing *saidin* again in front of everyone. He noticed Gedwyn and Rochaid watching him, wearing identical knowing smiles. And Dashiva as well, frowning, lips moving as he talked to himself. Was it his imagination, or was Narishma eyeing him askance too? And Adley? Morr?

Rand shivered before he could stop himself. Mistrust of Gedwyn and Rochaid was simple sense, but was he coming down with what Nynaeve had called the dreads? A kind of madness, a crippling dark suspicion of everyone and everything? There had been a Coplin, Benly, who thought everybody was scheming against him. He had starved to death when Rand was a boy, refusing to eat for fear of poison.

Ducking low on Tai’daishar’s neck, Rand heeled the gelding through the largest gateway. Flinn’s, as it happened, but he would have ridden through one made by Gedwyn right then. He was the first onto Altaran soil.

The others followed quickly, the Asha’man first of all. Dashiva stared in Rand’s direction, frowning, and Narishma, too, but Gedwyn immediately began directing his Soldiers. One by one, they rushed forward, opened a gateway and darted through, dragging their mounts behind them. Ahead up the valley, bright flashes of light told of gateways opening and closing. The Asha’man could Travel short distances without first memorizing the ground they left from, and cover ground far faster than riding. In short order, only Gedwyn and Rochaid remained, aside from the Dedicated holding the gateways. The others would be fanning out westward, searching for Seanchan. The Saldaeans were through from Illian, and mounting. Legionmen spread into the trees at a trot, crossbows held ready. In this country, they could move as fast afoot as men on horseback.

As the rest of the army began emerging, Rand rode up the valley in the direction the Asha’man had gone. Mountains rose high behind him, a wall fronting the Deep, but west the peaks ran almost to Ebou Dar. He quickened the gelding’s pace to a canter.

Bashere caught him before he reached the pass. The man’s bay was small—most of the Saldaeans rode small horses—but quick. “No Seanchan here, it seems,” he said almost idly, stroking his mustaches with a knuckle. “But there could have been. Tenobia’s likely to have my head on a pike soon enough for following a live Dragon Reborn, much more a dead one.”

Rand scowled. Maybe he could take Flinn, to watch his back, and Narishma, and. . . . Flinn had saved his life; the man had to be true. Men could change, though. And Narishma? Even after . . . ? He felt cold at the risk he had taken. Not the dreads. Narishma *had* proved true, but it still had been a mad risk. As mad as running from stares he was not even sure were real, running to where he had no notion what was waiting. Bashere was right, but Rand did not want to talk about it further.

The slopes leading up into the pass were bare stone and boulders of all sizes, but among the natural stone lay weathered pieces of what must have once been a huge statue. Some were just recognizable as worked stone, others more so. A beringed hand nearly big as his chest, gripping a sword hilt with a broken stub of blade wider than his hand. A great head, a woman with cracks across her face and a crown that seemed to be made of up-thrusting daggers, some still whole.

"Who do you think she was?" he asked. A queen, of course. Even if merchants or scholars had worn crowns in some distant time, only rulers and generals earned statues.

Bashere twisted in his saddle to study the head before speaking. "A Queen of Shiota, I'll wager," he said finally. "Not older. I saw a statue made in Eharon once, and it was so worn you couldn't say whether it was man or woman. A conqueror, or they wouldn't have shown her with a sword. And I seem to recall Shiota gave a crown like that to rulers who expanded the borders. Maybe they called it the Crown of Swords, eh? A Brown sister might be able to tell you more."

"It isn't important," Rand told him irritably. They did look like swords.

Bashere went on anyway, graying eyebrows lowered, gravely serious. "I expect thousands cheered her, called her the hope of Shiota, maybe even believed she was. In her time, she might have been as feared and respected as Artur Hawkwing was later, but now even the Brown sisters may not know her name. When you die, people begin to forget, who you were and what you did, or tried to do. Everybody dies eventually, and everybody is forgotten, eventually, but there's no bloody point dying before your time comes."

"I don't intend to," Rand said sharply. He knew where he was meant to die, if not when. He thought he did.

The corner of his eye caught motion, back down where bare stone gave way to brush and a few small trees. Fifty paces away, a man stepped into the open and raised a bow, smoothly drawing fletchings to cheek. Everything seemed to happen at once.

Snarling, Rand hauled Tai'daishar around, watching the archer adjust to follow. He seized *saidin* and sweet life and filth poured into him together. His head spun. There were two archers. Bile rose in his throat as he fought wild, uncontrolled surges of the Power that tried to sear him to the bone and freeze his flesh solid. He *could* not control them; it was all he could do to stay alive. Desperately, he fought to clear his sight, to be able to see well enough to weave the flows he could barely form, with nausea flooding him as strongly as the Power. He thought he heard Bashere shout. Two archers loosed.

Rand should have died. At that range, a boy could have hit his target. Maybe being *ta'veren* saved him. As the archer let fly, a covey of gray-winged quail burst up almost at his feet uttering piercing whistles. Not enough to throw off an experienced man, and indeed, the fellow only flinched a hair. Rand felt the wind of the arrow's passage against his cheek.

Fireballs the size of fists suddenly struck the archer. He screamed as his arm spun away, hand still gripping the bow. Another took his left leg at the knee, and he fell shrieking.

Leaning out of his saddle, Rand vomited onto the ground. His stomach tried to heave up every meal he had ever eaten. The Void and *saidin* left with a sickening wrench. It was nearly more than he could manage not to fall.

When he could sit upright again, he took the white linen handkerchief Bashere silently offered, and wiped his mouth. The Saldaean frowned with concern, as well he might. Rand's stomach wanted to find more to spew out. He thought his face must be pale. He drew a deep breath. Losing *saidin* that way could kill you. But he could still sense the Source; at least *saidin* had not burned him out. At least he could see properly; there was only one Davram Bashere. But the illness seemed a little worse each time he seized *saidin*.

"Let's see if there's enough left of this fellow to talk," he told Bashere. There was not.

Rochaid was on his knees, calmly searching through the corpse's torn, bloodstained coat. Besides his missing arm and leg, the dead man had a blackened hole as big as his head all the way through his chest. It was Eagan Padros; his sightless eyes stared at the sky in surprise. Gedwyn ignored the body at his feet, studying Rand instead, as cold as Rochaid. Both men held *saidin*. Surprisingly, Lews Therin only moaned.

In a clatter of hooves on stone, Flinn and Narishma came galloping up the rise, followed by nearly a hundred Saldaeans. As they came close, Rand could feel the Power in the grizzled old man and the younger, maybe as much as they could hold. They had both leaped up in strength since Dumai's Wells. That was the way of it with men; women seemed to gain smoothly, but men suddenly jumped. Flinn was stronger than Gedwyn or Rochaid either one, and Narishma not far behind. For the time being; there was no way to know how it would end. None came close to matching Rand, though. Not yet, anyway. There was no way to tell what time would bring. Not the dreads.

“It seems it’s well we decided to follow you, my Lord Dragon.” Gedwyn’s voice assumed concern, just shy of mocking. “Are you suffering from a tender stomach this morning?”

Rand just shook his head. He could not take his eyes from Padros’ face. Why? Because he had conquered Illian? Because the man had been loyal to “Lord Brend”?

With a loud exclamation, Rochaid ripped a wash-leather pouch from Padros’ coat pocket and upended it. Bright golden coins spilled onto the stony ground, bouncing and clinking. “Thirty crowns,” he growled. “Tar Valon crowns. No doubt who paid him.” He snatched a coin and tossed it up for Rand, but Rand made no effort to catch it, and it glanced off his arm.

“There’s plenty of Tar Valon coin to be found,” Bashere said calmly. “Half the men in this valley have a few in their pockets. I do, myself” Gedwyn and Rochaid swiveled to look at him. Bashere smiled behind his thick mustaches, or at least showed teeth, but some of the Saldaeans shifted uneasily in their saddles and fingered belt pouches.

Up where the pass leveled off for a bit between steep mountain slopes, a slash of light rotated into a gateway, and a top-knotted Shienaran in a plain black coat trotted through, pulling his horse behind him. It appeared the first Seanchan had been found, and not too far away if the man was back so quickly.

“Time to move,” Rand told Bashere. The man nodded, but he did not stir. Instead, he studied the two Asha’man standing near Padros. They ignored him.

“What do we do with him?” Gedwyn demanded, gesturing to the corpse. “We ought to send him back to the witches, at least.”

“Leave him,” Rand replied.

Are you ready to kill now? Lews Therin asked. He did not sound insane at all.

Not yet, Rand thought. *Soon*.

Digging his heels into Tai’daishar’s flanks, he galloped back down toward his army. Dashiva and Flinn followed closely, and Bashere and the hundred Saldaeans. They were all looking around as if they expected another attempt on his life. To the east, black clouds were building among the peaks, another cemaros storm. Soon.

The hilltop camp was well laid out, with a meandering stream close by for water and good lines of sight to the likeliest ways into the long mountain meadow. Assid Bakuun did not feel pride in the camp. During thirty years in the Ever Victorious Army, he had made hundreds of camps; he would as soon have felt pride in walking across a room without falling down. Nor did he feel pride in where he was. Thirty years serving the Empress, might she live forever, and while there had been the occasional rebellion by some mad upstart with eyes on the Crystal Throne, the bulk of those years had been spent preparing for this. For two generations, while the great ships were built to carry the Return, the Ever Victorious Army had trained and prepared. Bakuun certainly had been proud when he learned he was to be one of the Forerunners. Surely he could be forgiven dreams of retaking the lands stolen from Artur Hawkwing's rightful heirs, even wild dreams to completing this new Consolidation before the Corenne came. Not such a wild dream after all, as it turned out, but not at all the way he had imagined.

A returning patrol of fifty Taraboner lancers rode up the hillside, red and green stripes painted across their solid breastplates, veils of mail hiding their thick mustaches. They rode well, and even fought well, when they had decent leaders. More than ten times as many were already among the cook fires, or down at the picket lines tending their mounts, and three patrols were still out. Bakuun had never expected to find himself with well over half his command descendants of thieves. And unashamed of it; they would look you straight in the eyes. The patrol's commander bowed low to him as their muddy-legged horses passed, but many of the others went on talking in their peculiar accents, speaking too fast for Bakuun to understand without listening hard. They had peculiar notions of discipline, too.

Shaking his head, Bakuun strode across to the *sul'dam's* large tent. Larger than his, of necessity. Four of them were sitting on stools outside in their dark blue dresses with the forked lightning on the skirts, enjoying the sun during this break in the storms. Those were rare enough, now. The gray-clad *damane* sat at their feet, with Nerith braiding her pale hair. Talking to her, as well, all of them joining in and laughing softly. The bracelet on the end of the silvery *a'dam's* leash lay on the ground. Bakuun grunted sourly.

He had a favorite wolfhound, back home, and even talked to him sometimes, but he never expected Nip to carry on a conversation!

“Is she well?” he asked Nerith, not for the first time. Or the tenth. “Is everything well with her?” The *damane* dropped her eyes and went silent.

“She is quite well, Captain Bakuun.” A square-faced woman, Nerith put the proper degree of respect into her voice and not a whisker beyond. But she stroked the *damane’s* head soothingly while she talked. “Whatever the indisposition, it is gone, now. A small thing, in any case. Nothing to worry about.” The *damane* was trembling.

Bakuun grunted again. Not far from the answer he had received before. Something had been wrong, though, back in Ebou Dar, and not just with this *damane*. The *sul’dam* had all been as tight-lipped as clams—and the Blood would not say anything, of course, not to the likes of him!—but he had heard too many whispers. They said the *damane* were all sick, or insane. Light, he had not seen a single one used around Ebou Dar once the city was secured, not even for a victory display of Sky Lights, and who had ever heard the like of that!

“Well, I hope she . . . ” he began, and cut off as a *raken* appeared, sweeping through the eastern pass. Its great leathery wings beat powerfully for height, and right above the hill it suddenly tilted and cut a tight circle, one wingtip pointed almost straight down. A thin red streamer fell away under the weight of a lead ball.

Bakuun swallowed a curse. Fliers were always showing off, but if this pair injured one of his men delivering their scouting report, he would have their hides no matter who he had to face to get them. He would not have wanted to fight without fliers to scout, but they *were* coddled like some Blood’s favorite pet.

Arrow-straight the streamer plummeted. The lead weight struck the ground and bounced on the crest, almost beside the tall thin message pole, which was too long to lower unless there was a message to send. Besides, when it was left down somebody was always stepping a horse on the thing and breaking the joins.

Bakuun strode straight to his tent, but his First Lieutenant was already waiting with the mud-stained streamer and the message tube. Tiras was a bony man a head taller than him, with an unfortunate scrap of beard clinging to the point of his chin.

The report rolled up in the thin metal tube, on a slip of paper Bakuun could almost see through, was written simply. He had never been forced to ride on *raken* or *to'raken—the* Light be thanked, and the Empress, might she live forever, be praised!—but he doubted it was easy to handle a pen in a saddle strapped to the back of a flying lizard. What it said made him flip open the lid of his small camp desk and write hurriedly.

"There's a force not ten miles east of here," he told Tiras. "Five or six times our number." Fliers exaggerated sometimes, but not often by much. How had that many penetrated these mountains so far without being spotted before? He had seen the coast to the east, and he wanted his burial prayers paid for before he tried a landing there. Burn his eyes, the fliers boasted they would see a flea move anywhere in the range. "No reason to think they know we're here, but I'd not mind a few reinforcements."

Tiras laughed. "We'll give them a brush of the *damane*, and that will be that if they outnumber us by twenty times." His only real fault was a touch of overconfidence. A good soldier, though.

"And if they have a few . . . Aes Sedai?" Bakuun said quietly, hardly stumbling over the name, as he stuffed the flier's report back into the tube with his own brief message. He had not really believed *anyone* could let those . . . women run free.

Tiras' face showed that he remembered the tales about an Aes Sedai weapon. The red streamer floated behind him as he ran with the message tube.

Soon enough tube and streamer were attached to the tip of the message pole, a tiny breeze stirring the long red strip fifteen paces above the hill crest. The *raken* soared toward it along the valley, outstretched wings still as death. Abruptly one of the fliers swung down from the saddle and hung —upside down!—below the *raken's* trailing claws. It made Bakuun's stomach hurt to watch. But her hand closed on the streamer, the pole flexed, then vibrated back upright as the message tube pulled free of the clip, and she scrambled back up as the creature climbed in slow circles.

Bakuun thankfully put *raken* and fliers out of his mind as he surveyed the valley. Broad and long, nearly flat except for this hill, and surrounded by steep wooded slopes; only a goat could enter, except by the passes in his sight. With the *damane*, he could cut anybody to pieces before they managed to try attacking across that muddy meadow. He had passed word along, though; if the enemy came straight on, they would arrive before any possible reinforcements by three days at best. How *had* they come this far unseen?

He had missed the last battles of the Consolidation by two hundred years, but some of those rebellions had not been small. Two years fighting on Marendalar, thirty thousand dead, and fifty times that shipped back to the mainland as property. Taking notice of the strange kept a soldier alive. Ordering the camp struck and all signs of it cleared, he began moving his command to the forested slopes. Dark clouds were massing in the east, another of those cursed storms coming.

* * *

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CHAPTER

23

Fog of War, Storm of Battle

No rain fell, for the moment. Rand guided Tai'daishar around an uprooted tree lying across the slope and frowned down at a dead man sprawled on his back behind the tree trunk. The fellow was short and blocky, his face creased, and his armor all overlapping plates lacquered blue and green, but staring sightlessly at the black clouds overhead, he looked a deal like Eagan Padros, even to the missing leg. An officer, plainly; the sword beside his outflung hand had an ivory hilt carved in the likeness of a woman, and his lacquered helmet, shaped like some huge insect's head, bore two long thin blue plumes.

Uprooted trees and shattered ones, a fair number burning from end to end, littered the slope of the mountain for a good five hundred paces. Bodies, too, men broken or ripped apart when *saidin* harrowed the mountainside. Most wore steel veils across their faces, and breastplates painted in horizontal stripes. No women, thank the Light. The injured horses had been put down, another thing to be thankful for. It was incredible how loudly a horse could scream.

Do you think the dead are silent? Lews Therin's laugh was rasping. *Do you?* His voice turned to pained rage. *The dead* howl *at me!*

At me, too, Rand thought sadly. *I can't afford to listen, but how do you shut them up?* Lews Therin began weeping for his lost Ilyena.

“A great victory,” Weiramon intoned behind Rand, then muttered, “But small honor in it. The old ways are best.” Mud liberally decorated Rand’s coat, yet surprisingly, Weiramon appeared as pristine as he had back on the Silver Road. His helmet and armor shone. How had he managed? The Taraboners charged, at the end, lances and courage against the One Power, and Weiramon had led his own charge to break them. Without orders, and followed by every Tairen save the Defenders, even a half-drunk Torean, surprisingly. By Semaradrid and Gregorin Panar, too, with most of the Cairhienin and Illianers. Standing still had been hard by that time, and every man wanted to come to grips with something he actually could come to grips with. The Asha’man could have done it faster. If somewhat more messily.

Rand had taken no part in the fighting, except to sit his saddle where men could see him. He had been afraid to seize the Power. He did not dare display weakness for them to catch. Not a scrap. Lews Therin gibbered with horror at the very idea.

Equally surprising as Weiramon’s unsullied coat, Anaiyella rode with him, and for once not simpering. Her face was pinched and disapproving. Strangely, it did not spoil her looks nearly so much as her unctuous smiles did. She had not joined the charge herself, of course, any more than Ailil, but Anaiyella’s Master of the Horse had, and the man was most definitely dead, with a Taraboner lance through his chest. She did not like that one bit. But why did she accompany Weiramon? Just Tairens flocking together? Maybe. She had been with Sunamon, the last Rand had seen.

Bashere walked his bay up the slope, picking his way around the dead while seeming to pay them no more mind than he did a splintered tree trunk or a burning stump. His helmet hung from his saddle, and his gauntlets were stuffed behind his sword belt. He was mud all down his right side, and his horse as well.

“Aracome’s gone,” he said. “Flinn tried Healing him, but I don’t think Aracome wanted to live like that. There’s near fifty dead so far, and some of the rest might not survive.” Anaiyella paled. Rand had seen her near Aracome, emptying herself. Dead commoners did not affect her so much.

Rand felt a moment of pity. Not for her, and not very much for Aracome. For Min, though she was safely back in Cairhien. Min had foretold Aracome’s death from one of her viewings, and Gueyam and

Maraconn’s, too. Whatever she had seen, Rand hoped it had not been anywhere near the reality.

Most of the Soldiers were off scouting again, but down in the broad meadow, gateways woven by Gedwyn’s Dedicated were spilling out the supply carts and the remounts. The men coming with them gaped as soon as they were clear enough to see. The muddy ground was not so well plowed as the mountainside, yet blackened furrows, two paces wide and fifty long, carved through the brown grass, and gaping holes a horse might not be able to leap. They had not found the *damane* so far. Rand thought there had to be only one; more would have done considerably greater damage under the circumstances.

Men moved around a number of small fires where water boiled for tea, among other things. For once, Tairens, Cairhienin and Illianers mingled. Not just the commoners. Semaradrid was sharing his saddle-flask with Gueyam, who wearily rubbed a hand over his bald head. Maraconn and Kiril Drapaneos, a stork of a man whose square-cut beard looked odd on his narrow face, were squatting on their heels near one of the fires. Playing cards, by the look of it! Torean had a whole circle of laughing Cairhienin lordlings around him, though they might have been less amused by his jokes than by the way he swayed and rubbed at his potato nose. The Legionmen kept apart, but they had taken in the “volunteers” who had followed Padros to the Banner of Light. That lot seemed more eager than anyone since learning how Padros died. Blue-coated Legionmen were showing them how to change direction without falling apart like a *gaggle* of geese.

Flinn was among the wounded with Adley and Morr and Hopwil. Narishma could Heal little more than minor cuts, no better than Rand, and Dashiva not even that. Gedwyn and Rochaid stood talking well apart from anyone else, holding their horses by the reins atop the hill in the middle of the valley. The hill where they had expected to catch the Seanchan by surprise when they rushed out of gateways surrounding it. Near fifty dead, and more to come, but it would have been above two hundred without Flinn and the rest who could manage Healing to one degree or another. Gedwyn and Rochaid had not wanted to dirty their hands and grimaced when Rand drove them to it. One of the dead was a Soldier, and another Soldier, a round-faced Cairhienin, sat slumped beside a fire with a dazed look that

Rand hoped came from being tossed through the air by the ground erupting almost under his feet.

Down there on the furrowed flats, Ailil was conferring with her Lance-captain, a pale little man called Denharad. Their horses stood nearly touching, and occasionally they looked up the mountain toward Rand. What were *they* scheming?

"We'll do better next time," Bashere murmured. He ran his gaze around the valley, then shook his head. "The worst mistake is to make the same one twice, and we won't."

Weiramon heard him and repeated the same thing, but using twenty times the words, and flowery enough for a garden in spring. Without admitting that there had been any mistakes, certainly not on his part. He avoided Rand's mistakes with equal adroitness.

Rand nodded, his mouth tight. Next time they would do better. They had to, unless he wanted to leave half his men buried in these mountains. Right then, he was wondering what to do with the prisoners.

Most of those who escaped death on the mountainside had managed to withdraw through the trees that remained standing. With amazingly good order considering, Bashere claimed, yet they were unlikely to be much threat now. Not unless they had the *damane* with them. But a hundred or so men sat huddled on the ground, stripped of weapons and armor, under the watchful eyes of two dozen mounted Companions and Defenders. Taraboners, for the most part, they had not fought like men driven to it by conquerors. A fair number held their heads up, and jeered at their guards. Gedwyn had wanted to kill them, after putting them to the question. Weiramon did not care whether they had their throats slit, but he considered torture a waste of time. None would know anything useful, he maintained; there was not a one nobly born.

Rand glanced at Bashere. Weiramon was *still* going on sonorously. ". . . sweep these mountains clean for you, my Lord Dragon. We'll trample them beneath our hooves, and. . . ." Anaiyella was nodding grim approval.

"Six up, and half a dozen down," Bashere said softly. He scraped mud from one of his thick mustaches with a fingernail. "Or as some of my tenants say, what you gain on the swings, you lose on the roundabouts." What in the Light was a roundabout? A great help that was!

And then one of Bashere's patrols made matters worse.

The six men came prodding a prisoner along the slope ahead of their horses with the butts of their lances. She was a black-haired woman in a torn and dirty dark blue dress, with red panels on the breast and skirts bearing forked lightning. Her face was dirty, too, and tear-streaked. She stumbled and half-fell, but the prodding was more gesture than actual touching. She glared scornfully at her captors, even spitting once. She sneered at Rand, too.

"Did you hurt her?" he demanded. A strange question, perhaps, about an enemy after what had happened in this valley. About a *sul'dam*. But it popped out.

"Not us, my Lord Dragon," the gruff-faced patrol leader said. "We found her like this." Scratching his chin through a black flowing beard, he eyed Bashere as if for support. "She claims we killed her Gille. A pet dog, or cat, or some such, the way she carries on. Her name's Nerith. We got that much out of her." The woman turned and snarled at him again.

Rand sighed. Not a pet dog. No! That name did not belong on the list! But he could hear the litany of names reciting itself in his head, and "Gille the *damane*" was there. Lews Therin moaned for his Ilyena. Her name also was on the list. Rand thought it had a right.

"This is a Seanchan Aes Sedai?" Anaiyella asked suddenly, leaning over the pommel of her saddle to peer hard at Nerith. Nerith spat at her, as well, eyes widening in outrage. Rand explained the little he knew of *sul'dam*, that they *controlled* women who could channel with the aide of a leash-and-collar *ter'angreal* but could not themselves channel, and to his surprise, the dainty simpering High Lady said coldly, "If my Lord Dragon feels constrained, I'll hang her for him." Nerith spat at her again! Contemptuously, this time. No shortfall of courage there.

"No!" Rand growled. Light, the things people would do to get on his good side! Or maybe Anaiyella had been closer to her Master of the Horse than was considered proper. The man had been stout and balding—and a commoner; that counted heavily with Tairens—but women did have strange tastes in men. He knew that for a pure fact.

"As soon as we're ready to move again," he told Bashere, "turn the men down there loose." Taking prisoners along when he launched his next attack was out of the question, and leaving a hundred men—a hundred now; more later, for sure—leaving them to follow with the supply carts risked fifty kinds of mischief. They could cause no trouble left behind. Even the fellows who had gotten away on horseback could not carry a warning faster than he could Travel.

Bashere shrugged faintly; he thought it might be so, but then again there was always the odd chance. Strange things happened even without a *ta'veren* around.

Weiramon and Anaiyella opened their mouths almost together, faces set in protest, but Rand pressed on. "I've spoken, and it's done! We'll keep the woman, though. And any more women we capture."

"Burn my soul," Weiramon exclaimed. "Why?" The man appeared dumbfounded, and for that matter, Bashere gave a startled jerk of his head. Anaiyella's mouth twisted in contempt before she managed to turn it to a simpering smile for the Lord Dragon. Plainly, she thought him too soft to send a woman off with the others. They would have hard walking in this terrain, not to mention short rations. And the weather was not weather to turn a woman out in.

"I have enough Aes Sedai against me without sending *sul'dam* back to their trade," he told them. The Light knew that was true! They nodded, if Weiramon was slow about it; Bashere looked relieved, Anaiyella disappointed. But what to do with the woman, and any more he captured? He did not intend to turn the Black Tower into a prison. The Aiel could hold them. Except that the Wise Ones might slit their throats the moment his back was turned. What about the sisters that Mat was taking to Caemlyn with Elayne, though? "When this is done, I'll hand her over to some Aes Sedai I choose." They might see it as a gesture of goodwill, a little honey to sweeten their having to accept his protection.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Nerith's face went dead white and she screamed at the top of her lungs. Howling without cease, she flung herself down the slope, scrabbling over downed trees, falling and scrambling back up.

"Bloody—! Catch her!" Rand snapped, and the Saldaean patrol leaped after the woman, jumping their mounts across the tree-littered slope careless of broken legs and necks. Still wailing, she dodged and darted among the horses with even less care.

In the mouth of the easternmost pass, a gateway opened in a flash of silver light. A black-coated Soldier pulled his horse through, jumped to the saddle as the gateway winked out and put his mount to a gallop, toward the hilltop where Gedwyn and Rochaid waited. Rand watched impassively. In his head, Lews Therin snarled of killing, killing all the Asha'man before it was too late.

By the time the three of them started up the slope toward Rand, four of the Saldaeans had Nerith down on the ground, binding her hand and foot. It took four, the way she thrashed and bit at them, and an amused Bashere was offering odds on whether she might not overcome them instead. Anaiyella muttered something about cracking the woman's head. Did she mean cracking it open? Rand frowned at her.

The Soldier between Gedwyn and Rochaid glanced at Nerith uneasily as they rode past. Rand vaguely remembered seeing him at the Black Tower, the day he first handed out the silver Swords, and gave Taim the very first Dragon pin. He was a young man, Varil Nensen by name, still wearing a transparent veil to cover his thick mustaches. He had not hesitated when he found himself facing his countrymen, though. Allegiance was to the Black Tower and the Dragon Reborn, now, so Taim always said. The second part of that always sounded an afterthought.

"You may have the honor of making your report to the Dragon Reborn, Soldier Nensen," Gedwyn said. Wryly.

Nensen sat up straight in his saddle. "My Lord Dragon!" he barked, slapping fist to chest. "There's more of them about thirty miles west, my Lord Dragon." Thirty miles was as far as Rand had told the scouts to go before returning. What good if one Soldier found Seanchan while the rest kept moving ever farther west? "Maybe half what were here," Nensen went on. And. . . ." His dark eyes flickered toward Nerith again. She was tied, now, the Saldaeans struggling to get her over a horse. "And I saw no sign of women, my Lord Dragon."

Bashere squinted at the sky. Dark clouds lay in a blanket from mountain peak to mountain peak, but the sun should still be high. "Time to feed the men before the rest return," he said, nodding in satisfaction. Nerith had managed to sink her teeth into a Saldaean's wrist and was hanging on like a badger.

"Feed them quick," Rand said irritably. Would every *sul'dam* he captured be as difficult? Very likely. Light, what if they took a *damane? "I* don't want to spend all winter in these mountains." Gille the *damane*. He could not erase a name once it went onto that list.

The dead are never silent, Lews Therin whispered. *The dead never sleep*.

Rand rode down toward the fires. He did not feel like eating.

From the point of a thrusting shoulder of stone, Furyk Karede carefully studied the forested mountains rising all around him, sharp peaks like dark fangs. His horse, a tall dappled gelding, stiffened his ears as though catching a sound he had missed, but otherwise the animal was still. Every so often, Karede had to stop and wipe the lens of his looking glass. A light rain fell from a gray morning sky. His helmet's two black plumes were bent over instead of standing straight, and water ran down his back. A light rain compared to yesterday, anyway, and probably compared to tomorrow. Or this afternoon, perhaps. Thunder rumbled ominously in the south. Karede's concern had nothing to do with weather, though.

Below him, the last of twenty-three hundred men snaked through the winding passes, men gathered from four outposts. Well-mounted, reasonably well-led, yet a bare two hundred were Seanchan, and just two besides himself wore the red-and-green of the Guard. Most of the remainder were Taraboners—he knew their mettle—but a good third were Amadicians and Altarans, too new to their oaths for any to be sure how they would stand up. Some Altarans and Amadicians had switched allegiance two or three times already. Tried to, anyway. People this side of the Aryth Ocean had no shame. A dozen *sul'dam* rode near the front of the column, and he wished all twelve had leashed *damanes* walking by their horses instead of only two.

Fifty paces farther on, the ten men of the spearhead were watching the slopes above them, though not as carefully as they should have. Too many men who rode spearhead relied on the forward scouts to find any dangers. Karede made a note to speak to them personally. They would do their duties properly after that, or he would send them to the labor levies.

A *raken* appeared in the east ahead, skimming low over the treetops, twisting and turning to follow the curves of the land like a man running his hand down a woman's back. Peculiar. *Morat'raken*, fliers, always liked to soar high unless the sky was actually full of lightning. Karede lowered the looking glass to watch.

"Maybe we'll finally get another scouting report," Jadranka said. To the other officers waiting behind Karede, not to him. Three of the ten matched Karede's rank, yet few except the Blood disturbed a man in the blood-red and nearly black green of the Deathwatch Guard. Not that many among the Blood did.

According to the tales he had heard as a child, one of his ancestors, a noble, had followed Luthair Paendrag to Seanchan at Artur Hawkwing's command, but two hundred years later, with only the north secure, another ancestor tried to carve out a kingdom of his own and ended sold from the block instead. Perhaps it was so; many *da'covale* claimed noble ancestors. Among themselves, at least; few of the Blood found such chatter amusing. In any case, Karede had felt lucky when the Choosers picked him out, a sturdy boy not yet old enough to be assigned duties, and he still felt pride in the ravens tattooed on his shoulders. Many Deathwatch Guards went without coat or shirt whenever possible, to display those. The humans, anyway. Ogier Gardeners were not marked or owned, but that was between them and the Empress.

Karede was *da'covale* and proud of it, like every man of the Guard, the property of the Crystal Throne, body and soul. He fought where the Empress pointed, and would die the day she said die. To the Empress alone did the Guard answer, and where they appeared, they appeared as her hand, a visible reminder of her. No wonder that some among the Blood could become uneasy watching a detachment of Guardsmen pass. A far better life than mucking out a Lord's stables or serving *kaf* to a Lady. But he cursed the luck that had sent him into these mountains to inspect the outposts.

The *raken* darted on westward, the two fliers crouched low in their saddle. There was no scouting report, no message for him. Furyk knew it was his imagination, but the creature's long, outstretched neck somehow looked . . . anxious. Had he been anyone else, he might have been anxious, too. There had been few messages for him since his orders three days ago to assume command and move east. Each message had thickened the fog more than cleared it.

The locals, these Altarans, had moved into the mountains in force, it seemed, but how? The roads along the northern border of this range were patrolled and watched nearly to the border of Illian, by fliers and *morat'torm* as well as horse-mounted parties. What could have made the Altarans decide to show so many teeth? To stand together? A man might find himself in a duel for a look—though they had begun to learn challenging a Guardsman was just a slower way of cutting your own throat—but he had seen nobles of this so-called nation trying to sell each other *and* their Queen for the mere suggestion that their own lands might be protected and perhaps those of their neighbor added to them.

Nadoc, a big man with a deceptively mild face, twisted in his saddle to watch the *raken*. “I don’t like marching blind,” he muttered. “Not when the Altarans have managed to put forty thousand men up here. Forty, at least.”

Jadranka snorted so hard that his tall white gelding shifted. Jadranka was the senior of the three captains behind Karede, having served as long as Karede himself. A short thin man with a prominent nose and such airs you might have thought him of the Blood. That horse would stand out at a mile. “Forty thousand or a hundred, Nadoc, they’re scattered from here to the end of the range, too far apart to support one another. Stab my eyes, likely half are dead already. They must be tangling with outposts everywhere. That’s why we aren’t getting reports. We’re just expected to sweep up the remnants.”

Karede swallowed a sigh. He had hoped Jadranka was not a fool atop his airs. Praise of victors spread quickly, whether they were an army or half a Banner. It was the rare defeats that were swallowed in silence and forgotten. So much silence was . . . ominous.

“That last report didn’t sound like remnants to me,” Nadoc persisted. *He* was no fool. “There are five thousand men not fifty miles ahead of us, and I doubt we’ll take them with brooms.”

Jadranka snorted again. “We’ll crush them, with swords or brooms. The Light burn my eyes, I can hardly wait for a decent engagement. I told the scouts to press on until they found them. I won’t have them slipping away from us.”

“You did what?” Karede said softly.

Soft or not, his words jerked every eye toward him. Though Nadoc and a few of the others had to struggle to stop gaping at Jadranka. Scouts told to press ahead, scouts told what to look for. What had gone unseen for those orders?

Before anyone could open his mouth shouts rose from the men in the pass, screams and the shrieks of horses.

Karede pressed the leather tube of the looking glass to his eye. Along the pass ahead of him, men and horses were dying under a hail of what he thought must be crossbow bolts, the way they hammered through steel breastplates, exploded through chests protected by mail. Hundreds were down already, hundreds more sagging wounded in their saddles or afoot and running from horses thrashing on the ground. Too many were running. Even as he looked, men still mounted whirled their horses to try fleeing back up the pass. Where in the Light were the *sul'dam?* He could not find them. He had faced rebels who had *sul'dam* and *damane*, and they always had to be killed as fast as possible. Maybe the locals had learned that.

Suddenly, shockingly, the ground began to erupt in roaring fountains all along the writhing snake of his command, fountains that flung men and horses into the air as easily as dirt and stones. Lightning flashed out of the sky, blue-white bolts shattering earth and men alike. Other men simply exploded, ripped to shreds by nothing he could see. Did the locals have *damane* of their own? No, it would be those Aes Sedai.

"What are we going to do?" Nadoc said. He sounded shaken. As well he might.

"Do you think to abandon your men?" Jadranka snarled. "We rally them and attack, you—!" He cut off, gurgling, as Karede's swordpoint went neatly into his throat. There were times fools could be tolerated, and times not. As the man toppled from his saddle, Karede deftly wiped his blade on the gelding's white mane before the animal bolted. There were times for a little show, too.

"We rally what can be rallied, Nadoc," he said as if Jadranka had never spoken. As if he had never been. "We save what can be saved, and fall back."

Turning to ride down into the pass where lightnings flashed and thunders roared, he ordered Anghar, a steady-eyed young man with a fast horse, to ride east and report what had transpired here. Perhaps a flier would see and perhaps not, though Karede suspected he knew why they flew low, now. He suspected the High Lady Suroth and the generals in Ebou Dar already knew what was occurring up here, too. Was today the day he died for the Empress? He dug his heels into his horse's flanks.

From the flat, thinly treed ridge, Rand peered westward over the forest before him. With the Power in him—life, so sweet; vileness, oh, so vile—he could see individual leaves, but it was not enough. Tai'daishar stamped a hoof. The jagged peaks behind, to either side, and all around overtopped the ridge by a mile or more, but the ridge stood well above the treetops below, a rolling wooded valley over a league in length and nearly as wide. All was still down there. As quiet as the Void he floated in. Quiet for the moment, anyway. Here and there plumes of smoke rose from where two or three trees in a clump burned like torches. Only the general wet stopped them turning the valley into a conflagration.

Flinn and Dashiva were the only Asha'man still with him. All the rest were down in the valley. The pair stood a little way from him at the edge of the trees, holding their horses by the reins and staring at the forest below. Well, Flinn stared, as intently as Rand himself. Dashiva glanced occasionally, twisting his mouth, sometimes muttering to himself in a way that made Flinn shift his feet and eye him sideways. The Power filled both men, nearly to overflowing, but for a change, Lews Therin said nothing. The man seemed increasingly to have gone back into hiding over the last few days.

In the sky there was actually sunlight, and the scattered clouds were gray. It was five days since Rand had brought his small army to Altara, five days since he had seen his first Seanchan dead. He had seen quite a few since. Thought slid across the surface of the Void. He could feel the heron branded into his palm pressing against the Dragon Scepter through his glove. Silent. There were none of the flying creatures to be seen. Three of those had died, slashed from the sky by lightning, before their riders learned to stay clear. Bashere was fascinated by the creatures. Quiet.

"Perhaps it is finished, my Lord Dragon." Ailil's voice was calm and cool, but she patted her mare's neck, though the animal did not need soothing. She eyed Flinn and Dashiva sideways and straightened, unwilling to reveal a shred of unease in front of them.

Rand found himself humming and stopped abruptly. That was Lews Therin's habit, looking at a pretty woman, not his. Not his! Light, if he started taking on the fellow's mannerisms, and when he was not there, at that . . . !

Abruptly, hollow thunder boomed up the valley. Fire fountained out of the trees a good two miles away or more, then again, and again, again. Lightning streaked down into the forest not far from where the tall flames had bloomed, single slashes like jagged blue-white lances. A flurry of lightning bolts and fire, and all was still again. No trees had caught fire, this time.

Some of that had been *saidin*. Some of it.

Shouts rose, dim and distant, from another part of the valley, he thought. Too far for even his *saidin*-enhanced ears to hear the crash of steel. Despite everything, not all of the fighting was being done by Asha'man and Dedicated and Soldiers.

Anaiyella let out a long breath she must have been holding since the exchange with the Power began. Men fighting with steel did not disturb her. Then *she* patted her mount's neck. The gelding had only flickered an ear. Rand had noticed that about women. Quite often, when a woman was agitated, she tried to soothe others whether they required soothing or not. A horse would do. Where *was* Lews Therin?

Irritably he leaned forward to study the forest canopy again. A good many of those trees were evergreens—oak and pine and leatherleaf—and despite the late drought, they made an effective screen, even to his intensified vision. As if idly, he touched the narrow bundle under his stirrup leather. He could take a hand. And strike blindly. He could ride down into the woods. And be able to see ten paces at most. Down there, he would be little more effective than one of the Soldiers.

A gateway opened among the trees a little way along the ridge, silvery slash widening into a hole that showed different trees and thick winter brown underbrush. A copper-skinned Soldier with a thin mustache on his upper lip and a small pearl in his ear exited afoot and let the gateway vanish. He was shoving a *sul'dam* ahead of him with her wrists tied behind her, a handsome woman except for the purple knot on the side of her head. That seemed to go along with her scowl, though, as well as it did with her rumpled, leaf-stained dress. She sneered over her shoulder at the Soldier while he pushed her along the ridgetop to Rand, and then she sneered up at Rand.

The Soldier stiffened, saluting smartly. "Soldier Arlen Nalaam, my Lord Dragon," he barked, staring straight at Rand's saddle. "My Lord Dragon's orders were to bring any women captured to him."

Rand nodded. It was only to give him the appearance of doing something, inspecting prisoners to be sure they were what any idiot could see they were. "Take her back to the carts, Soldier Nalaam, then return to the fighting." He almost ground his teeth saying that. Return to the fighting. While Rand al'Thor, Dragon. Reborn and King of Illian, sat his horse and watched treetops!

Nalaam saluted again before pushing away the woman ahead of him, but he was not slow about it. She kept peering over her shoulder again, yet not at the Soldier this time. At Rand. With wide-eyed, openmouthed astonishment. For some reason, Nalaam did not pull her to a halt until he reached the spot where he had come out. All that was necessary was to go far enough to avoid injuring the horses.

"What are you doing?" Rand demanded as *saidin* filled the man.

Nalaam half turned back to him, hesitating briefly. "It seems easier, here, if I use a place I've already made a gateway, my Lord Dragon. *Saidin* . . . *Saidin* feels . . . strange . . . to me here." His prisoner turned to frown at him.

After a moment, Rand gestured him to go ahead. Flinn pretended to be interested in his horse's saddle girth, but the balding old man smiled faintly. Smugly. Dashiva . . . *giggled*. Flinn had been the first to mention an odd feel to *saidin* in this valley. Of course, Narishma and Hopwil had heard him, and Morr added his tales of the "strangeness" around Ebou Dar. Small wonder everyone was claiming to feel something now, though not a one could say what. *Saidin* just felt . . . peculiar. Light, with the taint thick on the male half of the Source, what else would it feel? Rand hoped they were not all coming down with his new sickness.

Nalaam's gateway opened, and vanished behind him and his prisoner. Rand let himself really feel *saidin*. Life and corruption commingled; ice to make winter's heart seem warm, and fire to make a forge's flames cold; death, waiting for him to slip. Wanting him to slip. It did not feel any different. Did it? He scowled at where Nalaam had disappeared. Nalaam and the woman.

She was the fourth *sul'dam* taken this afternoon. That made twenty-three *sul'dam* prisoners with the carts. And two *damane*, each still in her silvery leash and collar, carried on separate carts; in those collars, they could not walk three steps before becoming more violently sick than Rand did seizing the Source. He was not sure the sisters with Mat would be pleased to receive them after all. The first *damane*, three days before, he had not thought of as a prisoner. A slender woman with pale yellow hair and big blue eyes, she was a Seanchan captive to be freed. He thought. But when he forced a *sul'dam* to remove the woman's collar, her *a'dam*, she screamed for the *sul'dam* to help her and immediately began lashing out with the Power. She had even offered her neck for the *sul'dam* to replace the thing! Nine Defenders and a Soldier died before she could be shielded. Gedwyn would have killed her on the spot had Rand not stopped it. The Defenders, nearly as uncomfortable around women who could channel as others were around men who could—the Defenders still wanted her dead.

They had taken casualties in the fighting these past days, but having men killed by a prisoner seemed to offend them.

There had been more casualties than Rand had expected. Thirty-one Defenders dead, and forty-six Companions. More than two hundred among the Legionmen and the noble's armsmen. Seven Soldiers and a Dedicated, men Rand had never met before they answered his summons to Illian. Too many, considering that all except the gravest injury could be Healed, if a man could only hang on until there was time. But he was driving the Seanchan west. Driving them hard.

More shouting rose somewhere far off down in the valley. Fire blossomed a good three miles to the west, and lightning struck, toppling trees. Trees and stone erupted from a mountainside farther on, strange fountains marching along the slope. The roaring booms swallowed shouts. The Seanchan were retreating.

"Get down there," Rand told Flinn and Dashiva. "Both of you. Find Gedwyn and tell him I said push! Push!"

Dashiva grimaced at the forest below, then began awkwardly tugging his horse along the ridge. The man was ungainly with horses, riding or leading. He nearly tripped over his sword!

Flinn looked up at Rand worriedly. "You mean to stay here alone, my Lord Dragon?"

"I'm hardly alone," Rand said dryly, glancing at Ailil and Anaiyella. They had ridden back to their armsmen, almost two hundred lancers waiting just short of where the ridge began to slope down to the east. At their head, Denharad frowned through the face-bars of his helmet. He had command of both lots, now, and if his concern was for Ailil and Anaiyella, his fellows still made a show fit to keep away most attackers. Besides, Weiramon had the northern end of this ridge secured so a fly could not pass, he claimed, and Bashere held the south. Without boasting; Bashere just erected a wall of lances without talking about it. And the Seanchan were retreating. "And I'm hardly helpless, anyway, Flinn."

Flinn actually looked doubtful and scratched his fringe of white hair before saluting and leading his horse toward where Dashiva's gateway was already winking out. Limping along, Flinn shook his head, muttering to himself fit for Dashiva. Rand wanted to snarl. He could not go mad, and neither could they.

Flinn’s gateway vanished, and Rand returned to his study of the treetops. It was quiet again. Time stretched in stillness. This notion of taking the outposts in the mountains had been a bad one; he was willing to admit that, now. In this terrain, you could be half a mile from an army without knowing. In those tangled woods down there, you could be ten feet from them without knowing! He needed to face the Seanchan on better ground. He needed. . . .

Abruptly he was fighting *saidin*, fighting wild surges that tried to ream out his skull. The Void was vanishing, melting beneath the onslaught. Frantic, dazed, he released the Source before it could kill him. Nausea twisted his middle. Double vision showed him two Crowns of Swords. Lying on the thick mulch of dead leaves in front of his face! He was on the ground! He could not seem to breathe properly, and struggled to suck in air. There was a chip broken off one of the crown’s golden laurel leaves, and blood stained several of the tiny golden swordpoints. A knot of hot pain in his side told him those never-healing wounds had broken open. He tried to push himself up, and cried out. In stunned amazement he stared at the dark fletchings of an arrow stuck through his right arm. With a groan he collapsed. Something ran down his face. Something dripped in front of his eye. Blood.

Vaguely he became aware of ululating cries. Horsemen appeared among the trees to the north, galloping along the ridge, some with lowered lances, some working short bows as fast as they could nock and draw. Horsemen in blue-and-yellow armor of overlapping plates, and helmets like huge insects’ heads. Seanchan, several hundred of them it seemed. From the north. So much for Weiramon’s fly.

Rand struggled to reach the Source. Too late to worry about sicking up, or falling on his face. Another time, he might have laughed at that. He struggled. . . . It was like fumbling for a pin in the dark with numbed fingers.

Time to die, Lews Therin whispered. Rand had always known Lews Therin would be there at the end.

Not fifty paces from Rand, screaming Tairens and Cairhien plowed into the Seanchan.

“Fight, you dogs!” Anaiyella shrieked, swinging down from her saddle beside him. “Fight!” The willow lady in her silks and laces hurled a string of curses that would have made a wagon driver’s tongue go dry.

Anaiyella stood holding her mount’s reins, glaring from the mill of men and steel to Rand. It was Ailil who turned him onto his back. Kneeling there, she looked down at him with an unreadable expression in her big dark eyes. He could not seem to move. He felt drained. He was not sure he could blink. Screams and the clash of steel rang in his ears.

“If he dies on our hands, Bashere will hang both of us!” Anaiyella certainly was not simpering now. “If those black-coated monsters get hold of us . . . !” She shuddered, and bent closer to Ailil, gesturing with a belt knife he had not noticed in her hand before. A ruby sparkled blood-red on the hilt. “Your Lance-captain could break off enough men to get us away. We could be miles away before he’s found, and back to our estates by the time—”

“I think he can hear us,” Ailil broke in calmly. Her red-gloved hands moved at her waist. Sheathing a belt knife? Or drawing one? “If he dies here—” She cut off as sharply as the other woman had, and her head jerked around.

Hooves thundered past Rand on either side in thick streams. Galloping north, toward the Seanchan. Sword in hand, Bashere barely reined in before leaping from his saddle. Gregorin Panar dismounted more slowly, but he waved his sword at the men flooding by. “Strike home for King and Illian!” he shouted. “Strike home! The Lord of the Morning! The Lord of the Morning!” The crash of steel rose higher. And the screaming.

“It *would* be like this at the last of it,” Bashere growled, favoring the two women with suspicious glares. He wasted only an instant, though, before raising his voice above the din of battle. “Morr! Burn your Asha’man hide! Here, now!” He did not shout that the Lord Dragon was down, thank the Light.

With an effort, Rand turned his head perhaps a hand. Enough to see Illianers and Saldaeans driving on north. The Seanchan must have given way.

“Morr!” The name roared through Bashere’s mustaches, and Morr himself dropped from a galloping horse nearly on top of Anaiyella. She looked disgruntled at the lack of an apology as the man knelt beside Rand, scrubbing dark hair out of his face. She moved back quickly enough when she realized he intended to channel, though, practically bounding away. Ailil was much smoother about rising, but not noticeably slower in stepping clear. And she slipped a silver-handled belt knife back into its sheath at her waist.

Healing was a simple matter, if not exactly comfortable. The fletchings were broken off and the arrow drawn the rest of the way through with a sharp jerk that brought a gasp to Rand's lips, but that was just to clear the way. Dirt and lightly embedded fragments would fall away as flesh knit itself up, but only Flinn and a few others could use the Power to remove what was driven deep. Resting two fingers on Rand's chest, Morr caught his tongue between his teeth with a fixed expression and wove Healing. That was how he always did it; it did not work for him, otherwise. It was not the complex weaves that Flinn used. Few could manage that, and none as well as Flinn, so far. This was simpler. Rougher. Waves of heat rushed through Rand, strong enough to make him grunt and send sweat gushing from every pore. He quivered violently from head to foot. A roast in the oven must have felt that way.

The sudden flood of heat ebbed slowly, and Rand lay panting. In his head, Lews Therin panted, too. *Kill him! Kill him!* Over and over.

Muting the voice to a faint buzz, Rand thanked Morr—the young man blinked as if surprised!—then grabbed the Dragon Scepter from the ground and forced himself to his feet. Erect, he swayed slightly. Bashere started to offer an arm, then backed away at a gesture. Rand could stand unaided. Barely. He could as soon have flown by waving his arms as channeled, though. When he touched his side, his shirt slipped on blood, yet the old round scar and the newer slash across it merely felt tender. Half-healed only, but they had never been better than that since he got them.

For a moment, he studied the two women. Anaiyella murmured something vaguely congratulatory and offered him a smile that made him wonder whether she intended to lick his wrist. Ailil stood very straight, very cool, as if nothing had happened. Had they meant to leave him to die? Or to kill him? But if so, why send their armsmen charging in and rush to check on him? On the other hand, Ailil *had* drawn her knife once the talk of him dying began.

Most of the Saldaeans and Illianers were galloping north or riding down the slope of the ridge, pursuing the last of the Seanchan. And then Weiramon appeared from the north, riding a tall, glossy black at a slow canter that picked up when he saw Rand. His armsmen rode in double file at his back.

“My Lord Dragon,” the High Lord intoned as he dismounted. He *still* seemed as clean as he had in Illian. Bashere simply looked rumpled and a bit grimy here and there, but Gregorin’s finery was decidedly dirt-stained, and slashed down one sleeve besides. Weiramon flourished a bow to shame a king’s court. “Forgive me, my Lord Dragon. I thought I saw Seanchan advancing in front of the ridge and went to meet them. I never suspected this other company. You can’t know how it would pain me if you were injured.”

“I think I know,” Rand said dryly, and Weiramon blinked. Seanchan advancing? Perhaps. Weiramon would always snatch at a chance for glory in the charge. “What did you mean, ‘at the last,’ Bashere?”

“They’re pulling back,” Bashere replied. In the valley, fire and lightning erupted for a moment as if to give him the lie, but nearly to the far end.

“Your . . . scouts do say they all do be retreating,” Gregorin said, rubbing his beard, and gave Morr a sidelong, uncomfortable glance. Morr grinned at him toothily. Rand had seen the Illianer in the thick of fighting heading his men, shouting encouragement and laying his sword about with wild abandon, but he flinched at Morr’s grin.

Gedwyn strode up then, leading his horse carelessly, insolently. He almost sneered at Bashere and Gregorin, frowned at Weiramon as if already knowing the man’s blunder, and eyed Ailil and Anaiyella as though he might pinch them. The two women drew back from him hastily, but then, so did the men except for Bashere. Even Morr. Gedwyn’s salute to Rand was a casual tap of fist to chest. “I sent scouts out as soon as I saw this lot was done. There are three more columns inside ten miles.”

“All headed west,” Bashere put in quietly, but he looked at Gedwyn sharp enough to slice stone. “You’ve done it,” he told Rand. “They’re *all* falling back. I doubt they’ll stop short of Ebou Dar. Campaigns don’t always end with a grand march into the city, and this one is finished.”

Surprisingly—or perhaps not—Weiramon began arguing for an advance, to “take Ebou Dar for the glory of the Lord of the Morning,” as he put it, but it was certainly a shock to hear Gedwyn say he would not mind taking a few more swipes at these Seanchan and he certainly would not mind seeing Ebou Dar. Even Ailil and Anaiyella added their voices in favor of “putting an end to the Seanchan once and for all,” though Ailil did add that she would as soon like to avoid having to return to finish. She was quite sure the Lord Dragon would insist on her company for it. That in a tone as cool and dry as night in the Aiel Waste.

Only Bashere and Gregorin spoke for turning back, and raise their voices they did increasingly as Rand stood silent. Silent and staring west. Toward Ebou Dar.

“We did do what we came for,” Gregorin insisted. “Light’s mercy, do you think to take Ebou Dar itself?”

Take Ebou Dar, Rand thought. Why not? No one would expect that. A total surprise, for the Seanchan and everybody else.

“Times are, you seize the advantage and ride on,” Bashere growled. “Other times, you take your winnings and go home. I say it’s time to go home.”

I would not mind you in my head, Lews Therin said, sounding almost sane, *if you were not so clearly mad*.

Ebou Dar. Rand tightened his hand on the Dragon Scepter, and Lews Therin cackled.

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CHAPTER 24

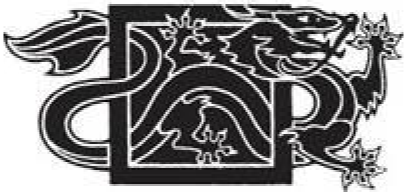

A Time for Iron

A dozen leagues east of Ebou Dar, *raken* glided in out of the cloud-streaked sunrise to land in a long pasture marked as the fliers' field by colored streamers on tall poles. The brown grasses had been trampled and scored days since. All of the creatures' grace in the air was lost as soon as their claws touched the ground in a lumbering run, leathery pinions thirty paces or more wide held high as if the animal wanted to sweep itself back upward. There was little beauty, either, in the *raken* that ran awkwardly down the field beating ribbed wings, fliers crouching in the saddle as if to pull the beast up by main force, ran on until at last they stumbled into the air, wingtips barely clearing the tops of the olive trees at the end of the field. Only as they gained height and turned toward the sun, soared toward the clouds, did the *raken* regain dignified grandeur. Fliers who landed did not bother to dismount. While a groundling held a basket up for the *raken* to gulp whole shriveled fruits by the double-handful at a time, one of the fliers would hand down their scouting report to a still more senior groundling, and the other bent on the other side to receive new orders from a flier too senior to handle reins personally very often. Almost that quickly after coming to a halt, the creature was reined around to waddle over to where four or five others waited their turn to make that long, ungainly run to the sky.

At a dead run, dodging between moving formations of cavalry and infantry, messengers carried the scouting reports to the huge red-bannered command tent. There were haughty Taraboner lancers and stolid Amadician pikemen in well-ordered squares, breastplates striped horizontally in the colors of the regiments they were attached to. Altaran light horse in disordered bunches made their mounts prance, vain of the red slashes crisscrossing their chests, so different from the markings anyone else wore. The Altarans did not know those indicated irregulars of doubtful reliability. Among the Seanchan soldiers, named regiments with proud honors were represented, from every corner of the Empire, pale-eyed men from Alqam, honey-brown men from N'Kon, men black as coal from Khoweal and Dalenshar. There were *morat'torm* on their sinuous bronze-scaled mounts that made horses whicker and dance in fright, and even a few *morat'grolm* with their squat, beak-mouthed charges, but one thing that always accompanied a Seanchan army was conspicuous by it absence. The *sul'dam* and *damane* were still in their tents. Captain-General Kennar Miraj thought of *sul'dam* and *damane* a great deal.

From his seat on the dais he could see the map table clearly, where helmetless under-lieutenants checked the reports and placed markers to represent the forces in the field. A small paper banner stood above each marker, inked symbols giving the size and composition of the force. Finding decent maps in these lands was next to impossible, but the map copied atop the large table was sufficient. And worrying, in what it told him. Black discs for outposts overrun or dispersed. Far too many of those, dotting the whole eastern half of the Venir range. Red wedges, for commands on the move, marked the western end as thickly, all pointed back toward Ebou Dar. And scattered among the black discs, seventeen stark white. As he watched, a young officer in the brown-and-black of a *morat'torm* carefully placed an eighteenth. Enemy forces. A few might be the same group seen twice, but for the most part they were much too far apart, the timing of the sightings wrong.

Along the walls of the tent, clerks in plain brown coats, marked only with insignia of rank among clerks on the wide collars, waited at their writing tables, pens in hand, for Miraj to issue orders that they would copy out for distribution. He had already given what orders he could. There were as many as ninety thousand enemy soldiers in the mountains, nearly twice what he could muster here even with the native levies. Too many for belief, except that scouts did not lie; liars had their throats slit by their fellows. Too many, springing out of the ground like trap-worms in the Sen T'jore. At least they had a hundred miles of mountain yet to cover if they intended to threaten Ebou Dar. Almost two hundred, for the white discs farthest east. And hill country after that for another hundred miles. Surely the enemy general could not mean to let his dispersed forces be confronted one by one. Gathering them together would take more time. Time alone was on his side, right then.

The entry flaps of the tent swept open, and the High Lady Suroth glided in, black hair a proud crest spilling down her back, pleated snow-white gown and richly embroidered over-robe somehow untouched by the mud outside. He had thought her still in Ebou Dar; she must have flown out by *to'raken*. She was accompanied by a small entourage, for her. A pair of Deathwatch Guards with black tassels on their sword hilts held the tentflaps, and more were visible outside, stone-faced men in red-and-green. The embodiment of the Empress, might she live forever. Even the Blood took note of them. Suroth sailed past as if they were as much servants as the lushly bodied *da'covale* in slippers and a nearly transparent white robe, her honey-yellow hair in a multitude of thin braids, who carried the High Lady's gilded writing desk a meek two paces behind. Suroth's Voice of the Blood, Alwhin, a glowering woman in green robes with the left side of her head shaved and the remainder of her pale brown hair in a severe braid, followed close on her mistress's heels. As Miraj stepped down from the dais, he realized with shock that the second *da'covale* behind Suroth, short and dark-haired and slim in her diaphanous robe, was *damane!* A *damane* garbed as property was unheard of, but odder still, it was Alwhin who led her by the *a'dam!*

He let none of his amazement show as he went to one knee, murmuring, “The Light be upon the High Lady Suroth. All honor to the High Lady Suroth.” Everyone else prostrated themselves on the canvas groundcloth, eyes down. Miraj was of the Blood, if too low to shave the sides of his scalp like Suroth. Only the nails of his little fingers were lacquered. Much too low to register surprise if a High Lady allowed her Voice to continue acting as *sul'dam* after being raised to the *so'jhin*. Strange times in a strange land, where the Dragon Reborn walked and *marath'damane* ran wild to kill and enslave where they would.

Suroth barely glanced at him before turning to study the map table, and if her black eyes tightened at what she saw, she had cause. Under her, the Hailene had done far more than had been dreamed, reclaiming great stretches of the stolen lands. All they had been sent for was to scout the way, and after Falme, some had thought even that impossible. She drummed fingers on the table irritably, the long blue-lacquered fingernails on the first two clicking. Continued success, and she might be able to shave her head entirely and paint a third nail on each hand. Adoption into the Imperial family was not unheard of for achievements so great. And if she stepped too far, overstepped, she might find her fingernails clipped and herself stuffed into a filmy robe to serve one of the Blood, if not sold to a farmer to help till his fields, or sweat in a warehouse. At worst, Miraj would only have to open his own veins.

He continued to watch Suroth in patient silence, but he had been a scout lieutenant, *morat'raken*, before being raised to the Blood, and he could not help being aware of everything around him. A scout lived or died by what he saw or did not, and so did others. The men lying on their faces around the tent; some hardly seemed to breathe. Suroth should have taken him aside and let them continue with their work. A messenger was being turned back by the soldiers at the entrance. How dire was the message that the woman tried to push past Deathwatch Guards?

The *da'covale* with the writing desk in her arms caught his eye. Scowls flashed across her pretty doll's face, never pushed down for more than moments. Property showing anger? And there was something else. His gaze flickered to the *damane*, who stood with her head down but still looked around with curiosity. Brown-eyed *da'covale* and pale-eyed *damane* looked about as different as two women could, yet there was something about them. Something in their faces. Strange. He could not have said how old either was.

Quick as his glance was, Alwhin noticed. With a twitch of the *a'dam's* silvery leash she put the *damane* facedown on the groundcloth. Snapping her fingers, she pointed to the canvas with the hand not encumbered by the *a'dam's* bracelet, then grimaced when the honey-haired *da'covale* did not move. "Down, Liandrin!" she hissed almost under her breath. With a glare for Alwhin—a glare!—the *da'covale* sank to her knees, features painted with sulkiness.

Most strange. But hardly important. Face impassive, and otherwise bursting with impatience, he waited. Impatience and no little discomfort. He had been raised to the Blood after riding fifty miles in a single night with three arrows in him to bring word of a rebel army marching on Seandar itself, and his back still pained him.

Finally, Suroth turned from the map table. She did not give him leave to rise, much less embrace him as one of the Blood. Not that he had expected that. He was far beneath her. “You are ready to march?” she demanded curtly. At least she did not speak to him through her Voice. Before so many of his officers, the shame would have put his eyes on the ground for months if not years.

“I will be, Suroth,” he replied calmly, meeting her gaze. He *was* of the Blood, however low. “They cannot combine in fewer than ten days, with at least another ten before they can exit the mountains. Well before then, I—”

“They could be here tomorrow,” she snapped. “Today! If they come, Miraj, they will come by the ancient art of Traveling, and it seems very possible that they will come.”

He heard men shifting on their bellies before they could restrain themselves. Suroth lost control of her emotions *and* babbled of legends? “Are you certain?” The words popped out of his mouth before he could stop them.

He had only thought she had lost control before. Her eyes blazed. She gripped the edges of her flower-worked robe, white-knuckled, and her hands shook. “Do you question me?” she snarled incredulously. “Suffice it that I have my sources of information.” And was furious with them as much as with him, he realized. “If they come, there will be perhaps as many as fifty of these grandly named Asha’man, but no more than five or six thousand soldiers. It seems there have been no more since the beginning, whatever the fliers say.”

Miraj nodded slowly. Five thousand men, moved about in some way with the One Power, would explain a great deal. What *were* her sources, that she knew numbers so precisely? He was not fool enough to ask. She certainly had Listeners and Seekers in her service. Watching her, too. Fifty Asha’man. The very idea of a man channeling made him want to spit in disgust. Rumor claimed they were being gathered from every nation by the Dragon Reborn, this Rand al’Thor, but he had never expected there could be so many. The Dragon Reborn could channel, it was said. That might be true, but he was the Dragon Reborn.

The Prophecies of the Dragon had been known in Seanchan even before Luthair Paendrag began the Consolidation. In corrupted form, it was said, much different from the pure version Luthair Paendrag brought. Miraj had seen several volumes of *The Karaethon Cycle* printed in these lands, and they were corrupted too—not one mentioned him serving the Crystal Throne!—but the Prophecies held men's minds and hearts still. More than a few hoped the Return came soon, that these lands could be reclaimed before Tarmon Gai'don so the Dragon Reborn could win the Last Battle for the glory of the Empress, might she live forever. The Empress surely would want al'Thor sent to her, so she could see what sort of man served her. There would be no difficulty with al'Thor once he had knelt to her. Few easily shook off the awe they felt, kneeling before the Crystal Throne, with the thirst to obey drying their tongues. But it seemed obvious that bundling the fellow onto a ship would be easier if disposing of the Asha'man—they had to be disposed of, certainly—waited until al'Thor was well on his way across the Aryth Ocean to Seandar.

Which brought him back to the problem he had been trying to avoid, he realized with an inward start. He was not a man to shy from difficulties, much less ignore them blindly, but this was different from any he had faced before. He had fought in two dozen battles with *damane* used on both sides; he knew the way of them. It was not only a matter of striking out with the Power. Experienced *sul'dam* could somehow see what *damane* or *marath'damane* did and *damane* would tell the others, so they could defend as well. Could *sul'dam* see what a man did, too? Worse. . . .

"You will release the *sul'dam* and *damane* to me?" he said. Taking a deep breath in spite of himself, he added, "If they're still sick, it will be a short fight and bloody. On our side."

Which produced another stir among the men waiting on their faces. Every second rumor in the camp was about what illness had confined the *sul'dam* and *damane* to their tents. Alwhin reacted quite openly, most improper in a *so'jhin*, with a furious glare. The *damane* flinched again, and began to shiver where she lay. Oddly, the honey-haired *da'covale* flinched, as well.

Smiling, Suroth glided to where the *da'covale* knelt. Why would she smile at a poorly trained serving girl? She began stroking the kneeling woman's thin braids, and a sullen pout appeared on that rosebud mouth. A former noblewoman of these lands? Suroth's first words supported that, though obviously meant for him. "Small failures bring small costs; great failures bring painfully great costs. You will have the *damane* you require, Miraj. And you will teach these Asha'man they should have remained in the north. You will wipe them from the face of the earth, the Asha'man, the soldiers, all of them. To the man. Miraj. I have spoken."

"It will be as you say, Suroth," he replied. "They will be destroyed. To the man." There was nothing else he could say, now. He wished, though, that she had given him an answer about whether the *sul'dam* and *damane* were still sick.

Rand reined Tai'daishar around near the crest of the bare, stony hill to watch most of his small army spilling out of other holes in the air. He held hard to the True Source, so hard it seemed to tremble in his grasp. With the Power in him, the sharp points of the Crown of Swords pricking his temples felt at once keener than ever and utterly removed, the midmorning chill both colder and beneath notice. The never-healing wounds in his side were a dull and distant ache. Lews Therin seemed to be panting in uncertainty. Or perhaps fear. Maybe after coming so close to death the day before, he did not want so much to die anymore. But then, he did not always want to die. The only constant in the man was the desire to kill. Which just happened to include killing himself, often enough.

There'll be killing enough for anybody, soon, Rand thought. *Light, the last six days were enough to sicken a vulture*. Had it only been six days? The disgust did not touch him, though. He would not let it. Lews Therin did not answer. Yes. It was a time for iron hearts. And iron stomachs, too. He bent a moment to touch the long cloth-wrapped package under his stirrup leather. No. Not time, yet. Maybe not at all. Uncertainty shimmered across the Void, and maybe something else. Not at all, he hoped. Uncertainty, yes, but the other had not been fear. It had not!

Half the surrounding low hills were covered with squat, gnarled olive trees, dappled by the sunlight, where lancers already rode along the rows to make sure they were clear. There was no sign of workers in those orchards, no farmhouse, no structure of any kind in sight. A few miles to the west, the hills were darker, forested. Legionmen, emerging in trotting files below Rand, formed up, trailed by a ragged square of Illianer volunteers, now enlisted into the Legion. As soon as their ranks were aligned, they marched out of the way to make room for Defenders and Companions. The ground seemed mostly clay, and boots and hooves alike skidded in the thin skim of mud. For a wonder, though, only a few clouds hung in the sky, white and clean. The sun was a pale yellow ball. And nothing flew up there larger than a sparrow.

Dashiva and Flinn were among the men holding gateways, as were Adley and Hopwil, Morr and Narishma. Some of the gateways lay out of Rand's sight behind the folded hills. He wanted everyone through as quickly as possible, and except for a few Soldiers scanning the sky, every man in a black coat who was not already out scouting held a weave. Even Gedwyn and Rochaid, though both grimaced over it, at each other and in his direction. Rand thought them no longer used to doing anything so common as holding a gateway for others to use.

Bashere cantered up the slope, very much at ease with himself, and with his short bay. His cloak was flung back despite the morning's coolness, not so cold as the mountains, but still wintery. He nodded casually to Anaiyella and Ailil, who gave bleak stares in return. Bashere smiled through those thick mustaches, like down-curving horns, a not entirely pleasant smile. He had as many doubts of the women as Rand did. The women knew, about Bashere's reservations at least. Turning her head quickly from the Saldaean, Anaiyella returned to stroking her gelding's mane; Ailil held her reins too rigidly.

That pair had not strayed far from Rand since the incident on the ridge, even having their tents pitched in earshot of his the night before. On a brown-grass hillside opposite, Denharad shifted to study the two noblewomen's retainers, arrayed together behind him, then quickly returned to watching Rand. Very likely he watched Ailil, and maybe Anaiyella as well, but he watched Rand without doubt. Rand was unsure whether they still feared to take the blame if he was killed or simply wanted to see it happen. The one thing he was certain of was that if they did want him dead, he would give them no opportunity.

Who knows a woman's heart? Lews Therin chuckled wryly. He sounded in one of his saner moods. *Most women will shrug off what a man would kill you for, and kill you for what a man would shrug off*.

Rand ignored him. The last gateway in Rand's sight winked out. The Asha'man mounting their horses were too far for him to say for sure whether any still held on to *saidin*, but it did not matter so long as he did. Clumsy Dashiva tried to mount quickly and nearly fell off twice before successfully reaching his saddle. Most of the black-coated men in view began riding north or south.

The rest of the nobles gathered quickly with Bashere on the slope just below Rand, the highest ranking and those with the most power in front after a little jostling here and there, where precedence remained uncertain. Tihera and Marcolin kept their horses on the fringes, on opposite sides of the mass of nobles, faces carefully blank; they might be asked for advice, but both knew the final decisions rested with others. Weiramon opened his mouth with a grand gesture, doubtless to begin another splendid peroration on the glories of following the Dragon Reborn. Sunamon and Torean, accustomed to his speeches and powerful enough to take no care around him, reined their horses together and began talking quietly. Sunamon's face wore an unaccustomed hardness, and Torean seemed ready to squabble over a boundary line despite the red satin stripes on his coatsleeves. Square-jawed Bertome and some of the other Cairhienin were not quiet at all, laughing at each other's jokes. Everyone had had a bellyful of Weiramon's grand declamations. Though Semaradrid's scowl deepened every time he looked at Ailil and Anaiyella—he did not like them remaining close to Rand, especially his countrywoman—so perhaps his sourness had more root than Weiramon's windiness.

"About ten miles from us," Rand said loudly, "a good fifty thousand men are preparing to march." They were aware of that, but it pulled every eye to him and silenced every tongue. Weiramon's mouth snapped shut sourly; the fellow did love to hear himself talk. Gueyam and Maraconn, tugging at sharp oiled beards, smiled in anticipation, the fools. Semaradrid looked like a man who had eaten an entire bowl of bad plums; Gregorin and the three lords of the Nine with him merely wore grim determination on their faces. Not fools. "The scouts saw no signs of *sul'dam* or *damane,*" Rand went on, "but even without them, even with Asha'man, that's enough to kill a lot of us if anybody forgets the plan. No one *will* forget, though, I'm sure." No charges without orders, this time. He had made that clear as glass, and hard as stone. No haring off because you thought maybe you just might have seen something, either.

Weiramon smiled, managing to put as much oil into it as Sunamon ever could.

It was a simple plan, in its way. They would advance west in five columns, each with Asha'man, and attempt to fall on the Seanchan from every side at once. Or as close to all sides as could be managed. Simple plans were best, Bashere insisted. *If you won't be satisfied with a whole* *litter of fat piglets*, he had muttered, *if you have to rush into the woods to find the old sow, then don't get too fancy, or she'll gut you*.

No plan of battle survives first contact, Lews Therin said in Rand's head. For a moment, he still seemed lucid. For a moment. *Something is wrong*, he growled suddenly. His voice began to gain intensity, and drift into wild disbelieving laughter. *It can't be wrong, but it is. Something strange, something wrong, skittering, jumping, twitching*. His cackles turned to weeping. *It can't be! I must be mad*! And he vanished before Rand could mute him. Burn him, there was nothing wrong with the plan, or Bashere would have been on it like a duck on a beetle.

Lews Therin *was* mad, no doubt of it. But so long as Rand al'Thor remained sane. . . . A bitter joke on the world, if the Dragon Reborn went mad before the Last Battle even began. "Take your places," he commanded with a wave of the Dragon Scepter. He had to fight down the urge to laugh at that joke.

The large clump of nobles broke apart at his order, milling and muttering as they sorted themselves out. Few liked the way Rand had divided them up. Whatever breaking down of barriers had occurred in the shock of the first fight in the mountains, they had sprung up again almost immediately.

Weiramon frowned over his undelivered speech, but after an elaborate bow that thrust his beard at Rand like a spear he rode north over the hills followed by Kiril Drapaneos, Bertome, Doressin, and several minor Cairhienin lords, every last one of them stony-faced at a Tairen being placed over them. Gedwyn rode by Weiramon's side almost as if he were the one leading, and got dark scowls for it that he affected not to notice. The other groupings were as mixed. Gregorin also headed north, with a sullen Sunamon trying to pretend he was heading in the same direction by happenstance, and Dalthanes leading lesser Cairhienin behind. Jeordwyn Semaris, another of the Nine, followed Bashere south with Amondrid and Gueyam. Those three had accepted the Saldaean almost eagerly for the simple reason that he was not Tairen, or Cairhienin, or Illianer, depending on the man. Rochaid seemed to be trying the same with Bashere that Gedwyn was with Weiramon, but Bashere appeared to ignore it. A little way from Bashere's party, Torean and Maraconn rode with their heads together, likely venting spleen at having Semaradrid placed over them. For that matter, Ershin Netari kept glancing toward Jeordwyn, and standing in his stirrups to look back toward Gregorin and Kiril, though it was improbable he could see them any longer past the hills. Semaradrid, his back iron-rod straight, looked as unflappable as Bashere.

It was the same principle Rand had used all along. He trusted Bashere, and he thought he might be able to trust Gregorin, and none of the others could dare think of turning against him with so many outlanders around him, so many old enemies and so few friends. Rand laughed softly, watching them all ride off from his hillside. They would fight for him, and fight well, because they had no other choice. Any more than he had.

Madness, Lews Therin hissed. Rand shoved the voice away angrily.

He was hardly alone, of course. Tihera and Marcolin had most of the Defenders and Companions mounted in ranks among the olive trees on hills flanking the one where he sat his horse. The rest were out as a screen against surprise. A company of blue-coated Legionmen waited patiently in the hollow below under Masond's eye, and at their rear, as many men in what they had worn surrendering on the heath back in Illian. They were trying to emulate the Legionmen's calm—the other Legionmen, now—trying without a great deal of success.

Rand glanced at Ailil and Anaiyella. The Tairen woman gave him a simpering smile, but it faltered weakly. The Cairhienin woman's face was frost. He could not forget them, or Denharad and their armsmen. His column, in the center, would be the largest, and the strongest by a fair margin. A very fair margin.

Flinn and the men Rand had chosen out after Dumai's Wells rode up the hill toward him. The balding old man always led, though all save Adley and Narishma now wore the Dragon as well as the Sword, and Dashiva had worn it first. In part it was because the younger men deferred to Flinn, with his long experience as a banner-man in the Andoran Queen's Guards. In part it was because Dashiva did not seem to care. He only appeared amused by the others. When he could spare time from talking to himself, that was. Most often, he hardly seemed aware of anything past his own nose.

For that reason, it was something of a shock when Dashiva awkwardly booted his slab-sided mount ahead of the rest. That plain face, so often vague or bemused with the fellow's own thoughts, was fixed in a worried frown. It was *more* than something of a shock when he seized *saidin* as soon as he reached Rand and wove a barrier around them against eavesdropping. Lews Therin did not waste breath—if a disembodied voice *had* breath—on mutters about killing; he lurched for the Source snarling wordlessly, tried to claw the Power away from Rand. And just as abruptly fell silent and vanished.

"There's something askew with *saidin* here, something amiss," Dashiva said, sounding not at all vague. In fact, he sounded . . . precise. And testy. A teacher lecturing a particularly dense pupil. He even stabbed a finger at Rand. "I don't know what it is. Nothing can twist *saidin*, and if it could be twisted, we'd have felt it back in the mountains. Well, there *was* something there, yesterday, but so small. . . . I feel it clearly here, though. *Saidin* is . . . eager. I know; I know. *Saidin* is not alive. But it . . . pulses, here. It is difficult to control."

Rand forced his hand to loosen its grip on the Dragon Scepter. He had always been sure Dashiva was nearly as mad as Lews Therin himself. Usually the man maintained a better hold on himself, though, however precariously. "I've been channeling longer than you, Dashiva. You're just feeling the taint more." He could not soften his tone. Light, he could not go mad yet, and neither could they! "Get to your place. We'll be moving soon." The scouts had to return soon. Even in this flatter country, even limited to no farther than they could see, ten miles would not take long to cover, Traveling.

Dashiva made no move to obey. Instead, he opened his mouth angrily, then snapped it shut. Shaking visibly, he drew a deep breath. "I am well aware how long you have channeled," he said in an icy, almost contemptuous voice, "but surely even you can feel it. Feel, man! I don't like 'strange' applied to *saidin*, and I don't want to die or . . . or be burned out because you're blind! Look at my ward! Look at it!"

Rand stared. Dashiva pushing himself forward was peculiar enough, but Dashiva in a temper? And then he did look at the ward. Really look. The flows should have been as steady as the threads in tight-woven canvas. They vibrated. The ward stood solid as it should be, but the individual threads of the Power shimmered with faint movement. Morr had said *saidin* was strange near Ebou Dar, and for a hundred miles around. They were closer than a hundred miles, now.

Rand made himself feel *saidin*. He was always aware of the Power—anything else meant death or worse—yet he had become used to the struggle. He fought for life, but the fight had become as natural as life. The struggle *was* life. He made himself feel that battle, his life. Cold to make stone shatter into dust. Fire to make stone flash to vapor. Filth to make a rotten cesspit smell a garden in full flower. And . . . a pulsing, like something quivering in his fist. This was not the sort of throbbing he had felt in Shadar Logoth, when the taint on *saidin* had resonated with the evil of that place, and *saidin* had pulsed with it. The vileness was strong, but steady here. It was *saidin* itself that seemed full of currents and surges. Eager, Dashiva called it, and Rand could see why.

Down the slope, behind Flinn, Morr scrubbed a hand through his hair and looked around uneasily. Flinn alternated shifting on his saddle and easing his sword in its scabbard. Narishma, watching the sky for flying creatures, blinked too often. A muscle twitched in Adley's cheek. Every one of them displayed some sign of nervousness, and little wonder. Relief welled up in Rand. Not madness after all.

Dashiva smiled, a twisted self-satisfied smile. "I cannot believe you didn't notice before." There was very close to a *sneer* in his voice. "You've been holding *saidin* practically day and night since we began this mad expedition. This is a simple ward, but it did not want to form, then it snapped together like pulling out of my hands."

The silver-blue slash of a gateway rotated open atop one of the bare hills, half a mile to the west, and a Soldier pulled his horse through and mounted hurriedly, returning from the scout. Even at a distance, Rand could make out the faint shimmer of the weaves surrounding the gateway before they vanished. The rider had not reached the bottom of the hill before another gateway opened on the crest, and then a third, a fourth, more, one after another, almost as fast as the preceding man could get out of the way.

"But it did form," Rand said. So had the scouts' gateways. "If *saidin* is hard to control, it's always hard, and it still does what you want." But why more difficult here? A question for another time. Light, he wished Herid Fel were still alive; the old philosopher might have had an answer. "Get back with the others, Dashiva," he ordered, but the man stared at him in astonishment, and he had to repeat himself before the fellow let the ward vanish, jerked his horse around without a salute and thumped the animal back down the slope with his heels.

"Some trouble, my Lord Dragon?" Anaiyella simpered. Ailil merely looked at Rand with flat eyes.

Seeing the first scout on the way toward Rand, the others fanned off to north and south, where they would join one of the other columns. Finding them the old-fashioned way would be faster than casting about with gateways. Drawing rein in front of Rand, Nalaam slapped fist to chest—did he look a bit wild-eyed? No matter. *Saidin* still did what the man wielding it made it do. Nalaam saluted and gave his report. The Seanchan were not encamped ten miles away, they were no more than five or six distant, marching east. And they had *sul'dam* and *damane* by the score.

Rand issued his orders as Nalaam galloped away, and his column began moving west. The Defenders and the Companions rode on either flank. The Legionmen marched at the rear, just behind Denharad. A reminder to the noblewomen, and their armsmen, if they needed one. Anaiyella certainly looked over her shoulder often enough, and Ailil's refusal to was pointed. Rand formed the main thrust of the column, Rand and Flinn and the others, just as it would be with the other columns. Asha'man to strike, and men with steel to guard their backs while they killed. The sun still had a long way to climb before midday. Nothing had changed to alter the plan.

Madness waits for some, Lews Therin whispered. *It creeps up on others*.

Miraj rode near the head of his army marching east along a muddy road that wound through hilly olive groves and patchy forest. Not at the head. A full regiment, most Seanchan, rode between him and the forward scouts. He had known generals who wanted to be at the very front. Most were dead. Most had lost the battles they died in. Mud kept down dust, yet word of an army on the move ran like wildfire on the Sa'las Plains, whatever the land. Here and there among the olive trees he spotted an overturned wheelbarrow or an abandoned pruning hook, but the workers had vanished long since. Luckily, they would avoid his opponents as much as they did him. With luck, lacking *raken*, his opponents would not know he was on them until it was too late. Kennar Miraj did not like trusting to luck.

Aside from under-officers ready to produce maps or copy orders and messengers ready to carry them, he rode accompanied only by Abaldar Yulan, small enough to make his quite ordinary brown gelding seem immense, a fiery man with the nails of his little fingers painted green who wore a black wig to conceal his baldness, and Lisaine Jarath, a gray-haired woman from Seandar itself, whose pale plump face and blue eyes were a study in serenity. Yulan was not calm; Miraj's coal-dark Captain of the Air often wore a scowl for the rules that seldom let him touch the reins of a *raken* anymore, but today his frown went bone deep. The sky was clear, perfect weather for *raken*, but by Suroth’s command, none of his fliers would be in the saddle today, not here. There were too few *raken* with the Hailene to risk them unnecessarily. Lisaine’s calm troubled Miraj more. More than the senior *der’sul’dam* under his command, she was a friend with whom he had shared many a cup of *kaf* and many a game of stones. An animated woman, always bubbling over with enthusiasms and amusement. And she was icy calm, as silent as any *sul’dam* he had tried to question.

Within his sight were twenty *damane* flanking the horsemen, each walking beside her *sul’dam’s* mount. The *sul’dam* bobbed in their saddles, bending to pat a *damane’s* head, straightening only to bend again to stroke her hair. The *damane* looked steady enough to his eye, but plainly the *sul’dam* were on razor’s edge. And ebullient Lisaine rode silent as a stone.

A *torm* appeared ahead, racing down the column. Well off to the side, on the edge of the groves, yet horses whickered and shied as the bronze-scaled creature flowed past. A trained *torm* would not attack horses—at least not unless the killing frenzy overtook it, the reason *torm* were no good in battle—but horses trained to be calm around *torm* were in as short supply as *torm* themselves.

Miraj sent a skinny under-lieutenant named Varek to fetch the *morat’torm’s* scouting report. Afoot, and the Light consume whether Varek lost *sei’taer*. He would not waste time on Varek trying to control a mount acquired locally. The man returned faster than he went and made a crisp bow, beginning his report before his back was straight again.

“The enemy is less than five miles due east, my Lord Captain-General, marching in our direction. They are deployed in five columns spaced approximately one mile apart.”

So much for luck. But Miraj had considered how he would attack forty thousand with only five himself, and fifty *damane*. Quickly men were galloping with orders to deploy to meet an attempted envelopment, and the regiments behind him began turning into the groves, *sul’dam* riding among them with their *damane*.

Gathering his cloak against a sudden cold wind, Miraj noticed something that made him feel colder still. Lisaine was watching the *sul’dam* vanish into the trees, too. And she had begun to sweat.

Bertome rode easily, letting the wind stream his cloak to one side, but he studied the forested country ahead with a wariness he barely attempted to conceal. Of his four countrymen at his back, only Doressin was truly skilled in the Game of Houses. That fool Tairen dog Weiramon was blind, of course. Bertome glared at the puffed-up buffoon's back. Weiramon rode well ahead of the rest in deep conversation with Gedwyn, and if Bertome needed any further proof that the Tairen would smile at what *gagged* a goat, it was how he tolerated that hot-eyed young monster. He noticed Kiril glancing sideways at him, and reined his gray farther from the towering man. He had no particular enmity toward the Illianer, but he did hate people looming over him. He could not wait to return to Cairhien, where he did not have to be surrounded by ungainly giants. Kiril Drapeneos was not blind, though, however over-tall. He had sent a dozen scouts forward, too. Weiramon had sent one.

"Doressin," Bertome said softly, then, a little louder, "Doressin, you lump!"

The bony man gave a start in his saddle. Like Bertome, like the other three, he had shaved and powdered the front of his head; the style of marking yourself like a soldier had become quite fashionable. Doressin should have called him a toad in return, the way they had since boyhood, but instead he heeled his gelding up beside Bertome's and leaned close. He was worried, and letting it show, his forehead furrowed deeply. "You realize the Lord Dragon means us to die?" he whispered, glancing at the column trailing behind them. "Blood and fire, I only listened to Colavaere, but I have known I was a dead man since he killed her."

For a moment, Bertome eyed the column of armsmen, snaking back through the rolling hills. The trees were more scattered here than ahead, but still enough to shield an attack until it was right on top of you. The last olive grove lay nearly a mile behind. Weiramon's men rode at the fore, of course, in those ridiculous coats with their fat white-striped sleeves, and then Kiril's Illianers in enough green and red to shame Tinkers. His own people, decently clad in dark blue beneath their breastplates, were still beyond his sight with Doressin's and the others', ahead only of the company of Legionmen. Weiramon had seemed surprised that the foot kept up, though he had hardly set a difficult pace.

It was not really the armsmen Bertome glanced at, though. Seven men rode before even Weiramon's, seven men with hard faces and death-cold eyes, in black coats. One wore a pin in the shape of a silver sword on his tall collar.

“An elaborate way to go about it,” he told Doressin dryly. “And I doubt al’Thor would have sent those fellows with us, if we were just being fed into a sausage grinder.” Forehead still creased, Doressin opened his mouth again, but Bertome said, “I need to talk to the Tairen.” He disliked seeing his childhood friend this way. Al’Thor had unhinged him.

Absorbed in one another, Weiramon and Gedwyn did not hear him riding up on them. Gedwyn was idly playing with his reins, his features cold with contempt. The Tairen was red-faced. “I don’t care who you are,” he was saying to the black-coated man in a low, hard voice, spittle flying, “I won’t take more risk without a command direct from the lips of—”

Abruptly the pair became aware of Bertome, and Weiramon’s mouth snapped shut. He glared as if he wanted to kill Bertome. The Asha’man’s ever-present smile melted away. The wind gusted, cold and sharp as clouds drifted across the sun, but no colder than Gedwyn’s sudden stare. With a small shock Bertome realized the man also wanted to strike him dead on the spot.

Gedwyn’s icily murderous gaze did not change, but Weiramon’s face underwent a remarkable transformation. The red faded slowly as he produced a smile in an instant, an oily smile with only a trace of mocking condescension. “I’ve been thinking about you, Bertome,” he said heartily. “A pity al’Thor strangled your cousin. With his own hands, I hear. Frankly, I was surprised you came when he called. I’ve seen him watching you. I fear he plans something more . . . interesting . . . for you than thrashing your heels on the floor while his fingers tighten on your throat.”

Bertome suppressed a sigh, and not only at the fool’s clumsiness. A good many thought to manipulate him with Colavaere’s death. She had been his favorite cousin, but ambitious beyond reason. Saighan had good claims to the Sun Throne, yet she could not have held it against the strength of Riatin or Damodred either one, let alone both together, not without the open blessings of the White Tower or the Dragon Reborn. Still, she *had* been his favorite. What did Weiramon want? Certainly not what it seemed on the surface. Even this Tairen oaf was not *that* simple.

Before he could frame any response, a horseman came galloping toward them through the trees ahead. A Cairhienin, and as he reined to a sudden halt in front of them, that made his horse sit back on its haunches, Bertome recognized one of his own armsmen, a gap-toothed fellow with seamed scars on both cheeks. Doile, he thought. From the Colchaine estates.

“My Lord Bertome,” the fellow panted, bowing hastily. “There are two thousand Taraboners hard on my heels. And women with them! With lightning on their dresses!”

“Hard on his heels,” Weiramon murmured disparagingly. “We’ll see what my man has to say when he gets back. I certainly don’t see any—!”

Sudden whoops in the near distance ahead cut him off, and the thunder of hooves, and then quickly galloping lancers appeared, a flowing tide spreading through the trees. Straight toward Bertome and the others.

Weiramon laughed. “Kill whoever you wish, wherever you wish, Gedwyn,” he said, drawing sword with a flourish. “I use the methods I use, and that’s that!” Racing back toward his armsmen, he waved the blade over his head shouting, “Saniago! Saniago and glory!” It was no surprise he did not add a shout for his country to those for his House and his greatest love.

Spurring in the same direction, Bertome raised his own voice. “Saighan and Cairhien!” No need for sword waving yet. “Saighan and Cairhien!” What *had* the man been after?

Thunder rumbled, and Bertome looked to the sky, perplexed. There were few more clouds than earlier. No; Doile—Dalyn?—had mentioned those women. And then he forgot all about whatever the fool Tairen wanted as steel-veiled Taraboners poured over the wooded hills toward him, the earth blooming fire and the sky raining lightning ahead of them.

“Saighan and Cairhien!” he shouted.

The wind rose.

Horsemen clashed amid thick trees and heavy underbrush, where shadows hung heavily. The light seemed to be failing, the clouds thickening overhead, but it was hard to say with the dense forest canopy for a roof. Booming roars half-drowned the ring of steel on steel, the shouts of men, the screams of horses. Sometimes the ground shook. Sometimes the enemy raised shouts.

“Den Lushenos! Den Lushenos and the Bees!”

Annallin! Rally to Annallin!”

“Haellin! Haellin! For the High Lord Sunamon!”

The last was the only cry Varek understood in the least, though he suspected any of the locals who named themselves High Lords or Ladies might not be offered the chance to swear the Oath.

He jerked his sword free from where he had jammed it into his opponent’s armpit, just above the breastplate, and let the pale little man topple. A dangerous fighter, until he made the mistake of raising his blade too high. The man’s bay crashed off through the undergrowth, and Varek spared a moment for regret. The animal looked better than the white-footed dun he was forced to ride. A moment only, and then he was peering through the close-set trees, where it seemed vines dangled from half the branches and bunches of some gray, feathery plant from nearly all.

Sounds of battle rose from every direction, but at first he could see nothing that moved. Then a dozen Altaran lancers appeared at fifty paces, walking their horses and peering about carefully, though the way they talked loudly among themselves more than justified the red slashes crisscrossing their breastplates. Varek gathered his reins, meaning to take them in. An escort, even this undisciplined rabble, might be the difference between the urgent message he carried reaching Banner-General Chianmai and not.

Black streaks flashed from among the trees, emptying Altaran saddles. Their horses dashed in every direction as the riders fell, and then there were only a dozen corpses sprawled on the damp carpet of dead leaves, at least one crossbow bolt jutting from every man. Nothing moved. Varek shivered in spite of himself. Those foot in blue coats had seemed easy at first, with no pikes to stand behind, but they never came into the open, hiding behind trees, in dips in the ground. They were not the worst. He had been sure after the frantic retreat to the ships at Falme that he had seen the worse he ever could see, the Ever Victorious Army in a rout. Not half an hour gone, though, he had seen a hundred Taraboners face one lone man in a black coat. A hundred lancers against one, and the Taraboners had been ripped to shreds. Literally ripped to shreds, men and horses simply exploding as fast he could count; the slaughter had continued after the Taraboners turned to flee, went on so long as one of them remained in sight. Perhaps it was really no worse than having the ground erupt beneath your feet, but at least *damane* usually left enough of you to be buried.

He had been told by the last man he managed to speak to in these woods, a grizzled veteran from home leading a hundred Amadician pikes, that Chianmai was in this direction. Ahead, he spotted riderless horses tied to trees, and men afoot. Maybe they could give him further direction. And he would give them the lash of his tongue for standing about while a battle raged.

When he rode in among them, he forgot tongue-lashings. He had found what he was looking for, but not at all what he wanted to find. A dozen badly burned corpses lay in a row. One, his honey-brown face untouched, was recognizably Chianmai. The men on their feet were all Taraboners, Amadicians, Altarans. Some of them were injured, too. The only Seanchan was a tight-faced *sul'dam* soothing a weeping *damane*.

"What happened here?" Varek demanded. He did not think it was like these Asha'man to leave survivors. Maybe the *sul'dam* had fought him off.

"Madness, my lord." A hulking Taraboner shrugged away the man who was spreading ointment down his seared left arm. The sleeve appeared to have been burned away clear to the fellow's breastplate, yet despite his burns, he did not grimace. His veil of steel mail hung by a corner from his red-plumed conical helmet, baring a hard face with thick gray mustaches that nearly hid his mouth, and his eyes were insultingly direct. "A group of Illianers, they fell on us without warning. At first, all went well. They had none of the blackcoats with them. Lord Chianmai, he led us bravely, and the . . . the woman . . . channeled lightnings. Then, just as the Illianers broke, the lightnings, they fell among us, too." He cut off with a significant look at the *sul'dam*.

She was on her feet in an instant, shaking her free fist and striding as far toward the Taraboner as the leash attached to her other wrist would allow. Her *damane* lay in a weeping heap. "I will not hear this dog's words against my Zakai! She is a good *damane*! A good *damane*!"

Varek made soothing gestures to the woman. He had seen *sul'dam* make their charges howl for misdeeds, and a few who crippled the recalcitrant, but most would bristle even at one of the Blood who cast aspersions on a favorite. This Taraboner was *not* of the Blood, and by the look of the quivering *sul'dam*, she was ready to do murder. Had the man voiced his ridiculous, unspoken charge, Varek thought she might have killed him on the spot.

"Prayers for the dead must wait," Varek said bluntly. What he was about to do would end with him in the hands of the Seekers, if he failed, but there was not a Seanchan left standing here except the *sul'dam*. "I am assuming command. We will disengage and turn south."

“Disengage!” the heavy-shouldered Taraboner barked. “It will take us *days* to *disengage*! The Illianers, they fight like badgers backed into a corner, the Cairhienin like ferrets in a box. The Tairens, they are not so hard as I have heard, but there are maybe a dozen of these Asha’man, yes? I do not even know where three-quarters of my men are, in this jolly-bag!” Emboldened by his example, the others began giving protest, too.

Varek ignored them. And forbore asking what a “jolly-bag” was; looking at the tangled forest all around, listening to the clash of battle, the booms of explosions and lightnings, he could imagine. “You will gather your men and begin pulling back,” he said loudly, cutting through their chatter. “Not too fast; you will act in unison.” Miraj’s orders to Chianmai said “with all possible speed”—he had memorized them, in case something happened to the copy in his saddlebags—“all possible speed,” but too much speed in this, and half the men would be left behind, chopped to flinders at the enemy’s leisure. “Now, move! You fight for the Empress, may she live forever!”

That last was the sort of thing you told fresh recruits, but for some reason, the listening men jerked as if he had struck them all with his quirt. Bowing quickly and deeply, hands on knees, they all but flew to their horses. Strange. Now it was up to him to find the Seanchan units. One of those would be commanded by someone above him, and he could pass his responsibility.

The *sul’dam* was on her knees, stroking her still weeping *damane’s* hair and crooning softly. “Get her soothed down,” he told her. With all possible speed. And he thought he had seen a touch of anxiety in Miraj’s eyes. What could make Kennar Miraj anxious? “I think we will be depending on you *sul’dam* to the south.” Now, why would that make the blood drain from her face?

Bashere stood just inside the edge of the trees, frowning through his helmet’s face-bars at what he saw. His bay nuzzled his shoulder. He held his cloak close against the wind. More to avoid any motion that would draw eyes than for the cold, though that chilled his flesh. It would have been a spring breeze back in Saldaea, but months in the southlands had softened him. Shining bright between gray clouds that sailed along quickly, the sun still lay a little short of midday. And ahead of him. Just because you began a battle facing west did not mean you ended it that way. Before him lay a broad pasture where flocks of black-and-white goats cropped at the brown grass in desultory fashion just as if there was no battle raging all around them. Not that there was any sign of it here. For the moment. A man could get himself cut to doll rags crossing that meadow. And in the trees, whether forest or olive groves or thickets, you did not always see the enemy before you were on top of him, scouts or no scouts.

“If we’re going to cross,” Gueyam muttered, rubbing a wide hand over his bald head, “we should cross. Light’s truth, we’re wasting time.” Amondrid snapped his mouth shut; likely, the moon-faced Cairhienin had been about to say much the same thing. He would agree with a Tairen when horses climbed trees.

Jeordwyn Semaris snorted. The man should have grown a beard to hide that narrow jaw. It made his head look like a forester’s splitting wedge. “I do say go around,” he muttered. “I’ve lost enough men to those Light-cursed *damane*, and . . .” He trailed off with an uneasy glance toward Rochaid.

The young Asha’man stood by himself, mouth tight, fingering that Dragon pin on his collar. Maybe wondering whether it was worth it, by the look of him. There was no knowing air about the boy now, only frowning worry.

Leading Quick by the reins, Bashere strode to the Asha’man and drew him farther aside in the trees. Pushed him farther aside. Rochaid scowled, going reluctantly. The man was tall enough to loom over Bashere, but Bashere was having none of it.

“Can I count on your people next time?” Bashere demanded, jerking a mustache in irritation. “No delays?” Rochaid and his fellows seemed to have grown slower and slower responding when they found themselves opposite *damane*.

“I know what I’m about, Bashere,” Rochaid snarled. “Aren’t we killing enough of them for you? As far as I can see, we’re about done!”

Bashere nodded slowly. Not in agreement with the last. There were plenty of enemy soldiers left, almost anywhere you looked hard enough. But a good many *were* dead. He had patterned his movements on what he had studied of the Trolloc Wars, when the forces of the Light seldom came anywhere near the numbers they had to face. Slash at the flanks, and run. Slash at the rear, and run. Slash, and run, and when the enemy chased after, turn on the ground you had chosen beforehand, where the legionmen lay waiting with their crossbows, turn and cut at him until it was time to run again. Or until he broke. Already today he had broken Taraboners, Amadicians, Altarans *and* these Seanchan in their strange armor. He had seen more enemy dead than in any fight since the Blood Snow. But if he had Asha'man, the other side had those *damane*. A good third of his Saldaeans lay dead along the miles behind. Nearly half his force was dead, all told, and there were still more Seanchan out there with their cursed women, and Taraboners, and Amadicians and Altarans. They just kept coming, more appearing as soon as he finished the last. And the Asha'man were growing . . . hesitant.

Swinging into Quick's saddle, he rode back to Jeordwyn and the others. "We go around," he ordered, ignoring Jeordwyn's nods as much as he did Gueyam and Amondrid's scowls. "Triple scouts out. I mean to push hard, but I don't want to trip over a *damane*." No one laughed.

Rochaid had gathered the other five Asha'man around him, one with a silver sword pinned to his collar, the others without. There had been two more with bare collars when they started out that morning, but if Asha'man knew how to kill, so did *damane*. Waving his arms angrily, Rochaid appeared to be arguing with them. His face was red, theirs blank and stubborn. Bashere just hoped Rochaid could keep all of them from deserting. Today had been costly enough without adding that sort of man wandering about loose.

A light rain fell. Rand scowled at the thick black clouds gathering the sky, already beginning to obscure a pale sun halfway down to the far horizon. Light rain now, but it would thicken like those clouds! Irritably he returned to studying the land ahead of him. The Crown of Swords pricked his temples. With the Power in him, the land was clear as a map despite the weather. Clear enough, anyway. Hills sinking away, some covered with thickets or olive trees, others bare grass or just stone and weeds. He thought he saw movement at the edge of a copse, then again among the rows of an olive orchard on another hill a mile from the copse. Thinking was not enough. Dead men lay across the miles behind, dead enemies. Dead women, too, he knew, but he had stayed away from anywhere *sul'dam* and *damane* had died, refused to see their faces. Most thought it was hatred for those who killed so many of his followers.

Tai'daishar frisked a few steps on the hilltop before Rand settled him with a firm hand and the pressure of his knees. A fine thing if a *sul'dam* spotted *his* movement. The few trees around him were not enough to hide much. Vaguely, he realized he did not recognize a one of them. Tai'daishar tossed his head. Rand tucked the Dragon Scepter into his saddlebags, just the carved butt end sticking out, to free both hands in case the gelding was not satisfied. He could have taken weariness from the horse with *saidin*, but he knew no way to make it obey with the Power.

He could not see how the gelding retained enough energy. *Saidin* filled him, bubbled in him, but his distantly felt body wanted to sag with weariness. Part of that was the sheer amount of the Power he had handled today. Part was the strain of fighting *saidin* to make it do what he wanted. Always, *saidin* had to be conquered, forced, but never before like today. The half-healed, never-healing wounds in his left side were agony, the older an auger trying to drill through the Void, the newer a blaze of raw flame.

"It was an accident, my Lord Dragon," Adley said suddenly. "I swear it was!"

"Shut up and watch!" Rand told him harshly. Adley's eyes sank to his hands on his own reins for a moment, then he raked damp hair out of his face and jerked his head up obediently.

Today, here, controlling *saidin* was harder than ever, but letting it slip anytime, anywhere, could kill you. Adley had let it slip, and men had died in uncontrolled bursts of fire, not just the Amadicians he had been aiming at, but near thirty of Ailil's armsmen and almost as many of Anaiyella's.

Except for his slip, Adley would have been with Morr, with the Companions in the woods half a mile to the south. Narishma and Hopwil were with the Defenders, to the north. Rand wanted Adley under his eye. Had any other "accidents" happened, out of his sight? He could not watch everyone, all the time. Flinn's face was grim as day-old death, and Dashiva, far from looking vague, seemed on the point of sweating with concentration. He still muttered to himself under his breath, so low Rand could not hear even with the Power in him, but the man mopped rain from his face continually with a sodden lace-edged linen handkerchief that had grown more than grimy as the day wore on. Rand did not think they had slipped. In any case, neither they nor Adley held the Power now. Nor would until he instructed them to seize it.

"Is it done?" Anaiyella asked behind him.

Heedless of who might be watching out there, Rand wheeled Tai'daishar around to face her. The Tairen woman started back in her saddle, the hood of her richly elaborate rain cape falling to her shoulders.

Her cheek gave a twitch. Her eyes might have been full of fear, or hate. At her side, Ailil fingered her reins calmly with red-gloved hands.

"What more can you want?" the smaller woman asked in a cool voice. A lady being polite to a menial. Barely. "If the size of a victory is accounted by dead enemies, I think today alone will put your name in the histories."

"I mean to drive the Seanchan into the sea!" Rand snapped. Light, he *had* to finish them now, when he had the chance! He could not fight the Seanchan and the Forsaken and the Light alone knew who or what else, all at the same time! "I did it before, and I will again!"

Do you have the Horn of Valere hidden in your pocket this time? Lews Therin asked slyly. Rand snarled at him silently.

"There's someone below," Flinn said suddenly. "Riding up this way. From the west."

Rand pulled his mount back around. Legionmen ringed the slopes of the hill, though they hid well enough that he seldom caught sight of a blue coat. None of them had a horse. Who would be riding . . .

Bashere's bay trotted up the slope almost as though it were level ground. Bashere's helmet hung from his saddle, and the man himself looked tired. Without preamble, he spoke in a flat voice. "We're finished, here. Part of fighting is knowing when to go, and it's time. I've left five hundred dead behind, near enough, and two of your Soldiers for salt. I sent three more to find Semaradrid, Gregorin and Weiramon and tell them to rally on you. I doubt they're in any better condition than I am. How does *your* butcher's bill run?"

Rand ignored the question. His own dead topped Bashere's by close to two hundred. "You had no right sending orders to the others. So long as there are half a dozen Asha'man left—so long as there's me!—I have enough! I mean to find the rest of the Seanchan army and destroy it, Bashere. I won't let them add Altara to Tarabon and Amadicia."

Bashere knuckled his thick mustaches with a wry laugh. "You want to find them. Look out there." He swept a gauntleted hand across the hills to the west. "I can't point to a particular spot, but there are ten, maybe fifteen thousand close enough to see from here, if those trees weren't in the way. I danced with the Dark One getting through them unseen to reach you. Maybe a hundred *damane* down there. Maybe more. More coming, for sure, and more men. Seems their general has decided to concentrate on you. I suppose it isn't always cheese and ale being *ta'veren*."

"If they're out there . . ." Rand scanned the hills. The rain fell more heavily. Where had he seen movement? Light, he was tired. *Saidin* hammered at him. Unconsciously he touched the wrapped bundled beneath his stirrup leather. His hand jerked away of its own accord. Ten thousand, even fifteen . . . Once Semaradrid reached him, and Gregorin, and Weiramon . . . More important, once the rest of the Asha'man did . . . "If they're out there, that's where I'll destroy them, Bashere. I'll hit them from all sides, the way we intended in the first place."

Frowning, Bashere reined his horse closer, until his knee almost touched Rand's. Flinn moved his mount away, but Adley was too focused on staring through the rain to notice anything so near, and Dashiva, still wiping his face incessantly, stared with open interest. Bashere lowered his voice to a murmur. "You aren't thinking straight. That was a good plan, in the beginning, but their general thinks fast. He spread out to blunt our attacks before we could fall on him spread out marching. We've cost him even so, it seems, and he now he's pulling everything together. You won't catch him by surprise. He *wants* us to come at him. He's out there *waiting* for it. Asha'man or no Asha'man, if we stand nose-to-nose with this fellow, I think maybe the vultures grow fat and nobody rides away."

"Nobody stands nose-to-nose with the Dragon Reborn," Rand growled. "The Forsaken could tell him that, whoever he is. Right, Flinn? Dashiva?" Flinn nodded uncertainly. Dashiva flinched. "You think I can't surprise him, Bashere? Watch!" Pulling the long bundle loose, he stripped away the cloth covering, and Rand heard gasps as raindrops glistened on a sword seemingly made of crystal. The Sword That Is Not a Sword. "Let's see if he's surprised by *Callandor* in the hands of the Dragon Reborn, Bashere."

Cradling the translucent blade in the crook of his elbow, Rand rode Tai'daishar forward a few steps. There was no reason to. He had no clearer view from there. Except . . . Something spidered across the outer surface of the Void, a wriggling black web. He was afraid. The last time he had used *Callandor*, really used it, he had tried to bring the dead back to life. He had been sure he could do anything, then, anything at all. Like a madman thinking he could fly. But he was the Dragon Reborn. He *could* do anything. Had he not proved it time and again? He reached for the Source through the Sword That Is Not a Sword.

Saidin seemed to leap into *Callandor* before he touched the Source through it. From pommel to point, the crystal sword shone with a white light. He had only thought the Power filled him before. Now he held more than ten men could have unaided, a hundred, he did not know how many. The fires of the sun, searing through his head. The cold of all of the winters of all the Ages, eating into his heart. In that torrent, the taint was all the midden heaps in the world emptying into his soul. *Saidin* still tried to kill him, tried to scour away, burn away, freeze away, every scrap of him, but he fought, and he lived for a moment more, and another moment, another. He wanted to laugh. He *could* do anything!

Once, holding *Callandor*, he had made a weapon that searched out Shadowspawn through the Stone of Tear, struck them dead with hunting lightning wherever they stood or ran or hid. Surely there must be something like that, to use against his enemies here. But when he called to Lews Therin, only anguished whimpers answered, as if that disembodied voice feared the pain of *saidin*.

With *Callandor* blazing in his hand—he did not remember raising the blade overhead—he stared at the hills where his enemies hid. They were gray now, with thickening rain, and dense black clouds blocking the sun. What was it he had told Eagan Padros?

"I am the storm," he whispered—a shout in his ears, a roar—and he channeled.

Overhead, the clouds boiled. Where they had been the black of soot, they became midnight, the heart of midnight. He did not know what he was channeling. So often, he did not, in spite of Asmodean's teaching. Maybe Lews Therin was guiding him, in spite of the man's weeping. Flows of *saidin* spun across the sky, Wind and Water and Fire. Fire. The sky truly did rain lightning. A hundred bolts at once, hundreds, forked blue-white shafts stabbing down as far as he could see. The hills before him erupted. Some flew apart under the torrent of lightning like kicked anthills. Flames sprang up in thickets, trees turning to torches in the rain, flames racing through olive orchards.

Something struck him hard, and he realized he was picking himself up from the ground. The crown had fallen from his head. *Callandor* still blazed in his hand, though. Vaguely, he was aware of Tai'daishar scrambling to his feet, trembling. So they thought to strike back at him, did they.

Shoving *Callandor* high, he screamed at them. “Come against me, if you dare! I *am* the storm! Come if you dare, Shai’tan! I am the Dragon Reborn!” A thousand sizzling lightning bolts hailed down from the clouds.

Again something struck him down. He tried to fight up again. *Callandor*, still shining, lay a pace from his outstretched hand. The sky shattered with lightnings. Suddenly, he realized that the weight atop him was Bashere, that the man was shaking him. It must have been Bashere who had flung him down!

“Stop it!” the Saldaean shouted. Blood fanned down his face from a split across his scalp. “You’re killing us, man! Stop!”

Rand turned his head, and one stunned look was enough. Lightnings flashed *all* around him, in *every* direction. A bolt stabbed down onto the reverse slope, where Denharad and the armsmen were; the screams of men and horses rose. Anaiyella and Ailil were both afoot, trying vainly to quiet mounts that reared, eyes rolling, trying to rip reins free. Flinn was bending over someone, not far from a dead horse with legs already stiff.

Rand let *saidin* go. He let it go, but for moments it still flowed into him, and lightning raged. The flow into him dwindled, tailed off and vanished. Dizziness swept through him in its place. For three more heartbeats, two of *Callandor* shone where they lay on the ground, and lightning fell. Then, silence except for the rising drum of the rain. And the screams from behind the hill.

Slowly Bashere climbed off of him, and Rand rose unaided on tottering legs, blinking as his sight returned to normal. The Saldaean watched him as he might have a rabid lion, fingering his sword hilt. Anaiyella took one look at Rand on his feet and collapsed in a faint; her horse dashed away, reins dangling. Ailil, still fighting her rearing animal, spared few glances for Rand. Rand let *Callandor* lie where it was for the moment. He was not sure he dared pick it up. Not yet.

Flinn straightened, shaking his head, then stood silently as Rand went unsteadily to stand beside him. The rain fell on Jonan Adley’s sightless eyes, bulging as if in horror. Jonan had been one of the first. Those screams from behind the hill seemed to slice through the rain. How many more, Rand wondered. Among the Defenders? The Companions? Among . . . ?

Rain thick as a blanket hid the hills where the Seanchan army lay. Had he hurt them at all, striking out blindly? Or were they still waiting out there with all their *damane*? Waiting to see how many more of his own he could kill for them.

“Set whatever guard you think we need,” Rand told Bashere. His voice was iron. One of the first. His heart was iron. “When Gregorin and the others reach us, we’ll Travel to where the carts are waiting as fast as we can.” Bashere nodded without speaking, and turned away in the rain.

I’ve lost, Rand thought dully. *I’m the Dragon Reborn, but for the first time, I’ve lost*.

Suddenly, Lews Therin raged up inside him, sly digs forgotten. *I’ve* never *been defeated*, he snarled. *I am the Lord of the Morning*! No *one can defeat me*!

Rand sat in the rain, turning the Crown of Swords in his hands, looking at *Callandor* lying in the mud. He let Lews Therin rage.

* * *

Abaldar Yulan wept, grateful for the downpour that hid the tears on his cheeks. Someone would have to give the order. Eventually someone would have to apologize to the Empress, might she live forever, and maybe to Suroth sooner. Those were not why he wept, though, nor even for a dead comrade. Roughly ripping a sleeve from his coat, he laid it across Miraj’s staring eyes so the rain would not fall in them.

“Send out orders for retreat,” Yulan ordered, and saw the men standing around him jerk. For the second time on these shores, the Ever Victorious Army had suffered a devastating defeat, and Yulan did not think he was the only one who wept.

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CHAPTER 25

An Unwelcome Return

Seated behind her gilded writing table, Elaida fingered an age-dark ivory carving of a strange bird with a beak as long as its body and listened with some amusement to the six women standing on the other side on the table. Each a Sitter for her Ajah, they frowned sideways at one another, shifted velvet slippers on the brightly patterned carpet that covered most of the russet floor tiles, twitched at vine-worked shawls so the colored fringes danced, and generally looked and sounded like a gaggle of peevish serving girls wishing they had the nerve to go for each others' throats in front of their mistress. Frost coated the glassed casements fitted into the windows so that it was hardly possible to see the snow swirling outside, though sometimes the winds howled with an icy rage. Elaida felt quite warm, and not just for the thick logs blazing in the white marble fireplace. Whether these women knew it or not—well, Duhara knew, certainly, and perhaps the others did—she *was* their mistress. The elaborate gold-covered case clock that Cemaile had commissioned ticked away. Cemaile's vanished dream *would* come true; The Tower returned to its glory. And firmly in the capable hands of Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan.

"No *ter'angreal* has ever been found that can 'control' a woman's channeling," Velina was saying in a voice cool and precise but almost girlishly high-pitched, a voice at strong odds with her eagle's beak of a nose and her sharp, tilted eyes. She sat for the White, and was the very model of a White sister, in all but her fierce appearance. Her plain, snowy dress seemed stark and cold. "Very few have ever been found that perform the same function. Therefore, logically, if such a *ter'angreal* were found, or more than one, improbable as that must be, there could not be sufficient of them to control more than two or three women at most. It follows that the reports of these so-called Seanchan are exaggerated wildly. If women on 'leashes' exist, they cannot channel. Plainly not. I do not deny these people hold Ebou Dar, and Amador, and perhaps more, but clearly they are but a creation of Rand al'Thor, perhaps to frighten people into flocking to him. Like this Prophet of his. It is simple logic."

"I am very glad you don't deny Amador and Ebou Dar at least, Velina," Shevan said drily. And she could be *very* dry indeed. As tall as most men, and bonily thin with it, the Brown Sitter had an angular face and a long chin, not improved by a cap of curls. With spidery fingers she rearranged her shawl and smoothed skirts of dark golden silk, and her voice took on pointed amusement. "I'm uncomfortable saying what can and can't be. For example, not long gone, everyone 'knew' only a shield woven by a sister could stop a woman channeling. Then comes a simple herb, forkroot, and anyone at all can feed you a tea that leaves you unable as a stone to channel for hours. Useful with unruly wilders or the like, I suppose, but a nasty little surprise for those who think they knew everything, eh? Maybe next, someone will learn to make *ter'angreal* again."

Elaida's mouth tightened. She did not concern herself with impossibilities, and if no sister had managed to rediscover the making of *ter'angreal* in three thousand years, one never would and that was that. It was knowledge slipping through her fingers when she wanted it held close that curled Elaida's tongue. In spite of all her efforts, every last initiate in the Tower had learned of forkroot, now. No one liked knowing in the least. No one liked suddenly being vulnerable to anyone with a knowledge of herbs and a little hot water. That knowledge was worse than poison, as the Sitters here made clear.

At mention of the herb, Duhara's big, dark eyes grew uneasy in her coppery face, and she held herself more stiffly than usual, hands clutching skirts so red they seemed nearly black. Sedore actually swallowed, and her fingers tightened on the worked leather folder Elaida had handed her, though the round-faced Yellow usually carried herself with a frosty elegance. Andaya shivered! She actually wrapped her gray-fringed shawl around her convulsively.

Elaida wondered what they would do if they learned the Asha'man had rediscovered Traveling. As it was, they were barely able to make themselves speak of them. At least she had managed to hold that knowledge to a handful.

"I think we might better concern ourselves with what we know to be true, yes?" Andaya said firmly, back in control of herself. Her light brown hair, brushed till it gleamed, hung flowing down her back, and her silver-slashed blue dress was cut in the style of Andor, but Tarabon still rested strongly on her tongue. Though neither particularly small nor particularly slim, she somehow always reminded Elaida of a sparrow about to hop on a branch. A most unlikely-appearing negotiator, though her reputation had been earned. She smiled at the others, not very pleasantly, and that seemed sparrowlike, too. Perhaps it was how she held her head. "Idle speculation, it wastes precious time. The world hangs by a thread, and myself, I do not wish to fritter away valuable hours prattling about supposed logic or chattering over what every fool and novice knows. Does anyone have anything useful to say?" For a sparrow, she could put acid on her words. Velina's face went red, and Shevan's darkened.

Rubinde twisted her lips at the Gray. Perhaps they were meant to make a smile, but they merely seemed to writhe. With raven-black hair and eyes like sapphires, the Mayener usually looked as if she intended to walk through a stone wall, and planting her fists on her hips now, she seemed ready to walk through two. "We've dealt with what we can for the time being, Andaya. Most of it, anyway. The rebels are caught by the snows in Murandy, and we'll make winter hot enough for them that in the spring they'll come crawling back to apologize and beg penance. Tear will be taken care of as soon as we find where the High Lord Darlin has vanished to, and Cairhien once we root Caraline Damodred and Toram Riatin out of their hiding places. Al'Thor has the crown of Illian for the moment, but that's in work. So, unless you have a scheme for snaffling the man into the Tower or making these so-called Asha'man' vanish, I have the business of my Ajah to be about."

Andaya drew herself up, her feathers well and truly ruffled. For that matter, Duhara's eyes narrowed; mention of men who could channel always lit fires in her head. Shevan clicked her tongue as if at children squabbling—though she looked pleased to see it—and Velina frowned, for some reason sure Shevan had aimed at her. This was amusing, but getting out of hand.

"The business of the Ajahs is important, daughters." Elaida did not raise her voice, but every head swiveled toward her. She replaced the ivory carving with the rest of her collection in the large box covered with roses and golden scrolls, carefully adjusted the positions of her writing case and correspondence box so the three lacquered boxes lined up just so on the table, and once their silence was perfect she went on. "The business of the Tower is *more* important, though. I trust you will effect my decrees promptly. I see too much sloth in the Tower. I fear Silviana may find herself very busy if matters do not come right soon." She did not voice any further threat. She merely smiled.

"As you command, Mother," murmured six voices not so steady as their owners might have wished. Even Duhara's face was pasty pale as they made their curtsies. Two Sitters had been stripped of their chairs, and half a dozen had served days of Labor for penance—which was humiliating enough in their position to be Mortification of the Spirit besides; Shevan and Sedore certainly wore tight mouths as they remembered all too well scrubbing floors and working in the laundries—but none had been sent to Silviana for Mortification of the Flesh. No one wanted to be. The Mistress of Novices had two or three visits each week from sisters who been given penance by their Ajahs or set one for themselves—a dose of the strap, however painful, was done with much more quickly than raking garden paths for a month—but Silviana possessed considerably less mercy with sisters than with the novices and Accepted in her charge. More than one sister must have spent the next few days wondering whether a month pulling a rake might not have been preferable after all.

They scurried toward the doors, eager to be away. Sitters or no, not one would have set foot this high in the Tower without Elaida's direct summons. Fingering her striped stole, Elaida let her smile become one of pleasure. Yes, she was the mistress in the White Tower. As was only proper for the Amyrlin Seat.

Before that fast-stepping knot of Sitters reach the doorway, the left-hand door opened, and Alviarin stepped in, the narrow white stole of the Keeper almost vanishing against a silk dress that made Velina's seem dingy.

Elaida felt her smile go crooked and begin sliding from her face. Alviarin had a single sheet of parchment in one slim hand. Odd, what one noticed at a time like this. The woman had been gone almost two weeks, vanished from the Tower without word or note, without anyone so much as seeing her go, and Elaida had begun to think fond thoughts of Alviarin lying in a snowbank, or swept away in a river, sliding beneath the ice.

The six Sitters skidded to a halt uncertainly when Alviarin did not move out of their way. Even a Keeper with Alviarin's influence did not impede Sitters. Though Velina, normally the most self-possessed woman in the Tower, flinched for some reason. Alviarin glanced once at Elaida, coolly, studied the Sitters for a moment, and understood everything.

"I think you should leave that with me," she said to Sedore in tones only a fraction warmer than the snow outside. "The Mother likes to consider her decrees carefully, as you know. This would not be the first time she changed her mind after signing." She held out a slim hand.

Sedore, whose arrogance was notable even among Yellows, barely hesitated before giving her the leather folder.

Elaida ground her teeth in fury. Sedore had hated her five days up to her elbows in hot water and scrub boards. Elaida would find something less comfortable for her next time. Maybe Silviana after all. Maybe cleaning the cesspits!

Alviarin stepped aside without a word, and the Sitters went, adjusting shawls, muttering to themselves, reassuming the dignity of the Hall. Briskly, Alviarin closed the door behind them and walked toward Elaida thumbing through the papers in the folder. The decrees she had signed hoping Alviarin was dead. Of course, she had not rested on hope. She had not spoken to Seaine, in case someone might see and tell Alviarin when she returned, but Seaine was certainly working away as instructed, following the path of treason that surely would lead to Alviarin Freidhen. But Elaida had hoped. Oh, how she had hoped.

Alviarin murmured to herself as she rifled the folder. "This can go through, I suppose. But not this. Or this. And certainly not this!" She crumpled a decree, signed and sealed by the Amyrlin Seat, and tossed it to the floor contemptuously. Stopping beside Elaida's gilded chair, with the Flame of Tar Valon in moonstones atop its high back, she slapped the folder and her own parchment down on the table. And then slapped Elaida's face so hard she saw black flecks.

"I thought we had settled this, Elaida." The monstrous woman's voice made the snowstorm outside seem warm. "I know how to save the Tower from your blunders, and I won't have you making new ones behind my back. If you persist, be assured that I will see you deposed, stilled, and howling under the birch before every initiate and even the servants!"

With an effort, Elaida kept her hand away from her cheek. She did not need a mirror to tell her it was red. She had to be careful. Seaine had found nothing yet, or she would have come. Alviarin could open her mouth before the Hall and reveal the whole disastrous kidnapping of the al'Thor boy. She might see her deposed, and stilled and birched with that alone, but Alviarin had another string to her bow. Toveine Gazal was leading fifty sisters and two hundred of the Tower Guard against a Black Tower Elaida had been sure, when she gave the orders, held perhaps two or three men who could channel. Yet even with the hundreds—hundreds! with Alviarin staring coldly down at her, that thought still curdled Elaida's stomach!—even with hundreds of these Asha'man, she had hope for Toveine. The Black Tower would be rent in fire and blood, she had Foretold, and sisters would walk its grounds. Surely that meant that somehow, Toveine would triumph. More, the rest of the Foretelling had told her that the Tower would regain all its old glories under her, that al'Thor himself would quail at her anger. Alviarin had heard the words coming out of Elaida's mouth when the Foretelling took her. And she had not remembered later, when she began her blackmail, had not understood her own doom. Elaida waited in patience. She would repay the woman three-fold! But she could be patient. For now.

Making no attempt to hide her sneer, Alviarin pushed the folder aside and moved the single parchment in front of Elaida. She flipped open the green-and-gold writing case, dipped Elaida's pen in the inkwell and thrust it at her. "Sign."

Elaida took the pen wondering what madness she would be putting her name to this time. Yet another increase in the Tower Guard, when the rebels would be done before there was any use for soldiers? Another attempt to make the Ajahs reveal publicly which sisters headed them? That had certainly fallen on its nose! Reading quickly, she felt a knot of ice grow in her belly and keep growing. Giving each Ajah final authority over any sister in its quarter no matter her own Ajah had been the worst insanity so far—how could picking apart the very fabric of the Tower save it?—but this—!

> *The world now knows that Rand al'Thor is the Dragon Reborn. The world knows that he is a man who can touch the One Power. Such men have lain within the authority of the White Tower since time immemorial. The Dragon Reborn is granted the protection of the Tower, but whosoever attempts to approach him save through the White Tower lies attainted of treason against the Light, and anathema is pronounced against them now and forever. The world may rest easily knowing that the White Tower will safely guide the Dragon Reborn to the Last Battle and the inevitable triumph*.

Automatically, numbly, she added "of the Light" after "triumph," but then her hand froze. Publicly acknowledging al'Thor as the Dragon Reborn could be borne, since he was, and this might lead many to accept the rumors that he had knelt to her already, which would prove useful, but for the rest, she could not believe so much damage could be contained in so few words.

"The Light have mercy," she breathed fervently. "If this is proclaimed, it will be impossible to convince al'Thor that his abduction was unsanctioned." It would be hard enough without, but she had seen people convinced before that what had happened, had not, and them in the middle of it happening. "And he will be ten times on his guard against another attempt. Alviarin, at best, this will frighten away a few of his followers. At best!" Many likely had waded so deep with him they did not dare try to wade back. Certainly not if they thought anathema already hung over their heads! "I might as well set fire to the Tower with my own hand as sign this!"

Alviarin sighed impatiently. "You haven't forgotten your catechism, have you? Say it for me, as I taught you."

Elaida's lips compressed of their own accord. One pleasure in the woman's absence—not the greatest, but a very real pleasure—had been not being forced to repeat that vile litany every day. "I will do as I am told," she said at last, in a flat voice. She was the Amyrlin Seat! "I will speak the words you tell me to speak, and no more." Her Foretelling ordained her triumph, but, oh, Light, let it come soon! "I will sign what you tell me to sign, and nothing else. I am . . ." She choked over the last. "I am obedient to your will."

"You sound as if you need to be reminded of the truth of that," Alviarin said with another sigh. "I suppose I've left you alone too long." She tapped the parchment with a peremptory finger. "Sign."

Elaida signed, dragging the pen across the parchment. There was nothing else she could do.

Alviarin barely waited for the pen's nib to lift before snatching up the decree. "I will seal this myself," she said, heading for the door. "I shouldn't have left the Amyrlin's seal where you could find it. I want to talk to you later. I *have* left you to yourself too long. Be here when I return."

"Later?" Elaida said. "When? Alviarin? Alviarin?"

The door closed behind the woman, leaving Elaida to fume. Be there when Alviarin returned! Confined to her quarters like a novice in the punishment cells!

For a time she fingered her correspondence box, with its golden hawks fighting among white clouds in a blue sky, yet she could not make herself open it. With Alviarin gone, that box had begun once more to hold letters and reports of importance, not just the table scraps Alviarin let fall to her, yet with the woman's return, it might as well have been empty. Rising, she began rearranging the roses in their white vases, each atop a white marble plinth in a corner of the room. Blue roses; the most rare.

Abruptly she realized that she was staring at a broken rose stem in her hands, snapped in two. Half a dozen more littered the floor tiles. She made a vexed sound in her throat. She had been thinking of her hands around Alviarin's throat. It was not the first time she had considered killing the woman. But Alviarin would have taken precautions. Sealed documents, to be opened should anything untoward happen, had no doubt been left with the last sisters Elaida would suspect. That had been her one real worry during Alviarin's absence, that someone else might think the woman dead, and come forward with the evidence that would drag the stole from her shoulders. Sooner or later, though, one way or another, Alviarin was finished, as surely as those roses were—

"You didn't answer my knock, Mother, so I came on in," a woman said gruffly behind her.

Elaida turned, ready to flay with her tongue, but at the sight of the stocky, square-faced woman in a red-fringed shawl standing just inside the room, the blood drained from her own cheeks.

"The Keeper said you wanted to speak me," Silviana said irritably. "About a private penance." Even to the Amyrlin Seat, she made no effort to hide her disgust. Silviana believed private penance a ridiculous affectation. Penance was public; only punishment took place in private. "She also asked me to remind you of something, but she rushed off before saying what." She finished with a snort. Silviana saw anything that took time away from her novices and Accepted as needless interruption.

"I think I remember," Elaida told her dully.

When Silviana finally left—after only half an hour by the chimes of Cemaile's clock, yet an endless eternity—all that kept Elaida from calling the Hall to sit immediately so she could demand Alviarin be stripped of the Keeper's stole were the certainty of her Foretelling and the certainty that Seaine would trace that trail of treason back to Alviarin. That, and the sure fact that whether or not Alviarin fell in the confrontation, she herself definitely would. So, Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan, Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, surely the most powerful ruler in the world, lay facedown on her bed and blubbered into her pillows, too tender to don the shift that lay discarded on the floor, certain that when Alviarin returned, the woman would insist on her sitting through the entire interview. She blubbered, and through her tears she prayed for Alviarin's downfall to come soon.

"I did not tell you to have Elaida . . . beaten," that voice of crystal chimes said. "Do you rise above yourself?"

Alviarin flung herself from her knees onto her belly before the woman who seemed made of dark shadows and silvery light. Seizing the hem of Mesaana's dress, she rained kisses on it. The weave of Illusion—it must be that, though she could not see a single thread of *saidar* any more than she could sense the ability to channel in the woman who stood over her—did not hold completely, with her frantically shifting the skirt's edge. Flickers of bronze silk with a thin border of intricately embroidered black scrollwork showed through.

"I live to serve and obey you, Great Mistress," Alviarin panted between kisses. "I know that I am among the lowest of the low, a worm in your presence, and I pray only for your smile." She had been punished once for "rising above herself"—not for disobedience, thanks be to the Great Lord of the Dark!—and she knew that whatever howls Elaida might be raising right then, they could not be half so loud as her own had been.

Mesaana let the kissing go on for some time, and finally signaled an end by tipping Alviarin's face up with the toe of a slipper beneath the chin. "The decree has gone out." It was not a question, but Alviarin answered hastily.

“Yes, Great Mistress. Copies went to Northharbor and Southharbor even before I had Elaida sign. The first couriers have gone, and no merchant will leave the city without copies to distribute.” Mesaana knew all that, of course. She knew everything. A cramp tightened the back of Alviarin’s awkwardly craned neck, but she did not move. Mesaana would tell her when to move. “Great Mistress, Elaida is an empty husk. With all humility, would it not be better without the need to use her?” She held her breath. Questions could be dangerous, with the Chosen.

A shadow-nailed silvery finger tapped silver lips pursed in an amused smile. “Better if you wore the Amyrlin’s stole, child?” Mesaana said at last. “An ambition small enough to fit you, but all in its time. For now, I have a tiny task for you. In spite of all the walls that have gone up between the Ajahs, the heads of the Ajahs seem to encounter one another with surprising frequency. By chance, they make it seem. All but the Red, at least; a pity Galina got herself killed, or she could tell you what they are about. Very probably it is trivial, but you will learn why they bare teeth at one another in public, then whisper together in private.”

“I hear and obey, Great Mistress,” Alviarin replied promptly, grateful that Mesaana considered it unimportant. The great “secret” of who headed the Ajahs was none to her—every Black sister was required to relay to the Supreme Council every whisper inside her supposed Ajah—but only Galina among them had been Black. That meant querying the Black sisters among the Sitters, which meant going through all the layers between them and her. That would take time, and without any certainty of success. Except for Ferane Neheran and Suana Dragand, who *were* the heads of the their Ajahs, Sitters rarely seemed to know what their Ajah’s head was thinking until they were told. “I will tell you as soon as I learn, Great Mistress.”

But she did file away a tidbit for herself. Trivial matter or not, Mesaana did *not* know everything that happened in the White Tower. And Alviarin would keep her eyes open for a sister in bronze skirts bordered on the hem in black scrollwork. Mesaana was hiding herself in the Tower, and knowledge was power.

* * *

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CHAPTER 26

The Extra Bit

Seaine strode the hallways of the Tower with a growing sense of being confounded at every turn. The White Tower was quite large, true, but she had been at this for hours. She very much wanted to be snug in her own rooms. Despite casements in place in every window, drafts drifted along the broad, tapestry-hung corridors and made the stand-lamps flicker. Cold drafts, and difficult to ignore when they slipped under her skirts. Her rooms were warm and comfortable, and safe.

Maids bobbed curtsies and manservants bowed in her wake, half-seen and completely ignored. Most sisters were in their own Ajahs’ quarters, and those few out and about moved with wary pride, often in pairs, always of the same Ajah, shawls spread along their arms and displayed like banners. She smiled and nodded pleasantly to Talene, but the statuesque, golden-haired Sitter returned a hard stare, beauty carved from ice, then stalked away twitching her green-fringed shawl.

Too late now to approach Talene about being part of the search, even had Pevara been agreeable. Pevara counseled caution, then more caution, and truth to tell, Seaine was more than willing to listen under the circumstances. It was just that Talene was a friend. Had been a friend.

Talene was not the worst. Several ordinary sisters sniffed at her openly. At a Sitter! None White, of course, but that should have made no difference. No matter what was going on in the Tower, proprieties should be observed.

Juilaine Madome, a tall, attractive woman with short-cut black hair who had held a chair for the Brown less than a year, brushed past her without so much as a murmur of apology and went off with those mannish strides of hers. Saerin Asnobar, another Brown Sitter, gave Seaine a fierce scowl and fingered that curved knife she always carried behind her belt before disappearing down a side corridor. Saerin was Altaran, slight touches of white at her dark temples emphasizing a thin age-faded white scar across one olive cheek, and only a Warder could match her for scowling.

Perhaps these things were all to be expected. There had been several unfortunate incidents recently, and no sister would forget being bundled unceremoniously from the hallways around another Ajah's quarters, much less what had sometimes gone with it. Rumor said a Sitter—a Sitter!—had had more than her dignity ruffled by the Reds, though not who. A great pity the Hall could not obstruct Elaida's mad decree, but first one Ajah, then another, had leaped on the new prerogatives, few Sitters were willing to think of giving them up now that they were in place, and the result was a Tower divided very nearly into armed camps. Once Seaine had thought the air in the Tower felt like a quivering hot jelly of suspicion and backbiting; now it was quivering hot jelly with an acid bite.

Clicking her tongue in vexation, she adjusted her own white-fringed shawl as Saerin vanished. It was illogical to flinch because an Altaran scowled—even Saerin would go no farther; surely not—and more than illogical to worry over what she could not change when she had a task.

And then, after all of her search that morning, she took a single step and saw her long-sought quarry walking toward her. Zerah Dacan was a slim, black-haired girl with a prideful air, properly self-possessed, and by all outward evidence untouched by the heated currents flowing through the Tower these days. Well, not a girl precisely, but Seaine was sure she had not worn that white-fringed shawl fifty years yet. She was inexperienced. Relatively inexperienced. That might help.

Zerah made no move to avoid a Sitter of her own Ajah, bowing her head in respect as Seaine fell in beside her. Quite a lot of intricate golden embroidery climbed the sleeves of her snowy dress and made a wide band at the bottom of her skirt. It was an unusual degree of show for the White Ajah. "Sitter," she murmured. Did her blue eyes hold a touch of worry?

"I need you for something," Seaine said more calmly than she felt. Very likely she was transplanting her own feelings into Zerah's big eyes.

“Come with me.” There was nothing to fear, not in the heart of the White Tower, but keeping her hands folded at her waist, unclenched, required surprising effort.

As expected—as hoped—Zerah went along with only another murmur, this of acquiescence. She glided at Seaine’s side quite gracefully as they descended broad marble staircases and wide curving ramps, and gave only the slightest frown when Seaine opened a door on the ground floor, onto narrow stairs that spiraled down into darkness.

“After you, sister,” Seaine said, channeling a small ball of light. By protocol, she should have preceded the other woman, but she could not bring herself to do that.

Zerah did not hesitate in going down. Logically, she had nothing to fear from a Sitter, a White Sitter. Logically, Seaine would tell her what she wanted when the time was ripe, and it would be nothing she could not do. Illogically, Seaine’s stomach fluttered like a huge moth. Light, she held *saidar* and the other woman did not. Zerah was weaker in any case. There was nothing to fear. Which did nothing to quiet those fluttering wings in her middle.

Down they climbed and down, past doors letting onto basements and subbasements, until they reached the very lowest level, below even where the Accepted were tested. The dark hallway was lit only by Seaine’s small light. They held their skirts high, but their slippers kicked up small clouds of dust however carefully they stepped. Plain wooden doors lined the smooth stone walls, many with great lumps of rust for hinges and locks.

“Sitter,” Zerah asked, finally showing doubt, “whatever can we be after down here? I don’t believe anyone has been this deep for years.”

Seaine was sure her own visit, a few days earlier, had been the first to this level in at least a century. That was one of the reasons she and Pevara had chosen it. “Just in here,” she said, swinging open a door that moved with only a little squealing. No amount of oil could loosen all the rust, and efforts to use the Power had been useless. Her abilities with Earth were better than Pevara’s, but that was not saying very much.

Zerah stepped in, and blinked in surprise. In an otherwise empty room, Pevara sat behind a sturdy if rather worn table with three small benches around it. Getting those few pieces down unseen had been difficult—especially when servants could not be trusted. Clearing out the dust had been much simpler if no more pleasant, and smoothing the dust in the hall outside, necessary after every visit, had been simply onerous.

"I was about to give up sitting here in the dark," Pevara growled. The glow of *saidar* surrounded her as she lifted a lantern from beneath the table and channeled it alight, casting as much illumination as the rough-walled former storeroom deserved. Somewhat plump and normally pretty, the Red Sitter looked a bear with two sore teeth. "We want to ask you a few questions, Zerah." And she shielded the woman as Seaine shut the door.

Zerah's shadowed face remained utterly calm, but she swallowed audibly. "About what, Sitters?" There was the faintest tremor in the younger woman's voice, as well. It could be simply the mood of the Tower, though.

"The Black Ajah," Pevara replied curtly. "We want to know whether you're a Darkfriend."

Amazement and outrage shattered Zerah's calm. Most would have taken that for sufficient denial without her snapped "I don't have to take that from you! You Reds have been setting up false Dragons for years! If you ask me, there's no need to look further than the Red quarters to find Black sisters!"

Pevara's face darkened with fury. Her loyalty to her Ajah was strong, which went without saying, but worse, she had lost her entire family to Darkfriends. Seaine decided to step in before Pevara resorted to brute force. They had no proof. Not yet.

"Sit, Zerah," she said with as much warmth as she could muster. "Sit down, sister."

Zerah turned toward the door as though she might disobey an order from a Sitter—and of her own Ajah!—but at last she settled onto one of the benches, stiffly, sitting right at the edge.

Before Seaine had finished taking a seat that placed Zerah between them, Pevara laid the ivory-white Oath Rod on the battered tabletop. Seaine sighed. They were Sitters, with a perfect right to use any *ter'angreal* they wished, but she had been the one to filch it—she could not help thinking of it as filching when she had observed none of the proper procedures—and the whole time, in the back of her head, she had been sure she would turn to find long-dead Sereille Bagand standing here, ready to haul her off to the Mistress of Novices' study by her ear. Irrational, but no less real.

"We want to make sure you tell the truth," Pevara said, still sounding like an angry bear, "so you will swear an oath on this, and then I'll ask again.”

“I should not be subjected to this,” Zerah said with an accusing look at Seaine, “but I will re-swear all of the Oaths, if that’s what it needs to satisfy you. And I will demand an apology from you *both*, afterward.” She hardly sounded like a woman shielded and asked such a question. Almost contemptuously, she reached for the slim, foot-long rod. It shone in the dim light of the lantern.

“You’ll swear to obey the two of us absolutely,” Pevara told her, and that hand snatched back as if from a coiled viper. Pevara went right on, even sliding the Rod closer to the woman with two fingers. “That way, we can tell you to answer truthfully and know you will, and if you give the wrong answer, we can know you’ll be obedient and helpful in helping us hunt down your Black sisters. The Rod can be used to free you of the oath, if you give the right answer.”

“To *free*—?” Zerah exclaimed. “I’ve never heard of anyone being *loosed* from an oath on the Oath Rod.”

“That is why we are taking all these precautions,” Seaine told her. “Logically, a Black sister must be able to lie, which means she must have been freed of at least that Oath and likely all three. Pevara and I tested, and found the procedure much the same as taking an oath.” She did not mention how painful it had been, though, leaving the pair of them weeping. She also did not mention that Zerah would not be freed of her oath whatever her answer, not until the search for the Black Ajah came to a conclusion. For one thing, she could not be allowed to run off and complain about this questioning, which she most certainly would, with every right, if she was not of the Black. If.

Light, but Seaine wished they had found a sister from another Ajah who fit the criteria they had set. A Green or a Yellow would have done quite nicely. That lot were overweening at the best of times, and of late . . . ! No. She was not going to fall prey to the sickness spreading through the Tower. Yet she could not help the names that flashed through her head, a dozen Greens, twice as many Yellows, and every one long past due taking down a few rungs. Sniff at a Sitter?

“You *freed* yourselves from one of the Oaths?” Zerah sounded startled, disgusted, uneasy, all at the same time. Perfectly reasonable responses.

“And took it again,” Pevara muttered impatiently. Snatching up the slim rod, she channeled a little Spirit into one end while maintaining

Zerah’s shield. “Under the Light, I vow to speak no word that is not true. Under the Light, I vow to make no weapon for one man to kill another. Under the Light, I vow not to use the One Power as a weapon except against Dark-friends or Shadowspawn, or in the last defense of my life, the life of my Warder, or that of another sister.” She did not grimace over the part about Warders; new sisters bound for the Red often did. “I am not a Darkfriend. I hope that satisfies you.” She showed Zerah her teeth, but whether in smile or snarl was hard to say.

Seaine retook the Oaths in turn, each producing a slight momentary pressure everywhere from her scalp to the soles of her feet. In truth, the pressure was difficult to detect at all, with her skin still feeling too tight from retaking the Oath against speaking a lie. Claiming that Pevara had a beard or that the streets of Tar Valon were paved with cheese had been strangely exhilarating for a time—even Pevara had giggled—but hardly worth the discomfort now. Testing had not really seemed necessary, to her. Logically, it must be so. Saying that she was not of the Black twisted her tongue—a vile thing to be forced to deny—but she handed Zerah the Oath Rod with a decisive nod.

Shifting on her bench, the slender woman turned the smooth white rod in her fingers, swallowing convulsively. The pale lantern light made her appear ill. She looked from one of them to the other, wide-eyed, then her hands tightened on the Rod, and she nodded.

“Exactly as I said,” Pevara growled, channeling Spirit to the Rod again, “or you’ll be swearing until you have it right.”

“I vow to obey the two of you absolutely,” Zerah said in a tight voice, then shuddered as the oath took hold. It was always tighter at the first. “Ask me about the Black Ajah,” she demanded. Her hands shook holding the Rod. “Ask me about the Black Ajah!” Her intensity told Seaine the answer even before Pevara released the flow of Spirit and asked the question, commanding utter truth. “No!” Zerah practically shouted. “No, I am not Black Ajah! Now take this oath from me! Free me!”

Seaine slumped dejectedly, resting her elbows on the table. She certainly had not *wanted* Zerah to answer yes, but she had been sure they had found the other woman out in a lie. One lie found, or so it had seemed, after weeks of searching. How many more weeks of searching lay ahead? And of looking over her shoulder from waking to sleeping? When she managed to sleep.

Pevara stabbed an accusing finger at the woman. “You told people that you came from the north.”

Zerah’s eyes went wide again. “I did,” she said slowly. “I rode down the bank of the Erinin to Jualdhe. Now free me of this oath!” She licked her lips.

Seaine frowned at her. “Goldenthorn seeds and a red cockleburr were found on your saddlecloth, Zerah. Goldenthorn and red cockleburr can’t be found for a hundred miles *south* of Tar Valon.”

Zerah leaped to her feet, and Pevara snapped, “Sit down!”

The woman dropped onto the bench with a loud smack, but she did not even wince. She was trembling. No, shaking. Her mouth was clamped shut, otherwise Seaine was sure her teeth would have been chattering. Light, the question of north or south frightened her more than an accusation of being a Darkfriend.

“From where did you start out,” Seaine asked slowly, “and why—?” She meant to ask why the woman had gone roundabout—which plainly she had—just to hide which direction she came from, but answers burst from Zerah’s mouth.

“From Salidar,” she squealed. There was no other word for it. Still clutching the Oath Rod, she writhed on her bench. Tears spilled from her eyes, eyes as wide as they would go and fixed on Pevara. Words poured out, though her teeth truly did chatter now. “I c-came to m-make sure all the sisters here know about the R-Reds and Logain, so they’ll d-depose Elaida and the T-Tower can be whole again.” With a wail she collapsed into openmouthed bawling as she stared at the Red Sitter.

“Well,” Pevara said. Then again, more grimly, “Well!” Her face was all composure, but the glitter in her dark eyes was far from the mischief Seaine remembered as novice and Accepted. “So you are the source of that . . . rumor. You are going to stand before the Hall and reveal it for the lie it is! Admit the lie, girl!”

If Zerah’s eyes had been wide before, they bulged now. The Rod dropped from her hands to roll across the tabletop, and she clutched her throat. A choking sound came from her suddenly gaping mouth. Pevara stared at her in shock, but suddenly Seaine understood.

“Light’s mercy,” she breathed. “You do not have to lie, Zerah.” Zerah’s legs thrashed beneath the table as if she were trying to rise and could not get her feet under her. “Tell her, Pevara. She believes it’s true! You’ve commanded her to speak the truth *and* to lie. Don't look at me that way! She believes!" A bluish tinge appeared on Zerah's lips. Her eyelids fluttered. Seaine gathered calm with both hands. "Pevara, you gave the order so apparently you must release her, or she will suffocate right in front of us."

"She's a *rebel*." Pevara's mutter invested that word with all the scorn it could hold. But then she sighed. "She hasn't been tried, yet. You don't have to . . . lie . . . girl." Zerah toppled forward and lay with her cheek pressed against the tabletop, gulping air between whimpers.

Seaine shook her head in wonder. They had not considered the possibility of *conflicting* oaths. What if the Black Ajah did not merely remove the Oath against lying, but replaced it with one of their own? What if they replaced all Three with their own oaths? She and Pevara would need to go very carefully if they did find a Black sister, or they might have her fall dead before they knew what the conflict was. Perhaps first a renunciation of *all* oaths—no way to go about it more carefully without knowing what Black sisters swore—followed by retaking the Three? Light, the pain of being loosed from everything at once would be little short of being put to the question. Maybe not short of it at all. But certainly a Darkfriend deserved that and more. If they ever found one.

Pevara glared down at the gasping woman without the slightest touch of pity on her face. "When she stands trial for rebellion, I intend to sit on her court."

"When she *is* tried, Pevara," Seaine said thoughtfully. "A pity to lose the assistance of one we know isn't a Darkfriend. And since she *is* a rebel, we need not be overly concerned about using her." There had been a number of discussions, none to a conclusion, about the second reason for leaving the new oath in place. A sister sworn to obey could be compelled—Seaine shifted uneasily; that sounded entirely too close to the forbidden vileness of Compulsion—she could be *induced* to help in the hunt, so long as you did not mind forcing her to accept the danger, whether she wished to or not. "I cannot think they would send only one," she went on. "Zerah, how many of you came to spread this tale?"

"Ten," the woman mumbled against the tabletop, then jerked erect, glaring in defiance. "I will not betray my sisters! I won't—!" Abruptly she cut off, lips twisting bitterly as she realized she had done just that.

“Names!” Pevara barked. “Give me their names, or I will have your hide here and now!”

Names spilled from Zerah’s unwilling lips. At the command, certainly, more than the threat. Looking at Pevara’s grim face, though, Seaine was sure she needed little provocation to stripe Zerah like a novice caught stealing. Strangely, she herself did not feel the same animosity. Revulsion, yes, but clearly not as strong. The woman was a rebel who had helped break the White Tower when a sister must accept anything to keep the Tower whole, and yet. . . . Very strange.

“You agree, Pevara?” she said when the list concluded. The stubborn woman gave her only a fierce nod for agreement. “Very well. Zerah, you will bring Bernaile to my rooms this afternoon.” There were two from each Ajah excepting the Blue and the Red, it seemed, but best to begin with the other White. “You will say only that I wish to speak to her on a private matter. You will give her no warning by word, deed, or omission. Then you will stand quietly and let Pevara and me do what is necessary. You are being recruited into a worthier cause than your misguided rebellion, Zerah.” Of course it was misguided. No matter how mad with power Elaida had become. “You are going to help us hunt down the Black Ajah.”

Zerah’s head jerked unwilling nods at each injunction, her face pained, but at mention of a hunt for the Black Ajah, she gasped. Light, her wits must have been totally unhinged by her experiences not to see that!

“And you will stop spreading these . . . stories,” Pevara put in sternly. “From this moment, you’ll not mention the Red Ajah and false Dragons together. Am I understood?”

Zerah’s face donned a mask of sullen stubbornness. Zerah’s mouth said, “I understand, Sitter.” She looked ready to begin weeping again from sheer frustration.

“Then get out of my sight,” Pevara told her, releasing the shield and *saidar* together. “And compose yourself! Wash your face and straighten your hair!” That last was directed at the back of the woman already darting from the table. Zerah had to pull her hands away from her hair to open the door. As the door squeaked shut behind her, Pevara snorted. “I wouldn’t put it past her to have gone to this Bernaile like a sloven, hoping to warn her that way.”

“A valid point,” Seaine admitted. “But who will we warn if we scowl right and left at these women? At the very least, we will attract notice.”

“The way matters are, Seaine, we wouldn’t attract notice kicking them across the Tower grounds.” Pevara sounded as if that were an attractive notion. “They are *rebels,* and I intend to hold them so hard they squeak if one of them so much as has a wrong thought!”

They went round and round about that. Seaine insisted that care in the orders they gave, leaving no loopholes, would be sufficient. Pevara pointed out that they were letting ten rebels—ten!—walk the Tower’s halls unpunished. Seaine said they *would* face punishment eventually, and Pevara growled that eventually was not soon enough. Seaine had always admired the other woman’s strength of will, but really, sometimes it was pure stubbornness.

A faint creak from a hinge was all the warning Seaine had to snatch the Oath Rod into her lap, hiding it in folds of her skirt as the door opened wide. She and Pevara embraced the Source almost as one.

Saerin walked into the room calmly, holding a lantern, and stood aside for Talene, who was followed by tiny Yukiri, with a second light, and boyishly slim Doesine, tall for a Cairhienin, who closed the door quite firmly and settled her back against it as if to keep anyone from leaving. Four Sitters, representing all the remaining Ajahs in the Tower. They seemed to ignore the fact that Seaine and Pevara held *saidar*. Suddenly, to Seaine, the room felt rather crowded. Imagination, and irrational, but . . .

“Strange to see the pair of you together,” Saerin said. Her face might be serene, but she slid fingers along the hilt of that curved knife behind her belt. She had held her chair forty years, longer than anyone else in the Hall, and everyone had learned to be careful of her temper.

“We might say the same of you,” Pevara replied dryly. Saerin’s temper never upset *her*. “Or did you come down here to help Doesine try to get some of her own back?” A sudden flush made the Yellow’s face look even more that of a pretty boy despite her elegant bearing, and told Seaine which Sitter had strayed too near the Red quarters with unfortunate results. “I wouldn’t have thought that would bring you together, though. Greens at Yellows’ throats, Browns at Grays’. Or did you just bring them down for a quiet duel, Saerin?”

Frantically, Seaine cast around for what reason *would* have these four this deep into the bedrock of Tar Valon. What could tie them together? Their Ajahs—*all* of the Ajahs—truly were at one another’s throats. All four had been handed penances by Elaida. No Sitter could enjoy Labor, especially when everyone knew exactly why she was scrubbing floors or pots, yet that was hardly a bond. What else? None were nobly born. Saerin and Yukiri were the daughters of innkeepers, Talene of farmers, while Doesine's father had been a cutler. Saerin had been trained first by the Daughters of Silence, the only one of that lot to reach the shawl. Absolutely useless drivel. Suddenly, something did strike her, and dried her throat. Saerin with her temper often barely in rein. Doesine, who had actually run away three times as a novice, though she had only once made it as far as the bridges. Talene, who might have earned more punishments than any other novice in the history of the Tower. Yukiri, always the last Gray to join her sisters' consensus when she wanted to go another way, the last to join the Hall's, for that matter. All four were considered rebels, in a way, and Elaida had humiliated every one. Could they be thinking they had made a mistake, standing to depose Siuan and raise Elaida? Could *they* have found out about Zerah and the others? And if so, what did they intend to do?

Mentally, Seaine prepared herself to weave *saidar*, though without much hope that she could escape. Pevara matched Saerin and Yukiri in strength, but she herself was weaker than any here save Doesine. She prepared herself, and Talene stepped forward and burst all of her logical deductions to flinders.

"Yukiri noticed you two sneaking about together, and we want to know why." Her surprisingly deep voice held heat despite the ice that seemed to coat her face. "Did the heads of your Ajahs set you a secret task? In public, the Ajahs' heads snarl at one another worse than anyone else, but they've been sneaking off into corners to talk, it seems. Whatever they're scheming, the Hall has a right to know."

"Oh, do give over, Talene." Yukiri's voice was always an even bigger surprise than Talene's. The woman looked a miniature queen, in dark silver silk with ivory lace, but she sounded a comfortable country woman. She claimed the contrast helped in negotiations. She smiled at Seaine and Pevara, a monarch perhaps unsure how gracious she should be. "I saw the pair of you sniffing about like ferrets at the hencoop," she said, "but I held my tongue—you might be pillow friends, for all I know, and whose business is that but yours?—I held my tongue till Talene here started yelping about who's been huddling in corners. I've seen a bit of huddling in corners myself, and I suspect some of those women might head their Ajahs as well, so. . . . Sometimes six and six make a dozen, and sometimes they make a mess. Tell us if you can, now. The Hall does have a right."

"We are not leaving until you do tell," Talene put in even more heatedly than before.

Pevara snorted and folded her arms. "If the head of my Ajah spoke two words to me, I'd see no reason to tell you what they were. As it happens, what Seaine and I were discussing has nothing to do with the Red or the White. Snoop elsewhere." But she did not release *saidar*. Neither did Seaine.

"Bloody useless and I bloody knew it," Doesine muttered from her place by the door. "Why I ever flaming let you talk me into this. . . . Just as bloody well nobody else knows, or we'd have sheepswallop all over faces for the whole bloody Tower to see." At times she had a tongue like a boy, too, a boy who needed his mouth washed out.

Seaine would have stood to leave if she had not feared her knees would betray her. Pevara did stand, and raised an impatient eyebrow at the women between her and the door.

Saerin fingered her knife hilt and eyed them quizzically, not shifting a step. "A puzzle," she murmured. Suddenly she glided forward, her free hand dipping into Seaine's lap so quickly that Seaine gasped. She tried to keep the Oath Rod hidden, but the only result was that she ended with Saerin holding the Rod waist high with one hand while she held the other end and a fistful of her skirts. "I enjoy puzzles," Saerin said.

Seaine let go and adjusted her dress; there seemed nothing else to do.

The appearance of the Rod produced a momentary babble as nearly everyone spoke at once.

"Blood and fire," Doesine growled. "Are you down here raising new bloody sisters?"

"Oh, leave it with them, Saerin," Yukiri laughed right on top of her. "Whatever they're up to, it's their own business."

Atop both, Talene barked, "Why else are they sneaking about—together!—if it isn't to do with the Ajah heads?"

Saerin waved a hand, and after a moment gained quiet. All present were Sitters, but she had the right to speak first in the Hall, and her forty years counted for something, too. "This is the key to the puzzle, I think," she said, stroking the Rod with her thumb. "Why this, after all?" Abruptly the glow of *saidar* surrounded her, too, and she channeled Spirit to the Rod.

“Under the Light, I will speak no word that is not true. I am not a Darkfriend.”

In the silence that followed, a mouse sneezing would have sounded loud.

“Am I right?” Saerin said, releasing the Power. She held the Rod out toward Seaine.

For the third time, Seaine retook the Oath against lying, and for the second time repeated that she was not of the Black. Pevara did the same with frozen dignity. And eyes sharp as an eagle’s.

“This is ridiculous,” Talene said. “There *is* no Black Ajah.”

Yukiri took the Rod from Pevara and channeled. “Under the Light, I will speak no word that is not true. I am not Black Ajah.” The light of *saidar* around her winked out, and she handed the Rod to Doesine.

Talene frowned in disgust. “Stand aside, Doesine. I for one will not put up with this filthy suggestion.”

“Under the Light, I will speak no word that is not true,” Doesine said almost reverently, the glow around her like a halo. “I am not of the Black Ajah.” When matters were serious, her tongue was as clean as any Mistress of Novices could have wished. She extended the Rod to Talene.

The golden-haired woman started back as from a poisonous snake. “Even to ask this is a slander. Worse than slander!” Something feral moved in her eyes. An irrational thought, perhaps, but that was what Seaine saw. “Now move out of my way,” Talene demanded with all the authority of a Sitter in her voice. “I am leaving!”

“I think not,” Pevara said quietly, and Yukiri nodded slowly in agreement. Saerin did not stroke her knife hilt; she gripped it till her knuckles went white.

Riding through the deep snows of Andor, floundering through them, Toveine Gazal cursed the day she was born. Short and slightly plump, with smooth copper skin and long glossy dark hair, she had seemed pretty to many over the years, but none had ever called her beautiful. Certainly none would now. The dark eyes that had once been direct now bored into whatever she looked at. That was when she was not angry. She was angry today. When Toveine was angry, serpents fled.

Four other Reds rode—floundered—at her back, and behind them twenty of the Tower Guard in dark coats and cloaks. None of the men liked it that their armor was stowed away on the packhorses, and they watched the forest lining both sides of the road as though expecting attack any moment. How they thought to cross three hundred miles of Andor unnoticed, wearing coats and cloaks with the Flame of Tar Valon shining bright on them, Toveine could not imagine. The journey was almost done, though. In another day, perhaps two with roads knee-deep in snow on the horses, she would join with nine other parties exactly like hers. Not all of the sisters in them were Red, unfortunately, but that did not trouble her overmuch. Toveine Gazal, once a Sitter for the Red, would go into the histories as the woman who destroyed this *Black* Tower.

She was sure Elaida thought her grateful for the chance, called back from exile and disgrace, given the opportunity for redemption. She sneered, and if a wolf had been looking into the deep hood of her cloak, it might have quailed. What had been done twenty years ago was necessary, and the Light burn all those who muttered that the Black Ajah must have been involved. It had been necessary and right, but Toveine Gazal had been driven from her chair in the Hall, and forced to howl for mercy under the birch, with the assembled sisters watching, and even novices and Accepted witnessing that Sitters, too, lay beneath the law, though they were not told what law. And then she had been sent to work these last twenty years on the isolated Black Hills farm of Mistress Jara Doweel, a woman who considered an Aes Sedai serving penance in exile no different from any other hand laboring in sun and snow. Toveine's hands shifted on her reins; she could feel the calluses. Mistress Doweel—even now, she could not think of the woman without the honorific she had demanded—Mistress Doweel believed in hard work. And discipline as tight as any novice faced! She had no mercy on anyone who tried to shirk the backbreaking labor that she herself shared, and less than none for a woman who sneaked away to comfort herself with a pretty boy. That had been Toveine's life for fifteen years. And Elaida had slipped through the cracks uncaught, danced her way to the Amyrlin Seat that Toveine had once dreamed of for herself. No, she was not grateful. But she had learned to wait her chance.

Abruptly, a tall man in a black coat, dark hair falling to his shoulders, spurred his horse out of the forest into the road ahead of her, spraying snow. "There's no point struggling," he announced firmly, raising a gloved hand. "Surrender peacefully, and no one will be hurt."

It was neither his appearance nor his words that made Toveine rein up short, letting the other sisters gather beside her. "Take him," she said calmly. “You had better link. He has me shielded.” It seemed one of these Asha’man had come to her. How convenient of him.

Abruptly she realized that nothing was happening and took her eyes from the fellow to frown at Jenare. The woman’s pale, square face seemed absolutely bloodless. “Toveine,” she said unsteadily, “I also am shielded.”

“I am shielded, too,” Lemai breathed in disbelief, and the others chimed in, increasingly frantic. All shielded.

More men in black coats appeared from among the trees, their horses stepping slowly, all around. Toveine stopped counting at fifteen. The Guards muttered angrily, waiting on a sister’s command. They knew nothing yet except that a band of rogues had waylaid them. Toveine clicked her tongue in irritation. These men could not all channel, of course, but apparently every Asha’man who could do so had come against her. She did not panic. Unlike some of the sisters with her, these were not the first men who channeled that she had confronted. The tall man began riding toward her, smiling, apparently thinking they had obeyed his ridiculous order.

“At my command,” she said quietly, “we will break in every direction. As soon as you are far enough away that the man loses the shield,” men always thought they had to be able to see to hold their weaves, which meant that they did have to, “turn back and help the Guards. Ready yourselves.” She raised her voice to a shout. “Guardsmen, fight them!”

Roaring, the Guardsmen surged forward, waving their swords and no doubt thinking to surround and protect the sisters. Pulling her mare around to the right, Toveine dug in her heels and crouched low over Sparrow’s neck, dodging between startled Guardsmen, then between two very young men in black coats who gaped at her in astonishment. Then she was into the trees, urging more speed, snow spraying wildly, careless of whether the mare broke a leg. She liked the animal, but more than a horse would die today. Behind her, shouts. And one voice, roaring through all the cacophony. The tall man’s voice.

“Take them alive, by order of the Dragon Reborn! Harm an Aes Sedai, and you’ll answer to me!”

By order of the Dragon Reborn. For the first time, Toveine felt fear, an icicle worming into her middle. The Dragon Reborn. She thrashed Sparrow’s neck with the reins. The shield was still on her! Surely there were enough trees between them already to block the cursed men’s sight of her! Oh, Light, the Dragon Reborn!

She grunted as something struck her across the middle, a branch where there was no branch, snatching her out of the saddle. She hung there watching Sparrow plow off at as much of a gallop as the snow allowed. She hung there. In the middle of the air, arms trapped at her sides, feet dangling a pace or more above the ground. She swallowed. Hard. It had to be the male part of the Power holding her up. She had never been touched by *saidin* before. She could feel the thick band of nothing snug around her middle. She thought she could feel the Dark One’s taint. She quivered, fighting down screams.

The tall man reined his horse to a halt in front of her, and she floated down to sit sideways in front of his saddle. He did not seem particularly interested in the Aes Sedai he had captured, though. “Hardlin!” he shouted. “Norley! Kajima! One of you bloody young louts come here now!”

He was very tall, with shoulders an axe-handle wide. That was how Mistress Doweel would have put it. Just short of his middle years, handsome in a brooding, rugged fashion. Not at all like the pretty boys Toveine liked, eager and grateful and so easily controlled. A silver sword decorated the tall collar of his black wool coat on one side, with a peculiar creature in gold and red enamel on the other. He was a man who could channel. And he had her shielded and a prisoner.

The shriek that burst from her throat startled even her. She would have held it back if she could, but another leaped out behind it, higher still, and another even higher, another and another. Kicking wildly, she flung herself from side to side. Useless against the Power. She knew that, but only in a tiny corner of her mind. The rest of her howled at the top of her lungs, howled wordless pleas for rescue from the Shadow. Screaming, she struggled like a mad beast.

Dimly she was aware of his horse plunging and dancing as her heels drummed its shoulder. Dimly she heard the man talking. “Easy, you lump-eared sack of coal! Calm down, sister. I’m not going to—Easy, you spavined mule! Light! My apologies, sister, but this is how we learn to do it.” And then he kissed her.

She had only a heartbeat to realize his lips were touching hers, then sight vanished, and warmth flooded through her. More than warmth. She was melted honey inside, bubbling honey, rushing toward the boil. She was a harpstring, vibrating faster and faster, vibrating to invisibility and faster still. She was a thin crystal vase, quivering on the brink of shattering. The harpstring broke; the vase shattered.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

At first, she did not realize that sound had come from her gaping mouth. For a moment, she could not think coherently. Panting, she stared up at the male face above her, wondering who it belonged to. Yes. The tall man. The man who could—

“I could have done without the extra bit,” he sighed, patting the horse’s neck; the animal snorted, but it no longer leaped about, “yet I suppose it is necessary. You’re hardly a wife. Be calm. Don’t try to escape, don’t attack anyone in a black coat, and don’t touch the Source unless I give you permission. Now, what’s your name?”

Unless he gave permission? The effrontery of the man!

“Toveine Gazal,” she said, and blinked. Now, why had she answered him?

“There you are,” another black-coated man said, splashing his horse through the snow to them. This one would be much more to her liking—if he could not actually channel, at least. She doubted this pink-cheeked lad shaved more than twice in the week. “Light, Logain!” the pretty boy exclaimed. “Did you take a *second* one? The M’Hael won’t like that! I don’t think he likes us taking any! Maybe it won’t matter, though, you two being so close and all.”

“Close, Vinchova?” Logain said wryly. “If the M’Hael had his way, I’d be hoeing turnips with the new boys. Or buried under the field,” he added in a mutter she did not think he meant to be heard.

However much he heard, the pretty boy laughed with incredulous disbelief. Toveine barely heard him. She was gazing up at the man looming over her. Logain. The false Dragon. But he was dead! Stilled and dead! And holding her before his saddle with a casual hand. Why was she not screaming, or striking at him? Even her belt knife would do, this near. Yet she had no desire at all to reach for the ivory haft. She could, she realized. That band around her middle was gone. She could at least slip down off the horse and try to—She had no desire to do that, either.

“What did you do to me?” she demanded. Calmly. At least she had managed to hold on to that!

Turning his horse to ride back to the road, Logain told her what he had done, and she put her head against that wide chest, not caring at all how big he was, and wept. She was going to make Elaida pay for this, she vowed. If Logain ever let her, she would. That last was an especially bitter thought.

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CHAPTER 27

The Bargain

Seated cross-legged in a heavily gilded, high-backed chair, Min tried to lose herself in the leather-bound copy of Herid Fel's *Reason and Unreason* lying open on her knees. It was not easy. Oh, the book itself was mesmerizing; Master Fel's writings always swept her into worlds of thought she had not dreamed of while working in stables. She very much regretted the sweet old man's death. She hoped to find a clue in his books to why he had been killed. Her dark ringlets swung as she shook her head and tried to apply herself.

The book was fascinating, but the room was oppressive. Rand's small throne room in the Sun Palace was thick with gilt from the wide cornices to the tall mirrors on the walls replacing those Rand had smashed, from the two rows of chairs like the one she sat in to the dais at the head of the rows and the Dragon Throne atop the dais. That was a monstrosity, in the style of Tear as imagined by Cairhienin craftsmen, resting on the backs of a pair of Dragons with two more Dragons for the arms and others climbing the back, all with large sunstones for eyes, the whole glittering with gilt and red enamel. A huge golden, wavy-rayed Rising Sun set in the polished stone floor only added to the sense of heaviness. At least the fires blazing in two great fireplaces, tall enough for her to walk into, gave a pleasing warmth, especially with snow spilling down outside. And these were Rand's rooms; the comfort of that alone outweighed any amount of oppression. An irritating thought. This was Rand's room if he ever deigned to return. A very irritating thought. Being in love with a man seemed to consist largely of a great many irritating admissions to yourself!

Shifting in a vain attempt to make the hard chair comfortable, she tried to read, but her eyes kept swinging to the tall doors, each climbed by its own line of gilded Rising Suns. She hoped to see Rand walk in; she feared to see Sorilea, or Cadsuane. Unconsciously, she adjusted her pale blue coat, fingering the tiny snowflowers embroidered on the lapels. More twined around the sleeves, and the legs of breeches made as snug as she could manage to wriggle herself into. Not that great a change from what she had always worn. Not really. So far, she had avoided dresses, however much embroidery she wore, but she very much feared that Sorilea meant to stuff her into a dress if the Wise One had to peel her out of what she was wearing with her own hands.

The woman knew all about her and Rand. *All* about. She felt her cheeks heating. Sorilea seemed to be trying to decide whether Min Farshaw was a suitable . . . lover . . . for Rand al'Thor. That word made her feel foolishly giddy; she was not a fluff-brained girl! That word made her want to look over her shoulder guiltily for the aunts who had raised her. *No*, she thought wryly, *you're not fluff-brained. Fluff has its wits about it compared to you*!

Or maybe Sorilea wanted to know whether Rand was suitable for Min; it seemed that way, at times. The Wise Ones accepted Min as one of them, or very nearly, but these past weeks, Sorilea had wrung her out like a laundress's mangle. The leather-faced, white-haired Wise One wanted to know every scrap about Min, and every shred about Rand. She wanted the dust from the bottoms of his pockets! Twice Min had tried balking at the incessant interrogation, and twice Sorilea had produced a switch! That terrible old woman simply bundled her over the side of the nearest table, and afterward told her that maybe *that* would loosen another scrap in her head. None of the other Wise Ones gave the slightest commiseration, either! Light, the things you had to put up with for a man! And she could not have him for herself alone, at that!

Cadsuane was a different proposition altogether. The immensely dignified Aes Sedai, as gray-haired as Sorilea was white, did not seem to care two figs for Min or Rand either one, but she spent a great deal of time in the Sun Palace. Avoiding her entirely was impossible; she seemed to wander wherever she wanted. And when Cadsuane looked at Min, however briefly, Min could not help seeing a woman who could teach bulls to dance and bears to sing. She kept expecting the woman to point at her and announce that it was time Min Farshaw learned to balance a ball on her nose. Sooner or later, Rand had to face Cadsuane again, and the thought tied Min's stomach in knots.

She made herself bend back over her book. One of the doors swung open, and Rand strolled in with the Dragon Scepter nestled in the crook of his arm. He wore a golden crown, a broad circlet of laurel leaves—that must be this Crown of Swords everyone was talking about—snug breeches that showed his legs to advantage, and a gold-worked green silk coat that fit him beautifully. *He* was beautiful.

Marking her place with the note Master Fel had written saying she was "too pretty," she carefully closed the book and carefully set it on the floor beside her chair. Then she folded her arms and waited. Had she been standing, she would have tapped her foot, but she would not have the man thinking she was springing up just because *he finally* appeared.

For a moment he stood smiling at her, and tugging his earlobe for some reason—he seemed to be humming!—then abruptly he swung round to frown at the doors. "The Maidens out there didn't tell me you were in here. They hardly said a word at all. Light, they looked ready to veil at the sight of me."

"Maybe they are upset," she said calmly. "Maybe they wondered where you were. The way I did. Maybe *they* wondered whether you were hurt, or sick, or cold." *The way I did*, she thought bitterly. The man looked confused!

"I wrote to you," he said slowly, and she sniffed.

"Twice! With Asha'man to deliver your letters, you wrote twice, Rand al'Thor. If you call it writing!"

He staggered as if she had slapped him—no; as if she had kicked him in the belly!—and blinked. She took a firm hold on herself and settled against the chairback. Give a man sympathy at the wrong moment, and you never regained the ground lost. A part of her wanted to throw her arms around him, comfort him, draw out all his pains, soothe all his hurts. He had so many, and refused to admit a one. She was *not* going to spring up and rush to him, gushing to know what was wrong or . . . Light, he had to be all right.

Something took her gently beneath the elbows and lifted her out of the chair. Blue boots dangling, she floated toward him through the air. The Dragon Scepter floated away from him. So, he thought he could smile, did he? He thought a pretty smile could turn her around? She opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind. A very sharp piece! Folding his arms around her, he kissed her.

When she could breathe again, she peered up at him through her lashes. "The first time . . ." She swallowed to clear her voice. "First, Jahar Narishma stalked in trying to stare inside everybody's skull the way he does, and vanished after handing me a scrap of parchment. Let me see. It said, 'I have claimed the crown of Illian. Trust no one until I return. Rand.' A little short of a proper love letter, I'd say."

He kissed her again.

This time, getting her breath back took longer. This was not going as she had expected at all. On the other hand, it was not going very badly. "The second time, Jonan Adley delivered a bit of paper that said, 'I will return when I finish here. Trust no one. Rand.' Adley walked in on me in my bath," she added, "and he wasn't shy about getting an eyeful." Rand always tried to pretend he was not jealous—as if there were a man in the world who was not—but she had noticed his scowls at men who looked at her. And his very considerable ardor was more heated afterward, too. She wondered what this kiss would be like. Maybe she should suggest retiring to the bedchamber? No, she would not be that forward no matter—

Rand set her down, his face suddenly bleak. "Adley's dead," he said. Suddenly the crown flew from his head, spinning the length of the room as though hurled. Just when she thought it would crash into the back of the Dragon Throne, perhaps smash through it, the wide ring of gold stopped short and settled slowly onto the throne's seat.

Min's breath caught as she looked up at him. Blood glistened in the dark red curls above his left ear. Pulling a lace-edged handkerchief from her sleeve, she reached for his temple, but he caught her wrist.

"I killed him," he said quietly.

She shivered at the sound of his voice. Quiet, the way the grave was quiet. Perhaps the bedchamber was a very good idea. No matter how forward it was. Making herself smile—and blushing when she realized how easy it was to smile, thinking of that huge bed—she gripped the front of his shirt, preparing to rip shirt and coat from his back right then and there.

Someone knocked at the doors.

Min's hands sprang away from Rand's shirt. She sprang away, too. Who could it be, she wondered irritably. The Maidens either announced visitors when Rand was there, or simply sent them in.

"Come," he said loudly, giving her a rueful smile. And she blushed again at that.

Dobraine put his head in at the door, then entered and shut the door behind him when he saw them standing together. The Cairhienin lord was a small man, little taller than she, with the front of his head shaved and the rest of his mostly gray hair falling to his shoulders. Stripes of blue and white decorated the front of his nearly black coat to below his waist. Even before gaining Rand's favor he had been a power in the land. Now, he ruled here, at least until Elayne could claim the Sun Throne. "My Lord Dragon," he murmured, bowing. "My Lady *Ta'veren*."

"A joke," Min muttered, when Rand quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Perhaps," Dobraine said, shrugging slightly, "yet half the noblewomen in the city now wear bright colors in imitation of the Lady Min. Breeches that display their legs, and many in coats that do not even cover their . . ." He coughed discreetly, realizing that Min's coat did not cover *her* hips completely.

She thought about telling him *he* had very pretty legs, even if they were decidedly knobby, then quickly thought better. Rand's jealousy might be a wonderful flame if they were alone, but she did not want him striking out at Dobraine. He was capable of that, she feared. Besides, she thought it really was a slip; Lord Dobraine Taborwin was not the sort to make even slightly rough jokes.

"So you're changing the world, too, Min." Grinning, Rand tapped the tip of her nose with a finger. He tapped her nose! Like a child he was amused with! Worse, she felt herself grinning back at him like a fool. "In better ways than I am, it appears," he went on, and that momentary boyish grin faded like mist.

"Is all well in Tear and Illian, my Lord Dragon?" Dobraine enquired.

"In Tear and Illian, all is well," Rand replied grimly. "What do you have for me, Dobraine? Sit, man. Sit." He motioned toward the rows of chairs, and took one for himself.

"I have acted on all of your letters," Dobraine said, seating himself across from Rand, "but there is little good to report, I fear."

“I’ll get us something to drink,” Min said in a tight voice. Letters? It was not easy to stalk in heeled boots—she had grown accustomed to them, but the things made you sway whatever you did—not easy, yet enough anger made anything possible. She stalked to the small gilded table beneath one of the huge mirrors where a silver pitcher and goblets sat. She busied herself with pouring spiced wine, splashing it out furiously. The servants always brought extra goblets, in case she had visitors, though she seldom did except for Sorilea or a fool lot of noblewomen. The wine was barely warm, but it was more than hot enough for the likes of that pair. She had received two letters, but she would bet Dobraine had had ten! Twenty! Banging pitcher and goblets about, she listened carefully. What had they been up to behind her back with their dozens of letters?

“Toram Riatin appears to have vanished,” Dobraine said, “though rumor, at least, says he still lives, worse luck. Rumors also say that Daved Hanlon and Jeraal Mordeth—Padan Fain, as you call the man—have deserted him. By the way, I have settled Toram’s sister, the Lady Ailil, in generous apartments, with servants who are . . . trustworthy.” By his tone, he clearly meant trustworthy toward himself. The woman would not be able to change her dress without him knowing. “I can understand bringing her here, and Lord Bertome and the others, but why High Lord Weiramon, or High Lady Anaiyella? It goes without saying, of course, that their servants also are trustworthy.”

“How do you know when a woman wants to kill you?” Rand mused.

“When she knows your name?” Dobraine did not sound as if he were joking. Rand tilted his head thoughtfully, then nodded. Nodded! She hoped he was not still hearing voices.

Rand gestured as if brushing away the women who wanted to kill him. A dangerous thing, with her about. She did not want to kill him, certainly, but she would not mind seeing Sorilea go at him with that switch! Breeches did not give much protection.

“Weiramon is a fool who makes too many mistakes,” Rand told Dobraine, who nodded sober agreement. “My mistake for thinking I could use him. He seems happy enough to stay near the Dragon Reborn in any case. What else?” Min handed him a goblet, and he smiled at her despite the wine that slopped over his wrist. Maybe he thought it was an accident.

“Little else and too much,” Dobraine began, then jerked back in his chair to avoid spilling wine as Min shoved the second silver goblet at him.

She had not liked her brief stint as a tavernmaid. “My thanks, my Lady Min,” he murmured graciously, but he eyed her askance as he took the goblet. She walked calmly back to fetch her own wine. Calmly.

“I fear that Lady Caraline and the High Lord Darlin are in Lady Arilyn’s palace here in the City,” the Cairhienin lord went on, “under the protection of Cadsuane Sedai. Perhaps protection is not the correct word. I have been refused entry to see them, but I hear that they have attempted to leave the City and been brought back like sacks. *In* a sack, one story claims. Having met Cadsuane, I can almost believe it.”

“Cadsuane,” Rand murmured, and Min felt a chill. He did not sound afraid, precisely, yet he did sound more than uneasy. “What do you think I should do about Caraline and Darlin, Min?”

Settling into a chair two away from him, Min jerked at suddenly being included. Ruefully, she stared down at the wine soaking through her best cream silk blouse, and her breeches, too. “Caraline will support Elayne for the Sun Throne,” she said glumly. For warm wine, it seemed very cold, and she doubted the stain would ever come out of the blouse. “Not a viewing, but I believe her.” She did not glance toward Dobraine, though he nodded sagely. Everyone knew about her viewings, now. The only result had been a stream of noblewomen who wanted to know their futures, and right sulky, too, when she said she could not tell them. Most would not have been pleased with the little she had seen; nothing dire, but not at all the bright wonders that fortune-tellers at the fair forecast. “As for Darlin, aside from the fact that he’ll marry Caraline, after she’s wrung him out and hung him up to dry, all I can say is that one day he’ll be a king. I saw the crown on his head, a thing with a sword on the front of it, but I don’t know what country it belongs to. And, oh, yes. He’ll die in bed, and she will survive him.”

Dobraine choked on his wine, spluttering and dabbing at his lips with a plain linen handkerchief. Most of those who *knew* did not *believe*. Quite satisfied with herself, Min drank the little that remained in her goblet. And then *she* was choking and gasping, jerking her handkerchief from her sleeve to wipe at her mouth. Light, she *would* have to give herself the dregs!

Rand simply nodded, peering into his goblet. “So they will live to trouble me,” he murmured. A very soft sound, for words like stone. He was hard as a blade, her sheepherder. “And what do I do about—”

Abruptly he twisted in his chair, toward the doors. One was opening. He had very sharp ears. Min had heard nothing.

Neither of the two Aes Sedai who entered was Cadsuane, and Min felt her shoulders loosen as she tucked her handkerchief away. While Rafela shut the door, Merana curtsied deeply to Rand, though the Gray sister's hazel eyes took in Min and Dobraine and filed them away, and then the round-faced Rafela was spreading her deep blue skirts wide, too. Neither rose until Rand gestured. They glided to him wearing cool serenity as they did their dresses. Except that the plump Blue sister fingered her shawl briefly as though to remind herself it was there. Min had seen that gesture before, from other sisters who had sworn fealty to Rand. It could not be easy for them. Only the White Tower commanded Aes Sedai, but Rand crooked a finger and they came, pointed and they went. Aes Sedai spoke with kings and queens as equals, perhaps slightly as their betters, yet the Wise Ones called them apprentices and expected them to obey twice as fast as Rand did.

None of that showed on Merana's smooth face. "My Lord Dragon," she said respectfully. "We only just learned that you had returned, and we thought you might be eager to learn how matters went with the Atha'an Miere." She merely glanced at Dobraine, but he rose immediately. Cairhienin were used to people wanting to speak in private.

"Dobraine can stay," Rand said curtly. Had he hesitated? He did not stand. His eyes like blue ice, he was being the Dragon Reborn for all he was worth. Min had told him these women were his in truth, that all five who had accompanied him to the Sea Folk ship were his, utterly loyal to their oath and therefore obedient to his will, yet he seemed to find trusting any Aes Sedai difficult. She understood, but he was going to have to learn how.

"As you wish," Merana replied, inclining her head briefly. "Rafela and I have reached a bargain with the Sea Folk. The Bargain, they call it." The difference was clear to the ear. Hands lying still on gray-slashed green skirts, she drew a deep breath. She needed it. "Harine din Togara Two Winds, Wavemistress of Clan Shodein, speaking for Nesta din Reas Two Moons, Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere, and thus binding all the Atha'an Miere, has promised such ships as the Dragon Reborn needs, to sail when and where he needs them, for whatever purposes he requires." Merana did seem to grow a touch pontifical when there were no Wise Ones around; the Wise Ones did not allow it. "In return, Rafela and I, speaking for you, promised that the Dragon Reborn will not change any laws of the Atha'an Miere, as he has done among the . . ." For a moment, she faltered.

“Forgive me. I am used to delivering agreements exactly as made. The word they used was ‘shorebound,’ but what they mean is what you have done in Tear and Cairhien.” A question appeared in her eyes, and was gone. Perhaps she was wondering whether he had done the same in Illian. She had expressed relief that he had changed nothing in her native Andor.

“I suppose I can live with that,” he muttered.

“Secondly,” Rafela took up, folding plump hands at her waist, “you must give the Atha’an Miere land, a square one mile on a side, at every city on navigable water that you control now or come to control.” She sounded less pompous than her companion, but only just. Nor did she sound entirely pleased with what she was saying. She was Tairen, after all, and few ports held a tighter control on their trade than Tear. “Within that area, the laws of the Atha’an Miere are to hold sway above any others. This agreement must also be made by the rulers of those ports so that . . .” It was her turn to falter, and her dark cheeks turned a trifle gray.

“So the agreement will survive me?” Rand said dryly. He barked a laugh. “I can live with that, too.”

“Every city on water?” Dobraine exclaimed. “Do they mean here, too?” He leaped to his feet and began pacing, spilling more of his wine than Min had. He did not seem to notice. “A mile square? Under the Light alone knows what peculiar laws? I’ve traveled on a Sea Folk ship, and it *is* peculiar! Bare legs are not in it! And what of the customs duties, and docking fees, and . . .” Suddenly he rounded on Rand. He scowled at the Aes Sedai, who paid him no mind, but it was to Rand he spoke, in a tone bordering on roughness. “They will ruin Cairhien in a year, my Lord Dragon. They will ruin any port where you allow them to do this.”

Min agreed, silently, but Rand merely waved a hand and laughed again. “They may think so, but I know something of this, Dobraine. They didn’t say who chooses the land, so it doesn’t have to be *on* the water at all. They’ll have to buy their food from you, and live with your laws when they leave, so they can’t be too arrogant. At worst, you can collect your customs when the goods come out of their . . . sanctuary. For the rest . . . If I can accept it, you can, too.” There was no laughter in his voice now, and Dobraine bowed his head.

Min wondered where he had learned all that. He sounded a king, and one who knew what he was doing. Maybe Elayne had taught him.

“ ‘Secondly’ implies more,” Rand said to the two Aes Sedai.

Merana and Rafela exchanged glances, unconsciously touched skirts and shawls, and then Merana spoke, her voice not at all pompous. In fact, it was much too light. “Thirdly, the Dragon Reborn agrees to keep an ambassador chosen by the Atha’an Miere with him at all times. Harine din Togara has named herself. She will be accompanied by her Windfinder, her Swordmaster and a retinue.”

“What?” Rand roared, springing from the chair.

Rafela rushed in, rushed ahead, as though afraid he might cut her off. “And fourthly, the Dragon Reborn agrees to go promptly to a summons from the Mistress of the Ships, but not more than twice in any three consecutive years.” She finished panting a little, trying to make the last sound like extenuation.

The Dragon Scepter flew from the floor behind Rand, and he snagged it out of the air without looking. His eyes were not ice any more. They were blue fire. “A Sea Folk ambassador clinging to my heels?” he shouted. “Obey summonses?” He shook the carved spearhead at them, the green-and-white tassel flailing. “There are a people out there who want to conquer all of us, and might be able to do it! The Forsaken are out there! The Dark One is waiting! Why didn’t you agree I’d caulk their hulls while you were about it!”

Normally, Min tried to soothe his temper when it flared, but this time she sat forward and glared at the Aes Sedai. She agreed with him fully. They had given away the barn to sell a horse!

Rafela actually swayed before that blast, but Merana drew herself up, her own eyes managing a good imitation of brown fire flecked with gold. “You castigate *us*?” she snapped in tones as frosty as her eyes were hot. She was Aes Sedai as the child Min had seen them, regal above queens, powerful above powers. “You were present in the beginning, *ta’veren,* and you twisted them as you wanted them. You could have had them all kneeling to you! But you left! They were not pleased to know they had been dancing for a *ta’veren*. Somewhere, they learned to weave shields, and before you were well off their ship, Rafela and I were shielded. So we could not take advantage with the Power, they said. More than once, Harine threatened to hang us in the rigging by our toes until we came to our senses, and I for one believe she meant it! Feel lucky that you have the ships you want, Rand al’Thor. Harine would have given you a handful! Feel lucky she didn’t want your new boots and that ghastly throne of yours as well! Oh, by the by, she formally acknowledged you as the Coramoor, may you get a bellyache from it!”

Min stared at her. Rand and Dobraine stared at her, and the Cairhienin’s jaw hung open. Rafela stared, her mouth working soundlessly. For that matter, the fire faded from Merana’s eyes, and they slowly grew wider and wider as if she were just hearing what she had said.

The Dragon Scepter trembled in Rand’s fist. Min had seen his fury swell near to bursting for far less. She prayed for a way to avoid the explosion, and could not see one.

“It seems,” he said finally, “that the words a *ta’veren* drags out aren’t always the words he wants to hear.” He sounded . . . calm; Min was not about to think, sane. “You’ve done well, Merana. I handed you a dog’s dinner, but you and Rafela have done well.”

The two Aes Sedai swayed, and for a moment, Min thought they might collapse in puddles on the floor from sheer relief.

“At least we managed to keep the details from Cadsuane,” Rafela said, smoothing her skirts unsteadily. “There was no way to stop everyone learning we had made *some* sort of agreement, but we kept that much from her.”

“Yes,” Merana said breathlessly. “She even waylaid us on the way here. It’s difficult keeping anything from her, but we did. We didn’t think you’d want her to . . .” She trailed off at the stony look on Rand’s face.

“Cadsuane again,” he said flatly. He frowned at the carved length of spearhead in his hand, then tossed it onto a chair as if he did not trust himself with it. “She’s in the Sun Palace, is she? Min, tell the Maidens outside to carry a message to Cadsuane. She is to attend the Dragon Reborn in all haste.”

“Rand, I don’t think,” Min began uneasily, but Rand cut in. Not harshly, but quite firmly.

“Do it, please, Min. This woman is like a wolf eyeing the sheepfold. I intend to find out what she wants.”

Min took her time getting up, and dragged her feet to the doors. She was not the only one to think this a bad idea. Or at least to want to be elsewhere when the Dragon Reborn faced Cadsuane Melaidhrin. Dobraine passed her on the way to the door, making a hasty bow with barely a pause, and even Merana and Rafela were out of the room before her, though they made it appear they were not hurrying. Inside the room, they did, anyway.

When Min put her head into the hallway, the two sisters had caught Dobraine and were scurrying along at little short of a trot.

Strangely, the half-dozen Maidens who had been outside when Min entered earlier had now grown in number until they lined the corridor as far as she could see in both directions, tall hard-faced women in the grays and browns and grays of the *cadin'sor*, *shoufa* wrapped around their heads with the long black veil hanging down. A good many carried their spears and bull-hide bucklers as if they expected a battle. Some were playing a finger-game called "knife, paper, stone," and the rest were watching intently.

Not so intently that they did not see her, though. When she passed Rand's message, handtalk flashed up and down the rows, then two lanky Maidens went trotting off. The others promptly returned to the game, playing or watching.

Scratching her head in puzzlement, Min went back in. The Maidens often made her nervous, yet they always had a word for her, sometimes respectful, as to a Wise One, sometimes joking, though their humor was odd, to say the least. Never had they ignored her like this.

Rand was in the bedchamber. That simple fact set her heart racing. He had his coat off, his snowy shirt unlaced at neck and cuffs and pulled out of his breeches. Sitting on the foot of the bed, she leaned back against one of the heavy blackwood bedposts and swung her feet up, crossing her ankles. She had not had a chance to watch Rand undress himself, and she intended to enjoy it.

Instead of continuing, though, he stood there looking at her. "What can Cadsuane possibly teach me?" he asked suddenly.

"You, and all the Asha'man," she replied. That had been her viewing. "I don't know what, Rand. I only know you have to learn it. All of you do." It did not seem he intended to progress beyond letting his shirt hang down. Sighing, she went on. "You need her, Rand. You can't afford to make her angry. You can't afford to chase her away." Actually, she did not think fifty Myrddraal and a thousand Trollocs could *chase* Cadsuane anywhere, but the point was the same.

A far-off look came into Rand's eyes, and after a moment, he shook his head. "Why should I listen to a madman?" he muttered almost under his breath. Light, did he really believe Lews Therin Telamon spoke in his head? "Let someone know you need them, Min, and they have a hold on you. A leash, to pull you where they want. I won't put a halter on my own neck for any Aes Sedai. Not for anyone!" Slowly his fists unclenched. "You, I need, Min," he said simply. "Not for your viewings. I just need you."

Burn her, but the man could sweep her feet out from under her with a few words!

With a smile as eager as hers, he grasped the bottom of his shirt with both hands and bent to begin hauling it over his head. Lacing her fingers over her stomach, she settled back to watch.

The three Maidens who marched into the room no longer wore the *shoufa* that had concealed their short hair in the corridor. They were empty-handed, and no longer wore those heavy-blade belt knives, either. That was all Min had time to notice.

Rand's head and arms were still inside the shirt, and Somara, flaxen-haired and tall even for an Aiel woman, seized the white linen and tangled it, trapping him. Almost in the same movement, she kicked him between the legs. With a strangled groan, he bent farther, staggering.

Nesair, fiery-haired and beautiful despite white scars on both sun-dark cheeks, planted a fist in his right side hard enough to make him stumble sideways.

With a cry, Min launched herself from the bed. She did not know what madness was happening here, could not even begin to guess. One of her knives came smoothly from each sleeve, and she threw herself at the Maidens, shouting, "Help! Oh, Rand! Somebody, help!" At least, that was what she tried to shout.

The third Maiden, Nandera, turned like a snake, and Min found a foot planted in her stomach. Breath rushed out of her in a wheeze. Her knives flew from numb hands, and she turned a somersault over the graying Maiden's foot, landing on her back with a crash that drove out what little air remained in her. Trying to move, trying to breathe—trying to understand!—all she could do was lie there and watch.

The three women were quite thorough. Nesair and Nandera pounded Rand with their fists while Somara held him bent over and caught in his own shirt. Again and again and again they drove studied blows into Rand's hard belly, into his right side. Min would have laughed hysterically, had she had any breath. They were trying to beat him to death, and they very carefully avoid hitting anywhere near the tender round scar in his left side with the half-healed slash running through it.

She knew very well how hard Rand's body was, how strong, but no one could stand up to that. Slowly, his knees folded, and when they thumped to the floor tiles, Nandera and Nesair stood back. Each nodded, and Somara released her hold on Rand's shirt. He fell forward on his face. She could hear him gasping, fighting groans that bubbled up despite his efforts. Kneeling, Somara pulled his shirt down almost tenderly. He lay there with his cheek on the floor, eyes bulging, struggling for breath.

Nesair bent to catch a fistful of his hair and jerk his head up. "We won the right for this," she growled, "but every Maiden wanted to lay her hands on you. I left my clan for you, Rand al'Thor. I will not have you spit on me!"

Somara moved a hand as if to smooth hair out of his face, then snatched it back. "This is how we treat a first-brother who dishonors us, Rand al'Thor," she said firmly. "The first time. The next, we will use straps."

Nandera stood over Rand with fist planted on her hips and a face of stone. "You carry the honor of *Far Dareis Mai*, son of a Maiden," she said grimly. "You promised to call us to dance the spears for you, and then you ran to battle and left us behind. You will not do this again."

She stepped over him to stride out, and the other two followed. Only Somara glanced back, and if sympathy touched her blue eyes, there was none in her voice when she said, "Do not make this necessary again, son of a Maiden."

Rand had pushed himself up to hands and knees by the time Min managed to crawl to him. "They must be mad," she croaked. Light, but her middle hurt! "Rhuarc will—!" She did not know what Rhuarc would do. Not enough, whatever it was. "Sorilea." Sorilea would stake them out in the sun! To start! "When we tell her—"

"We tell no one," he said. He almost sounded as if he had his breath back, although he was still slightly pop-eyed. How could he do that? "They have the right. They've *earned* the right."

Min recognized that tone much to well. When a man decided to be stubborn, he would sit bare in a nettle patch and deny to your face that they made his bottom sting! She was almost pleased to hear him groan as she helped him to his feet. Well, as they helped each other. If he was going to be a pure wool-headed idiot, he deserved a few bruises!

He eased himself onto the bed, lying back on the heaped pillows, and she snuggled in beside him. Not what she had been hoping for, but as much as was going to happen, she was sure.

“Not what I was hoping to use this bed for,” he muttered. She was not sure she had been supposed to hear.

She laughed. “I enjoy you holding me just as much as . . . as the other.” Strangely, he smiled at her as if he knew she was lying. Her Aunt Miren claimed that was one of the three lies any man would believe from a woman.

“If I am interrupting,” a woman’s cool voice said from the doorway, “I suppose I could return when it is more convenient.”

Min jerked away from Rand as though burned, but when he pulled her back, she settled against him again. She recognized the Aes Sedai standing in the doorway, a plump little Cairhienin with four thin stripes of color across her full bosom and white slashes in her dark skirts. Daigian Moseneillin was one of the sisters who had come with Cadsuane. And she was almost as overbearing as Cadsuane herself, in Min’s opinion.

“Who might you be when you’re at home?” Rand said lazily. “Whoever you are, didn’t anyone ever teach you to knock?” Min realized that every muscle in the arm holding her was hard as a rock, though.

The moonstone dangling onto Daigian’s forehead on a thin silver chain swung as she slowly shook her head. Plainly, she was not pleased. “Cadsuane Sedai received your request,” she said, even more coolly than before, “and asked me to convey her regrets. She very much wishes to finish the piece of needlepoint she is working on. Perhaps she might be able to see you another day. If she can find time.”

“Is that what she said?” Rand asked dangerously.

Daigian sniffed disdainfully. “I will leave you to resume . . . whatever you were doing.” Min wondered whether she could get away with slapping an Aes Sedai. Daigian eyed her frostily, as if hearing the thought, and turned to glide from the room.

Rand sat up with a muffled oath. “You tell Cadsuane she can go to the Pit of Doom!” he shouted after the retreating sister. “Tell her she can rot!”

“It won’t do, Rand,” Min sighed. This was going to be harder than she had thought. “You need Cadsuane. She doesn’t need you.”

“Doesn’t she?” he said softly, and she shivered. She had only thought his voice was dangerous before.

Rand prepared carefully, dressing in the green coat again, sending Min with messages for the Maidens to carry. At least they would still do that. His ribs ached almost as much on his right side as the wounds did on his left, and his belly felt as he had been beaten with a board. He had promised them. He seized hold of *saidin* alone in his bedchamber, unwilling to let even Min see him falter again. He could keep her safe, at least, somehow, but how could she feel safe if she saw him about to fall over? He had to be strong, for her sake. He had to be strong, for the world. That bundle of emotions in the back of his head that was Alanna reminded him of the cost of carelessness. Right then, Alanna was sulking. She must have pushed a Wise One too far, because if she was sitting, she was sitting gingerly.

"I still think this is lunacy, Rand al'Thor," Min said as he placed the Crown of Swords carefully on his head. He did not want those tiny blades to draw blood again now. "Are you listening to me? Well, if you intend to go through with it, I'm going with you. You admitted you need me, and you'll need me more than ever for this!" She was in full fig, fists on her hips, foot tapping, eyes all but glowing.

"You're staying here," he told her firmly. He was still not sure what he intended to do, not fully, and he did not want her to see him stumble. He was very afraid he might stumble. He expected an argument, though.

She frowned at him, and her foot stopped tapping. The angry light in her eyes faded into worry that vanished in a twinkling. "Well, I suppose you're old enough to cross the stableyard without your hand held, sheepherder. Besides, I *am* falling behind in my reading."

Dropping into one of the tall gilded chairs, she folded her legs beneath her and picked up the book she had been reading when he came in. In moments, she seemed totally engrossed in the page before her.

Rand nodded. That was what he wanted; her here, and safe. Still, she did not have to forget him so completely.

There were six Maidens squatting in the hallway outside his door. They stared at him flat-eyed, not speaking, Nandera's gaze the flattest of all. Though Somara and Nesair came close. He thought Nesair was Shaido; he would have to keep a hard eye on her.

The Asha'man were waiting, too—Lews Therin muttered darkly of killing in Rand's head—all but Narishma with the Dragon on their collars as well as the Sword. Curtly, he ordered Narishma to stand guard on his apartments, and the man saluted sharply, those dark too-big eyes seeing too much, faintly accusing. Rand did not think the Maidens would take out their displeasure on Min, but he was not taking any chances. Light, he *had* told Narishma everything about the traps he had woven in the Stone when he sent the man to fetch *Callandor*. The man was imagining things. Burn him, but that had been a mad risk to take.

Only madmen never *trust*. Lews Therin sounded amused. And quite mad. The wounds in Rand's side throbbed; they seemed to resonate with each other in distant pain.

"Show me where to find Cadsuane," he commanded. Nandera rose smoothly to her feet and started off without a backward glance. He followed, and the others fell in behind him, Dashiva and Flinn, Morr and Hopwil. He gave them hasty instructions as they walked. Flinn, of all people, tried to protest, but Rand bore him down; this was no time for quailing. The grizzled onetime Guardsman was the last Rand had expected it of. Morr or Hopwil, perhaps. If no longer exactly dewy-eyed, they were still young enough to leave their razors dry as many days as wet. But not Flinn. Nandera's soft boots made no sound; their footsteps reverberated from the high square-vaulted ceiling, chasing away everyone with the shadow of a reason for fear. His wounds pulsed.

Every last person in the Sun Palace knew the Dragon Reborn on sight by now, and they knew who the black-coated men were, too. Black-liveried servants made deep bows or curtsies, and hurried to get out of his sight. Most nobles were almost as quick to put distance between themselves and five men who could channel, going somewhere with purpose on their faces. Ailil watched them pass with an unreadable expression. Anaiyella simpered, of course, but when Rand glanced back, she was staring after him with a face to match Nandera's. Bertome smiled as he made his leg, a dark smile with neither mirth nor pleasure in it.

Nandera did not speak even when they reached their destination, merely pointed to a closed door with one of her spears, turned on her heel, and strode back the way they had come. The *Car'a'carn* without a single Maiden to guard him. Did they think four Asha'man enough to keep him safe? Or was her departure another sign of displeasure?

"Do what I told you," Rand said.

Dashiva gave a jerk as if coming back to himself, then seized the Source. The wide door, carved in vertical lines, swung open with a bang on a flow of Air. The other three took hold of *saidin* and followed Dashiva in, faces grim.

“The Dragon Reborn,” Dashiva’s voice sounded loud, magnified slightly by the Power, “the King of Illian, the Lord of the Morning, comes to see the woman, Cadsuane Melaidhrin.”

Rand stepped in, standing tall. He did not recognize the other weave Dashiva had created, but the air seemed to hum with menace, a sense of something inexorable approaching, drawing ever nearer.

“I sent for you, Cadsuane,” Rand said. He did not use weaves. His voice was hard and flat enough without aid.

The Green sister he remembered sat beside a small table with an embroidery hoop in her hands, an opened basket on the polished tabletop spilling out skeins of bright thread from some of its many compartments. She was exactly as he remembered. That strong face topped by an iron-gray bun decorated with small dangling golden fish and birds, stars and moons. Those dark eyes, seeming almost black in her fair face. Cool, considering eyes. Lews Therin gave a wail and fled at the sight of her.

“Well,” she said, setting the embroidery hoop on the table, “I must say I’ve seen better without paying. With all I’ve been hearing about you, boy, the least I expected was peals of thunder, trumpets in the heavens, flashing lights in the sky.” Calmly, she regarded the five stone-faced men who could channel, which should have been enough to make any Aes Sedai flinch. Calmly, she regarded the Dragon Reborn. “I hope one of you is at least going to juggle,” she said. “Or eat fire? I’ve always enjoyed watching gleemen eat fire.”

Flinn barked a laugh before catching himself, and even then raked a hand through his fringe of hair and seemed to be struggling with amusement. Morr and Hopwil exchanged looks both puzzled and more than a little outraged. Dashiva smiled unpleasantly, and the weave he was holding grew stronger, until Rand felt as if he wanted to look over his shoulder to see what was rushing toward him.

“It is enough that you know I am who I am,” Rand told her. “Dashiva, all of you, wait outside.”

Dashiva opened his mouth as if to protest. That had not been part of Rand’s instructions, but they were not going to overawe the woman, not this way. The man went, though, muttering to himself. Hopwil and Morr actually stepped out eagerly, with sidelong glances at Cadsuane. Flinn was the only one to make a dignified withdrawal, in spite of his limp. And he still seemed amused!

Rand channeled, and a heavy, leopard-carved chair floated into the air from its place by the wall, spinning end over end in somersaults before settling like a feather in front of Cadsuane. At the same time, a heavy silver pitcher drifted up from a long, draped table across the room, making a loud ping as it was suddenly heated; steam gushed from the top, and it tipped over, whirling round and round like a slow top, as a silver cup darted up to neatly catch the dark pouring.

"Too hot, I think," Rand said, and the glassed casements leaped from the tall, narrow windows. Snowflakes billowed in on an icy blast, and the cup soared out through one of the windows, soared back again, straight to his hand as he sat himself. Let her see how calm she could stay with a madman staring at her. The dark liquid was tea, too strong after his boiling, and bitter enough to set his teeth on edge. But the warmth was just right. His skin pebbled in the gusts howling into the room and flapping tapestries against the walls, but in the Void, that was far away, someone else's skin.

"The Laurel Crown is prettier than some," Cadsuane said with a faint smile. Her hair ornaments swayed whenever the wind rose, and small wisps flailed about her bun, but the only notice she took was to catch her embroidery hoop just before it was blown from the table. "I prefer that name. But you can't expect me to be impressed by crowns. I've paddled the bottoms of two reigning kings and three queens. Not sitting rulers, you understand, once I was done with them, not for a day or so, but it did get their attention. You can see why crowns don't impress me, though."

Rand eased his jaw. Grinding his teeth would not help. He widened his eyes, hoping he looked insane instead of simply furious. "Most Aes Sedai avoid the Sun Palace," he told her. "Except for those who have sworn fealty to me. And those I hold prisoner." Light, what was he to do with *those*? As long as the Wise Ones kept them out of his hair, all was well enough.

"The Aiel seem to think I should come and go as I please," she said absently, eyeing the hoop in her hand as if thinking of taking up her needle again. "A matter of some trifling help I gave some boy or other. Though why anyone but his mother should think him worth it, I can hardly say."

Rand made another effort not to grind his teeth. The woman *had* saved his life. Her and Darner Flinn between them, and plenty of others in the bargain, Min among them. But he still owed Cadsuane something for that.

Burn her. “I want you to be my advisor. I’m King of Illian now, and kings have Aes Sedai advisors.”

She gave his crown a dismissive glance. “Certainly not. An advisor has to stand and watch her charge make a muddle much too often to suit me. She also has to take orders, something I am particularly bad at. Won’t someone else do? Alanna, perhaps?”

Despite himself, Rand sat up straight. Did she know about the bond? Merana had said it was hard to keep anything from her. No; he could worry later about how much his “faithful” Aes Sedai were telling Cadsuane. Light, he wished Min could be wrong for once. But he would believe himself breathing water, first. “I . . .” He could not make himself tell her that he needed her. No halter! “What if you didn’t have to swear any oaths?”

“I suppose that might work,” she said doubtfully, peering at her cursed stitchery. Her eyes rose to his. Considering. “You sound . . . uneasy. I don’t like to tell a man he’s afraid even when he has reason to be. Uneasy over a sister you haven’t turned into a tame lapdog snaring you in some fashion? Let me see. I can make you a few promises; perhaps they will set your mind at rest. I expect you to listen, of course—make me waste my breath, and you’ll yelp for it—but I won’t make you do what I want. I won’t tolerate anyone lying to me, certainly—that’s another thing you’ll find decidedly uncomfortable—but I don’t expect you to tell me the deepest yearnings of your heart, either. Oh, yes. Whatever I do, it will be for your own good; not mine, not the good of the White Tower, yours. Now, does that ease your fears? Pardon me. Your unease.”

Wondering whether he was supposed to laugh, Rand stared at her. “Do they teach you how to do that?” he demanded. “Make a promise sound a threat, I mean.”

“Oh, I see. You want rules. Most boys do, whatever they say. Very well. Let me see. I cannot abide incivility. So you will be properly civil to me, to my friends, and my guests. That includes not channeling at them, in case you haven’t guessed, and holding your temper, which I understand is memorable. It also takes in your . . . companions in those black coats. A pity if I had to spank you for something one of them did. Does that suffice? I can make more, if you need them.”

Rand set his cup down beside the chair. The tea had gone cold as well as bitter. Snow was beginning to pile up in drifts beneath the windows. “I’m the one who's supposed to go mad, Aes Sedai, but you already are." Rising, he strode for the door.

"I do hope you haven't tried to use *Callandor*," she said complacently behind him. "I have heard it's vanished from the Stone. You managed to escape once, but you might not twice."

He stopped short, looking over his shoulder. The woman was pushing that bloody needle through the cloth stretched on her hoop! The wind gusted, swirling snow around her, and she did not even lift her head. "What do you mean, escape?"

"What?" She did not look up. "Oh. Very few even in the Tower knew what *Callandor* is before you drew it, but there are surprising things hidden in musty corners of the Tower Library. I went rummaging some years ago, when I first had the suspicion you might be suckling at your mother's breast. Just before I decided to go back into retirement. Babes are messy things, and I could not see how to find you before you stopped dripping at one end or the other."

"What do you mean?" he demanded roughly.

Cadsuane looked up then, and with her hair flung about and snow settling on her dress, she looked a queen. "I told you I cannot abide incivility. If you ask for my help again, I expect you to ask *politely*. And I will expect an apology for your behavior today!"

"What do you mean about *Callandor*?"

"It is flawed," she replied curtly, "lacking the buffer that makes other *sa'angreal* safe to use. And it apparently magnifies the taint, inducing wildness of the mind. So long as a man is using it, anyway. The only safe way for you to use The Sword That Is Not a Sword, the only way to use it without the risk of killing yourself, or trying to do the Light alone knows what insanity, is linked with two women, and one of them guiding the flows."

Trying not to hunch his shoulders, he strode away from her. So it had been not just the wildness of *saidin* around Ebou Dar that had killed Adley. He had murdered the man the moment he sent Narishma for the thing.

Cadsuane's voice pursued him. "Remember, boy. You must ask very nicely, and apologize. I might even agree, if your apology sounds truly sincere."

Rand barely heard her. He had hoped to use *Callandor* again, hoped it would be strong enough. Now only one chance remained, and it terrified him. He seemed to hear another woman’s voice, a dead woman’s voice. *You could challenge the Creator*.

* * *

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CHAPTER 28

Crimsonthorn

It hardly seemed the setting for the explosion Elayne feared. Harlon Bridge was a village of moderate size, with three inns and enough houses that no one had to sleep in a hayloft. When Elayne and Birgitte went downstairs to the common room that morning, Mistress Dill, the round innkeeper, smiled warmly and offered as much of a curtsy as her size allowed. It was not just that Elayne was Aes Sedai. Mistress Dill was so pleased that her inn was full, what with the roads snow-packed, that she bobbed at nearly everyone. At their entrance, Aviendha hastily gulped the last of her breakfast bread and cheese, brushed a few crumbs from her green dress, and snatched up her dark cloak to join them.

Outside, the sun was just peeking over the horizon, a low dome of pale yellow. Only a few clouds marred a beautiful blue sky, and they were white and fluffy, not the sort to carry snow. It seemed a wonderful day for traveling.

Except that Adeleas was trampling a path up the snowy street, and the white-haired sister was dragging one of the Kin, Garenia Rosoinde, by her arm. Garenia was a slim-hipped Saldaean who had spent the last twenty years as a merchant although she looked only a few years older than Nynaeve did. Normally, her strongly hooked nose gave her a forceful appearance, a woman who would make hard trading and not back away. Now her dark tilted eyes were large in her face and her wide mouth hung open, emitting a wordless wail. A growing knot of Kinswomen followed behind, skirts held high out of the snow, whispering among themselves, with more running from every direction to join. Reanne and the rest of the Knitting Circle were in the front, all grim-faced except for Kirstian, who seemed even paler than usual. Alise was there, too, wearing an utterly blank expression.

Adeleas stopped in front of Elayne and shoved Garenia so hard the woman fell to hands and knees in the snow. Where she stayed, still wailing. The Kinswomen gathered behind her, more of their number flocking in.

"I'm bringing this to you because Nynaeve is busy," the Brown sister told Elayne. She meant that Nynaeve was enjoying a little time alone with Lan somewhere, but for once, not so much as a hint of a smile crossed her lips. "Be quiet, child!" she snapped at Garenia. Who promptly went silent. Adeleas gave a satisfied nod. "This is not Garenia Rosoinde," she said. "I finally recognized her. Zarya Alkaese, a novice who ran away just before Vandene and I decided to retire and write our history of the world. She admitted it, when I confronted her. I'm surprised Careane didn't recognize her before this; they were novices together for two years. The law is clear, Elayne. A runaway must be put back in white as soon as possible and kept under strict discipline until she can be returned to the Tower for proper punishment. She won't think of running again after that!"

Elayne nodded slowly, trying to think of what to say. Whether or not Garenia—Zarya—thought of running again, she would not be allowed the opportunity. She was very strong in the Power; the Tower would not let her go if it took the rest of her life to earn the shawl. But Elayne was recalling something she had heard this woman say the first time she met her. The meaning had not registered then, but now it did. How would Zarya face novice white again after living as her own woman for seventy years? Worse, those whispers among the Kinswomen had begun to sound like rumbles.

She did not have long to think. Suddenly Kirstian fell to her knees, clutching at Adeleas' skirts with one hand. "I submit myself," she said calmly, her tone a wonder coming from that bloodless face. "I was enrolled in the novice book almost three hundred years ago, and ran away less than a year later. I submit myself, and . . . and beg mercy."

It was white-haired Adeleas' turn to go wide-eyed. Kirstian was claiming to have run away from the White Tower when she herself was an infant, if not before she was born! Most of the sisters still did not really believe the ages claimed by the Kin. Indeed, Kirstian appeared just into her middle years.

Even so, Adeleas recovered herself quickly. However old the other woman was, Adeleas had been Aes Sedai about as long as anyone living. She carried an aura of age, and authority. “If that is so, child,” her voice did falter just a bit at that, “I fear we must put you in white, too. You will still be punished, but surrendering as you have will gain you some mitigation.”

“That is why I did it.” Kirstian’s steady tone was spoiled somewhat by a hard swallow. She was almost as strong as Zarya—none of the Knitting Circle were weak—and she would be held very closely. “I knew you would find me out sooner or later.”

Adeleas nodded as though that were clearly obvious, though how the woman would have been found out, Elayne could not guess. She very much doubted that Kirstian Chalwin was the name the woman had been born with. Most of the Kin believed in Aes Sedai omniscience, though. They had, at least.

“Rubbish!” Sarainya Vostovan’s husky voice cut through the murmured babble of the Kin. Neither strong enough to become Aes Sedai nor nearly old enough to stand very high among the Kin, she still stepped from the pack defiantly. “Why should we give them up to the White Tower? We have helped women run away, and rightly so! It is not part of the rules to give them back!”

“Control yourself!” Reanne said sharply. “Alise, take Sarainya in hand, please. It seems she forgets too many of the rules she claims to know.”

Alise looked at Reanne, her face still unreadable. Alise, who enforced the Kin’s rules with a firm hand. “It is not part of our rules to hand runaways back, Reanne,” she said.

Reanne jerked as though struck. “And how do you suggest keeping them?” she demanded finally. “We have always held runaways apart until we were sure they were no longer hunted, and if they were found before, we let the sisters take them. That is the *rule*, Alise. What other rule do you propose violating? Do you suggest that we actually set ourselves *against* Aes Sedai?” Ridicule of such a notion larded her voice, yet Alise stood looking at her, silent.

“Yes!” a voice shouted from the crowd of Kinswomen. “We are many, and they are few!” Adeleas stared at the crowd in disbelief. Elayne embraced *saidar*, though she knew the voice was right—the Kin were too many. She felt Aviendha embracing the Power, and Birgitte setting herself.

Giving herself a shake as if coming to, Alise did something far more practical, certainly far more effective. “Sarainya,” she said loudly, “you will report to me when we stop tonight, with a switch you cut yourself before we leave this morning. You, too, Asra; I recognize your voice!” And then, just as loudly, she said to Reanne, “I will report myself for your judgment when we stop tonight. I don’t see anyone getting ready!”

The Kinswomen broke up quickly then, heading off to gather their things, yet Elayne saw some of them talking quietly as they went. When they rode over the bridge across the frozen stream that wound down beside the village, with Nynaeve incredulous over what she had missed and glaring about for someone to call down, Sarainya and Asra carried switches—as did Alise—and Zarya and Kirstian wore hastily found white dresses beneath their dark cloaks. The Windfinders pointed at them and laughed uproariously. But many of the Kinswomen still talked in clusters, falling silent whenever a sister or one of the Knitting Circle looked at them. And there was a darkness to their eyes when they looked at Aes Sedai.

Eight more days of floundering through the snow when it was not falling, and grinding her teeth in an inn when it was. Eight more days of brooding by the Kin, of staring bleakly at the sisters, days of strutting by the Windfinders around Kin and Aes Sedai alike. On the morning of the ninth day, Elayne began to wish everyone had simply gone for everyone else’s throat.

She was just wondering whether they could cover the last ten miles to Caemlyn without a murder, when Kirstian rapped at her door and darted in without waiting for an answer. The woman’s plain woolen dress was not the shade of white proper for a novice, and she had regained much of her dignity somehow, as if knowing her future had smoothed her present, but now she made a hasty curtsy, almost tripping over her cloak, and her nearly black eyes were anxious. “Nynaeve Sedai, Elayne Sedai, Lord Lan says you are to come at once,” she said breathlessly. “He told me to speak to no one, and you aren’t to, either.”

Elayne and Nynaeve exchanged looks with Aviendha and Birgitte. Nynaeve growled something under her breath about the man not knowing private from public, but it was clear before she blushed that she did not believe it. Elayne felt Birgitte focus, the drawn arrow hunting a target.

Kirstian did not know what Lan wanted, only where she was to lead them. The small hut outside of Cullen's Crossing where Adeleas had taken Ispan the night before. Lan stood outside, his eyes as cold as the air, and would not let Kirstian enter. When Elayne went inside, she saw why.

Adeleas lay on her side beside an overturned stool, a cup on the rough wooden floor not far from one outstretched hand. Her eyes stared, and a pool of congealed blood spread out from the deep slash across her throat. Ispan lay on a small cot, staring at the ceiling. Lips drawn back in a rictus bared her teeth, and her bulging eyes seemed full of horror. As well they might have, since a wrist-thick wooden stake stood out from between her breasts. The hammer that had plainly been used to drive it in lay beside the cot, on the edge of a dark stain that ran back under the cot.

Elayne forced herself to stop thinking about emptying her stomach on the spot. "Light," she breathed. "Light! Who could do this? *How* could anyone do this?" Aviendha shook her head wonderingly, and Lan did not even bother with that. He just watched nine directions at once, as though he expected whoever, or whatever, had committed this murder to come through one of the two tiny windows if not through the walls. Birgitte drew her belt knife, and by her face, she dearly wished she had her bow. That drawn arrow was stronger than ever in Elayne's head.

At first, Nynaeve simply stood in one spot, studying the hut's interior. There was little to see, aside from the obvious. A second three-legged stool, a rough table holding a flickering lamp, a green teapot and a second cup, a rude stone fireplace with cold ash on the hearthstone. That was all. The hut was so small it only took Nynaeve a step to reach the table. Dipping her finger into the teapot, she touched it to the tip of her tongue, then spat vigorously and emptied the whole teapot into the table in a wash of tea and tea leaves. Elayne blinked wonderingly.

"What happened?" Vandene asked coolly from the door. Lan moved to bar her way, but she stopped him with a small gesture. Elayne started to put an arm around her, and received another raised hand to keep her back. Vandene's eyes remained on her sister, calm in a face of Aes Sedai serenity. The dead woman on the cot might as well not have existed. "When I saw all of you heading this way, I thought . . . We knew we didn't have many years remaining, but . . ." Her voice sounded serenity itself, but small wonder if that was a mask. "What have you found, Nynaeve?"

Sympathy looked odd on Nynaeve's face. Clearing her throat, she pointed to the tea leaves without touching them. To white shavings among the matted black leaves. "This is crimsonthorn root," she said, trying to sound matter-of-fact and failing. "It's sweet, so you might miss it in tea unless you know what it is, especially if you take a lot of honey."

Vandene nodded, never taking her eyes from her sister. "Adeleas developed a taste for sweet tea in Ebou Dar."

"A little kills pain," Nynaeve said. "This much . . . This much kills, but slowly. Even a few sips would be enough." Taking a deep breath, she added, "They might have remained conscious for hours. Not able to move, but aware. Either whoever did this didn't want to risk someone coming too soon with an antidote—not that I know one, for a brew this strong—or else they wanted one or the other to know who was killing them." Elayne gasped at the brutality, but Vandene simply nodded.

"Ispan, I think, since they appear to have taken the most time with her." The white-haired Green almost seemed to be thinking aloud, working out a puzzle. Cutting a throat took less time than driving a stake through someone's heart. The calm of her made Elayne's skin crawl. "Adeleas would never have accepted anything to drink from someone she didn't know, not out here with Ispan. Those two facts name her killer, in a way. A Dark-friend, and one of our party. One of us." Elayne felt two chills, her own, and Birgitte's.

"One of us," Nynaeve agreed sadly. Aviendha began testing the edge of her belt knife on her thumb, and for once, Elayne felt no objection.

Vandene asked to be left alone with her sister for a few moments, and sat on the floor to cradle Adeleas in her arms before they were out of the door. Jaem, Vandene's gnarled old Warder, was waiting outside with a shivering Kirstian.

Suddenly a wail burst out inside the hut, the full-throated cry of a woman mourning the loss of everything. Nynaeve, of all people, turned to go back, but Lan laid a hand on her arm, and Jaem planted himself before the door with eyes not much warmer than Lan's. There was nothing to do but leave them, Vandene to shriek her pain, and Jaem to guard her in it. And share it, Elayne realized, feeling that knot of emotions in her head that was Birgitte. She shivered, and Birgitte put an arm around her shoulders. Aviendha did the same from the other side, and motioned for Nynaeve to join them, which she did, after a moment. The murder Elayne had thought of so lightly had come, one of their companions was a Darkfriend, and the day suddenly felt cold enough to shatter bones, but there was a warmth in the closeness of her friends.

The last ten funereal miles to Caemlyn took two days in the snow, with even the Windfinders decently subdued. Not that they pushed Merilille any less hard. Not that Kin stopped talking, and falling silent whenever a sister or one of the Knitting Circle came near. Vandene, with her sister's silver-mounted saddle on her horse, appeared as serene as she had at Adeleas' graveside, but Jaem's eyes carried a silent promise of death that surely rode in Vandene's heart, too. Elayne could not have been happier to see the walls and towers of Caemlyn if the very sight had given her the Rose Crown and brought back Adeleas.

Even Caemlyn, one of the great cities of the world, had never seen the likes of their party before, and once inside the fifty-foot walls of gray stone they attracted notice as they crossed the New City along wide, slush-filled streets bustling with people and carts and wagons. Shopkeepers stood in their doorways and gaped. Wagon drivers reined in their teams to stare. Towering Aielmen and tall Maidens eyed them from every corner, it seemed. The people seemed to take no notice of the Aiel, but Elayne did. She loved Aviendha as she did herself, more, but she could not love an army of armed Aiel walking Caemlyn's streets.

The Inner City, ringed by towered walls of silver-streaked white, was a remembered delight, and Elayne finally began to feel that she was coming home. The streets followed the curves of the hills, and every rise presented a new vista of snow-covered parks and monuments laid out to be seen from above as well as up close, of brightly tiled towers shining with a hundred colors in the afternoon sun. And then the Royal Palace itself was before them, a confection of pale spires and golden domes and intricate stonework traceries. The banner of Andor waved from nearly every prominence, the White Lion on red. And from the others, the Dragon Banner or the Banner of Light.

At the tall gilded gates of the Palace, Elayne rode forward alone in her travel-stained gray riding dress. Tradition and legend said women who first approached the Palace in splendor always failed. She had made clear that she had to do it alone, yet she almost wished Aviendha and Birgitte had succeeded in overruling her. Half the two dozen guards in front of the gates were Aiel Maidens, the others men in blue helmets and blue coats with a red-and-gold Dragon marching across the chest.

“I am Elayne Trakand,” she announced loudly, surprised at how calm she sounded. Her voice carried, and across the great plaza people turned from staring at her companions to stare at her. The ancient formula rolled from her tongue. “In the name of House Trakand, by right of descent from Ishara, I have come to claim the Lion Throne of Andor, if the Light wills it so.”

The gates opened wide.

It would not be that easy, of course. Even possession of the Palace was not enough to hold the throne of Andor by itself. Passing her companions into the care of an astonished Reene Harfor—and very pleased to see that the graying First Maid, round and as regal as any queen, still had the Palace in her capable hands—and a coterie of servants in red-and-white livery, Elayne hurried to the Grand Hall, the throne room of Andor. Alone, again. This was not part of the ritual, not yet. She should have been going to change into the red silk with the pearl-worked bodice and white lions climbing the sleeves, but she felt compelled. This time, not even Nynaeve tried to object.

White columns twenty paces high marched down the sides of the Grand Hall. The throne room was empty, still. That would not last long. Clear afternoon light through the glassed casements in tall windows along the walls mingled with the colored light through the great windows set in the ceiling, where the White Lion of Andor alternated with scenes of Andoran victories and the faces of the land’s earliest queens, beginning with Ishara herself, as dark as any of the Atha’an Miere, as full of authority as any Aes Sedai. No ruler of Andor could forget herself with the predecessors who had forged this nation staring down at her.

One thing she feared to see—the huge monstrosity of a throne, all gilded Dragons, that she had seen standing on the dais at the far end of the Hall in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. It was not there, thank the Light. The Lion Throne no longer rested on a tall plinth like some trophy, either, but kept its proper place upon the dais, a massive chair, carved and gilded, but sized for a woman. The White Lion, picked out in moonstones on a field of rubies, would stand above the head of any woman who sat there. No man could feel at his ease sitting on that throne, because, so legend said, he would know he had sealed his doom. Elayne thought it more likely the builders had simply made sure a man would not *fit* on it easily.

Climbing the white marble steps of the dais, she laid a hand on one arm of the throne. She had no right to sit on it herself, not yet. Not until she was acknowledged Queen. But taking oaths on the Lion Throne was a custom as old as Andor. She had to resist the desire to simply fall on her knees and weep into the throne's seat. Reconciled to her mother's death she might be, but this brought back all the pain. She could not break down now.

"Under the Light, I will honor your memory, Mother," she said softly. "I will honor the name of Morgase Trakand, and try to bring only honor to House Trakand."

"I ordered the guards to keep the curious and the favor-seekers away. I suspected you might want to be alone here for a time."

Elayne turned slowly to face Dyelin Taravin, as the golden-haired woman walked the length of the Grand Hall. Dyelin had been one of her mother's earliest supporters in her own quest for the throne. There was more gray in her hair than Elayne remembered, more lines at the corners of her eyes. She was still quite beautiful. A strong woman. And powerful as friend or foe.

She stopped at the foot of the dais, looking up. "I've been hearing for two days that you were alive, but I didn't really believe it until now. You've come to accept the throne from the Dragon Reborn, then?"

"I claim the throne by my own right, Dyelin, with my own hand. The Lion Throne is no bauble to be accepted from a man." Dyelin nodded, as at self-evident truth. Which it was, to any Andoran. "How do you stand, Dyelin? With Trakand, or against? I have heard your name often on my way here."

"Since you claim the throne by your own right, with." Few people could sound as dry as she. Elayne sat down on the top step, and motioned the older woman to join her. "There are a few obstacles, of course," Dyelin went on as she gathered her blue skirts to sit. "There have been several claimants already, as you may know. Naean and Elenia, I have securely locked up. On a charge of treason that most people seem willing to accept. For the time being. Elenia's husband is still active for her, though quietly, and Arymilla has announced a claim, the silly goose. She's getting support of a kind, but nothing that need worry you. Your real worries—aside from Aiel all over the city waiting for the Dragon Reborn to come back—are

Aemlyn, Arathelle, and Pelivar. For the moment, Luan and Ellorien will be behind you, but they might go over to those three."

A very succinct list, delivered in a tone suitable for discussing a possible horse trade. Naean and Elenia she knew about, if not that Jarid still thought his wife had a chance at the throne. Arymilla *was* a goose to believe she would be accepted, whatever her support. The last five names were worrying, though. Each had been as strong a supporter of her mother, as had Dyelin, and each led a strong House.

"So Arathelle and Aemlyn want the throne," Elayne murmured. "I can't believe it of Ellorien, not for herself." Pelivar might be acting for one of his daughters, but Luan had only granddaughters, none near old enough. "You spoke as if they might unite, all five Houses. Behind whom?" That would be a dire threat.

Smiling, Dyelin propped her chin in her hand. "They seem to think I should have the throne. Now, what do you intend about the Dragon Reborn? He hasn't been back here in some time, but he can pop out of the air, it seems."

Elayne squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, but when she opened them, she was still sitting on the steps of the dais in the Grand Hall, and Dyelin was still smiling at her. Her brother fought for Elaida, and her half-brother was a Whitecloak. She had filled the Palace with women who might turn on one another at any moment, not to mention the fact that one was a Darkfriend, maybe even Black Ajah. And the strongest threat she faced in claiming the throne, a *very* strong one, stood behind a woman who said *she* supported Elayne. The world was quite mad. She might as well add her bit.

"I mean to bond him my Warder," she said, and went on before the other woman could more than blink in astonishment. "I also hope to marry him. Those things have nothing to do with the Lion Throne, however. The very first thing I intend . . ."

As she went on, Dyelin began to laugh. Elayne wished she knew whether it was from delight over her plans or because Dyelin saw her own path to the Lion Throne being made smooth. At least she knew what she faced, now.

Riding into Caemlyn, Daved Hanlon could not help thinking what a city for the looting it was. In his years soldiering, he had seen many villages and towns looted, and once, twenty years ago, a great city, Cairhien, after the Aiel left. Strange that all these Aiel had left Caemlyn so apparently untouched, but then, if the tallest towers in Cairhien had not been burning, it might have been hard to know they had been there; plenty of gold, among other things, lying about for the picking up, and plenty of men to do the picking. He could see these broad streets full of horsemen and fleeing people, fat merchants who would give up their gold before the knife touched them in the hope their lives would be spared, slim girls and plump women so terrified when they were dragged into a corner that they could hardly manage to squeal, much less struggle. He had seen those things and done them, and he hoped to again. Not in Caemlyn, though, he admitted with a sigh. If the orders that sent him here had been the sort he could disobey, he would have gone where the pickings might not be so rich, but definitely easier to pluck.

His instructions had been clear. Stabling his horse at The Red Bull, in the New City, he walked a mile to a tall stone house on a side street, the house of a wealthy merchant discreet about her gold, marked with a tiny painted sigil on the doors, a red heart on a golden hand. The hulking fellow who let him in was no merchant’s servant, with his sunken knuckles and sullen eyes. Without a word, the huge man led him deeper into the house, then down, toward the basements. Hanlon eased his sword in its scabbard. Among the things he had seen were men and women, failures, led to their own very elaborate executions. He did not think he had failed, but then again, he had hardly succeeded. He had followed orders, though. Which was not always enough.

In the rough stone basement, lit by gilded lamps set all around, his eyes went first to a pretty woman in a lace-trimmed dress of scarlet silk, with her hair caught in frothy lace net. He did not know who this Lady Shiaine was, but his orders had been to obey her. He made his best leg, smiling. She simply looked at him, as if waiting for him to notice what else the basement held.

He could hardly have missed it, since except for a few casks the room held only a large heavy table, decorated in a very strange fashion. Two ovals had been cut in the tabletop, and from one stuck the head and shoulders of a man, his head wrenched back against the wooden surface and held there by means of leather straps nailed to the tabletop and fastened to a block of wood jammed between his teeth. A woman, prepared the same, provided the other decoration. Beneath the table, they knelt with wrists tied to ankles. Quite securely held for any sort of pleasure. The man had a touch of gray in his hair and the face of a lord, but unsurprisingly, his deep-set eyes rolled wildly. The woman's hair, spread out on the table, was dark and glossy, but her face was a little long for Hanlon's taste.

Suddenly he really saw her face, and his hand leaped to his sword before he could stop it. Releasing the hilt took some effort, which he made pains to hide. An Aes Sedai's face, but an Aes Sedai who let herself be fastened like that was no threat.

"So you have some brains," Shiaine said. By her accents, she was a noble, and she certainly had the commanding air, sweeping around the table to peer down into the bound man's face. "I asked the Great Master Moridin to send me a man with brains. Poor Jaichim here has very few."

Hanlon frowned, and smoothed it away immediately. His orders had come from Moghedien herself. Who in the Pit of Doom was Moridin? It did not matter. His orders had come from Moghedien; that was enough.

The hulking fellow handed Shiaine a funnel, which she fitted into a hole bored through the block of wood between this Jaichim's teeth. The man's eyes seemed ready to leap from his head. "Poor Jaichim here failed very badly," Shiaine said, smiling like a fox looking at a chicken. "Moridin wishes him punished. Poor Jaichim does like his brandy."

She stepped back, not so far that she could not see clearly, and Hanlon gave a start as the hulking man came to the table with one of the casks. Hanlon did think he could have lifted the thing unaided, but the big man tipped it easily. The bound man shrieked once, and then a stream of dark liquid was pouring from the cask into the funnel, turning his cry to gurgling. The rough smell of crude brandy filled the air. Secured as he was, the man fought, thrashing about, even managing to heave the table sideways, but the brandy kept pouring. Bubbles rose in the funnel as he tried to shout or scream, but the steady stream never faltered. And then his thrashing slowed and stopped. Wide, glazing eyes stared up the ceiling, and brandy trickled from his nostrils. The big fellow still did not stop until the last drops fell from an empty cask.

"I think poor Jaichim has finally had enough brandy," Shiaine said, and laughed in delight.

Hanlon nodded. He supposed the man had, at that. He wondered who he had been.

Shiaine was not quite finished. At a gesture from her, the hulking man ripped one of the straps holding the Aes Sedai's gag off of its nail. Hanlon thought the wooden block might have loosened a few of her teeth coming out of her mouth, but if so, she did not waste time on them. She began babbling before the fellow let go of the strap.

“I will obey you!” she howled. “I will obey, as the Great Master commanded! He set the shield on me to dissolve so I could obey! He told me so! Let me prove myself! I will crawl! I am a worm, and you are the sun! Oh, please! Please! Please!”

Shiaine stifled words if not whimpers by putting a hand over the Aes Sedai’s mouth. “How do I know you won’t fail again, Falion? You have failed before, and Moridin left your punishment to me. He gave me another; do I need two of you? I may give you a second chance to plead your case, Falion—perhaps—but if I do, you will have to convince me. I will expect *true* enthusiasm.”

Falion began screaming pleas again, making extravagant promises, the moment Shiaine’s hand moved, but soon enough she was reduced to wordless shrieks and tears as the gag was replaced, the nail driven through the strap again, and Jaichim’s funnel placed above her gaping throat. The hulking man stood another cask on the table beside her head. The Aes Sedai seemed to go mad, bulging eyes rolling, flinging herself about below the table till it trembled.

Hanlon was impressed. An Aes Sedai must be harder to break than a plump merchant or his round-cheeked daughter. Still, she had had the help of one of the Chosen, it seemed. Realizing that Shiaine was looking at him, he stopped smiling down at Falion. His first rule in life was never to offend those the Chosen set above him.

“Tell me, Hanlon,” Shiaine said, “how would you like to put your hands on a queen?”

He licked his lips in spite of himself. A queen? *That*, he had never done.

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CHAPTER
29

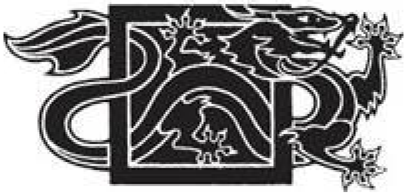

A Cup of Sleep

“Don’t be an utter woolhead, Rand,” Min said. Making herself remain seated, she crossed her legs and kicked her foot idly, but she could not keep exasperation out of her voice. “Go to her! Speak to her!”

“Why?” he snapped. “I know which letter to believe, now. It’s better this way. She’s safe, now. From anyone who wants to strike at me. Safe from me! It’s better!” But he stalked up and down in his shirtsleeves between the two rows of chairs in front of the Dragon Throne, his fists white-knuckle hard, glaring to beat the black clouds beyond the casements that were laying a new blanket of snow on Cairhien.

Min exchanged looks with Fedwin Morr, who stood by the sun-carved doors. The Maidens now let anyone who was not an obvious threat walk in unannounced, but those Rand did not want to see this morning would be turned away by the husky boy. He wore the Dragon and Sword on his black collar, and Min knew he had already seen more battles—more horror—than most men three times his age, yet he was a boy. Today, casting uneasy glances at Rand, he seemed younger than ever. The sword on his hip still looked out of place, to her.

“The Dragon Reborn is a man, Fedwin,” she said. “And like any man, he’s sulking because he thinks a woman doesn’t want to see him again.”

Goggling, the boy jerked as if she had goosed him. Rand stopped to scowl at her sullenly. All that kept her from laughing was knowing that he was hiding pain as real as any stab wound. That, and the sure knowledge that he would be as hurt if she had done what had been done. Not that she would ever have the chance to rip down his banners, but the point applied. Rand had been stunned at first by the news Taim brought from Caemlyn at dawn, but as soon as the man left, he had stopped looking like a poleaxed bull and started . . . This!

Standing, she adjusted her pale green coat, folded her arms beneath her breasts, and confronted him directly. “What else can it be?” she asked calmly. Well, she tried for calm, and almost made it. She loved the man, but after a morning of this, she wanted to box his ears soundly. “You haven’t mentioned Mat twice, and you don’t know whether *he’s* even alive.”

“Mat’s alive,” Rand snarled. “I’d know if he was dead. What do you mean I’m—!” His jaw clenched as if he could not make himself say the word.

“Sulking,” she provided. “Soon, you’ll be pouting. Some women think men are prettier when they pout. I’m not one of them.” Well, enough of that. His face had darkened, and he was not blushing. “Haven’t you twisted yourself into knots to make sure she got the throne of Andor? Which is hers by right, might I add. Didn’t you say you wanted her to have Andor whole, not ripped apart like Cairhien or Tear?”

“I did!” he roared. “And now it’s hers, and she wants me out of it! Good enough, I say! And don’t tell me again to stop shouting! I’m not—!” He realized that he was, and clamped his teeth shut. A low growl came from his throat. Morr set to studying one of his buttons, twisting it back and forth. He had been doing a lot of that this morning.

Min kept her face smooth. She was *not* going to slap him, and he was too big for her to spank. “Andor is hers, just as you wanted,” she said. Calmly. Almost. “None of the Forsaken are going after her now she’s torn your banners down.” A dangerous light appeared in those blue-gray eyes, but she pressed on. “Just as you wanted. And you can’t believe she’s siding with your enemies. Andor will follow the Dragon Reborn, and you know it. So the only reason for you to be in a snit is because you think she doesn’t want to see you. Go to her, you fool!” The next part was the hardest to say. “Before you can say two words, she’ll be kissing you.” Light, she loved Elayne almost as much as she did Rand—maybe as much, in a very different way—but how was a woman to compete with a beautiful golden-haired queen who had a powerful nation at her beck and call?

“I am not . . . angry,” Rand said in a tight voice. And started pacing again. Min considered kicking him square in the bottom. Hard.

One of the doors opened to admit leathery white-haired Sorilea, who brushed Morr aside even as he was looking to see whether Rand wanted her allowed entry. Rand opened his mouth—angrily, whatever he chose to claim—and five women in thick black robes damp with melted snow followed the Wise One into the room, hands folded, eyes down, and deep hoods not quite hiding their faces. Their feet were wrapped in rags.

Min's scalp prickled. To her eyes, images and auras danced and vanished and were replaced around all six women, just as around Rand. She had been hoping he had forgotten those five were alive. What in the name of the Light was that wicked old woman doing?

Sorilea gestured once in a clatter of gold and ivory bracelets, and the five hastily arranged themselves in a line atop the golden Rising Sun set in the stone floor. Rand strode along that row, stripping back hoods, baring faces that he stared into cold-eyed.

Every one of the black-robed women was unwashed, her hair lank and dirty with sweat. Elza Penfell, a Green sister, met his gaze eagerly, a strangely fervent look on her face. Nesune Bihara, a slender Brown, studied him as intently as he did her. Sarene Nemdahl, so beautiful even in her dirt that you thought her agelessness must be natural, appeared to be holding to her White Ajah coolness by a fingernail. Beldeine Nyram, too new to the shawl to have the ageless features, essayed an uncertain smile that melted under his stare. Erian Boroleos, pale and almost as lovely as Sarene, flinched, then visibly forced herself to look into that frigid gaze. Those last two also were Green, and all five had been among the sisters who kidnapped him on Elaida's orders. Some had been among those who tortured him while trying to carry him to Tar Valon. Sometimes Rand still woke, sweating and panting, mumbling about being confined, being beaten. Min hoped she did not see murder in his stare.

"These were named *da'tsang*, Rand al'Thor," Sorilea said. "I think they feel their shame in the bone, now. Erian Boroleos was the first to ask to be beaten as you were, sunrise and sunset, but now each has done so. That plea has been granted. Each has asked to serve you however she may. The *toh* for their betrayal cannot be met," her voice darkened for a moment; to the Aiel, the betrayal of the kidnapping was far worse than what they had done after, "yet they know their shame, and they wish to try. We have decided to leave the choice to you."

Min frowned. Leave the choice to him? Wise Ones rarely left any choice they could make to anyone else. Sorilea *never* did. The sinewy Wise One casually shifted her dark shawl on her shoulders and watched Rand as if this was of no importance at all. But she shot one blue ice glance at Min, and suddenly Min was sure that if she said the wrong thing here, that bony old woman would have her hide. It was not a viewing. She just knew Sorilea better than she wanted to, by now.

Determinedly she set to studying what was appearing and vanishing around the women. No easy task when they stood so close together she could not be certain whether a particular image belonged to one woman or the woman next to her. At least the auras were always certain. Light, let her be able to understand at least some of what she saw!

Rand took Sorilea's announcement coolly, on the surface. He rubbed his hands together slowly, then thoughtfully examined the herons branded on his palms. He examined each of those Aes Sedai faces in turn. Finally, he focused on Erian.

"Why?" he asked her in a mild voice. "I killed two of your Warders. Why?" Min winced. Rand was many things, but seldom mild. And Erian was one of the few who had beaten him more than once.

The pale Illianer sister straightened. Images danced, and auras flashed and were gone. Nothing Min could read. Dirty-faced and her long black hair matted, Erian gathered Aes Sedai authority around her and met his gaze levelly. But her answer came simply and directly. "We did be wrong in taking you. I have considered long on it. You must fight the Last Battle, and we must help you. If you will no accept me, I do understand, but I will help as you do require if you will allow."

Rand stared at her without expression.

He put that same one-word question to each, and their answers were as different as the women.

"The Green is the Battle Ajah," Beldeine told him proudly, and despite smudges on her cheeks and dark circles beneath her eyes, she did look a Queen of Battles. But then, Saldaean women seemed to find that second nature. "When you go to Tarmon Gai'don, the Green must be there. I will follow, if you will accept me." Light, she was going to bond an Asha'man as a Warder! How . . . ? No; it was not important now.

"What we did was logical at the time." Sarene's tightly held cool serenity slipped into clear worry, and she shook her head. "I say that to explain, not to exculpate. Circumstances have changed. For you, the logical course might seem to . . .” She drew a decidedly unsteady breath. Images and auras; a tempestuous love affair, of all things! The woman was ice, however beautiful. And there was nothing useful in knowing some man would melt her! “To send us back to captivity,” she went on, “or even execute us. For me, logic says I must serve you.”

Nesune tilted her head, and her nearly black eyes seemed to be trying to store away every scrap of him. One red-and-green aura spoke of honors, and fame. A huge building appeared above her head and vanished. A library she would found. “I want to study you,” she said simply. “I can hardly do that carrying stones or digging holes. They do leave plenty of time for thought, but serving you seems a fair exchange for what I might learn.” Rand blinked at the directness of that, but otherwise, his expression did not alter.

The most surprising answer came from Elza, in her manner of delivery more than the words. Sinking to her knees, she gazed up at Rand with feverish eyes. Her whole face seemed to shine with fervor. Auras flared and images cascaded around her, telling nothing. “You are the Dragon Reborn,” she said breathlessly. “You must be there for the Last Battle. I must help you be there! Whatever is necessary, I will do!” And she flung herself facedown, pressing her lips to the polished stone floor in front of his boots. Even Sorilea looked taken aback, and Sarene’s mouth dropped open. Morr gaped at her and hastily returned to twisting his button. Min thought he giggled nervously, almost under his breath.

Turning on his heel, Rand stalked halfway to the Dragon Throne, where his scepter and the crown of Illian rested atop his gold-embroidered red coat. His face was so bleak that Min wanted to rush to him no matter who was watching, but she continued to study the Aes Sedai. And Sorilea. She had never seen anything really useful around that white-haired harridan.

Abruptly, Rand turned back, striding toward the line of women so quickly that Beldeine and Sarene stepped back. A sharp gesture from Sorilea jerked them into place again.

“Would you accept being confined in a box?” His voice grated, stone grinding on frozen stone. “Locked in a chest all day, and beaten before you go in and when you come out?” That was what they had done to him.

“Yes!” Elza moaned against the floor. “Whatever I must do, I will!”

“If you do require it,” Erian managed shakily, and, faces aghast, the others nodded slowly.

Min stared in amazement, knotting her fists in her coat pockets. That he might think of getting his own back in the same manner seemed almost natural, but she had to stop it, somehow. She knew him better than he did himself; she knew where he was hard as a knife blade, and where he was vulnerable no matter how he denied it. He would never forgive himself this. But how? Fury contorted his face, and he shook his head as he did when arguing with that voice he heard. He muttered one word aloud that she understood. *Ta’veren*. Sorilea stood there calmly examining him as closely as Nesune did. Not even the threat of the chest shook the Brown. Except for Elza, still moaning and kissing the floor, the others were hollow-eyed, as if seeing themselves doubled up and bound as he had been.

Among all of those images spilling around Rand and the women, suddenly an aura flashed, blue and yellow tinged with green, encompassing them all. And Min knew its meaning. She gasped, half in surprise, half in relief.

“They will serve you, each in her fashion, Rand,” she said hurriedly. “I saw it.” *Sorilea* would serve him? Suddenly Min wondered exactly what “in her fashion” meant. The words came with the knowing, but she did not always know what the words themselves meant. But they *would* serve; that much was plain.

The fury drained from Rand’s face as he silently studied the Aes Sedai. Some of them glanced at Min with raised eyebrows, obviously marveling that a few words from her carried so much weight, but for the most part, they watched Rand and hardly seemed to breathe. Even Elza lifted her head to gaze up at him. Sorilea gave Min one quick look, and the faintest nod. Approving, Min thought. So the old woman pretended not to care one way or the other, did she?

At last, Rand spoke. “You can swear to me as Kiruna and the others did. That, or go back to wherever the Wise Ones have been keeping you. I’ll accept nothing less.” Despite a hint of demand in his voice, he looked as if he, too, did not care, arms folded, eyes impatient. The oath he demanded of them came out in a rush.

Min did not expect quibbles, not after her viewing, yet it was still a surprise when Elza scrambled up to her knees, and the others lowered themselves to theirs. In ragged unison, five more Aes Sedai swore under the

Light and by their hope of salvation to serve the Dragon Reborn faithfully until the Last Battle had come and gone. Nesune delivered the words as though examining each one, Sarene as if stating a principle of logic, Elza wearing a wide, victorious smile, but they all swore. How many Aes Sedai would he gather around him?

With the oath, Rand seemed to lose interest. "Find them clothes and put them with your other 'apprentices,' " he told Sorilea absently. He was frowning, but not at her or the Aes Sedai. "How many do you think you'll end up with?" Min almost jumped at the echo of her own thought.

"However many are necessary," Sorilea said dryly. "I think more will come." She clapped her hands once and gestured, and the five sisters sprang to their feet. Only Nesune looked surprised at the alacrity with which they had obeyed. Sorilea smiled, a very satisfied smile for an Aiel, and Min did not think it was caused by the other women's obedience.

Nodding, Rand turned away. He was already beginning to pace again, already beginning to scowl over Elayne. Min settled into her chair once more, wishing she had one of Master Fel's books to read. Or to throw at Rand. Well, one of Master Fel's to read, and someone else's to throw.

Sorilea herded the black-clad sisters out of the room, but at the last, she paused with one hand holding a door and looked back at Rand striding away from her toward the gilded throne. Her lips pursed thoughtfully. "That woman, Cadsuane Melaidhrin, is beneath this roof again today," she said at last, to his back. "I think she believes you are afraid of her, Rand al'Thor, the way you avoid her whereabouts." With that, she left.

For a long moment, Rand stood staring at the throne. Or maybe at something beyond it. Abruptly, he gave himself a shake and strode the remaining distance to pick up the Crown of Swords. On the point of setting it on his head, though, he hesitated, then put it back. Donning the coat, he left crown and scepter where they lay.

"I mean to find out what Cadsuane wants," he announced. "She doesn't come to the palace every day because she likes a trip through the snow. Will you come with me, Min? Maybe you'll have a viewing."

She was on her feet faster than any of those Aes Sedai. A visit with Cadsuane would likely be as pleasurable as a visit with Sorilea, yet anything was better than sitting there alone. Besides, maybe she *would* have a viewing. Fedwin fell in behind her and Rand with an alert look in his eyes.

The six Maidens outside in the tall vaulted hallway rose, but they did not follow. Somara was the only one Min knew; she gave Min a brief smile, and Rand a flat, disapproving stare. The others glowered. The Maidens had accepted his explanation about why he had gone without them in the first place, so any watchers would believe for as long as possible that he was still in Cairhien, but they still demanded to know why he had not sent for them afterward, and Rand had had no answers. He muttered something under his breath, and quickened his pace so Min had to stretch her legs to keep up.

"Watch Cadsuane carefully, Min," he said. "And you, too, Morr. She's up to some Aes Sedai scheme, but burn me if I can see what. I don't know. There's—"

A stone wall seemed to strike Min from behind; she thought she heard roaring, crashing. And then Rand was turning her over—she was lying on the floor?—looking down at her with the first fear she remembered seeing in those morning-blue eyes. It only faded when she sat up, coughing. The air was full of dust! And then she saw the corridor.

The Maidens were gone from in front of Rand's doors. The doors themselves were gone, along with most of the wall, and a jagged hole nearly as big gaped in the wall opposite. She could see into his apartments clearly despite the dust, into devastation. Massive piles of rubble lay everywhere, and above, the ceiling yawned open to the sky. Snow swirled down onto flames dancing among the rubble. One of the massive blackwood posts of his bed stuck burning out of shattered stone, and she realized she could see all the way outside to the stepped towers veiled by the snowfall. It was as if a huge hammer had smashed into the Sun Palace. And had they been in there, instead of going to see Cadsuane . . . Min shivered.

"What . . . ?" she began unsteadily, then abandoned the useless question. Any fool would see *what* had happened. "Who?" she asked instead.

Covered in dust, hair every which way, and with tears in their coats, the two men looked as if they had been rolled along the corridor, and perhaps they had. She thought they were all a good ten paces farther from the doors than she remembered. From where the doors had been. In the distance, anxious shouts rose, echoing along the halls. Neither man answered her.

"Can I trust you, Morr?" Rand asked.

Fedwin met his gaze openly. “With your life, my Lord Dragon,” he said simply.

“That’s what I *am* trusting you with,” Rand said. His fingers brushed her cheek, and then he stood abruptly. “Guard her with *your* life, Morr.” Hard as steel, his voice. Grim as death. “If they’re still in the Palace, they’ll feel you try to make a gateway, and strike before you can finish. Don’t channel at all unless you must, but be ready. Take her down to the servants’ quarters, and kill anyone or anything that tries to get to her. Anyone!”

With a last look down at her—oh, Light, any other time, she would have thought she could die happily, seeing that look in his eyes!—he went running, away from the ruination. Away from her. Whoever had tried to kill him would be hunting for him.

Morr patted her on the arm with a dusty hand and gave her a boyish grin. “Don’t worry, Min. I’ll take care of you.”

But who was going to take care of Rand? Can I trust you, he had asked this boy who had been one of the first to come asking to learn. Light, who would make him safe?

* * *

> Rounding a corner, Rand stopped with a hand against one wall to seize the Source. A fool thing, not wanting Min to see him stagger when someone tried to kill him, but there it was. Not just any someone. A man, Demandred, or perhaps Asmodean come back at last. Maybe both; there had been an oddity, as if the weaving came from different directions. He had felt the channeling too late to do anything. He would have died, in his rooms. He was ready to die. But not Min, no, not Min. Elayne was better off, turning against him. Oh, Light, she was!

He seized the Source, and *saidin* flooded him with molten cold and freezing heat, with life and sweetness, filth and death. His stomach twisted, and the hallway in front of him doubled itself. For an instant, he thought he saw a face. Not with his eyes; in his head. A man, shimmering and unrecognizable, gone. He floated in the Void, empty, and full of the Power.

You won’t win, he told Lews Therin. *If I die, I’ll die* me!

I should have sent Ilyena away, Lews Therin whispered back. *She would have lived*.

Pushing the voice away as he pushed himself from the wall, Rand slipped along the Palace corridors with all the stealth he could muster, stepping lightly, gliding close to tapestry-hung walls, around gold-worked chests and gilded cabinets bearing fragile golden porcelains and ivory statuettes. His eyes searched for his attackers. They would not be satisfied short of finding his body, but they would be very careful in approaching his rooms in case he had survived by some *ta'veren* swirl of fate. They would wait, to see whether he stirred. In the Void, he was as near one with the Power as any man could live through. In the Void, as with a sword, he was one with his surroundings.

Frantic shouts and clamor rose in every direction, some screaming to know what had happened, others crying that the Dragon Reborn had gone mad. The bundle of frustration in his head that was Alanna provided one small comfort. She was out of the Palace, as she had been all morning, maybe even outside the city walls. He wished Min was, too. Sometimes he saw men and women down one hallway or another, black-liveried servants mainly, running, falling down and scrambling up to run again. They did not see him. With the Power in him, he could hear every whisper. Including the whisper of soft boots running, light-footed.

Backing against the wall beside a long table topped with porcelain, he quickly wove Fire and Air around himself and held very still wrapped in Folded Light.

Maidens appeared, a stream of them, veiled, and ran by without seeing him. Toward his apartments. He could not let them accompany him; he had promised, but to let them fight, not to lead them to slaughter. When he found Demandred and Asmodean, all the Maidens could do was die, and he already had five names to learn and add to his list. Somara of the Bent Peak Daryne was already there. A promise he had had to make, a promise he had to keep. For that promise alone, he deserved to die!

Eagles and women can only be kept safe in cages, Lews Therin said as though quoting, then abruptly began weeping as the last of the Maidens vanished.

Rand moved on, sweeping back and forth through the palace in arcs that slowly moved away from his apartments. Folded Light used very little of the Power—so little no man could have felt the use of *saidin* unless right on top of it—and he used it whenever anyone seemed about to see him. His attackers had not struck at his rooms on the chance he would be there. They had eyes-and-ears in the Palace. Maybe it had been *ta'veren* work that pulled him out of the apartments, if a *ta'veren* could work on himself, and maybe just happenstance, but perhaps his tugging at the Pattern could bring his attackers within his grasp while they thought him dead or injured. Lews Therin chuckled at the thought. Rand could almost feel the man rubbing his hands in anticipation.

Three more times he had to hide behind the Power as veiled Maidens rushed by, and once when he saw Cadsuane sweeping along the corridor ahead with no fewer than six Aes Sedai at her heels, and not one other that he recognized besides her. They seemed to be hunting. He was not afraid of the gray-haired sister, precisely. No, of course not afraid! But he waited until she and her friends were well out of sight before letting his concealing weave go. Lews Therin did not chuckle over Cadsuane. He was deathly silent until she was gone.

Rand stepped away from the wall, a door opened right beside him, and Ailil peeked out. He had not known he was near her rooms. Behind her shoulder stood a dark woman with fat golden rings in her ears and a medallion-filled golden chain running across her left cheek to her nose ring. Shalon, Windfinder to Harine din Togara, the Atha'an Miere ambassador who had moved into the Palace with her retinue almost as Merana informed him of the agreement. And meeting with a woman who might want him dead. Their eyes popped at the sight of him.

He was as gentle as he could be, but he had to be quick. A few moments after the door opened, he was tucking a somewhat rumpled Ailil beneath her bed alongside Shalon. Perhaps they were not part of what was happening. Perhaps. Safe was better than sorry. Glaring at him above mouths wadded full of Ailil's scarves, the two women writhed against the torn strips of bedsheet he had used to bind their wrists and ankles. The shield he had tied off on Shalon would hold her for a day or two before the knot unraveled, but someone would find them and cut their other bonds before too much longer.

Worrying about that shield, he opened the door enough to check the hallway, and hurried out, along the empty corridor. He could not have left the Windfinder free to channel, but shielding a woman was not a matter of dribbles of the Power. If one of his attackers had been close enough . . . But he saw no one down any of the crossing corridors, either.

Fifty paces beyond Ailil’s rooms, the corridor opened into a square-railed balcony of blue marble with broad stairs at either end, fronting a square chamber with a high, vaulted ceiling and the same sort of balcony at the other side. Tapestries ten paces long hung along the walls, birds soaring to the skies in rigid patterns. Below, Dashiva stood looking about, licking his lips uncertainly. Gedwyn and Rochaid were with him! Lews Therin chittered of killing.

“. . . telling you I felt nothing,” Gedwyn was saying. “He’s dead!”

And Dashiva saw Rand, at the head of the stairs.

The only warning he had was the sudden snarl that contorted Dashiva’s face. Dashiva channeled, and with no time to think, Rand wove—as so often, he did not know what; something dredged from Lews Therin’s memories; he was not even sure he created the weave entirely himself, or whether Lews Therin snatched at *saidin*—Air and Fire and Earth woven around himself just so. The fire that leaped from Dashiva erupted, shattering marble, flinging Rand back down the hallway, bounding and rolling in his cocoon.

That barrier would keep out anything short of balefire. Including air to breathe. Rand released it panting, scraping along the floor, with the crash of the explosions still ringing in the air, dust still hanging and bits of broken marble tumbling. As much as for breath, though, he let it go because what could keep the Power out, kept it in. Before he stopped sliding, he channeled Fire and Air, but woven much differently than for Folded Light. Thin red wires leaped from his left hand, fanning out as they sliced through the intervening stone toward where Dashiva and the others had been standing. From his left sped balls of flame, Fire woven with Air, faster than he could count, and they burned through the stone before exploding in that chamber. One continuous deafening roar made the Palace tremble. Dust that had fallen rose up again, and pieces of stone bounced.

Almost immediately, though, he was up and running, back past Ailil’s apartments. The man who struck and stayed in one spot was asking to die. He was ready to die, but not yet. Snarling soundlessly, he sped down another hall, descended narrow servants’ stairs, and came out on the floor below.

He took care making his way back to where he had seen Dashiva, deadly weaves ready to fling at so much as a glimpse.

I should have killed them all in the beginning, Lews Therin panted. *I should have killed them all!*

Rand let him rage.

The large chamber seemed to have been washed in fire. Only charred fragments licked by flames remained of the tapestries, and great gouges a pace across had been burned into floor and walls. The stairs Rand had been about to descend ended in a ten-foot gap halfway down. Of the three men, there was no sign. They would not have been consumed completely. Something would have remained.

A servant in a black coat cautiously poked his head from a tiny door beside the stairs on the other side of the chamber. His eyes fell on Rand, rolled up in his head, and he fell forward in a heap. Another servant peeped out of a corridor, then gathered her skirts and raced back the way she had come, shrieking at the top of her lungs that the Dragon Reborn was killing everyone in the Palace.

Rand slipped out of the chamber grimacing. He was very good at frightening people who could not harm him. Very good at destroying.

To destroy, or be destroyed, Lews Therin laughed. *When that's your choice, is there a difference?*

Somewhere in the Palace, a man channeled enough of the Power to make a gateway. Dashiva and the others fleeing? Or wanting him to think that?

He walked the corridors of the Palace, no longer bothering to hide. Everyone else seemed to be. The few servants he saw, fled screaming. Corridor after corridor, he hunted, filled near to bursting with *saidin*, full of fire and ice trying to annihilate him as surely as Dashiva had, full of the taint worming its way into his soul. He had no need of Lews Therin's ragged laughter and ravings to be filled with a desire to kill.

A glimpse of a black coat ahead, and his hand shot up, fire streaking, exploding, tearing away the corner where the two hallways met. Rand let the weave subside, but did not let it go. Had he killed him?

"My Lord Dragon," a voice shouted from beyond the torn stonework, "it's me, Narishma! And Flinn!"

"I didn't recognize you," Rand lied. "Come here."

"I think maybe your blood's hot," Flinn's voice called. "I think maybe we should wait for everybody to cool down."

"Yes," Rand said slowly. Had he really tried to kill Narishma? He did not think he could claim the excuse of Lews Therin. "Yes, that might be best. For a little while longer." There was no answer. Did he hear boots retreating? He forced his hands down and turned another way.

He searched through the Palace for hours without finding a sign of Dashiva or the others. The corridors and great halls, even the kitchens, were empty of people. He found nothing, and learned nothing. No. He realized that he had learned one thing. Trust was a knife, and the hilt was as sharp as the blade.

Then he found pain.

The small stone-walled room was deep below the Sun Palace and warm despite the lack of a fireplace, but Min felt cold. Three gilded lamps on the tiny wooden table gave more than enough light. Rand had said that from there, he could get her away even if someone tried to root the Palace out of the ground. He had not sounded as if he were joking.

Holding the crown of Illian on her lap, she watched Rand. Watched Rand watching Fedwin. Her hands tightened on the crown, and loosened immediately at the stabs of those small swords hidden among the laurel leaves. Strange, that the crown and scepter should have survived when the Dragon Throne itself was a pile of gilded splinters buried in rubble. A large leather scrip beside her chair, with Rand's sword belt and scabbarded sword resting against it, held what else he had been able to salvage. Strange choices for the most part, in her estimation.

You brainless loobie, she thought. *Not thinking about what's right in front of you won't make it go away*.

Rand sat cross-legged on the bare stone floor, still covered in dust and scratches, his coat torn. His face might have been carved. He seemed to watch Fedwin without blinking. The boy was sitting on the floor, too, his legs sprawled out. Tongue caught between his teeth, Fedwin was concentrating on making a tower out of blocks of wood. Min swallowed hard.

She could still remember the horror when she realized the boy "guarding" her now had the mind of a small child. The sadness remained, too—Light, he was only a boy! it was not right!—but she hoped Rand still had him shielded. It had not been easy, talking Fedwin into playing with those wooden blocks instead of pulling stones out of the walls with the Power to make a "big tower to keep you safe in." And then *she* had sat guarding *him* until Rand came. Oh, Light, she wanted to cry. For Rand even more than Fedwin.

"You hide yourself in the depths, it appears."

The deep voice was not finished speaking from the doorway before Rand was on his feet, facing Mazrim Taim. As usual, the hook-nosed man wore a black coat with blue-and-gold Dragons spiraling up the arms. Unlike the other Asha'man, he had neither Sword nor Dragon on his high collar. His dark face wore nearly as little expression as Rand's. Now, staring at Taim, Rand seemed to be gritting his teeth. Min surreptitiously eased a knife in her coatsleeve. As many images and auras danced around one as the other, but it was not a viewing that made her suddenly wary. She had seen a man trying to decide whether to kill another before, and she was seeing it again.

"You come here holding *saidin*, Taim?" Rand said, much too softly. Taim spread his hands, and Rand said, "That's better." But he did not relax.

"It was just that I thought I might be stabbed by accident," Taim said, "making my way here through corridors packed with those Aiel women. They seem agitated." His eyes never left Rand, but Min was sure he had noticed her touching her knife. "Understandably, of course," he went on smoothly. "I cannot express my joy at finding you alive after seeing what I did above. I came to report deserters. Normally, I wouldn't have bothered, but these are Gedwyn, Rochaid, Torval, and Kisman. It seems they were malcontented over events in Altara, but I never thought they would go this far. I haven't seen any of the men I left with you." For an instant, his gaze flickered to Fedwin. For no more than an instant. "There were . . . other . . . casualties? I will take this one with me, if you wish."

"I told them to stay out of sight," Rand said in a harsh voice. "And I'll take care of Fedwin. Fedwin Morr, Taim; not 'this one.' " He actually backed to the small table to pick up the silver cup sitting among the lamps. Min's breath caught.

"The Wisdom in my village could cure anything," Rand said as he knelt beside Fedwin. Somehow, he managed to smile at the boy without taking his eyes from Taim. Fedwin smiled back happily and tried to take the cup, but Rand held it for him to drink. "She knows more about herbs than anybody I've ever met. I learned a little from her, which are safe, which not." Fedwin sighed as Rand took the cup away and held the boy to his chest. "Sleep, Fedwin," Rand murmured.

It did seem that the boy was going to sleep. His eyes closed. His chest rose and fell more slowly. Slower. Until it stopped. The smile never left his lips.

“A little something in the wine,” Rand said softly as he laid Fedwin down. Min’s eyes burned, but she would not cry. She would not!

“You are harder than I thought,” Taim muttered.

Rand smiled at him, a hard feral smile. “Add Corlan Dashiva to your list of deserters, Taim. Next time I visit the Black Tower, I expect to see his head on your Traitor’s Tree.”

“Dashiva?” Taim snarled, his eyes widening in surprise. “It will be as you say. When next you visit the Black Tower.” That quickly, he recovered himself, all polished stone and poise once more. How she wished she could read her viewings of him.

“Return to the Black Tower, and don’t come here again.” Standing, Rand faced the other man over Fedwin’s body. “I may be moving about for a while.”

Taim’s bow was minuscule. “As you command.”

As the door closed behind him, Min let out a long breath.

“No point wasting time, and no time to waste,” Rand muttered. Kneeling in front of her, he took the crown and slipped it into the scrip with the other things. “Min, I thought I was the whole pack of hounds, chasing down one wolf after another, but it seems I’m the wolf.”

“Burn you,” she breathed. Tangling both hands in his hair, she stared in his eyes. Now blue, now gray, a morning sky just at sunrise. And dry. “You can cry, Rand al’Thor. You won’t melt if you cry!”

“I don’t have time for tears, either, Min,” he said gently. “Sometimes, the hounds catch the wolf and wish they hadn’t. Sometimes, he turns on them, or waits in ambush. But first, the wolf has to run.”

“When do we go?” she asked. She did not let go of his hair. She was never going to let go of him. Never.

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CHAPTER 30

Beginnings

Holding his fur-lined cloak close with one hand, Perrin let Stayer walk at the bay's own pace. The midmorning sun gave no warmth, and the rutted snow on the road leading into Abila made poor footing. He and his dozen companions shared the way with only two lumbering ox-carts and a handful of farm-folk in plain dark woolens. They all trudged along with heads down, clutching at hat or cap whenever a gust rose but otherwise concentrating on the ground beneath their shoes.

Behind him, he heard Neald make a ribald joke in a low voice; Grady grunted in reply, and Balwer sniffed prissily. None of the three seemed at all affected by what they had seen and heard this past month since crossing the border into Amadicia, or by what lay ahead. Edarra was sharply berating Masuri for letting her hood slip. Edarra and Carelle both wore their shawls wrapped around their heads and shoulders in addition to cloaks, but even after admitting the necessity to ride, they had refused to change out of their bulky skirts, so their dark-stockinged legs were bared above the knee. The cold did not seem to bother them in the least; just the strangeness of snow. Carelle began quietly advising Seonid as to what would happen if she did not keep her face hidden.

Of course, if she let her face be seen too soon, a dose of the strap would be the least she had to fear, as she and the Wise One knew well. Perrin did not have to look back to know the sisters' three Warders, bringing up the rear in ordinary cloaks, were men expecting the need at any moment to out sword and carve a way clear. They had been that way since leaving the camp at dawn. He ran a gloved thumb along the axe hanging at his belt, then regathered his own cloak just before a sudden gust could make it billow. If this went badly, the Warders might be right.

Off to the left, short of where the road crossed a wooden bridge over a frozen stream that twisted along the town's edge, charred timbers thrust out of the snow atop a large square stone platform with drifts piled around the bottom. Slow to proclaim allegiance to the Dragon Reborn, the local lord had been lucky merely to be flogged and fined all that he possessed. A knot of men standing at the bridge watched the mounted party approaching. Perrin saw no sign of helmets or armor, but every man clutched spear or crossbow almost as hard as he did his cloak. They did not talk to one another. They just watched, the mist of their breath curling before their faces. There were other guards bunched all around the town, at every road leading out, at every space between two buildings. This was the Prophet's country, but the Whitecloaks and King Ailron's army still held large parts of it.

"I was right not to bring her," he muttered, "but I'll pay for it anyway."

"Of course you'll pay," Elyas snorted. For a man who had spent most of the last fifteen years afoot, he handled his mouse-colored gelding well. He had acquired a cloak lined with black fox, dicing with Gallenne. Aram, riding on Perrin's other side, eyed Elyas darkly, but the bearded man ignored him. They did not get on well. "A man always pays sooner or later, with any woman, whether he owes or not. But I was right, wasn't I?"

Perrin nodded. Grudgingly. It still did not seem right taking advice about his wife from another man, even circumspectly, obliquely, yet it did seem to be working. Of course, raising his voice to Faile was as hard as not raising it to Berelain, but he had managed the last quite often and the first several times. He had followed Elyas' advice to the letter. Well, most of it. As well as he could. That spiky scent of jealousy still flared at the sight of Berelain, yet on the other hand, the hurt smell had vanished as they made their slow way south. Still, he was uneasy. When he firmly told her she was not coming with him this morning, she had not raised a single word of protest! She even smelled . . . pleased! Among other things, including startled. And how could she be pleased and angry at the same time? Not a scrap of it had showed on her face, but his nose never lied. Somehow, it seemed that the more he learned about women, the less he knew!

The bridge guards frowned and fingered their weapons as Stayer's hooves thudded hollowly onto the wooden planking. They were the usual odd mix that followed the Prophet, dirty-faced fellows in silk coats too big for them, scar-faced street toughs and pink-cheeked apprentices, former merchants and craftsmen who looked as if they had slept in their once fine woolens for months. Their weapons appeared well cared for, though. Some of the men had a fever in their eyes; the rest wore guarded, wooden faces. Along with unwashed, they smelled eager, anxious, fervent, afraid, all jumbled together.

They made no move to bar passage, just watched, hardly blinking. By what Perrin had heard, all sorts from ladies in silks to beggars in rags came to the Prophet hoping that submitting to him in person might gain added blessings. Or maybe added protection. That was why he had come this way, with only a handful of companions. He would frighten Masema if he had to, if Masema could be frightened, but it had seemed better to try reaching the man without fighting a battle. He could feel the guard's eyes on his back until he and the others were all across the short bridge and onto the paved streets of Abila. When that pressure left, though, it brought no sense of relief.

Abila was a goodly sized town, with several tall watchtowers and many buildings rising four stories, every last one roofed in slate. Here and there, mounded stone and timbers filled a gap between two structures where an inn or some merchant's house had been pulled down. The Prophet disapproved of wealth gained by trade as much as he did carousing or what his followers called lewd behavior. He disapproved of a great many things, and made his feelings known with sharp examples.

The streets were jammed with people, but Perrin and his companions were the only ones on horseback. The snow had long since been trampled to half-frozen ankle-deep mush. Plenty of ox-carts made their slow way through the throng, but very few wagons, and not a single carriage. Except for those wearing worn castoffs or possibly stolen clothes, everyone wore drab woolens. Most people hurried, but like the folk on the road, with heads down. Those who did not hurry were straggling groups of men carrying weapons. In the streets, the smell was mainly dirt and fear. It made Perrin's hackles rise. At least, if it came to that, getting out of a town with no wall would not prove harder than getting in.

"My Lord," Balwer murmured as they came abreast of one of those heaps of rubble. He barely waited for Perrin's nod before turning his hammer-nosed mount aside and making his way in another direction, hunched in his saddle with his brown cloak held tight around him. Perrin had no worries about the dried-up little man going off alone, even here. For a secretary, he managed to learn a surprising amount on these forays of his. He seemed to know what he was about.

Dismissing Balwer from his thoughts, Perrin set to what *he* was there about.

It took only one question, put to a lanky young man with an ecstatic light on his face, to learn where the Prophet was staying, and three more to other folk in the streets to find the merchant's house, four stories of gray stone with white marble moldings and window frames. Masema disapproved of grubbing for money, but he was willing to accept accommodations from those who did. On the other hand, Balwer said he had slept in a leaky farmhouse as often and been as satisfied. Masema drank only water, and wherever he went, he hired a poor widow and ate the food she prepared, fair or foul, without complaint. The man had made too many widows for that charity to count far with Perrin.

The throng that packed the streets elsewhere was absent in front of the tall house, yet the number of armed guards like those at the bridge almost made up for it. They stared at Perrin sullenly, those who did not sneer insolently. The two Aes Sedai kept their faces hidden in their deep hoods and their heads down, white breath rising from the cowls like steam. From the corner of his eye, Perrin saw Elyas thumbing the hilt of his long knife. It was hard not to stroke his axe.

"I've come with a message for the Prophet from the Dragon Reborn," he announced. When none of the men moved, he added, "My name is Perrin Aybara. The Prophet knows me." Balwer had cautioned him about the dangers of using Masema's name, or calling Rand anything but the Lord Dragon Reborn. He was not there to start a riot.

The claim of knowing Masema seemed to put a spark into the guards. Several exchanged wide-eyed looks, and one went running inside. The rest stared at him as if he were a gleeman. In a few moments, a woman came to the door. Handsome, with white at her temples, in a high-necked dress of blue wool that was fine if unadorned, she might have been the merchant herself. Masema did not throw those who offered him hospitality into the streets, but their servants or farmhands usually ended up with one of the bands "spreading the glories of the Lord Dragon."

"If you will come with me, Master Aybara," the woman said calmly, "you and your friends, I will take you to the Prophet of the Lord Dragon, may the Light illumine his name." Calm she might sound, but terror filled her scent.

Telling Neald and the Warders to watch the horses until they returned, Perrin followed her inside with the others. The interior was dark, with few lamps lit, and not much warmer than outside. Even the Wise Ones seemed subdued. They did not smell afraid, but almost as close to it as the Aes Sedai, and Grady and Elyas smelled of wariness, of raised hackles and ears laid back. Strangely, Aram's scent was eager. Perrin hoped the man did not try to draw that sword on his back.

The large, carpeted room the woman led them to, with fires blazing on hearths at either end, might have been a general's study, every table and half the chairs covered with maps and papers, and warm enough that Perrin tossed his cloak back and regretted wearing two shirts under his coat. But it was Masema standing in the middle of the room who drew his eyes immediately, like iron filings to a lodestone, a dark, scowling man with a shaven head and a pale triangular scar on one cheek, in a wrinkled gray coat and scuffed boots. His deep-set eyes burned with a black fire, and his scent . . . The only name Perrin could give that smell, steel-hard and blade-sharp and quivering with wild intensity, was madness. And Rand thought he could put a leash on this?

"So, it is you," Masema growled. "I did not think you would dare show your face. I know what you've been up to! Hari told me more than a week ago, and I have kept myself informed." A man shifted in a corner of the room, a narrow-eyed fellow with a thrusting nose, and Perrin upbraided himself for not noticing him before. Hari's green silk coat was much finer than what he had worn when he denied collecting ears. The fellow rubbed his hands together and grinned at Perrin viciously, but he kept silent as Masema went on. The Prophet's voice grew hotter by the word, not with anger, but as though he meant to burn every syllable deep into Perrin's flesh. "I know about you murdering men who have come to the Lord Dragon. I know about you trying to carve out your own kingdom! Yes, I know about Manetheren! About your ambition! Your greed for glory! You have turned your back on—!”

Suddenly Masema’s eyes bulged, and for the first time, anger flamed in his scent. Hari made a strangled sound and tried to back through the wall. Seonid and Masuri had lowered their hoods and stood with bare faces, calm and cool, and plainly Aes Sedai to anyone who knew the look. Perrin wondered whether they held the Power. He would have wagered that the Wise Ones did. Edarra and Carelle were quietly watching every direction at once, and smooth faces or no, if he had ever seen anyone ready to fight, it was them. For that matter, Grady wore readiness like his black coat; maybe he held the Power, too. Elyas was leaning against the wall beside the open doors, outwardly as composed as the sisters, but he smelled ready to bite. And Aram stood gazing at Masema with his mouth hanging open! Light!

“So that is true, too!” Masema snapped, spittle flying from his lips. “With filthy rumors spreading against the holy name of the Lord Dragon, you dare to ride with these . . . these . . . !”

“They’ve sworn fealty to the Lord Dragon, Masema,” Perrin cut in. “They serve him! Do you? He sent me to stop the killing. And to bring you to him.” No one was offering him a chair, so he pushed a stack of papers from one and sat. He wished the rest would sit, too; shouting seemed harder when you were sitting down.

Hari goggled at him, and Masema was practically shaking. Because he had taken a chair without being asked? Oh. Yes.

“I have given up the names of men,” Masema said coldly. “I am simply the Prophet of the Lord Dragon, may the Light illumine him and the world come to kneel before him.” By his tone, the world and the Light would regret failure equally. “There is much to do here, yet Great works. All must obey when the Lord Dragon calls, but in winter, travel is always slow. A delay of a few weeks will make little difference.”

“I can have you in Cairhien today,” Perrin said. “Once the Lord Dragon has spoken to you, you can return the same way and be back here in a few days.” If Rand let him return.

Masema actually recoiled. Baring his teeth, he glared at the Aes Sedai. “Some contrivance of the Power? I will not be touched with the Power! It is blasphemy for mortals to touch it!”

Perrin came close to gaping. “The Dragon Reborn channels, man!”

"The blessed Lord Dragon is not as other men, Aybara!" Masema snarled. "He is the Light made flesh! I will obey his summons, but I will not be touched by the filth these women do!"

Slumping back in the chair, Perrin sighed. If the man was this bad over Aes Sedai, how would he be when he learned that Grady and Neald could channel? For a moment, he considered simply knocking Masema over the head, and . . . Men were passing by in the corridor, pausing to glance in before hurrying on. All it took was one of them raising a shout, and Abila could become a slaughterhouse. "Then we ride, Prophet," he said sourly. Light, Rand had said to keep this secret until Masema stood in front of him! How to manage *that* riding all the way to Cairhien? "But no delays. The Lord Dragon is very anxious to talk with you."

"I am anxious to speak with the Lord Dragon, may his name be blessed by the Light." His eyes flickered toward the two Aes Sedai. He tried to hide it, actually smiling at Perrin. But he smelled . . . grim. "I am very anxious indeed."

"Would my Lady like me to ask one of the handlers to bring her a hawk?" Maighdin asked. One of Alliandre's four hawk handlers, all men as lean as their birds, urged a sleek duckhawk wearing a feathered hood onto his heavy gauntlet from the wooden stand in front of his saddle and lifted the gray bird toward her. The falcon, with its blue-tipped wings, was on Alliandre's green-gloved wrist. That bird was reserved to her, unfortunately. Alliandre knew her place as a vassal, but Faile understood not wanting to relinquish a favorite bird.

She merely shook her head, and Maighdin bowed in her saddle and moved her roan mare away from Swallow, far enough not to intrude but close enough to be at hand without Faile raising her voice. The dignified golden-haired woman had proved to be every bit as good a lady's maid as Faile had hoped, knowledgeable, capable. At least, she had once she learned that whatever their relative positions with their former mistress, Lini was first among Faile's serving women, and willing to use her authority. Surprisingly, that had actually taken an episode with a switch, but Faile pretended not to know. Only an utter fool embarrassed her servants. There was still the matter of Maighdin and Tallanvor, of course. She was certain Maighdin had begun sharing his bed, and if she found proof, they would marry if she had to turn Lini loose on both of them. Still, that was a small matter, and could not spoil her morning.

Hawking had been Alliandre's idea, but Faile had not objected to a ride through this sparse forest, where snow made a rolling blanket over everything and lay thick and white on bare branches. The green of the trees that still held their leaves seemed sharper. The air was crisp, and it smelled new and fresh.

Bain and Chiad had insisted on accompanying her, but they squatted nearby, *shoufa* wrapped around their heads, watching her with disgruntled expressions. Sulin had wanted to come with all of the Maidens, but with a hundred stories of Aiel depredations floating everywhere, the sight of an Aiel was enough to send most people in Amadicia running or reaching for a sword. There must be some truth in those tales, or so many would *not* know an Aiel, though the Light alone knew who they were or where they had come from, yet even Sulin agreed that whoever they were, they had moved on east, perhaps into Altara.

In any case, this close to Abila, twenty of Alliandre's soldiers and as many Mayener Winged Guards provided sufficient escort. The streamers on their lances, red or green, lifted like ribbons when the breeze stirred. Berelain's presence was the only blight. Though watching the woman shiver in her fur-trimmed red cloak, thick enough for two blankets, was certainly amusing. Mayene did not have a real winter. This was like the last days of autumn. In Saldaea, the heart of winter could freeze exposed flesh hard as wood. Faile took a deep breath. She felt like laughing.

By some miracle, her husband, her beloved wolf, had begun behaving as he should. Instead of shouting at Berelain or running from her, Perrin now tolerated the jade's blandishments, plainly tolerated them the way he would a child playing around his knees. And best of all, there was no longer any need to tamp down her anger when she wanted to let it loose. When she shouted, he shouted back. She knew he was not Saldaean, but it had been so hard, thinking in her heart of hearts that he believed her too weak to stand up to him. A few nights ago at supper, she had almost pointed out to him that Berelain was going to fall out of her dress if she leaned over the table any farther. Well, she was not going to go that far, not with Berelain; the trull *still* thought she could win him. And that very morning, he had been commanding, quietly brooking no argument, the sort of man a woman knew she had to be strong to deserve, to equal. Of course, she would have to nip him over that. A commanding man was wonderful, so long as he did not come to believe he could always command. Laugh? She could have sung!

“Maighdin, I think after all I will . . .” Maighdin was there immediately with an enquiring smile, but Faile trailed off at the sight of three riders ahead of her, plowing through the snow as fast as they could push their horses.

“At least there are plenty of hares, my Lady,” Alliandre said, walking her tall white gelding up beside Swallow, “but I had hoped . . . Who are they?” Her falcon shifted on her thick glove, the bells on its jesses jingling. “Why, it looks like some of your people, my Lady.”

Faile nodded grimly. She recognized them, too. Parelean, Arrela and Lacile. But what were they doing here?

The three drew rein before her, their horses panting steam. Parelean looked as wide-eyed as his dapple. Lacile, her pale face nearly hidden in the deep cowl of her cloak, was swallowing anxiously, and Arrela’s dark face seemed gray. “My Lady,” Parelean said urgently, “dire news! The Prophet Masema has been meeting with the Seanchan!”

“The Seanchan!” Alliandre exclaimed. “Surely he cannot believe *they* will come to the Lord Dragon!”

“It might be simpler,” Berelain said, heeling her too-showy white mare up on Alliandre’s other side. Without Perrin about for her to try to impress, her dark blue riding dress was cut quite modestly, with a neck up under her chin. She still shivered. “Masema dislikes Aes Sedai, and the Seanchan keep women who can channel as prisoners.”

Faile clicked her tongue in vexation. Dire news indeed, if true. And she could only hope Parelean and the others retained enough of their wits to at least pretend they had simply overheard talk by chance. Even so, she had to be sure, and quickly. Perrin might already have reached Masema. “What proof do you have, Parelean?”

“We talked to three farmers who saw a large flying creature land four nights ago, my Lady. It brought a woman who was taken to Masema and remained with him for three hours.”

“We were able to trace her all the way to where Masema stays in Abila,” Lacile added.

“The three men all thought the creature was Shadowspawn,” Arrela put in, “but they seemed fairly reliable.” For her to say any man not of *Cha Faile* was fairly reliable was the same as anyone else saying they thought he was honest as a bell.

“I think I must ride into Abila,” Faile said, gathering Swallow’s reins. “Alliandre, take Maighdin and Berelain with you.” Any other time, the tightening of Berelain’s lips over that would have been amusing. “Parelean, Arrela and Lacile will accompany me—” A man screamed, and everyone jerked.

Fifty paces away, one of Alliandre’s green-coated soldiers was toppling from his saddle, and a moment later, a Winged Guard fell with an arrow standing out from his throat. Aiel appeared among the trees, veiled and wielding bows as they ran. More soldiers fell. Bain and Chiad were on their feet, dark veils hiding their faces to the eyes; their spears were thrust through the straps of the bow cases on their back, and they worked their bows smoothly, but they cast glances toward Faile, too. There were Aiel all around, hundreds it seemed, a great noose closing in. Mounted soldiers lowered lances, pulling back in their own circle around Faile and the others, but gaps appeared immediately as Aiel arrows struck home.

“Someone must get this news of Masema to Lord Perrin,” Faile told Parelean and the two women. “One of you must reach him! Ride like fire!” Her sweeping gaze took in Alliandre and Maighdin. And Berelain, too. “All of you, ride like fire, or die here!” Barely waiting for their nods, she suited actions to words, and dug her heels into Swallow’s flanks, bursting through the useless ring of soldiers. “Ride!” she shouted. Someone had to get the news to Perrin. “Ride!”

Leaning low on Swallow’s neck, she urged the black mare for speed. Fleet hooves splashed snow as Swallow ran, light as her namesake. For a hundred strides, Faile thought she might break free. And then Swallow screamed and stumbled, pitching forward with the sharp snap of a breaking leg. Faile flew through air and struck hard, most of the breath driven out of her as she plunged facedown into the snow. Fighting for air, she struggled to her feet and snatched a knife from her belt. Swallow had screamed before she stumbled, before that awful crack.

A veiled Aielman loomed up before her as if out of the air, chopping at her wrist with a stiffened hand. Her knife dropped from suddenly numb fingers, and before she could try to draw another with her left hand, the man was on her.

She fought, kicking, punching, even biting, but the fellow was as wide as Perrin and a head taller. He seemed as hard as Perrin, too, for all the impression she made on him. She could have wept with frustration at the humiliating ease with which he handled her, first rooting out all of her knives and tucking them behind his belt, then using one of her own blades to cut her clothes away. Almost before she knew it, she was naked in the snow, her elbows bound together behind her back with one of her stockings, the other tied about her neck for a leash.

She had no choice except to follow him, shivering and stumbling through the snow. Her skin pebbled with the cold. Light, how she had ever thought this day anything less than icy? Light, if only someone had managed to escape with the news of Masema! To carry word of her capture to Perrin, of course, but she could escape somehow. The other was more important.

The first body she saw was Parelean, sprawled on his back with his sword in one outflung hand and blood all over his fine coat with the satin-striped sleeves. There were plenty of corpses after, Winged Guards in their red breastplates, Alliandre's soldiers in their dark green helmets, one of the hawkers, the hooded duckhawk flapping vainly against the jesses still gripped in the dead man's fist. She held on to hope, though.

The first other prisoners she saw, kneeling among some Aiel, men and Maidens with their veils hanging down their chests, were Bain and Chiad, each naked, unbound hands on her knees. Blood ran down across Bain's face and matted her flame-red hair. Chiad's left cheek was purple and swollen, and her gray eyes looked slightly glazed. They knelt there, straight-backed, impassive, and unashamed, but as the big Aielman pushed her roughly to her knees beside them, they roused themselves.

"This is not right, Shaido," Chiad mumbled angrily.

"She does not follow *ji'e'toh*," Bain barked. "You cannot make her *gai'shain*."

"The *gai'shain* will be quiet," a graying Maiden said absently. Bain and Chiad gave Faile regretful looks, then settled back to their calm waiting. Huddling, trying to hide her nakedness against her knees, Faile did not know whether to weep or laugh. The two women she would have chosen to help her escape from anywhere, and neither would raise a hand to try because of *ji'e'toh*.

"I say again, Efalin," the man who had captured her muttered, "this is foolishness. We travel at a crawl in this . . . snow." He said the word awkwardly. "There are too many armed men, here. We should be moving east, not taking more *gai'shain* to slow us further."

“Sevanna wants more *gai’shain,* Rolan,” the graying Maiden replied. She frowned, though, and her hard gray eyes seemed disapproving for a moment.

Shivering, Faile blinked as the names sank in. Light, but the cold was making her wits slow. Sevanna. Shaido. They were in Kinslayer’s Dagger, as far from here as was possible to be without crossing the Spine of the World! Clearly they were not, though. That was something Perrin should know, another reason for her to escape soon. There seemed little chance of that, crouching there in the snow and wondering which bits of her were going to freeze first. The Wheel was balancing her amusement over Berelain’s shivers with a vengeance. She was actually looking forward to the thick woolen robes that *gai’shain* wore. Her captors made no move to depart, though. There were other captives to be brought in.

First was Maighdin, stripped bare and bound as Faile was, and struggling every step of the way. Until the Maiden who was pushing her along abruptly kicked her feet out from under her. Maighdin plunked down sitting in the snow, and her eyes popped so wide that Faile might have laughed if she had not felt sorry for the woman. Alliandre came next, bent nearly double in an effort to shield herself, and then Arrela, who seemed half paralyzed by her nudity and was almost being dragged by a pair of Maidens. Finally, another tall Aielman appeared with a furiously kicking Lacile tucked under one arm like a package.

“The rest are dead or escaped,” the man said, dropping the small Cairhienin woman beside Faile. “Sevanna will have to be satisfied, Efalin. She puts too much store in taking people who wear silk.”

Faile did not struggle at all when she was prodded to her feet and set to laboring through the snow at the head of the other prisoners. She was too stunned to fight. Parelean dead, Arrela and Lacile captive, and Alliandre, and Maighdin. Light, someone had to warn Perrin about Masema. Someone. It seemed a final blow. Here she was, shivering and gritting her teeth to keep them from chattering, trying her best to pretend that she was not stark naked and bound, on her way to an uncertain captivity. All of that, and she had to hope that that slinking cat—that pouting trull!—Berelain, had managed to escape so she could reach Perrin. Alongside everything else, that seemed the worst of all.

Egwene walked Daishar along the column of initiates, sisters on their horses among the wagons, Accepted and novices afoot despite the snow.

The sun was bright in a sky with few clouds, but mist curled from her gelding's nostrils. Sheriam and Siuan rode at her back, talking quietly about information learned from Siuan's eyes-and-ears. Egwene had thought the fire-haired woman an efficient Keeper once she learned that she was not the Amyrlin, but day by day, Sheriam seemed to grow ever more assiduous about her duties. Chesa followed on her tubby mare in case the Amyrlin wanted anything, and unlike her, she was muttering again about Meri and Selame both running away, the ungrateful wretches, leaving her to do the work of three. They rode slowly, and Egwene very carefully did not look toward the column.

A month of recruiting, a month of the novice book being open to all, had brought in startling numbers, a flood anxious to become Aes Sedai, women of every age some from hundreds of miles away. There were now twice as many novices with the column as before. Almost a thousand! Most by far would never wear the shawl, yet the number of them had everyone staring. Some might cause minor problems, and one, a grandmother named Sharina with a potential above even that of Nynaeve, certainly had everyone startled, but it was not the sight of a mother and daughter squabbling because the daughter would be the stronger by far one day that she was trying to avoid, or noblewomen who were beginning to think they had made the wrong choice asking to be tested, or even Sharina's disturbingly direct looks. The gray-haired woman obeyed every rule and showed every proper respect, but she had run her large family by the sheer force of her presence, and even some of the sisters stepped warily around her. What Egwene did not want to see were the young women who had joined them two days before. The two sisters who brought them had been more than startled to find Egwene as Amyrlin, but their charges could not believe it, not Egwene al'Vere, the Mayor's daughter from Emond's Field. She did not want to order anyone else punished, but she would have to if she saw another stick her tongue out at her.

Gareth Bryne had his army in a wide column, too, cavalry and foot all arrayed and stretching out of sight through the trees. The pale sun glinted off breastplates and helmets and the points of pikes. Horses stamped their hooves in the snow impatiently.

Bryne walked his sturdy bay to meet her before she reached the Sitters waiting on their horses, in a large clearing ahead of both columns. He smiled at her through the face-bars of his helmet. A reassuring smile, she thought. “A fine morning for it, Mother,” he said. “Here.”

She only nodded, and he fell in behind her, beside Siuan. Who did not immediately begin spitting at him. Egwene was not certain exactly what accommodation Siuan had reached with the man, but she seldom grumbled about him anymore in Egwene’s hearing, and never when he was present. Egwene was glad he was there, now. The Amyrlin Seat could not let her general know she wanted his reassurance, but she felt the need of it this morning.

The Sitters had their horses in a line at the edge of the trees, and thirteen more sisters sat their mounts a little way off, watching the Sitters carefully. Romanda and Lelaine spurred their animals forward almost together, and Egwene could hardly help sighing as they approached, cloaks flaring behind them, hooves spraying snow as if at the charge. The Hall obeyed her because it had no choice. In matters concerning the war against Elaida, they did, but Light, how they could quibble over what did or did not concern the war. When it did not, getting anything out of them was like pulling duck’s teeth! Except for Sharina, they might have found a way to put a stop to accepting women of any age. Even Romanda was impressed by Sharina.

The pair reined in before her, but before they could open their mouths, she spoke. “It’s time we got on with it, daughters, and no time for wasting in idle chatter. Proceed.” Romanda sniffed, though softly, and Lelaine looked as though she wanted to.

They wheeled their horses as one, then glared at one another a moment. Events this past month had only heightened their dislike for each other. Lelaine tossed her head angrily in concession, and Romanda smiled, a faint curving of her lips. Egwene almost smiled, too. That mutual animosity was still her greatest strength in the Hall.

“The Amyrlin Seat commands you to proceed,” Romanda announced, raising one hand grandly.

The light of *saidar* sprang up around the thirteen sisters near the Sitters, around all of them together, and a thick slash of silver appeared in the middle of the clearing, rotating into a gateway ten paces tall and a hundred wide. Falling snow drifted through from the other side. Shouted orders rose among the soldiers, and the first armored heavy calvary rode through. The swirling snow beyond the gateway was too thick to see far, yet

Egwene imagined that she could make out the Shining Walls of Tar Valon, and the White Tower itself.

“It has begun, Mother,” Sheriam said, sounding almost surprised.

“It has begun,” Egwene agreed. And the Light willing, soon Elaida would fall. She was supposed to wait until Bryne said sufficient of his soldiers were through, but she could not stop herself. Digging her heels into Daishar’s flanks, she rode through into the falling snow, onto the plain where Dragon-mount reared black and smoking against a white sky.

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CHAPTER 31

After

Winter winds and winter snows slowed the passage of trade across lands where they did not end it until spring, and for every three pigeons sent by merchants, two fell to hawks or weather, but where ice did not cover the rivers, ships still sailed, and rumor flew faster than lightnings. A thousand rumors, each throwing off a thousand seeds that sprouted and grew in snow and ice as in fertile soil.

At Tar Valon, some stories said, great armies had clashed, and the streets ran with blood, and rebel Aes Sedai had stuck the head of Elaida a'Roihan on a pike. No; Elaida had closed her hand, and those who survived among the rebels groveled at Elaida's feet. There had been no rebels, no division of the White Tower. It was the Black Tower that had been broken, by Aes Sedai designs and Aes Sedai power, and Asha'man hunted Asha'man across the nations. The White Tower had shattered the Sun Palace in Cairhien, and the Dragon Reborn himself was bound now to the Amyrlin Seat, her puppet and her tool. Some tales said Aes Sedai had been bound to him, bound to the Asha'man, yet few believed that, and those few were ridiculed.

Artur Hawkwing's armies had returned to reclaim his long-dead empire, and the Seanchan were sweeping all before them, even to driving the Dragon Reborn from Altara in defeat. The Seanchan had come to serve him. No; he had cast the Seanchan into the sea, destroying their army utterly. They had carried the Dragon Reborn away, to kneel before their Empress. The Dragon Reborn was dead, and there was as much celebration as mourning, as many tears as cries of joy.

Across the nations the stories spread like spiderweb laid upon spiderweb, and men and women planned the future, believing they knew truth. They planned, and the Pattern absorbed their plans, weaving toward the future foretold.

The End
of the Eighth Book of
The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

armsmen: Soldiers who owe allegiance or fealty to a particular lord or lady.

Asha'man: (1) In the Old Tongue, "Guardian" or "Guardians," but always a guardian of justice and truth. (2) The name given, both collectively and as a rank, to the men who have come to the Black Tower, near Caemlyn in Andor, in order to learn to channel. Their training concentrates on the ways in which the One Power can be used as a weapon, and in another departure from the usages of the White Tower, once they learn to seize *saidin*, the male half of the Power, they are required to perform all chores and labors with the Power. When newly enrolled, a man is termed a Soldier; he wears a plain black coat with a high collar, in the Andoran fashion. Being raised to Dedicated brings the right to wear a silver pin, called the Sword, on the collar of his coat. Promotion to Asha'man brings the right to wear a Dragon pin, in gold and red enamel, on the collar opposite the Sword. Although many women, including wives, flee when they learn that their men actually can channel, a fair number of men at the Black Tower are married, and they use a version of the Warder bond to create a link with their wives. This same bond, altered to compel obedience, has recently been used to bond captured Aes Sedai as well.

Balwer, Sebban: Formerly Pedron Niall's secretary, in public, and secretly Niall's spymaster. He aided Morgase's escape from the Seanchan in Amador for his own reasons, and now is employed as secretary to Perrin t'Bashere Aybara and Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara.

Blood, the: Term used by the Seanchan to designate the nobility. One can be raised to the Blood as well as born to it.

***Cha Faile*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "the Falcon's Talon." (2) Name taken by the young Cairhienin and Tairens, attempted followers of *ji'e'toh*, who have sworn fealty to Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara. In secret, they act as her personal scouts and spies.

Companions, the: The elite military formation of Illian, currently commanded by First Captain Demetre Marcolin. The Companions provide a bodyguard for the King of Illian and guard key points around the nation. Additionally, the Companions have traditionally been used in battle to assault the enemy's strongest positions, to exploit weaknesses, and, if necessary, to cover the retreat of the King. Unlike most other such elite formations, foreigners (excepting Tairens, Altarans and Murandians) are not only welcome, they can rise even to the highest rank, as can commoners, which also is unusual. The uniform of the

Companions consists of a green coat, a breastplate worked with the Nine Bees of Illian, and a conical helmet with a faceguard of steel bars. The First Captain wears four rings of golden braid on the cuffs of his coat, and three thin golden plumes on his helmet. The Second Captain wears three rings of golden braid on each cuff, and three golden plumes tipped with green. Lieutenants wear two yellow rings on their cuffs, and two thin green plumes, under-lieutenants one yellow ring and a single green plume. Bannermen are designated by two broken rings of yellow on the cuffs and a single yellow plume, squadmen by a single broken ring of yellow.

Consolidation, the: When the armies sent by Artur Hawkwing under his son Luthair landed in Seanchan, they discovered a shifting quilt of nations often at war with one another, where Aes Sedai often reigned. Without any equivalent of the White Tower, Aes Sedai worked for their own individual power, using the Power. Forming small groups, they schemed against one another constantly. In large part it was this constant scheming for personal advantage and the resulting wars among the myriad nations that allowed the armies from east of the Aryth Ocean to begin the conquest of an entire continent, and for their descendants to complete it. This conquest, during which the descendants of the original armies became Seanchan as much as they conquered Seanchan, took more than nine hundred years and is called the Consolidation.

Corenne**:** In the Old Tongue, “the Return.” The name given by the Seanchan both to the fleet of thousands of ships and to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers, craftsmen and others carried by those ships, who will come behind the Forerunners to reclaim the lands stolen from Artur Hawkwing’s descendants. *See also* Forerunners.

Daughters of Silence, the: During the history of the White Tower (over three thousand years), various women who have been put out have been unwilling to accept their fates and have tried to band together. Such groups—most of them by far, at least—have been dispersed by the White Tower as soon as found and punished severely and publicly to make sure that the lesson is carried to everyone. The last group to be dispersed called themselves the Daughters of Silence (794–798 NE). The Daughters consisted of two Accepted who had been put out of the Tower and twenty-three women they had gathered and trained. All were carried back to Tar Valon and punished, and the twenty-three were enrolled in the novice book. Only one of those managed to reach the shawl. *See also* Kin, the.

***da'covale*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "one who is owned," or "person who is property." (2) Among the Seanchan, the term often used, along with property, for slaves. Slavery has a long and unusual history among the Seanchan, with slaves having the ability to rise to positions of great power and open authority, including over those who are free. *See also* so'jhin.

Deathwatch Guards, the: The elite military formation of the Seanchan Empire, including both humans and Ogier. The human members of the Deathwatch Guard are all *da'covale*, born as property and chosen while young to serve the Empress, whose personal property they are. Fanatically loyal and fiercely proud, they often display the ravens tattooed on their shoulders, the mark of a *da'covale* of the Empress. The helmets and armor are lacquered in dark green and blood-red, their shields are lacquered black, and their spears and swords carry black tassels. *See also* da'covale.

Defenders of the Stone, the: The elite military formation of Tear. The current Captain of the Stone (commander of the Defenders) is Rodrivar Tihera. Only Tairens are accepted into the Defenders, and officers are usually of noble birth, though often from minor Houses or minor branches of strong Houses. The Defenders are tasked to hold the great fortress called the Stone of Tear, in the city of Tear, to defend the city, and to provide police services in place of any City Watch or the like. Except in times of war, their duties seldom take them far from the city. Then, as with other elite formations, they are the core around which the army is formed. The uniform of the Defenders consists of a black coat with padded sleeves striped black-and-gold with black cuffs, a burnished breastplate, and a rimmed helmet with a faceguard of steel bars. The Captain of the Stone wears three short white plumes on his helmet, and on the cuffs of his coat three intertwined golden braids on a white band. Captains wear two white plumes and a single line of golden braid on white cuffs, lieutenants one white plume and a single line of black braid on white cuffs and under-lieutenants one short black plume and plain white cuffs. Bannermen have gold-colored cuffs on their coats, and squadmen have cuffs striped black-and-gold.

Delving: (1) The ability to use the One Power to diagnose physical condition and illness. (2) The ability to find deposits of metal ores with the One Power. That this has long been a lost ability among Aes Sedai may account for the name becoming attached to another ability.

***der'morat-*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "master handler." (2) Among the Seanchan, the suffix applied to indicate a senior and highly skilled handler of one of the exotics, one who trains others, as in *der'morat'raken. Der'morat* can have a fairly high social status, the highest of all held by *der'sul'dam*, the trainers of *sul'dam*, who rank with fairly high military officers. *See also morat*.

Fain, Padan: Former Darkfriend, now more and worse than a Darkfriend, and an enemy of the Forsaken as much as he is of Rand al'Thor, whom he hates with a passion. Last seen using the name Jeraal Mordeth, advising Lord Toram Riatin in his rebellion against the Dragon Reborn in Cairhien.

Fists of Heaven, the: Lightly armed and lightly armored Seanchan infantry carried into battle on the backs of the flying creatures called *to'raken*. All are small men, or women, largely because of limits as to how much weight a *to'raken* can carry for any distance. Considered to be among the toughest soldiers, they are used primarily for raids, surprise assaults on positions at an enemy's rear, and where speed in getting soldiers into place is of the essence.

Forerunners, the: *See* Hailene.

Forsaken, the: The name given to thirteen powerful Aes Sedai, men and women both, who went over to the Shadow during the Age of Legends and were trapped in the sealing of the Bore into the Dark One's prison. While it has long been believed that they alone abandoned the Light during the War of the

Shadow, in fact others did as well; these thirteen were only the highest ranking among them. The Forsaken (who call themselves the Chosen) are somewhat reduced in number since their awakening in the present day. The known survivors are Demandred, Semirhage, Graendal, Mesaana, Moghedien, and two who were reincarnated in new bodies and given new names, Osan'gar and Aran'gar. Recently, a man calling himself Moridin has appeared, and may be yet another of the dead Forsaken brought back from the grave by the Dark One. The same possibility may exist regarding the woman calling herself Cyndane, but since Aran'gar was a man brought back as a woman, speculation as to the identities of Moridin and Cyndane may prove futile until more is learned.

Hailene: In the Old Tongue, "Forerunners," or "Those Who Come Before." The term applied by the Seanchan to the massive expeditionary force sent across the Aryth Ocean to scout out the lands where Artur Hawkwing once ruled. Now under the command of the High Lady Suroth, its numbers swollen by recruits from conquered lands, the Hailene has gone far beyond its original goals.

Hanlon, Daved: A Darkfriend, formerly commander of the White Lions in service to the Forsaken Rahvin while he held Caemlyn using the name Lord Gaebril. From there, Hanlon took the White Lions to Cairhien under orders to further the rebellion against the Dragon Reborn. The White Lions were destroyed by a "bubble of evil," and Hanlon has been ordered back to Caemlyn for purposes as yet unknown.

Ishara: The first Queen of Andor (circa FY 994–1020). At the death of Artur Hawkwing, Ishara convinced her husband, one of Hawkwing's foremost generals, to raise the siege of Tar Valon and accompany her to Caemlyn with as many soldiers as he could break away from the army. Where others tried to seize the whole of Hawkwing's empire and failed, Ishara took a firm hold on a small part and succeeded. Today, nearly every noble House in Andor contains some of Ishara's blood, and the right to claim the Lion Throne depends both on direct descent from her and on the number of lines of connection to her that can be established.

Kin, the: Even during the Trolloc Wars, more than two thousand years ago (circa 1000–1350 AB), the White Tower continued to maintain its standards, putting out women who failed to measure up. One group of these women, fearing to return home in the midst of the wars, fled to Barashta (near the present-day site of Ebou Dar), as far from the fighting as was possible to go at that time. Calling themselves the Kin, and Kinswomen, they kept in hiding and offered a safe haven for others who had been put out. In time, their approaches to women told to leave the Tower led to contacts with runaways, and while the exact reasons may never be known, the Kin began to accept runaways, as well. They made great efforts to keep these girls from learning anything about the Kin until they were sure that Aes Sedai would not swoop down and retake them. After all, everyone knew that runaways were always caught sooner or later, and the Kin knew that unless they held themselves secret, they themselves would be punished severely.

Unknown to the Kin, Aes Sedai in the Tower were aware of their existence almost from the very first, but prosecution of the wars left no time for dealing with them. By the end of the wars, the Tower realized that it might not be in their best interests to snuff out the Kin. Prior to that time, a majority of runaways actually had managed to escape, whatever the Tower's propaganda, but once the Kin began helping them, the Tower knew exactly where any runaway was heading, and they began retaking nine out of ten. Since Kinswomen moved in and out of Barashta (and later Ebou Dar) in an effort to hide their existence and their numbers, never staying more than ten years lest someone notice that they did not age at a normal speed, the Tower believed they were few, and they certainly were keeping themselves low. In order to use the Kin as a trap for runaways, the Tower decided to leave them alone, unlike any other similar group in history, and to keep the very existence of the Kin a secret known only to full Aes Sedai.

The Kin do not have laws, but rather rules based in part on the rules for novices and Accepted in the White Tower, and in part on the necessity of maintaining secrecy. As might be expected given the origins of the Kin, they maintain their rules very firmly on all of their members.

Recent open contacts between Aes Sedai and Kinswomen, while known only to a handful of sisters, have produced a number of shocks, including the facts that there are twice as many Kinswomen as Aes Sedai and that some are more than a hundred years older than any Aes Sedai has lived since before the Trolloc Wars. The effect of these revelations, both on Aes Sedai and on Kinswomen, is as yet a matter for speculation. *See also* Daughters of Silence, the; Knitting Circle, the.

Knitting Circle, the: The leaders of the Kin. Since no member of the Kin has ever known how Aes Sedai arrange their own hierarchy—knowledge passed on only when an Accepted has passed her test for the shawl—they put no store in strength in the Power but give great weight to age, with the older woman always standing above the younger. The Knitting Circle (a title chosen, like the Kin, because it is innocuous) thus consists of the thirteen oldest Kinswomen resident in Ebou Dar, with the oldest given the title of Eldest. By the rules, all will have to step down when it is time for them to move on, but so long as they are resident in Ebou Dar, they have supreme authority over the Kin, to a degree that any Amyrlin Seat would envy. *See also* Kin, the.

Lance-Captain: In most lands, noblewomen do not personally lead their armsmen into battle under normal circumstances. Instead, they hire a professional soldier, almost always a commoner, who is responsible both for training and leading their armsmen. Depending on the land, this man can be called a Lance-Captain, Sword-Captain, Master of the Horse, or Master of the Lances. Rumors of closer relationships than Lady and servant often spring up, perhaps inevitably. Sometimes they are true.

Legion of the Dragon, the: A large military formation, all infantry, giving allegiance to the Dragon Reborn, trained by Davram Bashere along lines worked out by himself and Mat Cauthon, lines which depart sharply from the usual employment of foot. While many men simply walk in to volunteer, large numbers of the Legion are scooped up by recruiting parties from the Black Tower, who first gather all of the men in an area who were willing to follow the Dragon Reborn, and only after taking them through gateways to near Caemlyn winnow out those who can be taught to channel. The remainder, by far the greater number, are sent to Bashere's training camps.

***marath'damane*:** In the Old Tongue, "those who must be leashed," and also "one who must be leashed." The term applied by the Seanchan to any woman capable of channeling who has not been collared as a *damane*.

Master of the Lances: *See* Lance-Captain.

Master of the Horse: *See* Lance-Captain.

***Mera'din*:** In the Old Tongue, "the Brotherless." The name adopted, as a society, by those Aiel who abandoned clan and sept and went to the Shaido because they could not accept Rand al'Thor, a wetlander, as the *Car'a'carn*, or because they refused to accept his revelations concerning the history and origins of the Aiel. Deserting clan and sept for any reason is anathema among the Aiel, therefore their own warrior societies among the Shaido were unwilling to take them in, and they formed this society, the Brotherless.

***morat-*:** In the Old Tongue, "handler." Among the Seanchan, it is used for those who handle exotics, such as *morat'raken*, a *raken* handler or rider, also informally called a flier. *See also* der'morat.

Prophet, the: More formally, the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. Once known as Masema Dagar, a Shienaran soldier, he underwent a revelation and decided that he had been called to spread the word of the Dragon's Rebirth. He believes that nothing —nothing!—is more important than acknowledging the Dragon Reborn as the Light made flesh and being ready when the Dragon Reborn calls, and he and his followers will use any means to force others to sing the glories of the Dragon Reborn. Forsaking any name but "the Prophet," he has brought chaos to much of Ghealdan and Amadicia, large parts of which he controls.

Return, the: *See* Corenne.

Sea Folk hierarchy: The Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk, are ruled by the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere. She is assisted by the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships, and by the Master of the Blades. Below this come the clan Wavemistresses, each assisted by her Windfinder and her Swordmaster. Below her are the Sailmistresses (ship captains) of her clan, each assisted by her Windfinder and her Cargomaster. The Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships has authority over all Windfinders to clan Wavemistresses, who in turn have authority over all the Windfinders of her clan. Likewise, the Master of the Blades has authority over all Swordmasters, and they in turn over the Cargomasters of their clans. Rank is not hereditary among the Sea Folk. The Mistress of the Ships is chosen, for life, by the First Twelve of the Atha'an Miere, the twelve most senior clan Wavemistresses. A clan Wavemistress is elected by the twelve seniormost Sailmistresses of her clan, called simply the First Twelve, a term which is also used to designate the senior Sailmistresses present anywhere. She can also be removed by a vote of those same First Twelve. In fact, anyone other than the Mistress of the Ships can be demoted, even all the way down to deckhand, for malfeasance, cowardice or other crimes. Also, the Windfinder to a Wavemistress or Mistress of the Ship who dies will, of necessity, have to serve a lower ranking woman, and her own rank thus decreases. The Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships has authority over all Windfinders, and the Windfinder to a clan Wavemistress authority over all Windfinders of her clan. Likewise, the Master of the Blades has authority over all Swordmasters and Cargomasters, and a Swordmaster over the Cargomaster of his clan.

***sei'mosiev*:** In the Old Tongue, "lowered eyes," or "downcast eyes." Among the Seanchan, to say that one has "become *sei'mosiev*" means that one has "lost face." *See also* sei'taer.

***sei'taer*:** In the Old Tongue, "straight eyes," or "level eyes." Among the Seanchan, it refers to honor or face, to the ability to meet someone's eyes. It is possible to "be" or "have" *sei'taer*, meaning that one has honor and face, and also to “gain” or “lose” *sei’taer. See also sei’mosiev*.

***Shen an Calhar*:** In the Old Tongue, “the Band of the Red Hand.” (1) A legendary group of heroes who had many exploits, finally dying in the defense of Manetheren when that land was destroyed during the Trolloc Wars. (2) A military formation put together almost by accident by Mat Cauthon and organized along the lines of military forces during what is considered the height of the military arts, the days of Artur Hawkwing and the centuries immediately preceding.

***so’jhin*:** The closest translation from the Old Tongue would be “a height among lowness,” though some translate it as meaning “both sky and valley” among several other possibilities. *So’jhin* is the term applied by the Seanchan to hereditary upper servants. They are *da’covale*, property, yet occupy positions of considerable authority and often power. Even the Blood step carefully around *so’jhin* of the Imperial family, and speak to *so’jhin* of the Empress herself as to equals. *See also* Blood, the; *da’covale*.

Sword-Captain: *See* Lance-Captain.

Wise Woman: Honorific used in Ebou Dar for women famed for their incredible abilities at healing almost any injury. A Wise Woman is traditionally marked by a red belt. While some have noted that many, indeed most, Ebou Dari Wise Women were not even from Altara, much less Ebou Dar, what was not known until recently, and still is known only to a few, is that all Wise Women are in fact Kinswomen and use various versions of Healing, giving out herbs and poultices only as a cover. With the flight of the Kin from Ebou Dar after the Seanchan took the city, no Wise Women remain there. *See also* Kin, the.

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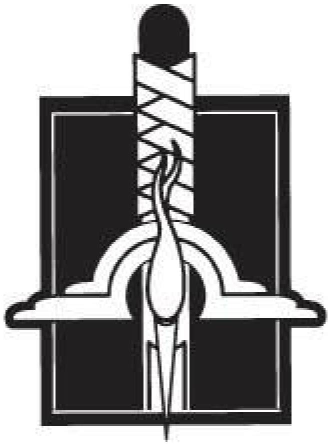

About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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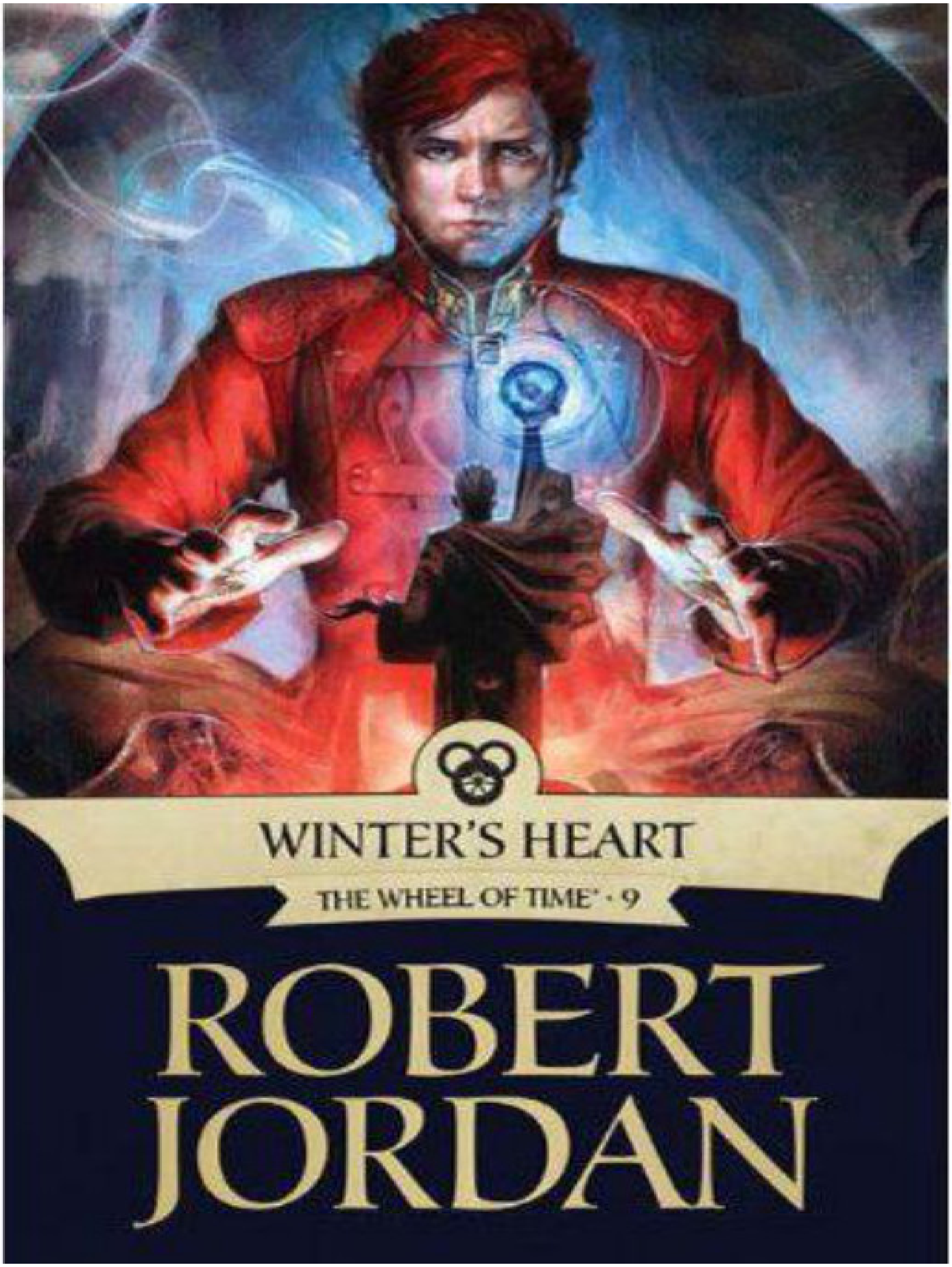
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“Throughout Jordan’s preeminent high-fantasy saga . . . the characters (minor as well as major), the world, and the source of powers have remained remarkably rich and consistent—no mean feat. . . . Amid all the Sturm and Drang, however, is a finely tuned comic strain that both leavens the story and adds to its development. A major fantasy epic.”

—*Booklist*

“Truth is not only stranger, it’s richer than fiction, but Jordan’s fictional universe approaches the variety and complexity of the real. . . . Plotlines [are] strummed with resonating long-wave rhythms something like Beethoven’s *Eroica*.”

—Robert Knox, MPG Newspapers

“Adventure and mystery and dark things that move in the night—a combination of Robin Hood and Stephen King that is hard to resist. Furthermore, Jordan makes the reader put down the book regretting the wait for the next title in the series.”

—*Milwaukee Sentinel*

“The Wheel of Time [is] rapidly becoming the definitive American fantasy saga. It is a fantasy tale seldom equaled and still less often surpassed in English.”

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“In the decades since J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy was published, many fantasy writers have tried to capture the spirit of that seminal work. While many have been able to imitate the style, develop a similarly swift and complex plot, and create convincing characters, none had captured the spirit of small men and mighty, struggling against a force of overwhelming evil. Robert Jordan has.”

—*Ottawa Citizen*

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—Piers Anthony

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—Orson Scott Card

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—*Publishers Weekly*

“Jordan continues to utilize his towering imagination to construct plots of incredible ingenuity and develop themes hidden, sometimes quite deeply, in earlier installments. As ever, Jordan writes intelligently and lyrically—one of the most literary exponents of the genre.”

—*SFX* magazine

“Jordan’s bestselling high fantasy series carries on . . . colossal, dauntingly complex storytelling. . . . The narrative employs elements of realism rare in high fantasy.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Jordan’s characters [are] fleshed out with the strengths and weaknesses of real men and women. . . . Invokes the end-of-the-world milieu of Stephen King’s *The Stand*.”

—*The Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC)

“Jordan writes with the stark vision of light and darkness, and sometimes childlike sense of wonder, that permeates J. R. R. Tolkien’s works. His style is undebatably his own.”

—*The Pittsburgh Press*

“Jordan’s multivolume epic continues to live up to its high ambitions. Complex plotting, an array of strong characters, lavish detail, and a panoramic scope make this series a feast for fantasy aficionados. . . . Richly detailed and vividly imagined.”

—*Library Journal*

“Jordan’s writing is clear and his vision is fascinating, as are the philosophies which run his characters. And speaking of characters, a more interesting bunch I would be hard put to name.”

—*Science Fiction Review*

“The complex philosophy behind The Wheel of Time series is expounded so simply the reader often gives a start of surprise at returning to the real world. Rand’s adventures are not finished and neither is this thinking person’s fantasy series.”

—*Brunswick Sentinel* (Australia)

“Robert Jordan can write one hell of a story. . . . [He] keeps the suspense acute and the surprises and invention beautifully paced. Compelling. An exhilarating experience.”

—*Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*

“[The Wheel of Time is] a work of genuine and often stirring imagination.”

—Kirkus Reviews

“For those who like to keep themselves in a fantasy world, it’s hard to beat the complex, detailed world created here.”

—Locus

“Jordan has not merely put old wine into new bottles: he has clothed old bones with new flesh.”

—Chicago Sun-Times

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WINTER'S HEART

ROBERT JORDAN

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GLOSSARY

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The seals that hold back night shall weaken,
and in the heart of winter shall winter’s heart be born
amid the wailing of lamentations and the gnashing of teeth,
for winter’s heart shall ride a black horse,
and the name of it is Death.
—from *The Karaethon Cycle:*
The Prophecies of the Dragon

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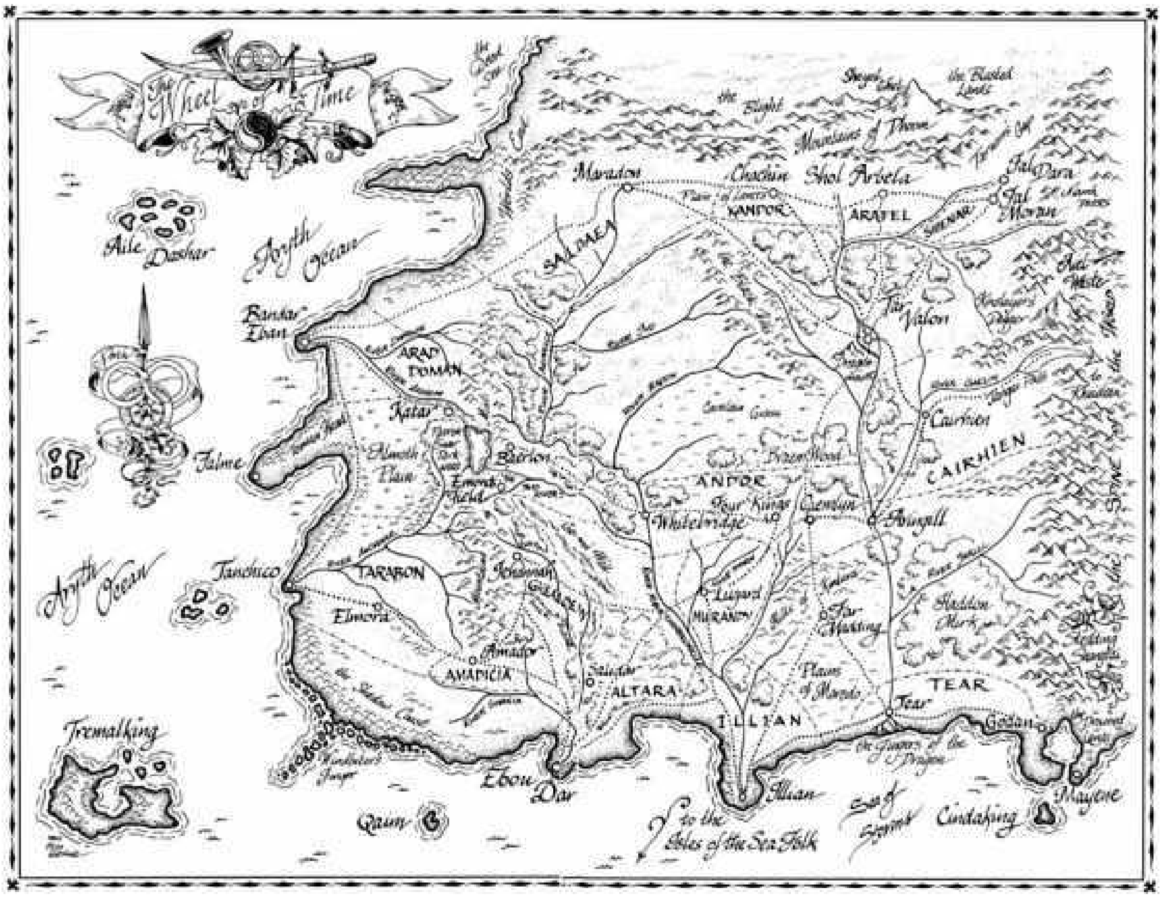
The Wheel of Time
the Blight
the Blasted Lands
Mountains of Dhoom
Maradon
Chachin
Shol Arbela
Fal Dara
Fal Moran
KANDOR
ARAFEL
SHIENAR
SALDAEA
Aile Dashar
Aryth Ocean
Bandar Eban
ARAD DOMAN
Tar Valon
Kinslayer's Dagger
Katar
Caemlyn
Cairhien
CAIRHIEN
Falme
Almoth Plain
Emond's Field
Baerlon
ANDOR
Braem Wood
Four Kings
Whitebridge
Aringill
Tanchico
TARABON
Aryth Ocean
Jehannah
GHEALDAN
Lugard
MURANDY
Far Madding
Haddon Mirk
Elmora
Amador
AMADICIA
Salidar
ALTARA
Plains of Maredo
ILLIAN
TEAR
Tear
Godan
Tremalking
Ebou Dar
Qaim
Illian
to the Isles of the Sea Folk
Sea of Storms
Cindaking
Mayene

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PROLOGUE

Snow

Three lanterns cast a flickering light, more than enough to illuminate the small room with its stark white walls and ceiling, but Seaine kept her eyes fixed on the heavy wooden door. Illogical, she knew; foolish in a Sitter for the White. The weave of *saidar* she had pushed around the jamb brought her occasional whispers of distant footsteps in the warren of hallways outside, whispers that faded away almost as soon as heard. A simple thing learned from a friend in her long-ago novice days, but she would have warning long before anyone came near. Few people came down as deep as the second basement, anyway.

Her weave picked up the far-off chittering of rats. Light! How long since there had been rats in Tar Valon, in the Tower itself? Were any of them spies for the Dark One? She wet her lips uneasily. Logic counted for nothing in this. True. If illogical. She wanted to laugh. With an effort she crept back from the brink of hysteria. Think of something besides rats. Something besides . . . A muffled squeal rose in the room behind her, faltered into muted whimpering. She tried to stop up her ears. Concentrate!

In a way, she and her companions had been led to this room because the heads of the Ajahs seemed to be meeting in secret. She herself had glimpsed Ferane Neheran whispering in a secluded nook of the library with Jesse Bilal, who stood very high among the Browns if not at the very top. She thought she was on firmer ground concerning Suana Dragand, of the Yellows. She thought so. But why had Ferane gone walking with Suana in a secluded part of the Tower grounds, both swathed in plain cloaks? Sitters of different Ajahs still talked to one another openly, if coldly. The others had seen similar things; they would not give names from their own Ajahs, of course, but two had mentioned Ferane. A troubling puzzle. The Tower was a seething swamp these days, every Ajah at every other Ajah’s throat, yet the heads met in corners. No one outside an Ajah knew for certain who within it led, but apparently the leaders knew each other. What *could* they be up to? What? It was unfortunate that she could not simply ask Ferane, but even had Ferane been tolerant of anyone’s questions, she did not dare. Not now.

Concentrate as she would, Seaine could not keep her mind on the question. She knew she was staring at the door and worrying at puzzles she could not solve just to avoid looking over her shoulder. Toward the source of those stifled whimpers and snuffling groans.

As if thinking of the sounds compelled her, she looked back slowly to her companions, her breath growing more uneven as her head moved by inches. Snow was falling heavily on Tar Valon, far overhead, but the room seemed unaccountably hot. She made herself *see*!

Brown-fringed shawl looped on her elbows, Saerin stood with her feet planted apart, fingering the hilt of the curved Altaran dagger thrust behind her belt. Cold anger darkened her olive complexion enough to make the scar along her jaw stand out in a pale line. Pevara appeared calmer, at first glance, yet one hand gripped her red-embroidered skirts tightly and the other held the smooth white cylinder of the Oath Rod like a foot-long club she was ready to use. She might be ready; Pevara was far tougher than her plump exterior suggested, and determined enough to make Saerin seem a shirker.

On the other side of the Chair of Remorse, tiny Yukiri had her arms wrapped tightly around herself; the long silvery-gray fringe on her shawl trembled with her shivers. Licking her lips, Yukiri cast a worried glance at the woman standing beside her. Doesine, looking more like a pretty boy than a Yellow sister of considerable repute, displayed no reaction to what they were doing. She was the one actually manipulating the weaves that stretched into the Chair, and she stared at the *ter'angreal*, focusing so hard on her work that perspiration beaded on her pale forehead. They were all Sitters, including the tall woman writhing on the Chair.

Sweat drenched Talene, matting her golden hair, soaking her linen shift till it clung to her. The rest of her clothes made a jumbled pile in a corner. Her closed eyelids fluttered, and she let out a constant stream of strangled moans and mewling, half-uttered pleas. Seaine felt ill, but could not drag her eyes away. Talene was a friend. Had been a friend.

Despite its name, the *ter'angreal* looked nothing like a chair, just a large rectangular block of marbled gray. No one knew what it was made of, but the material was hard as steel everywhere except the slanted top. The statuesque Green sank a little into that, and somehow it molded itself to her no matter how she twisted. Doesine's weavings flowed into the only break anywhere on the Chair, a palm-sized rectangular hole in one side with tiny notches spaced unevenly around it. Criminals caught in Tar Valon were brought down here to experience the Chair of Remorse, to experience carefully selected consequences of their crimes. On release, they invariably fled the island. There was very little crime in Tar Valon. Queasily, Seaine wondered whether this was anything like the use the Chair had been put to in the Age of Legends.

"What is she . . . seeing?" Her question came out a whisper in spite of herself. Talene would be more than seeing; to her, it all would seem real. Thank the Light she had no Warder, almost unheard of for a Green. She had claimed a Sitter had no need for one. Different reasons came to mind, now.

"She is bloody being flogged by bloody Trollocs," Doesine said hoarsely. Touches of her native Cairhien had appeared in her voice, something that seldom happened except under stress. "When they are done. . . . She can see the Trollocs' cook kettle boiling over a fire, and a Myrddraal watching her. She must know it will be one or the other next. Burn me, if she doesn't break this time. . . ." Doesine brushed perspiration from her forehead irritably and drew a ragged breath. "Stop joggling my elbow. It has been a long while since I did this."

"Three times under," Yukiri muttered. "The toughest strongarm is broken by his own guilt, if nothing else, after two! What if she's innocent? Light, this is like stealing sheep with the shepherd watching!" Even shaking, she managed to appear regal, but she always sounded like what she had been, a village woman. She glared around at the rest of them in a sickly fashion. "The law forbids using the Chair on initiates. We'll all be unchaired! And if being thrown out of the Hall isn't enough, we'll probably be exiled. And birched before we go, just to drop salt in our tea! Burn me, if we're wrong, we could all be stilled!"

Seaine shuddered. They would escape that last, if their suspicions proved right. No, not suspicions; certainties. They had to be right! But even if they were, Yukiri was correct about the rest. Tower law seldom allowed for necessity, or any supposed higher good. If they were right, though, the price was worth paying. Please, the Light send they were right!

"Are you blind and deaf?" Pevara snapped, shaking the Oath Rod at Yukiri. "She refused to reswear the Oath against speaking an untrue word, and it had to be more than stupid Green Ajah pride after we'd all done as much already. When I shielded her, she tried to *stab* me! Does *that* shout innocence? Does it? For all she knew, we just meant to talk at her until our tongues dried up! What reason would she have to expect more?”

“Thank you both,” Saerin put in dryly, “for stating the obvious. It’s too late to go back, Yukiri, so we might as well go forward. And if I were you, Pevara, I wouldn’t be shouting at one of the four women in the whole Tower I knew I could trust.”

Yukiri flushed and shifted her shawl, and Pevara looked a trifle abashed. A trifle. They might all be Sitters, but Saerin had most definitely taken charge. Seaine was unsure how she felt about that. A few hours ago, she and Pevara had been two old friends alone on a dangerous quest, equals reaching decisions together; now they had allies. She should be grateful for more companions. They were not in the Hall, though, and they could not claim Sitters’ rights on this. Tower hierarchies had taken over, all the subtle and not-so-subtle distinctions as to who stood where with respect to whom. In truth, Saerin had been both novice and Accepted twice as long as most of them, but forty years as a Sitter, longer than anyone else in the Hall, counted for a great deal. Seaine would be lucky if Saerin asked her opinion, much less her advice, before deciding anything at all. Foolish, yet the knowledge pricked like a thorn in her foot.

“The Trollocs are dragging her toward the kettle,” Doesine said suddenly, her voice grating. A thin keening escaped through Talene’s clenched teeth; she shook so hard she seemed to vibrate. “I—I do not know if I can . . . can flaming make myself . . .”

“Bring her awake,” Saerin commanded without so much as glancing at anyone else to see what they thought. “Stop sulking, Yukiri, and be ready.”

The Gray gave her a proud, furious stare, but when Doesine let her weaves fade and Talene’s blue eyes fluttered open, the glow of *saidar* surrounded Yukiri and she shielded the woman lying on the Chair without uttering a word. Saerin was in charge, and everyone knew it, and that was that. A very sharp thorn.

A shield hardly seemed necessary. Her face a mask of terror, Talene trembled and panted as though she had run ten miles at top speed. She still sank into the soft surface, but without Doesine channeling, it no longer formed itself to her. Talene stared at the ceiling with bulging eyes, then squeezed them shut, but they popped right open again. Whatever memories lay behind her eyelids were nothing she wanted to face.

Covering the two strides to the Chair, Pevara thrust the Oath Rod at the distraught woman. “Forswear all oaths that bind you and retake the Three Oaths, Talene,” she said harshly. Talene recoiled from the Rod as from a poisonous serpent, then jerked the other way as Saerin bent over her.

“Next time, Talene, it’s the cookpot for you. Or the Myrddraal’s tender attentions.” Saerin’s face was implacable, but her tone made it seem soft by comparison. “No waking up before. And if that doesn’t do, there’ll be another time, and another, as many as it takes if we must stay down here until summer.” Doesine opened her mouth in protest before giving over with a grimace. Only she among them knew how to operate the Chair, but in this group, she stood as low as Seaine.

Talene continued to stare up at Saerin. Tears filled her big eyes, and she began to weep, great shuddering, hopeless sobs. Blindly, she reached out, groping until Pevara stuck the Oath Rod into her hand. Embracing the Source, Pevara channeled a thread of Spirit into the Rod. Talene gripped the wrist-thick rod so hard that her knuckles turned white, yet she just lay there sobbing.

Saerin straightened. “I fear it’s time to put her back to sleep, Doesine.”

Talene’s tears redoubled, but she mumbled through them. “I—forswear—all oaths—that bind me.” With the last word, she began to howl.

Seaine jumped, then swallowed hard. She personally knew the pain of removing a single oath and had speculated on the agony of removing more than one at once, but now the reality was in front of her. Talene screamed till there was no breath left in her, then pulled in air only to scream again, until Seaine half expected people to come running down from the Tower itself. The tall Green convulsed, flinging her arms and legs about, then suddenly arched up till only her heels and head touched the gray surface, every muscle clenched, her whole body spasming wildly.

As abruptly as the seizure had begun, Talene collapsed bonelessly and lay there weeping like a lost child. The Oath Rod rolled from her limp hand down the sloping gray surface. Yukiri murmured something with the sound of a fervent prayer. Doesine kept whispering, “Light!” over and over in a shaken voice. “Light! Light!”

Pevara scooped up the Rod and closed Talene’s fingers around it again. There was no mercy in Seaine’s friend, not in this matter. “Now swear the Three Oaths,” she spat.

For an instant, it seemed Talene might refuse, but slowly she repeated the oaths that made them all Aes Sedai and held them together. To speak no word that was not true. Never to make a weapon for one man to kill another. Never to use the One Power as a weapon except against Darkfriends or Shadowspawn, or in defense of her life, or that of her Warder or of another sister. At the end, she began weeping in silence, shaking without a sound. Perhaps it was the oaths tightening down on her. They were uncomfortable when fresh. Perhaps.

Then Pevara told the other oath they required of her. Talene flinched, but muttered the words in tones of hopelessness. “I vow to obey all five of you absolutely.” Otherwise, she only stared straight ahead dully, tears trailing down her cheeks.

“Answer me truthfully,” Saerin told her. “Are you of the Black Ajah?”

“I am.” The words creaked, as if Talene’s throat were rusty.

The simple words froze Seaine in a way she had never expected. She had set out to hunt the Black Ajah, after all, and believed in her quarry as many sisters did not. She had laid hands on another sister, on a Sitter, had helped bundle Talene along deserted basement hallways wrapped in flows of Air, had broken a dozen Tower laws, committed serious crimes, all to hear an answer she had been nearly certain of before the question was asked. Now she had heard. The Black Ajah really did exist. She was staring at a Black sister, a Darkfriend who wore the shawl. And believing turned out to be a pale shadow of confronting. Only her jaw clenched near to cramping kept her teeth from chattering. She struggled to compose herself, to think rationally. But nightmares were awake and walking the Tower.

Someone exhaled heavily, and Seaine realized she was not the only one who found her world turned upside down. Yukiri gave herself a shake, then fixed her eyes on Talene as though determined to hold the shield on her by willpower if need be. Doesine was licking her lips, and smoothing her dark golden skirts uncertainly. Only Saerin and Pevara appeared at ease.

“So,” Saerin said softly. Perhaps “faintly” was a better word. “So. Black Ajah.” She drew a deep breath, and her tone became brisk. “There’s no more need for that, Yukiri. Talene, you won’t try to escape, or resist in any way. You won’t so much as touch the Source without permission from one of us. Though I suppose someone else will take this forward once we hand you over. Yukiri?” The shield on Talene dissipated, but the glow remained around Yukiri, as if she did not trust the effect of the Rod on a Black sister.

Pevara frowned. “Before we give her to Elaida, Saerin, I want to dig out as much as we can. Names, places, anything. Everything she knows!” Darkfriends had killed Pevara’s entire family, and Seaine was sure she would go into exile ready to hunt down every last Black sister personally.

Still huddled on the Chair, Talene made a sound half bitter laugh, half weeping. “When you do that, we are all dead. Dead! Elaida is Black Ajah!”

“That’s impossible!” Seaine burst out. “Elaida gave me the order herself.”

“She must be,” Doesine half whispered. “Talene’s sworn the oaths again; she just named her!” Yukiri nodded vehemently.

“Use your heads,” Pevara growled, shaking her own in disgust. “You know as well as I do if you believe a lie, you can say it for truth.”

“And that *is* truth,” Saerin said firmly. “What proof do you have, Talene? Have you seen Elaida at your . . . meetings?” She gripped her knife hilt so hard that her knuckles paled. Saerin had had to fight harder than most for the shawl, for the right to remain in the Tower at all. To her, the Tower was more than home, more important than her own life. If Talene gave the wrong answer, Elaida might not live to face trial.

“They don’t have meetings,” Talene muttered sullenly. “Except the Supreme Council, I suppose. But she must be. They know every report she receives, even the secret ones, every word spoken to her. They know every decision she makes before it’s announced. Days before; sometimes weeks. How else, unless she tells them?” Sitting up with an effort, she tried to fix them each in turn with an intent stare. It only made her eyes seem to dart anxiously. “We have to run; we have to find a place to hide. I’ll help you—tell you everything I know!—but they’ll kill us unless we run.”

Strange, Seaine thought, how quickly Talene had made her former cronies “they” and tried to identify herself with the rest of them. No. She was avoiding the real problem, and avoidance was witless. *Had* Elaida really set her to dig out the Black Ajah? She had never once actually mentioned the name. Could she have meant something else? Elaida had always jumped down the throat of anyone who even mentioned the Black. Nearly any sister would do the same, yet . . .

“Elaida’s proven herself a fool,” Saerin said, “and more than once I’ve regretted standing for her, but I’ll not believe she’s Black, not without more than that.” Tight-lipped, Pevara jerked an agreeing nod. As a Red, she would want much more.

“That’s as may be, Saerin,” Yukiri said, “but we cannot hold Talene long before the Greens start asking where she is. Not to mention the . . . the Black. We’d better decide what to do fast, or we’ll still be digging at the bottom of the well when the rains hit.” Talene gave Saerin a feeble smile that was probably meant to be ingratiating. It faded under the Brown Sitter’s frown.

“We don’t dare tell Elaida anything until we can cripple the Black at one blow,” Saerin said finally. “Don’t argue, Pevara; it’s sense.” Pevara threw up her hands and put on a stubborn expression, but she closed her mouth. “If Talene is right,” Saerin went on, “the Black knows about Seaine or soon will, so we must ensure her safety, as much as we can. That won’t be easy, with only the five of us. We can’t trust *anyone* until we are certain of them! At least we have Talene, and who knows what we’ll learn before she’s wrung out?” Talene attempted to look willing to be wrung out, but no one was paying her any mind. Seaine’s throat had gone dry.

“We might not be entirely alone,” Pevara said reluctantly. “Seaine, tell them your little scheme with Zerah and her friends.”

“Scheme?” Saerin said. “Who’s Zerah? Seaine? Seaine!”

Seaine gave a start. “What? Oh. Pevara and I uncovered a small nest of rebels here in the Tower,” she began breathily. “Ten sisters sent to spread dissent.” Saerin was going to make sure she was safe, was she? Without so much as asking. She was a Sitter herself; she had been Aes Sedai for almost a hundred and fifty years. What right had Saerin or anyone to . . . ? “Pevara and I have begun putting an end to that. We’ve already made one of them, Zerah Dacan, take the same extra oath Talene did, and told her to bring Bernaile Gelbarn to my rooms this afternoon without rousing her suspicions.” Light, any sister outside this room might be Black. Any sister. “Then we will use those two to bring another, until they have all been made to swear obedience. Of course, we’ll ask the same question we put to Zerah, the same we put to Talene.” The Black Ajah might already have her name, already know she had been set hunting them. How could Saerin keep her safe? “Those who give the wrong answer can be questioned, and those who give the right can repay for a little of their treachery by hunting the Black under our direction.” Light, how?

When she was done, the others discussed the matter at some length, which could only mean that Saerin was unsure what decision she would make. Yukiri insisted on giving Zerah and her confederates over to the law immediately—if it could be done without exposing their own situation with Talene. Pevara argued for using the rebels, though halfheartedly; the dissent they had been spreading centered around vile tales concerning the Red Ajah and false Dragons. Doesine seemed to be suggesting that they kidnap every sister in the Tower and force them all to take the added oath, but the other three paid little attention to her.

Seaine took no part in the discussion. Her reaction to their predicament was the only possible one, she thought. Tottering to the nearest corner, she vomited noisily.

Elayne tried not to grind her teeth. Outside, another blizzard pelted Caemlyn, darkening the midday sky enough that the lamps along the sitting room's paneled walls were all lit. Fierce gusts rattled the casements set into the tall arched windows. Flashes of lightning lit the clear glass panes, and thunder boomed hollowly overhead. Thunder snow, the worst kind of winter storm, the most violent. The room was not precisely cold, but . . . Spreading her fingers in front of the logs crackling in the broad marble fireplace, she could still feel a chill rising through the carpets layered over the floor tiles, and through her thickest velvet slippers, too. The wide black fox collar and cuffs on her red-and-white gown were pretty, but she was not sure they added any more to its warmth than the pearls on the sleeves. Refusing to let the cold touch her did not mean she was unaware.

Where *was* Nynaeve? And Vandene? Her thoughts snarled like the weather. *They should be here already! Light! I wish I could learn to go without sleep, and they take their sweet time!* No, that was unfair. Her formal claim for the Lion Throne was only a few days old, and for her, everything else had to take second place for the time being. Nynaeve and Vandene had other priorities; other responsibilities, as they saw them. Nynaeve was up to her neck planning with Reanne and the rest of the Knitting Circle how to spirit Kinswomen out of Seanchan-controlled lands before they were discovered and collared. The Kin were very good at staying low, but the Seanchan would not just pass them by for wilders the way Aes Sedai always had. Supposedly, Vandene was still shaken by her sister's murder, barely eating and hardly able to give advice of any sort. The barely eating part was true, but finding the killer consumed her. Supposedly walking the halls in grief at odd hours, she was secretly hunting the Darkfriend among them. Three days earlier, just the thought of that could make Elayne shiver; now, it was one danger among many. More intimate than most, true, but only most.

They were doing important tasks, approved and encouraged by Egwene, but she still wished they would hurry, selfish though it might be. Vandene had a wealth of good advice, the advantage of long experience and study, and Nynaeve's years dealing with the Village Council and the Women's Circle back in Emond's Field gave her a keen eye for practical politics, however much she denied it. *Burn me, I have a hundred problems, some right here in the Palace, and I* need *them!* If she had *her* way, Nynaeve al'Meara was going to be the Aes Sedai advisor to the next Queen of Andor. She needed all the help she could find—help she could trust.

Smoothing her face, she turned away from the blazing hearth. Thirteen tall armchairs, carved simply but with a fine hand, made a horseshoe arc in front of the fireplace. Paradoxically, the place of honor, where the Queen would sit if receiving here, stood farthest from the fire's heat. Such as it was. Her back began to warm immediately, and her front to cool. Outside, snow fell, thunder crashed and lightning flared. Inside her head, too. Calm. A ruler had as much need of calm as any Aes Sedai.

"It must be the mercenaries," she said, not quite managing to keep regret out of her voice. Armsmen from her estates surely would begin arriving inside a month—once they learned she was alive—but it might be spring before any significant numbers came, and the men Birgitte was recruiting would require half a year or more before they were fit to ride and handle a sword at the same time. "And Hunters for the Horn, if any will sign and swear." There were plenty of both trapped in Caemlyn by the weather. Too many of both, most people said, carousing, brawling, troubling women who wanted no part of their attentions. At least she would be putting them to good use, to stop trouble instead of beginning it. She wished she did not think she was still trying to convince herself of that. "Expensive, but the coffers will cover it." For a little while, they would. She had better start receiving revenues from her estates soon.

Wonder of wonders, the two women standing before her reacted in much the same fashion.

Dyelin gave an irritated grunt. A large, round silver pin worked with Taravin's Owl and Oak was fastened at the high neck of her dark green dress, her only jewelry. A show of pride in her House, perhaps too much pride; the High Seat of House Taravin was a proud woman altogether. Gray streaked her golden hair and fine lines webbed the corners of her eyes, yet her face was strong, her gaze level and sharp. Her mind was a razor. Or maybe a sword. A plainspoken woman, or so it seemed, who did not hide her opinions.

"Mercenaries know the work," she said dismissively, "but they are hard to control, Elayne. When you need a feather touch, they're liable to be a hammer, and when you need a hammer, they're liable to be elsewhere, and stealing to boot. They are loyal to gold, and only as long as the gold lasts. If they don't betray for more gold first. I'm sure this once Lady Birgitte will agree with me."

Arms folded tightly beneath her breasts and heeled boots planted wide, Birgitte grimaced, as always when anyone used her new title. Elayne had granted her an estate as soon as they reached Caemlyn, where it could be registered. In private, Birgitte grumbled incessantly over that, *and* the other change in her life. Her sky-blue trousers were cut the same as those she usually wore, billowing and gathered at the ankles, but her short red coat had a high white collar, and wide white cuffs banded with gold. She was the Lady Birgitte Trahelion *and* the Captain-General of the Queen's Guard, and she could mutter and whine all she wanted, so long as she kept it private.

"I do," she growled unwillingly, and gave Dyelin a not-quite-sidelong glare. The Warder bond carried what Elayne had been sensing all morning. Frustration, irritation, determination. Some of that might have been a reflection of herself, though. They mirrored each other in surprising ways since the bonding, emotionally and otherwise. Why, her courses had shifted by more than a week to match the other woman's!

Birgitte's reluctance to take the second-best argument was clearly almost as great as her reluctance to agree. "Hunters aren't much bloody better, Elayne," she muttered. "They took the Hunter's Oath to find adventure, and a place in the histories if they can. Not to settle down keeping the law. Half are supercilious prigs, looking down their flaming noses at everyone else; the rest don't just take necessary chances, they look for chances to take. And one whisper of a rumor of the Horn of Valere, and you'll be lucky if only two in three vanish overnight."

Dyelin smiled a thin smile, as though she had won a point. Oil and water were not in it compared to those two; each managed well enough with nearly anyone else, but for some reason they could argue over the color of charcoal. Could and would. “Besides, Hunters and mercenaries alike, nearly all are foreigners. That will sit poorly with high and low alike. Very poorly. The last thing you want is to start a rebellion.” Lightning flared, briefly lighting the casements, and a particularly loud peal of thunder punctuated her words. In a thousand years, seven Queens of Andor had been toppled by open rebellion, and the two who survived probably wished they had not.

Elayne stifled a sigh. One of the small inlaid tables along the walls held a heavy silver ropework tray with cups and a tall pitcher of hot spiced wine. Lukewarm spiced wine, now. She channeled briefly, Fire, and a thin wisp of steam rose from the pitcher. Reheating gave the spices a slight bitterness, but the warmth of the worked-silver cup in her hands was worth it. With an effort she resisted the desire to heat the air in the room with the Power and released the Source; the warmth would not have lasted unless she maintained the weaves, anyway. She had conquered her unwillingness to let go every time she took in *saidar*—well, to some extent—yet of late, the desire to draw more grew every time. Every sister had to face that dangerous desire. A gesture brought the others to pour their own wine.

“You know the situation,” she told them. “Only a fool could think it anything but dire, and you’re neither of you fools.” The Guards were a shell, a handful of acceptable men and a double handful of strongarms and toughs better suited to throwing drunks out of taverns, or being thrown out themselves. And with the Saldaeans gone and the Aiel leaving, crime was blooming like weeds in spring. She would have thought the snow would damp it down, but every day brought robbery, arson and worse. Every day, the situation *grew* worse. “At this rate, we’ll see riots in a few weeks. Maybe sooner. If I can’t keep order in Caemlyn itself, the people *will* turn against me.” If she could not keep order in the capital, she might as well announce to the world that she was unfit to rule. “I don’t like it, but it has to be done, so it will be.” Both opened their mouths, ready to argue further, but she gave them no chance. She made her voice firm. “It will be done.”

Birgitte’s waist-long golden braid swung as she shook her head, yet grudging acceptance filtered through the bond. She took a decidedly odd view of their relationship as Aes Sedai and Warder, but she had learned to recognize when Elayne would not be pressed. After a fashion she had learned. There was the estate and title. And commanding the Guards. And a few other small matters.

Dyelin bent her neck a fraction, and perhaps her knees; it might have been a curtsy, yet her face was stone. It was well to remember that many who did not want Elayne Trakand on the Lion Throne wanted Dyelin Taravin instead. The woman had been nothing but helpful, but it was early days yet, and sometimes a niggling voice whispered in the back of Elayne's head. Was Dyelin simply waiting for her to bungle badly before stepping in to "save" Andor? Someone sufficiently prudent, sufficiently devious, might try that route, and might even succeed.

Elayne raised a hand to rub her temple but made it into adjusting her hair. So much suspicion, so little trust. The Game of Houses had infected Andor since she left for Tar Valon. She was grateful for her months among Aes Sedai for more than learning the Power. *Daes Dae'mar* was breath and bread, to most sisters. Grateful for Thom's teaching, too. Without both, she might not have survived her return as long as she had. The Light send Thom was safe, that he and Mat and the others had escaped the Seanchan and were on their way to Caemlyn. Every day since leaving Ebou Dar she prayed for their safety, but that brief prayer was all she had time for, now.

Taking the chair at the center of the arc, the Queen's chair, she tried to look like a queen, back straight, her free hand resting lightly on the carved chair arm. *Looking a queen is not enough,* her mother had told her often, *but a fine mind, a keen grasp of affairs, and a brave heart will go for nothing if people do not* see *you as a queen.* Birgitte was watching her closely, almost suspiciously. Sometimes the bond was decidedly inconvenient! Dyelin raised her winecup to her lips.

Elayne took a deep breath. She had harried this question from every direction she knew, and she could see no other way. "Birgitte, by spring, I want the Guards to be an army equal to anything *ten* Houses can put in the field." Impossible to achieve, likely, but just trying meant keeping the mercenaries who signed now and finding more, signing every man who showed the least inclination. Light, what a foul tangle!

Dyelin choked, her eyes bulging; dark wine sprayed from her mouth. Still spluttering, she plucked a lace-edged handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her chin.

A wave of panic shot down the bond from Birgitte. "Oh, burn me, Elayne, you can't mean . . . ! I'm am archer, not a general! That's all I've ever been, don't you understand yet? I just did what I had to do, what circumstances forced on me! Anyway, I'm not her, anymore; I'm just me, and . . . !" She trailed off, realizing she might have said too much. Not for the first time. Her face went crimson as Dyelin eyed her curiously.

They had put it about that Birgitte was from Kandor, where country women wore something like her clothes, yet Dyelin clearly suspected the lie. And every time Birgitte let her tongue slip, she came closer to letting her secret slip, too. Elayne shot her a look that promised a talking-to, later.

She would not have thought Birgitte's cheeks could get any redder. Mortification drowned everything else in the bond, flooding through until Elayne felt her own face coloring. Quickly she put on a stern expression, hoping her crimson cheeks would pass for something other than an intense desire to squirm in her seat with *Birgitte's* humiliation. That mirroring effect could be *more* than merely inconvenient!

Dyelin wasted only a moment on Birgitte. Tucking her handkerchief back in its place, she carefully set her cup back on the tray, then planted her hands on her hips. Her face was a thunderhead, now. "The Guards have always been the *core* of Andor's army, Elayne, but this. . . . Light's mercy, this is madness! You could turn every hand against you from the River Erinin to the Mountains of Mist!"

Elayne focused on calm. If she was wrong, Andor would become another Cairhien, another blood-soaked land filled with chaos. And she would die, of course, a price not high enough to meet the cost. Not trying was unthinkable and in any case would have the same result for Andor as failure. Cool, composed, steely calm. A queen could not show herself afraid, even when she was. Especially when she was. Her mother had always said to explain decisions as seldom as possible; the more often you explained, the more explanations were necessary, until they were all you had time for. Gareth Bryne said to explain if you could; your people did better if they knew the why as well as the what. Today, she would follow Gareth Bryne. A good many victories had been won by following him.

"I have three declared challengers." And maybe one not declared. She made herself meet Dyelin's gaze. Not angrily; just eyes meeting eyes. Or maybe Dyelin did take it for anger, with her jaw tight and her face flushed. If so, so be it. "By herself, Arymilla is negligible, but Nasin has joined House Caeren to her, and whether or not he's sane, his support means she must be considered. Naean and Elenia are imprisoned; their armsmen are not. Naean's people may dither and argue until they find a leader, but Jarid is High Seat of Sarand, and he will take chances to feed his wife's ambition. House Baryn and House Anshar flirt with both; the *best* I can hope is that one goes with Sarand and one with Arawn. Nineteen Houses in Andor are strong enough that smaller Houses will follow where they lead. Six are arrayed against me, and I have two." Six so far, and the Light send she had two! She would not mention the three great Houses that had all but declared for Dyelin; at least Egwene had them tied down in Murandy for now.

She motioned to a chair near her, and Dyelin sat, carefully arranging her skirts. The storm clouds had left the older woman's face. She studied Elayne, giving no hint as to her questions or conclusions. "I know all that as well as you, Elayne, but Luan and Ellorien will bring their Houses to you, and Abelle will as well, I'm sure." A careful voice, too, but it gathered heat as she went on. "Other Houses will see reason, then. As long as you don't frighten them *out* of reason. Light, Elayne, this is not a Succession. Trakand succeeds Trakand, not another House. Even a Succession has seldom come to open fighting! Make the Guards into an army, and you risk everything."

Elayne threw her head back, but her laughter held no amusement. It fit right in with the peals of thunder. "I risked everything the day I came home, Dyelin. You say Norwelyn and Traemane will come to me, and Pendar? Fine; then I have five to face six. I don't think the other Houses will 'see reason,' as you put it. If any of them move before it's clear as good glass the Rose Crown is mine, it will be against me, not for." With luck, those lords and ladies would shy away from associating with cronies of Gaebril, but she did not like depending on luck. She was not Mat Cauthon. Light, most people were sure Rand had killed her mother, and few believed that "Lord Gaebril" had been one of the Forsaken. Mending the damage Rahvin had done in Andor might take her entire lifetime even if she managed to live as long as the Kinswomen! Some Houses would stand aside from supporting her because of the outrages Gaebril had perpetrated in Morgase's name, and others because Rand had said he intended to "give" her the throne. She loved the man to her toes, but *burn* him for giving voice to *that*! Even if it was what reined in Dyelin. The meanest crofter in Andor would shoulder his scythe to pull a puppet from the Lion Throne!

"I want to avoid Andoran killing Andoran if I can, Dyelin, but Succession or no Succession, Jarid is ready to fight, even with Elenia locked away. Naean is ready to fight." Best to bring both women to

Caemlyn as soon as possible; too much chance of them slipping messages, and orders, out of Aringill. "*Arymilla* is ready, with Nasin's men behind her. To them, this *is* a Succession, and the only way to *stop* them from fighting is to be so strong they don't dare. If Birgitte can build the Guards into an army by spring, well and good, because if I don't have an army before then, I *will* have need of one. And if that isn't enough, remember the Seanchan. They won't be satisfied with Tanchico and Ebou Dar; they want everything. I won't let them have Andor, Dyelin, any more than I'll let Arymilla." Thunder roared overhead.

Twisting a little to look back at Birgitte, Dyelin moistened her lips. Her fingers plucked unconsciously at her skirts. Very little frightened her, but tales of the Seanchan had. What she murmured, though, as if to herself, was, "I had hoped to avoid outright civil war." And *that* might mean nothing, or a great deal! Perhaps a little probing might show which.

"Gawyn," Birgitte said suddenly. Her expression had lightened, and so had the emotions flowing though the bond. Relief stood out strong. "When he comes, he'll take command. He'll be your First Prince of the Sword."

"Mother's milk in a cup!" Elayne snapped, and lightning flared in the windows for emphasis. Why did the woman have to change the subject *now*? Dyelin gave a start, and heat flooded back into Elayne's face. By the older woman's gaping mouth, she knew exactly how coarse that curse was. Strangely embarrassing, that; it should not have counted for anything that Dyelin had been her mother's friend. Unthinking, she took a deep swallow of wine—and nearly gagged at the bitterness. Quickly she suppressed images of Lini threatening to wash out her mouth and reminded herself that she was a grown woman with a throne to win. She doubted her mother had ever found herself feeling foolish so often.

"Yes, he will, Birgitte," she went on, more calmly. "When he comes." Three couriers were on their way to Tar Valon. Even if none managed to get past Elaida, Gawyn would learn eventually that she had made her claim, and he would come. She needed him desperately. She had no illusions of herself as a general, and Birgitte was so fearful she could not live up to the legends about her that sometimes she seemed afraid to try. Face an army, yes; lead an army, never under the sun!

Birgitte was well aware of the tangle in her own mind. Right that moment her face was frozen, but her emotions were full of self-anger and embarrassment, with the first growing stronger by the moment. With a stab of irritation, Elayne opened her mouth to pursue Dyelin's mention of civil war before she began reflecting Birgitte's anger.

Before she could utter a word, though, the tall red doors opened. Her hopes for Nynaeve or Vandene were dashed by the entrance of two Sea Folk women, barefoot despite the weather.

A cloud of musky perfume wafted ahead of them, and by themselves they made up a procession in bright brocaded silk trousers and blouses, jeweled daggers and necklaces of gold and ivory. And other jewelry. Straight black hair with white at the temples nearly hid the ten small, fat golden rings in Renaile din Calon's ears, but the arrogance in her dark eyes was as plain as the medallion-laden golden chain that connected one earring to her nose ring. Her face was set, and despite a graceful sway to her walk, she appeared ready to stride through a wall. Nearly a hand shorter than her companion and darker than charcoal, Zaida din Parede wore half again as many golden medallions dangling on her left cheek and carried an air of command rather than arrogance, a sure certainty that she would be obeyed. Gray flecked her cap of tight black curls, yet she was stunning, one of those women who grew more and more beautiful as they aged.

Dyelin flinched at sight of them, and half raised a hand to her nose before she could stop herself. A common enough reaction in people unused to the Atha'an Miere. Elayne grimaced, and not for their nose rings. She even considered another curse, something still more . . . pungent. Excepting the Forsaken, she could not have named two people she wanted less to see right then. Reene was supposed to see this did not happen!

"Forgive me," she said, rising smoothly, "but I am very busy, now. Matters of state, you understand, or I would greet you as your stations deserve." The Sea Folk were sticklers for ceremony and propriety, at least on their own terms. Very likely they had gotten past the First Maid by simply not telling her they wanted to see Elayne, but they easily might take offense if she greeted them sitting before the crown was hers. And, the Light burn both of them, she could not afford to offend. Birgitte appeared at her side, bowing formally to take her cup; the Warder bond carried wariness. She was always ginger around the Sea Folk; she had let her tongue slip around them, too. "I will see you later in the day," Elayne finished, adding, "the Light willing." They also were great ones for ceremonial turns of phrase, and that one showed courtesy *and* gave a way out.

Renaile did not stop until she stood right in front of Elayne, and much too close. One tattooed hand gestured curt permission for her to sit. Permission! “You have been avoiding me.” Her voice was deep for a woman, and as chill as the snow falling on the roof. “Remember that I am Windfinder to Nesta din Reas Two Moons, Mistress of the Ships to the Atha’an Miere. You still must fulfill the rest of the bargain you made for your White Tower.” The Sea Folk knew of the division in the Tower—by this time, everyone and her sister knew—but Elayne had not seen fit to add to her difficulties by making public which side she was on. Not yet. Renaile finished on an imperious, commanding note. “You *will* deal with me, and *now*!” So much for ceremony and propriety.

“She has been avoiding me, I think, not you, Windfinder.” In contrast to Renaile, Zaida sounded as though she were merely making conversation. Rather than rushing across the carpets, she moved idly about the room, pausing to touch a tall vase of thin green porcelain, then rising on her toes to peer through a four-barreled kaleidoscope atop a tall stand. When she glanced toward Elayne and Renaile, an amused glint twinkled in her black eyes. “After all, the bargain was with Nesta din Reas, speaking for the ships.” In addition to Wavemistress of Clan Catelar, Zaida was an ambassador from the Mistress of the Ships. To Rand, not Andor, but her warrant gave the authority to speak and bind for Nesta herself. Changing one gold-chased barrel for another, she went on tiptoe to look through the eyepiece again. “You promised the Atha’an Miere twenty teachers, Elayne. So far, you have delivered one.”

Their entrance had been so sudden, so dramatic, that Elayne was surprised to see Merilille turn from closing the doors. Shorter still than Zaida, the Gray sister was elegant in dark blue wool trimmed with silvery fur and sewn with small moonstones across the bodice, yet barely more than two weeks teaching the Windfinders had brought changes. Most were powerful women with a thirst for knowledge, more than ready to squeeze Merilille like a grape in the winepress, demanding the last drop of juice. Once, Elayne had thought her self-possessed beyond the ability to surprise, but now Merilille was constantly wide-eyed, her lips always a little parted, as though she had just been startled half out of her wits and expected to be startled again any moment. Folding her hands at her waist, she waited by the doorway, and appeared relieved to be out of the center of attention.

Harrumphing loudly, Dyelin got to her feet and scowled at Zaida and Renaile both. “Have a care how you speak,” she growled. “You are in Andor, now, not on one of your ships, and Elayne Trakand will be Queen of Andor! Your *bargain* will be met in good time. For now, we have more important matters to contend with.”

“Under the Light, there are none more important,” Renaile rumbled in turn, rounding on her. “You say the bargain will be met? So you stand surety. Know there will be room to dangle you by your ankles in the rigging as well if—”

Zaida snapped her fingers. That was all, but a tremor passed though Renaile. Snatching the golden scent-box dangling from one of her necklaces, she pressed it to her nose and breathed deeply. Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships she might be, a woman of great authority and power among the Atha’an Miere, but to Zaida, she was . . . a Windfinder. Which grated her pride excessively. Elayne was sure there must be a way to use that to keep them out of her hair, but she had not found it, yet. Oh, yes; for good or ill, *Daes Dae’mar* was in her bones, now.

She glided around a silently furious Renaile as if around a column, a part of the room, though not toward Zaida. If anyone had a right to be casual here, she did. She could not afford to give Zaida a hair of advantage, or the Wavemistress would shave her scalp for the wig-makers. At the fireplace, she spread her hands in front of the flames again.

“Nesta din Reas trusted we would fulfill the bargain, or she never would have agreed to it,” she said calmly. “You have regained the Bowl of the Winds, but assembling nineteen more sisters to join you requires time. I know you worry about the ships that were at Ebou Dar when the Seanchan came. Have Renaile make a gateway to Tear. There are hundreds of Atha’an Miere vessels there.” Every report said so. “You can learn what they know, and rejoin your people. They will have need of you, against the Seanchan.” And she would be rid of them. “The other sisters will be sent to you as soon as can be arranged.” Merilille did not move from the doorway, but her face took on a green tinge of panic at the possibility of being alone among the Sea Folk.

Zaida gave over looking through the kaleidoscope and eyed Elayne sideways. A smile quirked her very full lips. “I must remain here, at least until I speak with Rand al’Thor. If he ever comes.” That smile tightened for an instant before blooming once more; Rand would have a hard time with her. “And I will keep Renaile and her companions, for the time. A handful of Windfinders more or less will make no great difference against these Seanchan, and here, the Light willing, they may learn what will be useful.” Renaile snorted, just loudly enough to be heard. Zaida frowned briefly and began fiddling with the eyepiece that stood level with the top of her head. “There are five Aes Sedai here in your palace, counting yourself,” she murmured thoughtfully. “Perhaps some of you might teach.” As though the idea had just occurred to her. And if that were so, Elayne could lift both Sea Folk women with one hand!

“Oh, yes, that would be wonderful,” Merilille burst out, taking a step forward. Then she glanced at Renaile and subsided, a blush suffusing her Cairhienin paleness. Folding her hands at her waist once more, she snatched meekness around herself like a second skin. Birgitte shook her head in amazement. Dyelin stared as if she had never seen the Aes Sedai before.

“Something may be worked out, if the Light pleases,” Elayne said cautiously. Not rubbing at her temples took effort. She wished she could blame the ache inside her skull on the incessant thunder. Nynaeve would erupt at the suggestion, and Vandene likely would ignore any such order, but Careane and Sareitha might be possible. “For no more than a few hours a day, you understand. When they have time.” She avoided looking at Merilille. Even Careane and Sareitha might rebel at being tossed into that winepress.

Zaida touched the fingers of her right hand to her lips. “It is agreed, under the Light.”

Elayne blinked. That was ominous; in the Wavemistress’s eyes, apparently, they had just made another bargain. Her limited experience of dealing with the Atha’an Miere was that you were lucky to walk away with your shift. Well, this time things were going to be different. For instance, what were the sisters to gain in it? There had to be two sides to a bargain. Zaida smiled, as if she knew what Elayne was thinking and was amused. One of the doors opening again was almost a relief, giving her an excuse to turn away from the Sea Folk woman.

Reene Harfor slipped into the room with deference but without servility, and her curtsy was restrained, suitable for the High Seat of a powerful House to her Queen. But then, any High Seat worth a pinch of salt knew enough to offer respect to the First Maid. Her graying hair was arranged in a bun, like a crown atop her head, and she wore a scarlet tabard over her red-and-white dress, with the White Lion of Andor's head resting on her formidable bosom. Reene had no say in who would sit on the throne, but she had adopted full formal dress on the day of Elayne's arrival, as if the Queen already were in residence. Her round face hardened momentarily at the sight of the Atha'an Miere women who had bypassed her, but that was all the notice she gave them. For now. They would learn to their cost what incurring the animosity of the First Maid entailed.

"Mazrim Taim has come at last, my Lady." Reene managed to make that sound very like "my Queen." "Shall I tell him to wait?"

Not beforetime! Elayne muttered in her head. She had summoned the man two days ago! "Yes, Mistress Harfor. Give him wine. The third best, I think. Inform him that I will see him as soon as I—"

Taim strode into the room as though he owned the Palace. She did not need him named. Blue-and-gold Dragons wove round the sleeves of his black coat from elbows to cuffs, in imitation of the Dragons on Rand's arms. Though she suspected he would not appreciate the observation. He was tall, nearly as tall as Rand, with a hooked nose and dark eyes like augers, a physically powerful man who moved with something of a Warder's deadly grace, but shadows seemed to follow him, as if half the lamps in the room had gone out; not real shadows, but an air of imminent violence that seemed palpable enough to soak up light.

Two more black-coated men followed at his heels, a bald fellow with a long grizzled beard and leering blue eyes and a younger man, snake-slim and dark-haired, with the sneering arrogance young men often adopted before they learned better. Both wore the silver Sword and red-enameled Dragon on their tall collars. None of the three carried a sword on his hip, though; they did not need swords. Suddenly the sitting room felt smaller, and crowded.

Instinctively, Elayne embraced *saidar* and reached out to link. Merilille slipped into the circle easily; astoundingly, so did Renaile. A quick glance at the Windfinder lessened her surprise. Her face gray, Renaile was gripping the dagger thrust behind her sash so hard that Elayne could feel the pain in her knuckles through the link. She had been in Caemlyn long enough to be aware of what an Asha'man was.

The men knew someone had embraced *saidar*, of course, even if they could not see the glow surrounding the three women. The bald man stiffened; the slim young man clenched his fists. They stared with angry eyes. Surely they had seized *saidin*. Elayne began to regret giving in to reflex, but she was not going to let go of the Source, not now. Taim radiated danger the way a fire gave heat. She drew deeply through the link, to the point where the overwhelming sense of life became sharp, warning prickles. Even those felt . . . joyous. With that much of the Power in her, she could lay waste to the Palace, but she wondered whether it was enough to match Taim and the other two. She very much wished she had one of the three *angreal* they had found in Ebou Dar, now safely locked away with the rest of the things from the cache until she had time to study them again.

Taim shook his head contemptuously, a half-smile flickering across his lips. "Use your eyes." His voice was quiet, but hard and sneering. "There are two Aes Sedai here. Are you afraid of two Aes Sedai? Besides, you don't want to frighten the future Queen of Andor." His companions relaxed visibly, then began trying to emulate the unthinking dominance of his stance.

Reene knew nothing of *saidar* or *saidin*; she had rounded on the men, scowling, as soon as they entered. Asha'man or no Asha'man, she expected people to behave as they should. She muttered something almost under her breath. Not quite far enough under, though. The words "sneaking rats" were just audible.

The First Maid reddened when she realized everyone in the room had heard, and Elayne got a chance to see Reene Harfor flustered. Which was to say that the woman drew herself up and said, with a grace and dignity any ruler might envy, "Forgive me, my Lady Elayne, but I've been told there are rats infesting the storerooms. Most unusual this time of year, and so many of them. If you will excuse me, I must make sure my orders for ratcatchers and poison baits are being carried out."

"Stay," Elayne told her coolly. Calmly. "Vermin can be dealt with in due time." Two Aes Sedai. He did not realize Renaile could channel, and he had *emphasized* two. Would just three women give some advantage? Or did it take more? Plainly the Asha'man knew of *some* advantage to women in numbers less than a circle of thirteen. Walk in on her without so much as a by-your-leave, would they? "You can show these goodmen out when I'm done with them." Taim's companions scowled at being called "goodmen," but the man himself merely flashed another of those almost-smiles. He was quick enough to know she had been thinking of him when she spoke of vermin. Light! Maybe Rand had needed this man once, but why would he keep him now, and in a position of such authority? Well, his authority counted for nothing here.

Unhurriedly, she took her chair again, and gave a moment to adjusting her skirts. The men would have to come around in front of her like supplicants, or else talk to the side of her head while she refused to look at them. For an instant she considered passing control of the small circle. The Asha'man would surely focus their attention on her. Renaile was still gray, though, anger and fear tumbling over one another inside her; she might strike out as soon as the link was hers. Merilille had some fear, just under control, mixed with a very great deal of a . . . goosey . . . feeling that matched her wide eyes and parted lips; the Light alone knew what *she* might do with the link.

Dyelin glided to the side of Elayne's chair, as if to shield her from the Asha'man. Whatever lay inside the High Seat of Taravin, her face was stern, unfrightened. The other women had wasted no time in preparing as best they could. Zaida stood very still beside the kaleidoscope, doing her best to look diminutive and harmless, but her hands were behind her back and the dagger was missing from behind her sash. Birgitte lounged beside the fireplace, left hand propped on the jamb, seemingly at her ease, but the sheath of her belt knife was empty, and from the way her other hand rested by her side, she was ready for an underhand throw. The bond carried . . . focus. Arrow nocked, drawn to cheek, ready to loose.

Elayne made no effort to look around Dyelin at the three men. "First you are too slow obeying my summons, Master Taim, and then too sudden." Light, *was* he holding *saidin*? There were methods of interfering with a man channeling short of shielding him, but it was a difficult skill, chancy, and she knew little more than the theory.

He did come in front of her, several paces off, but he did not look a supplicant. Mazrim Taim knew who he was and his own worth, though he plainly set it higher than the sky. Lightning flashing in the windows sent strange lights across his face. Many would feel overawed by him, even without his fancy coat or his infamous name. She did not. She *would* not!

Taim rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I understand you've taken down the Dragon banners all over Caemlyn, Mistress Elayne." There was *amusement* in his deep voice, if none in his eyes! Dyelin hissed in fury at the slight to Elayne, but he ignored her. "The Saldaeans have withdrawn to the Legion of the Dragon's camp, I hear, and soon the last of the Aiel will be in camps outside the city, as well. What will he say when he learns?" There was no doubt who he meant. "And after he's sent you a gift, too. From the south. I'll have it delivered later."

"I will ally Andor with the Dragon Reborn in due course," she told him coldly, "but Andor is *not* a conquered province, not for *him* or anyone else." She made her hands stay relaxed on the arms of the chair. Light, talking the Aiel and Saldaeans into leaving had been her biggest achievement yet, and even with the flare-up in crime, it had been necessary! "In any case, Master Taim, it is not your place to call me to task. If Rand objects, I will deal with *him*!" Taim raised an eyebrow, and that odd quirk of his mouth lingered.

Burn me, she thought indignantly, *I shouldn't have used Rand's name!* The man clearly thought he knew *exactly* how she would deal with the anger of the bloody Dragon Reborn! The worst of it was, if she could trip Rand into a bed, she would. Not for this, not to *deal* with him, but because she wanted to. What sort of gift had he sent her?

Anger hardened her voice. Anger at Taim's tone, at Rand for staying away so long. At herself, for blushing and thinking of gifts. Gifts! "You've walled in four *miles* of Andor." Light, that was more than half as large as the Inner City! How many of these fellows could it hold? The thought made her skin crawl. "With whose permission, Master Taim? Don't tell me the Dragon Reborn. He has no right to give permission for *anything* in Andor." Dyelin shifted beside her. No right, but enough strength could make right. Elayne kept her attention on Taim. "You've refused the Queen's Guard entry to your . . . *compound*." Not that they had tried before she came home. "The law in Andor runs over *all* of Andor, Master Taim. Justice *will* be the same for lord or farmer—or Asha'man. I won't claim I can force my way in." He began to smile again, or nearly so. "I wouldn't demean myself. But unless the Queen's Guard is allowed in, I promise you not so much as a potato will go through your gates, either. I know you can Travel. Let your Asha'man spend their days Traveling to buy food." The almost-smile vanished in a faint grimace; his boots shifted slightly.

Annoyance lasted only an instant, though. "Food is a small problem," he said smoothly, spreading his hands. "As you say, my men can Travel. To anywhere I command. I doubt you could stop me buying whatever I want even ten miles from Caemlyn, but it wouldn't bother me if you could. Still, I am willing to allow visits whenever you ask. Controlled visits, with escorts at all times. The training is hard in the Black Tower. Men die almost every day. I would not want any accidents."

He was irritatingly accurate on how far from Caemlyn her writ ran. But no more than irritating. Were his remarks about Traveling anywhere he commanded and "accidents" meant to be veiled threats? Surely not. A wave of fury ran through her as she realized that she was certain he would not threaten her because of Rand. She would *not* hide behind Rand al'Thor. *Controlled* visits? When she *asked*? She ought to burn the man to a cinder where he stood!

Abruptly she became aware of what was coming through the bond from Birgitte, anger, a reflection of hers, joining with Birgitte's, reflecting from Birgitte to her, bouncing from her to Birgitte, feeding on itself, building. Birgitte's knife hand quivered with the desire to throw. And herself? Fury filled her! A whisker more, and she would lose *saidar.* Or lash out with it.

With an effort she forced rage down, into a semblance of calm. A rough, seething semblance. She swallowed, and struggled to keep her voice level. "The Guards will visit every day, Master Taim." And how she was to manage that in this weather, she did not know. "Perhaps I will come myself, with a few other sisters." If the thought of having Aes Sedai inside his Black Tower upset Taim, he did not show it. *Light*, she was trying to establish Andor's authority, not goad the man. Hurriedly she did a novice exercise—the river contained by the bank—seeking calm. It worked, a little. Now she merely wanted to throw all the winecups at him. "I will accede to your request for escorts, but nothing is to be hidden. I won't have crimes concealed by your secrets. Do we understand one another?"

Taim's bow was mocking—mocking!—but there was a tightness in his voice. "I understand you perfectly. Understand me, though. My men are not farmers knuckling their foreheads when you pass. Press an Asha'man too hard, and you may learn just how strong your law is."

Elayne opened her mouth to tell him exactly how strong the law was in Andor.

"It is time, Elayne Trakand," a woman's voice said from the doorway.

"Blood and ashes!" Dyelin muttered. "Is the whole *world* just going to walk in here?"

Elayne recognized the new voice. She had been expecting this summons, without knowing when it would come. Knowing that it must be obeyed, though, on the instant. She stood, wishing she could have a little longer to make matters clear to Taim. He frowned at the woman who had just entered, and at Elayne, clearly uncertain what to make of this. Good. Let him stew until she had time to set him straight on what special rights Asha'man had in Andor.

Nadere stood as tall as either of the two men by the door, a wide woman, as close to stout as any Aiel Elayne had seen. Her green eyes examined the pair for a moment before dismissing them as unimportant. Asha'man did not impress Wise Ones. Very little did. Adjusting her dark shawl on her shoulders in a clatter of bracelets, she walked over in front of Elayne, her back to Taim. Despite the cold, she wore only that shawl over her thin white blouse, though oddly, she carried a heavy wool cloak draped across one arm. "You must come now," she told Elayne, "without delay." Taim's eyebrows seemed to be climbing his forehead; no doubt he was unaccustomed to being so thoroughly ignored.

"Light of heaven!" Dyelin breathed, massaging her forehead. "I don't know what this is about, Nadere, but it will have to wait until—"

Elayne laid a hand on her arm. "You *don't* know, Dyelin, and it *can't* wait. I will send everyone away and come with you, Nadere."

The Wise One shook her head disapprovingly. "A child waiting to be born cannot take time to send people away." She shook out the thick cloak. "I brought this to shield your skin from the cold. Perhaps I should leave it, and tell Aviendha your modesty is greater than your desire for a sister." Dyelin gasped in sudden realization. The Warder bond quivered with Birgitte's outrage.

There was only one choice possible. No choice, really. Letting the link to the other two women dissolve, she released *saidar* herself. The glow remained around Renaile and Merilille, though. "Will you help me with my buttons, Dyelin?" Elayne was proud of how steady her voice was. She had expected this. *Just not with so many* witnesses! she thought faintly. Turning her back on Taim—at least she would not have to see him watching her!—she began with the tiny buttons on her sleeves. "Dyelin, if you please? Dyelin?" After a moment Dyelin moved as if sleepwalking and began fumbling with the buttons down Elayne's back, muttering to herself in shocked tones. One of the Asha'man by the doors snickered.

"About turn!" Taim snapped, and boots stamped by the doors.

Elayne did not know whether he had turned away as well—she was certain she could feel his eyes on her—but suddenly Birgitte was there, and Merilille and Reene, and Zaida, and even Renaile, crowding shoulder-to-shoulder, scowling as they formed a wall between her and the men. Not a very adequate wall. None were as tall as she, and neither Zaida nor Merilille stood higher than her shoulder.

Focus, she told herself. *I am composed. I am tranquil. I am. . . . I'm stripping naked in a room full of people is what I am!* She undressed as hurriedly as she could, letting her dress and shift fall to the floor, tossing her slippers and stockings on top of them. Her skin pebbled in the cool air; ignoring the chill just meant she was not shivering. And she rather thought the heat in her cheeks might have something to do with that.

"Madness!" Dyelin muttered in a low voice, snatching up the clothes. "Utter madness!"

"What is this about?" Birgitte whispered. "Should I come with you?"

"I must go alone," Elayne whispered back. "Don't argue!" Not that Birgitte gave any outward sign of it, but the bond carried volumes. Taking the golden hoops from her ears, she handed them to Birgitte, then hesitated before adding her Great Serpent ring. The Wise Ones had said she must come as a child came to birth. They had had a great many instructions, first among them to tell no one what was coming. For that matter, she wished *she* knew. A child came to birth without foreknowledge of what was to happen. Birgitte's muttering began to sound like Dyelin's.

Nadere came forward with the cloak, but simply held it out; Elayne had to take it and wrap it around herself hastily. She was still sure she could feel Taim's gaze. Holding the heavy wool close, her instinct was to hurry from the room, but instead she drew herself up and turned around slowly. She would not *scurry* out cloaked in shame.

The men who had come with Taim stood rigidly, facing the doors, and Taim himself was peering at the fireplace, arms folded across his chest. The feel of his eyes had been imagination, then. Excepting Nadere, the other women looked at her in variations of curiosity, consternation and shock. Nadere merely seemed impatient.

Elayne tried for her most queenly voice. "Mistress Harfor, you will offer Master Taim and his men wine, before they go." Well, at least it did not tremble. "Dyelin, please entertain the Wavemistress and the Windfinder, and see if you can allay their fears. Birgitte, I expect to hear your plan for recruiting tonight." The women she named blinked in startlement, nodded wordlessly.

Then she walked from the room, followed by Nadere, wishing she could have done better. The last thing she heard before the door closed behind her was Zaida's voice. "Strange customs, you shorebound have."

In the corridor she tried to move a little faster, though it was not easy while keeping the cloak from gaping. The red-and-white floor tiles were *much* colder than the carpets in the sitting room. A few servants, warmly bundled in good woolen livery, stared when they saw her, then hurried on about their tasks. The flames of the stand-lamps flickered; there were always drafts in the hallways. Occasionally the air stirred enough to make a wall hanging ripple lazily.

"That was on purpose, wasn't it?" she said to Nadere, not really asking a question. "Whenever you called me, you'd have made sure there were plenty of people to watch. To make sure adopting Aviendha was important enough to me." It had to be more important than *anything* else, they had been told. "What did you do to *her*?" Aviendha seemed to have very little modesty sometimes, often walking around her apartments unclothed and unconcerned, not even noticing when servants entered. Making *her* undress in a crowd would have proved nothing.

"That is for her to tell you if she wishes," Nadere said complacently. "You are sharp to see it; many do not." Her large bosom heaved in a grunt that might have been a laugh. "Those men, turning their backs, and those women, guarding you. I would have put a stop to it if the man in the embroidered coat had not kept looking over his shoulder to admire your hips. And if your blushes had not said you knew."

Elayne missed a step and stumbled. The cloak flared, losing the little body warmth it had trapped before she could snatch it closed again. "That filthy pig-kisser!" she growled. "I'll . . . ! I'll . . . !" Burn her, what *could* she do? Tell Rand? Let *him* deal with Taim? Never in life!

Nadere eyed her quizzically. "Most men enjoy looking at a woman's bottom. Stop thinking about men, and start thinking about the woman you want for a sister."

Flushing again, Elayne put her mind on Aviendha. It did nothing to settle her nerves. There were specific things she had been told to think on before the ceremony, and some made her uneasy.

Nadere kept her pace to Elayne's, and Elayne took great care not to let her legs flash through the cloak's opening—there were servants everywhere—so it took them some little time to reach the room where the Wise Ones were gathered, more than a dozen of them in their bulky skirts and white blouses and dark shawls, decked with necklaces and bracelets of gold and silver, gems and ivory, their long hair held back with folded scarves. All the furnishings and carpets had been cleared out, leaving bare white floor tiles, and there was no fire on the hearth. Here, deep in the Palace, with no windows, the crash of thunder was barely audible.

Elayne's eyes went straight to Aviendha, standing on the far side of the room. Naked. She smiled at Elayne nervously. Nervously! Aviendha! Hurriedly throwing off the cloak, Elayne smiled back. Nervously, she realized. Aviendha gave a soft laugh, and after a moment, Elayne did, too. Light, the air was *cold*! And the floor was colder!

She did not know most of the Wise Ones in the room, but one face jumped at her. Amys' prematurely white hair combined with features that appeared short of their middle years to give her something of the look of an Aes Sedai. She must have Traveled from Cairhien. Egwene had been teaching the dreamwalkers, to repay their teaching about *Tel'aran'rhiod*. And to meet a debt, she claimed, though she had never made clear what debt.

"I hoped Melaine would be here," Elayne said. She liked Bael's wife, a warm and generous woman. Not like two others in the room she recognized, bony Tamela with her angular face and Viendre, a beautiful, blue-eyed eagle. Both were stronger in the Power than she, stronger than any sister she had met save Nynaeve. That was not supposed to matter among Aiel, but she could think of no other reason why they always sneered and looked down their noses when they saw her.

She expected Amys to take charge—Amys always did, it seemed—but it was a short woman named Monaelle, her hair yellow with hints of red, who stepped forward. Not truly short, yet still the only woman in the room shorter than Elayne. And the weakest in the Power, too, barely strong enough, had she gone to Tar Valon, to have earned the shawl. Perhaps that really did not count with Aiel.

"Were Melaine here," Monaelle said, her tone brisk but not unfriendly, "the babes she carries would be part of the bond between you and Aviendha, if the weaves brushed them. If they survived, that is; the unborn are not strong enough for this. The question is, are the two of you?" She gestured with both hands, pointing to spots on the floor not far from her. "Come here to the middle of the chamber, both of you."

For the first time, Elayne realized that *saidar* was to be part of this. She had thought it would be just a ceremony, pledges exchanged, perhaps oaths given. What *was* going to happen? It did not matter, except . . . Her steps dragged as she moved toward Monaelle. "My Warder. . . . Our bond. . . . Will she be . . . affected . . . by this?" Aviendha, coming to face her, had frowned when Elayne hesitated, but at the question, she swung startled eyes to Monaelle. Clearly, it was something she had not thought of.

The short Wise One shook her head. "No one outside this chamber can be touched by the weaves. She may sense some part of what you share with each other, because of her bond with you, but only a very little." Aviendha heaved a sigh of relief that Elayne echoed.

"Now," Monaelle went on. "There are forms to be followed. Come. We are not clan chiefs discussing water-pledges over *oosquai*." Laughing, making what seemed to be jokes about clan chiefs and the strong Aiel liquor, the other women formed a circle around Aviendha and Elayne. Monaelle settled gracefully to the floor, sitting cross-legged two paces to one side of the bare women. Laughter ceased as her voice became formal. "We are gathered because two women wish to be first-sisters. We will see whether they are strong enough, and if they are, help them. Are their mothers present?"

Elayne gave a start, but the next moment Viendre was behind her. "I stand for Elayne Trakand's mother, who cannot be here." Hands on Elayne's shoulders, Viendre pushed her forward and pressed down until she was kneeling on the cold tiles in front of Aviendha, then knelt behind her. "I offer my daughter to her testing."

Tamela appeared behind Aviendha, pressing her down with her knees almost touching Elayne's, kneeling at her back. "I stand for Aviendha's mother, who cannot be here. I offer my daughter to her testing."

Another time, Elayne might have giggled. Neither woman looked more than a half-dozen years older than Aviendha or her. Another time. Not now. The standing Wise Ones wore solemn faces. They were studying her and Aviendha as if weighing them, unsure they would measure up.

"Who will suffer the pangs of birth for them?" Monaelle asked, and Amys stepped forward.

Two others came with her, a fiery redhead named Shyanda, whom Elayne had seen with Melaine, and a graying woman she did not know. They helped Amys strip to her skin. Proud in her nakedness, Amys faced Monaelle and slapped her taut belly. “I have borne children. I have given suck,” she said, cupping breasts that looked as if she had done nothing of the kind. “I offer myself.”

At Monaelle’s dignified nod of acceptance, Amys went to her knees two paces on the other side of Elayne and Aviendha and settled back on her heels. Shyanda and the graying Wise One knelt flanking her, and suddenly the glow of the Power surrounded every woman in the room except Elayne, Aviendha and Amys.

Elayne took a deep breath, and saw Aviendha do the same. Occasionally a bracelet clicked against another among the Wise Ones, the only sound in the room beyond breathing, and faint, distant thunder. It was almost a shock when Monaelle spoke.

“You will both do as you are instructed. If you waver or question, your dedication is not strong enough. I will send you away, and that will be the end of it, forever. I will ask questions, and you will answer truthfully. If you refuse to answer, you will be sent away. If any here think you lie, you will be sent away. You may leave at any time on your own, of course. Which also will end this for all time. There are no second chances here. Now. What is the best you know of the woman you want for a first-sister?”

Elayne half-expected the question. This was one of the things she had been told to think about. Choosing one virtue among many had not been easy, yet she had her answer ready. When she spoke, flows of *saidar* suddenly wove together between her and Aviendha, and no sound came from her tongue, or Aviendha’s. Without thought, a part of her mind tucked away the weaves; even now, trying to learn was as much a part of her as the color of her eyes. The weaves vanished as her lips closed.

“Aviendha is so confident, so proud. She doesn’t care what anyone thinks she should do, or be; she is who *she* wants to be,” Elayne heard her own voice say, while Aviendha’s words suddenly were audible at the same time. “Even when Elayne is so afraid that her mouth dries, her spirit will not bend. She is braver than anyone I have ever known.”

Elayne stared at her friend. Aviendha thought she was *brave*? Light, she was no coward, but *brave*? Strangely, Aviendha was staring at *her* in disbelief.

“Courage is a well,” Viendre said at Elayne’s ear, “deep in some, shallow in others. Deep or shallow, wells go dry eventually, even if they fill again later. You will face what you cannot face. Your spine will turn to jelly, and your vaunted courage will leave you weeping in the dust. The day will come.” She sounded as though she wanted to be there to see it come. Elayne gave a curt nod. She knew all about her spine turning to jelly; she fought it every day, it seemed.

Tamela was speaking to Aviendha, in a voice almost as satisfied as Viendre’s. “*Ji’e’toh* binds you like bands of steel. For *ji*, you make yourself exactly what is expected of you, to the last hair. For *toh*, if necessary you will abase yourself and crawl on your belly. Because you care to your *bones* what *everyone* thinks of you.”

Elayne nearly gasped. That was harsh, and unfair. She knew something of *ji’e’toh*, but Aviendha was not like that. Yet Aviendha was nodding, much as she herself had. An impatient acceptance of what she already knew.

“Fine traits to love in a first-sister,” Monaelle said, lifting her shawl down to her elbows, “but what do you find worst in her?”

Elayne shifted on her chilling knees, licked her lips before speaking. She had dreaded this. It was not just Monaelle’s warning. Aviendha had said they must speak the truth. *Must*, or what was sisterhood worth? Again the weaves held their words captive until they were done.

“Aviendha . . .” Elayne’s voice said suddenly, hesitantly. “She . . . she thinks violence is always the answer. At times, she won’t think beyond her belt knife. At times, she’s like a boy who won’t grow up!”

“Elayne knows that . . .” Aviendha’s voice began, then gulped and went on in a rush. “She knows she is beautiful, knows the power it gives her over men. She exposes half her bosom sometimes, in the open air, and she smiles to make men do what she wants.”

Elayne gaped. Aviendha thought *that* of her? It made her sound a *lightskirt*! Aviendha frowned back and half-opened her mouth, but Tamela pressed her shoulders again and began to speak.

“You think men do not stare at your face in approval?” There was an edge in the Wise One’s voice; strong was the best anyone would ever say of her face. “Do they not look at your breasts in the sweat tent? Admire your hips? You are beautiful, and you know it. Deny it, and deny yourself! You have taken pleasure in men’s looks, and smiled at them. Will you never smile at a man to give your arguments more weight, or touch his arm to distract him from the weakness of your arguments? You will, and you will be no less for it."

Red flooded Aviendha's cheeks, but Elayne was having to listen to Viendre. And fight blushes of her own. "There is violence in you. Deny it, and deny yourself. Have you never raged and struck out? Have you never drawn blood? Have you never *wished* to? Without considering another way? Without any thought at all? While you breathe, that will be part of you." Elayne thought of Taim, and other times, and her face felt like a furnace.

This time, there was more than one response.

"Your arms will grow weak," Tamela was telling Aviendha. "Your legs will lose their swiftness. A youth will be able to take the knife from your hand. How will skill or ferocity avail you then? Heart and mind are the true weapons. But did you learn to use the spear in a day, when you were a Maiden? If you do not hone mind and heart now, you will grow old and children will befuddle your wits. Clan chiefs will sit you in a corner to play cat's cradle, and when you speak, all will hear only the wind. Take heed while you can."

"Beauty flees," Viendre went on, to Elayne. "Years will make your breasts sag, your flesh grow slack, your skin grow leathery. Men who smiled to see your face will speak to you as if you were just another man. Your husband may see you always as the first time his eyes caught you, but no other man will dream of you. Will you no longer be you? Your body is only clothing. Your flesh will wither, but you are your heart and mind, and they do not change except to grow stronger."

Elayne shook her head. Not in denial. Not really. She had never thought on aging, though. Especially not since going to the Tower. The years lay lightly even on very old Aes Sedai. But what if she lived as long as the Kinswomen? That would mean giving up being Aes Sedai, of course, but what if she did? The Kin took a very long time to grow wrinkles, but grow them they did. What was Aviendha thinking? She knelt there looking . . . sullen.

"What is the most childish thing you know of the woman you want for a first-sister?" Monaelle said.

This was easier, not so fraught. Elayne even smiled as she spoke. Aviendha grinned back, sullenness gone. Again the weaves took their words and released them together, voices with laughter in them.

“Aviendha won’t let me teach her to swim. I’ve tried. She isn’t afraid of anything, except getting into more water than a bathtub.”

“Elayne gobbles sweets with both hands like a child who’s escaped her mother’s eye. If she keeps on, she will be fat as a pig before she grows old.”

Elayne jerked. Gobbles? *Gobbles?* A taste, now and then, was all she took. Just now and then. *Fat?* Why was Aviendha glaring at *her*? Refusing to step into water more than knee-deep *was* childish.

Monaelle covered a slight cough with one hand, but Elayne thought she was hiding a smile. Some of the standing Wise Ones laughed outright. At Aviendha’s silliness? Or her . . . *gobbling*?

Monaelle resumed dignity, adjusting her skirts spread out on the floor, but there was still a touch of mirth in her voice. “What is your greatest jealousy of the woman you want for a first-sister?”

Perhaps Elayne would have hedged her answer despite the requirement for truth. Truth had jumped up as soon as she was told to think on this, but she had found something smaller, less embarrassing for them both, that would have passed muster. Perhaps. But there was that about her smiling at men and exposing her bosom. Maybe she did smile, but Aviendha walked in front of red-faced servingmen without a *stitch* on and seemed not even to *see* them! So she *gobbled* candy, did she? She was going to get fat? She spoke the bitter truth while the weaves took her words and Aviendha’s mouth moved in grim silence, until at last what they had said was loosed.

“Aviendha has lain in the arms of the man I love. I never have; I may never, and I could weep over it!”

“Elayne has the love of Rand al’Th . . . of *Rand*. My heart is dust for wanting him to love me, but I do not know if he ever will.”

Elayne peered into Aviendha’s unreadable face. She was jealous of her over *Rand*? When the man avoided Elayne Trakand as if she had scabies? She had no time for more thought.

“Strike her as hard as you can with your open hand,” Tamela told Aviendha, removing her own hands from Aviendha’s shoulders.

Viendre squeezed Elayne’s lightly. “Do not defend yourself.” They had not been told anything of this! Surely, Aviendha would not—

Blinking, Elayne pushed herself up from the icy floor tiles. Gingerly she felt her cheek, and winced. She was going to wear a palm print the rest of the day. The woman did not have to hit her *that* hard.

Everyone waited until she was kneeling again, and then Viendre leaned closer. “Strike her as hard as you can with your open hand.”

Well, *she* was not going to knock Aviendha on her ear. *She* was not going to—Her full-armed slap sent Aviendha sprawling, sliding on her chest across the tiles almost to Monaelle. Elayne’s palm stung almost as much as her cheek.

Aviendha half pushed herself up, gave her head a shake, then scrambled back to her position. And Tamela said, “Strike her with the other hand.”

This time, Elayne slid all the way to Amys’ knees on the frozen tiles, her head ringing, *both* cheeks burning. And when she regained her own knees in front of Aviendha, when Viendre told her to strike, she put her whole body into the slap, so much that she nearly fell over atop Aviendha as the other woman went down.

“You may go now,” Monaelle said.

Elayne’s eyes jerked toward the Wise One. Aviendha, halfway back to her knees, went stiff as stone.

“If you wish to,” Monaelle continued. “Men usually do, at this point if not sooner. Many women do, too. But if you still love one another enough to go on, then embrace.”

Elayne flung herself at Aviendha, and was met with a rush that nearly knocked her over backward. They clung together. Elayne felt tears trickling from her eyes, and realized Aviendha was crying as well. “I’m sorry,” Elayne whispered fervently. “I’m sorry, Aviendha.”

“Forgive me,” Aviendha whispered back. “Forgive me.

Monaelle was standing over them, now. “You will know anger at one another again, you will speak harsh words, but you will always remember that you have already struck her. And for no better reason than you were told to. Let those blows pass for all you might wish to give. You have *toh* toward one another, *toh* you cannot repay and will not try to, for every woman is always in her first-sister’s debt. You will be born again.”

The feel of *saidar* in the room was changing, but Elayne had no chance to see how even had she thought of it. The light dwindled as if the lamps were being put out. The feel of Aviendha’s hug dwindled. Sound dwindled. The last thing she heard was Monaelle’s voice. “You will be born again.” Everything faded. She faded. She ceased to exist.

Awareness, of a sort. She did not think of herself as she, she did not think at all, but she was aware. Of sound. A liquid swishing all around. Muted gurgles and rumbles. And a rhythmic thudding. That above all. *Thu-thud. Thu-thud.* She did not know contentment, but she was content. *Thu-thud.*

Time. She did not know time, yet Ages passed. There was a sound within her, a sound that *was* her. *Thu-thud.* The same sound, the same rhythm as the other. *Thu-thud.* And from another place, nearer. *Thu-thud.* Another. *Thu-thud.* The same sound, the same beat, as her own. Not another. They were the same; they were one. *Thu-thud.*

Forever went by to that pulse, all the time that had ever been. She touched the other that was herself. She could feel. *Thu-thud.* She moved, she and the other that was herself, writhing against each other, limbs entangling, rolling away but always coming back to each other. *Thu-thud.* There was light sometimes, in the darkness; dim beyond seeing, but bright to one who had never known anything but darkness. *Thu-thud.* She opened her eyes, stared into the eyes of the other that was herself, and closed hers again, content. *Thu-thud.*

Change, sudden, shocking to one who had never known any change. Pressure. *Thu-thud-thu-thud.* That comforting beat was faster. Convulsive pressure. Again. Again. Getting stronger. *Thu-thud-thu-thud! Thu-thud-thu-thud!*

Suddenly, the other that was herself—was gone. She was alone. She did not know fear, but she was afraid, and alone. *Thu-thud-thu-thud!* Pressure! Greater than anything before! Squeezing her, crushing her. If she had known how to scream, if she had known what a scream was, she would have shrieked.

And then light, blinding, full of swirling patterns. She had weight; she had never felt weight before. A cutting pain at her middle. Something tickled her foot. Something tickled her back. At first she did not realize that wailing sound was coming from her. She kicked feebly, waved limbs that did not know how to move. She was lifted, laid on something soft but firmer than anything she had felt before, except for recollections of the other that was herself, the other that was gone. *Thu-thud. Thu-thud.* The sound. The same sound, the same beat. Loneliness reigned, unrecognized, but there was contentment, too.

Memory began to return, slowly. She lifted her head from a breast and looked up into Amys' face. Yes, Amys. Sweat-slick and weary-eyed, but smiling. And she was Elayne; yes, Elayne Trakand. But there was something more to her, now. Not like the Warder bond, but like it in a way. Fainter, but more magnificent. Slowly, on a neck that wobbled uncertainly, she turned her head to look at the other that was herself, lying on Amys' other breast. To look at Aviendha, her hair matted, her face and body shining with sweat. Smiling with joy. Laughing, weeping, they clutched each other and hung on as if they never intended to let go.

"This is my daughter Aviendha," Amys said, "and this is my daughter Elayne, born on the same day, within the same hour. May they always guard one another, support one another, love one another." She laughed softly, tiredly, fondly. "And now will someone bring us garments before my new daughters and I all freeze to death?"

Elayne did not care at that moment if she did freeze to death. She clung to Aviendha in laughter and tears. She had found her sister. Light, she had found her sister!

Toveine Gazal woke to the sounds of quiet bustle, other women moving about, some talking softly. Lying on her hard narrow cot, she sighed with regret. Her hands around Elaida's throat had been just a pleasant dream. This tiny canvas-walled room was reality. She had slept poorly, and she felt thinned, drained. She had overslept, too; there would be no time for breakfast. Reluctantly she tossed off her blankets. The building had been a small warehouse of some sort, with thick walls and heavy rafters low overhead, but there was no heat. Her breath misted, and the crisp morning air pricked through her shift before her feet reached the rough floorboards. Even if she could have considered lying abed in this place, she had her orders. Logain's filthy bond made disobedience impossible, no matter how often she wished it.

She always tried to think of him as simply Ablar, or at worst Master Ablar, but it was always just Logain that came into her mind. The name he had made infamous. Logain, the false Dragon who had shattered the armies of his native Ghealdan. Logain, who had carved a path through the few Altarans and Murandians with nerve enough to try stopping him until he threatened Lugard itself. Logain, who had been gentled and somehow could channel again, who had dared to fix his cursed weave of *saidin* on Toveine

Gazal. A pity for him he had not commanded her to stop thinking! She could *feel* the man, in the back of her head. He was always there.

For a moment, she squeezed her eyes shut. Light! Mistress Doweel's farm had seemed the Pit of Doom, years of exile and penance with no way out except the unthinkable, to become a hunted renegade. Barely half a week since her capture, she knew better. *This* was the Pit of Doom. And there was no escape. Angrily, she shook her head, and scrubbed glistening dampness from her cheeks with her fingers. No! She would escape, somehow, if only for long enough to put her real hands on Elaida's throat. Somehow.

Aside from the cot, there were only three pieces of furniture, yet they left little space for her to move. She cracked the ice in the yellow-striped pitcher on the washstand with her belt knife, filled the chipped white basin, and channeled to heat the water till tendrils of steam rose. It was *allowed* to channel for that. That and no more. By rote she washed and scrubbed her teeth with salt and soda, then took a fresh shift and stockings from the small wooden chest at the foot of the cot. Her ring she left in the chest, tucked under everything else in a small velvet pouch. Another order. All of her things were here, except for her lapdesk. Luckily, that had been lost when she was taken. Her dresses hung on a cloakstand, the last of the room's furnishings. Choosing one without really looking, she put it on mechanically and used comb and brush on her hair.

The ivory-backed brush slowed as she really saw herself in the washstand's cheap, bubbled mirror. Breathing raggedly, she set the brush down beside the matching comb. The dress she had chosen was thick, finely woven wool of an unadorned red so dark it seemed nearly black. Black, like an Asha'man's coat. Her distorted image stared back at her, lips writhing. Changing would be a sort of surrender. Determinedly she snatched her marten-lined gray cloak from the stand.

When she pushed aside the canvas doorflap, twenty or so sisters already occupied the long central hallway lined with canvas rooms. Here and there a few were speaking in murmurs, but the rest avoided one another's eyes, even when they belonged to the same Ajah. Fear had its presence, but it was shame that coated most faces. Akoure, a stout Gray, was staring at the hand where she normally wore her ring. Desandre, a willowy Yellow, was hiding her right hand in her armpit.

The soft conversations trailed off when Toveine appeared. Several women glared at her openly. Including Jenare and Lemai, from her own Ajah! Desandre came to herself enough to turn her back stiffly. In the space of two days, fifty-one Aes Sedai had fallen captive to the black-coated monsters, and fifty of them blamed Toveine Gazal as though Elaida a’Roihan had no hand in the disaster at all. Except for Logain’s intervention, they would have had their revenge their first night here. She did not love him for putting a stop to it and making Carniele Heal the welts left by belts, the bruises left by fists and feet. She would rather they had beaten her to death than she owe him.

Putting her cloak on her shoulders, she walked proudly down the corridor, out into pale morning sunshine that suited her washed-out mood. Behind her, someone shouted acid words before the closing door cut them off. Her hands trembled as she pulled up her hood, nestling the dark fur around her face. No one got away with pushing down Toveine Gazal. Even Mistress Doweel, who had crushed her into a semblance of submission over the years, learned that when her exile ended. She would show them. She would show them all!

The dormitory she shared with the others lay on the very edge of a large village, if a very strange one. A village of Asha’man. Elsewhere, so she had been told, ground was marked off for structures they claimed would dwarf the White Tower, but this was where most of them lived now. Five large, blocky stone barracks, spaced along streets as wide as anything in Tar Valon, could each hold a hundred Asha’man Soldiers. They were not full yet, the Light be thanked, but snow-covered scaffolding awaited the arrival of workmen around the thick walls of two more that were almost ready for roofing in thatch. Nearly a dozen smaller stone structures were made to hold ten Dedicated each, and another of those was under construction, too. Scattered around them stood nearly two hundred houses that might have been seen in any village, where some of the married men lived, and the families of others not far enough along in training.

Men who could channel did not frighten her. Once she had given in to panic for a moment, true, but that was beside the point. Five hundred men who could channel, however, were a scrap of bone wedged between two of her teeth where she could not free it. Five *hundred*! And they could Travel, some of them. A sharp scrap of bone. More, she had tramped the mile or more through the woods to the wall. *That* frightened her, what it signified.

Nowhere was the wall finished, nowhere more than twelve or fifteen feet high, none of the towers or bastions more than begun. In places, she could have clambered over the piles of black stone, except for her orders not to attempt escape. The thing ran for *eight* miles, though, and she believed Logain when he said it was begun less than three months ago. The man held her too tightly to bother with lying. He called the wall a waste of time and effort, and perhaps it was, but it made her teeth chatter. Just three months. Made using the Power. The male half of the Power. When she thought of that black wall, she saw an implacable force that could not be stopped, an avalanche of black stone sliding down to bury the White Tower. Impossible, of course. Impossible, but when she did not dream of strangling Elaida, she dreamed of that.

There had been snowfall in the night, and a heavy blanket of white covered every roof, but she did not have to pick her way along the broad streets. The hard-packed dirt had been cleared, a chore of men in training before the sun came up. They used the Power for everything from filling woodboxes to cleaning their clothes! Black-clad men hurried here and there in the streets, and more were gathering in rows in front of their barracks with others calling roll in loud voices. Women bundled up against the cold walked past them, placidly carrying baskets to the quartermaster’s storehouse or water buckets to the nearest fountain, though how any woman could remain, knowing what her husband was, was beyond Toveine’s comprehension. Even more bizarre, children ran up and down the street, around the squares of men who could channel, shouting and laughing, rolling hoops, tossing painted balls, playing with dolls or dogs. A drop of normality that heightened the evil stench of the rest.

Ahead of her, a mounted party was approaching up the street at a walk. In the short time she had been here—the endless time—she had not seen anyone ride in the village except workmen on carts or wagons. Nor any visitors, which some of these plainly must be. Five men in black were escorting a dozen in the red coats and cloaks of the Queen’s Guards, with two yellow-haired women at the front, one in a red-and-white cloak lined with black fur and the other . . . Toveine’s eyebrows climbed. The other wore green Kandori trousers and a coat made up as if it belonged to the Captain-General of the Guard. Her red cloak even had golden knots of rank on the shoulder! Maybe she was mistaken about the men. That one would find short shift when she encountered real Guardsmen. In any case, it was strangely early for visitors.

Each time the odd party reached one of the formations, the man in front shouted, “Asha’man, attend front!” and boot heels stamped on the hardened earth as the others stiffened like pillars of stone.

Pulling her hood forward better to hide her face, Toveine moved to the side of the wide street, close beside the corner of one of the smaller stone barracks. A fork-bearded old man coming out, a silver sword pin on his high collar, glanced at her curiously without slowing his stride.

What she had done struck her like a bucket of cold water, and she nearly wept. None of those strangers would spot an Aes Sedai face, now, if they could recognize one. If either of those women could channel, unlikely though that was, she would not pass close enough to tell that Toveine could, too. She fretted and fumed over how to disobey Logain, and then did everything necessary to carry out his instructions without even thinking about it!

As an act of defiance, she stopped where she was, turning to watch the visitors. Automatically, her hands checked her hood before she could snatch them to her sides. It was pitiful, and ridiculous. She knew the Asha’man guiding the party, by sight at least, a bulky man in his middle years with oily black hair, an oily smile and eyes like augurs. None of the others, though. What could she hope to gain by this? How could she entrust a message to any of them? Even if the escort vanished, how could she get close enough to pass a message when she was forbidden to let any outsider discover the presence of Aes Sedai?

The augur-eyed fellow looked bored with his duty this morning, hardly bothering to hide his yawns behind a gloved hand. “. . . when we do finish here,” he was saying as he rode past Toveine, “I will show you the Craft Town. Quite a bit bigger than this. We do have every kind of craftsfolk, from masons and carpenters to metalsmiths and tailors. We can make everything we need, Lady Elayne.”

“Except turnips,” one of the women said in a high voice, and the other laughed.

Toveine’s head jerked. She watched the riders move on down the street accompanied by shouted orders and stamping boots. Lady Elayne? Elayne Trakand? The younger of the pair might match the description she had been given. Elaida did not reveal why she was so desperate to lay her hands on one runaway Accepted, even one who might become a queen, but she never let a sister leave the Tower without orders on what to do if she encountered the girl. *Be very careful, Elayne Trakand,* Toveine thought. *I would not like Elaida to have the satisfaction of laying hands on you.*

She wanted to think on this, on whether there was some way to use the girl's presence here, but abruptly she became aware of the sensations at the back of her head. A mild contentment and a growing purpose. Logain had finished his breakfast. He would be coming out, soon. He had told her to be there when he did.

Her feet were running before she thought. With the result that her skirts tangled in her legs, and she fell hard, knocking her breath out. Anger welled up, fury, but she scrambled to her feet and, without pausing to brush off the dust, gathered her skirts above her knees and began to run again, cloak billowing behind. Men's raucous shouts followed her down the street, and laughing children pointed as she ran past.

Suddenly a pack of dogs was around her, snarling, nipping at her heels. She leaped and spun and kicked, but they harried her. She wanted to shriek with frustration and fury. Dogs were always a bother, and she could not channel a feather to drive them off. A gray hound seized a mouthful of dangling skirt, pulling her sideways. Panic overwhelmed everything else. If she fell again, they would tear her to shreds.

A shouting woman in brown wool swung her heavy basket at the dog tugging Toveine's skirt, making it dodge away. A round woman's bucket caught a brindled cur in the ribs, and it ran yelping. Toveine gaped in astonishment, and for her inattention had to pull her left leg away from another dog at the cost of a piece of her stocking and a little skin. There were women all around her, flailing away at the animals with whatever they had to hand.

"Go on with you, Aes Sedai," a skinny, graying woman told her, slicing at a spotted dog with a switch. "They won't bother you more. I'd like a nice cat, myself, but cats won't abide the husband now. Go on."

Toveine did not wait to thank her rescuers. She ran, considering furiously. The women knew. If one did, they all did. But they would carry no messages, give no help to an escape, not when they were willing to remain themselves. Not if they understood what they were helping. There was that.

Just short of Logain’s house, one of several down a narrower side street, she slowed and hastily let down her skirts. Eight or nine men in black coats were waiting outside, boys and oldsters and in between, but there was no sign of Logain yet. She could still sense him, full of purpose but concentrating. Reading, perhaps. She walked the rest of the way at a dignified pace. Composed and every inch an Aes Sedai, no matter the circumstances. She almost managed to forget her frantic flight from the dogs.

The house surprised her every time she saw it. Others on the street were as large and two larger. An ordinary wooden house of two stories, though the red door, shutters and window frames looked odd. Plain curtains hid the interior, but the glass in the windows was so poor she doubted she could have seen anything clearly with the curtains drawn. A house suitable for a not overly successful shopkeeper; hardly the dwelling for one of the most notorious men alive.

Briefly she wondered what was keeping Gabrelle. The other sister bonded to Logain had the same instruction she did, and until now, she had always been here first. Gabrelle was eager, studying the Asha’man as if she intended writing a book on the subject. Perhaps she did; Browns would write about anything. She put the other sister out of her mind. Although, if Gabrelle did turn up late, she would have to find out how the woman had managed it. For now, she had her own studying.

The men outside the red door eyed her, but said nothing, even to one another. Still there was no animosity. They were simply waiting. None had a cloak, though their breath made pale feathers in front of their faces. All were Dedicated, with the silver sword pin on their collars.

It had been the same every morning she had *reported* this way, though not always the same men. She knew some, knew their names at least, and sometimes a few other gleaned tidbits. Evin Vinchova, the pretty lad who had been there when Logain captured her, leaning against the corner of the house and toying with a bit of string. Donalo Sandomere, if that was his real name, with his creased farmer’s face and sharply trimmed oiled beard, attempting the languid stance he thought a nobleman would assume. The Taraboner Androl Genhald, a square fellow with his heavy eyebrows drawn in thought and his hands clasped behind his back; he wore a gold signet ring, but she thought him an apprentice who had shaved his mustaches and abandoned his veil. Mezar Kurin, a Domani with gray at his temples, fingering the garnet in his left ear; he very well might be a minor noble. She was collecting a neat file of names and faces in her head. Sooner or later they would be hunted down, and every piece of information that could help identify them would be useful.

The red door opened, and the men straightened, but it was not Logain who came out.

Toveine blinked in surprise, then met Gabrelle's sooty green eyes with a flat stare, making no effort to hide her disgust. That accursed link with Logain had made clear what he was up to the night before—she had been afraid she would *never* fall asleep!—but not in her darkest imaginings had she suspected Gabrelle! Some of the men seemed as startled as she. Some attempted to hide smiles. Kurin grinned openly and stroked his thin mustache with a thumb.

The dusky woman did not even have the grace to blush. She lifted her upturned nose a trifle, then boldly adjusted her dark blue dress over her hips as if to advertise that she had just donned the garment. Sweeping her cloak around her shoulders, she tied the ribbons as she glided toward Toveine, as serene as if she were back in the Tower.

Toveine grabbed the taller woman's arm, pulling her a little way from the men. "We may be captives, Gabrelle," she whispered harshly, "but that is no reason to surrender. Especially to Ablar's vile lusts!" The other woman did not so much as look abashed! A thought came. Of course. "Did he . . . ? Did he *order* you?"

With something close to a sneer, Gabrelle pulled free. "Toveine, it took me two days to decide I should 'surrender' to his lusts, as you put it. I feel lucky it only required four to convince him to let me. You Reds might not be aware, but men love to talk and gossip. All you need do is listen, or even pretend to, and a man will tell you his whole life." A thoughtful frown creased her forehead, and the twist to her lips vanished. "I wonder whether it's like that for ordinary women."

"Whether what is like what?" Toveine demanded. Gabrelle was *spying* on him? Or just trying to get more material for her book? But *this* was unbelievable, even for a Brown! "What are you talking about?"

That musing expression never left the other's face. "I felt . . . helpless. Oh, he was gentle, but I never really thought before on how strong a man's arms are, and me unable to channel a whisker. He was . . . in charge, I suppose, though that isn't quite right. Just . . . stronger, and I knew it. It felt . . . strangely exhilarating."

Toveine shuddered. Gabrelle must be insane! She was about to tell her so when Logain himself appeared, closing the door behind him. He was tall, taller than any other man there, with dark hair that brushed wide shoulders and framed an arrogant face. His high collar carried both the silver sword and that ridiculous snake with legs. He flashed a smile at Gabrelle as the others gathered around him. The hussy smiled back, too. Toveine shuddered again. Exhilarating. The woman *was* insane!

As on previous mornings, the men began making reports. Most of the time, Toveine had not been able to make *up* from *down* with them, but she listened.

"I found two more who seem interested in that new kind of Healing this Nynaeve used on you, Logain," Genhald said, frowning, "but one can barely do the Healing we already know, and the other, he wants to know more than I could tell him."

"What you can tell him is all I know," Logain replied. "Mistress al'Meara didn't tell me much of what she was doing, and I could only learn bits and pieces listening to the other sisters talk. Just keep planting the seed and hope something grows. It's all you can do. Several other men nodded along with Genhald.

Toveine filed it away. Nynaeve al'Meara. She had heard that name often after returning to the Tower. Another runaway Accepted, another one Elaida wanted more than the normal desire to catch runaways seemed to account for. From the same village as al'Thor, too. And associated somehow with Logain. That might lead to something, eventually. But a *new* kind of Healing? Used by an *Accepted*? That was unlikely bordering close on impossible, but she had seen the impossible happen before, so she tucked it away. Gabrelle was listening closely, too, she noticed. But watching her as well, out of the corner of her eye.

"There's a problem with some of those Two Rivers men, Logain," Vinchova said. An angry flush rose on his smooth face. "Men, I say, but these two are boys, fourteen at most! They won't say." He might have been a year or two older, with his beardless cheeks. "It was a crime, bringing them here."

Logain shook his head; whether it was in anger or regret was hard to say. "I've heard the White Tower takes girls as young as twelve. Look after the Two Rivers men where you can. No coddling, or the others will turn on them, but try to see they don't do anything stupid. The Lord Dragon might not like it if we kill too many from his district."

"He doesn't seem to be caring much at all as I can see," a sleek fellow muttered. The sound of Murandy was strong in his mouth, though his fiercely curled mustaches told where he was from plainly enough. He was rolling a silver coin across the backs of his fingers and seemed as intent on that as on Logain. "I was hearing it was the Lord Dragon himself told the M'Hael to pluck up anything male in this Two Rivers that could channel, down to the roosters. With the number he brought back, I'm just surprised he didn't bring the chicks and lambs, as well." Chuckles met his sally, but Logain's level tones cut them like a blade.

"Whatever the Lord Dragon ordered, I trust I've made my orders clear." Every head nodded this time, and some men murmured "Yes, Logain" and "As you say, Logain."

Toveine hastily smoothed the sneer from her lips. Ignorant louts. The Tower accepted girls under fifteen only if they had already begun channeling. The other was interesting, though. The Two Rivers again. Everyone said al'Thor had turned his back on his home, but she was not so certain. Why was Gabrelle watching her?

"Last night," Sandomere said after a moment, "I learned that Mishraile is having private lessons from the M'Hael." He stroked his pointed beard with satisfaction, as if he had produced a gem of great price.

Perhaps he had, but Toveine could not say what kind. Logain nodded slowly. The others exchanged silent looks with faces that might have been carved. She chewed frustration, watching. Too often it was like this, matters they saw no reason to comment on—or feared to?—and she did not understand. She always felt there *were* gems hidden there, beyond her reach.

A wide Cairhienin fellow, barely as tall as Logain's chest, opened his mouth, but whether he meant to speak of Mishraile, whoever he was, she never found out.

"Logain!" Welyn Kajima pounded down the street at a dead run, the bells at the ends of his black braids jangling. Another Dedicated, a man in his middle years who smiled too much, he had been there when Logain captured her, too. Kajima had bonded Jenare. He was almost out of breath when he pushed through the other men, and he was not smiling now.

“Logain,” he panted, “the M’Hael’s back from Cairhien, and he’s posted new deserters on the board at the palace. You won’t believe the names!” He spilled out his list in a breathless rush amid exclamations from the others that kept Toveine from hearing more than fragments.

“Dedicated have deserted before,” the Cairhienin muttered when Kajima was done, “but *never* a full Asha’man. And now seven at once?”

“If you don’t believe me,” Kajima began, drawing himself up in a fussy manner. He had been a clerk, in Arafel.

“We believe you,” Genhald said soothingly. “But Gedwyn and Torval, they are the M’Hael’s men. Rochaid and Kisman, too. Why would they desert? He gave them anything a king could want.”

Kajima shook his head irritably, making his bells chime. “You know the list never gives reasons. Just names.”

“Good riddance,” Kurin growled. “At least, it would be if we didn’t have to hunt them down, now.”

“It’s the others I cannot understand,” Sandomere put in. “I was at Dumai’s Wells. I saw the Lord Dragon choose, after. Dashiva had his head in the clouds, like always. But Flinn, Hopwil, Narishma? You never saw men more pleased. They were like lambs let loose in the barley shed.”

A sturdy fellow with gray in his hair spat. “Well, I wasn’t at the Wells, but I went south against the Seanchan.” His accents were Andoran. “Maybe the lambs didn’t like the butcher’s yard as much as they did the barley shed.”

Logain had been listening without taking part, arms folded across his chest. His face was unreadable, a mask. “Do you worry about the butcher’s yard, Canler?” he said now.

The Andoran grimaced, then shrugged. “I reckon we’re all headed there, soon or late, Logain. Don’t see we have much choice, but I don’t have to grin about it.”

“As long as you’re there on the day,” Logain said quietly. He addressed the man called Canler, but several of the others nodded.

Looking past the men, Logain considered Toveine and Gabrelle. Toveine tried to look as if she had not been eavesdropping, and remembering names fiercely. “Go inside out of the cold,” he told them. “Have some tea to warm you. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Don’t touch my papers.” Gathering up the other men with a gesture, he led them off in the direction Kajima had come from.

Toveine gritted her teeth in frustration. At least she would not have to follow him to the training grounds, past the so-called Traitor's Tree, where heads hung like diseased fruit from the bare branches, and watch men studying how to destroy with the Power, but she had hoped for another day to herself, free to wander about and see what she could learn. She had heard men speak of Taim's "palace" before, and today she had hoped to find it and perhaps catch a glimpse of the man whose name was as black as Logain's. Instead, she meekly followed the other woman through the red door. There was no use in fighting it.

Inside, she looked around the front room while Gabrelle hung her cloak on a peg. Despite the exterior, she had expected something grander for Logain. A low fire burned in a rough stone fireplace. A long narrow table and ladder-backed chairs stood on bare floorboards. A desk, only slightly more elaborate than the other furnishings, caught her eye. Stacks of lidded letterboxes littered the desktop, and leather folders full of long sheets of paper. Her fingers itched, but she knew that even if she sat at the desk, she would not be able to lay a finger on anything more than the pen or glass ink bottle.

With a sigh, she followed Gabrelle into the kitchen, where an iron stove gave too much heat and dirty breakfast dishes sat on a low cabinet beneath the window. Gabrelle filled a teakettle and put it on the stove, then took a green-glazed teapot and a wooden canister from another cabinet. Toveine draped her cloak over a chair and sat down at the square table. She did not want tea unless it came with the breakfast she had missed, but she knew she was going to drink it.

The silly Brown nattered on as she carried out her domestic tasks like a contented farmwife. "I've learned a good deal already. Logain is the only full Asha'man to live here in this village. The others all live in Taim's 'palace.' They have servants, but Logain hired the wife of a man in training to cook and clean for him. She'll be here soon, and she thinks he put the sun in the sky, so we best be done talking about anything important by then. He found your lapdesk."

Toveine felt as though an icy hand had seized her throat. She tried to hide it, but Gabrelle was looking straight at her.

"He burned it, Toveine. After reading the contents. He seemed to think he had done us a favor."

The hand eased, and Toveine could breathe again. “Elaida’s order was among my papers.” She cleared her throat to rid herself of hoarseness. Elaida’s order to gentle every man found here and then hang them on the spot, without the trial in Tar Valon required by Tower law. “She imposed harsh conditions, and these men would have reacted harshly, if they knew.” In spite of the heat from the stove, she shivered. That single paper could have gotten them all stilled and hanged. “Why would he do us favors?”

“I don’t know why, Toveine. He isn’t a villain, no more than most men. It could be as simple as that.” Gabrelle set a plate of crusted rolls and another with white cheese on the table. “Or it could be that this bond is like the Warder bond in more ways than we know. Maybe he just did not want to experience the two of us being executed.” Toveine’s stomach rumbled, but she picked up a roll as if she did not care for more than a nibble.

“I suspect ‘harsh’ was a mild choice of words,” Gabrelle went on, spooning tea into the teapot. “I saw you flinch. Of course, they went to a great deal of trouble to bring us here. Fifty-one sisters in their midst, and even with the bond, they must fear we’ll find some way around their orders, some loophole they missed. The obvious answer is, if we were dead, the Tower would be roused to fury. With us alive and captive, even Elaida will move cautiously.” She laughed, quietly amused. “Your face, Toveine. Did you think I’ve spent all my time thinking about tangling my fingers in Logain’s hair?”

Toveine closed her mouth and put down the untouched roll. It was cold, anyway, and felt hard. Always a mistake to assume Browns were unworldly, absorbed in their books and studies to the exclusion of everything else. “What else have you seen?”

Still gripping the spoon, Gabrelle sat across the table from her and leaned forward intently. “Their wall may be strong when it’s done, but this place is full of fractures. There is Mazrim Taim’s faction, and Logain’s faction, though I am uncertain either thinks of them so. Perhaps other factions, too, and certainly men who don’t know there are factions. Fifty-one sisters should be able to make something of that, even with the bond. The second question is, what *do* we make of it?”

“The second question?” Toveine demanded, but the other woman merely waited. “If we manage to break those fissures open,” she said finally, “we scatter ten or fifty or a hundred bands across the world, each more dangerous than any army ever seen. Catching them all might take a lifetime and rip the world apart like a new Breaking, and that with Tarmon Gai'don on its way. That is, if this fellow al'Thor really is the Dragon Reborn." Gabrelle opened her mouth, but Toveine waved away whatever she was going to say. That he was, very likely. It hardly mattered, here and now. "But if we don't . . . Put down the rebellion and gather those sisters back to the Tower, call back every retired sister, and I don't know whether all of us together could destroy this place. I suspect half the Tower would die in the attempt, either way. What is the first question?"

Gabrelle leaned back in her chair, her face suddenly weary. "Yes, not an easy decision. And they bring in more men every day. Fifteen or twenty since we've been here, I believe."

"I won't be trifled with, Gabrelle! What is the first question?" The Brown's gaze sharpened, stared at her for a long moment.

"Soon, the shock will wear off," she said finally. "What comes then? The authority Elaida gave you is finished; the expedition is finished. The first question is, are we fifty-one sisters united, or do we revert to being Browns and Reds, Yellows and Greens and Grays? And poor Ayako, who must be regretting that the Whites insisted on having a sister included. Lemai and Desandre stand highest among us." Gabrelle waved the spoon in admonishment. "The only chance we have of holding together is if you and I publicly submit to Desandre's authority. We must! That will start it, at any rate. I hope. If we can only bring a few others, to begin with, it will be a start."

Toveine drew a deep breath and pretended to stare at nothing, as if considering. Submitting to a sister who stood higher than she was no hardship, in itself. The Ajahs had always kept secrets, and sometimes schemed a little against one another, but the open dissension in the Tower now appalled her. Besides, she had learned how to be humble before Mistress Doweel. She wondered how the woman enjoyed poverty, and working on a farm for a taskmistress even harsher than herself.

"I can bring myself to it," she said finally. "We should have a plan of action to present to Desandre and Lemai, if we mean to convince them." She already had one partly formed, if not for presentation to anyone. "Oh, the water is boiling, Gabrelle."

Suddenly smiling, the foolish woman rose and hurried to the stove. Browns always were better reading books than people, come to think of it.

Before Logain and Taim and the rest were destroyed, they would help Toveine Gazal bring down Elaida.

The great city of Cairhien was a hulking mass inside massive walls, crowding the River Alguenya. The sky was clear and cloudless, but a cold wind blew and the sun shone on roofs covered with snow, glinted on icicles that showed no sign of melting. The Alguenya was not frozen, but small, jagged ice floes from farther upriver spun in the currents, now and then banging against the hulls of ships waiting their turns at the docks. Trade slowed for winter and wars, and the Dragon Reborn, but it never really stopped, not until nations died. Despite the cold, wagons and carts and people flowed along streets that razored the terraced hills of the city. The City, it was called here.

In front of the square-towered Sun Palace, a crowd jammed together around the long entry ramp and stared up, merchants wrapped in fine woolens and nobles in velvets rubbing shoulders with grimy-faced laborers and dirtier refugees. No one cared who stood next to him, and even the cutpurses forgot to follow their trade. Men and women departed, often shaking their heads, but others took their places, sometimes hoisting a child to get a better view of the Palace’s ruined wing, where workmen were clearing away the rubble of the third story. Throughout the rest of Cairhien, craftsmen’s hammers and creaking axles filled the air, together with the cries of shopkeepers, the complaints of buyers, the murmurs of merchants. The crowd before the Sun Palace was silent.

A mile from the Palace, Rand stood at a window in the grandly named Academy of Cairhien, peering through the frosted panes at the stone-paved stableyard below. There had been schools called Academies in Artur Hawkwing’s time and before, centers of learning filled with scholars from every corner of the known world. The conceit made no difference; they could have called it the Barn, so long as it did what he wanted. More important concerns filled his thoughts. Had he made a mistake, returning to Cairhien so soon? But he had been forced to flee too quickly, so it would be known in the right quarters that he actually had fled. Too quickly to prepare everything. There were questions he needed to ask, and tasks that could not be put off. And Min wanted more of Master Fel’s books. He could hear her muttering to herself as she rummaged through the shelves where they had been stored after Fel’s death. With the bounty for books and manuscripts it did not yet possess, the Academy's library was fast outgrowing the rooms that could be spared in Lord Barthanes' former palace. Alanna sat in the back of his head, sulking it seemed; she would know he was in the City. This near, she would be able to walk straight to him, but he would know if she tried. Blessedly, Lews Therin was silent for the moment. Of late, the man seemed madder than ever.

He rubbed a spot clear on a windowpane with his coatsleeve. Stout dark gray wool, good enough for a man with a little money and few airs, it was not a garment anyone would expect to see on the Dragon Reborn. The golden-maned Dragon's head on the back of his hand glittered metallically; it presented no danger here. His boot touched the leather scrip sitting below the window as he leaned forward to look out.

In the stableyard, the paving stones had been swept clear of snow, and a large wagon stood surrounded by buckets like mushrooms in a clearing. Half a dozen men in heavy coats and scarves and caps seemed to be working on the wagon's odd cargo, mechanical devices crowded around a fat metal cylinder that took up more than half the wagon bed. Even stranger, the wagon-shafts were missing. One of the men was moving split firewood from a large wheelbarrow into the side of a metal box fastened below one end of the big cylinder. The open door in the box glowed with the red of fire inside, and smoke rose from a tall, narrow chimney. Another fellow danced around the wagon, bearded, capless and bald-headed, gesturing and apparently shouting orders that did not seem to make the others move any faster. Their breath made faint white plumes. It was almost warm inside; the Academy had large furnaces in the cellars and an extensive system of vents. The half-healed, never healing wounds in his side were hot.

He could not make out Min's curses—he was sure they were curses—but her tone was enough to say they would not be leaving yet unless he dragged her away. There were one or two items he might ask about still. "What are people saying? About the Palace?"

"What you might expect," Lord Dobraine answered behind him with level patience, as he had answered all the other questions. Even when he admitted a lack of knowledge, his tone had not changed. "Some say the Forsaken attacked you, or that Aes Sedai did. Those who think you swore fealty to the Amyrlin Seat favor the Forsaken. Either way, there is considerable debate on whether you are dead or kidnapped or fled. Most believe you live, wherever you are, or say they do. Some, a good many I fear, think . . .” His voice faded to silence.

“That I’ve gone mad,” Rand finished for him in the same level tone. Not a matter for concern, or anger. “That I destroyed part of the Palace myself?” He would not speak of the dead. Fewer than other times, other places, but enough, and some of their names appeared whenever he closed his eyes. One of the men below climbed down from the wagon, but the bald fellow caught his arm and dragged him back up, making him show what he had done. A man on the other side jumped to the pavement carelessly, skidding, and the capless man abandoned the first to chase around the wagon and make that one climb back up with him. What in the Light could they be doing? Rand glanced over his shoulder. “They’re not far wrong.”

Dobraine Taborwin, a short man with the front of his head shaved and formally powdered and the rest of his hair nearly all gray, looked back with dark impassive eyes. Not a handsome man, but steady. Blue-and-white stripes marched down the front of his dark velvet coat from his neck almost to his knees. His signet ring was a carved ruby, and he wore another at his collar, not much larger yet flamboyant for a Cairhienin. He was High Seat of his House, with more battles behind him than most, and not much frightened him. He had proved that at Dumai’s Wells.

But then, the stocky, graying woman patiently waiting her turn at his shoulder appeared just as unafraid. In sharp contrast to Dobraine’s noble elegance, Idrien Tarsin’s sensible brown woolens were plain enough for a shopkeeper, yet she had her own well of authority and dignity. Idrien was Headmistress of the Academy, the title she had given herself since most of the scholars and mechanics called themselves master of this or mistress of that. She ran the school with a strong hand and believed in practical things, new methods of surfacing roads or making dyes, improvements to foundries and mills. She also believed in the Dragon Reborn. Whether or not that was practical, it was pragmatic, and he would settle for that.

He turned back to the window and cleared his patch on the glass again. Maybe it was for heating water—some of those buckets seemed to have water in them still; in Shienar, they used big boilers to heat water for the baths—but why on a wagon? “Has anyone left suddenly since I went? Or come unexpectedly?”

He did not expect that anyone had, anyone of importance to him. Between merchants’ pigeons and White Tower eyes-and-ears—and Mazrim

Taim; he must not forget Taim; Lews Therin snarled wordlessly at the name—with all those pigeons and spies and babbling tongues, in a few more days the whole world would be aware that he had vanished from Cairhien. All the world that mattered, here and now. Cairhien was no longer the ground where the battle would be fought. Dobraine's answer surprised him.

"No one, except . . . Ailil Riatin and some high Sea Folk official are both missing since the . . . attack." A bare pause, but a pause. Perhaps he was not so sure what had happened, either. Yet he would keep his word. He had proved that at Dumai's Wells, too. "No bodies were found, but they may have been killed. The Sea Folk Wavemistress refuses to countenance the possibility, though. She is raising a storm with demands that her woman be produced. In truth, Ailil may have fled to the countryside. Or gone to join her brother, despite her pledges to you. Your three Asha'man are still in the Sun Palace. Flinn, Narishma and Hopwil. They make people nervous. More so now than before." The Headmistress made a sound in her throat, and her shoes shifted audibly on the floorboards. They certainly made her nervous.

Rand dismissed the Asha'man. Unless much closer than the Palace, none was strong enough to have felt him open a gateway here. Those three had not been part of the attack on him, but a wise planner might have considered the chance of failure. Planned how to keep someone close to him if he survived. *You won't survive*, Lews Therin whispered. *None of us will survive.*

Go back to sleep, Rand thought irritably. He knew he was not going to survive. But he wanted to. A derisive laugh answered in his head, but the sound thinned and was gone. The bald man was letting the others climb down, now, and rubbing his hands together in a pleased fashion. Of all things, the fellow seemed to be giving a speech!

"Ailil and Shalon are alive, and they didn't flee," Rand said aloud. He had left them bound and gagged, stuffed under a bed, where they would have been found by servants in a few hours, though the shield he had woven on the Sea Folk Windfinder would have dissipated before that. The two women should have been able to free themselves then. "Look to Cadsuane. She'll have them in Lady Arilyn's palace."

"Cadsuane Sedai is in and out of the Sun Palace as if it were her own," Dobraine said judiciously, "but how could she have taken them out unseen? And why? Ailil is Toram's sister, yet his claim to the Sun Throne is dust now, if it was ever more. She is unimportant even as a counter, now. As for holding an Atha'an Miere of high rank . . . To what purpose?"

Rand made his voice light, uncaring. "Why is she keeping Lady Caraline and High Lord Darlin as 'guests,' Dobraine? Why do Aes Sedai do anything? You'll find them where I said. If she lets you in to look." Why was not a foolish question. He just did not have the answer. Of course, Caraline Damodred and Ailil Riatin did represent the last two Houses to hold the Sun Throne. And Darlin Sisnera led the nobles in Tear who wanted him thrown out of their precious Stone, out of Tear.

Rand frowned. He had been sure Cadsuane was focused on him despite her pretense otherwise, but what if it was not pretense? A relief, if so. Of course it was. The last thing he needed was an Aes Sedai who thought she could meddle in his affairs. The very last. Perhaps Cadsuane was directing her meddling elsewhere. Min had seen Sisnera wearing a strange crown; Rand had thought a great deal on that viewing of hers. He did not want to think of other things she had seen, concerning himself and the Green sister. Could it be as simple as Cadsuane thinking she could decide who would rule both Tear and Cairhien?

Simple? He almost laughed. But that was how Aes Sedai behaved. And Shalon, the Windfinder? Possessing her might give Cadsuane leverage with Harine, the Wavemistress, but he suspected she had just been scooped up with Ailil, to try hiding who took the noblewoman. Cadsuane would have to be disabused. Who would rule in Tear and Cairhien had already been decided. He would point that out to her. Later. It stood far down his list of priorities.

"Before I go, Dobraine, I need to give you—" Words froze on his tongue.

In the stableyard, the capless man had pulled a level on the wagon, and one end of a long horizontal beam suddenly rose, then sank, driving a shorter beam down through a hole cut in the wagon bed. And, vibrating till it seemed ready to shake apart, trailing smoke from the chimney, the wagon lurched ahead, the beam rising and falling, slowly at first, then faster. It moved, without horses!

He did not realize he had spoken aloud until the Headmistress answered him.

"Oh, that! That's Mervin Poel's steamwagon, as he calls it, my Lord Dragon." Disapproval freighted her high, startlingly youthful voice.

"Claims he can pull a hundred wagons with the contraption. Not unless he can make it go further than fifty paces without bits breaking or freezing up. It has only done that far once, that I know."

Indeed, the—steamwagon?—shuddered to a halt not twenty paces from where it first stood. Shuddered indeed; it seemed to be shaking harder by the heartbeat. Most of the men swarmed over it again, one of them frantically twisting at something with a cloth wrapped around his hand. Abruptly steam shot into the air from a pipe, and the shuddering slowed, stopped.

Rand shook his head. He remembered seeing this fellow Mervin, with a device that quivered on a tabletop and did nothing. And this marvel had come from that? He had thought it was meant to make music. That must be Mervin leaping about and shaking his fists at the others. What other odd things, what marvels, were people building here at the Academy?

When he asked, still watching the men in the courtyard work on the wagon, Idrien sniffed loudly. Respect for the Dragon Reborn held only a thin edge in her voice as she began, and quickly lost ground to disgust. "Bad enough I must give space to philosophers and historians and arithmetists and the like, but you said take in anyone who wanted to make anything new and let them stay if they showed progress. I suppose you hoped for weapons, but now I have dozens of dreamers and wastrels on my hands, every one with an old book or manuscript or six, *all* of which date back to the Compact of the Ten Nations, mind, if not the Age of Legends itself, or so they say, and they are all trying to make sense of drawings and sketches and descriptions of things they've never seen and maybe nobody ever did see. *I* have seen old manuscripts that talk about people with their eyes in their bellies, and animals ten feet tall with tusks longer than a man, and cities where—"

"But what are they making, Headmistress Tarsin?" Rand demanded. The men working on the thing below moved with an air of purpose, not as if they saw failure. And it had moved.

She sniffed louder this time. "Foolishness, my Lord Dragon, that is what they make. Kin Tovere constructed his big looking glass. You can see the moon through it plain as your hand, and what he claims are other worlds, but what is the good of that? He wants to build a bigger, now. Maryl Harke makes huge kites she calls gliders, and come spring, she will be throwing herself off hills again. Puts your heart in your mouth to see her sailing downhill on the things; she will break more than her arm next time one folds up on her, I warrant. Jander Parentakis believes he can move riverboats with waterwheels off a mill, or near enough, but when he put enough men into the boat to turn the cranks, there was no room for cargo, and any craft with sails could outrun it. Ryn Anhara traps lightning in big jars—I doubt even he knows why—and Niko Tokama is just as silly with her—"

Rand spun around so fast that she stepped back, and even Dobraine shifted on his feet, a swordsman's move. No, they were not sure of him at all. "He traps lightning?" he asked quietly.

Comprehension flooded her blunt face, and she waved her hands in front of her. "No, no! Not like . . . like that!" Not like you, she had almost said. "It is a thing of wires and wheels and big clay jars and the Light knows what. He calls it lightning, and I saw a rat jump down on one of the jars once, on the metal rods sticking out of the top. It certainly looked struck by lightning." A hopeful tone entered her voice. "I can make him stop, if you wish."

He tried to picture someone riding on a kite, but the image was ludicrous. Catching lightning in jars was beyond his ability to imagine. And yet . . . "Let them go on as before, Headmistress. Who knows? Maybe one of these inventions will turn out to be important. If any work as claimed, give the inventor a reward."

Dobraine's leathery, sun-darkened face looked dubious, though he almost managed to conceal it. Idrien bowed her head in sullen assent, and even curtsied, but plainly she thought he was asking to let pigs fly if they could.

Rand was not certain he disagreed. Then again, maybe one of the pigs *would* grow wings. The wagon *had* moved. He wanted very badly to leave something behind, something to help the world survive the new Breaking the Prophecies said he would bring. The trouble was, he had no idea what that might be, save for the schools themselves. Who knew what a marvel could do? Light, he wanted to build *something* that could last.

I thought I could build, Lews Therin murmured in his head. *I was wrong. We are not builders, not you, or I, or the other one. We are destroyers. Destroyers.*

Rand shivered, and scrubbed his hands through his hair. The other one? At times, the voice sounded sanest when it was the most mad. They were watching him, Dobraine very nearly hiding uncertainty, Idrien making no effort to. Straightening as if nothing was wrong, he drew two slim packets from inside his coat. Both carried the Dragon in a long lump of red wax on the outside. The belt buckle he was not wearing at the moment served for an impressive signet.

“The top one names you my steward in Cairhien,” he said, handing the packets to Dobraine. A third still nestled next to his chest, for Gregorin den Lushenos, making him steward in Illian. “So there’ll be no trouble with anyone questioning your authority while I’m gone.” Dobraine could handle that sort of trouble with his armsmen, but best to make sure no one could claim ignorance or doubt. Maybe there would be no trouble to handle if everyone believed the Dragon Reborn would descend on transgressors. “There are orders about things I want done, but aside from those, use your own judgment. When the Lady Elayne lays claim to the Sun Throne, throw your full support behind her.” Elayne. Oh, Light, Elayne, and Aviendha. At least they were safe. Min’s voice sounded happier, now; she must have found Master Fel’s books. He was going to let her follow him to her death because he was not strong enough to stop her. *Ilyena,* Lews Therin moaned. *Forgive me, Ilyena!* Rand’s voice came out as cold as winter’s heart. “You’ll know when to deliver the other. Whether to deliver it. Pry him out if need be, and decide by what he says. If you decide no, or he refuses, I’ll pick someone else. Not you.”

Perhaps that was brusque, but Dobraine’s expression hardly changed. His eyebrows rose slightly at the name written on the second packet; that was all. He made a smooth bow. Cairhienin usually were smooth. “It shall be as you say. Forgive me, but you sound as though you mean to be gone a long while.”

Rand shrugged. He trusted the High Lord as far as he trusted anyone. Almost as far. “Who can say? The times are uncertain. Make sure Headmistress Tarsin has whatever coin she needs, and the men starting the school in Caemlyn. The school in Tear, as well, until matters change there.”

“As you say,” Dobraine repeated, tucking the packets into his coat. His face betrayed no emotion, now. An experienced player in the Game of Houses, was Dobraine.

For her part, the Headmistress managed to look pleased and disgruntled at the same time, and busied herself smoothing her dress unnecessarily the way women did when hard-pressed not to speak their minds. Complain how she would about dreamers and philosophers, she was jealous of the Academy's well-being. She would shed no tears if those other schools vanished and their scholars were forced to come to the Academy. Even the philosophers. What would she think of one particular order in Dobraine's packet?

"I've found everything I need," Min said, coming out from the shelves staggering slightly under the weight of the three bulging cloth scrips that hung from her. Her plain brown coat and breeches were very like what she had worn when he first saw her in Baerlon. For some reason, she had grumbled over them until anyone who knew her would have thought he was asking her to put on a dress. She smiled now, though, with delight and a hint of mischief. "I hope those packhorses are where we left them, or my Lord Dragon will have to be fitted for a packsaddle."

Idrien gasped, scandalized to hear him addressed so, but Dobraine merely smiled a little. He had seen Min around Rand before.

Rand got rid of them as quickly as possible then, since they had heard and seen as much as he wanted them to—sent them off with a final admonition that he had never been there at all. Dobraine nodded as if he had expected no less. Idrien looked thoughtful as she left. If she let anything slip where a servant could hear, or a scholar, it would be all over the City in two days. There was not much time in any case. Perhaps no one who could tell had been close enough to feel him open a gateway here, but anyone looking for the signs would be sure by now there was a *ta'veren* in the city. It was not his plan to be found yet.

When the door closed behind them, he studied Min for a moment, then took one of the scrips and slung it from his shoulder.

"Only one?" she said. Setting the others on the floor, she planted her fists on her hips and scowled. "Sometimes you really are a sheepherder. These bags must be a hundredweight each." But she sounded more amused than upset.

"You should have picked smaller books," he told her, pulling on riding gloves to hide the Dragons. "Or lighter." He turned toward the window, to fetch the leather scrip, and a wave of dizziness hit him. Knees turning to water, he stumbled. A shimmering face he could not make out flashed through his head. With an effort, he caught himself, forced his legs straight. And the whirling sensation vanished. Lews Therin panted hoarsely in the shadows. Could the face be his?

"If you think you'll make me carry them all that way, think again," Min grumbled. "I've seen better pretending from stablehands. You could try falling down."

"Not this time." He was ready for what happened when he channeled; he could control it to some extent. Usually. Most of the time. This dizziness without *saidin* was new. Maybe he had just turned too fast. And maybe pigs *did* fly. He settled the leather scrip's strap over his free shoulder. The men in the stableyard were still busy. Building. "Min—"

Her brows lowered immediately. She paused for an instant in drawing on her red gloves and began tapping her foot. A dangerous sign with any woman, especially one who carried knives. "We had this out, Rand bloody Dragon Reborn al'Thor! You are *not* leaving me behind!"

"The thought never crossed my mind," he lied. He was too weak; he could not make himself say the words, to make her stay. *Too weak,* he thought bitterly, *and she might well die for it, the Light burn me forever!*

It will, Lews Therin promised softly.

"I just thought you should know what we've been doing, and what we are going to do," Rand went on. "I haven't been very forthcoming, I suppose." Gathering himself, he seized *saidin.* The room seemed to whirl, and he rode the avalanche of fire and ice and filth with nausea seething in his belly. He was able to stand erect without swaying, though. Barely. And just able to weave the flows of a gateway that opened into a snowy clearing where two saddled horses were tethered to a low branch of an oak.

He was glad to see the animals still there. The clearing was well away from the nearest road, but there were still wanderers who had turned their backs on families and farms, trades and crafts, because the Dragon Reborn had broken all bonds. The Prophecies said so. On the other hand, a good many of those men and women, footsore and half-frozen now on top of it, were tired of searching without any notion what they were searching for. Even these nondescript mounts surely would have vanished with the first man to find them unattended. He had gold enough to buy others, but he did not think Min would have enjoyed the hour's walk to the village where they had left the packhorses.

Hurrying through into the clearing, pretending the change from floor to knee-deep snow caused his stumble, he only waited until she had snatched up her bags of books and staggered through after him before releasing the Power. They were five hundred miles from Cairhien, and nearer Tar Valon than anywhere else of note. Alanna had faded in his head when the gateway closed.

"Forthcoming?" Min said, sounding suspicious. Of his motives, he hoped, or anything but the truth. The dizziness and nausea faded slowly. "You have been as open as a mussel, Rand, but I am not blind. First we Traveled to Rhuidean, where you asked so many questions about this Shara place that anybody would think you meant to go there." Frowning faintly, she shook her head as she fastened one of her burdens to the saddle of her brown gelding. She grunted with the effort, but she was not about to set the other bag of books down in the snow. "I never thought the Aiel Waste was like that. That city is bigger than Tar Valon, even if it is half ruined. And all those fountains, and the lake. I couldn't even see the far side. I thought there wasn't any water in the Waste. And it was as cold as here; I thought the Waste was hot!"

"In summer, you fry during the day, but you still freeze at night." He felt recovered enough to begin shifting his own burdens to the gray's saddle. Almost enough. He did it anyway. "If you already know everything, what was I doing besides asking questions?"

"The same as in Tear last night. Making sure every cat and blackbird knew you were there. In Tear, it was Chachin you asked about. It's obvious. You are trying to confuse anyone who tries to find out where you are and where you're going next." The second bag of books balancing the first behind her saddle, she untied her reins and climbed into the saddle. "So, am I blind?"

"Your eyes belong on an eagle." He hoped his pursuers saw as clearly. Or that whoever directed them did. It would not do to have them haring off the Light knew where. "I need to lay some more false trails, I think."

"Why take the time? I know you have a plan, I know it concerns something in that leather scrip—a *sa'angreal*?—and I know it's important. Don't look so surprised. You barely let that bag out of your sight. Why not go ahead and do whatever it is you plan, *then* lay your false trails? And the real one, of course. You're going to turn on them when they least expect, you said. You can hardly do that unless they follow where you want."

"I wish you'd never started reading Herid Fel's books," he muttered sourly, pulling himself into the gray's saddle. His head spun only a little. "You puzzle out too much. Can I keep any secrets at all from you, now?"

“You never could, woolhead,” she laughed, and then, contradicting herself, “What *are* you planning? Aside from killing Dashiva and the rest, I mean. I have a right to know if I’m traveling with you.” As if she had not insisted on traveling with him.

“I’m going to cleanse the male half of the Source,” he said in a flat voice. A momentous announcement. A grand scheme, more than grand. Grandiose, most would say. He might have said he intended to take an afternoon stroll, for all of Min’s reaction. She simply looked at him, hands folded on the pommel of her saddle, until he went on.

“I don’t know how long it will take, and once I start, I think everyone within a thousand miles of me who can channel will know something is happening. I doubt I’ll be able to just stop if Dashiva and the rest, or the Forsaken, suddenly appear to see what it is. The Forsaken, I can’t do anything about, but with luck, I can finish the others.” Maybe being *ta’veren* would give him the edge he needed so desperately.

“Depend on luck, and Corlan Dashiva or the Forsaken, either one, will have you for breakfast,” she said, turning her horse out of the clearing. “Maybe I can think of a better way. Come on. There’s a warm fire at that inn. I hope you’re going to let us have a hot meal before we leave.”

Rand stared after her incredulously. You would have thought five renegade Asha’man, not to mention the Forsaken, were less bother than a sore tooth. Booting the gray ahead in a spray of snow, he caught up to her and rode in silence. He still had a few secrets from her, this sickness that had begun affecting him when he channeled, for one. That was the real reason he had to deal with Dashiva and the others first. It gave him time to get over the sickness. If that was possible. If not, he was not sure the two *ter’angreal* riding behind his saddle were going to be any use at all.

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CHAPTER

1

Leaving the Prophet

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose above the Aryth Ocean. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

East the wind blew above the cold gray-green ocean swells, toward Tarabon, where ships already unloaded or waiting their turns to enter the harbor of Tanchico tossed at anchor for miles along the low coastline. More ships, great and small, filled the huge harbor, and barges ferrying people and cargo ashore, for there was no mooring empty at any of the city's docks. The inhabitants of Tanchico had been fearful when the city fell to its new masters, with their peculiar customs and strange creatures and women held on leashes who could channel, and fearful again when this fleet arrived, mind-numbing in its size, and began disgorging not only soldiers but sharp-eyed merchants, and craftsfolk with the tools of their trades, and even families with wagons full of farm implements and unknown plants. There was a new King and a new Panarch to order the laws, though, and if King and Panarch owed fealty to some far distant Empress, if Seanchan nobles occupied many of the palaces and demanded deeper obeisance than any Taraboner lord or lady, life was little changed for most people, except for the better. The Seanchan Blood had small contact with ordinary folk, and odd customs could be lived with. The anarchy that had ripped the country apart was just a memory, now, and hunger with it. The rebels and bandits and Dragonsworn who had plagued the land were dead or captured or driven north onto Almoth Plain, those who had not yielded, and trade moved once more. The hordes of starving refugees that had clogged the city streets were back in their villages, back on their farms. And no more of the newest arrivals remained in Tanchico than the city could support easily. Despite the snows, soldiers and merchants, craftsfolk and farmers fanned out inland in their thousands and tens of thousands, but the icy wind lashed a Tanchico at peace and, after its harsh troubles, for the most part content with its lot.

East the wind blew for leagues, gusting and fading, dividing but never dying, east and veering to the south, across forests and plains wrapped in winter, bare-branched and brown-grassed, at last crossing what had once been the border between Tarabon and Amadicia. A border still, but only in name, the customs posts dismantled, the guards gone. East and south, around the southern reaches of the Mountains of Mist, swirling across high-walled Amador. Conquered Amador. The banner atop the massive Fortress of the Light snapped in the wind, the golden hawk it bore truly seeming to fly with lightning bolts clutched in its talons. Few natives left their homes except at need, and those few hurried along the frozen streets, cloaks clutched around them and eyes down. Eyes down not just to mind footing on slick paving stones but to avoid looking at the occasional Seanchan riding by on a beast like a bronze-scaled cat the size of a horse, or steel-veiled Taraboners guarding groups of onetime Children of the Light, now chained and laboring like animals to haul refuse wagons out of the city. A bare month and a half in the Seanchan fold, the people of Amadicia's capital city felt the bitter wind like a scourge, and those who did not curse their fate meditated on what sins had brought them to this.

East the wind howled over a desolated land where as many villages lay burned and farms ruined as held people. Snow blanketed charred timbers and abandoned barns alike, softening the view even as it added freezing to starvation as a way of dying. Sword and axe and spear had been there already, and remained to kill again. East, until the wind moaned a dirge over unwalled Abila. No banners flew above the town's watchtowers, for the Prophet of the Lord Dragon was there, and the Prophet needed no banner save his name. In Abila, people shivered harder at the name of the Prophet than they did for the wind. People elsewhere shivered at that name, too.

Striding out of the tall merchant's house where Masema lived, Perrin let the wind whip his fur-lined cloak as he pulled on his gloves. The midday sun gave no warmth, and the air bit deep. He kept his face smooth, but he was too angry to feel the cold. Keeping his hands from the axe at his belt was an effort. Masema—he would not call the man Prophet, not in his own head he would not!—Masema was very likely a fool, and very certainly insane. A powerful fool, more powerful than most kings, and mad with it.

Masema's guards filled the street from side to side and stretched around the corners of the next streets, bony fellows in stolen silks, beardless apprentices in torn coats, once-plump merchants in the remains of fine woolens. Their breath was white mist, and some shivered without a cloak, but every man clutched a spear, or a crossbow with the bolt in place. Still, none looked outwardly hostile. They knew he claimed acquaintance with the Prophet, and they gaped as if expecting him to leap into the air and fly. Or at least turn somersaults. He filtered out the smell of woodsmoke from the town's chimneys. The lot of them stank of old sweat and unwashed bodies, of eagerness and fear. And of a strange fever he had not recognized before, a reflection of the madness in Masema. Hostile or not, they would kill him, or anyone, at Masema's word. They would butcher nations at Masema's word. Smelling them, he felt a coldness deeper than any winter wind. He was gladder than ever that he had refused to let Faile come with him.

The men he had left with the mounts were playing at dice alongside the animals, or going though the motions of it, on a space of paving stones scraped mostly clear of snowy slush. He did not trust Masema as far as he could throw his bay, and nor did they. They were paying more mind to the house, and the guards, than to their game. The three Warders sprang to their feet as soon as he appeared, their eyes going to his companions coming out behind him. They knew what their Aes Sedai had felt inside there. Neald was slower, pausing to scoop up the dice and coins. The Asha'man was a popinjay, always stroking his curled mustaches, strutting and smirking at women, but he stood on the balls of his feet now, wary as a cat.

"I thought we'd have to fight our way out of there for a time," Elyas murmured at Perrin's shoulder. His golden eyes were calm, though. A lanky old man in a broad-brimmed hat, with graying hair that hung down his back to his waist and a long beard fanning across his chest. A long knife at his belt, not a sword. But he had been a Warder. He still was, in a way.

"That's the only thing that went right," Perrin told him, taking Stayer's reins from Neald. The Asha'man quirked an eyebrow questioningly, but Perrin shook his head, not caring what the question was, and Neald, with a twist to his mouth, handed Elyas the reins of his mouse-colored gelding before climbing onto his own dapple.

Perrin had no time for the Murandian's sulks. Rand had sent him to bring back Masema, and Masema was coming. As always of late when he thought of Rand, colors swirled in his head, and as always, he ignored them. Masema was too great a problem for Perrin to waste thought fretting over colors. The bloody man thought it blasphemy for anyone but Rand to touch the One Power. Rand, it seemed, was not really mortal; he was the Light made flesh! So there would be no Traveling, no quick leap to Cairhien through a gateway made by one of the Asha'man, no matter how Perrin had tried to bring Masema around. They would have to ride the whole four hundred leagues or more, through the Light alone knew what. And keep it secret who they were, and Masema as well. Those had been Rand's orders.

"There's only one way I can see to do it, boy," Elyas said as if he had spoken aloud. "A slim chance. We might have had better odds knocking the fellow on the head and fighting clear anyway."

"I know," Perrin growled. He had thought of it more than once during the hours of argument. With Asha'man and Aes Sedai and Wise Ones all channeling, it might have been possible. But he had seen a battle fought with the One Power, men ripped to blood-soaked shreds in the blink of an eye, the earth itself blooming in fire. Abila would have been a butcher's yard before they were done. He would never look on the like again, if he had his way.

"What do you think this Prophet will make of it?" Elyas asked.

Perrin had to clear his mind of Dumai's Wells, and Abila looking like the field at Dumai's Wells, before he could think of what Elyas was talking about. Oh. How he was going to do the impossible. "I don't care what he makes of it." The man would make trouble, that was for certain sure.

Irritably, he rubbed at his beard. He needed to trim it. To have it trimmed, rather. If he picked up the scissors, Faile would take them away and give them to Lamgwin. It still seemed impossible that that hulking shoulderthumper with his scarred face and sunken knuckles should know the skills of a bodyservant. Light! A bodyservant. He was finding his footing with Faile and her strange Saldaean ways, but the better his footing, the more she managed to run things to suit herself. Women always did that anyway, of course, but sometimes he thought he had exchanged one sort of whirlwind for another. Maybe he could try some of this masterful shouting she seemed to like so much. A man ought to be able to put scissors to his own beard if he wanted. He doubted he would, though. Shouting at her was hard enough when she began shouting first. Fool thing to be thinking about now, anyway.

He studied the others making their way to the horses as he would have studied tools he needed for a hard job of work. He was afraid Masema would make this journey as bad a job as he had ever taken on, and his tools were full of cracks.

Seonid and Masuri paused beside him, the hoods of their cloaks pulled well forward, putting their faces in shadow. A razor-sharp quivering laced the faint scent of their perfumes, fear under control. Masema would have killed them on the spot if he had had his way. The guards still might, if any recognized an Aes Sedai face. Among this many, there had to be some who could. Masuri was the taller by almost a hand, but Perrin still looked down on the tops of their heads. Ignoring Elyas, the sisters exchanged glances sheltered within their cowls; then Seonid spoke quietly.

“Do you see now why he must be killed? The man is . . . rabid.” Well, the Green was seldom one to mince words. Luckily, none of the guards was close enough to overhear.

“You could choose a better place to say that,” he said. He did not want to hear the arguments again, now or later, but especially not now. And it seemed he did not have to.

Edarra and Carelle loomed behind the Aes Sedai, dark shawls already wrapped around their heads. The bits that hung down across chest and back hardly seemed any protection from the cold, but then, snow bothered the Wise Ones more, just the existence of such a thing. Their sun-dark faces might have been carved for all they revealed, yet the scent of them was a steel spike, Edarra’s blue eyes, usually so composed that they seemed odd set in her youthful features, were as hard as that spike. Of course, her composure masked steel. Sharp steel.

“This is no place for talking,” Carelle told the Aes Sedai mildly, tucking a strand of fiery red hair beneath her shawl. As tall as many men, she was always mild. For a Wise One. Which only meant she did not bite your nose off without giving warning first. “Get to your horses.”

And the shorter women curtsied to her briefly and hurried to their saddles as if they were not Aes Sedai at all. They were not, to the Wise Ones. Perrin thought he would never grow accustomed to that. Even if Masuri and Seonid seemed to have done so.

With a sigh, he swung up onto Stayer as the Wise Ones followed their Aes Sedai apprentices. The stallion frisked a few steps after his rest, but Perrin brought him under control with the pressure of his knees and steady hands on the reins. The Aiel women mounted awkwardly even after all the practice they had had these past weeks, their heavy skirts pushed up to bare wool-stockinged legs above the knee. They agreed with the two sisters about Masema, and so did the other Wise Ones back at his camp. A fine boiling stew for anyone to carry to Cairhien without being scalded.

Grady and Aram were already mounted, and he could not make out their scents among all the others. There was little need. He had always thought Grady looked a farmer despite his black coat and the silver sword on his collar, but not now. Statue-still in his saddle, the stocky Asha'man surveyed the guards with the grim eyes of a man deciding where to make the first cut. And the second, and third, and however many were needed. Aram, bilious green Tinker's cloak flailing the wind as he handled his reins, the hilt of his sword rising above his shoulder—Aram's face was a map of excitement that made Perrin's heart sink. In Masema, Aram had met a man who had given his life and heart and soul to the Dragon Reborn. In Aram's view, the Dragon Reborn ranked close behind Perrin and Faile.

You did the boy no favor, Elyas had told Perrin. *You helped him let go of what he believed, and now all he has to believe in is you and that sword. It's not enough, not for any man.* Elyas had known Aram when Aram was still a Tinker, before he picked up the sword.

A stew that might have poison in it, for some.

The guards might gaze at Perrin in wonder, but they did not move to clear a passage until someone shouted from a window of the house. Then they edged aside enough for the riders to leave single file. Reaching the Prophet was not easy, without his permission. Without his permission, leaving him was impossible.

Once away from Masema and his guards, Perrin set as fair a pace as he could through the crowded streets. Abila had been a large, prosperous town not so long ago, with its stone marketplaces, and slate-roofed buildings as tall as four stories. It was still large, but mounds of rubble marked where houses and inns had been torn down. Not an inn remained standing in Abila, or a house where someone had been slow to proclaim the glory of the Lord Dragon Reborn. Masema's disapproval was never subtle.

The throng held few who looked as if they lived in the town, drab folk in drab clothes for the most part scuttling fearfully along the sides of the street, and no children. No dogs, either; hunger was a likely problem in this place, now. Everywhere groups of armed men straggled through the ankle-deep muck that had been snow last night, twenty here, fifty there, knocking down people too slow to get out of their path, even making the ox-carts wend around them. There were always hundreds in sight. There had to be thousands in the town. Masema's army was a rabble, but their numbers had made up for other lacks so far. Thank the Light the man had agreed to bring along only a hundred. It had taken an hour's argument, but he had agreed. In the end, Masema's desire to reach Rand quickly, even if he would not Travel, had won the point. Few of his followers had horses, and the more that came afoot, the slower they would go. At least he would arrive at Perrin's camp by nightfall.

Perrin saw no one mounted except his own party, and they drew stares from the armed men, stony stares, fevered stares. Finely dressed folk came to the Prophet often enough, nobles and merchants hoping a submission in person would gain more blessings and fewer penalties, but they usually departed afoot. Their way was unimpeded, however, aside from the necessity of riding around the clumps of Masema's followers. If they left mounted, it must be by Masema's will. Even so, Perrin had no need to tell anyone to stay close. There was a feel of waiting in Abila, and no one with half a brain would want to be near when the waiting ended.

It was a relief when Balwer kneed his hammer-nosed gelding out of a side street just short of the low wooden bridge that led out of town, almost as great as the relief he felt when they had crossed the bridge and passed the last guards. The pinch-faced little man, all knobby joints and with his plain brown coat more hanging on him than worn, could look after himself in spite of appearances, but Faile was setting up a proper household for a noblewoman, and she would be more than displeased if Perrin let any harm come to her secretary. Hers, and Perrin's. Perrin was not sure how he felt about having a secretary, yet the fellow possessed skills beyond writing a fine hand. Which he demonstrated as soon as they were clear of the town, with low, forested hills all around. Most of the branches were stark and bare, and those that retained leaf or needle splashed a vivid green against the white. They had the road to themselves, but snow frozen in ruts kept their riding slow.

“Forgive me, my Lord Perrin,” Balwer murmured, leaning in his saddle to peer past Elyas, “but I happened to overhear something back there you might find of interest.” He coughed discreetly into his glove, then hurriedly recaptured his cloak and pulled it close.

Elyas and Aram hardly needed Perrin’s gesture to fall back with the others. Everyone was accustomed to the dry little man’s desire for privacy. Why he wanted to pretend that no one else knew he ferreted out information at every town or village they passed, Perrin could not begin to guess. He had to know that Perrin discussed what he learned with Faile, and Elyas. In any case, he was very good at ferreting.

Balwer tilted his head to one side to watch Perrin as they rode side by side. “I have two pieces of news, my Lord, one I believe important, and one urgent.” Urgent or not, even the fellow’s voice sounded dry, like dead leaves rustling.

“How urgent?” Perrin made a wager with himself over who the first piece of news would be about.

“Very, perhaps, my Lord. King Ailron has brought the Seanchan to battle near the town of Jeramel, approximately one hundred miles west of here. This was about ten days ago.” Balwer’s mouth pursed momentarily in irritation. He disliked imprecision; he disliked not knowing. “Reliable information is scarce, but without doubt, the Amadician army is dead, captive or scattered. I would be very surprised if more than a hundred remain together anywhere, and those will take to banditry soon enough. Ailron himself was taken, along with his entire court. Amadicia no longer has any nobility, not to amount to anything.”

Mentally, Perrin marked the wager lost. Usually, Balwer began with news of the Whitecloaks. “A pity for Amadicia, I suppose. For the people captured, anyway.” According to Balwer, the Seanchan had a harsh way with those captured under arms opposing them. So Amadicia had no army left, and no nobles to raise or lead another. Nothing to stop the Seanchan spreading as fast as they wished, though they seemed to spread very quickly even when there was opposition. Best if he rode east as soon as Masema reached the camp, and then moved as fast as he could for as long as the men and horses could sustain it.

He said as much, and Balwer nodded, with a thin smile of approval. The man appreciated it when Perrin saw the value of what he reported.

“One other point, my Lord,” he went on. “The Whitecloaks took part in the battle, but apparently Valda managed to get most of them off the field at the end. He has the Dark One’s own luck. No one seems to know where they have gone. Or rather, every tongue gives a different direction. If I may say so, I favor east. Away from the Seanchan.” And toward Abila, of course.

The wager was not a loss, then. Though the man had not begun with it. A draw, maybe. Far ahead, a hawk soared high in the cloudless sky, heading north. It would reach the camp long before he would. Perrin could recall a time when he had had as few concerns as that hawk. Compared to now, at least. It had been a very long time ago.

“I suspect the Whitecloaks are more interested in avoiding the Seanchan than in bothering us, Balwer. Anyway, I can’t move any faster for them than for the Seanchan. Were they the second piece of news?”

“No, my Lord. Simply a point of interest.” Balwer seemed to hate the Children of the Light, most especially Valda—a matter of rough treatment somewhere in his past, Perrin suspected—but like everything else about the man, it was a dry, cold hate. Passionless. “The second news is that the Seanchan have fought another battle, this in southern Altara. Against Aes Sedai, possibly, though some mentioned men channeling.” Half turning in his saddle, Balwer looked back at Grady and Neald in their black coats. Grady was in conversation with Elyas, and Neald with Aram, but both Asha’man appeared to be keeping as close an eye on the forests as did the Warders bringing up the rear. The Aes Sedai and the Wise Ones were talking in low voices, too. “Whoever they fought, my Lord, it is clear that the Seanchan lost and were sent reeling back into Ebou Dar.”

“Good news,” Perrin said flatly. Dumai’s Wells flashed into his head again, stronger than before. For a moment, he was back-to-back with Loial again, fighting desperately, sure that every breath would be his last. For the first time that day, he shivered. At least Rand knew about the Seanchan. At least he did not have to worry about that.

He became aware of Balwer eyeing him. Considering him, like a bird considering a strange insect. He had seen him shiver. The little man liked to know everything, but there were some secrets no one would ever know.

Perrin’s eyes returned to the hawk, barely visible now even to him. It made him think of Faile, his fierce falcon of a wife. His beautiful falcon of a wife. He put Seanchan and Whitecloaks and battle and even Masema out of his mind. For the time, at least.

“Let’s pick up the pace a little,” he called back to the others. The hawk might see Faile before he did, but unlike the bird, he would be seeing the love of his heart. And today, he would not shout at her no matter what she did.

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CHAPTER 2

Taken

The hawk soon passed out of sight, and the road remained empty of other travelers, but press as Perrin would, frozen ruts ready to break a horse’s leg and a rider’s neck allowed no great speed. The wind carried ice, and a promise of snow again tomorrow. It was midafternoon by the time he turned off through the trees into white drifts that were knee-deep on the horses in places, and covered the last mile to the forest camp where he had left the Two Rivers men and the Aiel, the Mayeners and Ghealdanin. And Faile. Nothing there was as he expected.

As always, there were four camps spaced out among the trees, in truth, but the Winged Guards’ smoking campfires stood abandoned around Berelain’s striped tents, amid overturned kettles and bits of gear dropped on the snow, and the same signs of haste dotted the trampled ground where Alliandre’s soldiers had been set up when he left that morning. The only evidence of life in either place was the horse handlers and farriers and cart drivers, bundled in woolens and huddled in clumps around the horselines and high-wheeled supply carts. They were all staring toward what caught his eye and held it.

Five hundred paces from the rocky, flat-topped hill where the Wise Ones had placed their low tents, the gray-coated Mayeners were drawn up, all nine hundred or so of them, horses stamping impatiently, red cloaks and the long red streamers on their lances rippling in the cold breeze. Nearer the hill and off to one side, just at the near bank of a frozen stream, the Ghealdanin made a block of lances just as large, these with green streamers. The mounted soldiers’ green coats and armor appeared drab compared with the Mayeners’ red helmets and breastplates, but their officers sparkled in silvered armor and scarlet coats and cloaks, with reins and saddlecloths fringed in crimson. A brave show, for men on parade, but they were not parading. The Winged Guards faced toward the Ghealdanin, the Ghealdanin toward the hill. And the crest of the hill was ringed by Two Rivers men, longbows in hand. No one had drawn, yet, but every man had a shaft nocked and ready. It was madness.

Booting Stayer to as near a gallop as the bay could manage, Perrin plowed through the snow, followed by the others, until he reached the head of the Ghealdanin formation. Berelain was there, in a fur-trimmed red cloak, and Gallenne, the one-eyed Captain of her Winged Guards, and Annoura, her Aes Sedai advisor, all apparently arguing with Alliandre’s First Captain, a short, hard-bitten fellow named Gerard Arganda, who was shaking his head so hard the fat white plumes quivered on his gleaming helmet. The First of Mayene looked ready to bite iron, vexation showed through Annoura’s Aes Sedai calm, and Gallenne was fingering the red-plumed helmet hanging at his saddle as though deciding whether to don it. At the sight of Perrin, they broke off and turned their mounts toward him. Berelain sat her saddle erect, but her black hair was windblown, and her fine-ankled white mare was shivering, the lather of a hard run freezing on her flanks.

With so many people about, it was all but impossible to make out individual scents, but Perrin did not need his nose to recognize trouble hanging by a hair. Before he could demand to know what in the Light they thought they were doing, Berelain spoke with a porcelain-faced formality that made him blink at first.

“Lord Perrin, your Lady wife and I were hunting with Queen Alliandre when we were attacked by Aiel. I managed to escape. No one else in the party has returned, yet, though it may be the Aiel took prisoners. I have sent a squad of lancers to scout. We were about ten miles to the southeast, so they should return with news by nightfall.”

“Faile was captured?” Perrin said thickly. Even before crossing into Amadicia from Ghealdan they had heard of Aiel burning and looting, but it had always been somewhere else, the next village over or the one beyond that, if not farther. Never close enough to worry about, or to be sure they were more than rumor. Not when he had Rand bloody al’Thor’s orders to carry out! And look what it had cost.

“Why are you all still here?” he demanded aloud. “Why aren’t you all searching for her?” He realized he was shouting. He wanted to howl, to savage them. “Burn you all, what are you waiting for?” The levelness of her reply, as if reporting how much fodder was left for the horses, pushed needles of rage into his head. The more so because she was right.

"We were ambushed by two or three hundred, Lord Perrin, but you know as well as I, from what we have heard there easily could be a dozen or more such bands roaming the countryside. If we pursue in force, we may find a battle that will cost us heavily, against Aiel, without even knowing whether they are the ones who hold your Lady wife. Or even if she still lives. We must know that first, Lord Perrin, or the rest is worse than useless."

If she still lived. He shivered; the cold was inside him, suddenly. In his bones. His heart. She had to be alive. She had to be. Oh, Light, he should have let her come to Abila with him. Annoura's wide-mouthed face was a mask of sympathy framed by thin Taraboner braids. Suddenly he became aware of pain in his hands, cramping on the reins. He forced them to loosen their grip, flexed his fingers inside his gauntlets.

"She's right," Elyas said quietly, moving his gelding closer. "Hold on to yourself. Blunder around with Aiel, and you're asking to die. Maybe take a lot of men with you to a bad end. Dying does no good if it leaves your wife a prisoner." He tried to make his voice lighter, but Perrin could smell the strain. "Anyway, we'll find her, boy. She could well have escaped them, a woman like that. Be trying to make her way back here afoot. Take time, that would, in a dress. The First's scouts will locate traces." Raking fingers through his long beard, Elyas gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "If I can't find more than the Mayeners, I'll eat bark. We'll get her back for you."

Perrin was not fooled. "Yes," he said harshly. Nobody could escape Aiel afoot. "Go now. Hurry." Not fooled at all. The man expected to find Faile's body. She had to be alive, and that meant captive, but better a prisoner than . . .

They could not talk between themselves as they did with wolves, but Elyas hesitated as if he understood Perrin's thoughts. He did not try to deny them, though. His gelding set off southeast at a walk, as quick as the snow would allow, and after a quick glance at Perrin, Aram followed, his face dark. The one-time Tinker did not like Elyas, but he near enough worshipped Faile, if only because she was Perrin's wife.

It would do no good to founder the animals, Perrin told himself, frowning at their retreating backs. He wanted them to run. He wanted to run with them. Fine cracks seemed to be spidering through him. If they returned with the wrong news, he would shatter. To his surprise, the three Warders trotted their mounts through the trees after Elyas and Aram in splashes of snow, plain woolen cloaks streaming behind, then matched speed when they caught up.

He managed to give Masuri and Seonid a grateful nod, and included Edarra and Carelle. Whoever had made the suggestion, there was no doubt who had granted permission. It was a measure of the control the Wise Ones had established that neither sister was trying to take charge. They very likely wanted to, but their gloved hands remained folded on the pommels of their saddles, and neither betrayed impatience by so much as the flicker of an eyelid.

Not everyone was watching the departing men. Annoura alternated between beaming sympathy at him and studying the Wise Ones out of the corner of her eye. Unlike the other two sisters, she had made no promises, but she was almost as circumspect with the Aielwomen as they. Gallenne's one eye was on Berelain, awaiting a sign he should draw the sword he was gripping, while she was intent on Perrin, her face still smooth and unreadable. Grady and Neald had their heads together, casting quick, grim glances in his direction. Balwer sat very still, like a sparrow perched on the saddle, trying to be invisible, listening intently.

Arganda pushed his tall roan gelding past Gallenne's heavy-chested black, ignoring the Mayener's one-eyed glare of outrage. The First Captain's mouth worked angrily behind the shining face-bars of his helmet, but Perrin heard nothing. Faile filled his head. Oh, Light, Faile! His chest felt bound with iron straps. He was near to panic, holding to the precipice with his fingernails.

Desperately he reached out with his mind, frantically searching for wolves. Elyas must have tried this already—Elyas would not have given way to panic at the news—but he had to try himself.

Searching, he found them, Three Toes' pack and Cold Water's, Twilight's and Springhorn's and others. Pain flowed out with his plea for help, but grew greater inside him rather than less. They had heard of Young Bull, and they commiserated over the loss of his she, but they kept clear of the two-legs, who frightened away all the game and were death for any wolf caught alone. There were so many packs of two-legs about, afoot and riding the hard-footed four-legs, that they could not say whether any they knew of were the one he sought. Two-legs were two-legs, to them, indistinguishable except for those who could channel, and the few who could speak with them. Mourn, they told him, and move on, and meet her again in the wolf dream.

One by one, the images that his mind turned to words faded away, until only one lingered. Mourn, and meet her again in the wolf dream. Then that also was gone.

"Are you listening?" Arganda demanded roughly. He was not a smooth-faced noble, and despite his silks and the gold-work atop the silver of his breastplate he looked like what he was, a graying soldier who had first hefted a lance as a boy and probably carried two dozen scars. His dark eyes were almost as fevered as those of Masema's men. He smelled of rage, and fear. "Those savages took Queen Alliandre, as well!"

"We will find your Queen when we find my wife," Perrin said, his voice as cold and hard as the edge of his axe. She had to be alive. "Suppose you tell me what all this is about, you drawn up ready to charge, it looks like. And facing my people, at that." He had other responsibilities, too. Acknowledging that was bitter as gall. Nothing else counted alongside Faile. Nothing! But the Two Rivers men *were* his people.

Arganda dashed his mount close and seized Perrin's sleeve in a gauntleted fist. "You listen to me! The First Lady Berelain says it was Aiel took Queen Alliandre, and there are Aiel sheltering behind those archers of yours. I have men who will be happy enough to put them to the question." His heated gaze swung back to Edarra and Carelle for a moment. Perhaps he was thinking that they were Aiel with no archers barring his path.

"The First Captain is . . . overwrought," Berelain murmured, laying a hand on Perrin's other arm. "I have explained to him that none of the Aiel here were involved. I'm sure that I can convince him—"

He shook her off, ripped his arm away from the Ghealdanin. "Alliandre swore fealty to me, Arganda. You swore fealty to her, and that makes me your lord. I said I'll find Alliandre when I find Faile." The edge of an axe. She *was* alive. "You question no one, *touch* no one, unless I say. What you will do is take your men back to your camp, *now,* and be ready to ride when I give the order. If you're not ready when I call, you will be left behind."

Arganda stared at him, breathing hard. His eyes strayed again, this time toward Grady and Neald, then jerked back to Perrin's face. "As you command, my Lord," he said stiffly. Wheeling his roan, he shouted orders to his officers and was already galloping away before they began issuing their own. The Ghealdanin began to peel away by columns, riding after their First Captain. Toward their camp, though whether Arganda intended to remain there was anyone's guess. And whether it might not be for the worse if he did.

"You handled that very well, Perrin," Berelain said. "A difficult situation, and a painful time for you." Not formal at all, now. Just a woman full of pity, her smile compassionate. Oh, she had a thousand guises, Berelain did.

She stretched out a red-gloved hand, and he backed Stayer away before she could touch him. "Give it over, burn you!" he snarled. "My wife has been taken! I've no patience for your childish games!"

She jerked as if he had struck her. Color bloomed in her cheeks, and she changed again, becoming supple and willowy in her saddle. "Not childish, Perrin," she murmured, her voice rich and amused. "Two women contesting over you, and you the prize? I would think you'd be flattered. Attend me, Lord Captain Gallenne. I suppose we, too, should be ready to ride at command."

The one-eyed man rode back toward the Winged Guards at her side, as close to a canter as the snow made possible. He was leaning toward her as if hearing instructions. Annoura paused where she was, gathering the reins of her brown mare. Her mouth was a razored line beneath her beak of a nose. "Sometimes you are a very large fool, Perrin Aybara. Quite often, in fact."

He did not know what she was talking about, and did not care. At times she seemed resigned to Berelain chasing after a married man, and other times amused by it, even helping out by arranging for Berelain to be alone with him. Right then, First and Aes Sedai both disgusted him. Heeling Stayer in the flanks, he trotted away from her without a word.

The men on the hilltop opened enough to let him through, muttering to one another and watching the lancers below ride toward their respective camps, parted again to let the Wise Ones and Aes Sedai and Asha'man pass. They did not break up and crowd around him, as he had expected, for which he was grateful. The whole hilltop smelled of wariness. Most of it did.

The snow atop the hill had been trampled until some patches were clear except for frozen clumps and others were sheets of ice. The four Wise Ones who had remained behind when he rode to Abila were standing in front of one of the low Aiel tents, tall unruffled women with dark woolen shawls around their shoulders, watching the two sisters dismount with Carelle and Edarra, and seemingly paying no mind to what was going on around them. The *gai'shain* who served them in place of servants were going about their normal tasks quietly, meekly, faces hidden in the deep cowls of their white robes. One fellow was even beating a carpet hung over a rope tied between two trees! The only sign among the Aiel that they might have been on the brink of a fight was Gaul and the Maidens. They had been squatting on their heels, *shoufa* around their heads and black veils hiding all but their eyes, short spears and bull-hide bucklers in hand. As Perrin jumped down from his saddle, they rose.

Dannil Lewin trotted up, chewing worriedly at the thick mustache that made his nose look even bigger than it was. He had his bow in one hand and was sliding an arrow back into the quiver at his belt. “I didn’t know what else to do, Perrin,” he said in a jerky voice. Dannil had been at Dumai’s Wells, and faced Trollocs back home, but this was outside his view of the world. “By the time we found out what happened, those Ghealdanin fellows were already starting this way, so I sent off Jondyn Barran and a couple of others, Hu Marwin and Get Ayliah, told the Cairhienin and your servants to make a circle with the carts and stay inside it—had to just about tie up those folks who’re always following the Lady Faile around; they wanted to go off after her, and not a one of them knows a footprint from an oak tree—then I brought everybody else here. I thought those Ghealdanin might charge us, until the First got there with her men. They must be crazy, thinking any of our Aiel would hurt the Lady Faile.” Even when they Perrined him, Faile nearly always received the honorific from the Two Rivers men.

“You did right, Dannil,” Perrin said, tossing him Stayer’s reins. Hu and Get were good woodsmen, and Jondyn Barran could follow yesterday’s wind. Gaul and the Maidens were starting to leave, in single file. They were still veiled. “Tell off one man in three to stay here,” Perrin told Dannil hurriedly; just because he had faced Arganda down was no reason to believe the man had changed his mind, “and send the rest back to pack up. I want to ride as soon as there’s word.”

Without waiting on a reply, he hurried to put himself in front of Gaul and stopped the taller man with a hand to his chest. For some reason, Gaul’s green eyes tightened above his veil. Sulin and the rest of the Maidens strung out behind him went up on the balls of their feet.

"Find her for me, Gaul," Perrin said. "All of you, please find who took her. If anyone can track Aiel, it's you."

The tightness in Gaul's eyes vanished as suddenly as it had come, and the Maidens relaxed, too. As much as Aiel ever could be said to relax. It was very strange. They could not think he blamed them in any way.

"We all wake from the dream one day," Gaul said gently, "but if she still dreams, we will find her. But if Aiel took her, we must go. They will move quickly. Even in . . . this." He put considerable disgust in the word, kicking at a clod of snow.

Perrin nodded and hastily stepped aside, letting the Aiel set out at a trot. He doubted they could maintain that for very long, but he was sure they would keep the pace longer than anyone else could have. As the Maidens passed him, each quickly pressed fingers to the veil over her lips, then touched his shoulder. Sulin, right behind Gaul, gave him a nod, but none said a word. Faile would have known what they meant with their finger kissing.

There was something else odd about their departure, he realized as the last Maiden went by. They were letting Gaul lead. Normally, any of them would have stuck a spear in him before allowing that. Why . . . ? Maybe . . . Chiad and Bain would have been with Faile. Gaul did not care one way or the other about Bain, but Chiad was a different matter. The Maidens certainly had not been encouraging Gaul's hope that Chiad would give up the spear to marry him—anything but!—yet maybe that was it.

Perrin grunted in disgust at himself. Chiad and Bain, and who else? Even blind with fear for Faile, he should have asked that much. If he was going to get her back, he needed to strangle fear and *see.* But it was like trying to strangle a tree.

The flat hilltop swarmed now. Someone had already led Stayer away, and Two Rivers men were leaving the ring around the crest, hurrying toward their camp in a scattered stream, shouting to one another about what they would have done had the lancers charged. Occasionally a man raised his voice asking about Faile, did anyone know if the Lady was safe, were they going to look for her, but others always shushed him hurriedly with worried glances at Perrin. The *gai'shain* went about their tasks placidly in the middle of all the rush. Unless commanded to stop, they would have done the same if a battle had swirled around them, not raising a hand to help or hinder. The Wise Ones had all gone into one of the tents with Seonid and Masuri, and the flaps were not only down, but tied. They did not want to be disturbed. They would be discussing Masema, no doubt. Possibly discussing how to kill the man without him or Rand learning they had done it.

He smacked a fist into his palm in irritation. He had actually forgotten Masema until now. The man was supposed to be following before nightfall, with that honor guard of a hundred men. With luck, the Mayener scouts would be back by then, and Elyas and the others soon after.

“My Lord Perrin?” Grady said behind him, and he turned. The two Asha’man stood in front of their horses, fiddling uncertainly with their reins. Grady drew breath and went on with Neald nodding agreement. “The pair of us could cover a lot of ground, Traveling. And if we find the lot who kidnapped her, well, I doubt even a few hundred Aiel could stop two Asha’man from taking her back.”

Perrin opened his mouth to tell them to start immediately, then closed it again. Grady had been a farmer, true, but never a hunter or woodsman. Neald thought any place without a stone wall was a village. They might know a footprint from an oak tree, yet if they did find tracks, very likely neither would be able to say which direction they were headed. Of course, he could go with them. He was not as good as Jondyn, but . . . He could go, and leave Dannil to deal with Arganda. And with Masema. Not to mention the Wise Ones’ schemes.

“Go get yourselves packed,” he said quietly. Where was Balwer? Nowhere in sight. Not very likely that *he* had gone haring off to find Faile. “You may be needed here.”

Grady blinked in surprise, and Neald’s mouth dropped open.

Perrin gave them no chance to argue. He strode over to the low tent with the tied flaps. There was no way to undo the ties from the outside. When Wise Ones wanted to remain undisturbed, they wanted to remain undisturbed, by clan chiefs or anyone else. Including a wetlander lumbered with the title of Lord of the Two Rivers. He drew his belt knife, and bent to slice the ties, but before he could slide the blade through the tight crack between the entry flaps, they jerked as if someone was unfastening them from inside. He straightened and waited.

The tentflaps opened, and Nevarin slipped out. Her shawl was tied around her waist, but except for the mist of her breath, she gave no evidence of the icy air. Her green eyes took in the knife in his hand, and she planted her fists on her hips in a rattle of bracelets. She was near enough bone-thin, with long sandy yellow hair held back by a dark folded kerchief, and more than a hand taller than Nynaeve, but that was who she always made him think of. She stood blocking the entrance to the tent.

“You are impetuous, Perrin Aybara.” Her light voice was level, but he had the impression that she was considering boxing his ears. Very much like Nynaeve. “Though that might be understandable, in the circumstances. What do you want?”

“How . . . ?” He had to stop to swallow. “How will they treat her?”

“I cannot say, Perrin Aybara.” There was no sympathy on her face, no expression at all. Aiel could give Aes Sedai lessons in that. “Taking wetlanders captive is against custom, except for Treekillers, though that has changed. So is killing without need. But many have refused to accept the truths the *Car’a’carn* revealed. Some were taken by the Bleakness and threw down their spears, yet they may have taken them up again. Others simply left, to live as they believe we are meant to. I cannot say what customs might be kept or abandoned by those who have abandoned clan and sept.” The only emotion she displayed was a hint of disgust at the end, for those who abandoned clan and sept.

“Light, woman, you must have some idea! Surely you can make a guess—”

“Do not become irrational,” she broke in sharply. “Men often do in such situations, but we have need of you. I think it will do your standing with the other wetlanders no good if we must bind you until you calm down. Go to your tent. If you cannot control your thoughts, drink until you cannot think. And do not bother us when we are in council.” She ducked back into the tent, and the flaps jerked closed and began to twitch as they were tied again.

Perrin considered the closed flaps, running his thumb over the blade of his knife, then shoved it into the sheath. They just might do as Nevarin had threatened if he barged in. And they could not tell him anything he wanted to know. He did not think she would keep secrets at a time like this. Not about Faile, anyway.

The hilltop had grown quieter, with most of the Two Rivers men gone. The remainder, still watchful of the Ghealdanin camp below, stamped their feet against the cold, but no one talked. The scurrying *gai’shain* hardly made a sound. Trees obscured parts of the Ghealdanin and Mayener camps, but Perrin could see carts being loaded in both. He decided to leave men on guard anyway. Arganda could be trying to lull him. A man who smelled like that could be . . . *Irrational,* he finished the thought dryly.

There was nothing left for him to do on the hill, so he set out to walk the half mile to his tent. The tent he shared with Faile. He stumbled as much as walked, laboring when the snow rose around his legs. As much to stop it snapping in the wind as for warmth, he held his cloak tight around him. There was no warmth.

The Two Rivers camp was aswarm with activity when he arrived. The carts still made a big circle, with men and women from Dobraine's estates back in Cairhien loading them, and others readying horses for saddling. In this depth of snow, cartwheels might as well have tried to roll through mud, so they were all lashed to the sides of the carts, now, replaced by pairs of broad wooden sleds. Bundled against the weather till most seemed twice as wide as they really were, the Cairhienin hardly paused to glance at him, but every Two Rivers man who saw him stopped to stare until someone else prodded the fellow to get on with whatever he was about. Perrin was glad none gave words to the sympathy in those stares. He thought he might break down and cry if anyone did.

There seemed to be nothing for him to do here, either. His big tent—his and Faile's—was already down and on a cart, along with its contents. Basel Gill was walking along the carts with a long list in his hands. The stout man had taken to the job of *shambayan,* running Faile's household, Perrin's, like a squirrel to a corn crib. More used to cities than traveling outside their walls, though, he suffered from the cold, and wore not only a cloak but a thick scarf around his neck, a floppy-brimmed felt hat and heavy woolen gloves. For some reason, Gill flinched at the sight of him, and mumbled something about seeing to the carts before hurrying off as fast as he could. Odd.

Perrin did think of one thing then, and finding Dannil, he gave orders to relieve the men on the hill every hour and make sure everyone had a hot meal.

"Take care of the men and horses first," a thin but strong voice said. "But then you must take care of yourself. There's hot soup in the kettle, and bread of a sort, and I've put by some smoked ham. A full belly will make you look less like murder walking."

“Thank you, Lini,” he said. Murder walking? Light, he felt like one of the dead, not a murderer. “I’ll eat in a little while.”

Faile’s chief maid was a frail-appearing woman, with skin like parchment and white hair in a bun on top of her head, but her back was straight and her dark eyes were clear and sharp. Worry creased her forehead now, though, and her hands gripped her cloak too tightly, straining. She would be worried about Faile, certainly, but . . .

“Maighdin was with her,” he said, and did not need her nod. Maighdin was always with Faile, it seemed. A treasure, Faile called her. And Lini seemed to consider the woman her daughter, though sometimes Maighdin did not appear to enjoy that as much as Lini did. “I’ll get them back,” he promised. “All of them.” His voice almost broke on that. “Get on with your work,” he went on roughly, hurriedly. “I’ll eat in a bit. I have to see to . . . to . . .” He strode away without finishing.

There was nothing he had to see to. Nothing he could think of, except Faile. He hardly knew where he was heading until his steps took him outside the circle of carts.

A hundred paces beyond the horselines, a low, stony ridge thrust a black peak through the snow. From there, he would be able to see the tracks left by Elyas and the others. From there, he would see them returning.

His nose told him he was not alone well before he reached the narrow crest of the ridge, told him who was up there. The other man was not listening, because Perrin crunched his way to the top before he sprang up from where he had been crouching on his heels. Tallanvor’s gauntleted hands kneaded his long sword hilt, and he peered at Perrin uncertainly. A tall man who had taken hard knocks in his life, he usually was very sure of himself. Perhaps he expected a tirade for not having been there when Faile was taken, though she had rejected the armsman as a bodyguard, rejected any bodyguard. Beyond Bain and Chiad, at least, who apparently did not count. Or maybe he just thought he would be sent away, back to the carts, so Perrin could be alone. Perrin tried to make his face look less like—what had Lini called it?—murder walking? Tallanvor was in love with Maighdin, and would be wed to her soon if Faile’s suspicions were correct. The man had a right to keep watch.

They stood there on the ridge while twilight fell, and nothing moved in the snowy forest they watched. Darkness came without movement, and without Masema, but Perrin did not even think of Masema. The gibbous moon shone white on the snow, giving nearly as much light as a full moon, it seemed. Until scudding clouds began to hide it, and moonshadows raced across the snow, thicker and thicker. Snow began to fall with a dry rustling. Snow that would bury traces and tracks. Silent in the cold, the two men stood there, watching into the snowfall, waiting, hoping.

* * *

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CHAPTER 3

Customs

From the first hour after being captured, laboring through the snowy woods, Faile worried about freezing. Breezes stirred and died, stirred and died. Few of the scattered trees still carried leaves, and most of those hung dead and brown. The breezes swirled through the forest unhindered, and small as the gusts were, they carried ice. Perrin hardly entered her thoughts, except for a hope that he somehow learned of Masema’s secret dealings. And of the Shaido, of course. Even if that trull Berelain was the only one who could tell him, now. She hoped Berelain had escaped the ambush and told Perrin everything. And then fallen into a hole and broken her neck. But she had far more pressing concerns than her husband.

She had called this weather autumnal, yet people froze to death in a Saldaean autumn, and of her clothes she retained only her dark woolen stockings. One lashed her elbows tight behind her back, while the second had been tied around her neck for a leash. Brave words made scant covering for bare skin. She was too cold for sweat, yet her legs soon ached with the struggle to keep up with her captors. The Shaido column, veiled men and Maidens, slowed when the snow rose toward their knees but immediately resumed a steady trot when it sank toward their ankles, and they did not seem to tire. Horses could not have moved faster over the distance. Shivering, she labored on at the end of her leash, doing her best to gulp air through teeth gritted to stop their chattering.

The Shaido were fewer than she had estimated during the attack, no more than a hundred and fifty she thought, and nearly all carried spears or bows at the ready. Small chance anyone could surprise them. Always alert, they ghosted along in silence except for the faint crunch of the snow under their soft, knee-high boots. The greens and grays and browns of their clothing stood out against the white landscape, though. Green had been added to the *cadin’sor* since crossing the Dragonwall, so Bain and Chiad had told her, to aid concealment in a green land. Why had these people not added white, for the winter? As it was, they could be seen at some distance. She tried to notice everything, remember anything that might prove useful later, when it came time to escape. She hoped her fellow prisoners were doing as much. Perrin would be hunting for her, certainly, but the thought of rescue never entered her calculations. Wait for rescue, and you might wait forever. Besides, they needed to escape as quickly as possible, before their captors joined with the rest of the Shaido. She could not see how, yet, but there must be a way. The one bit of luck was that the main body of Shaido must be days distant. This part of Amadicia was chaos, but thousands of Shaido could not be too near without her having heard of them.

Once, early on, she tried to look back at the women who had been captured with her, but the only result was a stumbling fall into a snowbank. Half-buried in the white powder, she gasped from the icy shock, and gasped again when the great hulking Shaido who held her leash set her back on her feet. As wide as Perrin and a full head taller, Rolan simply hauled her upright by a fistful of her hair, set her moving again with a brisk slap on her bare bottom, and once more took up the long strides that forced her to step quickly. The slap might have been given to make a pony move. Despite her nakedness, there was nothing of a man looking at a woman in Rolan's blue eyes. Part of her was very grateful. Part her was vaguely . . . taken aback. She certainly did not want him gazing at her with lust or even interest, but those bland glances were almost insulting! After that she made sure not to fall, though as the hours passed without a pause in the march, simply staying upright became more and more of an effort.

In the beginning she worried over which bits of her would freeze first, but by the time morning had rolled into afternoon without a pause in the march, she was focused on her feet. Rolan and those ahead of him trampled a sort of path for her, yet enough snowcrust remained for sharp edges, and she began to leave red stains freezing in her footprints. Worse was the cold itself. She had seen frostbite. How long before her toes began to turn black? Staggering, she flexed each foot as she swung it forward, and worked her hands constantly. Fingers and toes were in the worst danger, but any exposed skin was at risk. About her face and the rest of her she could only hope. The flexing hurt, making the cuts on her feet burn, but any feeling was better than none. When sensation went, she would have very little time left. Flex and stride, flex and stride. That filled her thoughts. She kept moving on quivering legs, and kept her hands and feet from freezing. She kept moving.

Abruptly, she stumbled into Rolan and rebounded from his wide chest, panting. Half dazed, or maybe more than half, she had not realized that he had stopped. So had the others ahead, a few looking back, the rest facing outward and warily on guard, weapons up as though expecting attack. That was all she had time to see before Rolan seized a handful of her hair again and bent to lift one of her feet. Light, the man really was treating her like a pony!

Releasing her hair and her foot, he snaked an arm around her legs, and the next moment her vision whirled as she was heaved up onto his shoulder, head-down beside the horn bow cased on his back. Indignation welled up as he casually shifted her about to find the easiest position for carrying, but she tamped it down as fast as it rose. This was no place or time. Her feet were out of the snow; that was what mattered. And she could catch her breath, like this. He could have warned her, though.

With an effort, she arched her neck so she could see her companions, and felt relief to find them all still there. Naked prisoners, true, but she was sure only a corpse would have been left behind. The others who walked were leashed with stockings or strips of cloth cut from their lost garments, and most also had their arms tied behind. Alliandre was no longer trying to bend double in an attempt to shield herself. Other concerns had replaced modesty for the Queen of Ghealdan. Panting and trembling, she might have fallen if the squat Shaido examining her feet had not supported her by her bound elbows. Squat for an Aiel meant he could have passed unremarked most places, except for shoulders nearly as wide as Rolan’s. The dark hair spilling down Alliandre’s back was windblown, her face haggard. Behind her, Maighdin appeared in almost as bad a state, gulping air, red-gold hair in disarray and blue eyes staring, yet she managed to stay erect on her own with a bone-lean Maiden lifting her foot. Somehow, Faile’s maid looked more a queen than Alliandre did, if a very disheveled queen.

In comparison, Bain and Chiad seemed in no worse state than did the Shaido, though Chiad’s cheek was yellowing and swollen from a blow when they were first taken, and the black blood matting Bain’s short fiery hair and spread across her face seemed to have frozen. That was bad; that could scar. The two Maidens were not breathing hard, though, and even raised their own feet for examination. Alone of the prisoners they were unbound—except by custom stronger than chains. They had calmly accepted their fate, to serve a year and a day as *gai'shain.* Bain and Chiad might be of some help in escaping—Faile was not sure how far custom constrained them—but they themselves would not try to get away.

The last prisoners, Lacile and Arrela, attempted to pattern themselves after the Maidens, of course, with indifferent success. A tall Aielman had simply tucked tiny Lacile under his arm to look at her feet, and crimson mortification stained her pale cheeks. Arrela was tall, but the pair of Maidens who had charge of her were taller than Faile herself, and they handled the Tairen woman with impersonal ease. A scowl contorted her dark face at their prodding, and maybe at the rapid handtalk they were exchanging. Faile hoped she would not make trouble, not now. Everyone in *Cha Faile* tried to be like the Aiel, to live as they thought the Aiel did, but Arrela wanted to *be* a Maiden, and she resented the fact that Sulin and the others would not teach her handtalk. She would have been worse if she knew Bain and Chiad had taught Faile a little. Not enough to make out more than every other word the Maidens were saying now, but some. As well Arrela could not understand. They thought the wetlander had soft feet, that she was altogether too pampered and soft, and that surely would have set the woman off.

As it turned out, Faile need not have worried about Arrela. The Tairen stiffened when one of the Maidens hefted her onto a shoulder—pretending to stagger, the burdened woman used her free hand to flicker a message that made the other Maiden bark a laugh behind her veil—but after a glance at Bain and Chiad, already meekly belly down on Aielmen's shoulders, Arrela sullenly let herself hang limp. Lacile squealed when the big man holding her abruptly spun her about to land in the same position, but she quieted after that, though her face was still bright scarlet. There were definite advantages to their emulation of Aiel.

Alliandre and Maighdin, however, the last women Faile would have expected to cause problems, were another matter entirely. When they realized what was happening, the pair of them fought wildly. It was not much of a fight, two naked and exhausted women with their elbows bound tight behind their backs, but they twisted and shouted and kicked at anyone who came within reach, and Maighdin even sank her teeth into the hand of a careless Aielman, hanging on like a boarhound.

“Stop it, you fools!” Faile called to them. “Alliandre! Maighdin! Let them carry you! Obey me!” Neither her maid nor her vassal paid the slightest heed. Maighdin growled like a lion around her mouthful of Aiel. Alliandre was wrestled down, still shouting and flailing with her feet. Faile opened her mouth for another command.

“The *gai’shain* will be quiet,” Rolan grunted, spanking her hard.

She ground her teeth and muttered under her breath. Which earned *another* slap! The man had her knives tucked behind his belt. If she could lay hands on just one . . . ! No. What must be endured, could be endured. She intended to escape, not make useless gestures.

Maighdin’s fight lasted a little longer than Alliandre’s, until a pair of burly men could pry her jaws from the Shaido’s hand. It required a pair. To Faile’s surprise, instead of cuffing Maighdin, the bitten fellow shook blood off his hand and laughed! That did not save her, though. In a trice, Faile’s maid was facedown in the snow alongside the Queen. They were given only a few moments to gasp and writhe in the added cold. Two Shaido, one a Maiden, appeared out of the surrounding trees, shaving the stubs from long switches with their heavy belt knives. A foot planted between each woman’s shoulder blades, a fist on bound elbows to raise fluttering hands out of the way, and red welts began to bloom on white hips.

At first both women continued to fight, twisting about despite the way they were held. Their struggle was even more useless than when they were upright. Little moved above their waists beyond tossing heads and wildly waving hands. Alliandre kept shrilling that they could not do this to her, understandable coming from a queen, if foolish in the circumstances. Plainly they could, and they were. Surprisingly, Maighdin raised her voice in the same piercing denials. Anyone would have thought her royalty instead of a lady’s maid. Faile knew for a fact that Lini had taken a switch to Maighdin without all these histrionics. In any case, denials did no good for either woman. The methodical thrashings continued until they both were kicking and howling wordlessly, and a little longer for good measure. When they were finally hoisted like the other prisoners, they hung weeping, all fight gone out of them.

Faile felt no sympathy. The fools had earned every stripe, in her opinion. Frostbite and cut feet aside, the longer they remained outside without clothes, the more chance that some of them might not survive to escape. The Shaido had to be taking them to some sort of shelter, and

Alliandre and Maighdin had delayed reaching it. Maybe it was little more than a quarter hour's delay, but minutes could be the difference between the living and the dead. On top of which, even Aiel would surely let down their guard a little once they found shelter and made fires. And they could rest, being carried. They could be ready to take their chance when it came.

Carrying their prisoners, the Shaido set out again at that ground-covering pace. If anything, they seemed to move through the forest more quickly than before. The hard leather bow case bumped Faile's side as she swayed, and she began to feel dizzy. Rolan's every long stride sent a jolt through her middle. Surreptitiously, she tried to find some position where she would not be poked and thudded quite so vigorously.

"Be still, or you will fall," Rolan muttered, patting her hip as he might have patted a horse to soothe it.

Raising her head, Faile peered back at Alliandre, scowling. There was not much to be seen of the Queen of Ghealdan, and that crisscrossed by scarlet welts from the tops of her hips almost to the backs of her knees. Come to think of it, a short delay and a few stripes might be a small price to pay for biting a chunk out of this oaf toting her like a sack of grain. Not his hand, though. His throat would be about right.

Bold thoughts, and worse than useless. Foolish. Even being carried, she knew she must fight the cold. In some ways, she began to realize, being carried was worse. Walking, at least she had had the struggle to stay erect and on her feet to keep her awake, but as evening came on and deepened to darkness, the swaying motion on Rolan's shoulder seemed to have a lulling effect. No. It was the cold that was numbing her mind. Making her blood sluggish. She had to fight it, or she would die.

Rhythmically she worked her hands and bound arms, tensed her legs and relaxed them, tensed and relaxed, forcing her muscles to work her blood. She thought of Perrin, solid planning thoughts of what he should do about Masema, and how she could convince him if he balked. She went over the argument they would have when he learned she been using *Cha Faile* as spies, planned how she would meet his anger and turn it. There was an art to guiding a husband's anger in the direction you wanted, and she had learned from an expert, her mother. It would be a splendid argument. And a splendid making-up, after.

Thinking about making up with him made her forget to work her muscles, so she tried to concentrate on the argument, on the planning. Cold dulled her thoughts, though. She began losing the thread, having to shake her head and start over. Rolan's growls at her to be still helped, a voice to focus on, to keep her awake. Even the accompanying slaps on her upturned bottom helped, as much as she hated to admit the fact, each one a shock that jolted her to wakefulness. After a while, she began shifting more, then struggling almost to the point of falling, courting the rude smacks. Anything to stay awake. She could not have said how much time passed, but her twists and wriggles began to weaken, until Rolan no longer growled, much less gave her a slap. Light, she wanted the man to play her like a drum!

Why in the Light would I want a thing like that? she thought dully, and a dim corner of her mind realized the battle was lost. The night seemed darker than it should be. She could not even make out the glow of moonlight on the snow. She could feel herself sliding, though, sliding faster and faster toward a deeper dark. Wailing silently, she sank into a stupor.

Dreams came. She was sitting on Perrin's lap with his arms so tight around her she could barely move, before a great fire roaring in a broad stone fireplace. His curly beard scratched her cheeks as he nipped her ears almost painfully. Suddenly a huge wind howled through the room, snuffing the fire like a candle. And Perrin turned to smoke that vanished in the gale. Alone in bitter darkness, she fought the wind, but it tumbled her end over end until she was so dizzy she could not tell up from down. Alone and endlessly tumbling into icy dark, knowing she would never find him again.

She ran across a frozen land, floundering from snowdrift to snowdrift, falling, scrambling up to run on in panic, gulping air so cold it sliced her throat like shards of glass. Icicles sparkled on stark branches around her, and a frigid wind keened through the leafless forest. Perrin was very angry, and she had to get away. Somehow, she could not recall the specifics of the argument, just that somehow she had pushed her beautiful wolf to real anger, to the point of throwing things. Only, Perrin did not throw things. He was going to turn her over his knee, as he had done once, long ago. Why was she running from that, though? There would still be the making-up. And she would make him pay for the humiliation, of course. Anyway, she had drawn a little blood from him a time or two with a well-aimed bowl or pitcher, not really meaning to, and she knew he would never really hurt her. But she also knew that she had to run, to keep moving, or she would die.

If he catches me, she thought dryly, *at least part of me will be warm.* And she began to laugh at that, until the dead white land spun around her, and she knew that soon she would be dead, too.

The monstrous bonfire loomed over her, a towering pile of thick logs roaring with flame. She was naked. And cold, so cold. No matter how near the fire she edged, her bones felt frozen, her flesh ready to shatter at a blow. She moved closer, closer. The heat of the blaze grew till she flinched at it, but the bitter cold remained trapped inside her skin. Closer. Oh, Light, it was hot, too hot! And still cold within. Closer. She began to scream at the burning, the searing pain, but she was still ice inside. Closer. Closer. She was going to die. She shrieked, but there was only silence, and the cold.

It was daylight, but leaden clouds filled the sky. Snow fell in a steady shower, feathery flakes swirling in the wind through the trees. Not a fierce wind, but it licked with tongues of ice. Ridges of white built on branches until they were tall enough to collapse from their own weight and the wind, sending heavier showers to the ground below. Hunger gnawed her belly with dull teeth. A very tall, bony man with a white woolen cowl sheltering his face forced something into her mouth, the rim of a large clay mug. His eyes were a startling green, like emeralds, and surrounded by puckered scars. He was kneeling on a large brown woolen blanket with her, and another blanket, striped in gray, was draped around her nakedness. The taste of hot tea thick with honey exploded on her tongue, and she seized the man’s sinewy wrist weakly with both hands in case he tried to take the mug away. Her teeth chattered against the mug, but she gulped the steaming syrupy liquid greedily.

“Not too fast; you must not spill any,” the green-eyed man said meekly. Meekness sounded odd from that fierce face, and in a gravelly voice. “They offended your honor. But you are a wetlander, so maybe it does not count with you.”

Slowly it dawned on her that this was no dream. Thought came in a trickle of shadows that melted if she tried to hold them too hard. The white-robed brute was *gai’shain.* Her leash and bonds were gone. He pulled his wrist away from her feeble grip, but only to pour a dark stream from a leather water bag hanging from his shoulder. Steam rose from the mug, and the aroma of tea.

Shivering so hard she almost fell over, she clutched the thick striped blanket around her. Fiery pain was blossoming in her feet. She could not have stood had she tried. Not that she wanted to. The blanket managed to cover everything but her feet so long as she remained in a crouch; standing would have bared her legs and maybe more. It was warmth she thought of, not decency, though there was little of either to be had. Hunger's teeth grew sharp, and she could not stop shaking. She was frozen inside, the tea's heat already just a memory. Her muscles were week-old congealed pudding. She wanted to stare at the filling mug, coveting the contents, but she made herself look for her companions.

They were all there in a line with her, Maighdin and Alliandre and everyone, slumped on their knees atop blankets, shivering inside blankets speckled with snow. In front of each a *gai'shain* knelt with a bulging water bag and a mug or cup, and even Bain and Chiad drank like women half-dead of thirst. Someone had cleaned the blood from Bain's face, but unlike the last time Faile had seen them, the two Maidens were as drawn and unsteady as anyone else. From Alliandre to Lacile, her companions looked—what was Perrin's phrase?—as if they had been dragged through a knothole backward. But everyone was still alive; that was the important thing. Only the living could escape.

Rolan and the other *algai'd'siswai* who had had charge of them made a cluster at the far end of the kneeling line. Five men and three women, the snow on the ground nearly knee-deep on the Maidens. Black veils hanging down their chests, they watched their prisoners and the *gai'shain* impassively. For a moment, she frowned at them, trying to grasp a slippery thought. Yes; of course. Where were the others? Escape would be easier if the rest had gone for some reason. There was something more, another misty question she could not quite catch.

Suddenly what lay beyond the eight Aiel leaped out at her, and question and answer came at the same time. Where had the *gai'shain* come from? A hundred paces or so distant, veiled by the scattered trees and falling snow, a steady stream of people and pack animals, wagons and carts, was flowing by. Not a stream. A flood of Aiel on the move. Instead of a hundred and fifty Shaido, she had the whole clan to contend with. It seemed impossible that so many people could pass within a day or two of Abila without raising some alarm, even with the countryside in anarchy, but the proof was right in front of her eyes. Inside, she felt leaden. Maybe escape would be no harder, but she did not believe it.

"How did they offend me?" she asked jerkily, then clamped her mouth shut to stop chattering. And opened it again as the *gai'shain* raised the mug to her once more. She gulped the precious heat, choking, and forced herself to swallow more slowly. The honey, so thick it would have been cloying any other time, dulled her hunger a little.

"You wetlanders know nothing," the scarred man said dismissively. "*Gai'shain* are not clothed in any way until they can be given proper robes. But they feared you would freeze to death, and all they had to wrap you was their coats. You were shamed, named as weak, if wetlanders have shame. Rolan and many of the others are *Mera'din,* yet Efalin and the rest should know better. Efalin should not have allowed it."

Shamed? Infuriated was more like it. Unwilling to turn her head from the blessed mug, she rolled her eyes toward the hulking giant who had carried her like a sack of grain *and* smacked her unmercifully. Vaguely she seemed to recall welcoming those spanks, but that was impossible. Of course it was impossible! Rolan did not look like a man who had half-trotted through most of a day and a night besides, carrying someone. His white-misted breath came easily. *Mera'din?* She thought that would mean Brotherless in the Old Tongue, which told her nothing, but there had been a note of scorn in the *gai'shain*'s voice. She would have to ask Bain and Chiad, and hope it was not one of those things Aiel would not talk about to wetlanders, not even wetlanders who were close friends. Any piece of knowledge might aid escape.

So they had wrapped their prisoners up against the cold, had they? Well, no one would have been in any danger of freezing except for Rolan and the others. Still, she might owe him a small favor. Very small, considering everything. Perhaps she would only slice off his ears. If she ever got the chance, surrounded by thousands of Shaido. Thousands? The Shaido numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and tens of thousands of those were *algai'd'siswai.* Furious with herself, she fought despair. She would escape; they would all escape, and she would take the man's ears with her!

"I *will* see Rolan's repaid as he deserves," she muttered when the *gai'shain* took the mug away for refilling again. He gave her a narrow-eyed suspicious stare, and she hurried. "As you say, I am a wetlander. Most of us are. We don't follow *ji'e'toh.* By your customs, we shouldn't be made *gai'shain* at all, is that not right?" The man's scarred face did not change, not by so much as the twitch of an eyelid. A dim thought said it was too soon, she did not know the ground yet, but thoughts gelid with cold could not catch her tongue. “What if the Shaido decide to break other customs? They might decide not to let you go when your time is done.”

“The Shaido break many customs,” he told her placidly, “but I do not. I have over half a year yet to wear white. Until then, I will serve as custom demands. If you can talk so much, maybe you have had enough tea?”

Faile clumsily snatched the mug from him. His eyebrows lifted, and she rearranged her draperies one-handed as quickly as she could manage, her cheeks heating. *He* certainly knew he was looking at a woman. Light, she was blundering about like a blind ox! She had to think, to concentrate. Her brain was the only weapon she had. And at the moment, it might as well have been frozen cheese. Drinking deep of the hot sweet tea, she set herself to thinking of some way that being surrounded by thousands of Shaido could be turned to advantage. Nothing came to her, though. Nothing at all.

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CHAPTER 4

Offers

“What have we here?” a woman’s hard voice said. Faile looked up, and stared, hot tea gone from her thoughts for the moment.

Two Aiel women with a much shorter *gai’shain* woman between them came out of the swirling snow, sinking halfway up their calves in the white carpet that covered the ground but still managing powerful strides. The taller women did, anyway; the *gai’shain* stumbled and floundered trying to keep up, and one of the others had a hand on her shoulder to make sure she did. All three were worth a stare. The woman in white kept her head meekly down as much as she could and her hands folded in her wide sleeves as a *gai’shain* was supposed to, but her robes had the sheen of heavy silk, of all things. *Gai’shain* were forbidden jewelry, yet a wide, elaborate belt of gold and firedrops cinched her waist and a matching collar was just visible inside her cowl, nearly covering her neck. Very few besides royalty could afford the like. Strange as the *gai’shain* was, however, it was the others Faile studied. Something told her they were Wise Ones. There was too much authority about them for anything else; these were women used to giving orders and being obeyed. Beyond that, though, their simple presence caught the eye. The woman pushing the *gai’shain* along, a stern blue-eyed eagle with a dark gray shawl wrapped around her head, stood a good span in height, as much as most Aielmen, while the other was at least half a hand taller than Perrin! She was not bulky, though, except in one particular. Sandy yellow hair flowed to her waist, held back from her face by a wide dark kerchief, and her brown shawl lay across her shoulders, open enough to show an incredible amount of bosom thrusting half out of her pale blouse. How did she avoid freezing, exposing so much skin in this weather? All those heavy necklaces of ivory and gold must feel like bands of ice!

As they stopped in front of the kneeling prisoners, the eagle-faced woman frowned disapprovingly at the Shaido who had captured them, and made a curt gesture of dismissal with her free hand. For some reason, she continued to hold on to the *gai'shain*'s shoulder tightly. The three Maidens turned immediately, hurrying toward the passing throng of Shaido. One of the men did, as well, but Rolan and the rest exchanged flat-eyed looks before they followed. Perhaps it meant something, perhaps nothing. Faile suddenly knew how someone in a whirlpool felt, grabbing desperately at straws.

"What we have is more *gai'shain* for Sevanna," the incredibly tall woman said in amused tones. She had a strong face that some might call pretty, but alongside the other Wise One, she seemed soft. "Sevanna will not be satisfied until the entire world is *gai'shain,* Therava. Not that I would object to that myself," she finished with a laugh.

The eagle-eyed Wise One did not laugh. Her face was stone. Her voice was stone. "Sevanna has too many *gai'shain* already, Someryn. We have too many *gai'shain*. They slow us to a crawl when we should race." Her iron stare ran along the kneeling line.

Faile flinched when that gaze touched her, and hurriedly buried her face in the mug. She had never seen Therava before, but in that glance she knew the woman's sort, eager to crush any challenge utterly and capable of seeing challenge in a casual glance. Bad enough when it was only a fool noble at court, or someone encountered on the road, but escape could become more than difficult if this eagle took a personal interest. Just the same, she watched the woman from the corner of her eye. It felt like watching a banded adder, scales glittering in the sun, coiled a foot from her face.

Meek, she thought. *I am kneeling here meekly, with no thought in my head but drinking my tea. No need to look at me twice, you cold-eyed witch.* She hoped the others saw what she did.

Alliandre did not. She tried to rise to her swollen feet, tottered, then sank back to her knees with a wince. Even so, she knelt upright in the falling snow, head high, a red-striped blanket held around her as if it were a fine silk shawl over a splendid gown. Bared legs and windblown hair spoiled the effect somewhat, yet she was still arrogance on a pedestal.

"I am Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, Queen of Ghealdan," she announced loudly, very much queen addressing ruffian vagabonds. "You would be wise to treat me and my companions well, and punish those who have handled us so crudely. You can gain a large ransom for us, larger than you can imagine, and pardon for your crimes. My liege lady and I will require suitable accommodation for ourselves until arrangements can be made, and for her maid. Lesser will do for the others, so long as they are not harmed. I will pay no ransom if you ill-treat the least of my liege lady’s servants.”

Faile could have groaned—did the idiot woman think these people were simple bandits?—only she had no time to.

“Is that true, Galina? Is she a wetlander queen?” Another woman rode out from behind the prisoners, her tall black gelding walking softly in the snow. Faile thought she must be Aiel, but she was unsure. It was difficult to say for certain with the other woman on horseback, but she seemed at least as tall as Faile herself, and few women were except among the Aiel, certainly not with those green eyes in a sun-dark face. And yet . . . That wide, dark skirt looked like the Aiel women’s at a glance, but it was divided for riding and appeared to be silk, as was her creamy blouse, and the hem revealed red boots in her stirrups. The wide folded kerchief that held back her long golden hair was brocaded red silk, and a thumb-thick circlet of gold and firedrops nestled over it. In contrast to the Wise Ones’ worked gold and carved ivory, her ropes of fat pearls and necklaces of emeralds and sapphires and rubies half hid nearly as much bosom as Someryn had on display. The bracelets climbing almost to her elbows differed from those worn by the two Wise Ones in the same way, and Aiel did not wear rings, but gems sparkled on every finger. Instead of a dark shawl, a bright crimson cloak, bordered with golden embroidery and lined with white fur, flared around her in the stiff breeze. She did sit her saddle with the awkwardness of Aiel on horseback, though. “And a queen’s,” her tongue tripped unfamiliarly, “liege lady? That means the Queen swore oath to her? A truly powerful woman, then. Answer me, Galina!”

The silk-clad *gai’shain* hunched her shoulders and favored the mounted woman with a groveling smile. “A truly powerful woman, to have a queen swear fealty, Sevanna,” she said eagerly. “I’ve never heard of the like. Yet I think she is who she claims. I saw Alliandre once, years ago, and the girl I recall could well have grown into this woman. And she was crowned Queen of Ghealdan. What she is doing in Amadicia, I don’t know. The Whitecloaks or Ailron either one would snap her up in an instant if they—”

“Enough, Lina,” Therava said firmly. The hand on Galina’s shoulder tightened visibly. “You know I hate it when you natter.”

The *gai'shain* flinched as if struck, and her mouth snapped shut. Practically writhing, she smiled up at Therava, fawning even more wretchedly than she had for Sevanna. Gold flashed on one of her fingers as she wrung her hands. Fear flashed in her eyes, too. Dark eyes. Definitely not Aiel. Therava seemed oblivious to the woman's truckling; a dog had been called to heel and had obeyed. Her attention was all on Sevanna. Someryn eyed the *gai'shain* sideways, her lips twisting with contempt, but she folded her shawl across her bosom and looked to Sevanna as well. Aiel did not give away much on their faces, yet plainly she disliked Sevanna, and was wary of her at the same time.

Faile's eyes followed the mounted woman, too, over the edge of her mug. In a way, it was like seeing Logain, or Mazrim Taim. Sevanna also had painted her name across the sky in blood and fire. Cairhien would need years to recover from what she had wrought there, and the ripples had spread to Andor and Tear and beyond. Perrin laid the blame to a man called Couladin, but Faile had heard enough of this woman to have a shrewd idea whose hand had been behind it all. And no one disputed that the slaughter at Dumai's Wells was Sevanna's fault. Perrin had almost died there. She had a personal claim on Sevanna for that. She might be willing to let Rolan keep his ears if she could settle that claim.

The flamboyantly garbed woman walked her mount slowly along the line of kneeling women, her steady green eyes almost as cold as Therava's. The sound of snow crunching beneath the black's hooves suddenly seemed loud. "Which of you is the maid?" An odd question. Maighdin hesitated, tight-jawed, before raising a hand from beneath her blanket. Sevanna nodded thoughtfully. "And the . . . liege lady?"

Faile considered holding back, but one way or another, Sevanna would learn what she wanted to know. Reluctantly, she lifted her hand. And shivered from more than the cold. Therava was watching with those cruel eyes, paying close attention. To Sevanna, and to those she marked out.

How anyone could be unaware of that augering gaze, Faile did not understand, yet Sevanna seemed so as she turned her gelding down the back of the line. "They cannot walk on those feet," she said after a moment. "I do not see why they should ride with the children. Heal them, Galina."

Faile gave a start and almost dropped the clay mug. She pushed it toward the *gai'shain*, trying to make out that that was what she had been doing all along. It was empty anyway. The scarred fellow calmly began filling it up again from his water bag of tea. Heal? Surely she could not mean . . .

"Very well," Therava said, giving the *gai'shain* woman a shove that staggered her. "Do it quickly, little Lina. I know you do not want to disappoint me."

Galina caught herself from falling, but only to struggle on toward the prisoners. She sank above her knees in places, her robes dragging in the snow, but she was intent on reaching her goal. Wide-eyed fear and revulsion mingled on her round face with . . . could it be, eagerness? All in all, it was a sickening combination.

Sevanna completed her circuit, coming back to where Faile could see her clearly, and reined in facing the Wise Ones. The woman's full mouth was tight. The icy breeze rippled her cloak, but she seemed unaware of it, or of the snow falling on her head. "I have just received word, Therava." Her voice was calm, though lightning bolts should have been flashing from her eyes. "Tonight we camp with the Jonine."

"A fifth sept," Therava replied flatly. For her, also, wind and snow might as well not have existed. "Five, while seventy-eight remain scattered on the wind. Well that you remember your pledge to reunite the Shaido, Sevanna. We will not wait forever."

Not lightning bolts, now. Sevanna's eyes were green volcanoes erupting. "I always do what I say, Therava. Well that you remember that. And remember that you *advise* me. *I* speak for the clan chief."

Wheeling her gelding, she drummed her heels on the animal's ribs, trying to make him gallop back toward the river of people and wagons, though no horse could do so in that depth of snow. The black managed something faster than a walk, but not much. Their faces expressionless as masks, Therava and Someryn watched horse and rider fade into the falling white veil.

An important exchange, at least to Faile. She knew tension tight as a harpstring when she saw it, and mutual hatred. A weakness that might be exploited, if she could puzzle out how. And it seemed the Shaido were not all here after all. Though more than enough seemed to be, judging by the unending river of them passing by. Galina reached her then, and anything else fled from her mind.

Smoothing her face to a ragged semblance of composure, Galina clutched Faile's head in both hands without speaking a word. Faile might have gasped; she could not be sure. The world seemed to fly by as she jerked halfway to her feet. Hours streaked by, or heartbeats crawled. The white-clad woman stepped back, and Faile collapsed on her face atop the brown blanket to lie panting against the rough wool. Her feet no longer hurt, but Healing always brought its own hunger, and she had eaten nothing since yesterday's breakfast. She could have wolfed down *plates* of anything that even looked like food. She no longer felt tired, but her muscles were water instead of pudding. Pushing herself up with arms that wanted to fold under her weight, she unsteadily gathered the gray-striped blanket again. She felt stunned as much by what she had seen on Galina's hand just before Galina seized her as she did by the Healing. Gratefully she let the scarred man hold the steaming mug to her mouth. She was not sure her fingers could have held on to it.

Galina was wasting no time. A dazed Alliandre was just attempting to rise from flat on her face, her striped covering blanket sliding to the ground unnoticed. Her welts were gone, of course. Maighdin still lay sprawled between her two blankets, loose limbs poking out in every direction and twitching as she feebly tried to collect herself. Chiad, with Galina's hands on her head, lurched all the way to her feet, arms flung wide, breath leaving her in a loud rush. The yellowed swelling on her face faded away even as Faile watched. The Maiden dropped as if poleaxed when Galina moved on to Bain, though she began stirring almost at once.

Faile attended to her tea, and furious thought. The gold on Galina's finger was a Great Serpent ring. She might have thought it a strange present from whoever gave the woman her other jewels if not for the Healing. Galina was Aes Sedai. She must be. But what was an Aes Sedai doing here, in *gai'shain* robes? Not to mention apparently ready to lick Sevanna's wrist and kiss Therava's feet! An Aes Sedai!

Standing over a limp Arrela, the last in the line, Galina panted slightly from the effort of Healing so many so quickly, and gazed at Therava as though hopeful for a word of praise. Without so much as a look at her, the two Wise Ones started toward the river of Shaido, their heads together, talking. After a moment, the Aes Sedai scowled and lifted her robes, hurrying after them as quickly as she could. She glanced back more than once, though. Faile had the feeling that she did so even after the falling snow put a curtain between them.

More *gai'shain* came the other way, a dozen men and women, and only one was Aiel, a lanky redhead with a thin white scar from hairline to jaw. Faile recognized short, pallid Cairhienin, and others she thought might be Amadician or Altaran, taller and darker, and even a bronze-skinned Domani. The Domani and one of the other women wore wide belts of shiny golden chain tight around their waists, and collars of the flat links around their necks. So did one of the men! In any case, jewelry on *gai'shain* seemed unimportant except as an oddity, especially alongside the food and clothing they brought.

Some of the newcomers carried baskets with loaves of bread and yellow cheese and dried beef, and the *gai'shain* already there with their water bags of tea provided drink to wash it down. Faile was not alone in stuffing her mouth with unseemly haste even while she dressed, clumsily and with more mind to speed than modesty. The hooded white robe and two thick under-robes seemed wondrously warm, just to keep the air off, and so were heavy woolen stockings and soft Aiel boots that laced to her knees—even the boots had been bleached white!—but they did not fill up the hole in her middle. The meat was tough as boot leather, the cheese nearly rock hard and the bread not much softer, yet they tasted like a feast! Her mouth watered for every bite.

Chewing a mouthful of cheese, she knotted the last bootlace and stood, smoothing down her robes. As she reached for some more bread, one of the women wearing gold, plump and plain and weary-eyed, took another belt of golden chain out of a cloth sack hanging from her shoulder. Hastily swallowing, Faile stepped back. "I would rather not have that, thank you." She had a sinking feeling she had been wrong to dismiss the adornments as unimportant.

"What you want does not matter," the plump woman replied tiredly. Her accent was Amadician, and cultured. "You serve the Lady Sevanna, now. You will wear what you are given and do as you are told, or you will be punished until you see the error of your ways."

A few paces away, Maighdin was fending off the Domani, resisting being fitted with a collar. Alliandre was backing away from the man who wore golden chains, her hands raised and a sickly expression on her face. He held out one of the belts toward her. Thankfully, they were both looking to Faile, though. Perhaps that switching in the forest had done some good.

Exhaling heavily, Faile nodded to them, then allowed the plump *gai'shain* to fasten the wide belt around her. With her example, the other two let their hands fall. It seemed one blow too many for Alliandre, who stood staring at nothing as she was belted and collared. Maighdin did her best to glare a hole through the slim Domani. Faile tried smiling encouragement, but smiling was difficult. To her, the collar's catch snapping shut sounded like a prison door being locked. Belt and collar could be removed as easily as they had been put on, but *gai'shain* serving "the Lady Sevanna" surely would be watched very closely. Disaster was piling on disaster. Things had to get better from here on. They had to.

Soon, Faile found herself tramping though the snow on wobbly legs with a stumbling, dull-eyed Alliandre and a scowling Maighdin, surrounded by *gai'shain* leading pack animals, carrying large covered baskets on their backs, dragging loaded barrows with the wheels lashed to wooden sleds. The carts and wagons had sleds or broad runners, too, with the wheels tied on top of the snow-shrouded cargo. Snow might be unfamiliar to the Shaido, but they had learned something of traveling in it. Neither Faile nor the other two bore any burdens, though the plump Amadician woman made clear that they would be expected to carry or haul tomorrow and from then on. However many Shaido were in the column, it seemed a great city on the move, if not a nation. Children up to twelve or thirteen rode on the carts and wagons, but everyone else walked. All of the men wore the *cadin'sor,* but most women wore skirts and blouses and shawls like the Wise Ones, and most of the men carried only a single spear or no weapon at all and looked softer than the others. Soft meaning that there were stones softer than granite.

By the time the Amadician left, without giving her name or saying much more than obey or be punished, Faile realized that she had lost sight of Bain and the rest somewhere in the falling snow. No one tried to make her keep a particular place, so she tramped wearily back and forth across the column, accompanied by Alliandre and Maighdin. Keeping her hands folded together in her sleeves made walking difficult, especially wading through snow, but it did keep them warm. Warmer than the alternative, at least. The wind made sure they kept their hoods well up. Despite the identifying golden belts, neither *gai'shain* nor Shaido looked at them twice. Despite crossing the column a dozen times or more, however, the search proved fruitless. There were people in white robes everywhere, more than without, and any of those deep cowls could have hidden her other companions.

“We will have to find them tonight,” Maighdin said finally. She actually managed to stalk through the deep snow, if in an ungainly fashion. Her blue eyes were fierce inside the cavern of her hood, and she gripped the broad golden chain around her neck with one hand as if wanting to rip it off. “As it is, we’re taking ten steps to one for everyone else. Twenty for one. It will do us little good to arrive at tonight’s camp too exhausted to move.”

On Faile’s other side, Alliandre roused from her numbness enough to raise an eyebrow at the decisiveness in Maighdin’s voice. Faile merely looked at her maid, but that was enough to set Maighdin blushing and stammering. What had gotten into the woman? Still, it might not be what she expected from a serving woman, but she could not fault Maighdin’s spirit in a companion for escape. A pity the woman could not channel more. Faile had had great hopes of that once, until she learned that Maighdin possessed so little ability it was useless.

“Tonight it must be, Maighdin,” she agreed. Or however many nights it took. She did not mention that. Hurriedly she surveyed the people nearest them to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. The Shaido, whether in *cadin’sor* or not, moved through the falling snow purposefully, pressing forward toward an unseen goal. The *gai’shain*—the other *gai’shain*—moved with a different purpose. Obey or be punished. “The way they ignore us,” she went on, “it should be possible to just fall by the wayside, so long as you don’t try under a Shaido’s nose. If either of you finds a chance, take it. These robes will help you hide in the snow, and once you find a village, the gold they’ve so graciously given us will see you back to my husband. He will be following.” Not too quickly, she hoped. Not too closely, at least. The Shaido had an army here. A small army, perhaps, compared to some, but larger than Perrin’s.

Alliandre’s face hardened in determination. “I will not leave without you,” she said softly. Softly, yet in firm tones. “I will not take my oath of fealty lightly, my Lady. I will escape with you, or not at all!”

“She speaks for both of us,” Maighdin said. “I may be only a simple maid,” she wrung the word with scorn, “but I won’t leave anyone behind to these . . . these bandits!” Her voice was not simply firm; it brooked no opposition. Really, after this, Lini would have to have a very long talk with her before she was fit to hold her position!

Faile opened her mouth to argue—no, to command; Alliandre was her sworn woman, and Maighdin her maid, however fire-brained captivity had made her! They *would* follow her orders!—but she let the words die on her tongue.

Dark shapes approaching through the tide of Shaido and the falling snow resolved into a cluster of Aiel-women with their shawls framing their faces. Therava led them. A murmured word from her, and the others slowed to keep pace behind while Therava joined Faile and her companions. That was to say, she walked alongside them. Her fierce eyes seemed to chill even Maighdin's enthusiasm, not that she gave them more than a glance. To her, they were not worth looking at.

"You are thinking of escape," she began. No one else opened her mouth, but the Wise One added, "Do not try denying it!" in a scornful voice.

"We will try to serve as we should, Wise One," Faile said carefully. She kept her head down in her cowl and made sure not to meet the taller woman's eyes.

"You know something of our ways." Therava sounded surprised, but it vanished quickly. "Good. But you take me for a fool if you think I believe you will serve meekly. I see spirit in the three of you, for wetlanders. Some never try to escape, but only the dead succeed. The living are always brought back. Always."

"I will heed your words, Wise One," Faile said humbly. Always? Well, there had to be a first time. "We all will."

"Oh, *very* good," Therava murmured. "You might even convince someone as blind as Sevanna. Know this, however, *gai'shain.* Wetlanders are not as others who wear white. Rather than being released at the end of a year and a day, you will serve until you are too bent and withered to work. I am your only hope of avoiding that fate."

Faile stumbled in the snow, and if Alliandre and Maighdin had not caught her windmilling arms, she would have fallen. Therava gestured impatiently for them to keep moving. Faile felt sick. *Therava* would help them escape? Chiad and Bain claimed the Aiel knew nothing of the Game of Houses and scorned wetlanders for playing it, but Faile recognized the currents swirling around her now. Currents that would pull all of them under if she misstepped.

“I do not understand, Wise One.” She wished her voice did not sound so hoarse, suddenly.

Perhaps that very hoarseness convinced Therava, though. People like her believed in fear as a motivation before any other. At any rate, she smiled. It was not a warm smile, just a curving of thin lips, and the only emotion it conveyed was satisfaction. “All three of you will watch and listen while you serve Sevanna. Each day a Wise One will question you, and you will repeat every word Sevanna said, and who she spoke to. If she talks in her sleep, you will repeat what she mumbles. Please me, and I will see that you are left behind.”

Faile wanted no part of this, but refusal was out of the question. If she refused, none of them would survive the night. She was certain of that. Therava would take no chances. They might not even survive until nightfall; this snow would hide three white-clad corpses quickly, and she very much doubted that anyone within sight would so much as protest if Therava decided to slit a few throats then and there. Everyone was focused on moving forward through the snow in any case. They might not even see.

“If she learns of it. . . .” Faile swallowed. The woman was asking them to walk out on a crumbling cliff. No, she was ordering them to. Did the Aiel kill spies? She had never thought to ask Chiad or Bain that. “Will you protect us, Wise One?”

The hard-faced woman caught Faile’s chin with steely fingers, pulling her to a halt, pulling her up on her toes. Therava’s eyes caught hers just as tightly. Faile’s mouth went dry. That stare promised pain. “If she learns of it, *gai’shain,* I will trice you up for cooking myself. So make sure she does not. Tonight you will serve in her tents. You and a hundred others, so you will not have many labors to distract you from what is important.”

A moment’s careful study of the three of them, and Therava gave a satisfied nod. She saw three soft wetlanders, too weak to do anything but obey. Without another word she released Faile and turned away, and in moments she and the other Wise Ones were swallowed by the snow.

For a time, the three women struggled on in silence. Faile did not bring up anyone escaping alone, much less give orders. She was certain that if she did, the others would balk again. Aside from anything else, complying now would make it seem Therava had changed their minds, that fear of her had. Faile knew enough of the other two women to be sure they would die before admitting that the woman frightened them. Therava certainly frightened her. *And I'd swallow my tongue before admitting it aloud,* she thought wryly.

"I wonder what she meant by . . . cooking," Alliandre said finally. "Whitecloak Questioners sometimes turn prisoners over a fire on a spit, I've heard." Maighdin wrapped her arms around herself, shuddering, and Alliandre freed a hand from her sleeves long enough to pat the other woman's shoulder. "Do not worry. If Sevanna has a hundred servants, we may never get close enough to hear anything. And we can choose what we report, so it cannot be traced back to us."

Maighdin laughed bitterly inside her white hood. "You think we still have small choices. We have none. You need to learn about having no choices. That woman didn't pick us out because we have *spirit*." She almost spat the word. "I'll wager every one of Sevanna's *other* servants has had that lecture from Therava, too. If we miss a word we should have heard, you can be sure she'll know of it."

"You may be right," Alliandre allowed after a moment. "But you will not speak to me again in that fashion, Maighdin. Our circumstances are trying, to say the least, but you *will* remember who I am."

"Until we escape," Maighdin replied, "you are Sevanna's servant. If you don't think of yourself as a servant every minute, then you might as well climb onto that spit. And leave room for the rest of us, because you will put us on it, as well."

Alliandre's cowl hid her face, but her back grew stiffer with every word. She was intelligent, and knew how to do what she must, but she had a queen's temper when she did not control it.

Faile spoke before she could erupt. "Until we manage to get away, we are *all* servants," she said firmly. Light, the last thing she needed was the pair of them squabbling. "But you will apologize, Maighdin. Now!" Head averted, her serving woman mumbled something that might have been an apology. She let it pass for one, in any case. "As for you, Alliandre, I expect you to be a *good* servant." Alliandre made a noise, a half-protest, that Faile ignored. "If we are to have any chance of escape, we must do as we are told, work hard, and attract as little attention as possible." As if they had not already attracted what seemed all the attention in the world. "And we will tell Therava every time Sevanna sneezes. I don't know what Sevanna will do if she finds out, but I think we all have a good idea of what Therava will do if we displease her."

That was enough to settle them all back into muteness. They did all have a good idea of what Therava would do, and killing might not be the worst of it.

The snow faded away to a few scattered flakes by midday. Dark roiling clouds still hid the sun, but Faile decided it must be near enough midday, because they were fed. No one stopped moving, but hundreds of *gai'shain* made their way through the column with baskets and scrips full of bread and dried beef, and water bags that contained water this time, cold enough to make her teeth ache. Strangely, she felt no more hungry than hours of walking through snow would account for. Perrin had been Healed once, she knew, and he had been ravenous for two days. Perhaps it was because her injuries had been so much less than his. She noticed that Alliandre and Maighdin ate no more than she.

Healing made her think of Galina, all the same questions that boiled down to an incredulous *why*? Why would an Aes Sedai—she *must* be Aes Sedai—why would she toady for Sevanna and Therava? For anyone? An Aes Sedai might help them escape. Or she might not. She might betray them, if it suited her purposes. Aes Sedai did what they did, and you had no alternative but to accept that unless you were Rand al'Thor. But he was *ta'veren,* and the Dragon Reborn on top of it; she was a woman with very few resources at the moment, and a considerable danger hanging over her head. Not to mention the heads of those she was responsible for. Any help would be welcome, from anyone. The brisk breeze failed while she prodded at Galina from every angle she could think of, and the snow came again, growing heavier, until she could not see ten paces. She could not decide whether to trust the woman.

Abruptly she became aware of another white-robed woman watching her, almost hidden by the snow. Not enough snow to mask that wide, jeweled belt, though. Faile touched her companions on the arm and nodded toward Galina.

When Galina saw she had been seen, she came to trudge along between Faile and Alliandre. She still did not move with any grace in the snow, but she seemed more used to walking in it than they. There was nothing of fawning about her, now. Her round face was hard within her hood, her eyes sharp. But she did keep turning her head, darting wary glances to see who else was nearby. She looked like a housecat pretending to be a leopard. “You know who I am?” she demanded, but in a voice that would have been inaudible ten feet off. “What I am?”

“You seem to be Aes Sedai,” Faile said carefully. “On the other hand, you have a very peculiar place here for an Aes Sedai.” Neither Alliandre nor Maighdin gave the slightest start of surprise. Plainly they had already seen the Great Serpent ring that Galina was thumbing nervously.

Color bloomed in Galina’s cheeks, and she tried to make it out as anger. “What I do here is of great importance to the Tower, child,” she said coldly. Her expression said she had reasons they could not begin to comprehend. Her eyes darted, trying to pierce the falling snow. “I must not fail. That is all you need to know.”

“We need to know whether we can trust you,” Alliandre said calmly. “You must have trained in the Tower or you would not know Healing, but women earn the ring without earning the shawl, and I cannot believe you are Aes Sedai.” It seemed Faile had not been the only one puzzling over the woman.

Galina’s plump mouth hardened, and she clenched a fist at Alliandre, to threaten or show her ring, or both. “You think they will treat you differently because you wear a crown? Because you used to wear one?” There was no doubt of her anger, now. She forgot to keep lookout for listeners, and her voice was acid. Spittle flew with the force of her tirade. “You will bring Sevanna wine and wash her back just like the rest. Her servants are all nobles, or rich merchants, or men and women who know how to serve nobles. Every day she has five of them strapped, to encourage the rest, so they all carry tales to her hoping to curry favor. The first time you try to escape, they will switch the soles of your feet until you cannot walk, and tie you twisted up like a blacksmith’s puzzle to carry on a cart until you can. The second time will be worse, and the third worse again. There is a fellow here who used to be a Whitecloak. He tried to escape nine times. A hard man, but the last time they brought him back, he was begging and crying before they even began stripping him for punishment.”

Alliandre did not take the harangue well. She puffed up indignantly, and Maighdin growled, “Was that what happened to you? Whether Aes Sedai or Accepted, you are a disgrace to the Tower!”

“Be silent when your betters speak, wilder!” Galina snapped.

Light, if this went any further, they would be screaming at one another next. “If you mean to help us escape, then say so,” Faile told the silk-clad

Aes Sedai. She did not really doubt that about the woman. Just everything else. "If not, what do you want with us?"

Ahead of them a wagon loomed out of the snow, leaning where one of the sleds had come loose. Directed by a Shaido with the arms and shoulders of a blacksmith, *gai'shain* were rigging a lever to hoist the wagon enough for the sled to be lashed back in place. Faile and the others kept silent as they passed.

"Is this really your liege lady, Alliandre?" Galina demanded once they were out of earshot of the men around the wagon. Her face was still flushed with anger, her tone slicing. "Who is she that you would swear to her?"

"You can ask me," Faile said coldly. Burn Aes Sedai and their bloody secrecy! Sometimes she thought an Aes Sedai would not tell you the sky was blue unless she saw advantage in it. "I am the Lady Faile t'Aybara, and that's as much as *you* need to know. Do you mean to help us?"

Galina stumbled to one knee, peering at Faile so hard that she began to wonder whether she had made a mistake. A moment later, she knew she had.

Regaining her feet, the Aes Sedai smiled unpleasantly. She no longer seemed angry. In fact, she looked as pleased as Therava had, and worse, in much the same way. "t'Aybara," she mused. "You are Saldaean. There is a young man, Perrin Aybara. Your husband? Yes, I see I've hit the target. That would explain Alliandre's oath, certainly. Sevanna has grandiose plans for a man whose name is linked to your husband. Rand al'Thor. If she knew she had you in her hands . . . Oh, never fear she will learn from me." Her gaze hardened, and suddenly she seemed a leopard in truth. A starving leopard. "Not if you all do as I tell you. I will even help you get away."

"What do you want of us?" Faile said, more insistently than she felt. Light, she had been angry at Alliandre for drawing attention to them by naming herself, and now she had done the same. Or worse. *And I thought I was concealing myself by hiding my father's name,* she thought bitterly.

"Nothing too trying," Galina replied. "You marked Therava, of course? Of course, you did. Everyone notices Therava. She keeps something in her tent, a smooth white rod about a foot long. It is in a red chest with brass banding that is never locked. Bring it to me, and I will take you with me when I go."

"A small thing to do, it seems," Alliandre said doubtfully. "But if so, why do you not take it yourself?"

“Because I have you to fetch it for me!” Realizing she had shouted, Galina huddled in on herself, and her cowl swung as she searched for eavesdroppers among the snow-veiled throng. No one seemed to be so much as glancing their way, but her voice dropped to a feral hiss. “If you do not, I will leave you here until you are gray and wrinkled. And Sevanna will hear of Perrin Aybara.”

“It may take time,” Faile said desperately. “We won’t be free to just sneak into Therava’s tent whenever we want.” Light, the last thing in the world she wanted was to go anywhere near Therava’s tent. But Galina had said she would help them. Vile she might be, but Aes Sedai could not lie.

“You have all the time you need,” Galina replied. “The rest of your life, Lady Faile t’Aybara, if you are not careful. Do not fail me.” She gave Faile a last hard stare, then turned to labor away into the snow, holding her arms as if trying to hide her jeweled belt behind her wide sleeves.

Faile struggled onward in silence. Neither of her companions had anything to say, either. There did not seem to be anything to say. Alliandre appeared sunk in thought, hands in her sleeves, peering straight ahead as if seeing something beyond the blizzard. Maighdin had gone back to gripping her golden collar in a tight fist. They were caught in three snares, not one, and any of the three might kill. Rescue suddenly seemed very attractive. Somehow, though, Faile intended to find her way out of this trap. Pulling her hand away from her own collar, she fought through the snowstorm, planning.

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CHAPTER 5

Flags

He ran across the snow-covered plain, nose into the wind, hunting for a scent, for that one precious scent. The falling snow no longer melted on his chilled fur, but cold could not deter him. The pads of his paws were numb, yet his burning legs worked furiously, carrying him on, faster and faster, till the land blurred in his eyes. He had to find her.

Suddenly a great grizzled gray wolf, ragged-eared and scarred from many fights, settled down out of the sky to race the sun beside him. Another great gray wolf, but not so large as himself. His teeth would tear the throats of those who had taken her. His jaws would crush their bones!

Your she *is not here, Hopper sent to him, but you are here too strongly, and too long from your body. You must go back, Young Bull, or you will die.*

I must find her. Even his thoughts seemed to pant. He did not think of himself as Perrin Aybara. He was Young Bull. Once, he had found the falcon here, and he could again. He had to find her. Beside that need, death was nothing.

In a flash of gray the other wolf lunged against his side, and though Young Bull was the larger, he was tired, and he fell heavily. Scrambling to his feet in the snow, he snarled and launched himself at Hopper's throat. Nothing *mattered more than the falcon.*

The scarred wolf flew into the air like a bird, and Young Bull went sprawling. Hopper lighted on the snow behind him.

Hear me, cub! Hopper thought at him fiercely. Your mind is twisted with fear! She is not here, and you will die if you remain longer. Find her in the waking world. You can only find her there. Go back, and find her!

Perrin's eyes snapped open. He was bone tired and his middle felt hollow, but hunger was a shadow beside the hollowness in his chest. He was all hollow, and distanced even from himself, as if he were another person watching Perrin Aybara suffer. Above him, a blue-and-gold-striped tent roof rippled in the wind. The interior of the tent was dim and shadowed, but sunlight made the bright canvas glow softly. And yesterday had not been a nightmare any more than Hopper was. Light, he had tried to kill Hopper. In the wolf dream, death was . . . final. The air was warm, but he shivered. He was lying on a feather mattress, in a large bed with heavy cornerposts thickly carved and gilded. Through the scent of charcoal burning in the braziers he smelled musky perfume, and the woman wearing it. No one else was present.

Without raising his head from the pillow, he said, “Have they found her yet, Berelain?” His head felt too heavy to lift.

One of her camp chairs squeaked faintly as she shifted. He had been here before often, with Faile, to discuss plans. The tent was big enough to house a family, and Berelain’s elaborate furnishings would not have looked out of place in a palace, all intricate carving and gilt, though everything, tables and chairs and the bed itself, was held together with pegs. They could be disassembled for storage on a cart, but the pegs did not make for true sturdiness.

Under the perfume, Berelain smelled of surprise that he knew she was there, yet her voice was composed. “No. Your scouts haven’t returned yet, and mine . . . When they didn’t return by nightfall, I sent a full company. They found my men dead in an ambush, killed before they had gone more than five or six miles. I ordered Lord Gallenne to keep a tight watch around the camps. Arganda has a strong guard mounted, too, but he sent patrols out. Against my advice. The man’s a fool. He thinks no one can find Alliandre but him. I am not sure he believes anyone else is really trying. Certainly not the Aiel.”

Perrin’s hands tightened on the soft wool blankets covering him. Gaul would not be caught by surprise, or Jondyn, not even by Aiel. They were still hunting, and that meant Faile was alive. They would have been back long since if they had found her body. He had to believe that. He lifted one of the blue blankets a trifle. Beneath them, he was bare. “Is there an explanation for this?”

Her voice did not change, but caution shimmered in her scent. “You and your armsman might have frozen to death if I hadn’t gone looking for you when Nurelle returned with news of my scouts. No one else had the nerve to disturb you; apparently you snarled like a wolf at everyone who did. When I found you, you were so numb you couldn’t hear anyone speak to you, and the other man was ready to fall on his face. Your woman Lini kept him—all he needed was hot soup and blankets—but I had you carried here. You might have lost some toes at best without Annoura. She . . . She seemed afraid you might die even after she Healed you. You slept like a man already dead. She said you almost felt like someone who had lost his soul, cold no matter how many blankets were piled on you. I felt it, as well, when I touched you."

Too much explanation, and not enough. Anger flared, a distant anger, but he hammered it down. Faile was always jealous when he raised his voice to Berelain. The woman would get no shouts from him. "Grady or Neald could have done whatever was necessary," he said in a flat voice. "Even Seonid and Masuri were closer."

"My own advisor came to mind first. I never thought of the others till I was almost back here. Anyway, does it matter who did the Healing?"

So plausible. And if he asked why the First of Mayene herself was watching over him in a half-dark tent instead of her serving women, or some of her soldiers, or even Annoura, she would have another plausible answer. He did not want to hear it.

"Where are my clothes?" he asked, propping himself up on his elbows. His voice still had no expression.

A single candle on a small table beside Berelain's chair gave the only real light in the tent, but it was more than enough for his eyes, even grainy with tiredness as they were. She was garbed demurely enough, in a dark green riding dress with a high neck that nestled her chin in a thick ruff of lace. Putting demure on Berelain was like putting a sheepskin on a ridgecat. Her face was faintly shadowed, beautiful and untrustworthy. She would do what she promised, but like an Aes Sedai, for her own reasons, and the things she had made no promises about could stab you in the back.

"On the chest over there," she said, gesturing with a graceful hand nearly hidden in pale lace. "I had Rosene and Nana clean them, but you need rest and food more than clothing. And before we get to food, and business, I want you to know that no one hopes Faile is alive more than I." Her expression was so open and honest, he could have believed her had she been anyone else. She even managed to smell honest!

"I need my clothes now." He twisted around to sit up on the side of the bed with the blankets pulled across his legs. The clothes he had been wearing lay neatly folded on a banded travel chest that was carved and gilded within an inch of its life. His fur-lined cloak was draped across one end of the chest, and his axe leaned next to his boots on the brightly flowered carpets layered for a floor. Light, he was tired. He did not know how long he had been in the wolf dream, but awake there was awake, as far as your body was concerned. His stomach rumbled loudly. “And food.”

Berelain made an exasperated sound in her throat and rose, smoothing her skirts, her chin lifted high with disapproval. “Annoura will not be pleased with you when she comes back from talking with the Wise Ones,” she said firmly. “You can’t just ignore Aes Sedai. You are not Rand al’Thor, as they will prove to you sooner or later.”

But she left the tent, letting in a swirl of cold air. In her displeasure, she did not even bother to take a cloak. Through the momentary gap in the entry flaps, he saw that it was still snowing. Not as hard as last night, but white flakes drizzled down steadily. Even Jondyn would have difficulty finding sign after last night. He tried not to think about that.

Four braziers warmed the air in the tent, but ice seeped into his feet as soon as they hit the carpets, and he hurried to his clothes. Tottered to them, really, though not dallying about it. He was so tired he could have lain down on the carpets and gone to sleep again. On top of that, he felt weak as a newborn lamb. Perhaps the wolf dream had something to do with that, too—going there as strongly as he had, abandoning his body—but Healing likely had exacerbated matters. With nothing to eat since yesterday’s breakfast and a night spent standing in the snow, he had had no reserve to draw on. Now his hands fumbled with the simple task of putting on his smallclothes. Jondyn would find her. Or Gaul would. Find her alive. Nothing else in the world mattered. He felt numb.

He had not expected Berelain to return herself, but a gust of cold entered carrying her perfume while he was still drawing on his breeches. Her gaze on his back was like stroking fingers, but he made himself go on as if alone. She would not have the satisfaction of seeing him hurry because she was watching. He did not look at her.

“Rosene is bringing hot food,” she said. “There is only mutton stew, I’m afraid, but I told her enough for three men.” She hesitated, and he heard her slippers shift on the carpets. She sighed softly. “Perrin, I know you are hurting. There are things you might want to say that you can’t to another man. I can’t see you crying on Lini’s shoulder, so I offer mine. We can call a truce until Faile is found.”

“A truce?” he said, carefully bending to tug on a boot. Carefully so he did not fall over. Stout wool stockings and thick leather soles would have his feet warm soon enough. “Why do we need a truce?” She was silent while he donned the other boot and folded the turndowns below his knees, not speaking until he had done up the laces of his shirt and was stuffing it into his breeches.

“Very well, Perrin. If that is how you want it.” Whatever that was supposed to mean, she sounded very determined. Suddenly he wondered whether his nose had failed him. Her scent was affronted, of all things! When he looked at her, though, she wore a faint smile. On the other hand, those big eyes held a glint of anger. “The Prophet’s men began arriving before daylight,” she said in a brisk voice, “but as I far as I know, he hasn’t come himself, yet. Before you see him again—”

“*Began* arriving?” he broke in. “Masema agreed to bring only an honor guard, a hundred men.”

“Whatever he agreed, there were three or four thousand the last I looked—an army of ruffians, every man within miles who could carry a spear, it seemed—and more coming from every direction.”

Hurriedly, he shrugged into his coat and buckled his belt over it, settling the weight of the axe at his hip. It always felt heavier than it should. “We will see about that! Burn me, I won’t be lumbered with his murderous vermin!”

“His *vermin* are an annoyance compared to the man himself. The danger lies with Masema.” Her voice was cool, but tightly leashed fear quivered in her scent. It always did when she spoke of Masema. “The sisters and the Wise Ones are right about that. If you need more proof of it than your own eyes, he has been meeting with the Seanchan.”

That hit him like a hammer, especially after Balwer’s news of the fighting in Altara. “How do you know?” he demanded. “Your thief-catchers?” She had a pair, brought from Mayene, and she sent them off to learn what they could at every town or village. Between them they never discovered half of what Balwer did. Not that she told him, anyway.

Berelain shook her head slightly, regretfully. “Faile’s . . . retainers. Three of them found us just before the Aiel attacked. They had talked with men who saw a huge flying creature land.” She shivered a little too ostentatiously, but by her smell, it was a true reaction. No surprise; he had seen some of the beasts once, and a Trolloc did not look more like

Shadowspawn. “A creature carrying a passenger. They traced her to Abila, to Masema. I don’t believe it was a first meeting. It had the sound of practice, to me.”

Suddenly her lips curved in a smile, slightly mocking, flirtatious. This time, her scent matched her face. “It was not very nice of you to make me think that dried-up little secretary of yours was finding out more than my thief-catchers when you have two dozen eyes-and-ears masquerading as Faile’s retainers. I must admit, you had me fooled. There are always new surprises to find in you. Why do you look so startled? Did you really think you could trust Masema after all we’ve seen and heard?”

Perrin’s stare had little to do with Masema. That news could mean a great deal or nothing at all. Perhaps the man thought he could bring the Seanchan to the Lord Dragon, too. He was mad enough for it. But . . . Faile had those fools *spying?* Sneaking into Abila? And the Light knew where else. Of course, she always said spying was a wife’s work, but listening to gossip around a palace was one thing; this was altogether different. She could have told him, at least. Or had she kept quiet because her retainers were not the only ones poking their noses where they should not? It would be just like her. Faile truly did possess a falcon’s spirit. She might think it fun to spy herself. No, he was not going to get angry with her, certainly not now. Light, she *would* think it was fun.

“I am glad to know you can be discreet,” Berelain murmured. “I would not have thought it in your nature, but discretion can be a fine thing. Especially now. My men were not killed by Aiel, unless Aiel have taken to using crossbows and axes.”

His head jerked up, and despite his best intentions, he glared at her. “You just slip that in? Is there anything else you’ve forgotten to tell me, anything that escaped your mind?”

“How can you ask?” she almost laughed. “I would have to strip myself naked to reveal more than I already have.” Spreading her arms wide, she twisted slightly like a snake as if to demonstrate.

Perrin growled in disgust. Faile was missing, the Light only knew whether she was alive—Light, let her be alive!—and Berelain chose *now* to flaunt herself worse than she ever had before? But she was who she was. He should be grateful she had clung to decency long enough for him to dress.

Eyeing him thoughtfully, she ran a fingertip along her lower lip. “Despite what you may have heard, you will be only the third man to share my bed." Her eyes were . . . smoky . . . yet she might have been saying he was the third man she had spoken to that day. Her scent . . . The only thing that came to mind was a wolf eyeing a deer caught in brambles. "The other two were politics. You will be pleasure. In more ways than one," she finished with a surprising touch of bite.

Just then Rosene bustled into the tent in a billow of icy air, her blue cloak thrown back and carrying an oval silver tray covered with a white linen cloth. Perrin snapped his mouth shut, praying she had not overheard. Smiling, Berelain seemed not to care. Setting the tray on the largest table, the stout serving woman spread her blue-and-gold-striped skirts in a deep curtsy for Berelain and another, shorter, for him. Her dark eyes lingered on him a moment, and she smiled, as pleased as her mistress, before gathering her cloak together and hurrying out again at a quick gesture from Berelain. She had overheard, all right. The tray gave off the smells of mutton stew and spiced wine that made Perrin's belly rumble again, but he would not have stayed to eat if his legs had been broken.

Flinging his cloak around his shoulders, he stalked out into the soft snowfall, tugging on his gauntlets. Heavy clouds shrouded the sun, but dawn was a few hours past, by the light. Paths had been beaten through the snow on the ground, yet the white drifting out of the sky was piling up on bare branches and giving the evergreens new coats. This storm was far from finished. Light, how could the woman talk to him that way? Why would she talk that way, and now?

"Remember," Berelain called after him, making no effort to mute her voice. "Discretion." With a wince, he quickened his step.

A dozen paces from the great striped tent he realized he had forgotten to ask the location of Masema's men. All around him the Winged Guards were warming themselves at campfires, armored and cloaked and near to their saddled mounts on the horselines. Their lances stood close at hand in steel-tipped cones that trailed red streamers in the wind. Despite the trees, a straight line could have been drawn through any row of those fires, and they were even as near the same size as humanly possible. The supply carts they had acquired coming south were all loaded, the horses harnessed, and they were arrayed in rigid lines, too.

The trees did not hide the crest of the hill completely. Two Rivers men still stood guard up there, but the tents were down, and he could make out loaded packhorses. He thought he saw a black coat, too; one of the

Asha’man, though he could not see which. Among the Ghealdanin, knots of men stood staring up the hill, yet all in all, they appeared as ready as the Mayeners. The two camps were even laid out alike. But nowhere was there any sign that thousands of men were gathering, no broad trampled paths in the snow to follow. For that matter, there were no footprints between the three camps at all. If Annoura was with the Wise Ones, she had been on the hill for some time. What were they talking about? Probably how to kill Masema without him finding out they were responsible. He glanced at Berelain’s tent, but the thought of going back in there with her made his hackles rise.

One other tent remained up, not far away, the smaller striped tent belonging to Berelain’s two serving women. Despite the drizzling snow, Rosene and Nana sat on camp stools in front of the smaller tent, cloaked and hooded and warming their hands over a small fire. Alike as two peas in the pod, neither was pretty, but they had company, likely the reason they were not huddled around a brazier inside. Doubtless Berelain insisted on more propriety in her serving women than she managed for herself. Normally Berelain’s thief-catchers seldom seemed to speak more than three words together, at least in Perrin’s hearing, but they were animated and laughing with Rosene and Nana. Plainly dressed, the pair was so nondescript you would not notice one bumping into him on the street. Perrin was still not sure which was Santes and which Gendar. A small kettle set off to one side of the fire smelled of mutton stew; he tried to ignore it, but his stomach growled anyway.

Talk stopped as he approached, and before he reached the fire, Santes and Gendar glanced from him to Berelain’s tent, faces absolutely blank, then pulled their cloaks around them and hurried away, avoiding his eyes. Rosene and Nana looked from Perrin to the tent, and tittered behind cupped hands. Perrin did not know whether to blush or howl.

“Would you by any chance know where the Prophet’s men are gathering?” he asked. Keeping his voice level was hard with all their arched eyebrows and smirks. “Your mistress forgot to tell me exactly.” The pair exchanged looks hidden by their hoods and giggled behind their hands again. He wondered whether they were brainless, but he doubted Berelain would tolerate fluff-brains around her for long.

After a great deal of tittering interspersed with quick glances at him, at each other, at Berelain’s tent, Nana allowed as how she was not really sure but thought it was that way, waving a hand vaguely toward the southwest. Rosene was certain she had heard her mistress say it was no more than two miles. Or maybe three. They were still giggling when he strode away. Maybe they really were goose-brained.

Wearily he tramped around the hill thinking about what he had to do. The depth of snow he had to wade through once he left the Mayener camp made his foul mood no better. Nor did the decisions he reached. It only got fouler after he arrived where his own people were camped.

Everything was as he had ordered. Cloaked Cairhienin sat on loaded carts with the reins looped around a wrist or tucked under a haunch, and other short figures moved along the lead lines of remounts, soothing the haltered horses. The Two Rivers men not on the hilltop squatted around dozens of small fires scattered through the trees, dressed to ride and holding their horses' reins. There was no order to them, not like the soldiers in the other camps, but they had faced Trollocs, and Aiel. Every man had his bow slung across his back and a full quiver on his hip, sometimes balanced by a sword or short-sword as well. For a wonder, Grady was at one of the fires. The two Asha'man usually kept a little apart from the other men, and the other way around as well. No one was talking, just concentrating on staying warm. The glum faces told Perrin that Jondyn had not returned yet, nor Gaul, nor Elyas or anybody else. There was still a chance they would bring her back. Or at least find where she was held. For a time, it seemed those were the last good thoughts he would have for the day. The Red Eagle of Manetheren and his own Wolfshead banner hung limp in the falling snow, on two staffs leaning against a cart.

He had planned to use those flags with Masema in the same way he had to come south, hiding in the open. If a man was mad enough to try reclaiming Manetheren's ancient glories, no one looked further, to any other reason for him marching with a small army, and so long as he did not linger, they were far too pleased to see the madman ride on to try stopping him. There were enough troubles in the land without calling more down on your head. Let someone else fight and bleed and lose men who would be needed come spring planting. Manetheren's borders had run almost to where Murandy now stood, and with luck, he could have been into Andor, where Rand had a firm grip, before having to give up the deception. That was changed, now, and he knew the price of changing. A very large price. He was prepared to pay, only it would not be he who paid. He would have nightmares about it, though.

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CHAPTER 6

The Scent of Madness

Seeking through the falling snow for Dannil, Perrin found him at one of the fires and pushed between the horses. The other men straightened and backed away enough to give him room. Not knowing whether to offer sympathy, they barely looked at him, and jerked their eyes away when they did, hiding their faces in their cowls. “Do you know where Masema’s people are?” he asked, then had to conceal a yawn behind his hand. His body wanted sleep, but there was no time.

“About three miles south and west,” Dannil replied in a sour voice, and tugged irritably at his mustache. So the goose-brains had been right after all. “Flocking in like ducks into the Waterwood in autumn, and the lot of them look like they’d skin their own mothers.” Horse-faced Lem al’Dai spat in disgust through the gap in his teeth he had gotten tussling with a wool merchant’s guard long ago. Lem liked to fight with his fists; he looked eager to pick a scrap with some of Masema’s followers.

“They would, if Masema said to,” Perrin said quietly. “Best you make sure everybody remembers that. You’ve heard how Berelain’s men died?” Dannil gave a sharp nod, and some of the others shifted their boots and muttered angrily under their breath. “Just so you know. There’s no proof of anything, yet.” Lem snorted, and the rest looked about as bleak as Dannil. They had seen the corpses Masema’s followers left behind.

The snow was picking up, fat flakes that dotted the men’s cloaks. The horses kept their tails tucked in against the cold. It would be a full blizzard again in a few hours, if not sooner. No weather to be leaving the fires’ warmth. No weather to be on the move.

“Bring everybody off the hill and start toward where the ambush was,” he ordered. That was one of the decisions he had made, walking back. He had delayed too long already, no matter who or what was out there. The renegade Aiel had too much lead as it was, and if they were headed in any direction but south or east, someone would have brought word by this time. By this time, they would expect him to be following. “We’ll ride until I have a better idea where we’re heading, then Grady or Neald will take us there through a gateway. Send men to Berelain and Arganda. I want the Mayeners and Ghealdanin moving, too. Put scouts out, and flankers, and tell them not to look for Aiel so hard they forget there are others who might want to kill us. I don’t want to stumble into anything before I know it’s there. And ask the Wise Ones to stay close to us.” He would not put it past Arganda to try putting them to the question in spite of his orders. If the Wise Ones killed some of the Ghealdanin defending themselves, the fellow might strike out entirely on his own, fealty or no. He had the feeling he was going to need every fighting man he could find. “Be as firm as you dare.”

Dannil took in the flood of orders calmly, but at the last his mouth twisted in a sickly grimace. Likely, he would as soon try to be firm with the Women’s Circle back home. “As you say, Lord Perrin,” he said stiffly, touching a knuckle to his forehead before he swung into his high-cantled saddle and began calling out orders.

Surrounded by men scrambling to mount, Perrin caught Kenly Maerin’s sleeve while the young man still had one foot in his stirrup and asked him to have Stepper saddled and brought. With a wide grin, Kenly knuckled *his* forehead. “As you say, Lord Perrin. Right away.”

Perrin growled inside his head as Kenly tramped toward the horselines pulling his brown gelding behind. The young whelp should not grow a beard if he was going to scratch at it all the time. The thing was straggly, anyway.

Waiting for his horse, he moved close to the blaze. Faile said he had to live with all the Lord Perrining and bowing and scraping, and most of the time he managed to ignore it, but today it was another drop of bile. He could feel a chasm growing wider between him and the other men from home, and he seemed to be the only one who wanted to bridge it. Gill found him muttering to himself as he held his hands out to the flames.

“Forgive me for bothering you, my Lord,” Gill said, bowing and briefly snatching off his floppy hat to reveal a thinly thatched scalp. The hat went right back on his head again to keep off the snow. City bred, he felt the cold badly. The stout man was not obsequious—few Caemlyn innkeepers were—but he seemed to enjoy a certain amount of formality. He had certainly fitted into his new job well enough to please Faile. “It’s young

Tallanvor. At first light, he saddled his horse and went off. He said you gave him permission, if . . . if the search parties hadn't gotten back by then, but I wondered, since you wouldn't let anyone else go."

The fool. Everything about Tallanvor marked him an experienced soldier, though he had never been very clear about his background, but alone against Aiel, he was a hare chasing weasels. *Light, I want to be riding with him! I shouldn't have listened to Berelain about ambushes.* But there had been another ambush. Arganda's scouts might end the same way. But he had to move. He had to.

"Yes," he said aloud. "I told him he could." If he said otherwise, he might have to take notice later. Lords had to do that sort of thing. If he ever saw the man alive again. "You sound as though you want to go hunting yourself."

"I am . . . very fond of Maighdin, my Lord," Gill replied. Quiet dignity marked his voice, and a degree of stiffness, as though Perrin had said he was too old and fat for the task. He certainly smelled of vexation, all prickly and ginger, though his cold-reddened face was smooth. "Not like Tallanvor—nothing like that, of course—but very fond all the same. And of the Lady Faile, of course," he added hastily. "It's just that it seems I've known Maighdin my whole life. She deserves better."

Perrin's sigh misted in front of his mouth. "I understand, Master Gill." He did. He himself wanted to rescue everyone, but he knew if he had to choose, he would take Faile and let the others go. Everything could go, to save her. Horse-scent was heavy in the air, but he smelled someone else who was irritated, and looked over his shoulder.

Lini was glaring at him from the middle of the turmoil, shifting her ground just enough to keep from being ridden down accidentally by men jostling to form ragged files. One bony hand gripped the edge of her cloak, and the other held a brass-studded cudgel, nearly as long as her arm. It was a wonder she had not gone with Tallanvor.

"You'll hear as soon as I do," he promised her. A rumbling in his middle reminded him suddenly and forcefully of that stew he had scorned. He could almost taste the mutton and lentils. Another yawn cracked his jaws. "Forgive me, Lini," he said when he could talk. "I didn't get much sleep last night. Or a bite to eat. Is there anything? Some bread, and whatever's to hand?"

"Everyone's eaten long since," she snapped. "The scraps are gone, and the kettles cleaned and stored away. Sup from too many dishes, and you deserve a bellyache that'll split you open. Especially when they're not your dishes." Trailing off into dissatisfied mutters, she scowled at him a moment longer before stalking away, glaring at the world.

"Too many dishes?" Perrin muttered. "I haven't had a one; that's my trouble, not a bellyache." Lini was making her way across the campground, threading her way between horses and carts. Three or four men spoke to her in passing, and she barked at every one, even shaking her cudgel if they failed to take the hint. The woman must be out of her mind over Maighdin. "Or was that one of her sayings? They usually make more sense than that."

"Ah . . . well, as to that, now. . . ." Gill snatched his hat off again and peered inside, then stuffed it back on. "I . . . ah . . . I have to see to the carts, my Lord. Need to make sure all's ready."

"A blind man could see the carts are ready," Perrin told him. "What is it?"

Gill's head swung wildly in search of another excuse. Finding none, he wilted. "I . . . I suppose you'll hear sooner or later," he mumbled. "You see, my Lord, Lini . . ." He drew a deep breath. "She walked over to the Mayener camp this morning, before sunrise, to see how you were and . . . ah . . . why you hadn't come back. The First's tent was dark, but one of her maids was awake, and she told Lini . . . She implied . . . I mean to say . . . Don't look at me that way, my Lord."

Perrin smoothed the snarl from his face. Tried to, at any rate. It stayed in his voice. "Burn me, I *slept* in that tent, man. That is all I did! You tell her that!"

A violent coughing fit wracked the stout man. "Me?" Gill wheezed once he could talk. "You want *me* to tell her? She'll crack my pate if I *mention* a thing like that! I think the woman was born in Far Madding in a thunderstorm. She probably told the thunder to be quiet. It probably did."

"You're *shambayan*," Perrin told him. "It can't all be loading carts in the snow." He wanted to bite someone!

Gill seemed to sense it. Mumbling his courtesies, he made a jerky bow and scurried away clutching his cloak close. Not to find Lini, Perrin was sure. Gill ordered the household, such as it was, but never her. No one ordered Lini except Faile.

Glumly Perrin watched the scouts ride out through the falling snow, ten men already watching the trees around them before they were beyond sight of the carts. Light, women would believe anything about a man so long as it was bad. And the worse it was, the more they had to talk about it. He had thought Rosene and Nana were all he had to worry about. Likely Lini had told Breane, Faile's other maid, first thing on getting back, and by this time, Breane surely had told every woman in the camp. There were plenty among the horse handlers and cart drivers, and Cairhienin being Cairhienin, they probably had been eager to pass everything on to the men, too. That sort of thing was not seen with charity in the Two Rivers. Once you gained the reputation, losing it was not easy. Suddenly the men backing away to give him room took on a new light, and the uncertain way they had looked at him, and even Lem spitting. In memory, Kenly's grin became a smirk. The one bright spot was that Faile would not believe it. Of course she would not. Certainly not.

Kenly returned at a stumbling trot through the snow, drawing Stepper and his own rangy gelding behind. Both horses were miserable with the cold, their ears folded back and tails tight, and the dun stallion made no effort to bite at Kenly's mount, as he usually would have.

"Don't show your teeth all the time," Perrin snapped, snatching Stepper's reins. The boy eyed him doubtfully, then slunk away glancing back over his shoulder.

Growling under his breath, Perrin checked the stallion's saddle girth. It was time to find Masema, but he did not mount. He told himself it was because he was tired and hungry, that he wanted just a bit of rest and something in his belly, if he could find anything. He told himself that, but he kept seeing burned farms and bodies hanging by the side of the road, men and women and even children. Even if Rand was still in Altara, it was a long way. A long way, and he had no choice. None he could make himself take.

He was standing with his forehead sunk against Stepper's saddle when a delegation of the young fools who had attached themselves to Faile sought him out, near a dozen of them. He straightened wearily, wishing the snow would bury them all.

Selande planted herself alongside Stepper's hindquarters, a short slender woman with green-gloved fists on her hips and an angry scowl creasing her forehead. She managed to swagger standing still. Despite the falling snow, one side of her cloak was thrown back to give easy access to her sword, exposing six bright slashes across the front of her dark blue coat. All the women wore men's clothing and swords, and usually they were twice as ready to use them as the men, which was saying quite a bit. Men and women alike, they were touchy with everyone, and would have been fighting duels every day had not Faile put a stop to it. Men and women alike, the lot with Selande smelled angry, sullen, sulky and petulant, all jumbled together, a scent that twitched uncomfortably in his nose.

"I see you, my Lord Perrin," Selande said formally in the crisp accents of Cairhien. "Preparations are being made to move out, but still we are refused our horses. Will you have this made right?" She made it sound a demand.

She saw him, did she? He wished he did not see her. "Aiel walk," he growled, and stifled a yawn, not caring a whit for the furious glares that earned him. He tried to put sleep out of his mind. "If you won't walk, ride on the carts."

"You cannot do that!" one of the Tairen women announced haughtily, one hand tight on the edge of her cloak, the other on her sword hilt. Medore was tall, with bright blue eyes in a dark face, and if she missed beautiful, it was not by much. The fat, red-striped sleeves of her coat looked decidedly odd with her full bosom. "Redwing is my favorite mount! I won't be denied her!"

"Third time," Selande said cryptically. "When we stop tonight, we will discuss your *toh*, Medore Damara."

Supposedly, Medore's father was an aging man who had retired to his country estates years ago, but Astoril was still a High Lord for all that. As those things were reckoned, that put his daughter well above Selande, only a minor noble in Cairhien. Yet Medore swallowed hard, and her eyes widened till she looked as though she expected to be skinned alive.

Abruptly Perrin had had all he could take of these idiots and their dog's dinner of Aiel bits and pieces and pure highborn jacfoolery. "When did you start spying for my wife?" he demanded. They could not have gone stiffer had their backbones frozen.

"We carry out such small tasks and errands as the Lady Faile might require of us from time to time," Selande said after a long moment, in very careful tones. Wariness was thick in her scent. The whole gaggle of them smelled like foxes wondering whether a badger had taken over their den.

“Did my wife really go hunting, Selande?” he growled heatedly. “She’s never wanted to before.” Anger roared in him, flames fanned by all the events of the day. He pushed Stepper away with one hand and stepped closer to the woman, looming over her. The stallion tossed his head, sensing Perrin’s humor. His fist ached in his gauntlet from its grip on the reins. “Or did she ride out to meet some of you, fresh from Abila? Was she kidnapped because of your bloody spying?”

That made no sense, and he knew it as the words left his mouth. Faile could have talked with them anywhere. And she would never have arranged to meet her eyes-and-ears—Light, her *spies!*—in company with Berelain. It was always a mistake to speak without thinking. He knew about Masema and the Seanchan because of their spying. But he wanted to lash out, he needed to lash out, and the men he wanted to hammer into nothingness were miles away. With Faile.

Selande did not back away from his anger. Her eyes narrowed to slits. Her fingers opened and closed on the hilt of her sword, and she was not alone. “We would die for the Lady Faile!” she spat. “Nothing we have done has put her in danger! We are sworn to her by water oath!” To Faile and not to him, her tone added.

He should apologize. He knew he should. Instead, he said, “You can have your horses if you give me your word you’ll do as I say and not try anything rash.” “Rash” was not the word for this lot. They were capable of rushing off alone as soon as they learned where Faile was. They were capable of getting Faile killed. “When we find her, I will decide how to rescue her. If your water oath says different, tie a knot in it, or I’ll tie you in knots.”

Her jaw tightened and her scowl deepened, but finally she said “I agree!” as though the words were being pried out of her. One of the Tairens, a long-nosed fellow named Carlon, grunted in protest, but Selande raised one finger, and he shut his mouth. With that narrow chin, he probably regretted shaving off his beard. The little woman had the rest of these fools in the palm of her hand, which did not make her any less a fool herself. Water oath, indeed! She did not take her eyes from Perrin’s. “We will obey you until the Lady Faile is returned. Then, we are hers again. And she can decide our *toh*.” That last seemed more for the others than him.

“Good enough,” he told her. He attempted to moderate his tone, but his voice was still rough. “I know you are loyal to her, all of you. I respect that.” That was about all he did respect in them. As an apology it was not very much, and that was just how they took it. A grunt from Selande was the only reply he got, that and glowers from the rest as they stalked off. So be it. As long as they kept their word. The whole bunch had never done an honest day’s work between them.

The camp was emptying out. The carts had begun moving south, sliding on their sleds behind the carthorses. The horses left deep tracks, but the sleds made only shallow ruts that the falling snow began to bury immediately. The last of the men from the hill were scrambling into their saddles and joining the others already riding with the carts. Just off to one side, the Wise Ones’ party began to pass, even the *gai’shain* leading the pack animals themselves mounted. However firm Dannil had dared to be, or not as was more likely, apparently it had been enough. The Wise Ones looked particularly awkward on horseback compared to the grace of Seonid and Masuri, though not so bad as the *gai’shain*. The white-robed men and women had all been riding since the third day in snow, yet they crouched low over the tall pommels of their saddles and clung to neck or mane as if expecting to fall off at the next step. Getting them mounted in the first place had required direct commands from the Wise Ones, and some would still slide down and walk if they were not watched.

Perrin pulled himself up onto Stepper. He was not sure he might not fall off himself. It was time to make this ride he did not want to make, though. He would have killed for a piece of bread. Or some cheese. Or a nice rabbit.

“Aiel coming!” someone shouted from the head of the column, and everything came to a halt. More shouts rang out, passing the word as if everyone had not already heard, and men unlimbered bows from their backs. Cart drivers stood up on their seats, peering ahead, or leaped down to crouch beside the cart. Growling under his breath, Perrin heeled Stepper in the flanks.

At the front of the column, Dannil was still in his saddle, and the two men carrying those bloody banners, but a good thirty were on the ground, coverings stripped from their bowstrings and arrows nocked. The men holding the horses for the dismounted men jostled about, pointing and trying to get a clear view. Grady and Neald were there, as well, peering ahead with intent faces but sitting on their horses calmly. Everyone else reeked of agitation. The Asha’man only smelled . . . ready.

Perrin could make out what they were staring at through the trees a good deal more clearly than they. Ten veiled Aiel trotting toward them through the falling snow, one leading a tall white horse. A little behind them rode three men, cloaked and hooded. There seemed to be something odd in the way the Aiel moved. And there was a bundle tied to the white's saddle. A fist gripped Perrin's heart until he realized it was not nearly large enough to be a body.

"Put up your bows," he said. "That's Alliandre's gelding. It must be our people. Can't you see the Aiel are all Maidens?" Not a one was tall enough to be an Aielman.

"I can barely make out they're Aiel," Dannil muttered, giving him a sidelong look. They all took it for granted that his eyes were good, even took pride in it—or used to—but he tried to keep them from knowing how good. Right then, he did not care, though.

"They are ours," he told Dannil. "Everybody stay here."

Slowly he rode out to meet the returning party. The Maidens began unveiling as he approached. In one of the deep cowls on the mounted men, he made out Furen Alharra's black face. The three Warders, then; they would have come back togther. Their horses looked as tired as he felt, near exhaustion. He wanted to force Stepper to run, to hear what they had to report. He dreaded hearing. Ravens would have been at the bodies, and foxes, badgers maybe, and the Light alone knew what besides. Maybe they thought they were sparing him by not bringing back what they had found. No! Faile had to be alive. He tried to fix that thought in his head, but it hurt like gripping a sharp blade barehanded.

Dismounting in front of them, he stumbled and had to hold on to the saddle to keep from falling. He felt numb around the bright pain of holding on to that one thought. She had to be alive. Little details loomed large, for some reason. Not one bundle fastened to the elaborately tooled saddle, but a number of small bundles that looked like gathered rags. The Maidens wore snowshoes, rough-made of vines and supple pine branches with the needles still on. That was why they seemed to be moving oddly. Jondyn must have shown them how to make them. He tried to focus. He thought his heart was going to pound through his ribs.

Gripping spears and buckler in her left hand, Sulin took one of the small bundles of cloth from the saddle before she came to him. The pink scar running down her leathery cheek twisted as she smiled. "Good news, Perrin Aybara," she said softly, handing him the dark blue cloth. "Your wife lives." Alharra exchanged glances with Seonid's other Warder, Teryl Wynter, who frowned. Masuri's man, Rovair Kirklin, stared straight ahead stonily. It was as plain as Wynter's curled mustaches that they were not sure it was good news. "The others press on to see what more they can find," she went on. "Though we already have found oddities enough."

Perrin let the bundle fall open in his hands. It was Faile's dress, sliced down the front and along the arms. He inhaled deeply, pulling Faile's scent into him, a faint trace of her flowery soap, a touch of her sweet perfume, but most of all, the smell that was her. And no hint of blood. The rest of the Maidens gathered around him, mostly older women with hard faces, though not as hard as Sulin's. The Warders climbed down, showing no sign that they had been all night in the saddle, but they held back behind the Maidens.

"All of the men were killed," the wiry woman said, "but by the garments we found, Alliandre Kigarin, Maighdin Dorlain, Lacile Aldorwin, Arrela Shiego, and two more also were made *gai'shain.*" The other two must have been Bain and Chiad; mentioning them by name, that they had been taken, would have shamed them. He had learned a little about Aiel. "This goes against custom, but it protects them." Wynter frowned in doubt, then tried to hide it by adjusting his hood.

The neat cuts were like those made skinning an animal. It hit Perrin suddenly. Someone had cut Faile's clothes off! His voice shook. "They only took women?"

A round-faced young Maiden named Briain shook her head. "Three men would have been made *gai'shain,* I think, but they fought too hard and were killed with knife or spear. All the rest died by arrow."

"It is not like that, Perrin Aybara," Elienda said hurriedly, sounding shocked. A tall woman with wide shoulders, she managed to look almost motherly, though he had seen her knock a man down with her fist. "Harming a *gai'shain* is like harming a child, or a blacksmith. It was wrong to take wetlanders, but I cannot believe they will break custom *that* far. I am sure they will not even be punished, if they can be meek until they are recovered. There are others who will show them." Others; Bain and Chiad again.

"What direction did they go?" he asked. Could Faile be meek? He could not picture her that way. At least let her try, till he could find her.

"Almost south," Sulin replied. "Much nearer south than east. After the snow hid their tracks, Jondyn Barran saw other traces. What the others are following. I believe him. He sees as much as Elyas Machera. There is much to see." Thrusting her spears behind the bow case on her back, she hung her buckler from the hilt of her heavy belt knife. Her fingers flashed handtalk, and Elienda unfastened a second, larger bundle and handed it to her. "Many people are moving out there, Perrin Aybara, and strange things. This you must see first, I think." Sulin unfolded another cut dress, this one green. He thought he remembered it on Alliandre. "These, we recovered where your wife was taken." Inside, forty or fifty Aiel arrows shifted in a heap. There were dark stains on the shafts, and he caught the scent of dried blood.

"Taardad," Sulin said, picking out an arrow and immediately throwing it to the ground. "Miagoma." She tossed two more aside. "Goshien." Those brought a grimace to her face; she was Goshien. Clan by clan, she named them all except the Shaido, dropping arrows until just over half lay scattered around her. She held up the cut dress holding the remainder in both hands, then spilled them. "Shaido," she said significantly.

Clutching Faile's dress to his chest—her scent eased the pain in his heart, and made it worse at the same time—Perrin frowned at the arrows jumbled on the snow. Already, some were half buried in the fresh fall. "Too many Shaido," he said at last. They should all be bottled up in Kinslayer's Dagger, five hundred leagues distant. But if some of their Wise Ones had learned to Travel . . . Maybe even one of the Forsaken . . . Light, he was rambling like a fool—what would the Forsaken have to do with this?—rambling when he had to think. His brain felt as weary as the rest of him. "The others are men who wouldn't accept Rand as the *car'a'carn.*" Those cursed colors flashed in his head. He had no time for anything but Faile. "They joined the Shaido." Some of the Maidens averted their eyes. Elienda glared at him. They knew that some had done what he said, but it was one of those things they did not like to hear said aloud. "How many altogether, do you reckon? Not the whole clan, surely?" If the Shaido were here in a body, there would be more than rumors of distant raids. Even among all the other troubles, all of Amadicia would know.

"Near enough to be going on with, I'm thinking," Wynter muttered under his breath. Perrin was not meant to hear.

Reaching in among the bundles tied to the ornate saddle, Sulin drew out a rag doll dressed in *cadin'sor.* "Elyas Machera found this just before we turned back, about forty miles from here." She shook her head, and for a moment her voice and scent became . . . startled. "He said he smelled it beneath the snow. He and Jondyn Barran found scrapes on the trees they said were caused by carts. Very many carts. If there are children . . . I think it may be a whole sept, Perrin Aybara. Perhaps more than one. Even a single sept will have at least a thousand spears, and more at need. Every man but the blacksmiths will pick up a spear at need. They are days south of us. Perhaps more days than I think, in this snow. But I believe those who took your wife are going to meet them."

"This blacksmith has picked up a spear," Perrin murmured. A thousand, maybe more. He had over two thousand, counting the Winged Guards and Arganda's men. Against Aiel, though, the numbers would favor the Shaido. He fingered the doll in Sulin's sinewy hand. Was a Shaido child weeping over the loss of her doll? "We go south."

He was turning to mount Stepper when Sulin touched his arm to stop him. "I told you we saw other things. Twice, Elyas Machera found horse droppings and campfires under the snow. Many horses, and many campfires."

"Thousands," Alharra put in; His black eyes met Perrin's levelly, and his voice was matter-of-fact. He was simply reporting what was. "Five, maybe ten or more; it's hard to tell. But soldiers' camps. The same men both places, I think. Machera and Barran agree. Whoever it is, they're heading near enough south, too. Maybe they have nothing to do with the Aiel, but they could be following."

Sulin gave the Warder an impatient frown and continued with barely a pause for his interruption. "Three times we saw flying creatures like those you say the Seanchan use, huge things with ribbed wings and people riding their backs. And twice we saw tracks like this." Bending, she picked up one of the arrows and drew a rounded shape a little like a large bear's paw in the snow, but with six toes longer than a man's fingers. "Sometimes it shows claws," she said, marking them, longer even than one of the big bears in the Mountains of Mist. "It has a long stride. I think it runs very fast. Do you know what it is?"

He did not—he had never heard of anything with six toes except the cats in the Two Rivers; he had been surprised to find cats elsewhere only had five—but he could make a safe guess. "Another Seanchan animal." So there were Seanchan to the south as well as Shaido, and—what?—

Whitecloaks, or a Seanchan army. It could not be anyone else. He trusted Balwer's information. "We still go south." The Maidens stared at him as if he had told them it was snowing.

Pulling himself up into Stepper's saddle, he turned back toward the column. The Warders walked, leading their weary hordes. The Maidens took Alliandre's gelding with them as they trotted to where the Wise Ones were standing. Masuri and Seonid were riding to meet their Warders. He wondered why they all had not come to stick their noses in. Perhaps it was as simple as letting him be alone with his grief if the news turned out bad. Perhaps. In his head, he tried to fit everything together. The Shaido, however many they were. The Seanchan. The mounted army, whether Whitecloak or Seanchan. It was like the puzzles Master Luhhan had taught him to make, intricate twists of metal that slid apart and slipped back together like a dream, if you knew the trick. Only, his head felt muddled, groping at pieces that would not slide anywhere.

The Two Rivers men were all mounted again when he reached them. Those who had been on the ground with their bows ready looked a little abashed. They all eyed him uneasily, tentatively.

"She's alive," he said, and it was as if every man of them started breathing again. They took the rest of his news with a strange impassiveness, some even nodding as though they had expected no less.

"Won't be the first time we've faced long odds," Dannil said. "What do we do, my Lord?"

Perrin grimaced. The man was still stiff as an oak. "For starters, we're Traveling forty miles due south. After that, I will see. Neald, you go ahead and find Elyas and the others. Tell them what I'm doing. They will be a good deal further on, by this time. And have a care. You can't fight ten or a dozen Wise Ones." A whole sept should have at least that many who could channel. And if it was more than one? A bog he had to cross when he came to it.

Neald nodded before turning his gelding back toward the camp, where he had already memorized the ground. There were only a few more orders to give. Riders had to be sent to find the Mayeners and Ghealdanin, who would be moving apart as they camped apart. Grady thought he could memorize the ground right there before they could join up, so there was no need to turn everything around and follow Neald back. And that left only one thing.

“I need to find Masema, Dannil,” Perrin said. “Somebody who can give him a message, anyway. With luck, I won’t be long.”

“You go among that filth alone, my Lord, and you’ll need luck,” Dannil replied. “I heard some of them talking about you. Said you’re Shadowspawn, because of your eyes.” His gaze met Perrin’s golden eyes and slid sideways. “Said you’d been tamed by the Dragon Reborn, but still Shadowspawn. You ought to take a few dozen men to watch your back.”

Perrin hesitated, patting Stepper’s neck. A few dozen men would not be enough if Masema’s people really thought he was Shadowspawn and decided to take matters into their own hands. All the Two Rivers men together might not be enough. Maybe he did not need to tell Masema, just let him learn for himself.

His ears caught a bluetit’s trill from the trees to the west, followed a moment later by a second that everyone could hear, and the decision was taken away from him. He was sure of it, and wondered whether this was part of being *ta’veren.* He reined Stepper around and waited.

The Two Rivers men knew what it meant, hearing that particular bird from back home. Men coming, more than a handful, and not necessarily peaceful. It would have been a crookbill trilling if they were friends, and a mocker’s cry of alarm had they been clearly unfriendly. This time, they behaved better. Along the west side of the column, every second man as far as Perrin could see in the snow dismounted and handed his reins to the man next to him, then readied his bow.

The strangers appeared through the scattered trees spread out in a line as if to increase the impression of their numbers. They were perhaps a hundred, with two in advance, but their slow advance did seem ominous. Half carried lances, not couched but held as though ready be tucked under an arm. At a steady walk they came on. Some wore armor, a breastplate or a helmet but rarely both. Still, they were better armed than the general run of Masema’s followers. One of the pair out front was Masema himself, his zealot’s face staring out of his cloak’s cowl like a rabid mountain cat staring out of a cave. How many of those lances had borne a red streamer yesterday morning?

Masema stopped his men with a raised hand only when he was just a few paces from Perrin. Pushing back his hood, he ran his gaze along the dismounted men with their bows. He seemed unaware of the snow hitting his bare scalp. His companion, a bigger man with a sword on his back and another at his saddlebow, kept his cowl up, but Perrin thought his head was shaved, too. That one managed to study the column and watch Masema with equal intensity. His dark eyes burned almost as much as Masema's. Perrin thought about telling them that at this range, a Two Rivers longbow would put a pile shaft right through a breastplate, and out the wearer's back besides. He considered mentioning Seanchan. Discretion, Berelain had counseled. Perhaps it was a fine thing, in the circumstances.

"You were coming to meet me?" Masema said abruptly. Even the man's voice seethed with intensity. Nothing was ever casual on his tongue. Anything he had to say was important. The pale triangular scar on his cheek pulled his sudden smile crooked. There was no warmth in it anyway. "No matter. I am here, now. As you no doubt know by now, those who follow the Lord Dragon Reborn—the Light illumine his name!—refuse to be left behind. I cannot demand it of them. They serve him as I do."

Perrin saw a tide of flame rolling across Amadicia into Altara and perhaps beyond, leaving death and devastation behind. He took a deep breath, sucking cold into his lungs. Faile was more important than anything. Anything! If he burned for it, then he burned. "Take your men east." He was shocked at how steady his voice was. "I will catch up when I can. My wife has been kidnapped by Aiel, and I'm heading south to get her back." For once, he saw Masema surprised.

"Aiel? So they are more than rumor?" He frowned at the Wise Ones on the far side of the column. "South, you say?" Folding his gloved hands on the pommel of his saddle, he turned his study to Perrin. Insanity filled the man's scent; Perrin could not find anything but madness in it. "I will come with you," Masema said at last, as if reaching a decision. Odd, he had been impatient to reach Rand without delay. So long as he did not have to be touched by the Power to do so, at least. "All those who follow the Lord Dragon Reborn—the Light illumine his name!—will come. Killing Aiel savages is doing the Light's work." His eyes flickered toward the Wise Ones, and his smile was even colder than before.

"I would appreciate the help," Perrin lied. That rabble would be useless against Aiel. Still, they numbered in the thousands. And they had held off armies, if not armies of Aiel. A piece of that puzzle in his head shifted. Ready to drop with fatigue, he could not make out exactly how, just that it had. In any case, it was not going to happen. "They have a long lead on me, though. I intend to Travel, to use the One Power, to catch up. I know how you feel about that."

Uneasy murmurs ran through the men behind Masema, and they eyed one another and shifted weapons. Perrin caught muttered curses and also "yellow eyes" and "Shadowspawn." The second shaven-headed man glared at Perrin as though he had blasphemed, but Masema just stared, trying to bore a hole into Perrin's head and see what lay inside.

"*He* would be grieved if harm came to your wife," the madman said at last. The emphasis named Rand as clearly as the name Masema did not allow to be spoken. "There will be a . . . dispensation, in this one instance. Only to find your wife, because you are his friend. Only this." He spoke calmly—calmly for him—but his deep-set eyes were dark fire, his face contorted with unknowing rage.

Perrin opened his mouth, then closed it without speaking. The sun might as well rise in the west as Masema say what he just had. Suddenly Perrin thought that Faile might be safer with the Shaido than he was here and now.

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CHAPTER 7

The Streets of Caemlyn

Elayne’s entourage attracted plenty of attention as it rode through Caemlyn, along streets that rose and fell with the hills of the city. The Golden Lily on the breast of her fur-lined crimson cloak was sufficient to identify her for citizens of the capital, but she kept her hood back, framing her face so the single golden rose on the coronet of the Daughter-Heir was clearly visible. Not just Elayne, High Seat of House Trakand, but Elayne the Daughter-Heir. Let everyone see, and know.

The domes of the New City glinted white and gold in the pale morning light, and icicles sparkled on the bare branches of the trees down the center of the main streets. Even nearing its zenith the sun lacked warmth, despite a blessedly cloudless sky. Luckily, there was no wind today. The air was cold enough to frost her breath, yet with the paving stones cleared of snow even on the narrower, twisting ways, the city was alive again, the streets full and bustling. Carters and wagon drivers, harnessed by their work as surely as the horses between the shafts, clutched their cloaks in resignation as they made slow passage through the throng. A huge water wagon rumbled by, empty by the sound, on its way to be refilled for fighting the too-frequent arsons. A few hawkers and street peddlers braved the chill to cry their wares, but most folk hurried about their tasks, eager to be indoors as soon as possible. Not that hurrying meant moving very fast. The city bulged, its population swollen beyond that of Tar Valon. In such a swarm, even the few who were mounted moved no faster than a man could walk. In the whole morning she had seen only two or three carriages inching along the streets. If their passengers were not invalids or facing miles ahead, they were fools.

Everyone who saw her and her party paused at the very least, some pointing her out to others, or hoisting a child for a better view so one day they could tell their own children they had seen her. Whether they said they had seen the future Queen or simply a woman who held the city for a time was the question. Most people simply stared, but now and then a handful of voices cried out “Trakand! Trakand!” or even “Elayne and Andor!” as she passed. Better if there had been more cheering, yet silence was preferable to jeers. Andorans were outspoken folk, none more so than Caemlyners. Rebellions had begun and queens lost their thrones because Caemlyners voiced their displeasure in the streets.

An icy thought made Elayne shiver. Who holds Caemlyn holds Andor, the ancient saying went; it was not exactly true, as Rand had demonstrated, yet Caemlyn was Andor’s heart. She had laid claim to the city—the Lion Banner and Trakand’s Silver Keystone shared pride of place on the towers of the outer wall—but she did not yet hold the heart of Caemlyn, and that was far more important than holding stone and mortar.

They will all cheer me, one day, she promised herself. *I will earn their acclaim.* Today, though, the crowded ways felt lonely between those few upraised voices. She wished Aviendha were there, just for her company, but Aviendha saw no reason to climb onto a horse simply to move about the city. Anyway, Elayne could feel her. It was different from the bond with Birgitte, yet she could feel her sister’s presence in the city, like sensing an unseen person in the same room, and it was comforting.

Her companions drew their own share of attention. After barely three years as Aes Sedai, Sareitha’s dark square face had not yet achieved agelessness, and she looked a prosperous merchant in her fine bronze-colored woolens with a large silver-and-sapphires brooch holding her cloak. Her Warder, Ned Yarman, rode at her heels, and he certainly caught eyes. A tall, broad-shouldered young man with bright blue eyes and corn-yellow hair curling to his shoulders, he wore a shimmering Warder’s cloak that made him appear a disembodied head floating above a tall gray gelding that was not entirely there either, where the cloak draped its haunches. There was no mistaking what he was, or that his presence announced an Aes Sedai. The others, maintaining a circle around Elayne as they made a way through the crowd, attracted just as many eyes, though. Eight women in the red coats and burnished helmets and breastplates of the Queen’s Guard were not something seen every day. Or ever before, come to that. She had chosen them out from the new recruits herself for that very reason.

Their under-lieutenant, Caseille Raskovni, lean and hard as any Aiel Maiden, was that rarity of rarities, a woman merchant’s guard, nearly twenty years in the trade, as she put it. Silver bells in her stocky roan gelding's mane named her Arafellin, though she was vague about her past. The only Andoran among the eight was a graying, placid-faced woman with wide shoulders, Deni Colford, who had kept order in a wagon drivers' tavern in Low Caemlyn, outside the walls, another rough and singular job for a woman. Deni did not yet know how to use the sword at her hip, but Birgitte said she had very quick hands and quicker eyes, and she was quite adept with the pace-long cudgel that hung opposite her sword. The remainder were Hunters for the Horn, disparate women, tall and short, slender and wide, dewy-eyed and gray-haired, with backgrounds as varied, though some were as discreet as Caseille and others clearly inflated their former station in life. Neither attitude was uncommon among Hunters. They had leaped at the chance to be listed on the Guards' roll, though. More important, they had passed Birgitte's close inspection.

"These streets are not safe for you," Sareitha said suddenly, heeling her chestnut up beside Elayne's black gelding. Fireheart almost managed to nip the sleek mare before Elayne reined his head away. The street was narrow here, compressing the crowd and forcing the Guardswomen in closer around them. The Brown sister's face pictured Aes Sedai composure, but apparent concern sharpened her tone. "Anything might happen in a crush like this. Remember who is staying at the Silver Swan, less than two miles from this spot. Ten sisters at one inn are not simply seeking their own for company. Elaida might well have sent them."

"She might not have, too," Elayne replied calmly. More calmly than she felt. A great many sisters seemed to be waiting on the side until the struggle between Elaida and Egwene was over. Two had departed the Silver Swan and three more come just since her arrival in Caemlyn. That did not sound like a party sent on a mission. And none were Red Ajah; surely Elaida would include Reds. Still, they were being watched as well as she could arrange, though she did not tell Sareitha that. Elaida very much wanted her, much more than she would want a runaway Accepted, or one connected to Egwene and those Elaida called rebels. Why, she could not quite understand. A queen who was Aes Sedai would be a great prize for the White Tower, but she would not become queen if she was snatched back to Tar Valon. For that matter, Elaida had issued the order to bring her back by any means necessary long before there seemed any possibility she would assume the throne for many years to come. It was a puzzle she had fretted over more than once since Ronde Macura slipped her that foul brew that dulled a woman’s ability to channel. A very worrying puzzle, especially now she was announcing her location to the world.

Her eyes lingered a moment on a black-haired woman in a blue cloak with her hood thrown back. The woman barely glanced at her before turning into a candlemaker’s shop. A weighted cloth bag hung from her shoulder. Not an Aes Sedai, Elayne decided. Merely another woman who aged well, like Zaida. “In any case,” she went on firmly, “I won’t be penned up by fear of Elaida.” What *were* those sisters at the Silver Swan up to?

Sareitha snorted, and not very softly; she seemed about to roll her eyes, then thought better of it. Occasionally Elayne caught an odd look from one of the other sisters in the Palace, doubtless thinking of how she had been raised, yet on the surface, at least, they accepted her as Aes Sedai, acknowledged that she stood higher among them than any except Nynaeve. That was not enough to stop them speaking their minds, often more bluntly that they would have with a sister who stood where she did and had achieved the shawl in more usual fashion. “Forget Elaida, then,” Sareitha said, “and remember who else would like to have you in hand. One well-aimed rock, and you are an unconscious bundle, easily carried away in the confusion.”

Did Sareitha really have to tell her water was wet? Kidnapping other claimants to the throne was almost customary, after all. Every House that stood against her had supporters in Caemlyn watching for an opportunity, or she would have her slippers for her midday meal. Not that they could succeed, not so long as she could channel, but they would make the attempt given a chance. She had never thought that simply reaching Caemlyn provided safety.

“If I don’t dare leave the Palace, Sareitha, I will never get the people behind me,” she said quietly. “I must be seen, out and about and unafraid.” That was why she had eight Guards instead of the fifty Birgitte had wanted. The woman refused to grasp the realities of politics. “Besides, they would need two well-aimed rocks with you here.”

Sareitha snorted again, but Elayne did her best to ignore the other’s obstinacy. She wished she could ignore the woman’s presence, but that was impossible. She had more reason for this ride than being seen. Halwin Norry gave her facts and figures by the ream, though the First Clerk’s droning voice almost put her to sleep, yet she wanted to see for herself.

Norry could make a riot sound as lifeless as a report on the state of the city's cisterns or the expense of cleaning the sewers.

The crowds were thick with foreigners, Kandori with forked beards and Illianers with beards that left their upper lips bare and Arafellin with silver bells in their braids, copper-skinned Domani, olive-skinned Altarans and dark Tairens, Cairhienin who stood out for their short stature and pale skins. Some were merchants, caught by the sudden onset of winter or hoping to steal a jump on their competition, smooth-faced puffed-up folk who knew that trade was the life's blood of nations, and every one of them claiming to be a major artery even when betrayed by a poorly dyed coat or a brooch of brass and glass. Many of the people afoot had worn and ragged coats, breeches out at the knee, dresses with tattered hems, and threadbare cloaks or none at all. Those were refugees, either harried from their homes by war or sent wandering by the belief that the Dragon Reborn had broken every bond that held them. They hunched against the cold, faces haggard and defeated, and let themselves be buffeted by the flow of others around them.

Watching a dull-eyed woman stagger through the crowd clutching a small child on her shoulder, Elayne fumbled a coin from her purse and handed it to one of the Guards, an apple-cheeked woman with cold eyes. Tzigan claimed to be from Ghealdan, the daughter of a minor noble; well, she might be Ghealdanin, at least. When the Guardswoman leaned down to proffer the coin, the woman with her child staggered on by unheeding, unseeing. There were too many in the city like that. The Palace fed thousands every day, at kitchens set up throughout the city, but too many could not even summon the energy to collect their bread and soup. Elayne offered a prayer for mother and child as she dropped the coin back into her purse.

"You cannot feed everyone," Sareitha offered quietly.

"Children are not allowed to starve in Andor," Elayne said, as if issuing a decree. But she did not know how to stop it. Food was still plentiful in the city, but no command could force people to eat.

Some of the other foreigners had come to Caemlyn that way, too, men and women who no longer wore rags and haunted faces. Whatever had sent them flying from their homes, they had begun thinking that they had traveled far enough, thinking about the trades they had abandoned, often along with everything they possessed. In Caemlyn, though, anyone with skill in a craft and a little drive could always find a banker with ready coin. There were new trades being followed in the city these days. She had seen three clockmakers' shops already this morning! Within her sight were two shops selling blown glass, and nearly thirty manufactories had been built north of the city. From now on, Caemlyn would export glass, not import it, and crystal as well. The city had lacemakers, now, producing as fine as Lugard ever had, and no wonder since nearly all of them had come from there.

That brightened her mood a little—the taxes those new crafts paid would help, though it would take time before they paid much—yet it was still others in the crowds she noticed most. Foreign or Andoran, the mercenaries were easily picked out, hard-faced men wearing swords, swaggering even when slowed to a crawl by the press. Merchants' guards also went armed, rough fellows shouldering aside most men who got in their way, but they seemed subdued and sober compared to the sell-swords. And on the whole, they displayed fewer scars. Mercenaries dotted the crowd like raisins in a cake. With such a large pool to draw on, and with winter employment for their skills always in short supply, she did not think they would come too dear. Unless, as Dyelin feared, they cost her Andor. Somehow, she had to find enough men that foreigners were not a majority in the Guards. And the money to pay them.

Abruptly, she became aware of Birgitte. The other woman was angry—she often was, of late—and coming closer. Very angry, and coming very quickly. An ominous combination that set alarm gongs ringing in Elayne's head.

Immediately she ordered a return to the Palace by the most direct route—that would be how Birgitte was coming; the bond would lead her straight to Elayne—and they took the next turn south, onto Needle Street. It was actually a rather wide street, though it meandered like a river, down one hill and up the next, but generations ago it had been full of needlemakers. Now a few small inns and taverns were jammed among cutlers and tailors and every sort of shop except needlemakers.

Before they had even reached the Inner City, Birgitte found them climbing Pearman's Lane, where a handful of fruit-sellers still clung to shops handed down since the days of Ishara, though there was precious little to be seen in their windows this time of year. Despite the crowd Birgitte cantered into sight, red cloak flaring behind, scattering people before her left and right, and only slowed her rangy gray when she saw them ahead.

As if to make up for her hurry, she took a moment to study the Guardswomen and return Caseille's salute before turning her mount to walk beside Elayne's. Unlike them, she wore neither sword nor armor. The memories of her past lives were fading—she said she could remember nothing at all clearly before the founding of the White Tower, now, though fragments still floated up—but one thing she claimed to recall absolutely. Every time she had tried to use a sword, she had nearly gotten herself killed, and had even done so more than once. Her strung bow was in a leather saddle-case, though, with a bristling quiver of arrows on the other side. Anger boiled in her, and she wore a frown that only deepened as she spoke.

"A half-frozen pigeon flew into the Palace cote a little while ago with word from Aringill. The men escorting Naean and Elenia were ambushed and killed not five miles out of the town. Luckily, one of their horses came back with blood on the saddle, or we'd have known nothing for weeks yet. I doubt our luck extends to that pair being held for ransom by brigands."

Fireheart pranced a few steps, and Elayne reined him in sharply. Someone in the crowd shouted what might have been a cry for Trakand. Or not. Shopkeepers trying to attract custom raised enough din to muffle the words. "So we have a spy in the Palace," she said, then compressed her lips, wishing she had held her tongue in front of Sareitha.

Birgitte did not seem to care. "Unless there's a *ta'veren* trotting around we don't know about," she replied dryly. "Maybe now you'll let me assign a bodyguard. Just a few Guards, well chosen and—"

"No!" The Palace was her home. She would not be guarded there. Glancing at the Brown, she sighed. Sareitha was listening very attentively. There was no point in trying to hide things now. Not this. "You let the First Maid know?"

Birgitte gave her a sidelong look that, combined with a burst of mild outrage through their shared bond, told her to go teach her grandmother to knit. "She intends to question every servant who didn't serve your mother at least five years. I'm not sure she doesn't mean to put them to the question. The look on her face when I told her, I was glad to get out of her study with a whole skin. I'm looking at others, myself." She meant the Guards, but she would not say so in hearing of Caseille and the others. Elayne did not think it likely. All the recruiting gave anyone a perfect opportunity to slip in eyes-and-ears, yet without any assurance they would ever be where they could learn anything useful.

“If there are spies in the Palace,” Sareitha said quietly, “there may be worse. Perhaps you should accept the Lady Birgitte’s suggestion of a bodyguard. There is precedent.” Birgitte showed the Brown sister her teeth; as a smile, it was a miserable failure. However much she disliked being addressed by her title, however, she turned hopeful eyes on Elayne.

“I said no, and I mean no!” Elayne snapped. A beggar, approaching the slow-moving circle of horses with a wide, gap-toothed grin and his cap in his hand, flinched and scurried away into the throng before she could even think of reaching for her purse. She was not sure how much of her anger was her own and how much Birgitte’s, but it was appropriate.

“I should have gone to get them myself,” she growled bitterly. Instead, she had woven a gateway for the messenger and spent the rest of the day meeting with merchants and bankers. “At the least, I should have stripped the garrison at Aringill for escort. Ten men dead because I blundered! Worse—the Light help me, it *is* worse!—I’ve lost Elenia and Naean because of it!”

Birgitte’s thick golden braid, hanging outside her cloak, swung as she shook her head emphatically. “In the first place, queens don’t go running off to do everything themselves. They’re bloody queens!” Her anger was dying down, a little, but irritation flared on top of it, and her tone reflected both. She really wanted Elayne to have a bodyguard, very likely even in her bath. “Your adventuring days are done. The next thing, you’d be sneaking out of the Palace in disguise, maybe even wandering around after nightfall, when you might get your skull cracked open by some tough you never even saw.”

Elayne sat up straight in her saddle. Birgitte knew, of course—she did not know any way to get around the bond, though she was sure there must be one—but the woman had no right to bring it up now. If Birgitte offered enough hints, she would have other sisters trying to follow her with their Warders and likely squads of Guardsmen as well. Everyone was so ridiculous about keeping her safe. You would think she had never been in Ebou Dar, much less Tanchico, or Falme. Besides, she had only done it once. So far. And Aviendha went with her.

“Cold dark streets don’t compare to a warm fire and an interesting book,” Sareitha put in idly, as if talking to herself. Studying the shops they were passing, she seemed intent on them. “I very much dislike walking on icy pavement, myself, especially in the dark, without so much as a candle. Young, pretty women often think plain clothes and a dirty face make them invisible.” The shift was so sudden, with no change in tone, that at first Elayne did not realize what she was hearing. “Being knocked down and dragged into an alley by drunken rowdies is a hard way to learn differently. Of course, if you are lucky enough to have a friend with you who also can channel, if she’s lucky enough that the tough fails to hit her as hard as he should . . . Well, you cannot be lucky every time. Wouldn’t you agree, Lady Birgitte?”

Elayne closed her eyes for a moment. Aviendha had said someone was following them, but she had been sure it was only a footpad. Anyway, it had not been like that. Not exactly. Birgitte’s glare promised a talking to, later. She *refused* to understand that a Warder just did *not* dress down her Aes Sedai.

“In the second place,” Birgitte went on grimly, “ten men or nearly three hundred, the bloody outcome would have been the bloody same. Burn me, it was a good plan. A few men could have brought Naean and Elenia to Caemlyn unnoticed. Emptying out the garrison would have pulled every flaming eye in the east of Andor, and whoever took them would have brought enough armsmen to be sure. Very likely, they’d hold Aringill now on top of it. Small as the garrison is, Aringill keeps anybody who wants to move against you in the east off balance, and the more Guards who come out of Cairhien, the better that gets, since they’re nearly all loyal to you.” For someone who claimed to be a simple archer, she had a good grasp of the situation. The only thing she had left out was the loss of the customs duties from the river trade.

“Who did take them, Lady Birgitte?” Sareitha asked, leaning to look past Elayne. “Surely that is a very important question.” Birgitte sighed loudly, almost a whimper.

“We will know soon enough, I fear,” Elayne said. The Brown quirked a doubting eyebrow at her, and she tried not to grind her teeth. She seemed to be doing that quite a lot since coming home.

A Taraboner woman in a green silk cloak stepped out of the way of the horses and made a deep curtsy, her thin, beaded braids swinging out of her cowl. Her maid, a diminutive woman with her arms full of small packages, imitated her mistress awkwardly. The two wide men close behind, guards carrying brass-ferruled quarterstaffs, remained upright and alert. Their long heavy leather coats would turn all but the most determined thrust of a knife.

Elayne inclined her head as they rode by to acknowledge the Taraboner's courtesy. She had not received as much from any Andoran in the streets, so far. The handsome face behind the woman's sheer veil showed too much age to be Aes Sedai. Light, she had too much on her plate to be worrying about Elaida now!

"It is very simple, Sareitha," she said in a carefully controlled voice. "If Jarid Sarand took them, Elenia will give Naean a choice. Declare Arawn for Elenia, with some sweetening of estates for Naean in return, or else have her throat slit in a quiet cell somewhere and her corpse buried behind a barn. Naean won't give in easily, but her House is arguing over who is in charge until she returns, so they'll dither, Elenia will threaten torture and maybe use it, and eventually Arawn will stand behind Sarand for Elenia. Soon to be joined by Anshar and Baryn; they will go where they see strength. If Naean's people have them, she will offer the same choices to Elenia, but Jarid will go on a rampage against Arawn unless Elenia tells him not to, and she won't if she thinks he has any hope of rescuing her. So we must hope to hear in the next few weeks that Arawn estates are being burned." *If not,* she thought, *I have four houses united to face, and I* still *don't know whether I really have even two!*

"That is . . . very nicely reasoned out," Sareitha said, sounding faintly surprised.

"I'm sure you could have, too, with time," Elayne said, too sweetly, and felt a stab of pleasure when the other sister blinked. Light, her mother would have expected her to see that much when she was ten!

The rest of the ride back to the Palace passed in silence, and she barely noticed the bright mosaic towers and grand vistas of the Inner City. Instead, she thought about Aes Sedai in Caemlyn and spies in the Royal Palace, about who had Elenia and Naean and how much Birgitte could step up recruiting, about whether it was time to sell the Palace's plate and the rest of her gems. A gloomy list to consider, but she kept her face smooth and serenely acknowledged the scant cheers that followed her. A queen could not show herself afraid, especially when she was.

The Royal Palace was a pure white confection of intricately worked balconies and columned walks atop the highest hill of the Inner City, the highest in Caemlyn. Its slender spires and gilded domes loomed against the midday sky, visible for miles, proclaiming the power of Andor. Grand entrances and departures were made at the front, at the Queen's Plaza, where in the past great crowds had gathered to hear the proclamations of queens and shout their acclaim for Andor's rulers. Elayne entered at the rear of the Palace, Fireheart's steel-shod hooves ringing on the paving stones as she trotted into the main stableyard. It was a broad space fronted on two sides by the rows of tall arched doors of the stables, overlooked by a single long white stone balcony, plain and sturdy. Several of the high, columned walks offered partial views from above, but this was a working place. In front of the simple colonnade that gave entry to the Palace itself a dozen Guardsmen preparing to replace those on duty in the Plaza stood rigidly beside their horses, being inspected by their under-lieutenant, a grizzled fellow with a limp who had been a bannerman under Gareth Bryne. Along the outer wall, thirty more were mounting, ready to begin patrols of the Inner City in pairs. In normal days, there would have been Guardsmen whose main duty was policing the streets, but with numbers so reduced, those who protected the Palace had to do that as well. Careane Fransi was there, as well, a stocky woman in an elegant green-striped riding dress and blue-green cloak, sitting her gray gelding while one of her Warders, Venr Kosaan, climbed onto his bay. Dark, with touches of gray in his tight-curled hair and beard, the blade-slim man wore a plain brown cloak. Apparently they did not mean to advertise who they were.

Elayne's arrival bought a flash of surprise to the stableyard. Not to Careane or Kosaan, of course. The Green sister merely looked thoughtful in the sheltering cowl of her cloak, and Kosaan not even that. He simply nodded to Birgitte and Yarman, Warder to Warder. Without another glance they rode out as soon as the last of Elayne's escort cleared the iron-strapped gates. But some of those mounting along the wall paused with one foot in a stirrup, staring, and heads whipped toward the new arrivals among the men standing inspection. She had not been expected back for another hour at least, and excepting a few who never thought beyond what their hands were doing, everyone in the Palace knew the situation was volatile. Rumors spread among soldiers even faster than among other men, and the Light knew, that was saying something, the way men gossiped. These had to know that Birgitte had departed in a hurry, and now she returned with Elayne, ahead of time. Was one of the other Houses marching on Caemlyn? Ready to attack? Were they to be ordered to the walls that they could not man completely, even with what Dyelin had in the city? Moments of surprise and worry, then the leathery under-lieutenant barked a command, and eyes snapped straight ahead, arms swept across chests in salute. Only three besides the former bannerman had been on the rolls a few days gone, but there were no raw recruits here.

Grooms in red coats with the White Lion embroidered on one shoulder came rushing out from the stable, though in fact there was little for them to do. The Guardswomen quietly dismounted at Birgitte's order and began leading their horses through the tall doors. She herself leaped from her saddle and tossed her reins to one of the grooms, and she was no quicker than Yarman, who hurried to hold Sareitha's bridle while she climbed down. He was what some sisters called "fresh caught," bonded less than a year—the term dated from a time when Warders had not always been asked whether they wanted the bond—and he was very assiduous in his duties. Birgitte just stood scowling, fists on her hips, apparently watching the men who would patrol the Inner City for the next four hours ride out in a column of twos. Elayne would have been surprised if those men more than crossed Birgitte's mind, though.

In any event, she had her own worries. Trying not to be obvious about it, she studied the wiry woman who held Fireheart's bridle, and the stocky fellow who put down a leather-covered mounting stool and held her stirrup as she dismounted. He was unsmilingly stolid and deliberate, while she was wrapped up in stroking the gelding's nose and whispering to him. Neither really looked at Elayne beyond a respectful bow of the head; courtesies came second to making sure she was not tossed from the saddle by a horse made skittish by bobbing people. No matter that she had no need of their help. She was not in the country any longer, and there were forms to be followed. Even so, she tried not to frown. Leaving them as they led Fireheart away, she did not look back. But she wanted to.

The windowless entry hall beyond the colonnade seemed dim, though a few of the mirrored stand-lamps were lit. Plain lamps here, the iron worked into simple scrolls. Everything was utilitarian, the plastered cornices unadorned, the white stone walls bare and smooth. Word of their arrival had spread, and before they were well inside, half a dozen men and women appeared, bowing and curtsying, to take cloaks and gloves. Their livery differed from the stablefolk's in having white collars and cuffs, and the Lion of Andor on the left breast rather than shoulder. Elayne did not recognize anyone on duty today. Most servants in the Palace were new, and others had come out of retirement to take the places of those frightened off when Rand captured the city. A bald, bluff-faced fellow did not quite meet her eyes, but he might have feared it would be too forward. A slender young woman with a squint put too much enthusiasm into her curtsy, and her smile, but perhaps she simply wanted to show eagerness. Elayne walked away, followed by Birgitte, before she began glaring at them. Suspicion had a bitter taste.

Sareitha and her Warder left them after a few paces, the Brown murmuring an excuse about books she wanted to see in the library. The collection was not small, though nothing in comparison to the great libraries, and she spent hours there every day, frequently pulling up age-worn volumes she said were unknown elsewhere. Yarman heeled her as she glided off down a crossing hallway, a dark stocky swan drawing a strangely graceful stork in her wake. He still carried his disturbing cloak, carefully folded over one arm. Warders rarely let those out of their own hands for long. Kosaan's likely was in his saddlebags.

"Would you like a Warder's cloak, Birgitte?" Elayne asked, walking on. Not for the first time, she envied Birgitte her voluminous trousers. Even divided skirts made an effort of anything beyond a sedate pace. At least she had on riding boots instead of slippers. The bare red-and-white floor tiles would have been freezing in slippers. There were not enough carpets to layer in the halls as well as in the rooms; they would have been worn out in no time, anyway, just from the constant traffic of servants keeping up the Palace. "As soon as Egwene has the Tower, I will have one made for you. You should have one."

"I don't care about flaming cloaks," Birgitte replied grimly. A foreboding scowl set her mouth in a hard line. "It was over so fast, I thought you'd just bloody stumbled and hit your bloody head. Blood and ashes! Knocked down by street toughs! The Light only knows what might have happened!"

"There is no need to apologize, Birgitte." Outrage and indignation began flooding through the bond, but she meant to seize the advantage. Birgitte's chiding was bad enough in private; she was not about to put up with it in the halls, with servants all around, scurrying by on errands, polishing the carved wall panels, tending stand-lamps that were gilded here. They barely paused to offer silent courtesies to Birgitte and her, but doubtless every one was wondering why the Captain-General looked like a thunderhead and had their ears wide to catch whatever they could. “You were not there because I didn’t want you there. I’ll wager Sareitha didn’t have Ned with her.” It hardly seemed possible that Birgitte’s face could darken more. Perhaps mentioning Sareitha was a mistake. Elayne changed the subject. “You really must do something about your language. You are beginning to sound like the worst sort of layabout.”

“My . . . language,” Birgitte murmured dangerously. Even her strides changed, to something like a pacing leopard. “*You* talk about *my* language? At least I always know what the words I use mean. At least I know what fits where, and what doesn’t.” Elayne colored, and her neck stiffened. She *did* know! Most of the time. Often enough, at least. “As for Yarman,” Birgitte went on, her voice still soft, and still dangerous, “he’s a good man, but he isn’t over being goggle-eyed that he’s a Warder yet. He probably jumps when Sareitha snaps her fingers. I was *never* goggle-eyed, and I don’t jump. Is *that* why you saddled me with a title? Did you think it would rein me in? Wouldn’t have been the first silly thought in that head of yours. For someone who thinks so clearly most of the time . . . Well. I have a writing desk buried in flaming reports I have to shovel through if you’re going to get even half the Guards you want, but we’ll have a good long talk tonight. My Lady,” she added, much too firmly. Her bow was almost mockingly formal. She stalked away, and her long golden braid should have been bristling like an angry cat’s tail.

Elayne stamped her foot in frustration. Birgitte’s title was a well-earned reward, earned ten times over just since she bonded the woman! And ten thousand times over before that. Well, she had *thought* of the other, but not until afterwards. Much good it had done, anyway. Whether from liege lady or Aes Sedai, Birgitte chose which commands she obeyed. Not when it was important—not when *she* thought it was important, anyway—but over anything else, especially what she called unnecessary risks, or improper behavior. As if Birgitte Silverbow could talk to anyone about taking risks! And as for proper behavior, Birgitte caroused in taverns! She drank and gambled, and ogled pretty men to boot! She enjoyed looking at the pretty ones even if she did prefer those who looked as if they had been beaten about the head often. Elayne did not want to change her—she admired the woman, liked her, counted her a friend—but she wished there were a little more of Warder to Aes Sedai in their relationship. And much less of knowing older sister to scampish younger.

Abruptly she realized that she was standing there scowling at nothing. Servants hesitated as they went by, and tucked their heads down as if afraid she might be glaring at them. Smoothing her face, she gestured to a gangling, pimply-faced boy coming down the hall. He bowed so awkwardly and so deeply that he staggered and almost fell over.

“Find Mistress Harfor and ask her to see me immediately in my apartments,” she told him, then added in a not unkindly voice, “And you might remember, your superiors won’t be pleased if they find you gawking at the Palace when you should be working.” His mouth dropped open as though she had read his mind. Perhaps he thought she had. His wide eyes flashed to her Great Serpent ring, and he squeaked and made an even deeper bow before darting away at a dead run.

She smiled in spite of herself. It had been a wild stab, but he was too young to be anyone’s spy, and too nervous not to be up to something he should not. On the other hand . . . Her smile faded. On the other hand, he was not that much younger than she.

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CHAPTER 8

Sea Folk and Kin

It was no surprise to Elayne when she encountered the First Maid before reaching her apartments. After all, they were both heading for the same place. Mistress Harfor made her curtsy and fell in with her, carrying an embossed leather folder beneath one arm. She had certainly been up as early as Elayne if not earlier, but her scarlet tabard appeared freshly ironed, the White Lion on her front as clean and pale as new-fallen snow. The servants scurried faster and polished harder when they saw her. Reene Harfor was not harsh, but she kept as tight a discipline over the Palace as Gareth Bryne ever had over the Guards.

“I fear I haven’t caught any spies yet, my Lady,” she said in response to Elayne’s question, her voice pitched to reach Elayne’s ears alone, “but I believe I uncovered a pair. A woman and a man, both taken in service during the last months of the late Queen your mother’s reign. They left the Palace as soon as word spread that I was questioning everyone. Without waiting to gather a scrap of their belongings, not so much as a cloak. That’s as good as an admission, I’d say. Unless they were afraid of being caught out in some other mischief,” she added reluctantly. “There have been cases of pilfering, I’m afraid.”

Elayne nodded thoughtfully. Naean and Elenia had been much in the Palace during the last months of her mother’s reign. More than enough opportunity to settle eyes-and-ears in place. Those two had been in the Palace, and more who had opposed Morgase Trakand’s claim to the throne, accepted her amnesty once she had it, then betrayed her. She would not make her mother’s mistake. Oh, there must be amnesty wherever possible—anything else was planting the seeds for a civil war—but she planned to watch those who took her pardon very closely. Like a cat watching a rat that claimed to have given up interest in the grain barns. “They were spies,” she said. “And there may well be others. Not just for Houses. The sisters at the Silver Swan may have bought eyes-and-ears in the Palace, too.”

“I will continue to look, my Lady,” Reene replied, inclining her head slightly. Her tone was perfectly respectful; she did not so much as raise an eyebrow, but once again Elayne found herself thinking of teaching her grandmother to knit. If only Birgitte could handle matters the way Mistress Harfor did.

“As well you returned early,” the plump woman went on. “You have a busy afternoon, I fear. To begin, Master Norry wishes to speak with you. On an urgent matter, he says.” Her mouth hardened for an instant. She always required to know why people wanted to approach Elayne, so she could winnow out the chaff rather than let Elayne be buried under it, but the First Clerk never saw fit to give her even a hint of his business. Any more than she told him hers. Both were jealous of their fiefs. With a shake of her head, she dismissed Halwin Norry. “After him, a delegation of tabac merchants has petitioned to see you, and another of weavers, both asking remission of taxes because times are hard. My Lady does not need my advice to tell them times are hard for everyone. A group of foreign merchants is waiting as well; rather a large group. Merely to wish you well in a way that doesn’t encumber them, of course—they wish to be on your good side without antagonizing anyone else—but I suggest meeting them briefly.” She laid plump fingers on the folder under her arm. “Also, the Palace accounts require your signature before they can go to Master Norry. They’ll make him sigh, I fear. I hardly expected it in winter, but much of the flour is full of weevils and moths, and half the cured hams have turned, as well as most of the smoked fish.” Quite respectful. And quite firm.

I rule Andor, Elayne’s mother had told her once, in private, *but at times I think Reene Harfor rules me.* Her mother had been laughing, but she sounded as if she meant it, too. Come to think on it, Mistress Harfor as a Warder would be ten times worse than Birgitte.

Elayne did not want to meet with Halwin Norry or with merchants. She wanted to sit quietly and think about spies, and who had Naean and Elenia, and how she could counter them. Except . . . Master Norry had kept Caemlyn alive since her mother died. In truth, by what she could see in the old accounts, he had done so almost from the day she had fallen into Rahvin’s clutches, though Norry was vague about that. He seemed offended by the events of those days, in a rather dusty way. She could not simply shuffle him off. Besides, he never expressed urgency over anything. And the goodwill of merchants was not to be sneered at, even foreign merchants.

And the accounts did need to be signed. Weevils and moths? And hams spoiling? In winter? That was decidedly odd.

They had reached the tall, lion-carved doors of her apartments. Smaller lions than on the doors to those her mother had used, and smaller apartments, but she never considered using the Queen's chambers. That would have been as presumptuous as sitting on the Lion Throne before her right to the Rose Crown was acknowledged.

With a sigh, she reached for the folder.

Down the hallway she caught sight of Solain Morgeillin and Keraille Surtovni, hurrying along as quickly as they could without appearing to run. Flashes of silver showed at the neck of the sullen woman squeezed between them, though the Kinswomen had draped a long green scarf around her to hide the *a'dam*'s leash. That *would* cause talk, and it would be seen sooner or later. Better if she and the others did not have to be moved, but there was no way to avoid it. Between Kinswomen and Sea Folk Windfinders, rooms in the servants' quarters had been needed to hold the overflow even with two and three to a bed, and the Palace had basements for storage, not dungeons. How did Rand *always* manage to do the wrong thing? Being male just was not excuse enough. Solain and Keraille vanished around a corner with their prisoner.

"Mistress Corly asked to see you this morning, my Lady." Reene's voice was carefully neutral. She had been watching the Kinswomen, too, and a trace of frown remained on her broad face. The Sea Folk were odd, yet she could fit a clan Wavemistress and her entourage into her view of the world even if she did not know precisely what a clan Wavemistress was. A high-ranking foreigner was a high-ranking foreigner, and foreigners were expected to be odd. But she could not understand why Elayne had given shelter to nearly a hundred and fifty merchants and craftswomen. Neither "the Kin" nor "the Knitting Circle" would have meant anything to her had she heard them, and she did not understand the peculiar tensions between those women and the Aes Sedai. Nor did she understand the women the Asha'man had brought, prisoners in truth if not confined in cells, kept secluded and never allowed to speak to anyone but the women who escorted them through the halls. The First Maid knew when not to ask questions, yet she disliked not understanding what was going on in the Palace. Her voice did not change by a hair. "She said she had good news for you. Of a sort, she said. She did not petition for an audience, though."

Good news of any sort was better than going over the accounts, and she had hopes of what this news might be. Relinquishing the folder in the First Maid's hands, she said, "Leave that on my writing table, please. And tell Master Norry that I will see him shortly."

Setting out in the direction the Kin had come from with their prisoner, she walked quickly in spite of her skirts. Good news or no good news, Norry and the merchants did have to be seen, and the merchants, not to mention the accounts gone over and signed. Ruling meant endless weeks of drudgery and rare hours of doing what you wanted. Very rare hours. Birgitte lay in the back of her head, a tight ball of the purest irritation and frustration. No doubt, she was digging through that table piled with papers. Well, her own relaxation this day would be whatever time was required to change out of riding clothes and snatch a hasty meal. So she walked very quickly, lost in thought and hardly seeing what was in front of her. What did Norry find urgent? Surely not street repairs. How many spies? Small chance Mistress Harfor would catch them all.

As she rounded a corner, only the sudden awareness of other women who could channel kept her from running headlong into Vandene coming the other way. They recoiled from one another in startlement. Apparently the Green had been deep in thought, too. Her two companions raised Elayne's eyebrows.

Kirstian and Zarya wore plain white and stayed a careful pace behind Vandene, hands folded meekly at their waists. Their hair was bound back simply, and they wore no jewelry. Jewelry was strongly discouraged among novices. They had been Kinswomen—Kirstian had actually been in the Knitting Circle itself—but they were runaways from the Tower, and there were prescribed ways of dealing with those, set in Tower law, no matter how long they had been gone. Returned runaways were required to be absolutely perfect in everything they did, the very model of an initiate striving for the shawl, and small slips that might be overlooked in others were punished swiftly and strongly. They faced a much stronger punishment when they reached the Tower, in addition, a public birching, and even then they would be held to their straight and painful path for at least a year. A returned runaway was made to know in her heart that she never, ever wanted to run away again. Not ever! Half-trained women were just too dangerous to be left loose.

Elayne had tried to be lenient, the few times she was with them—the Kinswomen were not really half-trained; they had as much experience with the One Power as any Aes Sedai, if not the training—she had tried, only to discover that even most of the other Kinswomen disapproved. Given another chance to become Aes Sedai—those who could, at least—they embraced all of the Tower's laws and customs with shocking fervor. She was not surprised at the subdued eagerness in the two women's eyes or the way they seemed to radiate a promise of good behavior—they wanted that chance as badly as anyone—just that they were with Vandene at all. Until now, she had ignored the pair entirely.

"I was looking for you, Elayne," Vandene said without preamble. Her white hair, gathered at the nape of neck with a dark green ribbon, had always given her an air of age despite her smooth cheeks. Her sister's murder had added grimness, soaked it into the bone, so she seemed like an implacable judge. She had been slender; now she was bony, her cheeks hollow. "These children—" She cut off, a faint grimace thinning her mouth.

It was the proper way to refer to novices—the worst moment for a woman who went to the Tower was not when she discovered she would not be considered fully adult until she earned the shawl, but when she realized that so long as she wore novice white, she really was a child, one who might injure herself or others through ignorance and blundering—the proper way, yet even to Vandene it must have seemed strange here. Most novices came to the Tower at fifteen or sixteen, and until recently, none over eighteen, except for a handful who had managed to carry off a lie. Unlike Aes Sedai, the Kin used age to set their hierarchy, and Zarya—she had been calling herself Garenia Rosoinde, but Zarya Alkaese was the name in the novice book, and Zarya Alkaese she would answer to—Zarya, with her strong nose and wide mouth, was more than ninety years old, though she appeared well short of her middle years. Neither woman had the agelessness despite their years of using the Power, and pretty, black-eyed Kirstian looked a little older, perhaps thirty or so. She was over three hundred, older than Vandene herself, Elayne was sure. Kirstian had been gone from the Tower so long that she had felt safe using her true name again, or part of it. Not at all the usual run of novices.

"These *children,*" Vandene went on more firmly, a deep frown creasing her forehead, "have been thinking over events in Harlon Bridge." That was where her sister had been murdered. And Ispan Shefar, but as far as

Vandene was concerned, the death of a Black sister counted with the death of a rabid dog. “Unfortunately, rather than keeping silent about their conclusions, they came to me. At least they haven’t blathered where anyone could hear.”

Elayne frowned slightly. Everyone in the Palace knew of the murders by this time. “I don’t understand,” she said slowly. And carefully. She did not want to give the pair hints if they had not really dug up painstakingly hidden secrets. “Have they worked out that it was Darkfriends instead of robbery?” That was the tale they had put about, two women in an isolated house, killed for their jewelry. Only she, Vandene, Nynaeve and Lan knew any real measure of the truth. Until now anyway, it seemed. They must have gotten that far, or Vandene would have sent them away with a flea in their collective ear.

“Worse.” Vandene looked around, then moved a few paces to the center of where the hallways crossed, forcing Elayne to follow. From that vantage, they could see anyone coming along either corridor. The novices attentively maintained their positions relative to the Green. Maybe they had already gotten that flea, for all their eagerness. There were plenty of servants in sight, but no one approaching, no one close enough to overhear. Vandene lowered her voice anyway. Quietness did nothing to mask her displeasure. “They reasoned out that the killer must be Merilille, Sareitha or Careane. Good thinking on their part, I suppose, but they shouldn’t have been thinking about it in the first place. They should have been kept at their lessons so hard they had no time to think of anything else.” Despite the scowl she directed at Kirstian and Zarya, the two overaged novices beamed with delight. There had been a compliment buried in the scolding, and Vandene was sparing of compliments.

Elayne did not point out that the pair might have been kept a little busier if Vandene had been willing to take part of their lessons. Elayne herself and Nynaeve had too many other duties, and since they had added daily lessons for the Windfinders—everyone but Nynaeve had, anyway—no one at all had the energy for much time with the two novices. Teaching the Atha’an Miere women was like being fed through a laundress’s mangle! They had little respect for Aes Sedai. And even less for rank among “the shorebound.”

“At least they didn’t speak to anyone else,” she murmured. A blessing, if small.

It had been obvious when they found Adeleas and Ispan that their killer must be an Aes Sedai. They had been paralyzed with crimsonthorn before they were killed, and it was all but impossible that the Windfinders knew of an herb only found far from the sea. And even Vandene was sure the Kin numbered no Darkfriends among them. Ispan had run away herself as a novice, and even gotten as far as Ebou Dar, but she had been retaken before the Kin revealed themselves to her, that they were more than a few women put out of the Tower who had decided on a whim to help her. Under questioning by Vandene and Adeleas, she had revealed a great deal. Somehow she had managed to resist saying anything about the Black Ajah itself except for exposing old schemes long carried out, but she had been eager to tell anything else once Vandene and her sister were done with her. They had not been gentle, and they had plumbed her depths, yet she knew no more of the Kin than any other Aes Sedai. If there were any Darkfriends among the Kin, the Black Ajah would have known everything. So as much as they could wish otherwise, the killer was one of three women they had all grown to like. A Black sister in their midst. Or more than one. They had all been frantic to keep that knowledge secret, at least until the murderer was uncovered. The news would throw the entire Palace into a panic, maybe the entire city. Light, who else had been thinking over events in Harlon Bridge? Would they have the sense to hold silence?

"Someone had to take them in hand," Vandene said firmly, "to keep them out of further mischief. They need regular lessons and hard work," The pair's beaming faces had taken on a hint of smugness, but it faded a little at that. Their lessons had been few, but *very* hard, the discipline *very* strict. "That means you, Elayne, or Nynaeve."

Elayne clicked her tongue in exasperation. "Vandene, I hardly have a moment for myself to think. I'm already straining to give them an hour now and then. It will have to be Nynaeve."

"What will have to be Nynaeve?" the woman herself demanded cheerfully, joining them. Somehow she had acquired a long, yellow-fringed shawl embroidered with leaves and bright flowers, but it lay looped over her elbows. Despite the temperatures she wore a blue gown with quite a low neckline for Andor, though the thick, dark braid pulled over her shoulder and nestled in her cleavage kept the exposure from being too great. The small red dot, the *ki'sain*, in the middle of her forehead did look quite strange. According to Malkieri custom, a red *ki'sain* marked a married woman, and she had insisted on wearing it as soon as she learned. Toying idly with the end of her braid, she looked . . . content . . . not an emotion anyone usually associated with Nynaeve al’Meara.

Elayne gave a start when she noticed Lan, a few paces off, strolling a circle around them and keeping watch down both hallways. As tall as an Aielman in his dark green coat, with shoulders belonging on a blacksmith, the hard-faced man still managed to move like a ghost. His sword was buckled at his waist even here in the Palace. He always made Elayne shiver. Death gazed from his cold blue eyes. Except when he looked at Nynaeve, anyway.

Contentment vanished from Nynaeve’s face as soon as she learned what would have to be her task. She stopped fingering her braid, and seized it in a tight fist. “Now you listen to me. Elayne might be able to loll around playing politics, but I have my hands full. More than half the Kin would have vanished by now if Alise wasn’t holding them by the scruff of the neck, and since she hasn’t a hope of reaching the shawl herself, I’m not sure how much longer she’ll hold anybody. The rest think they can argue with me! Yesterday, Sumeko called me . . . *girl*!”

She bared her teeth, but it was all her own fault, one way and another. After all, she was the one who had hammered at the Kin that they ought to show some backbone instead of groveling to Aes Sedai. Well, they certainly had stopped groveling. Instead, they were all too likely to hold sisters up to the standard of their Rule. And find the sister wanting! It might not be Nynaeve’s fault, exactly, that she appeared to be little more than twenty—she had slowed early—but age was important to the Kin, and she had chosen to spend most of her time with them. She was not jerking her braid, just pulling at it so steadily it must be ready to pull free of her scalp.

“And those cursed Sea Folk! Wretched women! Wretched; wretched; wretched! If it wasn’t for that *bloody* bargain . . . ! The last thing I need on my hands is a couple of whining, bleating novices!” Kirstian’s lips thinned for an instant, and Zarya’s dark eyes flashed indignation before she managed to assume meekness again. A semblance of it. They had sense enough to know that novices did not open their mouths to Aes Sedai, though.

Elayne shoved down the desire to smooth everything over. She wanted to slap Kirstian and Zarya both. They had complicated everything by not keeping their mouths shut in the first place. She wanted to slap Nynaeve. So she finally had been cornered by the Windfinders, had she? That earned no sympathy. “I’m not *playing* at anything, Nynaeve, and you well know it! I have asked your advice often enough!” Drawing a deep breath, she tried to calm herself. The servants she could see beyond Vandene and the two novices had paused in their work to goggle at the cluster of women. She doubted they more than noticed Lan, impressive as he was. Arguing Aes Sedai were something to watch, and stay clear of. “Someone has to take charge of them,” she said more quietly. “Or do you think you can just tell them to forget all this? Look at them, Nynaeve. Left to themselves, they will be trying to find out who it is in a heartbeat. They wouldn’t have gone to Vandene unless they thought she would let them help.” The pair became pictures of wide-eyed novice innocence, with just a hint of offense at an unjust accusation. Elayne did not believe it. They had had a lifetime to work on disguising themselves.

“And why not?” Nynaeve said after a moment, shifting her shawl. “Light, Elayne, you have to remember they aren’t what we normally expect in novices.” Elayne opened her mouth in protest—what we normally expect, indeed!—Nynaeve might never have been a novice, but she had been Accepted not all that long ago; a whining, bleating Accepted, often enough, too!—she opened her mouth, and Nynaeve went right on. “Vandene can make good use of them, I’m sure,” she said. “And when she isn’t, she can give them regular lessons. I remember someone telling me you’ve taught novices before, Vandene. There. It’s settled.”

The two novices smiled broad, eager smiles of anticipation—they all but rubbed their hands together in satisfaction—but Vandene scowled. “I do not need novices getting under my feet while I—”

“You’re just as blind as Elayne,” Nynaeve broke in. “They have experience making Aes Sedai take them for something other than what they are. They can work at your direction, and that will give you time to sleep and eat. I don’t believe you’re doing either.” She drew herself up, draping her shawl across her shoulders and along her arms. It was quite a performance. Short as she was, no taller than Zarya and markedly shorter than Vandene or Kirstian, she managed to seem the tallest one there by inches. It was a skill Elayne wished she could master. Although she would not try in a dress cut that way. Nynaeve was in danger of coming right out. Still, that did not diminish her presence. She was the essence of command. “You will do it, Vandene,” she said firmly.

Vandene's scowl faded slowly, but fade it did. Nynaeve stood higher in the Power than she, and even if she never consciously thought of the fact, deeply ingrained custom made her yield, however unwillingly. By the time she turned to the two women in white, her face was as near composed as it had been since Adeleas' murder. Which just meant that the judge might not order an execution right now. Later, perhaps. Her gaunt face was calm, and starkly grim.

"I did teach novices for a time," she said. "A short time. The Mistress of Novices thought I was too hard on my students." The pair's eagerness cooled a bit. "Her name was Sereille Bagand." Zarya's face went as pale as Kirstian's, and Kirstian swayed as if suddenly dizzy. As Mistress of Novices and later Amyrlin Seat, Sereille was a legend. The sort of legend that made you wake in the middle of the night sweating. "I do eat," Vandene said to Nynaeve. "But everything tastes like ashes." With a curt gesture at the two novices, she led them away past Lan. They were staggering slightly as they followed.

"Stubborn woman," Nynaeve grumbled, frowning at the retreating backs, but there was more than a hint of sympathy in her voice. "I know a dozen herbs that would help her sleep, but she won't touch them. I've half a mind to slip something into her evening wine."

A wise ruler, Elayne thought, *knows when to speak and when not.* Well, that was wisdom in anyone. She did not say that Nynaeve calling anyone stubborn was the rooster calling the pheasant proud. "Do you know what Reanne's news is?" she said instead. "Good news—'of a sort'—so I understand."

"I haven't seen her this morning," the other woman muttered, still peering after Vandene. "I haven't been out of my rooms." Abruptly she gave herself a shake, and for some reason frowned suspiciously at Elayne. And then at Lan, of all things. Unperturbed, he continued to stand guard.

Nynaeve claimed her marriage was glorious—she could be *shockingly* frank about it with other women—but Elayne thought she must be lying to cover up disappointment. Very likely Lan was ready for an attack, ready to fight, even when asleep. It would be like lying down beside a hungry lion. Besides, that stone face was enough to chill any marriage bed. Luckily, Nynaeve had no idea what she thought. The woman actually smiled. An amused smile, oddly. Amused, and . . . could it be condescending? Of course not. Imagination.

“I know where Reanne is,” Nynaeve said, settling her shawl back down to her elbows. “Come with me. I’ll take you to her.”

Elayne knew exactly where Reanne would be, since she was not closeted with Nynaeve, but once again she schooled her tongue, and let Nynaeve lead her. A sort of penance for arguing earlier, when she should have tried to make peace. Lan followed, those cold eyes scanning the halls. The servants they passed flinched when Lan’s gaze fell on them. A youngish, pale-haired woman actually gathered her skirts and ran, bumping into a stand-lamp and setting it rocking in her flight.

That reminded Elayne to tell Nynaeve about Elenia and Naean, and about the spies. Nynaeve took it quite calmly. She agreed with Elayne that they would know soon enough who had rescued the two women, with a dismissive sniff for Sareitha’s doubts. For that matter, she expressed surprise that they had not been taken right from Aringill long since. “I couldn’t believe they were still there when we arrived in Caemlyn. Any fool could see they would be brought here sooner or later. Much easier to get them out of a small town.” A small town. Aringill would have seemed a great city to her, once. “As for spies . . .” She frowned at a lanky, gray-haired man filling a gold-worked stand-lamp with oil, and shook her head. “Of course there are spies. I knew there must be, right from the start. You just have to watch what you say, Elayne. Don’t say anything to anyone you don’t know well unless you don’t mind everyone knowing.”

When to speak and when not, Elayne thought, pursing her lips. Sometimes that could be a true penance, with Nynaeve.

Nynaeve had her own information to impart. Eighteen of the Kin who had accompanied them to Caemlyn were no longer in the Palace. They had not run away, though. Since none was strong enough to Travel, Nynaeve had woven the gateways herself, sending them deep into Altara and Amadicia and Tarabon, into the Seanchan-held lands where they would try to find any of the Kin who had not already fled and bring them back to Caemlyn.

It would have been nice if Nynaeve had thought to inform her yesterday, when they left, or better yet, when she and Reanne reached the decision to send them, but Elayne did not mention that. Instead, she said, “That’s very brave of them. Avoiding capture won’t be easy.”

“Brave, yes,” Nynaeve said, sounding irritated. Her hand crept up to her braid again. “But that isn’t why we chose them. Alise thought they were the most likely to run if we didn't give them something to do." Glancing over her shoulder at Lan, she snatched her hand back down. "I don't see how Egwene means to do it," she sighed. "All very well to say every one of the Kin will be 'associated' with the Tower somehow, but how? Most aren't strong enough to earn the shawl. Many can't even reach Accepted. And they certainly won't stand for being novices or Accepted the rest of their lives."

This time Elayne said nothing because she did not know what to say. The promise had to be kept; she had made it herself. In Egwene's name, true, and at Egwene's order, but she had spoken the words herself, and she would not break her word. Only, she did not see how to keep it unless Egwene came up with something truly wonderful.

Reanne Corly was just where Elayne had known she would be, in a small room with two narrow windows looking down on a small, fountained courtyard deep in the Palace, though the fountain was dry, this time of year, and the glass casements made the room a little stuffy. The floor was plain dark tile with no carpet, and for furnishings there were only a narrow table and two chairs. There were two people with Reanne when Elayne entered. Alise Tenjile, in simple high-necked gray, looked up from where she stood at the end of the table. Seemingly in her middle years, she was a woman of pleasant, unremarkable appearance who was quite remarkable indeed once you came to know her and could be very unpleasant indeed when it was called for. A single glance, and she returned to her study of what was going on at the table. Aes Sedai, Warders and Daughter-Heirs did not impress Alise, not any longer. Reanne herself was sitting on one side of the table, her face creased and her hair more gray than not, in a green dress more elaborate than Alise's; she had been put out of the Tower after failing her test for Accepted, and offered a second chance, she had already adopted the colors of her preferred Ajah. Across from her sat a plump woman in plain brown wool, her face set in stubborn defiance and her dark eyes locked on Reanne, avoiding the silvery segmented *a'dam* lying like a snake between them on the table. Her hands stroked the edge of the tabletop, though, and Reanne wore a confident smile that deepened the fine lines at the corners of her eyes.

"Don't tell me you have made one of them see reason," Nynaeve said before Lan had even shut the door behind them. She scowled at the woman in brown as though she wanted to box her ears if not worse, then glanced at Alise. Elayne thought Nynaeve was a little in awe of Alise. The woman was far from strong in the Power—she would never attain the shawl—but she had a way of taking charge when she wanted to and making everyone around her accept it. Including Aes Sedai. Elayne thought she might be just a little in awe of Alise herself.

“They still deny they can channel,” Alise muttered, folding her arms beneath her breasts, and frowned at the woman facing Reanne. “They can’t, really, I suppose, but I can feel . . . something. Not quite the spark of a woman born to it, but almost. It’s as if she were right at the brink of being able to channel, one foot poised to step over. I have never sensed anything like it before. Well. At least they don’t try to attack us with their fists anymore. I think I put them straight on that, at least!” The woman in brown flashed a sullen, angry glare at her, but jerked her eyes away from Alise’s firm gaze, her mouth twisting in a sickly grimace. When Alise set somebody straight, they were set very straight indeed. Her hands continued to shift along the tabletop; Elayne did not think she was aware of it.

“They still deny seeing the flows, too, but they’re trying to convince themselves,” Reanne said in her high, musical voice. She continued to meet the other’s obstinate stare with a smile. Any sister might have envied Reanne’s serenity and presence. She had been Eldest of the Knitting Circle, the highest authority among the Kin. According to their Rule, the Knitting Circle existed only in Ebou Dar, but she was still the oldest among those in Caemlyn, a hundred years older than any Aes Sedai in living memory, and she could match any sister with her air of calm command. “They claim we trick them with the Power, use it to make them believe the *a’dam* can hold them. Sooner or later, they will run out of lies.” Drawing the *a’dam* to her, she opened the collar’s catch with a deft motion. “Shall we try again, Marli?” The woman in brown—Marli—still avoided looking at the length of silver metal in Reanne’s hands, but she stiffened and her hands fluttered on the table’s edge.

Elayne sighed. What a gift Rand had sent her. A gift! Twenty-nine Seanchan *sul’dam* neatly held by *a’dam*, and five *damane*—she hated that word; it meant Leashed One, or simply Leashed; but that was what they were—five *damane* who could not be uncollared for the simple reason that they would try to free the Seanchan women who had held them prisoner. Leopards tied with string would have been a better gift. At least leopards could not channel. They had been given into the Kin’s keeping because no one else had the time.

Still, she had seen right away what to do with the *sul'dam.* Convince them that they could learn to channel, then send them back to the Seanchan. Apart from Nynaeve, only Egwene, Aviendha and a few of the Kin knew her plan. Nynaeve and Egwene were doubtful, but however hard the *sul'dam* tried to hide what they were once they were returned, eventually one would slip. If they did not just report everything right away. Seanchan were peculiar; even the Seanchan among the *damane* truly believed that any woman who could channel had to be collared for the safety of everyone else. *Sul'dam,* with their ability to control women wearing the *a'dam,* were highly respected among the Seanchan. The knowledge that *sul'dam* themselves were able to channel would shake the Seanchan to their core, maybe even break them apart. It had seemed so simple, in the beginning.

"Reanne, I understood that you had good news," she said. "If the *sul'dam* haven't started breaking down, what is it?" Alise frowned at Lan, who stood silent guard in front of the door—she disapproved of him knowing their plans—but she said nothing.

"A moment, if you please," Reanne murmured. It was not really a request. Nynaeve truly had done her job too well. "There is no need for her to listen." The glow of *saidar* suddenly shone around her. She moved her fingers as she channeled, as though guiding the flows of air that bound Marli to her chair, then tied them off and cupped her hands as though shaping in her sight the ward against sound that she wove around the woman. The gestures were no part of channeling, of course, but necessary to her, since she had learned the weaves that way. The *sul'dam*'s lips twisted slightly in contempt. The One Power did not frighten her at all.

"Take your time," Nynaeve put in acidly, planting her hands on her hips. "There's no hurry." Reanne did not intimidate her the way Alise did.

Then again, Nynaeve no longer intimidated Reanne, either. Reanne did take her time, studying her handiwork, then nodded with satisfaction before rising. The Kin had always tried to channel as little as was necessary, and she took great pleasure in the freedom to use *saidar* as often as she wished, as well as pride in weaving well.

"The good news," she said, standing and smoothing her skirts, "is that three of the *damane* seem ready to be let out of their collars. Perhaps."

Elayne's eyebrows rose, and she exchanged surprised looks with Nynaeve. Of the five *damane* Taim had handed over to them, one had been taken by the Seanchan on Toman Head and another in Tanchico. The others had come from Seanchan.

"Two of the Seanchan women, Marille and Jillari, still say they *deserve* to be collared, *need* to be collared." Reanne's mouth tightened with distaste, but she paused for only a moment. "They truly seem horrified at the prospect of freedom. Alivia has stopped that. Now she says it was only because she was afraid she would be retaken. She says she hates all the *sul'dam*, and she certainly makes a good show of it, snarling at them and cursing them, but . . ." She shook her head slowly in doubt. "She was collared at thirteen or fourteen, Elayne, she's not certain which, and she's been *damane* for *four hundred years!* And aside from that, she is . . . she's . . . Alivia is considerably stronger than Nynaeve," she finished in a rush. Age, the Kin might discuss openly, but they had all the Aes Sedai reticence about speaking of strength in the Power. "Do we dare let her free? A Seanchan wilder who could tear the entire Palace apart?" The Kin shared the Aes Sedai view of wilders, too. Most did.

Sisters who knew Nynaeve had learned to take care with that word around her. She could become quite snappish when it was used in a disparaging tone. Now, she just stared at Reanne. Perhaps she was trying to find the answer. Elayne knew what her own answer would be, but this had nothing to do with claiming the throne, or Andor. It was a decision for Aes Sedai, and here, that meant it was Nynaeve's to make.

"If you don't," Lan said quietly from the door, "then you might as well give her back to the Seanchan." He was not at all abashed by the dark looks given him by the four women who heard his deep voice toll those words like a funeral gong. "You will have to watch her closely, but keep her collared when she wants to be free, and you are no better than they are."

"That isn't for you to say, Warder," Alise said firmly. He met her stern stare with cool equanimity, and she gave a small disgusted grunt and threw up her hands. "You should give him a good talking-to when you get him alone, Nynaeve."

Nynaeve must have been feeling her awe of the women particularly strongly, because her cheeks colored. "Don't think that I will not," she said lightly. She did not look at Lan at all. Finally condescending to notice the chill, she pulled her shawl up onto her shoulders, and cleared her throat. "He is right, though. At least we don't have to worry about the other two.

I’m just surprised it took them this long to stop imitating those fool Seanchan.”

“I am not so sure,” Reanne sighed. “Kara was a sort of wise woman on Toman Head, you know. Very influential in her village. A wilder, of course. You would think she’d hate the Seanchan, but she doesn’t, not all of them. She is very fond of the *sul’dam* captured with her, and very anxious that we shouldn’t hurt *any* of the *sul’dam.* Lemore is just nineteen, a pampered noblewoman with the extreme bad luck to have the spark manifest itself in her on the very day Tanchico fell. She says she hates the Seanchan and wants to make them pay for what they did to Tanchico, but she answers to Larie, her *damane* name, as readily as to Lemore, and she smiles at the *sul’dam* and lets them pet her. I don’t mistrust them, not the way I do Alivia, but I doubt either one could stand up to a *sul’dam.* I think if a *sul’dam* ordered either to help her escape, she would, and I fear she might not fight too hard if the *sul’dam* tried to collar her again.”

After she stopped speaking, the silence stretched.

Nynaeve seemed to look inward, struggling with herself. She gripped her braid, then let go and folded her arms tight across her chest, the fringe of her shawl swaying as she hugged herself. She glared at everyone except Lan. Him, she did not so much as glance at.

Finally she took a deep breath, and squared herself to face Reanne and Alise. “We must remove the *a’dam.* We will hold on to them until we can be sure—and Lemore after; she needs to be put in white!—and we will make sure they are never left alone, especially with the *sul’dam,* but the *a’dam* come off!” She spoke fiercely, as if expecting opposition, but a broad smile of approval spread across Elayne’s face. The addition of three more women they could not be sure of hardly counted as good news, but there had been no other choice.

Reanne merely nodded acceptance—after a moment—but a smiling Alise came around the table to pat Nynaeve’s shoulder, and Nynaeve actually blushed. She tried to hide it behind clearing her throat roughly and grimacing at the Seanchan woman in her cage of *saidar*, but her efforts were not very effectual, and Lan spoiled them in any case.

“*Tai’shar Manetheren,*” he said softly.

Nynaeve’s mouth fell open, then curled into a tremulous smile. Sudden tears glistened in her eyes as she spun to face him, her face joyous. He smiled back at her, and there was nothing cold in his eyes.

Elayne struggled not to gape. Light! Maybe he did not chill their marriage bed after all. The thought made her cheeks warm. Trying not to look at them, her eyes fell on Marli, still fastened in her chair. The Seanchan woman was staring straight ahead, tears flowing down her plump cheeks. Straight ahead. At the weaves holding sound away from her. She could not deny seeing the weaves now. But when she said as much, Reanne shook her head.

“They all weep if they are made to look at weaves very long, Elayne,” she said wearily. And a touch sadly. “But once the weaves are gone, they convince themselves we tricked them. They have to, you understand. Else they’d be *damane,* not *sul’dam.* No, it will take time to convince the Mistress of the Hounds that she is really a hound herself. I am afraid I really haven’t given you any good news at all, have I?”

“Not very much,” Elayne told her. None, really. Just another problem to stack up on all the rest. How much bad news could be stacked before the pile buried you? She had to get some good, soon.

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CHAPTER 9

A Cup of Tea

Once in her dressing room, Elayne hurriedly changed out of her riding clothes with the help of Essande, the white-haired pensioner she had chosen for her maid. The slender, dignified woman was a trifle slow-moving, but she knew her job and did not waste time chattering. In fact, she seldom said a word beyond suggestions on clothing, and the comment given every day, that Elayne looked like her mother. Flames danced atop thick logs on a wide marble hearth at one end of the room, but the fire did little to take the chill off the air. Quickly she put on a fine blue wool with patterns of seed pearls on the high neck and down the sleeves, her silver-worked belt with a small silver-sheathed dagger, and the silver-embroidered blue velvet slippers. There might be no time to change again before seeing the merchants, and they must be impressed at the sight of her. She would have to be sure Birgitte was there; Birgitte was *most* impressive in her uniform. And Birgitte would take even listening to merchants as a break. By the heated knot of irritation resting in the back of Elayne's head, the Captain-General of the Queen's Guard was finding those reports heavy going.

Fastening clusters of pearls in her ears, she dismissed Essande to her own fire, in the pensioners' quarters. The woman had denied it when offered Healing, but Elayne suspected her joints ached. In any case, she herself was ready. She would not wear the coronet of the Daughter-Heir; it could stay atop the small ivory jewelry chest on her dressing table. She did not have many gems; most had already been put in pawn, and the rest might have to go when the plate did. No point worrying about it now. A few moments to herself, and she would have to leap back to duty.

Her dark-paneled sitting room with its wide cornices of carved birds contained two tall fireplaces with elaborate mantels, one at either end, which did a better job of warming than the one in the dressing room, though here, too, the carpets layered on the white-tiled floor were necessary. To her surprise, the room also contained Halwin Norry. Duty had leaped at her, it seemed.

The First Clerk stretched up out of a low-backed chair as she entered, clutching a leather folder to his narrow chest, and lurched around the scroll-edged table in the middle of the room to make an awkward leg. Norry was tall and lean, with a long nose, his sparse fringe of hair rising behind his ears like sprays of white feathers. He often reminded her of a heron. Any number of clerks under him actually wielded the pens, yet a small inkstain marred one edge of his scarlet tabard. The stain looked old, though, and she wondered whether the folder hid others. He had only taken to holding it against his chest when he donned formal dress, two days after Mistress Harfor. Whether he had done so as an expression of loyalty, or simply because the First Maid had, was still in question.

“Forgive me for being precipitate, my Lady,” he said, “but I do believe I have matters of some importance, if not actual haste, to lay before you.” Important or not, his voice still droned.

“Of course, Master Norry. I would not want to press you to haste.” He blinked at her, and she tried not to sigh. She thought he might be more than a little deaf, from the way he tilted his head this way and that as if to catch sound better. Maybe that was why his voice almost never changed pitch. She raised hers a little. He might just be a bore, after all. “Sit, and tell me these matters of importance.”

She took one of the carved chairs away from the table and motioned him to another, but he remained standing. He always did. She settled back to listen, crossing her knees and adjusting her skirts.

He did not refer to his folder. Everything on the papers in it would be inside his head, the papers there only in case she required to see with her own eyes. “Most immediate, my Lady, and perhaps most important, large deposits of alum have been discovered on your estates at Danabar. The first quality of alum. I believe the bankers will be . . . umm . . . less hesitant regarding my inquiries on your behalf once they learn of this.” He smiled briefly, a momentary curving of thin lips. For him, that was near to capering.

Elayne sat up straight as soon as he mentioned alum, and she smiled much more broadly. She felt a little like capering herself. Had her companion been anyone but Norry, she might have. Her elation was so strong that for a moment she felt Birgitte’s irritability wane. Dyers and weavers devoured alum, and so did glassmakers and papermakers among others. The only source for first quality alum was Ghealdan—or had been till now—and just the taxes on the trade had been sufficient to support the throne of Ghealdan for generations. What came from Tear and Arafel was not nearly so fine, yet it put as much coin in those countries' coffers as olive oil or gems.

"That *is* important news, Master Norry. The best I've had today." The best since reaching Caemlyn, very likely, but *certainly* the best today. "How quickly can you overcome the bankers' 'hesitation'?" It had been more like slamming the door in her face, only not so rude. The bankers knew to a man how many swords stood behind her at the moment, and how many behind her opponents. Even so, she had no doubts the riches of alum would bring them around. Neither did Norry.

"Quite quickly, my Lady, and on very good terms, I believe. I shall tell them if their best offers are insufficient, I will approach Tear or Cairhien. They will not risk losing the custom, my Lady." All in that dry, flat voice, without a hint of the satisfaction any other man would have. "It will be loans against future income, of course, and there will be expenses. The mining itself. Transportation. Danabar is in mountainous country, and some distance from the Lugard Road. Still, there should be sufficient to meet your ambitions for the Guards, my Lady. And for your Academy."

"Sufficient is hardly the word, if you've given over trying to talk me out of my plans for the Academy, Master Norry," she said, nearly laughing. He was as jealous of Andor's treasury as a hen with one chick, and he had been adamantly opposed to her taking over the school Rand had ordered founded in Caemlyn, returning to his arguments time and again until his voice seemed a drill boring into her skull. So far the school consisted of only a few dozen scholars with their students, scattered about the New City in various inns, but even in winter more arrived every day, and they had begun to clamor for more space. She did not propose giving them a palace, certainly, yet they needed something. Norry was trying to husband Andor's gold, but she was looking to Andor's future. Tarmon Gai'don was coming, yet she had to believe there would be a future afterward, whether or not Rand broke the world again. Otherwise, there was no point in going on with anything, and she could not see just sitting down to wait. Even if she knew for a fact that the Last Battle would end everything, she did not think she could sit on her hands. Rand started schools in case he *did* end breaking the world, in the hope of saving something, but this school would be Andor's, not Rand al'Thor's. The Academy of the Rose, dedicated to the memory of Morgase Trakand. There *would* be a future, and the future would remember her mother. "Or have you decided the Cairhienin gold can be traced to the Dragon Reborn after all?"

"I still believe the risk to be very small, my Lady, but no longer worth taking in view of what I have just learned from Tar Valon." His tone did not alter, but clearly he was agitated. His fingers drummed the leather folder against his chest, spiders dancing, then still. "The . . . umm . . . White Tower has issued a proclamation acknowledging . . . umm . . . Lord Rand as the Dragon Reborn and offering him . . . umm . . . protection and guidance. It also pronounces anathema on anyone approaching him save through the Tower. It is wise to be wary of Tar Valon's anger, my Lady, as you yourself are aware." He looked significantly at the Great Serpent ring on her hand resting on the carved arm of the chair. He knew of the split in the Tower, of course—maybe a crofter in Seleisin did not; no one else could fail to, by now—but he had been too discreet to ask her allegiance. Though plainly he had been about to say "the Amyrlin Seat" instead of "the White Tower." And the Light alone knew what in place of "Lord Rand." She did not hold that against him. He was a cautious man, a quality needed in his post.

Elaida's proclamation stunned her, though. Frowning, she thumbed her ring thoughtfully. Elaida had worn that ring longer than she herself had lived. The woman was arrogant, wrong-headed, blind to any view except her own, but she was not stupid. Far from it. "Can she possibly think he will *accept* such an offer?" she mused, half to herself. "Protection and *guidance*? I can't imagine a better way to put his back up!" Guidance? No one could *guide* Rand with a barge pole!

"He may possibly have accepted already, my Lady, according to my correspondent in Cairhien." Norry would have shuddered at the suggestion he was in any way a spymaster. Well, he would have twisted his mouth in distaste, anyway. The First Clerk administered the treasury, controlled the clerks who ran the capital, and advised the throne on matters of state. He certainly had no network of eyes-and-ears, like the Ajahs and even some individual sisters did. But he did exchange regular letters with knowledgeable and often well-connected people in other capitals, so his advice could be current with events. "She sends a pigeon only once a week, and it seems that right after her last, someone attacked the Sun Palace using the One Power."

"The Power?" she exclaimed, jerking forward in shock.

Norry nodded once. He might have been reporting the current state of street repairs. "So my correspondent reports, my Lady. Aes Sedai, perhaps, or Asha'man, or even the Forsaken. She repeats gossip here, I fear. The wing housing the apartments of the Dragon Reborn was largely destroyed, and he himself has vanished. It is widely believed that he has gone to Tar Valon to kneel before the Amyrlin Seat. Some do believe him dead in the attack, but not a great many. I advise doing nothing until you have a clearer picture." He paused, head tilted in thought. "From what I saw of him, my Lady," he said slowly, "I myself would not believe him dead unless I sat three days with the corpse."

She almost stared. That was very nearly a joke. A rough witticism, at least. From Halwin Norry! She did not believe Rand was dead, either. She would not believe he was dead. As for kneeling to Elaida, the man was too stubborn to submit to anyone. A great many difficulties could be surmounted if only he could bring himself to kneel to Egwene, but he would not do it, and she was his childhood friend. Elaida stood as much chance as a goat at a court ball, particularly once he learned of her proclamation. Who had attacked him, though? Surely the Seanchan could not have reached out to Cairhien. If the Forsaken had decided to move openly, that could mean worse chaos and destruction than already faced the world, but the worst would be Asha'man. If his own creations turned on him . . . No! She could not protect him, however much he needed it. He would just have to fend for himself.

Fool man! she muttered in her head. *He's probably marching around with banners, just as if no one tried to kill him at all! You had* better *fend for yourself, Rand al'Thor, or I'll slap you silly when I get my hands on you!*

"What else do your correspondents have to say, Master Norry?" she asked aloud, putting Rand aside. She did not have her hands on him yet, and she needed to concentrate on trying to hold on to Andor.

His correspondents had a great deal to say, though some of it was quite old. Not all the writers used pigeons, and letters given to the most trustworthy merchant could take months to come across land in the best of times. Untrustworthy merchants accepted the post fee and never bothered to deliver the letter. Few people could afford to hire couriers. Elayne had a mind to start a Royal Post, if the situation ever allowed. Norry lamented the fact that his latest from Ebou Dar and Amador were already overtaken by events that had been the talk of the streets for weeks.

Not all the news was important, either. His letter writers really were not eyes-and-ears; they just wrote the news of their city, the talk of the court. The talk of Tear was of increasing numbers of Sea Folk ships that made their way through the Fingers of the Dragon without pilots and now crowded the river at the city, of rumors that Sea Folk vessels had fought the Seanchan at sea, though that was purely rumor. Illian was quiet, and full of Rand's soldiers, recovering from a battle against the Seanchan; no more was known; even whether Rand had been in the city was in question. The Queen of Saldaea was still on her long retreat in the country, which Elayne already knew about, but it seemed the Queen of Kandor had not been seen in Chachin for months, either, and the King of Shienar was supposedly still on an extended inspection of the Blightborder, though the Blight was reported quieter than any time in memory. In Lugard, King Roedran was gathering every noble who would bring armsmen, and a city already worried about two great armies camped near the border with Andor, one full of Aes Sedai and the other full of Andorans, now also worried about what a dissolute wastrel like Roedran intended.

"And your counsel here?" she asked when he was done, though she did not need it. In truth, she had not needed it in the others. The events were too far away to affect Andor, or else unimportant, just a view of what was occurring in other lands. Still, she was expected to ask even when they both knew she already had the answer—"do nothing"—and he had been prompt with his replies. Murandy was neither far away nor unimportant, yet this time he hesitated, pursing his lips. Norry was slow and methodical, but seldom hesitant.

"None, in this regard, my Lady," he said at last. "Normally, I would advise an emissary to Roedran to attempt sounding out his goals and reasons. He may be fearful of events north of him, or of the Aiel raids we hear so much about. Then again, though he has always been unambitious, he may have some enterprise in northern Altara. Or in Andor, under the circumstances. Unfortunately . . ." Still pressing the folder to his chest, he spread his hands slightly and sighed, perhaps in apology, perhaps distress.

Unfortunately, she was not queen yet, and no emissary from her would get near Roedran. If her claim failed, and he had received her envoy, the successful claimant might seize a swath of Murandy to teach him a lesson, and Lord Luan and the others had already seized territory. She had better information than the First Clerk, though, from Egwene. She had no intention of revealing her source, but she decided to ease his distress. That must be what had his mouth wrinkled: knowing what should be done and not being able to see how to do it.

"I know Roedran's aims, Master Norry, and he aims at Murandy itself. The Andorans in Murandy have accepted oaths from Murandian nobles in the north, which make the rest nervous. And there is a large band of mercenaries—Dragonsworn, really, but Roedran thinks they are mercenaries—who he has hired in secret, to sit and provide a menace after the other armies are gone. He plans to use those threats to bind nobles to him tightly enough that each is afraid to be the first to break away when the threats are all gone. He may be a problem in the future, if his plan succeeds—for one thing, he will want those northern lands back—but he presents no immediate problems for Andor."

Norry's eyes widened, and he tilted his head first to one side then other, studying her. He wet his lips before speaking. "That would explain much, my Lady. Yes. Yes, it would." His tongue touched his lips again. "There was one other point mentioned by my correspondent in Cairhien which I . . . umm . . . forgot to mention. As you may be aware, your intention to claim the Sun Throne is well known there, and has large support. It seems that many Cairhienin speak openly of coming to Andor, to aide you in gaining the Lion Throne so you can take the Sun Throne sooner. I think perhaps you do not need my advice concerning any such offers?"

She nodded, quite graciously in the circumstances, she thought. Aid from Cairhien would be worse than the mercenaries, for there had been too many wars between Andor and Cairhien. He had not forgotten. Halwin Norry never forgot anything. So why had he decided to tell her, rather than let her be caught by surprise, perhaps by the arrival of her Cairhien supporters? Had her display of knowledge impressed him? Or made him fearful she might learn he had held back? He waited on her patiently, a dried-up heron waiting . . . on a fish?

"Have a letter prepared for my signature and seal, Master Norry, to be sent to every major House in Cairhien. Begin with setting out my right to the Sun Throne as the daughter of Taringail Damodred, and say that I will come to put forward my claim when events in Andor are more settled. Say that I will bring no soldiers with me, as I know that Andoran soldiers on Cairhienin soil would incite all of Cairhien against me, and rightly so. Finish with my appreciation of the support offered to my cause by many Cairhienin, and my hope that any divisions within Cairhien can be healed peacefully." The intelligent would see the message behind the words, and with luck, explain it to any who were not bright enough.

"A deft response, my Lady," Norry said, hunching his shoulders in a semblance of a bow. "I shall make it so. If I may ask, my Lady, have you had time to sign the accounts? Ah. No matter. I will send someone for them later." Bowing properly, if no less awkwardly than before, he prepared to go, then paused. "Forgive me for being so bold, my Lady, but you remind me very much of the late Queen your mother."

Watching the door close behind him, she wondered whether she could count him in her camp. Administering Caemlyn without clerks, much less Andor, was impossible, and the First Clerk had the power to bring a queen to her knees if unchecked. A compliment was not the same as a declaration of fealty.

She did not have long to mull the question, for only moments after he departed, three liveried maids entered, bearing silver-domed trays that they placed in a row on the long side table standing against one wall.

"The First Maid said my Lady forgot to send for her midday meal," a round, gray-haired woman said, curtsying as she gestured for her younger companion to remove the tall domes, "so she sent a choice for my Lady."

A choice. Shaking her head at the display, Elayne was reminded how long it had been since breakfast, eaten with the rising sun. There was sliced saddle of mutton with mustard sauce, and capon roasted with dried figs, sweetbreads with pinenuts, and creamy leek and potato soup, cabbage rolls with raisins and peppers, and a squash pie, not to mention a small plate of apple tarts and another of tipsy cake topped with clotted cream. Mists of steam rose from two squat silver pitchers of wine, in case she preferred one sort of spicing over another. A third held hot tea. And pushed scornfully into a corner of one tray was the meal she always ordered in the middle of the day, clear broth and bread. Reene Harfor disapproved of that; she claimed Elayne was "thin as a rail."

The First Maid had spread her opinions. The gray-haired woman put on a reproachful face as she set the bread and broth and tea on the table in the middle of the room with a white linen napkin, a thin blue porcelain cup and saucer, and a silver pot of honey. And a few of the figs on a dish. A full stomach at midday made for a dull head in the afternoon, as Lini used to say. *Her* opinions were not shared, however. The maids were all comfortably padded women, and even the younger pair looked disappointed as they departed with the remainder of the food.

It was very good broth, hot and lightly spiced, and the tea was pleasantly minty, but she was not left alone with her meal, and her thoughts that perhaps she could have taken a *little* of the tipsy cake, for long. Before she had swallowed two mouthfuls, Dyelin stormed into the room like a whirlwind in a green riding dress, breathing hard. Setting down her spoon, Elayne offered tea before realizing there was only the one cup she was already using, but Dyelin waved the offer aside, her face set in a dire frown.

"There is an army in Braem Wood," she announced, "like nothing seen since the Aiel War. A merchant down from New Braem brought the news this morning. A solid, reliable man, Tormon; an Illianer; not given to flights of fancy or jumping at shadows. He said he saw Arafellin, Kandori, and Shienarans, in different places. Thousands of them, altogether. Tens of thousands." Collapsing into a chair, she fanned herself with one hand. Her face was touched with red, as if she had run with the news. "What in the Light are Borderlanders doing nearly on the border of Andor?"

"It's Rand, I'll wager," Elayne said. Stifling a yawn, she drank the rest of her tea and refilled the cup. Her morning had been tiring, but enough tea would perk her up.

Dyelin stopped fanning and sat up straight. "You don't think he sent them, do you? To . . . help you?"

That possibility had not occurred to Elayne. At times she regretted letting the older woman know her feelings for Rand. "I cannot think he was . . . I mean, would be . . . *that* foolish."

Light, she *was* tired! Sometimes Rand behaved as if he were the King of the World, but surely he would not . . . Would not . . . What it was he would not do seemed to slide away from her.

She covered another yawn, and suddenly her eyes widened above her hand, staring at her teacup. A cool, minty taste. Carefully, she put the cup down, or tried to. She nearly missed the saucer altogether, and the cup toppled over, spilling tea onto the tabletop. Tea laced with forkroot. Even knowing there was no use, she reached out to the Source, tried to fill herself with the life and joy of *saidar*, but she might as well have tried to catch the wind in a net. Birgitte's irritation, less hot than before, was still lodged in a corner of her mind. Frantically she tried to pull up fear, or panic. Her head seemed stuffed with wool, everything in it dulled. *Help me, Birgitte!* she thought. *Help me!*

"What is it?" Dyelin demanded, leaning forward sharply. "You've thought of something, and by your face, it is horrific."

Elayne blinked at her. She had forgotten the other woman was there. "Go!" she said thickly, then swallowed heavily to try clearing her throat. Her tongue still felt twice its size. "Get help! I've . . . been poisoned!" Explaining would take too much time. "Go!"

Dyelin gaped at her, frozen, then lurched to her feet gripping the hilt of her belt knife.

The door opened, and a servant hesitantly put his head in. Elayne felt a flood of relief. Dyelin would not stab her before a witness. The man wet his lips, eye darting between the two women. Then he came in. Drawing a long-bladed knife from his belt. Two more men in red-and-white livery followed, each unsheathing a long knife.

I will not die like a kitten in a sack, Elayne thought bitterly. With an effort, she pushed herself to her feet. Her knees wobbled, and she had to support herself on the table with one hand, but she used the other to draw her own dagger. The pattern-etched blade was barely as long as her hand, but it would suffice. It would have, had her fingers not felt wooden gripping the hilt. A child could take it away. *Not without fighting back*, she thought. It was like pushing through syrup, but determined even so. *Not without fighting!*

Strangely little time seemed to have passed. Dyelin was just turning to her henchmen, the last of them just closing the door behind him.

"Murder!" Dyelin howled. Picking up her chair, she hurled it at the men, "Guards! Murder! Guards!"

The three tried to dodge the chair, but one was too slow, and it caught him on the legs. With a yell, he fell into the man next to him, and they both went down. The other, a slender, towheaded young man with bright blue eyes, skipped by with his knife advanced.

Dyelin met him with her own, slashing, stabbing, but he moved like a ferret, avoiding her attack with ease. His own long blade slashed, and Dyelin stumbled back with a shriek, one hand clutching at her middle. He danced forward nimbly, stabbing, and she screamed and fell like a rag doll. He stepped over her, walking toward Elayne.

Nothing else existed for her except him, and the knife in his hand. He did not rush at her. Those big blue eyes studied her cautiously as he advanced at a steady pace. Of course. He knew she was Aes Sedai. He had to be wondering whether the potion had done its work. She tried to stand straight, to glare at him, to win a few moments by bluff, but he nodded to himself, hefting his knife. If she could have done anything, it would have happened by now. There was no pleasure on his face. He was just a man with a job to do.

Abruptly, he stopped, staring down at himself in astonishment. Elayne stared, too. At the foot of steel sticking out from his chest. Blood bubbled in his mouth as he toppled into the table, shoving it hard.

Staggering, Elayne fell to her knees, and barely caught the edge of the table again to stop herself falling further. Amazed, she stared at the man bleeding onto the carpets. There was a sword hilt sticking out of his back. Her leaden thoughts were wandering. Those carpets might never come clean, with all that blood. Slowly she raised her eyes, past the motionless form of Dyelin. She did not appear to be breathing. To the door. The open door. One of the remaining two assassins lay in front of it, his head at an odd angle, only half attached to his neck. The other was struggling with another red-coated man, the pair of them grunting and rolling on the floor, both striving for the same dagger. The would-be killer was trying to pry the other's fist from his throat with his free hand. The other. A man with a face like an axe. In the white-collared coat of a Guardsman.

Hurry, Birgitte, she thought dully. *Please hurry.*

Darkness consumed her.

* * *

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CHAPTER 10

A Plan Succeeds

Elayne’s eyes opened in darkness, staring at dim shadows dancing on misty paleness. Her face was cold, the rest of her hot and sweaty, and something confined her arms and legs. For an instant panic flared. Then she sensed Aviendha’s presence in the room, a simple, comforting awareness, and Birgitte’s, a fist of calm, controlled anger in her head. They soothed her by being there. She was in her own bedchamber, lying beneath blankets in her own bed and staring up at the taut linen canopy with hot-water bottles packed along her sides. The heavy winter bedcurtains were tied back against the carved posts, and the only light in the room came from tiny flickering flames in the fireplace, just enough to make shadows shift, not dispel them.

Without thought she reached out for the Source and found it. Touched *saidar*, wondrously, without drawing on it. The desire to draw deeply welled up strong in her, but reluctantly she retreated. Oh, so reluctantly, and not just because her wanting to be filled with the deeper life of *saidar* was often a bottomless need that must be controlled. Her greatest fear during those endless minutes of terror had not been death, but that she would never touch the Source again. Once, she would have thought that strange.

Abruptly, memory returned, and she sat up unsteadily, the blankets sliding to her waist. Immediately, she pulled them back up. The air was *cold* against her bare skin slick with sweat. They had not even left her a shift, and try as she would to copy Aviendha’s ease about being unclothed in front of others, she could not manage it. “Dyelin,” she said anxiously, twisting to drape the blankets around herself better. It was an awkward operation; she felt wrung out and more than a little wobbly. “And the Guardsman. Are they . . . ?”

“The man didn’t suffer a scratch,” Nynaeve said, stepping out of the shifting shadows, a shadow herself. She rested her hand on Elayne’s forehead and grunted in satisfaction at finding it cool. “I Healed Dyelin. She will need time to recover her strength fully, though. She lost a great deal of blood. You are doing well, too. For a time, I thought you were taking a fever. That can come on suddenly when you’re weakened.”

“She gave you herbs instead of Healing,” Birgitte said sourly from a chair at the foot of the bed. In the near darkness, she was just a squat, ominous shape.

“Nynaeve al’Meara is wise enough to know what she cannot do,” Aviendha said in level tones. Only her white blouse and a flash of polished silver were really visible, low against the wall. As usual, she had chosen the floor over a chair. “She recognized the taste of this forkroot in the tea and did not know how to work her weaves against it, so she did not take foolish chances.”

Nynaeve sniffed sharply. No doubt as much at Aviendha’s defense of her as Birgitte’s acidity. Perhaps more so. Nynaeve being Nynaeve, she probably would have preferred to let slide what she did not know and could not do. And she was more prickly than usual about Healing, of late. Ever since it became clear that several of the Kin were already outstripping her skill. “You should have recognized it yourself, Elayne,” she said in a brusque voice. “At any rate, greenwort and goatstongue might make you sleep, but they’re sovereign for stomach cramps. I thought you would prefer the sleep.”

Fishing leather hot-water bottles from under the covers and dropping them onto the carpets so she did not start roasting again, Elayne shuddered. The days right after Ronde Macura dosed her and Nynaeve with forkroot had been a misery she had tried to forget. Whatever the herbs were that Nynaeve had given her, she felt no weaker than the forkroot would have made her. She thought she could walk, so long as she did not have to walk far or stand long. And she could think clearly. The casements showed only thin moonlight. How deeply into the night was it?

Embracing the Source again, she channeled four threads of Fire to light first one stand-lamp, then a second. The small, mirrored flames brightened the room greatly after the darkness, and Birgitte put a hand up to shield her eyes, at first. The Captain-General’s coat truly did suit her; she would have impressed the merchants no end.

“You should not be channeling yet,” Nynaeve fussed, squinting at the sudden light. She still wore the same low-cut blue dress Elayne had seen her in earlier, with her yellow-fringed shawl caught in her elbows. “A few days to regain strength would be best, with plenty of sleep.” She frowned at the hot-water bottles tumbled on the floor. “And you need to be kept warm. Better to avoid a fever than need to Heal it.”

“I think Dyelin proved her loyalty today,” Elayne said, shifting her pillows so she could lean back against the headboard, and Nynaeve threw up her hands in disgust. A small silver tray on one of the side tables flanking the bed held a single silver cup filled with dark wine that Elayne gave a brief, mistrusting look. “A hard way to prove it. I think I have *toh* toward her, Aviendha.”

Aviendha shrugged. On their arrival in Caemlyn she had returned to Aiel garments with almost laughable haste, forsaking silks for *algode* blouses and bulky woolen skirts as though suddenly afraid of wetlander luxury. With a dark shawl tied around her waist and a dark folded kerchief holding her long hair back, she was the image of a Wise One’s apprentice, though her only jewelry was a complicated silver necklace of intricately worked discs, a gift from Egwene. Elayne still did not understand her hurry. Melaine and the others had seemed willing to let her go her own way so long as she wore wetlander clothes, but now they had her back in their grip as tightly as any novice in the hands of Aes Sedai. The only reason they allowed her to stay any time at all in the Palace—in the city, for that matter—was that she and Elayne were first-sisters.

“If you think you do, then you do.” Her tones of pointing out the obvious slid into an affectionate chiding. “But a small *toh,* Elayne. You had reason to doubt. You cannot assume obligation for every thought, sister.” She laughed as if suddenly seeing a wonderful joke. “That way lies too much pride, and I will have to be overproud with you, only the Wise Ones will not call to you to account for it.”

Nynaeve rolled her eyes ostentatiously, but Aviendha simply shook her head, wearily patient with the other woman’s ignorance. She had been studying more than the Power with the Wise Ones.

“Well, we wouldn’t want the pair of you being too proud,” Birgitte said with what sounded suspiciously like suppressed mirth. Her face was much too smooth, almost rigid with the effort of not laughing.

Aviendha eyed Birgitte with a wooden-faced wariness. Since she and Elayne had adopted one another, Birgitte had adopted her, too, in way. Not as a Warder, of course, but with the same elder-sister attitude she often displayed toward Elayne. Aviendha was not quite sure what to make of it, or how to respond. Joining the tiny circle who knew who Birgitte really was certainly had not helped. She bounced between fierce determination to show that Birgitte Silverbow did not overawe her and a startling meekness, with odd stops in between.

Birgitte smiled at her, an amused smile, but it faded as she picked up a narrow bundle from her lap and began unfolding the cloth with great care. By the time she revealed a dagger with a leather-wrapped hilt and a long blade, her expression was severe, and tight anger flowed through the bond. Elayne recognized the knife instantly; she had last seen its twin in the hand of a tow-headed assassin.

“They were not trying to kidnap you, sister,” Aviendha said softly.

Birgitte’s tone was grim. “After Mellar killed the first two—the second by spearing him with his sword across the width of the room like somebody in a bloody gleeman’s tale,” she held the dagger upright by the end of the hilt, “he took this from the last fellow and killed him with it. They had four near identical daggers between them. This one is poisoned.”

“Those brown stains on the blade are gray fennel mixed with powdered peach pit,” Nynaeve said, sitting down on the edge of the bed, and grimaced in disgust. “One look at his eyes and tongue, and I knew that was what killed the fellow, not the knife.”

“Well,” Elayne said quietly after a moment. Well, indeed. “Forkroot so I couldn’t channel, or stand up, for that matter, and two men to hold me on my feet while the third put a poisoned dagger in me. A complicated plan.”

“Wetlanders like complicated plans,” Aviendha said. Glancing at Birgitte uneasily, she shifted against the wall and added, “Some do.”

“Simple, in its way,” Birgitte said, rewrapping the knife with as great a care as she had shown unwrapping. “You were easy to reach. Everyone knows you eat your midday meal alone.” Her long braid swung as she shook her head. “A lucky thing the first man to reach you didn’t have this; one stab, and you’d be dead. A lucky thing Mellar happened to be walking by and heard a man cursing in your rooms. Enough luck for a *ta’veren*.”

Nynaeve snorted. “You might be dead from a deep enough cut on your *arm*. The pit is the most poisonous part of a peach. Dyelin wouldn’t have had a chance if the other blades had been poisoned as well.”

Elayne looked around at her friends’ flat, expressionless faces and sighed. A *very* complicated plan. As if spies in the Palace were not bad enough. “A *small* bodyguard, Birgitte,” she said finally. “Something . . . discreet.” She should have known the woman would be prepared, Birgitte’s face did not change in the slightest, but the tiniest burst of satisfaction flared through their shared bond.

“The women who guarded you today, for a start,” she said, without so much as *pretending* to pause for thought, “and a few more that I’ll pick. Maybe twenty or so, altogether. Too few can’t protect you day and night, and you bloody well must be,” she put in firmly, though Elayne had not offered any protest. “Women can guard you where men can’t, and they’ll be discreet just by being who they are. Most people will think they’re ceremonial—your very own Maidens of the Spear—and we’ll give them something, a sash maybe, to make them look more so.” That earned her a very sharp look from Aviendha, which she affected not to notice. “The problem is who to command,” she said, frowning in thought. “Two or three nobles, Hunters, are already arguing for rank ‘sufficient to their station.’ The bloody women know how to give orders, but I’m not sure they know the right bloody orders to give. I could promote Caseille to lieutenant, but she’s more a bannerman at heart, I think.” Birgitte shrugged. “Maybe one of the others will show promise, but I think they are better followers than leaders.”

Oh, yes; all thought out. Twenty or so? She would have to keep a close eye on Birgitte to make sure the number did not climb to fifty. Or more. Able to guard her where men could not. Elayne winced. That probably meant guards watching her bathe at the very least. “Caseille will do, surely. A bannerman can handle twenty.” She was certain she could talk Caseille into keeping it all unobtrusive. And keeping the guards outside while she took a bath. “The man who arrived just in the nick of time. Mellar? What do you know of him, Birgitte?”

“Doilin Mellar,” Birgitte said slowly, her brows drawing down at a sharp angle. “A coldhearted fellow, though he smiles a lot. Mainly at women. He pinches serving girls, and he’s tumbled three in four days that I know of—he likes to talk about his ‘conquests’—but he hasn’t pressed anyone who said no. He claims to have been a merchant’s guard and then a mercenary, and now a Hunter for the Horn, and he certainly has the skills. Enough that I made him a lieutenant. He’s Andoran, from somewhere out west, near Baerlon, and he says he fought for your mother during the Succession, though he couldn’t have been much more than a boy at the time. Anyway, he knows the right answers—I checked—so maybe he was involved in it. Mercenaries lie about their pasts without thinking twice."

Folding her hands on her middle, Elayne considered Doilin Mellar. She remembered only the impression of a wiry man with a sharp face, choking one of her assailants while they struggled over the poisoned dagger. A man with enough of a soldier's skills that Birgitte had made him an officer. She was trying to make sure that as many as possible of the officers, at least, were Andoran. A rescue just in time, one man against three, and a sword hurled across the room like a spear; very much like a gleeman's tale. "He deserves a suitable reward. A promotion to captain and command of my bodyguard, Birgitte. Caseille can be his second."

"Are you mad?" Nynaeve burst out, but Elayne shushed her.

"I'll feel much safer knowing he's there, Nynaeve. He won't try pinching *me*, not with Caseille and twenty more like her around him. With his reputation, they'll watch him like hawks. You did say twenty, Birgitte? I will hold you to that."

"Twenty," Birgitte said absently. "Or so." There was nothing absent about the gaze she fixed on Elayne, though. She leaned forward intently, hands on her knees. "I suppose you know what you're doing." Good; she was going to behave like a Warder for once instead of arguing. "Guardsman-Lieutenant Mellar becomes Guardsman-Captain Mellar, for saving the life of the Daughter-Heir. That will add to his swagger. Unless you think it's better to keep the whole thing secret."

Elayne shook her head. "Oh, no; not at all. Let the whole city know. Someone tried to murder me, and Lieutenant—Captain—Mellar saved my life. We *will* keep the poison to ourselves, though. Just in case someone makes a slip of the tongue."

Nynaeve harrumphed and gave her a sidelong glare. "One day you will be too clever, Elayne. So sharp you cut yourself."

"She is clever, Nynaeve al'Meara." Rising smoothly to her feet, Aviendha settled her heavy skirts, then patted her horn-hilted belt knife. It was not so large as the blade she had worn as a Maiden, yet still a credible weapon. "And she has me to watch her back. I have permission to stay with her, now."

Nynaeve opened her mouth angrily. And for a wonder, closed it again, composing herself visibly, smoothing her skirts and her features. "What are you all staring at?" she muttered. "If Elayne wants this fellow close enough to pinch her whenever he feels like, who am I to argue?" Birgitte's mouth dropped open, and Elayne wondered whether Aviendha was going to choke. Her eyes were certainly popping.

The faint sound of the gong atop the Palace's tallest tower, tolling the hour, made her jerk. It was later than she had thought. "Nynaeve, Egwene might already be waiting for us." None of her clothes were anywhere to be seen. "Where's my purse? My ring is in it." Her Great Serpent ring was on her finger, but that was not the one she meant.

"I will see Egwene alone," Nynaeve said firmly. "You are in no condition to enter *Tel'aran'rhiod.* In any case, you just slept the afternoon away. You won't go to sleep again soon, I'll wager. And I know you've had no luck putting yourself into a waking trance, so that is that." She smiled smugly, certain of her victory. *She* had gone cross-eyed and dizzy attempting to enter the waking trance Egwene had tried to teach them.

"You'll wager that, will you?" Elayne murmured. "What will you bet? Because I intend to drink that," she glanced at the silver cup on the sidetable, "and *I* wager I'll go right to sleep. Of course, if you *didn't* put something in it, if you didn't intend trying to trick me into drinking it . . . Well, of course, you wouldn't do that. So what shall we wager?"

That insufferable smile slid greasily off Nynaeve's face, replaced by bright spots of color in her cheeks.

"A fine thing," Birgitte said, standing. Fists on hips, she squared herself at the foot of the bed, her face and tone alike censuring. "The woman saves you a roiling belly, and you snip at her like Mistress Priss. Maybe if you drink that cup and go to sleep and forget about adventuring in the World of Dreams tonight, I'll decide you've grown up enough that I can trust fewer than a hundred guards to keep you alive. Or do I need to hold your nose to make you drink?" Well, Elayne had not expected her to keep holding back for long. Fewer than a hundred?

Aviendha spun to face Birgitte before she finished, and barely waited for the last word to leave the other woman's mouth. "You should not speak to her so, Birgitte Trahelion," she said, drawing herself to gain the full advantage of her greater height. Given the raised heels on Birgitte's boots, it was not that much, yet with her shawl drawn tightly over her breasts, she looked very much a Wise One rather than an apprentice. Some had faces not much older than hers. "You are her Warder. Ask Aan'allein how to behave. He is a great man, yet he obeys as Nynaeve tells him." Aan'allein was Lan, The Man Alone, his story well known and much admired among the Aiel.

Birgitte eyed her up and down as if measuring her, and adopted a lounging posture that all but lost the extra inches of her boot heels. With a mocking grin, she opened her mouth, plainly ready to prick Aviendha's bubble if she could. She usually could. Before she said a word, Nynaeve spoke quietly and quite firmly.

"Oh, for the love of the Light, give over, Birgitte. If Elayne says she's going, then she is going. Now, not another word out of you." She stabbed a finger at the other woman. "Or you and I will have words, later."

Birgitte stared at Nynaeve, her mouth working soundlessly, the Warder bond carrying an intense blend of irritation and frustration. At last, she flung herself back into her chair, legs sprawled and boots balanced on her lion-head spurs, and began a sullen muttering under her breath. If Elayne had not known her better, she would have sworn the woman was sulking. She wished she knew how Nynaeve did it. Once, Nynaeve had been as much in awe of Birgitte as Aviendha ever was, but that had changed. Completely. Now Nynaeve bullied Birgitte as readily as anyone else. And more successfully than with most. *She's a woman just like any other*, Nynaeve had said. *She told me so herself, and I realized she was right.* As if *that* explained anything. Birgitte was still Birgitte.

"My purse?" Elayne said, and of all people, Birgitte went to fetch the gold-embroidered red purse from the dressing room. Well, a Warder did do that sort of thing, but Birgitte always made some comment when she did. Though perhaps her return was meant for one. She presented the purse to Elayne with a flourishing bow. And a twist of her lips for Nynaeve and Aviendha. Elayne sighed. It was not that the other women disliked one another; they really got on very well, if you ignored their little foibles. They just rubbed against each other sometimes.

The oddly twisted stone ring, strung on a plain loop of leather, lay in the bottom of the purse underneath a mix of coins, next to the carefully folded silk handkerchief full of feathers she considered her greatest treasure. The *ter'angreal* appeared to be stone, anyway, all flecks and stripes of blue and red and brown, but it felt as hard and slick as steel, and too heavy even for that. Settling the leather cord around her neck, and the ring between her breasts, she pulled the drawstrings tight and set the purse on the side table, taking up the silver cup instead. The fragrance was simply that of good wine, but she raised an eyebrow anyway and smiled at Nynaeve.

"I will go to my own room," Nynaeve said stiffly. Rising from the mattress, she shared out a stern look between Birgitte and Aviendha. Somehow, the *ki'sain* on her forehead made it seem even more uncompromising. "The pair of you stay awake and keep your eyes open! Until you have those women around her, she is still in danger. And after, I hope I don't have to remind you."

"You think I do not know that?" Aviendha protested at the same time that Birgitte growled, "I'm not a fool, Nynaeve!"

"So you say," Nynaeve answered them both. "I hope so, for Elayne's sake. And for your own." Gathering her shawl, she glided from the room, as stately as any Aes Sedai could wish to be. She was getting very good at that.

"You'd think she was the bloody queen here," Birgitte muttered.

"She is the one who is overproud, Birgitte Trahelion," Aviendha grumbled. "As proud as a Shaido with one goat." They nodded at one another in perfect agreement.

But Elayne noticed that they had waited to speak until the door had shut behind Nynaeve. The woman who had denied so hard wanting to be Aes Sedai was becoming very much Aes Sedai. Perhaps Lan had something to do with that. Coaching her, from his experience. She still had to work at staying composed, sometimes, but it seemed to come more and more easily since her peculiar wedding.

The first sip of the wine had no taste other than wine, a very good wine, but Elayne frowned at the cup and hesitated. Until she realized what she was doing, and why. The memory of forkroot hidden in her tea was still strong. What had Nynaeve put in here? Not forkroot, of course, but what? Raising the cup to take a full swallow seemed very difficult. Defiantly, she drained the wine. *I was thirsty, that's all,* she thought, stretching to set the cup back on the silver tray. *I certainly wasn't trying to* prove *anything.*

The other two women had been watching her, but as she began settling herself in a more comfortable position for sleep, they turned to one another.

"I'll keep watch in the sitting room," Birgitte said. "I have my bow and quiver in there. You stay here in case she needs you for anything."

Rather than arguing, Aviendha drew her belt knife and knelt, ready to spring up again, off to one side, where she would see anyone coming through the door before they saw her. "Knock twice, then once, and name yourself before you enter," she said. "Otherwise, I will assume it is an enemy." And Birgitte nodded as if that were the most reasonable thing in the world.

"This is sil—" Elayne smothered a yawn behind her hand. "Silly," she finished when she could speak again. "No one is going to try to—" Another yawn, and she could have put her fist into her mouth! Light, what *had* Nynaeve put in that wine? "To kill me—tonight," she said drowsily, "and you—both know—" Her eyelids were leaden, sliding down despite every effort to keep them open. Unconsciously snuggling her face into her pillow, she tried to finish what she had been about to say, but . . .

She was in the Grand Hall, the throne room of the Palace. In the Grand Hall's reflection in *Tel'aran'rhiod.* Here, the twisted stone ring that felt too heavy for its size in the waking world seemed light enough to float up from between her breasts. There was light, of course, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere. It was not like sunlight, or lamps, but even if it was night here, too, there was always enough of that odd light to see. As in a dream. The ever-present sensation of unseen eyes watching was not dreamlike—more like a nightmare—but she had grown accustomed to that.

Great audiences were held in the Grand Hall, foreign ambassadors formally received, important treaties and declarations of war announced to gathered dignitaries, and the long chamber suited its name and function. Empty of people save for her, it seemed cavernous. Two rows of thick gleaming white columns, ten spans high, marched the length of the room, and at one end, the Lion Throne stood atop a marble dais, with red carpeting climbing the white steps from the red-and-white floor tiles. The throne was sized for a woman, but still massive on its heavy lion-pawed legs, carved and gilded, with the White Lion picked out in moonstones on a field of rubies at the top of its high back, announcing that whoever sat there ruled a great nation. From large, colored windows set in the arched ceiling high overhead, the queens who had founded Andor stared down, their images alternating with the White Lion and scenes of the battles they had fought to build Andor from a single city in Artur Hawkwing's shattering empire into that nation. Many lands that had come out of the War of the Hundred Years no longer existed, yet Andor had survived the thousand years since and prospered. Sometimes Elayne felt those images judging her, weighing her worth to follow in their footsteps.

No sooner did she find herself in the Grand Hall than another woman appeared, sitting on the Lion Throne, a dark-haired young woman in flowing red silk embroidered in silver lions on the sleeves and hem, with a strand of firedrops as large as pigeon's eggs around her neck and the Rose Crown sitting on her head. One hand resting lightly on the lion-headed arm of the throne, she gazed regally about the Hall. Then her eyes fell on Elayne, and recognition dawned, along with confusion. Crown and firedrops and silks vanished, replaced by plain woolens and a long apron. An instant later, the young woman vanished, too.

Elayne smiled in amusement. Even scullions dreamed of sitting on the Lion Throne. She hoped the young woman had not been wakened in fright by the start she received, or at least that she had gone on to another pleasant dream. A safer dream than *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

Other things shifted in the throne room. The elaborately worked stand-lamps standing in rows down the chamber seemed to vibrate against the tall columns. The great arched doors stood now open, now closed, in the blink of an eye. Only things that had stood in one place for a goodly time had a truly permanent reflection in the World of Dreams.

Elayne imagined a stand-mirror, and it was before her, reflecting her image in high-necked green silk worked in silver across the bodice, with emeralds in her ears and smaller ones strung in her red-gold curls. She made the emeralds disappear from her hair, and nodded. Fit for the Daughter-Heir, but not too ostentatious. You had to be careful of how you imagined yourself, here, or else. . . . Her modest green silk gown became the snug, form-hugging folds of a Taraboner gown, then flashed to dark, wide Sea Folk trousers and bare feet, complete with golden earrings and nose ring and chain full of medallions, and even dark tattoos on her hands. But without a blouse, the way the Atha'an Miere went at sea. Cheeks coloring, she hastily returned everything to how it had been, then changed the emerald earrings for plain silver hoops. The simpler you imagined your garb, the easier it was to maintain.

Letting the stand-mirror disappear—she just had to stop concentrating on it—she looked up at those stern faces overhead. "Women have taken the throne as young as I," she told them. Not very many, though; only seven who had managed to wear the Rose Crown for very long. "Women younger than I." Three. And one of those lasted barely a year. "I don't claim I will be as great as you, but I will not make you ashamed, either. I *will* be a good queen."

"Talking to *windows?*" Nynaeve said, making Elayne start in surprise. Using a copy of the ring Elayne wore next to her skin, she appeared misty, almost transparent. Frowning, she tried to stride toward Elayne and staggered, nearly tripped by the hobbling skirt of a deep blue Taraboner dress that was much tighter than the one Elayne had imagined on herself. Nynaeve gaped down at the thing, and abruptly it was an Andoran gown in the same colored silk, embroidered in gold on the sleeves and atop the bodice. She still went on about "good, stout Two Rivers wool" being good enough for her, but even here where she could appear in it if she wished, she almost never did.

"What *did* you put in that wine, Nynaeve?" Elayne asked. "I went out like a snuffed candle."

"Don't try to change the subject. If you are talking to windows, you should *really* be asleep instead of here. I've half a mind to order you—"

"Please don't. I'm not Vandene, Nynaeve. Light, I don't even *know* half the customs Vandene and the others take for granted. But I would rather not disobey you, so don't, please."

Nynaeve glowered at her, giving her braid one firm tug. Details of her dress changed, the skirts growing a trifle fuller, the embroidery's pattern altering, the high neck sinking, then rising again, sprouting lace. She was just not very good at the necessary concentration. The red dot on her forehead never wavered, though.

"Very well," she said calmly, the scowl vanishing. Her yellow-fringed shawl appeared on her shoulders, and her face took on something of the Aes Sedai agelessness. There were wings of white at her temples. Her words contrasted with her appearance and composed tone, though. "Let me do the talking when Egwene gets here. I mean about what happened today. You always end up chattering as if you're brushing each other's hair for bed. Light! I don't want her coming to the Amyrlin with *me*, and you know she will be all over both of us if she finds out."

"If I find out what?" Egwene said. Nynaeve's head whipped around, eyes panic-stricken, and for a moment her fringed shawl and silk gown were replaced by an Accepted's banded white. Even the *ki'sain* went. Just a moment, and she was back as she had been except for the white in her hair, yet that was enough to put a rueful expression on Egwene's face. She knew Nynaeve very well. "If I find out what, Nynaeve?" she asked firmly.

Elayne drew a deep breath. She had not intended to hold anything back, exactly. Not anything important to Egwene, anyway. But in her present mood, Nynaeve was likely to babble everything, or else grow stubborn and try insisting there was nothing to find out. Which would only make Egwene dig harder.

"Someone put forkroot in my midday tea," she said, and went on succinctly about the men with their daggers and Doilin Mellar's fortuitous appearance, and how Dyelin had proved herself. For good measure she added the news of Elenia and Naean, and the First Maid's search for spies in the Palace, and even Zarya and Kirstian being assigned to Vandene, and the attack on Rand and his disappearance. Egwene appeared to be unruffled by the recital—she even cut Elayne short about Rand, saying she already knew—but she gave a dismissive shake of her head at hearing that Vandene had made no progress in learning who the Black sister was, and that was of the gravest concern to her. "Oh, and I'm to have a bodyguard," Elayne finished. "Twenty women, commanded by Captain Mellar. I don't think Birgitte will find me any Maidens, but she will come close."

A backless armchair appeared behind Egwene, and she sat without looking for it. She was much more skilled here than Elayne or Nynaeve. She wore a dark green woolen riding dress, fine and well-cut but unadorned, likely what she had worn awake that day. And it remained a green woolen riding dress. "I would tell you to join me in Murandy tomorrow—tonight," she said, "if the arrival of the Kinswomen would not light a wildfire among the Sitters."

Nynaeve had recovered herself, though she gave her skirts an unneeded adjusting shake. The embroidery on her dress was silver, now. "I thought you had the Hall of the Tower under your thumb, now."

"That's very much like having a ferret under your thumb," Egwene said dryly. "It twists and writhes and wriggles around to nip at your wrist. Oh, they do just as I say when it concerns the war with Elaida—they can't get around that, however much they grumble over the expense of more soldiers!—but the agreement with the Kin is no part of the war, or letting the Kin learn the Tower had known about them all along. Or thought it did. The entire Hall would have apoplexy, just at finding out how much they didn’t know. They are trying very hard to find a way to stop accepting new novices.”

“They can’t, can they?” Nynaeve demanded. She made a chair for herself, but it was a copy of Egwene’s when she looked to make sure it was there, a three-legged stool as she began to sit, and a ladder-backed farm chair by the time she settled on it. Her dress had divided skirts, now. “You made a proclamation. Any woman of any age, if she tested true. All you have to do is make another, about the Kin.” Elaine made her own seat a copy of one of the chairs in her sitting room. Much easier to hold onto.

“Oh, an Amyrlin’s proclamation is as good as law,” Egwene said. “Until the Hall sees a way around it. The newest complaint is that we only have sixteen Accepted. Though most sisters do treat Faolain and Theodrin as if they were still Accepted. But even eighteen isn’t near sufficient to give the novice lessons that Accepted are supposed to handle. Sisters have to take them, instead. I think some were hoping the weather would hold the numbers down, but it hasn’t.” She smiled suddenly, a light of mischief in her dark eyes. “There’s one new novice I’d like you to meet, Nynaeve. Sharina Melloy. A grandmother. I think you’ll agree she’s a remarkable woman.”

Nynaeve’s chair disappeared completely, and she hit the floor with an audible smack. She hardly seemed to notice, sitting there and staring at Egwene in astonishment. “Sharina Melloy?” she said in a shaky voice. “She’s a novice?” Her dress was a style Elayne had never seen before, with flowing sleeves and a deeply scooped neck worked with flowers in embroidery and seed pearls. Her hair flowed to her waist, held by a cap of moonstones and sapphires on golden wires no thicker than threads. And there was a plain golden band on her left forefinger. Only the *ki’sain* and her Great Serpent ring remained the same.

Egwene blinked. “You know the name?”

Getting to her feet, Nynaeve stared at her dress. She held up her left hand and touched the plain gold ring almost hesitantly. Strangely, she left everything as it was. “It might not be the same woman,” she muttered. “It couldn’t be!” Making another chair like Egwene’s, she frowned at it as if commanding it to stay, but it still had a high back and carving by the time she sat. “There was a Sharina Melloy. . . . It was during my test for Accepted,” she said in a rush, “I don’t have to talk about that; it’s the rule!”

“Of course you don’t,” Egwene said, though the look she gave Nynaeve was certainly as strange as Elayne knew her own must be. Still, there was nothing to be done; when Nynaeve wanted to be stubborn, she could teach mules.

“Since you brought up the Kin, Egwene,” Elayne said, “have you thought further on the Oath Rod?”

Egwene raised one hand as if to stop her, but her reply was calm and level. “There’s no need to think further, Elayne. The Three Oaths, sworn on the Oath Rod, are what make us Aes Sedai. I didn’t see that, at first, but I do, now. The very first day we have the Tower, I will swear the Three Oaths, on the Oath Rod.”

“That’s madness!” Nynaeve burst out, leaning forward in her chair. Surprisingly, still the same chair. And still the same dress. Very surprising. Her hands were fists resting on her lap. “You know what it does; the Kin are proof! How many Aes Sedai live past three hundred? Or reach it? And don’t tell me I shouldn’t talk about age. That’s a ridiculous custom, and you know it. Egwene, Reanne was called Eldest because she was the oldest Kinswoman in Ebou Dar. The oldest anywhere is a woman called Aloisia Nemosni, an oil merchant in Tear. Egwene, she’s nearly six . . . hundred . . . years . . . old! When the Hall hears that, I wager they’ll be ready to put the Oath Rod on a shelf.”

“The Light knows three hundred years is a long time,” Elayne put in, “but I can’t say I’m happy myself at the prospect of perhaps cutting my life in half, Egwene. And what of the Oath Rod and your promise to the Kin? Reanne wants to be Aes Sedai, but what happens when she swears? What about Aloisia? Will she fall over dead? You can’t ask them to swear, not knowing.”

“I don’t *ask* anything.” Egwene’s face was still smooth, but her back had straightened, her voice cooled. And hardened. Her eyes augered deep. “Any woman who wants to be a sister *will* swear. And *anyone* who refuses and still calls herself Aes Sedai *will* feel the full weight of Tower justice.”

Elayne swallowed hard under that steady gaze. Nynaeve’s face paled. There was no mistaking Egwene’s meaning. They were not hearing a friend now, but the Amyrlin Seat, and the Amyrlin Seat had no friends when it came time to pronounce judgment.

Apparently satisfied with what she saw in them, Egwene relaxed. “I do know the problem,” she said in a more normal tone. More normal, but still not inviting argument. “I expect any woman whose name is in the novice book to go as far as she can, to earn the shawl if she can, and serve as Aes Sedai, but I don’t want anyone to die for it when they could live. Once the Hall learns about the Kin—once they’re over pitching fits—I think I can get them to agree that a sister who wants to retire should be able to. With the Oaths removed.” They had decided long ago that the Rod could be used to unbind as well as bind, else how could Black sisters lie?

“I suppose that would be all right,” Nynaeve allowed judiciously. Elayne simply nodded; she was certain there was more.

“Retire into the Kin, Nynaeve,” Egwene said gently. “That way, the Kin are bound to the Tower, too. The Kin will keep their own ways, of course, their Rule, but they will have to agree that their Knitting Circle is beneath the Amyrlin, if not the Hall, and that Kinswomen stand below sisters. I do mean them to be part of the Tower, not go their own way. But I think they will accept.”

Nynaeve nodded again, happily, but her smile faded as the full import reached her. She spluttered indignantly. “But . . . ! Standing among the Kin is by age! You’ll have sisters taking orders from women who couldn’t even reach Accepted!”

“Former sisters, Nynaeve.” Egwene fingered the Great Serpent ring on her right hand and sighed faintly. “Even Kinswomen who earned the ring don’t wear it. So we will have to give it up, too. We will be Kinswomen, Nynaeve, not Aes Sedai any longer.” She sounded as if she could already feel that distant day, that distant loss, but she took her hand from the ring and took a deep breath. “Now. Is there anything else? I have a long night ahead of me, and I would like to get a little real sleep before I have to face the Sitters again.”

Frowning, Nynaeve had clenched her fist tight and laid her other hand over it to cover her rings, but she appeared ready to give up arguing over the Kin. For the time being. “Do your headaches still trouble you? I’d think if that woman’s massages did any good, you’d stop having them.”

“Halima’s massages work wonders, Nynaeve. I couldn’t sleep at all without her. Now, is there . . . ?” She trailed off, staring toward the doors at the entrance of the throne room, and Elayne turned to look.

A man was standing there watching, a man as tall as an Aielman, with dark red hair faintly streaked with white, but his high-collared blue coat would never be worn by an Aiel. He appeared muscular, and his hard face seemed somehow familiar. When he saw them looking, he turned and ran down the corridor out of sight.

For an instant, Elayne gaped. He had not just accidentally dreamed himself into *Tel'aran'rhiod*, or he would have vanished by now, but she could still hear his boots, loud on the floor tiles. Either he was a dreamwalker—rare among men, so the Wise Ones said—or he had a *ter'angreal* of his own.

Leaping to her feet, she ran after him, but as fast as she was, Egwene was faster. One instant Egwene was behind, the next she was standing in the doorway, peering the way the man had gone. Elayne tried thinking of herself standing beside Egwene, and she was. The corridor was silent, now, and empty except for stand-lamps and chests and tapestries, all flickering and shifting.

"How did you do that?" Nynaeve demanded, running up with her skirts hoisted above her knees. Her stockings were silk, and fed! Hastily letting her skirts fall when she realized Elayne had noticed her stockings, she peered down the hallway. "Where did he go? He could have heard everything! Did you recognize him? He reminded me of someone; I don't know who."

"Rand," Egwene said. "He could have been Rand's uncle."

Of course, Elayne thought. *If Rand had a mean uncle.*

A metallic click echoed from the far end of the throne room. The door into the dressing rooms behind the dais, closing. Doors were open or closed or sometimes in between in *Tel'aran'rhiod;* they did not swing shut.

"Light!" Nynaeve muttered. "How many people have been eavesdropping on us? Not to mention who, and why?"

"Whoever they are," Egwene replied calmly, "they apparently don't know *Tel'aran'rhiod* as well as we do. Not friends, safe to say, or they wouldn't be eavesdropping. And I think they may not be friends to one another, otherwise, why listen from opposite ends of the room? That man was wearing a Shienaran coat. There are Shienarans in my army, but you both know them all. None resemble Rand."

Nynaeve sniffed. "Well, whoever he is, there are too many people listening at corners. That's what I think. I want to be back in my own body, where all I have to worry about are spies and poisoned daggers."

Shienarans, Elayne thought. Borderlanders. How could *that* have slipped her mind? Well, there had been the little matter of forkroot. "There is one more thing," she said aloud, though in a careful voice she hoped would not carry, and related Dyelin's news of Borderlanders in Braem Wood. She added Master Norry's correspondence, too, all the while trying to watch both ways along the corridor and the throne room as well. She did not want to be caught napping by another spy. "I think those rulers are in Braem Wood," she finished, "all four of them."

"Rand," Egwene breathed, sounding irritated. "Even when he can't be found he complicates things. Do you have any idea whether they came to offer him allegiance or try to hand him over to Elaida? I can't think of any other reasons for them to march a thousand leagues. They must be boiling shoes for soup by now! Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep an army supplied on the march?"

"I think I can find out," Elayne said. "Why, I mean. And at the same time. . . . You gave me the idea, Egwene." She could not help smiling. Something good *had* come of today. "I think I might just be able to use them to secure the Lion Throne."

Asne examined the tall embroidery frame in front of her and gave a sigh that turned into a yawn. The flickering lamps gave a poor light for this, but that was not the reason her birds all seemed lopsided. She wanted to be in her bed, and she despised embroidery. But she had to be awake, and this was the only way to avoid conversation with Chesmal. What Chesmal called conversation. The smugly arrogant Yellow was intent on her own embroidery, on the other side of the room, and she assumed that anyone who took up a needle had her own keen interest in the work. On the other hand, Asne knew, if she rose from her chair, Chesmal would soon start regaling her with tales of her own importance. In the months since Moghedien vanished, she had heard Chesmal's part in putting Tamra Ospenya to the question at least twenty times, and how Chesmal had induced the Reds to murder Sierin Vayu before Sierin could order her arrest perhaps fifty! To hear Chesmal tell it, she had saved the Black Ajah single-handed, and she *would* tell it, given half a chance. That sort of talk was not only boring, it was dangerous. Even deadly, if the Supreme Council learned of it. So Asne stifled another yawn, squinted at her work, and pushed the needle through the tightly stretched linen. Perhaps if she made the redbird larger, she could even up the wings.

The click of the doorlatch brought both women's heads up. The two servants knew not to bother them, and in any case, the woman and her husband should be fast asleep. Asne embraced *saidar*, readying a weave that would sear an intruder to the bone, and the glow surrounded Chesmal, too. If the wrong person stepped through that door, they would regret it until they died.

It was Eldrith, gloves in hand, with her dark cloak still hanging down her back. The plump Brown's dress was dark, too, and unadorned. Asne hated wearing plain woolens, but they did need to avoid notice. The drab clothes suited Eldrith.

She stopped at the sight of them, blinking, a momentary look of confusion on her round face. "Oh, my," she said. "Who did you think I was?" Throwing her gloves onto the small table by the door, she suddenly became aware of her cloak and frowned as if just realizing she had worn it upstairs. Carefully unpinning the silver brooch at her neck, she tossed the cloak onto a chair in a tumbled heap.

The light of *saidar* winked out around Chesmal as she twisted her embroidery frame aside so she could stand. Her stern face made her seem taller than she was, and she was a tall woman. The brightly colored flowers she had embroidered might have been in a garden. "Where have you been?" she demanded. Eldrith stood highest among them, and Moghedien had left her in charge besides, but Chesmal had begun taking only cursory notice if that. "You were supposed to be back by afternoon, and the night is half gone!"

"I lost track of the hour, Chesmal," Eldrith replied absently, appearing lost in thought. "It has been a long time since I was last in Caemlyn. The Inner City is fascinating, and I had a delightful meal at an inn I remembered. Though I must say, there were fewer sisters about then. No one recognized me, however." She peered at her brooch as though wondering where it had come from, then tucked it into her belt pouch.

"You lost track," Chesmal said flatly, lacing her fingers together at her waist. Perhaps to keep them from Eldrith's throat. Her eyes glittered with anger. "You lost track."

Once more Eldrith blinked, as if startled to be addressed. "Oh. Were you afraid Kennit had found me again? I assure you, since Samara I have been quite careful at keeping the bond masked."

At times, Asne wondered how much of Eldrith's apparent vagueness was real. No one so unaware of the world around her could have survived this long. On the other hand, she had been unfocused enough to let the masking slip more than once before they reached Samara, enough for her Warder to track her. Obedient to Moghedien's orders to await her return, they had hidden through the riots after her departure, waited while the so-called Prophet's mobs swept south into Amadicia, stayed in that wretched, ruined town even after Asne became convinced that Moghedien had abandoned them. Her lip curled at the memory. What had sparked the decision to leave was the arrival of Eldrith's Kennit in the town, sure that she was a murderer, half convinced she was Black Ajah, and determined to kill her no matter the consequences to himself. Not surprisingly, she had been unwilling to face those consequences herself, and refused to let anyone kill the man. The only alternative was to flee. Then again, Eldrith was the one who had pointed out Caemlyn as their only hope.

"Did you learn anything, Eldrith?" Asne asked politely. Chesmal was a fool. However tattered the world seemed at the moment, affairs would right themselves. One way or another.

"What? Oh. Only that the pepper sauce wasn't as good as I remembered. Of course, that was fifty years ago."

Asne suppressed a sigh. Perhaps after all it was time for Eldrith to have an accident.

The door opened and Temaile slipped into the room so silently they were all caught by surprise. The diminutive fox-faced Gray had tossed a robe embroidered with lions over her shoulders, but it gaped down the front, exposing a cream-colored silk nightdress that molded itself to her indecently. Draped over one hand she carried a bracelet made of twisted glass rings. They looked and felt like glass, at least, but a hammer could not have chipped one.

"You've been to *Tel'aran'rhiod*," Eldrith said, frowning at the *ter'angreal*. She did not speak forcefully, though. They were all a little afraid of Temaile since Moghedien had made them observe the last of Liandrin being broken. Asne had lost track of how often she had killed or tortured in the hundred and thirty-odd years since she gained the shawl, but she had seldom seen anyone so . . . enthusiastic . . . as Temaile. Watching Temaile and trying to pretend not to, Chesmal seemed unaware that she was licking her lips nervously. Asne hurriedly put her own tongue back behind her teeth and hoped no one had noticed. Eldrith certainly had not. “We agreed not to use those,” she said, not very far short of pleading. “I’m certain it was Nynaeve who wounded Moghedien, and if she can best one of the Chosen in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, what chance do we have?” Rounding on the others, she attempted a scolding tone. “Did you two know about this?” She had managed to sound peevish.

Chesmal met Eldrith’s stare indignantly, while Asne gave her surprised innocence. They had known, but who was going to stand in Temaile’s way? She doubted very much that Eldrith would have made more than a token protest had she been there.

Temaile knew exactly her effect on them. She should have hung her head at Eldrith’s lecture, fainthearted as it was, and apologized for going against her wishes. Instead, she smiled. That smile never reached her eyes, though, large and dark and much too bright. “You were right, Eldrith. Right that Elayne would come here, and right that Nynaeve would come with her, it seems. They were together, and it is clear they are both in the Palace.”

“Yes,” Eldrith said, squirming slightly under Temaile’s gaze. “Well.” And she licked *her* lips, and shifted her feet, too. “Even so, until we can see how to get at them past all those wilders—”

“They *are* wilders, Eldrith.” Temaile threw herself down in a chair, limbs sprawling carelessly, and her tone hardened. Not enough to seem commanding, but still more than merely firm. “There are only three sisters to trouble us, and we can dispose of them. We can take Nynaeve, and perhaps Elayne in the bargain.” Abruptly she leaned forward, hands on the arms of the chair. Disarrayed clothing or not, there was no shred of indolence about her now. Eldrith stepped back as though pushed by Temaile’s eyes. “Else why are we here, Eldrith? It is what we came for.”

No one had anything to say to that. Behind them lay a string of failures —in Tear, in Tanchico—that might well cost them their lives when the Supreme Council laid hands on them. But not if they had one of the Chosen for a patron, and if Moghedien had wanted Nynaeve so badly, perhaps another of them would, too. The real difficulty would be finding one of the Chosen to present with their gift. No one but Asne seemed to have considered that part of it.

“There were others, there,” Temaile went on, leaning back once more. She sounded almost bored. “Spying on our two Accepted. A man who let them see him, and someone else I could not see.” She pouted irritably. At least, it would have been a pout except for her eyes. “I had to stay behind a column so the girls would not see me. That should please you, Eldrith. That they did not see me. Are you pleased?”

Eldrith almost stammered getting out how pleased she was.

Asne let herself feel her four Warders, coming ever closer. She had stopped masking herself when they left Samara. Only Powl was a Friend of the Dark, of course, yet the others would do whatever she said, believe whatever she told them. It would be necessary to keep them concealed from the others unless absolutely necessary, but she wanted armed men close at hand. Muscles and steel were very useful. And if worse came to worst, she could always reveal the long, fluted rod that Moghedien had not hidden so well as she thought she had.

The early morning light in the sitting room’s windows was gray, an earlier hour than the Lady Shiaine usually rose, but this morning she had been dressed while it was still full dark. The Lady Shiaine was how she thought of herself, now. Mili Skane, the saddler’s daughter, was almost completely forgotten. In every way that mattered, she really was the Lady Shiaine Avarhin, and had been for years. Lord Willim Avarhin had been impoverished, reduced to living in a ramshackle farmhouse and unable to keep even that in good repair. He and his only daughter, the last of a declining line, had stayed in the country, far from anywhere their penury might be exposed, and now they were only bones buried in the forest near that farmhouse, and *she* was the Lady Shiaine, and if this tall, well-appointed stone house was not a manor, it still had been the property of a well-to-do merchant. She was long dead, too, after signing over her gold to her “heir.” The furnishings were well made, the carpets costly, the tapestries and even the seat cushions embroidered with thread-of-gold, and the fire roared in a wide blue-veined marble fireplace. She had had the once-plain lintel carved with Avarhin’s Heart and Hand row on row.

“More wine, girl,” she said curtly, and Falion scurried with the tall-necked silver pitcher to refill her goblet with steaming spiced wine. The livery of a maid, with the Red Heart and Golden Hand on her breast, suited Falion. Her long face was a stiff mask as she hurried to replace the pitcher on the drawered highchest and take up her place beside the door.

“You play a dangerous game,” Marillin Gemalphin said, rolling her own goblet between her palms. A skinny woman with lifeless pale brown hair, the Brown sister did not look an Aes Sedai. Her narrow face and wide nose would have fitted better above Falion's livery than it did above her fine blue wool, and that was suitable only for a middling merchant. "She is shielded somehow, I know, but when she can channel again, she will make you howl for this." Her thin lips quirked in a humorless smile. "You may find yourself wishing you could howl."

"Moridin chose this for her," Shiaine replied. "She failed in Ebou Dar, and he ordered her punished. I don't know the details and don't want to, but if Moridin wants her nose ground in the mud, I'll push it so deep she is breathing mud a year from now. Or do you suggest I disobey one of the Chosen?" She barely suppressed a shudder at the very thought. Marillin tried to hide her expression in drinking, but her eyes tightened. "What about you, Falion?" Shiaine asked. "Would you like me to ask Moridin to take you away? He might find you something less onerous." Mules might sing like nightingales, too.

Falion did not even hesitate. She bobbed a maid's straight-backed curtsy, her face going even paler than it already was. "No, mistress," she said hastily. "I am content with my situation, mistress."

"You see?" Shiaine said to the other Aes Sedai. She doubted very much that Falion was anything approaching content, but the woman would accept whatever was handed out rather than face Moridin's displeasure directly. For the same reason, Shiaine would rule her with a very heavy hand. You never knew what one of the Chosen might learn of, and take amiss. She herself thought her own failure was buried deep, but she would take no chances. "When she can channel again, she won't have to be a maid all the time, Marillin." Anyway, Moridin had said Shiaine could kill her if she wished. There was always that, if her position began to chafe too much. He had said she could kill both sisters, if she wished.

"That's as may be," Marillin said darkly. She cast a sidelong glance at Falion and grimaced. "Now, Moghedien instructed me to offer you what assistance I thought I could give, but I'll tell you right now, I won't enter the Royal Palace. The whole city has too many sisters in it for my taste, but the Palace is stuffed with wilders on top. I wouldn't get ten feet without someone knowing I was there."

Sighing, Shiaine leaned back and crossed her legs, idly kicking a slippered foot. Why did people always think you did not know as much as they? The world was full of fools! "Moghedien ordered you to obey me, Marillin. I know, because Moridin told me. He did not say so right out, but I think when he snaps his fingers, Moghedien jumps.” Talking about the Chosen this way was dangerous, but she had to make matters clear. “Do you want to tell me again what you won’t do?”

The narrow-faced Aes Sedai licked her lips, darting another glance at Falion. Did the woman fear *she* would end up that way? Truth to tell, Shiaine would have traded Falion for a proper lady’s maid in a heartbeat. Well, as long as she could retain her other services. Very likely, they both would have to die when this was finished. Shiaine did not like leaving loose ends.

“I wasn’t lying about that,” Marillin said slowly. “I really wouldn’t get ten feet. But there’s a woman already in the Palace. She can do what you need. It may take time to make contact, though.”

“Just make sure it’s not too long a time, Marillin.” So. One of the sisters in the Palace was Black Ajah, was she? She would have to be Aes Sedai, not just a Darkfriend, to do what Shiaine needed.

The door opened, and Murellin looked in questioningly, his heavily muscled bulk almost filling the doorway. Beyond him, she could make out another man. At her nod, Murellin stepped aside and motioned Daved Hanlon to enter, closing the door behind him. Hanlon was swathed in a dark cloak, but he snaked out one hand to cup Falion’s bottom through her dress. She glared at him bitterly, but did not move away. Hanlon was part of her punishment. Still, Shiaine had no wish to watch him fondle the woman.

“Do that later,” she ordered. “Did it go well?”

A broad smile split his axe-like face. “It went exactly as I planned it, of course.” He threw one side of the dark cloak over his shoulder, revealing golden knots of rank on his red coat. “You are speaking to the Captain of the Queen’s Bodyguard.”

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CHAPTER 11

Ideas of Importance

Without even taking a look, Rand stepped through the gateway into a large dark room. The strain of holding the weave, of fighting *saidin*, made him sway; he wanted to gag, to double over and spew up everything in him. Holding himself upright was an effort. A little light crept through cracks between the shutters on a few small windows set high in one wall, just enough to see by with the Power in him. Furniture and large cloth-covered shapes nearly filled the room, interspersed with wide barrels of the sort used to store crockery, chests of all shapes and sizes, boxes and crates and knickknacks. Little more than walkways a pace or two wide remained clear. He had been sure he would not find servants hunting for something, or cleaning up. The highest floor of the Royal Palace had several such storerooms, looking like the attics of huge farmhouses and just about forgotten. Besides, he was *ta'veren,* after all. A good thing no one had been there when the gateway opened. One edge of it had sliced the corner off an empty chest bound in cracked, rotting leather, and the other had taken a glass-smooth shaving down the length of a long, inlaid table stacked with vases and wooden boxes. Maybe some Queen of Andor had eaten at that table, a century or two gone.

A century or two, Lews Therin laughed thickly in his head. *A very long time. For the love of the Light, let go! This is the Pit of Doom!* The voice dwindled as the man fled into the recesses of Rand's mind.

For once, he had his own reasons to listen to Lews Therin's complaints. Hastily he motioned Min to follow him from the forest clearing on the other side of the gateway, and as soon as she did, he let it close behind her in a quick vertical slash of light by releasing *saidin*. Blessedly, the nausea went with it. His head still spun a little, but he did not feel as if he were going to vomit or fall over or both. The feel of filth remained, though, the Dark One's taint oozing into him from the weaves he had tied off around himself. Shifting the strap of his leather scrip from one shoulder to the other, he tried to use the motion to hide wiping sweat from his face with his sleeve. He did not have to worry about Min noticing after all, however.

Her blue, heeled boots stirred the dust on the floor at her first step, and her second made it rise. She pulled a lace-edged handkerchief from her coatsleeve just in time to catch a violent sneeze, followed by a second and third, each worse than the last. He wished she had been willing to stay in a dress. Embroidered white flowers decorated the sleeves and lapels of her blue coat, and paler blue breeches molded her legs snugly. With yellow-embroidered bright blue riding gloves tucked behind her belt, and a cloak edged with yellow scrollwork and held by a golden pin in the shape of a rose, she did look as if she had arrived by more normal means, but she would draw every eye. He was in coarse brown woolens any laborer might wear. Most places in the last few days, he had been blatant with his presence; this time he did not want just to be gone before anyone knew he had been here, he did not want anyone but a special few to ever know he had been.

“Why are you grinning at me and thumbing your ear like a loobie?” she demanded, stuffing the handkerchief back into her sleeve. Suspicion filled her big, dark eyes.

“I was just thinking how beautiful you are,” he said quietly. She was. He could not look at her without thinking so. Or without regretting that he was too weak to send her away to safety.

She drew a deep breath, and sneezed before she could even clap a hand over her mouth, then glared at him as if it were somehow his fault. “I abandoned my horse for you, Rand al’Thor. I curled my hair for you. I gave up my *life* for you! I will *not* give up my coat and breeches! Besides, no one here has ever seen me in a dress for more time than it took me to change out of it. You know this won’t work unless I’m recognized. You certainly can’t pretend you wandered in off the street with that face.”

Unthinking, he ran a hand across his jaw, feeling his own face, but that was not what Min saw. Anyone looking at him would see a man inches shorter and years older than Rand al’Thor, with lank black hair, dull brown eyes and a wart on his bulbous nose. Only someone who touched him could pierce the Mask of Mirrors. Even an Asha’man would not see it, with the weaves inverted. Though if there were Asha’man in the Palace, it might mean his plans had gone further awry than he believed. This visit could not, must not, come to killing. In any case, she was right; it was not a face that would have been allowed into the Royal Palace of Andor unescorted.

“As long as we can finish this and be gone quickly,” he said. “Before anyone has time to think that if you’re here, maybe I am, too.”

“Rand,” she said, her voice soft, and he eyed her warily. Resting a hand on his chest, she looked up at him with a serious expression. “Rand, you really need to see Elayne. And Aviendha, I suppose; you know she’s probably here, too. If you—”

He shook his head, and wished he had not. The dizziness had still not gone completely. “No!” he said curtly. Light! No matter what Min said, he just could not believe that Elayne and Aviendha *both* loved him. Or that the fact they did, if it was a fact, did not upset her. Women were not *that* strange! Elayne and Aviendha had reason to hate him, not love him, and Elayne, at least, had made herself clear. Worse, he was in love with both of them, as well as with Min! He had to be as hard as steel, but he thought he might shatter if he had to face all three at once. “We find Nynaeve and Mat, and go, as fast as we can.” She opened her mouth, but he gave her no chance to speak. “Don’t argue with me, Min. This is no time for it!”

Tilting her head to one side, Min put on a small, amused smile. “When do I ever argue with you? Don’t I always do exactly as you tell me?” If that lie were not bad enough, she added, “I was going to say, if you want to hurry, why are we standing in this dusty storeroom all day?” For punctuation, she sneezed again.

She was the least likely to cause comment, even dressed as she was, so she put her head out of the room first. Apparently the storeroom was not entirely forgotten; the heavy door’s hinges barely creaked. A quick look both ways, and she hurried out, gesturing him to follow. *Ta’veren* or no, he was relieved to find the long corridor empty. The most timid servant might have wondered at seeing them emerge from a storeroom in the upper reaches of the Palace. Still, they would encounter people soon enough. The Royal Palace did not run as heavily to servants as the Sun Palace or the Stone of Tear, but there were still hundreds of them in a place this size. Walking along beside Min, he tried to shamble and gawk at bright tapestries and carved wall panels and polished highchests. None were so fine this high as they would be lower down, but a common workman would gawk.

“We need to get down to a lower floor as fast as we can,” he murmured. There was still no one in sight, but there might be ten people around the next corner. “Remember, just ask the first servant we see where to find Nynaeve and Mat. Don’t elaborate unless you have to.”

“Why, thank you for reminding me, Rand. I knew something had slipped my mind, and I just couldn’t imagine what.” Her brief smile was much too tight, and she muttered something under her breath.

Rand sighed. This was too important for her to play games, but she was going to, if he let her. Not that she saw it that way. Sometimes, though, her ideas of important differed widely from his. Very widely. He would have to keep a close eye on her.

“Why, Mistress Farshaw,” a woman’s voice said behind them. “It is Mistress Farshaw, isn’t it?”

The scrip swung and thumped Rand’s back heavily as he spun around. The plump graying woman staring at Min in astonishment was perhaps the last person he wanted to meet, besides Elayne or Aviendha. Wondering why she was wearing a red tabard with the White Lion large on the front, he slouched and avoided looking at her directly. Just a workman doing his job. No reason to glance at him twice.

“Mistress Harfor?” Min exclaimed, beaming delightedly. “Yes, it’s me. And you are just the woman I was looking for. I’m afraid I am lost. Can you tell me where to find Nynaeve al’Meara? And Mat Cauthon? This fellow has something Nynaeve asked him to deliver.”

The First Maid frowned slightly at Rand before returning her attention to Min. She raised an eyebrow at Min’s garments, or maybe at the dust on them, but she mentioned neither. “Mat Cauthon? I don’t believe I know him. Unless he’s one of the new servants or Guardsmen?” she added doubtfully. “As for Nynaeve Sedai, she’s very busy. I suppose it will be all right with her if I accept whatever it is and put it in her room.”

Rand jerked upright. Nynaeve *Sedai?* Why would the others—the real Aes Sedai—let her play at that still? And Mat was not here? Had never been here, apparently. Colors whirled in his head, almost an image he could make out. In a heartbeat it vanished, but he staggered. Mistress Harfor frowned at him again, and sniffed. Likely she thought him drunk.

Min frowned, too, but in thought, tapping a finger on her chin, and that only lasted a moment. “I think Nynaeve . . . Sedai wants to see him.” The hesitation was barely noticeable. “Could you have him shown to her rooms, Mistress Harfor? I have another errand before I go. You mind your manners, now, Nuli, and do as you're told. There's a good fellow."

Rand opened his mouth, but before he could get out a word she darted away down the corridor, almost running. Her cloak flared behind her, she was moving so quickly. Burn her, she was going to try finding Elayne! She could ruin everything!

Your plans fail because you want to live, madman. Lews Therin's voice was a rough, sweaty whisper. *Accept that you are dead. Accept it, and stop tormenting me, madman!* Rand suppressed the voice to a muted buzz, a biteme buzzing in the darkness of his head. Nuli? What kind of name was Nuli?

Mistress Harfor gaped after Min until she vanished around a corner, then gave her tabard an adjusting tug it did not need. She turned her disapproval on Rand. Even with the Mask of Mirrors she saw a man who towered over her, but Reene Harfor was not a woman to let a small thing like that put her off stride for an instant. "I mistrust the looks of you, Nuli," she said, her eyebrows drawn down sharply, "so you watch your step. You'll watch it very carefully, if you have any brain at all."

Holding the scrip's shoulder strap with one hand, he tugged his forelock with the other. "Yes, Mistress," he muttered gruffly. The First Maid might recognize his real voice. Min had been supposed to do all the talking until they found Nynaeve and Mat. What in the Light was he going to do if she did bring Elayne? And maybe Aviendha. She probably was here, too. Light! "Pardon, Mistress, but we ought to hurry. It's urgent I see Nynaeve as soon as possible." He hefted the scrip slightly. "She wanted this real important like." If he was done when Min returned, he might be able to get away with her before he had to face the other two.

"If Nynaeve *Sedai* thought it was urgent," the plump woman told him tartly, placing heavy emphasis on the honorific he had omitted, "she would have left word you were expected. Now, follow me, and keep your comments and opinions to yourself."

She started off without waiting for a reply, without looking back, gliding along with a stately grace. After all, what could he do except as he had been told? As he recalled, the First Maid was accustomed to everyone doing as they were told. Striding to catch up, he took only one step at her side before her startled look made him drop back, tugging his forelock and mumbling apologies. He was not used to having to walk behind anyone. It was not calculated to moderate his mood. The tag end of dizziness hung on, too, and the filth of the taint. He seemed to be in a foul mood more often than not of late, unless Min was with him.

Before they had gone very far, liveried servants began to appear in the hallway, polishing and dusting and carrying, scurrying every which way. Plainly the absence of people when he and Min left the storeroom was a rare occurrence. *Ta'veren* again. Down a flight of narrow service stairs built into the wall, and there were even more. And something else, a great many women who were not in livery. Copper-skinned Domani women, short pale Cairhienin, women with olive skins and dark eyes who were certainly not Andoran. They made him smile, a tight satisfied smile. None had what he could call an ageless face, and a number even bore lines and wrinkles that never decorated any Aes Sedai's face, but sometimes goose bumps danced on his skin when he came near one of them. They were channeling, or least holding *saidar.* Mistress Harfor led him past closed doors where that prickling raced, too. Behind those doors, still other women had to be channeling.

"Pardon, Mistress," he said in the coarse voice he had adopted for Nuli. "How many Aes Sedai are there in the Palace?"

"That is no concern of yours," she snapped. Glancing over one shoulder at him, though, she sighed and relented. "I don't suppose there is any harm in you knowing. Five, counting the Lady Elayne and Nynaeve Sedai." A touch of pride entered her voice. "It has been a long time since that many Aes Sedai claimed guestright here at one time."

Rand could have laughed, though without amusement. Five? No, that included Nynaeve and Elayne. Three real Aes Sedai. Three! Whoever the rest were did not really matter. He had begun to believe that the rumors of hundreds of Aes Sedai moving toward Caemlyn with an army meant there really might be that many ready to follow the Dragon Reborn. Instead, even his original hope for a double handful of them had been wildly optimistic. The rumors were only rumors. Or else some scheme of Elaida's making. Light, where *was* Mat? Color flashed in his head—for an instant he thought it was Mat's face—and he stumbled.

"If you came here drunk, Nuli," Mistress Harfor said firmly, "you will leave regretting it bitterly. I will see to it myself!"

"Yes, Mistress," Rand muttered, jerking at his forelock. Inside his head, Lews Therin cackled in mad, weeping laughter. He had had to come here—it was necessary—but he was already beginning to regret it.

* * *

Surrounded by the light of *saidar*, Nynaeve and Talaan faced one another at four paces in front of the fireplace, where a brisk blaze had managed to take all chill out of the air. Or maybe it was effort that had warmed her, Nynaeve thought sourly. This lesson had lasted an hour already, by the ornate clock on the carved mantel. An hour of channeling without rest would warm anyone. Sareitha was supposed to be here, not her, but the Brown had slipped out of the Palace leaving a note about an urgent errand in the city. Careane had refused to take two days in a row, and Vandene still refused to take any, on the ridiculous grounds that teaching Kirstian and Zarya left her no time.

“Like this,” she said, whipping her flow of Spirit around the boy-slim Sea Folk apprentice’s attempt at fending her off. Adding the force of her own flow, she pushed the girl’s further away and at the same time channeled Air in three separate weaves. One tickled Talaan’s ribs through her blue linen blouse. A simple ploy, but the girl gasped in surprise, and for an instant her embrace of the Source lessened just a hair, the faintest flicker in the Power filling her. In that heartbeat Nynaeve stopped the pushing she had just begun on the other’s flow and snapped her own back to its original target. Forcing the shield onto Talaan still felt much like slapping a wall—except the sting was spread evenly across her skin rather than just in her palm, hardly an improvement—but the glow of *saidar* vanished just as the last two flows of Air trapped Talaan’s arms at her sides and pulled her knees together in their wide, dark trousers.

Very neatly done, if Nynaeve did think so herself. The girl was very agile, very deft with her weaves. Besides, trying to shield someone who held the Power was chancy at best and futile at worst, unless you were *very* much stronger than they—sometimes if you were—and Talaan matched her as closely as made no difference. That helped keep a satisfied smile from her face. It seemed a very short time ago that sisters had been startled at her strength and believed that only some of the Forsaken possessed greater. Talaan had not slowed, yet; she was little more than a child. Fifteen? Maybe younger! The Light alone knew what her potential was. At least, none of the Windfinders had mentioned it, and Nynaeve was not about to ask. She had no interest in knowing how much stronger than she a Sea Folk girl was going to be. None at all.

Bare feet shuffling on the patterned green carpet, Talaan made one futile attempt to break the shield that Nynaeve held easily, then sighed in defeat and lowered her eyes. Even when she had succeeded in following Nynaeve's instruction, she behaved as if she had failed, and now she slumped so dejectedly you might have thought the weaves of Air were all that held her upright.

Letting her flows dissipate, Nynaeve adjusted her shawl and opened her mouth to tell Talaan what she had done wrong. And to point out—once again—that it was useless to try breaking free unless you were *much* stronger than whoever had shielded you. The Sea Folk hardly seemed to believe anything she told them until she told them ten times and showed them twenty.

"She used your own force against you," Senine din Ryal said bluntly before Nynaeve could speak. "And distraction, again. It is like wrestling, girl. You know how to wrestle."

"Try again," Zaida commanded with a brisk gesture of one dark, tattooed hand.

All of the chairs in the room had been moved against the wall, though there was no real need for a clear space, and Zaida sat watching the lesson flanked by six Windfinders, a riot of reds and yellows and blues in brocaded silks and brightly dyed linens, a flinch-inducing display of earrings and nose rings and medallion-laden chains. That was always the way; one of the two apprentices was used for the actual lesson—or Merilille, Nynaeve had heard, actually forced to take the part of an apprentice unless she herself was teaching—while Zaida and one group or another of Windfinders watched. The Wavemistress could not channel, of course, though she was always present, and none of the Windfinders would actually stoop to participating personally. Oh, never that.

In Nynaeve's estimation, today's grouping was very odd, considering the Sea Folks' obsession with rank. Zaida's own Windfinder, Shielyn, sat on her right, a slender, coolly reserved woman almost as tall as Aviendha and towering over Zaida. That was proper, as far as Nynaeve understood, but at Zaida's left was Senine, and she served on a soarer, one of the Sea Folk's smaller vessels, and hers among the smallest of those. Of course, the weathered woman, with her creased face and hair thick with gray, had worn more than her present six earrings in the past, and more golden medallions on the chain across her dark left cheek. She had been Windfinder to the

Mistress of the Ships before Nesta din Reas was elected to the post, but by their law, when the Mistress of the Ships or a Wavemistress died, her Windfinder had to begin again at the lowest level. There was more to it than respect for Senine's former position, though, Nynaeve was certain. Rainyn, an apple-cheeked young woman who served on a darter, occupied the chair next to Senine, and stone-faced, flat-eyed Kurin sat beside Shielyn like a black carving. This relegated Caire and Tebreille to the outermost chairs, and they were both Windfinders to Wavemistresses themselves, with four fat earrings in each ear and nearly as many medallions as Zaida herself. Perhaps it was just to keep the haughty-eyed sisters apart, though. They hated one another with a passion only blood kin could achieve. Perhaps that was it. Understanding the Atha'an Miere was worse than trying to understand men. A woman could go mad trying.

Muttering to herself, Nynaeve gave her shawl a jerk and prepared herself, readying her flows. The pure joy of holding *saidar* could hardly compete with her vexation. Try again, Nynaeve. One more time, Nynaeve. Do it now, Nynaeve. At least Renaile was not there. Often they wanted her to teach things she did not know as well as others—too often, things she barely knew at all, she admitted reluctantly; she had not really had much training in the Tower—and whenever she fumbled in the slightest, Renaile positively delighted in making her sweat. The others made her sweat, too, but they did not seem to take so much pleasure in it. Anyway, after a solid hour, she was tired. Drat Sareitha and her errand!

She struck out again, but this time Talaan's flow of Spirit met hers much more lightly than she expected, and her own flow swept the other further aside than she had meant. Abruptly six weaves of Air shot out from the girl, darting toward Nynaeve, and Nynaeve quickly sliced them with Fire. The severed flows snapped back into Talaan, jolting her visibly, but before they had vanished properly, six more appeared, faster than before. Nynaeve slashed. And gaped as Talaan's weave of Spirit flickered around hers and wrapped around her, cutting off *saidar.* She was shielded! Talaan had shielded her! For the final indignity, flows of Air pinioned her arms and legs tightly, crushing her skirts. If she had not been so upset at Sareitha, it never would have happened.

"The girl has her," Caire said, sounding surprised. No one would think she was Talaan's mother by the cold look she gave her. Indeed, Talaan seemed embarrassed by her own success, releasing the flows immediately and dropping her eyes to the floor.

“Very good, Talaan,” Nynaeve said, since no one else was offering a word of praise or encouragement. Irritably she shook out her shawl behind her and settled it into the crooks of her elbows. No need to tell the girl she had been lucky. She was quick, true, but Nynaeve was not sure she herself could keep channeling much longer. She certainly was not at her best now. “I’m afraid that is all the time I have today, so—”

“Try again,” Zaida commanded, leaning forward intently. “I want to see something.” That was not an explanation, or anything near apology, simply a statement of fact. Zaida never explained or apologized. She just expected obedience.

Nynaeve considered telling the woman she could not see anything they were doing anyway, but she rejected the thought immediately. Not with six Windfinders in the room. Two days earlier she had voiced her opinions freely, and she certainly did not want a repeat of that. She had tried thinking of it as a penance, for speaking without thinking, but that did not help very much. She wished she had never taught them to link.

“One more time,” she said tightly, turning back to Talaan, “and then I must go.”

She was ready for the girl’s trick this time. Channeling, she met Talaan’s weave more dexterously, and without so much force. The girl smiled at her uncertainly. Thinking Nynaeve would not be distracted by extraneous flows of Air this time, was she? Talaan’s weave began to curl around hers, and she nimbly spun her own to catch it. She would be ready when the woman produced her flows of Air. Or maybe not Air, this time. Nothing dangerous surely. This was practice. Only, Talaan’s flow of Spirit did not complete that curl, and Nynaeve’s swung wide while Talaan’s struck straight at her and latched on. Once again, *saidar* winked out of her, and bonds of Air snapped her arms to her sides, fastened her knees.

Carefully, she drew breath. She would have to congratulate the young woman. There was no getting out of it. If she had had a hand free, she would have yanked her braid right out of her scalp.

“Hold!” Zaida commanded, rising to stride gracefully toward Nynaeve, her red silk trousers whisking softly above her bare feet, intricately knotted red sash swaying against her thigh. The Windfinders stood with her and followed, in order of rank. Caire and Tebreille icily ignored one another as they hurried to take places nearest the Wavemistress while Senine and Rainyn fell a pace to the rear.

Obediently, Talaan held the shield on Nynaeve, and the bonds, leaving her standing like a statue. And fuming like a kettle too long on the boil. She refused to shuffle about, a broken puppet, and that was all that was left to her except standing still. Caire and Tebreille studied her with icy disdain, Kurin with the hard contempt she had for all land dwellers. The stone-eyed woman did not sneer or grimace or wear any real expression at all, but you could not be with her long without becoming aware of her opinion. Only Rainyn displayed the smallest touch of sympathy, a slight rueful smile.

Zaida’s eyes met Nynaeve’s levelly. They were much the same height. “She is held as tightly as you can, apprentice?”

Talaan bowed deeply, parallel to the floor, touching her forehead, lips and heart. “As you commanded, Wavemistress,” she all but whispered.

“What is the meaning of this?” Nynaeve demanded. “Let me go. You may get away with treating Merilille this way, but if you think for one minute—!”

“You say there is no way to break this shield unless you are much stronger,” Zaida cut her off. Her tone was not harsh, but she meant to be heard, not to listen. “The Light willing, we will learn whether you told us correctly. It is well known how Aes Sedai make truth spin like a whirlpool. Windfinders, you will form a circle. Kurin, you will lead. If she does break free, see that she causes no harm. For incentive . . . Apprentice, prepare to turn her upside down at my count of five. One.”

The light of *saidar* enveloped the Windfinders, all of them together, as they linked. Kurin stood with her feet apart and her hands on her hips, as if balancing on the deck of a ship. Her very lack of expression seemed to convey that she was already convinced they would uncover prevarication if not an outright lie. Talaan drew a deep breath, and for once stood very straight, not even blinking as she kept her anxious eyes on Zaida.

Nynaeve blinked. No! They could not do this to her! Not again! “I am telling you,” she said, much more calmly than she felt, “there is no way for me to break the shield. Talaan is too strong.”

“Two,” Zaida said, folding her arms beneath her breasts and staring at Nynaeve as though she really could see the weaves.

Nynaeve pushed tentatively at the shield. She might as well push at a stone wall for all the give in it. “Listen to me, Za . . . uh . . . Wavemistress.”

There was certainly no need to antagonize the woman further. They were sticklers for proper forms of address. Sticklers for all too many things. “I’m sure Merilille has told you something about shielding, at least. She swore the Three Oaths. She *can’t* lie.” Maybe Egwene was right about the Oath Rod.

Zaida’s gaze never wavered, her expression never changed. “Three.”

“Listen to me,” Nynaeve said, not caring at all if she sounded a bit desperate. Maybe more than just a bit. She pushed against the shield harder, then as hard as she could. She might as well have beat her head against a boulder for all the effect it had. Instinctively, uselessly, she struggled in the bonds of Air holding her, the fringe and loose folds of her shawl dancing around her. She had as much chance of breaking free of those bonds as she did of breaking through the shield, but she could not stop herself. Not again! She could not face that! “You have to listen!”

“Four.”

No! No! Not again! Frantically she scrabbled at the shield. It might be as hard as stone, but it felt more like glass, sleek and slippery. She could feel the Source beyond it, almost see the Source, like light and warmth just beyond the corner of vision. In desperation, panting, she felt her way across the smooth surface. It had an edge, like a circle at once small enough to hold in her hands and large enough to cover the world, but when she attempted to slip around that edge, she found herself right back in the center of the slick hard circle again. This was useless. She had learned all this long ago, tried it all long ago. Her heart pounded fit to burst out of her ribs. Struggling vainly for calm, she hurriedly felt her way back to the edge, felt along it without trying to go around. There was one place where it felt . . . softer. She had never noticed that before. The soft point—a slight lump?—seemed no different in any other way from the rest, and it was not much softer, but she hurled herself at it. And found herself back in the center. In a frenzy, she flung all of her strength at the soft spot, again and again, being hurled back to the center, not even pausing before launching herself at it again. Again. Oh, Light! Please! She had to, before . . . !

Abruptly she realized that Zaida still had not said five. Gulping air as if she had run ten miles, she stared. Sweat rolled down her face, her back. It trickled between her breasts, slid down her belly. Her legs wobbled. The Wavemistress looked straight into her eyes, thoughtfully tapping full lips with a slim finger. The glow still enveloped the circle of six, Kurin still could have been a scornfully stony statue, but Zaida had not said five.

"Did she truly try as hard as it seemed, Kurin," the Wavemistress asked finally, "or was all that thrashing about and whimpering just a show?" Nynaeve tried to summon an indignant glare. She had *not* whimpered! Had she? Her scowl, such as it was, made no more impression on Zaida than rain on a rock.

"With that much effort, Wavemistress," Kurin said reluctantly, "she could have carried a raker on her back." The flat black pebbles of her eyes still held contempt, though. Only those who lived at sea got any respect from her.

"Release her, Talaan," Zaida commanded, and shield and bonds vanished as she turned away, starting back toward the chairs without another glance at Nynaeve. "Windfinders, I will have words with you after she goes. I will see you at the same hour tomorrow, Nynaeve Sedai."

Smoothing her rumpled skirts and irritably shaking out her shawl again, Nynaeve attempted to regather a little dignity. It was not easy, sweat-slicked and trembling. She *certainly* had not whimpered! She tried not to look at the woman who had shielded her. Twice! Standing there meek as butter, with her eyes fixed on the carpet. Ha! Nynaeve jerked her shawl around her shoulders. "Sareitha Sedai will take her turn tomorrow, Wavemistress." At least her voice was steady. "I will be busy until—"

"Your instruction is more edifying than that of the others," Zaida said, still not bothering to look at her. "At the same hour, or I will send your pupils to bring you. You may leave now." And that had the sound of you *will* leave now.

With an effort, Nynaeve swallowed her arguments. They had a bitter taste. More edifying? What did that mean? She did not think she really wanted to know.

Until she actually left the room, she was still the teacher—the Sea Folk were rigid in their rules; Nynaeve supposed that lax rules on ships could lead to trouble, but she wished they would realize they were not on a ship—she was still the teacher, and that meant she could not simply stalk out, however much she wanted to. Worse, their rules were quite specific about teachers from among the shorebound. She could simply have refused to cooperate, she supposed, but if she violated their bargain by a hair, these women would spread it from Tear to the Light knew where! The whole world would know that Aes Sedai had broken their word. What *that* would do to Aes Sedai standing did not bear thinking about. Blood and bloody ashes! Egwene *was* right, and burn her for it!

“Thank you, Wavemistress, for allowing me to instruct you,” she said, bowing and touching fingers to forehead, lips and heart. Not a very deep bow, but a quick bob was all they were getting today. Well, two. The Windfinders had to have one. “Thank you, Windfinders, for allowing me to instruct you.” The sisters who finally went to the Atha’an Miere would explode when they learned that their pupils could tell them what to teach and when, and even order what they did when *not* teaching. On a Sea Folk vessel, a land-dwelling teacher outranked the common deckhands, but only just. And the sisters would not even get the fat purses of gold used to lure other teachers on board.

Zaida and the Windfinders reacted very much as if the lowest deckhand had announced her departure. That is, they stood in a silent cluster, plainly waiting for her to go, and not very patient about it. Only Rainyn favored her with as much as a glance. An impatient glance. She was a Windfinder, after all was said and done. Talaan still stood where she had been left, a meek figure gazing at the carpet in front of her bare feet.

Head high and back straight, Nynaeve left the room with every shred of dignity she could wrap around herself. Sweaty, rumpled shreds. In the hall, she seized the door in both hands and slammed it as hard as she could. The great, echoing crash was very satisfying. She could always say it had slipped out of her hands, if anyone complained. It really had, once she got a good swing going.

Turning from the door, she dusted her hands with satisfaction. And gave a start at who was waiting in the corridor for her.

In a simple dark blue dress provided by one of the Kinswomen, Alivia did not look at all unusual at first glance, a woman a little taller than Nynaeve, with fine lines at the corners of her blue eyes and threads of white in her golden yellow hair. Those blue eyes crackled with intensity, though, like the eyes of a hawk focused on prey.

“Mistress Corly sent me to tell you she’d like to see you at dinner tonight,” the blue-eyed hawk said in a slow Seanchan drawl. “Mistress Karistovan, Mistress Arman, and Mistress Juarde will be there.”

“What are you doing here alone?” Nynaeve demanded. She wished she could be like most other sisters, aware of another woman’s strength without ever really thinking about it, but that was something else she had not had time to learn. Maybe some of the Forsaken topped Alivia, but surely no one else. And she was Seanchan. Nynaeve wished there was someone else there besides the two of them. Even Lan, and she had ordered him to stay away from her lessons with the Sea Folk. She was not certain he believed her story about slipping on the stairs the other day. “You aren’t supposed to go anywhere without an escort!”

Alivia shrugged, a slight movement of one shoulder. A few days ago, she had been a bundle of simpers that made Talaan look bold. She did not simper for anybody, now. “There wasn’t anyone free, so I slipped out by myself. Anyway, if you always guard me, you’ll never come to trust me, and I’ll never get to kill *sul’dam*.” Somehow that sounded even more chilling, delivered in such a casual tone. “You ought to be learning from me. Those Asha’man say they’re weapons, and they aren’t bad, I know for a fact, but I’m better.”

“That’s as may be,” Nynaeve replied sharply, shifting her shawl. “And maybe we know more than you think we do.” She would not mind demonstrating a few of the weaves she had learned from Moghedien for this woman. Including a few they had all agreed were too nasty to do to anyone. Except . . . She was fairly certain the other woman could overpower her easily, whatever she did. Keeping her feet from shifting under that intense stare was not easy. “Until—unless!—we decide differently, you won’t let me see you without two or three Kinswomen again, if you know what’s good for you.”

“If you say so,” Alivia said, not at all abashed. “What message do you want me to take back to Mistress Corly?”

“Tell Mistress Corly I have to decline her kind invitation. And remember what I told you!”

“I’ll tell her,” the Seanchan woman drawled, completely ignoring the admonition. “But I don’t think it was exactly an invitation. An hour after first dark, she said. You might want to remember that.” With a slight, knowing smile, she walked away, not hurrying at all to return where she belonged.

Nynaeve glared at the retreating woman’s back, and not because of her lack of a curtsy. Well, not only that. A pity she had not hung on to a few of her simpers, for sisters, anyway. With a glance at the door that hid the Atha’an Miere, Nynaeve considered following Alivia to make sure she did as she had been told. Instead, she went in the opposite direction. She did not hurry. It would be unpleasant if the Sea Folk came out and decided she had been eavesdropping, but she definitely did not hurry. She merely wanted to walk briskly. That was all.

The Atha'an Miere were hardly the only ones in the Palace she wanted to avoid. Not exactly an invitation, was it? Sumeko Karistovan, Chilares Arman and Famelle Juarde had been in the Knitting Circle with Reanne Corly. Dinner was only an excuse. They would want to talk to her about the Windfinders. More specifically, about the relationship between the Aes Sedai in the Palace and the Sea Folk "wilders." They would not quite upbraid her for failing to maintain the dignity of the White Tower. They had not gone that far; not yet, though they seemed to be coming closer. But the whole dinner would be full of pointed questions and sharper comments. Nothing she could simply order them to stop. She doubted they would for less than a command. And they were quite capable of coming to find her if she did not go to them. Trying to teach them to show backbone had been a terrible mistake. At least she was not the only one who had to put up with it, though she thought Elayne had managed to avoid the worst. Oh, how she looked forward to seeing them back in novice white or Accepted's dresses. How she looked forward to seeing the last of the Atha'an Miere!

"Nynaeve!" came a strangely muted cry behind her. In Sea Folk accents. "Nynaeve!"

Forcing her hand away from her braid, Nynaeve spun on her heel, ready to deliver a tongue-lashing. She was not teaching now, they were not on a ship, and they could bloody well leave her alone!

Talaan skidded to a halt in front of her, bare feet sliding on the dark red floor tiles. Panting, the young woman swiveled her head as if afraid someone would sneak up on her. She flinched every time a liveried servant moved just on the edge of her sight, and only breathed again when she saw it was just a servant. "Can I go to the White Tower?" she asked breathlessly, wringing her hands and dancing from foot to foot. "I will never be chosen. A sacrifice, they call it, leaving the sea forever, but I dream of becoming a novice. I will miss my mother terribly, but . . . Please. You must take me to the Tower. You must!"

Nynaeve blinked at the onslaught. Many women dreamed of becoming Aes Sedai, but she had never before heard one say she dreamed of becoming a novice. Besides . . . The Atha'an Miere refused passage to Aes

Sedai on any ship whose Windfinder could channel, but to keep sisters from trying to look deeper, every so often an apprentice was chosen to go to the White Tower. Egwene said there were only three sisters from among the Sea Folk at present, all weak in the Power. For three thousand years that had been enough to convince the Tower that the ability was rare and small with Atha'an Miere women, not worth investigating. Talaan was right; no one as strong as she would ever be allowed to go to the Tower, even now that their subterfuge was coming to an end. In fact, it was part of the bargain with them that Atha'an Miere sisters be allowed to give up being Aes Sedai and return to the ships. The Hall of the Tower would not *half* howl about that!

"Well, the training is very hard, Talaan," she said gently, "and you must be at least fifteen. Besides . . ." Something else the young woman ad said struck her suddenly. "You will miss your mother?" she said incredulously, not caring how it sounded.

"I am nineteen!" Talaan replied indignantly. Looking at that boyish face and form, Nynaeve was not sure she believed. "And of course I will miss my mother. Do I look unnatural? Oh; I see. You do not understand. We are very affectionate in private, but she must avoid any sign of favor in public. That is a serious crime, with us. It could have mother stripped of her rank, and *both* of us hung upside down in the rigging to be flogged."

Nynaeve grimaced at the mention of upside down. "I certainly can see where you would want to avoid that," she said. "Even so—"

"Everyone tries to avoid even a hint of favor, but it is worse for me, Nynaeve!" Really, the girl—woman—young woman—would have to learn not to step on what a sister was saying if she did become a novice. Not that she could, of course. Nynaeve tried to regain the initiative, but words poured out of Talaan in a torrent. "My grandmother is Windfinder to the Wavemistress of Clan Rossaine, my great-grandmother is Windfinder to Clan Dacan, and her sister to Clan Takana. My family is honored that five of us have risen so high. And everyone watches for signs that Gelyn abuses its influence. Rightly so, I know—favor cannot be allowed—but my sister was kept an apprentice five years longer than normal, and my cousin six! Just so no one can claim they were favored. When I cast the stars and give our position correctly, I am punished for being slow even when I have the answer as fast as Windfinder Ehvon! When I taste the sea and name the coast we are approaching, I am punished because the taste I name is not quite what Windfinder Ehvon tastes! I shielded you twice, but tonight I will hang by my ankles for not doing so sooner! I am punished for flaws ignored in others, for flaws I never make, because I *might*! Was your novice training any harder than that, Nynaeve?"

"My novice training," Nynaeve said faintly. She wished the woman would not keep bringing up being hung by the ankles. "Yes. Well. You really don't want to hear about that." *Four* generations of women with the ability? Light! Even daughter following mother was rare enough. The Tower really would want Talaan. That was not going to happen, though. "I suppose Caire and Tebreille really love one another, too?" she said, trying to change the subject.

Talaan sneered. "My aunt is sly and deceitful. She celebrates any humiliation she can cause my mother. But my mother will bring her low, as she deserves. One day, Tebreille will find herself serving on a soarer, beneath a Sailmistress with an iron hand and sore teeth!" She gave a grim, satisfied nod at the thought. And then jumped, wide-eyed as a fawn, when a serving man hurried by behind her. That recalled her to her purpose. She went back to trying to look every way at once as she spoke hastily. "You cannot speak out during the lessons, of course, but any other time will do. Announce that I am to go to the Tower, and they will not be able to deny you. You are Aes Sedai!"

Nynaeve goggled at the girl. And they would have forgotten all about it by the next time she gave a lesson? The fool had *seen* what they did to her! "I can see how much you want to go, Talaan," she said, "but—"

"Thank you," Talaan broke in, making a quick bow. "Thank you!" And she darted back the way she had come at a dead run.

"Wait!" Nynaeve shouted, taking a few steps after her. "Come back! I didn't promise anything!"

Servants turned to stare at her, and continued to shoot wondering glances in her direction even after returning to their tasks. She would have run after the idiot except that she was afraid she would have to follow her straight to Zaida and the others. And the fool would probably gush out that she was going to the Tower, that Nynaeve had promised. Light, she would probably tell them anyway!

"You look as if you just swallowed a rotten plum," Lan said, appearing at her side, tall and starkly handsome in his well-fitting green coat. She wondered how long he had been there. It did not seem possible that a man so large, so commanding in his presence, could stand still enough that you failed to notice him, even without a Warder's cloak.

"A basketful of them," she murmured, pressing her face against her husband's broad chest. It felt very good to lean against his strength, just for a moment, while he stroked her hair softly. Even if she did have to shift his sword hilt out of her ribs. And anyone who wanted to stare at such a public display of affection could go hang themselves. She could see disaster piling up on disaster. Even if she told Zaida and the others she had no intention of taking Talaan anywhere, they were going to *skin* her. There would be no hiding it from Lan this time. If she had managed to the first. Reanne and the others would learn of it. And Alise! They would start treating her the way they did Merilille, ignoring her orders, giving her about as much respect as the Windfinders did Talaan. Somehow she would be saddled with guarding Alivia, and some catastrophe would come of it, some utter humiliation. That was all she seemed fit to do, lately; find another way to be humiliated. And every fourth day, she would still have to face Zaida and the Windfinders.

"Do you remember how you kept me in our rooms yesterday morning?" she murmured, looking up in time to catch a grin replacing concern on his face. Of course he remembered. Her face grew hot. Talking to friends was one thing, but being forward with her own husband still seemed quite another. "Well, I want you to take me back there right now and keep me from putting on any clothes for about a year!" She had been quite furious about that, at first. But he had ways to make her forget to be furious.

He threw back his head and laughed, a great booming sound, and after a moment, she echoed him. She wanted to weep, though. She had not really been joking.

Having a husband meant that she did not have to share a bed with another woman, or two, and it gained her a sitting room. It was not large, but it always seemed snug, with a good fireplace and a small table with four chairs. Certainly as much as she and Lan needed. Her hopes for privacy were dashed as soon as they entered the sitting room, though. The First Maid was waiting in the middle of the flowered carpet, as stately as a queen, as neatly turned out as if she had just finished dressing, and not at all pleased. And in one corner of the room was a roughly dressed, lumpy fellow with a horrible wart on his nose and a scrip dangling heavily from his shoulder.

“This man claims he has something you want urgently,” Mistress Harfor said once she had made brief courtesies. Very brief, if proper; she did not waste them on anyone except Elayne. She sounded equally disapproving of Nynaeve and the fellow with the wart. “I don’t mind telling you, I do not like the looks of him.”

Tired as Nynaeve was, embracing the Source was almost beyond her, but she managed it in a flash, spurred by thoughts of assassins and the Light knew what. Lan must have caught some change in her face, because he took a step toward the warty fellow; he did not touch his sword, but suddenly his whole stance seemed as if the blade were already drawn. How he sometimes managed to read her mind when another held his bond, she could not say, but she was pleased. She had managed to match Talaan—in strength, at least!—but she was not sure she could channel enough right then to knock over a chair. “I never,” she began.

“Pardon, Mistress,” the lumpy fellow muttered hurriedly, tugging his greasy forelock. “Mistress Thane said you wanted to see me right away. Women’s Circle business, she said. Something about Cenn Buie.”

Nynaeve gave herself a shake, and after a moment remembered to close her mouth. “Yes,” she said slowly, staring at the fellow. Seeing anything but that awful wart was difficult, but she was certain she had never laid eyes on him before. Women’s Circle business. No man would be allowed a sniff of that. It was secret. She held on to *saidar,* though. “I . . . remember, now. Thank you, Mistress Harfor. I’m sure you have all sorts of things to see to.”

Rather than take the hint, the First Maid hesitated, frowning at her suspiciously. That frown slid around to the lumpy man, then settled on Lan and vanished. She nodded to herself, as if his presence somehow made the difference! “I will leave you, then. I’m sure Lord Lan can handle this fellow.”

Stifling her indignation, Nynaeve barely waited for the door to close before rounding on the lumpy fellow and his wart. “Who are you?” she demanded. “How do you know those names? You’re no Two Riv—”

The man . . . rippled. There was no other word for it. He rippled and stretched taller, and suddenly it was Rand, grimacing and swallowing, in rumpled woolens with those awful heads glittering red-and-gold on the backs of his hands and a leather scrip on his shoulder. Where had he learned that? Who had taught him? She resisted the idea of disguising herself, just for a moment, to show him she could do as much.

“I see you didn’t take your own advice,” Rand said to Lan, just as if she were not there. “But why do you let her pretend to be Aes Sedai? Even if the real Aes Sedai let her, she can get hurt.”

“Because she is Aes Sedai, sheepherder,” Lan replied quietly. He did not look at her either! And he still seemed ready to draw his sword in a heartbeat. “As for the other . . . Sometimes, she is stronger than you. Did you take it?”

Rand looked at her then. To frown disbelievingly. Even when she pointedly adjusted her shawl so the yellow fringe swayed. What he said though, shaking his head slowly, was “No. You’re right. Sometimes you’re just too weak to do what you should.”

“What are you two blathering about?” she said sharply.

“Just things that men talk about,” Lan replied.

“You wouldn’t understand,” Rand said.

She sniffed at that. Gossip and idle chatter, that was what men’s talk was, nine times in ten. At best. Wearily, she let go of *saidar.* Reluctantly. She did not need to protect herself against Rand, certainly, but she would have liked to hold on a little longer, just to touch it, tired or not.

“We know about Cairhien, Rand,” she said, sinking gratefully into a chair. Those cursed Sea Folk had worn her out! “Is that why you’re here, dressed that way? If you’re trying to hide from whoever it was . . .” He looked tired. Harder than she remembered, but very tired. He remained standing, though. Strangely, he seemed much like Lan, ready to draw a sword he was not wearing. Maybe that attempt to kill him would be enough to make him see sense. “Rand, Egwene can help you.”

“I’m not hiding exactly,” he said. “At least, just until I kill some men who need killing.” Light, he was as matter of fact about it as Alivia! Why did he and Lan keep eyeing one another and pretending they were not? “Anyway, how could Egwene help?” he went on, setting the scrip on the table. It made a soft but solid sound of weight inside. “I suppose she’s Aes Sedai, too?” He sounded *amused!* “Is she here, as well? You three, and two real Aes Sedai. Only two! No. I don’t have time for that. I need you to keep something until—”

“Egwene is the Amyrlin Seat, you fool woolhead,” she growled. It was nice to be able to interrupt someone else for a change. “Elaida is a usurper. I hope you've had sense enough not to go near her! You wouldn't leave that meeting on your own two legs, I can tell you! There are five *real* Aes Sedai here, *including* me, and three hundred more with Egwene and an army, ready to pull Elaida down. Look at yourself! Whatever your brave talk, somebody almost killed you, and you're sneaking around dressed like a stableman! What safer place for you than with Egwene? Even those Asha'man of yours wouldn't dare go against three hundred sisters!" Oh, yes; very nice indeed. He tried to mask his surprise, but he made a poor job of it, staring at her.

"You'd be surprised what my Asha'man would dare," he said dryly after a minute. "I suppose Mat is with Egwene's army?" Putting a hand to his head, he staggered.

Only half a step, but she was out of her chair before he could right himself. Embracing *saidar* with an effort, she reached up to clasp his head between her hands, and laboriously wove a Delving around him. She had tried finding a better way to find what ailed someone, so far without success. It was enough. No sooner had the weave settled on him than her breath caught. She had known about the wound in his side from Falme, never healing completely, resisting all the Healing she knew, like a pustule of evil in his flesh. Now there was another half-healed wound atop the old, and that pulsed with evil, too. A different sort of evil, somehow, like a mirror of the other, yet just as virulent. And she could not touch either with the Power. She did not really want to—just thinking of it made her skin crawl!—but she tried. And something unseen held her away. Like a ward. A ward she could not see. A ward of *saidin?*

That made her stop channeling and step back. She clung to the Source; no matter how tired she was, she would have had to force herself to let go. No sister could think of the male half of the Power without at least a touch of fear. He looked down at her calmly, and that made her shiver. He seemed another man entirely from the Rand al'Thor she had watched grow up. She was very glad that Lan was there, hard as that was to admit. Suddenly she realized that he had not relaxed by a whisker. He might chatter with Rand like two men over pipes and ale, but he thought Rand was dangerous. And Rand looked at Lan as if he knew it, and accepted it.

"None of that is important now," Rand said, turning to the scrip on the table. She did not know whether he meant his wounds or where Mat was. From the scrip he produced two statuettes a foot high, a wise-looking, bearded man and an equally wise and serene woman, each in flowing robes and holding aloft a clear crystal sphere. From the way he handled them, they were heavier than they appeared. “I want you to keep these hidden for me until I send for them, Nynaeve.” One hand on the figure of the woman, he hesitated. “And for you. I’ll need you when I use them. When we use them. After I take care of those men. That has to come first.”

“Use them?” she said suspiciously. Why did killing anyone have to come first? That was hardly the important question, though. “For what? Are they *ter’angreal*?”

He nodded. “With this, you can touch the greatest *sa’angreal* ever made for a woman. It’s buried on Tremalking, I understand, but that doesn’t matter.” His hand moved to the figure of the man. “With this one, I can touch its male twin. I was told by . . . someone . . . once, that a man and woman using those *sa’angreal* could challenge the Dark One. They might have to be used for that, one day, but in the meantime, I hope they’re enough to cleanse the male half of the Source.”

“If it could be done, wouldn’t they have done it in the Age of Legends?” Lan said quietly. Quiet the way steel sliding from a scabbard was quiet. “You said once that I could get her hurt.” It seemed impossible his voice could grow any harder, but it did. “You could kill her, sheepherder.” And his tone made clear that he would not allow that.

Rand met Lan’s cold blue stare with one just as cold. “I don’t know why they didn’t. I don’t care why. It has to be tried.”

Nynaeve bit her lower lip. She supposed Rand made this a public occasion—shifting from public to private, deciding which was which, made her dizzy sometimes—but she did not care that Lan had spoken out of turn. He was bad that way, in any case, but she liked an outspoken man. She needed to think. Not about her decision. She had made that. About how to implement it. Rand might not like it. Lan certainly would not. Well, men always wanted their own way. Sometimes you just had to teach them they could not always have it.

“I think it is a wonderful idea,” she said. That was not exactly a lie. It *was* wonderful, compared to the alternatives. “But I don’t see why I should sit here waiting for your summons like a serving maid. I’ll do it, but we all go together.”

She had been right. They did not like it one bit.

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CHAPTER 12

A Lily in Winter

Another serving man nearly fell on his nose bowing, and Elayne sighed as she glided past along the Palace corridor. At least, she tried to glide. The Daughter-Heir of Andor, stately and serene. She wanted to run, though her dark blue skirts probably would have tripped her had she tried. She could almost feel the stout man's goggling eyes following her and her companions. A minor irritant, and one that would pass; a grain of sand in her slipper. *Rand bloody thinks-he-knows-best-for-everybody al'Thor is itchoak down my back!* she thought. If he managed to get away from her this time . . . !

"Just remember," she said firmly. "He hears nothing about spies, or forkroot, or any of that!" The very last thing she needed was him deciding to "rescue" her. Men did that sort of nonsense; Nynaeve called it "thinking with the hair on their chests." Light, he would probably try to move the Aiel and the Saldaeans back into the city! Into the Palace itself! Bitter as it was to admit, she could not stop him if he did, not short of open war, and even that might not be enough.

"I don't tell him things he doesn't need to know," Min said, frowning at a lanky, wide-eyed serving woman whose curtsy nearly collapsed into a sprawl on the red-brown floor tiles. Eyeing Min sideways, Elayne remembered her own time wearing breeches, and wondered whether she might not try again. They were certainly freer than skirts. Not the heeled boots, though, she decided judiciously. They made Min almost as tall as Aviendha, but even Birgitte swayed in those, and with Min's snug breeches and a coat that barely covered her hips, it looked positively scandalous.

"You lie to him?" Suspicion larded Aviendha's tone. Even the way she adjusted her dark shawl on her shoulders carried disapproval, and she glared past Elayne at Min.

"Of course not," Min replied sharply, glaring right back. "Not unless it's necessary." Aviendha chuckled, then looked startled that she had, and put on a stony face.

What was she to do about them? They *had* to like one another. They just *had* to. But the two women had been staring at each other like strange cats in a small room ever since they met. Oh, they had agreed to everything—there really had been no choice, not when none of them could guess when they would all have the man at hand again—but she hoped they did not show one another again how skillfully they handled their knives. Very casually, not actually implying any threat, but very open about it, too. On the other hand, Aviendha had been quite impressed with the number of knives Min carried about her person.

A gangly young serving man carrying a tray of tall mantles for the stand-lamps bowed as she swept by. Unfortunately, he was staring so hard that he forgot to pay attention to his burden. The crash of glass shattering on the floor tiles filled the corridor.

Elayne sighed again. She did hope everyone became used to the new order of things soon. She was not the object of all that gaping, of course, or Aviendha, or even Min, though she probably drew some. No, it was Caseille and Deni, following close behind, who were making eyes pop and servants stumble. She had eight bodyguards, now, and those two had been standing guard at her door when she woke.

Very likely some of the gaping was just that Elayne had Guardswomen trailing behind her at all, and almost certainly that they *were* women. No one was used to that, yet. But Birgitte had said she would make them appear ceremonial, and she had. She must have set every seamstress and milliner in the Palace working as soon as she left Elayne's rooms the night before. Each woman wore a bright red hat with a long white plume lying flat along the wide brim, and a wide red sash edged in snowy laee across her chest with rampant White Lions marching up it. Their white-collared crimson coats were silk, and the cut had been altered a little, so they fit better and hung almost to the knee above scarlet breeches with a white stripe up the outsides of the legs. Pale lace hung thickly at their wrists and necks, and their black boots had been waxed till they shone. They looked quite dashing, and even placid-eyed Deni swaggered just a little. Elayne suspected they would be even prouder once the sword belts and scabbards with gold tooling were ready, and the lacquered helmets and breastplates. Birgitte was having breastplates made to fit women, which Elayne suspected had *certainly* made the Palace armorer's eyes pop!

At the moment, Birgitte was busy interviewing women to round out the twenty for the bodyguard. Elayne could feel her concentrating, with no sign of physical activity, so it must be that, unless she was reading, or playing stones, and she seldom took a moment away from her duties for herself. Elayne hoped she would keep it to just twenty. She hoped Birgitte was busy enough that she did not notice until too late when she masked the bond. To think that she had been so worried about Birgitte sensing what she did not want her to when the solution lay in a simple question to Vandene. The answer had been a rueful reminder how little she actually knew about being Aes Sedai, especially the parts other sisters took for granted. Apparently, every sister who had a Warder knew how, even those who remained celibate.

It was odd how things came about, sometimes. If not for the bodyguards, if not for wondering how she could manage to elude them *and* Birgitte, she would never have thought to ask, would never have learned the masking in time for this. Not that she planned to elude her guards any time soon, but it was best to be prepared in advance of need. Birgitte certainly was not going to allow her and Aviendha to wander the city alone, day *or* night, not any longer.

Their arrival at Nynaeve’s door put thoughts of Birgitte completely out of her head. Except that she must not mask the bond until the very last instant. Rand was on the other side of that door. Rand who sometimes crowded her thoughts until she wondered whether she was like some fool woman in a story who threw her head over the wall because of a man. She had always thought those stories must have been written by men. Only, Rand sometimes did make her feel witless. At least he did not realize it, thank the Light.

“Wait out here, and admit no one,” she commanded the Guardswomen. She could not afford interruptions or attention now. With luck, her bodyguard was new enough that no one would even recognize what their fine uniforms meant. “I will only be a few minutes.”

They saluted briskly, an arm across the chest, and took positions on either side of the door, Caseille stonefaced with a hand on her sword hilt, Deni taking her long cudgel in both hands and smiling faintly. Elayne was sure the stocky woman thought Min had brought her here to meet a secret lover. She suspected Caseille might, as well. They had hardly been as discreet in front of the two women as they might have; no one had mentioned his name, but there had more than enough of “he this” and “he that.” At least neither had tried making an excuse to leave so she could report to Birgitte. If they were her bodyguard, then they were *her* bodyguard, not Birgitte’s. Except that they would not keep Birgitte out if she masked the bond too soon.

And she was dithering, she realized. The man she dreamed of every night was on the other side of that door, and she was standing there like a witling. She had waited so long, wanted so much, and now she was almost afraid. She would not let this go wrong. With an effort, she gathered herself.

“Are you ready?” Her voice was not as strong as she could have hoped, but at least it did not tremble. Butterflies the size of foxes fluttered in her stomach. That had not happened in a long time.

“Of course,” Aviendha said, but she had to swallow first.

“I’m ready,” Min said faintly.

They went in without knocking, hurriedly closing the door behind them.

Nynaeve jumped to her feet, wide-eyed, before they were well into the sitting room, but Elayne barely noticed her or Lan, though the sweet smell of the Warder’s pipe filled the room. Rand really was there; it had been hard to believe he would be. That dreadful disguise Min had described was gone, except for the shabby clothing and rough gloves, and he was . . . beautiful.

He leaped from his chair at the sight of her, too, but before he was completely upright, he staggered and grabbed the table with both hands, gagging and heaving with dry retches. Elayne embraced the Source and took a step toward him, then stopped and made herself let go of the Power. Her ability with Healing was tiny, and anyway, Nynaeve had moved as quickly as she, the shine of *saidar* suddenly around her, hands raised toward Rand.

He recoiled, waving her away. “It’s nothing you can Heal, Nynaeve,” he said roughly. “In any case, it seems you win the argument.” His face was a rigid mask hiding emotion, but his eyes seemed to Elayne to be drinking her in. And Aviendha as well. She was surprised to feel gladdened by that. She had hoped it would be that way, hoped she could manage for her sister’s sake, and now it took no managing at all. Straightening up was a visible effort for him, and pulling his gaze away from her and Aviendha, though he tried to hide both. “It is past time to be gone, Min,” he said.

Elayne’s jaw dropped. “You think you can just go without even *speaking* to me, to us?” she managed.

“Men!” Min and Aviendha breathed at almost the same instant, and gave one another startled looks. Hastily they unfolded their arms. For an instant, despite the disparity in just about everything about them, they had been almost mirror images of womanly disgust.

“The men who tried to kill me in Cairhien would turn this palace into a slag heap if they knew I was here,” Rand said quietly. “Maybe if they just suspected. I suppose Min told you it was Asha’man. Don’t trust any of them. Except for three, maybe. Damer Flinn, Jahar Narishma and Eben Hopwil. You may be able to trust them. For the rest . . .” He clenched gauntleted fists at his sides, seemingly unaware. “Sometimes a sword turns in your hand, but I still need a sword. Just stay away from any man in a black coat. Look, there’s no time for talking. It’s best I go quickly.” She had been wrong. He was not exactly as she had dreamed of him. There had been a boyishness about him sometimes, but it was gone as if burned away. She mourned that for him. She did not think he did, or could.

“He is right in one thing,” Lan said around his pipestem with the same sort of quiet. Another man who seemed never to have been a boy. His eyes were blue ice beneath the braided leather cord that encircled his brows. “Anyone near him is in great danger. Anyone.” For some reason, Nynaeve snorted. Then put her hand on a leather scrip with hard bulges lying on the table and smiled. Though after a moment her smile faltered.

“Do my first-sister and I fear danger?” Aviendha demanded, planting her fists on her hips. Her shawl slipped from her shoulders and fell to the floor, but she was so intent that she seemed unaware of the loss. “This man has *toh* to us, Aan’allein, and we to him. It must be worked out.”

Min spread her hands. “I don’t know what anybody’s toes have to do with anything, or feet either, but I’m not going anywhere until you talk to them, Rand!” She affected not to notice Aviendha’s outraged glare.

Sighing, Rand leaned against a corner of the table and raked gloved fingers through the dark, reddish curls that hung to his neck. He seemed to be arguing with himself under his breath.

“I’m sorry you ended up with the *sul’dam* and *damane,*” he said finally. He did sound sorry, but not very; he might have been regretting the cold. “Taim was supposed to deliver them to the sisters I thought were with you. But I suppose anyone can make a mistake like that. Maybe he thought all those Wisdoms and Wise Women Nynaeve has gathered were Aes Sedai." His smile was quiet. It did not touch his eyes.

"Rand," Min said in a low, warning tone.

He had the nerve to look at her questioningly, as if he did not understand. And he went right on. "Anyway, you seem to have enough of them to hold on to a handful of women until you can turn them over to the . . . the other sisters, the ones with Egwene. Things never turn out quite the way you expect, do they? Who would have thought a few sisters running away from Elaida would grow into a rebellion against the White Tower? With Egwene as Amyrlin! And the Band of the Red Hand for her army. I suppose Mat can stay there awhile." For some reason he blinked and touched his forehead, then went on in that irritatingly casual tone. "Well. A strange turn of events all around. At this rate, I won't be surprised if my friends in the Tower work up enough courage to come out in the open."

Arching an eyebrow, Elayne glanced, at Nynaeve. Wisdoms and Wise Women? The Band was Egwene's army, and Mat was with it? Nynaeve's attempt at wide-eyed innocence made her look like guilt nailed to a door. Elayne supposed it did not matter. He would learn the truth soon enough, if he could be talked into going to Egwene. In any case, she had more important matters to take up with him. The man was babbling, however offhand he managed to sound, tossing out anything they might snap at in hopes of diverting them.

"It won't do, Rand." Elayne tightened her hands on her skirts to keep herself from shaking a finger at him. Or a fist; she was not sure which it would be. The *other* sisters? The *real* Aes Sedai, he had been about to say. How *dare* he? And his *friends* in the Tower! Could he still believe Alviarin's strange letter? Her voice was cool and firm and steady, brooking no nonsense. "None of that matters a hair, not now. You and Aviendha and Min and I are what we need to talk about. And we will. We *all* will, Rand al'Thor, and you are *not* leaving the Palace until we do!"

For the longest time, he simply looked at her, his expression never changing. Then he inhaled audibly, and his face turned to granite. "I love you, Elayne." Without a pause, he went on, words rushing out of him, water from a burst dam. And his face a stone wall. "I love you, Aviendha. I love you, Min. And not one a whisker more or less than the other two. I don't just want one of you, I want all three. So there you have it. I'm a lecher.

Now you can walk away and not look back. It’s madness, anyway. I can’t afford to love anybody!”

“Rand al’Thor,” Nynaeve shrieked, “that is the most outrageous thing I ever heard out of your mouth! The very idea of telling *three* women you love them! You’re *worse* than a lecher! You apologize right now!” Lan had snatched his pipe from his mouth and was staring at Rand.

“I love you, Rand,” Elayne said simply, “and although you haven’t asked, I want to marry you.” She blushed faintly, but she intended to be much more forward before very long, so she supposed this hardly counted. Nynaeve’s mouth worked, but no sound came out.

“My heart is in your hands, Rand,” Aviendha said, treating his name like something rare and precious. “If I can convince my first-sister, we will make a bridal wreath for you.” And she blushed, too, trying to cover it in bending to take her shawl from the floor and arranging it on her arms. By Aiel customs, she should never had said any of that. Nynaeve finally got a sound out. A squeak.

“If you don’t know by this time that I love you,” Min said, “then you’re blind, deaf and dead!” She certainly did not blush; there was a mischievous light in her dark eyes, and she seemed ready to laugh. “And as for marriage, well, we’ll work that out between the three of us, so there!” Nynaeve took a grip on her braid with both hands and gave it a steady pull, breathing heavily through her nose. Lan had begun an intense study of the contents of his pipe’s bowl.

Rand examined the three of them as if he had never seen a woman before and wondered what they were. “You’re all mad,” he said finally. “I’d marry any of you—all of you, the Light help me!—but it can’t be, and you know it.” Nynaeve collapsed into a chair, shaking her head. She muttered to herself, though all Elayne could understand was something about the Women’s Circle swallowing their tongues.

“There is something else we need to discuss,” Elayne said. Light, Min and Aviendha could have been looking at a pastry! With an effort she managed to make her own smile a little less . . . eager. “In my rooms, I think. There’s no need to bother Nynaeve and Lan.” Or rather, she was afraid that Nynaeve would try to stop them, if she heard. The woman was very quick to use her authority when it came to Aes Sedai matters.

“Yes,” Rand said slowly. And then, strangely, added, “I said you’d won, Nynaeve. I won’t leave without seeing you again.”

“Oh!” Nynaeve gave a start. “Yes. Of course not. I watched him grow up,” she blathered, turning a sickly smile on Elayne. “Almost from the start. Watched his first steps. He can’t go without a good long talk with me.”

Elayne eyed her suspiciously. Light, she sounded for all the world like an aged nurse. Though Lini had never babbled. She hoped Lini was alive and well, but she was very much afraid that neither was true. Why was Nynaeve carrying on in this fashion? The woman was up to something, and if she was not going to use her standing to carry it off, it was something even she knew was wrong.

Suddenly, Rand seemed to waver, as though the air around him were shimmering with heat, and everything else flew out of Elayne’s head. In an instant, he was . . . someone else, shorter and thicker, coarse and brutish. And so repulsive to look at that she did not even consider the fact that he was using the male half of the Power. Greasy black hair hung down onto an unhealthily pale face dominated by hairy warts, including one on a bulbous nose above thick slack lips that appeared on the edge of drooling. He squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed, hands gripping the arms of his chair, as if he could not stand to see them look at him.

“You are still beautiful, Rand,” she said gently.

“Ha!” Min said. “That face would make a goat faint!” Well, it would, but she should not have said so.

Aviendha laughed. “You have a sense of humor, Min Farshaw. That face would make a *herd* of goats faint.” Oh, Light, it *would!* Elayne swallowed a giggle just in time.

“I am who I am,” Rand said, pushing himself up out of the chair. “You just won’t see it.”

At Deni’s first sight of Rand in his disguise, the smile slid crookedly off the stocky woman’s face. Caseille’s mouth dropped open. *So much for thoughts of secret lovers,* Elayne thought, laughing to herself in amusement. She was sure he drew as many stares as the Guardswomen, shambling along between them with a sullen scowl. Certainly no one could suspect who he was. The servants in the corridors probably thought he had been apprehended in some crime. He certainly had the look. Caseille and Deni kept a hard eye on him as if they thought so, too.

The Guardswomen came near to arguing when they realized she intended them to wait outside her apartments while the three of them took him inside. Suddenly, Rand’s disguise did not seem amusing at all any longer. Caseille's mouth thinned, and Deni's wide face set in stubborn displeasure. Elayne almost had to wave her Great Serpent ring beneath their noses before they took positions beside her door, scowling. She shut the door softly, cutting off the sight of their frowns, but she wanted to slam it. Light, the man could have chosen something a *little* less unsavory for his disguise.

And as for *him*, he went straight to the inlaid table, leaning against it while the air around him shimmered and he became himself once more. The Dragon's heads on the backs of his hands glittered metallically, scarlet and gold. "I need a drink," he muttered thickly, catching sight of the tall-necked silver pitcher on the long side-table against the wall.

Still not looking at her or Min or Aviendha, he walked over unsteadily and filled a silver winecup that he half-drained in one long swallow. That sweet spicy wine had been left when her breakfast was taken away. It must be cold as ice by now. She had not been expected to return to her rooms so soon, and the fire on the hearth had been banked down beneath ashes. But he made no move she could see to warm the wine by channeling. She would have seen steam, at least. And why had he walked to the wine, instead of channeling to bring it to him? That was the sort of thing he always did, floating winecups and lamps about on flows of Air.

"Are you well, Rand?" Elayne asked. "I mean, are you sick?" Her stomach tightened at the thought of what sickness it might be, with him. "Nynaeve can—"

"I am as fine as I can be," he said flatly. *Still* with his back to them. Emptying the cup, he began to fill it again. "Now what is it you don't want Nynaeve to hear?"

Elayne's eyebrows shot up, and she exchanged looks with Aviendha and Min. If *he* had seen through her subterfuge, Nynaeve *certainly* had. Why had she let them go? And how *had* he seen through it? Aviendha shook her head slightly in wonder. Min shook hers, too, but with a grin that said you just had to expect this sort of thing now and then. Elayne felt the smallest stab of—not quite jealousy; jealousy was out of the question, for them—just irritation that Min had had so much time with him and she had not. Well, if he wanted to play surprises . . .

"We want to bond you our Warder," she said, smoothing her dress under her as she took a chair. Min sat on the edge of the table, legs dangling, and Aviendha settled onto the carpet cross-legged, carefully spreading out her heavy woolen skirts. “All three of us. It is customary to ask, first.”

He spun around, wine sloshing out of his cup, more pouring from the pitcher before he could bring it upright. With a muttered oath, he hastily stepped out of the spreading wetness on the carpet and put the pitcher back on the tray. A large damp spot decorated the front of his rough coat, and droplets of dark wine that he tried to brush away with his free hand. Very satisfactory.

“You really are mad,” he growled. “You know what’s ahead of me. You know what it means for anyone I’m bonded to. Even if I don’t go insane, she has to live through me dying! And what do you mean, all three of you? Min can’t channel. Anyway, Alanna Mosvani got there ahead of you, and she didn’t bother asking. She and Verin were taking some Two Rivers girls to the White Tower. I’ve been bonded to her for months, now.”

“And you kept it from me, you woolheaded sheepherder?” Min demanded. “If I’d known—!” She deftly produced a slim knife from her sleeve, then glared at it and glumly put it back. That cure would have been as hard on Rand as on Alanna.

“This was against custom,” Aviendha said, half questioning. She shifted on the carpet and fingered her belt knife.

“Very much so,” Elayne replied grimly. That a sister would do that to *any* man was disgusting! That Alanna had done it to *Rand* . . . ! She remembered the dark, fiery Green with her quicksilver humor and her quicksilver temper. “Alanna has more *toh* to him than she could repay in a *lifetime*! And to us. Even if she doesn’t, she will wish I had just *killed* her after I lay hands on her!”

“After *we* lay hands on her,” Aviendha said, nodding for emphasis.

“So.” Rand peered into his wine. “You can see there’s no point in this. I . . . I think I’d better go back to Nynaeve, now. Are you coming, Min?” Despite what they had told him, he sounded as though he did not really believe, as if Min might abandon him now. He did not sound afraid of it, only resigned.

“There *is* a point,” Elayne said insistently. She leaned toward him, trying by the force of her will to make him accept what she was saying. “One bond doesn’t ward you against another. Sisters don’t bond the same man because of *custom*, Rand, because they don’t want to *share* him, not because it can’t be done. And it isn’t against Tower law, either.” Of course, some customs were strong as law, at least in the eyes of the sisters. Nynaeve seemed to go on more every day about upholding Aes Sedai customs and dignity. When she learned of this, she would probably explode right through the roof. “Well, we *do* want to share you! We *will* share you, if you agree.”

How easy it was to say that! She had been sure she could not, once. Until she came to realize that she loved Aviendha as much as she did him, just in a different way. And Min, too; another sister, even if they had not adopted one another. She would stripe Alanna from top to bottom for touching him, given the chance, but Aviendha and Min were different. They were part of her. In a way, they *were* her, and she them.

She softened her tone. “I am asking, Rand. *We* are asking. Please let us bond you.”

“Min,” he murmured, almost accusingly. His eyes on Min’s face were filled with despair. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew if I laid eyes on them . . .” He shook his head, unable or unwilling to go on.

“I didn’t know about the bonding until they told me less than an hour ago,” she said, meeting his gaze with the most gentle look Elayne had ever seen. “But I knew, I hoped, what would happen if you saw them again. Some things have to be, Rand. They have to be.”

Rand stared into the winecup, moments seeming to stretch like hours, and at last set it back on the tray. “All right,” he said quietly. “I can’t say I do not want this, because I do. The Light burn me for it! But think of the cost. Think of the price you’ll pay.”

Elayne did not need to think of the price. She had known it from the beginning, had discussed it with Aviendha to make sure she understand, too. She had explained it to Min. Take what you want, and pay for it, the old saying went. None of them had to think about the price; they knew, and they were willing to pay. There was no time to waste, though. Even now, she did not put it past him to decide that price was too high. As if that were his decision to make!

Opening herself to *saidar,* she linked with Aviendha, sharing a smile with her. The increased awareness of one another, the more intimate sharing of emotions and physical feelings, was always a pleasure with her sister. It was very much like what they would soon share with Rand. She had worked this out carefully, studied it from every angle. What she had been able to learn of the Aiel adoption weaves had been a great help. That ceremony had been when the idea first came to her.

Carefully she wove Spirit, a flow of over a hundred threads, every thread placed just so, and laid the weave on Aviendha sitting on the floor, then did the same to Min on the table's edge. In a way, they were not two separate weaves at all. They glowed with a precise similarity, and it seemed that looking at one, she saw the other as well. These were not the weaves used in the adoption ceremony, but they used the same principles. They *included;* what happened to one meshed in that weave, happened to all in it. As soon as the weaves were in place, she passed the lead of the circle of two to Aviendha. The weaves already made remained, and Aviendha immediately wove identical weaves around Elayne, and around Min again, blending that one until it was indistinguishable from Elayne's before passing control back. They did that very easily now, after a great deal of practice. Four weaves, or rather, three now, yet they all seemed the same weave.

Everything was ready. Aviendha was a rock of confidence as strong as anything Elayne had ever felt from Birgitte. Min sat gripping the edge of the table, her ankles locked together; she could not see the flows, but she gave an assured grin that was only spoiled a little when she licked her lips. Elayne breathed deeply. To her eyes, they three were surrounded and connected by a tracery of Spirit that made the finest lace seem drab. Now if only it worked as she believed it would.

From each of them, she extended the weave in narrow lines toward Rand, twisting the three lines into one, changing it into the Warder bond. That, she laid on Rand as softly as if she were laying a blanket on a baby. The spiderweb of Spirit settled around him, settled into him. He did not even blink, but it was done. She let go of *saidar.* Done.

He stared at them, expressionless, and slowly put his fingers to his temples.

"Oh, Light, Rand, the pain," Min murmured in a hurt voice. "I never knew; I never imagined. How can you stand it? There are pains you don't even seem to know, as if you've lived with them so long they're part of you. Those herons on your hands; you can still feel the branding. Those things on your arms hurt! And your side. Oh, Light, your side! Why aren't you crying, Rand? Why aren't you crying?"

"He is the *Car'a'carn,*" Aviendha said, laughing, "as strong as the Three-fold Land itself!" Her face was proud—oh, so proud—but even as she laughed, tears streamed down her sun-dark cheeks. “The veins of gold. Oh, the veins of gold. You do love me, Rand.”

Elayne simply stared at him, felt him in her head. The pain of wounds and hurts he really had forgotten. The tension and disbelief; the wonder. His emotions were too rigid, though, like a knot of hardened pine sap, almost stone. Yet laced through them, golden veins pulsed and glowed whenever he looked at Min, or Aviendha. Or her. He *did* love her. He loved all three of them. And that made her want to laugh with joy. Other women might find doubts, but she would always know the truth of his love.

“The Light send you know what you’ve done,” he said in a low voice. “The Light send you aren’t . . .” The pine sap grew a trifle harder. He was sure they would be hurt, and was already steeling himself. “I . . . I have to go, now. At least I’ll know you are all well now; I won’t have to worry about you.” Suddenly he grinned; he might have looked almost boyish if it had reached his eyes. “Nynaeve will be frantic thinking I’ve slipped away without seeing her. Not that she doesn’t deserve a little flustering.”

“There is one more thing, Rand,” Elayne said, and stopped to swallow. Light, she had thought *this* would be the easy part.

“I suppose Aviendha and I have to talk while we can,” Min said hurriedly, springing off the table. “Somewhere we can be alone. If you’ll excuse us?”

Aviendha rose from the carpet gracefully, smoothing her skirts. “Yes. Min Farshaw and I must learn about one another.” She eyed Min doubtfully, adjusting her shawl, but they left arm in arm.

Rand watched them warily, as if he knew their leaving had been planned. A cornered wolf. But those veins of gold gleamed in her head.

“There is something they have had from you that I haven’t,” Elayne began, and choked, a flush scalding her face. Blood and ashes! How *did* other women go about this? Carefully she considered the bundle of sensations in her head that was him, and the bundle that was Birgitte. There was still no change in the second. She imagined wrapping it in a kerchief, knotting the kerchief snugly, and Birgitte was gone. There was only Rand. And those shining golden veins. Butterflies the size of *wolfhounds* drummed their wings in her middle. Swallowing hard, she took a long breath. “You will have to help me with my buttons,” she said unsteadily. “I cannot take this dress off by myself.”

The two Guardswomen stirred when Min came into the corridor with the Aiel woman, and jerked erect when they realized, as Min closed the door, that no one else was coming out.

"Her taste *can't* be *that* bad," the blocky, sleepy-eyed one muttered under her breath, hands tightening on her long cudgel. Min did not think anyone had been meant to hear.

"Too much courage, and too much innocence," the lean, mannish one growled. "The Captain-General warned us about that." She put a gauntleted hand on the lion-headed doorlatch.

"You go in there now, and she might skin you, too," Min said blithely. "Have you ever seen her in a temper? She could make a bear weep!"

Aviendha disengaged her arm from Min's and put a little distance between them. It was the Guardswomen who received her scowl, though. "You doubt my sister can handle a single man? She is Aes Sedai, and has the heart of a lion. And you are oath-sworn to follow her! You follow where she leads, not put your noses up her sleeve."

The Guardswomen exchanged a long look. The heavier woman shrugged. The wiry one grimaced, but she took her hand from the doorlatch. "I'm oath-sworn to keep that girl alive," she said in a hard voice, "and I mean to. Now you children go play with your dolls and let me do my job."

Min considered producing a knife and performing one of the flashy finger-rolls Thom Merrilin had taught her. Just to show them who was a child. The lean woman was not young, but there was no gray in her hair, and she looked quite strong. And quick. Min wanted to believe some of the other woman's bulk was fat, but she did not. She could not see any images or auras around either, but neither looked in the least afraid to do whatever she thought needed doing. Well, at least they were leaving Elayne and Rand alone. Maybe the knife was unnecessary.

From the corner of her eye she caught sight of the Aiel reluctantly letting a hand fall from her belt knife. If the woman did not stop mirroring her this way, she was going to start thinking there was more to this jiggery-pokery with the Power than she had been told. Then again, it had begun before the jiggery-pokery. Maybe they just thought alike. A disturbing idea. Light, all this talk about him marrying all three of them was very well for talk, but which one was he *really* going to marry?

"Elayne *is* brave," she told the Guards, "as brave as anybody I've ever met. And she isn't stupid. If you start off thinking she is, you'll soon go wrong with her." They stared down at her from the vantage of an added fifteen or twenty years, solid, unperturbed and determined. In a moment they would tell her to run along, again. "Well, we can't stand around here if we're going to talk, can we, Aviendha?"

"No," the Aiel woman breathed in a tight voice, glaring at the Guardswomen. "We cannot stand here."

The Guardswomen took no notice of their going at all. They had a job to do, and it had nothing to with watching Elayne's friends. Min hoped they did their job well. *She isn't at* all *stupid,* she thought. *She just lets her courage lead the way, sometimes.* She hoped they would not let Elayne scramble into brambles she could not get out of.

Walking along the hallway, she eyed the Aiel woman sideways. Aviendha strode along as far from her as she could be and still remain in the same corridor. Not even glancing in Min's direction, she pulled a thickly carved ivory bracelet from her belt pouch and slipped it over her left wrist with a small, satisfied smile. She had had a fly on her nose from the first, and Min did not understand why. Aiel were supposed to be used to women sharing a man. A far cry more than she could say for herself. She just loved him so badly she was willing to share, and if she must, then there was no one in the world she would rather share with than Elayne. With her, it almost wasn't like sharing at all. This Aiel woman was a stranger, though. Elayne had said it was important they get to know one another, but how could they if the woman would not talk to her?

She did not spend much time worrying about Elayne, though, or Aviendha. What lay in her head was too wondrous. Rand. A little ball that told her everything about him. She had been sure the whole thing would fail, for her at least. What would making love with him be like after this, when she knew *everything*! Light! Of course, he would know everything about her, too. She was *definitely* uncertain how she felt about *that*!

Abruptly she realized that the bundle of emotions and sensations was no longer the same as at first. There was a . . . red roaring . . . to it, now, like wildfire raging through a tinder dry forest. What could . . . ? Light! She stumbled, and just caught her footing short of tumbling. If she had known this furnace, this fierce hunger, was inside him, she would have been afraid to let him touch her! On the other hand . . . It might be nice, knowing she had sparked such an inferno. She could not wait to see whether she produced the same effect as . . . She stumbled again, and this time had to catch herself on an ornately carved highchest. Oh, Light! Elayne! Her *face* felt like a furnace. This was like peeking through the bedcurtains!

Hurriedly she tried the trick Elayne had told her about, imaging that ball of emotions tied up in a kerchief. Nothing happened. Frantically she tried again, but the raging fire was still there! She had to stop looking at it, stop feeling it. Anything to get her attention anywhere but there! Anything! Maybe if she started talking.

"She should have drunk that heartleaf tea," she babbled. She never told what she saw except to those involved, and only then if they wanted to hear, but she had to say something. "She'll get with child from this. Two of them; a boy and a girl; both healthy and strong."

"She wants his babies," the Aiel woman mumbled. Her green eyes stared straight ahead; her jaw was tight, and sweat beaded on her forehead. "I will not drink the tea myself if I—" Giving herself a shake, she frowned across the width of the hall at Min. "My sister and the Wise Ones told me about you. You really see things about people that come true?"

"Sometimes I see things, and if I know what they mean, they happen," Min said. Their voices, raised to reach each other, carried along the corridor. Red-and-white-liveried servants turned to stare at them. Min moved to the center of the hallway. She would meet the other woman halfway, no more. After a moment, Aviendha joined her.

Min wondered whether to tell her what she had seen while they were all together. Aviendha would have Rand's babies, too. Four of them at once! Something was odd about that, though. The babies would be healthy, but still something odd. And people often did not like hearing about their futures, even when they said they wanted to. She wished someone could tell her whether she *herself* would. . . .

Walking along in silence, Aviendha wiped sweat from her face with her fingers and swallowed hard. Min had to swallow, too. Everything Rand was feeling was in that ball. Everything!

"The kerchief trick didn't work for you, either?" she said hoarsely.

Aviendha blinked, and crimson darkened her face. A moment later, she said, "That is better. Thank you. I . . . With him in my head, I forgot." She frowned. "It did not work for you?"

Min shook her head miserably. This was indecent! "It helps if I talk, though." She had to make friends with this woman, somehow, if this whole peculiar business was to have a hope of working. "I'm sorry for what I said.

About toes, I mean. I know a little of your customs. There's something about that man that just makes me cheeky. I can't control my tongue. But don't think I'm going to let you start hitting me or carving on me. Maybe I have *toh,* but we'll have to find some other way. I could always groom your horse, when we have time."

"You are as proud as my sister," Aviendha muttered, frowning. What did she mean by that? "You have a good sense of humor, too." She seemed to be talking to herself. "You did not make a fool of yourself about Rand and Elayne the way most wetlander women would. And you did remind me. . . ." With a sigh, she flipped her shawl up onto her shoulders. "I know where there is some *oosquai.* If you are too drunk to think, then—" Staring down the hallway, she stopped dead. "No!" she growled. "Not yet!"

Coming toward them was an apparition that made Min's jaw drop. Consternation pushed Rand beyond awareness. From comments she had known that the Captain-General of Elayne's Guards was a woman, and Elayne's Warder to boot, but nothing else. This woman had a thick, intricate golden braid pulled over one shoulder of her short, white-collared red coat, and her voluminous blue trousers were tucked into boots with heels as high as Min's. Auras danced around her and images flickered, more than Min had ever seen around anyone, thousands it seemed, cascading over one another. Elayne's Warder and Captain-General of the Queen's Guards . . . wobbled . . . a little, as though she had already been into the *oosquai.* Servants who caught sight of her decided they had work in another part of the Palace, leaving the three of them alone in the corridor. She did not seem to see Min and Aviendha until she almost walked into them.

"You bloody helped her in this, didn't you?" she growled, focusing glassy-looking blue eyes on Aviendha. "First, she flaming vanishes out of my head, and then . . . !" She trembled, and visibly controlled herself, but even then she was breathing hard. Her legs did not seem to want to hold her upright. Licking her lips, she swallowed and went on angrily. "Burn her, I can't concentrate enough to shake it off! You let me tell you, if she's doing what I think she's doing, I'll kick her tickle-heart around the bloody Palace, and then I'll flaming welt her till she can't sit for a *month*—and you alongside her!—if I have to find *forkroot* to do it!"

"My first-sister is a grown woman, Birgitte Trahelion," Aviendha said truculently. Despite her tone, her shoulders were hunched, and she did not quite meet the other woman’s stare. “You must stop trying to treat us as children!”

“When she bloody well behaves like an adult, I bloody well treat her as one, but she has no right to do *this,* not in my flaming head, she doesn’t! Not in my—!” Abruptly, Birgitte’s glazed blue eyes bulged. The golden haired woman’s mouth dropped open, and she would have fallen if Min and Aviendha had not each seized an arm.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she sobbed, just once, and whimpered, “*Two* months!” Shaking free of them, she straightened and fixed Aviendha with blue eyes clear as water and hard as ice. “Shield her for me, and I’ll let you off your share.” Aviendha’s sullen, indignant glare just slid off her.

“You’re Birgitte Silverbow!” Min breathed. She had been sure even before Aviendha said the name. No wonder the Aiel woman was behaving as if she feared those threats would be carried out right then and there. Birgitte Silverbow! “I saw you at Falme!”

Birgitte gave a start as if goosed, then looked around hurriedly. Once she realized they were alone, she relaxed. A little. She eyed Min up and down. “Whatever you saw, Silverbow is dead,” she said bluntly. “I’m Birgitte Trahelion, now, and that’s all.” Her lips twisted wryly for a moment. “The flaming *Lady* Birgitte Trahelion, if you flaming please. Kiss a sheep on Mother’s Day if I can do anything about that, I suppose. And who might you be when you’re to home? Do you always show off your legs like a bloody feather dancer?”

“I am Min Farshaw,” she replied curtly. *This* was Birgitte Silverbow, hero of a hundred legends? The woman was *foul*-mouthed! And what did she mean, Silverbow was dead? The woman was standing right in front of her! Besides, those multitudes of images and auras flashed by too quickly for her to make out any clearly, but she was certain they indicated more adventures than a woman could have in one lifetime. Strangely, some were connected to an ugly man who was older than she, and others to an ugly man who was much younger, yet somehow Min knew they were the same man. Legend or no legend, that superior air irritated her no end. “Elayne, Aviendha and I just bonded a Warder,” she said without thinking. “And if Elayne is celebrating a little, well, you better think twice about storming in, or *you’ll* be the one sitting tender.”

That was enough to make her aware of Rand again. That raging furnace was still there, hardly lessened at all, but thank the Light, he was no longer . . . Blood rushed into her cheeks. He had lain often enough in her arms, catching his breath in the tangle of their bedding, but this really did seem like peeping!

"Him?" Birgitte said softly. "Mothers' milk in a cup! She could have fallen in love with a cutpurse or a horsethief, but she had to choose him, more fool her. By what I saw of him at that place you mentioned, the man's too pretty to be good for any woman. In any case, she has to stop."

"You have no right!" Aviendha insisted in a sulky voice, and Birgitte took on a look of patience. Stretched patience, but still patience.

"She might be proper as a Talmouri maiden except when it comes to putting her head on the chopping block, but I think she'll wind up her courage to put him through his paces again, and even if she does whatever it was she did, she'll forget and be back in my head. I won't bloody go through that again!" She squared herself, plainly ready to march off and confront Elayne.

"Think of it as a good joke," Aviendha said pleadingly. Pleadingly! "She has played a good joke on you, that is all." A curl of Birgitte's lip expressed what she thought of that.

"There's a trick Elayne told me," Min said hurriedly, catching hold of Birgitte's sleeve. "It didn't work for me, but maybe . . ." Unfortunately, once she had explained . . .

"She's still there," Birgitte said grimly after a moment. "Step out of my way, Min Farshaw," she said, pulling her arm free, "or—"

"*Oosquai!*" Aviendha voice rose desperately, and she was actually wringing her hands! "I know where there is *oosquai!* If you are drunk . . . ! Please, Birgitte! I . . . I will pledge myself to obey you, as apprentice to mistress, but please do not interrupt her! Do not shame her so!"

"*Oosquai*?" Birgitte mused, rubbing her jaw. "Is that anything like brandy? Hmm. I think the girl is blushing! She really is prim most of the time, you know. A joke, you said?" Suddenly she grinned, and spread her arms expansively. "Lead me to this *oosquai* of yours, Aviendha. I don't know about you two, but I intend to get drunk enough to . . . well . . . to take off my clothes and dance on the table. And not a hair drunker."

Min did not understand that at all, or why Aviendha stared at Birgitte and suddenly began laughing about it being "a wonderful joke," but she was sure she knew why Elayne was blushing, if she actually was. That hard ball of sensations in her head was a raging wildfire again.

“Could we go find that *oosquai,* now?” she said. “I want to get drunk as a drowned mouse, and fast!”

When Elayne woke the next morning, the bedchamber was icy, a light snow was falling on Caemlyn, and Rand was gone. Except inside her head. That would do. She smiled, a slow smile. For now, it would. Stretching languorously beneath the blankets, she remembered her abandon the night before—and most of the day as well! She could hardly believe it had been her!—and thought that she should be blushing like the *sun*! But she wanted to be abandoned with Rand, and she did not think she would ever blush again, not for anything connected to him.

Best of all, he had left her a present. On the pillow beside her when she woke lay a golden lily in full bloom, the dew fresh on the lush petals. Where he could have gotten such a thing in the middle of winter she could not begin to imagine. But she wove a Keeping around it, and set it on a side table where she would see it every morning when she woke. The weave was Moghedien’s teaching, but it would hold the blossom fresh forever, the dewdrops never evaporating, a constant reminder of the man who had given her his heart.

Her morning was taken up with the news that Alivia had vanished during the night, a serious matter that put the Kin in a tumult. It was not until Zaida appeared in a taking because Nynaeve had not come for a lesson with the Atha’an Miere that Elayne learned that Nynaeve and Lan were both gone from the Palace, too, and no one knew when or how. Not until much later did she learn that the collection of *angreal* and *ter’angreal* they had carried out of Ebou Dar was missing the most powerful of the three *angreal,* and several other items besides. Some of those, she was sure, were intended for a woman who expected to be attacked at any moment with the One Power. Which made the hastily scribbled note Nynaeve had left hidden among the remainder all the more disturbing.

* * *

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CHAPTER 13

Wonderful News

The Sun Palace's sunroom was cold despite fires roaring on hearths at either end of the room, thickly layered carpets, and a slanted glass roof that let in bright morning light where snow caught on the thin muntins did not shield it, but it was suitable for holding audiences. Cadsuane had thought it best not to appropriate the throne room. So far, Lord Dobraine had remained quiet about her holding Caraline Damodred and Darlin Sisnera—she saw no better way to keep them from going on with their mischief than keeping them in a firm grip—but Dobraine might begin to fuss over that if she pushed beyond what he considered proper. He was too close to the boy for her to want to force him, and faithful to his oaths. She could look back on her life and recall failures, some bitterly regretted, and mistakes that had cost lives, but she could not afford mistakes or failure here. Most definitely not failure. Light, she wanted to *bite* someone!

"I demand the return of my Windfinder, Aes Sedai!" Harine din Togara, all in green brocaded silk, sat rigidly in front of Cadsuane, her full mouth tight. Despite an unlined face, white streaked her straight black hair. Wavemistress of her clan for ten years, she had commanded a large vessel long before that. Her Sailmistress, Derah din Selaan, a younger woman all in blue, sat on a chair placed a careful foot farther back in accordance with their notions of propriety. The pair might have been dark carvings of outrage, and their outlandish jewelry somehow added to the effect. Neither so much as flickered an eye toward Eben when he bowed and offered silver goblets of hot spiced wine on a tray.

The boy did not seem to know what to do next when they took nothing. Frowning uncertainly, he remained bent until Daigian plucked at his red coat and led him away smiling, an amused pouter pigeon in dark blue slashed with white. A slender lad with a big nose and large ears, never to be called handsome much less pretty, but she was very possessive of him.

They took seats close together on a padded bench in front of one of the fireplaces and began playing cat's cradle.

"Your sister is assisting us in learning what happened on the unfortunate day," Cadsuane said smoothly, and somewhat absently. Taking a swallow of her own spiced wine, she waited, uncaring whether they saw her impatience. No matter how Dobraine grumbled about how impossible it was to meet the terms of that incredible bargain Rafela and Merana had made on behalf of the al'Thor boy, he still might have handled the Sea Folk himself. She could hardly give them half of her mind. Probably that was just as well for them. If she focused on the Atha'an Miere, she would be hard-pressed not to swat them like bitemes, though they were not the real source of her exasperation.

Five sisters were arrayed around the fireplace at the other end of the sunroom from Daigian and Eben. Nesune had a large wood bound volume from the Palace library spread on a reading stand in front of her chair. Like the others, she wore a plain woolen dress more suited to a merchant than an Aes Sedai. If any regretted the lack of silks, or money for silks, they did not show it. Sarene, with her thin, beaded braids, stood working at a large embroidery frame, her needle making the tiny stitches of yet another flower in a field of blossoms. Erian and Beldeine were playing stones, watched by Elza, who waited her turn to take on the winner. By all appearances they were enjoying an idle morning, without a care in the world. Perhaps they knew they were here because she wanted to study them. Why had they sworn fealty to the al'Thor boy? At least Kiruna and the others had been in his presence when they decided to swear. She was willing to admit that no one could resist the influence of a *ta'veren* when it caught you. But these five had taken a harsh penance for kidnapping him and reached their decision to offer oath before they were brought near him. In the beginning she had been inclined to accept their various explanations, but over the last few days that inclination had taken hard knocks. Disturbingly hard knocks.

"My *Windfinder* is not subject to your authority, Aes Sedai," Harine said sharply, as if denying the blood connection. "Shalon must and will be returned to me at once." Derah nodded curt agreement. Cadsuane thought the Sailmistress might do the same if Harine ordered her to jump from a cliff. In the Atha'an Miere's hierarchy, Derah stood a long distance below Harine. And that was almost as much as Cadsuane knew of them. The Sea

Folk might prove useful or might not, but she could find a way to get a grip on them in any case.

“This is an Aes Sedai inquiry,” she replied blandly. “We must follow Tower law.” Loosely interpreted, to be sure. She had always believed the spirit of the law was far more important than the letter.

Harine puffed up like an adder and began yet another harangue listing her rights and demands, but Cadsuane listened with half an ear.

She could almost understand Erian, a pale, black-haired Illianer, fiercely insisting that she must be at the boy’s side when he fought the Last Battle. And Beldeine, so new to the shawl that she had not yet achieved agelessness, so determined to be everything that a Green should be. And Elza, a pleasant-faced Andoran whose eyes almost glowed when she spoke of making certain that he lived to face the Dark One. Another Green, and even more intense than most. Nesune, hunched forward to peer at her book, looked like a black-eyed bird examining a worm. A Brown, she would climb into a box with a scorpion if she wanted to study it. Sarene might be fool enough to be startled that anyone thought her pretty, much less stunning, but the White insisted on the cool precision of her logic; al’Thor was the Dragon Reborn, and logically, she must follow him. Tempestuous reasons, idiotic reasons, yet she could have accepted them, if not for the others.

The door to the hall opened to admit Verin and Sorilea. The leathery, white-haired Aiel woman handed something small to Verin that the Brown tucked into her belt pouch. Verin was wearing a flowered brooch on her simple bronze-colored dress, the first jewelry Cadsuane had ever seen on her aside from her Great Serpent ring.

“That will help you sleep,” Sorilea said, “but remember, just three drops in water or one in wine. A little more, and you might sleep a day or longer. Much more, and you will not wake. There is no taste to warn you, so you must be careful.”

So Verin was having trouble sleeping, too. Cadsuane had not had a good night’s rest since the boy fled the Sun Palace. If she did not find one soon, she thought she *might* bite someone. Nesune and the others were eyeing Sorilea uneasily. The boy had made them *apprentice* themselves to the Wise Ones, and they had learned that the Aiel women took that very seriously. One snap of Sorilea’s bony fingers could end their idle morning.

Harine leaned forward out of her chair and gave Cadsuane's cheek a sharp tap with her fingers! "You are not listening to me," she said harshly. Her face was a thunderhead, and that of her Sailmistress scarcely less stormy. "You *will* listen!"

Cadsuane put her hands together and regarded the woman over her fingertips. No. She would not stand the Wavemistress on her head here and now. She would not send the woman back to her apartments weeping. She would be as diplomatic as Coiren could wish. Hastily she scanned through what she had heard. "You speak for the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere, with all of her authority, which is more than I can imagine," she said mildly. "If your Windfinder is not returned to you within the hour, you will see that the Coramoor punishes me severely. You require an apology for your Windfinder's imprisonment. And you require me to make Lord Dobraine set aside the land promised by the Coramoor immediately. I believe that covers the essential points." Except for the one about having her flogged!

"Good," Harine said, leaning back comfortably, in command now. Her smile was sickeningly self-satisfied. "You will learn that—"

"I do not care a fig for your Coramoor," Cadsuane continued, her voice still mild. All the figs in the world for the Dragon Reborn, but not one for the Coramoor. She did not alter her tone by a hair. "If you ever touch me again without permission, I will have you stripped, striped, bound and carried back to your rooms in a sack." Well, diplomacy had never been her strongest point. "If you do not cease pestering me about your sister . . . Well, I might actually grow angry." Standing, she ignored the Sea Folk woman's indignant puffing and gaping and raised her voice to be heard at the end of the room. "Sarene!"

The slender Taraboner whirled from her embroidery, beaded braids clicking, and hurried to Cadsuane's side, barely hesitating before spreading her dark gray skirts in a curtsy. The Wise Ones had had to teach them to leap when a Wise One spoke, but more than custom made them leap for her. There truly were advantages to being a legend, especially an unpredictable legend.

"Escort these two to their rooms," Cadsuane commanded. "They wish to fast and meditate on civility. See that they do. And if they offer one uncivil word, spank them both. But be diplomatic about it."

Sarene gave a start, half opening her mouth as if to protest the illogic of that, but one glance at Cadsuane's face and she quickly turned to the Atha'an Miere women, gesturing for them to rise.

Harine sprang to her feet, her dark face hard and scowling. Before she could utter a word of her no doubt furious tirade, though, Derah touched her arm and leaned close to whisper into her ring-heavy ear behind a cupped hand covered with dark tattoos. Whatever the Sailmistress had to say, Harine closed her mouth. Her expression certainly did not soften, yet she eyed the sisters at the far end of the room and after a moment curtly motioned Sarene to lead the way. Harine might pretend that it was her decision to leave, but Derah followed so close on her heels she appeared to be herding her and shot an uneasy glance back over her shoulder before the door shut her from sight.

Cadsuane almost regretted giving that frivolous order. Sarene would do exactly as she had been told. The Sea Folk women were an irritant, and useless thus far, besides. The irritation must be removed so she could concentrate on what was important, and if she found a use for them, tools needed to be shaped one way or another. She was too angry with them to care how that was done, and it might as well begin now as later. No, she was angry with the boy, but she could not lay hands on him yet.

With a loud harrumph, Sorilea turned from watching Sarene and the Atha'an Miere go and directed her scowl at the sisters gathered at the end of the solar. Bracelets clattered on her wrists as she adjusted her shawl. Another woman not in her best temper. The Sea Folk had peculiar notions of "Aiel savages"—though in truth not that much stranger than some Cadsuane herself had believed before meeting Sorilea—and the Wise One did not like them a hair.

Cadsuane went to meet her with a smile. Sorilea was not a woman you made come to you. Everyone thought they were becoming friends—which they might yet, she realized in surprise—but no one knew of their alliance. Eben appeared with his tray, and appeared relieved when she set her half-empty goblet on it.

"Late last night," Sorilea said as the red-coated boy hurried back to Daigian, "Chisaine Nurbaya asked to serve the *Car'a'carn*." Disapproval lay heavy in her voice. "Before first light, Janine Pavlara asked, then Innina Darenhold, then Vayelle Kamsa. They had not been allowed to speak to one another. There could be no collusion. I accepted their pleas."

Cadsuane made a vexed sound. “I suppose you already have them serving penance,” she murmured, thinking hard. Nineteen sisters had been prisoners in the Aiel camp, nineteen sisters sent by that fool Elaida to kidnap the boy, and now they *all* had sworn to follow him! These last were the worst. “What could make *Red* sisters swear fealty to a man who can channel?”

Verin began to make an observation, but fell silent for the Aiel woman. Strangely, Verin had taken to her own enforced apprenticeship like a heron to the marsh. She spent more time in the Aiel camp than out of it.

“Not penance, Cadsuane Melaidhrin.” Sorilea made a dismissive gesture with one sinewy hand in another rattle of gold and ivory bracelets. “They are attempting to meet *toh* that cannot be met. As foolish in its way as our naming them *da’tsang* in the first place, but perhaps they are not beyond redemption if they are willing to try,” she allowed grudgingly. Sorilea more than merely disliked those nineteen sisters. She gave a thin smile. “In any event, we will teach them much they need to learn.” The woman seemed to believe all Aes Sedai could do with time apprenticing under the Wise Ones.

“I hope you will continue to watch them all closely,” Cadsuane said. “Especially these last four.” She was sure they would keep that ridiculous oath, if not always in ways the boy would like, but there was always the possibility that one or two might be Black Ajah. Once she had thought herself on the point of rooting out the Black only to watch her quarry slip through her fingers like smoke, her bitterest failure except possibly for failing to learn what Caraline Damodred’s cousin had been up to in the Borderlands until the knowledge was years too late to do any good. Now, even the Black Ajah seemed a diversion from what was truly important.

“Apprentices are always watched closely,” the weathered woman replied. “I think I must remind these others to be grateful for being allowed to loll about like clan chiefs.”

The remaining four sisters in front of the fireplace rose with alacrity at her approach, made deep curtsies, and listened carefully to what she told them in a low voice with much finger shaking. Sorilea might think she had much to teach them, but they had already learned that an Aes Sedai shawl offered no protection to a Wise One’s apprentice. *Toh* seemed a great deal like penance to Cadsuane.

“She is . . . formidable,” Verin murmured. “I am very glad she is on our side. If she is.”

Cadsuane gave her a sharp look. “You have the appearance of a woman with something to say that you don’t want to. About Sorilea?” That alliance was very vaguely defined. Friendship or no friendship, she and the Wise One still might turn out to be aiming at different goals.

“Not that,” the stout little woman sighed. Despite a square face, tilting her head to one side made her look like a very plump sparrow. “I know it was not my business, Cadsuane, but Bera and Kiruna were getting nowhere with our guests, so I had a little talk alone with Shalon. After a little *gentle* questioning, she spilled out the whole story, and Ailil confirmed everything once she realized I already knew. Soon after the Sea Folk first arrived here, Ailil approached Shalon hoping to learn what they wanted with young al’Thor. For her part, Shalon wanted to learn whatever she could about him, and about the situation here. That led to meetings, which led to friendship, which led to them becoming pillow friends. As much from loneliness as anything else, I suspect. In any case, that was what they were hiding more than their mutual snooping.”

“They put up with days under the question to hide *that*?” Cadsuane said incredulously. Bera and Kiruna had had the pair howling!

Verin’s eyes twinkled with suppressed mirth. “Cairhienin are prim and prudish, Cadsuane, in public at least. They might carry on like rabbits when the curtains are drawn, but they wouldn’t admit to touching their own husbands if anyone might overhear! And the Sea Folk are almost as straitlaced. At least, Shalon is married to a man with duties elsewhere, and breaking marriage vows is a very serious crime. A breach of proper discipline, it seems. If her sister found out, Shalon would be—‘Windfinder on a rowboat,’ I think her exact words were.”

Cadsuane was aware of her hair ornaments swaying as she shook her head. When the two women had been discovered right after the attack on the Palace, bound and gagged and stuffed under Ailil’s bed, she had suspected they knew more of the attack than they were admitting. Once they refused to say why they had been meeting in secret, she was sure. Perhaps even that they were involved in some way, though the attack apparently was the work of renegade Asha’man. Supposedly renegade, at least. All that time and effort wasted on nothing. Or perhaps not quite nothing, if they were so desperate to keep things hidden.

“Return the Lady Ailil to her apartments with apologies for her treatment, Verin. Give her very . . . tenuous . . . assurances that her confidences will be kept. Be sure she is aware just how tenuous. And suggest *strongly* that she might wish to keep me abreast of anything she hears concerning her brother.” Blackmail was a tool she disliked using, but she had already used it on the three Asha’man, and Toram Riatin might still cause trouble even if his rebellion did seem to have evaporated. In truth, she cared little who sat on the Sun Throne, yet the plots and schemes of those who considered thrones important often had a way of interfering with more significant matters.

Verin smiled, her bun bobbing as she nodded. “Oh, yes, I think that will work very nicely. Especially since she dislikes her brother intensely. The same for Shalon, I suppose? Except that you will want to hear of events among the Atha’an Miere? I’m not certain how far she will betray Harine, no matter the consequences to herself.”

“She will betray what I require her to betray,” Cadsuane said grimly. “Keep her until tomorrow, late.” Harine must not be allowed to think for a moment that her demands were being met. The Sea Folk were another tool to be used on the boy, no more. Everyone and everything had to be viewed in that light.

Beyond Verin, Corele slipped into the sunroom and shut the door carefully behind her as if hoping not to disturb anyone. That was not her way. Boyishly slim, with thick black eyebrows and a mass of glossy black hair flowing down her back that gave her a wild appearance no matter how neat her clothes were, the Yellow was much more likely to sweep into a room laughing. Rubbing the end of her upturned nose, she looked at Cadsuane hesitantly, with none of the usual sparkle in her blue eyes.

Cadsuane made a peremptory gesture at her, and Corele drew a breath and glided across the carpets gripping her yellow-slashed blue skirts with both hands. Eyeing the sisters clustered around Sorilea at the far end of the room, and Daigian playing cat’s cradle with Eben at the other end, she spoke in a soft voice that carried the lilting accents of Murandy.

“I have the most wonderful news, Cadsuane.” By the sound of her, she was not all certain how wonderful it was. “I know you said I should keep Damer busy here in the Palace, but he insisted on looking at the sisters still in the Aiel camp. Mild-tempered as he is, he’s very insistent when he wants to be, and sure as the sun there’s nothing can’t be Healed. And, well, the fact of it is, he's gone and Healed Irgain. Cadsuane, it's as if she'd never been . . ." She trailed off, unable to say the word. It hung in the air even so. Stilled.

"Wonderful news," Cadsuane said flatly. It was. Every sister carried the fear somewhere deep inside that she might be cut off from the Power. And now a way to Heal what could not be Healed had been discovered. By a man. There would be tears and recriminations before *this* was done with. In any case, while every sister who heard would consider it a world-shaking discovery—in more ways than one; a man!—it was a storm in a teacup compared to Rand al'Thor. "I suppose she is offering herself up to be beaten like the others?"

"She won't need to," Verin said absently. She was frowning at an inkstain on her finger, but she seemed to be studying something beyond. "The Wise Ones apparently decided that Rand had punished Irgain and the other two sufficiently when he . . . did what he did. At the same time they were treating the others like worthless animals, they have been working to keep those three alive. I heard talk about finding Ronaille a husband."

"Irgain knows all about the oaths the others swore." Corele's voice took on tones of amazement. "She started weeping for the loss of her Warders almost as soon as Damer finished with her, but she's ready to swear, too. The thing of it is, Damer wants to try with Sashalle and Ronaille, too." Surprisingly, she drew herself up almost defiantly. She had always been as arrogant as any other Yellow, but she had always known where she stood with Cadsuane. "I can't see letting a sister remain in that condition if there's a way out, Cadsuane. I want to let Damer try his hand with them."

"Of course, Corele." It seemed some of Damer's insistence was rubbing off on her. Cadsuane was willing to let that go, so long as it did not go too far. She had begun gathering sisters she trusted, those here with her and others, the day she first heard of strange events in Shienar—her eyes and ears had kept watch on Siuan Sanche and Moiraine Damodred for years without learning anything useful until then—yet just because she trusted them did not mean she intended to let them start going their own way. Too much lay at stake. But in any case, she could not leave a sister like that, either.

The door banged open to admit Jahar at a run, the silver bells on the ends of his dark braids jangling. Heads turned to look at the youth in the well-fitted blue coat Merise had chosen for him—even Sorilea and Sarene stared—but the words that came out of him in a rush drove away thoughts of how pretty his sun-dark face was.

"Alanna's unconscious, Cadsuane. She just collapsed in the hallway. Merise had her taken to a bedchamber and sent me for you."

Riding over exclamations of shock, Cadsuane gathered Corele and Sorilea—who could not be left behind in this—and ordered Jahar to lead the way. Verin came as well, and Cadsuane did not stop her. Verin had a way of noticing what others missed.

The black-liveried servants had no idea who or what Jahar was, but they stepped lively to get out of Cadsuane's way as she walked quickly along behind him. She would have told him to be quicker about it, but any faster, and she would have had to run. Before she had gone very far, a short man with the front of his head shaved, in a dark coat with horizontal stripes of color down the front, stepped into her path and bowed. She had to stop for him.

"Grace favor you, Cadsuane Sedai," he said smoothly, "Forgive me for bothering you when you are in such a hurry, but I thought I should tell you that the Lady Caraline and the High Lord Darlin are no longer in the Lady Arilyn's palace. They are on a rivership bound for Tear. Beyond your reach by this time, I fear."

"You might be surprised what is within my reach, Lord Dobraine," she said in a cold voice. She should have left at least one sister at Arilyn's palace, but she had been certain the pair was secure. "Was this wise?" She had no doubt it was his work, though she doubted he had the nerve to admit it. No wonder he had not pressed her over them.

Her tone made no impression on the fellow. And he surprised her. "The High Lord Darlin is to be the Lord Dragon's Steward of Tear, and it did seem wise to send the Lady Caraline out of the country. She has fore-sworn her rebellion and her claims to the Sun Throne, but others still might try to use her. Perhaps, Cadsuane Sedai, it was unwise to leave them in the charge of servants. Under the Light, you must not hold them at fault. They were able to hold two . . . guests . . . but not to stand up to my armsmen."

Jahar was all but dancing with anxiety to go on. Merise had a firm hand. Cadsuane herself was anxious to reach Alanna.

"I hope you have the same opinion in a year," she said. Dobraine merely bowed.

The bedchamber where Alanna had been taken was the nearest that had been available, and it was not large, appearing smaller for the dark paneling that Cairhienin liked so much. It seemed quite crowded once everyone was inside. Merise snapped her fingers and pointed, and Jahar retreated to a corner, but that helped little.

Alanna was lying on the bed, her eyes closed, with her Warder, Ihvon, kneeling beside it chafing her wrist. “She seems afraid to wake,” the tall, slender man said. “There’s nothing wrong with her that I can tell, but she seems afraid.”

Corele brushed him aside so she could cup Alanna’s face in her hands. The glow of *saidar* surrounded the Yellow, and the weave of Healing settled on Alanna, but the slim Green did not even twitch. Corele drew back, shaking her head.

“My skill with Healing, it may not equal yours, Corele,” Merise said dryly, “but I did try.” The accents of Tarabon were still strong in her voice after all these years, but she wore her dark hair drawn back severely from her stern face. Cadsuane trusted her perhaps more than any of the others. “What do we do now, Cadsuane?”

Sorilea stared at the woman stretched out on the bed with no expression beyond a thinning of her lips. Cadsuane wondered whether she was reevaluating their alliance. Verin was staring at Alanna, too, and she looked absolutely terrified. Cadsuane had not thought anything could frighten Verin that far. But she felt a thrill of terror herself. If she lost this connection to the boy now . . .

“We sit down and wait for her to wake,” she said in a calm voice. There was nothing else to do. Nothing.

“Where is he?” Demandred growled, clenching his fists behind his back. Standing with his feet apart, he was aware that he dominated the room. He always did. Even so, he wished Semirhage or Mesaana were present. Their alliance was delicate—a simple agreement that they would not turn on one another until the others had been eliminated—yet it had held all this time. Working together, they had unbalanced opponent after opponent, toppling many to their deaths or worse. But it was difficult for Semirhage to attend these meetings, and Mesaana had been shy, of late. If she was thinking of ending the alliance . . . “Al’Thor has been seen in five cities, including that cursed place in the Waste, and a dozen towns since those blind fools—those idiots!—failed in Cairhien. And that only includes the reports we have! The Great Lord only knows what else is crawling toward us by horse, or sheep, or whatever else these savages can find to carry a message."

Graendal had chosen the setting, since she had been first to arrive, and it irritated him. View-walls made the striped wooden floor appear to be surrounded by a forest full of brightly flowered vines and fluttering birds that were even more colorful. Sweet scents and soft birdcalls filled the air. Only the arch of the doorway spoiled the illusion. Why did she want a reminder of what was lost? They could as soon make shocklances or showings as a view-wall outside of this place, close to Shayol Ghul. In any case, she despised anything to do with nature, as he recalled.

Osan'gar frowned at "idiots" and "blind fools," as well he might, but he quickly smoothed that plain, creased face, so unlike the one he had been born with. By whatever name he was called, he had always known who he dared challenge and who not. "A matter of chance," he said calmly, though he did begin dry-washing his hands. An old habit. He was garbed like some ruler of this Age, in a coat so heavy with golden embroidery that it almost hid the red of the cloth, and boots fringed with golden tassels. There was enough white lace at his neck and wrists to clothe a child. The man had never known the meaning of excess. If not for his particular skills, he never would have been Chosen. Realizing what his hands were doing, Osan'gar snatched the tall *cuendillar* wineglass from the round table beside his chair and inhaled the dark wine's aroma deeply. "Simply probabilities," he murmured, trying to sound offhand. "Next time, he will be killed or taken. Chance can't protect him forever."

"You are going to depend on chance?" Aran'gar was stretched out in a long, flowing chair as though it were a bedchair. Directing a smoky smile at Osan'gar, she arched one leg on bare toes so the slit in her bright red skirts exposed her to the hip. Every breath threatened to free her from the red satin that just contained her full breasts. All of her mannerisms had changed since she became a woman, but not the core of what had been placed into that female body. Demandred hardly scorned fleshly pleasures, but one day her cravings would be the death of her. As they already had been once. Not that he would mourn, of course, if the next time was final. "You were responsible for watching him, Osan'gar," she went on, her voice caressing every syllable. "You, and Demandred." Osan'gar flinched, flicking his tongue against his lips, and she laughed throatily. “My own charge is . . .” She pressed a thumb down on the edge of the chair as if pinning something and laughed again.

“I should think you would be more worried, Aran’gar,” Graendal murmured over her wine. She concealed her contempt about as well as the almost transparent silvery mist of her streith gown concealed her ripe curves. “You, and Osan’gar, and Demandred. And Moridin, wherever he is. Perhaps you should fear al’Thor’s success as much as his failure.”

Laughing, Aran’gar caught the standing woman’s hand in one of hers. Her green eyes sparkled. “And perhaps you could explain what you mean better if we were alone?”

Graendal’s gown turned to stark black concealing smoke. Jerking her hand free with a coarse oath, she stalked away from the chair. Aran’gar . . . giggled.

“What do you mean?” Osan’gar said sharply, struggling out of his chair. Once on his feet, he struck a lecturer’s pose, gripping his lapels, and his tone became pedantic. “In the first place, my dear Graendal, I doubt that even I could devise a method to remove the Great Lord’s shadow from *saidin.* Al’Thor is a primitive. Anything he tries inevitably will prove insufficient, and I, for one, cannot believe he can even imagine how to begin. In any event, we will stop him trying because the Great Lord commands it. I can understand fear of the Great Lord’s displeasure if we somehow failed, unlikely as that might be, but why should those of us you named have any special fear?”

“Blind as ever, and dry as ever,” Graendal murmured. With the return of composure, her gown was clear mist again, though red. Perhaps she was not so calm as she pretended. Or perhaps she wanted them to believe she was controlling some agitation. Except for the streith, her adornments all came from this age, firedrops in her golden hair, a large ruby dangling between her breasts, ornate golden bracelets on both wrists. And something quite strange, that Demandred wondered whether anyone else had noticed. A simple ring of gold on the little finger of her left hand. Simple was never associated with Graendal. “If the young man does somehow remove the shadow, well . . . You who channel *saidin* will no longer need the Great Lord’s special protection. Will he trust your . . . loyalty . . . then?” Smiling, she sipped her wine.

Osan’gar did not smile. His face paled, and he scrubbed a hand across his mouth. Aran’gar sat up on the edge of her long chair, no longer trying to be sensuous. Her hands formed claws on her lap, and she glared at Graendal as if ready to go for her throat.

Demandred’s fists unclenched. It was out in the open at last. He had hoped to have al’Thor dead—or failing that, captive—before this suspicion reared its head. During the War of Power, more than a dozen of the Chosen had died of the Great Lord’s suspicion.

“The Great Lord is sure you are all faithful,” Moridin announced, striding in as though he were the Great Lord of the Dark himself. He had often seemed to believe he was, and the boy’s face he wore now had not changed that. In spite of his words, that face was grim, and his unrelieved black made his name, Death, fit. “You need not worry until he stops being sure.” The girl, Cyndane, trotted at his heels like a bosomy little silver-haired pet in red-and-black. For some reason, Moridin had a rat riding his shoulder, pale nose sniffing the air, black eyes studying the room warily. Or for no reason, perhaps. A youthful face had not made him any saner, either.

“Why have you called us here?” Demandred demanded. “I have much to do, and no time for idle talk.” Unconsciously he tried to stand taller, to match the other man.

“Mesaana is absent again?” Moridin said instead of answering. “A pity. She should hear what I have to say.” Plucking the rat from his shoulder by its tail, he watched the animal wave its legs futilely. Nothing except the rat seemed to exist for him. “Small, apparently unimportant matters can become very important,” he murmured. “This rat. Whether Isam succeeds in finding and killing that other vermin, Fain. A word whispered in the wrong ear, or not spoken to the right. A butterfly stirs its wings on a branch, and on the other side of the world a mountain collapses.” Suddenly the rat twisted, trying to sink its teeth into his wrist. Casually, he flung the creature away. In midair, there was a burst of flame, something hotter than flame, and the rat was gone. Moridin smiled.

Demandred flinched in spite of himself. That had been the True Power; he had felt nothing. A black speck floated across Moridin’s blue eyes, then another, in a steady stream. The man must have been using the True Power exclusively since he last saw him to gain so many *saa* so quickly. He himself had never touched the True Power except at need. Great need. Of course, only Moridin had that privilege now, since his . . . anointing. The man truly was insane to use it so freely. It was a drug more addictive than *saidin*, more deadly than poison.

Crossing the striped floor, Moridin laid a hand on Osan'gar's shoulder, his smile made more ominous by the *saa*. The shorter man swallowed, and gave a wavering smile in return. "It is well you've never considered how to remove the Great Lord's shadow," Moridin said quietly. How long had he been outside? Osan'gar's smile grew even more sickly. "Al'Thor is not as wise as you. Tell them, Cyndane."

The little woman drew herself up. By face and form she was a luscious plum, ready for plucking, but her big blue eyes were glacial. A peach, perhaps. Peaches were poisonous, here and now. "You recall the Choedan Kal, I suppose." No amount of effort could make that low, breathy voice anything except sultry, but she managed to inject sarcasm. "Lews Therin has two of the access keys, one for each. And he knows a woman strong enough to use the female of the pair. He plans to use the Choedan Kal for his deed."

Nearly everyone began to talk at once.

"I thought the keys were all destroyed!" Aran'gar exclaimed, surging to her feet. Her eyes were wide with fear. "He could shatter the world just *trying* to use the Choedan Kal!"

"If you had ever read anything besides a history book, you would know they're almost impossible to destroy!" Osan'gar snarled at her. But he was tugging at his collar as if it were too tight, and his eyes seemed ready to fall out of his face. "How can this girl know he has them? How?"

Graendal's wineglass had dropped from her hand as soon the words were out of Cyndane's mouth, bouncing end over end across the floor. Her gown turned as crimson as fresh blood, and her mouth twisted as if she were going to vomit. "And you've just been hoping to blunder into him!" she screamed at Demandred. "Hoping someone will find him for you! Fool! Fool!"

Demandred thought Graendal had been a touch flamboyant even for her. He would wager the announcement had been no surprise to her. It seemed she bore watching. He said nothing.

Putting a hand over his heart, for all the world like a lover, Moridin tilted up Cyndane's chin on his fingertips. Resentment burned in her eyes, but her face might have been a doll's unchanging face. She certainly accepted his attentions like a pliable doll. "Cyndane knows many things," Moridin said softly, “and she tells me everything she knows. Everything.” The tiny woman’s expression never altered, but she trembled visibly.

She was a puzzle to Demandred. At first he had thought she was Lanfear reincarnated. Bodies for transmigration supposedly were chosen by what was available, yet Osan’gar and Aran’gar were proof of the Great Lord’s cruel sense of humor. He had been sure, until Mesaana told him the girl was weaker than Lanfear. Mesaana and the rest thought she was of this Age. Yet she spoke of al’Thor as Lews Therin, just as Lanfear had, and spoke of the Choedan Kal as one familiar with the terror they had inspired during the War of Power. Only balefire had been more feared, and only just. Or had Moridin taught her for purposes of his own? If he had any real purposes. There had always been times when the man’s actions had been sheer madness.

“So it seems he must be killed after all,” Demandred said. Hiding his satisfaction was not easy. Rand al’Thor or Lews Therin Telamon, he would rest easier when the fellow was dead. “Before he can destroy the world, and us. Which makes finding him all the more urgent.”

“Killed?” Moridin moved his hands as though weighing something. “If it comes to that, yes,” he said finally. “But finding him is no problem. When he touches the Choedan Kal, you will know where he is. And you will go there and take him. Or kill him, if necessary. The Nae’blis has spoken.”

“As the Nae’blis commands,” Cyndane said eagerly, bowing her head, and echos of her ran around the room, though Aran’gar sounded sullen, Osan’gar desperate, and Graendal oddly thoughtful.

Bending his neck hurt Demandred as much as speaking those words. So *they* would take al’Thor—while he was trying to use the Choedan Kal, no less, he and some woman drinking enough of the One Power to melt continents!—but there had been no indication that Moridin would be with them. Or his twin pets, Moghedien and Cyndane. The man was Nae’blis for now, but perhaps matters could be arranged so he did not get another body the next time he died. Perhaps it could be arranged soon.

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CHAPTER

14

What a Veil Hides

The Victory of Kidron rolled on long sea swells, making the gilded lamps in the stern cabin swing on their gimbals, but Tuon sat calmly as the razor in Selucia’s sure hand slid across her scalp. Through the tall stern windows she could see other greatships crashing through the gray-green swells in sprays of white, hundreds of them row on row, stretching to the horizon. Four times as many had been left at Tanchico. The *Rhyagelle,* Those Who Come Home. The *Corenne,* the Return, had begun.

A soaring albatross seemed to be following the *Kidron,* an omen of victory indeed, though the bird’s long wings were black instead of white. It must still mean the same thing. Omens did not change according to location. An owl calling at dawn meant a death and rain without clouds an unexpected visitor whether in Imfaral or Noren M’Shar.

The morning ritual with her dresser’s razor was soothing, and she needed that today. Last night, she had given a command in anger. No command should be issued in anger. She felt almost *sei’mosiev,* as if she had lost honor. Her balance was disturbed, and that boded as ill for the Return as a loss of *sei’taer,* albatross or no albatross.

Selucia wiped away the last of the lather with a warm damp cloth, then used a dry cloth, and finally powdered her smooth scalp lightly with a brush. When her dresser stepped back, Tuon rose and let her elaborately embroidered blue silk dressing gown slide to the gold-and-blue patterned carpet. Instantly the cool air pebbled her dark bare skin. Four of her ten maids rose gracefully from where they had been kneeling against the walls, clean-limbed and comely in their filmy white robes. All had been purchased for their appearance as much as their skills, and they were very skilled. They had become used to the motions of the ship during the long voyage from Seanchan, and they scurried to fetch the garments that had already been laid out atop the carved chests and bring them to Selucia. Selucia never allowed the *da'covale* to actually dress her, not so much as stockings or slippers.

When she settled a pleated gown the color of well-aged ivory over Tuon's head, the younger woman could not help comparing the two of them in the tall mirror fastened to the inner wall. Golden-haired Selucia possessed a stately, cream-skinned beauty and cool blue eyes. Anyone might have taken her for one of the Blood, and of high rank, rather than *so'jhin,* if the left side of her head had not been shaved. A notion that would have shocked the woman to the quick, expressed aloud. The very idea of any stepping above her appointed station horrified Selucia. Tuon knew she herself would never have such a commanding presence. Her eyes were too large, and a liquid brown. When she forgot to keep a stern mask, her heart-shaped face belonged on a mischievous child. The top of her head barely came to Selucia's eyes, and her dresser was not a tall woman. Tuon could ride with the best, she excelled at wrestling and the use of suitable weapons, but she had always had to exercise her mind to impress. She had trained that tool as hard as she had trained at every other talent combined. At least the wide, woven belt of gold emphasized her waist enough that she would not be taken for a boy in a dress. Men watched when Selucia passed by, and Tuon had overheard some murmur about her full breasts. Perhaps that had nothing to do with a commanding presence, but it would have been nice to possess a little more bosom.

"The Light be upon me," Selucia murmured, sounding amused, as the *da'covale* hurried back to kneel upright against the walls. "You've done that every morning since the first day your head was shaved. Do you still think after three years that I'll leave a patch of stubble?"

Tuon realized that she had rubbed a hand across her bare scalp. Searching for stubble, she admitted to herself ruefully. "If you did," she said with mock severity, "I would have you beaten. A repayment for all the times you used a switch on me."

Placing a rope of rubies around Tuon's neck, Selucia laughed. "If you pay me back for all that, I'll never be able to sit down again."

Tuon smiled. Selucia's mother had given her to Tuon for a cradle-gift, to be her nursemaid, and more important, her shadow, a bodyguard no one knew about. The first twenty-five years of Selucia's life had been training for those jobs, training in secret for the second. On Tuon's sixteenth naming day, when her head was first shaved, she had made the traditional gifts of her House to Selucia, a small estate for the care she had shown, a pardon for the chastisements she had given, a sack of one hundred golden thrones for each time she had needed to punish her charge. The Blood assembled to watch her presented as an adult for the first time had been impressed by all those sacks of coin, more than many of them could have laid hand on themselves. She had been . . . unruly . . . as a child, not to mention headstrong. And the last traditional gift: the offer for Selucia to choose where she would be appointed next. Tuon was not sure whether she or the watching crowd had been more astonished when the dignified woman turned her back on power and authority, and asked instead to be Tuon's dresser, her chief maid. And her shadow still, of course, though that was not made public. She herself had been delighted.

"Perhaps in small doses, spread over sixteen years," she said. Catching sight of herself in the mirror, she held her smile long enough to make sure there was no sting in her words, then replaced it with sternness. She certainly felt more affection for the woman who had raised her than for the mother she had seen only twice a year before becoming an adult, or the brothers and sisters she had been taught from her first steps to battle for their mother's favor. Two of them had died in those struggles, so far, and three had tried to kill her. A sister and a brother had been made *da'covale* and had their names stricken from the records as firmly as if it had been discovered they could channel. Her place was far from secure even now. A single misstep could see her dead, or worse, stripped and sold on the public block. Blessings of the Light, when she smiled, she still looked sixteen! At best!

Chuckling, Selucia turned to take the close-fitting cap of golden lace from its red-lacquered stand on the dressing table. The sparse lace would expose most of her shaven scalp, and mark her with the Raven-and-Roses. Perhaps she was not *sei'mosiev,* but for the sake of the *Corenne,* she had to restore her balance. She could ask Anath, her *Soe'feia,* to administer a penance, but it was less than two years since Neferi's unexpected death, and she still was not entirely comfortable with her replacement. Something told her she must do this on her own. Perhaps she had seen an omen she had not recognized consciously. Ants were not likely on a ship, but several sorts of beetle might be.

"No, Selucia," she said quietly. "A veil."

Selucia’s mouth tightened in disapproval, but she replaced the cap on its stand silently. In private, as now, she had license to free her tongue, yet she knew what could be spoken and what not. Tuon had only ever had to have her punished twice, and Light’s truth, she had regretted it as much as Selucia. Wordlessly, her dresser produced a long sheer veil, draping it over Tuon’s head and securing it with a narrow band of golden braid set with rubies. Even more transparent than the *da’covale*’s robes, the veil did not hide her face at all. But it hid what was most important.

Laying a long, gold-embroidered blue cape on Tuon’s shoulders, Selucia stepped back and bowed deeply, the end of her golden braid touching the carpet. The kneeling *da’covale* bowed their faces to the deck. Privacy was about to end. Tuon left the cabin alone.

In the second cabin stood six of her *sul’dam,* three to either side, with their charges kneeling in front of them on the wide, polished planks of the deck. The *sul’dam* straightened when they saw her, proud as the silver lightning in the red panels on their skirts. The gray-clad *damane* knelt erect, full of their own pride. Except for poor Lidya, who crouched over her knees and tried to press her tearstained face against the deck. Ianelle, holding the red-haired *damane*’s leash, scowled down at her.

Tuon sighed. Lidya had been responsible for her anger last night. No, she had caused it, but Tuon herself was responsible for her own emotions. She had commanded the *damane* to read her fortune, and she should not have ordered her caned because she disliked what she heard.

Bending, she cupped Lidya’s chin, laying long red-enameled fingernails against the *damane*’s freckled cheek, and drew her up to sit on her heels. Which produced a wince and a fresh set of tears that Tuon carefully wiped away with her fingers as she pulled the *damane* upright on her knees. “Lidya is a good *damane,* Ianelle,” she said. “Paint her welts with tincture of sorfa and give her lionheart for the pain until the welts are gone. And until they *are* gone, she is to have a sweet custard with every meal.”

“As the High Lady commands,” Ianelle replied formally, but she smiled slightly. All the *sul’dam* were fond of Lidya, and she had not liked punishing the *damane.* “If she gets fat, I will take her for runs, High Lady.”

Lidya twisted her head around to kiss Tuon’s palm and murmured, “Lidya’s mistress is kind. Lidya will not get fat.”

Making her way along the two lines, Tuon spoke a few words to each *sul'dam* and petted each of the *damane.* The six she had brought with her were her best, and they beamed at her with a fondness equal to hers for them. They had competed eagerly to be chosen. Plump, yellow-haired Dali and Dani, sisters who hardly needed a *sul'dam*'s direction. Charral, her hair as gray as her eyes, but still the most agile in her spinning. Sera, with red ribbons in her tightly curled black hair, the strongest, and proud as a *sul'dam.* Tiny Mylen, shorter even than Tuon herself. Mylen was Tuon's special pride among the six.

Many had thought it odd when Tuon tested for *sul'dam* on reaching adulthood, though none could gainsay her, then. Except her mother, who had allowed it by remaining silent. Actually becoming a *sul'dam* was unthinkable, of course, but she found as much enjoyment in training *damane* as in training horses, and she was as good at one as the other. Mylen was the proof of that. The pale little *damane* had been half-dead with shock and fear, refusing to eat or drink, when Tuon bought her on the docks at Shon Kifar. The *der'sul'dam* all had despaired, saying she would not live long, but now Mylen smiled up at Tuon and leaned forward to kiss her hand before she even reached to stroke the *damane*'s dark hair. Once skin and bones, she was becoming a trifle plump. Instead of rebuking her, Catrona, who held her leash, let a smile crease her usually stern black face and murmured that Mylen was a perfect *damane.* It was true, no one would believe now that once she had called herself Aes Sedai.

Before leaving, Tuon gave a few orders concerning the *damane*'s diet and exercise. The *sul'dam* knew what to do, just like the other twelve in Tuon's entourage, or they would not have been in her service, but she believed no one should be allowed to own *damane* unless they took an active interest. She knew the quirks of every one of hers as well as she knew her own face.

In the outer cabin, the Deathwatch Guards, lining the walls in armor lacquered blood red and nearly black green, stiffened at her entrance. That is, they stiffened if statues could be said to stiffen. Hard-faced men, they and five hundred more like them had been charged personally with Tuon's safety. Any or all would die to protect her. They would die if she did. Every man had volunteered, asked to be in her guard. Seeing the veil, grizzled Captain Musenge ordered only two to accompany her on deck, where two dozen Ogier Gardeners in the red-and-green made a line to either side of the doorway, great black-tasseled axes upright in front of them and grim eyes watching for any danger even here. They would not die if she did, but they also had asked to be in her guard, and she would rest her life in any of those huge hands without a qualm.

The ribbed sails on the *Kidron*'s three tall masts were taut with the cold wind that drove the vessel toward the land that lay ahead, a dark shore near enough that she could make out hills and headlands. Men and women filled the deck, all of the Blood on the vessel in their finest silks, ignoring the wind that whipped their cloaks as they ignored the barefoot men and women of the ship's crew who darted between them. Some of the nobles were much too ostentatious about ignoring the crew, as though they could run the ship while kneeling or bowing every two paces. Prepared for prostration, the Blood made slight bows instead, one equal to another, when they saw her veil. Yuril, the sharp-nosed man everyone thought was her secretary, went to one knee. He was her secretary, of course, but also her Hand, commanding her Seekers. The Macura woman flung herself down prostrate and kissed the deck before a few quiet words from Yuril made her get back to her feet blushing and smoothing her pleated red skirts. Tuon had been uncertain about taking her into service, back in Tanchico, but the woman had pleaded like a *da'covale.* She hated Aes Sedai in her bones, for some reason, and despite the rewards already given for her extremely valuable information, she hoped to do them more injury.

Bowing her head to the Blood, Tuon climbed to the quarterdeck followed by the two Deathwatch Guards. The wind made handling her cape difficult, and pressed her veil against her face one moment, then flailed it over her head the next. It did not matter; that she wore it was sufficient. Her personal banner, two golden lions harnessed to an ancient war-cart, flew at the stern above the six helmsmen struggling to control the long tiller. The Raven-and-Roses would have been packed away as soon as the first crewman to see her veil could pass the word. *Kidron*'s captain, a wide, weathered woman with white hair and the most incredible green eyes, bowed as Tuon's slipper touched the quarterdeck then immediately returned her attention to her ship.

Anath was standing by the railing, in unrelieved black silk, outwardly undisturbed by the chill wind in spite of her lack of a cloak or cape. A slender woman, she would have been tall even for a man. Her charcoal-dark face was beautiful, but her large black eyes seemed to pierce like awls.

Tuon's *Soe'feia,* her Truthspeaker, named by the Empress, might she live forever, when Neferi died. A surprise, with Neferi's Left Hand trained and ready to replace her, but when the Empress spoke from the Crystal Throne, her word was law. You certainly were not supposed to be *afraid* of your *Soe'feia,* yet Tuon was, a little. Joining the woman, she gripped the railing, and had to loosen her hands before she broke a lacquered nail. That would have meant very bad luck.

"So," Anath said, the word like a nail driven into Tuon's skull. The tall woman frowned down at her, and contempt lay thick in her voice. "You hide your face—in a way—and now you are just the High Lady Tuon. Except that everyone still knows who you really are, even if they won't mention it. How long do you intend carrying on this farce?" Anath's full lips sneered, and she made a curt, dismissive gesture with one slim hand. "I suppose this idiocy is over having the *damane* caned. You are a fool to think your eyes are downcast by a little thing like that. What did she say to make you angry? No one seems to know, except that you threw a tantrum I am sorry to have missed."

Tuon made her hands be still on the railing. They wanted to tremble. She forced her face to maintain a stern appearance. "I will wear the veil until an omen tells me the time has come to remove it, Anath," she said, schooling her voice to calm. Only luck had kept anyone from overhearing Lidya's cryptic words. Everyone knew that *damane* could foretell the future, and if any of the Blood had heard, they would all have been chattering behind their hands about her fate.

Anath laughed rudely and began telling her again what a fool she was, in greater detail this time. Much greater detail. She did not bother to lower her voice. Captain Tehan was staring straight ahead, but her eyes were almost falling out of her lined face. Tuon listened attentively, though her cheeks grew hotter and hotter, until she thought her veil might burst into flame.

Many of the Blood called their Voices *Soe'feia,* but Voices of the Blood were *so'jhin,* and knew they could be punished if their owners were displeased by what they said even if they were called *Soe'feia.* A Speaker of Truth could not be commanded or coerced or punished in any way. A Truthspeaker was *required* to tell the stark truth whether or not you wanted to hear it, and to make sure that you heard. Those Blood who called their Voices *Soe'feia* thought that Algwyn, the last man to sit on the Crystal

Throne, almost a thousand years ago, had been insane because he let his *Soe'feia* live and continue in her post after she slapped his face before the entire court. They did not understand the traditions of her family any more than the goggle-eyed captain did. The Deathwatch Guards' expressions never altered behind the half-concealing cheek-pieces of their helmets. They understood.

"Thank you, but I do not need a penance," she said politely when Anath finally ceased her harangue.

Once, after she cursed Neferi for dying by something as stupid as a fall down stairs, she had asked her new *Soe'feia* to perform that service for her. Cursing the dead was enough to make you *sei'mosiev* for months. The woman had been almost tender about it, in an odd fashion, though she left her weeping for days, unable to don even a shift. That was not why she refused the offer, though; a penance must be severe or it was useless in redressing balance. No, she would not take the easier way because she had made her decision. And, she had to admit, because she wanted to resist her *Soe'feia*'s advice. Wanted not to listen to her at all. As Selucia said, she always had been headstrong. Refusing to listen to your Truthspeaker was abominable. Perhaps she should accept after all, to redress that balance. Three long gray porpoises rose beside the ship and sounded. Three, and they did not rise again. Hold to your chosen course.

"When we are ashore," she said, "the High Lady Suroth must be commended." Hold to your chosen course. "And her ambition must be looked into. She has done more with the Forerunners than the Empress, may she live forever, dreamed of, but success on such a scale often breeds ambitions to match."

Peeved at the change of subject, Anath drew herself up, lips compressing. Her eyes glittered. "I am sure Suroth has only the best interests of the Empire for ambition," she said curtly.

Tuon nodded. She herself was not sure at all. That sort of sureness could lead to the Tower of the Ravens even for her. Perhaps especially for her. "I must find a way to make contact with the Dragon Reborn as soon as possible. He must kneel before the Crystal Throne before Tarmon Gai'don, or all is lost." The Prophecies of the Dragon said so, clearly.

Anath's mood changed in a flash. Smiling, she laid a hand on Tuon's shoulder almost possessively. That was going too far, but she was *Soe'feia*, and the feel of ownership might have been only in Tuon's mind. "You must be careful," Anath purred. "You must not let him learn how dangerous you are to him until it is too late for him to escape."

She had more advice, but Tuon let it wash over her. She listened enough to hear, yet it was nothing she had not heard a hundred times before. Ahead of the ship she could make out the mouth of a great harbor. Ebou Dar, from where the *Corenne* would spread, as it was spreading from Tanchico. The thought gave her a thrill of pleasure, of accomplishment. Behind her veil, she was merely the High Lady Tuon, of ho higher rank than many others of the Blood, but in her heart, always, she was Tuon Athaem Kore Paendrag, Daughter of the Nine Moons, and she had come to reclaim what had been stolen from her ancestor.

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CHAPTER
15

In Need of a Bellfounder

The boxlike wagon reminded Mat of Tinker wagons he had seen, a little house on wheels, though this one, filled with cabinets and workbenches built into the walls, was not made for a dwelling. Wrinkling his nose at the odd, acrid smells that filled the interior, he shifted uncomfortably on his three-legged stool, the only place for anyone to sit. His broken leg and ribs were near enough healed, and the cuts that he had suffered when that whole bloody building fell on his head, but the injuries still pained him now and then. Besides, he was hoping for sympathy. Women loved to show sympathy, if you played it out right. He made himself stop twisting his long signet ring on his finger. Let a woman know you were nervous, and she put her own construction on it, and sympathy went right out the window.

“Listen, Aludra,” he said, assuming his most winning smile, “by this time you must know the Seanchan won’t look twice at fireworks. Those *damane* do something called Sky Lights that makes your best fireworks look like a few sparks flying up the chimney, so I hear. No offense meant.”

“Me, I have not seen these so-called Sky Lights myself,” she replied dismissively in her strong Taraboner accent. Her head was bent over a wooden mortar the size of a large keg on one of the workbenches, and despite a wide blue ribbon gathering her dark waist-length hair loosely at the nape of her neck, it fell forward to hide her face. The long white apron with its dark smudges did nothing to conceal how well her dark green dress fit over her hips, but he was more interested in what she was doing. Well, as interested. She was grinding at a coarse black powder with a wooden pestle nearly as long as her arm. The powder looked a little like what he had seen inside fireworks he had cut open, but he still did not know what went into it. “In any event,” she went on, unaware of his scrutiny, “I will not give you the Guild secrets. You must understand this, yes?”

Mat winced. He had been working on her for days to bring her to this point, ever since a chance visit to Valan Luca's traveling show revealed that she was here in Ebou Dar, and all the while he had dreaded that she would mention the Illuminators' Guild. "But you aren't an Illuminator anymore, remember? They kicked . . . ah . . . you said you left the Guild." Not for the first time he considered a small reminder that he had once saved her from four Guild members who wanted to cut her throat. That sort of thing was enough to make most women fall on your neck with kisses and offers of whatever you wanted. But there had been a notable lack of kisses when he actually saved her, so it was unlikely she would begin now. "Anyway," he went on airily, "you don't have to worry about the Guild. You've been making nightflowers for how long? And nobody has come around trying to stop you. Why, I'll wager you never see another Illuminator."

"What have you heard?" she asked quietly, her head still down. The pestle's rotation slowed almost to a stop. "Tell me."

The hair on his scalp nearly stood on end. How did women do that? Hide every clue, and they still went straight to what you wanted to conceal. "What do you mean? I hear the same gossip you do, I suppose. Mostly about the Seanchan."

She spun around so fast that her hair swung like a flail, and snatched the heavy pestle up in both hands, brandishing it overhead. Perhaps ten years or so older than he, she had large dark eyes and a small plump mouth that usually seemed ready to be kissed. He had thought about kissing her a time or two. Most women were more amenable after a few kisses. Now, her teeth were bared, and she looked ready to bite off his nose. "Tell me!" she commanded.

"I was playing at dice with some Seanchan down near the docks," he said reluctantly, keeping a careful eye on the upraised pestle. A man might bluff and bluster and walk away if the matter was not serious, but a woman could crack your skull on a whim. And his hip was aching and stiff from sitting too long. He was not sure how quickly he could move from the stool. "I didn't want to be the one to tell you, but . . . The Guild doesn't exist anymore, Aludra. The chapter house in Tanchico is gone." That had been the only real chapter house in the Guild. The one in Cairhien was long abandoned now, and for the rest, Illuminators only traveled to put on displays for rulers and nobles. "They refused to let Seanchan soldiers inside the compound, and fought, tried to, when they broke in anyway. I don't know what happened—maybe a soldier took a lantern where he shouldn’t have—but half the compound exploded, as I understand it. Probably exaggeration. But the Seanchan believed one of the Illuminators used the One Power, and they . . .” He sighed, and tried to make his voice gentle. Blood and ashes, he did not want to tell her this! But she was glaring at him, that bloody club poised to split his scalp. “Aludra, the Seanchan gathered up everyone left alive at the chapter house, and some Illuminators that had gone to Amador, and everybody in between who even looked like an Illuminator, and they made them all *da’covale*. That means—”

“I know what it means!” she said fiercely. Swinging back to the big mortar, she began pounding away with the pestle so hard that he was afraid the thing might explode, if that powder really was what went inside fireworks. “Fools!” she muttered angrily, thumping the pestle loudly in the mortar. “Great blind fools! With the mighty, you must bend your neck a little and walk on, but they would not see it!” Sniffing, she scrubbed at her cheeks with the back of her hand. “You are wrong, my young friend. So long as one Illuminator lives, the Guild, it lives too, and me, I still live!” Still not looking at him, she wiped her cheeks with her hand again. “And what would you do if I gave you the fireworks? Hurl them at the Seanchan from the catapult, I suppose?” Her snort told what she thought of that.

“And what’s wrong with the idea?” he asked defensively. A good field catapult, a scorpion, could throw a ten-pound stone five hundred paces, and ten pounds of fireworks would do more damage than any stone. “Anyway, I have a better idea. I saw those tubes you use to toss nightflowers into the sky. Three hundred paces or more, you said. Tip one on its side more or less, and I’ll bet it could toss a nightflower a *thousand* paces.”

Peering into the mortar, she muttered almost under her breath. “Me, I talk too much,” he thought it was, and something about pretty eyes that made no sense. He hurried on to stop her from starting up about Guild secrets again. “Those tubes are a lot smaller than a catapult, Aludra. If they were well hidden, the Seanchan would never know where they came from. You could think of it as paying them back for the chapter house.”

Turning her head, she gave him a look of respect. Mingled with surprise, but he managed to ignore that. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and there were tearstains on her cheeks. Maybe if he put an arm around her . . . Women usually appreciated a little comforting when they cried.

Before he could even shift his weight, she swung the pestle between them, pointing it at him like a sword with one hand. Those slender arms must be stronger than they looked; the wooden club never wavered. *Light,* he thought, *she* couldn't *have known what I was going to do!*

"This is not bad, for one who only saw the lofting tubes a few days ago," she said, "but me, I have thought about this long before you. I had reason." For a moment, her voice was bitter, but it smoothed out again, and became a little amused. "I will set you the puzzle, since you are so clever, no?" she said, arching an eyebrow. Oh, she definitely was amused by something! "You tell me what use I might have for a bellfounder, and I will tell you *all* of my secrets. Even the ones that will make you blush, yes?"

Now, that did sound interesting. But the fireworks were more important than an hour snuggling with her. What secrets did she have that could make him blush? He might surprise her, there. Not all of those other men's memories that had been stuffed into his head had to do with battles. "A bellmaker," he mused, without a notion of where to go from there. None of those old memories gave even a hint. "Well, I suppose . . . A bellmaker could . . . Maybe . . ."

"No," she said, suddenly brisk. "You will go, and return in two or three days. I have the work to do, and you are too distracting with all of your questions and wheedling. No; no arguments! You will go now."

Glowering, he rose and clapped his wide-brimmed black hat onto his head. Wheedling? Wheedling! Blood and bloody ashes! He had dropped his cloak in a heap by the door on entering, and he grunted softly, bending to pick it up. He had been sitting on that stool most of the day. But maybe he had made a little headway with her. If he could solve her puzzle, anyway. Alarm bells. Gongs to sound the hour. It made no sense.

"I might think of kissing such a smart young man as you if you did not belong to another," she murmured in decidedly warm tones. "You have such a pretty bottom."

He jerked erect, keeping his back to her. The heat in his face was pure outrage, but she was sure to say he was blushing. He could usually manage to forget what he was wearing unless someone brought it up. There had been an incident or three in taverns. While he was flat on his back with his leg in splints and his ribs strapped and bandages just about everywhere else, Tylin had hidden all of his clothes. He had not found where, yet, but surely they were hidden, not burned. After all, she could not mean to hold on to him forever. All that remained of his own were his hat and the black silk scarf tied around his neck. And the silvery foxhead medallion, of course, hanging on a leather cord under his shirt. And his knives; he really would have felt lost without those. When he finally managed to crawl out of that bloody bed, the bloody woman had had new clothes made for him, with her sitting there watching the bloody seamstresses measure and fit him! Snowy lace at his wrists almost hid his bloody hands unless he was careful, and more spilled from his neck almost to his flaming waist. Tylin liked lace on a man. His cloak was a brilliant scarlet, as red as his too-tight breeches, and edged with golden scrollwork and white roses, of all bloody things. Not to mention a white oval on his left shoulder with House Mitsobar's green Sword and Anchor. His coat was blue enough for a Tinker, worked in red and gold Tairen mazes across the chest and down the sleeves for good measure. He did not like recalling what he had been forced to go through to convince Tylin to leave off the pearls and sapphires and the Light alone knew what else she had wanted. And it was short, to boot. Indecently short! Tylin liked his bloody bottom, too, and she did not seem to mind who saw it!

Settling the cloak around his shoulders—it was some covering, at least—he grabbed his shoulder-high walking staff from where it was leaning beside the door. His hip and leg were going to ache until he could walk the pain away. "In two or three days, then," he said with as much dignity as he could muster.

Aludra laughed softly. Not softly enough that he could not hear, though. Light, but a woman could do more with a laugh than a dockside bullyboy with a string of curses! And just as deliberately.

Limping out of the wagon, he slammed the door behind him as soon as he was far enough down the wooden steps that were fastened to the wagon bed. The afternoon sky was just like the morning sky had been, gray and blustery, thatched with sullen clouds. A sharp wind gusted fitfully. Altara had no true winter, but what it did have was enough to be going on with. Rather than snow, there were icy rains and thunderstorms racing in off the sea, and in between it was damp enough to make the cold seem harder. The ground had a sodden feel under your boots even when it was dry. Scowling, he hobbled away from the wagon.

Women! Aludra was pretty, though. And she did know how to make fireworks. A bellfounder? Maybe he could make it a short two days. So long as Aludra did not start chasing *him*. A good many women seemed to be doing that, of late. Had Tylin changed something about him, to make women pursue him the way she herself did? No. That was ridiculous. The wind caught his cloak, flaring it behind him, but he was too absorbed to master it. A pair of slender women—acrobats, he thought—gave him sly smiles as they passed, and he smiled and made his best leg. Tylin had not changed him. He was still the same man he had always been.

Luca's show was fifty times as large as what Thom had told him about, maybe more, a sprawling hodgepodge of tents and wagons the size of a large village. Despite the weather, a number of performers were practicing where he could see them. A woman in a flowing white blouse and breeches as tight as his swung back and forth on a sagging rope slung between two tall poles, then threw herself off and somehow caught her feet in the rope just before she hurtled to the ground below. Then she twisted to catch the rope with her hands, pulled herself back to her seat and began the same thing again. Not far off, a fellow was *running* on top of an egg-shaped wheel that must have been a good twenty feet long, mounted on a platform that put him higher above the ground when he dashed across the narrow end than the woman who was going to break her fool neck soon. Mat eyed a bare-chested man who was rolling three shiny balls along his arms and across his shoulders without ever touching them with his hands. That was interesting. He might be able to manage that himself. At least those balls would not leave you bleeding and broken. He had had enough of that to suit him a lifetime.

What really caught his eyes, however, were the horselines. Long horselines, where two dozen men bundled against the cold were shoveling dung into barrows. Hundreds of horses. Supposedly, Luca had given shelter to some Seanchan animal trainer, and his reward had been a warrant, signed by the High Lady Suroth herself, allowing him to keep all of his animals. Mat's own Pips was secure, saved from the lottery ordered by Suroth because he was in the Tarasin Palace stables, but getting the gelding out of those stables was beyond him. Tylin as good as had a leash around his neck, and she did not intend to let him go any time soon.

Turning away, he considered having Vanin steal some of the show's horses if the talks with Luca went badly. From what Mat knew of Vanin, it would be an evening stroll for the unlikely man. Fat as he was, Vanin could steal, and ride, any horse ever foaled. Unfortunately, Mat doubted he himself could sit a saddle for more than a mile. Still, it was something to consider. He was growing desperate.

Limping along, idly eyeing tumblers and jugglers and acrobats at their practice, he wondered how matters had come to this pass. Blood and ashes! He was *ta'veren!* He was supposed to shape the world around him! But here he was, stuck in Ebou Dar, Tylin's pet and toy—the woman had not even let him heal completely before leaping on him again like a duck on a beetle!—while everyone else was having a fine time of it. With those Kinswomen fawning at her heels, likely Nynaeve was lording it over everyone in sight. Once Egwene realized those stark raving mad Aes Sedai who had named her Amyrlin did not really mean it, Talmanes and the Band of the Red Hand were ready to spirit her away. Light, Elayne might be wearing the Rose Crown by now, if he knew her! Rand and Perrin probably were lolling in front of a fire in some palace, swilling wine and telling jokes.

He grimaced and rubbed at his forehead as a faint rush of colors seemed to swirl inside his head. That happened lately whenever he thought about either man. He did not know why, and he did not want to know. He just wanted it to stop. If only he could get away from Ebou Dar. And take the secret of fireworks with him, of course, but he would take escape over the secret any day.

Thom and Beslan were still where he had left them, drinking with Luca in front of Luca's elaborately decorated wagon, but he did not join them immediately. For some reason, Luca had taken an instant dislike to Mat Cauthon. Mat returned the favor, but with reason. Luca had a smug, self-satisfied face, and a way of smirking at any woman in sight. And he seemed to think every woman in the world enjoyed looking at him. Light, the man was married!

Sprawled in a gilded chair he must have stolen from a palace, Luca was laughing and making expansive, lordly gestures to Thom and Beslan, seated on benches to either side of him. Golden stars and comets covered Luca's brilliant red coat and cloak. A *Tinker* would have blushed! His wagon would have made a Tinker weep! Much larger than Aludra's work-wagon, the thing appeared to have been *lacquered*! The phases of the moon repeated themselves in silver all the way around the wagon, and golden stars and comets in every size covered the rest of the red-and-blue surface. In that setting, Beslan looked almost ordinary in a coat and cloak worked in swooping birds. Thom, knuckling wine from his long white mustaches, seemed positively drab in plain bronze-colored wool and a dark cloak.

One person who should have been there was not, but a quick glance around found a cluster of women at a nearby wagon. They were every age from his own up to graying hair, but every one of them was giggling at what they surrounded. Sighing, Mat made his way there.

“Oh, I just cannot decide,” came a boy’s piping voice from the center of the women. “When I look at you, Merici, your eyes are the prettiest I have ever seen. But when I look at you, Neilyn, yours are. Your lips are ripe cherries, Gillin, and yours make me want to kiss them, Adria. And your neck, Jameine, graceful as a swan’s. . . .”

Swallowing an oath, Mat quickened his pace as much as he could and pushed through the women muttering apologies left and right. Olver was in the middle of them, a short, pale boy posturing and grinning at one woman then another. That toothy grin alone was enough that any of them might decide to slap his ears off in a moment.

“Please forgive him,” Mat murmured, taking the boy’s hand. “Come on, Olver; we have to get back to the city. Stop waving your cloak about. He doesn’t know what he’s saying, really. I don’t know where he picks up that sort of thing.”

Luckily, the women laughed and ruffled Olver’s hair as Mat led him away. Some murmured that he was a sweet boy, of all things! One slipped her hand under Mat’s cloak and pinched his bottom. Women!

Once clear, he scowled at the boy tripping along happily at his side. Olver had grown since Mat first met him, but he was still short for his years. And with that wide mouth and ears to match, he would never be handsome. “You could get yourself in deep trouble talking to women that way,” Mat told him. “Women like a man to be quiet, and well-mannered. And reserved. Reserved, and maybe a little shy. Cultivate those qualities, and you’ll do well.”

Olver gave him a gaping, incredulous stare, and Mat sighed. The lad had a fistful of uncles looking after him, and every one except Mat himself was a bad influence.

Thom and Beslan were enough to restore Olver’s grin. Pulling his hand free, he ran ahead to them laughing. Thom was teaching him how to juggle and play the harp and the flute, and Beslan was teaching him how to use a sword. His other “uncles” gave him other lessons, in a remarkably varied set of skills. Mat intended to start teaching him to use a quarterstaff, and the Two Rivers bow, once he had his strength back. What the boy was learning from Chel Vanin, or the Redarms, Mat did not want to know.

Luca rose from his fancy chair at Mat's approach, his fatuous smile fading to a sour grimace. Eyeing Mat up and down, he swept that ridiculous cloak around himself with a wide flourish and announced in a booming voice, "I am a busy man. I have much to do. It may be that I soon will have the honor of guesting the High Lady Suroth for a private showing." Without another word he strode away holding the ornate cloak with just one hand, so gusts rippled it behind him like a banner.

Mat gathered his own with both hands. A cloak was for warmth. He had seen Suroth in the Palace, though never closely. As closely as he wanted, though. He could not imagine her giving a moment to Valan Luca's Grand Traveling Show and Magnificent Display of Marvels and Wonders, as the streamer strung between two tall poles at the entrance to the show announced in red letters a pace high. If she did, likely she would eat the lions. Or frighten them to death.

"Has he agreed yet, Thom?" he asked quietly, frowning after Luca.

"We can travel with him when he leaves Ebou Dar," the weathered man replied. "For a price." He snorted, blowing out his mustaches, and irritably raked a hand through his white hair. "We should eat and sleep like kings for what he wants, but knowing him, I doubt we will. He doesn't think we are criminals, since we're still walking free, but he knows we're running from something, or we would travel some other way. Unfortunately, he does not intend to leave until spring at the earliest."

Mat considered several choice curses. Not until spring. The Light knew what Tylin would have done to him, would have him doing, by spring. Maybe Vanin stealing horses was not such a bad notion. "Gives me more time for dice," he said, as if it did not matter. "If he wants as much as you say, I need to fatten my purse. One thing you can say for the Seanchan, they don't seem to mind losing." He tried to be careful how long he let his luck run, and he had not faced any threats of having his throat slit for cheating, at least since he had been able to leave the Palace on his own feet. At first, he had believed it was his luck spreading, or perhaps being *ta'veren* finally coming in for something useful.

Beslan regarded him gravely. A dark slender man a little younger than Mat, he had been blithely rakish when Mat first met him, always ready for a round of the taverns, especially if it ended with women or a fight. Since the Seanchan came, he had grown more serious, though. To him, they were very serious business. “My mother won’t be pleased if she learns I am helping her pretty leave Ebou Dar, Mat. She will marry me to someone with a squint and a mustache like a Taraboner foot soldier.”

After all this time, Mat still winced. He could never get used to Tylin’s son thinking what his mother was doing with Mat was all right. Well, Beslan did believe she had become a little too possessive—just a little, mind!—but that was the only reason he was willing to help. Beslan claimed Mat was what his mother needed to take her mind off the agreements she had been forced into by the Seanchan! Sometimes, Mat wished he was back in the Two Rivers, where at least you knew how other people thought. Sometimes he did.

“Can we return to the Palace now?” Olver said, more a demand than a question. “I have a reading lesson with the Lady Riselle. She lets me rest my head on her bosom while she reads to me.”

“A notable achievement, Olver,” Thom said, stroking his mustaches to hide a smile. Leaning closer to the other two men, he pitched his voice to escape the boy’s ears. “The woman makes me play the harp for her before she lets me rest *my* head on that magnificent pillow.”

“Riselle makes everyone entertain her first,” Beslan chuckled in a knowing way, and Thom stared at him in astonishment.

Mat groaned. It was not his leg, this time, or the fact that every man in Ebou Dar seemed to be choosing the bosom they rested their heads on except for Mat Cauthon. Those bloody dice had just started tumbling in his head again. Something bad was coming his way. Something very bad.

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CHAPTER 16

An Unexpected Encounter

The walk back to the city was better than two miles, across low hills that worked the ache out of Mat’s leg and put it back again before they topped a rise and saw Ebou Dar ahead, behind its extravagantly thick, white-plastered wall that no siege catapult had ever been able to break down. The city within was white, too, though here and there pointed domes bore thin stripes of color. The white-plastered buildings, white spires and towers, white palaces, gleamed even on a gray winter day. Here and there a tower ended in a jagged top or a gap showed where a building had been destroyed, but in truth, the Seanchan conquest had occasioned little damage. They had been too fast, too strong, and in control of the city before more than scattered resistance could form.

Surprisingly, such trade as there was this time of year had hardly faltered with the city’s fall. The Seanchan encouraged it, though merchants and ship captains and crews were required to take an oath to obey the Forerunners, await the Return, and serve Those Who Come Home. In practice, that meant largely going about your life as usual, so few objected. The broad harbor was more crowded with ships every time Mat looked at it. This afternoon, it seemed he could have walked from Ebou Dar proper across to the Rahad, a rough quarter he would just as soon never revisit. Often in the days after he first managed to walk again, he had gone down to the docks to stare. Not at the vessels with ribbed sails or the Sea Folk ships that the Seanchan were re-rigging and manning with their own crews, but at craft flying the Golden Bees of Illian, or the Sword and Hand of Arad Doman, or the Crescents of Tear. He no longer did. Today, he barely glanced toward the harbor. Those dice spinning in his head seemed to roar like thunder. Whatever was going to happen, he very much doubted he would like it. He seldom did, when the dice gave warning.

Though a steady stream of traffic flowed out of the great arched gateway, and people afoot seemed to be squeezing through to get in, a thick column of wagons and ox-carts, stretching all the way back to the rise, was waiting to enter and hardly moving. Everyone departing on a horse was Seanchan, whether with skin as dark as one of the Sea Folk or pale as a Cairhienin, and they stood out for more than being mounted. Some of the men wore voluminous trousers and odd, tight coats with high collars that fit their necks snugly right to the chin and rows of shiny metal buttons down the front, or flowing, elaborately embroidered coats almost as long as a woman's dress. They were of the Blood, as were the women in strangely cut riding dresses that seemed made of narrow pleats, with divided skirts cut to expose colorfully booted ankles and wide sleeves that hung to their feet in the stirrups. A few wore lace veils that hid all but their eyes, so their faces were not exposed to the lowborn. Most of the riders by far, however, wore brightly painted armor of overlapping plates. Some of the soldiers were women, too, though there was no way to tell which with those painted helmets like the heads of monstrous insects. At least none wore the black-and-red of the Deathwatch Guard. Even other Seanchan seemed nervous around them, and that was enough to warn Mat to walk wide around them.

In any case, none of the Seanchan spared so much as a glance for three men and a boy slowly walking toward the city along the column of waiting carts and wagons. Well, the men walked slowly. Olver skipped. Mat's leg was setting their pace, but he tried not to let the others see how much he was leaning on his staff. The dice usually announced incidents he managed to survive by the skin of his teeth, battles, a building dropping on his head. Tylin. He dreaded what would happen when they stopped this time.

Nearly all of the wagons and carts leaving the city had Seanchan driving or walking alongside, more plainly dressed than those on horses, hardly peculiar looking at all, but those in the waiting line were more likely to belong to Ebou Dari or folk from the surrounding area, men in long vests, women with their skirts sewn up on one side to expose a stockinged leg or colorful petticoats, their wagons as well as their carts pulled by oxen. Outlanders dotted the column, merchants with small trains of horse-drawn wagons. There was more trade in winter here in the south than farther north, where merchants had to contend with snow-covered roads, and they came from far, some of them. A stout Domani woman with a dark beauty patch on her copper cheek, riding the lead of four wagons, clutched her flowered cloak around her and scowled at a man five wagons ahead of her in the line, a greasy-looking fellow, hiding long thick mustaches behind a Taraboner veil, beside the wagon driver. A competitor, no doubt. A lean Kandori with a large pearl in her left ear and silver chains across her chest sat her saddle calmly, gloved hand folded on the pommel, maybe still unaware that her gray gelding and her wagon teams alike would be put into the lottery once she was into the city. One horse in five had been taken from locals, and so as not to discourage trade, one in ten from outlanders. Paid for, true, and a fair price in other days, but not nearly what the market would bear, given the demand. Mat always noticed horses, even if with only half his mind or less. A fat Cairhienin in a coat as drab as those of his wagon drivers was shouting angrily about the delay and letting his fine bay mare dance nervously. A very good conformation on that mare. She would go to an officer, most likely. What was going to happen when the dice stopped?

The wide arched gates into the city had their guards, though it was likely only the Seanchan recognized them as such. *Sul'dam* in their lightning-paneled blue dresses threaded back and forth through the streams of traffic with gray-clad *damane* on silvery *a'dam.* Just one of those pairs would have been sufficient to quell any disturbance short of a full-scale assault, and maybe even that, but that was not the real reason for their presence. In the first days after Ebou Dar's fall, while he was still confined to bed, they had harrowed the city searching for the women they called *Marath'damane,* and now they made sure none could enter. The *sul'dam* each carried an extra leash coiled on her shoulder just in case. Pairs patrolled the docks, too, meeting every arriving ship and boat.

Beside the wide arched gate into the city, a long platform displayed, on spikes twenty feet above the ground, the tarred but still recognizable heads of over a dozen men and two women who had fallen afoul of Seanchan justice. Above them hung the symbol for that justice, a headsman's slant-edged axe with the haft wrapped in an intricately knotted white cord. A placard below each head announced the crime that had placed it there, murder or rape, robbery with violence, assault on one of the Blood. Lesser offenses brought fines or flogging, or being made *da'covale.* The Seanchan were evenhanded about it. None of the Blood themselves were on display—one of those who earned execution would be sent back to Seanchan, or strangled with the white cord—but three of those heads had been attached to Seanchan, and the weight of their justice fell on high as well as low. Two placards marked rebellion hung below the heads of the woman who had been Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere and her Master of the Blades.

Mat had been through that gate often enough that he barely noticed the display, now. Olver skipped along singing a rhyming song. Beslan and Thom walked with their heads together, and once Mat caught a soft "risky business" from Thom, but he did not care what they were talking about. Then they were into the long, dim tunnel that carried the road through the wall, and the rumble of wagons passing through would have made listening impossible even had he wanted to. Keeping close to the side, well away from the wagon wheels, Thom and Beslan forged ahead talking in low murmurs, Olver darting after them, but when Mat emerged into daylight again, he walked into Thom's back before he realized that all of them had stopped, hard beside the tunnel's mouth. On the point of making a caustic comment, he suddenly saw what they were staring at. People afoot pushing out of the tunnel behind him shoved them aside, but he just stared, too.

The streets of Ebou Dar were always full of people, but not like this, as though a dam had burst and sent a flood of humanity into the city. The throng packed the street in front of him from one side to the other, surrounding pools of livestock the like of which he had never seen before, spotted white cattle with long up-swept horns, pale brown goats covered in fine hair that hung to the paving stones, sheep with four horns. Every street he could see looked as jammed. Wagons and carts inched through the mass where they moved at all, the shouts and curses of the wagon drivers and carters all but drowned in the babble of voices and the noise of the animals. He could not make out words, but he could distinguish accents. Slow, drawling Seanchan accents. Some of them nudged a neighbor and pointed at him in his bright clothing. They were gaping and pointing at everything, as if they had never seen an inn or a cutler's shop before, but he still growled under his breath and jerked his hat brim low over his eyes.

"The Return," Thom muttered, and if Mat had not been right at his shoulder he would not have heard. "While we were taking our ease with Luca, the *Corenne* has arrived."

Mat had been thinking of this Return that the Seanchan kept going on about as an invasion, an army. One of the wagon drivers shouted and waved her long-handled whip at some boys who had crawled up on the side of the wagon box to poke at what appeared to be grapevines in wooden tubs of earth. Another wagon held a long printing press, and still another, just managing to turn into the tunnel, carried what looked like brewers' vats and a faint smell of hops. Crates of strangely colored chickens and ducks and geese decorated some of those wagons, not birds for sale, but a farmer's stock. It was an army all right, only not the sort he had imagined. This kind of army would be harder to fight than soldiers.

"Stab my eyes, we'll have to wade to get though this!" Beslan grumbled in disgust, rising on his toes to try peering farther ahead over the crowd. "How far before we find a clear street?"

Mat found himself remembering what he had not really seen when it was in front of his eyes, the harbor full of ships. *Full* of ships. Maybe two or three times the vessels that had been there when they left for Luca's camp at first light, quite a few of them still maneuvering under sail. Which meant there might be more still waiting to enter the harbor. Light! How many could have disgorged their cargo since morning? How many remained to be unloaded? Light, how many people could be carried on that number of ships? And why had they all come here instead of Tanchico? A shiver ran down his spine. Maybe this was not all of them.

"You had best try to find your way by back streets and alleys," he said, raising his voice so they could hear over the cacophony. "You won't reach the Palace before night, otherwise."

Beslan turned a frown on him. "You aren't returning with us? Mat, if you try to buy passage on a ship again . . . You know she won't go easy on you this time."

Mat matched the Queen's son scowl for scowl. "I just want to walk around a little," he lied. As soon as he returned to the Palace, Tylin would start cosseting and petting him. It would not have been that bad, really—not really—except that she did not care who saw her caress his cheeks and whisper endearments in his ear, even her son. Besides, what if the dice in his head stopped when he reached her? Possessive was hardly the word for Tylin these days. Blood and ashes, the woman might have decided to marry him! He did not want to marry, not yet, but he knew who he was going to marry, and it was not Tylin Quintara Mitsobar. Only, what could he do if she decided differently?

Suddenly he remembered Thom's murmur of "risky business." He knew Thom, and he knew Beslan. Olver was gaping at the Seanchan as hard as they themselves were at everything around them. He started to dart away for a closer look, and Mat seized his shoulder just in time and pushed him, protesting, into Thom’s hands. “Take the boy back to the Palace and give him his lessons when Riselle is done with him. And forget whatever madness you have in mind. You could put your heads on display outside the gate, and Tylin’s, too.” And his own. Never let that be forgotten!

The two men stared back at him without any expression, as good as confirming his suspicions.

“Perhaps I should walk with you,” Thom said at last. “We could talk. You’re remarkably lucky, Mat, and you have a certain flair for, shall we say, the adventurous?” Beslan nodded. Olver squirmed in Thom’s grip, trying to stare at all the strange people at once and unconcerned with what his elders were talking about.

Mat grunted sourly. Why did people always want him to be a hero? Sooner or later that sort of thing was going to get him killed. “I don’t need to talk about anything. They are here, Beslan. If you couldn’t stop them getting in, sure as morning, you won’t be able to push them out. Rand will deal with them, if the rumors are anything to go by.” Again, those whirling colors spun through his head, almost obliterating the sound of the dice for an instant. “You took that bloody oath to wait on the Return; we all did.” Refusal had meant being put in chains and set to work on the docks, or clearing the canals in the Rahad. Which made it no oath at all, in his book. “Wait on Rand.” The colors came once more and vanished. Blood and ashes! He just had to stop thinking about . . . About certain people. Again they swirled. “It might come out right yet, if you give it time.”

“You don’t understand, Mat,” Beslan said fiercely. “Mother still sits on the throne, and Suroth says she will rule all of Altara, not just what we hold around Ebou Dar, and maybe more besides, but mother had to lie down on her *face* and swear *fealty* to some woman on the other side of the Aryth Ocean. Suroth says I should marry one of their Blood and shave the sides of my head, and mother is listening to her. Suroth might pretend they are equals, but she *has* to listen when Suroth speaks. No matter what Suroth says, Ebou Dar isn’t really ours anymore, and the rest won’t be either. Maybe we can’t push them out by force of arms, but we can make the country too hot to hold them. The Whitecloaks found out. Ask them what they mean by ‘the Altaran Noon.’ ”

Mat could guess without asking anyone. He bit his tongue to keep from pointing out that there were more Seanchan soldiers in Ebou Dar than there had been Whitecloaks in all of Altara during the Whitecloak War. A street full of Seanchan was no place for a flapping tongue, even if most did appear to be farmers and craftsfolk. “I understand you’re hot to put your head on a spike,” he said quietly. As quietly as he could and still be heard in that din of voices and cattle lowing and geese honking. “You know about their Listeners. That fellow over there who looks like a stableman could be one, or that skinny woman with the bundle on her back.”

Beslan glowered so hard at the pair Mat had pointed out that if they really were Listeners, they might report him for that alone. “Maybe you’ll sing a different song when they reach Andor,” he growled, and pushed his way into the throng, shoving anyone who got in his way. Mat would have been unsurprised to see a fight break out. He suspected that was what the man was looking for.

Thom turned to follow with Olver, but Mat caught his sleeve. “Cool his temper if you can, Thom. And cool your own while you’re about it. I would think by this time you’d have had enough of shaving blind.”

“My head is cool and I’m trying to cool his,” Thom said drily. “He can’t just sit, though; it is his country.” A faint smile crossed his leathery face. “You say you won’t take risks, but you will. And when you do, you’ll make anything Beslan and I might try look like an evening stroll in the garden. With you around, even the barber is blind. Come along, boy,” he said, swinging Olver up onto his shoulders. “Riselle might not let you rest your head if you’re late for your lesson.”

Mat frowned after him as he strode away, making much better progress with Olver straddling his neck than Beslan had. What did Thom mean? He never took risks unless they were forced on him. Never. He glanced casually toward the skinny woman, and the fellow with dung on his boots. Light, they *could* be Listeners. Anybody could be. It was enough to set a prickle between his shoulders, as if he were being watched.

He inched a goodly distance along streets that actually grew thicker with people and animals and wagons the nearer he came to the docks. The stalls on the bridges over the canals had their shutters down, the street peddlers had picked up their blankets, and the tumblers and jugglers that usually entertained at every street crossing would have had no room to perform if they had not gone away, too. There were too many Seanchan, that was how many there were, and maybe one in five a soldier, plain enough by their hard eyes and the set of their shoulders, so different from farmer or craftsman, even when they were not wearing armor. Now and then a group *sul'dam* and *damane* moved along the street in a little eddy of clear space, more even than soldiers got. It was not given out of fear, at least not by the Seanchan. They bowed respectfully to the women with lightning-marked red panels on the blue dresses, and smiled with approval as the pairs passed by. Beslan was out of his mind. The Seanchan were not going to be driven off by anyone except an army with Asha'man, like the one rumor said had fought them to the east a week ago. Or one armed with the Illuminator's secrets. What in the Light could Aludra want with a bellfounder?

He took pains not to come in sight of the docks. He had learned his lesson on that. What he really wanted was a game of dice, one that would last well into the night. Preferably late enough that Tylin would be asleep when he returned to the Palace. She had taken away his dice, claiming she did not like him gambling, though she did it after he talked her into wagering forfeits, while he was still confined to bed. Fortunately, dice could always be found, and with his luck, it was always better to use the other men's dice anyway. Unfortunately, once he discovered she was not about to pay a forfeit of letting him go—the woman pretended not to know what he was talking about!—he had used them to give her back a bit of her own medicine. A grave mistake, however much fun it had been at the time. Since the forfeits ran out, she had been twice as bad as before.

The taverns and common rooms he entered were as packed as the streets, though, with barely room to lift a mug, much less toss dice, full of Seanchan laughing and singing, and glum-faced Ebou Dari who eyed the Seanchan in sullen silence. He still queried the innkeepers and tapsters on the chance they might have a cubby hole he could rent, but one and all they shook their heads. He had not really expected anything else. There had been nothing available even before all the new arrivals. Still, he began to feel as gloomy as the foreign merchants he saw peering into their wine and wondering how they were to get their goods out of the city with no horses. He had gold to pay whatever Luca wanted, and more, but it was all in a chest in the Tarasin Palace, and he was not about to try taking enough out in one go, not after Palace servants had *carried* him back from the docks like a stag taken in hunt. All he had been doing then was talking to ship captains; if Tylin learned, and she would, that he was trying to leave the Palace with more gold than he needed for an evening of gambling . . . Oh, no! He had to have a room, a garret in some inn’s attic the size of a wardrobe, anything, where he could hide away gold a little at a time, or he had to have a chance with the dice, one or the other. Luck or no luck, though, he eventually realized that he was going to find neither today. And those bloody dice were still tumbling in his head, tumbling.

He did not stay in any one place long, and not just for the lack of a game or a room. His colorful clothes, his shame-a-Tinker-for-brightness clothes, drew eyes. Some of the Seanchan thought he was there for entertainment, and tried to pay him to sing! He almost let them, once or twice, but once they heard him, they would have demanded the money back. Some of the Ebou Dari men, with long curved knives tucked behind their belts and a bellyful of anger they could not take out on the Seanchan, thought to take it out on the buffoon who lacked only a painted face to look like a noble’s fool. Mat ducked back into the crowded street whenever he saw such fellows eyeing him. He had learned the hard way that he was in no condition for a fight yet, and his killer’s head going up beside the city gate would do him no good at all.

Mat took rest where he could find it, on an empty barrel abandoned beside the mouth of an alleyway, on the rare bit of bench in front of a tavern that had room for one more, on a stone step until the building’s owner came out and knocked his hat off with a swipe of her broom. His belly was kissing his backbone, he was beginning to feel that everyone was gaping at his garish clothes, the dank cold was seeping into his bones, and the only dice he was going to find were those still thundering away in his head like horse’s hooves. He did not think they had ever been this loud before.

“Nothing for it but to go back and be the Queen’s bloody pet!” he growled, using his staff to lever himself up off a cracked wooden crate lying at the side of the street. Several passersby looked at him as if his face were already painted. He ignored them. Beneath his notice, they were. He was not beating them over the head with his staff as they deserved, goggling at a man that way.

The streets really were as full as earlier, he realized, and it would be well after nightfall before he got back to the Palace if he tried to make his way through the crowds. Of course, Tylin might be asleep by then. Maybe. His stomach growled, almost loudly enough to drown out the dice. She might order the kitchens not to feed him, if he was too late.

Ten hard-won paces through the press, and he turned down an alley, narrow and dark. There were no paving stones. The white plaster on the windowless walls was cracked and falling to expose the brick beneath, often as not. The air was rank with the fetid stench of decay, and he hoped that what squished under his boots was mud even when it gave off a loathsome odor. There were no people, either. He could step out with a good stride. Or what passed for one, today. He could hardly wait for the day he could walk a few miles again without panting and aching and needing to lean on a stick. Twisting alleys, most so narrow his shoulders brushed both sides, crisscrossed the city in a maze that was easy to get lost in if you did not know your way. He never took a wrong turn, even when a narrow, crooked passage suddenly forked into three or even four that all seemed to meander in roughly the same direction. There had been a good many times in Ebou Dar when he needed to avoid eyes, and he knew these alleys like he knew his own hand. Though, oddly enough, he still had the feeling he was being watched. He expected to feel that as long as he had to wear those bloody clothes.

If he had to struggle through a mass of people and animals from one alley to another, and occasionally shove his way across a bridge that seemed a solid wall of humanity, he was still almost back to the Palace in the time it would have taken him to go three streets otherwise. Hurrying into the shadowed passage between a well-lit tavern and a shuttered lacquerware shop, he wondered what the kitchens would have ready. More capacious than most, wide enough for three if they were friendly, this alley let out onto the Mol Hara Square almost in front of the Tarasin Palace. Suroth was living there, and the cooks had been outdoing themselves since she had had the lot of them flogged after her first meal. There might be oysters with cream, and perhaps gilded fish, and squid with peppers. Ten strides into the shadows, his foot came down on something that did not squish, and he went down in the freezing mud with a grunt, twisting at the last instant so he did not land on his bad leg. Icy liquid immediately soaked through his coat. He hoped it was water.

He grunted again when boots landed on his shoulder. The fellow toppled off of him, cursing and skidding deeper into the alley on the mud, and went to one knee, just managing to catch himself against the side of the tavern short of falling flat himself. Mat's eyes were accustomed to the dim light, enough for him to make out a slender, nondescript man. A man with what appeared to be a large scar on his cheek. Not a man, though. A creature he had seen rip out his friend's throat with one bare hand and take a knife out of its own chest and throw it back at him. And the thing would have landed right in front of him, in easy reach, if he had not tripped. Maybe a little twist of *ta'veren* shaping had worked in his favor, thank the Light! All that flashed through his head in the time it took the *gholam* to catch itself against the wall and turn its head to glare at him.

With an oath, Mat snatched his fallen walking staff and awkwardly hurled it at the creature like a spear. At its legs, hoping to tangle them, gain a moment. The thing flowed aside like water, avoiding the staff, boots sliding a little in the mud, then threw itself toward Mat. The delay had been enough, though. As soon as the staff left his hand, Mat fumbled inside his shirt for the foxhead medallion, breaking the leather cord as he snatched the medallion out. The *gholam* threw itself at him, and he swung the medallion desperately. Silver that had lain cool on his chest brushed across an outstretched hand with a hiss like bacon frying and a smell of burning flesh. Fluid as quicksilver, snarling, the thing tried to dodge by the whirling medallion, to seize some part of Mat. Once it laid hands on him, he was as good as dead. It would not try to toy with him this time, as it had in the Rahad. Flailing continuously, he caught it with the foxhead on the other hand, across the face, each time with a hiss and stench of burning as if he had struck with a hot iron. Teeth bared, the *gholam* backed away, but in a crouch on the balls of its feet, hands clawed, ready to jump at the slightest weakness.

Not letting the spinning medallion slow, Mat pushed unsteadily to his feet, watching the thing that looked a like a man. *He wants you dead as much as he wants her,* it had told him in the Rahad, smiling. It was not talking or smiling now. He did not know who the "her" was, or the "he," but the rest was clear as good glass. And here he was, barely able to stay on his feet. His leg and hip ached like fire, and his ribs. Not to mention the shoulder the *gholam* had landed on. He had to get back to the street, back among people. Maybe enough people would deter the thing. A small hope, but the only hope he could see. The street was not far. He could hear the babble of voices, hardly softened by distance at all.

He took a careful step backward. His boot slid in something that gave off a foul smell and threw him against the tavern's wall. Only frantic swings of the silver foxhead kept the *gholam* back. Those voices in the street were so tantalizingly close. They might as well have been in Barsine. Barsine was long dead, and he would be too, soon.

"He's down this alley!" a man shouted. "Follow me! Hurry! He'll get away!"

Mat kept his eyes on the *gholam*. Its gaze flickered beyond him, toward the street, and it hesitated. "I am ordered to avoid notice, save by those I harvest," it spat at him, "so you will live a little longer. A little longer."

Spinning, it ran down the alley, slipping a little in the mud, yet still seeming to flow as it dodged around behind the tavern.

Mat ran after it. He could not have said why, except that it had tried to kill him, would try again, and his hackles were stiff. So it was going to kill him at leisure, was it? If the medallion could hurt it, maybe the medallion could kill it.

Reaching the corner of the tavern, he saw the *gholam* at the same time that it glanced back and saw him. Again, the thing hesitated for an instant. The tavern's back door stood ajar, letting out the sounds of revelry. The creature stuck its hands into a hole left by a missing brick in the back wall of the building opposite the tavern, and Mat stiffened. It hardly seemed to need weapons, but if it had hidden one in there . . . He did not think he would survive facing that thing with any sort of weapon. Hands followed arms, and then the *gholam*'s head went into the hole. Mat's jaw dropped. The *gholam*'s chest slithered through, its legs, and it was gone. Through an opening maybe the size of Mat's two hands.

"I don't think I have ever seen the like," someone said quietly beside him, and Mat gave a start at realizing he was no longer alone. The speaker was a stoop-shouldered, white-haired old man with a large hooked nose planted in the middle of a sad face and a bundle slung on his back. He was sliding a very long dagger into a sheath beneath his coat.

"I have," Mat said hollowly. "In Shadar Logoth." Sometimes bits of his own memory he thought lost floated up out of nowhere, and that one had just surfaced, watching the *gholam*. It was one memory he wished had remained lost.

"Not many survive a visit there," the old man said, peering at him. His weathered face looked familiar, somehow, but Mat could not place him. "Whatever took you to Shadar Logoth?"

“Where are your friends?” Mat said. “The people you were shouting to?” The alleyway held only the two of them. The sounds from the street continued unabated, and undisturbed by any cries about anyone getting away if they did not hurry.

The old man shrugged. “I’m not certain anyone out there understood what I was shouting. It’s hard enough understanding them. Anyway, I thought it might scare off the fellow. Seeing that, though . . .” Gesturing toward the hole in the wall, he laughed mirthlessly, showing gaps in his teeth. “I think maybe you and I both have the Dark One’s own luck.”

Mat grimaced. He had heard that too often about himself, and he did not like it. Mainly because he was not sure it was not true. “Maybe we do,” he muttered. “Forgive me; I should introduce myself to the man who saved my neck. I’m Mat Cauthon. Are you new-come to Ebou Dar?” That bundle strapped to the fellow’s back gave him the look of a man on the move. “You will have a hard time finding a place to sleep.” He took care with the gnarled hand the other man put in his. It was all knobs, as if every bone had been broken at the same time and had healed badly. It had a strong grip, though.

“I am Noal Charin, Mat Cauthon. No, I have been here some time. But my pallet in the attic of The Golden Ducks is now occupied by a fat Illianer oil merchant who was rousted from his room this morning in favor of a Seanchan officer. I thought I’d find somewhere back in this alley for tonight.” Rubbing the side of his big nose with a crooked, knobby finger, he chuckled as if sleeping in an alley were of no moment. “It will not be the first time I’ve slept rough, even in a city.”

“I think I can do better for you than that,” Mat told him, but the rest of what he had been going to say died on his tongue. The dice were still spinning in his head, he realized. He had managed to forget them with the *gholam* trying to kill him, but they were still bouncing, still waiting to land. If they were warning of something worse than the *gholam,* he did not want to know. Only, he would. There was no doubt of that. He would, when it was too late.

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CHAPTER 17

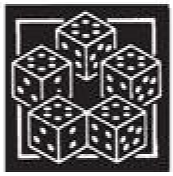

Pink Ribbons

Cold winds gusted through the Mol Hara, lifting Mat’s cloak and threatening to freeze the mud caking his clothing as he and Noal hurried out of the alley. The sun sat on the rooftops, half-hidden, and the shadows stretched long. With one hand for his staff and the other gripping the broken cord of the foxhead, stuffed into a coat pocket where he could snatch it out if need be, he had to let his cloak go where it would. He ached from head to foot, the dice rattled warning inside his skull, and he hardly noticed either thing. He was too busy trying to watch every direction at once, and wondering just how small a hole that thing could get through. He found himself uneasily eyeing cracks between the square’s paving stones. Though it hardly seemed likely the thing would come at him in the open.

A hum carried from surrounding streets, but here only a slat-ribbed dog moved, running past the fountained statue of long-dead Queen Nariene. Some said her uplifted hand pointed to the ocean’s bounty that had enriched Ebou Dar, and some that it pointed in warning of dangers. Others said her successor had wanted to draw attention to the fact that only one of the statue’s breasts was uncovered, proclaiming that Nariene had only been of middling honesty.

In other days the Mol Hara would have been full of strolling lovers and lingering street vendors and hopeful beggars at this hour even in winter, but beggars found themselves snatched off the streets and put to work, since the Seanchan came, and the rest stayed away even in daylight. The reason was the Tarasin Palace, that great mound of white domes and marble spires and wrought-iron balconies, the residence of Tylin Quintara Mitsobar, by the Grace of the Light, Queen of Altara—or as much of Altara as lay within a few days’ ride of Ebou Dar—Mistress of the Four Winds and Guardian of the Sea of Storms. And, perhaps more important, the residence of the High Lady Suroth Sabelle Meldarath, commanding the Forerunners for the

Empress of the Seanchan, might she live forever. A position of much greater eminence in Ebou Dar, at the moment. Tylin’s green-booted guards stood at every entrance in their baggy white trousers and gilded breastplates worn over green coats, and so did men and women in those insectile helmets with armor striped in blue-and-yellow or green-and-white or any other combination you might happen to think of. The Queen of Altara required security and silence for her rest. Or rather, Suroth said she did, and what Suroth said Tylin wanted, Tylin soon decided that she did indeed want.

After a moment’s consideration, Mat led Noal to one of the stableyard gates. There was more chance of getting a stranger in there than if he used the grand marble stairs that led down into the square. Not to mention a much better chance of getting all the mud off him before he had to face Tylin. She had made her displeasure markedly known the last time he came back disheveled, after a tavern brawl.

A handful of Ebou Dari guards stood to one side of the open gates with halberds, and the same number of Seanchan on the other with tasseled spears, all as stiff as Nariene’s statue.

“The Light’s blessing on all here,” Mat murmured politely to the Ebou Dari guards. It was always best to be polite to Ebou Dari until you were sure of them. Afterwards, too, for that matter. Even so, they were more . . . flexible . . . than the Seanchan.

“And on you, my Lord,” their stocky officer replied, ambling forward, and Mat recognized him, Surlivan Sarat, a good fellow, always ready with a quip and possessing a fine eye for horses. Shaking his head, Surlivan tapped the side of his pointed helmet with the thin, gilded rod of his office. “Have you been in another fight, my Lord? She will go up like a waterspout, when she sees you.”

Squaring his shoulders, and trying not to lean so obviously on his staff, Mat bristled. Ready with a quip? Come to think on it, the sun-dark man had a tongue like a rasp. And his eye for horses was not all that fine, either. “Will there be any questions if my friend here beds down with my men?” Mat asked roughly. “There shouldn’t be. There’s room for one more with my fellows.” Room for more than one, truth be told. Eight men had died so far, for following him to Ebou Dar.

“None from me, my Lord,” Surlivan said, though he eyed the scrawny man at Mat’s side and pursed his lips judiciously. Noal’s coat appeared of good quality, though, at least in the dim light, and he did have his lace, and in a better state than Mat's. Perhaps that tipped the balance. "And she doesn't need to know everything, so none from her, either."

Mat scowled, but before intemperate words could put himself and Noal in the soup kettle, three armored Seanchan galloped up to the gate, and Surlivan turned to face them.

"You and your lady wife live in the Queen's Palace?" Noal enquired, starting toward the gate.

Mat pulled him back. "Wait on them," he said, nodding toward the Seanchan. His lady wife? Bloody women! Bloody dice in his bloody head!

"I have dispatches for the High Lady Suroth," one of the Seanchan announced, slapping a leather satchel hanging from one armored shoulder. Her helmet bore a single thin plume, marking her a low-ranking officer, yet her horse was a tall dun gelding with a look of speed. The other two animals were sturdy enough, but there was nothing to be said for them beyond that.

"Enter with the blessings of the Light," Surlivan said, bowing slightly.

The Seanchan woman's bow from her saddle was a mirror of his. "The blessings of the Light be on you also," she drawled, and the three of them clattered into the stableyard.

"It is very strange," Surlivan mused, peering after the three. "They always ask permission of us, not them." He flicked his rod toward the Seanchan guards on the other side of the gates. They had not stirred an inch from their rigid stance, or even glanced at the arrivals that Mat had noticed.

"And what would they do if you said they couldn't go in?" Noal asked quietly, easing the bundle on his back.

Surlivan spun on his heel. "It is enough that I have given oath to my Queen," he said in an expressionless voice, "and she has given hers . . . where she has given it. Give your friend a bed, my Lord. And warn him, there are things better left unsaid in Ebou Dar, questions better left unasked."

Noal looked befuddled and began protesting that he was simply curious, but Mat exchanged further benisons and courtesies with the Altaran officer—as quickly as he could, to be sure—and hustled his new-found acquaintance through the gates, explaining about Listeners in a low voice. The man might have saved his hide from the *gholam,* but that did not mean he would let the fellow hand it over to the Seanchan. They had people called Seekers, too, and from the little he had heard—even people who spoke freely about the Deathwatch Guard locked their teeth when it came to the Seekers—from the little he had heard, Seekers made Whitecloak Questioners look like boys tormenting flies, nasty but hardly anything to worry a man.

“I see,” the old man said slowly. “I hadn’t known that.” He sounded irritated with himself. “You must spend a good deal of time with the Seanchan. Do you know the High Lady Suroth as well, then? I must say, I had no idea you had such high connections.”

“I spend time with soldiers in taverns, when I can,” Mat replied sourly. When Tylin let him. Light, he might as well be married! “Suroth doesn’t know I’m alive.” And he devoutly hoped it remained that way.

The three Seanchan were already out of sight, their horses being led into the stables, but several dozen *sul’dam* were giving *damane* their evening exercise, walking them in a big circle around the stone-paved yard. Nearly half the gray-clad *damane* were dark-skinned women, lacking the jewelry they had worn as Windfinders. There were more like them in the Palace and elsewhere; the Seanchan had had a rich harvest from Sea Folk vessels that had failed to escape. Most wore sullen resignation or stony faces, but seven or eight stared ahead of them, lost and confused, disbelieving still. Each of those had a Seanchan-born *damane* at her side, holding her hand or with an arm around her, smiling and whispering to her under the approving eyes of the women who wore the bracelets attached to their silvery collars. A few of those dazed women clutched the *damane* walking with them as if holding to lifelines. It would have been enough to make Mat shiver, if his damp clothes had not already been doing the job.

He tried to hurry Noal across the yard, but the circle brought a *damane* who was neither Seanchan nor Atha’an Miere near him, linked to a plump, graying *sul’dam*, an olive-skinned woman who might have passed for Altaran and someone’s mother. A stern mother with a possibly fractious child, from the way she regarded her charge. Teslyn Baradon had fleshed out after a month and a half in Seanchan captivity, yet her ageless face still looked as if she ate briars three meals a day. On the other hand, she walked placidly on her leash and obeyed the *sul’dam*’s murmured directions without hesitation, pausing to bow very deeply to him and Noal. For an instant, though, her dark eyes flashed hatred at him before she and the *sul’dam* continued their circuit of the stableyard. Placidly, obediently. He had seen *damane* upended and switched till they howled in this same stableyard for making any sort of fuss, Teslyn among them. She had done him no good turns, and maybe a few bad, but he would not have wished this on her.

"Better than being dead, I suppose," he muttered, moving on. Teslyn was a hard woman, likely plotting every moment how to escape, yet hardness only took you so far. The Mistress of the Ships and her Master of the Blades had died on the stake without ever screaming, but it had not saved them.

"Do you believe that?" Noal asked absently, fumbling awkwardly with his bundle again. His broken hands had handled that knife well enough, but they seemed clumsy at everything else.

Mat frowned at him. No; he was not sure he believed it. Those silver *a'dam* seemed too much like the invisible collar Tylin had on him. Then again, Tylin could tickle him under the chin the rest of his life if it kept him off the stake. Light, he wished those bloody dice in his head would just stop and get it over with! No, that was a lie. Since he had finally realized what they meant, he had never wanted the dice to stop.

The room Chel Vanin and the surviving Redarms shared lay not far from the stables, a long white-plastered chamber with a low ceiling and too many beds for those who remained alive. Vanin, a balding suety heap, was lying on one in his shirtsleeves, an open book propped on his chest. Mat was surprised the man *could* read. Spitting through a gap in his teeth, Vanin eyed Mat's mud-smeared clothes. "You been fighting again?" he asked. "She won't like that, I reckon." He did not rise. With a few startling exceptions, Vanin considered himself as good as any lord or lady.

"Trouble, Lord Mat?" Harnan growled, leaping to his feet. He was a solid man, physically and by temperament, but his heavy jaw clenched, twisting the hawk crudely tattooed on his cheek. "Begging your pardon, but you're in no condition for it. Tell us what he looks like, and we'll sort him out for you."

The last three gathered behind him with eager expressions, two grabbing for their coats while still tucking in shirttails. Metwyn, a boyish-appearing Cairhienin who was ten years older than Mat, instead picked up his sword from where it was propped at the foot of his bed and eased a little of the blade out of the scabbard to check the edge. He was the best of them with a sword, very good indeed, though Gorderan came close for all he looked a blacksmith. Gorderan was not nearly as slow as his thick shoulders made him appear. A dozen Redarms had followed Mat Cauthon to Ebou

Dar, eight of those were dead, and the rest were stuck here in the Palace where they could not pinch the maids, get into a fight over dice, and drink till they fell on their faces, as they could have staying at an inn and knowing the innkeeper would see them carried up to their beds, though maybe with their purses a little lighter than they had been.

“Noal here can tell you what happened better than I can,” Mat replied, pushing his hat back on his head. “He’ll be bedding in here with you. He saved my life tonight.”

That brought exclamations of shock, and cries of approbation for Noal, not to mention slaps on the back that almost toppled the old fellow. Vanin went so far as to mark his place in the book with a fat finger and sit up on the side of his thin mattress.

Setting his bundle down on a vacant bed, Noal told the tale with elaborate gestures, playing down his own role and even making himself a bit of a buffoon, slipping in the mud and gaping at the *gholam* while Mat fought like a champion. The man was a natural storyteller, as good as a gleeman for making you see what he described. Harnan and the Redarms laughed genially, knowing what he was about, not stealing their captain’s thunder, and approving of it, but laughter died when he came to Mat’s attacker slipping away through a tiny hole in a wall. He made you see that, too. Vanin put down his book and spat through his teeth again. The *gholam* had left Vanin and Harnan half-dead in the Rahad. Half-dead because it was after other prey.

“The thing wants me for some reason, it seems,” Mat said lightly when the old man finished and sank onto the bed with his belongings, seemingly exhausted. “It probably played at dice with me some time I don’t recall. None of you has to worry, as long as you don’t get between it and me.” He grinned, trying to make it all a joke, but no one so much as smiled. “In any case, I’ll parcel out gold to you in the morning. You’ll book passage on the first ship leaving for Illian, and take Olver with you. Thom and Juilin, too, if they’ll go.” He imagined the thief-catcher would, anyway. “And Nerim and Lopin, of course.” He had gotten used to having a pair of serving men look after him, but he hardly needed them here. “Talmanes must be somewhere close to Caemlyn by this time. You shouldn’t have much trouble finding him.” When they were gone, he would be alone with Tylin. Light, he would rather face the *gholam* again!

Harnan and the other three Redarms exchanged looks, Fergin scratching his head as if he did not quite understand. He might not. The bony man was a good soldier—not the best, mind, but good enough—yet he was not very bright when it came to other things.

“That wouldn’t be right,” Harnan allowed finally. “One thing, Lord Talmanes’d have our hides if we came back without you.” The other three nodded. Fergin could understand that.

“And you, Vanin?” Mat asked.

The fat man shrugged. “I take that boy away from Riselle, and he’ll gut me like a trout the first time I go to sleep. I would myself, in his boots. Anyway, I got time to read, here. Don’t get much chance for that working as a farrier.” That was one of the itinerant trades he claimed to follow. The other was stableman. In truth, he was a horsethief and poacher, the best in two countries and maybe more.

“You’re all mad,” Mat said with a frown. “Just because it wants me, doesn’t mean it won’t kill you if you get in the way. The offer stays open. Anyone who comes to his senses can go.”

“I have seen your like before,” Noal said suddenly. The stooped old man was the image of hard age and exhaustion, but his eyes were bright and sharp studying Mat. “Some men have an air about them that makes other men follow where they lead. Some lead to devastation, others to glory. I think your name may go into the history books.”

Harnan looked as confused as Fergin. Vanin spat and lay back down, opening his book.

“If all my luck goes away, maybe,” Mat muttered. He knew what it took to get into the histories. A man could get killed, doing that sort of thing.

“Better clean up before she sees you,” Fergin piped up suddenly. “All that mud will put a burr under her saddle for sure.”

Snatching his hat off angrily, Mat stalked out without a word. Well, he stalked as well as he could, hobbling on a walking staff. Before the door closed behind him, he heard Noal starting a story about one time he sailed on a Sea Folk ship and learned to bathe in cold salt water. At least, that was how it began.

He intended to get himself clean before Tylin saw him—he did—but as he limped through hallways hung with the flowered tapestries Ebou Dari called summer-hangings, for the season they evoked, four serving men in the Palace's green-and-white livery and no fewer than seven maids suggested he might want to bathe and change his clothes before the Queen saw him, offering to draw him a bath and fetch clean garments without her learning of it. They did not know everything about him and Tylin, thank the Light—no one but Tylin and himself knew the worst bits—but they knew too bloody much. Worse, they approved, every last flaming servant in the whole flaming Tarasin Palace. For one thing, Tylin was Queen and could do as she pleased, so far as they were concerned. For another, her temper had been on a razor's edge since the Seanchan captured the city, and if Mat Cauthon scrubbed and bright in lace kept her from snapping their noses off for trifles, then they would scrub behind his ears and wrap him in lace like a Sunday gift!

"Mud?" he said to a pretty, smiling maid spreading her skirts in a curtsy. There was a twinkle in her dark eyes, and the plunging neckline of her bodice displayed a fair amount of bosom to almost rival Riselle's. On another day he might have taken a little time to enjoy looking. "What mud? I don't see any mud!" Her mouth dropped open, and she forgot to straighten, staring at him with her knees bent as he hobbled away.

Juilin Sandar, rounding a corner quickly, nearly walked into him. The Tairen thief-catcher leaped back with a muffled oath, his swarthy face turning gray until he realized who had almost run him over. Then he muttered an apology and started to hurry on by.

"Has Thom got you mixed into his foolishness, Juilin?" Mat said. Juilin and Thom shared a room deep in the servants' quarters, and there was no excuse for him to be up here. In that dark Tairen coat, flaring over his boot tops, Juilin would stand out among the servants like a duck in a chicken coop. Suroth was strict about things like that, stricter than Tylin. The only reason for it Mat could see was whatever Thom and Beslan were meddling with. "No; don't bother telling me. I've made an offer to Harnan and the others, and it's open to you, too. If you want to leave, I'll give you the money for it."

Actually, Juilin did not look ready to tell him anything. The thief-catcher tucked his thumbs behind his belt and met Mat's gaze levelly. "What did Harnan and the others say? And what is Thom doing that you call foolish? This is one set of rooftops he knows his way around better than you or I."

“The *gholam* is still in Ebou Dar, Juilin.” Thom knew that the Game of Houses was what *he* knew, and he loved sticking his nose into politics. “The thing tried to kill me, earlier this evening.”

Juilin grunted as if he had been hit in the pit of his belly, and scrubbed a hand through his short black hair. “I have a reason to stay a while longer,” he said, “even so.” His air changed slightly, to something stubborn and defensive and tinged with guilt. He had never shown a roving eye that Mat had seen, but when a man looked like that, it could only mean one thing.

“Take her with you,” Mat said. “And if she won’t go, well, you’ll not be in Tear an hour before you have a woman on each knee. That’s the thing about women, Juilin. If one says no, there’s always another will say yes.”

A serving man hurrying by with an armload of linen towels stared at Mat’s muddiness in amazement, but Juilin thought it was at him, and snatched his thumbs free of his belt and attempted to adopt a more humble stance. Without much success. Thom might sleep with the servants, yet from the beginning he had somehow made it seem to be his own choice, an eccentricity, and no one thought it odd to see him up here, perhaps slipping into Riselle’s rooms that had once been Mat’s. Juilin had gone on at length about being a thief-catcher—never a thief-*taker*—and stared so many prickly lordlings and complacent merchants in the eye to show he was as good as they that everyone in the Palace knew who and what he was. And where he was supposed to be, which was belowstairs.

“My Lord is wise,” he said, too loudly, and making a stiff, jerky bow. “My Lord knows all about women. If my Lord will forgive a humble man, I must return to my place.” Turning to go, he spoke over his shoulder, still in a carrying voice. “I heard today that if my Lord comes back one more time looking like he’s been dragged in the street, the Queen intends taking a switch to my Lord’s person.”

And that was the stone that broke the wagon clean in two.

Flinging open the doors of Tylin’s apartments, Mat strode in, sailed his hat across the width of the room . . . And stopped dead, his mouth hanging open and everything he had planned to say frozen on his tongue. His hat hit the carpets and rolled, he did not see where. A gust of wind rattled the tall triple-arched windows that let out onto a long, screened balcony overlooking the Mol Hara.

Tylin turned in a chair carved to look like gilded bamboo and stared at him over her golden winecup. Waves of glossy black hair touched with gray at the temples framed a beautiful face with the eyes of a bird of prey, and not one best pleased at the moment. Inconsequential things seemed to leap at him. She kicked her crossed leg slightly, rippling layered green and white petticoats. Pale green lace trimmed the oval opening in her gown that half exposed her full breasts, where the jeweled hilt of her marriage knife dangled. She was not alone. Suroth sat facing her, frowning into her winecup and tapping long fingernails on the arm of her chair, a pretty enough woman despite her hair being shaved to that long crest, except that she made Tylin seem a rabbit by comparison. Two of those fingernails on each hand were lacquered blue. Seated at her side was a little girl, of all things, also in an elaborately flowered robe over pleated white skirts, but with a sheer veil covering her entire head—it seemed to be shaved completely!—and wearing a fortune in rubies. Even in a state of shock, he noticed rubies and gold. A slender woman, nearly as dark as her stark black gown and tall even had she been Aiel, stood behind the girl's chair with her arms folded and ill-concealed impatience. Her wavy black hair was short, but not shaved at all, so she was neither of the Blood nor *so'jhin.* Imperiously beautiful, she put Tylin and Suroth both in the shade. He noticed beautiful women, too, even when he did feel hit in the head with a hammer.

It was not the presence of Suroth or the strangers that jerked him to a halt, though. The dice had stopped, landing with a thunder that made his skull ring. That had never happened before. He stood there waiting for one of the Forsaken to leap out of the flames in the marble fireplace, or the earth to swallow the Palace beneath him.

"You aren't listening to me, pigeon," Tylin cooed in dangerous tones. "I said, take yourself down to the kitchens and have a pastry until I have time for you. Have a bath while you're about it." Her dark eyes glittered. "We will discuss your mud later."

In a daze, he ran it through again in his head. He had walked into the room, the dice had stopped, and . . . Nothing had happened. Nothing!

"This man has been set upon," the tiny, veiled figure said, rising. Her tone turned cold as the wind outside. "You told me the streets were safe, Suroth! I am displeased."

Something *had* to happen! It already should have! Something always happened when the dice stopped.

“I assure you, Tuon, the streets of Ebou Dar are as safe as the streets of Seandar itself,” Suroth replied, and that pulled Mat out of his stupor. She sounded . . . anxious. Suroth made other people anxious.

A slender, graceful young man in the almost transparent robe of a *da’covale* appeared at her side with a tall blue porcelain pitcher, bowing his head and silently offering to replenish her wine. And giving Mat another start. He had not realized anyone else was present in the room. The yellow-haired man in his indecent garment was not the only one, either. A slim but nicely rounded red-haired woman wearing the same sheer robe was kneeling beside a table that held spice bottles and more fine Sea Folk porcelain wine pitchers and a small gilded brass brazier with the pokers needed for heating the wine, while a graying nervous-eyed serving woman wearing green-and-white House Mitsobar livery stood at the other end. And in one corner, so motionless that he still almost missed her, yet another Seanchan, a short woman with half her golden head shaved and a bosom that might outmatch Riselle’s if her dress of red-and-yellow panels had not covered her neck to the chin. Not that he had any real desire to find out. Seanchan were very touchy about their *so’jhin.* Tylin was touchy about any woman. There had not been a serving woman younger than his grandmother in her apartments since he was able to get out of bed.

Suroth looked at the graceful man as though wondering what he was, then shook her head wordlessly and turned her attention back to the child, Tuon, who waved the fellow away. The liveried serving maid scurried forward to take the pitcher from him and try to refill Tylin’s cup, but the Queen made a very small gesture that sent her back to the wall. Tylin was sitting very, very still. Little wonder that she wanted to avoid notice if this Tuon frightened Suroth, as she plainly did.

“I am displeased, Suroth,” the girl said again, sternly frowning down at the other woman. Even standing, she did not have all that far down to stare at the seated High Lady. Mat supposed she must be a High Lady, too, only Higher than Suroth. “You have recovered much, and that will please the Empress, may she live forever, but your ill-considered attack eastward was a disaster that must not be repeated. And if the streets of this city are safe, how can he have been set upon?”

Suroth’s knuckles were white from gripping the chair arm, and her winecup. She glared at Tylin as though the lecture were her fault, and Tylin gave her an apologetic smile and bowed her head. Oh, blood and ashes, he was going to pay for that!

"I fell down, that's all." His voice might as well have been fireworks for the way heads whipped around. Suroth and Tuon looked shocked that he had spoken. Tylin looked like an eagle who wanted her rabbit fried. "My Ladies," he added, but that did not seem to improve anything.

The tall woman suddenly reached out and snatched the winecup from Tuon's hand, throwing it into the fireplace. Sparks showered up the chimney. The serving woman stirred as if to retrieve the cup before it could be damaged further, then subsided at a touch from the *so'jhin.*

"You are being foolish, Tuon," the tall woman said, and her voice made the girl's sternness seem laughter. The too-familiar Seanchan drawl seemed almost absent entirely. "Suroth has the situation here well in her control. What happened to the east can happen in any battle. You must stop wasting time on ridiculous trifles."

Suroth gaped at her in astonishment for an instant before she could assume a frozen mask. Mat did a little gaping on his own part. Use that tone of voice to one of the Blood, and you were lucky to escape with a trip to the flogging post!

Shockingly, Tuon inclined her head slightly. "You may be right, Anath," she said calmly, and even with a touch of deference. "Time and the omens will tell. But the young man plainly is lying. Perhaps he fears Tylin's anger. But his injuries clearly are more than he could sustain falling down unless there are cliffs in the city I have not seen."

So he feared Tylin's anger, did he? Well, come to that, he did, a little. Only a little, mind. But he did not like being reminded of it. Leaning on his shoulder-high staff, he tried to make himself comfortable. They could ask a man to sit, after all. "I was hurt the day your lads took the city," he said with his cheekiest grin. "Your lot were flinging around lightning and balls of fire something fierce. I'm just about healed, though, thank you for asking." Tylin buried her face in her winecup, and still managed to shoot him a look over the rim that promised retribution later.

Tuon's skirts rustled as she crossed the carpets to him. The dark face behind that sheer veil might have been pretty, without the expression of a judge passing sentence of death. And with a decent head of hair instead of a bald pate. Her eyes were large and liquid, but utterly impersonal. All of her long fingernails were lacquered, he noticed, a bright red. He wondered whether that signified anything. Light, a man could live in luxury for years on the price of those rubies.

She reached up with one hand, putting her fingertips under his chin, and he started to jerk back. Until Tylin glared at him over Tuon's head, promising retribution here and now, if he did any such thing. Glowering, he let the girl shift his head for her study.

"You fought us?" she demanded. "You have sworn the oaths?"

"I swore," he muttered. "For the other, I had no chance."

"So you would have," she murmured. Circling him slowly, she continued her study, fingering the lace at his wrist, touching the black silk scarf tied around his neck, lifting the edge of his cloak to examine the embroidery. He endured it, refusing to shift his stance, glowering fit to match Tylin. Light, he had bought horses without so thorough an examination! Next, she would want to look at his teeth!

"The boy told you how he was injured," Anath said in frosty tones of command. "If you want him, then buy him and be done. The day has been long, and you should be in your bed."

Tuon paused, examining the long signet ring on his finger. It had been carved as a try-piece, to show the carver's skills, a running fox and two ravens in flight, all surrounded by crescent moons, and he had bought it by chance, though he had come to like it. He wondered whether she wanted it. Straightening, she stared up at his face. "Good advice, Anath," she said. "How much for him, Tylin? If he is a favorite, name your price, and I will double it."

Tylin choked on her wine and began coughing. Mat almost fell off his staff. The girl wanted to *buy* him? Well, she might as well have been looking at a horse for all the expression on her face.

"He is a free man, High Lady," Tylin said unsteadily when she could speak. "I . . . I cannot sell him." Mat could have laughed, if Tylin did not sound as though she were trying to keep her teeth from chattering, if bloody Tuon had not just asked his price. A free man! Ha!

The girl turned away from him as though dismissing him from her mind. "You are afraid, Tylin, and under the Light, you should not be." Gliding to Tylin's chair, she lifted her veil with both hands, baring the lower half of her face, and bent to kiss Tylin lightly, once on each eye and once on the lips. Tylin looked astounded. "You are a sister to me, and to Suroth," Tuon said in a surprisingly gentle voice. "I myself will write your name as one of the Blood. You will be the High Lady Tylin as well as Queen of Altara, and more, as was promised you."

Anath snorted, loudly.

"Yes, Anath, I know," the girl sighed, straightening and lowering her veil. "The day has been long and arduous, and I am weary. But I will show Tylin what lands are in mind for her, so she will know and be easy in her mind. There are maps in my chambers, Tylin. You will honor me by accompanying me, there? I have excellent masseuses."

"The honor is mine," Tylin said, sounding not all that much steadier than before.

At a gesture from the *so'jhin,* the yellow-haired man went running to open the door and kneel holding it open, but there was still all the smoothing and adjusting of clothes that women had to do before they would go anywhere, Seanchan or Altaran or from anywhere else. Though, the red-haired *da'covale* performed the function for Tuon and Suroth. Mat took the opportunity to draw Tylin a little aside, far enough that he would not be overheard. The *so'jhin's* blue eyes kept coming back to him, he realized, but at least Tuon, accepting the attentions of the slender *da'covale* woman, seemed to have forgotten he existed.

"I didn't just fall down," he told Tylin softly. "The *gholam* tried to kill me not much more than an hour ago. It might be best if I left. That thing wants me, and it'll kill anybody near me, too." The plan had just occurred to him, but he thought it had a good chance of success.

Tylin sniffed. "He—it—it cannot have you, piglet." She directed a look at Tuon that might have made the girl forget about Tylin being a sister had she seen. "And neither can she." At least she had sense enough to whisper.

"Who is she?" he asked. Well, it had never been more than a chance.

"The High Lady Tuon, and you know as much as I," Tylin replied, just as quietly. "Suroth jumps when she speaks, and she jumps when Anath speaks, though I would almost swear that Anath is some sort of servant. They are a very peculiar people, sweetling." Suddenly she flaked some mud from his cheek with one finger. He had nor realized he had mud on his face, too. Suddenly, the eagle was strong in her eyes. "Do you recall the pink ribbons, sweetling? When I come back, we'll see how you look in pink."

She swanned out of the room with Tuon and Suroth, trailed by Anath and the *so'jhin* and the *da'covale,* leaving Mat with the grandmotherly serving woman who began to clean up the wine table. He sank into one of the bamboo carved chairs and rested his head in his hands.

Any other time, those pink ribbons would have had him gibbering. He never should have tried to get his own back with her. Even the *gholam* did not occupy much of his thoughts. The dice had stopped and . . . What? He had come face-to-face, or near enough, with three people he had not met before, but that could not be it. Maybe it was something to do with Tylin becoming one of the Blood. But always before, when the dice stopped, something had happened to him, personally.

He sat there worrying over it while the serving woman called in others to carry everything away, sat there until Tylin returned. She had not forgotten about the pink ribbons, and that made him forget about anything else for quite a long time.

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CHAPTER 18

An Offer

The days after the *gholam* tried to kill him settled into rhythms that irritated Mat no end. The gray sky never altered, except to give rain or not.

There was talk in the streets of a man being killed by a wolf not far outside the city, his throat ripped. No one was worried, just curious; wolves had not been seen close to Ebou Dar in years. Mat worried. City people might believe a wolf would come that close to city walls, but he knew better. The *gholam* had not gone away. Harnan and the other Redarms stubbornly refused to leave, claiming they could watch his back, and Vanin refused without reasons, unless a muttered comment that Mat had a good eye for fast horses was supposed to be one. He spat after he said it, though. Riselle, her olive face pretty enough to make a man swallow, her big dark eyes knowing enough to dry his tongue, inquired about Olver's age, and when he said close on ten, she looked surprised and tapped her full lips thoughtfully, but if she changed anything in the boy's lessons, he still came away from them bubbling equally over her bosom and the books she read him. Mat thought Olver would almost have given up his nightly games of Snakes and Foxes for Riselle and the books. And when the lad ran out of the rooms that once had been Mat's, Thom often slipped in with his harp under his arm. By itself that was enough to make Mat grind his teeth, only that was not the half.

Thom and Beslan frequently went out together, not inviting him, and were gone for half the day, or half the night. Neither would say a word more about their schemes, though Thom had the grace to look embarrassed. Mat hoped they were not going to get people killed for nothing, but they showed little interest in his opinions. Beslan glared at the very sight of him. Juilin continued to slip abovestairs and was seen by Suroth, which earned him a strapping hung up by his wrists from a stallpost in the stables. Mat saw his welts tended by Vanin—the man claimed doctoring men was the same as doctoring horses—and warned him it could be worse next time, but the fool was back on the upper floors that very night, still wincing from the weight of his shirt on his back. It had to be a woman, though the thief-catcher refused to say. Mat suspected one of the Seanchan noblewomen. One of the Palace servants could have met him in his own room, with Thom out of it so much.

Not Suroth or Tuon, to be sure, but they were not the only Seanchan High Blood in the Palace. Most of the Seanchan nobles rented rooms, or more often whole houses, in the city, but several had come with Suroth and a handful with the girl, too. More than one of the women looked a pleasant armful in spite of their crested heads and their way of staring down their noses at everybody without shaved temples. If they noticed them more than they did the furniture, that was. If it seemed unlikely that one of those haughty women would look twice at a man who slept in the servant's quarters, well, the Light knew women had peculiar tastes in men. He had no choice but to leave Juilin alone. Whoever the woman was, she might get the thief-catcher beheaded yet, but that sort of fever had to burn itself out before a man could think straight. Women did strange things to a man's head.

The newly arrived ships disgorged people and animals and cargo for days on end, enough that the city's massive walls would have burst from the inside had they all stayed, but they flowed through the city and out into the countryside with their families and their crafts and their livestock, prepared to put down roots. Soldiers passed through in thousands, too, well-ordered infantry and cavalry with the flair of veterans, moving north in bright-colored armor, and east across the river. Mat gave up trying to count them. Sometimes he saw strange creatures, though most of those were unloaded above the city to avoid the streets. *Torm* like three-eyed bronze-scaled cats the size of horses, sending most real horses around them into a frenzy just by their presence, and *corlm,* like hairy wingless birds as tall as a man, tall ears twitching constantly and long beaks seeming to yearn for flesh to rend, and huge *s'redit* with their long noses and longer tusks. *Raken* and the larger *to'raken* flew from their landing site below the Rahad, huge lizards spreading wings like bats and carrying men on their backs. The names were easy enough to pick up; any Seanchan soldier was eager to discuss the necessity of scouts on *raken* and the abilities of *corlm* at tracking, whether *s'redit* were useful for more than moving heavy loads and *torm* too intelligent to trust. He learned a great deal of interest from men who wanted what most soldiers did, a drink and a woman and a bit of a gamble, not necessarily in any given order. Those soldiers were indeed veterans. Seanchan was an Empire larger than all the nations between the Aryth Ocean and the Spine of the World, all under one Empress, but with a history of almost constant rebellions and revolts that kept its soldiers' skills keen. The farmers would be harder to dig out.

Not all the soldiers left, of course. A strong garrison remained, not only Seanchan, but steel-veiled Taraboner lancers and Amadician pikemen with their breastplates painted to resemble Seanchan armor. And Altarans, too, besides Tylin's House armsmen. According to the Seanchan, the Altarans from inland, with red slashes crisscrossing their breastplates, were Tylin's as much as the fellows guarding the Tarasin Palace, which, strangely, did not seem to best please her. It did not please the fellows from inland very much, either. They and the men in Mitsobar's green-and-white eyed each other like strange tomcats in a small room. There was plenty of glaring going on, Taraboners at Amadicians, Amadicians at Altarans, and the other way round, well-aged, long-standing animosities bubbling to the surface, but no one went further than shaken fists and a few curses. Five hundred men of the Deathwatch Guards had come off the ships and remained in Ebou Dar for some reason. The ordinary sort of crime expected in any large city had fallen off dramatically under the Seanchan, but the Guards took to patrolling the streets as if they expected cutpurses, bullyboys and maybe fully armed bands of brigands to spring out of the pavement. The Altarans and the Amadicians and the Taraboners kept their tempers reined in. No one but a fool argued with the Deathwatch Guards, not more than once. And another contingent of the Guards had taken up residence in the city, too, a hundred Ogier, of all things, in the red-and-black. Sometimes they patrolled with the others, and sometimes they wandered about with their long-handled axes on their shoulders. They were not at all like Mat's friend Loial. Oh, they had the same wide noses and tufted ears and long eyebrows that drooped to their cheeks beside eyes the size of teacups, but the Gardeners looked at a man as though wondering whether he needed pruning of a few limbs. Nobody at all was fool enough to argue even once with the Gardeners.

Seanchan flowed out from Ebou Dar, and news flowed in. Even when they had to sleep in the attic, merchants preened in the common rooms of inns, smoking their pipes and telling what they knew that no one else did. So long as the telling did not affect their profits. The merchants' guards cared little for profits they would not share and told everything, some of it true. Seamen spread tales for anyone who would buy a mug of ale, or better, hot spiced wine, and when they had drunk enough, they talked even more, of ports they had visited, and events they had witnessed, and likely dreams they had had after the last time their heads were full of fumes. Still, it was clear the world outside Ebou Dar was seething like the Sea of Storms. Tales of Aiel looting and burning came from everywhere, and armies were on the move other than the Seanchan, armies in Tear and Murandy, in Arad Doman and Andor, in Amadicia, which was not yet entirely under Seanchan control, and dozens of armed gatherings too small to be called armies in the heartland of Altara itself. Except for the men in Altara and Amadicia, no one really seemed sure who intended to fight whom, and there was some doubt about Altara. Altarans had a way of taking advantage of troubles to try paying off grievances against their neighbors.

The news that shook the city most, though, was of Rand. Mat tried his best not to think of him, or Perrin, but avoiding those odd swirls of color in his head was difficult when the Dragon Reborn was on everyone's lips. The Dragon Reborn was dead, some claimed, murdered by Aes Sedai, by the whole White Tower descending on him at once in Cairhien, or maybe it was in Illian, or Tear. No, they had kidnapped him, and he was held prisoner in the White Tower. No, he had gone to the White Tower on his own and sworn fealty to the Amyrlin Seat. The last gained great credence because a number of men claimed to have seen a proclamation, signed by Elaida herself, that announced as much. Mat had his doubts, about Rand being dead or swearing fealty, at least. For some odd reason, he felt sure he would know if Rand died, and as for the other, he did not believe the man would put himself within a hundred miles of the White Tower voluntarily. Dragon Reborn or no Dragon Reborn, he had to have more sense than that.

That news—all the versions of it—stirred the Seanchan the way a stick stirs an antheap. High-ranking officers strode the halls of the Tarasin Palace at every hour of the day and night, their odd, plumed helmets beneath their arms, their boots ringing on the floor tiles, their faces set. Couriers raced away from Ebou Dar, on horses and on *to'raken. Sul'dam* and *damane* began patrolling the streets instead of just standing guard at the gates, once more hunting for women who could channel. Mat kept out of the officers' way and nodded politely to the *sul'dam* when he passed one in the streets. Whatever Rand's situation was, he could do nothing about it in Ebou Dar. First, he had to get out of the city.

The morning after the *gholam* tried to kill him, Mat burned every last one of the long pink ribbons, the whole great wad of them, in the fireplace as soon as Tylin left her apartments. He also burned a pink coat she had had made for him, two pairs of pink breeches and a pink cloak. A stench of burning wool and silk filled the rooms, and he opened some windows to let it out, but he did not really care. He felt a great relief dressing himself in bright blue breeches and embroidered green coat, and a blue cloak with painfully ornate working. Even all the lace did not bother him. At least none of it was pink. He never wanted to *see* anything that particular color ever again!

Clapping his hat on his head, he stumped out of the Tarasin Palace with a renewed determination to find that cubbyhole to store what he needed for his escape, if he had to visit every tavern, inn and sailors' dive in the city ten times over. Even those in the Rahad. A hundred times! Gray gulls and black-winged skimmers swirled in leaden sky that promised more rain, and an icy wind carrying the tang of salt whipped across the Mol Hara, flailing cloaks about. He thumped the paving stones as though intending to crack every one. Light, if need be, he would go with Luca in what he wore. Maybe Luca would let him work his way as a buffoon! The man would probably insist on it. At least that would keep him close to Aludra and her secrets.

He stalked the whole width of the square before he realized that he was in front of a wide white building he knew well. The sign over the arched door proclaimed The Wandering Woman. A tall fellow in red-and-black armor strode out, three thin black plumes on the front of the helmet under his arm, and stood waiting for his horse to be brought around. A bluff-faced man with gray at his temples, he did not look at Mat, and Mat avoided looking at him. No matter how pleasant the man might appear on the surface, he was a Deathwatch Guard, after all, and a banner-general to boot. The Wandering Woman, so near the Palace, had every room rented by high Seanchan officers, and for that reason he had not been back since he was able to walk again. Ordinary Seanchan soldiers were not such bad fellows, ready to gamble half the night and buy a round when it came their turn, but high-ranking officers might as well be nobles. Still, he had to start somewhere.

The common room was almost as he remembered, high-ceilinged and well-lighted by lamps burning on all the walls despite the early hour. Solid shutters covered the tall arched windows now, for warmth, and fires crackled in both long fireplaces. A faint haze of pipesmoke filled the air, and the smell of good cooking from the kitchens. Two women with flutes and a fellow with a drum between his knees were playing a quick, shrill Ebou Dari tune that he nodded in time to. Not so different from when he had stayed there, so far as it went. But all of the chairs held Seanchan, now, some in armor, others in long, embroidered coats, drinking, talking, studying maps spread out on the tables. A graying woman with the flame of a *der'sul'dam* embroidered on her shoulder seemed to be making a report at one table, and at another a skinny *sul'dam* with a round-faced *damane* at her heels appeared to be getting orders. A number of the Seanchan had the sides and backs of their heads shaved so they seemed to be wearing bowls, with the hair remaining at the back left long in a sort of wide tail that hung to the shoulders on men and often to the waist on women. Those were simple lords and ladies, not High anything, but that hardly mattered. A lord was a lord, and besides, the men and women going to fetch a serving maid for more drinks had the smooth-cheeked disdainful look of officers themselves, which meant the folk they were fetching for had rank to cause a man trouble. Several noticed him and frowned, and he almost left.

Then he saw the innkeeper coming down the railless stairs at the back of the room, a stately hazel-eyed woman with large golden hoops in her ears and a little gray in her hair. Setalle Anan was not Ebou Dari, or even Altaran he suspected, but she wore the marriage-knife, hanging hilt-down from a silver collar into a deep narrow neckline, and a long curved blade at her waist. She knew he was supposed to be a lord, but he was not sure how far she believed any longer or what good it would do if she still swallowed the whole faradiddle. In any case, she saw him at the same instant and smiled, a friendly, welcoming smile that made her face even prettier. There was nothing for it but to go and greet her and ask after her health, not too elaborately. Her muscular husband was a fishing-boat captain with more dueling scars than Mat wanted to think about. Straight off she wanted to know about Nynaeve and Elayne, and to his surprise, whether he knew anything about the Kin. He had had no idea she had even heard of them.

“They went with Nynaeve and Elayne,” he whispered, cautiously keeping watch to make sure no Seanchan was paying them any mind. He did not intend to say too much, but talking about the Kin where Seanchan might hear made the back of his neck prickle. “So far as I know, they’re all safe.”

“Good. I would be pained had any of them been collared.” The fool woman did not even lower her voice!

“Yes; that’s good,” he muttered, and hurriedly explained his needs before she could start shouting how happy she was that women who could channel had escaped the Seanchan. He was happy, too, just not happy enough to put himself in chains for joy.

Shaking her head, she seated herself on the steps and put her hands on her knees. Her dark green skirts, sewn up on the left side, showed red petticoats. Ebou Dari really did seem to knock Tinkers on their heels when it came to choosing colors. The buzz of Seanchan voices fought with the high-pitched music all around them, and she sat there looking at him sternly. “You don’t know our ways, that is the trouble,” she said. “Pretties are an old and honored custom in Altara. Many a young man or woman has a final fling as a pretty, pampered and showered with presents, before settling down. But you see, a pretty leaves when she chooses. Tylin shouldn’t be treating you as I hear she is. Still,” she added judiciously, “I must say she dresses you well.” She made a circling motion with one hand. “Hold out your cloak and turn around so I can get a better look.”

Mat drew a deep, calming breath. And then three more. The color flooding his face was sheer fury. He was not blushing. Certainly not! Light, did the whole city know? “Do you have a space I can use or don’t you?” he demanded in a strangled voice.

It turned out that she did. He could use a shelf in her cellar, which she said stayed dry year round, and there was the small hollow under the kitchen’s stone floor where he once had kept his chest of gold. It turned out the rental price was for him to hold out his cloak and turn around so she could get a better look. She grinned like a cat! One of the Seanchan, a buzzard-faced woman in red-and-blue armor, enjoyed the show so much that she tossed him a fat silver coin with strange markings, a forbidding woman’s face on one side and some sort of heavy chair on the other.

Still, he had his place to store clothes and money, and once he returned to the Palace, to Tylin’s apartments, he found out he had clothes to store in it.

“I fear my Lord’s garments are in a terrible state,” Nerim said lugubriously. The skinny, gray-haired Cairhienin would have been as dolorous announcing the gift of a sack of firedrops, though. His long face was perpetually in mourning. He did keep an eye on the door against Tylin’s return, however. “Everything is quite filthy, and I am afraid mildew has ruined several of my Lord’s best coats.”

“They were all in a cupboard with Prince Beslan’s childhood toys, my Lord,” Lopin laughed, tugging at the lapels of a dark coat like Juilin’s. The balding man was the reverse of Nerim, stout instead of bony, dark instead of pale, his round belly always shaking with laughter. For a time after Nalesean’s death it had seemed he intended to compete with Nerim at sighing, the way they did over everything else, but the intervening weeks had recovered him to his normal self. As long as no one mentioned his former master, anyway. “They are dusty, though, my Lord. I doubt anyone has been in that cupboard since the Prince put his toy soldiers away.”

Feeling that his luck was running strong at last, Mat told them to start taking his clothes across to The Wandering Woman a few pieces at a time, and a pocket full of gold each trip. His black-hafted spear, propped in a corner of Tylin’s bedchamber with his unstrung Two Rivers bow, would have to wait for last. Getting that out might be as difficult as getting himself out. He could always make a new bow for himself, but he was not going to abandon the *ashandarei*.

I paid too high a price for the bloody thing to leave it, he thought, fingering the scar hidden beneath the scarf around his neck. One of the first, among too many. Light, it would be nice to think that he had more to look forward to than scars and battles he did not want. And a wife he did not want or even know. There had to be more than that. First came getting out of Ebou Dar with a whole hide, though. That above all else, first.

Lopin and Nerim bowed themselves out of his presence with the equivalent of two fat purses spread about their clothing, so as not to create any bulges, but no sooner had they gone than Tylin appeared, wanting to know why his bodyservants were running in the halls as though racing each other. If he had been feeling suicidal he could have told her they were racing to see who would be first to reach the inn with his gold, or maybe just the first to start cleaning his clothes. Instead he busied himself diverting her, and soon enough that chased any other thoughts out of his head, except for a glimmer that his luck had finally begun to pay off at something besides gambling. All it needed to put the cap on would be for Aludra to give him what he wanted before he left. Tylin put her mind to what she was doing, and for a time he forgot fireworks and Aludra and escaping. For a time.

After a little searching through the city, he finally located a bellfounder. There were a number of gong-makers in Ebou Dar, but only one bellmaker, with a foundry outside the western wall. The bellmaker, a cadaverous, impatient fellow, sweated in the heat of his huge iron furnace. The sweltering foundry's one long room might have been some sort of torture chamber. Hoisting chains dangled from the rafters, and sudden flames gouted from the furnace, throwing flickering shadows and leaving Mat half-blind. And no sooner would he blink away the afterimage of raging fire than another eruption would leave him squinting again. Workmen dripping with sweat poured molten bronze from the furnace's melting pot into a square mold, half again as tall as a man, that had been levered into position on rollers. Other great molds like it stood around the stone floor, amid a litter of smaller molds in various sizes.

"My Lord is pleased to jest." Master Sutoma forced a chuckle, but he did not look amused, with his damp black hair hanging down and clinging to his face. His chuckle sounded as hollow as his cheeks, and he kept shooting frowns at his workmen as though suspecting they would lie down and go to sleep if he did not maintain a close watch on them. A dead man could not have slept in that heat. Mat's shirt stuck to him damply, and he was beginning to sweat his coat through in patches. "I know nothing of Illuminators, my Lord, and I wish to know nothing. Useless fripperies, fireworks. Not like bells. If my Lord will excuse me? I am very busy. The High Lady Suroth has commissioned thirteen bells for a victory set, the largest bells ever cast anywhere. And Calwyn Sutoma will cast them!" That it was a victory over his own city did not seem to bother Sutoma in the least. The last was enough to make him grin and rub his bony hands together.

Mat attempted to make Aludra relent, but the woman might as well have been cast bronze herself. Well, she was considerably softer than bronze once she finally let him put an arm around her, yet kisses that left her trembling did nothing to slacken her resolve.

“Me, I do not believe in telling a man more than he needs to know,” she said breathlessly, sitting beside him on a padded bench in her wagon. She allowed no more than kisses, but she was very enthusiastic about those. The thin beaded braids she had taken to wearing again were a tangle. “Men gossip, yes? Chatter, chatter, chatter, and you yourselves don’t know what you will say next. Besides, maybe I have made you the puzzle just to make you return, yes?” And she set about further disarraying her hair, and his as well.

She put up no more nightflowers, though, not after he told her about the chapter house in Tanchico. He tried two more visits to Master Sutoma, but on the second, the bellmaker had the doors barred against him. He was casting the largest bells ever made, and no foolish foreigner with foolish questions would be allowed to interfere with that.

Tylin began lacquering the first two fingernails on each hand green, though she did not shave the sides of her head. She would, eventually, she told him, pulling her flowing hair back with her hands to study herself in the gilt-framed mirror on the bedchamber wall, but she wanted to become used to the idea first. She was making her accommodations with the Seanchan, and he could not fault her for it, no matter how many dark scowls Beslan gave his mother.

There was no way she could suspect anything about Aludra, but the day after he first kissed the Illuminator, the grandmotherly maids disappeared from her chambers, replaced by women white-haired and wizened. Tylin began sticking her curved belt knife into one of the bedposts at night, close to hand, and musing aloud in his hearing about how he would look in a *da’covale*’s sheer robes. In fact, night was not the only time she stuck her knife in the bedpost. Grinning serving women started delivering summonses to Tylin’s rooms by simply telling him that she had stabbed the bedpost, and he started trying to avoid any woman in livery he saw with a smile on her face. It was not that he disliked being bedded by Tylin, aside from the fact she was a queen, as snooty as any other noblewoman. And the fact that she made him feel like a mouse that had been made a pet by a cat. But there were only so many hours of daylight, if more than he was used to back home in winter, and for a bit he had to wonder whether she meant to consume all of them.

Luckily, Tylin began spending more and more time with Suroth and Tuon. Her accommodations seemed to have embraced friendship, with

Tuon at least. No one could be friends with Suroth. Tylin seemed to have adopted the girl, or the girl had adopted her. Tylin told him little of what they talked about except in the sketchiest outlines, and often not even that, but they closeted themselves alone for hours, and swept along the Palace corridors conversing quietly, or sometimes laughing. Frequently Anath or Selucia, Tuon's golden-haired *so'jhin*, trailed along behind, and now and then a pair of hard-eyed Deathwatch Guards.

He still could not figure out the relationship between Suroth, Tuon and Anath. On the surface, Suroth and Tuon behaved as equals, calling each other by name, laughing at one another's jests. Tuon certainly never gave Suroth any order, at least not in his hearing, but Suroth seemed to take Tuon's suggestions as orders. Anath, on the other hand, badgered the girl unmercifully with razor-sharp criticisms, calling her a fool and worse.

"This is the worst sort of stupidity, girl," he heard her say coldly one midday in the halls. Tylin had not sent her crude summons—yet—and he was trying to sneak out before she could, slipping along the walls and peeking around corners. He had a visit to Sutoma planned, and another to Aludra. The three Seanchan women—four, counting Selucia, but he did not think they saw it that way—were clustered just around the next turning. Trying to keep an eye out for serving women wearing a smile, he waited impatiently for them to move. Whatever they were talking about, they would not appreciate him blundering by in the middle of it. "A taste of the strap will set you right, and clear your head of nonsense," the tall woman went on in a voice like ice. "Ask for it and be done."

Mat worked a finger in his ear, and shook his head. He must have misheard. Selucia, standing placidly with her hands folded at her waist, certainly never turned a hair.

Suroth gasped, though. "Surely you will punish her for this!" she drawled angrily, glaring holes through Anath. Or trying to. Suroth might as well have been a chair for all the notice the tall woman gave her.

"You do not understand, Suroth." Tuon's sigh stirred the veil covering her face. Covering but not concealing. She looked . . . resigned. He had been shocked to learn she was only a few years younger than he. He would have said more like ten. Well, six or seven. "The omens say otherwise, Anath," the girl said calmly, and not at all in anger. She was simply stating facts. "Be assured, I will tell you if they change."

Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he looked back into the face of a serving woman wearing a broad grin. Well, he had not really been that anxious to go out right away.

Tuon troubled him. Oh, when they passed in the hallways, he made his best leg politely, and in return she ignored him as completely as Suroth or Anath did, but it began to seem to him that they passed in the hallways a little too often.

One afternoon, he walked into Tylin's apartments, having checked and found out that Tylin was shut up with Suroth on some business or other, and in the bedchamber, he found Tuon examining his *ashandarei*. He froze at the sight of her fingering the words in the Old Tongue carved into the black shaft. A raven in some still darker metal was inlaid at each end of the line of script, and a pair of them engraved on the slightly curved blade. Ravens were an Imperial sigil, to the Seanchan. Not breathing, he tried to move backwards without making a sound.

That veiled face swivelled toward him. A pretty face, really, it might even have been beautiful if she ever stopped looking as though she was about to bite off a mouthful of wood. He no longer thought she looked like a boy—those tight wide belts she always wore made sure you noticed what curves there were—but she was the next thing to it. He seldom saw a grown woman younger than his grandmother that he did not at least think idly of what it would be like dancing with her, maybe kissing her, even those snooty Seanchan Blood, but never a glimmer of that crossed his mind with Tuon. A woman had to have something to put an arm around, or what was the point?

"I don't see Tylin owning a thing like this," she drawled coolly, setting the long-bladed spear back next to his bow, "so it must be yours. What is it? How did you come to possess it?" Those cold demands for information set his jaw. The bloody woman could have been ordering a servant. Light, as far as he was aware, she did not even know his name! Tylin said she had never asked about him or mentioned him since the offer of purchase.

"It's called a spear, my Lady," he said, resisting the urge to lean against the doorframe and tuck his thumbs behind his belt. She was Seanchan Blood, after all. "I bought it."

"I will give you ten times the price you paid," she said. "Name it."

He almost laughed. He wanted to, and not for pleasure, that was certain sure. No *would you think of selling,* just *I will buy it and here is* *what I will pay.* “The price wasn’t gold, my Lady.” Involuntarily, his hand went to the black scarf to make sure it still hid the ridged scar that encircled his neck. “Only a fool would pay it one time, let alone ten.”

She studied him for a moment, her expression unreadable no matter how sheer her veil. And then, he might as well have vanished. She glided past him as though he were no longer there and swept out of the apartments.

That was not the only time he encountered her alone. Of course, she was not always followed by Anath or Selucia, or guards, yet it seemed to him that rather too often he would decide to go back for something and turn to find her by herself, looking at him, or he might leave a room suddenly and find her outside the door. More than once he looked over his shoulder leaving the Palace and saw her veiled face peering out of a window. True, there was nothing of staring about it. She looked at him and glided away as though he had ceased to exist, peered from a window and turned back into the room as soon as he saw her. He was a stand-lamp in the corridor, a paving stone in the Mol Hara. It began to make him nervous, though. After all, the woman had offered to *buy* him. A thing like that had a tendency to make a man nervous by its own self.

Even Tuon could not truly upset his welling sense that things were finally coming right, though. The *gholam* did not return, and he began to think maybe it had gone on an easier “harvest.” In any event, he was staying away from dark and lonely places where it might have a chance at him. His medallion was all very well for what it did, but a good crowd was better. On his latest visit to Aludra she had almost let something slip—he was certain of it—before coming to herself and hastily bundling him out of her wagon. There was nothing a woman would not tell you if you kissed her enough. He stayed away from The Wandering Woman, to avoid rousing Tylin’s suspicions, but Nerim and Lopin stealthily transferred his real clothing to the inn’s cellar. Bit by bit, half the contents of the iron-bound chest under Tylin’s bed traveled across the Mol Hara to the hidden hollow beneath the inn’s kitchen.

That hollow under the kitchen floor began to trouble him, though. It had been good enough for hiding the chest. A man could break chisels getting into that. He had been living upstairs at the inn then, too. Now the gold would be just spilled into the hole after Setalle cleared the kitchen. What if someone began to wonder why she chased everybody out when Lopin and Nerim came? Anybody at all could lift up that floorstone, if they knew where to look. He had to make sure for himself. Afterwards, long afterwards, he would wonder why the bloody dice had not warned him.

* * *

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CHAPTER 19

Three Women

The wind was out of the north with the sun not yet fully above the horizon, which the locals said always meant rain, and a sky full of clouds certainly threatened as he made his way across the Mol Hara. The particular men and women in the common room of The Wandering Woman had changed, there were no *sul'dam* or *damane* this time, but the place was still full of Seanchan and pipesmoke, though the musicians had not yet appeared. Most of the people in the room were breakfasting, sometimes eyeing the bowls uncertainly as if unsure what they were being asked to eat—he felt that way himself about the strange white porridge Ebou Dari liked for breakfast—but not everyone was intent on food. Three men and a woman in those long embroidered robes were playing cards and smoking pipes at one table, all with their heads shaved in the fashion of lesser nobles. The gold coins on their table caught Mat's attention for a moment; they were playing for high stakes. The largest stacks of coins sat in front of a tiny black-haired man, as dark as Anath, who grinned wolfishly at his opponents around the very long stem of a silver-mounted pipe. Mat had his own gold, though, and his luck at cards had never been as good as at dice.

Mistress Anan, however, had gone out on some errand or other while it was still dark, so her daughter Marah said, leaving Marah herself in charge. A pleasingly plump young woman with big pretty eyes the same hazel shade as her mother's, she wore her skirts sewn up to mid-thigh on the left side, something Mistress Anan would not have allowed when he was staying there. Marah was not best pleased to see him, frowning as soon as he approached her. Two men had died by his hand in the inn when he was staying there; thieves who were trying to split his skull, to be sure, but that sort of thing did not happen at The Wandering Woman. She had made it clear she was happy to see the back of him when he moved out.

Marah was hardly interested in what he wanted now, either, and he could not really explain. Only Mistress Anan knew what was hidden in the kitchen, so he devoutly hoped, and he certainly was not about to bleat out the information in the common room. So he made up a tale about missing the dishes the cook turned out, and eyeing that blatantly sewn skirt, he slipped in the implication that he had missed looking at her even more. He could not understand why exposing a little more petticoat was scandalous when every woman in Ebou Dar walked around showing half her bosom, but if Marah was feeling rakish, maybe a few blandishments might ease his path. He gave her his very best smile.

Giving him half an ear in return, Marah seized a passing serving maid, a smoky-eyed cat of a woman he knew well. "Air Captain Yulan's cup is almost empty, Caira," Marah said angrily. "You are supposed to keep it full! If you can't do your job, girl, there are plenty in Ebou Dar who will!" Caira, several years older than Marah, made her a mocking curtsy. And scowled at Mat. Before Caira could straighten her knees again, Marah turned to grab a boy who was walking by carefully balancing a tray piled with dirty dishes. "Stop lollygagging, Ross!" she snapped. "There is work to be done. Do it, or I'll take you out to the stables, and you will not like that, I tell you!"

Marah's youngest brother glared at her. "I can't wait till spring, when I can work on the boats again," he muttered sullenly. "You've been in a bad skin ever since Frielle got married, just because she's younger than you and you haven't been asked yet."

She directed a cuff at his head that he easily eluded, though the stacked cups and plates rattled and nearly fell. "Why not just pin up your petticoats at the fishing docks?" he shouted, darting off before she could slap at him again.

Mat sighed as she finally turned her full attention to him. Pinning up petticoats was a new one on him, but from Marah's face, he could guess. Steam should have been jetting from her ears. "If you want to eat, you must come back later. Or you can wait, if you like. I don't know how long before you can be served."

Her smile was malicious. No one would choose to wait in that common room. Every seat was taken by a Seanchan, and there were more Seanchan standing, enough that the aproned maids were forced to weave their way carefully, holding trays of food and drink aloft. Caira was filling the dark little man's cup and offering him the sort of sultry smiles she had once offered Mat. He did not know why she had soured on him, but he had as many women in his life as he could handle at the moment. What was an Air Captain, anyway? He would have to find out. Later.

“I will wait in the kitchen,” he told Marah. “I want to tell Enid how much I enjoyed her cooking.”

She started to protest, but a Seanchan woman raised her voice demanding wine. Grim-eyed in blue-and-green armor, with a helmet carrying two plumes under her arm, she wanted her stirrup cup right then. All of the maids seemed occupied, so Marah grimaced at him one last time and went scurrying, trying to set her face in a pleasant smile. And not getting far with it. Holding his walking staff wide, Mat flourished a bow to her retreating back.

The good smells that had mingled with sweet pipesmoke in the common room permeated the kitchen, roasting fish, baking bread, meats sizzling on the spits. The room was hot from the iron stoves and the ovens and the fire in the long brick fireplace, and six sweating women and three potboys were dashing about under the orders of the chief cook. Wearing a snowy white apron as if it were a tabard of office and wielding a long-handled wooden spoon to reign over her domain, Enid was the roundest woman Mat had even seen. He did not think he could have gotten his arms around her had he wanted to. She recognized him right away, and a sly grin split her wide olive face.

“So, you found out I was right,” she said, pointing the spoon at him. “You squeezed the wrong melon, and it turned out the melon was a lionfish in disguise and you were just a plump grunter.” Throwing back her head, she cackled with laughter.

Mat forced a grin. Blood and bloody ashes! Everybody really did know! *I have to get out of this bloody city,* he thought grimly, *or I’ll hear them bloody laughing at me the rest of my life!*

Suddenly his fears about the gold began to seem foolish. The gray floorstone in front of the stoves appeared firmly in place, no different from any other in the kitchen. You had to know the trick in order to lift it. Lopin and Nerim would have told him if so much as a single coin had vanished between their visits. Mistress Anan likely would have tracked down and skinned the culprit if anyone tried thieving in her inn. He might as well be on his way. Maybe Aludra’s willpower would be weaker at this hour.

Maybe she would give him breakfast. He had slipped out of the Palace without waiting to eat.

So as not rouse curiosity about his visit, he did tell Enid how much he had enjoyed her gilded fish, how it was better than that served in the Tarasin Palace, without having to exaggerate even a whisker. Enid was a marvel. The woman positively beamed, and to his surprise, lifted one out of the oven onto a platter just for him. Somebody in the common room could just wait, she told him, setting the platter at the end of the kitchen's long work-table. A wave of her spoon brought a stout potboy with a stool.

Looking at the golden-crusted flatfish, he felt his mouth watering. Aludra likely would be no weaker now than any other time. And if she was upset over being disturbed so early, she might not give him breakfast. His stomach rumbled loudly. Hanging his cloak on a peg beside the door to the stableyard and propping his walking staff beneath, he tucked his hat under the stool and turned back his lace to keep it out of the platter.

By the time Mistress Anan came in through the door to the stableyard, swinging her cloak off and shaking rain onto the floor, little remained beyond a tangy taste on his tongue and fine white bones on the platter. He had learned to enjoy a number of odd things since coming to Ebou Dar, but he left the eyes staring up at him. The things were on the same side of the fish's head!

Another woman slipped in behind Mistress Anan as he dabbed his mouth with a linen napkin. She closed the door behind her quickly, and kept her damp cloak on with the hood pulled well up. Rising, he caught a glimpse of the face inside that hood and nearly knocked his stool over. He thought he covered well, though, making a leg to the women, but his head was spinning.

“It is well you are here, my Lord,” Mistress Anan said briskly, handing her cloak to a potboy. “I would have sent for you, otherwise. Enid, clear the kitchen, please, and watch the door. I need to speak with the young lord alone.”

The cook briskly herded the under-cooks and potboys out into the stableyard, and despite their muttered complaints about the rain and wails about the food burning, it was clear they were as accustomed to this as Enid. She herself did not even glance at Mistress Anan and her companion again before hurrying through the door into the common room with her long spoon held up like a sword.

"What a surprise," Joline Maza said, tossing her hood back. Her dark woolen dress, with a deep neckline in the local style, fit loosely and looked worn and frayed. You would never have thought it from her carefree attitude, though. "When Mistress Anan told me she knew a man who might take me with him when he left Ebou Dar, I never guessed it was you." Pretty and brown-eyed, she had a smile almost as warm as Caira's. And an ageless face that screamed Aes Sedai. With dozens of Seanchan just the other side of a door guarded by a cook with a spoon.

Removing her cloak, Joline turned to hang it on one of the pegs, and Mistress Anan made an irritated sound in her throat. "That isn't safe yet, Joline," she said, sounding more as if talking to one of her daughters than to an Aes Sedai. "Until I have you safely—"

Suddenly a commotion rose at the door to the common room, Enid protesting in a shout that no one could enter, and a voice almost as loud, in Seanchan accents, demanding that she move aside.

Ignoring the protests of his leg, Mat moved faster than he thought he ever had in his life, grabbing Joline by the waist and plunking himself down on the bench by the door to the stableyard with the Aes Sedai on his lap. Hugging her close, he pretended to be kissing her. It was a fool way to try hiding her face, but all he could think of short of throwing her cloak over her head. She gasped indignantly, but fear widened her eyes when she finally heard the Seanchan voice, and she snaked her arms around him in a flash. Praying for his luck to hold, he watched the door open.

Still protesting loudly, Enid backed into the kitchen thumping away with her spoon at the *so'jhin* with a wet cloak hanging down his back who was pushing her ahead of him. A heavyset scowling man with a stub of a braid that did not even come close to reaching his shoulder, he fended off most of her blows with his free hand and seemed to ignore the few he could not. He was the first *so'jhin* Mat had seen with a beard, and it gave him a lopsided look, running down the right side of his chin and up the left to stop dead at the middle of his ear. A tall woman with sharp blue eyes in a pale stern face followed him, flinging back an elaborately embroidered blue cloak, held at her throat by a large silver pin shaped like a sword, to reveal a pleated dress of a paler blue. Her short dark hair was cut in the bowl, the rest shaved off all the way around above her ears. Still, she was better than a *sul'dam* with a *damane*. A little better. Realizing the battle was lost, Enid backed away from the man, but by the way she gripped her spoon and glared, she was ready to leap on him again in a heartbeat if Mistress Anan gave the word.

“A fellow out front did say he did see the innkeeper going round the back,” the *so’jhin* announced. He was looking at Setalle, but eyeing Enid warily. “If you be Setalle Anan, then know this do be Captain of the Green Lady Egeanin Tamarath, and she do have an order for rooms signed by the High Lady Suroth Sabelle Meldarath herself.” His tone altered, becoming less a pronouncement and more the voice of a man wanting accommodations. “Your best rooms, mind, with a good bed, a view of the square out there, and a fireplace that no does smoke.”

Mat gave a start when the man spoke, and Joline, perhaps thinking someone was coming toward them, moaned against his mouth in fear. Her eyes shone with unshed tears, and she trembled in his arms. The Lady Egeanin Tamarath glanced at the bench when Joline moaned, then grimaced in disgust and turned so she could avoid seeing the pair. It was the man who intrigued Mat, though. How in the Light did an Illianer come to be *so’jhin?* And the fellow looked familiar, somehow. Likely another of those thousands of long-dead faces he could not help recalling.

“I am Setalle Anan, and my best rooms are occupied by Captain of the Air Lord Abaldar Yulan,” Mistress Anan said calmly, unintimidated by *so’jhin* or Blood. She folded her arms beneath her breasts. “My second-best rooms are occupied by Banner-General Furyk Karede. Of the Deathwatch Guards. I don’t know whether a Captain of the Green outranks them, but either way, you will have to sort out for yourselves who stays and who has to go elsewhere. I have a firm policy of not expelling any Seanchan guest. So long as he pays his rent.”

Mat tensed, waiting for the explosion—Suroth would have her flogged for half that!—but Egeanin smiled. “It’s a pleasure to deal with someone who has a little nerve,” she drawled. “I think we’ll get on just fine, Mistress Anan. So long as you don’t take nerve too far. Captain gives the orders, and crew obeys, but I never made anyone crawl on my deck.” Mat frowned. Deck. A ship’s deck. Why did that tug at something in his head? Those old memories were a nuisance, sometimes.

Mistress Anan nodded, never taking her dark eyes from the Seanchan’s blue. “As you say, my Lady. But I hope you will remember that The Wandering Woman is my ship.” Luckily for her, the Seanchan woman had a sense of humor. She laughed.

“Then you be captain of your ship,” she chuckled, “and I will be Captain of the Gold.” Whatever that meant. With a sigh, Egeanin shook her head. “Light’s truth, I don’t outrank many here, I suspect, but Suroth wants me close at hand, so some move down, and somebody moves out unless they want to double up.” Suddenly she frowned, half glancing toward Mat and Joline, and her lip curled in distaste. “I trust you don’t let that sort of thing go on everywhere, Mistress Anan?”

“I assure you, you will never see the like again under my roof,” the innkeeper replied smoothly.

The *so’jhin* was frowning at Mat and the woman on his lap, too, and Egeanin had to tug at his coatsleeve before he gave a start and followed her back into the common room. Mat grunted contemptuously. The fellow could pretend to be outraged like his mistress all he wanted; Mat had heard about festivals in Illian, though, and they were almost as bad as festivals in Ebou Dar when it came to people running around half-clothed or less. No better than *da’covale*, or those shea dancers the soldiers went on about.

He tried to ease Joline from his lap when the door swung shut behind the pair, but she clung to him and buried her face on his shoulder, weeping softly. Enid heaved a great sigh and sagged against the worktable as though her bones had softened. Even Mistress Anan appeared shaken. She dropped onto the stool Mat had vacated and put her head in her hands. Only for a moment, though, and then she was back on her feet.

“Count to fifty and then get everyone in out of the rain, Enid,” she said briskly. No one would have known that she had been trembling a moment earlier. Gathering Joline’s cloak from its peg, she took a long splinter from a box on the mantelpiece and bent to light it in the fire beneath the spits. “I will be in the cellar if you need me, but if anyone asks, you don’t know where I am. Until I say otherwise, no one but you or I goes down there.” Enid nodded as though this was nothing out of the ordinary. “Bring her,” the innkeeper told Mat, “and don’t dawdle. Carry her if you must.”

He did have to carry her. Still weeping almost soundlessly, Joline would not loosen her hold on him or even lift her head from his shoulder. She was not heavy, thank the Light, yet even so, a dull ache began in his leg as he followed Mistress Anan to the cellar door with his burden. He might have enjoyed it in spite of the throbbing, if Mistress Anan had not taken her time about everything.

As though there were no Seanchan within a hundred miles she lit a lamp on a shelf beside the heavy door and carefully blew out the splinter before replacing the tall glass mantle, then laid the smoking splinter on a small tin tray. Unhurriedly producing a long key from her belt pouch, she undid the iron lock and, finally, motioned him to go through. The stairs beyond were wide enough to bring up a barrel, yet steep, vanishing into darkness. He obeyed, but waited on the second step while she drew the door shut and re-locked it, waited for her to take the lead with the lamp held high. The last thing he needed was a tumble.

“Do you do this often?” he asked, shifting Joline. She had stopped her crying, but she still held tight to him, trembling. “I mean, hiding Aes Sedai?”

“I heard whispers there was a sister still in the city,” Mistress Anan replied, “and I managed to find her before the Seanchan did. I couldn’t leave a sister to them.” She glared back over her shoulder, daring him to say different. He wanted to, but he could not make the words come. He supposed he would have helped anyone get away from the Seanchan, if he could, and he owed a debt to Joline Maza.

The Wandering Woman was a well-stocked inn, and the dark cellar was large. Aisles stretched between barrels of wine and ale stacked on their sides, high, slatted bins of potatoes and turnips that stood up off the stone floor, rows of tall shelves holding sacks of dried beans and peas and peppers, mounds of wooden crates holding the Light alone knew what. There appeared to be little dust, but the air had the dry smell common to sound storerooms.

He spotted his clothes, neatly folded on a cleared shelf—unless someone else was storing garments down there—but he had no chance to look at them. Mistress Anan led the way to the far end of the cellar, where he set Joline down on an upturned keg. He had to pry her arms free in order to leave her huddled there. Sniveling, she pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at red-rimmed eyes. With her face blotchy, she was hardly the image of an Aes Sedai, never mind her worn dress.

“Her nerve is broken,” Mistress Anan said, putting the lamp on a barrel that also stood on end, the bung in its end gone. Several other empty barrels stood about the floor where others had been removed, awaiting return to the brewer. It was as close to a clear space as he had seen in the cellar. “She’s been hiding ever since the Seanchan came. The last few days, her Warders have had to move her several times when Seanchan decided to search a building instead of just the streets. Enough to break anyone’s nerve, I suppose. I doubt they will try to search here, though.”

Thinking of all those officers upstairs, Mat had to concede she was probably right. Still, he was glad it was not him taking the risk. Squatting in front of Joline, he grunted at a stab of pain up his leg. “I will help you if I can,” he said. How, he could not have said, but there was that debt. “Just be glad you were lucky enough to dodge them all this time. Teslyn wasn’t so lucky.”

Snatching the handkerchief from her eyes, Joline glared at him. “Luck?” she spat angrily. It she had been other than Aes Sedai, he would have said she was sullen, sticking her lower lip out that way. “I could have escaped! It was all confusion the first day, as I understand. But I was unconscious. Fen and Blaeric barely managed to carry me out of the Palace before the Seanchan swarmed over it, and two men carrying a limp woman attracted too much attention for them to get anywhere near the city gates before they were secured. I am glad Teslyn was caught! Glad! She gave me something; I am sure she did! That is why Fen and Blaeric couldn’t wake me, why I have been sleeping in stables and hiding in alleys, afraid those monsters would find me. It serves her right!”

Mat blinked at the tirade. He doubted he had ever heard so much pure venom in a voice before, even in those old memories. Mistress Anan frowned at Joline, and her hand twitched.

“Anyway, I’ll help you as much as I can,” he said hurriedly, rising so he could move between the two women. He would not put it past Mistress Anan to slap Joline, Aes Sedai or no Aes Sedai, and Joline looked in no mood to consider the possibility of a *damane* being upstairs to feel whatever she did in retaliation. It was a simple truth; the Creator made women so men would not find life too easy. How in the Light was he to get an Aes Sedai out of Ebou Dar? “I’m in debt to you.”

A tiny frown wrinkled Joline’s brow. “In debt?”

“The note asking me to warn Nynaeve and Elayne,” he said slowly. He licked his lips and added, “The one you left on my pillow.”

She flicked a hand dismissively, but her eyes, focused on his face, never blinked. “All debts between us are settled the day you help me get outside the city walls, Master Cauthon,” she said, in tones as regal as a queen on her throne.

Mat swallowed hard. The note had been stuck into his coat pocket somehow, not left on his pillow. And that meant he was mistaken about who he owed the debt to.

He made his leave without calling Joline on her lie—a lie even if only by letting his mistake pass—and he left without telling Mistress Anan, either. It was his problem. It made him feel sick. He wished he had never found out.

Back in the Tarasin Palace, he went straight to Tylin's apartments and spread his cloak over a chair to dry. A pounding rain beat against the windows. Putting his hat atop one of the carved and gilded wardrobes, he toweled his face and hands dry and considered changing his coat. The rain had soaked through his cloak in a few places. His coat was damp here and there. Damp. Light!

Growling in disgust, he wadded up the striped towel and threw it on the bed. He was delaying, even hoping—a little—that Tylin might walk in and stab the bedpost, so he could put off what he had to do. What he had to do. Joline had left him with no choice.

The Palace was laid out simply, if you cared to look at it that way. Servants lived on the lowest level, where the kitchens were, and some in the cellars. The next floor up contained the spacious public rooms and the cramped studies of the clerks, and the third apartments for less favored guests, most occupied now by Seanchan Blood. The highest floor held Tylin's apartments, and rooms for more favored guests, like Suroth and Tuon and a few others. Except, even palaces had attics, of a sort.

Pausing at the foot of a flight of stairs hidden around an innocuous corner where they would not be noticed, Mat drew a deep breath before going up slowly. The huge windowless room at the top of the stairs, low-ceiling and floored with rough planks, had been cleared of whatever it held before the Seanchan, and the space filled with a grid of tiny wooden rooms, each with its own closed door. Plain iron stand-lamps lit the narrow halls between. The rain beating down on the roof tiles was loud here, just overhead. He paused again on the top step, and only breathed again when he realized that he could hear no footsteps. A woman was crying in one of the tiny rooms, but no *sul'dam* was going to appear and demand to know what he was doing there. Likely they would learn he had been, but not until after he found out what he needed, if he was quick.

He did not know which room was hers, was the trouble. He walked to the first and opened the door long enough to peek in. An Atha'an Miere woman in a gray dress was sitting on the side of a narrow bed, hands folded in her lap. The bed and a washstand with bowl and pitcher and a tiny mirror took up most of the room. Several gray dresses hung from pegs on the wall. The segmented silver leash of an *a'dam* ran in an arc from the silver collar around her neck to a silver bracelet looped over a hook set in the wall. She could reach any part of the tiny room. The small holes where her earrings and nose ring had been had not yet had time to heal. They looked like wounds. When the door opened, her head came up with a fearful expression that faded into speculation. And maybe hope.

He closed the door without saying a word. *I can't save all of them,* he thought harshly. *I can't!* Light, but he hated this.

The next doors revealed identical rooms and three more Sea Folk women, one of them weeping loudly on her bed, and then a sleeping yellow-haired woman, all with their *a'dam* loosely stretched to hooks. He eased that door shut as though he were trying to filch one of Mistress al'Vere's pies right under her nose. Maybe the yellow-haired woman was not Seanchan, but he was not about to take the chance. A dozen doors later, he exhaled heavily in relief and slipped inside, pulling the door shut behind him.

Teslyn Baradon lay on the bed, her face pillowed on her hands. Only her dark eyes moved, stabbing at him. She said nothing, just looked at him as though trying to bore holes in his skull.

"You put a note in my coat pocket," he said softly. The walls were thin; he could still hear the weeping woman. "Why?"

"Elaida does want those girls as much as she ever wanted the staff and stole," Teslyn said simply, without moving. Her voice still had a harshness to it, but less than he recalled. "Especially Elayne. I did wish to . . . inconvenience . . . Elaida, if I could. Let her whistle for them." She gave a soft laugh tinged with bitterness. "I did even dose Joline with forkroot, so she could no interfere with those girls. And look what it did get me. Joline did escape, and I . . ." Her eyes moved again, to the silver bracelet hanging on the hook.

Sighing, Mat leaned against the wall beside the dresses hanging on pegs. She knew what had been in the note, a warning for Elayne and Nynaeve. Light, but he had hoped she would not, that someone else had put the bloody thing in his pocket. It had not done any good, anyway. They both knew Elaida was after them. The note had changed nothing! The woman had not really been trying to help them, anyway, just to . . . inconvenience . . . Elaida. He could walk away with a clean conscience. Blood and ashes! He should never actually have spoken to her. Now that he had actually exchanged words with her . . .

“I’ll try to help you escape, if I can,” he said reluctantly.

She remained still on the bed. Neither her expression nor her tone of voice changed. She might have been explaining something simple and unimportant. “Even if you can remove the collar, I will no get very far, perhaps no even out of the Palace. And if I do, no woman who can channel can walk through the city gates unless she does wear an *a’dam.* I have stood guard there myself, and I do know.”

“I’ll figure out something,” he muttered, raking his fingers through his hair. Figure out something? What? “Light, you don’t even sound as if you want to escape.”

“You do be serious,” she whispered, so low he nearly did not hear. “I did think you only did come to taunt me.” Slowly she sat, swinging her feet down to the floor. Her eyes latched on to his intently, and her voice took on a low urgency. “Do I *want* to escape? When I do something that does please them, the *sul’dam* do give me sweets. I do find myself *looking forward* to those rewards.” Breathy horror crept into her voice. “Not for liking of sweets, but because I have pleased the *sul’dam.*” A single tear trickled from her eye. She inhaled deeply. “If you do help me escape, I will do anything you ask of me that does not encompass treason to the White—” Her teeth snapped shut, and she sat up straight, staring right through him. Abruptly, she nodded to herself. “Help me escape, and I will do *anything* you ask of me,” she said.

“I will do what I can,” he told her. “I must think of a way.”

She nodded as though he had promised an escape by nightfall. “There do be another sister held prisoner here in the Palace. Edesina Azzedin. She must come with us.”

“One other?” Mat said. “I thought I’d seen three or four, counting you. Anyway, I’m not sure I can get you out, much less—”

“The others do be . . . changed.” Teslyn’s mouth tightened. “Guisin and Mylen—I did know her as Sheraine Caminelle, but she do answer only to Mylen, now—those two would betray us. Edesina do still be herself. I will no leave her behind, even if she do be a rebel."

"Now, look," Mat said with a smile, soothingly, "I said I will try to get you out, but I can't see any way to get *two* of you—"

"It do be best if you go now," she broke in again. "Men are no allowed up here, and in any case, you will rouse suspicions if you do be found." Frowning at him, she sniffed. "It would help if you did not dress so flamboyantly. Ten drunken Tinkers could no attract as much attention as you do. Go, now. Quickly. Go!"

He went, mattering to himself. Just like an Aes Sedai. Offer to help her, and the next thing you knew, she had you scaling a sheer cliff in the middle of the night to break fifty people out of a dungeon by yourself. That had been another man, a long time dead, but he remembered it, and it fit. Blood and bloody ashes! He did not know how to rescue one Aes Sedai, and she had him trying to rescue two!

He stalked around the innocuous corner at the foot of the stairs and almost walked into Tuon.

"*Damane* kennels are forbidden to men," she said, peering up at him coldly through her veil. "You could be punished just for entering."

"I was looking for a Windfinder, High Lady," he said hastily, making a leg and thinking as fast as he ever had in his life. "She did me a favor once, and I thought she might like something from the kitchens. Some pastries, or the like. I didn't see her, though. I suppose she wasn't caught when . . ." He trailed off, staring. The stern judicial mask the girl always wore for a face had melted into a smile. She really was beautiful.

"That is very kind of you," she said. "It's good to know you are kind to *damane*. But you must be careful. There are men who actually take *damane* to their beds." Her full mouth twisted in disgust. "You would not want anyone to think you are perverted." That severe expression settled on her face again. All prisoners would be executed immediately.

"Thank you for the warning, High Lady," he said, a little unsteadily. What kind of man wanted to bed a woman who was on a leash?

He disappeared then, as far as she was concerned. She just glided away down the hall as if she saw no one. For once, though, the High Lady Tuon did not concern him at all. He had an Aes Sedai hiding in the cellar of The Wandering Woman and two wearing *damane* leashes who all expected Mat bloody Cauthon to save their necks. He was sure Teslyn would inform this

Edesina all about it as soon as she was able. Three women who might start getting impatient if he failed to waft them to safety soon enough. Women liked to talk, and when they talked enough, they let slip things better left unspoken. Impatient women talked even more than the rest. He could not feel the dice in his head, but he could almost hear a clock ticking. And the hour might be struck by a headsman's axe. Battles he could plan in his sleep, but those old memories did not seem much help here. He needed a schemer, someone used to plotting and crooked ways of thinking. It was time to make Thom sit down and talk. And Juilin.

Setting out in search of either, he unconsciously began humming "I'm Down at the Bottom of the Well." Well, he was, and night was falling and the rain well and truly coming down. As often happened, another name drifted up out of those old memories, a song of the Court of Takedo, in Farashelle, crushed a thousand years ago and more by Artur Hawkwing. The intervening years had made remarkably little change in the tune itself, though. Then, it had been called "The Last Stand at Mandenhar." Either way, it fit too bloody well.

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CHAPTER 20

Questions of Treason

Climbing to the cramped kennels at the very top of the Tarasin Palace, Bethamin held her writing board carefully. Sometimes the ink jar’s cork came loose, and ink spots were difficult to remove from clothing. She kept herself as presentable at all times as if she had been called to appear before one of the High Blood. She did not talk to Renna, who had the inspection duty with her today, as they walked up the stairs. They were supposed to be doing an assigned task, not chattering idly. That was part of her reason. Where others jockeyed to be complete with their favorite *damane,* and goggled at the strange sights of this land, and speculated on the rewards to be gained here, she focused on her duties, asking for the most difficult *marath’damane* to tame to the *a’dam,* working twice as hard and twice as long as anyone else.

The rain had stopped, finally, leaving the kennels in silence. The *damane* would get some exercise at least, today—most grew sulky if confined to the kennels too long, and these makeshift kennels were decidedly confining—but regrettably, she was not assigned to walking today. Renna never was, though once she had been Suroth’s best trainer, and well respected. A little harsh, sometimes, but highly skilled. Once, everyone had said she would soon be made *der’sul’dam* in spite of her youth. Matters had changed. There were always more *sul’dam* than *damane,* yet no one could recall Renna being complete since Falme, her or Seta, whom Suroth had taken into personal service after Falme. Bethamin enjoyed gossiping over wine about the Blood and those who served them as much as anyone else, yet she never ventured any opinion when the talk turned to Renna and Seta. She thought of them often, though.

“You start on the other side, Renna,” she ordered. “Well? Do you want to be reported to Essonde for laziness yet again?”

Before Falme, the shorter woman had been nearly overpowering in her self-assurance, but a muscle twitched in her pale cheek, and she gave

Bethamin a sickly, obsequious smile before hurrying into the kennel’s warren of narrow passages patting at her long hair as though afraid it might be disordered. Everyone except Renna’s closest friends bullied her at least a little, repaying her former lofty pride. To do otherwise was to mark yourself out, something Bethamin avoided except in carefully chosen ways. Her own secrets were buried as deeply as she could bury them, and she held silent about the secrets no one knew she was aware of, but she wanted to fix in everyone’s mind that Bethamin Zeami was the image of the perfect *sul’dam*. Absolute perfection was what she strove for, in herself and in the *damane* she trained.

She set about her inspection briskly and efficiently, checking that the *damane* had kept themselves and their individual kennels neat, making a short notation in her neat hand on the top page pinned to the writing board when one had failed to, and she did not dawdle, except to give out hard candies to a few who were doing particularly well in the training. Most of those she had been complete with greeted her entrance with smiles even as they knelt. Whether from the Empire or from this side of the ocean, they knew she was firm yet fair. Others did not smile. For the most part, the Atha’an Miere *damane* met her with stony faces as dark as her own, or sullen anger they seemed to believe they were concealing.

She did not mark their anger down for punishment, as some would have. They still thought they were resisting, but unseemly demands for the return of their garish jewelry already were a thing of the past, and they knelt and spoke properly. A new name was a useful tool with the most difficult cases, creating a break with what was done and gone, and they answered to theirs, however reluctantly. Reluctance would fade, along with scowls, and eventually they would hardly remember they ever had other names. It was a familiar pattern, and unfailing as sunrise. Some accepted immediately, and some went into shock at learning what they were. Always there were a handful who gave ground grudgingly over months, while with others, one day it was shrieked protests that a terrible mistake had been made, that they could never have failed the tests, and the next day came acceptance and calm. The details differed on this side of the ocean, but here or in the Empire, the end result remained the same.

For two of the *damane* she made notes that had nothing to do with neatness. Zushi, an Atha’an Miere *damane* even taller than she herself, was certainly marked for a switching. Her dress was rumpled, her hair uncombed, her bed unmade. But her face was swollen from crying, and no sooner had she knelt than a new set of sobs racked her, tears streaming down her cheeks. The gray dress that had been fitted on her so carefully now hung loosely, and she had not been plump to begin with. Bethamin had named Zushi herself, and she felt a special concern. Unclipping the steel-nibbed pen, she dipped it and wrote a suggestion that Zushi be moved from the Palace to somewhere she could be kept in a double kennel with a *damane* from the Empire, preferably one experienced in becoming heart-friends with newly collared *damane.* Sooner or later, that always put an end to tears.

She was not sure Suroth would allow it, though. Suroth had claimed these *damane* for the Empress, of course—anyone who owned a tenth so many personally would be suspected of plotting rebellion, or even accused outright—yet she behaved as though they were her own property. If Suroth disallowed, some other way would have to be found. Bethamin refused to lose a *damane* to despondency. She refused to lose a *damane* for any reason! The second to receive a special comment was Tessi, and she expected no objections there.

The Illianer *damane* knelt gracefully, hands folded at her waist, as soon as Bethamin opened the door. Her bed was made, her extra gray dresses hung neatly on their pegs, her brush and comb were laid out precisely on her washstand, and the floor had been swept. Bethamin expected no less. Tessi had been neat from the start. She was fleshing out nicely now that she had learned to clean her plate. Other than treats, *damane*'s diets were regulated strictly; an unhealthy *damane* was a waste. Tessi would never be decked in ribbons and entered in the competitions for the prettiest *damane,* though. Her face seemed perpetually angry even in repose. But today she wore a slight smile that Bethamin was sure had been in place before she entered. Tessi was not one she expected smiles from, not yet.

“How is my little Tessi feeling today?” she asked.

“Tessi do feel very well,” the *damane* replied smoothly. Always before she had had to struggle to speak properly, and had earned her latest switching for outright refusal only yesterday.

Fingering her chin thoughtfully, Bethamin studied the kneeling *damane.* She was suspicious of any *damane* who had called herself Aes Sedai. History fascinated her, and she had even read translations from the myriad of languages that had existed before the Consolidation began. Those ancient rulers reveled in their murderous, capricious rule, and delighted in setting down how they came to power and how they crushed neighboring states and undermined other rulers. Most had died by assassination, often at the hands of their own heirs or followers. She knew very well what Aes Sedai were like.

“Tessi is a good *damane,*” she murmured warmly, taking one of the hard candies from the twist of paper in her belt pouch. Tessi leaned forward to receive it and kiss her hand in thanks, but the smile slipped a little, though it was back by the time she stuffed the red candy into her mouth. So. It was like that, was it? Pretending to accept in order to lull the *sul’dam* was not unknown, but given what Tessi had been, very likely she was plotting escape as well.

Back out in the narrow hallway, Bethamin wrote a strong suggestion that Tessi’s training be redoubled, along with her punishments, and her rewards be made sporadic, so she could never be sure that even perfection would earn so much as a pat on the head. It was a harsh method, one she normally avoided, but for some reason it turned even the most recalcitrant *marath’damane* into a supple *damane* in a remarkably short time. It also produced the meekest of *damane.* She disliked breaking a *damane’s* spirit, yet Tessi needed to be broken to the *a’dam* so she could forget the past. She would be happier for it, in the end.

Finishing ahead of Renna, Bethamin waited at the foot of the stairs until the other *sul’dam* came down. “Take this to Essonde when you take yours,” she said, thrusting her writing board at Renna before she cleared the final step. Unsurprisingly, Renna accepted the task as meekly as she had accepted the earlier order, and hurried away eyeing the extra writing board as though wondering whether the pages held a report on her. She was a very different woman than she had been before Falme.

Fetching her cloak and leaving the Palace, Bethamin intended to return to the inn where she was forced to share a bed with two other *sul’dam,* but only long enough to take some coin from her lockbox. The inspection had been her only duty today, and the rest of the hours were her own. For a change, instead of seeking extra assignments, she would spend them buying souvenirs. Perhaps one of those knives the local women wore at their necks, if she could find one without the gems they seemed to like on the hilt. And lacquerware, of course; that was as good here as any in the Empire, and the designs were so . . . foreign. It would be soothing to shop. She needed soothing.

The paving stones of the Mol Hara still glistened damply from the morning's rain, and a pleasant tang of salt filled the air, reminding her of the village on the Sea of L'Heye where she had been born, though the freezing cold made her clutch her cloak around herself. It had never been cold in Abunai, and she had never become accustomed to it no matter how far she had traveled. Thoughts of home were no comfort, now, though. As she made her way through the crowded streets, Renna and Seta filled her head to the extent that she bumped into people and once almost walked right in front of a merchant's train of wagons leaving the city. A shout from a wagon driver caught her attention, and she leaped back just in time. The wagon rumbled across the paving stones where she would have been standing, and the woman wielding the whip did not even glance at her. These foreigners had no idea of the respect due a *sul'dam.*

Renna and Seta. Everyone who had been at Falme had memories they wanted to forget, memories they would not talk about except when they drank too much. She did, too, only hers were not about the shock of battling half-recognized ghosts out of legend, or the horror of defeat, or mad visions in the sky. How often had she wished she had not gone upstairs that day? If only she had not wondered how Tuli was doing, the *damane* who had the marvelous skill with metals. But she had looked into Tuli's kennel. And she had seen Renna and Seta frantically trying to remove *a'dam* from each other's necks, shrieking with the pain, wavering on their knees from the nausea, and still fumbling at the collars. Vomit stained the fronts of their dresses. In their frenzy they had not noticed her backing away, horror-stricken.

Not simply horror at seeing two *sul'dam* revealed as *marath'damane,* but her own sudden personal terror. Often she thought she could almost see *damane*'s weaves, and she could always sense a *damane*'s presence and know how strong she was. Many *sul'dam* could; everyone knew it came from long experience at handling the *a'dam.* Yet the sight of that desperate pair roused unwanted thoughts, putting a different and frightening complexion on what she had always accepted. Did she *almost* see the weaves, or did she really see? Sometimes she thought she *felt* the channeling, too. Even *sul'dam* had to undergo the yearly testing, until their twenty-fifth naming day, and she had passed by failing every time. Only . . .

There would be a new testing after Renna and Seta were discovered, a new testing to find the *marath'damane* who somehow had evaded the first. The Empire itself might tremble before such a blow. And with the image of Renna and Seta burned into her brain, she had known with total certainty that after those tests, Bethamin Zeami would no longer be a respected citizen. Instead, a *damane* called Bethamin would serve the Empire.

The shame curdled in her still. She had placed personal fears ahead of the needs of the Empire, ahead of everything she knew to be right and true and good. Battle came to Falme, and nightmare, but she had not rushed to complete herself with a *damane* and join the battle line. Instead, she had used the confusion to secure a horse and flee, to run as hard and as far as she could.

She realized she had stopped, staring into a seamstress's shop window without really seeing what was on display inside. Not that she wanted to see. The blue dress with its lightning-marked red panels was the only one she had thought of wearing in years. And she certainly would not wear something that exposed her so indecently. Skirts swirling about her ankles, she walked on, but she could not shake Renna and Seta from her thoughts, or Suroth.

Obviously Alwhin had found the collared pair of *sul'dam* and reported them to Suroth. And Suroth had sheltered the Empire by protecting Renna and Seta, dangerous as that was. What if they suddenly began channeling? Better perhaps for the Empire if she had arranged their deaths, though killing a *sul'dam* was murder even for the High Blood. Two suspicious deaths among the *sul'dam* would certainly have brought in Seekers. So Renna and Seta were free, if it could be called that when they were never allowed to be complete. Alwhin had done her duty, and been honored by becoming Suroth's Voice. Suroth had done her duty as well, however distasteful. There was no new testing. Her own flight had been for nothing. And if she had remained, she would not have ended up in Tanchico, a nightmare she wanted to forget even more than she did Falme.

A squad of the Deathwatch Guards marched by, resplendent in their armor, and Bethamin paused to watch them pass. They left a wake through the crowd like a greatship under full sail. There would be joy in the city, in the land, when Tuon finally revealed herself, and celebrations as though she had just arrived. She felt a guilty pleasure at thinking of the Daughter of the Nine Moons so, as when she had done something forbidden as a child, though of course, until Tuon removed her veil, she was merely the High Lady Tuon, no higher than Suroth. The Deathwatch Guards tramped on, dedicated heart and soul to Empress and Empire, and Bethamin went in the opposite direction. Appropriately, since she was dedicated heart and soul to preserving her own freedom.

The Golden Swans of Heaven was a grand name for a tiny inn squeezed between a public stable and a lacquerware shop. The lacquerware shop was full of military officers buying everything the shop contained, the stable was full of horses purchased in the lottery and not yet assigned, and The Golden Swans was full of *sul'dam.* Packed with them, in fact, at least once night came. Bethamin was lucky to have only two bedmates. Ordered to accommodate as many as she could, the innkeeper pushed four and five into a bed when she thought they would fit. Still, the bedding was clean and the food quite good, if peculiar. And given that the alternative was likely a hayloft, she was glad to share.

At this hour, the round tables in the common room were empty. Some of the *sul'dam* living there surely had duties, and the rest simply wanted to avoid the innkeeper. Arms folded, frowning, Darnella Shoran was watching several serving women sweep the green-tiled floor industriously. A skinny woman with gray hair worn rolled on the nape of her neck and a long jaw that gave her a belligerent appearance, she might have been a *der'sul'dam* in spite of the ridiculous knife she wore, its hilt studded with cheap red and white gems. Supposedly the serving women were free, but they jumped like property whenever the innkeeper spoke.

Bethamin jumped slightly herself when the woman rounded on her. “You are aware of my rules concerning men, Mistress Zeami?” she demanded. After all this time, the slow way these people talked still sounded odd. “I've heard about your foreign ways, and if that is how you are, it is your business, but not under my roof. If you want to meet with men, you will do it elsewhere!”

“I assure you, I have not been meeting men here or anywhere else, Mistress Shoran.”

The innkeeper frowned at her in suspicion. “Well, he came around asking for you by name. A pretty, yellow-haired man. Not a boy, but not very old, either. One of your lot, dragging his words out so you could hardly understand him.”

Making her tone placating, Bethamin did her best to convince the woman that she did not know anyone who met that description, and that she had no time for men with her duties. Both were true, yet she would have lied if necessary. The Golden Swans had not been commandeered, and three in a bed was *much* preferable to a hayloft. She tried to find out whether the woman might like some small gift when she went shopping, but the woman actually seemed offended when she suggested a knife with more colorful gems. She had not meant anything expensive, nothing in the way of a bribe—not really—yet Mistress Shoran seemed to take it so, huffing and frowning indignantly. In any case, she was not sure she succeeded in changing the woman's mind by a hair. For some reason, the innkeeper seemed to believe they spent all their free hours engaged in debauchery. She was still frowning when Bethamin started up the railless stairs at the side of the common room pretending that she had not a thought in her mind beyond shopping.

The man's identity did concern her, though. She certainly did not recognize the description. In all likelihood, he had come about her inquiries, but if that was the case, if he had been able to trace her here, then she had been insufficiently discreet. Perhaps dangerously so. Still, she hoped he came back. She needed to know. She needed to!

Opening the door to her room, she froze. Impossibly, her iron lockbox sat on the bed with its lid thrown open. That was a very good lock, and the only key lay at the bottom of her belt pouch. The thief was still there, and oddly, he was thumbing through her diary! How in the Light had the man gotten past Mistress Shoran's surveillance?

Paralysis lasted only an instant. Snatching her belt knife from its sheath, she opened her mouth to scream for help.

The fellow's expression never changed, and he neither tried to run nor to attack her. He just took something small from his pouch and held it up where she could see it, and her breath turned to lead in her throat. Numbly she fumbled her knife back into its scabbard and held out her hands to show him she held no weapon and was not attempting to reach one. Between his fingers was a gold-edged ivory plaque, engraved with a raven and a tower. Suddenly she really saw the man, yellow-haired and in his middle years. Perhaps he was pretty, as Mistress Shoran had said, but only a madwoman would think of a Seeker for Truth in that fashion. Thank the Light she had not recorded anything dangerous in her diary. But he must know. He had asked for her by name. Oh, Light, he must know!

“Close the door,” he said quietly, returning the plaque to his pouch, and she obeyed. She wanted to run. She wanted to plead for mercy. But he was a Seeker, so she stood there, trembling. To her surprise, he dropped her diary back into the lockbox and gestured to the room’s single chair. “Sit. There is no need for you to be uncomfortable.”

Slowly, she hung up her cloak and settled onto the chair, for once not caring how uncomfortable the strange ladderlike back was. She did not try to hide her shivers. Even one of the Blood, even one of the High Blood, might, quake at being questioned by a Seeker. She had a small hope. He had not simply ordered her to accompany him. Perhaps he did not know after all.

“You have been asking questions about a ship captain named Egeanin Sarna,” he said. “Why?”

Hope faltered with a thud she could feel in her chest. “I was looking for an old friend,” she quavered. The best lies always contained as much truth as possible. “We were at Falme together. I don’t know whether she survived.” Lying to a Seeker was treason, but she had committed her first treason in deserting during the battle at Falme.

“She lives,” he said curtly. He sat down on the end of the bed without taking his eyes from her. They were blue, and made her want her cloak back. “She is a hero, a Captain of the Green, and the Lady Egeanin Tamarath, now. Her reward from the High Lady Suroth. She is also here in Ebou Dar. You will renew your friendship with her. And report to me who she sees, where she goes, what she says. Everything.”

Bethamin clamped her jaws to keep from laughing hysterically. He was after Egeanin, not her. The Light be praised! The Light be praised in all its infinite mercy! She had only wanted to know if the woman still lived, if she had to take precautions. Egeanin had freed her once, yet in the ten years Bethamin had known her before that, she had been a model of duty. It had always seemed possible she would repent that one aberration no matter the cost to herself, but, wonder of wonders, she had not. And the Seeker was after her, not . . . ! Possibilities reared up in front of her, certainties, and she no longer wanted to laugh. Instead, she licked her lips.

“How . . . ? How can I renew our friendship?” It had never been friendship anyway, merely acquaintance, but it was too late to say that now.

"You tell me she's been raised to the Blood. Any overture must come from her." Fear emboldened her. And panicked her as it had at Falme. "Why do you need me to be your Listener? You can take her for questioning any time you decide to." She bit the inside of her cheek to still her tongue. Light, she wanted nothing less than she wanted him to do that. Seekers were the secret hand of the Empress, might she live forever; in the Empress's name, he could put even Suroth to the question, or Tuon herself. True, he would die horribly if it turned out he had been in error, but the risk was small with Egeanin. She was only of the low Blood. If he put Egeanin to the question . . .

To her shock, rather than simply telling her to obey, he sat studying her. "I will explain certain things," he said, and that was a greater shock. Seekers never explained, so she had heard. "You are no use to me, or the Empire, unless you survive, and you will not survive if you fail to understand what you face. If you reveal a word of what I tell you to anyone, you will dream of the Tower of the Ravens as a respite from where you will find yourself. Listen, and learn. Egeanin was sent to Tanchico before the city fell to us, among other things as part of the effort to find *sul'dam* who had been left behind at Falme. Strangely, she found none, though others did, like those who aided your own return. Instead, Egeanin murdered the *sul'dam* she found. I put the charge to her myself, and she did not bother denying it. She did not even show outrage, or even indignation. As bad, she consorted in secret with Aes Sedai." He said the name flatly, not with the normal disgust but rather like an accusation. "When she departed Tanchico, she was traveling on a ship commanded by a man named Bayle Domon. He made some disturbance at having his ship boarded and was made property. She bought him and immediately made him *so'jhin,* so plainly he is of some importance to her. Interestingly, she had brought the same man to the High Lord Turak in Falme. Domon engaged the High Lord's regard to the extent that the fellow was often invited to converse with him." He grimaced. "Do you have wine? Or brandy?"

Bethamin gave a start. "Iona has a flask of the local brandy, I think. It's a rough drink. . . ."

He ordered her to pour him a cup anyway, and she obeyed hurriedly. She wanted to keep him talking, anything to delay the inevitable. She knew for a fact that Egeanin had not been killing *sul'dam,* yet her proof would condemn her to share Renna and Seta's sour fate. If she was lucky. If this

Seeker saw his duty to the Empire as Suroth had. He peered into the pewter cup, swirling the dark apple brandy while she took her seat again.

“The High Lord Turak was a great man,” he murmured. “Perhaps one of the greatest the Empire has ever seen. A pity his *so’jhin* decided to follow him into death. Honorable of them, but it makes it impossible to be sure Domon was in the band that murdered the High Lord.” Bethamin flinched. Sometimes the Blood died at one another’s hands, of course, but the word murder was never mentioned. The Seeker continued, still peering into his cup without drinking. “The High Lord had ordered me to watch Suroth. He suspected she was a danger to the Empire itself. His own words. And with his death, she managed to gain command of the Forerunners. I have no evidence that she ordered his death, but there is much that is suggestive. Suroth brought a *damane* to Falme, a young woman who was Aes Sedai,” again, the name was flat and hard, “and who somehow escaped the very day that Turak died. Suroth also has a *damane* in her entourage who was once Aes Sedai. She has never been seen uncollared, but . . .” He shrugged, as though that were a thing of no moment. Bethamin’s eyes popped. Who would uncollar a *damane?* A well-trained *damane* was a treat and a joy, but as well unleash a drunken *grolm!* “It seems very likely she has a *marath’damane* hidden among her property, too,” he went on, just as if he were not listing crimes little lower than treason. “I believe Suroth gave the order for *sul’dam* who managed to reach Tanchico to be killed, perhaps in order to hide Egeanin’s meetings with Aes Sedai. You *sul’dam* always say you can tell a *marath’damane* at sight, correct?”

He looked up suddenly, and somehow she managed to meet those frozen eyes with a smile. His face could have belonged to any man, but those eyes . . . She was glad to be seated. Her knees were shaking so hard she was surprised it did not show through her skirts. “It is not quite that easy, I’m afraid.” She almost succeeded in keeping her voice steady. “You . . . Surely you know enough to charge Suroth with the High Lord Turak’s m-m-murder.” If he took Suroth, there would be no need to involve her, or Egeanin.

“Turak was a great man, but my duty is to the Empress, may she live forever, and through her, to the Empire.” He drank the brandy down in one long swallow, and his face became as hard as his voice. “Turak’s death is dust beside the danger facing the Empire. The Aes Sedai of these lands seek power in the Empire, a return to the days of chaos and murder when no man could close his eyes at night knowing he would wake, and they are aided by a venomous worm of treachery boring from within. Suroth may not even be that worm's head. For the Empire's sake, I dare not take her until I can kill the whole worm. Egeanin is a thread I can follow to the worm, and you are a thread to Egeanin. So you will renew your friendship with her, whatever it takes. Do you understand me?"

"I understand, and I will obey." Her voice shook, but what else could she say? The Light save her, what else could she say?

* * *

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CHAPTER 21

A Matter of Property

Egeanin lay on her back on the bed with her hands raised, palms toward the ceiling and fingers spread. Her pale blue skirts made a fan across her legs, and she tried to lie very still so as not to wrinkle the narrow pleats too much. The way dresses confined movement, they must be an invention of the Dark Lord. Lying there, she studied fingernails too long for her to lay hands on a line without breaking at least half. Not that she had personally handled lines in quite a few years, but she had always been ready and able to, at need.

"... plain foolheadedness!" Bayle growled, poking at the blazing logs in the brick fireplace. "Fortune prick me, *Seahawk* could sail nearer the wind, and faster, than any Seanchan ship ever made. There did be squalls ahead, too, and . . ." She listened only enough to know he had stopped grumbling about the room and taken up the same old argument. The dark-paneled chamber was not the best at The Wandering Woman, or even close, yet it met his requirements excepting the view. The two windows looked out on the stableyard. A Captain of the Green ranked with a banner-general, but in this place, most of those she outranked were aides or secretaries to senior officers of the Ever Victorious Army. Among the army as at sea, being of the Blood added little unless it was the High Blood.

The sea-green lacquer on the nails of her little fingers sparkled. She had always hoped to rise, eventually perhaps to Captain of the Gold, commanding fleets, as her mother had. As a girl, she had even dreamed of being named the Hand of the Empress at Sea just like her mother, to stand at the left hand of the Crystal Throne, *so'jhin* to the Empress herself, might she live forever, allowed to speak directly to her. Young women had foolish dreams. And she had to admit that once chosen for the Forerunners, she considered the possibility of a new name. Not hoping for it, certainly—that would have been getting above herself—yet everyone had known the recovery of the stolen lands would mean new additions to the Blood. Now she was Captain of the Green, ten years before she should have had any hope of it, and stood on the slopes of that steep mountain that rose through the clouds to the sublime pinnacle of the Empress, might she live forever.

She doubted she would be given command of one greatship, however, much less a squadron. Suroth claimed to accept her story, but if so, why had she been left sitting at Cantorin? Why, when orders finally came, were they to report here and not to a ship? Of course, there were only so many commands available, even for a Captain of the Green. It might be that. She might have been chosen for a position near Suroth, though her orders said only that she was to travel to Ebou Dar by the first available means and await further instructions. Maybe. The High Blood might speak to the low without the intervention of a Voice, but it seemed to her that Suroth had forgotten her as soon as she was dismissed after receiving her rewards. Which also might mean Suroth was suspicious. Arguments that ran in circles. In any case, she could live on seawater if that Seeker had given over his suspicions. He had no more, or she would already be in a dungeon shrieking, yet if he was in the city, too, he would be watching her, waiting for one misstep. He could not shed so much as a single drop of her blood, now, but the Seekers were experienced at dealing with that minor difficulty. So long as he left it to watching, though, he could stare at her until his eyes shriveled. She had a stable deck under her feet, now, and from here on she would take great care how she stepped. Captain of the Gold might no longer be possible, yet retiring as Captain of the Green was honorable.

“Well?” Bayle demanded. “What about that?”

Wide and solid and strong, just the sort of man she had always favored, he was standing beside the bed in his shirtsleeves, a frown on his face and his fists on his hips. Not a pose a *so’jhin* should take with his mistress. With a sigh, she let her hands drop onto her stomach. Bayle just would not learn how a *so’jhin* was supposed to behave. He took it all as a joke, or play, as though none of it were real. Sometimes he even said he wanted to be her Voice, no matter how often she explained she was not of the High Blood. Once, she had had him beaten, and afterwards he had refused to sleep in the same bed with her until she apologized. Apologized!

Hastily, she ran through what she had half-heard of his growling. Yes; still the same arguments after all this time. Nothing new. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she sat up and ticked points off on her fingers. She had done it so often, she could deliver them by rote. “Had you tried to run, the *damane* on the other ship would have snapped your masts like twigs. It was not a chance stop, Bayle, and you know it; their first hail was a demand to know whether you were *Seahawk*. By bringing you into the wind and announcing we were on our way to Cantorin with a gift for the Empress, may she live forever, I allayed their suspicions. Anything else—anything!—and we would all have been chained in the hold and sold as soon as we reached Cantorin. I doubt we’d have been lucky enough to face the headsman instead.” She held up her thumb. “And last, if you had kept calm as I told you to, you would not have gone to the block, either. You cost me a great deal!” Several other women in Cantorin apparently had her same taste in men. They had pushed the bidding up extravagantly.

Stubborn man that he was, he scowled and scrubbed at his short beard irritably. “I do still say we could have dropped it all over the side,” he muttered. “That Seeker had no proof I did have it aboard.”

“Seekers do no need proof,” she said, mocking his accent. “Seekers do find proof, and the finding do be painful.” If he was reduced to bringing up what even he had conceded long since, maybe she was finally nearing the end of the whole thing. “In any case, Bayle, you have already admitted there is no harm in Suroth having that collar and bracelets. They can’t be put on him unless someone gets close enough, and I’ve heard nothing that suggests anyone has or will.” She refrained from adding that it would not matter if someone did. Bayle was not really familiar with even the versions of the Prophecies they had on this side of the World Sea, but he was adamant that none mentioned the necessity of the Dragon Reborn kneeling to the Crystal Throne. It might prove necessary for him to be fitted with this male *a’dam*, but Bayle would never see it. “What is done is done, Bayle. If the Light shines on us, we will live long in the service of the Empire. Now, you know this city, so you say. What is there interesting to see or do?”

“There always do be festivals of some sort,” he said slowly, grudgingly. He never liked giving up his argument, no matter how futile. “Some may be to your taste. Some not, I do think. You do be . . . picky.” What did he mean by that? Suddenly he grinned. “We could find a Wise Woman. They do hear marriage vows, here.” He ran his fingers across the shaven side of his scalp, rolling his eyes upward as though trying to see it. “Of course, if I do recall the lecture you did give me on the ‘rights and privileges’ of my position, *so’jhin* can only marry other *so’jhin*, so you do need to free me, first. Fortune prick me, you do no have a foot of those promised estates, yet. I can take up my old trade and give you an estate soon enough."

Her mouth fell open. This was not something old. This was very, very new. She had always prided herself on being level-headed. She had risen to command by skill and daring, a veteran of sea battles and storms and shipwreck. And right that moment she felt like a first-voyage fingerling looking down from the main peak, panicked and dizzy, with the whole world spinning around her and a seemingly inevitable fall to the sea filling her eyes.

"It is not so simple," she said, surging to her feet so he was forced to step back. Light's truth, she hated sounding breathless! "Manumission requires me to provide for your livelihood as a free man, to see you can support yourself." Light! Words flooding out in a rush were as bad as being breathless. She imagined herself on a deck. It helped, a little. "In your case, that means buying a ship, I suppose," she said, sounding unruffled, at least, "and as you reminded me, I have no estates yet. Besides, I could not allow you to return to smuggling, and you know it." That much was simple truth, and the rest not really a lie. Her years at sea had been profitable, and if the gold she could call on was small gleanings to one of the Blood, she could buy a ship, so long as he did not want a greatship, but she had not actually denied being able to afford one.

He spread his arms, another thing he was not supposed to do, and after a moment she laid her cheek against his broad shoulder and let him enfold her. "It will be well, lass," he murmured gently. "Somehow, it will be well."

"You must not call me 'lass,' Bayle," she chided, staring beyond his shoulder toward the fireplace. It would not seem to come into focus. Before leaving Tanchico she had decided to marry him, one of those lightning decisions that had made her reputation. Smuggler he might be, but she could have put a stop to that, and he was steadfast, strong and intelligent, a seafarer. That last had always been a necessity, to her. Only, she had not known his customs. Some places in the Empire, men did the asking, and were actually offended if a woman even suggested. She knew nothing of enticing a man, either. Her few lovers had all been men of equal rank, men she could approach openly and bid farewell when one or the other of them was ordered to another ship or promoted. And now he was *so'jhin*. There was nothing wrong with bedding your own *so'jhin*, of course, so long as you did not flaunt the fact. He would make up a pallet at the foot of the bed as usual, even if he never slept on it. But freeing a *so'jhin,* casting him off from the rights and privileges Bayle sneered at, was the height of cruelty. No, she was lying by avoidance again, and worse, lying to herself. She wanted wholeheartedly to marry the man Bayle Domon. She was bitterly unsure she could bring herself to marry manumitted property.

"As my Lady do command, so shall it be," he said in a blithe mockery of formality.

She punched him under the ribs. Not hard. Just enough to make him grunt. He had to learn! She did not want to see the sights of Ebou Dar any longer. She just wanted to stay where she was, wrapped in Bayle's arms, not needing to make decisions, stay right where they stood forever.

A sharp knock sounded at the door, and she pushed him away. At least he knew enough not to protest that. While he tugged on his coat, she shook out the pleats of her dress and attempted to smooth away the wrinkles from lying on the bed. There seemed to be a good many, despite how still she had been. This knock might be a summons from Suroth or a maid seeing whether she needed anything, but whoever it was, she was not going to let anyone see her looking as if she had been rolling about on the deck.

Giving up the useless attempt, she waited until Bayle had buttoned himself up and adopted the attitude he thought proper for a *so'jhin—Like a captain on his quarterdeck ready to shout orders,* she thought, sighing to herself—then barked, "Come!" The woman who opened the door was the last she expected to see.

Bethamin eyed her hesitantly before darting in and closing the door softly behind her. The *sul'dam* took a deep breath, then knelt, holding herself stiffly upright. Her dark blue dress with its lightning-worked red panels looked freshly cleaned and ironed. The sharp contrast to her own dishevelment irritated Egeanin. "My Lady," Bethamin began uncertainly, then swallowed. "My Lady, I beg a word with you." Glancing at Bayle, she licked her lips. "In private, if it pleases you, my Lady?"

The last time Egeanin had seen this woman was in a basement in Tanchico, when she removed an *a'dam* from Bethamin and told her to go. That would have been enough for blackmail if she were of the High Blood! Without doubt the charge would be the same as for freeing a *damane*. Treason. Except that Bethamin could not reveal it without condemning herself, too.

“He can hear anything you have to say, Bethamin,” she said calmly. She was in shoal waters, and that was no place for anything except calm. “What do you want?”

Bethamin shifted on her knees and wasted more time with lip licking. Then, suddenly, words came out in a rush. “A Seeker came to me and ordered me to resume our . . . our acquaintance and report on you to him.” As if to stop herself babbling, she caught her underlip in her teeth and stared at Egeanin. Her dark eyes were desperate and pleading, just as they had been in that Tanchico basement.

Egeanin met her gaze coolly. Shoal waters, and an unexpected gale. Her strange orders to Ebou Dar suddenly were explained. She did not need a description to know it must be the same man. Nor did she need to ask why Bethamin was committing treason by betraying the Seeker. If he decided his suspicions were strong enough to take her for questioning, eventually Egeanin would tell him everything she knew, including about a certain basement, and Bethamin would soon find herself once more wearing an *a’dam*. The woman’s only hope was to help Egeanin evade him.

“Rise,” she said. “Have a seat.” Luckily, there were two chairs, though neither appeared comfortable. “Bayle, I think there is brandy in that flask on the drawered chest.”

Bethamin was so shaky that Egeanin had to help her up and guide her to a chair. Bayle brought worked silver cups holding a little brandy and remembered to bow and present Egeanin’s first, but when he returned to the chest, she saw he had poured for himself, as well. He stood there, cup in hand, watching them as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Bethamin stared at him pop-eyed.

“You think you are poised over the impaling stake,” Egeanin said, and the *sul’dam* flinched, her frightened gaze jerking back to Egeanin’s face. “You are wrong, Bethamin. The only real crime I have committed was freeing you.” Not precisely true, but in the end, after all, she had placed the male *a’dam* in Suroth’s hands herself. And talking with Aes Sedai was not a crime. The Seeker might suspect—he had tried to listen at a door in Tanchico—but she was not a *sul’dam,* charged with catching *marath’damane*. At worst that meant a reprimand. “So long as he doesn’t learn about that, he has no reason to arrest me. If he wants to know what I say, or anything else about me, tell him. Just remember that if he does decide to arrest me, I will give him your name.” A reminder could only guard against Bethamin suddenly thinking she saw a safe way out, leaving her behind. “He won’t have to make me scream once.”

To her surprise, the *sul’dam* began to laugh hysterically. Until Egeanin leaned forward and slapped her, anyway.

Rubbing her cheek sullenly, Bethamin said, “He knows near enough everything *except* the basement, my Lady.” And she began to describe a fantastical web of treason connecting Egeanin and Bayle and Suroth and maybe even Tuon herself with Aes Sedai, and *marath’damane,* and *damane* who had been Aes Sedai.

Bethamin’s voice began to grow panicky as she darted from one incredible charge to another, and before long, Egeanin began sipping brandy. Just sips. She was calm. She was in command of herself. She was . . . This was beyond shoal waters. She was riding close on a lee shore, and Soulblinder himself rode that gale, coming to steal her eyes. After listening for a time with his own eyes growing wider and wider, Bayle drank down a brimful cup of the dark raw liquor in one go. She was relieved to see his shock, and guilty at feeling relieved. She would not believe him a murderer. Besides, he was very good using his hands but only fair at a sword; with weapons or bare-handed, the High Lord Turak would have gutted Bayle like a carp. Her only excuse for even considering it was that he had been with two Aes Sedai in Tanchico. The whole thing was nonsense. It had to be! Those two Aes Sedai had not been part of any plot, just a chance meeting. Light’s truth, they had been little more than girls, and near innocents at that, too softhearted to accept her suggestion they cut the Seeker’s throat when they had the chance. A pity, that. They had *handed* her the male *a’dam*. Ice crept down her spine. If the Seeker ever learned she had intended disposing of the *a’dam* the way those Aes Sedai suggested, if anyone learned, she would be judged as guilty of treason as if she had succeeded in dropping it into the ocean’s depths. *Are you not?* she demanded of herself. The Dark One was coming to steal her eyes.

Tears streaming down her face, Bethamin clutched her cup to her breasts as though hugging herself. If she was trying to keep from shaking, she failed miserably. Trembling, she stared at Egeanin, or perhaps at something beyond her. Something horrifying. The fire had not warmed the room very far yet, but sweat was beaded on Bethamin’s face. “. . . and if he learns about Renna and Seta,” she babbled, “he will know for sure! He’ll come after me, and the other *sul’dam*! You have to stop him! If he takes me, I'll give him your name! I will!" Abruptly she tilted lifted the cup to her mouth unsteadily and gulped the contents, choking and coughing, then thrust it out toward Bayle for more. He did not move. He looked poleaxed.

"Who are Renna and Seta?" Egeanin asked. She was as frightened as the *sul'dam,* but as always, she kept her fear hard-reefed. "What can the Seeker learn about them?" Bethamin's eyes slid away, refusing to meet hers, and abruptly she knew. "They are *sul'dam,* aren't they, Bethamin? And they were collared, too, just like you."

"They are in Suroth's service," the woman whimpered. "They are never allowed to be complete, though. Suroth knows."

Egeanin rubbed at her eyes wearily. Perhaps there was a conspiracy, after all. Or Suroth might be hiding what the pair were to protect the Empire. The Empire depended on *sul'dam;* its strength was built on them. The news that *sul'dam* were women who could learn to channel might shatter the Empire to its core. It had surely shaken her. Maybe shattered her. She herself had not freed Bethamin out of duty. So many things had changed in Tanchico. She no longer believed that any woman who could channel deserved to be collared. Criminals, certainly, and maybe those who refused oaths to the Crystal Throne, and . . . She did not know. Once, her life had been made up of rock-solid certainties, like guiding stars that never failed. She wanted her old life back. She wanted a few certainties.

"I thought," Bethamin began. She would have no lips left if she did not stop licking them. "My Lady, if the Seeker . . . suffers an accident . . . perhaps the danger would pass with him." Light, the woman *believed* in this intrigue against the Crystal Throne, and she was ready to let it pass to save her own skin!

Egeanin rose, and the *sul'dam* had no choice but to follow. "I will think on it, Bethamin. You will come to see me every day you are free. The Seeker will expect it. Until I make my decision, you will do nothing. Do you understand me? Nothing except your duties and what I tell you." Bethamin understood. She was so relieved that someone else was dealing with the danger that she knelt again and kissed Egeanin's hand.

All but bundling the woman out of the room, Egeanin closed the door, then hurled her cup at the fireplace. It hit the bricks and bounced off, rolling across the small rug on the floor. It was dented. Her father had given her that set of cups when she gained her first command. All the strength seemed to have leached out of her. The Seeker had knitted moonbeams and happenstance into a strangling cord for her neck. If she was not named property instead. She shuddered at the possibility. Whatever she did, the Seeker had her trapped.

“I can kill him.” Bayle flexed his hands, broad like the rest of him. “He be a skinny man, as I recall. Used to everyone obeying his word. He will no be expecting anyone to snap his neck.”

“You’ll never find him to kill, Bayle. He won’t meet her in the same place twice, and even if you followed her day and night, he might well be in disguise. You cannot kill every man she speaks to.”

Stiffening her spine, she marched to the table where her writing desk sat and flipped open the lid. The wave-carved writing desk, with its silver-mounted glass inkpot and silver sand jar, had been her mother’s gift at that first command. The neatly stacked sheets of fine paper bore her newly granted sigil, a sword and a fouled anchor. “I will write out your manumission,” she said, dipping the silver pen, “and give you enough coin to buy passage.” The pen glided across the page. She had always had a good hand. Log entries had to be legible. “Not enough to buy a ship, I fear, but it must do. You will depart on the first available ship. Shave the rest of your head, and you should have no trouble. It’s still a shock, seeing bald men not wearing wigs, but so far no one seems to—” She gasped as Bayle slid the page right out from under her pen.

“If you do free me, you can no give me orders,” he said. “Besides, you must ensure I can support myself if you do free me.” He stuck the page into the fire and watched while it blackened and curled. “A ship, you did say, and I will hold you to it.”

“Listen well and hear,” she said in her best quarterdeck voice, but it made no impression on him. It had to be the cursed dress.

“You do need a crew,” he said right over her, “and I can find you one, even here.”

“What good will a crew do me? I don’t have a ship. If I did, where could I sail that the Seeker couldn’t find me?”

Bayle shrugged as though that was not important. “A crew, first. I did recognize that young fellow in the kitchens, the one with the lass on his knee. Stop grimacing. There be no harm to a little kissing.”

She drew herself up, prepared to set him firmly to rights. She was frowning, not grimacing, that pair had been groping at one another in public like animals, and he was her property! He could not speak to her this way!

“His name be Mat Cauthon,” Bayle went on even as she opened her mouth. “By his clothes, he has come up in the world, and far. The first time I did see him, he did be in a farmer’s coat, escaping Trollocs in a place even Trollocs be afraid of. The last time, half the town of Whitebridge did be burning, close enough to, and a Myrddraal did be trying to kill him and his friends. I did no see for myself, but anything else be more than I can believe. Any man who can survive Trollocs and Myrddraal do be useful, I think. Especially now.”

“Someday,” she growled, “I am going to have to see some of these Trollocs and Myrddraal you go on about.” The things could not be half as fearsome as he described.

He grinned and shook his head. He knew what she thought about these so-called Shadowspawn. “Better still, young Master Cauthon did have companions on my ship. Good men for this situation, too. One, you do know. Thom Merrilin.”

Egeanin’s breath caught. Merrilin was a clever old man. A dangerous old man. And he had been with those two Aes Sedai when she met Bayle. “Bayle, is there a conspiracy? Tell me. Please?” No one said please to property, not even to *so’jhin.* Not unless they wanted something badly, anyway.

Shaking his head again, he leaned a hand on the stone mantelpiece and frowned into the flames. “Aes Sedai do plot the way fish swim. They could scheme with Suroth, but the question do be, could she scheme with them? I did see her look at *damane,* like they did be mangy dogs with fleas and catching diseases. Could she even talk to an Aes Sedai?” He looked up, and his eyes were clear and open, hiding nothing. “I do tell this for true. On my grandmother’s grave, I do know of no plot. But did I know of ten, I still will no let that Seeker or anyone else harm you, whatever it do take.” It was the sort of thing any loyal *so’jhin* might say. Well, no *so’jhin* she had ever heard of would have been so straightforward, but the sentiments were the same. Only, she knew he did not mean it that way, could never mean it that way.

“Thank you, Bayle.” A steady voice was a necessity for command, but she was proud that hers was steady now. “Find this Master Cauthon, and Thom Merrilin, if you can. Perhaps something can be done.”

He failed to bow before leaving her presence, but she did not even consider upbraiding him. She did not intend to let the Seeker take her, either. Whatever it took to stop him. That was a decision she had reached before she freed Bethamin. She filled the dented cup to the brim with brandy, meaning to get so drunk she could not think, but instead she sat peering into the dark liquid without touching a drop. Whatever it took. Light, she was no better than Bethamin! But knowing it changed nothing. Whatever it took.

* * *

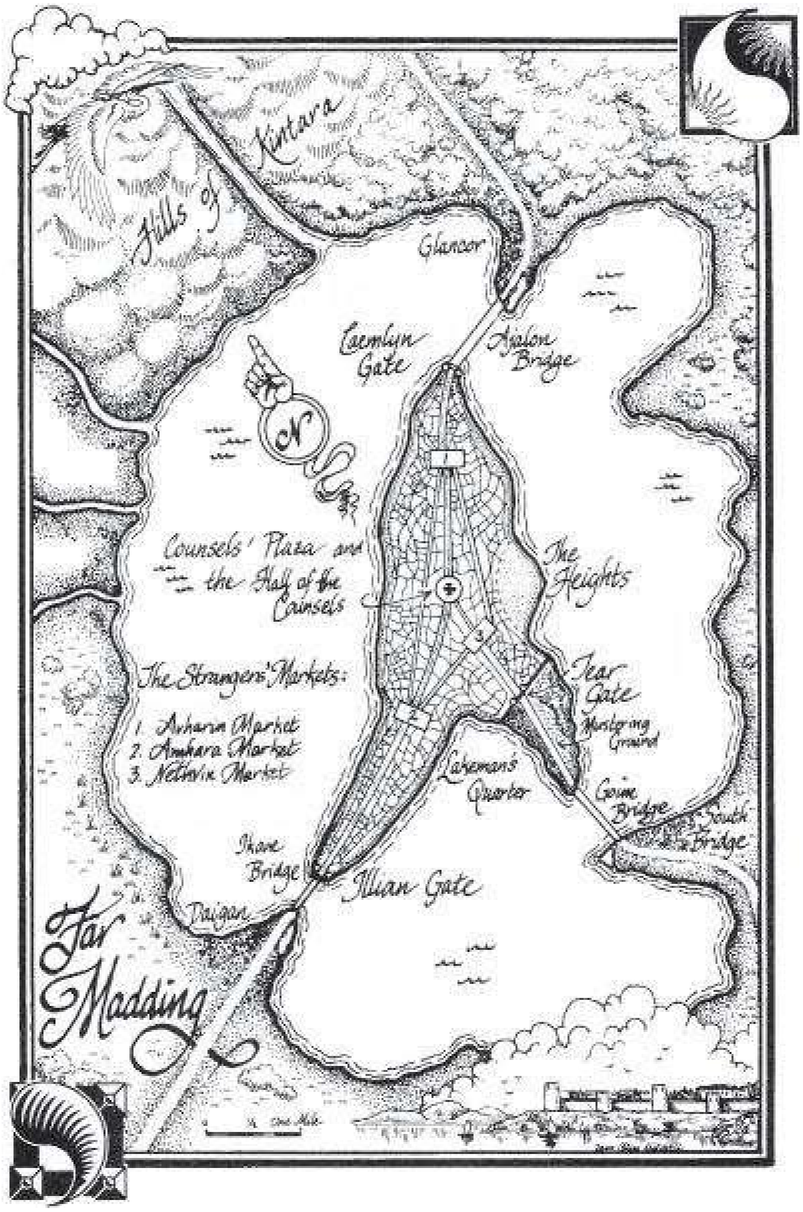
Hills of Kintara
Glancor
Caemlyn Gate
Ayalon Bridge
N
Counsels' Plaza and the Hall of the Counsels
The Heights
The Strangers' Markets:
1. Avharin Market
2. Amhara Market
3. Nethvin Market
Tear Gate
Mustering Ground
Lakeman's Quarter
Goim Bridge
South Bridge
Iman Bridge
Illian Gate
Daigan
Far Madding
One Mile

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CHAPTER 22

Out of Thin Air

The Amhara Market was one of three in Far Madding where foreigners were allowed to trade, but despite the name, the huge square had nothing of the look of a market, no market stalls or displays of merchandise. A few mounted riders, a handful of closed sedan chairs carried by brightly liveried bearers and the occasional coach with its window curtains drawn made their way though a sparse yet bustling crowd that might have been seen in any large city. Most were well wrapped in their cloaks against the morning winds blowing in off the lake that surrounded the city, and it was the cold that made them hurry more than any urgent business. Around the square, as at the city’s other two Strangers’ Markets, the tall stone houses of bankers rubbed shoulders with slate-roofed stone inns where the foreign merchants stayed and blocky windowless stone warehouses where their goods were stored, all jumbled in among stone stables and stone-walled wagon yards. Far Madding was a city of stone walls and slate roofs. This time of year, the inns were a quarter full at best, and the warehouses and wagon yards emptier than that. Come spring and the full revival of trade, though, merchants would pay triple for whatever space they could find.

A round marble pedestal in the center of the square held a statue of Savion Amhara, two spans tall and proud in fur-trimmed robes of marble, with elaborate marble chains of office around her neck. Her marble face was stern beneath the First Counsel’s jeweled marble diadem, and her right hand firmly gripped the hilt of a marble sword, its point resting between her slippered feet, while her raised left hand aimed a warning marble finger toward the Tear Gate, some three-quarters of a mile away. Far Madding depended on merchants from Tear and Illian and Caemlyn, but the High Council was ever wary of foreigners and their corrupting outland ways. One of the steel-capped Street Guards, in a leather coat sewn with overlapping square metal plates and a Golden Hand on the left shoulder, stood below the statue using a long limber pole to frighten away black-winged gray pigeons. Savion Amhara was one of the three most revered women in Far Madding's history, though none was known very far beyond the lake's shores. Two men from the city were mentioned in every history of the world, though it had been called Aren Mador when one was born and Fel Moreina for the other, but Far Madding did its fervent best to forget Raolin Darksbane and Yurian Stonebow. In a real way, those two men were why Rand was in Far Madding.

A few people in the Amhara glanced at him as he passed, yet nobody glanced twice. That he was from off was plain enough, with his blue eyes and his hair cut at the shoulder. Men here wore it sometimes hanging all the way to the waist, either tied at the nape of the neck or held with a clip. His plain brown woolens were nondescript, though, no better than a moderately successful merchant might wear, and he was not the only one cloakless in spite of the lake winds. Most of the others were fork-bearded Kandori or Arafellin with belled braids, or hawk-nosed Saldaeans, men and women who found this weather mild compared to Borderland winter, but nothing about him said he was not a Borderlander, too. For his part, he simply refused to let the cold touch him, ignored it as he might have a fly buzzing. A cloak might get in his way, if he found his chance to act.

For once, even his height did not attract notice. There were a good many very tall men in Far Madding, few of them natives. Manel Rochaid himself was only a hand shorter than Rand, if that. Rand stayed well behind the man, letting people and sedan chairs sift between them and sometimes even hide his quarry. With his hair dyed black by herbs Nynaeve had provided, he doubted that the renegade Asha'man would notice him even if the man turned around. For his part, he was not worried about losing Rochaid. Most of the local men wore dull colors, with brighter embroidery about the chest and shoulders and perhaps a jeweled hair clip for the more prosperous, while the outland merchants favored sober unpretentious clothes, so as not to seem overly wealthy, and their guards and drivers bundled themselves in rough woolens. Rochaid's bright red silk coat stood out. He strode across the square like a king, one hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword, a fur-edged cloak billowing behind him in the wind. He was a fool. That flapping cloak and the sword alike drew eyes. His waxed and curled mustaches named him a Murandian, who should be shivering like any normal human being, and that sword . . . A pure bull goose fool.

You *are the fool, coming to this place,* Lews Therin panted wildly inside his head. *Madness! Madness! We have to get out! We have to!*

Ignoring the voice, Rand pulled his snug gloves tighter and kept a steady pace after Rochaid. A number of the Street Guards in the square were watching the man. Foreigners were considered troublemakers and hotheads, and Murandians had a prickly reputation. A foreigner carrying a sword always attracted the Guards' attention. Rand was glad he had decided to leave his at the inn with Min. She nestled in the back of his head more strongly than Elayne or Aviendha, or Alanna. He was only vaguely aware of the others. Min seemed alive inside him.

As Rochaid left the Amhara, heading deeper into the city, flights of pigeons sprang up from the rooftops, but instead of making the unerring swoops that normally would have taken them into the sky, birds crashed into one another and some tumbled fluttering to the pavement. People gaped, including the Street Guards who had been watching Rochaid so intently a moment before. The man did not look back, but it would not have mattered had he seen. He knew Rand was in the city without seeing the effects of a *ta'veren,* or he would not have been there.

Following Rochaid onto the Street of Joy, really two broad straight streets separated by a measured row of leafless gray-barked trees, Rand smiled. Rochaid and his friends probably thought themselves very clever. Perhaps they had found the map of the northern Plains of Maredo replaced upside down in the racks in the Stone of Tear, or the book on cities of the south misshelved in the library of the Aesdaishar Palace in Chachin, or one of the other hints he had left behind. Small mistakes a man in a hurry might make, but any two or three together painted an arrow pointing to Far Madding. Rochaid and the others had been quick to see it, quicker than he had expected, or else they had had help to point it out. Either way, it did not matter.

He was not sure why the Murandian had come ahead of the others, but he knew they would come, Torval and Dashiva, Gedwyn and Kisman, to try finishing what they had bungled in Cairhien. A pity none of the Forsaken would be fool enough to come after him here. They would just send the others. He wanted to kill Rochaid before the rest arrived, if he could. Even here, where they were all on an equal footing, it would be best to cut down the odds. Two days Rochaid had been in Far Madding, openly asking questions about a tall red-haired man, swaggering about as if he had not a worry in the world. The man had seen any number who more or less met his description, but he still thought he was the hunter, not the hunted.

You've brought us here to die! Lews Therin moaned. Being *here is as bad as death!*

Rand shrugged uncomfortably. He agreed with the voice about that last. He would be as glad as Lews Therin to leave. But sometimes the only choice was between bad and worse. Rochaid was ahead of him, almost within reach. That was all that mattered now.

The gray stone shops and inns along the Street of Joy changed the farther Rand went from the Amhara Market. Silversmiths replaced cutlers, and then goldsmiths replaced silversmiths. Seamstresses and tailors displayed embroidered silks and brocades instead of woolens. The coaches that rumbled over the paving stones now had sigils lacquered on the doors and teams of four or six matched for size and color, and more riders were mounted on prime Tairen bloodstock or animals as good. Sedan chairs borne by trotting bearers became almost as common as people afoot, and, afoot, shopkeepers in coats or dresses heavily embroidered around the chest and shoulders were outnumbered by folk in livery as bright as that of the chair-bearers. Often as not, bits of colored glass now decorated men's hair clips, or occasionally pearls or richer gems, though few men walked whose wives could afford gems. Only the cold wind was the same, that and the Street Guards patrolling in threes, eyes alert for trouble. There were not so many as in the Strangers' Markets, yet as soon as one patrol strode out of sight another appeared, and wherever a street wider than an alleyway met the Street of Joy, a stone watchstand stood with two Guardsmen waiting at the foot in case the man atop spotted trouble. The peace was kept rigorously in Far Madding.

Rand frowned as Rochaid kept on along the street. Could he be headed for the Counsels' Plaza, in the middle of the island? There was nothing there but the Hall of the Counsels, monuments from more than five hundred years earlier, when Far Madding had been the capital of Maredo, and the countinghouses of the city's wealthiest women. In Far Madding, a wealthy man was one whose wife gave him a generous allowance or a widower who had been provided for. Maybe Rochaid was meeting Darkfriends. But if so, why had the man waited?

Suddenly a wave of dizziness hit him, a murky face filling his vision for an instant, and he staggered against a passerby. Taller than Rand himself, in bright green livery, the yellow-haired man shifted the large basket he was carrying and fended Rand off gently. A long, puckered scar ran down the side of his sun-dark face. Bowing his head, he murmured an apology and hurried on.

Righting himself, Rand growled a curse under his breath.

You destroyed them already, Lews Therin whispered in his head. *Now you have someone else to destroy, and not beforetime. How many will we three kill before the end, I wonder*.

Shut up! Rand thought fiercely, but cackling, derisive laughter answered him. It was not the encounter with an Aielman that upset him. He had seen many since coming to Far Madding. For some reason, hundreds of the Aiel who fled after learning the truth of their history had ended up there, attempting to follow the Way of the Leaf when they had no more idea of what that entailed except that they were supposed to be lifelong *gai'shain*. He was not even worried about the dizziness, or whose face it was that he half saw when it struck. Ahead of him, a coach drawn by six grays clattered through the stream of sedan chairs and hurrying folk in livery, and men and women darting in and out of the shops, but there was no sign of a red coat. He smacked a gloved fist into his palm in irritation.

Going ahead blindly was idiotic. He might run right into the man, or at least be seen. So far, Rochaid thought Rand did not know he was in the city, an advantage too important to squander. He knew where Rochaid had his rooms, one of the inns that catered to foreign men. He could loiter outside tomorrow and wait for another chance. The others might arrive in the night, too. He thought he could kill any two together, or maybe even all five, but it could not be done quietly. He would take injuries against five, and at best, he would have to abandon his sword, which he was reluctant to do. It was a gift from Aviendha. At worst . . .

A flicker of fur-trimmed cloak caught his eye, fluttering in the wind as it vanished around a corner ahead, and he ran toward it. The Guardsmen at the watchstand there straightened, the man at the top taking his rattle from his belt. One of those at the bottom of the stand hefted his long cudgel, while the other lifted a catchpole from where it had leaned against the watchstand's steps. The forked end was fashioned to catch and hold an arm or a leg or a neck, and the pole itself was belted with iron, proof against any sword or axe. They watched him closely, with hard eyes.

He nodded to them and smiled, then ostentatiously peered down the side street, searching the crowd there. Not a running thief, just a man trying to catch up to someone. The cudgel went back onto its belt hook, the catchpole returned to the steps. He did not look at the Guardsmen again. Ahead, he got a glimpse of the cloak, and maybe a red coat, as the wearer turned onto another street.

Raising his hand as if to hail somebody, Rand sped after the man, dodging between people and street peddlers' barrows. Hawkers displaying pins or needles or combs on their trays tried to catch his attention, or anyone's, with their cries. Few people here wore embroidery, and a simple cord tying a man's hair was much more common than even the plainest clip. These streets were cramped at best, and crooked, a haphazard maze where cheap inns and narrow stone apartment buildings of three and four stories towered over the shops of butchers and candlemakers and barbers, tinsmiths and potters and coopers. Coaches would not have fit along these streets, and there were no sedan chairs, either, no riders, and only a handful of liveried servants, carrying baskets on errands but strolling and looking down their noses at everyone around them except the Street Guards. Their patrols and watchstands were present even here.

At last he got near enough for at clear view of the man he was following. Rochaid had finally shown enough sense to pull his cloak about him, hiding his red coat and his useless sword, but there was no doubt of who he was. In truth, he seemed to be trying to avoid notice altogether now, slinking along the side of the street with his shoulder brushing the shopfronts. Abruptly he looked around furtively, then darted into an alley between a tiny basketweaver's shop and an inn with a sign so dirty the name was completely obscured. Rand almost grinned, and wasted no time hurrying after him. There were no Street Guards or watchstands in Far Madding's alleyways.

Those alleys were even more crooked than the streets Rand had just left, making a warren of their own through the interior of every block of the city, and Rochaid was already out of sight, but Rand could hear his boots pounding on the damp stony dirt. The sound bounced and multiplied between the windowless stone walls until he could hardly tell where it was coming from, but he followed, running along passages barely wide enough for two men abreast. If they were friendly. Why had Rochaid come into this maze? Wherever he was going, he wanted to be there quickly. But he could not know how to use the alleys to get from one place to another.

Abruptly Rand realized the only boots he was hearing were his own and stopped dead. Silence. From where he stood, he could see three more narrow alleys splitting off from the one he stood in. Barely breathing, he strained his ears. Silence. Almost, he decided to turn back. And then he heard a distant clatter from the nearest alley mouth, as though someone had accidentally kicked a rock against a stone wall in passing. Best to kill the man and be done.

Rand turned the corner in to the alley, and found Rochaid waiting for him.

The Murandian had his cloak thrown back again, and both hands on his sword hilt. The Far Madding peace-bond wove hilt and scabbard inside a net of fine wire. He wore a small, knowing smile. “You were as easy to bait as a pigeon,” he said, beginning to draw his sword. The wires had been cut, then fixed so they still appeared solid to a casual glance. “Run, if you want.”

Rand did not run. Instead, he stepped forward, slamming his left hand down on the end of Rochaid’s sword hilt, trapping the blade still half in its scabbard. Surprise widened the man’s eyes, yet he still did not realize that pausing to gloat had already killed him. He moved back, trying to get room to complete his draw, but Rand followed smoothly, keeping the sword trapped, and pivoted from the hips, driving folded knuckles hard into Rochaid’s throat. Cartilage cracked loudly, and the renegade forgot about trying to kill anyone. Staggering backwards, wide-eyed and staring, he clapped both hands to his throat and desperately tried to pull air through his ruined windpipe.

Rand was already beginning the killing stroke, beneath the breastbone, when a whisper of sound came to him from behind, and suddenly Rochaid’s taunting took on new meaning. Backheeling Rochaid, Rand let himself fall to the ground atop the man. Hard-swung metal clanged against a stone wall, and a man cursed. Grabbing Rochaid’s sword, Rand let the motion of falling turn into a roll, pulling the blade clear as he tumbled over his own shoulder. Rochaid gave a shrill, gurgling scream as Rand came up in a crouch facing back the way he had come.

Raefar Kisman stood gaping down at Rochaid, the blade he had meant to stab through Rand instead driven into Rochaid’s chest. Blood bubbled on the Murandian's lips, and he dug his heels into the ground and bloodied his hands on the sharp steel as though he could push it out of him. Of only average height, and pale for a Tairen, Kisman wore clothes as plain as Rand's except for the sword belt. Hiding that beneath his cloak, he could have gone anywhere in Far Madding without being noticed.

His dismay lasted only an instant. As Rand rose, sword ready in both hands, Kisman jerked his own blade free and did not look at his thrashing accomplice again. He watched Rand, and his hands shifted nervously on the long hilt of his sword. No doubt he was one of those so proud of being able to use the Power as a weapon that he had disdained really learning the sword. Rand had not disdained. Rochaid gave a last twitch and was still, staring up at the sky.

"Time to die," Rand said quietly, but as he started forward, a rattle sounded somewhere behind the Tairen, an incessant chattering, and then another. The Street Guards.

"They'll take us both," Kisman breathed, sounding frantic. "If they find us standing over a corpse, they'll *hang* us both! You know they will!"

He was right, at least in part. If the Guards found them there, they would both be hauled off to the cells beneath the Hall of the Counsels. More rattles chattered, coming closer. The Guards must have noticed three men ducking one by one into the same alley. Perhaps they had even seen Kisman's sword. Reluctantly, Rand nodded.

The Tairen backed away cautiously, and when he saw Rand making no move to follow, he sheathed his blade and ran wildly, dark cloak flaring behind him.

Rand threw his borrowed sword down atop Rochaid's body and ran the other way. There were no rattles in that direction yet. With luck, he could be out into the streets, blending into the crowds, before he was seen. He had other fears than the noose. Stripping off his gloves, showing the Dragons that marked his arms, would be enough to prevent his hanging, he was sure. But the Counsels had proclaimed their acceptance of that odd decree Elaida had issued. Once he was in a cell, he would remain there until the White Tower sent for him. So he ran as hard as he could.

Melting into the crowd in the street, Kisman heaved a sigh of relief as three Street Guards ran into the alley he had just emerged from. Holding his cloak close to hide his scabbarded sword, he moved with the flow of traffic, no faster than anyone else and slower than some. Nothing to draw a Guardsman’s eye. A pair of them passed with a trussed prisoner stuffed into a large sack slung from a quarterstaff carried on their shoulders. Only the man’s head stuck out, his eyes wild and darting. Kisman shuddered. Burn his eyes, that could have been him! Him!

He had been a fool to let Rochaid talk him into this in the first place. They were supposed to wait until everyone had arrived, slipping into the city one by one to avoid notice. Rochaid had wanted the glory of being the one to kill al’Thor; the Murandian had burned with the desire to prove himself a better man than al’Thor. Now he was dead of it, and very nearly Raefar Kisman with him, and that made Kisman furious. He wanted power more than glory, perhaps to rule Tear from the Stone. Perhaps more. He wanted to live forever. Those things had been promised; they were his due. Part of his anger was because he was unsure they actually were supposed to kill al’Thor. The Great Lord knew he wanted to—he would not sleep soundly until the man was dead and buried!—and yet . . .

“Kill him,” the M’Hael had ordered before sending them to Cairhien, but he had been as displeased that they were found out as that they had failed. Far Madding was to be their last chance; he had made that as plain as polished brass. Dashiva had simply vanished. Kisman did not know whether he had run or the M’Hael had killed him, and he did not care.

“Kill him,” Demandred had commanded later, but he had added that it would be better they died than let themselves be discovered again. By anyone, even the M’Hael, as if he did not know of Taim’s order.

And later still, Moridin had said, “Kill him if you must, but above all, bring everything in his possession to me. That will redeem your previous transgressions.” The man said he was one of the Chosen, and no one was mad enough to make that claim unless it was true, yet he seemed to think al’Thor’s belongings more important than his death, the killing incidental and not really necessary.

Those two were the only Chosen Kisman had met, but they made his head hurt. They were worse than Cairhienin. He suspected that what they left unsaid could kill a man quicker than a signed order from a High Lord. Well, once Torval and Gedwyn arrived, they could work out—

Abruptly something stung his right arm, and he stared down in consternation at the bloodstain spreading on his cloak. It did not feel like a deep cut, and no cutpurse would have slashed his forearm.

“He belongs to me,” a man whispered behind him, but when he turned, there was only the crowd in the street, all going about their business. The few who noticed the dark stain on his cloak looked away quickly. In this place, no one wanted to be associated with even the smallest violence. They were good at ignoring what they did not want to see.

The wound throbbed, burning more than it had at first. Releasing his cloak to the wind, Kisman pressed his left hand over the bloody slash in his sleeve. His arm felt swollen to his touch, and hot. Suddenly he stared in horror at his right hand, stared as it turned as black and bloated as a week-old corpse.

Frantically he began to run, pushing people out of his way, knocking them down. He did not know what was happening to him, how it had been done, but he was sure of the result. Unless he could get out of the city, beyond the lake, up into the hills. He had a chance, then. A horse. He needed a horse! He had to have a chance. He had been promised he would live forever! All he could see were people afoot, and they were scattering before his charge. He thought he heard Guardsmen’s rattles, but it might have been the blood pounding in his ears. Everything was going dark. His face hit something hard, and he knew he had fallen. His last thought was that one of the Chosen had decided to punish him, but for what, he could not have said.

Only a few men were sitting at the round tables in the common room of The Crown of Maredo when Rand walked in. Despite the grand name, it was a modest inn, with two dozen rooms on two floors above. The plastered walls of the common room were painted yellow, and the men serving table here wore long yellow aprons. A stone fireplace at either end of the room gave it a marked warmth after outside. The shutters were bolted, but lamps hung on the walls took the edge off the dimness. The smells drifting from the kitchens promised a tasty midday meal of fish from the lake. Rand would be sorry to miss that. The cooks at The Crown of Maredo were very good.

He saw Lan at a table by himself against the wall. The braided leather cord that held Lan’s hair back drew sidelong glances from some of the other men, but he refused to give up wearing the *hadori* even for a little while. He met Rand’s gaze, and when Rand nodded toward the stairs at the back of the room, he did not waste time with questioning looks; he just set down his winecup and rose, starting for the stairs. Even with just a small knife at his belt, he looked dangerous, but there was nothing to be done about that, either. Several men at the tables glanced Rand's way, but for some reason, they looked away hurriedly when he met their eyes.

Near the kitchen, at the door to the Women's Room, Rand stopped. Men were not allowed in there. Aside from a few flowers painted on the yellow walls, the Women's Room was not much fancier than the common room, though the stand-lamps were painted yellow, too, and the facings of the fireplace. The yellow aprons worn by the women who served table here were no different than those worn by the men in the common room. Mistress Nalhera, the slim, gray-haired innkeeper, was sitting at the same table as Min, Nynaeve and Alivia, all of them chatting and laughing over tea.

Rand's jaw tightened at the sight of the former *damane*. Nynaeve claimed the woman had insisted on coming along, but he did not believe anyone could "insist" on anything with Nynaeve. She wanted Alivia along for some secret reason. She had been behaving mysteriously, as though working as hard as she could at being Aes Sedai, ever since he went back for her after leaving Elayne. All three women had adopted high-necked Far Madding dresses, heavily embroidered with flowers and birds on the bodice and shoulders and right up to their chins, though sometimes Nynaeve grumbled over them. No doubt she would have preferred stout Two Rivers woolens to the finer material she found here. On the other hand, if the red dot of the *ki'sain* on her forehead were not enough to draw every eye, she had decked herself out in jewelry as though attending a royal audience, a slim golden belt and a long necklace and any number of bracelets, all but one set with bright blue sapphires and polished green stones he did not know, and every finger on her right hand had a ring to match. Her Great Serpent ring was tucked away somewhere, so as not to attract attention, but the rest drew ten times as much. Many people would not have known an Aes Sedai's ring at sight, but anyone could see money in those gems.

Rand cleared his throat and bent, his head. "Wife, I need to speak with you upstairs," he said, remembering at the last moment to add, "if it pleases you." He could not make it more urgent than that, not and maintain the proprieties, but he hoped they did not linger. They might, if only to demonstrate for the innkeeper that they were not at his beck and call. For some reason, people in Far Madding actually seemed to believe that women from off jumped when men told them to!

Min twisted around in her chair to grin at him, the way she did every time he called her wife. The feel of her in his head was warmth and delight, suddenly sparkling with amusement. She found their situation in Far Madding very amusing. Leaning toward Mistress Nalhera without taking her eyes from him, she said something in a low voice that made the older woman cackle with laughter and gave Nynaeve a pained expression.

Alivia stood up, looking nothing like the subdued woman he vaguely remembered handing over to Taim. All those captured *sul'dam* and *damane* had been a burden he was glad to be free of, no more. There were threads of white in her golden hair and fine lines at the corners of her eyes, but those eyes were fierce now. "Well?" she drawled, staring down at Nynaeve, but somehow she made the word both a criticism and a command.

Nynaeve glared up at the woman and took her sweet time in standing and smoothing her skirts, but at least she stood.

Rand waited no longer before rushing upstairs. Lan was waiting at the head of the stairs, just out of sight of the common room below. Quietly, Rand gave a bare-bones account of what had happened. Lan's stony face never changed expression.

"At least one of them is done," he said, turning toward the room he shared with Nynaeve. "I'll get our things ready."

Rand was already in the room he and Min shared, hurriedly pulling their clothes out of the tall wardrobe and stuffing them any way they would go into one of the wicker pack hampers, when she finally entered the room. Followed by Nynaeve and Alivia.

"Light, you'll ruin our things that way," Min exclaimed, shouldering him away from the hamper. She began removing garments and folding them neatly on the bed beside his peace-bonded sword. "Why are we packing?" she asked, but gave him no chance to answer. "Mistress Nalhera says you wouldn't be so sulky if I switched you every morning," she laughed, shaking out one of the coats she did not wear here. He had told her he would buy her new, but she refused to leave the embroidered coats and breeches behind. "I told her I'd consider it. She likes Lan very much." Suddenly she pitched her voice high in imitation of the innkeeper. "A neat, mild-mannered man is much to be preferred over a pretty face, I always say."

Nynaeve snorted. “Who wants a man she can make jump through hoops whenever she likes?” Rand stared at her, and Min’s mouth fell open. That was exactly what Nynaeve did to Lan, and how the man put up with it was more than Rand could understand.

“You think about men too much, Nynaeve,” Alivia drawled. Nynaeve frowned but instead of saying anything, she just stood there fingering one of her bracelets, a peculiar piece with flat golden chains stretching down the back of her left hand to rings on all four fingers. The older woman shook her head as though disappointed at not getting a rise.

“I’m packing because we have to go, and be quick about it,” Rand said hastily. Nynaeve might be quiet for the moment, odd as that was, but if her face got any darker she would be yanking her braid and shouting till no one could get a word in edgewise for hours.

Before he finished the same account he had given Lan, Min stopped folding things and started replacing her books in the second hamper, hurriedly enough that she did not pad them with cloaks the way she usually did. The other two women stood staring at him as though they had never seen him before. In case they were not being as quick to see as Min, he impatiently added, “Rochaid and Kisman ambushed me. They knew I was following. Kisman got away. If he knows this inn, he and Dashiva and Gedwyn and Torval might all turn up here, maybe in two or three days, or maybe in an hour or so.”

“I am not blind,” Nynaeve said, still staring at him. There was no heat in her voice; was she protesting just for the form of it? “If you want to hurry, help Min instead of standing around like a woolhead.” She stared at him a moment longer, and shook her head before leaving.

Alivia paused in the act of following, and glared at Rand. No, there was nothing subdued about her any longer. “You could get yourself killed like that,” she said disapprovingly. “You have too much to do to get killed yet. You must let us help.”

He frowned at the door closing behind her. “Have you had any viewings about her, Min?”

“All the time, but not the kind you mean, nothing I understand.” She wrinkled her nose at one of the books and set it aside. Small chance she would abandon a single volume of her not-so-small library. Undoubtedly she meant to carry that one, and read it at the first opportunity. She spent hours with her nose in those books. “Rand,” she said slowly, “you did all that, killed one man and faced another, and . . . Rand, I didn't *feel* anything. In the bond, I mean. No fear, no anger. Not even *concern*! Nothing."

"I wasn't angry with him." Shaking his head, he began shoving clothes into the hamper again. "He just needed killing, that's all. And why would I be afraid?"

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "I see." She bent back to the books. The bond had gone very still, as if she were deep in thought, but there was a troubled thread worming though the stillness.

"Min, I promise I won't let anything happen to you." He did not know whether he could keep that promise, but he intended to try.

She smiled at him, almost laughing. Light, she was beautiful. "I know that, Rand. And I won't let anything happen to you." Love flowed along the bond like the blaze of a noonday sun. "Alivia's right, though. You do have to let us help somehow. If you describe these fellows well enough, maybe we can ask questions. You certainly can't search the whole city alone."

We are dead men, Lews Therin murmured. *Dead men should be quiet in their graves, but they never are.*

Rand barely heard the voice in his head. Suddenly he knew he did not have to describe Kisman and the others. He could draw them so well that anyone would recognize the faces. Except, he had never been able to draw in his life. Lews Therin could, though. That should have frightened him. It should have.

Isam paced the room, studying by the ever-present light of *Tel'aran'rhiod*. The bed linens shifted from rumpled to neatly made between one glance and the next. The coverlet changed from flowered to plain dark red to quilted. The ephemeral always changed here, and he barely noticed anymore. He could not use *Tel'aran'rhiod* the way the Chosen could, but here was where he felt most free. Here, he could be who he wanted to be. He chuckled at the thought.

Stopping beside the bed, he carefully unsheathed the two poisoned daggers and stepped out of the Unseen World into the waking. As he did, he became Luc. It seemed appropriate.

The room was dark in the waking world, but the single window let in sufficient moonlight for Luc to make out the mounded shapes of two people lying asleep beneath their blankets. Without hesitation he drove a blade into each. They woke with small cries, but he pulled the blades free and drove them in again and again. With the poison, it was unlikely either would have had the strength to shout loudly enough to be heard outside the room, but he wanted to make this kill his own in a way that poison could not grant. Soon they stopped twitching when he thrust a blade between ribs.

Wiping the daggers clean on the coverlet, he resheathed them with as much care as he had drawn them. He had been given many gifts, but immunity to poison, or any other weapon, was not among them. Then he took a short candle from his pocket and blew away enough ash from the banked coals in the fireplace to light the wick. He always liked to see the people he killed, after if he could not during. He had especially enjoyed those two Aes Sedai in the Stone of Tear. The incredulity on their faces when he appeared out of thin air, the horror when they realized he had not come to save them, were treasured memories. That had been Isam, not him, but the memories were none the less prized for that. Neither of them got to kill an Aes Sedai very often.

For a moment he studied the faces of the man and woman on the bed, then pinched out the candle's flame and returned the candle to his pocket before stepping back into *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

His patron of the moment was waiting for him. A man, he was sure of that much, but Luc could not look at him. It was not as it was with those slimy Gray Men, whom you just did not notice. He had killed one of them, once, in the White Tower itself. They felt cold and empty to the touch. It had been like killing a corpse. No, this man had done something with the Power so Luc's eyes slid away from him like water sliding down glass. Even seen at the corner of the eye, he was a blur.

"The pair sleeping in this room will sleep forever," Luc said, "but the man was bald, the woman gray."

"A pity," the man said, and the voice seemed to melt in Luc's ears. He would not be able to recognize it if he heard it without the disguise. The man had to be one of the Chosen. Few save the Chosen knew how to reach him, and none of the men among those few could channel, or would have dared trying to command him. His services were always begged, except by the Great Lord himself, and more recently by the Chosen, but none of the Chosen Luc had met had ever taken such precautions as this.

"Do you want me to try again?" Luc asked.

"Perhaps. When I tell you. Not before. Remember, not a word of this to anyone."

“As you command,” Luc replied, bowing, but the man was already making a gateway, a hole that opened into a snowy forest glade. He was gone before Luc straightened.

It really was a pity. He had rather looked forward to killing his nephew and the wench. But if there was time to pass, hunting was always a pleasure. He became Isam. Isam liked killing wolves even more than Luc did.

* * *

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CHAPTER
23

To Lose the Sun

Trying to hold the unfamiliar woolen cloak tightly around her with one hand, trying not to fall out of the even more unfamiliar saddle, Shalon awkwardly heeled her horse forward and followed Harine and her Swordmaster Moad through the hole in the air that led from a stableyard in the Sun Palace to . . . She was not sure where, except that it was a long open area—a clearing, was it called? she thought that was right—a clearing larger than a raker’s deck, among stunted trees spaced out on hills. The pines, the only trees among them she recognized, were too small and twisted for any use but tar and turpentine. Most of the rest showed bare gray branches that made her think of bones. The morning sun sat just above the treetops, and if anything, the cold seemed more bitter here than it had in the city she had left behind. She hoped the horse did not misstep and tumble her down onto the rocks that stuck up wherever patches of snow did not cover the rotting leaves on the ground. She distrusted horses. Unlike ships, animals had minds of their own. They were treacherous things to climb on top of. And horses had teeth. Whenever her mount showed his, so near to her legs, she flinched and patted his neck and made soothing sounds. At least, she hoped the beast found them soothing.

Cadsuane herself, garbed in unrelieved dark green, sat easily on a tall horse with a black mane and tail, maintaining the weave that made the gateway. Horses did not bother her. Nothing bothered her. A sudden breeze stirred the dark gray cloak spread over the back end of her mount, but she gave no sign of feeling the cold at all. The golden hair ornaments dangling around her dark gray bun swung as she turned her head to watch Shalon and her companions. She was a handsome woman, but not one you would notice twice in a crowd except that her smooth face did not match her hair. Once you came to know her, it was too late.

Shalon would have given much to see how that weave was done, even if it had meant being near Cadsuane, but she had not been allowed into the stableyard until the gateway was complete, and seeing a sail spread on the yardarm did not teach you how to set a sail much less make one. All she knew was the name. Riding past, she avoided meeting the Aes Sedai's gaze, but she felt it. The woman's eyes made her toes curl, seeking a footing the stirrups could not give. She could see no way to escape, yet she hoped to find one through studying the Aes Sedai. That she knew very little about Aes Sedai, she was readily willing to admit—she had never met one before sailing to Cairhien, and thought about them only to praise the Light that she had not been chosen to become one—but there were currents among Cadsuane's companions, deep beneath the surface. Deep, strong currents could alter everything that seemed apparent on the surface.

The four Aes Sedai who had come through right after Cadsuane were waiting on their horses at one side of the . . . clearing . . . with three Warders. At least, Shalon was sure that Ihvon was the fiery Alanna's Warder, and Tomas was stout little Verin's, but she also was sure she had seen the very young man who stayed so close to plump Daigian's side wearing an Asha'man's black coat. Surely he could not be a Warder. Could he? Eben was just a boy. Yet when the woman gazed at him, her usual puffed-up pride seemed to swell further. Kumira, a pleasant-looking woman with blue eyes that could turn into knives when something interested her, sat her saddle a little to one side, studying young Eben so sharply it was a wonder he was not lying on the ground flensed.

"I will not put up with this much longer," Harine grumbled, thumping her mare with her bare heels to keep it moving. Her brocaded yellow silks did not help her keep a good seat in the saddle any more than did Shalon's blue. She swayed and slid with the animal's movements, on the point of toppling to the ground at every step. The breeze gusted again, flipping the dangling ends of her sash about, making her cloak billow, but she disdained to control the garment. Cloaks were not much used in the ships; they got in the way, and could tangle your arms and legs when you needed them for survival. Moad had refused one, trusting to the quilted blue coat he wore in the coldest seas. Nesune Bihara, all in bronze wool, rode through the gateway looking around as if trying to see everything at once, and then Elza Penfel, who wore a sullen expression for some reason and clutched her fur-lined green cloak tight. None of the other Aes Sedai seemed to bother much with sheltering themselves from the cold.

“I *may* be able to see the Coramoor, she says,” Harine muttered, pulling at her reins until the mare turned toward the side of the clearing away from where the Aes Sedai were gathering. “May! And she offers this *chance* as though granting a privilege.” Harine did not need to give a name; when Harine said “she” that way, like a jellyfish’s sting, there could only be one woman she meant. “I have the right, bargained for and agreed! She denies me the agreed entourage! I must leave my Sailmistress behind, and my attendants!” Erian Boroleos appeared through the opening, as intent as if she expected to find a battle, followed by Beldeine Nyram, who did not even look like an Aes Sedai. Both wore green, Erian completely, Beldeine in slashes in her sleeves and skirts. Did that mean something? Likely not. “Am I to approach the Coramoor like a deckgirl touching my heart to a Sailmistress?” When several Aes Sedai were together, you could see the smooth-faced agelessness clearly, so you could not say whether any one was twenty or twice that even if her hair was white, and Beldeine simply looked a girl of twenty. And that told no more than did her skirts. “Am I to air my own bedding and wash my own linens? She turns protocol straight into the wind! I will not allow it! No more!” These were old complaints, voiced a dozen times since last night, when Cadsuane laid down her conditions if they were to accompany her. Those conditions had been strict, but Harine had had no choice save to accede, which only added to the bitterness.

Shalon listened with half an ear, nodding and murmuring the appropriate responses. Agreement, of course. Her sister expected agreement. Most of her attention was on the Aes Sedai. Surreptitiously. Moad did not pretend to listen, but then, he was Harine’s Swordmaster. Harine might be tight as a wet knot with everyone else, yet she gave Moad so much leeway anyone might have thought the hard-eyed, gray-haired man was her lover, especially since both were widowed. At least, they might think it if they did not know Harine. Harine would never take a lover who stood lower than she, and now, of course, that meant she could take none. In any case, once they stopped their horses near the trees, Moad leaned an elbow on the tall pommel of his saddle, rested a hand on the long, carved ivory hilt of the sword thrust behind his green sash, and openly studied the Aes Sedai and the men with them. Where had he learned to ride a horse? He actually looked . . . comfortable. Anyone could tell his rank at a glance, from his eight earrings of the heaviest weight and the knotting of his sash, even if he was not wearing his sword and matching dagger. Did Aes Sedai have no way to do the same? Could they truly be so disorganized? Supposedly the White Tower was like some mechanical contrivance that ground up thrones and reshaped them to its will. Of course, the machinery did seem to be broken, now.

"I said, where has she brought us, Shalon?"

Harine's voice, like an icy razor, drained the blood from Shalon's face. Serving under a younger sibling was always difficult, but Harine made it more so. In private she was beyond cool, and in public she was capable of having a Sailmistress hung up by the ankles, not to mention a Windfinder. And since that young shorebound woman, Min, had told her she would be Mistress of the Ships one day, she had grown ever sharper. Staring hard-eyed at Shalon, she raised her golden scent-box as if to cover an unpleasant odor, though the cold killed all the perfume.

Hurriedly Shalon looked into the sky, trying to judge the sun. She wished her sextant were not locked away on *White Spray*—the shorebound were never allowed to see a sextant, much less see one being used—but she was uncertain it would have done her any good. These trees might be short, but she still could not make out a horizon. Close on to the north, the hills rose into mountains that slanted northeast to southwest. She could not say how high she was. There was far too much up and down about landside to suit her. Even so, any Windfinder knew how to make rough approximations. And when Harine demanded information, she expected to receive it.

"I can only guess, Wavemistress," she said. Harine's jaw tightened, but no Windfinder would present a guess as a firm position. "I believe we are three or four hundred leagues south of Cairhien. More, I cannot say." Any first-day apprentice using a string-stick who gave a fix that loose would have been bent over for the deckmaster's starter, but the words chilled Shalon's tongue as she heard what she was saying. A hundred leagues over the full turn of a day was good sailing for a raker. Moad pursed his lips thoughtfully.

Harine nodded slowly, looking right through Shalon as though she could see rakers under full sail gliding through holes woven in the air with the Power. The seas truly would be theirs, then. Giving herself a shake, she leaned toward Shalon, her eyes catching Shalon's like hooks. "You must learn this, whatever the cost. Tell her you will spy on me if she teaches you.

If you convince her, she might, the Light willing. Or at least you may get close enough to one of the others to learn it."

Shalon licked her lips. She hoped Harine had not seen her jerk. "I refused her before, Wavemistress." She had needed some explanation of why the Aes Sedai had held her for a week, and a version of the truth had seemed safest. Harine knew everything. Except the secret Verin had winkled out. Except that Shalon had agreed to Cadsuane's demands in order to hide that secret. The Grace of the Light be upon her, she regretted Ailil, but she had been so lonely that she sailed too far before she knew it. With Harine, there were no evening talks over honeyed wine to soften the long months parted from her husband Mishael. At best, many more months would pass before she could lie in his arms. "With respect, why should she believe me now?"

"Because you want the learning." Harine chopped the air with one hand. "The shorebound always believe greed. You will have to tell some things, of course, to prove yourself. I will decide what each day. Perhaps I can steer her where I wish."

Hard fingers seemed to dig into Shalon's scalp. She had intended to tell Cadsuane as little as she could get by with, and as seldom, until she found a way free of her. If she had to talk with the Aes Sedai every day, and worse, lie to her outright, the woman would pry out more than Shalon wanted. More than Harine wanted. Much more. It was as certain as sunrise. "Forgive me, Wavemistress," she said with every ounce of deference she could find, "but if I may be allowed to say so—"

She cut off as Sarene Nemdahl rode up and reined to a halt before them. The last of the Aes Sedai and Warders had come through, and Cadsuane had let the gateway vanish. Corele, a thin woman if pretty, was laughing and tossing her mane of black hair as she spoke to Kumira. Merise, a tall woman with eyes bluer than Kumira's and a more than handsome face that was stern enough to give even Harine pause, was using sharp gestures to direct the four men leading packhorses. Everyone else was gathering reins. It seemed they were all getting ready to leave the clearing.

Sarene was lovely, though the absence of jewelry lessened her looks, of course, as did the plain white dress she wore. The shorebound seemed to have no joy of color at all. Even her dark cloak was lined with white fur. "Cadsuane, she has asked . . . instructed . . . me to be your attendant, Wavemistress," she said, inclining her head respectfully. "I will answer your questions, to the extent that I can, and help you with the customs, as well as I know them. I realize you might feel discomfort at being with me, but when Cadsuane commands, we must obey."

Shalon smiled. She doubted the Aes Sedai knew that in the ships, an attendant was what the shorebound would call a servant. Harine would probably laugh and demand to know whether the Aes Sedai could clean linens properly. It would be good to have her in a good mood.

Rather than laughing, though, Harine stiffened in her saddle as though her backbone had become a mainmast, and her eyes popped. "I feel no discomfort!" she snapped. "I simply prefer to . . . to put any questions to someone else . . . to Cadsuane. Yes. To Cadsuane. And *I* certainly do not have to obey her or anyone! Not anyone! Except the Mistress of the Ships!" Shalon frowned; it was unlike her sister to sound scatter-witted. Drawing a deep breath, Harine continued in a firmer tone, though in a way, just as oddly as before. "I speak for the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere, and I demand due respect! I demand it, do you hear me? Do you?"

"I can ask her to name someone else," Sarene said doubtfully, as if she did not expect her asking would change anything. "You must understand that she gave me quite specific instructions that day. But I should not have lost my temper. That is a failing of mine. Temper destroys logic."

"I understand obeying orders," Harine growled, crouching in the saddle. She looked ready to launch herself at Sarene's throat. "I *approve* of obeying orders!" she very nearly snarled. "However, orders that have been carried out can be forgotten. They no longer need be spoken of. Do you understand me?" Shalon stared sideways at her. What was she talking about? What orders had Sarene carried out, and why did Harine want them forgotten? Moad made no pretence of hiding his raised eyebrows. Harine was aware of his scrutiny, at least, and her face became a thunderhead.

Sarene seemed not to notice. "I do not see how one can deliberately forget," she said slowly, a small frown creasing her forehead, "but I suppose you mean that we should pretend to. Is that it?" The beaded braids dangling from her cowl clicked together as she shook her head at this foolishness. "Very well. I will answer your questions as well as I can. What do you wish to know?" Harine sighed loudly. Shalon might have taken it for impatience, but she thought it was relief. Relief!

Relieved or not, Harine became her normal self again, self-possessed and commanding, meeting the Aes Sedai's gaze as though trying to make her drop her eyes. “You can tell me where we are and where we are going,” she demanded.

“We are in the Hills of Kintara,” Cadsuane said, appearing before them suddenly, her mount rearing and pawing the air, flinging snow, “and we are going to Far Madding.” Not only did she stay in the saddle, she did not even seem to notice the animal’s heaving!

“Is the Coramoor in this Far Madding?”

“Patience is a virtue, I am told, Wavemistress.” Despite Cadsuane’s use of Harine’s proper title, there was no respect in her manner. Far from it. “You will ride with me. Keep up and try not to fall off. It would be unpleasant, if I had to have you carried like sacks of grain. Once we reach the city, keep silent unless I tell you to speak. I won’t have you creating problems through ignorance. You will let Sarene guide you. She has her instructions.”

Shalon expected an outburst of rage, but Harine held her tongue, though with obvious effort. Once Cadsuane turned away, Harine did mutter angrily under her breath, but she clamped her teeth tight when Sarene’s horse moved. Plainly, her mutters were not to be overheard by Aes Sedai.

Riding with Cadsuane, it turned out, meant riding behind her, southward through the trees. Alanna and Verin actually rode beside the woman, but one look from her when Harine attempted to join them made clear that no one else was welcome. Once again the expected explosion did not come. Instead, Harine frowned at Sarene for some reason, then jerked her mount around to take position between Shalon and Moad. She did not bother asking any further questions of Sarene, on Shalon’s other side, only glowered at the backs of the women ahead. If Shalon had not known Harine better, she would have said there was more sulk than anger in that glare.

For her part, Shalon was glad to ride in silence. Riding a horse was difficult enough without having to talk at the same time. Besides, she suddenly knew why Harine was behaving in such a peculiar fashion. Harine must be trying to smooth the waters with the Aes Sedai. It had to be that. Harine never controlled her temper without great need. The strain of controlling it now must have her boiling inside. And if her efforts did not end as she wanted, she would boil Shalon. Thinking about that made Shalon’s head ache. The Light help and guide her, there had to be a way to avoid spying on her sister without finding her cheek-chain stripped of honors and herself assigned to a scow under a Sailmistress brooding over why she had never risen higher and ready to take out her grievances on everyone around her. Equally as bad, Mishael might declare their marriage vows broken. There just had to be a way.

Sometimes she twisted around in her saddle to look at the Aes Sedai riding behind her. There was nothing to learn from the women in front, certainly. Every so often Cadsuane and Verin exchanged words, but leaning close to one another and speaking too softly to be overheard. Alanna appeared intent on whatever lay ahead, her eyes always looking south. Two or three times she quickened her horse's pace for a few steps before Cadsuane brought her back with a quiet word that Alanna obeyed reluctantly, with hot-eyed stare or sullen grimace. Cadsuane and Verin appeared solicitous of the woman, Cadsuane patting her arm in almost the way Shalon patted her mount's neck and Verin beaming at her, as though Alanna were recovering from an illness. Which told Shalon nothing. So she thought about the others.

You did not rise in the ships just through your ability to Weave the Winds or predict the weather or fix a position. You needed to read the intent that lay between the words of your orders, to interpret small gestures and facial expressions; you had to notice who deferred to whom, even subtly, for courage and ability alone took you only so high.

Four of them, Nesune and Erian, Beldeine and Elza, rode in a cluster not far behind her, though they were not really together, only occupying the same space. They did not talk among themselves, or look at one another. They did not seem to like one another very much. In her mind, Shalon had them in the same boat with Sarene. The Aes Sedai pretended that they were all one under Cadsuane, yet that was plainly untrue. Merise, Corele, Kumira and Daigian crewed another boat, commanded by Cadsuane. Sometimes Alanna seemed in one boat, sometimes the other, while Verin appeared to be in some way of Cadsuane's boat but not in it. Swimming alongside, perhaps, with Cadsuane holding her hand. If that was not strange enough, there was the matter of deference.

Oddly, it seemed that Aes Sedai valued strength in the Power above experience or skill. They ranked themselves by strength, like deckmen squabbling in shoreside taverns. All deferred to Cadsuane, of course, yet there were oddities among the rest. By their own hierarchy, some in Nesune's boat were in a position to expect deference from some in Cadsuane's, but although those in Cadsuane's boat who should defer did so, they did so as though to a superior who had committed a grievous crime known to all. By that hierarchy, Nesune stood higher than any save Cadsuane and Merise, yet she faced Daigian, who stood at the very bottom, as if willfully defiant over committing that crime, and so did the others in her boat. It was all very discreet, a slightly lifted chin, a small arch of the eyebrow, a twist of the lips, but obvious to an eye trained climbing in the ships. Perhaps there was nothing in it that would help her, but if she had to pick oakum, the only way was to find a thread and pull.

The wind began to pick up; gusts flattened her cloak against her back and made it flap on either side ahead of her. She was hardly aware of it.

The Warders might be another thread. They were all at the very rear, hidden by the Aes Sedai riding behind Nesune and the other three. In truth, Shalon had expected that among twelve Aes Sedai, there would be more than seven Warders. Every Aes Sedai was supposed to have one, if not more. She shook her head irritably. Except the Red Ajah, of course. She was not *entirely* ignorant of Aes Sedai.

Anyway, the question was not how many Warders, but whether they all *were* Warders. She was certain she had seen grizzled old Damer and the so-pretty Jahar in black coats, too, before they suddenly took up with the Aes Sedai. At the time, she had been unwilling to look too closely at the blackcoats, and in truth, she had been half-blind with the dainty Ailil as well, but she *was* sure. And whatever the case with Eben, she was almost certain the other two were Warders, now. Almost. Jahar jumped as fast as Nethan or Bassane when Merise pointed, and from the way Corele smiled at Damer, he was either her Warder or her bedwarmer, and Shalon could not imagine a woman like Corele taking a nearly bald old man with a limp into her bed. She might know little about Aes Sedai, but she was sure bonding men who could channel was not an accepted practice. If she could prove they had done so, perhaps that was a knife sharp enough to cut herself free from Cadsuane.

“The men, they can no longer channel now,” Sarene murmured.

Shalon straightened herself around in the saddle so quickly that she had to grab her horse’s mane with both hands to keep from falling off. The wind blew her cloak over her head, and she had to fight that down before she could sit up. They were coming out of the trees above a wide road that curved southward out of the hills to a lake perhaps a mile off, on the edge of flat land covered with brown grass, a sea of brown stretching to the horizon.

The lake, bordered along the west with a narrow wash of reeds, was a pitiful excuse for a body of water, no more than ten miles long at most and less than that wide. A fair-sized island crouched in the middle, surrounded by high, tower-studded walls as far as she could see, and covered by a city. She took all that in at a glance, her eyes fastening on Sarene. It was almost as if the woman had been reading her mind. “Why can they not channel?” she asked. “Did you . . . ? Have you . . . gentled . . . them?” She thought that was the right word, but that was supposed to kill the man. She had always supposed it was just an odd way to soften execution for some unknown reason.

Sarene blinked, and Shalon realized the Aes Sedai had been speaking to herself. For a moment she studied Shalon as they followed Cadsuane down the slope, then turned her gaze back to the city on the island. “You notice things, Shalon. It would be best if you keep what you have noticed about the men to yourself.”

“Such as them being Warders?” Shalon said quietly. “Is that why you could bond them? Because you gentled them?” She hoped to jar some admission loose, but the Aes Sedai merely glanced at her. She did not speak again until they had reached the bottom of the hill and turned onto the road behind Cadsuane. The road was wide, the dirt packed hard by much traffic, but they had it to themselves.

“It is not exactly a secret,” Sarene said at last, and not very willingly for something that was not a secret, “but neither is it well known. We do not speak of Far Madding often, except for sisters born there, and even they seldom visit. Still, you should know before you enter. The city possesses a *ter’angreal*. Or perhaps it is three *ter’angreal*. No one knows. They—or it—cannot be studied any more than they can be removed. They must have been made during the Breaking, when fear of madmen channeling the Power was the matter of every day. But to pay such a price for the safety.” The beaded braids dangling onto her chest rattled together as she shook her head in disbelief. “These *ter’angreal*, they duplicate a *stedding*. In the important ways at least, I fear, though I suppose an Ogier would not think so.” She gave a doleful sigh.

Shalon gaped at her, and exchanged confused looks with Harine and Moad. Why would fables frighten an Aes Sedai? Harine opened her mouth, then motioned for Shalon to ask the obvious question. Perhaps she was to make friends with Sarene to help smooth her course, too? Shalon's head really did ache. But she was curious, too.

"What ways are those?" she asked carefully. Did the woman really believe in people five spans tall who sang to trees? There was something about axes, too. Here come the Aelfinn to steal all your bread; here come the Ogier to chop off your head. Light, she had not heard that since Harine was still in leading strings. With their mother rising in the ships, she had been charged with raising Harine along with her own first child.

Sarene's eyes widened in surprise. "You truly do not know?" Her gaze went back to the island city ahead. By her expression, she was about to enter the bilges. "Inside the *stedding,* you cannot channel. You cannot even feel the True Source. No weave made outside can affect what is inside, not that that matters. In truth, here there are two *stedding,* one within the other. The larger affects men, but we will enter the smaller before we reach the bridge."

"You will not be able to channel in there?" Harine said. When the Aes Sedai nodded without looking away from the city, a thin frosty smile touched Harine's lips. "Perhaps after we find quarters, you and I can discuss instructions."

"You read the philosophy?" Sarene looked startled. "The Theory of Instructions, it is not well thought of these days, yet I have always believed there was much to learn there. A discussion will be pleasant, to take my mind from other matters. If Cadsuane allows us time."

Harine's mouth fell open. Gaping at the Aes Sedai, she forgot to cling to her saddle, and only Moad seizing her arm saved her from a fall.

Shalon had never heard Harine mention philosophy, but she did not care what her sister was talking about. Staring toward Far Madding, she swallowed hard. She had learned to sheathe someone against using the Power, of course, and been sheathed herself as part of her training, yet when you were sheathed, you could still feel the Source. What would it be like not to feel it, like the sun just out of sight beyond the corner of your eye? What would it be like to lose the sun?

As they rode nearer the lake, she felt more aware of the Source than she had since her first joy at touching it. It was all she could do not to drink of it, but the Aes Sedai would see the light and know, and likely know why. She would not shame herself or Harine in that manner. Small, beamy craft dotted the water, none more than six or seven spans in length, some hauling in nets, others creeping along on long sweeps. Judging by the windswept swells that rolled across the surface, sometimes crashing into one another in fountains of foam like surf, sails might have been as much hindrance as help. Still, the boats seemed almost a familiar thing, though nothing like the sleek fours or eights or twelves carried on the ships. A tiny comfort amid strangeness.

The road turned onto a spit of land jutting half a mile or more into the lake, and abruptly the Source vanished. Sarene sighed, but gave no other sign she had noticed. Shalon wet her lips. It was not so bad as she had feared. It made her feel . . . empty . . . but she could bear that. As long as she did not have to bear it too long. The wind, gusting and curling and trying to steal cloaks, suddenly felt much colder.

At the end of the spit, a village of gray stone houses with darker slate roofs stood between road and water on one side. Village women hurrying along with large baskets stopped at the sight of the mounted party. More than one felt at her own nose as she stared. Shalon had grown almost accustomed to those stares, in Cairhien. In any case, the fortification opposite the village drew her eyes, a mound of tight-fitted stone five spans high with soldiers watching through the barred faceguards of their helmets from atop towers at the corners. Some held drawn crossbows where she could see them. From a large iron-plated door at the end nearest the bridge, more helmeted soldiers spilled out into the road, men in square-scaled armor with a golden sword worked on the left shoulder. Some wore swords at their waists and others carried long spears or crossbows. Shalon wondered whether they expected the Aes Sedai to try fighting past. An officer with a yellow plume on his helmet motioned Cadsuane to a halt, then approached her and removed his helmet, freeing gray-streaked hair that spilled down his back to his waist. He had a hard, disgruntled face.

Cadsuane leaned low in her saddle to exchange a few quiet words with the man, then produced a fat purse from beneath her saddlebags. He took it and stepped back, motioning one of the soldiers forward, a tall bony man who was not wearing a helmet. He carried a writing board, and his hair, gathered at the back of his head like the officer’s, also hung to his waist. He bent his neck respectfully before inquiring Alanna’s name, and wrote it very carefully, with his tongue caught between his teeth, dipping his pen often. Helmet on his hip, the discontented officer stood studying the others behind Cadsuane with no expression. The purse hung from his hand as though forgotten. He seemed unaware he had been speaking with an Aes Sedai. Or maybe, he did not care. Here, an Aes Sedai was no different from any other woman. Shalon shuddered. Here, she was no different from any other woman, bereft of her gifts for the duration of her stay. Bereft.

“They take the names of all foreigners,” Sarene said. “The Counsels, they like to know who is in the city.”

“Perhaps they would admit a Wavemistress without bribes,” Harine said drily. The bony soldier, turning away from Alanna, gave the usual shorebound start at Shalon and Harine’s jewelry before coming toward them.

“Your name, Mistress, if it pleases you?” he said politely to Sarene, ducking his head again. She gave it without mentioning that she was Aes Sedai. Shalon gave hers as simply, but Harine offered the titles as well, Harine din Togara Two Winds, Wavemistress of Clan Shodein, Ambassador Extraordinary of the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha’an Miere. The fellow blinked, then bit his tongue and bent his neck over the writing board. Harine scowled. When she wanted to impress someone, she expected them to be impressed.

As the bony man was writing, a stocky, helmeted soldier with a leather scrip hanging from his shoulder pushed between Harine’s horse and Moad’s. Behind the bars of his faceguard, a puckered scar down his face pulled up one side of his mouth in a sneer, but he bowed his head to Harine respectfully enough. And then he tried to take Moad’s sword.

“You must allow it or leave your blades here until you depart,” Sarene said quickly when the Swordmaster twitched the scabbard out of the stocky man’s hands. “This service, it is what Cadsuane was paying for, Wavemistress. In Far Madding, no man is allowed to carry more than the belt knife unless it is peace-bonded so it cannot be drawn. Even the Wall Guards like these men cannot take a sword away from their place of duty. Is that not so?” she asked the skinny soldier, and he replied that it was, and a good thing, too.

With a shrug, Moad lifted the sword from his sash, and when the fellow with the perpetual sneer demanded his ivory-hilted dagger as well, he handed that over. Tucking the long dagger behind his belt, the man produced a spool of fine wire from his scrip and deftly began wrapping the sword in a fine net. Every so often he paused to pluck a seal-press from his belt and fold a small lead disc around the wires, but he had quick, practiced hands.

"The list of names, it will be distributed to the other two bridges," Sarene went on, "and the men will have to show the wires unbroken or they will be held until a magistrate determines that no other crime has been committed. Even if none has, the penalty is both a very heavy fine and flogging. Most foreigners, they deposit their weapons before entering to save the coin, but that would mean we must leave by this bridge. The Light alone knows which direction we will want to go when we leave here." Looking toward Cadsuane, who appeared to be restraining Alanna from riding across the long bridge alone, Sarene added almost under her breath, "At least, I hope that is her reasoning."

Harine snorted. "This is ridiculous. How is he to defend himself?"

"No need for any man to defend himself in Far Madding, Mistress." The stocky man's voice was coarse, but he did not sound mocking. He was stating the obvious. "The Street Guards take care of that. Let any man as wants start carrying a sword, and soon we'd be as bad as everyplace else. I heard what they're like, Mistress, and we don't want that here." Bowing to Harine, he strode on down the column followed by the man with the writing board.

Moad briefly examined his sword and dagger, both neatly wrapped hilt and scabbard, then eased them back in place, taking care not to snag his sash on the seals. "Swords only become useful when wits fail," he said. Harine snorted again. Shalon wondered how that fellow had gained his scar if Far Madding was so safe.

Sounds of protest rose from the rear, where the other men were, but they were quickly silenced. By Merise, Shalon would have wagered. At times, the woman made Cadsuane seem lax. Her Warders were like the trained guard dogs the Amayar used, ready to leap at a whistle, and she was not at all hesitant about calling down the other Aes Sedai's Warders. Soon enough all of the swords had been peace-bonded, and the packhorses searched for hidden weapons, and they rode out onto the bridge, hooves ringing on stone. Shalon tried to take in everything, not so much from interest as to take her mind off what was missing.

The bridge was flat and as wide as the road behind, with low stone copings on the side that would stop a wagon from plunging over but give no shelter to attackers, and it was long, too, perhap as much as three-quarters of a mile, and straight as an arrow. Now and then one of the boats passed beneath, which they could not have done had they had masts. Tall towers flanked the city’s iron-strapped gates—the Caemlyn Gate was the name Sarene gave—where guards with the golden sword on their shoulders bowed their heads to the women and cast suspicious eyes on the men. The street beyond. . . .

Trying to be observant was no use. The street was wide and straight, full of people and carts, lined with stone buildings two or three stories high, and it all seemed a blur. The Source was gone! She knew it would come back when she left this place, and Light, she wanted to leave now. But how long before she could? The Coramoor might be in this city, and Harine meant to make herself fast to the Coramoor, perhaps because of who he was, perhaps because she thought he would help her rise to Mistress of the Ships. Until Harine left, until Cadsuane freed them from the agreement, Shalon was anchored here. Here, where there was no True Source.

Sarene talked incessantly, yet Shalon barely heard her. They crossed a large square with a huge statue of a woman in the center, but Shalon caught only her name, Einion Avharin, though she knew Sarene was telling her why the woman was famous in Far Madding and why her statue was pointing toward the Caemlyn Gate. A row of leafless trees divided the street beyond the square. Sedan chairs and coaches and men in square-scaled armor threaded though the crowds, but they registered only on her eyes. Trembling, she huddled in on herself. The city vanished. Time vanished. Everything vanished except her fear that she would never feel the Source again. She had never before realized what comfort she had taken in its unseen presence. It had always been there, promising joy beyond knowing, life so rich that colors paled when the Power was gone from her. And now the Source itself was gone. Gone. That was all she was aware of, all she could be aware of. It was gone.

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CHAPTER 24

Among the Counsels

Someone shook Shalon’s arm. It was Sarene, and the Aes Sedai was talking to her. “It is in there,” Sarene said, “in the Hall of the Counsels. Beneath the dome.” Withdrawing her hand, she took a deep breath and gathered her reins. “It is ridiculous to think that the effect is any worse just because we are close,” she muttered, “but it does feel so.”

Shalon roused herself with an effort. The emptiness would not go away, but she forced herself to ignore it. Yet in truth she felt cored like a piece of fruit.

They were in a huge—she supposed it was still called a square, though this one was round—a huge square paved with white stone. At the center stood a great palace, a round structure all of white except for the tall blue dome on top, like half of a ball. Massive fluted columns surrounded the upper two levels below the dome, and a steady stream of people flowed up and down the broad white stone stairs leading up to the second level on either side. Except for a pair of tall arched bronze gates standing open directly ahead of them, the lowest level was all white stone carved with diademed women more than twice life-size, and between them, white stone sheaves of grain and bolts of cloth that seemed to have their free ends rippling in a wind, and stacks of ingots that might have been meant for gold or silver or iron or perhaps all three, and sacks spilling out what looked coins and gemstones. Beneath the women’s feet, much smaller white stone figures drove wagons and worked forges and looms in a continuous band. These people had made a monument proclaiming their success at trade. That was foolish. When people decided you were better at trade than they, they not only grew jealous, they became stubborn and tried to demand ridiculous bargains. And sometimes you had no alternative save to accept.

She realized that Harine was frowning at her, and straightened herself in the saddle. “Forgive me, Wavemistress,” she said. The Source was gone, but it would return—of course it would!—and she had her duty. She was ashamed that she had let herself give in to fear, yet the emptiness remained. Oh, Light, the emptiness! “I am better, now. I will do better from here on.” Harine merely nodded, still frowning, and Shalon’s scalp prickled. When Harine failed to deliver an expected tongue-lashing, it was because she intended to deliver worse.

Cadsuane rode straight across the square and through the Hall of the Counsels’ open gates into a large, high-ceilinged room that appeared to be an indoor stableyard. A dozen men in blue coats, squatting beside sedan chairs with both a golden sword and a golden hand painted on the doors, looked up in surprise when they rode in. So did the men in blue vests who were unharnessing the team from a coach with the sword-and-hand sigil, and those sweeping the stone floor with large pushbrooms. Two more grooms were leading horses down a wide corridor that gave off the smell of hay and dung.

A plump, smooth-cheeked man in his middle years came scurrying across the paving stones, bobbing his head in small bows and dry-washing his hands. Where the other men had their long hair tied at the nape of the neck, his was caught with a small silver clip, and his blue coat appeared of good quality wool, with the golden Sword-and-Hand embroidered large on his left breast. “Forgive me,” he said with an unctuous smile, “I mean no offense, but I fear you must have mistaken your direction. This is the Hall of the Counsels, and—”

“Tell First Counsel Barsalla that Cadsuane Melaidhrin is here to see her,” Cadsuane broke in on him as she dismounted.

The man’s smile slid off to one side, and his eyes widened. “Cadsuane Melaidhrin? I thought you were—!” He cut himself short at her suddenly hard stare, then coughed into his hand and reassumed his fulsome smile. “Forgive me, Cadsuane Sedai. Will you allow me to show you and your companions to a waiting room where you can receive welcome while I send word to the First Counsel?” His eyes widened slightly as he took in those companions. Plainly he, too, could recognize Aes Sedai, at least in a group. Shalon and Harine made him blink, but he had self-control, for one of the shorebound. He did not gape.

“I’ll allow you to run tell Aleis I’m here as fast as your legs can carry you, boy,” Cadsuane replied, unfastening her cloak and tossing it across her saddle. “Tell her I’ll be in the dome, and tell her I don’t have all day. Well?

Hop!" This time the man's smile did not slide, it turned sickly, but he only hesitated a moment before setting off at a dead run while shouting for grooms to come take the horses.

Cadsuane had dismissed him from her attention as soon as she finished giving him his orders, however. "Verin, Kumira, you two will come with me," she announced briskly. "Merise, keep everyone together and ready until I—Alanna, come back and dismount. Alanna!" Reluctantly Alanna turned her mount away from the gates and climbed down with a sulky glower. Her slim Warder, Ihvon, watched her anxiously. Cadsuane sighed as though her patience was almost at an end. "Sit on her if you must to keep her here, Merise," she said, handing her reins to a small, wiry groom. "I want everyone ready to leave when I'm done with Aleis." Merise nodded, and Cadsuane turned to the groom. "A little water is all he needs," she said, giving her horse an affectionate pat. "I haven't exercised him much today."

Shalon was more than happy to turn her own horse over to a groom without instructions. She would not mind if he killed the creature. She did not know how far she had ridden in a daze, but she felt as though she had been in that saddle every mile of the however many hundred leagues to Cairhien. She felt rumpled in her flesh as well as her clothes. Abruptly, she realized that Jahar's pretty face was not with the other men. Verin's Tomas, a stocky gray-head as hard as any of the others, was leading the spotted gray pack animal that had been Jahar's. Where had the young man gotten to? Merise certainly did not appear concerned by his absence.

"This First Counsel," Harine growled, letting Moad help her down. She moved as stiffly as Shalon. He had simply leapt from his horse. "She is an important woman here, Sarene?"

"You might say she is the ruler of Far Madding, though the other Counsels, they call her first among equals, whatever that is supposed to mean." Handing over her own mount to a groom, Sarene looked quite unrumpled. Perhaps she had been upset before over this *ter'angreal* that stole the Source, but now she was all cool detachment, like carved ice. The groom stumbled over his own feet looking at her face. "Once, the First Counsel, she advised the queens of Maredo, but since Maredo's . . . dissolution . . . most First Counsels have considered themselves the natural heirs of Maredo's rulers."

Shalon knew that her knowledge of the shorebound's history was as uncertain as her knowledge of geography away from the shore, but she had never heard of any nation called Maredo. It was enough for Harine, though. If this First Counsel ruled here, the Wavemistress of Clan Shodein must meet her. Harine's dignity demanded no less. She hobbled determinedly across the stableyard to Cadsuane.

"Oh, yes," the insufferable Aes Sedai said before Harine could more than open her mouth. "You will come with me, as well. And your sister. I think not your Swordmaster, though. A man in the dome would be bad enough; but a man with a sword might make the Counsels fall over in fits. You have a question, Wavemistress?" Harine snapped her mouth shut with an audible click of teeth. "Good," Cadsuane murmured. Shalon groaned. This was not improving her sister's temper by a feather.

Cadsuane led them along broad, blue-tiled corridors hung with bright tapestries and lit by gilded stand lamps with glittering mirrors, where servants in blue first stared at them in surprise, then made hasty shorebound courtesies as they passed. She led them up long, swooping flights of white stone stairs that hung unsupported except where they touched a pale wall, which they did not always. Cadsuane glided like a swan, but at a speed that made the ache in Shalon's legs begin to burn. Harine's face set in a wooden mask, hiding the effort of trotting up stairs. Even Kumira seemed a trifle surprised, though Cadsuane's pace caused her no apparent exertion. Round little Verin churned away at Cadsuane's side, now and then smiling over her shoulder at Harine and Shalon. Sometimes Shalon thought she hated Verin, but there was no spite or amusement in those smiles, only encouragement.

Cadsuane took them up a final curling flight of stairs, enclosed by walls, and suddenly they were on a balcony with an intricate, gilded metal railing that ran all the way around. . . . For a moment, Shalon' gaped. Above her rose an overarching blue dome a hundred feet or more high at its peak. Nothing held it up but itself. Her ignorance of the shorebound extended to architecture as well as geography and history—and Aes Sedai—in fact, her ignorance of the shorebound was almost complete, excepting only Cairhien. She knew how to draw the plans for a raker and see it built, but she could not begin to imagine how to construct this.

Arched doorways edged with white stone, like the one they had come through, marked stairs at three other places around the long balcony, but they were alone, and that seemed to please Cadsuane, though all she did was nod to herself. "Kumira, show the Wavemistress and her sister Far Madding's guardian." Her voice echoed faintly inside the vast dome. She drew Verin a little distance away, and the pair of them put their heads together. There was no echo of what they whispered.

“You must forgive them,” Kumira told Harine and Shalon quietly. Even that produced a slight sound, if not quite an echo. “Peace, but this must be awkward, even for Cadsuane.” She ran her fingers through her short brown hair and shook her head to settle it back in place. “The Counsels are seldom happy to see Aes Sedai, especially sisters born here. I think they would like to pretend the Power doesn’t exist. Well, their history gives them reason, and for the last two thousand years they have had the means to support the pretense. In any event, Cadsuane is Cadsuane. She seldom sees a swelled head without deciding to deflate it, even when it happens to be wearing a crown. Or a Counsel’s diadem. Her last visit was over twenty years ago, during the Aiel War, but I suspect some who remember it will want to hide under their beds when they learn she is back.” Kumira gave a small, amused laugh. Shalon saw nothing to laugh at. Harine twisted her lips, but it made her look as though she suffered from a bad belly.

“You wish to see the . . . guardian?” Kumira went on. “As good a name as any, I suppose. There isn’t much to see.” She stepped cautiously closer to the gilded railing and peered over as if fearing she might fall, but those blue eyes had sharpened again. “I would give anything to study it, but that is impossible, of course. Who knows what else it might be able to do beside what we already know?” Her tone held as much awe as regret.

Shalon had no fear of heights, and she pressed herself against the elaborately worked metal beside the Aes Sedai, wanting to see this thing that had taken the Source away. After a moment, Harine joined them. To Shalon’s surprise, the drop that made Kumira uneasy was less than twenty feet, below, a smooth floor tiled in blue and white to make a convoluted maze centered on a double-pointed red oval rimmed with yellow. Beneath the balcony, three women in white sat on stools spaced equally around the edge of the floor, right against the dome’s wall, and beside each woman, a disc a full span across that looked like clouded crystal had been set into the floor and inlaid with a long thin wedge of clear crystal that pointed toward the chamber’s center. Metal collars surrounded the murky discs, marked off like a compass but with ever-smaller markings between the larger. Shalon could not be sure, but the collar nearest her appeared to be inscribed with numerals. That was all. No monstrous shapes. She had imagined something huge and black that sucked in the light. Her hands tightened on the rail to keep from trembling, and she locked her knees to hold herself still. Whatever was down there, it *had* stolen the Light.

A whisper of slippers announced new arrivals on the balcony by the same doorway they had used, about a dozen smiling women with their hair on top of their heads, in flowing blue silk robes worn over their dresses like sleeveless coats, richly embroidered in gold and trailing behind them on the floor. These people knew how to mark out rank. Each woman wore a large pendant in the shape of that gold-rimmed red oval suspended from a necklace of heavy golden links, and the same shape was repeated at the front of each narrow golden diadem. On one woman, the red ovals were made of rubies, not enamel, and sapphires and moonstones almost hid the golden circlet on her brows, and she wore a heavy golden signet ring on her right forefinger. She was tall and stately, her black hair drawn up in a large ball, heavily winged with white, though her face was unlined. The others were tall, short, stout, thin, pretty and plain, none young, and every one of them had an air of authority about her, but she stood out for more than her gems. Compassion and wisdom filled her large dark eyes, and it was command that she radiated, not simple authority. Shalon did not need to be told that this was the First Counsel, but the woman announced it anyway.

"I am Aleis Barsalla, First Counsel of Far Madding." Her mellifluous voice, deep for a woman, seemed to be making a proclamation, and expecting cheers. The sound of her voice bouncing inside the dome gave something like acclamation. "Far Madding gives welcome to Harine din Togara Two Winds, Wavemistress of Clan Shodein and Ambassador Extraordinary for the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere. May the Light illumine you and see you prosper. Your coming gladdens every heart in Far Madding. I embrace the chance to learn more of the Atha'an Miere, but you must be weary from the rigors of your journey. I have arranged pleasant quarters for you in my palace. When you have rested and eaten, we can talk; to our mutual advantage, if it pleases the Light." The others spread the skirts of their robes and made half bows.

Harine inclined her head slightly, a hint of satisfaction in her smile. Here, at last, were those who showed her proper respect. And very likely it helped that they did not gape at her and Shalon's jewelry.

"The messengers from the gates are as quick as ever, it seems, Aleis," Cadsuane said. "Is there no welcome for me?" Aleis' smile thinned for a moment, and some of the other smiles faded altogether as Cadsuane moved to stand beside Harine. Those that remained were forced. A pretty woman with a serious cast to her face went so far as to scowl.

"We are grateful to you for bringing the Wavemistress here, Cadsuane Sedai." The First Counsel did not sound particularly grateful. She drew herself up to her full height and looked straight ahead, over Cadsuane's head rather than at her. "I am sure we can find some way to make the depth of our gratitude known before you leave."

She could not have made her dismissal plainer short of a command, but the Aes Sedai smiled up at the taller woman. It was not an unpleasant smile, exactly, but neither was it in the least amused. "I may not be leaving for a while, Aleis. I thank you for the offer of accommodations, and accept. A palace on the Heights is always preferable to even the best inn." The First Counsel's eyes widened with startlement, then narrowed in determination.

"Cadsuane must stay with me," Harine said, managing to sound no more than half strangled, before Aleis could speak. "Where she is unwelcome, so am I." This had been part of the bargain forced on her, if they were to accompany Cadsuane. Among other things they must go when and where she said until they joined the Coramoor, and include her in any invitations they received. That last had seemed very small at the time, especially weighed against the rest, but plainly the woman had known exactly the reception she would receive.

"No need to be disheartened, Aleis." Cadsuane leaned toward the First Counsel confidingly, but she did not lower her voice. The reverberations in the dome magnified her words. "I'm sure you no longer have any bad habits for me to correct."

The First Counsel's face flooded with crimson, and behind her back, speculative frowns passed between the other Counsels. Some contemplated her as if with fresh eyes. How did they attain rank, and how lose it? Besides Aleis, they were twelve, surely a coincidence, but the First Twelve among a clan's Sailmistresses chose the Wavemistress, usually one of their own number, just as the First Twelve among the Wavemistresses chose the Mistress of the Ships. That was why Harine had accepted that strange girl's words, because she was of the First Twelve. That, and the fact that two Aes Sedai said the girl saw true visions. A Wavemistress or even the Mistress of the Ships could be deposed, though only for specified causes, such as gross incompetence or losing her wits, and the First Twelve had to speak with a unanimous voice. Things seemed to be done differently among the shorebound, and often sloppily. Aleis' eyes, fixed now on Cadsuane, were both hate-filled and hunted. Perhaps she could feel twelve sets of eyes on her back. The other Counsels had her on the scales. But if Cadsuane had chosen to meddle in the politics of this place, why? And why so bluntly?

"A man just channeled," Verin said suddenly. She had not joined the rest and was peering over the rail, ten paces away. The dome made her voice carry. "Do you have many men channeling lately, First Counsel?"

Shalon looked down, and blinked. The formerly clear wedges were now black, and rather than pointing toward the chamber's heart, somehow they had turned in roughly the same direction. One of the women below was on her feet, bending over to study where along the marked collar the thin black wedge was pointing, and the other two women were already racing toward a round-topped doorway. Suddenly, Shalon knew. Triangulation was a simple matter to any Windfinder. Somewhere beyond that doorway was a chart, and soon the position where the man had channeled would be marked on it.

"It would be red for a woman, not black," Kumira said in almost a whisper. She still stood a little back from the rail, but she was gripping it with both hands and leaning forward to peer at the scene below. "It warns and locates and defends. And what else? The women who made it would have wanted more, perhaps needed more. Not knowing what else could be incredibly dangerous." She did not sound frightened, though. She sounded excited.

"An Asha'man, I expect," Aleis said calmly, pulling her gaze from Cadsuane. "They cannot trouble us. They are free to enter the city, so long as they obey the law." However calm she was, some of the women behind her tittered like new deckgirls their first time among the shorebound. "Forgive me, Aes Sedai. Far Madding gives you welcome. I am afraid I don't know your name, though."

Verin was still gazing down at the dome's floor. Shalon glanced over the rail again, and blinked as the thin black wedges . . . changed. One moment they were black and pointing north, the next clear and once again pointing to the center of the maze. They did not turn; they just were one thing, then the other.

"All of you may call me Eadwina," Verin said. Shalon barely suppressed a start. Kumira did not so much as blink. "Do you consider history, First Counsel?" Verin continued without looking up. "Guaire Amalasan's siege of Far Madding lasted just three weeks. A savage business, at the end."

"I doubt they want to hear about *him,*" Cadsuane said sharply, and indeed, for some reason more than one of the Counsels looked uncomfortable. Who in the Light was this Guaire Amalasan? The name sounded vaguely familiar, but Shalon could not place it. Some shorebound conqueror, obviously.

Aleis glanced at Cadsuane, and her mouth tightened. "History records Guaire Amalasan as a remarkable general, Eadwina Sedai, perhaps second only to Artur Hawkwing himself. What brings him to mind?"

Shalon had never seen one of the Aes Sedai traveling with Cadsuane fail to heed her most casual warning as quickly as they obeyed her commands, but Verin paid no heed this time. She did not look up. "I was just thinking that he couldn't use the Power, yet he crushed Far Madding like an overripe plum." The stout little Aes Sedai paused as though something had just occurred to her. "You know, the Dragon Reborn has armies in Illian and Tear, in Andor and Cairhien. Not to mention many tens of thousands of Aiel. Very fierce, the Aiel. I wonder you can be so complacent about his Asha'man scouting you."

"I think you have frightened them quite enough," Cadsuane said firmly.

Verin finally turned from the gilded rail, her eyes open very wide, a round, startled shorebird. Her plump hands even fluttered like wings. "Oh. I didn't mean . . . Oh, no. I would think the Dragon Reborn would have moved against you already if he intended to. No, I suspect the Seanchan . . . You've heard of them? What we hear from Altara and farther west is really quite horrible. They seem to sweep everything before them. No, I suspect they're somewhat more important to his plans than capturing Far Madding. Unless you do something to anger him, of course, or upset his followers. But I am sure you are too intelligent to do that." She looked very innocent. There was a stir among the Counsels, the ripple that small fish made on the surface when a lionfish swam below.

Cadsuane sighed, her patience clearly at an end. "If you want to discuss the Dragon Reborn, Eadwina, you must do so without me. I want to wash my face and have some hot tea."

The First Counsel jerked as though she had forgotten Cadsuane's existence, incredible as that seemed. "Yes. Yes, of course. Cumere, Narvais, would you please escort the Wavemistress and Cadsuane Sedai to . . . to my palace and make them welcome?" That slight hitch was the only sign she gave of discomfort at having Cadsuane in her dwelling. "I wish to have some further talk with Eadwina Sedai, if it pleases her." Followed by most of the Counsels, Aleis glided away along the balcony. Verin looked suddenly alarmed and uncertain as they gathered her up and swept her along. Shalon did not believe the surprise or unease any more than she had the earlier innocence. She thought she knew now where Jahar was. She just did not know why.

The women Aleis had named, the pretty one who had scowled at Cadsuane, and a slim gray-haired woman, took the First Counsel's request as a command, which perhaps it was. They spread their robes and made those half bows, asking Harine whether she would be pleased to accompany them and announcing in flowery terms their pleasure at escorting her. Harine listened with a sour face. They could strew baskets of rose petals in her path if they wished, but the First Counsel had left her to underlings. Shalon wondered whether there was any way to avoid her sister until her temper cooled.

Cadsuane did not watch Verin leave with Aleis, not openly, but her mouth curved in a faint smile when they vanished through the next arched doorway along the balcony. "Cumere and Narvais," she said abruptly. "That would be Cumere Powys and Narvais Maslin? I have heard things about you." That jerked their attention away from Harine. "There are standards any Counsel should meet," Cadsuane went on in a firm tone, taking them each by a sleeve and turning them toward the stairs on either side of her. Exchanging worried glances, they let her, Harine apparently quite forgotten. At the doorway, Cadsuane paused to look back, but not at Harine or Shalon. "Kumira? Kumira!"

The other Aes Sedai gave a start, and with a last lingering look over the railing, pulled herself away to follow Cadsuane. Which left Harine and Shalon no option except to follow, too, or be left to try finding their own way out. Shalon darted after the others, and Harine was no less quick. Still gripping the Counsels to her sides, Cadsuane led the way down the curling stairs, talking in a low voice. With Kumira between her and the three, Shalon could hear nothing. Cumere and Narvais tried to speak, but

Cadsuane allowed neither more than a few words before she began again. She seemed calm, matter-of-fact. The pair with her began to look anxious. What in the Light was Cadsuane up to?

“This place troubles you?” Harine said suddenly.

“It is as if I have lost my eyes.” Shalon shivered at the truth of that. “I am afraid, Wavemistress, but the Light willing, I can control my fear.” Light, she hoped she could. She desperately needed to.

Harine nodded, frowning at the women ahead of them down the stairs. “I do not know whether Aleis’ palace has a tub big enough for us to bathe together, and I doubt they know honeyed wine, but we will find something.” Glancing away from Cadsuane and the others, she touched Shalon’s arm awkwardly. “I was afraid of the dark when I was a child, and you never left me alone till the fear passed. I will not leave you alone, either, Shalon.”

Shalon missed a step and barely caught herself short of tumbling down head over heels. Harine had not used her name except in private since she was first made Sailmistress. She had not been this friendly in private since before that. “Thank you,” she said, and with an effort, added, “Harine.” Her sister patted her arm again, and smiled. Harine was unpracticed at smiling, but the awkward effort held warmth.

There was no warmth in the look she directed toward the women ahead, though. “Perhaps I truly can make a bargain here. Cadsuane has already shifted their ballast so they ride with a list. You must try to find out why, Shalon, when you get close to her. I would like to put Aleis’ eyeteeth on a string—walking away from me without so much as a word!—but not at the expense of letting Cadsuane mesh the Coramoor in some trouble here. You must find out, Shalon.”

“I think perhaps Cadsuane meddles the way anyone else breathes,” Shalon replied with a sigh, “but I will try, Harine. I will do my best.”

“You always have, sister. You always will. I know that.”

Shalon sighed again. It was much too soon to test the depth of her sister’s newfound warmth. Confession might bring absolution or not, and she could not live with the loss of her marriage and her rank at one blow. But for the first time since Verin had bluntly laid out Cadsuane’s terms for keeping her secret, Shalon began to consider confession.

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CHAPTER 25

Bonds

In his room at The Counsel's Head, Rand sat on the bed with his legs folded and his back against the wall, playing the silver-mounted flute Thom Merrilin had given him so long ago. An Age ago. This room, with carved wall panels and windows overlooking the Nethvin Market, was better than that they had abandoned at The Crown of Maredo. The pillows stacked beside him were goose down, the bed had an embroidered canopy and curtains, and the mirror above the washstand had not a single bubble. The lintel above the stone fireplace even had a bit of simple carving. It was a room for a well-to-do foreign merchant. He was glad he had thought to bring enough gold when he left Cairhien. He had lost the habit of carrying much. Everything had been provided for the Dragon Reborn. Still, he could have earned a bed of some sort with the flute. The tune was called "Lament for the Long Night," and he had never heard it before in his life. Lews Therin had, though. It was like the skill at drawing. Rand thought that should frighten him, or make him angry, but he simply sat and played while Lews Therin wept.

"Light, Rand," Min muttered, "are you just going to sit there puffing on that thing?" Her skirts swirled as she paced up and down the flowered carpet. The bond with her and Elayne and Aviendha felt as though he had never known anything else or wanted to. He breathed, and he was bonded to them; one was as natural as the other. "If she says one wrong word where it can be overheard, if she's already said it . . . I am *not* letting anyone, haul you off to a cell for Elaida!" Alanna's bond had never felt that way. It had not changed, not in itself, yet increasingly since that day in Caemlyn, Alanna's bond seemed an intrusion, a stranger looking over his shoulder, a sandspur in his boot. "Do you *have* to play that? It makes me want to cry, and it makes my skin crawl at the same time. If she puts you in danger . . . !" Snatching one of her knives from its hiding place up a loose-fitting sleeve, she flourished it in her fist.

He took the flute away from his mouth and silently looked at her over it. Her face reddened, and with a sudden snarl, she hurled the blade to stick quivering in the door.

"She's there," he said, using the flute to point. Unconsciously, he shifted the instrument, following Alanna exactly. "She'll be here soon." She had been in Far Madding since the day before, and he did not understand why she had waited till now. Alanna was a tangle of emotions inside his skull, nervous and wary, worried and determined and above all, angry. In a barely restrained fury. "If you'd rather not be here, you can wait. . . ." Min shook her head fiercely. Right beside Alanna in his head lay the bundle that was her. She bubbled with worry and anger, too, but love shone through like a beacon whenever she looked at him and often when she did not. Fear shone through, as well, though she was trying to hide that.

He put the flute back to his lips and began "The Drunken Peddler." That was jolly enough to cheer the dead. Lews Therin snarled at him.

Min stood studying him, her arms folded, then abruptly gave her dress a twitch, settling it on her hips. With a sigh, he lowered the flute and waited. When a woman adjusted her clothes for no reason, it was like a man tightening the straps of his armor and checking his saddle girth; she meant to drive home a charge, and you would be cut down like a dog if you ran. Determination was as strong in Min now as it was in Alanna, twin suns flaring in the back of his brain.

"We will not talk about Alanna any more until she gets here," she said firmly, as though he had been the one insisting. Determination, and still the fear, stronger now than before, continually trampled down and continually springing back up.

"Why, of course, wife, if it pleases you," he replied, bending his neck in the approved Far Madding fashion. She sniffed loudly.

"Rand, I like Alivia. I do, even if she does make Nynaeve have kittens left and right." One fist planted on her hip, Min leaned forward and pointed a finger at his nose. "But she is going to kill you." She bit off every word.

"You said she was going to help me die," he said quietly. "Those were your words." How would he feel at dying? Sadness at leaving her, at leaving Elayne and Aviendha. Sadness for the pain he had brought them. He would like to see his father again before the end. Aside from those things, he almost thought death would be a relief.

Death is *a relief,* Lews Therin said fervently. *I* want *death. We deserve death!*

“Helping me die isn’t the same as killing me,” Rand went on. He was very good at ignoring the voice, now. “Unless you’ve changed your mind about what you saw.”

Min flung up her hands in exasperation. “I saw what I saw and it’s what I told you, but the Pit of Doom swallow me if I can see any difference. And I can’t see why you think there is!”

“Sooner or later, I have to die, Min,” he said patiently. He had been told by those he had to believe. To live, you must die. That still made no sense to him, but it left one cold hard fact. Just as the Prophecies of the Dragon seemed to say, he had to die. “Not soon, I hope. I plan not soon. I’m sorry, Min. I never should have let you bond me.” But he had not been strong enough to refuse, any more than he had been strong enough to push her away. He was too weak for what had to be done. He needed to drink in winter, till he made winter’s heart seem Sunday noon.

“If you hadn’t, we’d have tied you up and done it anyway.” Best not to ask how that would have differed from what Alanna had done, he decided. Certainly, she saw a difference. Climbing onto the bed on her knees, she cupped his face in her hands, “You listen to me, Rand al’Thor. I won’t let you die. And if you manage it just to spite me, I’ll follow you and bring you back.” Suddenly a thick vein of amusement rippled through the seriousness he felt in his head. Her voice took on a mock sternness: “And then I’ll bring you back here to live. I’ll make you grow your hair below your waist and wear hair clips with moonstones.”

He smiled at her. She could still make him smile. “I never heard of a fate worse than death, but I think that fits.”

Someone knocked at the door, and Min froze. In a silent question, she mouthed Alanna’s name. Rand nodded, and to his amazement, Min pushed him over onto the pillows and flung herself on his chest. Squirming around, she raised her head, and he realized she was trying to see herself in the washstand mirror. Finally she found a position she liked, lying half on top of him with one hand behind his neck and the other beside her face on his chest. “Come in,” she called.

Cadsuane stepped into the room and stopped, frowning at the knife stuck in the door. In a dress of fine dark green wool and a fur-lined cloak held by a silver brooch at the neck, she might have passed for a successful merchant or a banker, though the golden birds and fish, stars and moons dangling from the iron-gray bun atop her head would have been ostentatious for either. She was not wearing her Great Serpent ring, so it seemed she was making some effort to avoid too much notice. “Have you children been arguing?” she asked mildly.

Rand could almost feel Lews Therin go still, like a ridge cat crouching in the shadows. Lews Therin was almost as wary of this woman as he was himself.

Red-faced, Min scrambled to her feet smoothing furiously at her dress. “You said it was her!” she said accusingly, just as Alanna entered. Cadsuane closed the door.

Alanna glanced once at Min and dismissed her, focusing on Rand. Without taking her dark eyes from him, she swept her cloak off and flung it over one of the room’s two chairs. Her hands settled on her dark gray skirts, gripping them hard. She was not wearing her golden Aes Sedai ring, either. From the moment her eyes fell on him, joy bloomed along the bond. All the rest was still there, the nervousness, the fury, but he had never expected her to feel joy!

Not changing how he lay, he picked up the flute and toyed with it. “Should I be surprised to see you, Cadsuane? You pop up when I don’t want to see you too often to suit. Who taught you to Travel?” It had to have been that. One moment Alanna had been a vague awareness on the edge of thought, and the next she sprang to life full strength in his head. At first, he had thought she herself had learned Traveling somehow, but seeing Cadsuane, he knew better.

Alanna’s mouth tightened, and even Min looked disapproving. The emotions flowing along the Warder bond from one jumped and skittered; from the other, there was just anger mingled with delight, now. Why did Alanna feel *joy*?

“Still no more manners than a goat, I see,” Cadsuane said dryly. “Boy, I hardly think I need your permission to visit my birthplace. As for Traveling, it is none of your business where or when I learned anything.” Unpinning her cloak, she stuck the brooch on her belt, ready to hand, and folded the cloak over one arm as though making it neat were much more important than he was. Her voice took on an edge of irritation. “You’ve lumbered me with a lot of traveling companions, one way and another. Alanna was so frantic to see you again, only a heart of stone could have refused to bring her, and Sorilea said some of the others who pledged themselves to you would be good for nothing until they were allowed to go with Alanna, so I've ended up bringing Nesune, Sarene, Erian, Beldeine and Elza, too. Not to mention Harine, plus her sister and that Swordmaster of hers. She didn't know whether to faint, scream or bite someone when she found out Alanna was going off to find you. And then there are those three black-coated friends of yours. I don't know how eager they are to see you, but they're here, as well. Well, now that we've located you, I can send the Sea Folk and the sisters to you and let you deal with them."

Rand sprang to his feet with a muttered oath. "No! Keep them away from me!"

Cadsuane's dark eyes narrowed. "I've warned you before about your language; I will not warn you again." She frowned at him a moment longer, then nodded as though she thought he had taken the lesson to heart. "Now, what makes you think you can tell me what to do, boy?"

Rand struggled with himself. He could not issue orders here. He had never been able to order Cadsuane anywhere. Min said he needed the woman, that she would teach him something he needed to learn, but if anything, that only made him more uneasy about her. "I want to finish my business here and leave quietly," he said at last. "If you tell them, at least make sure they see I can't afford to have them come anywhere near me, not until I'm ready to leave." The woman raised an eyebrow at him, waiting, and he took a deep breath. Why did she always need to make everything difficult? "I would appreciate it very much if you didn't tell any of them where I am." Reluctantly, very reluctantly, he added, "Please." Min exhaled as though she had been holding her breath.

"Good," Cadsuane said after a moment. "You can show manners when you try, even if it does make you look as though your teeth ached. I suppose I can keep your secret for you, for the time being. Not all of them even know you are in the city. Oh, yes. I should tell you, Merise has bonded Narishma, Corele has Damer, and young Hopwil is Daigian's." She said that as though it were just a casual bit of information that might easily have slipped her mind.

He did not bother to mutter his oath this time, and Cadsuane's full-armed slap almost unhinged his jaw. Black spots shimmered in front of his eyes. One of the other women gasped.

"I did tell you," Cadsuane said placidly. "No more warnings."

Min took a step toward him, and he shook his head slightly. It helped to clear the spots. He wanted to rub his jaw, but he kept his hands at his sides. He had to make himself loosen his grip on the flute. For Cadsuane's part, the slap might never had occurred.

"Why would Flinn and the others accept being bonded?" he demanded.

"Ask them when you see them," she replied. "Min, I suspect Alanna wants to be alone with him awhile." Turning toward the door without waiting for Min's reply, she added, "Alanna, I will be waiting below, in the Women's Room. Don't be too long. I want to get back to the Heights. Min?"

Min glared at Alanna. She glared at Rand. Then she flung up her hands and stalked out after Cadsuane, muttering under her breath. She slammed the door behind her.

"I liked you better with your own hair." Alanna folded her arms beneath her breasts and studied him. Anger and joy warred with one another in the bond. "I had hoped that being close to you would be better, but you are still like a stone in my head. Even standing here, I can hardly tell whether you're upset or not. Even so, being here is better. I dislike being parted from a Warder so long."

Rand ignored her and the rippling joy that flowed along the bond. "She didn't ask why I came to Far Madding," Rand said quietly, staring at the door as if he could see Cadsuane through the wood. Surely, she had to wonder. "You told her I was here, Alanna. It had to be you. What happened to your oath?"

Alanna drew a deep breath, and a moment passed before she replied. "I am not sure Cadsuane cares two pins about you," she snapped. "I keep that oath as well as I can, but you do make keeping it hard." Her voice began to harden, and anger welled more strongly through the bond. "I owe fealty to a man who walks off and leaves me behind. Just how am I supposed to serve you? More importantly, what did you do?" Crossing the carpet, she stood staring up at him, fury burning in her eyes. He topped her by more than a foot, and she seemed not to notice. "You did something, I know. I was unconscious for three days! What did you do?"

"I decided if I was going to be bonded, it might as well be by someone I said could." He barely caught her hand before it landed on his face. "I've been slapped enough for one day."

She glared up at him, teeth bared as if ready to bite out his throat. The bond carried only fury and outrage, now, distilled to daggers. “You let someone else *bond* you?” she snarled. “How dare you! Whoever she is, I’ll see her before a court! I’ll see her *birched*! You are mine!”

“Because you *took* me, Alanna,” he said coldly. “If more sisters knew, *you* would be the one birched.” Min had told him once that he could trust Alanna, that she had seen the Green and four other sisters “in his hand.” He did trust her, in an odd fashion, yet he was in Alanna’s hand, too, and he did not want to be. “Release me, and I’ll deny it ever happened.” He had not even known that was possible until Lan told him about himself and Myrelle. “Release me, and I’ll set you free of your oath.”

The roiling anger flowing through the bond lessened without disappearing, but her face grew calm, and her voice was composed. “You are hurting my wrist.”

He knew he was. He could feel the pain through the bond. He let go, and she massaged her wrist far more ostentatiously than required by the hurt he felt. Still rubbing her wrist, she sat on the second chair and crossed her legs. She seemed to be thinking.

“I’ve thought of being free of you,” she said finally. “I have dreamed of it.” She gave a small, rueful laugh. “I even asked Cadsuane to let me pass the bond to her. A sign of how desperate I was, to ask such a thing. But if anyone can handle you, Cadsuane can. Only, she refused. She was furious that I suggested it without asking you, outraged, but even if you agreed, she won’t.” She spread her hands. “So you are mine.” Her face did not change, but as she said that, the joy flared anew. “However I acquired you, you are my Warder, and I have a responsibility. That is as strong in me as the oath I swore to obey you. Every bit as strong. So I will not release you to anyone unless I know she can handle you properly. Who bonded you? If she is capable, I will let her have you.”

Just the possibility that Cadsuane might have received his bond sent icicles down Rand’s spine. Alanna had never been able to control him with the bond, and he did not think any sister could, but he would never risk it with that one. Light!

“What makes you think she doesn’t care about me?” he demanded instead of answering Alanna’s question. Trust or no trust, no one would learn that answer if he could help it. What Elayne and Min and Aviendha had done might be allowed by Tower law, yet they had worse to fear than punishment from other Aes Sedai if it came out they were linked to him in this way. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he turned the flute over in his hands. “Just because she refused my bond? Maybe she isn’t as nonchalant about the consequences as you. She came to me in Cairhien, and stayed long after there could be any reason but me. Am I really supposed to believe she just decided to visit friends while I happen to be here? She brought you to Far Madding so she could find me.”

“Rand, she wanted to know where you were every day,” Alanna said dismissively, “but I doubt there’s a shepherd in Seleisin who doesn’t wonder where you are. The whole *world* wants to know that. I knew you were far to the south, that you hadn’t moved for days. No more. When I found out she and Verin were coming here, I had to beg her—beg on my knees!—before she would let me come along. But I didn’t know myself that you were here until I came out of the gateway in the hills above the city. Before that, I thought I might have to Travel halfway to Tear to find you. Cadsuane taught me that, when we came here, so don’t think you can evade me so easily in the future.”

Cadsuane had taught Alanna to Travel? That still did not say who had taught Cadsuane, though. Not that it mattered, he supposed. “And Damer and the other two allowed themselves to be bonded? Or did those sisters just take them the way you took me?”

A faint flush stained her cheeks, but her voice was steady. “I heard Merise ask Jahar. It took him two days to accept, and she never pressured him that I saw. I cannot speak for the others, but as Cadsuane said, you can always ask them. Rand, you must understand, those men were afraid to go back to this ‘Black Tower’ of yours.” Her mouth twisted sourly around the name. “They were afraid they would be blamed in the attack on you. If they simply ran, they would be hunted down as deserters. I understand that is your standing order? Where else could they go, except to Aes Sedai? And a good thing they did, too.” She smiled as though she had just seen something wonderful, and her voice became excited. “Rand, Damer has discovered a way to Heal being stilled! Light, I can say that word without freezing my tongue. He Healed Irgain and Ronaille and Sashalle. They’ve sworn fealty to you, too, just like all the others.”

“What do you mean, all the others?”

“I mean all the sisters the Aiel were holding. Even the Reds.” She sounded half disbelieving about that, as well she should, but disbelief melted into intensity as she put both feet on the floor and leaned toward him, her eyes fixed on his. “Every one of them has sworn and accepted the penance you put on Nesune and the others, the first five of them who swore. Cadsuane doesn’t trust them. She wouldn’t let them bring any of their Warders. I admit I was uncertain at first, but I believe you *can* trust them. They swore oath to you. You know what that means for a sister. We can’t break an oath, Rand. It isn’t possible.”

Even the Reds. He had been surprised when those first five captives offered fealty. Elaida had sent them to kidnap him, and they had. He had been sure it was him being *ta’veren* that had done it, but that only altered chance, made what might happen one time in a million become a certainty. It was hard to believe that a Red would swear under any circumstances to a man who could channel.

“You need us, Rand.” Rising, she shifted as if she wanted to pace, but instead she stood watching him, unblinking. Her hands smoothed her skirts as if she was unaware of what they were doing. “You need the support of Aes Sedai. Without it, you will have to conquer every nation, and you haven’t done very well at that thus far. The rebellion in Cairhien might seem finished to you, but not everyone likes Dobraine being named your Steward. A good many might go to Toram Riatin, if he reappears. The High Lord Darlin is snug in the Stone, so we hear, announced as your Steward in Tear, but the rebels there haven’t come streaming out of Haddon Mirk to support him. As for Andor, Elayne Trakand might say she will support you once she has the throne, but she has maneuvered your soldiers out of Caemlyn, and I’ll wear bells in the Blight if she lets them remain in Andor when she does succeed. Sisters can help you. Elayne will listen to us. The rebels in Cairhien and Tear will listen. The White Tower has stopped wars and ended rebellions for three thousand years. You may not like the treaty Rafela and Merana negotiated with Harine, but they got everything you asked for. Light, man, let us help you!”

Rand nodded slowly. It had seemed just a way to impress people with his power, that Aes Sedai gave him fealty. Fear that they might manipulate him to their own ends had blinded him to anything else. He did not like admitting that. He had been a fool.

A man who trusts everyone is a fool, Lews Therin said, *and a man who trusts no one is a fool. We are all fools, if we live long enough.* He almost sounded sane.

“Go back to Cairhien,” he said. “Tell Rafela and Merana I want them to approach the rebels in Haddon Mirk. Tell them to take Bera and Faeldrin, too.” Those were the four besides Alanna whom Min said he could trust. What had she said about the five others Cadsuane had brought with her? That each would serve him in her fashion. That was not strong enough, not yet. “I want Darlin Sisnera as my Steward and the laws I made left in place. They can negotiate away anything else as long as they end the rebellion. After that . . . What’s the matter?”

Alanna’s face had fallen, and she had sagged back in her chair. “It’s just that I’ve come all this way, and you are sending me right off again. I suppose it is for the best, with that girl here,” she sighed. “You have no idea what I went through in Cairhien, masking the bond just enough to keep what the two of you were doing from keeping me awake all night. That is much harder than simply masking it completely, but I dislike losing touch with my Warders completely. Only, going back to Cairhien will be almost as bad.”

Rand cleared his throat. “That’s what I want you to do.” Women, he had learned, talked about some things much more openly than men, but it was still a shock when they did. He hoped Elayne and Aviendha masked the bond when he was making love with Min. When the two of them were together in bed, no one else existed except her, the same as it had been with Elayne. He certainly did not want to talk about it with Alanna. “I may be done here by the time you finish in Cairhien. If I haven’t . . . If I haven’t, you can return here. But you’ll have to stay away from me until I say otherwise.” Even with that restriction, the joy billowed up in her afresh.

“You aren’t going to tell me who bonded you, are you?” He shook his head, and she sighed. “I had better go.” Rising, she took up her cloak and draped it over her arm. “Cadsuane is impatient at best. Sorilea admonished her to look after us like a mother hen, and she does. After her fashion.” At the door, she paused for one last question. “Why *are* you here, Rand? Cadsuane may not care, but I do. I’ll keep it secret, if you wish. I have never been able to stay more than a few days in a *stedding*. Why would you be willing to stay here, where you can’t even feel the Source?”

“Maybe it isn’t that bad for me,” he lied. He could tell her, he realized. He did trust her to keep it secret. But she did see him as her Warder, and she was a Green. No explanation could make her let him face it alone, but in

Far Madding, she was no better able to defend herself than Min, maybe less. “Go on, Alanna. I’ve wasted enough time.”

Once she was gone, he shifted himself to put his back against the wall again and sat fingering the flute. He thought instead of playing, though. Min said he needed Cadsuane, but Cadsuane was not interested in him except as a curiosity. A bad-mannered curiosity. Somehow, he had to make her interested. How in the Light was he going to do that?

With some difficulty Verin squeezed herself out of the sedan chair in the courtyard of Aleis’ palace. She was simply not constructed to fit the things, but they were the fastest way to get about in Far Madding. Coaches always bogged down in the crowds sooner or later, and they could not go some places she wanted to. The damp winds off the lake were turning colder as evening deepened into twilight, but she let the wind whip her cloak about while she dug two silver pennies from her purse and gave them to the bearers. She was not supposed to, of course, since they were Aleis’ boys, but Eadwina would not know that. They should not have accepted, but the silver vanished into their coats in a twinkling, and the younger of the pair, a handsome fellow in his middle years, even made her a flourishing bow before they picked up the chair and trotted off toward the stable, a low structure set in a corner against the front wall. Verin sighed. A boy in his middle years. It had not taken her long back in Far Madding to begin thinking as if she had never left. She had to be careful about that. It could be dangerous, not least if Aleis or the others discovered her deception. She suspected the warrants for Verin Mathwin’s exile had never been suspended. Far Madding kept quiet when an Aes Sedai fell afoul of the law, but the Counsels had no reason to fear Aes Sedai, and for its own reasons, the Tower in turn kept quiet on those rare occasions when a sister found herself strung up for a judicial flogging. She had no intention of being the latest reason for the Tower to keep silence.

Aleis’ palace was not a patch on the Sun Palace, of course, or the Royal Palace in Andor, or any of the palaces kings and queens ruled from. It was her own property, not attached to her position as First Counsel. Others, larger and smaller, marched away on either side, each surrounded by a high wall except on the end where the Heights, the only point approaching a hill on the entire island, fell away to the water in a sheer bluff. Still, it was not small, either. The Barsalla women had been dealing in trade and politics since the city was still called Fel Moreina. Tall-columned walks surrounded the Barsalla palace on both levels, and the white marble cube covered most of the walled grounds.

She found Cadsuane in a sitting room that would have offered a good view of the lake if the curtains had not been drawn to keep in the warmth of the blaze in the wide marble fireplace. Cadsuane sat, with her sewing basket on a small inlaid table beside her chair, calmly working with needle and embroidery hoop. She was not alone. Verin folded her cloak over the back of a padded chair and took another to wait.

Elza barely glanced at her. The usually pleasant-faced Green stood on the carpet in front of Cadsuane looking quite fierce, her face red and her eyes glaring. Elza was always very conscious of where she stood with respect to other sisters, perhaps too much so. For her to ignore Verin, much less confront Cadsuane, she must have been in a fine swivet. “How could you let her go?” she demanded of Cadsuane. “How are we to find him without her?” Ah, so that was it.

Cadsuane’s head remained bent over her embroidery hoop, and her needle continued to make tiny stitches. “You can wait until she returns,” she said calmly.

Elza’s hands doubled into fists at her side. “How can you be so detached?” she demanded. “He is the Dragon Reborn! This place could be a death trap for him! You have to—!” Her teeth snapped shut as Cadsuane held up a finger. That was all Cadsuane did, but from her it was enough.

“I’ve put up with your tirade long enough, Elza. You may go. Now!”

Elza hesitated, but she really had no choice. Her face was still red as she bobbed a curtsy with her dark green skirts clutched in her fists, but if she stalked from the sitting room, she still left without further delay.

Cadsuane set the embroidery hoop on her lap and leaned back. “Will you make me some tea, Verin?”

In spite of herself, Verin gave a small start. The other sister had not looked in her direction once. “Of course, Cadsuane.” A heavily worked silver teapot sat on a four-legged stand on one of the side tables, and was still hot, luckily. “Was it wise to let Alanna go?” she asked.

“I could hardly stop her without letting the boy know more than he should, now could I?” Cadsuane replied dryly.

Taking her time, Verin tipped the teapot to pour into a thin blue porcelain cup. Not Sea Folk porcelain, but very fine. “Do you have any idea why he came to Far Madding, of all places? I nearly swallowed my tongue when it came to me that the reason he had stopped leaping about might be because he was here. If it's something dangerous, perhaps we should try to stop him."

"Verin, he can do whatever his heart desires, anything at all, as long as he lives to reach Tarmon Gai'don. And as long as I can be at his side long enough to make him learn how to laugh again, and cry." Closing her eyes, she rubbed her temples with her fingertips and sighed. "He is turning into a stone, Verin, and if he doesn't relearn that he's human, winning the Last Battle may not be much better than losing. Young Min told him he needs me; I got that much out of her without rousing her suspicions. But I must wait for him to come to me. You see the way he runs roughshod over Alanna and the others. It will be hard enough teaching him, if he does ask. He fights guidance, he thinks he must do everything, learn everything, on his own, and if I do not make him work for it, he won't learn at all." Her hands dropped onto the embroidery hoop on her lap. "I seem to be in a confiding mood tonight. Unusual, for me. If you ever finish pouring that tea, I may confide some more."

"Oh, yes; of course." Hastily filling a second cup, Verin slipped the small vial back into her pouch unopened. It was good to be sure of Cadsuane at last. "Do you take honey?" she asked in her most muddled voice. "I never can remember."

* * *

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CHAPTER 26

Expectation

Walking across the brown-grassed village green of Emond’s Field with Egwene, Elayne felt saddened by the changes. Egwene seemed stunned by them. When she first appeared in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, a long braid had dangled down Egwene’s back and she was in a plain woolen dress, of all things, with stout shoes peeking out beneath her skirts as she walked. Elayne supposed it was the sort of clothing she had worn when she lived in the Two Rivers. Now her dark hair hung about her shoulders, secured by a small cap of fine lace, and her garments were as fine as Elayne’s, a rich blue embroidered with silver on the bodice and high neck as well as along the hem of her skirt and her cuffs. Silver-worked velvet slippers replaced the thick leather shoes. Elayne needed to maintain her focus to keep her own green silk riding dress from altering, perhaps in embarrassing fashion, but for her friend, without any doubt, the changes were deliberate.

She hoped Rand could still love Emond’s Field, but it was no longer the village where he and Egwene had grown up. There were no people, here in the World of Dreams, yet clearly Emond’s Field was a considerable town now, a prosperous town, with nearly one house in three made of well-dressed stone, some of three stories, and more roofed with tiles in every hue of the rainbow than with thatch. Some streets were paved with smooth well-fitted stone, new and unworn as yet, and there was even a thick stone wall going up around the town, with towers and iron-plated gates that would have suited a Borderland town. Outside the walls there were gristmills and sawmills, an iron foundry and large workshops for weavers of both woolens and carpets, and within were shops run by furniture makers, potters, seamstresses, cutlers, and gold-and silversmiths, many as fine as could be seen in Caemlyn, though some of the styles seemed to be from Arad Doman or Tarabon.

The air was cool but not cold, and there was not a sign of snow on the ground, at least for the moment. The sun stood straight overhead here, though Elayne hoped it was still night in the waking world. She wanted some real sleep before she had to face the morning. She was always tired, the last few days; there was just so much to be done, and so few hours. They had come here because it seemed unlikely any spy could find them here, but Egwene had lingered to stare at the changes in the place she was born. And Elayne had her own reasons, beyond Rand, for wanting to look over Emond's Field. The problem, one of the problems, was that one hour might pass in the waking world while you spent five or ten in the World of Dreams, but it could just as easily be the other way around. It might be morning already in Caemlyn.

Stopping at the edge of the green, Egwene gazed back at the wide stone bridge that arched over the rapidly widening stream running from a spring that gushed out of a stone outcrop strongly enough to knock a man down. A massive marble shaft carved all over with names stood in the middle of the green, and two tall flagpoles on stone bases. "A battle monument," she murmured. "Who could imagine such a thing in Emond's Field? Though Moiraine said that once a great battle was fought on this spot, in the Trolloc Wars, when Manetheren died."

"It was in the history I studied," Elayne said quietly, glancing at the bare flagpoles. Bare for the moment. She could not feel Rand, here. Oh, he was still in her head as much as Birgitte, a rocklike knot of emotions and physical sensations that was even more difficult to interpret now that he was far away, yet here in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* she could not know which direction he was. She missed that knowledge, small as it was. She missed him.

Banners appeared atop the flagpoles, remaining just long enough to ripple once lazily. Long enough to make out on one a red eagle flying across a field of blue. Not *a* red eagle; the Red Eagle. Once, visiting this place with Nynaeve in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* she had thought she glimpsed it, had decided she must be mistaken. Master Norry had begun setting her straight. She loved Rand, but if someone in the place he grew up was trying to raise Manetheren from its ancient grave, she would have to take cognizance, however much it pained him. That banner and that name still carried enough power to threaten Andor.

"I heard about changes from Bode Cauthon and the other novices from home," Egwene went on, frowning at the houses around the green, "but nothing like this.” Most of those houses were stone. A tiny inn still stood beside the sprawling stone foundation of some much larger building, with a huge oak growing up through the middle of it, but what looked to be an inn many times bigger was almost finished on the other side of the foundation, with a large sign reading The Archers already hung above the door. “I wonder whether my father is still Mayor. Is my mother well? My sisters?”

“I know you are moving the army tomorrow,” Elayne said, “if it isn’t tomorrow already, but surely you could find a few hours to visit here once you reach Tar Valon.” Traveling made such things easy. Perhaps she herself should send someone to Emond’s Field. If she knew whom to trust for the mission. If she could spare anyone she did trust.

Egwene shook her head. “Elayne, I’ve had to order women I grew up with switched because they don’t believe I am the Amyrlin Seat, or if they do, that they can break the rules because they knew me.” Suddenly the seven-striped stole hung from her shoulders. Until she noticed it with a grimace, and it vanished again. “I don’t think I can face confronting Emond’s Field as Amyrlin,” she said sadly. “Not yet.” She gave herself a shake, and her voice firmed. “The Wheel turns, Elayne, and everything changes. I must get used to it. I *will* get used to it.” She sounded a great deal like Siuan Sanche, as Siuan had sounded in Tar Valon before everything had changed. Stole or no stole, Egwene sounded like the Amyrlin Seat. “Are you certain I can’t send you some of Gareth Bryne’s soldiers? Enough to help secure Caemlyn, at least.”

Abruptly, they were surrounded by glistening snow, standing knee-deep in it. Snow made gleaming white mounds on the rooftops as if from a heavy fall. This was not the first time such a thing had happened, and they simply refused to let the sudden cold touch them, rather than imagining cloaks and warmer clothes.

“No one is going to move against me before spring,” Elayne said. Armies did not move in winter, at least, not unless they had the benefit of Traveling, like Egwene’s army. Snow bogged everything down, and mud whenever the snow melted. Those Borderlanders probably had begun their march south thinking winter was never coming this year. “Besides, you will need every man when you reach Tar Valon.”

Unsurprisingly, Egwene nodded acceptance without making the offer again. Even with this past month of hard recruiting behind her, Gareth Bryne still had no more than half the soldiers he had told her would be needed to take Tar Valon. According to Egwene, he was ready to begin with what he had, but clearly it troubled her. “I have hard decisions to make, Elayne. The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, but it is still me who has to decide.”

Impulsively, Elayne waded through the snow and threw her arms around Egwene to hug her. At least, she started out wading. As she clasped the other woman to her, the snow vanished, leaving not so much as a damp spot on their dresses. The two of them staggered as if dancing with one another and almost fell.

“I know you will make the right decision,” Elayne said, laughing in spite of herself. Egwene did not join her laughter.

“I hope so,” she said gravely, “because whatever I decide, people are going to die for it.” She patted Elayne’s arm. “Well, you understand that sort of decision, don’t you. We both need to be back in our beds.” She hesitated before going on. “Elayne, if Rand comes to you again, you must let me know what he says, whether he gives you any clue what he means to do or where he means to go.”

“I will tell you whatever I can, Egwene.” Elayne felt a stab of guilt. She had told Egwene everything—almost everything—but not that she had bonded Rand with Min and Aviendha. Tower law did not prohibit what they had done. Very careful questioning of Vandene had made that much clear. But whether it would be permitted was not clear at all. Still, as she had heard an Arafellin mercenary recruited by Birgitte say, “what was not forbidden was allowed.” That sounded almost like one of Lini’s old sayings, though she doubted her nurse would ever have been so permissive. “You’re troubled by him, Egwene. More than usual, I mean. I can tell. Why?”

“I have reason to be, Elayne. The eyes-and-ears report very troubling rumors. Only rumors, I hope, but if they aren’t . . .” She was very much the Amyrlin Seat now, a short slender young woman who seemed strong as steel and tall as a mountain. Determination filled her dark eyes and set her jaw. “I know you love him. I love him, too. But I am not trying to Heal the White Tower just so he can chain Aes Sedai like *damane*. Sleep well and have pleasant dreams, Elayne. Pleasant dreams are more valuable than people realize.” And with that, she was gone, back to the waking world.

For a moment, Elayne stood staring at the spot where Egwene had been. What had she been talking about? Rand would never do that! If only for love of her, he would not! She prodded that rock-hard knot in the back of her head. With him so far away, the veins of gold shone only in memory. Surely he would not. Troubled in herself, she stepped out of the dream, back to her sleeping body.

She needed sleep, but no sooner was she back in her own body than sunlight fell on her eyelids. What hour *was* it? She had appointments to keep, duties to carry out. She wanted to sleep for months. She wrestled with duty, but duty won. She had a busy day ahead. Every day was a busy day. Her eyes popped open, feeling grainy, as if she had not slept at all. By the slant of light through the windows, it was well beyond sunrise. She could simply lie there. Duty. Aviendha shifted in her sleep, and Elayne poked her sharply in the ribs. If she had to be awake, then Aviendha was not going to loll about.

Aviendha woke with a start, stretching for her knife lying atop the small table on her side of the bed. Before her hand touched the dark horn hilt, she let it fall. “Something woke me,” she muttered. “I thought a Shaido was—Look at the sun! Why did you let me sleep so late?” she demanded, scrambling from the bed. “Just because I’m allowed to stay with you—” the words were muffled for an instant as she jerked her sleep-wrinkled shift off over her head “—does not mean Monaelle won’t switch me if she thinks I am being lazy. Do you mean to lie there all day?”

With a groan, Elayne climbed out of the bed. Essande was already waiting at the door to the dressing room; she never waked Elayne unless Elayne remembered to order it. Elayne surrendered herself to the white-haired woman’s almost silent ministrations while Aviendha dressed herself, but her sister made up for Essande’s quiet with a laughing string of comments along the line of how having someone else put your clothes on you must feel like being a baby again and how Elayne might forget how to put on her own clothes and *need* somebody to dress her. She had done very much the same every morning since they had begun to share the same bed. Aviendha found it very funny. Elayne did not say a word, except to answer her tire-woman’s suggestions on what she should wear, until the last mother-of-pearl button was done up and she stood examining herself in the stand-mirror.

“Essande,” she said then, casually, “are Aviendha’s clothes ready?” The fine blue wool with a little silver embroidery would do well enough for what she faced today.

Essande brightened. “All Lady Aviendha’s pretty silks and laces, my Lady? Oh, yes. All brushed and cleaned and ironed and put away.” She gestured to the wardrobes lining one wall.

Elayne smiled over her shoulder at her sister. Aviendha stared at the wardrobes as though they contained vipers, then gulped and hastily finished winding the dark folded kerchief around her head.

When Elayne had dismissed Essande, she said, “Just in case you need them.”

“Very well,” Aviendha muttered, putting on her silver necklace. “No more jokes about the woman dressing you.”

“Good. Or I’ll tell her to start dressing *you.* Now, that *would* be amusing.”

Grumbling under her breath about people who could not take a joke, Aviendha plainly did not agree. Elayne half expected her to demand that all the clothes she had acquired be discarded. She was a little surprised Aviendha had not seen to it already.

For Aviendha, the breakfast laid out in the sitting room consisted of cured ham with raisins, eggs cooked with dried plums, dried fish prepared with pine nuts, fresh bread slathered with butter, and tea made syrupy with honey. Well, not actually syrupy, but it seemed so. Elayne got no butter on her bread, very little honey in her tea, and instead of the rest, a hot porridge of grains and herbs that was supposed to be especially healthy. She did not feel with child, no matter what Min had told Aviendha, but Min had told Birgitte, too, once the three of them began getting drunk. Between her Warder, Dyelin, and Reene Harfor, she now found herself limited to a diet “suitable for a woman in her condition.” If she sent to the kitchens for a treat, somehow it never arrived, and if she slipped down there herself, the cooks gave her such glum disapproving stares that she slipped back out again with nothing.

She did not really mourn the spiced wine and sweets and the other things she was no longer allowed—not that much, anyway, except when Aviendha was gobbling tarts or puddings—but *everyone* in the Palace knew she was pregnant. And of course, that meant they knew how she had gotten that way, if not with whom. The men were not too bad, beyond the fact that they *knew,* and she *knew* they knew, but the women did not bother to hide knowing. Whether they accepted or deprecated the situation, half looked at her as though she were a hoyden and the other half with speculation.

Forcing herself to swallow the porridge—it was not that bad, really, but she dearly would have loved some of the ham Aviendha was slicing, or a little of the egg with plums—spooning lumpy porridge into her mouth, she almost looked forward to the start of birthing sickness, so she could share the queasy belly with Birgitte.

The first visitor to enter her apartments that morning beside Essande was the leading candidate among the Palace women for the father of her barely quickened child.

"My Queen," Captain Mellar said, sweeping off his plumed hat in a flourishing bow. "The Chief Clerk awaits Your Majesty's pleasure." The captain's dark, unblinking eyes said he would never have dreams of the men he killed, and the lace-edged sash across his chest and the lace at his neck and wrists only made him look harder. Wiping grease from her chin with a linen napkin, Aviendha watched him with no expression on her face. The two Guardswomen standing one on either side of the doors grimaced faintly. Mellar already had a reputation for pinching Guardswomen's bottoms, the prettier ones' at least, not to mention disparaging their abilities in the city's taverns. The second was far worse, in the Guardswomen's eyes.

"I am not a queen, yet, Captain," Elayne said briskly. She always tried to keep as much to the point as possible with the man. "How is recruiting for my bodyguard coming along?"

"Only thirty-two, so far, my Lady." Still holding his hat, the hatchet-faced man rested both hands on his sword hilt, his lounging posture hardly suitable for the presence of one he had called his queen. Nor was his grin. "Lady Birgitte has exacting standards. Not many women can match them. Give me ten days, and I can find a hundred men who'll better them and hold you as dear in their hearts as I do."

"I think not, Captain Mellar." It was an effort to keep a chill out of her voice. He had to have heard the rumors concerning himself and her. Could he think that just because she had not denied them, she might actually find him . . . attractive? Pushing away the half-empty porridge bowl, she suppressed a shudder. Thirty-two, so far? The numbers were growing quickly. Some of the Hunters for the Horn who had been demanding rank had decided that serving in Elayne's bodyguard carried a certain flair. She conceded that the women could not all be on duty day and night, but no matter what Birgitte said, the goal of a hundred seemed excessive. The woman dug in her heels now at any suggestion of fewer, though. "Please tell the Chief Clerk he can come in," she told him. He swept her another elaborate bow.

She rose to follow him, and as he pulled one of the lion-carved doors open, she laid a hand on his arm and smiled. "Thank you again for saving my life, Captain," she said, this time warm enough for a caress.

The fellow smirked at her! The Guardswomen stared straight ahead, frozen, those she could see out in the hall before the doors closed behind him as well as those inside, and when Elayne turned around, Aviendha was staring at her with little more expression than she had shown Mellar. That little was pure amazement, though. Elayne sighed.

Crossing the carpets, she bent to put an arm around her sister and spoke softly, for her ear alone. She trusted the women of her bodyguard with things she told very few others, but there were some matters she dared not trust to them. "I saw a maid passing, Aviendha. Maids gossip worse than men. The more who think this child is Doilin Mellar's, the safer it will be. If necessary, I'll let the man pinch my bottom."

"I see," Aviendha said slowly, and frowned into her plate as though seeing something other than the eggs and plums she began pushing around with her spoon.

Master Norry presented his usual blend of mundane maintenance of the Palace and the city, tidbits from his correspondents in foreign capitals, and information gleaned from merchants and bankers and others who had dealings beyond the borders, but his first piece of news was by far the most important to her, if not the most interesting.

"The two most prominent bankers in the city are . . . amenable, my Lady," he said in that dry-as-dust voice of his. Clutching his leather folder to his narrow chest, he eyed Aviendha sideways. He was still not accustomed to her presence while he made his reports. Or the Guardswomen. Aviendha bared her teeth at him, and he blinked, then coughed into a bony hand. "Master Hoffley and Mistress Andscale were somewhat . . . hesitant . . . at first, but they know the market for alum as well as I. It would not be safe to say that their coffers are now yours, but I have arranged for twenty thousand gold crowns to be moved to the Palace strongroom, and more will come as needed."

"Inform the Lady Birgitte," Elayne told him, hiding her relief. Birgitte had not yet signed enough new Guards to hold a city as large as Caemlyn, much less do anything else, but Elayne could not expect to see revenue from her estates before spring, and the mercenaries *were* expensive. Now she would not lose them for lack of gold before Birgitte recruited men to replace them. “Next, Master Norry?”

“I fear the sewers must be given a high priority, my Lady. The rats are breeding in them as if it were spring, and . . .”

He mingled it all together, according to what he felt was most pressing. Norry seemed to take it as a personal failure that he had not yet learned who had freed Elenia and Naean, though less than a week had passed since their rescue. The price of grain was climbing exorbitantly, along with that of every other sort of foodstuff, and it was already apparent that repairs to the Palace roof would take longer and cost more than the masons had first estimated, but food always grew more expensive as winter went on and masons always cost more than they first had said they would. Norry admitted that his last correspondence from New Braem was several days old, but the Borderlanders appeared content to remain where they were, which he could not understand. Any army, much less one as large as this was said to be, ought to be stripping the countryside around it bare by now. Elayne did not understand why either, but she was content that it was so. For the time being. Rumors in Cairhien of Aes Sedai swearing fealty to Rand at least gave a reason for Egwene’s concern, though it hardly seemed likely any sister would actually do such a thing. That was the least important piece of news, in Norry’s estimation, but not in hers. Rand could not afford to alienate the sisters with Egwene. He could not afford to alienate *any* Aes Sedai. But he did seem to find ways to do so.

Reene Harfor soon replaced Halwin Norry, nodding to the bodyguards at the door in passing and giving Aviendha an open smile. If the plump graying woman had ever been uncertain about Elayne calling Aviendha sister, she had never shown it, and now she genuinely appeared to approve. Smiles or no smiles, though, her report was much more grim than anything in the Chief Clerk’s.

“Jon Skellit is in the pay of House Arawn, my Lady,” Reene said, her round face stern enough to fit a hangman. “Twice now he has been seen accepting a purse from men known to favor Arawn. And there is no doubt that Ester Norham is in someone’s pay. She isn’t stealing, but she has over fifty crowns of gold hidden under a loose floorboard, and she added ten crowns last night.”

“Do as with the others,” Elayne said sadly. The First Maid had uncovered nine spies she was certain of, so far, four of them employed by people Reene had not yet been able to uncover. That Reene had found any at all was enough to anger Elayne, but the barber and the hairdresser were something more. Both had been in her mother’s service. A pity they had not seen fit to transfer their loyalty to Morgase’s daughter.

Aviendha grimaced as Mistress Harfor murmured that she would, but there was no point in discharging the spies, or killing them as Aviendha had suggested. They would just be replaced by spies she did not know. *A spy is your enemy’s tool until you know her,* her mother had said, *but then she is your tool. When you find a spy,* Thom had told her, *wrap him in swaddling and feed him with a spoon.* The men and women who had betrayed their service would be “allowed” to discover what Elayne wanted them to know, not all true, such as the numbers Birgitte had recruited.

“And the other matter, Mistress Harfor?”

“Nothing yet, my Lady, but I have hopes,” Reene said even more grimly than before. “I have hopes.”

Following the First Maid’s departure came two delegations of merchants, first a large group of Kandori with gem-studded earrings and silver guild-chains draped across their chests and then, right behind them, half a dozen Illianers with only a touch of embroidery on otherwise somber coats and dresses. She used one of the smaller reception rooms. The tapestries flanking the marble fireplace were of hunting scenes, not the White Lion, and the polished wooden wall panels were uncarved. They were merchants, not diplomats, though some seemed to feel slighted that she offered only wine and did not drink with them. Kandori or Illianers, they also looked askance at the two Guardswomen who followed her into the room and posted themselves beside the door, though if by this time they had not heard the tales of an attempt to kill her, they must be deaf. Six more of her bodyguard waited outside the door.

The Kandori studied Aviendha surreptitiously when not listening attentively to Elayne, and the Illianers avoided looking at her at all after the first widening of eyes in surprise. Doubtless they read significance into the presence of an Aiel, even if she only sat on the floor in a corner and said nothing, but whether Kandori or Illianers, the merchants wanted the same thing, reassurance that Elayne would not so anger the Dragon Reborn that he would interfere with trade by sending his armies and his Aiel to ravage

Andor, though they did not come out and say so. Nor did they mention that Aiel and the Legion of the Dragon both had large encampments not many miles from Caemlyn. Their polite questions about her plans now that she had removed the Dragon banners and the Banners of Light from Caemlyn were sufficient. She told them what she told everyone, that Andor would ally itself to the Dragon Reborn but was not his conquest. In return, they offered vague wishes for her well-being, suggesting that they supported her claim to the Lion Throne wholeheartedly without actually saying any such thing. After all, if she failed, they would want to be welcome in Andor under whoever did gain the crown.

When the Illianers had made their bows and curtsies and departed, she closed her eyes for a moment and rubbed her temples. She still had a meeting with a delegation of glassmakers before the midday meal, and five more with merchants or craftsfolk later; a very busy day, full of mealy-mouthed platitudes and ambiguity. And with Nynaeve and Merilille gone, it was her turn to teach the Windfinders again tonight, at best a less pleasant experience than the worst meeting with merchants. Which might leave her a little time to study the *ter'angreal* they had brought out of Ebou Dar before she was so weary that she could no longer keep her eyes open. It was embarrassing when Aviendha had to half carry her to bed, but she could not stop. There was too much to be done and not enough time in a day.

There was almost an hour before the glassmakers, but Aviendha ruthlessly rode over her suggestion that she might take a peek at the things from Ebou Dar.

“Has Birgitte been talking to you?” Elayne demanded as her sister all but dragged her up a narrow flight of stone stairs. Four Guardswomen went ahead, and the others trailed behind, studiously ignoring what passed between her and Aviendha. Though she thought that Rasoria Domanche, a stocky Hunter for the Horn with the blue eyes and yellow hair occasionally found among Tairens, wore a tiny smile.

“Do I need her to tell me you spend too many hours inside and sleep too little?” Aviendha replied contemptuously. “You need fresh air.”

The air in the high colonnade was certainly fresh. And crisp, though the sun stood high in a gray sky. A cold breeze blew around the smooth columns, so the Guardswomen standing ready to protect her from pigeons had to hang on to their plumed hats. Perversely, Elayne refused to ignore the chill.

“Dyelin talked to you,” she grumbled, shivering. Dyelin claimed a woman with child needed long walks every day. She had been quick to remind Elayne that, Daughter-Heir or not, she was really only the High Seat of House Trakand for the moment, and if the High Seat of Trakand wanted to talk with the High Seat of Taravin, she could do it tramping up and down the Palace corridors or not at all.

“Monaelle has borne seven children,” Aviendha replied. “She says I must see you get fresh air.” Despite no more than her shawl pulled over her shoulders, she gave no sign of feeling the wind. But then, Aiel were as good as the sisters at ignoring the elements. Wrapping her arms around herself, Elayne scowled.

“Stop sulking, sister,” Aviendha said. She pointed down to one of the stableyards, just visible over the white-tiled roofs. “Look, Reanne Corly is already checking to see if Merilille Ceandevin is returning.” The familiar vertical slash of light appeared in the stableyard and rotated into a hole in the air ten feet tall and as wide.

Elayne scowled down at Reanne’s head. She was *not* sulking. Perhaps she should not have taught Reanne to Travel, since the Kinswoman was not yet Aes Sedai, but none of the other sisters were strong enough to make the weave work, and if the Windfinders were allowed to learn, then the few Kinswomen who could should be allowed, too, in her book. Besides, she could not do everything herself. Light, had winter been this icy before she learned to stop heat and cold from touching her?

To her surprise, Merilille rode through the gateway shaking snow from her dark fur-lined cloak, followed by the helmeted Guardsmen who had been sent off with her seven days earlier. Zaida and the Windfinders had been most unpleasant over her disappearance, to put it mildly, but the Gray had leaped at a chance to escape them for however long. It had been necessary to check for her every day, opening a gateway to the same spot, yet Elayne had not expected her for a week yet at the very best. As the last of the ten red-cloaked Guards entered the stableyard, the slim little Gray sister climbed down from her saddle, handed her reins to a groom, and hurried into the Palace before the woman from the stables could more than get out of her way.

“I *am* enjoying the fresh air,” Elayne said, just keeping her teeth from chattering, “but if Merilille is back, I must go down.” Aviendha quirked an eyebrow as if she suspected the evasion, but she was the first to start for the stairs. Merilille's return was important, and by her haste, she brought either very good news or very bad.

By the time Elayne and her sister walked into her sitting room—followed by two of the Guardswomen, of course, who planted themselves beside the doors—Merilille was already there. Her damp-spotted cloak lay over the back of a chair, her pale gray riding gloves were tucked behind her belt, and her black hair could have used a brush. With purple crescents under her dark eyes, Merilille's pale face looked as weary as Elayne felt.

As quickly as she had come up from the stableyard, she was not alone. Birgitte, frowning pensively, stood with one hand on the carved mantel over the fireplace. The other gripped her long golden braid, almost like Nynaeve. Today, she wore voluminous dark green trousers with her short red coat, a combination to make the eye flinch. And Captain Mellar made Elayne an elaborate bow, waving his white-plumed hat about. He had no place here, but she let him stay, and even gave him a very warm smile. *Very* warm.

The plump young maid who had just placed a large silver tray on one of the sideboards blinked and looked wide-eyed at Mellar before remembering to make her curtsy on going. Elayne held her smile until the door closed. Whatever protected her baby, she was willing to do. There was hot spiced wine on the rope work tray for everyone else, and weak tea for her. Well, at least it was hot.

"I was quite lucky," Merilille sighed once she was seated, giving Mellar an uncertain glance over her winecup. She knew the tale of him saving Elayne's life, but she had left before the rumors began. "It turned out that Reanne had opened her gateway not five miles from the Borderlanders. They have not moved since arriving." Her nose wrinkled. "If not for the weather, the stench of latrines and horse dung would be overpowering. You were right, Elayne. All four rulers are there, in four camps a few miles apart. Each holds an army. I found the Shienarans the first day, and most of my time since has been spent talking with Easar of Shienar and the other three. We met in a different camp each day."

"You spent a little time looking too, I hope," Birgitte said respectfully from in front of the fireplace. She was respectful with every Aes Sedai except the one she was bonded to. "How many are they?"

"I don't suppose you got an accurate count," Mellar put in, sounding as though he expected anything but. For once, his narrow face was unsmiling. Peering into his wine, he shrugged. "Whatever you saw might have some value, though. If there are enough of them, they may starve themselves before they can threaten Caemlyn. The largest army in the world is just so many walking corpses without food and fodder." He laughed. Birgitte stared at his back darkly, but Elayne lifted a hand slightly at her side, motioning the other woman to keep silent.

"They are not in a good way for food, Captain," Merilille said coolly, sitting up straighter in spite of her obvious fatigue, "but neither are they starving quite yet. I should not count on starvation to defeat them, if it comes to that." After a little time away from the Sea Folk, her big eyes were no longer perpetually startled, and despite her smooth Aes Sedai composure, it was plain she had decided to dislike Doilin Mellar no matter whose life he had saved. "As for numbers, something over two hundred thousand, I should say, and I very much doubt anyone but their own officers could be more accurate than that. Even hungry, that is a great many swords," Mellar shrugged again, undisturbed by Aes Sedai stares.

The slim Gray sister neither looked at him again nor ignored him in any obvious way; he just seemed to become a piece of the furniture for her as she went on. "There are at least ten sisters with them, Elayne, though they made a great effort to hide the fact. Not adherents to Egwene, I should think, though they need not be Elaida's either. A good many sisters appear to be sitting to one side until the Tower's troubles are over, I fear." She sighed again, perhaps not from tiredness this time.

With a grimace, Elayne set her teacup aside. The kitchens had not sent up any honey, and she really did not like it bitter. "What do they want, Merilille? The rulers, not the sisters." Ten sisters made that army ten times as dangerous, especially to Rand. No, to anyone. "They haven't been sitting there in the snow all this time for the joy of it."

The Gray spread her slim hands slightly. "Over the long run, I can only make suppositions. Over the short, they want to meet you, and as soon as possible. They sent riders toward Caemlyn when they arrived at New Braem, but this time of year, it might take another week or more before they arrive here. Tenobia of Saldaea let slip, or pretended to let slip, that they know you have some connection to, or least a close acquaintance with, a certain person in whom they also apparently have an interest. Somehow, they know of your presence in Falme when certain events took place." Mellar frowned in confusion, but no one enlightened him. "I did not disclose Traveling, because of those sisters, but I did say I could return with a reply very soon.”

Elayne exchanged a look with Birgitte, who also shrugged, though in her case neither from detachment nor from disdain. The largest hole in Elayne’s hopes to use the Borderlanders to influence her opponents for the throne had been how to approach sitting rulers while she was merely the High Seat of Trakand and Daughter-Heir of a deceased queen. Birgitte’s shrug said be thankful for the hole closing, but Elayne wondered how these people from the Borderlands had learned what very few others knew. And if they knew, how many more did, too? She *would* protect her unborn child.

“Would you be willing to go back right away, Merilille?” she asked. The other sister accepted with alacrity, and with a slight widening of her eyes that suggested she would put up with any amount of stench to avoid returning to the Windfinders a little longer. “Then we will go together. If they want to meet me soon, nothing can be sooner than today.” They knew too much for delay. Nothing could be allowed to threaten her child. Nothing!

* * *

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CHAPTER 27

To Surprise Queens and Kings

It was not quite so simple as just saying she would go, of course.

“This is unwise, sister,” Aviendha said darkly as Merilille scurried off to freshen herself. Scurried in truth; the Gray seemed to be keeping a sharp eye out for Sea Folk before she reached the sitting room doors. When a sister of Elayne’s standing said go, Merilille went. Arms folded and shawl wrapped around her so she looked very much the Wise One, Aviendha stood over Elayne at her writing table, “This is very unwise.”

“Wise?” Birgitte growled, feet apart and fists planted on her hips. “Wise? The girl wouldn’t know ‘wise’ if it bit her on the nose! Why this rush? Let Merilille do what Grays do, arrange a parley in a few days, or a week. Queens hate being surprised, and kings despise it. Believe me, I know it to my cost. They find ways to make you regret it.” The Warder bond mirrored her anger and frustration.

“I *want* to catch them by surprise, Birgitte. It might help me to find out just how much they know about me.” Grimacing, Elayne pushed away the blotted page and took another sheet from the inlaid rosewood paper-box. Her weariness had vanished with Merilille’s news, but writing a steady, clean hand did seem difficult. The wording needed to be just right, too. This was not to be a letter from the Daughter-Heir of Andor, but from Elayne Trakand, Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. They had to see what she wanted them to see.

“Try to talk some bloody sense into her, Aviendha,” Birgitte muttered. “In case you can’t, I had best see if I can scrape together a suitable flaming escort.”

“No escort, Birgitte. Except for you. An Aes Sedai and her Warder. And Aviendha, of course.” Elayne paused in writing to smile at her sister, who did not smile back.

“I know your courage, Elayne,” Aviendha said. “I admire your courage. But even *Sha’mad Conde* know when to be cautious!” *She* spoke of caution? Aviendha would not know caution if . . . well . . . if it bit her on the nose!

“An Aes Sedai and her Warder?” Birgitte exclaimed. “I told you, you can’t go running off trying to have adventures any more!”

“No escort,” Elayne said firmly, dipping her pen for another try. “This isn’t an adventure. It is just the way it must be done.” Throwing up her hands, Birgitte growled several oaths, but nothing Elayne had not heard before.

To her surprise, Mellar made no objection to staying behind. A meeting with four rulers would hardly be as boring as meeting merchants, but he begged leave to be about his duties since she did not need him. That contented her. A Captain of the Royal Guards would make the Borderlanders think of her as Daughter-Heir sooner than she wanted. Not to mention that Mellar might decide to leer at her.

Captain Mellar’s unconcern was not shared by the rest of her bodyguard, though. One of the Guardswomen apparently went running for Caseille, because the tall Arafellin woman came striding into the sitting room while Elayne was still writing, demanding to accompany Elayne with the entire bodyguard. Birgitte finally had to order her out to stop her protests.

For once, Birgitte appeared to recognize the fact that Elayne was not going to be budged, leaving with Caseille to change her clothes. Well, she stalked off grumbling oaths, slamming the door behind her with a crash, but at least she did go. You might have thought she would be happy for a chance to take off that Captain-General’s coat, but the bond might as well have been an echo of her curses. Aviendha did not curse, but she kept up her admonitions. Everything had to be done in such a whirlwind, though, that Elayne had an excuse to ignore them.

Essande was summoned and began laying out suitable garments, while Elayne hastily ate her midday meal early. She had not sent for it; Aviendha had. Apparently, Monaelle said missing meals was as bad as eating too much. Mistress Harfor, informed that she would have to handle the glassmakers, and the other delegations as well, grimaced faintly even as she inclined her head in acceptance. Before leaving, she announced that she had acquired goats for the Palace. Elayne needed to drink goat’s milk, and lots of it. Careane groaned at hearing that she was to teach the Windfinders that night, but at least the woman made no comment on her diet. In truth, she hoped to be back in the Palace by nightfall, but she also expected to be as tired as if she had already taught that lesson. Vandene did not offer advice, either, not of that sort. Elayne had studied the nations of the Blightborder along with every other land as part of her education, and had discussed her intentions with the white-haired Green, who knew the Borderlands well, yet she would have dearly loved to take Vandene along. Someone who had actually lived in the Borderlands might see nuances that escaped her. But she did not dare do more than ask a few last hurried questions while Essande was dressing her, just to reassure herself on things Vandene had already told her. Not that she needed reassurance, she realized. She felt as focused as Birgitte drawing a bow.

Finally, Reanne had to be brought from where she was yet again trying to convince a former *sul'dam* that she, too, could channel. Reanne had been making that weave in the stableyard every day since she first wove it to send Merilille off; she could open it on the same spot in Braem Wood with no difficulty. There were no maps of that area in the Palace that were good enough for Merilille to mark the camp's positions very well, and if Elayne or Aviendha wove the gateway, it might open ten miles or more farther from the camps than the small clearing Reanne knew. The snow had stopped falling in Braem Wood before the Gray returned, yet even so, ten miles in fresh snow could mean another two hours at best. Elayne wanted this done quickly. Speed. Everyone had to move with speed.

The Sea Folk must have been aware of the bustle that enveloped the Palace, Guardswomen running through the hallways carrying messages and fetching this person or that, but Elayne made sure they were told nothing. Suppose Zaida decided to come along, she was capable of having one of the Windfinders make her own gateway if Elayne refused her, and the Wavemistress was a complication to be avoided. The woman already behaved as though she had as much right in the Palace as Elayne herself. Zaida trying to domineer could ruin everything as surely as Mellar leering at her.

Making haste seemed beyond Essande's ability, yet everyone else flew, and by the time the sun stood straight overhead, Elayne found herself riding Fireheart slowly through the snows of Braem Wood, near enough fifty leagues north of Caemlyn as the wild goose flew but only a step through the gateway into thick forest of tall pine and leatherleaf and oak mixed with gray-branched trees that had lost their leaves. Occasionally a broad meadow opened up, covered with snow like white carpets, unblemished save for the hoofprints of Merilille's running horse. Merilille had been sent ahead with the letter, and Elayne, Aviendha and Birgitte had followed after an hour, to give her time to reach the Borderlanders ahead of them. The road from Caemlyn to New Braem lay some miles to the west. Here, they could have been a thousand leagues from human habitation.

For Elayne, dressing had been as serious as choosing armor. Her cloak was lined with marten for added warmth, but the material was dark green wool, soft yet thick, and her riding dress was green silk, and unadorned. Even her snug riding gloves were plain dark green leather. Unless the swords had been drawn, that was the armor in which an Aes Sedai faced rulers. Her only visible jewelry was a small amber brooch in the shape of a turtle, and if anyone thought that odd, let them. An army of Borderlanders was beyond any trap one of her rivals could lay, or even Elaida, but those ten sisters—ten or more—might be Elaida's. She was not about to let herself be bundled off back to the White Tower.

"We can turn back from this without incurring *toh*, Elayne." Aviendha, scowling, still wore her Aiel garments, with her single silver necklace and heavy ivory bracelet. Her stocky bay was a hand shorter than Fireheart or Birgitte's lean gray, Arrow, and much gentler to handle, though she rode more easily than once she had. Dark-stockinged legs bared above the knee by straddling a saddle, she actually looked warm, except for the shawl wrapped around her head. Unlike Birgitte, she had not ceased her attempts to dissuade Elayne. "Surprise is all very well, but they will respect you more if they must meet you halfway."

"I can hardly abandon Merilille," Elayne said more patiently than she felt. Perhaps she was not weary any longer, but neither did she feel particularly fresh, not at all ready to put up with badgering. But she did not want to snap at Aviendha. "She might feel something of a fool, standing there with a letter announcing that I'm coming and I don't come. Worse, *I* would feel a fool."

"Better to feel a fool than be one," Birgitte muttered, half under her breath. Her dark cloak spread behind her saddle, and her intricate braid hung from the opening of her hood almost to her waist. Pulling that hood up just enough to frame her face was the one concession she had made to the cold and the gusting wind that sometimes lifted fresh-fallen snow like feathers. She did not want her vision obscured. The cover on her bow's saddle-case, meant to keep the bowstring dry, hung down so she could reach the bow quickly. The suggestion that she wear a sword had been quashed with as much indignation as if Elayne had asked Aviendha to wear one. Birgitte knew the bow, but she claimed she might stab herself trying to draw a sword. Still, her short green coat would have blended into woodlands at another time of the year, and for a wonder, her wide-legged trousers were the same color. She was a Warder now, not the Captain-General of the Queen's Guard, yet she was not so pleased by the title as might have been expected. The bond carried as much frustration as alertness.

Elayne sighed, her breath misting. "You two know what I hope to achieve here. You've known since I decided. Why are you suddenly treating me as if I'm made of blown glass?"

The pair exchanged looks past her, each waiting for the other to speak first, then silently turned to stare straight ahead, and suddenly she knew.

"When my child is born," she said dryly, "you can both apply to be her wet nurse." If her child was "her." If Min had said, it was lost in Aviendha and Birgitte's wine-hazed memories of that night. It might be better to have a son first, so he could begin his training before his sister came. Yet a daughter secured the succession, while a lone son would be pushed aside, and as much as she wanted more than one, nothing said she would have another child. The Light send her more of Rand's children, but she had to be practical. "I myself do not need a wet nurse."

Aviendha's sun-darkened cheeks turned darker with embarrassment. Birgitte's expression did not change, yet the same emotion oozed along the Warder bond.

They rode slowly, following Merilille's tracks for close on two hours, and Elayne was thinking that the nearest camp must be very close when Birgitte suddenly pointed ahead and said, "Shienarans," then eased her bow in its case. Alertness swallowed frustration and everything else in the bond. Aviendha touched the hilt of her belt knife as if making sure it was there.

Waiting beneath the trees, off to one side from Merilille's traces, men and horses alike were so still that Elayne almost took them for natural outcrops of some sort until she made out the strange swooping crests on their helmets. Their mounts were not armored, as Shienaran heavies' animals often were, but the men themselves wore plate-and-mail, with long-hilted swords on their backs, and swords and maces hung at their belts and from their saddles. Their dark eyes never blinked. One of the horses swished its tail, and the movement seemed startling.

A sharp-faced man with a harsh voice spoke as Elayne and the other two women drew rein in front of him. The crest atop his helmet looked like narrow wings. “King Easar sends his assurance of your safety, Elayne Sedai, and I add my own. I am Kayen Yokata, Lord of Fal Eisen, and may Peace abandon me and the Blight consume my soul if harm befalls you or anyone with you in our camp.”

That was not so comforting as Elayne might have wished. All these guarantees of her safety only made clear that there had been some question of it, and might still be. “Does an Aes Sedai need assurances from Shienarans?” she said. She started to run through a novice exercise for calmness, and realized she did not need it. Very strange. “You may lead, Lord Kayen.” He merely nodded and turned his horse.

Some of the Shienarans glanced at Aviendha without expression, recognizing an Aiel, but for the most part they simply fell in behind. Only the hooves crunching the harder snow beneath the fresh fall broke the silence of their short ride. She had been right. The Shienaran camp was very close. She began to see sentries, mounted and armored, just minutes later, and soon after that they rode into the Shienaran camp.

Sprawled among the trees, the encampment seemed larger than she had imagined. Whether she looked left, right or ahead, tents and cookfires, lines of tethered horses and rows of wagons stretched out of her sight. As she and her escort passed, soldiers looked up in curiosity, hard-faced men with their heads shaved except for a tuft on top that was sometimes long enough to reach the shoulders. Few wore any part of their armor, but armor and weapons always lay close to hand. The smell was not so bad as Merilille had described, though she could make out the faint odor of latrines and horse dung beneath the aroma of whatever was boiling in all these cookpots. No one appeared hungry, though many were lean. Not the leanness of starvation, though, just that of men who had never carried much fat on them. She did notice that there were no spits over any fire she could see. Meat would be harder to come by than grain, though grain itself was in short enough supply this late in winter. Barley soup did not strengthen a man the way meat did. They needed to move soon; nowhere could support four armies this size for long. She just had to make sure they moved in the right direction.

Not everyone she saw was a soldier with a shaven head, of course, though the men among them looked almost as hard. There were fletchers making arrows, wheelwrights working on wagons, farriers shoeing horses, laundresses stirring boiling kettles, women working with needles who might have been seamstresses or wives. Great numbers of people always followed an army, sometimes as many as the soldiers themselves. She did not see anyone who could have been Aes Sedai, though; sisters were unlikely to push up their sleeves and work wooden paddles in the laundry kettles, or don patched woolens and sit darning breeches. Why did they want to remain hidden? She resisted the desire to embrace the Source, to draw *saidar* through the turtle *angreal* pinned to her breast. One battle at a time, and first she must fight for Andor.

Before a much larger tent than any of the others she could see, pale canvas with a single long peak, Kayen dismounted and handed her down. He hesitated over whether to do the same for Birgitte and Aviendha, but Birgitte solved his dilemma by stepping down smoothly and handing her reins to a waiting soldier, Aviendha by half-falling out of the saddle. She had improved her riding, but mounting and dismounting still gave her difficulty. Glaring around her to see whether anyone was laughing, she smoothed down her bulky skirts, then unwrapped the shawl from around her head and settled it on her shoulders. Birgitte watched her horse being taken away as though she wished she had taken her bow and quiver from the saddle. Kayen pulled open one of the entry flaps and bowed.

Drawing a last deep calming breath, Elayne led the other two women in. She could not allow them to see her as a supplicant. She was not here to beg, or to defend. *Sometimes,* Gareth Bryne had told her when she was a child, *you find yourself outnumbered, with no path to slip away. Always do what your enemy least expects, Elayne. In that case, you must attack.* From the start, she must attack.

Inside, Merilille glided to her across the layered carpets laid down for a floor. The diminutive Gray's smile was not precisely relieved, but clearly she was glad to see Elayne. Aside from her, there were only five others present, two women and three men, and one of the latter was a servant, an old cavalryman by his bowed legs and scarred face, who came to take cloaks and gloves—and blink at Aviendha—before retreating to a plain wooden table that held a silver tray with a tall-necked pitcher and an array of cups. The other four ruled the nations of the Borderlands. A scattering of backless camp chairs and four large braziers holding glowing coals completed the tent's furnishings. This was not the sort of reception the Daughter-Heir of Andor might have expected, with courtiers and many servants, and idle conversation to be made before serious discussions could begin, and men and women at those rulers' shoulders to advise them. What she found was what she had hoped for.

Healing had rid Merilille's eyes of their dark circles before she left the Palace, and she made Elayne's introduction with simple dignity. "This is Elayne Trakand, of the Green Ajah, as I told you." That, and nothing more. Elayne knew enough from Vandene to pick out one from another of the four rulers who faced her.

"I give you welcome, Elayne Sedai," Easar of Shienar said. "Peace and the Light favor you." He was a short man, no taller than herself, slim in a bronze-colored coat, his face unwrinkled despite a long white topknot that hung over the side of his head. Looking at his sad eyes, she reminded herself that he was accounted a wise ruler and a skilled diplomat as well as a fine soldier. In appearance, he was none of those things. "May I offer you wine? The spices are not fresh, but they have gained extra sharpness with age."

"When Merilille told us you would come all the way from Caemlyn today, I confess I would have doubted her, were she not Aes Sedai." Ethenielle of Kandor, perhaps half a hand taller than Merilille, was plump, her black hair lightly dusted with gray, but there was nothing motherly about her despite her smile. Regal dignity clothed her as much as did her fine blue wool. Her eyes were blue, too, clear and level.

"We are pleased that you did come," Paitar of Arafel said in a surprisingly deep, rich voice that made Elayne feel warmed, somehow. "We have much to discuss with you." Vandene had said he was the most beautiful man in the Borderlands, and perhaps he had been long ago, but age had laid deep lines in his face, and only a fringe of short gray hair remained on his head. He was tall and broad-shouldered, though, in plain green, and he did look strong. And not a fool.

Where the others carried their years with grace, Tenobia of Saldaea flaunted youth if not beauty, with her eagle's beak of a nose and wide mouth. Her tilted, almost purple eyes, level with Elayne's, were her best feature. Perhaps her only one. Where the others dressed simply, even if they did rule nations, her pale blue dress was worked with pearls and sapphires and she wore more sapphires in her hair. Suitable for the court, but hardly for a camp. And where they were courteous . . . “Under the Light, Merilille Sedai,” Tenobia said in a high voice, frowning, “I know you speak truth, but she looks more a child than an Aes Sedai. You did not mention she would be bringing a black-eyed Aiel.”

Easar’s face never changed, but Paitar’s mouth tightened, and Ethenielle went so far as to cut her eyes briefly toward Tenobia in a glance that would have suited a mother. A very irritated and displeased mother.

“Black?” Aviendha muttered in confusion. “My eyes are not black. I never saw black eyes except on a peddler until I crossed the Dragonwall.”

“You know I can speak only the truth, Tenobia, and I assure you,” Merilille began.

Elayne silenced her with a touch on the arm. “It is enough that you know I am Aes Sedai, Tenobia. This is my sister, Aviendha, of the Nine Valleys Sept of the Taardad Aiel.” Aviendha smiled at them, or at least bared her teeth. “This is my Warder, Lady Birgitte Trahelion.” Birgitte made a short bow, her golden braid swaying.

One announcement caused as many startled looks as the other—an Aiel woman was her *sister*? her Warder was a *woman*?—but Tenobia and the others ruled lands on the edge of the Blight, where nightmares truly might walk abroad in daylight and anyone who let themselves be startled too greatly was as good as dead. Elayne gave them no chance to recover fully, though. *Attack before they know what you are doing,* Gareth Bryne had said, *and keep attacking until you rout them or break through*.

“Shall we consider the niceties completed?” she said, taking a cup that gave off the aroma of spiced wine from the tray proffered by the old soldier. A surge of caution flowed along the Warder bond, and she saw Aviendha glance sideways at the cup, but she did not mean to drink. She was just glad neither actually spoke. “Only a fool would think you have come all this way to invade Andor,” she said, walking to the chairs and sitting. Rulers or not, they had no choice but to follow or stare at her back. At Birgitte’s back, since she stood behind her. As usual, Aviendha folded herself to the floor and arranged her skirts in a neat fan. They followed. “The Dragon Reborn brings you,” Elayne went on. “You requested this audience with me because I was at Falme. The question is, why is that important to you? Do you think

I can tell you more of what happened there than you already know? The Horn of Valere was sounded, dead heroes out of legend rode against Seanchan invaders, and the Dragon Reborn fought the Shadow in the sky for all to see. If you know that much, you know as much as I."

"Audience?" Tenobia said incredulously, pausing half-seated. The camp chair creaked as she let herself drop the rest of the way. "No one *requested* an *audience*! Even if you already held the throne of Andor—!"

"Let us stay to the point, Tenobia," Paitar broke in mildly. Rather than sitting, he stood, occasionally sipping at his wine. Elayne was glad she could see the wrinkles on his face. That voice could confuse a woman's thoughts, otherwise.

Ethenielle spared Tenobia another quick glance while seating herself, and murmured something under her breath. Elayne thought she heard the word "marriage," with a rueful sound, but that made no sense. In any case, she turned her attention to Elayne as soon as she was settled in her chair. "I might like your ferocity another time, Elayne Sedai, but there's little to enjoy falling into an ambush that one of your own allies has helped lay." Tenobia scowled, though Ethenielle did not even dart those sharp eyes in her direction. "What happened at Falme," the Queen of Kandor told Elayne, "is not so important as what came of it. No, Paitar; we must tell her what we must tell her. She already knows too much for anything else. We know that you were a companion to the Dragon Reborn at Falme, Elayne. A friend, perhaps. You are right; we have not come to invade. We have come to find the Dragon Reborn. And we have marched all this way only to find that no one knows where he is to be found. Do you know where he is?"

Elayne hid her relief at the blunt question. It would never have been asked if they thought she was more than a companion or friend. She could be just as blunt. Attack and keep attacking. "Why do you want to find him? Emissaries or messengers could take any word you wanted to send him." Which was as good as asking why they brought vast armies.

Easar had taken no wine, and he stood with his fists on his hips. "The war against the Shadow is fought along the Blight," he said grimly. "The Last Battle will be fought in the Blight, if not at Shayol Ghul itself. And he ignores the Borderlands and concerns himself with lands that have not seen a Myrddraal since the Trolloc Wars."

"The *Car'a'carn* decides where to dance the spears, wetlander," Aviendha sneered. "If you follow him, then you fight where he says." No one looked at her. They were all looking at Elayne. No one took the opening Aviendha had offered.

Elayne made herself breathe evenly and meet their gazes without blinking. A Borderland army was too great a trap for Elaida to lay in order to catch Elayne Trakand, but Rand al'Thor, the Dragon Reborn, might be another matter. Merilille shifted on her chair, but she had her instructions. No matter how many treaties the Gray sister had negotiated, once Elayne began, she was to keep silent. Confidence flowed along the bond with Birgitte. Rand was a stone, unreadable, and distant. "You know of the White Tower's proclamation regarding him?" she asked quietly. They must, by now.

"The Tower calls anathema on anyone who approaches the Dragon Reborn save through the offices of the Tower," Paitar said just as quietly. Taking a seat at last, he regarded her with serious eyes. "You are Aes Sedai. Surely that counts as the same thing."

"The Tower meddles everywhere," Tenobia muttered. "No, Ethenielle; I will say this! The whole world knows the Tower is divided. Do you follow Elaida or the rebels, Elayne?"

"The world seldom knows what it thinks it knows," Merilille said in a voice that seemed to lower the temperature in the tent. The tiny woman who ran when Elayne ordered her and squeaked when Windfinders looked at her sat up straight and faced Tenobia as an Aes Sedai, her smooth face as frosty as her tone. "The affairs of the Tower are for initiates to know, Tenobia. If you want to learn, ask to have your name written in the novice book, and in twenty years you might learn a little."

Her Illumined Majesty, Tenobia si Bashere Kazadi, Shield of the North and Sword of the Blightborder, High Seat of House Kazadi, Lady of Shahayni, Asnelle, Kunwar and Ganai, glared at Merilille with all the fury of a blizzard. And said nothing. Elayne's respect for her increased slightly.

Merilille's disobedience did not displease her. It saved her from trying to prevaricate while seeming to speak only the truth. Egwene said they must try to live as if they had already sworn the Three Oaths, and here and now, Elayne felt the weight of it. Here, she was not the Daughter-Heir of Andor struggling to claim her mother's throne, or not only that. She was an Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah, with more reason for taking care with her words than simply hiding what she wanted to remain hidden.

"I cannot tell you exactly where he is." Truth, because she could only have given them a vague direction, roughly toward Tear, and no telling how far; truth, because she did not trust them sufficiently for even that. She just had to be careful what she said, and how. "I do know that apparently he intends to remain where he is awhile." He had not moved for days, the first time since leaving her that he had remained in any one place longer than half a day. "I will tell you what I can, but only if you agree that you will march south within the week. You will run out of barley as well as meat if you remain here much longer, anyway. I promise, you will be marching toward the Dragon Reborn." To begin with they would be, at any rate.

Paitar shook his bald head. "You want us to enter Andor? Elayne Sedai—or should I call you Lady Elayne, now?—I wish you the Light's blessing in your quest for Andor's crown, but not enough to offer my men to fight for it."

"Elayne Sedai and Lady Elayne are one and the same," she told them. "I do not ask you to fight for me. In truth, I hope with all my heart that you cross Andor without so much as a skirmish." Raising her silver winecup, she wet her lips without drinking. A flash of caution surged through the Warder bond, and in spite of herself, Elayne laughed. Aviendha was watching her from the corner of her eye and frowning. Even now, they were going to look after the mother to be.

"I am glad someone finds this amusing," Ethenielle said wryly. "Try to think like a Southlander, Paitar. They play the Game of Houses here, and I think she is being very clever at it. She should be, I suppose; I've always heard that Aes Sedai created *Daes Dae'mar*."

"Think tactics, Paitar." Easar was studying Elayne, wearing a small smile. "We move toward Caemlyn as invaders, so any Andoran will see it. Winter may be mild here, but we'll still need weeks to ride that far. By the time we do, she will have rallied enough of the Andoran Houses against us, and to her, that she will have the Lion Throne, or near enough. At the least, enough strength will have been pledged to her that no one else will be able to stand long against her." Tenobia shifted on her chair, frowning and adjusting her skirts, but there was a respect in her eyes when she looked at Elayne that had not been there before.

"And when we reach Caemlyn, Elayne Sedai," Ethenielle said, "you will . . . negotiate . . . us into leaving Andor without a battle being fought." That came out as not quite a question, but almost. "Very clever indeed."

"If all works as she plans," Easar said, his smile fading. He put out a hand without looking, and the old soldier placed a winecup in it. "Battles seldom do; even this bloodless sort, I think."

"I very much want it all to be bloodless," Elayne said. Light, it had to be, or instead of saving her country from civil war, she had plunged it into worse. "I will work hard to see that it is. I expect you to do the same."

"Do you also happen to know where my Uncle Davram is, Elayne Sedai?" Tenobia said suddenly. "Davram Bashere? I would like to speak with him as much as with the Dragon Reborn."

"Lord Davram is not far from Caemlyn, Tenobia. I cannot promise he will still be there when you arrive, though. That is, if you agree?" Elayne made herself breathe, to hide her anxiety. She was beyond where she could turn back, now. They would move south now, she was certain, but without their agreement, there would be bloodshed.

For a long moment there was silence in the tent except for a coal cracking in one of the braziers. Ethenielle exchanged glances with the two men.

"So long as I get to see my uncle," Tenobia said heatedly, "I am agreed."

"On my honor, I am agreed," Easar said decisively, and almost atop him, if in a milder tone, Paitar said, "Under the Light, I am agreed."

"Then so are we all," Ethenielle breathed. "And now your part, Elayne Sedai. Where do we find the Dragon Reborn?"

A thrill shot through Elayne, and she could not say whether it was exhilaration, or fear. She had done what she had come for, risked the dangers for herself and for Andor, and only time would tell whether she had made the right decision. She answered without hesitation, "As I told you, I cannot say exactly where. A search in Murandy will be profitable, though." Truth, though the profit would be hers, not theirs, if any came. Egwene had moved from Murandy today, taking away the army that had held Arathelle Renshar and the other nobles in the south. Perhaps the Borderlanders moving south would force Arathelle and Luan and Pelivar to decide as Dyelin believed they would, to support her. The Light send it so.

Except for Tenobia, the Borderlanders did not seem at all exultant over learning where to find Rand. Ethenielle let out a long breath, almost a sigh, and Easar simply nodded and pursed his lips in thought. Paitar drank down half his wine, the first real drink he had taken. It very much seemed that however much they wanted to find the Dragon Reborn, they were not looking forward to meeting him. Tenobia, on the other hand, called for the old soldier to bring her wine and went on about how much she wanted to see her uncle. Elayne would not have thought the woman had so much family feeling.

Night came early that time of year, and only a few hours of daylight remained, as Easar pointed out, offering beds for the night. Ethenielle suggested that her own tent would be more comfortable, yet they gave no sign of disappointment when Elayne said she must leave immediately.

“Remarkable that you can cover such distance so quickly,” Ethenielle murmured. “I have heard Aes Sedai speak of a thing called Traveling. A lost Talent?”

“Have you encountered many sisters on your journey?” Elayne asked.

“Some,” Ethenielle replied. “There are Aes Sedai everywhere, it seems.” Even Tenobia was suddenly expressionless.

Allowing Birgitte to lay the marten-lined cloak on her shoulders, Elayne nodded. “So there are. Would you have our horses brought?”

None of them spoke again until they were out of the camp, riding through the trees. The horse-smell and latrine-stink had seemed mild in the camp, but their absence here made the air seem very fresh, and the snow whiter, somehow.

“You were very quiet, Birgitte Trahelion,” Aviendha said, thumping her bay’s ribs with her heels. She always believed the animal would stop without reminders to keep going.

“A Warder doesn’t speak for her Aes Sedai; she bloody listens and watches her back,” Birgitte replied dryly. It was unlikely the forest contained anyone who might threaten them, this near the Shienaran camp, but her bow remained uncovered, and her eyes scanned the trees.

“A much hastier form of negotiation than I am used to, Elayne,” Merilille said. “Normally, these matters require days or weeks of talking, if not months, before anything is agreed. You were lucky they are not Domani. Or Cairhienin,” she admitted judiciously. “Borderlanders are refreshingly open and straightforward. Easy to deal with.”

Open and straightforward? Elayne shook her head slightly. They wanted to find Rand, but concealed why. They concealed the presence of sisters, too. At least they would be moving away from him, once she had them on their way to Murandy. That would have to do, for now, but she had to warn him, once she could figure out how to do so without endangering him. *Take care of him, Min,* she thought. *Take care of him for us.*

A few miles from the camp, she reined in to study the forest as assiduously as Birgitte. Especially behind them. The sun sat low on the treetops. A trotting white fox appeared for an instant and was gone. Something flickered on a bare gray branch, a bird perhaps, or a squirrel. A dark hawk suddenly plummeted out of the sky, and a thin squeal broke the air and ended suddenly. They were not being followed. It was not the Shienarans she worried about, but those hidden sisters. The weariness that had vanished earlier, with Merilille's news, had returned with interest now that her meeting with the Borderlanders was done. She wanted nothing so much as to climb into her bed as soon as possible, but she did not want it enough to give the weave for Traveling to sisters she did not know.

She could have woven a gateway to the Palace stableyard, but only at the risk of killing someone who happened to be crossing where it opened, so instead she wove one for another place she knew just as well. She was so tired that it required effort to weave, so tired that she did not think of the *angreal* pinned to her dress until the silvery slash had appeared in the air and opened onto a field covered with brown grass beaten flat by earlier snowfalls, a field just south of Caemlyn where Gareth Bryne had often taken her to watch the Queen's Guards ride to command, breaking from columns to form a line four abreast at a shouted order.

"Are you just going to look at it?" Birgitte demanded.

Elayne blinked. Aviendha and Merilille were studying her with concern. Birgitte's face gave nothing away, but the bond carried worry, too.

"I was just thinking," Elayne said, and heeled Fireheart through the gateway. Bed would be wonderful.

From the old practice field to the tall arched gates set in the pale, fifty-foot-high city walls was a short ride. The long market buildings lining the approach to the gates were empty at this hour, but sharp-eyed Guardsmen still kept a watch. They watched her and the others ride in apparently without recognizing her. Mercenaries, very likely. They would not know her unless they saw her on the Lion Throne. With the help of the Light, and luck, they would see her there.

Twilight was fast approaching, the sky turning a deep gray and the shadows slanting long across the streets. Very few people were still out and about, a scattering of folk hurrying to finish their day's work before going home to dinner and a warm fire. A pair of bearers carrying a merchant's dark lacquered sedan-chair went trotting past along a street ahead, and a few moments later one of the big pump-wagons rumbled in the other direction behind eight running horses, its iron-shod wheels loud on the paving stones. Another fire, somewhere. They happened most often at night. A patrol of four Guardsman walked their horses toward her and on, without looking at her twice. They did not recognize her anymore than the men at the gates.

Swaying in her saddle, she rode wishing for her bed.

It was a shock to realize that she was being lifted down from her saddle. She opened eyes she did not remember closing and found herself being carried into the Palace in Birgitte's arms.

"Put me down," she said tiredly. "I can still walk."

"You can hardly stand up," Birgitte growled. "Be still."

"You cannot talk with her!" Aviendha said loudly.

"She really does need sleep, Master Norry," Merilille said in firm tones. "Tomorrow will have to do."

"Forgive me, but tomorrow will *not* do," Norry replied, for a wonder sounding very firm himself. "It is *urgent* I speak with her now!"

Elayne's head wanted to wobble as she lifted it. Halwin Norry was clutching that leather folder to his skinny chest, as always, but the dry man who talked of crowned heads with the same dusty tone he used for speaking of the roof repairs was almost dancing on his toes in an effort to get by Aviendha and Merilille, who each had him by an arm, holding him back.

"Put me down, Birgitte," she said again, and for the second wonder in as many moments, Birgitte obeyed. She kept a supporting arm around Elayne, though, for which Elayne was grateful. She was not sure her legs would have supported her for very long. "What is it, Master Norry? Let the man go, Aviendha. Merilille?"

The First Clerk darted forward as soon they let go of him. "Word began arriving soon after you left, my Lady," he said, not sounding dusty at all. Worry pinched his brows. "There are four armies. . . . Small, I should say now, I suppose. Light, I recall when five thousand men *was* an army." He rubbed a hand over his bald head, leaving the white tufts rising behind his ears in ruffled disarray. "There are four small armies approaching Caemlyn, from the east," he went on in a more usual tone for him. Almost. "They will be here inside the week, I fear. Twenty thousand men. Perhaps thirty. I cannot be sure.” He half extended the folder to her as if offering to show her the papers inside. He *was* agitated.

“Who?” she said. Elenia had estates, and forces, in the east, but so did Naean. But neither could raise twenty thousand men. And the snow and mud should have held them until spring. *“Should” and “would” build no bridges*, she seemed to hear Lini’s thin voice say.

“I do not know, my Lady,” Norry replied, “not yet.”

It did not matter, Elayne supposed. Whoever it was, they were coming, and now. “At first light, Master Norry, I want you to begin buying all the foodstuffs you can find outside the walls and get it brought in. Birgitte, have the bannerman announcing the signing bounty add that mercenaries have four days to sign with the Guards or they must leave the city. And have announcements made to the people, too, Master Norry. Whoever wants to leave before the siege begins should go now. It will cut down the number of mouths we have to feed, and it might lead a few more men to enlist in the Guards.” Pushing away from Birgitte’s support, she strode along the hallway, heading for her apartments. The others were forced to follow. “Merilille, let the Kinswomen know, and the Atha’an Miere. They may want to leave before it begins, too, Maps, Birgitte. Have the good maps brought to my apartments. And another thing, Master Norry . . .”

There was no time for sleep, no time for weariness. She had a city to defend.

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CHAPTER 28

News in a Cloth Sack

The morning after Mat promised to help Teslyn, if he could—and Joline, and this Edesina he had yet to lay eyes on!—Tylin announced that she was departing the city.

“Suroth is going to show me how much of Altara I control now, pigeon,” she said. Her belt knife was stuck in the carved bedpost, and they were still lying on the rumpled linen sheets amid a tangle of bedding, him in only the silk scarf that hid the hanging scar around his neck, and her in her skin. A very fine skin it was, too, as smooth as he had ever touched. Idly she traced his other scars with a long, green-lacquered fingernail. One way and another, he had acquired quite a few, though not for want of trying to avoid them. His hide would not bring much at auction, that was for sure, but the scars fascinated her. “It wasn’t her idea, actually. Tuon thinks it will . . . help me . . . if I see with my own eyes instead of just on a map, and what that girl suggests, Suroth does. She would like to see it done yesterday, though. We’ll be going by *to’raken,* so to cover the ground quickly. As much as two hundred miles in a day, it seems. Oh, don’t look sick, piglet. I won’t make you climb on one of those things.”

Mat heaved a sigh of relief. It had not been the prospect of flying that upset him. He thought he might actually like that. But if he was out of Ebou Dar for any length of time, the Light alone knew whether Teslyn or Joline or even this Edesina might grow impatient enough to do something stupid, or what idiocy Beslan might get up to. Beslan worried him almost as much as the women. Tylin, excited by her coming flight on one of the Seanchan beasts, looked more an eagle than ever.

“I’ll be gone little more than a week, sweetling. Hmmm.” That green fingernail traced the foot-long puckering that slanted across his ribs. “Shall I tie you to the bed so I’ll know you will be safe till I return?”

Returning her wicked smile with his most winning grin took a bit of effort. He was fairly sure she was joking, but only fairly. The clothes she chose today put him all in red brilliant enough to hurt the eye; all red except for the flowers worked on the coat and the cloak, anyway, and his black hat and scarf. The white lace at his neck and wrists only made the rest look redder. Still, he scrambled into them, eager to get out of her apartments. With Tylin, a man was wise not to be too sure of anything. She might *not* be joking, too.

Tylin had not exaggerated Suroth's impatience, it appeared. In little more than two hours by the jeweled cylinder-clock in Tylin's sitting room, a gift from Suroth, he was accompanying the Queen to the docks. Well, Suroth and Tylin rode at the head of the twenty or so other Blood that were to accompany them, and their assorted *so'jhin*, men and women who bowed their half-shaved heads to the Blood and stared down their noses at everyone else, while he rode behind on Pips. An Altaran Queen's "pretty" could not ride with the Blood, which included Tylin herself now, of course. It was not as if he was a hereditary servant or anything of that level.

The Blood and most of the *so'jhin* were mounted on fine animals, sleek mares with arched necks and a delicate step, deep-chested geldings with fierce eyes and strong withers. His luck seemed to have no effect on horse racing, but he would have wagered on Pips against any of them. The blunt-nosed bay gelding was not showy, but Mat was sure he could outrun nearly all of those pretty animals in a sprint and all of them over a long haul. After so long in the stables, Pips wanted to frisk if he could not run, and it took all Mat's skill—well, all the skill that had somehow come with those other men's memories—to keep the animal in hand. Before they were halfway to the docks, though, his leg was aching to the hip. If he was to leave Ebou Dar any time soon, it would have to be by sea, or with Luca's show. He had a good notion how to make the man leave before spring, if it came to that. A dangerous notion, maybe, but he did not see much choice. The alternative was riskier still.

He was not alone at the rear. More than fifty men and women, blessedly wearing thick white woolen robes over the sheer garments they usually went around in, marched behind him in two rows, some leading packhorses with large wicker hampers full of delicacies. The Blood could not do without their servants; in fact, they seemed to think they would be sleeping rough, with so few. The *da'covale* seldom raised their eyes from the paving stones, and their faces were meek as milk. He had seen a *da'covale* sent for a strapping once, a yellow-haired man about his age, and the fellow had raced to bring the instrument of his own punishment. He had not even tried to delay or hide, much less escape the strapping. Mat could not understand people like that.

Ahead of him rode six *sul'dam,* their short divided skirts showing their ankles. Very nice ankles on one or two, but the women sat their saddles as if they were of the Blood, too. The cowls of their lightning-paneled cloaks hung down their backs, and they let the cold gusts lift the cloaks as though the chill did not touch them, or would not dare. Two had leashed *damane* walking beside their horses.

Mat studied the women surreptitiously. One of the *damane,* a short woman with pale blue eyes, was linked by a silvery *a'dam* to the plump olive-skinned *sul'dam* he had seen walking Teslyn. The dark-haired *damane* answered to the name Pura. The Aes Sedai agelessness was clear on her smooth face. He had not really believed Teslyn when she said the woman had become a true *damane,* but the graying *sul'dam* leaned low in her saddle to say something to the woman who had been Ryma Galfrey, and whatever it was the *sul'dam* murmured, Pura laughed and clapped her hands in delight.

Mat shivered. She would bloody well shout for help if he tried to take the *a'dam* from her neck. Light, what was he thinking of! Bad enough that he was stuck with pulling three Aes Sedai's bacon off the fire for them—Burn him, but he did seem to get lumbered with doing that every time he bloody turned around!—bad enough that, without thinking about trying to get any more out of Ebou Dar.

Ebou Dar was a great seaport, with perhaps the largest harbor in the known world, and the docks were long gray fingers of stone thrusting out from the quay that ran the whole length of the city. Almost all the mooring spots were taken by Seanchan vessels of every size, the crews in the rigging and cheering vigorously as Suroth passed by, a thunder of voices calling her name. The men on other ships waved their arms and shouted as well, though many appeared confused as to who or what they were cheering. No doubt they thought it expected of them. On those vessels, the wind blowing across the harbor stirred the Golden Bees of Illian, and the Crescent Moons of Tear, and the Golden Hawk of Mayene. Apparently Rand had not ordered the merchants there to stop trading with Seanchan-held ports, or else the merchants were going behind his back. Colors flashed through Mat's skull, and he shook his head to clear it. Most merchants would trade with their mother's murderer if it brought profit.

The southernmost dock had been cleared of ships, and Seanchan officers with thin plumes on their lacquered helmets stood waiting to hand Suroth and Tylin down into one of the large rowboats that stood waiting, eight men on the long oars of each. After Tylin gave Mat a last kiss, anyway, almost yanking his hair out to pull his head down, and after she pinched his bottom as though no one was bloody watching! Suroth frowned impatiently until Tylin was settled in the long boat, and in truth, the Seanchan woman did not stop chafing even then, twitching her fingers at Alwhin, her *so'jhin,* so the sharp-faced woman was continually scrambling across the benches to fetch her one thing or another.

The rest of the Blood received deep bows from the officers, but had to climb down the ladders with their *so'jhin*'s aid. The *sul'dam* helped the *damane* into the boats, and no one at all helped the white-robed folk load the pack hampers and themselves. Soon enough, the boats were crossing the harbor toward where the *raken* and *to'raken* were kept south of the Rahad, spidering through the sprawling anchored fleet of Seanchan ships and the scores of captured Sea Folk vessels that dotted the harbor. The greater number of those appeared to have been rerigged with ribbed Seanchan sails and different lines. Their crews were Seanchan, too. Excepting the Windfinders he tried not to think about, and maybe some who had been sold, the surviving Atha'an Miere were all in the Rahad with the other *da'covale* clearing the silted-up canals. And there was nothing he could do about it. He did not owe them anything, he had more on his plate than he could handle already, and there was nothing he could do. That was all there was to it!

He wanted to ride away immediately, to leave the Sea Folk ships behind him. No one on the docks paid him the slightest heed. The officers had gone away as soon as the boats cast off. Someone, he did not know who, had taken the packhorses away. The seamen climbed out of the rigging and went back to their work, and the members of the cargo-loaders guild began pushing their low, heavy barrows stacked with bales and crates and barrels. But if he left too soon, Tylin might decide he was planning to keep riding right out of the city and send for him, so he sat Pips on the end of the dock and waved like a bull goose fool till she was far enough away that she could not see him without a looking glass.

Despite the throbbing leg, he rode slowly back up almost the whole length of the quay. He avoided looking at the harbor again. Soberly dressed merchants stood watching their cargo being loaded or unloaded, sometimes slipping a purse to a man or woman in a green leather vest to obtain gentler handling for their goods or more speed, not that it seemed possible the guildfolk could move any faster. Southerners always seemed to move at a half trot unless the sun was right overhead, when the heat here could roast a duck, and with a gray sky and a cutting wind off the sea, it would have been cold no matter where the sun stood.

By the time he was abreast of the Mol Hara, he had counted more than twenty *sul'dam* patrolling the docks with *damane*, poking their noses into boats leaving anchored ships that were not Seanchan, boarding any vessel newly arrived at the docks or, for that matter, ready to cast off lines. He had been quite sure they would be there. It was going to have to be Valan Luca. The only alternative was just too hazardous, except in an emergency. Luca was chancy, too, but the only real choice left.

Back at the Tarasin Palace, he climbed down off Pips with a wince and pulled his walking staff out from behind the saddle girth. Letting a groom take the bay, he limped inside, his left leg barely able to support his weight. Maybe a soak in a hot bath would take some of the pain. Maybe then he could think. Luca had to be caught by surprise, but before it came to Luca, there were a few other little problems to overcome.

"Ah, there you are," Noal said, popping up in front of him. Mat had caught only glimpses of the old man since getting him a bed, but he looked well-rested in his freshly brushed gray coat, considering that he vanished into the city every day and only returned to the Palace at night. Adjusting the bits of lace at his cuffs, he smiled confidingly, revealing the gaps in his teeth. "You are planning something, Lord Mat, and I would like to offer my services."

"I'm planning to take the weight off my leg," Mat said as casually as he could. Noal seemed harmless enough. According to Harnan, he told stories before going to sleep, stories that Harnan and the other Redarms seemed to swallow whole, even the one about some place called Shibouya, supposedly beyond the Aiel Waste, where women who could channel had tattooed faces, over three hundred crimes carried a penalty of death, and giants lived under the mountains, men taller than Ogier, with their faces on their bellies. He claimed to have been there. No one who made claims like that could be anything but harmless. On the other hand, the one time Mat had seen him handle those long daggers he carried under his coat, he had looked far from harmless. There was a way a man had of touching a weapon that said he was accustomed to using it. “If I decide to plan anything else, I’ll keep you in mind.”

Still smiling, Noal tapped one of those crooked fingers against the side of his beak of a nose. “You don’t trust me, yet. That is understandable. Although, if I meant you any harm, all I had to do was stand back that night in the alley. You have the look in your eye. I’ve seen great men laying plans, and villains dark as the Pit of Doom, too. There is a look a man gets, laying dangerous plans he doesn’t want known.”

“My eyes are just tired,” Mat laughed, leaning on his staff. Great men laying plans? The old fellow had probably seen them in Shibouya, with the giants. “I do thank you for that alley, you know. If there’s ever anything more I can do for you, ask. But right now, I am going to find a hot bath.”

“Does this *gholam* drink blood?” Noal asked catching Mat’s arm as he started to hobble by.

Light, he wished he had not mentioned that name where the old man could hear. He wished Birgitte had never told him about the thing. “Why do you ask?” *Gholam* lived on blood. They ate nothing else.

“There was another man found with his throat torn out, last night, only there was almost no blood on him or his bedding. Did I mention? He was at an inn down near the Moldine Gate. If that thing did leave the city, it’s back.” Glancing beyond Mat, he made a low, elaborate bow to someone. “If you change your mind, I am always ready,” he said in a lower voice when he straightened.

Mat looked over his shoulder as the old man hurried off. Tuon was standing beneath one of the gilded stand lamps, watching him through her veil. Looking at him, at least. Glancing? As always, the moment he saw her, she turned away and glided off down the hall, her pleated white skirts rustling faintly. There was no one with her, today.

For the second time that day, Mat shivered. A pity the girl had not gone with Suroth and Tylin. A man given a loaf should not complain that a few crumbs were missing, but Aes Sedai and Seanchan, *gholam* stalking him and old men poking their noses in and skinny girls staring at him was enough to give any man the golliwogs. Maybe he should forget about wasting time soaking his leg.

He felt better once he had sent Lopin to fetch the rest of his own clothes from Beslan's toy cupboard. And Nerim to find Juilin. His leg still hurt like fire and wobbled when he wanted to walk, but if he was not going to waste time, then he might as well get a move on about it. He wanted to be gone from Ebou Dar before Tylin came back, and that gave him ten days. Less, to be on the safe side.

When the thief-catcher stuck his head in at the bedroom door, Mat was studying himself in Tylin's tall stand-mirror. The red . . . garments . . . were tucked away in the wardrobe with the rest of the gauds she had given him. Maybe Tylin's next pretty could get some use of them. The coat he had put on was the plainest he owned, a fine-woven blue wool without a thread of embroidery. The sort of coat a man could be proud to wear, without having everybody stare at him. A decent coat.

"Maybe a little lace," he muttered, fingering the neck of his shirt. "Just a little." It really was a very plain coat, come to think. Almost sober.

"I don't know anything about lace," Juilin said. "Is that why you wanted me?"

"No, of course not. What are you grinning at?" The fellow was not just grinning; his smile nearly split his dark face in two.

"I am happy, that's all. Suroth is gone, and I am happy. If you don't want to ask me about lace, what do you want?"

Blood and bloody ashes! The woman he was interested in must be one of Suroth's *da'covale*! One she had left behind. He certainly had no other reason to care whether she was gone, much less be happy over it. And the man wanted to take one of her property! Well, maybe that was not so much, compared to taking a couple of *damane.*

Limping over to put an arm around Juilin's shoulders, Mat walked him out into the sitting room. "I need a *damane* dress to fit a woman about so high," he held up a hand just about his shoulder, "and slender." He gave the fellow his most sincere smile, but Juilin's own smile faded markedly. "I need three *sul'dam* dresses, too, and an *a'dam.* And it came to me that the man who knows best how to steal something without getting caught would be a thief-catcher."

"I am a thief-*catcher,*" the man growled, shaking off Mat's arm, "not a thief!"

Mat let his own grin vanish. “Juilin, you know the only way to take those sisters out of the city is if the guards think they’re still *damane*. Teslyn and Edesina are wearing what they need, but we have to disguise Joline. Suroth will be back in ten days, Juilin. If we aren’t gone by then, in all likelihood your pretty will still be her property when we go.” He could not help feeling that if they were not gone by then, none of them would be going. Light, a man could shiver himself to death indoors in this city.

Stuffing his fists into the pockets of his dark Tairen coat, Juilin glared at him. Glared through him, really, at something the thief-catcher did not like. Finally he grimaced, and muttered, “It won’t be easy.”

The days that followed were anything but easy. The serving women clucked and laughed over his new clothes. His old clothes, that was. They grinned and made wagers where he could hear over how fast he could change back when Tylin returned—most seemed to think he would race through the halls ripping off whatever he was wearing as soon he heard she was on her way—but he paid them no mind. Except for the part about Tylin returning. The first time a serving woman mentioned it, he nearly jumped out of his skin thinking she actually had for some reason.

A number of the women and nearly all the men took his change of clothing to mean he was leaving. Running away, they called it disapprovingly, and did what they could to hamper him. In their eyes, he was the ointment to soothe Tylin’s aching, tooth, and they did not want her to come back and bite them for losing it. If he had not made sure Lopin or Nerim was always in Tylin’s apartments guarding his belongings, the clothes would have vanished again, and only Vanin and the Redarms kept Pips from disappearing out of the stables.

Mat tried to encourage the belief. When he went and two *damane* vanished at the same time, the events were sure to be linked, but with Tylin gone and his intention to run away plain before she returned, she would be safe from blame. Every day, even when it rained, he rode Pips in circles in the stable, for a longer time every day, as if trying to build up his stamina. Which he actually was, he realized after a while. His leg and hip still ached like fury, but he began to think he could manage as much as ten miles before needing to climb down. Eight miles, anyway.

Often, if the sky was clear, *sul’dam* were walking *damane* when he exercised. The Seanchan women were aware he was not Tylin’s property, but on the other hand, he heard some call him her toy! Tylin’s Toy, they said, as if that was his name! He was not important enough for them to learn if he had another. To them, someone was either *da'covale* or not, and this halfway business amused them no end. He rode to the sound of *sul'dam* laughing, and tried to tell himself it was all to the good. The more people who could tell that he worked to flee before Tylin returned, the better for her. It just was not very pleasant for him.

Now and then he saw Aes Sedai faces among the *damane* being walked, three besides Teslyn, but he had not a clue what Edesina looked like. She could have been the short pale woman who reminded him of Moiraine, or the tall one with silvery-golden hair, or the slender black-haired woman. Gilding along beside a *sul'dam,* any of them might have been taking a walk on her own, if not for the gleaming collar around her neck and the leash tying her to the *sul'dam*'s wrist. Teslyn herself looked increasingly grim every time he saw her, staring fixedly straight ahead. Every time, there seemed to be more determination on her face. And something that might have been panic, too. He began to worry about her, and her impatience.

He wanted to reassure Teslyn—he did not need those old memories to tell him that determination combined with panic could get people killed, but they confirmed it—he wanted to reassure her, only he dared not go near the kennels in the attic again. Tuon continued to be there when he turned around, looking at him or glancing or whatever she was doing, just too often for comfort. Not enough to make him think she was following him. Why would she do that? Just too often. Occasionally her *so'jhin* Selucia was with her, and now and then Anath, though the strange tall woman seemed to vanish from the Palace after a time, at least from the hallways. She was "on retreat," he heard, whatever that was supposed to mean, and he only wished she had taken Tuon with her. He doubted the girl would believe he was taking sweets to a Windfinder a second time. Maybe she still wanted to buy him? If that was the case, he still could not understand why. He had never been able to understand what attracted women to a man—they seemed to go pop-eyed over the most ordinary looking fellows—but he knew he was no beauty, no matter what Tylin said. Women lied to get a man into bed, and they lied worse once they had him there.

In any case, Tuon was a minor irritant. A fly on his ear. No more than that. It took more than chattering women or staring girls to make him sweat. Absent as she was, however, Tylin did. If she came back and caught him preparing to leave, she might change her mind about selling. She was a High Lady herself now, after all, and he was sure she would shave her hair to a crest before much longer. A proper Seanchan High Blood, and who knew what she would do then? Tylin caused a little sweat, but there was more than enough else to drench a man in it.

He continued to hear from Noal about the *gholam*'s murders, and sometimes from Thom. There was a fresh one every night, though no one but those two and him seemed to connect the killings. Mat kept to open places as much as he could, with people around as often as possible. He stopped sleeping in Tylin's bed, and never spent two nights running in the same place. If that meant a night in a stable loft, well, he had slept in haylofts before, although he did not recall hay sticking through his clothes quite that sharply. Still, better stuck by hay than having his throat torn out.

He had sought out Thom straight away after he decided to try freeing Teslyn, and had found him in the kitchens chatting with the cooks over a honey-glazed chicken. Thom got on as well with cooks as he did with farmers and merchants and nobles. He had a way of getting on with everyone, did Thom Merrilin, a way of hearing everyone's gossip and fitting it together to make a picture. He could look at things from a slant and see what others missed. As soon as he finished the chicken, Thom had come up with the only way to get the Aes Sedai past the guards. The whole thing had almost seemed easy, then. For a very short while. But other obstacles arose.

Juilin possessed the same sort of twisty way of looking at things, perhaps from his years as thief-catcher, and some nights Mat met with him and Thom in the tiny room the two men shared in the servants' quarters to try planning how to overcome those obstacles. Those were what really made Mat sweat.

At the first of those meetings, the night Tylin left, Beslan barged in looking for Thom, so he said. Unfortunately, he had listened at the door first, hearing enough that he could not be foisted off with a story. Very unfortunately, he wanted to take part. He even told them just how to do it.

"An uprising," he said, squatting on the three-legged stool between the two narrow beds. A washstand with a chipped white pitcher and bowl and no mirror finished crowding the room. Juilin sat on the edge of one bed in his shirtsleeves, his face unreadable, and Thom was stretched out on the other examining his knuckles with a frown. That left Mat to lean against the door to keep anyone else from barging in. He did not know whether to laugh or cry. Plainly Thom had known about this madness all along; this was what he had been trying to cool down. “The people will rise when I give the word,” Beslan went on. “My friends and I have talked to men all over the city. They are ready to fight!”

Sighing, Mat eased his weight more onto his good leg. He suspected that when Beslan gave the word, he and his friends would rise alone. Most people were more willing to talk about fighting than to do it, especially against soldiers. “Beslan, in gleeman’s tales, grooms with pitchforks and bakers with cobblestones defeat armies because they want to be free.” Thom snorted so hard, his long white mustache stirred. Mat ignored him. “In real life, the grooms and the bakers get killed. I know good soldiers when I see them, and the Seanchan are very good.”

“If we free the *damane* along with the Aes Sedai, they will fight beside us!” Beslan insisted.

“There must be two hundred or more *damane* up in the attic, Beslan, most of them Seanchan. Free them, and like as not, every last one will run to find a *sul’dam*. Light, we couldn’t even trust all the women who aren’t Seanchan!” Mat held up a hand to forestall Beslan’s protest. “We have no way to find out which we can trust, and no time to. And if we did, we’d have to kill the rest. I’m not up to killing a woman whose only crime is that she’s on a leash. Are you?” Beslan looked away, but his jaw was set. He was not giving up.

“Whether we free any *damane* or not,” Mat went on, “if the people rise up, the Seanchan will turn Ebou Dar into a slaughter yard. They put down rebellions hard, Beslan. Very hard! We could kill every *damane* in the attic, and they would bring in more from the camps. Your mother will come back to find rubble inside the walls and your head stuck up outside them. Where hers will soon join it. You don’t think they’ll believe she did not know what her own son was planning, do you?” Light, *did* she? The woman was brave enough to try it. He did not think she was stupid enough, but . . .

“She says we are mice,” Beslan said bitterly. “ ‘When wolfhounds pass by, mice lie quiet or get eaten,’ ” he quoted. “I don’t like being a mouse, Mat.”

Mat breathed a little more easily. “Better a live mouse than a dead one, Beslan.” Which might not have been the most diplomatic way to put it—Beslan grimaced at him—but it was true.

He encouraged Beslan to join the meetings, if just to keep a rein on him, but Beslan seldom came, and it fell to Thom to try to cool the man's ardor when and as he could. The most he could persuade Beslan to promise was that he could not call for the rising until the rest of them had been gone a month, to let them get clear. That was something settled, if not satisfactorily. Everything else seemed to be take two steps and hit a stone wall. Or a trip wire.

Juilin's lady love had quite a hold on him. For her, he seemed to not to mind doffing his Tairen clothes for a servant's green-and-white livery, or missing sleep to spend two nights sweeping the floor not far from the stairs that led up to the kennels. No one looked twice at a servant pushing a broom, not even the other servants. The Tarasin Palace had enough of those that they did not all know one another, and if they saw a man in livery with a broom, they assumed he was supposed to be using it. Juilin spent two whole days sweeping, too, and finally reported that *sul'dam* inspected the kennels first thing in the morning and just after dark, and might be in or out at any time of the day between, but at night the *damane* were left to themselves.

"I overheard a *sul'dam* say she was glad she wasn't out in the camps where . . ." Lying stretched out on his thin mattress, Juilin paused to yawn copiously behind his hand. Thom was sitting on the edge of his bed, which left the stool for Mat. It was better than standing, if not by much. Most people would be asleep at that hour. "Where she'd have to stand guard some nights," the thief-catcher continued when he could speak again. "Said she liked being able to let the *damane* sleep all night, too, so they were all fresh come sunrise."

"So we must move at night," Thom murmured, fingering his long white mustache. There was no need to add that anything moving at night drew eyes. Seanchan patrolled the streets at night, which the Civil Guard never had. The Guard had been amenable to bribes, too, until the Seanchan disbanded them. Now, at night, it was as likely to be the Deathwatch Guards in the street, and anyone who tried to bribe them might not live to face trial.

"Have you found an *a'dam* yet, Juilin?" Mat asked. "Or the dresses? Dresses can't be as difficult as an *a'dam*."

Juilin yawned into his hand again. "I'll get them when I get them. They don't just leave either lying about, you know."

Thom discovered that simply walking *damane* through the gates was not possible. Or rather, as he freely admitted, Riselle had discovered it. It seemed that one of the high-ranking officers staying at The Wandering Woman had a singing voice she found most entertaining.

"One of the Blood can take *damane* out with no questions asked," Thom said at their next meeting. This time, he and Juilin both were sitting on their beds. Mat was beginning to hate that stool. "Or few enough, anyway. *Sul'dam,* though, need an order signed and sealed by one of the Blood, an officer who's captain or above, or a *der'sul'dam.* The guards at the gates and on the docks have lists of every seal in the city that qualifies, so I can't just make any sort of seal and think it will be accepted. I need a copy of the right sort of order with the right sort of seal. That leaves the question of who will be our three *sul'dam.*"

"Maybe Riselle will be one," Mat suggested. She did not know what they were doing, and telling her would be a risk. Thom had asked her all sorts of questions, as if he was trying to learn about life under the Seanchan, and she had been happy enough to ask her Seanchan friend, but she might not be happy enough to chance her pretty head going up on a spike. She could do worse than say no. "And what about your lady love, Juilin?" He had a thought on the third. He had asked Juilin to find a *sul'dam* dress that would fit Setalle Anan, though there had been no chance to actually put it to her, yet. He had only been back to The Wandering Woman once since Joline had walked into the kitchen, to make sure she understood he was doing all he could. She did not, but Mistress Anan had actually managed to smother the Aes Sedai's anger before she could begin shouting. She would make the perfect *sul'dam* for Joline.

Juilin shrugged uncomfortably. "I had a hard enough time convincing Thera to run away with me. She is . . . timid, now. I can help her overcome that, in time—I know I can—but I don't think she is up to anything like pretending to be a *sul'dam.*"

Thom tugged at his mustaches. "It's unlikely Riselle would leave under any circumstances. It seems she likes Banner-General Lord Yamada's singing well enough that she has decided to marry him." He sighed regretfully. "There will be no more information from that well, I fear." And no more pillowing his head on her bosom, his expression said. "Well, both of you think on who we can ask. And see if you can lay hands on a copy of those orders."

Thom managed to find the proper inks and paper, and was ready to imitate anyone's hand and seal. He was contemptuous of seals; anyone with a turnip and a knife could copy those, he said. Writing another man's hand so the man himself would think he had written it was an art. But none of them were able to find a copy of orders with the necessary seal to copy. Like *a'dam,* the Seanchan did not leave orders lying about. Juilin seemed to making no progress with the *a'dam,* either. Two steps forward, and a stone wall. And six days were gone, just like that. Four left. To Mat, it felt as if six years had passed since Tylin's departure, and four hours remained till she came back.

On the seventh day, Thom stopped Mat in the hallway as soon as he came in from his ride. Smiling as though making idle conversation, the one-time gleeman pitched his voice low. The servants hurrying past could not have heard more than a murmur. "According to Noal, the *gholam* killed again last night. The Seekers have been ordered to find the killer if they have to stop eating or sleeping to do it, though I can't find out who gave the order. Even the fact that they have been ordered to do anything seems to be a secret. They are practically readying the rack and heating their irons already, though."

No matter that Thom's voice was low, Mat looked around to see whether anyone was listening. The only person in sight was a stout gray-haired man named Narvin, in livery but neither hurrying nor carrying anything. Servants as high as Narvin did not carry or hurry. He blinked at the sight of Mat trying to look every direction at once, and frowned. Mat wanted to snarl, but instead he grinned as disarmingly as he knew how, and Narvin went off scowling. Mat was sure the fellow had been responsible for the first attempt to remove Pips from the stable.

"Noal told you about the Seekers?" he whispered incredulously as soon as Narvin was far enough away.

Thorn waved a lean hand dismissively. "Of course not. Just about the killing. Though he does seem to hear whispers, and know what they mean. A rare talent, that. I wonder whether he really has been to Shara," he mused. "He said he . . ." Thom cleared his throat under Mat's glare. "Well, later for that. I do have other resources than the much-lamented Riselle. Several of them are Listeners. Listeners really do seem to hear everything."

"You've been talking to Listeners?" Mat's voice squeaked like a rusty hinge. He thought his throat might have rusted solid!

“There’s nothing to it, as long as they don’t know you know,” Thom chuckled. “Mat, with Seanchan you have to assume they are all Listeners. That way, you learn what you want to know without saying the wrong thing in the wrong ear.” He coughed and knuckled his mustache, not quite hiding a smile so self-deprecating it all but invited praise. “I just happen to know two or three who really are. In any case, more information never hurts. You do want to be gone before Tylin returns, don’t you? You seem to looking a little . . . forlorn . . . with her gone.”

Mat could only groan.

That night, the *gholam* struck again. Lopin and Nerim were bubbling over with the news before Mat had finished his breakfast fish. The whole city was in an uproar, they claimed. The latest victim, a woman, had been discovered at the mouth of an alley, and suddenly people were talking, putting together one killing with another. There was a madman on the loose, and the people were demanding more Seanchan patrols on the streets at night. Mat pushed his plate away, all hunger gone. More patrols. And if that were not bad enough, Suroth might come back early if she learned of this, bringing Tylin with her. At best, he could only count on two more days. He thought he might lose what he’d already eaten.

He spent the rest of the morning pacing—well, limping—up and down the carpet in Tylin’s bedchamber, ignoring the pain in his leg while he tried to think of something, anything, that would let him carry out the impossible in two days. The pain really was less. He had given up the walking stick, pushing himself to regain strength. He thought he might manage two or three miles on foot without needing to rest the leg. Without resting it very much, anyway.

At midday, Juilin brought him the only really good news he had heard in an Age. It was not news, exactly. It was a cloth sack containing two dresses wrapped around the silver length of an *a’dam.*

* * *

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CHAPTER 29

Another Plan

The beam-ceilinged basement of The Wandering Woman was large, yet it seemed as cramped as the room Thom and Juilin shared, though it held only five people. The oil lamp set on an upended barrel cast flickering shadows. Farther away, the basement was all shadow. The aisle between the shelves and the rough stone walls was barely wider than a barrel was tall, but that was not what made it seem crowded.

“I asked for your help, not a noose around my neck,” Joline said coldly. After near a week in Mistress Anan’s care, eating Enid’s cooking, the Aes Sedai no longer looked haggard. The frayed dress Mat had first seen on her was gone, replaced by high-necked fine blue wool with a touch of lace at her wrists and under her chin. In the wavering light, her face half shadowed, she looked furious, her eyes trying to bore holes through Mat’s face. “If anything went awry—anything!—I’d be helpless!”

He was having none of it. Offer to help out of the goodness of your heart—well, sort of—and see what it got you. He practically shook the *a’dam* under her nose. It wiggled in his hand like a long silver snake, glinting in the dim lamplight, the collar and bracelet both scraping across the stone floor, and Joline gathered her dark skirts and stepped back to avoid being touched. It might have been a viper from the way her mouth twisted. He wondered whether it would fit her; the collar seemed larger than her slim neck. “Mistress Anan will take it off as soon as we get you outside the walls,” he growled. “You trust her, don’t you? She risked her head to hide you down here. I’m telling you, it is the only way!” Joline raised her chin stubbornly. Mistress Anan muttered angrily under her breath.

“She does not want to wear the thing,” Fen said in a flat voice behind Mat.

“If she doesn’t want to wear it, then she doesn’t wear it,” Blaeric said in an even flatter, at Fen’s side.

Joline's dark-haired Warders were like peas in a pod for men so different. Fen, with his dark tilted eyes and a chin that could chip stone, was a touch shorter than Blaeric, and maybe a little heavier in the chest and shoulders, yet they could have worn each other's clothes without much difficulty. Where Fen's straight black hair hung almost to his shoulders, blue-eyed Blaeric's very short hair was slightly lighter in color. Blaeric was Shienaran, and he had shaved his topknot and was letting his hair grow in to avoid notice, but he did not like it. Fen, a Saldaean, seemed not to like much except for Joline. They both liked Joline a lot. The pair of them talked alike, thought alike, moved alike. They wore dingy shirts and workmen's plain woolen vests that hung down below their hips, yet anyone who took them for laborers, even in this poor light, was blind. By day, in the stables where Mistress Anan had them working . . . Light! They were looking at Mat as lions might look at a goat that had bared its teeth at them. He moved so he did not have to see the Warders even from the corner of his eye. The knives hidden about him in various places were small comfort, with them at his back.

"If you will not listen to him, Joline Maza, you will listen to me." Planting her hands on her hips, Setalle rounded on the slender Aes Sedai, her hazel eyes glaring. "I mean to see you back in the White Tower if I have to walk every step of the way pushing you! Perhaps along the way you will show me that you know what it means to be Aes Sedai. I'd settle for a glimpse of a grown woman. So far, all I have seen is a novice sniveling in her bed and throwing tantrums!"

Joline stared at her, those big brown eyes as wide as they would go, as if she could not believe her ears. Mat was not sure he believed his, either. Innkeepers did not leap down Aes Sedai's throats. Fen grunted, and Blaeric muttered something that sounded uncomplimentary.

"There's no need for you to go farther than beyond sight of the guards at the gates," Mat told Setalle hastily, hoping to divert any explosion Joline might be considering. "Keep the hood of your cloak pulled up . . ." Light, he had to get her one of those fancy cloaks! Well, if Juilin could steal an *a'dam,* he could steal a bloody cloak, too. ". . . and the guards will just see another *sul'dam*. You can be back here before daybreak, and no one the wiser. Unless you insist on wearing your marriage knife." He laughed at his own joke, but she did not.

“Do you think I could remain anywhere women are turned into animals because they can channel?” she demanded, stalking across the floor till she stood toe-to-toe with him. “Do you think I’d let my family stay?” If her eyes had glared at Joline, they blazed up at him. Frankly, he had never considered the question. Certainly he would like to see the *damane* freed, but why should it matter this much to her? Plainly, it did, though; her hand slid along the hilt of the long curved dagger stuck behind her belt, caressing it. Ebou Dari did not take kindly to insults, and she was pure Ebou Dari to that extent. “I began negotiating the sale of The Wandering Woman two days after the Seanchan arrived, when I could see what they are. I should have handed everything over to Lydel Elonid days ago, but I’ve been holding off because Lydel would not expect to find an Aes Sedai in the basement. When you are ready to go, I can hand over the keys and go with you. Lydel is growing impatient,” she added significantly over her shoulder to Joline.

And what about his gold? he wanted to ask indignantly. Would Lydel have let him take that away, a windfall under her kitchen floor? Still, it was something else that made him choke. Suddenly he could see himself saddled with Mistress Anan’s whole family, including the married sons and daughters with their children, and maybe a few aunts and uncles and cousins, as well. Dozens of them. Scores, maybe. She might be from off, but her husband had relations all over the city. Blaeric slapped him on the back so hard that he staggered.

He showed the fellow his teeth and hoped the Shienaran would take it for a smile of thanks. Blaeric’s expression never altered. Bloody Warders! Bloody Aes Sedai! Bloody, bloody innkeepers!

“Mistress Anan,” he said carefully, “the way I mean to get away from Ebou Dar, there’s only room for so many.” He had not told her about Luca’s show, yet. There was a chance he could not convince the man, after all. And the more people he had to convince Luca to take, the harder it would be. “Come back here once we’re outside the city. If you have to leave, go on one your husband’s fishing boats. I suggest you wait a few days, though. Maybe a week or so. Once the Seanchan discover two *damane* missing, they’ll be all over anything trying to leave.”

“Two?” Joline put in sharply. “Teslyn and who?”

Mat winced. He had not meant to let that slip. He had Joline pegged, and petulant, willful and spoiled were the words that came most readily to mind. Anything at all that made her think this more difficult, more likely to fail, might just be enough to make her decide to try some crackbrained scheme of her own. Something that would no doubt ruin his own plans. She would be captured for sure if she tried to run on her own, and she would fight. And once the Seanchan learned there had been an Aes Sedai in the city, right under their noses, they would intensify the searches for *marath'damane* again, increase the street patrols more than they already had for the "mad killer," and worst of all, they might well make it even harder to pass the gates.

"Edesina Azzedin," he said reluctantly. "I don't know anything more about her."

"Edesina," Joline said slowly. A tiny frown creased her smooth forehead. "I heard that she had—" Whatever she had heard, she snapped her teeth shut on it and fixed him a fierce stare. "Are they holding any other sisters? If Teslyn is getting free, I won't leave any other sister to them!"

It took an effort on Mat's part not to gape. Petulant and spoiled? He was looking at a lioness to match Blaeric and Fen. "Believe me, I won't leave an Aes Sedai in the kennels unless she wants to stay," he said, making his voice as wry as he could. The woman was still willful. She might insist on trying to rescue the other two like Pura. Light, he should *never* have let himself get tangled with Aes Sedai, and he did not need any ancient memories to warn him! His own would do very well, thank you.

Fen poked him on the back of his left shoulder with a hard finger. "Don't be so light-tongued," the Warder said warningly.

Blaeric poked him on the back of the other shoulder. "Remember who you are talking to!"

Joline sniffed at his tone, but she did not probe further.

Mat felt a knot loosen in the back of his neck, about where a headsman's axe would strike. Aes Sedai twisted words with other people; they did not expect others to use their own tricks on them.

He turned to Setalle. "Mistress Anan, you can see your husband's boats are much better—"

"It might be so," she broke in, "except that Jasfer sailed with all ten of his boats and all of our kin three days ago. I expect the guilds will want to talk to him if he ever returns. He isn't supposed to carry passengers. They are coasting to Illian, where they will wait for me. I don't really intend to go as far as Tar Valon, you see."

This time, Mat could not stop a wince. He had intended falling back on Jasfer Anan's fishing boats if he failed to persuade Luca. A dangerous option, true, more than dangerous. Mad, maybe. The *sul'dam* on the docks likely would have wanted to check any order that sent *damane* out on fishing boats, especially in the night. But the boats had always been in the back of his mind. Well, he was just going to have twist Luca's arm hard, just as hard as necessary.

"You let your kin go out in this season?" Disbelief and scorn mingled in Joline's voice. "When the worst storms are brewing?"

Her back to the Aes Sedai, Mistress Anan raised her head proudly, but it was not pride in herself. "I trust Jasfer to sail into the teeth of a cemaros, if need be. I trust him as much as you do your Warders, Green. More."

Frowning suddenly, Joline picked up the lamp by the iron base and moved it to cast light on the innkeeper's face. "Have we met somewhere before? Sometimes, when I cannot see your face, your voice sounds familiar."

Instead of answering, Setalle took the *a'dam* from Mat and fumbled at the flat segmented bracelet on one end of the round silver leash. The whole thing was made in segments, fitted together so cunningly you could not see how it had been done. "We might as well get the testing over with."

"Testing?" he said, and those hazel eyes gave him a withering look.

"Not every woman can be a *sul'dam*. You should know that by now. I have hopes that I can, but better we find out before the last hour." Scowling at the stubbornly closed bracelet, she turned it in her hands. "Do you know how to open this thing? I cannot even find *where* it opens."

"Yes," he said faintly. The only times he had talked with Seanchan about *sul'dam* and *damane*, it had been cautious questions about how they were used in battle. He had never even thought about how *sul'dam* were chosen. He might have to fight them—those ancient memories hardly let him stop thinking about how to fight battles—but he had certainly never meant to recruit any. "Better to test it now." Instead of . . . Light!

The catches were a simple matter for him, the bracelet easiest. That was just a matter of squeezing the right spots, top and bottom, not quite opposite the leash. It could be done with one hand, and the bracelet popped open on one with a metallic click. The collar was a little trickier, and required both hands. Putting his fingers on the proper spots on either side of where the leash attached, he pressed, then twisted and pulled while holding the pressure. Nothing happened, that he could see, until he twisted the two sides the other way. Then they came apart right beside the leash, with a sharper click than the bracelet. Simple. Of course, figuring it out had taken him nearly an hour, back in the Palace, even with what Juilin had seen to help. Nobody here praised him, though. Nobody even looked as though he had done anything they could not!

Snapping the bracelet around her wrist, Setalle looped the leash in coils on her forearm, then held up the open collar. Joline stared it with loathing, her hands tightening into fists gripping her skirts.

“Do you want to escape?” the innkeeper asked quietly.

After a moment, Joline straightened and lifted her chin. Setalle closed the collar around the Aes Sedai’s neck with the same crisp snap it had made opening. He must have been wrong about the size; it fit her quite snugly atop the high neck of her dress. Joline’s mouth twitched, that was all, but Mat could almost feel Blaeric and Fen tensing behind him. He held his breath.

Side by side, the two women took a small step, brushing by Mat, and he began to breathe. Joline frowned uncertainly. Then they took a second step.

With a cry, the Aes Sedai fell to the floor, writhing in agony. She could not form words, only increasingly louder moans. She huddled in on herself, her arms and legs and even her fingers twitching and crooking at odd angles.

Setalle dropped to her knees as soon as Joline hit the floor, her hands going to the collar, but she was no quicker than Blaeric and Fen, though their actions did seem odd. Kneeling, Blaeric raised a wailing Joline and supported her against his chest while he began to massage her neck, of all things. Fen worked his fingers along her arms. The collar came loose, and Setalle fell back on her heels, but Joline continued to jerk and whimper, and her Warders continued to work over her as though trying to rub away cramps. They shot cold stares at Mat as though it were all his fault.

Looking down on all his fine plans lying in ruins, Mat barely saw the men. He did not know what to do next, where to begin. Tylin might be back in two more days, and he was sure he had to be gone before she returned.

Squeezing past Setalle, he patted her on the shoulder. “Tell her we’ll try something else,” he muttered. But what? Obviously it had to be a woman with a *sul’dam*’s abilities to handle the *a’dam.*

The innkeeper caught him in the dark at the foot of the stairs leading up to the kitchen while he was gathering his hat and cloak. A stout, plain wool cloak with no embroidery. A man could do without embroidery. He certainly did not miss it. And all that lace! Certainly not!

"Do you have another plan ready?" she asked. He could not make out her face in the dark, but the silver length of the *a'dam* gleamed even so. She was groping at the bracelet on her wrist.

"I always have another plan," he lied, undoing the bracelet for her. "At least you can forget about risking your neck. As soon as I take Joline off your hands, you can go join your husband."

She just grunted. He suspected she knew he had no plan.

He wanted to avoid the common room full of Seanchan, so he went out through the kitchen into the stableyard and out through the gate into the Mol Hara. He was not afraid that any of them would mark him out or wonder why he was there. In his drab clothes, they seemed to take him for someone running an errand for the innkeeper when he came in. But there had been three *sul'dam* among the Seanchan, two with *damane*. He was beginning to be afraid he would have to leave Teslyn and Edesina collared, and he just did not want to look at *damane* right then. Blood and bloody ashes, he had only promised to try!

The weak sun still stood high in the sky, but the sea wind was picking up, full of salt and a cold promise of rain. Except for a squad of Deathwatch Guards marching across the square, humans rather than Ogier, everyone in the Mol Hara was hurrying to be done with whatever they were about before the rain came. As he reached the base of Queen Nariene's tall bare-breasted statue, a hand fell on his shoulder.

"I did no recognize you at first, without your fancy clothes, Mat Cauthon."

Mat turned to find himself facing the heavyset Illianer *so'jhin* he had seen the day Joline reappeared in his life. It was not a pleasant association. The round-faced fellow did look odd, between that beard and half the hair on his head missing, and he was shivering in his shirtsleeves, of all things.

"You know me?" Mat said cautiously.

The heavyset man beamed a wide smile at him. "Fortune prick me, I do. You did take a memorable voyage on my ship, once, with Trollocs and Shadar Logoth at one end and a Myrddraal and Whitebridge in flames at the other. Bayle Domon, Master Cauthon. Do you remember me now?"

"I remember." He did, after a fashion. Most of that voyage was vague in his head, tattered by the holes those other men's memories had filled. "We'll have to sit down over hot spiced wine some time and talk over old times." Which would never happen if he saw Domon first. What remained in his memory of that voyage was strangely unpleasant, like remembering a deathly illness. Of course, he had been ill, in a way. Another unpleasant memory.

"There be no time like now," Domon laughed, swinging a thick arm around Mat's shoulders and turning him back toward The Wandering Woman.

Short of fighting, there seemed to be no way to escape the man, so Mat went. A knock-down fight was no way to avoid being noticed. Anyway, he was not sure he would win. Domon looked fat, but the fat was layered over hard muscle. A drink would not go amiss in any case. Besides which, hadn't Domon been something of a smuggler? He might know paths in and out of Ebou Dar that others did not, and he might reveal them to a little judicious questioning. Especially over wine. A fat purse of gold lay in Mat's coat pocket, and he did not mind spending it all to get the man drunk as a fiddler at Sunday. Drunk men talked.

Domon hustled him through the common room, bowing left and right to Blood and officers who barely saw him if that, but he did not enter the kitchens, where Enid might have given them a bench in the corner. Instead, he took Mat up the railless stairs. Until he ushered Mat into a room at the back of the inn, Mat assumed Domon was going to fetch his coat and cloak. A good fire blazing on the hearth warmed the room, but Mat suddenly felt colder than he had outside.

Closing the door behind them, Domon planted himself in front of it with his arms folded across his chest. "You do be in the presence of Captain of the Green Lady Egeanin Tamarath," he intoned, then added in a more normal tone, "This be Mat Cauthon."

Mat looked from Domon to the tall woman seated stiffly on a ladder-backed chair. Her pleated dress was pale yellow today, and she wore a flower-embroidered robe over it, but he remembered her. Her pale face was hard, and her blue eyes were every bit as predatory as Tylin's. Only, he suspected Egeanin was not after kisses. Her hands were slender, but they had swordsman's calluses. He had no chance to ask what this was about, and no need.

“My *so’jhin* informs me you are not unfamiliar with danger, Master Cauthon,” she said as soon as Domon finished speaking. Her slow Seanchan drawl still sounded peremptory and commanding, but then, she was of the Blood. “I need such men to crew a ship, and I will pay well, in gold not silver. If you know others like yourself, I will hire them. They must be able to hold their tongues, though. My business is my own. Bayle mentioned two other names. Thom Merrilin and Juilin Sandar. If either is here in Ebou Dar, I can use their skills, as well. They know me, and know they can trust me with their lives. So can you, Master Cauthon.”

Mat sat down on the room’s second chair and threw back his cloak. He was not supposed to sit even with one of the lesser Blood—as her dark bowl-cut hair and green-lacquered little fingernails proclaimed her to be—but he needed to think. “You have a ship?” he asked, in the main to gain time. She opened her mouth angrily. Asking questions of the Blood was supposed to be done delicately.

Domon grunted and shook his head, and for a moment she looked even angrier, but then her stern face smoothed. On the other hand, her eyes bored into Mat like augers, and she rose to stand with her feet apart and her hands on her hips, confronting him. “I will have a vessel by the end of spring at latest, as soon as my gold can be brought from Cantorin,” she said in an icy voice.

Mat sighed. Well, there really had been no chance he could take Aes Sedai out on a ship owned by a Seanchan, not really. “How do you know Thom and Juilin?” Domon could have told her about Thom, certainly, but, Light, how could she know Juilin?

“You ask too many questions,” she said firmly, turning away. “I fear I cannot use you after all. Bayle, put him out.” The last was a peremptory command.

Domon did not move from the door. “Tell him,” he urged her. “Soon or late, he must know everything or he will put you in greater danger than you face now. Tell him.” Even for a *so’jhin*, he seemed to get away with a great deal. The Seanchan were great ones for property keeping its place. For everyone else keeping theirs, for that matter. Egeanin must not be a quarter as tough as she looked.

She looked very tough at the moment, kicking her skirts and striding back and forth, scowling at Domon, at Mat. Finally, she stopped. “I gave them some small aid in Tanchico,” she said. After a moment she added, “And two women who were with them, Elayne Trakand and Nynaeve al’Meara.” Her eyes focused on him intently, watching to see whether he knew the names.

Mat’s chest felt tight. It was not a pain, but more like watching a horse he had bet on streak toward the finish line with others close behind and the question still in doubt. What in the Light had Nynaeve and Elayne been up to in Tanchico that they had needed a Seanchan’s help, and had gotten it? Thom and Juilin had been closemouthed about the details. That was beside the point, anyway. Egeanin wanted men who could keep her secrets and did not mind danger. She herself was in danger. Very little was dangerous to one of the Blood, except for other Blood and . . . “The Seekers are after you,” he said.

The way her head came up was confirmation enough, and her hand went to her side as though reaching for a sword. Domon shifted his feet and flexed his big hands, his eyes on Mat. Eyes suddenly harder than Egeanin’s. The thick man no longer looked funny; he looked dangerous. Abruptly it came to Mat that he might not leave the room alive.

“If you need to get away from the Seekers, I can help you,” he said quickly. “You’ll have to go where the Seanchan aren’t in control. Anywhere they are, the Seekers can find you. And it’s best to go as soon as possible. You can always get more gold. If the Seekers don’t take you first. Thom tells me they’re getting very active about something. Heating the irons and getting the rack ready.”

For a time Egeanin stood motionless, staring at him. At last, she exchanged a long look with Domon. “Perhaps it would be well to leave as soon as possible,” she breathed. Her tone firmed immediately, though. If there had been worry on her face for a moment, it vanished. “The Seekers will not stop me leaving the city, I think, but they think they can follow me to something they want more than they want me. They will follow me, and until I leave the lands already held by the *Rhyagelle,* they can call on soldiers to arrest me, which they will as soon as they decide I *am* going to lands not yet gathered. That is when I will need the skills of your friend Thom Merrilin, Master Cauthon. Between here and there, I must vanish from the Seekers’ sight. I may not have the gold from Cantorin, but I have enough to reward your help handsomely. You can rest assured of that.”

“Call me Mat,” he said, giving her his very best smile. Even hard-faced women softened for his best smile. Well, she did not soften visibly—

if anything, she frowned slightly—but one thing he did know about women was the effect his smiles had. “I know how to make you vanish now. No use waiting, you know. The Seekers might decide to arrest you tomorrow.” That hit home. She did not flinch—he suspected very little made her flinch—but she almost nodded. “There is just one thing, Egeanin.” This still could blow up in his face like one of Aludra’s fireworks, but he did not hesitate. Sometimes, you just had to toss the dice. “I don’t need any gold, but I do have need of three *sul’dam* who will keep their mouths shut. Do you think you supply could those?”

After a moment that seemed to stretch hours, she nodded, and he smiled to himself. His horse had crossed first.

* * *

“Domon,” Thom said in a flat voice around the pipestem clenched between his teeth. He was lying with a thin pillow doubled up beneath his head, and he seemed to be studying the faint blue haze that hung in the air of the windowless room. The single lamp gave a fitful light. “And Egeanin.”

“And she is of the Blood, now.” Sitting on the edge of his bed, Juilin peered into the charred bowl of his pipe. “I do not know as I like that.”

“Are you saying we can’t trust them?” Mat demanded, tamping down his tabac with a careless thumb. He snatched his thumb out with a mild oath and stuck it in his mouth to suck the burn away. Yet again he had the choice of the stool or standing, but for once he did not mind the stool. Dealing with Egeanin had taken little enough of the afternoon, but Thom had been out of the Palace until after dark, while Juilin had taken even longer to appear. Neither appeared nearly as pleased with Mat’s news as he expected. Thom had just sighed that he had finally gotten a good look at one of the accepted seals, but Juilin glowered whenever he looked at the bundle lying in the corner of the room where he had hurled it. There was no bloody need for the man to carry on so just because they no longer needed the *sul’dam* dresses. “I tell you, they’re both scared spitless over the Seekers,” Mat went on when his thumb was cooled. Maybe not exactly spitless, but frightened nonetheless. “Egeanin may be Blood, but she never twitched an eyelid when I told her what I wanted *sul’dam* for. She just said she knew three who would do what we need, and she could have them ready tomorrow.”

“An honorable woman, Egeanin,” Thom mused. Every so often he paused to blow a smoke ring. “Odd, true, but then, she is Seanchan. I think even Nynaeve came to like her, and I know Elayne did. And she liked them. Even if they were Aes Sedai, as she believed. She was very useful in Tanchico. Very useful. More than merely competent. I truly would like to know how she came be raised to the Blood, but yes, I believe we can trust Egeanin. And Domon. An interesting man, Domon."

"A smuggler," Juilin muttered disparagingly. "And now he *belongs* to her. *So'jhin* are more than just property, you know. There are *so'jhin* who tell Blood what to do." Thom raised a shaggy eyebrow at him. Just that, but after a moment, the thief-catcher shrugged. "I suppose Domon is trustworthy," he said reluctantly. "For a smuggler."

Mat snorted. Maybe they were jealous. Well, he was *ta'veren*, and they had to live with it. "Then tomorrow night, we leave. The only change in the plan is that we have three real *sul'dam* and one of the Blood to get us through the gates."

"And these *sul'dam* are going to take three Aes Sedai out of the city, let them go, and never think of raising an alarm," Juilin muttered. "Once, while Rand al'Thor was in Tear, I saw a tossed coin land on its edge five times in a row. We finally walked away and left it standing there on the table. I suppose anything can happen."

"Either you trust them or you don't, Juilin," Mat growled. The thief-catcher glared at the bundled dresses in the corner, and Mat shook his head. "What did they do to help you in Tanchico, Thom? Blood and ashes, don't the two of you go all flat-eyed on me again! You know, and they know, and I might as well."

"Nynaeve said not to tell *anyone*," Juilin said as if that really mattered. "Elayne said not to. We promised. You might say we swore an oath."

Thom shook his head on the pillow. "Circumstances alter cases, Juilin. And in any case, it wasn't an oath." He blew three perfect smoke rings, one inside the other. "They helped us acquire and dispose of a sort of male *a'dam*, Mat. The Black Ajah apparently wanted to use it on Rand. You can see why Nynaeve and Elayne wanted it kept quiet. If word spread that such a thing ever existed, the Light knows what kind of tales would spring up."

"Who cares what stories people tell?" A male *a'dam*? Light, if the Black Ajah had gotten that onto Rand's neck, or the Seanchan had . . . Those colors whirled through his head again, and he made himself stop thinking about Rand. "Gossip isn't going to hurt . . . anybody." No colors that time. He could avoid it as long as he did not think about . . . The colors swirled again, and he ground his teeth on his pipestem.

“Not true, Mat. Stories have power. Gleemen’s tales, and bards’ epics, and rumors in the street alike. They stir passions, and change the way men see the world. Today, I heard a man say that Rand had sworn fealty to Elaida, that he was in the White Tower. The fellow believed it, Mat. What if, say, enough Tairens begin to believe? Tairens dislike Aes Sedai. Correct, Juilin?”

“Some do,” Juilin allowed, then added as though Thom had dragged it from him, “Most do. But riot many of us have met Aes Sedai, not to know it. They way the law was, forbidding channeling, few Aes Sedai came to Tear, and they very seldom advertised who they were.”

“That’s beside the point, my fine Aes Sedai-loving Tairen friend. And it gives weight to my argument in any event. Tear holds to Rand, the nobles do at least, because they’re afraid if they do not, he’ll come back, but if they believe the Tower holds him, then maybe he can’t come back. If they believe he’s a tool of the Tower, it is just one more reason for them to turn on him. Let enough Tairens believe those two things, and he might as well have left Tear as soon as he drew *Callandor*. That is just the one rumor, and just Tear, but it could do as much harm in Cairhien, or Illian, or anywhere. I don’t know what sort of tales might spring from a male *a’dam,* in a world with the Dragon Reborn, and Asha’man, but I’m too old to want to find out.”

Mat understood, in a manner of speaking. A man always tried to make whoever was commanding the troops against him believe that he was doing something other than what he was, that he was going where he had no intention of going, and the enemy tried to do the same to him, if the enemy was any good at the craft. Sometimes both sides could get so confused that very strange things happened. Tragedies, sometimes. Cities burned that no one had any interest in burning, except that the burners believed what was untrue, and thousands died. Crops destroyed for the same reason, and tens of thousands died in the famine that followed.

“So I won’t crack my teeth about this *a’dam* for men,” he said. “I suppose somebody has thought to tell . . . him?” Colors flashed. Maybe he could just ignore them, or grow used to them. They were gone as fast as they came, and they did not hurt. He just did not like things he could not understand. Especially when they might have to do with the Power in some way. The silver foxhead under his shirt might protect him against the Power, but that protection had as many holes as his own memories.

“We have not exactly been in regular communication,” Thom said dryly, waggling his eyebrows. “I suppose Elayne and Nynaeve have found some way to let him know, if they think it important.”

“Why should they?” Juilin said, bending to tug off a boot with a grunt. “The thing is at the bottom of the sea.” Scowling, he hurled the boot at the bundled dresses in the corner. “Are you going to let us get any sleep tonight, Mat? I don’t think we’ll have any tomorrow night, and I like to sleep at least every other night.”

That night, Mat chose to sleep in Tylin’s bed. Not for old times’ sake. That thought made him laugh, though his laughter had too much of the sound of a whimper to be very funny. It was just that a good feather mattress and goose-down pillows were preferable to a hayloft when a man did not know when his next decent night’s sleep would come.

The trouble was that he could not sleep. He lay there in the dark with an arm behind his head and the medallion’s leather cord looped through itself on his wrist, ready to hand in case the *gholam* slid through the crack under the door, but it was not the *gholam* that kept him awake. He could not stop going over the plan in his head. It was a good plan, and simple; as simple as it could be, in the circumstances. Only, no battle ever went according to plan, even the best. Great captains earned their reputation not just for laying brilliant plans, but for still being able to find victory after those plans began to fall apart. So when first light illumined the windows, he was still lying there, rolling the medallion across the back of his fingers and trying to think of what was going to go wrong.

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CHAPTER 30

Cold, Fat Raindrops

The day dawned cold, with gray clouds that obscured the rising sun and winds off the Sea of Storms that rattled loose panes of glass in the window casements. In stories, not the sort of day for grand rescues and escapes. It was a day for murders. Not a pleasant thought when you were hoping to live past another dawn. But the plan *was* simple. Now that he had a Seanchan Blood to use, nothing could possibly go wrong. Mat tried very hard to convince himself of that.

Lopin brought him breakfast, bread and ham and some hard yellow cheese, while he dressed. Nerim was folding a few last pieces of clothing that were to go to the inn, including some of the shirts Tylin had had made. They were good shirts, after all, and Nerim claimed he could do something about the lace, though as usual he made it sound as if he was offering to sew a shroud. The lugubrious, gray-haired little fellow was handy with a needle, as Mat knew well. He had sewn up enough of Mat’s wounds.

“Nerim and I will take Olver out by the refuse gate at the rear of the Palace,” Lopin recited with exaggerated patience, his hands clasped at his waist. Servants in a palace seldom missed meals, and his dark Tairen coat fit more tightly than ever over his round belly. For that matter, the bottom of the coat did not appear to flare as much as it once had. “There is never anyone there except the guards until the refuse cart leaves in the afternoon, and they are accustomed to us taking my Lord’s things out that way, so they won’t remark us. At The Wandering Woman, we will secure my Lord’s gold and the rest of my Lord’s garments, and Metwyn, Fergin and Gorderan will meet us with the horses. We and the Redarms will then take young Olver through the Dal Eira Gate at midafternoon. I have the lottery tokens for the horses, including both pack animals, in my pocket, my Lord. There is an abandoned stable on the Great North Road, about a mile north of the Circuit of Heaven, where we will wait until we see my Lord. I trust I have my Lord's instructions correctly?"

Mat swallowed the last of the cheese and dusted his hands. "You think I'm making you go over it too often?" he said, shrugging into his coat. A plain dark green coat. A man wanted to be plain while about business like today's. "I want to make sure you have it by heart. Remember, if you don't see me before sunrise tomorrow, you keep moving until you find Talmanes and the Band." The alarm would go up with the morning inspection of the kennels, and if he was not out of the city before that, he expected to learn whether his luck ran to stopping a headsman's axe. He had been told that he was fated to die and live again—a prophecy, or near enough one—but he was pretty sure that had already happened.

"Of course, my Lord," Lopin said blandly. "It will be as my Lord commands."

"Certainly, my Lord," Nerim murmured, funereal as ever. "My Lord commands, and we obey."

Mat suspected they were lying, but two or three days waiting would not hurt them, and by that time, they would have to see he was not coming. Metwyn and the other two soldiers would convince them, if need be. Those three might follow Mat Cauthon, but they were not fool enough to stretch their necks on the chopping block if his head had already fallen. For some reason, he was not as sure of Lopin and Nerim.

Olver was not as upset over leaving Riselle as Mat had feared he would be. He brought the subject up while he was helping the boy bundle his belongings to be carried over to the inn. All of Olver's things were laid out neatly on the narrow bed in what had been the sulking room, a small sitting room, when the apartments had been Mat's.

"She is getting married, Mat," Olver said patiently, as though explaining to someone who didn't see the obvious. Popping open a narrow little carved box Riselle had given him, just long enough to make sure his redhawk's feather was safe, he snapped it shut and tucked it into the leather scrip he would be carrying on his shoulder. He was as careful of the feather as he had been of the purse holding twenty gold crowns and a fistful of silver. "I don't think her husband would like her to keep teaching me to read. I would not, if I were her husband."

"Oh," Mat said. Riselle had worked quickly once she made her mind up. Her marriage to Banner-General Yamada had been announced publicly yesterday and was to take place tomorrow, though by custom there was usually a wait of months between. Yamada might be a good general—Mat did not know—but he had never stood a chance against Riselle and that marvelous bosom. Today they were looking at a vineyard in the Rhannon Hills that the groom was buying for her wedding gift. "I just thought you might want to—I don't know—take her with us, or something."

"I'm not a child, Mat," Olver said dryly. Folding the linen cloth back around his striped turtle shell, he added that to the scrip. "You *will* play Snakes and Foxes with me, won't you? Riselle enjoys playing, and you never have time any more." Despite the clothes Mat was bundling up in a cloak that would go into a pack hamper, the boy had a spare pair of breeches and some clean shirts and stockings in the scrip, too. And the game of Snakes and Foxes his dead father had made for him. You were less likely to lose what you kept on your person, and Olver had already lost more in his ten years than most people did in a lifetime. But he still believed you could win at Snakes and Foxes without breaking the rules, too.

"I will," Mat promised. He would if he managed to make it out of the city. He was certainly breaking enough rules to deserve to win. "You just take care of Wind till I get there." Olver ginned widely, and for him, that was very wide indeed. The boy loved that leggy gray gelding almost as much as he did Snakes and Foxes.

Unfortunately, Beslan was another who seemed to think you could win at Snakes and Foxes.

"Tonight," he growled, stalking up and down in front of the fireplace in Tylin's sitting room. The slender man's eyes were cold enough to take away the warmth of the blaze, and his hands were clasped behind his back as if to keep them from the hilt of his narrow-bladed sword. The jeweled cylinder-clock on the wave-carved marble mantel chimed four times for the second hour of the morning. "With a few days' warning, I could have laid on something magnificent!"

"I don't want anything magnificent," Mat told him. He did not want anything from the man, but by chance Beslan had seen Thom slipping into the stableyard of The Wandering Woman a little earlier. Thom had gone to keep Joline amused until Egeanin brought her *sul'dam* that evening, to settle her nerves and jolly her along with courtly manners, but there could have been any number of reasons for him to visit the inn. Well, maybe not that many, with it full of Seanchan, but several, surely. Only, Beslan had leaped to the reason like a duck leaping on a beetle, and he refused to be left out. “It will be enough if a few of your friends fire some of the stores the Seanchan have stockpiled on the Bay Road. After midnight, mind, as near as they can reckon it; better an hour later than any time before.” With any luck, he would be out of the city before midnight. “That will draw their attention away south, and you know losing stores will hurt them.”

“I said I would do it,” Beslan said sourly, “but you can’t say setting fires is exactly a grand gesture.”

Sitting back, Mat rested his hands on the bamboo-carved arms of the chair and frowned. He wanted to rest his hands, anyway, but his signet ring made a metallic clicking on the gilded wood as he tapped his fingers. “Beslan, you will be seen at an inn when those fires are set, won’t you?” The other man grimaced. “Beslan?”

Beslan flung up his hands. “I know; I know. I mustn’t endanger Mother. I’ll be seen. By midnight, I will be as drunk as an innkeeper’s husband! You can wager I’ll be seen! It just isn’t very heroic, Mat. I’m at war with the Seanchan whether or not Mother is.”

Mat tried not to sigh. He almost succeeded.

There was no way to hide the three Redarms moving horses out of the stables, of course. Twice that morning he noticed serving women handing coins to others, and both times the woman doing the handing over glared when she saw him. Even with Vanin and Harnan apparently still solidly ensconced in the long barracks room near the stables, the Palace knew that Mat Cauthon was leaving soon, and wagers were being paid already. He just had to make sure no one found out how soon before it was too late.

The wind picked up strength as the morning wore on, but he had Pips saddled and rode his endless circles in the Palace stableyard, huddling a little in his saddle and clutching his cloak close. He rode more slowly than usual, so Pips’ steel shoes made a lazy, plodding sound on the paving stones. Now and then he grimaced at the darkening clouds in the sky and shook his head. No, Mat Cauthon did not like being out in this weather. Mat Cauthon would be staying somewhere warm and dry until the skies cleared, yes, he would.

The *sul’dam* walking *damane* in their own circle in the stableyard knew he was leaving soon, too. Maybe the serving women did not talk directly to the Seanchan women, but what one woman knew was always known to every woman inside a mile soon enough. Wildfire did not run through dry woods as fast as gossip ran through women. A tall yellow-haired *sul'dam* glanced in his direction and shook her head. A short stout *sul'dam* laughed out loud, splitting a face as dark as any of the Sea Folk. He was just Tylin's Toy.

The *sul'dam* did not concern him, but Teslyn did. For several days, until this morning, he had not seen her among the *damane* being exercised. Today the *sul'dam* let their cloaks fly with the wind, but the *damane* all held theirs tightly around them, except Teslyn's gray cloak flapped this way and that, forgotten, and she stumbled a little where the pavement was uneven. Her eyes were wide and worried in that Aes Sedai face. Occasionally she darted a glance at the buxom black-haired *sul'dam* wearing the other end of her silver leash, and when she did, she licked her lips uncertainly.

A tightness settled in Mat's belly. Where had the determination gone? If she was ready to knuckle under. . . .

"Everything all right?" Vanin said when Mat dismounted and gave him Pips' reins. Rain had begun to fall, cold fat drops, and the *sul'dam* were hurrying their charges inside, laughing and running to avoid getting wet. Some of the *damane* were laughing, too, a sound to chill Mat's blood. Vanin took no chances anyone might wonder why they were standing in the rain to talk. The fat man bent to lift Pips' left foreleg and study the hoof. "You look a mite more peaked than usual."

"Everything is just fine," Mat told him. The ache in his leg and hip gnawed like a tooth, but he was barely aware of it or of the quickening rain. Light, if Teslyn was cracking now. . . . "Just remember. If you hear shouting inside the Palace tonight, or anything that sounds like trouble, you and Harnan don't wait. You ride out right then and go find Olver. He'll be—"

"I know where the little tyke'll be." Letting go of Pips' leg and straightening, Vanin spat through one of the gaps in his teeth. Raindrops ran down his face. "Harnan ain't too stupid to put his boots on alone, and I know what to do. You just take care of your piece of it and make sure your luck is working. Come on there, boy," he added much more warmly to Pips. "I got some good oats for you. And a fine hot fish stew for me."

Mat knew he should eat, too, but he felt as though he had swallowed a stone, and it did not leave room for food. Hobbling back up to Tylin's apartments, he threw his damp cloak over a chair, and for a time, stood staring at the corner where his black-hafted spear stood propped next to his unstrung bow. He planned to come back for the *ashandarei* at the last moment. The Blood should all be abed by the time he moved, and the servants, as well, with only the guards outside remaining awake, but he would not risk being seen with it before he had to. Even the Seanchan who called him Toy would take notice of him carrying a weapon through the halls in the middle of the night. He had meant to carry the bow, too. Good black yew was almost impossible to find outside the Two Rivers, and they cut it too short besides. Unstrung, a bow should be two hands taller than the man who would draw it. Maybe he should abandon it after all, though. He would need both hands to use the *ashandarei,* if it came to that, and the moment needed to drop the bow might be the moment that killed him.

"Everything will go according to plan," he said aloud. Blood and ashes, he sounded as wool-headed as Beslan! "I am not going to have fight my way out of the bloody Palace!" And almost as fool-witted. Luck was a very fine thing with the dice. Depending on luck other places could get a man dead.

Lying down on the bed, he propped one booted foot atop the other and lay studying the bow and the spear. With the door to the sitting room open, he could hear the cylinder-clock softly chime each hour away. Light, he needed his luck tonight.

The window light faded so slowly he almost got up to see whether the sun had stopped, but eventually gray light faded to purple twilight, then to full dark. The clock chimed twice, and then the only sounds were the drumming of the rain and the rush of the wind. Workmen who had been braving the weather would be downing tools to trudge home. No one came to light the lamps or tend the fires. No one expected him to be there, since he had slept in the bed the night before. The flames in the bedroom fireplace dwindled and died. Everything was in motion, now. Olver was snug in that old stable; it still had most of its roof. The clock sounded the first full hour of the night, and after no more than a week, four chimes for the second.

Rising from the bed, he felt his way into the pitch-dark sitting room and pulled open the hinged casement of one of the tall windows. The strong wind drove raindrops through the intricate white wrought-iron screen, quickly soaking his coat. The moon was hidden behind clouds, and the city was a mass of rain-shrouded darkness without even lightning to break it. All the streetlamps had apparently been extinguished by the rain and wind; the night would hide them when they left the Palace. And any patrol that saw them out in this weather would look twice. Shivering as the wind cut through his damp coat, he shut the casement.

Taking a seat on the edge of one of the bamboo-carved chairs, he propped his elbows on his knees and watched the clock above the dead fireplace. He could not see it in the darkness, but here, he could hear the steady tick. He remained motionless, though the single chime of another hour made him twitch. There was nothing now but to wait. In a little while, Egeanin would be introducing Joline to her *sul'dam.* If she really had been able to find three who would do as she claimed. If Joline did not panic when they first put the *a'dam* on her. Thom, Joline and the others from the inn would meet him just before he reached the Dal Eira. And if he did not reach it, Thom had gone ahead with carving his turnip; he was sure he could get them past the gates with his forged order. At least they had a chance, if it all fell apart. If. Too many ifs to think about, now. It was too late for that.

Ding, from the clock, like a piece of crystal tapped with a spoon. *Ding.* About now, Juilin would be making his way to his precious Thera, and with any luck Beslan was starting to drink hard at an inn somewhere. Drawing a deep breath, he stood in the blackness and checked his knives by feel, up his sleeves, beneath his coat, tucked into the turned-down tops of his boots, one hanging down inside the back of his collar. That done, he left the apartments. Too late for anything but beginning.

The empty hallways he walked along were only dimly lit. One stand lamp in three or four carried flames in front of the mirrors, little pools of light with pale shadows between that never quite reached darkness. His boots were loud on the floor tiles. They rang on the marble stairs. It was unlikely anyone at all would be awake this late, but if someone did see him, he must not look as if he were skulking. Tucking his thumbs behind his belt, he made himself saunter. It was no worse than stealing a pie from a kitchen window sill. Though, come to think of it, the spotty memories that remained of his boyhood seemed to contain getting half-skinned for that a time or two.

Stepping onto the columned walk that bordered the stableyard, he turned up his collar against the wind-driven rain flying between the fluted white columns. Bloody rain! A man could drown in it, even when he had not really been outside yet. The wall-mounted lamps had blown out, except for the pair flanking the open gates, the only glowing spots in the pouring rain. He could not make out the guards outside the gates. The Seanchan squad would be as motionless as if it were a pleasant afternoon. Very likely the Ebou Dari, too; they did not like being shown up in any way. After a moment he retreated to the anteroom door, to avoid getting completely drenched. Nothing moved in the stableyard. Where were they? Blood and bloody ashes, where . . . ?

Riders appeared in the gates, led by two men afoot carrying pole-lanterns. He could not count them in the rain, but they were too many. Would Seanchan messengers have lantern-bearers? Maybe, in this weather. Grimacing, he took another step back, into the anteroom. The thin light of a single stand-lamp behind him was enough to turn the night outside to a blanket of black, but he peered into it. In a few minutes, four heavily cloaked figures appeared, hurrying toward the door. If they were messengers, they would pass him by without a second glance.

"Your man Vanin is rude," Egeanin announced, throwing back her hood as soon as she was beyond the fluted columns. In the darkness, her face was just a shadow, but the coldness of her voice was sufficient to tell him what he would see before she stepped into the anteroom, forcing him to move back. Her brows were drawn down sharply, and her blue eyes were icy augers. A grim-faced Domon followed her, shaking rain from his cloak, and then a pair of *sul'dam*, one pale and yellow-haired, the other with long brown hair. He could not see much more since they stood with their heads down, studying the floor tiles in front of their feet. "You didn't tell me she had two men with her," Egeanin went on, peeling her gloves off. Odd, how she could make that drawl sound brisk. She did not give a man room to squeeze in a word. "Or that Mistress Anan was coming. Luckily, I know how to adapt. Plans always need adapting, once the anchor is dry. Speaking of dry, have you been running around outside already? I trust you haven't gotten yourself noticed."

"What do you mean, you adapted, the plan?" Mat demanded, raking his hands through his hair. Light, it *was* wet! "I had everything laid out!" Why were those two *sul'dam* standing so still? If he had ever seen statues of reluctance, it was that pair. "Who are those others out there?"

"The people from the inn," Egeanin said impatiently. "For one thing, I need a proper entourage to look right for any street patrols. Those two—Warders?—are muscular fellows; they make excellent lantern-bearers. For another, I didn't want to risk missing them in this blow. Better that we are all together from the start." Her head turned, following his glances at the *sul'dam*. "These are Seta Zarbey and Renna Emain. I suspect they hope you'll forget those names after tonight."

The pale woman flinched at the name Seta, which made the other Renna. Neither raised her head. What hold did Egeanin have on them, anyway? Not that it mattered. All that mattered was that they were here and ready to do what was necessary.

"No point standing here," Mat said. "Let's get on with it." He let her changes in the plan go without further comment. After all, lying on that bed in Tylin's apartments, he had decided to risk a change or two himself.

* * *

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CHAPTER 31

What the Aelfinn Said

The Seanchan noblewoman expressed surprise, and no little irritation, when Mat accompanied her toward the kennels. Seta and Renna knew the way, of course, and he was supposed to be getting his cloak and whatever else he meant to carry. The two *sul'dam* followed them through the poorly lit halls, cloaks hanging down their backs and eyes on the floor. Domon brought up the rear as though shepherding the pair. The braid hanging down the side of his head swayed as his eyes darted down every crossing corridor, and sometimes he felt at his waist as though expecting to find a sword or a cudgel. Except for them, the tapestry-lined hallways were silent and still.

"I have a small errand up there," Mat told Egeanin, as casually as he knew how, and smiled for her. "No need to bother yourself. Won't take a minute." His very best smile seemed to make no more impression than it had yesterday in her room at the inn.

"If you wreck me now—" she growled in a threatening tone.

"Just remember who planned this," he muttered, and she grunted. Light, women always seemed to think they could just step in and take over, and do a better job than the man whose job it was!

At least she made no further complaint. They climbed quickly to the top floor of the Palace, then up the dark narrow stairs to the sprawling attic. Only a few of the lamps were lit, not even as many as in the hallways below, and the maze of narrow corridors between the tiny wooden rooms was a mass of pale shadows. Nothing moved, and Mat breathed a little more easily. He would have breathed easier still if Renna had not sighed with obvious relief.

She and Seta knew where the various *damane* were kenneled, and if they did not exactly hurry, they made no delay in heading deeper in the attic, perhaps because Domon still walked at their heels. It was not an image to inspire confidence. Well, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. A man made do with what he had. Especially when he had no choice.

Egeanin gave him a last hard look and growled again, wordlessly this time, then strode off after the others, her cloak flaring behind her. He grimaced at her back. The way the woman walked, you could take her for a man if she was not wearing a dress.

He did have an errand, and maybe not so small. It was not something he wanted to do. Light, he had tried to talk himself out of it! It was something he bloody well had to do, though. As soon as Egeanin vanished around a corner after Domon and the others, he darted for the nearest room that he remembered containing one of the Sea Folk.

Easing open the plain wooden door soundlessly, he slipped into the pitch-black interior. The sleeping woman inside snored with a rasping sound. Slowly he felt his way forward until his knee bumped into the bed, then felt along the mound beneath the blankets more quickly, finding her head just in time to clamp his hand over her mouth as she jerked awake.

“I want you to answer a question,” he whispered. Blood and ashes, what if he had mistaken the room? What if this was not a Windfinder at all, but one of the bloody Seanchan women? “What would you do if I took that collar off your neck?” Lifting his hand, he held his breath.

“I would free my sisters, if it pleases the Light that should happen.” The Sea Folk accents in the darkness made him breathe again. “The Light be willing, we would cross the harbor, somehow, to where our people are held, and free as many as we were able.” The unseen woman’s voice remained low, but grew fiercer by the word. “The Light be willing, we would take back our ships, and fight our way to sea. Now! If this is a trick, punish me for it and be done, or kill me for it. I was on the brink of yielding, of giving up myself, and the shame of that will burn me forever, but you have reminded me who I am, and now I will never yield. Do you hear me? Never!”

“And if I asked you to wait for three hours?” he asked, still crouching over her. “I remember the Atha’an Miere judging the passage of an hour within minutes.” That fellow had not been him, but the memory was his now, passage on an Atha’an Miere vessel from Allorallen to Barashta, and a bright-eyed Sea Folk woman who wept when she refused to follow him ashore.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

"I'm called Mat Cauthon, if it makes a difference."

"I am Nestelle din Sakura South Star, Mat Cauthon." He heard her spit, and knew what she was doing. He spat on his own palm, and their two hands found each other in the darkness. Hers was as callused as his, her grip strong. "I will wait," she said. "And I will remember you. You are a great and good man."

"I'm just a gambler," he told her. Her hand guided his to the segmented collar around her neck, and it came open for him with a metallic *snick.* She drew a very long breath.

He only had to put her fingers in the proper places and show her the trick once before she got it, but he made her close and open the collar three times before he was satisfied. If he was going to do this, he might as well make sure it was done right. "Three hours, as near as you can," he reminded her.

"As near as I can," she whispered.

She could ruin everything, but if he could not take a chance, then who could? He was the man with the luck, after all. Maybe it had not been all that much in evidence lately, but he had found Egeanin just when he needed her. Mat Cauthon still had the luck.

Slipping out of the room as quietly as he had entered, he closed the door. And almost choked on his tongue. He was staring at the back of a wide, gray-haired woman in a red-paneled dress. Beyond her stood Egeanin drawn up to her full height, and Teslyn, connected to Renna by the silver length of an *a'dam.* There was no sign of Domon or Seta or this Edesina he still had not seen to know her. Egeanin looked fierce as a lioness over her kill, but Teslyn was wide-eyed and trembling, terrified half out of her wits, and Renna's mouth had a twist that said she might sick up any moment now.

Not daring to breathe, he took a cautious step toward the gray-haired woman, stretching out his hands. If he overpowered her before she could cry out, they could hide her. . . . Where? Seta and Renna would want to kill her. No matter what hold Egeanin had on them, the woman could name them.

Egeanin's stern blue eyes caught his over the gray-haired *sul'dam*'s shoulder for a brief instant before focusing on the other woman's face again. "No!" she said sharply. "There is no time to waste with changes to my plans, now. The High Lady Suroth said I could use any *damane* I wish, *Der'sul'dam.*"

"Of course, my Lady," the gray-haired woman replied, sounding confused. "I merely pointed out that Tessi is not really trained. I actually came up to look in on her. She *is* coming along very nicely, now, my Lady, but . . ."

Still not breathing, Mat backed away on tiptoe. He eased down the dark narrow stairs using his hands against the walls to support as much of his weight as possible. He did not remember any creaky steps coming up, but there were chances, and then there were chances. A man took those he had to, and did not press his luck otherwise. That was the way to a long life, something he wished for very much.

At the foot of the steps, he paused to suck in air until his heart stopped pounding. Until it slowed a little, anyway. It might not stop pounding till tomorrow. He was not sure he had drawn breath since seeing the gray-haired woman. Light! If Egeanin thought she had the matter in hand, well and bloody good, but just the same, Light! She must have nooses around the two *sul'dam*'s necks! *Her* plan? Well, she had been right about no time to waste. He ran.

He ran until his hip gave a sharp twinge, and he stumbled into a turquoise-inlaid table. He caught a summer tapestry to keep from falling, and the bright-flowered length of silk tore free from the yellow marble cornice for half its length. The tall white porcelain vase sitting on the table toppled, shattering on the blue-and-red floor tiles with a crash that echoed along the hallway. After that, he hobbled. But he hobbled as fast as any man ever had. If anyone came to investigate the noise, they were not going to find Mat Cauthon standing over that mess, or within two corridors of it.

Limping the rest of the way to Tylin's apartments, he was across the sitting room and into the bedchamber before he realized that the lamps were all lit. The blaze in the bedroom fireplace had been renewed with split billets from the gilded wood-basket. Tylin, her arms doubled behind her to work at her buttons, looked up at his entrance and frowned. Her dark green riding dress was wrinkled. The fire crackled and spat a shower of sparks up the chimney.

"I didn't expect you back yet," he said, trying to think. Of everything he had considered going amiss tonight, Tylin returning early had never been in it. His brain seemed frozen.

“Suroth learned that an army had vanished in Murandy,” Tylin replied slowly, straightening. She spoke absently, giving what she said a fraction of the attention she put into studying Mat Cauthon. “What army, or how any army can vanish, I don’t know, but she decided her return was urgent. We left everyone behind, came as fast as one of the beasts could carry just the two of us and the woman who handled it, and commandeered two horses to ride up from the docks alone. She even went to that inn across the square where all their officers are instead of coming here. I don’t think she intends to sleep tonight, or let any of them. . . .”

Letting her words trail off, Tylin glided to him across the carpets and fingered his plain green coat. “The trouble with having a pet fox,” she murmured, “is that sooner or later it remembers it is a fox.” Those big dark eyes peered up at him. Suddenly she seized two handfuls of his hair and pulled his head down for a kiss that curled his toes in his boots. “That,” she said breathlessly when she finally let him go, “is to show you how much I will miss you.” Without the slightest change of expression, she slapped him so hard that silver flecks floated in front of his eyes. “And that is for trying to sneak away while I was gone.” Turning her back, she pulled her mane of raven hair over one shoulder. “Undo my buttons for me, my pretty little fox. We arrived so late I decided not to wake my maids, but these fingernails make buttons all but impossible. One last night together, and tomorrow I will send you on your way.”

Mat rubbed his cheek. The woman could have broken a tooth for him! At least she had jarred his thoughts loose. If Suroth was at The Wandering Woman, she was not in the Tarasin Palace to see what she should not. His luck was still good. He only had to worry about the woman in front of him. The only way was forward.

“I’m going tonight,” he said, putting his hands on Tylin’s shoulders. “And when I do, I’m taking a couple of Aes Sedai from the attic. Come with me. I’ll send Thom and Juilin to find Beslan, and—”

“Go *with* you?” she said incredulously, moving away and turning to face him. Her proud face was scornful. “Pigeon, I don’t fancy becoming *your* pretty, and I have no intention of becoming a refugee. Or of leaving Altara to whoever the Seanchan choose to replace me. I am the Queen of Altara, the Light help me, and I will not abandon my country now. You really mean to try freeing the Aes Sedai? I wish you well in it, if you must—I wish the sisters well—but it seems a good way to have your head stuck up on a spike, sweetling. It's too pretty a head to be cut off and covered with tar."

He tried to take her by the shoulders again, but she stepped back with a piercing look that made his hands fall. He put every scrap of urgency he could find into his voice. "Tylin, I made sure everybody knew I was leaving, and anxious to be gone before you returned, so the Seanchan would know you didn't have anything to do with it, but now—"

"I returned and surprised you," she broke in fiercely, "and you tied me up and left me under the bed. When I am discovered in the morning, I will be furious with you. Outraged!" She smiled, but her eyes glittered, not that far from outrage now, whatever she said about foxes and sending him on his way. "I will offer a bounty for you, and tell Tuon she can buy you when you're caught, if she still wants you. I will be the perfect High Blood in my anger. They'll believe me, duckling. I've already told Suroth I intend to shave my hair."

Mat grinned weakly. He certainly believed her. She really would sell him if he was caught. "Women are a maze through briars in the night," the old saying went, and even they do not know the way.

Tylin insisted on supervising her own binding. She seemed to take pride in it. She had to be bound with strips cut from her skirts, as if she had come on him by surprise and been overpowered. The knots had to be tight, so she could not escape however she struggled, and she did struggle against them once they were tied, thrashing about hard enough that it seemed she really was trying to get free. Maybe she was; her mouth twisted in a snarl when she failed. Her ankles and wrists had to be tied together in the small of her back, and a leash run from her neck to one leg of the bed, so she could not wriggle her way across the floor and out into the hall. And of course, she could not be able to shout for help, either. When he gently pushed one of her silk kerchiefs into her mouth and tied another to hold it in place, she smiled, but her eyes were fierce. A maze through briars in the night.

"I am going to miss you," he said quietly as he pushed her beneath the edge of the bed. To his surprise, he realized that he really would. Light! Hurriedly he gathered his cloak and gloves and spear, and snuffed the lamps on his way out. Women could tangle a man in that maze before he knew it.

The hallways remained empty, and silent save for the sound of his own limping bootsteps, but any relief he felt vanished when he reached the anteroom off the stableyard.

The single lit stand-lamp still cast a wavering light on those inevitable flowered tapestries, but Juilin and his woman were not there, and neither were Egeanin and the others. With the time he had taken up with Tylin, they all should have been waiting on him by now. Beyond the columned walk the rain was sheeting down in a solid black curtain that hid everything. Could they have gone on to the stables? That Egeanin seemed to change his plan whenever it suited her.

Grumbling under his breath, he hitched his cloak around him and prepared to make his way to the stables through the downpour. He had had just about all he could take of women tonight.

“So you *are* intending to leave. I cannot allow that, Toy.”

With an oath, he spun on his heel and found himself facing Tuon, her dark face stern behind her long transparent veil. The narrow circlet holding the veil on her shaven head was a mass of firedrops and pearls, yet another fortune taken together with the wide jeweled belt that cinched her waist and the long necklace around her neck. A fine time it was to be noticing jewels, however rich. What in the Light was she doing awake? Blood and ashes, if she went running off, shouting for guards to stop him . . . !

Desperately he reached for the skinny girl, but she writhed away from his grip and sent the *ashandarei* flying with a sharp blow that half numbed his wrist. He expected her to flee, but instead she rained blows at him, punching with folded knuckles, chopping her hands like axe blades. He had quick hands, the quickest Thorn had ever seen according to the old gleeman, but it was all he could do to ward her off, forget about grabbing her. If he had not been trying so hard to keep her from breaking his nose—or something else, maybe; she hit very hard for such a tiny thing—except for that, he might have found the whole thing laughable. He towered over her, though he was not much above average height, yet she came at him in a concentrated fury, as though she were the taller and stronger and expected to overwhelm him. For some reason, after a few moments her full lips curved in a smile, and if he had not known better, he would have said those big liquid eyes took on a glow of delight. Burn him, thinking about how pretty a woman was at a time like this was as bad as trying to price her gems!

Abruptly, she flowed back from him, using both hands to readjust the circle of gems that secured her veil. There was certainly nothing like delight on her face now. Her expression was all concentration. Placing her feet carefully, never taking her eyes from his face, she began slowly gathering her white pleated skirts in her hands, inching them up above her knees in folds.

He could not understand why she was not already shouting for help, but he knew she was about to kick at him. Well, not if he had anything to say about it! He leaped for her, and everything happened at once. A stab of pain in his hip sent him to one knee. Tuon snatched her skirts almost to her own hips, and her slim, white-stockinged leg flashed out at him in a kick that passed over his head as she was suddenly hoisted into the air.

He thought he must be as surprised to see Noal with his arms wrapped around the girl as she was to have those arms there, but he reacted faster than she. As she opened her mouth to shout at last, Mat scrambled to his feet and began stuffing her veil between her teeth, tipping the jeweled circlet to the floor with a flip of his hand. She did not cooperate the way Tylin had, of course. A firm grip on her jaw was all that kept her from sinking her teeth into his fingers. Angry sounds came from her throat, and her eyes showed a fury they never had at the worst of her attack. She twisted in Noal's grip and flailed her legs, but the worn old man managed to shift his burden and himself to avoid every kick of her heels. Worn or not, he seemed to have no difficulty hanging on to her.

"Do you often have this sort of trouble with women?" he asked mildly around a gap-toothed smile. He was wearing his cloak, and his bundled belongings were tied over it across his back.

"Always," Mat replied sourly, and grunted when a knee caught his aching hip. Managing to untie his neck-scarf one-handed, he used it to secure the wadded veil in Tuon's mouth at the cost of a nipped thumb. Light, what was he going to *do* with her?

"I didn't know this was what you were planning," Noal said, not breathing hard in spite of the way the tiny woman thrashed herself about in his grip, "but as you can see, I'm leaving tonight, too. I thought that in a day or two, this might be an unpleasant place for someone you gave a bed to."

"A wise decision," Mat muttered. Light, he should have thought of warning Noal.

Lowering himself to his knees, he avoided Tuon's kicks—most of them, anyway—long enough to catch her legs. A knife plucked from his sleeve started a cut in the hem of her dress, and he tore away a long strip to tie her ankles. It was a good thing he had gotten all that practice with Tylin earlier. He was not accustomed to tying women up. Tearing off a second strip of cloth from the bottom of her skirt, he picked up the circle of gems from the floor, and stood with one grunt for the effort and a deeper one for a last, two-legged kick that set fire to his hip. When he set the circlet back on her head, Tuon stared him straight in the eye. She had stopped thrashing about uselessly, but she was not afraid. Light, in her place, he would have been soiling himself.

Juilin finally arrived, then, cloaked and fully accoutered, with his short sword and notched sword-breaker at his belt and his thin bamboo staff in one hand. A slender, dark-haired woman in the thick white robes worn by *da'covale* outside clung to his right arm. She was pretty, in a pouty way, with a rosebud mouth, but five or six years older than Mat had expected, and her large dark eyes darted timidly. At the sight of Tuon, she squeaked and let go of Juilin as though he were a hot stove, folding herself to the floor beside the door with her head on her knees.

"I had to talk Thera into running away all over again," the thief-catcher sighed, giving her a concerned look. That was all the explanation he made for his lateness, before turning his attention to Noal's burden. Pushing back the ridiculous conical red cap he wore, he scratched his head. "And what do we do with her?" he asked simply.

"Leave her in the stables," Mat replied. They would if Vanin had convinced the grooms to let him and Harnan tend to any messengers' horses that came in. Until now, that had seemed like only an added precaution, not really necessary. Until now. "In the hayloft. She shouldn't be found before morning, when they fork down fresh hay for the stalls."

"And I thought you were kidnaping her," Noal sighed, setting Tuon's bound feet back on the floor and shifting his hold on her to gripping her upper arms. Head high, the little woman disdained to struggle. Even with a gag in her mouth, scorn was clear on her face. She refused to fight, not because it was hopeless, but because she did not choose to fight.

Bootsteps echoed in the corridor leading to the anteroom, growing louder. It could be Egeanin at last. Or the way the night seemed to be turning, it might be Deathwatch Guards. The Ogier sort.

Hastily, Mat motioned the other toward corners out of sight of anyone coming through the door, then hobbled over to pick up his black spear.

Juilin pulled Thera to her feet and drew her to his left, where she crouched in the corner while he stood in front of her with his staff held in both hands. It appeared a frail weapon, but the thief-catcher could use it to great effect. Noal dragged Tuon to the opposite corner of the room and released one of her arms to put a hand inside his coat, where he kept his long knives. Mat planted himself in the middle of the room with his back to the rain-soaked night, the *ashandarei* upright in front of him. No matter who came into the room, he was not going to be able to dance about, with his hip knotted in a fist from Tuon's kicks, but if worse came to worst, he could at least leave marks on a few people.

When Egeanin strode through that doorway, he sagged on the spear in relief. Two *sul'dam* entered after her, and Domon followed. Mat got his first look at Edesina to know who he was seeing, though he did recall her from one day when the *damane* were being exercised, a slender handsome woman in one of those plain gray dresses, with black hair spilling to her waist. Despite the *a'dam* leashing her to Seta's wrist, Edesina looked about her calmly. An Aes Sedai on a leash, perhaps, but an Aes Sedai confident that leash was coming off soon. Teslyn, on the other hand, was a quivering mass of eagerness, licking her lips and staring at the door to the stableyard. Renna and Seta hurried the two Aes Sedai along behind Egeanin without taking their eyes from the stableyard door.

"I had to soothe the *der'sul'dam,*" Egeanin said, as soon as she was into the room. "They are very protective of their charges." Noticing Juilin and Thera, she scowled; there had not seemed any reason to tell her about Thera, not when she was willing to help *damane,* but clearly she did not like the surprise of woolen robes. "Her seeing Seta and Renna changes a few things, of course," she went on, "but—" Her words cut off as though sliced with a knife as her eyes fell on Tuon. Egeanin was a pale woman, but she went paler. Tuon glared back above her gag with the stern ferocity of a headsman. "Oh, Light!" Egeanin said hoarsely, sinking to her knees. "You madman! It's death by slow torture to lay hands on the Daughter of the Nine Moons!" The two *sul'dam* gasped, and knelt without hesitation, not only pulling the two Aes Sedai down with them but gripping the *a'dam* right at the collar to force their faces to the floor.

Mat grunted as though Tuon had just kicked him square in the belly. He felt as if she had. The Daughter of the Nine Moons. The Aelfinn had told him truth, much as he hated knowing. He would die and live again, if he had not already. He would give up half the light of the world to save the world, and he did not even want to think about what that meant. He would marry. . . . “She is my wife,” he said softly. Somebody made a choking sound; he thought it was Domon.

“What?” Egeanin squeaked, her head whipping toward him so fast that her tail of hair swung around to slap her face. He would not have thought she *could* squeak. “You cannot say that! You *must* not say that!”

“Why not?” he demanded. The Aelfinn always gave true answers. Always. “She is my wife. Your bloody Daughter of the Nine Moons is my wife!”

They stared at him, except for Juilin, who took off his cap and stared into that. Domon shook his head, and Noal laughed softly. Egeanin’s mouth hung open. The two *sul’dam* gaped as though at a madman, stark raving and loose. Tuon stared, but her expression was absolutely unreadable, hiding every thought behind those dark eyes. Oh, Light, what *was* he to do? For one thing, get a move on before . . .

Selucia scurried into the room, and Mat groaned. Was everybody in the whole bloody Palace going to walk in? Domon tried to grab her, but she eluded him, darting about. The buxom golden-haired *so’jhin* was not so stately as usual, wringing her hands and looking around in a hunted fashion. “Forgive me for speaking,” she said in a fear-filled voice, “but what you do is foolish beyond madness.” With a groan, she darted to half crouch between the kneeling *sul’dam* with one hand on the shoulder of each, as though seeking their protection. Her blue eyes never ceased flitting about the room. “Whatever the omens, this can still be rectified if you will only consent to draw back.”

“Be easy, Selucia,” Mat said in a soothing. She was not looking at him, but he made calming gestures anyway. In none of his memories could he find a way to deal with a hysterical woman. Except to hide. “No one is going to be hurt. No one! I promise you. You can be easy, now.”

For some reason, consternation flashed across her face, but she settled to her knees and folded her hands in her lap. Suddenly, all her fear vanished, and she was as regal as ever she had been. “I will obey you, so long as you do not harm my mistress. If you do, I will kill you.”

From Egeanin, that would have given him pause. Coming from this plump cream-cheeked woman, short even if she was taller than her mistress, he put it out of his mind. The Light knew women were dangerous, but he thought he could handle a lady’s maid. At least she was no longer hysterical. Odd, how that came and went in women.

“I suppose you mean to leave them *both* in the hayloft?” Noal said.

“No,” Mat replied, looking at Tuon. She stared right back, still with no expression he could read. A boy-slim little woman, when he liked women with flesh on their bones. Heir to the Seanchan throne, when noblewomen gave him goose bumps. A woman who had wanted to *buy* him, and now likely wanted to put a knife in his ribs. And she would be his wife. The Aelfinn always gave true answers. “We are taking them with us,” he said.

At last, Tuon showed expression. She smiled, as if she suddenly knew a secret. She smiled, and he shivered. Oh, Light, how he shivered.

* * *

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CHAPTER 32

A Portion of Wisdom

The Golden Wheel was a large inn, just off the Avharin Market, with a long, beam-ceilinged common room crowded with small square tables. Even at midday no more than one table in five had anyone sitting at it, though, usually an outland merchant facing a woman in sober colors with her hair worn on top of her head or gathered up at the nape of her neck. The women were merchants, too, or bankers; in Far Madding, banking and trade were forbidden to men. All the foreigners in the common room were male, since the women among them could be taken into the Women's Room. The smells of fish and mutton cooking in the kitchens filled the air, and occasionally a shout from one of the tables summoned one of the serving men who waited in a line at the back of the room. Otherwise, the merchants and bankers kept their voices low. The sound of the rain outside was louder.

"Are you certain?" Rand asked, taking the creased drawings back from a lantern-jawed serving man he had drawn off to one side of the room.

"I think it's him," the fellow said uncertainly, wiping his hands on a long apron embroidered with a yellow wagon wheel. "It looks like him. He should be back soon." His eyes darted beyond Rand, and he sighed. "You better buy a drink or go. Mistress Gallger doesn't like us talking when we should be working. And she wouldn't like me talking about her patrons any time."

Rand glanced over his shoulder. A lean woman with a tall ivory comb stuck in the dark bun on the back of her head was standing in the yellow-painted arch that led to the Women's Room. The way she looked over the common room—half queen surveying her domain, half farmer surveying her fields, and either way displeased with the sparsity of trade she saw—named her the innkeeper. When her gaze fell on Rand and the lantern-jawed fellow, she frowned.

"Mulled wine," Rand said, handing the man some coins, coppers for the wine and a silver mark for his information, uncertain as it was. More than a week had passed since he had killed Rochaid and Kisman had gotten away, and in all those days this was the first time he had gotten more than a shrug or a shake of the head when he showed the drawings.

There were a dozen empty tables right at hand, but he wanted to be in a corner at the front of the room, where he could see who came in without being seen himself, and as he edged his way between the tables, snatches of conversation caught his ear.

A tall pale woman in dark green silk shook her head at a stocky man in a tight-fitting black Tairen coat. An iron-gray bun made her look a little like Cadsuane from the side. He appeared to be made of stone blocks, but his dark square face was worried. “You can put your mind at ease about Andor, Master Admira,” she said soothingly. “Believe me, the Andorans will shout and shake swords at one another, but they’ll never let it come to actual fighting. It is in your best interests to stay with the present route for your goods. Cairhien would tax you a fifth more than Far Madding. Think of the added expense.” The Tairen grimaced as if he were thinking of it. Or wondering whether his best interests really coincided with hers.

“I hear the body did be all black and swollen,” a lean, white-bearded Illianer in a dark blue coat said at another table. “I hear the Counsels did order it burned.” He raised his eyebrows significantly and tapped the side of a pointed nose that gave him the appearance of a weasel.

“If there was *plague* in the city, Master Azereos, the Counsels would have announced it,” the slim woman sitting across from him said calmly. With two elaborate ivory combs in her rolled hair, she was pretty, in a fox-faced way, and cool as an Aes Sedai, though with faint lines at the corners of her brown eyes. “I really do suggest against moving *any* of your trade to Lugard. Murandy is *most* unsettled. The nobles will *never* stand for Roedran building an army. And there are *Aes Sedai* involved, as I’m sure you have heard. The Light alone knows what *they* will do.” The Illianer shrugged uncomfortably. These days, no one was very certain what Aes Sedai would do, if they ever had been.

A Kandori with gray streaks in his forked beard and a large pearl in his left ear was leaning toward a stout woman in dark gray silk who wore her black hair in a tight roll along the top of her head. “I hear the Dragon Reborn has been crowned King of Illian, Mistress Shimel.” A frown put more wrinkles in his forehead. “Given the White Tower’s proclamation, I am considering sending my spring wagons to travel along the Erinin to

Tear. The River Road may be a harder route, but Illian is not such a market for furs that I want to take too many risks."

The stout woman smiled, a very thin smile for such a round face. "I'm told the man has hardly been seen in Illian since he took the crown, Master Posavina. In any case, the Tower will deal with him, if it hasn't already, and this morning, I received word that the Stone of Tear is under siege. That is hardly a situation where you will find much market for furs, now it? No, Tear is not a place to avoid risks." The wrinkles in Master Posavina's forehead deepened.

Reaching a small table in the corner, Rand tossed his cloak over the back of the chair and sat with his back to the wall, turning up his collar. The lantern-jawed fellow brought a steaming pewter cup of spiced wine, murmured a hurried thanks for the silver, and scurried off at a shout from another table. Two large fireplaces on either side of the room took the chill off the air, but if anyone noticed that Rand kept his gloves on, no one glanced at him twice. He pretended to stare into the winecup between his hands on the table while keeping an eye on the door to the street.

Most of what he had overheard did not interest him greatly. He had heard as much before, and sometimes knew more than the people he eavesdropped on. Elayne agreed with the pale woman, for example, and she had to know Andor better than any Far Madding merchant. The Stone under siege was new, though. Still, he need not trouble himself with it yet. The Stone had never fallen, except to him, and he knew Alanna was somewhere in Tear. He had felt her leap from just north of Far Madding to somewhere much farther north, then, a day later, to somewhere far to the south and east. She was distant enough that he could not say whether she was in Haddon Mirk or the city of Tear itself, yet he was confident she was one place or the other, with four other sisters he could trust. If Merana and Rafela could get what he wanted from the Sea Folk, they could from the Tairens, too. Rafela was Tairen, and that should help. No, the world could get along without him a little longer. It had to.

A tall man swathed in a long, damp cloak with the hood hiding his face came in from the street, and Rand's eyes followed him to the stairs at the back of the room. Starting up, the fellow threw back his cowl, revealing a fringe of gray hair and a pale pinched face. He could not be the one the serving man meant. No one with eyes would confuse him with Peral Torval.

Rand went back to studying the surface of his wine, his thoughts turning sour. Min and Nynaeve had refused to spend one more hour tramping the streets, as Min had put it, and he suspected Alivia was only going through the motions of showing the drawings. When she did even that. They were all three out of the city for the day, in the hills, he judged from what the bond told him of Min. She felt very excited about something. The three of them believed Kisman had fled after failing to kill Rand, and the other renegades had either gone with him or never come at all. They had all been trying to talk him into leaving for days, now. At least Lan had not given up.

Why can't the women be right? Lews Therin whispered fiercely in his head. *This city is worse than any prison. There is no* Source *here! Why would they stay? Why would* any *sane man stay? We could ride out, beyond the barrier, just for a day, a few hours. Light, just for a few hours!* The voice laughed uncontrollably, wildly. *Oh, Light, why do I have a madman in my head? Why? Why?*

Angrily, Rand forced Lews Therin to a muted hum, like a biteme buzzing nearby. He had thought about accompanying the women on their ride, just to feel the Source again, though only Min had shown much enthusiasm. Nynaeve and Alivia would not admit why they wanted to ride out when the morning sky had promised the rain that was pouring down outside now. This was not the first time they had gone. To feel the Source, he suspected. To drink in the One Power again, if only for a short time. Well, he could endure not being able to channel. He could endure the absence of the Source. He could! He had to, so he could kill the men who had tried to kill him.

That is not the reason! Lews Therin shouted, forcing past Rand's efforts to shut him up. *You are afraid! If the sickness takes you while you are trying to use the access* ter'angreal, *it could kill you, or worse! It could kill us all!* he moaned.

Wine slopped over Rand's wrist, soaking his coats-leeve, and he loosened his grip on the winecup. The thing had not been in true round to begin with, and he did not think he had bent it enough to be noticed. He was *not* afraid! He refused to let fear touch him. Light, he had to die, eventually. He had accepted that.

They tried to kill me, and I want them dead for it, he thought. *If it takes a little time, well, maybe the sickness will pass by then. Burn you, I have to* *live until the Last Battle.* In his head, Lews Therin laughed more wildly than before.

Another tall man swaggered in, through the door to the stableyard, almost at the foot of the stairs in the back of the room. Shaking rain from his cloak, he tossed back his hood and strode to the doorway of the Women's Room. With his sneering mouth and sharp nose, and a gaze that swept contemptuously over the people at the tables, he did look something like Torval, but with twenty years' more wear on his face and thirty pounds of fat on his frame. Peering through the yellow arch, he called out in a high, prissy voice that was thick with the accents of Illian. "Mistress Gallger, I do be leaving in the morning. Early, so I do expect no charges for tomorrow, mind!" Torval was a Taraboner.

Gathering his cloak, Rand left his winecup on the table and did not look back.

The noon sky was gray and cold, and if the rain had slackened, it was not by much, and driven by blustery lake winds, it was enough to have driven almost everyone from the streets. He held the cloak around him one-handed, as much to shelter, the drawings in his coat pocket as to keep the rest of him dry, and used the other to hold his hood against the gusts. The windblown raindrops hit his face like flecks of ice. A lone sedan chair passed him, the bearers' hair hanging sodden down their backs and their boots splashing in puddles on the paving stones. A few people trudged along the streets wrapped up in their cloaks. There were hours of daylight left, such as it was, but he walked by an inn called The Heart of the Plain without going in, and then by The Three Ladies of Maredo. He told himself it was the rain. This was no weather to be making his way from inn to inn. He knew he was lying, though.

A short stout woman coming down the street bundled in a dark cloak suddenly veered toward him. When she stopped in front of him and raised her head, he saw it was Verin.

"So you are here after all," she said. Raindrops fell on her upturned face, but she did not seem to notice. "Your innkeeper thought you intended to walk up to the Avharin, but she was not sure. I'm afraid Mistress Keene doesn't pay much attention to the comings and goings of men. And here I am with my shoes soaked through, and my stockings. I used to like walking in the rain when I was a girl, but it seems to have lost its charm somewhere along the way."

"Did Cadsuane send you?" he asked, trying to keep his voice from sounding hopeful. He had kept his room at The Counsel's Head after Alanna left so that Cadsuane could find him. He could hardly make her interested if she had to hunt for him inn by inn. Especially since she had shown no evidence that she would hunt.

"Oh, no; she would never do that." Verin sounded surprised at the thought. "I just thought you might want to hear the news. Cadsuane is out riding with the girls." She frowned thoughtfully, tilting her head. "Though I suppose I shouldn't call Alivia a girl. An intriguing woman. Much too old to become a novice, unfortunately; oh, yes, very unfortunate. She drinks in whatever she's taught. I believe she may know almost every way there is to destroy something with the Power, but she knows almost nothing else."

He drew her to the side of the street, where the deep overhanging eaves of a single-story stone house gave a little shelter from the rain, if not from the wind to any great extent. Cadsuane was with Min and the others? It might mean nothing. He had seen Aes Sedai fascinated with Nynaeve before, and according to Min, Alivia was even stronger. "What news, Verin?" he said quietly.

The round little Aes Sedai blinked as though she forgotten there was any news, then smiled suddenly. "Oh, yes. The Seanchan. They are in Illian. Not the city, not yet; no need to go pale. But they have crossed the border. They are building fortified camps along the coast and inland. I know little of military matters. I always skip over the battles when I read a history. But it does seem to me that whether they are in the city yet or not, that is where they are aiming. Your battles don't seem to have done much to slow them. That's why I don't read about the battles. They seldom seem to alter anything in the long run, only in the short. Are you well?"

He forced his eyes open. Verin peered up at him like a chubby sparrow. All that fighting, all those men dead, men he had killed, and it had changed nothing. Nothing!

She is wrong, Lews Therin murmured in his head. *Battles can alter history.* He did not sound pleased with it. *The trouble is, sometimes you cannot say how history will be changed until it is too late.*

"Verin, if I went to Cadsuane, would she talk with me? About something other than how my manners don't suit her? That's all she ever seems to care about."

“Oh, dear. I’m afraid Cadsuane is very much a traditionalist in some ways, Rand. I’ve never actually heard her call a man uppity, but . . .” She laid fingertips against her mouth in thought for a moment, then nodded, raindrops sliding down her face. “I believe she will listen to what you have to say, if you can manage to erase the bad impression you made on her. Or at least smudge it, as much as you can. Few sisters are impressed by titles or crowns, Rand, and Cadsuane less than any other I know. She cares much more about whether or not people are fools. If you can show her you aren’t a fool, she will listen.”

“Then tell her . . .” He drew a deep breath. Light, he wanted to strangle Kisman and Dashiva and all of them with his bare hands! “Tell her I’ll be leaving Far Madding tomorrow, and I hope she will come with me, as my advisor.” Lews Therin sighed with relief at the first part of that; if he had been more than a voice, Rand would have said he stiffened at the second part. “Tell her I accept her terms; I apologize for my behavior in Cairhien, and I will do my best to watch my manners in the future.” Saying that hardly grated at all. Well, a little, but unless Min was wrong, he needed Cadsuane, and Min was never wrong with her viewings.

“So you found what you are after here?” He frowned at her, and she smiled back and patted his arm. “If you had come to Far Madding thinking you could conquer the city by announcing who you are, you would have left as soon as you realized you cannot channel here. That leaves wanting to find something, or someone.”

“Maybe I found what I need,” he said curtly. Just not what he wanted.

“Then come to the Barsalla palace, on the Heights, this evening, Rand. Anyone can tell you how to find it. I really am sure she will be willing to listen to you.” Shifting her cloak, she seemed to notice the dampness of the wool for the first time. “Oh, my. I must go dry off. I suggest you do the same.” Half turned to leave, she paused and looked back over her shoulder at him. Her dark eyes were unblinking. Suddenly she did not sound muddled at all. “You could do far worse than Cadsuane for an advisor, Rand, but I doubt you could do better. If she accepts, and you truly are not a fool, you will listen to her advice.” She glided away through the rain looking nothing so much as a very stout swan.

Sometimes that woman frightens me, Lews Therin murmured, and Rand nodded. Cadsuane did not frighten him, but she made him wary. Any

Aes Sedai who had not sworn to him made him wary, except for Nynaeve. And he was not always certain of her, either.

The rain died away while he was walking the two miles back to The Counsel's Head, but the wind picked up, and the sign over the door, painted with the stern visage of a woman wearing the jeweled coronet of a First Counsel, swung on creaking hinges. The common room was smaller than that of The Golden Wheel, but the wall panels were carved and polished, the tables beneath the red ceiling beams not so crowded together. The doorway to the Women's Room was red, too, and carved like intricate lace, as were the lintels of the pale marble fireplaces. At The Counsel's Head, the serving men secured their long hair with polished silver clips. Only two of them were to be seen, standing near the kitchen door, but there were just three men at the tables, foreign merchants sitting far apart, each engrossed in his own wine. Competitors, perhaps, since now and then one or another would shift on his chair and frown at the other two. One, a graying man, wore a dark gray silk coat, and a lean fellow with a hard face had a red stone the size of a pigeon's egg in his ear. The Counsel's Head catered to the wealthier outland merchants, and there were not many of those in Far Madding at present.

The clock on a mantel in the Women's Room—a clock with a silver case, so Min said—rang the hour with small bells as he came into the common room, and before he had finished shaking out his cloak, Lan entered. As soon as the Warder met Rand's eye, he shook his head. Well, Rand had not really expected to find them at this point. Even for a *ta'veren*, that might be pushing the impossible.

Once they both had steaming cups of wine and were settled on a long red bench in front of one of the fireplaces, he told Lan what he had decided, and why. Part of why. The important part. "If I had my hands on them right this minute, I'd kill them and take my chances escaping, but killing them changes nothing. It doesn't change enough, anyway," he corrected, frowning into the flames. "I can wait one more day, hoping to find them tomorrow, for weeks. Months. Only, the world won't wait for me. I thought I'd be done with them by now, but events are already marching ahead of what I expected. Just the events I know about. Light, what's happening that I don't know about because I haven't heard some merchant nattering about it over his wine?"

“You can never know everything,” Lan said quietly, “and part of what you know is always wrong. Perhaps even the most important part. A portion of wisdom lies in knowing that. A portion of courage lies in going on anyway.”

Rand stretched his boots toward the fire. “Did Nynaeve tell you she and the others have been keeping company with Cadsuane? They’re on a ride with her right now.” On the way back from it, rather. He could feel Min drawing closer. She would not be much longer. She was still excited about something, a feeling that surged and fell as if she were trying to hold it down.

Lan smiled, a rare event without Nynaeve present. It did not reach his icy eyes, though. “She forbade me to reveal it to you, but since you already know . . . She and Min convinced Alivia that if they could catch Cadsuane’s interest themselves, they might be able to bring her closer to you. They found out where she is staying and asked her to teach them.” The smile faded, leaving a face carved from stone. “My wife has made a sacrifice for you, sheepherder,” he said quietly. “I hope you remember that. She will not say much, but I believe Cadsuane treats her as if she were still one of the Accepted, or maybe a novice. You know how hard that would be for Nynaeve to bear.”

“Cadsuane treats everyone as if they were novices,” Rand muttered. Uppity? Light, how was he to deal with the woman? And yet he had to find a way. They sat in silence, staring at the fire until steam began to rise from their out-thrust bootsoles.

The bond gave him warning, and he looked around just as Nynaeve appeared through the door to the stableyard, and then Min and Alivia, shaking the rain off their cloaks and adjusting their divided skirts and grimacing at damp spots as if they had expected to go riding in this weather without getting damp. As usual, Nynaeve was wearing her jeweled *ter’angreal,* belt and necklace, bracelets and rings, and the odd bracelet-and-rings *angreal.*

Still neatening herself, Min looked at Rand and smiled, not at all surprised to see him there, of course. Warmth flowed from her along the bond like a caress, though she was still trying to suppress her excitement. The other two women took longer to notice Lan and him, but when they did, they handed their cloaks to one of the serving men to be taken up to their rooms and joined the two men at the fireplace, holding out their hands to the warmth.

"Did you enjoy your ride in the rain with Cadsuane?" Rand asked, raising his cup to take a mouthful of the sweet wine. Min's head jerked toward him, and a flash of guilt stabbed along the bond, but the expression on her face was purest indignation. He almost choked in swallowing. How was her meeting Cadsuane behind his back *his* fault? "Stop glaring at Lan, Nynaeve," he said when he could talk. "Verin told me." Nynaeve shifted her dark glower to him, and he shook his head. He had heard women say that it, whatever "it" was, was always a man's fault, but sometimes women really seemed to believe it! "I apologize for whatever you've gone through with her on my behalf," he continued, "but you won't need to any longer. I asked her to be my advisor. Or rather, I asked Verin to tell her I want to ask. Tonight. With any luck, she will leave with us tomorrow." He expected exclamations of surprised relief, but that was not what he got.

"A remarkable woman, Cadsuane," Alivia said, patting her white-threaded golden hair into place. Her husky drawl sounded impressed. "A strict taskmistress, she can teach."

"Sometimes you can see the forest, woolhead, if you're led to it by the nose," Min said, folding her arms under her breasts. The bond carried approval, but he did not think it was for deciding to give up on finding the renegades. "Remember she wants an apology for Cairhien. Think of her as your aunt, the one who won't put up with any nonsense, and you will do all right with her."

"Cadsuane is not as bad as she seems." Nynaeve frowned at the other two women, and her hand twitched toward the braid drawn over her shoulder, though all they had done was look at her. "Well, she isn't! We will work out our . . . differences . . . in time. That's all it will take. A little time."

Rand exchanged glances with Lan, who shrugged slightly and took another drink. Rand exhaled slowly. Nynaeve had differences with Cadsuane she could work out with time, Min saw a strict aunt in the woman, and Alivia a strict teacher. The first would cause sparks to fly until it was worked out, if he knew Nynaeve, and the last two he did not want. But he was stuck with them. He took another swallow of wine himself.

The men at the tables were not near enough to overhear unless she spoke loudly, but Nynaeve lowered her voice and leaned toward Rand.

“Cadsuane showed me what two of my *ter’angreal* do,” she whispered, a glow of excitement in her eyes. “I’ll wager those ornaments she wears are *ter’angreal,* too. She recognized mine as soon as she touched them.” Smiling, Nynaeve thumbed one of the three rings on her right hand, the one with a pale green stone. “I knew this would detect someone channeling *saidar* as much as three miles away, if I set it, but she says it will detect *saidin,* too. She seemed to think it should tell me what direction they were, as well, but we could not see how.”

Turning from the fireplace, Alivia sniffed loudly, but she also lowered her voice to say, “And you were satisfied when she could not. I saw it on your face. How can you be satisfied with not knowing, with ignorance?”

“Just with *her* not knowing everything,” Nynaeve muttered, glowering over her shoulder at the taller woman, but an instant later her smile returned. “The most important thing, Rand, is this.” Her hands settled on the slim jeweled belt around her waist. “She called it a ‘Well.’ ” He gave a start as something brushed his face, and she giggled. Nynaeve actually giggled! “It *is* a well,” she laughed behind fingers pressed over her mouth, “or a barrel, anyway. And full of *saidar.* Not very much, but all I have to do to refill it is embrace *saidar* through it as if it was an *angreal.* Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Wonderful,” he said without much enthusiasm. So Cadsuane was walking around with *ter’angreal* in her hair, was she, and very likely one of these “wells” among them, or she would not have recognized it. Light, he thought no one had *ever* found two *ter’angreal* that did the same thing. Meeting her tonight would have been bad enough without knowing she would be able to channel, even here.

He was about to ask Min to come with him, when Mistress Keene bustled up, the white bun on top of her head drawn so tight it seemed she was trying to pull the skin off of her face. She cast a suspicious, disapproving look over Rand and Lan and pursed her lips as if considering what they had done wrong. He had seen her give the same look to the merchants who stayed at the inn. The men, anyway. If the accommodations had not been so comfortable and the food so good, she might not have had any custom.

“This was delivered for your husband this morning, Mistress Farshaw,” she said, handing Min a letter sealed with an untidy blob of red wax. The innkeeper’s pointed chin rose. “And a woman was inquiring after him.”

“Verin,” Rand said quickly, to forestall questions and get rid of the woman. Who knew to send him a letter here? Cadsuane? One of the Asha’man with her? Maybe one of the other sisters? He frowned at the folded square of paper in Min’s hand, impatient for the innkeeper to leave.

Min’s lips twitched, and she avoided looking at him so hard that he knew he caused the smile. Her amusement trickled through the bond. “Thank you, Mistress Keene. Verin is a friend.”

That sharp chin rose higher. “If you ask me, Mistress Farshaw, when you have a pretty husband, you need to watch your friends, too.”

Watching the woman march back to the red arch, Min’s eyes sparkled with the mirth that flowed along the bond, and her mouth struggled against laughing. Instead of handing the message to Rand, she broke the seal with her thumb and unfolded the letter herself, for all the world as if she were a native of this mad city.

She frowned slightly as she read, but a brief flare in the bond was the only warning he had. Crumpling the letter, she turned toward the fireplace; he bounded from the bench to snatch it from her hand just before she could toss it into the flames.

“Don’t be a fool,” she said, catching his wrist. She stared up at him, her large dark eyes deadly serious. All that came to him through the bond was a grim intensity. “Please don’t be a fool.”

“I promised Verin I’d try not,” he said, but Min did not smile.

He smoothed out the page on his chest. The writing was in a spidery hand he did not recognize, and there was no signature.

> *I know who you are, and I wish you well, but I also wish you gone from Far Madding. The Dragon Reborn leaves death and destruction where he steps. I now know why you are here, too. You killed Rochaid, and Kisman also is dead. Torval and Gedwyn have taken the top floor above a bootmaker named Zeram on Blue Carp Street, just above the Illian Gate. Kill them and go, and leave Far Madding in peace.*

The clock in the Women’s Room rang the hour. Hours of daylight remained before he had to meet Cadsuane.

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CHAPTER 33

Blue Carp Street

Min sat cross-legged on the bed, not as comfortable a position in a riding dress as it was in breeches, and rolled one of her knives across the backs of her fingers. It was an absolutely useless skill, Thom had told her, but sometimes it caught peoples' eyes and made them pay attention without need to do more. In the middle of their room Rand was holding his scabbarded sword up to study the cuts he had made in the peace-bond, and paid her no attention at all. The Dragon's heads on the backs of his hands glittered, metallic red and gold.

"You admit this has to be a trap," she growled at him. "Lan admits it. A half-blind goat in Seleisin has more brains than to walk into a trap! 'Only fools kiss hornets or bite fire!' " she quoted.

"A trap isn't really a trap if you know it's there," he said absently, bending the end of one of the severed wires a little to line up better with its mate. "If you know it's there, maybe you can see a way to walk in so it isn't a trap at all."

She threw the knife as hard as she could. It flew in front of his face to stick quivering in the door, and she gave a little jump recalling the last time she had done that. Well, she was not lying on top of him, now, and Cadsuane was not going to walk in, worse luck. Burn the man, that frozen knot of emotions in her head had not even quivered when the knife streaked by, not by so much as a flicker of surprise! "Even if you just see Gedwyn and Torval, you know the others will be there, hiding. Light, they could have fifty sell-swords waiting!"

"In Far Madding?" He stopped looking at the knife sticking in the door, but only to shake his head and go back to examining the peace-bond. "I doubt there are two mercenaries in the whole city, Min. Believe me, I don't intend to get myself killed here. Unless I can see how to spring the trap without getting caught, I won't go near it." There was no more fear in him than in a stone! And about as much sense! He did not intend to get killed, as if anyone ever intended to!

Scrambling off the bed, she opened the front of the bedside table long enough to take out the strap that Mistress Keene made sure was in every room, even if she did rent to outlanders. The thing was as long as her arm and as wide as her hand, with a wooden handle at one end and the other end split into three tails. "Maybe if I took this to you, it would clear your nose enough to smell what's in front of you!" she cried.

That was when Nynaeve and Lan and Alivia walked in. Nynaeve and Lan were cloaked, and Lan had his sword at his hip. Nynaeve had removed all of the jewelry except for one gemmed bracelet and the jeweled belt, the Well. Lan closed the door quietly. Nynaeve and Alivia stood staring at Min with the strap raised over her head.

Hastily she dropped the thing to the flowered carpet and kicked it underneath the bed with the side of her foot. "I don't understand why you're letting Lan do this, Nynaeve," she said as firmly as she could. At the moment, that was not particularly firm. Why did people *always* walk in at the worst time?

"A sister has to trust her Warder's judgment sometimes," Nynaeve said coolly, drawing on her gloves. Her face belonged on a porcelain doll for all the emotion it displayed. Oh, she was being Aes Sedai to her toenails.

He isn't your Warder, he's your husband, Min wanted to say, *and at least you can go along to look after him. I don't know if my Warder will* ever *marry me, and he threatened to tie me up if* I *tried to go with him!* Not that she had argued very hard on that point. If he was going to be a bull-goose fool, there were better ways to save him than trying to stick a knife in somebody.

"If we are going to do this, sheepherder," Lan said grimly, "best we be about it while there's still light to see." His blue eyes seemed colder than ever, and hard as polished stones. Nynaeve gave him a worried look that almost made Min feel sorry for her. Almost.

Rand belted his sword over his coat, then settled his cloak with the hood hanging down his back and turned toward her. His face was as hard as Lan's, his blue-gray eyes almost as cold, but in her head that frozen stone blazed with veins of fiery gold. She wanted to tangle her hands in the black-dyed hair that almost brushed his shoulders and kiss him no matter how many people were watching. Instead, she folded her arms across her chest and lifted her chin, making her disapproval clear. She did not intend for him to die here, either, and she was not about to let him start thinking she would give in just because he was stubborn.

He did not try to take her in his arms. Nodding as if he actually understood, he picked up his gloves from the small table by the door. "I'll be back as soon as I can, Min. Then we'll go to Cadsuane." Those golden veins continued to glow even after he left the room, followed by Lan.

Nynaeve paused, holding the door. "I will look after them both, Min. Alivia, please stay with her and see she doesn't do anything foolish." She was all cool, dignified Aes Sedai composure. Until she glanced into the hallway. "Burn them!" she yelped. "They're leaving!" And she ran, leaving the door standing half open.

Alivia closed it. "Shall we play games to pass the time, Min?" Crossing the carpet, she sat down on the stool in front of the fireplace and took a piece of string from her beltpouch. "Cat's cradle?"

"No, thank you, Alivia," Min said, almost shaking her head at the eagerness in the woman's voice. Rand might be complacent about what Alivia was going to do, but Min had set herself to get to know her, and what she had found was startling. On the surface, the former *damane* was a mature woman who appeared well into her middle years, stern and fierce and even intimidating. She certainly managed to intimidate Nynaeve. Nynaeve seldom said please to anyone except Alivia. But she had been made *damane* at fourteen, and her love of playing children's games was not the only oddity about her.

Min wished there was a clock in the room, though the only inn she could imagine with a clock in every room would be an inn for queens and kings. Pacing back and forth under Alivia's watchful gaze, she counted seconds in her head, trying to judge how long it would take Rand and the others to go beyond sight of the inn. When she decided enough time had passed, she took her cloak from the wardrobe.

Alivia darted to block the door, hands on her hips, and there was nothing childlike in her expression. "You aren't going after them," she drawled in a firm voice. "It would only cause trouble, now, and I can't allow that." With those blue eyes and that golden hair, her coloring was all wrong, but she reminded Min of her Aunt Rana, who always seemed to know when you had done something wrong and always saw to it that you did not want to do it again.

“Do you remember those talks we had about men, Alivia?” The other woman turned bright red, and Min hurriedly added, “I mean the one about how they don’t always think with their brains.” She had often heard women sneer that some other woman knew nothing about men, but she had never actually met one of those until she encountered Alivia. She really did know nothing! “Rand will get himself in more than enough trouble without me. *I* am going to find Cadsuane, and if you try to stop me . . .” She held up a clenched fist.

For a long moment, Alivia frowned at her. Finally she said, “Let me get my cloak, and I’ll go with you.”

There were no sedan chairs or liveried servants to be seen on Blue Carp Street, and carriages would never have fit along the narrow, twisting passage. Slate-roofed stone shops and houses lined the street, most of two stories, sometimes jammed one hard against the next and sometimes with a little alleyway between. The pavement was still slick from the rain, and the cold wind tried to carry Rand’s cloak away, but people were back out and bustling about. Three Street Guards, one with a catchpole on his shoulder, paused to glance at Rand’s sword, then went on their way. Not far along on the other side of the street, the building housing the shop of the bootmaker Zeram rose a full three stories, not counting the attic under the peaked roof.

A skinny man with very little chin dropped Rand’s coin into his purse and used a thin strip of wood to lift a brown-crusted meatpie from the charcoal grill on his barrow. His face was lined, his dark coat shabby, and his long graying hair was tied with a leather cord. His eyes flickered to Rand’s sword, and looked away quickly. “Why do you ask about the bootmaker? That’s the best mutton, there.” A toothy grin made his chin almost vanish, and his eyes suddenly looked very shifty. “First Counsel herself don’t eat better.”

There were meat pies called pasties when I was a boy, Lews Therin murmured. *We would buy them in the country and . . .*

Juggling the pie from hand to hand, the heat soaking through his gloves, Rand suppressed the voice. “I like to know what kind of man makes my boots. Is he suspicious of strangers, for instance? A man doesn’t do his best work if he’s suspicious of you.”

“Yes, Mistress,” the chinless fellow said, ducking his head to a stout gray-haired woman with a squint. Wrapping four meat pies in coarse paper, he handed her the package before taking her coins. “A pleasure, Mistress. The Light shine on you.” She tottered away without a word, clutching the wrapped pies under her cloak, and he grimaced sourly at her back before returning his attention to Rand. “Zeram never had a suspicious bone, and if he did, Milsa wouldn’t let him keep it. That’s his wife. Since the last of the children married, Milsa’s been renting out the top floor. Whenever she finds somebody don’t mind being locked in at night, anyway,” he laughed. “Milsa had stairs put in right up to the third floor, so it’s private, but she wouldn’t pay for having a new door cut as well, so the stairs come out in the shop, and she’s not trusting enough to leave that unlocked at night. You going to eat that pie, or just look at it?”

Taking a quick bite, Rand wiped hot juice from his chin and walked over to shelter beneath the eaves of a small cutler’s shop. Along the street others were snatching a quick meal from the food-peddlers, meat pies or fried fish or twisted paper cones heaped with roasted peas. Three or four men as tall as he, and two or three women as tall as most of the other men in the street, might have been Aiel. Maybe the chinless fellow was not as shifty as he seemed, or maybe it was just that Rand had eaten nothing since breakfast, but Rand found himself wanting to gobble the pie down and buy another. Instead, he made himself eat slowly. Zeram seemed to be doing a good business. A steady if not constant flow of men went into his shop, most carrying a pair of boots to be mended. Even if he let visitors go up without sending word ahead, he would be able to identify them later, and maybe so would two or three others.

If the renegades were renting the top floor from the bootmaker’s wife, being locked in at night would not inconvenience them much. To the south, an alleyway separated the bootmaker’s from a single-story house, a dangerous drop, but on the other side, a two-story building with a seamstress on the ground floor stood wall-to-wall with the bootmaker. Zeram’s building had no windows except at the front—in back was another alley, for taking away rubbish; Rand had already checked—but there had to be a way onto the roof so the slates could be repaired when necessary. From there it would be a short drop to the seamstress’s roof, with only three more to cross before another low building, a candlemaker’s shop, and an easy jump to the street, or into the alley behind the buildings. There would not be a great deal of risk in it at night, or even in daylight, if you stayed back from the street and were careful about the Guard’s patrols when you came down. The way Blue Carp Street bent, the nearest watchstands were out of sight.

Two men approaching the bootmaker’s made him turn away and pretend to peer through the bubbled panes of the cutler’s small shopwindow at a display of scissors and knives fastened to a board. One of the men was tall, though not as tall as the possible Aielmen. Their deep cowls hid their faces, but neither carried a pair of boots, and although they held their cloaks with both hands, the wind flipped the tails of them enough to show the bottoms of scabbarded swords. A gust pulled the shorter man’s hood from his head, and he snatched it back again, but not before the damage was done. Charl Gedwyn had taken to wearing his hair caught at the nape of his neck in a silver clip set with a large red stone, but he was still a hard-faced man with a challenging look about him. And Gedwyn’s presence made the other Torval. Rand was willing to wager on it. None of the others was as tall.

Waiting until the pair had gone into Zeram’s shop, Rand licked a few greasy crumbs from his gloves and went in search of Nynaeve and Lan. He found them before he was far enough along the curve of the street to lose sight of the bootmaker’s. The candlemaker’s he had marked as a way down from the rooftops stood a little behind him, with an alley at one side. Ahead, the narrow street twisted back the other way. No more than fifty paces farther on was a watchstand with a Street Guard at the top, but another building of three stories, a cabinetmaker’s that shared the alleyway with the candlemaker, blocked the rooftops beyond from his view.

“Half a dozen people recognized Torval and Gedwyn,” Lan said, “but none of the others.” He kept his voice low, though no one passing more than glanced at the three of them. A glimpse of two men wearing swords beneath their cloaks was enough to make everyone who noticed step a little faster.

“A butcher down the street says those two buy from him,” Nynaeve said, “but never more than enough for two.” She looked sideways at Lan as though hers was the real proof.

“I saw them,” Rand said. “They’re inside now. Nynaeve, can you lift Lan and me to that rooftop from the alley behind the building?”

Nynaeve frowned at Zeram’s building, rubbing the belt around her waist with one hand. “One at a time, I could,” she said finally. “But it would use more than half what the Well holds. I wouldn’t be able to lift you down again.”

“Up is enough,” Rand told her. “We will leave over the rooftops, and climb down right over beside the candlemaker.”

She protested, of course, as they walked back down the street toward the bootmaker’s shop. Nynaeve always fought anything she had not thought of herself. “I am just supposed to put you on the roof and wait?” she muttered, scowling left and right so hard that as many people shied away from her as from the men flanking her, swords or no swords. She thrust her hand out from under her cloak to show the bracelet with its pale red stones. “This can cover me with armor better than any steel. I’d hardly even feel a sword hitting me. I *thought* I would be going inside with you.”

“And do what?” Rand asked softly. “Hold them with the Power for us to kill? Kill them yourself?” She frowned at the paving stones in front of her feet.

Walking beyond Zeram’s shop, Rand paused in front of the low house and looked around as casually as he could. There were no Street Guards in sight, but when he prodded Nynaeve into the narrow alley, he moved quickly. He had not seen any Guards before following Rochaid, either.

“You are very quiet,” Lan said, following close behind.

She took three more quick steps before replying, without slowing or looking back. “I didn’t think, before,” she said quietly. “I was thinking of it as an adventure, confronting Darkfriends, renegade Asha’man, but you are going up there to execute them. You’ll kill them before they know you’re there if you can, won’t you?”

Rand glanced over, his shoulder at Lan, but the older man only shook his head, as confused as he was. Of course they would kill them without warning if they could. This was not a duel; it was the execution she had named it. At least, Rand hoped very much it would be.

The alley that ran behind the buildings was a little wider than the one to the street, the rocky soil rutted with the tracks of the rubbish barrows that were pushed along it mornings. Blank stone walls rose around them. No one wanted a window to watch the rubbish carts.

Nynaeve stood peering up at the back of Zeram’s building, then suddenly sighed. “Kill them in their sleep, if you can,” she said, very quietly for such fierce words.

Something unseen wrapped snugly around Rand’s chest beneath his arms, and slowly he rose into the air, floating higher until he drifted over the edge of the overhanging eave. The invisible harness vanished, and his boots dropped to the sloping roof, sliding a little on the damp gray slates. Crouching, he moved back on all fours. A few moments later, Lan floated up to land on the roof, too. The Warder crouched as well, and peered into the alley below.

“She is gone,” Lan said finally. Twisting around to face Rand, he pointed. “There is our way in.”

It was a trapdoor set among the slates high toward the peak, with metal flashing to keep water out of the attic that lifting it revealed. Rand lowered himself into a dusty space, dimly lit by the light through the trapdoor. For a moment, he hung by his hands, then let go, dropping the last few feet. Except for a chair with three legs and a chest with the lid thrown open, the long room was as empty as the chest. Apparently Zeram had stopped using the attic for storage when his wife began taking renters.

Stepping lightly, the two men searched the floorboards until they found another, larger trapdoor lying flat against the floor. Lan felt the brass hinges and whispered that they were dry but unrusted. Rand drew his sword and nodded, and Lan snatched the trapdoor open.

Rand was not sure what he would find when he sprang down through the opening, using a hand on the coping to control his fall. He landed lightly on the balls of his feet, in a room that seemed to have taken the attic’s place from the wardrobes and cabinets shoved against the walls, the wooden chests piled on one another and tables with chairs standing atop them. The last thing he expected, though, was two dead men sprawled on the floor as if they had been dragged into the storage room and flung down. The black swollen faces were unrecognizable, but the shorter of the pair wore a silver hairclip set with a large red stone.

Dropping soundlessly from the attic, Lan looked at the corpses and raised an eyebrow. That was all. Nothing ever surprised him.

“Fain is here,” Rand whispered. As if saying the name were a trigger, the twin wounds in his side began throbbing, the older like a disc of ice, the newer a bar of fire across it. “It was him sent the letter.”

Lan gestured toward the trapdoor with his sword, but Rand shook his head. He had wanted to kill the renegades with his own hands, yet now that Torval and Gedwyn were dead—and almost certainly Kisman, too; there was that swollen corpse mentioned by the merchant at The Golden Wheel—now, he realized he did not care who killed them so long as they were dead. If a stranger finished Dashiva, it would not matter. Fain was another matter. Fain had harrowed the Two Rivers with Trollocs, and given him a second wound that would not heal. If Fain was within reach, Rand would not allow him to escape. He motioned for Lan to do as they had in the attic, and set himself in front of the door with his sword in both hands. When the other man pulled the door open, he darted into a large lamplit room with a posted bed against the far wall and a fire crackling in a small fireplace.

Only the speed of his movement saved him. A flicker of movement caught the corner of his eye, something tugged at the cloak billowing behind him, and he spun awkwardly to fend off slashes of a curved dagger. Every movement was an effort of will. The wounds in his side no longer throbbed; they clawed at him, molten iron and the very soul of ice warring to rip him open. Lews Therin howled. It was all Rand could do to think, with the agony.

"I told you he's mine!" the bony man screamed, dancing away from Rand's cut. With his face contorted in fury, his big nose and ears that stuck out made him seem something contrived to frighten children, but his eyes held murder. Teeth bared in a snarl, he looked like a weasel wild with killing fury. A rabid weasel, ready to savage even a leopard. With that dagger, he could kill any number of leopards. "Mine!" Padan Fain shrieked, leaping back again as Lan rushed into the room. "Kill the ugly one!"

Only when Lan turned away from Fain did Rand realize someone else was in the room, a tall pale man who came almost eagerly to meet the Warder blade to blade. Toram Riatin's face was haggard, but he flowed into the dance of swords with the grace of the blademaster he was. Lan met him with an equal grace, a dance of steel and death.

Startled as Rand was to see the man who had tried to claim the throne of Cairhien in a worn coat in Far Madding, he kept his eyes on Fain and his sword toward the one time peddler. Darkfriend and worse, Moiraine had called him long ago. The blinding pain in Rand's side made him stumble as he advanced on Fain, ignoring the stamp of boots and the ring of steel on steel behind him as he ignored Lews Therin's groans in his head. Fain danced and darted, trying to get close enough to use the dagger that had made the never-healing slash in Rand's side, growling curses in a low voice as Rand’s blade forced him back. Abruptly he turned and ran, toward the back of the building.

The torment tearing at Rand faded to mere throbbing as Fain vanished from the room, but he followed cautiously even so. At the doorway, though, he saw that Fain was not trying to hide. The man stood waiting for him at the head of stairs leading down, the curved dagger in one hand. The large ruby capping the hilt glittered, catching the light of the lamps set on tables about the windowless room. As soon as Rand stepped into the room, fire and ice raged in his side till he could feel his heart shuddering. Staying upright was an effort of iron will. Taking a step forward made that effort seem pale, but he took that step, and the next.

“I want him to know who is killing him,” Fain whined petulantly. He was glaring straight at Rand, but he seemed to talking to himself. “I want him to know! But if he’s dead, then he will stop haunting my dreams. Yes. He will stop, then.” With a smile, he raised his free hand.

Torval and Gedwyn came up the stairs with their cloaks over their arms.

“I say we aren’t going near him until I know where the others are,” Gedwyn growled. “The M’Hael will kill us if . . .”

Without thought, Rand twisted his wrists in Cutting the Wind and immediately followed with Unfolding the Fan.

The illusion of dead men come back to life vanished, and Fain leaped back with a shriek, blood streaming down the side of his face. Suddenly he tilted his head as though listening, and a moment later, aiming a scream of wordless fury at Rand, he fled down the stairs.

Wondering, Rand moved to follow the descending thumps of Fain’s boots, but Lan caught his arm.

“The street out front is filling up with Guards, sheepherder.” A dark wetness stained the left side of Lan’s coat, but his sword was sheathed, proof of who had danced that dance the better. “Time we were on the roof, if we’re going.”

“A man can’t even walk down an alley with a sword in this city,” Rand muttered, sheathing his own blade. Lan did not laugh, but then, he seldom did except for Nynaeve. Shouts and screams rose up the stairwell from below. Maybe the Street Guards would capture Fain. Maybe he would hang for the corpses up here. It was not enough, but it would have to do. Rand was tired of what would have to do.

In the attic, Lan leapt to catch the coping of the trapdoor in the roof and pull himself up and out. Rand was not sure he could make that leap. The agony was gone with Fain, but his side felt as if it had been beaten with axehandles. As he was gathering himself to try, Lan put his head back through the trapdoor and extended a hand.

“They may not come up right away, sheepherder, but is there any point in waiting to see?”

Rand caught Lan’s hand and let himself be drawn up to where he could catch the coping and pull himself out onto the roof. Crouching low, they moved along the damp slates to the back of the building, then began the short climb to the peak. There might be Guards in the street, but there was still a chance to get away unseen, especially if they could signal Nynaeve to make a distraction.

Rand reached for the roof peak, and behind him, Lan’s boot slipped on the slates with a screech. Twisting around, Rand seized the other man’s wrist, but Lan’s weight pulled him down the slick gray slope. Vainly they scrabbled with their free hands for any hold, the edge of a slate, anything. Neither uttered a word. Lan’s legs went over the edge, and then the rest of him. Rand’s gloved fingers caught on something; he did not know what, and he did not care. His head and one shoulder stuck over the edge of the roof, and Lan was dangling from his grip above the ten-pace drop to the alley next to the low house.

“Let go,” Lan said quietly. He looked up at Rand, his eyes cold and hard, no expression on his face. “Let go.”

“When the sun turns green,” Rand told him. If he could just pull the other man up a little, enough to catch the eave . . .

Whatever his fingers had caught broke with a sharp snap, and the alley rushed up to meet them.

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CHAPTER 34

The Hummingbird’s Secret

Trying not to be too obvious about watching the alley beside the candlemaker’s, Nynaeve set the folded length of flat green braid back on the hawker’s tray and slipped her hand inside her cloak to help hold it shut against the wind. It was a finer cloak than any on the people walking by, but plain enough that no one more than glanced at her in passing. They would if they saw her belt, though. Women who wore jewels did not frequent Blue Carp Street, or buy from street peddlers. After standing there for her to finger every last bit of braid on the tray, the lean woman grimaced, but Nynaeve had already bought three pieces of braid, two lengths of ribbon and a packet of pins from hawkers, just for a reason to loiter. Pins were always useful, but she did hot know what she was going to do with the rest.

Suddenly she heard a commotion down the street, in the direction of the watchstand, the racket of Street Guards’ rattles loud and growing louder. The Guardsman scrambled down from his perch. Passersby near the watchstand stared down the crossing street and further up Blue Carp Street, then hurriedly pressed themselves against the sides of the street as running Guardsmen appeared, swinging their wooden rattles overhead. Not a patrol of two or three, but a flood of armored men pounding down Blue Carp Street, and more joining the tide from the other street. People slow to get out of their way were shoved aside, and one man went down under their boots. They did not slow a step as they trampled him.

The braid-seller spilled half her tray scrambling to the side of the street, and Nynaeve was just as quick to squeeze herself against the stone housefront alongside the gaping woman. Filling the street, catchpoles and quarterstaffs jutting up like pikes, the mass of Guardsmen bumped her with shoulders, scraping her along the wall. The braid-seller yelled as her tray was ripped away and vanished, but the Guards were all staring ahead.

When the last man ran past, Nynaeve was a good ten paces farther down the street than she had been. The braid-seller shouted angrily and shook her fists at the men's backs. Indignantly pulling her twisted cloak into some proper order, Nynaeve was of a mind to do more than shout. She was half of a mind to . . .

Abruptly her breath froze in her throat. The Street Guards had stopped in a mass, perhaps a hundred men shouting to one another as if they suddenly were uncertain what to do next. They were stopped in front of the bootmaker's shop. Oh, Light, Lan. And Rand, too, always Rand, but first and foremost always the heart of her heart, Lan.

She made herself breathe. A hundred men. She touched the jeweled belt, the Well, around her waist. Less than half the *saidar* she had stored in it remained, but it might be enough. It would have to be enough, though she did not know for what exactly, yet. Tugging the cowl of her cloak up, she started toward the men in front of the bootmaker's. None was looking her way. She could . . .

Hands seized her, dragging her backward and spinning her around to face the other direction.

Cadsuane had one of her arms, she realized, and Alivia the other, the pair of them hurrying her along the street. Away from the bootmaker's. Walking beside Alivia, Min kept casting worried looks over her shoulder. Abruptly she flinched. "He . . . I think he fell," she whispered. "I think he's unconscious, but he's hurt, I don't know how badly."

"We will do him no good here, or ourselves," Cadsuane said calmly. The golden ornaments dangling from the front of her bun swung inside the hood of her cloak as she swivelled her head, her eyes searching through the people ahead of them. She held the deep cowl against the wind with her free hand, letting her cloak flap behind her. "I want to be away from here before one of those boys thinks of asking women to show their faces. Any Aes Sedai found near Blue Carp Street this afternoon will have questions to answer because of this child."

"Let me go!" Nynaeve snapped, pulling against them. Lan. If Rand had been knocked unconscious, what of Lan? "I have to go back and help them!" The two women dragged her along with hands like iron. Everyone they passed was peering toward the bootmaker's shop.

"You have done quite enough already, you fool girl." Cadsuane's voice was cold iron. "I *told* you about Far Madding's watchdogs. Phaw! You've put a panic in the Counsels with your channeling where *no* one can channel. If the Guards have them, it is because of you."

"I thought *saidar* wouldn't matter," Nynaeve said weakly. "It was only a little, and not for long. I . . . I thought maybe they wouldn't even notice."

Cadsuane gave her a disgusted glance. "This way, Alivia," she said, pulling Nynaeve around the corner by the abandoned watchstand. Small knots of excited people dotted the street, jabbering. A man gestured vigorously as if wielding a catchpole. A woman pointed to the empty watchstand, shaking her head in wonder.

"Say something, Min," Nynaeve pleaded. "We can't just leave them." She did not even think of addressing Alivia, who wore a face to make Cadsuane appear soft.

"Don't expect sympathy from me." Min's low voice was almost as chill as Cadsuane's. When she looked at Nynaeve, it was a sidelong glare before snapping her eyes back to the street ahead. "I begged you to help me stop them, but you had to be as wool-headed as they were. Now we have to depend on Cadsuane."

Nynaeve sniffed. "What can she do? Do I need to remind you that Lan and Rand are behind us, and getting farther behind by the minute?"

"The boy isn't the only one who needs lessons in manners," Cadsuane muttered. "He hasn't apologized to me, yet, but he told Verin he would, and I suppose I can accept that for the moment. Phaw! That boy puts me to more trouble than any ten I ever met before. I will do what I can, girl, which is a sight more than you could do trying to batter your way through the Street Guards. From here on, you will exactly as I say, or I will have Alivia sit on you!" Alivia nodded. So did Min!

Nynaeve grimaced. The woman was *supposed* to defer to her! Still, a guest of the First Counsel *could* do more than plain Nynaeve al'Meara, even if she donned her Great Serpent ring. For Lan, she could put up with Cadsuane.

But when she asked what Cadsuane planned to do to free the men, the only answer the woman would give was "Much more than I want to, girl, if I can do anything at all. But I made the boy promises, and I keep my promises. I hope he remembers that." Delivered in a voice like ice, it was not a reply to inspire confidence.

* * *

Rand woke in darkness and pain, lying on his back. His gloves were gone, and he could feel a rough pallet beneath him. They had taken his boots, too. His gloves were gone. They knew who he was. Carefully, he sat up. His face felt bruised and every muscle in his body hurt as if he had been beaten, but nothing seemed to be broken.

Standing slowly, he felt his way along the stone wall beside the pallet, reaching a corner almost immediately, and then a door covered with rough iron straps. In the darkness his fingers traced a small flap, but he could not push it open. No hint of light seeped in around its edges. Inside his head, Lews Therin began to pant. Rand moved on, feeling his way, the floorstones cold beneath his bare feet. The next corner came almost immediately, and then a third, where his toes struck something that rattled on the stone floor. Keeping one hand on the wall, he bent and found a wooden bucket. He left it there and made himself complete the circuit, all the way back to the iron door. All the way. He was inside a black box three paces long and just over two paces wide. Raising one hand, he found the stone ceiling less than a foot above his head.

Closed in, Lews Therin panted hoarsely. *It's the box again. When those women put us in the box. We have to get out!* he howled. *We have to get out!*

Ignoring the screaming voice in his head, Rand backed away from the door until he thought he was in the center of the cell, then lowered himself to sit cross-legged on the floor. He was as far from the walls as he could put himself, and in the dark he tried to imagine them farther away, but it seemed that if he reached out, he would not have to straighten his arm fully to touch stone. He could feel himself trembling, as if it were someone else's body shaking uncontrollably. The walls seemed just beside him, the ceiling right over his head. He had to fight this, or he would be as mad as Lews Therin by the time anyone came to let him out. They would have to let him out eventually, if only to hand him over to whoever Elaida sent. How many months for a message to reach Tar Valon and Elaida's emissaries to return? If there were sisters loyal to Elaida closer than Tar Valon, it might happen sooner. Horror added to his shudders as he realized that he was hoping those sisters were closer, were in the city already, so they could take him out of this box.

"I will not surrender!" he shouted. "I will be as hard as I need to be!" In that confined space, his voice boomed like thunder.

Moiraine had died because he was not hard enough to do what had to be done. Her name always headed the list engraved on his brain, the women who had died because of him. Moiraine Damodred. Every name on that list brought anguish that made him forget the pains of his body, forget the stone walls just beyond his fingertips. Colavaere Saighan, who died because he had stripped her of everything she valued. Liah, Maiden of the Spear, of the Cosaida Chareen, who died at his own hands because she followed him to Shadar Logoth. Jendhilin, a Maiden of the Cold Peak Miagoma who died because she wanted the honor of guarding his door. He had to be hard! One by one he summoned up the names on that long list, patiently forging his soul in the fires of pain.

Preparation took longer than Cadsuane had hoped, largely because she had to impress on various people that a grand rescue in the best traditions of gleemen's tales was out of the question, so it was night before she found herself walking along the lamplit corridors of the Hall of the Counsels. Walking sedately, not hurrying. Hurry, and people assumed that you were anxious, that they had the upper hand. If ever in her life she had needed to keep the upper hand from the start, it was tonight.

The corridors should have been empty at this hour, but today's events had changed the normal course of things. Blue-coated clerks were scurrying everywhere, sometimes pausing to gape at her companions. Quite possibly, they had never seen four Aes Sedai at once—she was not willing to allow Nynaeve that title until she took the Three Oaths—and today's commotion would have added to their confusion at the sight. The three men bringing up the rear earned almost as many stares, though. The clerks might not know the meaning of their black coats or the pins on their high collars, but it was very unlikely any of those clerks had ever seen three men wearing swords in these hallways. In any case, with a little luck, no one would go running to inform Aleis who was coming to break in on the Counsels sitting in closed session. It was a pity she could not have brought the men by themselves, but even Daigian had displayed backbone at the suggestion. A great pity that all of her companions were not displaying the composure showed by Merise and the other two sisters.

"This will never work," Nynaeve grumbled, for perhaps the tenth time since leaving the Heights. "We should strike hard from the start!"

“We should have moved faster,” Min muttered darkly. “I can feel him changing. If he was a stone before, he’s iron, now! Light, what are they doing to him?” Along only because she was a link to the boy, she had been unceasing with her reports, each bleaker than the last. Cadsuane had not told her what the cells were like, not when the girl had broken down just telling her what the sisters who kidnapped the boy had done to him.

Cadsuane sighed. A ragtag army she had assembled, but even a makeshift army needed discipline. Especially with the battle just ahead. It would have been worse had she not forced the Sea Folk women to remain behind. “I can do this without either of you, if need be,” she said firmly. “No; don’t say anything, Nynaeve. Merise or Corele can wear that belt as well as you. So if you children do not stop whining, I will have Alivia take you back to the Heights and give you something to whine about.” That was the only reason she had brought the strange wilder. Alivia had a tendency to become very mild-mannered around those she could not stare down, but she stared very fiercely at those two chattering magpies.

Their heads swiveled toward the golden-haired woman as one, and the magpies fell blessedly silent. Silent, yet hardly accepting. Min could grind her teeth all she wanted, but Nynaeve’s sullen glower irritated Cadsuane. The girl had good material in her, but her training had been cut far too short. Her ability with Healing was little short of miraculous, her ability with almost anything else dismal. And she had not been put through the lessons that what must be endured, could be endured. In truth, Cadsuane sympathized with her. Somewhat. It was a lesson not everyone could learn in the Tower. She herself, full of pride in her new shawl and her own strength, had been taught by a near toothless wilder at a farm in the heart of the Black Hills. Oh, it was a very ragtag little army she had gathered to try standing Far Madding on its head.

Clerks and messengers half-filled the columned anteroom to the Counsels’ Chamber, but they were, after all, only clerks and messengers. The clerks hesitated in officious puzzlement, each waiting for another to speak first, but the red-coated messengers, who knew it was not their place to say anything, backed across the blue floortiles to the sides of the room, and the clerks parted in front of her, none quite daring to be the first to open his mouth. Even so, she heard a collective gasp when she opened one of the tall doors carved with the Hand and Sword.

The Counsels’ Chamber was not large. Four mirrored stand-lamps sufficed to light it, and a large Tairen carpet in red and blue and gold almost covered the floor tiles. A wide marble fireplace on one side of the room made a fair job of warming the air, though the glassed doors leading to the colonnade outside rattled in the night wind, loud enough to drown the ticking of the tall, gilded Illianer clock on the mantel. Thirteen carved and gilded chairs, very nearly thrones, made an arc facing the door, all occupied by worried-looking women.

Aleis, at the head of the arc, frowned when she saw Cadsuane lead her little parade into the chamber. “This session is closed, Aes Sedai,” she said, at once formal and cold. “We may ask you to speak to us later, but—”

“You know who you have in the cells,” Cadsuane cut in.

It was not a question, but Aleis tried to bluff her way past. “A number of men, I believe. Public drunkards, various foreigners arrested for fighting or stealing, a man from the Borderlands taken just today who may have murdered three men. I do not keep a personal record of arrests, Cadsuane Sedai.” Nynaeve drew a deep breath at mention of a man taken for murder, and her eyes glittered dangerously, but at the least the child had sense enough to keep her mouth shut.

“So you will try to conceal that you hold the Dragon Reborn,” Cadsuane said quietly. She had hoped—hoped fervently!—that Verin’s spadework would make them back away from this. Perhaps it could still be done simply, though. “I can take him off your hands. I have faced more than twenty men who could channel, over the years. He holds no fears for me.”

“We do thank you for the offer,” Aleis replied smoothly, “but we prefer to communicate with Tar Valon, first.” To negotiate his price, she meant. Well, what had to be, had to be. “Do you mind telling us how you learned—”

Cadsuane broke in again. “Perhaps I should have mentioned earlier, these men behind me are Asha’man.”

The three stepped forward then, as they had been instructed, and she had to admit they gave a dangerous appearance. Grizzled Damer looked a graying bear with sore teeth, pretty Jahar seemed a dark, sleek leopard, and Eben’s unblinking gaze was particularly ominous coming from that youthful face. They certainly had their effect on the Counsels. Some simply shifted in their chairs as if to draw back, but Cyprien let her mouth fall open, unfortunate with her protruding teeth. Sybaine, her hair as gray as

Cadsuane's, sagged back in her chair and began fanning herself with a slender hand, while Cumere's mouth twisted as if she might vomit.

Aleis was made of sterner stuff, though she pressed both hands tight against her midriff. "I told you once that Asha'man were free to visit so long as they obeyed the law. We have no fear of Asha'man, Cadsuane, though I must say I am surprised to see you in their company. Particularly in view of the offer you have just made."

So, she was plain Cadsuane now, was she? Still, she regretted the necessity to break Aleis. She led Far Madding well, but she might never recover from tonight. "Are you forgetting what else happened today, Aleis? Someone channeled inside the city." Again Counsels shifted, and worried frowns creased more than one forehead.

"An aberration." The coolness was gone from Aleis' voice, replaced by anger, and maybe a touch of fear. Her eyes shone darkly. "Perhaps the guardians were in error. No one who was questioned saw anything to suggest—"

"Even what we think is perfect can have flaws, Aleis." Cadsuane drew on her own Well, taking in *saidar* in a measured amount. She had practice; the little golden hummingbird could not hold near so much as Nynaeve's belt. "Flaws can pass unnoticed for centuries before they are found." The flow of Air she wove was just enough to lift the gem-encrusted coronet from Aleis' head and set it on the carpet in front of the woman's feet. "Once they are found, however, it seems that anyone who looks can find them."

Thirteen sets of shocked eyes stared at the coronet. One and all, the Counsels seemed frozen, barely breathing.

"Not so much a flaw as a barn door, seems to me," Damer announced. "I think it's prettier on your head."

The glow of the Power suddenly shone around Nynaeve, and the coronet flew toward Aleis, slowing at the last instant so that it settled above her bloodless face rather than cracking her head. The light of *saidar* did not vanish from the girl, though. Well, let her drain her Well.

"Will . . . ?" Aleis swallowed, but when she went on, her voice still cracked. "Will it be sufficient if we release him to you?" Whether she meant Cadsuane or the Asha'man was unclear, perhaps even to her.

"I think that it will," Cadsuane said calmly, and Aleis sagged like a stringless puppet. Shocked as they were by the display of channeling, questioning looks passed between the other Counsels. Eyes darted toward

Aleis, faces firmed, nods were exchanged. Cadsuane drew a deep breath. She had promised the boy that whatever she did would be for his good, not the good of the Tower or anyone else’s, and now she had broken a good woman for his good. “I am very sorry, Aleis,” she said. *You are building up a large account already, boy,* she thought.

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CHAPTER 35

With the Choedan Kal

Rand rode across the wide stone bridge leading north from the Caemlyn Gate without looking back. The sun was a pale golden ball just risen above the horizon in a cloudless sky, but the air was cold enough to mist his breath, and the lake winds made his cloak fly about. He did not feel the chill, though, except as something distant and not really connected to him. He was colder than any winter could be. The guards who had come to take him out of the cell the night before had been surprised to find him wearing a small smile. He wore it still, a slight curve of his mouth. Nynaeve had Healed his bruises using the last of the *saidar* in her belt, yet the helmeted officer who came into the road at the foot of the bridge, a stocky man with blunt features, gave a start at the sight of him, as though his face was still swollen and purple.

Cadsuane leaned from her saddle to speak a few quiet words and hand the officer a folded paper. He frowned at her and began to read, then jerked his head up to stare in amazement at the men and women waiting patiently on their horses behind her. Starting again at the top of the page, he read moving his lips silently, as if he wanted to be sure of every word, and small wonder. Signed and sealed by all thirteen Counsels, the order said that there was to be no checking of peace-bonds, no search of the packhorses. This party's names were to be blotted out completely in the record books, and the order itself burned. They had never come to Far Madding. No Aes Sedai, no Atha'an Miere, none of them.

"It's over, Rand," Min said gently, moving her sturdy brown mare nearer to his gray gelding, though she already stayed as close to him as Nynaeve did to Lan. Lan's bruises, and a broken arm, had been Healed before she had attended to Rand. Min's face reflected the worry flowing through the bond. Letting her cloak go on the wind, she patted his arm. "You don't have to think about it anymore."

“I’m grateful to Far Madding, Min.” His voice was emotionless, distant, as it had been when he seized *saidin* in the early days. He would have warmed it for her, but that seemed beyond him. “I really did find what I needed here.” If a sword had memory, it might be grateful to the forge fire, but never fond of it. When they were waved through, he cantered the gray up the hard-packed dirt road and into the hills, and he did not so much as glance back until trees hid any sight of the city.

The road climbed and wound through forested winter hills, where only pine and leatherleaf showed green and most branches were stark and gray, and suddenly the Source was there again, seemingly just beyond the corner of his eye. It pulsed and beckoned and filled him with hunger like starvation. Without thought he reached out and filled the emptiness in himself with *saidin,* an avalanche of fire, a storm of ice, all larded with the filthy taint that made the larger wound in his side pulse. He swayed in the saddle as his head spun and his stomach clenched even as he fought to ride the avalanche that tried to sear his mind, to soar on the storm that tried to scour his soul. There was no forgiveness or pity in the male half of the Power. A man fought it, or died. He could feel the three Asha’man behind him filling themselves too, drinking at *saidin* like men just out of the Waste who had found water. In his head, Lews Therin sighed with relief.

Min reined her mount so close to him that their legs touched. “Are you all right?” she said worriedly. “You look ill.”

“I’m as well as rainwater,” he told her, and the lie was not just about his belly. He was steel, and to his surprise, still not hard enough. He had intended sending her to Caemlyn, with Alivia to protect her. If the golden-haired woman was going to help him die, he had to be able to trust her. He had planned his words, but looking into Min’s dark eyes, he was not hard enough to make his tongue form them. Turning the gray in among the bare-branched trees, he spoke to Cadsuane over his shoulder. “This is the place.”

She followed him, of course. They all did. Harine had barely let him out of her sight long enough to sleep a few hours last night. He would have left her behind, but on that subject, Cadsuane had given him her first advice. *You made a bargain with them, boy, the same as signing a treaty. Or giving your word. Keep it, or tell them it’s broken. Otherwise, you are just a thief.* Blunt, to the point, and in tones that left no doubt as to her opinion of thieves. He had never promised to follow her counsel, but she was too reluctant about being his advisor at all for him to risk driving her away this soon, so the Wavemistress and the other two Sea Folk rode with Alivia, ahead of Verin and the other five Aes Sedai who had sworn to him, and the four who were Cadsuane's companions. She would as soon leave him as them, he was certain, maybe sooner.

To other eyes than his, nothing distinguished the place where he had dug before going into Far Madding. To his eyes, a thin shaft that shone like a lantern rose through the damp mulch on the forest floor. Even another man who could channel could have walked through that shaft without knowing it was there. He did not bother to dismount. Using flows of Air, he ripped aside the thick layer of rotting leaves and twigs and shoveled away damp earth until he uncovered a long, narrow bundle tied with leather cords. Clods of dirt clung to the wrapping-cloth as he floated *Callandor* to his hand. He had not dared carry that to Far Madding. Without a scabbard, he would have had to leave it at the bridge fortress, a dangerous flag waiting to announce his presence. It was unlikely there was another sword made of crystal to be found in the world, and too many people knew that the Dragon Reborn had one. And leaving it here, he had still ended up in a dark, cramped stone box under the . . . No. That was done and over. Over. Lews Therin panted in the shadows of his mind.

Thrusting *Callandor* under his saddle-girth, he reined the gray around to face the others. The horses held their tails tight against the wind, but now and then one stamped a hoof or tossed its head, impatient to be moving again after so long in the stable. The leather scrip that hung from Nynaeve's shoulder looked incongruous with all the be-gemmed *ter'angreal* she wore. Now that the time was near, she was stroking the bulging scrip, apparently without realizing what she was doing. She was trying to hide her fear, but her chin trembled. Cadsuane was looking at him impassively. Her cowl had fallen down her back, and sometimes a gust stronger than most swayed the golden fish and birds, stars and moons, dangling from her bun.

"I am going to remove the taint from the male half of the Source," he announced.

The three Asha'man, now in plain dark coats and cloaks like the other Warders, exchanged excited glances, but a ripple passed through the Aes Sedai. Nesune let out a gasp that seemed too large for the slender, bird-like sister.

Cadsuane's expression never altered. "With that?" she said, raising a skeptical eyebrow at the bundle beneath his leg.

“With the Choedan Kal,” he replied. That name was another gift from Lews Therin, resting in Rand’s head as if it had always been there. “You know them as immense statues, *sa’angreal,* one buried in Cairhien, the other on Tremalking.” Harine’s head jerked, making the golden medallions on her nose chain click together, at mention of the Sea Folk island. “They’re too big to be moved with any ease, but I have a pair of *ter’angreal* called access keys. Using those, the Choedan Kal can be tapped from anywhere in the world.”

Dangerous, Lews Therin moaned. *Madness.* Rand ignored him. For the moment, only Cadsuane mattered.

Her bay flicked one black ear, and at that he seemed more excitable than his rider. “One of those *sa’angreal* is made for a woman,” she said coolly. “Who do you propose to use that? Or do these keys allow you to draw on both yourself?”

“Nynaeve will link with me.” He trusted Nynaeve, to link with, but no one else. She was Aes Sedai, but she had been the Wisdom of Emond’s Field; he had to trust her. She smiled at him and nodded firmly, her chin no longer trembling. “Don’t try to stop me, Cadsuane.” She said nothing, only studied him, dark eyes weighing and measuring.

“Forgive me, Cadsuane,” Kumira broke into the silence, heeling her dapple forward. “Young man, have you considered the possibility of failure? Have you considered the *consequences* of failure?”

“I must ask the same question,” Nesune said sharply. She sat very straight in her saddle, and her dark eyes met Rand’s gaze levelly. “By everything I have read, the attempt to use those *sa’angreal* may result in disaster. Together, they might be strong enough to crack the world like an egg.”

Like an egg! Lews Therin agreed. *They were never tested, never tried. This is insane!* he shrieked. *You are mad! Mad!*

“The last I heard,” Rand told the sisters, “one Asha’man in fifty had gone mad and had to be put down like a rabid dog. More will have, by now. There is a risk to doing this, but it’s all maybe and might. If I don’t try, the certainty is that more and more men will go mad, maybe scores, maybe all of us, and sooner or later it will be too many to be killed easily. Will you enjoy waiting for the Last Battle with a hundred rabid Asha’man wandering about, or two hundred, or five? And maybe me one of them? How long will the world survive that?” He spoke to the two Browns, but it was Cadsuane who he watched. Her almost black eyes never left him. He needed to keep her with him, but if she tried to talk him out of it, he would reject her advice no matter the consequences. If she tried to stop him . . . ? *Saidin* raged inside him.

“Will you do the deed here?” she asked.

“In Shadar Logoth,” he told her, and she nodded.

“A fitting place,” she said, “if we are to risk destroying the world.”

Lews Therin screamed, a dwindling howl that echoed inside Rand’s skull as the voice fled into the dark depths. There was nowhere to hide, though. No safe place.

The gateway he wove did not open into the ruined city of Shadar Logoth itself, but to a thinly wooded, uneven hilltop a few miles to the north, where the horse hooves rang on sparse, stony soil that had stunted the leafless trees, and ragged patches of snow covered the ground. As Rand dismounted, his eye was caught by distant glimpses of the place once called Aridhol showing above the trees, towers that ended abruptly in jagged stone, and white onion-shaped domes that could have sheltered a village had they been whole. He did not look for long. Despite the clear morning sky, those pale domes failed to gleam as they should, as if something cast a shadow over the sprawling ruin. Even at this distance from the city, the second never-healing wound in his side had begun to throb faintly. The slash given by Padan Fain’s dagger, the dagger that had come from Shadar Logoth, did not beat together with the pulsing of the larger wound it cut across, but rather against it, alternating.

Cadsuane took charge, issuing brisk commands, as might have been expected. One way or another, Aes Sedai always did, given half a chance, and Rand did not try to stop her. Lan and Nethan and Bassane rode down into the forest to scout, and the other Warders hurried to fasten the horses to low branches out of the way. Min stood up in her stirrups and pulled Rand’s head to where she could kiss his eyes. Without speaking a word, she went to join the men with the horses. The bond surged with her love for him, with confidence and a trust so complete that he stared after her in amazement.

Eben came to take Rand’s mount, grinning from ear to ear. Together with his nose, those ears still seemed to make up half his face, but he was a slender youth rather than gawky, now. “It will be wonderful, channeling without the taint, my Lord Dragon,” he said excitedly. Rand thought Eben might be as much as seventeen, but he sounded younger. “That always makes me want to empty my belly, if I think on it.” He trotted away with the gray, still grinning.

The Power roared in Rand, and the filth tarnishing the pure life of *saidin* seeped into him, rank runnels that would bring madness and death.

Cadsuane gathered the Aes Sedai around her, and Alivia and the Sea Folk Windfinder, too. Harine grumbled loudly about being excluded, until a finger pointed by Cadsuane sent her stalking across the hilltop. Moad, in his odd blue quilted coat, sat Harine down on an outcrop, and talked soothingly, though sometimes his eyes went to the surrounding trees, and then he slid a hand along the long ivory hilt of his sword. Jahar appeared from the direction of the horses, stripping the Cloth wrappings from *Callandor.* The crystal sword, with its long clear hilt and slightly curving blade, sparkled in the pale sunlight. At an imperious gesture from Merise, he quickened his step to join her. Damer was in that group, too, and Eben. Cadsuane had not asked to use *Callandor.* That could pass. For now, it could.

“That woman could try a stone’s patience!” Nynaeve muttered, striding up to Rand. With one hand, she held the scrip’s strap firmly on her shoulder, while the other was just as firmly around the thick braid hanging from her cowl. “To the Pit of Doom with her, that’s what I say! Are you sure Min couldn’t be wrong just this once? Well, I suppose not. But still . . . ! Will you stop smiling like that? You’d make a cat nervous!”

“We might as well begin,” he told her, and she blinked.

“Shouldn’t we wait on Cadsuane?” No one would suspect she had been complaining about the Aes Sedai a moment earlier. If anything, she sounded anxious not to upset her.

“She will do what she will do, Nynaeve. With your help, I will do what I must.”

Still she hesitated, clutching the scrip to her chest and casting worried glances in the direction of the women gathered around Cadsuane. Alivia left that group and hurried toward them across the uneven ground holding her cloak closed with both hands.

“Cadsuane says I must have the *ter’angreal,* Nynaeve,” she said in that soft Seanchan drawl. “Now don’t argue; there isn’t time. Besides, they are no good to you if you’re going to be linked to him.”

This time the look Nynaeve directed toward the women around Cadsuane was near murderous, but she stripped off rings and bracelets, muttering under her breath, and handed the jeweled belt and necklace to

Alivia, as well. After a moment, she sighed and unfastened the peculiar bracelet connected to finger rings by flat chains. “You might as well take this, too. I don’t suppose I need an *angreal* if I’m going to be using the most powerful *sa’angreal* ever made. But I want them all back, understand,” she finished fiercely.

“I am not a thief,” the hawk-eyed woman told her primly, slipping the four rings over the fingers of her left hand. Strangely, the *angreal* that fitted Nynaeve so well, fit on her longer hand just as easily. The two women both stared at the thing.

It came to him then that neither of them acknowledged any possibility that he might fail here. He wished he could be as certain. What had to be done, had to be done, though.

“Are you going to wait all day, Rand?” Nynaeve asked when Alivia set off back to Cadsuane, even more quickly than she had come. Smoothing her cloak under her, Nynaeve sat down on an upthrust gray stone the size of a small bench, pulled the scrip onto her lap, and flipped back the leather flap.

Rand folded himself to the ground cross-legged in front of her as she produced the two access keys, smooth white statues a foot tall, each holding a clear sphere in one upraised hand. The figure of a bearded man in robes, she handed to him. That of a robed woman, she set on the ground at her feet. The faces on those figures were serene and strong and wise with years.

“You must put yourself right on the edge of embracing the Source,” she told him, smoothing skirts that did not need smoothing. “Then I can link with you.”

With a sigh, Rand put down the bearded man and released *saidin.* Raging fire and cold vanished, and the grease-slick vileness of the taint, and with them, life seemed to dwindle, too, turning the world pale and drab. He placed his hands on the ground beside him against the sickness that would strike when he took hold of the Source again, but a different dizziness suddenly spun his head. For a heartbeat, a vague face filled his eyes, blotting out Nynaeve, a man’s face, almost recognizable. Light, if that ever happened while he was actually grabbing hold of *saidin* . . . Nynaeve bent toward him, concern on her face.

“Now,” he said, and reached for the Source through the bearded man. Reached, but did not seize it. He hung on the brink, wanting to howl with the agony as flickering flames seemed to broil him even while shrieking winds blasted particles of frozen sand across his skin. Watching Nynaeve take a quick breath, he knew it lasted only an instant, yet it seemed he endured for hours before . . .

Saidin flowed through him, all the molten fury and icy tumbling, all the foulness, and he could not control a hair-thin thread. He could see the flow from him into Nynaeve. To feel it seething through him, feel the treacherous tides and shifting ground that could destroy him in a heartbeat, to feel that without being able to fight or control was an agony in itself. He was aware of her, he realized suddenly, in much the same way he was aware of Min, but all he could think of was *saidin,* flooding through him uncontrolled.

She drew a shuddering breath. “How can you stand . . . *that*?” she said hoarsely. “All chaos and rage and death. Light! Now, you must try as hard as you can to control the flows while I—” Desperate to gain his balance in that never-ending war with *saidin,* he did as she said, and she yelped and jumped. “You were supposed to wait until I . . .” she began in angry tones, then went on in a merely irritated voice. “Well, at least I’m rid of it. What are you so wide-eyed about? I’m the one had her skin yanked off!”

“Saidar,” he murmured in wonder. It was so . . . different.

Alongside the turmoil of *saidin, saidar* was a tranquil river flowing smoothly. He dipped into that river, and suddenly he was struggling against currents that tried to pull him further in, swirling whirlpools that tried to yank him under. The harder he struggled, the stronger the shifting fluxes grew. Only an instant since he had tried to control *saidar,* and already he felt as if he was drowning in it, being swept away into eternity. Nynaeve had warned him what he must do, but it seemed so foreign he had not truly believed until now. With an effort, he forced himself to stop fighting the currents, and as quickly as that the river was tranquil once more.

That was the first difficulty, to fight *saidin* while surrendering to *saidar.* The first difficulty, and the first key to what he had to do. The male and female halves of the True Source were alike and unalike, attracting and repelling, fighting against each other even as they worked together to drive the Wheel of Time. The taint on the male half had its opposite twin, too. The wound given him by Ishamael throbbed in time with the taint, while the other, from Fain’s blade, beat counterpoint in time with the evil that had killed Aridhol.

Awkwardly, forcing himself to work gently, to use the unfamiliar *saidar*’s own immense strength to guide it as he wanted, he wove a conduit that touched the male half of the Source at one end and the distantly seen city at the other. The conduit had to be of untainted *saidar.* If this worked as he hoped, a tube of *saidin* might shatter when the taint began to leech out of it. He thought of it as a tube, at least, though it was not. The weave did not form at all as he expected it to. As if *saidar* had a mind of its own, the weave took on convolutions and spirals that made him think of a flower. There was nothing to see, no grand weaves sweeping down from the sky. The Source lay at the heart of creation. The Source was everywhere, even in Shadar Logoth. The conduit covered distance beyond his imagining, and had no length at all. It had to be a conduit, no matter its appearance. If it was not . . .

Drawing on *saidin,* fighting it, mastering it in the deadly dance he knew so well, he forced it into the flowery weave of *saidar.* And it flowed through. *Saidin* and *saidar,* like and unlike, could not mix. The flow of *saidin* squeezed in on itself, away from the surrounding *saidar,* and the *saidar* pushed it from all sides, compressing it further, making it flow faster. Pure *saidin,* pure except for the taint, touched Shadar Logoth.

Rand frowned. Had he been wrong? Nothing was happening. Except . . . The wounds in his side seemed to be throbbing faster. Amid the firestorm and icy fury of *saidin,* it seemed that the foulness stirred and shifted. Just a slight movement that might have escaped notice had he not been straining to find anything. A slight stirring in the midst of chaos, but all in the same direction.

“Go on,” Nynaeve urged. Her eyes were bright, as though just having *saidar* flow in her was enough for joy.

He drew more deeply on both halves of the source, strengthening the conduit as he forced more of *saidin* into it, drew on the Power until nothing he did would bring more. He wanted to shout at how much was flowing into him, so much that it seemed he did not exist any more, only the One Power. He heard Nynaeve groan, but the murderous struggle with *saidin* consumed him.

Fingering the Great Serpent ring on her left forefinger, Elza stared at the man she had sworn to serve. He sat on the ground, grim-faced, staring straight ahead as if he could not see the wilder Nynaeve sitting right in front of him, glowing like the sun. Perhaps he could not. She could feel *saidar* sweeping through Nynaeve in torrents undreamed of. All the sisters of the

Tower combined could have wielded only a fraction of that ocean. She envied the wilder that, and at the same time she thought she might have gone mad from the sheer joy of it. Despite the cold, there were beads of sweat on Nynaeve's face. Her lips were parted, and her wide eyes stared rapturously beyond the Dragon Reborn.

"It will begin soon, I fear," Cadsuane announced. Turning away from the seated pair, the gray-haired sister planted her hands on her hips and swept a piercing gaze across the hilltop. "They'll be feeling that in Tar Valon, and maybe on the other side of the world. Everyone to your places."

"Come, Elza," Merise said, the light of *saidar* suddenly around her.

Elza allowed herself to be drawn into a link with the stern-faced sister, but she flinched when Merise added her Asha'man Warder to the circle. He was darkly beautiful, but the crystal sword in his hands shone with a faint light, and she could feel the incredible seething tumult that must be *saidin*. Even though Merise was controlling the flows, the vileness of *saidin* turned Elza's stomach. It was a midden heap rotting in a sweltering summer. The other Green was a lovely woman in spite of her sternness, but her mouth thinned as if she, too, were struggling not to vomit.

All around the hilltop the circles were forming, Sarene and Corele linked with the old man, Flinn, and Nesune, Beldeine and Daigian with the boy Hopwil. Verin and Kumira even made a circle with the Sea Folk wilder; she was actually quite strong, and everyone had to be used. As soon as each of those circles formed, it moved off the hilltop, each vanishing among the trees in a different direction. Alivia, the very peculiar wilder who seemed to have no other name, strode off north, cloak flapping behind her, surrounded by the glow of the Power. A very *troubling* woman with those tiny lines around her eyes, and incredibly strong. Elza would have given a great deal to have her hands on those *ter'angreal* the woman wore.

Alivia and the three circles would provide an encircling defense, if it were needed, but the greatest need lay right there on the hilltop. The Dragon Reborn must be protected at all costs. That job Cadsuane had taken on herself, of course, but Merise's circle would remain there, too. Cadsuane must have had an *angreal* of her own, from the amount of *saidar* she was drawing, more than Elza and Merise combined, yet even that paled beside the Power that flowed though *Callandor*.

Elza glanced toward the Dragon Reborn and drew a deep breath. "Merise, I know I shouldn't ask, but may I meld the flows?"

She expected to have to plead, but the taller woman hesitated only a moment before nodding and passing control to her. Almost immediately Merise’s mouth softened, though it could never be called soft. Fire and ice and filth welled up in Elza, and she shuddered. Whatever the cost, the Dragon Reborn had to reach the Last Battle. Whatever the cost.

Riding his cart down the snowy road to Tremonsien, Barmellin wondered whether old Maglin at The Nine Rings would pay what he wanted for the plum brandy in the cart behind him. He was not sanguine. She was tight with silver, Maglin was, the brandy was not very good, and this late in the winter, she might be willing to wait until spring to get better. Suddenly he realized that the day seemed very bright. Almost like summer noon instead of a winter morning. Strangest of all, the glow seemed to be coming from the huge pit beside the road where workmen from the City had been digging away until the previous year. There was supposed to be a monstrous statue down there, but he had never been interested enough to actually look for himself.

Now, almost against his will, he reined in his stout mare and climbed down into the snow to trudge to the brink of the pit. It was a hundred paces deep and ten times as far across, and he had to put his hands in front of his face against the blinding glare that came from the bottom. Squinting through his fingers, he could make out a glowing ball, like a second sun. Abruptly, it came to him that this must the One Power.

With a strangled yell he lumbered back through the snow to his cart and scrambled up, flailing Nisa with the reins to get her moving even as he was trying to jerk her head around to head back to his farm. He was going to stay in his own house and drink that brandy himself. All of it.

Strolling lost in thought, Timna barely saw the fallow fields that covered all the hillsides but one around her. Tremalking was a large island, and this far from the sea, the wind carried no hint of salt, yet it was the Atha’an Miere that troubled her. They refused the Water Way, yet Timna was one of the Guides chosen to protect them from themselves, if possible. That was very difficult now, with them all in an uproar over this Coramoor of theirs. Very few remained on the island. Even the Governors, always fretting at being away from the sea as the Atha’an Miere did, had set sail to search for him in any craft they could find.

Suddenly the one unplowed hill caught her eye. A great stone hand stuck out of the ground clasping a clear sphere as large as a house. And that sphere was shining like a glorious summer sun.

All thoughts of the Atha'an Miere gone, Timna gathered her cloak and sat down on the ground, smiling to think that she might see the fulfillment of prophecy and the end of Illusion.

"If you truly are one of the Chosen, I will serve you," the bearded man in front of Cyndane said doubtfully, but she did not hear what else he had to say.

She could feel it. That much of *saidar* being drawn to one spot was a beacon that any woman in the world who could channel would feel and locate. So he had found a woman to use the other access key. She would have faced the Great Lord—faced the Creator!—with him. She would have shared the power with him, let him rule the world at her side. And he had spurned her love, spurned her!

The fool babbling at her was an important man as such things were accounted here and now, but she did not have time to make certain of his trustworthiness, and without that, she could not leave him to babble, not when she could feel Moridin's hand caressing the *cour'souvra* that held her soul. A razor-thin flow of Air sliced the fellow's beard in two as it took off his head. Another flow shoved the body backward so the blood fountaining from the stub of his neck did not spot her dress. Before body or head hit the stone floor, she had spun her gateway. A beacon she could point to, beckoning her.

As she stepped into rolling forest where scattered carpets of snow littered the ground beneath stark branches bare save for the thick ropes of drooping brown vines, she wondered where the beacon had drawn her. It did not matter. South of her, that beacon shone, enough *saidar* to lay waste to a continent in one blow. He would be there, him and whoever the woman was he had betrayed her with. Carefully, she drew on the Power to spin a web for his death.

Lightnings such as Cadsuane had never seen streaked down from the cloudless sky, not jagged bolts but lances of silver-blue that struck at the hilltop where she stood, and struck instead the inverted shield she had woven, erupting with a deafening roar fifty feet above her head. Even within the shield the air crackled, and her hair stirred and lifted. Without the aid of the *angreal* that looked a little like a shrike dangling from her bun, she would not have been able to hold the shield up.

A second golden bird, a swallow, hung from her hand by its thin chain. "There," she said, pointing in the direction it seemed to be flying. A pity she could not say how far away the Power had been channeled, or whether by a man or a woman, but the direction would have to do. She hoped there would be no . . . mishaps. Her people were out there, too. If the warning came with an attack, though, there could not be much doubt.

As soon as the single word left her mouth, a fountain of flame erupted in the forest to the north, and then another and another, a staggered line racing northward. *Callandor* shone like a flame in young Jahar's hands. Surprisingly, from the intensity on Elza's face and the way she gripped her skirts in fists, she was the one directing those flows.

Merise took a fistful of the boy's black hair and gently shook his head. "Steady, my pretty," she murmured. "Oh, steady, my lovely strong one." He smiled at her, a ravishing smile.

Cadsuane shook her own head slightly. Understanding any sister's relationship with her Warder was difficult, especially among Greens, but she could not begin to fathom what passed between Merise and her boys.

Her real attention was on another boy, though. Nynaeve was swaying, groaning with the ecstasy of such an unbelievable mass of *saidar* flooding through her, but Rand sat like a stone, sweat rolling down his face. His eyes were blank, like polished sapphires. Was he even aware of what was happening around him?

The swallow turned on its chain beneath her hand.

"There," she said, pointing toward the ruins of Shadar Logoth.

Rand could not see Nynaeve any longer. He could not see anything, feel anything. He swam in surging seas of flame, scrambled across collapsing mountains of ice. The taint flowed like an ocean tide, trying to sweep him away. If he lost control for an instant, it would strip away everything that was him and carry that down the conduit, too. As bad, or maybe worse, despite the tide of filth flooding through that odd flower, the taint on the male half of the Source seemed no less. It was like oil floating on water in a coating so thin you would not notice till you touched the surface, yet covering the vastness of the male half, it was an ocean in itself.

He had to hold on. He had to. But for how long? How long could he hold on?

* * *

If he could undo what al'Thor had done at the source, Demandred thought as he stepped through his gateway into Shadar Logoth, undo it sharply and suddenly, that might well kill the man, or at least sear the ability to channel out of him. He had reasoned out what al'Thor's plan had to be as soon as he realized where the access key was. A brilliant scheme, he did not mind admitting, however insanely dangerous. Lews Therin had always been a brilliant planner, too, if not so brilliant as everyone made out. Not nearly as brilliant as Demandred himself.

One look at the rubble-strewn street changed his mind about altering anything, though. Beside him rose half a pale dome, its shattered top two hundred feet or more above the street, and above it, the sky held the light of midmorning. From the broken rim of the ruin down to the street, though, the air was dark with shadows, as if night were already falling. The city . . . quivered. He could feel it through his boots.

Fire erupted in the forest, great explosions spun of *saidin* that hurled trees into the air on gouts of flame that sped toward him, but he was already weaving a gateway. Leaping through, he let it vanish and ran through the vine-draped trees as hard as he could, plowing through patches of snow, stumbling over rocks hidden in the mulch, but not slowing down, never that. The web had been reversed, for caution's sake, but so had the first, and he had been a soldier. Still running, he heard the explosions he expected, and knew they were racing toward where his gateway had been as surely as they had raced straight toward him among the ruins. They were far enough from him now to present no danger, though. Without slowing, he turned toward the access key. With the amount of *saidin* pouring through it, there might as well have been a fiery arrow in the sky pointing to al'Thor.

So. Unless someone in this accursed Age had discovered yet another unknown ability, al'Thor must have acquired a device, a *ter'angreal,* that could detect a man channeling. From what he knew of what people now called the Breaking, after he himself had been imprisoned at Shayol Ghul, any woman who knew how to make *ter'angreal* would have been trying to create one that would do that. In war, the other side always came up with something you did not expect, and you had to counter it. He had always been good at war. First, he needed to get closer.

Suddenly he saw people off to the right ahead of him through the trees, and sheltered behind a rough gray trunk. A bald-headed old man with a fringe of white hair was limping along between two women, one of them beautiful in a wild way, the other stunning. What were they doing in these woods? Who were they? Friends of al'Thor, or just people in the wrong place at the wrong time? He hesitated to kill them, whoever they were. Any use of the Power would warn al'Thor. He would have to wait until they passed. The old man's head was turning as if he were searching for something among the trees, but Demandred doubted a fellow that decrepit could see very far.

Abruptly the old man stopped and thrust out his hand straight toward Demandred, and Demandred found himself frantically fending off a net of *saidin* that struck his warding much harder than it should have, as hard as his own spinning would. That tottering old man was an Asha'man! And at least one of the women must be what passed for Aes Sedai in this time, and joined with the fellow in a ring.

He tried to launch his own attack and crush them, but the old man flung web after web at him without pause, and it was all he could do to fend them off. Those that struck trees enveloped them in flame or blew the trunks apart in splinters. He was a general, a great general, but generals did not have to fight alongside the men they commanded! Snarling, he began to retreat amid the crackle of burning trees and the thunder of explosions. Away from the key. Sooner or later the old man had to tire, and then he could take care of killing al'Thor. If one of the others did not get there first. He hoped fervently they did not.

Skirts hiked to her knees, cursing, Cyndane ran from her third gateway as soon as she was through. She could hear the explosions marching toward the site, but this time she had realized why they came straight for her. Tripping on vines hidden in the snow, bumping into tree trunks, she ran. She hated forests! At least some of the others were here—she had seen those fountaining fires speed elsewhere than at her; she could feel *saidar* being spun at more than one place, spun with fury—but she prayed to the Great Lord that she would reach Lews Therin first. She wanted to see him die, she realized, and for that, she would have to get closer.

Crouching behind a fallen log, Osan'gar panted from the exertion of running. Those months masquerading as Corlan Dashiva had not made him any fonder of exercise. The explosions that had almost killed him died away, then started up again somewhere in the distance, and he cautiously raised himself enough to peek over the log. Not that he supposed a piece of wood was very much protection. He had never been a soldier, not really. His talents, his genius, lay elsewhere. The Trollocs were his making, and thus the Myrddraal that had sprung from them, and many other creatures that had rocked the world and made his name famous. The access key blazed with *saidin,* but he could feel lesser amounts being wielded, too, in various directions.

He had expected others of the Chosen to be here ahead of him, had hoped they might have finished the task before he arrived, but plainly they had not. Plainly al'Thor had brought along some of those Asha'man, and by the amount of *saidin* that had gone into the eruptions that targeted him, *Callandor* as well. And maybe some of his tame, so-called Aes Sedai.

Crouching again, he bit his lip. This forest was a very dangerous place, more so than he had expected, and nowhere for a genius. But the fact remained that Moridin terrified him. The man had always terrified him, from the very beginning. He had been mad with power before they were sealed into the Bore, and since they had been freed, he seemed to think that *he* was the Great Lord. Moridin would find out somehow if he fled, and kill him. Worse, if al'Thor succeeded, the Great Lord might decide to kill both of them, and Osan'gar as well. He did not care whether they died, but he did very much about himself.

He was not good at judging time by the sun, but it was obviously still short of noon. Hauling himself from the ground, he dabbed at the dirt on his clothes, then gave up in disgust and began to skulk from tree to tree in what he imagined was a stealthy manner. It was toward the key that he skulked. Perhaps one of the others would finish the man before he got close to it, but if not, perhaps he would find the chance to be a hero. Carefully, of course.

Verin frowned at the apparition making its way through the trees off to her left. She could think of no other term for a woman walking through the forest in gems and a gown that shifted through every color from black to white and sometimes even turned transparent! She was not hurrying, but she was heading toward the hill where Rand was. And unless Verin was very much mistaken, she was one of the Forsaken.

“Are we just going to watch her?” Shalon whispered furiously. She had been upset that she was not the one to meld the flows, as if a wilder’s strength counted with Aes Sedai, and hours tramping through the woods had not improved her temper.

“We must do *something,*” Kumira said softly, and Verin nodded.

“I was just deciding what.” A shield, she decided. A captive Forsaken might prove very useful.

Using the full strength of her circle, she wove her shield, and watched aghast as it rebounded. The woman was already embracing *saidar,* though no light shone around her, and she was immensely strong!

Then she had no time for thought of anything as the golden-haired woman spun around and began channeling. Verin could not see the weaves, but she knew when she was fighting off an attack on her life, and she had come too far to die here.

Eben hitched his cloak around himself and wished he were better at ignoring the cold. Simple cold, he could ignore, but not the wind that had sprung up since the sun passed its zenith. The three sisters linked to him simply let the wind take their cloaks as they tried to watch every direction at once. Daigian was leading the circle—because of him, he thought—but she was drawing so lightly that he felt barely a whisper of *saidin* passing through him. She would not want to face that until she had to. He lifted her cowl back into place on her head, and she smiled at him from its depths. The bond carried her affection to him, and his own back, he supposed. With time, he thought he might come to love this little Aes Sedai.

The torrent of *saidin* far behind him had a tendency to wash out his awareness of other channeling, but he could feel others wielding the Power. The battle had been joined, elsewhere, and so far all the four of them had done was walk. He did not mind that much, really. He had been at Dumai’s Wells, and fought the Seanchan, and he had learned that battles were more fun in a book than in the flesh. What did irk him was that he had not been given control of the circle. Of course, Jahar had not, but he figured Merise amused herself by making Jahar balance a cookie on his nose. Damer had been given control of that circle, though. Just because the man had a few years on him—well, more than a few; he was older than Eben's da—was no reason for Cadsuane to look at him as if he were a—

"Can you help me? I seem to have lost my way, and my horse." The woman who stepped from behind a tree ahead of them did not even have a cloak. Instead, she wore a gown of deep green silk cut so low that half of her lush bosom was exposed. Waves of black hair surrounded a beautiful face, with green eyes that sparkled as she smiled.

"A strange place to be riding," Beldeine said suspiciously. The pretty Green had not been pleased when Cadsuane put Daigian in charge, and she had taken every opportunity to state her opinion of Daigian's decisions.

"I hadn't meant to ride so far," the woman said coming closer. "I see you're all Aes Sedai. With a . . . groom? Do you know what all the commotion is about?"

Suddenly, Eben felt the blood drain from his face. What he felt was impossible! The green-eyed woman frowned in surprise, and he did the only thing that he could.

"She's holding *saidin*!" he shouted, and threw himself at her as he felt Daigian draw deeply on the Power.

Cyndane slowed at the sight of the woman standing among the trees a hundred paces ahead of her, a tall yellow-haired woman who simply watched her come closer. The feel of battles being fought with the Power in other places made her wary at the same time it gave her hope. The woman was plainly dressed in wool, but incongruously decked with gems as if she were a great lady. With *saidar* in her, Cyndane could see the faint lines at the corners of the woman's eyes. Not one of those who called themselves Aes Sedai, then. But who? And why did she stand there as if she would bar Cyndane's way? It did not really matter. Channeling now would give her away, but she had time. The key still shone as a beacon of the Power. Lews Therin still lived. No matter how fierce the other woman's eyes, a knife would do for her, if she really thought she could be a bar. And just in case she proved to be what they called a wilder, Cyndane prepared a small present for her, a reversed web she would not even see until it was too late.

Abruptly the light of *saidar* appeared around the woman, but the ready ball of fire streaked from Cyndane's hand, small enough to escape detection she hoped, but enough to burn a hole through this woman who—

Just as it reached the woman, almost close enough to singe her garments, the web of Fire unraveled. The woman did not do anything; the net simply came apart! Cyndane had never heard of a *ter'angreal* that would break a web, but it must be that.

Then the woman struck back at her, and she suffered her second shock. She was stronger than Cyndane had been before the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn held her! That was impossible; no woman *could* be stronger. She must have an *angreal,* too. Shock lasted only the time it took her to slice the other woman's flows. She did not know how to reverse them. Maybe that would be enough advantage. She *would* see Lews Therin die! The taller woman jerked as her cut flows snapped back into her, but even as she shifted her feet with the blow, she channeled again. Snarling, Cyndane fought back, and the earth heaved beneath their feet. She *would* see him die! She *would*!

The high hilltop was not very near to the access key, but even so the key shone so brightly in Moghedien's head that she hungered for just a sip at that immense flow of *saidar.* To hold so much, the thousandth part of so much, would be ecstasy. She hungered, but this wooded vantage was as near as she intended going. Only the threat of Moridin's hands caressing her *cour'souvra* had driven her to Travel here at all, and she had delayed coming, prayed that it would be over before she was forced to. Always she had worked in secrecy, but she had had to flee an attack as soon as she arrived, and in widely separated places in the forest spread out before her, lightnings and fires woven of *saidar* and others that must have been *saidin* flashed and flared beneath the midafternoon sun. Black smoke rose in plumes from burning clumps of trees, and thunderous explosions rolled through the air.

Who fought, who lived, who died were all matters of indifference to her. Except that it would be pleasant if Cyndane or Graendal perished. Or both. Moghedien would not, not thrashing about in the middle of a battle. And if that were not bad enough, there was what stood beyond the shining key, an immense flattened dome of black in the forest, as though night had turned to stone. She flinched as a ripple passed across the dark surface and the dome heaved perceptibly higher. Madness to go any closer to that, whatever it was. Moridin would not know what she did here, or did not do.

Retreating to the back of the hilltop, away from the shining key and the strange dome, she sat down to do what she had done so often in the past.

Watch from the shadows, and survive.

Inside his head, Rand was screaming. He was sure that he was screaming, that Lews Therin was screaming, but he could not hear either voice in the roar. The foul ocean of the taint was flooding through him, howling with its speed. Tidal waves of vileness crashed over him. Raging gales of filth ripped at him. The only reason he knew that he still held the Power was the taint. *Saidin* could be shifting, flaring, about to kill him, and he would never know. That putrid flood overwhelmed everything else, and he hung on by his fingernails to keep from being swept away on it. The taint was moving. That was all that counted, now. He had to hold on!

"What can you tell me, Min?" Cadsuane kept her feet despite her weariness. Holding that shield through most of a day was enough to tire anyone.

There had not been an attack on the hilltop for some time, and in fact, it seemed the only active channeling she could sense was what Nynaeve and the boy were doing. Elza was pacing an endless circle around the crest of the hill, still linked to Merise and Jahar, but there was nothing for her to do at the moment except scan the hills around them. Jahar was sitting on a stone with *Callandor* shining faintly in the crook of his arm. Merise sat on the ground beside him with her head on his knee, and he was stroking her hair.

"Well, Min?" Cadsuane demanded.

The girl looked up angrily from the depression in the stony ground where Tomas and Moad had bundled her and Harine. At least the men had sense enough to accept that they could not fight any part of this fight. Harine wore a sullen scowl, and more than once it had been necessary for one of the men to restrain Min from going to young al'Thor. They had actually had to take her knives away, after she tried to use the blades on them.

"I know he's alive," the girl muttered, "and I think he's hurting. Only, if I can feel enough to think he's hurting, then he's in agony. Let me go to him."

"You would only get in the way now."

Ignoring the girl's frustrated groan, Cadsuane walked across the uneven ground to where Rand and Nynaeve sat, but for a moment she did not look at them. Even at a distance of miles, the black dome looked immense, rearing a thousand feet at its height. And it was swelling. The surface looked like black steel, though it did not sparkle in the afternoon sun. If anything, the light seemed to dim around it.

Rand was sitting as he had since the beginning, an unmoving, unseeing statue with sweat rolling down his face. If he was in agony as Min said, he showed no sign of it. And if he was, Cadsuane did not know what she could do, what she dared to do. Disturbing him now in any way might have dire consequences. Glancing at that rising dead-black dome, Cadsuane grunted. Having let him begin in the first place might have dire consequences, too.

With a moan, Nynaeve slipped from her stone seat to the ground. Her dress was sodden with sweat, and strands of hair clung to her slick face. Her eyelids fluttered weakly, and her breasts heaved as she gulped air desperately. “No more,” she whimpered. “I cannot stand anymore.”

Cadsuane hesitated, something she was not accustomed to doing. The girl could not leave the circle until young al’Thor released her, but unless these Choedan Kal were flawed in the same way as *Callandor,* she would be buffered against taking in enough of the Power to damage her. Except that she was acting as a conduit for far more of *saidar* than the entire White Tower could have handled using every *angreal* and *sa’angreal* the Tower possessed. After having that flow through her for hours, simple physical exhaustion might be killing her.

Kneeling beside the girl, Cadsuane laid the swallow on the ground beside her, took the girl’s head in her hands and lessened the amount of *saidar* she was putting into the shield. Her abilities with Healing were no more than average, but she could wash away some of the girl’s exhaustion at least without falling over herself. She was very conscious of the weakened shield over them, though, and she wasted no time in forming the weaves.

Scrambling to the top of the hill, Osan’gar dropped to the ground on his belly and smiled as he crabbed sideways to shelter behind a tree. From here, with *saidin* in him, he could see the next crest clearly, and the people on it. Not as many as he had expected. One woman was making a slow circuit around the crest, peering into the trees, but everyone else was still, Narishma sitting with *Callandor* glowing in his hands and a woman’s head on his knee. There were two other women that Osan’gar could see, one kneeling over the other, but they were obscured by a man’s back. He did not need to see the man’s face to know al’Thor. The key lying on the ground at his side named him. To Osan’gar’s eyes, it shone brightly. In his head, it overwhelmed the sun, a thousand suns. What he could do with that! A pity it had to be destroyed along with al’Thor. But still, he could take *Callandor* after al’Thor was dead. No one else among the Chosen possessed so much as an *angreal*. Even Moridin would quail before him once he had that crystal sword. Nae’blis? Osan’gar would be named Nae’blis after he destroyed al’Thor and undid all that he had done here. Laughing softly, he wove balefire. Who would ever have thought that he would turn out to be the hero of the day?

Walking slowly, studying the forested hills around them, Elza suddenly stopped as a flicker of movement caught the corner of her eye. She turned her head slowly, and not as far as the hill where she had seen that flash. The day had been very difficult for her. In her captivity among the Aiel tents at Cairhien it had come to her that it was paramount for the Dragon Reborn to reach the Last Battle. It had suddenly become so blindingly obvious that it astounded her she had not seen it before. Now it was clear to her, as clear as *saidar* made the face of the man trying to hide on that hill while peeking around a tree trunk. Today, she had been forced to fight the Chosen. Surely the Great Lord would understand if she had actually killed any of them, but Corlan Dashiva was only one of those Asha’man. Dashiva raised his hand toward the hill where she stood, and she drew as hard as she could on *Callandor* in Jahar’s hands. *Saidin* seemed well suited to destruction, to her. A huge ball of coruscating fire surrounded the other hilltop, red and gold and blue. When it was gone, that other hill ended in a smooth surface fifty feet lower than the old crest.

Moghedien was not sure why she had remained this long. There could not be more than two hours of daylight left, and the forest was quiet. Except for the key, she could not feel *saidar* being channeled anywhere. That was not to say that someone was not using small amounts somewhere, but nothing like the fury that had raged earlier. The battle was over, the other Chosen dead or flying in defeat. Plainly defeat, since the key still blazed in her head. Amazing that the Choedan Kal had survived continuous use for this long, at this level.

Lying on her belly atop her high vantage point with her chin in her hands, she was watching the great dome. Black no longer seemed to describe it. There was no term for it, now, but black was a pale color by comparison. It was half a ball, now, rearing like a mountain two miles or more into the sky. A thick layer of shadow lay around it, as though it were sucking the last light out of the air. She could not understand why she was not afraid. That thing might grow until it enveloped the entire world, or perhaps shatter the world, as Aran'gar had said it might. But if that happened, there was no safe place, no shadows for the Spider to hide in.

Suddenly something writhed up from that dark smooth surface, like a flame if flames were blacker than black, then another, another, until the dome boiled with stygian fire. The roar of ten thousand thunders made her clap her hands over her ears and shriek, soundlessly in that crash, and the dome collapsed in on itself in the space of a heartbeat, to a pinpoint, to nothing. It was wind that howled then, rushing toward the vanished dome, dragging her along the stony ground no matter how desperately she clawed for purchase, tumbling her against trees, lifting her into the air. Strangely, she still felt no fear. She thought if she survived this, she would never feel fear again.

Cadsuane let the thing that had been a *ter'angreal* drop to the ground. It could no longer be called a statue of a woman. The face was as wisely serene as ever, but the figure was broken in two and lumpy like bubbled wax where one side had melted, including the arm that had held the crystal sphere now lying in shattered fragments around the ruined thing. The male figure was whole, and already tucked away in her saddlebags. *Callandor* was secured, too. It was best not to leave temptation on the open hilltop. Where Shadar Logoth had been there was a now a huge opening in the forest, perfectly round and so wide that even with the sun low on the horizon she could see the far side sloping down into the earth.

Lan, leading his limping warhorse up the slope, dropped the black stallion's reins when he saw Nynaeve stretched out on the ground and covered to her chin with her cloak. Young al'Thor lay at her side also blanketed in his cloak, with Min curled up against him, her head on his chest. Her eyes were closed, but by her small smile, she was not asleep. Lan barely spared them a glance as he ran the last distance and fell on his knees to raise Nynaeve’s head gently on his arm. She did not stir any more than the boy.

“They are just unconscious,” Cadsuane told him. “Corele says it is better to let them recover on their own.” And how long that might require, Corele had not been prepared to say. Nor had Damer. The wounds in the boy’s side were unchanged, though Damer had expected they would be. It was all very disturbing.

A little farther up the hill, the bald Asha’man was bent over a groaning Beldeine, his fingers writhing just above her as he wove his strange Healing. He had been busy the last hour. Alivia could not stop staring in wonder and flexing the arm that had been broken as well as seared to the bone. Sarene walked unsteadily, but that was just tiredness. She had almost died out there in the forest, and her eyes were still wide with the experience. Whites were not used to that sort of thing.

Not everyone had been so lucky. Verin and the Sea Folk woman were sitting beside the cloak-covered form of Kumira, their lips moving silently in prayers for her soul, and Nesune was trying awkwardly to comfort a weeping Daigian, who cradled young Eben’s corpse in her arms and rocked him like a baby. Greens were used to that sort of thing, but Cadsuane did not like losing two of her people in return for no more than a few singed Forsaken and one dead renegade.

“It’s clean,” Jahar said softly yet again. This time, Merise was the one sitting, with his head resting in her lap. Her blue eyes were as stern as ever, but she stroked his black hair gently. “It’s clean.”

Cadsuane exchanged looks with Merise over the boy’s head. Damer and Jahar both said the same thing, the taint was gone, but how could they be sure some scrap did not remain? Merise had allowed her to link with the boy, and she could not feel anything like what the other Green had described, yet how could they be certain? *Saidin* was so alien that anything could be hidden in that mad chaos.

“I want to leave as soon as the rest of the Warders return,” she announced. There were too many questions for which she had no answers to suit her, but she had young al’Thor now, and she did not intend to lose him.

Night fell. On the hilltop, the wind blew dust across the fragments of what had once been a *ter’angreal*. Below lay the tomb of Shadar Logoth, open to give the world hope. And on distant Tremalking, the word began to spread that the Time of Illusions was at an end.

The End
of the Ninth Book of
The Wheel of Time

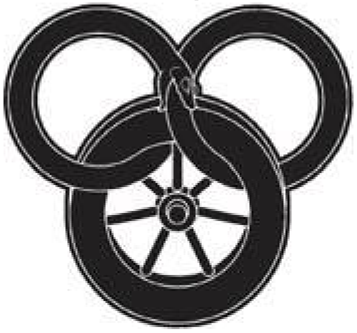

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

armsmen: Soldiers who owe allegiance or fealty to a particular lord or lady.

Asha'man: (1) In the Old Tongue, "Guardian" or "Guardians," but always a guardian of justice and truth. (2) The name given, both collectively and as a rank, to the men who have come to the Black Tower, near Caemlyn in Andor, in order to learn to channel. Their training concentrates on the ways in which the One Power can be used as a weapon, and in another departure from the usages of the White Tower, once they learn to seize *saidin,* the male half of the Power, they are required to perform all chores and labors with the Power. When newly enrolled, a man is termed a Soldier; he wears a plain black coat with a high collar, in the Andoran fashion. Being raised to Dedicated brings the right to wear a silver pin, called the Sword, on the collar of his coat. Promotion to Asha'man brings the right to wear a Dragon pin, in gold and red enamel, on the collar opposite the Sword. Although many women, including wives, flee when they learn that their men actually can channel, a fair number of men at the Black Tower are married, and they use a version of the Warder bond to create a link with their wives. This same bond, altered to compel obedience, has recently been used to bond captured Aes Sedai as well.

Balwer, Sebban: Formerly Pedron Niall's secretary, in public, and secretly Niall's spymaster. He aided Morgase's escape from the Seanchan in Amador for his own reasons, and now is employed as secretary to Perrin t'Bashere Aybara and Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara.

Blood, the: Term used by the Seanchan to designate the nobility. One can be raised to the Blood as well as born to it.

Cha Faile**:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "the Falcon's Talon." (2) Name taken by the young Cairhienin and Tairens, attempted followers of *ji'e'toh*, who have sworn fealty to Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara. In secret, they act as her personal scouts and spies.

Companions, the: The elite military formation of IIlian, currently commanded by First Captain Demetre Marcolin. The Companions provide a bodyguard for the King of Illian and guard key points around the nation. Additionally, the Companions have traditionally been used in battle to assault the enemy's strongest positions, to exploit weaknesses, and, if necessary, to cover the retreat of the King. Unlike most other such elite formations, foreigners (excepting Tairens, Altarans and Murandians) are not only welcome, they can rise even to the highest rank, as can commoners, which also is unusual. The uniform of the Companions consists of a green coat, a breastplate worked with the Nine Bees of Illian, and a conical helmet with a faceguard of steel bars. The First Captain wears four rings of golden braid on the cuffs of his coat, and three thin golden plumes on his helmet. The Second Captain wears three rings of golden braid on each cuff, and three golden plumes tipped with green. Lieutenants wear two yellow rings on their cuffs, and two thin green plumes, under-lieutenants one yellow ring and a single green plume. Bannermen are designated by two broken rings of yellow on the cuffs and a single yellow plume, squadmen by a single broken ring of yellow.

Consolidation, the: When the armies sent by Artur Hawkwing under his son Luthair landed in Seanchan, they discovered a shifting quilt of nations often at war with one another, where Aes Sedai often reigned. Without any equivalent of the White Tower, Aes Sedai worked for their own individual power, using the Power. Forming small groups, they schemed against one another constantly. In large part it was this constant scheming for personal advantage and the resulting wars among the myriad nations that allowed the armies from east of the Aryth Ocean to begin the conquest of an entire continent, and for their descendants to complete it. This conquest, during which the descendants of the original armies became Seanchan as much as they conquered Seanchan, took more than nine hundred years and is called the Consolidation.

Corenne**:** In the Old Tongue, “the Return:” The name given by the Seanchan both to the fleet of thousands of ships and to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers, craftsmen and others carried by those ships, who will come behind the Forerunners to reclaim the lands stolen from Artur Hawkwing’s descendants. *See also* Forerunners.

Daughters of Silence, the: During the history of the White Tower (over three thousand years), various women who have been put out have been unwilling to accept their fates and have tried to band together. Such groups—most of them by far, at least—have been dispersed by the White Tower as soon as found and punished severely and publicly to make sure that the lesson is carried to everyone. The last group to be dispersed called themselves the Daughters of Silence (794-798 NE). The Daughters consisted of two Accepted who had been put out of the

Tower and twenty-three women they had gathered and trained. All were carried back to Tar Valon and punished, and the twenty-three were enrolled in the novice book. Only one of those managed to reach the shawl. *See also* Kin, the.

***da'covale*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "one who is owned," or "person who is property." (2) Among the Seanchan, the term often used, along with property, for slaves. Slavery has a long and unusual history among the Seanchan, with slaves having the ability to rise to positions of great power and open authority, including over those who are free. *See also so'jhin.*

Deathwatch Guards, the: The elite military formation of the Seanchan Empire, including both humans and Ogier. The human members of the Deathwatch Guard are all *da'covale,* born as property and chosen while young to serve the Empress, whose personal property they are. Fanatically loyal and fiercely proud, they often display the ravens tattooed on their shoulders, the mark of a *da'covale* of the Empress. The helmets and armor are lacquered in dark green and blood-red, their shields are lacquered black, and their spears and swords carry black tassels. *See also da'covale.*

Defenders of the Stone, the: The elite military formation of Tear. The current Captain of the Stone (commander of the Defenders) is Rodrivar Tihera. Only Tairens are accepted into the Defenders, and officers are usually of noble birth, though often from minor Houses or minor branches of strong Houses. The Defenders are tasked to hold the great fortress called the Stone of Tear, in the city of Tear, to defend the city, and to provide police services in place of any City Watch or the like. Except in times of war, their duties seldom take them far from the city. Then, as with other elite formations, they are the core around which the army is formed. The uniform of the Defenders consists of a black coat with padded sleeves striped black-and-gold with black cuffs, a burnished breastplate, and a rimmed helmet with a faceguard of steel bars. The Captain of the Stone wears three short white plumes on his helmet, and on the cuffs of his coat three intertwined golden braids on a white band. Captains wear two white plumes and a single line of golden braid on white cuffs, lieutenants one white plume and a single line of black braid on white cuffs and under-lieutenants one short black plume and plain white cuffs. Bannermen have gold-colored cuffs on their coats, and squadmen have cuffs striped black-and-gold.

Delving: (1) The ability to use the One Power to diagnose physical condition and illness. (2) The ability to find deposits of metal ores with the One Power. That this has long been a lost ability among Aes Sedai may account for the name becoming attached to another ability.

***der'morat-*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "master handler." (2) Among the Seanchan, the suffix applied to indicate a senior and highly skilled handler of one of the exotics, one who trains others, as in *der'morat'raken. Der'morat* can have a fairly high social status, the highest of all held by *der'sul'dam,* the trainers of *sul'dam,* who rank with fairly high military officers. *See also morat.*

Fain, Padan: Former Darkfriend, now more and worse than a Darkfriend, and an enemy of the Forsaken as much as he is of Rand al'Thor, whom he hates with a passion. Last seen using the name Jeraal Mordeth, advising Lord Toram Riatin in his rebellion against the Dragon Reborn in Cairhien.

Fists of Heaven, the: Lightly armed and lightly armored Seanchan infantry carried into battle on the backs of the flying creatures called *to'raken.* All are small men, or women, largely because of limits as to how much weight a *to'raken* can carry for any distance. Considered to be among the toughest soldiers, they are used primarily for raids, surprise assaults on positions at an enemy's rear, and where speed in getting soldiers into place is of the essence.

Forerunners, the: *See* Hailene.

Forsaken, the: The name given to thirteen powerful Aes Sedai, men and women both, who went over to the Shadow during the Age of Legends and were trapped in the sealing of the Bore into the Dark One's prison. While it has long been believed that they alone abandoned the Light during the War of the Shadow, in fact others did as well; these thirteen were only the highest ranking among them. The Forsaken (who call themselves the Chosen) are somewhat reduced in number since their awakening in the present day. The known survivors are Demandred, Semirhage, Graendal, Mesaana, Moghedien, and two who were reincarnated in new bodies and given new names, Osan’gar and Aran’gar. Recently, a man calling himself Moridin has appeared, and may be yet another of the dead Forsaken brought back from the grave by the Dark One. The same possibility may exist regarding the woman calling herself Cyndane, but since Aran’gar was a man brought back as a woman, speculation as to the identities of Moridin and Cyndane may prove futile until more is learned.

Hailene**:** In the Old Tongue, “Forerunners,” or “Those Who Come Before.” The term applied by the Seanchan to the massive expeditionary force sent across the Aryth Ocean to scout out the lands where Artur Hawkwing once ruled. Now under the command of the High Lady Suroth, its numbers swollen by recruits from conquered lands, the Hailene has gone far beyond its original goals.

Hanlon, Daved: A Darkfriend, formerly commander of the White Lions in service to the Forsaken Rahvin while he held Caemlyn using the name Lord Gaebril. From there, Hanlon took the White Lions to Cairhien under orders to further the rebellion against the Dragon Reborn. The White Lions were destroyed by a “bubble of evil,” and Hanlon has been ordered back to Caemlyn for purposes as yet unknown.

Ishara: The first Queen of Andor (circa FY 994–1020). At the death of Artur Hawkwing, Ishara convinced her husband, one of Hawkwing’s foremost generals, to raise the siege of Tar Valon and accompany her to Caemlyn with as many soldiers as he could break away from the army. Where others tried to seize the whole of Hawkwing’s empire and failed, Ishara took a firm hold on a small part and succeeded. Today, nearly every noble House in Andor contains some of Ishara’s blood, and the right to claim the

Lion Throne depends both on direct descent from her and on the number of lines of connection to her that can be established.

Kin, the: Even during the Trolloc Wars, more than two thousand years ago (circa 1000–1350 AB), the White Tower continued to maintain its standards, putting out women who failed to measure up. One group of these women, fearing to return home in the midst of the wars, fled to Barashta (near the present-day site of Ebou Dar), as far from the fighting as was possible to go at that time. Calling themselves the Kin, and Kinswomen, they kept in hiding and offered a safe haven for others who had been put out. In time, their approaches to women told to leave the Tower led to contacts with runaways, and while the exact reasons may never be known, the Kin began to accept runaways, as well. They made great efforts to keep these girls from learning anything about the Kin until they were sure that Aes Sedai would not swoop down and retake them. After all, everyone knew that runaways were always caught sooner or later, and the Kin knew that unless they held themselves secret, they themselves would be punished severely.

Unknown to the Kin, Aes Sedai in the Tower were aware of their existence almost from the very first, but prosecution of the wars left no time for dealing with them. By the end of the wars, the Tower realized that it might not be in their best interests to snuff put the Kin. Prior to that time, a majority of runaways actually had managed to escape, whatever the Tower's propaganda, but once the Kin began helping them, the Tower knew exactly where any runaway was heading, and they began retaking nine out of ten. Since Kinswomen moved in and out of Barashta (and later Ebou Dar) in an effort to hide their existence and their numbers, never staying more than ten years lest someone notice that they did not age at a normal speed, the Tower believed they were few, and they certainly were keeping themselves low. In order to use the Kin as a trap for runaways, the Tower decided to leave them alone, unlike any other similar group in history, and to keep the very existence of the Kin a secret known only to full Aes Sedai.

The Kin do not have laws, but rather rules based in part on the rules for novices and Accepted in the White Tower, and in part on the necessity of maintaining secrecy. As might be expected given the origins of the Kin, they maintain their rules very firmly on all of their members.

Recent open contacts between Aes Sedai and Kinswomen, while known only to a handful of sisters, have produced a number of shocks, including the facts that there are twice as many Kinswomen as Aes Sedai and that some are more than a hundred years older than any Aes Sedai has lived since before the Trolloc Wars. The effect of these revelations, both on Aes Sedai and on Kinswomen, is as yet a matter for speculation. *See also* Daughters of Silence, the; Knitting Circle, the.

Knitting Circle, the: The leaders of the Kin. Since no member of the Kin has ever known how Aes Sedai arrange their own hierarchy—knowledge passed on only when an Accepted has passed her test for the shawl—they put no store in strength in the Power but give great weight to age, with the older woman always standing above the younger. The Knitting Circle (a title chosen, like the Kin, because it is innocuous) thus consists of the thirteen oldest Kinswomen resident in Ebou Dar, with the oldest given the title of Eldest. By the rules, all will have to step down when it is time for them to move on, but so long as they are resident in Ebou Dar, they have supreme authority over the Kin, to a degree that any Amyrlin Seat would envy. *See also* Kin, the.

Lance-Captain: In most lands, noblewomen do not personally lead their armsmen into battle under normal circumstances. Instead, they hire a professional soldier, almost always a commoner, who is responsible both for training and leading their armsmen. Depending on the land, this man can be called a Lance-Captain, Sword-Captain, Master of the Horse, or Master of the Lances. Rumors of closer relationships than Lady and servant often spring up, perhaps inevitably. Sometimes they are true.

Legion of the Dragon, the: A large military formation, all infantry, giving allegiance to the Dragon Reborn, trained by Davram Bashere along lines worked out by himself and Mat Cauthon, lines which depart sharply from the usual employment of foot. While many men simply walk in to volunteer, large numbers of the Legion are scooped up by recruiting parties from the Black Tower, who first gather all of the men in an area who were willing to follow the Dragon Reborn, and only after taking them through gateways to near Caemlyn winnow out those who can be taught to channel. The remainder, by far the greater number, are sent to Bashere's training camps.

***marath'damane*:** In the Old Tongue, "those who must be leashed," and also "one who must be leashed." The term applied by the Seanchan to any woman capable of channeling who has not been collared as a *damane*.

Master of the Lances: *See* Lance-Captain.

Master of the Horse: *See* Lance-Captain.

***Mera'din*:** In the Old Tongue, "the Brotherless." The name adopted, as a society, by those Aiel who abandoned clan and sept and went to the Shaido because they could not accept Rand al'Thor, a wetlander, as the *Car'a'carn*, or because they refused to accept his revelations concerning the history and origins of the Aiel. Deserting clan and sept for any reason is anathema among the Aiel, therefore their own warrior societies among the Shaido were unwilling to take them in, and they formed this society, the Brotherless.

***morat-*:** In the Old Tongue, "handler." Among the Seanchan, it is used for those who handle exotics, such as *morat'raken*, a *raken* handler or rider, also informally called a flier. *See also der'morat-*.

Prophet, the: More formally, the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. Once known as Masema Dagar, a Shienaran soldier, he underwent a revelation and decided that he had been called to spread the word of the Dragon's Rebirth. He believes that nothing —nothing!—is more important than acknowledging the Dragon

Reborn as the Light made flesh and being ready when the Dragon Reborn calls, and he and his followers will use any means to force others to sing the glories of the Dragon Reborn, Forsaking any name but “the Prophet,” he has brought chaos to much of Ghealdan and Amadicia, large parts of which he controls.

Return, the: *See Corenne.*

Sea Folk hierarchy: The Atha’an Miere, the Sea Folk, are ruled by the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha’an Miere. She is assisted by the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships, and by the Master of the Blades. Below this come the clan Wavemistresses, each assisted by her Windfinder and her Swordmaster. Below her are the Sailmistresses (ship captains) of her clan, each assisted by her Windfinder and her Cargomaster. The Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships has authority over all Windfinders to clan Wavemistresses, who in turn have authority over all the Windfinders of her clan. Likewise, the Master of the Blades has authority over all Swordmasters, and they in turn over the Cargomasters of their clans. Rank is not hereditary among the Sea Folk. The Mistress of the Ships is chosen, for life, by the First Twelve of the Atha’an Miere, the twelve most senior clan Wavemistresses. A clan Wavemistress is elected by the twelve seniormost Sailmistresses of her clan, called simply the First Twelve, a term which is also used to designate the senior Sailmistresses present anywhere. She can also be removed by a vote of those same First Twelve. In fact, anyone other than the Mistress of the Ships can be demoted, even all the way down to deckhand, for malfeasance, cowardice or other crimes. Also, the Windfinder to a Wavemistress or Mistress of the Ship who dies will, of necessity, have to serve a lower ranking woman, and her own rank thus decreases.

***sei’mosiev*:** In the Old Tongue, “lowered eyes,” or “downcast eyes.” Among the Seanchan, to say that one has “become *sei’mosiev*” means that one has “lost face.” *See also sei’taer.*

***sei’taer*:** In the Old Tongue, “straight eyes,” or “level eyes.” Among the Seanchan, it refers to honor or face, to the ability to meet someone’s eyes. It is possible to “be” or “have” *sei’taer,* meaning that one has honor and face, and also to “gain” or “lose” *sei’taer. See also sei’mosiev.*

***Shen an Calhar*:** In the Old Tongue, “the Band of the Red Hand.” (1) A legendary group of heroes who had many exploits, finally dying in the defense of Manetheren when that land was destroyed during the Trolloc Wars. (2) A military formation put together almost by accident by Mat Cauthon and organized along the lines of military forces during what is considered the height of the military arts, the days of Artur Hawkwing and the centuries immediately preceding.

***so’jhin*:** The closest translation from the Old Tongue would be “a height among lowness,” though some translate it as meaning “both sky and valley” among several other possibilities. *So’jhin* is the term applied by the Seanchan to hereditary upper servants. They are *da’covale,* property, yet occupy positions of considerable authority and often power. Even the Blood step carefully around *so’jhin* of the Imperial family, and speak to *so’jhin* of the Empress herself as to equals. *See also* Blood, the; *da’covale.*

Sword-Captain: *See* Lance-Captain.

Wise Woman: Honorific used in Ebou Dar for women famed for their incredible abilities at healing almost any injury. A Wise Woman is traditionally marked by a red belt. While some have noted that many, indeed most, Ebou Dari Wise Women were not even from Altara, much less Ebou Dar, what was not known until recently, and still is known only to a few, is that all Wise Women are in fact Kinswomen and use various versions of Healing, giving out herbs and poultices only as a cover. With the flight of the Kin from Ebou Dar after the Seanchan took the city, no Wise Women remain there. *See also* Kin, the.

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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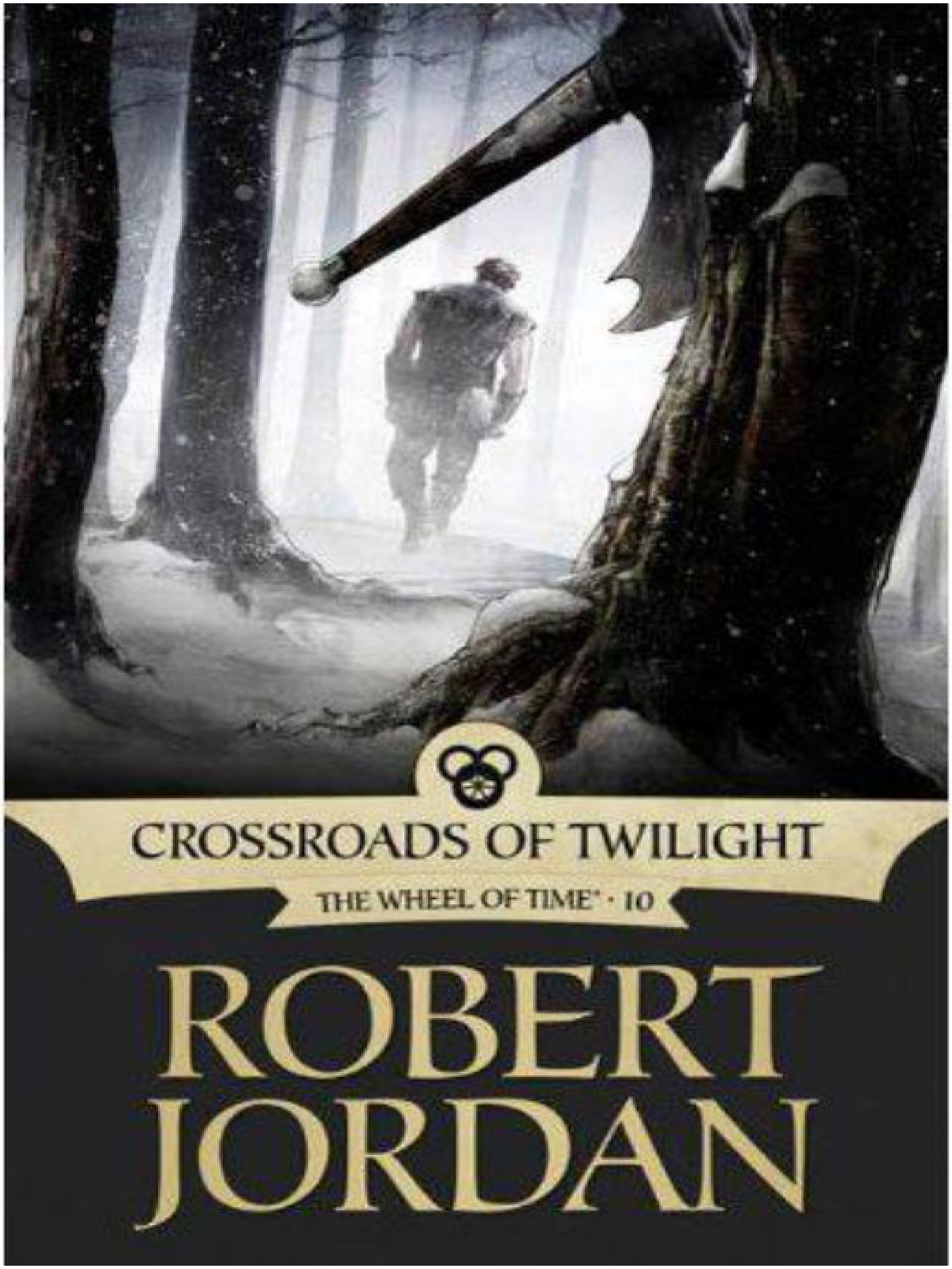

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—*The Post and Courier* (Charleston, S.C.)

“Jordan writes with the stark vision of light and darkness, and sometimes childlike sense of wonder, that permeates J. R. R. Tolkien’s works. His style is undebatably his own.”

—*Pittsburgh Press*

“[The Wheel of Time] will be the definitive American exploration of Tolkien’s territory for many years to come. Jordan can spin as rich a world and as event-filled a tale as the master, and the presence of women and a certain sense of the comic possibilities of a high destiny add further dimension to the work.”

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“The complex philosophy behind The Wheel of Time series is expounded so simply the reader often gives a start of surprise at returning to the real world. Rand’s adventures are not finished and neither is this thinking person’s fantasy series.”

—*Brunswick Sentinel* (Australia)

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—*Publishers Weekly*

“Robert Jordan can write one hell of a story. . . . [He] keeps the suspense acute and the surprises and invention beautifully paced. Compelling. An exhilarating experience.”

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Then, now, and always

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And it shall come to pass, in the days when the Dark Hunt rides, when the right hand falters and the left hand strays, that mankind shall come to the Crossroads of Twilight and all that is, all that was, and all that will be shall balance on the point of a sword, while the winds of the Shadow grow.

—From *The Prophecies of the Dragon*,
translation believed done by Jain Charin, known as Jain Farstrider, shortly before his disappearance

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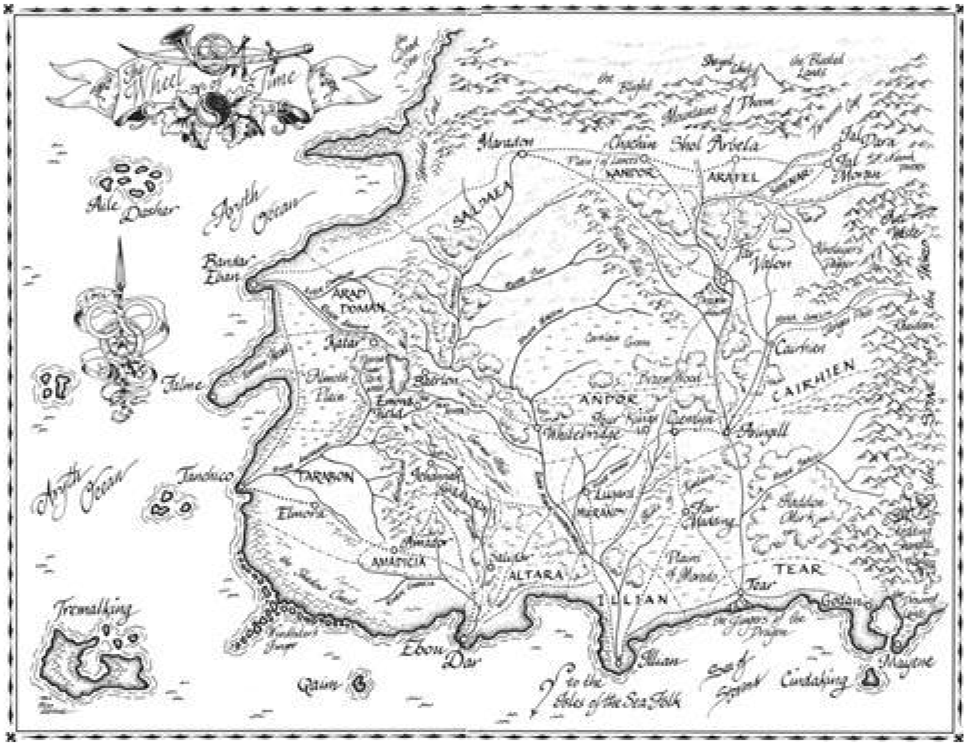
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PROLOGUE

Glimmers of the Pattern

Rodel Ituralde hated waiting, though he well knew it was the largest part of being a soldier. Waiting for the next battle, for the enemy to move, to make a mistake. He watched the winter forest and was as still as the trees. The sun stood halfway to its peak, and gave no warmth. His breath misted white in front of his face, frosting his neatly trimmed mustache and the black fox fur lining his hood. He was glad that his helmet hung at his pommel. His breastplate held the cold and radiated it through his coat and all the layers of wool, silk and linen beneath. Even Dart's saddle felt cold, as though the white gelding were made of frozen milk. The helmet would have addled his brain.

Winter had come late to Arad Doman, very late, but with a vengeance. From summer heat that lingered unnaturally into fall, to winter's heart in less than a month. The leaves that had survived the long summer's drought had been frozen before they could change color, and now they glistened like strange, ice-covered emeralds in the morning sun. The horses of the twenty-odd armsmen around him occasionally stamped a hoof in the knee-deep snow. It had been a long ride this far, and they had farther to go whether this day turned out good or ill. Dark clouds roiled the sky to northward. He did not need his weather-wise there to tell him the temperature would plummet before nightfall. They had to be under shelter by then.

"Not as rough as winter before last, is it, my Lord?" Jaalam said quietly. The tall young officer had a way of reading Ituralde's mind, and his voice was pitched for the others to hear. "Even so, I suppose some men would be dreaming of mulled wine about now. Not this lot, of course. Remarkably abstemious. They all drink tea, I believe. Cold tea. If they had a few birch switches, they'd be stripping down for snow baths."

"They'll have to keep their clothes on for the time being," Ituralde replied dryly, "but they might get some cold tea tonight, if they're lucky."

That brought a few chuckles. Quiet chuckles. He had chosen these men with care, and they knew about noise at the wrong time.

He himself could have done with a steaming cup of spiced wine, or even tea. But it was a long time since merchants had brought tea to Arad Doman. A long time since any outland merchant had ventured farther than the border with Saldaea. By the time news of the outside world reached him, it was as stale as last month's bread, if it was more than rumor to begin. That hardly mattered, though. If the White Tower truly was divided against itself, or men who could channel really were being called to Caemlyn . . . well, the world would have to do without Rodel Ituralde until Arad Doman was whole again. For the moment, Arad Doman was more than enough for any sane man to go on with.

Once again he reviewed the orders he had sent, carried by the fastest riders he had, to every noble loyal to the King. Divided as they were by bad blood and old feuds, they still shared that much. They would gather their armies and ride when orders came from the Wolf; at least, so long as he held the King's favor. They would even hide in the mountains and wait, at his order. Oh, they would chafe, and some would curse his name, but they would obey. They knew the Wolf won battles. More, they knew he won wars. The Little Wolf, they called him when they thought he could not hear, but he did not care whether they drew attention to his stature—well, not much—so long as they rode when and where he said.

Very soon they would be riding hard, moving to set a trap that would not spring for months. It was a long chance he was taking. Complex plans had many ways to fall apart, and this plan had layers inside layers. Everything would be ruined before it began if he failed to provide the bait. Or if someone ignored his order to evade couriers from the King. They all knew his reasons, though, and even the most stiff-necked shared them, though few were willing to speak of the matter aloud. He himself had moved like a wraith racing on a storm since he received Alsalam's latest command. In his sleeve where the folded paper lay tucked above the pale lace that fell onto his steel-backed gauntlet. They had one last chance, one very small chance, to save Arad Doman. Perhaps even to save Alsalam from himself before the Council of Merchants decided to put another man on the throne in his place. He had been a good ruler, for over twenty years. The Light send that he could be again.

A loud crack to the south sent Ituralde's hand to the hilt of his longsword. There was a faint creak of leather and metal as others eased their weapons. For the rest, silence. The forest was as still as a frozen tomb. Only a limb breaking under the weight of snow. After a moment, he let himself relax—as much as he had relaxed since the tales came north of the Dragon Reborn appearing in the sky at Falme. Perhaps the man really was the Dragon Reborn, perhaps he really had appeared in the sky, but whatever the truth, those tales had set Arad Doman on fire.

Ituralde was sure he could have put out that fire, given a freer hand. It was not boasting to think so. He knew what he could do, with a battle, a campaign, or a war. But ever since the Council had decided the King would be safer smuggled out of Bandar Eban, Alsalam seemed to have taken into his head that he was the rebirth of Artur Hawkwing. His signature and seal had marked scores of battle orders since, flooding out from wherever the Council had him hidden. They would not say where that was, even to Ituralde himself. Every woman on the Council that he confronted went flat-eyed and evasive at any mention of the King. He could almost believe they did not know where Alsalam was. A ridiculous thought, of course. The Council kept an unblinking eye on the King. Ituralde had always believed the merchant Houses interfered too much, yet he wished they would interfere now. Why they remained silent was a mystery, for a king who damaged trade did not remain long on the throne.

He was loyal to his oaths, and Alsalam was a friend, besides, but the orders the King sent could not have been better written to achieve chaos. Nor could they be ignored. Alsalam was the King. But he had commanded Ituralde to march north with all possible speed against a great gathering of Dragonsworn that Alsalam supposedly knew of from secret spies, then ten days later, with no Dragonsworn yet in sight, an order came to move south again, with all possible speed, against another gathering that never materialized. He had been commanded to concentrate his forces to defend Bandar Eban when a three-pronged attack might have ended it all and to divide them when a hammer blow could have done the same, to harry ground he knew the Dragonsworn had abandoned, and to march away from where he knew they camped. Worse, Alsalam's orders often had gone directly to the powerful nobles who were supposed to be following Ituralde, sending Machir in this direction, Teacal in that, Rahman in a third. Four times, pitched battles had resulted from parts of the army blundering into one another in the night while moving to the King’s express command and expecting none but enemies ahead. And all the while the Dragonsworn gained numbers, and confidence. Ituralde had had his triumphs—at Solanje and Maseen, at Lake Somal and Kandelmar—the Lords of Katar had learned not to sell the products of their mines and forges to the enemies of Arad Doman—but always, Alsalam’s orders wasted his gains.

This last order was different, though. For one thing, a Gray Man had killed Lady Tuva trying to stop it from reaching him. Why the Shadow might fear this order more than any other was a mystery, yet it was all the more reason to move swiftly. Before Alsalam reached him with another. This order opened many possibilities, and he had considered every last one he could see. But the good ones all started here, today. When small chances of success were all that remained, you had to seize them.

A snowjay’s strident cry rang out in the distance, then a second time, a third. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Ituralde repeated the three harsh calls. Moments later a shaggy, pale dapple gelding appeared out of the trees, his rider in a white cloak streaked with black. Man and horse alike would have been hard to see in the snowy forest had they been standing still. The rider pulled up beside Ituralde. A stocky man, he wore only a single sword, with a short blade, and there were a cased bow and a quiver fastened to his saddle.

“Looks like they all came, my Lord,” he said in his permanently hoarse voice, pushing his cowl back from his head. Someone had tried to hang Donjel when he was young, though the reason was lost in the years. What remained of his short-cropped hair was iron-gray. The dark leather patch covering the socket of his right eye was a remnant of another youthful scrape. One eye or two, though, he was the best scout Ituralde had ever known. “Most, anyways,” he went on. “They put two rings of sentries around the lodge, one inside the other. You can see them a mile off, but nobody will get close without them at the lodge hearing of it in time to get away. By the tracks, they didn’t bring no more men than you said they could, not enough to count. Course,” he added wryly, “that still leaves you outnumbered a fair bit.”

Iturralde nodded. He had offered the White Ribbon, and the men he was to meet had accepted. Three days when men pledged under the Light, by their souls and hope of salvation, not to draw a weapon against another or shed blood. The White Ribbon had not been tested in this war, however, and these days some men had strange ideas of where salvation lay. Those who called themselves Dragonsworn, for instance. He had always been called a gambler, though he was not. The trick was in knowing what risks you could take. And sometimes, in knowing which ones you had to take.

Pulling a packet sewn into oiled silk from his boot top, he handed it to Donjel. “If I don’t reach Coron Ford in two days, take this to my wife.”

The scout tucked the packet somewhere beneath his cloak, touched his forehead, and turned his horse west. He had carried its like for Ituralde before, usually on the eve of battle. The Light send this was not the time Tamsin would have to open that packet. She would come after him—she had told him so—the first incident ever of the living haunting the dead.

“Jaalam,” Ituralde said, “let us see what waits at Lady Osana’s hunting lodge.” As he heeled Dart forward, the others fell in behind him.

The sun rose to its height and began again to descend as they rode. The dark clouds in the north moved closer, and the chill bit deeper. There was no sound but the crunch of hooves breaking through the snow crust. The forest seemed empty save for themselves. He did not see any of the sentries Donjel had spoken of. The man’s opinion of what could be seen from a mile differed from that of most. They would be expecting him, of course. And watching to make sure he was not followed by an army, White Ribbon or no White Ribbon. A good many of them likely had reasons they felt sufficient to feather Rodel Ituralde with arrows. A lord might pledge the White Ribbon for his men, but would all of those feel bound? Sometimes, there were chances you just had to take.

About midafternoon, Osana’s so-called hunting lodge loomed suddenly out of the trees, a mass of pale towers and slender, pointed domes that would have fitted well among the palaces of Bandar Eban itself. Her hunting had always been for men or power, her trophies numerous and noteworthy despite her relative youth, and the “hunts” that had taken place here would have raised eyebrows even in the capital. The lodge lay desolate, now. Broken windows gaped like mouths with jagged teeth. None showed a glimmer of light or movement. The snow covering the cleared ground around the lodge had been well trampled by horses, however. The ornate brass-bound gates of the main courtyard stood open, and he rode through without slowing, followed by his men. The horses’ hooves clattered on the paving stones, where the snow had been beaten to slush.

No servants came out to greet him, not that he had expected any. Osana had vanished early in the troubles that now shook Arad Doman like a dog shaking a rat, and her servants had drifted quickly to others of her house, taking whatever places they could find. These days, the masterless starved, or turned bandit. Or Dragonsworn. Dismounting in front of the broad marble stairway at the end of the courtyard, he handed Dart's reins to one of his armsmen, and Jaalam ordered the men to take shelter where they could find it for themselves and the animals. Eyeing the marble balconies and wide windows that surrounded the courtyard, they moved as if expecting a crossbow bolt between the shoulder blades. One set of stable doors stood slightly ajar, but in spite of the cold, they divided themselves between the corners of the courtyard, huddling with the horses where they could keep watch in every direction. If the worst came, perhaps a few might make it out.

Removing his gauntlets, he tucked them behind his belt and checked his lace as he climbed the stairs with Jaalam. Snow that had been trodden underfoot and frozen again crackled beneath his boots. He refrained from looking anywhere but straight ahead. He must appear supremely assured, as though there were no possibility events should go other than as he expected. Confidence was one key to victory. The other side believing you were confident was sometimes almost as good as actually being confident. At the head of the stairs, Jaalam pulled open one of the tall, carved doors by its gilded ring. Ituralde touched his beauty spot with a finger to make sure it was in place—his cheeks were too cold to feel the black velvet star clinging—before he stepped inside. As self-assured as he would have been at a ball.

The cavernous entry hall was as icy as the outside. Their breath made feathered mists. Unlit, the space seemed already wreathed in twilight. The floor was a colorful mosaic of hunters and animals, the tiles chipped in places, as though heavy weights had been dragged over them, or perhaps dropped. Aside from a single toppled plinth that might once have held a large vase or a small statue, the hall was bare. What the servants had not taken when they fled had long since been looted by bandits. A single man awaited them, white-haired and more gaunt than when Ituralde had last seen him. His breastplate was battered, and his earring was just a small gold hoop, but his lace was immaculate, and the sparkling red quarter moon beside his left eye would have gone well at court, in better times.

"By the Light, be welcome under the White Ribbon, Lord Ituralde," he said formally, with a slight bow.

"By the Light, I come under the White Ribbon, Lord Shimron," Ituralde replied, making his courtesy in return. Shimron had been one of Alsalam's most trusted advisors. Until he joined the Dragonsworn, at least. Now he stood high in their councils. "My armsman is Jaalam Nishur, honor bound to House Ituralde, as are all who came with me."

There had been no House Ituralde before Rodel, but Shimron answered Jaalam's bow, hand to heart. "Honor be to honor. Will you accompany me, Lord Ituralde?" he said as he straightened.

The great doors to the ballroom were gone from their hinges, though Ituralde could hardly imagine bandits looting those. They left a tall pointed arch wide enough for ten men to pass. Within the windowless oval room, half a hundred lanterns of every size and sort beat at shadows, though the light barely reached the domed ceiling. Separated by a wide expanse of floor, two groups of men stood against the painted walls, and if the White Ribbon had induced them to leave off helmets, all two hundred or more were armored otherwise, and certainly no one had put aside his swords. To one side were a few Domani lords as powerful as Shimron—Rajabi, Wakeda, Ankaer—each surrounded by his cluster of lesser lords and sworn commoners and smaller clusters, of few as two or three, many containing no nobles at all. The Dragonsworn had councils, but no one commander. Still, each of those men was a leader in his own right, some counting their followers in scores, a few in thousands. None appeared happy to be where he was, and one or two shot glares across the floor, to where fifty or sixty Taraboners stood in one solid mass and scowled back. Dragonsworn they might all be, yet there was little love lost between Domani and Taraboners. Ituralde almost smiled at the sight of the outlanders, though. He had not dared to count on half so many appearing today.

"Lord Rodel Ituralde comes under the White Ribbon." Shimron's voice rang through the lantern shadows. "Let whoever may think of violence search his heart, and consider his soul." And that was the end of formality.

"Why does Lord Ituralde offer the White Ribbon?" Wakeda demanded, one hand gripping the hilt of his longsword and the other in a fist at his side. He was not a tall man, though taller than Ituralde, but as haughty as if he held the throne himself. Women had called him beautiful, once. Now a slanting black scarf covered the socket of his missing right eye, and his beauty spot was a black arrowhead pointing at the thick scar running from his cheek up onto his forehead. “Does he intend to join us? Or ask us to surrender? All know the Wolf is bold as well as devious. Is he that bold?” A rumble rose among the men on his side of the room, part mirth, part anger.

Ituralde clasped his hands behind his back to keep from fingering the ruby in his left ear. That was widely known as a sign that he was angry, and sometimes he did it on purpose, but he needed to present a calm face, now. Even while the man spoke past his ear! No. Calm. Duels were entered into in anger, but he was here to fight a duel, and that required calm. Words could be deadlier weapons than swords.

“Every man here knows we have another enemy to the south,” he said in a steady voice. “The Seanchan have swallowed Tarabon.” He ran his gaze over the Taraboners, and met flat stares. He never had been able to read Taraboners’ faces. Between those preposterous mustaches—like hairy tusks; worse than a Saldaean’s!—and those ridiculous veils, they might as well wear masks, and the poor light from the lanterns did not help. But he had seen them veiled in mail, and he needed them. “They have flooded onto Almoth Plain, and moved ever north. Their intent is clear. They mean to have Arad Doman, too. They mean to have the whole world, I fear.”

“Does Lord Ituralde want to know who we will support if these Seanchan invade us?” Wakeda demanded.

“I have true faith you will fight for Arad Doman, Lord Wakeda,” Ituralde said mildly. Wakeda went purple at having the direct insult flung in his teeth, and his oath-men’s hands went to hilts.

“Refugees have brought word that there are Aiel on the plain, now,” Shimron put in quickly, as though he feared Wakeda might break the White Ribbon. None of Wakeda’s oath-men would draw steel unless he did, or commanded them to. “They fight for the Dragon Reborn, so say the reports. He must have sent them, perhaps as an aid to us. No one has ever defeated an Aiel army, not even Artur Hawkwing. You recall the Blood Snow, Lord Ituralde, when we were younger? I believe you agree with me that we did not defeat them there, whatever the histories may say, and I cannot believe the Seanchan have the numbers we did then. I myself have heard of Seanchan moving south, away from the border. No, I suspect the next we hear will be of them *retreating* from the plain, not advancing on us.” He was not a bad commander in the field, but he had always been pedantic.

Ituralde smiled. Word came more swiftly from the south than from anywhere else, but he had been afraid he would have to bring up the Aiel, and they might have thought he was trying to trick them. He could hardly believe it himself, Aiel on Almoth Plain. He did not point out that Aiel sent to help the Dragonsworn were more likely to have appeared in Arad Doman itself. "I've questioned refugees, too, and they speak of Aiel raids, not armies. Whatever the Aiel are doing on the plain may have slowed the Seanchan, but it hasn't turned them back. Their flying beasts have begun scouting on our side of the border. That does not smack of retreat."

Producing the paper from his sleeve with a flourish, he held it up so all could see the Sword and Hand impressed in green-and-blue wax. As always of late, he had used a hot blade to separate the Royal Seal on one side while leaving it whole, so he could show it unbroken to doubters. There had been plenty of those, when they heard some of Alsalam's orders. "I have orders from King Alsalam to gather as many men as I can, from wherever I can find them, and strike as hard as I can at the Seanchan." He took a deep breath. Here, he took another chance, and Alsalam might have his head on the block unless the dice fell the right way. "I offer a truce. I pledge in the King's name not to move against you in any way so long as the Seanchan remain a threat to Arad Doman, if you will all pledge the same and fight beside me against them until they are beaten back."

A stunned silence answered him. Bull-necked Rajabi appeared poleaxed. Wakeda chewed his lip like a startled girl.

Then Shimron muttered, "Can they *be* beaten back, Lord Ituralde? I faced their . . . their chained Aes Sedai on Almoth Plain, as did you." Boots scraped the floor as men shifted their feet, and faces darkened in bleak anger. No man liked to think he was helpless before an enemy, but enough had been there in the early days, with Ituralde and Shimron, for all to know what this enemy was like.

"They can be defeated, Lord Shimron," Ituralde replied, "even with their . . . little surprises." A strange thing to call the earth erupting under your feet, and scouts that rode what looked like Shadowspawn, but he had to sound assured as well as look it. Besides, when you knew what the enemy could do, you adapted. That had been one core of warfare long before the Seanchan appeared. Darkness cut the Seanchan advantages, and so did storms, and a weather-wise could always tell you when a storm was coming. "A wise man stops chewing when he reaches bone," he continued, "but so far, the Seanchan have had their meat sliced thin before they reached for it. I intend to give them a tough shank to gnaw. More, I have a plan to make them snap so fast they'll break their teeth on bone before they have a mouthful of meat. Now. I have pledged. Will you?"

It was hard not to hold his breath. Each man seemed to be looking inward. He could all but see them mulling it over. The Wolf had a plan. The Seanchan had chained Aes Sedai and flying beasts and the Light alone knew what else. But the Wolf had a plan. The Seanchan. The Wolf.

"If any man can defeat them," Shimron said finally, "you can, Lord Ituralde. I will so pledge."

"I *do* so pledge!" Rajabi shouted. "We'll chase them back across the ocean where they came from!" He had a bull's temperament as well as its neck.

Surprisingly, Wakeda thundered his agreement with equal enthusiasm, and then a storm of voices broke, calling that they would match the King's pledge, that they would smash the Seanchan, even some that they would follow the Wolf into the Pit of Doom. All very gratifying, but not all Ituralde had come for.

"If you ask *us* to fight for Arad Doman," one voice shouted above the rest, "then ask *us!*" The men who had been calling their pledges fell to angry mutters and half-heard curses.

Hiding his pleasure behind a bland expression, Ituralde turned to face the speaker, on the other side of the room. The Taraboner was a lean man, with a sharp nose that made a tent of his veil. His eyes were hard, though, and keen. Some of the other Taraboners frowned as if displeased he had spoken, so it appeared they had no one leader any more than the Domani, but he had spoken. Ituralde had hoped for the pledges he had received, but they were not necessary to his plan. The Taraboners were. At least, they would make it a hundred times more likely to work. He addressed the man courteously, with a bow.

"I offer you the chance to fight for Tarabon, my good Lord. The Aiel are making some confusion on the plain; the refugees speak of it. Tell me, could a small company of your men—a hundred, perhaps two—cross the plain in that disorder and enter Tarabon, if their armor was marked with stripes, as those who ride for the Seanchan?"

It seemed impossible the Taraboner's face could grow any tighter, yet it did, and it was the turn of the men on his side of the room to mutter angrily and curse. Enough word had come north for them to know of a king and panarch put on their thrones by the Seanchan and swearing fealty to an empress on the other side of the Aryth Ocean. They could not like reminders of how many of their countrymen now rode for this empress. Most of the “Seanchan” on Almoth Plain were Taraboners.

“What good could one small company do?” the lean man growled, contemptuous.

“Little good,” Ituralde replied. “But if there were fifty such companies? A hundred?” These Taraboners might have that many men behind them, all told. “If they all struck on the same day, all across Tarabon? I myself would ride with them, and as many of my men as can be outfitted in Taraboner armor. Just so you will know this is not simply a stratagem to get rid of you.”

Behind him, the Domani began protesting loudly. Wakeda the loudest of all, if it could be believed! The Wolf’s plan was all very well, but they wanted the Wolf himself at their head. Most of the Taraboners began arguing among themselves, over whether so many men could cross the plain without being discovered, even in such small bands, over what good if any they could do in Tarabon in small companies, over whether they were willing to wear armor marked with Seanchan stripes. Taraboners argued as easily as Saldaeans, and as hotly. Not the sharp-nosed man. He met Ituralde’s gaze steadily. Then gave a slight nod. It was hard to tell, behind those thick mustaches, but Ituralde thought he smiled.

The last tension faded from Ituralde’s shoulders. The fellow would not have agreed while the others argued if he were not more of a leader among them than he seemed. The others would come, too, he was certain. They would ride south with him into the heart of what the Seanchan considered their own, and slap them hard and full across the face. The Taraboners would want to stay afterward, of course, and continue the fight in their own homeland. He could not expect anything more. Which would leave him and the few thousand men he could take with him to be hounded back north again, all the long way across Almoth Plain. If the Light shone on him, hounded with fury.

He returned the Taraboner’s smile, if smile it was. With any luck, furious generals would not see where he was leading them until it was too late. And if they did . . . Well, he had a second plan.

Eamon Valda held his cloak tight around himself as he tramped through the snow among the trees. Cold and steady, the wind sighed through the snow-laden branches, a deceptively quiet sound in the damp gray light. It sliced through the thick white wool as through gauze, chilling him to the bone. The camp sprawling around him through the forest was too quiet. Movement provided a little warmth, but in this, men huddled together unless driven to move.

Abruptly he stopped in his tracks, wrinkling his nose at a sudden stench, a gagging foulness like twenty midden heaps crawling with maggots. He did not gag; instead, he scowled. The camp lacked the precision he preferred. The tents were clustered haphazardly wherever the limbs overhead grew thickest, the horses tethered close by rather than properly picketed. It was the sort of slackness that led to filth. Unwatched, the men would bury horse dung under a few shovels of dirt to be done with it quicker, and dig latrines where they would not have to walk far in the cold. Any officer of his who allowed that would cease to be an officer, and learn firsthand how to use a shovel.

He was scanning the camp for the source of the smell, when suddenly there was no smell. The wind did not change; the stink just vanished. He was startled for only a moment. Walking on, he scowled all the harder. The stench had come from *some*where. He would find whoever thought discipline had slackened, and make examples of them. Discipline had to be tight, now; tighter than ever.

At the edge of a broad clearing, he paused again. The snow in the clearing was smooth and unmarked despite the camp hidden all around it. Staying back among the trees, he scanned the sky. Scudding gray clouds hid the noonday sun. A flicker of motion made his breath catch before he realized it was just a bird, some small brown thing wary of hawks and staying low. He barked a laugh that was more than touched with bitterness. Little more than a month since the Light-cursed Seanchan had swallowed Amador and the Fortress of Light in one unbelievable gulp, but he had learned new instincts. Wise men learned, while fools . . .

Ailron had been a fool, puffed up with old tales of glory brightened by age and new hope of winning real power to go with his crown. He refused to see the reality in front of his eyes, and Ailron’s Disaster had been the result. Valda had heard it named the Battle of Jeramel, but only by some of the bare handful of Amadician nobles who escaped, dazed as poleaxed steers yet still trying mechanically to put the best face on events. He wondered what Ailron had called it when the Seanchan's tame witches began tearing his orderly ranks to bloody rags. He could still see that in his head, the earth turning to fountains of fire. He saw it in his dreams. Well, Ailron was dead, cut down trying to flee the field and his head displayed on a Taraboner's lance. A suitable death for a fool. He, on the other hand, had over nine thousand of the Children gathered around him. A man who saw clearly could make much out of that in times like these.

On the far side of the clearing, just inside the treeline, was a rude house that had once belonged to a charcoal burner, a single room with winter-brown weeds thick in the gaps between the stones. By all appearances, the man had abandoned the place some time ago; parts of the thatch roof sagged dangerously, and whatever had once filled the narrow windows was long since gone, replaced now by dark blankets. Two guards stood beside the ill-fitting wooden door, big men with the scarlet shepherd's crook behind the golden sunflare on their cloaks. They had their arms wrapped around themselves and were stamping their boots against the cold. Neither could have reached his sword in time to do any good, had Valda been an enemy. Questioners liked to work indoors.

Their faces might have been carved stone as they watched him approach. Neither offered more than a halfhearted salute. Not for a man without the shepherd's crook, even if he was Lord Captain Commander of the Children. One opened his mouth as if to question Valda's purpose, but Valda walked by them and pushed open the rough door. At least they did not try to stop him. He would have killed them both, if they had.

At his entrance, Asunawa looked up from the crooked table where he was perusing a small book, one bony hand cupped around a steaming pewter cup that gave off the odor of spices. His ladder-back chair, the only other piece of furniture in the room, appeared rickety, but someone had strengthened it with rawhide lashings. Valda tightened his mouth to stop a sneer. The High Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light demanded a real roof, not a tent, even if it was thatch sorely in need of patching, and mulled wine when no one else had tasted wine of any sort in a week. A small fire burned on the stone hearth, too, giving a meager warmth. Even cook fires had been banned since before the Disaster, to prevent smoke giving them away. Still, although most Children despised the Questioners, they held Asunawa in a strange esteem, as if his gray hair and gaunt martyr's face graced him with all the ideals of the Children of the Light. That had been a surprise, when Valda first learned of it; he was unsure whether Asunawa himself knew. In any case, there were enough Questioners to make trouble. Nothing he could not handle, but it was best to avoid that sort of trouble. For now.

"It is almost time," he said, shutting the door behind him. "Are you ready?"

Asunawa made no move to rise or reach for the white cloak folded across the table beside him. There was no sunflare on that, just the scarlet crook. Instead, he folded his hands over the book, hiding the pages. Valda thought it was Mantelar's *The Way of the Light*. Odd reading for the High Inquisitor. More suited to new recruits; those who could not read when they swore were taught so they could study Mantelar's words. "I have reports of an Andoran army in Murandy, my son," Asunawa said. "Deep in Murandy, perhaps."

"Murandy is a long way from here," Valda said as though he did not recognize an old argument starting anew. An argument that Asunawa often seemed to forget he had already lost. But what were Andorans doing in Murandy? If the reports were true; so many were travelers' fantasies wrapped in lies. Andor. The very name rankled in Valda's memory. Morgase was dead, or else a servant to some Seanchan. They had little respect for titles other than their own. Dead or a servant, she was lost to him, and more importantly by far, his plans for Andor were lost. Galadedrid had gone from a useful lever to just another young officer, and one who was too popular with the common soldiers. Good officers were never popular. But Valda was a pragmatic man. The past was the past. New plans had replaced Andor.

"Not so far if we move east, across Altara, my son, across the north of Altara. The Seanchan cannot have moved far from Ebou Dar yet."

Spreading his hands to catch the hearthfire's small warmth, Valda sighed. They had spread like a plague in Tarabon, and here in Amadicia. Why did the man think Altara was different? "Are you forgetting the witches in Altara? With an army of their own, need I remind you? Unless they're into Murandy by now." Those reports he believed, of the witches on the move. In spite of himself, his voice rose. "Maybe this so-called Andoran army you've heard about is the witches, and their army! They gave Caemlyn to al'Thor, remember! And Illian, and half the east! Do you really believe the witches are divided? Do you?" Slowly he drew a deep breath, calming himself. Trying to. Every tale out of the east was worse than the last. A gust of wind down the chimney blew sparks into the room, and he stepped back with a curse. Bloody peasant hovel! Even the chimney was ill made!

Asunawa snapped the small book shut between his palms. His hands were folded as in prayer, but his deep-set eyes suddenly seemed hotter than the fire. "I believe the witches must be destroyed! That is what I believe!"

"I'd settle for knowing how the Seanchan tame them." With enough tame witches, he could drive al'Thor out of Andor, out of Illian and everywhere else he had settled like the Shadow itself. He could better Hawkwing himself!

"They must be destroyed," Asunawa asserted stubbornly.

"And us with them?" Valda demanded.

A knock came at the door, and at Asunawa's curt summons one of the guards from outside appeared in the doorway, standing rigidly erect, arm snapping across his chest in a crisp salute. "My Lord High Inquisitor," he said respectfully, "the Council of the Anointed is here."

Valda waited. Would the old fool continue to be stubborn with all ten surviving Lords Captain outside, mounted and ready to ride? What was done, was done. What had to be done.

"If it brings down the White Tower," Asunawa said finally, "I can be content. For now. I will come to this meeting."

Valda smiled thinly. "Then I am content. We will see the witches fall together." Certainly, he would see them fall. "I suggest you have your horse readied. We have a long way to ride by nightfall." Whether Asunawa would see it with him was another matter.

Gabrelle enjoyed her rides through the wintery woods with Logain and Toveine. He always let Toveine and her follow at their own pace in a semblance of privacy, so long as they did not lag too far behind. The two Aes Sedai seldom spoke more than absolutely necessary, though, even when they truly were private. They were far from friends. In fact, Gabrelle often wished Toveine would ask to stay behind when Logain offered these outings. It would have been very pleasant to be really alone.

Holding her reins in one green-gloved hand and keeping her fox-lined cloak shut with the other, she let herself feel the cold, just a little, just for the refreshing vigor of it. The snow was not deep, but the morning air was crisp. Dark gray clouds promised more snow, soon. High overhead flew a long-winged bird of some sort. An eagle, perhaps; birds were not her strong point. Plants and minerals stayed in one place while you studied them, and so did books and manuscripts, though those might crumble under her fingers, if they were old enough. She could barely make the bird out at that height, in any case, but an eagle fit the landscape. Woodland surrounded them, small dense thickets dotted among more widely spaced trees. Great oaks and towering pines and firs had killed off most of the undergrowth, though here and there the thick brown remains of a hardy vine, waiting for a still distant spring, clung to a boulder or a low gray ledge of stone. She carefully held that landscape in her mind like a novice exercise, chill and empty.

With no one in sight except her two companions, she could almost imagine she was somewhere other than the Black Tower. That horrid name came all too easily to mind, now. A thing as real as the White Tower, and no longer "so-called" for anyone who laid eyes on the great stone barracks buildings that held hundreds of men in training, and the village that had grown up around them. She had lived in that village for nearly two weeks, and there were parts of the Black Tower she still had not seen. Its grounds covered miles, surrounded by the beginnings of a wall of black stone. Still, she could almost forget, here in the woods.

Almost. Except for the bundle of sensation and emotion, the essence of Logain Ablar, that always rode in the back of her mind, a constant feel of controlled wariness, of muscles always on the edge of tensing. A hunting wolf might feel that way, or perhaps a lion. The man's head moved constantly; even here he watched his surroundings as though expecting attack.

She had never had a Warder—they were needless flamboyance for Browns; a hired servant could do all she needed—and it felt peculiar to be not only part of a bond, but at the wrong end of it, so to speak. Worse than simply the wrong end; *this* bond required her to obey, and she was hedged about with prohibitions. So it was not the same as a Warder bond, really. Sisters did not *force* their Warders to obedience. Well, not very often. And sisters had not bonded men against their will for centuries. Still, it did provide a fascinating study. She had worked at interpreting what she sensed. At times, she could almost read his mind. Other times, it was like fumbling through a mineshaft with no lamp. She supposed she would try to study if her neck were stretched on the headsman's block. Which, in a very real way, it was. He could sense her as well as she could him.

She must always remember that. Some of the Asha'man might believe the Aes Sedai were resigned to their captivity, but only a fool could think fifty-one sisters who had been forcibly bonded would all embrace resignation, and Logain was no fool. Besides, he knew they had been sent to destroy the Black Tower. Yet if he suspected that they were still trying to find a way to end the threat of hundreds of men who could channel . . . Light, constrained as they were, one order could halt them in their tracks! You will do nothing to harm the Black Tower. She could not understand why that command had not been given as a simple precaution. They must succeed. Fail, and the world was doomed.

Logain turned in his saddle, an imposing, broad-shouldered figure in a well-fitting coat dark as pitch, without a touch of color save for the silver Sword and the red-and-gold Dragon on his high collar. His black cloak was thrown back, as though he were refusing to let the cold touch him. He might be; these men seemed to believe they had to fight everything, all the time. He smiled at her—reassuringly?—and she blinked. Had she let too much anxiety slip into her end of the bond? It was such a delicate dance, trying to control her emotions, to present just the right responses. It was almost like taking the test for the shawl, where every weave had to be made exactly so, without the slightest falter, despite every manner of distraction, only this test went on and on and on.

He turned his attention on Toveine, and Gabrelle exhaled softly. Just a smile, then. A companionable gesture. He was often congenial. He might have been likable if he were anything but what he was.

Toveine beamed back at him, and Gabrelle had to stop herself from shaking her head in wonderment, not for the first time. Pulling her hood a little forward as though against the cold, so it sheltered her face while giving her an edge to peek around, she studied the Red sister surreptitiously.

Everything she knew of the other woman said she buried her hates in shallow graves, if at all, and Toveine loathed men who could channel as deeply as any Red Gabrelle had ever met. *Any* Red must despise Logain Ablar, after the claims he had made, that the Red Ajah itself had set him up to become a false Dragon. He might be holding his silence now, but the damage was done. There were sisters captive with them who looked at Reds as though thinking they, at least, were caught in a trap of their making. Yet Toveine all but *simpered* at him. Gabrelle bit her underlip in perplexed thought. True, Desandre and Lemai had ordered everyone to achieve cordial relations with the Asha'man who held their bonds—the men must be lulled before the sisters could do anything useful—but Toveine bristled openly at every command from either sister. She had detested yielding to them, and might have refused if Lemai were not also Red, no matter that she had admitted it must be so. Or that no one had recognized her authority once she led them into captivity. She hated that, too. Yet that was when she had begun smiling at Logain.

For that matter, how could Logain sit at the other end of her bond and take that smile as anything but fraud? Gabrelle had picked at that knot before, too, without coming close to untying it. He knew too much about Toveine. Knowing her Ajah should have been enough. Yet Gabrelle felt as little suspicion in him when he looked at the Red sister as when he looked at her. He was hardly *free* of suspicion; the man was distrustful of everyone, it seemed. But less of *any* sister than of some Asha'man. That made no sense, either.

He's no fool, she reminded herself. *So, why? And why for Toveine, as well? What is she scheming at?*

Abruptly, Toveine flashed that seemingly warm smile at her, and spoke as if she had voiced at least one of her questions aloud. "With you near," she murmured in a mist of breath, "he's barely aware of me. You've made him *your* captive, sister."

Caught by surprise, Gabrelle flushed in spite of herself. Toveine never made conversation, and to say she disapproved of Gabrelle's situation with Logain was to understate drastically. Seducing him had seemed such an obvious way to get close enough to learn his plans, his weaknesses. After all, even if he *was* an Asha'man, she had been Aes Sedai long before he was born, and she was hardly a total innocent when it came to men. He had been so surprised when he realized what she was doing that she almost thought of *him* as the innocent. More fool, she. Playing the Domani turned out to hide many surprises, and a few pitfalls. Worst of all, a trap she could never reveal to anyone. Something she very much feared that Toveine knew, though, at least in part. But then, any sister who had followed her lead must know, too, and she thought several had. None had spoken of the problem, and none was likely to, of course. Logain could mask the bond, in a crude way she believed would still allow her to find him however well it hid his emotions, but sometimes when they shared a pillow, he let the masking slip.

To say the least, the results were . . . devastating. There was no calm restraint, then, no cool study. Not much of reason at all.

Hurriedly she summoned the image of the snowy landscape again and fixed it in her mind. Trees and boulders and smooth, white snow. Smooth, *cold* snow.

Logain did not look back at her, or give any outward sign, but the bond told her that he was aware of her momentary loss of control. The man brimmed with smugness! And *satisfaction!* It was all she could do not to seethe. But he would expect her to seethe, burn him! He *had* to know what she felt from him. Letting her anger rise, though, only filled the fellow with *amusement!* And he was not even attempting to hide it!

Toveine was wearing a small, satisfied smile, Gabrelle noticed, but she had only a moment to wonder why.

They had had the morning to themselves, but now another rider appeared through the trees, a cloakless man in black who angled his horse in their direction when he saw them, and dug his bootheels into his animal's flanks for speed despite the snow. Logain reined in to wait, the image of calm, and Gabrelle stiffened as she halted her mount beside him. The feelings carried by the bond had shifted. Now they were the tension of a wolf waiting to spring. She expected to see his gauntleted hands on his sword hilt rather than resting at ease on the tall pommel of his saddle.

The newcomer was almost as tall as Logain, with waves of golden hair to his wide shoulders and a winning smile. She suspected he knew it was a winning smile. He was too pretty not to know, much more beautiful than Logain. Life's forges had hardened Logain's face, and left edges. This young man was smooth, yet. Still, the Sword and the Dragon decorated his coat collar. He studied the two sisters with bright blue eyes. "Are you bedding both of them, Logain?" he said in a deep voice. "The plump one looks cold-eyed, to me, but the other appears warm enough."

Toveine hissed angrily, and Gabrelle's jaw clenched. She had made no real secret of what she did—she was no Cairhienin, to cloak in privacy what she was ashamed of in public—but that did not mean she expected to have it bantered about. Worse, the man spoke as though they were tavern lightskirts!

"Don't ever let me hear that again, Mishraile," Logain said quietly, and she realized the bond had changed again. It was cold, now; cold to make the snow seem warm. Cold to make a grave seem warm. She had heard that name before, Atal Mishraile, and felt distrust in Logain when he spoke it—certainly more than he felt for her or Toveine—but this was the feel of killing. It was almost laughable. The man held her prisoner, yet he was ready to do violence to defend her reputation? Part of her did want to laugh, but she tucked the information away. Any scrap might be useful.

The younger fellow gave no sign of hearing a threat. His smile never faltered. "The M'Hael says you can go, if you want. Can't see why you'd want to take on recruiting."

"Someone has to," Logain replied in a level tone.

Gabrelle exchanged puzzled glances with Toveine. Why *would* Logain want to go recruiting? They had seen parties of Asha'man return from that, and they were always tired from Traveling long distances, and usually dirty and snappish besides. Men beating the drum for the Dragon Reborn did not always get the warmest welcome, it seemed, even before anyone learned what they were really after. And why were she and Toveine just hearing of it? She would have *sworn* he told her everything when they were lying together.

Mishraile shrugged. "Plenty of Dedicated and Soldiers to do that sort of work. Of course, I suppose it bores you looking after training all the time. Teaching fools to sneak around in the woods and climb cliffs as if they couldn't channel a whisker. Even a fly-speck village might look better." His smile slid into a smirk, disdainful and not at all winning. "Maybe if you ask the M'Hael, he'll let you join his classes at the palace. You wouldn't be bored then."

Logain's face never changed, but Gabrelle felt one sharp bolt of fury through the bond. She had overheard tidbits about Mazrim Taim and his private classes, but all any of the sisters really knew was that Logain and his cronies did not trust Taim or any who attended his lessons, and Taim appeared not to trust Logain. Unfortunately, what the sisters could learn of the classes was limited; no one was bonded to a man of Taim's faction. Some thought the mistrust was because both men had claimed to be the Dragon Reborn, or even a sign of the madness that channeling brought to men. She had not detected any evidence of insanity in Logain, and she watched for it as hard as she watched for signs he was about to channel. If she were still bound to him when he went mad, it might seize her mind, too. Whatever caused a crack in the Asha'man's ranks must be exploited, though.

Mishraile’s smile faded as Logain merely looked at him. “Enjoy your flyspecks,” he said finally, pulling his horse around. A thud of his heel made the animal spring away as he called over his shoulder, “Glory waits for some of us, Logain.”

“He may not enjoy his Dragon long,” Logain murmured, watching the other man gallop off. “He’s too free with his tongue.” She did not think he meant the comment about her and Toveine, but what else could he mean? And why was he suddenly worried? Hiding it very well, especially considering the bond, but still, he was worried. Light, sometimes it seemed that knowing what was in a man’s head made the confusion worse!

Abruptly, he turned his gaze on her and Toveine, studying. A new thread of concern slipped through the bond. About them? Or—an odd thought—*for* them?

“I fear we must cut short our ride,” he said after a moment. “I have preparations to make.”

He did not break into a gallop, but he still set a quicker pace back toward the village of the men in training than he had coming out. He was concentrating on something, now; thinking hard, Gabrelle suspected. The bond practically hummed with it. He must have been riding by instinct.

Before they had gone very far, Toveine moved her horse close to Gabrelle’s. Leaning in her saddle, she tried to fix Gabrelle with an intent stare while darting quick glances at Logain as if afraid he might look back and see them talking. She never seemed to pay attention to what the bond told her. The divided effort made her bob about like a puppet, in danger of falling.

“We must go with him,” the Red whispered. “Whatever it takes, you must see to it.” Gabrelle raised her eyebrows, and Toveine had the grace to color, but she lost nothing of her insistence. “We cannot afford to be left behind,” she breathed hurriedly. “The man didn’t abandon his ambitions when he came here. Whatever vileness he plans, we can do nothing if we aren’t right there when he tries.”

“I can see what’s in front of my nose,” Gabrelle said sharply, and felt relief when Toveine simply nodded and fell silent. It was all Gabrelle could do to control the fear that was rising in her. Did Toveine never *think* about what she must sense through the bond? Something that had always been there in the connection with Logain—determination—now lay hard and sharp as a knife. She thought she knew what it meant, this time, and knowing made her mouth dry. Against whom, she could not say, but she was sure that Logain Ablar was riding to war.

Slowly descending one of the wide hallways that spiraled gently through the White Tower, Yukiri felt prickly as a starved cat. She could barely make herself listen to what the sister gliding beside her was saying. The morning was still dim, first light darkened by the snow falling heavily on Tar Valon, and the middle levels of the Tower were as icy as a Borderland winter. Well, perhaps not so cold as that, she allowed after a moment. She had not been that far north in a number of years, and memory expanded what it did not shrink. That was the reason written records were so important. Except when you did not dare write down anything, at least. Still, it was chill enough. For all the ancient builders' cleverness and skill, heat from the great furnaces in the basement never reached this high. Drafts made the flames dance on the gilded stand-lamps, and some were strong enough to stir the heavy tapestries spaced along the white walls, spring flowers and woodlands and exotic animals and birds alternating with scenes of Tower triumphs that would never be displayed in the public areas below. Her own rooms, with their warm fireplaces, would once have been much more comfortable.

News from the outside world churned through her head despite her efforts to avoid it. Or rather, more often, the lack of solid news. What eyes-and-ears reported from Altara and Arad Doman was all confusion, and the few reports beginning to seep out of Tarabon again were frightening. Rumor put the Borderland rulers everywhere from the Blight to Andor to Amadicia to the Aiel Waste; the only confirmed fact was that none were where they were supposed to be, guarding the Blightborder. The Aiel *were* everywhere, and finally out of al'Thor's control, it appeared, if they had ever been in it. The latest news from Murandy made her want to grind her teeth and weep at the same time, while Cairhien . . . ! Sisters all over the Sun Palace, some suspected of being rebels and none known to be loyal, and still no word of Coiren and her embassy since they departed the city, though they should have been back in Tar Valon long since. And as if that were not enough, al'Thor himself had vanished like a soap bubble yet again. Could the tales that he had half-destroyed the Sun Palace be true? Light, the man *could* not go mad yet! Or had Elaida's witless offer of "protection" frightened him into hiding? Did *anything* frighten him? He frightened her. He frightened the rest of the Hall, too, let them put whatever face on it they wanted.

The only thing truly certain was that none of that mattered a spit in a rainstorm. Knowing so did not help her mood in the slightest. Worry over being caught in a tangle of roses, even if the thorns might kill you eventually, was a luxury when you had a knife point pressed to your ribs.

"Every time she's left the Tower in the last ten years, it has been on her own affairs, so there are no recent records to check," her companion murmured. "It's difficult to learn exactly when she *has* been out of the Tower and remain . . . discreet." Her dark golden hair held back by ivory combs, Meidani was tall, and slender enough to look overbalanced by her bosom, an effect emphasized by both the fit of her dark silver embroidered bodice and the way she walked in a stoop to put her mouth more on the level of Yukiri's ear. Her shawl was caught on her wrists, the long gray fringe dragging the floor tiles.

"Straighten your backbone," Yukiri growled quietly. "My ears aren't clogged with dirt."

The other woman jerked herself upright, faint splashes of color in her cheeks. Pulling her shawl higher on her arms, Meidani half glanced over her shoulder toward her Warder Leonin, who was following at a discreet distance. If they could barely hear the faint tinkle of the silver bells in the lean man's black braids, though, he could hear nothing said in a moderate tone. The man knew no more than necessary—precious little, in fact, except that his Aes Sedai wanted certain things of him; that was enough for any good Warder—and he might cause problems if he learned too much, but there was no need for whispering. People who saw whispering wanted to know what the secret was.

The other Gray was no more the source of her irritation than the outside world, however, even if the woman was a jackdaw in swan's feathers. Not the main source, anyway. A disgusting thing, a rebel pretending loyalty, yet Yukiri was actually glad that Saerin and Pevara had convinced her that they should not yet turn Meidani and her sister jackdaws over to Tower law. Their wings were clipped, now, and they were useful. They might even gain a measure of clemency, for when they did face justice. Of course, when the oath that had clipped Meidani's wings came out, Yukiri might easily find herself wishing for clemency herself. Rebels or not, what she and the others had done with Meidani and her confederates was as far outside the law as murder. Or treason. An oath of personal obedience—sworn on the Oath Rod itself; sworn under duress—was all too close to Compulsion, which was clearly prohibited if not really defined. Still, sometimes you had to smudge the plaster to smoke out hornets, and the Black Ajah were hornets with venomous stings. The law would have its course in due time—without the law, there was nothing—but she needed to be more concerned with whether she would survive the smoking out than with what penalties the law would exact. Corpses had no need to worry about punishment.

She motioned curtly for Meidani to go on, but no sooner had the other woman opened her mouth than three Browns rounded a corner from another hallway right in front of them, flaunting their shawls like Greens. Yukiri knew Marris Thornhill and Doraise Mesianos slightly, in the manner Sitters knew sisters from other Ajahs who spent long periods in the Tower, which was to say enough to attach names to faces and not much more. Mild and absorbed in their studies was how she would have described them, if pressed. Elin Warrel was so newly raised to the shawl, she still should have been bobbing curtsies on instinct. Instead of offering courtesies to a Sitter, though, all three stared at Yukiri and Meidani the way cats stared at strange dogs. Or maybe dogs at strange cats. No mildness, there.

“May I ask about a point of Arafellin law, Sitter?” Meidani said, as smoothly as if that were what she had been intending to say all along.

Yukiri nodded, and Meidani began rambling about fishing rights on rivers versus lakes, hardly an inspired choice. A magistrate might ask an Aes Sedai to listen to a case of fishing rights, but only to bolster her own opinion if powerful people were involved and she was worried about an appeal to the throne.

A single Warder trailed the Browns—Yukiri could not recall whether he belonged to Marris or Doraise—a heavyset fellow with a hard round face and a dark top knot who eyed Leonin and the swords on his back with a distrust surely picked up from his sister. That pair stalked by up the slowly spiraling corridor with plump chins high, the skinny newling leaping anxiously to keep up. The Warder strode after them radiating the air of a man in hostile country.

Hostility was all too usual, nowadays. The invisible walls between the Ajahs, once barely thick enough to hide each Ajah’s own mysteries, had become hard stone ramparts with moats. No, not moats; chasms, deep and wide. Sisters never left their own Ajah’s quarters alone, often took their Warders even to the library and the dining rooms, and always wore their shawls, as though someone might mistake their Ajah, otherwise. Yukiri herself was wearing her best, embroidered in silver and thread-of-gold, with the long silk fringe that hung to her ankles. So she supposed she was flaunting her Ajah a bit, too. And lately, she had been considering that a dozen years was long enough to go without a Warder. A horrible thought, once she sifted out the source. No sister should have need of a Warder inside the White Tower.

Not for the first time, the thought hit her hard that someone had to mediate among the Ajahs, and soon, or the rebels would dance in through the front door, bold as thieves, and empty the house while the rest of them squabbled over who got Great Aunt Sumi's pewter. But the only end of the thread she could see to begin working out the snarl was to have Meidani and her friends publicly admit that they had been sent to the Tower by the rebels to spread rumors—tales they still insisted were true!—that the Red Ajah had created Logain as a false Dragon. *Could* it be true? Without Pevara knowing? Impossible to think that a Sitter, especially Pevara, could have been fooled. In any case, that bit of the tangle had been overlaid with so many others by now that it scarcely could make any difference by itself. Besides, it would throw away the aid of ten out of the fourteen women she could be sure were not Black Ajah, not to mention likely exposing what the rest of them were doing, before the storm over it blew out.

She shivered, and it had nothing to do with drafts in the corridor. She and every other woman who might reveal the truth would die before that storm ended, by so-called accident or in bed. Or she might just vanish, apparently gone out of the Tower never to be seen again. She had no doubt of that. Any evidence would be buried so deep, an army with shovels could never dig it up. Even rumors would be plastered over. It had happened before. The world and most sisters still believed Tamra Ospenya had died in her bed. She had believed it. They had to have the Black Ajah wrapped up and tied, as near as possible, before they dared risk going public.

Meidani took up her report again once the Browns were safely past, but fell silent only moments later when, just ahead of them, a big hairy hand suddenly thrust aside a tapestry from behind. An icy draft swept out of the doorway that had been hidden by the tapestry's brightly colored birds from the Drowned Lands, and a heavy fellow in a thick brown workcoat backed into the corridor, pulling a handcart stacked high with split hickory that another serving man in a rough coat was pushing from behind. Common laborers: neither had the white Flame on his chest.

At sight of two Aes Sedai, the men hastily let the tapestry fall back into place and wrestled their cart out of the way against the wall while trying to make their bows, almost toppling the load, which set them grabbing at the sliding firewood frantically while still bobbing. No doubt they had expected to finish their work without encountering any sisters. Yukiri always felt sympathy for the people who had to haul wood and water and everything else up the servants' ramps all the way from the ground, but she strode past them with a scowl.

Talk while walking was never overheard, and the hallways in the common areas had seemed a good place to be private with Meidani. Much better than her own apartments, where any ward against eavesdropping would only announce to everyone in the Gray quarter that she was discussing secrets, and, far worse, with whom. There were only two hundred or so sisters in the Tower at the moment, a number the White Tower could swallow and seem vacant, and with everyone keeping to themselves, the common areas should have been empty. So she had thought.

She had taken into account the liveried servants rushing about to check lamp-wicks and oil levels and a dozen other things, and the plain-clad workers carrying wicker baskets of the Light knew what on their backs. They were always about in the early hours, readying the Tower for the day, but they made hasty bows and curtsies and scurried to get out of a sister's way. Out of hearing. Tower servants knew how to be tactful, especially since anyone eavesdropping on a sister would be shown the door. Given the present mood in the Tower, the servants were particularly quick to avoid so much as a chance of overhearing things they should not.

What she had failed to reckon on was how many sisters would choose to walk outside the quarters, by twos and threes, despite the hour and the cold, Reds trying to stare down anyone they encountered except other Reds, Greens and Yellows competing for the crown of haughty and Browns doing their best to outdo both. A few Whites, all but one Warderless, attempted to maintain a façade of cool reason while jumping at their own footfalls. One little group was not out of sight for more than minutes, it seemed, before another appeared, so Meidani spent nearly as much time chattering about points of law as she did giving her report.

Worst of all, twice Grays smiled in what looked like relief on seeing others of their Ajah, and would have joined them had Yukiri not shaken her head. Which infuriated her no end, because it let all who saw know she had special reason to be alone with Meidani. Even if the Black Ajah took no notice, and the Light send there was no reason they should, too many sisters spied on other Ajahs these days, and in spite of the Three Oaths, the tales they carried somehow grew in the carrying. With Elaida apparently trying to force the Ajahs into line by brute force, those tales too often resulted in penances, and the best to be hoped for was that you could pretend to have chosen to take it on for reasons of your own. Yukiri had already suffered through one such, and she had no desire to waste days scrubbing floors again, especially now that she had more on her plate than she knew what to do with. And taking the alternative, a private visit to Silviana, was no better, even if it did save the time! Elaida seemed fiercer than ever since she began summoning Silviana for her own supposedly private penances. The whole Tower was still buzzing with that.

As much as Yukiri hated admitting it, all that made her careful how she looked at the other sisters she saw. Look too long, and you might seem to be spying yourself. Shift your gaze away too fast, and you looked furtive, with the same result. Even so, she could barely keep her eyes from lingering on one pair of Yellows who glided along a crossing corridor like queens in their own palace.

The dark stocky Warder following just far enough behind to give them privacy must have belonged to Pritalle Nerbaijan, a green-eyed woman who had largely escaped the Saldaean nose, because Atuan Larisett had no Warder. Yukiri knew little about Pritalle, but she would learn more after seeing her in close conversation with Atuan. In high-necked gray slashed with yellow and a silk-fringed shawl, the Taraboner was striking. Her dark hair, in thin, brightly beaded braids that hung to her waist, framed a face that somehow seemed perfect as it was without being beautiful. She was even fairly modest, at least as Yellows went. But she was the woman Meidani and the others were trying to study without being caught out. The woman whose name they were afraid to speak aloud except behind strong wards. Atuan Larisett was one of only three Black sisters Talene knew. That was how they organized themselves, three women who knew each other, three women who formed one heart, with each woman knowing one more the other two did not. Atuan had been Talene's "one more," so there was some hope she could be followed to two others.

Just before the pair passed out of view beyond the corner, Atuan glanced up the spiral hallway. Her gaze only brushed by Yukiri, yet that was enough to make Yukiri's heart leap into her throat. She kept walking, holding her face calm with an effort, and risked a quick glance of her own when she reached the corner. Atuan and Pritalle were already well along the corridor, heading toward the outer ring. The Warder was in the way, but neither was looking back. Pritalle was shaking her head. To something Atuan was saying? They were too far for Yukiri to hear any sound other than the faint click of the dark Warder's bootheels on the floor tiles. It had just been a glance. Of course it had. She quickened her step to take her beyond sight if one of them did look over a shoulder, and let out a long breath she had not realized she was holding. Meidani echoed her faintly, her shoulders sagging.

Strange, how it takes us, Yukiri thought, squaring her own shoulders.

When they first learned Talene was a Darkfriend, Talene had been a shielded prisoner. *And she still scared us spitless,* she admitted to herself. Well, what they did to make her confess had scared them spitless first, but learning the truth turned their tongues to dust. Now Talene was tethered tighter than Meidani, closely guarded even if she did appear to walk free—how to keep a Sitter prisoner without anyone noticing had been beyond even Saerin—and she was pathetically eager to offer up every scrap she knew or even suspected in hope it might save her life, not that she had any choice. Hardly an object of fear. As for the rest . . .

Pevara had tried to maintain that Talene must be wrong about Galina Casban, and went into a rage that lasted a full day when she finally was convinced that her Red sister was really Black. She still spoke of strangling Galina with her own hands. Yukiri herself had felt a cold detachment when Temaile Kinderode was named. If there were Darkfriends in the Tower, it stood to reason some had to be Grays, though perhaps disliking Temaile helped. She remained cool even after she did the sums and realized that Temaile had left the Tower at the same time that three sisters were murdered. That provided more names for suspicion, other sisters who had gone then, too, but Galina and Temaile and the rest were out of the Tower, beyond reach for the moment, and only the two could be proven Darkfriends.

Atuan was right there, Black Ajah without doubt, walking the Tower as she wished, unrestrained and unbound of the Three Oaths. And until Doesine could arrange for her to be questioned in secret—a difficult matter, even for a Sitter of Atuan's Ajah, since it had to be secret from *every*one—until then, all they could do was watch. A distant, carefully circumspect watching. It was like living with a red adder, never knowing when you would find yourself eye to eye with it, never knowing when it might bite. Like living in a den of red adders, and only being able to see one.

Suddenly, Yukiri realized that the wide, curving corridor was empty ahead as far as she could see, and a glance back showed only Leonin behind. The Tower might have been empty save for the three of them. Nothing in sight moved except the flickering flames on the stand lamps. Silence.

Meidani gave a small start. "Forgive me, Sitter. Seeing her so suddenly took me aback. Where was I? Oh, yes. I understand that Celestin and Annharid are trying to find out her close friends in the Yellow." Celestin and Annharid were Meidani's fellow conspirators, both Yellows. There were two from each Ajah—except the Red and the Blue, of course—which had proven very useful. "I fear that won't be much help. She has a wide circle of friends, or did before the . . . current situation rose between the Ajahs." A touch of satisfaction tinged her voice, however smooth her face; she was still a rebel, in spite of the added oath. "Investigating all of them will be difficult, if not impossible."

"Forget her for the moment." It took an effort for Yukiri not to crane her neck trying to look every way at once. A tapestry worked with large white flowers rippled slightly, and she hesitated until she was sure it was a draft and not another servant coming out of a servants' ramp. She never could recollect where they were located. Her new topic was as dangerous as discussing Atuan, in its own way. "Last night, I remembered you were a novice with Elaida, and close friends as I recall. It would be a good idea for you to renew that friendship."

"That was some years ago," the taller woman replied stiffly, lifting her shawl to her shoulders and wrapping it around herself as though she suddenly felt the cold. "Elaida very properly broke it off when she was raised Accepted. She might have been accused of favoritism if I were in a class she was given to teach."

“As well for you that you weren’t a favorite,” Yukiri said dryly. Elaida’s current ferocity had its precedent. Before she went off to Andor years ago, she had pushed those she favored so hard that sisters had needed to step in more than once. Siuan Sanche had been one of them, strange to remember, though Siuan had never needed rescuing from standards she could not meet. Strange and sad. “Even so, you *will* do everything in your power to renew that friendship.”

Meidani walked two dozen paces along the corridor opening and closing her mouth, adjusting and readjusting her shawl, twitching her shoulders as though trying to shrug off a horsefly, looking everywhere but at Yukiri. How had the woman ever functioned as a Gray, with so little self-control? “I did try,” she said finally, in a breathy tone. She still avoided Yukiri’s eye. “Several times. The Keeper . . . Alviarin always put me off. The Amyrlin was busy, she had appointments, she needed rest. There was always some excuse. I think Elaida just doesn’t want to take up a friendship she dropped more than thirty years ago.”

So the rebels had remembered that friendship, too. How had they thought to use it? Spying, most likely. She would have to find out how Meidani was supposed to pass on what she learned. In any case, the rebels had provided the tool, and Yukiri would use it. “Alviarin is out of your way. She left the Tower yesterday, or maybe the day before. No one is quite certain. But the maids say she took spare clothes, so it’s unlikely she’ll return for a few days at the soonest.”

“Where could she have gone in this weather?” Meidani frowned. “It’s been snowing since yesterday morning, and it was threatening before.”

Yukiri stopped and used both hands to turn the other woman to face her. “The only thing that need concern you, Meidani, is that she’s gone,” she said firmly. Where *had* Alviarin gone in this? “You have a clear path to Elaida, and you will take it. And you will keep a close watch to see if anyone might be reading Elaida’s papers. Just be sure no one sees you watching.” Talene said the Black Ajah knew everything that came out of the Amyrlin’s study before it was announced, and they needed someone close to Elaida if they were to find out how it was done. Of course, Alviarin saw everything before Elaida signed, and the woman had taken on more authority than any Keeper in memory, but that was no reason to accuse her of being a Darkfriend. No reason not to, either. Her past was being investigated, too. “Watch Alviarin, as well, as much as you can, but Elaida’s papers are the important thing.”

Meidani sighed and gave a reluctant nod. She might have to obey, but she knew the added danger she would be in if Alviarin did turn out a Darkfriend. Yet Elaida herself still might be Black, whatever Saerin and Pevara insisted. A Darkfriend as Amyrlin Seat. Now that was a thought to pickle your heart.

“Yukiri!” a woman’s voice called from back up the hallway.

A Sitter in the Hall of the Tower did *not* jump like a startled goat at hearing her own name, but Yukiri did. If she had not been holding on to Meidani, she might have fallen, and as it was, the pair of them staggered like drunken farmers at a harvest dance.

Recovering, Yukiri jerked her shawl straight and set her face in a scowl that did not diminish when she saw who was hurrying toward her. Seaine was supposed to be keeping close to her own rooms, with as many White sisters around her as she could manage, when she was not with Yukiri or one of the other Sitters who knew about Talene and the Black Ajah, but here she was scurrying down the hallway with only Bernaile Gelbarn, a stocky Taraboner and another of Meidani’s jackdaws, for company. Leonin stepped aside, and gave Seaine a formal bow, fingertips pressed to his heart. Meidani and Bernaile were foolish enough to exchange smiles. They were friends, but they should know better, when they could not tell who might see.

Yukiri was in no mood for smiles. “Taking the air, Seaine?” she said sharply. “Saerin won’t be pleased, when I tell her. Not at *all* pleased. *I’m* not pleased, Seaine.”

Meidani made a small sound in her throat, and Bernaile’s head twitched, her multitude of narrow beaded braids rattling against one another. The pair of them took to studying a tapestry that supposedly showed the humbling of Queen Rhiannon, and for all their smooth faces, clearly they wished they were somewhere else. In their eyes, Sitters were supposed to be equals. And so they were. Normally. After a fashion. Leonin should not have been able to hear a word, but he could feel Meidani’s mood, of course, and he moved a step farther away. While still keeping watch along the corridor, of course. A good man. A wise man.

Seaine had sense enough to look abashed. Unconsciously, she smoothed her dress, covered with snowy embroidery along the hem and across the bodice, but almost immediately her hands knotted in her shawl and her eyebrows drew down stubbornly. Seaine had been strong-willed from the day she first came to the Tower, a furniture-maker's daughter from Lugard who had talked her father into buying passage for her and her mother. Passage for two upriver, but only one down. Strong-willed and confident. And frequently as blind to the world around her as any Brown. Whites were often like that, all logic and no judgment. "There's no need for me to hide from the Black Ajah, Yukiri," she said.

Yukiri winced. Fool woman, naming the Black right out in the open. The corridor was still empty in both directions as far as the curve allowed sight, but carelessness led to more carelessness. She could be stubborn herself, when there was need, but at least she showed more brain than a goose about when and where. She opened her mouth to give Seaine a piece of her mind, a sharp piece, but the other woman rushed on before she could speak.

"Saerin told me I could find you." Seaine's mouth tightened and spots of color flared in her cheeks, at having asked permission or at having to ask. It was understandable for her to resent her situation, of course. Just witless for her not to accept it. "I need to talk to you alone, Yukiri. About the second mystery."

For a moment, Yukiri was as puzzled as Meidani and Bernaile looked. They could sham not listening, but that did not shut their ears. Second mystery? What did Seaine mean? Unless . . . Could she mean the thing that had brought Yukiri into the hunt for the Black Ajah in the first place? Wondering why the heads of the Ajahs were meeting in secret had lost its urgency compared to finding Darkfriends among the sisters.

"Very well, Seaine," Yukiri said, more calmly than she felt. "Meidani, take Leonin down the hall until you can just see Seaine and me around the curve. Keep a sharp eye for anyone coming this way. Bernaile, do the same up the hall." They were moving before she finished speaking, and as soon as they were out of earshot, she turned her attention to Seaine. "Well?"

To her surprise, the glow of *saidar* sprang up around the White Sitter, who wove a ward against eavesdropping around the pair of them. It was a clear sign of secrets to anyone who saw. This had better be important.

"Think about it logically." Seaine's voice was calm, but her hands still gripped her shawl in fists. She stood very straight, towering over Yukiri, though she was not much above average height herself. "It's more than a month, almost two, since Elaida came to me, and nearly two weeks since you found Pevara and me. If the Black Ajah knew about me, I would be dead by now. Pevara and I would have been dead before you and Doesine and Saerin ever walked in on us. Therefore, they don't know. About any of us. I admit I was frightened, at first, but I have control of myself, now. There's no reason for the rest of you to keep trying to treat me like a novice," a little heat invaded the calmness, "and a brainless one, at that."

"You'll have to talk to Saerin," Yukiri said curtly. Saerin had taken charge from the start—after forty years in the Hall for the Brown, Saerin was very good at taking charge—and Yukiri had no intention of going against her unless she must, not without the Sitter's privilege she could hardly claim in the circumstances. As well try to catch a falling boulder. If Saerin could be convinced, Pevara and Doesine would come around, and she herself would hardly try to stand in the way. "Now, what about this 'second secret'? You *do* mean the Ajah heads' meeting?"

Seaine's face took on a muley expression. Yukiri almost expected her ears to lie back. Then she exhaled. "Did the head of your Ajah have a hand in choosing Andaya for the Hall? More than usual, I mean?"

"She did," Yukiri replied carefully. Everyone had been sure Andaya would go into the Hall one day, perhaps in another forty or fifty years, yet Serancha had all but anointed her, when the customary method was discussion until a consensus could be reached on two or three candidates, then a secret ballot. That was Ajah business, though, as secret as Serancha's name and title.

"I knew it." Seaine nodded excitedly, not at all her normal manner. "Saerin says that Juilaine was handpicked for the Brown, too, apparently not their usual way, and Doesine says the same about Suana, though she was hesitant about saying anything. I think Suana may be head of the Yellow herself. In any case, she was a Sitter for forty years the first time, and you know it isn't common to take a chair after you were a Sitter that long. And Ferane stepped down for the White less than ten years ago; no one has ever entered the Hall again so soon. To cap it off, Talene says the Greens nominate choices and their Captain-General chooses one, but Adelorna chose Rina without any nominations."

Yukiri managed to stifle a grimace, but only by a hair. Everyone had their suspicions about who headed other Ajahs, else no one would ever have noticed the meetings in the first place, yet speaking those names aloud was rude at best. Anyone but a Sitter might face penance for it. Of course, she and Seaine both knew when it came to Adelorna. In her attempts to curry favor, Talene poured out all the secrets of the Green without being asked. It embarrassed all of them, except Talene herself. At least it explained why the Greens had been in such an outstanding rage when Adelorna was birched. Still, Captain-General was a ridiculous title, Battle Ajah or no Battle Ajah. At least Head Clerk really described what Serancha did, in a manner of speaking.

Down the corridor, Meidani and her Warder were standing just in sight on the curve, apparently taking quietly. One or the other always watched further down around the curve, though. In the opposite direction, Bernaile was just in sight, too. Her head was swiveling constantly as she tried to watch Yukiri and Seaine while keeping an eye out for anyone approaching. The way she kept shifting from one foot to the other would attract attention, too, but these days a sister alone outside her Ajah quarter was asking for trouble, and she knew it. This conversation had to end soon.

Yukiri raised one finger. “Five Ajahs had to choose new Sitters after women they had in the Hall joined the rebels.” Seaine nodded, and Yukiri raised a second finger. “Each of those Ajahs chose a woman as Sitter who wasn’t the . . . logical . . . choice.” Seaine nodded again. A third finger joined the first two. “The Brown had to choose two new Sitters, but you didn’t mention Shevan. Is there anything . . .” Yukiri smiled wryly, “odd . . . about her?”

“No; according to Saerin, Shevan would likely have been her replacement when she decided to step down, but—”

“Seaine, if you’re actually implying the Ajah heads *conspired* over who would go into the Hall—and I never heard a more crack-brained notion!—if that’s what you’re suggesting, why would they choose five odd women and one who isn’t?”

“Yes, I am suggesting it. With the rest of you keeping me practically under lock and key, I’ve had more time for thinking than I know what to do with. Juilaine and Rina and Andaya gave me a hint, and Ferane made me decide to check.” What did Seaine mean about Andaya and the other two giving a hint? Oh. Of course: Rina and Andaya were not really old enough to be in the Hall yet, either. The custom of not talking about age soon enough became the habit of not thinking about it, either.

"Two might have been coincidence," Seaine went on, "even three, though that strains credulity, but five makes a pattern. Except for the Blue, the Brown was the only Ajah to have two Sitters join the rebels. Maybe there's a reason in that why they chose one odd sister and one not, if I can figure it out. But there is a pattern, Yukiri—a puzzle—and whether it's rational or not, something tells me we had better solve it before the rebels get here. It makes me feel as though somebody's hand is on my shoulder, but when I look, there isn't anyone there."

What strained credulity was the idea of the Ajah heads conspiring in the first place. *But then,* Yukiri thought, *a conspiracy of Sitters is beyond farfetched, and I'm in the middle of one.* And there was the simple fact that no one outside an Ajah was supposed to know the Ajah's head, but the Ajah heads against all custom did. "If there's a puzzle," she said wearily, "you have a long time to solve it. The rebels can't leave Murandy before spring, whatever they've told people, and the march upriver will take months, if they hold their army together that long." She did not doubt they would, though, not any longer. "Go back to your rooms before someone sees us standing here warded, and think on your puzzle," she said, not unkindly, resting a hand on Seaine's sleeve. "You'll have to put up with being looked after until we're *all* sure you are safe."

The expression on Seaine's face would have been called sullen on anyone but a Sitter. "I'll speak to Saerin again," she said, but the light of *saidar* around her vanished.

Watching her join Bernaile and the two of them glide up the curving hallway toward the Ajah quarters, both as wary as fawns when wolves were out, Yukiri felt a heavy heart. It was a pity the rebels could not get there before summer. At least that might make the Ajahs come together again, so sisters were not forced to slink about the White Tower. *As well wish for wings,* she thought sadly.

Determined to keep her mood in check, she went to gather up Meidani and Leonin. She had a Black sister to investigate, and at least investigation was a puzzle she knew how to work.

Gawyn's eyes popped open in the darkness as a new wave of cold rose into the hayloft. The barn's thick stone walls normally kept out the worst of the night's chill, if only the worst. Voices murmured below; no one sounded excited. He took his hand away from the sword lying beside him and tugged his gauntlets tighter. Like all the rest of the Younglings, he slept in every stitch he could put on. Probably it was just time to wake some of the men around him for their sentry turns, but he was fully awake now himself, and he doubted he would find sleep again soon. In any case, his sleep was always fretful, troubled by dark dreams, haunted by the woman he loved. He did not know where Egwene was, or whether she was alive. Or whether she could forgive him. He stood up, letting the loose hay he had pulled over himself slide off his cloak, and buckled on his sword belt.

As he picked his way among the shadowy mounds of men sleeping atop the stacked bales of hay, the faint scrape of boots on wooden rungs told him someone was climbing the ladder to the loft. A dim figure appeared at the top of the ladder, then stopped to wait for him.

"Lord Gawyn?" Rajar's deep voice said softly, in a Domani accent unaltered by six years' training in Tar Valon. The First Lieutenant's rumbling voice was always a surprise, coming from a slight man who stood barely higher than Gawyn's shoulder. Even so, had times been different, Rajar surely would have been a Warder by this time. "I thought I'd have to wake you. A sister just arrived, on foot. A messenger from the Tower. She wanted the sister in charge here. I told Tomil and his brother to take her to the Mayor's house before they turned in for the night."

Gawyn sighed. He should have gone home when he returned to Tar Valon and found the Younglings expelled from the city, instead of letting himself be caught here by winter. Especially when he was sure Elaida wanted them all dead. His sister Elayne would come to Caemlyn, eventually, if she was not already there. Certainly any Aes Sedai would see that the Daughter-Heir of Andor reached Caemlyn in time to claim the throne before someone else could. The White Tower would not give up the advantage of a queen who would also be Aes Sedai. On the other hand, Elayne could be on her way to Tar Valon, too, or residing in the White Tower right that minute. He did not know how she had become entangled with Siuan Sanche, or how deeply—she always dove into a pond without checking the depth—but Elaida and the Hall of the Tower might want to question her closely, Daughter-Heir or not. Queen or not. He was sure she could not be held accountable, though. She was still only one of the Accepted. He had to tell himself that frequently.

The newest problem was that an army lay between him and Tar Valon, now. At least twenty-five thousand soldiers on this side of the River Erinin and, he had to believe, as many on the west bank. They had to be supporting the Aes Sedai whom Elaida called rebels. Who else would dare besiege Tar Valon itself? The way that army had appeared, though, seeming to materialize out of nowhere in the middle of a snowstorm, was enough to raise prickles on his back still. Rumor and alarms always flew ahead of any large force under arms on the march. Always. This one had arrived like spirits, in silence. The army was as real as stone, however, so he could neither enter Tar Valon to find whether Elayne was in the Tower, nor ride south. Any army would take notice of upward of three hundred men on the move, and the rebels would have no goodwill toward the Younglings. Even if he went alone, travel in winter was very slow, and he could reach Caemlyn as quickly if he waited until spring. There was no hope of finding passage on a ship, either. The siege would mire river traffic in a hopeless snarl. *He* was mired in a hopeless snarl.

And now, an Aes Sedai had come in the middle of the night. She would not simplify matters any.

“Let’s find out what news she brought,” he said quietly, motioning Rajar down the ladder ahead of him.

Twenty horses and their stacked saddles crowded nearly every inch of the dark barn not taken by Mistress Millin’s two dozen or so milkcows in their stalls, so he and Rajar had to thread their way to the wide doors. The only warmth came from the sleeping animals. The two men guarding the horses were silent shadows, but Gawyn could feel them watching Rajar and him slip out into the icy night. They would know about the messenger, and be wondering.

The sky was clear, and the waning moon still gave a fair light. The village of Dorlan shone with snow. Holding their cloaks close, the pair of them trudged knee-deep through the village in silence, along what had once been the road to Tar Valon from a city that had not existed for hundreds of years. Nowadays, nobody traveled in this direction from Tar Valon except to come to Dorlan, and there was no reason to come in winter. By tradition, the village supplied cheeses to the White Tower and to no one else. It was a tiny place, just fifteen slate-roofed, gray stone houses with drifts of snow piled up as high as the bottoms of the first-floor windows. A little distance behind each house stood its cowbarn, all crowded with men and horses now, as well as cows. Most of Tar Valon might well have forgotten Dorlan existed. Who thought about where cheese came from? It had seemed a very good place for keeping out of sight. Until now.

All the houses but one in the village were dark. Light leaked through the shutters on several windows of Master Burlow's dwelling, upstairs and down. Garon Burlow had the misfortune to own the largest house in Dorlan, in addition to being Mayor. Villagers who had shifted sleeping arrangements to find a bed for an Aes Sedai must be regretting it by now; Master Burlow had had two rooms already empty.

Stamping the snow from his boots on the stone step, Gawyn rapped at the Mayor's stout door with a gauntleted fist. No one answered, and after a moment he lifted the latch and led Rajar in.

The beam-ceilinged front room was fairly large for a farmhouse, and dominated by several tall open-front cabinets, full of pewter and glazed crockery, and a long, polished table lined with high-back chairs. All of the oil lamps had been lit, an extravagance in winter, when a few tallow candles would do, but the flames in the fireplace had made little impression on the split logs, yet, or on the temperature of the room. Even so, the two sisters who had rooms above were barefoot on the rugless wooden floor, with fur-lined cloaks flung hastily over their linen nightdresses. Katerine Alruddin and Tarna Feir were watching a small woman in a dark, yellow-slashed riding dress and cloak that were snow-damp to her hips. She stood as near the wide hearth as she would, tiredly warming her hands and shivering. Afoot in the snow, she could not have made the trip from Tar Valon in less than two or three days, and even Aes Sedai felt the cold eventually. She had to be the sister Rajar had spoken of, yet compared to the others, the agelessness was hardly noticeable in her. Compared to the other two, she was hardly noticeable at all.

The absence of the Mayor and his wife put an extra knot in Gawyn's middle, though he had half expected it. They would have been there making over the Aes Sedai, offering hot drinks and food, no matter the hour, unless they had been sent back to their bed to give Katerine and Tarna privacy with the messenger. Which likely meant he was a fool to want to know the message. But he had known that before he left the barn.

". . . boatman said he would stay where we landed until the siege lifted," the small woman was saying in weary tones as Gawyn entered, "but he was so frightened, he could be leagues downriver by now." As the cold from the doorway reached her, she looked around, and some of the fatigue drained from her square face. "Gawyn Trakand," she said. "I have orders for you from the Amyrlin Seat, Lord Gawyn."

“Orders?” Gawyn said, drawing off his gauntlets and tucking them behind his belt to gain time. Blunt truth might be in order for once, he decided. “Why would Elaida send me orders? Why should I obey if she did? She disowned me, and the Younglings.” Rajar had taken a respectful stance for the sisters, hands folded behind his back, and he gave Gawyn a quick sidelong glance. He would not speak out of turn, whatever Gawyn said, but the Younglings did not share Gawyn’s belief. Aes Sedai did what they did, and no man could know why until a sister told him. The Younglings had cast their lots with the White Tower wholeheartedly, embracing fate.

“That can wait, Narenwin,” Katerine snapped, jerking her cloak tighter. Her black hair spilled around her shoulders half in tangles, as though she had taken a few hasty swipes with a comb and given up. There was an intensity about her that reminded Gawyn of a hunting lynx. Or maybe one wary of traps. She spared half a glance for him and Rajar; no more. “I have pressing business in the Tower. Tell me how to find this nameless fishing village. Whether or not your boatman is still there, I’ll find someone to take me across.”

“And me,” Tarna put in, her strong jaw stubborn and her blue eyes sharp as spears. In contrast to Katerine, Tarna’s long, pale yellow hair was as neat as if she had had a maid attending her before coming downstairs. She was every bit as focused, though, just more controlled. “I also have urgent reason to reach the Tower without any further delay.” She gave Gawyn a nod and Rajar a lesser, cool as the marble she seemed carved from. Yet, more friendly than the face she showed Katerine or got in return. There was always a stiffness between the two women, though they shared the same Ajah. They did not like one another, perhaps even disliked each other. With Aes Sedai, it was hard to be sure.

Gawyn would not be sorry to see either leave. Tarna had ridden into Dorlan barely a day after the mysterious army arrived, and however Aes Sedai determined these things, she immediately displaced Lusonia Cole from her room upstairs and Covarla Baldene from command of the eleven other sisters already in the village. She might have been a Green from the way she took charge of everything, questioning the other sisters about the situation, inspecting the Younglings closely every day as though searching for possible Warders. Having a Red study them that way made the men start looking over their shoulders. Worse, Tarna spent long hours out riding, no matter the weather, trying to find some local who could show her a way into the city past the besiegers. Sooner or later, she would lead their scouts back to Dorlan. Katerine had come only yesterday, in a fury at having her path to Tar Valon blocked, and straightaway took command from Tarna and her room from Covarla. Not that she used her authority in the same way. She avoided the other sisters, refusing to tell anyone why she had disappeared at Dumai's Wells or where she had been. But she, too, had inspected the Younglings. With the air of a woman examining an axe she had a mind to use, and not a care how much blood was shed. He would not have been surprised if she had tried to bully him into cutting a way to the bridges into the city for her. He would be more than happy to see them go, in fact. But then, when they left, he would have to deal with Narenwin. And with Elaida's orders.

"It's hardly a village, Katerine," the shivering sister said, "just three or four squalid little fisherman's houses a full day downriver by land. More than that from here." Plucking at her damp skirts, she held them nearer the fire. "We may be able to find a way to send messages into the city, but you two are needed here. All that stopped Elaida sending fifty sisters, or more, rather than just me, was the difficulty of getting even one tiny boat across the river unseen, even in darkness. I must say, I was surprised to learn there were any sisters this close to Tar Valon. Under the circumstances, every sister who is outside the city must—"

Tarna cut her off firmly with a raised hand. "Elaida cannot even know I am here." Katerine closed her mouth and frowned, her chin lifting, but she let the other Red continue. "What were her orders to you regarding the sisters in Dorlan, Narenwin?" Rajar took to studying the floorboards in front of his boots. He had faced battle without flinching, yet only a fool wanted to be around Aes Sedai who were arguing.

The short woman fussed with her divided skirts a moment longer. "I was ordered to take charge of the sisters I found here," she said stuffily, "and do what I could." After a moment, she sighed, and amended herself reluctantly. "The sisters I found here under Covarla. But, surely—"

This time, Katerine broke in. "I was never under Covarla, Narenwin, so those orders cannot apply to me. In the morning, I will set out to find these three or four fisherman's huts."

"But—"

“Enough, Narenwin,” Katerine said in an icy voice. “You can make your arrangements with Covarla.” The black-haired woman gave her Ajah sister a glance from the corner of her eye. “I suppose you may accompany me, Tarna. A fishing boat should have room for two.” Tarna bent her head the slightest fraction, possibly in thanks.

Their business concluded, the pair of Reds gathered their cloaks around them and glided toward the door deeper into the house. Narenwin shot a vexed look at their backs, and turned her attention to Gawyn, her face settling into the semblance of a calm mask.

“Have you any word of my sister?” he asked before she could open her mouth. “Do you know where she is?”

The woman really was tired. She blinked, and he could almost see her forming an answer that would tell him nothing.

Stopping halfway to the door, Tarna said, “Elayne was with the rebels when I saw her last.” Every head jerked toward her. “But your sister is safe from retribution,” she went on calmly, “so put that out of your mind. Accepted can’t choose which sisters to obey. I give you my word; under the law, she can suffer no lasting harm of it.” She seemed unaware of Katerine’s frozen stare, or Narenwin’s popping eyes.

“You could have told me before this,” Gawyn said roughly. No one spoke roughly to Aes Sedai, not more than once, but he was past caring. Were the other two surprised that Tarna knew the answer, or surprised that she had given it? “What do you mean by ‘no lasting harm’?”

The pale-haired sister barked a laugh. “I can hardly promise she won’t suffer a few welts if she puts her feet too far wrong. Elayne *is* one of the Accepted, not Aes Sedai. Yet that protects her from greater harm if she is led astray by a sister. And you never asked. Besides, she doesn’t need rescuing, even if you could manage it. She is with Aes Sedai. Now you know as much as I can tell you of her, and I am going to find a few hours’ more sleep before daylight. I will leave you to Narenwin.”

Katerine watched her go without altering her expression by an eyelash, a woman of ice with the eyes of a hunting cat, but then she herself strode from the room so quickly that her cloak flared behind her.

“Tarna is correct,” Narenwin said once the door closed behind Katerine. The small woman might not make a good show of Aes Sedai serenity and mystery alongside the other two, but alone she managed very well. “Elayne is sealed to the White Tower. So are you, for all your talk of disowning. The history of Andor seals you to the Tower.”

“The Younglings are all sealed to the Tower by our own choice, Narenwin Sedai,” Rajar said, making a leg formally. Narenwin’s gaze remained on Gawyn.

He closed his eyes, and it was all he could do not to scrub at them with the heels of his hands. The Younglings *were* sealed to the White Tower. No one would ever forget that they had fought, on the very grounds of the Tower, to stop the rescue of a deposed Amyrlin. For good or ill, the tale would follow them to their graves. He was marked by that, as well, and by his own secrets. After all that bloodshed, he was the man who had let Siuan Sanche walk free. More importantly, though, Elayne bound him to the White Tower, and so did Egwene al’Vere, and he did not know which tied the tighter knot, the love of his sister or the love of his heart. To abandon one was to abandon all three, and while he breathed, he could not abandon Elayne or Egwene.

“You have my word that I will do all I can,” he said wearily. “What does Elaida want of me?”

The sky above Caemlyn was clear, the sun a pale golden ball near its noonday peak. It shed a brilliant light on the blanket of white covering the surrounding countryside, but gave no warmth. Still, the weather was warmer than Davram Bashere would have expected back home in Saldaea, though he did not regret the marten fur lining his new cloak. Cold enough in any case for his breath to have frosted his thick mustaches with more white than the years had put in them. Standing in ankle-deep snow among the leafless trees on a rise perhaps a league north of Caemlyn, he held a long, gold-mounted looking glass to his eye, studying the activity on lower ground about a mile south of him. Quick nosed his shoulder impatiently from behind, but he ignored the bay. Quick disliked standing still, but sometimes you had to, whatever you wanted.

A sprawling camp was going up down there among the scattered trees, astride the road to Tar Valon, soldiers unloading supply wagons, digging latrines, erecting tents and building lean-tos of brush and tree limbs scattered in clumps of varying size, each lord and lady keeping their own men close. They expected to be in place for some time. From the horselines and the general extent of the camp, he estimated close to five thousand men, give or take a few hundred. Fighting men; fletchers, farriers, armorers, laundresses, wagon drivers and other camp followers as good as doubled that, though as usual they were making their own camp on the fringes. Most of the camp followers spent more time staring toward the rise where Bashere stood than they did working. Here and there a soldier paused in his labors to peer toward the higher ground, too, but bannermen and squadmen quickly drove them back to their work. The nobles and officers riding about the rising camp never so much as glanced north, that Bashere saw. A fold of land hid them from the city, though he could see the silver-streaked gray walls from his rise. The city knew they were there, of course; they had announced themselves that morning with trumpets and banners in sight of the walls. Well out of bowshot, though.

Laying siege to a city with high, strong walls that stretched more than six leagues in circumference was no easy matter, and complicated in this instance by Low Caemlyn, the warren of brick and stone houses and shops, windowless warehouses and long markets, that lay outside Caemlyn's walls. Seven more like camps were being made, though, spaced around the city where they could cover every road, every gate that would allow a sizable sortie. They already had patrols out, and likely watchers lurked in the now-deserted buildings of Low Caemlyn. Small parties might get past into the city, maybe a few pack animals by night, but not near enough to feed one of the world's great cities. Hunger and disease ended more sieges than swords or siege engines ever did. The only question was whether they brought down besieged or besieger first.

The plan seemingly had all been well thought out by someone, but what confused him were the banners in the camp below. It was a strong looking glass, crafted by a Cairhienin named Tovere, a gift from Rand al'Thor, and he could make out most of the banners whenever a breeze straightened them. He knew enough of Andoran sigils to pick out the Oak and Axe of Dawlin Armaghn and the five Silver Stars of Daerilla Raened and several more banners of lesser nobles who supported Naean Arawn's claim to the Lion Throne and Rose Crown of Andor. Yet Jailin Maran's cross-hatched Red Wall was down there, too, and Carlys Ankerin's paired White Leopards, and Eram Talkend's golden Winged Hand. By all reports, they were oathsworn to Naean's rival, Elenia Sarand. Seeing them with the others was like seeing wolves and wolfhounds sharing a meal. With a cask of good wine opened in the bargain.

Two other banners, gold-fringed and at least twice the size of any others, were on display as well, though both were too heavy for the occasional gust to make them more than stir. They shone with the glisten of thick silk. He had seen the pair clearly enough earlier, however, when the bannermen rode back and forth atop the rise that hid their camp, the banners spread out above them in the breeze of their gallop. One was the Lion of Andor, white on red, the same as flew from the tall round towers dotted along the city wall. In both cases it was a declaration of someone's right to the throne and crown. The second large banner below him proclaimed the woman throwing her claim against that of Elayne Trakand. Four silver moons on a field of twilight blue, the sign of House Marne. All this was in support of Arymilla Marne? A month ago, she would have been lucky if anyone except her own House or that half-witted Nasin Caeren gave her a bed for the night!

"They ignore us," Bael growled. "I could break them before sunset, and leave not one alive to see the sun rise again, yet they ignore us."

Bashere looked sideways at the Aielman. Sideways and up. The man towered above him by well over a foot. Only Bael's gray eyes and a strip of sun-dark skin were visible above the black veil drawn across his face. Bashere hoped the man was just shielding his mouth and nose from the cold. He was carrying his short spears and bull-hide buckler, and he had a cased bow on his back and a quiver at his hip, but only the veil mattered. This was no time for the Aiel to start killing. Twenty paces downslope toward the camp, thirty more Aielmen were squatting on their heels, holding their weapons casually. One in three had his face bare, so maybe it was the cold. With Aiel, you could never be sure, though.

Quickly considering several approaches, Bashere decided on lightness. "Elayne Trakand would not like that, Bael, and if you've forgotten what it's like being a young man, that means Rand al'Thor won't like it."

Bael grunted sourly. "Melaine told me what Elayne Trakand said. We must do nothing on her part. That is simpleminded. When an enemy comes against you, you make use of whoever will dance the spears by your side. Do they play at war the way they play at their Game of Houses?"

"We are outlanders, Bael. That counts, in Andor."

The huge Aielman grunted again.

There seemed no point trying to explain the politics involved. Outland help could cost Elayne what she was trying to gain, and her enemies knew it and knew she knew it, so they had no fear of Bashere or Bael or the Legion of the Dragon, whatever their numbers. In fact, despite the siege, both sides would go to great effort to avoid pitched battle. It was a war, but of maneuver and skirmishes unless someone blundered, and the winner would be whoever gained an unassailable position or forced the other into one that could not be defended. Bael likely would see it as no different from *Daes Dae'mar.* In all truth, Bashere saw a great deal of similarity himself. With the Blight on its doorstep, Saldaea could not afford contests for the throne. Tyrants could be endured, and the Blight soon killed the stupid and the greedy, but even this peculiar sort of civil war would allow the Blight to kill Saldaea.

He returned to studying the camp through his looking glass, trying to puzzle out how an utter fool like Arymilla Marne could have gained the backing of Naean Arawn and Elenia Sarand. That pair was greedy and ambitious, each utterly convinced of her own right to the throne, and if he understood the tangled web Andorans used to decide these matters, each had far better claim than Arymilla. Wolves and wolfhounds were not in it. This was wolves deciding to follow a lapdog. Perhaps Elayne knew the reason, but she would barely even exchange notes with him, brief and uninformative. Too much chance someone would learn of it and think she was plotting with him. It was *very* like the Game of Houses.

"Someone is going to dance the spears, it seems," Bael said, and Bashere lowered the ornate tube long enough to find where the Aielman was pointing.

There had been a steady stream of people fleeing the city ahead of the siege for days, but someone had left it too late. Half a dozen canvas-topped wagons stood halted in the middle of the Tar Valon Road just outside the edge of Low Caemlyn, surrounded by fifty horsemen under a blue-and-white quartered banner that appeared to show a running bear, or maybe some sort of thick-bodied hound, when it rippled in a sudden wind. Dispirited folk huddled to one side, clutching cloaks around themselves, men with their heads down, children clinging to women's skirts. Some of the horsemen had dismounted to ransack the wagons; chests and boxes and even what looked to be clothes already dotted the snow. Likely they were searching for coin or drink, though any other valuable that turned up would go into someone's saddlebags, too. Soon enough someone would cut free the wagon teams, or perhaps they would just take the wagons. Wagons and horses were always useful for an army, and the peculiar rules of this very peculiar Andoran civil war did not appear to give much protection to those who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the city gates were swinging open, and as soon as the gap was wide enough, red-coated lancers poured out of the twenty-foot-high arch at a gallop, sunlight glittering on lance points and breastplates and helmets, thundering down the road between the long, empty markets. The Queen's Guards were coming out. Enough of them, anyway. Bashere swung his glass back to the wagons.

Apparently the officer under the bear, if bear it was, had done his sums already. Fifty against two hundred made very poor odds, with only a few wagons at stake. The men who had dismounted were back in their saddles, and even as Bashere found them, the lot of them galloped away north toward him, the blue-and-white banner streaming behind its staff. Most of the people huddled beside the road stared after the departing soldiers, their confusion as clear as if he had been able to make out their faces, but a few immediately rushed to begin gathering up their scattered belongings out of the snow and piling them back into the wagons.

The arrival of the Guardsmen, drawing rein around the wagons a few minutes later, put a quick end to that. Guardsmen quickly began herding people toward the wagons. Some still tried to dart past them for some prized belonging, and one man began waving his arms in protest at a Guardsman, an obvious officer with white plumes on his helmet and a red sash across his breastplate, but the officer leaned from the saddle and backhanded the protester in the face. The fellow went down on his back like a stone, and after one frozen moment, everyone who was not already scrambling onto the wagons went scurrying, except a pair of men who paused to pick up the fallen man by his shoulders and heels, and they hurried as best they could carrying his limp weight. A woman up on the last wagon in line was already lashing her reins to get her team turned around and headed back toward the city.

Bashere lowered the glass to study the camp, then pressed it back to his eye for a closer look. Men were still digging away with shovel and mattock, and others wrestling sacks and barrels down from wagons. Nobles and officers walked their horses about the camp, keeping an eye on the work. All calm as cattle in pasture. Finally, someone pointed toward the rise between them and the city, then another and another, and mounted men began to trot, plainly shouting orders. The bear-banner was just coming into sight of the camp on the height.

Tucking the glass beneath his arm, Bashere frowned. They had no guards on the high ground to warn them of what might be happening beyond their sight. Even in the certainty no one was going to offer battle, that was stupid. It might also be useful, if the other camps were as careless, and if no one corrected the mistake. He puffed irritably through his mustaches. If he had been going to fight the besiegers.

A glance showed him the wagons halfway back to the Tar Valon Gate with their escort of Guardsmen, the wagon drivers lashing their teams as if pursuit were breathing down their necks. Or maybe it was just the officer with the sash, who was waving his sword over his head for some reason. “There’ll be no dancing today,” he said.

“Then I have better to do with my day than watch wetlanders dig holes,” Bael replied. “May you always find water and shade, Davram Bashere.”

“At the moment, I’d rather have dry feet and a warm fire,” Bashere muttered without thinking, then wished he had not. Step on a man’s formality and he might try to kill you, and the Aiel were formal and strange besides.

But Bael threw back his head and laughed. “The wetlands turn everything on its head, Davram Bashere.” A curious gesture of his right hand brought the other Aiel to their feet, and they loped off eastward in long, easy strides. The snow did not seem to give them any difficulty.

Sliding his looking glass into the leather case hanging from Quick’s saddlebow, Bashere mounted and turned the bay west. His own escort had been waiting on the reverse slope, and they fell in behind him with only the faint creak of leather and never a jingle of unsecured metal. They numbered fewer than Bael’s escort, but they were tough men from his estates at Tyr, and he had led them into the Blight many times before bringing them south. Every man had his assigned part of the trail to watch, ahead or behind, left or right, high or low, and their heads swiveled constantly. He hoped they were not just going through the motions. The forest was sparse here, every branch bare except on oak and leatherleaf, pine and fir, but the snow-covered land rolled so that a hundred mounted men could be fifty paces away and unseen. Not that he expected any such thing, but then, what killed you was always what you never expected. Unconsciously, he eased his sword in its scabbard. You just had to expect the unexpected.

Tumad had command of the escort, as he did most days Bashere did not have something more important for the young lieutenant to do. Bashere was grooming him. He could think clearly and see beyond what was in front of him; he was destined for higher rank, if he lived long enough. A tall man, if a couple of hands shorter than Bael, today he wore disgruntlement on his face like a second nose.

“What troubles you, Tumad?”

“The Aielman was right, my Lord.” Tumad tugged angrily at his thick black beard with a gauntleted fist. “These Andorans spit at our feet. I do not like having to ride away while they thumb an ear at us.” Well, he was still young.

“You find our situation boring, perhaps?” Bashere laughed. “You need more excitement? Tenobia is only fifty leagues north of us, and if rumor can be believed, she brought Ethenielle of Kandor and Paitar of Arafel and even that Shienaran Easar with her. All the might of the Borderlands come looking for us, Tumad. Those Andorans down in Murandy don’t like us being in Andor, either, so I hear, and if that Aes Sedai army they’re facing doesn’t chop them to pieces, or hasn’t already, they may come looking for us. So may the Aes Sedai, for that matter, sooner or later. We’ve ridden for the Dragon Reborn, and I can’t see any sister forgetting that. And then there are the Seanchan, Tumad. Do you really think we’ve seen the last of them? They will come to us, or we will have to go to them; one or the other is sure. You young men don’t know excitement when it’s crawling in your mustache!”

Quiet chuckles rippled through the men following, men as old as Bashere himself for the most part, and even Tumad flashed white teeth through his beard in a grin. They had all been on campaign before, if never one so odd as this. Straightening around, Bashere watched the way through the trees, but with only half his attention.

In all truth, Tenobia did worry him. The Light only knew why Easar and the others had decided to leave the Blightborder together, much less strip away as many soldiers as hearsay said they had brought south. Even hearsay divided by half. Doubtless they had reasons they considered good and sufficient, and doubtless Tenobia shared them. But he knew her; he had taught her to ride, watched her grow up, presented her the Broken Crown when she took the throne. She was a good ruler, neither too heavy-handed nor too light, intelligent if not always wise, brave without being foolhardy, but impulsive was a mild description of her. Sometimes, hotheaded was mild. And he was as sure as he could be that she had her own goal aside from whatever the others aimed at. The head of Davram Bashere. If that was so, she was unlikely to settle for another period of exile, after coming this far. The longer Tenobia worried a bone in her teeth, the harder it was to convince her to give it up. It was a neat problem. She should be in Saldaea guarding the Blightborder, but so should he. She could convict him of treason twice-over at least for what he had done since coming south, but he still could see no other way to have gone. Rebellion—Tenobia could define that loosely when she chose—rebellion was horrible to contemplate, yet he wanted his head firmly attached to his neck a while longer. A neat and thorny problem.

The encampment containing the eight thousand–odd light cavalry he had left after Illian and fighting the Seanchan spread wider than the camp back on the Tar Valon Road, but it could not be said to sprawl. The horselines were uniform rows with a farrier’s forge at either end, stretched between equally straight rows of large gray or shell-white tents, though those showed a good many patches, now. Every man could be mounted and ready to fight inside a count of fifty from a trumpet signal, and his sentries were placed to make sure they had that count and more. Even the camp followers’ tents and wagons, a hundred paces south of the rest, were more orderly than the soldiers besieging the city, as though they had followed the example of the Saldaeans. Somewhat, at least.

As he rode in with his escort, men moved quickly and grimly among the horselines, almost as if the signal to mount had been sounded. More than one had his sword drawn. Voices called to him, but at the sight of a large crowd of men and women, mostly women, gathered in the center of the camp, he felt a sudden numbness inside. He dug in his heels, and Quick sprang forward at a gallop. He did not know whether anyone followed him or not. He heard nothing but the blood pounding in his ears, saw nothing but the crowd in front of his own sharp-peaked tent. The tent he shared with Deira.

He did not rein in on reaching the crowd, just threw himself out of the saddle and hit the ground running. He heard people speak without taking in what they were saying. They parted in front of him, opening a path to his tent, or he would have run over them.

Just inside the tentflaps, he halted. The tent, large enough for twenty soldiers to sleep in, was crowded to the walls with women, wives of nobles and officers, but his eyes quickly found his own wife, Deira, seated on a folding chair in the middle of the carpets that served for a floor, and the numbness faded. He knew she would die one day—they both would—but the only thing he feared was living without her. Then he realized that some of the women were helping her to lower her dress to her waist. Another was pressing a folded cloth to Deira's left arm, and the cloth was growing red as blood ran down her arm in a sheet and dripped from her fingers into a bowl set on the carpet. There was a considerable amount of dark blood already in the bowl.

She saw him at the same instant, and her eyes flashed in a face that was much too pale. "It comes from hiring outlanders, husband," she said fiercely, her right hand shaking a long dagger at him. As tall as most men, inches taller than he, and beautiful, her face framed with raven hair winged with white, she had a commanding presence that could become imperious when she was angry. Even when she obviously could barely sit upright. Most women would have been flustered at being bare to the waist in front of so many, with her husband present. Not Deira. "If you did not always insist on moving like the wind, we could have good men from our own estates to do whatever was needful."

"A dispute with servants, Deira?" he said, cocking an eyebrow. "I never thought you'd start taking knives to them." Several of the women gave him cool, sidelong glances. Not every man and wife dealt together as he and Deira did. Some thought them odd, since they seldom shouted.

Deira scowled at him, then grunted a short, involuntary laugh. "I will start at the beginning, Davram. And go slowly, so you can understand," she added with a small smile, pausing to thank the women who draped a white linen sheet around her bare torso. "I returned from my ride to find two strange men ransacking our tent. They drew daggers, so naturally, I hit one of them with a chair and stabbed the other." She directed a grimace at her cut arm. "Not well enough, since he managed to touch me. Then Zavion and some of the others came in, and the pair fled through a slit they had made in the rear of the tent."

Several of the women nodded grimly and gripped the hilts of the daggers they all wore. Until Deira said darkly, “I told them to give chase, but they insisted on tending my scratch.” Hands dropped away from hilts, and faces colored, though none looked in the least apologetic for disobeying. They had been in a ticklish position. Deira was their liege lady as he was their liege lord, but whether or not she called it a scratch, she could have bled to death if they had left her to go chasing the thieves. “In any event,” she went on, “I ordered a search. They won’t be hard to find. One has a lump on his head, and the other is bleeding.” She gave a sharp, satisfied nod.

Zavion, the sinewy, red-haired Lady of Gahaur, held up a threaded needle. “Unless you have taken up an interest in embroidery, my Lord,” she said coolly, “may I suggest that you withdraw?”

Bashere acquiesced with a small bow of his head. Deira never liked him to watch her being sewn up. He never liked watching her being sewn up.

Outside the tent, he paused to announce in a loud voice that his lady wife was well and being tended, and that they should all go on about their business. The men departed with wishes for Deira’s well being, but none of the women stirred a foot. He did not press them. They would remain until Deira herself appeared, whatever he said, and a wise man tried to avoid battles he would not only lose, but look foolish losing.

Tumad was waiting on the edge of the crowd, and he fell in beside Bashere, who walked with his hands clasped tightly behind his back. He had been expecting this, or something like, for a long time, but he had almost begun to think it would not happen. And he had never expected Deira to nearly die because of it.

“The two men have been found, my Lord,” Tumad said. “At least, they apparently meet the description the Lady Deira gave.” Bashere’s head jerked around, murder on his face, and the younger man quickly added, “They were dead, my Lord, just outside the camp. Each got one thrust with a narrow blade.” He stabbed a finger at the base of his skull, just behind the ear. “It had to be more than one did it, unless he was faster than a rock viper.”

Bashere nodded. The price of failure often was death. Two to search, and how many to silence them? How many remained, and how long before they tried again? Worst of all, who was behind it? The White Tower? The Forsaken? It seemed a decision had been reached for him.

No one except Tumad was close enough to hear him, but he spoke softly anyway, and chose his words cautiously. Sometimes, the price of carelessness was death, too. “You know where to find the man who came to me yesterday? Find him, and tell him I agree, but there will be a few more than we talked about.”

The light feathery snow falling on the city of Cairhien dimmed the morning sunlight only a little, just muting the brightness. From the tall narrow window in the Sun Palace, fitted with a casement of good glass panes against the cold, Samitsu could see clearly the wooden scaffolding erected around the ruined section of the palace, broken cubes of dark stone still littered with rubble and stepped towers that stopped abruptly short of equaling the rest of the palace’s towers. One, the Tower of the Risen Sun, was simply no longer there. Several of the city’s fabled “topless” towers loomed through the drifting white flakes, enormous square spires with huge buttresses, much taller by far than any in the palace despite its location on the highest hill in a city of hills. They were wrapped in their own scaffolds and still not completely rebuilt twenty years after the Aiel had burned them; another twenty might see them done. There were no workmen clambering along the planks on any of the scaffolding, of course, not in this weather. She found herself wishing the snow could give her a respite, too.

When Cadsuane departed a week past, leaving her in charge, her task had appeared straightforward. Make sure the Cairhienin pot did not begin to boil again. That had appeared a simple task at the time, though she had seldom dabbled in politics to speak of. Only one noble retained sizable forces under arms, and Dobraine was cooperative, for the most part, seeming to want everything kept quiet. Of course, he had accepted that fool appointment as “Steward of Cairhien for the Dragon Reborn.” The boy had named a “Steward” of Tear, too, a man who had been in rebellion against him a month gone! If he had done as much in Illian . . . It seemed all too probable. Those appointments would cause no end of trouble for sisters to sort out before all was said and done! The boy brought *nothing* but trouble! Yet so far Dobraine seemed to be using his new post only to run the city. And to quietly rally support for Elayne Trakand’s claim to the Sun Throne, if she ever made one. Samitsu was satisfied to leave it at that, not caring one way or another who took the Sun Throne. She did not care much for Cairhien at all.

The falling snow beyond her window swirled in a gust of wind like a white kaleidoscope. So . . . tranquil. Had she ever valued tranquility before? She certainly could not recall it, if she had.

Neither the possibility of Elayne Trakand taking the throne nor Dobraine’s new title had brought nearly as much consternation as the ridiculous, and ridiculously persistent, rumors about the al’Thor boy going to Tar Valon to submit to Elaida, though she had done nothing to quell those. That tale had everyone from nobles to stablemen half afraid to breathe, which was very well and good for maintaining the peace. The Game of Houses had ground to a halt; well, compared to how matters normally were in Cairhien. The Aiel who came into the city from their huge camp a few miles east very likely helped, however much they were hated by the general run of folk. Everyone knew they followed the Dragon Reborn, and no one wanted to risk finding themselves on the wrong end of thousands of Aiel spears. Young al’Thor was *much* more useful absent than present. Rumors out of the west of Aiel raiding elsewhere—looting, burning, killing indiscriminately, so merchants’ hearsay claimed—gave people another reason to step gingerly with those here.

In fact, there seemed to be no burrs to prick Cairhien out of its quiet, aside from the occasional street brawl between Foregaters and city folk who considered the noisy, brightly clad Foregaters as alien as the Aiel and a good deal safer to fight. The city was crowded to the attics, with people sleeping anywhere they could find shelter from the cold, yet food supplies were more than adequate if not overabundant, and trade was actually better than expected in winter. All in all, she should have felt content that she was carrying out Cadsuane’s instructions as well as the Green could wish for. Except that Cadsuane would expect more. She always did.

“Are you listening to me, Samitsu?”

Sighing, Samitsu turned from the peaceful view through the window, taking pains not to smooth her yellow-slashed skirts. The Jakanda-made silver bells in her hair tinkled faintly, but today the sound failed to soothe her. At the best of times she did not feel entirely comfortable in her apartments in the palace, though a blazing fire in the wide marble fireplace gave a good warmth and the bed in the next room had the best-quality feather mattresses and goose down pillows. All three of her rooms were overly ornate in the severe Cairhienin fashion, the white ceiling plaster worked in interlocking squares, the wide bar-cornices heavily gilded, and the wooden wall panels polished to a soft glow yet dark even so. The furnishings were darker still, and massively constructed, edged with thin lines of gold leaf and inlaid with patterned ivory wedges. The flowered Tairen carpet in this room seemed garishly disordered compared to everything else, and emphasized the surrounding stiffness. It all seemed too much like a cage, of late.

What really discomfited her, though, was the woman with her hair in ringlets to her shoulders standing in the middle of the carpet, fists on her hips, a belligerent set to her chin, and a frown narrowing her blue eyes. Sashalle wore the Great Serpent ring, of course, on her right hand, but also an Aiel necklace and bracelet, fat beads of silver and ivory intricately worked and carved, gaudy against her high-necked dress of brown wool, which was plain if fine and well cut. Not crude pieces, certainly, but . . . flamboyant, and hardly the sort a sister would wear. The oddity of that jewelry might hold the key to much, if Samitsu could ever find the reason behind it. The Wise Ones, especially Sorilea, looked at her as if she were a fool for not knowing without asking, and refused to be bothered with answering. They did that all too often. *Most* especially Sorilea. Samitsu was unused to being thought a fool, and she disliked it immensely.

Not for the first time, she found it difficult to meet the other sister’s gaze. Sashalle was the major reason contentment eluded her, no matter how well everything was going otherwise. Most maddening, Sashalle was a Red, yet despite her Ajah, she was *oathsworn* to young al’Thor. How could any Aes Sedai swear fealty to anyone or anything other than the White Tower itself? How in the *Light* could a *Red* swear to a man who could channel? Maybe Verin had been right about *ta’veren* twisting chance. Samitsu could not begin to think of any other reason for thirty-one sisters, *five* of them Red, to take such an oath.

“The Lady Ailil has been approached by lords and ladies who represent most of House Riatin’s strength,” she replied, much more patiently than she felt. “They want her to take the High Seat of Riatin, and she wants White Tower approval. Aes Sedai approval, at least.” For something to do besides match stares—and likely lose—she moved to a blackwood table where a gold-worked silver pitcher sitting on a silver tray still gave off the faint scent of spices. Filling a cup with mulled wine provided an excuse to break the fleeting eye contact. Needing an excuse made her replace the pitcher on the tray with a sharp clink. She found herself avoiding looking at Sashalle too often. Even now, she realized she was looking at the other woman sideways. To her frustration, she could not quite make herself turn completely to meet her stare.

"Tell her no, Sashalle. Her brother was still alive when last seen, and rebellion against the Dragon Reborn is nothing that need concern the Tower; certainly not now it's done with." The memory arose of Toram Riatin as last seen, running off into a strange fog that could take on solid form and kill, a fog that resisted the One Power. The Shadow had walked outside the walls of Cairhien that day. Samitsu's voice tightened from the effort to stop it short of trembling. Not with fear, but anger. That had been the day she failed at Healing young al'Thor. She hated failures, hated remembering them. And she should not have to explain herself. "Most of Riatin's strength is not all. Those still tied to Toram will oppose her, with force of arms if necessary, and in any case, fostering upheaval inside the Houses themselves is no way to maintain the peace. There is a precarious balance in Cairhien now, Sashalle, but it *is* a balance, and we mustn't disturb it." She managed to stop short of saying Cadsuane would be displeased if they did. That would hardly carry weight with Sashalle.

"Upheaval will come whether or not we foster it," the other sister said firmly. Her frown had faded as soon as Samitsu showed she had been listening, though the set of her jaw remained. Perhaps it was stubbornness rather than belligerence, yet that hardly mattered. The woman was not arguing or trying to convince her, just stating her own position. And most galling of all, plainly doing that much as a courtesy. "The Dragon Reborn is the herald of upheaval and change, Samitsu. The herald foretold. And if he weren't, this is Cairhien. Do you think they have really stopped playing at *Daes Dae'mar?* The surface of the water may be still, but the fish never stop swimming."

A *Red,* preaching the Dragon Reborn like a street-corner demagogue! Light! "And if you are wrong?" In spite of herself, Samitsu bit off the words. Sashalle—burn her!—maintained a perfect serenity.

"Ailil has forsworn any claim to the Sun Throne in favor of Elayne Trakand, which is what the Dragon Reborn desires, and she is ready to swear fealty to him, if I ask it. Toram led an army against Rand al'Thor. I say the change is worth making and the chance worth taking, and I will tell her so."

The bells in Samitsu's hair chimed at an irritated shake of her head, and she barely managed to stop herself from sighing again. Eighteen of those Dragonsworn sisters remained in Cairhien—Cadsuane had carried some away with her, then sent Alanna back to take off still more—and others of the eighteen besides Sashalle stood higher than she, but the Aiel Wise Ones kept them out of her way. In principle, she disapproved of how that was done—Aes Sedai *could* not be apprentices, not to anyone! It was outrageous!—but in practice, it did make her job easier. They could not meddle or try to take charge with Wise Ones running their lives and watching over their every hour. Unfortunately, for some reason she could not learn, the Wise Ones looked differently on Sashalle and the other two sisters who had been stilled at Dumai's Wells. Stilled. She felt a faint shiver at the thought, but only faint, and it would be less if she ever managed to work out how Damer Flinn had Healed what could not be Healed. At least *someone* could Heal stilling, even if it was a man. A man channeling. Light, how the horror of yesterday became merely the uneasiness of today, once you grew accustomed.

She was sure that Cadsuane would have arranged matters with the Wise Ones before leaving had she known about the difference with Sashalle and Irgain and Ronaille. At least, she thought she was sure. This was not the first time she had been pulled into one of the legendary Green's designs. Cadsuane could be more devious than a Blue, schemes inside plots wrapped in stratagems and all hidden behind still others. Some were planned to fail in order to help others succeed, and only Cadsuane knew which were which, not at all a comforting thought. In any case, those three sisters were free to come and go as they desired, do as they desired. And they certainly felt no need to follow the guidance Cadsuane had left behind or to follow the sister she had named to lead. Only their mad oath to al'Thor guided or constrained them.

Samitsu had never felt weak or ineffectual in her life except when her Talent failed her, yet she very much wished that Cadsuane would return and take matters out of her hands. A few words delivered in Ailil's ear would quench any desire the lady had to mount the High Seat, of course, yet it would come to nothing unless she found some way to deflect Sashalle from her purpose. No matter that Ailil feared having her silly secrets aired abroad, inconsistency in what Aes Sedai told her could well make her decide it was better to try vanishing to her country estates rather than risk offending a sister whatever she did. Cadsuane would be upset over losing Ailil. Samitsu herself would be upset. Ailil was a conduit into half the plots brewing among the nobles, a gauge to be sure those intrigues were all still petty and unlikely to bring any major disturbance. The cursed Red knew that. And once Sashalle gave Ailil this permission, it would be her the woman came running to with her news, not Samitsu Tamagowa.

While Samitsu was floundering in her quandary, the door to the hallway opened to admit a pale, stern-faced Cairhienin woman, a hand shorter than either Aes Sedai. Her hair was in a thick gray roll on the nape of her neck, and she wore an unadorned gray dress so dark it was nearly black, the current livery of a Sun Palace servant. Servants never announced themselves or asked admittance, of course, but Corgaide Marendevin was hardly just another servant; the heavy silvery ring of long keys at her waist was a badge of office. Whoever ruled Cairhien, the Holder of the Keys ruled the Sun Palace in simple fact, and there was nothing submissive in Corgaide's manner. She made a minimal curtsy carefully aimed halfway between Samitsu and Sashalle.

"I was asked to report anything unusual," she said to the air, though it had been Samitsu who asked. Very likely, she had known of the power struggle between them as soon as they did themselves. Little in the palace escaped her. "I am told there is an Ogier in the kitchens. He and a young man supposedly are looking after work as masons, but I have never heard of Ogier and human masons working together. And *Stedding* Tsofu sent word no masons would be available from any *stedding* for the foreseeable future, when we inquired after . . . the incident." The pause was barely perceptible, and her grave expression did not alter, but half the gossip about the attack on the Sun Palace laid it to al'Thor's doing, the other half to Aes Sedai. A few tales mentioned the Forsaken, but only to pair them with either al'Thor or the Aes Sedai.

Pursing her lips in thought, Samitsu set aside the cursed tangle Cairhienin made of everything they touched. Denials of Aes Sedai involvement did little good; the Three Oaths went only so far in a city where a simple yes or no could give rise to six contradictory rumors. But, Ogier . . . The palace kitchens scarcely took in stray passersby, yet the cooks very likely would give an Ogier a hot meal just for the strangeness of seeing him. Ogier were even more uncommon than usual, this last year or so. A few were still seen now and then, but walking as fast as only an Ogier could, and seldom stopping in one place more than long enough to sleep. They rarely traveled with humans, much less worked with them. The pairing tickled something in her mind, though. Hoping to tease whatever it was into the open, she opened her mouth to ask a few questions.

“Thank you, Corgaide,” Sashalle said with a smile. “You’ve been most helpful. But if you will leave us, now?” Being abrupt with the Holder of the Keys was a good way to find yourself with dirty bed linens and poorly spiced meals, unemptied chamber pots and messages that went astray, a thousand annoyances that could make life a misery and leave you wading in mud trying to accomplish anything at all, yet somehow, that smile appeared to take the sting out of her words for Corgaide. The gray-haired woman bowed her head slightly in assent and again made the smallest possible curtsy. This time, obviously to Sashalle.

No sooner had the door closed behind the gray-haired woman than Samitsu thumped her silver cup back on the tray hard enough to splash warm wine over her wrist and rounded on the Red sister. She was on the brink of losing control of Ailil, and now the Sun Palace itself appeared to be slipping through her fingers! It was as likely Corgaide would sprout wings and fly as keep silent about what she had seen here, and whatever she said would flash through the palace and infect every servant down to the men who mucked out the stables. That final curtsy had made it quite clear what she thought. Light, but Samitsu hated Cairhien! The customs of civility between sisters were deeply ingrained, but Sashalle did not stand high enough to make her hold her tongue in the face of this disaster, and she intended to deliver the rough side of it.

Frowning at the other woman, though, she saw Sashalle’s face—*really* saw it, perhaps for the first time—and suddenly she knew why it troubled her so, perhaps even why she had found it difficult to look directly at the Red sister. It was no longer an Aes Sedai face, outside of time and standing apart from age. Most people were unsure of the look until it was pointed out, but it was unmistakable to another sister. Perhaps some bits remained, scraps that made Sashalle appear closer to beautiful than she really was, yet anyone at all would put an age to her, somewhere short of her middle years. The realization froze Samitsu’s tongue.

What was known about women who had been stilled was little better than rumor. They ran away and hid from other sisters; eventually, they died. Usually, they died soon rather than late. The loss of *saidar* was more than most women could bear for very long. But it was all really tittle-tattle; as far as she knew, no one in a very long time had had the nerve to try learning more. The rarely acknowledged fear in the darkest corner of every sister's head, that the same fate might come to her one day in a careless moment, kept anyone from wanting to know too much. Even Aes Sedai could hide their eyes when they did not want to see. There were always those rumors, though, almost never mentioned and so vague you could never recall where you heard them first, whispers on the edge of hearing, yet forever floating about. One that Samitsu had only half remembered, till now, said that a woman who was stilled grew young again, if she lived. It had always seemed ludicrous, till now. Regaining the ability to channel had not given Sashalle back everything. Once more she would have to work with the Power for years to gain the face that would proclaim her Aes Sedai to any sister who could see her clearly. Or . . . would she regain it? It seemed inevitable, yet this was unmapped terrain. And if her face was changed, was anything else about her changed as well? Samitsu shivered, harder than she had for the thought of stilling. Perhaps it was as well she had gone slow in trying to puzzle out Damer's way of Healing.

Fingering her Aiel necklace, Sashalle seemed unaware that Samitsu had any grievance, unaware of Samitsu's scrutiny. "This may be nothing, or it may warrant looking into," she said, "but Corgaide was only reporting what she heard. If we want to learn anything, we must go and see for ourselves." Without another word, she gathered her skirts and started out of the apartments, leaving Samitsu only a choice between following or remaining behind. It was intolerable! Yet remaining was unthinkable.

Sashalle was no taller than she, not to speak of, but she had to hurry to keep up as the Red glided swiftly along wide, square-vaulted corridors. Taking the lead was out of the question, unless she chose to run. She fumed in silence, though it required gritting her teeth. Arguing with another sister in public was improper at best. Worse, without any doubt, it would be futile. And that would only dig the hole she was in deeper. She felt a very great desire to kick something.

Stand-lamps at regular intervals gave plenty of light even in the darkest stretches of hallway, but there was little color or decoration beyond the occasional tapestry with everything in it arranged in orderly fashion, whether animals being hunted or nobles fighting gallantly in battle. A few niches in the walls held ornaments of gold or Sea Folk porcelain, and in some corridors the cornices were worked in friezes, most left unpainted. That was all. Cairhienin hid their opulence out of public view, as they did with so much. The serving men and women who hurried industriously along the halls like streams of ants wore livery the color of charcoal, except for those in service to nobles resident in the palace, who seemed bright beside the rest, with their House badges embroidered on their breasts, and their collars and sometimes sleeves marked in House colors. One or two even had a coat or dress all in House colors, and appeared almost an outlander among the others. But they all kept their eyes down and barely paused long enough to offer quick bows or curtsies to the two sisters as they passed. The Sun Palace required countless hundreds of servants, and it seemed they were all scurrying about this morning tending their chores.

Nobles strolled in the hallways, too, offering their own cautious courtesies to the Aes Sedai as they passed, perhaps with a greeting carefully balanced between an illusion of equality and the true state of affairs, spoken in low voices that did not carry far. They proved the old saying that strange times make for strange traveling companions. Old enmities had been put away in the face of new dangers. For the moment. Here, two or three pale Cairhienin lords in dark silk coats with thin stripes of color across the front, some with the fronts of their heads shaved and powdered soldier-fashion, promenaded alongside an equal number of dark Tairens, taller in their bright coats with fat, striped sleeves. There, a Tairen noblewoman in a snug pearl-sewn cap, colorfully brocaded gown, and pale lace ruff walked arm-in-arm beside a shorter Cairhienin noble with her hair in an elaborate tower that reached well above her companion’s head, smoky gray lace under her chin, and narrow stripes of her House colors cascading down the front of her wide-skirted dark silk. All like bosom friends and trusted confidants.

Some pairings did look odder than others. A number of women had begun wearing outlandish clothes of late, apparently never noticing how they drew men’s eyes and made even the servants struggle not to stare. Tight breeches and a coat barely long enough to cover the hips were not suitable garments for a woman, no matter how much effort went into rich embroidery or patterning the coat with gemstones. Jeweled necklaces and bracelets and pins with sprays of colorful feathers only pointed up the oddity. And those brightly dyed boots, with their heels that added as much as a hand to a woman's height, made them appear in danger of falling down with every swaying step.

"Scandalous," Sashalle muttered, eyeing one such pair of women and twitching her skirts in displeasure.

"Scandalous," Samitsu murmured before she could stop herself, then snapped her mouth shut so hard her teeth clicked. She needed to control her tongue. Voicing agreement just because she agreed was a habit she could ill afford with Sashalle.

Still, she could not help glancing back at the pair in disapproval. And a bit of wonder. A year ago, Alaine Chuliandred and Fionnda Annariz would have been at each other's throats. Or rather have had their armsmen at one another's throats. But then, who would have expected to see Bertome Saighan walking peacefully with Weiramon Saniago, neither man reaching for the dagger at his belt? Strange times and strange traveling companions. Doubtless they were playing the Game of Houses, maneuvering for advantage as they always had, yet dividing lines that once were graven in stone now turned out to have been drawn on water instead. Very strange times.

The kitchens were on the lowest level of the Sun Palace above-ground, at the back, a cluster of stone-walled beamed-ceiling rooms centered around a long windowless room full of iron stoves and brick ovens and dressed-stone fireplaces, and the heat was enough to make anyone forget the snow outside, or even that it was winter. Normally, sweaty-faced cooks and under-cooks, as darkly clad as any other palace servants beneath their white aprons, would have been scurrying about getting ready to prepare the midday meal, kneading loaves on long flour-strewn tables topped with marble, basting the joints and fowl that were turning on spits in the fireplaces. Now, only the trotting spit-dogs were moving, eager to earn their bits from the joints. Baskets of turnips and carrots stood unpeeled and unchopped, and smells sweet and spicy came from untended pots of sauces. Even the scullions, boys and girls surreptitiously wiping their faces on their aprons, stood on the fringe of a group of women clustered around one of the tables. From the doorway, Samitsu could see the back of an Ogier's head rising above them where he was seated at the table, taller than most men would have been standing up, and broad with it. Of course, Cairhienin were short by and large, and that helped. She laid a hand on Sashalle's arm, and for a wonder, the woman stopped where they were without protest.

". . . vanished without leaving a clue where he was going?" the Ogier was asking in a deep rumble like the earth shifting. His long, tufted ears, sticking up through dark hair that hung to his high collar, flicked back and forth uneasily.

"Oh, do stop talking about him, Master Ledar," a woman's voice answered in a quaver that seemed well-practiced. "Wicked, he was. Tore half the palace apart with the One Power, he did. He could turn your blood to ice just looking at you, and kill you as soon as look. Thousands have died by his own hand. Tens of thousands! Oh, I never like talking about him."

"For someone as never likes talking about something, Eldrid Methin," another woman said sharply, "you surely talk of little else." Stout and quite tall for a Cairhienin, nearly as tall as Samitsu herself, with a few strands of gray hair escaping her white plain-lace cap, she must have been the chief cook on duty, because everyone Samitsu could see quickly nodded agreement and twittered with laughter and said, "Oh, right you are, Mistress Beldair," in a particularly sycophantic way. Servants had their own hierarchies, as rigidly maintained as the Tower itself.

"But that sort of thing really is not for us to be gossiping over, Master Ledar," the stout woman went on. "Aes Sedai business, that is, and not for the likes of you and me. Tell us more about the Borderlands. Have you really seen Trollocs?"

"Aes Sedai," a man muttered. Hidden by the crowd around the table, he had to be Ledar's companion. Samitsu could see no grown men among the kitchen folk this morning. "Tell me, do you really think they bonded those men you were talking about, those Asha'man? As Warders? And what about the one who died? You never said how."

"Why, it was the Dragon Reborn as killed him," Eldrid piped up. "And what else would Aes Sedai bond a man as? Oh, terrible, they was, them Asha'man. Turn you to stone with a look, they could. You can tell one just by looking at him, you know. Frightful glowing eyes, they have."

"Be quiet, Eldrid," Mistress Beldair said firmly. "Maybe they was Asha'man and maybe not, Master Underhill. Maybe they was bonded and maybe not. All I or anyone else can say is they was with *him*," the emphasis in her voice made plain who she was talking about; Eldrid might consider Rand al'Thor fearful, but this woman did not want to so much as name him, “and soon after *he* left, suddenly the Aes Sedai was telling them what to do and they was doing it. Of course, any fool knows to do as an Aes Sedai says. Anyway, those fellows are all gone off, now. Why are you so interested in them, Master Underhill? Is that an Andoran name?”

Ledar threw back his head and laughed, a booming sound that filled the room. His ears twitched violently. “Oh, we want to know everything about the places we visit, Mistress Beldair. The Borderlands, you say? You might think it’s cold here, but we’ve seen trees crack open like nuts on the fire from the cold in the Borderlands. You have blocks of ice in the river, floating down from upstream, but we’ve seen rivers as wide as the Alguenya frozen so merchants can drive loaded trains of wagons across them, and men fishing through holes cut in ice nearly a span thick. At night, there are sheets of light in the sky that seem to crackle, bright enough to dim the stars, and . . .”

Even Mistress Beldair was leaning toward the Ogier, caught up, but one of the young scullions, too short to see past the adults, glanced behind him, and his eyes went wide when they lit on Samitsu and Sashalle. His gaze stayed fixed on them as if trapped, but he fumbled with one hand till he could tug at Mistress Beldair’s sleeve. The first time, she shook him off without looking around. At a second tug, she turned her head with a scowl that vanished in a blink when she, too, saw the Aes Sedai.

“Grace favor you, Aes Sedai,” she said, hastily tucking stray hair back under her cap as she bobbed her curtsy. “How may I serve you?” Ledar broke off short in midsentence, and his ears stiffened for an moment. He did not look toward the doorway.

“We wish to speak with your visitors,” Sashalle said, moving into the kitchen. “We won’t disrupt your kitchen for long.”

“Of course, Aes Sedai.” If the stout woman felt any surprise at two sisters wanting to talk to kitchen visitors, she showed none. Head swinging from side to side to take in everyone, she clapped her plump hands and began spouting orders. “Eldrid, those turnips will never peel themselves. Who was watching the fig sauce? Dried figs are hard to come by! Where is your basting spoon, Kasi? Andil, run, fetch some. . . .” Cooks and scullions scattered in every direction, and a clatter of pots and spoons quickly filled the kitchen, though everyone was plainly making an effort to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb the Aes Sedai. They were plainly making an effort not to even look in their direction, though that involved some contortion.

The Ogier rose to his feet smoothly, his head coming near the thick ceiling beams. His clothing was what Samitsu remembered from meeting Ogier before, a long dark coat that flared over turned-down boots. Stains on his coat said he had been traveling hard; Ogier were a fastidious people. He only half turned to face her and Sashalle even as he made a bow, and he rubbed at his wide nose as if it itched, partially hiding his broad face, but he appeared young, for an Ogier. “Forgive us, Aes Sedai,” he murmured, “but we really must be moving on.” Bending to gather a huge leather scrip that had a large rolled blanket tied across the top and showed the impressions of several square shapes packed around whatever else was stuffed inside, he hoisted the broad strap over one shoulder. His capacious coat pockets bulged with angular shapes, too. “We have a long way to go before nightfall.” His companion remained seated, though, his hands spread on the tabletop, a pale-haired young man with a week’s growth of beard who seemed to have slept more than one night in his rumpled brown coat. He watched the Aes Sedai warily, with dark eyes that belonged on a cornered fox.

“Where are you going that you can reach by nightfall?” Sashalle did not stop until she was standing in front of the young Ogier, close enough to need to crane her neck to look up at him, though she made it seem graceful rather than awkward, as it should have been. “Are you on your way to the meeting we’ve heard about, in *Stedding* Shangtai? Master . . . Ledar, is it?”

His tall ears twitched violently, then were still, and his teacup-sized eyes narrowed almost as warily as the young man’s, till the dangling ends of his eyebrows trailed onto his cheeks. “Ledar, son of Shandin son of Koimal, Aes Sedai,” he said reluctantly. “But I’m certainly not going to the Great Stump. Why, the Elders wouldn’t let me close enough to hear what was being said.” He gave a deep bass chuckle that sounded forced. “We can’t get where we’re going tonight, Aes Sedai, but every league behind us is a league we don’t have to walk tomorrow. We need to be on our way.” The unshaven young man stood up, running a hand nervously along the long hilt of the sword belted at his waist, yet he made no move to pick up the scrip and blanket roll at his feet and follow as the Ogier started toward the door that led to the street, even when the Ogier said over his shoulder, “We need to go now, Karldin.”

Sashalle glided fluidly into the Ogier's path, though she had to take three strides to his one. "You were asking after work as a mason, Master Ledar," she said in tones brooking no nonsense, "but your hands are not as callused as any mason's I've ever seen. It would be best for you to answer my questions."

Suppressing a triumphant smile, Samitsu moved up beside the Red sister. So Sashalle thought she could simply push her aside and ferret out what was going on, did she? The woman was in for a surprise. "You really must stay a while longer," she said to the Ogier in a low voice; the noise in the kitchen should keep anyone from overhearing, yet there was no need to take chances. "When I came to the Sun Palace, I had already heard of a young Ogier, a friend of Rand al'Thor. He left Cairhien some months past, in company with a young man named Karldin. Isn't that right, Loial?" The Ogier's ears wilted.

The young man bit off a coarse curse he should have known better than to mouth in front of sisters. "I leave when I want to leave, Aes Sedai," he said harshly, but in a low voice. For the most part, he divided his gaze between her and Sashalle, yet he was watchful for any of the kitchen workers who might come near. He did not wish to be overheard, either. "Before I do, *I* want some answers. What happened to . . . my friends? And *him*. Did he go mad?"

Loial sighed heavily, and made a pacifying gesture with one huge hand. "Be easy, Karldin," he murmured. "Rand wouldn't like you starting trouble with Aes Sedai. Be easy." Karldin's scowl only deepened.

Abruptly it occurred to Samitsu that she could have handled this better. Those were not the eyes of a cornered fox, but a wolf. She had grown too accustomed to Damer and Jahar and Eben, safely bonded and tamed. That might be an overstatement, though Merise was making an effort with Jahar—that was Merise's way—yet it seemed the horror of yesterday could become the complacency of today after long enough exposure. Karldin Manfor was an Asha'man, too, and neither bonded nor tame. Was he embracing the male half of the Power? She almost laughed. Did birds fly?

Sashalle was watching the young man with a studying frown, her hands much too still on her skirts, but Samitsu was glad not to see the light of *saidar* around her. Asha'man could feel it when a woman held the Power, and that might make him act . . . precipitately. Certainly she and Samitsu together could handle him—could they, if he already held the Power? Of course they could. Of course!—but it would be much better if they did not have to.

Sashalle certainly was making no move to take charge, now, so Samitsu laid a hand lightly on his left arm. Through his coatsleeve, it felt like a bar of iron. So he was as uneasy as she. As uneasy as she? Light, but Damer and those other two had spoiled all her instincts!

"*He* seemed sane as most men when I last saw him," she said softly, with just a slight emphasis. None of the kitchen folk were nearby, but a few had begun sneaking peeks toward the table. Loial exhaled heavily in relief, a sound like wind rushing across the mouth of a cave, but she kept her attention on Karldin. "I don't know where he is, but he was alive as of a few days ago." Alanna had been closemouthed as a mussel beyond that, and overbearing, too, with Cadsuane's note in her fist. "Fedwin Morr died of poison, I fear, but I have no idea who gave it to him." To her surprise, Karldin merely shook his head, with a rueful grimace, and muttered something incomprehensible about wine. "As for the others, they became Warders of their own free will." As much as any man did anything of his free will. Her Roshan certainly had not wanted to be a Warder, until she decided she wanted him for one. Even a woman who was not Aes Sedai could usually make a man decide the way she wanted. "They thought it a better choice, safer, than returning to . . . the others like you. You see, the damage here was done with *saidin.* You understand who must have been behind it? It was an attempt to kill the one whose sanity you fear for."

That did not seem to surprise him, either. What sort of men *were* these Asha'man? Was their so-called Black Tower a murder pit? The tightness went out of his arm, though, and suddenly he was just a road-weary young man who needed to shave. "Light!" he breathed. "What do we do now, Loial? Where do we go?"

"I . . . don't know," Loial replied, his shoulders sagging tiredly and his long ears drooping. "I . . . We have to find him, Karldin. Somehow. We can't give up now. We have to let him know we did what he asked. As much as we could."

And what was it al'Thor had asked, Samitsu wondered. With a little luck, she could learn a great deal from these two. A tired man, or Ogier, feeling lost and alone, was ripe for answering questions.

Karldin gave a small jump, his hand tightening on his sword hilt, and she bit back a curse of her own as a palace serving woman came running into the room with her skirts gathered almost to her knees. “Lord Dobraine’s been murdered!” the serving woman squealed. “We will all be killed in our beds! My own eyes have seen the dead walking, old Maringil himself, and my mam says spirits will kill you if there has been a murder done! They—” Her mouth froze open when she caught the presence of Aes Sedai, and she skidded to a halt still clutching her skirts. The kitchen folk seemed frozen, too, all watching the Aes Sedai from the corners of their eyes to see what they would do.

“Not Dobraine,” Loial moaned, ears laying flat against his head. “Not him.” He looked as much angry as saddened, his face stony. Samitsu did not think she had ever seen an Ogier angry.

“What is your name?” Sashalle demanded of the serving woman before Samitsu could even part her lips. “How do you know he was murdered? How do you even know he’s dead?”

The woman swallowed, her eyes held by Sashalle’s cool gaze. “Cera, Aes Sedai?” she said hesitantly, bending her knees in a curtsy and only then realizing that she still had her skirts gathered up. Hastily smoothing them down only seemed to fluster her more. “Cera Doinal? They say . . . Everybody says Lord Dobraine is . . . I mean, he was . . . I mean . . .” She swallowed again, hard. “They all say his rooms are covered with blood. He was found lying in a great pool of it. With his head cut off, they say.”

“*They* say a great many things,” Sashalle said grimly, “and usually they’re wrong. Samitsu, you will come with me. If Lord Dobraine *has* been injured, you may be able to do something for him. Loial, Karldin, you come, too. I don’t want you out of my sight before I have a chance to ask a few questions.”

“Burn your questions!” the young Asha’man growled, shouldering his belongings. “I’m leaving!”

“No, Karldin,” Loial said gently, laying a huge hand on his companion’s shoulder. “We can’t go before we know about Dobraine. He’s a friend, Rand’s friend, and mine. We can’t. Anyway, where are we hurrying to?” Karldin looked away. He had no answer.

Samitsu squeezed her eyes shut, and took a deep breath, but there was no help for it. She found herself following Sashalle out of the kitchens, once more hurrying to keep up with the other woman’s quick, gliding stride. In fact, she found herself half-running; Sashalle set an even more rapid pace than before.

The babbling of voices rose behind them as soon as they were out the door. The kitchen folk probably all were pressing the serving woman for particulars, details she very likely would invent where her knowledge failed. Ten different versions of events would find their way out of that kitchen, if not as many as there were kitchen folk. Worst of all, ten different versions of events *in* the kitchen would find their way out, every one adding to the rumors Corgaide doubtless was already starting. She could hardly recall a day that had gone so badly for her, so suddenly, like slipping on one patch of ice only to find another under her feet, then another. Cadsuane would have her hide to make gloves after this!

At least Loial and Karldin trailed after Sashalle as well. Whatever she learned from them might still be put to advantage, a way to salvage something. Scurrying along at Sashalle's side, she studied them in brief glances over her shoulder. Taking short strides to keep from over-running the Aes Sedai, the Ogier was frowning in worry. Over Dobraine, very likely, but also perhaps over only completing his mysterious task "as well as he could." That was a mystery she intended to solve. The young Asha'man had no difficulty keeping up, though he wore an expression of stubborn reluctance and his hand caressed his swordhilt. The danger in him did not lie in steel. He stared suspiciously at the backs of the Aes Sedai ahead, once meeting Samitsu's glance with a dark glower. He had the sense to keep his mouth shut, though. She would have to find a way to pry it open later for more than snarling.

Sashalle never glanced behind to make sure the pair were following, but then, she had to hear the thud of the Ogier's boots on the floor tiles. Her face was thoughtful, and Samitsu would have given a great deal to know what she was thinking. Sashalle might be oathsworn to Rand al'Thor, but what protection did that give to an Asha'man? She was Red, after all. *That* had not changed with her face. Light, this could be the worst patch of ice of all!

It was a long arduous climb from the kitchens to Lord Dobraine's apartments in the Tower of the Full Moon, which was usually set aside for visiting nobility of high rank, and all along the way, Samitsu saw the evidence that Cera had been far from the first to hear what the ever-anonymous *they* had to say. Rather than endless streams of servants flowing along the corridors, small excited knots stood whispering anxiously. At sight of the Aes Sedai, they sprang apart and scurried away. A handful did gape at seeing an Ogier striding through the palace, yet for the most part, they all but fled. The nobles who had been about before had all vanished, doubtless back to their own rooms to mull over what opportunities and hazards Dobraine's death afforded them. Whatever Sashalle thought, Samitsu no longer doubted. If Dobraine had been alive, his own servants would have put paid to the rumor already.

For further confirmation, the hallway outside Dobraine's rooms was crowded with ashen-faced servants, their sleeves ringed to the elbows in the blue-and-white of House Taborwin. Some wept, and others looked lost, their foundation stone pulled out from under them. At a word from Sashalle, they stood aside for the Aes Sedai, moving drunkenly or mechanically. Dazed eyes swept by the Ogier without actually registering what they saw. Few remembered to make even half-hearted courtesies.

Inside, the anteroom was almost as full of Dobraine's servants, most staring as if poleaxed. Dobraine himself lay motionless on a litter in the middle of the large room, his head still attached to his body but his eyes closed and a drying sheet of blood, from a long cut in his scalp, across his still features. A dark trickle had leaked from his slack mouth. Two serving men with tears streaming down their cheeks paused in the act of laying a white cloth over his face at the entrance of the Aes Sedai. Dobraine did not appear to be breathing, and there were bloodstained gashes in the chest of his coat, with its thin stripes of color that marched down to his knees. Beside the litter, a dark blot larger than a man's body marred the green-and-yellow Tairen maze of the fringed carpet. Anyone who lost that much blood had to be dead. Two other men lay sprawled on the floor, one with death-glazed eyes gazing at the ceiling, the other on his side, an ivory knife hilt sticking up from his ribs where the blade had surely reached his heart. Short, pale-skinned Cairhienin, both wore the livery of palace servants, but a servant never carried the long, wooden-handled dagger that lay beside each corpse. A House Taborwin man, his foot drawn back to kick one of the corpses, hesitated on seeing the two sisters, then planted his boot hard in the dead man's ribs anyway. Clearly, proper decorum lay far from anyone's mind at the moment.

"Move that cloth out of the way," Sashalle told the men by the litter. "Samitsu, see whether you can still help Lord Dobraine."

Whatever she believed, instinct had moved Samitsu toward Dobraine, but that command—it was *clearly* a command!—put a stutter in her step.

Gritting her teeth, she kept moving, and knelt carefully beside the litter, on the side away from the still damp blot, to put her hands on Dobraine's blood-soaked head. She never minded getting blood on her hands, but bloodstains were impossible to get out of silk unless you channeled, and she still felt a pang of guilt at the waste when she used the Power for something so mundane.

The necessary weaves were second nature to her, so much so that she embraced the Source and delved the Cairhienin lord without a thought. And blinked in surprise. Instinct had made her go ahead, though she had been certain there were three corpses in the room, yet life still flickered in Dobraine. A tiny guttering flame that the shock of Healing might well extinguish. The shock of the Healing she knew.

Her eyes searched out the pale-haired Asha'man. He was crouched beside one of the dead servants, calmly searching the man, oblivious of the shocked stares of the living servants. One of the women suddenly noticed Loial, standing just inside the door, and goggled as if he had leapt out of thin air. With his arms folded across his chest and a grim expression on his broad face, the Ogier looked as though he were standing guard.

"Karldin, do you know the kind of Healing that Damer Flinn uses?" Samitsu asked. "The kind that uses all of the Five Powers?"

He paused for a moment, frowning at her. "Flinn? I don't even know what you're talking about. I don't have much Talent for Healing, anyway." Eyeing Dobraine, he added, "He looks dead to me, but I hope you can save him. He was at the Wells." And he bent back to rummaging though the dead servant's coat.

Samitsu licked her lips. The thrill of being filled with *saidar* always seemed diminished to her, in situations like this. Situations when all of her possible choices were bad. Carefully, she gathered flows of Air, Spirit and Water, weaving them just so, the basic weave of Healing that every sister knew. No one in living memory had the Talent for Healing as strongly as she, and most sisters were limited in what they could Heal, some to little more than bruises. By herself, she could Heal almost as well as a linked circle. Most sisters could not regulate the weave to any degree at all; most did not even try to learn. She had been able to from the start. Oh, she could not Heal one particular thing and leave everything else as it was, the way Damer could; what she did would affect everything from the stab wounds to the stuffed nose Dobraine was also suffering from. Delving had told her everything that ailed him. But she could wash away the worst injuries as if they had never been, or Heal so whoever she Healed appeared to have spent days recovering on her own, or anything in between. Each took no less of her strength, but they did require less from the patient. The smaller the amount of change in the body, the smaller the amount of the body's strength it drained. Only, except for the gash in his scalp, Dobraine's wounds were all serious, four deep punctures in his lungs, two of them gashing the heart as well. The strongest Healing would kill him before his wounds finished closing, while the weakest would revive him long enough to drown in his own blood. She had to choose somewhere in the middle and hope that she was right.

I am the best that ever has been, she thought firmly. Cadsuane had told her that. *I am the best!* Altering the weave slightly, she let it sink into the motionless man.

Some of the servants cried out in alarm as Dobraine's body convulsed. He half sat up, deep-set eyes opening wide, long enough for what sounded all too much like a long death rattle to rush out of his mouth. Then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he slipped from her grasp, thudding back down onto the litter. Hastily, she readjusted the weave and delved him again, holding her breath. He lived. By a hair, and so weak he might yet die, but it would not be those stabs that killed him, except indirectly. Even through the drying blood that matted his hair, shaven away from his forehead, she could see the puckered pink line of a fresh, tender scar across his scalp. He would have the same beneath his coat, and he might be troubled by shortness of breath when he exerted himself, if he pulled through, yet for the moment, he did live, and that was all that mattered. For the moment. There was still the matter of who had wanted him dead, and why.

Releasing the Power, she stood unsteadily. *Saidar* draining out of her always made her feel tired. One of the serving men, gaping, hesitantly handed her the cloth he had been going to lay on his lord's face, and she used it to wipe her hands. "Take him to his bed," she said. "Get as much mild honey-water down him as you can. He needs to gain strength quickly. And find a Wise Woman . . . a Reader? Yes, a Reader. He will need her, too." He was out of her hands, now, and herbs might help. At least, they were unlikely to harm, coming from a Reader, and at worst the woman would make sure they gave him enough honey-water and not too much.

With much bowing and many murmurs of thanks, four of the serving men took up the litter and carried Dobraine deeper into the apartments. Most of the other servants followed hurriedly, wearing expressions of relief, and the rest dashed out into the corridor. An instant later, glad shouts and cheers broke out, and she heard her name nearly as often as Dobraine's. Very gratifying. It would have been more satisfying if Sashalle had not smiled and given her an approving nod. Approving! And why not a pat on the head, while she was about it?

Karldin had paid no mind at all to the Healing, insofar as Samitsu had noticed. Finishing his search of the second corpse, he rose and crossed the room to Loial, attempting to show the Ogier something, shielded by his body, without letting the Aes Sedai notice. Loial plucked it—a sheet of cream-colored paper, creased from folding—out of the Asha'man's hand and held it up in front of his face opened out in his thick fingers, ignoring Karldin's scowl.

"But this makes no sense," the Ogier muttered, frowning as he read. "No sense at all. Unless—" He cut off abruptly, long ears flickering, and exchanged a tense look with the pale-haired fellow, who gave a curt nod. "Oh, this is very bad," Loial said. "If there were more than two, Karldin, if they found—" He choked off his words again at a frantic head shake from the young man.

"I will see that, please," Sashalle said, holding out her hand, and please or no please, it was not a request.

Karldin attempted to snatch the paper from Loial's hand, but the Ogier calmly handed it to Sashalle, who inspected it without any change of expression, then handed it to Samitsu. It was thick paper, smooth and expensive, and new-looking. Samitsu had to control her eyebrows' desire to climb as she read.

> *At my command, the bearers of this are to remove certain items, which they will know, from my apartments and take them out of the Sun Palace. Make them private of my rooms, give them whatever aid they require and keep silent on this matter, in the name of the Dragon Reborn and on pain of his displeasure.*
>
> *Dobraine Taborwin*

She had seen Dobraine's writing often enough to recognize the rounded hand as his. "Obviously, someone employs a very good forger," she said, earning a quick, contemptuous glance from Sashalle.

“It did seem unlikely he wrote it himself and was stabbed by his own men in mistake,” the Red said in cutting tones. Her gaze swung to Loial and the Asha’man. “What is it they might have found?” she demanded. “What is it you are *afraid* they found?” Karldin stared back at her blandly.

“I just meant whatever they were looking for,” Loial answered. “They had to be here to steal something.” But his tufted ears twitched so hard they almost vibrated before he could master them. Most Ogier made very poor liars, at least while young.

Sashalle’s ringlets swung as she shook her head deliberately. “What you know is important. The pair of you are not leaving until I know it, too.”

“And how are you going to stop us?” The very quietness of Karldin’s words made them more dangerous. He met Sashalle’s gaze levelly, as if he had not a worry in the world. Oh, yes; very much a wolf, not a fox.

“I thought I’d never find you,” Rosara Medrano announced, marching into that moment of perilous silence still wearing her red gloves and fur-lined cloak, with the hood thrown back to reveal the carved ivory combs in her black hair. There were damp patches on the shoulders of the cloak from melted snow. A tall woman, as brown as a sun-dark Aiel, she had gone out at first light to try finding spices for some sort of fish stew from her native Tear. She spared only the briefest glance for Loial and Karldin, and did not waste a moment inquiring after Dobraine. “A party of sisters has entered the city, Samitsu. I rode like a madwoman to get here ahead of them, but they could be riding in at this moment. There are Asha’man with them, and one of the Asha’man is Logain!”

Karldin barked a rough laugh, and suddenly Samitsu wondered whether she was going to live long enough for Cadsuane to have her hide.

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CHAPTER 1

Time to Be Gone

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the Rhannon Hills. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

Born among the groves and vineyards that covered much of the rugged hills, the olive trees in evergreen rows, the ordered vines leafless till spring, the cold wind blew west and north across the prosperous farms dotting the land between the hills and the great harbor of Ebou Dar. The land lay winter fallow still, but men and women were already oiling plowshares and tending harnesses, preparing for the planting to come. They paid little mind to the trains of heavily laden wagons moving east along the dirt roads carrying people who wore odd clothes and spoke with odd accents. Many of the strangers seemed to be farmers themselves, familiar implements lashed to their wagon boxes, and in their wagons unfamiliar saplings with roots balled in rough cloth, but they were heading on toward more distant land. Nothing to do with life here and now. The Seanchan hand lay lightly on those who did not contest Seanchan rule, and the farmers of the Rhannon Hills had seen no changes in their lives. For them, rain or the lack of it had always been the true ruler.

West and north the wind blew, across the broad blue-green expanse of the harbor, where hundreds of huge ships sat rocking at anchor on choppy swells, some bluff-bowed and rigged with ribbed sails, others long and sharp-prowed, with men laboring to match their sails and rigging to those of the wider vessels. Not nearly so many ships still floated there as had only a few days before, though. Many now lay in the shallows, charred wrecks heeled over on their sides, and burned frames settling in the deep gray mud like blackened skeletons. Smaller craft skittered about the harbor, slanting under triangular sails or crawling on oars like many-legged waterbugs, most carrying workers and supplies to the ships that still floated. Other small vessels and barges rode tethered to what appeared to be tree trunks shorn of branches, rising out of the blue-green water, and from those men dove holding stones to carry them down swiftly to sunken ships below, where they tied ropes to whatever could be hauled up for salvage. Six nights ago death had walked across the water here, the One Power killing men and women and ships in darkness split by silver lightnings and hurtling balls of fires. Now the rough rolling harbor, filled with furious activity, seemed at peace by comparison, the chop giving up spray to the wind that blew north and west across the mouth of the River Eldar, where it widened into the harbor, north and west and inland.

Sitting cross-legged atop a boulder covered with brown moss, on the reed-fringed bank of the river, Mat hunched his shoulders against the wind and cursed silently. There was no gold to be found here, no women or dancing, no fun. Plenty of discomfort, though. In short, it was the last sort of place he would choose, normally. The sun stood barely its own height above the horizon, the sky overhead was pale slate gray, and thick purple clouds moving in from the sea threatened rain. Winter hardly seemed winter without snow—he had yet to see a single flake in Ebou Dar—but a cold damp morning wind off the water could serve as well as snow to chill a man to the bone. Six nights since he had ridden out of the city in a storm, yet his throbbing hip seemed to think he was still soaked to the skin and clinging to a saddle. This was no weather or time of day for a man to be out by his own choice. He wished he had thought to bring a cloak. He wished he had stayed in bed.

Ripples in the land hid Ebou Dar, just over a mile to the south, and hid him from the city, as well, but there was not a tree or anything more than scrub brush in sight. Being in the open this way made him feel as though ants were crawling under his skin. He should be safe, though. His plain brown woolen coat and cap were nothing like the clothes he was known by in the city. Instead of black silk, a drab woolen scarf hid the scar around his neck, and the collar of his coat was turned up to hide that, as well. Not a bit of lace or a thread of embroidery. Dull enough for a farmer milking cows.

No one he needed to avoid would know him to recognize if they saw him. Not unless they were close. Just the same, he tugged the cap a bit lower.

“You intend to stay out here much longer, Mat?” Noal’s tattered dark blue coat had seen better days, but then so had he. Stooped and white-haired, the broken-nosed old fellow was squatting on his heels below the boulder, fishing off the riverbank with a bamboo pole. Most of his teeth were missing, and sometimes he felt at a gap with his tongue as though surprised to find the empty space. “It’s cold, in case you haven’t noticed. Everybody always thinks it’s warm in Ebou Dar, but winter is cold everywhere, even places that make Ebou Dar feel like Shienar. My bones crave a fire. Or a blanket, anyway. A man can be snug with a blanket, if he’s out of the wind. Are you going to do anything but stare downriver?”

When Mat only glanced at him, Noal shrugged and went back to peering at the tarred wooden float bobbing among the sparse reeds. Now and then he worked one gnarled hand as though his crooked fingers felt the chill particularly, but if so, it was his own fault. The old fool had gone wading in the shallows to scoop up minnows for bait with a basket that now sat half-submerged and anchored by a smooth stone at the edge of the water. Despite his complaints about the weather, Noal had come along to the river without urging or invitation. From things he had said, everyone he cared about was long years dead, and the truth of it was, he seemed almost desperate for any sort of company. Desperate, indeed, to choose Mat’s company when he could be five days from Ebou Dar by now. A man could cover a lot of ground in five days if he had reason to and a good horse. Mat had thought on that very subject often enough himself.

On the far side of the Eldar, half-hidden by one of the marshy islands that dotted the river, a broad-beamed rowboat backed oars, and one of the crew stood up and fished in the reeds with a long boathook. Another oarsman helped him heave what he had caught into the boat. At this distance, it looked like a large sack. Mat winced and shifted his eyes downriver. They were still finding bodies, and he was responsible. The innocent died along with the guilty. And if you did nothing, then only the innocent died. Or as bad as died. Maybe worse than, depending on how you looked at it.

He scowled irritably. Blood and ashes, he was turning into a bloody philosopher! Taking responsibility drained all the joy out of life and dried a man to dust. What he wanted right then was a great deal of mulled wine in a snug common room full of music, and a plump, pretty serving maid on his knee, somewhere far from Ebou Dar. Very far. What he had were obligations he could not walk away from and a future he did not fancy. There seemed no help at all in being *ta'veren*, not if this was how the Pattern shaped itself to you. He still had his luck, anyway. At least, he was alive and not chained in a cell. Under the circumstances, that counted as luck.

From his perch, he had a fairly clear view down past the last low marshy river islands. Wind-caught spray drifted up the harbor like banks of fine mist, but not enough to hide what he needed to see. He was attempting to do sums in his head, counting ships afloat, trying to count wrecks. He kept losing his place, though, thinking he had counted vessels twice and starting over. The Sea Folk who had been recaptured intruded on his thoughts, too. He had heard that gibbets in the Rahad, across the harbor, displayed more than a hundred corpses, with placards listing "murder" and "rebellion" as their crimes. Normally, the Seanchan used the headsman's axe and the impaling stake, while the Blood got the strangling cord, but property had to settle for being hanged.

Burn me, I did what I could, he thought sourly. There was no use feeling guilty that that was all he could do. Not a bit of use. None! He had to concentrate on the people who escaped.

The Atha'an Miere who got away had taken ships in the harbor for their flight, and while they might have seized some smaller craft, anything they could board and overwhelm in the night, they had intended to carry off as many of their people as possible. With thousands of them laboring as prisoners in the Rahad, that would have meant big ships, by choice, and that meant Seanchan greatships. Many of the Sea Folk's own vessels were large enough, for certain, but they all had been stripped of their sails and rigging by that time, to be fitted out in the Seanchan fashion. If he could calculate how many greatships remained, he might have some notion of how many Atha'an Miere had actually reached freedom. Freeing the Sea Folk Windfinders had been the right thing to do, the only thing he could do, but aside from the hangings, hundreds and hundreds of bodies had been fished out of the harbor in the last five days, and the Light only knew how many had washed out to sea with the tides. The gravediggers labored from sunup to sundown, and the graveyards were filled with weeping women and children. Men, too. More than a few of those dead had been Atha'an Miere, with no one to weep while they were dumped into mass graves, and he wanted some idea of the number he had saved to balance his bleak suspicions of the number he had killed.

Estimating how many ships had made it out into the Sea of Storms was difficult, though, quite apart from losing the count. Unlike Aes Sedai, Windfinders had no strictures against using the Power as a weapon, not when the safety of their people was at stake, and they would have wanted to halt pursuit before it began. No one gave chase in a burning ship. The Seanchan, with their *damane,* had even less compunction against fighting back. *Lightning bolts lacing through the rain as numerous as blades of grass and balls of fire streaking across the sky, some the size of horses, and the harbor seemed aflame from one side to the other, till even in a storm the night made any Illuminator's show look stark.* Without turning his head he could count a dozen places where the charred ribs of a greatship stuck up out of shallow water or a huge bluff-bowed hull lay on its side with the harbor waves licking against the tilted deck, and twice as many where the lines of blackened timbers were finer, the remains of Sea Folk rakers. Apparently they had disliked leaving their own vessels to people who had put them in chains. Three dozen right in front of him, and that without adding in the sunken wrecks that had salvage boats working over them. Perhaps a seafarer could tell greatship from raker by the tops of masts sticking out of the water, but the task was beyond him.

Suddenly an old memory tugged at him, of lading ships for an attack from the sea, and how many men could be crowded into how much space for how long. It was not his memory, really, from an ancient war between Fergansea and Moreina, yet it seemed his. Realizing that he had not actually lived one of those ancient bits of other men's lives that were stuck in his head always took him a little by surprise now, so maybe they were his, in a way. They were certainly sharper than some stretches of his own life. The vessels he recalled had been smaller than most in the harbor, yet the principles were the same.

"They don't have enough ships," he muttered. The Seanchan had even more in Tanchico than had come here, but the losses here were sufficient to make the difference.

"Enough ships for what?" Noal said. "I never saw so many in one place before." That was quite a statement, coming from him. To hear Noal tell it, he had seen everything, and nearly always bigger or grander than what was in front of his nose. Back home, they would have said he kept tight purse-strings on the truth.

Mat shook his head. “They don’t have enough ships left to take them all back home.”

“We don’t have to go home,” a woman drawled behind him. “We’ve come home.”

He did not quite jump at the slurred Seanchan accent, but it was a near thing before he recognized who was speaking.

Egeanin was scowling, her eyes like blue daggers, but not for him. At least, he thought not. She was tall and lean, with a hard face that was pale-skinned despite a life at sea. Her green dress was bright enough for a Tinker, or close to it, and embroidered with a mass of tiny yellow and white blossoms on the high neck and down the sleeves. A flowered scarf tied tightly under her chin held a long black wig on her head, spilling halfway down her back and over her shoulders. She hated the scarf and the dress, which did not quite fit, but her hands checked every other minute to make sure the wig was straight. That concerned her more than her clothes, though concern was not nearly a strong enough word.

She had only sighed over cutting her long fingernails short, but she almost had a fit, red-faced and pop-eyed, when he told her she must shave her head completely. The way her hair had been cut before, shaved above her ears with only a bowl-like cap and a wide shoulder-length tail in the back remaining, shouted that she was of the Seanchan Blood, a lesser noble. Even someone who had never laid eyes on a Seanchan would have remembered seeing her. She had agreed, reluctantly, but afterward she was close to hysterical until she was able to cover her scalp. Not for the reasons most women would have gone over the moon, though. No, among the Seanchan, only the Imperial family shaved their heads. Men who went bald began wearing wigs as soon as their hair started falling out to any noticeable degree. Egeanin would have died before letting anyone think she was pretending to belong to the Imperial family, even people who would never have had the thought in their lives. Well, that sort of pretense did carry a death penalty among the Seanchan, but he would never have believed she would go on about it so. What was one more death penalty when your neck was already being stretched for the axe? The strangling cord, in her case. The noose would be for him.

Slipping the half-drawn knife back up his left sleeve, he slid down from the boulder. He landed poorly and almost fell, barely hiding a wince at the stabbing jar to his hip. He did hide it, though. She was a noblewoman *and* a ship captain, and she made enough tries at taking charge without him showing any more weakness to give her an opening than he had to. She had come to him for help, not the other way ’round, but that buttered no bread with her. Leaning against the boulder with his arms folded, he pretended he was lounging, idly kicking at tufts of dead grass to work the pain out. *That* was sharp enough to put sweat on his forehead despite the cold wind. Fleeing in that storm had cost him ground with his hip, and he had not made it up yet.

“Are you sure about the Sea Folk?” he asked her. No point in mentioning the lack of ships again. Too many Seanchan settlers had spread out from Ebou Dar anyway, and apparently even more from Tanchico. However many ships they had, no power on earth would ever root all the Seanchan out, now.

Reaching toward the wig again, she hesitated, frowning at her short fingernails, and instead tucked her hands under her arms. “What about them?” She knew he had been behind the Windfinders’ break for freedom, but neither of them had mentioned it specifically. She always tried to avoid talking about the Atha’an Miere. Quite aside from all the sunken ships and dead, freeing *damane* was another death-penalty charge, and disgusting besides, in the Seanchan view, as bad as rape or molesting children. Of course, she had helped free some *damane* herself, though to her way of looking, that was among the least of her crimes. Still, she avoided that topic, too. There were quite a few subjects she held silent on.

“Are you *certain* about the Windfinders who were caught? I’ve heard talk about cutting off hands, or feet.” Mat swallowed a sour taste. He had seen men die, had killed men with his own hands. The Light send him mercy, he had killed a woman, once! Not even the darkest of those other men’s memories burned so hot as that, and a few of those were dark enough to need drowning in wine when they floated to the surface. But the thought of deliberately cutting off somebody’s hands curdled his stomach.

Egeanin’s head jerked, and for a moment he thought she would ignore his question. “Talk from Renna, I’ll wager,” she said, with a dismissive gesture. “Some *sul’dam* talk about that nonsense to frighten recalcitrant *damane* when they’re new-leashed, but nobody’s done it in, oh, six or seven hundred years. Not many, anyway, and people who can't control their property without . . . mutilation . . . are *sei'mosiev* to start." Her mouth twisted in loathing, though whether for mutilation or *sei'mosiev* was unclear.

"Shamed or not, they do it," he snapped. *Sei'mosiev* went beyond being shamed, to a Seanchan, but he doubted that anyone who deliberately cut off a woman's hand could be humiliated enough to kill themselves. "Is Suroth one of that 'not many'?"

The Seanchan woman glared to match his and planted her fists on her hips, leaning forward with her feet astride as though she were on the deck of a ship and about to berate a fumble-witted sailor. "The High Lady Suroth doesn't own these *damane,* you lump-brained farmer! They're property of the Empress, may she live forever. Suroth might as well slit her own wrists straightaway as order something like that for Imperial *damane.* That's even if she would; I've never heard of her mistreating her own. I'll try to put this in terms you can understand. If your dog runs away, you don't maim it. You switch the dog so it knows not to do that again, and you put it back in the kennel. Besides, *damane* are just too—"

"Too valuable," Mat finished for her dryly. He had heard that till he was sick of it.

She disregarded his sarcasm, or maybe did not notice. In his experience, if a woman did not want to hear something, she could ignore it till you yourself started to doubt you had spoken. "You're finally beginning to understand," she drawled, nodding. "Those *damane* you're so worried about probably don't even have welts left by this time." Her gaze went to the ships in the harbor, and slowly took on a look of loss, made deeper by the hardness of her face. Her thumbs ran across her fingertips. "You wouldn't believe what my *damane* cost me," she said in a quiet voice, "her and hiring the *sul'dam* for her. Worth every throne I paid, of course. Her name's Serrisa. Well-trained, responsive. She'll gorge herself on honeyed nuts, if you let her, but she never gets seasick or the sulks, the way some do. A pity I had to leave her in Cantorin. I suppose I'll never see her again." She sighed regretfully.

"I'm sure she misses you as much as you miss her," Noal said, flashing a gap-toothed smile, and for all the world, he sounded sincere. Maybe he was. He contended that he had seen worse than *damane* and *da'covale,* for what that was worth.

Egeanin's back stiffened, and she frowned as if she did not believe his sympathy. Or else she had just realized how she was staring at the ships in the harbor. Certainly, she turned away from the water very deliberately. "I gave orders that no one was to leave the wagons," she said firmly. Likely, crewmen on her ships had jumped at that tone. She jerked her head away from the river as though she expected Mat and Noal to jump where she indicated, too.

"Did you, now?" Mat grinned, showing teeth. He could manage an insolent grin that sent most puffed-up fools into apoplexy. Egeanin was far from a fool, most times, but puffed-up she was. Ship captain and noblewoman. He did not know which was worse. Bah for both! "Well, I was about ready to head that way. Unless you're not done fishing, Noal. We can wait here awhile, if you're not."

But the old man was already emptying the remaining silver-gray minnows out of his basket into the water. His hands had been broken badly, maybe more than once by their lumpy appearance, yet they were deft in winding his line around the bamboo pole. In the short time he had been fishing, he had caught nearly a dozen fish, the largest less than a foot long, strung through the gills on a looped reed, and he moved those to the basket before picking it up. He claimed that if he could find the right peppers, he was going to make a fish stew—from Shara, of all places! As well say from the moon!—a stew that would make Mat forget all about his hip. The way Noal went on about the peppers, Mat suspected any forgetting would be because he was focused on finding enough ale to cool his tongue.

Egeanin, waiting impatiently, was paying no attention to Mat's grin, either, so he slipped an arm around her. If they were heading back, they might as well get started. She knocked his hand away from her shoulder. The woman made some maiden aunts he had known look like tavern girls.

"We're supposed to be lovers, you and I," he reminded her.

"There's nobody here to see," she growled.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Leilwin?" That was the name she was using. She claimed it was Taraboner. At any rate, it did not sound Seanchan. "If we don't even hold hands unless we see somebody watching, we're going to look a pretty strange pair of lovers to anybody we don't see."

She snorted in derision, yet she let him put his arm back around her, and slipped hers around him. But she gave him a warning stare at the same time.

Mat shook his head. She was crazy as a spring hare if she thought he enjoyed this. Most women had a little padding over their muscles, at least the women he liked, but hugging Egeanin was like hugging a fence post. Almost as hard, and definitely as stiff. He could not puzzle out what Domon saw in her. Maybe she had not given the Illianer any choice. She had *bought* the man, after all, same as buying a horse. *Burn me, I'll* never *understand these Seanchan,* he thought. Not that he wanted to. The only thing was, he had to.

As they were turning away, he took one last glance back at the harbor, and almost wished he had not. Two small sailing craft broke through a wide wall of mist that was drifting slowly down the harbor. Drifting against the wind. Time to be gone and past time.

It was better than two miles from the river to the Great North Road, across rolling countryside covered in winter-brown grasses and weeds and dotted with clumps of vine-tangled bushes too thick to push through even with most of the leaves gone. The rises hardly deserved the name of hill, not for anyone who had climbed in the Sand Hills and the Mountains of Mist as a boy—there were gaps in his own memories, but Mat could remember some of that—yet before long, he was glad he had an arm around somebody. He had sat motionless on that bloody rock for too long. The throb in his hip had faded to a dull ache, but it still made him limp, and without some sort of support, he would have been staggering on the slopes. Not that he leaned on Egeanin, of course, but holding on helped steady him. The woman frowned at him as though she thought he was trying to take advantage.

"If you did as you were told," she growled, "I wouldn't need to carry you."

He showed his teeth again, this time not trying to disguise it as a smile. The way Noal scampered along beside them easily, never missing a step despite balancing his basket of fish on his hip with one hand and carrying his fishing pole in the other, was embarrassing. For all he looked hard-worn, the old man was spry enough. Too spry by half, at times.

Their route slanted north of the Circuit of Heaven, with its long, open-ended tiers of polished stone seats where, in warmer weather, wealthy patrons sat on cushions beneath colorful canvas awnings to watch their horses race. Now the awnings and poles were stowed away, the horses all in their country stables, those the Seanchan had not taken, and the seats were empty save for a handful of small boys darting up and down the tiers in a game of keep-away. Mat was fond of horses, and racing, but his eyes slid past the Circuit toward Ebou Dar. Whenever he topped a rise, the city's massive white ramparts were visible, deep enough that they supported a road encircling the city on top, and looking gave him an excuse to pause a moment. Fool woman! A scrap of a limp did not mean she was carrying him! He managed to keep a good temper, take the rough with the smooth and no complaining. Why could she not?

Inside the city white roofs and walls, white domes and spires, ringed in thin bands of color, gleamed in the gray morning light, a picture of serenity. He could not make out the gaps where buildings had burned to the ground. A long line of farmers' high-wheeled ox-carts was trundling through the wide arched gateway that opened on the Great North Road, men and women on their way to the city markets with whatever they had left to sell this late in winter, and in their midst a merchant's train of big, canvas-topped wagons behind six- and eight-horse teams, carrying goods from the Light knew where. Seven more trains, ranging from four wagons to ten, stood in line at the side of the road to wait for the gate guards to finish their inspections. Trade never stopped entirely while the sun shone, no matter who ruled a city, unless there was actual fighting. Sometimes it did not stop completely then. The stream of people flowing the other way was mostly Seanchan, soldiers in ordered ranks with their segmented armor painted in stripes and helmets that looked like the heads of huge insects, some marching and some mounted, nobles who were always mounted, wearing ornate cloaks, pleated riding dresses and lace veils, or voluminous trousers and long coats. Seanchan settlers were still departing the city, too, wagon upon wagon filled with farmers and craftsmen and the tools of their trades. The settlers had begun leaving as soon as they came off the ships, but it would be weeks before they were all gone. It was a peaceful scene, workaday and ordinary if you ignored what lay behind it, yet every time they reached a place where he could see the gates, his mind flashed back to six nights ago, and he was there again, at those same gates.

The storm had grown worse as they crossed the city from the Tarasin Palace. Rain fell by buckets, pounding the darkened city and slicking the paving stones under the horses' hooves, and wind howled off the Sea of Storms, driving the rain like stones from slings and jerking at cloaks so that keeping at all dry was a lost cause. Clouds hid the moon, and the deluge seemed to soak up the light of the pole-lanterns carried by Blaeric and Fen, on foot ahead of the rest. Then they entered the long passageway through the city wall, and gained a bit of shelter, at least from the rain. The wind made the high-ceilinged tunnel keen like a flute. The gate guards were waiting just inside the far end of the passage, four of them also bearing pole-lanterns. A dozen more, half of them Seanchan, carried halberds that could strike at a man in the saddle or pull him out of it. Two Seanchan with their helmets off were peering from the lighted doorway of the guardhouse built into the white-plastered wall, and shifting shadows behind them told of others inside. Too many to fight past quietly, maybe too many to fight past at all. Not without everything going off like an Illuminator's firework bursting in his hand.

The guards were not the danger, anyway, not the main danger. A tall, plump-faced woman in dark blue, her divided ankle-length skirts bearing red panels worked with silver lightning bolts, stepped past the men in the guardhouse door. A long silvery metal leash was coiled in the *sul'dam*'s left hand, the free end connecting her to the graying woman in a dark gray dress who followed her out with an eager grin. Mat had known they would be there. The Seanchan had *sul'dam* and *damane* at all the gates, now. There could even be another pair inside, or two. They did not mean to let one woman who could channel escape their nets. The silver foxhead medallion beneath his shirt lay cold against his chest; not the cold that signaled someone embracing the Source nearby, just the accumulated chill of the night and his flesh too icy to warm it, but he could not stop waiting for the other. Light, he was *juggling* fireworks tonight, with the fuses lit!

The guards might have been puzzled by a noblewoman leaving Ebou Dar in the middle of the night and that weather, with over a dozen servants and strings of packhorses indicating a journey of some distance, but Egeanin was of the Blood, her cloak embroidered in an eagle with spread black-and-white wings, and long fingers on her red riding gloves to accommodate her fingernails. Ordinary soldiers did not question what the Blood chose to do, even the low Blood. Which did not mean there were no formalities. Anyone was free to leave the city when they wished, but the Seanchan recorded the movement of *damane,* and three rode in the entourage, heads down and faces covered by the hoods of their gray cloaks, each linked to a mounted *sul'dam* by the silvery length of an *a'dam.*

The plump-faced *sul'dam* walked by them with barely a glance, strolling down the tunnel. Her *damane* peered intently at every woman they passed, though, sensing whether she could channel, and Mat held his breath when she paused beside the last mounted *damane* with a slight frown. Even with his luck, he would not bet against the Seanchan recognizing an Aes Sedai's ageless face if they looked inside that hood. There were Aes Sedai held as *damane,* but what were the odds that all three of Egeanin's would be? Light, what were the odds one of the low Blood would own three?

The plump-faced woman made a clicking sound, as you might to a pet dog, and twitched the *a'dam,* and the *damane* followed her on. They were looking for *marath'damane* trying to escape the leash, not *damane.* Mat still thought he might choke. The sound of dice rolling had started up again in his head, loud enough to rival the occasional rumble of distant thunder. Something was going to go wrong; he knew it.

The officer of the guards, a burly Seanchan with tilted eyes like a Saldaean but pale honey-brown skin, bowed courteously and invited Egeanin into the guardhouse, to have a cup of spiced wine while a clerk wrote down the information about the *damane*. Every guardhouse Mat had ever seen was a stark place, yet the lamplight glowing in the arrowslits made this one seem almost inviting. A pitcherplant probably looked inviting to a fly, too. He had been glad of the rain dripping from the hood of his cloak and running down his face. It disguised the sweat of nerves. He held one of his throwing knives, resting flat atop the long bundle draped in front of his saddle. With it lying flat like that, none of the soldiers should notice. He could feel the woman inside the cloth breathing under his hands, and his shoulders were knotted from waiting for her to cry out for help. Selucia kept her mount close to him, peering at him from the shelter of her hood with her golden braid tucked out of sight, never even glancing away when the *sul'dam* and *damane* walked by. A shout from Selucia would have put the weasel in the chicken run as much as one from Tuon. He thought the threat of the knife had held both women silent—they had to believe he was desperate enough or crazy enough to use it—but he still could not be sure. There was so much about night he could not be sure of, so much off-balance and askew.

He remembered holding his breath, wondering when someone would notice that the bundle he carried was richly embroidered and question why he was letting it get soaked with rain, wondering and cursing himself for grabbing a wall hanging because it had been close to hand. In memory, everything slowed. Egeanin stepped down, tossing her reins to Domon, who took them with a bow from his saddle. Domon's hood was pushed back just enough to show that his head was shaved on one side and his remaining hair gathered in a braid that hung to his shoulder. Raindrops dripped from the stocky Illianer's short beard, yet he managed the proper stiff-necked arrogance of a *so'jhin,* hereditary upper servant to one of the Blood and thus almost equal to the Blood. Definitely higher than any common soldier. Egeanin glanced back toward Mat and his burden, her face a frozen mask that could pass for hauteur if you did not know she was horrified by what they were doing. The tall *sul'dam* and her *damane* turned briskly back up the tunnel, finished with their inspection. Vanin, just behind Mat leading one of the strings of packhorses and as always sitting his horse like a sack of suet, leaned from his saddle and spat. Mat did not know why that hung in his memory, but it did. Vanin spat, and trumpets sounded, thin and sharp in the distance far behind them. From south of the city, where men had been planning to fire Seanchan supplies stored along the Bay Road.

The officer of the guard hesitated at the sound of the trumpets, but suddenly a bell pealed loudly in the city itself, then another, and then it seemed hundreds were clanging alarm in the night as the black sky split with more lightning than any storm had ever birthed, silver-blue streaks stabbing down inside the walls. They bathed the tunnel in flickering light. That was when the shouting started, amid the explosions back in the city, and the screaming.

For a moment, Mat had cursed the Windfinders for moving sooner than he had been promised. But the dice in his head had stopped, he realized. Why? It made him want to curse all over again, but there was no time for even that. In the next instant the officer was hurriedly urging Egeanin back into her saddle and on her way, hurriedly shouting orders to the men boiling out of the guardhouse, directing one into the city at a run to see what the alarm was while he arrayed the rest against any threat from inside or out. The plump-faced woman ran to place herself and her *damane* with the soldiers, along with another pair of women linked by an *a'dam,* who came running from the guardhouse. And Mat and the others galloped out into the storm, carrying with them three Aes Sedai, two of them escaped *damane,* and the kidnapped heir to the Seanchan Crystal Throne, while behind them a far worse storm broke over Ebou Dar. *Lightning bolts more numerous than blades of grass. . . .*

With a shiver, Mat pulled himself back to the present. Egeanin scowled at him, and gave him an exaggerated pull. “Lovers arm-in-arm don’t hurry,” he muttered. “They . . . stroll.” She sneered. Domon had to be blinded by love. That, or he had taken too many thumps on the head.

The worst was over and done, in any case. Mat hoped that getting out of the city had been the worst. He had not felt the dice since. They were always a bad sign. His backtrail was as muddled as he could manage, and he was sure it would take someone as lucky as he to separate the gold from the dross. The Seekers had been on Egeanin’s scent before that night, and she would be wanted on charges of stealing *damane* now, as well, but the authorities would expect her to be riding as hard as she could and already leagues from Ebou Dar, not sitting just outside the city. Nothing except a coincidence of timing connected her to Tuon. Or to Mat, and that was important. Tylin certainly would have leveled her own charges against him—no woman was going to forgive a man tying her up and shoving her under a bed, even when she had suggested it—yet with any luck, he was beneath suspicion for anything else that had happened that night. With any luck, no one except Tylin had a thought for him at all. Trussing a queen like a pig for market would be enough to get a man dead usually, but it had to count for moldy onions alongside the Daughter of the Nine Moons disappearing, and what could Tylin’s Toy have to do with that? It still irritated him that he had been seen as a hanger-on—worse, a pet!—but there were advantages.

He thought he was safe—from the Seanchan, anyway—yet one point worried him like a thorn buried in his heel. Well, several did, most growing out of Tuon herself, but this one had a particularly long point. Tuon’s disappearance should have been as shocking as the sun vanishing at noon, but no alarm had been raised. None! No announcements of rewards or offers of ransom, no hot-eyed soldiers searching every wagon and cart within miles, galloping through the countryside to root out every cubbyhole and niche where a woman might be hidden. Those old memories told him something of hunting for kidnapped royalty, yet except for the hangings and the burned ships in the harbor, from the outside Ebou Dar seemed unchanged from the day before the kidnapping. Egeanin alleged that the search would be in utter secrecy, that many of the Seanchan themselves might still not know Tuon was missing. Her explanation involved the shock to the Empire and ill omens for the Return and the loss of *sei'taer,* and she sounded as if she believed every word, but Mat refused to buy a penny's worth. The Seanchan were strange folk, but no one could be that strange. The silence of Ebou Dar made his skin prickle. He felt a trap in that silence. When they reached the Great North Road, he was grateful that the city was hidden behind the low hills.

The road was a broad highway, a major avenue of trade, wide enough for five or six wagons abreast uncrowded, with a surface of dirt and clay that hundreds of years of use had packed nearly as hard as the occasional ancient paving stone that stuck an edge or corner inches into the air. Mat and Egeanin hurried across to the verge on the other side with Noal dogging their heels, between a merchant's train rumbling toward the city, guarded by a scar-faced woman and ten hard-eyed men in leather vests covered with metal discs, and a string of the settlers' oddly shaped wagons, rising to peaks at the ends, that were heading north, some pulled by horses or mules, others by oxen. Clustered between the wagons, barefoot boys used switches to herd four-horned goats with long black hair and big, dewlapped white cows. One man at the rear of the wagons, in baggy blue breeches and a round red cap, was leading a massive humpbacked bull by a thick cord tied to a ring in its nose. Except for his clothes, he could have been from the Two Rivers. He eyed Mat and the others, walking in the same direction, as if he might speak, then shook his head and plodded on without looking at them again. Contending with Mat's limp, they were not moving fast, and the settlers forged ahead slowly but steadily.

Hunch-shouldered and clutching the scarf beneath her chin with her free hand, Egeanin let out a breath and loosened fingers that had begun to grip Mat's side almost painfully. After a moment, she straightened and glared at the farmer's departing back as though she were ready to chase after him and box his ears and his bull's. If that were not bad enough, once the farmer was twenty or so paces away, she shifted her scowl to a company of Seanchan soldiers marching down the middle of the road at a pace that would soon overtake the settlers, perhaps two hundred men in a column four abreast followed by a motley collection of mule-drawn wagons covered with tightly lashed canvas. The middle of the road was left free for military traffic. Half a dozen well-mounted officers in thin-plumed helmets that hid all but their eyes rode at the column's head, looking neither left nor right, red cloaks spread neatly over their horses' cruppers. The banner following on the officers' heels was marked with what looked like a stylized silver arrowhead, or maybe an anchor, crossed by a long arrow and a jagged lightning bolt in gold, with script and numerals below that Mat could not make out as gusts swept the banner this way and that. The men on the supply wagons wore dark blue coats and breeches and square red-and-blue caps, but the soldiers were even more showy than most Seanchan, their segmented armor striped in blue banded at the bottom with silvery white and red banded with golden yellow, their helmets painted in all four colors so they resembled the faces of fearsome spiders. A large badge with the anchor—Mat thought it must be an anchor—and arrow and lightning was fastened to the front of each helmet, and every man except the officers carried a double-curve bow at his side, with a bristling quiver at his belt balancing a short-sword.

"Ship's archers," Egeanin grumbled, glowering at the soldiers. Her free hand had left her scarf, but it was still clenched in a fist. "Tavern brawlers. They always cause problems when they're left ashore too long."

They had a well-trained look, to Mat. Anyway, he had never heard of soldiers who did not get in fights, especially when they were drunk or bored, and bored soldiers tended to get drunk. A corner of his mind wondered how far those bows would carry, but it was an absent thought. He wanted nothing to do with any Seanchan soldiers. If he had his way, he would have nothing to do with any soldiers ever again. But his luck never ran that far, it seemed. Fate and luck were different, unfortunately. Two hundred paces at most, he decided. A good crossbow would outrange them, or any Two Rivers bow.

"We're not in a tavern," he said through his teeth, "and they're not brawling now. So let's not start one just because you were afraid a farmer would speak to you." Her jaw set, and she shot him a look hard enough to crack his skull. It was the truth, though. She was fearful of opening her mouth near anyone who might recognize her accent. A wise precaution, in his book, but everything seemed to grate at her. "We'll have a bannerman over here asking questions if you keep glaring at them. Women around Ebou Dar are famous for being demure," he lied. What could she know of local customs?

She gave him a sidelong frown—maybe she was trying to figure out what demure meant—but she stopped grimacing at the archers. She just looked ready to bite instead of hit.

“That fellow’s dark as an Atha’an Miere,” Noal muttered absently, staring at the passing soldiers. “Dark as a Sharan. But I’d swear he has blue eyes. I’ve seen the like before, but where?” Trying to rub his temples, he almost struck himself on the head with the bamboo fishing pole, and he took a step as though he meant to ask the fellow where he had been born.

With a lurch, Mat caught the old man’s sleeve. “We’re going back to the show, Noal. Now. We should never have left.”

“I told you that,” Egeanin said with a sharp nod.

Mat groaned, but there was nothing for it but to keep walking. Oh, it was way past time to be gone. He only hoped he had not left it too late.

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CHAPTER 2

Two Captains

About two miles north of the city a wide blue banner stretched between two tall poles rippled in the wind, proclaiming Valan Luca’s Grand Traveling Show and Magnificent Display of Marvels and Wonders in brilliant red letters large enough to be read from the road, perhaps a hundred paces east. For those unable to read, it at least indicated the location of something out of the ordinary. This was The Largest Traveling Show in the World, so the banner claimed. Luca claimed a great many things, but Mat thought he must be telling the truth about that. The show’s canvas wall, ten feet high and tightly pegged at the bottom, enclosed as much ground as a good-sized village.

The people streaming by looked toward the banner curiously, but the farmers and merchants had their work ahead of them and the settlers their future, and none turned aside. Thick ropes fastened to posts set in the ground were meant to herd crowds to the wide, arched entrance just behind the banner, but there was no one waiting to get in, not at this hour. Of late, few came at any hour. The fall of Ebou Dar had brought only a slight drop in attendance, once people realized the city would not be looted and they did not have to flee for their lives, but with the Return, all those ships and settlers, nearly everyone decided to hold on to their coin against more pressing needs. Two bulky men, huddling in cloaks that might have come from a ragbag, were on duty beneath the banner to keep out anyone who wanted to peek around without paying, but even those were in short supply, nowadays. The pair, one with a crooked nose above a thick mustache and the other missing an eye, were squatting on the dirt, tossing dice.

Surprisingly, Petra Anhill, the show’s strongman, stood watching the two horse-handlers play, arms larger than most men’s legs folded across his chest. He was shorter than Mat, but at least twice as wide, his shoulders straining the heavy blue coat his wife made him wear against the cold. Petra seemed engrossed in the dicing, but the man did not gamble, not so much as pitching pennies. He and his wife, Clarine, a dog trainer, saved every coin they could spare, and Petra needed small excuse to talk at length about the inn they intended to buy one day. Even more surprising, Clarine was at his side, enveloped in a dark cloak and apparently as absorbed in the gaming as he.

Petra glanced warily over his shoulder into the camp when he saw Mat and Egeanin approaching arm-in-arm, which made Mat frown. People looking over their shoulders was never good. Clarine's plump brown face broke into a warm smile, though. Like most women in the show, she thought he and Egeanin were romantic. The bent-nosed horse-handler, a heavy-shouldered Tairen named Col, leered as he scooped up the wager, a few coppers. No one but Domon could see Egeanin as pretty, but to some fools, nobility bestowed beauty. Or money did, and a noblewoman must be rich. A few thought any noblewoman who abandoned her husband for the likes of Mat Cauthon might be open to leaving him, too, and bringing her money with her. That was the story Mat and the others had put around to explain why they were hiding from the Seanchan: a cruel husband and a lovers' flight. Everyone had heard that sort of tale, from gleemen or books if seldom real life, often enough to accept it. Col kept his head down, though. Egeanin—Leilwin—had already drawn her belt knife on a sword-juggler, a too-handsome fellow who had been overly suggestive in asking her to share a cup of wine in his wagon, and no one doubted she would have used the blade if he had pressed his suit an inch further.

As soon as Mat reached the strongman, Petra said quietly, "There are Seanchan soldiers talking to Luca, about twenty of them. The officer's talking with him, leastwise." He did not sound frightened, but worry creased his forehead, and he laid a protective hand on his wife's shoulder. Clarine's smile faded, and she raised one hand to rest atop his. They trusted Luca's judgment, after a fashion, yet they knew the risk they were running. Or thought they did. The risk they believed in was bad enough.

"What do they want?" Egeanin demanded, pushing free of Mat, before he could crack his teeth. In fact, no one waited for him.

"Hold these for me," Noal said, handing his pole and basket to the one-eyed man, who gaped up at him. Straightening, Noal slipped a knobbly hand beneath his coat, where he kept two long-bladed knives. "Can we reach our horses?” he asked Petra. The strongman eyed him doubtfully. Mat was not the only one unsure whether Noal still possessed all his wits.

“They don’t seem interested in searching,” Clarine said hastily, making a hint of a curtsy to Egeanin. Everyone was supposed to pretend Mat and the others were part of the show, but few managed to carry it off with Egeanin. “The officer’s been in Luca’s wagon for a good half-hour, but the soldiers have been standing by their horses all that time.”

“I don’t think they’re here about you,” Petra added respectfully. Again, to Egeanin. Why should he be different? Probably practicing to welcome nobles to that inn. “We just didn’t want you to be surprised or worried, seeing them. I’m sure Luca will send them off with no trouble.” Despite his tone, the creases remained in his forehead. Most men became upset if their wives ran off, and a nobleman could make others bear the brunt of his ire. A traveling show, strangers just passing through, made a particularly easy target without added complications. “You don’t have to worry about anybody talking out of turn, my Lady.” Glancing at the horse handlers, Petra added, “Does she, Col?” Bent-nose shook his head, his eyes on the dice he was bouncing on his palm. He was a big man, but not as big as Petra, and the strongman could straighten horseshoes with his bare hands.

“Everybody likes a chance to spit on a noble’s boots now and then,” the one-eyed fellow mumbled, peering into the basket of fish. He was almost as tall and wide-shouldered as Col, but his face was all leathery wrinkles, and he had even fewer teeth than Noal. Glancing at Egeanin, he ducked his head and added, “Begging your pardon, Lady. ’Sides, this way we all get a little coin, which there ain’t been much of lately. Right, Col? Anybody talks, them Seanchan’ll take us all up, maybe hang us like they did them Sea Folk. Or put us to work cleaning them canals the other side of the harbor.” Horse handlers did whatever needed doing around the show, from mucking the horselines and cleaning animals’ cages to erecting and taking down the canvas wall, but he shuddered as though digging out silted canals in the Rahad was a worse prospect than hanging.

“Did I say anything about talking?” Col protested, spreading his hands. “I just asked how long we’re going to sit here, that’s all. I just asked when we’re going to see some of this coin.”

“We sit here as long as I say sit.” It was remarkable how hard Egeanin could make that drawl sound without raising her voice, like a blade sliding free of the scabbard. “You see your coin when we reach our destination.

There will be a little something extra for those who serve me faithfully. And a cold grave for anyone who thinks on betrayal." Col pulled his much-patched cloak tight and widened his eyes trying to look indignant, or maybe innocent, but he just appeared to be hoping she would come close enough for him to filch her purse.

Mat ground his teeth. For one thing, that was his gold she was promising with such a free hand. She had her own, but not near enough for this. More importantly, she was trying to take charge again. Light, except for him, she would still be in Ebou Dar scheming to avoid the Seekers, if not already being put to the question. Except for him, she would never have thought of staying close to Ebou Dar to throw off pursuit, or found a hiding place with Luca's show. But why were soldiers there? The Seanchan would have sent a hundred men, a thousand, for a vague suspicion of Tuon's presence. If they suspected the Aes Sedai . . . No; Petra and Clarine did not know they were helping hide Aes Sedai, but they would have mentioned *sul'dam* and *damane*, and the soldiers would not be hunting sisters without them. He fingered the foxhead through his coat. He wore that waking and sleeping, and it might give him a little warning.

He never considered trying for the horses, and not just because Col and a dozen more like him would go running to the Seanchan before he was well out of sight. They had no particular animosity toward him or Egeanin that he knew—even Rumann, the sword-juggler, seemed to have settled in happily with a contortionist named Adria—but some folks would not resist the temptation of a little more gold, either. In any case, no warning dice tumbled in his head. And there were people inside those canvas walls he could not leave behind.

"If they're not searching, then we have nothing to worry about," he said confidently. "But thanks for the warning, Petra. I've never liked surprises." The strongman made a small gesture as if to say it was nothing, but Egeanin and Clarine looked at Mat as though startled to find him there. Even Col and the one-eyed lout blinked at him. It took an effort to stop short of gritting his teeth again. "I'll just wander near Luca's wagon and see what I can see. Leilwin, you and Noal find Olver and stay with him." They liked the boy, everyone did, and that would keep them out of his hair. He could eavesdrop better alone. And if they had to run, maybe Egeanin and Noal could help get the boy out, at least. The Light send it did not come to that. He could see nothing but disaster in it.

“Well, I suppose nobody lives forever,” Noal sighed, retrieving his bamboo pole and basket. Burn him, but the fellow could make a colicky goat seem cheerful! Petra’s frown certainly deepened. Married men always seemed to be worried, one reason Mat was in no hurry himself. As Noal vanished around the corner of the canvas wall, the one-eyed man watched the fish go regretfully. He appeared to be another without a full set of wits. He probably had a wife somewhere.

Mat pulled his cap almost down to his eyes. Still no dice. He tried not to think of how many times he had nearly had his throat slit or his skull split without any dice. But surely they would have been there if there was any real danger. Of course they would.

He had not taken three steps inside the entrance before Egeanin caught up to him and slipped her arm around his waist. He stopped in his tracks, eyeing her balefully. She resisted his orders the way a trout fought the hook, but this went beyond stubborn. “What do you think you’re doing? What if this Seanchan officer recognizes you?” That seemed as likely as Tylin herself walking into the show, but anything that might make her leave was worth grabbing.

“What are the chances this fellow is anyone I know?” she scoffed. “I don’t have . . .” her face twisted for an instant, “didn’t have . . . many friends this side of the ocean, and none in Ebou Dar.” She touched an end of the black wig over her bosom. “Anyway, in this, my own mother wouldn’t recognize me.” Her voice turned bleak toward the end.

He was going to chip a tooth if he kept on clenching his jaw. Standing there arguing with her would be worse than useless, but the way she had stared at those Seanchan soldiers was fresh in his mind. “Don’t glare at anybody,” he warned her. “Don’t even look at anybody.”

“I’m a demure Ebou Dari woman.” She made it sound a challenge. “You can do all the talking.” She made that into a warning. Light! When a woman was not making everything smooth, she made things very rough indeed, and Egeanin never made anything smooth. He was definitely in danger of chipping a tooth.

Beyond the entrance, the show’s main street meandered among wagons like those the Tinkers used, little houses on wheels with the wagon shafts lifted against the drivers’ seats, and walled tents often as large as small houses. Most of the wagons were brightly painted, every shade of red or green, yellow or blue, and many of the tents were just as colorful, a few even striped. Here and there wooden platforms, where entertainers could perform, stood beside the street, their colored bunting beginning to look a bit grubby. The broad expanse of dirt, near thirty paces wide and beaten flat by thousands of feet, really was a street, one of several that wound through the show. The wind whipped away faint gray streamers of smoke rising from the tin chimneys that stuck from up from the roofs of the wagons, and from some tents. Most of the showfolk were probably at breakfast if not still in bed. They rose late, as a rule—a rule Mat approved—and no one would want to eat sitting around a cook fire outside in this cold. The only person he saw was Aludra, the sleeves of her dark green dress pushed up her forearms, grinding something with a bronze mortar and pestle on a table that folded down from the side of her vivid blue wagon, just around the corner on one of the narrower side streets.

Intent on her work, the slender Taraboner did not see Egeanin and Mat. He could not help looking at her, though. With her dark hair in thin, beaded braids that hung to her waist, Aludra was probably the most exotic of Luca's marvels. He advertised her as an Illuminator, and unlike many of the other performers and marvels, she really was what Luca claimed, though Luca probably did not believe it himself. Mat wondered what she was grinding. And whether it might explode. She had promised to reveal the secret of fireworks if he could answer a riddle, but he had not found a glimmer, so far. He would, though. One way or another.

Egeanin poked a hard finger into his ribs. "We're supposed to be lovers, as you keep reminding me," she growled. "Who's going to believe it if you stare at that woman as though you're hungry?"

Mat grinned lasciviously. "I always look at pretty women, haven't you noticed?" Adjusting her head scarf with a little more vigor than usual, she gave a disparaging grunt, and he was satisfied. Her prudish streak came in handy now and then. Egeanin was on the run for her life, but she was still Seanchan, and she already knew more about him than he liked. He was not about to trust her with all of his secrets. Even the ones he did not know yet.

Luca's wagon sat in the very middle of the show's camp, the most favored position, as far as possible from the smells of the animal cages and horselines situated along the canvas walls. The wagon was garish even compared to the others in the show, a red-and-blue thing that shone like the finest lacquerwork, every surface spotted with golden comets and stars. The phases of the moon, in silver, ran all the way around just below the roofline.

Even the tin chimney was painted in red and blue rings. A Tinker would have blushed. To one side of the wagon two ranks of helmeted Seanchan soldiers stood stiffly beside their horses, green-tasseled lances slanted at exactly the same angle. One of the men held the reins of an extra mount, a fine dun gelding with strong haunches and good ankles. The soldiers' blue-and-green armor appeared drab alongside Luca's wagon.

Mat was unsurprised to see he was not the only one interested in the Seanchan. A dark stocking cap covering his shaved head, Bayle Domon was squatting on his heels with his back against one wheel of the green wagon that belonged to Petra and Clarine, about thirty paces beyond the soldiers. Clarine's dogs lay under the wagon, a motley collection of smallish animals sleeping huddled together. The thick-bodied Illianer was pretending to whittle, but all he had produced was a small pile of shavings at his feet. Mat wished the fellow would grow a mustache to hide his upper lip or else shave off the rest of his beard. Someone might connect an Illianer to Egeanin. Blaeric Negina, a tall fellow leaning against the wagon as though keeping Domon company, had not hesitated to remove his Shienaran topknot to avoid Seanchan notice, though he ran a hand over the black bristle growing on his head about as often as Egeanin checked her wig. Maybe he should wear a cap.

In their dark coats with frayed cuffs and well-traveled boots, both men could pass for showfolk, maybe horse-handlers, except to other showfolk. They were watching the Seanchan while trying to seem not to, but Blaeric was the more successful, as might be expected from a Warder. His full attention appeared to be on Domon, except for an occasional glance at the soldiers, as casual as could be. Domon scowled at the Seanchan when he was not glaring at the lump of wood in his hand, as though ordering it to turn into a neat carving. The man had taken being *so'jhin* entirely too much to heart.

Mat was trying to figure out how to sneak close to Luca's wagon and eavesdrop unseen by the soldiers when the door at the back of the wagon opened and a pale-haired Seanchan marched down the steps, planting a helmet with a thin blue plume on his head as his boot touched the ground. Luca appeared behind him, resplendent in scarlet embroidered with golden sunbursts, bowing with elaborate flourishes as he followed the officer. Luca owned at least two dozen coats, most red and each gaudier than the last. It was a good thing his wagon was the largest in the show, or he would not have had room for them all.

Ignoring Luca, the Seanchan officer stepped up onto his gelding, adjusted his sword, and barked orders that sent his men flowing into their saddles and forming a column of twos that moved off at a slow walk toward the entrance. Luca stood watching them leave with a fixed smile on his face, poised for another bow if any looked back.

Mat stayed well to the side of the street and let his mouth hang open, affecting to gape in wonder as the soldiers rode by. Not that any of them so much as glanced his way—the officer stared straight ahead and so did the soldiers behind him—but no one ever paid any mind to a country yokel, or remembered one.

To his surprise, Egeanin studied the ground in front of her toes, clutching the scarf knotted beneath her chin, until the last horseman passed. Lifting her head to look after them, she pursed her lips for a moment. "It seems I do know that boy," she drawled softly. "I carried him to Falme on *Fearless.* His servant died, mid-voyage, and he thought he could use one of my crew. I had to put him straight. You'd have though he was of the Blood, the fuss he put up."

"Blood and bloody ashes," Mat breathed. How many other people had she gotten crosswise, fixing her face in their minds? Egeanin being Egeanin, probably hundreds. And he had been letting her walk around with just a wig and a change of clothes for disguise! Hundreds? Thousands, more likely. She could irritate a brick.

In any case, the officer was gone now. Mat exhaled slowly. His luck really was still with him. At times he thought that was all that kept him from bawling like a baby. He headed for Luca to find out what the soldiers had wanted.

Domon and Blaeric reached Luca as quickly as he and Egeanin did, and the scowl on Domon's round face deepened as he stared at Mat's arm around Egeanin's shoulder. The Illianer understood the necessity for the pretense, or said he did, yet he seemed to believe they could carry it off without so much as touching hands. Mat removed his arm from her—there was nothing to carry off here; Luca knew the truth; of everything—and Egeanin started to release him, too, yet after a look at Domon, she tightened her grip on Mat's waist instead, all without the slightest change of expression. Domon continued to scowl, but at the ground, now. Mat decided he would understand the Seanchan long before he understood women. Or Illianers, for that matter.

"Horses," Luca growled almost before Mat stopped walking. His frown took in all of them, but he focused most of his anger on Mat. A little the taller, Luca stretched to stare down at Mat. "That's what he wanted. I showed him the warrant exempting me from the horse lottery, signed by the High Lady Suroth herself, but was he impressed? It didn't matter to him that I rescued a high-ranking Seanchan." The woman had not been high-ranking, and he had not so much rescued her as given her a way to travel as a hired performer, but Luca always exaggerated to his own advantage. "I don't know how long that exemption is really good for, anyway. The Seanchan are desperate for horses. They might take it back any day!" His face was turning almost as red as his coat, and he jabbed a finger at Mat repeatedly. "You're going to get my horses taken! How do I move my show with no horses? Answer me that, if you can. I was ready to leave as soon as I saw that madness in the harbor, until you twisted my arm. You're going to get my head cut off! I could be a hundred miles from here, if not for you, riding in out of the night and snaring me in your crazy schemes! I'm not earning a penny here! There haven't been enough patrons the last three days to pay for feeding the animals one day! Half a day! I should have left a month ago! More! I should have!"

Mat almost laughed as Luca ran down into splutters. Horses. That was all; just horses. Besides, the notion that the show's heavy-laden wagons could cover a hundred miles in five days was as ludicrous as Luca's wagon. The man could have gone a month ago, two months, except for wanting to eke every copper he could out of Ebou Dar and its Seanchan conquerors. And as for talking him into staying, six nights past, that had been as easy as falling out of bed.

Instead of laughing, Mat put a hand on Luca's shoulder. The fellow was vain as a peacock, and greedy besides, but there was no point making him angrier than he already was. "If you'd left that night, Luca, you think nobody would have gotten suspicious? You would have had Seanchan tearing your wagons apart before you made two leagues. You could say I saved you from that." Luca glowered. Some people just could not see beyond their own noses. "Anyway, you can stop worrying. As soon as Thom returns from the city, we can put as many miles behind us as you want."

Luca leaped so suddenly that Mat stepped back in alarm, but all the man did was caper in a little circle laughing. Domon goggled at him, and even Blaeric stared. Sometimes, Luca seemed a flat bull-goose fool.

Luca had barely begun his dance when Egeanin shoved Mat away from her. “As soon as Merrilin returns? I gave orders no one was to leave!” Her glare swung between him and Luca in cold fury, a cold that burned. “I expect my orders to be obeyed!”

Luca stopped cavorting abruptly and eyed her sideways, then suddenly made her a bow with so many flourishes you could practically see the cloak. You could almost see the *embroidery* on the cloak! He thought he had a way with a women, Luca did. “You command, my sweet Lady, and I leap to obey.” Coming upright, he shrugged apologetically. “But Master Cauthon has gold, and I fear gold commands my first obedience.” Mat’s chest full of gold coins in this very wagon had been all the arm-twisting needed to convince him. Maybe Mat being *ta’veren* had helped, but for enough gold, Valan Luca would help kidnap the Dark One.

Egeanin drew a deep breath, ready to berate Luca further, but the man turned his back and went scampering up the steps into his wagon shouting, “Latelle! Latelle! We must roust everybody out immediately! We’re leaving at last, the minute Merrilin returns! The Light be praised!”

A moment later, he was back again, dashing back down the short stair followed by his wife drawing a black velvet cloak, sewn with glittering spangles, around herself. A stern-faced woman, she wrinkled her nose at Mat as though he had a bad smell and gave Egeanin a look that likely made her trained bears climb trees. Latelle disliked the idea of a woman running away from her husband even when she knew it was a lie. Luckily, she seemed to worship Luca for some reason, and she liked gold nearly as well as he did. Luca ran to the nearest wagon and began pounding on the door, and Latelle did the same at the next.

Not waiting around to watch, Mat hurried off down one of the side streets. More of an alley compared to the main street, it wound among the same sort of wagons and tents, all shut up tight against the cold, with smoke streaming from the metal chimneys. There were no platforms for performers here, but lines for drying laundry hung between some of the wagons, and here and there wooden toys lay scattered on the ground. This street was for living only, the narrowness meant to discourage outsiders.

He moved quickly despite his hip—he had walked most of the ache out—but he had not gone ten steps before Egeanin and Domon caught up to him. Blaeric had vanished, probably gone to tell the sisters they were still safe and could finally leave. The Aes Sedai, masquerading as servants sick with worry that their mistress's husband would catch them, were fed up with being confined to their wagon, not to mention fed up with sharing with the *sul'dam.* Mat had made them share, so the Aes Sedai could watch the *sul'dam* while the *sul'dam* kept the Aes Sedai out of his hair. Still Mat was glad Blaeric had taken away the necessity for him to visit that wagon again. One or another of the sisters had summoned him four or five times a day since their escape from the city, and he went when he could not avoid it, but it was never a pleasant experience.

Egeanin did not put her arm around him this time. She strode at his side staring straight ahead, not bothering to check her wig, for once. Domon lumbered behind like a bear, muttering under his breath in his heavy Illianer accent. The stocking cap exposed the fact that his dark beard stopped abruptly at the middle of each ear, with only stubble above. It made him look . . . unfinished.

"Two captains on one ship make sure course for disaster," Egeanin drawled with overdone patience. Her understanding smile looked as if it hurt her face.

"We aren't on a ship," Mat replied.

"The principle's the same, Cauthon! You are a farmer. I know you're a good man in a tight spot." Egeanin shot a dark look over her shoulder at Domon. He was the one who had brought her and Mat together, back when she thought she was getting a hired man. "But this situation needs judgment and experience. We're in dangerous waters, and you have no knowledge of command."

"More than you might think," he told her dryly. He could have spun out a list of the battles he remembered commanding, but only an historian would recognize most of them, and maybe not even an historian. No one would believe it, anyway. He certainly would not if someone else had made that claim. "Shouldn't you and Domon be getting ready? You wouldn't want to leave anything behind." Everything she owned was already stowed away in the wagon she and Mat shared with Domon—not a comfortable arrangement, that—but he quickened his step, hoping she would take the hint. Besides, he saw his destination ahead.

The bright blue wall-tent, crowded between a virulent yellow wagon and an emerald green one, was barely large enough to hold three cots, but providing shelter for everyone he brought out of Ebou Dar had required bribes to make people move and more bribes to make others let them in. What he had been able to hire was what the owners were willing to let him have. At rates suitable for a good inn. Juilin, a dark compact man with short black hair, was sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of the tent with Olver, a thin little boy, if not so skinny as when Mat first saw him, and short for ten, the age he claimed. Both coatless despite the wind, they were playing Snakes and Foxes on a board the boy's dead father had drawn for him on a piece of red cloth. Tossing the dice, Olver counted the pips carefully and considered his move along the spiderweb of black lines and arrows. The Tairen thief-catcher was paying less attention to the game. He sat up straight at the sight of Mat.

Abruptly, Noal darted around from the rear of the tent, breathing hard as if he had been running. Juilin glanced up in surprise at the old man, and Mat frowned. He had told Noal to come straight here. Where had he gone instead? Noal looked at him expectantly, not with any guilt or embarrassment, just eager to hear what Mat had to say.

"You know about the Seanchan?" Juilin asked, turning his attention to Mat, too.

A shadow moved inside the tent's entry flaps, and a dark-haired woman, seated on the end of one of the cots with an old gray cloak wrapped around her, leaned forward to rest a hand on Juilin's arm. And to give Mat a wary look. Thera was pretty, if you liked a mouth that always seemed to be pouting, and it seemed that Juilin did, from the way he smiled at her reassuringly and patted her hand. She was also Amathera Aelfdene Casmir Lounault, Panarch of Tarabon and the next thing to a queen. At least, she had been, once. Juilin had known that, and so had Thom, yet no one thought to tell Mat until they reached the show. He supposed it hardly mattered, alongside everything else. She answered faster to Thera than to Amathera, she made no demands, except on Juilin's time, and there seemed little chance anyone would recognize her here. In any case, Mat hoped she felt more than gratitude for being rescued, because Juilin certainly felt more for her. Who was to say a dethroned panarch could not fall in love with a thief-catcher? Stranger things had happened. Though he was not sure he could name one, offhand.

“They just wanted to see the warrant for Luca’s horses,” he said, and Juilin nodded, visibly relaxing a little.

“As well they didn’t count the horselines.” The warrant listed the exact number of horses Luca was allowed to keep. The Seanchan could be generous with their rewards, but given their need for mounts and wagon teams, they were not about to hand anyone a license to set up horse trading. “At best, they would have taken the extra. At worst . . .” The thief-catcher shrugged. Another cheerful soul.

With a gasp, Thera suddenly pulled her cloak tighter and jerked back into the depths of the tent. Juilin looked behind Mat, his eyes going hard, and the Tairen could match the Warders when it came to hard. Egeanin did not seem to catch hints, and she was glaring at the tent. Domon stood beside her with his arms folded, sucking his teeth in thought or forced patience.

“Get your tent packed up, Sandar,” Egeanin ordered. “The show is leaving as soon as Merrilin returns.” Her jaw tightened, and she did not quite glare at Mat. Not quite. “Make sure your . . . woman . . . doesn’t give any trouble.” Most lately, Thera had been a servant, *da’covale,* the property of the High Lady Suroth, until Juilin stole her away. To Egeanin, stealing *da’covale* was almost as bad as freeing *damane.*

“Can I ride Wind?” Olver exclaimed, bounding to his feet. “Can I, Mat? Can I, Leilwin?” Egeanin actually smiled at him. Mat had yet to see her smile at anyone else, even Domon.

“Not yet,” Mat said. Not until they were far enough from Ebou Dar that no one was likely to remember the gray winning races with a small boy on his back. “In a few days, maybe. Juilin, will you tell the others? Blaeric already knows, so the sisters are taken care of.”

Juilin did not waste time, aside from ducking inside the tent to reassure Thera. She seemed to need reassuring frequently. When he came out, carrying a dark Tairen coat that was beginning to show wear, he told Olver to put the game away and help Thera with the packing until he returned, then settled his flat-topped conical red hat on his head and started off, shrugging into the coat. He never so much as glanced at Egeanin. She considered him a thief, offensive in itself to a thief-catcher, and the Tairen had no love for her, either.

Mat started to ask Noal where he had been, but the old man darted nimbly after Juilin, calling over his shoulder that he would help let the others know the show was leaving. Well, two could spread the word faster than one—Vanin and the four surviving Redarms shared a crowded tent on one side of the show, while Noal himself shared another with Thom and the two serving men, Lopin and Nerim, on the opposite side—and the question could wait. Probably, he had just delayed to put his precious fish somewhere safe. In any case, the question suddenly seemed unimportant.

The noise of people shouting for horse handlers to bring their teams, and others demanding at the top of their lungs to know what was happening, was beginning to fill the camp. Adria, a slim woman holding a flowered green robe around her, came running up in bare feet and vanished into the yellow wagon, where the other four contortionists lived. Somebody in the green wagon bellowed hoarsely that people were trying to sleep. A handful of performers' children, some performers themselves, dashed by, and Olver looked up from folding the game. That was his most prized possession, but if not for that, he plainly would have gone after them. It was going to take some time yet before the show was ready to travel, but that was not what made Mat groan. He had just heard those bloody dice start rattling in his head again.

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CHAPTER 3

A Fan of Colors

Mat did not know whether to curse or weep. With the soldiers gone and Ebou Dar about to be left in his dust, there seemed no reason for the dice, but there never was a bloody reason he could see until it was too late. Whatever was coming might lie days in the future or only an hour, but he had never been able to figure it out ahead of time. The only certainties were that something important—or dire—was going to happen and that he would not be able to avoid it. Sometimes, like that night at the gate, he did not understand why the dice had been tumbling even after they stopped. All he really knew for sure was that however much the dice made him twitch like a goat with the itch, once they started, he did not want them to stop ever. But they did. Sooner or later, they always did.

“Are you all right, Mat?” Olver said. “Those Seanchan can’t catch us.” He attempted gruff conviction, but a hint of question hung in his voice.

Abruptly Mat realized he had been staring at nothing. Egeanin frowned at him while fiddling absentmindedly with her wig, plainly angry that he was ignoring her. Domon’s eyes had a studious look; if he was not deciding whether to be upset on Egeanin’s behalf, Mat would eat his cap. Even Thera was peeking at him past the tent’s entry flap, and she always tried to keep out of Egeanin’s sight. He could not explain. Only a man with porridge for brains would believe he got warnings from hearing dice no one could see. Or maybe a man marked by the Power. Or by the Dark One. He was not anxious to have any of those things suspected about him. And it might be that night at the gate all over again. No, this was not a secret he cared to reveal. It would do no good, anyway.

“They’ll never catch us, Olver, not you and me.” He ruffled the boy’s hair, and Olver gave a wide-mouthed grin, confidence restored as easy as that. “Not so long as we keep our eyes open and our wits about us.

Remember, you can find a way out of any difficulty if you keep your eyes and wits sharp, but if you don't, you'll trip over your own feet." Olver nodded gravely, but Mat meant the reminder for the others. Or maybe himself. Light, there was no way any of them could be more alert. Except for Olver, who thought it was all a great adventure, they had all been jumping out of their skins since before leaving the city. "Go help Thera like Juilin told you, Olver."

A sharp gust cut through Mat's coat, making him shiver. "And put your coat on; it's cold," he added as the boy ducked past Thera into the tent. Rustles and scraping sounds from inside said that Olver was setting to work, with or without his coat, but Thera remained crouched at the tent's entrance, peering at Mat. For all the care anybody but Mat Cauthon took, the boy could catch his death.

As soon as Olver disappeared, Egeanin stepped closer to Mat, her fists on her hips again, and he groaned under his breath. "We are going to settle matters now, Cauthon," she said in a hard voice. "Now! I won't have our journey wrecked by you countermanding my orders."

"There's nothing to settle," he told her. "I was never your hired hand, and that's that." Somehow, her face managed to grow harder, as good as shouting that she did not see matters like that. The woman was as tenacious as a snapping turtle, but there had to be some way to pry her jaws from his leg. Burn him if he wanted to be alone with the dice rolling in his head, yet that was better than having to listen to them while arguing with her. "I'm going to see Tuon before we leave." The words popped out of his mouth before they were clear in his head. He realized that they had been lying there for some time, though, murky and slowly solidifying.

The blood drained from Egeanin's cheeks as soon as Tuon's name left his mouth, and he heard a squeak from Thera followed by the snap of the tentflaps being jerked shut. The onetime panarch had absorbed a great many Seanchan ways while she was Suroth's property, and many of their taboos as well. Egeanin was made of harder stuff, however. "Why?" she demanded. In almost the same breath, she went on, anxious and furious all at once. "You mustn't call her that. You must show respect." Harder in some ways.

Mat grinned, but she did not seem to see the joke. Respect? There was precious little respect in stuffing a gag in someone's mouth and rolling them up in a wall hanging. Calling Tuon High Lady or anything else was not going to change that. Of course, Egeanin was more willing to talk about freeing *damane* than she was about Tuon. If she could have pretended the kidnapping never happened, she would have, and as it was, she tried. Light, she had tried to ignore it while it was happening. In her mind, any other crimes she might have committed paled to nothing beside that.

"Because I want to talk with her," he said. And why not? He had to, sooner or later. People had begun trotting up and down the narrow street, now, half-dressed men with their shirts hanging out and women with their hair still wrapped in night-kerchiefs, some leading horses and others just milling about as far as he could make out. A wiry boy a little bigger than Olver went past doing handsprings wherever the crowd gave him a pace of room, practicing or maybe playing. The sleepy fellow in the deep green wagon still had not appeared. Luca's Grand Traveling Show would not be traveling anywhere for hours yet. There was plenty of time. "You could come with me," he suggested in his most innocent voice. He should have thought of this before.

The invitation made Egeanin go fence-post stiff for true. It hardly seemed possible her face could grow any paler, but an extra scrap of color leached out. "You will show her fitting respect," she said hoarsely, clutching the knotted scarf with both hands as though trying to squeeze the black wig tighter onto her head. "Come, Bayle. I want to make sure my things are stowed properly."

Domon hesitated as she turned and hurried away into the crowd without looking back, and Mat watched him warily. He had vague memories of a flight on Domon's rivership, once, but vague was the best he could say of them. Thom was friendly with Domon, a point in the Illianer's favor, yet he was Egeanin's man to the knife, ready to back her on anything down to disliking Juilin, and Mat trusted him no further than he did her. Which was to say, not very far. Egeanin and Domon had their own goals, and whether Mat Cauthon kept a whole hide did not factor in them. He doubted that the man really trusted him, for that matter, but then, neither of them had much choice at the moment.

"Fortune prick me," Domon muttered, scratching the bristles growing above his left ear, "whatever you do be up to, you may be in over your head. I think she do be tougher than you do suspect."

"Egeanin?" Mat said incredulously. He looked around quickly to see whether anyone in the alley had heard his slip. A few glanced at him and

Domon as they brushed by, but nobody glanced twice. Luca was not the only one eager to be gone from a city where the flow of patrons for the show had dried up and night lightning setting the harbor on fire was a fresh memory. They might all have fled that first night, leaving Mat nowhere to hide, except for Luca arguing them out of it. That promised gold had made Luca very persuasive. "I know she's tougher than old boots, Domon, but old boots don't count with me. This isn't a bloody ship, and I'm not letting her take charge and ruin everything."

Domon grimaced as if Mat were goose-brained. "The girl, man. Do you believe you could be so calm if you did be carried off in the night? Whatever you be playing at, with that wild talk of her being your wife, have a care or she may shave your head at the shoulders."

"I was just cutting the fool," Mat muttered. "How many times do I have to say it? I was unnerved for a minute." Oh, he had been that. Learning who Tuon was, while he was wrestling with her, would have unnerved a bloody Trolloc.

Domon grunted in disbelief. Well, it was hardly the best story Mat had ever come up with. Except for Domon, everyone who had heard him babbling seemed to accept the tale, though. Mat thought they had, anyway. Egeanin might get a knot in her tongue at the very thought of Tuon, but she would have said plenty if she believed he had been serious. Likely she would have put her knife in him.

Peering in the direction Egeanin had gone, the Illianer shook his head. "Try to keep a grip on your tongue from now on. Eg— . . . Leilwin . . . do near have a fit whenever she do think about what you did say. I've heard her muttering under her breath, and you can wager the girl herself does take it no lighter. You 'cut the fool' with her, and you may get us all shortened." He slid a finger across his throat expressively and gave a curt nod before pushing through the crowd after Egeanin.

Watching him go, Mat shook his own head. Tuon, tough? True, she was the Daughter of the Nine Moons and all of that, and she had been able to get under his skin with a look back in the Tarasin Palace, when he thought she was just another Seanchan noblewoman with her nose in the air, but that was just because she kept turning up where he did not expect. No more than that. Tough? She looked like a doll made of black porcelain. How tough could she be?

It was all you could do to keep her from breaking your nose and maybe more, he reminded himself.

He had been careful not to repeat what Domon called “wild talk,” but the truth of it was, he *was* going to marry Tuon. The thought made him sigh. He knew it as sure as prophecy, which it was, in a way. He could not imagine how such a marriage could come about; it seemed impossible, on the face of it, and he would not weep if that proved to be so. But he knew it would not. Why did he always find himself bloody lumbered with bloody women who pulled knives on him or tried to kick his head off? It was not fair.

He intended to go straight to the wagon where Tuon and Selucia were being kept, with Setalle Anan to watch—the innkeeper could make a stone seem soft; a pampered noblewoman and a lady’s maid would give her no trouble, especially with a Redarm on duty outside. At least, they had not so far, or he would have heard—but he found his feet wandering, taking him along the winding streets that ran through the show. Bustle filled all of them, wide and narrow alike. Men rushed by leading horses that frisked and shied, too long without exercise. Other people were taking down tents and packing the storage wagons, or hauling cloth-wrapped bundles and brass-bound chests and casks and canisters of every size out of the house-like wagons that had been standing here for months, partially unloading so everything could be repacked for travel even while the teams were being harnessed. The din was constant: horses whickered, women shouted for children, children cried over lost toys or yelled for the pure pleasure of noise, men bellowed to know who had been at their harness or who had borrowed some tool. A troupe of acrobats, slender but muscular women who worked on ropes dangling from tall poles, had surrounded one of the horse handlers, all of them waving their arms and giving voice at the top of their lungs and nobody listening. Mat paused a moment trying to figure out what they were arguing over, but eventually he decided they were not sure themselves. Two fighting coatless men rolled on the ground, watched closely by the likely cause, a willowy hot-eyed seamstress named Jameine, but Petra appeared and pulled them apart before Mat could even get a bet down.

He was not afraid of seeing Tuon again. Of course not. He had stayed away, after sticking her into that wagon, to give her time to settle down and collect herself. That was all. Only . . . Calm, Domon had called her, and it was true. Kidnapped in the middle of the night, snatched out into a storm by people who would as soon have cut her throat as look at her, as far as she knew, and she had been by far the coolest of them all. Light, she could have planned it herself, that was how upset she was! It had made him feel as if the point of a knife were tickling between his shoulder blades then, and the knife was back again just thinking about her. And those dice were rattling away inside his skull.

The woman's hardly likely to offer to exchange vows here and now, he thought with a chuckle, but it sounded forced even to him. Yet there was no reason under the sun for him to be afraid. He was just properly wary, not afraid.

The show might have equaled a fair-sized village for size, but there was only so long a man could wander about in that much space before he started doubling back on himself. Soon enough, too soon, he found himself staring at a windowless wagon painted in faded purple, surrounded by canvas-topped storage wagons and in sight of the southernmost horselines. The dung carts had not gone out this morning, and the odor was strong. The wind carried a heavy scent from the nearest animal cages, too, a musky smell of big cats and bears and the Light knew what else. Beyond the storage wagons and pickets, a section of the canvas wall fell and another began to shake as men loosened the guy ropes holding the poles. The sun, half-hidden by dark clouds now, had climbed halfway to its noonday peak or better, but it was still too soon.

Harnan and Metwyn, two of the Redarms, had already hitched the first pair of horses to the shaft of the purple wagon and were almost done with the second pair. Soldiers well trained in the Band of the Red Hand, they would be ready to take the road while the showfolk were still figuring out which way the horses were supposed to face. Mat had taught the Band to move fast when there was need. His own feet dragged as though he were wading in mud.

Harnan, with that fool tattoo of a hawk on his cheek, was the first to see him. Buckling a trace, the heavy-jawed file-leader exchanged looks with Metwyn, a boyish-faced Cairhienin whose appearance belied his age and his weakness for tavern brawls. They had no call to look surprised.

"Everything going smoothly? I want to be away in good time." Rubbing his hands together against the cold, Mat eyed the purple wagon uneasily. He should have brought her a present, jewelry or flowers. Either worked as well, with most women.

“Smooth enough, my Lord,” Harnan replied in a cautious tone. “No shouting, no screaming, no crying.” He glanced at the wagon as if he did not credit it himself.

“Quiet suits me,” Metwyn said, stringing one of the reins through a ring on a horse-collar. “Woman starts crying, the only thing to do is leave, if you value your hide, and we can hardly drop these off by the side of the road.” But he glanced at the wagon, too, and shook his head in disbelief.

There really was nothing for Mat to do except go inside. So he did. It only took two tries, with a smile fixed on his face, to make himself climb the short flight of painted wooden steps at the back of the wagon. He was not afraid, but any fool would know enough to be nervous.

Despite the lack of windows, the interior of the wagon was well lighted, with four mirrored lamps burning, and the lamps held good oil, so there was no rancid smell. But then, with the stink from outside, it would have been hard to tell. He needed to find a better spot to park this wagon. A small brick stove with an iron door, and an iron top for cooking, made the space toasty compared with outside. It was not a large wagon, and every inch of wall that could be spared was covered with cabinets or shelves or pegs for hanging clothing and towels and the like, but the table that could be let down on ropes was snug against the ceiling, and the three women inside the wagon were hardly crowded.

They could not have been more different, those three. Mistress Anan was sitting on one of the two narrow beds built into the walls, a regal woman with touches of gray in her hair, seemingly intent on her embroidery hoop and not looking at all as if she were a guard. A large golden ring hung in each of her ears, and her marriage knife dangled from a close-fitting silver necklace, the hilt with its red and white stones snug in the cleavage exposed by the narrow plunging neckline of her Ebou Dari dress that had one side of the skirt sewn up to expose yellow petticoats. She wore another knife, with a long, curved blade, tucked behind her belt, but that was just the custom of Ebou Dar. Setalle had refused to take on any disguise, which seemed well enough. No one had reason to be hunting for her, and finding clothes for everyone else had been a big enough problem as it was. Selucia, a pretty woman with skin the color of buttery cream, was cross-legged on the floor between the beds, a dark scarf covering her shaven head and a sullen expression on her face, though normally she was dignified enough to make Mistress Anan look flighty. Her eyes were as blue as Egeanin's, and more piercing, and she had made more fuss than Egeanin over losing her the rest of her hair. She disliked the dark blue Ebou Dari dress she had been given, too, claiming the deep neckline was indecent, but it hid her as effectively as a mask. Few men who glimpsed Selucia's impressive bosom would be able to focus long on her face. Mat might have enjoyed the view for a moment or two himself, but there was Tuon, seated on the wagon's only stool, a leather-bound book open on her lap, and he could barely make himself look at anything else. His wife-to-be. Light!

Tuon was tiny, not just short but almost slim as a boy, and a loose-fitting dress of brown wool, bought from one of the showfolk, made her seem a child wearing her older sister's clothes. Not at all the sort of woman he enjoyed, especially with only a few days' growth of black stubble covering her scalp. If you ignored that, she *was* pretty, though, in a reserved way, with her heart-shaped face and full lips, her eyes large dark liquid pools of serenity. That utter calmness almost unnerved him. Not even an Aes Sedai would be serene in her circumstances. The bloody dice in his head did not help matters.

"Setalle has been keeping me informed," she said in a cool drawl as he pulled the door shut. He had gotten so he could tell a difference in Seanchan accents; Tuon's made Egeanin sound as if she had a mouthful of mush, but they all sounded slurred and slow. "She's told me the story you have put about concerning me, Toy." Tuon had persisted in calling him that, back in the Tarasin Palace. He had not cared, then. Well, not much.

"My name is Mat," he began. He never saw where the pottery cup in her hand came from, but he managed to drop to the floor in time for it to shatter against the door instead of his head.

"I am a *servant*, Toy?" If Tuon's tone had been cool before, now it was deep winter ice. She barely raised her voice, but it was hard as ice, too. Her expression would have made a hanging judge look giddy. "A *thieving* servant?" The book slid from her lap as she stood and bent to snatch up the lidded white chamber pot. "A *faithless* servant?"

"We will need that," Selucia said deferentially, slipping the bulbous pot out of Tuon's hands. Setting it carefully to one side, she crouched at Tuon's feet almost as if ready to hurl herself at Mat, laughable as that was. Though nothing much seemed laughable right then.

Mistress Anan reached up to one of the railed shelves above her head and handed Tuon another cup. “We have plenty of these,” she murmured.

Mat shot her an indignant look, but her hazel eyes twinkled with amusement. Amusement! She was supposed to be *guarding* those two!

A fist thumped on the door. “Do you need help in there?” Harnan called uncertainly. Mat wondered which of them he was asking.

“We have everything well in hand,” Setalle called back, calmly pushing her needle through the fabric stretched on her hoop. You would have thought that needlework was the most important thing. “Go on about your work. Don’t dawdle.” The woman was not Ebou Dari, but she certainly had soaked up Ebou Dari ways. After a moment, boots thumped back down the steps outside. It seemed Harnan had been too long in Ebou Dar, as well.

Tuon turned the new cup in her hands as though examining the flowers painted on it, and her lips quirked in a smile so small it almost might have been Mat’s imagination. She was more than pretty when she smiled, but it was one of those smiles that said she knew things he did not. He was going to break out in hives if she kept doing that. “I will not be known as a servant, Toy.”

“My name is Mat, not . . . that other thing,” he said, climbing to his feet and cautiously testing his hip. To his surprise, it ached no worse after smacking the floorboards. Tuon arched an eyebrow and hefted the cup in one hand. “I could hardly tell the showfolk I’d kidnapped the Daughter of the Nine Moons,” he said in exasperation.

“The High Lady Tuon, peasant!” Selucia said crisply. “She is under the veil!” Veil? Tuon had worn a veil in the palace, but not since.

The tiny woman gestured graciously, a queen granting license. “It is of no import, Selucia. He is ignorant, yet. We must educate him. But you will change this story, Toy. I will not be a servant.”

“It’s too late to change anything,” Mat said, keeping an eye on that cup. Her hands looked frail, with those long fingernails cut short, but he remembered how quick they were. “Nobody’s asking you to *be* a servant.” Luca and his wife knew the truth, but there had to be some reason to give everyone else why Tuon and Selucia were kept confined to this wagon and guarded. The perfect solution had been a pair of serving girls, about to be dismissed for theft, who had intended to betray their mistress’s flight with her lover. It seemed perfect to Mat, anyway. To the showfolk, it only added to the romance. He had thought Egeanin was going to swallow her tongue while he was explaining to Luca. Maybe she had known how Tuon would take it. Light, he almost wished the dice would stop. How could a man think with that in his head?

“I couldn’t leave you behind to raise an alarm,” he went on patiently. That was true, as far as it went. “I know Mistress Anan has explained it to you.” He thought about saying he had been babbling from nerves when he said she was his wife—she must think him a complete looby!—but it seemed best not to bring it up again. If she was willing to let the matter lie, all the better. “I know she’s already told you this, but I promise no one’s going to hurt you. We’re not after ransom, just getting away with our heads still attached. As soon as I can figure out how to send you home safe and sound, I will. I promise. I’ll make you as comfortable as I can until then. You’ll just have to put up with the other.”

Tuon’s big dark eyes crackled, heat lightning in a night sky, but she said, “It seems I will see what your promises are worth, Toy.” At her feet, Selucia hissed like a doused cat, her head half-turning as if to object, but Tuon’s left hand wiggled, and the blue-eyed woman blushed and went silent. The Blood used something like Maiden handtalk with their upper servants. Mat wished he understood the signals.

“Answer me a question, Tuon,” he said.

He thought he heard Setalle murmur, “Fool.” Selucia’s jaw knotted, and a dangerous look kindled in Tuon’s eyes, but if she was going to call him “Toy,” he would be burned if he gave her any titles.

“How old are you?” He had heard that she was only a few years younger than he, but looking at her in that sack of a dress, it seemed impossible.

To his surprise, that dangerous spark burst into flame. Not just heat lightning, this time. He should have been fried on the spot. Tuon threw back her shoulders and drew herself to her full height. Such as that was; he doubted she could reach five feet with her heels flat however she stretched. “My fourteenth true-name day will come in five months,” she said in a voice that was far from cold. In fact, it could have heated the wagon better than the stove. He felt a moment of hope, but she was not finished. “No; you keep your birth names here, don’t you. That will be my twentieth naming day. Are you satisfied, Toy? Did you fear you had stolen a . . . child?” She almost hissed the last word.

Mat waved his hands in front of him, frantically dismissing the suggestion. A woman started hissing at him like a kettle, a man with any brains found a way to cool her down fast. She was gripping the cup so tightly that tendons stood out on the back of her hand, and he did not want to try his hip with another fall to the floor. Come to think on it, he was not sure how hard she had tried to hit him the first time. Her hands were very fast. “I just wanted to know, that’s all,” he said quickly. “I was curious, making conversation. I’m only a little older myself.” Twenty. So much for hoping she was too young to marry for another three or four years. Anything that came between him and his wedding day would have been welcome.

Tuon studied him suspiciously with her head tilted, then tossed the cup onto the bed beside Mistress Anan and seated herself on the stool again, taking as much care about arranging her voluminous woolen skirts as if they had belonged to a silk gown. But she continued to examine him through her long eyelashes. “Where is your ring?” she demanded.

Unconsciously, he thumbed the finger on his left hand where the long ring usually lay. “I don’t wear it all the time.” Not when everybody in the Tarasin Palace knew he wore it. The thing would have stood out, with his rough layabout’s garb, in any case. It was not even his signet, anyway, just a carver’s try-piece. Strange, how his hand felt noticeably lighter without it. Too light. Strange that she remarked on it, too. But then, why not? Light, those dice had him shying at shadows and jumping at sighs. Or maybe it was just her, a discomforting thought.

He moved to sit on the unoccupied bed, but Selucia swung herself up onto it so quickly any of the acrobats might have been jealous, and stretched out with her head propped on her hand. That pushed her scarf askew for a moment, but she hurriedly straightened it, all the while staring at him proud and cold as a queen. He looked at the other bed, and Mistress Anan set down her embroidery long enough to ostentatiously smooth her skirts, making it clear she did not intend to share an inch. Burn her, she was behaving as though she were guarding Tuon from him! Women always seemed to club together so a man never had a fair chance. Well, he had managed to keep Egeanin from taking charge so far, and he was not about to be bullied by Setalle Anan or a bosomy lady’s maid or the high and mighty High Lady Daughter of the Nine bloody Moons! Only, he could hardly go shoving one of them out of the way to find a place to sit.

Leaning against a drawered cabinet at the foot of the bed Mistress Anan was seated on, he tried to think of what to say. He never had trouble thinking of what to say to women, but his brain seemed deafened by the sound of those dice. All three women gave him disapproving looks—he could all but hear one of them telling him not to slouch!—so he smiled. Most women thought his best smile very winning.

Tuon let out a long breath that did not sound won over in the slightest. “Do you remember Hawkwing’s face, Toy?” Mistress Anan blinked in surprise, and Selucia sat up on the bed frowning. At him. Why would she frown at *him*? Tuon just continued to look at him, hands folded in her lap, as cool and collected as a Wisdom at Sunday.

Mat’s smile felt frozen. Light, what did she know? How could she know anything? *He lay beneath the burning sun, holding his side with both hands, trying to keep the last of life from leaking out and wondering whether there was any reason to hold on. Aldeshar was finished, after this day’s work. A shadow blotted the sun for an instant, and then a tall man in armor crouched beside him, helmet tucked under his arm, dark deep-set eyes framing a hooked nose. “You fought well against me today, Culain, and many days past,” that memorable voice said. “Will you live with me in peace?” With his last breath, he laughed in Artur Hawkwing’s face.* He *hated* to remember dying. A dozen other encounters skittered through his mind, too, ancient memories that were his, now. Artur Paendrag had been a difficult man to get along with even before the wars started.

Drawing a deep breath, he took care choosing his words. This was no time to go spouting the Old Tongue. “Of course I don’t!” he lied. A man who could not lie convincingly got short shrift from women. “Light, Hawkwing died a thousand years ago! What kind of question is that?”

Her mouth opened slowly, and for a moment he was sure she meant to answer question with question. “A foolish one, Toy,” she replied finally, instead. “I can’t say why it popped into my head.”

The stiffness in Mat’s shoulders relaxed, a little. Of course. He was *ta’veren*. People did things and said things around him they never would elsewhere. Nonsense qualified. Still, a thing like that could become uncomfortable when it hit too close to home. “My name is Mat. Mat Cauthon.” He might as well not have spoken.

“I cannot say what I will do after returning to Ebou Dar, Toy. I have not decided. I may have you made *da’covale*. You are not pretty enough for a cupbearer, but it might please me to have you for one. Still, you have represented certain promises to me, so it pleases me now to promise, as well. So long as you keep your promises, I will neither escape nor betray you in any way, nor will I cause dissension among your followers. I believe that covers everything necessary." This time, Mistress Anan gaped at her, and Selucia made a sound in her throat, but Tuon appeared not to notice either woman. She just looked at him expectantly, waiting on a response.

He made a sound in his throat, too. Not a whimper, just a sound. Tuon's face was as smooth as a stern mask of dark glass. Her calm was madness, but this made gibbering look sane! She would *have* to be insane to think he would believe that offer. Except, he thought she did mean it. That, or she was a better liar than he ever hoped to be. Again he had that queasy sense that she knew more than he did. Ridiculous, of course, but there it was. He swallowed a lump in his throat. A hard lump.

"Well, that does all right for you," he said, trying to buy time, "but what about Selucia?" Time for what? He could not think with those dice pounding in his skull.

"Selucia follows my wishes, Toy," Tuon said impatiently. The blue-eyed woman herself straightened and stared at him as though indignant that he had doubted that. For a lady's maid, she could look fierce when she tried.

Mat did not know what to say or do. Without thinking, he spat on his palm and offered his hand as if sealing a bargain on a horse.

"Your customs are . . . earthy," Tuon said in a dry voice, but she spat on her own palm and clasped his hand. " 'Thus is our treaty written; thus is agreement made.' What does that writing on your spear mean, Toy?"

He did whimper this time, and not because she had read the Old Tongue inscription on his *ashandarei*. A bloody stone would have whimpered. The dice had stopped as soon as he touched her hand. Light, what had happened?

Knuckles rapped on the door, and he was so on edge that he moved without thought, spinning, a knife coming into either hand ready to throw at whatever came in. "Stay behind me," he snapped.

The door opened, and Thom stuck his head in. The hood of his cloak was up, and Mat realized it was raining outside. Between Tuon and the dice, he had missed the sound of rain hitting the wagon's roof. "I trust I'm not interrupting anything?" Thom said, knuckling his long white mustaches.

Mat’s face heated. Setalle had frozen with her embroidery needle trailing blue thread down to her work, and her eyebrows seemed to be trying to climb over the top of her head. Tensed on the edge of the other bed, Selucia watched him slip the knives back up his sleeves with considerable interest. He would not have thought she was the sort to like dangerous men. That kind of woman was worth avoiding; they tended to find ways to make a man need to be dangerous. He did not glance back at Tuon. She was probably staring at him as if he had been capering like Luca. Just because he did not want to get married did not mean he wanted his future wife to think him a fool.

“What did you find out, Thom?” he asked brusquely. *Something* had happened, or the dice would not have stopped. A thought came that made his hair want to stand on end. This was the second time they had stopped in Tuon’s presence. The third, counting the gate leading out of Ebou Dar. Three bloody times, and all tied to her.

Limping slightly, the white-haired man came the rest of the way in, pushing back his hood, and pulled the door shut behind him. His limp came from an old injury, not trouble in the city. Tall and lean and leathery, with sharp blue eyes and snowy mustaches that hung below his chin, it seemed he would draw attention wherever he went, but he had practice at hiding in plain sight, and his dark bronze coat and brown wool cloak were suitable for a man with a little coin to spend but not too much. “The streets are full of rumors about her,” he said, nodding toward Tuon, “but nothing about her disappearing. I bought drinks for a few Seanchan officers, and they seem to believe she’s snug in the Tarasin Palace or off on an inspection trip. I didn’t sense any dissembling, Mat. They didn’t know.”

“Did you expect public announcements, Toy?” Tuon said incredulously. “As it is, Suroth may be considering taking her own life for the shame. Do you expect her to spread such an ill omen for the Return about for everyone to see on top of that?”

So Egeanin had been right. It still seemed impossible. And it did not seem at all important compared to the dice stopping. What had *happened*? He had shaken hands with Tuon, that was all. Shaken hands and made a bargain. He meant to keep his side, but what had the dice told him? That she would keep hers? Or that she would not? For all he knew, Seanchan noblewomen were in the habit of marrying—what was it she had said she was going to make him?—a cupbearer—maybe they married cupbearers all the time.

“There’s more, Mat,” Thom said, eyeing Tuon thoughtfully, and with a hint of surprise. It came to Mat that she did not appear overly concerned that Suroth might kill herself. Maybe she was as tough as Domon thought. What *were* the bloody dice trying to tell him? That was what was important. Then Thom went on, and Mat forgot about how tough Tuon might be and even the dice. “Tylin’s dead. They’re keeping it quiet for fear of disturbances, but one of the Palace Guards, a young lieutenant who couldn’t hold his brandy, told me they’re planning her funeral feast and Beslan’s coronation for the same day.”

“How?” Mat demanded. She was older than he, but not that much older! Beslan’s coronation. Light! How would Beslan cope with that, when he hated the Seanchan? It had been his plan to fire those supplies on the Bay Road. He would have tried an uprising if Mat had not convinced him it would only result in a slaughter, and not of Seanchan.

Thom hesitated, stroking his mustaches with a thumb. Finally, he sighed. “She was found in her bedchamber the morning after we left, Mat, still bound hand and foot. Her head . . . Her head had been torn off.”

Mat did not realize his knees had given way until he found himself sitting on the floor with his head buzzing. He could hear her voice. *You’ll get your head cut off yet if you’re not careful, piglet, and I wouldn’t like that.* Setalle leaned forward on the narrow bed to press a hand against his cheek in commiseration.

“The Windfinders?” he said hollowly. He did not have to say more.

“According to what that lieutenant said, the Seanchan have settled on Aes Sedai for the blame. Because Tylin had sworn the Seanchan oaths. That’s what they’ll announce at her funeral feast.”

“Tylin dies the same night the Windfinders escape, and the Seanchan believe Aes Sedai killed her?” He could not imagine Tylin dead. *I’m going to have you for supper, duckling.* “That doesn’t make sense, Thom.”

Thom hesitated, frowning as he considered. “It could be political, in part, but I think that’s what they really believe, Mat. That lieutenant said they’re sure the Windfinders were running too hard to stop or go out of their way, and the quickest path out of the palace from the *damane* kennels goes nowhere near Tylin’s apartments.”

Mat grunted. He was sure it was not so. And if it were, there was nothing in the world he could do about it.

"The *marath'damane* had reason to murder Tylin," Selucia said suddenly. "They must fear her example for others. What reason had the *damane* you speak of? None. The hand of justice requires motive and proof, even for *damane* and *da'covale*." She sounded as though she were reading the words off a page. And she was looking at Tuon from the corner of her eye.

Mat looked over his shoulder, but if the tiny woman had been using her hands to tell Selucia what to say, they were resting in her lap, now. She was watching him, a neutral expression on her face. "Did you care for Tylin so deeply?" she said in a cautious voice.

"Yes. No. Burn me, I *liked* her!" Turning away, he scrubbed fingers through his hair, pushing the cap off. He had never been so glad to get away from a woman in his life, but this . . . ! "And I left her tied up and gagged so she couldn't even call for help, easy prey for the *gholam*," he said bitterly. "It was looking for me. Don't shake your head. Thom. You know it as well as I do."

"What is a . . . *gholam*?" Tuon asked.

"Shadowspawn, my Lady," Thom said. He frowned worriedly. He did not take easily to worry, but anybody except a fool would worry about a *gholam*. "It looks like a man, but it can slip through a mousehole, or under a door, and it's strong enough to . . ." He harrumphed through his mustaches. "Well, enough of that. Mat, she could have had a hundred guards around her, and it wouldn't have stopped that thing." She would not have needed a hundred guards if she had not taken up with Mat Cauthon.

"A *gholam*," Tuon murmured wryly. Suddenly she rapped Mat hard on the top of the head with her knuckles. Clapping a hand to his scalp, he stared over his shoulder incredulously. "I'm very happy that you show loyalty to Tylin, Toy," she told him in a severe voice, "but I won't have superstition in you. I will not have it. It does Tylin no honor." Burn him, Tylin's death seemed to concern her as little as whether or not Suroth committed suicide. What kind of woman was he going to marry?

When a fist pounded on the door this time, he did not even bother to stand. He felt numb at the core and scraped raw on the surface. Blaeric pushed into the wagon without asking, his dark brown cloak dripping rain. It was an old cloak, worn thin in spots, but he appeared not to care whether rain leaked through. The Warder ignored everyone but Mat, or almost everyone. The man actually took a moment to consider Selucia's bosom! "Joline wants you, Cauthon," he said, still studying her. Light! This was all Mat needed to make it a fine day.

"Who is Joline?" Tuon demanded.

Mat ignored her. "Tell Joline I'll see her once we're on the road, Blaeric." The last thing he wanted was to be forced to listen to more of the Aes Sedai's grievances now.

"She wants you now, Cauthon."

With a sigh, Mat got to his feet and gathered his cap from the floor. Blaeric looked as if he might try to drag him, otherwise. In his own current mood, he thought he might put a knife in the man if he tried. And get his neck broken for his pains; a Warder would not take a knife in the ribs lightly. He was fairly sure he had already died the one time he was allowed, and not in an old memory. Sure enough not to take risks he could sidestep.

"Who is Joline, Toy?" If he had not known better, he would have said Tuon sounded jealous.

"A bloody Aes Sedai," he grumbled, tugging the cap on, and got one small pleasure for the day. Tuon's jaw dropped in shock. He shut the door behind him on the way out before she could find a word to say. A very small pleasure. One butterfly on a midden heap. Tylin dead, and the Windfinders might take the blame yet, whatever Thom said. And that was aside from Tuon and the bloody dice. A very tiny butterfly on a very large midden.

The sky was full of dark clouds, now, and the downpour steady. A soaking rain, they would have called it back home. It began to slick his hair, cap or no, and seep through his coat as soon as he stepped outside. Blaeric hardly seemed to notice, barely gathering his cloak. There was nothing for it but for Mat to hunch his shoulders and splash through the widening puddles on the dirt streets. By the time he could reach his wagon for a cloak, he would be drenched to the skin anyway. Besides, the weather fit his spirits.

To his surprise, rain or no rain, an incredible amount of work had been done in the short time he was inside. The canvas wall was gone as far as he could see in either direction, and half the storage wagons that had been around Tuon's wagon were missing, too. So were most of the animals that had been picketed on the horselines. A large, iron-barred cage containing a black-maned lion trundled past toward the road behind a plodding team, the horses as unconcerned with the apparently sleeping lion behind them as they were with the shower. Performers were already taking to the road, too, though how they determined the order of leaving was a mystery. Most of the tents seemed to have vanished; in one place three of the brightly colored wagons together might be missing, another place every second wagon, while elsewhere the wagons standing and waiting still seemed a solid mass. The only thing that said the showfolk were not scattering was Luca himself, a bright red cloak gathered around him against the wet as he paraded along the street, stopping now and then to clap a man on the shoulder or murmur something to a woman that made her laugh. If the show had been breaking apart, Luca would have been out chasing down those who tried to leave. He held the show together as much by persuasion as anything else, and he never let anyone leave without talking himself hoarse trying to argue them out of it. Mat knew he should feel good about seeing Luca still there, though it had never occurred to him that the man would run out on the gold, but right at that moment, he doubted that anything could make him feel anything but numb and angry.

The wagon that Blaeric took him to was almost as large as Luca's, but it had been whitewashed rather than painted. The white had long since run and streaked and faded, and the rain was washing it a little more toward gray, where the wood was not already bare. The wagon belonged to a company of fools, four morose men who painted their faces for the show's patrons, dousing each other with water and hitting each other with inflated pig-bladders, and otherwise spent their time and money imbibing as much wine as they could buy. With what Mat had paid for rent, they might be drunk for months, and it had cost more than that to make anyone take them in.

Four shaggy, nondescript horses were already hitched to the wagon, and Fen Mizar, Joline's other Warder, was up on the driver's seat, swathed in an old gray cloak and reins in hand. His tilted eyes watched Mat the way a wolf might watch an impudent cur. The Warders had been unhappy with Mat's plan from the start, sure they could have gotten the sisters away safely once they were outside the city walls. Perhaps they could have, but the Seanchan hunted vigorously for women who could channel—the show itself apparently had been searched four times in the days after Ebou Dar fell—and all it would have taken was one slip to land all of them in the stewpot. From what Egeanin and Domon said, the Seekers could make a boulder tell everything it had ever seen. Luckily, not all the sisters were as sure as Joline's Warders. Aes Sedai tended to dither when they could not agree on what to do.

When Mat reached the steps at the back of the wagon, Blaeric stopped him with a hand to his chest. The Warder's face might have been carved, no more concerned than a piece of wood with the rain running down his cheeks. "Fen and I are grateful to you for getting her out of the city, Cauthon, but this can't continue. The sisters are crowded, sharing with those other women, and they don't get on. There is going to be trouble if we can't find another wagon."

"Is that what this is about?" Mat said crossly, tugging his collar tighter. Not that it did much good. He was already wet through on the back, and not much better in front. If Joline had pulled him here to whine about the accommodations again . . .

"She'll tell you what it's about, Cauthon. Just you remember what I said."

Grumbling under his breath, Mat climbed the dirt-streaked steps and went in, not quite slamming the door behind him.

The wagon was laid out much like the one Tuon was in, though with four beds, two of them folded flat against the walls above the other two. He had no idea how the six women arranged sleeping, but he suspected it was not done peacefully. The air in the wagon all but crackled like grease on a griddle. Three women sat on each of the lower beds, each variously watching or ignoring the women seated on the other bed. Joline, who had never been held as *damane,* behaved as though the three *sul'dam* did not exist. Reading a small wood-bound book, she was an Aes Sedai to the inch and arrogance on a stick despite her well-worn blue dress, lately owned by a woman who taught the lions to do tricks. The other two sisters knew firsthand what it was to be *damane,* though. Edesina watched the three *sul'dam* warily, one hand resting near her belt knife, while Teslyn's eyes shifted constantly, looking at anything except the *sul'dam,* and her hands kneaded her dark woolen skirts. He did not know how Egeanin had coerced the three *sul'dam* into helping *damane* escape, but even though they were being sought by the authorities as surely as Egeanin, they had not changed their attitudes toward women who could channel. Bethamin, tall and as dark as Tuon in an Ebou Dari dress with a very deep neckline and skirts sewn up above her knee on one side to show faded red petticoats, seemed a mother waiting for inevitable misbehavior by children, while yellow-haired Seta, in high-necked gray wool that covered her completely, appeared to be studying dangerous dogs that would need to be caged sooner or later. Renna, she of the talk about cutting off hands and feet, pretended to be reading, too, but every so often her deceptively mild brown eyes rose from the slim volume to study the Aes Sedai, and when they did, she smiled in an unpleasant way. Mat felt like cursing before one of them opened her mouth. A wise man kept clear when women were at odds, especially if there were Aes Sedai among them, but this was how it always was when he came to this wagon.

“This better be important, Joline.” Unbuttoning his coat, he tried to shake some of the water off. He thought he would do better wringing the garment out. “I just learned that the *gholam* killed Tylin the night we left, and I’m in no mood for complaints.”

Joline marked her place carefully with an embroidered marker and folded her hands on the book before speaking. Aes Sedai never hurried; they just expected everyone else to. Without him, she likely would have been wearing an *a’dam* by now herself, but he had never found Aes Sedai particularly noted for gratitude, either. She ignored what he had said about Tylin. “Blaeric tells me the show has already begun moving,” she said coolly, “but you must stop it. Luca will only listen to you.” Her mouth tightened slightly on the words. Aes Sedai also were unused to not being listened to, and Greens were not the best at hiding their displeasure. “We must abandon the idea of Lugard for the time being. We must take the ferry across the harbor and go to Illian.”

That was about as bad a suggestion as he had heard out of her, though she did not mean it for a suggestion, of course; she was worse than Egeanin that way. With half the show already on the road, or near enough, it would take all day just to get everyone down to the ferry landing, and it would mean going into the city, besides. Heading for Lugard took the show away from the Seanchan as quickly as possible, while they had soldiers camped all the way to the Illian border and maybe beyond. Egeanin was reluctant to tell what she knew, but Thom had his ways of learning these things. Mat did not bother to crack his teeth, though. He did not need to.

“No,” Teslyn said in a tight voice, her Illianer accent strong. Leaning past Edesina, she looked as though she chewed rocks three meals a day, hard-faced and set-jawed, but there was a nervousness in her eyes, put there by her weeks as a *damane*. “No, Joline. I have told you, we do no dare risk it! We do no dare!”

“Light!” Joline spat, slamming her book to the floor. “Take hold of yourself, Teslyn! Just because you were held prisoner for a little time is no reason to go to pieces!”

“Go to pieces? Go to pieces? Let them put that collar on you and then speak of going to pieces!” Teslyn’s hand went to her throat as though she felt the *a’dam*’s collar still. “Help me convince her, Edesina. She will have us collared again, if we do let her!”

Edesina drew back on herself against the wall behind the bed—a slim, handsome woman with black hair spilling to her waist, she always went silent when the Red and the Green argued, as they did often—but Joline did not spare her so much as a glance. “You ask a *rebel* for help, Teslyn? We should have left her for the Seanchan! Listen to me. You can feel it as well as I. Would you really accept a greater danger to avoid a lesser?”

“Lesser!” Teslyn snarled. “You do know nothing of—!”

Renna held her book out at arm’s length and let it drop to the floor with a bang. “If my Lord will excuse us a little while, we still have our *a’dam*, and we can teach these girls to behave again in short order.” Her accent had a musical quality, but the smile on her lips never touched her brown eyes. “It never works to let them go slack this way.” Seta nodded grimly and stood as if to fetch out the leashes.

“I think we’re done with *a’dam*,” Bethamin said, ignoring the shocked looks from the other two *sul’dam*, “but there are other ways to settle these girls down. May I suggest my Lord return in an hour? They’ll tell you what you want to know without any squabbling once they can’t sit down.” She sounded as though she meant exactly what she said. Joline was staring at the three *sul’dam* in outraged disbelief, but Edesina was sitting up straight, gripping her belt knife with a determined expression, while Teslyn was now the one shrinking back against the wall, her hands clasped tightly at her waist.

“That won’t be necessary,” Mat said after a moment. Only a moment. However satisfying it might be to have Joline “settled down,” Edesina might draw that knife, and that would set the cat among the chickens no matter how it turned out. “What greater danger are you talking about, Joline? Joline? What danger is greater than the Seanchan right now?”

The Green decided her stare was making no impression on Bethamin and turned it on Mat, instead. Had she been other than Aes Sedai, he would have said she looked sulky. Joline disliked explaining. “If you must know, someone is channeling.” Teslyn and Edesina nodded, the Red sister reluctantly, the Yellow emphatically.

“In the camp?” he said in alarm. His right hand rose on its own to press against the silver foxhead under his shirt, but the medallion had not turned cold.

“Far away,” Joline replied, still unwilling. “To the north.”

“Much farther than any of us should be able to sense channeling,” Edesina put in, a touch of fear in her voice. “The amount of *saidar* being wielded must be immense, inconceivable.” She fell silent at a sharp glance from Joline, who turned back to study Mat as though deciding how much she had to tell him.

“At that distance,” she went on, “we wouldn’t be able to feel every sister in the Tower channeling. It has to be the Forsaken, and whatever they’re doing, we do not want to be any closer than we can avoid.”

Mat was still for a moment; then finally, he said, “If it’s far, then we stick with the plan.”

Joline went on arguing, but he did not bother to listen. Whenever he thought of Rand or Perrin, colors swirled in his head. A part of being *ta’veren*, he supposed. This time, he had not thought of either of his friends, but the colors had suddenly been there, a fan of a thousand rainbows. This time, they had almost formed an image, a vague impression that might have been a man and a woman seated on the ground facing one another. It was gone in an instant, but he knew as surely as he knew his name. Not the Forsaken. Rand. And he could not help wondering, what had Rand been doing when the dice stopped?

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CHAPTER 4

The Tale of a Doll

Furyk Karede sat staring at his writing table without seeing the papers and maps spread out in front of him. Both of his oil lamps were lit and sitting on the table, but he no longer had need of them. The sun must be rimming the horizon, yet since waking from a fitful sleep and saying his devotions to the Empress, might she live forever, he had only donned his robe, in the dark Imperial green that some insisted on calling black, and sat here without moving since. He had not even shaved. The rain had stopped, and he considered telling his servant Ajimbura to swing a window open for a little fresh air in his room at The Wandering Woman. Clean air might clear his head. But over the last five days there had been lulls in the rain that ended with sudden drenching downpours, and his bed was located between the windows. He had needed to have his mattress and bedding hung in the kitchen to dry once already.

A tiny squeal and a pleased grunt from Ajimbura made him look up to find the wiry little man displaying a limp rat half the size of a cat on the end of his long knife. It was not the first Ajimbura had killed in this room recently, something Karede believed would not have happened if Setalle Anan still owned the inn, though the number of rats in Ebou Dar seemed to be increasing well in advance of spring. Ajimbura looked a little like a wizened rat himself, his grin both satisfied and feral. After more than three hundred years under the Empire, the Kaensada hill tribes were only half civilized, and less than half tamed. The man wore his white-streaked dark red hair in a thick braid that hung to his waist, to make a good trophy if he ever found his way back to those near-mountains and fell in one of the endless feuds between families or tribes, and he insisted on drinking from a silver-mounted cup that anyone who looked closely could see was the top of someone’s skull.

“If you are going to eat that,” Karede said as though there were any question, “you will clean it in the stableyard out of anyone’s sight.” Ajimbura would eat anything except for lizards, which were forbidden to his tribe for some reason he would never make clear.

“But of course, high one,” the man replied with the hunch of his shoulders that passed for a bow among his people. “I know well the ways of the townspeople, and I would not embarrass the high one.” After close to twenty years in Karede’s service, without a reminder he still would have skinned out the rat and roasted it over the flames in the small brick fireplace.

Scraping the carcass off the blade into a small canvas sack, Ajimbura tucked that into a corner for later and carefully wiped his knife clean before sheathing it and settling on his heels to await Karede’s needs. He would wait like that all day, if necessary, as patiently as a *da’covale*. Karede had never puzzled out exactly why Ajimbura had left his hill fort home to follow one of the Deathwatch Guard. It was a much more circumscribed life than the man had known before, and besides, Karede had nearly killed him three times before he made that choice.

Dismissing thoughts of his servant, he returned to the display on his writing table, though he had no intention of taking up his pen for the moment. He had been raised to banner-general for achieving some small success in the battles with the Asha’man, in days when few had achieved any, and now, because he had commanded against men who could channel, some thought he must have wisdom to share about fighting *marath’damane*. No one had had to do that in centuries, and since the so-called Aes Sedai revealed their unknown weapon only a few leagues from where he sat, a great deal of thinking had gone into how to cripple their power. That was not the only request littering the tabletop. Aside from the usual run of requisitions and reports that needed his signature, his comments on the forces arrayed against them in Illian had been solicited by four lords and three ladies, and on the special Aiel problem by six ladies and five lords, but those questions would be decided elsewhere, very likely already had been decided. His observations would only be used in the infighting over who controlled what in the Return. In any event, war had always been a second calling for the Deathwatch Guard. Oh, the Guards were always there whenever a major battle was fought, the swordhand of the Empress, might she live forever, to strike at her enemies whether or not she herself was present, always to lead the way where the fight was hottest, but their first calling was to protect the lives and persons of the Imperial family. With their own lives, when necessary, and willingly given. And nine nights past, the High Lady Tuon had vanished as if swallowed by the storm. He did not think of her as the Daughter of the Nine Moons, could not until he knew she was no longer under the veil.

He had not considered taking his own life, either, though the shame cut him keenly. It was for the Blood to resort to the easy way to escape disgrace; the Deathwatch Guard fought to the last. Musenge commanded her personal bodyguard, but as the highest-ranking member of the Guard this side of the Aryth Ocean, it was Karede's duty to return her safely. Every cranny in the city was being searched on one excuse or another, every vessel larger than a rowboat, but most often by men ignorant of what they were searching for, unaware that the fate of the Return might rest on their diligence. The duty was his. Of course, the Imperial family was given to even more complicated intrigues than the rest of the Blood, and the High Lady Tuon frequently played a very deep game indeed, with a sharp and deadly skill. Only a few were aware that she had vanished twice before, and had been reported dead, to the very arrangement of her funeral rites, all by her own contriving. Whatever the reasons for her disappearance, though, he had to find and protect her. So far he had no clue how. Swallowed by the storm. Or perhaps by the Lady of the Shadows. There had been countless attempts to kidnap or assassinate her, beginning on the day of her birth. If he found her dead, he must find who had killed her, who had given the ultimate commands, and avenge her whatever the cost. That was his duty, too.

A slender man slipped into the room from the hallway without knocking. He might have been one of the inn's stablemen from his rough coat, but no local had his pale hair or the blue eyes that slid across the room as though memorizing everything in it. His hand slipped under his coat, and Karede rehearsed two ways of killing him bare-handed in the brief moment before he produced a small, gold-bordered ivory plaque worked with the Raven and the Tower. Seekers for Truth did not have to knock. Killing them was frowned upon.

“Leave us,” the Seeker told Ajimbura, tucking away the plaque once he was sure Karede had recognized it. The little man remained crouched on his heels, motionless, and the Seeker’s eyebrows rose in surprise. Even in the Kaensada Hills everyone knew a Seeker’s word was law. Well, perhaps not in some of the more remote hill forts, not if they believed no one knew the Seeker was there, but Ajimbura knew better than this.

“Wait outside,” Karede commanded sharply, and Ajimbura rose with alacrity, murmuring, “I hear and obey, high one.” He studied the Seeker openly, though, as if to make sure the Seeker knew he had marked his face, before leaving the room. He was going to get himself beheaded, one day.

“A precious thing, loyalty,” the pale-haired man said, eyeing the tabletop, after Ajimbura pulled the door shut behind himself. “You are involved in Lord Yulan’s plans, Banner-General Karede? I would not have expected the Deathwatch Guard to be part of that.”

Karede moved two bronze map-weights shaped like lions and let the map of Tar Valon roll up on itself. The other had not been unrolled, yet. “You must ask Lord Yulan, Seeker. Loyalty to the Crystal Throne is precious above the breath of life, followed closely by knowing when to keep silent. The more who speak of a thing, the more will learn of it who should not.”

No one short of the Imperial family rebuked a Seeker or whatever Hand guided him, but the fellow appeared unaffected. Then again, he seated himself in the room’s cushioned armchair and made a tent of his fingers, peering over them at Karede, who had the choice of moving his own chair or leaving the man almost at his back. Most people would have been very nervous about having a Seeker behind them. Most would have been nervous having a Seeker in the same room. Karede hid a smile and did not move. He had only to turn his head a fraction, and he was trained at seeing clearly what lay in the corners of sight.

“You must be proud of your sons,” the Seeker said, “two following you into the Deathwatch Guard, the third listed among the honored dead. Your wife would have been very proud.”

“What is your name, Seeker?” The answering silence was deafening. More people rebuked Seekers than inquired after their names.

“Mor,” the reply came finally. “Almurat Mor.” So. Mor. He had an ancestor who had come with Luthair Paendrag, then, and was rightly proud. Without access to the breeding books, which no *da’covale* was allowed, Karede had no way of knowing whether any of the tales about his own ancestry were true—he also might have an ancestor who had once followed the great Hawkwing—but it did not matter. Men who tried to stand on their forebears' shoulders rather than their own feet often found themselves shorter by a head. Especially *da'covale.*

“Call me Furyk. We are both the property of the Crystal Throne. What do you want of me, Almurat? Not to discuss my family, I think.” If his sons were in trouble, the fellow would never have mentioned them so soon, and Kalia was beyond any misery. From the corner of his eye, Karede could see the struggle on the Seeker's face, though he hid it almost well enough. The man had lost control of the interview—as he might have expected, flashing his plaque as though a Deathwatch Guard were not ready to thrust a dagger into his own heart on command.

“Listen to a story,” Mor said slowly, “and tell me what you think.” His gaze was fastened to Karede as if by tacks, studying, weighing, evaluating as though Karede were on the block at sale. “This came to us in the last few days.” By us, he meant the Seekers. “It began among the local people, as near as we can tell, though we have not yet found the original source. Supposedly, a girl with a Seandar accent has been extorting gold and jewelry from merchants here in Ebou Dar. The title Daughter of the Nine Moons was mentioned.” He grimaced with disgust, and for a moment, his fingertips turned white, they were pressing against each other so hard. “None of the locals seem to understand what that title means, but the description of the girl is remarkably precise. Remarkably accurate. And no one can recall hearing this rumor before the night after . . . the night after Tylin's murder was discovered,” he finished, choosing the least unpleasant event to fix the time.

“A Seandar accent,” Karede said in a flat voice, and Mor nodded. “This rumor has passed to our own people.” That was not a question, but Mor nodded again. A Seandar accent and an accurate description, two things no local could invent. Someone was playing a very dangerous game. Dangerous for themselves, and for the Empire. “How does the Tarasin Palace take recent events?” There would be Listeners among the servants, likely among even the Ebou Dari servants by now, and what the Listeners heard soon passed to the Seekers.

Mor understood the question, of course. There was no need to mention what should not be mentioned. He replied in an indifferent tone. “The High

Lady Tuon’s entourage carries on as though nothing has happened, except that Anath, her Truth Speaker, has taken to seclusion, but I am told that is not unusual for her. Suroth herself is even more distraught in private than in public. She sleeps poorly, snaps at her favorites, and has her property beaten over trifles. She ordered the death of one Seeker each day until matters are rectified, and only rescinded the order this morning, when she realized she might run out of Seekers before she ran out of days.” His shoulders moved in a small shrug, perhaps to indicate this was all in a day for Seekers, perhaps in relief at a near escape. “It’s understandable. If she is called to account, she will pray for the Death of Ten Thousand Tears. The other Blood who know what has happened are trying to grow eyes in the backs of their heads. A few have even quietly made funeral arrangements, to cover any eventuality.”

Karede wanted a clearer look at the man’s face. He was inured to insult—that was part of the training—but this . . . Pushing back his chair, he stood and sat at the edge of the writing table. Mor stared at him unblinking, tensed to defend against an attack, and Karede drew a deep breath to still his anger. “Why did you come to me if you believe the Deathwatch Guards are implicated in this?” The effort of keeping his voice level almost strangled him. Since the first Deathwatch Guards swore on the corpse of Luthair Paendrag to defend his son, there had never been treason among the Guards! Never!

Mor relaxed by increments as he realized that Karede did not intend to kill him, at least not right then, but there was a haze of sweat on his forehead. “I have heard it said a Deathwatch Guard can see a butterfly’s breath. Do you have anything to drink?”

Karede gestured curtly to the brick hearth, where a silver cup and pitcher sat near the flames, to keep warm. They had been there, untouched, since Ajimbura brought them when Karede awoke. “The wine may be cool by now, but be free of it. And when your throat is wet, you will answer my question. Either you suspect Guardsmen, or you wish to play me in some game of your own, and by my eyes, I will know which, and why.”

The fellow sidled to the hearth, watching him from the corner of his eye, but as Mor bent for the pitcher, he frowned and then gave a small start. What appeared to be a silver-rimmed bowl with a ram’s-horn-patterned silver base sat beside the cup. Light of heaven, Ajimbura had been told often enough to keep that thing out of sight! There was no doubt that Mor recognized it for what it was.

The man considered treason possible for the Guards? “Pour for me as well, if you will.”

Mor blinked, showing a faint consternation—he held the only obvious cup—and then a light of understanding appeared in his eyes. An uneasy light. He filled the bowl, too, a trifle unsteadily, and wiped his hand on his coat before taking it up. Every man had his limits, even a Seeker, and a man pushed to them was especially dangerous, but he was also off balance.

Accepting the skull-cup with both hands, Karede raised it high and lowered his head. “To the Empress, may she live forever in honor and glory. Death and shame to her enemies.”

“To the Empress, may she live forever in honor and glory,” Mor echoed, bowing his head and lifting his cup. “Death and shame to her enemies.”

Putting Ajimbura’s cup to his lips, Karede was aware of the other man watching him drink. The wine was indeed cool, the spices bitter, and there was a faint, acrid hint of silver polish; he told himself the taste of dead man’s dust was his imagination.

Mor dashed off half his own wine in hurried gulps, then stared at his cup, seemed to realize what he had done, and made a visible effort to regain control of himself. “Furyk Karede,” he said briskly. “Born forty-two years ago to weavers, the property of one Jalid Magonine, a craftsman in Ancarid. Chosen at fifteen for training in the Deathwatch Guards. Cited twice for heroism and mentioned in dispatches three times, then, as a seven-year veteran, named to the bodyguard of the High Lady Tuon upon her birth.” That had not been her name then, of course, but mentioning her birth-name would have been an insult. “That same year, as one of three survivors of the first known attempt on her life, chosen for training as an officer. Service during the Muyami Uprising and the Jianmin Incident, more citations for heroism, more mentions in dispatches, and assignment back to the High Lady’s bodyguard just before her first true-name day.” Mor peered into his wine, then looked up suddenly. “At your request. Unusual, that. The following year, you took three serious wounds shielding her with your body against another set of assassins. She gave you her most precious possession, a doll. After more distinguished service, with further citations and mentions, you were selected for the bodyguard of the Empress herself, may she live forever, and served there until named to accompany the High Lord Turak to these lands with the *Hailene.* Times change, and men change, but before going to guard the throne, you made two other requests for assignment to the High Lady Tuon's bodyguard. *Most* unusual. And you kept the doll until it was destroyed in the Great Fire of Sohima, a matter of ten years."

Not for the first time, Karede was glad of the training that allowed him to maintain a smooth face no matter what. Careless expressions gave away too much to an opponent. He remembered the face of the small girl who had laid that doll on his litter. He could hear her still. *You have protected my life, so you must take Emela to watch over you in turn,* she said. *She can't really protect you, of course; she's only a doll. But keep her to remind you that I will always hear if you speak my name. If I'm still alive, of course.*

"My honor is loyalty," he said, setting Ajimbura's cup on the writing table carefully, so as not to slop wine onto his papers. However often the fellow polished the silver, Karede did not think he bothered to wash the thing. "Loyalty to the throne. Why did you come to me?"

Mor moved slightly, so the armchair was between them. No doubt he thought he was standing casually, but he was clearly ready to throw the winecup. He had a knife under his coat in the small of his back, and probably at least one other. "Three requests to join the High Lady Tuon's bodyguard. And you kept the doll."

"That much, I understand," Karede told him dryly. The Guards were not supposed to form attachments to those they were sent to guard. The Deathwatch Guard served only the Crystal Throne, served *whoever* succeeded to the throne, with a whole heart and a whole faith. But he remembered that serious child's face, already aware she might not live to do her duty yet trying to do it anyway, and he had kept the doll. "But there's more to it than rumor of a girl, isn't there?"

"A butterfly's breath," the fellow murmured. "It is a pleasure to talk to someone who sees deeply. On the night that Tylin was murdered, two *damane* were taken from the Tarasin Palace kennels. Both were formerly Aes Sedai. Do you not find the coincidence too much?"

"I find any coincidence suspect, Almurat. But what has that to do with rumors and . . . other matters?"

"This web is more tangled than you imagine. Several others left the palace that night, among them a young man who was apparently Tylin's pet, four men who were certainly soldiers, and an older man, one Thom

Merrilin, or so he called himself, who was supposedly a servant, but who displayed much more education than would be expected. At one time or another, they were all seen with Aes Sedai who were in the city before the Empire reclaimed it." Intent, the Seeker leaned forward slightly over the back of the armchair. "Perhaps Tylin was not murdered because she swore fealty, but because she had learned of things that were dangerous. She might have been careless in what she revealed to the boy on the pillows, and he carried word to Merrilin. We can call him that until we learn a better name. The more I learn of that one, the more intriguing he is: knowledgeable of the world, well-spoken, at ease with nobles and crowns. A courtier, in fact, if you didn't know he was a servant. If the White Tower had certain plans in Ebou Dar, they might send such a man to carry them out."

Plans. Unthinking, Karede picked up Ajimbura's cup and almost drank before he realized what he was doing. He continued to hold the cup, though, so as not to give away his turmoil. Everyone—those who knew, anyway—was sure the High Lady Tuon's disappearance was part of the contest to succeed the Empress, might she live forever. Such was life in the Imperial family. If the High Lady were dead, after all, a new heir must be named. If she were dead. And if not . . . The White Tower would have sent their best, if they planned to carry her away. If the Seeker was not playing him in some game of his own. Seekers could try to snare anyone short of the Empress herself, might she live forever. "You have taken this notion to your superiors, and they rejected it, or you would not come to me. That, or . . . You haven't mentioned it to them, have you? Why not?"

"Much more tangled than you can imagine," Mor said softly, eyeing the door as if suspecting eavesdroppers. Why did he grow cautious now? "There are many . . . complications. The two *damane* were removed by the Lady Egeanin Tamarath, who has had dealings with Aes Sedai before. Close dealings, in fact. Very close. Clearly, she released the other *damane* to cover her escape. Egeanin left the city that same night, with three *damane* in her entourage, and also, we believe, Merrilin and the others. We don't know who the third *damane* was—we suspect someone important among the Atha'an Miere, or perhaps an Aes Sedai who was hiding in the city—but we have identified the *sul'dam* she used, and two have close connections with Suroth. Who herself has many connections to Aes Sedai." For all his wariness, Mor said that as if it were not a lightning bolt. No wonder he was on edge.

So. Suroth plotted with Aes Sedai and had corrupted at least some of the Seekers above Mor, and the White Tower had placed men under one of their best to carry out certain actions. It was all believable. When Karede was sent with the Forerunners, he had been tasked to watch the Blood for over-ambition. There had always been a possibility, this far from the Empire, that they would try to set up their own kingdoms. And he himself had sent men into a city he knew would fall whatever was done to defend it, so they could harm the enemy from within.

"You have a direction, Almurat?"

Mor shook his head. "They went north, and Jehannah was mentioned in the palace stables, but that seems an obvious attempt at deception. They will have changed direction at the first opportunity. We have checked on boats large enough to have carried the party across the river, but vessels of that size come and go all the time. There is no order in this place, no control."

"This gives me a great deal to think on."

The Seeker grimaced, a slight twisting of his mouth, but he seemed to realize he had gotten as much commitment as Karede would make. He nodded once. "Whatever you choose to do, you should know this. You may wonder how the girl extorted anything from these merchants. It seems two or three soldiers always accompanied her. The description of their armor was also very precise." He half stretched out a hand as though to touch Karede's robe, but wisely let it fall back to his side. "Most people call that black. You understand me? Whatever you choose to do, do not delay." Mor raised his cup. "Your health, Banner-General. Furyk. Your health, and the health of the Empire."

Karede drained Ajimbura's cup without hesitation.

The Seeker departed as abruptly as he had entered, and moments after the door closed behind him, it opened to admit Ajimbura. The little man stared accusingly at the skull-cup in Karede's hands.

"You know this rumor, Ajimbura?" As well ask whether the sun rose in the morning as ask whether the fellow had been listening. He did not deny it, in any case.

"I would not soil my tongue with such filth, high one," he said, drawing himself up.

Karede permitted himself a sigh. Whether the High Lady Tuon's disappearance was her own doing or some other's, she was in great danger. And if the rumor was some ploy by Mor, the best way to defeat another's game was to make the game your own. "Lay out my razor." Sitting down, he reached for his pen, holding the sleeve of his robe clear of the ink with his left hand. "Then you will find Captain Musenge, when he is alone, and give him this. Return quickly; I will have more instructions for you."

Shortly after noon on the following day, he was crossing the harbor on the ferry that departed each hour, according to the strict ringing of bells. It was a lumbering barge that heaved as long sweeps propelled it across the harbor's choppy surface. The ropes lashing a merchant's half-dozen canvas-covered wagons to the cleats on the deck creaked with every shift, the horses stamped their hooves nervously, and the oarsmen had to fend off wagon drivers and hired guards who wanted to empty their bellies over the side. Some men had no stomach for the motion of water. The merchant herself, a plump-faced woman with a coppery skin, stood in the bow wrapped in her dark cloak, balancing easily with the ferry's movements, staring fixedly at the approaching landing and ignoring Karede beside her. She might know that he was Seanchan, from the saddle on his bay gelding if nothing else, but a plain gray cloak covered his red-trimmed green coat, so if she thought of him at all, it was as an ordinary soldier. Not a settler, with a sword on his hip. There might have been sharper eyes back in the city, despite all he had done to evade them, but there was nothing he could do about that. With luck, he had a day, perhaps two, before anyone realized he would not be returning to the inn any time soon.

Swinging into his saddle as soon as the ferry bumped hard against the landing dock's leather-padded posts, he was first off when the loading gate swung aside, the merchant was still chivvying her drivers to the wagons and the ferrymen unlashing wheels. He kept Aldazar to a slow walk across the stones, still slippery with the morning's rain, a litter of horse dung, and the leavings of a flock of sheep, and let the bay's pace increase only when he reached the Illian Road itself, though he kept short of a trot even then. Impatience was a vice when beginning a journey of unknown length.

Inns lined the road beyond the landing, flat-roofed buildings, covered in cracked and flaking white plaster and with faded signs out front or none at all. This road marked the northern edge of the Rahad, and roughly dressed men slouching on benches in front of the inns sullenly watched him pass. Not because he was Seanchan; he suspected they would have been no brighter for anyone on horseback. Anyone who had two coins to rub, for that matter. Soon he left them behind, though, and the next few hours took him past olive orchards and small farms where the workers were accustomed enough to passersby on the road that they did not look up from their labors. The traffic was sparse in any case, a handful of high-wheeled farmers' carts and twice a merchant's train rumbling toward Ebou Dar, surrounded by hired guards. Many of the drivers and both merchants wore those distinctive Illianer beards. It seemed strange that Illian continued to send its trade to Ebou Dar while fighting to resist the Empire, but people on this side of the Eastern Sea were often peculiar, with odd customs, and little like the stories told of the great Hawkwing's homeland. Often nothing like. They must be understood, of course, if they were to be brought into the Empire, but understanding was for others, higher than he. He had his duty.

The farms gave way to woodlands and fields of scrub, and his shadow was lengthening in front of him, the sun more than halfway to the horizon, by the time he saw what he was looking for. Just ahead, Ajimbura was squatting on the north side of the road, playing a reed flute, the image of an idler shirking. Before Karede reached him, he tucked the flute behind his belt, gathered his brown cloak and vanished into the brush and trees. Glancing behind to make sure the road was empty in that direction as well, Karede turned Aldazar into the woodland at the same point.

The little man was waiting just out of sight of the road, among a stand of some sort of large pine tree, the tallest easily a hundred feet. He made his hunch-shouldered bow and scrambled into the saddle of a lean chestnut with four white feet. He insisted that white feet on a horse were lucky. "This way, high one?" he said, and at Karede's gesture of permission, turned his mount deeper into the forest.

They had only a short way to ride, no more than half a mile, but no one passing on the road could have suspected what waited there in a large clearing. Musenge had brought a hundred of the Guard on good horses and twenty Ogier Gardeners, all in full armor, along with pack animals to carry supplies for two weeks. The packhorse Ajimbura had brought out yesterday, with Karede's armor, would be among them. A cluster of *sul'dam* were standing beside their own mounts, some petting the six leashed *damane*. When Musenge rode forward to meet Karede with Hartha, the First Gardener, striding grim-faced beside him with his green-tasseled axe over his shoulder. One of the women, Melitene, the High Lady Tuon's *der'sul'dam,* stepped into her saddle and joined them.

Musenge and Hartha touched fists to heart, and Karede returned their salute, but his eyes went to the *damane.* To one in particular, a small woman whose hair was being stroked by a dark, square-faced *sul'dam.* A *damane'*s face was always deceptive—they aged slowly and lived a very long time—but this one had a difference he had learned to recognize as belonging to those who called themselves Aes Sedai. "What excuse did you use to get all of them out of the city at once?" he asked.

"Exercise, Banner-General," Melitene replied with a wry smile. "Everyone always believes exercise." It was said the High Lady Tuon in truth needed no *der'sul'dam* to train her property or her *sul'dam,* but Melitene, with less black than gray in her long hair, was experienced in more than her craft, and she knew what he was really asking. He had requested that Musenge bring a pair of *damane,* if he could. "None of us would be left behind, Banner-General. Never for this. As for Mylen . . ." That must be the former Aes Sedai. "After we left the city, we told the *damane* why we were going. It's always best if they know what's expected. We've been calming Mylen ever since. She loves the High Lady. They all do, but Mylen worships her as though she already sat on the Crystal Throne. If Mylen gets her hands on one of these 'Aes Sedai,' " she chuckled, "we'll have to be quick to keep the woman from being too battered to be worth leashing."

"I see no cause for laughter," Hartha rumbled. The Ogier was even more weathered and grizzled than Musenge, with long gray mustaches and eyes like black stones staring out of his helmet. He had been a Gardener since before Karede's father was born, maybe before his grandfather. "We have no target. We are trying to catch the wind in a net." Melitene sobered quickly, and Musenge began to look grimmer than Hartha, if that was possible.

In ten days, the people they sought would have put many miles behind them. The best the White Tower could send would not be so blatant as to head due east after trying the ruse of Jehannah, nor so stupid to as to head too close to north, yet that left a vast and ever expanding area to be searched. "Then we must begin spreading our nets without delay," Karede said, "and spread them finely."

Musenge and Hartha nodded. For the Deathwatch Guard, what must be done, would be done. Even to catching the wind.

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CHAPTER 5

The Forging of a Hammer

He ran easily through the night in spite of the snow that covered the ground. He was one with the shadows, slipping through the forest, the moonlight almost as clear to his eyes as the light of the sun. A cold wind ruffled his thick fur, and suddenly brought a scent that made his hackles stand and his heart race with a hatred greater than that for the Neverborn. Hatred, and a sure knowledge of death coming. There were no choices to be made, not now. He ran harder, toward death.

Perrin woke abruptly in the deep darkness before dawn, beneath one of the high-wheeled supply carts. Cold had seeped into his bones from the ground despite his heavy fur-lined cloak and two blankets, and there was a fitful breeze, not strong or steady enough to be called a light wind, but icy. When he scrubbed at his face with gauntleted hands, frost crackled in his short beard. At least it seemed not to have snowed any more during the night. Too often he had awakened covered with a dusting despite the shelter of a cart, and snowfall made things difficult for the scouts. He wished he could speak with Elyas the same way he talked with wolves. Then he would not have to endure this endless waiting. Weariness clung to him like a second skin; he could not recall when he had last had a sound night's sleep. Sleep, or the lack of it, seemed unimportant anyway. These days, only the heat of anger gave him the strength to keep moving.

He did not think it was the dream that had wakened him. Every night he lay down expecting nightmares, and every night they came. In the worst, he found Faile dead, or never found her. Those woke him up in shivering sweats. Anything less horrible, he slept through, or only half-woke with Trollocs cutting him up alive for the cookpot or a Draghkar eating his soul. This dream was fading quickly, in the manner of dreams, yet he remembered being a wolf and smelling . . . What? Something wolves hated more than they did Myrddraal. Something a wolf knew would kill him. The knowledge he had had in the dream was gone; only vague impressions remained. He had not been in the wolf dream, that reflection of this world where dead wolves lived on and the living could go to consult them. The wolf dream always remained clear in his head after he left, whether he had gone there consciously or not. Yet this dream still seemed real, and somehow urgent.

Lying motionless on his back, he sent his mind questing, feeling for wolves. He had tried using wolves to help his hunt, to no avail. Convincing them to take an interest in the doings of two-legs was difficult, to say the least. They avoided large parties of men, and for them, half a dozen was large enough to stay clear of. Men chased away game, and most men tried to kill a wolf on sight. His thoughts found nothing, but then, after a time, he touched wolves, at a distance. How far, he could not be sure, but it was like catching a whisper almost on the edge of hearing. A long way. That was strange. Despite scattered villages and manors and even the occasional town, this was prime country for wolves, untouched forest for the most part, with plenty of deer and smaller game.

There was always a formality to speaking with a pack you were not part of. Politely, he sent his name among wolves, Young Bull, shared his scent, and received theirs in reply, Leafhunter and Tall Bear, White Tail and Feather and Thunder Mist, a cascade of others. It was a sizable pack, and Leafhunter, a female with a feel of quiet certainty, was their leader. Feather, clever and in his prime, was her mate. They had heard of Young Bull, were eager to speak with the friend of the fabled Long Tooth, the first two-legs who had learned to speak with wolves after a gap of time that carried the feel of Ages vanished into the mists of the past. It was all a torrent of images and memories of scents that his mind turned into words, as the words he thought somehow became images and scents they could understand.

There is something I want to learn, he thought, once the greetings were done. *What would a wolf hate more than the Neverborn?* He tried to recall the scent from the dream, to add that, but it was gone from his memory. *Something that a wolf knows means death.*

Silence answered him, and a thread of fear blended with hatred and determination and reluctance. He had felt fear from wolves before—above all things they feared the wildfire that raced through a forest, or so he would have said—but this was the prickling sort of fear that made a man’s skin crawl, made him shiver and jump at things unseen. Laced with the resolution to go on no matter what, it felt close to terror. Wolves never experienced that kind of dread. Except that these did.

One by one they faded from his consciousness, a deliberate act of shutting him out, until only Leafhunter remained. *The Last Hunt is coming,* she said at last, and then she also was gone.

Did I offend? he sent. *If I did, it was in ignorance.* But there was no reply. These wolves, at least, would not speak with him again, not any time soon.

The Last Hunt is coming. That was what wolves called the Last Battle, Tarmon Gai'don. They knew they would be there, at the final confrontation between the Light and the Shadow, though why was something they could not explain. Some things were fated, as sure as the rise and fall of the sun and the moon, and it was fated that many wolves would die in the Last Hunt. What they feared was something else. Perrin had a strong sense that he also had to be there, was meant to be at least, but if the Last Battle came soon, he would not be. He had a job of work in front of him that he could not shirk—would not!—even for Tarmon Gai'don.

Putting nameless fears and the Last Battle alike out of his mind, he fumbled his gauntlets off and felt in his coat pocket for the length of rawhide cord he kept there. In a morning ritual, his fingers made another knot mechanically, then slid down the cord, counting. Twenty-two knots. Twenty-two mornings since Faile was kidnapped.

At the start, he had not thought there was need to keep count. That first day, he had believed he was cold and numb but focused, yet looking back he could see he had been overwhelmed by unbound rage and a consuming need to find the Shaido as fast as possible. Men from other clans had been among the Aiel who had stolen Faile, yet on the evidence, most were Shaido, and that was how he thought of them. The need to rip Faile away from them, before she could be hurt, had gripped him by the throat till he almost choked. He would rescue the other women captured with her, of course, but sometimes he had to list their names in his head to make sure he did not forget them entirely. Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, Queen of Ghealdan, and his liege woman. It still seemed off-kilter to have anyone oathsworn to him, especially a queen—he was a blacksmith! He had been a blacksmith, once—but he had responsibilities toward Alliandre, and she would never have been in danger except for him. Bain of the Black Rock Shaarad and

Chiad of the Stones River Goshien, Aiel Maidens of the Spear who had followed Faile to Ghealdan and Amadicia. They had faced Trollocs in the Two Rivers, as well, when Perrin needed every hand that could raise a weapon, and that earned them the right to call on him. Arrela Shiego and Lacile Aldorwin, two foolish young women who thought they could learn to be Aiel, or some strange version of Aiel. They were oathsworn to Faile, and so was Maighdin Dorlain, a penniless refugee Faile had taken under her wing as one of her maids. He could not abandon Faile's people. Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara.

The litany came back to her, his wife, the breath of his life. With a groan, he clutched the cord so tightly that the knots impressed themselves painfully on a hand hardened by long days swinging the hammer at a forge. Light, twenty-two days!

Working iron had taught him that haste ruined metal, but in the beginning, he had been hasty, Traveling southward through gateways created by Grady and Neald, the two Asha'man, to where the farthest traces of the Shaido had been found, then leaping south again, the direction their tracks went, as soon as the Asha'man could make more gateways. Fretting every hour it took them to rest from making the first and holding them open long enough for everyone to pass through, his mind was eaten up with freeing Faile at any cost. What he found were days of increasing pain as the scouts spread farther and farther through uninhabited wilderness without locating the slightest sign that anyone had been that way before, until he knew he had to retrace his path, frittering away more days to cover ground the Asha'man had taken him across in a step, searching for any indication of where the Shaido had turned aside.

He should have known they would turn. South took them toward warmer lands, without the snow that seemed so strange to Aiel, yet it took them closer to the Seanchan in Ebou Dar, as well. He knew about the Seanchan, and he should have expected the Shaido to learn! They were after pillage, not a fight with Seanchan and *damane*. Days of slow marching with the scouts fanning out ahead, days when falling snow blinded even the Aiel and forced them all to a chafing halt, until finally Jondyn Barran found a tree scraped by a wagon and Elyas dug a broken Aiel spear shaft from beneath the snow. And Perrin at last turned east, at most two days south of where he had Traveled to the first time. He had wanted to howl when he realized that, yet he kept a tight hold on himself. He could not give way, not so much as an inch, not when Faile was depending on him. That was when he began to husband his anger, began to forge it.

Her kidnappers had gained a long lead because he was hasty, but since then, he had been as careful as he had been in a smithy. His anger was hardened and shaped to a purpose. Since finding the Shaido's trail again, he had Traveled no farther in one jump than the scouts could go and come between sunrise and sunset, and it was well that he had been cautious, because the Shaido changed directions suddenly several times, zigzagging almost as though they could not decide on a destination. Or maybe they had turned to joined others of their kind. All he had to go by were old traces, old camps buried by snow, yet all of the scouts agreed the Shaido's numbers had swollen. There had to be at least two or three septs together, maybe more, a formidable quarry to hunt. Slowly but surely, though, he had begun overtaking them. That was what was important.

The Shaido covered more ground on the march than he would have thought possible, given their numbers and the snow, yet they did not seem to care whether anyone was tracking them. Perhaps they believed no one dared. Sometimes they had camped several days in one spot. Anger forged to a purpose. Ruined villages and small towns and estates littered the Shaido's path as if they were human locusts, storehouses and valuables looted, men and women carried off along with the livestock. Often no one remained by the time he arrived, only empty houses, the people seeking somewhere for food to survive until spring. He had crossed the Eldar into Altara where a small ferry used by peddlers and local farmers, not merchants, once ran between two villages on the forested riverbanks. How the Shaido had gotten across, he did not know, but he had the Asha'man make gateways. All that remained of the ferry were the rough stone landings on either bank, and the few unburned structures were deserted except for three slat-ribbed feral dogs that slunk away at the sight of humans. Anger hardened and shaped for a hammer.

Yesterday morning, he had come to a tiny village where a double handful of stunned, dirty-faced people had stared at the hundreds of lancers and bowmen riding out of the forest at first light behind the Red Eagle of Manetheren and the crimson Wolfshead, the Silver Stars of Ghealdan and the Golden Hawk of Mayene, followed by long lines of high-wheeled carts and strings of remounts. At first sight of Gaul and the other Aiel, those people overcame their paralysis and began running for the trees in panic.

Catching a few to answer questions had been difficult; they were ready to run themselves to death rather than let an Aiel near. Brytan had consisted of only a dozen families, but the Shaido had carried off nine young men and women from there, along with all of their animals, only two days ago. Two days. A hammer was a tool with a purpose, and a target.

He knew he had to be careful, or lose Faile forever, but being too careful could lose her, too. Early yesterday he had told those who were going ahead to scout that they were to go farther than before, push on harder, returning only with a full turn of the sun unless they found the Shaido sooner. In a little while the sun would rise, and at most a few hours after that, Elyas and Gaul and the others would return, the Maidens and Two Rivers men he knew could track a shadow across water. As fast as the Shaido moved, the scouts could move faster. They were not encumbered with families and wagons and captives. This time, they would be able to tell him exactly where the Shaido were. They would. He knew it in his bones. The certainty flowed in his veins. He would find Faile and free her. That came before anything, even living, so long as he lived long enough to accomplish it, yet he *was* a hammer, now, and if there was any way to accomplish it, any way at all, he intended to hammer these Shaido into scrap.

Tossing the blankets aside, Perrin tugged his gauntlets back on, gathered his axe from where it lay beside him, a half-moon blade balanced by a heavy spike, and rolled out into the open, rising to his feet on trampled, frozen snow. Carts stood all around him in rows, in what had been Brytan's fields. The arrival of more strangers, so many, and armed, with their foreign banners, had been more than the survivors of the little village could absorb. As soon as Perrin would let them, the pitiful remnant had fled into the forest, carrying what they could on their backs and on drag-sleds. They had run as hard as if Perrin was another Shaido, not looking back for fear he was following them.

As he slipped the axe haft through the thick loop on his belt, a deeper shadow beside a nearby cart grew taller and resolved into a man swathed in a cloak that seemed black in the darkness. Perrin was not surprised; the nearby horselines thickened the air with the smell of several thousand animals, mounts and remounts and cart horses, not to mention the sweet stink of horse dung, but he still had caught the other's scent on waking. Man smell always stood out. Besides, Aram was always there when Perrin woke, waiting. A waning sickle moon low in the sky still gave enough light for him to make out the other man's face, if not clearly, and the brass-pommeled hilt of his sword slanting up past his shoulder. Aram had been a Tinker once, but Perrin did not think he would be again, even if he did wear a brightly striped Tinker coat. There was a frowning hardness about Aram now that moon shadows could not hide. He stood as though ready to draw that sword, and since Faile was taken, anger seemed a permanent part of his scent. A great deal had changed when Faile was taken. Anyway, Perrin understood anger. He had not, not really, before Faile was taken.

"They want to see you, Lord Perrin," Aram said, jerking his head toward two dim forms farther away between the lines of carts. The words came out in a faint mist in the cold air. "I told them to let you sleep." It was a fault Aram had, looking after him too much, unasked.

Testing the air, Perrin separated out the scents of those two shadows from the masking smell of the horses. "I'll see them now. Have Stepper readied for me, Aram." He tried to be in the saddle before the rest of the camp woke. Partly that was because standing still for long seemed beyond him. Standing still was not catching the Shaido. Partly it was to avoid having to share anyone's company he could avoid. He would have gone out with the scouts himself if the men and women already doing that job were not so much better at it than he.

"Yes, my Lord." A jaggedness entered Aram's scent as he trudged away across the snow, but Perrin barely noted it. Only something important would make Sebban Balwer root himself out of his blankets in the dark, and as for Selande Darengil . . .

Balwer appeared skinny even in a bulky cloak, his pinched face all but hidden in the deep hood. Had he stood straight instead of hunching, he still would have been at most a hand taller than the Cairhienin woman, who was not tall. With his arms wrapped around himself, he was hopping from one foot to the other, trying to avoid the cold that must be soaking through his boots. Selande, in a man's dark coat and breeches, made a good effort at ignoring the temperature despite the feathery white that marked every breath. She was shivering, but managed to swagger standing still, with one side of her cloak thrown back and a gloved hand on the hilt of her sword. The hood of her cloak was lowered, too, exposing hair cut short except for the tail in the back that was tied at the nape of her neck with a dark ribbon. Selande was the leader of those fools who wanted to be imitation Aiel, Aiel who carried swords. Her scent was soft and thick, like a jelly. She was worried. Balwer smelled . . . intent . . . but then, he nearly always did, though there was never any heat to his intensity, only focus.

The skinny little man stopped hopping to make a stiff, hurried bow. “The Lady Selande has news I think you should hear from her lips, my Lord.” Balwer’s thin voice was dry and precise, just like its owner. He would sound the same with his neck on a headsman’s block. “My Lady, if you would?” He was only a secretary—Faile’s secretary, and Perrin’s—a fussy self-effacing fellow for the most part, and Selande was a noblewoman, but Balwer made that more than a request.

She gave him a sharp sideways glance, shifting her sword, and Perrin tensed to grab her. He did not think she would actually draw on the man, but then again, he was not sure enough of her, or any of her ridiculous friends, to put it out of the question. Balwer merely watched her, his head tilted to one side, and his smell carried impatience, not concern.

With a toss of her head, Selande turned her attention to Perrin. “I see you, Lord Perrin Goldeneyes,” she began in the crisp accents of Cairhien, but, aware that he had little patience for her pretend Aiel formality, she hurried on. “I have learned three things tonight. First, the least important, Haviar reported that Masema sent another rider back toward Amadicia yesterday. Nerion tried to follow, but lost him.”

“Tell Nerion I said he isn’t to follow anybody,” Perrin told her sharply. “And tell Haviar the same. They should know that! They are to watch, listen, and report what they see and hear, no more. Do you understand me?” Selande gave a quick nod, a thorn of fear entering her scent for a moment. Fear of him, Perrin supposed, fear that he was angry with her. Yellow eyes on a man made some people uneasy. He took his hand from his axe and clasped both hands behind his back.

Haviar and Nerion were more of Faile’s two dozen young fools, one Tairen, the other Cairhienin. Faile had used the lot of them for eyes-and-ears, a fact that still irritated him for some reason, though she had told him to his face that spying was a wife’s business. A man needed to listen hard when he thought his wife was joking; she might not be. The whole notion of spying made him uncomfortable, but if Faile could use them so, then so could her husband, when there was need. Just the two, though. Masema seemed convinced that everyone except Darkfriends were fated to follow him sooner or later, yet he might grow suspicious if too many left Perrin's camp to join him.

"Don't call him Masema, not even here," he added brusquely. Lately the man claimed Masema Dagar was actually dead and risen from the grave as the Prophet of the Lord Dragon Reborn, and he was touchier than ever about mention of his former name. "You get careless with your tongue in the wrong place, and you might be lucky if he just has a few of his bullyboys flog you the next time they can find you alone." Selande nodded again, gravely, and this time without any fear smell. Light, those idiots of Faile's lacked the sense to recognize what they should be afraid of.

"It's almost dawn," Balwer murmured, shivering and pulling his cloak tighter. "All will be waking before long, and some matters are best discussed unseen. If my Lady will continue?" Once again, that was more than a suggestion. Selande and the rest of Faile's hangers-on had been good only for causing trouble, that Perrin could see, and Balwer looked to be trying to put a fly up her nose for some reason, but she actually gave an embarrassed start and murmured an apology.

The darkness truly was beginning to lessen, Perrin realized, at least to his eyes. The sky overhead still looked black, dusted with bright stars, yet he could almost make out the colors of the six thin stripes that crossed the front of Selande's coat. He could tell one from another, anyway. The realization that he had slept later than usual made him growl. He could not afford to give in to weariness, however tired he was! He needed to hear Selande's report—she would not be worried about Masema sending out riders; the man did that almost every day—yet he looked anxiously for Aram and Stepper. His ears picked up the sounds of activity among the horselines, but there was no sign of his horse yet.

"The second thing, my Lord," Selande said, "is that Haviar has seen casks of salt fish and salt beef branded with Altaran markings, a great many of them. He says there are Altarans among Mas . . . among the Prophet's people, too. Several appear to be craftsfolk, and one or two could be merchants or town officials. Established men and women, in any case, solid folk, and some seem unsure they made the right decision. A few questions might reveal from where the fish and beef came. And perhaps gain more eyes-and-ears for you."

"I know where the fish and beef came from and so do you," Perrin said irritably. His hands knotted into fists behind his back. He had hoped the speed with which he was moving would keep Masema from sending out raiding parties. That was what they were, and as bad as the Shaido if not worse. They offered people a chance to swear to the Dragon Reborn, and those who refused, sometimes those who simply hesitated too long, died by fire and steel. In any case, whether or not they marched off to follow Masema, those who swore were expected to donate generously in support of the Prophet’s cause, while those who died were plainly Darkfriends, their belongings forfeit. Thieves lost a hand, by Masema’s laws, but none of what his raiders did was thieving, according to Masema. By his laws, murder and a whole host of other crimes merited hanging, yet a fair number of his followers seemed to prefer killing to receiving oaths. There was more loot, that way, and for some of them murder was a fine game to play before eating.

“Tell them to keep clear of these Altarans,” Perrin went on. “All sorts drift into Masema’s following, and even if they are having second thoughts, it won’t take them long to stink of zeal like the rest. They wouldn’t hesitate to gut a neighbor then, much less somebody who’s asked the wrong questions. What I want to know is what Masema’s doing, what he’s planning.”

That the man had some scheme seemed obvious. Masema claimed it was blasphemy for anyone except Rand to touch the One Power, claimed he wanted nothing more than to join Rand in the east. As always, thought of Rand brought colors whirling through Perrin’s head, more vividly than usual this time, but anger melted them to vapor. Blasphemy or no, Masema had accepted Traveling, which was not just channeling but *men* channeling. And no matter what he claimed, he had done it to remain in the west as long as possible, not to help rescue Faile. Perrin tended to trust people until they proved unreliable, but one sniff of Masema had told him the fellow was as insane as a rabid animal and less trustworthy.

He had considered ways to stop that scheme, whatever it was. Ways to stop Masema’s killing and burning. Masema had ten or twelve thousand men with him, maybe more—the man was not very forthcoming about numbers, and the way they camped in a squalid sprawl made counting impossible—while less than a quarter of that number followed Perrin, several hundred of them cart drivers and grooms and others who would be more hindrance than help in a fight, yet with three Aes Sedai and two Asha’man, not to mention six Aiel Wise Ones, he could halt Masema in his tracks. The Wise Ones and two of the Aes Sedai would be eager to take part. More than simply willing, at least. They wanted Masema dead. But dispersing Masema's army would only break it into hundreds of smaller bands that would scatter across Altara and beyond, still looting and killing, just for themselves instead of in the name of the Dragon Reborn. *Breaking the Shaido will do the same thing*, he thought, and pushed the thought away. Stopping Masema would take time he did not have. The man would have to keep until Faile was safe. Until the Shaido were smashed to kindling.

"What's the third thing you learned tonight, Selande?" he said roughly. To his surprise, the smell of worry coming from the woman thickened.

"Haviar saw someone," she said slowly. "He did not tell me at first." Her voice hardened for a moment. "I made sure that will not happen again!" Drawing a deep breath, she seemed to struggle with herself, then burst out, "Masuri Sedai has visited Masema . . . the Prophet. It is true, my Lord; believe me! Haviar has seen her more than once. She slips into their camp hooded and leaves the same way, but he has had a good look at her face twice. A man accompanies her each time, and sometimes another woman. Haviar has not seen the man well enough to be sure, but the description fits Rovair, Masuri's Warder, and Haviar is certain the second woman is Annoura Sedai."

She broke off abruptly, her eyes shining darkly in the moonlight as she watched him. Light, she was as worried about how he would take it as by what it meant! He forced his hands to unclench. Masema despised Aes Sedai as much as he did Darkfriends; he nearly considered them Darkfriends. So why would he receive two sisters? Why would they go to him? Annoura's opinion of Masema lay hidden behind Aes Sedai mystery and double-jointed comments that could mean anything, but Masuri had said straight out that the man needed to be put down like a mad dog.

"Make sure Haviar and Nerion keep a sharp eye for the sisters and see if they can eavesdrop on one of their meetings with Masema." Could Haviar be mistaken? No, there were few women in Masema's camp, relatively speaking, and it passed belief that the Tairen could mistake one of those unwashed murderous-eyed harridans for Masuri. The sort of women willing to march with Masema usually made the men look like Tinkers. "Tell them to take care, though. Better to let the chance pass than get caught at it. They're no good to anyone strung up on a tree." Perrin knew he sounded gruff, and tried to make his voice milder. That seemed harder since Faile was kidnapped. “You’ve done well, Selande.” At least he did not sound as if he were barking at her. “You and Haviar and Nerion. Faile would be proud if she knew.”

A smile lit up her face, and she stood a little straighter, if that was possible. Pride, clean and bright, the pride of accomplishment, almost overwhelmed any other scent from her! “Thank you, my Lord. Thank you!” You would have thought he had given her a prize. Maybe he had, come to think on it. Though come to think Faile might not be best pleased that he was using her eyes-and-ears, or even knew about them. Once, the thought of Faile displeased would have made him uneasy, but that was before he learned about her spies. And that little matter of the Broken Crown that Elyas had let slip. Everybody always said that wives kept their secrets close, but there were limits!

Adjusting his cloak on his narrow shoulders with one hand, Balwer coughed behind the other. “Well said, my Lord. Very well said. My Lady, I’m sure you want to pass on Lord Perrin’s instructions as soon as possible. It wouldn’t do for there to be any misunderstanding.”

Selande nodded without taking her eyes off Perrin. Her mouth opened, and Perrin was sure she intended to say something about hoping he found water and shade. Light, water was the one thing they had in plenty, even if it was mostly frozen, and this time of year, nobody needed shade even at noon! She probably did intend it, because she hesitated before saying, “Grace favor you, my Lord. If I may be so bold, Grace has favored the Lady Faile in you.”

Perrin jerked his head in a nod of thanks. There was a taste of ashes in his mouth. Grace had a funny way of favoring Faile, giving her a husband who still had not found her after more than two weeks of searching. The Maidens said she had been made *gai’shain*, that she would not be mistreated, but they had to admit these Shaido already had broken their customs a hundred different ways. In his book, being kidnapped was mistreatment enough. Bitter ashes.

“The lady will do very well, my Lord,” Balwer said softly, watching Selande vanish into the darkness among the carts. This approval was a surprise; he had tried to talk Perrin out of using Selande and her friends on the grounds they were hotheaded and unreliable. “She has the necessary instincts. Cairhienin do, usually, and Tairens to some extent, at least the nobles, especially once—” He cut off abruptly, and eyed Perrin cautiously.

If he were another man, Perrin would have believed he had said more than he intended, but he doubted Balwer slipped in that fashion. The man's scent remained steady, not jiggling the way it would in a man who was unsure. "May I offer one or two points on her report, my Lord?"

The crunch of hooves in the snow announced the approach of Aram, leading Perrin's dun stallion and his own rangy gray gelding. The two animals were trying to nip at one another, and Aram was keeping them well apart, though with some difficulty. Balwer sighed.

"You can say whatever you need to in front of Aram, Master Balwer," Perrin said. The little man bowed his head in acquiescence, but he sighed again, too. Everybody in the camp knew that Balwer had the skill of fitting together rumors and chance-heard comments and things people had done to form a picture of what had really happened or what might, and Balwer himself considered that part of his job as a secretary, but for some reason he liked to pretend he never did any such thing. It was a harmless pretense, and Perrin tended to humor him.

Taking Stepper's reins from Aram, he said, "Walk behind us awhile, Aram. I need to talk with Master Balwer in private." Balwer's sigh was so faint that Perrin barely heard it.

Aram fell in behind the two of them without a word as they began to walk, frozen snow cracking beneath their feet, but his scent grew spiky again, and quivery, a thin, sour smell. This time, Perrin recognized the scent, though he paid it no more mind than usual. Aram was jealous of anyone except Faile who spent time with him. Perrin saw no way to put a stop to it, and anyway, he was as used to Aram's possessiveness as he was to the way Balwer hopped along at his side, glancing over his shoulder to see whether Aram was close enough to hear when he finally decided to speak. Balwer's razor-thin scent of suspicion, curiously dry and not even warm but still suspicion, provided a counterpoint to Aram's jealousy. You could not change men who did not want to change.

The horselines and supply carts were located in the middle of the camp, where thieves would have a hard time reaching them, and although the sky still looked black to most eyes, the cart drivers and grooms, who slept close to their charges, were already awake and folding their blankets, some tending shelters made of pine boughs and other small tree limbs harvested from the surrounding forest, in case they might be needed another night. Cook fires were being lit and small black kettles set over them, though there was little to eat except porridge or dried beans. Hunting and trapping added some meat, venison and rabbits, partridges and woodhens and the like, but that could only go so far with so many to feed, and there had been nowhere to buy supplies since before crossing the Eldar. A ripple of bows and curtsies and murmurs of "A good morning, my Lord" and "The Light favor you, my Lord" followed Perrin, but the men and women who saw him stopped trying to strengthen their shelters, and a few began to pull theirs down, as though they had sensed his determination from his stride. They should have known his resolve by now. Since the day he realized how badly he had blundered, he had not spent two nights in one place. He returned the greetings without slowing.

The rest of the camp made a thin ring around the horses and carts, facing the encircling forest, with the Two Rivers men divided into four groups and the lancers from Ghealdan and Mayene spaced between them. Whoever came at them, from whatever direction, would face Two Rivers longbows and trained cavalry. It was not a sudden appearance by the Shaido that Perrin feared, but rather Masema. The man seemed to be following him meekly enough, but aside from this news of raiding, nine Ghealdanin and eight Mayeners had vanished in the last two weeks, and no one believed they had deserted. Before that, on the day Faile was stolen, twenty Mayeners had been ambushed and killed, and no one believed it had been anyone but Masema's men who did the killing. So an uneasy peace existed, a strange thorny sort of peace, yet a copper wagered on it lasting forever was likely a copper lost. Masema pretended to be unaware of any danger to that peace, but his followers seemed not to care one way or the other, and whatever Masema pretended, they took their lead from him. Somehow, though, Perrin intended to see that it endured until Faile was free. Making his own camp too tough a nut to crack was one way of making the peace last.

The Aiel had insisted on having their own thin wedge of the strange pie, though there were fewer than fifty of them, counting the *gai'shain* who served the Wise Ones, and he paused to study their low dark tents. The only other tents erected anywhere in the camp were those of Berelain and her two serving women, on the other side of the camp, not far from Brytan's few houses. Fleas and lice in hordes made those uninhabitable, even for hardened soldiers seeking shelter from the cold, and the barns were putrid ramshackle affairs that let the wind howl through and harbored worse vermin than the houses. The Maidens and Gaul, the only man among the Aiel not *gai'shain,* were all out with the scouts, and the Aiel tents were silent and still, though the smell of smoke coming from some of the vent holes told him the *gai'shain* were preparing breakfast for the Wise Ones, or serving it. Annoura was Berelain's adviser, and usually shared her tent, but Masuri and Seonid would be with the Wise Ones, maybe even helping the *gai'shain* with breakfast. They still tried to hide the fact that the Wise Ones considered them apprentices, though everyone in camp must be aware of it by now. Anyone who saw an Aes Sedai actually carrying firewood or water, or heard one being switched, could make it out. The two Aes Sedai were oathsworn to Rand—again the colors whirled in his head, an explosion of hues; again they melted under his constant anger—but Edarra and the other Wise Ones had been sent to keep an eye on them.

Only the Aes Sedai themselves knew how tightly their oaths held them, or what room they saw to maneuver between the words, and neither was allowed to hop unless a Wise One said toad. Seonid and Masuri had *both* said Masema should be put down like a mad dog, and the Wise Ones agreed. Or so they said. They had no Three Oaths to hold them to the truth, though in truth, that particular Oath held the Aes Sedai more in letter than spirit. And he seemed to recall one of the Wise Ones telling him that Masuri thought that the mad dog could be leashed. Not allowed to hop unless a Wise One said toad. It was like a blacksmith's puzzle with the edges of the metal pieces sharpened. He needed to solve it, but one mistake and he could cut himself to the bone.

From the corner of his eye, Perrin caught Balwer watching him, lips pursed in thought. A bird studying something unfamiliar, not afraid, not hungry, just curious. Gathering Stepper's reins, he walked on so quickly that the little man had to lengthen his stride into small jumps to catch up.

Two Rivers men had the segment of camp next to the Aiel, facing northeast, and Perrin considered walking a little north, to where Ghealdanin lancers were camped, or south to the nearest Mayener section, but taking a deep breath, he made himself lead his horse through his friends and neighbors from home. They were all awake, huddling in their cloaks and feeding the remnants of their shelters into the cook fires or cutting up the cold remains of last night's rabbit to add to the porridge in the kettles. Talk dwindled and the smell of wariness grew thick as heads lifted to watch him. Whetstones paused in sliding along steel, then resumed their sibilant whispering. The bow was their preferred weapon, but everyone carried a heavy dagger or a short-sword as well, or sometimes a longsword, and they had picked up spears and halberds and other polearms with strange blades and points that the Shaido had not thought worth carrying off with their pillage. Spears they were accustomed to, and hands used to wielding the quarterstaff at feastday competitions found the polearms not much different once the weight of metal on one end was accounted for. Their faces were hungry, tired and withdrawn.

Someone raised a halfhearted cry of “Goldeneyes!” but no one took it up, a thing that would have pleased Perrin a month gone. A great deal had changed since Faile was taken. Now their silence was leaden. Young Kenly Maerin, his cheeks still pale where he had scraped off his attempt at a beard, avoided meeting Perrin’s eyes, and Jori Congar, lightfingered whenever he saw anything small and valuable and drunk whenever he could manage it, spat contemptuously as Perrin passed by. Ban Crawe punched Jori’s shoulder for it, hard, but Ban did not look at Perrin either.

Dannil Lewin stood up, tugging nervously at the thick mustache that looked so ridiculous beneath his beak of a nose. “Orders, Lord Perrin?” The skinny man actually looked relieved when Perrin shook his head, and he sat down again quickly, staring at the nearest kettle as though he were anxious for the morning gruel. Maybe he was; nobody got a full belly lately, and Dannil had never had much spare flesh on his bones. Behind Perrin, Aram made a disgusted sound very like a growl.

There were others here besides Two Rivers folk, yet they were no better. Oh, Lamgwin Dorn, a hulking fellow with scars on his face, tugged his forelock and bobbed his head. Lamgwin looked like a shoulderthumper, a tavern tough, but he was Perrin’s bodyservant now, when he had need of one, which was not often, and he might just want to keep in a good odor with his employer. But Basel Gill, the stout onetime innkeeper Faile had taken on as their *shambayan,* busied himself folding his blankets with exaggerated care, keeping his balding head down, and Faile’s chief maid, Lini Eltring, a bony woman whose tight white bun made her face seem even narrower than it was, straightened from stirring a kettle, her thin lips compressed, and raised her long wooden spoon as if to fend Perrin off. Breane Taborwin, dark eyes fierce in her pale Cairhienin face, slapped Lamgwin’s arm hard and frowned up at him. She was Lamgwin’s woman, if not his wife, and the second of Faile’s three maids. They would follow the

Shaido till they dropped dead, if necessary, and fall on Faile's neck when they found her, but only Lamgwin had an ounce of welcome for Perrin. He might have gotten more from Jur Grady—the Asha'man were estranged from everyone else themselves, by who and what they were, and neither had shown any animosity toward Perrin—but despite the noise of people tramping about on the frozen snow and cursing when they slipped, Grady was still wrapped in his blankets, snoring away beneath a pine-branch lean-to. Perrin walked through his friends and neighbors and servants and felt alone. A man could only proclaim his faithfulness so long before he just gave up. The heart of his life lay somewhere to the northeast. Everything would return to normal once he had her back.

A thicket of sharpened stakes ten paces deep encircled the camp, and he went to the edge of the Ghealdanin lancers' section, where angled paths had been left for mounted men to ride out, though Balwer and Aram had to fall in behind him in the narrow way. In front of the Two Rivers men, a man afoot would have to twist and turn to make it through. The edge of the forest lay little more than a hundred paces distant, easy bowshot for Two Rivers men, huge trees thrusting a canopy high into the sky. Some of the trees here were strange to Perrin, but there were pines and leatherleaf and elms out there, some as much as three or four paces thick at the base, and oaks that were larger still. Trees that big killed anything larger than weeds or small bushes that tried to grow beneath them, leaving wide spaces between, but shadows darker than the night filled those spaces. An old forest, one that could swallow armies whole and never give up the bones.

Balwer followed him all the way through the stakes before deciding that this was as close to alone with Perrin as he was likely to get any time soon. "The riders Masema has sent out, my Lord," he said, and holding his cloak close he cast a suspicious look back at Aram, who met it with a flat stare.

"I know," Perrin said, "you think they're going to the Whitecloaks." He was eager to be moving, and that much farther from his friends. He put the hand holding his reins on the saddlebow, but refrained from putting a boot in the stirrup. Stepper tossed his head, also impatient. "Masema could be sending messages to the Seanchan just as easily."

"As you have said, my Lord. A viable possibility, to be sure. May I suggest once again, however, that Masema's view of Aes Sedai is very close to that of the Whitecloaks? In fact, identical. He would see every last sister dead, if he could. The Seanchan view is more . . . pragmatic, if I may be permitted to call it that. Less in accord with Masema, in any case."

"However much you hate Whitecloaks, Master Balwer, they aren't at the root of every evil. And Masema has dealt with the Seanchan before."

"As you say, my Lord." Balwer's face did not change, but he reeked of doubt. Perrin could not prove Masema's meetings with the Seanchan, and telling anyone how he had learned of them would only add to his present difficulties. That gave Balwer problems; he was a man who liked evidence. "As for the Aes Sedai and the Wise Ones, my Lord. . . . Aes Sedai always seem to believe they know better than anyone else, except possibly another Aes Sedai. I believe the Wise Ones are much the same."

Perrin snorted brief white plumes in the air. "Tell me something I don't know. Like why Masuri would meet with Masema, and why the Wise Ones allowed it. I'll wager Stepper against a horseshoe nail she didn't do it without their permission." Annoura was another question, but she could be acting on her own. It certainly seemed unlikely she was acting at Berelain's behest.

Shifting his cloak on his shoulders, Balwer peered back across the rows of sharpened stakes into the camp, toward the Aiel tents, squinting as if he hoped to see through the tent walls. "There are many possibilities, my Lord," he said testily. "For some who swear an oath, whatever is not forbidden is permitted, and whatever is not commanded can be ignored. Others take actions they believe will help their liege without first asking permission. The Aes Sedai and the Wise Ones fall into one of those categories, it seems, but further than that, I can only speculate, as matters stand."

"I could just ask. Aes Sedai can't lie, and if I press hard enough, Masuri might actually tell me the truth."

Balwer grimaced as though at a sudden stomach pain. "Perhaps, my Lord. Perhaps. More likely is that she would tell you something that sounds like the truth. Aes Sedai are experienced in that, as you know. In any event, my Lord, Masuri would wonder how you knew to ask, and that line of thought might lead to Haviar and Nerion. Under the circumstances, who can say who she might tell? Straightforward is not always the best way. Sometimes, certain things must be done behind masks, for safety."

"I told you the Aes Sedai couldn't be trusted," Aram said abruptly. "I told you that, Lord Perrin." He fell silent when Perrin raised a hand, but the stink of fury from him was so strong that Perrin had to exhale to clear his lungs. Part of him wanted to draw the scent deep and let it consume him.

Perrin studied Balwer carefully. If Aes Sedai could twist the truth till you could not tell up from down, and they could and did, how far could you trust? Trust was always the question. He had learned that in hard lessons. He took a firm check on his anger, though. A hammer had to be used with care, and he was working a forge where one slip would tear the heart out of his chest. “And might matters change if some of Selande’s friends began spending more time among the Aiel? They want to be Aiel, after all. That ought to give them enough excuse. And maybe one of them can strike up a friendship with Berelain, and with her advisor.”

“That should be possible, my Lord,” Balwer said after the slightest hesitation. “Lady Medore’s father is a High Lord of Tear, giving her sufficient rank to approach the First of Mayene, and also a reason. Possibly one or two of the Cairhienin stand high enough, as well. Finding those to live among the Aiel will be easier still.”

Perrin nodded. Infinite care with the hammer, however much you wanted to smash whatever lay within reach. “Then do it. But, Master Balwer, you’ve been trying to . . . guide . . . me to this since Selande left us. From now on, if you have a suggestion to make, make it. Even if I say no to nine in a row, I’ll always listen to a tenth. I’m not a clever man, but I’m willing to listen to people who are, and I think you are. Just don’t try poking me in the direction you want me to go. I don’t like that, Master Balwer.”

Balwer blinked, then of all things, bowed with his hands folded at his waist. He smelled surprised. And gratified. Gratified? “As you say, my Lord. My previous employer disliked me suggesting actions unless I was asked. I won’t make the same mistake again, I assure you.” Eyeing Perrin, he seemed to reach a decision. “If I may say so,” he said carefully, “I have found serving you . . . pleasant . . . in ways I did not expect. You are what you seem, my Lord, with no poisoned needles hidden away to catch the unwary. My previous employer was known widely for cleverness, but I believe you are equally clever, in a different way. I believe I would regret leaving your service. Any man might say these things to keep his place, but I mean them.”

Poisoned needles? Before entering Perrin’s service, Balwer’s last employment had been as secretary to a Murandian noblewoman fallen into hard times who could no longer afford to keep him. Murandy must be a rougher place than Perrin thought. “I see no reason for you to leave my employ. Just tell me what you want to do and let me decide, don’t try to prod. And forget the flattery.”

“I never flatter, my Lord. But I am adept at shaping myself to my master’s needs; it is a requirement of my profession.” The little man bowed once more. He had never been this formal before. “If you have no further questions, my Lord, may I go to find the Lady Medore?”

Perrin nodded. The little man bowed yet again, backing away, then went skittering toward the camp, his cloak fluttering behind him as he dodged through the sharpened stakes like a sparrow hopping across the snow. He was a strange fellow.

“I don’t trust him,” Aram muttered, staring after Balwer. “And I don’t trust Selande and that lot. They’ll throw in with the Aes Sedai, you mark my words.”

“You have to trust somebody,” Perrin said roughly. The question was, who? Swinging into Stepper’s saddle, he booted the dun in the ribs. A hammer was useless lying at rest.

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CHAPTER 6

The Scent of a Dream

The cold air seemed clean and fresh in Perrin’s nose as he galloped into the forest, the breezes full of the crispness of the snow that fountained in sprays beneath Stepper’s hooves. Out here, he could forget old friends who were willing to believe the worst on rumor. He could try to forget Masema, and the Aes Sedai, and the Wise Ones. The Shaido were welded to the inside of his skull, however, an iron puzzle that would not yield no matter how he twisted. He wanted to wrench it apart, but that never worked with a blacksmith’s puzzle.

After one short burst of speed, he slowed the dun to a walk, feeling a touch of guilt. The darkness beneath the forest canopy was deep, and stone outcrops between the tall trees warned of more hidden beneath the snow, a hundred places that could break a running horse’s leg, and that without counting gopher holes and fox dens and badger sets. There was no need to take the risk. A gallop would not free Faile an hour sooner, and no horse could maintain that pace for long in any case. The snow here was knee-deep in places where it had drifted, and deep enough elsewhere. He rode northeast, though. The scouts would be coming from the northeast, with news of Faile. News of the Shaido, at least, a location. He had hoped for that so often, prayed for it, but today, he knew it would come. Yet knowing only increased his anxiety. Finding them was only the first part of solving this puzzle. Anger made his mind flash from one thing to another, yet no matter what Balwer said, Perrin knew he was methodical at best. He did not do well trying to think quickly, and lacking cleverness, methodical was going to have to do. Somehow.

Aram caught up to him, running his gray hard, and slowed to ride just a little behind and to one side like a heeling hound. Perrin let him. Aram never smelled comfortable when Perrin made him ride alongside. The onetime Tinker did not speak, but eddies in the icy air brought his scent, a melange of anger and suspicion and disgruntlement. He sat his saddle as tense as an over-wound clockspring and watched the forest around them grimly, as though he expected Shaido to leap out from behind the nearest tree.

In truth, almost anything could have hidden from most men in these woods. Where the sky overhead could be seen through the canopy of branches, it held a definite tinge of dark grayness, but for the moment that cast the forest in shadows murkier than night, and the trees themselves were massive columns of darkness. Yet even the shift of a black-winged jackdaw on a snow-mounded branch, its feathers fluffed against the cold, caught Perrin's eyes, and a hunting pine martin, a deeper black than the darkness, cautiously raising its head on another. He caught the scent of both, too. A faint whiff of man scent came from up in a massive oak with dark spreading limbs as thick as a pony. The Ghealdanin and Mayeners had their mounted patrols circling the camp a few miles out, but he preferred to rely on Two Rivers men closer in. He did not have enough men to ring the camp completely, yet they were used to forests, and to hunting animals that might hunt them in turn, used to noticing movement that would escape a man thinking in terms of soldiers and war. Ridgecats down from the mountains after sheep could hide in plain sight, and bear and wild boar were known to double back on their pursuers and lie in ambush. From branches thirty and forty feet above the ground, the men could see anything that moved below in time to warn the camp, and with their longbows, they could exact a heavy price from anyone who tried to force a way past them. Yet the presence of the guard touched his mind as lightly as the presence of the jackdaw. He was focused ahead through the trees and the shadows, intent on picking out the first sign of the scouts returning.

Abruptly Stepper tossed his head and snorted in a spew of mist, eyes rolling in fear as he stopped dead, and Aram's gray squealed and shied. Perrin leaned forward to pat the trembling stallion's neck, but his hand froze as he caught a trace of scent, a smell of burned sulphur faint in the air, that made the hair on the back of his neck try to stand. Almost burnt sulphur; that was only a pale imitation of this smell. It had a reek of . . . wrongness, of something that did not belong in this world. The scent was not new—you could not ever have called that stink "fresh"—but not old, either. An hour, perhaps less. Maybe about the time he had wakened. About the time he had dreamed of this scent.

“What is it, Lord Perrin?” Aram was having difficulty controlling his gray, which danced in circles fighting the reins and wanting to run in any direction so long as it was away, but even while sawing at his reins he had his wolfhead-pommeled sword out. He practiced with it daily, for hours on end when he could, and those who knew about such things said he was good. “You may be able to make out a black thread from a white in this, but it isn’t day yet to me. I can’t see anything well enough to matter.”

“Put that away,” Perrin told him. “It isn’t needed. Swords wouldn’t do any good, anyway.” He had to coax his trembling mount to move forward, but he followed the rank smell, scanning the snow-covered ground ahead. He knew that smell, and not just from the dream.

It only took a little while to find what he was looking for, and Stepper gave a grateful whicker when Perrin reined him in well short of a slab-like crest of gray stone, two paces wide, that jutted up to his right. The snow all around was smooth and unmarked, but dog tracks covered the tilted span of stone, as though a pack had scrambled over it as they ran. Dimness and shadows or no, they were plain to Perrin’s eyes. Footprints larger than the palm of his hand, pressed into the stone as though it had been mud. He patted Stepper’s neck again. No wonder the animal was frightened.

“Go back to the camp and find Dannil, Aram. Tell him I said to let everyone know there were Darkhounds here, maybe an hour ago. And put your sword away. You wouldn’t want to try killing a Darkhound with a sword, believe me.”

“Darkhounds?” Aram exclaimed, peering around into the murky shadows between the trees. There was an anxious fear in his scent, now. Most men would have laughed about travelers’ tales or stories for children. Tinkers roamed the countryside, and knew what could found in the wilds. Aram sheathed the sword on his back with obvious reluctance, but his right hand remained raised, half-reaching for the hilt. “How do you kill a Darkhound? Can they be killed?” Then again, maybe he did not have much good sense at that.

“Just be glad you don’t have to try, Aram. Now go do like I told you. Everyone needs to keep a sharp lookout in case they come back. Not much chance of that, I’d say, but better safe.” Perrin remembered facing a pack of them once, and killing one. He thought he had killed one, after hitting it with three good broadhead arrows. Shadowspawn did not die easily. Moiraine had had to finish that pack, with balefire. "Make sure the Aes Sedai and Wise Ones learn of this, and the Asha'man." Small chance any of them knew how to make balefire—the women might not admit knowing a forbidden weave if they did, and maybe not the men either—but maybe they knew something else that could work.

Aram was reluctant to leave Perrin alone until Perrin snapped at him, and then he turned back toward the camp trailing smells of umbrage and hurt, as if two men would have been a whit safer than one. As soon as the other man was out of sight, Perrin reined Stepper southward, the direction the Darkhounds had been heading. He did not want company for this, even Aram's. Just because people sometimes noted his sharp eyesight was no reason to flaunt it, or his sense of smell. There were already reasons enough to shun him without adding more.

It might have been chance that the creatures had passed so near his camp, but the last few years had made him uneasy with coincidences. All too often, they were not coincidence at all, not the way other men counted such things. If this was another bit of his *ta'veren* tugging at the Pattern, it was a bit he could have done without. The thing seemed to have more disadvantages than advantages even when it appeared to be working in your favor. The chance that favored you one minute could turn on you in the next. And there was always another possibility. Being *ta'veren* made you stand out in the Pattern, and some of the Forsaken could use that to find you at times, or so he had been told. Maybe some Shadowspawn could, too.

The trail he followed was surely near an hour old, but Perrin felt a tightness between his shoulder blades, a prickling on his scalp. The sky was still a deep dark gray where it showed, even to his eyes. The sun had not yet crested the horizon. Just before sunrise was one of the worst times to meet the Wild Hunt, when darkness was changing to light but the light had not taken hold. At least there was no crossroads nearby, no graveyard, but the only hearthstones to touch lay back in Brytan, and he was not certain how much safety those hovels held. In his mind, he marked out the location of a nearby stream, where the camp got its water by chopping through the ice. It was no more than ten or twelve paces wide and only knee-deep, but putting running water between you and Darkhounds would stop them supposedly. But then, so would facing them, supposedly, and he had seen the results of that. His nose tested the breezes, searching for that old scent. And for any hint of a newer. Coming on those things unaware would be worse than unpleasant.

Stepper caught scents almost as easily as Perrin, and sometimes noticed what they were sooner, but whenever the dun balked, Perrin forced him forward. There were plenty of tracks scattered in the snow, hoofprints of the mounted patrols going out and coming back, occasional sign of rabbits and foxes, but the only marks left by the Darkhounds were where stone stuck up out of the snow. The burnt sulphur smell was always strongest there, yet enough trace lingered in between to lead him to the next place where their tracks showed. The huge pawprints overlapped one another, and there was no way to tell how many Darkhounds there had been, but whether a pace wide or six, every rock surface they had crossed was smothered in tracks from one side to the other. A larger pack than the ten he had seen outside Illian. Much larger. Was that why there were no wolves in the area? He was sure that the certainty of death he had felt in the dream was something real, and he had *been* a wolf in the dream.

As the trail began to curve to the west, he felt a growing suspicion that firmed into certainty as it continued to bend. The Darkhounds had circled the camp completely, running right across the place north of the camp where several huge trees lay half toppled and propped by their neighbors, each with a tall chunk sliced cleanly out of its splintered trunk. The tracks covered a stone outcrop as smooth and flat as a polished marble floor except for one hair-thin gouge cut through it straight as a plumb line. Nothing resisted the opening of an Asha’man’s gateway, and two had opened here. A thick pine that had fallen blocking one had a section four paces wide burned out of it, but the charred ends were as neat as if they had come from a sawmill. It seemed that evidence of the One Power did not interest Darkhounds, however. The pack had not paused there any more than anywhere else, or even slowed that he could tell. Darkhounds could run faster than horses, and for longer, and the stench of them hardly seemed to have faded more in one place than another. At two points in that circuit he had picked up a forking in the trail, but that was only the pack coming from the north and departing south. Once around the camp, and then on their way after whatever or whoever they were hunting.

Plainly, that was not him. Perhaps the pack had circled because they sensed him, sensed someone who was *ta’veren*, yet he doubted that Darkhounds would have hesitated one instant at coming into the camp, had they been after him. The pack he had faced before had entered the city of Illian, though it had not tried to kill him till later. But did Darkhounds report what they saw, the way rats and ravens did? The thought made his jaw clench. The Shadow's attention was something any sane man feared, the Shadow's attention might interfere with freeing Faile. That concerned him more than anything else. Yet there were ways to fight Shadowspawn, ways to fight the Forsaken, if it came to that. Whatever came between him and Faile, Darkhounds or the Forsaken or anything else, he would find a way to go around or through, whichever was necessary. A man could only have so much fear in him at one time, and all of his fear was centered on Faile. There just was no room for any more.

Before he reached his starting place again, the breezes brought him the smells of people and horses, sharp in the icy cold, and he reined Stepper to a slow walk, and then to a halt. He had spotted some fifty or sixty horses near a hundred paces ahead. The sun had finally peeked above the horizon and begun to send sharply slanted shafts of light through the forest canopy, reflecting off the snow and lessening the gloom a little, though deep, dappled shadows remained between the sun's slender fingers. Some of those shadows enveloped him. The mounted party was not far from where he had first seen the Darkhounds' tracks, and he could see Aram's sickly green cloak and red-striped coat, the Tinker garments jarring with the sword on his back. Most of the riders wore rimmed red helmets shaped like pots and dark cloaks over red breastplates, and the long red streamers on their lances stirred in the light airs as the soldiers tried to keep watch in every direction. The First of Mayene often rode out in the mornings, with a suitable bodyguard of the Winged Guards.

He started to slip away without having to meet Berelain, but then he saw three tall women afoot among the horses, long dark shawls wrapped around their heads and draped over their upper bodies, and he hesitated. Wise Ones rode when they had to, if unwillingly, but tramping a mile or two in the snow wearing heavy woolen skirts was insufficient reason to force them onto horseback. Almost certainly Seonid or Masuri was in that group, as well, though the Aiel women seemed to like Berelain for some reason he could not fathom.

He had no thought of joining the riders, no matter who was with them, but hesitation cost him his chance at evasion. One of the Wise Ones—he thought it was Carelle, a fire-haired woman who always had a challenge in her sharp blue eyes—raised a hand to point in his direction, and the whole party turned, the soldiers whipping their horses around and peering through the trees toward him, lances tipped with a foot of steel half lowered. It was unlikely they could make him out clearly through the deep pools of shadow and bright bars of sunlight. He was surprised the Wise One had, but then, Aiel generally had sharp eyes.

Masuri was there, a slim woman in a bronze-colored cloak riding a dapple mare, and Annoura as well, keeping her brown mare well back but marked by the dozens of thin dark braids that hung from the opening of her cowl. Berelain herself sat a sleek bay gelding at the forefront, a tall beautiful young woman with long black hair, in a red cloak lined with black fur. A simple flaw lessened her beauty, though; she was not Faile. A worse flaw ruined it, as far as he was concerned. He had learned of Faile's kidnapping from her, and of Masema's contact with the Seanchan, but nearly everyone in the camp believed that he had slept with Berelain on the very night Faile was taken, and she had done nothing to correct the tale. It was hardly the kind of story he could ask her to stand up and deny publicly, yet she could have said something, told her maids to deny it, anything. Instead, Berelain held her silence, and her maids, gossiping like magpies, actually fostered the tale. That sort of reputation stuck to a man, in the Two Rivers.

He had avoided Berelain since that night, and he would have ridden away now even after they saw him, but she took a hoop-handled basket from the maid accompanying her, a plump woman wrapped in a blue-and-gold cloak, then spoke to the others and started her sleek bay gelding toward him. Alone. Annoura raised a hand and called something after her, but Berelain never glanced back. Perrin did not doubt she would follow wherever he went, and the way things were, leaving would only make people believe he wanted to be private with her. He dug his heels into Stepper's flanks, meaning to join the others no matter how little he wanted to—let her follow him back to them if she wanted—but she urged the bay to a canter despite the rough ground and the snow, even leaping a stone outcrop, her red cloak flowing out behind her, and met him halfway. She was a good rider, he admitted grudgingly. Not as good as Faile, but better than most.

"Your scowl is quite fierce," she laughed softly as she halted right in front of Stepper. From the way she held her reins, she was ready to block him if he tried going around. The woman had no shame at all! “Smile, so people think we are flirting.” She pushed the basket at him with one crimson-gloved hand. “This should make you smile, at least. I hear you forget to eat.” Her nose wrinkled. “And to wash, it seems. Your beard needs trimming, too. A careworn, somewhat disheveled husband rescuing his wife is a romantic figure, but she might not think so well of a dirty ragamuffin. No woman will ever forgive you ruining her image of you.”

Suddenly confused, Perrin took the basket, sitting it in front of him on the tall pommel of his saddle, and unconsciously rubbed at his nose. He was accustomed to certain smells from Berelain, usually those of a hunting she-wolf, and he was the intended prey, but today she gave off no hunting scent. Not a whisker of it. She smelled patient as stone, and amused, with undercurrents of fear. The woman certainly had never been afraid of him that he recalled. And what did she have to be patient about? For that matter, what did she have to amused about? A ridge cat smelling like a lamb would not have confounded him more.

Confusion or no, his stomach rumbled at the aromas drifting from the lidded basket. Roasted woodhen, unless he was much mistaken, and bread still warm from the baking. Flour was in short supply, and bread almost as rare as meat. It was true that he missed eating some days. He really did forget, sometimes, and when he remembered, eating was a chore, for he had to run the gauntlet of Lini and Breane or be given the cold shoulder by people he had grown up with just to get a meal. Food right under his nose made his mouth water. Would it be disloyal to eat food brought by Berelain?

“Thank you for the loaf and the woodhen,” he said roughly, “but the last thing on earth I want is for anyone to think we’re flirting. And I wash when I can, if it’s any of your business. It isn’t easy in this weather. Besides, nobody else smells any better than I do.” She did, he realized suddenly. There was no hint of sweat or dirt under her light, flowery perfume. It irritated him that he had noticed she was wearing perfume, or that she smelled clean. It seemed a betrayal.

Berelain’s eyes widened momentarily in startlement—why?—but then she sighed through her smile, which was beginning to look fixed, and a thread of irritation entered her scent. “Have your tent set up. I know there’s a good copper bathtub in one of your carts. You won’t have thrown that out. People expect a noble to look like a noble, Perrin, and that includes being presentable, even when it takes extra effort. It's a bargain between you and them. You must give them what they expect as well as what they need or want, or they lose respect and start resenting you for making them lose it. Frankly, none of us can afford for you to let that happen. We're all far from our homes, surrounded by enemies, and I very much believe that you, Lord Perrin Goldeneyes, may be our only chance of living to reach our homes again. Without you, everything falls apart. Now smile, because if we're flirting, then we aren't talking about something else."

Perrin bared his teeth. The Mayeners and the Wise Ones were watching, but at fifty paces, in this gloom, it would be taken for a smile. Lose respect? Berelain had helped strip him of any respect he once had from the Two Rivers folk, not to mention Faile's servants. Worse, Faile had given him some version of that lecture about a noble's duty to give people what they expected more than once. What *he* resented was hearing this woman, of all people, echo his wife. "What are we talking about, then, that you don't trust your own people to know?"

Her face remained smooth and smiling, yet the undercurrent of fear in her scent strengthened. It was nowhere near panic, but she believed herself in danger. Her gloved hands were tight on the bay's reins. "I've had my thief-catchers nosing about in Masema's camp, making 'friends.' Not as good as having eyes-and-ears there, but they took wine they supposedly stole from me, and they learned a little by listening." For an instant she regarded him quizzically, tilting her head. Light! She knew Faile used Selande and those other idiots as spies! It had been Berelain who told him about them in the first place. Likely Gendar and Santes, her thief-catchers, had seen Haviar and Nerion in Masema's camp. Balwer would have to be warned before he tried to set Medore on Berelain and Annoura. That would certainly make a fine tangle.

When he said nothing, she went on. "I put something in that basket besides bread and a woodhen. A . . . document . . . that Santes found early yesterday, locked away in Masema's camp desk. The fool never saw a lock without wanting to know what it hid. If he had to meddle with what Masema kept under lock and key, he should have memorized the thing instead of taking it, but what's done is done. Don't let anyone see you reading it after I went to all this trouble to hide it!" she added sharply as he lifted the basket's lid, revealing a cloth-wrapped bundle and releasing stronger smells of roasted bird and warm bread. “I’ve seen Masema’s men following you before. They could be watching now!”

“I’m not a fool,” he growled. He knew about Masema’s watchers. Most of the man’s followers were townsmen, and most of the rest awkward enough in the woods to shame a ten-year-old back home. Which was not to say one or two might not be hiding somewhere among the trees close enough to spy from among the shadows. They always kept their distance, since his eyes made them believe he was some sort of half-tame Shadowspawn, so he seldom detected their scents, and he had had other things on his mind this morning.

Fingering the cloth aside to expose the woodhen, almost as large as a fair-sized chicken, with its skin crisply browned, he tore off one of the bird’s legs while feeling under the bundle and sliding out a piece of heavy, cream-colored paper folded in four. Careless of grease spots, he unfolded the paper atop the bird, a little clumsily in his gauntlets, and read while nibbling on the leg. To everyone watching, he would appear to be studying what part of the woodhen to attack next. A thick green wax seal, cracked on one side, held an impression of what he decided were three hands, each with the forefinger and little finger raised and the others folded. The letters written on the paper in a flowing script were oddly formed, some unrecognizable, but the thing was readable with a little effort.

The bearer of this stands under my personal protection. In the name of the Empress, may she live forever, give him whatever aid he requires in service to the Empire and speak of it to none but me.

By her seal
Suroth Sabelle Meldarath
of Asinbayar and Barsabba
High Lady

“The Empress,” he said softly, soft like iron brushing silk. Confirmation of Masema’s dealings with the Seanchan, though for himself, he had needed none. It was not the sort of thing Berelain would have lied about. Suroth Sabelle Meldarath must be someone important, to be handing out this kind of document. “This will finish him, once Santes testified where he found it.” Service to the Empire? Masema knew Rand had fought the Seanchan! That rainbow burst into his head, and was swept away. The man was a traitor!

Berelain laughed as if he had said something witty, but her smile definitely looked forced, now. “Santes told me no one saw him in the bustle of setting up camp, so I allowed him and Gendar to go back with my last cask of good Tunaighan. They were supposed to return by an hour after dark, but neither has. I suppose they could be sleeping it off, but they’ve never—”

She broke off with a startled sound, staring at him, and he realized that he had bitten the thighbone in half. Light, he had stripped all the flesh from the leg without noticing. “I’m hungrier than I thought,” he muttered. Spitting the nub of bone into the palm of his gauntlet, he dropped the pieces to the ground. “It’s safe to assume Masema knows you have this. I hope you’re keeping a heavy guard around you all the time, not just when you ride out.”

“Gallenne has fifty men sleeping around my tent as of last night,” she said, still staring, and he sighed. You would think she had never seen anybody bite a bone in two before.

“What has Annoura told you?”

“She wanted me to give it to her to destroy, so if I was asked, I could say I didn’t have it and didn’t know where it was, and she could support my word. I doubt that would satisfy Masema, though.”

“No, I doubt it would.” Annoura had to know that, too. Aes Sedai could be wrongheaded, or even foolish upon occasion, but they were never stupid. “Did she say she would destroy it, or that if you gave it to her, she could?”

Berelain’s brow furrowed in thought, and it took her a moment to say, “That she would.” The bay danced a few impatient steps, but she brought him under control easily, without paying attention. “I can’t think what else she would want it for,” she said after another pause. “Masema is hardly likely to be susceptible to . . . pressure.” Blackmail, she meant. Perrin could not see Masema standing still for that either. Especially blackmail by an Aes Sedai.

Under cover of tearing the other leg loose from the bird, he managed to refold the piece of paper and tuck it into his sleeve, where his gauntlet would keep it from falling out. It was still evidence. But of what? How could the man be both a fanatic for the Dragon Reborn and a traitor? Could he have taken the document from . . . ? Who? Some collaborator he had captured? But why would Masema keep it locked away unless it had been meant for him? He *had* met with Seanchan. And how had he intended to use it? Who could tell what a thing this would allow a man to call on? Perrin sighed heavily. He had too many questions, and no answers. Answers required a quicker mind than his. Maybe Balwer would have a notion.

With a taste of food in it, his stomach wanted him to devour the leg in his hand and the rest of the bird too, but he closed the lid firmly and tried to take measured bites. There was one thing he could find out for himself. “What else has Annoura said? About Masema.”

“Nothing, besides that he’s dangerous and I should avoid him, as if I didn’t know that already. She dislikes him and talking about him.” Another brief hesitation, and Berelain added, “Why?” The First of Mayene was used to intrigues, and she listened for what was not said.

Perrin took another bite to give himself a moment while he chewed and swallowed. He was *not* used to intrigues, yet he had been exposed to enough of them to know that saying too much could be dangerous. So could saying too little, no matter what Balwer thought. “Annoura has been meeting with Masema in secret. So has Masuri.”

Berelain’s fixed smile remained in place, but alarm entered her scent. She started to twist in her saddle as if to look back at the two Aes Sedai, and stopped herself, licking her lips with the tip of her tongue. “Aes Sedai always have their reasons” was all she said. So, was she alarmed over her advisor meeting Masema, or alarmed that Perrin knew, or . . . ? He hated all these complications. They just got in the way of what was important. Light, he had managed to clean the second leg already! Hoping Berelain had not noticed, he hastily tossed the bones aside. His belly growled for more.

Her people had maintained their distance, but Aram had ridden a short way toward Perrin and Berelain and was leaning forward to peer at them through the shadowed trees. The Wise Ones were standing to one side talking among themselves, seemingly unaware that they were over their ankles in snow or that the cold breezes had picked up enough to flap the dangling ends of their shawls. Every so often one or another of the three looked Perrin and Berelain’s way, too. Notions of privacy never kept a Wise One from sticking her nose wherever she wanted. They were like Aes Sedai that way. Masuri and Annoura were watching, too, though they appeared to be keeping their distance from one another. Perrin would have wagered that without the Wise Ones there, both sisters would have been using the One Power to eavesdrop. Of course, the Wise Ones probably knew how to do that, too, and they had allowed Masuri's visits to Masema. Would either Aes Sedai crack her teeth if they saw the Wise Ones listening with the Power? Annoura seemed almost as careful with the Wise Ones as Masuri was. Light, he had no time for this briar thicket! He had to live in it, though.

"We've given tongues enough to wag over," he said. Not that they needed any more than they had. Hooking the basket's hoop-handles over his pommel, he heeled Stepper's flanks. It could hardly be disloyal just to eat a bird.

Berelain did not follow immediately, yet before he reached Aram, she caught up and slowed her bay beside him. "I'll find out what Annoura is up to," she said determinedly, looking straight ahead. Her eyes were hard. Perrin would have pitied Annoura, if he had not been ready to try shaking answers out of her himself. But then, Aes Sedai seldom needed pity, and they seldom gave answers they did not want to give. The next instant, Berelain was all smiles and gaiety again, though the scent of determination still hung about her, almost crushing the fear scent. "Young Aram has been telling us all about Heartsbane riding these woods with the Wild Hunt, Lord Perrin. Could it really be so, do you think? I remember hearing those tales in the nursery." Her voice was light and amused and carrying. Aram's cheeks turned red, and some of the men beyond him laughed.

They stopped laughing when Perrin showed them the tracks in the stone slab.

* * *

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CHAPTER 7

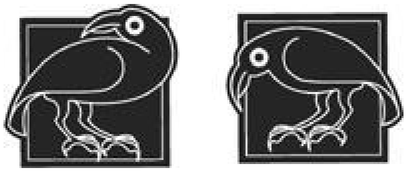

Blacksmith’s Puzzle

When the laughter cut off, Aram put on a smug grin, and with none of the fear scent he had given off earlier. Anyone would have thought he had already seen the tracks himself and knew everything there was to know. No one paid any mind to his smirk, however, or to much of anything except the huge dog tracks impressed in stone, even Perrin’s explanation that the Darkhounds were long gone. Of course, he could not tell them how he knew that, yet no one seemed to notice the lack. One of the sharply slanting bars of early morning light was falling directly on the gray slab, illuminating it clearly. Stepper had grown accustomed to the fading burnt-sulphur smell—at least he only snorted and laid back his ears—but the other horses shied at the tilted stone. None of the humans except Perrin could detect that smell, and most growled over their mounts’ fractious behavior and peered at the oddly marked stone as if it were a curiosity displayed by a traveling show.

Berelain’s plump maid screamed when she saw the tracks, and swayed on the point of falling off her round-bellied, nervously dancing mare, but Berelain merely asked Annoura in an absent fashion to look after her and stared at the prints with as little expression as if she herself were Aes Sedai. Her hands tightened on her reins, though, until the thin red leather paled across her knuckles. Bertain Gallenne, the Lord Captain of the Winged Guards, his red helmet embossed with wings and bearing three thin crimson plumes, had personal command of Berelain’s bodyguard this morning, and he forced his tall black gelding close to the stone, swinging down from his saddle in knee-deep snow and removing his helmet to frown at the stone slab with his one eye. A scarlet leather patch covered the empty socket of the other, the strap cutting through his shoulder-length gray hair. His grimace said he saw trouble, but he always saw the worst possibilities first. Perrin supposed that was better in a soldier than always seeing the best.

Masuri dismounted, too, but no sooner was she on the ground than she paused with her dapple's reins in one gloved hand, looking uncertainly toward the three sun-dark Aiel women. A few of the Mayener soldiers muttered uneasily at that, yet they should have been used to it by now. Annoura hid her face deeper in her gray hood as if she did not want to see the rock and gave Berelain's maid a brisk shake; the woman goggled at her in astonishment. Masuri, on the other hand, waited beside her mare with an appearance of patience, spoiled only by smoothing the russet skirts of her silk riding dress as though unaware of what she was doing. The Wise Ones exchanged silent glances, expressionless as sisters themselves. Carelle stood on one side of Nevarin, a skinny green-eyed woman, and on the other Marline, with eyes of twilight blue and dark hair, rare among Aiel, not covered completely with her shawl. All three were tall women, as tall as some men, and none looked more than a few years older than Perrin, but no one could have managed that calm self-assurance without more years than their faces claimed. Despite the long necklaces and heavy bracelets of gold and ivory that they wore, their dark heavy skirts and the dark shawls that almost hid their white blouses could have suited farm women, yet there was no doubt who was in command between them and the Aes Sedai. In truth, sometimes there seemed to be doubt who was in command between them and Perrin.

Finally, Nevarin nodded. And gave a warm and approving smile. Perrin had never before seen a smile out of her. Nevarin did not walk around scowling, but she usually seemed to be searching for someone to upbraid.

Not until that nod did Masuri hand her reins up to one of the soldiers. Her Warder was nowhere to be seen, and that had to be the Wise Ones' doing. Rovair usually stuck to her like a burr. Lifting her divided skirts, she waded through the snow, deeper the closer to the stone she came, and began passing her hands above the footprints, obviously channeling, though nothing happened that Perrin could see. The Wise Ones watched her closely, but then, Masuri's weaves were visible to them. Annoura displayed no interest. The ends of the Gray sister's narrow braids twitched as if she were shaking her head inside her hood, and she moved her horse back from the maid, well out of the Wise Ones' line of sight, though that took her farther from Berelain, who anyone could think might want her advice now. Annoura really did avoid the Wise Ones as much as she could.

“Fireside stories walking,” Gallenne muttered, drawing his gelding away from the stone with a sideways glance at Masuri. Aes Sedai, he honored, yet few men wanted to be close to an Aes Sedai who was channeling. “Though I don’t know why I’m surprised anymore after what I’ve seen since leaving Mayene.” Intent on the tracks, Masuri did not seem to notice him.

A stir rippled through the mounted lancers, as though they had not really believed their own eyes until their commander gave confirmation, and some of them began to smell of uneasy fear, as if expecting Darkhounds to leap out of the shadows. Perrin could not pick out individuals among so many with any ease, but the jittery rankness was strong enough that it had to come from more than a few.

Gallenne seemed to sense what Perrin smelled; he had his faults, but he had commanded soldiers for a long time. Hanging his helmet on his long sword hilt, he grinned. The eyepatch gave it a grim quality, a man who could see a joke in the face of death and expected others to see it, too. “If the Black Dogs bother us, we’ll salt their ears,” he announced in a loud and hearty voice. “That’s what you do in the stories, isn’t it? Sprinkle salt on their ears, and they vanish.” A few of the lancers laughed, though the miasma of fear did not lessen appreciably. Stories told by the fire were one thing, those same stories walking in the flesh quite another.

Gallenne led his black to Berelain and rested a gauntleted hand on her bay’s neck. He gave Perrin a considering look that Perrin returned levelly, refusing to take the hint. Whatever the man had to say, he could say in front of him and Aram. Gallenne sighed. “They will keep their nerve, my Lady,” he said softly, “but the fact is, our position is precarious, with enemies on every side and our supplies running out. Shadowspawn can only make matters worse. My duty is to you and Mayene, my Lady, and with all respect to Lord Perrin, you may wish to alter your plans.” Anger crackled in Perrin—the man would abandon Faile!—but Berelain spoke before he could suggest it.

“There will be no alteration, Lord Gallenne.” Sometimes it was easy to forget that she was a ruler, small though Mayene was, but there was a regal note in her voice fit for the Queen of Andor. Back straight, she made her saddle seem a throne, and she spoke loudly enough to make sure everyone heard her decision, firmly enough that everyone knew the decision *had* been made. “If we have enemies all around, then going on is as safe as turning back or turning aside. Yet if turning back or turning aside were ten times safer, I would still go on. I intend to see the Lady Faile rescued if we must fight our way through a thousand Darkhounds, and Trollocs as well. That I have sworn to do!"

A roar of cheers answered her, Winged Guards shouting and thrusting their lances into the air so the red streamers danced. The smell of fear remained, but they sounded ready to cut their way through any number of Trollocs rather than appear less in Berelain's eyes. Gallenne commanded them, but they felt more than fondness for their ruler, despite her reputation with men. Maybe because of it, in part. Berelain had kept Tear from swallowing Mayene by playing one man who found her beautiful against another. For his part, Perrin found it hard not to gape in surprise. She sounded as determined as he was! She *smelled* as determined! Gallenne bowed his gray head in unwilling acceptance, and Berelain gave a small, satisfied nod before turning her attention to the Aes Sedai beside the stone slab.

Masuri had stopped waving her hands about and was staring at the footprints, tapping a finger against her lips thoughtfully. She was a pretty woman without being beautiful, though some of that might have been Aes Sedai agelessness, with a grace and elegance that might also have come from being Aes Sedai. It was often difficult to tell a sister who had been born on a hardscrabble farm from one born in a grand palace. Perrin had seen her red-faced and angry, worn down and on the end of her tether, yet despite hard travel and life in the Aiel tents, her dark hair and her clothing looked as though she had a maid attending her, too. She might have been standing in a library.

"What have you learned, Masuri?" Berelain asked. "Masuri, if you please? Masuri?"

The last came a little more sharply, and Masuri gave a start, as though surprised to realize she was not alone. Possibly she was startled; in many ways she seemed more of the Green Ajah than the Brown, more intent on action than on contemplation, straight to the point and never vague, yet she was still capable of losing herself completely in whatever captured her interest. Folding her hands at her waist, she opened her mouth, but rather than speaking, she hesitated and looked a question at the Wise Ones.

"Go on, girl," Nevarin said impatiently, planting her fists on her hips in a jangle of bracelets. A frown made her appear more her usual self, but neither of the other Wise Ones looked any more approving. Three frowns in a row like three pale-eyed crows on a fence. “We were not simply letting you exercise your curiosity. Get on with it. Tell us what you learned.”

Masuri’s face reddened, but she spoke up immediately, her eyes on Berelain. She could not like being called down in public, no matter what anyone knew of her relationship with the Wise Ones. “Relatively little is known of Darkhounds, but I’ve made something of a study of them, in a small way. Over the years, I have crossed the paths of seven packs, five of them twice and two others three times.” The color began to fade from her cheeks, and slowly she began to sound as if she were lecturing. “Some ancient writers say there *are* only seven packs, others say nine, or thirteen, or some other number they believed had special significance, but during the Trolloc Wars, Sorelana Alsahhan wrote of ‘the hundred packs of the Shadow’s hounds that hunt the night,’ and even earlier, Ivonell Bharatiya supposedly wrote of ‘hounds born of the Shadow, in numbers like unto the nightmares of mankind.’ Though in truth, Ivonell herself may be apocryphal. In any case, the—” She gestured as if groping for a word. “Smell is not the right word, and neither is flavor. The sense of each pack is unique, and I can say with certainty that I have never encountered this one before, so we know the number seven is wrong. Whether the correct number is nine or thirteen or something else, tales of Darkhounds are much more common than Darkhounds themselves, and they are extremely rare this far south of the Blight. A second rarity: there may have been as many as fifty in this pack. Ten or twelve is the usual limit. A useful maxim: two rarities combined call for close attention.” Pausing, she raised a finger to emphasize the point, then nodded when she thought Berelain had taken it, and folded her hands again. A gusting breeze pushed her yellowish-brown cloak off one shoulder, yet she did not appear to notice the loss of warmth.

“There is always a feel of urgency about Darkhounds’ trails, but it varies according to a number of factors, not all of which I can be certain of. This one has an intense admixture of . . . I suppose you could call it impatience. That isn’t really strong enough, by far—as well call a stabwound a pinprick—but it will do. I would say their hunt has been going on for some time, and their prey is eluding them somehow. No matter what the stories say—by the way, Lord Gallenne, salt doesn’t harm Darkhounds in the least.” So she had not been entirely lost in thought after all. “Despite the stories, they never hunt at random, though they will kill if the opportunity presents itself and doesn’t interfere with the hunt. With Darkhounds, the hunt is paramount. Their quarry is always important to the Shadow, though at times we cannot see why. They have been known to bypass the great and mighty to slay a farmwife or a craftsman, or to enter a town or village and leave without killing, though clearly they came for some reason. My first thought for what brought them here had to be discarded, since they moved on.” Her gaze flickered toward Perrin, so quickly he was not sure anyone else noticed. “Given that, I strongly doubt they will return. Oh, yes; and they are an hour or more gone. That, I’m afraid, is really all I can tell you.” Nevarin and the other Wise Ones nodded their approval as she finished, and a touch of color returned to her cheeks, though it vanished quickly as she assumed a mask of Aes Sedai serenity. A shift in the breeze brought her scent to Perrin, surprised and pleased, and upset at being pleased.

“Thank you, Masuri Sedai,” Berelain said formally, making a small bow in her saddle that Masuri acknowledged with a slight motion of her head. “You have put our minds at rest.”

Indeed, the fear smell among the soldiers began to fade, though Perrin heard Gallenne grumble under his breath, “She might have told those last bits first.”

Perrin’s ears caught something else, too, through the stamping of horses’ hooves and men’s quiet, relieved laughter. A bluetit’s trill sounded to the south, beyond the hearing of anyone else there, followed closely by the buzzing call of a masked sparrow. Another bluetit sounded, closer, followed again by a masked sparrow, and then the same pair called again closer still. There might be bluetits and masked sparrows in Altara, but he knew these birds carried Two Rivers longbows. The bluetit meant men were coming, more than a few and maybe unfriendly. The masked sparrow, that some back home called the thiefbird for its habit of stealing bright objects, on the other hand . . . Perrin ran a thumb along the edge of his axe, but he waited for one more pair of calls, close enough that the others might have noticed.

“Did you hear that?” he said, looking south as if he had just heard. “My sentries have spotted Masema.” That brought heads up, listening, and several men nodded when the calls were repeated, closer still. “He’s coming this way.”

Growling curses, Gallenne clapped his helmet onto his head and mounted. Annoura gathered her reins, and Masuri began floundering back toward her dapple. The lancers shifted in their saddles and began giving off smells of anger, once more touched with fear. The Winged Guards were owed a blood debt by Masema, in their eyes, but none was anxious to try collecting with only fifty men, not when Masema always rode with a hundred at his back.

"I will not run from him," Berelain announced. She stared south wearing a cold frown. "We will wait for him here."

Gallenne opened his mouth, and closed it again without speaking—to her, at least. Drawing a deep breath, he began to bellow orders arraying his Guardsmen. That was not an easy matter. No matter how far apart the trees stood, forests were poor places for lancers. Any charge would be disjointed at its start, and sticking a man with a lance was difficult when he could dodge behind a tree trunk and come out behind you. Gallenne tried to form them in front of Berelain, between her and the approaching men, but she gave him a sharp look, and the one-eyed man changed his commands, lining the lancers up in a single crooked rank, bulging around massive trees but centered on her. One soldier Gallenne sent racing back toward the camp, crouching low in his saddle with his lance low as if at the charge, riding as fast as he could in spite of the snow and terrain. Berelain raised an eyebrow at that, yet said nothing.

Annoura began guiding her brown mare toward Berelain, but stopped when Masuri called her name. The Brown sister had gathered her dapple but still stood in the snow with the Wise Ones around her, who were tall enough in comparison to make her seem less than full-grown. Annoura hesitated until Masuri summoned her again, more sharply, and then Perrin thought he heard Annoura sigh heavily before she rode to them and dismounted. Whatever the Aiel women had to say, in voices pitched too softly for Perrin to hear, clustering in front of Annoura with heads bent close to hers, the Taraboner sister did not like. Her face remained hidden in her hood, but her thin braids swung ever faster with the shaking of her head, and at last she turned away abruptly and put a foot in the stirrup of her saddle. Masuri had been standing quietly, letting the Wise Ones have their say, but now she laid a hand on Annoura's sleeve and said something in a low voice that made Annoura's shoulders slump and the Wise Ones nod. Pushing back her hood to fall down her back, Annoura waited for Masuri to climb onto her mare before mounting her own horse, and then the two sisters rode back to the line of lancers together, crowding in beside Berelain with the Wise Ones pushing in between them, on the other side from Perrin. Annoura's wide mouth was turned down in a glum curve, and she was rubbing her thumbs nervously.

"What is it you're planning?" Perrin asked, trying not to hide suspicious. Maybe the Wise Ones had let Masuri meet with Masema, yet they still claimed to think the man was better dead. The Aes Sedai could not use the Power as a weapon unless they were in danger, but the Wise Ones had no such prohibition. He wondered whether they were linked. He knew more than he wanted about the One Power, and enough about the Wise Ones to be sure that Nevarin would be in control if they had formed a circle.

Annoura opened her mouth, but snapped it shut at a warning touch from Carelle and glared at Masuri. The Brown sister pursed her lips and shook her head slightly, which did not seem to mollify Annoura. Her gloved hands gripped her reins so tightly that they shook.

Nevarin looked up at Perrin past Berelain as if she read his mind. "We *plan* to see you safely back to the camp, Perrin Aybara," she said sharply, "you and Berelain Paeron. We *plan* to see that as many as possible survive this day, and the days to come. Do you have objections?"

"Just don't do anything unless I tell you," he said. An answer like that could mean a lot of things. "Not anything."

Nevarin shook her head in disgust, and Carelle laughed as if he had made a huge joke. None of the Wise Ones seemed to think any more response was needed. They had been commanded to obey him, but their notions of obedience failed to square with any he had ever learned. Pigs would grow wings before he got a better answer out of them.

He could have put a stop to it. He knew he should. No matter what the Wise Ones had planned, meeting Masema this far from the others in the camp, when the man had to know who had stolen his Seanchan paper, was like hoping to snatch your hand off the anvil before the hammer fell. Berelain was almost as bad as the Wise Ones when it came to following orders, but he thought she would listen if he gave an order to withdraw to the camp. He thought she would, for all that her smell said she had her heels dug in hard. Staying was a senseless risk. He was sure he could convince her of that. Yet he did not want to run from the man, either. Part of him said he was being a fool. The larger part smoldered with anger that he found hard to control. Aram crowded in beside him scowling, but at least he had not drawn his sword. Waving a sword might put a hot coal in the hayloft, and the time for a confrontation with Masema had not come yet. Perrin rested a hand on his axe. Not yet.

Despite the sharply angled rays of light that penetrated through the thick branches overhead, the forest as a whole lay wrapped in dim early-morning shadows. Even at noon, it would be dim here. Sounds came to him first, the muffled thud of hooves in snow, the heavy breath of horses pushed for speed, and then a mass of riders appeared, a disordered mob flowing north among the huge trees at a near-gallop in spite of snow and rough ground. Rather than a hundred, they numbered two or three times that. A horse went down with a scream and laying thrashing atop its rider, but none of the others so much as slowed until, some seventy or eighty paces away, the man at their head raised a hand, and they suddenly drew rein in sprays of snow, lathered horses blowing hard and steaming. Here and there, lances stuck up among the riders. Most wore no armor, and many just a breastplate or a helmet, yet their saddles were hung about with swords and axes and maces. Shafts of sunlight picked out a few faces, grim flat-eyed men who looked as though they never had smiled and never would.

It occurred to Perrin that he might have made a mistake not to overrule Berelain. That was what came of hasty decisions, of letting anger do his thinking. Everyone knew that she often rode out in the mornings, and Masema might be desperate to recover his Seanchan document. Even with the Aes Sedai and Wise Ones, a fight in these woods could turn bloody, a free-for-all where men, and women, could die without once seeing who killed them. If no witnesses lived, it could always be blamed on bandits or even the Shaido. That had happened before. And if there were witnesses left, Masema was not above hanging a few dozen of his own men and claiming the guilty had been punished. He likely wanted to keep Perrin Aybara alive for a while yet, though, and he would not have expected the Wise Ones, or a second Aes Sedai. Small points to hang fifty-odd lives on. Very small points to hang Faile’s life on. Perrin eased his axe in its loop on his belt. Beside him, Berelain smelled of cool calm and stony determination. No fear, oddly. Not a whiff. Aram smelled . . . excited.

The two parties sat regarding one another in silence, until at last Masema rode forward, followed by just two men, all three pushing back their hoods. None wore a helmet, or any piece of armor. Like Masema, Nengar and Bartu were Shienaran, but like him, they had shaved off their topknots, leaving bare heads with a look of skulls. The coming of the Dragon Reborn had broken all bonds, including those that had pledged these men to fight the Shadow along the Blight. Nengar and Bartu each carried a sword on his back and had another hanging at his saddlebow, and Bartu, shorter than the other two, had a cased horsebow and a quiver fastened to his saddle, too. Masema wore no visible weapons. The Prophet of the Lord Dragon Reborn needed none. Perrin was glad to see Gallenne watching the men Masema had left behind, for there was something about Masema that drew the eye. Maybe it was only knowing who he was, but that was more than enough.

Masema stopped his rangy sorrel a few paces from Perrin. The Prophet was a dark frowning man of average size with a faded arrow-scar white on his cheek, in a worn brown woolen coat and a dark cloak with frayed edges. Masema cared nothing for appearances, least of all his own. At his back, Nengar and Bartu held a fever in their eyes, but Masema's deep-set, almost black eyes seemed as hot as coals in a forge, as though the breezes must soon fan them to a glow, and his smell was the jangled, darting sharpness of pure insanity. He ignored the Wise Ones and Aes Sedai with a scorn he did not bother to hide. Wise Ones were worse than Aes Sedai, in his view; they not only blasphemed by channeling the One Power, they were Aiel savages to boot, a double sin. The Winged Guards could have been just more shadows beneath the trees. "You are taking a picnic?" he said with a glance at the basket hanging from Perrin's saddle. Normally, Masema's voice was as intense as his eyes, but now it sounded wry, and his lip curled as his eyes traveled to Berelain. He had heard the rumors, of course.

A wave of rage shot through Perrin, but he seized onto it, forcing it back. Folding it in with the rest, folding it tight. His anger had one target, and he would not waste it striking at another. Catching his rider's mood, Stepper bared his teeth at Masema's gelding, and Perrin had to rein him in sharply. "There were Darkhounds here in the night," he said, not very smoothly, but it was the best he could manage. "They're gone, and Masuri doesn't think they'll come back, so there's no need to worry."

Masema did not smell worried. He never smelled of anything except madness. The sorrel thrust his head aggressively toward Stepper, but Masema pulled him up with a harsh jerk. He rode well, Masema did, but he treated his horses as he did people. For the first time, he looked at Masuri. Perhaps his gaze grew a little hotter, if that was possible. “The Shadow can be found everywhere,” he said, a heated pronouncement of unquestionable truth. “No one need fear the Shadow who follows the Lord Dragon Reborn, may the Light illumine his name. Even in death they will find the final victory of the Light.”

Masuri’s mare shied as though burned by that gaze, yet Masuri controlled the animal with a touch on the reins and met Masema’s stare with Aes Sedai inscrutability, as calm as a frozen pond. Nothing hinted that she had been meeting this man in secret. “Fear is a useful spur to the wits, and to determination, when well controlled. If we have no fear of our enemies, that leaves only contempt, and contempt leads to the enemy’s victory.” You could have thought she was speaking to a simple farmer she had never met before. Annoura, watching, looked a little ill. Was she afraid their secret would come out? That their plans for Masema could be spoiled?

Masema’s lip curled again, in a smile, or a sneer. The Aes Sedai seemed to cease to exist for him as he turned his attention back to Perrin. “Some of those who follow the Lord Dragon have found a town called So Habor.” That was how he always referred to his followers: they really followed the Dragon Reborn, not him. The fact that Masema told them what do and when and how was just a detail. “A tidy place of three or four thousand people, about a day back, or a little less, to the south and west. It seems they were out of the Aiel’s path, and their crop was good last year despite the drought. They have storehouses full of barley, millet and oats, and other needful things, I should imagine. I know you are running short on fodder. For your men as well as your horses.”

“Why would their storehouses be full this time of year?” Berelain leaned forward with a frown, her tone just short of a demand, and not far short of disbelief.

Scowling, Nengar put a hand to his saddle-sword. No one made demands of the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. No one doubted him, either. No one who wished to live. Leather creaked as lancers shifted their saddles, but Nengar ignored them. The smell of Masema’s madness slithered and flailed in Perrin’s nose. Masema studied Berelain. He seemed unaware of Nengar or the lancers or the possibility that men might start killing one another any moment.

“A matter of greed,” he said finally. “Apparently the grain traders of So Habor thought to make larger profits by holding their stock until winter drove prices up. But they normally sell west, into Ghealdan and Amadicia, and events there and in Ebou Dar have made them fearful that anything they send out will be confiscated. Their greed has left them with full storehouses and empty purses.” A note of satisfaction entered Masema’s voice. He despised greed. But then, he despised any human weakness, great or small. “I think they will part with their grain very cheaply, now.”

Perrin smelled a trap, and it did not take a wolf’s nose. Masema had his own men and horses to feed, and no matter how thoroughly they had scoured the country they crossed, they could not be in much better shape than Perrin’s own people. Why had Masema not sent a few thousand of his followers into this town and taken whatever it held? A day back. That would take him farther from Faile, and maybe give the Shaido time to gain ground again. Was that the reason for this peculiar offer? Or a further delay to keep Masema in the west, close to his Seanchan friends?

“Perhaps there will be time to visit this town after my wife is free.” Once again, Perrin’s ears caught the faint sound of men and horses moving through the forest before anyone else, coming from the west, this time, from the camp. Gallenne’s messenger must have galloped the whole way.

“Your wife,” Masema said in a flat voice, directing a look at Berelain that made Perrin’s blood boil. Even Berelain colored, though her face remained smooth. “Do you really believe you will have word of her today?”

“I do.” Perrin’s voice was as flat as Masema’s, and harder. He clutched the pommel of his saddle, atop the hoop-handles of Berelain’s basket, to keep from reaching for his axe. “Freeing her comes first. Her and the others. We can fill our bellies to bursting once that’s done, but that comes first.”

The horses approaching were audible to everyone, now. A long line of lancers appeared to the west, sifting through the shadowed trees with another mounted line behind it, the red streamers and breastplates of Mayene interspersed with the green streamers and burnished breastplates of Ghealdan. The lines stretched from opposite Perrin down below the mass of horsemen who were waiting on Masema. Men afoot ghosted from tree to tree, carrying long Two Rivers bows. Perrin found himself hoping that they had not stripped the camp too far. Stealing that Seanchan paper might have forced Masema’s hand, and he was a veteran of fighting along the Blight and against the Aiel. He might have thought further ahead than simply riding out to find Berelain. It was like another blacksmith's puzzle. Move one piece to shift another just enough to let a third slip free. A camp with weakened defenders could be overrun, and in these woods, numbers could count for as much as who had people channeling. Did Masema want to keep his secret enough to try putting a seal to it here and now? Perrin realized that he had moved one hand to rest on his axe, but he left it there.

Among the mass of Masema's followers, horses moved nervously at tugs from their riders, men shouted and waved weapons, but Masema himself studied the oncoming lancers and bowmen with no change of expression, neither more dour nor less. They might have been birds hopping from branch to branch. The smell of him writhed madly, unchanging.

"What is done to serve the Light, must be done," he said when the newcomers halted, some two hundred paces away. That was easy range for a Two Rivers bowman, and Masema had seen demonstrations, but he gave no sign that broadhead shafts might be aimed at his heart. "All else is dross and trash. Remember that, Lord Perrin Goldeneyes. *Everything* else is dross and trash!"

Jerking his sorrel around without another word, he headed back toward his waiting men trailed by Nengar and Bartu, all three pushing their horses without a care for broken legs or broken heads. The waiting company fell in behind, a mob flowing south, now. A few men at the tail end stopped to drag a limp shape from under the injured horse and put the animal out of its misery with a quick slash of a dagger. Then they began gutting and butchering. That much meat could not be allowed to go to waste. The rider, they left where they had dropped him.

"He believes every word he says," Annoura breathed, "but where does his belief lead him?"

Perrin considered asking her straight out where she thought Masema's belief was leading him, where *she* wanted to lead him, but she suddenly put on that impenetrable Aes Sedai calm. The tip of her sharp nose had turned red from the cold; she regarded him with a level stare. You could pry that Darkhound-marked stone out of the ground bare-handed as easily as get an answer from an Aes Sedai who wore that look. He would have to leave questions to Berelain.

The man who had brought the lancers suddenly spurred his horse forward. A short compact fellow in a silver-plated breastplate and a helmet with a barred faceguard and three short white plumes, Gerard Arganda was a tough man, a soldier who had worked his way up from the bottom, against all odds, to become the First Captain of Alliandre's bodyguard. He had no liking for Perrin, who had brought his queen south for no good reason and gotten her kidnapped, but Perrin expected him to stop and make his respects to Berelain, perhaps confer with Gallenne. Arganda had a great deal of respect for Gallenne, and often spent time with him both smoking their pipes. Instead, the roan floundered past Perrin and the others, Arganda digging his heels into the animal's sides, trying to force more speed. When Perrin saw where the man was heading, he understood. A single horseman on a mouse-colored animal was approaching from the east at a steady walk, and beside him, an Aiel shuffled along on snowshoes.

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CHAPTER 8

Whirlpools of Color

Perrin did not realize he had moved until he found himself crouched over Stepper’s neck, streaking after Arganda. The snow was no less deep, the ground no smoother, the light no better, but Stepper raced through the shadows, unwilling to let the roan stay in the lead, and Perrin urged him to run faster. The approaching rider was Elyas, his beard fanned out over his chest, a broad-brimmed hat casting his face in shadows and his fur-lined cloak hanging down his back. The Aiel was one of the Maidens, with a dark *shoufa* wrapped around her head and a white cloak, used for hiding against the snow, worn over her coat and breeches of grays and browns and greens. Elyas and one Maiden, without the others, meant Faile had been found. It had to.

Arganda ran his horse without a care for whether he broke the roan’s neck or his own, leaping stone outcrops, splashing through the snow at a near-gallop, but Stepper overtook him just as he reached Elyas and demanded in a harsh voice, “Did you see the queen, Machera? Is she alive? Tell me, man!” The Maiden, Elienda, her sun-darkened face expressionless, raised a hand to Perrin. It might have been meant for a greeting, or sympathy, but she never broke her skimming stride. With Elyas to make his report to Perrin, she would carry hers to the Wise Ones.

“You’ve found her?” Perrin’s throat was suddenly dry as sand. He had waited so long for this. Arganda snarled soundlessly through the steel bars of his helmet’s faceguard, knowing that Perrin was not asking after Alliandre.

“We found the Shaido we’ve been following,” Elyas said carefully, both hands on the pommel of his saddle. Even Elyas, the fabled Long Tooth who had lived and run with wolves, was showing the strain of too many miles and not enough sleep. His whole face sagged with a weariness emphasized by the golden-yellow glow of his eyes beneath his hat brim. Gray streaked his thick beard and the hair that he wore hanging to his waist and tied with a leather cord at the nape of his neck, and for the first time since Perrin had known him, he looked old. “They’re camped around a fair-sized town they took, in ridge country near forty miles from here. They’ve got no sentries to speak of close in, and those further out seem to be watching for prisoners trying to escape more than anything else, so we got near enough for a good look. But Perrin, there are more of them than we thought. At least nine or ten septs, the Maidens say. Counting *gai’shain*—folks in white, anyway—there could be as many people in that camp as in Mayene or Ebou Dar. I don’t know how many spear fighters, but ten thousand might be on the low side from what I saw.”

Knots of desperation twisted and tightened in Perrin’s stomach. His mouth was so dry he could not have spoken had Faile miraculously appeared in front of him. Ten thousand *algai’d’siswai,* and even weavers and silversmiths and old men who passed their days reminiscing in the shade would pick up a spear if they were attacked. He had fewer than two thousand lancers, and they would have been overmatched against an equal number of Aiel. Fewer than three hundred Two Rivers men, who could wreak havoc with their bows at a distance but not stop ten thousand. That many Shaido would shred Masema’s murderous rabble like a cat slaughtering a nest of mice. Even counting the Asha’man and the Wise Ones and Aes Sedai. . . . Edarra and the other Wise Ones were hardly generous in what they told him about Wise Ones, but he knew ten septs might have fifty women who could channel, maybe more. Maybe fewer, too—there was no set number—but not enough fewer to make a difference.

With an effort, he strangled the despair welling up in him, squeezed until only writhing filaments remained for his anger to burn up. A hammer had no place in it for despair. Ten septs or the whole Shaido clan, they still had Faile, and he still had to find a way.

“What does it matter how many there are?” Aram demanded. “When Trollocs came to the Two Rivers, there were thousands, tens of thousands, but we killed them just the same. Shaido can’t be worse than Trollocs.”

Perrin blinked, surprised to find the man right behind him, not to mention Berelain and Gallenne and the Aes Sedai. In his haste to reach Elyas, he had shut out everything else. Dimly visible through the trees, the men Arganda had brought out to confront Masema still held their rough lines, but Berelain's bodyguard was forming a loose ring centered on Elyas and facing outward. The Wise Ones stood outside the circle, listening to Elienda with grave faces. She spoke in a low murmur, sometimes shaking her head. Her view of matters was no brighter than Elyas's. He must have lost the basket in his haste, or thrown it away, because it hung from Berelain's saddle now. There was a look of . . . could it be sympathy, on her face? Burn him, he was too tired to think straight. Only, now more than ever, he had to think straight. His next mistake might be the last, for Faile.

"Way I heard it, Tinker," Elyas said quietly, "the Trollocs came to you in the Two Rivers, and you managed to catch them in a vise. You have any fancy plans for catching the Shaido in a vise?" Aram glared at him sullenly. Elyas had known him before he picked up a sword, and Aram disliked being reminded of that time, despite his brightly colored clothes.

"Ten septs or fifty," Arganda growled, "there must be some way to free the Queen. And the others, of course. And the others." His hard-bitten face was creased in a scowl of anger, yet he smelled frantic, a fox ready chew off its own leg to escape a trap. "Will . . . ? Will they accept a ransom?" The Ghealdanin looked around until he found Marline coming through the Winged Guards. She managed a steady stride in spite of the snow, not staggering in the least. The other Wise Ones were no longer anywhere to be seen among the trees, nor Elienda. "Will these Shaido take a ransom . . . Wise One?" Arganda's honorific had the sound of an afterthought. He no longer believed the Aiel with them had any knowledge of the kidnapping, but there was a taint in him regarding Aiel.

"I cannot say." Marline seemed not to notice his tone. Arms folded across her chest, she stood looking at Perrin rather than Arganda. It was one of those looks where a woman weighed and measured you till she could have sewn you a suit of clothes or told you when your smallclothes were last washed. It would have made him uncomfortable back when he had had time for such things. When she spoke again, there was nothing of offering advice in her tone, merely a setting out of the facts. She might even have meant it so. "Your wetlander paying of ransom goes against our custom. *Gai'shain* may be given as a gift, or traded for other *gai'shain,* but they are not animals to be sold. Yet it seems the Shaido no longer follow *ji'e'toh.* They make wetlanders *gai'shain* and take everything instead of only the fifth. They may set a price."

“My jewels are at your disposal, Perrin,” Berelain put in, her voice steady and her face firm. “If necessary, Grady or Neald can fetch more from Mayene. Gold, as well.”

Gallenne cleared his throat. “Altarans are used to marauders, my Lady, neighboring nobles and brigands alike,” he said slowly, slapping his reins against his palm. Although reluctant to contradict Berelain, he clearly intended to anyway. “There’s no law this far from Ebou Dar, except what the local lord or lady says. Noble or common, they’re accustomed to paying off anyone they can’t fight off, and quick to tell the difference. It goes against reason that none of them tried to buy safety, yet we’ve seen nothing but ruins in these Shaido’s path, heard of nothing but pillage right down to the ground. They may accept an offer of ransom, and even take it, but can they be trusted to give anything in return? Just making the offer gives away our one real advantage, that they don’t know we are here.” Annoura shook her head slightly, the barest movement, but Gallenne’s one eye caught it, and he frowned. “You disagree, Annoura Sedai?” he asked politely. And with a hint of surprise. The Gray was almost diffident at times, especially for a sister, but she never vacillated about speaking up when she disagreed with advice offered to Berelain.

This time Annoura hesitated, though, and covered by pulling her cloak around herself and arranging the folds with care. It was clumsy of her; Aes Sedai could ignore heat or cold when they chose, remaining untouched when everyone around them was drenched with sweat or fighting to stop their teeth chattering. An Aes Sedai who paid attention to the temperature was buying time to think, usually about how to hide what she was thinking. Glancing toward Marline with a small frown, she finally reached a decision, and the slight crease in her forehead vanished.

“Negotiation is always better than fighting,” she said in cool Taraboner accents, “and in negotiation, trust is always a matter of the precautions, yes? We must consider with care the precautions that must be taken. There is also the question of who is to approach them. Wise Ones may no longer be sacrosanct, since they took part in the battle at Dumai’s Wells. A sister, or a group of sisters, might be better, yet even that must have careful arrangement. I myself am willing to—”

“No ransom,” Perrin said, and when everyone stared at him, most in consternation, Annoura with her face unreadable, he said it again, in a harder voice. “No ransom.” He would not pay these Shaido for making

Faile suffer. She would be afraid, and they had to pay for that, not profit from it. Besides, Gallenne had the right of it. Nothing Perrin had seen, in Altara or Amadicia or before that in Cairhien, so much as hinted that the Shaido could be trusted to keep any bargain. As well trust rats in the grain bins and cutworms with the harvest. "Elyas, I want to see their camp." When he was a boy he had known a blind man, Nat Torfinn with his wrinkled face and thin white hair, who could disassemble any blacksmith's puzzle by touch. For years Perrin tried to learn how to duplicate that feat, but he never could. He had to see how the pieces fit together before he could make sense of them. "Aram, find Grady and tell him to meet me as fast as he can, at the Traveling ground." That was what they had come to call the place where they arrived at the end of each jump, and departed from for the next. It was easier for the Asha'man to weave a gateway in a place already touched by one they had woven before.

Aram gave one short, purposeful nod, then wheeled his gray and sped toward camp, but Perrin could see arguments and questions and demands gathering on the faces around him. Marline was still examining him, as though suddenly not quite sure what he was, and Gallenne was frowning at the reins in his hands, no doubt seeing matters turn out badly whatever he did, but Berelain wore a perturbed expression, objections visible in her eyes, and Annoura's mouth had tightened to a thin line. Aes Sedai disliked being interrupted, and, diffident for an Aes Sedai or not, she looked ready to vent her displeasure. Arganda, his face growing red, opened his mouth with the clear intention of shouting. Arganda had shouted often since his queen was kidnapped. There was no point in waiting to listen.

Digging in his heels, Perrin sent Stepper lunging through the line of Winged Guards, heading back toward the sheared trees. Not at a run, but not dawdling, either—a quick trot through the towering forests, hands tight on the reins and eyes already searching the dappled gloom for Grady. Elyas followed on his gelding without a word. Perrin had been sure he had no room in him for another ounce of fear, yet Elyas' silence made the weight grow. The other man never saw an obstacle without seeing a way around. His silence shouted of impassable mountains. There had to be a way, though. When they reached the smooth stone outcrop, Perrin walked Stepper back and forth through the slanting bars of light, around the toppled trees and between the standing ones, unable to make himself stop. He had to keep moving. There had to be a way. His mind darted like a caged rat.

Elyas dismounted to squat and frown at the sliced stone, paying little heed to his gelding tugging at the reins and trying to back away. Beside the stone, the thick trunk of a pine that had stood a good fifty paces tall was propped up at one end by the splintered remains of its stump, high enough that Elyas could have walked beneath the tree trunk upright. Brilliant rays of sunlight piercing the forest canopy elsewhere seemed to deepen the shadow to near blackness around the track-marked outcrop but that troubled him no more than it did Perrin. His nose wrinkled at the burnt-sulphur smell that still hung in the air. “I thought I caught this stink on the way here. I expect you’d have mentioned this if you didn’t have things on your mind. A big pack. Bigger than anything I’ve ever seen or heard of.”

“That’s what Masuri said,” Perrin said absently. What was keeping Grady? How many people were there in Ebou Dar? That was the size of the Shaido camp. “She said she’s crossed the paths of seven packs, and this isn’t one she’s seen before.”

“Seven,” Elyas murmured in surprise. “Even an Aes Sedai would have to go some to do that. Most tales of Darkhounds are just people frightened by the dark.” Frowning at the tracks crossing the smoothed stone, he shook his head, and sadness entered his voice when he said, “They were wolves, once. The souls of wolves, anyway, caught and twisted by the Shadow. That was the core used to make Darkhounds, the Shadowbrothers. I think that’s why the wolves have to be at the Last Battle. Or maybe Darkhounds were made because wolves will be there, to fight them. The Pattern makes Sovarra lace look like a piece of string, sometimes. Anyway, it was a long time ago, during the Trolloc Wars as near as I can make out, and the War of the Shadow before that. Wolves have long memories. What a wolf knows is never really forgotten while other wolves remain alive. They avoid talking about Darkhounds, though, and they avoid Darkhounds, too. A hundred wolves could die trying to kill one Shadowbrother. Worse, if they fail, the Darkhound can eat the souls of those that aren’t quite dead yet, and in a year or so, there’d be a new pack of Shadowbrothers that didn’t remember ever being wolves. I hope they don’t remember, anyway.”

Perrin reined in, though he itched to keep moving. Shadowbrothers. The wolves’ name for Darkhounds had taken on a new grimness. “Can they eat a man’s soul, Elyas? Say a man who can talk to wolves?” Elyas shrugged. Only a handful of people could do what they did, as far as either man knew. An answer to that question might come only at the point of death. More importantly right then, if they had been wolves, once, they must be intelligent enough to report what they found. Masuri had implied as much. Foolishness to hope otherwise. How long before they did? How long did he have to free Faile?

The sound of hooves crunching in snow announced riders coming, and he hurriedly told Elyas that the Darkhounds had circled the camp, that they would be carrying word of him to whomever they reported to.

"I wouldn't worry overmuch, boy," the older man replied, watching warily for sight of the oncoming horses. Moving away from the stone, he began to stretch, working muscles over-long in the saddle. Elyas was too careful to be caught studying what would be swallowed in shadows to other eyes. "Sounds like they're hunting something more important than you. They'll stay on that till they find it if it takes all year. Don't worry. We'll get your wife out before those Darkhounds report you were here. Not saying it'll be easy, but we'll do it." There was determination in his voice, and in his scent, but not much hope. Almost none at all, in fact.

Fighting despair, refusing to let it rise again, Perrin resumed walking Stepper as Berelain and her bodyguard appeared through the trees, with Marline astride behind Annoura. As soon as the Aes Sedai drew rein, the twilight-eyed Wise One slid to the ground, shaking down her thick skirts to cover her dark stockings. Another woman might have appeared flustered over having her legs exposed, but not Marline. She was merely straightening her clothes. Annoura was the one who looked upset, a sour-faced disgruntlement that made her nose seem more like a beak. She kept silent, but her mouth was set to bite. She must have been certain her offer to negotiate with the Shaido would be accepted, especially with Berelain supporting and Marline seemingly neutral at worst. Grays were negotiators and mediators, adjudicators and treaty makers. That might have been her motivation. What else could it have been? A problem that he had to set aside while keeping it in mind. He had to take into account anything that might interfere with freeing Faile, but the problem he had to solve lay forty miles to the northeast.

While the Winged Guards formed their protective circle among the towering trees around the Traveling ground, Berelain brought her bay alongside Stepper and paced him, trying to engage Perrin in talk, to entice him with the rest of the woodhen. She smelled uncertain, doubtful of his decision. Maybe she hoped to talk him into attempting the ransom. He kept

Stepper moving and refused to listen. To make that attempt was to gamble everything on one toss of the dice. He could not gamble with Faile as the stake. Methodical as working at a forge, that was the way. Light, but he was tired. He folded himself in tighter around his anger, embracing the heat for energy.

Gallenne and Arganda arrived shortly after Berelain, with a double column of Ghealdanin lancers in burnished breastplates and bright conical helmets who interspersed themselves among the Mayeners between the trees. A trace of irritation entering her scent, Berelain left Perrin and rode to Gallenne. The pair of them sat their horses knee-to-knee, the one-eyed man bending his head to listen to what Berelain had to say. Her voice was low, but Perrin knew their subject, at least in part. Now and then one of them glanced at him as he walked Stepper back and forth, back and forth. Arganda planted his roan in one spot and stared south through the trees toward the camp, still as a statue yet radiating impatience as a fire radiated heat. He was the picture of a soldier, with his plumes and his sword and his silvered armor, his face as hard as stone, but he smelled on the brink of panic. Perrin wondered how he himself smelled. You could never catch your own scent unless you were in a closed space. He did not think he smelled of panic, just fear and anger. All would be well once he had Faile back. All would be well, then. Back and forth, back and forth.

At last Aram appeared, with a yawning Jur Grady on a dark bay gelding, dark enough that the white stripe on its nose made it seem almost a black. Dannil and a dozen Two Rivers men, spears and halberds abandoned for the moment in favor of their longbows, rode close behind, but not too close. A stocky fellow with a weathered face already beginning to show creases, though he was short of his middle years yet, Grady looked like a sleepy farmer despite of the long-hilted sword at his waist and his black coat with the silver sword pin on the high collar, but he had left the farm behind forever, and Dannil and the others always gave him room. They gave Perrin room, too, hanging back and peering at the ground, sometimes darting quick, embarrassed looks at him or Berelain. It did not matter. All would be well.

Aram tried to lead Grady to Perrin, but the Asha’man knew why he had been summoned. With a sigh, he climbed down beside Elyas, who squatted in a patch of sunlight to mark a map in the snow with his finger and speak of distance and direction, describing the place he wanted to go in detail, a clearing on a slope that faced almost south, with the ridge above notched in three places. Distance and direction were enough, if the distance and direction were precise, but the better the picture in an Asha'man's mind, the closer he could come to an exact spot.

"There's no margin for error here, boy." Elyas's eyes seemed to brighten with intensity. Whatever others thought of Asha'man, they never intimidated him. "There's lots of ridges in that country, and the main camp is only a mile or so the other side of this one. There'll be sentries, little parties that camp in a different place every night, maybe less than two miles the other way. You put us out off by much, and we'll be seen for sure."

Grady met that stare, unblinking. Then he nodded and scrubbed stubby fingers through his hair, drawing a deep breath. He looked as weary as Elyas. As bone-tired as Perrin felt. Making gateways, holding them open long enough for thousands of people and horses to pass through, was wearing work.

"Are you rested enough?" Perrin asked him. Tired men made mistakes, and mistakes with the One Power could be deadly. "Should I send for Neald?"

Grady stared up at him blearily, then shook his head. "Fager's no more rested than me. Less, maybe. I'm stronger than he is, a bit. Better if I do it." He turned to face northeast, and with no more warning, a vertical slash of silver-blue appeared beside the track-marked stone. Annoura jerked her mare out of the way with a loud gasp as the line of light widened into an opening, a hole in the air that showed a sunlit clearing on steep ground among trees much smaller than those around Perrin and the others. The already splintered pine shivered as it lost another thin slice, groaned, and collapsed the rest of the way with a snow-muffled crash that made the horses snort and dance. Annoura glared at the Asha'man, her face growing dark, but Grady just blinked and said, "Does that look like the right place?" Elyas adjusted his hat before nodding.

That nod was all Perrin waited for. He ducked his head and rode Stepper through into snow that was over the dun's fetlocks. It was a small clearing, but the sky full of white clouds overhead made it seem vastly open after the forest behind. The light was almost blinding compared to the forest, though the sun was still hidden by the tree-covered ridge above. The Shaido camp lay on the other side of that ridge. He stared toward the height yearningly. It was all he could do to stay where he was rather than race ahead to finally see where Faile was. He made himself turn Stepper to face the gateway as Marline came out.

Still studying him, hardly taking her eyes away long enough to place her feet in the snow without tripping, she moved to one side to let Aram and the Two Rivers men ride through. Accustomed to Traveling if not to Asha'man by now, they barely bent their heads enough to clear the top of the opening, and only the tallest did even that. It struck Perrin that the gateway was larger than the first one of Grady's make that he had passed through. He had had to dismount, then. It was a vague thought, no more important than a fly buzzing. Aram rode straight to Perrin, tight-faced and smelling impatient and eager to be going on, and once Dannil and the others were out of the way, climbing down and calmly fitting arrows to bows while they watched the surrounding trees, Gallenne appeared, peering grimly at the trees around them as though he expected an enemy to come dashing out, followed by half a dozen Mayeners who had to lower their red-streamered lances to crowd through after him.

A long pause passed with the gateway empty, but just when Perrin had decided to go back and see what was holding Elyas up, the bearded man led his horse out, with Arganda and six Ghealdanin riding at his heels, discontent carved on their faces. Their shining helmets and breastplates were nowhere to be seen, and they scowled as though they had been made to leave off their breeches.

Perrin nodded to himself. Of course. The Shaido camp was on the other side of this ridge, and so was the sun. That gleaming armor would have been like mirrors. He should have thought of that. He was still letting fear goad him into impatience and cloud his thinking. He had to be clearheaded, now more than ever. The detail he missed now could kill him and leave Faile in Shaido hands. It was easier to say that he had to let go of fear than to do it, though. How could he not be afraid for Faile? It had to be managed, but how?

To his surprise, Annoura rode through the gateway just ahead of Grady, who was leading his dark bay. Just as every time he had seen her pass through a gateway, she lay as flat on her mare as her saddle's high pommel would allow, grimacing at the opening that had been made with the tainted male half of the Power, and as soon as she was clear of it, she urged her horse as far up the slope as she could without entering the trees. Grady let the gateway snap shut, leaving the purple afterimage of a vertical bar in

Perrin's eyes, and Annoura flinched and looked away, glaring at Marline, at Perrin. If she had been anyone other than an Aes Sedai, he would have said she was simmering in a sullen fury. Berelain must have told her to come, but it was not Berelain she blamed for her having to be there.

"From here, we go afoot," Elyas announced in a quiet voice that barely carried over the occasional stamp of a horse's hoof. He had said the Shaido were careless and had no sentries, or almost none, but he spoke as if they could be within twenty paces. "A man on a horse stands out. The Shaido aren't blind, just blind for Aiel, which means they see twice as sharp as any of you, so don't go skylining yourselves when we reach the crest. And try not to make any more noise than you can help. They aren't deaf, either. They'll find our tracks, eventually—can't do much about that in snow—but we can't let them know we were here until after we're gone."

Already sour over being shorn of his armor and plumes, Arganda began to argue about Elyas giving orders. Not being a complete fool, he did it in a quiet voice that would not carry, but he had been a soldier since the age of fifteen, he had commanded soldiers fighting Whitecloaks, Altarans and Amadicians, and as he was fond of pointing out, he had fought in the Aiel War and lived through the Blood Snow, at Tar Valon. He knew about Aiel, and he did not need an unbarbered woodsman to tell him how to put his boots on. Perrin let it pass, since the man did his complaining in between telling off two men to hold the horses. He really was not a fool, just afraid for his queen. Gallenne left all of his men behind, muttering that lancers were worse than useless off their horses and would probably break their necks if he made them walk any distance. He was no fool, either, but he did see the black side first. Elyas took the lead, and Perrin waited only long enough to transfer the thick brass-bound tube of his looking glass from Stepper's saddlebags to his coat pocket before following.

The underbrush grew in clumps beneath the trees, which were mostly pine and fir, with clusters of others that were winter-gray and leafless, and the terrain, no steeper than the Sand Hills back home, if more rocky, presented no problems for Dannil and the other Two Rivers men, who ghosted up the slope with arrows nocked and eyes watchful, almost as silent as the mist of their breath. Aram, no stranger to the woods himself, stayed close to Perrin with his sword out. Once he started to chop a tangle of thick brown vines out of his way until Perrin stopped him with a hand on his arm, yet he made little more noise than Perrin, the faint crunch of boots in snow.

It was no shock that Marline moved through the trees as if she had grown up in a forest instead of the Aiel Waste, where anything that could be called a tree was rare and snow unheard of, though it seemed that all of her necklaces and bracelets should have made some clatter as they swung, but Annoura climbed with almost as little effort, floundering a little with her skirts but deftly avoiding the sharp thorns of dead cat's-claw and wait-a-minute vines. Aes Sedai usually found a way to surprise you. She managed to keep a wary eye on Grady, too, though the Asha'man appeared to be focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Sometimes he sighed heavily and paused for a minute, frowning toward the crest ahead, but somehow he never fell behind. Gallenne and Arganda were not young men, nor accustomed to walking where they could ride, and their breathing began to grow heavier as they ascended, sometimes pulling themselves up from tree to tree, but they watched one another nearly as much as they did the ground, each unwilling to let the other outdo him. The four Ghealdanin lancers, on the other hand, slipped and slid, tripped over roots hidden beneath the snow, caught their scabbards on vines, and growled curses when they fell on rocks or were stabbed by thorns. Perrin began to consider sending them back to wait with the horses. That, or hitting them over the head and leaving them to be picked up when he returned.

Abruptly, two Aiel stepped out of the undergrowth in front of Elyas, dark veils hiding their faces to the eyes, white cloaks hanging down their backs and spears and bucklers in hand. They were Maidens of the Spear by their height, which made them no less dangerous than any other *algai'd'siswai*, and in an instant, nine longbows were drawn, broadhead points aimed at their hearts.

"You could get hurt that way, Tuandha," Elyas muttered. "You should know better, Sulin." Perrin motioned for the Two Rivers men to lower their bows, and for Aram to lower his sword. He had caught their scents as soon as Elyas had, before they stepped into the open.

The Maidens exchanged startled looks, but they unveiled, letting the dark veils hang down their chests. "You see closely, Elyas Machera," Sulin said. Wiry and leather-faced, with a scar across one cheek, she had sharp blue eyes that could pierce like awls, but they still looked surprised, now. Tuandha was taller and younger, and she might have been pretty before losing her right eye and gaining a thick scar than ran from her chin up under her *shoufa*. It pulled up one corner of her mouth in a half-smile, but that was the only smile she ever gave.

"Your coats are different," Perrin said. Tuandha frowned down at her coat, all gray and green and brown, then at Sulin's identical garment. "Your cloaks, too." Elyas *was* tired, to make that slip. "They haven't started moving, have they?"

"No, Perrin Aybara," Sulin said. "The Shaido seem prepared to stay in one place for a time. They made the people from the city leave and go north last night, those they would let leave." She gave a small shake of her head, still perturbed by the Shaido forcing people to become *gai'shain* who did not follow *ji'e'toh*. "Your friends Jondyn Barran and Get Ayliah and Hu Marwin have gone after them to see if they can learn anything. Our spear-sisters and Gaul are making their way around the camp again. We waited here for Elyas Machera to return with you." She seldom let emotion into her voice, and there was none there now, but she smelled of sadness. "Come, I will show you."

The two Maidens turned up the slope, and he hurried after them, forgetting anyone else. A little short of the crest, they crouched, then went to hands and knees, and he copied them, crawling the last spans through the snow to peer past a tree over the top of the ridgeline. The forest ended there, fading into scattered brush and isolated saplings on the downslope. He was high enough to see for several leagues, across rolling ridges like long treeless hills to where a dark band of forest began again. He could see everything he wanted to see, and so much less than he needed.

He had tried to imagine the Shaido camp from Elyas' description, but the reality dwarfed his imaginings. A thousand paces below lay a mass of low Aiel tents and every other sort of tent, a mass of wagons and carts and people and horses. It spread for well over a mile in every direction from the gray stone walls of a city halfway to the next rise. He knew the sprawl must be the same on the other side. It was not one of the great cities, not like Caemlyn or Tar Valon, less than four hundred paces wide along the side he could see and narrower on the others, it seemed, but still a city with high walls and towers and what looked like a fortress at the northmost end. Yet the Shaido encampment swallowed it whole. Faile was somewhere in that great lake of people.

Fumbling his looking glass from his pocket, he remembered at the last instant to cup one hand for shade on the far end of the tube. The sun was a golden ball almost ahead of him, just shy of halfway to its noonday height. A stray reflection from the lens could ruin everything. Groups of people leapt up in the looking glass, their faces clear, at least to his eye. Long-haired women with dark shawls over their shoulders, draped in dozens of long necklaces, women with fewer necklaces milking goats, women wearing the *cadin'sor* and sometimes carrying spears and bucklers, women peeking from the deep cowls of heavy white robes as they scurried across snow already trampled halfway to mud. There were men and children, too, but his eye skipped past them hungrily, ignored them. Thousands upon thousands of women, just counting those in white.

"Too many," Marline whispered, and he lowered the glass to glare at her. The others had joined the Maidens and him, all lying in a row in the snow along the ridgeline. The Two Rivers men were taking pains to keep their bowstrings up out of the snow without raising their bows above the ridgeline. Arganda and Gallenne were using their own looking glasses to study the camp below, and Grady was staring down the slope with his chin propped on his hands, every bit as intent as the two soldiers. Maybe he was using the Power in some way. Marline and Annoura were staring at the camp, too, the Aes Sedai licking her lips and the Wise One frowning. Perrin did not think Marline had intended to speak aloud.

"If you think I'll walk away just because there are more Shaido than I expected," he began heatedly, but she broke in, meeting his scowl with a level look.

"Too many Wise Ones, Perrin Aybara. Wherever I look, I can see a woman channeling. Just for a moment here, a moment there—Wise Ones do not channel all the time—but they are everywhere I look. Too many to be the Wise Ones of ten septs."

He drew a deep breath. "How many do you think there are?"

"I think maybe all the Shaido Wise Ones are down there," Marline replied, as calm as if she were talking about the price of barley. "All who can channel."

All of them? That made no sense! How could they all be together here, when the Shaido seemed to be scattered everywhere? At least, he had heard tales of what had to be Shaido raids all across Ghealdan and Amadicia, tales of raids here in Altara long before Faile was taken and rumors from even farther. *Why* would they all be together? If the Shaido intended to gather here, the whole clan . . . No, he had to deal with what he knew for fact. That was bad enough. “How many?” he asked again, in a reasonable tone.

“Do not growl at me, Perrin Aybara. I cannot say exactly how many Shaido Wise Ones remain alive. Even Wise Ones die from sickness, snakebite, accident. Some died at Dumai’s Wells. We found bodies left behind, and they must have carried away those they could for proper burial. Even Shaido cannot have abandoned all custom. If all who remain alive are below, and the apprentices who can channel, I would say perhaps four hundred. Perhaps more, but fewer than five hundred. There were fewer than five hundred Shaido Wise Ones who could channel before they crossed the Dragonwall, and perhaps fifty apprentices.” Most farmers would have shown more emotion over the barley.

Still staring at the Shaido camp, Annoura made a strangled sound, half a sob. “Five hundred? Light! Half the Tower from one clan? Oh, Light!”

“We could sneak in, in the night,” Dannil murmured from down the row, “the way you sneaked into that Whitecloak camp back home.” Elyas gave a grunt that might have meant anything but did not sound hopeful.

Sulin snorted derisively. “*We* could not sneak into that camp, not with any real hope of getting out. *You* would be trussed like a goat for the spit before you passed the first tents.”

Perrin nodded slowly. He had thought of slipping in under cover of darkness and somehow spiriting Faile away. And the others, of course. She would not go without the others. He had never had any real belief that could work, though, not against Aiel, and the size of the camp had quenched the last glimmers. He could wander for days among that many people without finding her.

Abruptly, he realized that he was not having to fight down despair. The anger remained, but it was cold as steel in winter, now, and he could not detect a single drop of the hopelessness that had threatened to drown him before. There were ten thousand *algai’d’siswai* in that camp, and five hundred women who could channel—Gallenne had the right of it; prepare for the worst, and all your surprises were pleasant ones—five hundred women who would not hesitate to use the Power as a weapon; Faile was hidden like one snowflake in a meadow covered with snow, but when you piled up so much, there just was no point in despair. You had to buckle down or be plowed under. Besides, he could see the puzzle, now. Nat

Torfinn had always said any puzzle could be solved, once you found out where to push and where to pull.

To the north and south, the land had been cleared farther from the city than the rise where he lay. Scattered farmhouses, none with smoke rising from its chimney, dotted the landscape, and rail fences marked out fields beneath the snow, but more than a handful of men trying to approach from either direction might as well carry torches and banners and blow trumpets. There seemed to be a road leading roughly south through the farms and another roughly north. Useless to him, probably, but you never could tell. Jondyn might bring back some information about the city, though what good that would do when the city was in the middle of the Shaido, he could not begin to guess. Gaul and the Maidens who were making their way around the camp would be able to tell him what lay beyond the next ridge. A saddle in that ridge had the look of a road heading somewhere east. Oddly, a cluster of windmills stood maybe a mile north of the saddle, long white arms turning slowly, and there appeared to another group of windmills atop the next rise beyond. A row of arches, like a long narrow bridge, stretched down the slope from the nearest windmills all the way to the city walls.

“Does anybody know what that is?” he asked, pointing. Studying it through the looking glass told him nothing except that it seemed made of the same gray stone as the wall. The thing was much too narrow for a bridge. It lacked side walls, and there did not seem to be anything for a bridge to cross.

“It is for bringing water,” Sulin replied. “It runs for five miles, to a lake. I do not know why they did not build their city closer, but most of the land around the lake looks as if it will be mud when the cold goes away.” She no longer stumbled over unfamiliar words like mud, yet a touch of awe remained in “lake,” in the idea of so much water in one place. “You think to stop their water supply? That will surely make them come out.” She understood fighting over water. Most fighting in the Waste started with water. “But I do not think—”

The colors erupted inside Perrin’s head, an explosion of hues so strong that sight and hearing vanished. All sight except for the colors themselves, at least. They were a vast tide, as if all the times he had pushed them out of his head had built a dam that they now smashed aside in a silent flood, swirling in soundless whirlpools that tried to suck him under. An image coalesced in the middle of it, Rand and Nynaeve sitting on the ground facing one another, as clear as if they were right in front of him. He had no time for Rand, not now. Not now! Clawing at the colors like a drowning man clawing for the surface, he—forced—them—out!

Sight and hearing, the world around, crashed in on him.

“. . . it’s madness,” Grady was saying in worried tones. “Nobody can handle enough of *saidin* for me to feel that far off! Nobody!”

“No one can handle that much of *saidar,* either,” Marline murmured. “But someone is.”

“The Forsaken?” Annoura’s voice shook. “The Forsaken, using some *sa’angreal* we never suspected. Or . . . or the Dark One himself.”

They were all three peering back to the north and west, and if Marline looked calmer than Annoura or Grady, she smelled as frightened and worried. Except for Elyas, the others were watching those three with the look of men awaiting an announcement that a new Breaking of the World had begun. Elyas’s face was accepting. A wolf would snap at a landslide carrying him to his death, but a wolf knew that death came sooner or later, and you could not fight death.

“It’s Rand,” Perrin muttered thickly. He shuddered as the colors tried to return, but he hammered them down. “His business. He’ll take care of it, whatever it is.” Everyone was staring at him, even Elyas. “I need prisoners, Sulin. They must send out hunting parties. Elyas says they have sentries out a few miles, small groups. Can you get me prisoners?”

“Listen to me carefully,” Annoura said, the words rushing out of her. She rose up out of the snow enough to reach over Marline and seize a fistful of Perrin’s cloak. “Something is happening, perhaps wonderful, perhaps terrible, but in any case momentous, more so than anything in recorded history! We must know what! Grady can take us there, close enough to see. *I* could take us if I knew the weaves. We must know!”

Meeting her gaze, Perrin raised his hand, and she stopped with her mouth open. Aes Sedai never shut up that easily, yet she did. “I told you what it is. Our work is right down there in front of us. Sulin?”

Sulin’s head swung from him to the Aes Sedai to Marline. Finally, she shrugged. “You will learn little useful even if you put them to the question. They will embrace the pain and laugh at you. And shame will be slow—if these Shaido can still be shamed.”

“Whatever I learn will be more than I know now,” he replied. His work lay in front of him. A puzzle to solve, Faile to free, and the Shaido to destroy. That was all that mattered in the world.

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CHAPTER 9

Traps

“And she complained again that the other Wise Ones are timid,” Faile finished in her best meek voice, shifting the tall basket she held balanced on one shoulder, shifting from foot to foot in the muddy snow. The basket was not heavy, though filled with dirty laundry, and the wool of her white robe was thick and warm, with two under-robes beneath, but her soft leather boots, themselves bleached white, gave little protection from the cold slush. “I was told to report what the Wise One Sevanna said exactly,” she added quickly. Someryn was one of the “other” Wise Ones, and her mouth had turned down at the word timid.

With her eyes lowered, that was all Faile could see of Someryn’s face. *Gai’shain* were required to maintain a humble manner, especially the *gai’shain* who were not Aiel, and though she looked up through her eyelashes to read Someryn’s expression, the other woman was taller than most men, even Aiel men, a yellow-haired giant who towered over her. Most of what she could see was Someryn’s over-large bosom, plump sun-dark cleavage exposed by a blouse unlaced halfway down her chest and covered mainly by a massive collection of long necklaces, firedrops and emeralds, rubies and opals, three-tiered strands of fat pearls and intricately patterned chains of gold. Most of the Wise Ones seemed to dislike Sevanna, who “spoke for the chief” until a new Shaido clan chief could be chosen, an event unlikely to occur any time soon, and they tried to undercut her authority whenever they were not squabbling among themselves or forming cliques, but many shared Sevanna’s love of wetlander jewelry, and some had even begun wearing finger rings, like Sevanna. On her right hand Someryn wore a large white opal that flashed caverns of red whenever she adjusted her shawl, and a long blue sapphire surrounded by rubies on the left. She had not adopted silk clothing, however. Her blouse was plain white *algode*, from the Waste, and her skirt and shawl thick wool as dark as the folded scarf that held her waist-long yellow hair back from her face. The cold did not appear to discomfort her in the least.

The two of them stood just beyond what Faile thought of as the border between the Shaido camp and the *gai'shain* camp—the prisoners' camp—not that there really were two camps. A few *gai'shain* slept among the Shaido, but the rest were kept to the center of the camp unless doing their assigned work, cattle fenced off from the lure of freedom by a wall of Shaido. Most of the men and women who passed them wore white *gai'shain* robes, though few as finely woven as what she wore. With so many to clothe, the Shaido scooped up any sort of white cloth they could find. Some were garbed in layers of coarse linen or toweling or robes of rough tent cloth, and many of the robes were stained with mud or soot. Only now and then did one of the *gai'shain* show the height and pale eyes of an Aiel. The vast majority were ruddy-faced Amadicians, olive-skinned Altarans, and pale Cairhienin, along with occasional travelers or merchants from Illian or Tarabon or elsewhere who had found themselves in the worst place at the worst time. The Cairhienin were the longest held and most resigned to their situation aside from the handful of Aiel in white, but they all kept their eyes down and moved about their tasks as fast as the trampled mush of snow and mud would allow. *Gai'shain* were expected to display humility, obedience, and an eagerness to embrace both. Any less resulted in painful reminders.

Faile would very much have liked to hurry on herself. Cold feet were only a small part of it, and eagerness to do Sevanna's laundry less. Too many eyes could see her standing there in the open with Someryn, and even with her deep cowl hiding her face, the broad mesh belt of shiny golden links around her waist and a close-fitting collar to match marked her as one of Sevanna's servants. No one called them that—in Aiel eyes, being a servant was demeaning—but that was what they were, the wetlanders at least, just unpaid and with fewer rights and less freedom than any servant Faile had ever heard tell of. Sooner or later Sevanna herself was going to learn that Wise Ones were stopping her *gai'shain* to question them. Sevanna had well over a hundred servants and kept adding to them, and Faile was certain that every last one was repeating every word they heard Sevanna say to the Wise Ones.

It was a brutally efficient trap. Sevanna was a harsh mistress, in a rather casual way, never snapping, seldom openly angry, but the slightest infraction, the smallest slip in demeanor or behavior, was punished immediately with the switch or the strap, and every night the five *gai'shain* who had pleased her least that day were chosen out for further punishment, sometimes a night bound and gagged on top of a beating, just to encourage the rest. Faile did not want to think of what the woman would order for a spy. On the other hand, the Wise Ones had made it clear that anyone who did not talk freely of what they heard, anyone who tried to hold back or bargain, faced an uncertain future, possibly ending in a shallow grave. Harming a *gai'shain* beyond the permitted limits of discipline was a violation of *ji'e'toh,* the web of honor and obligation that governed the lives of Aiel, but wetlander *gai'shain* seemed to stand outside a number of the rules.

Sooner or later, one side or the other of that trap would snap shut. All that had held the jaws apart this long was that the Shaido seemed to see their wetlander *gai'shain* as no different from cart horses or pack animals, though in truth the animals received far better treatment. Now and then a *gai'shain* tried to run away, but aside from that, one simply gave them food and shelter, put them to work and punished them if they faltered. The Wise Ones no more expected them to disobey, Sevanna no more expected them to spy on her, than they expected a cart horse to sing. Sooner or later, though . . . And that was not the only trap Faile was caught in.

"Wise One, I have nothing more to tell," she murmured when Someryn said nothing. Unless you were addled in the head, you did not just walk away from a Wise One, not until she dismissed you. "The Wise One Sevanna talks freely in front of us, but she says little."

The tall woman remained silent, and after a long moment Faile dared to raise her eyes a little more. Someryn was staring over Faile's head, her mouth hanging open in stunned amazement. Frowning, Faile shifted the basket on her shoulder and looked behind her, but there was nothing to account for Someryn's expression, just the sprawl of the camp, dark low Aiel tents mingled with peaked tents and walled tents and every sort of tent, most in shades of dirty white or pale brown, others green or blue or red or even striped. The Shaido took everything valuable when they struck, everything that might prove useful, and they left behind nothing that resembled a tent.

As it was, they hardly had enough shelter to go around. There were ten septs gathered here, more than seventy thousand Shaido and nearly as many *gai'shain*, by her estimate, and everywhere she saw only the usual bustle, dark-clad Aiel going about their lives among scurrying white-clad captives. A smith was working the bellows on his forge in front of an open tent with his tools laid out on a tanned bull hide, children were herding flocks of bleating goats with switches, a trader was displaying her goods in an open pavilion of yellow canvas, everything from golden candlesticks and silver bowls to pots and kettles, all looted. A lean man with a horse on a lead stood talking with a gray-haired Wise One named Masalin, no doubt seeking a cure for some ailment the animal had, from the way he kept pointing at the horse's belly. Nothing to make Someryn gape.

Just as Faile was about to turn back around, she noticed a dark-haired Aiel woman facing the other way. Not just dark hair, but hair black as a raven's wing, a great rarity among Aiel. Even from behind, Faile thought she recognized Alarys, another of the Wise Ones. There were over four hundred Wise Ones in the camp, but she had learned quickly to know all of them on sight. Mistaking a Wise One for a weaver or a potter was a quick way to earn a switching.

It might have meant nothing that Alarys was standing stock-still and looking in the same direction as Someryn, or that she had let her shawl slide to the ground, except that just beyond her, Faile recognized still another Wise One, also looking off to the north and west, and slapping at people who walked in front of her. That had to be Jesain, a woman who would have been called short even if she were not Aiel, with a great mass of hair red enough to make fire look pale and a temper to match. Masalin was talking to the man with the horse and gesturing to the animal. She could not channel, but three Wise Ones who could were all staring in the same direction. Only one thing could account for it; they saw someone channeling up there on the forested ridgeline beyond the camp. A Wise One channeling surely would not make any of them stare. Could it be an Aes Sedai? Or more than one? Better not to get her hopes up. It was too soon.

A clout on the head staggered her, and she nearly dropped the basket.

"Why are you standing like a lump?" Someryn snarled. "Go on with your work. Go, before I . . . !"

Faile went, balancing the basket with one hand, lifting the skirts of her robe out of the muddy snow with the other, and moving as quickly as she could without slipping and falling in the muck. Someryn never hit anyone, and she never raised her voice. If she was doing both, it was best to be out of her way with no delay. Humbly and obediently.

Pride said to maintain a cool defiance, a quiet refusal to yield, yet sense said that was the way to find herself guarded twice as closely as she was. The Shaido might take the wetlander *gai'shain* for domesticated animals, but they were not completely blind. They must think that she had accepted her captivity as inescapable if she were to be able to escape, and that was very much on her mind. The sooner, the better. Certainly before Perrin caught up. She had never doubted that Perrin was following her, that he would find her somehow—the man would walk through a wall if he took it into his head!—but she had to escape before that. She was a soldier's daughter. She knew the Shaido's numbers, she knew the strength Perrin had to call on, and she knew she had to reach him before that clash could take place. There was just the little matter of getting free of the Shaido, first.

What had the Wise Ones been looking at—the Aes Sedai or Wise Ones with Perrin? Light, she hoped not, not yet! But other matters took precedence, the laundry not least. She carried the basket toward what remained of the city of Malden, weaving through a steady flow of *gai'shain*. Those leaving the city each carried a pair of heavy buckets balanced on the ends of a pole carried across the shoulders, while the buckets of those going in swayed, empty, on their poles. As many people as were in the camp required a great deal of water, and this was how it came to them, bucket by bucket. It was easy to tell the *gai'shain* who had been inhabitants of Malden. This far north in Altara, they were fair rather than olive-complected, and some even had blue eyes, but all stumbled along in a daze. Shaido climbing the city walls in the night had overwhelmed the defenses before most of the residents knew they were in danger, and they still seemed unable to believe what their lives had come to.

Faile searched for a particular face, though, someone she hoped would not be carrying water today. She had been looking ever since the Shaido made camp here, four days ago. Just outside the city gates, which stood open and shoved back against the granite walls, she found her, a white-clad woman taller than herself with a flat basket of bread on her hip and her hood pushed back just enough to show a bit of dark reddish hair. Chiad appeared to be studying the iron-strapped gates that had failed to protect Malden, but she turned away from them as soon as Faile approached. They paused side by side, not really looking at one another while they pretended to shift their baskets. There was no reason two *gai'shain* should not talk to one another, but no one should remember that they had been captured together. Bain and Chiad were not watched as closely as *gai'shain* serving Sevanna, but that might change if anyone remembered. Almost everyone in sight was *gai'shain,* and from west of the Dragonwall besides, yet too many had learned to curry favor by carrying tales and rumors. Most people did what they must to survive, and some always tried to feather their own nests, whatever the circumstances.

"They got away the first night here," Chiad murmured. "Bain and I led them out to the trees and obscured the tracks coming back. No one seems to realize they are gone, as far as I can see. With so many *gai'shain,* it seems a wonder these Shaido notice any who run away."

Faile heaved a small sigh of relief. Three days gone. The Shaido did notice runaways. Few managed a full day of freedom, but the chances of success increased with every day uncaught, and it seemed certain the Shaido would move on tomorrow, or the next day. They had not halted as long as this since Faile was captured. She suspected they might be trying to march back to the Dragonwall and recross into the Waste.

It had not been easy talking Lacile and Arrela into leaving without her. What finally convinced them had been the argument that they could carry word to Perrin of where Faile was, along with a warning of how many Shaido there were and a claim that Faile already had her own escape well in hand and any interference by him might endanger that and her. She was sure she had made them believe all of that—she did have her escape in hand, in a way; she had several plans, in fact, and one of them had to work—but until this minute she had been half convinced the two women would decide their oaths to her required them to stay. Water oaths were tighter than oaths of fealty in some ways, yet they left considerable room for stupidity in the name of honor. In truth, she did not know whether the pair could find Perrin, but either way, they were free and she had only two other women to worry about. Of course, the absence of three of Sevanna's servants would be noticed very quickly, within hours, and the best trackers would be sent to bring them back. Faile was accustomed to the woods, but she knew better than to pit herself against Aiel trackers. It was very unpleasant for "ordinary" *gai'shain* who ran away and were recaptured. For Sevanna's *gai'shain,* it might be better to die in the attempt. At best, they would never be allowed the opportunity for a second try.

"The rest of us would have a better chance if you and Bain came with us," she said in a low voice. The flow of men and women in white carrying water by them continued, no one seeming to more than glance their way, but wariness had become ingrained in her these last two weeks. Light, it seemed more like two years! "What difference can there be between helping Lacile and Arrela reach the forest and helping the rest of us get further?" That was despair talking. She knew the difference—Bain and Chiad were her friends and had taught her about Aiel ways, about *ji'e'toh* and even a little Maiden handtalk—and it did not surprise her when Chiad turned her head slightly to regard her with gray eyes that had nothing of *gai'shain* meekness in them. Nor did her voice, though she still spoke quietly.

"I will help you as far as I can because it is not right for the Shaido to hold you. You do not follow *ji'e'toh.* I do. If I cast aside my honor and my obligations just because the Shaido have, then I allow them to decide how I will act. I will wear white for a year and a day and then they will release me, or I will walk away, but I will not throw away who I am." Without another word, Chiad strode off into the throngs of *gai'shain.*

Faile half-raised a hand to stop her, then let it fall. She had asked that question before, receiving a gentler answer, and in asking again, she had insulted her friend. She would have to apologize. Not to keep Chiad's help—the woman would not withdraw that—but because she had her own honor, even if she did not follow *ji'e'toh.* You did not insult friends and simply forget it, or expect them to. Apologies must wait, though. They dared not be seen talking too long.

Malden had been a prosperous city, a producer of good wool and great quantities of fair-quality wine, but an empty ruin inside the walls, now. As many of the slate-roofed houses were timber as were stone, and fire had gotten loose during the looting. The southern end of the city was half piles of blackened timbers decorated with icicles, half scorched, roofless walls. The streets everywhere, whether stone-paved or dirt, were gray with windblown ash trampled into the snow, and the whole city stank of charred wood. Water was one thing Malden apparently never ran short of, but like all Aiel, the Shaido placed a very high value on it, and they knew nothing of fighting fires. There was little in the Aiel Waste that *could* burn. They might have let the entire city be consumed had they been finished with stealing, and as it was, they dithered over the waste of water before forcing *gai'shain* into bucket lines at spearpoint and letting the men of Malden bring out their pump-wagons. Faile would have thought the Shaido would at least have rewarded those men by allowing them to leave with the people who had escaped being chosen for *gai'shain,* but the men who worked the pumps were young and fit, just the sort the Shaido wanted for their *gai'shain.* The Shaido kept some of the rules regarding *gai'shain*—women who were pregnant or had children under the age of ten had been let go, and youths under sixteen, and the city's blacksmiths, who had been both mystified and grateful—but gratitude never entered into it.

Furniture littered the streets, large overturned tables and ornate chests and chairs, and sometimes a crumpled wall hanging or broken dishes. Bits of clothing lay everywhere, coats and breeches and dresses, most sliced to tatters. The Shaido had seized anything made of gold or silver, anything that had gems, anything useful or edible, but the furnishings must have been hauled outside in the frenzy of looting, then abandoned when whoever was carrying them decided that a little gilded edging or fine carving did not make them worth the effort. Aiel did not use chairs in any case, except for chiefs, and there was no room on the carts and wagons for any of those heavy tables. A few Shaido still wandered through, searching the houses and inns and shops for anything they might have missed, yet most people she saw were *gai'shain* carrying buckets. Aiel had no interest in cities except as storehouses to be plundered. A pair of Maidens passed her, using the butts of their spears to drive a naked, wild-eyed man, his arms bound behind him, toward the gates. Doubtless he had thought he could hide in a basement or attic until the Shaido were gone. Doubtless the Maidens had thought to find a cache of coin or plate. When a huge man in the *cadin'sor* of an *algai'd'siswai* stepped in front of her, she swerved to go around him as smoothly as she could. A *gai'shain* always made way for any Shaido.

"You are very pretty," he said, putting himself in her way. He was the biggest man she had ever seen, perhaps seven feet tall and thick in proportion. Not fat—she had never seen a fat Aiel—but very wide. He belched, and she smelled wine fumes. Drunken Aiel she had seen, since they found all those casks of wine here in Malden. She felt no fear, though. *Gai'shain* might be punished for any number of infractions, often for transgressions few of the wetlanders understood, but the white robes gave a certain protection, too, and she had another layer besides.

"I am *gai'shain* to the Wise One Sevanna," she said in as obsequious a tone as she could manage. To her disgust, she had gotten so she could manage it very well. "Sevanna would be displeased if I shirked my duties to talk." She tried again to step around him, and gasped when he seized her arm in a hand that could have wrapped around it twice with inches to spare.

"Sevanna has hundreds of *gai'shain.* She will not miss one for an hour or two."

The basket fell to the street as he plucked her into the air as easily as picking up a pillow. Before she knew what was happening, he had her tucked beneath his arm, her own arms trapped at her sides. She opened her mouth to scream, and he used his free hand to press her face flat against his chest. The smell of sweaty wool filled her nose. All she could see was gray-brown wool. Where were those two Maidens? Maidens of the Spear would not let him do this! *Any* Aiel who saw would step in! She never expected help from any of the *gai'shain.* One or two might run for help, if she was lucky, but the very first lesson a *gai'shain* learned was that even a threat of violence got you hung up by the ankles and beaten till you howled. The first lesson wetlanders learned, at least; Aiel already knew: a *gai'shain* was forbidden to offer violence for any reason. *Any* reason. Which did not stop her from kicking at the man furiously. She might as well have been kicking a wall for all the impression it made. He was moving, carrying her somewhere. She bit as hard down as hard as she could, and got a mouthful of coarse dirty wool for her pains, her teeth sliding over muscle with no slack to give her purchase. He seemed made of stone. She screamed, but her shriek sounded muffled even to her own ears.

Abruptly, the monster carrying her stopped.

"I made this one *gai'shain,* Nadric," another man's deep voice said.

Faile felt a rumble of laughter in the chest against her face even before she heard it. She did not stop her kicking, never stopped writhing or trying to shout, yet her captor seemed unaware of her efforts. "She belongs to Sevanna now, Brotherless," the huge man—Nadric?—said contemptuously. "Sevanna takes what she wants, and I take what I want. It is the new way."

"Sevanna took her," the other man replied calmly, "but I never gave her to Sevanna. I never offered to trade her to Sevanna. Do you abandon your honor because Sevanna abandons hers?"

There was a long silence broken only by the smothered noises Faile was making. She did not stop struggling, could not stop, but she might as well have been an infant in swaddling.

“She is not pretty enough to fight over,” Nadric said finally. He did not sound frightened or even concerned.

His hands fell away from her, and Faile’s teeth ripped loose from his coat so suddenly she thought one or two might be jerked out, but the ground smashed into her back and all of the air rushed out of her lungs along with most of the wits from her head. By the time she could gather enough breath to push up on her hands, the huge man was striding away down the alley, almost back to the street. It *was* an alley, a narrow track of dirt between two stone buildings. No one would have seen what he did back here. Shivering—she was not trembling, just shivering!—spitting out the taste of unwashed wool and Nadric’s sweat, she glared at his back. If the knife she had hidden away had been within reach, she would have stabbed him. Not pretty enough to fight over, was she? Part of her knew that was ludicrous, but she was grabbing hold of anything that could feed her anger, just for the warmth of it. To help her stop shivering. She would have stabbed him and stabbed him, until she could not lift her arms.

Getting up on legs that wobbled, she explored her teeth with her tongue. They were all sound, nothing broken or missing. Her face had been scraped by the rough wool of Nadric’s coat, and her lips were bruised, but she was unhurt. She reminded herself of that. She was unhurt, and free to walk out of the alley. As free as anyone in *gai’shain* robes could be, anyway. If there were many like Nadric who no longer saw the protection of those robes, then order was breaking down among the Shaido. The camp would be a more dangerous place, but disorder would bring more opportunities for escape. That was how she had to look at this. She had learned something that could aid her. If only she could stop shivering.

At last, reluctantly, she looked at her rescuer. She had recognized his voice. He stood well back from her, watching her calmly, making no move to offer sympathy. She thought she would have screamed if he touched her. Another absurdity, since he had rescued her, but a fact all the same. Rolan was no more than a hand shorter than Nadric, and almost as wide, and she had reason to want to stab him, too. He was not Shaido, but one of the Brotherless, the *Mera’din*, men who had left their clans because they would not follow Rand al’Thor, and he had indeed been the one to “make her *gai'shain*." True, he had kept her from freezing to death the night after she was captured by wrapping her in his own coat, yet she would not have needed the covering if he had not cut off every last stitch of her clothing in the first place. The first part of being made *gai'shain* was always being stripped, but that was no reason to forgive him for any of it.

"Thank you," she said, the words sour on her tongue.

"I do not ask for gratitude," he said mildly. "Do not look at me as though you want to bite me just because you could not bite Nadric."

She managed not to snarl at him—barely; she could not have summoned meekness right then had she wanted to—before she turned away and stalked back out to the street. Well, she tried to stalk. Her legs were still shaking enough that it was more of a lurch. The passing *gai'shain* barely glanced in her direction as they trudged along the street with their water buckets. Few of the captives wanted to share anyone else's troubles. They had enough of their own.

Reaching the laundry basket, she gave a sigh. It lay on its side, white silk blouses and dark silk skirts divided for riding spilled out over the dirty ash-smeared pavement. At least it seemed no one had trodden on them. Anyone who had been carrying water all morning, and had a day of it to look forward to, could have been forgiven if they failed to step aside, with bits of clothing lying all around that had been cut off the people of Malden who had been made *gai'shain*. She would have tried to forgive them. Righting the basket, she began gathering the clothes, shaking off the dirt and ash that would come loose and careful not to grind in the rest. Unlike Someryn, Sevanna had taken to silk. She wore nothing else. She was as proud of her silks as she was of her jewelry, and equally possessive of both. She would not be pleased if any of these garments failed to be returned clean.

As Faile laid the last blouse atop the rest, Rolan reached past her and lifted the basket with one hand. On the brink of snapping at him—she could carry her own burdens, thank you very much!—she swallowed the words. Her brain was the only real weapon she possessed, and she had to use it instead of letting her temper have control. Rolan had not been here by chance. That was straining credulity too far. She had seen him frequently since she was captured, much more often than chance could account for. He had been following her. What was it he had told Nadric? He had not given her to Sevanna or offered to trade her. For all that he had been the one to capture her, she thought he disapproved of making wetlanders *gai'shain*—most of the Brotherless did—but apparently he still claimed his rights to her.

She was sure she did not need to fear him trying to force her. Rolan had had his chance for that, when he had her naked and bound, and he could have been looking at a fence post then. Perhaps he did not like women in that way. In any case, the Brotherless were almost as much outsiders among the Shaido as the wetlanders. None of the Shaido really trusted them, and the Brotherless themselves often seemed like men holding their noses, accepting what they considered a lesser wrong rather than embrace a greater, but no longer truly sure that it was lesser. If she could make a friend of the man, perhaps he would be willing to help her. Not to escape, certainly—that would asking too much—but . . . Or would it? The only way to find out was to try.

"Thank you," she said again, and this time she worked up a smile. Surprisingly, he smiled back. A small smile, barely there at all, but Aiel were not demonstrative. They could seem stone-faced till you became used to them.

For a few paces they walked along side by side in silence, him carrying the basket in one hand and her holding up the skirts of her robes. They might have been out for a stroll. If you squinted. Some of the passing *gai'shain* looked at them in surprise, but they always put their eyes down again quickly. She could not think of how to begin—she did not want him to think she was flirting; he might like women after all—but he took away the necessity.

"I have watched you," he said. "You are strong and fierce, and not afraid, I think. Most of the wetlanders are frightened half out of their heads. They bluster until they are punished, and then they weep and cower. I think you are a woman of much *ji*."

"I am frightened," she replied. "I just try not let it show. Crying never does any good." Most men believed that. Tears could get in your way if you let them, but a few tears shed at night could help you make it through the next day.

"There are times to weep and times to laugh. I would like to see you laugh."

She did laugh, a dry laugh. "There's little reason while I wear white, Rolan." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. Was she going too fast? But he only nodded.

“Still, I would like to see it. Smiles suit your face. Laughter would suit it even better. I have no wife, but I can make a woman laugh, sometimes. I have heard you have a husband?”

Startled, Faile tripped over her own feet and caught herself on his arm. Quickly, she snatched her hand away, studying him past the edge of her cowl. He paused long enough for her to steady herself, then walked on when she did. His expression was no more than mildly curious. Despite Nadric, Aiel custom was for a woman to do the asking, after a man attracted her interest. Giving her gifts was one way. Making her laugh was another. So much for his not liking women. “I do have a husband, Rolan, and I love him very much. Very much. I can’t wait to return to him.”

“What happens while you are *gai’shain* cannot be held against you when you put off white,” he said calmly, “but perhaps you wetlanders do not see it that way. Still, it can be lonely when you are *gai’shain.* Perhaps we can talk sometimes.”

The man wanted to see her laugh, and she did not know whether to laugh or cry. He was announcing that he did not intend to give up trying to attract her interest. Aiel women admired perseverance in a man. Still, if Chiad and Bain would not, could not, help beyond giving her aid in reaching the trees, Rolan was her best hope. She thought she could convince him, given time. Of course she could; faint hearts never succeeded! He was a scorned outcast, accepted only because the Shaido needed his spear. But she was going to have to give him a reason to persist.

“I would like that,” she said carefully. A little flirting might be necessary after all, but she could not go from telling him how much she loved her husband straight to wide-eyed and breathless. Not that she had any intention of going that far—she was no Domani!—yet she might need to come close. For the time being, a little reminder that Sevanna had usurped his “right” would not go amiss. “I have work to do now, though, and I doubt Sevanna would be pleased if I spent the time talking to you instead.”

Rolan nodded again, and Faile sighed. He might know how to make a woman laugh, as he claimed, but he certainly did not talk very much. She was going to have to work to draw him out if she intended to get anything more than jokes she did not understand. Even with Chiad and Bain’s help, Aiel humor remained incomprehensible to her.

They had reached the broad square in front of the fortress at the north end of the city, a towered mass of gray stone walls that had protected its inhabitants no better than the city walls. Faile thought she had seen the lady who had ruled Malden and everything for twenty miles around, a handsome dignified widow in her middle years, among the *gai'shain* hauling water. White-clad men and women carrying buckets crowded the stone-paved square. At the eastern end of the square, what looked like a section of the city's outer wall, gray and thirty feet high, was actually the wall of a huge cistern fed by an aqueduct. Four pumps, each worked by a pair of men, gushed out water to fill the buckets, a good bit more splashing to the paving stones than the men would have dared allow if they had known Rolan was close enough to see. Faile had considered crawling through the tunnel-like aqueduct to escape, but they had no way to keep anything dry, and wherever it let them out, they would be soaking wet and more likely to freeze to death than make it more than a mile or two in the snow.

There were two other places in the city to get water, both fed by stone conduits underground, but here a long, lion-footed blackwood table had been placed at the foot of the cistern wall. Once it had been a banqueting table, the top inlaid with ivory, but the ivory wedges had been pried out and several wooden washtubs sat on the tabletop now. A pair of wooden buckets stood beside the table, and at one end a copper kettle steamed over a fire made from broken-up chairs. Faile doubted that Sevanna had her laundry carried into the city to save her *gai'shain* the labor of hauling water out to the tents, but whatever the reason, Faile was grateful. A basket of laundry was lighter than full water buckets. She had carried enough of them to know. Two baskets stood on the table, but only one woman wearing the golden belt and collar was at work, the sleeves of her white robe rolled up as high as they would go and her long dark hair tied with a strip of white cloth to keep it from falling into the washtub's water.

When Alliandre saw Faile approaching with Rolan, she straightened, drying her bare arms on her robe. Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, Queen of Ghealdan, Blessed of the Light, Defender of Garen's Wall and a dozen more titles, had been an elegant, reserved woman, poised and stately. Alliandre the *gai'shain* was still pretty, but she wore a perpetually harried expression. With damp patches on her robes and her hands wrinkled from long immersion in the water, she could have passed for a pretty washerwoman.

Watching Rolan set down the basket and smile at Faile before striding away, watching Faile return the smile, she raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“He’s the one who captured me,” Faile said, setting pieces of clothing from the basket on the table. Even here among none but *gai’shain*, it was best to talk while working. “He’s one of the Brotherless, and I think he doesn’t really approve of making wetlanders *gai’shain*. I think he may help us.”

“I see,” Alliandre said. With one hand she brushed delicately at the back of Faile’s robe.

Frowning, Faile twisted to look over her shoulder. For a moment she stared at the dirt and ash that covered her back from the shoulders down; then heat flooded her face. “I fell,” she said quickly. She could not tell Alliandre what had happened with Nadric. She did not think she could tell anyone. “Rolan offered to carry my basket.”

Alliandre shrugged. “If he helped me escape, I would marry him. Or not, as he wanted. He’s not quite pretty, but it wouldn’t be painful, and my husband, if I had one, would never have to know. If he had any sense, he would be overjoyed to have me back and ask no questions he didn’t want to hear answers to.”

Hands tightening on a silk blouse, Faile gritted her teeth. Alliandre was her liege woman, through Perrin, and she held to that well enough, at least insofar as obeying commands, but the nature of the relationship had become strained. They had agreed that they must try to think like servants, try to *be* servants, if they were to survive, yet that meant that each had seen the other curtsying and scurrying to obey. Sevanna’s punishments were dealt out by the nearest *gai’shain* to hand when she made her decision, and once Faile had been ordered to switch Alliandre. Worse, Alliandre had been ordered to return the favor twice. Holding back only meant a taste of the same for yourself plus the other woman having to endure a double dose from someone who would not spare her arm. It had to make a difference when you had twice made your liege-lady kick and shriek.

Abruptly she realized that the blouse she was gripping was one of those that had picked up extra dirt when the basket fell. Loosening her grip, she examined the garment anxiously. It did not seem that she had ground the dirt in. For a moment, she felt relief, and then irritation at being relieved. Even more irritating, the relief did not go away.

"Arrela and Lacile escaped three days ago," she said in a low voice. "They should be well away by now. Where is Maighdin?"

A worried frown appeared on the other woman's face. "She is trying to sneak into Therava's tent. Therava passed us with a group of Wise Ones, and from what we overheard, they seemed to be on their way to meet with Sevanna. Maighdin shoved her basket at me and said she was going to try. I think . . . I think she's becoming desperate enough to take too many chances," she said with a touch of hopelessness in her own voice. "She should have been here by now."

Faile drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. They were all becoming desperate. They had gathered supplies for their escape—knives and food, boots and men's breeches and coats that fit near enough, all carefully hidden in the wagons; the white robes would serve as blankets, and as cloaks to hide them in the snow—but the chance to use all that preparation seemed no closer now than the day they were captured. Only two weeks. Twenty-two days to be exact. That should have not been long enough to change anything, but their pretense of being servants was changing them in spite of all they could do. Only two weeks, and they found themselves jumping to obey commands without thought, worrying over punishments and whether they were pleasing Sevanna. The worst of it was, they could see themselves doing these things, knew some part of them was being molded against their wills. For now, they could tell themselves they were just doing what was needed to avoid suspicion until they could escape, yet every day the reactions became more automatic. How long before escape was a pale dream dreamed in the night after a day of being a perfect *gai'shain* in thought as well as deed? No one had dared ask that question aloud, so far, and Faile knew that she herself tried not to think it, but the question was always on the edge of her consciousness. In a way, she was afraid of it leaving. When it did, would it already have been answered?

With an effort, she forced herself back from despondency. That was the second trap, and only willpower held it open. "Maighdin knows she has to be careful," she said in a firm voice. "She will be here soon, Alliandre."

"And if she is caught?"

"She won't be!" Faile said sharply. If she was . . . No. She had to think of victory, not defeat. Faint hearts never won.

Washing the silk was time-consuming. The buckets of water they fetched from the cistern pumps were icy cold, but hot water scooped from the copper kettle brought the temperature in the washtubs up to lukewarm. You could not wash silk in hot water. Sinking your hands into the washtubs felt wonderful in the cold, but you always had to take them out again, and then the cold was twice as bitter. There was no soap, not that was mild enough anyway, so each skirt and blouse had to be submersed one by one and delicately scrubbed against itself. Then it was laid on a piece of toweling and gently rolled up to squeeze out as much water as possible. The damp garment was dipped again, in another washtub that was filled with a mixture of vinegar and water—that reduced fading and enhanced the gloss of the silk—then rolled up in toweling again. The wet toweling was wrung out hard and spread in the sun to dry wherever there was room, while each piece of silk was hung on a horizontal pole, slung in the shade of a rough canvas pavilion erected at the edge of the square, and smoothed by hand to rub out wrinkles. With luck, nothing would need ironing. Both of them knew how silk had to be cared for, but ironing it needed experience neither of them had. None of Sevanna's *gai'shain* did, not even Maighdin, though she had been a lady's maid even before entering Faile's service, but Sevanna did not accept excuses. Every time Faile or Alliandre went to hang another garment, they checked those already there and smoothed any that seemed to need it.

Faile was adding hot water to a washtub when Alliandre said bitterly, "Here comes the Aes Sedai."

Galina was Aes Sedai, complete with the ageless face and a golden Great Serpent ring on her finger, but she wore white *gai'shain* robes, too—in silk as thick as anyone else's wool, no less!—along with a wide, elaborate belt of gold and firedrops that cinched her waist tightly and a tall matching collar around her neck, jewels fit for a monarch. She was Aes Sedai, and sometimes rode out from the camp alone, but she always returned, and she jumped when any Wise One crooked a finger, especially Therava, whose tent she often shared. In a way, that last was the strangest thing of all. Galina knew who Faile was, knew who her husband was and Perrin's connection to Rand al'Thor, and she threatened to reveal it to Sevanna unless Faile and her friends stole something from the very tent she slept in. That was the third trap lying in wait for them. Sevanna was obsessed with al'Thor, insanely convinced that she could somehow marry him, and if she learned about Perrin, Faile would never be allowed far enough out of her sight to think of escape. She would be staked out like a goat to draw a lion.

Faile had seen Galina slinking and cowering, but now the sister glided through the square like a queen disdaining the rabble around her, an Aes Sedai to the hilt. There were no Wise Ones here for her simper at. Galina was pretty, but nowhere near beautiful, and Faile did not understand what Therava saw in her, unless it was simply the pleasure of dominating an Aes Sedai. That still left the question of why the woman remained when Therava seemed to take every opportunity to humiliate her.

Stopping a pace from the table, Galina surveyed them with a small smile that might have been called pitying. “You are not progressing very far in your work,” she said. She was not speaking of the laundry.

It was Faile’s place to do the talking, but Alliandre spoke up, even more bitterly than before. “Maighdin went to fetch your ivory rod this morning, Galina. When will we see some of the help you promised?” Help in their escape was the carrot Galina offered along with the stick of threatening Faile’s exposure. So far, however, they had seen only the stick.

“She went to Therava’s tent this morning?” Galina whispered, the blood draining from her face.

It dawned on Faile that the sun was halfway down to the horizon in the west, and her heart began to thud painfully. Maighdin should have joined them long since.

The Aes Sedai seemed even more shaken than she. “This morning?” Galina repeated, looking over her shoulder. She gave a start and a cry when Maighdin suddenly appeared out of the throng of *gai’shain* crowding the square.

Unlike Alliandre, the golden-haired woman had grown tougher by the day since their capture. She was no less desperate, but she seemed to focus it all into determination. She always had a presence that belonged more to a queen than a lady’s maid, though most lady’s maids had it, but now she stumbled past them, dull-eyed, and plunged her hands into a water bucket, cupping a double handful to her mouth to drink thirstily, then scrubbing the back of a hand across her mouth.

“I want to kill Therava when we go,” she said thickly. “I would like to kill her now.” Her blue eyes took on life again, and heat. “You’re safe, Galina. She thought I was there to steal. I hadn’t started looking. Something . . . Something happened, and she left. After tying me up. For later.” The heat faded from her gaze to be replaced by puzzlement. “What is it, Galina? Even I feel it, and I have so little ability these Aiel women decided I was no danger.” Maighdin could channel. Not reliably, though and not very much—from what little Faile knew, the White Tower would have sent her away in a matter of weeks, and she claimed never to have gone—so her ability would not be of much use in aiding their escape. Faile would have asked what she was talking about, but she never got the chance.

Galina’s face was still pale, but otherwise she was all Aes Sedai calm. Except that she seized a handful of Maighdin’s cowl and the hair beneath and wrenched her head back. “Never you mind what it is,” she said coolly. “Nothing to do with you. All you need worry about is getting me what I want. But you should worry about that very hard.”

Before Faile could move to defend Maighdin, another woman wearing the wide golden belt over her white robes was there, pulling Galina away and slinging her to the ground. Plump and plain, Aravine had been weary-eyed and resigned the first time Faile saw her, the day the Amadician woman handed her the golden belt she wore and told her she was now in the service of “the Lady Sevanna.” The intervening days had stiffened Aravine even more than they had Maighdin, though.

“Are you mad, to lay hands on an Aes Sedai?” Galina snapped, struggling to her feet. Brushing at the dirt staining her silk robes, she directed all her fury at the plump woman. “I will have you—”

“Shall I tell Therava you were manhandling one of Sevanna’s *gai’shain*?” Aravine broke in coldly. Her accents were cultured. She might have been a merchant of some note, or perhaps even a noble, but she never spoke of what she had been before putting on white. “The last time Therava thought you’d poked your nose where she didn’t want it, everybody inside a hundred paces could hear you squealing and begging.”

Galina actually quivered with rage, the first time Faile had ever seen an Aes Sedai so outdone. With a visible effort, she gained control of herself. Just. Her voice dripped acid. “Aes Sedai do what we do for our own reasons, Aravine, reasons you could not possibly understand. You will regret incurring this debt when I decide to collect payment. You will regret it to your heart.” Giving her robes a last brush, she stalked away, no longer the queen disdaining rabble but a leopard daring sheep to block her path.

Watching her go, Aravine seemed unimpressed, and uninclined to chat. “Sevanna wants you, Faile” was all she said.

Faile did not bother to ask why. She just dried her hands, rolled down her sleeves, and followed the Amadician woman, after promising Alliandre and Maighdin to return as soon as she could. Sevanna was fascinated with the three of them. Maighdin, the only true lady's maid among her *gai'shain*, seemed to interest her as much as Queen Alliandre, and Faile herself, a woman powerful enough to have a queen as her liege woman, and sometimes she summoned one of them by name to help her change clothes or bathe in the large copper bathtub that she used more often than the sweat tent, or just to pour her wine. The rest of the time they were given the same chores as her other servants, but she never asked whether they had already been assigned work or let them off because of it. Whatever Sevanna wanted, Faile knew she still would be held accountable for the laundry along with the other two. Sevanna wanted what she wanted when she wanted it, and she did not accept excuses.

There was no need for Faile to be shown the way to Sevanna's tent, but Aravine led the way through the throng of water carriers until they reached the first low Aiel tents, and then she pointed in the opposite direction to Sevanna's tent and said, "This way, first."

Faile stopped where she stood. "Why?" she asked suspiciously. There were actually men and women among Sevanna's servants who were jealous of the attentions she gave Faile, Alliandre and Maighdin, and though Faile had never detected that in Aravine, some of the rest might well try to get them in trouble by passing on false instructions.

"You will want to see this before you see Sevanna. Believe me."

Faile opened her mouth to demand more explanation, but Aravine simply turned and walked away. Faile gathered up the skirts of her robes and followed.

All sorts and sizes of carts and wagons stood among the tents, their wheels replaced by sleds. Most were piled high with bundles and wooden crates and barrels, with the wheels tied on top of the loads, but she did not have to follow Aravine far before she saw a flatbed cart that had been emptied. Except that the cart bed was not empty. Two women lay on the rough wooden planks, naked and cruelly hogtied, shivering in the cold yet panting as if they were running. Both women's heads hung tiredly, but as if they somehow knew Faile was there, both looked up. Arrela, a dark Tairen as tall as most Aiel women, averted her eyes in embarrassment. Lacile, slim and pale and Cairhienin, went bright red.

“They were brought back this morning,” Aravine said, watching Faile’s face. “They will be untied before dark, since it’s the first time they’ve tried to escape, though I doubt they will be in any condition to walk before tomorrow.”

“Why did you show me this?” Faile said. They had been so careful to keep the connection between them a secret.

“You forget, my Lady, I was there when you were all put in white.” Aravine studied her a moment, then suddenly took Faile’s hands and turned them so that her own hands were between Faile’s palms. Bending her knees just short of kneeling, she said quickly, “Under the Light and by my hope of rebirth, I, Aravine Carnel, do pledge my fealty and obedience in all things to the Lady Faile t’Aybara.”

Only Lacile appeared to have noticed; the Shaido walking past paid no mind to two *gai’shain* women. Faile jerked her hands free. “How do you know that name?” She had had to give more of her name than Faile, of course, but she had chosen Faile Bashere once she realized that none of the Shaido had a clue who Davram Bashere was. Aside from Alliandre and the others, only Galina knew the truth. Or so she had thought. “And who have you told?”

“I listen, my Lady. I overheard Galina speaking to you, once.” Anxiety touched Aravine’s voice. “And I have told no one.” She did not sound surprised that Faile wanted to hide her name, though clearly t’Aybara meant nothing to her. Perhaps Aravine Carnel was not her true name, or not all of it. “In this place, secrets must be held as closely as in Amador. I knew these women were yours, but I told no one. I know you intend to escape. I’ve been certain since the second or third day, and nothing I’ve seen since convinces me otherwise. Accept my oath, and take me with you. I can help, and what is more, I can be trusted. I have proved it by keeping your secrets. Please.” The last word came out strained, as if from someone unused to saying it. A noblewoman, then, rather than a merchant.

The woman had proven nothing beyond that she could spy out secrets, but that in itself was a useful trait. On the other hand, Faile knew of at least two *gai’shain* who had tried to escape and been betrayed by others. Some people really did try to feather their own nests no matter what the circumstances. But Aravine already knew enough to ruin everything. Faile thought about her hidden knife again. A dead woman could betray nothing. But the knife was half a mile away, she could think of no way to hide the body, and besides, the woman *could* have curried favor with Sevanna just by saying she thought Faile was planning escape.

Taking Aravine's hands between hers, she spoke as quickly as the other woman had. "Under the Light, I do accept your pledge and will defend and protect you and yours through battle's wrack and winter's blast and all that time may bring. Now. Do you know anyone else who can be trusted? Not people you think you can trust, people you know you can."

"Not with this, my Lady," Aravine said grimly. Her face shone with relief, though. She had not been sure Faile would accept her. That it was relief rather that anything else made Faile tend to believe in her. Tend to, which was not to say completely. "Half would betray their own mothers in hopes of buying freedom, and the other half are too afraid to try or too stunned to be trusted not to panic. There must be some, and I have my eye on one or two, but I want to be very careful. One mistake is one more than I'll be allowed."

"Very careful," Faile agreed. "Did Sevanna really send for me? If she didn't—"

It seemed that she had, and Faile was quick about reaching Sevanna's tent—quicker than she would have liked, in truth; it was irritating to leap to avoid Sevanna's displeasure—but no one paid her the slightest heed when she walked in and stood meekly by the entry flaps.

Sevanna's tent was no low Aiel structure, but a wall-tent of red canvas large enough to need two center poles, lit by near a dozen mirrored stand-lamps. Two gilded braziers gave a little warmth, emitting thin tendrils of smoke that eddied out through the smoke holes in the roof, but the interior was little warmer than outside. Rich carpets, the snow carefully scraped away before they were laid, made a floor of reds and greens and blues, Tairen mazes and flowers and animals. Tasseled silk cushions lay strewn about the carpets, and one chair, a massive thing intricately carved and heavily gilded, sat in a corner. Faile had never seen anyone sit in it, but its presence was supposed to evoke the presence of a clan chief, she knew. She was just as happy to stand quietly with her eyes down. Three other *gai'shain* with golden belts and collars, one a bearded male, stood along one wall of the tent, in case some service was needed. Sevanna was there, and so was Therava.

Sevanna was a tall woman, a little taller than Faile herself, with pale green eyes and hair like spun gold. She might have been beautiful except for a strong hint of avarice around her plump mouth. Little about her really seemed Aiel, beyond her eyes and hair and sun-dark face. Her blouse was white silk, her skirt divided for riding and also silk, if a dark gray, and the scarf folded around her temples was a blaze of crimson and gold. Also silk. Red boots peeked out beneath the hem of her skirt when she moved. Jeweled rings decorated her every finger, and her necklaces and bracelets of fat pearls and cut diamonds and rubies as large as pigeon's eggs, sapphires and emeralds and firedrops, paled anything Someryn had. Not a single one was Aiel-made. Therava, on the other hand, was all Aiel, in dark wool and white *algode,* her hands bare and her necklaces and bracelets gold and ivory. No finger rings or gems for her. Taller than most men, her dark red hair touched with streaks of white, she was a blue-eyed eagle that it seemed must devour Sevanna like a crippled lamb. Faile would rather anger Sevanna ten times than Therava once, but the two women faced another across a table inlaid with ivory and turquoise, and Sevanna met Therava glare for glare.

"What is happening today means danger," Therava said with the air of someone tired of repeating herself. And perhaps about to draw the knife at her belt. She caressed the hilt as she spoke, and not entirely absently, Faile thought. "We need to put as much distance between ourselves and whatever it is as we possibly can, and as soon as we can. There are mountains to the east. Once we reach them, we can be safe until we gather all the septs together again. Septs that would never have been separated if you had not been so sure of yourself, Sevanna."

"You speak of safety?" Sevanna laughed. "Have you grown so old and toothless you need to be fed bread and milk? Look. These mountains of yours are how distant? How many days, or weeks, when we must crawl through this cursed snow?" She gestured to the table between them where a map lay spread out, weighted down with two thick golden bowls and a heavy three-pronged golden candlestick. Most Aiel disdained maps, but Sevanna had taken to them along with other wetland customs. "Whatever happened is far away, Therava. You agreed it is so, as did every Wise One. This city is full of food, enough to feed us for weeks, if we remain here. Who is there to challenge us, if we do? And if we do . . . You have heard the runners, the messages. In two or three weeks, four at the most, ten more septs will have joined me. Perhaps more! This snow will have melted by then, if these wetlanders from the city can be believed. We will travel quickly instead of having to drag everything on sleds." Faile wondered whether any of the city people had mentioned mud.

"Ten more septs will join *you*," Therava said, her voice flat except for the last word. Her hand tightened on the knife hilt. "You speak for the clan chief, Sevanna, and so I was chosen to advise you as a clan chief, who must listen to advice for the good of our clan. I advise you to move east and keep moving east. The other septs can join us as easily in those mountains as here, and if we must go a little hungry on the way, who among us is a stranger to privation?"

Sevanna fingered her necklaces, a large emerald on her right hand like green fire in the light of the stand-lamps. Her mouth tightened, and seemed hungrier for it. She might have known privation, but despite the lack of warmth in the tent, she no longer chose to. "I speak for the chief, and I say we will remain here." There was more than a hint of challenge in her voice, but she did not give Therava a chance to meet it. "Ah, I see that Faile has come. My good, obedient *gai'shain*." Taking something wrapped in a cloth from the table, she stripped away the cloth. "Do you recognize this, Faile Bashere?"

What Sevanna held was a knife with a single-edged blade a hand and a half long, a simple tool of the sort that thousands of farmers carried. Except that Faile recognized the pattern of rivets in the wooden handle, and the chip in the edge. It was the knife that she had stolen and hidden away with such care. She said nothing. There was nothing to say. *Gai'shain* were forbidden to possess any weapon, even a knife except when cutting meat or vegetables for cooking. She could not help jerking when Sevanna went on, though.

"As well Galina brought me this before you could use it. For whatever purpose. If you stabbed someone, I would have to be very angry with you."

Galina? Of course. The Aes Sedai would not allow them to escape before they did as she wanted.

"She is shocked, Therava." Sevanna's laughter was amused. "Galina knows what is required of *gai'shain*, Faile Bashere. What should I do with her, Therava? That is advice you can give me. Several wetlanders have been killed for hiding weapons, but I would hate to lose her."

Therava tipped Faile's chin up with a finger and stared into her eyes. Faile met that gaze without blinking, but she felt her knees tremble. She did not try telling herself it was only the cold. Faile knew she was not a coward, but when Therava looked at her, Faile saw herself as a rabbit in that eagle's talons, alive and waiting for the beak to descend. It had been Therava who first told her to spy on Sevanna, and however circumspect the other Wise Ones might have been, Faile had no doubt that Therava would slit her throat without the slightest qualm if she failed her. There was no use pretending the woman did not frighten her. She just had to control that fear. If she could.

"I think she was planning to run away, Sevanna. But I think she can learn to do as she is told."

The rough wooden table had been set out between the tents in the nearest open space to Sevanna's tent, a hundred paces away. At first, Faile thought that the shame of being naked would be the worst of it, that and the icy cold that pebbled her skin. The sun sat low in the sky; the air had grown colder, and it would get much colder before morning. She had to stay there till morning. The Shaido were good at learning what shamed wetlanders, and they used shame as a punishment. She thought she would die of blushing whenever anyone looked at her, but the Shaido who passed by did not even pause. In itself, nudity was no reason for shame among Aiel. Aravine appeared in front of her, but she stopped only long enough to whisper, "Keep your courage," and then she was gone. Faile understood. Whether or not the woman was loyal, she did not dare do anything to help.

After a very short time, Faile no longer worried about shame. Her wrists had been tied behind her, and then her ankles had been doubled back and tied to her elbows. She understood now why Lacile and Arrela had been panting. Breathing was an effort in this position. The cold bit deeper and deeper, until she was shivering uncontrollably, but even that soon seemed secondary. Cramps began to burn in her legs, her shoulders, her sides, bunching muscles that seemed on fire, twisting tighter and tighter and tighter. She focused on not screaming. That became the center of her existence. She—would—not—scream. But, oh, Light, she hurt!

"Sevanna ordered that you were to remain here till dawn, Faile Bashere, but she did not say you could not have company."

She had to blink several times before she could see clearly. Sweat stung her eyes. How could she be sweating when she was frozen to the marrow? Rolan was standing in front of her, and strangely, he was carrying a pair of low bronze braziers full of glowing coals, with pieces of cloth wrapped around a leg of each to protect his hands from the heat. Seeing her stare at the braziers, he shrugged. “Once, a night in the cold would not have bothered me, but I have grown soft since I crossed the Dragonwall.”

She almost gasped when he set the braziers beneath the table. Warmth flooded up through the cracks between the planks. Her muscles still shrieked with cramps, but oh, the blessed warmth. She did gasp when the man put an arm across her chest and the other across her bent knees. Suddenly she realized the pressure was gone from her elbows. He had . . . squeezed . . . her. One of his hands began working at her thigh, and she almost screamed as his fingers dug into knotted muscles, but she felt the knots begin to loosen. They still hurt, his massaging hurt, but the pain in that one thigh muscle was changing in kind. Not growing less, exactly, but she knew that it would, if he continued.

“You do not mind if I occupy myself while I try to think of a way to make you laugh, do you?” he asked.

Suddenly she realized that she was laughing, and not hysterically. Well, it was only partly hysteria. She was trussed like a goose for the oven and being saved from the cold for the second time by a man she thought maybe she would not stab after all, Sevanna would be watching her like a hawk from now on, and Therava might be trying to kill her as an example; but she knew she was going to escape. One door never closed but another opened. She was going to escape. She laughed until she cried.

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CHAPTER 10

A Blazing Beacon

The wide-eyed maid was more used to kneading bread dough than doing up rows of tiny buttons, but eventually she finished buttoning Elayne into her dark green riding dress, curtsied and stepped back breathing heavily, though whether from the effort of concentration or just from being in the presence of the Daughter-Heir was hard to tell. The Great Serpent ring on Elayne’s left hand might have had something to do with it, too. Just over twenty miles in a straight line would take you from the manor of House Matherin to the River Erinin and all its great commerce, but the distance was far greater in actual miles to be covered through the Chishen Mountains, and people here were more accustomed to cattle raids across the border from Murandy than any sort of visitor, especially a visitor who wrapped the Daughter-Heir and an Aes Sedai into one package. The honor seemed beyond what some of the servants could bear. Elsie had been painfully conscientious in folding the blue silk gown that Elayne had worn last night and packing it away in a large leather traveling chest, one of a pair in the apartment’s dressing room, so conscientious that Elayne had nearly taken over the task herself. She had slept poorly at first, fitful and waking, then slept late when she could sleep, and she was beyond chafing to be on her way back to Caemlyn.

This was the fifth time she had spent a night out of Caemlyn since learning the city was threatened, and on each trip she had given a day to visiting three or four manors, once five, all the property of men and women bound to House Trakand by blood or oaths, and every visit took time. The press of time weighed down her bones, yet presenting the proper image was necessary. Riding clothes were needed to travel from one manor to the next lest she arrived rumpled and looking a fugitive, but she had to change before settling in whether it was for the night or just a few hours. Half those hours might be taken up by shifting from riding clothes to a gown and back again, but riding clothes spoke of haste and need, perhaps of desperation, while the coronet of the Daughter-Heir and an embroidered gown trimmed with lace, unpacked from a set of traveling cases and donned after washing, portrayed confidence and strength. She would have brought her own maid to add to the impression if Essande had been up to keeping the pace in winter, though she suspected the white-haired woman's slowness would have had her chewing her tongue in frustration. Still, Essande could not have been as slow as this goggled-eyed young Elsie.

At last Elsie handed her her fur-lined crimson cloak with a curtsy, and she slung the cloak around her shoulders hastily. A fire blazed on the stone hearth, but the room was nowhere near warm, and recently she could not seem to ignore the cold with any reliability. The girl bobbed as she asked whether she could fetch men to carry down the chests if it pleased Her Majesty. The first time she had done that, Elayne had gently explained that she was not yet Queen, but Elsie seemed horrified at the idea of addressing her simply as my Lady, or even as Princess, though in truth the last was considered very old-fashioned. Proper or not, it usually pleased Elayne to hear someone acknowledge her right to the throne, but this morning she was too tired to be anything but anxious to be on the road. Suppressing a yawn, she told Elsie curtly to fetch the men and be quick about it, and turned for the paneled door. The girl rushed to open it for her, which took longer than if she had done it herself, with a curtsy before opening and yet another after. Her divided silk skirts whispered furiously against each other as she strode out of the room tugging on her red riding gloves. If Elsie had delayed her one more second, she thought she would have screamed.

It was the girl who shrieked, however, before Elayne had gone three paces, a horrified howl that sounded ripped from her throat. The cloak flared as Elayne spun around, embracing the True Source, feeling the richness of *saidar* flood through her. Elsie was standing on the strip of carpet that ran along the middle of the pale brown floor tiles, staring the other way down the hall with both hands pressed to her mouth. Two crossing corridors opened in that direction, but there was not another soul in sight.

“What is it, Elsie?” Elayne demanded. She had several weaves already on the edge of forming, ranging from a simple net of air to a fireball that would have demolished half the walls in front of her, and in her present humor, she wanted to use one of them, to strike out with the Power. Her moods were uncertain of late, to say the least.

The girl looked back over one shoulder, trembling, and if her eyes had been wide before, they bulged now. Her hands remained clamped to mouth as if to prevent another scream. Dark-haired and dark-eyed, tall and plump-bosomed in House Matherin's gray-and-blue livery, she was not really a girl—Elsie might be four or five years older than herself—but the way she behaved made it difficult to think of her any other way.

"What *is* it, Elsie? And *don't* tell me it was nothing. You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

The girl flinched. "I did," she said unsteadily. That she gave Elayne no title showed just how unsteady she was. "Lady Nelein, as was Lord Aedmun's grandmother. She died when I was little, but I remember even Lord Aedmun tiptoed around her temper, and the maids used to jump if she looked at them, and other ladies who visited, too, and the lords, as well. *Everybody* was afraid of her. She was right there in front of me, and she scowled so furious—" She broke off, blushing, when Elayne laughed.

It was more a laugh of relief than anything else. The Black Ajah had not somehow followed her to Lord Aedmun's manor. There were no assassins waiting with knives in their fists, no sisters loyal to Elaida wanting to whisk her back to Tar Valon. Sometimes she dreamed about those things, about all of them in the same dream. She released *saidar*, reluctantly as always, regretful as that fullness of joy and life drained out of her. Matherin supported her, but Aedmun might have taken it amiss if she had ruined half his home place.

"The dead cannot harm the living, Elsie," she said gently. The more gently because she had laughed, not to mention wanting to box the ninny's ears. "They're not of this world anymore, and they can't touch anything in it, including us." The girl nodded, and dropped another curtsy, but by the size of her eyes and the trembling of her lips she was unconvinced. Elayne had no time to cosset her, though. "Fetch the men for my cases, Elsie," she said firmly, "and don't worry about ghosts." With yet another curtsy the girl dashed off, her head swiveling anxiously in case the Lady Nelein leaped out of the paneled walls. Ghosts! The fool girl *was* a ninny!

Matherin was an old House, if not large or strong, and the main stairs, leading down to the entry hall, were broad and trimmed with marble railings. The entry hall itself was a generous space, with gray-and-blue floor tiles and mirrored oil lamps hanging on chains from the ceiling twenty feet above. There was nothing in the way of gilding and little inlay, but ornately carved chests and cabinets stood along the sides of the hall, and two wall hangings were displayed on one wall. One showed men hunting leopards from horseback, a chancy business at best, and the other women of House Matherin presenting a sword to the first Queen of Andor, an event that Matherin treasured and that might or might not have actually happened.

Aviendha was already down, pacing restlessly in the hall, and Elayne sighed at the sight. They would have shared a room, if not for the implication that Matherin could not provide adequately for two visitors of note, but Aviendha did not really understand that the smaller the House, the loftier the pride. Often, the smaller Houses possessed little more. Pride, she should have understood, since a fierce pride and strength all but shone from her. Straight-backed and even taller than Elayne, a thick dark shawl draped over her pale blouse and a folded gray head scarf holding back her long reddish hair, she was the very picture of a Wise One despite being only a year older than Elayne. Wise Ones who could channel often appeared to be much younger than they were, and Aviendha had the dignity. At this moment she did, anyway, though the pair of them had giggled together often enough. Of course, her only jewelry was a long, silver Kandori necklace, an amber brooch in the shape of a turtle and a wide ivory bracelet, and Wise Ones always wore festoons of necklaces and bracelets, but Aviendha was not a Wise One yet, merely an apprentice. Elayne never thought of Aviendha as merely anything, but it did present problems now and then. Sometimes she thought the Wise Ones considered her an apprentice of some sort as well, or at least a student. A silly thought, to be sure, but sometimes . . .

As Elayne reached the foot of the stairs, Aviendha adjusted her shawl and asked, “Did you sleep well?” Her tone was untroubled, but anxiety nestled around her green eyes. “You did not send for wine to help you sleep, did you? I made sure your wine was watered when we ate, but I saw you looking at the wine pitcher.”

“Yes, Mother,” Elayne said in a sickly sweet voice. “No, Mother. I was wondering how Aedmun got his hands on such a fine vintage, Mother. It was a shame to water it. And I drank the goat’s milk before I went to sleep.”

If anything brought her to birthing sickness, it would be goat's milk! And to think she used to like it.

Aviendha planted her fists on her hips, such an embodiment of indignation that Elayne had to laugh. There were inconveniences to being with child, ranging from abrupt swings in her temper to tenderness in her breasts to always being tired, but the coddling was the worst, in some ways. Everyone in the Royal Palace knew she was pregnant—a good many had known before she did, courtesy of Min's viewing and Min being too free with her tongue—and she did not think she could have been so mothered when she was an infant. Still, she put up with all the bother with as much grace as she could muster. Usually, she did. They were only trying to be helpful. She just wished every woman she knew did not believe that pregnancy had made her brainless. Nearly every woman she knew. Those who had never borne a child themselves were the worst.

Thinking of her baby—at times she wished Min had said whether it would be a boy or girl, or rather that Aviendha or Birgitte could recall exactly what Min actually had said; Min was always right, but the three of them had consumed a great deal wine that night, and Min had been gone from the palace long before Elayne herself knew to ask—thinking of the child growing in her always made her think of Rand, just as thinking of him made her think of the babe. One followed the other as surely as cream rose in the milkpan. She missed Rand terribly, and yet she could not miss him. A part of him, the *sense* of him, rode always in the back of her head unless she masked the bond, right alongside her sense of Birgitte, her other Warder. The bond had its limits, however. He was somewhere to the west, far enough that she could tell little more than that he was alive. Nothing more, really, though she thought she would know if he had been badly injured. She was not sure she wanted to know what he was up to. He had been far to the south for a long time after leaving her, and now, just this morning, he had Traveled to the west. It was disconcerting, really, to feel him in one direction and then suddenly have him off in another, even farther away. He could be pursuing enemies or running from enemies or any one of a thousand things. She hoped very much it was something innocuous that made him Travel. He was going to die on her all too soon—men who could channel always died of it—but she wanted so very much to keep him alive as long as possible.

“He is well,” Aviendha said almost as though she could read her mind. They had their own shared sense of one another since their mutual adoption as first-sisters, but it did not go as far as the Warder bond they and Min shared with Rand. “If he allows himself to be killed, I will cut off his ears.”

Elayne blinked, then laughed again, and after a startled glance, Aviendha joined in. It was not that funny, except maybe to an Aiel—Aviendha’s sense of humor was *very* odd—but Elayne could not stop laughing, and Aviendha seemed as helpless. Shaking with mirth, they hugged one another and hung on. Life was very strange. Had anyone told her a few years ago that she would share a man with another woman—with two other women!—she would have called them mad. The very idea would have been indecent. But she loved Aviendha every bit as much as she did Rand, only in a different way, and Aviendha loved Rand as much as she did. Denying that meant denying Aviendha, and she could as easily step out of her skin. Aiel women, sisters or close friends, often married the same man, and seldom gave him any say in the matter. She was going to marry Rand, and so was Aviendha, and so was Min. Whatever anyone said or thought, that was all there was to it. If he lived long enough.

Suddenly she became afraid that her laughter was edging toward tears. Please, Light, let her not be one of those women who became weepy when they were with child. It was bad enough not knowing whether she was going to be melancholy or furious from one minute to the next. Hours might pass when she felt perfectly normal, but then there were hours when she felt like a child’s ball bouncing down an endless flight of stairs. This morning, she seemed to be on the stairs.

“He is well, and he will be well,” Aviendha whispered fiercely, as if she intended to assure his survival by killing anything that threatened him.

With the tips of her fingers, Elayne brushed a tear from her sister’s cheek. “He is well, and he will be well,” she agreed softly. But they could not kill *saidin,* and the taint on the male half of the Power was what was going to kill him.

The lamps overhead flickered as one of the tall doors to the outside opened, letting in a gust of air even colder than that in the entry hall, and they quickly moved a little apart, just holding hands. Elayne schooled her face to a serene smoothness fully worthy of an Aes Sedai. She could not afford to let anyone see her apparently seeking comfort in a hug. A ruler, or one who sought to rule, was not allowed the slightest suggestion of weakness or tears, not in public. There were rumors enough about her as it was, as many bad as good. She was benevolent or cruel, fair-minded or arbitrary, generous or avaricious, all according to which tale you listened to. At least the tales balanced out one another, but anyone who could say they had actually seen the Daughter-Heir huddling in the arms of her companion might add a tale of fear to the blend, and if her enemies believed she was afraid, they would only grow bolder. And stronger. Cowardice was the sort of rumor that stuck like greasy mud; you never could wash it off completely. History recorded women who had lost their bids for the Lion Throne on no further discernible grounds. Capability was a requirement for a successful ruler and wisdom was to be hoped for, though women lacking both had gained the throne and muddled through somehow, but few would support a coward, and none of those people she wanted on her side.

The man who came in, turning to push the massive door shut behind him, had only one leg and used a crutch in place of the other. Even with fleece padding, the sleeve of his heavy woolen coat was worn from it. A heavy-shouldered former soldier, Fridwyn Ros managed Lord Aedmun's estate, with the aid of a fat clerk who had blinked at the Daughter-Heir in consternation, gaped at her Great Serpent ring with something near to awe, and scurried back to his ledgers in relief as soon as he realized she had no business with him. He had probably feared a levy on the manor's accounts. Master Ros had stared at her ring in amazement, to be sure, but he had grinned with delight at the Daughter-Heir and regretted that he could no longer ride for her with such sincerity that, had he been a liar, he would already have bilked Aedmun and the clerk of everything they owned between them. She did not fear him carrying the wrong tales.

His crutch made a rhythmic thump as he came up the hall, and he managed a credible bow in spite of it, including Aviendha in his courtesy. He had been startled by her at first, but surprisingly quick to catch their friendship, and if he did not entirely trust an Aiel, it meant he accepted her. You could not ask for everything.

"The men are strapping your cases to the pack animals, my Queen, and your escort is ready." He was one of those who refused to call her anything except "my Queen" or "Majesty," but a hint of doubt entered his voice at mention of her escort. He covered it hastily with a cough and hurried on. "The men we're sending with you are all mounted as well as I could manage. Young men, mainly, and a few more experienced, but they all know which end of a halberd has the point. I wish the manor could give you more, but I explained, when Lord Aedmun heard there were others claiming what's yours by right, he decided not to wait for spring, and he called in his armsmen and set out for Caemlyn. We've had a couple of bad snowfalls since, but he might be halfway there by now with luck in the passes." His gaze carried conviction, but he knew better than she that with the wrong luck Aedmun and his armsmen might be dead in those passes.

"Matherin has always maintained faith with Trakand," Elayne told him, "and I put my trust that it always will. I value Lord Aedmun's loyalty, Master Ros, and yours."

She did not insult Matherin, and him, by promising to remember or offering rewards, yet Master Ros' broad smile said she had already given him as much reward as he desired. Matherin would receive rewards, if they were earned, but they could not be held out as if offering to buy a horse.

Thumping along on his crutch, Master Ros bowed her to the door, and bowed her out onto the broad granite step where servants wearing heavy coats waited in the bitter cold with a stirrup cup of hot spiced wine that she rejected with a murmur. Until she had a chance to adjust to the sharp air, she wanted both hands to hold her cloak closed. Aviendha would probably have found a way to make her drop it anyway. *She* took a cup, after wrapping her shawl around her head and shoulders, the only concession she made to the icy morning. *She* was ignoring the cold, of course. Elayne was the one who had taught her how. Elayne tried again to push the cold away, and to her surprise, it receded. Not all the way—she still felt chilly—but it was better than freezing.

The sky was clear, the sun bright as it sat over the mountains, but storm clouds could come boiling across the surrounding peaks at any time. It would be best to reach their first destination today as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, Fireheart, her tall black gelding, was living up to his name, rearing and snorting gouts of steamy breath as if he had never worn a bridle before, and Aviendha's leggy arch-necked gray had taken it into her head to imitate him, dancing in the knee-deep snow and trying to go anywhere except where the groom tried to lead her. She was a more spirited animal than Elayne would have chosen for her sister, yet Aviendha herself had insisted after learning the mare's name. Siswai meant spear, in the Old Tongue. The grooms seemed capable women, but they appeared to think they needed to calm the animals before handing them over. It was all

Elayne could do not to snap at them that she had managed Fireheart before they ever saw him.

Her escort was already mounted, to avoid standing in the snow, twenty-odd riders in the white-collared red coats and brightly burnished breastplates and helmets of the Queen's Guard. Master Ros' doubt might be explained by the fact that the riders' coats were silk, as were their red breeches with the white stripe up each leg, and by the pale lace they wore at neck and cuff. They certainly appeared more ceremonial than effective. Or it might have been that they were all women. Women were uncommon in jobs that required using weapons, just the occasional merchants' guard or a rare woman who turned up in an army during time of war, and Elayne had never heard of a group of all-female soldiers before she created one. Except the Maidens, of course, but they were Aiel and a different matter. She hoped people would think them an affectation on her part, and largely decorative with all the lace and silk. Men tended to underestimate a woman carrying weapons until they faced one, and even most other women tended to think her a brainless fool. Bodyguards usually tried to appear so ferocious that no one would dare trying to get past them, but her enemies would just find a new way to attack if she stood the whole Queen's Guard around her shoulder-to-shoulder. A bodyguard her enemies would dismiss until it was too late for more than regrets was her aim. She intended to make their uniforms more elaborate, partly to feed those misconceptions and partly to feed the women's pride as soldiers marked out from the rest, but she herself had no doubts. Every one of them, from merchants' guards to Hunters of the Horn, had been carefully chosen for her skills, experience and courage. She was ready to put her life in their hands. She already had.

A lean woman wearing a lieutenant's two golden knots on the shoulder of her red cloak saluted Elayne with an arm across her chest, and her roan gelding tossed his head, making the silver bells in his mane chime faintly, as if he too were saluting. "We are ready, my Lady, and the area is clear." Caseille Raskovni was one of those who had been a merchant's guard, and her Arafellin accents were not those of an educated woman, but her voice was brisk and no-nonsense. She used the proper form of address, and would until Elayne was crowned, yet she was ready to fight to gain that crown for Elayne. Very, very few, male or female, signed the roster of the Queen's Guard these days unless they were ready for that. "The men Master Ros handed over are ready, too. As ready as they'll ever be." Clearing his throat, the man shifted his crutch and took to studying the snow in front of his boots.

Elayne could see what Caseille meant. Master Ros had scraped together eleven men from the manor to send to Caemlyn and outfitted them with halberds and short-swords and what armor he could find, nine anique helmets without faceguards and seven breastplates with dents that made them vulnerable. Their mounts were not bad, though hairy with their winter coats, but even huddled as their riders were in thick cloaks, she could see that eight were unlikely to need to shave above once in a week, if that. The men Master Ros had described as being experienced had wrinkled faces and bony hands and probably not a full set of teeth between them. He had not been lying or trying to stint; Aedmun would have gathered all the fit men in the area to take with him and outfitted them in the best he had. The story had been the same everywhere. Apparently a great number of hale and hearty men scattered the length of Andor were trying to reach her in Caemlyn. And none of them likely to get into the city until all was decided, now. She could search every day without finding a single band. Still, this little bunch held their halberds as if they knew how to use them. Then again, that was not hard to do sitting a saddle at rest with the halberd's butt tucked in your stirrup. She could have managed that.

"We have visited nineteen of these manors, sister," Aviendha said softly, moving closer until their shoulders touched, "and counting these, we have gathered two hundred and five boys too young to be blooded and old men who should have laid down the spear long ago. I have not asked before. You know your people and your ways. Is this worth the time you give it?"

"Oh, yes, sister." Elayne kept her voice just as low, so the one-legged former soldier and the servants could not overhear. The best of people could turn muleheaded if they realized you wanted them to behave a certain way. Particularly if they realized that the help they had painfully gathered and offered, and you had accepted, was not what you were after at all. "Everyone in that village down by the river knows I'm here by now, and so do half the farms for miles. By noon, the other half will know, and by tomorrow, the next village over, and more farms. News travels slowly in winter, especially in this country. They *know* I've spoken my claim to the throne, yet if I gain the throne tomorrow or die tomorrow, they might not learn of it before the middle of spring, maybe not even until summer. But today they know that Elayne Trakand is alive that she visited the manor in silks and jewels and summoned men to her banner. People twenty miles from here will claim they saw me and touched my hand. Few people can say that without speaking in favor of whoever they claim to have seen, and when you speak in favor of someone, you convince yourself to favor them. There are men and women in nineteen places around Andor talking about how they saw the Daughter-Heir just this last week, and every day the area that talk covers spreads like an inkblot.

"If I had time, I'd visit every village in Andor. It won't make a hair of difference in what happens in Caemlyn, but it may make all the difference after I win." She would not admit to any possibility other than winning. Especially not given who would take the throne if she failed. "Most Queens in our history spent the first years of their rule gathering the people solidly behind them, Aviendha, and some never did, but harder times than these are coming. I may not have one year before I need every Andoran to stand behind me. I can't wait until I have the throne. Harder times are coming, and I have to be ready. Andor has to be ready, and I must make it so," she finished firmly.

Smiling, Aviendha touched Elayne's cheek. "I think I will learn a great deal about being a Wise One from you."

To her mortification, Elayne blushed in embarrassment. Her cheeks felt on fire! Maybe the swings in humor were worse than the cosseting. Light, she had *months* of this to look forward to! Not for the first time, she found a kernel of resentment toward Rand. He had done this to her—all right, she had helped him, instigated the doing, in fact, but that was beside the point—he had done this and walked away with a smug grin on his face. She doubted his grin had really been smug, but she could picture it all too easily. Let *him* dart from giddy to weepy every other hour and see how he liked it! *I can't think in a straight line,* she thought irritably. That was his fault, too.

The grooms finally deemed Fireheart and Aviendha's Siswai meek enough to be mounted by ladies, and Aviendha climbed to her saddle from the stone mounting block with a good deal more grace than she once had shown, arranging her bulky undivided skirts to cover as much of her dark-stockinged legs as possible. She still believed that her own legs were superior to any horse, yet she had become a passable rider. Though she did have a tendency to look surprised when the horse did as she wanted.

Fireheart tried to dance once Elayne was on his back, but she reined him in smartly, and a bit more sharply than she would have normally. Her teetering moods had taken her to a sudden sense of dread for Rand, and if she could not ensure his safety, there was one male at hand she could make certain did exactly as he was supposed to.

Six of the Guardswomen led the way down the road from the manor at a slow walk, all the depth of snow would allow, with the rest following her and Aviendha in smart columns, the last horsewomen in line leading the pack animals. The local men trailed behind raggedly with their own packhorse, a shaggy creature tied about with cookpots and rough bundles and even half a dozen live chickens. A few cheers greeted them as they rode through the thatch-roofed village and across the stone bridge that crossed a snake-curved frozen stream, loud cries of "Elayne of the Lily!" and "Trakand! Trakand!" and "Matherin stands!" But she saw a woman crying on her husband's chest, and tears on his face, too, and another woman who stood with her back to the riders and her head down, refusing even to look. Elayne hoped she would send their sons home to them. There should be little fighting at Caemlyn, unless she blundered badly, but there would be some, and once the Rose Crown was hers, battles lay ahead. To the south lay the Seanchan, and to the north, Myrddraal and Trollocs waiting to descend for Tarmon Gai'don. Andor would bleed sons in the days to come. Burn her, she was *not* going to cry!

Beyond the bridge, the road slanted up again, a steep climb through pine and fir and leatherleaf, but it was no more than a long mile to the mountain meadow they sought. The snow shining beneath the midmorning sun still bore the marks of hooves coming from where a gateway had left a deep furrow in the snow. It could have been nearer the manor, but the possibility of someone standing where your gateway opened was always the danger.

The glow of *saidar* surrounded Aviendha as they rode into the meadow. She had made the gateway to come here from their last stop yesterday afternoon, a manor a hundred miles north, so she would weave the gateway to go to Caemlyn, but the sight of Aviendha shining with the Power made Elayne go broody. Whoever made the gateway to leave Caemlyn always ended up making all the others until they returned, since she learned the ground at each place her gateway touched, but on each of their five trips, Aviendha had asked to make that first gateway. She might simply have wanted the practice, as she claimed, though Elayne hardly had more practice than she did, but another possibility had come to mind. Maybe Aviendha wanted to keep her from channeling, in any considerable amount at least. Because she was pregnant. The weave that had made them sisters of the same mother could not have been used if either of them had been with child, because the unborn child would have shared in the bond, a thing it could not be strong enough to survive, but surely one of the Aes Sedai in the palace would have said something if channeling was to be avoided in pregnancy. Then again, very few Aes Sedai ever bore children. They might not know. She was aware there were many things Aes Sedai did not know, however much they might pretend otherwise to the rest of the world—she herself had taken advantage of that presumption from time to time—but it seemed very strange that they might be ignorant of something so important to most women. It was as though a bird knew how to eat every seed and grain except barley, so supposedly knew, because if it did not know how to eat barley, what else might it be ignorant of? Wise Ones bore children, though, and they had said nothing about—

Abruptly concerns over her babe and channeling and what Aes Sedai might or might not know were pushed right out of her head. She could feel someone channeling *saidar.* Not Aviendha, not someone on one of the surrounding mountains, not anyone near as close as that. This was distant, like a beacon blazing on a far mountaintop in the night. A very distant mountain. She could not imagine how much of the One Power was needed for her to feel channeling at that distance. Every woman in the world who could channel must be able to sense this. To point straight to it. And the beacon lay to the west. Nothing had changed in the bond with Rand, she could not have said exactly where he was within a hundred miles, but she knew.

“He’s in danger,” she said. “We must go to him, Aviendha.”

Aviendha gave herself a shake and stopped staring westward. The glow remained around her, and Elayne could feel that she had drawn on the Source as deeply as she could. But even as Aviendha turned to her, she felt the amount of *saidar* the other woman held dwindle. “We must not, Elayne.”

Aghast, Elayne twisted in Fireheart’s saddle to stare at her. “You want to *abandon* him? To *that!*” No one could handle so much of *saidar,* not the strongest circle, not unaided. Supposedly a *sa’angreal* existed, greater than anything else ever made, and if what she had heard was correct, that might be able to handle this. Maybe. But from what she had heard, no woman could use it and live, not without *ter'angreal* made for the purpose, and no one had ever seen one that she knew of. Surely no sister would try even if she had found one. That much of the One Power could level mountain ranges at a stroke! No sister would try except perhaps one of the Black Ajah. Or worse, one of the Forsaken. Maybe more than one. What else *could* it be? And Aviendha simply wanted to *ignore* it, when she *must* know that Rand was there?

The Guardswomen, unaware, were still waiting patiently on their horses, keeping watch on the treeline around the meadow and little concerned with that after their reception at the manor, though Caseille was watching Elayne and Aviendha, a slight frown visible behind the face-bars of her helmet. She knew they never delayed at opening a gateway. The men from the manor were gathered around their packhorse, pawing at the bundles and apparently arguing over whether or not something had been included. Aviendha still moved her gray closer to Elayne's black and spoke in a voice that would not carry.

"We know nothing, Elayne. Not whether he is dancing the spears or this is something else. If he dances the spears and we rush in, will he attack us before he knows who are? Will we distract him because he does not expect us, and allow his enemies to win? If he dies, we will find who took his life and kill them, but if we go to him now, we go blindly, and we may bring disaster on our backs."

"We could be careful," Elayne said sullenly. It infuriated her that she was feeling sullen, and showing it, but all she could do was ride her moods and try not let them get the upper hand completely. "We don't have to Travel right to the spot." Gripping her pouch, feeling the small ivory carving of a seated woman that nestled inside, she looked pointedly at her sister's amber brooch. "Light, Aviendha, we have *angreal*, and neither of us is exactly helpless." Oh, Light, now she was sounding petulant. She knew very well that both of them together, *angreal* and all, would be flies battling a flame against what they could sense, but even so, a flybite at the right moment might make the difference. "And don't tell me I'll endanger the baby. Min said she will be born strong and healthy. You told me so yourself. That means I will live at least long enough for my daughter to be born." She hoped for a daughter.

Fireheart chose that moment to nip at the gray, and Siswai nipped back, and for a bit Elayne was occupied with getting her gelding under control and keeping Aviendha from being thrown and telling Caseille that they did not need any help, and by the end of it, she was not feeling sullen any longer. She wanted to smack Fireheart right between his ears.

Aside from making the animal obey the reins, Aviendha behaved as if nothing had happened at all. She did frown, a little uncertainly, her face framed by the dark wool of her shawl, but her uncertainty had nothing to do with the horse.

“I have told you about the rings in Rhuidean,” she said slowly, and Elayne gave an impatient nod. Every woman who wanted to become a Wise One was sent through a *ter’angreal* before she began training. It was something like the *ter’angreal* used to test novices for being raised to Accepted in the White Tower, except that in this one, a woman saw her whole life. All of her possible lives, really, every decision made differently, an infinite fan of lives based on differing choices. “No one can remember all of that, Elayne, only bits and pieces. I knew I would love Rand al’Thor . . .” she was still uncomfortable sometimes about using just his first name in front of others, “and that I would find sister-wives. For most things, all you retain is a vague impression at best. A hint of warning, sometimes. I think if we go to him now, something very bad will happen. Maybe one of us will die, maybe both in spite of what Min said.” That she said Min’s name without fumbling was a measure of her concern. She did not know Min very well, and usually named her formally, as Min Farshaw. “Perhaps he will die. Perhaps something else. I do not know for sure—maybe we will all survive, and we will sit around a fire with him roasting *pecara* when we find him—but the glimmer of a warning is there in my head.”

Elayne opened her mouth angrily. Then she closed it again, anger draining away like water down a hole, and her shoulders slumped. Perhaps Aviendha’s glimmer was true and perhaps not, but the fact was that her arguments had been good from the start. A great risk taken in ignorance, and taking it might bring disaster. The beacon had grown brighter still. And he was there, right where the beacon was. The bond did not tell her so, not at this distance, but she knew. And she knew she had to leave him to take care of himself while she took care of Andor.

“I don’t have anything to teach you about being a Wise One, Aviendha,” she said quietly. “You are already much wiser than I. Not to mention braver and more coolheaded. We return to Caemlyn.”

Aviendha colored faintly under the praise—she could be very sensitive, at times—but she wasted no time in opening the gateway, a rotating view of a stableyard in the Royal Palace that widened into a hole in the air and let snow from the meadow fall onto the clean-swept paving stones as near three hundred miles away as made no difference. The sense of Birgitte, somewhere in the palace, sprang alive in Elayne’s head. Birgitte had a headache and a sour stomach, not unusual occurrences of late, but they suited Elayne’s mood all too well.

I must leave him to take care of himself, she thought as she rode through. Light, how often had she thought that? No matter. Rand was the love of her heart and the joy of her life, but Andor was her duty.

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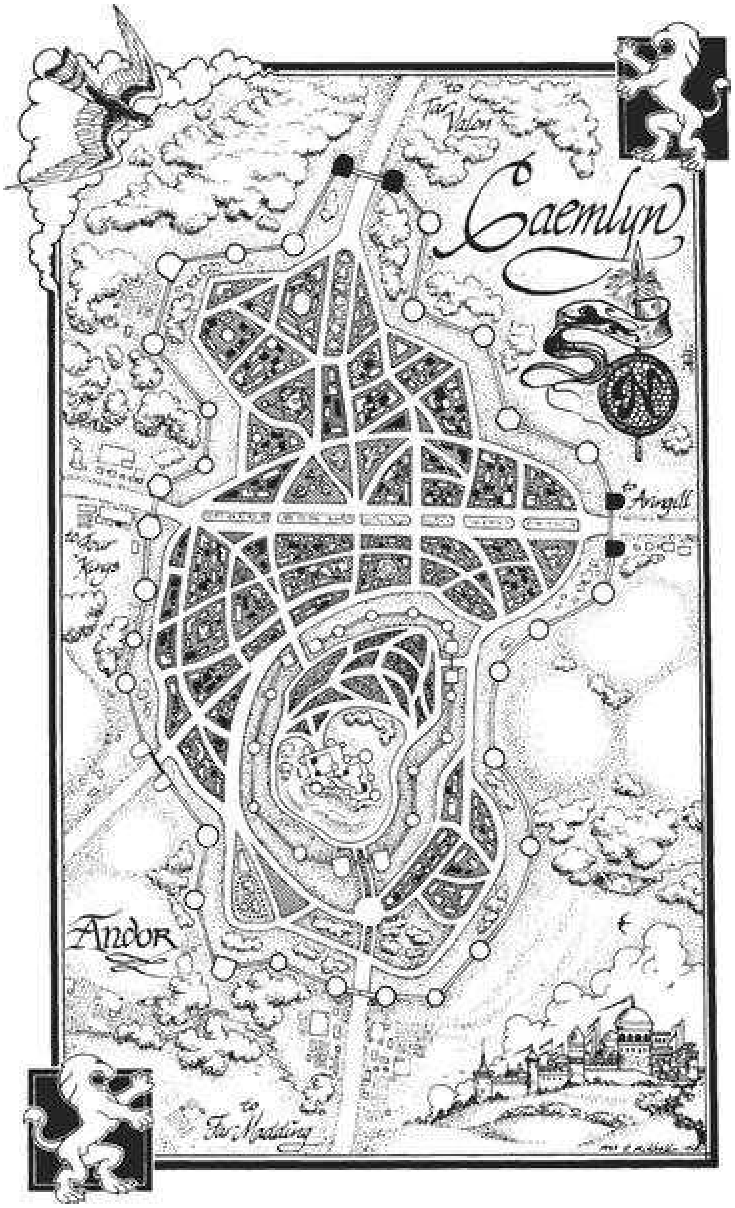
to Tar Valon
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to Aringill
to Four Kings
Andor
to Far Madding

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CHAPTER 11

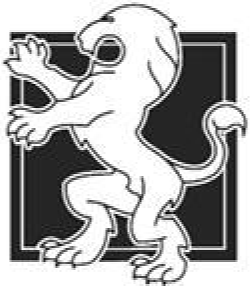

Talk of Debts

The gateway was positioned so that Elayne seemed to be riding out of a hole in the wall against the street, into a square marked out for safety by sand-filled wine barrels standing on the paving stones. Oddly, she could not feel a single woman channeling anywhere in the palace, though it housed more than a hundred and fifty with the ability. Some would be stationed on the city’s outer walls, of course, too far for her to sense anything short of a linked circle, and a few would be out of the city altogether, yet someone in the palace was almost always using *saidar,* whether to try forcing one of the captive *sul’dam* to admit that she really could see weaves of the One Power or simply to smooth the wrinkles from a shawl without heating an iron. Not this morning, though. Windfinder arrogance often matched the worst shown by any Aes Sedai, yet even that must be quashed by what they sensed. Elayne thought that if she climbed to a high window, she must be able to see the weaves of that great beacon, hundreds of leagues distant as they were. She felt like an ant that had just become aware of mountains, an ant comparing the Spine of the World to the hills it had always held in awe. Yes, even the Windfinders must be walking small in the face of that.

On the eastern side of the palace and fronted on north and south by two-story-high stables of pure white stone, the Queen’s Stableyard traditionally was given over to the Queen’s personal horses and carriages, and she had hesitated over using it before the Lion Throne was acknowledged hers. The steps that led to the throne were as delicate as any court dance, and if the dance sometimes came to resemble a tavern brawl, you still had to make your steps with grace and precision in order to gain your goal. Claiming the perquisites before being confirmed had cost some women their chance to rule. In the end, she had decided it was not a transgression that would make her seem over-proud. Besides, the Queen's Stableyard was relatively small and had no other use. There were fewer people to keep away from an opening gateway here. In fact, when she entered it, the stone-paved yard was empty apart from a single red-coated groom standing in one of the arched stable doorways, but he turned to give a shout inside, and dozens more came spilling out as she guided Fireheart clear of the marked-off square. After all, she might have returned with an entourage of powerful lords and ladies, or perhaps they just hoped she had.

Caseille brought the Guardswomen through the gateway, and ordered most to dismount and see to their animals. She and half a dozen more remained in their saddles, keeping watch over the heads of the people afoot. Even here, she would not leave Elayne unguarded. Particularly here, where she faced more danger than in any manor she had visited. The Matherin men milled about, getting in the way of grooms and Guards while gaping at the white stone balconies and colonnades that overlooked the yard and the spires and golden domes visible beyond. The cold seemed less here than in the mountains—refusing to let it touch her, as far as she could at present, did not make her totally unaware—but men and women and horses all still breathed faint plumes of mist. The odor of horse dung seemed strong, too, after the clean air of the mountains. A hot bath in front of a roaring fire would be welcome. Afterward, she would have to plunge back into the business of securing the throne, but right now a long soak would be just the thing.

A pair of grooms ran to Fireheart. One took his bridle with a hurried curtsy for Elayne, more concerned with seeing that the tall gelding made no bother while Elayne dismounted than with making courtesies herself, and another who made his bow and remained bent with his hands making a stirrup for Elayne. Neither gave more than a glance at the view of a snow-covered mountain meadow where they would normally see a stone wall. The stableworkers were accustomed to gateways by now. She had heard that they garnered drinks in the taverns by boasting of how often they saw the Power used and the things they supposedly had seen done with it. Elayne could imagine what those tales sounded like by the time they reached Arymilla. She rather enjoyed the thought of Arymilla chewing her fingernails.

As she set foot on the paving stones, a cluster of Guardswomen appeared around her, in crimson hats with white plumes lying flat on the broad brims, and lace-edged crimson sashes, embroidered with the White Lion, that slanted across their bright breastplates. Not until then did Caseille take the remainder of Elayne's escort to the stable. Their replacements were just as wary, eyes watching every direction, hands hovering near their sword hilts, except for Deni, a wide, placid-faced woman who carried a long brass-studded cudgel. They were only nine in number—*Only nine*, Elayne thought bitterly. *I need* only *nine bodyguards in the Royal Palace itself!*—yet every one who carried a sword was expert. Women who followed the "trade of the sword," as Caseille called it, had to be good, or else sooner or later they were cut down by some fellow whose only advantage was strength enough to batter her down. Deni possessed no facility with a sword at all, but the few men who had tested her cudgel regretted doing so. Despite her bulk, Deni was very quick, and she had no concept of fighting fair, or of practice, for that matter.

Rasoria, the stocky under-lieutenant in charge, seemed relieved when the grooms led Fireheart off. If Elayne's bodyguard had their way, no one except themselves would have been allowed within arm's reach. Well, maybe they were not quite *that* bad, but they looked with suspicion at almost everyone except Birgitte and Aviendha. Rasoria, a Tairen despite her blue eyes and the yellow hair she wore cut short, was among the worst in that regard, even insisting on watching the cooks make Elayne's meals and having everything tasted before it was brought up. Elayne had not protested, however over-zealous they might be. One experience of drugged wine was more than enough, even when she knew she would live at least long enough to bear her child. But it was neither the Guardswomen's mistrust nor the need for it that tightened her mouth. It was Birgitte, weaving her way through the crowded stableyard, but not toward her.

Aviendha was last to appear out of the gateway, of course, after she was sure that everyone was through, and before she let the gateway wink out of existence, Elayne started in her direction, striding off so suddenly that her escort had to leap to maintain their guarding ring around her. As quickly as she moved, though, Birgitte, with her thick golden braid hanging to her waist, was there first, helping Aviendha down and handing the gray mare over to a long-faced groom who seemed almost as leggy as Siswai. Aviendha always had more difficulty getting off a horse than getting on, but

Birgitte had more than assistance in mind. Elayne and her escort arrived just in time to hear the woman say to Aviendha in a low, hurried voice, “Did she drink her goat’s milk? Did she get enough sleep? She feels . . .” Her voice trailed off at the end, and she drew a deep breath before turning to face Elayne, outwardly calm, and unsurprised to find her right there. The bond did work both ways.

Birgitte was not a big woman, though she stood taller than Elayne in her heeled boots, as tall as Aviendha, but she usually had a presence that was only heightened by the uniform of the Captain-General of the Queen’s Guards, a short red coat with a high white collar worn over baggy blue trousers tucked into gleaming black boots, four golden knots on her left shoulder and four bands of gold on each white cuff. After all, she was Birgitte Silverbow, a hero out of legend. She remained wary of trying to live up to those legends; she claimed that the stories were grossly inflated where they were not complete fabrications. Yet she was still the same woman who had done every one of the things that formed the heart of those legends and more besides. Now, despite her apparent composure, unease tinged the concern for Elayne that flowed through the bond along with her headache and her sullen stomach. She knew very well that Elayne hated for them to check on her behind her back. That was not the whole reason for Elayne’s irritation, but the bond let Birgitte know just how upset she was.

Aviendha, calmly unwrapping her shawl from around her head and draping it over her shoulders, attempted the gaze of a woman who had done nothing wrong and certainly was not involved with anyone else who had done anything wrong. She might have managed it if she had not widened her eyes for an added touch of innocence. Birgitte was a bad influence on her in some ways.

“I drank the goat’s milk,” Elayne said in a level voice, all too conscious of the Guardswomen ringing the three of them. Facing outward, eyes scanning the yard and the balconies and the rooftops, nearly every one was certainly listening. “I got enough sleep. Is there anything else you want to ask *me?*” Aviendha’s cheeks colored faintly.

“I think I have all the answers I need for the moment,” Birgitte replied without a hint of the blush Elayne had been hoping for. The woman *knew* she was tired, *knew* she had to be lying about the sleep.

The bond was decidedly inconvenient at times. *She* had drunk nothing but half a cup of extremely well watered wine last night, but she was beginning to *have* Birgitte's morning-after head *and* her sour stomach. None of the other Aes Sedai she had spoken to about the bond had mentioned anything of the kind, but she and Birgitte all too often mirrored one another, physically and emotionally. The last presented real problems when her moods were on a seesaw. Sometimes she managed to shrug it off, or fight it off, but today she knew she was going to have to suffer until Birgitte was Healed. She thought the mirroring must occur because they were both women. No one had heard of anyone bonding another woman before. Few had heard of it now, to tell the truth, and some of them seemed to believe it could not be true. A Warder was male as surely as a bull was male. Everyone knew that, and not many stopped to think that anything that "everyone knew" deserved close examination.

Being caught in a lie, when she was trying to follow Egwene's dictate about living as if she had already taken the Three Oaths, made Elayne defensive, and that made her blunt. "Is Dyelin back?"

"No," Birgitte said just as bluntly, and Elayne sighed. Dyelin had left the city days before Arymilla's army appeared, taking Reanne Corly with her to make gateways and speed her travel, and a great deal depended on Dyelin's return. On what news she brought back. On whether she brought anything besides news.

Choosing who would be Queen of Andor was quite simple, boiled down to essentials. There were over four hundred Houses in the realm, but only nineteen strong enough that others would follow where they led. Usually, all nineteen stood behind the Daughter-Heir, or most of them, unless she was plainly incompetent. House Mantear had lost the throne to Trakand when Mordrellen died only because Tigraine, the Daughter-Heir, had vanished and Mantear had begun running heavily to boy children. And because Morgase Trakand had gathered thirteen Houses in her support. Only ten of the nineteen were necessary to ascend the throne, by law and custom. Even claimants who still thought they should have the throne themselves usually fell in with the rest, or at least fell silent and gave up their pursuit, once another woman had ten Houses at her back.

Things had been bad enough when she had three declared rivals, but now Naean and Elenia were united behind Arymilla Marne, of all people, the least likely of the three to have succeeded, and that meant she had two Houses—two large enough to count; Matherin and those eighteen others she had visited were too small—her own Trakand and Dyelin's Taravin, to face six. Oh, Dyelin insisted that Carand, Coelan and Renshar would come to Elayne, and Norwelyn and Pendar and Traemane besides, but the first three wanted Dyelin herself on the throne, and the last three seemed to have gone into hibernation. Dyelin was firm in her loyalty, though, and tireless on Elayne's behalf. She persisted in her belief that some of the Houses that were keeping silent could be convinced to support Elayne. Of course, Elayne could not approach them herself, but Dyelin could. And now the situation verged on desperate. Six Houses supporting Arymilla, and only a fool would think she had not sent feelers out toward the others. Or that some might listen just because she did have six already.

Despite the fact that Caseille and her Guards had vacated the courtyard, Elayne and the others had to thread their way across the paving stones though a crowd. The men from Matherin were finally down off their horses, but they were still moiling about, dropping their halberds and picking them up only to drop them again, trying to unload their packhorse there in the stableyard. One of the boys was chasing a chicken that somehow had gotten loose and was scuttling between the horses' legs, while one of the wrinkled old men shouted encouragement, though whether for the boy or the chicken was unclear. A leather-faced bannerman with the merest fringe of white hair remaining, in a faded red coat that strained across his belly, was trying to establish order with the help of an only slightly younger Guardsman, both of them likely returned from their pensions, as a good many had, but another of the boys seemed about to lead his shaggy horse into the palace itself, and Birgitte had to order him out of the way before Elayne could enter. The boy, a fuzz-cheeked lad who could not have been above fourteen, gaped at Birgitte as widely as he had at the palace. She was certainly more picturesque in her uniform than the Daughter-Heir in a riding dress, and he had already seen the Daughter-Heir. Rasoria gave him a shove back toward the old bannerman, shaking her head.

"I don't flaming know what I can do with them," Birgitte grumbled as a maid liveried in red-and-white took Elayne's cloak and gloves in the small entry hall. Small in terms of the Royal Palace. With gilded stand-lamps flickering between narrow, fluted white columns, it was half again the size of Matherin's main entry hall, though the ceiling was not so high. Another maid with the White Lion on the left breast of her dress, a girl not that much older than the boy who had tried to bring his horse inside, offered a ropework silver tray with tall cups of steaming spiced wine before simultaneous frowns from Aviendha and Birgitte made her shy back. “The flaming boys fall asleep if they’re put on guard,” Birgitte went on, scowling at the retreating maid. “The old men stay awake, but half can’t remember what they’re flaming supposed to do if they see somebody trying to scale the bloody wall, and the other half together couldn’t fight off six shepherds with a dog.” Aviendha raised an eyebrow at Elayne and nodded.

“They aren’t here to fight,” Elayne reminded them as they started down a blue-tiled corridor lined with mirrored stand-lamps and inlaid chests, Birgitte and Aviendha on either side of her and the Guardswomen spreading out a few paces ahead of them and behind. *Light,* she thought, *I wouldn’t have* taken *the wine!* Her head pounded in rhythm with Birgitte’s, and she touched her temple, wondering whether she should order her Warder to go find Healing immediately.

Birgitte had other ideas, though. She eyed Rasoria and the others in front, then looked over her shoulder and motioned those following to fall back a little more. That was strange. She had handpicked every last woman in the Guards, and she trusted them. Even so, when she spoke it was in a hurried near-whisper, bending her head close to Elayne. “Something happened just before you returned. I was asking Sumeko if she’d Heal me before you got back, and she suddenly fell over in a faint. Her eyes just rolled up in her head, and down she went. It isn’t only her. Nobody will admit a flaming thing, not to me, but the other Kin I’ve seen have been jumping out of their bloody skins, and the Windfinders, too. Not one of them could spit if she had to. You were back before I could find a sister, but I suspect they’d give me the fish eye, too. They’ll tell you, though.”

The palace required the population of a large village to keep running, and servants had begun to appear, liveried men and women scurrying along the corridors, flattening themselves against the walls or ducking into crossing hallways to make room for Elayne’s escort, so she explained the little she knew in as soft a voice and as few words as possible. Some rumors she did not mind reaching the streets, and inevitably Arymilla, but tales of Rand could be as bad as tales of the Forsaken by the time they were twisted through a few retellings. Worse, in a way. No one would believe the Forsaken were trying to put her on the throne as a puppet. “In any event,” she finished, “it’s nothing to do with us here.”

She thought she sounded very convincing, very cool and detached, but Aviendha reached out to squeeze her hand, for an Aiel as much as a comforting hug with so many people to see, and Birgitte's sympathy flooded through the bond. It was more than commiseration; it was the shared feeling of a woman who had already suffered the loss she herself feared and more. Gaidal Cain was lost to Birgitte as surely as if he were dead, and on top of that, her memories of her past lives were fading. She remembered almost nothing clearly before the founding of the White Tower, and not all of that. Some nights, the fear that Gaidal would fade from her memory, too, that she would lose any remembrance of actually having known and loved him, left her unable to sleep until she drank as much brandy as she could hold. That was a poor solution, and Elayne wished she could offer a better, yet she knew her own memories of Rand would not die until she did, and she could not imagine the horror of knowing those memories might leave her. Still, she hoped someone Healed Birgitte's morning-after head soon, before her own split open like an over-ripe melon. Her ability with Healing fell short of the task, and Aviendha's was no stronger.

Despite the emotion she could feel in Birgitte, the other woman kept her face smooth and unconcerned. "The Forsaken," she muttered dryly. And softly. That was not a name to bandy about. "Well, as long as it has nothing to do with us, we're bloody all right." A grunt that might have been a laugh gave her the lie. But then, although Birgitte said she had never been a soldier before, she had a soldier's view. Long odds were usually the only odds you could find, but you still had to get the job done. "I wonder what they think of it?" she added, nodding toward the four Aes Sedai who had just stepped out of a crossing corridor down the hallway.

Vandene, Merilille, Sareitha and Careane had their heads together as they walked, or rather, the last three were clustered around Vandene, leaning toward her and talking with urgent gestures that made the fringes on their shawls sway. Vandene glided along slowly as if she were alone, paying no heed. She had always been slender, but her dark green dress, embroidered with flowers on the sleeves and shoulders, hung on her as though made for a stouter woman, and the white hair gathered at the nape of her neck seemed in need of a brush. Her expression was bleak, but that might have had nothing to do with whatever the other sisters were saying. She had been joyless ever since her sister's murder. Elayne would have wagered that dress had belonged to Adeleas. Since the murder, Vandene wore her sister’s clothes more often than her own. Not that that accounted for the fit. The two women had been of a size, but Vandene’s appetite for food had died with her sister. Her taste for most things seemed to have died then.

Sareitha, a Brown whose dark square face was not yet touched with agelessness, saw Elayne just then, and put a hand on Vandene’s arm as if to draw her up the corridor. Vandene brushed the Tairen woman’s hand away and glided on with the merest glance at Elayne, disappearing on along the hallway they had come out of. Two women in novice white, who had been following the others at a respectful distance, offered quick curtsies to the remaining sisters and hastened after Vandene. Merilille, a tiny woman in dark gray that made her Cairhienin paleness seem like ivory, stared as if she might follow. Careane adjusted her green-fringed shawl on shoulders wider than those of many men and exchanged quiet words with Sareitha. The pair of them turned to meet Elayne as she approached, making her curtsies almost as deep as the novices had given them. Merilille noticed the Guardswomen and blinked, then noticed Elayne and gave a start. *Her* curtsy matched the novices’.

Merilille had worn the shawl for over a hundred years, Careane for more than fifty, and even Sareitha had worn it longer than Elayne Trakand, but standing among Aes Sedai went with strength in the Power, and none of these three was more than middling strong among sisters. In Aes Sedai eyes, increased strength gave, if not increased wisdom, at least increased weight to your opinions. With a sufficient gap, those opinions became commands. Sometimes, Elayne thought the Kin’s way was better.

“I don’t know what it is,” she said before any of the other Aes Sedai could speak, “but there is nothing we can do about it, so we might as well quit worrying. We have enough right in front of us without fretting over things we can’t affect.”

Rasoria half-turned her head, frowning and plainly wondering what she had missed, but the words smoothed the anxiety from Sareitha’s dark eyes. Perhaps not from the rest of her, since her hands moved as if she wanted to smooth her brown skirts, yet she was willing to follow the lead of a sister who stood as high as Elayne. Sometimes, there were advantages to standing high enough that you could quell objections with a sentence. Careane had already regained serenity, if she had ever lost it. It sat easily on her, though she looked more like a wagon driver than an Aes Sedai despite her beryl-slashed silks and smooth, ageless coppery face. But then, Greens usually were made of tougher stuff than Browns. Merilille did not look at all serene. Wide eyes and half-parted lips gave her the appearance of startlement. That was usual for her, though.

Elayne continued along the hallway, hoping they would go about their business, but Merilille fell in beside Birgitte. The Gray should have taken primacy among the three, but she had developed a tendency to wait for someone to tell her what to do, and she shifted over without a word when Sareitha politely asked Birgitte to give her room. The sisters were unfailingly courteous to Elayne's Warder when she was acting as Captain-General. It was Birgitte as Warder they tried to ignore. Aviendha received no such civility from Careane, who elbowed in between her and Elayne. Anyone not trained in the White Tower was a wilder by definition, and Careane despised wilders. Aviendha pursed her lips though she did not draw her belt knife or even suggest that she might, for which Elayne was grateful. Her first-sister could be . . . precipitate, at times. On second thought, she would have forgiven a little hastiness from Aviendha right then. Custom forbade rudeness toward another Aes Sedai under any circumstances, but Aviendha could have growled threats and waved her knife to her heart's content. That might have been enough to make the threesome leave, even if in a tizzy. Careane did not seem to notice the cool green gaze marking her.

"I told Merilille and Sareitha it was nothing we could do anything about," she said calmly. "But shouldn't we be ready to flee if it comes closer? There's no shame flying from that. Even linked, we would be moths fighting a forest fire. Vandene wouldn't bother to listen."

"We really should make some sort of preparations, Elayne," Sareitha murmured absently, as if making lists in her head. "It's when you don't make plans that you wish you had. There are a number of volumes in the library here that mustn't be left behind. I believe several can't be found in the Tower library."

"Yes." Merilille's voice was breathless, and as anxious as her large dark eyes. "Yes, we really should be ready to go. Perhaps . . . Perhaps we should not wait. Surely going from necessity would not violate our agreement. I am sure it would not." Only Birgitte as much as glanced at her, but she flinched.

"If we do go," Careane said as if Merilille had not spoken, "we'll have to take all of the Kin with us. Allow them to scatter, and the Light only knows what they'll do or when we will ever catch them again, especially now that some have learned to Travel." There was no bitterness in her voice, though only Elayne among the sisters in the palace could Travel. It seemed to make a difference to Careane that the Kinswomen had begun in the White Tower, even if most had been put out and a few had run away. She had identified no fewer than four of them herself. At least they were not wilders.

Sareitha's mouth tightened, though. It weighed on her that several Kinswomen could weave gateways, and she had very different notions of the Kin. Normally, she limited her objections to the occasional frown or disparaging grimace, since Elayne had made her own views clear, but the stress of the morning seemed to have loosened her tongue. "We do indeed need to take them with us," she said in a cutting tone, "else they'll all be claiming to be Aes Sedai as soon as they're out of our sight. Any woman who maintains she was put out of the Tower over three hundred years ago will claim anything! They need to be kept under a close watch, if you ask me, instead of going about as they please, most *especially* those who can Travel. They may have gone where you told them and come back so far, Elayne, but how long before one of them doesn't return? Mark my words, once one of them escapes, others will follow, and we will have a mess on our hands we'll never clean up."

"There is no reason for us to go anywhere," Elayne said firmly, as much for the Guards as for the sisters. That distant beacon was still in the same spot where she had first sensed it, and if it did move, the chance seemed small that it would move toward Caemlyn, much less actually come there, but a rumor that Aes Sedai were planning flight might be enough to engender a stampede, mobs clawing to reach the gates ahead of whatever could frighten Aes Sedai. An army sacking the city would not kill as many. And these three chattered away as if there were no one to hear but the wall hangings! There was some excuse for Merilille, but not the others. "We will remain here, as the Amyrlin Seat has commanded, until the Amyrlin commands otherwise. The Kinswomen will continue to receive every courtesy until they are welcomed back into the Tower, and that is the Amyrlin's command, too, as you very well know. And you will continue teaching the Windfinders and go about your lives as Aes Sedai should. We are supposed to deal with people’s fears and soothe them, not spread senseless gossip and panic.”

Well, perhaps she had been a touch more than firm. Sareitha put her gaze on the floor tiles like a rebuked novice. Merilille flinched again at mention of the Windfinders, but that was to be expected. The others gave lessons, but the Sea Folk held Merilille as tightly as they did one of their apprentices. She slept in their quarters and normally was not seen without two or three of them, and her trailing meekly at their heels. They refused to accept anything less than meekness from her.

“Of course, Elayne,” Careane said hastily. “Of course. None of us would suggest disobeying the Amyrlin.” Hesitating, she adjusted her green-fringed shawl over her arms, seemingly occupied with setting it just so. She did spare a pitying look for Merilille. “But speaking of the Sea Folk, could you tell Vandene to take her share of the lessons?” When Elayne said nothing, her voice took on an edge that would have been called sullen in anyone not Aes Sedai. “She says she’s too busy with those two runaways, but she finds enough time to keep me talking some nights until I’m half asleep. That pair is already so cowed they wouldn’t squeak if their dresses caught fire. They don’t need her attention. She could take her portion of teaching those cursed wilders. Vandene needs to start behaving as an Aes Sedai, too!”

Standing or no, rebuke or no, she gave Elayne a baleful glare that took her a moment to smother. Elayne had been the one who made the bargain that led to Aes Sedai having to teach Windfinders, but so far she herself had managed to miss giving more than a handful of lessons, claiming the press of other, more important duties. Besides, the Sea Folk saw a shorebound teacher as a hireling, even an Aes Sedai, and a hireling with less standing than a scullion at that. A scullion who might try to cheat on her labor. She still thought Nynaeve had gone away just to avoid giving those lessons. Certainly no one expected to end up in Merilille’s state, but even a few hours at a time was bad enough.

“Oh, no, Careane,” Sareitha put in, still avoiding Elayne’s eye. And Merilille’s. In her opinion, the Gray had gotten herself into this fix and thus deserved what came of it, but she did try not to rub salt in the wounds. “Vandene is distraught over her sister, and Kirstian and Zarya help her occupy her mind.” Whatever she thought of the other Kin, she accepted that Zarya was a runaway, as she had to, since Adeleas had recognized her, and if Kirstian must be a liar, her own lie would make her pay in full for that. Runaways were not treated kindly. “I spend hours with her, too, and she almost never talks of anything but Adeleas. It’s as if she wants to add my memories to her own. I think she needs to be allowed as much time as she needs, and those two keep her from being alone too often.” Giving Elayne a sidelong glance, she drew breath. “Still, teaching the Windfinders is certainly . . . challenging. Perhaps an hour now and then would help pull her out of despondency, if only by making her angry. Don’t you agree, Elayne? Just an hour or two, now and then.”

“Vandene will be allowed as much time to grieve for her sister as she needs or wants,” Elayne said in level tones. “And there will be no more discussion of it.”

Careane sighed heavily and rearranged her shawl again. Sareitha sighed faintly and began twisting the Great Serpent ring on the forefinger of her left hand. Perhaps they had sensed her mood, or perhaps it was just that neither looked forward to another session with the Windfinders. Merilille’s permanently surprised expression did not change, but then, her sessions with the Sea Folk lasted all day and all night unless Elayne managed to pry her away, and the Windfinders were becoming less and less willing to let her go no matter how Elayne pried.

At least she had managed to avoid being curt with the three. It took an effort, especially with Aviendha there. Elayne did not know what she would do if she ever lost her sister. Vandene was not only grieving for a sister, she was searching for Adeleas’s murderer, and there could be no doubt that the killer was Merilille Ceandevin, Careane Fransi or Sareitha Tomares. One of them, or worse, more than one. The charge was hard to believe of Merilille, in her present condition, but it was not easy to believe of any sister. As Birgitte had pointed out, one of the worst Darkfriends she had ever met, during the Trolloc Wars, was a mild-as-milk lad who jumped at loud noises. And poisoned an entire city’s water supply. Aviendha’s suggestion was to put all three to the question, which had horrified Birgitte, but Aviendha was considerably less in awe of Aes Sedai than she once had been. The proper courtesies must be maintained, until there was evidence to convict. Then there would be no courtesy at all.

“Oh,” Sareitha said, brightening suddenly. “Here’s Captain Mellar. He was a hero again while you were gone, Elayne.”

Aviendha gripped the hilt of her belt knife, and Birgitte stiffened. Careane's face went very still, very cold, and even Merilille managed a disapproving hauteur. Neither sister made any secret of her dislike for Doilan Mellar.

With a narrow face, he was not pretty, or even handsome, yet he moved with a swordsman's lithe grace that spoke of physical strength. As Captain of Elayne's bodyguard, he rated three golden knots of rank, and he wore them soldered to each shoulder of his brightly burnished breastplate. An ignorant observer might have thought he outranked Birgitte. The falls of snow-white lace at his throat and wrists were twice as thick and twice as long as those worn by any of the Guardswomen, but he had left off the sash again, perhaps because it would have obscured one set of golden knots. He claimed that he wanted nothing more in life than to command her bodyguard, yet he frequently talked of battles he had fought as a mercenary. It seemed he had never been on the losing side, and victory had often come from his unsung efforts on the field. He swept off his white-plumed hat in a deep, flourishing bow, managing his sword deftly with one hand, then offered a slightly lesser to Birgitte with an arm across his chest in salute.

Elayne arranged a smile on her face. "Sareitha says you were a hero again, Captain Mellar. How so?"

"Nothing more than my duty to my queen." Despite a voice thick with self-deprecation, his answering smile was warmer than it should have been. Half the palace thought him the father of Elayne's child. That she had not crushed that rumor seemed to make him believe he had prospects. The smile never reached his dark eyes, though. They remained as cold as death. "My duty to you is my pleasure, my Queen."

"Captain Mellar led another sortie without orders yesterday," Birgitte said in a carefully even voice. "This time the fighting almost spilled into the Far Madding Gate, which he had ordered left open against his return." Elayne felt her face growing hard.

"Oh, no," Sareitha protested. "It wasn't like that at all. A hundred of Lord Luan's armsmen tried to reach the city in the night, but they left it too late, and sunrise caught them. So did three times their number of Lord Nasin's men. If Captain Mellar hadn't opened the gates and led a rescue, they'd have been cut to pieces in sight of the walls. As it was, he managed to save eighty for your cause." Smiling, Mellar basked in the Aes Sedai's praise as if he had not heard Birgitte's criticism. Of course, he seemed unaware of Careane and Merilille's disapproving stares, too. He always managed to ignore disapproval.

"How did you know they were Lord Luan's men, Captain?" Elayne asked quietly. A small smile that should have given Mellar warning appeared on Birgitte's face. But then, he was one of those who seemed not to believe she was a Warder. Even if he did, few except Warders and Aes Sedai knew what the bond entailed. If anything, Mellar's expression grew more smug.

"I didn't go by banners, my Queen. Anybody can carry a banner. I recognized Jurad Accan through my looking glass. Accan is Luan's man to his toenails. Once I knew that. . .." He made a dismissive gesture in a flurry of lace. "The rest was no more than taking a little exercise."

"And did this Jurad Accan bring any message from Lord Luan? Anything signed and sealed, affirming House Norwelyn's support for Trakand?"

"Nothing in writing, my Queen, but as I said—"

"Lord Luan has not declared for me, Captain."

Mellar's smile faded somewhat. He was unused to being cut short. "But, my Queen, Lady Dyelin says that Luan is as good as in your camp right now. Accan showing up is proof of—"

"Of nothing, Captain," Elayne said coldly. "Perhaps Lord Luan will be in my camp eventually, Captain, but until he declares, you've given me eighty men who need to be watched." Eighty out of a hundred. And how many of hers had he lost? And he had risked Caemlyn doing it, burn him! "Since you can find time in your duties commanding my bodyguard to lead sorties, you can find time to arrange for watching them. I won't spare anyone from the walls for it. Set Master Accan and his fellows to drilling the men I've brought in from the manors. That will keep them all busy and out of trouble most of each day, but I leave it to you how to keep them away from the walls the rest of the time. And I do expect them kept away from the walls and out of trouble, Captain. You may see to it now."

Mellar stared at her, stunned. She had never taken him to task before, and he did not like it, particularly in front of so many witnesses. There were no over-warm smiles now. His mouth twitched, and a sullen heat grew in his eyes. But there was nothing for him to do except to jerk another bow, murmur "As my Queen commands" in a hoarse voice, and leave with as good a grace as he could muster. Before he had gone three paces he was striding down the hall as if to trample anyone who got in his way. She would have to tell Rasoria to take care. He might try to soothe his bile by taking it out on those who had seen and heard. Merilille and Careane gave almost identical nods; they would have seen Mellar called down, and preferably put out of the palace, long since.

“Even if he did wrong,” Sareitha said carefully, “and I am not convinced that he did, Captain Mellar saved your life at risk to his own, Elayne, your life and that of the Lady Dyelin. Was there really need to embarrass him in front of the rest of us?”

“Never think I avoid paying my debts, Sareitha.” Elayne felt Aviendha grip one of her hands, and Birgitte the other. She gave each of them a light squeeze. When you were surrounded by enemies, it was good to have a sister and a friend close by. “I am going to find a hot bath now, and unless one of you wishes to scrub my back . . . ?”

They could recognize a dismissal, and they departed more gracefully than Captain Mellar, Careane and Sareitha already discussing whether or not the Windfinders would actually want lessons today, Merilille trying to look every direction at once in hope of avoiding any Windfinders. What would they talk of later, though? Whether Elayne was having a spat with the father of her child? Whether they had successfully hidden their guilt in killing Adeleas?

I always pay my debts, Elayne thought, watching them go. *And I help my friends pay theirs.*

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CHAPTER 12

A Bargain

A bath was not hard to find, though Elayne had to wait in the hall frowning at the lion-carved doors of her apartments, drafts flickering the mirrored stand-lamps while Rasoria and two of the Guardswomen went in to search. Once they were sure there were no assassins lying in wait, and guards had been arrayed in the corridor and outer room, Elayne entered to find white-haired Essande waiting in the bedchamber with Naris and Sephanie, the two young tirewomen she was training. Essande was slim, with Elayne's Golden Lily embroidered over her left breast and a very great dignity emphasized by her deliberate way of moving, though some of that came from age and aching joints she refused to acknowledge. Naris and Sephanie were sisters, fresh-faced, sturdy and shy-eyed, proud of their livery and happy to have been chosen out for this rather than cleaning hallways but almost as much in awe of Essande as of Elayne. There were more experienced maids available, women who had worked years in the palace, but sadly, girls who had come seeking any sort of work they could find were safer.

Two copper bathtubs sat on thick layers of toweling laid atop the rose-colored floor tiles where one of the carpets had been rolled up, evidence that word of Elayne's arrival had flown ahead of her. Servants had a knack for learning what was happening that the Tower's eyes-and-ears might envy. A good blaze in the fireplace and tight casements in the windows made the room warm after the corridors, and Essande waited only to see Elayne enter the room before sending Sephanie off at a run to fetch the men with the hot water. That would be brought up in double-walled pails with lids to keep it from getting cold on the way from the kitchens, though it might be delayed a little by Guardswomen checking to make sure there were no knives hidden in the water.

Aviendha eyed the second bathtub almost as doubtfully as Essande eyed Birgitte, the one still uneasy about actually stepping into water and the other still not accepting that anyone more than necessary should be present during a bath, but the white-haired woman wasted no time before quietly bustling Elayne and Aviendha both into the dressing room, where another fire on a wide marble hearth had taken the chill from the air. It was a great relief to have Essande help her out of her riding clothes, knowing that she had more ahead of her than a hasty wash and a show of ease while worrying about how quickly she could move on to her next destination. Other pretenses awaited, the Light help her, and other worries, but she was home, and that counted for much. She could almost forget about that beacon shining in the west. Almost. Well, not at all, really, but she could manage to stop fretting over it as long as she did not dwell on the thing.

By the time they had been undressed—with Aviendha slapping Naris' hands away and removing her own jewelry, doing her best to pretend that Naris did not exist and her garments were somehow removing themselves—by the time they had been bundled into embroidered silk robes and had their hair tied up in white toweling—Aviendha tried to wrap the towel around her own head three times, and only after the construction collapsed down her neck for the third time did she allow Naris to do it, muttering about getting so soft that she soon would need someone to lace up her boots until Elayne began laughing and she joined in, throwing her head back so that Naris had to start over again—by the time all that was done and they had returned to the bedchamber, the bathtubs were full and the scent of the rose oil that had been added to the water filled the air. The men who had brought up the water were gone, of course, and Sephanie was waiting with her sleeves pushed above her elbows in case someone wanted her back scrubbed. Birgitte was sitting on the turquoise-inlaid chest at the foot of the bed, her elbows on her knees.

Elayne allowed Essande to help her off with her pale green, swallow-worked robe and sank into her tub immediately, submerging herself to her neck in water just a hair short of too hot. That left her knees poking up, but it immersed most of her in the warmth, and she sighed, feeling weariness leach out of her and languor creep in. Hot water might have been the greatest single gift of civilization.

Staring at the other tub, Aviendha gave a start when Naris attempted to remove her robe, lavender and embroidered with flowers on the wide sleeves. Grimacing, she finally allowed it, and stepped gingerly into the water, but she snatched the round soap out of Sephanie's hand and began washing herself vigorously. Vigorously, but very careful not to slop so much as a spoonful of water over the tub's rim. The Aiel did use water for washing, as well as in the sweat tents, especially for rinsing out the shampoo they made from a fat leaf that grew in the Waste, yet the dirty water was conserved and used for watering crops. Elayne had shown her two of the great cisterns beneath Caemlyn, fed by a pair of underground rivers and large enough that the far side of each was lost in a forest of thick columns and shadows, but the arid Waste was in Aviendha's bones.

Ignoring Essande's pointed looks—*she* seldom said two words more than necessary, and thought baths no time to say anything—Birgitte talked while they bathed, though she took care of what she said in front of Naris and Sephanie. It was unlikely they were in the pay of another House, but maids gossiped almost as freely as men—it seemed almost a tradition. Some rumors were worth fostering, nonetheless. Mostly Birgitte talked of two huge merchants' trains that had arrived yesterday from Tear, the wagons heavy with grain and salted beef, and another from Illian with oil and salt and smoked fish. It was always worthwhile reminding people that food continued to flow into the city. Few merchants braved the roads of Andor in winter, none carrying anything as cheap as food, but gateways meant that Arymilla could intercept all the merchants she wished and her forces still would starve long before Caemlyn felt the first pangs of hunger. The Windfinders, who were making most of those gateways, reported that the High Lord Darlin—claiming the title of Steward in Tear for the Dragon Reborn, of all things!—was besieged in the Stone of Tear by nobles who wanted the Dragon Reborn out of Tear completely, but even they were unlikely to try stopping a rich trade in grain, particularly since they believed the Kin who accompanied the Windfinders were Aes Sedai. Not that any real attempt was made at deception, but Great Serpent rings had been made for Kinswomen who had passed their tests for Accepted before being put out of the Tower, and if anyone drew the wrong conclusion, no one actually lied to them.

The water was going to shed its heat if she waited much longer, Elayne decided, so she took a rose-scented soap from Sephanie and allowed Naris to begin scrubbing her back with a long-handled brush. If there had been news of Gawyn or Galad, Birgitte would have mentioned it straight off. She was as eager to hear as Elayne, and she could not have held it back. Gawyn's return was one rumor they dearly wanted to reach the streets. Birgitte performed her duties well as Captain-General, and Elayne meant her to keep the position, if she could be convinced, but having Gawyn there would allow both women to relax a little. Most of the soldiers in the city were mercenaries, and only enough of them to man the gates strongly and make a display along the miles of wall surrounding the New City, but they still numbered more than thirty companies, each with its own captain who inevitably was full of pride, obsessed with precedence, and ready to squabble over any imagined slight from another captain at the drop of a straw. Gawyn had trained his whole life to command armies. He could deal with the squabblers, leaving her free to secure the throne.

Apart from that, she simply wanted him away from the White Tower. She prayed that one of her messengers had gotten through and that he was well downriver by this time. Egwene had been besieging Tar Valon with her army for more than a week, now, and it would be the cruelest spinning of fate for Gawyn to be caught between his oaths to defend the Tower and his love for Egwene. Worse, he had already broken that oath once, or at least bent it, for love of his sister and perhaps his love of Egwene. If Elaida ever suspected that Gawyn had aided Siuan's escape, whatever credit he had gained by helping her replace Siuan as Amyrlin would evaporate like a dewdrop, and if he was still within Elaida's reach when she learned, he would find himself in a cell, and lucky to avoid the headsman. Elayne did not resent his decision to aid Elaida; he could not have known enough then to make any other choice. A good many sisters had been confused over what was happening, too. A good many still seemed to be. How could she ask Gawyn to see what Aes Sedai could not?

As for Galad . . . She had grown up unable to like the man, sure he must resent her, and resent Gawyn most of all. Galad had to have thought he would be First Prince of the Sword one day, until Gawyn was born. Her earliest memories of him were of a boy, a young man, already behaving more like a father or uncle than a brother, giving Gawyn his first lessons with a sword. She remembered being afraid he would break open Gawyn's head with the practice blade. But he had never given more than the bruises any youth expected in learning swords. He knew what was right, Galad did, and he was willing to do what was right no matter the cost to anyone, including himself. Light, he had started a war to help her and Nynaeve escape from Samara, and it was likely he had known the risk from the start! Galad fancied Nynaeve, or had for a time—it was hard to imagine he still felt that way, with him a Whitecloak, the Light only knew where and doing what—but the truth was, he had started that war to rescue his sister. She could not condone him being a Child of the Light, she could not like him, yet she hoped that he was safe and well. She hoped he found his way home to Caemlyn, too. News of him would have been nearly as welcome as news of Gawyn. That surprised her, but it was true.

"Two more sisters came while you were away. They're at the Silver Swan." Birgitte made it sound as though they were merely stopping at an inn because every bed in the palace was taken. "A Green with two Warders and a Gray with one. They came separately. A Yellow and a Brown left the same day, so there are still ten altogether. The Yellow went south, toward Far Madding. The Brown was heading east."

Sephanie, waiting patiently beside Aviendha's tub with nothing to do, exchanged a glance with her sister over Elayne's head and grinned. Like many in the city, they knew for a fact that the presence of Aes Sedai at the Silver Swan signified White Tower support for Elayne and House Trakand. Watching the two girls like a hawk, Essande nodded; she knew it, too. Every streetsweeper and ragpicker was aware that the Tower was divided against itself, but even so, the name still carried weight, and an image of strength that never failed. Everyone knew the White Tower had lent support to every rightful Queen of Andor. In truth, most sisters looked forward to a sitting monarch who was also Aes Sedai, the first in a thousand years and the first since the Breaking of the World to be openly known as Aes Sedai, but Elayne would not be surprised to find there was a sister in Arymilla's camp, keeping discreetly out of notice. The White Tower never placed all of its coin on one horse unless the race was fixed.

"That's enough of the brush," she said, irritably twisting away from the bristles. Well trained, the girl laid the brush down on a stool and handed her a large Illianer sponge that she used to begin sluicing off soap. She wished *she* knew what those sisters meant. They were like a grain of sand in her slipper, so tiny a thing that you could hardly imagine it being a discomfort, but the longer it remained, the larger it seemed. The sisters at the Silver Swan were becoming a sizable stone just by being there.

Since before she arrived in Caemlyn the number at the inn had been changed frequently, a few sisters leaving every week and a few coming to replace them. The siege had not changed anything; the soldiers surrounding Caemlyn were no more likely to try stopping an Aes Sedai from going where she wanted than were the rebellious nobles in Tear. There had been Reds in the city too, for a while, asking after men heading for the Black Tower, but the more they learned, the more they had let their disgruntlement show, and the last pair had ridden out of the city the day after Arymilla appeared before the walls. Every Aes Sedai who entered the city was carefully watched, and none of the Reds had gone near the Silver Swan, so it seemed unlikely the sisters there had been sent by Elaida to kidnap her. For some reason she imagined little groups of Aes Sedai scattered from the Blight to the Sea of Storms, and constant streams of sisters flowing between, gathering information, sharing information. A peculiar thought. Sisters used eyes-and-ears to watch the world, and rarely shared what they learned unless it was a threat to the Tower itself. Likely those at the Swan were among the sisters sitting out the Tower's troubles, waiting to see whether Egwene or Elaida would end with the Amyrlin Seat before they declared themselves. That was wrong—an Aes Sedai should stand for what she thought was right without worrying over whether she was choosing the winning side!—but these made her uneasy for another reason.

Recently one of her watchers at the Swan had overheard a disturbing name, murmured and quickly shushed, as if in fear of eavesdroppers. Cadsuane. Not a common name, that. And Cadsuane Melaidhrin had meshed herself closely with Rand while he was in Cairhien. Vandene did not think much of the woman, calling her opinionated and muleheaded, but Careane had almost fainted in awe at hearing her name. It seemed the stories surrounding Cadsuane amounted to legends. Trying to deal with the Dragon Reborn single-handed was just the sort of thing Cadsuane Melaidhrin might do. Not that Elayne had concerns about Rand and any Aes Sedai, except that he might outrage her beyond her control—the man was too pigheaded himself sometimes to see where his own good lay!—but why would a sister in Caemlyn mention her name? And why had another hushed her?

Despite the hot bathwater, she shivered, thinking of all the webs the White Tower had spun through the centuries, so fine that none could see them except the sisters who did the spinning, so convoluted that none but those sisters could have unraveled them. The Tower spun webs, the Ajahs spun webs, even individual sisters spun webs. Sometimes those schemes blended into one another as though guided by a single hand. Other times they had pulled one another apart. That was how the world had been shaped for three thousand years. Now the Tower had divided itself neatly into rough thirds, one third for Egwene, one for Elaida, and one that was standing aside. If those last were in contact with one another, exchanging information—forming plans?—the implications . . .

A sudden tumult of voices, dimmed by the closed door, made her sit up straight. Naris and Sephanie squealed and leaped to clutch one another, staring wide-eyed at the door.

“What in the bloody flaming . . . ?” Snarling, Birgitte hurled herself off the chest and out of the room, slamming the door behind her. The voices rose higher.

It did not sound as if the Guardswomen were fighting, just arguing at the tops of the lungs, and the bond carried mainly anger and frustration, along with her *bloody* headache, but Elayne climbed out of the bathtub, holding out her arms for Essande to slip her robe on. The white-haired woman’s calmness, and perhaps Elayne’s, soothed the two maids enough that they blushed when Essande looked at them, but Aviendha leaped from her tub, splashing water everywhere, and dashed dripping into the dressing room. Elayne expected her to return with her belt knife, but instead she came back surrounded by the glow of *saidar* and holding the amber turtle in one hand. With the other she handed Elayne the *angreal* that had been in her belt pouch, an aged ivory carving of a woman clothed only in her hair. Excepting the towel atop her head, Aviendha wore only a wet sheen, and she angrily waved Sephanie away when the woman tried to put her robe on her. Knife or no knife, Aviendha still tended to think as if she were going to fight with a blade and might need to move suddenly.

“Put this back in the dressing room,” Elayne said, handing the ivory *angreal* to Essande. “Aviendha, I really don’t think we need to—”

The door opened a crack, and Birgitte put her head in, scowling. Naris and Sephanie jumped, not so soothed as they had seemed.

“Zaida wants to see you,” Birgitte growled at Elayne. “I told her she’d have to wait, but—” With a sudden yelp, she staggered into the room, catching her balance after two steps and whirling to face the woman who had pushed her.

The Wavemistress of Clan Catelar did not look as though she had pushed anyone. The ends of her intricately knotted red sash swirling about her knees, she entered the room calmly, followed by two Windfinders, one of whom shut the door in Rasoria's angry face. All three swayed when they moved nearly as much as Birgitte did in her heeled boots. Zaida was short, with streaks of gray in her tightly curled hair, but her dark face was one of those that grew more beautiful with the years, and her beauty only seemed magnified by the golden chain, heavy with small medallions, that connected one of her fat golden earrings to her nose ring. More importantly, her air was one of command. Not of arrogance, but of the knowledge that she would be obeyed. The Windfinders eyed Aviendha, still glowing with the Power, and Chanelle's angular face tightened, yet aside from a murmur from Shielyn that "the Aiel girl" was ready to weave, they remained silent and waited. The eight earrings in Shielyn's ears marked her as Windfinder to a Clan Wavemistress, and Chanelle's honor-chain carried nearly as many golden medallions as that of Zaida herself. Both were women of authority, and it was plain in the way they held themselves and moved, yet one needed to know nothing of the Atha'an Miere to know as soon as one saw them that Zaida din Parede held the first spot.

"Your boots must have tripped you, Captain-General," she murmured with a small smile on her full lips, one dark tattooed hand toying with the golden scent-box that dangled on her chest. "Clumsy things, boots." She and the two Windfinders were barefoot as always. The soles of the Atha'an Miere's feet were as tough as shoe soles, unbothered by rough decks or cold floor tiles. Strangely, in addition to their blouses and trousers of brightly colored silk brocades, each woman wore a wide stole of plain white that hung below her waist and almost hid her multitude of necklaces.

"I was taking a bath," Elayne said in a tight voice. As if they could not see that with her hair done up and her robe clinging to her damply. Essande was almost *quivering* with indignation, which meant she must be beside herself with fury. Elayne felt close to it herself. "I will be taking a bath again as soon as you go. I will speak with you when I have finished taking my bath. If it pleases the Light." There! If they were going to shove into her rooms, let them chew on that for ceremony!

"The grace of the Light be upon you also, Elayne Sedai," Zaida replied smoothly. She raised an eyebrow at Aviendha, though neither at the continuing light of *saidar,* since Zaida could not channel, nor at her nudity, since the Sea Folk were quite casual about that, at least out of sight of landmen. “You have never invited me to bathe with you, though it would have been courteous, but we will not speak of that. I have learned that Nesta din Reas Two Moons is dead, killed by the Seanchan. We mourn her loss.” All three women touched their white stoles and touched fingertips to lips, yet Zaida seemed as impatient with formality as Elayne. Without raising her voice or speeding its pace, she merely pushed on, almost shockingly abrupt and to the point for one of the Sea Folk.

“The First Twelve of the Atha’an Miere must meet to choose another Mistress of the Ships. What is happening to the west makes it clear there can be no delay.” Shielyn’s mouth tightened, and Chanelle raised her pierced scent box to her nose as if to drown the smell of something. Its spicy perfume was sharp enough to slice through the scent of rose oil in the room. However they had described what they sensed to Zaida, she displayed no unease, or anything but certainty. Her gaze held steady on Elayne’s face. “We must be ready for whatever comes, and for that we need a Mistress of the Ships. In the name of the White Tower, you promised twenty teachers. I cannot take Vandene in her grief, or you, but I will take the other three with me. The rest, the White Tower owes, and I will expect prompt payment. I have sent to the sisters at the Silver Swan to see whether some of them will meet the Tower’s debt, but I cannot wait on their reply. If it pleases the Light, I will bathe with the other Wavemistresses tonight at the harbor of Illian.”

Elayne fought very hard to keep her own face smooth. The woman just *announced* that she intended to scoop up every Aes Sedai lying around loose in Caemlyn and carry them off? And it sounded very much as if she did not intend to leave any of the Windfinders behind. That made Elayne’s heart sink. Until Reanne returned, there were seven of the Kin with sufficient strength to weave a gateway, but two of those could not make one large enough to admit a horse cart. Without the Windfinders, plans for keeping Caemlyn supplied from Tear and Illian became problematical at best. The Silver Swan! Light, whoever Zaida had sent would reveal every line of the bargain she had made! Egwene was not going to thank her for spilling that mess out into the open. She did not think she had ever had so many problems dropped in her lap in the course of one short statement.

“I regret your loss, and the Atha’an Miere’s loss,” she said, thinking fast. “Nesta din Reas was a great woman.” She had been a powerful woman, anyway, and a very strong personality. Elayne had felt happy to walk away with more than her shift after her one meeting with her. Speaking of shifts, she could not afford time to dress. Zaida might not wait. She belted her robe tighter. “We must talk. Have wine brought for our guests, Essande, and tea for me. Weak tea,” she sighed at a burst of caution through the bond to Birgitte. “In the smaller sitting room. Will you join me, Wavemistress?”

To her surprise, Zaida merely nodded as if she had expected this. That started Elayne thinking about Zaida’s side of the bargain between them. The bargains; there were two, really, and that might be a key point.

No one had expected the smaller sitting room to be used for some time, so the air held a chill even after Sephanie rushed with a spark-wheel to light the kindling laid beneath split oak on the wide white hearth and scurried out of the room. Flames leapt up from the fatwood, catching on the log atop the fire-irons as the women arrayed themselves in the lightly carved low-backed chairs arranged in a semicircle in front of the fireplace. Well, Elayne and the Sea Folk women arrayed themselves, Elayne arranging her robe carefully over her knees and wishing Zaida had delayed just an hour so she could be properly dressed, the Windfinders coolly waiting for the Wavemistress to take a chair, then sitting to either side of her. Birgitte stood in front of the writing table with her hands on her hips and her feet apart, her face a thunderhead. The bond carried a clear desire to wring an Atha’an Miere neck. Aviendha leaned casually against one of the sideboards, and even when Essande brought her robe and pointedly held it out for her, she merely put it on and resumed her pose with her arms folded beneath her breasts. She had released *saidar*, but the turtle was still in her hand, and Elayne suspected she was ready to embrace the Power again in an instant. Neither Aviendha’s cold green-eyed stare nor Birgitte’s scowl affected the Sea Folk in the least, however. They were who they were, and they knew who they were.

“The *Atha’an Miere* were promised twenty teachers,” Elayne said, emphasizing slightly. Zaida had said that *she* had been promised, that *she* would collect payment, but that bargain had been made with Nesta din Reas. Of course, Zaida might believe she would become the new Mistress of the Ships herself. “Proper teachers, to be selected by the Amyrlin Seat. I know that the Atha’an Miere pride themselves on meeting their bargains in full, and the Tower will meet its side, too. But you knew when sisters here agreed to teach, that it was temporary. And a bargain quite apart from that made with the Mistress of the Ships. You admitted as much when you agreed for Windfinders to weave gateways to bring supplies to Caemlyn from Illian and Tear. Surely you would not have gotten involved in the affairs of the shorebound for any reason other than paying off a bargain. But if you are leaving, your help is at an end, and so is our requirement to teach. I fear you will harvest no teachers at the Silver Swan, either. The Atha'an Miere will have to wait until the Amyrlin sends teachers. According to the bargain made with the Mistress of the Ships." A pity she could not demand they stay away from the inn, but it might already be too late for that, and every reason she could think of sounded hollow. An argument that shattered for lack of a center would only embolden Zaida. The Atha'an Miere were ferocious hagglers. Scrupulous, but ferocious. She had to go very slowly, very carefully.

"My sister has you by the ear, Zaida din Parede," Aviendha chortled, slapping her thigh. "Hung up by the ankles, in fact." That was a Sea Folk punishment that she found incredibly amusing, for some reason.

Elayne stifled a burst of irritation. Aviendha enjoyed chances to tweak the Sea Folk's noses—she had begun while they were fleeing Ebou Dar and never really stopped—but this was no time for it.

Chanelle stiffened, her calm face sinking into a glare. The lean woman had been the butt of Aviendha's nose-tweaking more than once, including a regrettable episode involving *oosquai*, a very potent Aiel drink. The glow of *saidar* actually surrounded her! Zaida could not see that, but she knew about the *oosquai* and Chanelle being carried to her bed, sicking up the whole way, and she raised a peremptory hand toward the Windfinder. The glow faded, and Chanelle's face darkened. It might have been a blush or anger.

"All that you say may be so," Zaida said, which was not far from insulting, especially said to an Aes Sedai. "In any event, Merilille was not part of that. She agreed to be one of the teachers long before she reached Caemlyn, and she will go with me to continue her teaching."

Elayne drew a long breath. She could not even try to argue Zaida out of this. A great part of the White Tower's influence rested on the fact that the Tower kept its word as surely as the Sea Folk. That it was *known* to keep its word. Oh, people said you had to listen carefully to be sure an Aes Sedai had promised what you thought she had, and that was often true, but once the promise was clear, it was as good as an oath under the Light. At least the Windfinders were not likely to let Merilille get away. They hardly let her out of their sight. “You may have to return her to me, if I have particular need of her.” If Vandene and the two helpers found proof that she was Black Ajah. “If that happens, I will arrange a replacement.” And who that could be, she had no idea.

“She has the rest of her year to serve. At least a year, by the bargain.” Zaida gestured as if making a concession. “But so long as you understand that her replacement must come before she leaves. I will not let her go without another in her place.”

“I suppose that will do,” Elayne replied calmly. It would bloody well have to, since she had no other choice!

Zaida smiled faintly and let the silence stretch. Chanelle shifted her feet, but more in impatience than as if to rise, and the Wavemistress did not stir. Plainly she wanted something more, intended another bargain, and plainly she wanted Elayne to speak first. Elayne set herself to outwait the other woman. The fire had begun to blaze and crackle, sending sparks up the chimney and radiating a fine warmth into the room, but her damp robe absorbed the chill in the air and transferred it to her skin. Ignoring the cold was all very well, but how were you supposed to ignore being cold *and* wet? She met Zaida’s gaze levelly and matched her tiny smile. Essande returned, followed by Naris and Sephanie carring ropework trays, the one with a silver teapot in the shape of a lion and thin green cups of Sea Folk porcelain, the other hammered silver cups and a tall-necked wine pitcher that gave off the aroma of spices. Everyone took wine, except for Elayne, who was never offered the choice. Peering into her tea, she sighed. She could see the bottom of the cup quite clearly. If they made it any weaker, they might as well give her water!

After a moment, Aviendha strode across the room to set her winecup back on the tray atop one of the sideboards and pour herself a cup of tea. She gave Elayne a nod and a smile combining sympathy with a suggestion that she really preferred watery tea to wine. Elayne smiled back in spite of herself. First-sisters shared the bad as well as the good. Birgitte grinned over the top of her silver cup, and proceeded to empty half of it in a gulp. The bond carried her amusement at the grumpiness she felt from Elayne. And it still carried her headache, in no way reduced. Elayne rubbed her temple. She should have insisted that Merilille Heal the woman as soon as she had seen her. A number of the Kin outstripped Merilille when it came to Healing, but she was the only sister in the palace with a halfway decent ability.

“You have great need of women to make these gateways,” Zaida said suddenly. Her full mouth was no longer smiling. She disliked having spoken first.

Elayne sipped her wretched excuse for tea and said nothing.

“It might please the Light that I could leave one or two Windfinders here,” Zaida went on. “For a set time.”

Elayne wrinkled her brow as though considering. She *needed* those bloody women, and more than one or two. “What would you ask in return?” she said finally.

“One square mile of land on the River Erinin. Good land, mind. Not marshy or boggy. It is to be Atha’an Miere land in perpetuity. Under our laws, not Andor’s,” she added as if that were a small afterthought hardly worth mentioning.

Elayne choked on her tea. The Atha’an Miere hated leaving the sea, hated being out of sight of it. And Zaida was asking for land a thousand miles from the nearest salt water? Asking for it to be ceded absolutely, at that. Cairhienin and Murandians and even Altarans had bled trying to take bits of Andor, and Andorans had bled to keep them out. Still, one square mile was a small bit, and a small price to keep Caemlyn supplied. Not that she would let Zaida know that. And if the Sea Folk began trading directly into Andor, then Andoran goods would be able to move in Sea Folk bottoms everywhere the Sea Folk sailed, and that was everywhere. Zaida surely knew that already, but there was no point in letting her know that Elayne had thought of it. The Warder bond urged caution, yet there were times for boldness, as Birgitte should know better than anyone.

“Sometimes tea goes down the wrong way.” Not a lie; merely an evasion. “For a square mile of Andor, I deserve more than two Windfinders. The Atha’an Miere got twenty teachers and more for help using the Bowl of the Winds, and when they go you will have twenty to replace them. You have twenty-one Windfinders with you. For a mile of Andor, I should have all twenty-one, and twenty-one more in their places when they leave, for as long as Aes Sedai teach Sea Folk.” Best not to let the woman think that was her way of rejecting the offer out of hand. “Of course, the normal customs duties would apply to any goods moving off this land into Andor.”

Zaida raised her silver cup to her mouth, and when she lowered it, she wore the tiniest smile. Yet Elayne thought it was a smile of relief rather than triumph. “Goods moving into Andor, but not goods coming from the river onto our land. I might leave three Windfinders. For half a year, say. And they must not be used in fighting. I will not have my people die for you, and I will not have other Andorans angry at us because Sea Folk have killed some of them.”

“They will be asked only to make gateways,” Elayne said, “though they must make them wherever I require.” Light! As if she intended using the One Power as a weapon! The Sea Folk did so without a second thought, but she was trying very hard to behave as Egwene demanded, as though she had already taken the Three Oaths. Besides, if she blasted those camps outside the walls with *saidar,* or allowed anyone else to, not a House in Andor would stand with her. “They must stay until my crown is secure, whether that is half a year or longer.” The crown should be hers in much less time, but as her old nurse Lini used to say, you counted your plums in the basket, not on the tree. Once the crown was hers, though, she would not need Windfinders to supply the city, and in all truth, she would be happy to see their backs. “But three is not nearly enough. You will want Shielyn, since she is your Windfinder. I will keep the rest.”

The medallions on Zaida’s honor-chain swayed gently as she shook her head. “Talaan and Metarra are apprentices still. They must return to their training. The others have duties, too. Four might be spared until your crown is secure.”

From there it was just a matter of bargaining. Elayne had never expected to keep the apprentices, and Windfinders to Clan Wavemistresses could not be spared either, which she had expected. Most Wavemistresses used their Windfinders and Swordmasters as close advisors, and would be parted from one as easily as she would be parted from Birgitte. Zaida tried to exclude others as well, such as Windfinders who served on large vessels like rakers and skimmers, but that would have disqualified the greater number right there, and Elayne refused, and refused to come down in her demands unless Zaida came up in her offers. Which the woman did slowly, grudging every concession. But not so slowly as Elayne might have expected. Clearly, the Wavemistress needed this bargain as much as she herself needed women who could weave gateways.

"Under the Light, it is agreed," she was able to say at last, kissing the fingertips of her right hand and leaning forward to press them to Zaida's lips. Aviendha grinned, obviously impressed. Birgitte kept a smooth face, but the bond said she found it hard to believe Elayne had come out so well.

"It is agreed, under the Light," Zaida murmured. Her fingers on Elayne's lips were hard and callused, though she could not have hauled on a rope herself in many years. She looked quite satisfied for a woman who had yielded nine of the fourteen Windfinders who had been on the table. Elayne wondered how many of those nine would be women whose ships had been destroyed by the Seanchan in Ebou Dar. Losing a ship was a serious matter among the Atha'an Miere, whatever the reason, and maybe cause enough to want to stay away from home a little longer. No matter.

Chanelle looked glum, her tattooed hands tight on the knees of her red brocaded trousers, yet not so glum as might be expected from a Sea Folk woman who would have to remain ashore a while longer. She was to command the Windfinders who stayed, and she did not like it that Zaida had acceded to her being under Elayne's authority, and Birgitte's. There were to be no more Sea Folk striding about the palace as if they owned it and making demands left and right. But then, Elayne suspected that Zaida had come to this meeting knowing she would leave some of her party behind, and Chanelle had come knowing she would command them. That hardly mattered, either, nor did it matter what advantage Zaida hoped to gain toward becoming Mistress of the Ships. That she saw some was clear as good glass. All that mattered was that Caemlyn would not go hungry. That and the . . . the *bloody* beacon still blazing in the west. No, she would be a queen, and she could not be a moonstruck girl. Caemlyn and Andor were all that *could* matter.

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CHAPTER 13

High Seats

Zaida and the two Windfinders departed from Elayne’s apartments, graceful and outwardly unhurried but with almost as little ceremony as they had entered, a bare wish that the Light illumine Elayne and see her safe. For Atha’an Miere, that was almost rushing off without a word. Elayne decided that if Zaida did indeed want to be the next Mistress of the Ships, the woman had a rival she hoped to steal a march on. It might be well for Andor if Zaida did attain the Atha’an Miere throne, or whatever the Sea Folk called it; bargain or no bargain, she would always be aware that Andor had helped her, and that had to be for the good. Though if she failed, her rival would be aware of where Andor’s favor had gone, too. Still, it was all if and maybe. Here and now was another thing altogether.

“I do not expect anyone to manhandle an ambassador,” she said quietly once the doors had closed behind them, “but in the future I do expect the privacy of my rooms. Even ambassadors are not to be allowed simply to wander in. Am I understood?”

Rasoria nodded, her face wooden, but by the color that flashed into her cheeks, she felt the mortification of having let the Sea Folk pass as keenly as Birgitte, and the bond . . . *writhed* . . . until Elayne felt her own face growing red with a stinging embarrassment. “You did nothing wrong, exactly, but don’t let it happen again.” Light, now she sounded a dolt! “We will speak no more of it,” she said stiffly. Oh, *burn* Birgitte *and* the bond! They *would* have had to wrestle with Zaida to stop her, but adding bone-deep humiliation to the other woman’s headache was piling insult on injury! And Aviendha had no call to grin in that . . . that *smarmy* way. Elayne did not know when or how her sister had learned that she and Birgitte sometimes reflected one another, but Aviendha found the whole thing vastly amusing. Her sense of humor could be rough at times.

“I think you two will make each other melt, one day,” she said, laughing. “But then, you already played that joke, Birgitte Trahelion.” Birgitte scowled at her, sudden alarm crushing embarrassment in the bond, and she returned such a look of innocence it seemed her eyes might fall out of her face.

Better not to ask, Elayne decided. When you ask questions, Lini used to say, then you have to hear the answers whether you want to or not. She did not want to hear, not with Rasoria studiously examining the floor tiles in front of her boots and the rest of the Guardswomen in the anteroom failing to pretend not to be listening. She had never realized how precious privacy was until she lost it completely. Near enough completely, anyway. “I am going to finish my bath now,” she said calmly. Blood and ashes, what joke *had* Birgitte played on her? Something that made her . . . melt? It could not have been much if she still did not know what it was.

Unfortunately, the bath water had gone cold. Tepid, anyway. Hardly anything she wanted to sit in. A little while longer soaking would have been wonderful, but not at the expense of waiting while the tubs were emptied bucket by bucket and more hot water brought up. The entire palace must know she was back by now, and the First Maid and the First Clerk would be anxious to make their daily reports. Daily when she was in the city, and doubly anxious because she had been gone for a day. Duty came before pleasure, if you were going to rule a country. And that went doubly for trying to gain the throne in the first place.

Aviendha pulled the towel from her head and shook down her hair, appearing relieved that she would not have to climb into water again. She started for the dressing room, shedding her robe before she reached the door, and had donned most of her garments when Elayne and the maids entered. With only a few mutters, she let Naris complete the job, although little remained beyond stepping into her heavy woolen skirt. She slapped the maid’s hands away and tightened the laces of her soft knee-high boots herself.

For Elayne, it was not so easy. Unless some emergency loomed, Essande felt slighted when she did not discuss her choice of dresses. With close servants, there was always a delicate balance to maintain. Without exception a bodyservant knew more of your secrets than you thought she did, and she saw you at your worst, grumpy, tired, weeping in your pillow, in rages and sulks. Respect had to go both ways, or the situation became impossible. So Aviendha was sitting on one of the padded benches, allowing Naris to comb out her hair, before Elayne could conclude on a simple gray in fine wool, embroidered in green on the high neck and the sleeves and trimmed with black fox. It was not so much that she had difficulty deciding, but that Essande kept putting forward silks sewn with pearls or sapphires or firedrops, each more ornately embroidered than the last. No matter that the throne was not yet hers, Essande wanted to dress her every day as a queen readying for an audience.

There had been a point to that, back when every day brought delegations of merchants to offer petitions or make their respects, especially outlanders hoping the troubles in Andor would not affect their trade. The old saying that who held Caemlyn held Andor had never really been true, and in merchant eyes, the chances she would actually gain the throne had diminished with the arrival of Arymilla's army outside the gates. They could count the Houses arrayed on either side as easily as they could count coin. Even Andoran merchants avoided the Royal Palace now, keeping out of the Inner City as much as possible so no one would think they had gone to the palace, and bankers came well hooded, in anonymous carriages. None wished her ill, that she knew, and certainly none wanted to anger her, but neither did they want to anger Arymilla, not now. Still, the bankers did come, and so far she had not heard of any merchants presenting petitions to Arymilla. That would be the first sign that her cause was lost.

Getting into the dress took twice as long as it should have, since Essande allowed Sephanie to help Elayne. The girl breathed heavily the whole time, unaccustomed as yet to dressing someone else and fearful of making a mistake under Essande's eye. Much more than of making one in front of her mistress, Elayne suspected. Apprehension made the sturdy young woman clumsy, clumsiness made her more painstaking, and taking pains made her worry more about mistakes, so the result was that she moved more slowly than the frail older woman ever had. Finally, however, Elayne found herself seated facing Aviendha, letting Essande draw an ivory comb through her curls. In Essande's view, allowing one of the girls to slip a shift over Elayne's head or fasten her buttons was one thing, but risking either of them making a tangle in her hair quite another.

Before the comb had made two dozen strokes, though, Birgitte appeared in the doorway. Essande sniffed, and Elayne could all but see the woman grimace behind her back. Essande had given way on Birgitte being present at baths, however reluctantly, but the dressing room was sacrosanct.

Surprisingly, Birgitte let the maid’s disapproval slide past without so much as a placating look. Usually, she refrained from pushing Essande an inch further than Elayne required. “Dyelin has returned, Elayne. She’s brought company. The High Seats of Mantear, Haevin, Gilyard and Northan.” For some reason, the bond carried streaks of puzzlement and annoyance.

Shared headache or no, Elayne could have jumped for joy. If Essande had not had the comb deep in her hair, she might have. Four! She had never expected Dyelin to accomplish so much. Hoped for it, prayed for it, but never expected it, certainly not in one short week. In truth, she had been sure Dyelin would return empty-handed. Four gave her an equal footing with Arymilla. It was galling to think of being on “an equal footing” with that foolish woman, but truth was truth. Mantear, Haevin, Gilyard and Northan. Why not Candraed? That was the fifth House Dyelin had gone to approach. No. She had four more Houses, and she was *not* going to fret over the lack of one.

“Entertain them in the formal sitting room until I can come, Birgitte.” The small sitting room had been sufficient for Zaida—she hoped the Wavemistress had not noticed the slight—but four High Seats required more. “And ask the First Maid to arrange apartments.” Apartments. Light! The Atha’an Miere would have to be hurried out of theirs to make room. Until they left, most beds that did not have two occupants had three. “Essande, the green silk with the sapphires, I think. And sapphires for my hair, too. The large sapphires.”

Birgitte left still feeling puzzled and upset. Why? Surely she could not think she should have left *Dyelin* cooling her heels because of Zaida? Oh, Light, now she was feeling puzzled over Birgitte feeling puzzled; if that was allowed to feed on itself, they would both end up dizzy! As the door closed, Essande moved to the nearest wardrobe wearing a smile that might have been called triumphant.

Looking at Aviendha, who had motioned Naris and her comb away and was folding a dark gray scarf to tie her hair back, Elayne smiled herself. She needed something to take her out of that spinning loop. “Maybe you should wear silks and gems just this once more, Aviendha," she said in a gently teasing tone. "Dyelin won't mind, of course, but the others aren't used to Aiel. They might think I'm entertaining a stablehand."

She meant it for a joke—they twitted one another about clothes all the time, and Dyelin looked askance at Aviendha whatever she wore—but her sister frowned at the wardrobes lining the wall, then nodded and set the scarf down beside her on the tufted cushion. "Just so these High Seats will be properly impressed. Do not think I will do this all the time. It is a favor to you."

For someone just doing a favor, she pored over the clothes that Essande pulled out with a great deal of interest before deciding on a dark blue velvet slashed with green, and a silver net to catch her hair. They were her clothes, made for her, but since reaching Caemlyn she had avoided them as if they were crawling with death's-head spiders. Stroking the sleeves, she hesitated as if she might change her mind, but finally she let Naris do up the tiny pearl buttons. She declined Elayne's offer of emeralds that would have suited the gown admirably, keeping her silver snowflake necklace and heavy ivory bracelet, but at the last minute she did pin the amber turtle to her shoulder.

"You can never tell when it might be needful," she said.

"Better safe than sorry," Elayne agreed. "Those colors look beautiful on you." It was true, but Aviendha blushed. Compliment her on how well she shot a bow or how fast she could run, and she took it as no more than her due, but she had difficulty coming to grips with the fact that she was beautiful. That was a part of herself she had managed to ignore, till recently.

Essande shook her head in disapproval, unaware that the brooch was an *angreal*. Amber did not go with blue velvet. Or maybe it was Aviendha's horn-hilted knife, which she tucked behind her green velvet belt. The white-haired woman made sure that Elayne wore a small dagger with sapphires on the scabbard and pommel, hanging from a belt of woven gold. Everything had to be just so to gain Essande's approbation.

Rasoria gave a start when Aviendha entered the anteroom in her high-necked velvets. The Guardswomen had never seen her in anything but Aiel garb before. Aviendha scowled as if they had laughed, and gripped her belt knife firmly, but luckily her attention was diverted by a cloth-covered tray sitting on the long side table against the wall. Elayne's midday meal had been delivered while they were dressing. Whisking the blue-striped cloth aside, Aviendha tried to interest Elayne in eating, smiling and pointing out how sweet the stew of dried plums would be and exclaiming over the pieces of pork in the grainy mush. Slivers, they looked like. Rasoria cleared her throat and mentioned that a fire was burning nicely in the apartment's larger sitting room. She would be more than happy to carry the tray in for the Lady Elayne. Everyone tried to make sure Elayne ate properly, however they saw "properly," but this was ridiculous. The tray had been sitting there some time. The mush was a congealed mass that would have stuck in the bowl if she turned it upside down!

She had the High Seats of four Houses waiting on her, and they had waited long enough. She pointed that out, but offered to let the two of them eat if they were hungry. In fact, she implied that she might insist on them eating. That was enough to make Aviendha drop the cloth back over the tray with a shudder, and Rasoria wasted no more time, either.

It was only a short walk down the icy hallway to the formal sitting room, and the only things that moved, aside from them, were the bright winter wall hangings that stirred in the corridor's drafts, but the Guardswomen formed a ring around Elayne and Aviendha and kept watch as if they expected Trollocs. It was only with an effort that Elayne convinced Rasoria there was no need to search the sitting room before she entered. The Guardswomen served her and obeyed her, but they also were pledged to keep her alive, and they could be as muley over that last duty as Birgitte was over deciding whether she was Warder, Captain-General or elder sister at any given moment. Likely, following on the heels of the incident with Zaida, Rasoria would have wanted the lords and ladies waiting inside to surrender their weapons! The threat with the mush might have had its part, too. After a short argument, however, Elayne and Aviendha swept in through the wide doorway together, and alone. Elayne's feeling of satisfaction did not last, though.

The sitting room was large, meant to accept dozens of people comfortably, a dark-paneled space with layered carpets covering the floor tiles and a horseshoe arch of high-back chairs in front of a tall fireplace of white marble with fine red veins. Here, important dignitaries could be received with more honor than an audience before the throne, because it was more intimate. The blaze dancing along the logs on the hearth had barely had time to take an edge off the chill in the air, but that certainly was not the reason Elayne felt as if she had been struck in the stomach. She understood Birgitte's puzzlement, now.

Dyelin turned from warming her hands at the fire as they entered. A strong-faced woman with fine lines at the corners of her eyes and hints of gray in her golden hair, she had not waited to change on reaching the palace, and still wore a riding dress of deep gray that showed a few travel stains on the hem. Her curtsy was the merest bend of her neck, the slightest dip of her knees, but she intended no discourtesy. Dyelin knew who she was as surely as Zaida did—her only jewelry was a small golden pin in the shape of Taravin's Owl and Oak on her shoulder, a clear statement that the High Seat of Taravin needed nothing more—yet she had almost died to prove her loyalty to Elayne. "My Lady Elayne," she said formally, "it gives me honor to present to you Lord Perival, High Seat of House Mantear."

A pretty, golden-haired boy in a plain blue coat jerked away from peering through the four-barreled kaleidoscope on a gilded stand taller than he was. He had a silver cup in his hand that Elayne hoped very much did not contain wine, or at least extremely well watered if it did. One of the side tables held several trays laden with pitchers and cups. And an ornate teapot she knew might as well be filled with water. "My pleasure, my Lady Elayne," he piped, blushing and managing a credible bow despite a little clumsiness in handling the sword belted to his waist. The weapon looked much too long for him. "House Mantear stands with House Trakand." She returned his courtesy in a daze, spreading her skirts mechanically.

"Lady Catalyn, High Seat of House Haevin," Dyelin continued.

"Elayne," a dark-eyed young woman at her side murmured, touching her dark green divided skirts and making a fractional dip that might possibly have been intended for a curtsy, though perhaps she just meant to imitate Dyelin. Or perhaps she wanted to avoid poking her chin against the large enameled brooch on the high neck of her dress, the Blue Bear of Haevin. Her hair was caught in a silver net worked with the Blue Bear, too, and she wore a long ring with the sigil as well. A touch too much pride of House, perhaps. Despite her cool haughtiness, she was a woman only by courtesy, her cheeks still round with baby fat. "Haevin stands with Trakand, obviously, or I would not be here."

Dyelin's mouth tightened slightly, and she gave the girl a hard glance that Catalyn seemed not to see. "Lord Branlet, High Seat of House Gilyard."

Another boy, this one with unruly black curls, in green embroidered with gold on the sleeves, who hastily set his winecup down on a side table as if uneasy at being seen with it. His blue eyes were too big for his face, and he nearly tripped himself with his sword, bowing. “It is my pleasure to say that House Gilyard stands for Trakand, Lady Elayne.” Halfway through, his voice broke from treble to bass, and he blushed even harder than Perival.

“And Lord Conail, High Seat of House Northan.”

Conail Northan grinned over the rim of his silver cup. Tall and lean, in a gray coat with sleeves just too short to cover his bony wrists, he had an engaging grin, merry brown eyes, and an eagle’s beak for a nose. “We drew straws for the order to be introduced, and I drew short. Northan stands with Trakand. Can’t let a ninny like Arymilla take the throne.” He managed his sword smoothly, and he at least had reached his majority, but if he was many months past sixteen, Elayne would eat his turned-down boots *and* his silver-knot spurs.

Their youth was no surprise, of course, but she had expected Conail to have a graying head at his side to advise him and the others to have their guardians looking over their shoulders. There was no one else in the room aside from Birgitte, standing in front of the tall arched windows with her arms folded beneath her breasts. Bright midday sunlight flooding through the clear glass set in the casements made her a silhouette of displeasure.

“Trakand welcomes all of you, and I welcome all of you,” Elayne said, suppressing her dismay. “I will not forget your support, and Trakand will not forget.” Something of her consternation must have crept through, because Catalyn’s mouth compressed and her eyes glittered.

“I am past my guardianship, as you must know, Elayne,” she said in a stiff voice. “My uncle, Lord Arendor, said at the Feast of Lights that I was as ready as I would ever be and might as well have free rein then as in a year. Truth, I think he wanted more time to go hunting while he still can. He has always loved hunting, and he’s quite old.” Once again she failed to see Dyelin’s frown. Arendor Haevin and Dyelin were roughly of an age.

“I have no guardian either,” Branlet said uncertainly, his voice nearly as high-pitched as Catalyn’s.

Dyelin gave him a sympathetic smile and smoothed his hair back from his forehead. It promptly fell forward again. “Mayv was riding alone, as she liked to do, and her horse stepped into a gopher hole,” she explained quietly. “By the time anyone found her, it was too late. There has been some . . . discussion . . . over who’s to take her place.”

“They’ve been arguing for three months,” Branlet muttered. For a moment he looked younger than Perival, a boy trying to find his way with no one to show him the path. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone that, but I can tell you. You’re going to be the Queen.”

Dyelin put a hand on Perival’s shoulder, and he stood up straighter, though he still was shorter than she. “Lord Willin would be here with Lord Perival, but the years have him bedridden. Age creeps up on us all, eventually.” She shot another look at Catalyn, but the girl was studying Birgitte, now, her lips pursed. “Willin said I was to tell you that he sends his good wishes and also one he considers a son.”

“Uncle Willin told me to uphold the honor of Mantear and of Andor,” Perival said, intent as only a child being serious could be. “I will try, Elayne. I will try very hard.”

“I’m sure you will succeed,” Elayne told him, managing to put at least a little warmth into her tone. She wanted to chase them all out and ask Dyelin some very pointed questions, but that could not be, not right away. Whatever their ages, they were all the High Seats of powerful Houses, and she had to offer refreshment and at least a modicum of conversation before they went to change from their journey.

“Is she really the Captain-General of the Queen’s Guards?” Catalyn asked as Birgitte handed Elayne a thin blue porcelain cup of slightly darkened hot water. The girl spoke as though Birgitte was not there. Birgitte raised an eyebrow before leaving, but Catalyn seemed practiced in not seeing what she did not want to see. The winecup in her plump hand gave off the sharply sweet aroma of spices. There was not so much as a drop of honey in Elayne’s miserable excuse for tea.

“Yes, and my Warder, too,” she said. Politely. As ready as she would ever be! The girl probably thought it a compliment. She deserved a switching for pure rudeness, yet you could not switch a High Seat. Not when you needed her support.

Catalyn’s eyes flashed to Elayne’s hands, but the Great Serpent ring did nothing to alter the coolness of her expression. “They gave you that? I had not heard you had been raised Aes Sedai. I thought the White Tower had sent you home. When your mother died. Or perhaps because of the troubles in the Tower we hear about. Imagine, Aes Sedai squabbling like farmwives at market. But how can she be a general *or* a Warder without a sword? In any case, my aunt Evelle says a woman should leave swords to men. You don't shoe your own horse when you have a farrier, or grind your own grain when you have a miller." A quote from Lady Evelle, no doubt.

Elayne schooled her face, ignoring the only slightly buried insults. "An army *is* a general's sword, Catalyn. Gareth Bryne says a general who uses another blade is mistaking the job." The name seemed to make no impression on her, either. Miners' children in the Mountains of *Mist* knew Gareth Bryne's name!

Aviendha appeared at Elayne's side, smiling as though delighted at the opportunity to talk with the girl. "Swords are no use at all," she said sweetly. Sweetly! Aviendha! Elayne had never realized her sister could dissemble so skillfully. She had a cup of mulled wine, too. It would have been too much to expect her to continue drinking bitter tea out of sisterly affection. "You should learn the spear. Also the knife, and the bow. Birgitte Trahelion could shoot your eyes out at two hundred paces with her bow. Maybe at three hundred."

"The spear?" Catalyn said faintly. And then, in a slightly incredulous tone, "My *eyes*?"

"You have not met my sister," Elayne said. "Aviendha, Lady Catalyn Haevin. Catalyn, Aviendha of the Nine Valleys Taardad." Perhaps she should have done that the other way around, but Aviendha *was* her sister, and even a High Seat must settle for being introduced to the sister of the Daughter-Heir. "Aviendha is Aiel. She's studying to become a Wise One."

The fool girl's mouth dropped open at the start, her chin falling more and more with each pronouncement until she was gaping like a fish. Very satisfying. Aviendha gave Elayne a smaller smile, her green eyes sparkling with approbation above her winecup. Elayne kept her own face smooth, but she wanted to grin back.

The others were much more easily handled, much less infuriating. Perival and Branlet were shy their first time in Caemlyn much less in the Royal Palace, hardly saying two words unless someone drew them out. Conail did think the claim that Aviendha was Aiel must be a joke, and nearly got her belt knife in his brisket for laughing raucously, but luckily, he thought that was a joke as well. Aviendha adopted an icy composure that might have made her seem a Wise One in her usual clothes; in velvets, she appeared even more a lady of the court no matter how she fingered her knife. And Branlet did keep sneaking sidelong peaks at Birgitte. It took Elayne a little while to realize that he was watching her walk in her heeled boots—those wide trousers were actually quite snug over the hips—but she only sighed. Fortunately, Birgitte never noticed, and the bond would have let Elayne know even if she tried to hide it. Birgitte liked having men look at her. Grown men. It would have done Elayne's cause no good if her Warder smacked young Branlet's bottom.

Mainly they wanted to know whether Reanne Corly was an Aes Sedai. None of the four had ever seen a sister before, but they thought she must be, since she could channel, and carry them and their armsmen across hundreds of miles in a step. It was a good opportunity to practice evasion without actually lying, helped by the Great Serpent ring on her own finger. A lie would taint her relations with these four at the start, but it would hardly do to hope that rumors of Aes Sedai aid would filter out to Arymilla while spreading the truth about freely. Of course, all four were eager to let her know how many armsmen they had brought, a total of just over three thousand, nearly half of them crossbowmen or halberdiers who would be especially useful on the walls. That was a sizable force for four Houses to have had ready to hand when Dyelin came calling, but then, no House wanted its High Seat unguarded in these times. Kidnapping was not unheard of when the throne sat in question. Conail said as much, with a laugh; he seemed to find everything worth a laugh. Branlet nodded and scrubbed a hand through his hair. Elayne wondered how many of his numerous aunts, uncles and cousins knew he was gone, and what they would do when they learned.

"If Dyelin had been willing to wait a few days," Catalyn said, "I could have brought more than twelve hundred men." That was the third time in as many sentences that she had managed to point out that she had brought the largest contingent by a considerable margin. "I have sent to all of the Houses pledged to Haevin."

"And I to every House pledged to Northan," Conail added. With a grin, of course. "Northan may not summon as many swords as Haevin or Trakand—or Mantear," he put in with a bow to Perival, "but whoever rides when the Eagles call will be riding for Caemlyn."

"They will not ride very fast in winter," Perival said quietly. And astonishingly, since no one had spoken to him. "I think that whatever we do, we will have to do it with who we have now."

Conail laughed and cuffed the lad's shoulder and told him to buck up his spirits, because every man with a heart was on his way to Caemlyn to support the Lady Elayne, but Elayne studied Perival more closely. His blue eyes met hers for a moment without blinking before he shyly lowered his gaze. A boy, but he knew what he had ridden into better than Conail or Catalyn, who proceeded to tell them yet again how many armsmen she had brought, *and* how many Haevin could call on, as if everyone there except Aviendha did not know *exactly* how many rode to each House's summons, in trained soldiers and farmers who had carried a halberd or pike in some war and village men who could be drafted at need. Close enough to exactly, anyway. Lord Willin had done good work with young Perival. Now she had to keep it from going to waste.

Eventually it was time to exchange kisses, with Branlet blushing to his hair, and Perival blinking bashfully when Elayne bent to him, and Conail vowing never to wash his cheek. Catalyn returned a surprisingly hesitant peck to Elayne's cheek, as if it had just occurred to her that she had consented to placing Elayne above her, but after a moment she nodded to herself, cool pride settling back on her like a mantle. Once the four were handed over to the maids and serving men who would take them to the apartments that Elayne hoped the First Maid had had time to ready, Dyelin refilled her winecup and settled herself in one of the tall, carved chairs with a weary sigh.

"As fine a week's work as I've ever done, if I do say so myself. I got Candraed out of the way straight off. I never thought Danine would be able to make up her mind, and it only took an hour to prove me right, though I had to stay three to keep from offending her. The woman must keep in bed till noon from being unable to decide to which side of the mattress to climb down from! The rest were ready to see sense with only a little convincing. No one with any sense wants to risk Arymilla gaining the throne."

For a moment, she frowned at her wine, then fixed Elayne with a steady look. She never hesitated to speak her mind, whether or not she thought Elayne would agree, and plainly she intended to do so now. "It may have been a mistake to pass these Kinswomen off as Aes Sedai, however side-mouthed we've been about it. The strain may be too much to ask of them, and it puts us all at risk. This morning, for no reason I could make out, Mistress Corly was staring and gaping like a goose-girl come to the city. I think she almost failed at weaving the gateway to bring us here. That would have been wonderful, everyone lined up to ride through a miraculous hole in the air that never materialized. Not to mention that it would have stuck me in Catalyn's company for the Light knows how long. Odious child! There's a good mind there, if someone took her in hand for a few years, but she has a double dose of the viperous Haevin tongue."

Elayne gritted her teeth. She knew how cutting Haevins could be. The whole family took *pride* in it! Catalyn obviously did. And she was tired of explaining what on this day could frighten any woman who could channel. She was tired of being reminded of what she was trying to ignore. That *bloody* beacon was still blazing in the west, an utter impossibility both for its size and its duration. The thing had been unchanging for hours! *Anyone* who channeled for this long without a rest *must* have fallen over with exhaustion by now. And Rand bloody al'Thor was right there, in the heart of it. She was certain of that! He was alive, but that only made her want to slap his face for putting her through this. Well, *his* face was not there, but—

Birgitte slammed her silver cup down on a side table so hard that wine flew everywhere. Some laundress was going to sweat to take that stain out of her coatsleeve. A maid would labor for *hours* to restore the side table's polish. "Children!" she barked. "People are going to die because of the decisions they make, and they're flaming children, Conail worst of all! You heard him, Dyelin. He wants to challenge Arymilla's *champion* like Artur bloody Hawkwing! Hawkwing never fought anybody's flaming champion, and he knew when he was younger than *Lord* Northan that it was a fool's game to rest so much on a flaming duel, but Conail thinks he can win Elayne the flaming throne with his flaming sword!"

"Birgitte Trahelion is right," Aviendha said fiercely. Her hands were fists gripping her skirts. "Conail Northan *is* a fool! But how could anyone follow those children into the dance of spears? How could anyone ask them to lead?"

Dyelin regarded them both, and chose to answer Aviendha first. She was plainly bemused by Aviendha's garb. But then, she was bemused by Aviendha and Elayne adopting one another as sisters, by Elayne having an Aiel friend in the first place. That Elayne chose to include that friend in their counsels was something she tolerated. Though not without letting her toleration show. "I became High Seat of Taravin at fifteen, when my father died in a skirmish on the Altaran Marches. My two younger brothers died fighting cattle raiders out of Murandy that same year. I listened to advisors, but I told Taravin riders where to strike, and we taught the Altarans and the Murandians to look elsewhere for their thieving. The times choose when children must grow up, Aviendha, not we, and in these times, a High Seat who is a child cannot *be* a child any longer.

“As for you, Lady Birgitte,” she went on in a drier voice. “Your language is, as ever . . . pungent.” She did not ask how Birgitte presumed to know so much of Artur Hawkwing, things no historian knew, but she studied her appraisingly. “Branlet and Perival will take guidance from me, and so will Catalyn, I think, much as I regret the time I’ll have to spend with the girl. As for Conail, he’s hardly the first young man to think he’s invincible and immortal. If you can’t keep him reined in as Captain-General, I suggest you try walking for him. The way he was eyeing those breeches of yours, he’ll follow anywhere you lead.”

Elayne . . . shrugged off . . . the pure fury welling up in her. Not her fury, any more than it had been her anger at Dyelin in the first place, or her anger at Birgitte splashing wine about. It was Birgitte’s. She did not want to slap Rand’s face. Well, she did, but that was beside the point. Light, Conail had been looking at Birgitte, too? “They are the High Seats of their Houses, Aviendha. No one in their Houses would thank me for treating them as less; far from it. The men who ride for them will fight to keep them alive, but it is Perival and Branlet, Conail and Catalyn they ride for, not me. Because they *are* the High Seats.” Aviendha frowned, and folded her arms as though pulling a shawl around herself, but she nodded. Abruptly, and reluctantly—no one rose to such prominence among the Aiel without years of experience, and the approval of the Wise Ones—but she nodded.

“Birgitte, you will have to deal with them, Captain-General to High Seat. White hair wouldn’t necessarily make them any wiser, and it definitely wouldn’t make them any easier to deal with. They’d still have their own opinions, and with years of experience to give them weight, most likely they’d be ten times as certain they knew what needs to be done better than you do. Or than I do.” She made a great effort to keep her tone clear of sharpness, and no doubt Birgitte felt the effort. At least, the flow of rage through the bond suddenly diminished. It was only tamped down, not gone—Birgitte enjoyed having men look, at least when she wanted them to look, but she very much did *not* like anyone saying she was trying to attract their attention—yet even so, she knew the danger to both of them of letting their emotions run too free.

Dyelin had begun sipping at her wine, still studying Birgitte. Only a bare handful knew the truth that Birgitte desperately wanted to keep hidden, and Dyelin was not among them, yet Birgitte had been careless enough, a slip of the tongue here, a slip there, that the older woman was certain that some mystery hid behind Birgitte's blue eyes. The Light only knew what she would think if she solved that riddle. As it was, the two were oil and water. They could argue over which way was up, and certainly over everything else. This time, Dyelin clearly thought she had won, foot and horse.

"Be that as it may, Dyelin," Elayne continued, "I would have been more pleased if you had brought their advisors with them. What's done is done, but Branlet troubles me in particular. If Gilyard accuses me of kidnapping him, matters become worse than they were, not better."

Dyelin waved that away. "You don't know the Gilyards well, do you? The way they squabble among themselves, they may not notice the boy is gone before summer, and if they do, none will repudiate what he's done. None of them will admit they were so busy in arguing over who's to be his guardian that they forgot to keep an eye on him. And second, none of them will admit they weren't consulted beforehand. In any event, Gilyard would stand for Zaida before standing for Marne, and they don't like Arawn or Sarand much better."

"I hope you're right, Dyelin, because I'm appointing you to deal with any angry Gilyards who appear. And while you're advising the other three, you can keep a thumb on Conail so he doesn't do anything completely harebrained."

For all her talk, the first suggestion made Dyelin wince slightly. The second made her sigh.

It made Birgitte laugh out loud. "If you have any problems, I'll lend you a pair of breeches and some boots, and you can walk for him."

"Some women," Dyelin murmured into her wine, "can make a fish bite by crooking a finger, Lady Birgitte. Other women have to drag their bait all over the pond." Aviendha laughed at that, but Birgitte's anger began to edge upward in the bond.

A wave of cold air swept into the room as the door opened, and Rasoria entered, coming to a stiff attention. "The First Maid and the First Clerk have come, my Lady Elayne," she announced. Her voice faltered at the end, as she caught the mood in the room.

A blind goat could have caught it, with Dyelin smug as a cat in the creamery, and Birgitte scowling at her and Aviendha both, and Aviendha choosing this moment to remember that Birgitte *was* Birgitte Silverbow, which on this occasion made her stare at the floor, as abashed as if she had been laughing at a Wise One. Now and again Elayne wished her friends could all get on as well as she and Aviendha did, but somehow they managed to rub on together, and she supposed that was really all she could ask from real people. Perfection was a thing for books and gleemen's stories.

"Send them in," she told Rasoria. "And don't disturb us unless the city is under attack. Unless it is important," she amended. In stories, women who gave orders like that were always setting themselves up for disaster. Sometimes, there were lessons in stories, if you looked for them.

* * *

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CHAPTER 14

What Wise Ones Know

Halwin Norry, the First Clerk, and Reene Harfor, the First Maid, entered together, him making a jerky, unpracticed bow, and her a graceful curtsy that was neither too low nor too shallow. They could not have been more different. Mistress Harfor was round-faced and regally dignified, her hair in a neat gray bun atop her head, Master Norry tall and gawky as a wading-bird, with his little remaining hair sticking up behind his ears like sprays of white feathers. Each carried an embossed leather folder stuffed with papers, but she held hers at her side as if not to rumple her formal scarlet tabard, unwrinkled as it always seemed to be, no matter the hour or how long she had been on her feet, while he clutched his folder to his narrow chest as if to hide old inkstains, of which several spotted his tabard, including a large blot that made the White Lion's tail end in a black tuft. Courtesies done, they immediately put a little distance between them, each not quite watching the other.

As soon as the door closed behind Rasoria, the glow of *saidar* sprung up around Aviendha, and she wove a ward against eavesdropping that clung to the walls of the room. What was said between them was now as safe as they could make it, and Aviendha would know if anyone even tried to listen with the Power. She was very good with this sort of weave.

"Mistress Harfor," Elayne said, "if you will begin." She did not offer wine or seats, of course. Master Norry would have been shocked to his toenails by such a lapse in the proprieties, and Mistress Harfor might well have been offended. As it was, Norry twitched and glanced sideways at Reene, and her mouth thinned. Even after a week's meetings, their dislike for giving their reports where the other could hear was palpable. They were jealous of their fiefs, the more so since the First Maid had moved into territory that once might have been considered Master Norry's responsibility. Of course, running the Royal Palace had always been the First Maid's charge, and it might be said that her new duties were only an extension of that. It would not be said by Halwin Norry, though. The blazing logs settled in the fireplace with a loud crack, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney.

"I am convinced the Second Librarian is . . . a spy, my Lady," Mistress Harfor said finally, ignoring Norry as if to make him disappear. She had resisted letting *anyone* else know that she was searching out spies in the palace, yet the First Clerk knowing seemed to grate on her worst of all. His only authority over her, if such it was, came from paying the palace accounts, and he never questioned an expenditure, but even that little was more than she wished. "Every three or four days Master Harnder visits an inn called the Hoop and Arrow, supposedly for the ale made by the innkeeper, one Millis Fendry, but Mistress Fendry also keeps pigeons, and whenever Master Harnder visits, she sends off a pigeon that flies north. Yesterday, three of the Aes Sedai staying at the Silver Swan found reason to visit the Hoop and Arrow, though it caters to a much poorer crowd than the Swan. They came and went hooded, and were closeted with Mistress Fendry in private for over an hour. All three are Brown Ajah. I fear that indicates Master Harnder's employer."

"Hairdressers, footmen, cooks, the master cabinetmaker, no fewer than five of Master Norry's clerks, and now one of the librarians." Leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs, Dyelin glowered sourly. "Is there anyone we *won't* eventually learn is a spy, Mistress Harfor?" Norry stretched his neck uncomfortably; he took the malfeasance of his clerks as a personal affront.

"I have hopes I may be reaching the bottom of that barrel, my Lady," Mistress Harfor said complacently. Neither spies nor the High Seats of powerful Houses ruffled her. Spies were pests she intended to rid the palace of as surely as she kept it clear of fleas and rats—though she had been forced to accept Aes Sedai aid with rats recently—while powerful nobles were like rain or snow, facts of nature to be endured until they went away, but nothing to get flustered over. "There are only so many people who can be bought, and only so many can afford to buy, or want to."

Elayne tried to picture Master Harnder, but all she could bring up in her mind was vague, a chubby, balding man who blinked incessantly. He had served her mother, and as she recalled, Queen Mordrellen before that. No one commented on the fact that it seemed he also served the Brown Ajah. Every ruler's palace between the Spine of the World and the Aryth Ocean contained the Tower's eyes-and-ears. Any ruler with half a brain expected it. Doubtless the Seanchan would soon be living under the White Tower's gaze, too, if they were not already. Reene had discovered several spies for the Red Ajah, assuredly legacies of Elaida's time in Caemlyn, but this librarian was the first for another Ajah. Elaida would not have liked other Ajahs knowing what went on in the palace while she was advisor to the Queen.

"A pity we have no false stories we want the Brown Ajah to believe," she said lightly. A *great* pity they, and the Reds, knew about the Kin. At best, they had to know there were a large number of women in the palace who could channel, and it would not take them long to figure out who they were. That would create any number of problems down the road, yet those difficulties did lie somewhere in the future. Always plan ahead, Lini used to say, but worry too hard over next year, and you can trip over tomorrow. "Watch Master Harnder and try to find out his friends. That will have to suffice for the time being." Some spies depended on their ears, either to hear gossip or listen at doors; others lubricated tongues with a few friendly cups of wine. The first part of counteracting a spy was to find out how he learned what he sold.

Aviendha snorted loudly and, spreading her skirts, started to sit down on the carpet before realizing what she wore. With a warning glance at Dyelin, she perched stiffly on the front edge of a chair instead, the picture of a court lady with her eyes flashing. Except that a lady of the court would not have checked the edge of her belt knife with a thumb. Left to her own devices, Aviendha would slit every spy's throat as soon as it could be stretched for the knife. Spying was a vile business, in her view, no matter how often Elayne explained that every spy found was a tool that could be used to make her enemies believe what she wanted.

Not that every spy necessarily worked for an enemy. Most of those the First Maid had uncovered took money from more than one source, and among those she had identified were King Roedran of Murandy, various Tairen High Lords and Ladies, a handful of Cairhienin nobles, and a fair number of merchants. A good many people were interested in what happened in Caemlyn, whether for its effect on trade or other reasons. Sometimes it seemed that everyone spied on everyone else.

“Mistress Harfor,” she said, “you haven’t found any eyes-and-ears for the Black Tower.”

Like most people who heard the Black Tower mentioned, Dyelin shivered, and took a deep drink of her wine, but Reene just grimaced faintly. She had decided to ignore the fact that they were men who could channel, since she could not change matters. To her, the Black Tower was . . . an annoyance. “They haven’t had time, my Lady. Give them a year, and you’ll find footmen and librarians taking their coin, too.”

“I suppose I will.” Dreadful thought. “What else do you have for us today?”

“I’ve had a word with Jon Skellit, my Lady. A man who turns his coat once is often amenable to turning it again, and Skellit is.” Skellit, a barber, was in the pay of House Arawn, which for the present made him Arymilla’s man.

Birgitte bit off an oath in midword—for some reason, she tried to watch her language around Reene Harfor—and spoke in a pained voice. “You had a *word* with him? Without asking anyone?”

Dyelin was under no compunctions regarding the First Maid, and she muttered, “Mother’s milk in a cup!” Elayne had never heard her use an obscenity before. Master Norry blinked and almost dropped his folder, and busied himself with not looking at Dyelin. The First Maid, however, merely paused until sure she and Birgitte were done, then went on calmly.

“The time seemed ripe, and so did Skellit. One of the men he hands his reports to left the city and hasn’t returned yet, while it appears the other broke his leg. The streets are always icy where a fire has been put out.” She said that so blandly, it seemed more than likely she had engineered the man’s fall somehow. Hard times uncovered hard talents in the most surprising people. “Skellit is quite agreeable to carrying his next communication out to the camps himself. He saw a gateway made, and he won’t have to pretend terror.” You would have thought she herself had been seeing merchants’ wagons rumble out of holes in the air for her entire life.

“What’s to stop this barber keeping on running once he’s outside the fla . . . uh . . . the city?” Birgitte demanded irritably, beginning to pace in front of the fire with her hands clasped behind her. Her heavy golden braid should have been bristling. “If he goes, Arawn will hire somebody else, and you'll have to hunt him out all over again. Light, Arymilla must have heard of the gateways almost as soon as she arrived, and Skellit has to know it." It was not the thought of Skellit escaping that irritated her, or not only that. The mercenaries thought they had been hired to stop soldiers, but for a few silvers they would allow one or two to slip through the gates by night in either direction. One or two could do no harm, as they saw matters. Birgitte did not like being reminded of that.

"Greed will stop him, my Lady," Mistress Harfor replied calmly. "The thought of earning gold from the Lady Elayne as well as from Lady Naean is enough to make the man breathe hard. It's true, Lady Arymilla must already have heard of the gateways, but that only adds credit to Skellit's reason for going in person."

"And if his greed is great enough for him to try earning still more gold by turning his coat a third time?" Dyelin said. "He could cause a great deal of . . . mischief, Mistress Harfor."

Reene's tone became a little crisper. She would never step over the boundaries, but she disliked *anyone* thinking her careless. "Lady Naean would have him buried under the nearest snowdrift, my Lady, as I made certain he is aware. She has never been patient. As I am sure you are aware. In any case, the news we get from the camps is quite sparse, to say the least, and he might see a few things we would like to know."

"If Skellit can tell us which camp Arymilla, Elenia and Naean will be in and when, I'll give him his gold with my own hand," Elayne said deliberately. Elenia and Naean stayed close to Arymilla, or she kept them close, and Arymilla was much less patient than Naean, much less willing to believe that anything could function without her presence. She spent half of each day riding from camp to camp, and never slept in the same two nights running, as far as anyone could learn. "That is the only thing he can tell us of the camps that I want to know."

Reene inclined her head. "As you say, my Lady. I will see to it." She too often tried not to say things straight out in front of Norry, but she gave no sign that she had heard any reproof. Of course, Elayne was not sure she actually would rebuke the woman openly. Mistress Harfor would continue to perform her duties properly if she did, and she certainly would continue hunting spies with undiminished ardor, if for no other reason than their presence in the palace offended her, yet Elayne might find a dozen inconveniences in every day, a dozen small discomforts that added up to misery, and not a one that she could directly attribute to the First Maid. *We must follow the steps of the dance as surely as our servants,* her mother had told her once. *You can keep hiring new servants, and spend all your time training them and suffering till they learn, only to find yourself back where you started, or you can accept the rules as they do, and live comfortably while you use your time to rule.*

"Thank you, Mistress Harfor," she said, for which she received another precise curtsy. Reene Harfor was another who knew her own worth. "Master Norry?"

The heron-like man gave a start and stopped frowning at Reene. In some ways, he saw the gateways as his, and not to be trifled with. "Yes, my Lady. Of course." His voice was a dusty monotone. "I trust the lady Birgitte already has informed you of the merchants' trains from Illian and Tear. I believe that is . . . um . . . her usual custom when you return to the city." For a moment, his eyes rested reproachfully on Birgitte. He would never think of causing Elayne the smallest irritation even if she shouted at him, but he lived by his own set of rules, and, in a mild fashion, he resented Birgitte stealing his chance to enumerate the wagons and casks and barrels that had arrived. He did love his numbers. At least, Elayne supposed it was in a mild fashion. There seemed to be very little heat in Mister Norry.

"She did," she told him, with just a hint of apology, not enough to embarrass him. "I fear some of the Sea Folk are leaving us. We'll only have half the number to make gateways after today."

His fingers spidered across the leather folder against his chest as though feeling the papers within. She had never seen him consult one. "Ah. Ah. We shall . . . cope, my Lady." Halwin Norry always coped. "To continue, there were nine arsons yesterday and last night, slightly more than usual. Three attempts were made to fire warehouses storing food. None successful, I hasten to add." He might hasten to add, yet he did it in that same drone. "If I may say so, the Guards patrolling the streets are having an effect—the number of assaults and thefts has declined to little more than normal for this time of year—but it seems evident that some hand is directing the arsons. Seventeen buildings were destroyed, all save one abandoned," his mouth narrowed in disapproval; it would take far more than a siege to make him leave Caemlyn, "and in my opinion, all of the fires were placed so as to draw the water-wagons as far as possible from the warehouses where attempts were made. I now believe that pattern holds for every fire we've seen these past weeks."

"Birgitte?" Elayne said.

"I can try plotting the warehouses on a map," Birgitte replied doubtfully, "and put extra Guards on the streets that seem to be farthest away, but it's still leaving a lot to fla . . . uh . . . to chance." She did not look toward Mistress Harfor, but Elayne *felt* a faint hint of a blush from her. "Anybody can have flint and steel in a belt pouch, and it only takes a minute with some dry straw to start a fire."

"Do what you can," Elayne told her. It would be *pure* luck if they caught an arsonist in the act, and beyond luck if the arsonist could say more than that she had been handed coin by someone with a hood hiding her face. Tracing that gold back to Arymilla or Elenia or Naean would require Mat Cauthon's luck. "Have you anything more, Master Norry?"

Knuckling his long nose, he avoided her gaze. "It has . . . uh . . . come to my attention," he said hesitantly, "that Marne, Arawn and Sarand have all recently taken very large loans against the revenues of their estates." Mistress Harfor's eyebrows climbed before she got them under control.

Peering into her teacup, Elayne discovered that she had actually emptied it. Bankers never told anyone how much they had loaned to whom, or against what, but she did not ask how he knew. It would be . . . embarrassing. For both of them. She smiled when her sister took the cup, then grimaced when Aviendha returned with it filled again. Aviendha seemed to think she should drink weak tea till her eyes floated! Goat's milk was better, but dishwater for tea would do. Well, she would hold the *bloody* cup, but she did *not* have to drink.

"The mercenaries," Dyelin growled, the heat in her eyes enough to make a bear back up. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again; the trouble with sell-swords is they don't always stay bought." She had opposed hiring mercenaries to help defend the city from the start, though the fact was that without them, Arymilla could have ridden in with her army by any gate she picked, or near enough. There simply had not been enough men to guard every gate properly otherwise, much less man the walls.

Birgitte had opposed the mercenaries, too, yet she had accepted Elayne's reasons, if reluctantly. She still distrusted them, but now she shook her head. Sitting on the arm of a chair near the fire, she rested her spurred boot on the seat. "Mercenaries have a concern for their reputations if not their honor. Changing sides is one thing; actually betraying a gate is something else entirely. A company that did that would never be hired again, anywhere. Arymilla would have to offer enough for a captain to live the rest of his life like a lord, and at least convince his men they'd be able to, as well."

Norry cleared his throat. Even that sounded dusty, somehow. "It seems they may have borrowed against the same revenues twice or even three times. The bankers, of course, are . . . unaware . . . of this, as yet."

Birgitte began to curse, then cut herself off. Dyelin scowled at her wine hard enough to make it turn sour. Aviendha squeezed Elayne's hand, just a quick pressure quickly released. The fire crackled in a shower of sparks, some nearly reaching the carpets.

"The mercenary companies will have to be watched." Elayne raised a hand to forestall Birgitte. The other woman had not opened her mouth, but the bond shouted volumes. "You will have to find the men for it somewhere." Light! They seemed to be guarding against as many people inside the city as outside! "It shouldn't take that many, but we need to know if they start to act strangely, or secretively, Birgitte. That might be our only warning."

"I was thinking what to do if one of the companies does sell out," Birgitte said wryly. "Knowing won't be enough unless I have men to rush to any gate I think is going to be betrayed. And half the soldiers in the city are mercenaries. Half the rest are old men who were living on their pensions a few months gone. I'll shift the mercenaries' postings at irregular intervals. It will be harder for them to betray a gate if they can't be sure where they'll be tomorrow, but that doesn't make it impossible." Protest how she would that she was no general, she had seen more battles and sieges than any ten generals living, and she knew very well how these matters unfolded.

Elayne almost wished she had wine in her cup. Almost. "Is there any chance the bankers will learn what you have, Master Norry? Before the loans come due?" If they did, some might decide they preferred Arymilla on the throne. She could strip the country's coffers to repay those loans, then. She might even do it. Merchants rode the political winds, whichever way they blew. Bankers had been known to attempt to influence events.

"In my opinion, it is unlikely, my Lady. They would have to . . . um . . . ask the right questions of the right people, but bankers are normally . . .

um . . . closemouthed . . . with one another. Yes, I think it unlikely. For the time being."

There was nothing to be done in any case. Except to tell Birgitte there might be a new source for assassins and kidnappers. Only given her hard expression and a sudden grimness in the bond, she had already realized that. There would be little chance of keeping the bodyguard under a hundred women, now. If there ever had been.

"Thank you, Master Norry," Elayne said. "You've done well, as always. Let me know immediately if you see any indications that the bankers have asked those questions."

"Of course, my Lady," he murmured, ducking his head like an egret darting after a fish. "My Lady is very kind."

When Reene and Norry left the room, him holding the door for her and making a bow that was a hair more graceful than usual and her giving him a slight bow of her head as she glided past him into the corridor, Aviendha did not release the ward she was holding. As soon as the door closed, its solid sound swallowed by the ward, she said, "Someone tried to listen."

Elayne shook her head. There was no way to tell who—a Black sister? A curious Kinswoman?—but at least the eavesdrop had failed. Not that there was much chance of anyone getting past one of Aviendha's wards, maybe not even the Forsaken, but she would have spoken up right away if someone had.

Dyelin took Aviendha's announcement with less aplomb, muttering about the Sea Folk. She had not turned a hair at hearing that half the Windfinders were leaving, not in front of Reene and Norry, but now she demanded to know the whole story. "I never did trust Zaida," she grumbled when Elayne finished. "This agreement sounds good for trade, I suppose, but it wouldn't surprise me if she had one of the Windfinders try to listen in. She struck me as a woman who wants to know everything, just in case it might be useful one day." There was very little hesitant about Dyelin, yet she hesitated now, rolling her winecup between her palms. "Are you certain this . . . this *beacon* . . . can't harm us, Elayne?"

"As certain as I can be, Dyelin. If it was going to crack open the world, I think it would have by now." Aviendha laughed, but Dyelin turned quite pale. Really! Sometimes you had to laugh if only to keep from crying.

"If we tarry much longer now that Norry and Mistress Harfor are gone," Birgitte said, "somebody might start wondering why." She waved a hand at the walls, indicating the ward she could not see. She knew it was still in place, though. The daily meetings with the First Maid and the First Clerk always concealed a little something more.

Everyone gathered around her as she moved a pair of golden Sea Folk porcelain bowls on one of the side tables and pulled a much-folded map from inside her short coat. It rode there always, except when she slept, and then it resided beneath her pillow. Spread out, with empty winecups at the corners to hold it flat, the map displayed Andor from the River Erinin to the border between Altara and Murandy. In truth, it could have been said to show all of Andor, since what lay farther west had been only half under Caemlyn's control for generations. It had hardly been a masterpiece of the mapmaker's art to begin with, and creases obscured much of the detail, but it showed the terrain well enough, and every town and village was marked, every road and bridge and ford. Elayne set her teacup down at arm's length from the map to avoid spilling on it and adding more stains. And to rid herself of the wretched excuse for tea.

"The Borderlanders are moving," Birgitte said, pointing to the forests north of Caemlyn, to a spot above Andor's northmost border, "but they haven't covered much ground. At this rate, they'll be well over a month getting close to Caemlyn."

Swirling her silver cup, Dyelin peered into the dark wine, then looked up suddenly. "I thought you northerners were used to snow, Lady Birgitte." Even now she had to probe, and telling her not to would only make her ten times as certain that Birgitte was hiding secrets, and twenty times as determined to learn them.

Aviendha scowled at the older woman—when she was not in awe of Birgitte, sometimes she became fiercely protective of Birgitte's secrets—but Birgitte herself met Dyelin's gaze levelly, with no hint of alarm in the bond. She had become quite comfortable with the lie about her origins. "I haven't been back to Kandor in a long time." That was simple truth, though it had been far longer than Dyelin could have imagined. The country had not even been called Kandor, then. "But no matter what you're used to, moving two hundred thousand soldiers, not to mention the Light alone knows how many camp followers, is slow going in winter. Worse, I sent Mistress Ocalin and Mistress Fote to visit some of the villages a few miles south of the border." Sabeine Ocalin and Julanya Fote were Kinswomen who could Travel. “They say the villagers think the Borderlanders are camped for the winter.”

Elayne *tsked,* frowning at the map as she traced distances with a finger. She was counting on news of the Borderlanders, if not on the Borderlanders themselves. Word of an army that size entering Andor should be leaping ahead of it like wildfire in dry grass. No one but a fool could believe they had marched all those hundreds of leagues to try conquering Andor, but everyone who heard would be speculating on their intentions and what to do about them, a different opinion on every tongue. Once the news began to spread, anyway. When it did, she had an advantage over everyone else. She had arranged for the Borderlanders to cross into Andor into the first place, and she had already arranged for them to leave.

The choice had not been very difficult. Stopping them would have been a bloody affair, if it could have been managed at all, and they wanted no more than the width of a road to march onward into Murandy, where they thought they would find the Dragon Reborn. That was her doing, as well. They hid their reason for seeking Rand, and she was not about to give them a true location, not when they had as many as a dozen Aes Sedai with them and hid that fact, too. But once news of them reached the High Seats . . .

“It should work,” she said softly. “If necessary, we can plant rumors of the Borderlanders ourselves.”

“It should work,” Dyelin agreed, then added in a dark voice, “As long as Bashere and Bael keep a close rein on their men. It’s going to be a volatile mix, with Borderlanders, Aiel and the Legion of the Dragon all within a few miles of one another. And I can’t see how we can be sure the Asha’man won’t do something mad.” She ended with a sniff. In her book, a man had to be mad in the first place, or he would never have chosen to become an Asha’man. Aviendha nodded. She disagreed with Dyelin almost as frequently as Birgitte did, but for the most part, the Asha’man were one thing they agreed on.

“I’ll make sure the Borderlanders stay well clear of the Black Tower,” Elayne reassured them, though she had done the same before. Even Dyelin knew that Bael and Bashere would hold their forces in check—neither man wanted a battle he did not need, and Davram Bashere certainly would not fight his own countrymen—but anyone had a right to be uneasy about the Asha’man and what they might do. She slid her finger from the six-pointed star identifying Caemlyn across the few miles to the ground the Asha'man had usurped. The Black Tower was not marked, but she knew all too well exactly where it lay. At least that was well away from the Lugard Road. Sending the Borderlanders south into Murandy without upsetting the Asha'man would not be difficult.

Her mouth compressed at the thought that she must not upset the Asha'man, but there was nothing to be done about it any time soon, so she mentally shifted the black-coated men to one side. What could not be dealt with now, had to be dealt with later.

"And the others?" She did not have to say more. Six major Houses remained uncommitted—at least to her or Arymilla. Dyelin claimed they would all come to Elayne eventually, but they showed no sign of it so far. Sabeine and Julanya had been looking for word of those six, too. Both women had spent the last twenty years as peddlers, accustomed to hard journeys, sleeping in stables or under the trees, and listening to what people did not say as much as to what they said. They made perfect scouts. It would be a great loss if they had to be shifted to helping keep the city supplied.

"Rumor has Lord Luan a dozen places, east and west." Frowning at the much-creased map as though Luan's position should have been marked on it, Birgitte muttered a curse, *much* viler than called for, now that Reene Harfor was absent. "Always the next village over, or the one beyond that. Lady Ellorien and Lord Abelle seem to have vanished completely, difficult as that has to be for a High Seat. At least, Mistress Ocalin and Mistress Fote haven't been able to find a whisper of them, or of any House Pendar or House Traemane armsmen, either. Not a man or a horse." *That* was very unusual. Someone was exerting great effort.

"Abelle was always a ghost when he wanted to be," Dyelin muttered, "always able to catch you wrong-footed. Ellorien . . ." Brushing fingers against her lips, she sighed. "The woman's too flamboyant to disappear. Unless she's with Abelle or Luan. Or both of them." She was not happy with that idea, no matter what she said.

"As for our other 'friends'," Birgitte said, "Lady Arathelle crossed out of Murandy five days ago, here." She touched the map lightly, some two hundred miles south of Caemlyn. "Four days ago, Lord Pelivar crossed about five or six miles west of that, and Lady Aemlyn here, another five or six miles."

“Not together,” Dyelin said, nodding. “Did they bring any Murandians? No? Good. They could be moving to their estates, Elayne. If they move further apart, we’ll know for certain.” Those three Houses made her most anxious of all.

“They could be heading home,” Birgitte agreed, reluctantly as always when agreeing with Dyelin. Drawing her intricate braid over her shoulder, she gripped it in a fist almost the way Nynaeve did. “The men and horses must be worn out, after marching into Murandy in winter. But all we can be sure of is that they’re on the move.”

Aviendha snorted. With her in elegant velvets, it was a startling sound. “Always assume your enemy will do what you do not want. Decide what you least want them to do, and plan on that.”

“Aemlyn, Arathelle and Pelivar aren’t enemies,” Dyelin protested weakly. Wherever she believed their allegiance would fall in time, those three had announced their support of Dyelin herself for the throne.

Elayne had never read of any queen being *forced* onto the throne—that sort of thing might not have made it into the histories in any case—yet Aemlyn, Arathelle and Pelivar seemed willing to try, and not for hope of power for themselves. Dyelin did not want the throne, but she would hardly be a passive ruler. The simple fact was that Morgase Trakand’s final year had been marred by blunder after blunder, and few knew or believed that she had been a captive of one of the Forsaken during that time. Some Houses wanted anyone except another Trakand on the throne. Or thought they did.

“What is the last thing we want them to do?” Elayne said. “If they disperse to their estates, then they are out of it until spring at the earliest, and everything will be decided by then.” The Light willing, it would. “But if they continue on to Caemlyn?”

“Without the Murandians, they don’t have enough armsmen to challenge Arymilla.” Studying the map, Birgitte rubbed her chin. “If they don’t know by now that the Aiel and the Legion of the Dragon are staying out of this, they’ll have to learn of it soon, but they’ll want to be careful. None of them seems foolish enough to provoke a fight they can’t win when they don’t have to. I’d say they’ll camp somewhere to the east or southeast, where they can keep an eye on events and maybe influence what happens.”

Downing the last of her wine, which must have been cold by now, Dyelin exhaled heavily and walked over to fill her cup again. “If they come to Caemlyn," she said in a leaden tone, "then they are hoping that Luan or Abelle or Ellorien will join them. Perhaps all three."

"Then we must figure out how to stop them reaching Caemlyn before our plans come to fruit, without making them permanent enemies." Elayne worked to make her voice as sure and firm as Dyelin's was dull. "And we must plan what to do in case they arrive here too early. If that happens, Dyelin, you will have to convince them the choice is between me and Arymilla. Otherwise, we'll be in a tangle we may never straighten out, and all of Andor in it with us."

Dyelin grunted as if she had been punched. The last time the great Houses split evenly among three claimants for the Lion Throne had been nearly five hundred years ago, and seven years of open war followed before a queen was crowned. The original claimants were all dead by that point.

Without thinking, Elayne picked up her teacup and took a sip. The tea had gone cold, but honey exploded on her tongue. Honey! She looked at Aviendha in astonishment, and her sister's lips quirked in a small smile. A conspiratorial smile, as if Birgitte did not know exactly what had happened. Even their strangely enhanced bond did not extend to her tasting what Elayne did, yet she had surely felt Elayne's surprise and pleasure on tasting the tea. Planting fists on hips, she adopted a censorious look. Or rather, she tried to; despite all she could do, a smile crept onto her face, too. Abruptly, Elayne realized that Birgitte's headache was gone. She did not know when it had vanished, but it certainly was not there any longer.

"Hope for the best and plan for the worst," she said. "Sometimes, the best actually happens."

Dyelin, unaware of the honey or anything except that they were all three grinning, harrumphed loudly. "And sometimes it doesn't happen. If your clever scheme comes off *exactly* as planned, Elayne, we won't have any need for Aemlyn or Ellorien or the others, but it's a terrible gamble. All it takes to go wrong is—"

The left-hand door opened to admit a wave of cold and an apple-cheeked woman with icy eyes and the golden knot of an under-lieutenant on her shoulder. She might have knocked first, but if so, the ward had sealed off the sound. Like Rasoria, Tzigan Sokorin had been a Hunter for the Horn before joining Elayne's bodyguard. It seemed the guard had changed. "The Wise One Monaelle wishes to see the Lady Elayne," Tzigan announced, drawing herself up rigidly. "Mistress Karistovan is with her."

Sumeko could be put off, but not Monaelle. Arymilla's people would as soon interfere with Aes Sedai as with the Aiel, yet only something important would have brought a Wise One into the city. Birgitte knew that, too; she immediately began folding the map up again. Aviendha let the warding dissipate and released the Source.

"Ask them to come in," Elayne said.

Monaelle did not wait on Tzigan, gliding into the room as soon as the ward vanished, her multitude of gold and ivory bracelets rattling as she lowered her shawl from shoulders to elbows in the comparative warmth. Elayne did not know how old Monaelle was—Wise Ones were not as reticent about age as Aes Sedai, but they *were* oblique—yet she appeared not far into her middle years. There were hints of red in her waist-long yellow hair, but not a touch of gray. Short for an Aiel, shorter than Elayne, with a mild, motherly face, she was barely strong enough in the Power to have been accepted in the White Tower, but strength did not count among Wise Ones, and among them, she stood very high. More importantly for Elayne and Aviendha, she had been the midwife at their rebirth as first-sisters. Elayne offered her a curtsy, ignoring Dyelin's disapproving sniff, and Aviendha made a deep bow, folding herself over her hands. Aside from the duties owed to her midwife under Aiel customs, she was still only an apprentice Wise One, after all.

"I assume your need for privacy is ended, since you lowered the ward," Monaelle said, "and it is time I checked on your condition, Elayne Trakand. It should be done twice in the month until full term." Why was she frowning at Aviendha? Oh, Light, the velvets!

"And I have come to see what she does," Sumeko added, following the Wise One into the room. Sumeko was imposing, a stout woman with confident eyes, in well-cut red-belted yellow wool, with silver combs in her straight black hair, and a red-enameled silver circle-pin on the high neck of her dress. She might have been a noblewoman or a successful merchant. Once she had shown a certain diffidence, at least around Aes Sedai, but no longer. Not with Aes Sedai or soldiers of the Queen's Guards. "You may go," she told Tzigan. "This doesn't concern you." Or with nobles, for that matter. "You may leave, too, Lady Dyelin, and you, Lady Birgitte." She studied Aviendha as if considering adding her to the list.

"Aviendha may remain," Monaelle said. "She is missing a great many lessons, and she must learn this sooner or later." Sumeko nodded in acceptance of Aviendha, but she kept a coolly impatient gaze on Dyelin and Birgitte.

“Lady Dyelin and I have matters to discuss,” Birgitte said, stuffing the folded map back under her red coat as she started for the door. “I’ll tell you tonight what we’ve thought of, Elayne.”

Dyelin gave her a sharp look, almost as sharp as the one she had given Sumeko, but she set her winecup on one of the trays and made her courtesies to Elayne, then waited with visible impatience while Birgitte bent to murmur at length in Monaelle’s ear and the Wise One replied briefly, but just as quietly. What were they whispering about? Probably goat’s milk.

Once the door closed behind Tzigan and the other two women, Elayne offered to send for more wine, since what was in the pitchers was cold, but Sumeko declined curtly, and Monaelle politely if rather absently. The Wise One was studying Aviendha with such intensity that the younger woman began to redden and looked away, gripping her skirts.

“You mustn’t take Aviendha to task about her clothes, Monaelle,” Elayne said. “I asked her to wear them, and she did as a favor to me.”

Pursing her lips, Monaelle thought before answering. “First-sisters should give one another favors,” she said finally. “You know your duty to our people, Aviendha. So far, you have done well at a difficult task. You must learn to live in two worlds, so it is fitting that you become comfortable in those clothes.” Aviendha began to relax. Until Monaelle continued. “But not too comfortable. From now on, you will spend every third day and night in the tents. You can return with me tomorrow. You have a great deal to learn yet before you can become a Wise One, and that is as much your duty as is being a binding cord.”

Elayne reached out and took her sister’s hand, and when Aviendha tried to let go after one squeeze, she held on. After a brief hesitation, Aviendha clung, too. In a strange way, having Aviendha there had comforted Elayne for the loss of Rand; she was not only a sister but a sister who also loved him. They could share strength and make each other laugh when they wanted to cry, and they could cry together when that was needed. One night in three alone very likely meant one night in three weeping alone. Light, what was Rand *doing*? That awful beacon to the west was still blazing as strongly as ever, and she was certain that he was in the heart of it. Not one particle had changed in the bond with him, but she was certain.

Suddenly she realized that she had a crushing grasp on Aviendha's hand, and Aviendha was holding hers as fiercely. They loosened their grips at the same instant. Neither let go, however.

"Men cause trouble even when they are elsewhere," Aviendha said softly.

"They do," Elayne agreed.

Monaelle smiled at the exchange. She was among the few who knew about the bonding of Rand, and who the father of Elayne's baby was. None of the Kinswomen did, though.

"I'd think you've let a man cause you all the trouble he could, Elayne," Sumeko said primly. The Kin's Rule followed the rules for novices and Accepted, forbidding not only children but anything that might lead to them, and they held to it strictly. Once, a Kinswoman would have swallowed her tongue before suggesting an Aes Sedai fell short of their Rule. Much had changed since then, however. "I'm supposed to travel to Tear today so I can bring back a shipment of grain and oil tomorrow, and it is growing late, so if you are done talking about men, I suggest you let Monaelle get on with what she came for."

Monaelle positioned Elayne in front of the fireplace, close enough that the heat from the nearly consumed logs was near to uncomfortable—it was best if the mother was very warm, she explained—then the glow of *saidar* surrounded her, and she began to weave threads of Spirit and Fire and Earth. Aviendha watched almost as avidly as Sumeko.

"What is this?" Elayne asked as the weave settled around her and sank into her. "Is it like Delving?" Every Aes Sedai in the palace had Delved her, though only Merilille had sufficient skill with Healing for it to be much use, but neither they nor Sumeko had been able to say much more than that she was with child. She felt a faint tingling, a sort of hum inside her flesh.

"Don't be silly, girl," Sumeko said absently. Elayne raised an eyebrow, and even thought of waving her Great Serpent ring under Sumeko's nose, but the round-faced woman did not appear to notice. She might not have noticed the ring, either. She was leaning forward, peering as though she could see the weave inside Elayne's body. "The Wise Ones learned about Healing from me. And from Nynaeve, I suppose," she allowed after a moment. Oh, Nynaeve would have gone up like an Illuminator's firework, hearing that. But then, Sumeko had outstripped Nynaeve long since. "And they did learn the simple form from Aes Sedai." A snort like ripping canvas showed what Sumeko thought of the “simple” form, the only sort of Healing Aes Sedai had known for thousands of years. “This is something of the Wise Ones’ own.”

“It is called Caressing the Child,” Monaelle said in an abstracted voice. Most of her attention was focused on the weave. A simple Delving to learn what ailed someone—it *was* simple, come to think—would have been finished by now, but she altered the flows, and the hum inside Elayne changed pitch, sinking deeper. “It may be some part of Healing, a sort of Healing, but we have known this since before we were sent to the Threefold Land. Some of the ways the flows are used are similar to what Sumeko Karistovan and Nynaeve al’Meara showed us. In Caressing the Child, you learn the health of mother and child, and by changing the weaves, you can cure some problems of either, but they will not work on a woman who is not with child. Or on a man, of course.” The hum grew louder, until it seemed everyone must be able to hear it. Elayne thought her teeth were vibrating.

An earlier thought returned to her, and she said, “Will channeling hurt my child? If I channel, I mean.”

“No more than breathing does.” Monaelle let the weave vanish with a grin. “You have two. It is too early to say whether they are girls are boys, but they are healthy, and so are you.”

Two! Elayne shared a wide smile with Aviendha. She could almost feel her sister’s delight. She was going to have twins. Rand’s babies. A boy and a girl, she hoped, or two boys. Twin girls would present all manner of difficulties for the succession. No one ever gained the Rose Crown with *everyone* behind her.

Sumeko made an urgent sound in her throat, gesturing toward Elayne, and Monaelle nodded. “Do exactly as I did, and you will see.” Watching Sumeko embrace the Source and form the weave, she nodded again, and the round Kinswoman let it sink into Elayne, letting out a gasp as if she felt the humming herself. “You will not have to worry about birthing sickness,” Monaelle went on, “but you will find that you have difficulty in channeling sometimes. The threads may slip away from you as though greased or fade like mist, so you will have to try again and again to make the simplest weave or hold it. This may grow worse as your pregnancy progresses, and you will not be able to channel at all while in labor or giving birth, but it will come right after the children are born. You soon will become moody, too, if that has not already started, weepy one minute and snarling the next. The father of your child will be wise to step warily and keep his distance as much as he can."

"I hear she's already snapped his head off once this morning," Sumeko muttered. Releasing the weave, she straightened and adjusted her red belt around her girth. "This is remarkable, Monaelle. I never thought of a weave that could only be used on a pregnant woman."

Elayne's mouth tightened, but what she said was "You can tell all of that with this weave, Monaelle?" It was best that people thought her babes were Doilan Mellar's. Rand al'Thor's children would be targets, stalked for fear or advantage or hatred, but no one would think twice about Mellar's, perhaps not even Mellar. It *was* for the best, and that was that.

Monaelle threw back her head, laughing so hard that she had to wipe a corner of her eyes with her shawl. "I know this from bearing seven children and having three husbands, Elayne Trakand. The ability to channel shields you from the birthing sickness, but there are other prices to pay. Come, Aviendha, you must try, too. Carefully, now. Exactly as I did."

Eagerly, Aviendha embraced the Source, but before she had begun to weave a thread, she let *saidar* go and turned her head to stare toward the dark-paneled wall. Toward the west. So did Elayne, and Monaelle, and Sumeko. The beacon that had been burning for so long had just vanished. One instant it had been there, that raging blaze of *saidar*, and then it was gone as if it had never existed.

Sumeko's massive bosom heaved as she drew a deep breath. "I think something very wonderful or very terrible has happened today," she said softly. "And I think I am afraid to learn which."

"Wonderful," Elayne said. It was done, whatever *it* was, and Rand was alive. That was wonderful enough. Monaelle glanced at her quizzically. Knowing about the bond, she could puzzle out the rest, but she only fingered one of her necklaces in a thoughtful manner. In any case, she would pry it out of Aviendha soon enough.

A knock at the door made them all start. All but Monaelle, anyway. Pretending not to see the other women jump, she focused a little too intently on adjusting her shawl which made the contrast all the greater. Sumeko coughed to hide her embarrassment.

"Come," Elayne said loudly. A half-shout was necessary to be heard through the door even without a ward.

Caseille put her head into the room, plumed hat in hand, then came in the rest of the way and closed the door carefully behind her. The white lace at her neck and wrists was fresh, the lace and lions on her sash gleamed, and her breastplate sparkled as if freshly burnished, but obviously she had gone right back on duty after cleaning up from their overnight trip. “Forgive me for interrupting, my Lady, but I thought you should know right away. The Sea Folk are in a frenzy, those that are still here. It seems one of their apprentices has gone missing.”

“What else?” Elayne said. A missing apprentice might be bad enough, but something in Caseille’s face told her there *was* more.

“Guardswoman Azeri happened to tell me that she saw Merilille Sedai leaving the palace about three hours ago,” Caseille said reluctantly. “Merilille and a woman who was cloaked and hooded. They took horses, and a loaded pack mule. Yurith said the second woman’s hands were tattooed. My Lady, no one had any reason to be looking for—”

Elayne waved her to silence. “No one did anything wrong, Caseille. No one will be blamed.” Not among the Guards, anyway. A fine pickle this was. Talaan and Metarra, the two apprentice Windfinders, were very strong in the Power, and if Merilille had been able to talk either one into trying to become Aes Sedai, she might have been able to convince herself that taking the girl where she could be entered into the novice book was reason enough to evade her own promise to teach the Windfinders. Who would be more than upset over losing Merilille, and more than furious over the apprentice. *They* would blame everyone in sight, and Elayne most of all.

“Is this general knowledge about Merilille?” she asked.

“Not yet, my Lady, but whoever saddled their horses and loaded that mule won’t hold their tongues. Stablehands don’t have much to gossip about.” More of a brush fire than a pickle, then, and small chance of putting it out before it reached the barns.

“I hope you will dine with me later, Monaelle,” Elayne said, “but you must forgive me, now.” Duty to her midwife or no, she did not wait for the other woman’s assent. Trying to douse the fire might be enough to stop the barns from catching. Maybe. “Caseille, inform Birgitte, and tell her I want an order sent to the gates immediately to watch for Merilille. I know; I know; she may be out of the city already, and the gate guards won’t stop an Aes Sedai, anyway, but maybe they can delay her, or frighten her companion into scuttling back into the city to hide. Sumeko, would you ask

Reanne to assign every Kinswoman who can’t Travel to start searching through the city. It’s a small hope, but Merilille may have thought it was too late in the day to start out. Check every inn, including the Silver Swan, and . . .”

She hoped Rand had done something wonderful today, but she could not waste time even thinking about that now. She had a throne to gain and angry Atha’an Miere to deal with, before they could vent their anger on her, it was to be hoped. In short, it was a day like every other since she returned to Caemlyn, and that meant her hands were quite full enough.

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CHAPTER 15

Gathering Darkness

The evening sun was a ball of blood on the treetops, casting a lurid light across the camp, a widely spaced sprawl of horselines and canvas-covered wagons and high-wheeled carts and tents in every size and sort with the snow between trampled to slush. Not the time of day or sort of place that Elenia wished to be on horseback. The smell of boiling beef wafting from the big black iron cookpots was enough to turn her stomach. The cold air frosted her breath and promised a bitter night to come, and the wind cut through her best red cloak without regard for the thick lining of plush white fur. Snowfox was supposed to be warmer than other furs, but she had never found it so.

Holding the cloak closed with one gloved hand, she rode slowly and tried very hard, if not very successfully, not to shiver. Given the hour, it seemed more than likely she would be spending the night here, but as yet, she had no idea where she would sleep. Doubtless in some lesser noble’s tent, with the lord or lady shuffled off to find haven elsewhere and trying to put the best face on being evicted, but Arymilla liked leaving her on tenterhooks until the very last, about beds and everything else. One suspense was no sooner dispelled than another replaced it. Plainly the woman thought the constant uncertainty would make her squirm, perhaps even strive to please. That was far from the only miscalculation Arymilla had made, beginning with the belief that Elenia Sarand’s claws had been clipped.

She had just four men with the two Golden Boars on their cloaks as escort—and her maid, Janny, of course, huddling in her cloak till she seemed a bundle of green wool piled on her saddle—and she had not seen a single fellow more in the camp who she could be sure held a scrap of loyalty to Sarand. Here and there one of the clumps of men huddled around the campfires with their laundresses and seamstresses displayed House Anshar's Red Fox, and a double column of horsemen wearing Baryn's Winged Hammer passed her heading in the opposite direction at a slow walk, hard-faced behind the bars of their helmets. They were of little real account, in the long run. Karind and Lir had gotten singed badly by being slow when Morgase took the throne. This time they would take Anshar and Baryn wherever the advantage lay the instant they saw it clearly, abandoning Arymilla with as great an alacrity as they had leapt to join her. When the time came.

Most of the men trudging through the muddy slush or peering hopefully into those disgusting cookpots were levies, farmers and villagers gathered up when their lord or lady marched, and few wore any sort of House badge on their shabby coats and patched cloaks. Even separating putative soldiers from farriers and fletchers and the like was near impossible, since nearly all had belted on a sword of some description, or an axe. Light, a fair number of the *women* wore knives large enough to be called short-swords, but there was no way to tell some conscripted farmer's wife from a wagon driver. They wore the same thick wool and had the same rough hands and weary faces. It did not really matter, in any case. This winter siege was a dire mistake—the armsmen would begin going hungry long before the city did—but it gave Elenia an opportunity, and when an opening presented itself, you struck. Keeping her hood back far enough to show her features clearly in spite of the freezing wind, she nodded graciously to every unwashed lout who so much as looked in her direction, and ignored the surprised starts that some gave at her condescension.

Most would remember her affability, remember the Golden Boars her escort wore, and know that Elenia Sarand had taken notice of them. On such a foundation power was built. A High Seat as much as a queen stood atop a tower built of people. True, those at the bottom were bricks of the basest clay, yet if those common bricks crumpled in their support, the tower fell. That was something Arymilla appeared to have forgotten, if she had ever known. Elenia doubted that Arymilla spoke to anyone lower than a steward or a personal servant. Had it been . . . prudent . . . she herself would have passed a few words at every campfire, perhaps grasping a grubby hand now and then, remembering people she had encountered before or at least dissembling well enough to make it seem she did. Pure and simple, Arymilla lacked the wit to be queen.

The camp covered more ground than most towns, more like a hundred clustered camps of varying sizes than one, so she was free to wander without worrying too much about straying close to the outer boundaries, but she took a care anyway. The guards on sentry would be polite, unless they were utter fools, yet without any doubt they had their orders. On principle, she approved of people doing as they were told, but it would be best to avoid any embarrassing incidents. Especially given the likely consequences if Arymilla actually thought she had been trying to leave. She had already been forced to endure one frigid night sleeping in some soldier's filthy tent, a shelter hardly worth the name, complete with vermin and badly patched holes, not to mention the lack of Janny to help her with her clothes and add a little warmth under the sorry excuse for blankets, and that had been for no more than a perceived slight. Well, it had been an actual slight, but she had not thought Arymilla bright enough to catch it. Light, to think that *she* must step warily around that . . . that pea-brained ninny! Pulling her cloak closer, she tried to pretend that her shudder was just a reaction to the wind. There were better things to dwell on. More important things. She nodded to a wide-eyed young man with a dark scarf wrapped around his head, and he recoiled as though she had glared. Fool peasant!

It was grating to think that, only a few miles away, that young chit Elayne sat snug and warm in the comfort of the Royal Palace, attended by scores of well-trained servants and likely without two thoughts in her head beyond what to wear tonight at a supper prepared by the palace cooks. Rumor had the girl with child, possibly by some Guardsman. It might be so. Elayne had never possessed any more sense of decency than her mother. Dyelin was the brain there, a sharp mind and dangerous notwithstanding her pathetic lack of ambition, perhaps advised by an Aes Sedai. There must be at least one real Aes Sedai among all those absurd rumors.

So many fabulations drifted out of the city that telling reality from nonsense became difficult—Sea Folk making holes in the *air*? Absolute drivel!—yet the White Tower clearly had an interest in putting one of its own on the throne. How could it not? Even so, Tar Valon seemed to be pragmatic when it came to these matters. History clearly showed that whoever reached the Lion Throne would soon find that she was the one the Tower actually had favored all along. The Aes Sedai would not lose their connection to Andor through a lack of nimbleness, particularly not with the Tower itself riven. Elenia was as certain of that as she was of her own name. In fact, if half what she heard of the Tower's situation was true, the next Queen of Andor might find herself able to demand whatever she wanted in return for keeping that connection intact. In any event, no one was going to rest the Rose Crown on her head before summer at the earliest, and a great deal could change before then. A very great deal.

She was making her second round of the camp when the sight of another small mounted party ahead of her, picking its slow way between the scattered campfires in the last light, made her scowl and draw rein sharply. The women were cloaked and deeply hooded, one in strong blue silk lined with black fur, the other in plain gray wool, but the silver Triple Keys worked large on the four armsmen's cloaks named them clearly enough. She could think of any number of people she would rather encounter than Naean Arawn. In any case, while Arymilla had not precisely forbidden them to meet without her—Elenia heard her teeth grind as much as felt them, and forced her face smooth—for the moment, it seemed wisest not to press matters. Especially when there seemed no possible advantage to such a meeting.

Unfortunately, Naean saw her before she could turn aside. The woman spoke hastily to her escort and, while armsmen and maid were still bowing in their saddles, spurred toward Elenia at a pace that sent clods of slush flying from her black gelding's hooves. The Light *burn* the fool! On the other hand, whatever was goading Naean to recklessness might be valuable to know, and dangerous not to. It might, but finding out presented its own dangers.

"Stay here and remember that you've seen nothing," Elenia snapped at her own meager retinue and dug her heels into Dawn Wind's flanks without waiting for any reply. She had no need for elaborate bows and courtesies every time she turned around, not beyond what seemliness demanded, and her people knew better than to do anything other than what she commanded. It was everyone else she had to worry about, burn them all! As the long-legged bay sprang forward, she lost her grip on her cloak, and it streamed behind her like the crimson banner of Sarand. She refused to gather the cloak under control, flailing around in front of farmers and the Light alone knew who, so the wind razored through her riding dress, another reason for irritation.

Naean at least had the sense to slow and meet her little more than halfway, beside a pair of heavily laden carts with their empty shafts lying in the muck. The nearest fire was almost twenty paces away, and the nearest tents farther, their entry flaps laced tight against the cold. The men at the fire were intent on the big iron pot steaming over the flames, and if the stench from it was enough to make Elenia want to empty her stomach, at least the wind that carried the stink would keep stray words from their ears. But they had better be important words.

With a face as pale as ivory in its frame of black fur, Naean might have been called beautiful by some despite more than a hint of harshness around her mouth and eyes as cold as blue ice. Straight-backed and outwardly quite calm, she seemed untouched by events. Her breath, making a white mist, was steady and even. “Do you know where we are sleeping tonight, Elenia?” she said coolly.

Elenia made no effort at all to stop from glaring. “Is *that* what you want?” Risking Arymilla’s displeasure for a brainless question! The thought of risking Arymilla’s displeasure, the thought that Arymilla’s displeasure was something she needed to avoid, made her snarl. “You know as much as I, Naean.” Tugging at her reins, she was already turning her mount away when Naean spoke again, with just a hint of heat.

“Don’t play the simpleton with me, Elenia. And don’t tell me you aren’t as ready as I am to chew off your own foot to escape this trap. Now, can we at least pretend to civility?”

Elenia kept Dawn Wind half turned away from the other woman and looked at her sideways, past the fur-trimmed edge of her hood. That way, she could keep an eye on the men crowding around the nearest fire, too. No House badges displayed there. They could belong to anyone. Now and then one fellow or another shielding bare hands in his armpits glanced toward the two ladies on horseback, but their real interest was on shuffling near enough the fire to get warm. That, and how long it was going to take for the beef to boil down to something approaching mush. That sort seemed able to eat anything.

“Do you think you *can* escape?” she asked quietly. Civility was all very well, but not at the expense of remaining here for all to see any longer than absolutely necessary. If Naean saw a way out, though . . . “How? The pledge you signed to support Marne has been posted across half of Andor by now. Besides, you can hardly think Arymilla will just allow you to ride away.” Naean flinched, and Elenia could not help a tight smile. The woman was not so untouched as she feigned. She still managed to keep her voice level, though.

“I saw Jarid yesterday, Elenia, and even at a distance he looked like a thundercloud, galloping fit to break his mount’s neck and his own. If I know your husband, he’s already planning a way to cut you out of this. He would spit in the Dark One’s eye for you.” That was true; he would. “I’m sure you can see it would be best if I were part of those plans.”

“My husband signed the same pledge you did, Naean, and he is an honorable man.” He was too honorable for his own good, in simple fact, but what Elenia wanted had been his guide since before their wedding vows. Jarid had signed the pledge because she wrote and told him to, not that she had any choice as matters were, and he would even repudiate it, however reluctantly, if she were mad enough to ask it. Of course, there was the difficulty in letting him know what she did want at the moment. Arymilla was very careful not to let her within a mile of him. She had everything in hand—as far as she could in the circumstances—but she needed to let Jarid know, if only to stop him from “cutting her a way out.” Spit in the Dark One’s eye? He could take them both to ruin in the belief he was helping her, and he might do it even knowing it meant their ruination.

It required a great effort not to allow the frustration and fury suddenly welling up inside her to show on her face, but she covered the strain with a smile. She took considerable pride in being able to produce a smile for any situation. This one held a touch of surprise. And a touch of disdain. “I’m not planning anything, Naean, and neither is Jarid, I’m sure. But if I were, why would I include you?”

“Because if I am not included in those plans,” Naean said bluntly, “Arymilla might learn of them. She may be a blind fool, but she’ll see once she’s told where to look. And you might find yourself sharing a tent with your *betrothed* every night, not to mention *protected* by his armsmen.”

Elenia’s smile melted, but her voice turned to ice, matching the frozen ball that abruptly filled her stomach. “You want to be careful what you say, or Arymilla may ask her Taraboner to play cat’s cradle with you again. In truth, I think I can guarantee as much.”

It seemed impossible that Naean’s face could grow any whiter, yet it did. She actually swayed in her saddle, and caught Elenia’s arm as if to keep from falling. A gust of wind flung her cloak about, and she let it flail.

Those once-cold eyes were quite wide, now. The woman made no effort to hide her fear. Perhaps she was too far gone to be capable of hiding it. Her voice came breathy and panicked. “I know you and Jarid are planning something, Elenia. I know it! Take me with you, and . . . and I will pledge Arawn to you as soon as I can be free of Arymilla.” Oh, she *was* shaken, to offer that.

“Do you want to draw more attention than you already have?” Elenia snapped, pulling free of the other woman’s grasp. Dawn Wind and the black gelding danced nervously, catching their riders’ moods, and Elenia reined her bay hard to quiet him. Two of the men at the fire hurriedly put their heads down. No doubt they thought they saw two noblewomen arguing in the graying evening and wanted to attract no part of that anger on themselves. Yes; it must be only that. They might carry tales, but they knew better than to get mixed in their betters’ arguments.

“I have no plans to . . . escape; none at all,” she said in a quieter voice. Drawing her cloak close again, she calmly turned her head to check the carts, and the nearest tents. If Naean was frightened enough . . . When an opening presented itself . . . There was no one close enough to overhear, but she still kept her voice low. “Matters might change, of course. Who can say? If they do, I make you this promise, under the Light and by my hope of rebirth, I will not leave without you.” A startled hope bloomed on Naean’s face. Now to present the hook. “If, that is, I have in my possession a letter written in your own hand, signed and sealed, in which you explicitly repudiate your support of Marne, of your own free will, and swear the support of House Arawn to me for the throne. Under the Light and by *your* hope of rebirth. Nothing less will do.”

Naean’s head jerked back, and she touched her lips with her tongue. Her eyes shifted as though searching for a way out, for help. The black continued to snort and dance, but she barely tightened her reins enough to keep him from bolting, and even that seemed unconscious. Yes, she was frightened. But not too frightened to know what Elenia was demanding. The history of Andor contained too many examples for her not to know. A thousand possibilities remained so long as nothing was in writing, but the mere existence of such a letter would put a bit between Naean’s teeth and the reins in Elenia’s hands. Publication meant Naean’s destruction, unless Elenia was fool enough to admit to coercion. She could try to hang on after that revelation, yet even a House with many fewer antagonisms between its members than Arawn, many fewer cousins and aunts and uncles ready to undercut one another in a heartbeat, would still break apart. The lesser Houses that had been tied to Arawn for generations would seek protection elsewhere. In a matter of years, if not sooner, Naean would be left as the High Seat of a minor and discredited remnant. Oh, yes; it had happened before.

“We’ve been together long enough.” Elenia gathered her reins. “I wouldn’t want to set tongues wagging. Perhaps we will have another chance to speak alone before Arymilla takes the throne.” What a vile thought! “Perhaps.”

The other woman exhaled as if all of the breath in her body were leaking out, but Elenia went on about turning her horse away, neither slowly nor in haste, not stopping until Naean said urgently, “Wait!”

Looking back over her shoulder, she did just that. Waited. Without speaking a word. What needed to be said had been said. All that remained was to see whether the woman was desperate enough to deliver herself into Elenia’s hands. She should be. *She* had no Jarid to work for her. In fact, anyone in Arawn who suggested that Naean needed rescuing likely would find herself imprisoned for thwarting Naean’s expressed will. Without Elenia, she could grow old in captivity. With the letter, though, her captivity would be of a different kind. With the letter, Elenia would be able to allow her every appearance of complete freedom. Apparently she was bright enough to see that. Or maybe just frightened enough of the Taraboner.

“I will get it to you as soon as I can,” she said at last, in a resigned voice.

“I look forward to seeing it,” Elenia murmured, barely bothering to mask her satisfaction. *But don’t wait too long,* she almost added, and just stopped herself. Naean might be beaten, but a beaten foe could still put a knife in your back if goaded too far. Besides which, she feared Naean’s threat as much as Naean feared hers. Perhaps more. So long as Naean did not know that, however, her blade had no point.

As she rode back to her armsmen, Elenia’s mood was more buoyant than it had been since . . . Certainly since before her “rescuers” had turned out to be Arymilla’s men. Perhaps since before Dyelin had imprisoned her in Aringill in the first place, though she had never lost hope there. Her prison had been the governor’s house, quite comfortable, even if she had to share an apartment with Naean. Communicating with Jarid certainly had presented no problem, and she thought she had made some inroads with the Queen's Guards in Aringill. So many of them had been new-come out of Cairhien that they were . . . unsure . . . where their true loyalties lay.

Now, this wonderfully fortuitous encounter with Naean lifted her spirits so much that she smiled at Janny and promised her a bevy of new dresses once they were inside Caemlyn. Which produced a properly grateful smile from the plump-cheeked woman. Elenia always bought new dresses for her maid when she felt particularly good, every one fine enough for a successful merchant. It was one way to insure loyalty and discretion, and for twenty years, Janny had delivered both.

The sun was only a red rim above the trees now, and it was time to find Arymilla so she could be told where she was sleeping tonight. The Light send it was a decent bed, in a warm tent that was not too smoky, with a decent meal beforehand. She could not ask more, at present. Even that did not dent her mood, though. She not only nodded to the clusters of men and women they rode past, she smiled at them. She almost went so far as to wave. Matters were progressing better than they had in quite some time. Naean was not simply disposed of as a rival for the throne, she had been leashed and brought to heel, or as good as, and that might—would!—be sufficient to bring Karind and Lir. And there were those who would accept *anyone* other than another Trakand on the throne. Ellorien, for one. Morgase had had her *flogged*! Ellorien would never stand for any Trakand. Aemlyn, Arathelle and Abelle were possibilities, too, with their own grievances that could be exploited. Perhaps Pelivar or Luan, as well. She had her feelers out. And she would not squander the advantage of Caemlyn, as that hoyden Elayne had. Historically, holding Caemlyn was enough to gather the support of at least four or five Houses by itself.

The timing would be key, certainly, or all the advantage would fall to Arymilla, but Elenia could already see herself seated on the Lion Throne, with the High Seats kneeling to swear fealty. She already had her list of which High Seats would need to be replaced. No one who had opposed her was going to be allowed to cause her trouble later. A series of unfortunate accidents would see to that. A pity she could not choose their replacements, but accidents could happen with incredible frequency.

Her happy contemplation was shattered by the scrawny man who suddenly came up beside her on a stocky gray, his eyes feverishly bright in the fading light. For some reason, Nasin had sprigs of green fir stuck in his thin white hair. It made him look as if he had been climbing in a tree, and his red silk coat and cloak were so worked with brightly colored flowers they could have passed for Illianer carpets. He was ludicrous. He was also High Seat of the most powerful single House in Andor. And he was quite mad. “Elenia, my darling treasure,” he brayed, spraying spittle, “how sweet the sight of you is to my eyes. You make honey seem stale and roses drab.”

Without need for conscious thought, she hastily reined Dawn Wind back and to the right, putting Janny’s brown mare between her and him. “I am *not* your betrothed, Nasin,” she snapped, seething at having to say that aloud for everyone to hear. “I am *married*, you old fool! Wait!” she added, flinging up a hand.

The imperative word and the gesture were for her armsmen, who had laid hands on sword hilts and were glaring at Nasin. Some thirty or forty men wearing House Caeren’s Sword and Star were following the man, and they would not hesitate to cut down anyone they thought was threatening their High Seat. Some already had blades half-drawn. They would not harm her, of course. Nasin would have them hanged to a man if she was even bruised. Light, she did not know whether to laugh or cry over that.

“Are you still afraid of that young oaf Jarid?” Nasin demanded, angling his mount to follow her. “He has no right to keep bothering you. The better man won, and he should acknowledge it. I’ll challenge him!” One hand, plainly bony even in its tight red glove, fumbled at a sword he probably had not drawn in twenty years. “I will cut him down like a dog for frightening you!”

Elenia moved Dawn Wind deftly, so they described a circle around Janny, who murmured apologies to Nasin and pretended to take her mare out of his way while getting in it. Mentally, Elenia added a little embroidery to the dresses she would buy. Addlepated as he was, Nasin could go in a blink from honeyed words of courtly love to groping at her as if she were the lowest sort of tavern maid. That, she could not endure, not again, certainly not in public. Circling, she forced a worried smile onto her face, though in truth, the smile took more effort than the worry. If this old fool forced Jarid to kill him, it would ruin everything! “You know I could not abide to have men fight over me, Nasin.” Her voice was breathy and anxious, but she did not try to control it. Breathy and anxious suited well enough. “How could I love a man with blood on his hands?”

The ridiculous man frowned down that long nose till she began to wonder whether she had gone too far. He was mad as a spring hare, but not in everything. Not always. “I had not realized you were so . . . sensitive,” he said finally. Without stopping his effort to ride around Janny. His decrepit face brightened. “But I should have known. I will remember, from now on. Jarid may live. So long as he doesn’t pester you.” Abruptly, he seemed to notice Janny for the first time, and with an irritated grimace, he raised his hand high, balling it into a fist. The plump woman visibly steeled herself for the blow without moving aside, and Elenia gritted her teeth. Silk embroidery. Definitely unsuitable for a maid, but Janny had earned it.

“Lord Nasin, I have been looking for you *everywhere*,” a woman’s simpering voice cried, and the circling stopped.

Elenia exhaled in relief as Arymilla rode up in the twilight with her entourage, and had to stifle a surge of fury at feeling relief. In over-elaborately embroidered green silk, with lace under her chin and at her wrists, Arymilla was plump verging on stout, with a vacuous smile and brown eyes that were always wide with affected interest even when there was nothing to be interested in. Lacking the brains to tell the difference, she possessed just enough cunning to know there were things that should interest her, and she did not want anyone to think she had missed them. The only real concern she had was her own comfort and the income to ensure it, and the only reason she wanted the throne was that the royal coffers could provide greater comfort than the revenues of any High Seat. Her entourage was larger than Nasin’s, though only half were armsmen wearing the Four Moons of her House. For the most part, hangers-on and sycophants made up the rest, lesser lords and ladies of minor Houses and others willing to lick Arymilla’s wrist for a place near power. She did love people to fawn over her. Naean was there, too, on the edge of the group with her armsmen and maid, apparently cool-eyed and in control of herself once more. But keeping well away from Jaq Lounalt, a lean man with one of those farcical Taraboner veils covering his huge mustaches and a conical cap pushing the hood of his cloak to a ridiculous height. The fellow smiled too much, as well. He hardly looked a man who could reduce someone to begging with just a few cords.

“Arymilla,” Nasin said in a confused tone, then frowned at his fist as if surprised to find it raised. Lowering his hand to the pommel of his saddle, he beamed a smile at the silly woman. “Arymilla, my dear,” he said warmly.

Not with the sort of warmth he often directed at Elenia. Somehow, it seemed, he had become at least half-convinced that Arymilla was his daughter, and his favorite at that. Once, Elenia had heard him reminiscing at length with the woman about her “mother,” his last wife, dead nearly thirty years now. Arymilla managed to hold her end of the conversation, too, though she had never met Miedelle Caeren as far as Elenia knew.

Still, despite all his fatherly smiles for Arymilla, his eyes sought through the shadowed crowd on horseback behind her, and his face relaxed when he found Sylvase, his granddaughter and heir, a sturdy, placid young woman who met his gaze, unsmiling, then pulled her dark, fur-lined cowl well forward. She never smiled or frowned or showed any emotion at all that Elenia had ever detected, just kept an unvarying cowlike expression. Plainly, she had a cow’s wits, too. Arymilla kept Sylvase closer than she did Elenia or Naean, and so long as she did, there was no chance that Nasin would be forced to retire from his honors. He was mad, assuredly, but sly. “I hope you’re taking good care of my little Sylvase, Arymilla,” he murmured. “There are fortune hunters everywhere, and I want the darling girl kept safe.”

“Of course, I am,” Arymilla replied, brushing her overfed mare past Elenia without so much as a glance. Her tone was honey-sweet, and sickeningly doting. “You know I’ll keep her as safe as I keep myself.” Smiling that empty-headed smile, she set about straightening Nasin’s cloak on his shoulders and smoothing it with the air of someone settling a shawl on a beloved invalid. “It’s much too cold out for you. I know what you need. A warm tent and some hot spiced wine. I’ll be happy to have my maid prepare it for you. Arlene, accompany Lord Nasin to his tent and fix him some good spiced wine.”

A slim woman in her entourage gave a violent twitch, then rode forward slowly, pushing back the hood of her plain blue cloak to reveal a pretty face and a tremulous smile. Suddenly all those lickspittles and toad-eaters were adjusting their cloaks against the wind or snugging their gloves, looking anywhere except at Arymilla’s maid. Especially the women. One of them could have been chosen as easily, and they knew it. Oddly, Sylvase did not look away. It was impossible to see her face in the shadows of her hood, but the opening turned to follow the slender woman.

Nasin’s grin showed his teeth, making him look even more like a goat than usual. “Yes. Yes, mulled wine would be good. Arlene, is it? Come, Arlene, there’s a good girl. Not too chill, are you?” The girl squeaked as he swept a corner of his cloak around her shoulders and gathered her so close she was leaning out of her saddle. “You’ll be warm in my tent, I promise.” Without so much as a glance back, he rode off at a walk, chortling and whispering at the young woman under his arm. His armsmen followed with the creak of leather and the slow, wet clop of hooves in the muck. One of them laughed, as if another had said something funny.

Elenia shook her head in disgust. Pushing a pretty woman in front of Nasin to distract him was one thing—she did not even have to be that pretty; any woman the old fool could corner was in danger—but using your own maid was revolting. Not as revolting as Nasin himself, though. “You promised to keep him away from me, Arymilla,” she said in a low, tight voice. That lecherous old crackbrain might have forgotten her existence for the moment, but he would remember the next time he saw her. “You promised to keep him occupied.”

Arymilla’s face grew sullen, and she petulantly tugged her riding gloves tighter. She had not gotten what she wanted. That was a great sin, to her. “If you want to be safe from admirers, you ought to stay close to me instead of wandering about loose. Can I help it if you attract men? And I did rescue you. I haven’t heard any thanks for that.”

Elenia’s jaw clenched so hard that it began to ache. Pretending that she supported this woman of her own choice was enough to make her want to bite something. Her choices had been made clear enough; write to Jarid or endure an extended honeymoon with her “betrothed.” Light, she might have taken the choice if not for the certainty that Nasin would lock her up in some out-of-the-way manor and, after she had put up with his pawing, eventually forget she was there. And leave her there. Arymilla insisted on the pretense, though. She insisted on a great many things, some of them utterly insufferable. Yet they had to be suffered. For the time being. Perhaps, once matters were set straight, Master Lounalt could offer his attentions to Arymilla for a few days.

From somewhere she summoned an apologetic smile, and made herself bend her neck as if she were one of the boot-licking leeches who were watching her avidly. After all, if *she* crawled for Arymilla, it only proved they were right to. The feel of their eyes on her made her want to bathe. Doing this in front of Naean made her want to shriek. “I offer you all the gratitude that’s in me, Arymilla.” Well, that was no lie. All the gratitude that was in her came about equal to a desire to strangle the other woman. Very slowly. She had to inhale deeply before she could get the next part out, though. “You must forgive me for being slow, please.” A *very* bitter word. “Nasin made me quite distraught. You know how Jarid would react if he learned of Nasin’s behavior.” Her own voice took on a honed edge at that last, but the fool woman giggled. She giggled!

“Of course you’re forgiven, Elenia,” she laughed, her face lightening. “All you need do is ask. Jarid is a hothead, isn’t he? You must write to him and tell him how content you are. You are content, aren’t you? You can dictate to my secretary. I do hate staining my fingers with ink, don’t you?”

“Certainly I’m content, Arymilla. How could I not be?” Smiling required no effort at all, this time. The woman actually thought she was clever. Using Arymilla’s secretary precluded any possibility of secret inks, but she could tell Jarid quite openly to do absolutely nothing without her counsel, and the brainless fluff would think she was only obeying.

Nodding with a smug self-satisfaction, Arymilla gathered her reins, imitated by her coterie. If she stuck a pot on her head and called it a hat, they would all wear pots, too. “It is getting late,” she said, “and I want an early start in the morning. Aedelle Baryn’s cook has an excellent repast waiting on us. You and Naean must ride with me, Elenia.” She made it sound as though she were honoring them, and they had no choice except to behave as though she were, falling in on either side of her. “And Sylvase, of course. Come, Sylvase.”

Nasin’s granddaughter brought her mare closer, but not up beside Arymilla. She followed a little behind, with Arymilla’s sycophants crowding on her heels since they had not been invited to ride with Arymilla. Despite the fitful, icy wind tugging at their cloaks, several of the women and two or three of the men tried unsuccessfully to engage the girl in conversation. She seldom said two words together. Still, with no High Seat in reach to fawn over, a High Seat’s heir would do, and maybe one of the fellows hoped to marry well. Likely one or two were more in the nature of guards, or at least spies making sure she did not try to communicate with anyone in her House. This lot would find that exciting, touching on the edges of power. Elenia had her own plans for Sylvase.

Arymilla was another with no objections to nattering away when anyone with sense would be muffling herself in her cowl, and her chatter as they rode through the dying light flitted from what Lir’s sister would offer at supper to the plans for her coronation. Elenia listened only enough to murmur approvingly at what seemed appropriate spots. If the fool wanted to offer a *sworn* amnesty to those who opposed her, far be it from Elenia Sarand to tell her she was a fool. It was painful enough having to . . . *simper* . . . at the woman without listening to her. Then one thing Arymilla said hit her ear like an awl.

"You and Naean won't mind sharing a bed, will you? It seems we are short of decent tents here."

She flitted on, but for a moment, Elenia could not hear a word. She felt as though her skin had been stuffed with snow. Turning her head slightly, she met Naean's shocked gaze. There was no possible way Arymilla could know about their chance meeting, not yet, and even if she did, why would she offer them a chance to plot together? A trap? Spies to listen to what they said? Naean's maid, or . . . Or Janny? The world seemed to spin. Black and silver flecks floated in front of Elenia's eyes. She thought she was about to faint.

Abruptly she realized that Arymilla had addressed something to her directly and was waiting on an answer with an increasingly impatient scowl. Frantically, she cast her mind about. Yes, she had it. "A gilded coach, Arymilla?" What a ridiculous notion. As well ride in a Tinker's wagon! "Oh, delightful! You do have such marvelous ideas!"

Arymilla's pleased simper put a little ease into Elenia's breathing. The woman *was* a brainless fool. Maybe there was a shortage of suitable tents. More likely she just thought they were safe, now. Tamed. Elenia turned her bared teeth into a simper of her own. But she put aside any idea of having the Taraboner "entertain" the woman, even for an hour. With Jarid's signature on that pledge, there was only one way to clear her path to the throne. Everything was in hand and ready to go forward. The only question was whether Arymilla or Nasin should die first.

Night pressed down on Caemlyn with a hard cold driven deep by sharp winds. Here and there a glow of light spilling from an upper window spoke of people still awake, but most shutters were drawn, and a thin sliver of moon low in the sky only seemed to emphasize the darkness. Even the snow coating rooftops and piled along the fronts of buildings where it had escaped the day's traffic was a shadowy gray. The lone man muffled head to ankles in a dark cloak, striding through the frozen slush left on the paving stones, answered to Daved Hanlon or Doilan Mellar with equal ease; a name was no more than a coat, and a man changed his coat whenever needed. He had worn a number over the years. Given his wishes, he would have had his feet up in front of a roaring fire in the Royal Palace, a mug in his hand, a pitcher of brandy at his side, and a willing wench on his knee, but he had others' wishes to serve. At least the footing was better here in the New City. Not good, with this frozen muck underfoot that could turn a careless step into a sprawl, yet a man's boots were less likely to go out from under him here than back on the steeper hills of the Inner City. Besides, darkness suited him tonight.

There had been few people in the streets when he started out, and the number had dwindled away as darkness deepened. Wise people stayed indoors once night fell. Occasionally, dim shapes skulked in the deeper shadows, but after a brief study of Hanlon, they scuttled around corners ahead of him, or withdrew into alleys trying to muffle their curses as they floundered in snow that likely had not been touched by the sun. He was not bulky, and little taller than the average run of men, with his sword and breastplate hidden by his cloak to boot, but footpads looked for weakness or hesitation, and he moved with an obvious self-confidence, plainly unafraid of lurkers. An attitude helped by the long dagger concealed in his gauntleted right hand.

He kept an eye out for patrols of Guardsmen as he walked, but he did not expect to see any. The strongarms and prowlers would have sought other hunting grounds if the Guards were about. Of course, he could send nosy Guardsmen on their way with a word, yet he wanted no observers of any kind, and no questions why he was so far from the palace afoot. His step hesitated as two heavily cloaked women appeared at a crossing well ahead, but they moved on without glancing his way, and he breathed more easily. Very few women would venture out at this time of night without a man along to wield sword or cudgel, and even without seeing their faces he would have wagered a fistful of gold to a horse apple that pair were Aes Sedai. Or else some of those strange women who filled most of the beds in the palace.

The thought of that lot brought a scowl, and a prickling between his shoulder blades like the brush of nettles. Whatever was going on in the palace, it was enough to give him the grips. The Sea Folk women were bad enough, and not just because they went swaying along the halls in that seductive way, then pulled a knife on a man. He had not even thought of patting one on the bottom after he realized they and the Aes Sedai were staring at one another like strange cats in a box. And plainly, however impossibly, the Sea Folk were the larger cats. The others were worse, in a way. No matter what the rumors said, he knew the look of Aes Sedai, and it did not include wrinkles. Yet some of them could channel, and he had the disturbing notion that they all could. Which made no sense at all. Maybe the Sea Folk had some sort of peculiar dispensation, but as for these Kin, as Falion called them, everyone knew that if three women who could channel and were not Aes Sedai sat down at the same table, Aes Sedai would appear before they could finish a pitcher of wine and tell them to move on and never speak to one another again. And make sure they did it, besides. That was given. But there those women sat in the palace, over a hundred of them, holding their private meetings, walking around Aes Sedai without one frown between them. Until today, anyway, and whatever had set them huddling like frightened hens, the Aes Sedai had been every bit as anxious. There were too many oddities to suit him. When Aes Sedai behaved oddly, it was time for a man to look to the safety of his own skin.

With a curse he jerked himself out of his reverie. A man needed to look out for his skin in the night, too, and letting his concentration drift was no way to do it. At least he had not stopped, or even slowed. After a few more steps, he smiled a thin smile and thumbed the blade of his dagger. The wind sighed down the street and fell, whistled across rooftops and fell, and in the brief silences between he could hear the faint crunch of the boots that had been following him since shortly after he left the palace.

At the next crossing street, he turned to his right at the same steady unhurried pace, then suddenly flattened his back against the front of a stable that stood hard on the corner. The wide stable doors were shut, and likely barred on the inside, but the smell of horse and horse dung hung in the icy air. The inn across the street was closed up tight, as well, its windows shuttered and dark, the only sound aside from the wind the creak of its swinging sign he could not make out in the night. No one to see what they should not.

He had a moment’s warning, the sound of boots quickened in an effort not to let him out of sight too long, and then a cowled head was thrust cautiously around the corner. Not cautiously enough, of course. His left hand darted into the cowl to seize a throat at the same time his right made a practiced stop-thrust with the dagger. He half expected to find a breastplate, or a mail shirt under the man's coat, and he was ready if he did, but an inch of steel sank easily beneath the fellow's breastbone. He did not know why that seemed to paralyze a man's lungs, so he could not cry out, until he had drowned in his own blood, but he knew that it did. Still, tonight he had no time to wait. No Guards in sight at present did not mean matters would stay that way for long. With a quick wrench, he slammed the man's head against the stable's stone wall hard enough to crack a skull, then shoved his dagger to the hilt, feeling the blade grate as it dug through the fellow's spine.

His breathing remained steady—killing was just a thing that had to be done now and again, nothing to get excited over—but he hurriedly lowered the corpse to the snow against the wall and crouched beside it, wiping his blade on the dead man's dark coat while sticking his other hand into his armpit to tug off his steel-backed gauntlet. Head swiveling, he watched the street both ways as he felt quickly across the man's face in the darkness. A rasp of stubble under his fingers told him that it *was* a man, but no more. Man, woman or child made no difference to him—fools behaved as though children had no eyes to see or tongues to tell what they saw—yet he wished there had been a mustache or a bulbous nose, anything to spark a memory and tell him who this fellow had been. A squeeze at the dead man's sleeve found thick wool, neither fine nor particularly rough, and a sinewy arm that could have belonged to clerk or wagon driver or footman. To any man, in short, just like the coat. Searching down the body, he rifled through the fellow's pockets, finding a wooden comb and a ball of twine, which he tossed aside. At the man's belt, his hand paused. A leather sheath hung there, empty. No man on earth could have drawn a dagger after Hanlon's blade found his lungs. Of course, there was good cause for a man to carry his knife unsheathed when he walked out at night, but the reason that came most readily to mind right then was to stab someone in the back or cut a throat.

It was only a fleeting pause, though. Wasting no time on speculation, he sliced off the fellow's purse beneath the drawstrings. The weight of the coins he spilled into his hand and hastily stuffed into his own pocket told him there was no gold, likely not even a piece of silver, but a cut purse and no coins would make whoever found the body think him the prey of strongarms. Straightening, he tugged on his gauntlet, and only moments after driving his blade home, he was striding along the slush-covered pavement once more, dagger held close to his side beneath his cloak and eyes wary. He did not relax until he was a street away from the dead man, and then he did not relax very far.

Most people who heard of the killing would accept the tale of murder for theft that he had laid out for them, but not whoever had sent the fellow. Following all the way from the palace meant that he had been sent, but by whom? He was fairly sure that any of the Sea Folk who wanted a knife put in him would have done the deed herself. For all that the Kin troubled him just by being there, they seemed to keep quiet and walk small. True, people who practiced avoiding notice were the most likely to resort to a hired knife in the night, but he had never exchanged more than three words at a time with any of them, and he certainly had never tried to finger one. The Aes Sedai seemed more likely, yet he was sure he had done nothing to rouse their suspicions. Still, any one of them might have her own reasons for wanting him dead. You could never tell with Aes Sedai. Birgitte Trahelion was a silly bint who seemed to think she really was a character out of a story, maybe even the real Birgitte, if there had ever been a real Birgitte, but she could well think he was a threat to her position. She might be a strumpet, wiggling around the corridors in those trousers the way she did, yet she had a cold eye. That one could order a throat slit without blinking. The last possibility was the one that worried him most, though. His own masters were not the most trusting of people, and not always the most trustworthy. And the Lady Shiaine Avarhin, who currently gave him his orders, was the one who had sent a summons that had pulled him into the night. Where a fellow just happened to be waiting to follow him, knife in hand. He did not believe in coincidence, no matter what people said about this al’Thor.

Thoughts of turning back to the palace came and went in a flash. He had gold tucked away; he could bribe his way through the gates as easily as anyone else, or just order one opened long enough to let him ride out. But it would mean spending the rest of his life watching his back, and anyone who came inside arm’s length of him might be the one sent to kill him. Not so different from the way he lived now. Except for the certainty that someone would put poison in his soup or a knife through his ribs sooner or later. Besides, that stone-eyed trull Birgitte was the most likely culprit. Or an Aes Sedai. Or maybe he had offended these Kin somehow. Still, it always paid to be careful. His fingers flexed around the dagger’s hilt. Life was good at the moment, with plenty of comfort and plenty of women impressed or frightened into compliance by a Captain of the Guards, but life on the run was always preferable to death here and now.

Finding the correct street, much less the correct house, was not easy—one narrow side street looked very like another when darkness swathed both—but he took a care and eventually found himself pounding on the front doors of a tall, shadowed pile that could have belonged to a wealthy but discreet merchant. Except he knew now that it did not. Avarhin was a tiny House, extinct some said, but one daughter of it remained, and Shiaine possessed money.

One of the doors swung open, and he flung up a hand against the sudden glare of light. His left hand; the dagger in his right, he kept concealed and ready. Squinting through his spread fingers, he recognized the woman at the door, in the plain dark dress of a maid. Not that that eased his mind by a hair.

“Give us a kiss, Falion,” he said as he stepped inside. Leering, he reached for her. Left-handed, of course.

The long-faced woman brushed his hand aside and shut the door firmly behind him. “Shiaine is closeted with a visitor in the front sitting room upstairs,” she said calmly, “and the cook is in her bedchamber. There is no one else in the house. Hang your cloak on the rack. I will let her know you are here, but you may have to wait.”

Hanlon let his leer vanish and his hand drop. For all of her ageless face, handsome was the best that Falion could be called, and even that might be stretching the truth, with her cold gaze and a colder manner in the bargain. She was hardly the sort of woman he would have chosen to fondle, but it seemed she was being punished by one of the Chosen and he was supposed to be part of the punishment, which altered matters. To some extent. Tumbling a woman who had no choice had never troubled him, and Falion certainly had none. Her maid’s dress was simple truth; she did the work of four or five women by herself, maids and scullions and spit-girl, sleeping when she could and truckling whenever Shiaine frowned. Her hands were rough and red from doing laundry and scrubbing floors. Yet she was likely to survive her punishment, and the last thing he wanted was an Aes Sedai with a personal grudge against Daved Hanlon. Not when circumstances might well change before he had an opportunity to put a knife through her heart, anyway. Reaching an accommodation with her had been easy, though. She seemed to have a practical view. When others could see, he rumpled her every time she came in reach, and when there was time, he bundled her up to her tiny maid's room under the eaves. Where they mussed the bedclothes, then sat on the narrow bed in the cold and exchanged information. Though at her urging, he did give her a few bruises, just in case Shiaine chose to check. He hoped she remembered that it was at her urging.

"Where are the others?" he said, swinging his cloak off and hanging it on the leopard-carved cloak rack. The sound of his boots on the floor tiles bounced from the entry hall's high ceiling. It was a fine space, with painted plaster cornices and several rich wall hangings on carved panels that were polished to a faint glow, well lit by mirrored stand-lamps with enough gilding for the Royal Palace itself, but burn him if it was much warmer than outside. Falion raised an eyebrow at the dagger in his hand, and he sheathed it with a tight smile. He could have it out again faster than anyone would believe, and his sword near as fast. "The streets are full of thieves at night." Despite the chill, he removed his gauntlets and tucked them behind his sword belt. Anything else might make it appear he thought himself in danger. The breastplate should be enough anyway, come the worst.

"I do not know where Marillin is," she said over her shoulder, already turning away and gathering her skirts for the stairsteps. "She went out before sunset. Murellin is in the stables with his pipe. We can talk after I inform Shiaine you've arrived."

Watching her climb the stairs, he grunted. Murellin, a hulking fellow Hanlon did not like at his back, was banished to the stables behind the house whenever he wanted to smoke his pipe, because Shiaine disliked the smell of the rough tabac he used, and since he usually took a pot of ale with him, or even a pitcher, he should not be coming in any time soon. Marillin worried him more. She was Aes Sedai, too, apparently as much under Shiaine's orders as Falion, or himself, but he had no agreements with her. No arguments, either, yet he distrusted any Aes Sedai on principle, Black Ajah or not. Where had she gone? To do what? What a man did not know could kill him, and Marillin Gemalphin spent entirely too much time off doing things he knew nothing about. He was coming to the conclusion that there were entirely too many things in Caemlyn he knew nothing about. Past time he learned, if he wanted to live.

With Falion gone, he went from the icy entry hall straight to the kitchen at the back of the house. The brick-walled room was empty, of course—the cook knew better than to poke her nose out of her room in the basement once she was sent away for the night—and the black iron stove and the ovens stood cold, but a small blaze on the long stone hearth made the kitchen one of the few rooms in the house that would be warm. Compared to the rest, at least. Shiaine was a stingy woman, except when it came to her own comforts. The fire here was only in case she happened to want mulled wine in the night, or a heated egg-milk.

He had been in this house above half a dozen times since coming to Caemlyn, and he knew which cabinets held the spices and which room off the kitchen always held a cask of wine. Always good wine. Shiaine never stinted there. Not with that she intended to drink herself, anyway. By the time Falion returned, he had the honeypot and a dish of ginger and cloves sitting on the wide kitchen table with a pitcher full of wine, and a poker thrust into the fire. Shiaine might say "come now" and mean "now," but when she wanted to make a man wait, it could be near daylight before she saw him. These calls always cost him sleep, burn the woman!

"Who is the visitor?" he asked.

"He gave no name, not to me," Falion said, propping the door to the hall open with a chair. That let some of the sparse warmth leak out, but she would want to be able to hear if Shiaine summoned her. Or maybe she wanted to make sure the other woman was not able to eavesdrop. "A lean man, tall and hard, with the look of a soldier. An officer of some rank, maybe a noble, by his manner, and Andoran by his accents. He seems intelligent and cautious. His clothes are quite plain, though costly, and he wears no rings or pins." Frowning at the table, she turned to one of the tall open-front cabinets beside the door to the hallway and added a second pewter cup to the one he had set out for himself. It had never occurred to him to set out two. Bad enough he had to fix his own wine. Aes Sedai or no Aes Sedai, she was the maid. But she took a chair at the table and pushed the dish of spices away from her for all the world as though she expected him to serve.

"Shiaine had two visitors yesterday, however, more careless than this fellow," she went on. "One, in the morning, had the Golden Boars of Sarand on the cuff of his gauntlets. He probably thought no one would notice small-work, if he thought at all. A plump, yellow-haired man in his middle years who looked down his nose at everything, complimented the wine as though surprised to find a decent vintage in the house, and wanted Shiaine to have me beaten for showing insufficient respect.” She said even that in a cold, measured voice. The only time she had had any heat in her was when Shiaine put the strap to her. He had heard her howl right enough then. “A countryman who has seldom been to Caemlyn but believes he knows how his betters behave, I should say. You can mark him by a wart on his chin and a small half-moon scar beside his left eye. The fellow in the afternoon was short and dark, with a sharp nose and wary eyes, and no scars or marks I could see, though he wore a ring with a square garnet on his left hand. He was sparing with words, very mindful to give away nothing in the little I heard, but he carried a dagger with the Four Moons of House Marne on the pommel.”

Folding his arms, Hanlon leaned against the side of the fireplace and kept his face smooth despite a desire to scowl. He had been sure that the plan was for Elayne to take the throne, though what came after remained a mystery. She had been promised to him as a queen. Whether or not she wore a crown when he took her mattered not a whit to him except for the spice it added—breaking that long-legged bit to saddle would be pure pleasure if she had been a farmer’s daughter, especially after the chit cut a slice off him today in front of all those other women!—but dealings with Sarand and Marne said maybe Elayne was meant to die uncrowned. Maybe, in spite of all the promises that he could romp a queen, he had been placed where he was so he could kill her at some selected moment, when her death would bring some specific result sought by Shiaine. Or rather by the Chosen who had given her her orders. Moridin, the fellow was called, a name Hanlon had never heard before coming to this house. That did not trouble him. If a man had the nerve to call himself one of the Chosen, Hanlon was not fool enough to question it. The likelihood that he was no more than a dagger in this did trouble him. So long as a dagger did the job, what matter if it broke in the doing? Much better to be the fist on the hilt than the blade.

“Did you see any gold change hands?” he asked. “Did you hear anything?”

“I would have said,” she replied thinly. “And by our agreement, it is my turn for a question.”

He managed to mask his irritation behind an expectant look. The fool woman always asked about the Aes Sedai in the palace or those she called the Kin, or about the Sea Folk. Silly questions. Who was friendly with whom, and who unfriendly. Who exchanged private words and who avoided one another. What he had heard them say. As if he had nothing to do with his time but lurk around the hallways spying on them. He never lied to her—there was too much chance she might learn the truth, even mired here in this house as a maid; she was Aes Sedai, after all—but it was growing difficult to come up with something he had not already told her, and she was adamant that he give information if he expected to receive any. Still, he had a few tidbits to offer today, some of the Sea Folk going off, and the whole lot of them jumping for most of the day as if they had icicles shoved down their backs. She would have to settle for that. What he needed to know was important, not bloody gossip.

Before she could get her question out, though, the door to the outside opened. Murellin was large enough that he almost filled the doorway, yet icy cold still swirled in, a gust that made the small fire dance and sent sparks flying up the chimney until the big man pushed the door shut. He gave no sign that he felt the chill, but then, his brown coat looked thick as two cloaks. Besides, the man was not only the size of an ox, he had the wits of one. Setting a tall wooden mug down on the table with a thump, he tucked his thumbs behind his wide belt and eyed Hanlon resentfully. “You messing with my woman?” he muttered.

Hanlon gave a start. Not from any fear of Murellin, not with the oaf on the other side of the table. What startled him was the Aes Sedai leaping from her chair and snatching up the wine pitcher. Dumping in the ginger and cloves, she added a scoop of honey and swirled the pitcher around as if that was going to mix everything, then used a fold of her skirt to pull the poker from the fire and shove it into the wine without checking to see whether it was hot enough yet. She never looked in Murellin’s direction at all.

“Your woman?” Hanlon said carefully. That earned a smirk from the other man.

“Near enough. The Lady figured I might as well use what you aren’t. Anyway, Fally and me keep each other warm nights.” Murellin started around the table, still grinning, but at the woman, now. A shout echoed in the hallway, and he stopped with a sigh, his grin fading.

“Falion!” Shiaine’s distant voice called sharply. “Bring Hanlon up now and be quick about it!” Falion set the pitcher on the table hard enough to slop wine over the rim and was heading for the door before Shiaine finished. When the other woman spoke, Falion jumped.

Hanlon jumped too, if for a different reason. Catching up to her, he seized her arm as she took the first step on the stairs. A quick glance back showed the kitchen door closed. Maybe Murellin did feel the cold. He kept his voice low anyway. “What was that all about?”

“It is none of your business,” she said curtly. “Can you get me something that will make him sleep? Something I can put in his ale or wine? He will drink anything, however it tastes.”

“If Shiaine thinks I’m not obeying orders, it bloody well is my business, and you ought to see it that way, too, if you have two bloody thoughts to rub together.”

She tilted her head, staring down that long nose at him, cold as a fish. “This has nothing to do with you. As far as Shiaine is concerned, I will still *belong* to you when you are here. You see, certain matters changed.” Suddenly, something unseen grasped his wrist tightly and pulled his hand from her sleeve. Something else latched on to his throat, squeezing till he could not draw breath. Futilely, he scrabbled left-handed for his dagger. Her tone remained cool. “I thought certain other matters should change accordingly, but Shiaine does not see things logically. She says that when the Great Master Moridin wishes my punishment lessened, he will say so. Moridin *gave* me to her. Murellin is her way of making sure I understand that. Her way of making sure I know that I am her *dog* until she says otherwise.” Abruptly she drew a deep breath, and the pressure vanished from his wrist and throat. Air had never tasted so sweet. “You can get what I ask for?” she said, as calm as if she had not just tried to kill him with the bloody Power. Just the thought that that had been touching him made his skin crawl.

“I can . . .” he began hoarsely, and stopped to swallow, rubbing at his throat. It felt as though it had been cinched in a hangman’s noose. “I can get you something that will put him in a sleep he’ll never wake from.” As soon as it was safe, he was going to gut her like a goose.

She snorted derisively. “I would be the first Shiaine suspected, and I might as well cut my own wrists as object to anything she decided to do. It will be enough if he sleeps the nights through. Leave the thinking to me, and we will both be the better for it.” Resting a hand on the carved newelpost, she glanced up the stairs. “Come. When she says now, she means now.” A pity he could not hang her up like a goose to wait for the knife.

Following her, his boots thumped on the treads, sending a clatter through the entry hall, and it struck him that he had not heard the visitor leave. Unless the house had some secret way out he did not know, there was only the front door, the one in the kitchen, and a second at the back that could only be reached by passing the kitchen. So it seemed he was to meet this soldier. Maybe it was supposed to come as a surprise. Surreptitiously, he eased his dagger in its sheath.

As expected, the front sitting room had a fine blaze burning away in the wide fireplace of blue-veined marble. It was a room worth the looting, with Sea Folk porcelain vases on the gilt-edged side tables, and tapestries and carpets that would fetch a pretty price. Except that one of the carpets was likely worthless, now. A low blanket-covered mound lay near the middle of the room, and if the fellow that made it had not stained the carpet with his blood, Hanlon would eat the boots sticking out from one end.

Shiaine herself was sitting in a carved armchair, a pretty woman in gold-embroidered blue silk with an ornate belt of woven gold and a heavy gold necklace around her slim neck. Glossy brown hair hung below her shoulders even caught in a net of intricate lace. She looked delicate at first glance, but there was something vulpine about her face, and her smile never touched those big brown eyes. She was using a lace-edged handkerchief to clean a small dagger capped with a firedrop on the pommel. “Go tell Murellin that I will have a . . . bundle . . . for him to dispose of later, Falion,” she said calmly.

Falion’s face remained smooth as polished marble, but she made a curtsy that lacked little of cringing before she scuttled out of the room at a run.

Watching the woman and her dagger from the corner of his eye, Hanlon moved to the covered mound and bent to lift a corner of the blanket. Glazed blue eyes stared out of a face that might have been hard, alive. The dead always looked softer. Apparently he had been neither as cautious nor as intelligent as Falion thought him. Hanlon let the blanket fall and straightened. “He said something you objected to, my Lady?” he said mildly. “Who was he?”

“He said several things I objected to.” She held her dagger up, studying the small blade to be sure it was clean, then slid it into a gold-worked sheath at her waist. “Tell me, is Elayne’s child yours?”

“I don’t know who fathered the whelp,” he said wryly. “Why, my Lady? Do you think I’d go soft? The last chit who claimed I’d gotten a child on her, I stuffed her down a well to cool her head and made sure she stayed there.” There were a long-necked silver wine pitcher and two chased silver cups sitting on a tray on one of the side tables. “Is this safe?” he asked, peering into the cups. Both had wine in the bottom, but a little addition to one would have turned the dead man into easy prey.

“Catrelle Mosenain, an ironmonger’s daughter from Maerone,” the woman said, just as smoothly as if it were common knowledge, and he very nearly flinched in surprise. “You split her head open with a rock before you pitched her down, no doubt to spare her drowning.” How did she know the wench’s name, much less about the rock? He had not remembered her name himself. “No, I doubt you would go soft, but I would hate to think you were kissing the Lady Elayne without letting me know. I would purely hate that.”

Suddenly she frowned at the bloodstained handkerchief in her hand and rose gracefully to glide to the fireplace and toss it into the flames. She stood there warming herself, never even glancing in his direction. “Can you arrange for some of the Seanchan women to escape? Best if it can be both those called *sul’dam* and the ones called *damane*,” she stumbled a little over the strange words, “but if you can’t do both, then a few of the *sul’dam* should do. They will free some of the others.”

“Maybe.” Blood and bloody ashes, she was dancing from one thing to another worse than Falion tonight. “It won’t be easy, my Lady. They’re all guarded close.”

“I didn’t ask whether it was easy,” she said, staring into the flames. “Can you shift guards away from the food warehouses? It would please me if some of those actually burned. I am tired of attempts that always fail.”

“That I cannot do,” he muttered. “Not unless you expect me to go into hiding right after. They keep a record of orders that would make a Cairhienin wince. And it wouldn’t do any good anyway, not with those bloody gateways bringing in more wagons every bloody day.” In truth, he was not sorry for that. Queasy over the means used, certainly, but not sorry. He expected the palace would be the last place in Caemlyn to go hungry in any case, but he had lived out sieges on both sides of the lines, and he had no intention of ever boiling his boots for soup again. Shiaine wanted fires, though.

“Another answer I did not ask for.” She shook her head, still looking into the fireplace, not at him. “But perhaps something can be done there. How close are you to actually . . . enjoying Elayne’s affections?” she finished primly.

“Closer than the day I arrived in the palace,” he growled, glowering at her back. He tried never to offend those the Chosen had set above him, but the chit was trying him. He could snap that slender neck like a twig! To keep his hands from her throat, he filled one of the cups and held it with no intention of drinking. In his left hand, of course. Just because there was one dead man in the room already did not mean she had no plans to make it two corpses. “But I have to go slow. It isn’t as if I can back her into a corner and tickle her out of her shift.”

“I suppose not,” Shiaine said in a muffled voice. “She is hardly the sort of woman you are used to.” Was she *laughing*? Was she *amused* at him? It was all he could do not to throw down the winecup and strangle the fox-faced bint.

Suddenly she turned around, and he blinked as she casually slipped her dagger back into its sheath. He had never seen her draw the bloody thing! He took a swallow of wine without thinking, and almost choked when he realized what he had done.

“How would you like to see Caemlyn looted?” she asked.

“Well enough, if I have a good company at my back and a clear path to the gates.” The wine had to be safe. Two cups meant she had drunk, too, and if he had picked up the dead man’s, there could not be enough poison left in it to sicken a mouse. “Is that what you want? I follow orders as well as the next man.” He did when he seemed likely to survive them, or when they came from the Chosen. As well die for a fool as disobey the Chosen. “But sometimes it helps to know more than ‘go there and do that.’ If you told me what you’re after here in Caemlyn, I might be able to help you reach it faster.”

“Of course.” She smiled a toothy smile while her eyes stayed as flat as brown stones. “But first, tell me why there is fresh blood on your gauntlet?”

He smiled back. “A footpad who got unlucky, my Lady.” Maybe she had sent the man and maybe not, but he added her throat to the list of those he intended to slit. And he might as well add Marillin Gemalphin, too. After all, a lone survivor was the only one who could tell the tale of what had happened.

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CHAPTER 16

The Subject of Negotiations

The morning sun sat on the horizon, leaving the nearer side of Tar Valon still wrapped in shadows, but the snow that covered everything gleamed brightly. The city itself seemed to shine behind its long white walls, all bravely towered and bannered, yet to Egwene, sitting her roan gelding on the riverbank above the city, it seemed even farther away than it really was. The Erinin widened to more than two miles here, and the Alindrelle Erinin and Osendrelle Erinin, flowing to either side of the island, were almost half that, so that Tar Valon appeared to sit in the middle of a great lake, unreachable despite the massive bridges that stood high above the waters so that ships could sail beneath them easily. The White Tower itself, a thick bone-white shaft rising to an impossible height from the city's heart, filled her own heart with a yearning for home. Not for the Two Rivers, but for the Tower. That was her home, now. A plume of smoke caught her eye, a faint black line rising from the far bank beyond the city, and she grimaced. Daishar stamped a hoof in the snow, but a pat on the neck sufficed to soothe the roan. It would take more to soothe his rider. Homesickness was the smallest part of it. Minuscule, compared to the rest.

With a sigh, she rested her reins on the high pommel of her saddle and raised the long brass-bound looking glass. Her cloak fell back, slipping off one shoulder, but she ignored the cold that misted her breath and placed a gloved hand to shield the front lens against the sun's glare. The city walls leaped closer in her sight. She focused on the tall curving arms of Northharbor that pushed out into the upstream currents. People moved purposefully atop the battlements that enfolded the harbor, but she could barely discern men from women at that distance. Still, she was glad that she was not wearing her seven-striped stole, and that her face was deep within her cowl, just in case someone there had a stronger glass than she. The wide mouth of the man-made harbor was blocked by a massive iron chain drawn taut a few feet above the water. Tiny dots on the water, diving birds fishing in front of the harbor, gave the chain scale. One single pace-long link would have required two men to lift it. A rowboat might slip under that barrier, but no vessel of any size would enter unless the White Tower allowed. Of course, the chain was only intended to keep out enemies.

"There they are, Mother," Lord Gareth murmured, and she lowered the glass. Her general was a stocky man in a plain breastplate worn over a plain brown coat, without any touch of gilt or embroidery anywhere. His face was bluff and weathered behind the bars of his helmet, and the years had given him a strange sort of comforting calmness. All you need do was look at Gareth Bryne to know that if the Pit of Doom opened in front of him, he would smother his fear and go about doing what needed doing. And other men would follow him. He had proved on battlefield after battlefield that following him was the path to victory. A good man to have following her. Her eyes followed his gauntleted hand, pointing upriver.

Just coming in sight around a point of land, five, six—no, seven—riverships were slicing furrows down the Erinin. Large vessels as such things were seen on the river, one with three masts, their triangular sails stood out tight, and their long sweeps cut hard through the blue-green water to add a little more speed. Everything about the craft spoke of a burning desire for speed, a desire to reach Tar Valon *now!* The river was deep enough here that ships could run within shouting distance of the banks in places, but these sailed in almost single file as close to the middle of the Erinin as the steersmen could manage and hold the wind. Sailors clinging to the mastheads kept watch along the shoreline, and not for mudbanks.

In fact, they had nothing at all to fear so long as they kept out of bowshot. True, from where she sat her horse, she could have set fire to every one of those ships, or simply cut holes through their hulls and let them sink. The work of moments. Yet doing so surely meant some of those aboard would drown. The currents were strong, the water like ice, and the swim to shore long, for those who actually could swim. Even one death would make what she did using the Power as a weapon. She was trying to live as though already bound by the Three Oaths, and the Oaths protected those vessels from her or any other sister. A sister who had sworn on the Oath Rod would not be able to *make* herself set those weaves, perhaps not even to form them, unless she could convince herself she was in immediate danger from the ships. But neither captains nor crews believed that, apparently.

As the riverships came closer, shouts thinned to threadbare by distance drifted across the water. The lookouts up on the masts pointed to her and Gareth, and it quickly became apparent they took her for an Aes Sedai with her Warder. Or at least, the captains were unwilling to take the chance she was not. After a moment, the beat of the sweeps increased. Only by a fraction, but the oarsmen labored to find that fraction. A woman on the quarterdeck of the lead vessel, likely the captain, waved her arms as if demanding still more effort, and a handful of men began running up and down the deck, tightening this line or loosening that to change the angle of the sails, though Egwene could not see that they achieved anything. There were men on those decks other than sailors, and most of those crowded to the railings, a handful raising looking glasses of their own. Some seemed to be measuring the distance left to cover before they reached the safety of the harbor.

She thought about weaving a flare, a starburst of light, perhaps with a loud bang, just above each of the vessels. That would certainly let anyone aboard with brains realize that neither speed nor distance kept them safe here, only a forbearance born of the Three Oaths. They *should* know that they were safe *because* of Aes Sedai. Exhaling heavily, she shook her head and mentally upbraided herself. That simple weave would also attract attention in the city, certainly more than the appearance of a single sister. Sisters often came to the riverbank to stare at Tar Valon and the Tower. Even if the only reaction to her flares was some sort of counterdisplay, once begun, that sort of contest could be very difficult to put a stop to. Once begun, matters might well escalate out of hand. There were too many opportunities for that, as it was, the more so these last five days.

“The harbormaster hasn’t let above eight or nine ships in at one time since we arrived,” Gareth said as the first vessel drew abreast of them, “but the captains seemed to have worked out the timing. Another clutch will appear soon, and reach the city about the time the Tower Guards are sure these fellows actually came to enlist. Jimar Chubain knows enough to guard against me sneaking men in aboard ships. He has more of the Guards crowded into the harbors than anywhere except at the bridge towers, and not many anywhere else, so far as I can learn. That will change, though. The flow of ships starts at first light and keeps up till near nightfall, here and at Southharbor too. This lot doesn't seem to be carrying as many soldiers as most do. Every plan is brilliant until the day comes, Mother, but then you must adapt to circumstances or be ridden down."

Egwene made a vexed sound. There must be two hundred or more passengers altogether on those seven ships. A few might be merchants or traders or some other sort of innocent traveler, but the low sun glittered off helmets and breastplates and steel discs sewn to leather jerkins. How many shiploads arrived each day? Whatever the number, a steady flow was pouring into the city to enlist under High Captain Chubain. "Why do men always rush so hard to kill or be killed?" she muttered irritably.

Lord Gareth looked at her calmly. He sat his horse, a big bay gelding with a white stripe down his nose, like a statue. Sometimes, she thought she knew one small part of how Siuan felt about the man. Sometimes she thought it would be worth whatever effort was needed to startle him, just to see him startled.

Unfortunately, she knew the answer to her own question as well as he did. At least as it applied to men going soldiering. Oh, there were men enough who rushed to support a cause or defend what they thought what was right, and some who sought adventure, whatever they believed that was, yet the simple fact was that for carrying a pike or spear, a man could earn twice each day what he would get for walking behind another man's plow, and half again as much if he could ride well enough to join the cavalry. Crossbowmen and archers fell in between. The man who worked for another could dream of having his own farm or shop one day, or a beginning toward one that his sons could build on, but he surely had heard a thousand tales of men soldiering for five years or ten and coming home with enough gold to set themselves up in comfort, tales of ordinary men who rose to become generals, or lords. For a poor man, Gareth had said bluntly, staring down the point of a pike could be a better view than the hind end of somebody else's plow horse. Even if he was far more likely to die from the pike than earn fame or fortune. A bitter way to look at it, yet she imagined that was how most of those men on the ships saw matters, too. But then, that was how she had gotten her own army. For every man who wanted to see the usurper pulled from the Amyrlin Seat, for every man who even knew for certain who Elaida was, ten if not a hundred had joined for the pay. Some of the men on the ship were raising their hands, to show the guards on the harbor walls they were not holding weapons.

“No,” she said, and Lord Gareth sighed. His voice remained calm, but his words were hardly comforting when he spoke.

“Mother, so long as the harbors remain open, Tar Valon will eat better than we do, and rather than growing weaker with hunger, the Tower Guard will grow larger and stronger. I very much doubt that Elaida will let Chubain rush out to attack us, as much as I wish he would. Every day you wait only adds to the butcher’s bill we’ll have to pay sooner or later. I’ve said from the start it will come to an assault, in the end, and that hasn’t changed, but everything else has. Have the sisters put me and my men inside the walls now, and I can take Tar Valon. It won’t be clean. It never is. But I can take the city for you. And fewer will die than if you delay.”

A knot formed in her belly, twisted tight till she could hardly breathe. Carefully, step by step, she performed novice exercises to make it loosen. The bank contained the river, guiding without controlling. Calm settled on her, in her.

Too many people had begun seeing the uses of gateways, and in a way, Gareth represented the worst. His business was war, and he was very good at it. As soon as he learned a gateway could take more than a small group of people at one time, he had seen the implications. Even the great walls of Tar Valon, beyond the range of any siege catapult not on a barge, and worked with the Power till the largest catapult could not mark them in any case, might as well be made of paper against an army that could Travel. But whether Gareth Bryne had learned or not, other men would seize on that idea. The Asha’man already had, it seemed. War had always been ugly, yet it was going to grow uglier.

“No,” she repeated. “I know people are going to die before this is over.” The Light help her, she could see them dying just by closing her eyes. Even more would die if she made the wrong decisions, though, and not just here. “But I have to keep the White Tower alive—against Tarmon Gai’don—to stand between the world and the Asha’man—and the Tower will die if this comes to sisters killing one another in the streets of Tar Valon.” That had already happened once. It could not be allowed a second time. “If the White Tower dies, hope dies. I shouldn’t have to tell you that again.”

Daishar snorted and tossed his head, lunging as though he had sensed her irritation, but she reined him in firmly and slipped the looking glass into the tooled leather case hanging from her saddle. The diving birds gave up their fishing and sprang into the air as the thick chain that blocked Northharbor began to droop. It would dip beneath the surface well before the first ship reached the harbor mouth. How long ago had it been that she reached Tar Valon by that same route? Almost beyond memory, it seemed. An Age gone. It had been another woman who came ashore and was met by the Mistress of Novices.

Gareth shook his head with a quick grimace. But then, he never gave up, did he? "You have to keep the White Tower alive, Mother, but my job is to give it to you. Unless things have changed that I don't know about. I can see sisters whispering and looking over their shoulders even if I don't know what it means. If you still want the Tower, it will come to an assault, better soon than late."

Suddenly the morning seemed darker, as though clouds had obscured the sun. Whatever she did, the dead were going to pile up like cordwood, but she had to keep the White Tower alive. She had to. When there were no good choices, you had to choose the one that seemed least wrong.

"I've seen enough here," she said quietly. With one last glance at that narrow line of smoke beyond the city, she turned Daishar toward the trees a hundred paces back from the river, where her escort waited among the evergreen leatherleaf and winter-bare beech and birch.

Two hundred light cavalry, in boiled leather breastplates or coats covered with metal discs, would certainly have attracted notice appearing on the riverbank, but Gareth had convinced her of the necessity of these men with their slender lances and short horsebows. Without any doubt, that smoke plume on the far bank rose from burning wagons or supplies. Pinpricks, yet those pinpricks came every night, sometimes one, sometimes two or three, till everyone looked for smoke first thing on rising. Hunting the raiders down had proved impossible, so far. Sudden snow squalls flared around the pursuers, or fierce freezing night winds, or the tracks simply vanished abruptly, the snow beyond the last hoofprint as smooth as fresh fallen. The residues of weavings made it plain enough they were being aided by Aes Sedai, and there was no point in taking a chance that Elaida had men and maybe sisters on this side of the river, too. Few things could please Elaida more than getting her hands on Egwene al'Vere.

They were not her whole escort, of course. Besides Sheriam, her Keeper, she had ridden out with six more Aes Sedai this morning, and those who had Warders had brought them, so behind the sister eight men waited in color-shifting cloaks that rippled in queasy-making fashion when a breeze caught them and otherwise made parts of riders and horses seem to vanish into the tree trunks. Aware of the dangers—from raiders, at least—aware that their Aes Sedai were wound tight to near breaking, they watched the surrounding copse as though the cavalrymen were not there. The safety of their own Aes Sedai was their primary concern, and that they trusted to no one else. Sarin, a black-bearded stump of a man, not that short but very wide, stayed so close to Nisao that he seemed to loom over the diminutive Yellow, and Jori managed to loom over Morvrin as well, though he was actually shorter than she. As broad as Sarin, but very short even for a Cairhienin. Myrelle's three Warders, the three she dared acknowledge, clustered around her until she could not have moved her horse without pushing one of theirs out of her way. Anaiya's Setagana, lean and dark and as beautiful as she was plain, almost managed to surround her by himself, and Tervail, with his bold nose and scarred face, did the same with Beonin. Carlinya had no Warder, not unusual for a White, but she studied the men from the depths of her fur-lined cowl as if thinking about finding one.

Not too long ago, Egwene would have hesitated to be seen with those six women. They and Sheriam had all sworn fealty to her, for various reasons, and neither they nor she wanted the fact known or even suspected. They had been her way to influence events, to the extent that she could, when everyone thought her no more than a figurehead, a girl Amyrlin the Hall of the Tower could use as it wished and no one listened to. The Hall had lost that illusion when she brought them to declare war on Elaida, finally admitting what they had been about since the day they had fled the Tower in the first place, but that only made the Hall, and the Ajahs, worry over what she would do next and try to figure out how to make sure that whatever it was met with their approval. The Sitters had been very surprised when she accepted their suggestion of a council, one sister from each Ajah, to advise her with their wisdom and experience. Or perhaps they thought her success with the declaration of war had gone to her head. Of course, she had just told Morvrin and Anaiya and the others to make sure they were the sisters chosen, and they retained enough prestige within their Ajahs to manage it, just. She had been listening to their advice, if not always taking it, for weeks by that time, but now there was no longer any need to arrange furtive meetings or pass messages in secret.

It seemed, however, that there had been an addition to the party while Egwene was staring at the Tower.

Sheriam, wearing the narrow blue stole of her office outside her cloak, managed a very formal bow from her saddle. The flame-haired woman could be incredibly formal at times. “Mother, the Sitter Delana wishes to speak with you,” she said as if Egwene could not see the stout Gray sister sitting there on a dappled mare almost as dark as Sheriam’s black-footed mount. “On a matter of some importance, so she says.” And the slight touch of asperity meant Delana had not told her what matter. Sheriam would not have liked that. She could be very jealous of her position.

“In private, if you please, Mother,” Delana said, pushing back her dark hood to reveal hair nearly the color of silver. Her voice was deep for a woman’s, but it hardly carried the urgency of someone with important matters to speak of.

Her presence was something of a surprise. Delana often supported Egwene in the Hall of the Tower, when Sitters were quibbling over whether a particular decision actually concerned the war against Elaida. That meant the Hall was required to support Egwene’s commands as if they had stood with the greater consensus, and even the Sitters who had stood for war did not half like that little fact, which made for endless quibbling. They wanted to pull Elaida down, yet left to themselves, the Hall would have done nothing but argue. Truth to tell, though, Delana’s support was not always welcome. One day she could be the very image of a Gray negotiator seeking consensus, and the next so strident in her arguments that every Sitter within hearing got her back up. She had been known to set the cat among the pigeons in other ways, too. No fewer than three times now, she had demanded the Hall make a formal declaration that Elaida was Black Ajah, which inevitably led to an awkward silence until someone called for the sitting to be adjourned. Few were willing to discuss the Black Ajah openly. Delana would discuss anything, from how they were to find proper clothes for nine hundred and eighty-seven novices to whether Elaida had secret supporters among the sisters, another topic that gave most sisters a case of the prickles. Which left the question of why she had ridden out so early, and by herself. She had never approached Egwene before without another Sitter or three for company. Delana's pale blue eyes gave away no more than did her smooth Aes Sedai face.

"While we ride," Egwene told her. "We will want a little privacy," she added when Sheriam opened her mouth. "Stay back with the others, please." The Keeper's green eyes tightened in what might almost have been anger. An efficient Keeper, and eager with it, she had pinned her hopes on Egwene and made little secret that she disliked being excluded from any meeting Egwene had. Upset or not, she bowed her head in acceptance with only a small hesitation. Sheriam had not always known which of them commanded, but she did now.

The land tended upward from the River Erinin, not in hills but simply rising toward the monstrous peak that loomed to the west, so massive it seemed to mock the name mountain. Dragonmount would have towered above everything else even in the Spine of the World; in the relatively flat country around Tar Valon, its white-capped crest seemed to reach the heavens, especially when a thin thread of smoke was streaming away from the jagged top as it was now. A thin thread at that height would be something else entirely, close at hand. Trees gave out less than halfway up Dragonmount, and no one had ever succeeded in reaching the crest or even coming close, though it was said the slopes were littered with the bones of those who had tried. Why anyone would try in the first place, no one could quite explain. Sometimes the long evening shadow of the mountain stretched all the way to the city. People who lived in the region were accustomed to Dragonmount dominating the sky, much as they were accustomed to the White Tower looming above the city walls and visible for miles. Both were unchanging fixtures that had always been there and always would be, but crops and crafts occupied the people's lives, not mountains or Aes Sedai.

In tiny hamlets of ten or a dozen stone houses roofed in thatch or slate, and the occasional village of a hundred, children playing in the snow or carrying buckets of water from the wells stopped to gape at the soldiers riding along the dirt tracks that passed for roads when not covered in snow. They carried no banners, but a few of the soldiers wore the Flame of Tar Valon worked on their cloaks or coatsleeves, and the Warders' strange cloaks named at least some of the women as Aes Sedai. Even this near the city, sisters had been an uncommon sight till recently, and they were still something to make a child's eyes gleam. But then, the soldiers themselves probably came close in the list of marvels. The farms that fed Tar Valon covered most of the land, stone-walled fields surrounding sprawling houses and tall barns of stone or brick, with copses and coppices and thickets of trees between, and groups of farm children often ran a little distance parallel to the line of travel, leaping across the snow like hares. Winter chores kept most older folk indoors, but those who ventured out, heavily bundled against the cold, spared barely a glance for soldiers or Warders or Aes Sedai. Spring would be coming soon, and the plowing and planting, and what Aes Sedai did would not affect that. The Light willing, it would not.

There was no point to guards unless they rode as if expecting an attack, and Lord Gareth had arranged a strong party of fore-riders and lines of flankers, with trailers riding to the rear while he led the mass of the soldiers right behind the Warders who followed closely on the heels of Sheriam and the "council." They all made a large, lopsided ring around Egwene, and she could almost imagine she was riding through the countryside alone with Delana if she did not look around too closely. Or if she looked beyond. Instead of pressing the Gray Sitter to speak—it was a long ride back to camp, and no one was allowed to weave a gateway where the weave might be observed; there was plenty of time to hear what Delana had to say—Egwene compared the farms they passed to those in the Two Rivers.

Perhaps the realization that the Two Rivers was no longer home made her study them. Acknowledging the truth could never be a betrayal, yet she needed to remember the Two Rivers. You could forget who you were if you forgot where you came from, and sometimes the innkeeper's daughter from Emond's Field seemed a stranger to her. Any of these farms would have looked decidedly odd, set down near Emond's Field, though she could not put a finger on why, exactly. A different shape to the houses, a different slant to the roofs. And more often slate topped a house than thatch, here, when you could make out either through the snow that was often mounded on the rooftops. Of course, there was less thatch and more stone and brick in the Two Rivers now than there had been. She had seen it, in *Tel'aran'rhiod.* Change came so slowly you never noticed it creeping up on you, or far too fast for comfort, but it came. Nothing stayed the same, even when you thought it did. Or hoped it would.

"Some think you're going to bond him your Warder," Delana said suddenly in a quiet voice. She might have been engaging in casual conversation. Her whole attention seemed to be on arranging the hood of her cloak with green-gloved hands. She rode well, blending with the motion of her mare so effortlessly that she appeared unaware of the animal. “Some think perhaps you already have. I haven’t had one myself for some time, but just knowing your Warder is there can be a comfort. If you choose the right one.”

Egwene raised an eyebrow—she was proud that she did not gape at the woman; this was the very *last* topic she would have expected—and Delana added, “Lord Gareth. He spends a great deal of time with you. He’s rather older than is usual, but Greens often choose a more experienced man for their first. I know you never actually had an Ajah, yet I often think of you as a Green. I wonder, will Siuan be relieved if you bond him, or upset? Sometimes I think one, sometimes the other. Their relationship, if it can be called that, is most peculiar, yet she seems completely unembarrassed.”

“You must ask Siuan herself about that.” Egwene’s smile had some bite in it. So did her tone, for that matter. She did not entirely understand herself why Gareth Bryne had offered her his loyalty, but the Hall of the Tower had better uses for its time than gossiping like village women. “You can tell whoever you choose that I’ve bonded no one, Delana. Lord Gareth spends time with me, as you put it, because I am the Amyrlin and he is my general. You may remind them of that, as well.” So Delana thought of her as a Green. That was the Ajah she would have chosen, though in truth, she wanted only one Warder. But Gawyn was either inside Tar Valon or else on his way to Caemlyn, and either way, she would not lay hands on him soon. She patted Daishar’s neck unnecessarily and tried to keep her smile from becoming a glare. It had been pleasant to forget the Hall, among other things, for a while. The Hall made her understand why Siuan had so often looked like a bear with a sore tooth when she was Amyrlin.

“I wouldn’t say it has become a matter for wide discussion,” Delana murmured. “So far. Still, there is some interest in whether you will bond a Warder, and who. I doubt that Gareth Bryne would be considered a wise pick.” She twisted in her saddle to look behind them. At Lord Gareth, Egwene thought, but when the Sitter turned back around, she said, very softly, “Sheriam was never your choice for Keeper, of course, but you must know that the Ajahs set the rest of that lot to watch you, as well.” Her dappled gray mare was shorter than Daishar, so she had to look up at Egwene, which she tried to do without seeming to. Those watery blue eyes were suddenly quite sharp. “There was some thought that Siuan might be advising you . . . too well . . . after the way you brought about the declaration of war against Elaida. But she’s still resentful over her changed circumstances, isn’t she? Sheriam is seen as the most likely culprit, now. In any case, the Ajahs want a little warning if you decide to pull another surprise.”

“I thank you for the warning,” Egwene said politely. Culprit? She had proven to the Hall that she would not be their puppet, yet most insisted on thinking she had to be someone’s. At least no one suspected the truth about her council. It was to be hoped no one did.

“There is another reason you should be wary,” Delana went on, the intensity in her eyes belying the casualness of her voice. This was more important to her than she wanted Egwene to know. “You may be sure that any advice one of them gives you comes straight from the head of her Ajah, and as you know, the head of an Ajah and its Sitters don’t always see eye to eye. Listening too closely could put you at odds with the Hall. Not every decision concerns the war, remember, but you will surely want some of those to go your way.”

“An Amyrlin should listen to every side before making any decision,” Egwene replied, “but I’ll remember your warning when they advise me, Daughter.” Did Delana think she was a fool? Or perhaps the woman was trying to make her angry. Anger made for hasty decisions and rash words that sometimes were hard to take back. She could not imagine what Delana was aiming at, but when Sitters could not manipulate her one way, they tried another. She had gotten a great deal of practice in sidestepping manipulation since being raised Amyrlin. Taking deep, regular breaths, she sought the balance of calm and found it. She had entirely too much practice at that, too, of late.

The Gray looked up at her past the edge of her hood, her face utterly smooth. But her pale blue eyes were *very* sharp, now, like augers. “You might inquire what they think on the subject of negotiations with Elaida, Mother.”

Egwene almost smiled. The pause had been very deliberate. Apparently Delana disliked being called Daughter by a woman younger than most novices. Younger than most who had come from the Tower, let alone the newest. But then, Delana herself was too young to be a Sitter. And she could not hold her temper as well as the innkeeper's daughter. "And why would I ask that?"

"Because the subject has come up in the Hall in the last few days. Not as a proposal, but it has been mentioned, very quietly, by Varilin, and by Takima, and also by Magla. And Faiselle and Saroiya have appeared interested in what they have had to say."

Calm or no calm, a worm of anger suddenly writhed inside Egwene, and crushing it was no easy task. Those five had been Sitters before the Tower was broken, but more importantly, they were divided between the two major factions struggling for control of the Hall. In reality, they were divided between following Romanda or Lelaine, yet that pair would oppose one another if it meant they both drowned. They also kept an iron grip on their followers.

She might believe the others had been panicked by events, but not Romanda or Lelaine. For half a week now, talk of Elaida or retaking the Tower had been all but overwhelmed by worried conversations over that impossibly powerful, impossibly long eruption of the Power. Nearly everyone wanted to know what had caused it, and nearly everyone was afraid to learn. Only yesterday had Egwene been able to convince the Hall that it must be safe for a small party to Travel to where that eruption had been—even the memory was strong enough for everyone to pinpoint exactly where it had been—and most sisters still seemed to be holding their collective breath until Akarrin and the others returned. Every Ajah had wanted a representative, but Akarrin had been the only Aes Sedai to push forward.

Neither Lelaine nor Romanda seemed concerned, however. Violent and prolonged as the display had been, it also had been very far away, and no harm done that they could see; if it was the Forsaken's work, as seemed certain, the chance of learning anything was vanishingly small, and the possibility that they could do anything to counter it even smaller. Wasting time and effort on impossibilities was senseless when an important task lay right in front of them. So they said, gritting their teeth over finding themselves in agreement. They did agree that Elaida must be stripped of the stole and staff, though, Romanda with almost as much fervor as Lelaine, and if Elaida unseating a former Blue as Amyrlin had enraged Lelaine, Elaida's proclamation that the Blue Ajah was disbanded had made her near-rabid. If they were allowing talk of negotiation . . . It made no sense.

The last thing Egwene wanted was for Delana or anyone else to suspect that Sheriam and the others were more than a set of sheepdogs set to watch her, but she summoned them with a sharp call. They were smart enough to keep the secrets that needed keeping, since their own Ajahs would have their hides if even the half came out, and with no great haste, they came forward and rode in a cluster around her, their faces all masks of Aes Sedai serenity and patience. Then Egwene told Delana to repeat what she had said. For all her initial request for privacy, the Gray made only a perfunctory demurral before complying. And that was the end of calm and patience.

"That's madness," Sheriam said before anyone else could open her mouth. She sounded angry, and perhaps a little frightened. Well she might be. Her name was on a list of those marked for stilling. "None of them can really believe negotiation is possible."

"I should hardly think so," Anaiya put in dryly. Her plain face belonged on a farmwife rather than a Blue sister, and she dressed very simply, publicly at least, in good wool, but she handled her bay gelding as easily as Delana did her mare. Very little could ruffle Anaiya's calm. Of course, there was no Blue among the Sitters talking negotiation. Anaiya looked an unlikely soldier, but for Blues, this was war to the knife, no quarter asked or given. "Elaida has made the situation quite clear."

"Elaida is irrational," Carlinya said with a toss of her head that made her cowl fall to her shoulders and shook her short dark curls. She pulled the hood back into place irritably. Carlinya seldom showed any hint of emotion, yet her pale cheeks were nearly as flushed as Sheriam's, and heat filled her voice. "She cannot possibly believe that we will all come crawling back to her now. How can Saroiya believe she will accept anything less?"

"Crawling is what Elaida has demanded, though," Morvrin muttered acridly. Her usually placid round face wore a sour expression, too, and her plump hands were tight on her reins. She scowled so hard at a flight of magpies, scattering from a stand of birch trees at the passage of horses, that it seemed they should fall out of the sky. "Takima likes the sound of her own voice, sometimes. She *must* be talking to hear herself."

"Faiselle must, too," Myrelle said darkly, glaring at Delana as though she were to blame. The olive-skinned woman was known for her temper, even among Greens. "I never expected to hear that sort of talk out of her. She's never been a fool before."

“I can’t believe Magla really means any such thing,” Nisao insisted, peering at each of them in turn. “She just can’t. For one thing, as much as I hate to say it, Romanda has Magla so tight under her thumb that Magla squeaks whenever Romanda sneezes, and the only doubt Romanda has is whether Elaida should be birched before she’s exiled.”

Delana’s expression was so bland, she had to be suppressing a smug smile. Plainly, this was exactly the reaction she had hoped for. “Romanda holds Saroiya and Varilin just as firmly, and Takima and Faiselle hardly put one foot in front of the other without Lelaine’s permission, but they still said what they said. I think your advisors are closer to the feelings of most sisters, though, Mother.” Smoothing her gloves, she gave Egwene a sidelong look. “You may be able to nip this in the bud, if you move firmly. It seems you will have the support you need from the Ajahs. And mine, of course, in the Hall. Mine, and enough more to stop it dead.” As if Egwene needed support to accomplish that. Perhaps she was trying to ingratiate herself. Or just to make it appear that support of Egwene was her only concern.

Beonin had been riding in silence, clutching her cloak around her and peering at a spot between her brown mare’s ears, but suddenly she shook her head. Ordinarily, her large blue-gray eyes made her appear startled, but they peered from her hood in a blaze of anger as she glared from one of her companions to another, including Egwene. “Why should negotiations be out of the question?” Sheriam blinked at her in surprise, and Morvrin opened her mouth with a scowl, but Beonin plunged on, directing her ire at Delana, now, her Taraboner accent stronger than usual. “We are Gray, you and I. We negotiate, mediate. Elaida, she has stated the conditions most onerous, but that is often the case in the beginning of negotiations. We can reunite the White Tower and assure the safety of everyone, if we only talk.”

“We also judge,” Delana snapped, “and Elaida has been judged.” That was not precisely true, but she seemed more startled than anyone else by Beonin’s outburst. Her voice dripped acid. “Perhaps you are willing to negotiate yourself into being birched. I am not, and I think you will find few others who are, either.”

“The situation, it has altered,” Beonin persisted. She stretched a hand toward Egwene, almost pleading. “Elaida would not have made the proclamation she did concerning the Dragon Reborn unless she had him in hand, one way or another. That flare of *saidar* was a warning. The Forsaken must be moving, and the White Tower, it must be—"

"Enough," Egwene cut in. "You are willing to open negotiations with Elaida? With the Sitters still in the Tower?" she amended. Elaida would never talk.

"Yes," Beonin said fervently. "Matters can be arranged to everyone's satisfaction. I know they can."

"Then you have my permission."

Immediately everyone but Beonin began talking frantically on top of one another, trying to dissuade her, telling her this was insanity. Anaiya shouted as loudly as Sheriam, gesturing emphatically, and Delana's eyes bulged in what looked like near terror. Some of the outriders began looking toward the sisters as much as they watched the farms they were riding past, and there was a stir among the Warders, who certainly had no need of their bonds at the moment to know their Aes Sedai were agitated, but they held their places. Wise men kept their noses out of the way when Aes Sedai began raising their voices.

Egwene ignored the shouts and arm-waving. She had considered every possibility she could think of for ending this struggle with the White Tower whole and united. She had talked for hours with Siuan, who had more reason than anyone to want to unseat Elaida. If it could have saved the Tower, Egwene would have surrendered to Elaida, forget whether the woman had come to the Amyrlin Seat legally. Siuan had nearly had apoplexy at the suggestion, yet she had agreed, reluctantly, that preserving the Tower superseded every other consideration. Beonin wore such a beautiful smile, it seemed a crime to quench it.

Egwene raised her voice just enough to be heard over the others. "You will approach Varilin and the others Delana named, and arrange to approach the White Tower. These are the terms I will accept: Elaida is to resign and go into exile." Because Elaida would never accept back the sisters who had rebelled against her. An Amyrlin had no say over how an Ajah governed itself, but Elaida had declared that the sisters who fled the Tower were no longer members of any Ajah. According to her, they would have to beg readmittance to their Ajahs, after serving a penance under her direct control. Elaida would not reunite the Tower, only shatter it worse than it already was. "Those are the only terms I will accept, Beonin. The *only* terms. Do you understand me?"

Beonin’s eyes rolled up in her head, and she would have fallen from her horse if Morvrin had not caught her, muttering under her breath as she held the Gray upright and slapped her face, not lightly. Everyone else stared at Egwene as though they had never seen her before. Even Delana, who must have planned for something like this to happen from the first word she had said. They had come to a halt with Beonin’s fainting fit, and the ring of soldiers around them drew up at a shouted command from Lord Gareth. Some stared toward the Aes Sedai, their anxiety plain even with their faces hidden behind the bars of their helmets.

“It’s time to get back to camp,” Egwene said. Calmly. What had to be done had to be done. Perhaps surrender would have healed the Tower, but she could not believe it. And now it might come down to Aes Sedai facing one another in the streets of Tar Valon, unless she could find a way to make her plan succeed. “We have work to do,” she said, gathering her reins, “and there isn’t much time left.” She prayed there was enough.

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CHAPTER 17

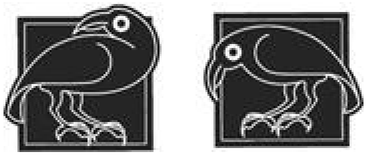

Secrets

Once Delana was sure that her noxious seed had taken root, she murmured that it might be best if they were not seen arriving back at the camp together and slipped away, pushing her mare to a quick trot through the snow and leaving the rest of them to ride on in uneasy silence except for the crunch of the horses’ hooves. The Warders maintained their distance behind, and the escorting soldiers had their attention back on the farms and thickets, without so much as a glance toward the Aes Sedai that Egwene could see, now. Men never knew when to keep their mouths shut, though. Telling a man to be quiet only made him gossip all the harder, just to close friends he could trust, to be sure, as if they in turn would not tell everyone who would listen. The Warders might be different—Aes Sedai always insisted they were, those who had Warders—but no doubt the soldiers would talk of sisters arguing, and no doubt they would say Delana had been sent off with a flea in her ear. The woman had planned this very carefully. Worse than fireweed or stranglervine could grow if that seed was allowed to sprout, but the Gray Sitter had sheltered herself from blame very neatly. Truth almost always did come out in the end, but by the end, truth was often so wrapped around with rumors and speculation and absolute lies that most people never did believe it.

“I trust I don’t have to ask whether any of you had heard about this before.” Egwene said that quite casually, seemingly studying the countryside as they rode, but she was pleased when everyone denied it outright with considerable indignation, including Beonin, who was working her jaw and glaring at Morvrin. Egwene trusted them as far as she dared—they could not have given her their oaths without meaning to hold to every word; not unless they were Black Ajah, a niggling possibility that accounted for most of her caution—yet even oaths of fealty left room for the most loyal people doing the worst possible thing in the belief that it was in your best interest. And people who had been coerced into their oaths could be adept at spotting the gaps and leeways.

“The real question,” she continued, “is what was Delana after?” She had no need to explain, not for these women, every one experienced in the Game of Houses. If all Delana had wanted was to stop negotiations with Elaida while keeping her own name out of it, she could simply have spoken to Egwene alone at any time. Sitters needed no excuse to come to the Amyrlin’s study. Or she could have used Halima, who slept on a pallet in Egwene’s tent most nights despite being Delana’s secretary. Egwene was troubled with headaches, and some nights only Halima’s massages could soothe them so she could sleep. For that matter, an anonymous note might have been sufficient to make her present the Hall with an edict forbidding negotiations. The touchiest quibbler would have to admit that talks to end the war certainly touched on the war. But plainly Delana wanted Sheriam and the others to know, too. Her tale-bearing was an arrow aimed at another target.

“Strife between the Ajah heads and the Sitters,” Carlinya said, as cool as the snow. “Perhaps strife between the Ajahs.” Casually adjusting her cloak, intricately embroidered white-on-white but lined with dense black fur, she might have been discussing the price of a spool of thread. “Why she wants these things, I can’t begin to say, but those will be the results, unless we are very careful, and she could not know we would be careful, or that we have any reason to be, so logically one or both must be her aim.”

“The first answer that comes to mind isn’t always correct, Carlinya,” Morvrin said. “There’s no saying that Delana thought her actions through as carefully as you have, or that she thought along the same lines.” The stout Brown believed more in common sense than logic, or so she said, but in truth she seemed to blend the two, a combination that made her very hardheaded, and suspicious of quick or easy answers. Which was not a bad thing to be. “Delana may be trying to sway some among the Sitters on some issue that’s important to her. Maybe she hopes to get Elaida declared Black Ajah after all. No matter the results, her goal may be something we don’t even suspect. Sitters can be as petty as anyone else. For all we know, she might have a grudge against one of those she named dating back to when she was a novice and they taught her. Better to concentrate on what will come of it than to worry about why until we know more.” Her tone was as placid as her broad face, but Carlinya’s cool composure flickered to cool disdain for a moment. Her rationality made few concessions for human foibles. Or for anyone disagreeing with her.

Anaiya laughed, a sound of almost motherly amusement that made her bay dance a few steps before she reined him back to a walk. A motherly farmwife amused by the antics of others in the village. Even some sisters were foolish enough to dismiss her that easily. “Don’t sulk, Carlinya. You are very probably right. No, Morvrin, she probably is. In any event, I believe we can squash any hopes she has for discord.” That did not sound amused at all. No Blue was amused by anything that might hamper pulling Elaida down.

Myrelle gave a savage nod of agreement, then blinked in surprise when Nisao said, “Can you afford to stop this, Mother?” The tiny Yellow did not speak up often. “I don’t mean whatever Delana is trying to do. If we can settle on what that is,” she added quickly, making a gesture at Morvrin, who had opened her mouth again. Nisao looked a child alongside the other women, but it was a peremptory gesture. She was Yellow, after all, with all the self-assurance that implied, and unwilling to step back for anyone in most circumstances. “I mean the talk of parley with the Sitters in the Tower.”

For a moment, everyone gaped at her, even Beonin.

“And why would we want to allow that?” Anaiya said finally, in a dangerous voice. “We didn’t come all this way to *talk* to Elaida.” She was a farmwife with a cleaver hidden behind her back and a mind to use it, now.

Nisao looked up at her and sniffed dismissively. “I didn’t say we wanted it. I asked whether we dare stop it.”

“I hardly see the difference.” Sheriam’s voice was icy, and her face pale. With anger, Egwene thought, but it might have been fear.

“Then think for a while, and you might see it,” Nisao said dryly. Dry the way a knife blade was dry, and equally cutting. “At present, talk of negotiations is limited to five Sitters, and very quiet, but will it remain so? Once word spreads that talks were proposed and rejected, how long before despair sets in? No, hear me out! We all set off full of righteous fury for justice, yet here we sit, staring at the walls of Tar Valon, while Elaida sits in the Tower. We’ve been here nearly two weeks, and for all anyone can see, we may be here two years, or twenty. The longer we sit with nothing happening, the more sisters will start making excuses for Elaida’s crimes. The more they’ll start thinking that we *have* to mend the Tower, never mind the cost. Do you want to wait until sisters start slipping back to Elaida one by one? I myself do not fancy standing on the riverbank defying the woman with just the Blue Ajah and the rest of you for company. Negotiations will at least let everyone see that *something* is happening."

"No one is going to return to Elaida," Anaiya protested, shifting on her saddle, but she wore a troubled frown, and she sounded as if she could see it happening. The Tower beckoned to every Aes Sedai. Very likely even Black sisters yearned for the Tower to be whole again. And there it stood, just a few miles away, but seemingly out of reach.

"Talk could buy time, Mother," Morvrin said reluctantly, and no one could put as much reluctance in her voice as she. Her frown was thoughtful, and not at all pleased. "A few more weeks, and Lord Gareth might be able to find the ships he needs to block the harbors. That will alter everything, in our favor. With no way for food to get in or mouths to get out, the city will be starving inside a month."

Egwene hung on to a smooth face with an effort. There was no real hope of ships to block the harbor, though none of them knew that. Gareth had made it plain enough to her, however, long before leaving Murandy. Originally, he had hoped to buy vessels while they marched north along the Erinin, using them to ferry supplies until they reached Tar Valon, then sinking them in the harbor mouths. Using gateways to reach Tar Valon had put paid to that in more ways than one. Word of the siege had left the city with the first ships sailing after the army arrived, and now, as far north and south as he had sent riders, ship captains were carrying out their business ashore by boat, from anchorages well out in the river. No captain was willing to risk the chance her ship would simply be seized. Gareth made his reports only to her, and his officers only to him, yet any sister could have known if she talked with a few soldiers.

Fortunately, even sisters looking for Warders rarely spoke to soldiers. They were generally accounted a thieving, unlettered lot who only bathed by accident, when they had to wade a stream. Not the kind of man any sister spent time with except when compelled to. It made keeping secrets easier, and some secrets were essential. Including, sometimes, secrets kept from those seemingly on your side. She could remember not thinking that way, but that was a part of the innkeeper's daughter she had been obliged to leave behind. This was another world, with very different rules from

Emond’s Field. A misstep there meant a summons to the Women’s Circle. Here, a misstep meant death or worse, and for more than herself.

“The Sitters remaining in the Tower should be willing to talk,” Carlinya put in, with a sigh. “They have to know that the longer the siege lasts, the more chance Lord Gareth will find his ships. I cannot think how long they will continue talking, though, when they realize we do not mean to surrender.”

“Elaida will insist on that,” Myrelle muttered, yet she did not seem to be arguing, just talking to herself, and Sheriam shivered, drawing her cloak around her as though she had let the cold touch her.

Only Beonin looked happy, sitting eager and upright in her saddle, dark honey hair framing a wide smile inside her hood. She did not press her case, however. She was good at negotiation, so everyone said, and knew when to wait.

“I did say you could begin,” Egwene said. Not that she had meant it for more than a setdown, yet if you were going to live by the Three Oaths, then you had to stand by what you said. She could not wait to hold the Oath Rod. It would be so much easier, then. “Just make sure you’re very careful what you say. Unless they think we all grew wings to fly here, they must suspect we’ve rediscovered Traveling, but they can’t be certain unless someone confirms it. It’s better for us if they stay uncertain. That must be one secret you hold as tightly as you hold the secret of our ferrets in the Tower.”

Myrelle and Anaiya jerked at that, and Carlinya looked around as though fearful, though neither Warders nor soldiers were close enough to hear unless someone shouted. Morvrin merely took on an even more sour expression. Even Nisao looked a little ill, though she had had nothing to do with the decision to send sisters back to the Tower in secret, supposedly answering Elaida’s summons. The Hall might be happy to learn that ten sisters were in the Tower trying to undermine Elaida however they could, even if the effort had borne no apparent fruit so far, but the Sitters would most definitely be *unhappy* at realizing that it had been kept secret because these women feared that some of the Sitters might actually be Black Ajah. As well for Sheriam and the others to reveal their oaths to Egwene as reveal that. The results for them might not be very different. The Hall had not ordered anyone birched yet, but the way most Sitters chafed at the bit over Egwene’s control of the war, it could hardly come as a surprise if they jumped at the chance to show they still had some authority while simultaneously expressing their displeasure forcefully.

Beonin was apparently the only one who had opposed that decision—at least, until it became apparent the others were going ahead anyway—but she drew a shuddering breath, too, and a tightness settled around her eyes. In her case, the sudden realization of just what she had undertaken might have played its part, too. Just finding someone in the Tower who was willing to talk might prove a daunting task. Eyes-and-ears inside Tar Valon could offer only hearsay about events inside the Tower; news of the Tower itself came only in dribs and drabs, from sisters venturing into *Tel'aran'rhiod* to glimpse fleeting reflections of the waking world, but every last one of those scraps told of Elaida ruling by edict and caprice, with not even the Hall daring to stand against her. Beonin's face took on a grayish tinge, till she began to appear more sickly than Nisao. Anaiya and the others looked as bleak as death.

A wave of gloom rose in Egwene. These were among the strongest against Elaida, even the foot-dragging Beonin, who always wanted to talk rather than act. Well, Grays were noted for believing that anything could be solved with enough talk. They should try that on a Trolloc sometime, or just a footpad, and see how far they got! Without Sheriam and the rest, resistance to Elaida would have fallen apart before it ever had a chance to coalesce. It nearly had anyway. But Elaida was as firmly seated in the Tower as ever, and after all they had gone through, all they had done, it seemed that even Anaiya saw it all melting away into disaster.

No! Drawing a deep breath, Egwene straightened her shoulders and sat erect in her saddle. *She* was the lawful Amyrlin, no matter what the Hall had thought they were getting when they raised her, and she had to keep the rebellion against Elaida alive to have any hope of healing the Tower. If that required a pretense of negotiations, it would not be the first time Aes Sedai had pretended to aim at one thing while targeting another. Whatever was required to keep the rebellion alive and pull Elaida down, she would do. Whatever was required.

"Stretch the talks out as long as you can," she told Beonin. "You can talk about anything, so long as you keep the secrets that need keeping, but agree to nothing, and keep them talking." Swaying in her saddle, the Gray definitely looked sicker than Anaiya. She almost appeared ready to empty her stomach.

When the camp came into sight, with the sun nearly halfway to its noonday peak, the escort of lightly armored horsemen broke away back toward the river, leaving Egwene and the sisters to ride the last mile across the snow followed by the Warders. Lord Gareth paused as if he wanted to speak with her once more, but finally he turned his bay east after the cavalry, trotting to catch up as they vanished beyond a long, coppiced stand of trees. He would not bring up their disagreement, or their discussions, where anyone else could hear, and he believed that Beonin and the others were just what everyone else thought them, the Ajahs' watchdogs. She felt a little sad at holding things back from him, but the fewer who knew a secret, the more likely it would remain secret.

The camp was a sprawl of tents in every shape and size and color and state of repair that almost covered a broad tree-rimmed pasture, halfway between Tar Valon and Dragonmount, inside a ring of horselines and rows of wagons and carts in almost as many shapes as there were wagons and carts. Chimney smoke rose in several places a few miles beyond the treeline, but the local farmers stayed away except for selling eggs and milk and butter, or sometimes when one needed Healing from some accident, and there was no sign at all of the army Egwene had brought so far. Gareth had concentrated his forces along the river, part occupying the bridge towns on both banks and the rest in what he called reserve camps, placed where men could be rushed to help fight off any sortie in strength from the city, just in case he was wrong about High Captain Chubain. Always consider the possibility your assumptions are wrong, he had told her. No one objected to his placements, of course, not in general anyway. Any number of sisters were ready to nitpick the details, but holding the bridge towns was the only way to besiege Tar Valon, after all. By land, it was. And a good many Aes Sedai were pleased to have the soldiers out of sight if not out of mind.

Three Warders in color-shifting cloaks came riding out from the camp as Egwene and the others approached, one of them very tall and one quite short, so they seemed arranged in steps. Making their bows to Egwene and the sisters, nodding to the Warders behind, they all had that dangerous look of men so confident that they had no need to convince anyone how dangerous they were, which somehow made it all the more evident. A Warder at his ease and a lion resting on a hill, so went an old saying among Aes Sedai. The rest of it was lost in the years, but there really was no need to say more. The sisters were not entirely complacent about the safety of even a camp full of Aes Sedai, under the circumstances. Warders patrolled closely for miles in every direction, lions on the prowl.

Anaiya and the others, all but Sheriam, scattered as soon as they reached the first row of tents beyond the wagons. Each would be seeking out the head of her Ajah, ostensibly to report on Egwene's ride to the river with Lord Gareth, and more importantly, to make sure those Ajah heads knew that some of the Sitters were talking about negotiations with Elaida and that Egwene was being firm. It would have been easier if she knew who those women were, but even oaths of fealty did not stretch to revealing that. Myrelle had nearly swallowed her tongue when Egwene suggested it. Being dropped into a job without training was hardly the best way to learn it, and Egwene knew she had oceans to learn yet about being Amyrlin. Oceans to learn, and a job of work to do at the same time.

"If you will forgive me, Mother," Sheriam said when Beonin, the last to go, vanished among the tents trailed by her scar-faced Warder, "I have a writing table piled high with paper." The lack of enthusiasm in her voice was understandable. The Keeper's stole came along with ever-growing stacks of reports to be sorted and documents to be prepared. Despite her zeal for the rest of the job, which in this case was to keep the camp running, Sheriam had been heard to mutter fervent wishes, when confronted by yet another mound of papers, that she was still Mistress of Novices.

Still, as soon as Egwene gave permission, she booted her black-footed dapple to a trot, scattering a covey of workmen in rough coats and mufflers wrapped around their heads, who were carrying large baskets on their backs. One fell flat on his face in the half-frozen muck that passed for a street. Sheriam's Arinvar, a slim Cairhienin with graying temples, paused long enough to make sure the fellow was getting to his feet, then spurred his dark bay stallion after her, leaving the workman to his curses, most of which seemed to be directed at his companions' laughter. Everyone knew that when an Aes Sedai wanted to go somewhere, you got out of the way.

What had spilled out of the fellow's basket onto the street caught Egwene's eye and made her shiver, a tall heap of meal crawling with weevils till it seemed there were as many moving black specks as meal. The men must all have been carrying ruined meal to the midden heaps. There was no use bothering to sift anything that infested—only someone who was starving could eat it—but too many baskets of meal and grain had to be disposed of every day. For that matter, half the barrels of salt pork and salt beef opened for use stank so that there was nothing to be done except bury them. For the servants and workmen, at least those who had experience of camp life, that was nothing new. A little worse than usual, but not unheard of. Weevils could appear any time, and merchants trying to stretch their profits always sold some rotting meat along with the good. Among the Aes Sedai, though, it was cause for deep worry. Every barrel of meat, every sack of grain or flour or meal, had been surrounded by a Keeping as soon as bought, and whatever was woven into a Keeping could not change until the weave was removed. But still the meat rotted and the insects multiplied. It was as though *saidar* itself was failing. You could get a sister to make jokes about the Black Ajah before you could get her to talk about that.

One of the laughing men caught sight of Egwene watching them and nudged the mud-covered fellow, who moderated his language, though not very far. He even glowered as if blaming her for his fall. With her face half-hidden by her hood and the Amyrlin's stole folded in her belt pouch, they seemed to take her for one of the Accepted, not all of whom had enough proper clothing to always dress as they should, or perhaps a visitor. Women frequently slipped into the camp, often keeping their faces hidden in public until they left again whether they wore fine silks or threadbare wool, and showing a sour expression to a stranger or an Accepted was certainly safer than grimacing at an Aes Sedai. It seemed odd not to have everyone in sight bobbing and bowing.

She had been in the saddle since before first light, and if a hot bath was out of the question—water had to be carried in from the wells that had been dug half a mile west of the camp, which made all but the most fastidious or self-absorbed sisters limit themselves—if a long hot soak was not to be had, she still would have liked to put her feet back on the ground. Or better yet, put them up on a footstool. Besides, refusing to let the cold touch you was not at all the same as warming your hands at a toasty brazier. Her own writing table would have its pile of paper, too. Last night she had told Sheriam to give her the reports on the state of wagon repairs and the supply of fodder for the horses. They would be dry and boring, but she checked on different areas every day, so she could at least tell whether what people told her was based on fact or wishes. And there were always the eyes-and-ears' reports. What the Ajahs decided to pass along to the Amyrlin Seat made for fascinating reading when compared to what Siuan and Leane gave her from their agents. It was not so much that there were contradictions, yet what the

Ajahs chose to keep to themselves could draw interesting pictures. Comfort and duty both pulled her toward her study—just another tent, really, though everyone called it the Amyrlin's study—but this was an opportunity to look around without having everything hastily made ready ahead of her arrival. Pulling her hood a little further forward to better conceal her face, she touched her heels lightly to Daishar's flanks.

There were few people mounted, mostly Warders, though the infrequent groom added to the traffic, leading a horse at as close to a trot as could be managed in the ankle-deep slush, but no one seemed to recognize her or her mount. In contrast to the nearly empty streets, the wooden walkways, no more than rough planks pegged atop sawn logs, shifted slightly under the weight of people. The handful of men, dotting the streams of women like raisins in a cheap cake, walked twice as fast as anyone else. Excepting Warders, men got their business among Aes Sedai done as quickly as possible. Nearly all the women had their faces hidden, their breath misting in the openings of their hoods, yet it was easy to pick out Aes Sedai from visitors whether their cloaks were plain or embroidered and lined with fur. The crowds parted in front of a sister. Anyone else had to weave her way through. Not that many sisters were about on this frigid midmorning. Most would be snug in their tents. Alone or in twos or threes, they would be reading, or writing letters, or questioning their visitors about whatever information those women had brought. Which might or might not be shared with the rest of a sister's Ajah, much less with anyone else.

The world saw Aes Sedai as a monolith, towering and solid, or it had before the current division in the Tower became common knowledge, yet the pure fact was that the Ajahs stood apart in all but name, the Hall their only true meeting point, and the sisters themselves were little more than a convocation of hermits, speaking three words beyond what was absolutely required only with a few friends. Or with another sister they had joined in some design. Whatever else changed about the Tower, Egwene was sure that never would. There was no point pretending that Aes Sedai had ever been anything but Aes Sedai or ever would be, a great river rolling onward, all its powerful currents hidden deep, altering its course with imperceptible slowness. She had built a few hasty dams in that river, diverting a stream here and a stream there for her own purposes, yet she knew they were temporary structures. Sooner or later those deep currents would undercut her dams. She could only pray they lasted long enough. Pray, and shore up as hard as she could.

Very occasionally one of the Accepted appeared in the throng, with the seven bands of color on the hood of her white cloak, but most by far were novices in unadorned white wool. Only a handful of the twenty-one Accepted in the camp actually possessed banded cloaks, and they saved their few banded dresses for teaching classes or attending sisters, yet great efforts had been made to see that every novice was dressed in white at all times, even if she only had one change. The Accepted inevitably tried to move with the swanlike glide of Aes Sedai, and one or two nearly managed despite the tilting of the walkways underfoot, but the novices darted along almost as quickly as the few men, scurrying on errands or hurrying to classes in groups of six or seven.

Aes Sedai had not had so many novices to teach in a very long time, not since before the Trolloc Wars, when there had been many more Aes Sedai as well, and the result of finding themselves with near a thousand students had been utter confusion until they were organized into these “families.” The name was not strictly official, yet it was used even by Aes Sedai who still disliked taking any woman who asked. Now every novice knew where she was supposed to be and when, and every sister could at least find out. Not to mention that the number of runaways had declined. That was always a concern for Aes Sedai, and several hundred of these women might well attain the shawl. No sister wanted to lose one of those, or any, for that matter, not before the decision was made to send a woman away. Women still slipped off occasionally after realizing that the training was harder than they had expected and the road to an Aes Sedai’s shawl longer, but quite apart from the families making it easier to keep track, running away seemed to be less attractive to women who had five or six cousins, as they were called, to lean on.

Well short of the big square pavilion that served as the Hall of the Tower, she turned Daishar down a side street. The walkway in front of the pale brown canvas pavilion was empty—the Hall was not a place anyone approached without business there—but the much-patched side curtains were kept down without a reason to make the workings of the Hall public, so there was no telling who might step out. Any Sitter would recognize Daishar at a glance, and some Sitters she would as soon avoid even more than others. Lelaine and Romanda, for example, who resisted her authority as instinctively as they opposed each other. Or any of those who had begun talking of negotiations. It was too much to believe that *they* were just hoping to rally spirits, or they would not have kept to whispers. The courtesies had to be maintained, though, no matter how often she wished she could box someone's ears, yet no one could think she was being snubbed if Egwene did not see her.

A faint silvery light flashed behind a tall canvas wall just ahead of her, surrounding one of the camp's two Traveling grounds, and a moment later two sisters emerged from behind one of the flaps. Neither Phaedrine nor Shemari was strong enough to weave a gateway by herself, but linked she thought they could just manage one big enough to walk through. Heads close together in deep conversation, strangely they were just pinning on their cloaks. Egwene kept her face averted anyway as she rode by. Both of the Browns had taught her as a novice, and Phaedrine still seemed surprised that Egwene was Amyrlin. Lean as a heron, she was quite capable of wading out into the muck to ask whether Egwene needed assistance. Shemari, a vigorous square-faced woman who looked more like a Green than a librarian, was always beyond proper in her behavior. Much beyond. Her deep curtsies, suitable for a novice, carried at least a suggestion of mockery no matter how smooth her expression, not least because she had been known to curtsy when she saw Egwene a hundred paces away.

Where had they been, she wondered. Somewhere indoors, perhaps, or at least warmer than the camp. No one really kept track of the sisters' comings and goings, of course, not even the Ajahs. Custom ruled everyone, and custom strongly discouraged direct questions about what a sister was doing or where she was going. Most likely, Phaedrine and Shemari had been to hear from some of their eyes-and-ears face to face. Or maybe to look at a book in some library. They *were* Brown. But she could not help thinking of Nisao's comment about sisters slipping away to Elaida. It was quite possible to hire a boatman to make the crossing to the city, where dozens of tiny water gates gave entrance to anyone who wished it, but with a gateway, there was no need to risk exposure by riding to the river and asking after boats. Just one sister returning to the Tower with the knowledge of that weave would give away their largest advantage. And there was no way to stop it. Except to keep heart in the opposition to Elaida. Except to make the sisters believe there could be a quick end to this. If only there was a way to a quick end.

Not far beyond the Traveling ground, Egwene drew rein and frowned at a long wall-tent, even more patched than the Hall. An Aes Sedai came swanning down the walkway—she wore a plain dark blue cloak, and the cowl hid her face, but novices and others skipped out of her way as they never would have for a merchant, say—and paused in front of the tent, looking at it for a long moment before pushing aside the entry flap to go inside, her unwillingness as clear as if she had shouted. Egwene had never gone in there. She could feel *saidar* being channeled inside, though faintly. The amount necessary was surprisingly small. A quick visit from the Amyrlin should not draw too much attention, however. She very much wanted to see what she had set in motion.

Dismounting in front of the tent, though, she discovered a trifling difficulty. There was nowhere to tie Daishar. The Amyrlin always had someone rushing to hold her stirrup and take away her horse, but she stood there holding the gelding's reins, and clusters of novices bustled past with no more than a quick glance, dismissing her as one of the visitors. By this time, every novice knew all of the Accepted on sight, but few had seen the Amyrlin Seat close up. She did not even have the ageless face to tell them she was Aes Sedai. With a rueful laugh, she put a gloved hand into her belt pouch. The stole would tell them who she was, and then she could order one of them to hold her horse for a few minutes. Unless they thought it was a joke in bad taste, at least. Some of the novices from Emond's Field had tried to pull the stole from her neck, to keep her from getting in trouble. No, that was past and dealt with.

Abruptly, the entry flap was pushed open and Leane emerged, fastening her dark green cloak with a silver pin in the shape of a fish. The cloak was silk, and richly embroidered in silver and gold, as was the bodice of her riding dress. Her red gloves were embroidered on the backs, too. Leane paid minute attention to her clothes since joining the Green Ajah. Her eyes widened lightly at the sight of Egwene, but her coppery face smoothed immediately. Taking in the situation at a glance, she put out a hand to stop a novice who appeared to be by herself. Novices went to classes by family. "What's your name, child?" Much had changed about Leane, but not her briskness. Except when she wanted it to, anyway. Most men turned to putty when Leane's voice grew languorous, but she never wasted that on women. "Are you on an errand for a sister?"

The novice, a pale-eyed woman close to her middle years, with an unblemished skin that had never seen a day's work in the field, gaped openly before recovering enough to make her curtsy, a smoothly practiced spreading of her white skirts with mittened hands. As tall as most men but willowy and graceful and beautiful, Leane lacked the ageless look, too, yet hers was one of the two most well known faces in the camp. Novices pointed her out in awe, a sister who had once been Keeper, who had been stilled, and Healed so she could channel again, if not so strongly as before. And then she had changed Ajahs! The newest women in white already had learned that that just never happened, though the other was becoming a part of lore, unfortunately. It was harder to make a novice go slowly when you could not point out that she risked ending her quest for the shawl by burning herself out and losing the One Power forever.

"Letice Murow, Aes Sedai," the woman said respectfully, in a lilting Murandian accent. She sounded as if she wanted to say more, perhaps to give a title, but one of the first lessons on joining the Tower was that you had left behind who you used to be. It was a hard lesson, for some, especially those who possessed titles. "I'm going to visit my sister. I haven't seen her more than a minute since before we left Murandy." Relatives were always put in different novice families, as were women who had known each other before being entered in the novice book. It encouraged making new friends, and cut down on the inevitable tensions when one was learning faster than the other or had a higher potential. "She's free of classes, too, until the afternoon, and—"

"Your sister will have to wait a while longer, child," Leane broke in. "Hold the Amyrlin's horse for her."

Letice gave a start and stared at Egwene, who had finally managed to extract her stole. Handing Daishar's reins to the woman, she lowered her cowl and settled the long narrow strip of cloth onto her shoulders. Light as a feather in her pouch, the stole had real weight hanging around her neck. Siuan claimed that sometimes you could feel every woman who had ever worn the stole hanging from the ends of it, a constant reminder of responsibility and duty, and Egwene believed every word. The Murandian gaped at her harder than she had for Leane, and took longer to remember to curtsy. No doubt she had heard that the Amyrlin was young, but it seemed unlikely she had given a thought to how young.

“Thank you, child,” Egwene said smoothly. There had been a time when she felt strange calling a woman ten years older than herself child. Everything changed, with time. “It won’t be for long. Leane, would you ask someone to send a groom for Daishar? Now that I’m out of the saddle, I’d as soon stay out, and Letice should be allowed to see her sister.”

“I will see to it myself, Mother.”

Leane offered a fluid curtsy and moved away with never a hint that there was more between them than this chance encounter. Egwene trusted her far more than she did Anaiya or even Sheriam. She certainly kept no secrets from Leane, any more than from Siuan. But their friendship was yet another secret that had to be kept. For one thing, Leane had eyes-and-ears actually inside Tar Valon if not in the Tower itself, and their reports came to Egwene and Egwene alone. For another, Leane was much petted for accommodating so well to her reduced status, and every sister welcomed her, if only because she was living proof that stilling, the deepest dread of any Aes Sedai, could be reversed. They welcomed her with open arms, and because she *was* less, now, standing below at least half the sisters in the camp, they often spoke in front of her about matters they would never want the Amyrlin to know of. So Egwene did not so much as glance after her as she left. Instead, she offered Letice a smile—the woman reddened and bobbed another curtsy—then entered the tent, stripping off her gloves and tucking them behind her belt.

Inside, eight mirrored stand-lamps stood along the walls between low wooden chests. One with a bit of worn gilding and the rest of painted iron, no two of the lamps had the same number of arms, but they provided good illumination, if not so bright as outside. Assorted tables that seemed to have come from seven different farm kitchens made a row down the center of the canvas ground-cloth, the benches of the three farthest occupied by a half a dozen novices with their cloaks folded beside them, each woman surrounded by the glow of the Power. Tiana, the Mistress of Novices, hovered anxiously over them, walking between the tables, and surprisingly, so did Sharina Melloy, one of the novices acquired in Murandy.

Well, Sharina was not exactly hovering, just watching calmly, and perhaps it should not have been a surprise to find her there. A dignified, gray-haired grandmother with a tight bun on the back of her head, Sharina had run a very large family with a very firm hand, and she seemed to have adopted all of the other novices as granddaughters or grandnieces. She was the one who had organized them into those tiny families, completely on her own and apparently out of simple disgust at seeing everyone flounder around. Most Aes Sedai went more than a touch tight-mouthed if reminded of that, though they had accepted the form quickly enough once they realized how much easier it made keeping track and organizing classes. Tiana was inspecting the novices' work so closely that it seemed obvious she was attempting to ignore Sharina's presence. Short and slight, with large brown eyes and a dimple in her cheek, Tiana somehow looked young despite her ageless face, particularly alongside the taller novice's creased cheeks and broad hips.

The pair of Aes Sedai channeling at the table nearest the entrance, Kairen and Ashmanaille, had an audience of two as well, Janya Frende, a Sitter for the Brown, and Salita Toranes, a Sitter for the Yellow. The Aes Sedai and the novices were all performing the same task. In front of each woman, a close net woven of Earth, Fire and Air surrounded a small bowl or cup or the like, all made by the camp's blacksmiths, who were very puzzled at why the sisters wanted such things made of iron, not to mention having them made as finely as if they were silver. A second weave, Earth and Fire woven just so, penetrated each net to touch the object, which was slowly turning white. Very, very slowly, in every case.

Ability with the weave improved with practice, but of the Five Powers, strength in Earth was the key, and beside Egwene herself, only nine sisters in the camp—along with two of the Accepted and nearly two dozen novices—had sufficient of that to make the weaves work at all. Few among the sisters wanted to give any time to it, though. Ashmanaille, lean enough to make her seem taller than she really was, fingers tapping the tabletop on either side of the simple metal cup in front her, was frowning impatiently as the edge of whiteness crept upward past halfway. Kairen's blue eyes were cold enough that it seemed her stare alone might shatter the tall goblet she was working on. That had only the smallest rim of white at the bottom. It must have been Kairen Egwene had seen going in.

Not everyone was unenthusiastic, though. Janya, slim in her pale bronze silks and wearing her brown-fringed shawl draped over her arms, studied what Kairen and Ashmanaille were doing with the eagerness of one who wished she could be doing the same. Janya wanted to know everything, to know how everything was done and why it happened that way. She had been extremely disappointed when she could not learn to make *ter'angreal*—only three sisters aside from Elayne had managed that, so far, with very spotty success—and she had made a concerted effort to learn this skill even after the testing showed she fell short of the required strength in using Earth.

Salita was the first to notice Egwene. Round-faced and almost as dark as charcoal, she eyed Egwene levelly, and the Yellow fringe of her shawl swayed slightly as she made a very precise curtsy, exact to the inch. Raised in Salidar, Salita was part of a disturbing pattern: too many Sitters who were too young for the position. Salita had only been Aes Sedai for thirty-five years, and rarely was a woman given a chair before wearing the shawl for a hundred or more. Siuan saw a pattern, anyway, and thought it disturbing, though she could not say why. Patterns she could not understand always disturbed Siuan. Still, Salita had stood for war against Elaida, and frequently supported Egwene in the Hall. But not always, and not in this. "Mother," she said coolly.

Janya's head jerked up, and she broke into a beaming smile. She also had stood for war, the only woman who had been a Sitter before the Tower divided to do so excepting Lelaine and Lyrelle, two of the Blues, and if her support for Egwene was not always unwavering, it was so here. As usual, words spilled out of her. "I will never get over this, Mother. It's simply amazing. I know we shouldn't be surprised any longer when you come up with something no one else has thought of—sometimes I think we've gotten too set in our ways, too sure what can and cannot be done—but to puzzle out how to make *cuendillar* . . . !" She paused for breath, and Salita moved into the gap smoothly. And coldly.

"I still say it is wrong," she said firmly. "I admit the discovery was a brilliant piece of work on your part, Mother, but Aes Sedai should not be making things for . . . sale." Salita invested that word with all the scorn of a woman who accepted the income from her estate in Tear without ever thinking how it had been come by. The attitude was not uncommon, though most sisters lived on the Tower's generous yearly allowance. Or had, before the Tower split apart. "On top of which," she went on, "nearly half the sisters forced into this are Yellow. I receive complaints every day. We, at least, have more important uses for our time than making . . . trinkets." That earned her a hard glare from Ashmanaille, a Gray, and a frigid stare from Kairen, who was Blue, but Salita ignored them. She was one of those

Yellows who seemed to think the other Ajahs were only adjuncts to her own, which of course had the only truly useful purpose among them.

“And novices should not be doing weaves of this complexity at all,” Tiana added, joining them. The Mistress of Novices was never shy about speaking up to Sitters, or to the Amyrlin, and she wore a disgruntled expression. She did not appear to realize that it deepened her dimple and made her look sulky. “It *is* a remarkable discovery, and I for one have no objections to trade, but some of these girls can barely manage to make a ball of fire change color with any surety. Letting them handle weaves like this will only make it more difficult to stop them from leaping to things they can’t handle, and the Light knows, that’s difficult enough already. They may even do themselves an injury.”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” Janya exclaimed, waving a slender hand as if to brush away the very idea. “Every girl who’s been chosen can already make three balls of fire at once, and this requires very little more of the Power. There’s no danger at all, so long as they’re under a sister’s supervision, and they always are. I’ve seen the roster. Besides, what we make in a day will bring enough to pay the army for a week or more, but the sisters alone can’t produce near that much.” Squinting slightly, she suddenly appeared to be looking through Tiana. The cascade from her tongue never slowed, yet she seemed to be talking at least half to herself. “We will have to take great care in the selling. The Sea Folk have a voracious appetite for *cuendillar,* and there are plenty of their ships still at Illian and Tear by all accounts—the nobles there are greedy for it, too—but even ravenous appetites have limits. I still cannot decide whether it will be best to appear with everything at once, or let it trickle out. Sooner or later, even the price of *cuendillar* will begin to drop.” Abruptly she blinked and peered first at Tiana then at Salita, tilting her head to one side. “You do see my point, don’t you?”

Salita glowered and hitched her shawl up on her shoulders. Tiana threw up her hands in exasperation. Egwene held her peace. For once, she felt no shame at being praised for one of her supposed discoveries. Unlike nearly everything else except Traveling, this one actually was hers, though Moghedien had pointed the way before she escaped. The woman did not know how to actually make anything—at least, she had not revealed any such knowledge however hard Egwene had pressed her, and she had pressed *very* hard—but Moghedien had a wide streak of greed, and even in the Age of Legends, *cuendillar* had been a prized luxury. She had known enough of how it was made for Egwene to puzzle out the rest. In any case, no matter who objected or how strenuously, the need for money meant the production of *cuendillar* would continue. Though as far as she was concerned, the longer before any of it was sold, the better.

Sharina slapping her hands together loudly in the back of the tent jerked everyone's head that way. Kairen and Ashmanaille turned, too, the Blue even letting her weaves go so the goblet bounced on the tabletop with a metallic clatter. It was a sign of boredom. The process could be started over, though finding the precise point was very hard, and some sisters took every opportunity to do anything else during the hour they had to spend in the tent each day. An hour or until they completed one item start to finish, whichever came first. That was supposed to push them to try harder at increasing their skill, but few had progressed very far.

"Bodewhin, Nicola, off to your next class," Sharina announced. She did not speak loudly, but her voice had a strength that could have cut through a babble of voices much less the quiet of the tent. "You have just time to wash your hands and faces. Quickly, now. You don't want any bad reports."

Bode—Bodewhin—moved with efficient alacrity, releasing *saidar* and placing her half-made *cuendillar* bracelet in one of the chests along the wall for someone else to finish, then gathering her cloak. Plump-cheeked and pretty, she wore her hair in a long dark braid, though Egwene was not sure she had gotten permission from the Women's Circle. But then, that world was behind her, now. Tugging on her mittens as she hurried from the tent, Bode kept her eyes down and never glanced in Egwene's direction. Plainly, she still did not understand why a novice could not drop by to chat with the Amyrlin Seat whenever she wanted, even if they had grown up together.

Egwene would have loved to talk with Bode and some of the others, but an Amyrlin had lessons to learn, too. An Amyrlin had many duties, few friends, and no favorites. Besides, even the appearance of favoritism would mark the Two Rivers girls out and make their lives with the other novices a misery. *And it wouldn't do me much good with the Hall, either,* she thought wryly. She did wish the Two Rivers girls understood, though.

The other novice Sharina had named did not leave her bench or stop channeling. Nicola's black eyes flashed at Sharina. "I could be the best at this if I was ever allowed to really practice," she grumbled sullenly. "I'm getting better; I know I am. I can Foretell, you know." As if the one had anything to do with the other. “Tiana Sedai, tell her I can stay longer. I can finish this bowl before my next class, and I’m sure Adine Sedai won’t mind if I’m just a little late.” If her class was any time soon, she would be more than a little late if she tarried to complete the bowl; her hour’s effort had turned only half of it white.

Tiana opened her mouth, but before she could utter a word, Sharina raised one finger, then a moment later, a second. It must have had some particular significance, because Nicola went pale and let go of her weaves on the instant, leaping up so quickly that she joggled the bench, earning quick frowns from the other two novices who shared it. They bent quickly back to their work, though, and Nicola almost ran to thrust the half-done bowl into a chest before snatching up her cloak. To Egwene’s surprise, a woman she had not seen, dressed in a short brown coat and wide trousers, jumped up from where she had been sitting on the ground-cloth beyond the tables. Scowling blue-eyed daggers at everyone in sight, Areina ran out of the tent after Nicola, the two women mirror images of disgruntlement and discontent. Seeing the pair of them together made Egwene uneasy.

“I didn’t know friends were allowed in here to watch,” she said. “Is Nicola still causing problems?” Nicola and Areina had attempted to blackmail her, and Myrelle and Nisao, but that was not what she meant. That was still another secret.

“Better the girl’s friendly with Areina than with one of the male grooms,” Tiana said with a sniff. “We’ve had two get with child, you know, and ten more likely to. The girl needs more friends, though. Friends will do the trick with her.”

She cut off as two more white-clad novices hurried into the tent, the pair of them squeaking and skidding to a halt when they found Aes Sedai standing right in front of them. Hastily dropping curtsies, they scuttled to the back of the tent at a gesture from Tiana and folded their cloaks on a bench before fetching a partly white goblet and an almost white cup from one of the chests.

Sharina saw them settled to work, then gathered her own cloak and swung it around her shoulders before coming up the tent. “If you will excuse me, Tiana Sedai,” she said, making a curtsy that just came short of being to an equal, “I’ve been told off to help with the midday meal today, and I wouldn’t want to get crosswise with the cooks.” Her dark eyes rested on Egwene for a brief moment, and she nodded to herself.

“Go on, then,” Tiana said sharply. “I would hate to hear you had been switched for being late.”

Without turning a hair, Sharina offered her courtesies again, neither in a hurry nor dragging it out, to Tiana, to the Sitters, to Egwene—with another glance that was penetrating but too short for offense—and when the tentflap swung shut behind her, Tiana blew out her cheeks in exasperation.

“Nicola causes less trouble than some,” she said darkly, and Janya shook her head.

“Sharina doesn’t cause problems, Tiana.” She spoke as quickly as ever, but quietly, so her voice would not carry to the back of the tent. Disagreements between sisters were never aired in front of novices. Especially when the disagreement was over a novice. “She already knows the rules better than any Accepted, and never puts a toe over the line. She never shirks at even the dirtiest chores, either, and she’s the first to lend a hand when another novice needs one. Sharina is simply who she is. Light, you can’t allow a *novice* to intimidate you.”

Tiana stiffened and opened her mouth angrily, but once Janya had the bit between her teeth, getting a word in edgewise was no easy matter. “Nicola, on the other hand, causes all sorts of problems, Mother,” the Brown rushed on. “Ever since we found out she has the Foretelling, she’s been Foretelling two or three times a day, to hear her tell it. Or rather, to hear Areina tell it. Nicola is smart enough to know everyone is aware she can’t remember what she says when she Foretells, but Areina always seems to be there to hear and remember, and help her interpret. Some are the sort of thing anyone in the camp with half a brain and a credulous nature might think of—battles with the Seanchan or the Asha’man, an Amyrlin imprisoned, the Dragon Reborn doing nine impossible things, visions that might be Tarmon Gai’don or a bilious stomach—and the rest all just happen to indicate that Nicola ought to be allowed to go faster with her lessons. She’s always too greedy for that. I think even most of the other novices have stopped believing her.”

“She also pokes her nose everywhere,” Salita put in the moment Janya gave her an opening, “her and the groom, both.” Her face remained smooth and cool, and she shifted her shawl as though that were the focus of her attention, but she rushed her words a little, perhaps fearing that the Brown would take over again. “They’ve both been switched for eavesdropping on sisters, and I myself caught Nicola trying to peek into one of the Traveling grounds. She said she just wanted to see a gateway open, but I think she was trying to learn the weave. Impatience, I can understand, but deceit cannot be tolerated. I no longer believe Nicola will attain the shawl, and frankly, I've begun to wonder whether she should be sent away soon rather than late. The novice book may be open to everyone," she finished with an expressionless glance at Egwene, "but we do not have to lower our standards completely."

Glaring, Tiana pursed her lips stubbornly, emphasizing her dimple again. You could almost forget she had worn the shawl for over thirty years and think her a novice herself. "As long as I am Mistress of Novices, the decision on whether to send a girl away is mine," she said heatedly, "and I do not intend to lose a girl of Nicola's potential." Nicola would be very strong in the Power, one day. "Or Sharina's," she added with a grimace, hands smoothing her skirts in irritation. Sharina's potential was nothing short of remarkable, far beyond anyone in living memory except for Nynaeve, and ahead of Nynaeve as well. Some thought she might become as strong as it was possible to be, though that was only speculation. "If Nicola has been bothering you, Mother, I will see to her."

"I was just curious," Egwene said carefully, swallowing a suggestion that the young woman and her friend both be watched closely. She did not want to talk about Nicola. It would be too easy to find herself with a choice between lying or revealing matters she dared not expose. A pity she had not allowed Siuan to arrange for two quiet deaths.

Her head jerked in shock at the thought. Had she gone that far from Emond's Field? She knew she would have to order men to die in battle sooner or later, and she thought she might be able to order a death if the need was great enough. If one death could stop the death of thousands, or even hundreds, was it not right to order it? But the danger presented by Nicola and Areina was simply that they might reveal secrets that could inconvenience Egwene al'Vere. Oh, Myrelle and the others might be lucky to get off with a birching, and they would certainly consider that more than inconvenient, but discomfort, however great, was *not* sufficient reason for killing.

Abruptly, Egwene realized that she was frowning, and Tiana and the two Sitters were watching her, Janya not bothering to hide her curiosity behind a mask of serenity. To cover herself, Egwene shifted her frown to the table where Kairen and Ashmanaille were once more at work. The white on

Ashmanaille’s cup had climbed a little farther, but in just that short time, Kairen had caught up. More than caught up, in fact, since her goblet stood twice as high as the cup.

“Your skill is improving, Kairen,” Egwene said approvingly.

The Blue looked up at her, and drew a deep breath. Her oval face became an image of cool calm around those icy blue eyes. “There isn’t much skill involved, Mother. All that’s needed is to set the weave and wait.” The last word held a touch of acridness, and for that matter, there had been a slight hesitation before Mother. Kairen had been sent off from Salidar on a very important mission only to see it collapse in a shambles, though from no fault of hers, and she had returned to them in Murandy to find everything she had left behind stood on its head and a girl she remembered as a novice wearing the Amyrlin’s stole. Of late, Kairen had been spending a good deal of time with Lelaine.

“She is improving; in *some* things,” Janya said with a pointed frown for the Blue sister. Janya might have been as sure as any other Sitter that the Hall was getting a puppet when they raised Egwene, but she seemed to have accepted that Egwene did wear the stole, and deserved the proper respect from everyone. “Of course, I doubt she’ll catch Leane unless she applies herself, much less yourself, Mother. Young Bodewhin might catch her, in fact. I wouldn’t want to be outdone by a novice, myself, but I suppose some don’t feel that way.” A stain of red crept into Kairen’s cheeks, and her eyes dropped to the goblet.

Tiana sniffed. “Bodewhin’s a good girl, but she spends more time giggling and playing with the other novices than applying herself if Sha—” She inhaled sharply. “If she isn’t watched. Yesterday, she and Althyn Conly tried two items at once, just to see what would happen, and the things fused together in a solid lump. Useless for sale, of course, unless you find someone who wants a pair of half-iron, half-*cuendillar* cups joined at angles. And the Light knows what might have happened to the girls. They didn’t seem to be harmed, but who can say about the next time?”

“Make sure there isn’t a next time,” Egwene said absently, her attention on Kairen’s cup. The line of white crept upward steadily. When Leane did this weave, black iron turned to white *cuendillar* as if the iron were sinking quickly into milk. For Egwene herself, the change was faster than the blink of an eye, black to white in a flash. It would have to be Kairen and Leane, but even Leane was barely fast enough. Kairen needed time to improve. Days? Weeks? Whatever was necessary, because anything less meant disaster, for the women involved and for the men who would die fighting in the streets of Tar Valon and maybe for the Tower. Suddenly Egwene was glad she had approved Beonin's suggestion. Telling Kairen why she needed to try harder might have spurred her efforts, but this was another secret that had to be kept until the time came to unveil it to the world.

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CHAPTER 18

A Chat with Siuan

Daishar had been taken away when Egwene left the tent, of course, but the seven-striped stole hanging from the opening of her cowl worked better than an Aes Sedai's face at making a way through the crowd. She moved in a ripple of curtsies, with the occasional bow thrown in from a Warder, or a craftsman who had some task among the sister's tents. Some novices squeaked when they saw the Amyrlin's stole, and whole families stepped hurriedly off the walkway, making their deep curtsies in the mire of the street. Since she had been forced to order punishment for some of the Two Rivers women, word had spread among the novices that the Amyrlin was as hard as Sereille Bagand, and it was best to avoid incurring her temper, which could spring up like wildfire. Not that most of them knew enough history to have any real idea who Sereille had been, but her name had been a byword of iron-handed strictness in the Tower for a hundred years, and the Accepted made sure that novices absorbed tidbits like that. It was a good thing that Egwene's cowl hid her face. By the tenth time a novice family leaped out of her way like frightened hares, she was gritting her teeth so hard that seeing her face would have cemented her reputation for chewing iron and spitting nails. She had the horrible feeling that in a few hundred years, Accepted would be using her name to frighten novices the way they used Sereille's now. Of course, there was the little matter of securing the White Tower first. Small irritations had to wait. She thought she could have spit nails without the iron.

The crowds thinned to nothing around the Amyrlin's study, which was just a peaked canvas tent with patched brown walls, despite the name. Like the Hall, it was a place to be avoided unless you had business there or were summoned. No one was simply asked to the Hall of the Tower or the

Amyrlin's study. The most innocuous invitation to either *was* a summons, a fact that turned that simple tent into a haven. Sweeping through the entry flaps, she swung her cloak off with a feeling of relief. A pair of braziers made the tent deliciously warm after outside, and they gave off very little smoke. A touch of sweet scent lingered from the dried herbs that had been sprinkled on the glowing embers.

"The way those fool girls behave, you would think I—" she began in a growl, and cut off abruptly.

She was not surprised to see Siuan standing beside the writing table in plain blue wool, finely cut but simple, a wide tooled-leather folder held to her chest. Most sisters still seemed to believe, like Delana, that she was reduced to instructing Egwene in protocol and running errands, grudgingly in both cases, but she was always there bright and early, which seemed to have gone unnoticed so far. Siuan *had* been an Amyrlin who chewed iron, though no one would believe who did not already know. Novices pointed her out as often as they did Leane, but with an air of doubt that she really was who the sisters said. Pretty, if not quite beautiful, with a delicate mouth and dark glossy hair to her shoulders, Siuan looked even younger than Leane, only a few years older than Egwene. She could have been taken for one of the Accepted without the blue-fringed shawl draped across her arms. That was why she never went without the shawl, to avoid embarrassing mistakes. Her eyes had not changed any more than her spirit, however, and they were icy blue awls aimed at the woman whose presence was a surprise.

Halima was certainly welcome, yet Egwene had not expected to see her stretched out on the brightly colored cushions that were piled along one side of the tent, her head propped on one hand. Where Siuan was pretty, the sort of young woman—seemingly young, at least—who made men and women alike smile at her, Halima was stunning, with big green eyes in a perfect face and a full firm bosom, the sort who made men swallow and other women frown. Not that Egwene frowned, or believed the tales carried by women jealous of the way Halima attracted men just by being. She could not help the way she looked, after all. But even if her position as Delana's secretary was plainly a matter of charity by the Gray sister—a poorly educated country woman, Halima formed her letters with the awkwardness of a young child—Delana usually kept her busy all day with some sort of make-work. She seldom appeared before time for bed, and then it was nearly always because she had heard Egwene had one of her heads. Nisao could do nothing with those headaches, even using the new Healing, but Halima's massages worked wonders even when the pain had Egwene whimpering.

"I told her you wouldn't have time for visits this morning, Mother," Siuan said sharply, still glaring at the woman on the cushions as she took Egwene's cloak with her free hand, "but I might as well have played cat's cradle with myself as opened my mouth." Hanging the cloak on the rustic cloak stand, she snorted contemptuously. "Maybe if I wore breeches and had a mustache, she'd pay mind." Siuan seemed to believe every one of the rumors about Halima's supposed depredations among the prettier craftsmen and soldiers.

Strangely, Halima seemed amused by her reputation. She might even have enjoyed it. She laughed, low and throaty, and stretched on the cushions like a cat. She did have an unfortunate liking for low-cut bodices, incredible in this weather, and she nearly came out of her blue-slashed green silk. Silk was hardly the usual garb for a secretary, but Delana's charity ran deep, or her debt to Halima did.

"You seemed worried this morning, Mother," the green-eyed woman murmured, "and you slipped out so early for your ride, trying not to wake me. I thought you might like to talk. You wouldn't get so many headaches if you talked over your worries more. At least you know you can talk to me." Eyeing Siuan, who was peering down her nose disdainfully, Halima gave another smoky laugh. "And you know I don't want anything from you, unlike some." Siuan snorted again, and deliberately busied herself with placing the folder on the writing table just so between the stone inkwell and the sand jar. She even fiddled with the pen-rest.

With an effort, Egwene managed not to sigh. Just. Halima did ask for nothing beyond a pallet in Egwene's tent, so she could be on hand when one of Egwene's headaches came on, and sleeping there must have given difficulties with carrying out her duties for Delana. Besides, Egwene liked her earthy outspoken manner. It was very easy to talk to Halima and forget for a little while that she was the Amyrlin Seat, a relaxation she could not have even with Siuan. She had fought too hard for recognition as Aes Sedai and Amyrlin, and her grip on that recognition was too tenuous. Every slip from *being* Amyrlin would make the next slip easier, and the next, and the next after that, until she was back to being regarded as a child at play. That made Halima a luxury to be treasured quite apart from what her fingers could do to Egwene’s headaches. To her annoyance, though, every other woman in the camp appeared to share Siuan’s view, with the possible exception of Delana. The Gray seemed too prudish to employ a lightskirt, no matter what charity she thought she owed. In any case, whether the woman chased men, or even tripped them up, was beside the point now.

“I’m afraid I do have work, Halima,” she said, tugging off her gloves. A mountain of work, most days. There was no sign of Sheriam’s reports on the table yet, of course, but she would be sending them soon, along with a few petitions she thought merited Egwene’s attention. Just a few; ten or twelve appeals for redress of grievances, with Egwene expected to pass the Amyrlin’s judgment on each. You could not do that without study, and questions, not and hand down a just decision. “Perhaps you can have dinner with me.” If she finished in time to do more than eat at her table right there in her study. It was getting on toward midday already. “We can talk then.”

Halima sat up abruptly, eyes flashing and full lips compressed, but her scowl vanished as quickly as it had come. A smoldering remained in her eyes, though. Had she been a cat, she would have had her back arched and her tail like a bottle-brush. Rising gracefully to her feet on the layered carpets, she smoothed her dress over her hips. “Very well, then. If you’re certain you don’t want me to stay.”

With remarkable timing, a dull throb began behind Egwene’s eyes, an all too familiar precursor to a blinding headache, but she shook her head anyway and repeated that she had work to do. Halima hesitated a moment longer, her mouth going tight once more, hands fisting in her skirts, then she snatched her fur-lined silk cloak from the cloak stand and stalked out of the tent without bothering to pull the garment around her shoulders. She could do herself an injury going about like that in the cold.

“That fishwife temper will get her in trouble sooner or later,” Siuan muttered before the entry flaps stopped swaying. Scowling after Halima, she twitched her shawl up onto her shoulders. “The woman holds it in around you, but she doesn’t mind giving me the rough side of her tongue. Me or anybody else. She’s been heard screaming at Delana. Who ever heard of a secretary screaming at her employer, and a sister at that? A Sitter! I don’t understand why Delana puts up with her.”

“That’s Delana’s business, surely.” Questioning another sister’s actions was just as forbidden as interfering with them. Only by custom, not law, yet some customs were as strong as law. Surely she did not have to remind *Siuan* of that.

Rubbing her temples, Egwene sat down carefully in the chair behind her writing table, but the chair wobbled anyway. Designed to fold for storage on a wagon, the legs had a habit of folding when they were not supposed to, and none of the carpenters had been able to fix them after repeated attempts. The table folded as well, but that held up more firmly. She wished she had taken the opportunity to acquire a new chair in Murandy, yet there had been so many things that needed buying and not enough coin to stretch when she already had a chair. At least she had acquired a pair of stand-lamps and a table-lamp, all three plain red-painted iron but with good mirrors that were free of bubbles. Good light did not seem to help her headaches, yet it was better than trying to read by a few tallow candles and a lantern.

If Siuan heard any rebuke, it did not slow her down. “It’s more than just a temper. Once or twice, I’ve thought she was on the brink of trying to strike me. I suppose she has sense enough to hold back from that, but not everyone is Aes Sedai. I’m convinced she managed to break a wheelwright’s arm somehow. He says he fell, but he looks to be lying to me, with his eyes shifting and his mouth twitching. He wouldn’t like admitting a woman bent his elbow backwards, now would he?”

“Give over, Siuan,” Egwene said wearily. “The man likely tried to take liberties.” He must have. She could not see how Halima could have broken a man’s arm in any event. However you described the woman, muscular did not come into it.

Instead of opening the embossed folder that Siuan had laid on the table, she rested her hands on either side of it. That kept them away from her head. Maybe if she ignored the pain, it would go away this time. Besides, for a change, she had information to share with Siuan. “It seems that some of the Sitters are talking about negotiating with Elaida,” she began.

Expressionless, Siuan balanced herself atop one of the two rickety three-legged stools in front of the table and listened attentively, only her fingers moving, lightly stroking against her skirts, until Egwene finished. Then she made fists and growled a set of curses that were pungent even for her, beginning with a wish for the lot of them to choke to death on week-old fish guts and sliding downhill fast from there. Coming from that young, pretty face only made them worse.

"I suppose you're right letting it go forward," she muttered once her invective ran down. "The talk will spread, now it's begun, and this way, you gain a jump on it. Beonin shouldn't surprise me, I suppose. Beonin's ambitious, but I always thought she'd have gone scurrying back to Elaida if Sheriam and the others hadn't stiffened her backbone." Voice quickening, Siuan fixed her eyes on Egwene as if to lend weight to her words. "I wish Varilin and that lot surprised me, Mother. Discounting the Blue, six Sitters from five Ajahs fled the Tower after Elaida carried out her coup," her mouth twisted slightly on the word, "and here we have one from each of those five. I was in *Tel'aran'rhiod* last night, in the Tower—"

"I hope you were careful," Egwene said sharply. Siuan hardly seemed to know the meaning of careful, sometimes. The few dream *ter'angreal* in their possession had lines of sisters panting to use them, mostly to visit the Tower, and while Siuan was not precisely forbidden one, it was the next thing to. She could have put her name down forever without the Hall granting her a single night. Quite aside from the sisters who blamed Siuan for the Tower being broken in the first place—she was not accepted back quite as warmly as Leane, on that account, nor cosseted by anyone—quite aside from that, too many remembered her rough teaching, when she was one of the few who knew how to use the dream *ter'angreal.* Siuan did not suffer fools gladly, and everyone was a fool their first few times in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* so now she had to borrow Leane's turn when she wanted to visit the World of Dreams, and if another sister saw her there, 'the next thing to' might become an outright ban. Or worse, set off a search for who had loaned her a *ter'angreal,* which might end by unmasking Leane.

"In *Tel'aran'rhiod,*" Siuan said with a dismissive gesture, "I'm a different woman in a different dress every time I turn a corner." That was good to hear, though it seemed likely a lack of control had as much to do with it as intent. Siuan's belief in her own abilities was sometimes greater than warranted. "The point is, last night I saw a partial list of Sitters and managed to read most of the names before it changed to a tally of wines." That was a common occurrence in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* where nothing stayed the same for long unless it was a reflection of something permanent in the waking world. "Andaya Forae was raised for the Gray, Rina Hafden for the

Green, and Juilaine Madome for the Brown. None has worn the shawl more than seventy years at most. Elaida has the same problem we do, Mother."

"I see," Egwene said slowly. She realized that she was massaging the side of her head. The throb behind her eyes beat on. It would grow stronger. It always did. By nightfall, she was going to regret having sent Halima away. Bringing her hand down firmly, she moved the leather folder in front of her a half inch to the left, then slid it back. "What of the rest? They had six Sitters to replace."

"Ferane Neheran was raised for the White," Siuan admitted, "and Suana Dragand for the Yellow. They've both been in the Hall before. It was only a partial list, and I didn't get to read it all." Her back straightened, and her chin shot out stubbornly. "One or two raised before time would be unusual enough—it happens, but not often—but this makes eleven—maybe twelve, but eleven for sure—between us and the Tower. I don't believe in coincidences that big. When the fishmongers are all buying at the same price, you can bet they were all drinking at the same inn last night."

"You don't have to convince me any more, Siuan." With a sigh, Egwene sat back, automatically catching the chair leg that always tried to fold when she did that. Clearly, something odd was happening, but what did it mean? And who could influence the choice of Sitters in *every* Ajah? Every Ajah except the Blue, at least; they had chosen one new Sitter, but Moria had been Aes Sedai well over a hundred years. And maybe the Red was not affected; no one knew what changes if any had been made in the Red Sitters. The Black might be behind it, but what could they gain, unless all of those too-young Sitters *were* Black? That seemed impossible in any case; if the Black Ajah had had that much influence, the Hall would have been all Darkfriends long ago. Yet if there was a pattern and coincidence would not hold, then *someone* had to be at the heart of it. Just thinking about the possibilities, the impossibilities, made the dull pain behind her eyes grow a little sharper.

"If this turns out to be happenstance after all, Siuan, you're going to regret ever thinking you saw a puzzle." She forced a smile saying that, to take out any sting. An Amyrlin had to be careful with her words. "Now that you've convinced me there is a puzzle, I want you to solve it. Who is responsible, and what are they after? Until we know that, we don't know anything."

"Is that all you want?" Siuan said dryly. "Before supper, or after?"

"After will have to do, I suppose," Egwene snapped, then took a deep breath at the abashed look on the other woman's face. There was no point taking her headache out on Siuan. An Amyrlin's words had power, and sometimes consequences; she had to remember that. "As soon as you can would be very good, though," she said in a milder voice. "I know you'll be as quick as you can."

Chagrined or not, Siuan seemed to understand that Egwene's outburst came from more than her own sarcasm. Despite her youthful appearance, she had years of practice at reading faces. "Shall I go find Halima?" she said, half rising. The lack of tartness attached to the woman's name was a measure of her concern. "It won't take a minute."

"If I give way for every ache, I'll never get anything done," Egwene said, opening the folder. "Now, what do you have for me today?" She kept her hands on the papers, though, to stop from rubbing her head.

One of Siuan's tasks each morning was to fetch what the Ajahs were willing to share from their networks of eyes-and-ears, along with whatever individual sisters had passed on to their Ajahs and the Ajahs had decided to pass on to Egwene. It was a strange process of sieving, yet it still gave a fair picture of the world when added to what Siuan put in. She had managed to hold on to the agents that had been hers as Amyrlin by the simple expedient of refusing to tell anyone who they were despite every effort by the Hall, and in the end, no one could gainsay that those eyes-and-ears were the Amyrlin's, and that they should by rights report to Egwene. Oh, there had been no end of grumbling over it, and still was on occasion, but no one could deny the facts.

As usual, the first report came from neither the Ajahs nor Siuan, but Leane, written on thin sheets of paper in a flowing elegant hand. Egwene could not see exactly why, but you could never doubt that anything Leane wrote had been written by a woman. Those pages Egwene held to the table-lamp's flame one by one as soon as she read them, letting the paper burn almost to her fingers, then crumpling the ash. It would hardly do for her and Leane to behave like near-strangers in public then allow one of her reports to fall into the wrong hands.

Very few sisters were aware that Leane had eyes-and-ears inside Tar Valon itself. She might have been the only sister who did. It was a human failing to watch keenly what was happening down the street while ignoring what lay right at your feet, and the Light knew Aes Sedai had as many human failings as anyone else. Unfortunately, Leane had little new to communicate.

Her people in the city complained of filthy streets that were increasingly dangerous after dark and little safer by daylight. Once crime had been all but unknown in Tar Valon, but now the Tower Guards had abandoned the streets to patrol the harbors and the bridge towers. Except for collecting the customs duties and buying supplies, both done through intermediaries, the White Tower seemed to have shut itself off from the city completely. The great doors that allowed the public to enter the Tower remained shut and barred, and no one had seen a sister outside the Tower to know her as Aes Sedai since the siege began, if not earlier. All confirmation of what Leane had reported before. The last page made Egwene's eyebrows rise, though. Rumor in the streets said Gareth Bryne had found a secret way into the city and would appear inside the walls with his whole army any day.

"Leane would have said if anyone had breathed a word that sounded like they meant gateways," Siuan said quickly when she saw Egwene's expression. She had read all of these reports already, of course, and knew what Egwene was seeing by which page she held. Shifting on the unsteady stool, Siuan almost fell off onto the carpets, she was paying so little heed. It did not slow her down a hair, though. "And you can be sure Gareth hasn't let anything slip," she went on while still righting herself. "Not that any of his soldiers are fool enough to desert to the city now, but he knows when to keep his mouth shut. He just has the reputation for attacking where he can't possibly be. He's done the impossible often enough that people expect him to. That's all."

Hiding a smile, Egwene held the paper mentioning Lord Gareth to the flame and watched it curl and blacken. A few months past, Siuan would have offered an acid comment about the man instead of praise. He would have been "Gareth bloody Bryne," not Gareth. She could not possibly miss doing his laundry and polishing his boots, but Egwene had seen her staring at him on those rare times when he came to the Aes Sedai camp. Staring, and then running away if he so much as glanced at her. Siuan! Running away! Siuan had been Aes Sedai for more than twenty years, and Amyrlin for ten, but she had no more idea how to deal with being in love than a duck had about shearing sheep.

Egwene crumbled the ash and dusted her hands together, her smile fading. She had no room to talk about Siuan. She was in love, too, but she did not even know where in the world Gawyn was, or what to do if she learned. He had his duty to Andor, and she hers to the Tower. And the one way to bridge that chasm, bonding him, might lead to his death. Better to let him go, forget him entirely. As easy as forgetting her own name. And she *would* bond him. She knew that. Of course, she could not bond the man without knowing where he was, without having her hands on him, so it all came full circle. Men were . . . a *bother*!

Pausing to press her fingers against her temples—it did nothing to lessen the pulsing pain—she put Gawyn out of her mind. As far out as she could. She thought she had a foretaste of what it was like having a Warder; there was always something of Gawyn in the back of her head. And liable to kick its way into her consciousness at the most inconvenient time. Concentrating on the business at hand, she picked up the next sheet.

Much of the world had vanished, as far as eyes-and-ears were concerned. Little news came from the lands held by the Seanchan, and that divided between fanciful descriptions of Seanchan beasts delivered as proof they were using Shadowspawn, horrifying tales of women being tested to see whether they should be collared as *damane,* and depressing stories of . . . acceptance. The Seanchan, it seemed, were no worse rulers than any others and better than some—as long as you were not a woman who could channel—and all too many people appeared to have given up thoughts of resistance once it became clear the Seanchan would let them go on with their lives. Arad Doman was almost as bad, producing nothing but rumors, admitted as such by the sisters who wrote the reports but included just to show the state the country was in. King Alsalam was dead. No, he had begun channeling and gone mad. Rodel Ituralde, the Great Captain, also was dead, or he had usurped the throne, or was invading Saldaea. The Council of Merchants were all dead, as well, or had fled the country, or begun a civil war over who the next king was to be. Any of those might have been true. Or none. The Ajahs were accustomed to seeing everything, but now a third of the world had been enveloped in dense fog, with only the tiniest gaps. At least, if there were any clearer views, no Ajah had deigned to pass on what they saw there.

Another problem was that the Ajahs saw different things as having paramount importance, and largely ignored anything else. The Greens, for example, were particularly concerned over tales of Borderland armies near New Braem, hundreds of leagues from the Blight they were supposed to be guarding. Their report talked of the Borderlanders and only the Borderlanders, as if something had to be done and done now. Not that they suggested anything, or so much as hinted, yet frustrations came through in the cramped, hasty handwriting that spidered urgently across the page.

Egwene had the truth of that situation from Elayne, but she was content to let the Greens gnash their teeth for the moment, since Siuan had revealed why they were not rushing off to set matters straight. According to her agent in New Braem, the Borderlanders were accompanied by fifty or a hundred sisters, perhaps two hundred. The number of Aes Sedai might be uncertain, and it must be wildly inflated, of course, but their presence was a fact the Greens had to be aware of, though the reports they sent to Egwene never mentioned them. No Ajah had mentioned those sisters in their reports. In the end, though, there was little difference between two hundred sisters and two. No one could be certain who those sisters were or why they were there, yet poking a nose in would surely be seen as interfering. It seemed strange that they could be engaged in a war between Aes Sedai and still be held back from interfering with another sister by custom, but thankfully, it was so.

"At least they don't suggest sending anyone to Caemlyn." Egwene blinked, the pain behind her eyes sharpened by following the tight letters.

Siuan gave a derisive snort. "Why should they? As far as they know, Elayne is letting Merilille and Vandene guide her, so they're sure they'll get their Aes Sedai queen, and a Green at that. Besides, as long the Asha'man stay out of Caemlyn, no one wants to take the chance of stirring them up. The way things stand, we might as well try pulling wasp-jellies out of the water with our bare hands, and even the Greens know it. Anyway, that won't stop some sister, Green or otherwise, from dropping into Caemlyn. Just a quiet visit to see one of her eyes-and-ears. Or to have a dress made, or buy a saddle, or the Light knows why else."

"*Even* the Greens?" Egwene said tartly. Everyone thought of Browns being this way and Whites that, even when it was demonstrably not so, yet sometimes she bristled a little at hearing Greens lumped together as if they were all the same woman. Maybe she did think of herself as a Green, or as having been one, which was silly. The Amyrlin was of all Ajahs and none—she adjusted the stole on her shoulders, reminding herself of the fact represented by those seven stripes—and she had never belonged to one in the first place. Yet she did feel a—not fondness; that was too strong—a sense of *sameness* between herself and Green sisters. “How many sisters are unaccounted for, Siuan? Even the weakest can Travel wherever they want, linked, and I wish I knew where they went.”

For a moment, Siuan frowned in thought. “About twenty, I think,” she said finally. “Maybe a few less. The number changes day to day. No one keeps track, really. No sister would stand still for it.” She leaned forward, carefully balancing herself this time when the uneven legs made her stool lurch. “You’ve juggled matters beautifully, so far, Mother, but it can’t last. Eventually, the Hall will find out everything that’s going on in Caemlyn. They might accept keeping the Seanchan prisoners secret—that will be seen as Vandene’s business, or Merilille’s—but they already know there are Sea Folk in Caemlyn, and they’ll learn about the bargain with them sooner or later. And the Kin, if not your plans for them.” Siuan snorted again, though faintly. She was not certain how she herself felt about the idea of Aes Sedai retiring into the Kin, much less how other sisters would take to the notion. “My eyes-and-ears haven’t picked up a glimmer, yet, but somebody’s will, as sure as certain. You can’t delay much longer, or we’ll find ourselves wading through a school of silverpike.”

“One of these days,” Egwene muttered, “I’ll have to see these silverpike you’re always talking about.” She held up a hand as the other woman opened her mouth. “One day. The agreement with the Sea Folk will cause problems,” she confessed, “but when the Ajahs hear hints, they won’t realize right away what they’re hearing. Sisters teaching Sea Folk in Caemlyn? It’s unheard of, but who is going to ask questions or interfere, against all custom? I’m sure there will be all sorts of grumbling, maybe some questions called in the Hall, but before it comes out that there *is* a bargain, I will have introduced my plan for the Kin.”

“You think *that* won’t sharpen their teeth?” Shifting her shawl, Siuan barely bothered to hide her incredulity. In fact, she scowled with it.

“It will cause argument,” Egwene allowed judiciously. A considerable understatement. It would cause an uproar was what it would do, once the whole was known. Likely as close to a riot as had ever been seen among Aes Sedai. But the Tower had been dwindling for a thousand years now, if not more, and she planned to put an end to that. “But I do intend to go slowly. Aes Sedai may be reluctant to talk about age, Siuan, but they’ll figure out soon enough that swearing on the Oath Rod shortens our lives by half at least. No one *wants* to die before they must."

"If they're convinced there really is a Kinswoman who's six hundred years old," Siuan said in grudging tones, and Egwene sighed with vexation. That was another thing the other woman was uncertain about, the Kin's claims of longevity. She valued Siuan's advice, valued that she did not just say what Egwene wanted to hear, but at times the woman seemed to drag her heels as hard as Romanda or Lelaine.

"If need be, Siuan," she said irritably, "I'll just let the sisters talk to a few women a hundred years or more older than any of them. They may try to dismiss them as wilders and liars, but Reanne Corly can prove she was in the Tower, and when. So can others. With luck, I'll convince the sisters to accept being freed of the Three Oaths so they can retire into the Kin before they ever learn there's a bargain with the Atha'an Miere. And once they accept *any* sister being freed of the Oaths, it won't be nearly as hard to convince them to let the Sea Folk sisters go. Beside that, the rest of that agreement is small turnips. As you keep saying, skill and a deft hand are necessary to get anything done in the Hall, but luck is absolutely required. Well, I'll be as skillful and deft as I can be, and as for luck, the odds seem to be in my favor for once."

Siuan grimaced and hemmed and hawed, but she had to agree in the end. She even agreed that Egwene might pull it off, with luck, and timing. Not that she was convinced about the Kin or the agreement with the Atha'an Miere either one, but what Egwene proposed was so unprecedented that it seemed the greater part of it might pass the Hall before they realized what was falling on them. Egwene was willing to settle for that. Whatever was laid before the Hall, almost always enough Sitters stood in opposition to make finding a consensus hard work at best, and nothing was done in the Hall without at least the lesser consensus and usually not without the greater. It seemed to her that most dealings with the Hall consisted of convincing them to do what they did not want to. There was certainly no reason for this to be any different.

While the Greens concentrated on the Borderlanders, the Grays focused south at present. Every Ajah was fascinated by the reports from Illian and Tear of large numbers of wilders among the Sea Folk, which they found interesting, if true, though there seemed strong doubt that it could be true, or else sisters would have known about it before this. After all, how could such a thing be hidden? No one mentioned that they had just accepted what they saw on the surface and never looked deeper. The Grays, though, were fascinated by the continued Seanchan threat to Illian and the recently begun siege of the Stone of Tear. Wars and threats of war always mesmerized Grays, since they were dedicated to ending strife. And to extending their influence, of course; every time the Grays stopped a war with a treaty, they increased the influence of all Aes Sedai, but of Grays most of all. The Seanchan seemed beyond negotiation, however, at least by Aes Sedai, and the Grays' outraged sense of being thwarted came through in curt words about Seanchan incursions across the border and the increasing forces being gathered by Lord Gregorin, the Steward in Illian for the Dragon Reborn, a title that was a matter of some concern in itself. Tear had its own Steward for the Dragon Reborn, the High Lord Darlin Sisnera, and he was besieged in the Stone by nobles who refused to accept Rand. It was a very strange siege. The Stone had its own docks and Darlin's enemies could not cut off supplies even holding the rest of the city as they did, and they seemed content to sit and wait in any event. Or perhaps they just could not see what to do next. Only the Aiel had ever taken the Stone by assault, and no one had ever starved it out. The Grays had some hopes in Tear.

Egwene's head came up as she read to the bottom of the page, and she hurriedly set that page down and picked up the next. The Grays had had some hopes. Apparently, a Gray sister had been recognized coming out of the Stone, and followed to a meeting with High Lord Tedosian and High Lady Estanda, two of the most prominent among the besiegers. "Merana," she breathed. "They say it was Merana Ambrey, Siuan." Unconsciously, she massaged her temple. The pain behind her eyes had ratcheted a little higher.

"She may do some good." Rising, Siuan crossed the carpets to a small table against the tent wall, where several mismatched cups and two pitchers sat on a tray. The silver pitcher held spiced wine, the blue-glazed pottery tea, both set there at first light against the Amyrlin's arrival and both long since gone cold. No one had expected Egwene to go riding off to the river. "As long as Tedosian and the others don't realize who she's really working for." Siuan's shawl slipped off one shoulder as she felt the side of the pottery pitcher, and the light of *saidar* surrounded her briefly as she channeled Fire, warming the contents. "They won't trust her to negotiate in good faith if they find out she's the Dragon Reborn's creature." Filling a polished pewter cup with tea, she added generous dollops from the honey jar, stirring it in well, and brought the cup back to Egwene. “This might help your head. It’s some sort of herb concoction Chesa found, but honey cuts the taste.”

Egwene took a cautious sip, and set the cup down with a shudder. If it tasted that sharp with honey, she did not want to imagine it without. The headache might be better. “How can you take this so calmly, Siuan? Merana turning up in Tear is the first real proof we’ve had. I’ll take your Sitters as coincidence before that.”

In the beginning, there had only been whispers, from the Ajahs or from Siuan’s eyes-and-ears. There were Aes Sedai in Cairhien, and they seemed to move freely in and out of the Sun Palace while the Dragon Reborn was there. Then the whispers grew hoarse and uneasy, hesitant. The eyes-and-ears in Cairhien did not want to say it. No one wanted to repeat what their agents said. There were Aes Sedai in Cairhien, and they seemed to be following the orders of the Dragon Reborn. Worse were the names that trickled out. Some were women who had been in Salidar, among the first to resist Elaida, while others were women known to be loyal to Elaida. No one had mentioned Compulsion aloud that Egwene knew of, but they had to be thinking it.

“No use pulling your hair when the wind isn’t blowing the way you want,” Siuan replied, taking her stool again. She started to cross her knees, but hastily put both feet back on the carpet when her stool tilted. Muttering under her breath, she adjusted her shawl with a twitch of her shoulders. And was forced to balance against another lurch. “You have to trim your sails to take advantage of how the wind *is* blowing. Think coolly, and you make it back to shore. Get your neck hot, and you’ll drown.” Sometimes, Siuan could sound as if she still worked a fishing boat. “I believe you need more than one sip for that to do any good, Mother.”

With a grimace, Egwene pushed the cup a little farther from her. The taste clinging to her tongue was at least as bad as her headache. “Siuan, if you see a way to make use of this, I wish you’d tell me. I don’t even want to think about *using* the fact that Rand may have Compelled sisters. I don’t want to think about the possibility that he could have.” Neither about the possibility that he knew such a repulsive weave, or that he could lay that weave on anyone. She knew it—another little gift from Moghedien—and she very much wished she could forget how to make it.

"In this case, it isn't so much a matter of using as figuring out the effects. He'll have to be dealt with eventually, and maybe taught a lesson, but you don't want sisters flying off after him now, and these tales out of Cairhien make everyone cautious." Siuan's voice was calm enough, but she fidgeted, clearly agitated inwardly. It was nothing any Aes Sedai could speak of *too* calmly. "At the same time, once everyone thinks it through, they'll realize this makes nonsense out of those stories about him submitting to Elaida. She might have sent sisters to watch over him, but they wouldn't accept sisters who want to pull Elaida down. Realizing that will put a little backbone in those who've started thinking maybe Elaida has him on a lead. That's one less reason for anyone to consider yielding to her."

"What about Cadsuane?" Egwene said. Of all the names coming out of Cairhien, that one had sent the most shock through the sisters. Cadsuane Melaidhrin was a legend, and there were as many disapproving versions of the legend as approving. Some sisters had been sure it must be a mistake; Cadsuane must be dead by now. Others just appeared to wish she were dead. "Are you certain she remained in Cairhien after Rand disappeared?"

"I made sure my people kept an eye on her as soon as I heard her name," Siuan said, no longer sounding at all calm. "I don't know she's a Darkfriend, I just suspect, but I can guarantee that she was in the Sun Palace a week after he vanished."

Squeezing her eyes shut, Egwene pressed the heels of her palms against her lids. That hardly seemed to affect the pulsing needle in her head. Maybe Rand was in company with a Black sister, or had been. Maybe he had used Compulsion on Aes Sedai. Bad enough on anyone, but somehow worse used on Aes Sedai, more ominous. What was dared against Aes Sedai was ten times, a hundred times, as likely to be used against those who could not defend themselves. Eventually they would have to deal with him, somehow. She had grown up with Rand, yet she could not allow that to influence her. He was the Dragon Reborn, now, the hope of the world and at the same time maybe the single greatest threat the world faced. Maybe? The Seanchan could not do as much damage as the Dragon Reborn. And she was going to *use* the possibility that he had Compelled sisters. The Amyrlin Seat really was a different woman from that innkeeper's daughter.

Scowling at the pewter cup of so-called tea, she picked it up and made herself drink the vile stuff down, gagging and spluttering the whole way.

Perhaps the taste would take her mind off her headache, at least.

As she set the cup down with a sharp clink of metal on wood, Anaiya pushed into the tent, mouth turned down and a frown creasing her plain face.

“Akarrin and the others have returned, Mother,” she said. “Moria told me to inform you she has called the Hall to hear their report.”

“So have Escaralde and Malind,” Morvrin announced, coming in behind Anaiya with Myrelle. The Green seemed an image of serene fury, if that was possible, her olive face smooth and her eyes like dark embers, but Morvrin wore a scowl to make Anaiya look pleased. “They’re sending novices and Accepted running to find all the Sitters,” the Brown said. “We can’t catch a whisper of what Akarrin found, but I think Escaralde and the others intend to use it to prod the Hall toward something.”

Peering at the dark dregs floating in a few drops in the bottom of the pewter cup, Egwene sighed. She would have to be there, too, and now she would have to face the Sitters with a headache *and* that awful taste in her mouth. Perhaps she could call it a penance for what she was going to do to the Hall.

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CHAPTER 19

Surprises

By custom, the Amyrlin was informed of the Hall sitting, yet nothing said they had to wait for her before starting the session, which meant that time might be short. Egwene wanted to leap to her feet and march straight to the big pavilion before Moria and the other two could spring whatever surprise they intended. Surprises in the Hall were seldom good. Surprises you learned about late were worse. Still, protocols that were law, not custom, had to be followed for the Amyrlin entering the Hall, so she remained where she was and sent Siuan to fetch Sheriam so she could be announced properly by the Keeper of the Chronicles. Siuan had told her that was really a matter of warning the Sitters of her presence—there were always matters they might want to discuss without the Amyrlin knowing—and she had not sounded entirely as if she were making a joke.

In any case, there was no point in going to the Hall until she could enter. Tamping down her impatience, she propped her head on her hands and massaged her temples as she tried to read a little more of the Ajah reports. Despite the vile “tea,” or perhaps because of it, her headache made the words shimmer on the page every time she blinked, and Anaiya and the other two did not help.

No sooner did Siuan depart than Anaiya tossed back her cloak, settling on the stool Siuan had vacated—it did not seem to lurch under her, uneven legs or no—and began to speculate on what Moria and the others were after. She was not a flighty woman, so her ventures were quite constrained given the circumstances. Constrained, but no less upsetting for that.

“Frightened people do silly things, Mother, even Aes Sedai,” she murmured, placing her hands on her knees, “but at least you can be sure Moria will be firm about Elaida, at least in the long run. She lays every sister who died after Siuan was deposed right at Elaida’s feet. Moria wants

Elaida birched for every single death before she goes to the headsman. A hard woman, harder than Lelaine in some ways. Tougher, anyway. She won’t scruple at things that might make Lelaine balk. I’m very much afraid she will press for an assault on the city as soon as possible. If the Forsaken are moving so openly, on such a scale, then better a wounded Tower that’s whole than a Tower divided. At least, I fear that’s how Moria may see things. After all, however much we want to avoid sisters killing sisters, it wouldn’t be the first time. The Tower has lasted a long time, and healed from many wounds. We can heal from this one, too.”

Anaiya’s voice suited her face, warm and patient and comforting, but making those remarks it seemed like fingernails screeching down a slat. Light, for all Anaiya saying this was what she feared out of Moria, she seemed much in accord with the sentiments. She was deliberate, unflappable, and never careless with words. If she favored an assault, how many others did, too?

As usual, Myrelle was anything but constrained. Mercurial and fiery described her best. She would not know patience if it bit her on the nose. She paced back and forth, as much as the confines of the tent allowed, kicking her deep-green skirts and sometimes kicking one of the bright cushions piled against the wall before turning to make another round. “If Moria is frightened enough to press for an assault, then she’s frightened out of her wits. A Tower too wounded to stand alone won’t be able to face the Forsaken or anyone else. Malind is who should concern you. She’s always pointing out that Tarmon Gai’don could be upon us any day. I’ve heard her say that what we felt could well have been the opening blows of the Last Battle. *And* that it might happen here, next. Where better for the Shadow to strike than Tar Valon? Malind has never been afraid to make hard choices, or to retreat when she thought it necessary. She would abandon Tar Valon *and* the Tower at once if she thought it would preserve at least some of us for Tarmon Gai’don. *She* will propose lifting the siege, fleeing somewhere the Forsaken can’t find us until we’re ready to strike back. If she puts the question to the Hall in the right way, she might even get the greater consensus in support.” The very thought made the words dance harder on the page in front of Egwene.

Morvrin, her round face unrelenting, simply planted fists on ample hips and met each suggestion with a curt answer. “We don’t know enough yet to be sure it was the Forsaken,” and “You can’t know until she says.”

"Perhaps it was, and perhaps not," and "Supposition isn't evidence." It was said she would not believe it was morning till she saw the sun for herself. Her firm voice brooked no nonsense, especially jumps to conclusions. It was not soothing to an aching head, either. She was not opposing the suggestions, really, just keeping an open mind. An open mind could go either way when it came down to the sticking point.

Egwene slapped the embossed folder shut on the reports with a loud smack. Between the disgusting taste on her tongue and the sharp throb in her head—not to mention their incessant voices!—she could not keep her place to read anyway. The three sisters looked at her in surprise. She had made it clear long ago that she was in charge, but she tried not to show temper. Oaths of fealty or no oaths of fealty, a young woman displaying temper was too easy to dismiss as sulky. Which only made her angrier, which made her head hurt more, which . . .

"I've waited long enough," she said, making an effort to keep her voice smooth. Her head gave it a slight edge of sharpness anyway. Perhaps Sheriam thought she was supposed to meet her at the Hall.

Gathering her cloak, she strode out into the cold while still swinging it around her shoulders, and Morvrin and the other two hesitated only a moment before following in her wake. Accompanying her to the Hall might seem a little like they were her entourage, but they *were* supposed to be watching her, and she suspected that even Morvrin was eager to hear what Akarrin had to report and what Moria and the rest intended to fashion from it.

Nothing too difficult to deal with, Egwene hoped, nothing like what Anaiya and Myrelle thought. If necessary, she could try applying the Law of War, but even if that was successful, ruling by edict had its disadvantages. When people *had* to obey you in one thing, they always found ways to wriggle away on others, and the more they were forced to obey, the more places they found for wriggling away. It was a natural balance you could not escape. Worse, she had learned just how addictive it was to have people jump when she spoke. You came to take it as the natural way of things, and then when they failed to jump, you were caught on the wrong foot. Besides, with her head pounding—it *was* pounding, now, not throbbing, though perhaps not as sharply—with her head, she was ready to snap at anyone who looked at her crosswise, and even when people had to swallow it, that never went down well.

The sun stood straight overhead, a golden ball in a blue sky with a scattering of white clouds, but it gave no warmth, only wan shadows and a glitter to the snow wherever it remained untrampled. The air felt as chill as it had by the river. Egwene ignored the cold, refused to let it touch her, but only the dead could have been unaware, with everyone’s breath misting white in front of their faces. It was time for the midday meal, yet there was no possibility of feeding so many novices at once, so Egwene and her escort still moved through a wave of white-clad women leaping out of their way and starting to curtsy in the street. She set such a pace that they were usually past before the knots of novices could more than spread their skirts.

It was not a long way, with only four places that they needed to wade across the muddy streets. There had been talk of wooden bridges, tall enough to ride under, but bridges suggested a permanence to the camp that no one wanted. Even the sisters who spoke of them never pressed to have them built. Which left wading slowly, and taking care to keep your skirts and cloak high if you were not to arrive filthy to your knees. At least the remaining crowds vanished as they approached the Hall. That stood alone as always, or nearly so.

Nisao and Carlinya were already waiting in front of the big canvas pavilion with its patched side curtains, the tiny Yellow fretting her underlip with her teeth and eyeing Egwene anxiously. Carlinya was calmness itself, cool-eyed, hands folded at her waist. Except that she had forgotten her cloak, mud stained the scroll-embroidered hem of her pale skirt, and her cap of dark curls badly needed a comb. Making their courtesies, the pair joined Anaiya and the other two, a little distance behind Egwene. The lot of them murmured softly, the snatches that Egwene caught innocuous, about the weather, or how long they might have to wait. This was no place for them to seem too closely associated with her.

Beonin came down the walk at a run, her hurried breath misting, and skidded to a halt, staring at Egwene before joining the others. The strain around her blue-gray eyes was even more apparent than earlier. Perhaps she thought this would affect her negotiations. But she *knew* the talks would be a sham, just a ploy to gain time. Egwene controlled her breathing and practiced novice exercises, yet none of it helped her head. It never did.

There was no sign of Sheriam among the tents in any direction, but they were not precisely alone on the walkway outside the pavilion. Akarrin and the five other sisters who had gone with her, one from each Ajah, were waiting in a cluster on the other side of the entrance. Most offered curtsies to Egwene distractedly, yet kept their distance. Perhaps they had been warned to say nothing to anyone until they spoke before the Hall. Egwene could simply have demanded their report on the spot, of course. They might even have given it, to the Amyrlin. Likely they would have. On the other hand, an Amyrlin's relations with the Ajahs were always delicate, often including the Ajah she had been raised from. Nearly as delicate as relations with the Hall. Egwene made herself smile and bow her head graciously. If she gritted her teeth behind that smile, well, that helped keep her mouth shut.

Not all of the sisters seemed aware of her presence. Akarrin, slender in plain brown wool and a cloak with surprisingly elaborate green embroidery, was staring at nothing, nodding to herself now and then. Apparently she was practicing what she would say inside. Akarrin was not strong in the Power, little more than Siuan if at all, but only one other of the six, Therva, a slim woman in yellow-slashed riding skirts and a cloak edged with yellow, stood even as high as she. That was a distressing measure of just how frightened the sisters were by that strange beacon of *saidar.* The strongest should have stepped forward for the task that had been given to these, but except for Akarrin herself, zeal had been notably lacking. Her companions still appeared less than enthusiastic. Shana normally maintained a deep reserve despite eyes that made her appear constantly startled, but now they seemed ready to come out of her head with worry. She peered at the entrance to the Hall, closed off by heavy flaps, and her hands fiddled with her cloak as if she could not keep them still. Reiko, a stout Arafellin Blue, kept her eyes down, but the silver bells in her long dark hair chimed faintly as if she were shaking her head inside her cowl. Only Therva's long-nosed face wore a look of absolute serenity, completely unperturbed and unshakable, yet that in itself was a bad sign. The Yellow sister was excitable by nature. What had they seen? What *were* Moria and the other two Sitters after?

Egwene controlled her impatience; the Hall plainly was not sitting yet. It was gathering, but several Sitters strolled past her and into the big pavilion, none hurrying. Salita hesitated as if she might speak, but then only dipped her knees before raising her yellow-fringed shawl onto her shoulders and sweeping inside. Kwamesa peered down her sharp nose at Egwene while making her curtsy, and peered down her nose while studying Anaiya and the others briefly, but then, the slim Gray peered down her nose at everyone. She was not tall, but she tried to seem so. Berana, face a mask of haughtiness and big brown eyes as cold as the snow, paused to offer cool courtesies to Egwene and frown at Akarrin. After a long moment, perhaps realizing that Akarrin did not even see her, she smoothed her silver-embroidered white skirts, which did not need it, adjusted her shawl along her arms so the white fringe hung just so, and glided through the entry flaps as though she just happened to be going in that direction. All three were among the Sitters Siuan had pointed out as too young. As were Malind and Escaralde. But Moria had been Aes Sedai for a hundred and thirty years. Light, Siuan had her looking for conspiracies in everything!

Just as Egwene began to think that her head would explode from frustration if not from her headache, Sheriam suddenly appeared, hiking her cloak and skirts while half-running across the dirty slush of the street. “I’m terribly sorry, Mother,” she said breathlessly, channeling hurriedly to clean off the mud she had splashed on herself. It fell to the walkway in a dry powder when she twitched her skirts. “I . . . I heard that the Hall was sitting, and I knew you would be looking for me, so I came as fast as I could. I’m very sorry.” So Siuan was still searching for her.

“You’re here now,” Egwene said firmly. The woman must have been truly upset to offer apologies in front of the others, Akarrin and her companions more than Anaiya and the rest. Even when people knew better, they tended to take you for what you appeared to be, and the Keeper should not be seen apologizing and wringing her hands. Surely she knew that. “Go ahead and announce me.”

Drawing a deep breath, Sheriam pushed back the hood of her cloak, adjusted her narrow blue stole, and stepped through the entry flaps. Her voice rang out clearly in the ritual phrases. “She comes, she comes. . . .”

Egwene barely waited for her to finish with “. . . the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat,” before striding in through the ring of braziers and stand-lamps that rimmed the pavilion’s walls. The stand-lamps gave a good light, and the braziers, giving off a scent of lavender today, warmed the whole space. No one wished to have to ignore the cold when she could feel real warmth.

The arrangement of the pavilion followed ancient rules, modified only slightly to allow for the fact that they were not meeting in the White Tower, in the great circular chamber called the Hall of the Tower. At the far end, a simple if well polished bench stood atop a box-like platform covered with cloth striped in the seven colors of the Ajahs. That and the stole around Egwene's neck were surely the only places in the camp where the Red Ajah had any representation. Some Blues had wanted the color removed, since Elaida apparently had had the actual throne called the Amyrlin Seat repainted and a stole woven without blue, but Egwene had dug in her heels. If she was to be of all Ajahs and none, then she would be of *all* Ajahs. Down the bright layered carpets that served as a ground-cloth, two lines of benches slanted away from the entrance in groups of three, sitting atop cloth-covered boxes in the colors of the Ajahs. Well, six of the Ajahs. By tradition, the two oldest Sitters could claim the places closest to the Amyrlin Seat for their Ajahs, so Yellow and Blue held those spots here. After that, it was a matter of who came first and wished to be seated where, the first arrival always choosing her Ajah's place.

There were only nine Sitters present, too few for the Hall to be sitting yet, legally speaking, but an oddity in the seating struck Egwene right away. Unsurprisingly, Romanda was already in place, an empty bench between her and Salita, and Lelaine and Moria occupied the end benches of the Blue. Romanda, her hair in a tight gray bun on the nape of her neck, was the oldest Sitter, and almost always the first to reach her place when the Hall sat. Lelaine, next oldest despite her dark glossy hair, seemed unable to let the other woman gain a jump on her even in something so small. The men who had shifted the boxes—they were stored along the walls until the Hall was called to sit—must have just left through the back, because Kwamesa, already seated on her bench, was the only Gray Sitter in evidence, and Berana, just climbing to hers, the only White. But Malind, a round-faced Kandori with an eagle's eyes, and the lone Green, obviously had entered ahead of them, yet strangely, she had chosen to seat the Greens near the pavilion's entrance. The nearer the Amyrlin Seat the better, was the usual thing. And directly opposite her, Escaralde stood in front of the brown-covered boxes, in hushed argument with Takima. Almost as short as Nisao, Takima was a quiet bird-like woman, but she could be forceful when she wished, and with her fists on her hips she looked a sparrow in a temper, feathers all puffed out to make her seem larger. By the way she kept darting sharp looks toward Berana, the seating was what upset her. It was too late for anything to be changed for this sitting, of course, but in any case, Escaralde loomed back at Takima as if she expected to have to fight for her choice. It amazed Egwene how Escaralde could do that. Loom, that was. She stood inches shorter even than Nisao. It must have been sheer force of will. Escaralde never backed down when she thought she was in the right. And she always did think she was in the right. If Moria really did want an immediate assault on Tar Valon, and Malind really wanted to retreat, what did Escaralde want?

For all Siuan's talk of Sitters wanting to be warned, Egwene's entrance caused no great stir. For whatever reasons Malind and the others had called the Hall to hear Akarrin's report, they had not considered the matter so sensitive that it needed to be held for Sitters' ears alone, so little clusters of four or five Aes Sedai were standing behind the benches of their Ajah's Sitters, and they made their curtsies as Egwene walked down the carpets toward her own seat. The Sitters themselves merely watched her, or perhaps inclined a head briefly. Lelaine eyed her coolly, then returned to frowning faintly at Moria, a quite ordinary-appearing woman in plain blue wool. So ordinary, in fact, that you could miss the ageless quality in her face at first glance. She sat staring straight ahead, absorbed in her own thoughts. Romanda was one of those to tilt her head a fraction. Inside the Hall, the Amyrlin Seat was still the Amyrlin Seat, but a little less so than outside it. Inside the Hall, Sitters felt their power. In a way, the Amyrlin could be said to be only the first among equals, inside the Hall. Well, perhaps a little more than that, but not by much. Siuan said as many Amyrlins had failed by believing the Sitters were fully her equals as by believing the difference was wider than really existed. It was like running along the top of a narrow wall with fierce mastiffs on either side. You maintained a careful balance and tried to watch your feet more than the dogs. But you were always aware of the dogs.

Unpinning her cloak as she stepped up onto the striped box, Egwene folded it across her bench before sitting. The benches were hard, and some Sitters brought cushions when they thought the sitting would be long. Egwene preferred not to. The prohibition on speeches seldom stopped at least one or two women from drawing their comments out at length, and a hard seat could help you remain awake through the worst. Sheriam took the Keeper's place standing to Egwene's left, and there was nothing to do but wait. Maybe she *should* have brought a cushion.

The other benches were beginning to fill, though slowly. Aledrin and Saroiya had joined Berana, Aledrin plump enough to make the other two appear slim. Of course, the vertical lines of white scrollwork running down Saroiya's skirts had that effect anyway, while Aledrin's wide white sleeves and the snowy panel running down the front of her dress did just the opposite. Each apparently was trying to find out whether the others knew what was afoot, from the way they were shaking their heads at each other and shooting glances toward the Blues, the Browns and the Greens. Varilin, a red-haired stork of a woman and taller than most men, had taken her seat beside Kwamesa, too. Adjusting and readjusting her shawl restlessly, Varilin darted her eyes from Moria to Escaralde to Malind and back. Magla, yellow-fringed shawl wrapped tightly around her broad shoulders, and Faiselle, a square-faced Domani in silks covered with dense green embroidery, were just entering the pavilion, each ignoring the other even when their skirts brushed. Magla was firmly in Romanda's camp and Faiselle in Lelaine's, and the two groups did not mix. Other sisters were trickling in by spurts, as well, Nisao and Myrelle among half a dozen or so who slipped in behind Magla and Faiselle. Morvrin was already among the Browns behind Takima and Escaralde, and Beonin stood on the edge of the Grays behind Varilin and Kwamesa. At this rate, half the Aes Sedai in the camp would be crowded into the pavilion before long.

While Magla was still walking down the carpets toward the Yellow seats, Romanda rose to her feet. "We are more than eleven now, so we may as well begin." Her voice was surprisingly high-pitched. You might have thought she had a beautiful singing voice, if you could imagine Romanda singing. Her face always seemed more set for scolding, at least slightly disapproving. "I don't think we need make this a formal session," she added when Kwamesa stood. "I hardly see why this need be done in session at all, but if it must, let us get it over and out of the way. Some of us have more important matters to deal with. As I'm sure you do, Mother."

That last was said with a deep bow of her head, in a tone perhaps a hair *too* respectful. Not far enough over the line to be called sarcasm, of course. She was too intelligent to place herself in jeopardy; fools seldom attained a Sitter's chair, or held it long, and Romanda had held a seat in the Hall for almost eighty years. This was her second time as a Sitter. Egwene inclined her own head slightly, eyes cool. An acknowledgment that she had been addressed and that she had marked the tone. A very careful balance.

Kwamesa was left looking around with her mouth open, uncertain whether she was to speak the phrases, always uttered by the youngest Sitter present, that opened a formal sitting of the Hall. Romanda's place gave her considerable influence and some measure of authority, yet others could override her in this. A number of Sitters frowned or shifted on their benches, but no one spoke.

Lyrelle glided into the pavilion, glided toward the Blue benches. Tall for a Cairhienin woman, which made her of average height for almost anywhere else, she was elegant in blue-slashed silk embroidered on the bodice with red and gold, her movements flowing. Some said she had been a dancer before coming to the Tower as a novice. By comparison, Samalin, the fox-faced Green who entered on her heels, seemed to stride mannishly, though there was nothing at all awkward about the Murandian woman. They both seemed surprised to see Kwamesa on her feet, and hurried to their respective benches. In any case, Varilin began plucking at Kwamesa's sleeve, until the Arafellin woman finally sat down. Kwamesa's face was a mask of cool calmness, yet she managed to radiate displeasure. She put a great store in ceremony.

"Perhaps there *is* reason for formal session." Lelaine's voice seemed low, after Romanda's. Arranging her shawl as though she had all the time in the world, she rose gracefully, very deliberately not looking at Egwene. A beautiful woman, Lelaine still was dignity incarnate. "It seems that talks with Elaida have been licensed," she said coolly. "I do understand that under the Law of War, we need not be consulted on this, but I also believe we should discuss it in session, especially since many of us face the possibility of being stilled if Elaida retains any power."

That word, "stilled," no longer carried quite the chill it had before Siuan and Leane were Healed from stilling, but murmurs rose among the watching Aes Sedai crowded behind the benches. It seemed that news of negotiations had not spread as quickly as Egwene expected. She could not tell whether the sisters were excited or dismayed, but clearly they were surprised. Including some of the Sitters. Janya, who had entered while Lelaine was speaking, stopped dead in her tracks, so that another knot of sisters coming in nearly walked into her. She stared at the Blue, then longer and harder at Egwene herself. Romanda plainly had not heard either, from the way her mouth hardened, and expressions among the too-young Sitters ranged from Berana's icy calm to amazed on Samalin's part and openly appalled on Salita's. For that matter, Sheriam swayed on her feet for a moment. Egwene hoped the woman would not sick up in front of the entire Hall.

More interesting, though, were the reactions of those Delana had reported as speaking of negotiation. Varilin sat very still and seemed to be suppressing a smile as she studied her skirts, but Magla licked her lips hesitantly and cast glances at Romanda from the corner of her eye. Saroiya had her eyes closed, and her mouth moved as though she might be uttering a prayer. Faiselle and Takima gazed at Egwene wearing almost identical tiny frowns. Then each noticed the other and gave a start, quickly assuming such regal serenity that they seemed to be mocking one another. It was very strange. Surely by now Beonin had informed all of them what Egwene had said, yet except for Varilin, they seemed upset. They could not possibly have thought they might really negotiate an end. Every woman sitting in this Hall risked stilling and execution just by being there. If there ever had been any path back except to remove Elaida, it had washed away months ago, when this Hall was chosen. There *was* no going back from that.

Lelaine appeared satisfied with the reactions to her words—smug as a cat in the milkbarn, in fact—but before she finished settling back onto her bench, Moria bounded to her feet. That caught every eye and caused a few more murmurs. No one called Moria particularly graceful, but the Illianer was not a woman who bounded. “That do need discussion,” she said, “but it must come later. This Hall did be called by three Sitters asking the same question. That question must be addressed before any other. What did Akarrin and her party find? I do ask they be brought in to make their report before the Hall.”

Lelaine scowled at her fellow Blue, and she could scowl with the best, her eyes as sharp as awls, yet Tower law was quite plain on the subject, for once, and well known to everyone. Often enough, it was neither. In an unsteady voice, Sheriam asked Aledrin, the youngest after Kwamesa, to go and escort Akarrin and the others before the Hall. Egwene decided she had best talk to the fire-haired woman as soon as this sitting was done. If Sheriam kept on this way, she would soon become worse than useless as Keeper.

Delana darted into the pavilion amid a cluster of sisters, the last Sitter to arrive, and was on her bench draping her shawl across her elbows by the time the plump White Sitter returned with the six sisters and led them to stand before Egwene. They must have left their cloaks on the walkway outside, because none was wearing one now. Delana peered at them, an uncertain frown drawing her eyebrows down. She seemed out of breath, as though she had run to get there.

Apparently, Aledrin felt that whether or not the sitting was formal, she, at least, should carry on with proper formality. "You have been called before the Hall of the Tower to relate what you have seen," she said in a strong Taraboner accent. Her combination of dark golden hair and brown eyes was not unusual in Tarabon, though she wore her shoulder-length hair caught in a lacy white net rather than in beaded braids. "I charge you to speak of these things without the evasion or holding back, and to answer all questions in complete fullness, leaving out nothing. Say now that you will do so, under the Light and by your hope of the rebirth and salvation, or suffer the consequences." Those ancient sisters who made this part of the Hall's ceremony had been well aware of how much leeway the Three Oaths gave. A little left out here, a touch of vagueness there, and the whole meaning of what you said could be stood on its head, all while you spoke only the truth.

Akarrin spoke the assurance loudly and somewhat impatiently, the other five with varying levels of formality and self-consciousness. Many sisters had lived their entire lives without being called to testify in front of the Hall. Aledrin waited until the last had repeated every word before marching back toward her bench.

"Tell us what you did see, Akarrin," Moria said as soon as the White Sitter turned away. Aledrin stiffened visibly, and when she took her seat, her face was utterly expressionless, but bright spots of color highlighted her cheeks. Moria should have waited. She must have been very anxious.

By tradition—there were many more traditions and customs than laws, and the Light knew there were more laws than anyone really knew, often contradictory layers of law laid down over the centuries, but tradition and custom ruled Aes Sedai as much as Tower law ever had, perhaps more so—by tradition, Akarrin addressed her response to the Amyrlin Seat.

"What we saw, Mother, was a roughly circular hole in the ground," she said, nodding for emphasis at nearly every other word. She seemed to choose those words carefully, as if to make sure she was absolutely clear to everyone. "It may have been a precise circle, originally, shaped like half of a ball, but the sides have collapsed in some places. The hole is approximately three miles across and perhaps a mile and a half deep."

Someone gasped loudly, and Akarrin frowned as though whoever it was had tried to interrupt. She went on without pausing, however. “We could not be entirely certain of the depth. The bottom is covered with water and ice. We believe it may become a lake, eventually. In any event, we were able to ascertain our exact location without too much difficulty, and we are prepared to say that the hole is located where the city called Shadar Logoth once stood.” She fell silent, and for a long moment the only sound was the rustle of skirts as Aes Sedai shifted uneasily.

Egwene wanted to shift, too. Light, a hole that size would cover half of Tar Valon! “Do you have any idea how this . . . hole . . . was created, Akarrin?” she asked finally. She was quite proud of how steady her voice was. Sheriam was actually trembling! Egwene hoped no one else noticed. A Keeper’s actions always reflected on the Amyrlin. If the Keeper showed fear, a good many sisters would think that Egwene was afraid. That was hardly something she wanted anyone to suspect.

“Each of us was chosen because we have some ability at reading residues, Mother. Better than most, in truth.” So they had *not* been chosen simply because no one stronger was interested. There was a lesson in that. What Aes Sedai did was seldom as simple as it appeared on the surface. Egwene wished she could stop having to relearn lessons she had thought already learned. “Nisain is the best of us at that,” Akarrin went on. “With your permission, Mother, I will let her answer.”

Nisain smoothed her dark woolen skirts nervously and cleared her throat. A gangly Gray with a strong chin and startlingly blue eyes, she had some small repute in matters of law and treaties, but she was obviously uneasy about speaking before the Hall. She looked straight at Egwene with the air of someone who did not want to actually see all the Sitters assembled. “Given the amount of *saidar* used there, Mother, it was no surprise to find the residues near as thick as the snow.” More than a hint of Murandy clung to her tongue, a lilting sound. “Even after so long, I should have been able to grasp some idea of what was woven, if it was at all like anything I’m familiar with, but I have none. I could all but trace the weave, Mother, and it made no sense at all. None. In fact, it seemed so alien, it might not have been. . . .” Clearing her throat again, she swallowed. Her face grew a little paler. “It might not have been woven by a woman. We thought it must have been the Forsaken, of course, so I tested for resonance. We all did.” Half-turning to gesture to her companions, she hurriedly turned back. She definitely preferred looking at Egwene to the Sitters, all leaning forward intently. “I can’t say what was done, beyond scooping three miles out of the earth, or how it was done, but *saidin* was definitely used, too. The resonance was so strong, we should have been able to smell it. There was more *saidin* used than *saidar,* much more, Dragonmount beside a foothill. And that is all I can say, Mother.” A sound fluttered through the pavilion, the sound of sisters letting out the breath they had been holding. Sheriam’s exhalation seemed the loudest, but perhaps that was just because she was nearest.

Egwene schooled her face to stillness. The Forsaken, and a weave that could tear away half of Tar Valon. If Malind did propose flight, could she try to make the sisters remain and face that? Could she abandon Tar Valon, and the Tower, and the Light knew how many tens of thousands of lives? “Does anyone else have a question?” she asked.

“I have one,” Romanda said in a dry tone. *Her* calm had not cracked by a hair. “But not for these sisters. If no one has any further questions for them, I’m sure they would like to be away from having the Hall stare at them.”

It was not precisely her place to suggest that, but neither was it precisely not, so Egwene let it pass. No one else had questions for Akarrin or her companions, as it turned out, and Romanda offered them surprisingly warm thanks for their efforts. Again, not precisely her place.

“Who is your question for?” Egwene asked as Akarrin and the other five scattered to join the growing numbers of sisters crowding among the stand-lamps and braziers. They were eager, as Romanda had said, to get out from under the Hall’s eyes, but they did want to hear what came of their work. It was very difficult for Egwene to keep asperity out of her voice. Romanda affected not to notice. Or perhaps did not notice.

“For Moria,” she said. “We suspected the Forsaken from the start. We knew that whatever happened was powerful, and far away. All we’ve learned, really, is that Shadar Logoth is gone, and of that I can only say, the world is better off without that sinkhole of the Shadow.” She fixed the Blue Sitter with a frown that had made many an Aes Sedai squirm like a novice. “My question is this. Has anything changed for us?”

“It should,” Moria replied, meeting the other woman’s stare levelly. She might not have been in the Hall as long as Romanda, but Sitters were at least supposedly on an equal footing. “We have long had preparations in case the Forsaken do come against us. Every sister does know to form a circle if she be able, or join one she does find forming, until every circle does reach thirteen. Everyone is to be brought in, even the novices, even the newest.” Lelaine looked up at her sharply, but however much she wanted to chide Moria, they were of the same Ajah. They must give at least the appearance of a common front. The effort of keeping her mouth shut thinned Lelaine’s lips, though.

Romanda was under no such constraint. “Must you explain what everyone here already knows? We are the ones who *made* those arrangements. Perhaps you have forgotten?” This time, her voice was cutting. Open displays of anger were forbidden in the Hall, but not goading.

If Moria felt the prick, though, she gave no outward sign beyond adjusting her shawl. “I must explain from the beginning, because we have no thought far enough. Malind, can our circles stand against what Akarrin and Nisain described?”

Despite her fierce eyes, Malind’s full mouth always looked ready to smile, but she was quite stern as she stood, and she stared at each Sitter in turn as if to impress her words on them. “They cannot. Even if we rearrange matters so the strongest sisters are always in the same circle—and that means they must live, eat and sleep together, if they’re to link on the moment—even then, we would be mice facing a cat. Enough mice can overwhelm even a large hungry cat, but not before many mice are dead. If enough of these mice die, though, the White Tower dies.” Again that ripple of sighs ran though the pavilion like an unsteady breeze.

Egwene managed to keep her face calm, but she had to force her fists to relax their grip on her skirt. Which would they propose, an assault or flight? Light, how *could* she oppose them?

Same Ajah or not, Lelaine could take the strain no longer. “What are you suggesting, Moria?” she snapped. “Even if we reunite the Tower this very day, that won’t change the facts.”

Moria smiled slightly, as if the other Blue had said just what she was hoping someone would say. “But we must change the facts. The fact at present do be that our strongest circles be too weak. We do have no *angreal,* much less *sa’angreal,* so we might as well ignore them. I’m no certain there be anything even in the Tower that would make a large enough difference, anyway. How, then, do we make our circles stronger? Strong enough, we must hope, to face what happened at Shadar Logoth and stop it. Escaralde, what have you to say on the matter?”

Startled, Egwene leaned forward. They *were* working together. But to what end?

She was not the only one to realize that the three Sitters who had called the Hall were all on their feet. By remaining standing, Moria and Malind had made a clear declaration. Escaralde stood like a queen, yet the tiny Brown seemed all too aware of the eyes sliding between her and Malind and Moria, the thoughtful frowns and too-still faces. She shifted her shawl twice before speaking. She sounded as though she were lecturing a class, her voice thin yet forceful.

“The ancient literature is quite clear, though little studied, I fear. It gathers dust rather than readers. Writings collected in the earliest years of the Tower make it plain that circles were not limited to thirteen, in the Age of Legends. The precise mechanism—I should say, the precise balance—is unknown, but it should not be too difficult to work out. For those of you who have not spent the time you should have in the Tower library, the *manner* of increasing the size of a circle involves . . .” For the first time, she faltered, and visibly forced herself to continue. “. . . involves the inclusion of men who can channel.”

Faiselle popped to her feet. “What are you suggesting?” she demanded and sat down immediately, as though someone might think she was standing in support.

“I do ask that the Hall be cleared!” Magla said, rising. Like Moria, she was Illianer, and agitation thickened her accent markedly. “This do no be a matter for discussion before any save the Hall in closed sitting.” She, too, dropped back onto her bench as soon as she finished, and sat glowering, wide shoulders hunched and hands opening and closing on her skirts.

“I do fear it be too late for that,” Moria said loudly. She had to speak loudly, to be heard over the murmur of sisters talking excitedly behind the benches, a hum like a huge beehive. “What has been said has been said, and heard by too many sisters for anyone to try shutting the words away now.” Her bosom rose as she pulled in a deep breath, and she raised her voice a notch louder. “I do put before the Hall the proposal that we do enter into an agreement with the Black Tower, that we may bring men into our circles at need.” If she sounded a trifle strangled at the end, it was no wonder. Few Aes Sedai could say that name without emotion, disgust if not outright hatred. It struck against the buzz of voices—and produced absolute silence for the space of three heartbeats.

“That is madness!” Sheriam’s shriek shattered the stillness in more ways than one. The Keeper did not enter discussions in the Hall. She could not even enter the Hall itself without the Amyrlin. Face flooding with red, Sheriam drew herself up, perhaps to face the inevitable rebuke, perhaps to defend herself. The Hall had other things on its mind than rebuking her, though.

Leaping up from their benches just long enough to get their words out, Sitters began to speak, to shout, sometimes on top of one another.

“Madness hardly begins to describe it!” Faiselle shouted, at the same time that Varilin cried, “How can we *ally* ourselves with men who can channel?”

“These so-called Asha’man are tainted!” Saroiya called out with no sign of the vaunted White Ajah reserve. Hands knotted in her shawl, she trembled so hard that the long snowy fringe swayed. “Tainted with the Dark One’s touch!”

“Even suggesting such a thing puts us against all the White Tower stands for,” Takima said roughly. “We would be despised by every woman who calls herself Aes Sedai, by Aes Sedai long in their graves!”

Magla went so far as to shake a fist, with a fury she did not attempt to mask. “Only a Darkfriend could suggest this! Only a Darkfriend!” Moria paled at the accusation, then went bright red with anger of her own.

Egwene did not know where she stood on this. The Black Tower was Rand’s creation, and perhaps necessary, if there was to be any hope of winning the Last Battle, yet the Asha’man *were* men who could channel, a thing feared for three thousand years, and they channeled Shadow-stained *saidin.* Rand himself was a man who could channel, yet without him, the Shadow would win at Tarmon Gai’don. The Light help her for seeing it so coldly, but it was hard truth. Wherever she stood on the matter, matters were getting out of hand there and then. Escaralde was exchanging insults with Faiselle, both at the tops of their lungs. Open insults! In the Hall! Saroiya had abandoned the last shreds of White Ajah coolness and was screaming at Malind, who screamed back, neither waiting on the other. It would have been a wonder if either could understand what the other was saying, and perhaps a blessing if they could not. Surprisingly, neither Romanda nor Lelaine had opened her mouth since the beginning. They sat staring at one another, unblinking. Likely each was trying to read how the other would stand just so she could stand in opposition. Magla got down from her bench and stalked toward Moria with the glare of someone eager to come to blows. Not words, but fists. Magla's were clenched at her sides. Her vine-worked shawl slid off onto the carpets, unnoticed.

Standing, Egwene embraced the Source. Except for certain exactly prescribed functions, channeling was forbidden in the Hall—another of the customs that pointed to darker days in the Hall's history—but she made a simple weave of Air and Fire. "A proposal has been laid before the Hall," she said, and released *saidar*. That was not as hard as it once had been. Not easy, not close to easy, but not as hard. A memory of the Power's sweetness remained, enough to sustain her until the next time.

Magnified by the weave, her words boomed in the pavilion like thunder. Aes Sedai shrank back, wincing and covering their ears. The silence after seemed incredibly loud. Magla gaped at her in astonishment, then gave a start at realizing that she was standing halfway to the Blue benches. Hastily unloosing her fists, she paused to snatch up her shawl and hurried back to her own seat. Sheriam stood weeping openly. Surely it had not been that loud.

"A proposal has been laid before the Hall," Egwene repeated into the silence. After that Power-magnified blare, her voice rang in her own ears. Perhaps it *had* been louder than she thought. That weave had never been intended for use inside walls, even patched canvas walls. "How speak you in support of an alliance with the Black Tower, Moria?" She sat down as soon as she finished. How *did* she stand on this? What difficulties would it present her? How could it be used to advantage? The Light help her, indeed. Those were the first two things to come to mind. She wished Sheriam would dry her eyes and straighten her backbone. She was the Amyrlin Seat, and she needed a Keeper, not a milksop.

It took a few minutes for order to restore itself, Sitters straightening clothes and smoothing skirts unnecessarily, avoiding each other's eyes and especially not looking at the watching sisters crowded behind the benches. Some Sitter's faces became stained with red that had nothing to do with anger. Sitters did not shriek at one another like farmhands at shearing. *Most* especially not in front of other sisters.

"We do be faced with two seemingly insurmountable difficulties," Moria said finally. Her voice was composed and cool once more, but a hint of flush still hung in her cheeks. “The Forsaken have discovered a weapon—discovered or uncovered; they surely would have used it before now, had they possessed it—a weapon we can no counter. A weapon we can no match, though the Light do know why we would wish to, but most importantly, a weapon we can neither survive nor stop. At the same time, the . . . Asha’man . . . have grown like weeds. Reliable reports do put their numbers at nearly equal to all the Aes Sedai living. Even if that number do be inflated, we can no afford to believe it exaggerated far. And more men come every day. The eyes-and-ears do be too consistent to believe anything else. We should take these men and gentle them, of course, but we have ignored them because of the Dragon Reborn. We have put them off, to be dealt with later. The bitter truth do be that it be too late to try taking them. They do be too many. Maybe it did be too late when we did first learned what they were doing.

“If we can no gentle these men, then we must control them somehow. An agreement with the Black Tower—*alliance* be too strong a word—with a carefully worded agreement, we can take the first steps toward protecting the world from them. We also can bring them into our circles.” Raising a cautionary finger, Moria ran her gaze along the benches, but her voice remained cool and composed. And firm. “We must make it clear that a sister will always meld the flows—I do *not* suggest letting a man control a linked circle!—but with men in the circles, we can expand them. With the blessings of the Light, perhaps we can expand the circles far enough to counter this weapon of the Forsaken. We do kill two hares with one stone. But these hares do be lions, and if we do no cast that stone, one of them will surely kill us. It is as simple as that.”

Silence fell. Excepting Sheriam, at least. Standing hunched in on herself a few feet from Egwene, shoulders shaking, she still had not mastered her weeping.

Then Romanda sighed heavily. “Perhaps we can expand the circles enough to counter the Forsaken,” she said in a quiet voice. In a way, that gave her words more weight than if she had shouted. “Perhaps we can control the Asha’man. A thin word, perhaps, in either context.”

“When you do be drowning,” Moria replied, equally quiet, “you do grab at whatever branch floats by, even when you can no be sure it will support your weight until you have hold. The water has no closed over our heads yet, Romanda, but we be drowning. We do be drowning.”

Again there was silence, but for Sheriam's sniveling. Had she forgotten all self-control? But then, no one among the Sitters wore a pleasant expression, not even Moria or Malind or Escaralde. It was not a pleasant prospect that lay in front of them. Delana's face had turned decidedly greenish. She looked as if she might be the one to sick up rather than Sheriam.

Egwene stood once more, long enough to ask the required question. Even when the unthinkable was proposed, the rituals must be followed. Perhaps more so then than ever. "Who speaks against this proposal?"

There was no shortage of speakers there, though everyone had regained herself enough for them to follow protocol. Several Sitters moved at once, but Magla was first on her feet, and the others sat back with no outward displays of impatience. Faiselle followed Magla, and Varilin followed Faiselle. Then came Saroiya, and finally Takima. Each spoke at length, Varilin and Saroiya coming very near making the forbidden speeches, and each spoke with all the eloquence she could summon. No one reached a Sitter's chair lacking eloquence at need. Even so, it soon became clear that they were repeating themselves and each other, just in different words.

The Forsaken and their weapon were never mentioned. The Black Tower was the Sitters' topic, the Black Tower and the Asha'man. The Black Tower was a blight on the face of the earth, as great a threat to the world as the Last Battle itself. The very name suggested connections to the Shadow, not to mention being a direct slap at the White Tower. The so-called Asha'man—no one used the name without adding "so-called," or saying it with a sneer; "guardians" it meant in the Old Tongue, and they were *anything* but guardians—the so-called Asha'man were men who could *channel*! Men doomed to go insane if the male half of the Power did not kill them first. Madmen wielding the One Power. From Magla to Takima, every one of them invested that with every scrap of horror in them. Three thousand years of the world's horror, and the Breaking of the World before that. Men like this had *destroyed* the world, destroyed the Age of Legends and changed the face of the world to desolation. This was who they were being asked to make *alliance* with. If they did so, they would be anathema in every nation, and rightly. They would be scorned by every Aes Sedai, and rightly. It could not be. It *could* not.

When Takima finally sat, arranging her shawl carefully along her arms, she wore a small but quite satisfied smile. Together they had managed to make the Asha'man seem more fearsome, more dangerous, than the Forsaken and the Last Battle combined. Maybe even a match for the Dark One himself.

Since Egwene had begun the ritual questions, it was for her to finish, and she rose long enough to say, "Who stands for an agreement with the Black Tower?" She had only thought there was silence in the pavilion before. Sheriam had finally governed her weeping, though tears glistened on her cheeks still, but her gulp sounded like shouts in the quiet that followed that question.

Takima's smile slid sideways when Janya stood as soon as the question left Egwene's mouth. "Even a slim branch is better than no branch when you're drowning," Janya said. "I'd rather try than trust to hope until I go under." She had the habit of speaking when she was not supposed to.

Samalin rose to stand beside Malind, and suddenly there was a rush, Salita and Berana and Aledrin together, with Kwamesa only a tick behind. Nine Sitters on their feet, and there it hung as the moments stretched out. Egwene realized she was biting her lip and stopped hurriedly, hoping no one had noticed. She could still feel the impression of her teeth. She hoped she had not drawn blood. Not that anyone was looking at her. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath.

Romanda sat frowning up at Salita, who was staring straight ahead, her face gray and her lips trembling. The Tairen sister might not be able to hide her fear, but she was going ahead. Romanda nodded slowly and then, shockingly, stood. She, too, decided to violate custom. "Sometimes," she said, looking straight at Lelaine, "we must do things we would rather not."

Lelaine met the gray-haired Yellow's eyes without blinking. Her face might have been cast in porcelain. Her chin rose by slow increments. And suddenly, she stood, glancing down impatiently at Lyrelle, who gaped at her a moment before coming to her feet.

Everyone stared. No one made a sound. It was done.

Almost done, anyway. Egwene cleared her throat, trying to catch Sheriam's attention. The next part was the Keeper's, but Sheriam stood scrubbing the tears from her cheeks with her fingers and running her eyes along the benches as if counting how many Sitters were standing and hoping to find she had miscounted. Egwene cleared her throat more loudly, and the green-eyed woman gave a start and turned to stare at her. Even then, it seemed to take forever before she recalled herself to her duty.

“The lesser consensus standing,” she announced in an unsteady voice, “an agreement will be sought with . . . with the Black Tower.” Inhaling deeply, she straightened to her full height, and her voice gained strength. She was back onto familiar ground. “In the interest of unity, I ask for the greater consensus to stand.”

That was a powerful call. Even on matters that could be decided by the lesser consensus, unanimity was always preferred, always strived for. Hours of discussion, days, might go into reaching it, but the effort would not stop until every Sitter agreed or it was clear as well water that there could be no agreement. A powerful call, one that tugged at every sister. Delana rose like a puppet drawn up against her will, looking around uncertainly.

“I cannot stand for this,” Takima said, against all decorum. “No matter what anyone says, no matter how long we sit, I cannot and I will not! I—will—*not*!”

No one else stood, either. Oh, Faiselle shifted on her bench, half moved as if to stand, adjusted her shawl, twitched again as if she might stand. That was as close as anyone came. Saroiya was biting her knuckle with an expression of horror, and Varilin wore the look of a woman who had been hit between the eyes with a hammer. Magla gripped the ends of her bench, holding herself in place and staring bleakly at the carpets in front of her. Plainly, she was aware of the scowl Romanda was aiming at the back of her neck, but her only response was to hunch her shoulders.

Takima should have been the end of it. There was no point in seeking the greater consensus when someone made it plain she would not stand. But Egwene decided to make her own break with decorum and protocol. “Is there anyone who feels she must leave her chair over this?” she asked in a loud, clear voice.

Gasps filled the pavilion, but she was holding her breath. This could shatter them, but better to have it out in the open now, if that was what was to come of it. Saroiya looked at her wildly, but no one moved.

“Then we will go forward,” she said. “Carefully. It will take time to plan exactly who is to approach the Black Tower, and what they are to say.” Time for her to plant a few safeguards, it was to be hoped. Light, she was going to have to scramble to deal with this. “First, are there suggestions for our . . . embassy?”

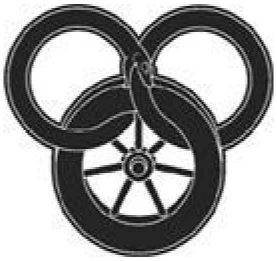

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CHAPTER 20

In the Night

Long before the sitting ended, in spite of the cloak folded beneath her, Egwene's bottom was quite numb from the hard wooden bench. After listening to endless discussion, she wished her ears were numb, as well. Sheriam, forced to stand, had begun shifting her feet as if wishing for a chair. Or maybe just to sit down on the carpets. Egwene could have left, freeing herself and Sheriam. Nothing required the Amyrlin to stay, and at best her comments were listened to politely. After which the Hall galloped off in its own direction. This had nothing to do with the war, and with the bit between their teeth, the Hall was not about to let her get a hand on the reins. She could have walked out at any time—with a slight interruption in the discussions for the required ceremonies—but if she did, she feared that first thing in the morning she might be handed a fully fledged plan, one the Sitters were already carrying out, and her with no idea what was coming until she read it. At least, that was her fear in the beginning.

Who spoke at the greatest length was no surprise, not any longer. Magla and Saroiya, Takima and Faiselle and Varilin, each fretting visibly when another Sitter had the floor. Oh, they accepted the decision of the Hall, at least on the surface. There was nothing else for them to do except resign their chairs; however hard the Hall might be willing to struggle for consensus if need be, once a course of action was decided, by whatever consensus, then *everyone* was expected to follow, or at the very least not hinder. That was the rub. What, exactly, constituted hindrance? None of the five spoke against a Sitter from her own Ajah, of course, but the other four leaped to their feet when any Sitter took her bench again, and all five if the Sitter was Blue. And whoever got the floor spoke very persuasively as to why the previous speaker's suggestions were utterly wrong and perhaps a recipe for disaster. Not that there was any real sign of collusion that Egwene could see. They eyed each other as warily as they did anyone else, frowned at each other as hard if not harder and, plainly, trusted none of the others to make her arguments.

In any event, little of what was suggested came close to conformity. The Sitters disagreed on how many sisters should be sent to the Black Tower and how many from each Ajah, on when those sisters were to be sent, what they must demand, what they should be allowed to agree to and what ordered to refuse entirely. In a matter this delicate, any error could lead to disaster. On top of which, every Ajah except the Yellow considered itself uniquely qualified to provide the leadership of the mission, from Kwamesa's insistence that the goal was negotiating a treaty, of sorts, to Escaralde's claim that historical knowledge was a necessity for such an unprecedented undertaking. Berana even pointed out that an agreement of this nature must be reached by absolute rationality; dealing with the Asha'man was sure to inflame passions, and anything except cold logic would surely lead to disaster on the spot. She grew rather heated about it, in fact. Romanda did want the party led by a Yellow, yet since it hardly seemed there would be any great need for Healing, she was reduced to a stubborn insistence that anyone else might be swayed by her Ajah's special interests and forget the point of what they were doing.

Sitters of the same Ajah supported one another only to the extent of not openly opposing, and no two Ajahs were willing to stand together on much beyond the fact that they had agreed to send an embassy to the Black Tower. Whether it should be called an embassy remained in dispute, even by some who had stood in its favor at the start. Moria herself seemed taken aback by the very idea.

Egwene was not the only one who found the constant argument and counterargument wearing, the points chopped so fine that nothing remained and everything had to begin over. Sisters drifted away from behind the benches. Others replaced them and then drifted away in turn after a few hours. By the time Sheriam uttered the ritual "Depart now in the Light," night had descended, and only a few dozen remained besides Egwene and the Sitters, several of whom sagged as though they had been run through a mangle like damp bed-linens. And nothing at all had been decided except that more talk was necessary before anything could be decided.

Outside, a pale half-moon hung in a velvet-black sky dusted with glittering stars, and the air was bitter cold. Her breath curling a pale mist in the darkness, Egwene walked away from the Hall smiling as she listened to the Sitters scattering behind her, some still arguing. Romanda and Lelaine were walking together, but the Yellow's clear high voice rose perilously close to shouting, and the Blue's was not far behind. They usually argued when forced into one another's company, but this was the first time Egwene had seen them choose it when they did not have to. Sheriam halfheartedly offered to fetch the reports on wagon repairs and fodder that she had asked for that morning, but the weary-eyed woman did not attempt to hide her relief when Egwene sent her off to her bed. With a hurried curtsy, she went scurrying away into the night clutching her cloak around her. Most of the tents stood dark, shadows in the moonlight. Few sisters remained awake long after nightfall. Lamp-oil and candles were never in generous supply.

For the moment, delay suited Egwene perfectly, but that was not the only reason for her smile. Somewhere in all that argument, her headache had gone away entirely. She would have no difficulty at all going to sleep this night. Halima always remedied that, yet her dreams were always troubled after one of Halima's massages. Well, few of her dreams were light, but these were darker than any others, and, strangely, she could never remember anything except that they *were* dark and troubled. Doubtless both things came from some remnant of the pains that Halima's fingers would not reach, yet the last was disturbing in itself. She had learned to remember every dream. She had to remember every dream. Still, with no headache tonight, she should have no problems, and dreaming was the least of what she had to do.

Like the Hall and her study, her tent stood in a little clearing with its own strip of wooden walkway, the nearest tents a dozen spans off to give the Amyrlin a bit of privacy. At least, that was how the spacing was explained. It might even have been the truth, now. Egwene al'Vere was certainly not irrelevant anymore. The tent was not large, short of four paces on a side, and crowded inside, with four brass-bound chests full of clothing stacked against one wall, two cots and a tiny round table, a bronze brazier, a washstand, a stand-mirror and one of the few real chairs in the camp. A simple piece with a little plain carving, it took up entirely too much room, but it was comfortable, and a great luxury when she wanted to curl her feet beneath her and read. When she had time to read anything for pleasure. The second cot was Halima's, and she was surprised to see the woman was not already there waiting on her. The tent was not unoccupied, however.

“You had nothing but bread for breakfast, Mother,” Chesa said in a mildly accusing voice as Egwene ducked through the entry flaps. Not far from stout in her plain gray dress, Egwene’s maid was sitting on the tent’s stool, darning stockings by the light of an oil lamp. She was a pretty woman, without a touch of gray in her hair, yet sometimes it seemed that Chesa had been in her employ forever rather than just since Salidar. She certainly took all the liberties of an old servant, including the right to scold. “You ate nothing at all midday, as far as I can learn,” she went on, holding up a snowy silk stocking to study the patch she was making in the heel, “and your dinner’s gone cold there on the table an hour ago at least. Nobody’s asked me, but if they did, I’d say those heads of yours come from not eating. You’re much too skinny.”

With that, she finally put the stocking down atop her mending basket and rose to take Egwene’s cloak. And to exclaim that Egwene was cold as ice. That was another cause of headaches, in her book. Aes Sedai went around ignoring freezing cold or steaming heat, but your body knew whether you did or not. Best to bundle up warm. And wear red shifts. Everyone knew red was warmest. Eating helped, too. An empty belly always led to shivering. You never saw her shivering, now did you?

“Thank you, Mother,” Egwene said lightly, which earned a soft snort of laughter. And a shocked look. For all her liberties, Chesa was a stickler for the proprieties to make Aledrin seem lax. The spirit, anyway, if often not the letter. “I don’t have a headache tonight, thanks to that tea of yours.” Maybe it had been the tea. Vile as that tasted, as a cure, it was no worse than sitting through a session of the Hall lasting more than half a day. “And I’m not very hungry, really. A roll will be enough.”

Of course, it was not quite so simple as that. The relationship between mistress and servant was never simple. You lived in one another’s sleeve, and she saw you at your worst, knew all your faults and foibles. There was no such thing as privacy from your maid. Chesa muttered and grumbled under her breath the whole time she was helping Egwene undress, and in the end, wrapped in a robe—red silk, to be sure, edged with frothy Murandian lace and embroidered with summery flowers; a gift from Anaiya—Egwene let her remove the linen cloth covering the tray on the little round table.

The lentil stew was a congealed mass in the bowl, but a little channeling fixed that, and with the first spoonful, Egwene discovered she did have some appetite. She ate every scrap, and the piece of blue-veined white cheese, and the somewhat shriveled olives, and the two crusty brown rolls, though she had to pick weevils out of both. Since she did not want to fall asleep too quickly, she drank only one cup of the spiced wine, which needed reheating, too, and had a slight bitterness for it, but Chesa beamed with approval as if she had cleaned the tray. Peering at the dishes, empty except for the olive pits and a few crumbs, she realized she had, at that.

Once she was in her narrow cot, two soft woolen blankets and a goose-down comforter pulled to her chin, Chesa took up the dinner tray, but she paused at the tent's entrance. "Do you want me to come back, Mother? If you get one of your heads . . . Well, that woman's found company, or she'd be here by now." There was open scorn in "that woman." "I could brew another pot of tea. I got it from a peddler who said it was sovereign for aching heads. And joints, and belly upsets, too."

"Do you really think she's a lightskirt, Chesa?" Egwene murmured. Already warm under her covers, she felt drowsy. She wanted sleep, but not just yet. Heads *and* joints *and* bellies? Nynaeve would laugh herself sick to hear that. Perhaps it had been all those chattering Sitters who chased her headache away after all. "Halima does flirt, I suppose, but I don't think it's ever gone beyond flirting."

For a moment Chesa was silent, pursing her lips. "She makes me . . . uneasy, Mother," she said finally. "There's something just not right about that Halima. I feel it every time she's around. It's like feeling somebody sneaking up behind me, or realizing there's a man watching me bathe, or . . ." She laughed, but it was an uncomfortable sound. "I don't know how to describe it. Just, not right."

Egwene sighed and snuggled deeper under the covers. "Good night, Chesa." Channeling briefly, she extinguished the lamp, plunging the tent into pitch blackness. "You go sleep in your own bed tonight." Halima might be upset to come and find someone else on her cot. Had the woman *really* broken a man's arm? The man *must* have provoked her somehow.

She wanted dreams tonight, untroubled dreams—at least, dreams she could recall; few of her dreams were what anyone would call untroubled—but she had another sort of dream to enter first, and for that, it had been some time since she needed to be asleep. Nor did she need one of the *ter'angreal* the Hall guarded so closely. Slipping into a light trance was no harder than deciding to do so, especially as tired as she was, and . . .

. . . bodiless, she floated in an endless blackness, surrounded by an endless sea of lights, an immense swirl of tiny pinpoints glittering more sharply than stars on the clearest night, more numerous than the stars. Those were the dreams of all the people in the world, of people in all the worlds that were or could be, worlds so strange she could not begin to comprehend them, all visible here in the tiny gap between *Tel'aran'rhiod* and waking, the infinite space between reality and dreams. Some of those dreams, she recognized at a glance. They all looked the same, yet she knew them as surely as she did the faces of her sisters. Some, she avoided. Rand's dreams were always shielded, and she feared he might know when she tried to peek in. The shield would keep her from seeing anything, anyway. A pity she could not tell where someone was from their dreams; two points of light could be side-by-side here, and the dreamers a thousand miles apart. Gawyn's dreams tugged at her, and she fled. His dreams held their own dangers, not least because part of her wanted very much to sink into them. Nynaeve's dreams gave her pause, and the desire to put the fear of the Light into the fool woman, but Nynaeve had managed to ignore her so far, and Egwene would not sink to pulling her into *Tel'aran'rhiod* against her will. That was the sort of thing the Forsaken did. It was a temptation, though.

Moving without moving, she searched for one particular dreamer. One of two, at least; either would do. The lights seemed to spin around her, to sweep past so fast that they blurred into streaks while she floated motionless in that starry sea. She hoped that at least one of those she hunted was asleep already. The Light knew, it was late enough for anyone. Vaguely aware of her body in the waking world, she felt herself yawn and curl her legs up beneath her covers.

Then she saw the point of light she sought, and it swelled in her sight as it rushed toward her, from a star in the sky to a full moon to a shimmering wall that filled her vision, pulsing like a breathing thing. She did not touch it, of course; that could lead to all sorts of complications even with this dreamer. Besides, it would be embarrassing to slide into someone's dream accidentally. Reaching out with her will across the hair-fine space that remained between her and the dream, she spoke cautiously, so she would not be heard in a shout. She had no body, no mouth, but she spoke.

ELAYNE, IT'S EGWENE. MEET ME AT THE USUAL PLACE. She did not think anyone could eavesdrop, not without her knowing, yet there was no point in taking unneeded chances.

The pinprick winked out. Elayne had wakened. But she would remember, and know the voice had not been just part of a dream.

Egwene moved . . . sideways. Or perhaps it was more like completing a step that she had paused halfway through. It felt like both. She moved, and . . .

. . . she was standing in a small room, empty save for a scarred wooden table and three straight-back chairs. The two windows showed deep night outside, yet there was light of an odd sort, different from moonlight or lamplight or sunlight. It did not seem to come from anywhere; it just was. But it was more than enough to see that sad, sorry little room clearly. The dusty wall-panels were riddled by beetles, and broken panes in the windows had allowed snow to drift in atop a litter of twigs and dead leaves. At least, there was snow on the floor sometimes, and twigs and leaves sometimes. The table and chairs remained where they stood, but whenever she glanced away, the snow might be gone when she looked back, the twigs and brown leaves in different places as if scattered by a wind. They even shifted while she was looking, simply here then there. That no longer seemed any odder to her than the feel of unseen eyes watching. Neither was truly real, just the way things were in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. A reflection of reality and a dream, all jumbled together.

Everywhere in the World of Dreams felt empty, but this room had the hollow emptiness that only came from a place that was truly abandoned in the waking world. Not so many months past, this little room had been the Amyrlin's study, the inn that held it was called the Little Tower, and the village of Salidar, reclaimed from the encroaching forest had bustled, the heart of resistance to Elaida. Now, if she walked outside, she would see saplings thrusting through the snow in the middle of those streets that had been so painfully cleared. Sisters did Travel to Salidar still, to visit the dovecotes, all jealous that a pigeon sent by one of their eyes-and-ears might fall into another's hands, but only in the waking world. Going to the dovecotes here would be as useless as wishing for the pigeons to find you by a miracle. Tame animals seemed to have no reflections in the World of Dreams, and nothing done here could touch the waking world. Sisters with access to the dream *ter'angreal* had other places to visit than a deserted village in Altara, and certainly no one else had reason to come here in the dream, either. This was one of the places in the world Egwene could be sure no one would catch her by surprise. Too many others turned out to have eavesdroppers. Or bone-deep sadness. She hated seeing what had become of the Two Rivers since she left.

Waiting for Elayne to appear, she tried to quell her impatience. Elayne was not a dreamwalker; she needed to use a *ter'angreal*. And she would want to tell Aviendha where she was going, no doubt. Still, as the minutes stretched out, Egwene found herself pacing the rough floorboards irritably. Time flowed differently here. An hour in *Tel'aran'rhiod* could be minutes in the waking world, or the other way around. Elayne could be moving like the wind. Egwene checked her clothing, a gray riding dress with elaborate green embroidery on the bodice and in broad bands on the divided skirts—had she been thinking of the Green Ajah?—a simple silver net to catch her hair. Sure enough, the Amyrlin's long narrow stole hung around her neck. She made the stole vanish, then after a moment, allowed it to return. It was a matter of letting it come back, not consciously thinking of it. The stole was part of how she thought of herself, now, and it was as Amyrlin that she needed to speak to Elayne.

The woman who finally appeared in the room, though, just flashing into existence, was not Elayne but Aviendha, surprisingly garbed in silver-embroidered blue silk, with pale lace at her wrists and throat. The heavy bracelet of carved ivory she wore seemed as much out of place with that dress as the dream *ter'angreal* that dangled from a leather cord around her neck, a strangely twisted stone ring flecked with color.

"Where is Elayne?" Egwene asked anxiously. "Is she all right?"

The Aiel woman gave a startled glance at herself, and abruptly she was in a dark bulky skirt and white blouse, with a dark shawl draped over her shoulders and a dark kerchief folded around her temples to hold the reddish hair that now hung to her waist, longer than in life, Egwene suspected. Everything was mutable in the World of Dreams. A silver necklace appeared around her neck, complicated strands of intricately worked discs that the Kandori called snowflakes, a gift from Egwene herself what seemed a very long time ago. "She could not make this work," Aviendha said, the ivory bracelet sliding on her wrist as she touched the twisted ring that still hung from its strip of leather, above the necklace now. "It is the babes." Suddenly, she grinned. Her emerald eyes seemed almost to shine. "She has a wonderful temper, sometimes. She threw the ring down and jumped up and down on it."

Egwene sniffed. Babes? So there was to be more than one. Oddly, Aviendha took it in stride that Elayne was with child, though Egwene was convinced the woman loved Rand, too. Aiel ways were peculiar, to say the least. Egwene would not have thought it of Elayne, though! And Rand! No one had actually said he was the father, and she could hardly ask something like that, but she could count, and she *very* much doubted that Elayne would lie with another man. She realized that she was wearing stout woolens, dark and heavy, and a shawl much thicker than Aviendha's. Good Two Rivers garments. The sort of clothes a woman would wear to sit in the Women's Circle. Say, when some fool woman had let herself get with child and showed no sign of marrying. A deep, relaxing breath, and she was back in her green-embroidered riding dress. The rest of the world was not the same as the Two Rivers. Light, she had come far enough to know that much. She did not have to like it, but she had to live with it.

"As long as she and the . . . babes . . . are well." Light, how many? More than one could present difficulties. No; she was not going to ask. Elayne surely had the best midwife in Caemlyn. Best just to change the subject quickly. "Have you heard from Rand? Or Nynaeve? I have some words for her, running off with him that way."

"We have heard from neither," Aviendha replied, adjusting her shawl as carefully as any Aes Sedai avoiding her Amyrlin's eyes. Was her tone careful, too?

Egwene clicked her tongue, vexed with herself. She really was beginning to see conspiracies everywhere and suspicions in everything. Rand had gone into hiding, and that was that. Nynaeve was Aes Sedai, free to do as she wished. Even when the Amyrlin commanded, Aes Sedai often found a way to do exactly as they wished anyway. But the Amyrlin was still going to set Nynaeve al'Meara down hard, once she laid hands on her. As for Rand . . . "I'm afraid trouble is heading your way," she said.

A fine silver teapot appeared on the table, on a hammered silver tray with two delicate green porcelain cups. A thread of steam rose from the spout. She could have made the tea appear already in the cups, yet pouring seemed part of offering someone tea, even ephemeral tea with no more reality than a dream. You could die of thirst trying to drink what you found in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* much less what you made, but this tea tasted as if the leaves had come from a new cask and she had put in just the right amount of honey. Taking a seat on one of the chairs, she sipped hers as she explained what had happened in the Hall and why.

After the first words, Aviendha held her cup on her fingertips without drinking and watched Egwene without blinking. Her dark skirts and pale blouse became the *cadin'sor,* coat and trousers of gray and brown that would fade into shadows. Her long hair was suddenly short, and hidden by a *shoufa,* the black veil hanging down her chest. Incongruously, the ivory bracelet still hung from her wrist although Maidens of the Spear did not wear jewelry.

“All of this because of the beacon we felt,” she muttered, half to herself, when Egwene finished. “Because they think the Shadowsouled have a weapon.” An odd way to put it.

“What else can it be?” Egwene asked, curious. “Did one of the Wise Ones say something?” It had been a long time since she believed that Aes Sedai possessed all knowledge, and sometimes the Wise Ones revealed pockets of information that could startle the most stolid sister.

Aviendha frowned, and her clothing changed back to the skirt and blouse and shawl, then after a moment to the blue silk and lace, this time with both the Kandori necklace and the ivory bracelet. The dream ring remained on its cord, of course. A shawl appeared around her shoulders. The room was winter cold, yet it hardly seemed that gauzy layer of pale blue lace could provide any warmth. “The Wise Ones are as uncertain as your Aes Sedai. Not as frightened, though, I think. Life is a dream, and everyone wakes eventually. We dance the spears with Leafblighter,” that name for the Dark One had always seemed strange to Egwene, coming as it did from the treeless Waste, “but no one enters the dance certain they will live, or win. I do not think the Wise Ones would consider any alliance with the Asha'man. Is this wise?” she added cautiously. “From what you said, I cannot be certain whether you wish it.”

“I don't see any other choice,” Egwene said reluctantly. “That hole is three *miles* across. This is the only hope we have that I can see.”

Aviendha peered into her tea. “And if the Shadowsouled possessed no weapon?”

Suddenly, Egwene realized what the other woman was doing. Aviendha was in training to be a Wise One, and garments or no, she was *being* a Wise One. Likely that was the reason for the shawl. Part of Egwene wanted to smile. Her friend was changing from the often hotheaded Maiden of the Spear she had first come to know. Another part of her remembered that the Wise Ones did not always have the same goals as Aes Sedai. What sisters valued deeply sometimes meant nothing to the Wise Ones. It made her sad, that she must think of Aviendha as a Wise One instead of just a friend. A Wise One who would see what was good for the Aiel rather than what was good for the White Tower. Still, the question was a good one.

"We do have to deal with the Black Tower sooner or later, Aviendha, and Moria was right; there are already too many Asha'man for any thought of gentling them all. And that's if we dared think of gentling them before the last Battle. Maybe a dream will show me another way, but none has so far." None of her dreams had showed her *anything* useful, so far. Well, not really. "This does give us at least the beginning of a way to handle them. In any case, it's going to happen. If the Sitters can agree on anything besides the fact they have to try for an agreement. So we must live with it. It might even be for the best, in the long run."

Aviendha smiled into her teacup. Not an amused smile; she seemed relieved, for some reason. Her voice was serious, though. "You Aes Sedai always think men are fools. Quite often, they are not. More often than you think, at least. Take a care with these Asha'man. Mazrim Taim is far from a fool, and I think he is a very dangerous man."

"The Hall is aware of that," Egwene said dryly. That he was dangerous, certainly. The other might be worth pointing out. "I don't know why we're even discussing this. It's out of my hands. The important thing is that eventually sisters will decide the Black Tower is no longer any reason to stay away from Caemlyn, if we're going to talk with them anyway. Next week or tomorrow, you'll find sisters popping in just to look in on Elayne and see how the siege is going. What we have to decide is how to keep what we want hidden, hidden. I have a few suggestions, and I hope you have more."

The notion of strange Aes Sedai appearing in the Royal Palace agitated Aviendha to the point that she flashed from blue silk to *cadin'sor* to woolen skirt and *algode* blouse and back again as they talked, though she appeared not to notice. Her face remained smooth enough to suit any sister. She certainly had nothing to worry about if the visiting Aes Sedai uncovered the Kinswomen, or the captive *sul'dam* and *damane,* or the bargain with the Sea Folk, but likely she was concerned about the repercussions on Elayne.

The Sea Folk not only made the *cadin'sor* appear, but a round bull-hide buckler lying beside her chair with three short Aiel spears. Egwene considered asking whether there was any special problem with the Windfinders—any problem beyond the usual, that was—yet she held her tongue. If Aviendha did not mention it, then the matter was something she and Elayne wanted to handle themselves. Surely she would have said something if it was anything Egwene should know about. Or would she?

Sighing, Egwene set her cup on the table, where it promptly disappeared, and rubbed her eyes with her fingers. Suspicion truly was part of her bones, now. And she was unlikely to survive long without it. At least she did not always have to act on her suspicions, not with a friend.

"You are tired," Aviendha said, once again in the white blouse and dark skirt and shawl, a concerned Wise One with sharp green eyes. "You do not sleep well?"

"I sleep well," Egwene lied, managing a smile. Aviendha and Elayne had their own worries without letting them know about her headaches. "I can't think of anything more," she said, rising. "Can you? Then we're done," she went on when the other woman shook her head. "Tell Elayne to take care of herself. You take care of her. And her babes."

"I will," Aviendha said, now in the blue silk. "But you must take care of yourself. I think you use yourself too hard. Sleep well and wake," she said gently, the Aiel way of saying good night, and she was gone.

Egwene frowned at the spot where her friend had vanished. She was not using herself too hard. Only as hard as she needed to. She slipped back to her body and discovered that it was sound asleep.

That did not mean that *she* was asleep, or not exactly. Her body slumbered, breathing slow and deep, but she let herself slip only far enough under for dreams to come. She could just have waited until she woke and recalled the dreams then as she wrote them into the little leather-bound book that she kept at the bottom of one her clothing chests, tucked under thin linen shifts that would not be taken out till well into spring. But observing the dreams as they came saved time. She thought it might help her decipher what they meant. At least, those that were more than ordinary night fancies.

There were plenty of those, often featuring Gawyn, a tall beautiful man who took her in his arms and danced with her and made love with her. Once, even in her dreams, she had shied away from thoughts of making love with him. She had blushed to think about it awake. That seemed so foolish, now, so childish. She *would* bond him as her Warder one day, somehow, and she would marry him, and make love to him until he cried for mercy. Even in her sleep, she giggled at that. Other dreams were not so pleasant. Wading through waist-deep snow with trees thick all around her, knowing she had to reach the edge of the forest. But even when she glimpsed the end of the trees ahead, one blink and it receded into the distance, leaving her to flounder on. Or she was pushing a great millstone up a steep hill, but every time she was almost to the top, she slipped and fell and watched the huge stone roll back to the bottom, so she had to trudge back down and begin again, only every time, the hill was higher than before. She knew enough of dreams to know where those came from even if they had no special meaning. None beyond the fact that she was tired and had a seemingly endless task in front of her, anyway. There was no help for it, though. She felt her body jerking at the laborious dreams, and tried to soothe her muscles, make them relax. This sort of half-sleep was little better than none, and less if she spent the whole night thrashing around on her cot. Her efforts worked, a little. At least she only twitched through a dream of being forced to pull a cart jammed full of Aes Sedai down a muddy road.

Other dreams came, betwixt and between.

Mat stood on a village green, playing at bowls. The thatch-roofed houses were vague, in the manner of dreams—sometimes the roofs were slate; sometimes the houses seemed of stone, sometimes wood—but he was sharp and clear, dressed in a fine green coat and that wide-brimmed black hat, just as he had been the day he rode into Salidar. There was not another human being in sight. Rubbing the ball between his hands, he took a short run and casually rolled it across the smooth grass. All nine pins fell, scattered as if they had been kicked. Mat turned and picked up another ball, and the pins were back upright. No, there was a fresh set of pins. The old still lay where they had fallen. He hurled the ball again, a lazy underhanded bowl. And Egwene wanted to scream. The pins were not turned pieces of wood. They were men, standing there watching the ball roll toward them. None moved until the ball sent them flying. Mat turned to pick up another ball, and there were more new pins, new men, standing in orderly formation among the men lying sprawled on the ground as if dead. No, they were dead. Unconcerned, Mat bowled.

It was a true dream; she knew that long before it faded. A glimpse of a future that might come to pass, a warning of what should be watched for. True dreams were always possibilities, not certainties—she often had to remind herself of that; Dreaming was not Foretelling—but this was a dire possibility. Every one of those human pins had represented thousands of men. Of that, she *was* certain. And an Illuminator was part of it. Mat had met an Illuminator once, but that was long ago. This was something more recent. The Illuminators were scattered, their guildhouses gone. One was even working her craft with a traveling show that Elayne and Nynaeve had traveled with for a time. Mat might find an Illuminator anywhere. Still, it was only a possible future. Bleak and bloodstained, but only possible. Yet she had dreamed of it at least twice. Not the same dream, exactly, but always the same meaning. Did that make it more likely to come to pass? She would have to ask the Wise Ones to find out, and she was increasingly reluctant to do that. Every question she asked revealed something to them, and their goals were not hers. To save what they could of the Aiel, they would let the White Tower be ground to dust. She had more than any one people, any one nation, to think of.

More dreams.

She was struggling up a narrow, rocky path along the face of a towering cliff. Clouds surrounded her, hiding the ground below and the crest above, yet she knew that both were very far away. She had to place her feet very carefully. The path was a cracked ledge barely wide enough for her to stand on with one shoulder pressed against the cliff, a ledge littered with stones as large as her fist that could turn under a misplaced step and send her hurtling over the edge. It almost seemed this was like the dreams of pushing millstones and pulling carts, yet she knew it was a true dream.

Abruptly, the ledge dropped away from under her with the crack of crumbling stone, and she caught frantically at the cliff, fingers scrabbling to find a hold. Her fingertips slid into a tiny crevice, and her fall stopped with a jolt that wrenched her arms. Feet dangling into the clouds, she listened to the falling stone crash against the cliff until the sound faded to nothing without the stone ever hitting the ground. Dimly, she could see the broken ledge to her left. Ten feet away, it might as well have been a mile off for all the chance she had of reaching it. In the other direction, the mists hid whatever remained of the path, but she thought it had to be farther away still. There was no strength in her arms. She could not pull herself up, only hang there by her fingertips until she fell. The edge of the crevice seemed as sharp as a knife under her fingers.

Suddenly a woman appeared, clambering down the sheer side of the cliff out of the clouds, making her way as deftly as if she were walking down stairs. There was a sword strapped to her back. Her face wavered, never settling clearly, but the sword seemed as solid as the stone. The woman reached Egwene’s level and held out one hand. “We can reach the top together,” she said in a familiar drawling accent.

Egwene pushed the dream away as she would have a viper. She felt her body thrash, heard herself groan in her sleep, but for a moment she could do nothing. She had dreamed of the Seanchan before, of a Seanchan woman somehow tied to her, but this was a Seanchan who would *save* her. No! They had put a leash on her, made her *damane*. She would as soon die as be saved by a Seanchan! A very long time passed before she could address herself to calming her sleeping body. Or maybe it only seemed a long time. Not a Seanchan; never that!

Slowly, the dreams returned.

She was climbing another path along a cliff shrouded in clouds, but this was a broad ledge of smoothly paved white stone, and there were no rocks underfoot. The cliff itself was chalky white and as smooth as if polished. Despite the clouds, the pale stone almost gleamed. She climbed quickly and soon realized that the ledge was spiraling around. The cliff was actually a spire. No sooner did that thought occur than she was standing on the top of it, a flat polished disc walled by mist. Not quite flat, though. A small white plinth stood centered in that circle, supporting an oil-lamp made of clear glass. The flame on that lamp burned bright and steady, without flickering. It was white, too.

Suddenly a pair of birds flashed out of the mist, two ravens black as night. Streaking across the spire-top, they struck the lamp and flew on without so much as a pause. The lamp spun and wobbled, dancing around atop the plinth, flinging off droplets of oil. Some of those drops caught fire in midair and vanished. Others fell around the short column, each supporting a tiny, flickering white flame. And the lamp continued to wobble on the edge of falling.

Egwene woke in darkness with a jolt. She knew. For the first time, she knew exactly what a dream meant. But why would she dream of a Seanchan woman saving her, and then of the Seanchan attacking the White Tower?

An attack that would shake the Aes Sedai to their core and threaten the Tower itself. Of course, it was only a possibility. But the events seen in true dreams were more likely than other possibilities.

She thought she was considering calmly, but at a rough rustle of canvas from the entry flaps, she very nearly embraced the True Source. Hastily she ran through novice exercises to compose herself, water flowing over smooth stones, wind blowing through high grass. Light, she *had* been frightened. It took two to achieve any sort of calm. She opened her mouth to ask who was there.

“Asleep?” Halima’s voice muttered softly. She sounded wound up tight, almost excited. “Well, I wouldn’t mind a good night’s sleep myself.”

Listening to the woman undress for bed in the dark, Egwene lay very still. If she let her know she was awake, she would have to talk with her, and at the moment, that would be embarrassing. She was fairly certain that Halima had found herself company, if not for the whole night. Halima could do as she wished, of course, but Egwene was still disappointed. Wishing that she had remained asleep, she found herself slipping under once more, and this time, she did not try to stop halfway. She would remember any dreams that came, and she did need some actual sleep.

Chesa came bright and early to bring her breakfast on a tray and help her dress. Actually, it was early and not bright at all. There was only the merest hint of sunlight, and the lamps’ light was necessary to see anything. The embers in the brazier had died down during the night, of course, and the cold that hung in the air felt gray. There might be a chance of more snow today. Halima wriggled into her silk shift and dress, making laughing jokes about how she would like to have a maid while Chesa was doing up the rows of buttons that ran down Egwene’s back. The plump woman wore a set face, ignoring Halima altogether. Egwene said nothing. She said nothing very determinedly. Halima was not her servant. She had no right to set standards for the woman.

Just as Chesa finished the last of the tiny buttons and gave Egwene’s arm a pat, Nisao ducked into the tent, letting in a fresh wave of cold air. The brief glimpse afforded before the flaps fell behind her showed that it was still gray outside. Definitely a chance of snow.

“I must speak to the Mother alone,” she said, holding her cloak around her as if she already felt the snow. Such a firm tone was unusual from the small woman.

Egwene nodded to Chesa, who curtsied, but still cautioned, “Now don’t let your breakfast get cold,” on her way out of the tent.

Halima paused, eyeing Nisao and Egwene both, before scooping up her cloak from where it lay in an untidy heap at the foot of her cot. “I suppose Delana has work for me,” she said, sounding irritated.

Nisao frowned at the woman’s back as she left, but without saying anything she embraced *saidar* and wove a ward against eavesdropping around her and Egwene. Without asking permission. “Anaiya and her Warder are dead,” she said. “Some of the workmen bringing in sacks of coals last night heard a noise, like someone thrashing around, and for a wonder, they all went running to see what it was. They found Anaiya and Setagana lying in the snow, dead.”

Egwene sat down slowly on her chair, which did not feel particularly comfortable at the moment. Anaiya, dead. She had had no beauty except her smile, but when she smiled, it warmed everything around her. A plain-faced woman who loved lace on her robes. Egwene knew she should feel sadness for Setagana, too, but he had been a Warder. If he had survived Anaiya, it was unlikely he would have lived long. “How?” she said. Nisao would not have woven that ward just to tell her Anaiya was dead.

Nisao’s face tightened, and despite the ward, she looked over her shoulder as if she feared someone might be listening at the entry flaps. “The workmen thought they had eaten badly preserved mushrooms. Some farmers are careless in gathering what they intend to sell, and the wrong sort can paralyze your lungs or make your throat swell up, so you die struggling for air.” Egwene nodded impatiently. She had grown up in a country village, after all. “Everyone seemed willing to accept that,” Nisao went on, but she did not hurry. Hands twisting and flexing on the edges of her cloak, she appeared reluctant to reach her conclusion. “There were no wounds, no injuries of any sort. No reason to think it was anything but a greedy farmer selling bad mushrooms. But . . .” She sighed, glancing over her shoulder again, and lowered her voice. “I suppose it was all the talk of the Black Tower in the Hall today. I tested for resonance. They were killed with *saidin*.” A grimace of disgust crossed her face. “I think someone just wove solid flows of Air around their heads and let them smother.” Shuddering, she drew her cloak closer.

Egwene wanted to shudder, too. She was surprised she did not. Anaiya, dead. Smothered. A deliberately cruel way of killing, used by someone who had hoped to leave no traces. “Have you told anyone, yet?”

“Of course not,” Nisao said indignantly. “I came to you straightaway. As soon as I knew you’d be awake, at least.”

“A pity. You will have to explain why you delayed. We can’t keep this secret.” Well, Amyrlins had kept darker secrets, for the good of the Tower as they saw it. “If we have a man who can channel among us, then the sisters need to be on their guard.” A man who could channel hiding among the workmen or soldiers seemed unlikely, but less so than one coming there just to kill a single sister and her Warder. Which raised another question. “Why Anaiya? Was she just in the wrong place at the wrong time, Nisao? Where did they die?”

“Near the wagons on the south side of camp. I don’t know why they were there that time of night. Unless Anaiya was going to the privies and Setagana thought she need guarding even there.”

“Then you’re going to find out for me, Nisao. What were Anaiya and Setagana doing out when everybody else was asleep? Why were they killed? This, you will keep secret. Until you can give me reasons, no one but the two of us is to know you’re looking for any.”

Nisao’s mouth opened and closed. “If I must, I must,” she muttered only half under her breath. She was not really suited to keeping deep secrets, and she knew it. The last she had tried to keep had led directly to her having to swear fealty to Egwene. “Will this put a stop to talk about an agreement with the Black Tower?”

“I doubt it,” Egwene said wearily. Light, how could she be weary already? The sun was not fully up yet. “Either way, I think it is going to be another very long day.” And the best she could find to hope for in it was that she could make it to another night without a headache.

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CHAPTER 21

A Mark

Alviarin stepped through the gateway, letting it snap shut behind her in a fading slash of brilliant blue-white, and almost immediately sneezed from the dust kicked up by her shoes. At once another sneeze racked her, and then another that brought tears to her eyes. Lit only by the glowing globe that floated in front of her, the rough-walled storeroom hewn out of the bedrock three levels below the Tower Library was empty except for centuries worth of dust. She would much rather have returned straight to her apartments in the Tower itself, but there was always the chance of walking in to find a servant cleaning, and then she would have to get rid of the body and hope that no one remembered that the servant had last been seen going into her rooms. Remain hidden and rouse not even the slightest hint of suspicion, Mesaana had commanded. That seemed over-timid when the Black Ajah had walked the Tower with impunity since its founding, but when one of the Chosen commanded, only a fool disobeyed. At least, if there was any chance of being found out.

Irritably, Alviarin channeled to force the dust out of the air, slamming it down so hard that the stone floor should have shaken. She would not have to go through this every time if she simply swept all the dust into a corner rather than leaving it spread out. No one else had come this far into the Library basements in years; no one would notice the room was clean. But someone was always doing what no one ever did. She often did so herself, and she did not intend to be caught through a foolish mistake. Still, she grumbled under her breath as she channeled the reddish mud from her shoes and the hem of her skirts and cloak. It seemed unlikely that anyone would recognize it as coming from Tremalking, the largest of the Sea Folk islands, but someone might wonder where she had been to get muddy. The Tower grounds would be buried in snow except where they had been shoveled clear and the dirt frozen hard. Still muttering to herself, she channeled again to muffle the squeal of rusted hinges as she pushed open the rough wooden door. There was a way to make a weave and hide it, so she would not have to soften that creak every time—she was certain there was—but Mesaana refused to teach it to her.

Mesaana was the real source of her annoyance. The Chosen taught what she wished and nothing more, hinted at wonders then withheld them. And Mesaana used her like an errand girl. She sat at the head of the Supreme Council and knew the names of every Black sister in every heart, which was more than Mesaana could say. The woman showed little interest in who would carry out her orders, so long as they *were* carried out, and to the absolute letter. All too often, she wanted them carried out by Alviarin herself, forcing her to deal with women and men who thought themselves her equals just because they also served the Great Lord. Too many of the Friends thought themselves equal to Aes Sedai, or even superior. Worse, Mesaana forbade her to make an object lesson of even one. Repellent little rodents, none able to channel, and Alviarin had to be polite just because some of them might be serving another of the Chosen! It was obvious that Mesaana did not know for sure. She was one of the Chosen, and she made Alviarin smile at the dust of the street for her uncertainty.

The ball of pale light floating ahead of her for illumination, Alviarin glided down the rough stone corridor, smoothing the dust behind with feathery brushes of Air so it would seem undisturbed and rehearsing several choice things she would like to say to Mesaana. She would actually say none of them, of course, which only honed her irritation. Criticizing one of the Chosen in even the mildest terms was a short path to pain, perhaps to death. Almost surely both, in truth. With the Chosen, grovel and obey was the only way to survive, and the first was as important as the second. The prize of immortality was worth a little groveling. With that, she could gain all the power she wished, much more than any Amyrlin had ever wielded. First, though, it was necessary to survive.

Once she reached the top of the first ramp leading upward, she no longer bothered hiding her traces. There was not nearly so much dust here, and that marked by the wheels of handcarts and scuffs from shoes; another set of faint footprints would never be noticed. She still walked quickly, though. Usually, the thought of living forever brightened her, the thought of eventually wielding power through Mesaana as she now did through Elaida. Well, almost the same; expecting to bring Mesaana to Elaida's state of compliance was too ambitious, but she could still tie strings to the woman that would assure her own rise. Today, her mind kept returning to the fact that she had been out of the Tower for almost a month. Mesaana would not have bothered to keep Elaida under control during her absence, though the Chosen would surely lay the fault at Alviarin's feet if anything had gone amiss. Of course, Elaida was properly cowed after the last time. The woman had *begged* for release from taking private penances from the Mistress of Novices. Of course she was too cowed to have stepped out of line. Of course. Alviarin pushed Elaida firmly to the back of her head, but she did not slow her steps.

A second ramp took her to the highest basement, where she let the glowing ball vanish and released *saidar.* The shadows here were dotted with pools of wan light that nearly touched one another, cast by lamps sitting in iron brackets along stone walls that were neatly dressed on this level. Nothing moved except for a rat that went scuttling away with a faint click of claws on the floorstones. That almost made her smile. Almost. The Great Lord's eyes riddled the Tower, now, though no one seemed to have noticed that the wardings had failed. She did not think it was anything Mesaana had done; the wards simply no longer worked as they were supposed to. There were . . . gaps. She certainly did not care whether the animal saw her, or reported what it had seen, but she still ducked quickly into a narrow circular staircase. There might be people about on this level, and people were not to be trusted the same as rats.

Perhaps, she thought as she climbed, she could probe Mesaana about that impossible flare in the Power, so long as she was . . . delicate. The Chosen would think she was hiding something if she never mentioned it. Every woman who could channel in the whole world had to be wondering what had happened. She would just have to be careful not to let slip anything that suggested that she had actually visited the site. Long after the flare vanished, of course—she was not stupid enough to simply stroll into *that!*—but Mesaana seemed to think Alviarin should carry out her *chores* without taking a moment for herself. Could the woman really believe that she had no affairs of her own to see to? It was best to behave as if she did have none. For the moment it was, at least.

In the shadows at the top of the stairs, she stopped in front of the small plain door, roughly finished on this side, in order to take hold of herself as she folded her cloak over her arm. Mesaana was one of the Chosen, but still human. Mesaana made mistakes. And she would kill Alviarin in a heartbeat if *she* made one. Grovel, obey and survive. And always be wary. She had known that long before meeting one of the Chosen. Retrieving the white Keeper's stole from her belt pouch, she settled it around her neck and cracked the door carefully to listen. Silence, as expected. She stepped out into the Ninth Depository and closed the door behind her. On the inner side, the door was no less plain, but polished to a soft glow.

The Tower Library was divided into twelve depositories, at least insofar as the world knew, and the Ninth was the smallest, given over to texts on various forms of arithmetic, yet it was still a large chamber, a long oval with a flattened dome for a ceiling, filled with row on row of tall wooden shelves, each surrounded by a narrow walkway four paces above the seven-colored floor tiles. Tall ladders stood alongside the shelves, on wheels so they could be moved easily, both on the floor and on the walkways, and mirrored brass stand-lamps with bases so heavy that each took three or four men to move. Fire was a constant concern in the Library. The stand-lamps all burned brightly, ready to light the way for any sister who wanted to find a book or boxed manuscript, but a shelved handcart holding three large leather-cased volumes to be replaced was still in the middle of one aisle exactly where she remembered it from the last time she walked through. She did not understand why there was any need for different forms of arithmetic or why so many books had been written on them, and for all the Tower prided itself on having the greatest collection of books in the world, covering every possible topic, it seemed that most Aes Sedai agreed with her. She had never seen another sister in the Ninth Depository, the reason she used it for her entryway. At the wide arched doors, standing invitingly open, she listened until she was satisfied that the corridor beyond was empty before slipping out. Anyone would have thought it strange that she had developed an interest for the books in there.

As she hurried along the main corridors, where the floor tiles were laid in repeating rows of the Ajah colors, it came to her that the Library was more silent than usual, even counting how few Aes Sedai remained in the Tower at present. There was always a sister or two to be seen, if only the librarians—some Browns actually maintained apartments in the upper levels in addition to their rooms in the Tower—yet the huge figures carved into the corridors' walls, fancifully garbed people and strange animals ten feet tall or more, might have been the Library's only inhabitants. Drafts made the intricately carved lamp wheels hanging ten paces overhead creak faintly on their chains. Her footsteps seemed unnaturally loud, casting soft echoes from the vaulted ceiling.

“May I help you?” a woman’s voice said quietly behind her.

Startled, Alviarin spun around, almost dropping her cloak, before she could catch herself. “I just wanted to walk through the Library, Zemaille,” she said, and immediately felt a stab of irritation. If she was jumpy enough to explain herself to a librarian, then she really did need to take a grip before she reported to Mesaana. She almost wanted to tell Zemaille what was happening on Tremalking, just to see whether the woman would flinch.

The bland expression on the Brown sister’s dark face did not change, but a touch of some unreadable emotion altered the pitch of her voice. Tall and very lean, Zemaille always held that outer mask of reserve and distance, but Alviarin suspected she was less shy than she pretended, and less pleasant. “That’s quite understandable. The Library is restful, and it’s a sad time for us all. And sadder still for you, of course.”

“Of course,” Alviarin repeated as if by rote. A sad time? For her in particular? She considered drawing the woman to some secluded corner where she could be questioned and disposed of, but then she noticed another Brown, a round woman even darker than Zemaille, watching them from farther down the hall. Aiden and Zemaille were weak in the Power, yet overcoming both at once would be difficult if it was possible at all. Why were they both down here on the ground floor? The pair was seldom seen, shuttling between the rooms on the upper levels they shared with Nyein, the third Sea Folk sister, and the so-called Thirteenth Depository, where the secret records were kept. All three worked there, willingly immersed to their necks in their labors. She walked on and tried to tell herself she was being skittish without reason, but that did nothing to soothe the prickling between her shoulder blades.

The lack of librarians guarding the front entrance only made the prickles grow. Librarians always stood at *every* entrance, to make sure not a scrap of paper left the library without their knowledge. Alviarin channeled to shove one of the tall carved doors open before she reached it and left it standing agape on its bronze hinges as she hurried down the wide marble stairs. The broad, oak-lined stone path that led toward the tall white shaft of the Tower had been shoveled clear, but if it had not been, she would have used the Power to melt the snow away ahead of her, let anyone think of it what they would. Mesaana had made crystal clear the price of taking the risk that anyone might learn the weave for Traveling, or even that she knew it, else she would have Traveled from the spot. With the Tower in sight, looming over the trees and gleaming in the pale morning sunlight, she could have been there in a step. Instead, she fought the urge to run.

It was no surprise to find the Tower's wide, tall corridors empty. A few scurrying servants with the white Flame of Tar Valon on their breasts bobbed their bows and curtsies as she passed, but they were no more use, no more important, than the drafts that made the gilded stand-lamps flicker and rippled the bright tapestries hanging on the snowy white walls. Sisters kept to their own Ajah quarters as much as possible these days, of course, and unless she encountered a member of her own heart, even seeing an Aes Sedai she knew was Black Ajah would have been useless. She knew them, but they did not know her. Besides, she was not about to reveal herself to anyone she did not have to. Perhaps some of those marvelous instruments from the Age of Legends that Mesaana talked about would allow her to question any sister immediately one day, if the woman ever actually produced them, but now it was still a matter of ciphered orders left on pillows or in secret spots. What had once seemed almost instantaneous responses now seemed interminably delayed. A stocky bald-headed serving man making his bow gulped audibly, and she smoothed her features. She prided herself on her icy detachment, always presenting a cool unruffled surface. In any event, scowling her way though the Tower was going to get her exactly nowhere.

There was one person in the Tower she was sure she knew exactly where to find, someone she could demand answers from with no fear of what the woman thought. A little caution was needed even there, of course—careless questions revealed more than most answers were worth—but Elaida would tell her anything. With a sigh, she began to climb.

Mesaana had told her of another marvel of the Age of Legends that she wished very much to see, a thing called a "lift." The flying machines sounded much grander, of course, but it was far easier to envision a mechanical contrivance that whisked you from floor to floor. She was not really certain that buildings several times as high as the White Tower could really have existed, either—in the whole world, not even the Stone of Tear rivaled the Tower's height—but just knowing about "lifts" made climbing up spiraling hallways and sweeping flights of stairs seem laborious.

She did pause at the Amyrlin's study, only three levels up, but as expected, both rooms were empty, the bare writing tables polished till they shone. The rooms themselves seemed bare, with no wall hangings, no ornaments, nothing at all but the tables and chairs and unlit stand-lamps. Elaida rarely came down from her apartments near the Tower's peak anymore. That had seemed acceptable at one time, since it isolated the woman even more from the rest of the Tower. Few sisters made that climb willingly. Today, though, by the time Alviarin had climbed close to eighty spans, she was seriously considering making Elaida move back down.

Elaida's waiting room was empty, of course, though a folder of papers sitting atop the writing table said someone had been there. Seeing what they contained, and deciding whether Elaida needed to be punished for having it, could wait, though. Alviarin tossed her cloak down on the writing table and pushed open the door, newly carved with the Flame of Tar Valon and awaiting the gilder, that led deeper into the apartments.

She was surprised at the surge of relief she felt at seeing Elaida sitting behind the starkly carved and gilded writing table, the seven-striped—no, six-striped, now—stole around her neck and the Flame of Tar Valon picked out in moonstones among the gold-work on the high chairback above her head. A niggling worry that she had not let surface until now had been the possibility that the woman was dead in some fool accident. That would have explained Zemaille's comment. Choosing a new Amyrlin could have taken months, even with the rebels and everything else confronting them, but her days as Keeper would have been numbered. What surprised her more than her relief, though, was the presence of more than half the Sitters in the Hall standing in front of the writing table in their fringed shawls. Elaida *knew* better than to entertain this sort of delegation without her present. The huge gilded case clock against the wall, a vulgarly over-ornamented piece, chimed twice for High, small enameled figures of Aes Sedai popping out of tiny doors in its front as she opened her mouth to tell the Sitters that she needed to confer with the Amyrlin privately. They would leave with little hemming or hawing. A Keeper had no authority to order them out, but they knew that her authority extended beyond that her stole conferred even if they did not begin to suspect how that could be.

"Alviarin," Elaida said, sounding surprised, before she could get a word out. The hardness of Elaida's face softened in what almost seemed pleasure. Her mouth quirked close to a smile. Elaida had had no reasons to smile in some time. “Stand over there and be quiet until I have time to deal with you,” she said, waving an imperious hand toward a corner of the room. The Sitters shifted their feet and adjusted their shawls. Suana, a beefy woman, gave Alviarin a tight glance, and Shevan, tall as a man and angular, stared straight at her with no expression, but the others avoided meeting her eye.

Stunned, she stood stock-still on the brightly patterned silk carpet, gaping. This could not be mere rebellion on Elaida’s part—the woman would have to be insane!—but what in the name of the Great Lord had happened to give her the nerve? What?

Elaida’s hand slapped the tabletop with a loud crack, a blow that made one of the lacquered boxes there rattle. “When I tell you to stand in the corner, Daughter,” she said in a low, dangerous voice, “I expect you to obey.” Her eyes glittered. “Or shall I summon the Mistress of Novices so these sisters can witness your ‘private’ penance?”

Heat suffused Alviarin’s face, part humiliation and part anger. To have anyone *hear* such things said, and to her face! Fear bubbled in her, too, turning her stomach to acid. A few words from her, and Elaida would stand accused of sending sisters to disaster and captivity, not once but twice. Rumors had already begun swirling about events in Cairhien; murky rumors, but growing more certain by the day. And once it was learned that on top of that, Elaida had sent fifty sisters to try to defeat hundreds of men who could channel, not even the existence of the rebel sisters wintering in Murandy with their army would keep the Amyrlin’s stole on her shoulders, or her head. She could not dare to do this. Unless . . . Unless she could discredit Alviarin as Black Ajah. That might gain her a little time. Only a little, surely, once the facts about Dumai’s Wells and the Black Tower were known, but Elaida might be ready to grasp at straws. No, it was not possible, could not *be* possible. Flight certainly was impossible. For one thing, if Elaida was ready to lay charges, flight would only confirm them. For another, Mesaana would find her and kill her if she fled. All that flashed through her head as she moved on leaden feet to stand in the corner like a penitent novice. There had to be a way to recover from this, whatever had happened. There was always a way to recover. Listening might find it for her. She would have prayed, if the Dark Lord listened to prayers.

Elaida studied her for a moment, then gave a satisfied nod. The woman’s eyes still shone with emotion, though. Lifting the lid of one of the three lacquered boxes on her table, she took out a small, age-darkened ivory carving of a turtle and stroked it between her fingers. Fondling the carvings in that box was a habit she had when she wanted to soothe her nerves. “Now,” she said. “You were explaining to me why I should enter negotiations.”

“We were not asking permission, Mother,” Suana said sharply, thrusting her chin out. She had too much chin, a square stone of it, and the arrogance to thrust it at anyone. “A decision of this sort belongs to the Hall. There is strong feeling in favor of it in the Yellow Ajah.” Which meant she had strong feelings. She was the head of the Yellow Ajah, the First Weaver, something Alviarin knew because the Black Ajah knew all the Ajah secrets, or nearly all, and in Suana’s view, her opinions *were* her Ajah’s opinions.

Doesine, the other Yellow present, eyed Suana sideways, but said nothing. Pale and boyishly slim, Doesine looked as if she did not really want to be there, a pretty, sulky boy who had been dragged somewhere by his ear. Sitters often balked at arm-twisting from their Ajah’s head, yet it was not beyond possibility that Suana had found some way.

“Many Whites also support talks,” Ferane said, frowning distractedly at an ink stain on one plump finger. “It is the logical thing to do, under the present circumstances.” She was First Reasoner, head of the White Ajah, but less likely than Suana to take her own views for those of the entire Ajah. A little less likely. Ferane often seemed as vague as the worst of the Browns—the long black hair that framed her round face needed a brush, and part of the fringe on her shawl appeared to have been dipped carelessly in her breakfast tea—but she could catch the slightest crack in the logic of an argument. She might well have been there by herself because she simply did not believe she needed any assistance from the other White Sitters.

Leaning back in her tall chair, Elaida began to glower, her fingers stroking faster on the turtle, and Andaya spoke up quickly, not quite looking at Elaida while pretending to adjust the set of her gray-fringed shawl along her arms.

“The point, Mother, is that we must find a way to end this peacefully,” she said, the Taraboner accent strong in her speech as it was when she felt uneasy. Frequently diffident around Elaida, she glanced at Yukiri as though hoping for support, but the slender little woman turned her head aside slightly. Yukiri was remarkably stubborn for such a tiny woman; unlike Doesine, she would not have responded to arm-twisting. So why was she here if she did not want to be? Realizing that she was on her own, Andaya rushed on. “It must not be allowed to come to fighting in the streets of Tar Valon. Or in the Tower; especially not that; not again. So far, the rebels seem content to sit and watch the city, but that cannot last. They have rediscovered how to Travel, Mother, and have used it to carry an army across hundreds of leagues. We must begin talks before they decide to use Traveling to bring that army into Tar Valon, or all is lost even if we win.”

Fists knotted in her skirts, Alviarin swallowed hard. She thought her eyes might pop out of her head. The rebels knew how to Travel? They were here at Tar Valon already? And these fools wanted to *talk*? She could see carefully laid plans, carefully arranged designs, evaporating like mist in a summer sun. Perhaps the Dark Lord would listen, if she prayed very hard.

Elaida’s scowl did not diminish, but she set the ivory turtle down very carefully, and her voice came close to normal. The old normal, before Alviarin reined her in, with a steel core beneath the softness of the words. “Do the Brown and the Green also support talks?”

“The Brown,” Shevan began, then pursed her lips in thought and visibly changed what she had intended to say. Outwardly, she seemed utterly composed, yet she was rubbing her long thumbs against her bony forefingers unconsciously. “The Brown is quite clear on the historical precedents. You have all read the secret histories, or should have. Whenever the Tower has been divided against itself, disaster has struck the world. With the Last Battle looming, in a world that contains the Black Tower, we can no longer afford to remain divided a day longer than need be.”

It hardly seemed that Elaida’s face could grow darker, but mention of the Black Tower did it. “And the Green?” Her voice was still controlled.

All three Green Sitters were there, indicating very strong support among their Ajah, or heavy pressure from the head of the Green. As senior, Talene should have answered Elaida—Greens stuck to their hierarchies in everything—but the tall, golden-haired woman glanced at Yukiri for some reason, then just as oddly, at Doesine, and put her eyes on the carpet and stood plucking at her green silk skirts. Rina frowned faintly, wrinkling her upturned nose in puzzlement, but she had worn the shawl for fewer than fifty years, so it was left to Rubinde to reply. A sturdy woman, Rubinde appeared short and stocky alongside Talene, and almost plain despite eyes the color of sapphires.

"I am instructed to make the same points as Shevan," she said, ignoring the startled look that Rina gave her. Plainly there had been pressure from Adelorna, the Green 'Captain-General,' and plainly Rubinde disagreed if she was willing to make it public. "Tarmon Gai'don is coming, the Black Tower is almost as great a threat, and the Dragon Reborn is missing, if he isn't dead. We can no longer afford to be divided. If Andaya can talk the rebels back into the Tower, then we must let her try."

"I see," Elaida said in a flat tone. But strangely, her color improved, and the hint of a smile even touched her mouth. "Then by all means, talk them back, if you can. But my edicts stand. The Blue Ajah no longer exists, and every sister who follows that child Egwene al'Vere must serve penance under my guidance before she can be readmitted to *any* Ajah. I intend to *weld* the White Tower into a weapon to use at Tarmon Gai'don."

Ferane and Suana opened their mouths, protest painted on their faces, but Elaida cut them off with a raised hand. "I have spoken, daughters. Leave me now. And see to your . . . talks."

There was nothing the Sitters could do short of open defiance. What was the Hall's right was theirs, but the Hall seldom dared infringe far on the Amyrlin Seat's authority. Not unless the Hall was united against the Amyrlin, and this Hall was anything but united on any point. Alviarin had helped insure that herself. They left, Ferane and Suana, stiff-backed and tight-lipped, Andaya almost scurrying. None of them so much as glanced in Alviarin's direction.

She barely waited for the door to close behind the last. "This really changes nothing, Elaida, surely you see that. You must think clearly, not trip over a momentary aberration." She knew she was babbling, but she could not seem to stop. "The disaster at Dumai's Wells, the certain disaster at the Black Tower, these can still unseat you. You need me to hold on to the staff and stole. You need me, Elaida. You . . ." She clamped her teeth shut before her tongue threw everything away. There still had to be a way.

"I'm surprised you returned," Elaida said, rising and smoothing her red-slashed skirts. She had never given up her way of dressing as a Red. Strangely, she was smiling as she came around the table. Not a hint at a smile, but a full, pleased curve of her lips. "Have you been hiding somewhere in the city since the rebels arrived? I thought you'd have taken ship as soon as you learned they were here. Who would have thought they would rediscover Traveling? Imagine what we can do once we know that." Smiling, she glided across the carpet.

"Now let me see. What do I have to fear from you? The stories out of Cairhien are the talk of the Tower, but even if sisters really were obeying the al'Thor boy, which I for one cannot believe, everyone blames Coiren. She had the responsibility of bringing him here, and she has as good as been tried and convicted, in the minds of the sisters." Elaida stopped in front of Alviarin, hemming her into the corner. That smile never touched her eyes. She smiled, and her eyes glittered. Alviarin could not break away from that gaze. "In the last week, we've heard a good many things about the 'Black Tower,' as well." Elaida's lips twisted in disgust around the name. "It seems there are even more men than you supposed. But everyone thinks Toveine must have had the sense to learn that before she attacked. There has been a good deal of discussion over it. If she comes dragging back here defeated, she will harvest the blame. So your threats . . ."

Alviarin staggered into the wall, blinking away spots, before she even realized that the other woman had slapped her. Her cheek already felt swollen. The glow of *saidar* had surrounded Elaida, and the shield settled on Alviarin before she could twitch, cutting her off from the Power. But Elaida did not intend to use the Power. She drew back a fist. Still smiling.

Slowly, the woman drew a deep breath and let her hand fall. She did not remove the shield, however. "Would you really use that?" she asked in an almost mild tone.

Alviarin's hand sprang away from the hilt of her belt knife. Grabbing it had been a reflex, but even if Elaida had not been holding the Power, killing her when so many Sitters knew they were together would have been as good as killing herself. Still, her face burned when Elaida sniffed contemptuously.

"I look forward to seeing your neck stretched on the headsman's block for treason, Alviarin, but until I have the proof I need, there are still a few things I can do. Do you remember how many times you had Silviana come to give me private penance? I hope you do, because you are going to take ten for every day I suffered. And, oh, yes." With a jerk, she pulled the Keeper's stole roughly from Alviarin's neck. "Since no one could find you when the rebels arrived, I asked the Hall to remove you as Keeper. Not the full Hall, of course. You may still have a little influence there. But it was surprisingly easy to gain the consensus from those who were sitting that day. A Keeper is supposed to be with her Amyrlin, not wandering off on her own. On second thought, you may not have any influence at all, since it turns out you were hiding in the city all along. Or did you sail back to find disaster, and actually think you could recover something from the ruins?

“No matter. It might have been better for you to leap on the first ship you could find leaving Tar Valon. But I must admit, the thought of you scuttling from village to village ashamed to show your face to another sister pales beside the pleasure I’ll take seeing you suffer. Now get out of my sight before I decide it should be the birch rather than Silviana’s strap.” Tossing the white stole to the floor, she turned her back and released *saidar,* gliding toward her chair as if Alviarin had ceased to exist.

Alviarin did not leave, she fled, running with the feel of the Darkhounds’ breath on the back of her neck. She had barely been able to think since she heard the word *treason.* That word, echoing in her head, made her want to howl. Treason could only mean one thing. Elaida knew, and she was searching for proof. The Dark Lord have mercy. But he never did. Mercy was for those afraid to be strong. She was not afraid. She was a skin stuffed to bursting with terror.

Back down through the Tower she fled, and if there was so much as a servant in the hallways, she did not see him. Horror blinded her eyes to anything not directly in her path. All the way back down to the sixth level she ran, to her own apartments. At least, she supposed they were still hers for the moment. The rooms with their balcony overlooking the great square in front of the Tower went with the office of Keeper. For the moment, it was enough that she still had rooms. And a chance to live.

The furnishings were still the Domani pieces left by the previous occupant, all pale striped wood inlaid with pearlshell and amber. In the bedchamber, she threw open one of the wardrobes and fell to her knees, pushing aside dresses to rummage in the back for a small chest, a box less than two hands square, that had been hers for many years. The carving on the box was intricate but clumsy, rows of varied knots apparently done by a carver with more ambition than skill. Her hands shook as she carried it to a table, and she set it down to wipe clammy palms on her dress. The trick to opening the box was simply a matter of spreading her fingers as wide as they would go to press simultaneously at four knots in the carving, no two alike. The lid lifted slightly, and she threw it back, revealing her most precious possession wrapped in a small bundle of brown cloth to keep it from rattling if a maid shook the box. Most Tower servants would not risk stealing, but most did not mean all.

For a moment, Alviarin only stared at the package. Her most precious possession, a thing from the Age of Legends, but she had never dared use it before. Only in the worst emergency, Mesaana had said, the most desperate need, yet what need could be more dire than this? Mesaana said the thing could take hammer blows without breaking, but she undid the wrappings with the care she would have used with a piece of fine blown glass, revealing a *ter'angreal*, a brilliant red rod no larger than her forefinger, utterly smooth except for a few fine lines worked into the surface in a sinuous interconnecting pattern. Embracing the Source, she touched that pattern with hair-thin flows of Fire and Earth at two of the interconnections. That would not have been necessary in the Age of Legends, but something called the "standing flows" no longer existed. A world where almost any *ter'angreal* could be used by people unable to channel seemed odd beyond comprehension. Why had it been allowed?

Pressing one end of the rod hard with her thumb—the One Power was not enough, by itself—she sat down heavily and leaned against the chair's low back, staring at the thing in her hand. It was done. She felt hollow, now, a vast empty space with fears fluttering through the darkness like enormous bats.

Instead of rewrapping the *ter'angreal*, she tucked it into her belt pouch and got up long enough to stuff the box back into the wardrobe. Until she knew she was safe, she did not intend to let that rod out of her possession. But then all she could do was sit and wait, rocking back and forth with her hands clasped between her knees. She could not stop rocking any more than she could stop the low moans that trickled between her teeth. Since the founding of the Tower, no sister had ever been charged with being Black Ajah. Oh, there had been suspicions by individual sisters, and from time to time Aes Sedai had died to make sure those suspicions never went further, but never had it come to official charges. If Elaida was willing to speak openly of the headsman's block, she must be close to bringing charges. Very close. Black sisters had been made to disappear, too, when suspicions grew too great. The Black Ajah remained hidden whatever the cost. She wished she could stop moaning.

Suddenly the light in the room dimmed, enveloping the chamber in swirling twilight shadows. The sunlight at the casements seemed unable to penetrate beyond the glass panes. Alviarin was on her knees in a breath, eyes down. She trembled with wanting to pour out her fears, but with the Chosen, the forms must be followed. “I live to serve, Great Mistress,” she said, and nothing more. She could not waste a moment, much less an hour screaming in pain. Her hands were clutched together to keep them from shaking.

“What is your grave emergency, child?” It was a woman’s voice, but a voice of crystal chimes. Displeased chimes. Only displeased. Angry chimes might have meant death on the spot. “If you think I will raise a finger to get the Keeper’s stole back for you, you are sadly mistaken. You can still do what I wish done, with a little extra effort. And you may consider your penances with the Mistress of Novices a small punishment from me. I did warn you about pushing Elaida quite so hard.”

Alviarin swallowed her protests. Elaida was not a woman to bend without hard pushing. Mesaana had to know that. But protests could be dangerous, with the Chosen. Many things were dangerous, with the Chosen. In any case, Silviana’s strap was a trifle compared to the headsman’s axe.

“Elaida knows, Great Mistress,” she breathed, raising her eyes. In front of her stood a woman of light-and-shadow, clothed in light-and-shadow, all stark blacks and silvery whites that flowed from one to the other and back. Silver eyes frowned from a face of smoke, with silver lips drawn in a tight line. It was only Illusion, and really not done any better than Alviarin could have. A flash of green silk skirt embroidered with elaborate bands of bronze showed as Mesaana glided across the Domani carpet. But Alviarin could not see the weaves that made the Illusion any more than she had felt those the woman had used to arrive or cast the room in shadows. For all she could sense, Mesaana could not channel at all! The lust for those two secrets usually cut at her, but today she hardly noticed. “She knows I am Black Ajah, Great Mistress. If she has uncovered me, then she has had someone digging deep. Dozens of us may be at risk, perhaps all of us.” Best to make a threat as large as possible if you wanted to be sure of a response. It might even be so.

But Mesaana’s response was a dismissive wave of one now-silver hand. Her face glowed like a moon around eyes blacker than coals. “That is ridiculous. Elaida cannot decide from one day to the next whether she even believes the Black Ajah exists. You are just trying to save yourself a little pain. Perhaps a little more will instruct you in your error.” Alviarin began to plead as Mesaana raised that hand higher, and a weave she remembered much too well formed in the air. She had to make the woman understand!

Abruptly, the shadows in the room lurched. Everything seemed to shift sideways as the darkness thickened in midnight lumps. And then the darkness was gone. Startled, Alviarin found herself with her begging hands stretched up toward a blue-eyed woman of flesh and blood, garbed in bronze-embroidered green. A tantalizingly familiar woman who looked just short of her middle years. She had known Mesaana walked the Tower disguised as one of the sisters, though no Chosen she had met showed any sign of agelessness, but she could not match that face to any name. And she realized something else, as well. That face was afraid. Hiding it, but afraid.

"She's been very useful," Mesaana said, not sounding afraid at all, in a voice that tugged the edge of recognition, "and now I will have to kill her."

"You were always . . . overly wasteful," replied a harsh voice, like rotten bone crumbling underfoot.

Alviarin fell over in shock at the tall shape of a man in sinuous black armor, all overlapping plates like the scales of a snake, standing in front of one window. It was not a man, though. That bloodless face had no eyes, just smooth dead white skin where they should have been. She had encountered Myrddraal before, in the service of the Dark Lord, and even managed to meet their eyeless gazes without giving way to the terror those stares engendered, but this one made her scrabble back across the floor until her back jarred a leg of the table. Lurks were alike as two raindrops, tall and lean and identical, but this one stood a head taller, and fear seemed to radiate from it, soaking into her bones. Unthinking, she reached for the Source. And nearly screamed. The Source was gone! She was not shielded; there was simply nothing there for her to embrace! The Myrddraal looked at her and smiled. Lurks never smiled. Never. Her breath came in ragged panting.

"She can be useful," the Myrddraal rasped. "I would not want the Black Ajah destroyed."

"Who are you to challenge one of the Chosen?" Mesaana demanded contemptuously, then ruined the effect by licking her lips.

"Do you think Hand of the Shadow is just a name?" The Myrddraal's voice no longer grated. Hollow, it seemed to boom down caverns from some unimaginable distance. The creature grew as it spoke, swelling in size till its head brushed the ceiling, over two spans up. “You were summoned, and you did not come. My hand reaches far, Mesaana.”

Shaking visibly, the Chosen opened her mouth, perhaps to plead, but suddenly black fire flashed around her, and she screamed as her clothing fell away in dust. Bands of black flame bound her arms to her sides, wrapped tight around her legs, and a seething ball of black appeared in her mouth, forcing her jaws wide. She writhed there, standing naked and helpless, and the look in her rolling eyes made Alviarin want to soil herself.

“Do you want to know why one of the Chosen must be punished?” The voice was a bone-grating rasp once more, the Myrddraal seemingly only a too-tall Lurk, but Alviarin was not fooled. “Do you want to watch?” it asked.

She should go facedown on the floor, grovel for her life, but she could not move. She could not look away from that eyeless stare. “No, Great Lord,” she managed with a mouth as dry as dust. She knew. It could not be, but she knew. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, she realized.

The Myrddraal smiled again. “Many have fallen from great heights for wanting to know too much.”

It flowed toward her—no; not it—the Great Lord, clothed in the skin of a Myrddraal, flowed toward her. He walked on legs, yet there was no other description for the way he moved. The pale, black-clad shape bent toward her, and she would have shrieked when he touched a finger to her forehead. She would have shrieked if she could have summoned any sound at all. Her lungs were airless sacks. The touch burned like red-hot iron. Vaguely, she wondered why she did not smell her own flesh burning. The Great Lord straightened, and the searing pain dwindled, vanished. Her terror did not lessen in the slightest, though.

“You are marked as mine,” the Great Lord rasped. “Mesaana will not harm you, now. Unless I give her permission. You will find who threatens my creatures here and deliver them to me.” He turned away from her, and the dark armor fell from his body. She was startled when it hit the carpeted floor tiles with a crash of steel rather than simply vanishing. He was clothed in black, and she could not have said whether it was silk or leather or something else. The darkness of it seemed to drink the light from the room. Mesaana began to thrash in her bonds, keening shrilly past the gag in her mouth. “Go now,” he said, “if you wish to live another hour.” The sound coming from Mesaana rose to a despairing scream.

Alviarin did not know how she got out of her rooms—she could not understand how she was upright when her legs felt like water—but she found herself running through the corridors, skirts pulled to her knees and running as hard as she could. Suddenly the head of a wide staircase loomed in front of her, and she barely managed to stop from running right out into the air. Sagging against the wall, shaking, she stared down the curving flight of white marble steps. In her mind, she could see her body breaking as it crashed down the stairway.

Breathing raggedly, in hoarse, raw-throated pants, she put a trembling hand to her forehead. Her thoughts tumbled one over another, as she would have down the stairs. The Great Lord had marked her as his. Her fingers slid across smooth unblemished skin. She had always prized knowledge—power grew from knowledge—but she did not want to know what was happening in the rooms she had left. She wished she did not know that anything was happening. The Great Lord had marked her, but Mesaana would find a way to kill her, for knowing that. The Great Lord had marked her and given her a command. She could live, if she found who was hunting the Black Ajah. Straightening her back with an effort, she hurriedly scrubbed at the tears on her cheeks with the heels of her palms. She could not pull her eyes away from the stairs falling away in front of her. Elaida surely suspected her, but if there was no more to it than that, she could always manufacture a hunt. It just had to include Elaida herself as a threat to be extinguished. Delivered to the Great Lord. Her fingers fluttered to her forehead again. She had the Black Ajah at her command. Smooth, unblemished skin. Talene had been there, in Elaida’s rooms. Why had she looked at Yukiri and Doesine that way? Talene was Black, though she did not know that Alviarin was, of course. Would any mark show in a mirror? Was there something that others could see? If she had to manufacture a scheme for Elaida’s supposed hunters, Talene might be a place to start. She tried to trace the route any message would have taken from heart to heart before it reached Talene, but she could not stop staring down the stairs, seeing her body bounce and break its way to the bottom. The Great Lord had marked her.

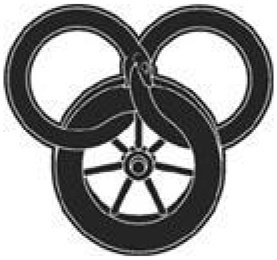

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CHAPTER 22

One Answer

Pevara waited with a touch of impatience while the slim little Accepted placed the rimmed silver tray on a side table and uncovered the dish of cakes. A short woman with a serious face, Pedra was not being laggard, or resentful over having to spend the morning fetching and carrying for a Sitter, just precise and careful. Those were useful qualities, to be encouraged. Still, when the accepted asked whether she should pour the wine, Pevara said crisply, “We will do for ourselves, child. You may wait in the anteroom.” She almost told the young woman to go back to her studies.

Pedra spread her banded white skirts in a graceful curtsy without any sign of being flustered the way Accepted often were when a Sitter showed snappishness. All too frequently, Accepted took any bite in a Sitter’s tone as an opinion on their fitness for the shawl, as if Sitters had no other concerns.

Pevara waited until the door closed behind Pedra and the latch clicked before nodding approvingly. “That one will be raised Aes Sedai soon,” she said. It was satisfying when any woman attained the shawl, but especially when the woman had appeared unpromising to begin with. Small pleasures seemed the only ones available, these days.

“Not one of ours, though, I think” was the reply from her surprising guest, who turned from a study of the row of painted miniatures of Pevara’s dead family that stood in a line on the wave-carved marble mantel above the fireplace. “She’s uncertain about men. I believe they make her nervous.”

Tarna certainly had never been nervous about men or very much of anything else, at least not since she reached the shawl just over twenty years ago. Pevara could remember a very jumpy novice, but the pale-haired woman’s blue eyes were steady as stones, now. And about as warm as stones in winter. Even so, there was something in that cool prideful face, something in the set of her mouth, that made her seem uneasy this morning. Pevara could hardly imagine what might make Tarna Feir nervous.

The real question, though, was why the woman had come to see her. It bordered on impropriety for her to visit any Sitter privately, particularly a Red. Tarna still maintained her rooms here in the Red quarter, but so long as she held her new position, she was no longer part of the Red Ajah despite the crimson embroidery on her dark gray dress. Delaying the move to her new apartment might be taken as a show of delicacy, by those who did not know her.

Anything out of the ordinary made Pevara wary since Seaine had pulled her into hunting the Black Ajah. And Elaida trusted Tarna, just as she had trusted Galina; it was wise to be very cautious with *anyone* Elaida trusted. Just thinking of Galina—the Light burn the woman forever!—still set Pevara's teeth on edge, but there was a second connection. Galina had taken a special interest in Tarna as a novice, too. True, Galina had taken an interest in any novice or Accepted she thought might join the Red, but it was another reason for caution.

Not that Pavara let anything show on her face, of course. She had been Aes Sedai too long for that. Smiling, she reached for the long-necked silver pitcher that sat on the tray giving off the sweet scent of spices. "Will you take wine, Tarna, in congratulation for being raised?"

Silver goblets in hand, they settled on spiral-worked armchairs, a style that had gone out of fashion in Kandor near a hundred years ago, but one that Pevara liked. She saw no reason to change her furniture or anything else according to the whims of the moment. The chairs had served her since they were new-made, and they were comfortable with the addition of a few cushions. Tarna sat stiffly, however, on the edge of her seat. No one had ever called her languid, but clearly she *was* uneasy.

"I am not certain congratulations are in order," she said, fingering the narrow red stole draped around her neck. The exact shade was not prescribed, except that anyone who saw it must call the color red, and she had chosen a brilliant scarlet that nearly shone. "Elaida insisted, and I could not refuse. Much has changed since I left the Tower, inside as well as out. Alviarin made everyone . . . watchful . . . of the Keeper. I suspect some will want her birched, when she finally returns. And Elaida . . ." She paused to sip at her wine, but when she lowered the goblet, she went on in a different vein. "I have often heard you called unconventional. I have even heard that you once said you would like to have a Warder."

"I've been called worse than unconventional," Pevara said dryly. What had the woman been about to say concerning Elaida? She sounded as though she would have refused the Keeper's stole, given her wishes. Strange. Tarna was hardly shy or shrinking. Silence seemed best. Especially about Warders. She had been talking too much if *that* was general gossip. Besides, keep silent long enough, and the other woman always spoke if only to fill up the gap. You could learn a great deal through silence. She sipped her own wine slowly. There was too much honey in it for her taste, and not enough ginger.

Still stiff, Tarna rose and strode to the fireplace, where she stood staring at the miniatures sitting on their white lacquered stands. She raised a hand to touch one of the ivory ovals, and Pevara felt her own shoulders tighten in spite of herself. Georg, her youngest brother, had been only twelve when he died, when all of the people in those paintings died, in an uprising by Darkfriends. They had not been a family who could afford ivory miniatures, but once she had the coin, she found a painter who could capture her memories. A beautiful boy, Georg, tall for his years and utterly fearless. Long after the event, she had learned how her baby brother died. With a knife in his hand, standing over their father's body and trying to keep the mob from their mother. So many years ago, now. They would all have been long dead in any case, and their children's children's children, as well. But some hatreds never died.

"The Dragon Reborn is *ta'veren,* so I have heard," Tarna said finally, still staring at Georg's picture. "Do you think he alters chance everywhere? Or do we change the future by ourselves, one step following another until we find ourselves somewhere we never expected?"

"What do you mean?" Pevara said, a trifle more curtly than she could have wished. She did not like the other woman peering at her brother's image so intently while talking of a man who could channel, even if he was the Dragon Reborn. She bit her lip so as not to tell Tarna to turn around and look at her. You could not read someone's back the way you could a face.

"I anticipated no great difficulty in Salidar. No great success, either, but what I found . . ." Was that a shake of her head, or had she merely changed the angle at which she was peering at the miniature? She spoke slowly, but with an undercurrent of remembered urgency. "I left a pigeon-handler a day outside the village, yet it took me less than half a day to get back to her, and after I loosed the birds with copies of my report, I pressed on so hard I had to pay the woman off because she could not keep up. I can hardly say how many horses I went through. Sometimes, the animal was spent to the point I had to show my ring to make a stable take it in trade, even with silver added. And because I pressed so hard, I happened to reach a village in Murandy while a . . . recruiting party . . . was there. If I had not been frightened out of my wits for the Tower by what I saw in Salidar, I would have ridden to Ebou Dar and taken ship for Illian and then upriver, but the thought of going south instead of north, the thought of waiting for a vessel, sent me like an arrow toward Tar Valon. So I was in that village to see them."

"Who, Tarna?"

"Asha'man." The woman did turn then. Her eyes were still blue ice, but tight. She held her goblet in both hands as if trying to soak in the warmth. "I did not know what they were then, of course, but they were openly recruiting men to follow the Dragon Reborn, and it seemed wisest to listen before I spoke. Well for me that I did. There were six of them, Pevara, six men in black coats. Two with silver swords on their collars were feeling men out about whether they might like to learn to channel. Oh, they did not say so right out. Wield the lightnings, they called it. Wield the lightnings and ride the thunder. But it was clear enough to me, if not to the fools they were talking to."

"Yes; very well for you that you kept silent," Pevara said quietly. "Six men who can channel would be more than merely dangerous for a sister by herself. Our eyes-and-ears are full of talk about these recruiting parties—they appear everywhere from Saldaea to Tear—but no one seems to have an idea of how to stop them. If it isn't too late for that already." She very nearly bit her lip again. That was the trouble with talking. Sometimes, you said more than you wanted.

Oddly, the comment took some of the stiffness out of Tarna. She resumed her seat, leaning back, though a hint of wariness still clung to the way she held herself. She chose her words carefully, pausing to touch the wine to her lips, but she did not actually drink, that Pevara saw. "I had a long time to think on the rivership coming north. Longer, after the fool captain ran us aground so hard he broke a mast and put a hole in the hull. Days trying to hail another ship, after we got ashore, and days finding a horse. Six of those men sent to one village convinced me, finally. Oh, the district around, as well, but it was not very populous. I . . . I believe it is too late."

"Elaida thinks they can all be gentled," Pevara said noncommittally. She had already exposed herself too much.

"When they can send six to one small village, and Travel? There is only one answer I can see. We . . ." Tarna took a deep breath, fingering the bright red stole again, but now it seemed more in regret than to play for time. "Red sisters must take them as Warders, Pevara."

That was so startling that Pevara blinked. A hair less self-control, and she would have gaped. "Are you serious?"

Those icy blue eyes met her gaze steadily. The worst was past—the unthinkable spoken aloud— and Tarna was a woman of stone once more. "This is hardly a matter for joking. The only other choice is to let them run loose. Who else can do it? Red sisters are used to facing men like this, and ready to take the necessary risks. Anyone else will flinch. Each sister will have to take more than one, but Greens appear to manage well enough with that. I think the Greens will faint if this is suggested to them, though. We . . . Red sisters . . . must do what needs to be done."

"Have you broached this to Elaida?" Pevara asked, and Tarna shook her head impatiently.

"Elaida believes as you said. She . . ." The yellow-haired woman frowned into her wine before going on. "Elaida often believes what she wants to believe and sees what she wants to see. I tried to bring up the Asha'man the first day I was back. Not to suggest bonding; not to her. I am not a fool. She forbade me to mention them to her. But you are . . . unconventional."

"And do you believe they can be gentled *after* they're bonded? I have no idea what that would do to the sister holding the bond, and in truth, I don't want to learn." She was the one playing for time, Pevara realized. She had had no idea where this interview was headed when it began, but she would have wagered everything she owned against it coming to this.

"That might be the end, and it might prove impossible," the other woman replied coolly. The woman *was* stone. "Either way, I can see no other way to handle these Asha'man. Red sisters must bond them as Warders. If there is any way, I will be among the first, but it *must* be done."

She sat there, calmly sipping her wine, and for a long time, Pevara could only stare at her in consternation. Nothing Tarna had said proved she was not Black Ajah, yet she could not distrust every sister unable to prove that. Well, she could and did, when it came to matters of the Black, but there were other matters she had to deal with. She was a Sitter, not simply a hunting dog. She had the White Tower to think of, and Aes Sedai far from the Tower. And the future.

Dipping her fingers into her embroidered belt pouch, she drew out a small piece of paper rolled into a thin tube. It seemed to her that it should glow with letters of fire. So far, she was one of two women in the Tower who knew what was written there. Even once she had it out, she hesitated before handing it to Tarna. “This came from one of our agents in Cairhien, but it was sent by Toveine Gazal.”

Tarna’s eyes jerked to Pevara’s face at the mention of Toveine’s name, then fell to reading again. Her stony face did not change even after she finished and let the paper roll back into a tube in her hand. “This changes nothing,” she said flatly. Coldly. “It only makes what I suggest more urgent.”

“On the contrary,” Pevara sighed. “That changes everything. It changes the whole world.”

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CHAPTER 23

Ornaments

The air in the room was just sufficiently warmer than outside to put a mist on the glass panes set in the red-painted casements, and the glass contained bubbles besides, but Cadsuane stood peering out as if she could see the dreary landscape clearly. She could see with more than enough clarity, in any case. A few hapless folk, bundled and hatted and only shapeless skirts or baggy breeches distinguishing men from women, were trudging the muddy fields that surrounded the manor house, sometimes stooping to feel a handful of the soil. It would not be long before they could begin their plowing and manuring, but only their inspection indicated the coming of spring any time soon. Beyond the fields, the forest was all dark bare branches against a washed-out gray morning sky. A good coating of snow would have made the view much less bleak, but it snowed lightly and seldom here, with traces of one fall rarely lasting until the next. Still, she could think of few places better for her purposes, with the Spine of the World little more than a day’s hard ride to the east. Who would think to look inside the borders of Tear? Had convincing the boy to stay here been too easy, though? With a sigh, she turned from the window, feeling the golden ornaments hanging in her hair sway, the small moons and stars, birds and fish. She was very aware of them, of late. Aware? Phaw! Of late, she had considered sleeping with them in place.

The sitting room was large but not ornate, like the manor house itself, with cornices of carved wood, painted red. The furniture was bright with paint but not a touch of gilding, the two long fireplaces plain stone if well made, the andirons sturdy wrought metal made for long service rather than appearances. The fires on the hearths were small, at her insistence, the flames flickering low on half-consumed splits, but either was enough to warm her hands, which was all she wanted. Left to his own devices, Algarin would have surrounded her with blazing warmth and smothered her in servants, few as he still employed. A lesser Lord of the Land, he was far from wealthy, yet he paid his debts in letter and spirit, even when most other men would have seen quite the reverse of a debt.

The uncarved door to the hall creaked open—most of Algarin's servants were nearly as old as he, and though they kept everything dusted and neat, the lamps topped with oil and the wicks trimmed, hinges in the manor seemed to escape regular oiling—the door creaked open to admit Verin, still dressed for a journey in simple brown wool with divided skirts and carrying her cloak over her arm, still patting her gray-streaked hair into place. The stout little sister's square face wore a vexed expression, and she was shaking her head. "Well, the Sea Folk are delivered to Tear, Cadsuane. I didn't go near the Stone, but I heard that High Lord Astoril stopped complaining about his creaking joints and mustered inside with Darlin. Who'd have thought Astoril would stir himself, and on Darlin's side? The streets are full of armsmen, most getting drunk and picking fights with each other when they're not fighting Atha'an Miere. There are as many Sea Folk in the city as everyone else put together. Harine was aghast. She went rushing out to the ships as soon as she could hire a boat, expecting to be declared Mistress of the Ships and set everything to rights. There seems no doubt that Nesta din Reas is dead."

Cadsuane was content to let the round little woman chatter on. Verin was not nearly so vague as she pretended. Some Browns really were capable of tripping over their own feet from not noticing them, but Verin was one of those who wore an assumed cloak of unworldliness. She seemed to believe that Cadsuane accepted the cloak for reality, yet if there was a point to be made, she would make it. And what she left out might be revealing, too. Cadsuane was less sure of the other sister than she might have wished. Uncertainty was a fact of life, but she was uncertain about entirely too many things to suit her.

Unfortunately, Min must have been listening at the door, and that young woman had little patience. "I told Harine it wouldn't be like that," she protested, bursting into the room. "I told her she'd be punished for the bargain she made with Rand. Only after that will she become Mistress of the Ships, and I can't say if it will be ten days from now or ten years." Slim and pretty, and tall in her red-heeled boots, with dark ringlets hanging to her shoulders, Min had a low womanly voice, but she wore a boy's red coat and blue breeches. The coat was embroidered with colorful flowers on the lapels and up the sleeves, and the breeches in bands down the outsides of the legs, but they were still coat and breeches.

“You may come in, Min,” Cadsuane said quietly. It was a tone that usually made people sit up and take notice. Those who knew her at all, anyway. Spots of color appeared in Min’s cheeks. “The Wavemistress has already learned all she is going to from your viewing, I fear. But from your urgency, perhaps you’ve read someone else’s auras and wish to tell me what you saw?” The girl’s peculiar ability had proved helpful in the past and doubtless could again. Perhaps. As far as Cadsuane could tell, she did not lie about what she saw in the images and auras that she perceived floating around people, but she was not always forthcoming, either. Particularly not when it came to the one person Cadsuane would have liked to know about above all others.

Red cheeks or no red cheeks, Min raised her chin stubbornly. She had changed since Shadar Logoth, or perhaps it had begun earlier, but either way, the change was not for the better. “Rand wants you to come see him. He said to ask, so you needn’t get snippy over it.”

Cadsuane merely looked at her and let the silence stretch. Snippy? Definitely not for the better. “Tell him I will come when I am able,” she said finally. “Close the door firmly behind you, Min.” The young woman opened her mouth as if to say something more, but at least she retained sense enough to leave it unsaid. She even made a passable curtsy, in spite of those ridiculous boots, and shut the door firmly behind her. Just barely short of slamming it, in fact.

Verin shook her head again, giving a laugh that sounded only slightly amused. “She’s in love with the young man, Cadsuane, and she’s tucked her heart in his pocket. She’ll follow that before her head, whatever you say or do. I think she’s afraid he almost died on her, and you know how that can make a woman determined to hang on.”

Cadsuane’s lips thinned. Verin knew more about that sort of relations with men than she did—she had never believed in indulging with her own Warders, as some Greens did, and other men had always been out of the question—but the Brown had hit close to a truth without knowing. At least, Cadsuane did not think the other sister knew Min was bonded to the al’Thor boy. She herself only knew because the girl had let too much slip in a careless moment. Even the tightest mussel eventually yielded its meat once you got that first small crack in the shell. Sometimes it gave up an unexpected pearl, as well. Yes, Min would want to keep the lad alive whether she loved him or not, but no more than Cadsuane did.

Draping her cloak on the tall back of a chair, Verin moved to the nearest fireplace and stretched out her hands to warm them in front of the low flames. You could not say that Verin glided, but she was more graceful than her bulk suggested. How much of her was deception? Every Aes Sedai hid behind various masks, over time. It became habit after a while. “I believe the situation in Tear may be resolved peacefully yet,” she said, peering into the fire. She might have been talking to herself. Or wanted Cadsuane to think it. “Hearne and Simaan are growing quite desperate, afraid the other High Lords will return from Illian and trap them in the city. They may be amenable to accepting Darlin, given their other choices. Estanda is made of sterner stuff, but if she can be convinced there’s advantage for her in it—”

“I told you not to go near them,” Cadsuane broke in sternly.

The stout woman blinked at her in surprise. “I didn’t. The streets are always full of rumors, and I do know how to piece rumors together and sift out a little truth. I did see Alanna and Rafela, but I ducked behind a fellow hawking meat pies from a barrow before they saw me. I’m sure they didn’t.” She paused, clearly waiting for Cadsuane to explain why she had been told to avoid the sisters as well.

“I have to go to the boy now, Verin,” Cadsuane said instead. That was the trouble with agreeing to advise someone. Even when you managed to set all the conditions you could wish for—most of them, anyway—you still had to come sooner or later when they called. Eventually. But it did give her a reason to evade Verin’s curiosity. The answer was simple. If you tried to solve every problem yourself, you ended by solving none. And with some problems, how they were solved really did not matter in the long run. But not answering left Verin with a puzzle to ponder, a little butter for her paws. When Cadsuane was unsure of someone, she wanted them unsure of her, too.

Verin gathered up her cloak and left the room with her. Did the other woman mean to accompany her? But outside the sitting room, they encountered Nesune walking briskly down the hall. She came to a sudden halt. No more than a handful of people had ever managed to ignore Cadsuane, yet Nesune did a credible job, her nearly black eyes latching on to Verin.

“You’re back then, are you?” The best of Browns did have a way of stating the obvious. “You wrote a paper on animals of the Drowned Lands, as I recall.” Which meant that Verin had; Nesune recalled everything she had ever seen—a useful skill, if Cadsuane had been sure enough of her to make use of it. “Lord Algarin showed me the skin of a large snake he claims came from the Drowned Lands, but I’m convinced it is the same as I observed. . . .” Verin glanced helplessly at Cadsuane over her shoulder as the taller woman drew her away by her sleeve, but before they were three steps along the corridor, she was deep in discussion over this fool snake.

It was a remarkable sight, and troubling in a way. Nesune was loyal to Elaida, or had been, while Verin was one of those who wanted to pull Elaida down. Or had been. Now they talked amiably about snakes. That both had sworn fealty to the al’Thor boy could be laid to his being *ta’veren,* winding the Pattern around himself unconsciously, but was that oath sufficient to make them ignore their opposition over who held the Amyrlin Seat? Or were they affected by having a *ta’veren* in close proximity? She would have liked very much to know that. None of her ornaments protected against *ta’veren.* Of course, she did not know what two of the fish and one of the moons did, but it seemed unlikely they did that. It could have been as simple as Verin and Nesune both being Brown. Browns could forget everything else when they settled to study something. Snakes. Phaw! The small ornaments swayed as she shook her head before turning away, having the two receding Browns behind. What did the boy want? She had never liked being an advisor, necessary or not.

Drafts along the corridors rippled the few tapestries on the walls, all in old styles and showing the wear of having been taken down and rehung many times. The manor house had grown like a rambling farmhouse rather than being built large, with additions added whenever the family’s fortunes and numbers waxed. House Pendaloan had never been wealthy, but there had been times they were numerous. The results showed in more than worn, old-fashioned wall hangings. The cornices were brightly painted, red or blue or yellow, but the hallways varied in width and height, and sometimes met at a slight skew. Windows that once had looked to the fields now looked down on courtyards, usually bare except for a few benches and placed purely to provide light. Sometimes there was no choice in getting from here to there except to take a roofed colonnade overlooking one of those courtyards. The columns were wooden more often than not, though bravely painted even where not carved.

On one of those walkways, with fat green columns, two sisters were standing together watching the activity in the courtyard below. At least, they were watching together when Cadsuane opened the door to the colonnade. Beldeine saw her step out, and stiffened, twitching at the green-fringed shawl she had worn fewer than five years. Pretty, with her high cheekbones and a slight tilt to her brown eyes, she had not yet achieved agelessness, and looked younger than Min, particularly when she shot Cadsuane a frosty stare and hurried from the colonnade in the other direction.

Merise, her companion, smiled after her in amusement, shifting her own green-fringed shawl slightly. Tall and usually quite serious, with her hair drawn back tightly from her pale face, Merise was not a woman who smiled often. “Beldeine, she is becoming concerned that she has no Warder yet,” she said in the accents of Tarabon as Cadsuane stopped beside her, though her blue eyes returned to the courtyard. “She seems to be considering an Asha’man, if she can find one. I told her to talk to Daigian. If it does not help her, it will help Daigian.”

All of the Warders they had with them were gathered in the stone-paved yard, in their shirtsleeves despite the cold, most seated on painted wooden benches watching two of their number work with wooden practice swords. Jahar, one of Merise’s three, was a pretty, sun-dark young man. The silver bells fastened to the ends of his two long braids chimed with the fury of his attack. He moved like a striking blacklance. Not a breath of breeze stirred, but the eight-pointed star, like a golden compass rose, seemed to shift against Cadsuane’s hair. Had it been held in her hand, she could have felt it vibrating clearly. But then, she already knew that Jahar was an Asha’man, and the star would not have pointed him out, merely told her that a man who could channel was nearby. The more men who could channel, the harder the star quivered, she had learned. Jahar’s opponent, a very tall, broad-shouldered fellow with a stone face and a braided leather cord around his graying temples to hold back shoulder-length hair, was not the second Asha’man down there, but he was as deadly in his own way. Lan did not really seem to move that fast, but he . . . flowed. His blade of bundled laths was always there to deflect Jahar’s, always moving the younger man just a touch more out of his line.

Suddenly, Lan's wooden blade struck Jahar's side with a resounding crack, a killing blow given with steel. While the younger man was still flinching from the force of the strike, Lan flowed back into a ready stance, long blade upright in his hands. Nethan, another of Merise's, rose to his feet, a lean fellow with wings of white at his temples and tall, if still a hand or more shorter than Lan. Jahar waved him away and raised his practice blade again, loudly demanding another go.

"Is Daigian still bearing up?" Cadsuane asked.

"Better than I expected," Merise admitted. "She stays in her room too much, but she keeps her weeping private." Her gaze shifted from the men dancing their swords to a green-painted bench where Verin's stocky gray-haired Tomas sat next to a grizzled fellow with only a fringe of white hair remaining. "Damer, he wanted to try his Healing on her, but Daigian refused. She may never have had a Warder before, but she knows that the grieving over a dead Warder is part of remembering him. I am surprised that Corele would consider allowing it."

With a shake of her head, the Taraboner sister returned to studying Jahar. Other sisters' Warders did not really interest her, at least not like her own. "Asha'man, they grieve as Warders do. I thought perhaps Jahar and Damer merely followed the lead of the others, but Jahar, he says it is their way, too. I did not intrude, of course, but I watched them drink in memory of Daigian's young Eben. They never mentioned his name, but they had a full winecup sitting for him. Bassane and Nethan, they know they can die on any day, and they accept that. Jahar *expects* to die; every day he expects it. To him, every hour is most assuredly his last."

Cadsuane barely refrained from glancing at the other woman. Merise did not often go on at such length. The other woman's face was smooth, her manner unruffled, but something had upset her. "I know you practice linking with him," she said delicately, peering down into the courtyard. Delicacy was required in talking to another sister about her Warder. That was part of the reason she stared into the courtyard, frowning. "Have you decided yet whether the al'Thor boy succeeded at Shadar Logoth? Did he really manage to cleanse the male half of the Source?"

Corele practiced linking with Damer, too, but the Yellow was so focused on her futile efforts to reason out how to do with *saidar* what he did with *saidin* that she would not have noticed the Dark One's taint sliding down her throat. A pity she herself had not come to the shawl fifty years later than she had, or she would have bonded one of the men herself and had no need to ask. But fifty years would have meant that Norla died in her little house in the Black Hills before Cadsuane Melaidhrin ever went to the White Tower. That would have altered a great deal of history. For one thing, it would have been unlikely that she would be in anything approaching her present circumstances. So she asked, delicately, and waited.

Merise was quiet, and still, for a long moment, and then she sighed. "I do not know, Cadsuane. *Saidar* is a calm ocean that will take you wherever you want so long as you know the currents and let them carry you. *Saidin* . . . An avalanche of burning stone. Collapsing mountains of ice. It *feels* cleaner than when I first linked with Jahar, but anything could hide in that chaos. Anything."

Cadsuane nodded. She was not sure she had expected any other answer. Why should she find any certainty about one of the two most important questions in the world when she could find none on so many simpler matters? In the courtyard, Lan's wooden blade stopped, not with a crack this time, just touching Jahar's throat, and the bigger man flowed back to his waiting stance. Nethan stood again, and again Jahar waved him back, angrily raising his sword and setting himself. Merise's third, Bassane, a short wide fellow nearly as sun-dark as Jahar for all he was Cairhienin, laughed and made a rude comment about over-ambitious men tripping on their own blades. Tomas and Damer exchanged glances and shook their heads; men of that age usually had given up taunting long ago. The clack of wood on wood began once more.

The other four Warders were not the only audience for Lan and Jahar in the courtyard. The slim girl with her dark hair in a long braid, watching anxiously from a red bench, was the focus of Cadsuane's frown. The child would need to flash her Great Serpent ring under people's noses to be taken for Aes Sedai, which she was, if just technically. It was not only because Nynaeve's face was a girl's face; Beldeine still seemed as young. Nynaeve bounced on the bench, always on the point of leaping up. Occasionally her mouth moved as if she were silently shouting encouragement, and sometimes her hands twisted as though demonstrating how Lan should have moved his sword. A frivolous girl, full of passions, who only rarely demonstrated that she had a brain. Min was not the only one to have thrown her heart and head both down the well over a man. By the customs of dead Malkier, the red dot painted on Nynaeve's forehead indicated her marriage to Lan, though Yellows seldom married their Warders. Very few sisters did, for that matter. And of course, Lan was not Nynaeve's Warder, however much he and the girl pretended otherwise. Who he did belong to was a matter they evaded like thieves slipping through the night.

More interesting, more disturbing, was the jewelry Nynaeve wore, a long gold necklace and slim gold belt, with matching bracelets and finger rings, the gaudy red and green and blue gems that studded them clashing with her yellow-slashed dress. And she wore that peculiar piece as well, on her left hand, golden rings attached to a golden bracelet by flat chains. That was an *angreal,* much stronger than Cadsuane's shrike hair ornament. The others were much like her own decorations, too, *ter'angreal* and plainly made at the same time, during the Breaking of the World, when an Aes Sedai might find many hands turned against her, most especially those of men who could channel. Strange to think that they had been called Aes Sedai, too. It would be like meeting a man called Cadsuane.

The question—her morning seemed filled with questions, and the sun not halfway to noon yet—the question was, did the girl wear her jewelry because of the al'Thor boy, or the Asha'man? Or because of Cadsuane Melaidhrin? Nynaeve had demonstrated her loyalty to a young man from her own village, and she had shown her wariness of him as well. She did have a brain, when she chose to use it. Until that question was answered, however, trusting the girl too far was dangerous. The trouble was, little these days did not seem dangerous.

"Jahar is growing stronger," Merise said abruptly.

For an instant, Cadsuane frowned at the other Green. Stronger? The young man's shirt was beginning to cling damply to his back, while Lan appeared not to have broken his first sweat. Then she understood. Merise meant in the Power. Cadsuane only raised a questioning eyebrow, though. She could not recall the last time she had let shock reach her face. It might have been all those years ago, in the Black Hills, when she began earning the ornaments she now wore.

"At first, I thought the way these Asha'man train, the forcing, had pushed him to his full strength already," Merise said, frowning down at the two men working their practice blades. No; it was at Jahar she was frowning. Just a faint crinkle of her eyes, but she reserved her frowns for those who could see and know her displeasure. "At Shadar Logoth, I thought I must be imagining it. Three or four days ago, I was half convinced

I was mistaken. Now, I am sure I am correct. If men gain strength by fits and starts, there is no saying how strong he will become.”

She did not voice her obvious worry, of course: that he might grow stronger than she. Saying such a thing would have been unthinkable on many different levels, and while Merise had become somewhat accustomed to doing the unthinkable—most sisters would faint at the very idea of bonding a man who could channel—she was never comfortable giving them voice. Cadsuane was, yet she kept her voice neutral. Light, but she hated being delicate. Hated the necessity, anyway.

“He seems content, Merise.” Merise’s Warders always seemed content; she handled them well.

“He is in a fury of . . .” The other woman touched the side of her head as though fingering the bundle of sensations she felt through the bond. She really *was* upset! “Not rage. Frustration.” Reaching into her green worked-leather belt pouch, she took out a small enameled pin, a sinuous figure in red and gold, like a snake with legs and a lion’s mane. “I do not know where the al’Thor lad got this, but he gave it to Jahar. Apparently, for Asha’man, it is akin to attaining the shawl. I had to take it away, of course; Jahar, he is still at the stage where he has to learn to accept only what I say he can. But he is so agitated over the thing. . . . Should I give it back to him? In a way, it would come from my hand, then.”

Cadsuane’s eyebrows began to climb before she could control them. Merise was asking advice about one of her *Warders?* Of course, Cadsuane had suggested she sound the man out in the first place, but this degree of intimacy was . . . Unthinkable? Phaw! “I’m sure whatever you decide will be correct.”

With one last glance at Nynaeve, she left the taller woman stroking the enameled pin with her thumb and frowning down into the courtyard. Lan had just defeated Jahar once more, but the young man was squaring up again, demanding yet another match. Whatever Merise decided, she had already learned one thing she did not like. The boundaries between Aes Sedai and Warders had always been as clear as the connections; Aes Sedai commanded, and Warders obeyed. But if Merise, of all people, was dithering over a collar pin—Merise, who managed her Warders with a firm hand—then new boundaries would have to be worked out, at least with Warders who could channel. It seemed unlikely that bonding them would stop now; Beldeine was evidence for that. People never really changed, yet the world did, with disturbing regularity. You just had to live with it, or at least live through it. Now and then, with luck, you could affect the direction of the changes, but even if you stopped one, you only set another in motion.

As expected, she did not find the door to the al'Thor boy's rooms unguarded. Alivia was there, of course, seated on a bench to one side of the door with her hands folded patiently in her lap. The pale-haired Seanchan woman had appointed herself the boy's protector, of sorts. Alivia credited him with freeing her from a *damane*'s collar, but there was more to it than that. Min disliked her, for one thing, and it was not the usual sort of jealousy. Alivia hardly seemed to know what men and women did together. But there was a connection between her and the boy, a connection revealed in glances that carried determination on her side and on his, hope, hard as that was to believe. Until Cadsuane knew what that was all about, she intended to do nothing to separate them. Alivia's sharp blue eyes regarded Cadsuane with a respectful wariness, but she did not see an enemy. Alivia had a short way with those she considered the al'Thor boy's enemies.

The other woman on guard was much of a size with Alivia, but the two could not have been more different, and not just because Elza's eyes were brown and she had the smooth, ageless look of Aes Sedai, where Alivia had fine lines at the corners of her eyes and threads of white almost hidden in her hair. Elza leaped to her feet as soon as she saw Cadsuane, drawing herself up in front of the door and wrapping herself tight in her shawl. "He is not alone," she said, frost riming her voice.

"Do you mean to stand in my way?" Cadsuane asked, just as coldly. The Andoran Green should have moved aside. Elza stood far enough below her in the Power that she should not have hesitated, much less waited, for a command, but the woman planted her feet, and her gaze actually grew heated.

It was a quandary. Five other sisters in the manor house had sworn fealty to the boy, and those who had been loyal to Elaida all stared at Cadsuane as if suspicious of her intentions toward him. Which raised the question of why Verin did not, of course. But only Elza tried to keep her away from him. The woman's attitude reeked of jealousy, which made no sense. She could not possibly believe herself better suited to advise him, and if there had been any suggestion that Elza desired the boy, as a man or a Warder, Min would have been snarling. The girl had finely honed instincts, there. Cadsuane would have ground her teeth, had she been the sort of woman to grind her teeth.

At the point when she thought she would have to order Elza to step aside, Alivia leaned forward. “He did send for her, Elza,” she drawled. “He’ll be upset if we keep her out. Upset with us, not her. Let her in.”

Elza glanced at the Seanchan woman from the corner of her eye, and her lip curled in contempt. Alivia stood far above her in the Power—Alivia stood well above Cadsuane, for that matter—but she was a wilder, and a liar in Elza’s view. The dark-haired woman hardly seemed to accept that Alivia had been *damane,* much less the rest of her story. Still, Elza darted a look at Cadsuane, then at the door behind her, and shifted her shawl. Plainly, she did not want the boy upset. Not with her.

“I’ll see whether he’s ready for you,” she said, very near to sullen. “Keep her here,” she added to Alivia, more sharply, before turning to knock lightly at the door. A male voice called from the other side, and she opened the door just wide enough to slip in, pulling it shut behind her.

“You’ll have to forgive her,” Alivia said in that irritatingly slow, soft Seanchan accent. “I think it’s just that she takes her oath very seriously. She isn’t used to serving anyone.”

“Aes Sedai keep their word,” Cadsuane replied dryly. The woman made her feel as if her own way of talking were as quick and crisp as a Cairhienin’s! “We must.”

“I think you do. Just so you know, I keep my word, too. I owe him anything he wants of me.”

A fascinating comment, and an opening, but before she could take advantage of it, Elza came out. Behind her came Algarin, white beard trimmed to a neat point. He offered Cadsuane a bow, with a smile that deepened the wrinkles of his face. His plain coat of dark wool, made in his younger days, hung loosely on him now, and the hair on his head provided a thin covering. There was no chance to find out why he had been visiting the al’Thor boy.

“He will see you now,” Elza said sharply.

Cadsuane very nearly did grind her teeth. Alivia would have to wait. And Algarin.

The boy was on his feet when Cadsuane entered, almost as tall and broad-shouldered as Lan in a black coat worked with gold on the sleeves and the high collar. It was too much like an Asha’man’s coat with embroidery added to suit her, but she said nothing. He made a courteous bow, ushering her to a chair with a tasseled cushion in front of the fireplace and asking whether she would like wine. That in the pitcher sitting on a side table with two winecups had gone cold, but he could send for more. She had worked hard enough to force him into civility; he could wear any coat he wanted. There were more important matters he had to be guided in. Or prodded, or pulled as need be. She was not going to waste time or talk on his clothing.

Inclining her head politely, she declined the wine. A winecup offered many opportunities—to sip when you needed a moment's thought; to peer into when you wished to hide your eyes—yet this young man needed watching every moment. His face gave away almost as little as a sister's. With that dark reddish hair and those blue-gray eyes, he could have passed for Aiel, but few Aiel had eyes that cold. They made the morning sky she had been staring at earlier seem warm. Colder than they had been before Shadar Logoth. Harder, too, unfortunately. They also looked . . . weary.

"Algarin had a brother who could channel," he said, turning toward a facing chair. Halfway into the turn, he staggered. He caught himself on an arm of the chair with a barked laugh, pretending he had tripped over his own boots, but there had been no tripping. And he had not seized *saidin*—she had seen him stagger, doing that—or her ornaments would have warned her. Corele said he only needed a little more sleep to recover from Shadar Logoth. Light, she needed to keep the boy alive, or it had all been for nothing!

"I know," she said. And since it seemed Algarin might have told him everything, she added, "I was the one who captured Emarin and took him to Tar Valon." A strange thing for Algarin to be grateful for, in some eyes, but his younger brother survived being gentled for more than ten years after she had helped him reconcile to it. The brothers had been close.

The boy's eyebrows twitched as he settled into his chair. He had *not* known. "Algarin wants to be tested," he said.

She met his gaze levelly, serenely, and held her tongue. Algarin's children were married, those who still lived. Maybe he was ready to turn this piece of land over to his descendants. In any case, one man more or less who could channel hardly made any difference at this point. Unless it was the boy who was staring at her.

After a moment, his chin moved, the vestige of a nod. Had he been testing her? “Never fear that I’ll fail to tell you when you’re being a fool, boy.” Most people remembered that after one meeting she had a sharp tongue. This young man required reminding from time to time. He grunted. It might have been a laugh. It might have been rueful. She reminded herself that he wanted her to teach him something, though he did not seem to know what. No matter. She had a list to choose from, and she had only begun on it.

His face might have been carved from stone for all the expression he showed, but he bounded to his feet and began to pace back and forth between the fireplace and the door. His hands were clenched in fists behind his back. “I’ve been talking with Alivia, about the Seanchan,” he said. “They call their army the Ever Victorious Army for a reason. It’s never lost a war. Battles, yes, but never a war. When they lose a battle, they sit down and work out what they did wrong, or what the enemy did right. Then they change what needs changing for them to win.”

“A wise way,” she said when the flow of words paused. Plainly, he expected some comment. “I know men who do the same. Davram Bashere, for one. Gareth Bryne, Rodel Ituralde, Agelmar Jagad. Even Pedron Niall did, when he was alive. All judged great captains.”

“Yes,” he said, still pacing. He did not look at her, perhaps did not see her, but he was listening. It was to be hoped that he actually heard, as well. “Five men, all great captains. The Seanchan *all* do it. That’s been their way for a thousand years. They change what they have to change, but they don’t give up.”

“Are you considering the possibility they can’t *be* defeated?” she asked calmly. Calmness always suited until you knew the facts, and usually after, too.

The boy rounded on her, stiff-necked and eyes like ice. “I can defeat them eventually,” he said, struggling to keep his tone civil. That much was to the good. The less often she had to prove that she could and would punish transgressions of her rules, the better. “But—” He cut off with a growl as the sounds of argument in the hallway penetrated the door.

A moment later the door swung open, and Elza backed into the room, still arguing in a loud voice and trying to hold back two other sisters with her spread arms. Erian, her pale face flushed with color, was pushing the other Green ahead of her physically. Sarene, a woman so beautiful she made

Erian look almost ordinary, wore a cooler expression, as might be expected from a White, but she was shaking her head in exasperation, and hard enough to make the colorful beads in her thin braids click together. Sarene possessed a temper, though she normally kept it sealed away tightly.

“Bartol and Rashan do be coming,” Erian announced loudly, agitation thickening Illian in her speech. Those were her two Warders, left behind in Cairhien. “I did no send for them, but someone did Travel with them. An hour ago, I felt them suddenly closer, and just now, closer again. They are coming toward us now.”

“My Vitalien, he also is coming closer,” Sarene said. “He will be here in a few hours, I think.”

Elza let her arms drop, though from the stiffness of her back, she was still glaring at the two sisters. “My Fearil will be here shortly as well,” she muttered. He was her only Warder; it was said they were married, and Greens who married seldom took another another Warder at the same time. Cadsuane wondered whether she would have spoken if the others had not.

“I didn’t expect it so soon,” the boy said softly. Softly, but there was steel in his voice. “But I shouldn’t have expected events to wait on me, should I, Cadsuane?”

“Events never wait on anyone,” she said, standing. Erian flinched as if she had just noticed her, though Cadsuane was sure her face was as smooth as the boy’s. And maybe as stony, at that. What had brought those Warders from Cairhien, and who had Traveled with them, might be problems enough to go on with, but she thought she had gotten another answer from the boy, and she was going to have to consider very carefully how to advise him on it. Sometimes, the answers were thornier than the questions.

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CHAPTER 24

A Strengthening Storm

Midafternoon sunlight should have been slanting through the windows of Rand's bedchamber, but a hard rain was falling outside, and all the lamps were lit to hold off a twilight darkness. Thunder rattled the glass-filled casements in the windows. It was a fierce storm that had rolled down out of the Dragonwall faster than a running horse and brought a deeper cold, almost deep enough for snow. The raindrops pelting the house were half-frozen slush, and despite blazing logs on the hearthstone, a chill clung to the room.

Lying on his bed with his booted feet propped one atop the other on the coverlet, he stared up at the canopy and tried to put his thoughts in order. He could disregard the thunderstorm outside, but Min, snuggling under his arm, was another matter. She did not try to distract him; she just did it without trying. What was he to do about her? About Elayne, and Aviendha. Those two were only vague presences in his head, at this distance from Caemlyn. At least, he assumed they were still in Caemlyn. Assuming was dangerous when it came to those two. All he had of them at the moment was a general sense of direction and the knowledge they were alive. Min's body was pressed tight against his side, though, and the bond made her as vibrant inside his head as she was in the flesh. Was it too late to keep Min safe, to keep Elayne and Aviendha safe?

What makes you think you can keep anyone safe? Lews Therin whispered in his head. The dead madman was an old friend, now. *We are all going to die. Just hope that you aren't the one who kills them.* Not a welcome friend, just one he could not rid himself of. He no longer feared killing Min or Elayne or Aviendha any more than he feared going mad. Madder than he already was, at least, with a dead man in his head, and sometimes a foggy face he could almost recognize. Did he dare ask Cadsuane about either one?

Trust no one, Lew Therin murmured, then gave a wry laugh. *Including me.*

Without warning, Min punched him in the ribs hard enough to make him grunt. “You’re getting melancholy, sheepherder,” she growled. “If you’re worrying about me again, I swear, I’ll . . .” She had so many different ways of growling, Min did, each matched to very different sensations through the bond. There was the light irritation he felt from her now, this time touched with worry, and sometimes there was a sharp edge as if she were refraining from snapping his head off. There was a growl that almost made him laugh from the amusement in her head, or as close to laughing as he had come in what seemed a very long time, and a throaty growl that would have heated his blood even without the bond.

“None of that, now,” she said warningly, before he could move the hand resting on her back, and rolled off the bed to her feet, tugging her embroidered coat straight with a reproving look. Since bonding him, she was even better at reading his mind, and she had been good enough before. “What are you going to do about them, Rand? What is Cadsuane going to do?” Lightning flashed in the windows, almost bright enough to wash out the lamps, and thunder boomed against the window glass.

“I haven’t yet been able to see what she was going to do ahead of time, Min. Why should today be different?”

The thick feather mattress sagged beneath him as he swung his legs over the side and sat up facing her. He almost pressed a hand to the old wounds in his side without thinking, then caught himself and changed the movement to buttoning up his coat. Half-healed and never healing, those two overlapping wounds hurt since Shadar Logoth. Or maybe he was just more aware of how they throbbed, the heat of them a furnace of fever trapped in an area smaller than the palm of his hand. One, at least, he hoped, would begin to heal with Shadar Logoth gone. Maybe there had just not been enough time yet for him to feel any difference. It was not the same side that Min had fisted—she was always gentle with that, if not always with the rest of him—but he thought he had kept the pain hidden from her. No point in giving her something more to worry over. The concern in her eyes, and in her head, must be about Cadsuane. Or the others.

The manor house and all of its outlying buildings were crowded, now. It had seemed inevitable that sooner or later someone would try using the Warders left in Cairhien; their Aes Sedai had not blared that they were going off to find the Dragon Reborn, but neither had they been particularly secretive. Even so, he had never anticipated those who arrived with them. Davram Bashere with a hundred of his Saldaean light horse, dismounting in a wind-driven soaking rain and muttering about ruined saddles. Over half a dozen black-coated Asha'man who for some reason had not shielded themselves from the downpour. They rode with Bashere, but it had been like two parties arriving, a little distance between them always, a strong whiff of watchful wariness. And one of the Asha'man was Logain Ablar. Logain! An Asha'man, wearing the Sword and Dragon on his collar! Bashere and Logain both wanted to talk to him, but not in front of anyone, especially each other it seemed. Unexpected or not, though, they were hardly the most surprising of the visitors. He had thought the eight Aes Sedai must be more friends of Cadsuane, yet he would swear she had been as surprised as he to see most of them. Odder, all but one seemed to be with the Asha'man! Not prisoners, and certainly not guards, but Logain had been reluctant to explain with Bashere present, and Bashere reluctant to leave Logain the first chance to talk to Rand alone. Now they were all drying off and settling into their rooms, leaving him to try to put his thoughts in order. To the extent that he could, with Min close by. What *would* Cadsuane do? Well, he had tried to ask her advice. Events had outrun both of them, though. The decision had been made, whatever Cadsuane thought. Lightning flashed again in the windows. Lightning seemed to suit Cadsuane. You could never tell where it would strike.

Alivia would finish her, Lews Therin muttered. *She's going to help us die; she'd remove Cadsuane for us, if you tell her to.*

I don't want to kill her, Rand thought at the dead man. *I can't afford for her to die.* Lews Therin knew that as well as he, but the man grumbled under his breath anyway. Since Shadar Logoth, he seemed a touch less mad, sometimes. Or maybe Rand was a touch more. After all, he took talking to a dead man in his head as a matter of every day, and that was hardly sane.

"You have to do *something,*" Min muttered, folding her arms beneath her breasts. "Logain's aura still speaks of glory, stronger than ever. Maybe he still thinks he's the real Dragon Reborn. And there's something . . . dark . . . in the images I saw around Lord Davram. If he turns against you, or dies . . . I heard one of the soldiers say Lord Dobraine might die. Losing even one of them would be a blow. Lose all three, and it might take you a year to recover."

“If you’ve seen it, then it’s going to happen. I have to do what I can, Min, not worry over what I can’t.” She gave him one of those looks women had in great store, as if he were trying to start an argument.

A scratching at the door brought his head around and made Min shift her stance. He suspected she had slipped a throwing knife out of her sleeve and was hiding it behind her wrist. The woman carried more knives tucked about her than Thom Merrilin had. Or Mat. Colors whirled in his head, almost resolving into . . . what? A man on a wagon seat? Not the face that sometimes appeared in his thoughts, anyway, and the scene was gone in an instant, without any of the dizziness that accompanied the face.

“Come,” he called, standing up.

Elza spread her dark green skirts in an elegant curtsy when she entered, her eyes bright on his face. A pleasant-appearing woman, and coolly complacent as a cat, she hardly seemed to see Min. Of all the sisters who had sworn to him, Elza was the most eager. The only eager one, really. The others had their reasons for swearing, their explanations, and of course Verin and the sisters who came to find him at Dumai’s Wells had no real choice facing a *ta’veren*, but for all Elza’s outer coolness, she seemed to burn inside with a passion to see he reached Tarmon Gai’don. “You said to let you know when the Ogier came,” she said, never taking her eyes from his face.

“Loial!” Min shouted gleefully, tucking the knife back up her sleeve as she rushed past Elza, who blinked at the sight of the blade. “I could have killed Rand for letting you get off to your room before I saw you!” The bond said she did not mean it. Not exactly.

“Thank you,” Rand told Elza, listening to the sounds of merriment from the sitting room, Min’s light laughter and Loial’s quake of Ogier mirth, like the earth laughing. Thunder rolled across the sky.

Perhaps the Aes Sedai’s passion extended to wanting to know what he said to Loial, because her lips thinned, and she hesitated before making another curtsy and sweeping out of the bedchamber. A brief pause in the sounds of pleasure announced her passage across the sitting room, and their resumption her departure. Only then did he seize the Power. He tried never to let anyone see him do that.

Fire flooded into him, hotter than the sun, and cold to make the worst blizzard seem spring, all a swirling rage that dwarfed the storm outside, threatening to scour him away for a moment’s inattention. Seizing *saidin* was a war for survival. But the green of the cornices was suddenly greener, the black of his coat blacker, the gold of its embroidery more golden. He could see the grain of the vine-carved bedposts, see faint marks left by the craftsman's sanding all those years ago. *Saidin* made him feel as if he had been half-blind and numb without it. That was a part of what he felt.

Clean, Lews Therin whispered. *Pure and clean again.*

It was. The foulness that had marked the male half of the Power since the Breaking was gone. That did not stop nausea from rising in Rand, though, the violent urge to bend double and empty himself on the floor. The room seemed to spin for an instant, and he had to put a hand on the nearest bedpost to steady himself. He did not know why he should still feel this sickness, with the taint gone. Lews Therin did not know, or would not tell. But the sickness was the reason he could not let anyone see him take hold of *saidin,* if he could help it. Elza might burn to see him reach the Last Battle, but too many others wanted to see him fall, not all of them Darkfriends.

In that moment of weakness, the dead man reached for *saidin.* Rand could feel him clawing for it greedily. Was it harder than it had been to push him away? In some ways, Lews Therin seemed more solidly part of him since Shadar Logoth. It did not matter. He had only so far left to go before he could die. He just had to last that far. Drawing a deep breath, he ignored the lingering traces of sickness in his belly and strode into the sitting room to the crash of thunder.

Min stood in the middle of the room holding one of Loial's hands in both of hers and smiling up at him. It took both of her hands to hold one of Loial's, and the pair did not come close to covering it. The top of his head missed the plaster ceiling by little more than a foot. He had donned a fresh coat of dark blue wool, the bottom flaring over baggy trousers to the tops of his knee-high boots, but for once his pockets did not bulge with the angular shapes of books. Eyes the size of teacups lit up at the sight of Rand, and the grin on his wide mouth really did split his face in two. The tufted ears sticking up through his shaggy hair quivered with pleasure.

"Lord Algarin has Ogier guest rooms, Rand," he boomed in a voice like a deep drum. "Can you imagine it? Six of them! Of course, they haven't been used in some time, but they're aired out every week, so there isn't any mustiness, and the bedsheets are very good linen. I thought I'd be back to doubling myself up in a human-sized bed. Umm. We aren't staying here long, are we?” His long ears sagged a little, then began to twitch uneasily. “I don’t think we should. I mean, I might get used to having a real bed, and that wouldn’t do if I’m going to stay with you. I mean . . . Well, you know what I mean.”

“I know,” Rand said softly. He could have laughed at the Ogier’s consternation. He should have laughed. Laughter just seemed to have escaped him, lately. Spinning a web against eavesdropping around the room, he knotted it so he could release *saidin*. The last traces of nausea began to fade immediately. He could control the sickness, usually, with an effort, but there was no point when he did not have to. “Did any of your books get wet?” Loial’s main concern coming in had been to check on his books.

Suddenly it struck him that he had thought of what he had done as spinning a web. That was how Lews Therin would put it. That sort of thing happened too often, the other man’s turns of phrase drifting into his head, the other man’s memories mingling with his. He was Rand al’Thor, not Lews Therin Telamon. He had woven a ward and tied off the weave, not spun a web and knotted it. But the one came to him as easily as the other.

“My *Essays of Willim of Maneches* got damp,” Loial said disgustedly, rubbing his upper lip with a finger the thickness of a sausage. Had he been careless shaving, or was that the beginning of a mustache beneath his wide nose? “The pages may spot. I shouldn’t have been so careless, not with a book. And my book of notes took some wet, too. But the ink didn’t run. Everything is still readable, but I really need to make a case to protect . . .” Slowly, a frown crept onto his face, dangling the long ends of his eyebrows onto his cheeks. “You look tired, Rand. He looks tired, Min.”

“He’s been doing too much, but he’s resting now,” Min said defensively, and Rand did smile. A little. Min would always defend him, even to his friends. “You *are* resting, sheepherder,” she added, letting go of Loial’s huge hand and planting her fists on her hips. “Sit down and rest. Oh, sit down, Loial. I’ll put a crick in my neck if I keep staring up at you.”

Loial chuckled, the bellowing of a bull muted in his throat, as he examined one of the straight-back chairs dubiously. Compared to him, it seemed a chair made for a child. “Sheepherder. You don’t know how good it is to hear you calling him sheepherder, Min.” He sat down cautiously. The plain-carved chair creaked under his weight, and his knees stuck up in front of him. “I am sorry, Rand, but it is funny, and I haven’t heard much to laugh at these past months.” The chair was holding. With a quick glance toward the hall door, he added, a little too loudly, “Karldin doesn’t have much sense of humor.”

“You can speak freely,” Rand told him. “We’re safe behind a . . . a ward.” He had almost said behind a shield, which was not the same thing. Except that he knew it was.

He was too weary to sit, just as he was too tired to find sleep easily most nights—his bones ached with it—so he went to stand in front of the fireplace. Winds gusting across the chimney top made the flames dance on the split logs and sometimes let a small puff of smoke into the room, and he could hear the rain drumming away at the windows, but the thunder seemed to have moved on. Maybe the storm was ending. Clasping his hands behind his back, he turned away from the fire. “What did the Elders say, Loial?”

Instead of answering straightaway, Loial looked at Min as if seeking encouragement or support. Perched on the edge of a blue armchair with her knees crossed, she smiled at the Ogier and nodded, and he sighed heavily, a wind gusting through deep caverns. “Karldin and I visited every *stedding*, Rand. All but *Stedding* Shangtai, of course. I couldn’t go there, but I left a message everywhere we went, and Daiting isn’t far from Shangtai. Someone will carry it there. The Great Stump is meeting in Shangtai, and that will attract crowds. This is the first time a Great Stump has been called in a thousand years, not since you humans fought the War of the Hundred Years, and it was Shangtai’s turn. They must be considering something very important, but no one would tell me why it was called. They won’t tell you about any Stump until you have a beard,” he muttered, fingering a narrow patch of stubble on his broad chin. Apparently, he intended to remedy his lack, though it was not certain that he could. Loial was over ninety years old, now, yet for an Ogier, that was still a boy.

“The Elders?” Rand asked patiently. You had to be patient with Loial, with any Ogier. They did not see time the way humans did—who among humans would think of whose *turn* it was after a thousand years?—and Loial tended to go on at length, given half a chance. Great length.

Loial’s ears twitched, and he gave Min another look, received another encouraging smile in return. “Well, as I said, I visited all the *stedding* but Shangtai. Karldin wouldn’t go inside. He’d rather sleep every night under a bush than be cut off from the Source for a minute.” Rand did not say a word, but Loial raised his hands from his knees, palms out. “I am getting to the point, Rand. I am. I did what I could, but I don't know whether it was enough. The *stedding* in the Borderlands told me to go home and leave matters to older and wiser heads. So did Shadoon and Mardoon, in the mountains on the Shadow Coast. The other *stedding* agreed to guard the Waygates. I don't think they really believe there's any danger, but they agreed, so you know they will keep a close guard. And I'm sure someone will take word to Shangtai. The Elders in Shangtai never liked having a Waygate right outside the *stedding.* I must have heard Elder Haman say a hundred times that it was dangerous. I know they'll agree to have it watched."

Rand nodded slowly. Ogier never lied, or at least the few who made the attempt were so poor at it that they seldom tried a second time. An Ogier's word was taken as seriously as anyone else's sworn oath. The Waygates would be guarded closely. Except for those in the Borderlands, and in the mountains south of Amadicia and Tarabon. From gate to gate, a man could journey from the Spine of the World to the Aryth Ocean, from the Borderlands to the Sea of Storms, all in a strange world somehow outside of time, or maybe alongside it. Two days walking along the Ways could carry you a hundred miles, or five hundred, depending on the paths you chose. And if you were willing to risk the dangers. You could die very easily in the Ways, or worse. The Ways had turned dark and corrupted long ago. Trollocs did not care about that, though, at least not when they had Myrddraal driving them. Trollocs cared only for killing, especially when they had Myrddraal driving them. And nine Waygates would remain unwatched, with the danger that any of them might open up to let out Trollocs by the tens of thousands. Setting any sort of guard without the *stedding*'s cooperation might be impossible. Many people did not believe Ogier existed, and few of those who did wanted to meddle without leave. Maybe the Asha'man, if he had enough he could trust.

Suddenly, he realized that he was not the only one who was tired. Loial looked worn and gaunt. His coat was rumpled and hung loosely on him. It was dangerous for an Ogier to be outside the *stedding* too long, and Loial had left his home a good five years ago. Maybe those brief visits over the last few months had not been enough for him. "Maybe you should go home now, Loial. *Stedding* Shangtai is a only a few days from here."

Loial's chair creaked alarmingly as he sat bolt upright. His ears shot upright, too, in alarm. "My mother will be there, Rand. She's a famous

Speaker. She would never miss a Great Stump."

"She can't have come all the way back from the Two Rivers already," Rand told him. Loial's mother was supposedly a famous walker, too, yet there were limits, even for Ogier.

"You don't know my mother," Loial muttered, a drum booming darkly. "She'll still have Erith in tow, too. She will."

Min leaned toward the Ogier, a dangerous light in her eyes. "The way you talk about Erith, I know you want to marry her, so why do you keep running from her?"

Rand studied her from the fireplace. Marriage. Aviendha assumed that he would marry her, and Elayne and Min as well, in the Aiel fashion. Elayne appeared to think so, too, strange as that seemed. He thought she did. What did Min think? She had never said. He should never have let them bond him. The bond would smother them in grief when he died.

Loial's ears trembled with caution, now. Those ears were one reason Ogier made poor liars. He made placating gestures as though Min were the larger of them. "Well, I do want to, Min. Of course, I do. Erith is beautiful, and very perceptive. Did I ever tell you how carefully she listened to me explain about . . . ? Of course, I did. I tell everybody I meet. I do want to marry her. But not yet. It isn't like with you humans, Min. You do everything Rand asks. Erith will expect me to settle down and stay home. Wives never let a husband go anywhere or do anything, if it means leaving the *stedding* for more than a few days. I have my book to finish, and how can I do that if I don't see everything Rand does? I'm sure he's done all sorts of things since I left Cairhien, and I know I'll never get it all down right. Erith just wouldn't understand. Min? Min, are you angry with me?"

"What makes you think I'm angry?" she said coolly.

Loial sighed heavily, and so clearly in relief that Rand almost stared. Light, the Ogier actually thought she meant she was not angry! Rand knew he was feeling his way in the dark when it came to women, even Min—maybe especially Min—but Loial had better learn a lot more than he already knew before he married his Erith. Otherwise, she would skin him out like a sick goat. Best to get him out of the room before Min did Erith's job for her. Rand cleared his throat.

"Think on it overnight, Loial," he said. "Maybe you'll change your mind by morning." Part of him hoped Loial would. The Ogier had been too long from home. Another part of him, though . . . He could use Loial, if what Alivia had told him about the Seanchan was true. Sometimes, he disgusted himself. “In any case, I need to talk to Bashere, now. And Logain.” His mouth tightened around the name. What *was* Logain doing in Asha’man black?

Loial did not stand. Indeed, his expression grew more troubled, ears slanting back and eyebrows drooping. “Rand, there’s something I need to tell you. About the Aes Sedai who came with us.”

Lightnings flared anew outside the windows as he went on, and the thunder crashed overhead harder than ever. With some storms, a lull only meant the worst was coming.

I told you to kill them all when you had the chance, Lews Therin laughed. *I told you.*

“Are you *positive* they’ve been bonded, Samitsu?” Cadsuane asked firmly. And loudly enough to be heard over the thunder booming on the manor house’s rooftop. Thunder and lightning fit her mood. She would have liked to snarl. It required a goodly measure of her training and experience to sit calmly and sip hot ginger tea. She had not let emotion get the upper hand in a very long time, but she wanted to bite something. Or someone.

Samitsu held a porcelain cup of tea, too, but she had yet to swallow a drop, and she had ignored Cadsuane’s offer of a chair. The slender sister turned from peering into the flames of the left-hand fireplace, the bells in her dark hair jingling as she shook her head. She had not bothered to dry her hair properly, and it hung damp and heavy down her back. Her hazel eyes were uneasy. “It’s hardly the sort of question I could ask a sister, now is it, Cadsuane, and they certainly didn’t tell me. As who would? At first, I thought maybe they had done like Merise and Corele. And poor Daigian.” A brief wince of sympathy crossed her face. She knew in full the pain that was gnawing at Daigian over her loss. Any sister beyond her first Warder knew that too well. “But it’s plain Toveine and Gabrelle are both with Logain. I think Gabrelle is bedding him. If there’s bonding been done, it was the men who did it.”

“Turnabout,” Cadsuane muttered into her tea. Some said that turnabout was fair play, but she had never believed in fighting fair. Either you fought, or you did not, and it was never a game. Fairness was for people standing safely to one side, talking while others bled. Unfortunately, there was little she could do beyond trying to find a way to balance events. Balance was not at all the same as fairness. What a dog’s dinner this was turning into.

"I'm glad you gave me at least a little warning before I have to face Toveine and the others, but I want you to return to Cairhien the first thing tomorrow."

"There was nothing I could do, Cadsuane," Samitsu said bitterly. "Half the people I gave an order had begun checking with Sashalle to see if it was right, and the other half told me to my face she'd already said different. Lord Bashere talked her into turning the Warders loose—I have no idea how he found out about them in the first place—and she talked Sorilea into it, and there wasn't the least thing I could do to stop it. Sorilea was behaving as if I had just abdicated! She doesn't understand, and she made it plain she thinks I'm a fool. There's no point at all in me going back, unless you expect me to carry Sashalle's gloves for her."

"I expect you to watch her, Samitsu. No more than that. I want to know what one of these Dragonsworn sisters does when neither I nor the Wise Ones are looking over their shoulders and holding a switch. You've always been very observant." Patience was not always her strongest trait, but sometimes it was required with Samitsu. The Yellow *was* observant, and intelligent, and strong-willed most of the time, not to mention the best alive at Healing—at least until the appearance of Damer Flinn—but she could suffer the most astonishing collapses in her confidence. The stick never worked with Samitsu, but pats on the back did, and it was ridiculous not to use what worked. As Cadsuane reminded her how intelligent she was, how skilled at Healing—that was always necessary, with Samitsu; she could go into a depression over failing to Heal a dead man—how clever, the Arafellin sister began to draw up her composure. And her self-assurance.

"You can be assured Sashalle won't change her stockings without I know it," she said crisply. In truth, Cadsuane expected no less. "But if you don't mind me asking," with her confidence restored, Samitsu's tone made that the merest courtesy; she was no shrinking flower except when her self-assurance weakened, "why are you here, at the back end of Tear? What's young al'Thor going to do? Or should I say, what are you going to have him do?"

"He intends something very dangerous," Cadsuane replied. Lightning flashed outside the windows, sharp silver forks in a sky near as dark as night. She knew exactly what he intended. She just did not know whether to stop it.

“It has to end!” Rand thundered, echoed by the crashes in the sky. He had doffed his coat before this interview, and rolled up his shirtsleeves to bare the Dragons twined around his forearms in scarlet and gold, the golden-maned heads resting on the backs of his hands. He wanted the man in front of him reminded with every look that he was facing the Dragon Reborn. But his hands were fists, to keep him from giving in to Lews Therin’s urgings and throttling bloody Logain Ablar. “I don’t need a war with the White Tower, and you bloody Asha’man bloody well won’t give me a war with the White Tower! Do I make myself understood?”

Logain, hands resting easily atop the long hilt of his sword, did not flinch. He was a big man, if smaller than Rand, with a steady gaze that gave no sign that he had been dressed down or called to account. The silver sword and red-and-gold Dragon glittered brightly in the lamplight on the high collar of his black coat, and that itself looked freshly ironed. “Are you saying release them?” he asked calmly. “Will the Aes Sedai release those of ours they’ve taken?”

“No!” Rand said curtly. And sourly. “What’s done can’t be undone.” Merise had been so shocked when he suggested she release Narishma, you would have thought he was asking her to abandon a puppy by the side of the road. And he suspected Flinn would fight as hard to hang on to Corele as she to him; he was fairly certain there was more between those two than the bond, now. Well, if an Aes Sedai could bond a man who channeled, what was to say a pretty woman could not fix on a gimpy old man? “You realize the mess you’ve created, though, don’t you? As it is, the only man who can channel that Elaida wants alive is me, and that only till the Last Battle is done. Once she learns of this, she’ll be twice as hot to see you all dead any way she can manage it. I don’t know how the other lot will react, but Egwene was always a sharp bargainer. I may have to tell off Asha’man for Aes Sedai to bond until they have as many of you as you do of them. That’s if they don’t just decide you all have to die as soon as they can arrange it, too. What’s done is done, but there cannot be any more!”

Logain stiffened a little more with every word, but his gaze held on Rand’s. It was plain as horns on a ram that he was ignoring the others in the sitting room. Min had wanted no part of this meeting and taken herself off to read; Rand could not make up from down in Herid Fel’s books, but she found them fascinating. He had insisted Loial remain, though, and the Ogier was pretending to study the flames in the fireplace. Except when he glanced at the door, tufted ears twitching, as if wondering whether he could slip out unnoticed under cover of the storm. Davram Bashere appeared even shorter than he really was alongside the Ogier, a graying man with dark tilted eyes, a beak of a nose, and thick mustaches curving down around his mouth. He had worn his sword, too, a shorter blade than Logain's, and serpentine. Bashere spent more time peering into his winecup than looking at anything else, but whenever his eyes touched Logain, he unconsciously ran a thumb along his sword hilt. Rand thought it was unconscious.

"Taim gave the order," Logain said, coldly uncomfortable explaining himself in front of an audience. Sudden lightning close to the house cast his face in lurid shadows for an instant, a bleak mask of darkness. "I assumed it came from you." His eyes moved slightly in Bashere's direction, and his mouth tightened. "Taim does a great many things people think are at your direction," he went on reluctantly, "but he has his own plans. Flinn and Narishma and Manfor are on the deserters' list, like every Asha'man you kept with you. And he has a coterie of twenty or thirty he keeps close and trains privately. Every man who wears the Dragon is one of that group except me, and he'd have kept the Dragon from me, if he dared. No matter what you've done, it is time to turn your eyes to the Black Tower before Taim splits it worse than the White Tower is. If he does, you'll find the larger part is loyal to him, not you. They know him. Most have never even seen you."

Irritably, Rand pushed his sleeves down and dropped into a chair. What he had done made no matter to Logain. The man knew *saidin* was clean, but he could not believe Rand or any man had actually done the cleansing. Did he think the Creator had decided to stretch out a merciful hand after three thousand years of suffering? The Creator had made the world and then left humankind to make of it what they would, a heaven or the Pit of Doom by their choosing. The Creator had made many worlds, watched each flower or die, and gone on to make endless worlds beyond. A gardener did not weep for each blossom that fell.

For an instant, he thought those must have been Lews Therin's reflections. He had never gone on that way about the Creator or anything else that he recalled. But he could *feel* Lews Therin nodding in approval, a man listening to someone else. Still, it was not the kind of thing he would have considered before Lews Therin. How much space remained between them?

“Taim will have to wait,” he said wearily. How long could Taim wait? He was surprised not to hear Lews Therin raging for him to kill the man. He wished that made him feel easier. “Did you just come to see that Logain reached me safely, Bashere, or to tell me somebody stabbed Dobraine? Or do you have an urgent task for me, too?”

Bashere raised an eyebrow at Rand’s tone, and his jaw tightened as he glanced at Logain, but after a moment, he snorted so hard his thick mustaches should have shaken. “Two men ransacked my tent,” he said, setting his winecup down on a carved blue table against the wall, “one carrying a note I could swear I wrote myself if I didn’t know better. An order to carry away ‘certain items.’ Loial tells me the fellows who knifed Dobraine had the same sort of note, apparently in Dobraine’s hand. A blind man could see what they were after, with a little thought. Dobraine and I are the most likely candidates to be guarding the seals for you. You have three, and you say three are broken. Maybe the Shadow knows where the last is.”

Loial had turned from the fireplace as the Saldaean spoke, his ears rigid, and now he burst out, “That *is* serious, Rand. If someone breaks all the seals on the Dark One’s prison, or maybe even just one or two more, the Dark One could break free. Even you can’t face the Dark One! I mean, I know the Prophecies say you will, but that has to be just a way of speaking.” Even Logain looked concerned, his eyes studying Rand as if measuring him against the Dark One.

Rand leaned back in his chair, careful not to let his tiredness show. The seals on the Dark One’s prison on one hand, Taim splitting the Asha’man on the other. Was the seventh seal already broken? Was the Shadow beginning the opening moves of the Last Battle? “You told me something once, Bashere. If your enemy offers you two targets . . .”

“Strike at a third,” Bashere finished promptly, and Rand nodded. He had already decided, anyway. Thunder rattled the windows till the casements shook. The storm was strengthening.

“I can’t fight the Shadow and the Seanchan at the same time. I am sending the three of you to arrange a truce with the Seanchan.”

Bashere and Logain seemed stunned into silence. Until they began to argue, one on top of the other. Loial just looked ready to faint.

Elza fidgeted, listening to Fearil report what had occurred since she left him in Cairhien. It was not the man’s harsh voice that irritated her. She hated lightning, and wished she could ward away the violent lights flashing in the windows as she had warded her room against eavesdropping. No one would think her wish for privacy strange, since she had spent twenty years convincing everyone that she was married to the pale-haired man. Despite his voice, Fearil looked the sort a woman would marry, tall and lean and quite pretty. The hard edge to his mouth only made his face more so, really. Of course, some might think it peculiar that she had never had more than one Warder at a time, if they stopped to think about it. A man with just the right qualifications was difficult to find, but perhaps she should start looking. Lightning lit up the windows again.

“Yes, yes, enough,” she broke in finally. “You did the right thing, Fearil. It would have been taken as odd if you were the only one to refuse to find your Aes Sedai.” A sense of relief flashed through the bond. She was strict about obedience to her orders, and while he knew she could not kill him—would not, at least—punishment only required her to mask the bond so she did not share his pain. That, and a ward to muffle his screams. She disliked screaming almost as much as she disliked lightning.

“It is just as well you’re with me,” she went on. A pity that the Aiel savages were still holding Fera, though she would have to quiz the White on exactly why she had sworn before she could be trusted. Until the journey to Cairhien, she had not known she shared anything with Fera. A very great pity that none of her own heart was with her, but only she had been sent to Cairhien, and she did not question the orders she received any more than Fearil questioned those she gave. “I think a few people are going to have to die soon.” As soon as she decided which ones. Fearil bowed his head, and a jolt of pleasure came through the bond. He did like killing. “In the meanwhile, you will kill anyone who threatens the Dragon Reborn. Anyone.” After all, it had become perfectly clear to her, while she herself was a captive of the savages. The Dragon Reborn had to reach Tarmon Gai’don, or how could the Great Lord defeat him there?

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CHAPTER 25

When to Wear Jewels

Perrin strode impatiently up and down the flowered carpets that floored the tent, shrugging with discomfort in the dark green silk coat he had seldom worn since Faile had had it made. She said the elaborate silver embroidery suited his shoulders, but the wide leather belt supporting his axe at his side, the one as plain as the other, only pointed up that he was a fool pretending to be more than he was. Sometimes he tugged his gauntlets tighter, or glared at his fur-lined cloak, lying across the back of a chair ready for him to put on. Twice, he pulled a sheet of paper from his sleeve and unfolded it to study the sketched map of Malden while he paced. That was the town where Faile was being held.

Jondyn and Get and Hu had caught up to the fleeing inhabitants of Malden, but the only useful thing they had gotten was this map, and making anyone pause long enough to provide that had been a chore. Those strong enough to fight were dead or wearing *gai'shain* white for the Shaido; those who remained to flee were the old and the very young, the sick and the lame. According to Jondyn, the thought that someone might force them to return and fight the Shaido had quickened their steps north toward Andor and safety. The map was a puzzle, with its maze of streets and the lady's fortress and the great cistern in the northeast corner. It tantalized him with possibilities. But they were possibilities only if he found a solution to the greater puzzle that was not shown on the map, the huge mass of Shaido surrounding the walled town, not to mention four or five hundred Shaido Wise Ones who could channel. So the map went back into his sleeve, and he continued to pace.

The red-striped tent itself made him chafe as much as the map, and so did the furnishings, the gilt-edged chairs that folded for storage and the mosaic-topped table that did not, the stand-mirror and the mirrored washstand and even the brass-bound chests standing in a row along an outer wall. It was barely light outside, and all twelve of the lamps were lit, mirrors sparkling. The braziers that had held off the night's freezing cold still contained a few embers. He had even had Faile's two silk hangings, worked with lines of birds and flowers, brought out and hung from the roof poles. He had let Lamgwin trim his beard and shave his cheeks and neck; he had washed and donned clean clothes. He had had the tent set up as if Faile were going to return any moment from a ride. All so everyone would look at him and see a bloody lord, look at him and feel confident. And every bit of it reminded him that Faile was not out riding. Tugging off one of his gauntlets, he felt in his coat pocket and ran his fingers along the rawhide cord tucked in there. Thirty-two knots, now. He did not need reminding of that, but sometimes he lay awake a whole night in the bedding that did not have Faile in it, counting those knots. Somehow, they had become a connection to her. Anyway, wakefulness was better than nightmares.

"If you don't sit down, you are going to be too tired to ride to So Habor even with Neald's help," Berelain said, sounding faintly amused. "Just watching you is exhausting me."

He managed not to glare at her. In a dark blue silk riding dress, a wide golden necklace studded with firedrops tight around her neck and the narrow crown of Mayene holding a golden hawk in flight above her brows, the First of Mayene was seated atop her crimson cloak on one of the folding chairs with her hands folded around red gloves in her lap. She looked as composed as an Aes Sedai, and she smelled . . . patient. He did not understand why she had stopped smelling as if he were a fat lamb caught in brambles for her meal, but he almost felt grateful to her. It was good to have someone he could talk to about missing Faile. She listened, and smelled of sympathy.

"I want to be here if . . . when Gaul and the Maidens bring in some prisoners." The slip made him grimace as much as the delay. It was as if he doubted. Sooner or later they would capture some of the Shaido, yet apparently that was no easy matter. Taking prisoners did no good unless they could be brought away, and the Shaido were only careless compared to other Aiel. Sulin had been patient, too, explaining it to him. It was getting so hard for him to be patient, though. "What's keeping Arganda?" he growled.

As if the Ghealdanin's name had summoned him at last, Arganda pushed through the entry flaps, his face like stone and his eyes sunken. He looked as though he slept as little as Perrin. The short man wore his silvery breastplate, but no helmet. He had not shaved yet this morning, and graying stubble grizzled his chin. Dangling from one gauntleted hand, a fat leather purse clinked as he set it on the table alongside two already there. "From the Queen's strongbox," he said sourly. He had said little the last ten days that was not sour. "Enough to cover our share and more. I had to break open the lock and put three men to guard the chest. It's a temptation to the best of them, with the lock broken."

"Good, good," Perrin said, trying not to sound too impatient. He did not care whether Arganda had to set a hundred men guarding his queen's strongbox. His own purse was the smallest of the three, and he had gleaned every bit of gold or silver he could find to make it up. Slinging his cloak around his shoulders, he picked up the purses and brushed past the man out into the gray morning.

To his disgust, the camp had taken a more permanent air, though it was not by design, and there was nothing he could do about it. Many of the Two Rivers men slept under tents now, pale brown patched canvas rather than striped red like his, but big enough for eight or ten men each, with their ill-assorted polearms stacked at the front, and the others had turned their temporary brush shelters into sturdy little huts of woven evergreen branches. The tents and huts made at best meandering rows, not at all like the rigid lines seen among the Ghealdanin and Mayeners, yet it still looked a little like a village, with paths and lanes through the snow trampled down to bare, frozen earth. A neat stone fire-ring surrounded each of the cookfires, where clusters of men stood cloaked and hooded against the cold, waiting for their breakfast.

It was what was in those black iron cookpots that had Perrin moving this morning. With so many men hunting, game was growing thin on the ground, and everything else was running out. They were down to searching for squirrels' hoards of acorns to grind for stretching the oatmeal, and this late in the winter, what they found were old and dried out at best. The sour mixture filled the belly after a fashion, but you had to be hungry to get it down. Most of the faces Perrin could see were watching the cookpots eagerly. The last of the carts were rattling though a gap made in the ring of sharpened stakes around the camp, the Cairhienin drivers swathed to their ears and hunched on their seats like dark sacks of wool. Everything the carts had held was stacked in the center of the camp. Empty, they lurched in the ruts left by the carts ahead, a single file disappearing into the surrounding forest.

Perrin's appearance with Berelain and Arganda at his heels caused a stir, although not among the hungry Two Rivers men. Oh, a few made cautious nods in his direction—one or two fools gave rough bows!—but most still tried not to look at him when Berelain was in the vicinity. Idiots. Stone-brained idiots! There were plenty of other people, though, gathered a little way from the red-striped tent, crowding into the lanes between the other tents. An unarmored Mayener soldier in a gray coat came running with Berelain's white mare, bowing and bending to hold her stirrup. Annoura was already up on a sleek mare almost as dark as Berelain's mount was pale. Thin beaded braids hanging down her chest from the cowl of her cloak, the Aes Sedai barely seemed to notice the woman she was supposed to advise. Back stiff, she peered fixedly toward the low Aiel tents, where nothing moved but the thin wavering lines of smoke rising from the smoke holes. One-eyed Gallenne, in his red helmet and breastplate and eyepatch, made up for the Taraboner sister's inattention, though. As soon as Berelain appeared, he barked an order that stiffened fifty of the Winged Guards to statues, long, red-streamered steel-tipped lances upright at their sides, and when she mounted, Gallenne snapped another command that put them on their horses so smoothly they seemed to move as one.

Arganda directed a frown toward the Aiel tents, frowned at the Mayeners, then stalked over to where as many Ghealdanin lancers waited, in shining armor and conical green helmets, and spoke softly to the fellow who would be commanding them, a lean man named Kireyin who Perrin suspected was nobly born from the haughty gaze visible behind the face-bars of his silvered helmet. Arganda was short enough that Kireyin had to bend to listen to what he had to say, and the necessity frosted the taller man's face even more. One of the men behind Kireyin was carrying a staff with a red banner bearing the three six-pointed Silver Stars of Ghealdan instead of a green-streamered lance, and one of the Winged Guards carried Mayene's Golden Hawk on blue.

Aram was there, too, though off to one side and not ready to ride. Wrapped in his putrid green cloak, sword hilt rising behind his shoulder, he shared his jealous scowls between the Mayeners and the Ghealdanin. When he saw Perrin, the man's scowl turned sullen, and he hurried off, blundering through the Two Rivers men waiting for their breakfast. He did not pause to offer apologies when he bumped someone. Aram had grown increasingly touchy, snapping and sneering at everyone but Perrin as the days passed and they sat and waited. Yesterday, he had almost come to blows with a pair of Ghealdanin over something none of them could quite recall once they were separated, except that Aram said the Ghealdanin had no respect and they said he had a bad mouth. That was why the former Tinker was staying behind this morning. Things were likely to be touchy enough in So Habor without Aram starting a fight when Perrin was not looking.

"Keep an eye on Aram," he said quietly when Dannil brought up his bay. "And keep a close eye on Arganda," he added, stuffing the purses into his saddlebags and buckling the flaps down tight. The weight of Berelain's contribution balanced his and Arganda's together very nicely. Well, she had cause to be generous. Her men were as hungry as anyone else. "Arganda looks a man ready to do something stupid, to me." Stayer frisked a little and tossed his head as Perrin took the reins, but the stallion settled quickly under a firm, gentle hand.

Dannil rubbed his tusk-like mustaches with a cold-reddened knuckle and eyed Arganda sideways, then exhaled heavily in a mist. "I'll watch him, Lord Perrin," he muttered, giving his cloak a hitch, "but no matter what you said about me being in charge, as soon as you're out of sight, he won't listen to a thing I say."

Unfortunately, that was true. Perrin would rather have taken Arganda with him and left Gallenne here, but neither had been willing to accept that. The Ghealdanin did accept that men and horses would begin starving soon unless food and fodder were found somewhere, but he could not make himself spend a day farther from his queen than he already was. In some ways, he seemed even more frantic than Perrin, or maybe just more ready to give in to it. Left to himself, Arganda would have been edging a little nearer the Shaido every day until he was right under their noses. Perrin was ready to die to free Faile. Arganda just seemed ready to die.

"Do what you can to keep him from doing anything stupid, Dannil." After a moment, he added, "As long as it doesn't come to blows." There was only so far he could expect Dannil to restrain the fellow, after all. There were three Ghealdanin for every Two Rivers man, and Faile would never be freed if it came to them killing each other. Perrin very nearly rested his head on Stayer’s flank. Light, but he was tired, and he could not see any place ahead of him anywhere.

A slow clop of hooves announced the arrival of Masuri and Seonid, with their three Warders riding close behind wrapped in cloaks that made most of each man vanish, along with part of his horse. Both Aes Sedai wore shimmering silk, and a heavy gold necklace, layers of thick strands, showed under the edge of Masuri’s dark cloak. A small white jewel dangled onto Seonid’s forehead from a fine golden chain fastened in her hair. Annoura relaxed, settling more easily in her saddle. Back among the Aiel tents, the Wise Ones stood in a line watching, six tall women with their heads wrapped in dark shawls. The people of So Habor might be about as welcoming to Aiel as the people of Malden would have been, but Perrin had not been sure the Wise Ones would let either sister come alone. They had been the last reason for waiting. The sun was a red-gold rim on the treetops.

“The sooner there, the sooner back,” he said, climbing into the bay’s saddle. As he rode through the gap that had been made to let the carts out, Two Rivers men were already beginning to replace the missing stakes. No one lacked for wariness with Masema’s people nearby.

It was a hundred paces to the treeline, but his eye caught movement, someone on a horse slipping away into the deeper shadows beneath the towering trees. One of Masema’s watchers, no doubt, racing to tell the Prophet that Perrin and Berelain had left the camp. No matter how fast he rode, though, he could not be in time. If Masema wanted Berelain or Perrin dead, as seemed likely, he would have to wait on another opportunity.

Gallenne was not about to take any chances, though. No one had seen hide nor toenails of Santes or Gendar, Berelain’s two thief-catchers, since the day they failed to return from Masema’s camp, and to Gallenne that was as sure a message as their heads in a sack. He had his lancers spread in a sharp-eyed ring around Berelain before they reached the trees. And around Perrin, too, but that was only incidental. Given his wishes, Gallenne would have brought all nine hundred or so of his Winged Guards, or better yet, in his view, talked Berelain out of going. Perrin had tried that, as well, with no better luck. The woman had a way of listening, then doing exactly as she wished. Faile was like that, too. Sometimes a man just had to live with it. Most of the time, since there was nothing else to do.

The huge trees and stone outcrops sticking out of the snow broke up the formation, of course, but it was still a colorful sight even in the dim light of the forest, red streamers floating on light airs in slanted beams of sunlight, red-armored riders vanishing momentarily behind massive oaks and leatherleafs. The three Aes Sedai rode behind Perrin and Berelain, followed by their Warders, all watching the woods around them, and then the man with Berelain's banner. Kireyin and the banner of Ghealdan came a little behind, his men dressed in neat, shining lines, or as near as they could manage. The forest's openness was a deception, and ill suited to neat lines and bright banners, but add in embroidered silks and gems and a crown and Warders in those color-shifting cloaks, and it was a most impressive sight. Perrin could have laughed, though without much mirth.

Berelain seemed to sense his thoughts. "When you go to buy a sack of flour," she said, "wear plain wool so the seller thinks you can't afford to pay any more than you must. When you're after flour by the wagonload, wear jewels so she thinks you can afford to come back for all she can lay hands on."

Perrin snorted a laugh in spite of himself. It sounded very much like something Master Luhhan had told him, once, with a nudge in the ribs to say it was a joke and a look in his eye that said it was a little more. Dress poor when you want a small favor, and fine when you want a large one. He was very glad Berelain no longer smelled like a hunting wolf. At least that took one worry off his mind.

They soon caught up to the tail end of the carts, a line that was no longer moving by the time they reached the Traveling ground. Axework and sweat had removed the trees sheared off by gateways and made a little clearing, but it was crowded even before Gallenne spread his ring of lancers around it facing outward. Fager Neald was there already, a foppish Murandian with his mustache waxed to points, on a dapple gelding. His coat would do for anyone who had not seen an Asha'man before; the only other one he had was black as well, and at least he had no collar pins to mark him out. The snow was not deep, but the twenty Two Rivers men led by Wil al'Seen were on their horses, too, rather than standing and waiting for their feet to freeze in their boots. They looked a harder lot than the fellows who had left the Two Rivers with him, longbows slung across their backs, bristling quivers and swords of various descriptions at their belts. Perrin hoped he could send them home soon, or better, take them home.

Most were balancing a polearm over their saddles, but Tod al'Caar and Flann Barstere carried banners, Perrin's own Red Wolfhead and the Red

Eagle of Manetheren. Tod's heavy jaw was set stubbornly, and Flann, a tall skinny fellow from up to Watch Hill, looked sullen. Likely he had not wanted the job. Maybe Tod had not, either. Wil gave Perrin one of those open, innocent looks that fooled so many girls back home—Wil liked too much embroidery on his coat at feastdays, and he purely loved riding ahead of those banners, probably in the hope some woman would think they were his—but Perrin let it pass. He had not expected the other three people in the clearing any more than he had the banners.

Holding his cloak around him as if the mild breeze were a gale, Balwer clumsily heeled his blunt-nosed roan forward to meet Perrin. Two of Faile's hangers-on trailed after him with defiant expressions. Medore's blue eyes looked odd in her dark Tairen face, but then, her coat, with its puffy green-striped sleeves, looked odd on her bosomy frame. The daughter of a High Lord, she was every inch a noblewoman, and men's clothing just did not suit her. Latian, Cairhienin and pale in a coat almost as dark as Neald's, though marked with four slashes of red and blue across the chest, was not much taller than she, and the way he sniffled with a cold and rubbed at his sharp nose made him look much less competent. Neither wore a sword, another surprise.

"My Lord; my Lady First," Balwer said in that dry voice, ducking a bow in his saddle, a sparrow bobbing on a branch. His eyes flickered toward the Aes Sedai behind them, but that was the only sign he gave that he was aware of the sisters. "My Lord, I recalled that I have an acquaintance in this So Habor. A cutler who travels with his wares, but he may be at home, and I've not seen him in several years." This was the first time he had ever mentioned having a friend anywhere, and a town buried in the north of Altara seemed a peculiar place for it, but Perrin nodded. He suspected there was more to this friend than Balwer was letting on. He was beginning to suspect there was more to Balwer than the man let on.

"And your companions, Master Balwer?" Berelain's face stayed smooth inside her fur-lined cowl, but she smelled amused. She knew very well that Faile had used her young followers as spies and was sure that Perrin made the same use of them.

"They wanted an outing, my Lady First," the bony little man replied blandly. "I will vouch for them, my Lord. They've promised to cause no trouble, and they may learn something." He smelled amused, too—a musty smell, of course, coming from him—though with a touch of irritation.

Balwer knew she knew, which did not please him, but she never made open reference to the fact, which did. There definitely was more to Balwer than he let on.

The man must have his reasons for taking them along. He had managed to take up all of Faile's young followers one way and another, and had them eavesdropping and watching among the Ghealdanin and the Mayeners and even the Aiel. According to him, what your friends said and did could be as interesting as what your enemies planned, and that was when you were sure they were your friends. Of course, Berelain knew that her people were being spied on. And Balwer knew she knew that, too. And she knew that he . . . It was all too sophisticated for a country blacksmith.

"We're wasting time," Perrin said. "Open the gateway, Neald."

The Asha'man grinned at him and stroked his waxed mustaches—Neald grinned too much since the Shaido were found; maybe he was eager to come to grips with them—he grinned and gestured grandly with one hand. "As you command," he said in a cheerful voice, and the familiar silvery slash of light appeared, widening into a hole in the air.

Without waiting for anyone else, Perrin rode through into a snow-covered field, surrounded by a low stone wall, in rolling country that seemed almost treeless compared with the forest he had left behind, just a few miles from So Habor unless Neald had made a substantial error. If he had, Perrin thought he might pull those fool mustaches right off the man's face. How could the fellow be *cheerful*?

Soon, though, he was riding west beneath a gray cloudy sky, along a snowy road with the high-wheeled carts trundling along in a line after him and early-morning shadows stretching ahead. Stayer tugged at the reins, wanting to run, but Perrin held him to a steady walk, no faster than the carthorses could manage. Gallenne's Mayeners had to cross fields beside the road to maintain their ring around him and Berelain, and that meant getting past the low walls of rough stone that divided field from field. Some had gates from one farmer's property to the next, probably to allow sharing plow-teams, and others they jumped flamboyantly with the streamers on their lances flying, risking their animal's legs and their necks. Perrin cared the less about their necks, in truth.

Wil and the two fools carrying the Wolfhead and the Red Eagle joined the Mayener bannerman behind the Aes Sedai and Warders, but the other Two Rivers men strung themselves out flanking the line of carts. There were far too many carts for fewer than twenty men to guard, yet the cart drivers would feel easier seeing them. Not that anyone expected brigands, or Shaido for that matter, but no one felt comfortable outside the protection of the camp. In any case, here they would be able to see any threat well before it reached them.

The low rolling hills did not really allow a very long view, but it was farm country, with sturdy thatch-roofed stone houses and barns scattered among the fields, and nothing of wildness about it anywhere. Even most of the small thickets clinging to the slopes were coppiced for firewood. But it struck Perrin suddenly that the snow on the road ahead of him was not fresh; yet the only tracks were those made by Gallenne's foreriders. No one moved around any of those dark houses and barns; no smoke rose from any of the thick chimneys. The countryside seemed absolutely still and absolutely empty. The hair on the back of his neck stirred, trying to stand.

An exclamation from one of the Aes Sedai made him look over his shoulder, and he followed Masuri's pointing finger north to a shape flying through the air. It might have been taken for a large bat at first glance, sweeping eastward on long ribbed wings, a strange bat with a long neck and a long thin tail trailing behind. Gallenne barked an oath and pressed his looking glass to his eye. Perrin could see it well enough unaided, and even make out the figure of a human being clinging to the creature's back, riding it like a horse.

"Seanchan," Berelain breathed, both her voice and the smell of her worried.

Perrin twisted in his saddle to watch the thing's flight until the glare of the sunrise made him turn away. "Nothing to do with us," he said. If Neald had made a mistake, he would strangle the man.

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CHAPTER 26

In So Habor

As it happened, Neald, who had had to remain to hold the gateway open till Kireyin and the Ghealdanin were through, had placed the hole in the air very close to where he aimed. He and Kireyin caught up at a gallop just as Perrin topped a rise and drew rein with the town of So Habor in front of him, on the other side of a small river crossed by a pair of arching timber bridges. Perrin was no soldier, but he knew right away why Masema had left this place alone. Hard against the river, the town had two massive stone walls dotted with towers around it, the inner rising taller than the outer. A pair of barges were tied to a long wharf that ran along the river wall from bridge to bridge, yet the wide bridge gates, iron-strapped and closed tight, seemed to be the only openings in that expanse of rough gray stone, and battlements topped the whole length of it. Built to hold off greedy neighboring nobles, So Habor would have had little fear of the Prophet's rabble even if they came by thousands. Anyone wanting to break into this town would need siege engines and patience, and Masema was more comfortable terrorizing villages and towns without walls or defenses.

"Well, it's glad I am to see people on the walls over there," Neald said. "I was beginning to think everyone in this country was dead and buried." He sounded only half joking, and his grin looked forced.

"As long as they're alive enough to sell grain," Kireyin murmured in his nasal, bored voice. Unbuckling his silvery, white-plumed helmet, he lifted it down to the tall pommel of his saddle. His eyes swept past Perrin and paused briefly on Berelain before he twisted around to address the Aes Sedai in the same weary tone. "Are we going to sit here, or go down?" Berelain arched an eyebrow at him, a dangerous look, as a man with any brains would see. Kireyin did not see.

Perrin’s hackles were still trying to stand, the more so since seeing the town. Maybe it was just the part of him that was wolf, disliking walls. But he did not think so. The people atop the walls pointed toward them, and some held looking glasses. Those, at least, would be able to make out the banners clearly. Everyone would be able to see the soldiers, with the streamers on their lances floating on a morning breeze. And the first few carts of the line that stretched down the road out of their sight. Maybe everyone from the farms was crowded into the town. “We didn’t come here to sit,” he said.

Berelain and Annoura between them had laid out how to approach So Habor. The local lord or lady had surely heard of Shaido depredations not many miles to the north of them, and they might have heard of the Prophet’s presence in Altara, too. Either thing was enough to make anyone wary; together, they might be enough to make people loose arrows and wait till after to ask who they had shot. In any case, it was highly unlikely they would welcome outland soldiers through their gates at the moment. The lancers remained spread along the rise, a show that these visitors possessed some armed might even if they chose not to employ it. Not that So Habor would be overly impressed by a hundred men, but the burnished armor of the Ghealdanin and the red armor of the Winged Guards said the visitors were not wandering tricksters. The Two Rivers men would impress no one until they used their bows, so they remained back with the carts, to hold up the cart drivers’ spirits. It was all an elaborate bit of nonsense, fluff and feathers, but Perrin was a country blacksmith no matter who called him lord. The First of Mayene and an Aes Sedai should know what they were about in a thing like this.

Gallenne led the way down to the river at a slow walk, bright crimson helmet resting on his saddle, his back straight. Perrin and Berelain rode a little way behind, with Seonid between them and Masuri and Annoura to either side, the Aes Sedai with their hoods thrown back so anyone on those walls who could recognize an Aes Sedai face would have the opportunity to see three. Aes Sedai were welcomed most places, even where people really would rather not. At their backs came all four bannermen, with the Warders spaced among them in their eye-wrenching cloaks. And Kireyin with his shining helmet balanced on his thigh, sour-mouthed at being relegated to riding with the Warders and now and then glaring coldly down his nose at Balwer, who trailed at the rear with his two companions. No one had told

Balwer he could come, yet no one had said he could not. He bobbed a bow whenever the nobleman looked at him, then went back to studying the town walls ahead.

Perrin could not shake his uneasiness as they drew nearer the town. The horses' hooves clattered hollowly on the southernmost bridge, a wide structure that rose high enough above the swift-flowing river to let a barge like those tied to the wharf pass easily underneath on sweeps. Neither of the broad bluff-bowed craft had any provision for stepping a mast. One of those barges had settled deep in the water, slanting against taut mooring ropes, and the other somehow looked abandoned, too. A rank, sour smell in the air made him rub at his nose. No one else seemed to notice.

Near the foot of the bridge, Gallenne drew up. The closed gates, covered with black iron straps a foot wide, would have forced a pause anyway. "We have heard of the troubles plaguing this land," he bellowed at the men atop the wall, managing formality at the top of his lungs, "but we are merely passing through, and we come for trade, not trouble; to buy grain and other needful things, not to fight. I have the honor to announce Berelain sur Paendrag Paeron, First of Mayene, Blessed of the Light, Defender of the Waves, High Seat of House Paeron, come to speak with the lord or lady of this land. I have the honor to announce Perrin t'Bashere Aybara . . ." He tossed in Lord of the Two Rivers for Perrin, and several other titles that Perrin had no more right to and had never heard before, then went on for the Aes Sedai, giving each the full honorific and adding her Ajah, as well. It was a very impressive recital. When he fell silent, there was . . . silence.

In the crenelations above, dirty-faced men exchanged bleak looks and fierce whispers, shifting crossbows and polearms nervously. Only a few wore helmets or any sort of armor. Most were in rough coats, but on one man Perrin thought he saw what might have been silk under a layer of grime. It was hard to tell, with so much caked dirt. Even his ears could not make out what they were saying.

"How do we know you're alive?" a hoarse voice shouted down at last.

Berelain blinked in surprise, but no one laughed. It was fool talk, yet Perrin thought the hair on the back of his neck really was standing stiff. Something was very wrong, here. The Aes Sedai seemed not to sense it. Then again, Aes Sedai could hide anything behind those smooth masks of cool serenity. The beads in Annoura's thin braids clicked faintly as she shook her head. Masuri ran an icy gaze along the men on the wall.

“If I must prove I am alive, you will regret it,” Seonid announced loudly in crisp Cairhienin accents, a little more heated than her face suggested. “If you continue to point that crossbow at me, you will regret it even more.” Several of the men hastily raised their crossbows to point at the sky. Not all, though.

More whispers rustled along the top of the wall, but someone must have recognized Aes Sedai. At last, the gates squealed open on massive rusty hinges. A gagging stench swept out of the town, the stink Perrin had been smelling, only stronger. Old dirt and old sweat, decaying middens and chamber pots too long unemptied. Perrin’s ears tried to lie back. Gallenne half-lifted his red helmet as if to replace it on his head before urging his dun through the gates. Perrin booted Stayer to follow, easing his axe in its belt loop.

Just inside the gate, a filthy man in a torn coat poked Perrin’s leg with a finger, then darted back when Stayer snapped at him. The fellow had been fat, once, but his coat sagged and his skin hung loose. “Just wanted to be sure,” he muttered, scratching his side absently. “My Lord,” he added, a tick late. His eyes seemed to focus on Perrin’s face for the first time, and his scratching fingers froze. Golden yellow eyes were not a common sight, after all.

“Do you see many dead men walking?” Perrin asked wryly, trying to make a joke of it, as he patted the bay’s neck. A trained warhorse wanted to be rewarded for protecting his rider.

The fellow flinched as if the horse had bared teeth at him again; his mouth twitched into a rictus smile, and he edged sideways. Until he bumped solidly into Berelain’s mare. Gallenne was right behind her, still looking ready to don his helmet, his one eye trying to watch six ways at once.

“Where can I find your lord or lady?” she demanded impatiently. Mayene was a small nation, but Berelain was unaccustomed to being ignored. “Everyone else seems to have gone mute, but I heard you use your tongue. Well, man? Speak up.”

The fellow stared up at her, licking his lips. “Lord Cowlin . . . Lord Cowlin is . . . away. My Lady.” His eyes darted toward Perrin, then flickered away. “The grain merchants. . . . They’re who you want. They can always be found at the Golden Barge. That way.” He thrust out a hand pointing vaguely deeper into the town, then suddenly scrambled away, looking back over his shoulder at them as though fearful of pursuit.

“I think we should find somewhere else,” Perrin said. That fellow had been afraid of more than yellow eyes. This place felt . . . askew.

“We are already here, and there is nowhere else,” Berelain replied in a very practical voice. In all that stink, he could not catch her scent; he would have to go by what he heard and saw, and her face was calm enough for an Aes Sedai. “I’ve been in towns that smelled worse than this, Perrin. I’m sure I have. And if this Lord Cowlin is gone, it won’t be the first time I’ve dealt with merchants. You don’t really believe they’ve seen the dead walking, do you?” What was a man to say to that without sounding a pure wool head?

In any case, the others were already crowding through the gates, though not in any neat array, now. Wynter and Alharra heeled Seonid like mismatched guard dogs, the one fair, the other dark, and both ready to rip out throats at the blink of an eye. They certainly had the feel of So Habor. Kirklin, riding beside Masuri, looked unwilling to wait for that eye to blink; his hand rested on the hilt of his sword. Kireyin had a hand to his nose, and a glare in his eye that said someone was going to pay for making him smell this. Medore and Latian looked ill, too, but Balwer merely peered about, tilting his head, then drew the pair of them off into a narrow side street leading north. As Berelain said, they were there already.

The colorful banners looked decidedly out of place as Perrin rode through the cramped winding streets of the town. Some of the streets were actually quite wide for the size of So Habor, but they felt close, as if the stone buildings on either side somehow loomed higher than their two or three stories and were about to topple on his head, to boot. Imagination made the streets seem dim, too. It had to be imagination. The sky was not that gray. People filled the dirty stone paving, but not enough to account for all the farms in the area being abandoned, and everyone scurried, heads down. Not hurrying toward something; hurrying away. No one looked at anyone else. With a river practically on their doorsteps, they had forgotten how to wash, too. He did not see a face without a coating of grime or a garment that did not look to have been worn for a week, and hard work in muck with it. The stink only worsened the deeper into the town they rode. He supposed you could get used to anything, in time. Worst of all was the quiet, though. Villages were quiet sometimes, if not so still as the woods, but a town always held a faint murmur, the sound of shopkeepers bargaining and people going about their lives. So Habor did not even whisper. It barely seemed to breathe.

Getting better directions was difficult, since most people darted away if spoken to, but eventually they dismounted in front of a prosperous-appearing inn, three stories of neatly dressed gray stone under a slate roof, with a sign hanging out front announcing the Golden Barge. The sign even had a touch of gilt on the lettering, and on the grain mounded high in the barge and uncovered as it never would be for shipping. No grooms appeared from the stableyard beside the inn, so the bannermen had to serve as horse holders, a task that did not make them happy. Tod put so much attention into peering at the flow of dirty people that scurried by and fondling the hilt of his short-sword that Stayer very nearly got a couple of his fingers when he took the stallion's reins. The Mayener and the Ghealdanin seemed to be wishing they had lances rather than banners. Flann just looked wild-eyed. In spite of the morning sun, the light did seem . . . shadowy. Going inside did not make things any better.

At first glance, the common room bore out the inn's prosperity, with polished round tables and proper chairs instead of benches, standing beneath a high, stout-beamed ceiling. The walls were painted with fields of barley and oats and millet, ripening under a bright sun, and a colorfully painted clock stood on the carved mantel above a wide fireplace of white stone. The fireplace was cold, though, the air nearly as icy as outside. The clock had run down and the polish dulled. Dust lay on everything. The only people in the room were six men and five women huddling over their drinks around an oval table, larger than the rest, that stood in the middle of the floor.

One of the men leaped to his feet with an oath, face paling underneath the dirt, when Perrin and the others entered. A plump woman with lank greasy hair shoved her pewter cup to her mouth and tried to gulp so fast that wine spilled over her chin. Maybe it was his eyes. Maybe.

"What happened in this town?" Annoura said firmly, tossing back her cloak as though a fire blazed on the hearth. The calm gaze she ran across the people at the table froze every one of them. Abruptly Perrin realized that neither Masuri nor Seonid had followed him inside. He doubted very much that they were waiting in the street with the horses. What they and their Warders *were* doing was any man's guess.

The man who had jumped up tugged at his coat collar with a finger. The coat had been fine blue wool once, with a row of gilded buttons to his neck, but he appeared to have been spilling food down the front of it for some time. Maybe more than had gone into him. He was another whose skin hung slack. “H-happened, Aes Sedai?” he stammered.

“Be quiet, Mycal!” a haggard woman said quickly. Her dark dress was embroidered on the high neck and along the sleeves, but dirt made the colors uncertain. Her eyes were sunken pits. “What makes you think something happened, Aes Sedai?”

Annoura would have continued, but Berelain stepped in as the Aes Sedai opened her mouth again. “We are looking for the grain merchants.” Annoura’s expression never changed, but her mouth snapped shut with an audible click.

Long looks passed between the people around the table. The haggard woman studied Annoura for a moment, quickly passing on to Berelain and obviously taking in the silks and firedrops. And the diadem. She spread her skirts in a curtsy. “We are the merchant’s guild of So Habor, my Lady. What’s left of—” Breaking off, she took a deep, shuddering breath. “I am Rahema Arnon, my Lady. How may we serve you?”

The merchants seemed to brighten a little on learning that their visitors had come for grain and other things that they could supply, oil for lamps and cooking, beans and needles and horseshoe nails, cloth and candles and a dozen things more that the camp needed. At least, they grew a little less fearful. Any ordinary merchant hearing the list Berelain gave would have been hard-pressed not to smile greedily, but this lot . . .

Mistress Arnon shouted for the innkeeper to bring wine—“the best wine; quickly, now; quickly”—but when a long-nosed woman stuck her head hesitantly into the common room, Mistress Arnon had to rush over and catch her soiled sleeve to keep her from vanishing again. The fellow in the food-stained coat called for someone named Speral to bring the sample jars, but after shouting three times with no response, he gave a nervous laugh and darted into a back room to return a moment later, his arms around three large cylindrical wooden containers that he sat on the table, still laughing nervously. The others wore a collection of twitching smiles as they bowed and curtsied Berelain to a seat at the head of the oval table, greasy-faced men and women scratching at themselves without appearing to notice what they were doing. Perrin tucked his gauntlets behind his belt and stood against a painted wall, watching.

They had agreed to leave the bargaining to Berelain. She was willing to admit, reluctantly, that he knew more of horseflesh than she, but she had negotiated treaties covering the sale of years' worth of the oilfish harvest. Annoura had smiled thinly at the suggestion that a jumped-up country lad might take a hand. She did not call him that—she could "my Lord" him as smoothly as Masuri or Seonid—yet it was clear she thought some things clearly above his ability. She was not smiling now, standing behind Berelain and studying the merchants as if to memorize their faces.

The innkeeper brought wine, in pewter cups that had last seen a polishing cloth weeks ago if not months, but Perrin only peered into his and swirled it in the cup. Mistress Vadere, the innkeeper, had dirt under her fingernails and embedded in her knuckles like part of her skin. He noticed that Gallenne, standing with his back to the opposite wall and one hand on his sword hilt, only held his cup, too, and Berelain never touched hers. Kireyin sniffed at his, then drank deeply and called for Mistress Vadere to bring him a pitcher.

"Thin stuff, to be called your best," he told the woman through his nose, and looking down it, "but it might wash away the stink." She stared at him blankly, then fetched a tall pewter pitcher to his table without saying a word. Kireyin apparently took her silence for respect.

Master Crossin, the fellow in the food-stained coat, unscrewed the tops of the wooden containers and spilled out hulled samples of the grain they had to offer in piles on the table, yellow millet and brown oats, the barley only a little darker brown. There would have been no rain before the harvest. "The finest quality, as you can see," he said.

"Yes, the finest." The smile slid off Mistress Arnon's face, and she jerked it back. "We sell only the finest."

For people touting their wares as the finest, they did not seem to bargain very hard. Perrin had watched men and women back home selling the wool clip and the tabac to merchants down from Baerlon, and they always disparaged the buyers' offers, sometimes complaining the merchants were trying to beggar them when the price was twice what it had been the year before or even suggesting they might wait till next year to sell at all. It was a dance as intricate as any at a feastday.

“I suppose we might lower the price further for such a large quantity,” a balding man told Berelain, scratching at his gray-streaked beard. It was cut short, and greasy enough to cling close to his chin. Perrin wanted to scratch his own beard just watching the fellow.

“It’s been a hard winter,” a round-faced woman muttered. Only two of the other merchants bothered to frown at her.

Perrin set his winecup down on a nearby table and walked over to the gathering in the middle of the room. Annoura gave him one sharp, warning glance, but several of the merchants looked at him curiously. And cautiously. Gallenne had made his introductions all over again, but these folk were not entirely clear where Mayene was, exactly, or how powerful, and the Two Rivers only meant good tabac, to them. Two Rivers tabac was known everywhere. If not for the presence of an Aes Sedai, his eyes might have set them running. Everyone fell silent as Perrin scooped up a handful of millet, the tiny spheres smooth and vivid yellow on his palm. This grain was the first clean thing he had seen in the town. Letting the grain spill back onto the table, he picked up the lid of one of the containers. The threads cut into the wood were sharp and unworn. The lid would fit tightly. Mistress Arnon’s eyes slid away from his, and she licked her lips.

“I want to see the grain in the warehouses,” he said. Half the people around the table twitched.

Mistress Arnon drew herself up, blustering. “We don’t sell what we don’t have. You can watch our laborers load every sack on your carts, if you wish to spend hours in the cold.”

“I was about to suggest a visit to a warehouse,” Berelain put in. Rising, she drew her red gloves from behind her belt and began tugging them on. “I would never buy grain without seeing the warehouse.”

Mistress Arnon sagged. The bald-headed man put his head down on the table. No one said anything, though.

The dispirited merchants did not bother to fetch their cloaks before leading them into the street. The breeze had picked up to a wind, cold as only a late winter wind could be, when people were already thinking ahead to spring, but they did not seem to notice. The hunch of their shoulders had nothing to do with cold.

“Can we go now, Lord Perrin?” Flann asked anxiously when Perrin and the others appeared. “This place makes me want a bath.” Annoura gave him a frown in passing that made him flinch like one of the merchants.

Flann tried a placating smile on her, but it was a sickly effort, and too late for anything but her back.

"As soon as I can arrange it," Perrin said. The merchants were already scurrying down the street, heads down and not looking at anyone. Berelain and Annoura managed to follow without appearing to rush, gliding along, one as composed as the other, two fine ladies out for a stroll and never mind the filth underfoot, or the stink in the air, or the dirty people who started at the sight of them and sometimes all but ran away as fast as they could. Gallenne had finally donned his helmet, and openly held his sword hilt with both hands, ready to draw. Kireyin was carrying his helmet on his hip, his other hand occupied with his winecup. Contemptuously eyeing the grimy-faced folk who hurried by, he sniffed at the wine as if it were a pomander to fight off the stench of the town.

The warehouses were located on a stone-paved street barely wider than a wagon, between the town's two walls. The smell was better there, close to the river, but the windblown street was empty except for Perrin and the others. There was not even a stray dog to be seen. Dogs disappeared when a town grew hungry, but why would a town with enough grain to sell be hungry? Perrin pointed to a two-story warehouse chosen at random, no different from any other, a windowless stone building with a wide pair of wooden doors held shut by a wooden bar that could have done for a ceiling beam at the Golden Barge.

The merchants suddenly recalled that they had forgotten to bring men to lift the bars. They offered to go back for them. The Lady Berelain and Annoura Sedai could rest in front of the fire at the Golden Barge while workmen were fetched. They were sure Mistress Vadere would lay a fire. Their tongues went still when Perrin placed his hand beneath the thick beam and shoved it up out of the wooden brackets. The thing was heavy, but he backed up with it to give him room to turn and toss it down on the street with a crash. The merchants stared. This might have been the first time they had ever seen a man in a silk coat do anything that could be called work. Kireyin rolled his eyes and took another sniff at his wine.

"Lanterns," Mistress Arnon said weakly. "We'll need lanterns, or torches. If . . ."

A ball of light appeared floating above Annoura's hand, glowing bright enough in the gray morning to cast everyone in faint shadows on the paving and the stone walls. Some of the merchants put hands up to shield their eyes. After a moment, Master Crossin tugged one of the doors open by an iron ring.

The smell inside was the familiar sharp scent of barley, almost strong enough to overcome the stench of the town, and something more. Small dim shapes slunk away into the shadows ahead of Annoura's light. He could have seen better without it, or at least deeper into the darkness. The glowing ball cast a large pool of light, and walled off what lay beyond. He smelled cat, closer to feral than not. And rat, too. A sudden squeal in the black depths of the warehouse, suddenly cut off, spoke of cat meeting rat. There were always rats in grain barns, and cats to hunt them. It was comforting, and normal. Almost enough to soothe his uneasiness. Almost. He smelled something else, a smell he should know. A fierce yowl deep in the warehouse turned to rising cries of pain that died abruptly. Apparently the rats of So Habor sometimes hunted back. Perrin's hackles stirred again, but surely there was nothing here the Dark One would want to spy on. Most rats were just rats.

There was no need to go very far in. Coarse sacks filled the darkness, in high slant-sided stacks on low wooden platforms to keep the sacks off the stone floor. Rows and rows of stacks piled nearly to the ceiling, and likely the same on the floor above. If not, this building still held enough grain to feed his people for weeks. Walking to the nearest stack, he drove his belt knife into a pale brown sack and sliced down through the tough jute fibers. A flood of barleycorns spilled out. And, clear in the glow of Annoura's brilliant light, wriggling black specks. Weevils, almost as many as there were barleycorns. Their scent was sharper than that of the barley. Weevils. He wished the hair on his neck would stop trying to rise. The cold should have been enough to kill weevils.

That one sack was proof, and his nose knew the smell of weevils, now, but he moved to another stack, then another, and another, each time slicing open one sack. Each released a spill of pale brown barley and black weevils.

The merchants were standing huddled together in the doorway, daylight behind them, but Annoura's light cast their faces in sharp relief. Worried faces. Despairing faces.

"We would be most happy to winnow each sack we sell," Mistress Arnon said unsteadily. "For only a slight additional—"

“For half the last price I offered,” Berelain cut in sharply. Wrinkling her nose in disgust, she moved her skirts clear of the weevils scuttling among the grain on the floor. “You will never get all of them.”

“And no millet,” Perrin said grimly. His men needed food, and so did the soldiers, but the millet grains were hardly bigger than the weevils. Winnow as they would, he would bring back weevils and millet in equal weight. “We’ll take extra beans instead. But they get winnowed, too.”

Suddenly someone shrieked outside in the street. Not a cat or a rat, but a man in terror. Perrin did not even realize he had drawn his axe until he found the haft in his hand as he pushed through the merchants in the doorway. They huddled closer together, licking their lips and not even trying to see who had screamed.

Kireyin was backed up against the wall of a warehouse across the way, his shining helmet with the white plume lying on the pavement beside his winecup. The man’s sword was half out of the scabbard, but he seemed frozen, staring with bulging eyes at the wall of the building Perrin had just come out of. Perrin touched his arm, and he jumped.

“There was a man,” the Ghealdanin said uncertainly. “He was just there. He looked at me, and . . .” Kireyin scrubbed a hand over his face. Despite the cold, sweat glistened on his forehead. “He walked through the wall. He did. You must believe me.” Someone moaned; one of the merchants, Perrin thought.

“I saw the man, too,” Seonid said behind him, and it was his turn to give a start. His nose was useless in this place!

Giving the wall Kireyin had indicated a last glance, the Aes Sedai stepped away from it with a palpable unwillingness. Her Warders were tall men, towering over her, but they stayed only far enough away to gain room to draw their swords. Though what the grim-eyed Warders were to fight if Seonid was serious, Perrin could not imagine.

“I find it difficult to lie, Lord Perrin,” Seonid said dryly when he expressed doubt, but her tone quickly became as serious as her face, and her eyes were so intent that they alone began to make Perrin feel uneasy. “The dead are walking in So Habor. Lord Cowlin fled the town for fear of his wife’s spirit. It seems there was doubt as to how she died. Hardly a man or woman in the town has not seen someone dead, and a good many have seen more than one. Some say people have died from the touch of someone dead. I cannot verify that, but people have died of fright, and others because of it.

No one goes out at night in So Habor, or walks into a room unannounced. People strike out at shadows and surprises with whatever is to hand, and sometimes they have found a husband, wife or neighbor dead at their feet. This is not hysteria or a tale to frighten children, Lord Perrin. I have never heard of the like, but it is real. You must leave one of us here to do what we can.”

Perrin shook his head slowly. He could not afford to lose an Aes Sedai if he was to free Faile. Mistress Arnon began to weep even before he said, “So Habor will have to face its dead alone.”

But fear of the dead only explained so much. Maybe people were too frightened to think of washing, but it seemed unlikely that fear would take everyone that way. They just did not seem to care anymore. And weevils thriving in winter, in freezing cold? There was worse wrong in So Habor than spirits walking, and every instinct told him to leave at a dead run, without looking back. He purely wished that he could.

* * *

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CHAPTER 27

What Must Be Done

The winnowing took place on the snowy eastern riverbank, where there was nothing to cut the sharp north wind. Men and women from the town hauled sacks across the bridges in four-horse wagons and one-horse carts even barrows pushed by hand. Normally buyers brought their own wagons to the warehouses, or at worst the grain and dried beans only had to be carried as far as the wharf, but Perrin had no intention of sending his cart drivers into So Habor. Or anyone else, for that matter. Whatever was wrong in that town might be catching. Anyway, the drivers were uneasy enough as it was, frowning at the dirty townsfolk, people who never spoke, but laughed nervously when they accidentally met someone’s eye. The grimy-faced merchants overseeing the work were no better. In the drivers’ native Cairhien, merchants were clean, respectable people, at least outwardly, who very seldom twitched just because someone moved at the corner of their vision. Between merchants with a tendency to peer suspiciously at anyone they did not know, and townsfolk who dragged their feet recrossing the bridges, clearly reluctant to go back inside their own walls, the cart drivers were right on edge. They gathered in little clusters, pale, dark-clad men and women, gripping the hilts of their belt knives and peering at the taller locals as if at murderous madmen.

Perrin rode about slowly, watching the winnowing, examining the row of carts that stretched up the rise and out of sight waiting to be loaded, or the town’s wagons and carts and barrows rolling across the bridges. He made sure he was in plain view. He was not sure why the sight of him pretending to be unconcerned should settle anyone else’s nerves, yet it seemed to. Enough that no one started running, at least, though they continued to look askance at the people of So Habor. They kept their distance, too, and just as well. Let the notion that some of those folk might not be alive get into the Cairhienin’s heads, and half would whip up their cart horses to flee then and there. Most of the rest might not wait much past dark. That sort of tale could twist anyone's head, come night. The wan sun, nearly hidden by gray overcast, still sat less than halfway to its noonday peak, yet increasingly it was obvious they would have to be there through the night. Maybe more than one. His jaw knotted with the effort of not grinding his teeth, and even Neald began to avoid his scowls. He did not snap at anyone. He just wanted to.

It was an arduous process, the winnowing. Every last sack had to be opened and emptied onto large flat wicker baskets, each of which took two people to toss the grain or beans. The cold wind carried away weevils in a shower of black flecks, and men and women with woven two-handed fans added to the gusts. A swift current swept away everything that was blown into the river, but soon the snow on the riverbank was trampled underfoot and the gray slush layered with insects dead or dying from the cold, and a liberal coating of oats and barley speckled with red beans. There was always a new layer to replace what feet mashed into the snow. What was left on the baskets seemed cleaner, though, if not entirely clean when it was poured back into the coarse jute bags, which had been turned inside out and beaten fiercely with sticks by children to shake out vermin. The refilled sacks went into the Cairhienin's carts as soon as the tops were tied, but the piles of empty bags grew at a prodigious rate.

He was leaning on the pommel of Stayer's saddle, trying to calculate whether it was taking two whole cart loads from the warehouses to fill one of his carts with grain, when Berelain brought her white mare up beside him, holding her scarlet cloak close against the wind with one red-gloved hand. Annoura reined in a few paces away, her ageless face smooth and unreadable. The Aes Sedai appeared to be giving them privacy, yet she was close enough to hear anything above whispers even without any tricks of the Power. Smooth face or no, her beak of a nose gave her a predatory look today. Her beaded braids seemed some strange eagle's lowered crest.

"You cannot save everyone," Berelain said calmly. Away from the stink of the town, her scent was sharp with urgency, and razor-edged with anger. "Sometimes, you must choose. So Habor is Lord Cowlin's duty. He had no right to abandon his people." Not angry with him, then.

Perrin frowned. Did she think he felt guilty? Balanced against Faile's life, the troubles of So Habor could not budge the scales a hair. But he turned his bay so he was looking at the gray town walls across the river, not the hollow-eyed children piling up empty sacks. A man did what he could. What he had to. “Does Annoura have an opinion on what’s happening here?” he growled. Quietly, but somehow he had no doubt the Aes Sedai heard.

“I’ve little idea what Annoura thinks,” Berelain replied, making no effort to lower her voice. She not only did not care who overheard, she wanted to be heard. “She is not as forthcoming as she once was. As I once thought she was. It is up to her to mend what she has torn.” Without looking at the Aes Sedai, she turned and rode away.

Annoura remained behind, eyes unblinking on Perrin’s face. “You are *ta’veren*, yes, but you are still only a thread in the Pattern, as am I. In the end, even the Dragon Reborn is just a thread to be woven into the Pattern. Not even a *ta’veren* thread chooses how it will be woven.”

“Those threads are people,” Perrin said wearily. “Sometimes maybe people don’t want to be woven into the Pattern without any say.”

“And you think this makes a difference?” Not waiting on an answer, she lifted her reins and heeled her fine-ankled brown mare after Berelain in a gallop that fanned her cloak behind her.

She was not the only Aes Sedai who wanted words with Perrin.

“No,” he told Seonid firmly after listening to her, patting Stayer’s neck. It was the rider wanted soothing, though. He wanted to be away from So Habor. “I said no, and I mean no.”

She sat her saddle stiffly, a pale little woman carved of ice. Except that her eyes were dark coals burning, and she reeked of affronted fury barely in check. Seonid was mild as milk-water with the Wise Ones, but he was not a Wise One. Behind her, Alharra’s dark face was a stone, gray streaking his curly black hair like frost. Wynter’s face was red above his curled mustaches. They had to accept what passed between their Aes Sedai and the Wise Ones, but Perrin was not . . . The wind whipped their Warder cloaks about, leaving their hands free for swords if need be. Rippling in the wind, the cloaks shifted in shades of gray and brown, blue and white. It was easier on the stomach than seeing them make parts of a man disappear. Some easier.

“If I have to, I’ll send Edarra to bring you back,” he warned.

Her face stayed cold, her eyes hot, yet a quiver ran through her, swaying the small white gem hanging on her forehead. Not from fear of what the Wise Ones would do to her if she had to be brought back, just from the same offense at Perrin that made her scent a hooked thorn. He was growing accustomed to offending Aes Sedai. Not a habit a wise man got into, but there seemed no way out of it.

“What about you?” he asked Masuri. “Do you want to stay in So Habor as well?”

The slim woman was known for speaking straight to the point, direct as a Green for all she was Brown, but she said calmly, “Would you not send Edarra after me, too? There are many ways to serve, and we cannot always pick the ways we would wish.” Which, come to think, might be to the point, in a way. He still had no idea why she visited Masema in secret. Did she suspect that he knew? Masuri’s face was a bland mask. Kirklin wore a bored expression, now they were out of So Habor. He managed to seem slumped while sitting his horse erect, without a worry in the world or a thought in his head. A man who believed that of Kirklin would return the next day to buy a second pig in a poke.

The townsfolk worked mechanically as the sun rose higher, like people who wanted to lose themselves in the task at hand and feared the return of memories when they stopped. Perrin decided So Habor was making him fanciful. Still, he thought he was right. The air beyond the walls still looked too dim, as though a shading cloud hung over the town.

At noon, the cart drivers cleared patches of snow on the slope rising from the river to make small fires and brew weak tea with leaves brewing their third pot, or maybe fourth. There had been no tea to be had in the town. Some of the drivers looked at the bridges as if thinking to enter So Habor and see what they could find to eat. A glance at the dirt-caked people working the winnowing baskets sent them back to dig out their small bags of oatmeal and ground acorn. At least they knew that mix was clean. A few eyed the sacks already loaded on the carts, but the beans needed to be soaked and the grain run through the large handmills that had been left back in the camp, and that was after the cooks picked out as many more weevils as they thought men could not stomach eating.

Perrin had no appetite, not for the cleanest bread, but he was drinking what passed for tea from a battered tin cup when Latian found him. The Cairhienin did not actually come to him. Instead, the short man in the striped dark coat rode slowly past the small fire where Perrin was standing, then reined in with a frown a little upslope. Dismounting, Latian lifted his gelding’s near forehoof and frowned at it. Of course, he did look up twice to see whether Perrin was coming.

With a sigh, Perrin returned the dented cup to the blocky little woman he had borrowed it from, a graying cart driver who spread her dark skirts in a curtsy. And grinned and shook her head at Latian. Likely, she could sneak ten times as well as the fellow. Neald, squatting by the fire with his hands wrapped around another tin cup, laughed out loud so hard he had to wipe a tear from his eye. Maybe he was beginning to go crazy. Light, but this place gave a man cheerful thoughts.

Latian straightened long enough to make Perrin a leg and say, “I see you, my Lord,” then ducked back down to snatch up the foreleg again like a fool. You did not grab at a horse’s legs that way unless you wanted kicking. But then, Perrin expected nothing but foolishness, really. First there was Latian’s playing at being Aiel, with his shoulder-long hair tied off in a tail at the nape of his neck in weak imitation of how Aiel cut theirs, and now the man was playing at being a spy. Perrin rested a hand on the gelding’s neck to soothe the animal after all that snatching and put an interested look on his face as he peered at a hoof that had absolutely nothing wrong with it. Except for a nick in the shoe where the iron might break in a few days if it was not replaced. His hands itched for farrier’s tools. It seemed years since he had changed a horse’s shoes, or worked a forge.

“Master Balwer sends word, my Lord,” Latian said softly, head down. “His friend is traveling to sell his wares, but is expected back tomorrow or the next day. He said to ask whether it will be all right if we catch up to you then.” Peering under the horse’s belly at the winnowers down by the river, he added, “Though it hardly looks as if you will be away before.”

Perrin scowled down at the winnowing. He scowled at the line of carts waiting their turn to be loaded, at the half dozen or so that already had their canvas covers lashed down. One of those held the first of the leather for patching boots and candles and such. No oil, though. The lamp oil in So Habor smelled as rancid as the cooking oil. What if Gaul and the Maidens brought word of Faile? An actual sighting, perhaps? He would give anything to talk to someone who had seen her, could tell him she was unharmed. What if the Shaido began to move suddenly? “Tell Balwer not to wait too long,” he growled. “As for me, I’ll be away inside the hour.”

He was as good as his word. Most of the carts and drivers had to be left behind to make the one-day journey back to camp on their own, and

Kireyin and his green-helmeted soldiers to guard them, with orders that no one was to cross the bridges. Cold-eyed, appearing completely recovered from his breakdown, the Ghealdanin assured him that he was fit and ready. Very likely, orders or not, he would be going back into So Habor just to convince himself he was not afraid. Perrin did not waste time trying to talk him out of it. For one thing, Seonid had to be found. She was not precisely hiding, yet she had learned of his departure, and, leaving her Warders to hold her horse quite openly, she dodged about on foot trying to keep carts between herself and him. The pale Aes Sedai could not hide her scent, though, or if she could, she did not know it was necessary. She was surprised when he tracked her down quickly, and indignant when he marched her to her horse ahead of Stayer. Even so, he was well under the hour riding away from So Habor, with the Winged Guards making their ring of red armor around Berelain, the Two Rivers men surrounding the eight loaded carts that trundled along behind the three remaining banners, and Neald grinning for all he was worth. Not to mention trying to chat up the Aes Sedai. Perrin did not know what to do if the fellow really was going mad. As soon as the rise hid So Habor behind them, he felt the loosening of a knot he had not realized was riding between his shoulders. That left only ten others, and a knot of impatience twisting his belly. Berelain's obvious sympathy could not loosen those.

Neald's gateway took them from the snow-covered field to the small clearing of the Traveling ground amid the towering trees, four leagues in a step, but Perrin did not wait for the handful of carts to come through. He thought he heard Berelain make a vexed sound when he booted Stayer to a quick trot, back toward the camp. Or maybe it was one of the Aes Sedai. Much more likely.

There was a sense of stillness when he rode in among the Two Rivers men's tents and huts. The sun still hung not too far off overhead in the gray sky, but there were no cookpots on the fires and very few of the men gathered around the campfires, holding their cloaks close and peering intently into the flames. A handful were sitting on the rough stools that Ban Crawe knew how to make; the rest stood or squatted. No one so much as looked up. Certainly no one came running to take his horse. Not stillness, he realized. Tension. The smell somehow minded him of a bow drawn to the point of breaking. He could almost hear the creak.

As he dismounted in front of the red-striped tent, Dannil appeared from the direction of the low Aiel tents, walking fast. Sulin and Edarra, one of the Wise Ones, were following him, and keeping up easily though neither appeared to hurry. Sulin's face was a sun-dark leather mask. Edarra's, barely revealed by the dark shawl wrapped around her head, was an image of calm. Despite her bulky skirts, she made as little sound as the white-haired Maiden, not so much as a faint clink from her gold and ivory bracelets and necklaces. Dannil was chewing the edge of one thick mustache, absently pulling his sword an inch out of its rough leather scabbard and shoving it back hard. Pull and shove. He drew a deep breath before speaking.

"The Maidens brought in five Shaido, Lord Perrin. Arganda took them over to the Ghealdanin tents to put them to the question. Masema's with them."

Perrin brushed aside Masema's presence inside the camp. "Why did you let Arganda take them?" he asked Edarra. Dannil could not have stopped it, but the Wise Ones were a different proposition.

Edarra appeared not much older than Perrin, yet her cool blue eyes seemed to have seen far more than he ever would. She folded her arms beneath her breasts in a rattle of bracelets. And with a touch of impatience. "Even Shaido know how to embrace pain, Perrin Aybara. It will take days to bring any of them to talk, and there seemed no reason to wait."

If Edarra's eyes were cool, Sulin's were blue ice. "My spear-sisters and I could have done it faster ourselves, a little, but Dannil Lewin said you wanted no blows struck. Gerard Arganda is an impatient man, and he mistrusts us." She sounded as though she would have spat if she were not Aiel. "You may not learn much, in any case. They are Stone Dogs. They will yield slowly, and as little as possible. In this, it is always necessary to put together a little from one with a little from another to make a picture."

Embrace pain. There had to be pain, when you put a man to the question. He had not let that thought form in his head before this. But to get Faile back . . .

"Have somebody rub Stayer down," he said roughly, thrusting the reins at Dannil.

The Ghealdanin portion of the camp could not have been more different from the rude shelters and haphazardly placed tents of the Two Rivers men. Here, the peaked canvas tents stood in precise rows, most with a steel-tipped cone of lances standing at the entry flaps and saddled horses tethered at the side, ready to mount. The flicking of the horses' tails and the long streamers on the lances, lifting on a cold breeze, were the only disordered things to be seen. The paths between the tents were all the same width, and a straight line could have been drawn through the rows of cookfires. Even the creases in the canvas, from where the tents had been folded away at the bottom of carts until the snows came, made straight lines. All orderly and neat.

A smell of oatmeal porridge and boiled acorn hung in the air, and some green-coated men were scraping the last of the midday meal from their tin plates with their fingers. Others were already scouring out the cookpots. None showed any sign of tension. They were just eating and doing chores, with about equal pleasure. It was something that had to be done.

A large knot of men stood gathered in a ring near the sharpened stakes that marked the outer edge of the camp. No more than half wore the green coats and burnished breastplates of Ghealdanin lancers. Some of the others carried lances or had swords belted over their rumpled coats. Those ranged from fine silk or good wool to the pickings of a ragbag, but none could be called clean except in comparison to So Habor. You could always tell Masema's men, even from the back.

Another smell came to him as he approached the circle of men. The smell of meat roasting. And there was a muffled sound that he tried not to hear. When he began pushing his way through, the soldiers looked around at him and gave way grudgingly. Masema's men started back, muttering about yellow eyes and Shadowspawn. Either way, he gained passage to the front.

Four tall men, red-haired or pale in the gray-and-brown *cadin'sor,* lay bound with their wrists lashed to their ankles in the small of their backs and stout lengths of branch tied behind their knees and elbows. Their faces were battered and bruised, and they had wadded rags tied between their teeth. The fifth man was naked, staked out between four stout pegs driven into the ground and stretched so tight his sinews stood out. He thrashed as much as his binding allowed, though, and howled into the rags stuffing his mouth, a muffled bellow of agony. Hot coals made a small cluster on his belly, giving off a faint smoke. It was the smell of blistering flesh that Perrin's nose had caught. The coals clung to the stretched man's skin, and every time his writhing managed to throw one off, a grinning fellow in a filthy green silk coat, squatting beside him, used a pair of tongs to replace it with another from a potful melting a circle of mud in the ground. Perrin knew him. His name was Hari, and he liked to collect ears strung on a leather cord. Men's ears, women's ears, children's ears; it never minded to Hari.

Without thinking, Perrin strode forward and kicked the little pile of coals off the bound man. Some of them struck Hari, who jumped back with a startled squeal that turned to a shriek when his hand came down in the pot. He toppled over sideways, cradling his burned hand and glaring at Perrin, a weasel in a human skin.

"The savage makes a sham, Aybara," Masema said. Perrin had not even noticed the man standing there, face like a scowling stone beneath his shaved scalp. His dark fevered eyes held a measure of contempt. The scent of madness skittered through the stink of burned flesh. "I know them. They pretend to feel pain, but they do not; not the way other men do. You must be willing and able to hurt a stone to make one of them talk."

Arganda, rigid beside Masema, was gripping his sword hilt so hard that his hand shook. "Perhaps you are willing to lose your wife, Aybara," he grated, "but I will not lose my queen!"

"It has to be done," Aram said, half pleading, half demanding. He was on Masema's other side, clutching the edges of his green cloak as if to keep his hands from the sword on his back. His eyes were almost as hot as Masema's. "You taught me that a man does what he must."

Perrin forced his fists to unknot. What had to be done, for Faile.

Berelain and the Aes Sedai came pushing through the crowd, Berelain wrinkling her nose slightly at the sight of the man stretched out between the pegs. The three Aes Sedai might have been looking at a piece of wood for all their expression. Edarra and Sulin were with them, neither more affected. Some of the Ghealdanin soldiers frowned at the two Aiel women and muttered under their breath. Masema's rumpled, dirty-faced men glared at Aiel and Aes Sedai alike, but most edged away from the three Warders, and those who did not were pulled away by their companions. Some fools knew the limits of stupidity. Masema glared at Berelain with burning eyes before deciding to pretend she did not exist. Some fools knew no limits.

Bending, Perrin untied the rag around the pegged man's mouth and tugged the wad from between his teeth. He just managed to snatch his hand back from a snap as vicious as any Stayer could have given.

Immediately, the Aielman threw back his head and began to sing in a deep, clear voice:

“Wash the spears; while the sun climbs high.
Wash the spears; while the sun falls low.
Wash the spears; who fears to die?
Wash the spears; no one I know!”

Masema’s laughter rose in the middle of the singing. Perrin’s hackles rose, too. He had never heard Masema laugh before. It was not a pleasant sound.

He did not want to lose a finger, so he pulled his axe out of its belt loop and carefully used the top of the axe head against the man’s chin to push his mouth shut. Eyes the color of the sky looked up at him out of a sun-dark face, unafraid. The man smiled.

“I don’t ask you to betray your people,” Perrin said. His throat hurt with the effort of keeping his voice steady. “You Shaido captured some women. All I want to know is how to get them back. One is named Faile. She’s as tall as one of your women, with dark tilted eyes, a strong nose and a bold mouth. A beautiful woman. You’d remember her, if you had seen her. Have you?” Pulling the axe away, he straightened.

The Shaido stared at him for a moment, then raised his head and began to sing again, never taking his eyes from Perrin. It was a jolly song, with the rollicking sound of a dance:

“I once met a man who was far from home.
His eyes were yellow and his wits were stone.
He asked me to hold smoke in my hand,
and said he could show me a watery land.
He put his head in the ground and his feet in the air,
and said he could dance like a woman fair.
He said he could stand till he turned to stone.
When I blinked my eyes, he was gone.”

Letting his head fall back, the Shaido chuckled, deep and rich. He could have been lounging at ease on a feather bed.

“If . . . If you can’t do this,” Aram said desperately, “then go away. I’ll help see to it.”

What had to be done. Perrin looked at the faces around him. Arganda, scowling with hatred, at him as much as the Shaido, now. Masema, stinking of madness and filled with a scornful hate. You must be willing and able to hurt a stone. Edarra, her face as unreadable as the Aes Sedai’s, arms folded calmly beneath her breasts. Even Shaido know how to embrace pain. It will take days. Sulin, the scar across her cheek still pale on her leathery skin, her gaze level and her scent implacable. They will yield slowly and as little as possible. Berelain, smelling of judgment, a ruler who had sentenced men to death and never lost a night's sleep. What had to be done. Willing and able to hurt a stone. Embrace pain. Oh, Light, Faile.

The axe was as light as a feather rising in his hand, and came down like a hammer on the anvil, the heavy blade shearing through the Shaido's left wrist.

The man grunted in pain, then reared up convulsively with a snarl, deliberately spraying the blood that gouted from his wrist across Perrin's face.

"Heal him," Perrin said to the Aes Sedai, stepping back. He did not try to wipe his face. The blood was seeping into his beard. He felt hollow. He could not have lifted the axe again if he had to for his life.

"Are you mad?" Masuri said angrily. "We cannot give the man back his hand!"

"I said, Heal him!" he growled.

Seonid was already moving, though, lifting her skirts to glide across the ground and kneel at the man's head. He was biting at his severed wrist, trying futilely to stem the flow of blood with the pressure of his teeth. But there was no fear in his eyes. Or in his smell. None.

Seonid gripped the Shaido's head, and suddenly he convulsed again, flinging his arm out wildly. The spray of blood dwindled as he jerked, and was gone before he slumped back to the ground, gray-faced. Unsteadily, he raised the stump of his left arm to look at the smooth skin that now covered the end. If there was a scar, Perrin could not see it. The man bared teeth at him. He still did not smell afraid. Seonid slumped, too, as if she had strained to her limit. Alharra and Wynter took a step forward, and she waved them away, rising by herself with a heavy sigh.

"I've been told you can hold out for days and still say next to nothing," Perrin said. His voice sounded too loud in his ears. "I don't have time for you to show how tough you are, or how brave. I know you're brave and tough. But my wife's been a prisoner too long. You'll be separated and asked about some women. Whether you've seen them and where. That's all I want to know. There'll be no hot coals or anything else; just questions. But if anybody refuses to answer, or if your answers are too different, then everybody loses something.” He was surprised to find that he could lift the axe after all. The blade was smeared with red.

“Two hands and two feet,” he said coldly. Light, he sounded like ice. He felt like ice to his bones. “That means you get four chances to answer the same. And if you all hold out, I still won’t kill you. I’ll find a village to leave you in, some place that will let you beg, somewhere the boys will toss a coin to the fierce Aielmen with no hands or feet. You think on it and decide whether it’s worth keeping my wife from me.”

Even Masema was staring at him as if he had never before seen the man standing there with an axe. When he turned to go, Masema’s men and the Ghealdanin alike parted in front of him as though to let a whole fist of Trollocs through.

He found the hedge of sharpened stakes in front of him, and the forest a hundred paces or so beyond, but he did not change direction. Carrying the axe, he walked until huge trees surrounded him and the smell of the camp was left behind. The smell of blood he carried with him, sharp and metallic. There was no running from that.

He could not have said how long he walked through the snow. He barely noticed the sharpening slant of the bars of light that sliced the shadows beneath the forest canopy. The blood was thick on his face, in his beard. Beginning to dry. How many times had he said he would do anything to get Faile back? A man did what he had to. For Faile, anything.

Abruptly, he raised the axe behind his head in both hands and hurled it as hard as he could. It spun end over end, and slammed into the thick trunk of an oak with a solid *thcunk.*

Letting out a breath that seemed locked in his lungs, he sank down on a rough stone outcrop that stuck up as high and broad as a bench, and put his elbows on his knees. “You can show yourself now, Elyas,” he said wearily. “I can smell you there.”

The other man stepped lightly out of the shadows, yellow eyes glowing faintly beneath the wide brim of his hat. The Aiel were noisy, compared to him. Adjusting his long knife, he took a seat beside Perrin on the outcrop, but for a time he merely sat combing his fingers through the gray-streaked beard that fanned across his chest. He nodded toward the axe stuck in the side of the oak. “I told you once to keep that till you got to like using it too much. Did you start liking it? Back there?”

Perrin shook his head hard. “No! Not that! But . . .”

“But what, boy? I think you almost have Masema scared. Only, you smell scared, too.”

“About time he was scared of something,” Perrin muttered, shrugging uncomfortably. Some things were hard to give voice. Maybe it was time to, though. “The axe. I didn’t notice it, the first time; only looking back. That was the night I met Gaul, and the Whitecloaks tried to kill us. Later, fighting Trollocs in the Two Rivers, I wasn’t sure. But then, at Dumai’s Wells, I was. I’m afraid in a battle, Elyas, afraid and sad, because maybe I’ll never see Faile again.” His heart clenched till his chest hurt. Faile. “Only . . . I’ve heard Grady and Neald talk about how it is, holding the One Power. They say they feel more *alive.* I’m too frightened to spit, in a battle, but I feel more alive than any time except when I’m holding Faile. I don’t think I could stand it if I came to feel that way about what I just did back there. I don’t think Faile would have me back if I came to that.”

Elyas snorted. “I don’t think you have that in you, boy. Listen, danger takes different men in different ways. Some are cold as clockwork, but you never struck me as the cold sort. When your heart starts pounding, it heats your blood. Stands to reason it heightens your senses, too. Makes you aware. Maybe you’ll die in a few minutes, maybe in a heartbeat, but you’re not dead now, and you know it from your teeth to your toenails. Just the way things are. Doesn’t mean you like it.”

“I would like to believe that,” Perrin said simply.

“Live as long as I have,” Elyas replied in a dry voice, “and you’ll believe. Till then, just take it that I’ve lived longer than you have, and I’ve been there before you.”

The two of them sat looking at the axe. Perrin wanted to believe. The blood on his axe looked black, now. Blood had never looked so black before. How long had it been? From the angle of the light sifting through the trees, the sun was falling.

His ears caught the crunch of hooves in the snow, slowly coming toward him. Minutes later, Neald and Aram appeared, the one-time Tinker pointing out tracks and the Asha’man shaking his head impatiently. It was a clear trail, but in truth, Perrin would not have bet on Neald being able to follow it. He was a city man.

“Arganda thought we ought to wait till your blood cooled,” Neald said, leaning on his saddle and studying Perrin. “Me, I think it can’t get any cooler.” He nodded, a touch of satisfaction around his mouth. He was accustomed to people being afraid of him, because of his black coat and what it represented.

"They talked," Aram said, "and they all gave the same answers." His scowl said he did not like the answers. "I think the threat of leaving them to beg frightened them more than your axe. But they say they've never seen the Lady Faile. Or any of the others. We could try the coals again. They might remember then." Did he sound eager? To find Faile, or to use the coals?

Elyas grimaced. "They'll just give you back the answers you've already given them, now. Tell you what you want to hear. It was a small chance, anyway. There's thousands of Shaido and thousands of prisoners. A man could live his whole life among that many people and never meet more than a few hundred to remember."

"Then we have to kill them," Aram said grimly. "Sulin said the Maidens made sure to take them when they had no weapons, so they could be questioned. They won't just settle down to be *gai'shain*. If even one escapes, he can let the Shaido know we're here. Then they'll be coming after us."

Perrin's joints felt rusted, aching as he stood up. He could not just let the Shaido go. "They can be guarded, Aram." Haste had almost lost him Faile completely, and he had been hasty again. Hasty. Such a mild word for cutting off a man's hand. And to no purpose. He had always tried to think carefully and move carefully. He had to think now, but every thought hurt. Faile was lost in a sea of white-clad prisoners. "Maybe other *gai'shain* would know where she is," he muttered, turning back toward the camp. But how to put his hands on any of the Shaido's *gai'shain*? They were never allowed outside the camp except under guard.

"What about that, boy?" Elyas asked.

Perrin knew what he meant without looking. The axe. "Leave it for whoever finds it." His voice turned harsh. "Maybe some fool gleeman will make a story out of it." He strode away toward the camp, never looking back. With its empty loop, the thick belt around his waist was too light. All to no purpose.

Three days later the carts returned from So Habor, heavy laden, and Balwer entered Perrin's tent with a tall unshaven man, wearing a dirty woolen coat and a sword that looked much better cared for. At first, Perrin did not recognize him behind an untrimmed month’s growth of beard. Then he caught the man’s scent.

“I never expected to see you again,” he said. Balwer blinked, as much as a gasp of startlement from anyone else. Doubtless the bird-like little man had been looking forward to presenting a surprise.

“I’ve been searching for . . . for Maighdin,” Tallanvor said roughly, “but the Shaido moved faster than I could. Master Balwer says you know where she is.”

Balwer gave the younger man a sharp look, but his voice remained as dry and emotionless as his scent. “Master Tallanvor reached So Habor just before I left, my Lord. It was the merest chance that I encountered him. But perhaps a fortunate chance. He may have some allies for you. I will let him tell it.”

Tallanvor frowned at his boots and said nothing.

“Allies?” Perrin prompted. “Nothing less than an army will be much use, but I’ll take any aid you can bring.”

Tallanvor looked at Balwer, who returned a half bow and a blandly encouraging smile. The unshaven man drew a deep breath. “Fifteen thousand Seanchan, near enough. Most are Taraboners, actually, but they ride under Seanchan banners. And . . . And they have at least a dozen *damane.*” His voice quickened with urgency, a need to finish before Perrin could cut him off. “I know it’s like taking help from the Dark One, but they’re hunting the Shaido, too, and I’d take the Dark One’s help to free Maighdin.”

For a moment, Perrin stared at the two men, Tallanvor nervously thumbing his sword hilt, Balwer like a sparrow waiting to see which way a cricket would hop. Seanchan. And *damane.* Yes, that *would* be like taking the Dark One’s help. “Sit down and tell me about these Seanchan,” he said.

* * *

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CHAPTER 28

A Cluster of Rosebuds

From the day they left Ebou Dar, traveling with Valan Luca’s Grand Traveling Show and Magnificent Display of Marvels and Wonders was every bit as bad as Mat’s darkest thoughts had made it. For one thing, it rained almost every day for a few hours and once for three days running, cold winter rain in downpours little short of snow and icy drizzles that slowly soaked a coat through and left you shivering before you knew it. Water ran off the hard-packed road as if it had been paved in stone, leaving at worst a thin slick of mud, but that long train of wagons and horses and people covered little enough ground when the sun shone. In the beginning, the showfolk had been all eagerness to leave the city where lightning sank ships in the night and strange murders had everyone looking over their shoulders, to be away from a jealous Seanchan nobleman who would be hunting his wife furiously and might take out his anger on anyone associated with spiriting her out her of his clutches. In the beginning, they pressed ahead as fast as the horses could pull the wagons, urging the animals for a quicker step, another mile. But every mile seemed to make them feel that much farther from danger, that much safer, and by the first afternoon . . .

“Have to take care of the horses,” Luca explained, watching the team unhitched from his ridiculously painted wagon and led away to the horselines through a light drizzle. The sun still sat little more than halfway down to the horizon, but already gray tendrils were rising from the smoke holes of tents and the metal chimneys of the box-like living wagons. “Nobody’s chasing us, and it’s a long way to Lugard. Good horses are hard to come by, and expensive.” Luca gave a sour frown and shook his head. Mention of expense always soured him. He was tight with a penny, except where his wife was concerned. “Not many places between here and there worth stopping more than a day. Most villages won’t provide a full crowd even if the whole population turns out, and you can never tell how a town will be until you set up. You're not paying me enough to give up what I can earn, though." Hitching his embroidered crimson cloak closer against the damp, he glanced over his shoulder toward his wagon. The smell of something bitter drifted through the light rain. Mat was not sure he would want to eat anything Luca's wife cooked. "You're certain nobody is chasing us, right, Cauthon?"

Irritably tugging his woolen cap lower, Mat stalked away through the brightly colored sprawl of tents and wagons grinding his teeth. Not paying enough? For what he had offered, Luca should have been willing to *run* his animals all the way to Lugard. Well, not exactly run—he did not want to kill horses, after all—but that puffed-up popinjay should have been willing to bloody push hard.

Not far from Luca's wagon, Chel Vanin was seated on a three-legged stool that he overlapped, stirring some sort of dark stew in a small kettle that hung over a small fire. Rain dripped into the kettle from the drooping brim of his hat, but the fat man did not seem to notice, or care. Gorderan and Fergin, two of the Redarms, grumbled curses as they drove pegs into the muddy ground for the guy ropes of the dirty-brown canvas tent they shared with Harnan and Metwyn. And with Vanin, too, but Vanin possessed skills that he considered put him above raising tents, and the Redarms agreed with only a little reluctance. Vanin was an experienced farrier, but more importantly, he was the best tracker and the best horsethief in the country, unlikely as that seemed to look at him, and you could name the country you chose.

Fergin caught sight of Mat, and bit off an oath as his hammer missed the tent peg and hit his thumb. Dropping the hammer, he stuck the thumb in his mouth and squatted there complaining shrilly around it. "We're going to be out in this all night guarding those women, my Lord. Can't you hire some of those horse handlers to do this so we can at least stay dry till we have to get wet?"

Gorderan poked Fergin's shoulder with a thick finger. He was as wide as Fergin was skinny, and a Tairen despite his gray eyes. "Horse handlers'll put up the tent and steal everything in it that's loose, Fergin." Another poke. "You want one of those lightfingers walking off with my crossbow, or my saddle? That's a good saddle." A third poke nearly pushed Fergin over sideways. “We don’t get this tent up, and Harnan’ll have us standing guard all night.”

Fergin glowered and grumbled, but he picked up his hammer, wiping the mud off on his coat. He was a good enough soldier, but not very bright.

Vanin spat through the gap in his teeth, just missing the kettle. The stew smelled wonderful after whatever Latelle was making, but Mat decided he was not going to eat here, either. Tapping his wooden spoon on the rim of the kettle to clean it, the fat man looked up at Mat through heavy-lidded eyes. His round face often looked half-asleep, but only a fool believed it. “At this rate, we’ll reach Lugard about the end of summer. If we ever do.”

“We will, Vanin,” Mat said, more confidently than he felt at the moment. The rough woolen coat he had donned dry a few hours ago only shed rain in spots, and water was trickling down his back. It was hard to feel confident with icy rain sliding down your backbone. “Winter’s almost done. We’ll move faster once spring comes. You’ll see. Come the middle of spring, and we’ll be in Lugard.”

He was not so sure of that, either. They covered no more than two leagues that first day, and after that, two and a half made a good day. Not many places could be called towns along the Great North Road, a name that began to change very quickly as the show crept north. People called it “the Ebou Dar Road,” or “the Ferry Road,” or sometimes just “the road,” as if there were only one. But Luca stopped at every last town, real or so-called, walled or jumped-up village with six streets and a rough-paved excuse for a town square. Near half a day went into just getting the show set up and the canvas wall erected around it with that huge red-lettered blue banner hung across the entrance. Valan Luca’s Grand Traveling Show. It was just not in Luca to pass up the chance of a crowd. Or the coins in their purses. Or the chance to flourish one of his bright red cloaks and bask in their adulation. Luca liked that almost as much as the coin. Almost.

The strangeness of the performers and the caged animals from far-off lands were sufficient to pull people. The animals from not so far were enough, for that matter; few had been far enough into the countryside to see a bear much less a lion. Only heavy rain lessened the crowd, and when the rain was too stiff, the jugglers and acrobats refused to perform anyway without some sort of covering overhead. Which made Luca stalk about in a sullen snit and talk wildly of finding enough canvas tarps to shelter every act, or having a tent made large enough to hold the entire show. One tent! The man was nothing if not grandiose in his ambitions. Why not a palace on wheels while he was about it?

If Luca and the slow way the show moved had been all Mat had to worry about, though, he would have been a happy man. Sometimes, two or three slow-moving trains of Seanchan settlers who had gotten an early start passed with their strangely shaped, peaked wagons and odd-looking cattle or sheep or goats before the first wagon from the show began to move. Sometimes columns of Seanchan soldiers overtook them as they ambled along at a slow walk, ranks of men wearing helmets like huge insects' heads, stepping out smartly, and columns of horsemen with their armor of overlapping plates painted in stripes. Once, the riders were on *torm,* bronze-scaled creatures like horse-sized cats. Except for having three eyes, anyway. Twenty or so of them snaking along in a sinuous lope faster than a horse could trot. Neither the riders nor their mounts gave the show a second glance, but the show's horses went wild as the *torm* passed, screaming and rearing in the traces. The lions and leopards and bears roared in their cages, and the peculiar deer flung themselves against the bars trying to flee. It took hours to quiet everything down enough for the wagons to move again, and Luca insisted on having the caged animals' scrapes seen to first. His animals were a large investment. Twice, officers in thin-plumed helmets decided to check the warrant for Luca's horses, and Mat oozed cold sweat the size of grapes until they moved on again, satisfied. As the show crept north, the numbers of Seanchan on the road dwindled, yet he still sweated when he saw another party, soldiers or settlers either one. Maybe Suroth really was keeping Tuon's disappearance a secret, but the Seanchan would be searching for her. All it would take was one meddlesome officer who actually compared the numbers on the warrant with the number of horses. He would search the wagons with a fine-tooth comb after that, for certain. Just one officious *sul'dam* who thought there might be a woman who could channel among the jugglers and tumblers and contortionists. He sweated plums! Unfortunately, not everyone had a proper regard for their own skins.

Outside a flyspeck village called Weesin, a thatch-roofed little cluster of houses where not even Luca thought two coppers could be shaken loose, Mat stood with a heavy woolen cloak pulled around him in a driving rain and watched the three Aes Sedai steal back into the show as the sun set. Thunder boomed in the distance. They were swathed in dark cloaks with the hoods well up, yet he had no doubts who they were. In the downpour, they passed within ten feet without seeing him, but the silver medallion hanging beneath his shirt went cold against his chest. At least one of them was channeling, or holding the Power, anyway. Burn him, they were all three mad as loons.

No sooner did the Aes Sedai vanish among the wagons and tents than three more cloaked shapes appeared, hurrying after them. One of these women had a sharper eye, raising a hand to point at him, but the others only paused, and then they scurried after the Aes Sedai together. He started to curse, then left it unuttered. He was beyond that. If he named the people he wanted wandering around where a Seanchan patrol might see them, the Aes Sedai and the *sul'dam* would come about even with Tuon and Selucia.

"I wonder what they want?" Noal said behind him, and Mat gave a jump that let a torrent of rain into his cowl and down his neck. He wished the knobbly old man would quit sneaking up on him.

"I intend to find out," he muttered, jerking his cloak straight. He hardly knew why he bothered. His coat was only a little damp, but his linen shirt was already soaked.

Oddly enough, Noal was no longer with him when he reached the gray-streaked wagon with its fading whitewash where the Aes Sedai and *sul'dam* slept. The man liked sticking his nose in everywhere. Maybe he had decided he was wet enough. Blaeric and Fen were already wrapped in their blankets beneath the wagon, apparently oblivious to rain or mud, but he would not have wagered on either being asleep. Indeed, one sat up as he squelched up to the wagon. Whichever it was, he said nothing, yet Mat could feel the man's eyes. He did not hesitate, though, and he did not bother with knocking.

The interior was crowded with all six women on their feet, dripping cloaks still in hand. Two lamps mounted in gimbals on the walls gave a good light, better than he could have wished for, in a way. Six faces swiveled toward him with those frozen looks women gave a man when he put a foot where they did not want it. The air in the wagon smelled of damp wool and felt as if lightning had just struck, or might at any moment. Rain drummed on the roof, and thunder rolled, but the foxhead medallion felt no cooler than any other piece of silver. Maybe Blaeric and Fen had let him come inside thinking he would get his head snapped off. Maybe they just wanted to stay out of this themselves. But then, a Warder was ready to die if his Aes Sedai decided it was necessary. Not Mat Cauthon. He pushed the door shut with his hip. It hardly gave him a twinge anymore. Seldom, anyway.

When he challenged them, Edesina fiercely, shaking out the black hair that spilled down her back. "I am grateful to you for rescuing me from the Seanchan, Master Cauthon, and I will show my gratitude, but there are limits. I am not your servant to be ordered about. There were no Seanchan in the village, and we kept our faces hidden. There was no need to send your . . . watchdogs . . . after us." The look she shot at the three Seanchan women could have fried eggs. Edesina was over being nervous about anyone with a Seanchan accent. She wanted some of her own back, and the *sul'dam* were close to hand. Mat was counting on that fabled Aes Sedai self-control to keep matters short of violence. He hoped it was not already stretched too far to hold. Those old memories recalled Aes Sedai going up like an Illuminator's wares.

Bethamin's dark face showed no sign of alarm. She had finished shaking out her cloak and hanging it on a peg while Edesina was speaking, then smoothed her dress over her hips. Tonight, she wore faded green petticoats. She complained that the Ebou Dari garment was indecent, and he supposed that he would have to find her something else now they were away from the coast, but she did fill out that very low narrow neckline nicely. She sounded too much like a mother for his taste, though. "They *did* keep their faces hidden, my Lord," she drawled, "and they stayed together. No one tried to sneak off. Very well behaved, all in all." A mother praising her children. Or maybe a dog trainer praising the dogs. Yellow-haired Seta nodded approvingly. Definitely a dog trainer.

"If my Lord wishes to keep them confined," Renna said fulsomely, "we can always use the *a'dam.* They really shouldn't be trusted loose." She even offered him a bow, in the Seanchan way, bending herself at a sharp right angle. Her big brown eyes looked hopeful. Teslyn gasped and clutched her wet cloak to her bosom. She certainly was not over her fear of the *sul'dam*, for all she looked as though she could eat nails. Joline, haughty as ever, drew herself up, eyes flashing. Aes Sedai serenity or no, lightning might as well strike when Joline's eyes started flashing. It was often so with pretty women.

"No," Mat said hastily. "There's no need for that. You give those things to me, and I'll get rid of them." Light, why had he ever saddled himself with these women? What seemed the best idea at the time could look pure quill stupid in hindsight. “All of you just have to be careful. We’re not thirty miles from Ebou Dar yet. The roads are full of bloody Seanchan.” He gave an apologetic look to the three Seanchan women. They *were* on his side, after all. In a manner of speaking. They had nowhere else to go except Egeanin, and they had realized who had the money. Bethamin’s eyebrows twitched upward in surprise. Seanchan nobles did not apologize, even with a glance.

“Seanchan soldiers did pass through the village yesterday,” Teslyn said, her Illianer accent particularly strong. Joline’s flashing eyes shifted to her, but she took no notice beyond turning away to hang up her own cloak. “They did ask questions about strangers on the road. And some did complain about being sent north.” Teslyn glanced over her shoulder at the *sul’dam*, then jerked her eyes away and took a deep breath. “It does seem the Return be aimed east. The soldiers did believe the Ever Victorious Army will present Illian to their empress before the end of spring. The City itself, and all the rest.” Supposedly Aes Sedai gave up the lands of their birth when they went to the White Tower, but to any Illianer, the city of Illian was ‘the City,’ and you could hear the capital.

“That’s good,” Mat said half to himself, thinking. Soldiers talked out of turn all the time; that was one reason you did not tell your plans to every trooper until the last minute. Teslyn’s thin eyebrows rose, and he added, “It means the road to Lugard will be clear most of the way.” Teslyn’s nod was curt and not very pleased. What Aes Sedai were supposed to do and what they did were often widely different.

“We didn’t speak to anyone, my Lord, only watched the girls,” Bethamin said, even more slowly than usual, and Seanchan usually talked like honey pouring in a snowstorm. She was clearly in charge among the three *sul’dam*, but she looked at each of the others before going on. “In Ebou Dar, all the talk in the *sul’dam* quarters was of Illian. A fat land and a fat city, where many would earn new names. And wealth.” She tossed that in as if wealth hardly counted alongside a new name. “We should have realized you’d want to know about such things.” Another deep breath almost popped her out of that dress. “If you have any questions, my Lord, we’ll tell you what we know.”

Renna made him another bow, her face eager, and Seta piped up with, “We could listen in the towns and villages where we stop, too, my Lord.

The girls can be shifty, but you can trust us.”

Why, when a woman offered to help you, did she always start by sticking you in a pot of hot water and stoking up the fire? Joline’s face became a disdainful mask of ice. The Seanchan women were beneath her notice; she made that clear with a glance. It was Mat bloody Cauthon who received her freezing gaze. Edesina’s mouth thinned, and she tried to stare holes in him and the *sul’dam* both. Even Teslyn managed indignation. She was grateful for rescue, too, but she was Aes Sedai. And she directed her frown at him. He suspected she would jump like a startled frog if one of the *sul’dam* clapped her hands.

“What I want,” he explained patiently, “is for all of you to stay with the wagons.” You had to be patient with women, including Aes Sedai. He was bloody well learning that by heart. “One whisper there’s an Aes Sedai with this show, and we’ll be hip-deep in Seanchan hunting for her. Rumors of Seanchan with the show won’t serve us any better. Either way, somebody will come to find out what’s behind it sooner or later, and we’ll all be in the pickling kettle. Don’t flaunt yourselves. You need to stay low till we get closer to Lugard. That isn’t so much to ask, now is it?” Lightning lit up the wagon’s windows with a blue flash, and thunder crashed overhead, so close it rattled the wagon.

It was too much to ask, apparently, as the days wore on. Oh, the Aes Sedai kept their hoods well up when they went outside—the rain gave enough excuse for that; the rain and the cold—but one or another rode on the wagon seat as often as not, and they made no real effort to pass as servants around the showfolk. Not that they admitted who they were, of course, or ordered anyone about or even spoke to anyone much besides each other, but what servant clearly expected people to move out of her way? They went into the villages, too, and sometimes the towns, if they were sure there were no Seanchan there. When an Aes Sedai was sure of something, it had to be true. Twice they came scurrying back when they found a town half-full of settlers on their way north. They told him what they learned on their visits. He thought they did. Teslyn did seem grateful, after an Aes Sedai fashion. And Edesina. After a fashion.

Despite their differences, Joline, Teslyn and Edesina stuck together like herded geese. If you saw one, you saw all three. Likely that was because when you saw them taking a stroll, all neatly cloaked and hidden as they were, a minute later Bethamin and Renna and Seta appeared trailing after them. Oh so casually, but never letting “the girls” out of sight. The goose-herds. A blind man could see there was tension between the two groups of women. A blind man could see none of them were servants. The *sul’dam* had held respected positions, positions of authority, and they moved almost as arrogantly as the Aes Sedai. He was stuck with the story, though.

Bethamin and the other two were as leery of other Seanchan as the Aes Sedai were, yet they also followed the Aes Sedai when they went into a village or town, and Bethamin always reported the tidbits they had picked up by eavesdropping, with Renna wearing an ingratiating smile and Seta chirping in that ‘the girls’ had missed this or that, or claimed not to have heard; you could never be sure with someone who had the audacity to call herself Aes Sedai; maybe he should reconsider having them leashed, just till everything was safe.

Their tales really were not that different from what the sisters told him. Townsfolk’s talk of what they had overheard from Seanchan passing through. Many of the settlers were nervous, their heads full of tales about savage Aiel ravaging through Altara, though the local people all said that was up north somewhere. It seemed someone higher might be thinking the same, though, because many settlers had been diverted east, toward Illian. An alliance had been concluded with someone powerful who was expected to give the High Lady Suroth access to many lands. The women refused to be convinced that they need not listen for rumors. They never quite got around to handing over the *a’dam*, either. In truth, those silvery leashes and the three *sul’dam* were the only real lever he had with the Aes Sedai. Gratitude. From an Aes Sedai! Ha! Not that he really thought about putting those collars on the sisters again. Not often, anyway. He was well and truly stuck.

He truly did have no need of what the *sul’dam* and Aes Sedai learned. He had better sources, people he trusted. Well, he trusted Thom, when the white-haired gleeman could be routed out from playing Snakes and Foxes with Olver or mooning over a much-creased letter he carried tucked in the breast of his coat. Thom could walk into a common room, tell a story, maybe juggle a bit, and walk out knowing what was in the head of every man there. Mat trusted Juilin, too—he did almost as well as Thom, without juggling or storytelling—but Juilin always insisted on taking Thera with him, demurely clutching his arm as they strolled into a town. To get her used to freedom again, the man said. She smiled up at Juilin, those big eyes shining darkly, that full little mouth asking to be kissed. Maybe she had been Panarch of Tarabon, the way Juilin and Thom claimed, but Mat was beginning to doubt it. He had heard some of the contortionists joking about how the Taraboner serving girl was wearing the Tairen thief-catcher out till he could barely walk. Panarch or serving girl, though, Thera still started to kneel any time she heard a drawling accent. Mat figured that any Seanchan who asked her a question would get everything she knew, beginning with Juilin Sandar and ending with which wagon the Aes Sedai were in, all answers delivered from her knees. Thera was a bigger danger than Aes Sedai and *sul'dam* put together, in his book. Juilin bridled at the slightest suggestion his woman might be unreliable, though, and spun his bamboo staff as if he was considering cracking Mat's head for him. There was no solution, but Mat found a stopgap, a way to get a little warning if the worst occurred.

"Of course I can follow them," Noal said, with a gap-toothed grin that said it would be child's play. Laying a gnarled finger alongside his bent nose, he slipped the other knobbly hand beneath his coat, where he kept his knives. "Are you sure it wouldn't be better just to make sure she can't talk to anyone? Just a suggestion, lad. If you say not, then not." Mat most emphatically said not. He had killed one woman in his life, and left another to be butchered. He was not going to add a third to his soul.

"It seems Suroth might have made an alliance with some king," Juilin reported with a smile over a cup of mulled wine. At least Thera seemed to be making him smile more. She huddled beside Juilin's stool in their cramped tent, her head lying on his lap, and he stroked her hair softly with his free hand. "At least, there's considerable talk of some powerful new ally. And those settlers are all frightened out of their wits by Aiel."

"Most of the settlers seem to be have been sent east," Thom said, peering sadly into his cup. As Juilin grew happier day by day, he seemed to grow sadder. Noal was out shadowing Juilin and Thera, and Lopin and Nerim were sitting cross-legged at the back of the tent, but the two Cairhienin serving men had their mending baskets out and were examining Mat's good coats from Ebou Dar for any repairs they thought necessary, so the small tent still seemed crowded. "And a great many soldiers, too," Thom went on. "Everything says they're going to fall on Illian like a hammer."

Well, at least he knew he was hearing the unvarnished truth when he heard it from them. No Aes Sedai spinning words on their heads or *sul'dam* trying to smarm their way into his good graces. Bethamin and Seta had even learned to curtsy. Somehow, he felt more comfortable with Renna bending herself double. It seemed honest. Strange, but honest.

For himself, town or village, Mat took no more than a quick look around, with his collar turned up and his cap pulled down, before heading back to the show. He seldom wore a cloak. A cloak could make it difficult to use the knives he carried tucked about his person. Not that he expected to need them. It was just a prudent precaution. There was no drinking, no dancing, and no gambling. Especially no gambling. The sound of dice rattling on a table in an inn's common room pulled at him, but his sort of luck with dice was bound to be remarked, even if it did not lead to somebody pulling a knife, and in this part of Altara both men and women carried knives tucked behind their belts and were ready to use them. He wanted to pass through unnoticed, so he walked by the dice games, nodded coolly to the tavern maids who smiled at him, and never drank more than a cup of wine and usually not that. After all, he had work to do back at the show. Work of a sort. He had begun it the very first night after leaving Ebou Dar, and a rough job it was.

"I need you to go with me," he had said then, pulling open the cupboard built into the side of the wagon beneath his bed. He kept his chest of gold in there, all honestly come by through gambling. As honestly as he could, anyway. The greater part came from one horse race, and his luck was no better than any other man's with horses. For the rest . . . If a man wanted to toss dice or play at cards or pitch coins, he had to be ready to lose. Domon, seated on the other bed rubbing a hand over the bristle on his shaved scalp, had learned that lesson. The fellow should have been willing to sleep on the floor like a good *so'jhin*, but in the beginning he had insisted on flipping a coin with Mat each night for the second bed. Egeanin got the first, of course. Tossing coins was as easy as dice. As long as the coin did not land on edge, the way it sometimes did for him. But Domon had made the offer, not him. Until Mat had won four times straight, and then the fifth night the coin did land on edge, three times in a row. They took turn and turn about, now. But it was still Domon's turn for the floor, tonight.

Finding the smallish washleather bag he was after, he stuffed it into his coat pocket and straightened, pushing the cupboard shut with his foot. "You have to face her some time," he said. "And I need you to smooth things over." He needed someone to attract Tuon's ire, someone to make him seem acceptable by comparison, but he could not say that, could he? "You're a Seanchan noble, and you can keep me from putting my boot in my mouth."

"Why do you need to smooth things over?" Egeanin's drawl was hard as a saw. She stood against the wagon's door with her fists on her hips, blue eyes augering out from beneath her long black wig. "Why do *you* need to see her? Haven't you done enough?"

"Don't tell me you're afraid of her," Mat scoffed, dodging the question. What answer could he give that did not sound insane? "You could tuck her under your arm almost as easily as I could. But I promise not to let her cut your head off or beat you up."

"Egeanin do no be afraid of anything, boy," Domon growled protectively. "If she does no want to go, then you trot off to court the girl by yourself. Stay the night, if you choose."

Egeanin continued to glare at Mat. Or through him. Then she glanced at Domon, her shoulders slumped a little, and she snatched her cloak from its peg on the wall. "Get a move on, Cauthon," she growled. "If it has to be done, best it's done and over with." She was out of the wagon in a flash, and Mat had to hurry to catch her up. You could almost think she did not want to be alone with Domon, as little sense as that made.

Outside the windowless purple wagon, black in the night, a shadow shifted in the deeper shadows. The sickle moon came out from behind the clouds long enough for Mat to recognize Harnan's lantern jaw.

"All quiet, my Lord," the file-leader said.

Mat nodded and took a deep breath, feeling for the washleather bag in his pocket. The air was clean, washed by the rain and away from the horselines. Tuon must be relieved to be away from the dung smell, and the rank odor of the animal cages. The performers' wagons to his left were as dark as the canvas-topped storage wagons to his right. No use waiting any longer. He pushed Egeanin up the purple wagon's steps ahead of him.

There were more people inside than he expected. Setalle was seated on one of the beds, working her embroidery hoop again, and Selucia stood at the far end scowling beneath her head scarf, but Noal was sitting on the other bed, apparently lost in thought, and Tuon sat cross-legged on the floor playing Snakes and Foxes with Olver.

The boy twisted around with a wide-mouthed grin that almost split his face when Mat came in. “Noal has been telling us about Co’dansin, Mat,” he exclaimed. “That’s another name for Shara. Did you know the Ayyad tattoo their faces? That’s what they call women who can channel, in Shara.”

“No, I didn’t,” Mat said, settling a grim eye on Noal. It was bad enough that Vanin and the Redarms were teaching the boy bad habits, not to mention what he was picking up from Juilin and Thom, without Noal filling his head with made-up nonsense.

Suddenly Noal slapped his thigh and sat up straight. “I remember now,” he said, and then the fool began to recite.

“Fortune rides like the sun on high
with the fox that makes the ravens fly.
Luck his soul, the lightning his eye,
He snatches the moons from out of the sky.”

The broken-nosed old man looked around as if just realizing anyone else was there. “I’ve been trying to remember that. It’s from the Prophecies of the Dragon.”

“Very interesting, Noal,” Mat muttered. Those colors whirled in his head just the way they had that morning, when the Aes Sedai were panicking. They flashed away without making a picture this time, but he felt as cold as if he had spent a night sleeping under a bush in his skin. The last thing on earth he needed was anybody else linking him to the Prophecies. “Maybe some time you can recite the whole thing for us. But not tonight, eh?”

Tuon looked up at him through her eyelashes, a black porcelain doll in a dress that was too big for her. Light, but she had long lashes. She ignored Egeanin as if the other woman did not exist, and in truth, Egeanin was doing her best to appear part of a cabinet built into the wall. So much for hoping for a diversion.

“Toy doesn’t mean to be rude,” Tuon murmured in that slow honey drawl. “He just has never been trained in manners. But it is late, Master Charin; time for Olver to be in bed. Perhaps you will escort him to his tent? We’ll play again another time, Olver. Would you like me to teach you to play stones?”

Olver most emphatically would. He almost wriggled, saying so. The boy liked anything that gave him a chance to smile at a woman, not to mention a chance to say things that should have gotten him slapped till his ears swelled up bigger than they already were. If Mat ever found out which of his "uncles" was teaching him that . . . But the lad gathered the pieces of his game and carefully rolled up the line-marked cloth without a second urging. He even made a very good leg, thanking the High Lady, before letting Noal lead him from the wagon. Mat nodded approvingly. He had taught the boy how to make a leg, but the boy usually added a leer for a pretty woman. If he ever found out who . . .

"You have a reason for interrupting me, Toy?" Tuon said in cool tones. "It *is* late, and I was thinking of going to sleep."

He made a leg and gave her his best smile. He could be polite even if she was not. "I just wanted to make sure you were all right. These wagons are uncomfortable, on the road. And I know you aren't happy with the clothes I could find you. I thought this might make you feel a little better." Fishing the leather bag from his pocket, he presented it with a flourish. Women always liked that little extra flourish.

Selucia tensed, blue eyes sharpening, but Tuon waggled her slim fingers and the bosomy maid subsided. A little. Mat liked feisty women, by and large, but if she ruined this, he was going to paddle her bottom. He hung on to his smile with an effort, and even managed to ratchet it up a notch.

Tuon turned the bag over her hands several times before untying the drawstrings and spilling what it contained into her lap, a heavy necklace of gold and carved amber. An expensive piece, and Seanchan work to boot. He was proud of finding the thing. It had been the property of an acrobat, who had it from a Seanchan officer whose fancy she caught, but she had been willing to sell now that her officer was left behind. It did not suit her skin, whatever that meant. He smiled and waited. Jewels always softened a woman's heart.

No one's reaction was quite what he expected, though. Tuon lifted the necklace in front of her face with both hands, studying it as if she had never seen such a thing before. Selucia's lip curled in a sneer. Setalle set her embroidery down on her knees and looked at him, the large golden hoops in her ears swaying as she shook her head.

Abruptly, Tuon thrust the necklace back over her shoulder toward Selucia. "It does not suit me," she said. "Would you like it, Selucia?" Mat's smile slipped a little.

The cream-skinned woman took the necklace between thumb and forefinger, as if holding a dead rat by the tail. “A piece for a shea dancer to wear with her veil,” she said wryly. With a twist of her wrist, she hurled the necklace at Egeanin, snapping, “Put it on!” Egeanin caught the thing just before it hit her face. Mat’s smile slid the rest of the way off his.

He expected an explosion, but Egeanin immediately fumbled open the clasp and pushed her heavy wig back to fasten it behind her neck. Her face might have been molded from snow for all the expression on it.

“Turn,” Selucia commanded, and it was a command, without any doubt. “Let me see.”

Egeanin turned. Stiff as a fence post, but she turned.

Setalle looked at her intently, with a puzzled shake of her head, then gave Mat a different head shake before returning to her embroidery. Women had as many ways of shaking their heads as they had looks. This one said he was a fool, and if he did not catch the finer nuances, he was just as glad. He did not think he would have liked them. Burn him, he bought a necklace for Tuon, who gave it to Selucia right in front of him, and now it was *Egeanin’*s?

“She came for a new name,” Tuon said musingly. “What does she call herself?”

“Leilwin,” Selucia replied. “A fitting name for a shea dancer. Leilwin Shipless, perhaps?”

Tuon nodded. “Leilwin Shipless.”

Egeanin jerked as though every word was a slap. “May I withdraw?” she asked stiffly, bending in sharp bow.

“If you want to go, then go,” Mat growled. Bringing her in the first place had not been the best notion he ever had, but maybe he could recover a little without her.

Eyes locked on the floorboards, Egeanin sank to her knees. “Please, may I withdraw?”

Tuon sat there straight-backed on the floor staring through the taller woman, clearly not seeing her at all. Selucia eyed Egeanin up and down, pursing her lips. Setalle pushed her needle through the cloth stretched on her hoop. No one so much as glanced at Mat.

Egeanin dropped to her face, and Mat bit back a startled oath when she kissed the floor. “Please,” she said hoarsely, “I beg leave to withdraw.”

“You will go, Leilwin,” Selucia said, cold as a queen speaking to a chickenthief, “and you will not let me see your face again unless it is covered by a shea dancer’s veil.”

Egeanin scrambled backward on hands and knees and all but tumbled out the door, so fast that Mat was left gaping.

With an effort, he managed to regain his smile. There seemed little point in staying, but a man could make a graceful exit. “Well, I suppose—”

Tuon wriggled her fingers again, still not looking at him, and Selucia cut him short. “The High Lady is weary, Toy. You have her permission to go.”

“Look, my name is Mat,” he said. “An easy name. A simple name. Mat.” Tuon might as well have been a porcelain doll in truth for all the response she made.

Setalle set down her embroidery, though, and rose with one hand resting lightly on the hilt of the curved dagger stuck behind her belt. “Young man, if you think you’re going to lounge about till you get to see us readying for bed, you’re sadly mistaken.” She smiled saying it, but she did have her hand on her knife, and she was Ebou Dari enough to stick a man on a whim. Tuon remained an unmoving doll, a queen on her throne somehow mistakenly dressed in ill-fitting clothes. Mat left.

Egeanin was leaning on one hand against the side of the wagon, her head hanging. Her other hand was gripping the necklace around her throat. Harnan moved, a little way off in the darkness, just to show he was still there. A wise man, to keep clear of Egeanin just then. Mat was too irritated for wisdom.

“What was that about?” he demanded. “You don’t have to go on your knees to Tuon anymore. And Selucia? She’s a bloody lady’s maid! I don’t know anybody who’d jump for his queen the way you jumped for her.”

Egeanin’s hard face was shadowed, but her voice was haggard. “The High Lady is . . . who she is. Selucia is her *so’jhin*. No one of the low Blood would dare meet her *so’jhin*’s eyes, and maybe not the High Blood, either.” The clasp broke with a metallic snap as she jerked the necklace free. “But then, I’m not of any Blood, now.” Rearing back, she put her whole body into throwing the necklace as far into the night as she could.

Mat opened his mouth. He could have bought a dozen prime horses with what he paid for that thing and had coin left. He closed it again without saying a word. He might not always be wise, but he was wise enough to know when a woman really might try to stick a knife in him. He knew another thing, as well. If Egeanin behaved this way around Tuon and Selucia, then he had better make sure the *sul'dam* were kept clear. The Light only knew what *they* would do if Tuon started wiggling her fingers.

That left him with a job of work to do. Well, he hated work, but those old memories had his head stuffed full of battles. He hated battle, too—a man could get killed dead!—but it was better than work. Strategy and tactics. Learn the ground, learn your enemy, and if you could not win one way, you found another.

The next night he returned to the purple wagon, alone, and once Olver had finished his lesson in stones from Tuon, Mat inveigled his way into a game. At first, sitting on the floor across the board from the dark little woman, he was not sure whether to win or lose. Some women liked to win every time, but the man had to make her work for it. Some liked the man to win, or at least more often than he lost. Neither made any sense to him—he liked to win, and the easier, the better—but that was how it was. While he was dithering, Tuon took matters out of his hands. Halfway through the game, he realized she had him in a trap he could not get out of. Her white stones were cutting off his black everywhere. It was a clean and resounding win for her.

"You don't play very well, Toy," she said mockingly. Despite the tone, her big, liquid eyes considered him coolly, weighing and measuring. A man could drown in eyes like that.

He smiled and made his goodbyes before there could be any thought of kicking him out. Strategy. Think to the future. Do the unexpected. The next night, he brought a small red paper flower made by one of the show's seamstresses. And presented it to a startled Selucia. Setalle's eyebrows rose, and even Tuon seemed taken aback. Tactics. Put your opponent off balance. Come to think, women and battles were not that different. Both wrapped a man in fog and could him kill him without trying. If he was careless.

Every night he visited the purple wagon for a game of stones under Setalle and Selucia's watchful eyes, and he concentrated on the crosshatched board. Tuon was very good, and it was all too easy to find himself watching the way she placed her stones, with her fingers bent back in a curiously graceful way. She was used to having fingernails an inch long and taking care not to break them. Her eyes were a danger, too. You needed a clear head in stones or battle, and her gaze seemed to reach inside his skull. He buckled down to the game, though, and managed to win four of the next seven, with one draw. Tuon was satisfied when she won and determined when she lost, with none of the temper tantrums he had feared, no scathing comments aside from insisting on calling him Toy, not very much of that icy regal hauteur, as long as they were playing anyway. She purely enjoyed the game, laughing exultantly when she pulled him into a trap, laughing in delight when he managed a clever placement to escape. She seemed a different woman once she lost herself in the stones board.

A flower sewn from blue linen followed the paper blossom, and two days later, a pink silk bloom that spread out as wide as a woman’s palm. Both handed to Selucia. Her blue eyes increasingly set in a suspicious frown when they rested on him, but Tuon told her she could keep the flowers, and she stored them away carefully, folded in a linen cloth. He let three days pass without a present, then brought a little cluster of red silk rosebuds, complete with short stems and glistening leaves that looked as real as nature, only more perfect. He had asked the seamstress to make it on the day he bought that first paper flower.

Selucia took a step, reaching to accept the rosebuds with a curl to her lip, but he sat down and put the flowers beside the board, a little toward Tuon. He said nothing, just left it lying there. She never so much as glanced at it. Dipping into the small leather bags that held the stones, he plucked one from each and shuffled them between his hands till even he was unsure which was where, then offered his closed fists. Tuon hesitated a moment, studying his face with no expression, then tapped his left hand. He opened it to display the glistening white stone.

“I’ve changed my mind, Toy,” she murmured, placing the white stone carefully on the intersection of two lines near the center of the board. “You play very well.”

Mat blinked. Could she know what he was up to? Selucia was standing at Tuon’s back, seemingly absorbed in the almost empty board. Setalle turned a page in her book and shifted a little to get a better light. Of course not. She was talking about stones. If she even suspected his real game, she would toss him out on his ear. Any woman would. It had to be the stones.

That was the night they played to a draw, with each of them controlling half the board in irregular pools and patches. In truth, she won a victory.

"I have kept my word, Toy," she drawled as he was replacing the stones in the bags. "No attempts to escape, no attempts at betrayal. This is confining." She gestured around at the interior of the wagon. "I wish to take walks. After dark will do. You may accompany me." Her eyes touched the cluster of rosebuds, then rose to his face. "To make sure I don't run away."

Setalle marked her place with a slim finger and looked at him. Selucia stood behind Tuon and looked at him. The woman *had* kept her word, mad as that seemed. Walks after dark, with most of the showfolk already in their beds, would do no harm, not with him there to make sure. So why did he feel that he was losing control of the situation?

Tuon agreed to go cloaked and hooded, which was something of a relief. The black hair was growing back in on her shaved scalp, but so far it was little more than long fuzz, and unlike Selucia, who very likely slept in her head scarf, Tuon had shown no inclination to cover her head. A child-sized woman with hair shorter than any man not going bald would have been remarked even in the night. Setalle and Selucia always followed at a little distance in the darkness, the lady's maid to keep a protective eye on her mistress and Setalle to keep an eye on the maid. At least, he thought that was how it was. Sometimes it seemed they were both watching him. The two of them were awfully friendly for guard and prisoner. He had overheard Setalle cautioning Selucia that he was a rogue with women, a fine thing for her to be saying! And Selucia had calmly replied that her lady would break his arms if he showed any disrespect, just as if they were not prisoners at all.

He thought to use these walks to learn a little more about Tuon—she did not talk much over a stones board—but she had a way of ignoring what he asked or deflecting the subject, usually to him.

"The Two Rivers is all forests and farms," he said as they strolled along the main street of the show. Clouds hid the moon, and the colorful wagons were indistinguishable dark shapes, the performers' platforms lining the street merely shadows. "Everybody grows tabac and raises sheep. My father breeds cows, too, and trades horses, but mostly, it's tabac and sheep from one end to the other."

"Your father trades horses," Tuon murmured. "And what do you do, Toy?"

He glanced over his shoulder at the two women ghosting along ten paces back. Setalle might not be close enough to hear, if he kept his voice down, but he decided to be honest. Besides, the show was dead quiet in the darkness. She might hear, and she knew what he had been doing in Ebou Dar. “I’m a gambler,” he said.

“My father called himself a gambler,” Tuon said softly. “He died of a bad wager.”

And how were you supposed to find out what *that* meant?

Another night, walking along a row of animal cages, each one built to fill an entire wagon, he said, “What do you do for fun, Tuon? Just because you enjoy it. Aside from playing stones.” He could almost feel Selucia bristling at his use of her name from thirty feet away, but Tuon did not seem to mind. He thought she did not.

“I train horses and *damane,*” she said, peering into a cage that held a sleeping lion. The animal was only a large shadow lying on the straw behind the thick bars. “Does he really have a black mane? There are no lions with black manes in all of Seanchan.”

She trained *damane?* For fun? Light! “Horses? What kind of horses?” It might be warhorses, if she trained bloody *damane.* For fun.

“Mistress Anan tells me you’re a scoundrel, Toy.” Her voice was cool, not cold. Composed. She turned toward him, face hidden in the shadows of her cowl. “How many women have you kissed?” The lion woke up and coughed, a deep sound guaranteed to raise the hair on anyone’s head. Tuon did not even flinch.

“Looks like rain’s coming again,” he said weakly. “Selucia will have my hide if I get you back soaked.” He heard her laugh softly. What had he said that was funny?

There was a price to pay, of course. Maybe things were going his way and maybe not, but when you thought they were, there was always a price.

“Bunch of chattering magpies,” he complained to Egeanin. The afternoon sat on the horizon, a red-gold ball half hidden by clouds, casting the show in long shadows. There was no rain, for once, and in spite of the cold they were sitting hunched beneath the green wagon they shared, playing stones in plain sight of anyone who walked by. A good many did, men hurrying about some last-minute chore, children snatching the final chance to roll hoops through the mud puddles and toss balls before night fell. Women holding their skirts up glanced at the wagon in passing, and even when they were hooded, Mat knew what their expressions were. Hardly a woman in the show would speak to Mat Cauthon. Irritably, he rattled the black stones he held gathered in his left hand. “They’ll get their gold when we reach Lugard. That’s all they ought to care about. They shouldn’t be poking their noses into my business.”

“You can hardly blame them,” Egeanin drawled, studying the board. “You and I are supposed to be fleeing lovers, but you spend more time with . . . her . . . than with me.” She still had trouble not calling Tuon High Lady. “You behave like a man courting.” She reached to place her stone, then stopped with her hand above the board. “You can’t think she’ll complete the ceremony, can you? You can’t be that big a fool.”

“What ceremony? What are you talking about?”

“You named her your wife three times that night in Ebou Dar,” she said slowly. “You really don’t know? A woman says three times that a man is her husband, and he says three times she’s his wife, and they’re married. There are blessings involved, usually, but it’s saying it in front of witnesses that makes it a marriage. You *really* didn’t know?”

Mat laughed, and shrugged his shoulders, feeling the knife hanging behind his neck. A good knife gave a man a feeling of comfort. But his laugh was hoarse. “But she didn’t say anything.” He had bloody well been stuffing a gag in her mouth at the time! “So whatever I said, it doesn’t mean anything.” But he knew what Egeanin was going to say. Sure as water was wet, he knew. He had been told who he was going to marry.

“With the Blood, it’s a little different. Sometimes a noble from one end of the Empire marries a noble from the other. An arranged marriage. The Imperial family never has any other kind. They may not want to wait until they can be together, so one acknowledges the marriage where she is, and the other where he is. As long as they both speak in front of witnesses, inside a year and a day, the marriage is legal. You truly didn’t *know*?”

Sure was sure, but the stones still spilled from his hand onto the board, bouncing everywhere. The bloody *girl* knew. Maybe she thought this whole thing was an adventure, or a game. Maybe she thought being kidnapped was as much fun as training horses or bloody *damane*! But he knew he was a trout waiting for her to set the hook.

He stayed away from the purple wagon for two days. There was no use running—he already had the bloody hook in his mouth, and he had put it there himself—but he did not have to swallow the flaming thing. Only, he knew it was just a matter of when she decided to jerk the line tight.

As slowly as the show moved, eventually they reached the ferry across the Eldar, running from Alkindar on the west bank to Coramen on the east, tidy little walled towns of tile-roofed stone buildings with half a dozen stone docks each. The sun was climbing high, hardly a cloud crossed the sky, and those white as new-washed wool. No rain today, maybe. It was an important crossing, with trading ships from upriver tied to some of the docks and big barge-like ferries crawling from one town to the other on long sweeps. The Seanchan apparently thought so, too. They had military camps outside both towns, and from the stone walls beginning to rise around the camps and the stone structures going up inside, they had no intention of leaving soon.

Mat crossed over with the first wagons, riding Pips. The brown gelding looked ordinary enough to an undiscerning eye; it would not seem out of place for him to be ridden by a fellow in a rough woolen coat with a woolen cap pulled down over his ears against the cold. He was not actually considering making a run for the hilly wooded ridge country behind Coramen. Thinking about it, but not really considering. She was going to set the hook whether he ran or not. So he sat Pips at the end of one of the stone ferry landings, watching the show cross over and trundle away through the town. There were Seanchan on the landings, a squad of beefy men in segmented armor painted blue and burnt gold under a lean young officer with one thin blue plume on his odd-looking helmet. They seemed to be there just to keep order, but the officer checked Luca’s horse warrant, and Luca inquired whether the noble lord might know of ground outside the town suitable for his show to perform. Mat could have wept. He could see soldiers wearing striped armor in the street behind him, wandering in and out of shops and taverns. A *raken* swooped down out of the sky on long, ribbed wings, alighting outside one of the camps across the river. Three or four of the snake-necked creatures were already on the ground. There had to be hundreds of soldiers in those camps. Maybe a thousand. And Luca was going to put on his show.

Then one of the ferries hit the rope-padded bumpers at the end of the landing, and the ramp came down to let the windowless purple wagon rumble off onto the stones. Setalle was driving. Selucia sat on one side of her, peering out from the hood of a faded red cloak. On the other side, swathed in a dark cloak so not an inch of her showed, was Tuon.

Mat thought his eyes were going to fall out of his head. If his heart did not pound its way out of his chest first. The dice had started up in his head, that rattling feel of dice rolling across a table. They were going to come up the Dark One's eyes, this time; he just knew it.

There was nothing to do except fall in beside the purple wagon, though, riding along as though life were wonderful, riding along the wide main street through criers for shops and hawkers selling things from trays. And Seanchan soldiers. They were not marching in formation now, and they eyed the brightly painted wagons with interest. Riding along and waiting for Tuon to shout. She had given her word, but a prisoner would say anything to get the shackles loosened. All she had to do was raise her voice, and summon a thousand Seanchan soldiers for rescue. The dice bounced and spun in Mat's head. Riding along, waiting for the Dark One's eyes.

Tuon never spoke a word. She peeked curiously past the edge of her deep cowl, curiously and cautiously, but she kept her face hidden, and even her hands, all wrapped in that dark cloak and even huddling against Setalle like a child seeking the protection of her mother in a strange crowd. Never a word until they had passed the gates of Coramen and were rumbling toward the base of the ridge that rose behind the town, where Luca was already gathering the show's wagons. That was when Mat really knew there was no escape for him. She was going to set the hook all right. She was just biding her bloody time.

He made sure all the Seanchan stayed in their wagons that night, and the Aes Sedai, too. Nobody had seen any *sul'dam* or *damane* that Mat knew, but the Aes Sedai did not argue for once. Tuon did not argue, either. She made a demand that sent Setalle's eyebrows almost to her hairline. It was phrased as a request, in a way, a reminder of a promise he had made, but he knew a demand when a woman made one. Well, a man had to trust the woman he was going to marry. He told her he had to think on it, just so she would not start imagining she could have anything she wanted out of him. He thought on it all the day that Luca put on his show, thinking and sweating while as many Seanchan as not came to gape at the performers. He thought on it while the wagons wound eastward through the hills, moving slower than ever, but he knew what answer he had to give.

On the third day after leaving the river, they reached the salt town of Jurador, and he told Tuon that he would. She smiled at him, and the dice in his head stopped dead. He would always remember that. She smiled, and *then* the dice stopped. A man could weep!

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CHAPTER 29

Something Flickers

“This do be madness,” Domon rumbled from where he stood with his arms folded as if blocking the way out of the wagon. Maybe he was. His jaw was thrust forward belligerently, sticking out a beard that was trimmed short but still longer than the hair on his head, and he was working his hands like a man thinking of making fists, or grappling with something. A wide man, Domon, and not as fat as he looked on first glance. Mat wanted to avoid fists or grappling, if he could.

He finished tying the black silk scarf around his neck, hiding his scar, and tucked the long ends into his coat. The chance that there was anyone in Jurador who knew about a man in Ebou Dar wearing a black scarf . . . Well, the odds seemed good even discounting his luck. Of course, there was always his being *ta’veren* to be factored in, but if that was going to bring him face-to-face with Suroth or a fistful of servants from the Tarasin Palace, he could stay in bed with a blanket wrapped around his head, and it still would happen. Sometimes, you just had to trust to luck. The trouble was, when he woke this morning, the dice had again been tumbling in his head. They were bouncing off the inside of his skull still.

“I promised,” he said. It was good to be back in decent clothes. The coat was a fine green wool, well cut and hanging almost to his knees and the turned-down tops of his boots. There was no embroidery—maybe it could do with a little—but he had a touch of lace at his cuffs. And a good silk shirt. He wished he had a mirror. A man needed to look his best on a day like this. Picking up his cloak from the bed, he swung it across his shoulders. Not a gaudy thing like Luca’s. Dark gray, nearly as dark as night. Only the lining was red. His cloak pin was simple silver knots no larger than his thumbs.

“She gave her word, Bayle,” Egeanin said. “Her word. She will not break that, ever.” Egeanin sounded absolutely convinced. More convinced than Mat was, anyway. But sometimes a man had to take a chance. Even if he was wagering his neck. He *had* promised. And he did have his luck.

“It still be madness,” Domon grumbled. But he moved grudgingly away from the door when Mat settled his broad-brimmed black hat on his head. Well, when Egeanin motioned him aside with a quick jerk of her head, anyway. He kept his glower, though.

She followed Mat out of the wagon, scowling herself and fiddling with her long black wig. Maybe she still felt uneasy with it, or maybe it fit differently now that she had close to a month’s growth of her own hair underneath. Not enough to go about bare-headed yet, in any case. Not till there was at least another hundred miles between them and Ebou Dar. Maybe it would not be safe until they crossed the Damona Mountains into Murandy.

The sky was clear, the sun just cresting the horizon, invisible yet behind the show’s canvas wall, and the morning was warm only compared to a snowstorm. Not the crispness of a late-winter morning in the Two Rivers, but a chill that slowly bored deep and put a faint mist in your breath. The showfolk were scurrying about like ants in a kicked anthill, filling the air with shouted demands to know who had moved those juggling rings or borrowed that pair of red-spangled breeches or shifted this performing platform. It looked and sounded like the start of a riot, yet there was no real anger in any of the voices. They shouted and waved arms all the time, but it never came to blows when there was a show in the offing, and somehow every performer would be in place and ready before the first patrons were let in. They might be slow packing up for the road, but performing meant money, and they could move fast enough for that.

“You really *do* think you can marry her,” Egeanin muttered, striding along at his side, kicking her worn brown woolen skirts. There was nothing dainty about Egeanin. She had a long stride, and she kept up easily. Dress or no dress, she seemed to need a sword on her hip. “There’s no other explanation for this. Bayle is right. You *are* mad!”

Mat grinned. “The question is, does she mean to marry me? The strangest people marry, sometimes.” When you knew you were going to hang, the only thing to do was grin at the noose. So he grinned and left her standing there with a scowl on her hard face. He thought she was growling curses under her breath, though he did not understand why. She was not the one who had to marry the last person on earth she wanted to. A noblewoman, all cool reserve and her nose in the air, when he liked barmaids with ready smiles and willing eyes. The heir to a throne, and not just any throne; the Crystal Throne, the Imperial Throne of Seanchan. A woman who spun his head like a top and left him wondering whether he held her captive or she held him. When fate gripped you by the throat, there was nothing to do but grin.

He kept a jaunty pace till he was in sight of the windowless purple wagon, and then he missed a step. A cluster of acrobats, four limber men who called themselves the Chavana brothers though it was plain as their noses they came from different countries, not just different mothers, rushed out of a green wagon nearby, shouting and gesturing wildly at one another. They spared a glance for the purple wagon and another for Mat, but they were too engrossed in their argument, and trotting too fast, for more. Gorderan was leaning against one of the purple wheels, scratching his head and frowning at the two women who stood at the foot of the wagon's wooden steps. Two women. Both swathed in dark cloaks, faces concealed, yet there was no mistaking the flowered head scarf hanging out of the taller woman's cowl. Well. He should have know Tuon would want her maid along. Noblewomen never went anywhere without a maid. Bet a penny or bet a crown, in the end it all came down to a toss of the dice just the same. They had had their chance to betray him. Still, he was betting on a woman making the same choice twice running. On two women doing it. What fool would make odds on that? But he had to toss the dice. Except, they were already rolling.

He met Selucia's cold blue stare with a smile and swept off his hat to make an elegant leg to Tuon. Not too showy, with just a small flourish of his cloak. “Are you ready to go shopping?” He very nearly called her “my Lady,” but until she was willing to say his name . . .

“I have been ready for an hour, Toy,” Tuon drawled coolly. Casually lifting an edge of his cloak, she glanced at the red silk lining and eyed his coat before letting the cloak fall. “Lace suits you. Perhaps I will have lace added to your robes if I make you a cupbearer.”

His smile slipped for an instant. Could she still make him *da'covale* if she married him? He would have to ask Egeanin. Light, why did women never make it easy?

“Do you want me to come along, my Lord?” Gorderan asked slowly, not quite looking at the women now. He tucked his thumbs behind his belt and did not quite look at Mat, either. “Just to carry, maybe?”

Tuon did not say a word. She just stood there looking up at Mat, waiting, big eyes getting cooler by the second. The dice bounced and rattled in his head. Well, he only hesitated a heartbeat before jerking his head to send the Redarm away. Maybe two heartbeats. He had to trust his luck. Trust her word. *Trust is the sound of death.* He stepped on that thought hard. This was no song, and no old memory could guide him. The dice inside his skull kept spinning.

With a slight bow, he offered his arm, which Tuon examined as if she had never seen an arm before, pursing those full lips. Then she gathered her cloak and set off with Selucia gliding at her heels, leaving him to hurry after them. No, women never did make it easy.

Despite the early hour, two burly fellows with cudgels were already guarding the entrance, and a third with a clear glass pitcher to take the coins and dump them through a slot in the iron-strapped box on the ground. Each of the three looked too clumsy to palm a copper without falling on his face, but Luca took no chances. Twenty or thirty people were already waiting inside the heavy ropes that led to the big blue banner naming Luca’s show, and unfortunately, Latelle was there, too, stern-faced in a dress sewn with crimson spangles and a cloak sewn with blue. Luca’s wife trained bears. Mat thought the bears did their tricks for fear she might bite them.

“I have everything in hand,” he told her. “Believe me, there’s nothing to worry about.” He might as well have spared his breath.

Latelle ignored him, frowning worriedly at Tuon and Selucia. She and her husband were the only two showfolk who knew who they were. There had seemed no reason to tell either about this morning’s jaunt. Luca, at least, would have had kittens. The stare Latelle shifted to Mat was not worried, just stone hard. “Remember,” she said quietly, “if you send us to the gallows, you send yourself.” Then she sniffed and went back to studying the people waiting to get in. Latelle was even better than Luca at judging the weight of a purse before the drawstrings were undone. She was also ten times tougher than her husband. The dice tumbled on. Whatever had set them spinning, he had not yet reached the fateful point. The deciding point.

“She is a good wife for Master Luca,” Tuon murmured when they had gone a little way.

Mat looked at her sideways, and resettled his hat on his head. There had been no mockery in her tone. Did she hate Luca *that* much? Or was she saying what sort of wife *she* would be? Or . . . ? Burn him, he could go as crazy as Domon thought he was, trying to puzzle this woman out. She had to be the reason for the feel of dice in his head. What was she going to do?

It was a short walk away from the rising sun to the town, along a hard-packed road through hills that were treeless here, but people dotted the road the way windmills and salt pans dotted the hills. Staring straight ahead, they moved so purposefully they seemed not to see anyone in front of them. Mat dodged a round-faced man who nearly walked right into him, which made him have to jump away from a white-haired old fellow making a good speed on spindly legs. That put him in front of a plump girl who would have run up the front of him if he had not jumped again.

“Are you practicing a dance, Toy?” Tuon said, peering up at him over a slim shoulder. Her breath made a faint white mist in front of her cowl. “It isn’t very graceful.”

He opened his mouth, just to point out how crowded the road was, and suddenly he realized he could no longer see anyone beyond her and Selucia. The people who had been there were just gone, the road empty as far as he could see before it made a bend. Slowly, he turned his head. There was no one between him and the show, either, just the folk waiting in line, and that looked no longer than before. Beyond the show, the road wound into the hills toward a distant forest, empty. Not a soul in sight. He pressed fingers against his chest, feeling the foxhead medallion through his coat. Just a piece of silver on a rawhide cord. He wished it felt cold as ice. Tuon arched an eyebrow. Selucia’s stare named him fool.

“I can’t buy you a dress standing here,” he said. That was the point of this expedition, his promise to find Tuon something better than dresses that hung on her and made her look a child in a grownup’s clothing. At least, he was pretty sure he had promised that, and she was perfectly certain. The needlework of the show’s seamstresses met with Tuon’s approval, but not the cloth they had available. Performers’ costumes glittered with spangles and beads and bright colors, but the cloth was usually whatever could be found cheaply. Those who had better kept it and used it till it wore out. Jurador made its money from salt, though, and salt made a great deal of money. The town’s shops should offer any sort of material a woman could wish.

There was no finger-wiggling, this time. Tuon shared a look with Selucia. The taller woman shook her head, a wry, rueful twist to her mouth. Tuon shook *her* head. And they gathered their cloaks and started toward the town's iron-studded gates. Women! He hurried to catch up again. They were his prisoners, after all. They were. Their shadows stretched out long in front of them. Had any of those people cast shadows before they vanished? He could not recall any of them breathing a mist, either. It hardly seemed to matter. They were gone, and he was not going to think about where they had come from or where they had gone. Probably something to do with being *ta'veren*. He was going to put it out of his head. He was. The dice rattling away left room for nothing else.

The gate guards seemed incurious about strangers, or at least about a man and two women afoot. Hard-faced fellows in white-painted breastplates and conical helmets with what looked like horsetails for crests, they ran impassive eyes over the cloaked women, lingering suspiciously a moment on Mat for some reason, and then returned to leaning on their halberds and staring blankly at the road. They were local men, most likely, in any case not Seanchan. The salt merchants and the local lady, Aethelaine, who apparently said whatever the salt merchants told her to, had sworn the Oaths of Return without hesitation and offered to pay a salt tax before they were asked. No doubt the Seanchan would get around to installing some sort of official here eventually, just to keep an eye on everything, but for the moment, they had more important uses for their soldiers. Mat had sent Thom and Juilin both to make sure there were no Seanchan in Jurador before agreeing to this excursion. A fool could trip over his own luck if he was not careful.

It was a prosperous, busy town, Jurador, with stone-paved streets, most of them wide and all lined with stone buildings roofed in reddish tiles. Houses and inns rubbed shoulders with stables and taverns, in a noisy jumble with a blacksmith's clanging hammer on an anvil here and the racketing of a rugweaver's looms there, and everywhere, it seemed, coopers hammering bands on tight barrels for transporting salt. Hawkers cried pins and ribbons, meat pies and roasted nuts from trays, or winter-wrinkled turnips and sorry plums from barrows. On every street men and women stood guard over the display goods on narrow tables in front of their shops and bellowed lists of what was offered within.

Picking out the salt merchants' houses was easy, though, three stories of stone rather than two, covering eight times as much ground as any others, each with a columned walk overlooking the street and shielded by white wrought-iron screens between the columns. The lower windows on most houses had those screens, though not always painted. That much was reminiscent of Ebou Dar, but little else was, beyond the olive complexions of the people. There were no deep necklines exposing cleavage here, no skirts sewn up to display colored petticoats. The women wore embroidered dresses with high necks right up to their chins, a little embroidery for the common folk, a great deal for the richer, who wore cloaks embroidered top to bottom and sheer veils hanging over their faces from combs of gold-work or carved ivory stuck into dark, coiled braids. The men's short coats were worked almost as thickly, in colors just as bright, and rich or poor, most men wore a long belt knife with a blade a little less curved than those in Ebou Dar. Rich or poor, the fellows did have a tendency to fondle their knife hilts as if expecting a fight, so maybe that was the same.

The Lady Aethelaine's palace appeared no different from the outside than the salt merchants' mansions, but it was located on the town's main square, a wide expanse of polished stone where a broad round marble fountain sprayed water into the air. People filled their buckets and big pottery water jars from pipes spilling into stone basins at the corners of other squares, though. The big fountain put out a smell of brine. It was a symbol of Jurador's wealth, pumped from the same source as the salt wells in the surrounding hills. Mat got to see a good deal of the town before the sun climbed even halfway to its noon peak.

Every time Tuon and Selucia spotted a shop with silks displayed out front, they stopped at the long narrow table to feel bolts of cloth and whisper with their heads together, waving off the attentions of the watchful shopkeeper. Those kept a *very* watchful eye, until they realized Mat was with the two women. In their stout woolens, well worn and badly fitting, they did not look customers for silk. Mat, with one side of his cloak thrown back to expose the lining, did. Whenever he tried to show an interest, though—women said they wanted you to show an interest!—whenever he got close enough to hear what they were saying, the women fell silent and looked at him, cool dark eyes and cool blue staring out of their deep cowls, until he fell back a step or two. Then Selucia would bend her head to Tuon's, and they would go back to murmuring and fingering silk, red silk, blue silk, green silk, smooth shimmering silk and brocaded silk. Jurador was a very wealthy town. Luckily, he had tucked a fat purse of gold into his coat pocket. None of it seemed to be right, though. Inevitably, Tuon shook her head, and the pair of them glided away into the crowd with Mat hurrying to keep up as far as the next shop showing silks. The dice continued to bounce off the inside of his skull.

They were not the only ones from the show who had come into the town. He spotted Aludra, her face framed by beaded braids, walking through the crowd with a gray-haired man who had to be a salt merchant from the amount of bright embroidery covering his silk coat in flowers and hummingbirds. What would the Illuminator want with a salt merchant? Whatever she was saying to him, his pleased smile had added a few creases to his face, and he was nodding.

Tuon shook her head, and the two women glided toward the next shop, ignoring the shopkeeper’s deep bows. Well, most of those were directed at Mat. Maybe the skinny fool thought he wanted to buy silk for himself. Not that he would have passed up a new silk coat or three, but who could think about coats when he was waiting for those bloody dice to stop? Just a little embroidery, on the sleeves and shoulders.

Thom went by clutching his bronze-colored cloak around him, knuckling his long white mustaches and yawning as if he had spent the night awake. He might have. The gleeman had not taken to drink again, but Lopin and Nerim complained about him remaining awake till all hours, burning a lamp so he could read and re-read his precious letter. What could be so fascinating in a letter from a dead woman? A dead woman. Light, maybe those people on the road . . . ! No; he was not going to think about that at all.

Tuon plucked one fold of silk and let it drop as she turned away without trying another. Selucia gave the stout shopkeeper such a stare before following that the woman started back in affront. Mat offered her a smile. Affronted shopkeepers could lead to town guards asking questions, and who could say where that might lead? He knew he could smile most women into feeling soothed. The round-faced woman sniffed at him and bent to smoothing the bolt of silk as tenderly as tucking in a babe. Most women, he thought sourly.

Down the street, a woman in a plain cloak let her hood fall back, and Mat’s breath caught in his throat. Edesina lifted her cowl again, but she took no hurry with it, and the damage was done anyway, an Aes Sedai's ageless face displayed for anyone who knew what they were seeing. No one in the street gave a sign that they had noticed anything, but he could not see every face. Was anyone thinking of a reward? There might be no Seanchan in Jurador at the moment, but they did pass through.

Edesina glided around a corner, and two dark-cloaked shapes followed her. Two. Had the *sul'dam* left only one of their number in the camp to watch two Aes Sedai? Or maybe Joline or Teslyn was somewhere close by, and he had missed seeing her. He craned his neck, searching the throng for another plain cloak, but every one he saw had at least a little embroidery.

Abruptly, it hit him like a stone between the eyes. Every cloak he could see had at least a little embroidery. Where were bloody Tuon and bloody Selucia? Were the dice spinning faster?

Breathing hard, he went up on his toes, but the street was a river of embroidered cloaks, embroidered coats and dresses. It did not mean they were trying to escape. Tuon *had* given her word; she had passed up a perfect chance for betrayal. But all either woman had to do was say three words, and anyone who heard them likely would recognize a Seanchan accent. That might be sufficient to set the hounds on his trail. There were two shops ahead that seemed to be offering cloth, one on either side of the street. Neither with a pair of dark-cloaked women at the tables out front. They could have turned a corner easily enough, but he had to trust to luck. His luck was especially good when the game was random. Bloody women probably thought it *was* a bloody game. Burn him, let his luck run good.

Closing his eyes, he spun in a circle in the middle of the street and took a step. At random. He bumped into someone solid, hard enough to make them both grunt. A bulky fellow with a small mouth and a little poorly done scrollwork on the shoulders of his rough coat stood glaring at him when he opened his eyes, glaring and fingering the hilt of his curved knife. Mat did not care. He was facing straight at one of the two shops. Pulling his hat down tight, he ran. The dice *were* rolling faster.

Divided shelves stuffed with bolts of cloth lined the walls of the shop from floor to ceiling, and more stood stacked on long tables out in the floor. The shopkeeper was a scrawny woman with a large mole on her chin, her assistant slim and pretty and angry-eyed. He dashed inside just in time to hear the shopkeeper say, "For the last time, if you won't tell me what you're here for, I'm going to send Nelsa for the guards." Tuon and Selucia, faces still hidden in their hoods, were walking slowly along one wall full of cloth, stopping to touch a bolt but neither paying the shopkeeper any heed.

“They’re with me,” Mat said breathlessly. Tugging the purse from his pocket, he tossed it on the nearest clear table. The heavy clink it made landing put a wide smile on the shopkeeper’s narrow face. “Give them whatever they want,” he told her. And to Tuon, he added firmly, “If you’re going to buy anything, it’s going to be here. I’ve had all the exercise I care for this morning.”

He would have had the words back as soon as they left his mouth, if he could. Speak to a woman that way, and she flared in your face like one of Aludra’s firesticks, every time. But Tuon’s big eyes looked up at him from the shelter of her hood. And her full mouth curved slightly in a smile. It was a secret smile, for herself, not him. The Light only knew what it meant. He hated it when women did that. At least the dice had not stopped. That had to be a good sign, right?

Tuon had no need of words to make her choices, silently pointing out bolt after bolt and measuring with her small dark hands how much the shopkeeper was to cut off with her shears. The woman did the work herself instead of delegating it to her assistant, and well she might, considering. Red silk in several shades went under those long sharp scissors, and green silk in a few shades, and more varieties of blue silk than Mat knew existed. Tuon chose out some fine linen in several thicknesses, and lengths of bright wool—she consulted Selucia over those in muffled whispers—but mostly it was silk. He got back much less of his purse than he had expected.

Once all that cloth had been folded and neatly tied, then bundled into a larger length of coarse linen—at no extra charge, thank you very much—it made a mound as fat as a peddler’s pack. It did not surprise him at all to learn that he was expected to carry the thing across his shoulders, with his hat dangling in one hand. Dress your best, buy a woman silk, and she still found a way to make you work! Maybe she was making him pay for speaking firmly.

He earned plenty of stares from gaping fools as he made his way out of the town behind the two women. They glided along smug as cats full of cream. Even cloaked and hooded, their backs said it all. The sun was still well short of midday, but the line of people waiting to get into the show stretched down the road almost to the town. Most gaped and pointed as if he were a painted fool. One of the big horse handlers guarding the coin box gave a gap-toothed smirk and opened his mouth, but Mat returned him a level look, and the fellow decided to put his eyes back on the coins going from townsfolk to glass pitcher to box. Mat thought he had never been so relieved to be inside Luca's show.

Before he and the two women had gotten three steps inside the entrance, Juilin came running up, for a wonder without Thera or his red cap. The thief-catcher's face could have been carved from ancient oak. Eyeing the people flowing past them into the show, he pitched his voice low. Low and urgent. "I was coming to find you. It's Egeanin; she's been . . . hurt. Come quickly."

The man's tone said enough, but worse, Mat realized the dice in his head were drumming, now. He flung the pack of cloth at the horse handlers with a hasty injunction to guard it as close as the coin-box or he would set the women on them, but he did not wait to see whether they took him seriously. Juilin darted back the way he had come at a run, and Mat ran after him, along the wide main street of the show where noisy gawking crowds were watching the four bare-chested Chavana brothers stand on one another's shoulders, and contortionists in filmy trousers and glittering vests sit on their own heads, and a slack-rope walker in spangled blue breeches climbing a long wooden ladder to begin her performance. Short of the slack-rope walker, Juilin dodged into one of the narrower streets, where laundry hung from lines between the tents and wagons, performers sat on stools and wagon steps waiting to go on, and show children ran playing with balls and hoops. Mat knew where they were headed, now, but the thief-catcher ran too fast to overtake.

Ahead, he saw his green wagon. Latelle was peering underneath, and Luca, in one of his bright red cloaks, was waving a pair of jugglers to move along. The two women, in baggy trousers and with faces painted white like a noble's fools, took a good look under the wagon before they obeyed. As he came closer, he could see what they had they been staring at. Coatless, Domon was sitting on the ground under the edge of the wagon, cradling a limp Egeanin in his arms. Her eyes were closed, and a trickle of blood ran from the corner her mouth. Her wig hung askew. That stood out, for some reason. She always fussed so to keep that wig straight. The dice beat like thunder.

"This could be disaster," Luca growled, splitting his glower between Mat and Juilin. It was an angry glower, though, not frightened. "You may have brought me to disaster!” He shooed away a gaggle of wide-eyed children, and growled at a plump woman in skirts that glittering with silvery spangles. Miyora made leopards do tricks that even Latelle would not try, but she merely tossed her head before gliding off. No one took Luca as seriously as he took himself.

The man gave a start when Tuon and Selucia hurried up, and looked on the point of telling them to go, too, before he thought better of it. In fact, he began to frown thoughtfully. And worriedly. It seemed his wife had not told him about Mat and the women leaving the show, and it was clear they had been somewhere. The blue-eyed woman had the huge bundle of cloth on her back now, with her arms doubled behind her, though she stood straight despite the bulk. You would think a lady’s maid was used to carrying things, but her face was a picture of frustrated irritation. Latelle eyed her up and down, then sneered at Mat as if he were the reason the woman was thrusting her considerable bosom out. Luca’s wife was very good at sneering, yet Tuon’s stern expression made Latelle nearly look mild. A judge peered out of her cowl, a judge ready to pass sentence.

For the moment, Mat did not care what the women thought. Those *bloody* dice. Tossing his cloak back, he went to one knee and touched fingers to Egeanin’s throat. Her pulse beat weakly, thin and fluttering.

“What happened?” he asked. “Have you sent for one of the sisters?” Moving Egeanin might be enough to kill her, but there might be time for Healing, if the Aes Sedai were quick. He was not about to say that name aloud, though, with people walking by, pausing for curious stares before Luca or Latelle hurried them on. Everyone moved quicker for her than for him. Latelle herself was the only one who really jumped for Luca.

“Renna!” Domon spat the name. Despite his short cap of hair and that Illianer beard that left his upper lip bare, he did not look ridiculous, now. He looked afraid and murderous, a dangerous combination. “I did see her stab Egeanin in the back and run. If I could have reached her, I would have broken her neck, but my hand be all that’s holding Egeanin’s blood in. Where be that bloody Aes Sedai?” he snarled. So much for being careful with his tongue.

“I be right here, Bayle Domon,” Teslyn announced coldly, rushing up with Thera, who took one horrified look at Tuon and Selucia and latched on to Juilin’s arm with a squeak, eyes on the ground. The way she began trembling, she might be there herself in a minute.

The hard-eyed Aes Sedai made a face as if she had a mouthful of briars when she saw what lay in front of her, or maybe where it lay, but she swiftly crouched underneath the wagon beside Domon and clasped Egeanin's head in her bony hands. "Joline do be better at this than I," she muttered, half under her breath, "but I may be able—"

The silver foxhead went cold against Mat's chest, and Egeanin jerked so violently that her wig fell off, nearly pulling herself out of Domon's grasp as her eyes popped open wide. The convulsion lasted only long enough for her to sit halfway up with a frozen gasp; then she slumped back against Domon's chest, panting, and the medallion became just a piece of worked silver again. He was almost accustomed to that. He hated being accustomed to that.

Teslyn slumped, too, on the point of falling over until Domon shifted his grip on Egeanin to steady the Aes Sedai with one hand. "Thank you," Teslyn said after a moment, the words sounding dragged from her. "But I need no help." She used the side of the wagon to help her rise, though, her cold Aes Sedai gaze daring anyone to comment. "The blade did slide on a rib and so did miss her heart. All she does need now be rest and food."

She had not delayed to grab a cloak, Mat realized. In one direction along the narrow street, a clutch of women in spangled cloaks was watching from in front of a green-striped tent, their gazes intent and focused. In the other, half a dozen men and women in white-striped coats and tight breeches, acrobats who performed on horseback, darted looks toward Teslyn between putting their heads together to whisper. Too late to worry about someone recognizing an Aes Sedai's face. Too late to worry that one of them knew Healing when he saw it done. The dice battered at the inside of Mat's head. They had not stopped; the game was not played out, yet.

"Who's looking for her, Juilin?" he asked. "Juilin?"

The thief-catcher gave over glaring at Tuon and Selucia and murmuring to Thera, though he continued to pat the trembling woman. "Vanin and the Redarms, Lopin and Nerim. Olver, too. He was away before I could catch him. But in this . . ." He stopped soothing Thera long enough to gesture toward the main street. The babble of voices was clearly audible even at this distance. "All she needs is to lay hands on one of those fancy cloaks, and she can slip out with the first folk to leave. If we try stopping every woman with her hood up, or even try looking inside, we'll have a riot on our hands. These people are touchy."

"Disaster," Luca moaned, wrapping his cloak around himself tightly. Latelle put an arm around him. It must have been like being comforted by a leopard, but in any case, Luca did not look much comforted.

"Burn me, why?" Mat growled. "Renna was always ready to lick my bloody wrist! I thought if anybody went over the edge . . . !" He did not even glance at Thera, but Juilin still scowled at him darkly.

Domon had stood up with Egeanin in his arms. She struggled feebly at first—Egeanin was not a woman to let herself be carried about like a doll—but eventually she seemed to realize that if she did make her own feet, she would fall over. She sagged against the Illianer's chest with a resentful glower. Domon would learn; even when a woman needed help, if she did not want it, she made you pay for giving it. "I'm the only one who knew her secret," she drawled in a weak voice. "The only one who might give it away, at least. She may have thought it would be safe to go home, with me dead."

"What secret?" Mat asked.

The woman hesitated, for some reason, frowning at Domon's chest. Finally she sighed. "Renna was leashed, once. So were Bethamin and Seta. They can channel. Or maybe learn to; I don't know. But the *a'dam* worked on those three. Maybe it works on any *sul'dam.*" Mat whistled through his teeth. Now, that would be a kick in the head for the Seanchan.

Luca and his wife exchanged puzzled glances, plainly not understanding a word. Teslyn's mouth hung open, Aes Sedai serenity washed away in shock. Selucia made an angry sound, though, blue eyes blazing, and dropped the bundle of cloth from her back as she took a step toward Domon. A quick flash of Tuon's fingers stopped her in her tracks, though it was a quivering halt. Tuon's face was a dark mask, unreadable. She did not like what she had heard, though. Come to think, she had said *she* trained *damane.* Oh, burn him, on top of everything else, he was going to marry a woman who could channel?

The sound of horses' hooves announced Harnan and the other three Redarms coming along the narrow way between the tents and wagons at a quick trot. Their swords were belted on under their cloaks, Metwyn with a dagger almost as long as a short-sword to boot, and Gorderan had his heavy crossbow hanging at his saddle, already drawn and latched. The crank at his belt would take a full minute to pull back the thick cord, but this way, all he need do was place a bolt. Harnan carried a double-curve horsebow, with a bristling quiver at his hip. Fergin was leading Pips.

Harnan did not bother dismounting. Eyeing Tuon and Selucia suspiciously, and Luca and Latelle with almost as much doubt, he leaned down from his saddle, the crude hawk tattoo sharp on his cheek. “Renna stole a horse, my Lord,” he said quietly. “Rode down one of the horse handlers at the entrance getting out. Vanin’s following her. He says she could reach Coramen some time tonight. That’s the way she headed. She’s moving a lot faster than the wagons did. But she’s riding bareback; we can catch her, with luck.” He sounded as if that luck were a matter of fact. The men of the Band trusted Mat Cauthon’s luck more than he did himself.

There did not seem to be any choices, really. The dice were still pounding in his head. There was still a chance they might fall his way. A small chance. Mat Cauthon’s luck. “Get your people on the road as fast as they can pack up, Luca,” he said, stepping up onto Pips. “Leave the wall and anything else you can’t get onto the wagons fast. Just go.”

“Are you crazy?” Luca spluttered. “If I try to chase those people out, I *will* have a riot! And they’ll want their coin back!” Light, the man would think of money with his neck stretched on the headsman’s block.

“Think what you’ll have if a thousand Seanchan find you here tomorrow.” Mat’s voice was as cold as he could make it. If he failed, the Seanchan would run Luca’s show down in short order however fast they flogged their horses. Luca knew it, too, from the twist of his mouth, as if he had just bitten a rotting plum. Mat made himself ignore the man. The dice were drumming hard, but they had not stopped yet. “Juilin, leave all the gold for Luca except one good purse.” Maybe the man could bribe his way clear, once the Seanchan saw he did not have their Daughter of the Nine bloody Moons. “Gather everybody and ride out as soon as you can. Once you’re out of sight of the town, take to the forest. I’ll find you.”

“Everybody?” Sheltering Thera with his body, Juilin jerked his head toward Tuon and Selucia. “Leave those two in Jurador, and the Seanchan might stop with getting them back. It might slow them down, at least. You keep saying you’re going to turn them loose sooner or later.”

Mat met Tuon’s eyes. Big dark liquid eyes, in a smooth expressionless face. She had pushed her hood back a little, so he could see her face clearly. If he left her behind, then she could not say the words, or if she did, he would be too far way for the words to matter. If he left her behind, he would never learn why she smiled those mysterious smiles, or what lay behind the mystery. Light, he *was* a fool! Pips danced a few impatient steps.

“Everybody,” he said. Did Tuon nod slightly, as if to herself? Why would she nod? “Let’s ride,” he told Harnan.

They had to walk their horses through the crowds to get out of the show, but as soon as they reached the road, Mat put Pips to a gallop, cloak streaming behind and head down to keep his hat from blowing off. It was not a pace you could keep a horse at for long. The road wound around hills and crossed ridges, occasionally cutting through where the rise was not too high. They splashed across ankle-deep streams and thundered over low wooden bridges crossing deeper water. Trees began to appear on the slopes again, pine and leatherleaf showing green among the winter-bare branches of the others. Farms clung to some of the hills, low tile-roofed stone houses and taller barns, and now and then a hamlet of eight or ten houses.

A few miles from the show, Mat spotted a wide man ahead of them, sitting his saddle like a sack of suet. The horse was a leggy dun, eating ground at a steady trot. It figured that a horse thief had an eye for a good animal. Catching the sound of their hooves, Vanin looked back, but he only slowed to a walk. That was bad.

When Mat slowed Pips beside the dun, Vanin spat. “Best wager we got is we find her horse run to death, so I can track her afoot from there,” he muttered. “She’s pushing harder than I figured, with her bareback. If we push, we can maybe catch her by sunset. If her horse don’t founder or die, that’s about the time she’ll make Coramen.”

Mat tipped back his head to glance at the sun, almost straight overhead. It was a long way to cover in less than half a day. If he turned back, he could be a good distance the other side of Jurador by sunset, in company with Thom and Juilin and the others. With Tuon. With the Seanchan knowing to hunt Mat Cauthon. The man who had kidnapped the Daughter of the Nine Moons could not own enough luck to get off with being made *da’covale*. And sometime tomorrow or the next day, they would plant Luca on an impaling stake. Luca and Latelle, Petra and Clarine and the rest. A thicket of impaling stakes. The dice rattled and bounced in his head.

“We can make it,” he said. There was no other choice.

Vanin spat.

There was only one way to cover a great deal of ground quickly on a horse, if you meant to be on a live horse at the end. They walked the animals for half a mile, then trotted half a mile. The same at a canter, then a run, and it was back to a walk. The sun began to slide downward, and the dice spun. Around sparsely forested hills and over tree-topped ridges. Streams that could be crossed in three strides, barely wetting the horses' hooves, and streams thirty paces across with flat bridges of wood or sometimes stone. The sun sank lower and lower, and the dice spun faster and faster. Almost back to the Eldar, and no sign of Renna except scuffs on the hard dirt of the road that Vanin pointed to as if they were painted signs.

"Getting close, now," the fat man muttered. He did not sound happy, though.

Then they rounded a hill, and there was another low bridge ahead. Beyond, the road twisted north to cross the next ridge through a saddle. The sun, sitting atop the ridge, blazed in their eyes. Coramen lay on the other side of that ridge. Pulling his hat low for shade, Mat searched the road for a woman, for anyone, mounted or afoot, and his heart sank.

Vanin cursed and pointed.

A lathered bay was laboring its way up the slope on the other side of the river, a woman frantically kicking its flanks, urging it to climb. Renna had been too anxious to reach the Seanchan to stick with the road. She was maybe two hundred paces from them, and she might as well have been miles. Her mount was on the point of collapsing, but she could get down and run within sight of the garrisons before they could reach her. All she had to do was reach the crest, another fifty feet.

"My Lord?" Harnan said. He had an arrow nocked and his bow half raised. Gorderan held the heavy crossbow to his shoulder, a thick pointed bolt in place.

Mat felt something flicker and die inside him. He did not know what. Something. The dice rolled like thunder. "Shoot," he said.

He wanted to close his eyes. The crossbow snapped; the bolt made a black streak through the air. Renna slammed forward when it hit her back. She had almost managed to push herself erect against the bay's neck when Harnan's arrow took her.

Slowly, she toppled from the horse, sliding down the slope, rolling, bouncing off saplings, tumbling faster and faster until she splashed into the stream. For a moment, she floated facedown against the bank, and then the current caught her and pulled her away, skirts billowing up on the water. Slowly she drifted toward the Eldar. Maybe, eventually, she would reach the sea. And that made three. It hardly seemed to matter that the dice had stopped. That made three. *Never again,* he thought as Renna floated out of sight around a bend. *If I die for it, never again.*

They did not press, riding back eastward. There was no point, and Mat felt too bone-weary. They did not stop, though, except to breathe and water the horses. No one wanted to talk.

It was the small hours of the night when they reached Jurador, the town a dark mass with the gates shut tight. Clouds covered the moon. Surprisingly, the canvas walls of Luca's show were still in place just beyond the town. With a pair of bulky men wrapped in blankets snoring aware beneath the big banner as they guarded the entrance. Even from the road, in the dark, it was plain that wagons and tents filled the space behind the wall.

"At least I can tell Luca he doesn't have to run after all," Mat said wearily, turning Pips toward the banner. "Maybe he'll give us a place to sleep a few hours." For all the gold he had left, Luca should give them his own wagon, but knowing the man, Mat had hopes for clean straw somewhere. Tomorrow, he would set out to find Thom and the others. And Tuon. Tomorrow, when he had rested.

A greater shock waited inside Luca's huge wagon. It truly was roomy inside, at least for a wagon, with a narrow table sitting in the middle and space to walk around it. Table, cupboards and shelves all were polished till they glowed. Tuon was sitting in a gilded chair—Luca would have a chair, and gilded, when everybody else made do with stools!—with Selucia standing at her back. A beaming Luca was watching Latelle offer Tuon a plate of steaming pastries, which the dark little woman was examining as if she would actually eat something that Luca's wife had cooked.

Tuon showed no surprise at all at Mat walking into the wagon. "Is she captured, or dead?" she said, picking up a pastry with her fingers curved in that curiously graceful way.

"Dead," he said flatly. "Luca, what in the Light—"

"I forbid it, Toy!" Tuon snapped, pointing a finger at him sharply. "I forbid you to mourn a traitor!" Her voice softened, slightly, but it remained firm. "She earned death by betraying the Empire, and she would have betrayed you as easily. She was trying to betray you. What you did was justice, and I name it so.” Her tone said that if she named a thing, then it was well and truly named.

Mat squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “Is everyone else still here, too?” he demanded.

“Of course,” Luca said, still smiling like a bullgoose fool. “The Lady—the High Lady; forgive me, High Lady.” He bowed deeply. “She talked to Merrilin and Sandar, and. . . . Well, you see how it was. A very persuasive woman, the Lady. The High Lady. Cauthon, about my gold. You *said* they were to hand it over, but Merrilin said he’d slit my throat first, and Sandar threatened to crack my head, and . . .” He trailed off under Mat’s stare, then suddenly brightened again. “Look what the Lady gave me!” Snatching open one of the cupboards, he pulled out a folded paper that he held reverently in both hands. It was thick paper, and white as snow; expensive. “A warrant. Not sealed, of course, but signed. Valan Luca’s Grand Traveling Show and Magnificent Display of Marvels and Wonders is now under the personal protection of the High Lady Tuon Athaem Kore Paendrag. Everyone will know who that is, of course. I could go to Seanchan. I could put on my show for the Empress! May she live forever,” he added hastily, with another bow to Tuon.

For nothing, Mat thought bleakly. He sank down on one of the beds with his elbows on his knees, earning a very pointed look from Latelle. Likely only Tuon’s presence kept her from clouting him!

Tuon raised a peremptory hand, a black porcelain doll but every inch a queen despite the shabby too-large dress. “You are not to use that except at need, Master Luca. *Great* need!”

“Of course, High Lady; of course.” Luca bobbed bows as if he might be kissing the floorboards any minute.

All for bloody nothing!

“I did make specific mention of who is not under my protection, Toy.” Tuon took a bite of pastry and delicately brushed a crumb from her lip with a finger. “Can you guess whose name heads that list?” She smiled. Not a malicious smile. Another of those smiles for herself, amusement or delight in something he could not see. Suddenly, he noticed something. That little cluster of silk rosebuds he had given her was pinned to her shoulder.

Despite himself, Mat began to laugh. He threw his hat down on the floor and laughed. With everything, all his efforts, he did not know this woman at all! Not a bit! He laughed until his ribs hurt.

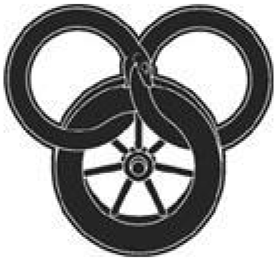

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CHAPTER 30

What the Oath Rod Can Do

The sun sat on the horizon, perfectly silhouetting the White Tower in the distance, but the cold of the previous night seemed to be deepening, and dark gray clouds marching across the sky threatened a snowfall. Winter was diminishing, yet it had clung past when spring should have begun, loosening its hold fitfully. The noises of morning penetrated Egwene’s tent, isolated as it was from everything around it. The camp seemed to vibrate. Laborers would be bringing in water from the wells, and extra measures of firewood and charcoal in carts. Serving women would be fetching sisters’ breakfasts, and novices in the second sitting scurrying to theirs, those in the first and third to classes. It was a momentous day, though none of them knew it. Likely, today would see an end to the spurious negotiations that were going on in Darein, at a table under a pavilion at the foot of the bridge to Tar Valon. Spurious on both sides. Elaida’s raiders continued to strike with impunity on the other side of the river. In any case, today would be the last meeting for some time.

Peering at her own breakfast, Egwene sighed and picked a tiny black fleck out of the steaming porridge, wiping it from her fingers on a linen napkin without looking closely enough to be sure that it was a weevil. If you could not be sure, then you worried less about what remained in the bowl. She put a spoonful into her mouth and tried to concentrate on the sweet slivers of dried apricot that Chesa had blended in. *Did* something crack under her teeth?

“It all feeds the belly, my mother used to say, so pay it no mind,” Chesa murmured as if talking to herself. That was how she gave Egwene advice, without straying across the line between mistress and maid. At least, she gave advice when Halima was not present, and the other woman had left early this morning. Chesa was sitting on one of the clothing chests, in case Egwene wanted something or needed an errand run, but now and then her eyes strayed to the pile of garments that were to go the washwomen today. She never minded darning or mending in front of Egwene, but in her book, sorting laundry would have been stepping over that line.

Smoothing the grimace from her face, Egwene was about to tell the woman to go get her own breakfast—Chesa considered eating before Egwene finished another transgression—but before she could open her mouth, Nisao pushed into the tent, surrounded by the glow of *saidar.* As the entry flaps fell, Egwene caught a glimpse of Sarin, Nisao's bald, black-bearded stump of a Warder, waiting outside. The small sister's cowl was down, carefully arranged on her shoulders so the yellow velvet lining showed, yet she was clutching her cloak as though she felt the cold intensely. She said nothing, just gave Chesa a sharp look. Chesa waited for Egwene's nod, gathered her own cloak and scurried out. She might not be able to see the light of the Power, but she knew when Egwene wanted privacy.

"Kairen Stang is dead," Nisao said without preamble. Her face was smooth, her voice steady, and chill. Short enough to make Egwene feel tall, she stood as though straining for an extra inch. Nisao did not usually do that. "Seven sisters had already tested for resonance before I got there. There is no doubt she was killed using *saidin.* Her neck was broken. Shattered. As if her head had been wrenched around full circle. At least it was quick." Nisao drew a deep, unsteady breath, then realized what she had done and pulled herself up even straighter. "Her Warder is primed for murder. Someone gave him an herbal concoction to put him to sleep, but he will be trouble to handle once he wakes." She did not put the usual dismissive Yellow twist on the mention of herbs, a measure of her upset no matter how calm her face was.

Egwene set her spoon down on the tiny table and leaned back. Suddenly, her chair did not feel comfortable anymore. Now the next best after Leane was Bode Cauthon. A novice. She tried not to think of what else Bode was. With the extra days of practice, Bode could do the work almost as well as Kairen could have. Almost. She did not mention that, though. Nisao knew some secrets, but not all. "Anaiya, and now Kairen. Both Blue Ajah. Do you know of any other link between them?"

Nisao shook her head. "Anaiya had been Aes Sedai fifty or sixty years when Kairen came to the Tower, as I recall. Perhaps they had mutual acquaintances. I just don’t know, Mother.” Now she sounded tired, and her shoulders slumped a little. Her quiet investigation into Anaiya’s death had gotten nowhere, and she had to be aware Egwene was going to add Kairen.

“Find out,” Egwene ordered. “Discreetly.” This second murder would cause enough ruction without her adding to it. For a moment, she studied the other woman. Nisao might make excuses after the fact, or claim she had been doubtful from the start, but until then, she was always a model of Yellow Ajah self-assurance and absolute certainty. Not now, however. “Are many sisters walking about holding *saidar*?”

“I’ve noticed several, Mother,” Nisao said stiffly. Her chin rose within a fraction of defiance. After a moment, though, the glow around her winked out. She pulled her cloak tighter, as if she had suddenly lost warmth. “I doubt it would have done Kairen any good. Her death was too sudden. But it makes a person feel . . . safer.”

After the small woman left, Egwene sat stirring her porridge with her spoon. She did not see any more dark flecks, but her appetite was gone. Finally, she rose and settled the seven-striped stole around her neck, then swung her cloak onto her shoulders. Today of all days, she would not sit mired in gloom. Today of all days, she must follow her routine exactly.

Outside, high-wheeled carts trundled along the frozen ruts of the camp streets, filled with big water barrels or piles of split firewood and sacks of charcoal, the drivers and the fellows riding behind alike enveloped in their cloaks against the cold. As usual, families of novices hurried along the wooden walkways, usually managing to make their courtesies to passing Aes Sedai without slowing. Failure in the proper respects to a sister could earn a switching, but so could tardiness, and teachers were generally less tolerant than Aes Sedai encountered in passing, who at least might make allowances for why a novice went rushing by.

The white-clad women still leapt out of the way at sight of the striped stole hanging from Egwene’s cowl, of course, but she refused to let her mood be soured, any more than it already was, by novices curtsying in the street, slipping and sliding on the ice-hard ground and sometimes almost falling on their faces before their cousins could grab them. “Cousin” was what members of the same family had taken to calling one another, and somehow that seemed to tie them closer together, as if they really were related, and close cousins at that. What did sour her mood were the few Aes Sedai she saw out and about, gliding along the walkways through ripples of curtsies. There were no more than a dozen or so between her tent and the Amyrlin’s study, but three out of every four were wrapped in the light of the Power as well as cloaks. They walked in pairs more often than not, followed by any Warders they had. They seemed watchful, too, enveloped in *saidar* or not, cowls swiveling constantly as they scanned everyone in sight.

It minded her of the time spotted fever had struck Emond’s Field, and everyone walked around clutching brandy-soaked handkerchiefs to their noses—Doral Barran, the Wisdom then, had said that would help stave it off—clutching their handkerchiefs and watching one another to see who would be the next to break out in spots and fall over. Eleven people died before the fever ran its course, but it was a month after the last person fell sick before everyone was willing to put those handkerchiefs away. For a long time, she had associated the smell of brandy with fear. She could almost smell it now. Two sisters had been murdered in their midst, by a man who could channel, not to mention apparently being able to come and go as he chose. Fear was running through the Aes Sedai faster than spotted fever ever could.

The tent she used as a study was already warm when she arrived, the brazier giving off a scent of roses. The mirrored stand-lamps and table-lamp were lit. Her routine was well known. Hanging her cloak on the cloak rack in the corner, she took her seat behind the writing table, automatically catching the unsteady chair leg that always tried to fold. All she had to do was follow routine. Tomorrow, she could announce what had been done.

Her first visitor was a shock, perhaps the last woman she expected to walk into the tent. Theodrin was a willowy, apple-cheeked Brown, a copper-skinned Domani with a stubborn set to her mouth. Once, she had always looked ready to smile. She glided across the worn carpets, close enough for the fringe of her shawl to brush the writing table. As she made a very formal curtsy, Egwene extended her left hand so the woman could kiss her Great Serpent ring. Formality must be met with formality.

“Romanda wishes to know if she can meet with you today, Mother,” the slender Brown said. Softly, but there was a stubbornness buried in her tone, too.

“Tell her, at any time she chooses, Daughter,” Egwene replied carefully. Theodrin offered another curtsy without changing expression.

As the Brown moved to leave, one of the Accepted brushed by her into the tent, pushing back her banded white hood. Emara was a thin woman, and as small as Nisao. It seemed a strong wind might blow her away, yet she had a very firm hand with the novices given into her care, firmer than many sisters. But then, she was hard on herself, and a novice's life was supposed to be hard. Emara's gray eyes rolled to the fringe on Theodrin's shawl, and her mouth twisted into a scornful grin before she smoothed it away to spread her snowy, banded skirts for Egwene. Bright spots of color flamed on Theodrin's cheeks.

Egwene slapped a hand down on the table hard enough to rattle the stone inkwell and the sand jar. "Have your forgotten how to be courteous to an Aes Sedai, child?" she said sharply.

Emara went pale—the Amyrlin did have a reputation, after all—and hastily made an even deeper curtsy for Theodrin, who acknowledged it with a wooden nod before gliding from the tent a good deal more swiftly than she had entered.

What Emara stammered out, in an Illianer accent made thicker by nerves, was a request from Lelaine to meet with the Amyrlin. Romanda and Lelaine had been much less formal, once, appearing unannounced and whenever they wished, but the declaration of war on Elaida had changed a great deal. Not everything, but enough to go on with. Egwene returned the same reply to Lelaine that she had to Romanda, though in a more clipped tone, and Emara almost fell over making her curtsy and practically ran out of the tent. One more nail fastening together the legend of Egwene al'Vere, the Amyrlin Seat who made Sereille Bagand look like a goose-down pillow.

As soon as the Accepted was gone, Egwene raised her hand and frowned at what it had covered. The folded square of paper that Theodrin had deposited on the table while kissing her ring. Her frown deepened when she opened it. The script that covered the small page managed to flow while being precise, but there was an inkblot on one edge. Theodrin was very neat. Perhaps she was trying to conform to the general view of Browns.

> Romanda has sent two sisters to Travel to Cairhien and investigate some tale that has the Yellow Sitters buzzing. I don't know what the rumor is, Mother, but I will find out. I heard one of them mention Nynaeve, not as if she were in Cairhien, but as if the rumor was somehow connected to her.

The fool woman had even signed her name!

"What is that, Mother?"

Egwene gave a start of surprise, and barely caught the folding chair leg before it dropped her onto the carpets. She refocused her scowl on Siuan, who stood just inside the entry flaps with her blue-fringed shawl on her arms and her leather folders pressed to her breasts. The blue-eyed woman's eyebrows raised slightly at Egwene's startlement.

"Here," Egwene said irritably, thrusting the paper at her. This was no time to be jumping and twitching! "You know about Kairen?" Of course, she must, but Egwene still said, "Have you made the necessary changes?" Necessary changes. Light, she sounded as pompous as Romanda. She *was* on edge. Only at the last did she think to embrace *saidar* and weave a ward against eavesdropping; only after the ward was in place did she think that today might not be the best time for anyone to think she had private matters to discuss with Siuan.

Siuan was not on edge. She had weathered storms. And managed to recover from drowning, some might say. Today was only a little windy, to her. "No need until we know for sure about the boats, Mother," she replied calmly, setting her folders on the table and neatly squaring them between the inkwell and the sand jar. "The less time Bode has to think about it, the less chance she'll panic." Calm as a pond. Even two murdered sisters could not ruffle Siuan. Or sending a novice of only a few months to replace one of them.

A frown creased her forehead as she read the note, though. "First Faolain goes into hiding," she growled at the paper, "and now Theodrin brings this to you instead of to me. That fool girl has less brains than a fisher-bird! You'd think she wants someone to find out she's keeping an eye on Romanda for you." Keeping an eye. A polite way of saying "spy." They were both practiced in euphemisms. That went with being Aes Sedai. Today, euphemisms grated on Egwene.

"Perhaps she does want to be discovered. Perhaps she's tired of Romanda telling her what to do, what to say, what to think. I had an Accepted in here who *sneered* at Theodrin's shawl, Siuan."

The other woman made a dismissive gesture. "Romanda tries to tell everyone what to do. And what to think. As for the rest, things will change once Theodrin and Faolain can swear on the Oath Rod. I don't suppose anyone will actually insist they be tested for the shawl now. Until then, they must take what comes."

"That isn't good enough, Siuan." Egwene managed to keep her tone level, but it took an effort. She had at least suspected what she was letting those two in for when she told them to attach themselves to Romanda and Lelaine. She had needed to know what the Sitters were scheming at, and still needed to know, yet she had a duty to them. They had been the first to swear fealty to her, and of their own free will. Besides which . . . "Much of what's said about Theodrin and Faolain can be said of me, too. If *Accepted* can show them disrespect . . ." Well, she had no fear of *that.* The sisters were another matter. Especially the Sitters. "Siuan, I have no hope at all of uniting the Tower if Aes Sedai doubt me."

Siuan snorted forcefully. "Mother, by now even Lelaine and Romanda know you're the Amyrlin Seat in truth, whether or not they'll admit it. That pair wouldn't have fallen in line with Deane Aryman. I think they're beginning to see you as another Edarna Noregovna."

"That's as may be," Egwene said dryly. Deane was considered the White Tower's savior, after Bonwhin's disaster with Artur Hawkwing. Edarna was believed to have been the most politically skilled woman ever to hold the staff and stole. Both had been very strong Amyrlins. "But as you've reminded me, I have to make sure I don't end up like Shein Chunla." Shein had begun as a strong Amyrlin, firmly in charge of the Tower and the Hall, and ended as a puppet doing exactly as she was told.

Siuan nodded, in approval and agreement. She really was teaching Egwene the Tower's history, and she often brought up Amyrlins who had misstepped fatally. Including herself. "This is another matter, though," she muttered, tapping the note against her fingers. "When I lay my hands on Theodrin, I'll make her wish she was a novice. And Faolain! If they think they can shirk off now, I swear, I'll gut the pair of them like grunters on the dock!"

"You'll gut who?" Sheriam asked as she walked in through the ward in a gust of cold air.

Egwene's chair almost dropped her onto the carpets again. She needed to get a chair that did not try to fold up every time she moved. She was willing to bet Edarna never jumped as if she had itchoak down her back.

"No one who concerns you," Siuan said calmly, putting the paper to one of the table-lamp's flames. It burned quickly, right to her fingertips, and then she mashed it out between her hands and brushed the ash away. Only Egwene, Siuan and Leane knew the truth of Faolain and Theodrin. And the two sisters themselves, of course. Though there was a great deal neither of them knew, either.

Sheriam accepted the rebuff with equanimity. The fire-haired woman seemed to have recovered completely from her collapse in the Hall. At least, she had recovered her outer dignity, for the most part. Watching Siuan burn the note, her tilted green eyes might have tightened a little, and she did touch the narrow blue stole hanging from her shoulders as if to remind herself that it was there. She did not have to accept Siuan's orders—putting her Keeper in that position had seemed too harsh to Egwene, in the end—but Sheriam knew very well that Siuan had no need to accept her orders either, which had to gall her now that Siuan stood so far beneath her in the Power. Knowing there were secrets she was not privy to had to gall her, as well. Sheriam would have to live with it though.

She also had brought a paper, which she laid on the table in front of Egwene. "I met Tiana on the way here, Mother, and told her I'd give this to you."

"This" was the day's report on runaways, though those no longer came every day, or even every week, since the novices had been organized into families. Cousins supported one another through frustrations and tears, and managed to talk one another out of the worst mistakes, like running away. There was only one name on the page. Nicola Treehill.

Egwene sighed and set the paper down. She would have thought Nicola's greed for learning would have kept her feet still no matter how frustrated the woman grew. And yet, she could not say she was sorry to see the end of her. Nicola was conniving and unscrupulous, willing to try blackmail or whatever else she thought would advance her. Very likely she had had help. Areina would not have balked at stealing horses for the pair of them to flee.

Abruptly, the date beside the name caught her eye. Two dates, actually, marked as questions. Months were seldom named, much less days numbered, except in official documents and treaties. Signed, sealed and witnessed in the city of Illian on the twelfth day of Saven, this Year of Grace. . . . And for reports of this nature, and entering a woman's name in the novice book. For common use, so many days before this feastday or after that sufficed. Written out, dates always looked a little strange to her. She had to count on her fingers to be sure of what she saw.

"Nicola ran away three or four days ago, Sheriam, and Tiana is just reporting it? She isn't even sure whether it *was* three days or four?"

"Nicola's cousins covered for her, Mother." Sheriam shook her head ruefully. Strangely, her small smile seemed amused, though. Or even admiring. "Not from love; apparently, they were glad to see the child go and afraid she'd be brought back. She was quite overbearing about her Talent at Foretelling. I'm afraid Tiana is very upset with them. None will be sitting comfortably in their classes today, or for days to come, I fear. Tiana says she intends to give them each a dose of the strap instead of breakfast every day till Nicola is found. I think she might relent, though. With Nicola gone so long before her flight was discovered, it may be some time before she's located."

Egwene winced slightly. She could recall her own visits to the study of the Mistress of Novices, then occupied by the very woman in front of her. Sheriam had a strong arm. A daily dose would be fierce. But hiding a runaway's flight was more serious than sneaking out after hours or pulling a prank. She pushed the report to one side.

"Tiana will handle it as she sees fit," she said. "Sheriam, has there been any change in how the sisters talk about my dream?" She had revealed the dream about a Seanchan attack the very morning after dreaming it, and the women she told stared at her apathetically, apparently because of the freshness of Anaiya's death. That had stunned everyone.

Instead of answering, Sheriam cleared her throat and smoothed her blue-slashed skirts. "You may not be aware, Mother, but one of Nicola's cousins is Larine Ayellin. From Emond's Field," she added, as if Egwene did not know that. "No one would think you were playing favorites if you pardoned the whole family. Whether or not she relents, Tiana does mean to be very sharp with them in the meantime. They will suffer."

Leaning back, carefully because of the wobbly chair leg, Egwene frowned up at the other woman. Larine was almost the same age as she, and a close friend growing up. They had spent hours together, gossiping and practicing putting their hair in braids for when the Women's Circle said they were old enough. Despite that, Larine had been one of the few Emond's Field girls who seemed to accept that Egwene might really be the Amyrlin Seat, though she showed it mainly by keeping her distance. But did Sheriam think Egwene would play *favorites*? Even Siuan looked taken aback. "You should know better than anyone, Sheriam, novice discipline is the province of the Mistress of Novices. Unless a girl is being abused, anyway, and you haven't suggested that. Besides, if Larine thinks she can get away with helping a runaway today—helping a runaway, Sheriam!—what will she think she can get away with tomorrow? She can reach the shawl, if she has the gumption to stick with it. I won't lead her down a path that ends with her being sent away for misbehavior. Now. What are they saying about my dream?"

Sheriam's tilted green eyes blinked, and she glanced at Siuan. Light, the woman thought Egwene was being hard because Siuan was present? Because Siuan might carry tales? She should know better; she *had* been the Mistress of Novices. "The attitude among the sisters, Mother," Sheriam said finally, "is still that the Seanchan are a thousand miles away, they don't know how to Travel, and if they start marching on Tar Valon, we'll learn of it before they're within two hundred leagues."

Siuan muttered something under her breath that sounded vile, but not surprised. Egwene wanted to curse, too. Worries over Anaiya's murder had had nothing to do with the sisters' apathy. They did not believe that Egwene was a Dreamer. Anaiya had been sure, but Anaiya was dead. Siuan and Leane believed, yet neither stood high enough now to be listened to with more than impatient politeness, if that. And it was quite clear that Sheriam did not believe. She obeyed her oath of fealty as scrupulously as Egwene could have wished for, but you could not order someone to believe. They only mouthed what you told them, and nothing changed.

When Sheriam left, Egwene found herself wondering what had brought the woman in the first place. Could it have been just to point out that Larine was going to be punished? Surely not. But she had said nothing else, apart from answering Egwene's questions.

Shortly, Myrelle arrived, followed closely by Morvrin. Egwene could feel each of them release the Source before she entered the tent, and they left their Warders waiting outside. Even in brief glimpses as the entry flaps were pushed aside, the men looked wary, even for Warders.

Myrelle's big dark eyes flashed at the sight of Siuan, and her nostrils flared. Morvrin's round face remained smooth as polished stone, but she brushed her dark brown skirts with both hands as if wiping something off. Perhaps it was unconscious. Unlike Sheriam, they did have to accept Siuan's orders, and neither liked that at all. It was not that Egwene wanted to grind their noses, but she trusted Siuan, and oaths or no oaths, she did not entirely trust them. Not to the degree she did Siuan. Besides, there were times it was inconvenient if not impossible for her to tell the sisters sworn to her what she wanted done. Siuan could carry messages, and this way, Egwene could be sure they were obeyed.

She asked about talk of her dream straightaway, but unsurprisingly, their stories were the same as Sheriam's. The Seanchan were far off. There would be plenty of warning should that change. The story had been the same for a good week and a half. Worse. . . .

"It might be different if Anaiya were alive," Morvrin said, balancing atop one of the rickety stools in front of the writing table. In spite of her bulk, she did it easily and gracefully. "Anaiya had a reputation for arcane knowledge. I always thought she should have chosen Brown, myself. If she said you were a Dreamer—" Her teeth clicked shut at a sharp look from Egwene. Myrelle suddenly took an interest in warming her hands at the brazier.

Neither of them believed, either. Except for Siuan and Leane, no one in the whole camp believed that Egwene had had a true dream. Varilin had taken over the talks in Darein, deftly pushing Beonin into a lesser role, and she offered constant excuses as to why she could not pass on a warning at just this moment. Perhaps in a few days, when the talks were going more smoothly. As if they were ever anything other than sisters talking in circles without saying a word that might send the other side away offended. No one at all but Siuan and Leane. She thought they believed.

Myrelle turned from the brazier as if steeling herself to put a hand on the coals. "Mother, I have been thinking about the day Shadar Logoth was destroyed—" She broke off and turned back to the brazier as a long-faced woman in deep blue entered the tent carrying a three-legged stool painted in bright spirals.

Maigan was beautiful, with large eyes and full lips, but she seemed elongated somehow. She was not that tall, but even her hands seemed long. She gave Morvrin a cool nod, and pointedly ignored Myrelle. "I brought my own seat today, Mother," she said, making as much of a curtsy as she could with the stool in one hand. "Yours are rather unsteady, if I may say so."

It had come as no surprise that Anaiya's death meant the Blue Ajah would name someone else to Egwene's "advisory council," but she had hoped for the best when she learned who it was to be. Maigan had been one of Siuan's allies when Siuan was Amyrlin.

“Do you mind if I send Siuan for tea, Mother?” Maigan said as she settled onto her stool. “You really should have a novice or Accepted to run errands, but Siuan will do.”

“The novices have their classes, Daughter,” Egwene replied, “and even with the arrangement of families, the Accepted hardly have time for their own studies.” Besides which, she would have to send a novice or Accepted to stand in the cold any time she wanted to speak to someone in privacy. Hard on one who would not yet have been taught how to ignore heat or cold, and a flag planted outside the tent telling everyone there might be something worth eavesdropping on. “Siuan, will you please bring us some tea? I’m sure we could all do with a hot cup.”

Maigan raised a long-fingered hand as Siuan started for the entrance. “I have a jar of mint honey in my tent,” she said imperiously. “Fetch that. And mind you don’t filch any. I remember you used to have a sweet tooth. Hurry, now.” Maigan had been an ally. Now she was one of many sisters who blamed Siuan for breaking the White Tower.

“As you say, Maigan,” Siuan replied in a meek voice, and even bent her knee slightly before she hurried out. And she did hurry. Maigan stood as high as Myrelle or Morvrin, and there were no orders or oaths of fealty to protect her here. The long-faced woman gave a small, satisfied nod. Siuan had had to beg to be accepted back into the Blue Ajah, and rumor had it that Maigan had been the most insistent on the begging.

Morvrin made her excuses to leave behind Siuan, perhaps meaning to catch her up for some reason, but Myrelle took one of the stools and engaged in a competition with Maigan: who could ignore the other most completely. Egwene did not understand the animosity between the two women. Sometimes, people just disliked one another. In any case, it did not make for conversation. Egwene took the opportunity to leaf through the pages in Siuan’s folders, but she could not concentrate on rumors out of Illian and innuendoes out of Cairhien. There seemed nothing to account for Theodrin’s claim of a tale that had set the Yellow Sitters buzzing. Siuan would have said something, if she had known.

Maigan and Myrelle stared at her as if watching her turn over sheets of paper was the most interesting activity in the world. She would have sent them both away, but she wanted to find out what Myrelle had been thinking about the day Shadar Logoth had been scooped out of the earth. She could not send one away without sending both. Drat the pair of them!

When Siuan returned, with a wooden tray holding a silver teapot and porcelain cups—and Maigan's white-glazed honey jar—she was followed into the tent by a soldier in plate-and-mail armor, a young Shienaran with his hair shaved off except for a topknot. Young, but not young. Ragan's dark cheek carried a puckered white scar from an arrow, and his face was hard in the way only the face of a man who lived with death every hour could be hard. As Siuan distributed teacups, he bowed, one hand holding a moon-crested helmet on his hip, the other on his sword hilt. Nothing in his expression said he had ever met her before.

"Honor to serve, Mother," he said formally. "Lord Bryne sent me. He said to tell you that it seems the raiders may have crossed to this side of the river last night. With Aes Sedai. Lord Bryne is doubling the patrols. He advises that sisters stay close to the camp. To avoid incidents."

"May I be excused, Mother?" Siuan said suddenly, with the slightly abashed sound of a woman who found herself with an urgent need for the jakes.

"Yes, yes," Egwene said, as impatiently as she could manage, and barely waited for the other woman to dash out of the tent before going on. "Tell Lord Bryne that Aes Sedai go where they wish, when they wish." She snapped her mouth shut before she could call him "Ragan," but that only served to make her seem severe. She hoped it did.

"I will tell him, Mother," he replied, making another bow. "Heart and soul to serve."

Maigan smiled faintly as he departed. She deprecated soldiers—Warders were good and necessary; soldiers made messes for others to clean up, in her opinion—but she did favor anything that seemed to indicate a wedge between Egwene and Gareth Bryne. Or perhaps better to say that Lelaine favored. In this, Maigan was Lelaine's woman to her toenails. Myrelle merely looked puzzled. She knew that Egwene got on well with Lord Gareth.

Egwene got up and poured herself a cup of tea. And took a touch of Maigan's honey. Her hands were quite steady. The boats were in place. In a few hours, Leane would gather Bode and ride well away from the camp before explaining what they were going to do. Larine must take the punishment she had earned, and Bode must do what needed doing. Egwene had been younger than Bode when she was set to hunt Black sisters. Shienarans served their war against the Shadow in the Blight, heart and soul. Aes Sedai, and those who would become Aes Sedai, served the Tower. A stronger weapon against the Shadow than any sword, and no less sharp to an unwary hand.

When Romanda arrived, with Theodrin to hold open the entry flap for her, the gray-haired Yellow made a very exact curtsy, neither a fraction more nor less than propriety required from Sitter to Amyrlin. They were not in the Hall, now. If the Amyrlin was only first among equals there, she was a little more in her own study, even for Romanda. She did not offer to kiss Egwene’s ring, though. There were limits. She eyed Myrelle and Maigan as if thinking of asking them to leave. Or perhaps telling them. It was a prickly point. Sitters expected obedience, but neither was of her Ajah. And this was the Amyrlin’s study.

In the end, she did neither, merely allowed Theodrin to take her cloak, embroidered with borders of yellow flowers, and pour her a cup of tea. Theodrin did not have to be asked to do either, and she retreated to a corner, twitching her shawl and her mouth set sullenly, as Romanda took the empty stool. Despite the stool’s uneven legs, Romanda managed to make it seem a seat in the Hall of the Tower, or maybe a throne, as she adjusted the yellow-fringed shawl she had worn beneath her cloak.

“The talks are going badly,” she said in that high, musical voice. She still made it sound a proclamation. “Varilin is chewing her lips in frustration. Magla is frustrated, too, for that matter, and even Saroiya. When Saroiya starts grinding her teeth, most sisters would be shouting.” Excepting Janya, every Sitter who had held a chair before the Tower divided had insinuated herself into the negotiations. They were talking with women they had known in the Hall back then, after all. Beonin was nearly reduced to running errands.

Romanda touched the tea to her lips, then held the cup out to one side on its dish without saying a word. Theodrin darted from the corner to take the cup over to the tray, adding honey before she returned the cup to the Sitter and herself to the corner. Romanda tasted the tea again and nodded in approval. Theodrin’s face colored.

“The talks will go as they go,” Egwene said carefully. Romanda had opposed any sort of negotiations, spurious or not. And she knew what was to happen tonight. Keeping the Hall in the dark about that had seemed a needless slap in the face.

The tight bun on the back of Romanda's head bobbed as she nodded. "They have shown us one thing already. Elaida won't allow the Sitters speaking for her to budge an inch. She is dug into the Tower like a rat in a wall. The only way to flush her is to send ferrets in after her." Myrelle made a sound in her throat, earning a surprised glance from Maigan. Romanda's eyes remained steady on Egwene's.

"Elaida will be removed one way or another," Egwene said calmly, setting her teacup down on its dish. Her hand did not shake. What had the women learned? How?

Romanda grimaced faintly at her tea as if after all it lacked sufficient honey. Or in disappointment that Egwene had not said more. The woman shifted on her stool with the air of a swordswoman setting herself for another attack, blade coming up. "The things you've said about the Kin, Mother. That there are over a thousand of them rather than a few dozen. That some are five or six hundred years old." She shook her head over the impossibility. "How could all of that have escaped the Tower?" She was challenging, not asking a question.

"We only recently learned how many wilders there are among the Sea Folk," Egwene replied gently. "And we still aren't sure how many there really are." Romanda's grimace was not so small, this time. It had been the Yellow that first confirmed hundreds of Sea Folk wilders in Illian alone. First blow to Egwene.

One blow was not enough to finish Romanda, though. Or even to wound her very badly. "We will have to hunt them down, once our business is done here," she said in grim tones. "Letting a few dozen remain in Ebou Dar and Tar Valon, just to help us trace runaways, was one thing, but we cannot allow a thousand wilders to remain . . . organized." She put even more contempt into the word, into the idea of wilders organizing, than she did into the rest. Myrelle and Maigan were watching closely, listening. Maigan was even leaning forward, she was so intent. Neither knew more than the stories Egwene had spread, which everyone assumed came through Siuan's eyes-and-ears.

"Well over a thousand," Egwene corrected, "and not one a wilder. All women sent away from the Tower, except for a few runaways who evaded capture." She did not raise her voice, but she made each point firmly, meeting Romanda's gaze. "In any case, how do you propose to hunt them down? They are spread through every country, in every sort of occupation.

Ebou Dar was the only place they ever gathered or met other than by chance, and all those fled when the Seanchan came. Since the Trolloc Wars, the Kin have allowed the Tower to know only what they wanted known. Two thousand years, hiding under the White Tower's nose. Their numbers have grown while the Tower's numbers dwindled. How do you propose to find them now, among all the wilders out there that the Tower has always ignored because they were 'too old' to become novices? Kinswomen don't stand out in any way, Romanda. They use the Power almost as often as Aes Sedai, but they show age like anyone else, if more slowly. If they want to remain hidden, we will never be able to find them." And that was several more blows for Egwene, with none taken. Romanda wore a faint sheen of sweat on her forehead, a sure sign of desperation in an Aes Sedai. Myrelle was sitting very still, but Maigan seemed about to fall off her stool onto her nose no matter how steady it was.

Romanda licked her lips. "If they channel, they would achieve the look. If they age, they cannot be channeling very often if at all. And neither way could they live five or six hundred years!" No more dissimulation, it seemed.

"There is only one real difference between Aes Sedai and the Kin," Egwene said quietly. The words still seemed loud. Even Romanda appeared to be holding her breath. "They left the White Tower before they could swear on the Oath Rod." There; it was in the open finally.

Romanda jerked as if she had taken a mortal blow. "You've not taken the Oaths yet," she said hoarsely. "Do you mean to abandon them? To ask sisters to abandon them?" Myrelle or Maigan gasped. Perhaps both.

"No!" Egwene said sharply. "The Three Oaths are what make us Aes Sedai, and I will swear on the Oath Rod as soon as it is ours!" Drawing a deep breath, she modulated her tone. But she leaned toward the other woman, too, trying to draw her in, to include her. To convince her. She almost stretched out a hand. "As it is, sisters retire to spend their last years in quiet, Romanda. Wouldn't it be better if those were *not* their last years? If sisters retired into the Kin, they could tie the Kin to the Tower. There would be no need for a futile hunt, then." She had gone this far; she might as well go the last step. "The Oath Rod can unbind as well as bind."

Maigan thudded to the carpets on her knees and scrambled up, brushing at her skirts as indignantly as if she had been pushed. Myrelle's olive face looked a little pale.

Moving slowly, Romanda set her teacup on the edge of the writing table and stood, drawing her shawl around her. Expressionless, she stood staring down at Egwene while Theodrin settled her yellow-embroidered cloak on her shoulders, fastened the golden pin and arranged the folds as carefully as any lady's maid. Only then did Romanda speak, in a voice like stone. "When I was a little girl, I dreamed of becoming Aes Sedai. From the day I reached the White Tower, I tried to live as an Aes Sedai. I have lived as Aes Sedai, and I will die as Aes Sedai. This cannot be allowed!"

She turned smoothly to go, but she knocked over the stool she had been sitting on, apparently without noticing. Theodrin hurried out after her. With concern on her face, oddly enough.

"Mother?" Myrelle drew a deep breath, fingers plucking at her deep green skirts. "Mother, are you really suggesting . . . ?" She trailed off, apparently unable to say it. Maigan sat on her stool as though forcing herself not to lean forward again.

"I have laid out the facts," Egwene said calmly. "Any decision will be the Hall's. Tell me, Daughter. Would you choose to die, when you could live and continue to serve the Tower?"

The Green sister and the Blue exchanged glances, then realized what they had done and snapped back to ignoring one another. Neither answered, but Egwene could almost see the thoughts churning behind their eyes. After a few moments, she got up and set the stool back upright. Even that failed to rouse them further than perfunctory apologies for making her see to that herself. Then they lapsed into silent reflection.

She tried to return to the pages in Siuan's folders—the stalemate at the Stone of Tear was dragging on, and no one admitted to any idea of how it would end—but not long after Romanda's departure, Lelaine arrived.

Unlike Romanda, the slender Blue Sitter was alone, and poured her own tea. Settling onto the empty stool, she tossed her fur-lined cloak back over both shoulders and let it hang from a silver cloak pin set with large sapphires. She wore her shawl, too; Sitters usually did. Lelaine was more direct than Romanda. Or so it might have seemed, on the surface. Her eyes held a sharp glitter.

"Kairen's death put another crimp in the chances of making any sort of agreement with the Black Tower," she murmured over her teacup, inhaling the fumes. "And there's poor Llyw to deal with. Perhaps Myrelle will take him. Two of her three belonged to someone else first. No one else has ever saved two Warders whose Aes Sedai died."

Egwene was not the only one to hear special emphasis in that. Myrelle's face definitely paled. She had two secrets to hide, and one was that she had four Warders. The passing of Lan Mandragoran's bond from Moiraine to her had been something not done in hundreds of years. Today, it was looked upon like bonding a man against his will. Something not done in even more hundreds of years. "Three is enough for me," she said breathlessly. "If you will excuse me, Mother?"

Maigan laughed softly as Myrelle left the tent walking fast. Not so fast that she failed to embrace *saidar* before the entry flaps fell, though.

"Of course," Lelaine said, exchanging amused looks with the other Blue, "they say she marries her Warders. All of them. Perhaps poor Llyw won't do for a husband."

"He *is* as wide as a horse," Maigan put in. Despite her amusement over Myrelle's flight, there was no maliciousness in her voice. She was simply stating a fact. Llyw was a very large man. "I think I know a young Blue who might take him. She isn't interested in men that way."

Lelaine nodded in a way that said the young Blue had found her Warder. "Greens can be very odd. Take Elayne Trakand, for example. Actually, I never thought Elayne would choose Green. I had her marked out for the Blue. The girl has a deft feel for the currents in politics. Though she also has a tendency to wander into deeper water than might be safe. Wouldn't you say so, Mother?" Smiling, she sipped at her tea.

This was not at all like Romanda's subtle feeling-out. This was slash and slash, with the blade appearing out of nowhere. Did Lelaine know about Myrelle and Lan? Had she sent someone to Caemlyn, and if so, how much had she learned? Egwene wondered whether Romanda had also felt off-balance and dazed.

"Do you think Kairen's murder is enough to stop an agreement?" she said. "For all anyone knows, this could be Logain returning for some mad revenge." Why in the Light had she said that? She needed to put a rein on her tongue and keep her wits. "Or more likely, some poor fool from a farm around here, or one of the bridge towns." Lelaine's smile deepened, and it was mocking, not amused. Light, the woman had not shown this much disrespect in months.

"If Logain wanted revenge, Mother, I suspect he would be in the White Tower trying to kill Reds." Despite her smile, her voice was smooth and level. A disturbing contrast. Perhaps that was her intention. "Perhaps it's a pity he isn't doing that. He might remove Elaida. But that would be easier than she deserves. No, Kairen won't stop an agreement any more than Anaiya did, but the two combined will make sisters worry even harder about safeguards and strictures. We may need these men, but we *must* be certain *we* are in control. Complete control."

Egwene nodded. A small nod. She agreed, but . . . "There might be difficulties bringing them to accept that," she said. Difficulties. She was displaying a positive talent for understatement today.

"The Warder bond could be modified slightly," Maigan said. "As it is, you can make the man do as you wish with a little tweaking, but the need to tweak could be removed quite easily."

"That sounds too much like Compulsion," Egwene said firmly. She had learned that weave from Moghedien, but only to work on how to counter it. The thing was filth, the theft of another person's will, of their whole being. Someone who was Compelled did anything you ordered. Anything. And believed it was their own choice. Just thinking about it made her feel dirty.

Maigan met her gaze almost as levelly as Lelaine had, though, and her voice was as smooth as her face. She had no thoughts of filth. "Compulsion was used on sisters in Cairhien. That seems certain, now. But I was talking about the bond, a different thing entirely."

"You think you can talk the Asha'man into accepting the bond?" Egwene could not keep the incredulity out of her voice. "Aside from that, who is going to do this bonding? Even if every sister who doesn't have a Warder took an Asha'man, and every Green took two or three, there aren't enough sisters. That's if you can find one who doesn't mind being bonded to a man who is going to go mad."

Maigan nodded at each point as if accepting it. And adjusted her skirts as if not really listening. "If the bond can be changed in one way," she said once Egwene finished, "it should be possible to change it in others. There might be a way to remove the sharing, perhaps some of the awareness. Then perhaps the madness would not be a problem. It would be a different sort of bond, not like the Warder bond at all. I'm certain everyone will agree it wouldn't be like having a Warder, really. Any sister could bond whatever number of Asha'man was necessary."

Abruptly, Egwene realized what was happening. Lelaine sat apparently peering into her teacup, but she was studying Egwene through her eyelashes. And using Maigan as a stalking horse. Smothering anger, Egwene did not have to make her voice cold. It was ice.

"That sounds *exactly* like Compulsion, Lelaine. It *is* Compulsion, and no twisting of words will make it anything else. I *will* point that out to anyone else who suggests this. And I will order the birch for anyone who does more than suggest. Compulsion is banned, and it will remain banned."

"As you say," Lelaine replied, which might have meant anything at all. What came next was more pointed. "The White Tower makes mistakes upon occasion. It is impossible to live or move without making mistakes. But we live, and we go on. And if we sometimes need to conceal our mistakes, whenever possible, we rectify them. Even when it is painful." Putting her cup back on the tray, she left with Maigan at her heels. Maigan embraced the Source before she left the tent. Lelaine did not.

For a time, Egwene concentrated on keeping her breathing steady. She performed the river contained by the bank. Lelaine had not quite said that Egwene al'Vere as Amyrlin was a mistake that might have to be rectified, but she had come very close.

At midday, Chesa brought Egwene's meal on another wooden tray, warm crusty bread with only one or two suspiciously dark flecks and lentil stew with slivers of tough turnip and woody carrot and bits of something that might have been goat. One spoonful was all Egwene could get down. It was not Lelaine that troubled her. Lelaine had threatened her before, if not since she made it clear that she *was* the Amyrlin and not a puppet. Instead of eating, she stared at Tiana's report lying to the side of the table. Nicola might not have gained the shawl in spite of her potential, but the Tower had long experience in taking muleheaded, fault-riddled women and turning them into confident Aes Sedai. Larine had a bright future ahead of her, but she had to learn to obey the rules before she could begin learning which could be broken and when. The White Tower was good at teaching both things, but the first always came first. Bode's future would be brilliant. Her potential almost equaled Egwene's. But Aes Sedai, Accepted or novice, the Tower required you to do what was needed *for* the Tower. Aes Sedai, Accepted, novice or Amyrlin.

Chesa was voluble in her disappointment when she returned to find the tray almost untouched, especially after she had found a practically untouched breakfast. Egwene considered claiming an upset stomach and rejected it. After Chesa's tea worked on her headaches—at least for a few days, until they returned fiercer than ever and every night—the plump woman had turned out to have a collection of herbal remedies for every ill, purchased from every peddler with a glib tongue and each viler-tasting than the last. She had a way of looking so downhearted when you would not drink the awful mixtures that you found yourself swallowing them just to keep her from worrying. Sometimes, surprisingly, they worked, but they were never anything Egwene wanted to put in her mouth. She sent Chesa away with the tray and a promise to eat later. No doubt Chesa would present a supper big enough to stuff a goose.

She felt like smiling at the thought—Chesa would stand over her, wringing her hands, till she ate every bite—but her eyes fell back on Tiana's report. Nicola, Larine and Bode. The White Tower was a strict taskmistress. Unless the Tower is at war by consensus of the Hall, the Amyrlin shall not . . . But the Tower was at war.

She did not know how long she sat staring at that piece of paper with one name on it, but when Siuan returned, she had made up her mind. A strict taskmistress who never played favorites.

"Have Leane and Bode gone?" she asked.

"At least two hours ago, Mother. Leane had to deliver Bode, and then ride downriver."

Egwene nodded. "Please have Daishar saddled. . . ." No. Some people recognized the Amyrlin's horse by this time. Too many. There was no time for arguments and explanations. No time to assert her authority and make it stick. "Saddle Bela, and meet me on the corner two streets north." Almost everyone knew Bela, too. Siuan's horse, everybody knew.

"What do you mean to do, Mother?" Siuan asked worriedly.

"I mean to take a ride. And Siuan, tell no one." She caught the other woman's eyes, held them with her own. Siuan had been Amyrlin, and able to stare down a stone. Egwene was Amyrlin, now. "Not anyone, Siuan. Now go on. Go. And hurry." Forehead still creased, Siuan hurried.

As soon as she was alone, Egwene slid the stole from her neck, folded it carefully, and tucked it into her belt pouch. Her cloak was good wool, and stout, but quite plain. Without the stole dangling from her cowl, she could have been anyone.

The walkway in front of her study was empty, of course, but once she crossed the frozen street, she made her way through the usual white river of novices speckled with Accepted and the occasional Aes Sedai. The novices bent knees to her without slowing, the Accepted offered curtsies as she passed, once they saw that the skirts beneath her cloak were not banded white, and the Aes Sedai glided along with their own faces hidden by their cowls. If any noticed that she was not followed by a Warder, well, a number of sisters lacked Warders. And not everyone was surrounded by the glowing nimbus of *saidar.* Just most.

Two streets from her study, she stopped at the edge of the wooden walkway facing away from the stream of hurrying women. She tried not to fret. The sun sat halfway down toward the horizon in the west, a golden ball stabbed by the broken peak of Dragonmount. The mountain's shadow already stretched across the camp, casting the tents in evening dimness.

At last Siuan appeared, mounted on Bela. The shaggy little mare walked surefooted on the slick street, but Siuan clung to reins and saddle as if she were afraid of falling off. Maybe she was. Siuan was one of the worst riders Egwene had ever seen. When she scrambled down from the saddle in a flurry of skirts and muttered curses, she looked relieved to have escaped with her life. Bela whickered at Egwene in recognition. Tugging her disarrayed cowl back into place, Siuan opened her mouth too, but Egwene held up a warning hand before the other woman could speak. She could see the word "Mother" forming on Siuan's lips. And likely it would have been loud enough to be heard fifty paces off.

"Tell no one," Egwene said softly. "And no notes or hints, either." That should cover everything. "Keep Chesa company till I get back. I don't want her worried."

Siuan gave a reluctant nod. Her mouth almost looked sullen. Egwene suspected she had been wise to add "notes" and "hints." Leaving the onetime Amyrlin Seat looking like a sulky girl, she climbed smoothly into Bela's saddle.

She had to walk the stout mare, at first, because of the frozen ruts in the camp's streets. And because everyone would wonder if they saw Siuan riding Bela at anything faster than a walk. She tried to ride like Siuan, swaying uncertainly, clinging to the saddle's tall pommel with one hand and sometimes both. It made her feel as if she were about to fall off, too. Bela twisted her head around to look at her. She knew who was on her back, and she knew Egwene rode better than this. Egwene continued to imitate Siuan and tried not to think about where the sun stood. All the way out of the camp, beyond the rows of wagons, until the first trees hid her from tents and wagons.

Then she bent over the pommel to press her face into Bela's mane. "You carried me away from the Two Rivers," she whispered. "Can you run as fast now?" Straightening, she dug in her heels.

Bela could not gallop like Daishar, but her sturdy legs churned through the snow. She had been a carthorse, once, not a racer or warhorse, but she gave what she had, stretching out her neck as bravely as Daishar ever could. Bela raced, and the sun slid lower as if the sky had suddenly become greased. Egwene lay low in the saddle and urged the mare on. A race with the sun that Egwene knew she could not win. But even if she could not beat the sun, there was still time. She thumped her heels in time with Bela's hooves, and Bela ran.

Twilight rolled over them, and then darkness, before Egwene saw the moon glinting on the water of the Erinin. Still time. It was almost the spot where she had sat Daishar with Gareth, watching the riverships slide toward Tar Valon. Reining Bela in, she listened.

Stillness. And then a muffled curse. The quiet grunts and scrapes of men dragging a heavy burden across the snow and trying for silence. She turned Bela through the trees toward the sounds. Shadows stirred, and she heard the soft whisper of steel sliding from scabbards.

Then a man muttered, not far enough under his breath, "I know that pony. It's one of the sisters. The one they say used to be Amyrlin. She doesn't look it to me. No older'n the one they say's Amyrlin now."

"Bela is not a pony," Egwene said crisply. "Take me to Bode Cauthon."

A dozen men coalesced out of the night shadows among the trees, surrounding her and Bela. They all seemed to think she was Siuan, but that was all right. To them, Aes Sedai was Aes Sedai, and they guided her to where Bode was sitting a horse not much taller than Bela and holding a dark cloak around her. Her dress was dark, too. White would have stood out, tonight.

Bode recognized Bela, too, and reached out to scratch the mare's ear fondly when Egwene rode up beside her.

"You're staying ashore," Egwene said quietly. "You can go back with me when it's done."

Bode jerked her hand back as if stung at the sound of Egwene's voice. "Why?" she said, not quite a demand. She had learned that much, at least. "I can do this. Leane Sedai explained to me, and I can do it."

"I know you can. But not as well as I can. Not yet." That seemed too much like a criticism that the other woman had not earned. "I am the Amyrlin Seat, Bode. Some decisions, only I can make. And some things, I shouldn't ask a novice to do when I can do them better." Perhaps that was not a great deal milder, but she could not explain about Larine and Nicola, or the price the White Tower demanded of all its daughters. The Amyrlin could not explain the one to a novice, and a novice was not ready to learn about the other.

Even in the night, the set of Bode's shoulders said she did not understand, but she had learned not to argue with Aes Sedai, too. Just as she had learned that Egwene *was* Aes Sedai. The rest, she would learn eventually. The Tower could take all the time it needed to teach her.

Dismounting, Egwene handed Bela's reins to one of the soldiers and raised her skirts to tramp through the snow toward the labored sounds of dragging. It was a large rowboat, being pushed and pulled across the snow like a sled. A bulky sled that had to be maneuvered between trees, though with fewer curses once the men doing the pushing and pulling realized that she was following them closely. Most men guarded their tongues around Aes Sedai, and if they could not see her face between the darkness and her cowl, who else would be down here by the river? If they knew she was not the same woman intended at first to accompany them, who questioned Aes Sedai?

They eased the boat into the river, careful of splashes, and six men scrambled aboard to set oars in rag-padded oarlocks. The men were barefoot, to avoid the noise of a boot scraping on the hull planks. Smaller boats plied these waters, but tonight, they had to master the currents. One of the men on the bank gave her a hand to steady herself climbing in, and she settled on a seat in the bow, holding her cloak close. The boat slid way from the bank, silent except for the faint swirl of the oars in the water.

Egwene looked ahead, south toward Tar Valon. The white walls gleamed in the light of a fat, waning moon, and lamp-lit windows gave the city a muted glow, almost as if the island was embracing *saidar.* The White Tower stood out even in the darkness, windows alight, the great mass shining beneath the moon. Something flashed across the moon, and her breath caught. For an instant, she thought it had been a Draghkar, an evil sight on this of all nights. Only a bat, she decided. Spring might be near enough for bats to be venturing out. Pulling her cloak tighter, she peered toward the city drawing nearer. Nearer.

As the tall wall of Northharbor loomed in front of the boat, the oarsmen backed water so the bow just missed kissing the wall beside the harbor entrance. Egwene almost put out a hand to fend off from the pale stone before the boat could bump into the wall. That thump would surely have been heard by the soldiers on guard. The oars made only a small gurgling noise as they swept back, though, and the boat stopped where she could have touched the massive iron chain across the harbor, its huge links giving off their own faint gleam from the grease coating them.

There was no need for touching, though. No need for waiting, either. Embracing *saidar,* she was barely aware of the thrill of life filling her before she had the weaves in place. Earth, Fire and Air surrounding the chain; Earth and Fire touching it. The black iron flashed to white across the whole width of the harbor mouth.

She had just time to realize that someone had embraced the Source not far away, above her on the wall, then something struck the boat, struck her, and she was aware of cold water enveloping her, filling her nose, her mouth. Darkness.

Egwene felt hardness beneath her. She heard women’s voices. Excited voices.

“Do you know who this is?”

“Well, well. We certainly got better than we bargained for tonight.”

Something was pressed to her mouth, and warmth trickled in, tasting faintly of mint. She swallowed convulsively, suddenly aware of how cold she was, shivering. Her eyes flickered open. And fastened on the face of the woman holding her head and the cup. Lanterns held by soldiers crowding around gave light enough for her to make out the face clearly. An ageless face. She was inside Northharbor.

“That’s it, girl,” the Aes Sedai said encouragingly. “Drink it all down. A strong dose, for now.”

Egwene tried to push the cup away, tried to embrace *saidar,* but she could feel herself sliding back down into darkness. They had been waiting for her. She had been betrayed. But by whom?

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EPILOGUE

An Answer

Rand stared out of the window at the steady rain falling out of a gray sky. Another storm down out of the Spine of the World. The Dragonwall. He thought spring must be coming soon. Spring always came, eventually. Earlier here in Tear than back home, it should be, though there seemed little sign of it. Lightning forked silver-blue across the sky, and long moments passed before the peal of thunder. Distant lightning. The wounds in his side ached. Light, the herons branded into his palms ached, after all this time.

Sometimes, pain is all that lets you know you're alive, Lews Therin whispered, but Rand ignored the voice in his head.

The door creaked open behind him, and he looked over his shoulder at the man who came into the sitting room. Bashere was wearing a short, gray silk coat, a rich shimmering coat, and he had the baton of the Marshal-General of Saldaea, an ivory rod tipped with a golden wolf's head, tucked behind his belt next to his scabbarded sword. His turned-down boots had been waxed till they shone. Rand tried not to let his relief show. They had been gone long enough.

"Well?" he said.

"The Seanchan are amenable," Bashere replied. "Crazy as loons, but amenable. They require a meeting with you in person, though. The Marshal-General of Saldaea isn't the Dragon Reborn."

"With this Lady Suroth?"

Bashere shook his head. "Apparently a member of their royal family has arrived. Suroth wants you to meet someone called the Daughter of the Nine Moons."

Thunder rolled again for distant lightning.

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We rode on the winds of the rising storm,
We ran to the sounds of the thunder.
We danced among the lightning bolts,
and tore the world asunder.

—Anonymous fragment of a poem believed
written near the end of the previous Age,
known by some as the Third Age.
Sometimes attributed to the
Dragon Reborn.

The End
of the Tenth Book of
The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Arad Doman: A nation on the Aryth Ocean, currently racked by civil war and by wars against those who have declared for the Dragon Reborn. Its capital is Bandar Eban. In Arad Doman, the ruler (king or queen) is elected by a council of the heads of merchant guilds (the Council of Merchants), who are almost always women. He or she must be from the noble class, not the merchant, and is elected for life. Legally the king or queen has absolute authority, except that he or she can be deposed by three-quarter vote of the Council. The current ruler is King Alsalam Saeed Almadar, Lord of Almadar, High Seat of House Almadar. His present whereabouts are much shrouded in mystery.

armsmen: Soldiers who owe allegiance or fealty to a particular lord or lady.

Asha’man: (1) In the Old Tongue, “Guardian” or “Guardians,” but the word always meant a guardian of justice and truth. (2) The name given, both collectively and as a rank, to the men who have come to the Black Tower, near Caemlyn in Andor, in order to learn to channel. Their training concentrates largely on the ways in which the One Power can be used as a weapon, and in another departure from the usages of the White Tower, once they learn to seize *saidin*, the male half of the Power, they are required to perform all chores and labors with the Power. When newly enrolled, a man is termed a Soldier; he wears a plain black coat with a high collar, in the Andoran fashion. Being raised to Dedicated brings the right to wear a silver pin, called the Sword, on the collar of his coat. Promotion to Asha’man brings the right to wear a Dragon pin, in gold and red enamel, on the collar opposite the Sword. Although many women, including wives, flee when they learn that their men actually can channel, a fair number of men at the Black Tower are married, and they use a version of the Warder bond to create a link with their wives. This same bond, altered to compel obedience, has recently been used to bond captured Aes Sedai as well.

Balwer, Sebban: Formerly secretary to Pedron Niall (the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light) in public, and secretly Niall’s spymaster. After Niall’s death, Balwer aided the escape of Morgase (once Queen of Andor) from the Seanchan in Amador for his own reasons, and now is employed as secretary to Perrin t’Bashere Aybara and Faile ni Bashere t’Aybara. Perrin is beginning to suspect that there is more to Balwer than at first appeared.

Band of the Red Hand: *see Shen an Calhar.*

Blood, the: Term used by the Seanchan to designate the nobility. There are degrees of nobility. The High Blood shave the sides of their heads and paint multiple fingernails—the higher the rank, the more nails painted—but a member of the lesser Blood, the low Blood, may have only the nails of the little fingers painted. One can be raised to the Blood as well as born to it, and this is frequently a reward for outstanding accomplishment or service to the Empire.

calendar: There are 10 days to the week, 28 days to the month, and 13 months to the year. Several feastdays are not part of any month; these include Sunday (the longest day of the year), the Feast of Thanksgiving (once every four years at the spring equinox), and the Feast of All Souls Salvation, also called All Souls Day (once every ten years at the autumn equinox). While the months have names—Taisham, Jumara, Saban, Aine, Adar, Saven, Amadaine, Tammaz, Maigdhal, Choren, Shaldine, Nesan, and Danu—these are seldom used except in official documents and by officials. For most people, using the seasons is good enough.

Captain-General: (1) The military rank of the leader of the Queen’s Guard, in Andor. This position is currently held by Lady Birgitte Trahelion. (2) The title given to the head of the Green Ajah, though known only to members of the Green. This position is currently held by Adelorna Bastine in the Tower, and Myrelle Berengari among the rebel Aes Sedai contingent under Egwene al’Vere.

Cha Faile**:** (1) In the Old Tongue, “the Falcon’s Talon.” (2) Name taken by the young Cairhienin and Tairens, attempted followers of *ji’e’toh*, who have sworn fealty to Faile ni Bashere t’Aybara. In secret, they act as her personal scouts and spies. Since her capture by the Shaido, they continue their activities under the guidance of Sebban Balwer.

Children of the Light: Society of strict ascetic beliefs, owing allegiance to no nation and dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar to proselytize against an increase in Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military society. They are extremely rigid in their beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. They consider Aes Sedai and any who support them to be Darkfriends. Known disparagingly as Whitecloaks, they were formerly headquartered in Amador, Amadicia, but were forced out when the Seanchan conquered the city. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white. *See also* Questioners.

Companions, the: The elite military formation of Illian, currently commanded by First Captain Demetre Marcolin. The Companions provide a bodyguard for the King of Illian and guard key points around the nation. Additionally, the Companions have traditionally been used in battle to assault the enemy's strongest positions, to exploit weaknesses, and, if necessary, to cover the retreat of the King. Unlike most other such elite formations, foreigners (excepting Tairens, Altarans and Murandians) are not only welcome, they can rise even to the highest rank, as can commoners, which also is unusual. The uniform of the Companions consists of a green coat, a breastplate worked with the Nine Bees of Illian, and a conical helmet with a faceguard of steel bars. The First Captain wears four rings of golden braid on the cuffs of his coat, and three thin golden plumes on his helmet. The Second Captain wears three rings of golden braid on each cuff, and three golden plumes tipped with green. Lieutenants wear two yellow rings on their cuffs, and two thin green plumes, under-lieutenants one yellow ring and a single green plume. Bannermen are designated by two broken rings of yellow on the cuffs and a single yellow plume, squadmen by a single broken ring of yellow.

Consolidation, the: When the armies sent by Artur Hawkwing under his son Luthair landed in Seanchan, they discovered a shifting quilt of nations often at war with one another, where Aes Sedai often reigned. Without any equivalent of the White Tower, Aes Sedai worked for their own individual goals, using the Power. Forming small groups, they schemed against one another constantly. In large part it was this constant scheming for personal advantage and the resulting wars among the myriad nations that allowed the armies from east of the Aryth Ocean to begin the conquest of an entire continent, and for their descendants to complete it. This conquest, during which the descendants of the original armies became Seanchan as much as they conquered Seanchan, took more than nine hundred years and is called the Consolidation.

***Corenne*:** In the Old Tongue, "the Return." The name given by the Seanchan both to the fleet of thousands of ships and to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers, craftsmen and others carried by those ships, who will come behind the Forerunners to reclaim the lands stolen from Artur Hawkwing's descendants. *See also Hailene*.

***cuendillar*:** A supposedly indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any known force used in an attempt to break it is absorbed, making *cuendillar* stronger. Although the making of *cuendillar* has been thought lost forever, rumors of new objects made from it have surfaced. It is also known as heartstone.

currency: After many centuries of trade, the standard terms for coins are the same in every land: crowns (the largest coin in size), marks and pennies. Crowns and marks can be minted of gold or silver, while pennies can be silver or copper, the last often called simply a copper. In different lands, however, these coins can be of different sizes and weights. Even in one nation, coins of different sizes and weights have been minted by different rulers. Because of trade, the coins of many nations can be found almost anywhere. For that reason, bankers, moneylenders and merchants all use scales to determine the value of any given coin. Even large numbers of coins are weighed for this reason. The only paper currency is "letters-of-rights," which are issued by bankers, guaranteeing to present a certain amount of gold or silver when the letter-of-rights is presented. Because of the long distances between cities, the length of time needed to travel from one to another, and the difficulties of transactions at long distance, a letter-of-rights may be accepted at full value in a city near to the bank that issued it, but it may be accepted only at a lower value in a city farther away. Generally, someone of means intending a long journey will carry one or more letters-of-rights to exchange for coin when needed. Letters-of-rights are usually accepted only by bankers or merchants, and would never be used in shops.

***da'covale*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, this would be translated literally as "one who is owned," or "person who is property." (2) Among the Seanchan, the term often used, along with "property," for slaves. Slavery has a long and unusual history among the Seanchan, with slaves having the ability to rise to positions of great power and open authority, including over those who are free. *See also so'jhin*.

Darkhounds: Shadowspawn created from lupine stock corrupted by the Dark One. While they resemble hounds in their basic shape, they are blacker than night and the size of ponies, weighing several hundred pounds each. They usually run in packs of ten or twelve, although the tracks of a larger pack have been sighted. They make no mark on soft ground, but leave prints in stone, and are frequently accompanied by the smell of burned sulphur. They will not usually venture out into the rain, but once running rain fails to stop them. Once they are on the trail, they must be confronted and defeated or the victim's death is inevitable. The only exception to this is when the victim can reach the other side of a river or stream, since Darkhounds will not cross flowing water. Or supposedly not. Their blood and saliva are poison, and if either touches the skin, the victim will die slowly and in great pain. *See also* Wild Hunt.

Daughters of Silence, the: During the history of the White Tower (over three thousand years), various women who have been put out have been unwilling to accept their fates and have tried to band together. Such groups—most of them by far, at least—have been dispersed by the White Tower as soon as found and punished severely and publicly to make sure that the lesson is carried to everyone. The last group to be dispersed called themselves the Daughters of Silence (794–798 NE). The Daughters consisted of two Accepted who had been put out of the Tower and twenty-three women they had gathered and trained. All were carried back to Tar Valon and punished, and the twenty-three were enrolled in the novice book. Only one of those, Saerin Asnobar, managed to reach the shawl. *See also* Kin, the.

Deathwatch Guards, the: The elite military formation of the Seanchan Empire, including both humans and Ogier. The human members of the Deathwatch Guard are all *da'covale,* born as property and chosen while young to serve the Empress, whose personal property they are. Fanatically loyal and fiercely proud, they often display the ravens tattooed on their shoulders, the mark of a *da'covale* of the Empress. The Ogier members are known as

Gardeners, and they are not *da'covale*. The Gardeners are as fiercely loyal as the human Deathwatch Guards, though, and are even more feared. Human or Ogier, the Deathwatch Guards not only are ready to die for the Empress and the Imperial family, but believe that their lives are the property of the Empress, to be disposed of as she wishes. Their helmets and armor are lacquered in dark green and blood-red, their shields are lacquered black, and their spears and swords carry black tassels. *See also da'covale*.

Defenders of the Stone, the: The elite military formation of Tear. The current Captain of the Stone (commander of the Defenders) is Rodrivar Tihera. Only Tairens are accepted into the Defenders, and officers are usually of noble birth, though often from minor Houses or minor branches of strong Houses. The Defenders are tasked to hold the great fortress called the Stone of Tear, in the city of Tear, to defend the city, and to provide police services in place of any City Watch or the like. Except in times of war, their duties seldom take them far from the city. Then, as with other elite formations, they are the core around which the army is formed. The uniform of the Defenders consists of a black coat with padded sleeves striped black-and-gold with black cuffs, a burnished breastplate, and a rimmed helmet with a faceguard of steel bars. The Captain of the Stone wears three short white plumes on his helmet, and on the cuffs of his coat three intertwined golden braids on a white band. Captains wear two white plumes and a single line of golden braid on white cuffs, lieutenants one white plume and a single line of black braid on white cuffs and under-lieutenants one short black plume and plain white cuffs. Bannermen have gold-colored cuffs on their coats, and squadmen have cuffs striped black and gold.

Delving: (1) Using the One Power to diagnose physical condition and illness. (2) Finding deposits of metal ores with the One Power. That this has long been a lost ability among Aes Sedai may account for the name becoming attached to another ability.

Depository: A division of the Tower Library. There are twelve publicly known Depositories, each having books and records pertaining to a particular subject, or to related subjects. A

Thirteenth Depository, known only to Aes Sedai, contains secret documents, records and histories which may be accessed only by the Amyrlin Seat, the Keeper of the Chronicles, and the Sitters in the Hall of the Tower. And, of course, by the handful of librarians who maintain the Depository.

***der'morat-*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "master handler." (2) Among the Seanchan, the prefix applied to indicate a senior and highly skilled handler of one of the exotics, one who trains others, as in *der'morat'raken*. *Der'morat* can have a fairly high social status, the highest of all held by *der'sul'dam,* the trainers of *sul'dam,* who rank with fairly high military officers. *See also morat-*.

Erith: Daughter of Iva daughter of Alar. An attractive young Ogier woman whom Loial intends to marry, although at present he is on the run from her.

Fain, Padan: Former Darkfriend, now more and worse than a Darkfriend, and an enemy of the Forsaken as much as he is of Rand al'Thor, whom he hates with a passion. Last seen in Far Madding with Toram Riatin.

Fel, Herid: The author of *Reason and Unreason* and other books. Fel was a student (and teacher) of history and philosophy at the Academy of Cairhien. He was discovered in his study torn limb from limb.

First Reasoner: The title given to the head of the White Ajah. This position is currently held by Ferane Neheran in the White Tower. Ferane Sedai is one of only two Ajah heads to sit in the Hall of the Tower at present.

First Weaver: The title given to the head of the Yellow Ajah. This position is currently held by Suana Dragand in the White Tower. Suana Sedai is one of only two Ajah heads to sit in the Hall of the Tower at present.

Fists of Heaven, the: Lightly armed and lightly armored Seanchan infantry carried into battle on the backs of the flying creatures called *to'raken*. All are small men, or women, largely because of limits as to how much weight a *to'raken* can carry for any distance. Considered to be among the toughest of soldiers, they are used primarily for raids, surprise assaults on positions at an enemy’s rear, and where speed in getting soldiers into place is of the essence.

Forerunners, the: *See Hailene.*

Forsaken, the: The name given to thirteen powerful Aes Sedai, men and women both, who went over to the Shadow during the Age of Legends and were trapped in the sealing of the Bore into the Dark One’s prison. While it has long been believed that they alone abandoned the Light during the War of the Shadow, in fact others did as well; these thirteen were only the highest-ranking among them. The Forsaken (who call themselves the Chosen) are somewhat reduced in number since their awakening in the present day. Those thought to have survived are Demandred, Semirhage, Graendal, Mesaana, Moghedien, and two who were reincarnated in new bodies and given new names, Osan’gar and Aran’gar, although it seems possible that Osan’gar may also be dead. The life of a Forsaken is always uncertain. Recently, a man calling himself Moridin has appeared, and seems to be yet another of the dead Forsaken brought back from the grave by the Dark One. The same may be possible regarding the woman calling herself Cyndane, but since Aran’gar was a man brought back as a woman, speculation as to the original identities of Moridin and Cyndane may prove futile until more is learned.

Gregorin: Full name Gregorin Panar de Lushenos. A member of the Council of Nine in Illian who presently serves as the Steward for the Dragon Reborn in Illian.

Hailene**:** In the Old Tongue, “Forerunners,” or “Those Who Come Before.” The term applied by the Seanchan to the massive expeditionary force sent across the Aryth Ocean to scout out the lands where Artur Hawkwing once ruled. Now under the command of the High Lady Suroth, its numbers swollen by recruits from conquered lands, the *Hailene* has gone far beyond its original goals, and has in fact been succeeded by the Return. *See* Return.

Hanlon, Daved: A Darkfriend, formerly commander of the White Lions in service to the Forsaken Rahvin while he held Caemlyn using the name Lord Gaebril. From there, Hanlon took the White Lions to Cairhien under orders to further the rebellion against the Dragon Reborn. The White Lions were destroyed by a “bubble of evil,” and Hanlon has been ordered back to Caemlyn and, under the name Doilin Mellar, has ingratiated himself with Elayne, the Daughter-Heir. According to rumor, he has done considerably more than ingratiate himself.

Head Clerk: The title given to the head of the Gray Ajah. This position is currently held by Serancha Colvine, a woman of reputedly fastidious behavior, in the Tower.

heart: The basic unit of organization in the Black Ajah. In effect, a cell. A heart consists of three sisters who know each other; each member of the heart knows one additional sister of the Black.

Illuminators, Guild of: A society that held the secret of making fireworks. It guarded this secret very closely, even to the extent of murder. The Guild gained its name from the grand displays, called Illuminations, that it provided for rulers and sometimes for greater lords. Lesser fireworks were sold for use by others, but with dire warnings of the disaster that could result from attempting to learn what was inside them. The Guild once had chapter houses in Cairhien and Tanchico, but both are now destroyed. In addition, the members of the Guild in Tanchico resisted the invasion by the Seanchan and the survivors were made *da’covale*, and the Guild as such no longer exists. However, individual Illuminators have escaped Seanchan rule, and perhaps more grand displays will be seen in the not-too-distant future. *See also da’covale.*

Ishara: The first Queen of Andor (*circa* FY 994–1020). At the death of Artur Hawkwing, Ishara convinced her husband, one of Hawkwing’s foremost generals, to raise the siege of Tar Valon and accompany her to Caemlyn with as many soldiers as he could break away from the army. Where others tried to seize the whole of Hawkwing’s empire and failed, Ishara took a firm hold on a small part and succeeded. Today, nearly every noble House in Andor contains some of Ishara’s blood, and the right to claim the Lion Throne depends both on direct descent from her and on the number of lines of connection to her that can be established.

Kaensada: An area of Seanchan that is populated by less-than-civilized hill tribes. These tribes fight a great deal among themselves, as do individual families within the tribes. Each tribe has its own customs and taboos, the latter of which often make no sense to anyone outside that tribe. Most of the tribesmen avoid the more civilized residents of Seanchan.

Katar: A city in Arad Doman known for its mines and forges. Katar is wealthy enough that its Lords occasionally need reminding that they are part of Arad Doman.

Kin, the: Even during the Trolloc Wars, more than two thousand years ago (circa 1000–1350 AB), the White Tower continued to maintain its standards, putting out women who failed to measure up. One group of these women, fearing to return home in the midst of the wars, fled to Barashta (near the present-day site of Ebou Dar), as far from the fighting as was possible to go at that time. Calling themselves the Kin, and Kinswomen, they kept in hiding and offered a safe haven for others who had been put out. In time, their approaches to women told to leave the Tower led to contacts with runaways, and while the exact reasons may never be known, the Kin began to accept runaways, as well. They made great efforts to keep these girls from learning anything about the Kin until they were sure that Aes Sedai would not swoop down and retake them. After all, everyone knew that runaways were always caught sooner or later, and the Kin knew that unless they held themselves secret, they themselves would be punished severely.

Unknown to the Kin, Aes Sedai in the Tower were aware of their existence almost from the very first, but prosecution of the wars left no time for dealing with them. By the end of the wars, the Tower realized that it might not be in their best interests to snuff out the Kin. Prior to that time, a majority of runaways actually had managed to escape, whatever the Tower's propaganda, but once the Kin began helping them, the Tower knew exactly where any runaway was heading, and they began retaking nine out of ten. Since Kinswomen moved in and out of Barashta (and later Ebou Dar) in an effort to hide their existence and their numbers, never staying more than ten years lest someone notice that they did not age at a normal speed, the Tower believed they were few, and they certainly were keeping themselves low. In order to use the Kin as a trap for runaways, the Tower decided to leave them alone, unlike any other similar group in history, and to keep the very existence of the Kin a secret known only to full Aes Sedai.

The Kin do not have laws, but rather rules (called “the Rule”) based in part on the rules for novices and Accepted in the White Tower, and in part on the necessity of maintaining secrecy. As might be expected given the origins of the Kin, they maintain the Rule very firmly on all of their members.

Recent open contacts between Aes Sedai and Kinswomen, while known only to a handful of sisters, have produced a number of shocks, including the facts that there are twice as many Kinswomen as Aes Sedai and that some have lived more than a hundred years longer than any Aes Sedai who has lived since before the Trolloc Wars. The effect of these revelations, both on Aes Sedai and on Kinswomen, is as yet a matter for speculation. *See also* Daughters of Silence, the; Knitting Circle, the.

Knitting Circle, the: The leaders of the Kin. Since no member of the Kin has ever known how Aes Sedai arrange their own hierarchy—knowledge passed on only when an Accepted has passed her test for the shawl—they put no store in strength in the Power but give great weight to age, with the older woman always standing above the younger. The Knitting Circle (a title chosen, like the Kin, because it is innocuous) thus consists of the thirteen oldest Kinswomen resident in Ebou Dar, with the oldest given the title of Eldest. By the rules, all will have to step down when it is time for them to move on, but so long as they are resident in Ebou Dar, they have supreme authority over the Kin, to a degree that any Amyrlin Seat would envy. *See also* Kin, the.

Lady of the Shadows: A Seanchan term for death.

Lance-Captain: In most lands, noblewomen do not personally lead their armsmen into battle under normal circumstances. Instead, they hire a professional soldier, almost always a commoner, who is responsible for both training and leading their armsmen. Depending on the land, this man can be called a Lance-Captain, Sword-Captain, Master of the Horse, or Master of the Lances. Rumors of closer relationships than lady and servant often spring up, perhaps inevitably. Sometimes they are true.

Legion of the Dragon, the: A large military formation, all infantry, giving allegiance to the Dragon Reborn, trained by Davram Bashere along lines worked out by himself and Mat Cauthon, lines which depart sharply from the usual employment of foot. While many men simply walk in to volunteer, large numbers of the Legion are scooped up by recruiting parties from the Black Tower, who first gather all of the men in an area who are willing to follow the Dragon Reborn, and only after taking them through gateways near Caemlyn winnow out those who can be taught to channel. The remainder, by far the greater number, are sent to Bashere's training camps.

length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

***marath'damane*:** In the Old Tongue, "those who must be leashed," and also "one who must be leashed." The term applied by the Seanchan to any woman capable of channeling who has not been collared as a *damane*.

Master of the Lances: *See* Lance-Captain.

Master of the Horse: *See* Lance-Captain.

***Mera'din*:** In the Old Tongue, "the Brotherless." The name adopted, as a society, by those Aiel who abandoned clan and sept and went to the Shaido because they could not accept Rand al'Thor, a wetlander, as the *Car'a'carn*, or because they refused to accept his revelations concerning the history and origins of the Aiel. Deserting clan and sept for any reason is anathema among the Aiel, therefore their own warrior societies among the Shaido were unwilling to take them in, and they formed this society, the Brotherless.

***morat-*:** In the Old Tongue, "handler." Among the Seanchan, it is used for those who handle exotics, such as *morat'raken*, a *raken* handler or rider, also informally called a flier. *See also der'morat-*.

Prophet, the: More formally, the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. Once known as Masema Dagar, a Shienaran soldier, he underwent a revelation and decided that he had been called to spread the word of the Dragon's Rebirth. He believes that nothing—nothing!—is more important than acknowledging the Dragon Reborn as the Light made flesh and being ready when the Dragon Reborn calls, and he and his followers will use any means to force others to sing the glories of the Dragon Reborn. Forsaking any name but "the Prophet," he has brought chaos to much of Ghealdan and Amadicia, large parts of which he controls. He joined with Perrin Aybara, who was sent to bring him to Rand, and has, for reasons unknown, stayed with him even though this delays his going to the Dragon Reborn.

Queen's Guards, the: The elite military formation in Andor. In peacetime the Guard is responsible for upholding the Queen's law and keeping the peace. The uniform of the Queen's Guard includes a red undercoat, gleaming mail and plate armor, a brilliant red cloak, and a conical helmet with a barred visor. High-ranking officers wear knots of rank on their shoulder, and may wear golden lion-head spurs. A recent addition to the Queen's Guard is the Daughter-Heir's personal bodyguard, which is composed entirely of women with the sole exception of its captain, Doilin Mellar.

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. They refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light, and their avowed purposes are to discover the truth in disputations and uncover Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is torture, their normal manner that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. At times they act as if they are entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the Questioners is the High Inquisitor, at present Rhadam Asunawa, who sits on the Council of the Anointed. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd's crook.

Redarms: Soldiers of the Band of the Red Hand, who have been chosen out for temproary police duty to make sure that other soldiers of the Band cause no trouble or damage in a town or village. So named because, while on duty, they wear very broad red armbands that almost cover their entire sleeves. Usually chosen from among the most experienced and reliable men. Since any damages must be paid for by the men serving as Redarms, they work hard to make sure all is quiet and peaceful. A number of former Redarms were chosen to accompany Mat Cauthon to Ebou Dar. *See also* Band of the Red Hand.

Return, the: *See Corenne*.

Sea Folk hierarchy: The Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk, are ruled by the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere. She is assisted by the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships, and by the Master of the Blades. Below this come the clan Wavemistresses, each assisted by her Windfinder and her Swordmaster. Below her are the Sailmistresses (ship captains) of her clan, each assisted by her Windfinder and her Cargomaster. The Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships has authority over all Windfinders to clan Wavemistresses, who in turn have authority over all the Windfinders of her clan. Likewise, the Master of the Blades has authority over all Swordmasters, and they in turn over the Cargomasters of their clans. Rank is not hereditary among the Sea Folk. The Mistress of the Ships is chosen, for life, by the First Twelve of the Atha'an Miere, the twelve most senior clan Wavemistresses. A clan Wavemistress is elected by the twelve most senior Sailmistresses of her clan, called simply the First Twelve, a term which is also used to designate the senior Sailmistresses present anywhere. She can also be removed by a vote of her clan's First Twelve. In fact, anyone other than the Mistress of the Ships can be demoted, even all the way down to deckhand, for malfeasance, cowardice or other crimes. Also, the Windfinder to a Wavemistress or Mistress of the Ship who dies will, of necessity, have to serve a lower ranking woman, and her own rank thus decreases.

Seandar: The Imperial capital of Seanchan, located in the northeast of the Seanchan continent. It is also the largest city in the Empire.

Seekers: More formally, Seekers for Truth, they are a police/spy organization of the Seanchan Imperial Throne.

Although most Seekers are *da'covale* and the property of the Imperial family, they have wide-ranging powers. Even one of the Blood can be arrested for failure to answer any question put by a Seeker, or for failure to cooperate fully with a Seeker, this last defined by the Seekers themselves, subject only to review by the Empress. Those Seekers who are *da'covale* are marked on either shoulder with a raven and a tower. Unlike the Deathwatch Guards, Seekers are seldom eager to show their ravens, in part because it necessitates revealing who and what they are.

***sei'mosiev*:** In the Old Tongue, “lowered eyes,” or “downcast eyes.” Among the Seanchan, to say that one has “become *sei'mosiev*” means that one has “lost face.” *See also sei'taer.*

***sei'taer*:** In the Old Tongue, “straight eyes,” or “level eyes.” Among the Seanchan, it refers to honor or face, to the ability to meet someone's eyes. It is possible to “be” or “have” *sei'taer*, meaning that one has honor and face, and also to “gain” or “lose” *sei'taer*. *See also sei'mosiev*.

Shara: A mysterious land that lies to the east of the Aiel Waste. The land is protected both by inhospitable natural features and by man-made walls. Little is known about Shara, as the people of that land appear to work to keep their culture secret. The Sharans deny that the Trolloc Wars touched them, despite Aiel statements to the contrary. They deny knowledge of Artur Hawkwing's attempted invasion, despite the accounts of eyewitnesses from the Sea Folk. The little information that has leaked out reveals that the Sharans are ruled by a single absolute monarch, a Sh'boan if a woman and a Sh'botay if a man. That monarch rules for exactly seven years, then dies. The rule then passes to the mate of that ruler, who rules for seven years and then dies. This pattern has repeated itself since the time of the Breaking of the World. The Sharans believe that the deaths are the “Will of the Pattern.”

There are channelers in Shara, known as the Ayyad, who are tattooed on their faces at birth. The women of the Ayyad enforce the laws regarding the Ayyad stringently. A sexual relationship between Ayyad and non-Ayyad is punishable by death for the non-Ayyad, and the Ayyad is also executed if force on his or her part can be proven. If a child is born of the union, it is left exposed to the elements, and dies. Male Ayyad are used as breeding stock only. When they reach their twenty-first year or begin to channel, whichever comes first, they are killed by Ayyad women and the body cremated. Supposedly, the Ayyad channel the One Power only at the command of the Sh'boan or Sh'botay, who is always surrounded by Ayyad women.

Even the name of the land is in doubt. The natives have been known to call it many different names, including Shamara, Co'dansin, Tomaka, Kigali, and Shibouya.

Shen an Calhar**:** In the Old Tongue, "the Band of the Red Hand." (1) A legendary group of heroes who had many exploits, finally dying in the defense of Manetheren when that land was destroyed during the Trolloc Wars. (2) A military formation put together almost by accident by Mat Cauthon and organized along the lines of military forces during what is considered the height of the military arts, the days of Artur Hawkwing and the centuries immediately preceding. *See also* Redarms.

Sisnera, Darlin: A High Lord in Tear, he was formerly in rebellion against the Dragon Reborn, but now serves as Steward for the Dragon Reborn in Tear.

so'jhin**:** The closest translation from the Old Tongue would be "a height among lowness," though some translate it as meaning "both sky and valley" among several other possibilities. *So'jhin* is the term applied by the Seanchan to hereditary upper servants. They are *da'covale*, property, yet occupy positions of considerable authority and often power. Even the Blood step carefully around *so'jhin* of the Imperial family, and speak to *so'jhin* of the Empress herself as to equals. *See also* Blood, the; *da'covale.*

Stump: A public meeting among the Ogier. The meeting can be within or between *stedding.* It is presided over by the Council of Elders of a *stedding,* but any adult Ogier may speak, or may choose an advocate to speak for him. A Stump is often held at the largest tree stump in a *stedding*, and may last for several years. When a question arises that affects all Ogier, a Great Stump is held, and Ogier from all *stedding* meet to address the question. The various *stedding* take turns hosting a Great Stump.

Sword-Captain: *See* Lance-Captain.

Taborwin, Breane: Once a bored noblewoman in Cairhien, she lost her wealth and status and is now not only a servant, but in a serious romantic relationship with a man whom she once would have scorned.

Taborwin, Dobraine: A lord in Cairhien. He currently serves as Steward for the Dragon Reborn in Cairhien.

Tarabon: A nation on the Aryth Ocean. Once a great trading nation, a source of rugs, dyes and the Guild of Illuminators' fireworks among other things, Tarabon has fallen on hard times. Racked by anarchy and civil war compounded by simultaneous wars against Arad Doman and the Dragonsworn, it was ripe for the picking when the Seanchan arrived. It is now firmly under Seanchan control; the chapter house of the Guild of Illuminators has been destroyed and most Illuminators themselves made *da'covale*. Most Taraboners appear grateful that the Seanchan have restored order, and since the Seanchan allow them to continue living their lives with minimal interference, they have no desire to bring on more warfare by trying to chase the Seanchan out. There are, however, some lords and soldiers who remain outside the Seanchan sphere of influence and hope to reclaim their land.

wasp-jelly: A small aquatic creature that appears to be made of jelly but stings severely when touched.

weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Wild Hunt, the: It is believed by many that the Dark One (often called Grim, or Old Grim, in Tear, Illian, Murandy, Altara and Ghealdan) rides out in the night with the "black dogs," or the Darkhounds, hunting souls. This is the Wild Hunt. It is believed by many that merely seeing the Wild Hunt pass means imminent death, either for the viewer or for someone dear to the viewer. It is held to be especially dangerous to meet the Wild Hunt at a crossroads, just before sunrise or just after sunset. *See also* Darkhounds.

Winged Guards, the: The personal bodyguards of the First of Mayene, and the elite military formation of Mayene. Members of the Winged Guards wear red-painted breastplates and red helmets shaped like rimmed pots that come down to the napes of their necks in the back, and carry red-streamered lances. Officers have wings worked on the sides of their helmets, and rank is denoted by slender plumes.

Wise Woman: Honorific used in Ebou Dar for women famed for their incredible abilities at healing almost any injury. A Wise Woman is traditionally marked by a red belt. While some have noted that many, indeed most, Ebou Dari Wise Women were not even from Altara, much less Ebou Dar, what was not known until recently, and still is known only to a few, is that all Wise Women are in fact Kinswomen and use various versions of Healing, giving out herbs and poultices only as a cover. With the flight of the Kin from Ebou Dar after the Seanchan took the city, no Wise Women remain there. *See also* Kin, the.

Younglings, the: The first Younglings were young men studying under the Warders at the White Tower. They fought against their teachers who attempted to free Siuan Sanche after she was deposed from the Amyrlin Seat. Led by Gawyn Trakand, the Younglings remained loyal to the White Tower, and fought skirmishes against Whitecloaks under Eamon Valda. They accompanied Elaida’s embassy to the Dragon Reborn in Cairhien and saw action against the Aiel and Asha’man at Dumai’s Wells. On their return to Tar Valon, they found themselves barred from the city.

The Younglings wear green cloaks with Gawyn’s White Boar; those who fought against their teachers in Tar Valon wear a small silver tower on their collars. They accept recruits wherever they go, but they do not take veterans or older men. One requirement is that the recruit must be willing to put aside all loyalties except to the Younglings. Older members teach the new recruits Warder techniques since they have given over accepting instruction from Warders, and several have refused offers of bonding from Aes Sedai. In many ways they hardly seem attached to the Tower and

Aes Sedai at all. This is a result in part of their suspicion that they were not meant to survive the expedition to Cairhien.

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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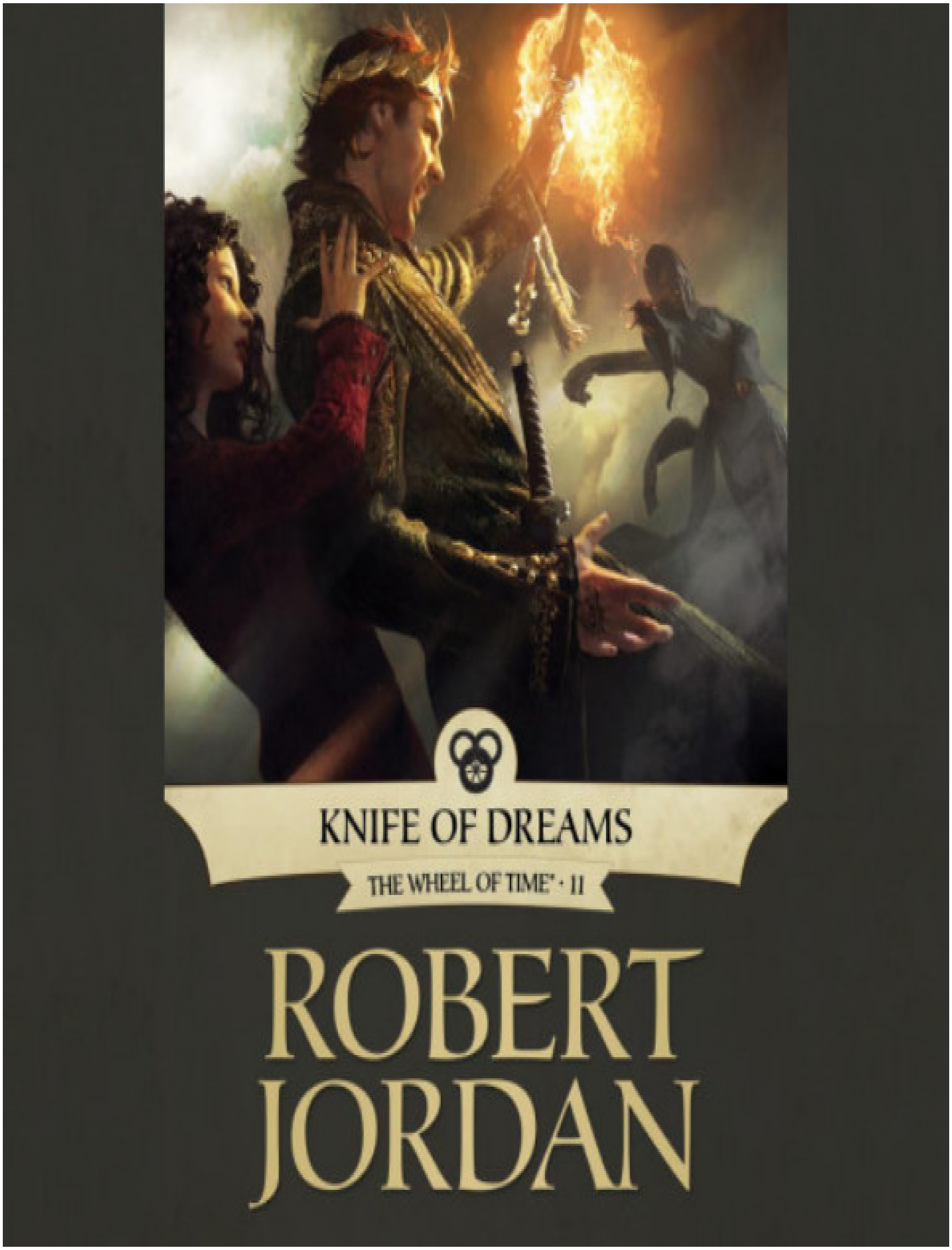
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—Robert Knox, MPG Newspapers

“Adventure and mystery and dark things that move in the night—a combination of Robin Hood and Stephen King that is hard to resist. Furthermore, Jordan makes the reader put down the book regretting the wait for the next title in the series.”

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“Jordan has a powerful vision of good and evil—but what strikes me as most pleasurable . . . is all the fascinating people moving through a rich and interesting world.”

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“Jordan can always be counted on to ground his dizzying intrigues in solid chunks of cultural detail, and he here rises to the occasion, with chapters as dense as Spenserian stanzas with symbols and rituals. . . . He manipulates the disorder of his narrative to credibly convey a sense of an embattled world on the verge of self-destruction, and he entertainingly juxtaposes the courtly civility of his villains with the precarious chaos they cause.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Jordan continues to utilize his towering imagination to construct plots of incredible ingenuity and develop themes hidden, sometimes quite deeply, in earlier installments. As ever, Jordan writes intelligently and lyrically—one of the most literary exponents of the genre.”

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“Beware, there is magic in these books. They are liable to make you neglect your work and keep you up way past your bedtime. . . . This is the genuine article.”

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—*The Post and Courier* (Charleston, S.C.)

“Jordan writes with the stark vision of light and darkness, and sometimes childlike sense of wonder, that permeates J. R. R. Tolkien’s works. His style is undebatably his own.”

—*The Pittsburgh Press*

“[The Wheel of Time] will be the definitive American exploration of Tolkien’s territory for many years to come. Jordan can spin as rich a world and as event-filled a tale as the master, and the presence of women and a certain sense of the comic possibilities of a high destiny add further dimension to the work.”

—*Booklist*

“Jordan’s multivolume epic continues to live up to its high ambitions. Complex plotting, an array of strong characters, lavish detail, and a panoramic scope make this series a feast for fantasy aficionados. . . . Richly detailed and vividly imagined.”

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“Jordan’s writing is clear and his vision is fascinating, as are the philosophies that run his characters. And speaking of characters, a more interesting bunch I would be hard put to name.”

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“The most ambitious American fantasy saga, The Wheel of Time, [may] also be the finest. . . . [It] surpasses all but a few of its peers.”

—*Booklist*

“The complex philosophy behind The Wheel of Time series is expounded so simply the reader often gives a start of surprise at returning to the real world. Rand’s adventures are not finished and neither is this thinking person’s fantasy series.”

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“Intricate allegorical fantasy [that] recalls the works of Tolkien because of its intensity and warmth.”

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In memory of Charles St. George Sinkler Adams July 6, 1976–April 13, 2005

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The sweetness of victory and the bitterness of defeat are alike a knife of dreams.

—From *Fog and Steel* by Madoc Comadrin

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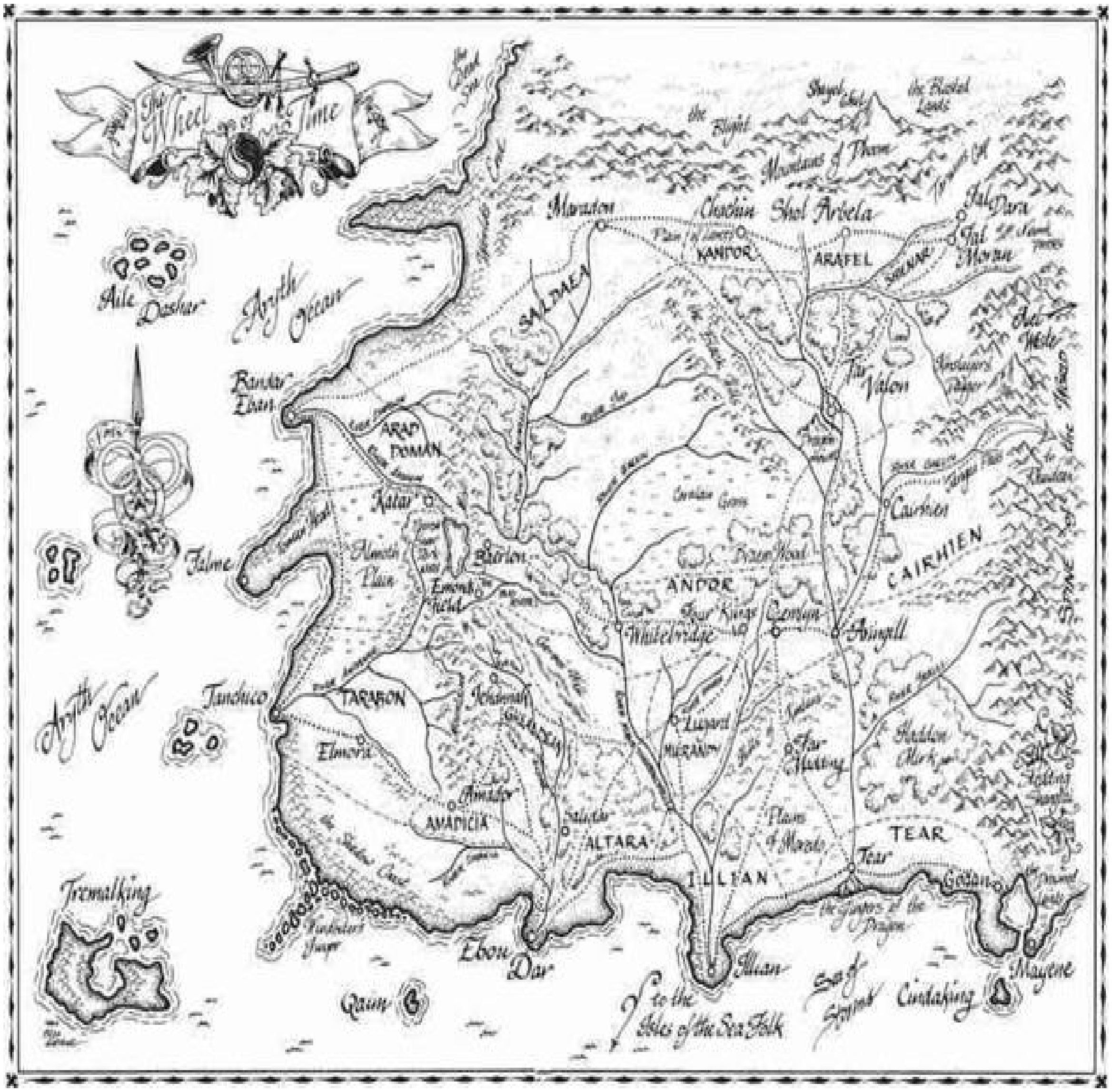
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PROLOGUE

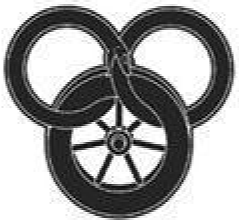

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Embers Falling on Dry Grass

The sun, climbing toward midmorning, stretched Galad's shadow and those of his three armored companions ahead of them as they trotted their mounts down the road that ran straight through the forest, dense with oak and leatherleaf, pine and sourgum, most showing the red of spring growth. He tried to keep his mind empty, still, but small things kept intruding. The day was silent save for the thud of their horses' hooves. No bird sang on a branch, no squirrel chittered. Too quiet for the time of year, as though the forest held its breath. This had been a major trade route once, long before Amadicia and Tarabon came into being, and bits of ancient paving stone sometimes studded the hard-packed surface of yellowish clay. A single farm cart far ahead behind a plodding ox was the only sign of human life now besides themselves. Trade had shifted far north, farms and villages in the region dwindled, and the fabled lost mines of Aelgar remained lost in the tangled mountain ranges that began only a few miles to the south. Dark clouds massing in that direction promised rain by afternoon if their slow advance continued. A red-winged hawk quartered back and forth along the border of the trees, hunting the fringes. As he himself was hunting. But at the heart, not on the fringes.

The manor house that the Seanchan had given Eamon Valda came into view, and he drew rein, wishing he had a helmet strap to tighten for excuse. Instead he had to be content with re-buckling his sword belt, pretending that it had been sitting wrong. There had been no point to wearing armor. If the morning went as he hoped, he would have had to remove breastplate and mail in any case, and if it went badly, armor would have provided little more protection than his white coat.

Formerly a deep-country lodge of the King of Amadicia, the building was a huge, blue-roofed structure studded with red-painted balconies, a wooden palace with wooden spires at the corners atop a stone foundation like a low, steep-sided hill. The outbuildings, stables and barns, workmen's small houses and craftsfolks' workshops, all hugged the ground in the wide clearing that surrounded the main house, but they were nearly as resplendent in their blue-and-red paint. A handful of men and women moved around them, tiny figures yet at this distance, and children were playing under their elders' eyes. An image of normality where nothing was normal. His companions sat their saddles in their burnished helmets and breastplates, watching him without expression. Their mounts stamped impatiently, the animals' morning freshness not yet worn off by the short ride from the camp.

"It's understandable if you're having second thoughts, Damodred," Trom said after a time. "It's a harsh accusation, bitter as gall, but—"

"No second thoughts for me," Galad broke in. His intentions had been fixed since yesterday. He was grateful, though. Trom had given him the opening he needed. They had simply appeared as he rode out, falling in with him without a word spoken. There had seemed no place for words, then. "But what about you three? You're taking a risk coming here with me. A risk you have no need to take. However the day runs, there will be marks against you. This is my business, and I give you leave to go about yours." Too stiffly said, but he could not find words this morning, or loosen his throat.

The stocky man shook his head. "The law is the law. And I might as well make use of my new rank." The three golden star-shaped knots of a captain sat beneath the flaring sunburst on the breast of his white cloak. There had been more than a few dead at Jeramel, including no fewer than three of the Lords Captain. They had been fighting the Seanchan then, not allied with them.

"I've done dark things in service to the Light," gaunt-faced Byar said grimly, his deep-set eyes glittering as though at a personal insult, "dark as moonless midnight, and likely I will again, but some things are too dark to be allowed." He looked as if he might spit.

"That's right," young Bornhald muttered, scrubbing a gauntleted hand across his mouth. Galad always thought of him as young, though the man lacked only a few years on him. Dain's eyes were bloodshot; he had been at the brandy again last night. "If you've done what's wrong, even in service to the Light, then you have to do what's right to balance it." Byar grunted sourly. Likely that was not the point he had been making.

"Very well," Galad said, "but there's no fault to any man who turns back. My business here is mine alone."

Still, when he heeled his bay gelding to a canter, he was pleased to have them gallop to catch him and fall in alongside, white cloaks billowing behind. He would have gone on alone, of course, yet their presence might keep him from being arrested and hanged out of hand. Not that he expected to survive in any case. What had to be done, had to be done, no matter the price.

The horses' hooves clattered loudly on the stone ramp that climbed to the manor house, so every man in the broad central courtyard turned to watch as they rode in: fifty of the Children in gleaming plate-and-mail and conical helmets, most mounted, with cringing, dark-coated Amadician grooms holding animals for the rest. The inner balconies were empty except for a few servants who appeared to be watching while pretending to sweep. Six Questioners, big men with the scarlet shepherd's crook upright behind the sunflare on their cloaks, stood close around Rhadam Asunawa like a bodyguard, away from the others. The Hand of the Light always stood apart from the rest of the Children, a choice the rest of the Children approved. Gray-haired Asunawa, his sorrowful face making Byar look fully fleshed, was the only Child present not in armor, and his snowy cloak carried just the brilliant red crook, another way of standing apart. But aside from marking who was present, Galad had eyes for only one man in the courtyard. Asunawa might have been involved in some way—that remained unclear—yet only the Lord Captain Commander could call the High Inquisitor to account.

Eamon Valda was not a large man, but his dark, hard face had the look of one who expected obedience as his due. As the very least he was due. Standing with his booted feet apart and his head high, command in every inch of him, he wore the white-and-gold tabard of the Lord Captain Commander over his gilded breast- and backplates, a silk tabard more richly embroidered than any Pedron Niall had worn. His white cloak, the flaring sun large on either breast in thread-of-gold, was silk as well, and his gold-embroidered white coat. The helmet beneath his arm was gilded and worked with the flaring sun on the brow, and a heavy gold ring on his left hand, worn outside his steel-backed gauntlet, held a large yellow sapphire carved with the sunburst. Another mark of favor received from the Seanchan.

Valda frowned slightly as Galad and his companions dismounted and offered their salutes, arm across the chest. Obsequious grooms came running to take their reins.

"Why aren't you on your way to Nassad, Trom?" Disapproval colored Valda's words. "The other Lords Captain will be halfway there by now." He himself always arrived late when meeting the Seanchan, perhaps to assert that some shred of independence remained to the Children—finding him already preparing to depart was a surprise; this meeting must be very important—but he always made sure the other high-ranking officers arrived on time even when that required setting out before dawn. Apparently it was best not to press their new masters too far. Distrust of the Children was always strong in the Seanchan.

Trom displayed none of the uncertainty that might have been expected from a man who had held his present rank barely a month. “An urgent matter, my Lord Captain Commander,” he said smoothly, making a very precise bow, neither a hair deeper nor higher than protocol demanded. “A Child of my command charges another of the Children with abusing a female relative of his, and claims the right of Trial Beneath the Light, which by law you must grant or deny.”

“A strange request, my son,” Asunawa said, tilting his head quizzically above clasped hands, before Valda could speak. Even the High Inquisitor’s voice was doleful; he sounded pained at Trom’s ignorance. His eyes seemed dark hot coals in a brazier. “It was usually the accused who asked to give the judgment to swords, and I believe usually when he knew the evidence would convict him. In any case, Trial Beneath the Light has not been invoked for nearly four hundred years. Give me the accused’s name, and I will deal with the matter quietly.” His tone turned chill as a sunless cavern in winter, though his eyes still burned. “We are among strangers, and we cannot allow them to know that one of the Children is capable of such a thing.”

“The request was directed to me, Asunawa,” Valda snapped. His glare might as well have been open hatred. Perhaps it was just dislike of the other man’s breaking in. Flipping one side of his cloak over his shoulder to bare his ring-quilloned sword, he rested his hand on the long hilt and drew himself up. Always one for the grand gesture, Valda raised his voice so that even people inside probably heard him, and declaimed rather than merely spoke.

“I believe many of our old ways should be revived, and that law still stands. It will always stand, as written of old. The Light grants justice because the Light is justice. Inform your man he may issue his challenge, Trom, and face the one he accuses sword-to-sword. If that one tries to refuse, I declare that he has acknowledged his guilt and order him hanged on the spot, his belongings and rank forfeit to his accuser as the law states. I have spoken.” That with another scowl for the High Inquisitor. Maybe there really was hatred there.

Trom bowed formally once more. “You have informed him yourself, my Lord Captain Commander. Damodred?”

Galad felt cold. Not the cold of fear, but of emptiness. When Dain drunkenly let slip the confused rumors that had come to his ears, when Byar reluctantly confirmed they were more than rumors, rage had filled Galad, a bone-burning fire that nearly drove him insane. He had been sure his head would explode if his heart did not burst first. Now he was ice, drained of any emotion. He also bowed formally. Much of what he had to say was set in the law, yet he chose the rest with care, to spare as much shame as possible to a memory he held dear.

“Eamon Valda, Child of the Light, I call you to Trial Beneath the Light for unlawful assault on the person of Morgase Trakand, Queen of Andor, and for her murder.” No one had been able to confirm that the woman he regarded as his mother was dead, yet it must be so. A dozen men were certain she had vanished from the Fortress of the Light before it fell to the Seanchan, and as many testified she had not been free to leave of her own will.

Valda displayed no shock at the charge. His smile might have been intended to show regret over Galad’s folly in making such a claim, yet contempt was mingled in it. He opened his mouth, but Asunawa cut in once more.

“This is ridiculous,” he said in tones more of sorrow than of anger. “Take the fool, and we’ll find out what Darkfriend plot to discredit the Children he is part of.” He motioned, and two of the hulking Questioners took a step toward Galad, one with a cruel grin, the other blank-faced, a workman about his work.

Only one step, though. A soft rasp repeated around the courtyard as Children eased their swords in their scabbards. At least a dozen men drew entirely, letting their blades hang by their sides. The Amadician grooms hunched in on themselves, trying to become invisible. Likely they would have run, had they dared. Asunawa stared around him, thick eyebrows climbing up his forehead in disbelief, knotted fists gripping his cloak. Strangely, even Valda appeared startled for an instant. Surely he had not expected the Children to allow an arrest after his own proclamation. If he had, he recovered quickly.

"You see, Asunawa," he said almost cheerfully, "the Children follow my orders, and the law, not a Questioner's whims." He held out his helmet to one side for someone to take. "I deny your preposterous charge, young Galad, and throw your foul lie in your teeth. For it is a lie, or at best a mad acceptance of some malignant rumor started by Darkfriends or others who wish the Children ill. Either way, you have defamed me in the vilest manner, so I accept your challenge to Trial Beneath the Light, where I will kill you." That barely squeezed into the ritual, but he had denied the charge and accepted the challenge; it would suffice.

Realizing that he still held the helmet in an outstretched hand, Valda frowned at one of the dismounted Children, a lean Saldaean named Kashgar, until the man stepped forward to relieve him of it. Kashgar was only an under-lieutenant, almost boyish despite a great hooked nose and thick mustaches like inverted horns, yet he moved with open reluctance, and Valda's voice was darker and acrid as he went on, unbuckling his sword belt and handing that over, too.

"Take a care with that, Kashgar. It's a heron-mark blade." Unpinning his silk cloak, he let it fall to the paving stones, followed by his tabard, and his hands moved to the buckles of his armor. It seemed that he was unwilling to see if others would be reluctant to help him. His face was calm enough, except that angry eyes promised retribution to more than Galad. "Your sister wants to become Aes Sedai, I understand, Damodred. Perhaps I understand precisely where this originated. There was a time I would have regretted your death, but not today. I may send your head to the White Tower so the witches can see the fruit of their scheme."

Worry creasing his face, Dain took Galad's cloak and sword belt, and stood shifting his feet as though uncertain he was doing the right thing. Well, he had been given his chance, and it was too late to change his mind, now. Byar put a gauntleted hand on Galad's shoulder and leaned close.

"He likes to strike at the arms and legs," he said in a low voice, casting glances over his shoulder at Valda. From the way he glared, some matter stood between them. Of course, that scowl differed little from his normal expression. "He likes to bleed an opponent until the man can't take a step or raise his sword before he moves for the kill. He's quicker than a viper, too, but he'll strike at your left most often and expect it from you."

Galad nodded. Many right-handed men found it easier to strike so, but it seemed an odd weakness in a blademaster. Gareth Bryne and Henre

Haslin had made him practice alternating which hand was uppermost on the hilt so he would not fall into that. Strange that Valda wanted to prolong a fight, too. He himself had been taught to end matters as quickly and cleanly as possible.

“My thanks,” he said, and the hollow-cheeked man made a dour grimace. Byar was far from likable, and he himself seemed to like no one save young Bornhald. Of the three, his presence was the biggest surprise, but he was there, and that counted in his favor.

Standing in the middle of the courtyard in his gold-worked white coat with his fists on his hips, Valda turned in a tight circle. “Everyone move back against the walls,” he commanded loudly. Horseshoes rang on the paving stones as the Children and the grooms obeyed. Asunawa and his Questioners snatched their animals’ reins, the High Inquisitor wearing a face of cold fury. “Keep the middle clear. Young Damodred and I will meet here—”

“Forgive me, my Lord Captain Commander,” Trom said with a slight bow, “but since you are a participant in the Trial, you cannot be Arbiter. Aside from the High Inquisitor, who by law may not take part, I hold the highest rank here after you, so with your permission . . . ?” Valda glared at him, then stalked over to stand beside Kashgar, arms folded across his chest. Ostentatiously he tapped his foot, impatient for matters to proceed.

Galad sighed. If the day went against him, as seemed all but certain, his friend would have the most powerful man in the Children as his enemy. Likely Trom would have had in any event, but more so now. “Keep an eye on them,” he told Bornhald, nodding toward the Questioners clustered on their horses near the gate. Asunawa’s underlings still ringed him like bodyguards, every man with a hand on his sword hilt.

“Why? Even Asunawa can’t interfere now. That would be against the law.”

It was very hard not to sigh again. Young Dain had been a Child far longer than he, and his father had served his entire life, but the man seemed to know less of the Children than he himself had learned. To Questioners, the law was what they said it was. “Just watch them.”

Trom stood in the center of the courtyard with his bared sword raised overhead, blade parallel to the ground, and unlike Valda, he spoke the words exactly as they were written. “Under the Light, we are gathered to witness Trial Beneath the Light, a sacred right of any Child of the Light.

The Light shines on truth, and here the Light shall illuminate justice. Let no man speak save he who has legal right, and let any who seek to intervene be cut down summarily. Here, justice will be found under the Light by a man who pledges his life beneath the Light, by the force of his arm and the will of the Light. The combatants will meet unarmed where I now stand," he continued, lowering the sword to his side, "and speak privately, for their own ears alone. May the Light help them find words to end this short of bloodshed, for if they do not, one of the Children must die this day, his name stricken from our rolls and anathema declared on his memory. Under the Light, it will be so."

As Trom strode to the side of the courtyard, Valda moved toward the center in the walking stance called Cat Crosses the Courtyard, an arrogant saunter. He knew there were no words to stop blood being shed. To him, the fight had already begun. Galad merely walked out to meet him. He was nearly a head taller than Valda, but the other man held himself as though he were the larger, and confident of victory.

His smile was all contempt, this time. "Nothing to say, boy? Small wonder, considering that a blademaster is going to cut your head off in about one minute. I want one thing straight in your mind before I kill you, though. The wench was hale the last I saw her, and if she's dead now, I'll regret it." That smile deepened, both in humor and disdain. "She was the best ride I ever had, and I hope to ride her again one day."

Red-hot searing fury fountained inside Galad, but with an effort he managed to turn his back on Valda and walk away, already feeding his rage into an imagined flame as his two teachers had taught him. A man who fought in a rage, died in a rage. By the time he reached young Bornhald, he had achieved what Gareth and Henre had called the oneness. Floating in emptiness, he drew his sword from the scabbard Bornhald proffered, and the slightly curved blade became a part of him.

"What did he say?" Dain asked. "For a moment there, your face was murderous."

Byar gripped Dain's arm. "Don't distract him," he muttered.

Galad was not distracted. Every creak of saddle leather was clear and distinct, every ringing stamp of hoof on paving stone. He could hear flies buzzing ten feet away as though they were at his ear. He almost thought he could see the movements of their wings. He was one with the flies, with the courtyard, with the two men. They were all part of him, and he could not be distracted by himself.

Valda waited until he turned before drawing his own weapon on the other side of the courtyard, a flashy move, the sword blurring as it spun in his left hand, leaping to his right hand to make another blurred wheel in the air before settling, upright and rock steady before him, in both hands. He started forward, once more in Cat Crosses the Courtyard.

Raising his own sword, Galad moved to meet him, without thought assuming a walking stance perhaps influenced by his state of mind. Emptiness, it was called, and only a trained eye would know that he was not simply walking. Only a trained eye would see that he was in perfect balance every heartbeat. Valda had not gained that heron-mark sword by favoritism. Five blademasters had sat in judgment of his skills and voted unanimously to grant him the title. The vote always had to be unanimous. The only other way was to kill the bearer of a heron-mark blade in fair combat, one on one. Valda had been younger then than Galad was now. It did not matter. He was not focused on Valda’s death. He focused on nothing. But he intended Valda’s death if he had to Sheathe the Sword, willingly welcoming that heron-mark blade in his flesh, to achieve it. He accepted that it might come to that.

Valda wasted no time with maneuvering. The instant he was within range, Plucking the Low-hanging Apple flashed toward Galad’s neck like lightning, as though the man truly did intend to have his head in the first minute. There were several possible responses, all made instinct by hard training, but Byar’s warnings floated in the dim recesses of his mind, and also the fact that Valda had warned him of this very thing. Warned him twice. Without conscious thought, he chose another way, stepping sideways and forward just as Plucking the Low-hanging Apple became the Leopard’s Caress. Valda’s eyes widened in surprise as his stroke missed Galad’s left thigh by inches, widened more as Parting the Silk laid a gash down his right forearm, but he immediately launched into the Dove Takes Flight, so fast that Galad had to dance back before his blade could bite deeply, barely fending off the attack with Kingfisher Circles the Pond.

Back and forth they danced the forms, gliding this way then that across the stone paving. Lizard in the Thornbush met Lightning of Three Prongs. Leaf on the Breeze countered Eel Among the Lily Pads, and Two Hares Leaping met the Hummingbird Kisses the Honeyrose. Back and forth as smoothly as a demonstration of the forms. Galad tried attack after attack, but Valda *was* as fast as a viper. The Wood Grouse Dances cost him a shallow gash on his left shoulder, and the Red Hawk Takes a Dove another on the left arm, slightly deeper. River of Light might have taken the arm completely had he not met the draw-cut with a desperately quick Rain in High Wind. Back and forth, blades flashing continuously, filling the air with the clash of steel on steel.

How long they fought, he could not have said. There was no time, only the moment. It seemed that he and Valda moved like men under water, their motions slowed by the drag of the sea. Sweat appeared on Valda’s face, but he smiled with self-assurance, seemingly untroubled by the slash on his forearm, still the only injury he had taken. Galad could feel the sweat rolling down his own face, too, stinging his eyes. And the blood trickling down his arm. Those wounds would slow him eventually, perhaps already had, but he had taken two on his left thigh, and both were more serious. His foot was wet in his boot from those, and he could not avoid a slight limp that would grow worse with time. If Valda was to die, it must be soon.

Deliberately, he drew a deep breath, then another, through his mouth, another. Let Valda think him becoming winded. His blade lanced out in Threading the Needle, aimed at Valda’s left shoulder and not quite as fast as it could have been. The other man countered easily with the Swallow Takes Flight, sliding immediately into the Lion Springs. That took a third bite in his thigh; he dared not be faster in defense than in attack.

Again he launched Threading the Needle at Valda’s shoulder, and again, again, all the while gulping air through his mouth. Only luck kept him from taking more wounds in those exchanges. Or perhaps the Light really did shine on this fight.

Valda’s smile widened; the man believed him on the edge of his strength, exhausted and fixated. As Galad began Threading the Needle, too slowly, for the fifth time, the other man’s sword started the Swallow Takes Flight in an almost perfunctory manner. Summoning all the quickness that remained to him, Galad altered his stroke, and Reaping the Barley sliced across Valda just beneath his rib cage.

For a moment it seemed that the man was unaware he had been hit. He took a step, began what might have been Stones Falling from the Cliff. Then his eyes widened, and he staggered, the sword falling from his grip to clatter on the paving stones as he sank to his knees. His hands went to the huge gash across his body as though trying to hold his insides within him, and his mouth opened, glassy eyes fixed on Galad's face. Whatever he intended to say, it was blood that poured out over his chin. He toppled onto his face and lay still.

Automatically, Galad gave his blade a rapid twist to shake off the blood staining its final inch, then bent slowly to wipe the last drops onto Valda's white coat. The pain he had ignored now flared. His left shoulder and arm burned; his thigh seemed to be on fire. Straightening took effort. Perhaps he was nearer exhaustion than he had thought. How long *had* they fought? He had thought he would feel satisfaction that his mother had been avenged, but all he felt was emptiness. Valda's death was not enough. Nothing except Morgase Trakand alive again could be enough.

Suddenly he became aware of a rhythmic clapping and looked up to see the Children, each man slapping his own armored shoulder in approval. Every man. Except Asunawa and the Questioners. They were nowhere to be seen.

Byar hurried up carrying a small leather sack and carefully parted the slashes in Galad's coatsleeve. "Those will need sewing," he muttered, "but they can wait." Kneeling beside Galad, he took rolled bandages from the sack and began winding them around the gashes in his thigh. "These need sewing, too, but this will keep you from bleeding to death before you can get it." Others began gathering around, offering congratulations, men afoot in front, those still mounted behind. None gave the corpse a glance except for Kashgar, who cleaned Valda's sword on that already bloodstained coat before sheathing it.

"Where did Asunawa go?" Galad asked.

"He left as soon as you cut Valda the last time," Dain replied uneasily. "He'll be heading for the camp to bring back Questioners."

"He rode the other way, toward the border," someone put in. Nassad lay just over the border.

"The Lords Captain," Galad said, and Trom nodded.

"No Child would let the Questioners arrest you for what happened here, Damodred. Unless his captain ordered it. Some of them would order it, I think." Angry muttering began, men denying they would stand for such a thing, but Trom quieted them, somewhat, with raised hands. "You know it's true," he said loudly. "Anything else would be mutiny." That brought dead silence. There had never been a mutiny in the Children. It was possible that nothing before had come as close as their own earlier display. “I’ll write out your release from the Children, Galad. Someone may still order your arrest, but they’ll have to find you, and you’ll have a good start. It will take half the day for Asunawa to catch the other Lords Captain, and whoever falls in with him can’t be back before nightfall.”

Galad shook his head angrily. Trom was right, but it was all wrong. Too much was wrong. “Will you write releases for these other men? You know Asunawa will find a way to accuse them, too. Will you write releases for the Children who don’t want to help the Seanchan take our lands in the name of a man dead more than a thousand years?” Several Taraboners exchanged glances and nodded, and so did other men, not all of them Amadician. “What about the men who defended the Fortress of the Light? Will any release get their chains struck off or make the Seanchan stop working them like animals?” More angry growls; those prisoners were a sore point to all of the Children.

Arms folded across his chest, Trom studied him as though seeing him for the first time. “What would you do, then?”

“Have the Children find someone, anyone, who is fighting the Seanchan and ally with them. Make sure that the Children of the Light ride in the Last Battle instead of helping the Seanchan hunt Aiel and steal our nations.”

“Anyone?” a Cairhienin named Doirellin said in a high-pitched voice. No one ever made fun of Doirellin’s voice. Though short, he was nearly as wide as he was tall, there was barely an ounce of fat on him, and he could put walnuts between all of his fingers and crack them by clenching his fists. “That could mean Aes Sedai.”

“If you intend to be at Tarmon Gai’don, then you will have to fight alongside Aes Sedai,” Galad said quietly. Young Bornhald grimaced in strong distaste, and he was not the only one. Byar half-straightened before bending back to his task. But no one voiced dissent. Doirellin nodded slowly, as if he had never before considered the matter.

“I don’t hold with the witches any more than any other man,” Byar said finally, without raising his head from his work. Blood was seeping through the bandages even as he wrapped. “But the Precepts say, to fight the raven, you may make alliance with the serpent until the battle is done.” A ripple of nods ran through the men. The raven meant the Shadow, but everyone knew it was also the Seanchan Imperial sigil.

“I’ll fight beside the witches,” a lanky Taraboner said, “or even these Asha’man we keep hearing about, if they fight the Seanchan. Or at the Last Battle. And I’ll fight any man who says I’m wrong.” He glared as though ready to begin then and there.

“It seems matters will play out as you wish, my Lord Captain Commander,” Trom said, making a much deeper bow than he had for Valda. “To a degree, at least. Who can say what the next hour will bring, much less tomorrow?”

Galad surprised himself by laughing. Since yesterday, he had been sure he would never laugh again. “That’s a poor joke, Trom.”

“It is how the law is written. And Valda did make his proclamation. Besides, you had the courage to say what many have thought while holding their tongues, myself among them. Yours is a better plan for the Children than any I’ve heard since Pedron Niall died.”

“It’s still a poor joke.” Whatever the law said, that part had been ignored since the end of the War of the Hundred Years.

“We’ll see what the Children have to say on the matter,” Trom replied, grinning widely, “when you ask them to follow us to Tarmon Gai’don to fight alongside the witches.”

Men began slapping their shoulders again, harder than they had for his victory. At first it was only a few, then more joined in, until every man including Trom was signaling approval. Every man but Kashgar, that was. Making a deep bow, the Saldaean held out the scabbarded heron-mark blade with both hands.

“This is yours, now, my Lord Captain Commander.”

Galad sighed. He hoped this nonsense would fade away before they reached the camp. Returning there was foolish enough without adding in a claim of that sort. Most likely they would be pulled down and thrown in chains if not beaten to death even without it. But he had to go. It was the right thing to do.

Daylight began to grow on this cool spring morning, though the sun had yet to show even a sliver above the horizon, and Rodel Ituralde raised his gold-banded looking glass to study the village below the hill where he sat his roan gelding, deep in the heart of Tarabon. He did hate waiting for enough light to see. Careful of a glint off the lens, he held the end of the long tube on his thumb and shaded it with a cupped hand. At this hour, sentries were at their least watchful, relieved that the darkness where an enemy might sneak close was departing, yet since crossing from Almoth Plain he had heard tales of Aiel raids inside Tarabon. Were he a sentry with Aiel perhaps about, he would grow extra eyes. Peculiar that the country was not milling like a kicked antheap over those Aiel. Peculiar, and perhaps ominous. There were plenty of armed men to be found, Seanchan and Taraboners sworn to them, and hordes of Seanchan building farms and even villages, but reaching this far had been almost too easy. Today, the easiness ended.

Behind him among the trees, horses stamped impatiently. The hundred Domani with him were quiet, except for an occasional creak of saddle leather as a man shifted his seat, but he could feel their tension. He wished he had twice as many. Five times. In the beginning, it had seemed a gesture of good faith that he himself would ride with a force mainly composed of Taraboners. He was no longer certain that had been the right decision. It was too late for recriminations, in any event.

Halfway between Elmora and the Amadician border, Serana sat in a flat grassy valley among forested hills, with at least a mile to the trees in any direction save his, and a small, reed-fringed lake fed by two wide streams lay between him and the village. Not a place that could be surprised by daylight. It had been sizable before the Seanchan came, a stopping point for the merchant trains heading east, with over a dozen inns and nearly as many streets. Village folk were already getting about their day’s tasks, women balancing baskets on their heads as they glided down the village streets and others starting the fires under laundry kettles behind their houses, men striding along toward their workplaces, sometimes pausing to exchange a few words. A normal morning, with children already running and playing, rolling hoops and tossing beanbags among the throng. The clang of a smithy rose, dim with the distance. The smoke from breakfast fires was fading at the chimneys.

As far as he could see, no one in Serana gave a second glance to the three pairs of sentries with bright stripes painted across their breastplates, walking their horses back and forth perhaps a quarter of a mile out. The lake, considerably wider than the village, shielded the fourth side effectively. It seemed the sentries were an accepted matter of every day, and so was the Seanchan camp that had swollen Serana to more than twice its former size.

Ituralde shook his head slightly. He would not have placed the camp cheek-by-jowl with the village that way. The rooftops of Serana were all tile, red or green or blue, but the buildings themselves were wooden; a fire in the town could spread all too easily into the camp, where canvas storetents the size of large houses far outnumbered the smaller tents where men slept, and great stacks of barrels and casks and crates covered twice as much ground as all the tents combined. Keeping lightfingered villagers out would be all but impossible. Every town had a few tickbirds who picked up anything they thought they could get away with, and even somewhat more honest men might be tempted by the proximity. The location did mean a shorter distance to haul water from the lake, and a shorter distance for soldiers to walk to reach the ale and wine in the village when off-duty, but it suggested a commander who kept slack discipline.

Slack discipline or not, there was activity in the camp, too. Soldiers' hours made farmers' hours seem restful. Men were checking the animals on the long horselines, bannermen checking soldiers standing in ranks, hundreds of laborers loading or unloading wagons, grooms harnessing teams. Every day, trains of wagons came down the road into this camp from east and west, and others departed. He admired the Seanchan efficiency at making sure their soldiers had what they needed when and where it was needed. Dragonsworn here in Tarabon, most sour-faced men who believed their dream snuffed out by the Seanchan, had been willing to tell what they knew if not to ride with him. That camp contained everything from boots to swords, arrows to horseshoes to water flasks, enough to outfit thousands of men from the ground up. They would feel its loss.

He lowered the looking glass to brush a buzzing green fly away from his face. Two replaced it almost at once. Tarabon teemed with flies. Did they always come so early here? They would just have begun hatching at home by the time he reached Arad Doman again. If he did. No; no ill thoughts. When he did. Tamsin would be displeased, otherwise, and it was seldom wise to displease her too far.

Most of the men down there were hired workmen, not soldiers, and only a hundred or so of those Seanchan. Still, a company of three hundred Taraboners in stripe-painted armor had ridden in at noon the day before, more than doubling their numbers and requiring him to change his plans. Another party of Taraboners, as large, had entered the camp at sunset, just in time to eat and bed down wherever they could lay their blankets. Candles and lamp oil were luxuries for soldiers. There was one of those leashed women, a *damane,* in the camp, too. He wished he could have waited until she left—they must have been taking her elsewhere; what use for a *damane* at a supply camp?—but today was the appointed day, and he could not afford to give the Taraboners reason to claim he was holding back. Some would snatch at any reason to go their own way. He knew they would not follow him much longer, yet he needed to hold as many as he could for a few days more.

Shifting his gaze to the west, he did not bother with the looking glass.

"Now," he whispered, and as though at his command, two hundred men with mail veils across their faces galloped out of the trees. And immediately halted, cavorting and jockeying for place, brandishing steel-tipped lances while their leader raced up and down before them gesturing wildly in an obvious effort to establish some semblance of order.

At this distance, Ituralde could not have made out faces even with the glass, but he could imagine the fury on Tornay Lanasiet's features at playing out this charade. The stocky Dragonsworn burned to close with Seanchan. Any Seanchan. It had been difficult to dissuade him from striking the day they crossed the border. Yesterday he had been visibly overjoyed finally to scrape the hated stripes indicating loyalty to the Seanchan from his breastplate. No matter; so far he was obeying his orders to the letter.

As the sentries nearest Lanasiet turned their mounts to speed toward the village and the Seanchan camp, Ituralde swung his attention there and raised his looking glass once more. The sentries would find their warning superfluous. Motion had ceased. Some men were pointing toward the horsemen on the other side of the village, while the rest seemed to be staring, soldiers and workmen alike. The last thing they expected was raiders. Aiel raids or no Aiel raids, the Seanchan considered Tarabon theirs, and safely so. A quick glance at the village showed people standing in the streets staring toward the strange riders. They had not expected raiders, either. He thought the Seanchan were right, an opinion he would not share with any Taraboner in the foreseeable future.

With well-trained men, shock could last only so long, however. In the camp, soldiers began racing toward their horses, many still unsaddled, though grooms had started working as fast as they could. Eighty-odd Seanchan footmen, archers, formed into ranks and set off running through Serana. At that evidence that there truly was a threat, people began snatching up the smaller children and herding the older toward the hoped-for safety of the houses. In moments, the streets were empty save for the hurrying archers in their lacquered armor and peculiar helmets.

Iturალde turned the glass toward Lanasiet and found the man galloping his line of horsemen forward. “Wait for it,” he growled. “Wait for it.”

Again it seemed the Taraboner heard his command, finally raising a hand to halt his men. At least they were still a half-mile or more from the village. The hotheaded fool was supposed to be near a mile away, on the edge of the trees and still in seeming disorder and easily swept away, but half would have to suffice. He suppressed the urge to finger the ruby in his left ear. The battle had begun, now, and in battle you had to make those following you believe that you were utterly cool, completely unaffected. *Not* wanting to knock down a putative ally. Emotion seemed to leak from a commander into his men, and angry men behaved stupidly, getting themselves killed and losing battles.

Touching the half-moon-shaped beauty patch on his cheek—a man should look his best on a day like today—he took slow measured breaths until certain that he was as cool inside as his outward display, then returned his attention to the camp. Most of the Taraboners there were mounted, now, but they waited for twenty or so Seanchan led by a tall fellow with a single thin plume on his curious helmet to gallop into the village before falling in behind, yesterday’s latecomers trailing at the rear.

Ituralde studied the figure leading the column, viewing him through the gaps between houses. A single plume would mark a lieutenant or maybe an under-lieutenant. Which might mean a beardless boy on his first command or a grizzled veteran who could take your head if you made one mistake. Strangely, the *damane*, marked by the shining silvery leash that connected her to a woman on another horse, galloped her animal as hard as anyone. Everything he had heard said *damane* were prisoners, yet she appeared as eager as the other woman, the *sul’dam*. Perhaps—

Abruptly his breath caught in his throat and all thought of *damane* fled. There *were* people still in the street, seven or eight men and women, walking in a cluster and right ahead of the racing column that they seemed not to hear thundering up behind them. There was no time for the Seanchan to stop if they wanted to, and good reason not to try with an enemy ahead, but it looked as though the tall fellow’s hand never twitched on his reins as he and the rest rode the people down. A veteran, then. Murmuring a prayer for the dead, Ituralde lowered the glass. What came next was best seen without it.

Two hundred paces beyond the village, the officer started forming his command where the archers had already stopped and were waiting with nocked arrows. Waving directions to the Taraboners behind, he turned to peer at Lanasiet through a looking glass. Sunlight glinted off the tube's banding. The sun was rising, now. The Taraboners began dividing smoothly, lance heads glittering and all slanted at the same angle, disciplined men falling into ordered ranks to either side of the archers.

The officer leaned over to converse with the *sul'dam*. If he turned her and the *damane* loose now, this could still turn into a disaster. Of course, it could if he did not, too. The last of the Taraboners, those who had arrived late, began stretching out in a line fifty paces behind the others, driving their lances point-down into the ground and pulling their horsebows from the cases fastened behind their saddles. Lanasiet, curse the man, was galloping his men forward.

Turning his head for a moment, Ituralde spoke loudly enough for the men behind him to hear. "Be ready." Saddle leather creaked as men gathered their reins. Then he murmured another prayer for the dead and whispered, "Now."

As one man the three hundred Taraboners in the long line, *his* Taraboners, raised their bows and loosed. He did not need the looking glass to see the *sul'dam* and *damane* and the officer suddenly sprout arrows. They were all but swept from their saddles by near a dozen striking each of them at once. Ordering that had given him a pang, but the women were the most dangerous people on that field. The rest of that volley cut down most of the archers and cleared saddles, and even as men struck the ground, a second volley lanced out, knocking down the last archers and emptying more saddles.

Caught by surprise, the Seanchan-loyal Taraboners tried to fight. Among those still mounted, some wheeled about and lowered lances to charge their attackers. Others, perhaps seized by the irrationality that could take men in battle, dropped their lances and tried to uncase their own horsebows. But a third volley lashed them, pile-headed arrows driving through breastplates at that range, and suddenly the survivors seemed to realize that they were survivors. Most of their fellows lay still on the ground or struggled to stand though pierced by two or three shafts. Those still mounted were now outnumbered by their opponents. A few men reined their horses around, and in a flash the lot of them were running south pursued by one final rain of bowshot that toppled more.

"Hold," Ituralde murmured. "Hold where you are."

A handful of the mounted archers fired again, but the rest wisely refrained. They could kill a few more before the enemy was beyond range, but this group was beaten, and before long they would be counting every arrow. Best of all, none of them went racing in pursuit.

The same could not be said of Lanasiet. Cloaks streaming, he and his two hundred raced after the fleeing men. Ituralde imagined he could hear them yelping, hunters on the trail of running prey.

"I think we've seen the last of Lanasiet, my Lord," Jaalam said, reining his gray up beside Ituralde, who shrugged slightly.

"Perhaps, my young friend. He may come to his senses. In any case, I never thought the Taraboners would return to Arad Doman with us. Did you?"

"No, my Lord," the taller man replied, "but I thought his honor would hold through the first fight."

Ituralde lifted his glass to look at Lanasiet, still galloping hard. The man was gone, and unlikely to come to senses he did not possess. A third of his force gone as surely as if that *damane* had killed them. He had counted on a few more days. He would need to change plans again, perhaps change his next target.

Dismissing Lanasiet from his thoughts, he swung the glass to glance at where those people had been ridden down, and grunted in surprise. There were no trampled bodies. Friends and neighbors must have come out to carry them away, though with a battle on the edge of the village that seemed about as likely as them getting up and walking away after the horses passed.

"It's time to go burn all those lovely Seanchan stores," he said. Shoving the looking glass into the leather case tied to his saddle, he donned his helmet and heeled Steady down the hill, followed by Jaalam and the others in a column of twos. Ruts from farm wagons and broken-down banks indicated a ford in the eastern stream. "And, Jaalam, tell a few men to warn the villagers to start moving what they want to save. Tell them to begin with the houses nearest the camp." Where fire could spread one way, it could the other, too, and likely would.

In truth, he had already set the important blaze. Breathed on the first embers, at least. If the Light shone on him, if no one had been overcome by eagerness or given in to despair at the hold the Seanchan had on Tarabon, if no one had fallen afoul of the mishaps that could ruin the best laid plan, then all across Tarabon, above twenty thousand men had struck blows like this, or would before the day was out. And tomorrow they would do it again. Now all he had to do was raid his way back across better than four hundred miles of Tarabon, shedding Taraboner Dragonsworn and gathering in his own men, then re-cross Almoth Plain. If the Light shone on him, that blaze would singe the Seanchan enough to bring them chasing after him full of fury. A great deal of fury, he hoped. That way, they would run headlong into the trap he had laid before they ever knew it was there. If they failed to follow, then at least he had rid his homeland of the Taraboners and bound the Domani Dragonsworn to fight for the King instead of against him. And if they saw the trap. . . .

Riding down the hillside, Ituralde smiled. If they saw the trap, then he had another plan already laid, and another behind that. He always looked ahead, and always planned for every eventuality he could imagine, short of the Dragon Reborn himself suddenly appearing in front of him. He thought the plans he had would suffice for the moment.

The High Lady Suroth Sabelle Meldarath lay awake on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. The moon was down, and the triple-arched windows that overlooked a palace garden were dark, but her eyes had adjusted so that she could make out at least the outlines of the ornate, painted plasterwork. Dawn was no more than an hour or two off, yet she had not slept. She had lain awake most nights since Tuon vanished, sleeping only when exhaustion closed her eyes however hard she tried to keep them open. Sleep brought nightmares she wished she could forget. Ebou Dar was never truly cold, but the night held a little coolness, enough to help keep her awake, lying beneath only a thin silk sheet. The question that tainted her dreams was simple and stark. Was Tuon alive, or dead?

The escape of the Atha’an Miere *damane* and Queen Tylin’s murder spoke in favor of her death. Three events of that magnitude happening on one night by chance was pressing coincidence too far, and the first two were horrifying enough in themselves to indicate the worst for Tuon. Someone was trying to sow fear among the *Rhyagelle*, Those Who Come Home, perhaps to disrupt the entire Return. How better to achieve that than to assassinate Tuon? Worse, it had to be one of their own. Because she had landed under the veil, no local knew who Tuon was. Tylin had surely been killed with the One Power, by a *sul'dam* and her *damane*. Suroth had leaped at the suggestion that Aes Sedai were to blame, yet eventually someone who mattered would question how one of those women could enter a palace full of *damane* in a city full of *damane* and escape detection. At least one *sul'dam* had been necessary to uncollar the Sea Folk *damane*. And two of her own *sul'dam* had disappeared at almost the same time.

In any case, they had been noticed as missing two days later, and no one had seen them since the night Tuon vanished. She did not believe they were involved, though they had been in the kennels. For one thing, she could not imagine Renna or Seta uncollaring a *damane*. They certainly had reasons enough to sneak away and seek employment far off, with someone ignorant of their filthy secret, someone like this Egeanin Tamarath who had stolen a pair of *damane*. Strange that, for one newly raised to the Blood. Strange, but unimportant; she could see no way to tie it to the rest. Likely the woman had found the stresses and complexities of nobility too much for a simple sailor. Well, she would be found and arrested eventually.

The important fact, the potentially deadly fact, was that Renna and Seta were gone, and no one could say exactly when they had left. If the wrong person noted their departure so close to the critical time and made the wrong calculation. . . . She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes and exhaled softly, very near to a groan.

Even should she escape suspicion of murdering Tuon, if the woman was dead, then she herself would be required to apologize to the Empress, might she live forever. For the death of the acknowledged heir to the Crystal Throne, her apology would be protracted, and as painful as it was humiliating; it might end with her execution, or much worse, with being sent to the block as property. Not that it would actually come to that, though in her nightmares it often did. Her hand slid beneath the pillows to touch the unsheathed dagger there. The blade was little longer than her hand, yet more than sharp enough to open her veins, preferably in a warm bath. If time came for an apology, she would not live to reach Seandar. The dishonor to her name might even be lessened a little if enough people believed the act was itself an apology. She would leave a letter explaining it so. That might help.

Still, there was a chance Tuon remained alive, and Suroth clung to it. Killing her and spiriting the body away might be a deep move ordered from Seanchan by one of her surviving sisters who coveted the throne, yet Tuon had arranged her own disappearance more than once. In support of the notion, Tuon's *der'sul'dam* had taken all of her *sul'dam* and *damane* into the country for exercise nine days ago, and they had not been seen since. Exercising *damane* did not require nine days. And just today—no; yesterday, now, by a good few hours—Suroth had learned that the captain of Tuon's bodyguard also had left the city nine days ago with a sizable contingent of his men and not returned. That was too much for coincidence, and very nearly proof. Near enough for hope, at least.

Each of those previous disappearances, however, had been part of Tuon's campaign to win the approval of the Empress, might she live forever, and be named heir. Each time, some competitor among her sisters had been forced or emboldened to acts that lowered her when Tuon reappeared. What need had she of such stratagems now, here? Rack her brains how she would, Suroth could not find a worthy target outside Seanchan. She had considered the possibility that she herself was the mark, but only briefly and only because she could think of no one else. Tuon could have stripped her of her position in the Return with three words. All she needed to do was remove the veil; here, the Daughter of the Nine Moons, in command of the Return, spoke with the voice of the Empire. Bare suspicion that Suroth was *Atha'an Shadar*, what those this side of the Aryth Ocean called a Darkfriend, might have been enough for Tuon to have handed her over to the Seekers for questioning. No, Tuon was aiming at someone else, or something else. If she did still live. But she had to. Suroth did not want to die. She fingered the blade.

Who or what else did not matter, except as a clue to where Tuon might be, but that was very important. Immensely so. Already, despite the announcement of an extended inspection trip, whispers floated among the Blood that she was dead. The longer she remained missing, the more those whispers would grow, and with them the pressure for Suroth to return to Seandar and make that apology. She could only resist so long before she would be adjudged *sei'mosiev* so deeply that only her own servants and property would obey her. Her eyes would be ground into the dirt. Low Blood as well as High, perhaps even commoners, would refuse to speak to her. Soon after that, she would find herself on a ship whatever her wishes.

Without doubt Tuon would be displeased at being found, yet it seemed unlikely her displeasure would extend so far as Suroth being dishonored and forced to slit her wrists; therefore Tuon *must* be found. Every Seeker in Altara was searching for her—those Suroth knew of, at least. Tuon's own Seekers were not among the known, yet they must be hunting twice as hard as any others. Unless they had been taken into her confidence. But in seventeen days, all that had been uncovered was that ridiculous story of Tuon extorting jewelry from goldsmiths, and that was known to every common soldier. Perhaps. . . .

The arched door to the anteroom began to open slowly, and Suroth snapped her right eye shut to protect her night vision against the light of the outer room. As soon as the gap was wide enough, a pale-haired woman in the diaphanous robes of a *da'covale* slipped into the bedchamber and softly closed the door behind her, plunging the room into pitch blackness. Until Suroth opened her eye again, and made out a shadowy form creeping toward her bed. And another shadow, huge, suddenly looming in a corner of the room as Almandaragal rose noiselessly to his feet. The *lopar* could cross the room and snap the fool woman's neck in a heartbeat, but Suroth still gripped the hilt of her dagger. It was wise to have a second line of defense even when the first seemed impregnable. A pace short of the bed, the *da'covale* stopped. Her anxious breathing sounded loud in the silence.

"Working up your courage, Liandrin?" Suroth said harshly. That honey-colored hair, worked in thin braids, had been enough to name her.

With a squeak, the *da'covale* dropped to her knees and bent to press her face to the carpet. She had learned that much, at least. "I would not harm you, High Lady," she lied. "You know I would not." Her voice was rushed, in a breathy panic. Learning when to speak and when not seemed as far beyond her as learning how to speak with proper respect. "We are both bound to serve the Great Lord, High Lady. Have I not proven I can be useful? I removed Alwhin for you, yes? You said you wished her dead, High Lady, and I removed her."

Suroth grimaced and sat up in the dark, the sheet sliding down to her lap. It was so easy to forget *da'covale* were there, even this *da'covale,* and then you let slip things you should not have. Alwhin had not been dangerous, merely a nuisance, awkward in her place as Suroth's Voice. She had achieved all she had ever wanted in reaching that, and the likelihood of her risking it by so much as the smallest betrayal had been tiny. True, had she broken her neck falling down a flight of stairs, Suroth would have felt some small relief from an irritant, but poison that left the woman with bulging eyes and a blue face was another matter. Even with the search for Tuon, that had brought the Seekers' eyes to Suroth's household. She had been forced to insist on it, for the murder of her Voice. That there were Listeners in her household, she accepted; every household had its share of Listeners. Seekers did more than listen, though, and they might uncover what must remain hidden.

Masking her anger required surprising effort, and her tone was colder than she wanted. "I hope you did not wake me merely to plead again, Liandrin."

"No, no!" The fool raised her head and actually looked straight at her! "An officer came from General Galgan, High Lady. He is waiting to take you to the general."

Suroth's head throbbed with irritation. The woman delayed delivering a message from Galgan *and* looked her in the eyes? In the dark, to be sure, yet an urge swept over her to strangle Liandrin with her bare hands. A second death hard on the heels of the first would intensify the Seekers' interest in her household, if they learned of it, but Elbar could dispose of the body easily; he was clever in such tasks.

Except, she enjoyed owning the former Aes Sedai who once had been so haughty with her. Making her a perfect *da'covale* in every way would be a great pleasure. It was time to have the woman collared, however. Already irritating rumors buzzed of an uncollared *marath'damane* among her servants. It would be a twelve-day wonder when the *sul'dam* discovered she was shielded in some way so she could not channel, yet that would help answer the question of why she had not been leashed before. Elbar would need to find some *Atha'an Shadar* among the *sul'dam*, though. That was never an easy task—relatively few *sul'dam* turned to the Great Lord, oddly—and she no longer really trusted any *sul'dam*, but perhaps *Atha'an Shadar* could be trusted more than the rest.

"Light two lamps, then bring me a robe and slippers," she said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

Liandrin scrambled to the table that held the lidded sand bowl on its gilded tripod and hissed when she found it with a careless hand, but she quickly used the tongs to lift out a hot coal, puffed it to a glow, and lit two of the silvered lamps, adjusting the wicks so the flames held steady and did not smoke. Her tongue might suggest that she felt herself Suroth's equal rather than a possession, yet the strap had taught her to obey commands with alacrity.

Turning with one of the lamps in her hand, she gave a start and a choked cry at the sight of Almandaragal looming in the corner, his dark, ridge-ringed eyes focused on her. You would think she had never seen him before! Yet he was a fearsome sight, ten feet tall and near two thousand pounds, his hairless skin like reddish brown leather, flexing his six-toed forepaws so his claws extended and retracted, extended and retracted.

"Be at ease," Suroth told the *lopar*, a familiar command, but he stretched his mouth wide, showing sharp teeth before settling back to the floor and resting his huge round head on his paws like a hound. He did not close his eyes again, either. *Lopar* were quite intelligent, and plainly he trusted Liandrin no more than she did.

Despite fearful glances at Almandaragal, the *da'covale* was quick enough to fetch blue velvet slippers and a white silk robe intricately embroidered in green, red and blue from the tall, carved wardrobe, and she held the robe for Suroth to thrust her arms into the sleeves, but Suroth had to tie the long sash herself, and to thrust out a foot before Liandrin remembered to kneel and fit the slippers on. Her eyes, but the woman was incompetent!

By the dim light, Suroth examined herself in the gilded stand-mirror against the wall. Her eyes were hollow and shadowed with weariness, the tail of her crest hung down her back in a loose braid for sleeping, and doubtless her scalp required a razor. Very well. Galgan's messenger would think her grief-stricken over Tuon, and that was true enough. Before learning the general's message, though, she had one small matter to take care of.

"Run to Rosala and beg her to beat you soundly, Liandrin," she said.

The *da'covale*'s tight little mouth dropped open and her eyes widened in shock. "But why?" she whined. "Me, I have done nothing!"

Suroth busied her hands with knotting the sash tighter to keep from striking the woman. Her eyes would be lowered for a month if it was learned that she had struck a *da'covale* herself. She certainly owed no explanations to property, yet once Liandrin did become completely trained, she would miss these opportunities to grind the woman's face in how far she had fallen.

“Because you delayed telling me of the general’s messenger. Because you still call yourself ‘I’ rather than ‘Liandrin.’ Because you meet my eyes.” She could not help hissing that. Liandrin had huddled in on herself with every word, and now she directed her eyes to the floor, as if that would mitigate her offense. “Because you questioned my orders instead of obeying. And last—last, but most importantly to you—because I wish you beaten. Now, run, and tell Rosala each of these reasons so she will beat you well.”

“Liandrin hears and obeys, High Lady,” the *da’covale* whimpered, at last getting something right, and flung herself at the door so fast that she lost one of her white slippers. Too terrified to turn back for it, or perhaps even to notice—and well for her that she was—she clawed the door open and ran. Sending property for discipline should not bring a sense of satisfaction, but it did. Oh, yes, it did.

Suroth took a moment to control her breathing. To appear to be grieving was one thing, to appear to be agitated quite another. She was filled with annoyance at Liandrin, jolting memories of her nightmares, fears for Tuon’s fate and even more so her own, but not until the face in the mirror displayed utter calm did she follow the *da’covale*.

The anteroom to her bedchamber was decorated in the garish Ebou Dari fashion, a cloud-painted blue ceiling, yellow walls and green and yellow floor tiles. Even replacing the furnishings with her own tall screens, all save two painted by the finest artists with birds or flowers, did little to relieve the gaudiness. She growled faintly in her throat at the sight of the outer door, apparently left open by Liandrin in her flight, but she dismissed the *da’covale* from her mind for the moment and concentrated on the man who stood there examining the screen that held the image of a kori, a huge spotted cat from the Sen T’jore. Lanky and graying, in armor striped blue-and-yellow, he pivoted smoothly at the soft sound of her footsteps and went to one knee, though he was a commoner. The helmet beneath his arm bore three slender blue plumes, so the message must be important. Of course, it must be important to disturb her at this hour. She would give him dispensation. This once.

“Banner-General Mikhel Najirah, High Lady. Captain-General Galgan’s compliments, and he has received communications from Tarabon.”

Suroth's eyebrows climbed in spite of herself. Tarabon? Tarabon was as secure as Seandar. Automatically her fingers twitched, but she had not yet found a replacement for Alwhin. She must speak to the man herself. Irritation over that hardened her voice, and she made no effort to soften it. Kneeling instead of prostrate! "What communications? If I have been wakened for news of Aiel, I will not be pleased, Banner-General."

Her tone failed to intimidate the man. He even raised his eyes almost to meet hers. "Not Aiel, High Lady," he said calmly. "Captain-General Galgan wishes to tell you himself, so you can hear every detail correctly."

Suroth's breath caught for an instant. Whether Najirah was just reluctant to tell her the contents of these communications or had been ordered not to, this sounded ill. "Lead on," she commanded, then swept out of the room without waiting for him, ignoring as best she could the pair of Deathwatch Guards standing like statues in the hallway to either side of the door. The "honor" of being guarded by those men in red-and-green armor made her skin crawl. Since Tuon's disappearance, she tried not to see them at all.

The corridor, lined with gilded stand-lamps whose flames flickered in errant drafts that stirred tapestries of ships and the sea, was empty except for a few liveried palace servants, scurrying on early tasks, who thought deep bows and curtsies sufficient. And they always looked right at her! Perhaps a word with Beslan? No; the new King of Altara was her equal, now, in law at any rate, and she doubted that he would make his servants behave properly. She stared straight ahead as she walked. That way, she did not have to see the servants' insults.

Najirah caught up to her quickly, his boots ringing on the too-bright blue floor tiles, and fell in at her side. In truth, she needed no guide. She knew where Galgan must be.

The room had begun as a chamber for dancing, a square thirty paces on a side, its ceiling painted with fanciful fish and birds frolicking in often confusing fashion among clouds and waves. Only the ceiling remained to recall the room's beginnings. Now mirrored stand-lamps and shelves full of filed reports in leather folders lined the pale red walls. Brown-coated clerks scurried along the aisles between the long, map-strewn tables that covered the green-tiled dancing-floor. A young officer, an under-lieutenant with no plume on her red-and-yellow helmet, raced past Suroth without so much as a move to prostrate herself. Clerks merely squeezed themselves out of her path. Galgan gave his people too much leeway. He claimed that what he called excessive ceremony at “the wrong time” hindered efficiency; she called it effrontery.

Lunal Galgan, a tall man in a red robe richly worked with bright-feathered birds, the hair of his crest snow white and its tail plaited in a tight but untidy queue that hung to his shoulders, stood at a table near the center of the room with a knot of other high-ranking officers, some in breastplates, others in robes and nearly as disheveled as she. It seemed she was not the first to whom he had sent a messenger. She struggled to keep anger from her face. Galgan had come with Tuon and the Return, and thus she knew little of him beyond that his ancestors had been among the first to throw their support to Luthair Paendrag and that he owned a high reputation as a soldier and a general. Well, reputation and truth were sometimes the same. She disliked him entirely for himself.

He turned at her approach and formally laid his hands on her shoulders, kissing her on either cheek, so she was forced to return the greeting while trying not to wrinkle her nose at the strong, musky scent he favored. Galgan’s face was as smooth as his creases would allow, but she thought she detected a hint of worry in his blue eyes. A number of the men and women behind him, mainly low Blood and commoners, wore open frowns.

The large map of Tarabon spread out on the table in front of her and held flat by four lamps gave reason enough for worry. Markers covered it, red wedges for Seanchan forces on the move and red stars for forces holding in place, each supporting a small paper banner inked with their numbers and composition. Scattered across the map, across the entire map, lay black discs marking engagements, and even more white discs for enemy forces, many of those without the banners. How could there be *any* enemies in Tarabon? It was as secure as. . . .

“What happened?” she demanded.

“*Raken* began arriving with reports from Lieutenant-General Turan about three hours ago,” Galgan began in conversational tones. Pointedly *not* making a report himself. He studied the map as he talked, never glancing in her direction. “They aren’t complete—each new one adds to the lists, and I expect that won’t change for a while—but what I’ve seen runs this way. Since dawn yesterday, seven major supply camps overrun and burned, along with more than two dozen smaller camps. Twenty supply trains attacked, the wagons and their contents put to the torch. Seventeen small outposts have been wiped out, eleven patrols have failed to report in, and there have been an additional fifteen skirmishes. Also a few attacks against our settlers. Only a handful of fatalities, mostly men who tried to defend their belongings, but a good many wagons and stores burned along with some half-built houses, and the same message delivered everywhere. Leave Tarabon. All this was done by bands of between two and perhaps five hundred men. Estimates are a minimum of ten thousand and perhaps twice that, nearly all Taraboners. Oh, yes," he finished casually, "and most of them are wearing armor painted with stripes."

She wanted to grind her teeth. Galgan commanded the soldiers of the Return, yet she commanded the *Hailene*, the Forerunners, and as such, she possessed the higher rank in spite of his crest and red-lacquered fingernails. She suspected the only reason he did not claim that the Forerunners had been absorbed into the Return by its very arrival was that supplanting her meant assuming responsibility for Tuon's safety. And for that apology, should it become necessary. "Dislike" was too mild a word. She loathed Galgan.

"A mutiny?" she said, proud of the coolness of her voice. Inside, she had begun to burn.

Galgan's white queue swung slowly as he shook his head. "No. All reports say our Taraboners have fought well, and we've had a few successes, taken a few prisoners. Not one of them can be found on the rosters of loyal Taraboners. Several have been identified as Dragonsworn believed to be up in Arad Doman. And the name Rodel Ituralde has been mentioned a number of times as the brain behind it all, and the leader. A Domani. He's supposed to be one of the best generals this side of the ocean, and if he planned and carried out all this," he swept a hand over the map, "then I believe it." The fool sounded admiring! "Not a mutiny. A raid on a grand scale. But he won't get out with nearly as many men as he brought in."

Dragonsworn. The word was like a fist clutching Suroth's throat. "Are there Asha'man?"

"Those fellows who can channel?" Galgan grimaced and made a sign against evil, apparently unconscious of doing so. "There was no mention of them," he said drily, "and I rather think there would have been."

Red-hot anger needed to erupt at Galgan, but screaming at another of the High Blood would lower her eyes. And, as bad, gain nothing. Still, it had to be directed somewhere. It had to come out. She was proud of what she had done in Tarabon, and now the country appeared to be halfway back to the chaos she found when she first landed there. And one man was to blame. “This Ituralde.” Her tone was ice. “I want his head!”

“Never fear,” Galgan murmured, folding his hands behind his back and bending to examine some of the small banners. “It won’t be long before Turan chases him back to Arad Doman with his tail between his legs, and with luck, he’ll be with one of the bands we snap up.”

“Luck?” she snapped. “I don’t trust to luck!” Her anger was open, now, and she did not consider trying to suppress it again. Her eyes scanned the map as though she could find Ituralde that way. “If Turan is hunting a hundred bands, as you suggest, he’ll need more scouts to run them down, and I want them run down. Every last one of them. Especially Ituralde. General Yulan, I want four in every five—no, nine in every ten *raken* in Altara and Amadicia moved to Tarabon. If Turan can’t find them all with that, then he can see if his own head will appease me.”

Yulan, a dark little man in a blue robe embroidered with black-crested eagles, must have dressed in too great a hurry to apply the gum that normally held his wig in place, because he was constantly touching the thing to make sure it was straight. He was Captain of the Air for the Forerunners, but the Return’s Captain of the Air was only a banner-general, a more senior man having died on the voyage. Yulan would have no trouble with him.

“A wise move, High Lady,” he said, frowning at the map, “but may I suggest leaving the *raken* in Amadicia and those assigned to Banner-General Khirgan. *Raken* are the best way we have to locate Aiel, and in two days we still haven’t found those Whitecloaks. That will still give General Turan—”

“The Aiel are less of a problem every day,” she told him firmly, “and a few deserters are nothing.” He inclined his head in assent, one hand keeping his wig in place. He was only low Blood, after all.

“I hardly call seven thousand men a few deserters,” Galgan murmured dryly.

“It shall be as I command!” she snapped. Curse those so-called Children of the Light! She still had not decided whether to make Asunawa and the few thousand who had remained *da'covale*. They had remained, yet how long before they offered betrayal, too? And Asunawa seemed to hate *damane,* of all things. The man was unbalanced!

Galgan shrugged, utterly unperturbed. A red-lacquered fingernail traced lines on the map as though he were planning movements of soldiers. "So long as you don't want the *to'raken,* too, I raise no objections. That plan must go forward. Altara is falling into our hands with barely a struggle, I'm not ready to move on Illian yet, and we need to pacify Tarabon again quickly. The people will turn against us if we can't give them safety."

Suroth began to regret letting her anger show. He would raise no *objections*? *He* was not ready for Illian yet? He was all but saying that he did not have to follow her orders, only not openly, not so he had to take her responsibility along with her authority.

"I expect this message to be sent to Turan, General Galgan." Her voice was steady, kept so by will alone. "He is to send me Rodel Ituralde's head if he has to hound the man across Arad Doman and into the Blight. And if he fails to send me that head, I *will* take his."

Galgan's mouth tightened briefly, and he frowned down at the map. "Turan sometimes needs a fire lit under him," he muttered, "and Arad Doman has always been next for him. Very well. Your message will be sent, Suroth."

She could stay no longer in the same room with him. Without a word, she left. Had she spoken, she *would* have screamed. She stalked all the way back to her rooms without bothering to mask her fury. The Deathwatch Guards took no notice, of course; they might as well have been carved of stone. Which made her slam the anteroom door behind her with a crash. Perhaps they noticed that!

Padding toward her bed, she kicked off her slippers, let the robe and sash fall to the floor. She must find Tuon. She *had* to. If only she could puzzle out Tuon's target, puzzle out where she was. If only—

Suddenly the walls of her bedchamber, the ceiling, even the floor, began to glow with a silvery light. Those surfaces seemed to have *become* light. Gaping in shock, she turned slowly, staring at the box of light that surrounded her, and found herself looking at a woman made of roiling flames, clothed in roiling flames. Almandaragal was on his feet, awaiting his owner's command to attack.

“I am Semirhage,” the woman of fire said in a voice like a tolling funeral gong.

“Belly, Almandaragal!” That command, taught as a child because it amused her to have the *lopar* prostrate himself before her, ended with a grunt because she obeyed it herself even as she gave it. Kissing the red-and-green-patterned carpet, she said, “I live to serve and obey, Great Mistress.” There was no doubt in her mind that this woman was who she said. Who would dare claim *that* name falsely? Or could appear as living fire?

“I think you would also like to rule.” The tolling gong sounded faintly amused, but then it hardened. “Look at me! I dislike the way you Seanchan avoid meeting my eyes. It makes me believe you are hiding something. You don’t want to try hiding anything from me, Suroth.”

“Of course not, Great Mistress,” Suroth said, pushing herself up to sit on her heels. “Never, Great Mistress.” She raised her gaze as far as the other woman’s mouth, but she could not make herself raise it higher. Surely that would be enough.

“Better,” Semirhage murmured. “Now. How would you like to rule in these lands? A handful of deaths—Galgan and a few others—and you could manage to name yourself Empress, with my help. It’s hardly important, but circumstances provide the opportunity, and you would certainly be more amenable than the current Empress has been so far.”

Suroth’s stomach clenched. She feared she might vomit. “Great Mistress,” she said dully, “the penalty for that is to be taken before the true Empress, may she live forever, and have your entire skin removed, great care being taken to keep you alive. After that—”

“Inventive, if primitive,” Semirhage broke in wryly. “But of no account. The Empress Radhanan is dead. Remarkable how much blood there is in a human body. Enough to cover the whole Crystal Throne. Take the offer, Suroth. I will not make it again. You will make certain matters slightly more convenient, but not enough for me to put myself out a second time.”

Suroth had to make herself breathe. “Then Tuon is the Empress, may she live. . . .” Tuon would take a new name, rarely to be spoken outside the Imperial family. The Empress was the Empress, might she live forever. Wrapping her arms around herself, Suroth began to sob, shaking beyond her ability to stop. Almandaragal lifted his head and whined at her interrogatively.

Semirhage laughed, the music of deep gongs. “Grief for Radhanan, Suroth, or is your dislike of Tuon becoming Empress so deep?”

Haltingly, in spurts of three or four words broken by unmanageable weeping, Suroth explained. As the proclaimed heir, Tuon had become Empress the moment her mother died. Except, if her mother had been assassinated, then it must have been arranged by one of her sisters, which meant that Tuon herself was surely dead. And none of that made the slightest difference. The forms would be carried out. She would have to return to Seandar and apologize for Tuon’s death, for the death of an Empress, now, to the very woman who had arranged it. Who would, of course, not take the throne until Tuon’s death was announced. She could not bring herself to admit that she would kill herself first; it was too shaming to say aloud. Words died as howling sobs racked her. She did not want to die. She had been promised she would live forever!

This time, Semirhage’s laughter was so shocking that it shut off Suroth’s tears. That head of fire was thrown back, emitting great peals of mirth. At last she regained control, wiping away tears of flame with fiery fingers. “I see I didn’t make myself clear. Radhanan is dead, and her daughters, and her sons, and half the Imperial Court, as well. There *is* no Imperial family except for Tuon. There is no Empire. Seandar is in the hands of rioters and looters, and so are a dozen other cities. At least fifty nobles are contending for the throne, with armies in the field. There is war from the Aldael Mountains to Salaking. Which is why you will be perfectly safe in disposing of Tuon and proclaiming yourself Empress. I’ve even arranged for a ship, which should arrive soon, to bring word of the disaster.” She laughed again, and said something strange. “Let the lord of chaos rule.”

Suroth gaped at the other woman in spite of herself. The Empire . . . destroyed? Semirhage had killed the . . . ? Assassination was not unknown among the Blood, High or low, nor within the Imperial family, yet for anyone else to reach inside the Imperial family in that way was horrifying, unthinkable. Even one of the *Da’concion*, the Chosen Ones. But to become Empress herself, even here. She felt dizzy, with a hysterical desire to laugh. She could complete the cycle, conquering these lands, and then send armies to reclaim Seanchan. With an effort, she managed to regain possession of herself.

“Great Mistress, if Tuon really is alive, then . . . then killing her will be difficult.” She had to force those words out. To kill the Empress . . . Even thinking it was difficult. To become Empress. Her head felt as if it might float off her shoulders. “She will have her *sul’dam* and *damane* with her, and some of her Deathwatch Guards.” Difficult? Killing her would be impossible in those circumstances. Unless Semirhage could be induced to do it herself. Six *damane* might well be dangerous even to her. Besides, there was a saying among commoners. The mighty tell the lesser to dig in the mud and keep their own hands clean. She had heard it by chance, and punished the man who spoke it, but it was true.

“Think, Suroth!” The gongs rang strong, imperative. “Captain Musenge and the others would have gone the same night Tuon and her maid left if they had had any inkling of what she was about. They are looking for her. You must put every effort into finding her first, but if that fails, her Deathwatch Guards will be less protection than they seem. Every soldier in your army has heard that at least some of the Guards are involved with an impostor. The general feeling seems to be that the impostor and anyone connected to her should be torn apart bodily and the pieces buried in a dungheap. Quietly.” Lips of fire curled in a small, amused smile. “To avoid the shame to the Empire.”

It might be possible. A party of Deathwatch Guards would be easy to locate. She would need to find out exactly how many Musenge had taken with him, and send Elbar with fifty for every one. No, a hundred, to account for the *damane*. And then . . . “Great Mistress, you understand I am reluctant to proclaim anything until I am certain Tuon is dead?”

“Of course,” Semirhage said. The gongs were amused once more. “But remember, if Tuon manages to return safely, it will matter little to me, so don’t dally.”

“I will not, Great Mistress. I intend to become Empress, and for that I must kill the Empress.” This time, saying it was not very hard at all.

In Pevara’s estimation, Tsutama Rath’s rooms were flamboyant beyond the point of extravagance, and her own beginnings as a butcher’s daughter played no part in her opinion. The sitting room simply put her on edge. Beneath a cornice carved with swallows in flight and gilded, the walls held two large silk tapestries, one displaying bright red bloodroses, the other a calma bush covered in scarlet blossoms larger than her two hands together. The tables and chairs were delicate pieces, if you ignored sufficient carving and gilding for any throne. The stand-lamps were heavily gilded, too, and the mantel, worked with running horses, above the red-streaked marble fireplace. Several of the tables held red Sea Folk porcelain, the rarest, four vases and six bowls, a small fortune in themselves, as well as any number of jade or ivory carvings, none small, and one figure of a dancing woman, a hand tall, that appeared to be carved from a *ruby*. A gratuitous display of wealth, and she knew for a fact that aside from the gilded barrel-clock on the mantel, there was another in Tsutama's bedroom and even one in her dressing room. Three clocks! That went far beyond flamboyant, never mind gilding or rubies.

And yet, the room suited the woman seated across from her and Javindhra. "Flamboyant" was exactly the word for her appearance. Tsutama was a strikingly beautiful woman, her hair caught in a fine golden net, with firedrops thick at her throat and ears and dressed as always in crimson silk that molded her full bosom, today with golden scrollwork embroidery to increase the emphasis. You might almost think she wanted to attract men, if you did not know her. Tsutama had made her dislike of men well known long before being sent into exile; she would have given mercy to a rabid dog before a man.

Back then, she had been hammer-hard, yet many had thought her a broken reed when she returned to the Tower. For a while, they had. Then everyone who spent any time near her realized that those shifting eyes were far from nervous. Exile *had* changed her, only not toward softness. Those eyes belonged on a hunting cat, searching for enemies or prey. The rest of Tsutama's face was not so much serene as it was still, an unreadable mask. Unless you pushed her to open anger, at least. Even then her voice would remain as calm as smooth ice, though. An unnerving combination.

"I heard disturbing rumors this morning about the battle at Dumai's Wells," she said abruptly. "Bloody disturbing." She had the habits now of long silences, no small talk, and sudden, unexpected statements. Exile had coarsened her language, too. The isolated farm she had been confined to must have been . . . vivid. "Including that three of the dead sisters were from our Ajah. Mother's milk in a cup!" All delivered in the most even tones. But her eyes stabbed at them accusingly.

Pevara took that gaze in stride. Any direct look from Tsutama seemed accusing, and on edge or not, Pevara knew better than to let the Highest see it. The woman swooped on weakness like a falcon. "I can't see why

Katerine would disobey your orders to keep her knowledge to herself, and you cannot believe Tarna is likely to put discredit on Elaida.” Not publicly, at any rate. Tarna guarded her feelings on Elaida as carefully as a cat guarded a mousehole. “But sisters do get reports from their eyes-and-ears. We can’t stop them learning what happened. I’m surprised it’s taken this long.”

“That’s so,” Javindhra added, smoothing her skirts. The angular woman wore no jewelry aside from the Great Serpent ring, and her dress was unadorned, and a red deep enough to appear near black. “Sooner or later, the facts will all come out if we work till our fingers bleed.” Her mouth was so tight she seemed to be biting something, yet she sounded almost satisfied. Odd, that. She was Elaida’s lapdog.

Tsutama’s stare focused on her, and after a moment a flush grew on Javindhra’s cheeks. Perhaps as an excuse to break eye contact, she took a long drink of her tea. From a cup of beaten gold worked with leopards and deer, of course, Tsutama being as she now was. The Highest continued to stare silently, but whether at Javindhra or something beyond her, Pevara could no longer say.

When Katerine brought word that Galina was among the dead at Dumai’s Wells, Tsutama had been raised to replace her by near acclamation. She had possessed a very good reputation as a Sitter, at least before her involvement in the disgusting events that led to her downfall, and many in the Red believed the times called for as hard a Highest as could be found. Galina’s death had lifted a great weight from Pevara’s shoulders—the Highest, a Darkfriend; oh, that had been agony!—yet she was uncertain about Tsutama. There was something . . . wild . . . about her, now. Something unpredictable. Was she entirely sane? But then, the same question could be asked regarding the whole White Tower. How many of the sisters were entirely sane, now?

As if sensing her thoughts, Tsutama shifted that unblinking gaze to her. It did not make Pevara color or start, as it did so many besides Javindhra, but she did find herself wishing Duhara were there, just to give the Highest a third Sitter to stare at, just to share them out. She wished she knew where the woman had gone and why, with a rebel army camped outside Tar Valon. Over a week ago, Duhara had simply taken ship without a word to anyone, so far as Pevara was aware, and no one seemed to know whether she had gone north or south. These days, Pevara was suspicious of everyone and nearly everything.

“Did you call us here because of something in that letter, Highest?” she said at last. She met that unsettling stare levelly, yet she was beginning to want a long pull from her own ornate cup, and she wished it held wine rather than tea. Deliberately she rested the cup on the narrow arm of her chair. The other woman’s gaze made her feel as though spiders were crawling on her skin.

After a very long moment, Tsutama’s eyes dropped to the folded letter in her lap. Only her hand held it from rolling up into a little cylinder. It was on the very thin paper used for messages sent by pigeon, and the small inked letters clearly visible through the page appeared to cover it densely.

“This is from Sashalle Anderly,” she said, bringing a wince of pity from Pevara and a grunt that might have been anything from Javindhra. Poor Sashalle. Tsutama continued without any outward sign of sympathy, though. “The bloody woman believes Galina escaped, because it is addressed to her. Much of what she writes merely confirms what we already know from other sources, including Toveine. But, without naming them, she bloody well says that she is ‘in charge of most of the sisters in the city of Cairhien.’”

“How can Sashalle be in charge of *any* sisters?” Javindhra shook her head, her expression denying the possibility. “Could she have gone insane?”

Pevara held her silence. Tsutama gave answers when she wished, rarely when you asked. Toveine’s earlier letter, also addressed to Galina, had not mentioned Sashalle at all, or the other two, but of course, she would have found the entire subject beyond distasteful. Even thinking of it was like eating rotten plums. Most of her words had been devoted to laying the whole blame for events at Elaida’s feet, however indirectly.

Tsutama’s eyes flickered toward Javindhra like dagger thrusts, but she went on without pausing. “Sashalle recounts Toveine’s bloody visit to Cairhien with the other sisters and the flaming Asha’man, though she clearly doesn’t know about the bloody bonding. She found it all very strange, sisters mingling with Asha’man on ‘tense yet often friendly’ terms. Blood and bloody ashes! That is how she puts it, burn me.” Tsutama’s tone, suitable for discussing the price of lace, in strong contrast to the intensity of her eyes, and her language, gave no hint of what she felt on the subject. “Sashalle says that when they left, they took flaming Warders belonging to sisters she believes are with the boy, so it seems bloody certain they were looking for him and likely have found him by now. She has no idea why. But she confirms what Toveine claimed concerning Logain. Apparently, the bloody man is no longer gentled.”

“Impossible,” Javindhra muttered into her teacup, but softly. Tsutama disliked having her statements challenged. Pevara kept her opinions to herself and sipped from her own cup. So far, there seemed nothing in the letter worthy of discussion except how Sashalle could be “in charge” of anything, and she would rather think of anything other than Sashalle’s fate. The tea tasted of blueberries. How had Tsutama obtained blueberries this early in the spring? Perhaps they had been dried.

“I will read the rest to you,” Tsutama said, unfolding the page and scanning almost to the bottom before beginning. Apparently Sashalle had been very detailed. What was the Highest not sharing? So many suspicions.

> *“I have been so long without communicating because I could not work out how to say what I must, but now I see that simply telling the facts is the only way. Along with a number of other sisters, who I will leave to decide for themselves whether to reveal what I am about to, I have sworn an oath of fealty to the Dragon Reborn which is to last until Tarmon Gai’don has been fought.”*

Javindhra gasped loudly, her eyes popping, but Pevara merely whispered, “*Ta’veren*.” It must be that. *Ta’veren* had always been her explanation for most of the disturbing rumors out of Cairhien.

Tsutama read on right over them.

> *“What I do, I do for the good of the Red Ajah and the good of the Tower. Should you disagree, I will surrender myself for your discipline. After Tarmon Gai’don. As you may have heard, Irgain Fatamed, Ronaille Vevanios and I were all stilled when the Dragon Reborn escaped at Dumai’s Wells. We have been Healed, however, by a man named Damer Flinn, one of the Asha’man, and we all seem to be restored fully. Unlikely as this seems, I swear beneath the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth that it is true. I look forward to my eventual return to the Tower, where I will retake the Three Oaths to reaffirm my dedication to my Ajah and to the Tower.”*

Folding the letter again, she gave her head a small shake. “There’s more, but it’s all more bloody pleading that what she’s doing is for the Ajah and the Tower.” A glitter in her eyes suggested that Sashalle might come to regret surviving the Last Battle.

“If Sashalle truly has been Healed,” Pevara began, and could not go on. She wet her lips with tea, then raised the cup again and took a mouthful. The possibility seemed too wonderful to hope for, a snowflake that might melt at a touch.

“This is impossible,” Javindhra growled, though not very strongly. Even so, she directed the comment to Pevara lest the Highest think it meant for her. A deep scowl made her face harsher. “Gentling cannot be Healed. Stilling cannot be Healed. Sheep will fly first! Sashalle *must* be delusional.”

“Toveine might be mistaken,” Tsutama said, in a *very* strong voice, “though if she is, I can’t see why these flaming Asha’man would let Logain be one of them, much less command, but I hardly think Sashalle could be bloody mistaken about herself. And she doesn’t write like a woman having flaming delusions. Sometimes what is bloody impossible is only bloody impossible until the first woman does it. So. Stilling has been Healed. By a man. Those flaming Seanchan locusts are chaining every woman they find who can channel, apparently including a number of sisters. Twelve days past . . . Well, you know what happened as bloody well as I. The world has become a more dangerous place than at any time since the Trolloc Wars, perhaps since the Breaking itself. Therefore I’ve decided we will move forward with your scheme for these flaming Asha’man, Pevara. Distasteful and hazardous, yet burn me, there is no bloody choice. You and Javindhra will arrange it together.”

Pevara winced. Not for the Seanchan. They were human, whatever strange *ter’angreal* they possessed, and they would be defeated eventually. Mention of what the Forsaken had done twelve days ago brought a grimace, though, despite her efforts at keeping a smooth face. So much of the Power wielded in one place could have been no one else. To the extent she could, she avoided thinking about that or what they might have been trying to accomplish. Or worse, what they might have accomplished. A second wince came at hearing the proposal to bond Asha’man named as hers. But that had been inevitable from the moment she presented Tarna’s suggestion to Tsutama, while holding her breath against the eruption she was sure would come. She had even used the argument of increasing the size of linked circles by including men, against that monstrous display of the Power. Surprisingly, there had been no eruption, and small reaction of any kind. Tsutama merely said she would think on it, and insisted on having the relevant papers about men and circles delivered to her from the Library. The third wince, the largest, was for having to work with Javindhra, for being saddled with the job at all. She had more than enough on her plate at the moment, besides which, working with Javindhra was always painful. The woman argued against anything put forward by anyone save herself. Nearly anything.

Javindhra had been vehemently against bonding Asha'man, horrified at the notion of Red sisters bonding anyone almost as much as at bonding men who could channel, yet now that the Highest had commanded it, she was stymied. Still, she found a way to argue against. "Elaida will never allow it," she muttered.

Tsutama's glittering eyes caught her gaze and held it. The bony woman swallowed audibly.

"Elaida will not know until it is too late, Javindhra. I hide her secrets—the disaster against the Black Tower, Dumai's Wells—as best I can because she was raised from the Red, but she is the Amyrlin Seat, of all Ajahs and none. That means she is no longer Red, and this is Ajah business, not hers." A dangerous tone entered her voice. And she had not cursed once. That meant she was on the edge of open fury. "Do you disagree with me on this? Do you intend to inform Elaida despite my express wishes?"

"No, Highest," Javindhra replied quickly, then buried her face in her cup. Strangely, she seemed to be hiding a smile.

Pevara contented herself with shaking her head. If it had to be done, and she was certain it must, then clearly Elaida had to be kept in the dark. What did Javindhra have to smile about? Too many suspicions.

"I'm very glad that you both agree with me," Tsutama said dryly, leaning back in her chair. "Now, leave me."

They paused only to set down their cups and curtsy. In the Red, when the Highest spoke, everyone obeyed, including Sitters. The sole exception, by Ajah law, was voting in the Hall, though some women who held the title had managed to insure that any vote near to their hearts went as they wished. Pevara was certain Tsutama intended to be one such. The struggle was going to be distinctly unpleasant. She only hoped she could give as good as she got.

In the corridor outside, Javindhra muttered something about correspondence and rushed off down the white floor tiles marked with the red Flame of Tar Valon before Pevara could say a word. Not that she had intended to say anything, but surely as peaches were poison, the woman was going to drag her heels in this and leave the whole matter in her lap. Light, but this was the last thing she needed, at the worst possible time.

Pausing at her own rooms only long enough to gather her long-fringed shawl and check the hour—a quarter of an hour to noon; she was almost disappointed that her one clock agreed with Tsutama's; clocks frequently did not—she left the Red quarters and hurried deeper into the Tower, down into the common areas below the quarters. The wide hallways were well lighted with mirrored stand-lamps but almost empty of people, which made them seem cavernous and the frieze-banded white walls stark. The occasional rippling of a bright tapestry in a draft had an eerie feel, as though the silk or wool had taken on life. The few people she saw were serving men and women with the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests, scurrying along about their chores and barely pausing long enough to offer hurried courtesies. They kept their eyes lowered. With the Ajahs separated into all but warring camps, fetid tension and antagonism filled the Tower, and the mood had infected the servants. Frightened them, at least.

She could not be sure, but she thought fewer than two hundred sisters remained in the Tower, most keeping to their Ajah quarters except for necessity, so she really did not expect to see another sister strolling. When Adelorna Bastine glided up the short stairs from a crossing corridor almost right in front of her, she was so surprised she gave a start. Adelorna, who made slimness appear stately despite her lack of height, walked on without acknowledging Pevara in any way. The Saldaean woman wore her shawl, too—no sister was seen outside her Ajah quarters without her shawl, now—and was followed by her three Warders. Short and tall, wide and lean, they wore their swords, and their eyes never ceased moving. Warders wearing swords and plainly guarding their Aes Sedai's back, in the Tower. That was all too common, yet Pevara could have wept at it. Only, there were too many reasons for weeping to settle on one; instead she set about solving what she could.

Tsutama could command Reds to bond Asha'man, command them not to go running to Elaida, but it seemed best to begin with sisters who might be willing to entertain the notion without being ordered, especially with rumors spreading of three Red sisters dead at Asha’man hands. Tarna Feir had already entertained it, so a very private conversation with her was in order. She might know others of a like mind. The greatest difficulty would be approaching the Asha’man with the idea. They were very unlikely to agree just because they themselves had already bonded fifty-one sisters. Light of the world, fifty-one! Broaching the subject would require a sister who possessed diplomacy and a way with words. And iron nerve. She was still mulling over names when she saw the woman she had come to meet, already at the appointed place, apparently studying a tall tapestry.

Tiny and willowy and regal in her pale silver silk with a slightly darker lace at her neck and wrists, Yukiri appeared thoroughly engrossed in the tapestry and quite at her ease. Pevara could only recall seeing her the slightest bit flustered on one occasion, and putting Talene to the question had been nerve-racking for everyone there. Yukiri was alone, of course, though of late she had been heard to say she was thinking of taking a Warder again. Doubtless that was equal parts the current times and their own present situation. Pevara could have done with a Warder or two herself.

“Is there any truth in this, or is it all the weaver’s fancy?” she asked, joining the smaller woman. The tapestry showed a long-ago battle against Trollocs, or was purported to. Most such things were made long after the fact, and the weavers usually went by hearsay. This one was old enough to need the protection of a warding to keep it from falling apart.

“I know as much about tapestries as a pig knows about blacksmithing, Pevara.” For all her elegance, Yukiri seldom let long pass without revealing her country origins. The silvery gray fringe of her shawl swung as she gathered it around her. “You’re late, so let’s be brief. I feel like a hen being watched by a fox. Marris broke this morning, and I gave her the oath of obedience myself, but as with the others, her ‘one other’ is out of the Tower. With the rebels, I think.” She fell silent as a pair of serving women approached up the hallway carrying a large wicker laundry basket with neatly folded bed linens bulging from the top.

Pevara sighed. It had seemed so encouraging, at the start. Terrifying and nearly overwhelming, too, yet they had appeared to be making a good beginning. Talene had only known the name of one other Black sister actually in the Tower at present, but once Atuan had been kidnapped—Pevara would have liked to think of it as an arrest, yet she could not when they seemed to be violating half of Tower Law and a good many strong customs besides—once Atuan was safely in hand, she had soon been induced to surrender the names of her heart: Karale Sanghir, a Domani Gray, and Marris Thornhill, an Andoran Brown. Only Karale among them had a Warder, though he had turned out to be a Darkfriend, too. Luckily, soon after learning that his Aes Sedai had betrayed him, he had managed to take poison in the basement room where he had been confined while Karale was questioned. Strange to think of that as lucky, but the Oath Rod only worked on those who could channel, and they were too few to guard and tend prisoners.

It had been such a bright beginning, however fraught, and now they were at an impasse unless one of the others returned to the Tower, back to searching for discrepancies between what sisters claimed to have done and what it could be proven they actually had, something made harder by the inclination of most sisters to be oblique in nearly everything. Of course, Talene and the other three would pass along whatever they knew, whatever came into their hands—the oath of obedience took care of that—but any message very much more important than "take this and put it in that place" would be in a cipher known only to the woman who sent it and the woman it was directed to. Some were protected by a weave that made the ink vanish if the wrong hand broke the seal; that could be done with so little of the Power it might go unnoticed unless you were looking for it, and there appeared to be no way to circumvent the ward. If they were not at an impasse, then their flow of success was reduced to a creeping trickle. And always there was the danger that the hunted would learn of them and become the hunters. Invisible hunters, for all practical purposes, just as they now seemed invisible prey.

Still, they had four names plus four sisters in hand who would admit they were Darkfriends, though likely Marris would be as quick as the other three to claim she now rejected the Shadow, repented of her sins, and embraced the Light once more. Enough to convince anyone. Supposedly, the Black Ajah knew everything that passed in Elaida's study, yet it might be worth the risk. Pevara refused to believe Talene's claim that Elaida was a Darkfriend. After all, she had initiated the hunt. The Amyrlin Seat could rouse the entire Tower. Perhaps a revelation that the Black Ajah truly existed might do what the appearance of the rebels with an army had failed to, stop the Ajahs from hissing at one another like strange cats and bind them back together. The Tower's wounds called for desperate remedies.

The serving women passed beyond earshot, and Pevara was about to bring up the suggestion when Yukiri spoke again.

"Last night, Talene received an order to appear tonight before their 'Supreme Council.'" Her mouth twisted around the words in distaste. "It seems that happens only if you're being honored or given a very, very important assignment. Or if you're to be put to the question." Her lips almost writhed. What they had learned about the Black Ajah's means of putting someone to the question was as nauseating as it was incredible. Forcing a woman into a circle against her will? Guiding a circle to inflict pain? Pevara felt her *stomach* writhing. "Talene doesn't think she's to be honored or given an assignment," Yukiri went on, "so she begged to be hidden away. Saerin put her in a room in the lowest basement. Talene may be wrong, but I agree with Saerin. Risking it would be letting a dog into the chicken yard and hoping for the best."

Pevara stared up at the tapestry stretching well above their heads. Armored men swung swords and axes, stabbed spears and halberds at huge, man-like shapes with boars' snouts and wolves' snouts, with goats' horns and rams' horns. The weaver had seen Trollocs. Or accurate drawings. Men fought alongside the Trollocs, too. Darkfriends. Sometimes, fighting the Shadow required spilling blood. And desperate remedies.

"Let Talene go to this meeting," she said. "We'll all go. They won't expect us. We can kill or capture them and decapitate the Black at a stroke. This Supreme Council must know the names of all of them. We can destroy the whole Black Ajah."

Lifting an edge of the fringe on Pevara's shawl with a slim hand, Yukiri frowned at it ostentatiously. "Yes, red. I thought it might have turned green when I wasn't looking. There will be thirteen of them, you know. Even if some of this 'Council' are out of the Tower, the rest will bring in sisters to make up the number."

"I know," Pevara replied impatiently. Talene had been a fount of information, most of it useless and much of it horrifying, almost more than they could take in. "We take everyone. We can order Zerah and the others to fight alongside us, and even Talene and that lot. They'll do as they're told." In the beginning, she had been uneasy about that oath of obedience, but over time you could become accustomed to anything.

"So, nineteen of us against thirteen of them," Yukiri mused, sounding much *too* patient. Even the way she adjusted her shawl radiated patience.

"Plus whoever they have watching to make sure their meeting isn't disturbed. Thieves are always the most careful of their purses." That had the irritating sound of an old saying. "Best to call the numbers even at best, and probably favoring them. How many of us die in return for killing or capturing how many of them? More importantly, how many of them escape? Remember, they meet hooded. If just one escapes, then we won't know who she is, but she'll know us, and soon enough, the whole Black Ajah will know, too. It sounds to me less like chopping off a chicken's head than like trying to wrestle a leopard in the dark."

Pevara opened her mouth, then closed it without speaking. Yukiri was right. She should have tallied the numbers and reached the same conclusion herself. But she wanted to strike out, at something, at anything, and small wonder. The head of her Ajah might be insane; she was tasked with arranging for Reds, who by ancient custom bonded no one, to bond not just any men, but Asha'man; and the hunt for Darkfriends in the Tower had reached a stone wall. Strike out? She wanted to bite holes through bricks.

She thought their meeting was at an end—she had come only to learn how matters progressed with Marris, and a bitter harvest that had turned out—but Yukiri touched her arm. "Walk with me awhile. We've been here too long, and I want to ask you something." Nowadays, Sitters of different Ajahs standing together too long made rumors of plots sprout like mushrooms after rain. For some reason, talking while walking seemed to cause many fewer. It made no sense, but there it was.

Yukiri took her time getting to her question. The floor tiles turned from green-and-blue to yellow-and-brown as they walked along one of the main corridors that spiraled gently through the Tower, down five floors without seeing anyone else, before she spoke. "Has the Red heard from anyone who went with Toveine?"

Pevara almost tripped over her own slippers. She should have expected it, though. Toveine would not have been the only one to write from Cairhien. "From Toveine herself," she said, and told almost everything that had been in Toveine's letter. Under the circumstances, there was nothing else she could do. She did hold back the accusations against Elaida, and also how long ago the letter had arrived. The one was still Ajah business, she hoped, while the other might require awkward explanations.

"We heard from Akoure Vayet." Yukiri walked a few paces in silence, then muttered, "Blood and bloody ashes!"

Pevara’s eyebrows rose in shock. Yukiri was often earthy, but never vulgar before this. She noted that the other woman had not said when Akoure’s letter arrived, either. Had the Gray received other letters from Cairhien, from sisters who had sworn to the Dragon Reborn? She could not ask. They trusted one another with their lives in this hunt, and still, Ajah business was Ajah business. “What do you intend doing with the information?”

“We will keep silent for the good of the Tower. Only the Sitters and the head of our Ajah know. Evanellein is for pulling Elaida down because of this, but that can’t be allowed now. With the Tower to mend and the Seanchan and Asha’man to be dealt with, perhaps never.” She did not sound happy over that.

Pevara stifled her irritation. She could not like Elaida, yet you did not have to like the Amyrlin Seat. Any number of very unlikable women had worn the stole and done well for the Tower. But could sending fifty-one sisters into captivity be called doing well? Could Dumai’s Wells, with four sisters dead and more than twenty delivered into another sort of captivity, to a *ta’veren*? No matter. Elaida was Red—had been Red—and far too long had passed since a Red gained the stole and staff. All the rash actions and ill-considered decisions seemed things of the past since the rebels appeared, and saving the Tower from the Black Ajah would redeem her failures.

That was not how she put it, of course. “She began the hunt, Yukiri; she deserves to finish it. Light, everything we’ve uncovered so far has come by chance, and we are at a full stop. We need the authority of the Amyrlin Seat behind us if we’re to get any further.”

“I don’t know,” the other woman said, wavering. “All four of them say the Black knows everything that happens in Elaida’s study.” She bit at her lip and shrugged uncomfortably. “Perhaps if we can meet her alone, away from her study—”

“There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere.”

Pevara turned calmly at the sudden voice behind them, but Yukiri gave a start and muttered something pungent almost under her breath. If she kept this up, she would be as bad as Doesine. Or Tsutama.

Seaine hurried down to them with the fringe of her shawl swinging and her thick black eyebrows rising in surprise at Yukiri’s glare. How like a White, logical in everything and often blind to the world around them. Half the time, Seaine seemed unaware they were in any danger at all.

“You were looking for us?” Yukiri almost growled, planting her fists on her hips. Despite her diminutive size, she gave a good impression of fierce looming. Doubtless part of that was for being startled, but she still believed Seaine should be guarded closely for her own protection, no matter what Saerin had decided, and here the woman was, out and about alone.

“For you, for Saerin, for anyone,” Seaine replied calmly. Her earlier fears, that the Black Ajah might know what work Elaida had assigned her, were quite gone. Her blue eyes held warmth, yet otherwise she was back to being the prototypical White, a woman of icy serenity. “I have urgent news,” she said as though it were anything but. “The lesser is this. This morning I saw a letter from Ayako Norsoni that arrived several days ago. From Cairhien. She and Toveine and all the others have been captured by the Asha’man and. . . .” Tilting her head to one side, she studied them in turn. “You aren’t surprised in the slightest. Of course. You’ve seen letters, too. Well, there’s nothing to be done about it now, anyway.”

Pevara exchanged looks with Yukiri, then said, “This is the *less* urgent, Seaine?”

The White Sitter’s composure faded into worry, tightening her mouth and creasing the corners of her eyes. Her hands tightened into fists gripping her shawl. “For us, it is. I’ve just come from answering a summons to Elaida. She wanted to know how I was getting on.” Seaine took a deep breath. “With discovering proof that Alviarin entered a treasonous correspondence with the Dragon Reborn. Really, she was so circumspect in the beginning, so indirect, it’s no wonder I misunderstood what she wanted.”

“I think that fox is walking on my grave,” Yukiri murmured.

Pevara nodded. The notion of approaching Elaida had vanished like summer dew. Their one assurance that Elaida was not herself Black Ajah had been that she instigated the hunt for them, but since she had done no such thing. . . . At least the Black Ajah remained in ignorance of them. At least they had that, still. But for how much longer?

“On mine, too,” she said softly.

Alviarin glided along the corridors of the lower Tower with an outward air of serenity that she held on to hard. Night seemed to cling to the walls despite the mirrored stand-lamps, the ghosts of shadows dancing where none should be. Imagination, surely, yet they danced on the edges of vision. The hallways were very nearly empty, though the second sitting of supper had just ended. Most sisters preferred to have food brought up to their rooms, these days, but the hardier and the more defiant ventured to the dining halls from time to time, and a handful still took many of their meals below. She would not risk sisters seeing her appear flustered or hurried; she refused to let them believe she was scuttling about furtively. In truth, she disliked anyone looking at her at all. Outwardly calm, she seethed inside.

Abruptly she realized that she was fingering the spot on her forehead where Shaidar Haran had touched her. Where the Great Lord himself had marked her as his. Hysteria bubbled almost to the surface with that thought, but she maintained a smooth face by sheer will and gathered her white silk skirts slightly. That should keep her hands occupied. The Great Lord had marked her. Best not to think on that. But how to avoid it? The Great Lord . . . On the outside she displayed absolute composure, but within was a swirling tangle of mortification and hatred and very near to gibbering terror. The external calm was what mattered, though. And there was a seed of hope. That mattered, too. An odd thing to think of as hopeful, yet she would hang on to anything that might keep her alive.

Stopping in front of a tapestry that showed a woman wearing an elaborate crown kneeling to some long-ago Amyrlin, she pretended to examine it while glancing quickly to left and right. Aside from her, the corridor remained as barren of life as an abandoned tomb. Her hand darted behind the edge of the tapestry, and in an instant she was walking on again, clutching a folded message. A miracle that it had reached her so quickly. The paper seemed to burn her palm, but she could not read it here. At a measured pace, she climbed reluctantly to the White Ajah quarters. Calm and unfazed by anything, on the outside. The Great Lord had marked her. Other sisters were going to look at her.

The White was the smallest of the Ajahs, and barely more than twenty of its sisters were in the Tower at present, yet it seemed that nearly all of them were out in the main hallway. The walk along the plain white floor tiles seemed like running a gauntlet.

Seaine and Ferane were heading out despite the hour, shawls draped along their arms, and Seaine gave her a small smile of commiseration, which made her want to kill the Sitter, always thrusting her sharp nose in where it was unwanted. Ferane held no sympathy. She scowled with more open fury than any sister should have allowed herself to show. All Alviarin could do was try to ignore the copper-skinned woman without being obvious. Short and stout, with her usually mild round face and an ink smudge on her nose, Ferane was no one's image of a Domani, but the First Reasoner possessed a fierce Domani temper. She was quite capable of handing down a penance for any slight, especially to a sister who had "disgraced" both herself and the White.

The Ajah felt keenly the shame of her having been stripped of the Keeper's stole. Most felt anger at the loss of influence, as well. There were far too many glares, some from sisters who stood far enough below her that they should leap to obey if she gave a command. Others deliberately turned their backs.

She made her way through those frowns and snubs at a steady pace, unhurried, yet she felt her cheeks beginning to heat. She tried to immerse herself in the soothing nature of the White quarters. The plain white walls, lined with silvered stand-mirrors, held only a few simple tapestries, images of snowcapped mountains, shady forests, stands of bamboo with sunlight slanting through them. Ever since attaining the shawl she had used those images to help her find serenity in times of stress. The Great Lord had marked her. She clutched her skirts in fists to hold her hands at her sides. The message seemed to burn her hand. A steady, measured pace.

Two of the sisters she passed ignored her simply because they did not see her. Astrelle and Tesan were discussing food spoilage. Arguing, rather, faces smooth but eyes heated and voices on the brink of heat. They were arithmetists, of all things, as if logic could be reduced to numbers, and they seemed to be disagreeing on how those numbers were used.

"Calculating with Radun's Standard of Deviation, the rate is eleven times what it should be," Astrelle said in tight tones. "Furthermore, this must indicate the intervention of the Shadow—"

Tesan cut her off, beaded braids clicking as she shook her head. "The Shadow, yes, but Radun's Standard, it is outdated. You must use Covanen's First Rule of Medians, and calculate separately for rotting meat or rotten. The correct answers, as I said, are thirteen and nine. I have not yet applied it to the flour or the beans and the lentils, but it seems intuitively obvious—"

Astrelle swelled up, and since she was a plump woman with a formidable bosom, she could swell impressively. "Covanen's First Rule?" she practically spluttered, breaking in. "That hasn't been properly proven yet. Correct and *proven* methods are always preferable to slipshod. . . ."

Alviarin very nearly smiled as she moved on. So someone had finally noticed that the Great Lord had laid his hand on the Tower. But knowing would not help them change matters. Perhaps she had smiled, but if so, she crushed it as someone spoke.

"You'd grimace too, Ramesa, if you were being strapped every morning before breakfast," Norine said, much too loudly and plainly meaning for Alviarin to hear. Ramesa, a tall slender woman with silver bells sewn down the sleeves of her white-embroidered dress, looked startled at being addressed, and likely she was. Norine had few friends, perhaps none. She went on, cutting her eyes toward Alviarin to see whether she had noticed. "It is irrational to call a penance private and pretend nothing is happening when the Amyrlin Seat has imposed it. But then, her rationality has always been overrated, in my opinion."

Fortunately, Alviarin had only a short way further to reach her rooms. Carefully she closed the outer door and latched the latch. Not that anyone would disturb her, but she had not survived by taking chances except where she had to. The lamps were lit, and a small fire burned on the white marble hearth against the cool of an early spring evening. At least the servants still performed their duties. But even the servants knew.

Silent tears of humiliation began to stream down her cheeks. She wanted to kill Silviana, yet that would only mean a new Mistress of Novices laying the strap across her every morning until Elaida relented. Except that Elaida would never relent. Killing *her* would be more to the point, yet such killings had to be carefully rationed. Too many unexpected deaths would cause questions, perhaps dangerous questions.

Still, she had done what she could against Elaida. Katerine's news of this battle was spreading through the Black Ajah, and beyond it already. She had overheard sisters who were not Black talking of Dumai's Wells in detail, and if the details had grown in the telling, so much the better. Soon, the news from the Black Tower would have diffused though the White Tower, too, likely expanding in the same way. A pity that neither would be sufficient to see Elaida disgraced and deposed, with those cursed rebels practically on the bridges, yet Dumai's Wells and the disaster in Andor hanging over her head would keep her from undoing what Alviarin had done. Break the White Tower from within, she had been ordered. Plant discord and chaos in every corner of the Tower. Part of her had felt pain at that command, a part of her still did, yet her greater loyalty was to the Great

Lord. Elaida herself had made the first break in the Tower, but she had shattered half of it past mending.

Abruptly she realized that she was touching her forehead again and snatched her hand down. There was no mark there, nothing to feel or see. Every time she glanced into a mirror, she checked in spite of herself. And yet, sometimes she thought people were looking at her forehead, seeing something that escaped her own eyes. That was impossible, irrational, yet the thought crept in no matter how often she chased it away. Dashing tears from her face with the hand holding the message from the tapestry, she pulled the other two she had retrieved out of her belt pouch and went to the writing table, standing against the wall.

It was a plain table, and unadorned like all of her furnishings, some of which she suspected might be of indifferent workmanship. A trivial matter; so long as furniture did what it was supposed to do, nothing more mattered. Dropping the three messages on the table beside a small, beaten copper bowl, she produced a key from her pouch, unlocked a brass-banded chest sitting on the floor beside the table, and sorted through the small leather-bound books inside until she found the three she needed, each protected so that the ink on the pages would vanish if any hand but hers touched them. There were far too many ciphers in use for her to keep them in memory. Losing these books would be a painful trial, replacing them arduous, hence the stout chest and the lock. A very good lock. Good locks were not trivialities.

Quickly she stripped off the thin strips of paper wrapping the message recovered from behind the tapestry, held them to a lamp flame and dropped them into the bowl to burn. They were only directions as to where the message was to be left, one meant for each woman in the chain, the extra strips merely a way of disguising how many links the message had to go through to reach its recipient. Too many precautions were an impossibility. Even the sisters of her own heart believed her no more than they. Only three on the Supreme Council knew who she was, and she would have avoided that had it been possible. There could never be too many precautions, especially now.

The message, once she worked it out, bending to write on another sheet, was much as she had expected since the previous night when Talene failed to appear. The woman had left the Green quarters early yesterday carrying fat saddlebags and a small chest. Not having a servant carry them, she had performed the task herself. No one seemed to know where she had gone. The question was, had she panicked on receiving her summons to the Supreme Council, or was there something more? Something more, Alviarin decided. Talene *had* looked to Yukiri and Doesine as though seeking . . . guidance, perhaps. She was sure she had not imagined it. Could she have? A very small seed of hope. There must be something more. She *needed* a threat to the Black, or the Great Lord would withdraw his protection.

Angrily, she pulled her hand away from her forehead.

She never considered using the small *ter'angreal* she had hidden away to call Mesaana. For one thing, one very important thing, the woman surely intended to kill her, very likely despite the Great Lord's protection. On the instant, if that protection were lost. She had seen Mesaana's face, knew of her humiliation. No woman would let that pass, especially not one of the Chosen. Every night she dreamed of killing Mesaana, often daydreamed of how to manage it successfully, yet that must wait on finding her without the woman knowing herself found. In the meanwhile, she needed more proof. It was possible that neither Mesaana nor Shaidar Haran would see Talene as verification of anything. Sisters had panicked and run in the past, if rarely, and assuming Mesaana and the Great Lord were ignorant of that would be dangerous.

In turn she touched the ciphered message and the clear copy to the lamp flame and held each by a corner until they had burned nearly to her fingers before dropping them atop the ashes in the bowl. With a smooth black stone that she kept as a paperweight, she crushed the ashes and stirred them about. She doubted that anyone could reconstitute words from ash, but even so. . . .

Still standing, she deciphered the other two messages and learned that Yukiri and Doesine both slept in rooms warded against intrusion. That was unsurprising—hardly a sister in the Tower slept without warding these days—but it meant kidnapping either would be difficult. That was always easiest when carried out in the depths of the night by sisters of the woman's own Ajah. It might yet turn out those glances were happenstance, or imagination. She needed to consider the possibility.

With a sigh, she gathered more of the small books from the chest and gently eased herself onto the goose down cushion on the chair at the writing table. Not gently enough to stop a wince as her weight settled, though. She stifled a whimper. At first, she had thought the humiliation of Silviana's strap far worse than the pain, but the pain no longer really faded. Her bottom was a mass of bruises. And tomorrow, the Mistress of Novices would add to them. And the day after that, and the day after. . . . A bleak vision of endless days howling under Silviana’s strap, of fighting to meet the eyes of sisters who knew all about the visits to Silviana’s study.

Trying to chase those thoughts away, she dipped a good steel-nibbed pen and began to write out ciphered orders on thin sheets of paper. Talene must be found and brought back, of course. For punishment and execution, if she had simply panicked, and if she had not, if she had somehow found a way to betray her oaths. . . . Alviarin clung to that hope while she commanded a close watch put on Yukiri and Doesine. A way had to be found to take them. And if they were caught up in chance and imagination, something could still be manufactured from whatever they said. She would guide the flows in the circle. Something could be made.

She wrote furiously, unaware that her free hand had risen to her forehead, searching for the mark.

Afternoon sunlight slanted through the tall trees on the ridge above the vast Shaido encampment, dappling the air, and songbirds trilled on the branches overhead. Redbirds and bluejays flashed by, slashes of color, and Galina smiled. Heavy rain had fallen in the morning, and the air still held a touch of coolness beneath sparse, slowly drifting white clouds. Likely her gray mare, with its arched neck and lively step, had been the property of a noblewoman, or at the least a wealthy merchant. No one else but a sister could have afforded such a fine animal. She enjoyed these rides on the horse she had named Swift, because one day it would carry her swiftly to freedom; just as she enjoyed this time alone to dwell on what she would do once she had her freedom. She had plans for repaying those who had failed her, beginning with Elaida. Thinking about those plans, about their eventual fruition, was *most* enjoyable.

At least, she enjoyed her rides so long as she managed to forget that the privilege was as much a mark of how thoroughly Therava owned her, as were the thick white silk robe she wore and her firedrop-studded belt and collar. Her smile faded into a grimace. Adornments for a pet that was allowed to amuse itself when not required to amuse its owner. And she could not remove those jeweled markers, even out here. Someone might see. She rode here to get away from the Aiel, yet they could be encountered in the forest, too. Therava might learn of it. Difficult as it was to admit to herself, she feared the hawk-eyed Wise One to her bones. Therava filled her dreams, and they were never pleasant. Often she woke sweat-soaked and weeping. Waking from those nightmares was always a relief, whether or not she managed to get any sleep for the rest of the night.

There was never any order against escape on these rides, an order she would have had to obey, and that lack produced its own bitterness. Therava knew she would return, no matter how she was mistreated, in the hope that some day the Wise One might remove that cursed oath of obedience. She would be able to channel again, when and as *she* wished. Sevanna sometimes made her channel to perform menial tasks, or just to demonstrate that she could command it, but that occurred so seldom that she hungered for even that chance to embrace *saidar*. Therava refused to let her so much as touch the Power unless she begged and groveled, but then refused her permission to channel a thread. And she had groveled, abased herself completely, just to be granted that scrap. She realized that she was grinding her teeth, and forced herself to stop.

Perhaps the Oath Rod in the Tower could lift that oath from her as well as the nearly identical rod in Therava's possession, yet she could not be sure. The two were *not* identical. It was only a difference in marking, yet what if that indicated that an oath sworn on one was particular to that rod? She dared not leave without Therava's rod. The Wise One often left it lying in the open in her tent, but *you will never pick that up*, she had said.

Oh, Galina could touch that wrist-thick white rod, stroke its smooth surface, yet however hard she strained, she could not make her hand close on it. Not unless someone handed it to her. At least, she hoped that would not count as picking the thing up. It had to be so. Just the thought that it might not be filled her with bleakness. The yearning in her eyes when she gazed at the rod brought Therava's rare smiles.

Does my little Lina want to be free of her oath? she would say mockingly. *Then Lina must be a* very *good pet, because the only way I will consider freeing you is for you to convince me that you will remain my pet even then.*

A lifetime of being Therava's plaything and the target for her temper? A surrogate to be beaten whenever Therava raged against Sevanna? Bleakness was not strong enough to describe her feelings on that. Horror was more like it. She feared she might go mad if that happened. And equally, she feared there might be no escape into madness.

Mood thoroughly soured, she shaded her eyes to check the height of the sun. Therava had merely said that she would like her back before dark, and a good two hours of daylight remained, but she sighed with regret and immediately turned Swift downslope through the trees toward the camp. The Wise One enjoyed finding ways to enforce obedience without direct commands. A thousand ways to make her crawl. For safety, the woman's slightest suggestion must be taken as a command. Being a few minutes late brought punishments that made Galina cringe at the memories. Cringe and heel the mare to a faster pace through the trees. Therava accepted no excuses.

Abruptly an Aielman stepped out in front of her from behind a thick tree, a very tall man in *cadin'sor* with his spears thrust through the harness that held his bowcase on his back and his veil hanging on his chest. Without speaking, he seized her bridle.

For an instant, she gaped at him, then drew herself up indignantly. "Fool!" she snapped. "You must know me by now. Release my horse, or Sevanna and Therava will take turns removing your skin!"

These Aiel usually showed little on their faces, yet she thought his green eyes widened slightly. And then she screamed as he seized the front of her robe in a huge fist and jerked her from the saddle.

"Be silent, *gai'shain*," he said, but as though he cared nothing for whether she obeyed.

At one time she would have had to, but once they realized that she obeyed any order from anyone, there had been too many who enjoyed sending her on foolish errands that kept her occupied when Therava or Sevanna wanted her. Now, she need obey only certain Wise Ones and Sevanna, so she kicked and flailed and screamed in desperate hope of attracting someone who knew she belonged to Therava. If only she were allowed to carry a knife. Even that would have been a help. How could this man not recognize her, or at least know what her jeweled belt and collar meant? The encampment was immense, as filled with people as many large cities, yet it seemed that everyone could point out Therava's pet wetlander. The woman *would* have this fellow skinned, and Galina meant to enjoy every minute of watching.

All too quickly it became apparent that a knife would have been no use at all. Despite her struggles, the brute handled her easily, pulling her cowl down over her head, blinding her, then stuffing as much of it as he could into her mouth before binding it there. Then he flipped her face down and bound her wrists and ankles tightly. As easily as if she had been a child! She still thrashed, but it was wasted effort.

“He wanted some *gai’shain* that aren’t Aiel, Gaul, but a *gai’shain* in silk and jewels, and out riding?” a man said, and Galina stiffened. That was no Aielman. Those were the accents of Murandy! “Sure and that’s none of your ways, is it?”

“Shaido.” The word was spat out like a curse.

“Well, we still need to find a few more if he’s to learn anything useful. Maybe more than a few. There are tens of thousands of folks in white down there, and she could be anywhere among them.”

“I think maybe this one can tell Perrin Aybara what he needs to know, Fager Neald.”

If she had stiffened before, now she froze. Ice seemed to form in her stomach, and in her heart. Perrin Aybara had sent these men? If he attacked the Shaido trying to rescue his wife, he would be killed, destroying her leverage with Faile. The woman would not care what was revealed, with her man dead, and the others had no secrets they feared having known. In horror, Galina saw her hopes of obtaining the rod melting away. She had to stop him. But how?

“And why would be you thinking that, Gaul?”

“She is Aes Sedai. And a friend of Sevanna, it seems.”

“Is she, now?” the Murandian said in a thoughtful tone. “Is she that?”

Strangely, neither man sounded the least uneasy over laying hands on an Aes Sedai. And the Aielman apparently had done so fully aware of what she was. Even if he was a renegade Shaido, he had to be ignorant of the fact that she could not channel without permission. Only Sevanna and a handful of the Wise Ones knew that. This was all growing more confusing by the moment.

Suddenly she was lifted into the air and laid on her belly. Across her own saddle, she realized, and the next moment she was bouncing on the hard leather, one of the men using a hand to keep her from falling as the mare began to trot.

“Let us go to where you can make us one of your holes, Fager Neald.”

“Just the other side of the slope, Gaul. Why, I’ve been here so often, I can make a gateway nearly anywhere at all. Do you Aiel run everywhere?”

A gateway? What was the man blathering about? Dismissing his nonsense, she considered her options, and found none good. Bound like a lamb for market, gagged so she would not be heard ten paces away if she shrieked her lungs out, her chances of escape were nonexistent unless some of the Shaido sentries intercepted her captors. But did she want them to? Unless she reached Aybara, she had no way to stop him from ruining everything. On the other hand, how many days off did his camp lie? He could not be very near, or the Shaido would have found him by now. She knew scouts had been making sweeps as far as ten miles from the camp. However many days were required to reach him, it would take as many to return. Not merely minutes late, but days late.

Therava would not kill her for it. Just make her wish she were dead. She could explain. A tale of being captured by brigands. No, just a pair; it was hard enough to believe two men had gotten this near the encampment, much less a band of brigands. Unable to channel, she had needed time to escape. She could make the tale convincing. It might persuade Therava. If she said. . . . It was useless. The first time Therava had punished her for being late, it had been because her cinch broke and she had had to walk back leading her horse. The woman had not accepted that excuse, and she would not accept being kidnapped, either. Galina wanted to weep. In fact, she realized that she was weeping, hopeless tears she was helpless to stop.

The horse halted, and before she could think, she convulsed wildly, trying to fling herself off the saddle, screaming as loudly as her gag permitted. They had to be trying to avoid sentries. Surely Therava would understand if the sentries returned with her and her captors, even if she was late. Surely she could find a way to handle Faile even with her husband dead.

A hard hand smacked her rudely. “Be silent,” the Aielman said, and they began to trot again.

Her tears began again, too, and the silk cowl covering her face grew damp. Therava was going to make her *howl*. But even while she wept, she began to work on what she would say to Aybara. At least she could salvage her chances of obtaining the rod. Therava was going to. . . . No. No! She needed to concentrate on what *she* could do. Images of the cruel-eyed Wise One holding a switch or a strap or binding cords reared in her mind, but every time she forced them down while she went over every question

Aybara might ask and what answers she would give him. On what she would say to make him leave his wife's safety in her hands.

In none of her calculations had she expected to be lifted down and stood upright no more than an hour after being captured.

"Unsaddle her horse, Noren, and picket it with the others," the Murandian said.

"Right away, Master Neald," came a reply. In a Cairhienin accent.

The bonds around her ankles fell away, a knife blade slid between her wrists, severing those cords, and then whatever held her gag in place was untied. She spat out silk sodden with her own saliva and jerked the cowl back.

A short man in a dark coat was leading Swift away through a straggle of large, patched brown tents and small, crude huts that seemed made from tree branches, including pine boughs with brown needles. How long for pine to turn brown? Days, surely, perhaps weeks. The sixty or seventy men tending cook fires or sitting on wooden stools looked like farmers in their rough coats, but some were sharpening swords, and spears and halberds and other polearms stood stacked in a dozen places. Through the gaps between the tents and huts, she could see more men moving about to either side, a number of them in helmets and breastplates, mounted and carrying long, streamered lances. Soldiers, riding out on patrol. How many more lay beyond her sight? No matter. What was in front of her eyes was impossible! The Shaido had sentries farther from their camp than this. She was certain they did!

"If the face wasn't enough," Neald murmured, "that cool, calculating study would convince me. Like she's examining worms under a rock she's turned over." A weedy fellow in a black coat, he knuckled his waxed mustaches in an amused way, careful not to spoil the points. He wore a sword, but he certainly had no look of soldier or armsman about him. "Well, come along then, Aes Sedai," he said, clasping her upper arm. "Lord Perrin will be wanting to ask you some questions." She jerked free, and he calmly took a firmer grip. "None of that, now."

The huge Aielman, Gaul, took her other arm, and she could go with them or be dragged. She walked with her head high, pretending they were merely an escort, but anyone who saw how they held her arms would know differently. Staring straight ahead, she was still aware of armed farmboys—most were young—staring at her. Not gaping in astonishment, just watching, considering. How could they be so high-handed with an Aes Sedai? Some of the Wise Ones who were unaware of the oath holding her had begun expressing doubt that she was Aes Sedai because she obeyed so readily and truckled so for Therava, but these two knew what she was. And did not care. She suspected those farmers knew, too, and yet none displayed any surprise at how she was being treated. It made the back of her neck prickle.

As they approached a large red-and-white-striped tent with the door-flaps tied back, she overheard voices from inside.

“. . . . said he was ready to come right now,” a man was saying.

“I can’t afford to feed one more mouth when I don’t know for how long,” another man replied. “Blood and ashes! How long does it take to arrange a meeting with these people?”

Gaul had to duck into the tent, but Galina strode in as though entering her own rooms in the Tower. A prisoner she might be, yet she was Aes Sedai, and that simple fact was a powerful tool. And weapon. Who was he trying to arrange a meeting with? Not Sevanna, surely. Let it be anyone but Sevanna.

In stark contrast to the ramshackle camp outside, there was a good flowered carpet for a floor here, and two silk hangings embroidered with flowers and birds in a Cairhienin fashion hung from the roof poles. She focused on a tall, broad-shouldered man in his shirtsleeves with his back to her, leaning on his fists against a slender-legged table that was decorated with lines of gilding and covered with maps and sheets of paper. She had only glimpsed Aybara at a distance in Cairhien, yet she was sure this was the farmboy from Rand al’Thor’s home village in spite of the silk shirt and well-polished boots. Even the turndowns were polished. If nothing else, everyone in the tent seemed to be looking to him.

As she walked into the tent, a tall woman in high-necked green silk with small touches of lace at her throat and wrists, black hair falling in waves to her shoulders, laid a hand on Aybara’s arm in a familiar manner. Galina recognized her. “She seems cautious, Perrin,” Berelain said.

“Wary of a trap, in my estimation, Lord Perrin,” put in a graying, hard-bitten man in an ornate breastplate worn over a scarlet coat. A Ghealdanin, Galina thought. At least he and Berelain explained the presence of soldiers, if not how they could be where they could not possibly be.

Galina was very glad she had not encountered the woman in Cairhien. That would have made matters now more than merely awkward. She wished her hands were free to wipe the residue of tears from her face, but the two men held onto her arms firmly. There was nothing to be done about it. She was Aes Sedai. That was all that mattered. That was all she would allow to matter. She opened her mouth to take command of the situation. . . .

Aybara suddenly looked over his shoulder at her, as though he had sensed her presence in some way, and his golden eyes froze her tongue. She had dismissed tales that the man had a wolf's eyes, but he did. A wolf's hard eyes in a stone-hard face. He made the Ghealdanin look almost soft. A sad face behind that close-cropped beard, as well. Over his wife, no doubt. She could make use of that.

"An Aes Sedai wearing *gai'shain* white," he said flatly, turning to face her. He was a large man, if not nearly so large as the Aielman, and he loomed just by standing there, those golden eyes taking in everything. "And a prisoner, it seems. She didn't want to come?"

"She thrashed like a trout on the riverbank while Gaul was tying her up, my Lord," Neald replied. "Myself, I had nothing to do but stand and watch."

A strange thing to say, and in such a significant tone. What could he have . . . ? Abruptly she became aware of another man in a black coat, a stocky, weathered fellow with a silver pin in the shape of a sword fastened to his high collar. And she remembered where she had last seen men in black coats. Leaping out of holes in the air just before everything turned to utter disaster at Dumai's Wells. Neald and his holes, his gateways. These men could channel.

It took everything she could summon not to try jerking free of the Murandian's clasp, not to edge away. Just being this close to him made her stomach writhe. Being touched by him. . . . She wanted to whimper, and that surprised her. Surely she was tougher than that! She concentrated on maintaining an appearance of calm while trying to work moisture back into her suddenly dry mouth.

"She claims friendship with Sevanna," Gaul added.

"A friend of Sevanna," Aybara said, frowning. "But wearing a *gai'shain* robe. A silk robe, and jewels, but still. . . . You didn't want to come, but you didn't channel to try stopping Gaul and Neald from bringing you. And you’re terrified.” He shook his head. How did he know she was afraid? “I’m surprised to see an Aes Sedai with the Shaido after Dumai’s Wells. Or don’t you know about that? Let her go, let her go. I doubt she’ll take off running since she let you bring her this far.”

“Dumai’s Wells does not matter,” she said coldly as the men’s hands fell away. The pair remained on either side of her like guards, though, and she was proud of the steadiness of her voice. A man who could channel. Two of them, and she was alone. Alone, and unable to channel a thread. She stood straight, head erect. She was Aes Sedai, and they must see her every inch an Aes Sedai. How *could* he know she was afraid? Not a shred of fear tinged her words. Her face might as well have been carved of stone for all she let show. “The White Tower has purposes none but Aes Sedai can know or understand. I am about White Tower business, and you are interfering. An unwise choice for any man.” The Ghealdanin nodded ruefully, as though he had learned that lesson personally; Aybara merely looked at her, expressionless.

“Hearing your name was the only reason I didn’t do something drastic to these two,” she continued. If the Murandian or the Aielmen brought up how long that had taken, she was ready to claim that she had been stunned at first, but they held silent, and she spoke quickly and forcefully. “Your wife Faile is under my protection, as well as Queen Alliandre, and when my business with Sevanna is done, I will take them to safety with me and help them reach wherever they wish to go. In the meanwhile, however, your presence here endangers my business, White Tower business, which I cannot allow. It also endangers you, and your wife, and Alliandre. There are tens of thousands of Aiel in that camp. Many tens of thousands. If they descend on you, and their scouts will find you soon if they haven’t already, they will wipe all of you from the face of the earth. They may harm your wife and Alliandre for it, as well. I may not be able to stop Sevanna. She is a harsh woman, and many of her Wise Ones can channel, nearly four hundred of them, all willing to use the Power to do violence, while I am one Aes Sedai, and constrained by my oaths. If you wish to protect your wife and the Queen, turn away from their camp and ride as hard as you can. They may not attack you if you are obviously retreating. That is the only hope you or your wife have.” There. If only a few of the seeds she had planted took root, they should be enough to turn him back.

“If Alliandre is in danger, Lord Perrin,” the Ghealdanin began, but Aybara stopped him with a raised hand. That was all it took. The soldier’s jaw tightened till she thought she might hear it creak, yet he remained silent.

“You’ve seen Faile?” the young man said, excitement touching his voice. “She’s well? She hasn’t been harmed?” The fool seemed not to have heard a word she said beyond mention of his wife.

“Well, and under my protection, Lord Perrin.” If this jumped-up country boy wanted to call himself a lord, she would tolerate it for the moment. “She and Alliandre, both.” The soldier glowered at Aybara, but he did not take the opportunity to speak. “You must listen to me. The Shaido will kill you—”

“Come here and look at this,” Aybara broke in, turning to the table and drawing a large page toward him.

“You must forgive his lack of manners, Aes Sedai,” Berelain murmured, handing her a worked silver cup of dark wine. “He is under considerable strain, as you might understand in the circumstances. I haven’t introduced myself. I am Berelain, the First of Mayene.”

“I know. You may call me Alyse.”

The other woman smiled as though she knew that was a false name, yet accepting it. The First of Mayene was far from unsophisticated. A pity she had to deal with the boy instead; sophisticated people who thought they could dance with Aes Sedai were easily led. Country folk could prove stubborn out of ignorance. But the fellow should know *something* of Aes Sedai by now. Perhaps ignoring him would give him reason to think on who and what she was.

The wine tasted like flowers on her tongue. “This is very good,” she said with genuine gratitude. She had not tasted decent wine for weeks. Therava would not permit her a pleasure the Wise One denied herself. If the woman learned that she had found several barrels in Malden, she would not even have mediocre wine. And surely would be beaten as well.

“There are other sisters in the camp, Alyse Sedai. Masuri Sokawa and Seonid Traighan, and my own advisor, Annoura Larisen. Would you like to speak to them after you finish with Perrin?”

With feigned casualness, Galina drew up her cowl till her face was shadowed and took another swallow of wine for time to think. Annoura’s presence was understandable, given Berelain’s, but what were the other two doing there? They had been among those who fled the Tower after Siuan was deposed and Elaida raised. True, none of them would know of her involvement in kidnapping the al'Thor boy for Elaida, but still. . . .

“I think not,” she murmured. “Their business is theirs, and mine is mine.” She would have given a great deal to know their business, but not at the cost of being recognized. Any friend of the Dragon Reborn might have . . . notions . . . about a Red. “Help me convince Aybara, Berelain. Your Winged Guards are no match for what the Shaido will send against them. Whatever Ghealdanin you have with you won't make a difference. An army will make no difference. The Shaido are too many, and they have hundreds of Wise Ones ready to use the One Power as a weapon. I have seen them do it. You may die, too, and even if you are captured, I can't promise I can make Sevanna release you when I leave.”

Berelain laughed as though thousands of Shaido and hundreds of Wise Ones who could channel were of no account. “Oh, have no fear they will find us. Their camp lies a good three-day ride from here, perhaps four. The terrain turns rough not far from where we are.”

Three days, perhaps four. Galina shivered. She should have put it together before this. Three or four days of ground covered in less than an hour. Through a hole in the air created with the male half of the Power. She had been near enough for *saidin* to touch her. She kept her voice steady, though. “Even so, you must help me convince him not to attack. It would be disastrous, for him, for his wife, for everyone involved. Beyond that, what I am doing is important to the Tower. You have always been a strong supporter of the Tower.” Flattery, for the ruler of a single city and a few hides of land, but flattery oiled the insignificant as well as it did the mighty.

“Perrin is stubborn, Alyse Sedai. I doubt you'll change his mind. That isn't easy to do once he has it set.” For some reason, the young woman smiled a smile mysterious enough to credit a sister.

“Berelain, could you have your talk later?” Aybara said impatiently, and it was not a suggestion. He tapped the sheet of paper with a thick finger. “Alyse, would you look at this?” That was not a suggestion, either. Who did the man think he was, ordering an Aes Sedai?

Still, moving to the table took her a little way from Neald. It brought her nearer the other one, who was studying her intently, but he was on the other side of the table. A feeble barrier, yet she could ignore him by looking at the sheet of paper under Aybara's finger. Keeping her eyebrows from rising was difficult. The town of Malden was outlined there, complete with the aqueduct that brought water from a lake five miles away, and also a rough outline of the Shaido camp surrounding the city. The real surprise was that markings seemed to indicate the arrival of septs since the Shaido reached Malden, and the number of those meant his men had been observing the camp for some time. Another map, roughly sketched, seemed to show the city itself in some detail.

"I see you have learned how large their camp is," she said. "You must know rescuing her is hopeless. Even if you have a hundred of those men," speaking of them was not easy, and she could not entirely keep the contempt from her voice, "it isn't enough. Those Wise Ones will fight back. Hundreds of them. It would be a slaughter, thousands dead, your wife perhaps among them. I have told you, she and Alliandre are under my protection. When my business is finished, I will take them to safety. You have heard me say it, so by the Three Oaths you know it is true. Don't make the mistake of thinking that your connection to Rand al'Thor will protect you if you interfere in what the White Tower is doing. Yes, I know who you are. Did you think your wife wouldn't tell me? She trusts me, and if you want to keep her safe, you must trust me, too."

The idiot looked at her as though her words had flown over his head without touching his ears. Those eyes were truly unsettling. "Where does she sleep? Her, and everyone else who was captured with her. Show me."

"I cannot," she replied levelly. "*Gai'shain* seldom sleep in the same place two nights running." With that lie vanished the last chance that she could leave Faile and the others alive. Oh, she had never intended to increase the risk of her own escape by aiding them, but that could always have been explained later by some change in circumstances. She could not hazard the possibility that they might actually escape one day and uncover her direct lie, however.

"I will get her free," he growled, almost too softly for her to hear. "Whatever it takes."

Her thoughts raced. There seemed no way to divert him from it, but perhaps she could delay him. She *had* to do at least that. "Will you at least hold off your attack? I may be able to conclude my affairs in a few more days, perhaps a week." A deadline should sharpen Faile's efforts. Before, it would have been dangerous; a threat not carried out lost all force, and the chance had been too great that the woman might be unable to get the rod in time. Now, the chance became necessary. “If I can do that, and bring your wife and others out, there will be no reason for you to die needlessly. One week.”

Frustration painting his face, Aybara thumped his fist on the table hard enough to make it bounce. “You can have a few days,” he growled, “maybe even a week or more, if—” He bit off whatever he had been about to say. Those strange eyes centered on her face. “But I can’t promise how many days,” he went on. “If I had my druthers, I’d be attacking now. I won’t leave Faile a prisoner a day longer than I have to while I wait on Aes Sedai schemes for the Shaido to bear fruit. You say she’s under your protection, but how great a protection can you really give, wearing that robe? There are signs of drunkenness in the camp. Even some of their sentries drink. Are the Wise Ones given to it as well?”

The sudden shift nearly made her blink. “The Wise Ones drink only water, so you needn’t think you can find them all in a stupor,” she told him dryly. And quite truthfully. It always amused her when the truth served her purposes. Not that the Wise Ones’ example was bearing much fruit. Drunkenness was rife among the Shaido. Every raid brought back all the wine that could be found. Dozens and dozens of small stills produced vile brews from grains, and every time the Wise Ones destroyed a still, two sprang up in its place. Letting him know that would only encourage him, though. “As for the others, I have been with armies before this and seen more drinking than I have among the Shaido. If a hundred are drunk among tens of thousands, what gain is there for you? Really, it will be better if you promise me a week. Two would be better still.”

His eyes flashed to the map, and his right hand made a fist again, but there was no anger in his voice. “Do the Shaido go inside the town walls very often?”

She set the winecup down on the table and drew herself up. Meeting that yellow-eyed gaze required effort, yet she managed without a falter. “I think it’s past time you showed proper respect. I am an Aes Sedai, not a servant.”

“Do the Shaido go inside the town walls very often?” he repeated in exactly the same even tone. She wanted to grind her teeth.

“No,” she snapped. “They’ve looted everything worth stealing and some things that aren’t.” She regretted the words as soon as they left her tongue. They had seemed safe, until she remembered men who could leap through holes in the air. “That isn’t to say they never enter. Most days, a few go in. There might be twenty or thirty at any time, more on occasion, in groups of two or three.” Did he have the wit to see what that would mean? Best to make sure he saw. “You could not secure them all. Inevitably, some will escape to warn the camp.”

Aybara only nodded. “When you see Faile, tell her that on the day she sees fog on the ridges and hears wolves howl by daylight, she and the others must go to Lady Cairen’s fortress at the north end of the city and hide there. Tell her I love her. Tell her I’m coming for her.”

Wolves? Was the man demented? How could he ensure that wolves would . . . ? Suddenly, with those wolf’s eyes on her, she was not sure she wanted to know.

“I will tell her,” she lied. Perhaps he only meant to use the men in black coats to grab his wife? But why wait at all, in that case? Those yellow eyes hid secrets she wished she knew. Who was he trying to meet? Clearly not Sevanna. She would have thanked the Light for that if she had not abandoned that foolishness long since. Who was ready to come to him right away? One man had been mentioned, but that might mean a king with an army. Or al’Thor himself? Him, she prayed never to see again.

Her promise seemed to release something in the young man. He exhaled slowly, and a tension she had not noticed left his face. “The trouble with a blacksmith’s puzzle,” he said softly, tapping the outline of Malden, “is always getting the key piece into place. Well, that’s done. Or soon will be.”

“Will you stay for supper?” Berelain asked. “The hour is near.”

The light was dimming in the open doorway. A lean serving woman in dark wool, her white hair in a bun on the back of her head, entered and began lighting the lamps.

“Will you promise me at least a week?” Galina demanded, but Aybara shook his head. “In that case, every hour is important.” She had never intended staying a moment longer than necessary, but she had to force her next words out. “Will you have one of your . . . men . . . take me back to as near the camp as possible?”

“Do it, Neald,” Aybara commanded. “And at least try to be polite.” *He* said that!

She drew a deep breath and pushed her cowl back. “I want you to hit me, here.” She touched her cheek. “Hard enough to bruise.”

Finally she had said something that got through to the man. Those yellow eyes widened, and he tucked his thumbs behind his belt as though securing his hands. “I will not,” he said, sounding as though she were insane.

The Ghealdanin’s mouth hung open, and the serving woman was staring at her, the burning taper in her hand hanging dangerously near her skirts.

“I require it,” Galina said firmly. She would need every scrap of verisimilitude she could find with Therava. “Do it!”

“I don’t believe he will,” Berelain said, gliding forward with her skirts gathered. “He has very country ways. If you will permit me?”

Galina nodded impatiently. There was nothing for it, though the woman likely would not leave a very convincing. . . . Her vision went dark, and when she could see again, she was swaying slightly. She could taste blood. Her hand went to her cheek, and she winced.

“Too hard?” Berelain inquired anxiously.

“No,” Galina mumbled, fighting to keep her face smooth. Had she been able to channel, she would have torn the woman’s head off! Of course, if she could have channeled, none of this would be necessary. “Now, the other cheek. And have someone fetch my horse.”

She rode into the forest with the Murandian, to a place where several of the huge trees lay toppled and oddly slashed, sure it would be difficult for her to use his hole in the air, but when the man produced a vertical silver-blue slash that widened into a view of steeply climbing land, she did not think of tainted *saidin* at all as she heeled Swift through the opening. Never a thought except of Therava.

She almost howled when she realized she was on the opposite side of the ridge from the encampment. Frantically she raced the sinking sun. And lost.

She had been right, unfortunately. Therava did not accept excuses. She was particularly upset over the bruises. She herself never marred Galina’s face. What followed easily equaled her nightmares. And it lasted much longer. At times, when she was screaming her loudest, she almost forgot her desperate need to get the rod. But she clung to that. Obtain the rod, kill Faile and her friends, and she would be free.

Egwene regained awareness slowly, and muzzy as she was, barely had the presence of mind to keep her eyes closed. Pretending still to be unconscious was all too easy. Her head lay slumped on a woman’s shoulder, and she could not have lifted it had she tried. An Aes Sedai’s shoulder; she could sense the woman’s ability. Her brain felt stuffed with wool, her thoughts were slow and veering, her limbs all but numb. Her wool riding dress and cloak were dry, she realized, despite the soaking she had received in the river. Well, that was easily managed with the Power. Small chance they had channeled the water from her garments for her comfort, though. She was seated, wedged in between two sisters, one of whom wore a flowery perfume, each using a hand to keep her more or less upright. They were in a coach by the way they all swayed and the clatter of a trotting team’s horseshoes on paving stones. Carefully, she opened her eyes to narrow slits.

The coach’s side curtains were tied back, though the stink of rotting garbage made her think it would have been better to pull them shut. Garbage, rotting! How *could* Tar Valon have come to that? Such neglect of the city was reason enough by itself for Elaida to be removed. The windows let in enough moonlight for her to dimly make out three Aes Sedai seated facing her, in the rear of the coach. Even had she not known they could channel, their fringed shawls would have made it certain. In Tar Valon, wearing a shawl with fringe could result in unpleasantness for a woman who was not Aes Sedai. Oddly, the sister on the left appeared to be huddling against the side of the coach, away from the other two, and if they were not exactly huddling, at least they were sitting very close together, as though avoiding contact with the third Aes Sedai. Very odd.

Abruptly it came to her that she was not shielded. Muddled she might be, but that made no sense at all. They could feel her strength, as she could theirs, and while none was weak, she thought she could overcome all five if she were quick enough. The True Source was a vast sun just beyond the edge of sight, calling to her. The first question was, did she dare try yet? In the state her head was, thought wading through knee-deep mud, whether she could actually embrace *saidar* was uncertain, and succeed or fail, they would know once she tried. Best to try recovering a little beforehand. The second question was, how long did she dare wait? They would not let her go unshielded forever. Experimentally, she tried wiggling her toes inside her stout leather shoes, and was delighted when they moved obediently. Life seemed to be returning slowly to her arms and legs. She thought she might be able to raise her head now, if unsteadily. Whatever they had given her was wearing off. How long?

Events were taken out of her hands by the dark-haired sister sitting in the middle of the rear seat, who leaned forward and slapped her so hard that she toppled onto the lap of the woman she had been leaning against. Her hand went to her stinging cheek on its own volition. So much for pretending unconsciousness.

“There was no need for that, Katerine,” a raspy voice said above her as its owner lifted her upright again. She could hold her head up, just, it turned out. Katerine. That would be Katerine Alruddin, a Red. It seemed important to identify her captors for some reason, though she knew nothing of Katerine beyond her name and Ajah. The sister she had fallen onto was yellow-haired, but her moon-shadowed face belonged to a stranger. “I think you gave her too much of the forkroot,” the woman went on.

A chill flashed through her. So that was what she had been fed! She racked her brain for everything Nynaeve had told her about that vile tea, but her thoughts were still slow. Better, though, it seemed. She was sure Nynaeve had said the effects took some time to go away completely.

“I gave her the exact dose, Felaana,” the sister who had slapped her replied dryly, “and as you can see, it is leaving her precisely as it should. I want her able to walk by the time we reach the Tower. I certainly don’t intend to help carry her again,” she finished with a glare for the sister seated to Egwene’s left, who gave a dismissive shake of her head. That was Pritalle Nerbaijan, a Yellow who had done her best to avoid teaching novices or Accepted and made little secret of her dislike for the task when forced to it.

“To have my Harril carry her would have been most improper,” she said coldly. In fact, icily. “Myself, I will be glad if she can walk, but if not, so be it. In any case, I look forward to handing her over to others. If you do not want to carry her again, Katerine, I do not want to stand guard over her half the night in the cells.” Katerine gave a dismissive toss of her head.

The cells. Of course; she was bound for one of those small, dark rooms on the first level of the Tower’s basement. Elaida would charge her with falsely claiming to be the Amyrlin Seat. The penalty for that was death. Strangely, that brought no fear. Perhaps it was the herb working on her. Would Romanda or Lelaine give way, agreeing to be raised Amyrlin after she was dead? Or would they continue to struggle with one another until the entire rebellion faltered and failed, and the sisters straggled back to Elaida? A sad thought, that. Bone-deep sad. But if she could feel sorrow, the forkroot was not quenching her emotions, so why was she not afraid? She thumbed her Great Serpent ring. At least, she tried to, and discovered it gone. Anger flared, white-hot. They might kill her, but they would not deny she was Aes Sedai.

“Who betrayed me?” she asked, pleased that her tone was even and cool. “It can’t hurt to tell me, since I’m your prisoner.” The sisters stared at her as though surprised she had a voice.

Katerine leaned forward casually, raising her hand. The Red’s eyes tightened when pale-haired Felaana lunged to catch the slap before it could land on Egwene.

“She will no doubt be executed,” the raspy-voiced woman said firmly, “but she is an initiate of the Tower, and none of us has the right to beat her.”

“Take your hand off me, Brown,” Katerine snarled, and shockingly, the light of *saidar* enveloped her.

In an instant the glow surrounded every woman in the coach except Egwene. They eyed one another like strange cats on the brink of hissing, on the brink of lashing out with claws. No, not everyone; Katerine and the taller sister seated against her flank never glanced at one another. But they had glares aplenty for the rest. What under the Light was going on? The mutual hostility was so thick in the air, she could have sliced it like bread.

After a moment, Felaana released Katerine’s wrist and leaned back, yet no one released the Source. Egwene suddenly suspected that no one was willing to be the first. Their faces were all serene in the pale moonlight, but the Brown’s hands were knotted in her shawl, and the sister leaning away from Katerine was smoothing her skirts repeatedly.

“About time for this, I think,” Katerine said, weaving a shield. “We wouldn’t want you to try anything . . . futile.” Her smile was vicious. Egwene merely sighed as the weave settled on her; she doubted she could have embraced *saidar* yet in any case, and against five already full of the Power, success would have lasted moments at most. Her mild reaction appeared to disappoint the Red. “This may be your last night in the world,” she went on. “It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if Elaida had you stilled and beheaded tomorrow.”

“Or even tonight,” her lanky companion added, nodding. “I think Elaida may be that eager to see the end of you.” Unlike Katerine, she was merely stating a fact, but she was surely another Red. And watching the other sisters, as though she suspected one of *them* might try something. This was *very* strange!

Egwene held on to her composure, denying them the response they wanted. The response Katerine wanted, at least. She was determined to maintain her dignity right to the headsman's block. Whether or not she had managed to do well as Amyrlin, she would die in a manner fitting for the Amyrlin Seat.

The woman huddling away from the two Reds spoke, and her voice, full of Arafel, allowed Egwene to put a name to the hard, narrow face, dimly seen by moonlight. Berisha Terakuni, a Gray with a reputation for the strictest, and often harshest, interpretation of the law. Always to the letter, of course, but never with any sense of mercy. "Not tonight *or* tomorrow, Barasine, not unless Elaida is willing to summon the Sitters in the middle of the night, and they're willing to answer. This requires a High Court, no thing of minutes or even hours, and the Hall seems less eager to please Elaida than she might wish, small wonder. The girl will be tried, but the Hall will sit in the matter when they choose, I think."

"The Hall will come when Elaida calls or she'll hand them all penances that will make them wish they had," Katerine sneered. "The way Jala and Merym galloped off when we saw who we'd caught, she knows by now, and I'll wager that for this one, Elaida will drag Sitters from their beds with her own hands if she must." Her voice grew smug, and cutting at the same time. "Perhaps she will name you to the Chair of Pardon. Would you enjoy that?"

Berisha drew herself up indignantly, shifting her shawl on her arms. In some instances, the Chair of Pardon faced the same penalty as the one she defended. Perhaps this charge required it; despite Siuan's best efforts to complete her education, Egwene did not know.

"What I want to hear," the Gray said after a moment, ostentatiously ignoring the women on the seat with her, "is what did you do to the harbor chain? How can it be undone?"

"It can't be undone," Egwene replied. "You must know that it's *cuendillar*, now. Even the Power won't break it, only strengthen it. I suppose you could sell it if you tear down enough of the harbor wall to remove it. If anyone can afford a piece of *cuendillar* that big. Or would want such a thing."

This time, no one tried to stop Katerine from slapping her, and very hard, too. “Hold your tongue!” the Red snapped.

That seemed good advice unless she wanted to be slapped silly. She could taste blood in her mouth already. So Egwene held her tongue, and silence descended on the rolling coach, the others all glowing with *saidar* and watching each other suspiciously. It was incredible! Why had Elaida ever chosen women who clearly detested one another for tonight’s task? As a demonstration of her power, just because she could? No matter. If Elaida allowed her to live through the night, at least she could let Siuan know what had happened to her—and likely to Leane, as well. She could let Siuan know they had been betrayed. And pray that Siuan could track down the betrayer. Pray that the rebellion would not collapse. She offered a small prayer for that on the spot. It was much more important than the other.

By the time the coachman reined in the team, she had recovered enough to follow Katerine and Pritalle from the coach unaided, though her head still felt a trifle thick. She could stand, but she doubted she had the strength to run far, not that trying would achieve anything beyond being halted after a few steps. So she stood calmly beside the dark-lacquered coach and waited as patiently as the four-horse team in their harness. After all, she was harnessed, too, in a manner of speaking. The White Tower loomed over them, a thick pale shaft rearing into the night. Few of its windows were alight, but some of those were near the very top, perhaps in the rooms Elaida occupied. It was very strange. She was a prisoner and unlikely to live much longer, yet she felt she had come home. The Tower seemed to renew her vigor.

Two Tower-liveried backriders, the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests, had dismounted from the rear of the coach to unfold the steps, and they stood offering a white-gloved hand to each woman who dismounted, but only Berisha availed herself, and only because it let her reach the paving stones quickly while eyeing the other sisters, Egwene suspected. Barasine gave the fellows such looks that one gulped audibly and the other’s face grew pale. Felaana, busy trying to watch the others, merely waved the men away irritably. All five still held *saidar*, even here.

They were at the main rear entrance, stone-railed marble stairs descending from the second level beneath four massive bronze lanterns that cast a wide pool of flickering light, and to her surprise, a single novice stood alone at the foot of the stairs, clutching her white cloak against a slight chill in the air. She had more than half-expected Elaida to meet them in person, to gloat over her capture with a retinue of sycophants. That the novice was Nicola Treehill was a second surprise. The last place she would have thought to find the runaway was inside the White Tower itself.

By the way Nicola's eyes widened when Egwene emerged from the coach, the novice was more startled than herself, but she dropped a neat if hasty curtsy to the sisters. "The Amyrlin says she . . . she is to be handed over to the Mistress of Novices, Katerine Sedai. She says that Silviana Sedai has her instructions."

"So, it seems you'll be birched tonight, at least," Katerine murmured with a smile. Egwene wondered whether the woman hated her personally, or for what she represented, or simply hated everyone. Birched. She had never seen it done, but she had heard a description. It sounded extremely painful. She met Katerine's gaze levelly, and after a moment the smile faded. The woman looked about to strike her again. The Aiel had a way of dealing with pain. They embraced it, gave themselves over to it without fighting or even trying to hold back screams. Perhaps that would help. The Wise Ones said that way the pain could be cast off without keeping its hold on you.

"If Elaida means to drag this out unnecessarily, I'll have no more part in it tonight," Felaana announced, frowning at everyone in sight including Nicola. "If the girl is to be stilled and executed, that should be sufficient." Gathering her skirts, the yellow-haired sister darted past Nicola up the stairs. Actually running! The glow of *saidar* still surrounded her as she vanished inside.

"I agree," Pritalle said coolly. "Harril, I think I'll walk with you while you stable Bloodlance." A dark, stocky man, who had come out of the darkness leading a tall bay, bowed to her. Stone-faced, he wore a Warder's chameleon cloak that made most of him seem not to be there when he stood still and rippled with colors when he moved. Silently he followed Pritalle off into the night, but watching over his shoulder, guarding Pritalle's back. The light remained around her, too. There was something here that Egwene was missing.

Suddenly, Nicola spread her skirts in another curtsy, deeper this time, and words burst out of her in a rush. "I'm sorry I ran away, Mother. I thought they'd let me go faster here. Areina and I thought—"

“Don’t call her that!” Katerine barked, and a switch of Air caught the novice across the bottom hard enough to make her squeal and jump. “If you’re attending the Amyrlin Seat tonight, child, get back to her and tell her I said her orders will be carried out. Now, run!”

With one last, frantic glance at Egwene, Nicola gathered her cloak and her skirts and went scrambling up the stairs so fast that twice she stumbled and nearly fell. Poor Nicola. Her hopes had surely been disappointed, and if the Tower discovered her age. . . . She must have lied about that to be taken in; lying was one of her several bad habits. Egwene dismissed the girl from her mind. Nicola was no longer her concern.

“There was no need to frighten the child out of her wits,” Berisha said, surprisingly. “Novices need to be guided, not bludgeoned.” A far cry from her views on the law.

Katerine and Barasine rounded on the Gray together, staring at her intently. Only two cats, now, but rather than another cat, they saw a mouse.

“Do you mean to come with us to Silviana alone?” Katerine asked with a decidedly unpleasant smile twisting her lips.

“Aren’t you afraid, Gray?” Barasine said, a touch of mockery in her voice. For some reason, she swung one arm a little so the long fringe of her shawl swayed. “Just the one of you, and two of us?”

The two backriders stood like statues, like men who desired heartily to be anywhere else and hoped to remain unnoticed if sufficiently still.

Berisha was no taller than Egwene, but she drew herself up and clutched her shawl around her. “Threats are specifically prohibited by Tower—”

“Did Barasine threaten you?” Katerine cut in softly. Softly, yet with sharp steel wrapped in it. “She just asked whether you are afraid. Should you be?”

Berisha licked her lips uneasily. Her face was bloodless, and her eyes grew wider and wider, as though she saw things she had no wish to see. “I. . . . I think I will take a walk in the grounds,” she said at last, in a strangled voice, and sidled away without ever taking her eyes from the two Reds. Katerine gave a small, satisfied laugh.

This was absolute madness! Even sisters who hated one another to the toenails did not behave in this fashion. No woman who gave in to fear as easily as Berisha had could ever have become Aes Sedai in the first place. Something was wrong in the Tower. Very wrong.

“Bring her,” Katerine said, starting up the stairs.

At last releasing *saidar*, Barasine gripped Egwene’s arm tightly and followed. There was no choice save to gather her divided skirts and go along without a struggle. Yet her spirits were oddly buoyant.

Entering the Tower truly did feel like returning home. The white walls with their friezes and tapestries, the brightly colored floor tiles, seemed as familiar as her mother’s kitchen. More so, in a way; it had been far longer since she saw her mother’s kitchen than these hallways. She took in the strength of home with every breath. But there was strangeness, too. The stand-lamps were all alight, and the hour could not be all that late, yet she saw no one. There were *always* a few sisters gliding along the corridors, even in the dead of night. She remembered that vividly, catching sight of some sister while running on an errand in the small hours and despairing that she would ever be so graceful, so queenly. Aes Sedai kept their own hours, and some Browns hardly liked being awake during daylight at all. Night held fewer distractions from their studies, fewer interruptions to their reading. But there was no one. Neither Katerine nor Barasine made any comment as they walked along hallways lifeless except for the three of them. Apparently this silent emptiness was a matter of course, now.

As they reached pale stone stairs set in an alcove, another sister finally appeared, climbing from below. A plump woman in a red-slashed riding dress, with a mouth that looked ready to smile, she wore her shawl, edged with long red silk fringe, draped along her arms. Katerine and the others might well have worn theirs to mark them out clearly at the docks—no one in Tar Valon would bother a woman wearing a fringed shawl, and most kept clear, if they could, particularly men—but why here?

The newcomer’s thick black eyebrows raised over bright blue eyes at the sight of Egwene, and she planted her fists on ample hips, letting her shawl slide to her elbows. Egwene did not think she had ever seen the woman before, but apparently, the reverse was not true. “Why, that’s the al’Vere girl. They sent *her* to Northharbor? Elaida will give you a pretty for this night’s work; yes, she will. But look at her. Look at how she stands so. You’d think the pair of you were an honor guard for escort. I’d have thought she’d be weeping and wailing for mercy.”

“I believe the herb is still dulling her senses,” Katerine muttered with a sidelong scowl for Egwene. “She doesn’t seem to realize her situation.” Barasine, still holding Egwene’s arm, gave her a vigorous shake, but after a small stagger she managed to catch her balance and kept her face smooth, ignoring the taller woman's glares.

"In shock," the plump Red said, nodding. She did not sound exactly sympathetic, but after Katerine, she was near enough. "I've seen that before."

"How did matters go at Southharbor?" Barasine asked.

"Not so well as with you, it seems. With everyone else squealing to themselves like shoats caught under a fence over there being two of us, I was afraid we'd scare off who we were trying to catch. It's a good thing there *were* two of us who would talk to one another. As it was, all we caught was a wilder, and not before she turned half the harbor chain to *cuendillar*. We ended up near killing the coach horses by galloping back like, well, like we'd caught your prize. Zanica insisted. Even put her Warder up in place of the coachman."

"A wilder," Katerine said contemptuously.

"Only half?" Relief stood out clearly in Barasine's voice. "Then Southharbor isn't blocked."

Melare's eyebrows climbed again as the implications sank in. "We'll see how clear it is in the morning," she said slowly, "when they let down the half that's still iron. The rest of it stands out stiff like, well, like a bar of *cuendillar*. Myself, I doubt any but smaller vessels will be able to cross." She shook her head with a puzzled expression. "There was something strange, though. More than strange. We couldn't find the wilder, at first. We couldn't feel her channeling. There was no glow around her, and we couldn't see her weaves. The chain just started turning white. If Arebis's Warder hadn't spotted the boat, she might have finished and gotten away."

"Clever Leane," Egwene murmured. For an instant, she squeezed her eyes shut. Leane had prepared everything in advance, before coming in sight of the harbor, all inverted and her ability masked. If she herself had been as clever, she likely would have escaped cleanly. But then, hindsight always saw farthest.

"That's the name she gave," Melare said, frowning. The woman's eyebrows, like dark caterpillars, were *very* expressive. "Leane Sharif. Of the *Green* Ajah. Two *very* stupid lies. Desala is striping her from top to bottom down there, but she won't budge. I had to come up for a breath. I never liked flogging, even for one like that. Do you know this trick of hers, child? How to hide your weaves?"

Oh, Light! They thought Leane was a wilder pretending to be Aes Sedai. “She’s telling the truth. Stilling cost her the ageless look and made her appear younger. She was Healed by Nynaeve al’Meara, and since she was no longer of the Blue, she chose a new Ajah. Ask her questions only Leane Sharif could know the answers—” Speech ended for her as a ball of Air filled her mouth, forcing her jaws wide till they creaked.

“We don’t have to listen to this nonsense,” Katerine growled.

Melare stared into Egwene’s eyes, though. “It sounds senseless, to be sure,” she said after a moment, “but I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to ask a few questions besides ‘What is your name?’ At worse, it’ll cut the tedium of the woman’s answers. Shall we take her down to the cells, Katerine? I don’t dare leave Desala alone with the other one for long. She despises wilders, and she purely hates women who claim to be Aes Sedai.”

“She’s not going to the cells, yet,” Katerine replied. “Elaida wants her taken to Silviana.”

“Well, as long as I learn that trick from this child or the other one.” Hitching her shawl up onto her shoulders, Melare took a deep breath and headed back down the stairs, a woman with labor ahead of her she was not looking forward to. She gave Egwene hope for Leane, though. Leane was “the other one,” now, no longer “the wilder.”

Katerine set off down the corridor walking quickly, and in silence, but Barasine pushed Egwene ahead of her after the other Red, muttering half under her breath about how ridiculous it was to think that a sister could learn anything from a wilder, or from a jumped-up Accepted who told outlandish lies. Maintaining some shreds of dignity was difficult, to say the least, while being shoved down a hallway by a long-legged woman with your mouth gaping open as wide as it would go and drool leaking down your chin, but she managed as best she could. In truth, she hardly thought about it. Melare had given her too much to think on. Melare added to the sisters in the coach. It could hardly mean what it seemed to, but if it did. . . .

Soon the blue-and-white floor tiles became red-and-green, and they approached an unmarked wooden door between two tapestries of flowered trees and stout-beaked birds so colorful they seemed unlikely to be real. Unmarked, but bright with polish and known to every initiate of the Tower. Katerine rapped on the door with what might almost have been a display of diffidence, and when a strong voice inside called, “Come,” she drew a deep breath before pushing the door open. Did she have bad memories of entering here as novice or Accepted, or was it the woman who awaited them who made her hesitant?

The study of the Mistress of Novices was exactly as Egwene recalled, a small, dark-paneled room with plain, sturdy furnishings. A narrow table by the doorway was lightly carved in a peculiar pattern, and bits of gilt clung to the carved frame of the mirror on one wall, but nothing else was decorated in any way. The stand-lamps and the pair of lamps on the writing table were unadorned brass, though of six different patterns. The woman who held the office usually changed when a new Amyrlin was raised, yet Egwene was ready to wager that a woman who had come to this room as a novice two hundred years ago would recognize nearly every stick and perhaps everything.

The current Mistress of Novices—in the Tower, at least—was on her feet when they entered, a stocky woman nearly as tall as Barasine, with a dark bun on the back of her head and a square, determined chin. There was an air of brooking no nonsense about Silviana Brehon. She was a Red, and her charcoal-colored skirts had discreet red slashes, but her shawl lay draped across the back of the chair behind the writing table. Her large eyes were unsettling, however. They seemed to take in everything about Egwene in a glance, as though the woman not only knew every thought in her head, but also what she would think tomorrow.

“Leave her with me and wait outside,” Silviana said in a low, firm voice.

“Leave her?” Katerine said incredulously.

“Which words did you not understand, Katerine? Need I repeat myself?”

Apparently she did not. Katerine flushed, but she said no more. The glow of *saidar* surrounded Silviana, and she took over the shield smoothly, without giving any opening when Egwene might have embraced the Power herself. She was certain that she could, now. Except that Silviana was far from weak; there was no hope she could break the woman’s shield. The gag of Air disappeared at the same time, and she contented herself with digging a handkerchief from her belt pouch and calmly wiping her chin. The pouch had been searched—she always kept the handkerchief on top, not beneath everything else—but learning whether anything besides her ring had been taken would have to wait. There had not been anything of much use to a prisoner in any case. A comb, a packet of needles, some small scissors, odds and ends. The Amyrlin's stole. What sort of dignity she could maintain while being birched was beyond her, but that was the future; this was now. Silviana studied her, arms folded beneath her breasts, until the door closed behind the other two Reds. "You aren't hysterical, at least," she said then. "That makes matters easier, but why aren't you hysterical?"

"Would it do any good?" Egwene replied, returning the handkerchief to her pouch. "I can't see how."

Silviana strode to the writing table and stood reading from a sheet of paper there, occasionally glancing up. Her expression was a perfect mask of Aes Sedai serenity, unreadable. Egwene waited patiently, hands folded at her waist. Even upside down she could recognize Elaida's distinctive hand on that page, if not read what it said. The woman need not think she would grow nervous at waiting. Patience was one of the few weapons left to her, at present.

"It seems the Amyrlin has been mulling over what to do about you for some time," Silviana said finally. If she had expected Egwene to begin shifting her feet or wringing her hands, she gave no sign of disappointment. "She has a very complete plan ready. She doesn't want the Tower to lose you. Nor do I. Elaida has decided that you have been used as a dupe by others and should not be held accountable. So you will not be charged with claiming to be Amyrlin. She has stricken your name from the roll of the Accepted and entered it in the novice book again. I agree with that decision, frankly, though it's never been done before. Whatever your ability with the Power, you missed almost everything else you should have learned as a novice. You needn't fear that you'll have to take the test again, though. I wouldn't force anyone to go through *that* twice."

"I am Aes Sedai by virtue of having been raised to the Amyrlin Seat," Egwene replied calmly. There was no incongruity in fighting for a title when claiming it might still lead to her death. Acquiescence would be as sharp a blow to the rebellion as her execution. Maybe sharper. A novice again? That was laughable! "I can cite the relevant passages in the law, if you wish."

Silviana arched an eyebrow and sat down to open a large leather-bound book. The punishments book. Dipping her pen in the simple glass ink jar, she made a notation. "You've just earned your first visit to me. I'll give you the night to think about it rather than putting you over my knee now. Let's hope contemplation increases the salubrious effect."

“Do you think you can make me deny who I am with a spanking?” Egwene was hard put to keep incredulity from her voice. She was not sure she succeeded.

“There are spankings and spankings,” the other woman replied. Wiping the nib clean on a scrap, she replaced the pen in its glass holder and considered Egwene. “You’re accustomed to Sheriam Bayanar as Mistress of Novices.” Silviana shook her head disparagingly. “I’ve browsed her punishments book. She let the girls get away with too much, and was far too lenient with her favorites. As a result, she was forced to deal out correction much more often than she should have had to. I record a third of the punishments in a month that Sheriam did, because I make sure that everyone I punish leaves here wishing above all things never to be sent to me again.”

“Whatever you do, you’ll never make me deny who I am,” Egwene said firmly. “How can you possibly think you can make this work? Am I to be escorted to classes, shielded all the while?”

Silviana leaned back against her shawl, resting her hands on the edge of the table. “You mean to resist as long as you can, do you?”

“I will do what I must.”

“And I will do what I must. During the day, you will not be shielded at all. But every hour you will be given a mild tincture of forkroot.” Silviana’s mouth twisted on the word. She picked up the sheet that contained Elaida’s notes as if to read, then let it drop back onto the tabletop, rubbing her fingertips as though something noxious clung to them. “I cannot like the stuff. It seems aimed directly at Aes Sedai. Someone who cannot channel can drink five times the amount that makes a sister pass out and barely grow dizzy from it. A disgusting brew. Yet useful, it seems. Perhaps it can be used on those Asha’man. The tincture won’t make you dizzy, but you won’t be able to channel enough to cause any problems. Only trickles. Refuse to drink, and it will be poured down your throat anyway. You’ll be closely watched as well, so you don’t try to slip away afoot. At night, you will be shielded, since giving you enough forkroot to make you sleep through the night would leave you doubled up with stomach cramps the next day.

“You are a novice, Egwene, and you will *be* a novice. Many sisters still consider you a runaway, no matter what orders Siuan Sanche gave, and others doubtless will think Elaida wrong not to have you beheaded. They’ll watch for every infraction, every fault. You may sneer at a spanking now, before you've received it, but when you're being sent to me for five, six, seven every day? We'll see how long it takes you to change your mind."

Egwene surprised herself by giving a small laugh, and Silviana's eyebrows shot up. Her hand twitched as though to reach for her pen.

"Did I say something funny, child?"

"Not at all," Egwene replied truthfully. It had occurred to her that she could deal with the pain by embracing it in the Aiel manner. She hoped it worked, but there went all hope for dignity. While she was being punished, at least. For the rest, she could only do what she could.

Silviana glanced at her pen, but finally stood without touching it. "Then I am done with you. For tonight. I will see you before breakfast, however. Come with me."

She started for the door, confident that Egwene would follow, and Egwene did. Attacking the other woman physically would achieve no more than another entry in the book. Forkroot. Well, she would find a way around that somehow. If not. . . . She refused to think about that.

Katerine and Barasine were startled to say the least at hearing Elaida's plans for Egwene, and not best pleased to learn that they would be watching her and shielding her while she slept, although Silviana told them she would arrange for other sisters to come after an hour or two.

"Why both of us?" Katerine wanted to know, which earned her a wry glance from Barasine. If only one were sent, it surely would not be Katerine, who stood higher.

"Firstly, because I said so." Silviana waited until the other two Reds nodded in acceptance. They did so with obvious reluctance, but not enough to make her wait long. She had not put on her shawl to come into the hallway, and in some odd fashion, she seemed the one out of place. "And secondly, because this child is tricky, I think. I want her watched carefully awake or asleep. Which of you has her ring?"

After a moment, Barasine produced the circle of gold from her belt pouch, muttering, "I only thought to keep it as a memento. Of the rebels being brought to heel. They're finished, now, for sure." A memento? It was stealing was what it was!

Egwene reached for the ring, but Silviana's hand got there first, and it was into her pouch that the ring went. "I'll keep this until you have the right to wear it again, child. Now take her to the novices' quarters and settle her in. A room should have been prepared by now."

Katerine resumed the shield, and Barasine reached for Egwene's arm again, but Egwene stretched out a hand toward Silviana. "Wait. There's something I must tell you." She had agonized over this. It would be all too easy to reveal far more than she wanted. But she had to do it. "I have the Talent of Dreaming. I've learned to tell the true dreams, and to interpret some of them. I dreamt of a glass lamp that burned with a white flame. Two ravens flew out of mist, struck the lamp, and flew on. The lamp wobbled, flinging off droplets of flaming oil. Some of those burned up in midair, others landed scattered about, and the lamp still wobbled on the edge of falling. It means the Seanchan will attack the White Tower and do great harm."

Barasine sniffed. Katerine gave a derisive snort.

"A Dreamer," Silviana said flatly. "Is there anyone who can back up your claim? And if there is, how can you be sure your dream means the Seanchan? Ravens would indicate the Shadow, to me."

"I'm a Dreamer, and when a Dreamer knows, she knows. Not the Shadow. The Seanchan. As for who knows what I can do. . . ." Egwene shrugged. "The only one you can reach is Leane Sharif, who's being held in the cells below." She saw no way to bring the Wise Ones into this, not without revealing entirely too much.

"That woman is a wilder, not—" Katerine began angrily, but her mouth snapped shut when Silviana raised a peremptory hand.

The Mistress of Novices studied Egwene carefully, her face still an unreadable mask of calmness. "You truly believe you are what you say," she said finally. "I do hope your Dreaming won't cause as many problems as young Nicola's Foretelling. If you truly can Dream. Well, I will pass along your warning. I can't see how the Seanchan could strike at us here in Tar Valon, but watchfulness never hurts. And I'll question this woman being held below. Carefully. And if she fails to back up your tale, then your visit to me in the morning will be even more memorable for you." She waved her hand at Katerine. "Take her away before she hands me another nugget and keeps me from getting any sleep at all tonight."

This time, Katerine muttered as much as Barasine. But they both waited until they were beyond earshot of Silviana. That woman was going to be a formidable opponent. Egwene hoped embracing pain worked as well as the Wise Ones claimed. Otherwise. . . . Otherwise did not bear thinking about.

A lean, gray-haired serving woman gave them directions to the room she had just finished making up, on the third gallery of the novices' quarters, and hurried on after brief curtsies to the two Reds. She never so much as glanced at Egwene. What was another novice to her? It tightened Egwene's jaw. She was going to have to make people *not* see her as just another novice.

"Look at her face," Barasine said. "I think it's finally settling in on her."

"I am who I am," Egwene replied calmly. Barasine pushed her toward the stairs that rose through the hollow column of railed galleries, lit by the fat, waning moon. A breeze sighed through, the only sound. It all seemed so peaceful. There was no light showing around any door. The novices would be asleep by now, except for those who had late chores or tasks. It was peaceful for them. Not for Egwene, though.

The tiny, windowless room might almost have been the one she had occupied when she first came to the Tower, with its narrow bed built against the wall and a small fire burning on the little brick hearth. The lamp on the small table was lit, but it lighted little more than the tabletop, and the oil must have gone bad, because it gave off a faint, unpleasant stink. A washstand completed the furnishings, except for a three-legged stool, onto which Katerine promptly lowered herself, adjusting her skirts as though on a throne. Realizing there was nowhere for her to sit, Barasine crossed her arms beneath her breasts and frowned at Egwene.

The room was quite crowded with three women in it, but Egwene pretended the other two did not exist as she readied herself for bed, hanging her cloak and belt and dress on three of the pegs set along one rough-plastered white wall. She did not ask for help with her buttons. By the time she laid her neatly rolled stockings atop her shoes, Barasine had settled herself cross-legged on the floor and was immersed in a small, leather-bound book that she must have carried in her belt pouch. Katerine kept her eyes on Egwene as though she expected her to make a break for the door.

Crawling beneath the light woolen blanket in her shift, Egwene settled her head on the small pillow—not a goose down pillow, that was for sure!—and went through the exercises, relaxing her body one part at a time, that would put her to sleep. She had done that so often that it seemed no sooner had she begun, than she was asleep . . .

. . . and floating, formless, in a darkness that lay between the waking world and *Tel'aran'rhiod*, the narrow gap between dream and reality, a vast void filled with a myriad of twinkling specks of light that were all the dreams of all the sleepers in the world. They floated around her, in this place with no up or down, as far as the eye could see, flickering out as a dream ended, springing alight as one began. She could recognize some at sight, put a name to the dreamer, but she did not see the one she sought.

It was to Siuan she needed to speak, Siuan who likely knew by now that disaster had struck, who might be unable to sleep until exhaustion took her under. She settled herself to wait. There was no sense of time here; she would not grow bored with waiting. But she had to work out what to say. So much had changed since she wakened. She had learned so much. Then, she had been sure she would die soon, sure the sisters inside the Tower were a solid army behind Elaida. Now. . . . Elaida thought her safely imprisoned. No matter this talk of making her a novice again; even if Elaida really believed it, Egwene al'Vere did not. She did not consider herself a prisoner, either. She was carrying the battle into the heart of the Tower itself. If she had had lips there, she would have smiled.

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CHAPTER 1

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When Last Sounds

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose above the broken mountain named Dragonmount. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

Born beneath the glow of a fat, sinking moon, at an altitude where men could not breathe, born among writhing currents heated by the fires inside the ragged peak, the wind was a zephyr in the beginning, yet it gained in strength as it rushed down the steep, rugged slope. Carrying ash and the stench of burning sulfur from the heights, the wind roared across the sudden, snowy hills that reared from the plain surrounding the impossible height of Dragonmount, roared and tossed trees in the night.

Eastward out of the hills the wind howled, across a large pasture encampment, a considerable village of tents and wooden walkways lining streets of frozen ruts. Soon enough the ruts would melt and the last of the snow vanish, replaced by spring rains and mud. If the encampment remained that long. Despite the hour, many among the Aes Sedai were awake, gathered in small groups warded against eavesdropping, discussing what had transpired this night. No few of those discussions were quite animated, little short of argument, and some held undeniable heat. Fists might have been shaken or worse had they not belonged to Aes Sedai. What to do next was the question. Every sister knew the news from the riverbank by now, if the details remained sketchy. The Amyrlin herself had gone in secret to seal Northharbor, and her boat had been found overturned and caught in the reeds. Survival in the swift, icy currents of the Erinin was unlikely, and hour by hour it had become more so, until certainty hardened. The Amyrlin Seat was dead. Every sister in the camp knew that her future and perhaps her life hung by a thread, not to mention the future of the White Tower itself. What to do now? Yet voices fell silent and heads came up as the fierce blast struck the camp, fluttering tent canvas like flags, pelting it with clods of snow. The sudden stink of burning sulphur hung heavy in the air, announcing where that wind had come from, and more than one Aes Sedai offered a silent prayer against evil. In moments, though, the wind had passed, and the sisters bent back to their deliberations on a future bleak enough to fit the sharp, fading stench left behind.

On the wind roared toward Tar Valon, gaining strength as it went, shrieking over military camps near the river where soldiers and camp followers sleeping on the ground suddenly had their blankets stripped off and those in tents awoke to canvas jerking and sometimes whipping away into the darkness as tent pegs gave way or guy ropes snapped. Laden wagons rocked and toppled, and banners stood out stiff before they were uprooted, their hurtling staffs now spears that pierced whatever lay in their path. Leaning against the gale, men struggled to the horselines to calm animals that reared and screamed in fear. None knew what the Aes Sedai knew, yet the biting, sulphurous smell that filled the chill night air seemed an ill omen, and hardened men offered their prayers aloud as fervently as the beardless boys. Camp followers added their own, and loudly, armorers and farriers and fletchers, wives and laundresses and seamstresses, all clutched by the sudden fear that something darker than blackness stalked the night.

The fierce flutter of canvas overhead, near to ripping, the babble of voices and the screams of horses, loud enough to cut through the wailing wind, helped Siuan Sanche struggle awake for the second time. The abrupt stink of burning sulphur made her eyes water, and she was grateful for it. Egwene might be able to don and doff sleep like a pair of stockings, but the same was not true for her. Sleep had been hard enough to come by after she finally made herself lie down. Once the news had reached her from the riverbank, she had been sure she never would sleep short of utter exhaustion. She had offered prayers for Leane, but all of their hopes rested on Egwene’s shoulders, and all of their hopes seemed gutted and hung up to dry. Well, she had exhausted herself with nerves and worry and pacing. Now there was hope again, and she did not dare let her leaden eyelids close for fear she would sink back into slumber and not wake till midday, if then. The ferocious wind abated, but people’s shouts and horses’ cries did not.

Wearily, she tossed aside her blankets and stood up unsteadily. Her bedding was hardly comfortable, laid out on the canvas ground-cloth in a corner of the not-very-large square tent, yet she had come here, though it meant riding. Of course, she had been near falling down by then, and likely not in her right mind from grief. She touched the twisted ring *ter’angreal* hanging from a leather cord around her neck. Her first waking, every bit as hard as this one, had been to fetch that from her belt pouch. Well, the grief was vanquished now, and that was adequate to keep her moving. A sudden yawn made her jaws creak like rusty oarlocks. Barely adequate. You would have thought Egwene's message, the fact that Egwene was alive to send a message, would be enough to banish bone-weariness. Not so, it appeared.

Channeling a globe of light long enough to see the box-lantern on the main tent pole, she lit it with a thread of Fire. The single flame gave a very pale, flickering illumination. There were other lamps and lanterns, but Gareth went on so about how little lamp oil there was in stock. The brazier, she left unlit; Gareth was not so parsimonious with charcoal as oil—charcoal was easier to come by—but she was barely aware of the frigid air. She frowned at his bedding, still lying untouched on the other side of the tent. He surely was aware of the boat's discovery and who it had carried. The sisters did their best to keep secrets from him, but somehow, they succeeded less often than most believed. More than once he had startled her with what he knew. Was he out there in the night organizing his soldiers for whatever the Hall decided? Or had he already departed, leaving a lost cause? No longer lost, yet he must be unaware of that.

"No," she muttered, feeling an odd sense of . . . treachery . . . that she had cast doubt on the man, even in her own mind. He would still be there at sunrise, and for every sunrise until the Hall commanded him to leave. Maybe longer. She did not believe he would abandon Egwene whatever the Hall commanded. He was too stubborn, proud. No; it was not that. Gareth Bryne's word was his honor. Once given, he would not take it back unless released, whatever the cost to himself. And maybe, just maybe, he had other reasons to stay. She refused to think of that.

Putting Gareth out of her mind—why *had* she come to his tent? It would have been so much easier to lie down in her own in the sisters' camp, cramped as it was, or even to have kept the weeping Chesa company, though on second thought, that last might have been beyond her. She could not *abide* weeping, and Egwene's maid would not stop—putting Gareth *firmly* out of her head, she ran a hasty brush through her hair, changed her shift for a fresh one, and dressed as quickly as she could in the dim light. Her plain blue wool riding dress was rumpled, and spotted with mud on the hem besides—she had gone down to see the boat for herself—but she did not take the time to clean and press it with the Power. She had to hurry.

The tent was far from the spacious affair you would have expected of a general, so hurrying meant bumping her hip against a corner of the writing table hard enough that one of the legs almost folded before she could catch it, nearly tripping over the camp stool, the only thing approaching a chair, and barking her shins on the brass-bound chests that lay scattered about. That brought a curse that would have singed any listener's ears. The things served double duty, seats as well as storage, and one with a flat top did for a makeshift washstand with a white pitcher and bowl. In truth, they were arrayed in a neat enough fashion, but one peculiar to him. *He* could find his way through that maze in pitch dark. Anyone else would break a leg trying to reach his bedding. She supposed he must have a concern for assassins, though he had never voiced it.

Gathering her dark cloak from atop one of the chests and folding it over her arm, she paused on the point of snuffing the lantern with a flow of Air. For a moment she stared at Gareth's second pair of boots, standing at the foot of his bedding. Channeling another small sphere of light, she moved it close to the boots. As she had thought. Freshly blacked. The bloody man insisted she work off her debt, then sneaked in behind her back—or worse, under her nose while she slept—and blacked his own bloody boots! Gareth bloody Bryne treated her like a maidservant, never so much as tried to kiss her . . . !

She jerked upright, her mouth going taut as a mooring rope. Now where had *that* thought come from? No matter what Egwene claimed, she was *not* in love with Gareth bloody Bryne! She was *not*! She had too much work in front of her to get caught in *that* kind of foolishness. *That's why you stopped wearing embroidery, I suppose*, a small voice whispered in the back of her head. *All those pretty things, stuffed into chests because you're afraid.* Afraid? Burn her if she was afraid of him or any man!

Carefully channeling Earth, Fire and Air just so, she laid the weave on the boots. Every last bit of the blacking, and most of the dye as well, came away and formed into a neat, glistening sphere that floated in the air, leaving the leather decidedly gray. For a moment she contemplated depositing the ball among his blankets. That would be a suitable surprise for him when he finally lay down!

With a sigh, she pushed open the doorflap and took the ball outside into the darkness to let it splash onto the ground. The man had a short and extremely disrespectful way when she let her temper carry her too far, as she had discovered the first time she hit him over the head with the boots she was cleaning. And when he made her so angry she put salt in his tea. Quite a lot of salt, but it had not been her fault he was hurried enough to drain the cup in a gulp. To try to, at any rate. Oh, he never seemed to mind when she shouted, and sometimes he shouted back—sometimes he just smiled, which was purely infuriating!—yet he had his limits. She could have stopped him with a simple weave of Air, of course, but she had her honor as much as he had his, burn him! Anyway, she had to stay close to him. Min said so, and the girl seemed infallible. *That* was the only reason she had not stuffed a fistful of gold down Gareth Bryne's throat and told him he was paid and be burned. The *only* reason! Besides her own honor, of course.

Yawning, she left the dark puddle shining in the cold moonlight. If he stepped in it before it dried and tracked the mess inside, the blame would be his own and none of hers. At least the sulphur smell had faded a little. Her eyes had stopped overflowing, though what she could see was turmoil.

This sprawling, night-shrouded camp had never had much order. The rutted streets were straight enough, true, and wide for moving soldiers, but for the rest it had always seemed a haphazard array of tents and rough shelters and stone-lined pits for cook fires. Now, it looked much as if it had been under attack. Collapsed tents lay everywhere, some tossed atop others that still stood, though a good many of those stood askew, and dozens of wagons and carts lay on their sides or upside down. Voices on every side called for help with the injured, of whom there appeared to be a fair number. Men limped along the street in front of Gareth's tent supported by other men, while several small groups hurried by carrying blankets being used as stretchers. Farther away she could see four blanket-covered shapes on the ground, three attended by kneeling women who rocked back and forth as they keened.

She could do nothing for the dead, but she could offer her ability with Healing to the others. That was hardly her greatest skill, not very strong at all, though it seemed to have returned to her fully when Nynaeve Healed her, yet she doubted there was another sister anywhere in the camp. They did avoid the soldiers, most of them. Her ability would be better than none. She could, except for the news she carried. It was urgent that it reach the right people as soon as possible. So she closed her ears to the groans and the keens alike, ignored dangling arms and rags clutched to bleeding heads, and hurried to the horselines on the edge of the camp, where the oddly sweet smell of horse dung was beginning to win over the sulphur. A rawboned, unshaven fellow with a haggard glare on his dark face tried to rush past her, but she caught his rough coatsleeve.

“Saddle me the mildest horse you can find,” she told him, “and do it right now.” Bela would have done nicely, but she had no notion where among all those animals the stout mare was tied and no intention of waiting for her to be found.

“You want to go riding?” he said incredulously, jerking his sleeve free. “If you own a horse, then saddle it yourself, if you’re fool enough to. Me, I’ve the rest of the night ahead of me in the cold tending the ones what’s hurt themselves, and lucky if at least one don’t die.”

Siuan ground her teeth. The imbecile took her for one of the seamstresses. Or one of the *wives*! For some reason, that seemed worse. She stuck her right fist in front of his face so quickly that he stepped back with a curse, but she shoved her hand close enough to his nose that her Great Serpent ring had to be only thing he could see. His eyes crossed, staring at it. “The mildest mount you can find,” she said in a flat voice. “But quickly.”

The ring did the trick. He swallowed, then scratched his head and stared along the horselines, where every animal seemed be either stamping or shivering. “Mild,” he muttered. “I’ll see what I can do, Aes Sedai. Mild.” Touching a knuckle to his forehead, he hurried off down the rows of horses still muttering to himself.

Siuan did a little muttering herself as she paced, three strides this way and three that. Snow trampled to slush and frozen again crunched under her stout shoes. From what she could see, it might take him hours to find anything that would not pitch her off if it heard a grunter jump. Swinging her cloak around her shoulders, she shoved the small silver circle pin in place with an impatient jab, nearly stabbing her own thumb. Afraid, was she? She would show Gareth bloody, *bloody* Bryne! Back and forth, back and forth. Perhaps she should walk the whole long way. It would be unpleasant, but better than being dumped from the saddle and maybe breaking bones in the bargain. She never mounted a horse, including Bela, without thinking of broken bones. But the fellow returned with a dark mare bearing a high-cantled saddle.

“She’s mild?” Siuan demanded skeptically. The animal was stepping as though ready to dance, and looked sleek. That was supposed to indicate speed.

“Nightlily here’s meek as milk-water, Aes Sedai. Belongs to my wife, and Nemaris is on the delicate side. She don’t like a mount what gets frisky.”

“If you say so,” she replied, and sniffed. Horses were seldom meek in her experience. But there was nothing for it.

Taking the reins, she clambered awkwardly into the saddle, then had to shift so she was not sitting on her cloak and half-strangling herself every time she moved. The mare did dance, however she sawed the reins. She had been sure it would. Trying to break her bones already. A boat now—with one oar or two, a boat went where you wanted and stopped when you wanted, unless you were a complete fool about tides and currents and winds. But horses possessed brains, however small, and that meant they might take it into their minds to ignore bridle and reins and what the rider wanted. That had to be considered when you had to straddle a bloody horse.

“One thing, Aes Sedai,” the man said as she was trying to find a comfortable seat. Why did saddles always seem harder than wood? “I’d keep her to a walk tonight, was I you. That wind, you know, and all that stink, well, she might be just a touch—”

“No time,” Siuan said, and dug her heels in. Meek-as-milk-water Nightlily leaped ahead so fast that she nearly pitched backward over the cantle. Only a quick grab at the pommel kept her in the saddle. She thought the fellow shouted something after her, but she could not be certain. What in the Light did this Nemaris consider a *frisky* horse? The mare sped out of the camp as though trying to win a race, sped toward the falling moon and Dragonmount, a dark spike rising against the starry sky.

Cloak billowing behind, Siuan made no effort to slow her, rather digging in her heels again and slapping the mare’s neck with the reins as she had seen others do to urge speed. She had to reach the sisters before anybody did something irretrievable. All too many possibilities came to mind. The mare galloped past small thickets and tiny hamlets and sprawling farms with their stone-walled pastures and fields. Snug beneath snow-covered slate roofs, behind walls of stone or brick, the inhabitants had not been roused by that fierce wind; every building lay dark and still. Even the bloody cows and sheep were probably enjoying a good night’s sleep. Farmers always had cows and sheep. And pigs.

Bouncing around on the hard leather of the saddle, she tried leaning forward over the mare’s neck. That was how it was done; she had seen it. Almost immediately she lost the left stirrup and nearly slid off on that side, barely clawing her way back to get her foot back in place. The only thing to do was sit bolt upright, one hand clutching the pommel in a deathgrip, the other tighter still on the reins. Her flailing cloak tugged uncomfortably against her throat, and she jounced up and down so hard that her teeth clicked if she opened her mouth at the wrong time, but she hung on, and even heeled the animal once more. Ah, Light, but she was going to be bruised within an inch of her life come sunrise. On through the night, smacking the saddle with the mare’s every bounding stride. At least her clenched teeth kept her from yawning.

At last the horselines and rows of wagons that ringed the Aes Sedai camp appeared out of the darkness though a thin rim of trees, and with a sigh of relief, she hauled back on the reins as hard as she could. For a horse moving this fast, surely it required hard hauling to stop. Nightlily did stop, so abruptly that she would have hurdled over its head if the mare had not reared at the same time. Wide-eyed, she clung to the animal’s neck until it finally settled all four hooves to the ground again. And for some little time after, as well.

Nightlily was breathing hard, too, she realized. Panting, really. She felt no sympathy. The fool animal had tried to kill her, just the way horses would! Recovering herself took a moment, but then she pulled her cloak straight, gathered the reins and rode past the wagons and the long lines of horses at a sedate walk. Shadowy men moved in the darkness along the horselines, doubtless grooms and farriers seeing to the visibly unsettled animals. The mare seemed more biddable, now. Really, this was not too bad at all.

As she entered the camp proper, she hesitated only a moment before embracing *saidar*. Strange to think of a camp full of Aes Sedai as dangerous, yet two sisters had been murdered here. Considering the circumstances of their deaths, it seemed unlikely that holding the Power would be enough to save her if she was the next target, but *saidar* at least gave an illusion of safety. So long as she remembered it was only illusion. After a moment, she wove the flows of Spirit that would hide her ability and the glow of the Power. There was no need to advertise, after all.

Even at this hour, with the moon low in the west, there were a few people out on the wooden walkways, serving women and workmen scurrying about late tasks. Or perhaps early would be a better word now. Most of the tents, in nearly every size and shape imaginable, were dark, but a number of the larger ones glowed with the light of lamps or candles. Unsurprising under the circumstances. Every lit tent had men around it, or gathered in front. Warders. No one else could stand so still they seemed to fade into the night, especially not in this icy night. With the Power filling her, she could make out others, their Warders' cloaks making them vanish in the shadows. Between the murdered sisters and what their bonds to their Aes Sedai must be carrying to them, not surprising at all. She suspected more than one sister was ready to tear her own hair, or someone else's. They took note of her, heads swiveling to follow her passage as she rode slowly along the frozen ruts, searching.

The Hall had to be informed, of course, but others needed to hear first. In her estimation, they were much more likely to do something . . . precipitate. And quite possibly disastrous. Oaths held them, but oaths given under duress, to a woman they now believed dead. For the Hall, for most of the Hall, they had nailed their flag to the mast in accepting a seat. None of *them* would be jumping until they were very, very sure where they would land.

Sheriam's tent was too small for what she was sure she would find, and dark besides, she noted in passing. She very much doubted the woman was asleep inside, though. Morvrin's, big enough to sleep four comfortably, would have done if there was room among all the books the Brown had managed to acquire on the march, but that was dark as well. Her third choice provided a catch, though, and she reined in Nightlily well short of it.

Myrelle had two peaked tents in the camp, one for herself and one for her three Warders—the three she dared acknowledge—and her own shone brightly, the shadows of women moving on the patched canvas walls. Three dissimilar men stood on the walkway in front of the tent—their stillness marked them Warders—but she ignored them for the moment. What exactly were they talking about inside? Certain that it was useless effort, she wove Air with just a hint of Fire; her weave touched the tent and struck a barrier against eavesdropping. Inverted, of course, and so invisible to her. She had only made the attempt on the chance they were being careless. Small possibility of that with the secrets they had to hide. The shadows against the canvas were still, now. So they knew someone had tried. She rode the rest of the way wondering what they had been talking about.

As she dismounted—well, at least she managed to turn half-falling off into something akin to jumping down—one of the Warders, Sheriam's Arinvar, a lean Cairhienin little taller than she, stepped forward to reach for the reins with a small bow, but she waved him away. Releasing *saidar*, she tied the mare to one of the wooden slats of the walkway using a knot that would have held a sizable boat against heavy wind and a strong current. None of those casual loops that others used, not for her. She might dislike riding, but when she tied a horse, she wanted it there when she came back. Arinvar's eyebrows climbed as he watched her finish the knot, but he would not be the one who had to pay for the bloody animal if it got loose and lost itself.

Only one of the other two Warders belonged to Myrelle, Avar Hachami, a Saldaean with a nose like an eagle's beak and thick, gray-streaked mustaches. After sparing her one glance and a slight inclination of his head, he returned to watching the night. Morvrin's Jori, short and bald and nearly as wide as he was tall, did not acknowledge her at all. His eyes studied the darkness, and his hand rested lightly on his long sword hilt. Supposedly he was among the best of the Warders with a blade. Where were the others? She could not ask, of course, any more than she could ask who was within. The men would have been shocked to their bones. None of them tried to stop her from entering. At least matters had not gotten that bad.

Inside, where two braziers gave off the scent of roses and made the air almost toasty compared to the night, she found almost everyone she had hoped for, and all watching to see who entered.

Myrelle herself, sitting on a sturdy straight-chair in a silk robe covered with red and yellow flowers, her arms folded beneath her breasts, wore such a perfect expression of calm on her olive face that it only pointed up the heat in her dark eyes. The light of the Power shone around her. It was her tent, after all; she would be the one to weave a ward here. Sheriam, seated on one end of Myrelle's cot with a straight back, pretended to be adjusting her blue-slashed skirts; her expression was as fiery as her hair, and it grew hotter when she saw Siuan. She was not wearing the Keeper's stole, a bad sign.

“I might have expected it would be you,” Carlinya said coldly, fists on her hips. She was never a warm woman, but now the ringlets that stopped well short of her shoulders framed a face that seemed carved from ice nearly as pale as her dress. “I will not have you trying to listen in on my private conversations, Siuan.” Oh, yes; they thought everything was at an end.

Round-faced Morvrin, for once not appearing at all absentminded or sleepy-eyed despite the creases in her brown wool skirt, walked around the small table where a tall silver pitcher and five silver cups sat on a lacquered tray. It seemed no one felt like tea; the cups were all dry. Dipping into her belt pouch, the graying sister thrust a carved horn comb into Siuan’s hand. “You are all windblown, woman. Fix your hair before some lout takes you for a tavern trull instead of an Aes Sedai and tries to dandle you on his knee.”

“Egwene and Leane are alive and prisoners inside the Tower,” Siuan announced, more calmly than she felt. A tavern trull? Touching her hair, she discovered that the other woman was right and began working the comb through the tangles. If you wanted to be taken seriously, you could not look as though you had been tussling in an alley. She had enough difficulty with that as it was, now, and would have until some years after she could lay hands on the Oath Rod again. “Egwene spoke to me in my dreams. They succeeded in blocking the harbors, near enough, but they were captured. Where are Beonin and Nisao? One of you go fetch them. I don’t want to scale the same fish twice.” There. If they thought themselves free of their oaths, and free of Egwene’s orders to obey her, that should disabuse them. Except that no one moved to obey.

“Beonin wanted her bed,” Morvrin said slowly, studying Siuan. A very intense study. A sharp mind hid behind that placid face. “She was too tired to talk any more. And why would we have asked Nisao to join us?” That earned a small frown from Myrelle, who was Nisao’s friend, but the other two nodded agreement. They and Beonin thought of Nisao as apart from themselves in spite of the oaths of fealty they shared. In Siuan’s opinion, these women had never stopped believing they might still guide events somehow, even after the rudder had long since been taken from their hands.

Sheriam rose from the cot as though about to rush off, even gathering her skirts, but that had nothing to do with Siuan’s command. Anger had vanished, replaced by shining eagerness. “We don’t need them for the moment in any case. ‘Prisoners’ means the deep cells until the Hall convenes for a trial. We can Travel there and free them before Elaida knows what is happening.”

Myrelle gave a sharp nod and stood, reaching to undo the sash of her robe. “Best if we leave the Warders behind, I think. They won’t be needed in this.” She drew more deeply on the Source, already anticipating.

“No!” Siuan said sharply, and winced as the comb caught in her hair. Sometimes she thought of cutting it shorter than Carlinya’s, for convenience, but Gareth had complimented her, saying how much he liked the way it brushed her shoulders. Light, could she not escape the man even here? “Egwene isn’t to be tried, and she isn’t in the deep cells. She wouldn’t tell me where she *is* being held except to say that she is guarded constantly. And she orders that there be no attempt to rescue her that involves sisters.”

The other women stared at her in shocked silence. In truth, she herself had argued the point with Egwene, to no avail. It *had* been an order, delivered by the Amyrlin Seat in full fig.

“What you’re saying is irrational,” Carlinya said finally. Her tone was still cool, her face serene, but her hands smoothed her embroidered white skirts unnecessarily. “If we capture Elaida, we will try her and very likely still her.” If. Their doubts and fears were not put to rest yet. “Since she has Egwene, surely she will do the same. I don’t need Beonin to tell me what the law says in that regard.”

“We *must* rescue her, whatever she wants!” Sheriam’s voice was hot as Carlinya’s was chill, and her green eyes sparkled. Her hands had turned to fists gripping her skirts. “She cannot realize the danger she is in. She must be in shock. Did she give you any hints where she’s held?”

“Don’t try to hide things from us, Siuan,” Myrelle said firmly. *Her* eyes seemed almost on fire, and she jerked the silk sash tighter for emphasis. “Why would she hide where she’s being held?”

“For fear of what you and Sheriam suggest.” Giving up on the wind-whipped tangles, Siuan tossed the comb down on the table. She could not stand there combing her hair and expect them to pay attention. Tousled would have to do. “She is *guarded*, Myrelle. By sisters. And they won’t give her up easily. If we try a rescue, Aes Sedai will die at the hands of Aes Sedai, sure as silverpike spawn in the reeds. It’s happened once, but it must not happen again, or all hope dies of reuniting the Tower peacefully. We cannot *allow* it to happen again. So there is to be *no* rescue. As to why

Elaida has decided not to try her, I can't say." Egwene had been vague on that, as if she did not understand either. But she had been definite on the facts, and it was not a claim she would make unless she was sure.

"Peacefully," Sheriam muttered, sinking back onto the cot. She imbued the word with a world of bitterness. "Was there ever any chance of that, from the beginning? Elaida has *abolished* the Blue Ajah! What chance of peace is there?"

"Elaida cannot simply do away with an Ajah," Morvrin murmured, as though that had anything to do with anything. She patted Sheriam's shoulder, but the fire-haired woman sullenly shrugged off her plump hand.

"There is always a chance," Carlinya said. "The harbors are blocked, strengthening our position. The negotiators meet every morning . . . " Trailing off with a troubled look in her eyes, she poured a cup of tea and drank half of it down in one go without adding honey. Blocking the harbors likely would have put an end to the negotiations by itself, not that they had seemed to be going anywhere. Would Elaida let them continue with Egwene in her hands besides?

"I do not comprehend why Elaida would not have Egwene put on trial," Morvrin said, "since conviction would be sure and certain, but the fact remains that she is a prisoner." She displayed none of Sheriam or Myrelle's heat and none of Carlinya's coldness. She was simply presenting the facts, with only a slight tightness of her mouth. "If she is not to be tried, then without any doubt she is to be broken. She has proven to be a stronger woman than I took her for at first, but no one is strong enough to resist the White Tower when it decides to break her. We must consider the consequences if we don't get her out before it can."

Siuan shook her head. "She isn't even going to be birched, Morvrin. I don't understand why either, but she'd hardly tell us to leave her if she thought they were going to torture—"

She broke off as the tentflap was pushed open and Lelaine Akashi stepped in, blue-fringed shawl draped along her arms. Sheriam stood, though she need not have; Lelaine was a Sitter, but Sheriam was the Keeper. Then again, Lelaine was imposing in blue-slashed velvet despite her slenderness, dignity made flesh, with an air of authority that seemed greater than ever tonight. Every hair in place, she might have been entering the Hall after a sound night's sleep.

Smoothly Siuan turned to the table and picked up the pitcher as if in anticipation. That normally would have been her role in this company, to pour tea and speak when her opinion was sought. Perhaps if she remained quiet, Lelaine would be about her business with the others and leave quickly without giving her a second glance. The woman seldom did give her that much.

"I thought that horse outside was the same I saw you ride in on, Siuan." Lelaine's gaze ran over the other sisters, each of them absolutely smooth-faced now. "Am I interrupting?"

"Siuan says Egwene is alive," Sheriam said as though relating the price of delta perch on the dockhead. "And Leane. Egwene spoke to Siuan's dreams. She refuses any attempt at a rescue." Myrelle gave her a sidelong glance, unreadable, but Siuan could have boxed her ears! Likely Lelaine would have been the next she sought out, but to tell her in her own way, not spilled out on the wharf like this. Of late, Sheriam had become as flighty as a novice!

Pursing her lips, Lelaine directed a look like twin awls at Siuan. "Did she, now? You really should be wearing your stole, Sheriam. You *are* the Keeper. Will you walk with me, Siuan? It's been far too long since we had a conversation alone." With one hand, she drew back the doorflap, shifting that penetrating gaze to the other sisters. Sheriam blushed as only a redhead could, brilliantly, and fumbled the narrow blue stole from her belt pouch to lay it across her shoulders, but Myrelle and Carlinya met Lelaine's study with level eyes. Morvrin had begun tapping her round chin with a fingertip as though unaware of anyone else. She might well have been. Morvrin was like that.

Had Egwene's orders sunk in? Siuan had no chance even for a firm look while putting the pitcher down. A suggestion from a sister of Lelaine's standing, Sitter or not, was a command to one of Siuan's standing. Gathering her cloak and skirts, she went out, murmuring thanks to Lelaine for holding the flap for her. Light, she hoped those fools had *listened* to what she said.

Four Warders stood outside now, but one of them was Lelaine's Burin, a copper-skinned stump of a Domani wrapped in a Warder cloak that made most of him seem not there, and Avar had been replaced by another of Myrelle's, Nuhel Dromand, a tall, burly man with an Illianer beard that left his upper lip bare. The man was so still you might have thought him a statue if not for the wisps of mist in front of his nostrils. Arinvar bowed to Lelaine, a quick courtesy, though formal. Nuhel and Jori did not let their vigilance slacken. Nor did Burin, for that matter.

The knot that secured Nightlily took as long to undo as it had to tie, but Lelaine waited patiently until Siuan straightened with the reins in her hands, then set off at a slow pace along the wooden walkway past dark tents. Moonshadows masked her face. She did not embrace the Power, so Siuan could not either. Trailed by Burin, Siuan walked beside Lelaine leading the mare, holding her silence. It was the Sitter's place to begin, and not only because she was a Sitter. Siuan fought the urge to bend her neck and so lose the extra inch she had on the other woman. She seldom thought any longer of the time when she had been Amyrlin. She had been embraced as Aes Sedai once more, and part of being Aes Sedai meant fitting into your niche among the sisters instinctively. The bloody horse nuzzled at her hand as though it thought itself a pet, and she shifted the reins to her other hand long enough to wipe her fingers on her cloak. Filthy slobbering beast. Lelaine eyed her sideways, and she felt her cheeks heating. Instinct.

"Strange friends you have, Siuan. I believe some of them were in favor of sending you away when you first appeared in Salidar. Sheriam, I might comprehend, though I'd think the fact that she stands so much higher than you now would make for awkwardness. That was the major reason I avoided you myself, to avoid awkwardness."

Siuan nearly gaped in astonishment. That came very near to talking about what was never to be talked about, *very* near, a transgression she would never had expected from this woman. From herself, perhaps—she had fitted herself into her niche, yet she was who she was—but never from Lelaine!

"I hope you and I can become friends again, Siuan, though I can understand if that proves impossible. This meeting tonight confirms what Faolain told me." Lelaine gave a small laugh and folded her hands at her waist. "Oh, don't grimace so, Siuan. She didn't betray you, at least not intentionally. She made one slip too many, and I decided to press her, rather hard. Not the way to treat another sister, but then, she's really just an Accepted until she can be tested and passes. Faolain will make a fine Aes Sedai. She was very reluctant to surrender everything she gave. Just bits and pieces, really, and a few names, but put together with you in that gathering, it gives me a complete picture, I think. I suppose I can let her free of confinement now. She certainly won't think of spying on me again. You and your friends have been very faithful to Egwene, Siuan. Can you be as faithful to me?"

So that was why Faolain had seemed to go into hiding. How many "bits and pieces" had she revealed while being "pressed hard"? Faolain did not know everything, yet it would be best to assume that Lelaine did. But assume while revealing nothing unless she herself was pressed hard.

Siuan stopped dead, drawing herself up. Lelaine halted, too, clearly waiting for her to speak. Even with her face half in shadow that was clear. Siuan had to steel herself to confront this woman. Some instincts were buried in the bone for Aes Sedai. "I'm faithful to you as a Sitter for my Ajah, but Egwene al'Vere is the Amyrlin Seat."

"So she is." Lelaine's expression remained unruffled, as much as Siuan could make out. "She spoke in your dreams? Tell me what you know of her situation, Siuan." Siuan glanced over her shoulder at the stocky Warder. "Don't mind him," the Sitter said. "I haven't kept a secret from Burin in twenty years."

"In my dreams," Siuan agreed. She certainly did not intend to admit that had been only to summon her to Salidar in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. She was not supposed to have that ring in her possession. The Hall would take it away if they learned of it. Calmly—outwardly calm, at least—she related what she had told Myrelle and the others, and more. But not everything. Not the certainty of betrayal. That had to have come from the Hall itself—no one else had known of the plan to block the harbor, except the women involved—though whoever was accountable could not have known they were betraying Egwene. Only helping Elaida, which was mystery enough. Why would any among them want to help Elaida? There had been talk of Elaida's secret adherents from the start, yet she herself had long since dismissed the notion. Most assuredly every Blue fervently wanted Elaida pulled down, but until she knew who was responsible, no Sitter, not even a Blue, would learn everything. "She's called a sitting of the Hall for tomorrow . . . no, it would be tonight, now, when Last sounds," she finished. "Inside the Tower, in the Hall of the Tower."

Lelaine laughed so hard that she had to brush a tear from her eye. "Oh, that is priceless. The Hall to sit right under Elaida's nose, as it were. I almost wish I could let her know just to see her face." Just as abruptly, she turned serious again. Lelaine had always had a ready laugh, when she chose to let it out, but the core of her was always serious. “So Egwene thinks the Ajahs may be turning on one another. That hardly seems possible. She’s only seen a handful of sisters, you say. Still, it bears looking into the next time in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Perhaps someone can see what they can find in the Ajah quarters instead of concentrating on Elaida’s study.”

Siuan barely suppressed a wince. She planned to do a little searching in *Tel’aran’rhiod* herself. Whenever she went to the Tower in the World of Dreams, she was a different woman in a different dress every time she turned a corner, but she would have to be even more cautious than usual.

“Refusing rescue is understandable, I suppose, even laudable—no one wants any more dead sisters—but very risky,” Lelaine went on. “No trial, and not even a birching? What can Elaida be playing at? Can she think to make her take up as Accepted again? That hardly seems likely.” But she gave a small nod, as though considering it.

This was heading in a dangerous direction. If sisters convinced themselves they knew where Egwene *might* be, the chance increased that someone would try to bring her out, Aes Sedai guards or no. Trying at the wrong place could be as risky as at the right one, if not more so. Worse, Lelaine was ignoring something.

“Egwene has called the Hall to sit,” Siuan asked acidly. “Will you go?” Reproving silence answered her, and her cheeks grew hot again. Some things *were* buried in the bone.

“Of course, I will go,” Lelaine said at last. A direct statement, yet there had been a pause. “The entire Hall will go. Egwene al’Vere *is* the Amyrlin Seat, and we have more than sufficient dream *ter’angreal*. Perhaps she will explain how she believes she can hold out if Elaida orders her broken. I would very much like to hear that.”

“Then what are you asking me to be faithful to you about?”

Instead of answering, Lelaine resumed her slow walk through the moonlight, carefully adjusting her shawl. Burin followed her, a half-invisible lion in the night. Siuan hurried to catch up, tugging Nightlily after her, fending off the fool mare’s attempts to nuzzle her hand again.

“Egwene al’Vere is the lawful Amyrlin Seat,” Lelaine said finally. “Until she dies. Or is stilled. Should either happen, we would be back to Romanda trying for the staff and the stole and me forestalling her.” She snorted. “That woman would be a disaster as bad as Elaida. Unfortunately, she had enough support to forestall me, as well. We’d be back to that, except that if Egwene dies or is stilled, you and your friends will be as faithful to me as you’ve been to Egwene. And you will help *me* gain the Amyrlin Seat in spite of Romanda.”

Siuan felt as though her stomach had turned to ice. No Blue would have been behind the first betrayal, but one Blue, at least, had reason to betray Egwene now.

* * *

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CHAPTER 2

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The Dark One's Touch

Beonin woke at first light, as was her habit, though little of the dawn trickled into her tent past the closed doorflap. Habits were good when they were the right habits. She had taught herself a number over the years. The air inside the tent held a touch of the night's chill, but she left the brazier unlit. She did not intend to remain long. Channeling briefly, she lit a brass lamp, then heated the water in the white-glazed pitcher and washed her face at the rickety washstand with its bubbled mirror. Nearly everything in the small round tent was unsteady, from the tiny table to her narrow camp cot, and the only sturdy piece, a low-backed chair, was rude enough to have come from the poorest farm kitchen. She was accustomed to making do, though. Not all of the judgments she had been called on to make had been given in palaces. The meanest hamlet also deserved justice. She had slept in barns and even hovels to make it so.

Moving deliberately, she put on the best riding dress she had with her, a plain gray silk that was very well cut, and snug boots that came to her knees, then began brushing her dark golden hair with an ivory-backed hairbrush that had belonged to her mother. Her reflection in the mirror was slightly distorted. For some reason, that irritated her this morning.

Someone scratched at the tentflap, and a man called cheerily in a Murandian accent, "Breakfast, Aes Sedai, if it pleases you." She lowered the brush and opened herself to the Source.

She had not acquired a personal serving woman, and it often seemed a new face brought every meal, yet she remembered the stout, graying man with a permanent smile who entered at her command carrying a tray covered with a white cloth.

"Leave it on the table, please, Ehvin," she said, releasing *saidar*, and was rewarded with a widening of his smile, a deep bow over the tray, and another before he left. Too many sisters forgot the small courtesies to those beneath them. Small courtesies were the lubricant of daily life.

Eyeing the tray without enthusiasm, she resumed her brushing, a twice-a-day ritual that she always found soothing. Rather than finding comfort in the brush sliding through her hair this morning, however, she had to make herself complete the full one hundred strokes before laying the brush on the washstand beside the matching comb and hand mirror. Once, she could have taught the hills patience, yet that had become harder and harder since Salidar. And nearly impossible since Murandy. So she schooled herself to it, as she had schooled herself to go to the White Tower against her mother’s stern wishes, schooled herself to accept the Tower’s discipline along with its teaching. As a girl, she had been headstrong, always aspiring to more. The Tower had taught her that you could achieve much if you could control yourself. She prided herself on that ability.

Self-control or no self-control, lingering over her breakfast of stewed prunes and bread proved as difficult as completing her ritual with the hairbrush. The prunes had been dried, and perhaps too old to begin with; they had been stewed to mush, and she was sure she had missed a few of the black flecks that decorated the crusty bread. She tried to convince herself that anything that crunched between her teeth was a barley grain or a rye seed. This was not the first time she had eaten bread containing weevils, yet it was hardly a thing to enjoy. The tea had a strange aftertaste, too, as though that also was beginning to spoil.

When she finally replaced the linen cloth over the carved wooden tray, she very nearly sighed. How long before nothing edible remained in the camp? Was the same happening inside Tar Valon? It must be so. The Dark One was touching the world, a thought as bleak as a field of jagged stones. But victory would come. She refused to entertain any other possibility. Young al’Thor had a great deal to answer for, a very great deal, yet he would—must!—achieve that somehow. Somehow. But the Dragon Reborn lay beyond her purview; all she could do was watch events unfold from afar. She had never liked sitting to one side and watching.

All this bitter musing was useless. It was time to be moving. She stood up so quickly that her chair toppled over backward, but she left it lying there on the canvas ground-cloth.

Putting her head out at the doorflap, she found Tervail on a stool on the walkway, his dark cloak thrown back, leaning on the scabbarded sword propped between his boots. The sun stood on the horizon, two-thirds of a bright golden ball, yet dark clouds in the other direction, massing around Dragonmount, suggested more snow before long. Or perhaps rain. The sun felt close to warm after the previous night. Either way, with luck she could be snug indoors soon.

Tervail gave a small nod to acknowledge her without stopping what appeared to be an idle study of everyone who moved in his sight. There were none but laborers at the moment, men in rough woolens carrying baskets on their backs, men and women just as roughly clad driving high-wheeled carts, laden with bound firewood and sacks of charcoal and water barrels, that clattered along the rutted street. At least, his scrutiny would have seemed idle to someone lacking the Warder bond with him. Her Tervail, he was focused as a drawn arrow. It was only the men he studied, and his gaze lingered on those he did not know personally. With two sisters and a Warder dead at the hands of a man who could channel—it seemed beyond possibility there could be two murderers of that sort—everyone was leery of strange men. Everyone who knew, at least. The news had hardly been shouted abroad.

How he thought he might recognize the killer was beyond her unless the man carried a banner, but she would not upbraid or belittle him for trying to perform his duty. Whipcord lean, with a strong nose and a thick scar along his jaw earned in her service, he had been little more than a boy when she found him, cat-quick and already one of the finest swordsmen in her native Tarabon, and for all the years since there had never been a moment when he did less. At least twenty times he had saved her life. Quite aside from brigands and footpads too ignorant to recognize an Aes Sedai, the law could be dangerous when one side or the other became desperate not to have the judgment go against them, and often he had spotted the peril before she herself.

“Saddle Winterfinch for me and bring your own horse,” she told him. “We are going for the little ride.”

Tervail raised one eyebrow slightly, half-glancing in her direction, then attached the scabbard to the right side of his belt and set off down the wooden walkway toward the horselines, walking very quickly. He never asked unnecessary questions. Perhaps she was more agitated within than she believed.

Ducking back inside, she carefully wrapped the hand mirror in a silk scarf woven in a black-and-white Tairen maze and tucked it into one of the two large pockets sewn inside her good gray cloak, along with the hairbrush and comb. Her neatly folded shawl and a small box of intricately carved blackwood went into the other. The box contained a few pieces of jewelry, some that had come down from her mother and the rest from her maternal grandmother. She herself seldom wore jewelry aside from her Great Serpent ring, yet she always took the box and the brush, comb and mirror with her when she journeyed, reminders of the women whose memories she loved and honored, and of what they had taught her. Her grandmother, a noted advocate in Tanchico, had infused her with a love for the intricacies of the law, while her mother had demonstrated that it was always possible to better yourself. Advocates rarely became wealthy, though Collaris certainly had been more than comfortable, yet despite her disapproval, her daughter Aeldrine had become a merchant and amassed a tidy fortune buying and selling dyes. Yes, it was always possible to better yourself, if you seized the moment when it appeared, as she had when Elaida a'Roihan deposed Siuan Sanche. Matters since had not gone anywhere near as she had foreseen, of course. Matters seldom did. That was why a wise woman always planned alternative paths.

She considered waiting inside for Tervail to return—he could not fetch two horses in mere minutes—but now that the time had actually arrived, her last stores of patience seemed to flee. Settling the cloak around her shoulders, she snuffed the lamp with an air of finality. Outside, however, she forced herself to stand in one place rather than pacing along the walkway's rough planks. Pacing would attract eyes, and perhaps some sister who thought she was fearful of being alone. In all truth, she was afraid, a little. When a man could kill you, unseen, undetected, it was most reasonable to be afraid. She did not want company, though. She pulled up her cowl, signaling a desire for privacy, and drew the cloak around her.

A gray cat, notch-eared and lean, began stropping himself against her ankles. There were cats all over the camp; they appeared anywhere that Aes Sedai gathered, tame as house pets however feral they had been before. After a few moments without having his ears scratched, the cat strolled away, as proud as a king, in search of someone who would see to them. He had plenty of candidates.

Just moments earlier there had been only roughly garbed laborers and cart drivers in view, but now the camp began to bustle. Clusters of white-clad novices, the so-called "families," scurried along the walkways to reach their classes, held in any tent large enough to accommodate them, or even in the open. Those who hurried by her ceased their childish prattle to offer perfect curtsies in passing. The sight never ceased to amaze her. Or to produce anger. A fair number of those "children" were well into their middle years or older—no few had at least some gray in their hair, and some were grandmothers!—yet they were bending to the ancient routines as well as any girl she had ever seen come to the Tower. And so many. A seemingly endless flood poured down the streets. How much had the Tower lost through its focus on bringing in girls born with the spark and those already on the brink of channeling through their own fumbling while leaving the rest to find their way to Tar Valon as they would or could? How much lost through insisting no girl above eighteen could submit to the discipline? Change was nothing she had ever sought—law and custom ruled an Aes Sedai's life, a bedrock of stability—and some changes, such as these novice families, seemed too radical to go on, but how much had the Tower lost?

Sisters glided along the walkways, too, usually in pairs or even threes, usually trailed by their Warders. The flow of novices parted around them in ripples of curtsies, ripples made jagged by the stares directed at the sisters, who pretended not to notice. Very few of the Aes Sedai lacked the glow of the Power around them. Beonin came close to clicking her tongue in irritation. The novices knew that Anaiya and Kairen were dead—there had been no thought of hiding the funeral pyres—but telling them how the two sisters had died would simply have frightened them. The newest, added to the novice book in Murandy, had worn white long enough to be aware that sisters walking about filled with *saidar* was beyond unusual, though. Eventually that alone would frighten them, and to no purpose. The killer seemed unlikely to strike in public, with dozens of sisters about.

Five mounted sisters riding slowly eastward, none carrying the light of *saidar*, caught her eye. Each was followed by a small entourage, generally a secretary, a serving woman, perhaps a serving man as well in case of heavy lifting, and some Warders. All rode with their hoods up, but she had no difficulty making out who was who. Varilin, of her own Gray, would have been tall as a man, while Takima, the Brown, was a tiny thing. Saroiya's cloak was flamboyant with white embroidery—she must use *saidar* to keep it so sparkling bright—and a pair of Warders trailing Faiselle marked her as clearly as her brilliant green cloak. Which made the last, wrapped in dark gray, Magla, the Yellow. What would they find when they reached Darein? Surely not negotiators from the Tower, not now. Perhaps they thought they must go through the motions anyway. People frequently continued to go on as they had been after all purpose in it had been lost. That seldom lasted long with Aes Sedai, however.

"They hardly seem to be together at all, do they, Beonin? You might think they just happened to be riding in the same direction."

So much for the cowl providing a modicum of privacy. Luckily, she was practiced at suppressing sighs, or anything else that might give away more than she wished. The two sisters who had stopped beside her were much of a height, both small-boned, dark-haired and brown-eyed, but there resemblance ended. Ashmanaille's narrow face, with its pointed nose, seldom displayed any emotion at all. Her silk dress, slashed with silver, might have come from a tirewoman's hands only moments before, and silver scrollwork decorated the edges of her fur-lined cloak and cowl. Phaedrine's dark wool bore a number of creases, not to mention several stains, her woolen cloak was unadorned and needed darning, and she frowned much too often, as she was doing right then. She might have been pretty without that. An odd pair of friends, the usually unkempt Brown and the Gray who paid as much attention to her clothes as to anything else.

Beonin glanced at the departing Sitters. They did appear to be riding in the same direction by chance more than riding together. It was a measure of her upset this morning that she had failed to note that. "Perhaps," she said turning to face her unwanted visitors, "they are contemplating the consequences of last night, yes, Ashmanaille?" Unwelcome or not, courtesy must be observed.

"At least the Amyrlin is alive," the other Gray replied, "and by what I've been told, she will remain alive and . . . healthy. Her and Leane both." Not even Nynaeve's Healing of Siuan and Leane could make anyone speak of stilling with ease.

"Alive and a captive, it is better than being beheaded, I suppose. But not a great deal better." When Morvrin woke her to tell her the news, it had been hard to share the Brown's excitement. Excitement for Morvrin, at least. The woman had worn a small grin. Beonin had never considered altering her plans, though. Facts, they must be faced. Egwene was a prisoner, and that was that. "Do you not agree, Phaedrine?"

"Of course," the Brown replied curtly. Curtly! But that was Phaedrine, always so immersed in whatever had caught her attention that she forgot how she should behave. And she was not done. "But that is not why we sought you. Ashmanaille says you have considerable acquaintance with murders." A sudden gust of wind snatched at their cloaks, but Beonin and Ashmanaille caught theirs smoothly. Phaedrine let hers swirl behind her, eyes intent on Beonin.

“Perhaps you have had some thoughts on our murders, Beonin,” Ashmanaille said smoothly. “Will you share them with us? Phaedrine and I have been putting our heads together, but we are getting nowhere. My own experience is more with civil matters. I know that you have gotten to the bottom of a number of unnatural deaths.”

Of course she had thought on the murders. Was there a sister in the camp who had not? She herself could not have avoided it had she tried. Finding a murderer was a joy, far more satisfying than settling a boundary dispute. It was the most heinous of crimes, the theft of what could never be recovered, all the years that would never be lived, all that might have been done in them. And these were the deaths of Aes Sedai, which surely made it personal for every sister in the camp. She waited for a last covey of white-clad women, two with gray hair, to make their curtsies and hurry on. The number of novices on the walkways was finally beginning to thin out. The cats seemed to be following them. Novices were more free with petting than most sisters.

“The man who stabs from greed,” she said once the novices were beyond hearing, “the woman who poisons from jealousy, they are one thing. This is quite another altogether. There are two killings, surely by the same man, but well over a week apart. That implies both the patience and the planning. The motive is unclear, yet it seems very unlikely that he chose his victims by chance. Knowing no more of him than the fact that he can channel, you must begin by looking at what ties the victims together. In this case, Anaiya and Kairen, they were both Blue Ajah. So I ask myself, what connection has the Blue Ajah with a man who can channel? The answer comes back, Moiraine Damodred and Rand al’Thor. And Kairen, she also had contact with him, yes?”

Phaedrine’s frown deepened to near a scowl. “You cannot be suggesting *he* is the killer.” Really, she was getting much too far above herself.

“No,” Beonin said coolly. “I am saying you must follow the connection. Which leads to the Asha’man. Men who can channel. Men who can channel, who know how to Travel. Men who have some reason to fear Aes Sedai, perhaps particular Aes Sedai more than others. A connection is not the proof,” she admitted reluctantly, “but it is suggestive, yes?”

“Why would an Asha’man come here twice and each time kill one sister? That sounds as though the killer wanted those two and no others.”

Ashmanaille shook her head. “How could he know when Anaiya and Kairen would be alone? You cannot think he is lurking about disguised as a workman. From all I hear, these Asha’man are far too arrogant for that. To me, it seems more likely we have an actual workman who can channel and bears a grudge of some sort.”

Beonin sniffed dismissively. She could feel Tervail approaching. He must have run to be back so soon. “And why would he have waited until now? The last workmen, they were taken on in Murandy, more than a month ago.”

Ashmanaille opened her mouth, but Phaedrine darted in, quick as a sparrow snatching a crumb. “He might have only just learned how. A male wilder, as it were. I’ve overheard workmen talking. As many admire the Asha’man as fear them. I’ve even heard some say they wish they had the nerve to go to the Black Tower themselves.”

The other Gray’s left eyebrow twitched, as much as both shooting to her hairline in another woman. The two were friends, yet she could not be pleased with Phaedrine plucking the words from her mouth in that way. All she said, though, was “An Asha’man could find him, I’m sure.”

Beonin let herself feel Tervail, waiting only a few paces behind her, now. The bond carried a steady flow of unwavering calm and patience as strong as the mountains. How she wished she could draw on that as she could on his physical strength. “That is most unlikely to happen, I’m sure you will agree,” she said thinly. Romanda and the others might have stood in favor of this nonsensical “alliance” with the Black Tower, but from that moment on they had fought like drunken cart drivers over how to implement it, how to word the agreement, how to present it, every single detail torn apart, put back together and torn apart again. The thing was doomed, thank the Light.

“I must go,” she told them, and turned to take Winterfinch’s reins from Tervail. His tall bay gelding was sleek and powerful and fast, a trained warhorse. Her brown mare was stocky, and not fast, yet she had always preferred endurance to speed. Winterfinch could keep going long after taller, supposedly more powerful animals gave up. Putting a foot in the stirrup, she paused with her hands on tall pommel and cantle. “Two sisters dead, Ashmanaille, and both Blues. Find sisters who knew them and learn what else they had in common. To locate the murderer, you must follow the connections.”

“I doubt very much they will lead to Asha’man, Beonin.”

“The important thing is that the killer is found,” she replied, pulling herself into the saddle, and turned Winterfinch away before the other woman could go on. An abrupt ending, and discourteous, but she had no more wisdom to offer, and time seemed to press down on her, now. The sun was clear of the horizon and climbing. After so long, time pressed very hard indeed.

The ride to the Traveling ground used for departures was short, but near a dozen Aes Sedai were waiting in a line outside the tall canvas wall, some leading horses, some cloakless as if they expected to be indoors before long, and one or two wearing their shawls for some reason. About half were accompanied by Warders, several of whom wore their color-shifting cloaks. The one thing the sisters shared was that each shone with the glow of the Power. Tervail expressed no surprise at their destination, of course, but more than that, the Warder bond continued to carry steady calm. He trusted her. A silvery flash appeared inside the walls, and after sufficient time to count slowly to thirty, a pair of Greens who could not make a gateway alone entered together with four Warders leading horses. The custom of privacy already had attached itself to Traveling. Unless someone allowed you to see her weave a gateway, trying to learn where she was going was accounted akin to asking direct questions about her business. Beonin waited patiently on Winterfinch, with Tervail towering over her on Hammer. At least the sisters here respected her raised cowl. Or perhaps they had their own reasons for silence. Either way, she did not have to talk with anyone. At this moment, that would have been insupportable.

The line in front of her dwindled quickly, and soon enough she and Tervail were dismounting at the head of a much shorter line, only three sisters. He held aside the heavy canvas flap for her to enter first. Hung between tall poles, the wall enclosed a space of nearly twenty paces by twenty where frozen slush covered the ground, an uneven surface marked by footprints and hoofprints atop one another and scored in the middle by a razor-straight line. Everyone used the middle. The ground glistened faintly, perhaps the beginning of another thaw that would turn it all to slush that might well freeze again. Spring came later here than in Tarabon, but it was on the brink.

As soon as Tervail let the canvas fall, she embraced *saidar* and wove Spirit almost caressingly. This weave fascinated her, a rediscovery of something thought lost forever and surely the greatest of Egwene al'Vere's discoveries. Every time she wove it she felt a sense of wonder, so familiar as novice and even Accepted, that had not come to her since she attained the shawl. Something new and marvelous. The vertical silvery line appeared in front of her, right atop the scoring on the ground, and suddenly became a gap that widened, the view through appearing to rotate until she was faced by a square hole in the air, more than two paces by two, that showed snow-draped oaks with heavy spreading limbs. A light breeze blew through the gateway, rippling her cloak. She had often enjoyed walking in that grove, or sitting on one of the low branches for hours reading, though never in snow.

Tervail did not recognize it, and darted through, sword in hand, tugging Hammer behind him, the warhorse's hooves kicking up puffs of snow on the other side. She followed a little more slowly and let the weave dissipate almost reluctantly. It truly was wondrous.

She found Tervail looking at what rose above the treetops in the near distance, a thick pale shaft rearing against the sky. The White Tower. His face was very still, and the bond seemed filled with stillness, too. "I think me you are planning something dangerous, Beonin." He still held his blade bared, though lowered now.

She laid a hand on his left arm. That should be enough to reassure him; she would never have impeded his sword arm if there was any real danger. "No more dangerous than is ne. . . ."

The words trailed off as she saw a woman some thirty paces away, walking slowly toward her through the grove of massive trees. She must have been behind a tree before. An Aes Sedai in a dress of old-fashioned cut, with straight white hair held back by a pearl-studded cap of silver wire and falling to her waist. It could not be. That strong face with its dark, tilted eyes and hooked nose was unmistakable, though. Unmistakable, but Turanine Merdagon had died when Beonin was Accepted. In midstep, the woman vanished.

"What is it?" Tervail spun, his sword coming up, to stare in the direction she had been looking. "What frightened you?"

"The Dark One, he is touching the world," she said softly. It was impossible! Impossible, but she was not given to delusions or fancies. She had seen what she had seen. Her shiver had nothing to with standing ankle-deep in snow. Silently, she prayed. *May the Light illumine me all of my* *days, and may I shelter in the Creator's hand in the sure and certain hope of salvation and rebirth.*

When she told him about seeing a sister more than forty years dead, he did not try to dismiss it as hallucination, merely muttered his own prayer half under his breath. She felt no fear in him, though. Plenty in herself, but none in him. The dead could not frighten a man who took each day as his last. He was not so sanguine when she revealed what she intended. Part of it, anyway. She did so looking into the hand mirror and weaving very carefully. She was not as adept with Illusion as she would have liked. The face in the mirror changed as the weave settled on her. It was not a great change, but the face was no longer an Aes Sedai's face, no longer Beonin Marinye's face, just that of a woman who looked vaguely like her, though with much paler hair.

"Why do you want to reach Elaida?" he demanded suspiciously. Abruptly the bond carried an edge. "You mean to get close to her then lower the Illusion, yes? She will attack you, and—No, Beonin. If it must be done, let me go. There are too many Warders in the Tower for her to know them all, and she will never expect a Warder to attack her. I can put a dagger in her heart before she knows what is happening." He demonstrated, a short blade appearing in his right hand quick as lightning.

"What I do, I must do myself, Tervail." Inverting the Illusion and tying it off, she prepared several other weaves just in case matters went too far awry, inverting them also, then began another, a very complex weave that she laid on herself. That would hide her ability to channel. She had always wondered why some weaves, such as Illusion, could be placed on yourself while it was impossible to make others, such as Healing, touch your own body. When she had asked that question as Accepted, Turanine had said in that memorable deep voice, "As well ask why water is wet and sand dry, child. Put your mind on what is possible rather than why some things are not." Good advice, yet she never had been able to accept the second part. The dead were walking. *May the Light illumine me all the days of. . . .* She tied off the last weave and removed her Great Serpent ring, tucking it into her belt pouch. Now she could stand beside any Aes Sedai unrecognized for what she was. "You have always trusted me to know what is best," she went on. "Do you still?"

His face remained as smooth as a sister's, yet the bond brought an instant of shock. "But of course, Beonin."

“Then take Winterfinch and go into the city. Hire a room at an inn until I come for you.” He opened his mouth, but she raised an admonitory hand. “Go, Tervail.”

She watched him disappear through the trees, leading both horses, then turned to face the Tower. The dead were walking. But all that mattered was that she reach Elaida. Only that.

Gusts of wind rattled the casements set in the windows. The fire on the white marble hearth had warmed the air to the point that moisture condensed on the glass panes and trickled down like raindrops. Seated behind her gilded writing table with her hands calmly folded on the tabletop, Elaida do Avriny a’Roihan, the Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat, kept a smooth face while she listened to the man in front of her rant, shoulders hunched and shaking his fist.

“. . . did be kept bound and gagged for most of the voyage, confined day and night to a cabin better called a cupboard! For that, I demand the captain of that vessel be punished, Elaida. More, I do demand an apology from you and from the White Tower. Fortune stab me, the Amyrlin Seat does not have the right to kidnap kings any longer! The White Tower does not have that right! I do demand. . . .”

He was repeating himself again. The man barely paused for breath. It was difficult to keep her attention on him. Her eyes wandered to the bright tapestries on the walls, the neatly arrayed red roses on white plinths in the corners. Tiresome, maintaining outward calm while enduring this tirade. She wanted to stand up and slap him. The audacity of the man! To speak so to the Amyrlin Seat! But enduring calmly served her purpose better. She would let him exhaust himself.

Mattin Stepaneos den Balgar was muscular, and he might have been good-looking when young, but the years had proven unkind. The white beard that left his upper lip bare was neatly trimmed, but the hair had retreated from most of his scalp, his nose had been broken more than once, and his scowl deepened creases on his flushed face that needed no deepening. His green silk coat, embroidered on the sleeves with the Golden Bees of Illian, had been brushed and cleaned well, short of a sister channeling to do the work, yet it had been his only coat for the voyage, and not all the stains had come out. The ship carrying him had been slow, arriving late the day before, but for once, she was not displeased with someone else’s slowness. The Light only knew what a mess Alviarin would have made of matters had he arrived in a timely fashion. The woman deserved to go to the headsman for the mire she had driven the Tower into, a mire Elaida now had to dig out of, much less for *daring* to blackmail the Amyrlin Seat.

Mattin Stepaneos cut off abruptly, taking half a step back on the patterned Taraboner carpet. Elaida wiped the frown from her face. Thinking of Alviarin always made her glare unless she was careful.

“Your rooms are comfortable enough for you?” she said into the silence. “The serving men are suitable?”

He blinked at the sudden change of direction. “The rooms do be comfortable and the serving men suitable,” he replied in a much milder tone, perhaps remembering her frown. “Even so, I—”

“You should be grateful to the Tower, Mattin Stepaneos, and to me. Rand al’Thor took Illian only days after you departed the city. He took the Laurel Crown, as well. The Crown of Swords, he named it. Can you believe he would have faltered in cutting off your head to take it? I knew you would not leave voluntarily. I saved your life.” There. He should believe it had been done with his best interests at heart, now.

The fool had the temerity to snort and fold his arms across his chest. “I am no a toothless old hound yet, Mother. I did face death defending Illian many times. Do you believe I fear dying so much I would rather be your ‘guest’ for the rest of my life?” Still, that was the first time he had given her her proper title since entering the room.

The ornate gilded case clock standing against the wall chimed, small figures of gold and silver and enamel moving on three levels. On the highest, above the clockface, a king and queen knelt to an Amyrlin Seat. Unlike the wide stole resting on Elaida’s shoulders, that Amyrlin’s stole still had seven stripes. She had not yet gotten around to bringing in an enameler. There was so much to be done that was so much more important.

Adjusting her stole on the bright red silk of her dress, she leaned back so the Flame of Tar Valon, picked out in moonstones on the tall gilded chairback, would stand directly above her head. She intended to make the man take in every symbol of who she was and what she represented. Had the Flame-topped staff been at hand, she would have held it under his crooked nose. “A dead man can reclaim nothing, my son. From here, with my help, it may be that you can reclaim your crown and your nation.”

Mattin Stepaneos' mouth opened a crack and he inhaled deeply, like a man scenting a home he had never thought to see again. "And how would you arrange that, Mother? I understand the City do be held by these . . . Asha'man," he fumbled the cursed name slightly, "and Aiel who follow the Dragon Reborn." Someone had been talking to him, telling him too much. His news of events was to be strictly rationed. It seemed his serving man would have to be replaced. But hope had washed the anger from his voice, and that was to the good.

"Regaining your crown will require planning, and time," she told him, since at the moment she had no idea of how it could be accomplished. She certainly intended to find a way, however. Kidnapping the King of Illian had been meant to demonstrate her power, but restoring him to a stolen throne would demonstrate it even further. She would rebuild the full glory of the White Tower at its highest, the days when thrones trembled if the Amyrlin Seat frowned.

"I am sure you are still weary from your journey," she said, standing. Just as if he had undertaken it of his own free will. She hoped he was intelligent enough to make that pretense, too. It would serve them both far better than the truth in the days to come. "We will dine together at midday and discuss what might be done. Cariandre, escort His Majesty to his rooms and see to fetching a tailor. He will need new clothes made. A gift from me." The plump Ghealdanin Red who had been standing still as a mouse beside the door to the anteroom glided forward to touch his arm. He hesitated, reluctant to go, but Elaida continued as though he were already leaving. "Tell Tarna to come in to me, Cariandre. I have a great deal of work today," she added for his benefit.

At last Mattin Stepaneos let himself be turned, and she sat down again before he reached the door. Three lacquered boxes were arranged just so on the tabletop, one her correspondence box, where she kept recently received letters and reports from the Ajahs. The Red shared whatever their eyes-and-ears learned—she thought they did—but the other Ajahs still provided only dribbles, though they had produced a number of unwelcome pieces of information in the last week or so. Unwelcome in part because they indicated contact with the rebels that must go beyond those farcical negotiations. It was the fat, gold-embossed leather folder in front of her that she opened, however. The Tower itself generated enough reports to have buried the table had she tried to read them all herself, and Tar Valon produced ten times as many. Clerks handled the vast majority, selecting only the most important for her to read. They still made a thick stack.

“You wanted me, Mother?” Tarna said coolly, shutting the door behind her. There was no disrespect in it; the yellow-haired woman was cold by nature, her blue eyes icy. Elaida did not mind that. What irritated her was that the bright red Keeper’s stole around Tarna’s neck was little more than a wide ribbon. Her pale gray dress was slashed with enough red to display her pride in her Ajah, so why was her stole so narrow? But Elaida had a great deal of trust in the woman, and of late that was a rare commodity.

“What news from the harbor, Tarna?” There was no need to say which. Southharbor alone had any hope of remaining functional without massive repairs.

“Only riverships of the shallowest draft can enter,” Tarna said, crossing the carpet to stand in front of the writing table. She might have been discussing the possibility of rain. Nothing fazed her. “But the rest are taking turns tying up to the part of the chain that’s *cuendillar* so they can off-load into barges. The ship captains complain, and it takes considerably longer, yet for the time being, we can make do.”

Elaida’s mouth compressed, and she drummed her fingers on the tabletop. For the time being. She could not begin to repair the harbors until the rebels finally collapsed. So far, they had not launched an assault, thank the Light. That might begin with soldiers only, yet sisters certainly would be drawn into it, something they must want to evade as much as she did. But razing the harbor towers, as repairs would require, laying the harbors open and defenseless, might lead them to desperate acts. Light! Fighting *must* be avoided, if at all possible. She intended to fold their army into the Tower Guard once they realized they were finished and returned to the Tower. Part of her already thought as if Gareth Bryne were commanding the Tower Guard for her. An infinitely better man for High Captain than Jimar Chubain. The world would know the White Tower’s influence then! She did not want her soldiers killing one another, any more than she wanted the Tower weakened by her Aes Sedai killing one another. The rebels *were* hers as much as those inside the Tower, and she meant to make them acknowledge it.

Picking up the top sheet from the stack of reports, she scanned it rapidly. “Apparently, despite my express order, the streets are still not being cleaned. Why?”

An uneasy light appeared in Tarna's eyes, the first time Elaida had ever seen her look troubled. "People are frightened, Mother. They don't leave their homes except at need, and with great reluctance even then. They say they have seen the dead walking in the streets."

"This has been confirmed?" Elaida asked quietly. Her blood suddenly seemed chill. "Have any sisters seen them?"

"None in the Red, that I know of." The others would speak with her as Keeper, yet not freely, not to share confidences. *How* under the Light was that to be mended? "But people in the city are adamant. They have seen what they've seen."

Slowly, Elaida set the page down to one side. She wanted to shiver. So. She had read everything she could find concerning the Last Battle, even studies and Foretellings so old they had never been translated out of the Old Tongue and had lain covered in dust in the darkest corners of the library. The al'Thor boy had been a harbinger, but now it seemed that Tarmon Gai'don would come sooner than anyone had thought. Several of those ancient Foretellings, from the earliest days of the Tower, said the dead appearing was the first sign, a thinning of reality as the Dark One gathered himself. There would be worse before long.

"Have the Tower Guards drag able-bodied men out of their houses, if need be," she said calmly. "I want those streets clean, and I want to hear that a start was made today. Today!"

The other woman's pale eyebrows lifted in surprise—she *had* lost her usual frigid self-control!—but all she said, of course, was, "As you command, Mother."

Elaida projected serenity, but it was a charade. What would come, would come. And she still had secured no hold on the al'Thor boy. To think she had once had him right under her hand! If only she had known then. Curse Alviarin and that triply cursed proclamation calling anathema on anyone who approached him save through the Tower. She would have recalled it, except that would seem weakness, and in any case, the damage had been done beyond simple mending. Still, soon she would have Elayne back in hand, and the Royal House of Andor was the key to winning Tarmon Gai'don. *That*, she had Foretold long ago. And news of rebellion against the Seanchan sweeping across Tarabon had been very pleasant reading. Not everything was a tangle of briars stabbing her from every side.

Scanning the second report, she grimaced. No one liked sewers, yet they were one-third of the life's blood of a city, the other two being trade and clean water. Without the sewers, Tar Valon would become prey to a dozen diseases, overwhelming anything the sisters could do, not to mention even more malodorous than the rotting garbage must have made the streets already. Though trade was cut to a trickle for the moment, the water still came in at the upriver end of the island and was distributed to watertowers throughout the city, then to fountains, ornamental and plain, that anyone was free to use, but now it seemed the sewer outlets on the downriver end of the island were nearly clogged. Dipping her pen in the ink jar, she scrawled I WANT THESE CLEARED BY TOMORROW across the top of the page and signed her name below. If the clerks had any sense, the work was already under way, but she never accused clerks of having much sense.

The next report made her own eyebrows rise. "Rats inside the Tower?" That was beyond serious! This should have been on top! "Have someone check the Wards, Tarna." Those Wardings had held since the Tower was built, but perhaps they could have weakened after three thousand years. How many of those rats were the Dark One's spies?

A rap came at the door, followed an instant later by a plump Accepted named Anemara, who spread her striped skirts in a deep curtsy. "If it pleases you, Mother, Felaana Sedai and Negaine Sedai have brought a woman to you they found wandering in the Tower. They say she wants to present a petition to the Amyrlin Seat."

"Tell her to wait and offer her tea, Anemara," Tarna said briskly. "The Mother is busy—"

"No, no," Elaida broke in. "Send them in, child. Send them in." It had been too long since anyone had come to present her with a petition. She was of a mind to grant whatever it was, if it was not too ridiculous. Perhaps that would restart the flow. It was far too long since any sisters had come to her without being summoned, too. Perhaps the two Browns would end that drought, as well.

But only one woman entered the room, carefully closing the door behind her. By her silk riding dress and good cloak, she appeared to be a noblewoman or a prosperous merchant, a supposition supported by her confident manner. Elaida was sure she had never met the woman before, yet there seemed something vaguely familiar about that face framed by hair even fairer than Tarna's.

Elaida stood and started around the table, hands outstretched and an unaccustomed smile on her face. She tried to make it seem welcoming. “I understand that you have a petition for me, my daughter. Tarna, pour her some tea.” The silver pot sitting on a silver tray atop the side table must still be at least warm.

“The petition, it was something I let them believe in order to reach you unbruised, Mother,” the woman replied in Taraboner accents, curtsying, and halfway through that, her face was suddenly that of Beonin Marinye.

Embracing *saidar*, Tarna wove a shield on the woman, but Elaida contented herself with planting her fists on her hips.

“To say that I’m surprised you dare show me your face would be an understatement, Beonin.”

“I managed to become part of what you might call the ruling council in Salidar,” the Gray said calmly. “I made sure they sat there and did nothing, and I put the rumors about that many among them were in truth your secret adherents. The sisters, they were looking at one another with so much suspicion, I think me most might have returned to the Tower soon at that point, but then other Sitters beside the Blues appeared. The next I knew, they had chosen their own Hall of the Tower, and the ruling council, it was done. Still, I continued to do what I could. I know that you commanded me to remain with them until they were all ready to return, but that must happen within days, now. If I may say, Mother, it was the most excellent decision not to try Egwene. For one thing, she has the genius for discovering new weaves, even better than Elayne Trakand or Nynaeve al’Meara. For another, before they raised her, Lelaine and Romanda struggled with one another to be named Amyrlin. With Egwene alive, they will struggle again, but neither can succeed, yes? Me, I think very soon now sisters will begin following behind me. In a week or two, Lelaine and Romanda will find themselves alone with the remainder of their so-called Hall.”

“How did you know the al’Vere girl wasn’t to be tried?” Elaida demanded. “How did you know she’s even alive? Unshield her, Tarna!”

Tarna complied, and Beonin gave her a nod as if in gratitude. A small gratitude. Those large blue-gray eyes might make Beonin appear constantly startled, but she was a very composed woman. Combine composure with a wholehearted dedication to the law and also ambition, which she possessed in as great a measure, and Elaida had known immediately that Beonin was the one to send off after the sisters fleeing the Tower. And the woman had failed utterly! Oh, she had apparently sowed a little dissension, but really, she had achieved *nothing* of what Elaida had expected from her. Nothing! She would find her rewards commensurate with her failure.

"Egwene, she can enter *Tel'aran'rhiod* simply by going to sleep, Mother. I myself have been there and seen her, but I must use a *ter'angreal*. I could not acquire any of those the rebels have to bring with me. In any event, she spoke to Siuan Sanche, in her dreams, it is claimed, though I think more likely in the World of Dreams. Apparently, she said that she is a prisoner, but she would not tell where, and she forbade any rescue attempt. May I pour myself that tea?"

Elaida was so stunned she could not speak. She motioned Beonin to the side table, and the Gray curtsied again before going over to feel the silver pitcher cautiously with the back of her hand. The girl could *enter Tel'aran'rhiod*? And there were *ter'angreal* that allowed the same thing? The World of Dreams was almost a legend. And according to those troubling scraps the Ajahs had deigned to share with her, the girl had rediscovered the weave for Traveling and made any number of other discoveries as well. They had been the determining factor in her decision to preserve the girl for the Tower, but this on top of it?

"If Egwene can do this, Mother, perhaps she really is a Dreamer," Tarna said. "The warning she gave Silviana—"

"Is useless, Tarna. The Seanchan are still deep in Altara and barely touching Illian." At least the Ajahs were willing to pass on everything they learned of the Seanchan. Or rather, she hoped they passed on everything. The thought roughened her voice. "Unless *they* learn to Travel, can you think of any precaution I need to take beyond what is already in place?" She could not, of course. The girl had *forbidden* a rescue. That was good on the face of it, but it indicated she still thought of herself as Amyrlin. Well, Silviana would remove that nonsense from her head soon enough if the sisters teaching her classes failed. "Can she be fed enough of that potion to keep her out of *Tel'aran'rhiod*?"

Tarna grimaced slightly—no one liked that vile brew, even the Browns who had brought themselves to test it—and shook her head. "We can make her sleep through the night, but she would be useless for anything the next day, and who can say whether it would affect this ability of hers."

“May I pour for you, Mother?” Beonin said, balancing a thin white teacup on her fingertips. “Tarna? The most important news I have—”

“I don’t care for any tea,” Elaida said harshly. “Did you bring back anything to save your skin from your miserable failure? Do you know the weave for Traveling, or this Skimming, or. . . .” There were so many. Perhaps they were all Talents and skills that had been lost, but apparently most had not been named yet.

The Gray peered at her across the teacup, her face very still. “Yes,” she said at last. “I cannot make *cuendillar,* but I can make the new Healing weaves work as well as most sisters, and I know them all.” An edge of excitement crept into her voice. “The most marvelous is Traveling.” Without asking permission, she embraced the Source and wove Spirit. A vertical line of silver appeared against one wall and widened into a view of snow-covered oaks. A cold breeze blew into the room, making the flames dance in the fireplace. “That is called a gateway. It’s well I have been to these rooms before, because it can only be used from places you know well. To journey from a place you do not know well, you use Skimming.” She altered the weave, and the opening dwindled into that silvery line once more then widened again. The oaks were replaced by blackness, and a gray-painted barge, railed and gated, that floated on nothing against the opening.

“Release the weave,” Elaida said. She had the feeling that if she walked over to that barge, the darkness would extend as far as she could see in any direction. That she could fall in it forever. It made her queasy. The opening—the gateway—vanished. The memory remained, however.

Resuming her seat behind the table, she opened the largest of the lacquered boxes, decorated with red roses and golden scrollwork. From the top tray, she picked up a small ivory carving, a fork-tailed swallow dark yellow with years, and stroked her thumb along the curved wings. “You will not teach these things to anyone without receiving my permission.”

“But . . . why ever not, Mother?”

“Some of the Ajahs oppose the Mother almost as strongly as those sisters beyond the river,” Tarna said.

Elaida shot a dark look at her Keeper, but that cool visage absorbed it without changing a hair. “*I* will decide who is . . . reliable enough . . . to be taught, Beonin. I want your promise. No, I want your oath.”

“On my way here, I saw sisters of different Ajahs glaring at one another. Glaring. What has happened in the Tower, Mother?”

“Your oath, Beonin.”

The woman stood peering into her teacup long enough that Elaida was beginning to think she would refuse. But ambition won out. She had tied herself to Elaida’s skirts in the hope of preferment, and she would not abandon that now. “Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I swear that I will teach the weaves I learned among the rebels to no one without the permission of the Amyrlin Seat.” She paused, taking a sip from the cup. “Some sisters in the Tower, they are perhaps less reliable than you think. I tried to stop it, but that ‘ruling council’ sent ten sisters to return to the Tower and spread the tale of the Red Ajah and Logain.” Elaida recognized few of the names she reeled off, until the last. That one made her sit bolt upright.

“Shall I have them arrested, Mother?” Tarna asked, still as chill as ice.

“No. Have them watched. Watch whoever they associate with.” So there *was* a conduit between the Ajahs inside the Tower and the rebels. How deeply had the rot spread? However deep, she would clean it out!

“That may be difficult as matters stand, Mother.”

Elaida slapped the table with her free hand, a sharp crack. “I didn’t ask whether it would be difficult. I said do it! And inform Meidani that I invite her to dinner this evening.” The woman had been persistent in trying to resume a friendship that had ended many years before. Now she knew why. “Go and do that now.” A shadow crossed Tarna’s face as she curtsied. “Don’t worry,” Elaida said. “Beonin can feel free to teach you every weave she knows.” She did trust Tarna, after all, and it certainly made her expression brighter, if not warmer.

As the door closed behind her Keeper, Elaida pushed the leather folder to one side and leaned her elbows on the table, focusing on Beonin. “Now. Show me everything.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 3

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At the Gardens

Aran'gar arrived in answer to Moridin's summons, spoken into her furious dreams, to find him not yet there. That was hardly surprising; he liked to make an entrance. Eleven tall armchairs, carved and gilded, sat in a circle in the middle of the striped wooden floor, but they were empty. Semirhage, all in black as usual, looked around to see who had entered, then returned to her huddled conversation with Demandred and Mesaana in one corner of the room. Demandred's hook-nosed face carried an expression of anger that only made him more striking. Not enough to attract her, of course. He was far too dangerous for that. That well-fitted coat of bronze silk, with falls of snowy lace at neck and wrists, suited him, however. Mesaana also wore the style of this Age, a darker, pattern-embroidered bronze. She appeared wan and subdued, for some reason, almost as if she had taken ill. Well, that was possible. This Age had a number of nasty diseases, and it seemed unlikely even she would trust Semirhage for Healing. Graendal, the only other human present, stood in the corner opposite cradling a delicate crystal goblet filled with dark wine, but watching the trio rather than drinking. Only idiots ignored being studied by Graendal, yet the three went on with their fierce murmurs.

The chairs jarred with the rest of their surroundings. The room appeared to have view-walls, though the stone arch of a doorway destroyed the illusion. The chairs could have been anything, here in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, so why not something to suit the room, and why eleven when that was surely two more than needed? Asmodean and Sammael *must* be as dead as Be'lal and Rahvin. Why not the usual dilating door of a view-room? The display made the floor seem to be surrounded by the Ansaline Gardens, with Cormalinde Masoon's immense sculptures of stylized humans and animals towering over low buildings themselves like delicate sculptures in spinglass. At the Gardens only the finest wines had been served, the finest dishes, and it almost always had been possible to impress a beautiful woman with large winnings at the *chinje* wheels, though cheating enough to win consistently had been difficult. Difficult, but necessary for a scholar who lacked wealth. All gone, in ruins by the third year of the war.

A golden-haired, ever-smiling *zomara* in a flowing white blouse and tight breeches bowed fluidly and offered Aran'gar a crystal goblet of wine on a silver tray. Graceful and beautifully androgynous, apparently human despite those dead black eyes, the creatures had been one of Aginor's less inspired creations. Still, even in their own Age, when Moridin had been called Ishamael—there was no longer any doubt in her mind of who he was—he had trusted the creatures above any human servant, despite their uselessness for every other task. Somewhere he must have found a stasis box stuffed with the things. He had dozens, although he seldom brought them out. Yet ten more stood waiting, graceful while standing still. He must consider this meeting more important than most.

Taking the goblet, she waved the *zomara* away, though it was already turning before she gestured. She hated the creatures' ability to know what was in her head. At least it could not communicate what it learned to anyone. Memories of anything but commands faded in minutes. Even Aginor possessed sense enough to see the need for that. Would he appear today? Osan'gar had missed every meeting since the failure at Shadar Logoth. The true question was, was he among the dead or was he moving in secret, perhaps at the Great Lord's direction? Either way, his absences presented delicious opportunities, but the latter presented as many dangers. Dangers had been much on her mind lately.

Casually, she strolled over to Graendal. "Who do you think arrived first, Graendal? The Shadow take me, whoever it was chose a depressing setting." Lanfear had preferred meetings that floated in endless night, yet this was worse in its own way, like meeting in a cemetery.

Graendal smiled thinly. At least, she attempted a thin smile, but no amount of effort would make those lips thin. Lush was the word for all of Graendal, lush and ripe and beautiful, and barely concealed by the gray mist of her streith gown. Though perhaps she should not have worn quite so many rings, all but one adorned with gems. The coronet encrusted with rubies clashed with her sun-gold hair, too. The emerald necklace Delana had provided went much better with her own green satin silks. Of course, while the emeralds were real, her silks were a product of the World of Dreams. She would have attracted too much notice in the waking world with a dress cut so low, if it would even stay up, there. And there was the slit that bared her left leg to the hip. Her legs were better than Graendal's. She had considered two slits. Her abilities here were not as large as some—she could not find Egwene's dreams without the girl right beside her—but she could manage the clothes she wanted. She enjoyed having her body admired, and the more she flaunted it, the more the others took her for inconsequential.

"I arrived first," Graendal said, frowning slightly into her wine. "I have fond memories of the Gardens."

Aran'gar managed a laugh. "So do I, so do I." The woman was a fool like the rest, living in the past among the tatters of what was lost. "We'll never see the Gardens again, but we'll see their like." She herself was the only one of them suited to rule in this Age. She was the only one who understood primitive cultures. They had been her specialty before the war. Still, Graendal had useful skills, and a wider range of contacts among the Friends of the Dark than she herself had, though the other woman would certainly disapprove of how Aran'gar meant to use them should she learn. "Has it occurred to you that all of the others have alliances, while you and I stand alone?" And Osan'gar, if he was alive, but there was no need to bring him into this.

Graendal's gown turned a darker gray, regrettably obscuring the view. It was real streith. Aran'gar had found a pair of stasis-boxes herself, but filled with the most appalling rubbish for the most part. "Has it occurred to *you* that this room must have ears? The *zomaran* were here when I arrived."

"Graendal." She purred the name. "If Moridin is listening, he'll assume I'm trying to get into your bed. He knows I never made alliances with anyone." In truth, she had made several, but her allies always seemed to suffer fatal misfortunes once their usefulness ended, and they took all knowledge of the affiliations to their graves. Those who found graves.

The streith went black as midnight in Larcheen, and spots of color appeared on Graendal's creamy cheeks. Her eyes became blue ice. But her words were at odds with her face, and her gown faded to near transparency as she spoke, slowly, sounding thoughtful. "An intriguing notion. One I've never before considered. I might do so now. Perhaps. You will have to . . . convince me, though." Good. The other woman was as quick-witted as ever. It was a reminder that she must be careful. She meant to use Graendal and dispose of her, not be caught in one of her traps.

"I am very good at convincing beautiful women." She stretched out a hand to caress Graendal's cheek. Now was not too soon to begin convincing the others. Besides, something more than an alliance might come of it. She had always fancied Graendal. She no longer really remembered having been a man. In her memories, she wore the body she did now, which did make for a few oddities, yet that body's influence had not changed everything. Her appetites had not altered, only broadened. She would like very much to have that streith gown. And anything else useful that Graendal might possess, of course, but she dreamed of wearing that dress sometimes. The only reason she was not wearing one now was that she would not have the other woman thinking she had imitated her.

The streith remained barely opaque, but Graendal stepped away from the caress looking past Aran'gar, who turned to find Mesaana approaching, flanked by Demandred and Semirhage. He still appeared angry, and Semirhage coolly amused. Mesaana was still pale, but no longer subdued. No, not subdued at all. She was a hissing *coreer*, spitting venom.

"Why did you let her go, Aran'gar? You were supposed to be controlling her! Were you so busy playing your little dream-games with her that you forgot to learn what she was thinking? The rebellion will fall apart without her for a figurehead. All my careful planning ruined because you couldn't keep a grasp on one ignorant girl!"

Aran'gar held on to her temper firmly. She could hold it, when she was willing to make the effort. Instead of snarling, she smiled. Could Mesaana actually have based herself inside the White Tower? How wonderful it would be if she could find a way to split that threesome apart. "I listened in on a sitting of the rebels' Hall last night. In the World of Dreams, so they could meet inside the White Tower, with Egwene leading it. She's not the figurehead you believe. I've tried telling you before, but you never listened." That came out too hard. With an effort, and it required effort, she moderated her tone. "Egwene told them all about the situation inside the Tower, the Ajahs at one another's throats. She convinced them it's the Tower that is about to fall apart, and that she might be able to help it along from where she is. Were I you, I'd worry whether the Tower can hold together long enough to keep this conflict going."

"They're determined to hold on?" Mesaana murmured, half under her breath. She nodded. "Good. Good. Then everything is proceeding according to plan. I had been thinking I would need to stage some sort of 'rescue,' but perhaps I can wait until Elaida has broken her. Her return should create even more confusion, then. You need to sow more dissension, Aran'gar. Before I'm done, I want these so-called Aes Sedai hating each other in their blood."

A *zomara* appeared, bowing gracefully as it offered a tray with three goblets. Mesaana and her companions took the wine without a glance at the creature, and it bowed again before flowing away.

“Dissension was always something she was good at,” Semirhage said. Demandred laughed.

Aran’gar forced her anger down. Sipping her own wine—it was quite good, with a heady aroma, if nowhere near the vintages served at the Gardens—she laid her free hand on Graendal’s shoulder and toyed with one of those sun-colored curls. The other woman never flinched, and the streith remained a bare mist. Either she was enjoying this, or she had better control of herself than seemed possible. Semirhage’s smile grew more amused. She, too, took her pleasures where she found them, though Semirhage’s pleasures had never attracted Aran’gar.

“If you’re going to fondle one another,” Demandred growled, “do it in private.”

“Jealous?” Aran’gar murmured, and laughed lightly at his scowl. “Where is the girl kept, Mesaana? She didn’t say.”

Mesaana’s big blue eyes narrowed. They were her best feature, yet only ordinary when she frowned. “Why do you want to know? So you can ‘rescue’ her yourself? I won’t tell you.”

Graendal hissed, and Aran’gar realized that her hand had become a fist in that golden hair, bending Graendal’s head back. The other woman’s face remained tranquil, but her gown was a red mist and rapidly growing darker, more opaque. Aran’gar loosened her grip, holding on lightly. One of the first steps was making your quarry accustomed to your touch. She did nothing to keep the anger from her voice this time, however. Her bared teeth were an undisguised snarl. “I want the girl, Mesaana. Without her, I have much weaker tools to work with.”

Mesaana sipped wine calmly before responding. Calmly! “By your own account, you don’t need her at all. It has been *my* plan from the start, Aran’gar. I will adapt it according to need, but it is mine. And *I* will decide when and where the girl is set free.”

“No, Mesaana, *I* will decide when and where, or whether, she is freed,” Moridin announced, striding through the stone arch. So he *had* set ears in place. He was in unrelieved black this time, a black somehow darker than what Semirhage wore. As usual, Moghedien and Cyndane followed him, both attired in identical red-and-black that suited neither. What hold did he have on them? Moghedien, at least, had never willingly followed anyone. As for that beautiful, bosomy little pale-haired doll Cyndane. . . . Aran’gar had approached her, just to see what might be learned, and the girl had coldly threatened to rip her heart out if Aran’gar touched her again. Hardly the words of someone who submitted easily.

“Sammael appears to have resurfaced,” Moridin announced, crossing the floor to take a seat. He was a big man, and he made the ornate high-backed chair seem a throne. Moghedien and Cyndane sat down to either side of him, but interestingly, not until he had. *Zomaran* in snowy white were there instantly with wine, yet Moridin received his first. Whatever was at work there, the *zomaran* sensed it.

“That hardly seems possible,” Graendal said as they all moved to take chairs. Her gown was dark gray now, concealing everything. “He must be dead.” No one moved quickly, though. Moridin was Nae’blis, yet no one except Moghedien and Cyndane was willing to display any hint of subservience. Aran’gar certainly was not.

She took a seat across from Moridin, where she could watch him without seeming to. And Moghedien and Cyndane. Moghedien was so still she would have faded into the chair except for her bright dress. Cyndane was a queen, her face chiseled from ice. Trying to pull down the Nae’blis was dangerous, yet those two might hold the key. If she could figure out how to turn it. Graendal sat down beside her, and the chair was suddenly closer. Aran’gar could have laid her hand on the other woman’s wrist but refrained from anything more than a slow smile. It was best to keep her mind centered right then.

“He could never have borne staying hidden this long,” Demandred put in, lounging into his chair between Semirhage and Mesaana, legs crossed as though perfectly at ease. That seemed doubtful. He was another who was unreconciled, she was sure. “Sammael needed to have every eye directed at him.”

“Nevertheless, Sammael, or someone disguised as him, gave orders to Myrddraal, and they obeyed, so it was one of the Chosen.” Moridin scanned around the chairs as though he could detect who it had been. Black *saa* trickled across his blue eyes in a continuous stream. She had no regrets that the True Power was limited to his use alone, now. The price was much too high. Ishamael had certainly been at least half insane, and he still was as Moridin. How long before she could remove him?

“Are you going to tell us what these orders were?” Semirhage’s tone was cool, and she sipped her wine calmly, watching Moridin over the goblet’s rim. She sat very erect, but she always did. She too appeared completely at ease, yet that was unlikely.

Moridin’s jaw tightened. “I don’t know,” he said at last, reluctantly. He never liked saying that. “But they sent a hundred Myrddraal and thousands of Trollocs into the Ways.”

“That sounds like Sammael,” Demandred said thoughtfully, twisting his goblet and studying the swirling wine. “Perhaps I was mistaken.” A remarkable admission, coming from him. Or an attempt to hide being the one who had worn Sammael as a disguise. She would like very much to know who had begun playing her own game. Or whether Sammael really was alive.

Moridin grunted sourly. “Pass orders to your Friends of the Dark. Any report of Trollocs or Myrddraal outside the Blight is to be handed to me as soon as you receive it. The Time of Return is coming soon. No one is allowed to go adventuring on their own any longer.” He studied them again, each in turn save for Moghedien and Cyndane. With a smile even more languorous than Graendal’s, Aran’gar met his gaze. Mesaana shrank back from it.

“As you learned to your sorrow,” he told Mesaana, and impossible as it seemed, her face went paler still. She took a long drink from her goblet, her teeth clicking on the crystal. Semirhage and Demandred avoided looking at her.

Aran’gar exchanged looks with Graendal. Something had been done to punish Mesaana’s failure to appear at Shadar Logoth, but what? Once, dereliction on that scale would have meant death. They were too few for that, now. Cyndane and Moghedien appeared as curious as she was, so they did not know either.

“We can see the signs as clearly as you, Moridin,” Demandred said irritably. “The Time *is* near. We need to find the rest of the seals on the Great Lord’s prison. I’ve had my followers searching everywhere, but they’ve found nothing.”

“Ah, yes. The seals. Indeed, they must be found.” Moridin’s smile was almost complacent. “Only three remain, all in al’Thor’s possession, though I doubt he has them with him. They’re too susceptible to breaking, now. He will have hidden them. Direct your people to places he has been. Search them yourselves."

"The easiest way is to kidnap Lews Therin." In strong contrast to her ice-maiden appearance, Cyndane's voice was breathy and sultry, a voice made for lying on soft pillows wearing very little. There was considerable heat in those big blue eyes, now. A searing heat. "I can make him tell where the seals are."

"No!" Moridin snapped, fixing her with a steady stare. "You would 'accidentally' kill him. The time and manner of al'Thor's death will be at my choosing. No one else." Strangely, he put his free hand to the breast of his coat, and Cyndane flinched. Moghedien shivered. "No one else," he repeated, in a hard voice.

"No one else," Cyndane said. When he lowered his hand, she exhaled softly then took a swallow of wine. Sweat glistened on her forehead.

Aran'gar found the exchange illuminating. It seemed that once she had disposed of Moridin, she would have Moghedien and the girl on leashes. Very good, indeed.

Moridin straightened himself in his chair, directing that stare at the rest of them. "That goes for all of you. Al'Thor is mine. You will not harm him in any way!" Cyndane bent her head over her goblet, sipping, but the hatred in her eyes was plain. Graendal had said she was not Lanfear, that she was weaker in the One Power, but she surely was fixated on al'Thor, and she called him by the same name Lanfear had always used.

"If you want to kill someone," he went on, "kill these two!" Suddenly the semblances of two young men in rough country clothes stood in the center of the circle, turning so that everyone could get a good look at their faces. One was tall and wide, with yellow eyes, of all things, while the other was not quite slender and wore a cheeky grin. Creations of *Tel'aran'rhiod*, they moved stiffly and their expressions never altered. "Perrin Aybara and Mat Cauthon are *ta'veren*, easily found. Find them, and kill them."

Graendal laughed, a mirthless sound. "Finding *ta'veren* was never as simple as you made out, and now it's harder than ever. The whole Pattern is in flux, full of shifts and spikes."

"Perrin Aybara and Mat Cauthon," Semirhage murmured, inspecting the two shapes. "So that is what they look like. Who knows, Moridin. If you had shared this with us before now, they might already have been dead."

Moridin’s fist came down hard on the arm of his chair. “Find them! Make doubly sure that your followers know their faces. Find Aybara and Cauthon and kill them! The Time is coming, and they must be dead!”

Aran’gar took a sip of her wine. She had no objections to killing these two if she happened to come across them, but Moridin was going to be terribly disappointed over Rand al’Thor.

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CHAPTER 4

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A Deal

Perrin sat Stepper's saddle a little back from the edge of the trees and watched the large meadow where red and blue wildflowers were beginning to poke through the winter-brown grass that the now vanished snows had flattened into a mat. This stand was mainly leatherleaf that kept its broad dark foliage through the winter, but only a few small pale leaves decorated the branches of the sweetgums among them. The dun stallion stamped a hoof with an impatience Perrin shared, though he let none of it show. The sun stood almost overhead; he had been waiting there nearly an hour. A stiff, steady breeze blew out of the west, down the meadow toward him. That was good.

Every so often his gauntleted hand stroked a nearly straight branch hacked from an oak, thicker than his forearm and more than twice as long, that lay across the saddle in front of him. For half its length he had shaved two sides flat and smooth. The meadow, ringed by huge oaks and leatherleaf, towering pine and shorter sweetgum, was less than six hundred paces wide, though longer than that. The branch should be broad enough. He had planned for every possibility he could imagine. The branch fit more than one.

"My Lady First, you should return to the camp," Gallenne said, not for the first time, rubbing irritably at his red eyepatch. His crimson-plumed helmet hung from the pommel of his saddle, leaving his shoulder-length gray hair uncovered. He had been heard to say, in Berelain's hearing, that most of those gray hairs were presents from her. His black warhorse tried to take a nip at Stepper, and he reined the heavy-chested gelding sharply without taking his attention from Berelain. He had counseled against her coming in the first place. "Grady can take you back and return while the rest of us wait a while longer to see whether the Seanchan are going to show up."

"I will remain, Captain. I *will* remain." Berelain's tone was firm and calm, yet beneath her usual smell of patience lay an edge of concern. She was not so certain as she made herself sound. She had taken to wearing a light perfume that smelled of flowers. Perrin sometimes found himself trying to puzzle out which flowers, but he was too focused for idle thoughts today.

Vexation spiked in Annoura’s scent, though her ageless Aes Sedai face, framed by dozens of thin braids, remained as smooth as ever. But then, the beak-nosed Gray sister had smelled vexed ever since the rift between her and Berelain. It was her own fault, visiting Masema behind Berelain’s back. She also had counseled Berelain to stay behind. Annoura edged her brown mare closer to the First of Mayene, and Berelain moved her white mare just that far away without so much as a glance in her advisor’s direction. Vexation spiked again.

Berelain’s red silk dress, heavily embroidered in golden scrollwork, displayed more bosom than she had in some time, though a wide necklace of firedrops and opals provided a degree of modesty. A wide matching belt, supporting a jeweled dagger, cinched her waist. The narrow crown of Mayene resting on her black hair, holding a golden hawk in flight above her brows, appeared ordinary beside the belt and necklace. She was a beautiful woman, the more so, it seemed to him, since she had stopped chasing him, though still not a patch on Faile, of course.

Annoura wore an unadorned gray riding dress, but most of them were in their best. For Perrin, that was a dark green silk coat with silver embroidery covering the sleeves and shoulders. He was not much for fancy clothes—Faile had chivvied him into buying what little he had; well, she had chivvied him gently—but today he needed to impress. If the wide, plain leather belt fastened over the coat spoiled the impression a little, so be it.

“She must come,” Arganda muttered. A short stocky man, Alliandre’s First Captain had not removed his silvered helmet with its three short white plumes, and he sat his saddle, easing his sword in its scabbard, as though awaiting a charge. His breastplate was silver-plated, too. He would be visible for miles out in the sunlight. “She must!”

“The Prophet says they won’t,” Aram put in, and not softly, heeling his leggy gray up beside Stepper. The brass wolfhead pommel of his sword stuck up over the shoulder of his green-striped coat. Once, he had seemed too good looking for a man, but now his face grew grimmer every day. There was a haggardness about him, his eyes sunken and his mouth tight. “The Prophet says either that, or it’s a trap. He says we shouldn’t trust the Seanchan.”

Perrin held his silence, but felt his own spike of irritation, as much with himself as with the onetime Tinker. Balwer had informed him that Aram had begun spending time with Masema, yet it had seemed unnecessary to tell the man not to let Masema know everything Perrin was doing. There was no putting the egg back into the shell, but he would know better in the future. A workman should know his tools, and not use them to breaking. The same went for people. As for Masema, no doubt he was afraid they would meet someone who knew he himself was dealing with the Seanchan.

They were a large party, though most would remain right there among the trees. Fifty of Berelain's Winged Guards in rimmed red helmets and red breastplates, scarlet streamers floating from their slender steel-tipped lances, were mounted behind the golden hawk on blue of Mayene, rippling on the breeze. Beside them fifty Ghealdanin in burnished breastplates and dark green conical helmets sat their horses behind Ghealdan's three silver stars on red. The streamers on their lances were green. They made a brave show, yet all of them together were far less deadly than Jur Grady, with his weathered farmer's face, even if they made him appear drab in his plain black coat with a silver sword pin on the high collar. He knew it, whether or not they did, and he stood beside his bay gelding with the ease of a man resting before the day's labor.

In contrast, Leof Torfinn and Tod al'Caar, the only other Two Rivers men present, were still all but bouncing in their saddles with excitement despite the long wait. It might have taken some of their pleasure away had they known they had been chosen in large part because they came nearest fitting their borrowed coats of dark, finely woven green wool. Leof carried Perrin's own Red Wolfhead banner, Tod the Red Eagle of Manetheren, both rippling on staffs a little longer than the lances. They had almost come to blows over who was to carry which. Perrin hoped it was not because neither wanted to carry the red-bordered Wolfhead. Leof looked happy enough. Tod looked ecstatic. Of course, he did not know why Perrin had brought the thing along. In any trade, you needed to make the other fellow think he was getting something extra, as Mat's father often said. Colors swirled in Perrin's head, and for a brief instant he thought he saw Mat talking to a small dark woman. He shook off the image. Here and now, today, were all that mattered. Faile was all that mattered.

"They will come," Arganda snapped in answer to Aram, though he glared through the face-bars of his helmet as if expecting a challenge.

"What if they don't?" Gallenne demanded, his one eye scowling as fiercely as Arganda's pair. His red-lacquered breastplate was not much better than Arganda's silvered one. Small chance they could be talked into painting them something dull. "What if it *is* a trap?" Arganda growled, almost a wolf's guttural growl. The man was near the end of his tether.

The breeze brought the scent of horses only moments before Perrin's ears caught the first bluetits' trills, too distant for anyone else to hear. They came from the trees flanking the meadow. Large parties of men, perhaps unfriendly, were entering the woods. More trills sounded, closer.

"They're here," he said, which earned him looks from Arganda and Gallenne. He tried to avoid revealing the acuteness of his hearing, or his sense of smell, yet that pair had been on the point of coming to blows. The relayed trills grew nearer, and everyone could hear them. The two men's looks grew odd.

"I can't risk the Lady First if there's any chance of a trap," Gallenne said, buckling on his helmet. They all knew what the signal meant.

"The choice is mine, Captain," Berelain replied before Perrin could open his mouth.

"And your safety is my responsibility, my Lady First."

Berelain drew breath, her face darkening, but Perrin got there first. "I told you how we're going to spring that trap, if that's what it is. You know how suspicious the Seanchan are. Likely they're worried about us ambushing them." Gallenne harrumphed loudly. The patience in Berelain's smell flickered, then settled in again rock steady.

"You should listen to him, Captain," she said with a smile for Perrin. "He knows what he is doing."

A party of riders appeared at the far end of the meadow and drew rein. Tallanvor was easy to pick out. In a dark coat and mounted on a good dappled gray, he was the only man not wearing armor vividly striped in red and yellow and blue. The other pair unarmored were women, one in blue with red on her skirts and breast, the other in gray. The sun reflected off something connecting them. So. A *sul'dam* and *damane*. There had been no mention of that in all the negotiations carried out through Tallanvor, but Perrin had counted on it.

"It's time," he said, gathering Stepper's reins one-handed. "Before she decides *we're* not coming."

Annoura managed to get close enough to lay a hand on Berelain's arm for a moment before the other woman could move her mare away. "You should let me come with you, Berelain. You may need my counsel, yes? This sort of negotiation, it is my specialty.”

“I suspect the Seanchan know an Aes Sedai face by now, don’t you, Annoura? I hardly think they’d negotiate with you. Besides,” Berelain added, in a too sweet voice, “you must remain here to assist Master Grady.”

Spots of color appeared briefly on the Aes Sedai’s cheeks, and her wide mouth tightened. It had taken the Wise Ones to make her agree to take orders from Grady today, though Perrin was just as glad he did not know how they had done it, and she had been trying to wiggle out ever since leaving the camp.

“You stay, too,” Perrin said when Aram made to ride forward. “You’ve been hotheaded lately, and I won’t risk you saying or doing the wrong thing out there. I won’t risk Faile on it.” That was true. No need to say he would not risk the man carrying what was said out there back to Masema. “You understand?”

Bubbles of disappointment filled Aram’s scent, but he nodded, however reluctantly, and rested his hands on the pommel of his saddle. He might come close to worshiping Masema, but he would give his life a hundred times over rather than risk Faile’s. On purpose, anyway. What he did without thinking was another matter.

Perrin rode out of the trees flanked by Arganda on one side and Berelain and Gallenne on the other. The banners followed behind, and ten Mayeners and ten Ghealdanin in a column of twos. As they walked their mounts forward, the Seanchan started toward them, also in column, with Tallanvor riding beside the leaders, one on a roan, the other a bay. The horses’ hooves made no sound on the thick mat of dead grass. The forest had gone silent, even to Perrin’s ears.

While the Mayeners and Ghealdanin spread out in a line, and most of the Seanchan in their brightly painted armor did the same, Perrin and Berelain advanced toward Tallanvor and two of the armored Seanchan, one with three thin blue plumes on that lacquered helmet that was so like an insect’s head, the other with two. The *sul’dam* and *damane* came, too. They met in the middle of the meadow, surrounded by wildflowers and silence, with six paces between them.

As Tallanvor positioned himself to one side between the two groups, the armored Seanchan removed their helmets with hands in steel-backed gauntlets that were striped like the rest of their armor. The two-plumed helmet revealed a yellow-haired man with half a dozen scars seaming his square face. He was a hard-bitten man who smelled of amusement, strangely, but it was the other who interested Perrin. Mounted on the bay, a trained warhorse if he had ever seen one, she was tall and broad-shouldered for a woman, though lean otherwise, and not young. Gray marked the temples of her close-cut, tightly curled black hair. As dark as good topsoil, she displayed only two scars, one slanting across her left cheek. The other, on her forehead, had taken part of her right eyebrow. Some people thought scars a sign of toughness. It seemed to Perrin that fewer scars meant that you knew what you were doing. Confidence filled the scent of her in the breeze.

Her gaze flickered across the fluttering banners. He thought she paused slightly on Manetheren's Red Eagle, and again on Mayene's Golden Hawk, yet she quickly settled to studying him. Her expression never altered a whit, but when she noticed his yellow eyes, something unidentifiable entered her scent, something sharp and hard. When she saw the heavy blacksmith's hammer in its loop on his belt, the strange scent grew.

"I give you Perrin t'Bashere Aybara, Lord of the Two Rivers, Liege Lord to Queen Alliandre of Ghealdan," Tallanvor announced, raising a hand toward Perrin. He claimed the Seanchan were sticklers for formality, but Perrin had no idea whether this was a Seanchan ceremony or something from Andor. Tallanvor could have made it up for all of him. "I give you Berelain sur Paendrag Paeron, First of Mayene, Blessed of the Light, Defender of the Waves, High Seat of House Paeron." With a bow to the pair of them, he shifted his reins and raised the other hand toward the Seanchan. "I give you Banner-General Tylee Khirgan of the Ever Victorious Army, in service to the Empress of Seanchan. I give you Captain Bakayar Mishima of the Ever Victorious Army, in service to the Empress of Seanchan." Another bow, and Tallanvor turned his gray to ride back to a place beside the banners. His face was as grim as Aram's, but he smelled of hope.

"I'm glad he didn't name you the Wolf King, my Lord," the Banner-General drawled. The way she slurred her words, Perrin had to listen hard to make out what she was saying. "Otherwise, I'd think Tarmon Gai'don was on us. You know the Prophecies of the Dragon? 'When the Wolf King carries the hammer, thus are the final days known. When the fox marries the raven, and the trumpets of battle are blown.' I never understood that second line, myself. And you, my Lady. Sur Paendrag. That would mean from Paendrag?”

“My family is descended from Artur Paendrag Tanreall,” Berelain replied, holding her head high. An eddy in the breeze brought a whiff of pride among the patience and perfume. They had agreed that Perrin was to do all of the talking—she was there to dazzle the Seanchan with a beautiful young ruler, or at least to lend weight to Perrin with it—but he supposed she had to answer a direct question.

Tylee nodded as though that were exactly the answer she expected. “That makes you a distant cousin of the Imperial family, my Lady. No doubt the Empress, may she live forever, will honor you. So long as you make no claims to Hawkwing’s empire yourself, anyway.”

“The only claim I make is to Mayene,” Berelain said proudly. “And that I will defend to my last breath.”

“I didn’t come here to talk about the Prophecies or Hawkwing or your Empress,” Perrin said irritably. For the second time in a matter of moments those colors tried to coalesce in his head only to be dispelled. He had no time. The Wolf King? Hopper would come as near to laughing as a wolf could over that. Any wolf would. Still, he felt a chill. He had not realized that he was mentioned in the Prophecies. And his hammer was a harbinger of the Last Battle? But nothing mattered except Faile. Only her. And whatever it took to free her. “The agreement for this meeting was no more than thirty in either party, but you have men in the woods on both sides of us. A lot of men.”

“So do you,” Mishima said with grin distorted by a white scar that met the corner of his mouth, “or you wouldn’t know about ours.” His drawl was worse than hers.

Perrin kept his eyes on the Banner-General. “As long as they both remain, there’s the chance of accidents. I don’t want any accidents. I want my wife back from the Shaido.”

“And how do you propose we avoid accidents?” Mishima said, idly flipping his reins. He sounded as though the question was not urgent. It seemed Tylee was content to let him do the talking while she observed Perrin’s reactions. “Are we supposed to trust you if we send our men out first, or you to trust us if we ask you to withdraw first? ‘On the heights, the paths are paved with daggers.’ There isn’t much room for trust. I suppose we could both order our men to pull back at the same time, but one side might cheat.”

Perrin shook his head. “You’re going to have to trust me, Banner-General. I have no reason to want to attack you or capture you, and every reason not to. I can’t be sure of the same about you. You might think capturing the First of Mayene worth a little betrayal.” Berelain laughed softly. It was time for the branch. Not just to force the Seanchan out of the woods first, but to convince them that they needed what he could offer. He stood the branch upright on the saddle in front of him. “I expect your men are probably good soldiers. My men aren’t soldiers, though they’ve fought Trollocs and Shaido and done well against both.” Gripping the branch at its base, he held it high overhead, the shaved sides uppermost and facing either side. “But they’re used to hunting lions and leopards and ridgecats come down out of the mountains after our flocks, and wild boar and bear, animals that hunt back, in forests not much different from this.”

The branch tried to twist violently in his gauntleted fist as twin impacts not a heartbeat apart shivered down his arm. He lowered the branch to display two pile arrows, their chisel-shaped heads driven clear of the tough wood on either side. Three hundred paces was a long range for that target, but he had chosen Jondyn Barran and Jori Congar to make the shots. They were the best he had. “If it comes down to it, your men won’t even see who’s killing them, and that armor won’t do much good against a Two Rivers longbow. I hope it doesn’t come to that.” With all of his strength, he heaved the branch up into the air.

“My eyes!” Mishima growled, a hand going to his sword even as he tried to rein the roan back and watch Perrin and the branch all at the same time. His helmet toppled from his saddle to the grass.

The Banner-General made no move toward her sword, though she also tried watching Perrin and the branch. At first she did. Then her gaze followed only the branch as it continued to climb until it hung centered between them a hundred feet in the air. Abruptly a ball of flame enveloped the branch, so fierce that Perrin felt the heat as from an open furnace. Berelain put up a hand to shield her face. Tylee merely watched thoughtfully.

The fire lasted just moments, yet that was enough to leave only ash drifting on the breeze when it vanished. Ash and two plummeting specks that fell into the dry grass. Small flames shot up immediately and began growing, spreading. Even the warhorses snorted in fear. Berelain's mare danced in an attempt to fight her reins and flee.

Perrin muttered a curse—he should have thought of the arrowheads—and started to dismount to stamp out the fire, but before he could swing his leg over the saddle, the flames vanished, leaving only thin tendrils of smoke rising from a patch of blackened grass.

"Good Norie," the *sul'dam* murmured, patting the *damane*. "Norie is a wonderful *damane*." The gray-clad woman smiled shyly at the praise. Despite her words, the *sul'dam* looked worried.

"So," Tylee said, "you have a *marath*—" She paused, pursing her lips. "You have an Aes Sedai with you. More than one? No matter. I can't say the Aes Sedai I've seen have impressed me very much."

"Not *marath'damane,* my general," the *sul'dam* said quietly.

Tylee sat very still, studying Perrin intently. "Asha'man," she said at last, not a question. "You begin to interest me, my Lord."

"Then maybe one last thing will convince you," Perrin said. "Tod, roll that banner around the staff and bring it here." Hearing nothing behind him, he looked over his shoulder. Tod was staring at him with a stricken look. "Tod."

Giving himself a shake, Tod began winding the Red Eagle around its staff. He still looked unhappy when he rode forward and handed it to Perrin, though. He sat there with his hand still stretched out as though hoping the staff might be returned to him.

Heeling Stepper toward the Seanchan, Perrin held the banner in front of him in his fist, parallel to the ground. "The Two Rivers was the heart of Manetheren, Banner-General. The last King of Manetheren died in a battle right where Emond's Field, the village I was born in, grew up. Manetheren is in our blood. But the Shaido have my wife prisoner. To free her, I'll give up any claim to reviving Manetheren, sign any sort of oath on it you want. That claim would be a field of brambles for you Seanchan. You could be the one who cleared that field without a drop of blood shed." Behind him, someone groaned miserably. He thought it was Tod.

Suddenly, the breeze was a gale howling in the opposite direction, pelting them with grit, blowing so hard that he had to cling to his saddle to keep from being knocked out of it. His coat seemed on the point of being ripped from his body. Where had the grit come from? The forest was carpeted inches deep with dead leaves. The tempest stank of burned sulphur, too, sharp enough to burn Perrin's nose. The horses tossed their heads, mouths open, but the roar of the wind buried their frightened whinnies.

Only moments the ferocious wind lasted, and then as suddenly as it came, it was gone, leaving only the breeze blowing the other way. The horses stood shivering, snorting and tossing their heads and rolling their eyes. Perrin patted Stepper's neck and murmured soothing sounds, yet it had little effect.

The Banner-General made a strange gesture and muttered, "Avert the Shadow. Where under the Light did that come from? I've heard tales of strange things happening. Or was it more 'convincing' on your part, my Lord?"

"No," Perrin said truthfully. Neald possessed abilities with weather, it had turned out, but not Grady. "What does it matter where it came from?"

Tylee looked at him thoughtfully, then nodded. "What does it matter?" she said, sounding as if she did not necessarily agree with him. "We have stories about Manetheren. That *would* be brambles underfoot and no boots. Half of Amadicia is buzzing with talk of you and that banner, come to bring Manetheren alive again and 'save' Amadicia from us. Mishima, sound withdrawal." Without hesitation, the yellow-haired man raised a small, straight horn that was hanging by a red cord around his neck. Blowing four shrill notes, he repeated the sequence twice before letting the horn fall to swing against his chest. "My part is done," Tylee said.

Perrin put back his head and shouted as loudly and distinctly as he could. "Dannil! Tell! When the last Seanchan moves below the end of the meadow, gather everyone and join Grady!"

The Banner-General stuck her little finger into her ear and wiggled it about in spite of her gauntlet. "You have a strong voice," she said dryly. Only then did she reach out to take the banner-staff, laying it carefully across the saddle in front of her. She did not look at it again, but one hand stroked the banner itself, perhaps unconsciously. "Now what do you have that can aid my plan, my Lord?" Mishima hooked an ankle behind the tall pommel of his saddle and lowered himself to catch up his helmet. The wind had rolled it across the beaten-down grass halfway back to the line of Seanchan soldiers. From the trees came a brief snatch of larksong, then another, another. The Seanchan were withdrawing. Had they felt the wind, too? No matter.

“Not near as many men as you already have,” Perrin admitted, “not that are trained soldiers, at least, but I have Asha’man and Aes Sedai and Wise Ones who can channel, and you’ll need every one of them.” She opened her mouth, and he raised a hand. “I’ll want your word that you won’t try putting collars on them.” He glanced pointedly at the *sul’dam* and *damane*. The *sul’dam* was keeping her eyes on Tylee, awaiting orders, but at the same time she was idly stroking the other woman’s hair the way you might stroke a cat to soothe it. And Norie looked to be almost purring! Light! “Your word that they’re safe from you, them and anyone in the camp wearing a white robe. Most of those aren’t Shaido anyway, and the only Aiel among them I know about are friends of mine.”

Tylee shook her head. “You have strange friends, my Lord. In any case, we’ve found people from Cairhien and Amadicia with bands of Shaido and let them go, though most of the Cairhienin seem too disoriented to know what to do with themselves. The only ones in white we keep are the Aiel. These *gai’shain* make marvelous *da’covale*, unlike the rest. Still, I’ll agree to letting your friends go free. And your Aes Sedai and Asha’man. Putting an end to this gathering is very important. Tell me where they are, and I can start incorporating you into my plans.”

Perrin rubbed the side of his nose with a finger. It seemed unlikely many of those *gai’shain* were Shaido, but he was not about to tell her that. Let them have their chance at freedom when their year and a day was up. “It’ll have to be my plan, I’m afraid. Sevanna will be a tough nut to crack, but I’ve worked out how. For one thing, she has maybe a hundred thousand Shaido with her, and she’s gathering in more. Not every one is *algai’d’siswai*, but any adult will pick up a spear if they need to.”

“Sevanna.” Tylee gave a pleased smile. “We’ve heard that name. I would dearly love to present Sevanna of the Jumai Shaido to the Captain-General.” Her smile faded. “A hundred thousand is many more than I expected, but not more than I can handle. We’ve fought these Aiel before, in Amadicia. Eh, Mishima?”

Riding back to join them, Mishima laughed, but it was a harsh sound, no amusement in it. “That we have, Banner-General. They’re fierce fighters, disciplined and crafty, but they can be handled. You surround one of their bands, their septs, with three or four *damane* and pound them till they give up. It’s a nasty business. They have their families with them. But they surrender the sooner for it.”

“I understand you have a dozen or so *damane,*” Perrin said, “but is that enough to face three or four hundred Wise Ones channeling?”

The Banner-General frowned. “You mentioned that before, Wise Ones channeling. Every band we’ve caught had its Wise Ones, but not one of them could channel.”

“That’s because all the Shaido have are with Sevanna,” Perrin replied. “At least three hundred and maybe four. The Wise Ones with me are sure of it.”

Tylee and Mishima exchanged a look, and the Banner-General sighed. Mishima looked glum. “Well,” she said, “orders or no orders, that puts an end to finishing this quietly. The Daughter of the Nine Moons will have to be disturbed if I must apologize for it to the Empress, may she live forever. Likely I will.” The Daughter of the Nine Moons? Some high-ranking Seanchan, apparently. But how was she supposed to be disturbed by any of this?

Mishima grimaced, a fearsome sight with all those scars crisscrossing his face. “I read there were four hundred *damane* on each side at Semalaren, and that was a slaughterhouse. Half the Imperial army on the field dead and better than three out of four among the rebels.”

“Nevertheless, Mishima, we have it to do. Or rather, someone else does. You might escape an apology, but I won’t.” What under the Light was so upsetting about an apology? The woman smelled . . . resigned. “Unfortunately, it will take weeks if not months to gather enough soldiers and *damane* to prick this boil. I thank you for your offer of help, my Lord. It will be remembered.” Tylee held out the banner. “You’ll want this back since I can’t deliver my side of the bargain, but a piece of advice. The Ever Victorious Army may have other tasks in front of it for the nonce, but we won’t let anyone take momentary advantage of the situation to set himself up as a king. We mean to reclaim this land, not divide it into parcels.”

“And we mean to keep our lands,” Berelain said fiercely, making her mare lunge across the few paces of dead grass between her and the Seanchan. The mare was eager to lunge, eager to run, away from that wind, and she had trouble reining the animal in. Even her scent was fierce. No patience now. She smelled like a she-wolf defending her injured mate. “I’ve heard that your Ever Victorious Army is misnamed. I’ve heard the Dragon Reborn defeated you soundly to the south. Don’t you ever think that Perrin

Aybara can’t do the same.” Light, and he had been worried over Aram’s hotheadedness!

“I don’t want to defeat anybody except the Shaido,” Perrin said firmly, fighting off the image that tried to form in his mind. He folded his hands on the pommel of his saddle. Stepper seemed to be settling down, at least. The stallion still gave small shivers now and then, but he had stopped rolling his eyes. “There’s a way to do that and still keep everything quiet so you don’t need to apologize.” If that was important to her, he was ready to use it. “The Daughter of the Nine Moons can rest easy. I told you I had this planned out. Tallanvor told me you have some kind of tea that makes a woman who can channel go wobbly in the knees.”

After a moment, Tylee lowered the banner back to her saddle and sat studying him. “A woman or a man,” she drawled at last. “I’ve heard of several men being caught that way. But just how do you propose feeding it to these four hundred women when they’re surrounded by a hundred thousand Aiel?”

“By feeding it to all of them without letting them know they’re drinking it. I’ll need as much as I can get, though. Wagonloads, probably. There’s no way to heat the water, you see, so it’ll be thin tea.”

Tylee laughed softly. “A bold plan, my Lord. I suppose they might have cartloads at the manufactory where the tea’s made, but that’s a long way from here, in Amadicia almost to Tarabon, and the only way I could get more than a few pounds at once would be to tell someone of higher rank why I wanted it. And there’s the end of keeping it quiet all over again.”

“The Asha’man know a thing called Traveling,” Perrin told her, “a way to cross hundreds of miles in a step. And as for getting the tea, maybe this will help.” From his left gauntlet he pulled a folded, grease-stained piece of paper.

Tylee’s eyebrows rose as she read it. Perrin had the short text by heart. THE BEARER OF THIS STANDS UNDER MY PERSONAL PROTECTION. IN THE NAME OF THE EMPRESS, MAY SHE LIVE FOREVER, GIVE HIM WHATEVER AID HE REQUIRES IN SERVICE TO THE EMPIRE AND SPEAK OF IT TO NONE BUT ME. He had no idea who Suroth Sabelle Meldarath was, but if she signed her name to something like that, she had to be important. Maybe she was this Daughter of the Nine Moons.

Handing the paper to Mishima, the Banner-General stared at Perrin. That sharp, hard scent was back, stronger than ever. “Aes Sedai, Asha’man, Aiel, your eyes, that hammer, now this! Who *are* you?”

Mishima whistled through his teeth. “Suroth herself,” he murmured.

“I’m a man who wants his wife back,” Perrin said, “and I’ll deal with the Dark One to get her.” He avoided looking at the *sul’dam* and *damane*. He was not far short of making a deal with the Dark One. “Do we have a bargain?”

Tylee looked at his outstretched hand, then took it. She had a firm grip. A deal with the Dark One. But he would do whatever it took to get Faile free.

* * *

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CHAPTER 5

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Something . . . Strange

The drumbeat of rain on the tent roof that had lasted through most of the night faded to something softer as Faile approached Sevanna's chair, a heavily carved and gilded throne placed in the center of the bright, layered carpets that made up the tent's floor, with her eyes carefully lowered, to avoid offense. Spring had arrived in a rush, but the braziers were unlit, and the morning air held a touch of chill. Curtsying deeply, she presented the ropework silver tray. The Aiel woman took the golden goblet of wine and drank without so much as a glance in her direction, but she gave another deep curtsy before backing away and setting the tray down on the brass-bound blue chest that already held a tall-necked silver wine pitcher and three more goblets, then returned to her place with the other eleven *gai'shain* present, standing between the mirrored stand-lamps along the red silk tent wall. It was a spacious tent, and tall. No low Aiel tent for Sevanna.

Often it was hard to see her as Aiel at all. This morning, she lounged in a red brocaded silk robe, tied so it gaped nearly to her waist and exposed half her considerable bosom, though she wore enough jeweled necklaces, emeralds and firedrops and opals, ropes of fat pearls, that she came near to being decent. The Aiel did not wear rings, yet Sevanna had at least one be-gemmed ring on every finger. The thick band of gold and firedrops worn over the folded blue silk scarf that held back her waist-long yellow hair had taken on the aspect of a coronet if not a crown. There was nothing Aiel in that.

Faile and the others, six women and five men, had been wakened in the night to stand beside Sevanna's bed—a pair of feather mattresses laid one atop the other—in case the woman woke and wanted something. Was any ruler in the world attended by a dozen servants while she slept? She fought the urge to yawn. Many things *might* earn punishment, but yawning surely would. *Gai'shain* were supposed to be meek and eager to please, and it seemed that that meant obsequious to the point of groveling. Bain and Chiad, fierce as they were otherwise, seemed to find it easy. Faile did not. In the near month since she was stripped and tied up like a blacksmith's puzzle for hiding a knife, she had been switched nine times for trivial offenses that were serious in Sevanna's eyes. Her last set of welts had not faded completely yet, and she had no intention of earning another set through carelessness.

She hoped that Sevanna thought her tamed by that night trussed up in the cold. Only Rolan and his braziers had saved her life. She hoped that she was not being tamed. Pretend something too long, and it could become truth. She had been a prisoner less than two months, yet she could no longer recall exactly how many days ago she was captured. At times it seemed she had been in white robes for a year or more. Sometimes the wide belt and collar of flat golden links felt natural. That frightened her. She clung hard to hope. She would escape soon. She *had* to. Before Perrin caught up and tried to rescue her. Why had he not caught up yet? The Shaido had been camped at Malden for a long time, now. He would not have abandoned her. Her wolf would be coming to rescue her. She had to escape before he got himself killed in the attempt. Before she was no longer pretending.

"How long are you going to keep punishing Galina Sedai, Therava?" Sevanna demanded, frowning at the Aes Sedai. Therava was seated cross-legged in front of her on a tasseled blue cushion, straight-backed and stern. "Last night, she made my bath water too hot, and she is so welted, I had to order the soles of her feet beaten. That is not very effective when she must be left able to walk."

Faile had been avoiding looking at Galina ever since Therava brought her into the tent, but her eyes went to the woman of their own accord at mention of her name. Galina was kneeling erect halfway between the two Aiel women and slightly to one side, mottled brown bruises on her cheeks, her skin damp and slick from the heavy rain she had been walked through to get there, her feet and ankles muddy. She wore only her firedrop-studded golden collar and belt, and seemed more naked than naked. Just a stubble remained of her hair and eyebrows. Every hair from head to toe had been singed from her with the One Power. Faile had heard it described, along with how the Aes Sedai had been hung from her ankles for her first beating. That had been half the talk among the *gai'shain* for days. Only the handful who recognized her ageless face for what it was still believed that she was Aes Sedai, and some of those had the same doubts that had plagued Faile on finding an Aes Sedai among the *gai'shain*. After all, she possessed the face, and the ring, but why would an Aes Sedai let Therava treat her so? Faile asked herself that question often without arriving at any answer. She kept telling herself that Aes Sedai often did what they did for reasons no one else could understand, but that was not very satisfying.

Whatever her reasons for tolerating such abuse, Galina's eyes were wide and frightened, now, and fixed on Therava. She was panting so hard that her breasts heaved. She had reason for fear. Anyone passing Therava's tent was likely to hear Galina howling for mercy inside. For more than half a week Faile had gotten glimpses of the Aes Sedai on some errand, hairless and garbed as she was now and running as hard as she could with panic painting her face, and every day Therava added to the bands of welts that striped Galina from her shoulders to the backs of her knees. Whenever one band began to heal, Therava refreshed it. Faile had heard Shaido mutter that Galina was being treated too harshly, but no one was about to interfere with a Wise One.

Therava, nearly as tall as most Aiel men, adjusted her dark shawl in a rattle of gold and ivory bracelets and regarded Galina like a blue-eyed eagle regarding a mouse. Her necklaces, also gold and ivory, seemed plain compared to Sevanna's opulence, her dark woolen skirts and white *algode* blouse drab, yet of the two women, Faile feared Therava far more than she did Sevanna. Sevanna might have her punished for a stumble, but Therava could kill her or crush her for a whim. She surely would if Faile attempted escape and failed. "So long as the faintest bruise remains on her face, the rest of her will be bruised as well. I have left the front of her unmarked so she *can* be punished for other misdeeds." Galina began trembling. Silent tears leaked down her cheeks.

Faile averted her gaze. It was painful to watch. Even if she managed to get the rod from Therava's tent, could the Aes Sedai still be of help in escape? She gave every sign of being completely broken. That was a harsh thought, but a prisoner needed to be practical above all else. Would Galina betray her to try buying her way out of the beatings? She had threatened to betray her, if Faile failed to obtain the rod. It was Sevanna who would be interested in Perrin Aybara's wife, yet Galina looked desperate enough to try anything. Faile prayed for the woman to find strength to hold out. Of course she was planning an escape on her own, in case Galina could not keep her promise to take them with her when she left, but it would be so much easier, so much safer for everyone, if she could do it. Oh, Light, why had Perrin not caught up yet? No! She had to keep her focus.

"She is not very impressive like that," Sevanna muttered, frowning into her goblet, now. "Even that ring cannot make her look like an Aes Sedai." She shook her head irritably. For some reason Faile did not understand, it was very important to Sevanna that everyone know that Galina was a sister. She had even taken to giving her the honorific. “Why are you here so early, Therava? I have not even eaten, yet. Will you take some wine?”

“Water,” Therava said firmly. “As for it being early, the sun is almost over the horizon. I broke fast before it rose. You grow as indolent as a wetlander, Sevanna.”

Lusara, a buxom Domani *gai’shain*, quickly filled a goblet from the silver water pitcher. Sevanna seemed amused by the Wise Ones’ insistence on drinking only water, yet she provided it for them. Anything else would have been an insult even she would want to avoid. The copper-skinned Domani had been a merchant, and well into her middle years, but a few white hairs among the black falling below her shoulders had not been enough to save her. She was stunningly beautiful, and Sevanna gathered the rich, the powerful and the beautiful, simply taking them if they were *gai’shain* to someone else. There were so many *gai’shain* that few complained at having one taken. Lusara curtsied gracefully and bowed to present her tray to Therava on her cushion, all very proper, but on the way back to her place against the wall, she smiled at Faile. Worse, it was a conspiratorial smile.

Faile suppressed a sigh. Her last switching had been for a sigh at the wrong moment. Lusara was one of those who had sworn fealty to her in the past two weeks. After Aravine, Faile had tried to choose carefully, but rejecting someone who asked to swear was creating a possible betrayer, so she had far too many adherents, a good number of whom she was unsure of. She was beginning to believe that Lusara was trustworthy, or at least that she would not intentionally betray her, but the woman treated their escape plans like a child’s game, without cost if they lost. It seemed she had treated merchanting in the same way, making and losing several fortunes, but Faile would have no chance to start over if they lost. Nor would Alliandre or Maighdin. Or Lusara. Among Sevanna’s *gai’shain*, those who actually attempted escape were kept chained when not serving her or performing tasks.

Therava took a swallow of water, then set the goblet down on the flowered carpet beside her and fixed Sevanna with a steely gaze. “The Wise Ones believe it is past time for us to move north and east. We can find easily defended valleys in the mountains there, and we can reach them in less than two weeks even slowed as we are by the *gai'shain*. This place is open on every side, and our raids to find food must go further and further."

Sevanna's green eyes met that stare without blinking, which Faile doubted she herself could have done. It nettled Sevanna when the other Wise Ones met without her, and frequently she took it out on her *gai'shain*, but she smiled and took a sip of wine before replying in patient tones, as though explaining to someone not quite bright enough to understand. "Here, there is good soil for planting, and we have their seed to add to our own. Who knows what the soil is like in the mountains? Our raids bring in cattle and sheep and goats, too. Here, there are good pastures. What pasturage do you know of in these mountains, Therava? Here, we have more water than any clan has ever had. Do you know where the water is in the mountains? As to defending ourselves, who will come against us? These wetlanders run from our spears."

"Not all run," Therava said drily. "Some are even good at dancing the spears. And what if Rand al'Thor sends one of the other clans against us? We would never know until the horns closed in on us." Suddenly she smiled, too, a smile that never reached her eyes. "Some say your plan is to be captured and made *gai'shain* to Rand al'Thor so you can induce him to marry you. An amusing idea, you agree?"

Despite herself, Faile flinched. Sevanna's mad intention to marry al'Thor—she *had* to be mad to think she could!—was what put Faile in danger from Galina. If the Aiel woman did not know that Perrin was linked to al'Thor, Galina could tell her. Would tell her if she could not get her hands on that cursed rod. Sevanna would take no chances on losing her then. She would be chained as certainly as if caught trying to escape.

Sevanna looked anything except amused. Eyes glittering, she leaned forward, her robe gaping to expose her bosom completely. "Who says this? Who?" Therava picked up her goblet and took another swallow of water. Realizing she would get no answer, Sevanna leaned back, and rearranged her robe. Her eyes still glittered like polished emeralds, though, and there was nothing casual in her words. They came out as hard as her eyes. "I *will* marry Rand al'Thor, Therava. I almost had him, until you and the other Wise Ones failed me. I will marry him, unite the clans, and conquer all of the wetlands!"

Therava sneered over her goblet. "*Couladin* was the *Car'a'carn*, Sevanna. I have not found the Wise Ones who gave him permission to go to

Rhuidean, but I will. Rand al’Thor is a creature of the Aes Sedai. They told him what to say at Alcair Dal, and a black day it was when he revealed secrets few are strong enough to know. Be grateful that most believe he lied. But I forget. You have never gone to Rhuidean. You believed his secrets lies yourself.”

Gai’shain began entering past the tentflap, their white robes rain-damp, holding their hems knee-high until they were inside. Each wore the golden collar and belt. Their soft white laced boots left muddy marks on the carpets. Later, when those had dried, they would have to clean them away, but getting visible mud on your robes was a sure path to the switch. Sevanna wanted her *gai’shain* spotless when they were around her. Neither Aiel woman paid the slightest attention to the arrivals.

Sevanna seemed taken aback by what Therava had said. “Why do you care who gave Couladin permission? No matter,” she said, waving a hand as though brushing away a fly, when she got no reply. “Couladin is dead. Rand al’Thor has the markings, however he got them. I will marry him, and I will make use of him. If the Aes Sedai could control him, and I saw them handling him like a babe, then I can. With a little help from you. And you will help. You agree that uniting the clans is worth doing no matter how it is done? You did once.” Somehow, there was more than a hint of threat in that. “We Shaido will become the most powerful of the clans in one leap.”

Lowering their cowls, the new *gai’shain* filed wordlessly along the tent walls, nine men and three women, one of them Maighdin. The sun-haired woman wore a grim expression that had been on her face since the day Therava had discovered her in the Wise One’s tent. Whatever Therava had done, all Maighdin would say of it was that she wanted to kill the other woman. Sometimes she whimpered in her sleep, though.

Therava kept whatever she thought about uniting the clans to herself. “There is much feeling against staying here. Many of the sept chiefs press the red disc on their *nar’baha* every morning. I advise you to heed the Wise Ones.”

Nar’baha? That would mean “box of fools,” or something very near. But what could this be? Bain and Chiad were still teaching her about Aiel ways, when they could find time, and they had never mentioned any such thing. Maighdin stopped beside Lusara. A slender Cairhienin nobleman named Doirmanes stopped beside Faile. He was young and very pretty, but he bit his lip nervously. If he learned about the oaths of fealty, he would have to be killed. She was certain he would run to Sevanna in a heartbeat.

“We remain here,” Sevanna said angrily, flinging her goblet to the carpets in a spray of wine. “I speak for the clan chief, and I have spoken!”

“You have spoken,” Therava agreed calmly. “Bendhuin, sept chief of the Green Salts, has received permission to go to Rhuidean. He left five days ago with twenty of his *algai’d’siswai* and four Wise Ones to stand witness.”

Not until one of the new *gai’shain* stood beside each of those already there did Faile and the others raise their cowls and begin filing along the walls toward the doorflap, already gathering their robes to the knee. She had become quite sanguine about exposing her legs so.

“He seeks to replace me, and I was not even informed?”

“Not you, Sevanna. Couladin. As his widow, you speak for the clan chief until a new chief returns from Rhuidean, but you are not the clan chief.”

Faile stepped out into the cold, gray morning drizzle, and the tentflap cut off whatever Sevanna said to that. What *was* going on between the two women? Sometimes, as this morning, they seemed antagonists, but at others they seemed reluctant conspirators bound together by something that gave neither any comfort. Or perhaps it was the being bound together itself that made them uncomfortable. Well, she could not see how knowing would help her escape, so it did not really matter. But the puzzle nagged at her.

Six Maidens stood clustered in front of the tent, veils hanging down onto their chests, spears thrust up through the harness of the bow cases on their backs. Bain and Chiad were contemptuous of Sevanna for using Maidens of the Spear for her guard of honor though she herself had never been a Maiden, and for having her tent always guarded, but there were never fewer than six, night or day. Those two were contemptuous of the Shaido Maidens for allowing it, too. Neither being a clan chief nor speaking for one gave you as much power as most nobles possessed. These Maidens’ hands were flashing in a rapid conversation. She caught the sign for *Car’a’carn* several times, but not sufficient else to make out what they were saying, or whether about al’Thor or Couladin.

Standing there long enough to find out, if she could find out, was beyond the question. With the others already hurrying away down the muddy street, the Maidens would become suspicious, for one thing, and then they might switch her themselves, or worse, use her own bootlaces. She had had a hard dose of that from some Maidens, for having "insolent eyes," and she did not want another. Especially when it meant baring herself in public. Being Sevanna's *gai'shain* gave no protection. Any Shaido could discipline any *gai'shain* they thought was behaving improperly. Even a child could, if the child was set to watch you carry out a chore. For another thing, the cold rain, light as it was, was going to soak through her woolen robes soon enough. She had only a short walk back to her tent, no more than a quarter of a mile, but she would not complete it without being stopped for a time.

A yawn cracked her jaw as she turned from the large red tent. She very much wanted her blankets and a few more hours' sleep. There would be more chores come afternoon. What they might be, she did not know. Matters would be much simpler if Sevanna settled on who she wanted to do what when, but she seemed to choose names at random, and always at the last minute. It made planning anything, much less the escape, very difficult.

All sorts of tents surrounded Sevanna's, low, dark Aiel tents, peaked tents, walled tents, tents of every sort and size in every color imaginable, separated by a tangle of dirt streets that were now rivers of mud. Lacking enough of their own, the Shaido snatched up every tent they could find. Fourteen septs were camped in a sprawl around Malden now, a hundred thousand Shaido and as many *gai'shain,* and rumor said two more septs, the Morai and the White Cliff, would arrive within days. Aside from small children splashing through the mud with romping dogs, most of the people she could see as she walked wore mud-stained white and were carrying baskets or bulging sacks. Most of the women did not hurry; they ran. Except for the blacksmiths, the Shaido seldom did any work themselves, and generally only out of boredom, she suspected. With so many *gai'shain,* finding chores for them all was itself a chore. Sevanna was no longer the only Shaido to actually sit in a bathtub with a *gai'shain* scrubbing her back. None of the Wise Ones had gone that far yet, but some of the others would not stir themselves two paces to pick something up when they could tell a *gai'shain* to fetch it.

She was almost to the *gai'shain* portion of the camp, hard against the gray stone walls of Malden, when she saw a Wise One striding toward her with her dark shawl wrapped around her head against the rain. Faile did not stop, but she bent her knees a little. Meira was not so frightening as

Therava, but the grim-faced woman was hard enough, and shorter than Faile. Her narrow mouth always grew even tighter when she was confronted with a woman taller than she. Faile would have thought that learning her own sept, the White Cliff, would be there soon, would brighten the woman's mood, but the news had had no discernable effect at all.

"So you were just lagging," Meira said as she came close. Her eyes were as hard as the sapphires they resembled. "I left Rhiale listening to the others because I feared some drunken fool had pulled you into a tent." She glared around her as though looking for a drunken fool about to do just that.

"No one accosted me, Wise One," Faile said quickly. Several had in the last few weeks, some drunk and some not, but Rolan always appeared in the nick of time. Twice the big *Mera'din* had had to fight to save her, and once he had killed the other man. She had expected nine kinds of uproar and trouble, but the Wise Ones judged it a fair fight, and Rolan said her name had never been mentioned. For all that Bain and Chiad insisted it went against all custom, assault was a constant danger for *gai'shain* women here. She was sure that Alliandre had been assaulted once, before she and Maighdin also acquired *Mera'din* shadows. Rolan denied having asked them to help her people. He said they were just bored and looking for something to do. "I'm very sorry I was slow."

"Do not cringe. I am not Therava. I will not beat you for the pleasure of it." Words said in tones hard enough for a headsman. Meira might not beat people for pleasure, but Faile knew for a fact that she had a strong arm swinging a switch. "Now tell me what Sevanna said and did. This water falling from the sky may be a wondrous thing, but it is miserable to walk around in."

Obeying the command was easy. Sevanna had not wakened during the night, and once she did rise, all her talk had been of what clothes and jewels she would wear, especially the jewels. Her jewelry chest had been made to hold clothing, and it was filled to the top with more gems than most queens possessed. Before putting on any garment at all, Sevanna had spent time trying on different combinations of necklaces and rings and studying herself in the gilt-framed stand-mirror. It had been very embarrassing. For Faile.

She had just reached Therava's arrival with Galina when everything in front of her eyes rippled. *She* rippled! It was not imagination. Meira's blue eyes widened as far as they could go; she had felt it, too. Again everything rippled, including herself, harder than before. In shock, Faile stood up straight and let go of her robe. A third time the world rippled, harder still, and as it passed through her, she felt as if she might blow away in a breeze, or simply dissipate in a mist.

Breathing hard, she waited for the fourth ripple, the one she knew would destroy her and everything else. When it did not come, she expelled every bit of air in her lungs from relief. “What just happened, Wise One? What was that?”

Meira touched her own arm and looked faintly surprised that her hand did not pass through flesh and bone. “I . . . do not know,” she said slowly. Giving herself a shake, she added, “Go on about your business, girl.” She gathered her skirts and strode past Faile at little short of a trot, splashing mud as she went.

The children had vanished from the street, but Faile could hear them wailing inside the tents. Abandoned dogs shivered and whined, tails tucked between their legs. People in the street were touching themselves, touching each other, Shaido and *gai’shain* alike. Faile clasped her hands together. Of course she was solid. She had only *felt* as though she were turning to mist. Of course. Hoisting her robes to avoid any more washing than she absolutely had to do, she began to walk. And then to run, careless of how much mud she splashed onto herself or anyone else. She knew there could be no running from another of those ripples. But she ran anyway, as fast as her legs could carry her.

The *gai’shain* tents made a broad ring around Malden’s high granite walls, and they were as varied as the tents in the outer part of the encampment, though most were small. Her own peaked tent could have slept two uncomfortably; it housed herself and three others, Alliandre, Maighdin and a former Cairhienin noblewoman named Dairaine, one of those who curried favor with Sevanna by carrying tales about the other *gai’shain*. That complicated matters, but there was no mending it short of killing the woman, and Faile would not countenance that. Not unless Dairaine became a real threat. They slept huddled together like puppies of necessity, glad of the shared body warmth on cold nights.

The interior of the low tent was dim when she ducked inside. Lamp oil and candles were in short supply, and not wasted on *gai’shain*. Only Alliandre was there, lying facedown on her blankets in her collar with a damp cloth, dipped in an herbal infusion, over her bruised bottom. At least the Wise Ones were as willing to give their healing herbs to *gai’shain* as to

Shaido. Alliandre had done nothing wrong, but had been named as one of the five who had pleased Sevanna least yesterday. Unlike some, she had done quite well while being punished—Doirmanes had begun weeping even before he was bent over the chest—but she seemed to be among those chosen out every three or four days. Being a queen did not teach you how to serve a queen. But then, Maighdin was picked nearly as often, and she was a lady's maid, if not a very skilled one. Faile herself had only been chosen once.

It was a measure of how Alliandre's spirits had fallen that she made no move to cover herself, only raised up on her elbows. Still, she had combed her long hair. If she failed to do that, Faile would know the woman had reached bottom. "Did anything . . . strange . . . happen to you just now, my Lady?" she asked, fear strong in her unsteady voice.

"It did," Faile said, standing crouched under the ridgepole. "I don't know what it was. Meira doesn't know what it was. I doubt any of the Wise Ones do. But it didn't harm us." Of course it had not harmed them. Of course not. "And it changes nothing in our plans." Yawning, she unfastened the wide golden belt and dropped it on her blankets, then grasped her outer robe to pull it over her head.

Alliandre put her head down on her hands and began weeping quietly. "We'll never escape. I'm going to be beaten again tonight. I know it. I'm going to be beaten every day for the rest of my life."

With a sigh, Faile left her outer robe where it was and knelt to stroke her liege woman's hair. There were as many responsibilities down as up. "I have those same fears now and then," she admitted softly. "But I refuse to let them take control. I *will* escape. *We* will escape. You have to keep your courage, Alliandre. I know you're brave. I know you've dealt with Masema and kept your nerve. You can keep it now, if you try."

Aravine put her head in at the tentflap. She was a plain, plump woman, a noble Faile was sure, though she never claimed it, and despite the dimness Faile could see that she was beaming. She wore Sevanna's belt and collar, too. "My Lady, Alvon and his son have something for you."

"It will have to wait a few minutes," Faile said. Alliandre had stopped crying, but she was just lying there, silent and still.

"My Lady, you won't want to wait for this."

Faile's breath caught. Could it be possible? It seemed too much to hope for.

“I can keep my nerve,” Alliandre said, raising her head to gaze at Aravine. “If what Alvon has is what I hope it is, I’ll keep my nerve if Sevanna has me put to the question.”

Snatching up her belt—being seen outside without belt and collar both meant punishment almost as severe as for trying to run away—Faile hurried out of the tent. The drizzle had slackened to a misting rain, but she pulled up her cowl anyway. The rain was still cold.

Alvon was a stocky man, overtopped by his son Theril, a lanky boy. Both wore mud-stained, almost-white robes made of tentcloth. Theril, Alvon’s eldest, was only fourteen, but the Shaido had not believed it because of his height, as much as most men in Amadicia. Faile had been ready to trust Alvon from the start. He and his son were something of legends among the *gai’shain*. Three times they had run away, and each time it had taken the Shaido longer to bring them back. And despite increasingly fierce punishment, on the day they swore fealty they had been planning a fourth attempt to return to the rest of their family. Neither ever smiled that Faile had seen, but today, smiles wreathed Alvon’s weathered face and Theril’s skinny one alike.

“What do you have for me?” Faile asked, hastily fastening her belt around her waist. She thought her heart was going to pound its way out of her chest.

“It was my Theril, my Lady,” Alvon said. A woodcutter, he spoke with a coarse accent that made him barely intelligible. “He was just walking by, see, and there was nobody around, nobody at all, so he ducked in quick like, and . . . Show the Lady, Theril.”

Shyly, Theril reached into his wide sleeve—the robes usually had pockets sewn in there—and drew out a smooth white rod that looked like ivory, about a foot long and as slim as her wrist.

Looking around to see if anyone was watching—the street was empty save for them, for the moment at least—Faile took it quickly and pushed it up her own sleeve to tuck into the pocket there. The pocket was just deep enough to keep it from falling out, but now that she had the thing in hand, she did not want to let go of it. It felt like glass, and was distinctly cool to the touch, cooler than the morning air. Perhaps it was an *angreal* or a *ter’angreal*. That would explain why Galina wanted it, if not why she had not taken it herself. Hand buried in her sleeve, Faile gripped the rod hard. Galina was no longer a threat. Now she was salvation.

“You understand, Alvon, that Galina may be unable to take you and your son with her when she leaves,” she said. “She has only promised that to me and those captured with me. But I promise you that I will find a way to free you and everyone who has sworn to me. All the rest, too, if I can, but those above all. Under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, I swear it.” How, she had no idea short of calling on her father for an army, but she would do it.

The woodcutter made as if to spit then glanced at her, and his face colored. He swallowed, instead. “That Galina ain’t going to help nobody, my Lady. Says she’s Aes Sedai and all, but she’s that Therava’s plaything if you ask me, and that Therava ain’t never going to let her go. Anyways, I know if we can get you free, you’ll come back for the rest of us. No need for you to swear and all that. You said you wanted the rod if anybody could lay hands on it without getting caught, and Theril got it for you, that’s all.”

“I want to be free,” Theril said suddenly, “but if we get anybody free, then we’ve beaten them.” He looked surprised that he had spoken, and blushed deep red. His father frowned at him, then nodded thoughtfully.

“Very well said,” Faile told the boy gently, “but I made my oath, and I stand by it. You and your father—” She cut off as Aravine, looking past her shoulder, laid a hand on her arm. The woman’s smile had been replaced by fright.

Turning her head, Faile saw Rolan standing beside her tent. A good two hands taller than Perrin, he wore his *shoufa* coiled around his neck with the black veil hanging down his broad chest. Rain slicked his face and made his short red hair cling to his scalp in curls. How long had he been there? Not long, or Aravine would have noticed him before. The tiny tent offered little concealment. Alvon and his son had their shoulders hunched, as if they were thinking about attacking the tall *Mera’din*. That was a very bad idea. Mice attacking a cat was not in it, as Perrin would have said.

“Go on about your duties, Alvon,” she said quickly. “You, too, Aravine. Go on, now.”

Aravine and Alvon had sense enough not to offer courtesies before leaving with final worried glances at Rolan, but Theril half raised a hand toward knuckling his forehead before catching himself. Blushing, he scurried away after his father.

Rolan came out from beside the tent to stand in front of her. Oddly, he had a small bunch of blue and yellow wildflowers in one hand. She was very conscious of the rod she was holding in her sleeve. Where was she to hide it? Once Therava discovered it missing, she likely would turn the camp upside down.

"You must be careful, Faile Bashere," Rolan said, smiling down at her. Alliandre called him not quite pretty, but Faile had decided she was wrong. Those blue eyes and that smile made him very nearly beautiful. "What you are about is dangerous, and I may not be here to protect you much longer."

"Dangerous?" She felt a chill in her middle. "What do you mean? Where are you going?" The thought of losing his protection made her stomach lurch. Few of the wetlander women had escaped the attentions of Shaido men. Without him. . . .

"Some of us are thinking of returning to the Three-fold Land." His smile faded. "We cannot follow a false *Car'a'carn*, and a wetlander at that, but perhaps we will be allowed to live out our lives in our own holds. We think on it. We have been a long time from home, and these Shaido sicken us."

She would find a way to deal with it once he was gone. She would have to. Somehow. "And what am I doing that is dangerous?" She tried to make her voice light, but it was difficult. Light, what would happen to her without him?

"These Shaido are blind even when they are not drunk, Faile Bashere," he replied calmly. Pushing her cowl back, he tucked one of the wildflowers into her hair above her left ear. "We *Mera'din* use our eyes." Another wildflower went into her hair, on the other side. "You have made many new friends lately, and you are planning to escape with them. A bold plan, but dangerous."

"And will you tell the Wise Ones, or Sevanna?" She was startled when that came out in an even tone. Her stomach was trying to tie itself into knots.

"Why would I do that?" he asked, adding another flower to her decorations. "Jhoradin thinks he will take Lacile Aldorwin back to the Three-fold Land with him even if she is a Treekiller. He believes he may convince her to make a bridal wreath to lay at his feet." Lacile had found her own protector by climbing into the blankets of the *Mera'din* who had made her *gai'shain*, and Arrela had done the same with one of the Maidens who had captured her, but Faile doubted that Jhoradin would attain his wish. Both women were focused on escape like arrows aimed at a target. “And now that I think on it, I may take you with me if we go.”

Faile stared up at him. The rain was beginning to soak through her hair. “To the Waste? Rolan, I love my husband. I’ve told you that, and it is true.”

“I know,” he said, continuing to add flowers. “But for the moment, you still wear white, and what happens while you wear white is forgotten when you put it off. Your husband cannot hold it against you. Besides, if we go, when we come near to a wetlander town, I will let you go. I should never have made you *gai’shain* in the first place. That collar and belt hold enough gold to get you safely back to your husband.”

Her mouth fell open in shock. It surprised her when her fist struck his wide chest. *Gai’shain* were *never* allowed to offer violence, but the man just grinned at her. “You—!” She struck him again, harder. She beat at him. “You—! I can’t think of a word bad enough. You let me think you were going to abandon me to these Shaido while all along you were meaning to help me escape?”

Finally he caught her fist and held it easily with a hand that enveloped hers completely. “If we go, Faile Bashere,” he laughed. The man laughed! “It is not decided. Anyway, a man cannot let a woman think he is too eager.”

Again she surprised herself, this time by beginning to laugh and cry at the same time, so hard that she had to lean against him or fall down. That *bloody* Aiel sense of humor!

“You are very beautiful with flowers in your hair, Faile Bashere,” he murmured, tucking in another blossom. “Or without them. And for the moment, you still wear white.”

Light! She had the rod, leaning against her arm so coolly, but there was no way to give it to Galina until Therava let her walk around freely again, no way to be sure that the woman would not betray her before then out of desperation. Rolan offered her escape, *if* the *Mera’din* decided to leave, but he would continue to try to inveigle her into his blankets so long as she wore white. And if the *Mera’din* decided not to go, would one of them betray her escape plans? If Rolan could be believed, they all knew! Hope and danger, all tied together inextricably. What a tangle.

She turned out to have been exactly right about Therava’s reaction. Just before midday all of the *gai’shain* were herded into the open and made to strip to their skins. Covering herself as best she could with her hands, Faile huddled together with other women wearing Sevanna’s belt and collar—they had been made to put those on again straightaway—huddled for a scrap of decency while Shaido rummaged through the *gai’shain* tents, tossing everything out into the mud. All Faile could do was think about her hiding place inside the town and pray. Hope and danger, and no way to untangle them.

* * *

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CHAPTER 6

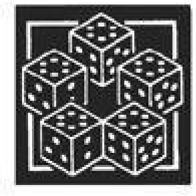

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A Stave and a Razor

Mat had never really expected Luca to leave Jurador after only one day—the stone-walled salt town was wealthy, and Luca did like to see coin stick to his hands—so he was not exactly disappointed when the man told him that Valan Luca's Grand Traveling Show and Magnificent Display of Marvels and Wonders would remain there at least two more days. Not *exactly* disappointed, yet he had hoped that his luck might hold good, or his being *ta'veren*. But then, being *ta'veren* had never brought anything other than bad that he could see.

"The lines at the entrance are already as long as they were at their best, yesterday," Luca said, gesturing expansively. They were inside Luca's huge gaudy wagon, early in the morning after Renna's death, and the tall man sat in the gilded chair at the narrow table—a real table, with stools tucked under for guests; most other wagons had an affair rigged on ropes from the ceiling, and people sat on the beds to eat. Luca had not yet donned one of his flamboyant coats, but he made up for it with gestures. Latelle, his wife, was cooking the breakfast porridge on a small, iron-topped brick stove built into a corner of the windowless wagon, and the air was sharp with spices. The harsh-faced woman put so many spices into everything she prepared that it was all inedible, in Mat's estimation, yet Luca always gobbled down whatever she set in front of him as if it were a feast. He must have a leather tongue. "I expect twice as many visitors today, maybe three times as many, and tomorrow as well. People can't see everything in one visit, and here they can afford to come twice. Word of mouth, Cauthon. Word of mouth. That brings as many as Aludra's nightflowers. I feel almost like a *ta'veren*, the way things are falling out. Large audiences and the prospect of more. A warrant of protection from the High Lady." Luca cut off abruptly, looking faintly embarrassed, as if he had just remembered that Mat's name was on that warrant as being excluded from protection.

"You might not like it if you really were *ta'veren*," Mat muttered, which made the other man give him an odd look. He put a finger behind the black silk scarf that hid his hanging scar and tugged at it. For a moment, the thing had felt too tight. He had spent a night of bleak dreams about corpses floating downstream and woken to the dice spinning in his head, always a bad sign, and now they seemed to be bouncing off the inside of his skull harder than before. "I can pay you as much as you'll make for every show you give between here and Lugard, no matter how many people attend. That's on top of what I promised for carrying us to Lugard." If the show was not stopping all the time, they could cut the time to reach Lugard by three quarters at the least. More, if he could convince Luca to spend whole days on the road instead of half days, the way they did now.

Luca seemed taken with the idea, nodding thoughtfully, but then he shook his head with a sadness that was plainly feigned and spread his hands. "And what will that look like, a traveling show that never stops to give shows? It will look suspicious, that's what. I have the warrant, and the High Lady will speak up for me besides, but you certainly don't want to pull the Seanchan down on us. No, it's safer for you this way." The man was not thinking of Mat Cauthon's bloody safety, he was thinking that his bloody shows might earn him more than Mat paid. That, plus making himself as much the center of attention as any of the performers was nearly as important to him as gold. Some of the showfolk talked of what they would do when they retired. Not Luca. He intended to keep on until he fell over dead in the middle of a show. And he would arrange it so he had the largest audience possible when he did.

"It's ready, Valan," Latelle said affectionately as she lifted the iron pot from the stove with a cloth protecting her hands and set it down on a thick woven mat on the table. Two places had already been set, with white-glazed plates and silver spoons. Luca would have silver spoons when everyone else settled for tin or pot metal or even horn or wood. Stern-eyed, with a hard set to her mouth, the bear trainer looked quite odd wearing a long white apron over her spangled blue dress. Her bears probably wished they had trees to climb when she frowned at them. Strangely, though, she jumped to ensure her husband's comforts. "Will you be eating with us, Master Cauthon?" There was no welcome in that; in fact, just the opposite, and she showed no sign of turning to the cupboard where the plates were stored.

Mat gave her a bow that soured her face further. He had never been less than civil to the woman, but she refused to like him. "I thank you for the kind invitation, Mistress Luca, but no." She grunted. So much for being courteous. He put on his flat-brimmed hat and left, the dice rattling away.

Luca's big wagon, glittering in red and blue and covered with golden stars and comets, not to mention the phases of the moon in silver, stood in the middle of the show, as far as possible from the animals' smelly cages and the horselines. It was surrounded by smaller wagons, little houses on wheels, most windowless and most painted just a single color with none of Luca's extra decorations, and by wall-tents the size of small houses in blue or green or red, sometimes striped. The sun stood nearly its own height above the horizon in a sky where a sprinkling of white clouds drifted slowly, and children ran playing with hoops and balls while the showfolk were limbering up for their morning performances, men and women twisting and stretching, many with glittering, colorful spangles on their coats or dresses. Four contortionists, in filmy trousers tied at the ankle and blouses thin enough to leave little to the imagination, made him wince. Two were sitting on their own heads atop blankets spread on the ground beside their red tent, while the others had twisted themselves into a pair of knots that looked beyond untying. Their backbones must have been made of spring-wire! Petra, the strongman, stood bare-chested beside the green wagon he shared with his wife, warming up by lifting weights with either hand that Mat was not sure he could have lifted with both. The man had arms thicker than Mat's legs, and he was not sweating at all. Clarine's small dogs stood in a line at the steps of the wagon wagging their tails and eagerly waiting on their trainer. Unlike Latelle's bears, Mat figured the plump woman's dogs performed so they could make her smile.

He was always tempted to just sit quietly somewhere when the dice were clicking in his head, some place nothing seemed likely to happen, waiting for the dice to stop, and though he would have enjoyed watching some of the female acrobats, a number of whom wore as little as the contortionists, he set out to walk the half mile to Jurador, eyeing everyone on the wide, hard-packed clay road closely. There was a purchase he hoped to make.

People were coming to join the long line waiting behind a stout rope stretched along the show's tall canvas wall, only a handful with more than a touch of embroidery on the women's dresses or the men's short coats, and a few farmers' high-wheeled carts lumbering behind a horse or an ox. Figures moved among the small forest of windmills that pumped the salt wells on the low hills behind the town, and around the long evaporation pans. A merchant's train of canvas-covered wagons, twenty of them behind six-horse teams, rumbled out of the town gates as he approached, the merchant herself in a bright green cloak seated beside the driver of the first wagon. A flock of crows cawed past overhead, giving him a chill, but no one vanished before his eyes, and everybody cast a long shadow so far as he could make out. There were no dead people's shades walking the road today, although he was convinced that was what he had seen the day before.

The dead walking surely could mean nothing good. Very likely it had something to with Tarmon Gai'don and Rand. Colors whirled in his brain, and for an instant, in his head, he saw Rand and Min standing beside a large bed, kissing. He stumbled and nearly tripped over his own boots. They had not been wearing any clothes! He would have to be careful thinking about Rand. . . . The colors swirled and resolved for a moment, and he stumbled again. There were worse things to spy on than kissing. *Very* careful what he thought. Light!

The pair of guards leaning on their halberds at the iron-studded gates, hard-faced men in white breastplates and conical white helmets with horsetail crests, eyed him suspiciously. They probably thought he was drunk. A reassuring nod failed to change their expressions by a hair. He could have used a stiff drink right then. The guards did not try to stop him entering, though, just watched him pass. Drunks caused trouble, especially a man who was drunk this early in the day, but a drunk in a good coat—plain, but well-cut and good silk—a man with a little lace at his wrists was an altogether different matter.

The stone-paved streets of Jurador were noisy even at this hour, with hawkers carrying trays or standing behind barrows crying their wares, and shopkeepers beside narrow tables in front of their shops bellowing the fineness of their goods, and coopers hammering hoops onto barrels for shipping salt. The clatter of rugmakers' looms nearly drowned out the ringing of the occasional blacksmith's hammer, not to mention the music of flutes and drums and dulcimers drifting from inns and taverns. It was a jumble of a town, with shops and houses and inns cheek by jowl with taverns and stables, all of stone and roofed with reddish tiles. A solid town, Jurador. And one accustomed to thievery. Most windows on the lower floors were covered with stout screens of wrought iron. The upper windows as well on the homes of the wealthy, most of whom were no doubt salt merchants. The music of the inns and taverns pulled at him. Likely there would be dice games going on in most of them. He could almost feel those dice spinning across a table. It had been too long since he had rattled a set of dice in his hands instead of inside his head, but he was not there for gambling this morning.

He had had no breakfast yet, so he approached a wrinkled woman with a tray hung from a strap around her neck who shouted “meat pies, made from the finest beef to be found in Altara.” He took her word for it and handed over the coppers she demanded. He had seen no cattle at any farms near Jurador, only sheep and goats, but it was best not to inquire too closely what was in a pie bought in the streets of any town. There could be cows on nearby farms. There could be. In any case, the meat pie was tasty, and still hot for a wonder, and he walked on along the crowded street juggling the pie and wiping greasy juice from his chin.

He was careful not to bump into anyone in the throng. Altarans were a touchy lot, by and large. In this town, you could tell somebody’s station to within a whisker by the amount of embroidery on coat or dress or cloak, the more the higher, long before you were close enough to tell wool from silk, though the richer women covered their olive-skinned faces with transparent veils hung from ornate combs stuck into their tightly coiled braids, but men and women alike, whether salt merchants or ribbon hawkers, wore long belt knives with curved blades and sometimes fondled the hilts as though looking for a fight. He always tried to avoid fighting, though his luck seldom did him much good there. *Ta’veren* took over with that, it seemed. The dice had never before signaled a fight—battles, yes, but never a dust-up in the street—yet he walked very carefully indeed. Not that that would help, of course. When the dice stopped, they stopped, and that was that. But he saw no reason to take chances. He hated taking chances. Except with gambling, of course, and that was hardly taking a chance for him.

He spotted a barrel full of thick quarterstaffs and walking staffs in front of a shop displaying swords and daggers under the watchful eye of a bulky fellow with sunken knuckles, a nose that had been broken more than once, and a thick truncheon hanging at his belt beside the inevitable dagger. The man announced in a rough voice that all the blades on display were Andoran made, but anybody who did not make his own blades always claimed they were Andoran or else from the Borderlands. Or Tairen, sometimes. Tear made good steel.

To Mat’s surprise and delight, a slim stave of what appeared to be black yew, more than a foot taller than he was, stood upright in the barrel. Pulling the stave out, he checked the fine, almost braided grain. It was black yew, all right. That braided grain was what gave bows made from it such power, twice what any other wood could give. You could never be sure until you started slicing away the excess, but the stave looked perfect. How in the Light had black yew come to be in southern Altara? He was sure it only grew in the Two Rivers.

When the proprietor, a sleek woman with bright-feathered birds embroidered to below her bosom, came out and began extolling the virtues of her blades, he said, “How much for this black stick, Mistress?”

She blinked, startled that a man in silk and lace wanted a quarterstaff—slim as it was, she bloody well thought the bloody thing was a quarterstaff!—and named a price that he paid without bargaining. Which made her blink again, and frown as if she thought she should have asked for more. He would have paid more for the makings of a Two Rivers bow. With the raw bowstave over his shoulder, he walked on, wolfing down the last of the meat pie and wiping his hand on his coat. But he had not come for breakfast or a bowstave any more than for gambling. It was the stables that interested him.

Livery stables always had a horse or three for sale, and if the price was right, they would usually sell one that had not been for sale. At least, they did when the Seanchan had not snapped them up already. Luckily, the Seanchan presence in Jurador had been fleeting so far. He wandered from stable to stable examining bays and roans, blue roans and piebalds, duns, sorrels, blacks, whites, grays and dapples, all mares or geldings. A stallion would not serve his purposes. Not every animal he looked at had a shallow girth or long cannons, yet none matched what he had in mind. Until he entered a narrow stable jammed between a large stone inn called The Twelve Salt Wells and a rugmaker’s shop.

He would have thought the racketing looms would have bothered the horses, but they were all quiet, apparently accustomed to the noise. Stalls stretched farther into the block than he had expected, but lanterns hanging from the stall posts gave a fair light away from the doors. The air, speckled with dust from the loft above, smelled of hay and oats and horse dung, but not old dung. Three men with shovels were mucking out stalls. The owner kept his place clean. That meant less chance of disease. Some stables he had walked out of after getting one whiff.

The black-and-white mare was out of her stall on a rope halter while a groom put down fresh straw, and she stood squarely, and with her ears perked forward, showing alertness. About fifteen hands tall, she was long in front, with a deep girth that promised endurance, and her legs were perfectly proportioned, with short cannons and a good angle to her fetlocks. Her shoulders were well sloped, and her croup dead level with her whithers. She had lines as good as Pips', or even better. More than that, she was a breed he had heard tell of but never thought to see, a razor, from Arad Doman. No other breed would have that distinctive coloring. In her coat, black met white in straight lines that could have been sliced by a razor, hence the name. Her presence here was as mystifying as the black yew. He had always heard no Domani would sell a razor to any outlander. He let his eyes sweep past her without lingering, studying the other animals in their stalls. Had the dice inside his skull slowed? No, it was his imagination. He was sure they were spinning as hard as they had in Luca's wagon.

A wiry man with only a fringe of gray hair remaining came forward, ducking his head over folded hands. "Toke Fearnim, my Lord," he introduced himself in rough accents, eyeing the bowstave on Mat's shoulder dubiously. Men who wore silk coats and gold signet rings rarely carried such things. "How can I be of service? My Lord wishes to rent a horse? Or to buy?" Embroidery, small bright flowers, covered the shoulders of the vest he wore over a shirt that might have been white once. Mat avoided looking at the flowers at all. The fellow had one of those curved knives at his belt and two long white scars on his leathery face. Old scars. Any fighting he had done lately had not marked him where it showed.

"Buy, Master Fearnim, if you have anything for sale. If I can find one that's halfway decent. I've had more spavined gluebaits offered to me as six-year-olds when they were eighteen if a day than I can shake a stick at." He hefted the bowstave slightly with a grin. His da claimed bargaining went better if you could make the other fellow start grinning.

"I have three for sale, my Lord, none of them spavined," the wiry man replied with another bow, and no hint of a grin. Fearnim gestured. "One is out of her stall there. Five years old and prime horseflesh, my Lord. And a steal at ten crowns. Gold," he added blandly.

Mat let his jaw drop. "For a *piebald*? I know the Seanchan have driven prices up, but that's ridiculous!"

"Oh, she's not your common piebald, my Lord. A razor is what she is. Domani bloodborn ride razors."

Blood and bloody ashes! So much for catching a bargain. "So you say, so you say," Mat muttered, lowering one end of the bowstave to the stone floor so he could lean on it. His hip seldom bothered him any longer except when he did a lot of walking, but he had done so this morning, and he felt twinges. Well, bargain or no, he had to play out the game. There were rules to horse trading. Break them, and you were asking to have your purse emptied out. “I’ve never heard of any horse called a razor myself. What else do you have? Only geldings or mares, mind.”

“Geldings are all I have for sale except the razor, my Lord,” Fearnim said, emphasizing the word razor a little. Turning toward the back of the stable, he shouted, “Adela, bring out that big bay what’s for sale.”

A lanky young woman with a pimply face, in breeches and a plain dark vest, came darting out of the back of the stable to obey. Fearnim had Adela walk the bay and then a dappled gray on rope leads in the good light near the doors. Mat had to hand him that. Their conformation was not bad at all, but the bay was too big, better than seventeen hands, and the gray kept his ears half laid back and tried to bite Adela’s hand twice. She was deft with the animals, though, easily evading the bad-tempered gray’s lunges. Rejecting the pair of them would have been easy even if he had not had his mind set on the razor.

A lean, gray-striped tomcat, like a ridgecat in miniature, appeared and sat at Fearnim’s feet to lick a bloody gash on his shoulder. “Rats are worse this year than I ever recall,” the stablekeeper muttered, frowning down at the cat. “They fight back more, too. I’m going to have to get another cat, or maybe two.” He brought himself back to the business at hand. “Will my Lord take a look at my prize, since the others don’t suit?”

“I suppose I could look at the piebald, Master Fearnim,” Mat said doubtfully. “But not for any ten crowns.”

“In gold,” Fearnim said. “Hurd, walk the razor for the Lord here.” He emphasized the breed again. Working the man down would be difficult. Unless he got some help for a change from being *ta’veren*. His luck never helped with anything as straightforward as dickering.

Hurd was the fellow refreshing the straw in the razor’s stall, a squat man who had about three white hairs left on his head and no teeth in his mouth at all. That was evident when he grinned, which he did while he led the mare in a circle. He clearly liked the animal, and well he should.

She walked well, but Mat still inspected her closely. Her teeth said Fearnim had been honest enough about her age—only a fool lied very far about a horse’s age unless the buyer was a fool himself, though it was surprising how many sellers thought buyers were all just that—and her ears pricked toward him when he stroked her nose while checking her eyes. They were clear and bright, free of rheum. He felt along her legs without finding any heat or swelling. There was never a hint of a lesion or sore, or of ringworm, anywhere on her. He could get his fist easily between her rib cage and her elbow—she would have a long stride—and was barely able to fit his flat hand between her last rib and the point of her hip. She would be hardy, unlikely to strain a tendon if run fast.

"My Lord knows his horseflesh, I see."

"That I do, Master Fearnim. And ten crowns gold is too much, especially for a piebald. Some say they're bad luck, you know. Not that I believe it, not as such, or I wouldn't offer at all."

"Bad luck? I never heard that, my Lord. What do you offer?"

"I could get Tairen bloodstock for ten crowns gold. Not the best, true, but still Tairen. I'll give you ten crowns. In silver."

Fearnim threw back his head, laughing uproariously, and when he stopped, they settled down to the dickering. In the end, Mat handed over five crowns in gold along with four marks gold and three crowns silver, all stamped in Ebou Dar. There were coins from many countries in the chest under his bed, but foreign coin usually meant finding a banker or money changer to weigh them and work out what they were worth locally. Aside from attracting more notice than he wanted, he would have ended paying more for the animal, maybe even the full ten crowns gold. Money changers' scales always seemed to work that way. He had not expected to get the man down that far, but from Fearnim's expression, grinning at last, he had never expected to receive so much. It was the best way for horse trading to end, with both sides thinking they had come out ahead. All in all, the day had begun very well, dice or no bloody dice. He should have known it would not last.

When he got back to the show at midday, riding the razor bareback because of his aching hip and with the dice rattling in his head, the line of people was longer than when he had left, waiting to pass beneath the big blue banner, stretched between two tall poles, that carried the show's name in big red letters. As people dropped their coins into the clear glass pitcher held by a heavy-set horse handler in a rough woolen coat, to be poured from there into an iron-bound chest under the watchful eyes of another horse handler who was even larger, more people joined the line, so it never seemed to grow shorter. The thing stretched beyond the end of the rope and around the corner. For a small wonder, no one was pushing or shoving. There were obvious farmers in the line, wearing rough woolens and with dirt ingrained in their hands, though the children's faces and those of the farmwives at least had been scrubbed clean. Luca was getting his hoped-for crowd, unfortunately. No chance of convincing him to leave tomorrow now. The dice said something was going to happen, something fateful to Mat bloody Cauthon, but what? There had been times when the dice stopped and he still had no idea what happened.

Just inside the canvas wall, with people streaming past to enjoy the performers lining both sides of the main street, Aludra was taking delivery of two wagonloads of barrels in various sizes. Of more than the barrels, it seemed. "I will show you where to park the wagons," the slender woman told the driver of the lead wagon, a lean man with a jutting jaw. Aludra's waist-long beaded braids swung as her eyes followed Mat for a moment, but she quickly turned back to the wagon driver. "The horses, you will take to the horselines afterward, yes?"

Now, what had she bought in such quantity? Something for her fireworks, certainly. Every night, soon after dark so she would catch everyone before they went to bed, she launched her nightflowers, two or three for a town the size of Jurador or if there were several villages close together. He had had some thoughts on why she wanted a bellfounder, but the only one that seemed to make any sense actually made no sense at all that he could see.

He hid the mare on the horselines. Well, you could not really hide a razor, but a horse was noticed less among other horses, and the time was not right, yet. The bowstave he left in the wagon he shared with Egeanin and Domon, neither of whom was there, then headed for Tuon's faded purple wagon. That was parked not far from Luca's wagon, now, though Mat wished it had been left near the storage wagons. Only Luca and his wife knew that Tuon was a High Lady rather than a servant who had been about to expose Mat and Egeanin to her supposed husband as lovers, but many among the showfolk were already wondering why Mat spent more time with Tuon than with Egeanin. Wondering and disapproving. They were an oddly prim lot for the most part, even the contortionists. Running off with the wife of a cruel lord was romantic. Canoodling with the lady's maid was sordid. Giving Tuon's wagon this favored spot, among the people who had been with Luca for years and were his most prized performers, was going to cause more talk.

In truth, he hesitated about going to Tuon at all with the dice drumming in his head. They had stopped too often in her presence, and he still did not know the why for a single one of those times. Not for certain. Maybe the first time, it had just been meeting her. Thinking of it made the hair on the back of his neck want to stand up. Still, with women, you always had to take chances. With a woman like Tuon, ten chances a day, and never knowing the odds until it was too late. Sometimes he wondered why his luck failed to help him more with women. Women were certainly as unpredictable as any honest dice ever made.

None of the Redarms was on guard outside the wagon—they were beyond that, now—so he trotted up the short flight of steps at the back of the wagon and rapped once before pulling the door open and entering. After all, he paid the rent for the thing, and they were hardly likely to be lying around unclothed at this time of day. Anyway, the door had a latch if they needed to keep people out.

Mistress Anan was off somewhere, but the interior was still crowded. The narrow table had been let down on ropes from the ceiling, with mismatched plates of bread and olives and cheese laid out on it along with one of Luca's tall silver wine pitchers, a squat red-striped pitcher and flower-painted cups. Tuon, a month's growth of tightly curled black hair on her head, sat on the wagon's sole stool at the far end of the table, with Selucia sitting on one of the beds at her side, and Noal and Olver on the other bed, elbows on the table. Today, Selucia was in the dark blue Ebou Dari dress that displayed her memorable bosom so well, with a flowered scarf tied around her head, but Tuon wore a red dress that seemed to be made entirely of tiny pleats. Light, he had only bought her the silk yesterday! How had she convinced the show's seamstresses to complete a dress already? He was pretty certain that usually took longer than a day. With liberal promises of his gold, he suspected. Well, if you bought a woman silk, you had to expect to pay to have it sewn. He had heard that saying as a boy, when he never expected to be able to afford silk, but it was the Light's own truth.

". . . . only the women are ever seen outside their villages," Noal was saying, but the gnarled, white-haired old man cut off when Mat entered the wagon, pulling the door shut behind him. The scraps of lace at Noal's wrists had seen better days, as had his well-cut coat of fine gray wool, but both were clean and neat, though in truth they looked odd with his crooked fingers and battered face. Those belonged on an aging tavern tough, one who had gone on fighting long past his prime. Olver, in the good blue coat Mat had had made for him, grinned as widely as an Ogier. Light, he was a good boy, but he would never be handsome with those big ears and that wide mouth. His manner with women needed vast improvement if he was ever to have any luck there at all. Mat had been trying to spend more time with Olver, to get him away from the influence of his "uncles," Vanin and Harnan and the other Redarms, and the boy seemed to enjoy that. Just not as much as he enjoyed playing Snakes and Foxes or stones with Tuon and staring at Selucia's bosom. It was all very well for those fellows to teach Olver how to shoot a bow and use a sword and the like, but if Mat ever learned who was teaching him to leer . . .

"Manners, Toy," Tuon drawled like honey sliding out of a dish. Hard honey. Around him, unless they were playing stones, her expression was usually severe enough for a judge handing down a death sentence, and her tone matched it. "You knock, then wait for permission to enter. Unless you are property or a servant. Then you do not knock. You also have grease on your coat. I expect you to keep yourself clean." Olver's grin faded at hearing Mat admonished. Noal raked bent fingers through his long hair and sighed, then began studying the green plate in front of him as if he might find an emerald among the olives.

Grim tone or no grim tone, Mat enjoyed looking at the dark little woman who was to be his wife. Who was halfway his wife already. Light, all she had to do was say three sentences and the thing was done! Burn him but she was beautiful. Once, he had mistaken her for a child, but that had been because of her size, and her face had been obscured by a transparent veil. Without that veil, it was plain that that heart-shaped face belonged to a woman. Her big eyes were dark pools a man could spend a lifetime swimming in. Her rare smiles could be mysterious or mischievous, and he prized them. He enjoyed making her laugh, too. At least, when she was not laughing at him. True, she was a little slimmer than he had always preferred, but if he could ever get an arm around her without Selucia there, he believed she would feel just right. And he might convince her to give him a few kisses with those full lips. Light, he dreamed about that sometimes! Never mind that she called him down as if they were already married. Well, almost never mind. Burn him if he could see what a little grease mattered. Lopin and Nerim, the two serving men he was saddled with, would fight over which one got to clean the coat. They had little enough to do that they really would if he did not name who received the task. He did not say that to her. Women liked nothing better than making you defend yourself, and once you started, she had won.

“I’ll try to remember that, Precious,” he said with his best smile, sliding in beside Selucia and putting his hat down on the other side from her. The blanket scrunched up between them, and they were a foot apart to boot, yet you would have thought he had pressed himself against her hip. Her eyes were blue, but the furious look she gave him was hot enough his coat should have been singed. “I hope there’s more water than wine in that cup in front of Olver.”

“It’s goat’s milk,” the boy said indignantly. Ah. Well, maybe Olver was still a little too young even for well-watered wine.

Tuon sat up very straight, though she was still shorter than Selucia, who was a short woman herself. “What did you call me?” she said, as close to crisply as her accent allowed.

“Precious. You have a pet name for me, so I thought I should have one for you, Precious.” He thought Selucia’s eyes were going to pop right out of her head.

“I see,” Tuon murmured, pursing her lips in thought. The fingers of her right hand waggled, as though idly, and Selucia immediately slid off the bed and went to one of the cupboards. She still took time to glare at him over Tuon’s head. “Very well,” Tuon said after a moment. “It will be interesting to see who wins *this* game. Toy.”

Mat’s smile slipped. Game? He was just trying to regain a little balance. But she saw a game, and that meant he could lose. Was likely to, since he had no idea what the game was. Why did women always make things so . . . complicated?

Selucia resumed her place and slid a chipped cup in front of him, and a blue-glazed plate that held half a loaf of crusty bread, six varieties of pickled olives mounded up, and three sorts of cheese. That perked his spirits again. He had hoped for this, if not expected it. Once you got a woman feeding you, she had a hard time finding it in herself to stop you from putting your feet under her table again.

“The thing of it is,” Noal said, resuming his tale, “in those Ayyad villages, you can see woman of any age, but no men much above twenty if that. Not a one.” Olver’s eyes grew even wider. The boy practically inhaled Noal’s tales, about the countries he had seen, even the lands beyond the Aiel Waste, swallowed them whole without butter.

“Are you any relation to Jain Charin, Noal?” Mat chewed an olive and discreetly spat the pit into his palm. The thing tasted not far from spoiling. So did the next one. But he was hungry, so he gobbled them down and followed with some crumbly white goat cheese while ignoring the frowns Tuon directed at him.

The old man’s face went still as stone, and Mat had torn off a piece of bread and eaten that as well before Noal answered. “A cousin,” he said at last, grudgingly. “He was my cousin.”

“You’re related to Jain Farstrider?” Olver said excitedly. His favorite book was *The Travels of Jain Farstrider*, which he would have sat up reading by lamplight long past his bedtime had Juilin and Thera allowed. He said he intended to see everything Farstrider had, when he grew up, all that and more.

“Who is this man with two names?” Tuon asked. “Only great men are spoken of so, and you speak as if everyone should know him.”

“He was a fool,” Noal said grimly before Mat could open his mouth, though Olver did get his open, and left it gaping while the old man continued. “He went gallivanting about the world and left a good and loving wife to die of a fever without him there to hold her hand while she died. He let himself be made into a tool by—” Abruptly Noal’s face went blank. Staring through Mat, he rubbed at his forehead as though attempting to recall something.

“Jain Farstrider *was* a great man,” Olver said fiercely. His hands curled into small fists, as though he was ready to fight for his hero. “He fought Trollocs and Myrddraal, and he had more adventures than anyone else in the whole world! Even Mat! He captured Cowin Gemallan after Gemallan betrayed Malkier to the Shadow!”

Noal came to himself with a start and patted Olver’s shoulder. “He did that, boy. That much is to his credit. But what adventure is worth leaving your wife to die alone?” He sounded sad enough to die on the spot himself.

Olver had no answer to that, and his face fell. If Noal had put the boy off his favorite book, Mat was going to have words with the old man.

Reading was important—he read himself; sometimes, he did—and he had made sure Olver had books he enjoyed.

Standing, Tuon leaned across the table to rest a hand on Noal's arm. The stern look had vanished from her face, replaced by tenderness. A wide belt of dark yellow tooled leather cinched her waist, emphasizing her slim curves. More of his coin spent. Well, coin was always easy to come by for him, and if she did not spend it, likely he would throw it away on some other woman. "You have a good heart, Master Charin." She gave everybody their bloody names except for Mat Cauthon!

"Do I, my Lady?" Noal said, sounding as though he really wanted to hear an answer. "Sometimes I think—" Whatever he thought sometimes, they were not to learn it now.

The door swung open and Juilin put his head into the wagon. The Tairen thief-catcher's conical red cap was at its usual jaunty angle, but his dark face was worried. "Seanchan soldiers are setting up across the road. I'm going to Thera. She'll take a fright if she hears it from anybody else." And as quickly as that he was gone again, leaving the door swinging.

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CHAPTER 7

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A Cold Medallion

Seanchan soldiers. Blood and bloody ashes! That was all Mat needed, with the dice spinning his head. "Noal, find Egeanin and warn her. Olver, you warn the Aes Sedai, and Bethamin and Seta." Those five would all be together or at least close by one another. The two former *sul'dam* shadowed the sisters whenever they left the wagon they all shared. Light, he hoped none of them had gone into the town again. That could put a weasel in the chicken yard for sure! "I'll go down to the entrance and try to see whether we're in any trouble."

"She won't answer to that name," Noal muttered, sliding out from the table. He moved spryly for a fellow who looked to have had half the bones in his body broken one time or another. "You know she won't."

"You know who I mean," Mat told him sharply, frowning at Tuon and Selucia. This name foolishness was their fault. Selucia had told Egeanin that her name was now Leilwin Shipless, and that was the name Egeanin was using. Well, he was not about to put up with that sort of thing, not for himself and not for her. She had to come to her senses, soon or late.

"I'm just saying," Noal said. "Come on, Olver."

Mat slid out after them, but before he reached the door, Tuon spoke.

"No warnings for us to remain inside, Toy? No one left to guard us?"

The dice said he should find Harnan or one of the other Redarms and plant him outside just to guard against accidents, but he did not hesitate. "You gave your word," he said, settling his hat on his head. The smile he got in reply was worth the risk. Burn him, but it lit up her face. Women were always a gamble, but sometimes a smile could be win enough.

He saw from the entrance that Jurador's days without a Seanchan presence had come to an end. Directly across the road from the show, several hundred men were taking off armor, unloading wagons, setting up tents in ordered rows, establishing horselines. All very efficiently done. He saw Taraboners with mail veils hanging from their helmets and bars of blue, yellow and green painted across their breastplates, and men who were clearly infantry, stacking long pikes and racking bows much shorter than a Two Rivers bow, in armor painted the same. He thought those must be Amadicians. Neither Tarabon nor Altara ran much to foot, and Altarans in service to the Seanchan had their armor marked differently for some reason. There were actual Seanchan, of course, perhaps twenty or thirty that he could see. There was no mistaking that painted armor of overlapping plates or those strange, insectile helmets.

Three of the soldiers came ambling across the road, lean, hard-bitten men. Their blue coats, with the collars striped green-and-yellow, were plain enough despite the colors and showed the wear of armor use, but no signs of rank. Not officers, then, but still maybe as dangerous as red adders. Two of the fellows could have been from Andor or Murandy or even the Two Rivers, but the third had eyes tilted like a Saldaean's, and his skin was the color of honey. Without slowing, they started into the show.

One of the horse handlers at the entrance gave a shrill three-note whistle that began to echo through the show while the other, a squint-eyed fellow named Bollin, pushed the glass pitcher in front of the three. "Price is a silver penny each, Captain," he said with deceptive mildness. Mat had heard the big man speak in the same tone a heartbeat before he thumped another horse handler over the head with a stool. "Children is five coppers if they's more than waist-high on me, and three if they's shorter, but only children as has to be carried gets in free."

The honey-skinned Seanchan raised a hand as if to push Bollin out of his way, then hesitated, his face growing harder, if that was possible. The other two squared up beside him, fists clenched, as pounding boots announced the arrival of every man in the show, it seemed, performers in their flashy garb and horse handlers in coarse wool. Every man had a club of some sort in his hand, including Luca, in a brilliant red coat embroidered with golden stars to his turned-down boot-tops, and even the bare-chested Petra, who possessed the mildest nature of any man Mat had ever met. Petra's face was a thunderhead now, though.

Light, this had the makings of a massacre, with these fellows' companions not a hundred paces away and all their weapons to hand. It was a good place for Mat Cauthon to take himself out of. Surreptitiously he touched the throwing knives hidden up his sleeves and shrugged just to feel the one hanging down behind the back of his neck. No way to check those under his coat or in his boots without being noticed, though. The dice seemed like continuous thunder. He began to plan how to get Tuon and the others away. He had to hang on to her a while longer, yet.

Before disaster could open the door, another Seanchan appeared, in blue-green-and-yellow striped armor but carrying her helmet on her right hip. She had the tilted eyes and honey-colored skin, and there was a scattering of white in her close-cropped black hair. She was near a foot shorter than any of the other three, and there were no plumes on her helmet, just a small crest like a bronze arrowhead at the front, but the three soldiers stood up very straight when they saw her. “Now why am I not surprised to find you here at what looks to be the fine beginnings of a riot, Murel?” Her slurred accent had a twang in it. “What’s this all about then?”

“We paid our money, Standardbearer,” the honey-skinned man replied in the same twangy accents, “then they said we had to pay more on account of us being soldiers of the Empire.”

Bollin opened his mouth, but she silenced him with a raised hand. She had that kind of presence. Running her eyes over the men gathered in a thick semicircle with their clubs, and pausing a moment to shake her head over Luca, she settled on Mat. “Did you see what happened?”

“I did,” Mat replied, “and they tried to walk in without paying.”

“That’s good for you, Murel,” she said, getting a surprised blink from the man. “Good for all three of you. Means you won’t be out your coin. Because you’re all confined to camp for ten days, and I doubt this show will be here that long. You’re all docked ten days’ pay, as well. You’re supposed to be unloading wagons so the homefolks don’t get the idea we think we’re better than they are. Or do you want a charge of causing dissension in the ranks?” The three men paled visibly. Apparently that was a serious charge. “I didn’t think so. Now get out of my sight and get to work before I make it a full month instead of a week.”

“Yes, Standardbearer,” they snapped out as one, then ran back across the road as hard as they could go while tugging off their coats. Hard men, yet the Standardbearer was harder.

She was not finished, however. Luca stepped forward, bowing with a grand flourish, but she cut off whatever thanks he was about to offer. “I don’t much like fellows threatening my men with cudgels,” she drawled, resting her free hand on her sword hilt, “not even Murel, not at these odds. Still, shows you have backbone. Any of you fine fellows want a life of glory and adventure? Step across the road with me, and I’ll sign you up. You there in that fancy red coat. You have the look of a born lancer, to me. I’ll wager I can whip you into a proper hero in no time.” A ripple of head-shaking ran through the assembled men, and some, seeing that no trouble was likely now, began slipping away. Petra was one of those. Luca looked as though he had been poleaxed. A number of others appeared almost as stunned by the offer. Performing paid better than soldiering, and you avoided the risk of people sticking swords into you. “Well, as long as you’re standing here, maybe I can convince you. Not likely you’ll get rich, but the pay is usually on time, and there’s always the chance of loot if the order is given. Happens now and then. The food varies, but it’s usually hot, and there’s usually enough to fill your belly. The days are long, but that just means you’re tired enough to get a good night’s sleep. When you don’t have to work the night, too. Anyone interested yet?”

Luca gave himself a shake. “Thank you, Captain, but no,” he said, sounding half-strangled. Some fools thought soldiers were flattered by someone thinking they had a higher rank than they did. Some fool soldiers were. “Excuse me, if you please. We have a show to put on. And people who aren’t going to be pleased if they have to wait much longer to see it.” With a last, wary look at the woman, as if he feared she might try to drag him off by his collar, he rounded on the men behind him. “All of you get back to your stands. What are you doing lounging around here? I have everything well in hand. Get back to your stands before people start demanding their money back.” That would have been a disaster in his book. Given the choice between handing back coin and having a riot, Luca would have been unable to decide which was worse.

With the showfolk dispersing and Luca hurrying away while shooting glances at her over his shoulder, the woman turned to Mat, the only man remaining aside from the two horse handlers. “And what about you? From the look of you, you might be made an officer and get to give me orders.” She sounded amused by the notion.

He knew what she was doing. The people in the line had seen three Seanchan soldiers sent running, and who could say for sure why they had run, but now they had seen her disperse a much larger crowd by herself. He would have given her a place in the Band as a Bannerman in a breath. “I’d make a terrible soldier, Standardbearer,” he said, tipping his hat, and she laughed.

As he turned away, he heard Bollin saying, mildly, “You didn’t hear what I told that man? It’s a silver penny for you and another for your goodwife.” Coins clinked into the pitcher. “Thank you.” Things were back to normal. And the dice were still racketing in his head.

Making his way through the show, where acrobats were again tumbling for the crowds on their wooden platforms and jugglers juggling and Clarine's dogs running atop large wooden balls and Miyora's leopards standing on their hind legs inside a cage that looked barely strong enough to hold them, he decided to check on the Aes Sedai. The leopards brought them to mind. The common soldiers might spend the day working, yet he would have laid coin on at least some of the officers coming for a look before long. He trusted Tuon, strangely enough, and Egeanin had enough sense to stay out of sight when there might be other Seanchan around, but common sense seemed in short supply among Aes Sedai. Even Teslyn and Edesina, who had spent time as *damane*, took foolish chances. Joline, who had not, seemed to think herself invulnerable.

Everybody in the show knew the three women were Aes Sedai now, but their large wagon, covered with rain-streaked whitewash, still stood near the canvas-topped storage wagons, not far from the horselines. Luca had been willing to rearrange his show for a High Lady who gave him a warrant of protection, but not for Aes Sedai who put him at risk with their presence and were practically penniless besides. The women among the showfolk were sympathetic to the sisters for the most part, the men wary to one degree or another—it was almost always so with Aes Sedai—but Luca likely would have turned them out to make their own way without Mat's gold. Aes Sedai were more threat than anything else so long as they were in lands controlled by the Seanchan. Mat Cauthon got no thanks for it, not that he was looking for any. He would have settled for a touch of respect, unlikely as that was. Aes Sedai were Aes Sedai, after all.

Joline's Warders, Blaeric and Fen, were nowhere to be seen, so there was no need to talk his way past them to get inside, but as he approached the dirt-streaked steps at the back of the wagon, the foxhead medallion hanging beneath his shirt went icy cold against his chest, then colder still. For a moment, he froze like a statue. Those fool women were *channeling* in there! Coming to himself, he pounded up the steps and banged the door open.

The women he expected to see were all present, Joline, a Green sister, slender and pretty and big-eyed, and Teslyn, a narrow-shouldered Red who looked as though she chewed rocks, and Edesina, a Yellow, handsome rather than pretty, with waves of black hair spilling to her waist. He had saved all three from the Seanchan, had gotten Teslyn and Edesina out of the *damane* kennels themselves, yet their gratitude was variable to say the best. Bethamin, as dark as Tuon but tall and nicely rounded, and yellow-haired

Seta had been *sul'dam* before they were forced into helping rescue the three Aes Sedai. The five of them shared this wagon, the Aes Sedai to keep an eye on the former *sul'dam,* the former *sul'dam* to keep an eye on the Aes Sedai. None realized their task, but mutual distrust made them carry it out assiduously. The one woman he had not expected to see was Setalle Anan, who had kept the Wandering Woman in Ebou Dar before she decided to make herself part of that rescue for some reason. But then, Setalle had a way of pushing herself in. Of meddling, in fact. She meddled between him and Tuon incessantly. What they were doing was completely unexpected, though.

In the middle of the wagon, Bethamin and Seta were standing rigid as fence posts, jammed shoulder-to-shoulder between the two beds that could not be raised against the walls, and Joline was slapping Bethamin's face again and again, first with one hand then the other. Silent tears trickled down the tall woman's cheeks, and Seta looked afraid that she would be next. Edesina and Teslyn, arms folded beneath their breasts, were watching with no expression whatsoever while Mistress Anan frowned her disapproval over Teslyn's shoulder. Whether disapproval of the slapping or of what Bethamin had done to earn it, he could not have said and did not care.

Crossing the floor in one stride, he seized Joline's upraised arm and spun her around. "What in the Light are you—?" That was as far as he got before she used her other hand to catch him a buffet so hard that his ears rang.

"Now, that killed the goat," he said, and, spots still floating in his vision, he dropped down onto the nearest bed and pulled a surprised Joline across his lap. His right hand landed on her bottom with a loud smack that pulled a startled squawk from her. The medallion went colder still, and Edesina gasped when nothing happened, but he tried to keep one eye on the other two sisters and one on the open door for Joline's Warders while he held her in place and whacked as fast and as hard as he could. With no idea how many shifts or petticoats she was wearing under that worn blue wool, he wanted to make sure he left an impression. It seemed his hand was beating time for the dice spinning in his head. Struggling and kicking, Joline began cursing like a wagon driver as the medallion seemed to turn to ice, and then to grow so cold he wondered if it would give him frostbite, but he soon added wordless yelps to her pungent vocabulary. His arm might not match Petra’s, but he was far from weak. Practice with bow and quarterstaff gave you strong arms.

Edesina and Teslyn seemed as frozen in place as the two wide-eyed former *sul’dam*—well, Bethamin was grinning, yet she appeared as amazed as Seta—but just as he began to think Joline’s yelps were outnumbering her curses, Mistress Anan tried to push past the two Aes Sedai. Astonishingly, Teslyn made a peremptory gesture for her to remain where she was! Very few women, or men, argued with an Aes Sedai’s commands, but Mistress Anan gave the Red sister a frosty look and squeezed between the two Aes Sedai muttering something that made both of them eye her curiously. She still had to force her way between Bethamin and Seta, and he took advantage of that to land a final flurry of hard smacks, then rolled the Green sister off his lap. His hand had begun to sting anyway. Joline landed with a thump and let out a gasped “Oh!”

Planting herself in front of him, close enough that she interfered with Joline’s hasty scramble to her feet, Mistress Anan studied him with her arms folded beneath her breasts in a way that increased the generous cleavage displayed by her plunging neckline. Despite the dress, she was not Ebou Dari, not with those hazel eyes, but she had large golden hoops in her ears, a marriage knife, the hilt marked with red and white stones for her sons and daughters, dangling from a wide silver collar around her neck, and a curved dagger thrust behind her belt. Her dark green skirts were sewn up on the left side to show red petticoats. With touches of gray in her hair, she was every inch the stately Ebou Dari innkeeper, sure of herself and accustomed to giving orders. He expected her to upbraid him—she was as good as an Aes Sedai when it came to upbraiding!—so he was surprised when she spoke, sounding very thoughtful.

“Joline must have tried to stop you, and Teslyn and Edesina as well, but whatever they did failed. I think that means you possess a *ter’angreal* that can disrupt flows of the Power. I’ve heard of such things—Cadsuane Melaidhrin supposedly had one, or so rumor said—but I’ve never seen the like. I would very much like to. I won’t try to take it away from you, but I would appreciate seeing it.”

“How do you know Cadsuane?” Joline demanded, attempting to brush off the seat of her skirt. The first brush of her hand brought a wince, and she gave over with a glare for Mat just to show him she still had him in mind.

Tears glistened in her big brown eyes and on her cheeks, but if he had to pay for them, it was worth the price.

“She said something about the test for the shawl,” Edesina said.

“She did say, ‘How could you have passed the test for the shawl if you freeze at moments like this?’ ” Teslyn added.

Mistress Anan’s mouth tightened for a moment, but if she was discomposed, she regained her poise in a breath. “You may recall that I owned an inn,” she said dryly. “Many people visited The Wandering Woman, and many of them talked, perhaps more than they should have.”

“No Aes Sedai would,” Joline began, then turned hurriedly. Blaeric and Fen were starting up the steps. Borderlanders both, they were big men, and Mat quickly got to his feet, ready to use his knives if necessary. They might drub him, but not without bleeding for it.

Surprisingly, Joline darted to the door and shut it right in Fen’s face, then fastened the latch. The Saldaean made no effort to open the door, but Mat had no doubt the pair of them would be waiting when he left. When she turned around, her eyes were blazing hot, tears and all, and she seemed to have forgotten Mistress Anan for the moment. “If you ever even *think* of . . .” she began, shaking a finger at him.

He stepped forward and stuck a finger of his own to her nose, so fast that she jumped back and bumped into the door. From which she rebounded with a squeak, spots of red blooming in her cheeks. He cared not a whisker whether that was anger or embarrassment. She opened her mouth, but he refused to let her get a word in edgewise.

“Except for me, you’d be wearing a *damane* collar around your neck, and so would Edesina and Teslyn,” he said, as much heat in his voice as there was in her eyes. “In return, you all try to bully me. You go your own way and endanger all of us. You bloody well *channeled* when you *know* there are Seanchan right across the road! They could have a *damane* with them, or a dozen, for all you know.” He doubted there was even one, but doubt was not certainty, and in any case, he was not about to share his doubts with her, not now. “Well, I might have to put up with some of that, though you’d better know I’m getting close to my edge, but I won’t put up with you hitting me. You do that again, and I vow I’ll pepper your hide twice as hard and twice as hot. My word on it!”

“And I won’t try to stop him next time if you do,” Mistress Anan said.

“Nor I,” Teslyn added, echoed after a long moment by Edesina.

Joline looked as though she had been hit between the eyes with a hammer. Very satisfactory. As long as he could figure out how to avoid having his bones broken by Blaeric and Fen.

"Now would someone like to tell me why you bloody decided to start channeling like it was the Last Battle? Do you have to keep holding them like that, Edesina?" He nodded at Seta and Bethamin. It was only an educated guess, but Edesina's eyes widened for a moment as if she thought his *ter'angreal* let him see flows of the Power as well as stop them. In any case, an instant later both women were standing normally. Bethamin calmly began drying her tears with a white linen handkerchief. Seta sat down on the nearest bed, hugging herself and shivering; she looked more shaken than Bethamin.

None of the Aes Sedai seemed to want to answer, so Mistress Anan did it for them. "There was an argument. Joline wanted to go see these Seanchan for herself, and she wouldn't be argued out of it. Bethamin decided to discipline her, just as if she had no clue what would happen." The innkeeper shook her head in disgust. "She tried to pull Joline across her lap, with Seta helping her, and Edesina wrapped them up in flows of air. I'm assuming," she said when the Aes Sedai all looked at her sharply. "I may not be able to channel, but I do use my eyes."

"That doesn't account for what I felt," Mat said. "There was a *lot* of channeling going on in here."

Mistress Anan and the three Aes Sedai studied him speculatively, long stares that seemed to probe for the medallion. They were not going to forget about his *ter'angreal*, that was for sure.

Joline took up the story. "Bethamin channeled. I've never before seen the weave she used, but for a few moments, until she lost the Source, she had sparks dancing all over the three of us. I think she may have used as much of the Power as she could draw."

Sobs suddenly racked Bethamin. She sagged, halfway to falling to the floor. "I didn't mean to," she wept, shoulders shaking, face contorted. "I thought you were going to kill me, but I didn't mean to. I didn't." Seta began rocking back and forth, staring at her friend in horror. Or perhaps her former friend. They both knew *a'dam* could hold them, and maybe any *sul'dam*, but they might well have denied the full import. Any woman who could use an *a'dam* could learn to channel. Likely they had tried as hard as they could to deny that hard fact, to forget it. Actually channeling altered everything, however.

Burn him, this was all he needed on top of everything else. “What are you going to do about it?” Only an Aes Sedai could handle this. “Now she’s started, she can’t just stop. I know that much.”

“Let her die,” Teslyn said harshly. “We can keep her shielded until we can be rid of her, then she can die.”

“We can’t do that,” Edesina said, sounding shocked. Though not, apparently, at the thought of Bethamin dying. “Once we let her go, she’ll be a danger to everyone around her.”

“I won’t do it again,” Bethamin wept, almost pleading. “I won’t!”

Pushing past Mat as if he were a coatrack, Joline confronted Bethamin, staring up at the taller woman with her fists on her hips. “You won’t stop. You can’t, once you begin. Oh, you may be able to go months between attempts to channel, but you will try again, and again, and every time, your danger will increase.” With a sigh, she lowered her hands. “You are much too old for the novice book, but there’s nothing for it. We will have to teach you. Enough to make you safe, at least.”

“Teach her?” Teslyn screeched, planting *her* fists on her hips. “I do say let her die! Do you have any idea how these *sul’dam* did treat me when they did have me prisoner?”

“No, since you’ve never gone into detail beyond moaning over how horrible it was,” Joline replied dryly, then added in very firm tones, “but I will not leave any woman to die when I can stop it.”

That did not end things, of course. When a woman wanted to argue, she could keep it going if she was by herself, and they *all* wanted to argue. Edesina joined in on Joline’s side, and so did Mistress Anan, just as if she had as much right to speak as the Aes Sedai. Of all things, Bethamin and Seta took Teslyn’s part, denying any wish to learn to channel, waving their hands and arguing as loudly as anyone. Wisely, Mat took the opportunity to slip out of the wagon and pull the door shut behind him softly. No need to remind them of him. The Aes Sedai, at least, would remember soon enough. At least he could stop worrying about where the bloody *a’dam* were and whether the *sul’dam* would try using them again. That was well and truly finished, now.

He had been right about Blaeric and Fen. They were waiting at the foot of the steps, and stormclouds were not in it for their faces. Without any doubt, they knew exactly what had happened to Joline. But not who was to blame, it turned out.

“What went on in there, Cauthon?” Blaeric demanded, his blue eyes sharp enough to poke holes. Slightly the taller of the two, he had shaved his Shienaran topknot and was not best pleased by the growth of short hair covering his scalp.

“Were you involved?” Fen asked coldly.

“How could I have been?” Mat replied, trotting down the steps as if he had not a care in the world. “She’s Aes Sedai, in case you hadn’t noticed. If you want to know what happened, I suggest you ask her. I’m not woolheaded enough to talk about it, I’ll tell you that. Only, I wouldn’t ask her right now. They’re all still arguing in there. I took the chance to slip out while my hide was still intact.”

Not the best choice of words, perhaps. The two Warders’ faces grew darker still, impossible as that seemed. But they let him go on his way without having to resort to his knives. There was that. Neither seemed very eager to enter the wagon, either. Instead, they settled on the wagon’s steps to wait, more fools they. He doubted Joline would be very forthcoming with them, but she might well take out some of her temper on them because they knew. Had he been them, he would have found tasks to keep him clear of that wagon for . . . oh, say, a month or two. That might help. Some. Women had long memories for some things. He was going to need to watch over his shoulder for Joline himself from now on. But it had still been worth it.

With Seanchan camped across the road and Aes Sedai arguing and women channeling as if they had never heard of the Seanchan and the dice spinning in his head, not even winning two games of stones from Tuon that night could make him feel anything but wary. He went to sleep—on the floor, since it was Domon’s turn to use the second bed; Egeanin always got the other—with the dice bouncing off the insides of his skull, but he was sure that tomorrow had to be better than today. Well, he had never claimed to always be right. He just wished he was not quite so wrong so often.

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CHAPTER 8

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Dragons' Eggs

Luca had the showfolk breaking camp, taking down the big canvas wall and packing everything into the wagons, while the sky was still dark the next morning. It was the clatter and banging of it, the shouting, that woke Mat, groggy and stiff from sleeping on the floor. As much as he could sleep, for the bloody dice. Those things gave a man dreams that slaughtered sleep. Luca was rushing about in his shirtsleeves with a lantern, giving orders and likely impeding matters as much as speeding them, but Petra, wide enough to seem squat though he was not all that much shorter than Mat, paused in hitching the four-horse team to his and Clarine's wagon to explain. With the waning moon low on the horizon and half-hidden by trees, a lantern on the driver's seat gave all the light they had, a flickering pool of yellow that was repeated a hundred times and more through the camp. Clarine was off walking the dogs, since they would be spending most of the day inside the wagon.

"Yesterday. . . ." The strongman shook his head and patted the nearest animal, patiently waiting for the last straps to be buckled, as if the horse had showed signs of nerves. Maybe he felt edgy himself. The night was only cool, not really cold, yet he was bundled up in a dark coat and had on a knitted cap. His wife worried about him falling sick from drafts or the cold, and took care that he would not. "Well, we're strangers everywhere, you see, and a lot of people think they can take advantage of strangers. But if we let one man get away with it, ten more will try, if not a hundred. Sometimes the local magistrate, or what passes for one, will uphold the law for us, too, but only sometimes. Because we're strangers, and tomorrow or the next day, we'll be gone, and anyway, everybody knows strangers are usually up to no good. So we have to stand up for ourselves, fight for what's ours if need be. Once you do that, though, it's time to move along. Same now as when there were only a few dozen of us with Luca, counting the horse handlers, though in those days, we'd have been gone as soon as those soldiers left. In those days, there weren't so many coins to be lost by leaving in a hurry," he said dryly, and shook his head, perhaps for Luca's greed or perhaps for how large the show had grown, before going on.

"Those three Seanchan have friends, or at least companions who won't like their own being faced down. That Standardbearer did it, but you can be sure they'll lay it to us, because they think they can hit at us, and they can't at her. Maybe their officers will uphold the law, or their rules or whatever, like she did, but we can't be sure of that. What is certain sure, though, is that those fellows will cause trouble if we stay another day. No point to staying when it means fights with soldiers, and maybe people hurt so they can't perform, and sure trouble with the law one way or another." It was the longest speech Mat had ever heard from Petra, and the man cleared his throat as though embarrassed by saying so much. "Well," he muttered, bending back to the harness, "Luca will want to be on the road soon. You'll want to be seeing to your own horses."

Mat wanted no such thing. The most wonderful thing about having coin was not what you could buy, but that you could pay others to do the work. As soon as he realized the show was preparing to move, he had rousted the four Redarms from the tent they shared with Chel Vanin to hitch the teams for his wagon and Tuon's, do as he instructed with the razor and saddle Pips. The stout horsethief—he had not stolen a horse since Mat had known him, but that was what he was—had roused himself long enough to say that he would get up when the others returned, then rolled over in his blankets and was snoring again before Harnan and the others had their boots half on. Vanin's skills were such that no one voiced any complaint beyond the usual grumbling about the hour, and all but Harnan would have grumbled if allowed to sleep till noon. When those skills were needed, he would repay them tenfold, and they knew it, even Fergin. The skinny Redarm was none too bright except when it came to soldiering, but he was plenty smart enough there. Well, smart enough.

The show left Jurador before the sun broke the horizon, a long snake of wagons rolling along the wide road through the darkness with Luca's lurid monstrosity pulled by six horses at its head. Tuon's wagon came just behind with Gorderan driving, almost wide-shouldered enough to seem a strongman himself, and Tuon and Selucia, well-cloaked and hooded, squeezed in on either side of him. The storage wagons and animal cages and spare horses brought up the tail. Sentries at the Seanchan camp watched them depart, silent armored figures in the night marching the camp's perimeter. Not that the camp itself was quiet. Shadowy forms stood in rigid lines among the tents while loud voices bellowed the rollcall at a steady pace and others answered. Mat all but held his breath until those regular shouts faded away behind him. Discipline was a wonderful thing. For other men, anyway.

He rode Pips alongside the Aes Sedai wagon, near the middle of the long line, flinching a little every time the foxhead went cool against his chest, which it began to do before they had gone much more than a mile. It seemed that Joline was wasting no time. Fergin, handling the reins, chattered away about horses and women with Metwyn. Both were as happy as pigs in clover, but then, neither had any idea what was going on inside the wagon. At least the medallion only turned cool, and barely that. They were using small amounts of the Power. Still, he disliked being so near any channeling at all. In his experience, Aes Sedai carried trouble in their belt pouches and seldom were shy about scattering it, never mind who might be in the way. No, with the dice bouncing inside his head, he could have done without Aes Sedai within ten miles.

He would have ridden up beside Tuon, for the chance to talk with her, no matter that Selucia and Gorderan would hear every word, but you never wanted a woman thinking you were too eager. Do that, and she either took advantage or else skittered away like a water drop on a hot greased griddle. Tuon found enough ways to take advantage already, and he had too little time for very much in the way of chasing. Sooner or later she would speak the words that completed the marriage ceremony, sure as water was wet, but that only made it more urgent for him to find out what she was like, which had hardly been easy so far. That little woman made a blacksmith’s puzzle seem simple. But how could a man be married to a woman if he did not know her? Worse, he had to make her see him as something more than Toy. Marriage to a woman with no respect for him would be like wearing a shirt of blackwasp nettles day and night. Worse still, he had to make her care for him, or he would find himself forced to hide from his own wife to keep her from making him *da’covale*! And to cap it off, he had to do all of that in whatever time remained before he had to send her back to Ebou Dar. A fine stew, and doubtless a tasty meal for some hero out of legend, a little something to occupy his idle time before he rushed off to perform some great deed, only Mat bloody Cauthon was no bloody hero. He still had it to do, though, and no time or room for missteps.

It was the earliest start they had made yet, but his hopes that the Seanchan had frightened Luca into moving faster were soon dashed. As the sun climbed, they passed stone farm buildings clinging to hillsides and occasionally a tiny tile- or thatch-roofed village nestled beside the road in a surround of stone-walled fields carved out of the forest, where men and women stood gaping as the show streamed past and children ran alongside until their parents called them back, but in the midafternoon, the show reached something larger. Runnien Crossing, near a so-called river that could have been waded in fewer than twenty paces without going more than waist-deep despite the stone bridge across it, was never a patch on Jurador, but it possessed four inns, each three stories of stone roofed in green or blue tiles, and near half a mile of hard-packed dirt between the village and the river where merchants could park their wagons for the night. Farms with their walled fields and orchards and pastures made a quilt of the countryside for a good league along the road and maybe more beyond the hills to either side of it. They certainly covered the hillsides Mat could see. That was enough for Luca.

Ordering the canvas wall erected in the clearing, near to the river to make watering the animals easier, the man strutted into the village wearing coat and cloak red enough to make Mat's eyes hurt and so embroidered with golden stars and comets that a Tinker would have wept for the shame of donning the garments. The huge blue-and-red banner was stretched across the entrance, each wagon in its place, the performing platforms unloaded and the wall nearly all up by the time he returned escorting three men and three women. The village was not all that far from Ebou Dar, yet their clothing might have come from another country altogether. The men wore short wool coats in bright colors embroidered with angular scrollwork along the shoulders and sleeves, and dark, baggy trousers stuffed into knee boots. The women, their hair in a sort of coiled bun atop their heads, wore dresses nearly as colorful as Luca's garments, their narrow skirts resplendent with flowers from hem to hips. They did all carry long belt knives, though with straight blades for the most part, and caressed the hilts whenever anybody looked at them; that much was the same. Altara was Altara when it came to touchiness. These were the village Mayor, the four innkeepers, and a lean, leathery, white-haired woman in red; the others addressed her respectfully as Mother. Since the round-bellied Mayor was as white-haired as she, not to mention mostly bald, and none of the innkeepers lacked at least a little gray hair, Mat decided she must be the village Wisdom. He smiled and tipped his hat to her as she passed, and she gave him a sharp look and sniffed in near perfect imitation of Nynaeve. Oh, yes, a Wisdom all right.

Luca showed them around with wide smiles and expansive gestures, elaborate bows and flourishes of his cloak, stopping here and there to make a juggler or a team of acrobats perform a little for his guests, but his smile turned to a sour grimace once they were safely back on their way and out of sight. “Free admission for them and their husbands and wives and *all* the children,” he growled to Mat, “and I’m supposed to pack up if a merchant comes down the road. They weren’t that blunt, but they were clear enough, especially that Mother Darvale. As if this flyspeck ever attracted enough merchants to fill this field. Thieves and scoundrels, Cauthon. Country folk are all thieves and scoundrels, and an honest man like me is at their mercy.”

Soon enough he was toting up what he might earn there despite the complimentary admissions, but he never did give over complaining entirely, even when the line at the entrance stretched nearly as far as it had in Jurador. He just added complaining about how much he would have taken in with another three or four days at the salt town. It was three or four more days, now, and likely he would have lingered until the crowds had dwindled to nothing. Maybe those three Seanchan had been *ta’veren* work. Not likely, but it was a pleasant way to think of it. Now that it was all in the past, it was.

That was how they progressed. At best a mere two leagues or perhaps three at an unhurried pace, and usually Luca would find a small town or a cluster of villages that he felt called for a halt. Or better to say that he felt their silver calling to him. Even if they passed nothing but flyspecks not worth the labor of erecting the wall, they never made as much as four leagues before Luca called a halt. He was not about to risk having to camp strung out along the road. If there was not to be a show, Luca liked to find a clearing where the wagons could be parked without too much crowding, though if driven to it, he would dicker with a farmer for the right to stop in an unused pasture. And mutter over the expense the whole next day if it cost no more than a silver penny. He was tight with his purse strings, Luca was.

Trains of merchants’ wagons passed them in both directions, making good speed and managing to raise small clouds of dust from the hard-packed road. Merchants wanted to get their goods to market as quickly as possible. Now and then they saw a caravan of Tinkers, too, their boxy wagons as bright as anything in the show except for Luca’s wagon. All of them were headed toward Ebou Dar, oddly enough, but then, they moved as slowly as Luca. Not likely any coming the other way would overtake the show. Two or three leagues a day, and the dice rattled away so that Mat was always wondering what lay beyond the next bend in the road or what was catching him up from behind. It was enough to give a man hives.

The very first night, outside Runnien Crossing, he approached Aludra. Near her bright blue wagon she had set up a small canvas enclosure, eight feet tall, for launching her nightflowers, and she straightened with a glare when he pulled back a flap and ducked in. A closed lantern sitting on the ground near the wall gave enough light for him to see that she was holding a dark ball the size of a large melon. Runnien Crossing was only big enough to merit a single nightflower. She opened her mouth, all set to chivvy him out. Not even Luca was allowed in here.

"Lofting tubes," he said quickly, gesturing to the metal-bound wooden tube, as tall as he was and near enough a foot across, sitting upright in front of her on a broad wooden base. "That's why you want a bellfounder. To make lofting tubes from bronze. It's the why I can't puzzle out." It seemed a ridiculous idea—with a little effort, two men could lift one of her wooden lofting tubes into the wagon that carried them and her other supplies; a bronze lofting tube would require a derrick—but it was the only thing that had occurred to him.

With the lantern behind her, shadows hid her expression, but she was silent for a long moment. "Such a clever young man," she said finally. Her beaded braids clicked softly as she shook her head. Her laugh was low and throaty. "Me, I should watch my tongue. I always get into the trouble when I make promises to clever young men. Never think I will tell you the secrets that would make you blush, though, not now. You are already juggling two women, it seems, and me, I will not be juggled."

"Then I'm right?" He was barely able to keep the incredulity from his voice.

"You are," she said. And casually tossed the nightflower at him!

He caught it with a startled oath, and only dared to breathe when he was sure he had a good grip. The covering seemed to be stiff leather, with a tiny stub of fuse sticking out of one side. He had a little familiarity with smaller fireworks, and supposedly those only exploded from fire or if you let air touch what was inside—though he had cut one open once without it going off—yet who could say what might make a nightflower erupt? The firework he had opened had been small enough to hold in one hand. Something the size of this nightflower would likely blow him and Aludra to scraps.

Abruptly he felt foolish. She was not very likely to go throwing the thing if dropping it was dangerous. He began tossing the ball from hand to hand. Not to make up for gasping and all that. Just for something to do.

"How will casting lofting tubes from bronze make them a better weapon?" That was what she wanted, weapons to use against the Seanchan, to repay them for destroying the Guild of Illuminators. "They seem fearsome enough to me already."

Aludra snatched the nightflower back muttering about clumsy oafs and turning the ball over in her hands to examine the leather surface. Maybe it was not so safe as he had assumed. "A proper lofting tube," she said once she was sure he had not damaged the thing, "it will send this close to three hundred paces straight up into the sky with the right charge, and a longer distance across the ground if the tube is tilted at an angle. But not far enough for what I have in mind. A lofting charge big enough to send it further would burst the tube. With a bronze tube, I could use a charge that would send something a little smaller close to two miles. Making the slow-match slower, to let it travel that far, is easy enough. Smaller but heavier, made of iron, and there would be nothing for pretty colors, only the bursting charge."

Mat whistled through his teeth, seeing it in his head, explosions erupting among the enemy before they were near enough to see you clearly. A nasty thing to be receiving. Now that would be as good as having Aes Sedai on your side, or some of those Asha'man. Better. Aes Sedai had to be in danger to use the Power as a weapon, and while he had heard rumors about hundreds of Asha'man, rumors grew with every telling. Besides, if Asha'man were anything like Aes Sedai, they would start deciding where they were needed and then take over the whole fight. He began envisioning how to use Aludra's bronze tubes, and right away he spotted a glaring problem. All your advantage was gone if the enemy came from the wrong direction, or got behind you, and if you needed derricks to move these things. . . . "These bronze lofting tubes—"

"Dragons," she broke in. "Lofting tubes are for making the nightflowers bloom. For delighting the eye. I will call them dragons, and the Seanchan will howl when my dragons bite." Her tone was grim as sharp stone.

"These dragons, then. Whatever you call them, they'll be heavy and hard to move. Can you mount them on wheels? Like a wagon or cart?

Would they be too heavy for horses to pull?”

She laughed again. “It’s good to see you are more than the pretty face.” Climbing a three-step folding ladder that put her waist nearly level with the top of the lofting tube, she set the nightflower into the tube with the fuse down. It slid in a little way and stopped, a dome above the top of the tube. “Hand me that,” she told him, gesturing to a pole as long and thick as a quarterstaff. When he handed it up to her, she held it upright and used a leather cap on one end to push the nightflower deeper. That appeared to take little effort. “I have already drawn plans for the dragoncarts. Four horses could draw one easily, along with a second cart to hold the eggs. Not nightflowers. Dragons’ eggs. You see, I have thought long and hard about how to use my dragons, not just how to make them.” Pulling the capped rod from the tube, she climbed down and picked up the lantern. “Come. I must make the sky bloom a little, then I want my supper and my bed.”

Just outside the canvas enclosure stood a wooden rack filled with more peculiar implements, a forked stick, tongs as long as Mat was tall, other things just as odd and all made of wood. Setting the lantern on the ground, she placed the capped pole in the rack and took a square wooden box from a shelf. “I suppose now you want to learn how to make the secret powders, yes? Well, I did promise. I am the Guild, now,” she added bitterly, removing the box’s lid. It was an odd box, a solid piece of wood drilled with holes, each of which held a thin stick. She plucked out one and replaced the lid. “I can decide what is secret.”

“Better than that, I want you to come with me. I know somebody who’ll be happy to pay for making as many of your dragons as you want. He can make every bellfounder from Andor to Tear stop casting bells and start casting dragons.” Avoiding Rand’s name did not stop the colors from whirling inside his head and resolving for an instant into Rand—fully clothed, thank the Light—talking with Loial by lamplight in a wood-paneled room. There were other people, but the image focused on Rand, and it vanished too quickly for Mat to make out who they were. He was pretty sure that what he saw was what was actually happening right that moment, impossible as that seemed. It would be good to see Loial again, but burn him, there had to be some way to keep those things out of his head! “And if he isn’t interested,” again the colors came, but he resisted, and they melted away, “I can pay to have hundreds cast myself. A lot of them, anyway.”

The Band was going to end up fighting Seanchan, and most likely Trollocs as well. And he would be there when it happened. There was no getting around the fact. Try to avoid it how he would, that bloody *ta'veren* twisting would put him right in the bloody middle. So he was ready to pour out gold like water if it gave him a way to kill his enemies before they got close enough to poke holes in his hide.

Aludra tilted her head to one side, pursing her rosebud lips. “Who is this man with such power?”

“It'll have to be a secret between us. Thom and Juilin know, and Egeanin and Domon, and the Aes Sedai, Teslyn and Joline at least, and Vanin and the Redarms, but nobody else, and I want to keep it that way.” Blood and bloody ashes, far too many people knew already. He waited for her curt nod before saying, “The Dragon Reborn.” The colors swirled and despite his fighting them again became Rand and Loial for a moment. This was not going to be as easy as it had seemed.

“You know the Dragon Reborn,” she said doubtfully.

“We grew up in the same village,” he growled, already fighting the colors. This time, they nearly coalesced before vanishing. “If you don't believe me, ask Teslyn and Joline. Ask Thom. But don't do it around anyone else. A secret, remember.”

“The Guild has been my life since I was a girl.” She scraped one of the sticks quickly down the side of the box, and the thing sputtered into flame! It smelled of sulphur. “The dragons, they are my life now. The dragons, and revenge on the Seanchan.” Bending, she touched the flame to a dark length of fuse that ran under the canvas. As soon as the fuse caught, she shook the stick until the fire went out, then dropped it. With a crackling hiss the flame sped along the fuse. “I think me I believe you.” She held out her free hand. “When you leave, I will go with you. And you will help me make many dragons.”

For a moment, as he shook her hand, he was sure the dice had stopped, but a heartbeat later they were rattling again. It must have been imagination. After all, this agreement with Aludra might help the Band, and incidentally Mat Cauthon, stay alive, yet it could hardly be called fateful. He would still have to fight those battles, and however you planned, however well-trained your men were, luck played its part, too, bad as well as good, even for him. These dragons would not change that. But were the dice bouncing as loudly? He thought not, yet how could he be sure? Never before had they slowed without stopping. It had to be his imagination.

A hollow thump came from inside the enclosure, and acrid smoke billowed over the canvas wall. Moments later the nightflower bloomed in the darkness above Runnien Crossing, a great ball of red and green streaks. It bloomed again and again in his dreams that night and for many nights after, but there it bloomed among charging horsemen and massed pikes, rending flesh as he had once seen stone rent by fireworks. In his dreams, he tried to catch the things with his hands, tried to stop them, yet they rained down in unending streams on a hundred battlefields. In his dreams, he wept for the death and destruction. And somehow it seemed that the rattling of the dice in his head sounded like laughter. Not his laughter. The Dark One's laughter.

The next morning, with the sun just rising toward a cloudless sky, he was sitting on the steps of his green wagon, carefully scraping at the bowstave with a sharp knife—you had to be careful, almost delicate; a careless slice could ruin all your work—when Egeanin and Domon came out. Strangely, they seemed to have dressed with special care, in their best, such as it was. He was not the only one to have bought cloth in Jurador, but without promises of Mat's gold to speed them, the seamstresses were still sewing for Domon and Egeanin. The blue-eyed Seanchan woman wore a bright green dress heavily embroidered with tiny white and yellow flowers on the high neck and all down the sleeves. A flowered scarf held her long black wig in place. Domon, looking decidedly odd with a head of very short hair and that Illianer beard that left his upper lip bare, had brushed his worn brown coat till it actually had some semblance of neatness. They squeezed past Mat and hurried off without a word, and he thought no more of it until they returned an hour or so later to announce that they had been into the village and gotten Mother Darvale to marry them.

He could not stop himself from gaping. Egeanin's stern face and sharp eyes gave good indications of her character. What could have brought Domon to *marry* the woman? As soon marry a bear. Realizing the Illianer was beginning to glare at him, he hastily got to his feet and made a presentable bow over the bowstave. "Congratulations, Master Domon. Congratulations, Mistress Domon. The Light shine on you both." What else was he to say?

Domon kept glaring as if he had heard Mat's thoughts, though, and Egeanin snorted. "My name is Leilwin Shipless, Cauthon," she drawled. "That's the name I was given and the name I'll die with. And a good name it is, since it helped me reach a decision I should have made weeks ago." Frowning, she looked sideways at Domon. "You do understand why I could not take your name, don't you, Bayle?"

"No, lass," Domon replied gently, resting a thick hand on her shoulder, "but I will take you with any name you do care to use so long as you be my wife. I told you that." She smiled and laid her hand atop his, and he began smiling, too. Light, but the pair of them were sickening. If marriage made a man start smiling like dreamy syrup. . . . Well, not Mat Cauthon. He might be as good as wed, but Mat Cauthon was never going to start carrying on like a loon.

And that was how he ended up in a green-striped wall-tent, not very large, that belonged to a pair of lean Domani brothers who ate fire and swallowed swords. Even Thom admitted that Balat and Abar were good, and they were popular with the other performers, so finding them places to stay was easy, but that tent cost as much as the wagon had! Everybody knew he had gold to fling about, and that pair just sighed over giving up their snug home when he tried to bargain them down. Well, a new bride and groom needed privacy, and he was more than glad to give it to them if it meant he did not have to watch them go moon-eyed at each other. Besides, he was tired of taking his turn sleeping on the floor. In the tent, at least he had his own cot every night—narrow and hard it might be, yet it was softer than floorboards—and with only him, he had more room than in the wagon even after the rest of his clothes were moved in and stowed in a pair of brass-bound chests. He had a washstand of his very own, a ladderback chair that was not too unsteady, a sturdy stool, and a table big enough to hold a plate and cup and a pair of decent brass lamps. The chest of gold he left in the green wagon. Only a blind fool would try robbing Domon. Only a madman would try robbing Egeanin. Leilwin, if she insisted, though he was still certain she would regain her senses eventually. After the first night, spent close by the Aes Sedai wagon, with the foxhead cool for half the night, he had the tent set up facing Tuon's wagon by dint of making sure that the Redarms started raising it before anyone else could claim the space.

"Are you placing yourself as my guard now?" Tuon said coolly when she saw the tent for the first time.

“No,” he replied. “I’m just hoping for more glimpses of you.” That was the Light’s own truth—well, getting away from the Aes Sedai was part of it, but the other was true, too—yet the woman waggled her fingers at Selucia, and the pair of them launched into gales of giggles before recovering themselves and reentering the faded purple wagon with all the dignity of a royal procession. Women!

He was not often alone in the tent. He had taken on Lopin as his bodyservant after Nalesean’s death, and the stout Tairen, with his blocky face and a beard that nearly reached his chest, was always popping in to bow his balding head and ask what “my Lord” would enjoy for his next meal or inquire whether “my Lord” had any need of wine or tea or would care for a plate of candied dried figs he had vaguely acquired somewhere. Lopin was vain over his ability to find delicacies where it seemed there could be none. That, or he was rifling through the clothes chests to see whether anything needed repair or cleaning or ironing. Something always did, in his estimation, though it all looked fine to Mat. Nerim, Talmanes’ melancholy bodyservant, frequently accompanied him, largely because the skinny, gray-haired Cairhienin was bored. Mat could not understand how anyone could get bored with not having any work to do, but Nerim was full of dolorous comments on how poorly Talmanes must be faring without him, mournfully sighing about five times a day that Talmanes must have given his place to another by now, and he was ready to wrestle Lopin if need be for a share of the cleaning and mending. He even wanted his turn blacking Mat’s boots!

Noal dropped by to spin his tall tales, and Olver to play stones or Snakes and Foxes, when he was not playing with Tuon instead. Thom came to play stones, too, and to share rumors he picked up in the towns and villages, knuckling his long white mustache over the choicer bits. Juilin brought his own reports, but he always brought Amathera, as well. The former Panarch of Tarabon was pretty enough for Mat to understand why the thief-catcher was interested, with a rosebud mouth just made for kissing, and she clung to Juilin’s arm as if she might return some of his feelings, but her big eyes always gazed fearfully toward Tuon’s wagon, even when they were all inside Mat’s tent, and it was still all Juilin could do to keep her from dropping to her knees and putting her face to the ground whenever she glimpsed Tuon or Selucia. She did the same with Egeanin, and with Bethamin and Seta, besides. Considering that Amathera had been *da’covale* for just a matter of months, it fair made Mat's skin crawl. Tuon could not really mean to make him *da'covale* when she was going to marry him. Could she?

He soon told them to stop bringing him rumors about Rand. Fighting the colors in his head was too much effort, and he lost that fight as often as he won. Sometimes it was all right, but sometimes he caught glimpses of Rand and Min, and it seemed those two were carrying on something awful. Anyway, the rumors were all the same, really. The Dragon Reborn was dead, killed by Aes Sedai, by Asha'man, by the Seanchan, by a dozen other assassins. No, he was in hiding, he was massing a secret army, he was doing some fool thing or other that varied village by village and usually inn by inn. The one thing that was clear was that Rand was no longer in Cairhien, and nobody had any idea where he was. The Dragon Reborn had vanished.

It was odd how many of these Altaran farmers and villagers and townsfolk seemed worried by that, as worried as the merchants passing through and the men and women who worked for them. Not one of those people knew any more of the Dragon Reborn than the tales they carried, yet his disappearance frightened them. Thom and Juilin were clear on that, until he made them stop. If the Dragon Reborn was dead, what was the world to do? That was the question that people asked over breakfast in the morning and ale in the evening and likely on going to bed. Mat could have told them Rand was alive—those bloody visions made him sure of that—but explaining how he knew was another matter. Even Thom and Juilin seemed uncertain about the colors. The merchants and the others would have thought him a madman. And if they believed, that would only scatter rumors about him, not to mention likely setting the Seanchan to hunting for him. All he wanted was the bloody colors out of his head.

Moving into the tent made the showfolk eye him very oddly, and small wonder. First he had been running off with Egeanin—Leilwin, if she insisted on it—and Domon supposedly was her servant, but now she was married to Domon, and Mat was out of the wagon entirely. Some of the showfolk seemed to think it no more than he deserved for trailing after Tuon, yet a surprising number offered him sympathy. Several men commiserated over the fickleness of women—at least they did when they there were no women around—and some of the unmarried women, contortionists and acrobats and seamstresses, began eyeing him much too warmly. He might have enjoyed that if they had not been so willing to give him smoky looks right in front of Tuon. The first time that happened, he was so startled that his eyes nearly popped. Tuon seemed to find it amusing, of all things! She *seemed* to. But only a fool thought he knew what was in a woman's head just because she had a smile on her face.

He continued to dine with her every midday, if they were halted, and began arriving for his nightly games of stones early, so she had to feed him then, too. Light's truth, if you got a woman to feed you on a regular basis, she was halfway won. At least, he dined with her when she would let him into the wagon. One night he found the latch down, and no amount of talking would make her or Selucia open the door. It seemed a bird had managed to get inside during the day, an extremely bad omen apparently, and the pair of them had to spend the night in prayer and contemplation to avert some evil or other. They seemed to run half their lives according to strange superstitions. Tuon or Selucia either one would make odd signs with their hands if they saw a torn spiderweb with the spider in it, and Tuon explained to him, just as serious as if she were making sense, that the sure result of clearing away a spiderweb before shooing the spider out of it was the death of someone close to you within the month. They would see a flight of birds circle more than once and predict a storm, or draw a finger through a line of marching ants, count how long it took for the ants to rejoin their line, and predict how many days of fair weather lay ahead, and never mind that it did not work out that way. Oh, there was rain three days after the birds—crows, disturbingly enough—but it was nowhere near a storm, just a gray, drizzling day.

"Obviously, Selucia miscounted with the ants," Tuon said, placing a white stone on the board with that oddly graceful arching of her fingers. Selucia, watching over her shoulder in a white blouse and divided brown skirts, nodded. As usual, she wore a head scarf over her short golden hair even indoors, a length of red-and-gold silk that day. Tuon was all in brocaded blue silk, a coat of odd cut that covered her hips and divided skirts so narrow they seemed to be wide trousers. She spent considerable time giving the seamstresses detailed instructions on what she wanted sewn, and little of it was much like anything he had ever seen before. It was all in Seanchan styles, he suspected, though she had had a few riding dresses sewn that would not draw comment, for when she went outside. Rain pattered softly on the roof of the wagon. "Obviously, what the birds told us was modified by the ants. It is never simple, Toy. You must learn these things. I will not have you ignorant."

Mat nodded as if that made sense and placed his black stone. And she called his uneasiness about crows and ravens superstition! Knowing when to keep your mouth shut was a useful skill around women. Around men, too, but more so around women. You could be pretty certain what would set a man's eyes on fire.

Talking with her could be dangerous in other ways, too. "What do you know of the Dragon Reborn?" she asked him another evening.

He choked on a mouthful of wine, and the whirling colors in his brain dissipated in a fit of coughing. The wine was near enough vinegar; but even Nerim had a hard time finding good wine these days. "Well, he's the Dragon Reborn," he said when he could speak, wiping wine from his chin with one hand. For a moment, he saw Rand eating at a large dark table. "What else is there to know?" Selucia refilled his cup smoothly.

"A great deal, Toy. For one thing, he must kneel to the Crystal Throne before Tarmon Gai'don. The Prophecies are clear on that, but I haven't even been able to learn where he is. It becomes still more urgent if he is the one who sounded the Horn of Valere, as I suspect."

"The Horn of Valere?" he said weakly. The Prophecies said *what*? "It's been found, then?"

"It must have been, mustn't it, if it was sounded?" she drawled dryly. "The reports I've seen from the place where it was blown, a place called Falme, are very disturbing. Very disturbing. Securing whoever blew the Horn, man or woman, may be as important as securing the Dragon Reborn himself. Are you going to play a stone or not, Toy?"

He played his stone, but he was so shaken that the colors whirled and faded without forming any image. In fact, he was barely able to eke out a draw from what had seemed a clear winning position.

"You played very poorly toward the end," Tuon murmured, frowning thoughtfully at the board, now divided evenly between the control of black stones and white. He could all but *see* her start trying to work out what they had been talking about when his poor play began. Talking with her was like walking a crumbling ledge across the face of a cliff. One misstep, and Mat Cauthon would be as dead as last year's mutton. Only, he had to walk that ledge. He had no bloody choice. Oh, he enjoyed it. In a way. The longer he spent with her, the more opportunity to memorize that heart-shaped face, to get it down so he could see her just by closing his eyes. But there was always that misstep waiting ahead. He could almost see that, too.

For several days after giving her the little bunch of silk flowers, he brought her no presents, and he thought he was beginning to detect hints of disappointment when he appeared empty-handed. Then, four days out of Jurador, just as the sun was peeking over the horizon into a nearly cloudless sky, he got her and Selucia out of the purple wagon. Well, he just wanted Tuon, but Selucia might as well have been her shadow when it came to trying to separate them. He had commented on that once, making a joke, and both women went on talking as if he had not spoken. It was a good thing he knew Tuon could laugh at a joke, because sometimes she seemed to have no sense of humor at all. Selucia, wrapped in a green wool cloak with the cowl all but hiding her red headscarf, eyed him suspiciously, but then, she nearly always did. Tuon never bothered with a scarf, yet the shortness of her black hair was not so apparent with the hood of her blue cloak up.

"Cover your eyes, Precious," he said. "I have a surprise for you."

"I like surprises," she replied, placing her hands over her big eyes. For an instant, she smiled in anticipation, but only for an instant. "Some surprises, Toy." That had the sound of a warning. Selucia stood hard by her shoulder, and though the bosomy woman appeared completely at her ease, something told him she was as tense as a cat ready to leap. He suspected she did *not* like surprises.

"Wait right there," he said, and ducked around the side of the purple wagon. When he returned, he was leading Pips and the razor, both saddled and bridled. The mare stepped lively, frisking at the prospect of an outing. "You can look now. I thought you might like a ride." They had hours; the show might as well have been deserted for all the evidence of life among the wagons. Only a handful had smoke rising from their metal chimneys. "She's yours," he added, and stiffened as the words nearly froze in his throat.

There was no doubt this time. He had said the horse was hers, and suddenly the dice were not beating so loudly in his head. It was not that they had slowed; he was sure of that. There had been more than one set rattling away. One *had* stopped when he made his agreement with Aludra, and another when he told Tuon the horse was hers. That was odd in itself—how could giving her a horse be fateful for him?—but Light, it had been bad enough when he had to worry about one set of dice giving warning at a time. How many sets were still bouncing off the inside of his skull? How many more fateful moments were waiting to crash down on him?

Tuon went immediately to the razor, all smiles as she examined the animal as thoroughly as he had himself. She did train horses for fun, after all. Horses and *damane*, the Light help him. Selucia was studying him, he realized, her face an expressionless mask. Because of the horse, or because he had gone stiff as a post?

"She's a razor," he said, patting Pips' blunt nose. The gelding had been getting plenty of exercise, but the razor's eagerness seemed to have infected him. "Domani bloodborn favor razors, and it's not likely you'll ever see another one outside of Arad Doman. What will you name her?"

"It is bad luck to name a horse before riding it," Tuon replied, taking the reins. She was still beaming. Her big eyes shone. "She's a very fine animal, Toy. A wonderful gift. Either you have a good eye, or you were very lucky."

"I have a good eye, Precious," he said warily. She seemed more delighted than even the razor called for.

"If you say so. Where is Selucia's mount?"

Oh, well. It had been worth a try. A smart man hedged his bets, though, so a sharp whistle brought Metwyn at a trot leading a saddled dapple. Mat ignored the wide grin that split the man's pale face. The Cairhienin Redarm had been sure he would not get away with leaving Selucia behind, but there was no need to smirk over it. Mat judged the dapple gelding, ten years old, to be gentle enough for Selucia—in his memory, ladies' maids seldom were more than tolerable riders—but the woman gave the animal a going over as complete as Tuon's. And when she was done, she directed a look at Mat that said she would ride the horse so as not to make a bother, but she found it decidedly lacking. Women could compress a great deal into one look.

Once clear of the field where the show was camped, Tuon walked the razor along the road for a time, then took her to a trot, and then a canter. The surface was hard-packed yellow clay here, studded with edges of old paving stones. No trouble for a well-shod horse, though, and he had made sure of the razor's shoes. Mat kept Pips even with Tuon as much for the pleasure of watching her smile as anything else. When Tuon was enjoying herself, the stern judge was forgotten and pure delight shone on her face. Not that watching her was easy, since Selucia held the dapple between them. The yellow-haired woman was a formidable chaperone, and by the sidelong glances she gave him, her small smiles, she very much enjoyed the job of frustrating him.

At the start they had the road to themselves except for a few farm carts, but after a while a Tinker caravan appeared ahead of them, a line of garishly painted and lacquered wagons rolling slowly southward down the other side of the road with massive dogs trotting alongside. Those dogs were the only real protection Tinkers had. The driver of the lead wagon, a thing as red as Luca's coats, trimmed in yellow and with violent green-and-yellow wheels to boot, half-stood to peer toward Mat, then sat back down and said something to the woman beside him, doubtless reassured by the presence of the two women with Mat. Tinkers were a cautious lot, of necessity. That whole caravan would whip up their horses and flee a single man they thought meant harm.

Mat nodded to the fellow as the wagons began to pass. The lean, gray-haired man's high-collared coat was as green as his wagon's wheels, and his wife's dress was striped in shades of blue, most bright enough to suit any of the show's performers. The gray-haired man raised his hand in a wave . . .

And Tuon suddenly turned the razor and galloped into the trees, cloak streaming out behind her. In a flash, Selucia had the dapple darting after her. Snatching his hat off so as not to lose it, Mat wheeled Pips and followed. Shouts rose from the wagons, but he paid them no mind. His attention was all on Tuon. He wished he knew what she was up to. Not escape, he was sure. Likely she was just trying to make him tear out his hair. If so, she was in a fair way for succeeding.

Pips quickly reeled in the dapple and left a scowling Selucia behind flailing her mount with the reins, but Tuon and the razor kept their lead as the rolling land climbed toward hills. Startled flights of birds sprang up from beneath both animals' hooves, coveys of gray dove and of brown-speckled quail, sometimes ruffed brown grouse. All disaster needed was for the mare to be frightened by one of those. The best-trained mount could rear and fall when a bird burst up under hoof. Worse, Tuon rode like a madwoman, never slowing, only swerving from her line where the underbrush lay dense, leaping trees toppled by old storms as if she had a clue what lay on the other side. Well, he had to ride like a madman himself to keep up, though he winced every time he set Pips to jump a tree trunk. Some were near as thick as he was tall. He dug his bootheels into the gelding’s flanks, urging more speed though he knew Pips was running as hard as he ever had. He had chosen too well in that bloody razor. Up and up they raced through the forest.

As abruptly as she had begun her mad dash, Tuon reined in, well over a mile from the road. The trees were old here and widely spaced, black pines forty paces tall and wide-spreading oaks with branches that arched down to touch the ground before rising again and could have been sliced crosswise into tables to seat a dozen in comfort. Thick creepers shrouded half-buried boulders and stone outcrops, but aside from that only a few weeds pushed through the mulch. Oaks that size killed off any lesser undergrowth beneath them.

“Your animal is better than he looks,” the fool woman said, patting her mount’s neck, when he reached her. Oh, she was all innocence, just out for a pleasant ride. “Maybe you do have a good eye.” With the cowl of her cloak fallen down her back, her cap of short hair was visible, glistening like black silk. He suppressed a desire to stroke it.

“Burn how good my eye is,” he growled, clapping his hat on. He knew he should speak smoothly, but he could not have taken the roughness from his voice with a file. “Do you always ride like a moon-blinded idiot? You could have broken that mare’s neck before she even got a name. Worse, you could have broken your own. I promised to get you home safely, and I mean to do just that. If you’re going to risk killing yourself every time you go riding, then I won’t let you ride.” He wished he had those last words back as soon as they left his tongue. A man might laugh off a threat like that as a joke, maybe, if you were lucky, but a woman. . . . Now all he could do was wait for the explosion. He expected Aludra’s nightflowers to pale by comparison.

She raised the hood of her cloak, settling it just so. She studied him, tilting her head first one way then the other. Finally, she nodded to herself. “I name her Akein. That means ‘swallow.’ ”

Mat blinked. That was it? No eruption? “I know. A good name. It suits her.” What was she about now? The woman almost never did or said what he expected.

“What is this place, Toy?” she said, frowning at the trees. “Or should I say, what was it? Do you know?”

What did she mean, what was this place? It was a bloody forest was what it was. But suddenly what had seemed a large boulder right in front of him, nearly obscured by thick vines, resolved into a huge stone head, slightly tilted to one side. A woman's head, he thought; those smooth roundels were probably meant for jewels in her hair. The statue it sat on must have been immense. A full span of the thing showed, yet only her eyes and the top of her head were out of the ground. And that long white stone outcrop with an oak tree's roots growing over it was piece of a spiral column. All around them now he could make out bits of columns and large worked stones that plainly had been part of some grand structure and what had to be a stone sword two spans long, all half buried. Still, ruins of cities and monuments could be found in many places, and few even among Aes Sedai had any idea what they had been. Opening his mouth to say that he did not know, he caught sight through the trees of three tall hills in a row, perhaps another mile on. The middle hill had a cleft top, like a wedge cut cleanly out, while the hill on the left had two. And he knew. There could hardly be three hills exactly like that anywhere else.

Those hills had been called The Dancers when this place had been Londaren Cor, the capital city of Eharon. The road behind them had been paved then and ran through the heart of the city, which had sprawled for miles. People had said that the artistry in stone that the Ogier had practiced in Tar Valon, they had perfected in Londaren Cor. Of course, the people of every Ogier-built city had claimed their own outdid Tar Valon, confirming Tar Valon as the touchstone. He had a number of memories of the city—dancing at a ball in the Palace of the Moon, carousing in soldiers' taverns where veiled dancers writhed, watching the Procession of Flutes during the Blessing of the Swords—but oddly, he had another memory of those hills, from near enough five hundred years after the Trollocs left no stone standing in Londaren Cor and Eharon died in blood and fire. Why it had been necessary for Nerevan and Esandara to invade Shiota, as the land was then, he did not know. Those old memories were fragments however long a time any one covered, and full of gaps. He had no idea why those hills had been called The Dancers, either, or what the Blessing of the Swords was. But he remembered being an Esandaran lord in a battle fought among these ruins, and he remembered having those hills in view when he took an arrow through his throat. He must have fallen no more than half a mile from the very spot where he sat Pips, drowning in his own blood.

Light, I hate *to remember dying*, he thought, and the thought turned to a coal burning in his brain. A coal that burned hotter and hotter. He *remembered* those men's deaths, not just one but dozens of them. He—remembered—dying.

"Toy, are you ill?" Tuon brought the mare close and peered up into his face. Concern filled her big eyes. "You've gone pale as the moon."

"I'm right as spring water," he muttered. She was close enough for him to kiss if he bent his head, but he did not move. He could not. He was thinking so furiously he had nothing left for motion. Somehow only the Light knew, the Eelfinn had gathered the memories they had planted in his head, but how could they harvest memory from a corpse? A corpse in the world of men, at that. He was certain they never came to this side of that twisted doorframe *ter'angreal* for longer than minutes at a time. A way occurred to him, one he did not like, not a scrap. Maybe they created some sort of link to any human who visited them, a link that allowed them to copy all of a man's memories after that right up to the moment he died. In some of those memories from other men he was white-haired, in some only a few years older than he really was, and everything in between, but there were none of childhood or growing up. What were the odds of that, if they had just stuffed him with random bits and pieces, likely things they considered rubbish or had done with? What *did* they do with memories, anyway? They had to have some reason for gathering them beyond giving them away again. No, he was just trying to avoid where this led. Burn him, the bloody foxes were inside his head right then! They had to be. It was the only explanation that made sense.

"Well, you look as if you're about to vomit," Tuon said, backing the razor away with a grimace. "Who in the show would have herbs? I have some knowledge there."

"I'm all right, I tell you." In truth, he did want to sick up. Having those foxes in his head was a thousand times worse than the dice however hard the dice rattled. Could the Eelfinn see through his eyes? Light, what was he going to do? He doubted any Aes Sedai could Heal him of this, not that he would trust them to, not when it meant leaving off the foxhead. There *was* nothing to be done. He would just have to live with it. He groaned at the thought.

Cantering up to them, Selucia gave him and Tuon each a quick look, as if considering what they might have been up to in their time alone. But then, she had taken her time in catching up, giving them that time. That was hopeful. "Next time, you can ride this gentle creature and I will ride your gelding," she told Mat. "High Lady, people from those wagons are following us with dogs. They're afoot, but they will be here soon. The dogs don't bark."

"Trained guard dogs, then," Tuon said, gathering her reins. "Mounted, we can avoid them easily enough."

"No need to try, and no use," Mat told her. He should have expected this. "Those people are Tinkers, Tuatha'an, and they're no danger to anybody. They couldn't be violent if their lives depended on it. That's no exaggeration, just simple truth. But they saw you two go haring off, trying to get away from me as it must have seemed, and me chasing after. Now that those dogs have a scent trail, the Tinkers will follow us all the way back to the show if need be to make sure you two haven't been kidnapped or harmed. We'll go meet them to save the time and trouble." It was not the Tinkers' time he cared about. Luca probably would not care one way or the other if a bunch of Tinkers getting in the way delayed the show setting out, but Mat certainly would.

Selucia scowled at him indignantly, and her fingers flew, but Tuon laughed. "Toy wishes to be commanding today, Selucia. I will let him command and see how he does." Bloody kind of her.

They trotted back the way they had come—riding around the fallen trees this time, though now and then Tuon would gather her reins as if she meant to jump one, then give Mat a mischievous grin—and it was not long before the Tinkers came into sight running through the trees behind their huge mastiffs like a flight of butterflies, fifty or so men and women in bright colors, often in jarring combinations. A man might be wearing a red-and-blue striped coat and baggy yellow trousers tucked into knee boots, or a violet-colored coat above red trousers, or worse. Some women wore dresses striped in as many colors as there were colors and even colors Mat had no name for, while others wore skirts and blouses as varied in hue and as clashing as the men's coats and trousers. A fair number had shawls, as well, to add more colors to the eye-scrambling blend. Except for the gray-haired man who had been driving the lead wagon, they all appeared to be short of their middle years. He must be the Seeker, the leader of the caravan. Mat dismounted, and after a moment, Tuon and Selucia did, too.

The Tinkers stopped at that, calling their dogs to heel. The big animals slumped to the ground, tongues lolling out, and the people came on more slowly. None carried so much as a stick, and though Mat wore no weapons that showed, they eyed him warily. The men clustered in front of him, while the women gathered around Tuon and Selucia. There was no threat in it, but as easily as that, Tuon and Selucia were separated from him, off where the Tinker women could make inquiries. Suddenly it occurred to him that Tuon might think it a fine game to claim he was trying to bother her. She and Selucia could ride off while he was trying to contend with Tinkers crowding around him and Pips so he could not climb into the saddle. That was all they would do, but unless he was willing to fight his way clear, they might keep him here for hours, maybe, to give that pair time to "escape."

The gray-haired man bowed with his hands pressed to his chest. "Peace be on you and yours, my Lord. Forgiveness if we intrude, but we feared our dogs had frightened the ladies' horses."

Mat responded with a bow in the same fashion. "Peace be on you always, Seeker, and on all the People. The ladies' horses weren't frightened. The ladies are . . . impetuous at times." What were the women saying? He tried to eavesdrop, but their voices were low murmurs.

"You know something of the People, my Lord?" The Seeker sounded surprised and had a right to. The Tuatha'an kept away from anywhere larger than a moderate-sized village. They would seldom encounter anyone in a silk coat.

"Only a little," Mat replied. A very little. He had memories of meeting Tinkers, but he himself had never spoken to one before. What were those bloody women saying? "Will you answer me a question? I've seen a number of your caravans the past few days, more than I'd have expected to, and all heading toward Ebou Dar. Is there a reason?"

The man hesitated, darting a glance toward the women. They were still murmuring away, and he had to be wondering why their conversation was lasting so long. After all, it only needed a moment to say yes, I need help, or the opposite. "It is the people called Seanchan, my Lord," he said finally. "Word is spreading among the People that there is safety where the Seanchan rule, and equal justice for all. Elsewhere. . . . You understand, my Lord?"

Mat did. Like the showfolk, Tinkers were strangers wherever they went, and worse, strangers with an undeserved reputation for thievery—well, they stole no more often than anyone else—and a deserved one for trying to entice young people into joining them. And on top of it, for Tinkers there was no question of fighting back if anybody tried to rob them or chase them away. “Take a care, Seeker. Their safety comes at a price, and some of their laws are harsh. You know what they do with women who can channel?”

“Thank you for your concern, my Lord,” the man said calmly, “but few of our women ever begin channeling, and if one does, we will do as we always do and take her to Tar Valon.”

Abruptly, the women began laughing, great gales and peals. The Seeker relaxed visibly. If the women were laughing, Mat was not the kind of man who would strike them down or kill them for getting in his way. For Mat’s part, he scowled. There was nothing in that laughter that he liked.

The Tinkers made their departure with more apologies from the Seeker for having bothered them, but the women kept looking back and laughing behind cupped hands. Some of the men leaned close as they walked, plainly asking questions, but the women just shook their heads. And looked back again, laughing.

“What did you tell them?” Mat asked sourly.

“Oh, that’s none of your business, now is it, Toy?” Tuon replied, and Selucia laughed. Oh, she bloody cackled, she did. He decided he was better off not knowing. Women just purely enjoyed planting needles in a man.

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CHAPTER 9

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A Short Path

Tuon and Selucia were not the only women who caused Mat trouble, of course. Sometimes it seemed that most of the trouble in his life came from women, which he could not understand at all since he always tried to treat them well. Even Egeanin gave her share of grief, though it was the smallest share.

“I was right. You do think you can marry her,” she drawled when he asked her for help with Tuon. She and Domon were seated on the steps of their wagon, with their arms around each other. A trickle of smoke rose from Domon’s pipe. It was midmorning on a fine day, though gathering clouds threatened rain for later, and the performers were putting on their acts for the inhabitants of four small villages that, combined, perhaps equaled Runnien Crossing in size. Mat had no desire to go watch. Oh, he still enjoyed watching the contortionists, and better still the female acrobats and tumblers, but when you saw jugglers and fire-eaters and the like every day just about, even Miyora and her leopards became, well, less interesting if not exactly ordinary.

“Never you mind what I think, Egeanin. Will you tell me what you know of her? Trying to find out from her is like fishing blindfolded and barehanded in a briar patch trying to catch a rabbit.”

“My name is Leilwin, Cauthon. Don’t forget it again,” she said in tones suitable for giving orders on a ship’s deck. Her eyes tried to drive the command home like blue hammers. “Why should I help you? You aim too high above yourself, a mole yearning for the sun. You could face execution for simply saying you want to marry her. It’s disgusting. Besides, I’ve left all that behind me. Or it’s left me,” she added bitterly. Domon gave her a one-armed hug.

“If you’ve left all that behind you, what do you care how disgusting my wanting to marry her is?” There. It was out in the open. Partly, at least.

Domon removed the pipe from his mouth long enough to blow a smoke-ring aimed at Mat’s face. “If she does no want to help you, then give over.” He gave it that same ship’s deck voice of command.

Egeanin muttered under her breath. She appeared to be arguing with herself. Finally, she shook her head. “No, Bayle. He’s right. If I’m cast adrift, then I have to find a new ship and a new course. I can never return to Seanchan, so I might as well cut the cable and be done with it.”

What she knew of Tuon was mainly rumor—it seemed the Imperial family lived their lives behind walls even when in plain sight, and only whispers of what went on behind those walls escaped—yet those were sufficient to make the hair on the back of Mat's neck stand up. His wife-to-be had had a brother and a sister *assassinated*? After they tried to have *her* killed, true, but still! What kind of family went around killing one another? The Seanchan Blood and the Imperial family, for starters. Half of her siblings were dead, assassinated, most of them, and maybe the others, too. Some of what Egeanin—Leilwin—had to tell was generally known among Seanchan, and hardly more comforting. Tuon would have been schooled in intrigue from infancy, schooled in weapons and fighting with her bare hands, heavily guarded yet expected to be her own last line of defense. All of those born to the Blood were taught to dissemble, to disguise their intentions and ambitions. Power shifted constantly among the Blood, some climbing higher, others slipping down, and the dance was only faster and more dangerous in the Imperial family. The Empress—she started to add, "May she live forever," and half-choked in swallowing the words, then closed her eyes for a long moment before continuing—the Empress had borne many children, as every Empress did, so that among those who survived there would be one fit to rule after her. It would not do to have someone who was stupid or a fool ascend the Crystal Throne. Tuon was accounted very far from either. Light! The woman he was to marry was as bad as Warder and Aes Sedai wrapped into one. And maybe as dangerous.

He had several conversations with Egeanin—he was careful to name her Leilwin to her face lest she go for him with her dagger, yet he thought of her as Egeanin—trying to learn more, but her knowledge of the Blood was largely from the outside looking in, and her knowledge of the Imperial Court, by her own admission, little better than that of a street urchin in Seandar. The day he gave Tuon the mare, he had ridden alongside Egeanin's wagon having one of those fruitless conversations. He had accompanied Tuon and Selucia for a time, but they kept looking at him sideways, then exchanging glances and giggling. Over what they had told the Tinker women, without a sliver of doubt. A man could only take so much of that sort of thing.

"A clever gift, that mare," Egeanin said, leaning out from the driver's seat to look up the line of wagons. Domon was handling the reins. She took her turn sometimes, but handling a team was not among the skills she had learned on ships. “How did you know?”

“Know what?” he asked.

She straightened and adjusted her wig. He did not know why she continued to wear the thing. Her own black hair was short, but no shorter than Selucia’s. “About courting gifts. Among the Blood, when you are courting someone higher than you, a traditional gift is something exotic or rare. Best of all is if you can connect the gift somehow to one of the recipient’s pleasures, and it’s well known the High Lady loves horses. It’s good you’ve acknowledged that you don’t expect to be her equal, too. Not that this is going to work, you understand. I don’t have a clue why she’s still here, now you’ve stopped guarding her, but you can’t believe she’ll actually say the words. When she marries, it will be for the good of the Empire, not because some layabout like you gave her a horse or made her smile.”

Mat ground his teeth to keep from shouting a curse. He had acknowledged *what*? No wonder a set of bloody dice had stopped. Tuon would let him forget this when it snowed on Sunday. He was certain sure of that.

If Leilwin bloody Shipless gave him small griefs, the Aes Sedai managed larger. Aes Sedai liked nothing better. He was resigned to them traipsing about every village and town they stopped at, asking questions and doing the Light knew what else. He had no choice but resignation, with no way to stop them. They claimed to be taking care—at least, Teslyn and Edesina did; Joline snapped that he was a fool for worrying—yet an Aes Sedai taking care was still clearly a woman of consequence whether or not anybody recognized what she was. Lacking the coin for silks, they had purchased bolts of fine wool in Jurador, and the seamstresses worked as hard for Aes Sedai as they did for Mat’s gold, so they strolled about dressed like wealthy merchants and as sure of themselves as any noble ever born. Nobody saw one of them walk five strides without knowing that she expected the world to conform itself to her. Three women like that, with a traveling show at that, were sure to cause talk. At least Joline left her Great Serpent ring in her belt pouch. The other two had lost theirs to the Seanchan. If Mat had seen Joline with the thing actually on her finger, he thought he would have wept.

He got no more reports on their activities from the former *sul’dam*. Joline had Bethamin firmly in hand; the tall dark woman ran when Joline said run and jumped when she said toad. Edesina was giving her lessons, too, but Joline considered Bethamin a personal project for some reason. She was never harsh that Mat saw, not after the face slapping, but you might have thought she was getting Bethamin ready to go to the Tower, and Bethamin returned a sort of gratitude that made it clear her loyalties had shifted. As for Seta, the yellow-haired woman was so frightened of the sisters that she did not dare follow them any longer. She actually shivered when he suggested it. Strange as it seemed, Seta and Bethamin had been so accustomed to how Seanchan women who could channel saw themselves that they had really believed Aes Sedai could not be much different. They were dangerous when off the leash, yet dangerous dogs could be handled by someone who knew how, and they were experts with that particular sort of dangerous dog. Now they knew that Aes Sedai were not dogs of any kind. They were wolves. Seta would have found another place to sleep had that been possible, and he learned from Mistress Anan that the Seanchan woman put her hands over her eyes whenever Joline or Edesina was teaching Bethamin in the wagon.

"I'm certain she can see the weaves," Setalle said. He would have said she sounded envious except that he doubted she envied anyone. "She's halfway to admitting it, or she wouldn't hide her eyes. Soon or late, she'll come around and want to learn, too." Maybe she did sound envious at that.

He could have wished for Seta to come around soon rather than late. Another student would have left the Aes Sedai less time to trouble him. If the show was halted, he could hardly turn around without seeing Joline or Edesina peering around the corner of a tent or wagon at him. Usually, the foxhead cooled on his chest. He could not prove they were actually channeling at him, yet he was certain of it. He was unsure which of them found the loophole in his protection that Adeleas and Vandene had, that something thrown with the Power would hit him, but after that, he could barely leave his tent without getting hit by a rock, and later, by other things, burning sparks like a shower from a forge fire, stinging sparks that made him leap and his hair try to stand on end. He was positive that Joline was behind it. If for no other reason, he never saw her without Blaeric or Fen or both nearby for protection. And she smiled at him like a cat smiling at a mouse.

He was planning how to get her alone—it was that or spend his time hiding from her—when she and Teslyn got into a shouting match that cleared Edesina out of the whitewashed wagon almost as quickly as Bethamin and Seta, and those two ran out and stood gaping at the wagon. The Yellow sister calmly went back to brushing her long black hair, lifting it up with one hand and sweeping the wooden hairbrush down it with the other. Seeing Mat, she smiled at him without ceasing the motions of her brush. The medallion went cold, and the shouting vanished as though cut off by a knife.

He never learned what was said behind that Power-woven shield. Teslyn favored him somewhat, yet when he asked her, she gave him one of those looks and silence. It was Aes Sedai business and none of his. Whatever had gone on in there, though, the rocks stopped, and the sparks. He tried thanking Teslyn, but she was having none of it.

"When something be no to be spoken of, it be no to be spoken of," she told him firmly. "It would be well for you to learn that lesson if you are to be around sisters, and I think your life be tied to Aes Sedai, now if it was no before." Bloody thing for her to say.

She never cracked her teeth about his *ter'angreal*, but the same could not be said of Joline and Edesina, even after the argument. They tried to bully him into handing it over every single day, Edesina cornering him by herself, Joline with her Warders glowering over her shoulders at him. *Ter'angreal* were rightfully the property of the White Tower. *Ter'angreal* needed proper study, particularly one with the odd properties this one possessed. *Ter'angreal* were potentially dangerous, too much so to be left in the hands of the uninitiated. Neither said especially a man's hands, but Joline came close. He began to worry that the Green would have Blaeric and Fen simply take it from him. That pair still suspected he had been involved in what had happened to her, and the dark looks they gave him said they wanted any excuse to beat him like a drum.

"That would be stealing," Mistress Anan told him in a lecturing tone, gathering her cloak around her. The sunlight was beginning to fade, and coolness already setting in. They were standing outside Tuon's wagon, and he was hoping to get inside in time to be fed. Noal and Olver were already inside. Setalle was apparently off to visit the Aes Sedai, something she did frequently. "Tower law is quite clear on that. There might be considerable . . . discussion . . . over whether it had to be given back to you—I rather think it would not be, in the end—but Joline would face a fairly harsh penance for theft all the same."

“Maybe she’d think it worth a penance,” he muttered. His stomach rumbled. The potted finches and creamed onions that Lopin had presented proudly for his midday meal had both turned out to be spoiling, to the Tairen’s extreme mortification, which meant Mat had had a heel of bread since breakfast and no more. “You know an awful lot about the White Tower.”

“What I know, Lord Mat, is that you’ve made just about every misstep a man can make with Aes Sedai, short of trying to kill one. The reason I came with you in the first place instead of going with my husband, half the reason I’m still here, is to try to keep you from making too many missteps. Truth to tell, I don’t know why I should care, but I do, and that’s that. If you had let yourself be guided by me, you’d not be in trouble with them now. I can’t say how much I can recover for you, not now, but I am still willing to try.”

Mat shook his head. There were only two ways to deal with Aes Sedai without getting burned, let them walk all over you or stay away from them. He would not do the first and could not do the second, so he had to find a third way, and he doubted it could come from following Setalle’s advice. Women’s advice about Aes Sedai generally was to follow the first path, though they never worded it that way. They talked of accommodation, but it was never the Aes Sedai who was expected to do any accommodating. “Half the reason? What’s the other . . . ?” He grunted as though he had been punched in the stomach. “Tuon? You think I can’t be trusted with Tuon?”

Mistress Anan laughed at him, a fine rich laugh. “You are a rogue, my Lord. Now, some rogues make fine husbands, once they’ve been tamed a little around the edges—my Jasfer was a rogue when I met him—but you still think you can nibble a pastry here, nibble a pastry there, then dance off to the next.”

“There’s no dancing away from this one,” Mat said frowning up at the wagon door. The dice clicked away in his head. “Not for me.” He was not sure he really wanted to dance away anymore, but want and wish as he might, he was well and truly caught.

“Like that, is it?” she murmured. “Oh, you’ve chosen a fine one to break your heart.”

“That’s as may be, Mistress Anan, but I have my reasons. I’d better get inside before they eat everything.” He turned toward the steps at the back of the wagon, and she laid a hand on his arm.

"Could I see it? Just to see?"

There was no doubt what she meant. He hesitated, then fished in the neck of his shirt for the leather cord that held the medallion. He could not have said why. He had refused Joline and Edesina even a glimpse. It was a fine piece of work, a silver foxhead nearly as big as his palm. Only one eye showed, and enough daylight remained to see, if you looked close, that the pupil was half shaded to form the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai. Her hand trembled slightly as she traced a finger around that eye. She had said she only wanted to see it, but he allowed the touching. She breathed out a long sigh.

"You were Aes Sedai, once," he said quietly, and her hand froze.

She recovered herself so quickly that he might have imagined it. She was stately Setalle Anan, the innkeeper from Ebou Dar with the big golden hoops in her ears and the marriage knife dangling hilt-down into her round cleavage, about as far from an Aes Sedai as could be. "The sisters think I'm lying about never having been to the Tower. They think I was a servant there as a young woman and listened where I shouldn't have."

"They haven't seen you looking at this." He bounced the foxhead once on his hand before tucking it safely back under his shirt. She pretended not to care, and he pretended not to know she was pretending.

Her lips twitched into a brief, rueful smile, as if she knew what he was thinking. "The sisters would see it if they could let themselves," she said, as simply as if she were discussing the chances of rain, "but Aes Sedai expect that when . . . certain things . . . happen, the woman will go away decently and die soon after. I went away, but Jasfer found me half starved and sick on the streets of Ebou Dar and took me to his mother." She chuckled, just a woman telling how she met her husband. "He used to take in stray kittens, too. Now, you know some of my secrets, and I know some of yours. Shall we keep them to ourselves?"

"What secrets of mine do you know?" he demanded, instantly wary. Some of his secrets were dangerous to have known, and if too many knew of them, they were not really secrets anymore.

Mistress Anan glanced at the wagon, frowning. "That girl is playing a game with you as surely as you are playing one with her. Not the same game that you are. She's more like a general plotting a battle than a woman being courted. If she learns you're moonstruck with her, though, she'll still gain the advantage. I am willing to let you have an even chance. Or as near to one as any man has with a woman of any brains. Do we have an agreement?"

"We do," he replied fervently. "That we do." He would not have been surprised if the dice stopped then, but they went on bouncing.

Had the sisters' fixation on his medallion been the only problem they gave him, had they contented themselves with creating rumors everywhere the show stopped, he could have said those days were no more than tolerably bad for traveling with Aes Sedai. Unfortunately, by the time the show departed Jurador they had learned who Tuon was. Not that she was the Daughter of the Nine Moons, but that she was a Seanchan High Lady, someone of rank and influence.

"Do you take me for a fool?" Luca protested when Mat accused him of telling them. He squared up beside his wagon, fists on his hips, a tall man full of indignation and ready to fight over it by his glare. "That's a secret I want buried deep until . . . well . . . until she says I can use that warrant of protection. That won't be much use if she revokes it because I told something she wants hidden." But his voice was a shade too earnest, and his eyes shifted a hair from meeting Mat's directly. The truth of it was, Luca liked to boast nearly as much as he liked gold. He must have thought it was safe—safe!—to tell the sisters and only realized the snarl he had created after the words were out of his mouth.

A snarl it was, as tangled as a pit full of snakes. The High Lady Tuon, readily at hand, presented an opportunity no Aes Sedai could have resisted. Teslyn was every bit as bad as Joline and Edesina. The three of them visited Tuon in her wagon daily, and descended on her when she went out for a walk. They talked of truces and treaties and negotiations, tried to learn what connection she had to the leaders of the invasion, attempted to convince her to help arrange talks to end the fighting. They even offered to help her leave the show and return home!

Unfortunately for them, Tuon did not see three Aes Sedai, representatives of the White Tower, perhaps the greatest power on earth, not even after the seamstresses began delivering their riding dresses and they could change out of the ragbag leavings Mat had been able to find for them. She saw two escaped *damane* and a *marath'damane*, and she had no use for either until they were decently collared. Her phrase, that. When they came to her wagon, she latched the door, and if they managed to get inside before she could, she left. When they cornered her, or tried to, she walked around them the same as walking around a stump. They all but talked themselves hoarse. And she refused to listen.

Any Aes Sedai could teach a stone patience if she had reason, yet they were unaccustomed to flat being ignored. Mat could see the frustration growing, the tight eyes and tighter mouths that took longer and longer to relax, the hands gripping skirts in fists to keep them from grabbing Tuon and shaking her. It all came to a head sooner than he expected, and not at all in the way he had imagined.

The night after he gave Tuon the mare, he ate his supper with her and Selucia. And with Noal and Olver, of course. That pair managed as much time with Tuon as he did. Lopin and Nerim, as formal as if they were in a palace instead of squeezed for room to move, served a typical early-spring meal, stringy mutton with peas that had been dried and turnips that had sat too long in somebody's cellar. It was too early yet for anything to be near harvesting. Still, Lopin had made a pepper sauce for the mutton, Nerim had found pine nuts for the peas, there was plenty to go around, and nothing tasted off, so it was as fine a meal as could be managed. Olver left once supper was done, having already had his games with Tuon, and Mat changed places with Selucia to play stones. Noal remained too, despite any number of telling looks, rambling on about the Seven Towers in dead Malkier, which apparently had overtopped anything in Cairhien, and Shol Arbela, the City of Ten Thousand Bells, in Arafel, and all manner of Borderland wonders, strange spires made of crystal harder than steel and a metal bowl a hundred paces across set into a hillside and the like. Sometimes he interjected comments on Mat's play, that he was exposing himself on the left, that he was setting a fine trap on the right, and just when Tuon looked ready to fall into it. That sort of thing. Mat kept his mouth shut except for chatting with Tuon, though it took gritting his teeth more than once to accomplish. Tuon found Noal's natter entertaining.

He was studying the board, wondering whether he might have a small chance of gaining a draw, when Joline led Teslyn and Edesina into the wagon like haughty on a pedestal, smooth-faced Aes Sedai to their toenails. Joline was wearing her Great Serpent ring. Squeezing by Selucia, giving her very cold looks when she was slow to move aside, they arrayed themselves at the foot of the narrow table. Noal went very still, eyeing the sisters sideways, one hand beneath his coat as if the fool thought his knives would do any good here.

“There must be an end to this, High Lady,” Joline said, very pointedly ignoring Mat. She was telling, not pleading, announcing what would be because it had to be. “Your people have brought a war to these lands such as we have not seen since the War of the Hundred Years, perhaps not since the Trolloc Wars. Tarmon Gai’don is approaching, and this war must end before it comes lest it bring disaster to the whole world. It threatens no less than that. So there will be an end to your petulance. You will carry our offer to whoever commands among you. There can be peace until you return to your own lands across the sea, or you can face the full might of the White Tower followed by every throne from the Borderlands to the Sea of Storms. The Amyrlin Seat has likely summoned them against you already. I have heard of vast Borderland armies already in the south, and other armies moving. Better to end this without more bloodshed, though. So avert your people’s destruction and help bring peace.”

Mat could not see Edesina’s reaction, but Teslyn simply blinked. For an Aes Sedai, that was as good as a gasp. Maybe this was not exactly what she had expected Joline to say. For his part, he groaned under his breath. Joline was no Gray, as deft as a skilled juggler in negotiations, that was for sure, but neither was he, and he still figured she had found a short path to putting Tuon’s back up.

But Tuon folded her hands in her lap beneath the table and sat very straight, looking right through the Aes Sedai. Her face was as stern as it had ever been for him. “Selucia,” she said quietly.

Moving up behind Teslyn, the yellow-haired woman bent long enough to take something from beneath the blanket Mat was sitting on. As she straightened, everything seemed to happen all at once. There was a click, and Teslyn screamed, clapping her hands to her throat. The foxhead turned to ice against Mat’s chest, and Joline’s head whipped around with an incredulous stare for the Red. Edesina turned and ran for the door, which swung half open, then slammed shut. Slammed against Blaeric or Fen, by the sound of men falling down the wagon’s steps. Edesina jerked to a halt and stood very stiffly, arms at her sides and divided skirts pressed against her legs by invisible cords. All that in moments, and Selucia had not stayed still. She bent briefly to the bed Noal was sitting on, then snapped the silver collar of another *a’dam* around Joline’s neck. Mat could see that was what Teslyn was gripping with both hands. She was not trying to take it off, just holding on to it, but her knuckles were white. The Red’s narrow face was an image of despair, her eyes staring and haunted. Joline had regained the utter calm of an Aes Sedai, but she did touch the segmented collar encircling her neck.

"If you think that you can," she began, then cut off abruptly, her mouth going tight. An angry light shone in her eyes.

"You see, the *a'dam* can be used to punish, though that is seldom done." Tuon stood, and she had the bracelet of an *a'dam* on each wrist, the gleaming leashes snaking away under the blankets on the beds. How in the Light had she managed to get her hands on those?

"No," Mat said. "You promised not to harm my followers, Precious." Maybe not the wisest thing to use that name now, but it was too late to call it back. "You've kept your promises so far. Don't go back on one now."

"I promised not to cause dissension among your followers, Toy," she said snippily, "and in any case, it is very clear that these three are not your followers." The small sliding door used to talk to whoever was driving or pass out food slid open with a loud bang. She glanced over her shoulder, and it slid shut with a louder. A man cursed outside and began beating at the door.

"The *a'dam* can also be used to give pleasure, as a great reward," Tuon told Joline, ignoring the hammering fist behind her.

Joline's lips parted, and her eyes grew very wide. She swayed, and the rope-suspended table swung as she caught herself with both hands to keep from falling. If she was impressed, though, she hid it well. She did smooth her dark gray skirts once after she was upright again, but that might have meant nothing. Her face was all Aes Sedai composure. Edesina, looking over her shoulder, matched that calm gaze, although she now wore the third *a'dam* around her neck—and come to it, her face was paler than usual—but Teslyn had begun weeping silently, shoulders shaking, tears leaking down her cheeks.

Noal was tensed, a man ready to do something stupid. Mat kicked him under the table and, when the man glared at him, shook his head. Noal's scowl deepened, but he took his hand out of his coat and leaned back against the wall. Still glaring. Well, let him. Knives were no use here, but maybe words could be. Much better if this could be ended with words.

"Listen," Mat said to Tuon. "If you think, you'll see a hundred reasons this won't work. Light, you can learn to channel yourself. Doesn't knowing that change anything? You’re not far different from them.” He might as well have turned to smoke and blown away for all the attention she paid.

“Try to embrace *saidar*,” she drawled, stern eyes steady on Joline. Her voice was quite mild in comparison to her gaze, yet plainly she expected obedience. Obedience? She looked a bloody leopard staring at three tethered goats. And strangely, more beautiful than ever. A beautiful leopard who might rake him with her claws as soon as the goats. Well, he had faced a leopard a few times before this, and those were his own memories. There was an odd sort of exhilaration that came with confronting a leopard. “Go ahead,” she went on. “You know the shield is gone.” Joline gave a small grunt of surprise, and Tuon nodded. “Good. You’ve obeyed for the first time. And learned that you cannot touch the Power while you wear the *a’dam* unless I wish it. But now, I wish you to hold the Power, and you do, though you didn’t try to embrace it.” Joline’s eyes widened slightly, a small crack in her calm. “And now,” Tuon went on, “I wish you not to be holding the Power, and it is gone from you. Your first lessons.” Joline drew a deep breath. She was beginning to look . . . not afraid, but uneasy.

“Blood and bloody ashes, woman,” Mat growled, “do you think you can parade them around on those leashes without anyone noticing?” A heavy thump came from the door. A second produced the sound of cracking wood. Whoever was beating at the wooden window was still at it, too. Somehow, that caused no sense of urgency. If the Warders got in, what could they do?

“I will house them in the wagon they are using and exercise them at night,” she snapped irritably. “I am nothing like these women, Toy. *Nothing* like them. Perhaps I could learn, but I choose not to, just as I choose not to steal or commit murder. That makes all the difference.” Recovering herself with visible effort, she sat down with her hands on the table, focused on the Aes Sedai once again. “I’ve had considerable success with one woman like you.” Edesina gasped, murmured a name too low to be caught. “Yes,” Tuon said. “You must have met my Mylen in the kennels or at exercise. I will train you all as well as she is. You have been cursed with a dark taint, but I will teach you to have pride in the service you give the Empire.”

“I didn’t bring these three out of Ebou Dar so you could take them back,” Mat said firmly, sliding himself along the bed. The foxhead grew colder still, and Tuon made a startled sound.

“How did you . . . do that, Toy? The weave . . . melted . . . when it touched you.”

“It’s a gift, Precious.”

As he stood up, Selucia started toward him, crouching, her hands outstretched in pleading. Fear painted her face. “You must not,” she began.

“No!” Tuon said sharply.

Selucia straightened and backed away, though she kept her eyes on him. Strangely, the fear vanished from her expression. He shook his head in wonder. He knew the bosomy woman obeyed Tuon instantly—she was *so’jhin*, after all, as much owned as Tuon’s horse, and she actually thought that right and good—but how obedient did you need to be to lose your fear at an order?

“They have annoyed me, Toy,” Tuon said as he put his hands on Teslyn’s collar. Still trembling, tears still streaming down her cheeks, the Red looked as though she could not believe he would actually remove the thing.

“They annoy me, too.” Placing his fingers just so, he pressed, and the collar clicked open.

Teslyn seized his hands and began kissing them. “Thank you,” she wept over and over. “Thank you. Thank you.”

Mat cleared his throat. “You’re welcome, but there’s no need for. . . . Would you stop that? Teslyn?” Reclaiming his hands took some effort.

“I want them to stop annoying me, Toy,” Tuon said as he turned to Joline. From anyone else, that might have been petulant. The dark little woman made it a demand.

“I think they’ll agree to that after this,” he said dryly. But Joline was looking up at him with a stubborn set to her jaw. “You will agree, won’t you?” The Green said nothing.

“I do agree,” Teslyn said quickly. “We do all agree.”

“Yes, we all agree,” Edesina added.

Joline stared at him silently, stubbornly, and Mat sighed.

“I could let Precious keep you for a few days, until you change your mind.” Joline’s collar clicked open in his hands. “But I won’t.”

Still staring into his eyes, she touched her throat as though to confirm the collar was gone. “Would you like to be one of my Warders?” she asked, then laughed softly. “No need to look like that. Even if I would bond you against your will, I couldn’t so long as you have that *ter’angreal*. I agree, Master Cauthon. It may cost our best chance to stop the Seanchan, but I will no longer bother . . . Precious.”

Tuon hissed like a doused cat, and he sighed again. What you gained on the swings, you lost on the roundabouts.

He spent part of that night doing what he liked least in the world. Working. Digging a deep hole to bury the three *a’dam*. He did the job himself because, surprisingly, Joline wanted them. They were *ter’angreal*, after all, and the White Tower needed to study them. That might well have been so, but the Tower would just have to find their *a’dam* elsewhere. He was fairly certain that none of the Redarms would have handed them over if he told them to bury the things, yet he was taking no chances that they would reappear to cause more trouble. It started raining before the hole was knee-deep, a cold driving rain, and by the time he was done, he was soaked to the skin and mud to his waist. A fine end to a fine night, with the dice bouncing around his skull.

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CHAPTER 10

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A Village in Shiota

The following day brought a respite, or so it seemed. Tuon, in a blue silk riding dress and her wide tooled-leather belt, not only rode beside him as the show rolled slowly north, she waggled her fingers at Selucia when the woman tried to put her dun between them. Selucia had acquired her own mount, somehow, a compact gelding that could not match Pips or Akein but still surpassed the dapple by a fair margin. The blue-eyed woman, with a green head scarf beneath her cowl today, fell in on Tuon's other side, and her face would have done an Aes Sedai proud when it came to giving nothing away. Mat could not help grinning. Let *her* hide frustration for a change. Lacking horses, the real Aes Sedai were confined to their wagon; Metwyn was too far away, on the driver's seat of the purple wagon, to overhear what he said to Tuon; only a few thin clouds remained in the sky from the night's rain; and all seemed right in the world. Even the dice bouncing in his head could steal nothing from that. Well, there were bad moments, but only moments.

Early on, a flight of ravens winged overhead, a dozen or more big black birds. They flew swiftly, never deviating from their line, but he eyed them anyway until they dwindled to specks and vanished. Nothing to spoil the day there. Not for him, at least. Maybe for someone farther north.

"Did you see some omen in them, Toy?" Tuon asked. She was as graceful in the saddle as she was in everything else she did. He could not recall seeing her be awkward about anything. "Most omens I know concerning ravens specifically have to do with them perching on someone's rooftop or cawing at dawn or dusk."

"They can be spies for the Dark One," he told her. "Sometimes. Crows, too. And rats. But they didn't stop to look at us, so we don't need to worry."

Running a green-gloved hand across the top of her head, she sighed. "Toy, Toy," she murmured, resettling the cowl of her cloak. "How many children's tales do you believe? Do you believe that if you sleep on Old Hob's Hill under a full moon, the snakes will give you true answers to three questions, or that foxes steal people's skins and take the nourishment from food so you can starve to death while eating your fill?"

Putting on a smile took effort. "I don't think I ever heard either one of those." Making his voice amused required effort, too. What were the odds of her mentioning snakes giving true answers, which the Aelfinn did after a fashion, in the same breath with foxes stealing skins? He was pretty sure that the Eelfinn did, and made leather from it. But it was Old Hob that nearly made him flinch. The other was likely just *ta'veren* twisting at the world. She certainly knew nothing about him and the snakes or the foxes. In Shandalle, the land where Artur Hawkwing had been born, though, Old Hob, *Caisen Hob*, had been another name for the Dark One. The Aelfinn and the Eelfinn both surely deserved to be connected to the Dark One, yet that was hardly anything he wanted to think on when he had his own connection to the bloody foxes. And to the snakes, too? That possibility was enough to sour his stomach.

Still, it was a pleasant ride, with the day warming as the sun rose, though it never could be called warm. He juggled six colored wooden balls, and Tuon laughed and clapped her hands, as well she should. That feat had impressed the juggler he bought the balls from, and it was harder while riding. He told several jokes that made her laugh, and one that made her roll her eyes and exchange finger-twitchings with Selucia. Maybe she did not like jokes about common room serving maids. It had not been the least off-color. He was no fool. He did wish she had laughed, though. She had a marvelous laugh, rich and warm and free. They talked of horses and argued over training methods with stubborn animals. That pretty head held a few odd notions, such as that you could calm a fractious horse by biting its ear! That sounded more likely to send it up like a haystack fire. And she had never heard of humming under your breath to soothe a horse, and would not believe his father had taught him such a skill shy of demonstration.

"Well, I can hardly do that without a horse that needs soothing, can I?" he said. She rolled her eyes again. Selucia rolled hers, too.

There was no heat in the argument, though, no anger, just spirit. Tuon had so much spirit it seemed impossible it could fit into such a tiny woman. It was her silences that put a small damper on the day, more so than snakes or foxes. They were far away, and there was nothing to be done. She was right there beside him, and he had a great deal to do concerning her. She never alluded to what had happened with the three Aes Sedai, or to the sisters themselves either. She never mentioned his *ter'angreal,* or the fact that whatever she had made Teslyn or Joline weave against him had failed. The night before might as well have been a dream.

She was like a general planning a battle, Setalle had said. Trained at intrigue and dissembling from infancy, according to Egeanin. And it was all aimed straight at him. But to what end? Surely it could not be some Seanchan Blood form of courting. Egeanin knew little of that, but surely not. He had known Tuon a matter of weeks and kidnapped her, she called him Toy, had tried to buy him, and only a vain fool could twist that into a woman falling in love. Which left anything from some elaborate scheme for revenge to . . . to the Light alone knew what. She had threatened to make him a cupbearer. That meant *da'covale*, according to Egeanin, though she had scoffed at the notion. Cupbearers were chosen for their beauty, and in Egeanin's estimation, he fell far short. Well, in his own as well, truth to tell, not that he was likely to admit it to anybody. Any number of women had admired his face. Nothing said Tuon could not complete the marriage ceremony just to make him think himself home free and safe, then have him executed. Women were never simple, but Tuon made the rest look like children's games.

For a long while they saw not so much as a farm, but perhaps two hours after the sun passed its zenith, they came on a sizable village. The ring of a blacksmith's hammer on an anvil sounded dimly. The buildings, some of three stories, were all heavy timber framing with whitish plaster between and had high-peaked roofs of thatch and tall stone chimneys. Something about them tugged at Mat's memory, but he could not say what. There was not a farm to be seen anywhere in the unbroken forest. But villages were always tied to farms, supporting them and living off them. They must all be further in from the road, back in the trees.

Oddly, the people he could see ignored the approaching train of show wagons. A fellow in his shirtsleeves, right beside the road, glanced up from the hatchet he was sharpening on a grindstone worked by a footpedal, then bent to his work again as though he had seen nothing. A cluster of children came hurtling around a corner and darted into another street without more than a glance in the show's direction. Very odd. Most village children would stop to stare at a passing merchant's train, speculating on the strange places the merchant had been, and the show had more wagons than any number of merchants' trains. A peddler was coming from the north behind six horses, his wagon's high canvas cover almost hidden by clusters of pots and pans and kettles. That should have caused interest, too. Even a large village on a well-traveled road depended on peddlers for most things the people bought.

But no one pointed or shouted that a peddler had come. They just went on about their business.

Perhaps three hundred paces short of the village, Luca stood up on his driver's seat and looked back over the roof of his wagon. "We'll turn in here," he bellowed, gesturing toward a large meadow where wildflowers, cat daisies and jumpups and something that might have been loversknots dotted spring grasses already a foot high. Sitting back down, he suited his own words, and the other wagons began following, their wheels rutting the rain-sodden ground.

As Mat turned Pips toward the meadow, he heard the shoes of the peddler's horses ringing on paving stones. The sound jerked him upright. That road had not been paved since . . . He pulled the gelding back around. The canvas-topped wagon was rolling over level gray paving stones that stretched just the width of the village. The peddler himself, a rotund fellow in a wide hat, was peering at the pavement and shaking his head, peering at the village and shaking his head. Peddlers followed fixed routes. He must have been this way a hundred times. He had to know. The peddler halted his team and tied the reins to the brake handle.

Mat cupped both hands around his mouth. "Keep going, man!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "As fast as you can! Keep going!"

The peddler glanced in his direction, then hopped up on his seat quite spryly for such a stout man. Gesturing as grandly as Luca, he began to declaim. Mat could not make out the words, but he knew what they would be. News of the world that he had picked up along the way interspersed with lists of his goods and claims for their vast superiority. Nobody in the village stopped to listen or even paused.

"Keep going!" Mat bellowed. "They're dead! Keep going!" Behind him, somebody gasped, Tuon or Selucia. Maybe both.

Suddenly the peddler's horses screamed, tossing their heads madly. They screamed like animals beyond the ragged edge of terror and kept screaming.

Pips jerked in fear, and Mat had his hands full; the gelding danced in circles, wanting to run, in any direction so long as it was away from here. Every horse belonging to the show heard those screams and began whinnying fearfully. The lions and bears began roaring, and the leopards joined in. That set some of the show's horses to screaming, too, and rearing in their harnesses. The tumult built on itself in moments. As Mat swung round, struggling to control Pips, everyone he could see handling reins was fighting to keep a wild-eyed team from racing off or injuring themselves. Tuon's mare was dancing, too, and Selucia's dun. He had a moment of fear for Tuon, but she seemed to be handling Akein as well as she had in her race into the forest. Even Selucia seemed sure of her seat, if not of her mount. He caught glimpses of the peddler, as well, pulling off his hat, peering toward the show. At last, Mat got Pips under control. Blowing hard, as if he had been run too hard for too long, but no longer trying to race away. It was too late. Likely, it had always been too late. Hat in hand, the round peddler leaped down to see what was the matter with his horses.

Landing, he lurched awkwardly and looked down toward his feet. His hat fell from his hand, landing on the hardpacked road. That was when he began screaming. The paving stones were gone, and he was ankle-deep in the road, just like his shrieking horses. Ankle-deep and sinking into rock-hard clay as if into a bog, just like his horses and his wagon. And the village, houses and people melting slowly into the ground. The people never stopped what they were doing. Women walked along carrying baskets, a line of men carried a large timber on their shoulders, children darted about, the fellow at the grindstone continued sharpening his hatchet, all of them nearly knee-deep in the ground by this time.

Tuon caught Mat's coat from one side, Selucia from the other. That was the first he realized he had moved Pips. Toward the peddler. Light!

"What do you think you can do?" Tuon demanded fiercely.

"Nothing," he replied. His bow was done, the horn nocks fitted, the linen bowstrings braided and waxed, but he had not fitted one arrowhead to its ash shaft yet, and with all the rain they had been having, the glue holding the goose-feather fletchings was still tacky. That was all he could think of, the mercy of an arrow in the peddler's heart before he was pulled under completely. Would the man die, or was he being carried to wherever those dead Shiotans were going? That was what had caught him about those buildings. That was how country people had built in Shiota for near enough three hundred years.

He could not tear his eyes away. The sinking peddler shrieked loudly enough to be heard over the screaming of his team.

"Help meeee!" he cried, waving his arms. He seemed to be looking straight at Mat. "Help meeee!" Over and over.

Mat kept waiting for him to die, hoping for him to die—surely that was better than the other—but the man kept on screaming as he sank to his waist, to his chest. Desperately, he tipped back his head like a man being pulled under water, sucking for one last breath. Then his head vanished, and just his arms remained, frantically waving until they, too, were gone. Only his hat lying on the road said there had ever been a man there.

When the last of the thatched rooftops and tall chimneys melted away, Mat let out a long breath. Where the village had been was another meadow decked out in cat daisies and jumpups where red and yellow butterflies fluttered from blossom to blossom. So peaceful. He wished he could believe the peddler was dead.

Except for the few that had followed Luca into the meadow, the show's wagons stood strung out along the road, and everybody was down on the ground, women comforting crying children, men trying to quiet trembling horses, everyone talking fearfully, and loudly, to be heard over the bears and the lions and the leopards. Well, everyone except the three Aes Sedai. They glided hurriedly up the road, Joline heeled by Blaeric and Fen. By their expressions, Aes Sedai and Warders alike, you might have thought villages sinking into the ground were as common as house cats. Pausing beside the peddler's wide hat, the three of them stared down at it. Teslyn picked it up and turned it over in her hands, then let it drop. Moving into the meadow where the village had stood, the sisters walked about talking, peering at this and that as if they could learn something from wildflowers and grasses. None had taken the time to don a cloak, but for once Mat could not find it in him to upbraid them. They might have channeled, but if so they did not use enough of the Power to make the foxhead turn chilly. He would not have taken them to task if they had. Not today, not after what he had just seen.

The arguing started right away. No one wanted to cross that patch of hard-packed clay that seemingly had been paved with stone. They shouted over one another, including the horse handlers and the seamstresses, all telling Luca what had to be done, and right now. Some wanted to turn back far enough to find a country road and use those narrower ways to find their way to Lugard. Others were for forgetting Lugard altogether, for striking out for Illian by those country roads, or even going all the way back to Ebou Dar and beyond. There was always Amadicia, and Tarabon. Ghealdan, too, for that matter. Plenty of towns and cities there, and far from this Shadow-cursed spot.

Mat sat Pips' saddle, idly playing with his reins, and held his peace through all the shouting and arm-waving. The gelding gave a shiver now and then, but he was no longer attempting to bolt. Thom came striding through the crowd and laid a hand on Pips' neck. Juilin and Amathera were close behind, she clinging to him and eyeing the showfolk fearfully, and then Noal and Olver. The boy looked as though he would have liked to cling to someone for comfort, to anyone, but he was old enough not to want it seen if he did. Noal appeared troubled, too, shaking his head and muttering under his breath. He kept peering up the road toward the Aes Sedai. Doubtless by that night he would be claiming to have seen something very like this before, only on a much grander scale.

"I think we'll be going on alone from here," Thom said quietly. Juilin nodded grimly.

"If we must," Mat replied. Small parties would stand out for those who were hunting for Tuon, for the kidnapped heir to the Seanchan Empire, else he would have left the show long since. Making their way to safety without the show to hide in would be much more dangerous, but it could be done. What he could not do was turn these people's minds. One glance into any of those frightened faces told him he did not have enough gold for that. There might not have been enough gold in the world.

Luca listened in silence, a bright red cloak wrapped around him, until most of the showfolk's energy was spent. When their shouts began to trickle away, he flung back the cloak and walked among them. There were no grand gestures, now. Here he clapped a man on the shoulder, there peered earnestly into a woman's eyes. The country roads? They would be half mud, more streams than roads, from the spring rains. It would take twice as long to reach Lugard that way, three times, maybe longer. Mat almost choked to hear Luca invoke speed, but the man was hardly warming up. He talked of the labor of freeing wagons that bogged down, made his listeners all but see themselves straining to help the teams pull them through mud nearly hub-deep on the wagon wheels. Not even a country road would get that bad, but he made them see it. At least, he made Mat see it. Towns of any size would be few and far between along those back roads, the villages tiny for the most part. Few places to perform, and food for so many hard to come by. He said that while smiling sadly at a little girl of six or so who was peering up at him from the shelter of her mother’s skirts, and you just knew he was envisioning her hungry and crying for food. More than one woman pulled her children close around her.

As for Amadicia and Tarabon, and yes, Ghealdan, they would be fine places to perform. Valan Luca’s Grand Traveling Show and Magnificent Display of Marvels and Wonders would visit those lands and draw immense crowds. One day. To reach any of them now, they must first return to Ebou Dar, covering the same ground they had crossed these past weeks, passing the same towns, where people were unlikely to lay out coin to see again what they had seen so short a time before. A long way, with everyone’s purses growing lighter and their bellies tighter by the day. Or, they could press on to Lugard.

Here his voice began to take on energy. He gestured, but simply. He still moved among them, but stepping more quickly. Lugard was a grand city. Ebou Dar was a shadow beside Lugard. Lugard *truly* was one of the great cities, so populous they might perform there all spring and always have new crowds. Mat had never been to Lugard, but he had heard it was half a ruin, with a king who could not afford to keep the streets clean, yet Luca made it sound akin to Caemlyn. Surely some of these people had seen the place, but they listened with rapt faces as he described palaces that made the Tarasin Palace in Ebou Dar seem a hovel, talked of the silk-clad nobles by the score who would come to see them perform or even commission private performances. Surely King Roedran would want such. Had any of them ever performed before a king before? They would. They would. From Lugard, to Caemlyn, a city that made Lugard look an imitation of a city. Caemlyn, one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the world, where they might perform the whole summer to never-ending throngs.

“I should like to see these cities,” Tuon said, moving Akein nearer to Pips. “Will you show them to me, Toy?” Selucia kept the dun at Tuon’s hip. The woman looked composed enough, but doubtless she was shaken by what she had seen.

“Lugard, maybe. From there I can find a way to send you back to Ebou Dar.” With a well-guarded merchant’s train and as many reliable bodyguards as he could hire. Tuon might be as capable and dangerous as Egeanin made out, but two women alone would be seen as easy prey by too many, and not just brigands. “Maybe Caemlyn.” He might need more time than from here to Lugard, after all.

“We shall see what we shall see,” Tuon replied cryptically, then began exchanging finger-wriggles with Selucia.

Talking about me behind my back, only doing it right under my nose. He hated it when they did that. “Luca’s as good as a gleeman, Thom, but I don’t think he’s going to sway them.”

Thom snorted derisively and knuckled his long white mustaches. “He’s not bad, I’ll grant him that, but he’s no gleeman. Still, he’s caught them, I’d say. A wager on it, my boy? Say one gold crown?”

Mat surprised himself by laughing. He had been sure he would not be able to laugh again until he could rid his head of the image of that peddler sinking into the road. And the horses. He could almost hear them screaming still, loudly enough that it came near to drowning out the dice. “You want to wager with *me*? Very well. Done.”

“I wouldn’t play at dice with you,” Thom said dryly, “but I know a man turning a crowd’s head with words when I see it. I’ve done as much myself.”

Finishing with Caemlyn, Luca gathered himself with a spark of his usual grandiosity. The man strutted. “And from there,” he announced, “to Tar Valon itself. I will hire ships to carry us all.” Mat did choke at that. Luca would hire *ships*? *Luca,* who was tight enough to render mice for tallow? “Such crowds will come in Tar Valon that we could spend the rest of our lives in that vast city’s splendor, where Ogier-built shops seem like palaces and palaces are beyond description. Rulers seeing Tar Valon for the first time weep that their cities are villages and their own palaces no more than peasant’s huts. The White Tower itself is in Tar Valon, remember, the greatest structure in the world. The Amyrlin Seat herself will ask us to perform before her. We have given shelter to three Aes Sedai in need. Who can believe they will do other than speak for us with the Amyrlin Seat?”

Mat looked over his shoulder, and found the three sisters no longer wandering about the meadow where the village had vanished. Instead, they stood side by side in the road watching him, perfect images of Aes Sedai serenity. No, they were not watching him, he realized. They were studying Tuon. The three had agreed not to bother her anymore, and being Aes Sedai, were bound by that, but how far did an Aes Sedai’s word ever go? They found ways around the Oath against lying all the time. So Tuon would not get to see Caemlyn, and perhaps not Lugard. Chances were, there would be Aes Sedai in both cities. What easier for Joline and the others than to inform those Aes Sedai that Tuon was a Seanchan High Lady? In all likelihood, Tuon would be on her way to Tar Valon before he could blink. As a “guest,” of course, to help stop the fighting. No doubt many would say that would be for the good, that he should hand her over himself and tell them who she really was, but he had given his word. He began to calculate how near to Lugard he dared wait before finding her passage back to Ebou Dar.

Luca had had a difficult time making Tar Valon sound greater than Caemlyn after his spiel on that city, and if they ever reached Tar Valon, some might actually be disappointed comparing his mad descriptions—the White Tower a thousand paces high? Ogier-built palaces the size of small mountains? he claimed there was an Ogier *stedding* actually inside the city!—but finally he called for a show of hands in favor of pressing on. Every hand shot up, even the children’s hands, and they had no vote.

Mat pulled a purse from his coat pocket and handed over an Ebou Dari crown. “I never enjoyed losing more, Thom.” Well, he *never* enjoyed losing, but in this instance it was better than winning.

Thom accepted with a small bow. “I think I’ll keep this as a memento,” he said, rolling the fat gold coin across the back of his fingers. “To remind me that even the luckiest man in the world can lose.”

For all of the show of hands, there was a shadow of reluctance to cross that patch of road ahead. After Luca got his wagon back onto the road, he sat staring, with Latelle clinging to his arm as hard as Amathera ever clung to Juilin. Finally, he muttered something that might have been an oath and whipped his team up with the reins. By the time they reached the fatal stretch, they were at a gallop, and Luca kept them there until well beyond where the paving stones had been. It was the same with every wagon. A pause, waiting until the wagon ahead was clear, then a flailing of reins and a hard gallop. Mat himself drew a deep breath before heeling Pips forward. At a walk, not a gallop, but it was hard not to dig his heels in, especially when passing the peddler’s hat. Tuon’s dark face and Selucia’s pale displayed no more emotion than Aes Sedai’s faces did.

“I will see Tar Valon one day,” Tuon said calmly in the middle of that. “I shall probably make it my capital. I shall have you show me the city, Toy. You *have* been there?”

Light! She was a tough little woman. Gorgeous, but definitely tough as nails.

After slowing from his gallop, Luca set the pace at a fast walk rather than the show's usual amble. The sun slid lower, and they passed several roadside meadows sufficiently large to hold the show, but Luca pressed on until their shadows stretched long ahead of them and the sun was a fat red ball on the horizon. Even then he sat holding the reins and peering at a grassy expanse beside the road.

"It's just a field," he said at last, too loudly, and turned his team toward it.

Mat accompanied Tuon and Selucia to the purple wagon once the horses had been handed over to Metwyn, but there was to be no meal or games of stones with her that night.

"This is a night for prayer," she told him before going in with her maid. "Do you know nothing, Toy? The dead walking is a sign that Tarmon Gai'don is near." He did not take this for one of her superstitions; after all, he had thought something very like that himself. He was not much for praying, yet he offered a small one then and there. Sometimes there was nothing else to do.

No one wanted to sleep, so lamps burned late throughout the camp. No one wanted to be alone, either. Mat ate by himself in his tent, with little appetite and the dice in his head sounding louder than ever, but Thom came to play stones just as he finished, and Noal soon after. Lopin and Nerim popped in every few minutes, bowing and inquiring whether Mat or the others wanted anything, but once they fetched wine and cups—Lopin carried the tall pottery jar and broke the wax seal; Nerim carried the cups on a wooden tray—Mat told them to find Harnan and the other soldiers.

"I don't doubt they're getting drunk, which seems a good notion to me," he said. "That's an order. You tell them I said to share."

Lopin bowed gravely over his round belly. "I have assisted the file leader now and again by procuring a few items for him, my Lord. I expect he will be generous with the brandy. Come along, Nerim. Lord Mat wants us to get drunk, and you are getting drunk with me if I have to sit on you and pour brandy down your throat." The abstemious Cairhienin's narrow face grew pinched with disapproval, but he bowed and followed the Tairen out with alacrity. Mat did not think Lopin would need to sit on the man, not tonight.

Juilin came with Amathera and Olver, so games of Snakes and Foxes, played sprawled on the ground-cloth, were added to stones played at the small table. Amathera proved an adequate player at stones, unsurprising given that she had been a ruler once, but her mouth became even more pouty when she and Olver lost at Snakes and Foxes, although nobody ever won that game. Then again, Mat suspected she had not been a very good ruler. Whoever was not playing sat on the cot. Mat watched the games when it was his turn there, as did Juilin if Amathera was playing. He seldom took his eyes from her except when it was his turn at a game. Noal nattered on with his stories—but then, he spun those tales even while playing, and talking seemed to have no effect on his skill at stones—and Thom sat reading the letter Mat had brought him what seemed a very long time ago. The page was heavily creased from being carried in Thom's coat pocket and much smudged from being read and re-read. He had said it was from a dead woman.

It was a surprise when Domon and Egeanin ducked through the entry flaps. They had not precisely been avoiding Mat since he moved out of the green wagon, but neither had they gone out of their way to seek him out. Like everyone else, they were in better clothes than they had worn for disguises in the beginning. Egeanin's divided skirts and high-collared coat, both of blue wool and embroidered in a yellow near to gold on the hem and cuffs, had something of a uniform about them, while Domon, in a well-cut brown coat and baggy trousers stuffed into turned-down boots just below his knees, looked every inch the prosperous, if not exactly wealthy, Illianer merchant.

As soon as Egeanin entered, Amathera, who was on the ground-cloth with Olver, curled herself into a ball on her knees. Juilin sighed and got up from the stool across the table from Mat, but Egeanin reached the other woman first.

"There's no need for that, with me or anyone else," she drawled, bending to take Amathera by the shoulders and draw her to her feet. Amathera rose slowly, hesitantly, and kept her eyes down until Egeanin put a hand beneath her chin and raised her head gently. "You look me in the eyes. You look everyone in the eyes." The Taraboner woman touched her tongue to her lips nervously, but she did keep looking straight at Egeanin's face when the hand was removed from her chin. On the other hand, her eyes were very wide.

"This is a change," Juilin said suspiciously. And with a touch of anger. He stood stiff as a statue carved from dark wood. He disliked any Seanchan, for what they had done to Amathera. “You’ve called me a thief for freeing her.” There was more than a touch of anger in that. He hated thieves. And smugglers, which Domon was.

“All things change given time,” Domon said jovially, smiling to head off more heated words. “Why, you do be looking at an honest man, Master Thief-catcher. Leilwin did make me promise to give up smuggling before she would agree to marry me. Fortune prick me, who did ever hear of a woman refusing to marry a man unless he did give up a lucrative trade?” He laughed as though that were the funniest joke in the world.

Egeanin fisted him in the ribs hard enough to change his laughter to a grunt. Married to her, his ribs must be a mass of bruises. “I expect you to keep that promise, Bayle. I am changing, and so must you.” Eyeing Amathera briefly—perhaps to make sure she was still obeying; Egeanin was big on others doing as she told them—she stuck out a hand toward Juilin. “I am changing, Master Sandar. Will you?”

Juilin hesitated, then clasped her hand. “I’ll make a try at it.” He sounded doubtful.

“An honest try is all I ask.” Frowning around the tent, she shook her head. “I’ve seen orlop decks less crowded than this. We have some decent wine in our wagon, Master Sandar. Will you and your lady join us in a cup or two?”

Again Juilin hesitated. “He has this game all but won,” he said finally. “No point in playing it out.” Clapping his conical red hat on his head, he adjusted his dark, flaring Tairen coat unnecessarily, and offered his arm to Amathera formally. She clasped it tightly, and though her eyes were still on Egeanin’s face, she trembled visibly. “I expect Olver will want to stay here and play his game, but my lady and I will be pleased to share wine with you and your husband, Mistress Shipless.” There was a hint of challenge in his gaze. It was clear that to him, Egeanin had further to go to prove she no longer saw Amathera as stolen property.

Egeanin nodded as if she understood perfectly. “The Light shine on you tonight, and for as many days and nights as we have remaining,” she said by way of farewell to those staying. Cheerful of her.

No sooner had the four departed than thunder boomed overhead. Another loud peal, and rain began pattering on the tent roof, quickly growing to a downpour that drummed the green-striped canvas. Unless Juilin and the others had run, they would do their drinking wet.

Noal settled on the other side of the red cloth from Olver and took up Amathera's part of the game, rolling the dice for the snakes and the foxes. The black discs that now represented Olver and him were nearly to the edge of the web-marked cloth, but it was evident to any eye that they would not make it. To any eye but Olver's, at least. He groaned loudly when a pale disc inked with a wavy line, a snake, touched his piece, and again when a disc marked with a triangle touched Noal's.

Noal took up the tale he had left off when Egeanin and Domon appeared, as well, a story of some supposed voyage on a Sea Folk raker. "Atha'an Miere women are the most graceful in the world," he said, moving the black discs back to the circle in the center of the board, "even more so than Domani, and you know that's saying something. And when they're out of sight of land—" He cut off abruptly and cleared his throat, eyeing Olver, who was stacking the snakes and foxes on the board's corners.

"What do they do then?" Olver asked.

"Why. . . ." Noal rubbed his nose with a gnarled finger. "Why, they scramble about the rigging so nimbly you'd think they had hands where their feet should be. That's what they do." Olver oohed, and Noal gave a soft sigh of relief.

Mat began removing the black and white stones from the board on the table, placing them in two carved wooden boxes. The dice in his head bounced and rattled even when the thunder was loudest. "Another game, Thom?"

The white-haired man looked up from his letter. "I think not, Mat. My mind's in a maze, tonight."

"If you don't mind my asking, Thom, why do you read that letter the way you do? I mean, sometimes your face looks like you're trying to puzzle out what it means." Olver yelped with glee at a good toss of the dice.

"That's because I am. In a way. Here." He held out the letter, but Mat shook his head.

"It's no business of mine, Thom. It's your letter, and I'm no good with puzzles."

"Oh, it's your business, too. Moiraine wrote it just before. . . . Well, anyway, she wrote it."

Mat stared at him for a long moment before taking the creased page, and when his eyes fell on the smudged ink, he blinked. Small, precise writing covered the sheet, but it began, “My dearest Thom.” Who would have thought Moiraine, of all people, would address old Thom Merrilin so? “Thom, this is personal. I don’t think I should—”

“Read,” Thom cut in. “You’ll see.”

Mat drew a deep breath. A letter from a dead Aes Sedai that was a puzzle and concerned him in some way? Suddenly, he wanted nothing less than to read the thing. But he began anyway. It was near enough to make his hair stand on end.

> *My dearest Thom,*
>
> *There are many words I would like to write to you, words from my heart, but I have put this off because I knew that I must, and now there is little time. There are many things I cannot tell you lest I bring disaster, but what I can, I will. Heed carefully what I say. In a short while I will go down to the docks, and there I will confront Lanfear. How can I know that? That secret belongs to others. Suffice it that I know, and let that foreknowledge stand as proof for the rest of what I say.*
>
> *When you receive this, you will be told that I am dead. All will believe that. I am not dead, and it may be that I shall live to my appointed years. It also may be that you and Mat Cauthon and another, a man I do not know, will try to rescue me. May, I say because it may be that you will not or cannot, or because Mat may refuse. He does not hold me in the affection you seem to, and he has his reasons which he no doubt thinks are good. If you try, it must be only you and Mat and one other. More will mean death for all. Fewer will mean death for all. Even if you come only with Mat and one other, death also may come. I have seen you try and die, one or two or all three. I have seen myself die in the attempt. I have seen all of us live and die as captives.*
>
> *Should you decide to make the attempt anyway, young Mat knows the way to find me, yet you must not show him this letter until he asks about it. That is of the utmost importance. He must know nothing that is in this letter until he asks. Events must play out in certain ways, whatever the costs.*
>
> *If you see Lan again, tell him that all of this is for the best. His destiny follows a different path from mine. I wish him all*

> *happiness with Nynaeve.*
>
> *A final point. Remember what you know about the game of Snakes and Foxes. Remember, and heed.*
>
> *It is time, and I must do what must be done.*
>
> *May the Light illumine you and give you joy, my dearest Thom, whether or not we ever see one another again.*
>
> *Moiraine*

Thunder boomed as he finished. Fitting, that. Shaking his head, he handed the letter back. “Thom,” he said gently, “Lan’s bond to her was broken. It takes death to do that. He *said* she was dead.”

“And her letter says everyone would believe that. She knew, Mat. She knew it all in advance.”

“That’s as may be, but Moiraine and Lanfear went into that doorframe *ter’angreal*, and it melted. The thing was redstone, or looked to be, *stone*, Thom, yet it melted like wax. I *saw* it. She went to wherever the Eelfinn are, and even if she is alive, there’s no way for us to get there anymore.”

“The Tower of Ghenjei,” Olver piped up, and all three adults turned their heads to stare at him. “Birgitte told me,” he said defensively. “The Tower of Ghenjei is the way to the lands of the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn.” He made the gesture that began a game of Snakes and Foxes, a triangle drawn in the air and then a wavy line through it. “She knows even more stories than you, Master Charin.”

“That wouldn’t be Birgitte Silverbow, would it?” Noal said wryly.

The boy gave him a level look. “I’m not an infant, Master Charin. But she is very good with a bow, so maybe she is. Birgitte born again, I mean.”

“I don’t think there’s any chance of that,” Mat said. “I’ve talked with her, too, you know, and the last thing she wants is to be any kind of hero.” He kept his promises, and Birgitte’s secrets were safe with him. “In any case, knowing about this tower doesn’t help much unless she told you where it is.” Olver shook his head sadly, and Mat bent to ruffle his hair. “Not your fault, boy. Without you, we wouldn’t even know it exists.” That did not seem to help much. Olver stared at the red cloth game board dejectedly.

“The Tower of Ghenjei,” Noal said, sitting up cross-legged and tugging his coat straight. “Not many know that tale anymore. Jain always said he'd go looking for it one day. Somewhere along the Shadow Coast, he said."

"That's still a lot of ground to search." Mat fitted the lid on one of the boxes. "It could take years." Years they did not have if Tuon was right, and he was sure that she was.

Thom shook his head. "She says you know, Mat. 'Mat knows the way to find me.' I doubt very much she'd have written that on a whim."

"Well, I can't help what she says, now can I? I never heard of any Tower of Ghenjei until tonight."

"A pity," Noal sighed. "I'd like to have seen it, something Jain bloody Farstrider never did. You might as well give over," he added when Thom opened his mouth. "He wouldn't forget seeing it, and even if he never heard the name, he'd have to think of it when he heard of a strange tower that lets people into other lands. The thing gleams like burnished steel, I'm told, two hundred feet high and forty thick, and there's not an opening to be found in it. Who could forget seeing that?"

Mat went very still. His black scarf felt too tight against his hanging scar. The scar itself suddenly felt fresh and hot. It was hard for him to draw breath.

"If there's no opening, how do we get in?" Thom wanted to know.

Noal shrugged, but Olver spoke up once more. "Birgitte says you make the sign on the side of it anywhere with a bronze knife." He made the sign that started the game. "She says it has to be a bronze knife. Make the sign, and a door opens."

"What else did she tell you about—" Thom began, then cut off with a frown. "What ails you, Mat? You look about to sick up."

What ailed him was his memory, and not the other men's memories for once. Those had been stuffed into him to fill holes in his own memories, which they did and more, or so it seemed. He certainly remembered many more days than he had lived. But whole stretches of his own life were lost to him, and others were like moth-riddled blankets or shadowy and dim. He had only spotty memories of fleeing Shadar Logoth, and very vague recollections of escaping on Domon's rivership, but one thing seen on that voyage stood out. A tower shining like burnished steel. Sick up? His stomach wanted to empty itself.

"I think I know where that tower is, Thom. Rather, Domon knows. But I can't go with you. The Eelfinn will know I'm coming, maybe the Aelfinn, too. Burn me, they might already know about this letter, because I read it. They might know every word we've said. You can't trust them. They'll take advantage if they can, and if they know you're coming, they'll be planning to do just that. They'll skin you and make harnesses for themselves from your hide." His memories of them were all his own, but they were more than enough to support the judgment.

They stared at him as if he were mad, even Olver. There was nothing for it but to tell them about his encounters with the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn. As much as was needful, at least. Not about his answers from the Aelfinn, certainly, or his two gifts from the Eelfinn. But the other men's memories were necessary to explain what he had reasoned out about the Eelfinn and Aelfinn having links to him, now. And the pale leather harnesses the Eelfinn wore; those seemed important. And how they had tried to kill him. That was very important. He had said he wanted to leave and failed to say alive, so they took him outside and hanged him. He even removed the scarf to show his scar for extra weight, and he seldom let anybody see that. The three of them listened in silence, Thom and Noal intently, Olver's mouth slowly dropping open in wonder. The rain beating on the tent roof was the only sound aside from his voice.

"That all has to stay inside this tent," he finished. "Aes Sedai have enough reasons already to want to put their hands on me. If they find out about those memories, I'll never be free of them." *Would* he ever be entirely free of them? He was beginning to think not, yet there was no reason to give them fresh reasons to meddle in his life.

"Are *you* any relation to Jain?" Noal raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Peace, man. I believe you. It's just, that tops anything I ever did. Anything Jain ever did, too. Would you mind if I made the third? I can be handy in tight spots, you know."

"Burn me, did everything I said pass in one ear and out the other? They'll know I'm coming. They may already know everything!"

"And it doesn't matter," Thom put in, "not to me. I'll go by myself, if necessary. But if I read this correctly," he began folding the letter up, almost tenderly, "the only hope of success is if you are one of the three." He sat there on the cot, silent now, looking Mat in the eye.

Mat wanted to look away, and could not. Bloody Aes Sedai! The woman almost certainly was dead, and yet she still tried coercing him into being a hero. Well, heroes got patted on the head and pushed out of the way until the next time a hero was needed, if they survived being a hero in the first place. Very often heroes did not. He had never really trusted Moiraine, or liked her either. Only fools trusted Aes Sedai. But then, if not for her, he would be back in the Two Rivers mucking out the barn and tending his da’s cows. Or he would be dead. And there old Thom sat, saying nothing, just staring at him. That was the rub. He liked Thom. *Oh, blood and bloody ashes.*

“Burn me for a fool,” he muttered. “I’ll go.”

Thunder crashed deafeningly right atop a flash of lightning so bright it shone through the tent canvas. When the rumbling booms faded, there was dead silence in his head. The last set of dice had stopped. He could have wept.

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CHAPTER 11

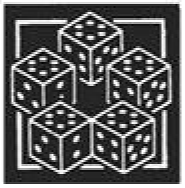

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A Hell in Maderin

Despite the late hours kept by everyone that night, the show made a very early start the next morning. Grainy-eyed and groggy, Mat trudged out of his tent while the sky was still dark to find men and women with lanterns trotting to get ready when they were not running, and nearly everyone shouting for somebody or other to move faster. Many had the unsteady step of people who had not slept. Everyone seemed to feel that the farther they could get from where that village had vanished in front of their eyes, the better. Luca's great gaudy wagon took to the road before the sun had cleared the horizon, and once again he set a goodly pace. Two merchants' trains of twenty or so wagons each passed them heading south, and a slow caravan of Tinkers, but nothing going the other way. The farther, the better.

Mat rode with Tuon, and Selucia made no attempt to put the dun between them, yet there was no conversation however much he tried to start one. Save for an occasional unreadable glance when he made a sally or told a joke, Tuon rode looking straight ahead, the cowl of her blue cloak hiding her face. Even juggling failed to catch her attention. There was something broody about her silence, and it worried him. When a woman went silent on you, there usually was trouble in the offing. When she brooded, you could forget about usually. He doubted it was the village of the dead that had her fretting. She was too tough for that. No, there was trouble ahead.

Little more than an hour after they set out, a farm on rolling ground hove into sight, with dozens of black-faced goats cropping grass in a wide pasture and a large olive grove. Boys weeding among the rows of dark-leaved olive trees dropped their hoes and rushed down to the stone fences to watch the show pass, shouting with excitement to know who they were and where they were going and where coming from. Men and women came out of the sprawling tile-roofed farmhouse and two big thatch-roofed barns, shading their eyes to watch. Mat was relieved to see it. The dead paid no mind to the living.

As the show rolled onward, farms and olive groves grew thicker on the ground until they ran side by side, pushing the forest back a mile or more on either side of the road, and well short of midmorning they reached a prosperous town somewhat larger than Jurador. A merchant's long train of canvas-topped wagons was turning in at the main gates, where half a dozen men in polished conical helmets and leather coats sewn with steel discs stood guard with halberds. More men, cradling crossbows, kept watch atop the two gate towers. But if the Lord of Maderin, one Nathin Sarmain Vendare, expected trouble, the guards were the only sign of it. Farms and olive groves reached right to the stone walls of Maderin, an unsound practice, and right costly should the town ever need to be defended. Luca had to bargain with a farmer for the right to set up the show in an unused pasture and came back muttering that he had just bought the scoundrel a new flock of goats or maybe two. But the canvas wall was soon rising, with Luca chivvying everyone for speed. They were to perform today and leave early in the morning. Very early. Nobody complained, or much said an unneeded word. The farther, the better.

"And tell no one what you saw," Luca cautioned more than once. "We saw nothing out of the ordinary. We wouldn't want to frighten the patrons away." People looked at him as if he were insane. No one wanted to think of that melting village or the peddler, much less speak of them.

Mat was sitting in his tent in his shirtsleeves, waiting for Thom and Juilin to return from their trip into the town to learn whether there was a Seanchan presence. He was idly tossing a set of dice on his small table. After an early run of mostly high numbers, five single pips stared up at him ten times in a row; most men thought the Dark One's eyes an unlucky toss.

Selucia pulled back the entry flap and strode in. Despite her plain brown divided skirts and white blouse, she managed to seem a queen entering a stable. A filthy stable, by the expression on her face, though Lopin and Nerim could have satisfied his mother when it came to cleaning.

"She wants you," she drawled peremptorily, touching her flowered scarf to make sure her short yellow hair was covered. "Come."

"What's she want with me, then?" he said, and leaned his elbows on the table. He even stretched out his legs and crossed his ankles. Once you let a woman think you would jump whenever she called, you never got out from under again.

"She'll tell you. You are wasting time, Toy. She won't be pleased."

"If Precious expects me to come running when she crooks a finger, she better learn to like being displeased."

Grimacing—if her mistress tolerated the name, Selucia took it for a personal affront—she folded her arms beneath that impressive bosom.

It was clear as good glass that she intended to wait there until he went with her, and he was of a mind to make it a long wait. He tossed the dice.

The Dark One’s Eyes. Expecting him to jump when Tuon said toad. Hah! Another toss, spinning across the table, one die nearly going over the edge. The Dark One’s Eyes. Still, he had nothing else to do at the moment.

Even so, he took his time donning his coat, a good bronze-colored silk. By the time he picked up his hat, he could hear her foot tapping impatiently. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he asked. She hissed at him. She held the entry flap open, but she purely hissed like a cat.

Setalle and Tuon were sitting on one of the beds talking when he entered the purple wagon, but they cut off the instant he stepped through the door and gave him brief but appraising looks. Which told him the subject of their talk had been Mat Cauthon. It made his hackles rise. Plainly, whatever Tuon wanted was something they thought he would disapprove of. And just as plainly, she meant to have it anyway. The table was snug against the ceiling, and Selucia brushed past him to take a place behind Tuon as the tiny woman sat down on the stool, her face stern and those beautiful big eyes steady. Hang all the prisoners immediately.

“I wish to visit the common room of an inn,” she announced. “Or a tavern. I have never seen the inside of either. You will take me to one in this town, Toy.”

He let himself breathe again. “That’s easy enough. Just as soon as Thom or Juilin lets me know it’s safe.”

“It must be a low place. What is called a hell.”

His mouth fell open. Low? Hells were the lowest of the low, dirty and dimly lit, where the ale and wine were cheap and still not worth half what you paid, the food was worse, and any woman who sat on your lap was trying to pick your pocket or cut your purse or else had two men waiting upstairs to crack you over the head as soon as you walked into her room. At any hour of the day or night you would find dice rolling in a dozen games, sometimes for surprising stakes given the surroundings. Not gold—only a stone fool displayed gold in a hell—but silver often crossed the tables. Few of the gamblers would have come by their coin by any means even halfway honest, and those few would be as hard-eyed as the headcrackers and knifemen who preyed on drunks in the night. Hells always had two or three strongarms with cudgels about to break up fights, and most days they worked hard for their pay. They usually stopped the patrons from killing one another, but when they failed, the corpse was dragged out the back and left in an alley somewhere or on a rubbish heap. And while they were dragging, the drinking never slowed, or the gambling either. That was a hell. How had she even heard of such places?

“Did you plant this fool notion in her head?” he demanded of Setalle.

“Why, what in the Light makes you think that?” she replied, going all wide-eyed the way women did when pretending to be innocent. Or when they wanted you to think they were pretending, just to confuse you. He could not see why they bothered. Women confused him all the time without trying.

“It’s out of the question, Precious. I walk into a hell with a woman like you, and I’ll be in six knife fights inside the hour, if I survive that long.”

Tuon gave a pleased smile. Just a flicker, but definitely pleased. “Do you really think so?”

“I know so for a fact.” Which produced another brief smile of delight. Delight! The bloody woman *wanted* to see him in a knife fight!

“Even so, Toy, you promised.”

They were arguing over whether he had made a promise—well, he was calmly presenting the logic that saying something was easy was no promise; Tuon just stubbornly insisted he had promised, while Setalle took up her embroidery hoop and Selucia watched him with the amused air of someone watching a man try to defend the indefensible; and he did not shout, no matter what Tuon said—when a knock came at the door.

Tuon paused. “You see, Toy,” she said after a moment, “that is how it is done. You knock and then wait.” She made a simple gesture over one shoulder at her maid.

“You may enter the presence,” Selucia called, drawing herself up regally. She probably expected whoever came in to prostrate themselves!

It was Thom, in a dark blue coat and dark gray cloak that would make him unremarked in any common room or tavern, neither well-to-do nor poor. A man who could afford to pay for his own drink while listening to the gossip, or buy another man a cup of wine to pay for hearing his news and the latest rumors. He did not prostrate himself, but he did make an elegant bow despite his bad right leg. “My Lady,” he murmured to Tuon before turning his attention to Mat. “Harnan said he saw you strolling this way. I trust I’m not interrupting? I heard . . . voices.”

Mat scowled. He had *not* been shouting. “You’re not interrupting. What did you find out?”

“That there may be Seanchan in the town from time to time. No soldiers, but it seems they’re building two farm villages a few miles to the north of the road and three more a few miles south. The villagers come to town to buy things now and then.”

Mat managed to keep from smiling as he spoke over his shoulder. He even got a smattering of regret into his voice. “I’m afraid there’s no jaunt into Maderin for you, Precious. Too dangerous.”

Tuon folded her arms, emphasizing her bosom. There were more curves to her than he once had thought. Not like Selucia, certainly, but nice curves. “Farmers, Toy,” she drawled dismissively. “No farmer has ever seen my face. You promised me a tavern or a common room, and you won’t escape on this puny excuse.”

“A common room should present no difficulties,” Thom said. “It’s a pair of scissors or a new pot these farmers are after, not drink. They make their own ale, it seems, and don’t much like the local brew.”

“Thank you, Thom,” Mat said through gritted teeth. “She wants to see a hell.”

The white-haired man gave a wheezing cough and knuckled his mustache vigorously. “A hell,” he muttered.

“A hell. Do *you* know a hell in this town where I might take her without starting a riot?” He intended the question for sarcasm, but Thom surprised him by nodding.

“I might just know a place at that,” the man said slowly. “The White Ring. I intend to go there anyway, to see what news I can pick up.”

Mat blinked. However unremarked Thom might be elsewhere, he would be looked at askance in a hell wearing that coat. More than askance. The usual garb there was coarse dirty wool and stained linen. Besides, asking questions in a hell was a good way to have a knife planted in your back. But maybe Thom meant that this White Ring was not a hell at all. Tuon might not know the difference if the place were only a little rougher than the usual. “Should I get Harnan and the others?” he asked, testing.

“Oh, I think you and I should be protection enough for the lady,” Thom said with what might have been the ghost of a smile, and knots loosened in Mat’s shoulders.

He still cautioned the two women—there was no question of Selucia staying behind, of course; Mistress Anan refused Tuon’s invitation to accompany them, saying she had already seen as many hells as she had any wish to—about keeping their hoods well up. Tuon might believe no farmer had ever seen her face, but if a cat could gaze on a king, as the old saying said, then a farmer might have gazed on Tuon some time or other, and it would be just their luck to have one or two of them turn up in Maderin. Being *ta'veren* usually seemed to twist the Pattern for the worst in his experience.

"Toy," Tuon said gently as Selucia settled the blue cloak on her slim shoulders, "I have met many farmers while visiting the country, but they very properly kept their eyes on the ground even if I allowed them to stand. Believe me, they never saw my face."

Oh. He went to fetch his own cloak. White clouds nearly obscured the sun, still short of its midday peak, and it was a brisk day for spring, with a strong breeze to boot.

People from the town crowded the main street of the show, men in rough woolens or sober coats of finer stuff with just a touch of embroidery on the cuffs; women, many wearing lace caps, in somber, collared dresses beneath long white aprons or dark, high-necked dresses with embroidery curling across the bosom; children darting everywhere, escaping their parents and being chased down, all of them oohing and aahing at Miyora's leopards or Latelle's bears, at the jugglers or Balat and Abar eating fire, the lean brothers moving in unison. Not pausing for so much as a glimpse of the female acrobats, Mat threaded through the throng with Tuon on his arm, which he assured by placing her hand on his left wrist. She hesitated a moment, then nodded slightly, a queen giving assent to a peasant. Thom had offered his arm to Selucia, but she stayed at her mistress's left shoulder. At least she did not try to crowd between.

Luca, in scarlet coat and cloak, was beneath the big banner at the entrance watching coins clink into the glass pitcher, clink again as they were dropped into the strongbox. He wore a smile on his face. The line waiting to get in stretched near a hundred paces along the canvas wall, and more people were trickling out of the town and heading toward the show. "I could take in a fine bit here over two or three days," he told Mat. "After all, this place is solid, and we're far enough from. . . ." His smile flickered out like a snuffed candle. "You think we're far enough, don't you?"

Mat sighed. Gold would defeat fear every time in Valan Luca.

He could not hold his cloak closed with Tuon on his arm, so it flared behind him in the stiff breeze, yet that was to the good. The gate guards, slouching in a ragged line, eyed them curiously, and one made a sketchy bow. Silk and lace had that effect, with country armsmen, at least, and that was what these men were no matter how brightly they had burnished their helmets and coin-armor coats. Most leaned on their halberds like farmers leaning on shovels. But Thom stopped, and Mat was forced to halt too, a few paces into the town. After all, he had no idea where The White Ring lay.

"A heavy guard, Captain," Thom said, worry touching his voice. "Are there brigands in the area?"

"No outlaws around here," a grizzled guard said gruffly. A puckered white scar slanting across his square face combined with a squint to give him a villainous appearance. He was not one of the leaners, and he held his halberd as if he might know how to use it. "The Seanchan cleaned out the few we hadn't caught. Move along, now, old fellow. You're blocking the way." There was not a wagon or cart in sight, and the few people leaving the town afoot had plenty of room. The gate arch was wide enough for two wagons abreast, though it might be a squeeze.

"The Seanchan said we didn't set enough guards," a stocky fellow about Mat's age put in cheerfully, "and Lord Nathin listens close when the Seanchan talk."

The grizzled man clouted him with a gauntleted hand on the back of his helmet hard enough to stagger him. "You watch your mouth with people from off, Keilar," the older man growled, "else you'll be back behind a plow before you can blink. My Lord," he added to Mat, raising his voice, "you want to call your servant before he gets himself in trouble."

"My apologies, Captain," Thom said humbly, ducking his white head, the very image of a chastened serving man. "No offense meant. My apologies."

"He would have thumped you, too, if I hadn't been here," Mat told him when he caught up. Thom was limping noticeably. He must have been tired for it to show that much. "He almost did anyway. And what did you learn that was worth risking that?"

"I wouldn't have asked without you, in that coat." Thom chuckled as they walked deeper into the town. "The first lesson is what questions to ask. The second, and just as important, is when and how to ask. I learned there aren't any brigands, which is always good to know, though I've heard of very few bands big enough to attack something as large as the show. I learned Nathin is under the Seanchan thumb. Either he's obeying a command with those extra guards, or he takes their suggestions as commands. And most important, I learned that Nathin's armsmen don't resent the Seanchan."

Mat quirked an eyebrow at him.

"They didn't spit when they said the name, Mat. They didn't grimace or growl. They won't fight the Seanchan, not unless Nathin tells them to, and he won't." Thom exhaled heavily. "It's very strange. I've found the same everywhere from Ebou Dar to here. These outlanders come, take charge, impose their laws, snatch up women who can channel, and if the nobles resent them, very few among the common people seem to. Unless they've had wife or relation collared, anyway. Very strange, and it bodes ill for getting them out again. But then, Altara is Altara. I'll wager they're finding a colder reception in Amadicia and Tarabon." He shook his head. "We had best hope they are, else. . . ." He did not say what else, but it was easy to imagine.

Mat glanced at Tuon. How did she feel hearing Thom talk about her people so? She said nothing, only walked at his side peering curiously at everything from the shelter of her cowl.

Tile-roofed buildings three and four stories tall, most of brick, lined the wide, stone-paved main street of Maderin, shops and inns with signs that swung in the stiff breeze crowded in beside stables and rich people's homes with large lamps above the arched doorways and humbler structures that housed poorer folk, by the laundry hanging from nearly every window. Horse carts and hand-barrows laden with bales or crates or barrels slowly made their way through a moderately thick throng, men and women with brisk strides, full of that storied southern industry, children dashing about in games of catch. Tuon studied it all with equal interest. A fellow pushing a wheeled grindstone and crying that he sharpened scissors or knives till they could cut wishes caught her attention as much as a lean, hard-faced woman in leather trousers with two swords strapped to her back. Doubtless a merchant's guard or perhaps a Hunter for the Horn, but a rarity either way. A buxom Domani in a clinging red dress that fell just short of transparent with a pair of bulky bodyguards in scale-armor jerkins at her back got neither more nor less study than a lanky one-eyed fellow in frayed wool hawking pins, needles and ribbons from a tray. He had not noticed this sort of curiosity from her in Jurador, but she had been intent on finding silk in Jurador. Here, she seemed to be trying to memorize all she saw.

Thom soon led them off into a maze of twisting streets, most of which deserved the name only because they were paved with rough stone blocks the size of a man's two fists. Buildings as big as those on the main street, some housing shops on the ground floor, loomed over them, almost shutting out the sky. Many of those ways were too narrow for horse carts—in some Mat would not have had to extend his arms fully to touch the walls on either side—and more than once he had to press Tuon against the front of a building to let a heavy-loaded hand-barrow rumble past over the uneven paving stones, the barrow-man calling apologies for the inconvenience without slowing. Porters trudged through that cramped warren, too, men walking bent nearly parallel to the ground, each with a bale or crate on his back held level by a padded leather roll strapped to his hips. Just the sight of them made Mat's own back ache. They reminded him how much he hated work.

He was on the point of asking Thom how far they had to go—Maderin was not that big a town—when they reached The White Ring, on one of those winding streets where his arms could more than compass the width of the pavement, a brick building of three floors across from a cutler's shop. The painted sign hanging over the inn's red door, a frilly white circle of lace, made the knots return to his shoulders. Ring, it might be called, but that was a woman's garter if ever he had seen one. It might not be a hell, but inns with signs like that usually were rowdy enough in their own right. He eased the knives up his coatsleeves, and those in his boot tops, as well, felt the blades under his coat, shrugged just to get the feel of the one hanging behind his neck. Though if it went that far. . . . Tuon nodded approvingly. The bloody woman was *dying* to see him get into a knife fight! Selucia had the sense to frown.

"Ah, yes," Thom said. "A wise precaution." And he checked his own knives, tightening those knots in Mat's shoulders a little more. Thom carried almost as many blades as he did, up his sleeves, beneath his coat.

Selucia writhed her fingers at Tuon, and suddenly they were in a silent argument, fingers flashing. Of course, it could not be that—Tuon bloody well owned Selucia the same as owning a dog, and you did not argue with your dog—but an argument it seemed, both women with their jaws set stubbornly. Finally, Selucia folded her hands and bowed her head in acquiescence. A reluctant submission.

“It will be well,” Tuon told her in a jollying tone. “You will see. It will be well.”

Mat wished he was sure of that. Taking a deep breath, he extended his wrist for her hand again and followed Thom.

The spacious, wood-paneled common room of The White Ring held better than two dozen men and women, nearly half obvious outlanders, at square tables beneath a thick-beamed ceiling. All neatly dressed in finely woven wool with little by way of ornamentation, most were talking quietly over their wine in pairs, cloaks draped over their low-backed chairs, though three men and a woman with long beaded braids were tossing bright red dice from a winecup at one table. Pleasant smells drifted from the kitchen, including meat roasting. Goat, most likely. Beside the wide stone fireplace, where a parsimonious fire burned and a polished brass barrel-clock sat on the mantel, a saucy-eyed young woman who rivaled Selucia—and with her blouse unlaced nearly to her waist to prove it—swayed her hips and sang, accompanied by a hammered dulcimer and a flute, a song about a woman juggling all of her lovers. She sang in a suitably bawdy voice. None of the patrons appeared to be listening.

“As I walked out one fine spring day,
I met young Jac who was pitching hay,
his hair so fair, and his eyes were, too.
Well, I gave him a kiss; oh, what could I do?
We snuggled and we tickled while the sun rose high,
and I won’t say how often he made me sigh.”

Lowering her hood, Tuon stopped just inside the door and frowned around the room. “Are you certain this is a hell, Master Merrilin?” she asked. In a low voice, thank the Light. Some places, a question of that sort could get you thrown out and roughly, silk coat or no. In others, the prices just doubled.

“I assure you, you won’t find a bigger collection of thieves and rascals anywhere in Maderin at this hour,” Thom murmured, stroking his mustaches.

“Now Jac gets an hour when the sky is clear,

and Willi gets an hour when my father's not near.
It's the hayloft with Moril, for he shows no fear,
and Keilin comes at midday; he's oh so bold!
Lord Brelan gets an evening when the night is cold.
Master Andril gets a morning, but he's very old.
Oh, what, oh, what is a poor girl to do?
My loves are so many and the hours so few."

Tuon looked doubtful, but with Selucia at her shoulder, she walked over to stand in front of the singer, who faltered a moment at Tuon's intense scrutiny before catching the song up again. She sang over the top of Tuon's head, plainly attempting to ignore her. It seemed that with every other verse, the woman in the song added a new lover to her list. The male musician, playing the dulcimer, smiled at Selucia and got a frosty stare back. The two women got other looks as well, the one so small and with very short black hair, the other rivaling the singer and with her head wrapped in a scarf, but no more than glances. The patrons were intent on their own business.

"It isn't a hell," Mat said softly, "but what is it? Why would so many people be here in the middle of the day?" It was mornings and evenings when common rooms filled up like this.

"The locals are selling olive oil, lacquerware or lace," Thom replied just as quietly, "and the outlanders are buying. It seems local custom is to begin with a few hours of drink and conversation. And if you have no head for it," he added dryly, "you sober up to find you've made much less of a bargain than you thought in your wine."

"Light, Thom, she'll never believe this place is a hell. I thought you were taking us somewhere merchants' guards drink, or apprentices. At least she might believe that."

"Trust me, Mat. I think you'll find she has lived a very sheltered life in some ways."

Sheltered? When her own brothers and sisters tried to kill her? "You wouldn't care to wager a crown on it, would you?"

Thom chuckled. "Always glad to take your coin."

Tuon and Selucia came gliding back, faces expressionless. "I expected rougher garb on the patrons," Tuon said quietly, "and perhaps a fight or two, but the song is too salacious for a respectable inn. Though she is much too covered to sing it properly, in my opinion. What is that for?" she added in tones of suspicion as Mat handed Thom a coin.

“Oh,” Thom said, slipping the crown into his coat pocket, “I thought you might be disappointed that only the more successful blackguards were present—they aren’t always so colorful as the poorer sort—but Mat said you’d never notice.”

She leveled a look at Mat, who opened his mouth indignantly. And closed it again. What was there to say? He was already in the pickling kettle. No need to stoke the fire.

As the innkeeper approached, a round woman with suspiciously black hair beneath a white lace cap and stuffed into a gray dress embroidered in red and green across her more than ample bosom, Thom slipped away with a bow and a murmured, “By your leave, my Lord, my Lady.” Murmured, but loud enough for Mistress Heilin to hear.

The innkeeper had a flinty smile, yet she exercised it for a lord and lady, curtsying so deeply that she grunted straightening back up, and she seemed only a little disappointed that Mat wanted wine and perhaps food, not rooms. Her best wine. Even so, when he paid, he let her see that he had gold in his purse as well as silver. A silk coat was all very well, but gold wearing rags got better service than copper wearing silk.

“Ale,” Tuon drawled. “I’ve never tasted ale. Tell me, good mistress, is it likely any of these people will start a fight any time soon?” Mat nearly swallowed his tongue.

Mistress Heilin blinked and gave her head a small shake, as if uncertain she really had heard what she thought she had. “No need to worry, my Lady,” she said. “It happens time to time, if they get too far in their cups, but I’ll settle them down hard if it does.”

“Not on my account,” Tuon told her. “They should have their sport.”

The innkeeper’s smile went crooked and barely held, but she managed another curtsy then scurried away clutching Mat’s coin and calling, “Jera, wine for the lord and lady, a pitcher of the Kiranaille. And a mug of ale.”

“You mustn’t ask questions like that, Precious,” Mat said quietly as he escorted Tuon and Selucia to an empty table. Selucia refused a chair, taking Tuon’s cloak and draping it over the chair she held for Tuon, then standing behind it. “It isn’t polite. Besides, it lowers your eyes.” Thank the Light for those talks with Egeanin, whatever name she wanted to go by. Seanchan would do any fool thing or refuse to do what was sensible to avoid having their eyes lowered.

Tuon nodded thoughtfully. “Your customs are often very peculiar, Toy. You will have to teach me about them. I have learned some, but I must know the customs of the people I will rule in the name of the Empress, may she live forever.”

“I’ll be glad to teach you what I can,” Mat said, unpinning his cloak and letting it fall carelessly over the low back of his chair. “It will be good for you to know our ways even if you end up ruling a sight less than you expect to.” He set his hat on the table.

Tuon and Selucia gasped as one, hands darting for the hat. Tuon’s reached it first, and she quickly put it on the chair next to her. “That is *very* bad luck, Toy. *Never* put a hat on a table.” She made one of those odd gestures for warding off evil, folding under the middle two fingers and extending the other two stiffly. Selucia did the same.

“I’ll remember that,” he said dryly. Perhaps too dryly. Tuon gave him a level look. Very level.

“I have decided you will not do for a cupbearer, Toy. Not until you learn meekness, which I almost despair of teaching you. Perhaps I will make you a running groom, instead. You are good with horses. Would you like trotting at my stirrup when I ride? The robes are much the same as for a cupbearer, but I will have yours decorated with ribbons. Pink ribbons.”

He managed to maintain a smooth face, but he felt his cheeks growing hot. There was only one way she could know pink ribbons had any special significance to him. Tylin had told her. It had to be. Burn him, women would talk about *anything*!

The arrival of the serving maid with their drink saved him from having to make any response. Jera was a smiling young woman with nearly as many curves as the singer, not so well displayed yet not really concealed by the white apron she wore tied snugly. Her dark woolen dress fit quite snugly, too. Not that he gave her more than a glance, of course. He was with his wife-to-be. Anyway, only a complete woolhead looked at a woman while with another.

Jera placed a tall pewter wine pitcher and two polished pewter cups on the table and handed a thick mug of ale to Selucia, then blinked in confusion when Selucia transferred the mug to Tuon and took a cup of wine in return. He handed her a silver penny to settle her discomposure, and she gave him a beaming smile with her curtsy before darting off to another call from the innkeeper. It was unlikely she received much in the way of silver.

"You could have smiled back at her, Toy," Tuon said, holding the mug up for a sniff and wrinkling her nose. "She is very pretty. You were so stone-faced, you probably frightened her." She took a sip, and her eyes widened in surprise. "This actually is quite good."

Mat sighed and took a long swallow of dark wine that smelled faintly of flowers. In none of his memories, his own or those other men's, could he recall having understood women. Oh, one or two things here and there, but never anywhere near completely.

Sipping her ale steadily—he was not about to tell her ale was taken in swallows, not sips; she might get herself drunk deliberately, just to experience a hell fully; he was not ready to put anything past her today. Or any day—taking sips between every sentence, the maddening little woman questioned him on customs. Telling her how to behave in a hell was easy enough. Keep to yourself, ask no questions, and sit with your back to a wall if you could and near to a door in case of a need to leave suddenly. Better not to go at all, but if you had to. . . . Yet she quickly passed on to courts and palaces, and got few answers there. He could have told her more of customs in the courts of Eharon or Shiota or a dozen other dead nations than in those of any nation that still lived. Scraps of how things were done in Caemlyn and Tear were all he really knew, and bits from Fal Dara, in Shienar. Well, that and Ebou Dar, but she already knew those ways.

"So you have traveled widely and been in other palaces than the Tarasin," she said finally, and took the last bit of ale in her mug. He had not finished half his wine yet; he thought Selucia had not taken above two small swallows of hers. "But you are not nobly born, it seems. I thought you must not be."

"That I am not," he told her firmly. "Nobles. . . ." He trailed off, clearing his throat. He could hardly tell her nobles were fools with their noses so high in the air they could not see where they were stepping. She was who and what she was, after all.

Expressionless, Tuon studied him while pushing her empty mug to one side. Still studying, she flickered the fingers of her left hand over her shoulder, and Selucia clapped her own hands together loudly. Several of the other patrons looked at them in surprise. "You called yourself a gambler," Tuon said, "and Master Merrilin named you the luckiest man in the world."

Jera came running, and Selucia handed her the mug. "Another, quickly," she commanded, though not in an unkindly way. Still, she had a regal manner to her. Jera dropped a hasty curtsy and scurried off again as though she had been shouted at.

"I have luck sometimes," Mat said cautiously.

"Let's see whether you have any today, Toy." Tuon looked toward the table where the dice were rattling on the tabletop.

He could see no harm in it. It was a certainty he would win more than he lost, yet he thought it unlikely one of the merchants would pull a knife however much his luck was in. He had not noticed anyone carrying one of those long belt knives that everybody wore farther south. Standing, he offered Tuon his arm, and she rested her hand lightly on his wrist. Selucia left her wine on the table and stayed close to her mistress.

Two of the Altaran men, one lean and bald except for a dark fringe, the other round-faced above three chins, scowled when he asked whether a stranger might join the game, and the third, a graying, stocky fellow with a pendulous lower lip, went stiff as a fence post. The Taraboner woman was not so unfriendly.

"Of course, of course. Why not?" she said, her speech slightly slurred. Her face was flushed, and the smile she directed at him had a slackness about it. Apparently she was one of those with no head for wine. It seemed the locals wanted to keep her happy because the scowls vanished, though the graying man remained wooden-faced. Mat fetched chairs from a nearby table for himself and Tuon. Selucia chose to remain standing behind Tuon, which was just as well. Six people crowded the table.

Jera arrived to curtsy and proffer a refilled mug to Tuon with both hands and a murmured "My Lady," and another serving woman, graying and nearly as stout as Mistress Heilin, replaced the wine pitcher on the gambler's table. Smiling, the bald man filled the Taraboner's cup to the brim. They wanted her happy and drunk. She drained half the cup and with a laugh wiped her lips delicately with a lace-edged handkerchief. Getting it back up her sleeve required two tries. She would come away with no good bargains this day.

Mat watched a little play and soon recognized the game. It used four dice rather than two, but without a doubt it was a version of *Piri*, Match, a game that had been popular for a thousand years before Artur Hawkwing began his rise. Small piles of silver admixed with a few gold coins lay in front of each of the players, and it was a silver mark that he laid in the middle of the table to buy the dice while the stout man was gathering his winnings from the last toss. He expected no trouble from merchants, but trouble was less likely if they lost silver rather than gold.

The lean man matched the wager, and Mat rattled the crimson dice in the pewter cup, then spun them out onto the table. They came to rest showing four fives.

“Is that a winning toss?” Tuon asked.

“Not unless I match it,” Mat replied, scooping the dice back into the cup, “without tossing a fourteen or the Dark One’s eyes first.” The dice clattered in the cup, clattered across the table. Four fives. His luck was in, for sure. He slid one coin over in front of himself and left the other.

Abruptly, the graying fellow scraped back his chair and stood up. “I’ve had enough,” he muttered, and began fumbling the coins in front of him into his coat pockets. The other two Altarans stared at him incredulously.

“You’re *leaving*, Vane?” the lean man said. “*Now*?”

“I said I’ve had enough, Camrin,” the graying man growled and went stumping out into the street pursued by Camrin’s scowl at his back.

The Taraboner woman leaned over unsteadily, her beaded braids clicking on the tabletop, to pat the fat man’s wrist. “Just means I’ll buy my lacquerware from you, Master Kostelle,” she said fuzzily. “You and Master Camrin.”

Kostelle’s triple chins wobbled as he chuckled. “So it does, Mistress Alstaing. So it does. Doesn’t it, Camrin?”

“I suppose,” the bald man replied grumpily. “I suppose.” He shoved a mark out to match Mat’s.

Once again the dice spun across the table. This time, they came up totaling fourteen.

“Oh,” Tuon said, sounding disappointed. “You lost.”

“I won, Precious. That’s a winning toss if it’s your first.” He left his original bet in the middle of the table. “Another?” he said with a grin.

His luck was in, all right, as strong as it had ever been. The bright red dice rolled across the table, bounced across the table, ricocheted off the wagered coins sometimes, and toss after toss they came to rest showing fourteen white pips. He made fourteen every way it could be made. Even at one coin to a wager, the silver in front of him grew to a tidy sum. Half the people in the common room came to stand around the table and watch. He grinned at Tuon, who gave him a slight nod. He had missed this, dice in a common room or tavern, coin on the table, wondering how long his luck would hold. And a pretty woman at his side while he gambled. He wanted to laugh with pleasure.

As he was shaking the dice in the cup again, the Taraboner merchant glanced at him, and for an instant, she did not look drunk at all. Suddenly, he no longer felt like laughing. Her face slackened immediately, and her eyes became a tad unfocused once more, but for that instant they had been awls. She had a much better head for wine than he had supposed. It seemed Camrin and Kostelle would not get away with fobbing off shoddy work at top prices or whatever their scheme had been. What concerned him, though, was that the woman was suspicious of him. Come to think, she herself had not risked a coin against him. The two Altarans were frowning at him, but just the way men who were losing frowned over their bad luck. She thought he had found some way to cheat. Never mind that he was using their dice, or more likely the inn's dice; an accusation of cheating could get a man a drubbing even in a merchants' inn. Men seldom waited on proof of that charge.

"One last toss," he said, "and I think I'll call it done. Mistress Heilin?" The innkeeper was among the onlookers. He handed her a small handful of his new-won silver coins. "To celebrate my good fortune, serve everybody what they want to drink until those run out." That brought appreciative murmurs, and someone behind him clapped him on the back. A man drinking your wine was less likely to believe you had bought it with cheated coin. Or at least they might hesitate long enough to give him a chance to get Tuon out.

"He can't keep this run going forever," Camrin muttered, scrubbing a hand through the hair he no longer possessed. "What say you, Kostelle? Halves?" Fingering a gold crown free of the coins piled in front of him, he slid it over beside Mat's silver mark. "If there's only to be one more toss, let's make a real wager on it. Bad luck has to follow this much good." Kostelle hesitated, rubbing his chins in thought, then nodded and added a gold crown of his own.

Mat sighed. He could refuse the bet, but walking away now might well trigger Mistress Alstaing's charge. So could winning this toss. Reluctantly he pushed out silver marks to match their gold. That left only two in front of him. He gave the cup an extra heavy shake before spilling the dice onto the table. He did not expect that to alter anything. He was just venting his feelings.

The red dice tumbled across the tabletop, hit the piled coins and bounced back, spinning before they fell to a stop. Each showing a single pip. The Dark One's Eyes.

Laughing just as if it were not just their own coin won back, Camrin and Kostelle began dividing their winnings. The watchers started drifting away, calling congratulations to the two merchants, murmuring words of commiseration to Mat, some lifting the cup he was paying for in his direction. Mistress Alstaing took a long pull at her winecup, studying him over the rim, to all outward appearance as drunk as a goose. He doubted she thought he had been cheating any longer, not when he was walking away with only one mark more than he sat down with. Sometimes bad luck could turn out to be good.

"So your luck is not endless, Toy," Tuon said as he escorted her back to their table. "Or is it that you are lucky only in small things?"

"Nobody has endless luck, Precious. Myself, I think that last toss was one of the luckiest I've ever made." He explained about the Taraboner woman's suspicions, and why he had bought wine for the whole common room.

At the table, he held her chair for her, but she remained standing, looking at him. "You may do very well in Seandar," she said finally, thrusting her nearly empty mug at him. "Guard this until I return."

He straightened in alarm. "Where are you going?" He trusted her not to run away, but not to stay out of trouble without him there to pull her out of it.

She put on a long-suffering face. Even that was beautiful. "If you must know, I am going to the necessary, Toy."

"Oh. The innkeeper can tell you where it is. Or one of the serving women."

"Thank you, Toy," she said sweetly. "I'd never have thought to *ask*." She waggled her fingers at Selucia, and the two of them walked toward the back of the common room having one of their silent talks and giggling.

Sitting down, he scowled into his winecup. Women seemed to enjoy finding ways to make you feel a fool. And he was half-married to this one.

"Where are the women?" Thom asked, dropping down into the chair beside Mat and setting a nearly full winecup on the table. He grunted when Mat explained, and went on in a low voice, leaning his elbows on the table to put his head close. “We have trouble behind and ahead. Far enough ahead that it may not bother us here, but best we leave as soon as they return.”

Mat sat up straight. “What kind of trouble?”

“Some of those merchant trains that passed us the last few days brought news of a murder in Jurador about the time we left. Maybe a day or two later; it’s hard to be sure. A man was found in his own bed with his throat ripped, only there wasn’t enough blood.” He had no need to say more.

Mat took a long pull at his wine. The bloody gholam was still following him. How had it found out he was with Luca’s show? But if it was still a day or two behind at the pace the show was making, likely it would not catch up to him soon. He fingered the silver foxhead through his coat. At least he had a way to fight it if it did appear. The thing carried a scar he had given it. “And the trouble ahead?”

“There’s a Seanchan army on the border of Murandy. How they assembled it without my learning about it before this. . . .” He puffed out his mustaches, offended by his failure. “Well, no matter. Everybody who passes through they make drink a cup of some herbal tea.”

“*Tea*?” Mat said in disbelief. “Where’s the trouble in tea?”

“Every so often, this tea makes a woman go unsteady in her legs, and then the *sul’dam* come and collar her. But that’s not the worst. They’re looking very hard for a slight, dark young Seanchan woman.”

“Well, of course they are. Did you expect they wouldn’t be? This solves my biggest problem, Thom. When we get closer, we can leave the show, take to the forest. Tuon and Selucia can travel on with Luca. Luca will like being the hero who returned their Daughter of the Nine Moons to them.”

Thom shook his head gravely. “They’re looking for an impostor, Mat. Somebody *claiming* to be the Daughter of the Nine Moons. Except the description fits her too closely. They don’t talk about it openly, but there are always men who drink too much, and some always talk too much as well when they do. They mean to kill her when they find her. Something about blotting out the shame she caused.”

“Light!” Mat breathed. “How could that be, Thom? Whatever general commands that army must know her face, wouldn’t he? And other officers, too, I’d think. There must be nobles who know her.”

“Won’t do her much good if they do. Even the lowest soldier will slit her throat or bash in her head as soon as she’s found. I had that from three different merchants, Mat. Even if they’re all wrong, are you willing to take the chance?”

Mat was not, and over their wine they began planning. Not that they did much drinking. Thom seldom did anymore for all his visits to common rooms and taverns, and Mat wanted a clear head.

“Luca will scream over letting us have enough horses to mount everyone whatever you pay him,” Thom said at one point. “And there are packhorses for supplies if we’re taking to the forest.”

“Then I’ll start buying, Thom. By the time we have to go, we’ll have as many as we need. I’ll wager I can find a few good animals right here. Vanin has a good eye, too. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he pays for them.” Thom nodded doubtfully. He was not so certain how reformed Vanin was.

“Aludra’s coming with us?” the white-haired man said in surprise a little later. “She’ll want to take all of her paraphernalia. That’ll mean more packhorses.”

“We have time, Thom. The border of Murandy is a long way, yet. I mean to head north into Andor, or east if Vanin knows a way through the mountains. Better east.” Any way Vanin knew would be a smuggler’s path, a horsethief’s escape route. There would be much less chance of unfortunate encounters along something like that. The Seanchan could be almost anywhere in Altara, and the way north took him nearer that army than he liked.

Tuon and Selucia appeared from the back of the common room, and he stood, taking up Tuon’s cloak from her chair. Thom rose, too, lifting Selucia’s cloak. “We’re leaving,” Mat said, trying to place the cloak around Tuon. Selucia snatched it out of his hands.

“I haven’t seen even one fight yet,” Tuon protested, too loudly. Any number of people turned to stare, merchants and serving women.

“I’ll explain outside,” he told her quietly. “Away from prying ears.”

Tuon stared up at him, expressionless. He knew she was tough, but she was so tiny, like a pretty doll, that it was easy to believe she would break if handled roughly. He was going to do whatever was necessary to make sure she was not put in danger of being broken. Whatever it took. Finally she nodded and let Selucia place the blue cloak on her shoulders. Thom attempted to do the same for the yellow-haired woman, but she took it away from him and donned it herself. Mat could not recall ever seeing her let anyone help her with her cloak.

The crooked street outside was empty of human life. A slat-ribbed brown dog eyed them warily, then trotted away around the nearest bend. Mat moved nearly as quickly in the other direction, explaining as they went. If he had expected shock or dismay, he would have been disappointed.

"It could be Ravashi or Chimal," the little woman said thoughtfully, as if having an entire Seanchan army out to kill her were no more than an idle distraction. "My two nearest sisters in age. Aurana is too young, I think, only eight. Fourteen, you would say. Chimal is quiet in her ambition, but Ravashi has always believed she should have been named just because she is older. She might well have sent someone to plant rumors should I disappear for a time. It is really quite clever of her. If she is the one." Just as coolly as talking about whether it might rain.

"This plot could be dealt with easily if the High Lady were in the Tarasin Palace where she belongs," Selucia said, and coolness vanished from Tuon.

Oh, her face became as chill as that of an executioner, but she rounded on her maid, fingers flashing so furiously they should have been striking sparks. Selucia's face went pale, and she sank to her knees, head down and huddling. Her fingers gestured briefly, and Tuon let her own hands fall, stood looking down at the scarf-covered top of Selucia's head, breathing heavily. After a moment, she bent and lifted the other woman to her feet. Standing very close, she said something very short in that finger-talk. Selucia replied silently, Tuon made the same gestures again, and they exchanged tremulous smiles. Tears glistened in their eyes. Tears!

"Will you tell me what *that* was all about?" Mat demanded. They turned their heads to study him.

"What are your plans, Toy?" Tuon asked at last.

"Not Ebou Dar, if that's what you're thinking, Precious. If one army is out to kill you, then they probably all are, and there are too many soldiers between here and Ebou Dar. But don't worry; I'll find some way to get you back safely."

"So you always. . . ." Her eyes went past him, widening, and he looked over his shoulder to see seven or eight men round the last bend in the street. Every man had an unsheathed sword in his hand. Their steps quickened at sight of him.

“Run, Tuon!” he shouted, spinning to face their attackers. “Thom, get her away from here!” A knife came into either hand from his sleeves, and he threw them almost as one. The left-hand blade took a graying man in the eye, the right-hand a skinny fellow in the throat. They dropped as if their bones had melted, but before their swords clattered on the paving stones, he had already snatched another pair of knives from his boot tops and was sprinting toward them.

It took them by surprise, losing two of their number so quickly, and him closing the distance instead of trying to flee. But with him so close so quickly, and them jamming against one another on that narrow street, they lost most of the advantage that swords gave them over his knives. Not all, unfortunately. His blades could deflect a sword, but he only bothered when someone drew back for a thrust. In short order he had a fine collection of gashes, across his ribs, on his left thigh, along the right side of his jaw, a cut that would have laid open his throat had he not jerked aside in time. But had he tried to flee, they would have run him through from behind. Alive and bleeding was better than dead.

His hands moved as fast as ever they had, short moves, almost delicate. Flamboyance would have killed him. One knife slipped into a fat man’s heart and out again before the fellow’s knees began to crumple. He sliced inside the elbow of a man built like a blacksmith, who dropped his sword and awkwardly drew his belt knife with his left hand. Mat ignored him; the fellow was already staggering from blood loss before his blade cleared the scabbard. A square-faced man gasped as Mat sliced open the side of his neck. He clapped a hand to the wound, but he only managed to totter back two steps before he fell. As men died, the others gained room, but Mat moved faster still, dancing so that a falling man shielded him from another’s sword while he closed inside the sword-arc of a third. To him, the world consisted of his two knives and the men crowding each other to get at him, and his knives sought the places where men bleed most heavily. Some of those ancient memories came from men who had not been very nice at all.

And then, miracle of miracles, bleeding profusely, but his blood too hot to let him feel the full pain yet, he was facing the last, one he had not noticed before. She was young and slim in a ragged dress, and she might have been pretty had her face been clean, had her teeth not been showing in a rictus snarl. The dagger she was tossing from hand to hand had a double-edged blade twice the length of his hand.

"You can't hope to finish alone what the others failed in together," he told her. "Run. I'll let you go unharmed."

With a cry like a feral cat, she rushed at him slashing and stabbing wildly. All he could do was dance backwards awkwardly, trying to fend her off. His boot slid in a patch of blood, and as he staggered, he knew he was about to die.

Abruptly Tuon was there, left hand seizing the young woman's wrist—not the wrist of her knife hand, worse luck—twisting so the arm went stiff and the girl was forced to double over. And then it mattered not at all which hand held her knife, because Tuon's right hand swept across, bladed like an axe, and struck her throat so hard that he heard the cartilage cracking. Choking, she clutched her ruined throat and sagged to her knees, then fell over still sucking hoarsely for breath.

"I told you to run," Mat said, not sure which of the two he was addressing.

"You very nearly let her kill you, Toy," Tuon said severely. "Why?"

"I promised myself I'd never kill another woman," he said wearily. His blood was beginning to cool, and Light, he hurt! "Looks like I've ruined this coat," he muttered, fingering one of the blood-soaked slashes. The motion brought a wince. When had he been gashed on the left arm?

Her gaze seemed to bore into his skull, and she nodded as if she had come to some conclusion.

Thom and Selucia were standing a little down the street, in front of the reason Tuon was still there, better than half a dozen bodies sprawled on the paving stones. Thom had a knife in either hand and was allowing Selucia to examine a wound on his ribs through the rent in his coat. Oddly, by evidence of the dark glistening patches on his coat, he seemed to have fewer injuries than Mat. Mat wondered whether Tuon had taken part there, too, but he could not see a spot of blood on her anywhere. Selucia had a bloody gash down her left arm, though it appeared not to hinder her.

"I'm an old man," Thom said suddenly, "and sometimes I imagine I see things that can't be, but luckily, I always forget them."

Selucia paused to look up at him coolly. Lady's maid she might be, but blood seemed not to faze her at all. "And what might you be trying to forget?"

"I can't recall," Thom replied. Selucia nodded and went back to examining his wounds.

Mat shook his head. Sometimes he was not entirely sure Thom still had all his wits. For that matter, Selucia seemed a shovel shy of a full load now and then, too.

"This one can't live to be put to the question," Tuon drawled, frowning at the woman choking and twitching at her feet, "and she can't talk if she somehow managed to." Bending fluidly, she scooped up the woman's knife and drove it hard beneath the woman's breastbone. That rasping fight for air went silent; glazing eyes stared up at the narrow strip of sky overhead. "A mercy she did not deserve, but I see no point to needless suffering. I won, Toy."

"You won? What are you talking about?"

"You used my name before I used yours, so I won."

Mat whistled faintly through his teeth. Whenever he thought he knew how tough she was, she found a way to show him he did not know the half. If anybody happened to be looking out a window, that stabbing might raise questions with the local magistrate, probably Lord Nathin himself. But there were no faces at any window he could see. People avoided getting embroiled in this sort of thing if they could. For all he knew, any number of porters or barrow-men might have come along during the fight. For a certainty, they would have turned right around again as quickly as they could. Whether any might have gone for Lord Nathin's guards was another question. Still, he had no fear of Nathin or his magistrate. A pair of men escorting two women did not decide to attack more than a dozen carrying swords. Likely these fellows, and the unfortunate young woman, were well known to the guards.

Limping to retrieve his thrown knives, he paused in the act of pulling the blade from the graying man's eye. He had not really taken in that face, before. Everything had happened too quickly for more than general impressions. Carefully wiping the knife on the man's coat, he tucked it away up his sleeve as he straightened. "Our plans have changed, Thom. We're leaving Maderin as fast as we can, and we're leaving the show as fast as we can. Luca will want to be rid of us so much that he'll let us have all the horses we need."

"This must be reported, Toy," Tuon said severely. "Failure to do so is as lawless as what they did."

“You know that fellow?” Thom said.

Mat nodded. “His name is Vane, and I don’t think anybody in this town will believe a respectable merchant attacked us in the street. Luca will *give* us horses to be rid of this.” It was very strange. The man had not lost a coin to him, had not *wagered* a coin. So, why? Very strange indeed. And reason enough to be gone quickly.

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CHAPTER 12

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A Manufactory

The midday Amadician sun was warm on Perrin’s head as he rode Stayer toward the roofs of Almizar beneath high, scudding white clouds, a hundred miles southwest of Amador. Impatient, he kept the bay at a trot. Farms stretched as far as he could see in any direction on both sides of the road, thatch-roofed stone houses with gray smoke rising from the chimneys and chickens scratching in front of the barns. Fat-tailed sheep and spotted black cattle grazed in stone-walled pastures, and men and boys were plowing the fields or sowing those already plowed. It seemed to be laundry day; he could see large kettles sitting over fires behind houses, and women and girls hanging shirts and blouses and bed linens on long lines to dry. There was little of wildness, only scattered thickets, and most of those neatly coppiced to provide firewood.

He reached out with his mind to find wolves, and found nothing. Unsurprising. Wolves stayed clear of this many people, this much tameness. The breeze stiffened, and he gathered his cloak around him. Despite the need to make a show, it was plain brown wool. The only silk cloak he had was lined with fur, and too hot for the day. His green silk coat worked in silver would have to do. That and his cloak pin, two wolves’ heads in silver-and-gold. A gift from Faile, it had always seemed too ornate to wear, but he had dug it out of the bottom of a chest that morning. A little something to make up for the plain cloak.

What was surprising were the Tinker caravans camped in fields scattered around the town, five of them within his sight. According to Elyas, there was always feasting when two caravans encountered one another, and a meeting of three caused days of celebration, but larger gatherings seldom occurred except in the summer, at Sunday, when they had their meeting places. He almost wished he had brought Aram, despite the risk of Masema learning too much. Maybe if the man could spend a little time among his own people, he might decide to put down his sword. That was the best solution Perrin could think of to a thorny problem, although not likely to work. Aram liked the sword, perhaps too well. But he could not send the man away. He had as good as put that sword in Aram’s hand, and now Aram and the sword were his responsibility. The Light only knew what would become of the man if he truly went over to Masema.

“You study the Tuatha’an and frown, my Lord,” General Khirgan drawled. He could understand her speech a little better, now that they had spent time together. “You’ve had problems with them in your lands? We have nothing like them at home, but the only trouble connected to them I know of has been locals trying to drive them away. Apparently, they’re supposed to be great thieves.”

She and Mishima were ornate today in blue cloaks trimmed with red and yellow, and red coats with blue cuffs and lapels edged in yellow. Three small vertical blue bars, shaped like the thin plumes of a Seanchan helmet, on the left breast of her coat indicated her rank, as two did for Mishima. The dozen soldiers riding behind wore their striped armor and painted helmets, however, and carried steel-tipped lances held at precisely the same angle. The cluster of Faile’s hangers-on following the Seanchan, also twelve in number, made a brave display in Tairen coats with puffy satin-striped sleeves and dark Cairhienin coats with stripes of House colors across the chests, yet in spite of their swords they looked much less dangerous than the soldiers and seemed to know it. Whenever the breeze gusted from behind, it carried traces of irritation that Perrin doubted came from the Seanchan. The soldiers’ scent was of stillness, waiting, like wolves who knew teeth might be needed soon, but not now. Not yet.

“Ah, they steal a chicken now and then, General,” Neald said with a laugh, giving one of his thin waxed mustaches a twist, “but I’d not be calling them great thieves.” He had enjoyed the Seanchan astonishment at the gateway that had brought them all here, and he was still posing over it, somehow managing to strut while sitting his saddle. It was difficult to remember that had he not earned that black coat, he would still be working his father’s farm and perhaps wondering about marriage to a neighbor girl in a year or two. “Great theft requires courage, and Tinkers have not a bit of it.”

Huddled in his dark cloak, Balwer grimaced, or perhaps smiled. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference with the desiccated little man unless Perrin could catch his scent. The pair of them accompanied Perrin in much the same way as a gray-haired *sul’dam* linked to a cool-eyed *damane* with touches of gray in her own dark hair accompanied Khirgan and Mishima, supposedly to balance the numbers. To the Seanchan, *sul’dam* and *damane* counted as one when connected by the segmented metal leash. He would have been satisfied to come with Neald alone, or Neald and

Balwer at least, but Tallanvor had been right about Seanchan and protocol. The talks had dragged on for three days, and while some time had been spent on whether to follow Perrin's plan or make it a part of something Tylee would come up with—with her yielding at the end only because she could find nothing better—a good part had been wasted on how many each side was to bring here. It had to be the same number for each, and the Banner-General had wanted to bring a hundred of her soldiers and a pair of *damane*. For honor's sake. She had been astounded that he was willing to come with less, and was only willing to accept it after he pointed out that everyone among Faile's people was noble in his or her own lands. He had the feeling she thought she had been cheated because she could not match his escorts' rank with her own. Strange folk, these Seanchan. Oh, there were sides, to be sure. This alliance was purely temporary, not to mention delicate, and the Banner-General was just as aware of that as he.

"Twice they offered me shelter when I needed it, me and my friends, and asked nothing in return," Perrin said quietly. "Yet what I remember best about them was when Trollocs surrounded Emond's Field. The Tuatha'an stood on the green with children strapped to their backs, the few of their own that survived and ours. They would not fight—it isn't their way—but if the Trollocs overran us, they were ready to try to carry the children to safety. Carrying our children would have hampered them, made escape even less likely than it already was, but they asked for the task." Neald gave an embarrassed cough and looked away. A flush tinged his cheek. For all he had seen and done, he was young yet, just seventeen. This time, there was no doubt about Balwer's thin smile.

"I think your life might make a story," the general said, her expression inviting him to tell as much of it as he would.

"I'd rather my life were ordinary," he told her. Stories were no place for a man who wanted peace.

"One day, I'd very much like to see some of these Trollocs I keep hearing about," Mishima said when the silence began to stretch. Amusement tinged his smell, yet he stroked his sword hilt, perhaps without knowing it.

"No you wouldn't," Perrin told him. "You'll get your chance soon or late, but you won't like it." After a moment, the scarred man nodded solemnly in understanding, amusement melting. At last he must be beginning to believe that Trollocs and Myrddraal were more than travelers' fanciful tales. If any doubts remained to him, the time was coming that would erase doubt forever.

Heading into Almizar, as they turned their horses toward the north end of the town along a narrow cart lane, Balwer slipped away. Medore went with him, a tall woman nearly as dark as Tylee but with deep blue eyes, in dark breeches and a man's coat with puffy red-striped sleeves, a sword at her hip. Balwer rode with his shoulders hunched, a bird perched precariously on his saddle, Medore straight-backed and proud, every inch a High Lord's daughter and leader of Faile's people, though she followed Balwer rather than riding beside. Surprisingly, Faile's hangers-on seemed to have accepted taking direction from the fussy little man. It made them much less bother than they once had been; it actually made them useful in some ways, which Perrin would have thought impossible. The Banner-General offered no objection to them leaving, though she gazed after them thoughtfully.

"Kind of the Lady to visit a servant's friend," she mused. That was the tale Balwer had given, that he used to know a woman who lived in Almizar and Medore wanted to meet her if she was still alive.

"Medore's a kind woman," Perrin replied. "It's our way, being kind to servants." Tylee gave him one glance, only that, yet he reminded himself not to take her for a fool. It was too bad he knew nothing of Seanchan ways to speak of, or they might have come up with a better story. But then, Balwer had been in a frenzy—a dry, dusty frenzy, yet still a frenzy—to seize this chance to gather information on what was happening in Amadicia under the Seanchan. For himself, Perrin could barely make himself care. Only Faile mattered, now. Later he could worry about other matters.

Just north of Almizar, the stone walls dividing seven or eight fields had been removed to make a long stretch of bare earth that appeared thoroughly turned by the harrow, the dirt all scored and scuffed. A large odd creature with a pair of hooded people crouched on its back was running awkwardly along that stretch on two legs that seemed spindly for its size. In fact, "odd" barely began to encompass it. Leathery and gray, the thing was larger than a horse without counting a long, snake-like neck and a thin, even longer tail that it held stretched out stiffly behind. As it ran, it beat wings ribbed like those of a bat, stretching as long as most riverships. He had seen animals like this before, but in the air, and at a distance. Tylee had told him they were called *raken*. Slowly the creature lumbered into the air, barely clearing the treetops of a coppiced thicket at the end of the field. His head swiveled to follow as the *raken* climbed slowly toward the sky, awkwardness vanishing in flight. Now, that would be a thing, to fly on one of those. He crushed the thought, ashamed and angered that he could let himself be diverted.

The Banner-General slowed her bay and frowned at the field. At the far end, men were feeding four more of the peculiar animals, holding up large baskets for them to eat from, horned snouts darting and horny mouths gulping. Perrin hated to think what a creature that looked like that might eat. “They should have more *raken* than this here,” she muttered. “If this is all there are. . . .”

“We take what we can get and go on,” he said. “None, if it comes to that. We already know where the Shaido are.”

“I like to know if anything is coming up behind me,” she told him dryly, picking up the pace again.

At a nearby farm that appeared to have been taken over by the Seanchan, a dozen or so soldiers were dicing at tables set up haphazardly in front of the thatch-roofed house. More were passing in and out of the stone barn, though he saw no sign of horses except for a team hitched to a wagon that was being unloaded of its crates and barrels and jute sacks by a pair of men in rough woolens. At least, Perrin assumed the others were soldiers. Nearly half were women, the men as short as the women for the most part and thin if taller, and none carried a sword, but they all wore close-fitting coats of sky-blue and each had a pair of knives in scabbards sewn to their snug boots. Uniforms implied soldiers.

Mat would be right at home with this lot, he thought, watching them laugh over good tosses and groan over bad. Those colors spun in his head, and for an instant he glimpsed Mat riding off a road into forest followed by a line of mounted folk and packhorses. An instant only, because he dashed the image aside without so much as a thought to why Mat was going into the woods or who was with him. Only Faile mattered. That morning he had tied a fifty-first knot in the leather cord he carried in his pocket. Fifty-one days she had been a prisoner. He hoped she had been a prisoner that long. It would mean she was still alive to be rescued. If she was dead. . . . His hand tightened on the head of the hammer hanging at his belt, tightened until his knuckles hurt.

The Banner-General and Mishima were watching him, he realized, Mishima warily, with a hand hovering near his sword hilt, Tylee thoughtfully. A delicate alliance, and little trust on either side. “For a moment, I thought you might be ready to kill the fliers,” she said quietly. “You have my word. We will free your wife. Or avenge her.”

Perrin drew a shuddering breath and released his hold on the hammer. Faile had to be alive. Alyse had said she was under her protection. But how much protection could the Aes Sedai give when she wore *gai’shain* white herself? “Let’s be done here. Time is wasting.” How many more knots would he need to tie in that cord? The Light send not many.

Dismounting, he handed Stayer’s reins to Carlon Belcelona, a clean-shaven Tairen with a long nose and an unfortunately narrow chin. Carlon had a habit of fingering that chin as if wondering where his beard had gone, or running a hand over his hair as though wondering why it was tied with a ribbon at the nape of his neck, making a tail that just reached his shoulders. But he gave no more sign of giving up his fool pretense that he was following Aiel ways than the others did. Balwer had given them their instructions, and at least they obeyed those. Most of them were already drifting over to the tables, leaving their mounts in the care of the rest, some producing coin, others offering leather flasks of wine. Which the soldiers were rejecting, strangely, though it seemed anyone with silver was welcome in their games.

Without more than glancing in their direction, Perrin tucked his gauntlets behind his thick belt and followed the two Seanchan inside, tossing back his cloak so his silk coat showed. By the time he came out, Faile’s people—his people, he supposed—would have learned a great deal of what those men and women knew. One thing he had learned from Balwer. Knowledge could be very useful, and you never knew which scrap would turn out worth more than gold. For the moment, though, the only knowledge he was interested in would not come from this place.

The front room of the farmhouse was filled with tables facing the door, where clerks sat poring over papers or writing. The only sound was the scritching of pen on paper and a man’s dry persistent cough. The men wore coats and breeches of dark brown, the women dresses in the exact same shade. Some wore pins, in silver or brass, in the shape of a quill pen. The Seanchan had uniforms for everything, it seemed. A round-cheeked fellow at the back of the room who wore two silver pens on his chest stood and bowed deeply, belly straining his coat, as soon as Tylee entered. Their boots were loud on the wooden floor as they walked back to him between the tables. He did not straighten until they reached his table.

“Tylee Khirgan,” she said curtly. “I would speak with whoever is in command here.”

“As the Banner-General commands,” the fellow replied obsequiously, made another deep bow, and hurried through a door behind him.

The clerk who was coughing, a smooth-faced fellow younger than Perrin who, by his face, might have come from the Two Rivers, began hacking more roughly, and covered his mouth with a hand. He cleared his throat loudly, but the harsh cough returned.

Mishima frowned at him. “Fellow shouldn’t be here if he’s ill,” he muttered. “What if it’s catching? You hear about all sorts of strange sicknesses these days. Man’s hale at sunrise, and by sunfall, he’s a corpse and swollen to half again his size, with no one knowing what he died of. I heard of a woman who went mad in the space of an hour, and everybody who touched her went mad, too. In three days, she and her whole village were dead, those who hadn’t fled.” He made a peculiar gesture, forming an arc with thumb and forefinger, the others curled tightly.

“You know better than to believe rumors, or repeat them,” the Banner-General said sharply, making the same gesture. She seemed unaware she had done so.

The stout clerk reappeared, holding the door for a graying, lean-faced man with a black leather patch hiding the spot where his right eye had been. A puckered white scar ran down his forehead, behind the patch and onto his cheek. As short as the men outside, he wore a coat of darker blue, with two small white bars on his chest, though he had the same sheaths sewn to his boots. “Blasic Faloun, Banner-General,” he said with a bow as the clerk hurried back to his table. “How may I serve you?”

“Captain Faloun, we need to speak in—” Tylee cut off when the man who was coughing surged to his feet, his stool toppling with a clatter.

Clutching his middle, the young man doubled over and vomited a dark stream that hit the floor and broke up into tiny black beetles that went scurrying in every direction. Someone cursed, shockingly loud in what was otherwise dead silence. The young man stared at the beetles in horror, shaking his head to deny them. Wild-eyed, he looked around the room still shaking his head and opened his mouth as if to speak. Instead, he bent over and spewed another black stream, longer, that broke into beetles darting across the floor. The skin of his face began writhing, as though more beetles were crawling on the outside of his skull. A woman screamed, a long shriek of dread, and suddenly clerks were shouting and leaping up, knocking over stools and even tables in their haste, frantically dodging the flitting black shapes. Again and again the man vomited, sinking to his knees, then falling over, twitching disjointedly as he spewed out more and more beetles in a steady stream. He seemed somehow to be getting . . . flatter. Deflating. His jerking ceased, but black beetles continued to pour from his gaping mouth and spread across the floor. At last—it seemed to have gone on for an hour, but could not have been more than a minute or two—at last, the torrent of insects dwindled and died. What remained of the fellow was a pale flat thing inside his clothes, like a wineskin that had been emptied. The shouting went on, of course. Half the clerks were up on the tables that remained upright, men as well as women, cursing or praying or sometimes alternating both at the tops of their lungs. The other half had fled outside. Small black beetles scuttled all across the floor. The room stank of terror.

"I heard a rumor," Faloun said hoarsely. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He smelled of fear. Not terror, but definitely fear. "From east of here. Only that was centipedes. Little black centipedes." Some of the beetles scurried toward him, and he backed away with a curse, making the same odd gesture that Tylee and Mishima had.

Perrin crushed the beetles under his boot. They made the hair on the back of his neck want to stand, but nothing mattered except Faile. Nothing! "They're just borer beetles. You can find them almost anywhere there's old fallen timber."

The man jerked, lifted his gaze and jerked again when he saw Perrin's eyes. Catching sight of the hammer at Perrin's belt, he darted a quick, startled glance at the Banner-General. "These beetles came from no log. They're Soulblinder's work!"

"That's as may be," Perrin replied calmly. He supposed Soulblinder was a name for the Dark One. "It makes no difference." He moved his foot, revealing the crushed carcasses of seven or eight of the insects. "They can be killed. And I have no time to waste on beetles I can crush underfoot."

"We do need to talk in private, Captain," Tylee added. Her scent was full of fear, too, yet tightly controlled. Mishima's hand was locked in that same strange gesture. His fear was almost as well controlled as hers.

Faloun gathered himself visibly, the fear smell fading. It did not go away, yet he had mastery of himself, now. He avoided looking at the beetles, however. “As you say, Banner-General. Atal, get down off that table and have these . . . these things swept out of here. And see that Mehtan is laid out properly for the rites. However he died, he died in service.” The stout clerk bowed before climbing down, gingerly, and again when he was on the floor, but the captain was already turning away. “Will you follow me, Banner-General?”

His study might have been a bedroom originally, but now it held a writing table with flat boxes full of papers and another table, larger, that was covered with maps weighted down by inkwells, stones and small brass figures. A wooden rack against one wall held rolls that appeared to be more maps. The gray stone fireplace was cold. Faloun gestured them to half a dozen mismatched chairs that stood on the bare floor in front of the writing table and offered to send for wine. He seemed disappointed when Tylee refused both. Perhaps he wanted a drink to steady his nerves. A small scent of fright still clung to him.

Tylee began. “I need to replace six *raken*, Captain, and eighteen *morat’raken*. And a full company of groundlings. The one I had is somewhere in Amadicia heading west, and beyond finding.”

Faloun winced. “Banner-General, if you lost *raken*, you know everything has been stripped to the bone because of. . . .” His one eye flickered to Perrin, and he cleared his throat before going on. “You ask for three-quarters of the animals I have left. If you can possibly do with fewer, perhaps only one or two?”

“Four,” Tylee said firmly, “and twelve fliers. I’ll settle for that.” She could make that slurred Seanchan accent sound crisp when she wanted to. “This region is as stable as Seandar by all I hear, but I’ll leave you four.”

“As you say, Banner-General,” Faloun sighed. “May I see the order, please? Everything has to be recorded. Since I lost the ability to fly myself, I spend all my time pushing a pen like a clerk.”

“Lord Perrin?” Tylee said, and he produced the document signed by Suroth from his coat pocket.

That made Faloun’s eyebrows climb higher and higher as he read, and he fingered the wax seal lightly, but he did not question it any more than the Banner-General had. It appeared the Seanchan were accustomed to such things. He appeared relieved to hand it back, though, and wiped his hands on his coat unconsciously. Accustomed to them, but not comfortably so. He studied Perrin, trying to be surreptitious, and Perrin could all but see on his face the question the Banner-General had asked. Who was he, to have such a thing?

“I need a map of Altara, Captain, if you have one,” Tylee said. “I can manage if you don’t, but better if you do. The northwestern quarter of the country is what I’m interested in.”

“You’re favored by the Light, Banner-General,” the man said, bending to pull a roll from the lowest level of the rack. “I have the very thing you want. By accident, it was in with the Amadician maps I was issued. I’d forgotten I had the thing until you mentioned it. Uncommon luck for you, I’d say.” Perrin shook his head slightly. Accident, not *ta’veren* work. Even Rand was not *ta’veren* enough to make this happen. The colors whirled, and he splintered them unformed.

Once Faloun had the map spread out on the map table, the corners held down by brass weights in the form of *raken*, the Banner-General studied it until she had her landmarks fixed. It was large enough to cover the table and showed exactly what she had asked for, along with narrow strips of Amadicia and Ghealdan, the terrain rendered in great detail, with the names of towns and villages, rivers and streams, in very small letters. Perrin knew he was looking at a fine example of the mapmaker’s art, far better than most maps. Could it be *ta’veren* work? No. No, that was impossible.

“They’ll find my soldiers here,” she drawled, marking a point with her finger. “They’re to leave immediately. One flier to a *raken*, and no personal items. They fly light, and as fast as possible. I want them there before tomorrow night. The other *morat’raken* will travel with the groundlings. I hope to be leaving in a few hours. Have them assembled and ready.”

“Carts,” Perrin said. Neald could not make a gateway large enough to accommodate a wagon. “Whatever they bring has to be in carts, not wagons.” Faloun mouthed the word incredulously.

“Carts,” Tylee agreed. “See to it, Captain.”

Perrin could smell an eagerness in the man that he interpreted as a desire to ask questions, but all Faloun said, bowing, was, “As you command, Banner-General, so shall it be done.”

The outer room was in a different sort of turmoil when they left the captain. Clerks darted everywhere, sweeping frantically or beating at the remaining beetles with their brooms. Some of the women wept as they wielded their brooms, some of the men looked as though they wanted to, and the room was still rank with terror. There was no sign of the dead man, but Perrin noticed that the clerks moved around the place where he had lain, refusing to let a foot touch it. They tried not to step on any beetles, either, which made for considerable dancing about on their toes. When Perrin crunched his way toward the outer door, they stopped to stare at him.

Outside, the mood was calmer, but not by much. Tylee's soldiers still stood by their horses in a row, and Neald was affecting an air of casual indifference, even to yawning and patting his mouth, but the *sul'dam* was petting the trembling *damane* and murmuring soothingly, and the blue-coated soldiers, many more than had been there before, stood in a large cluster talking worriedly. The Cairhienin and Tairens rushed to surround Perrin, leading their horses and all talking at once.

"Is it true, my Lord?" Camaille asked, her pale face twisted with worry, and her brother Barmanes said uneasily, "Four men carried out something in a blanket, but they averted their eyes from whatever it was."

All of them atop one another, all smelling of near panic. "They said he spewed beetles," and "They said the beetles chewed their way out of him," and "The Light help us, they're sweeping beetles out of the door; we'll be killed," and "Burn my soul, it's the Dark One breaking free," and more that made less sense.

"Be quiet," Perrin said, and for a wonder, they fell silent. Usually, they were very prickly with him, insisting that they served Faile, not him. Now they stood staring at him, waiting for him to put their fears to rest. "A man did spew up beetles and die, but they're ordinary beetles you can find in dead timber anywhere. Give you a nasty pinch if you sit on one, but nothing worse. Likely it was the Dark One's work somehow, true enough, but it has nothing to do with freeing the Lady Faile, and that means it has nothing to do with us. So calm yourselves, and let's get on about our business."

Strangely, it worked. More than one cheek reddened, and the smell of fear was replaced—or at least suppressed—by the scent of shame at letting themselves come so near to panic. They looked abashed. As they began mounting, their own natures reasserted themselves, though. First one then another offered boasts of the deeds they would do in rescuing Faile, each wilder than the next. They knew them for wild, because each boast brought laughter from the others, yet the next always tried to make his more outrageous still.

The Banner-General was watching him again, he realized as he took Stayer’s reins from Carlon. What did she see? What did she think she might learn? “What sent all the *raken* away?” he asked.

“We should have come here second or third,” she replied, swinging up into her saddle. “I still have to acquire *a’dam*. I wanted to keep believing I had a chance as long as I could, but we might as well get to the heart. That piece of paper faces a real test now, and if it fails, there’s no point to going after *a’dam*.” A frail alliance, and small trust.

“Why should it fail? It worked here.”

“Faloun’s a soldier, my Lord. Now we must talk with an Imperial functionary.” She imbued that last word with a wealth of scorn. She turned her bay, and he had no choice but to mount and follow.

Almizar was a considerable town, and prosperous, with six tall watchtowers around its edge but no wall. Elyas said Amadician law forbade walls anywhere save Amador, a law made at the behest of the Whitecloaks and enforced by them as much as by whoever held the throne. Balwer would no doubt learn who that might be now, with Ailron dead. The streets were paved with granite blocks, and lined with solid buildings of brick or stone, some gray, some black, many three or four stories high and most roofed in dark slate, the rest in thatch. People filled the streets, dodging between wagons and horse carts and handcarts, hawkers crying their wares, women in deep bonnets that hid their faces carrying shopping baskets, men in knee-length coats striding along self-importantly, apprentices in aprons or vests running errands. As many soldiers walked the streets as locals, men and women, with skin as dark as any Tairen, skin the color of honey, men as pale as Cairhienin but fair-haired and tall, all in brightly colored Seanchan uniforms. Most wore no more than a belt knife or dagger, but he saw some with swords. They walked in pairs, watchful of everyone around them, and had truncheons at their belts, too. A town Watch, he supposed, but a lot of them for a place the size of Almizar. He never had fewer than two of those pairs in his sight.

Two men and a woman came out of a tall, slate-roofed inn and mounted horses held by grooms. He knew her for a woman only by the way her long, split-tailed coat fit over her bosom because her hair was cut shorter than the men’s and she wore men’s clothing and a sword, just like the other two. Her face was certainly as hard as theirs. As the three cantered off west down the street, Mishima grunted sourly.

"Hunters for the Horn," he muttered. "My eyes if they're not. Those fine fellows cause trouble everywhere they go, getting in fights, sticking their noses where they don't belong. I've heard the Horn of Valere has already been found. What do you think, my Lord?"

"I've heard it's been found, too," Perrin replied cautiously. "There are all sorts of rumors floating about."

Neither one so much as glanced at him, and in the middle of a crowded street, catching their scents was well-nigh impossible, yet for some reason he thought they were mulling over his answer as if it had hidden depths. Light, could they think *he* was tied up with the Horn? He knew where it was. Moiraine had carried it off to the White Tower. He was not about to tell them, though. Small trust worked both ways.

The local people gave the soldiers no more heed than they did each other, nor the Banner-General and her armored followers, but Perrin was another matter. At least, when they noticed his golden eyes. He could tell instantly when someone did. The quick jerk of a woman's head, her mouth falling open as she stared. The man who froze, gaping at him. One fellow actually tripped over his own boots and stumbled to his knees. That one stared, then scrambled to his feet and ran, pushing people from his path, as though fearful Perrin might pursue him.

"I suppose he never saw yellow eyes on a man before," Perrin said wryly.

"Are they common where you come from?" the Banner-General asked.

"Not common, I wouldn't say that, but I'll introduce you to another man who has them."

She and Mishima exchanged glances. Light, he hoped there was nothing in the Prophecies about *two* men with yellow eyes. Those colors whirled, and he dashed them.

The Banner-General knew exactly where she was going, a stone stable on the southern edge of the town, but when she dismounted in the empty stableyard, no groom came rushing out. A stone-fenced paddock stood next to the stable, but it held no horses. She handed her reins to one of her soldiers and stood staring at the stable doors, only one of which was open. By her scent, Perrin thought she was steeling herself.

"Follow my lead, my Lord," she said finally, "and don't say anything you don't have to. It might be the wrong thing. If you must speak, speak to me. Make it clear you're speaking to me."

That sounded ominous, but he nodded. And began planning how to steal the forkroot if things went wrong. He would need to learn whether the place was guarded at night. Balwer might already know. The little man seemed to pick up information like that without trying. When he followed her inside, Mishima remained with the horses, and looking relieved not to accompany them. What did that mean? Or did it mean anything? Seanchan. In just a few days they had him seeing hidden meanings in everything.

The place had been a stable once, obviously, but now it was something else. The stone floor had been swept clean enough to satisfy any farmwife, there were no horses, and a thick smell like mint would have overwhelmed the remaining scent of horse and hay to any nose but his or Elyas'. The stalls at the front were filled with stacked wooden crates, and in the back, the stalls had been removed except for the uprights that supported the loft. Now men and women were working back there, some using mortars and pestles or sieves at tables, others carefully tending flat pans sitting on metal legs above charcoal braziers, using tongs to turn what appeared to be roots.

A lean young man in his shirtsleeves put a plump jute bag into one of the crates, then bowed to Tylee as deeply as the clerk had, body parallel to the floor. He did not straighten until she spoke.

"Banner-General Khirgan. I wish to speak with whoever is in charge, if I may." Her tone was much different than it had been with the clerk, not peremptory at all.

"As you command," the lean fellow replied in what sounded an Amadician accent. At least, if he was Seanchan, he spoke at a proper speed and without chewing his words.

Bowing again, just as deeply, he hurried to where six stalls had been walled in, halfway down the left-hand row, and tapped diffidently at a door, then awaited permission before going in. When he came out, he went to the back of the building without so much as a glance toward Perrin and Tylee. After a few minutes, Perrin opened his mouth, but Tylee grimaced and shook her head, so he closed it again and waited. A good quarter of an hour he waited, growing more impatient by the heartbeat. The Banner-General smelled solidly of patience.

At last a sleekly plump woman in a deep yellow dress of odd cut came out of the small room, but she paused to study the work going on in the back of the building, ignoring Tylee and him. Half of her scalp had been shaved bald! Her remaining hair was in a thick, graying braid that hung to her shoulder. Finally she nodded in satisfaction and made her unhurried way to them. An oval blue panel on her bosom was embroidered with three golden hands. Tylee bowed as deeply as Faloun had for her, and remembering her admonition, Perrin did the same. The sleek woman inclined her head. Slightly. She smelled of pride.

“You wish to speak with me, Banner-General?” She had a smooth voice, as sleek as she herself. And not welcoming. She was a busy woman being bothered. A busy woman well aware of her own importance.

“Yes, Honorable,” Tylee said respectfully. A spike of irritation appeared among her smell of patience, then was swallowed again. Her face remained expressionless. “Will you tell me how much prepared forkroot you have on hand?”

“An odd request,” the other woman said as though considering whether to grant it. She tilted her head in thought. “Very well,” she said after a moment. “As of the midmorning accounting, I have four thousand eight hundred seventy-three pounds nine ounces. A remarkable achievement, if I do say it myself, considering how much I have shipped off and how hard it is getting to find the plant in the wild without sending diggers unreasonable distances.” Impossible as it seemed, the pride in her scent deepened. “I’ve solved that problem, however, by inducing the local farmers to plant some of their fields in forkroot. By this summer I will need to build something bigger to house this manufactory. I’ll confide in you, I will not be surprised if I am offered a new name for this. Though of course, I may not accept.” Smiling a small, sleek smile, she touched the oval panel lightly, but it was near a caress.

“The Light will surely favor you, Honorable,” Tylee murmured. “My Lord, will you do me the favor of showing your document to the Honorable?” That with a bow to Perrin markedly lower than the one she had offered the Honorable. The sleek woman’s eyebrows twitched.

Reaching out to take the paper from his hand, she froze, staring at his face. She had finally noticed his eyes. Giving herself a small shake, she read without any outward expression of surprise, then folded the paper up again and stood tapping it against her free hand. “It seems you walk the heights, Banner-General. And with a very strange companion. What aid do you—or he—ask of me?”

“Forkroot, Honorable,” Tylee said mildly. “All that you have. Loaded into carts as soon as possible. And you must provide the carts and drivers as well, I fear.”

“Impossible!” the sleek woman snapped, drawing herself up haughtily. “I have established strict schedules as to how many pounds of prepared forkroot are shipped every week, which I have adhered to rigidly, and I’ll not see that record sullied. The harm to the Empire would be immense. The *sul’dam* are snapping up *marath’damane* on every hand.”

“Forgiveness, Honorable,” Tylee said, bowing again. “If you could see your way clear to let us have—”

“Banner-General,” Perrin cut in. Plainly this was a touchy encounter, and he tried to keep his face smooth, but he could not avoid a frown. He could not be certain that even near five tons of the stuff would be sufficient, and she was trying to negotiate some lesser weight! His mind raced, trying to find a way. Fast thought was shoddy thought, in his estimation—it led to mistakes and accidents—but he had no choice. “This may not interest the Honorable, of course, but Suroth promised death and worse if there was any hindrance to her plans. I don’t suppose her anger will go beyond you and me, but she did say to take it all.”

“Of course, the Honorable will not be touched by the High Lady’s anger.” Tylee sounded as though she was not so sure of that.

The sleek woman was breathing hard, the blue oval with the golden hands heaving. She bowed to Perrin as deeply as Tylee had. “I’ll need most of the day to gather enough carts and load them. Will that suffice, my Lord?”

“It will have to, won’t it,” Perrin said, plucking the note from her hand. She let go reluctantly and watched hungrily as he tucked it into his coat pocket.

Outside, the Banner-General shook her head as she swung into the saddle. “Dealing with the Lesser Hands is always difficult. None of them see anything lesser in themselves. I thought this would be in the charge of someone of the Fourth or Fifth Rank, and that would have been hard enough. When I saw that she was of the Third Rank—only two steps below a Hand to the Empress herself, may she live forever—I was sure we wouldn’t get away with more than a few hundred pounds if that. But you handled it beautifully. A risk taken, but still, beautifully masked.”

“Well, nobody wants to chance death,” Perrin said as they started out of the stableyard into the town with everyone strung out behind them. Now they had to wait for the carts, perhaps find an inn. Impatience burned in him. The Light send they did not need to spend the night.

“You didn’t know,” the dark woman breathed. “That woman knew she stood in the shadow of death as soon as she read Suroth’s words, but she was ready to risk it to do her duty to the Empire. A Lesser Hand of the Third Rank has standing enough that she might well escape death on the plea of duty done. But you used Suroth’s name. That’s all right most of the time, except when addressing the High Lady herself, of course, but with a Lesser Hand, using her name without her title meant you were either an ignorant local or an intimate of Suroth herself. The Light favored you, and she decided you were an intimate.”

Perrin barked a mirthless laugh. Seanchan. And maybe *ta’veren*, too.

“Tell me, if the question does not offend, did your Lady bring powerful connections, or perhaps great lands?”

That surprised him so much that he twisted in his saddle to stare at her. Something hit his chest hard, sliced a line of fire across his chest, punched his arm. Behind him, a horse squealed in pain. Stunned, he stared down at the arrow sticking through his left arm.

“Mishima,” the Banner-General snapped, pointing, “that four-story building with the thatched roof, between two slate roofs. I saw movement on the rooftop.”

Shouting a command to follow, Mishima galloped off down the crowded street with six of the Seanchan lancers, horseshoes ringing on the paving stones. People leapt out of their way. Others stared. No one in the street seemed to realize what had happened. Two of the other lancers were out of their saddles, tending the trembling mount of one that had an arrow jutting from its shoulder. Perrin fingered a broken button hanging by a thread. The silk of his coat was slashed from the button across his chest. Blood oozed, dampening his shirt, trickled down his arm. Had he not twisted just at that moment, that arrow would have been through his heart instead of his arm. Maybe the other would have hit him as well, but the one would have done the job. A Two Rivers shaft would not have been deflected so easily.

Cairhienin and Tairens crowded around him as he dismounted, all of them trying to help him, which he did not need. He drew his belt knife, but Camaille took it from him and deftly scored the shaft so she could break it cleanly just above his arm. That sent a jolt of pain down his arm. She did not seem to mind getting blood on her fingers, just plucking a lace-edge handkerchief from her sleeve, a paler green than usual for Cairhienin, and wiping them, then examined the end of the shaft sticking out of his arm to make sure there were no splinters.

The Banner-General was down off her bay, too, and frowning. “My eyes are lowered that you have been injured, my Lord. I’d heard that there has been an increase in crime of late, arsons, robbers killing when there was no need, murders done for no reason anyone knows. I should have protected you better.”

“Grit your teeth, my Lord,” Barmanes said, tying a length of leather cord just above the arrowhead. “Are you ready, my Lord?” Perrin tightened his jaw and nodded, and Barmanes jerked the bloodstained shaft free. Perrin stifled a groan.

“Your eyes aren’t lowered,” he said hoarsely. Whatever that meant. It did not sound good, the way she said it. “Nobody asked you to wrap me in swaddling. I certainly never did.” Neald pushed through the crowd surrounding Perrin, his hands already raised, but Perrin waved him away. “Not here, man. People can see.” Folk in the street had finally noticed and were gathering to watch, murmuring excitedly to one another. “He can Heal this so you’d never know I was hurt,” he explained, flexing his arm experimentally. He winced. That had been a bad idea.

“You’d let him use the One Power on you?” Tylee said disbelievingly.

“To be rid of a hole in my arm and a slice across my chest? As soon as we’re somewhere half the town isn’t staring at us. Wouldn’t you?”

She shivered and made that peculiar gesture again. He was going to have to ask her what that meant.

Mishima joined them, leading his horse and looking grave. “Two men fell from that roof with bows and quivers,” he said quietly, “but it wasn’t that fall that killed them. They hit the pavement hard, yet there was hardly any blood. I think they took poison when they saw they’d failed to kill you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Perrin muttered.

“If men will kill themselves rather than report failure,” Tylee said gravely, “it means you have a powerful enemy.”

A powerful enemy? Very likely Masema would like to see him dead, but there was no way Masema’s reach could extend this far. “Any enemies I have are far away and don’t know where I am.” Tylee and Mishima agreed that he must know about that, but they looked doubtful. Then again, there were always the Forsaken. Some of them had tried to kill him before. Others had tried to use him. He did not think he was going to bring the Forsaken into the discussion. His arm was throbbing. The cut on his chest, too. “Let’s find an inn where I can hire a room.” Fifty-one knots. How many more? Light, how many more?

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CHAPTER 13

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Siege

“Push them!” Elayne shouted. Fireheart tried to dance, impatient at being crowded in a narrow cobblestone street with other horses and women afoot, but she steadied the black gelding with a firm hand. Birgitte had insisted she remain well back. Insisted! As if she were a brainless fool! “Push them, burn you!”

None of the hundreds of men on the wide guardwalk atop the city wall, white-streaked gray stone rearing fifty feet, paid her any heed, of course. It was doubtful they heard her. Amid shouts of their own, curses and screams, the clash of steel rang over the broad street that ran alongside the wall beneath the noonday sun suspended in a rare cloudless sky as those men sweated and killed one another with sword or spear or halberd. The melee spanned two hundred paces of the wall, enveloping three of the high round towers where the White Lion of Andor flew and threatening two more, though all still seemed secure, thank the Light. Men stabbed and hacked and thrust, no one giving ground or quarter that she could see. Red-coated crossbowmen atop the towers did their share of killing, but once fired, a crossbow required time to ready for another shot, and they were too few to turn the tide in any case. They were the only Guardsmen up there. The rest were mercenaries. Save Birgitte.

This near, the bond let Elayne’s eye find her Warder easily, intricate golden braid swaying as she shouted encouragement to her soldiers, pointing her bow to where reinforcement was needed. In her short white-collared red coat and wide sky-blue trousers tucked into her boots, she alone atop the wall wore no armor of any sort. She had insisted Elayne don plain gray in the hope of avoiding notice, and any effort to capture or kill her—some of the men up there had crossbows or shortbows slung on their backs, and for those not in the forefront and engaged, fifty paces made an easy shot—but the four golden knots of rank on her own shoulder would make Birgitte the target of any of Arymilla’s men with eyes. At least she was not actually mingling in the press. At least she. . . .

Elayne’s breath caught as a wiry fellow in breastplate and conical steel cap lunged at Birgitte with a sword, but the golden-haired woman dodged the thrust calmly—the bond said she might have been out for a hard ride, no more!—and a backhand blow with her bow caught the fellow on the side of his head, knocking him from the rampart. He had time to scream before he hit the paving stones with a sickening splat. His was not the only corpse decorating the street. Birgitte said men would not follow you unless they knew you were ready to face the same dangers and hardships they did, but if she got herself killed with this man-foolishness. . . .

Elayne did not realize she had heeled Fireheart forward until Caseille seized her bridle. "I am not an idiot, Guardswoman Lieutenant," she said frigidly. "I have no intention of going closer until it is . . . *safe*."

The Arafellin woman jerked her hand back, her face becoming very still behind the face-bars of her burnished conical helmet. Instantly, Elayne felt sorry for the outburst—Caseille was just doing her job—but she still felt coldly angry, too. She would *not* apologize. Shame surged as she recognized the sulkiness of her own thoughts. Blood and bloody ashes, but there were times she wanted to slap Rand for planting these babes in her. These days, she could not be certain from one moment to the next which way her emotions would leap. Leap they did, however.

"If this is what happens to you when you get with child," Aviendha said, adjusting the dark shawl looped over her arms, "I think I will never have any." The high-cantled saddle of her dun pushed her bulky Aiel skirts high enough to bare her stockinged legs to the knee, but she showed no discomfort at the display. With the mare standing still, she looked quite at home on a horse. But then, Mageen, Daisy in the Old Tongue, was a gentle, placid animal tending to stoutness. Luckily, Aviendha was too ignorant of horses to realize that.

Muffled laughter pulled Elayne's head around. The women of her bodyguard, all twenty-one of them assigned this morning counting Caseille, in polished helmets and breastplates, wore smooth faces—much too smooth, in fact; without doubt they were laughing inside—but the four Kinswomen standing behind them had hands over their mouths and their heads together. Alise, a pleasant-faced woman normally, with touches of gray in her hair, saw her looking—well, glaring—and rolled her eyes ostentatiously, which set the others off in another round of laughter. Caiden, a plumply pretty Domani, laughed so hard she had to hold on to Kumiko, though the stout graying woman seemed to be having her own difficulties. Irritation stabbed at Elayne. Not at the laughter—all right, a little at the laughter—and certainly not at the Kinswomen. Not very much, at least. They were invaluable.

This fight on the wall was not Arymilla's first assault in recent weeks by far. In truth, the frequency was increasing, with three or four attacks coming some days, now. She knew very well that Elayne had insufficient soldiers to hold six leagues of wall. Burn her, Elayne was all too aware that she could not even spare trained hands to fit hoardings to all those miles of wall and towers. Untrained hands would only bungle the work. All Arymilla needed was to get enough men across to seize a gate. Then she could bring the battle into the city, where Elayne would be badly outnumbered. The population might rise in her favor, no certain thing, yet that only meant adding to the slaughter, apprentices and grooms and shopkeepers fighting trained armsmen and mercenaries. Whoever sat on the Lion Throne then—and very likely that would not be Elayne Trakand—it would be stained red with the blood of Caemlyn. So apart from holding the gates and leaving watchmen on the towers, she had pulled all of her soldiers back into the Inner City, close to the Royal Palace, and stationed men with looking glasses in the tallest spires of the palace. Whenever a watchman signaled an attack forming, linked Kinswomen made gateways to carry soldiers to the spot. They took no part in the fighting, of course. She would not have allowed them to use the Power as a weapon even had they been willing.

So far it had worked, though often by a hair. Low Caemlyn, outside the walls, was a warren of houses, shops, inns and warehouses that allowed men to close before they were seen. Three times her soldiers had been forced to fight on the ground inside the wall and to retake at least one wall tower. Bloody work, that. She would have burned Low Caemlyn to the ground to deny Arymilla's people cover, except that the fire might easily spread inside the walls and spawn a conflagration, spring rains or no spring rains. As it was, every night saw arsons inside the city, and containing those was difficult enough. Besides, people lived in those houses despite the siege, and she did not want to be remembered as the one who had destroyed their homes and livelihoods. No, what nettled her was that she had not thought of using the Kin that way earlier. If she had, she would not be saddled with Sea Folk still, not to mention a bargain that gave up a square mile of Andor. Light, a square mile! Her mother had never given up one inch of Andor. Burn her, this siege hardly gave her time to mourn her mother. Or Lini, her old nursemaid. Rahvin had murdered her mother, and likely Lini had died trying to protect her. White-haired and thin with age, Lini would not have backed down even for one of the Forsaken. But thinking of Lini made her hear the woman's reedy voice. *You can't put honey back in the comb, child.* What was done, was done, and she had to live with it.

"That's it, then," Caseille said. "They're making for the ladders." It was true. All along the wall Elayne's soldiers were pushing forward, Arymilla's falling back, climbing through the crenels where their ladders were propped. Men still died on the rampart, but the fight was ending.

Elayne surprised herself by digging her heels into Fireheart's flanks. No one was quick enough to catch her this time. Pursued by shouts, she galloped across the street and flung herself out of the saddle at the base of the nearest tower before the gelding was fully halted. Pushing open the heavy door, she gathered her divided skirts and raced up the widdershins spiraling stairs, past large niches where clusters of armored men stared in amazement as she darted by. These towers were made to be defended against attackers trying to make their way down and into the city. At last the stairs opened into a large room where stairs on the other side spiraled upward in the opposite direction. Twenty men in mismatched helmets and breastplates were taking their ease, tossing dice, sitting against the wall, talking and laughing as if there were no dead men beyond the room's two iron-strapped doors. Whatever they were doing, they stopped to gape when she appeared.

"Uh, my Lady, I wouldn't do that," a rough voice said as she laid hands on the iron bar across one of the doors. Ignoring the man, she turned the bar on its pivot pin and pushed the door open. A hand caught at her skirt, but she pulled free.

None of Arymilla's men remained on the wall. None standing, at least. Dozens of men lay on the blood-streaked guardwalk, some still, others groaning. Any number of those might belong to Arymilla, but the ringing of steel had vanished. Most of the mercenaries were tending the wounded, or just squatting on their heels to catch their breath.

"Shake them off and pull up the bloody ladders!" Birgitte shouted. Loosing an arrow into the mass of men trying to flee down the dirt-paved Low Caemlyn street below the wall, she nocked another and fired again. "Make them build more if they want to come again!" Some of the mercenaries leaned through crenels to obey, but only a handful. "I knew I shouldn't have let you come along today," she went on, still loosing shafts as fast as she could nock and draw. Crossbow bolts from the towertops struck down men below as well, but tile-roofed warehouses offered shelter here for any who could get inside.

It took a moment for Elayne to realize that last comment had been directed at her, and her face heated. “And how would you have stopped me?” she demanded, drawing herself up.

Quiver empty, Birgitte lowered her bow and turned with a scowl. “By tying you up and having her sit on you,” she said, nodding toward Aviendha, who was striding out of the tower. The glow of *saidar* surrounded her, yet her horn-hilted belt knife was in her fist. Caseille and the rest of the Guardswomen spilled out behind her, swords in hand and faces grim. Seeing Elayne unharmed changed their expressions not a whit. Those bloody women were insufferable when it came to treating her like a blown glass vase that might break at the rap of a knuckle. They would be worse than ever after this. And she would have to suffer it.

“I would have caught you,” Aviendha muttered, rubbing her hip, “except that fool horse tossed me off.” That was highly unlikely with such a placid mare. Aviendha had simply managed to fall off. Seeing the situation, she slipped her knife back into its sheath quickly, trying to pretend she had never had it out. The light of *saidar* vanished, too.

“I was quite safe.” Elayne tried to remove the acerbic touch from her voice, without much success. “Min said I will bear my babes, sister. Until they’re born, no harm can come to me.”

Aviendha nodded slowly, thoughtfully, but Birgitte growled, “I’d just as soon you didn’t put her visions to the test. Take too many chances, and you might prove her wrong.” That was foolish. Min was *never* wrong. Surely not.

“That was Aldin Miheres’ company,” a tall mercenary said in a lilting if rough Murandian accent as he removed his helmet to reveal a lean, sweaty face with gray-streaked mustaches waxed to spikes. Rhys a’Balaman, as he called himself, had eyes like stones and a thin-lipped smile that always seemed a leer. He had been listening to their conversation, and he kept darting sideways glances at Elayne while he talked to Birgitte. “I recognized him, I did. Good man, Miheres. I fought alongside him more times than I can number, I have. He’d almost made it to that warehouse door when your arrow took him in the neck, Captain-General. A shame, that.”

Elayne frowned. “He made his choice as you did, Captain. You may regret the death of a friend, but I hope you aren’t regretting your choice.” Most of the mercenaries she had put out of the city, maybe all, had signed on with Arymilla. Her greatest fear at present was that the woman would succeed in bribing companies still inside the walls. None of the mercenary captains had reported anything, but Mistress Harfor said approaches had been made. Including an approach to a’Balaman.

The Murandian favored her with his leer and a formal bow, flourishing a cloak he was not wearing. “Oh, I fought against him as often as with, my Lady. I’d have killed him, or he’d have killed me, had we come face to face this fine day. More acquaintance than friend, you see. And I’d much rather take gold to defend a wall like this than to attack it.”

“I notice some of your men have crossbows on their backs, Captain, but I didn’t see any using them.”

“Not the mercenary way,” Birgitte said dryly. Irritation floated in the bond, though whether with a’Balaman or Elayne there was no way to know. The sensation vanished quickly. Birgitte had learned to master her emotions once they discovered how she and Elayne mirrored one another through the bond. Very likely she wished Elayne could do the same, but then, so did Elayne.

A’Balaman rested his helmet on his hip. “You see, my Lady, the way of it is, if you press a man too hard when he’s trying to get off the field, attempting to ride him down and the like, well, the next time it’s you trying to get off the field, he might return the favor. After all, if a man’s leaving the field, then he’s out of the fight, now isn’t he?”

“Until he comes back tomorrow,” Elayne snapped. “The next time, I want to see those crossbows put to work!”

“As you say, my Lady,” a’Balaman said stiffly, making an equally stiff bow. “If you’ll pardon me, I must be seeing to my men.” He stalked off without waiting on her pardon, shouting to his men to stir their lazy stumps.

“How far can he be trusted?” Elayne asked softly.

“As far as any mercenary,” Birgitte replied, just as quietly. “If someone offers him enough gold, it becomes a toss of the dice, and not even Mat Cauthon could say how they’ll land.”

That was a very odd remark. She wished she knew how Mat was. And dear Thom. And poor little Olver. Every night she offered prayers that they had escaped the Seanchan safely. There was nothing she could do to help them, though. She had enough on her plate trying to help herself at the moment. “Will he obey me? About the crossbows?”

Birgitte shook her head, and Elayne sighed. It was bad to give orders that would not be obeyed. It put people in the habit of disobeying.

Moving close, she spoke in a near whisper. “You look tired, Birgitte.” This was nothing for anyone else’s ears. Birgitte’s face was tight, her eyes haggard. Anyone could see that, but the bond said she was bone-weary, as it had for days now. But then, Elayne felt that same dragging tiredness, as though her limbs were made of lead. Their bond mirrored more than emotions. “You don’t have to lead every counterattack yourself.”

“And who else is there?” For a moment weariness larded Birgitte’s voice, too, and her shoulders actually slumped, but she straightened quickly and strengthened her tone. It was pure willpower. Elayne could feel it, stone hard in the bond, so hard she wanted to weep. “My officers are inexperienced boys,” Birgitte went on, “or else men who came out of retirement and should still be warming their bones in front of their grandchildren’s fireplace. Except for the mercenary captains, anyway, and there isn’t one I’d trust without someone looking over his shoulder. Which brings us back to: Who else but me?”

Elayne opened her mouth to argue. Not about the mercenaries. Birgitte had explained about them, bitterly and at great length. At times, mercenaries would fight as hard as any Guardsman, but other times, they pulled back rather than take too many casualties. Fewer men meant less gold for their next hire unless they could be replaced with men as good. Battles that could have been won had been lost instead because mercenaries left the field to preserve their numbers. They disliked doing it if anybody except their own kind was watching, though. That spoiled their reputation and lowered their hire price. But there had to be someone else. She could not afford Birgitte falling over from exhaustion. Light, she wished Gareth Bryne were there. Egwene needed him, but so did she. She opened her mouth, and suddenly rumbling booms crashed from the city behind her. She turned, and her mouth stayed open, gaping in astonishment, now.

Where moments before there had been clear sky over the Inner City, a huge mass of black clouds loomed like sheer-sided mountains, forked lightning slashing down through a gray wall of rain that seemed as solid as the city walls. The gilded domes of the Royal Palace that should have been glittering in the sun were invisible behind that wall. That torrent fell only over the Inner City. Everywhere else the sky remained bright and cloudless. There was nothing natural in that. Amazement lasted only moments, though. That silver-blue lightning, three-tined, five-tined, was striking inside Caemlyn, causing damage and maybe deaths. How had those clouds come to be? She reached to embrace *saidar*, to disperse them. The True Source slipped away from her, and then again. It was like trying to grasp a bead buried in a pot of grease. Just when she thought she had it, it squirted away. It was like this far too often, now.

“Aviendha, will you deal with that, please?”

“Of course,” Aviendha replied, embracing *saidar* easily. Elayne stifled a surge of jealousy. Her difficulty was Rand’s bloody fault, not her sister’s. “And thank you. I need the practice.”

That was untrue, an attempt to spare her feelings. Aviendha began weaving Air, Fire, Water and Earth in complex patterns, and doing so nearly as smoothly as she herself could have, if much more slowly. Her sister lacked her skill with weather, but then, she had not had the advantage of Sea Folk teaching. The clouds did not simply vanish, of course. First the lightnings became single bolts, dwindled in number, then ceased. That was the hardest part. Calling lightning was twirling a feather between your fingers compared to stopping it. That was more like picking up a blacksmith’s anvil in your hands. Then the clouds began to spread out, to thin and grow paler. That was slow, too. Doing too much too fast with weather could cause effects that rippled across the countryside for leagues, and you never knew what the effects might be. Raging storms and flash floods were as likely as balmy days and gentle breezes. By the time the clouds had spread far enough to reach the outer walls of Caemlyn, they were gray and dropping a steady, soaking downpour that quickly slicked Elayne’s curls to her scalp.

“Is that enough?” Smiling, Aviendha turned her face up to let the rain run down her cheeks. “I love to watch water falling from the sky.” Light, you would think she had had enough of rain. It had rained nearly every bloody day since spring came!

“It’s time to be getting back to the palace, Elayne,” Birgitte said, tucking her bowstring into her coat pocket. She had begun unstringing her bow as soon as the clouds began moving toward them. “Some of these men need a sister’s attention. And my breakfast seems two days past.”

Elayne scowled. The bond carried a wariness that told her all she needed to know. They must return to the palace to get Elayne, in her delicate condition, out of the rain. As if she might melt! Abruptly she became aware of the groans from the wounded, and her face grew hot. Those men *did* need a sister's attention. Even if she could hold on to *saidar*, the least of their injuries were beyond her modest abilities, and Aviendha was no better at Healing.

"Yes, it *is* time," she said. If only she could get her emotions back under control! Birgitte would be pleased at that, too. Spots of color decorated her cheeks, too, echoes of Elayne's shame. They looked very odd with the frown she wore as she hurried Elayne into the tower.

Fireheart and Mageen and the other horses were all standing patiently where their reins had been dropped, as Elayne expected. Even Mageen was well trained. They had the wall street utterly to themselves until Alise and the other Kin walked out of the narrower way. There was not a cart or wagon to be seen. Every door in sight was tightly shut, every window curtained, though there might well be no one behind any of them. Most people had had sense enough to leave as soon they caught a glimmering that hundreds of men were about to start swinging swords in their vicinity. One curtain twitched; a woman's face showed for a moment, then vanished. Some others took ghoulish delight in watching.

Talking quietly among themselves, the four Kinswomen took their places where they had opened their gateway some hours earlier. They eyed the corpses in the street and shook their heads, but these were not the first dead men they had seen. Not one would have been allowed to test for Accepted, yet they were calm, sure of themselves, as dignified as sisters despite the rain soaking their hair and dresses. Learning Egwene's plans for the Kin, to be associated with the Tower and a place for Aes Sedai to retire, had lessened their fears over their future, especially once they found out that their Rule would remain in place and the former Aes Sedai would have to follow it, too. Not all believed—over the last month, seven of their number had run away without leaving so much as a note—yet most did, and took strength from belief. Having work to do had restored their pride. Elayne had not realized that had been dented until they stopped seeing themselves as refugees wholly dependent on her. They held themselves straighter, now. Worry had vanished from their faces. And they were not so quick to bend their necks for a sister, unfortunately. Though that part of it really had begun earlier. They once had considered Aes Sedai superior to mortal flesh, but had learned to their dismay that the shawl did not make a woman more than she was without it.

Alise eyed Elayne, compressing her lips for a moment and adjusting her brown skirts unnecessarily. She had argued against Elayne being allowed—allowed!—to come here. And Birgitte had almost given way! Alise was a forceful woman. “Are you ready for us, Captain-General?” she said.

“We are,” Elayne said, but Alise waited until Birgitte nodded before linking with the other three Kinswomen. She ignored Elayne after that one glance. Really, Nynaeve should never have begun trying to “put some backbone into them,” as she had put it. When she could lay hands on Nynaeve again, she was going to have words with the woman.

The familiar vertical slash appeared and seemed to rotate into a view of the main stableyard in the palace, a hole in the air nearly four paces by four, but the view through the opening, of the tall arched doors of one of the white marble stables, was a little off-center from what she expected. When she rode onto the rain-drenched flagstones of the stableyard, she saw why. There was another gateway, slightly smaller, open. If you tried to open a gateway where one already existed, yours was displaced just enough that the two did not touch, though the gap between was thinner than a razor’s edge. From that other gateway a twinned column of men seemed to be riding out of the stableyard’s outer wall, curving away to exit the stableyard through the open iron-strapped gates. Some wore burnished helmets and breastplates or plate-and-mail, but every man had on the white-collared red coat of the Queen’s Guard. A tall, broad-shouldered man with two golden knots on the left shoulder of his red coat stood in the rain watching them, helmet balanced on his hip.

“That’s a sight to soothe sore eyes,” Birgitte murmured. Small groups of Kinswomen were scouring the countryside for anyone trying to come to Elayne’s support, but it was a chancy business. Thus far, the Kinswomen had brought word of dozens and dozens of groups trying to find a way into the city, yet they had only managed to locate five bands totaling fewer than a thousand. Word had spread of how many men Arymilla had around the city, and men supporting Trakand were skittish about being found. About who might do the finding.

As soon as Elayne and the others appeared, red-clad grooms with the White Lion on their left shoulders came running. A scrawny, gap-toothed fellow with a fringe of white hair took Fireheart's bridle while a lean, graying woman held Elayne's stirrup for her to dismount. Ignoring the downpour, she strode toward the tall man, splashing water with every step. His hair hung every which way over his face, clinging wetly, but she could see he was young, well short of his middle years.

"The Light shine on you, Lieutenant," she said. "Your name? How many did you bring? And from where?" Through that smaller opening she could see a line of horsemen extending out of sight among tall trees. Whenever a pair rode through, another appeared at the far end of the column. She would not have believed that many of the Guards remained anywhere.

"Charlz Guybon, my Queen," he replied, sinking to one knee and pressing a gauntleted fist to the flagstones. "Captain Kindlin in Aringill gave me permission to try reaching Caemlyn. That was after we learned Lady Naean and the others had escaped."

Elayne laughed. "Stand, man. Stand. I'm not Queen yet." Aringill? There had never been so many of the Guards there.

"As you say, my Lady," he said as he regained his feet and made a bow that was more proper for the Daughter-Heir.

"Can we continue this inside?" Birgitte put in irritably. Guybon took in her coat with its gold stripes on the cuffs and knots of rank, and offered a salute that she returned with a quick arm across her chest. If he was surprised to see a woman as Captain-General, he was wise enough not to show it. "I'm soaked to the skin, and so are you, Elayne." Aviendha was right behind her, shawl wrapped around her head and not looking so pleased with rain now that her white blouse clung wetly and her dark skirts hung with water. The Guardswomen were leading their horses toward one of the stables, except for the eight who would remain with Elayne until their replacements arrived. Guybon made no comment on them, either. A very wise man.

Elayne allowed herself to be hustled as far as the simple colonnade that offered entrance to the palace itself. Even here the Guardswomen surrounded her, four ahead and four behind, so she felt a prisoner. Once out of the rain, though, she balked. She wanted to *know*. She tried again to embrace *saidar*—removing the moisture from her clothes would be a simple matter with the Power—but the Source skittered away once more. Aviendha did not know the weave, so they had to stand there dripping. The plain iron stand-lamps along the wall were still unlit, and with the rain, the space was dim. Guybon raked his hair into a semblance of order with his fingers. Light, he was little short of beautiful! His greenish hazel eyes were tired, but his face seemed suited to smiling. He looked as if he had not smiled in too long.

“Captain Kindlin said I could try to find men who’d been discharged by Gaebril, my Lady, and they started flocking in as soon as I put out the call. You’d be surprised how many tucked their uniforms into a chest against the day they might be wanted again. A good many carried off their armor, too, which they shouldn’t have done, strictly speaking, but I’m glad they did. I feared I’d waited too long when I heard of the siege. I was considering trying to fight my way to one of the city gates when Mistress Zigane and the others found me.” A puzzled look came over his face. “She became very upset when I called her Aes Sedai, but that has to be the One Power that brought us here.”

“It was, and she isn’t,” Elayne said impatiently. “How many, man?”

“Four thousand seven hundred and sixty-two of the Guards, my Lady. And I encountered a number of lords and ladies who were trying to reach Caemlyn with their armsmen. Be content. I made sure they were loyal to you before I let them join me. There are none from the great Houses, but they bring the total near to ten thousand, my Lady.” He said that as if it were of no moment at all. There are forty horses fit for riding in the stable. I have brought you ten thousand soldiers.

Elayne laughed and clapped her hands in delight. “Wonderful, Captain Guybon! Wonderful!” Arymilla still had her outnumbered, but not so badly as before.

“Guardsman Lieutenant, my Lady. I am a Lieutenant.”

“From this moment, you are Captain Guybon.”

“And my second,” Birgitte added, “at least for the present. You’ve shown resourcefulness, you’re old enough to have experience, and I need both.”

Guybon seemed overwhelmed, bowing and murmuring stammered thanks. Well, a man of his age would normally expect to serve at least ten or fifteen more years before being considered for captain, much less second to the Captain-General, however temporary.

“And now it’s past time for us to be getting into dry clothes,” Birgitte continued. “Especially you, Elayne.” The Warder bond carried an implacable firmness that suggested she might try dragging Elayne if she dallied.

Temper flared, hot and sharp, but Elayne fought it down. She had nearly doubled the number of her soldiers, and she would not let anything spoil this day. Besides, she wanted dry clothes, too.

* * *

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CHAPTER 14

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Wet Things

Inside, the gilded stand-lamps were lit, since daylight never penetrated far into the palace, flames flickering on the lamps that lacked glass mantles. The lamps' mirrors provided a good light in the bustling corridor, though, and bustling it was, with liveried servants scurrying in every direction, or sweeping or mopping. Serving men with the White Lion on the left breast of their red coats were up on tall ladders taking down the winter tapestries, mainly flowers and scenes of summer, and putting up the spring tapestries, many displaying the colorful foliage of fall. Always two seasons ahead for the majority of the hangings was the custom, to provide a touch of relief from winter's cold or summer's heat, to remind while spring's new growth was on all the trees that the branches would grow bare and the snows come again, to remind when dead leaves were falling and the first snows, too, and days grew ever colder, that there would be a spring. There were a few battles among them, showing days of particular glory for Andor, but Elayne did not enjoy looking at those as much as she had as a girl. Still, they had their place now, as well, tokens of what battle actually was. The difference between how a child looked at things and a woman did. Glory was always bought with blood. Glory aside, necessary things were often paid for with battle and blood.

There were too few servants to carry out such tasks in a timely manner, and a fair number were white-haired pensioners with bent backs who seldom moved quickly in any case. However slow they were, she was glad they had willingly come out of retirement, to train those newly hired and take up the slack left by those who had fled while Gaebril reigned or after Rand took Caemlyn, else the palace would have taken on the aspect of a barn by this time. A dirty barn. At least all of the winter runners were up off the floors. She left a damp trail behind her on the red-and-white floor tiles, and with all the spring rains, wet runners would have been sprouting mildew before nightfall.

Servants in red-and-white hurrying about their duties looked aghast as they bowed or curtsied, which did nothing for her temper. They did not appear upset to see Aviendha or Birgitte drenched and dripping, or the Guardswomen either. Burn her, if everyone did not stop expecting her to be mollycoddled all the day long . . . ! Her scowl was such that the servants began making their courtesies quickly and scurrying on. Her temper was becoming the stuff of evening stories in front of the fireplace, though she tried not to unleash it on servants. On anyone, really, but more so with servants. They lacked the luxury of shouting back.

She intended to go straight to her apartments and change, but intentions or no, she turned aside when she saw Reanne Corly walking in a crossing corridor where the floor tiles were all red. The servants' reactions had nothing to do with it. She was *not* being stubborn. She was wet, and she wanted dry clothing and a warm towel in the worst way, but seeing the Kinswoman was a surprise, and the two women with Reanne also caught her eye. Birgitte muttered a curse before following her, swishing her bowstave sideways through the air as though thinking of striking someone. The bond carried a blend of long suffering and irritability, soon stifled. Aviendha never left Elayne's side, though busily trying to wring water out of her shawl. Despite all the rain she had seen, all the rivers since crossing the Spine of the World and the great cisterns beneath the city, Aviendha winced at the waste, the water splashing uselessly on the floor. The eight Guardswomen, left behind by her sudden swerve, hurried to catch up, stolid and silent except for the stamp of their boots on the floor tiles. Give anyone a sword and boots, and they began stamping.

One of the women with Reanne was Kara Defane, who had been the wise woman, or Healer, of a fishing village on Toman Head before the Seanchan collared her. Plump and merry-eyed in brown wool with embroidered blue and white flowers at her cuffs, Kara appeared little older than Elayne, though she was nearly fifty. The other was named Jillari, a former *damane* from Seanchan. Despite everything, the sight of her made Elayne's flesh feel cold. Whatever else could be said of her, the woman was Seanchan, after all.

Not even Jillari herself knew how old she was, though she appeared just into her middle years. Slight of build, with long, fiery red hair and eyes as green as Aviendha's, she and Marille, the other Seanchan-born *damane* who remained in the palace, persisted in maintaining that they still were *damane*, that they needed to be collared because of what they could do. Daily walks were one way the Kin were trying to accustom them to freedom. Carefully supervised walks, of course. They were always closely watched, day and night. Either might try to free the *sul'dam*, otherwise. For that matter, Kara herself was not trusted alone with any of the *sul'dam*, nor was Lemore, a young Taraboner noble collared when Tanchico fell. The notion would not come to them on its own, yet there was no saying what either would do if a *sul'dam* ordered her to help the woman escape. The habit of obedience remained strong in Kara and Lemore both.

Jillari's eyes widened at the sight of Elayne, and she immediately fell to her knees with a thud. She tried to fold herself into a bundle on the floor, but Kara caught her shoulders and gently urged her back to her feet. Elayne tried not to let her distaste show. And hoped that if it did, everyone would take it for the kneeling and crouching. Some of it was. How could anyone *want* to be collared? She heard Lini's voice again, and shivered. *You can't know another woman's reasons until you've worn her dress for a year.* Burn her if she had any desire to do that!

"No need for all that," Kara said. "This is what we do." She curtsied, not very gracefully. She had never seen a town larger than a few hundred people before the Seanchan took her. After a moment, the red-haired woman spread her own dark blue skirts more awkwardly still. She almost fell over, in fact, and blushed a bright crimson.

"Jillari is sorry," she almost whispered, folding her hands at her waist. Her eyes, she kept meekly directed at the floor. "Jillari will try to remember."

" 'I,' " Kara said. "Remember what I told you? I call you Jillari, but you call yourself 'I' or 'me.' Try it. And look at me. You can do it." She sounded as though she were encouraging a child.

The Seanchan woman wet her lips, giving Kara a sidelong look. "I," she said softly. And promptly began weeping, tears rolling down her cheeks faster than she could wipe them away with her fingers. Kara enveloped her in a hug and made soothing noises. She seemed about to cry, too. Aviendha shifted uncomfortably. It was not the tears—men or women, Aiel wept unashamed when they felt the need—but for them, touching hands was a great display in public.

"Why don't you two walk on alone for a while," Reanne told the pair with a comforting smile that deepened the fine lines at the corners of her blue eyes. Her voice was high and lovely, suitable for singing. "I'll catch you up, and we can eat together." They offered her curtsies, too, Jillari still weeping, and turned away with Kara's arm around the smaller woman's shoulders. "If you care to, my Lady," Reanne said before they had gone two steps, "we could talk on the way to your apartments."

The woman's face was calm, and her tone put no special freight on the words, yet Elayne's jaw tightened. She forced it to relax. There was no point in being stubborn stupid. She *was* wet. And beginning to shiver, though the day could hardly be called cold. "An excellent suggestion," she said, gathering her sodden gray skirts. "Come."

"We could walk a little faster," Birgitte muttered, not quite far enough under her breath.

"We could run," Aviendha said, without trying to keep her voice low at all. "We might get dry from the exertion."

Elayne ignored them and glided at a suitable pace. In her mother, it would have been called regal. She was not sure she managed that, but she was not about to run through the palace. Or even hurry. The sight of her rushing would start a dozen rumors if not a hundred, each one of some dire event worse than the one before. Too many rumors floated on every breath of air as it was. The worst was that the city was about to fall, that she planned to flee before it did. No, she would be seen to be utterly unruffled. Everyone had to believe her completely confident. Even if that was a false facade. Anything else, and she might as well yield to Arymilla. Fear of defeat had lost as many battles as weakness had, and she could not afford to lose a single one. "I thought the Captain-General had you out scouting, Reanne."

Birgitte had been using two of the Kin for scouts, women who could not make a gateway large enough to admit a horse cart, but with circles of Kinswomen available to make gateways, for trade as well as moving soldiers, she had co-opted the remaining six who could Travel on their own. An encircling army was no impediment to them. Yet Reanne's well-cut, fine blue wool, though unadorned save for a red-enameled circle pin on the high neck, was decidedly unsuited for skulking about the countryside.

"The Captain-General believes her scouts need rest. Unlike herself," Reanne added blandly, raising an eyebrow at Birgitte. The bond carried a brief flash of annoyance. Aviendha laughed for some reason; Elayne still did not understand Aiel humor. "Tomorrow, I go out again. It takes me back to the days long ago when I was a pack-peddler with one mule." The Kin all followed many crafts during their long lives, always changing location and craft before anyone took note of how slowly they aged. The oldest among them had mastered half a dozen crafts or more, shifting from one to another easily. "I decided to use my freeday helping Jillari settle on a surname."

Reanne grimaced. “It’s custom in Seanchan to strike a girl’s name from her family’s rolls when she’s collared, and the poor woman feels she has no right to the name she was born with. Jillari was given with the collar, but she wants to keep that.”

“There are more reasons to hate the Seanchan than I can count,” Elayne said heatedly. Then, belatedly, she caught up to the import of it all. Learning to curtsy. Choosing a new surname. Burn her, if pregnancy was making her slow-witted on top of everything else . . . ! “When did Jillari change her mind about the collar?” There was no reason to let everyone know she was being dense today.

The other woman’s expression did not alter a whit, but she hesitated just long enough to let Elayne know her deception had failed. “Just this morning, after you and the Captain-General left, or you’d have been informed.” Reanne hurried on so the point had no time to fester. “And there’s other news as good. At least, it’s somewhat good. One of the *sul’dam*, Marli Noichin—you recall her?—has admitted seeing the weaves.”

“Oh, that *is* good news,” Elayne murmured. “Very good. Twenty-eight more to go, but they might be easier now that one of them has broken.” She had watched an attempt to convince Marli that she could learn to channel, that she could already see weaves of the Power. The plump Seanchan woman had been stubbornly defiant even after she began crying.

“Somewhat good, I said.” Reanne sighed. “In Marli’s opinion, she might as well have admitted she kills children. Now she insists that she must be collared. She *begs* for the *a’dam*. It makes my skin creep. I don’t know what to do with her.”

“Send her back to the Seanchan as soon as we can,” Elayne replied.

Reanne stopped dead in shock, her eyebrows climbing. Birgitte cleared her throat loudly—impatience filled the bond before being stifled—and the Kinswoman gave a start, then began walking again, at a faster pace than before. “But they’ll make her a *damane*. I can’t condemn any woman to that.”

Elayne gave her Warder a look that slid off like a dagger sliding off good armor. Birgitte’s expression was . . . bland. To the golden-haired woman, being a Warder contained strong elements of older sister. And worse, sometimes mother.

"*I* can," she said emphatically, lengthening her own stride. Well, it would not hurt to get dry a little sooner rather than later. "She helped hold enough others prisoner that she deserves a taste of it herself, Reanne. But that's not why I mean to send her back. If any of the others wants to stay and learn, and make up for what she's done, I certainly won't hand her to the Seanchan, but Light's truth, I hope they all feel like Marli. They'll put an *a'dam* on her, Reanne, but they won't be able to keep secret who she was. Every one-time *sul'dam* I can send the Seanchan to collar will be a mattock digging at their roots."

"A harsh decision," Reanne said sadly. She plucked at her skirts in an agitated manner, smoothed them, then plucked at them again. "Perhaps you might consider thinking on it for a few days? Surely it isn't anything that has to be done immediately."

Elayne gritted her teeth. The woman had as much as implied that she had reached this decision in one of her swinging moods! But had she? It seemed reasonable and logical. They could not keep the *sul'dam* imprisoned forever. Sending those who did not *want* to be free back to the Seanchan was a way to be rid of them and strike a blow at the Seanchan at the same time. It *was* more than hatred of any Seanchan. Of course, it was. Burn her, but she bloody well hated being unsure whether her own decisions were sound! She could not afford to make unsound decisions. Still, there was no hurry. Better to send back a group, if possible, in any event. There was less chance of someone arranging an "accident," that way. She did not put that sort of thing past the Seanchan. "I will think on it, Reanne, but I doubt I'll change my mind."

Reanne sighed again, deeply. Eager for her promised return to the White Tower and novice white—she had been heard to say she envied Kirstian and Zarya—she wanted very much to enter the Green Ajah, but Elayne had her doubts. Reanne was kindhearted, softhearted in fact, and Elayne had never met any Green who could be called soft. Even those who seemed frilly or frail on the surface were cold steel inside.

Ahead of them, Vandene glided from a crossing corridor, slender, white-haired and graceful in dark gray wool with deep brown trim, and turned in the same direction they were going, apparently without noticing them. She was Green, and as hard as a hammerhead. Jaem, her Warder, walked beside her, head bent in close conversation, now and then raking a hand through his thinning gray hair. Gnarled and lean, his dark green coat hanging loose on him, he was old, but every scrap as hard as she, an old root that could dull axes. Kirstian and Zarya, both in plain novice white, followed meekly with their hands folded at their waists, the one pale as a Cairhienin, the other short and slim-hipped. For runaways who had succeeded in what so few did, remaining free of the White Tower for years, over three hundred years in Kirstian's case, they had resettled into their places as novices with remarkable ease. But then, the Kin's Rule was a blending of the rules that governed novices and those that Accepted lived by. Perhaps, to them, the white woolen dresses and the loss of freedom to come and go as they chose were the only real change, though the Kin regulated that last to some extent.

"I'm very glad she has those two to occupy her," Reanne murmured in tones of sympathy. Pained caring shone in her eyes. "It's good that she mourns her sister, but I fear she'd be obsessed with Adeleas' death without Kirstian and Zarya. She may be anyway. I believe that dress she's wearing belonged to Adeleas. I've tried offering solace—I have experience helping people overcome grief; I've been a village Wise Woman as well as wearing the red belt in Ebou Dar many years ago—but she won't give me two words."

In fact, Vandene wore *only* her dead sister's clothing, now, and Adeleas' flowery perfume, as well. At times, Elayne thought Vandene was trying to become Adeleas, to offer up herself in order to bring her sister back to life. But could you fault someone for being obsessed with finding who had murdered her sister? Not that more than a handful of people knew that was what she was doing. Everyone else believed as Reanne did, that she was absorbed with teaching Kirstian and Zarya, that and beginning their punishment for running away. Vandene was doing both, of course, and with a will, yet it was really just a cover for her true purpose.

Elayne reached out without looking, and found Aviendha's hand waiting to take hers, a comforting grip. She squeezed back, unable to imagine the grief of losing Aviendha. They shared a quick glance, and Aviendha's eyes mirrored her own feelings. Had she really once thought Aiel faces impassive and unreadable?

"As you say, Reanne, she has Kirstian and Zarya to occupy her." Reanne was not among the handful who knew the truth. "We all mourn in our own way. Vandene will find solace along her own path."

When she found Adeleas' murderer, it was to be hoped. If that failed to at least begin assuaging the pain. . . . Well, that was to be faced when it must be. For now, she must allow Vandene her head. Especially since she had no doubt the Green would ignore any attempt to rein her in. That was more than irritating; it was infuriating. She had to watch Vandene perhaps destroying herself, and worse, make use of it. Having no alternative made that no less unpalatable.

As Vandene and her companions turned aside down another hallway, Reene Harfor appeared out of a side corridor right in front of Elayne, a stout, quiet woman with a graying bun atop her head and an air of regal dignity, her formal scarlet tabard with the White Lion of Andor as always looking freshly ironed. Elayne had never seen her with a hair out of place or looking even slightly the worse for a long day spent overseeing the workings of the palace. And more besides. Her round face appeared puzzled for some reason, but it took on a look of concern at the sight of Elayne. "Why, my Lady, you're drenched," she said, sounding shocked, as she made her curtsy. "You need to get out of those wet things right away."

"Thank you, Mistress Harfor," Elayne said through her teeth. "I hadn't noticed."

She regretted the outburst instantly—the First Maid had been as faithful to her as to her mother—but what made matters worse was that Mistress Harfor took her flare-up in stride, never so much as blinking. Elayne Trakand's moods were no longer anything to be surprised at.

"I will walk with you if I may, my Lady," she said calmly, falling in at Elayne's side. A freckled young serving woman carrying a basket of folded bed linens began to offer her courtesies, only a hair more directed at Elayne than the First Maid, but Reene made a quick gesture that sent the girl scurrying before she completed bending her knees. Perhaps it was just to keep her from overhearing. Reene did not stop talking. "Three of the mercenary captains are demanding to meet with you. I put them in the Blue Reception Room, and told the servants to keep watch so no small valuables accidentally fall into their pockets. Not that I had to, as it turned out. Careane Sedai and Sareitha Sedai appeared soon after and settled in to keep the captains company. Captain Mellar is with them, too."

Elayne frowned. Mellar. She was trying to keep him too busy for mischief, yet he had a way of turning up where and when she least wanted him. For that matter, so did Careane and Sareitha. One of them had to be the

Black Ajah killer. Unless it was Merilille, and she was beyond reach, it seemed. Reene knew about that. Keeping her in the dark would have been criminal. She had eyes everywhere, and they might notice a vital clue. “What do the mercenaries want, Mistress Harfor?”

“More money, is my guess,” Birgitte growled, and swung her unstrung bow like a club.

“Most likely,” Reene agreed, “but they refused to tell me.” Her mouth tightened slightly. No more than that, yet it seemed these mercenaries had managed to offend her. If they were stupid enough not to see that she was more than a superior serving woman, then they were very dense indeed.

“Has Dyelin returned?” Elayne asked, and when the First Maid said not, added, “Then I will see these mercenaries as soon as I’ve changed clothes.” She might as well get them out of the way.

Rounding a corner, she found herself face-to-face with two of the Windfinders and barely suppressed a sigh. The Sea Folk were the last people on earth she wanted to confront right then. Lean and dark and barefoot in red brocaded silk trousers and a blue brocaded silk blouse with a green sash tied in an elaborate knot, Chanelle din Seran White Shark was aptly named. Elayne had no idea what a white shark looked like—it might well have been a little thing—but Chanelle’s big eyes were hard enough to belong on a fierce predator, especially when she took in Aviendha. There was bad blood, there. A tattooed hand raised the gold piercework scent box hanging on a chain about Chanelle’s neck, and she inhaled the sharp, spicy scent deeply, as though covering some foul odor. Aviendha laughed out loud, which made Chanelle’s full lips grow thin. Thinner, at least. Thin was beyond them.

The other was Renaile din Calon, once Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships, in blue linen trousers and a red blouse sashed with blue, tied in a much less intricate knot. Both women wore the long white mourning stoles for Nesta din Reas, yet Renaile must have felt Nesta’s death most keenly. She was carrying a carved wooden writing box with a capped ink jar set in one corner and a sheet of paper with a few scrawled lines clipped to its top. Wings of white in her black hair hid the six gold earrings in her ears, much thinner rings than the ten she had worn before learning of Nesta’s fate, and the gold honor chain crossing her dark left cheek looked stark supporting only the medallion that named her clan. After Sea Folk custom, Nesta’s death had meant starting over for Renaile, with no more rank than a woman raised from apprentice on the day she herself had put off her honors. Her face still held dignity, though much subdued now that she was acting as Chanelle's secretary.

"I am on my way—" Elayne began, but Chanelle cut her off imperiously.

"What news do you have of Talaan? And of Merilille. Are you even trying to find them?"

Elayne took a deep breath. Shouting at Chanelle never did any good. The woman was more than willing to shout back and seldom willing to listen to reason. She would *not* engage in another screaming match. Servants slipping by to either side did not pause to offer bows or curtsies—they could sense the mood here—but they shot grim looks at the Sea Folk women. That was pleasing, though it should not have been. However upsetting they were, the Windfinders were guests. In a way, they were, bargain or no bargain. Chanelle had complained more than once of slow-footed servants and tepid bathwater. And that was pleasing, too. Still, she would maintain her dignity, and civility.

"The news is the same as yesterday," she replied in tones of moderation. Well, she attempted tones of moderation. If traces of sharpness remained, the Windfinder would have to live with them. "The same as last week, and the week before that. Inquiries have been made at every inn in Caemlyn. Your apprentice is not to be found. Merilille is not to be found. It seems they must have managed to leave the city." The gate guards had been warned to watch for a Sea Folk woman with tattooed hands, but they would not have tried to stop an Aes Sedai leaving, or taking anyone with her that she wanted. For that matter, the mercenaries would let anyone at all pass who offered a few coins. "And now, if you will excuse me, I am on my way—"

"That is not good enough." Chanelle's voice was hot enough to singe leather. "You Aes Sedai stick together as tightly as oysters. Merilille kidnapped Talaan, and I think you are hiding her. We will search for them, and I assure you, when we find them, Merilille will be punished sharply before she is sent to the ships to fulfill her part of the bargain."

"You seem to be forgetting yourself," Birgitte said. Her voice was mild, her face calm, but the bond quivered with anger. She held her bowstave propped in front of her with both hands as if to keep them from making fists. "You'll withdraw your accusations, or you'll suffer for it."

Perhaps she was not as self-controlled as she seemed. This was no way to go on with Windfinders. They were women of power among their own people, and accustomed to wielding it. But Birgitte did not hesitate. “By the bargain Zaida made, you’re under the Lady Elayne’s authority. You’re under *my* authority. Any searching you do will be when you aren’t needed. And unless I misremember badly, you’re supposed to be in Tear right now to bring back wagonloads of grain and salt beef. I strongly suggest you Travel there immediately, or you might learn a little about punishment yourself.” Oh, that was entirely the wrong way with Windfinders.

“No,” Elayne said as hotly as Chanelle, surprising herself. “Search if you wish, Chanelle, you and all of the Windfinders. Search Caemlyn from end to end. And when you can’t find Talaan or Merilille, you *will* apologize for calling me a liar.” Well, the woman *had*. As good as, anyway. She felt a strong desire to slap Chanelle. She wanted to. . . . Light, her anger and Birgitte’s were feeding each other! Frantically she tried to soothe her fury before it burst into open rage, but the only result was a sudden longing to weep that she had to fight just as wildly.

Chanelle drew herself up, scowling. “You would claim we had reneged on the bargain. We have labored like bilge girls this past month and more. You will not cast us off without meeting your side of the bargain. Renaile, the Aes Sedai at The Silver Swan are to be told—told, mind!—that they must produce Merilille and Talaan or else pay what the White Tower owes themselves. They cannot pay all, but they can make a start.”

Renaile began unscrewing the silver cap of the ink jar.

“Not a note,” Chanelle snapped. “Go yourself and tell them. Now.”

Tightening the cap, Renaile bowed almost parallel to the floor, quickly touching fingertips to her heart. “As you command,” she murmured, her face a dark mask. She did not delay in obeying, setting out at a trot the way she had come with the writing box tucked under her arm.

Still fighting the desire to strike Chanelle and weep at the same time, Elayne winced. This was not the first time the Sea Folk had gone to The Silver Swan, nor even the second or third, but always before they had gone asking, not demanding. There were nine sisters resident at the inn at present—the number kept changing as sisters entered the city or left, and rumor said there were other Aes Sedai in the city, too—and it worried her that none had appeared at the palace. She had stayed clear of the Swan—she knew how much Elaida wanted to lay hands on her, but not who the sisters at the Swan supported, or whether they supported anyone; they had been closemouthed as mussels with Sareitha and Careane—yet she had expected some of them to come to the palace if only to learn what was behind the Sea Folk's claim. Why were so many Aes Sedai in Caemlyn when Tar Valon itself was under siege? She herself was the first answer that came to mind, and that made her more determined to avoid any sister she did not personally know to be a supporter of Egwene. But that would not stop word of the bargain made for aid in using the Bowl of the Winds from spreading, and of the price the Tower had been committed to pay for that help. Burn her, but that news would be a bloody wagonload of fireworks going off at once when it became general knowledge among Aes Sedai. Worse. Ten wagonloads.

Watching Renaile trot away, she fought to steady her emotions. And tried to bring the tone back to something approaching civility. "She handles her change in circumstances very well, I think."

Chanelle gave a dismissive puff. "And well she should. Every Windfinder knows she will rise and fall many times before her body is given back to the salt." She twisted to gaze after the other Sea Folk woman, and a touch of malice entered her voice. She seemed to be speaking to herself. "She fell from a greater height than most, and she should not have been surprised to find her landing hard after so many fingers she trod on while she was—" Her mouth snapped shut, and she jerked her head around to glare at Elayne, at Birgitte, at Aviendha and Reene, even at the Guardswomen, daring them to comment.

Elayne prudently kept her mouth closed, and, the Light be thanked, so did everyone else. For her part, she thought she almost had her temper smoothed, the desire to cry suppressed, and she did not want to say anything that might start Chanelle shouting and undo all her work. For that matter, she could not think of anything to say after hearing that. She doubted it was part of Atha'an Miere custom to take revenge on someone you believed had misused their position above you. It was very human, though.

The Windfinder stared her up and down, frowning. "You're wet," she said as though just noticing. "It is very bad to be wet for long in your condition. You should change your clothes right away."

Elayne threw back her head and screamed as loudly as she could, a howl of pure outrage and fury. She screamed until her lungs were empty, leaving her panting.

In the silence that followed, everyone stared at her in amazement. Almost everyone. Aviendha began laughing so hard she had to lean against a tapestry of mounted hunters confronting a leopard that had turned. She had one arm pressed across the middle as if her ribs hurt. The bond carried amusement, too—amusement!—though Birgitte's face remained as smooth as a sister's.

"I must Travel to Tear," Chanelle said breathily after a moment, and she turned away without another word or any gesture toward a courtesy. Reene and Reanne offered curtsies, neither quite meeting Elayne's eye, and pled duties before hurrying off.

Elayne stared at Birgitte and Aviendha in turn. "If one of you says a single word," she said warningly.

Birgitte put on such an expression of innocence that it was palpably false, and the bond carried such mirth that Elayne found herself fighting the urge to laugh. Aviendha only laughed the harder.

Gathering her skirts and such dignity as she could summon, Elayne set out for her apartments. If she walked faster than before, well, she *did* want to get out of these damp clothes. That was the only reason. The *only* reason.

* * *

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CHAPTER 15

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A Different Skill

To Elayne's fury, a quiet, simmering fury that clenched her jaw, she got lost on the way to her apartments. Those rooms had been hers since she left the nursery, yet twice she took a turn only to find that it did not lead where she expected. And a sweeping flight of marble-railed stairs took her in entirely the wrong direction. Burn her, now being with child was fuzzing her wits completely! She could feel puzzlement, and increasing concern, through the bond as she retraced her way, climbed a different set of stairs. Some of the Guardswomen murmured uneasily, not quite loudly enough for her to make out the words, until the Bannerwoman in charge, a slim, cool-eyed Saldaean named Devore Zarbayan, silenced them with a sharp word. Even Aviendha began looking at her doubtfully. Well, she was not *about* to have getting lost—in the palace!—flung in her face.

"Not a word from anybody," she said grimly. "Not one!" she added when Birgitte opened her mouth anyway.

The golden-haired woman snapped her jaws shut and gave a tug at her thick braid, almost the way Nynaeve did. She did not bother to keep disapproval from her face, and the bond still carried puzzlement, and worry. Enough that Elayne began to feel worried herself. She struggled to fight that off before she found herself wringing her hands and apologizing. It was that strong.

"I think I'll try to find *my* rooms, if I can have just a *few* words," Birgitte said in a tight voice. "I want to get dry before I wear out my boots. We need to talk of this later. I fear there's nothing to be done, but. . . ." With a stiff nod, barely bending her neck, she stalked off slashing her unstrung bow from side to side.

Elayne almost called her back. She wanted to. But Birgitte had as much need of dry clothing as she. Besides, her mood had swung to grumpy and stubborn. She was *not* going to talk about losing her way in the very halls where she had grown up, not now or later. Nothing to be done? What did *that* mean? If Birgitte was suggesting that her wits were too befuddled to be set straight . . . ! Her jaw tightened all over again.

At last, after yet another unexpected turn, she found the tall, lion-carved doors of her apartments and heaved a small sigh of relief. She had begun to think her memories of the palace really were completely jumbled. A pair of Guardswomen, resplendent in broad-brimmed hats with white plumes and lace-edged sashes embroidered with the White Lion slanting across their burnished breastplates and more pale lace at their cuffs and necks, stiffened on either side of the doors at her approach. She intended them to have red-lacquered breastplates to match their silk coats and breeches when she had time to spend on that sort of thing. If they were to be so pretty that any assailant would discount them until it was too late, she would make them positively gaudy. None of the Guardswomen seemed to mind. In fact, they were eagerly looking forward to the lacquered breastplates.

She had overheard some who were unaware she was near disparage the Guardswomen—mostly women, but including Doilin Mellar, their own commander—yet she had full confidence in their ability to protect her. They were brave and determined, or they would not have been there. Yurith Azeri and others who had been merchants' guards, a rare trade for women, gave daily lessons in the sword, and one or another of the Warders gave a second lesson every day, too. Sareitha's Ned Yarman and Vandene's Jaem were quite laudatory about how quickly they learned. Jaem said it was because they did not think they already knew something of how to use a blade, which seemed silly. How could you believe you already knew something if you needed lessons in it?

Despite the guards already there, Devore told off two of those who accompanied her, and they drew their swords and went inside while Elayne waited in the corridor with Aviendha and the rest, tapping her foot impatiently. Everyone avoided looking at her. The search was not a slur on the women guarding the doors—she supposed it was possible for someone to scale the side of the palace; there certainly was carving enough to provide handholds—yet she felt irritation at being made to wait on it. Only when they came out and reported to Devore that there were no assassins waiting within, no Aes Sedai waiting to whisk Elayne back to Elaida and the Tower, were she and Aviendha allowed to enter, with the Guardswomen forming up on either side of the doors with the others. She was not sure they would have physically prevented her from entering sooner, but so far she had been unwilling to put it to the test. Being restrained by her own bodyguards would have been beyond insufferable, no matter that they were just doing their jobs. Better to avoid the possibility altogether.

A small fire burned on the white marble hearth of the anteroom, but it seemed to give little warmth. The carpets had been taken up for spring, and the floor tiles felt cold beneath the soles of her shoes, stout as they were. Essande, her maid, spread red-trimmed gray skirts with still surprising grace, though the slim, white-haired woman suffered from painful joints, which she denied and refused Healing for. She would have refused any suggestion that she return to her retirement as vehemently. Elayne's Golden Lily was embroidered large on her breast, and proudly worn. Two younger women flanked her a pace back in similar livery but with smaller lilies, stocky square-faced sisters named Sephanie and Naris. Shy-eyed yet quite well trained by Essande, they made deep curtsies, settling nearly to the floor.

Slow-moving and frail Essande might be, but she never wasted time in idle chitchat or stating the obvious. There were no exclamations over how wet Elayne and Aviendha were, though doubtless the Guardswomen had alerted her. "We'll get you both warm and dry, my Lady, and right into something suitable for meeting mercenaries. The red silk with firedrops on the neck should impress them suitably. It's past time you ate, too. Don't bother telling me you have, my Lady. Naris, go fetch meals from the kitchens for the Lady Elayne and the Lady Aviendha." Aviendha gave a snort of laughter, yet she had long since ceased objecting to being called Lady. And a good thing, since she would never stop Essande. With servants, there were things you commanded and things you simply had to tolerate.

Naris grimaced and took a deep breath for some reason, but dropped another deep curtsy, this to Essande, and one only slightly deeper to Elayne—she and her sister were every bit as much in awe of the elderly woman as they were of the Daughter-Heir of Andor—before gathering her skirts and darting into the corridor.

Elayne grimaced, too. The Guardswomen also had told Essande about the mercenaries, apparently. And that she had not eaten. She hated people talking about her behind her back. But how much of that was her shifting moods? She could not recall being upset before because a maid knew what dress to lay out in advance, or because someone knew she was hungry and sent for a meal without being asked. Servants talked among themselves—gossiped constantly, in truth; that was a given—and passed along anything that might help their mistress be served better, if they were good at their jobs. Essande was very good at hers. Still, it rankled, and rankled the worse for her knowing that it was irrational.

She let Essande lead her and Aviendha into the dressing room, with Sephanie bringing up the rear. She was feeling very miserable by this time, damp and shivering, not to mention angry with Birgitte for stalking off, frightened by losing her way in the place where she had grown up, and sullen over her bodyguards gossiping about her. In truth, she felt absolutely wretched.

Soon enough, though, Essande had her out of her wet things and wrapped in a large white towel that had been hanging on a warming rack in front of the wide marble fireplace at the end of the room. That had a soothing effect. This fire was not at all small, and the room seemed not far short of hot, a welcome heat that soaked into the flesh and banished shivers. Essande toweled Elayne's hair dry while Sephanie performed the same office for Aviendha, which chagrined Aviendha still, though this was hardly the first time. She and Elayne frequently brushed each other's hair at night, yet accepting this simple service from a lady's maid put spots of color in Aviendha's sun-dark cheeks.

When Sephanie opened one of the wardrobes lining one wall, Aviendha sighed deeply. She held one towel loosely draped around her—another woman drying her hair might be embarrassing, but near nudity presented no difficulties—and a second, smaller, was wrapped around her hair. "Do you think I should wear wetlander clothes, Elayne, since we are going to meet these mercenaries?" she asked in tones of great reluctance. Essande smiled. She enjoyed dressing Aviendha in silks.

Elayne hid a smile of her own, no easy task since she wanted to laugh. Her sister pretended to disdain silks, but she seldom missed an opportunity to wear them. "If you can bear it, Aviendha," she said gravely, adjusting her own robing towel carefully. Essande saw her in her skin every day, and Sephanie, too, but it was nothing to let happen without reason. "For best effect, we should both over-awe them. You won't mind too much, will you?"

But Aviendha was already at the wardrobe, her towel gaping carelessly as she fingered dresses. Several sets of Aiel garb hung in another of the wardrobes, but Tylin had given her chests of finely cut silks and woolens before they left Ebou Dar, enough to fill nearly a quarter of the carved cabinets.

That brief burst of amusement left Elayne no longer feeling as if she had to argue over everything, so without demurral she let Essande get her into the red silk with firedrops the size of a finger joint sewn in a band around the high neck. The garment would impress, for sure, with no need for other jewels, though in truth the Great Serpent ring on her right hand was jewel enough for anyone. The white-haired woman had a delicate touch, but Elayne still winced as she began doing up the rows of tiny buttons down her back, tightening the bodice across her tender bosom. Opinions varied on how long that would last, yet all agreed that she could expect more swelling.

Oh, how she wished Rand were near enough to share the full effect of her bond with him. That would teach him to get her with child so carelessly. Of course, she could have drunk the heartleaf tea before lying with him—she pushed that thought away firmly. This was all Rand's fault, and that was that.

Aviendha chose blue, which she often did, with rows of tiny pearls edging the bodice. The silk was not so deeply cut as Ebou Dari fashions, yet still would display a little cleavage; few dresses sewn in Ebou Dar failed to do that. As Sephanie began fastening her buttons, Aviendha fondled something she had retrieved from her belt pouch, a small dagger with a rough hilt of deerhorn wrapped in gold wire. It was also a *ter'angreal*, though Elayne had not been able to puzzle out what it did before pregnancy forced a halt to such studies. She had not known her sister was carrying the thing. Aviendha's eyes were almost dreamy as she stared at it.

"Why does that fascinate you so?" Elayne asked. This was not the first time she had seen the other woman absorbed in that knife.

Aviendha gave a start and blinked at the dagger in her hands. The iron blade—it looked like iron, at least, and felt almost like iron—had never been sharpened so far as Elayne could tell and was little longer than her palm, though wide in proportion. Even the point was too blunt for stabbing. "I thought to give it to you, but you never said anything about it, so I thought I might be wrong, and then we would believe you were safe, from some dangers at least, when you were not. So I decided to keep it. That way, if I am right, at least I could protect you, and if I am wrong, it does no harm."

Elayne shook her towel-wrapped head in confusion. "Right about what? What are you talking about?"

"This," Aviendha said, holding up the dagger. "I think that if you have this in your possession, the Shadow cannot see you. Not the Eyeless or the

Shadowtwisted, maybe not even Leafblighter. Except that I must be wrong if you did not see it."

Sephanie gasped, her hands going still until Essande murmured a soft admonition. Essande had lived too long to be shaken by mere mention of the Shadow. Or much else, for that matter.

Elayne stared. She had tried teaching Aviendha to make *ter'angreal*, but her sister possessed not a scrap of facility there. Yet perhaps she had a different skill, maybe even one that could be called a Talent. "Come with me," she said, and taking Aviendha's arm, she almost pulled her out of the dressing room. Essande followed with a torrent of protest, and Sephanie, attempting to continue buttoning up Aviendha's dress on the fly.

In the larger of the apartment's two sitting rooms, goodly fires blazed in both of the fireplaces, and if the air was not so warm as in the dressing room, it was still comfortable. The scroll-edged table bordered with low-backed chairs in the middle of the white-tiled floor was where she and Aviendha took most of their meals. Several leather-bound books from the palace library sat in a stack on one end of the table, histories of Andor and books of tales. The mirrored stand-lamps gave a good light, and they often read here of an evening.

More important, a long side table against one dark-paneled wall was covered with *ter'angreal* from the cache the Kin had kept hidden in Ebou Dar, cups and bowls, statuettes and figurines, jewelry, all manner of things. Most looked commonplace, aside from perhaps a strangeness of design, yet even the most fragile-seeming could not be broken, and some were much lighter or heavier than they appeared. She could no longer safely study them in any meaningful way—she had Min's assurance her babes could not be harmed, but with her control of the Power so slippery, damaging herself was more a possibility than ever—yet she changed what was on the table every day, picking out pieces at random from the panniers kept in the apartment's boxroom, just so she could look at them and speculate on what she had learned before getting with child. Not that she had learned very much—well, nothing, really—but she could think on them. There was no worry of anything being stolen. Reene had rooted out most, if not all, of the dishonest among the servants, and the constant guard at the entrance saw to the rest.

Mouth tight with disapproval—dressing was done in the dressing room, decently, not out where anyone at all might walk in—Essande resumed her task with Elayne’s buttons. Sephanie, likely as agitated by the older woman’s displeasure as anything else, breathed hard as she worked on Aviendha’s.

“Pick out something and tell me what you think it does,” Elayne said. Looking and speculating had done no good, and she had not expected it to. Yet if Aviendha could somehow tell what a *ter’angreal* did just by holding it. . . . Jealousy surged up in her, hot and bitter, but she knocked it down, then for good measure jumped up and down on it until it vanished. She would *not* be jealous of Aviendha!

“I am not sure that I can, Elayne. I only think this knife makes a kind of warding. And I must be wrong or you would know it. You know more of these things than anyone.”

Elayne’s cheeks heated with embarrassment. “I don’t know nearly as much as you seem to think. Try, Aviendha. I’ve never heard of anyone being able to . . . to ‘read’ *ter’angreal*, but if you can, even a little, don’t you see how wonderful that would be?”

Aviendha nodded, but her face held doubt. Hesitantly, she touched a slim black rod, a pace long and so flexible it could be bent into a circle and spring back, lying in the middle of the table. Touched it and jerked her hand back swiftly, wiping her fingers unconsciously on her skirt. “This causes pain.”

“Nynaeve told us that,” Elayne said impatiently, and Aviendha gave her a level look.

“Nynaeve al’Meara did not say you can change how much pain each blow gives.” Uncertainty overcame her again at once, though, and her voice became tentative. “At least, I think that can be done. I think one blow can feel like one, or a hundred. But I am only guessing, Elayne. It is only what I think.”

“Keep going,” Elayne told her encouragingly. “Maybe we’ll find something that makes it certain. What about this?” She picked up an oddly shaped metal cap. Covered with strange, angular patterns of what seemed to be the most minute engraving, it was much too thin to be of use as a helmet, though it was twice as heavy as it appeared. The metal felt slick, too, not simply smooth, as if it were oiled.

Aviendha put down the dagger reluctantly and turned the cap over once in her hands before setting it back on the table and taking up the dagger again. “I think that allows you to direct a . . . a device of some sort.

A machine.” She shook her towel-wrapped head. “But I do not know how, or what kind of machine. You see? I am only guessing again.”

Elayne would not let her stop, though. *Ter’angreal* after *ter’angreal* Aviendha touched or sometimes held for a moment, and every time she had an answer. Delivered hesitantly and with cautions that it was only a surmise, but always an answer. She thought a small hinged box, apparently ivory and covered with rippling red and green stripes, held music, hundreds of tunes, perhaps thousands. With a *ter’angreal*, that might be possible. After all, a fine music box might have cylinders for as many as a hundred tunes and some could play quite long pieces on one cylinder after another without changing them. A flattish white bowl almost a pace across was for looking at things that were far away, she thought, and a tall vase worked with vines in green and blue—blue vines!—would gather water out of the air. That sounded useless, but Aviendha almost caressed it, and after consideration, Elayne realized it would be very useful indeed in the Waste. If it worked as Aviendha believed. And someone figured out how to make it work. A black-and-white figurine of a bird with long wings spread in flight was for talking to people a long way off, she said. So was a blue figure of a woman, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, in an oddly cut skirt and coat. And five earrings, six finger-rings and three bracelets.

Elayne began to think that Aviendha was giving up, offering the same answer every time in hopes that she would stop asking, but then she realized that her sister’s voice was becoming more confident rather than less, that the protests that she was only guessing had dwindled. And her “guesses” were growing in detail. A bent, featureless rod of dull black, as wide as her wrist—it seemed metal, yet one end accommodated itself to any hand that gripped it—made her think of cutting, either metal or stone if they were not too thick. Nothing that could catch fire, though. The apparently glass figure of a man, a foot tall, with his hand raised as if to signal stop, would chase away vermin, which would certainly have been useful, given Caemlyn’s plague of rats and flies. A stone carving the size of her hand, all deep blue curves—it felt like stone, at least, though somehow it did not really look carved—was for growing something. Not plants. It made her think of holes, only they were not exactly holes. And she did not believe anyone had to channel to make it work. Only sing the right song! Some *ter’angreal* did not require channeling, but really! Singing?

Done with Aviendha's dress, Sephanie had grown enthralled with the recitation, her eyes getting wider and wider. Essande listened with interest too, her head tilted to one side, murmuring small exclamations at each new revelation, but she was not bouncing on her toes the way Sephanie was. "What about that one, my Lady?" the younger woman blurted when Aviendha paused. She pointed to the statuette of a stout, bearded man with a merry smile, holding a book. Two feet tall, it appeared to be age-darkened bronze and was certainly heavy enough to be. "Looking at him always makes me want to smile, too, my Lady."

"Me as well, Sephanie Pelden," Aviendha said, stroking the bronze man's head. "He holds more than the book you see. He holds thousands and thousands of books." Abruptly the light of *saidar* enveloped her, and she touched thin flows of Fire and Earth to the bronze figure.

Sephanie squeaked as two words in the Old Tongue appeared in the air above the statuette, as black as if printed with good ink. Some of the letters were shaped a little oddly, but the words were quite clear. *Ansoen* and *Imsoen*, floating on nothing. Aviendha looked nearly as startled as the maid.

"I think we have proof at last," Elayne said more calmly than she felt. Her heart was in her throat, and pounding. Lies and Truth, the two words might be translated. Or in context, perhaps Fiction and Not Fiction would be better. It was proof enough for her. She marked where the flows touched the figure, for when she could return to her studies. "But you shouldn't have done that. It isn't safe."

The glow around Aviendha vanished. "Oh, Light," she exclaimed, flinging her arms around Elayne, "I never thought! I have great *toh* to you! I never meant to endanger you or your babes! Never!"

"My babes and I are safe." Elayne laughed, hugging back. "Min's viewing?" Her babes were safe, at least. Until they were born. So many babies died in their first year. Min had said nothing beyond them being born healthy. Min had said nothing about her not being burned out, either, but she had no intention of bringing that up with her sister already feeling guilty. "You have no *toh* to me. It was you I was thinking of. You could have died, or burned yourself out."

Aviendha pulled back enough to look into Elayne's eyes. What she saw there reassured her, for a small smile curved her lips. "I did make it work, though. Perhaps I can take over the study of them. With you to guide me, it should be perfectly safe. We have months before you can do it yourself."

"You have no time at all, Aviendha," a woman's voice said from the doorway. "We are leaving. I hope you have not grown too used to wearing silk. I see you, Elayne."

Aviendha leaped away from the embrace, flushing furiously, as two Aiel women entered the room, and not just any two Aiel. Pale-haired Nadere, as tall as most men and wide with it, was a Wise One of considerable authority among the Goshien, and Dorindha, her long red hair touched with white, was the wife of Bael, clan chief of the Goshien, though her true prominence came from being Roofmistress of Smoke Springs Hold, the clan's largest hold. It was she who had spoken.

"I see you, Dorindha," Elayne said. "I see you, Nadere. Why are you taking Aviendha away?"

"You said I could stay with Elayne, to help guard her back," Aviendha protested.

"You did, Dorindha." Elayne took her sister's hand in a firm grip, and Aviendha squeezed back. "You and the Wise Ones, too."

Gold and ivory bracelets clattered as Dorindha shifted her dark shawl. "How many do you need to guard your back, Elayne?" she asked dryly. "You have perhaps a hundred or more dedicated to nothing else, and as hard as *Far Dareis Mai*." A smile deepened the creases at the corners of her eyes. "I think those women outside wanted us to give up our belt knives before letting us in."

Nadere touched the horn hilt of her knife, her green eyes holding a fierce light, though it was unlikely the guards had shown any such desire. Even Birgitte, suspicious of everyone when it came to Elayne's safety, could see no danger from the Aiel, and Elayne had accepted certain obligations when she and Aviendha adopted each other. Wise Ones who had taken part in that ceremony, as Nadere had, could go wherever they wished in the palace whenever they wished; that was one of the obligations. As for Dorindha, her presence was so commanding, if in a quiet way, that it seemed inconceivable anyone would attempt to bar her way.

"Your training has been in abeyance too long, Aviendha," Nadere said firmly. "Go and change into proper clothing."

"But I am learning so much from Elayne, Nadere. Weaves even you do not know. I think I can make it rain in the Three-fold Land! And just now we learned that I can—"

"Whatever you may have learned," Nadere cut in sharply, "it seems you have forgotten as much. Such as the fact that you are an apprentice still. The Power is the least of what a Wise One must know, else only those who can channel would be Wise Ones. Now go and change, and count your luck that I do not make you return in your skin to face a strapping. The tents are being struck as we speak, and if the clan's departure is delayed, you *will* face the strap."

Without another word, Aviendha dropped Elayne's hand and ran from the room, bumping into Naris, who staggered and almost dropped the large, cloth-covered tray she was carrying. At a quick gesture from Essande, Sephanie hurried after Aviendha. Naris' eyes went wide at the sight of the Aiel women, but Essande admonished her for taking so long and directed her to lay out the meal on the table, setting the young maid into hurried motion while muttering apologies under her breath.

Elayne wanted to run after Aviendha, too, to grasp every moment with her, but Nadere's words held her. "You're leaving Caemlyn, Dorindha? Where are you going?" As much as Elayne liked the Aiel, she did not want them wandering about the countryside. With the situation as unstable as it was, they were problem enough simply venturing out of their camp to hunt or trade.

"We are leaving Andor, Elayne. In a few hours, we will be far beyond your borders. As to where, you must ask the *Car'a'carn*."

Nadere had walked over to study what Naris was laying out, and Naris began to tremble so that she nearly dropped more than one dish. "This looks good, but I do not recognize some of these herbs," the Wise One said. "Your midwife has approved all of this, Elayne?"

"I'll summon a midwife when my time is near, Nadere. Dorindha, you can't think Rand would want your destination kept from me. What did he say?"

Dorindha gave a small shrug. "He sent a messenger, one of the black coats, with a letter for Bael. Bael let me read it, of course"—her tone said there had never been any question of her not reading it—"but the *Car'a'carn* asked Bael not to tell anyone, so I cannot tell you."

"No midwife?" Nadere said incredulously. "Who tells you what to eat and drink? Who gives you the proper herbs? Stop looking daggers at me, woman. Melaine's temper is worse than yours could ever be, but she has sense enough to let Monaelle govern her in these things."

“Every woman in the palace governs what I eat,” Elayne replied bitterly. “Sometimes I think every woman in Caemlyn does. Dorindha, can’t you at least—”

“My Lady, your food is getting cold,” Essande said mildly, but with just the touch of firmness that an elderly retainer was allowed.

Gritting her teeth, Elayne glided to the chair Essande stood behind. She did *not* flounce, much as she wanted to. She glided. Essande produced an ivory-backed hairbrush and, removing the towel from Elayne’s head, began brushing her hair while she ate. She ate largely because not eating only meant someone would be told to fetch more hot food, because Essande and her own bodyguards between them might well keep her there until she did, but except for some dried apple that had not gone bad, the meal was decidedly unappetizing. The bread was crusty but flecked with weevils, and the soaked dried beans, since all of the preserved beans had spoiled, were tough and tasteless. The apple was mixed in a bowl of herbs—sliced burdock root, black haw, cramp bark, dandelion, nettle leaf—with a touch of oil, and for meat she had a piece of kid simmered in bland broth. With next to no salt, as far as she could tell. She would have killed for salty beef dripping with fat! *Aviendha’s* plate had sliced beef, though it looked tough. *She* could as well ask for wine. To drink, she had her choice of water or goat’s milk. She wanted tea almost as much as she did fatty meat, but even the weakest tea sent her running to make water, and she had quite enough difficulties with that as it was. So she ate methodically, mechanically, trying to think of anything but the tastes in her mouth. Except for the apple, at least.

She tried to pry some news of Rand out of the two Aiel women, but it seemed they knew less than she. As far as they would admit, anyway. They could be closemouthed when they wanted to be. She at least knew that he was somewhere far to the southeast. Somewhere in Tear, she suspected, though he could as easily have been on the Plains of Maredo or in the Spine of the World. Beyond that, she knew he was alive and not a whit more. She tried keeping the conversation on Rand in the hope they might let something slip, yet she might as well have tried dressing bricks with her fingers. Dorindha and Nadere had their own goal, convincing her to acquire a midwife right away. They went on and on about how she might be endangering herself and her babes, and not even Min’s viewing would dissuade them.

"Very well," she said at last, slapping down her knife and fork. "I will start looking for one today." And if she failed to find one, well, they would never know.

"I have a niece who's a midwife, my Lady," Essande said. "Melfane dispenses herbs and ointments from a shop on Candle Street in the New City, and I believe she is quite knowledgeable." She patted a few last curls into place and stepped back with a pleased smile. "You do so remind me of your mother, my Lady."

Elayne sighed. It seemed she was to have a midwife whether she wanted one or not. Someone *else* to see that her meals were wretched. Well, perhaps the midwife could suggest a remedy for those backaches at night, and the tender bosom. Thank the Light she had been spared the desire to sick up. Women who could channel never suffered that part of pregnancy.

When Aviendha returned, she was in Aiel garb again, with her still-damp shawl draped over her arms, a dark scarf tied around her temples to hold back her hair, and a bundle on her back. Unlike the multitudes of bracelets and necklaces Dorindha and Nadere wore, she had a single silver necklace, intricately worked discs in a complex pattern, and one ivory bracelet densely carved with roses and thorns. She handed Elayne the blunt dagger. "You must keep this, so you will be safe. I will try to visit you as often as I can."

"There may be time for an occasional visit," Nadere said severely, "but you have fallen behind and must work hard to catch up. Strange," she mused, shaking her head, "to speak casually of visiting from so far. To cover leagues, hundreds of leagues, in a step. Strange things we have learned in the wetlands."

"Come, Aviendha, we must go," Dorindha said.

"Wait," Elayne told them. "Please wait, just a moment." Clutching the dagger, she raced to her dressing room. Sephanie paused in hanging up Aviendha's blue dress to curtsy, but Elayne ignored her and opened the carved lid of her ivory jewelry chest. Sitting atop the necklaces and bracelets and pins in their compartments were a brooch in the shape of a turtle that appeared to be amber and a seated woman, wrapped in her own hair, apparently carved from age-darkened ivory. Both were *angreal*. Placing the antler-hilted dagger in the chest, she picked up the turtle, and then, impulsively, snatched up the twisted stone dream ring, all red and blue and brown. It seemed to be useless to her since she became pregnant, and if she could manage to weave Spirit, she still had the silver ring, worked in braided spirals, that had been recovered from Ispan.

Hurrying back to the sitting room, she found Dorindha and Nadere arguing, or at least having an animated discussion, while Essande pretended to be checking for dust, running her fingers under the edge of the table. From the angle of her head, she was listening avidly, though. Naris, putting Elayne's dishes back on the tray, was gaping at the Aiel women openly.

"I told her she would feel the strap if we delayed the departure," Nadere was saying with some heat as Elayne entered the room. "It is hardly fair if she is not the cause, but I said what I said."

"You will do as you must," Dorindha replied calmly, but with a tightness to her eyes that suggested these were not the first words they had exchanged. "Perhaps we will not delay anything. And perhaps Aviendha will pay the price gladly to say farewell to her sister."

Elayne did not bother with trying to argue for Aviendha. It would have done no good. Aviendha herself displayed an equanimity that would have credited an Aes Sedai, as if whether she was to be beaten for another's fault were of no matter at all.

"These are for you," Elayne said, pressing the ring and the brooch into her sister's hand. "Not as gifts, I'm afraid. The White Tower will want them back. But to use as you need."

Aviendha looked at the things and gasped. "Even the loan of these is a great gift. You shame me, sister. I have no farewell gift to give in return."

"You give me your friendship. You gave me a sister." Elayne felt a tear slide down her cheek. She essayed a laugh, but it was a weak, tremulous thing. "How can you say you have nothing to give? You've given me everything."

Tears glistened in Aviendha's eyes, too. Despite the others watching, she put her arms around Elayne and hugged her hard. "I will miss you, sister," she whispered. "My heart is as cold as night."

"And mine, sister," Elayne whispered, hugging back equally hard. "I will miss you, too. But you will be allowed to visit me sometimes. This isn't forever."

"No, not forever. But I will still miss you."

They might have begun weeping next, only Dorindha laid her hands on their shoulders. "It is time, Aviendha. We must go if you are to have any hope of avoiding the strap."

Aviendha straightened with a sigh, scrubbing at her eyes. “May you always find water and shade, sister.”

“May you always find water and shade, sister,” Elayne replied. The Aiel way had a finality about it, so she added, “Until I see your face again.”

And as quickly as that, they were gone. As quickly as that, she felt very alone. Aviendha’s presence had become a certainty, a sister to talk to, laugh with, share her hopes and fears with, but that comfort was gone.

Essande had slipped from the room while she and Aviendha were hugging, and now she returned to set the coronet of the Daughter-Heir on Elayne’s head, a simple circlet of gold supporting a single golden rose on her forehead. “So these mercenaries won’t forget who they’re talking to, my Lady.”

Elayne did not realize her shoulders had slumped until she straightened them. Her sister was gone, yet she had a city to defend and a throne to gain. Duty would have to sustain her, now.

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CHAPTER 16

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The New Follower

The Blue Reception Room, named for its arched ceiling, painted to display the sky and white clouds, and its blue floor tiles, was the smallest reception room in the palace, less than ten paces square. The arched windows that made up the far wall, overlooking a courtyard and still filled with glassed casements against the spring weather, gave a fair light even with the rain falling outside, but despite two large fireplaces with carved marble mantels, a cornice of plaster lions and a pair of tapestries bearing the White Lion that flanked the doors, a delegation of Caemlyn's merchants would have been insulted to be received in the Blue Room, a delegation of bankers livid. Likely that was why Mistress Harfor had put the mercenaries there, although they would not know they were being insulted. She herself was present, "overseeing" the pair of liveried young maids who were keeping the winecups full from tall silver pitchers standing on a tray atop a plainly carved sideboard, but she had the embossed leather folder used to carry her reports pressed to her bosom, as if in anticipation of the mercenaries being dealt with quickly. Halwin Norry, the wisps of white hair behind his ears as always looking like feathers, was standing in a corner, also with his leather folder clutched to his narrow chest. Their reports were a daily fixture, and seldom much in them to cheer the heart of late. Quite the opposite.

Warned by the pair of Guardswomen who had checked the room ahead of her, everyone was on their feet when Elayne entered with another pair at her back. Deni Colford, in charge of the Guardswomen who had replaced Devore and the others, had simply ignored her order for them all to remain outside. Ignored her! She supposed they made a good show, swaggering proudly as they did, yet she could not stop grinding her teeth.

Careane and Sareitha, formal in their fringed shawls, bowed their heads slightly in respect, but Mellar swept off his plumed hat in a flourishing bow, one hand laid over the lace-edged sash slanting across his burnished breastplate. The six golden knots brazed to that breastplate, three on each shoulder, rankled her, yet she had let them pass so far. His hatchet face offered her a smile that was much too warm, too, but then, however cold she was to him, he thought he had some chance with her because she had not denied the rumor her babes were his. Her reasons for not countering that filthy tale had changed—she no longer had need to protect her babes, Rand’s babes—yet she let it stand. Give the man time, and he would braid a rope for his own neck. And if he failed to, she would braid one for him.

The mercenaries, all well into their middle years, were only a heartbeat behind Mellar, though not so elaborate in their courtesies. Evard Cordwyn, a tall, square-jawed Andoran, wore a large ruby in his left ear, and Aldred Gomaisen, short and slender, the front of his head shaved, had horizontal stripes of red and green and blue covering half his chest, far more than it seemed at all likely he was entitled to in his native Cairhien. Hafeen Bakuvun, graying, was ornamented with a thick gold hoop in his left ear and a jeweled ring on every finger. The Domani was very stout, but the way he moved spoke of solid muscle beneath the fat.

“Don’t you have duties, Captain Mellar?” Elayne said coolly, taking one of the room’s few chairs. There were only five, arms and high backs simply carved with vines and leaves and lacking even a hint of gilt. Standing in a widely spaced row in front of the windows, the chairs put the light behind whoever sat in them. On a bright day, those given audience here squinted in the glare. Unfortunately, that advantage was lost today. The two Guardswomen took up positions behind her and to either side, each with a hand resting on her sword hilt, watching the mercenaries with fierce expressions that made Bakuvun smile and Gomaisen rub his chin to half-hide a sly grin. The women gave no sign of being offended; they knew the point of their uniforms. Elayne knew they would wipe away any smiles very quickly if they needed to draw their blades.

“My first duty above all is to protect you, my Lady.” Easing his sword, Mellar eyed the mercenaries as though he expected them to attack her, or perhaps him. Gomaisen looked bitterly amused, and Bakuvun laughed aloud. All three men had empty scabbards, Cordwyn a pair on his back; no mercenary was allowed to enter the palace carrying so much as a dagger.

“I know you have other duties,” she said levelly, “because I assigned them to you, Captain. Training the men I brought in from the countryside. You are not spending as much time with them as I expect. You have a company of men to train, Captain.” A company of old men and boys, and surely enough to occupy his hours. He spent few enough with her bodyguards in spite of commanding them. That was just as well, really. He liked to pinch bottoms. “I suggest you see to them. Now.”

Rage flashed across Mellar’s narrow face—he actually quivered!—but he mastered himself instantly. It was all gone so fast that she might have imagined it. But she knew she had not. “As you command, my Lady,” he said smoothly. His smile had an oily smoothness, too. “My honor is to serve you well.” With another flamboyant bow, he started for the door, as near to strutting as made no difference. Little could dent Doilin Mellar’s demeanor for long.

Bakuvun laughed again, throwing his head back. “Man wears so much lace now, I vow, I keep expecting him to offer to teach us to dance, and now he does dance.” The Cairhienin laughed, too, a nasty, guttural sound.

Mellar’s back stiffened and his step hesitated, then quickened, so much so that he bumped into Birgitte at the doorway. He hurried on without stopping to ask pardon, and she frowned after him—the bond carried anger, quickly suppressed, and impatience, which was not—before shutting the door behind her and moving to stand beside Elayne’s chair with one hand resting on the chairback. Her thick braid was not so neatly done as usual after having been undone for drying, but the uniform of the Captain-General suited her. Taller than Gomaisen in her heeled boots, Birgitte had a commanding presence when she wanted to. The mercenaries offered her small bows, respectful though not deferential. Whatever misgivings of her they might have entertained in the beginning, few who had seen her use her bow, or expose herself to the enemy, had any remaining.

“You speak as if you know Captain Mellar, Captain Bakuvun.” Elayne put just a hint of question in that, but kept her tone casual. Birgitte was attempting to project confidence along the bond to equal her expression, yet wariness and worry kept intruding. And the ever-present weariness. Elayne tightened her jaw to fight a yawn. Birgitte *had* to get some rest.

“I’ve seen him once or twice before, my Lady,” the Domani replied cautiously. “Not above thrice at most, I’d say. Yes, no more than that.” He tilted his head, eyeing her almost sideways. “You know he’s followed my trade in the past?”

“He did not try to hide the fact, Captain,” she said, as if tired of the subject. Had he let anything interesting slip, she might have arranged to question him alone, but pressing was not worth the risk of Mellar discovering that questions were being asked. He might run then, before she could learn what she wanted to know.

“Do we really have need of the Aes Sedai, my Lady?” Bakuvun asked. “The other Aes Sedai,” he added, glancing at her Great Serpent ring. He held out his silver cup, and one of the maids darted to fill it. They were both pretty women, perhaps not the best choices, but Reene had not much to choose from; most of the maids were either young or else aged and not so spry as they once had been. “All they’ve done the whole time we’ve been here is try to put us in awe of the White Tower’s might and reach. I respect Aes Sedai as much as any man, yes, I do indeed, but if you’ll forgive me, it gets tiresome when they turn to trying to browbeat a man. I vow it does, my Lady.”

“A wise man always stands in awe of the Tower,” Sareitha said calmly, shifting her brown-fringed shawl, perhaps to draw attention to it. Her dark, square face lacked the ageless look as yet, and she admitted yearning for it.

“Only fools fail to stand in awe of the Tower,” Careane said on Sareitha’s heels. A bulky woman, as wide in the shoulders as most men, the Green had no need for gestures. Her coppery face proclaimed what she was to anyone who knew what to look for as loudly as did the ring on her right forefinger.

“The word I hear,” Gomaisen said darkly, “is that Tar Valon is besieged. I hear the White Tower is split, with two Amyrlins. I even hear the Tower itself is held by the Black Ajah.” A brave man, to mention that rumor to Aes Sedai, but he still flinched saying it. Flinched and went right on. “Who is it you want us to be in awe of?”

“Do not believe everything you hear, Captain Gomaisen.” Sareitha’s voice was serene, a woman stating indisputable fact. “Truth has more shadings than you might think, and distance often distorts truth into something very different from the facts. Lies about Darkfriend sisters are dangerous to repeat, however.”

“What you had best believe,” Careane added, just as calmly, “is that the White Tower is the White Tower, now and always. And you stand before three Aes Sedai. You should have a care with your words, Captain.”

Gomaisen scrubbed the back of a hand across his mouth, but his dark eyes held defiance. A hunted defiance. “I am just saying what can be heard on any street,” he muttered.

“Are we here to talk about the White Tower?” Cordwyn said, scowling. He emptied his winecup before going on, as if this talk made him uneasy. How much had he already consumed? He seemed a trifle unsteady on his feet, and there was a touch of slur in his words. “The Tower is hundreds of leagues from here, and what happens there is no business of ours.”

“True, friend,” Bakuvun said. “True. Our business is swords, swords and blood. Which, my Lady, brings us to the sordid matter of . . .”—he waggled thick, be-gemmed fingers—“gold. Every day, we lose men, day after day with no end in sight, and there are very few suitable replacements to be found in the city.”

“None at all that I’ve found,” Cordwyn muttered, eyeing the young maid filling his cup. She blushed at his scrutiny and finished her task quickly, spilling wine on the floor tiles and making Mistress Harfor frown. “Those that might have been are all signing up for the Queen’s Guards.” That was true enough; enlistments seemed to increase by the day. The Queen’s Guards would be a formidable force. Eventually. Unfortunately, the vast majority of those men were months from being able to handle a sword without stabbing themselves in the foot, and further from being of any use in battle.

“As you say, friend,” Bakuvun murmured. “As you say.” He directed a wide smile at Elayne. Perhaps he meant to seem friendly, or maybe reasonable, but it minded her of a man trying to sell her a pig in a sack. “Even after we’re done here, finding new men won’t be easy, my Lady. Suitable men aren’t found under cabbage leaves, no they’re not. Fewer men means fewer coins for our next hires. An inescapable fact of the world. We think it’s only just that we receive compensation.”

Anger surged in Elayne. They thought she was desperate to hold on to them was what they thought! Worse, they were right. These three men represented better than a thousand more between them. Even with what Guybon had brought her, that would be a grievous loss. Especially if it started other mercenaries thinking her cause was lost. Mercenaries disliked being on the losing side. They would run like rats fleeing fire to avoid that. Her anger surged, but she held it in rein. By a hair’s breadth. She could not keep the scorn from her voice, though. “Did you think you would take no casualties? Did you expect to mount guard and take gold for it without baring your swords?”

“You signed for so much gold each day,” Birgitte put in. She did not say how much because every company had bargained for its own agreement. The last thing they needed was for the mercenary companies to grow jealous of one another. As it was, it seemed that half the common room fights the Guards broke up were between men of different companies.

"A fixed amount. To put it cruelly, the more men you lose, the greater your profit."

"Ah, Captain-General," the stout man said blandly, "but you forget the death-money that has to be paid to the widows and orphans." Gomaisen made a choking noise, and Cordwyn stared at Bakuvun incredulously then tried to cover it by draining his winecup again.

Elayne trembled, her hands tightening to fists on the arms of her chair. She would not give way to anger. She would *not*! "I intend to hold you to your agreements," she said coldly. Well, at least she was not raging. "You'll be paid what you signed for, including the usual victory gold after I gain the throne, but not a penny more. If you try to back out, I'll assume you are turning coat and going over to Arymilla, in which case, I'll have you and your companies arrested and put outside the gates without swords or horses." The maid refilling Cordwyn's winecup yet again suddenly squealed and danced away from him rubbing her hip. The anger Elayne had been holding down fountained white hot. "And if one of you ever again dares fondle one of my women, he and his company will be put out without swords, horses, or *boots*! Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear, my Lady." Bakuvun's voice held a distinct chill, and his wide mouth was tight. "Very clear indeed. And now, since our . . . discussion . . . seems concluded, may we withdraw?"

"Think carefully," Sareitha said suddenly. "Will the White Tower choose to see an Aes Sedai on the Lion Throne, or a fool like Arymilla Marne?"

"Count the Aes Sedai in this palace," Careane added. "Count the Aes Sedai inside Caemlyn. There are none in Arymilla's camps. Count and decide where the White Tower's favor lies."

"Count," Sareitha said, "and remember that the White Tower's displeasure can be fatal."

It was very hard to believe that one of them must be Black Ajah, yet it must be so. Unless it was Merilille, of course. Elayne hoped that was not so. She liked Merilille. But then, she liked Careane and Sareitha, too. Not as much as she did Merilille, yet still a liking. Any way she looked at it, a woman she liked was a Darkfriend, and already under penalty of death.

When the mercenaries had departed, making their courtesies hurriedly, and Mistress Harfor had sent the maids away with the remnants of the wine, Elayne leaned back in her chair and sighed. “I handled that very badly, didn’t I?”

“Mercenaries require a strong hand on the reins,” Birgitte replied, but there was doubt in the bond. Doubt and worry.

“If I may say, my Lady,” Norry said in his dry voice, “I cannot see anything else you could have done. Mildness would only have emboldened them to make further demands.” He had been so still that Elayne had almost forgotten he was there. Blinking at the world, he seemed a wading bird wondering where the water had gone. In contrast to Mistress Harfor’s neatness, ink stains marked his tabard, and his fingers. She eyed the leather folder in his hands with distinct distaste.

“Will you leave us, please, Sareitha, Careane?” she said. They hesitated slightly, but there was nothing they could do save bow their heads and glide from the room like swans. “And you two as well,” she added over her shoulder to the Guardswomen. *They* did not so much as twitch!

“Outside!” Birgitte snapped with a jerk of her head that set her braid swaying. “Now!” Oh, the pair jumped for her, they did! They headed for the doors so fast they might as well have trotted!

Elayne scowled as the door closed behind them. “Burn me, I don’t want to hear any bloody bad news, not today. I don’t want to hear how much of the food brought in from Illian and Tear is already spoiled when it arrives. I don’t want to hear about arson, or flour black with weevils, or sewers breeding rats faster than they can be killed, or flies so thick you’d think Caemlyn was a filthy stable. I want to hear some bloody good news for a change.” Burn her, she sounded *petulant*! Truth be told, she *felt* petulant. Oh, how that grated! She was trying to gain a throne, and behaving like a child in the nursery!

Master Norry and Mistress Harfor exchanged glances, which only made matters worse. He fondled his folder with a sigh of regret. The man *enjoyed* droning his numbers, even when they were dire. At least they no longer balked at giving their reports in company. Well, not very far. Jealous of their own responsibilities, each was wary of the other straying and quick to point out where some imagined boundary had been crossed. Still, they managed to run the palace and the city efficiently, with few barked knuckles.

“Are we private, my Lady?” Reene asked.

Elayne drew a deep breath and performed novice exercises that seemed to have no calming effect whatsoever, then attempted to embrace the Source. To her surprise, *saidar* came to her easily, filling her with the sweetness of life and joy. And soothing her moods, too. It was always that way. Anger or sorrow or just being with child might interfere with embracing the Power in the first place, yet once it filled her, her emotions stopped jumping about. Deftly she wove Fire and Air, just so, with traces of Water, but when she was done, she did not release the Source. The feel of being filled with the Power was wondrous, yet not that much more so than knowing she would not be wanting to weep for no reason or shout for as little in the next moment. After all, she was not foolish enough to draw too deeply.

"We are private," she said. *Saidar* touched her ward and was gone. Someone had tried to listen in, not the first time that had happened. With so many women who could channel gathered in the palace, it would have been surprising if no one attempted to snoop, but she wished she knew how to trace whoever was making those attempts. As it was, she hardly dared say anything of substance without a ward in place.

"Then I have a little good news," Mistress Harfor said, shifting her folder but not opening it, "from Jon Skellit." The barber had been most assiduous about carrying his reports, approved beforehand by Reene, out to Arymilla and bringing back what he could learn in the camps outside the city. He was in the employ of Naean Arawn, but Naean, supporting Arymilla's claim, would surely share Skellit's reports with Arymilla. Unfortunately, what he had been able to learn so far had not been much of use. "He says that Arymilla and the High Seats supporting her intend to be in the first party to ride into Caemlyn. She boasts of it constantly, it seems."

Elayne sighed. Arymilla and the others stayed together, moving from camp to camp according to no pattern she could see, and for some time great effort had gone into trying to learn where they would be ahead of time. A simple matter then to send soldiers through a gateway to seize all of them at once and decapitate her opposition. As simple as such things could be, anyway. Men would die under the best of circumstances, some of the High Seats might well escape, yet if only Arymilla herself could be taken, there would be an end to it. Elenia and Naean had made public renunciation of their own claims, which was irreversible. That pair might go on supporting Arymilla if they remained free—they had tied themselves to her tightly—but with Arymilla in hand, all Elayne really would have to contend with was gaining the support of at least four more of the great Houses. As if it were easy. So far, efforts in that direction had proven futile. Perhaps today would bring good news on that front, though. But this news was useless. If Arymilla and the others were riding into Caemlyn it would mean the city was beyond the brink of falling. Worse, if Arymilla was boasting, she must believe it would happen soon. The woman was a fool in many ways, but it would be a mistake to underestimate her completely. She had not carried her claim this far by being an absolute fool.

“This is your good news?” Birgitte said. She saw the implications, too. “A hint of when might help.”

Reene spread her hands. “Arymilla gave Skellit a gold crown with her own hands once, my Lady. He turned it over to me as proof that he’s reformed.” Her lips compressed for a moment; Skellit had saved himself from hanging, yet he would never regain trust. “That’s the only time the man’s been within ten paces of her. He has to go by what he can pick up gossiping with the other men.” She hesitated. “He’s very afraid, my Lady. The men in those camps are certain they’ll take the city in a matter of days.”

“Afraid enough to turn his coat a third time?” Elayne asked quietly. There was nothing to say to the other matter.

“No, my Lady. If Naean, or Arymilla, learns what he’s done, he’s a dead man, and he knows it. But he’s afraid if the city falls, they will learn. I think he may bolt soon.”

Elayne nodded grimly. Mercenaries were not the only rats to flee fire. “Do *you* have any good news, Master Norry?”

The First Clerk had been standing quietly, fingering his embossed leather folder and trying to appear as if he were not listening to Reene. “I think I can better Mistress Harfor, my Lady.” There might have been a touch of triumph in his smile. Of late, it was rare for him to have better news than she. “I have a man I believe can follow Mellar successfully. May I have him brought in?”

Now, that *was* excellent news. Five men had died trying to follow Doilin Mellar when he went out into the city at night, and the “coincidence” seemed strained. The first time, it had appeared the fellow fell afoul of a footpad, and she thought nothing of it beyond settling a pension on the man’s widow. The Guards managed to keep crime under some control—

except for arson, at least—yet robbers used darkness as a cloak to hide in. The other four had seemed the same, killed with a single knife thrust, their purses emptied, but however dangerous the streets at night, coincidence hardly seemed credible.

When she nodded, the spindly old man hurried to the doors and opened one to put his head out. She could not hear what he said—the ward worked both ways—but in a few minutes a burly Guardsman entered pushing ahead of him a shuffling man with fetters on his wrists and ankles. Everything about the prisoner seemed . . . average. He was neither fat nor thin, tall nor short. His hair was brown, of no particular shade she could name, and his eyes as well. His face was so ordinary she doubted she could describe him. No feature stood out at all. His clothing was just as unremarkable, a plain brown coat and breeches of neither the best wool nor the worst, somewhat rumpled and beginning to show dirt, a lightly embossed belt with a simple metal buckle that might have ten thousand twins in Caemlyn. In short, he was eminently forgettable. Birgitte motioned the Guardsman to stop the fellow well short of the chairs and told him to wait outside.

“A reliable man,” Norry said, watching the Guardsman leave. “Afrim Hansard. He served your mother faithfully, and knows how to keep his mouth shut.”

“Chains?” Elayne said.

“This is Samwil Hark, my Lady,” Norry said, eyeing the man with the sort of curiosity he might have shown toward an unfamiliar and oddly shaped animal, “a remarkably successful cutpurse. The Guards only caught him because another ruffian . . . um . . . ‘turned the cat on him,’ as they say in the streets, hoping to lessen his own sentence for a third offense of strongarm robbery.” A thief would be eager for that. Not only was the flogging longer, the thief-mark branded on his forehead would be much harder to disguise or hide than the mark on his thumb for his second offense. “Anyone who has managed to keep from being caught for as long as Master Hark should be able to carry out the task I have in mind for him.”

“I’m innocent, I am, my Lady.” Hark knuckled his forehead, the iron chains of his fetters clinking, and put on an ingratiating smile. He talked very quickly. “It’s all lies and happenstances, it is. I’m a good Queen’s man, I am. I wore your mother’s colors in the riots, my Lady. Not that I took part in the rioting, you understand. I’m a clerk when I have work, which I’m out of at the moment. But I wore her colors on my cap for all to see, I did." The bond was full of Birgitte's skepticism.

"Master Hark's rooms contained chests full of neatly cut purses," the First Clerk went on. "There are thousands of them, my Lady. Quite literally thousands. I suppose he may regret keeping . . . um . . . trophies. Most cutpurses have sense enough to get rid of the purse as soon as possible."

"I picks them up when I sees one, I does, my Lady." Hark spread his hands as far as his chains allowed and shrugged, the very image of injured innocence. "Maybe it were foolish, but I never saw no harm. Just a harmless sort of amusement, my Lady."

Mistress Harfor sniffed loudly, disapproval clear on her face. Hark managed to look even more hurt.

"His rooms also contained coins to the value of over one hundred twenty gold crowns, secreted under the floorboards, in cubbyholes in the walls, in the rafters, everywhere. His excuse for that," Norry raised his voice as Hark opened his mouth again, "is that he distrusts bankers. He claims the money is an inheritance from an aged aunt in Four Kings. I myself very much doubt the magistrates in Four Kings will have registered such an inheritance, though. The magistrate judging his case says he seemed surprised to learn that inheritances are registered." Indeed, Hark's smile faded somewhat at being reminded. "He says that he worked for Wilbin Saems, a merchant, until Saems' death four months ago, but Master Saems' daughter maintains the business, and neither she nor any of the other clerks recall any Samwil Hark."

"They hates me, they does, my Lady," Hark said in a sullen voice. His hands gripped the chain between them in fists. "I was gathering evidence of how they was stealing from the good master—his own daughter, mind!—only he died afore I could give it to him, and I was turned out in the streets without a reference or a penny, I was. They burned what I'd gathered, gave me a drubbing and threw me out."

Elayne tapped her chin thoughtfully. "A clerk, you say. Most clerks are better spoken than you, Master Hark, but I'll offer you a chance to give evidence for your claim. Would you send for a lapdesk, Master Norry?"

Norry gave a thin smile. How *could* the man make a smile seem dry? "No need, my Lady. The magistrate in the case had the same idea." For the first time that she had ever seen, he took a sheet of paper from the folder clutched to his chest. She thought trumpets should sound! Hark's smile faded away completely as his eyes followed that page from Norry's hand to hers.

One glance was all that was needed. A few uneven lines covered less than half the sheet, the letters cramped and awkward. No more than half a dozen words were actually legible, and those barely.

"Hardly the hand of a clerk," she murmured. Returning the page to Norry, she tried to make her face stern. She had seen her mother passing judgment. Morgase had been able to make herself appear implacable. "I fear, Master Hark, that you will sit in a cell until the magistrates in Four Kings can be queried, and soon after that you will hang." Hark's lips writhed, and he put a hand to his throat as if he could already feel the noose. "Unless, of course, you agree to follow a man for me. A dangerous man who doesn't like to be followed. If you can tell me where he goes at night, instead of hanging, you will be exiled to Baerlon. Where you would be well advised to find a new line of work. The governor *will* be informed of you."

Suddenly Hark's smile was back. "Of course, my Lady. I'm innocent, but I can see how things look dark against me, I can. I'll follow any man you want me to. I was your mother's man, I was, and I'm your man, too. Loyal is what I am, my Lady, loyal if I suffers for it."

Birgitte snorted derisively.

"Arrange for Master Hark to see Mellar's face without being seen, Birgitte." The man was unmemorable, but there was no point in taking chances. "Then turn him loose." Hark looked ready to dance, iron chains or no iron chains. "But first. . . . You see this, Master Hark?" She held up her right hand so he could not miss the Great Serpent ring. "You may have heard that I am Aes Sedai." With the Power already in her, it was a simple matter to weave Spirit. "It is true." The weave she laid on Hark's belt buckle, his boots, his coat and breeches, was somewhat akin to that for the Warder bond, though much less complex. It would fade from the clothing and boots in a few weeks, or months at best, but metal would hold a Finder forever. "I've laid a weave on you, Master Hark. Now you can be found wherever you are." In truth, only she would be able to find him—a Finder was attuned to the one who wove it—but there was no reason to tell him that. "Just to be sure that you are indeed loyal."

Hark's smile seemed frozen in place. Sweat beaded on his forehead. When Birgitte went to the door and called in Hansard, giving him instructions to take Hark away and keep him safe from prying eyes, Hark staggered and would have fallen if the husky Guardsman had not held him up on the way out of the room.

“I fear I may just have given Mellar a sixth victim,” Elayne muttered. “He hardly seems capable of following his own shadow without tripping over his boots.” It was not so much Hark’s death she regretted. The man would have hanged for sure. “I want whoever put that bloody man in my palace. I want them so badly my teeth ache!” The palace was riddled with spies—Reene had uncovered above a dozen beyond Skellit, though she believed that was all of them—but whether Mellar had been set to spy or to facilitate kidnapping her, he was worse than the others. He had arranged for men to die, or he had killed them, in order to gain his place. That those men had thought they were to kill *her* made no difference. Murder was murder.

“Trust me, my Lady,” Norry said, laying a finger alongside his long nose. “Cutpurses are . . . um . . . stealthy by nature, yet they seldom last long. Sooner or later they cut the purse of someone faster afoot than they, someone who doesn’t wait for the Guards.” He made a quick gesture as if stabbing someone. “Hark has lasted at least twenty years. A number of the purses in his . . . um . . . collection were embroidered with prayers of thanks for the end of the Aiel War. Those went out of fashion very quickly, as I recall.”

Birgitte sat down on the arm of the next chair and folded her arms beneath her breasts. “I could arrest Mellar,” she said quietly, “and have him put to the question. You’d have no need of Hark then.”

“A poor joke, my Lady, if I may say so,” Mistress Harfor said stiffly, at the same time that Master Norry said, “That would be . . . um . . . against the law, my Lady.”

Birgitte bounded to her feet, outrage flooding the bond. “Blood and bloody ashes! We know the man’s as rotten as last month’s fish.”

“No.” Elayne sighed, fighting not to feel outraged as well. “We have suspicions, not proof. Those five men *might* have fallen afoul of footpads. The law is quite clear on when someone may be put to the question, and suspicions are not reason enough. Solid evidence is needed. My mother often said, ‘The Queen must obey the law she makes, or there is no law.’ I will not begin by breaking the law.” The bond carried something . . . stubborn. She fixed Birgitte with a steady look. “Neither will you. Do you understand me, Birgitte Trahelion? Neither will you.”

To her surprise, the stubbornness lasted only moments longer before dwindling away to be replaced by chagrin. “It was only a suggestion,” Birgitte muttered weakly.

Elayne was wondering how she had done that and how to do it again—sometimes there seemed doubt in Birgitte’s mind over which of them was in charge—when Deni Colford slipped into the room and cleared her throat to draw attention to herself. A long, brass-studded cudgel balanced the sword hanging at the heavyset woman’s waist, looking out of place. Deni was getting better with the sword but still preferred the cudgel she had used keeping order in a wagon drivers’ tavern. “A servant came to say that the Lady Dyelin has arrived, my Lady, and will be at your service as soon as she’s freshened herself.”

“Send the Lady Dyelin word that she’s to meet me in the Map Room.” Elayne felt a surge of hope. At last, perhaps, she might hear some good news.

* * *

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CHAPTER 17

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A Bronze Bear

Leaving Mistress Harfor and Master Norry, Elayne started eagerly toward the Map Room still holding *saidar*. Eagerly, but not hurriedly. Deni and three Guardswomen strode ahead of her, heads swiveling in constant search of threats, and the other four stamped along behind. She doubted that Dyelin would take long over her ablutions, good news or bad. The Light send that it was good. Birgitte, hands clasped behind her back and wearing a frown, seemed sunk in silence as they walked, though she studied every crossing corridor as if expecting an attack from it. The bond still carried worry. And tiredness. A yawn cracked Elayne's jaws before she could stop herself.

An unwillingness to start rumors was not the only reason she maintained a stately pace. There were more than servants in the hallways, now. Courtesy had required her to offer rooms in the palace to the nobles who managed to reach the city with armsmen—counting armsmen loosely; some were well-trained and carried a sword every day, others had been guiding a plow before being called to follow their lord or lady—and a fair number had accepted. Mainly those who had no dwelling in Caemlyn or, she suspected, felt pinched for coin. Farmers or laborers might think all nobles wealthy, and certainly most were, if only in comparison, but the expenses required by their positions and duties left many counting coins as carefully as any farmwife. What she was to do for the newest arrivals she did not know. Nobles already were sleeping three and four to a bed wherever the beds were large enough; all but the narrowest could take at least two, and did. Many Kinswomen had been reduced to pallets on the floor in the servants' quarters, and thank the Light spring had made that possible.

It seemed the whole lot of her noble guests were out strolling, and when they offered her courtesies, she had to stop and pass at least a few words. Sergase Gilbearn, small and slim in a green riding dress, her dark hair lightly touched with white, who had brought all twenty of the armsmen in her service, and vinegary old Kelwin Janevor, wiry in his discreetly darned blue wool coat, who had brought ten, received as gracious an exchange as did lanky Barel Layden and stout Anthelle Sharplyn, though they were High Seats, if of minor Houses. All had ridden to her support with whatever they could gather, and none had turned back on learning the odds. Many looked uneasy today, though. No one said anything of it—they were all full of good wishes and hopes for a speedy coronation and how honored they were to follow her—but worry was written on their faces. Arilinde Branstrom, normally so ebullient you might think she believed her fifty armsmen could turn the tide for Elayne by themselves, was not the only woman chewing her lip, and Laerid Traehand, stocky and taciturn and usually as stolid as stone, was not the only man with a furrowed brow. Even news of Guybon and the aid he had brought caused only brief smiles, quickly swallowed in ill ease.

"Do you think they've heard of Arymilla's confidence?" she asked in one of the brief intervals when she was not responding to bows and curtsies. "No, that wouldn't be enough to upset Arilinde or Laerid." Arymilla inside the walls with thirty thousand men likely would fail to upset that pair.

"It wouldn't," Birgitte agreed. She glanced around as if to see who besides the Guardswomen might hear before going on. "Maybe they're worried over what's been worrying me. You didn't get lost when we got back. Or rather, you had help."

Elayne paused to offer a few hurried words to a gray-haired couple in woolens that would have suited prosperous farmers. Brannin and Elvaine Martan's manor house was much like a large farmhouse, sprawling and housing generations. A third of their armsmen were their sons and grandsons, nephews and great-nephews. Only those too young or too old to ride had been left behind to see to planting. She hoped the smiling pair did not feel they were getting short shrift, but she was walking on almost as soon as she stopped. "What do you mean, I had help?" she demanded.

"The palace is . . . changed." For a moment, there was confusion in the bond. Birgitte grimaced. "It sounds mad, I know, but it's as if the whole thing had been built to a slightly different plan." One of the Guardswomen ahead missed a step, caught herself. "I have a good memory. . . ." Birgitte hesitated, the bond filled with a jumble of emotions hastily pushed down. Most of her memories of past lives had vanished as surely as the winter's snow. Nothing remained before the founding of the White Tower, and the four lives she had lived between then and the end of the Trolloc Wars were beginning to fragment. Little seemed to frighten her, yet she feared losing the rest, especially her memories of Gaidal Cain. "I don't forget a path once I've followed it," she went on, "and some of these hallways aren't the same as they were. Some of the corridors have been . . . shifted. Others aren't there anymore, and there are some new. Nobody is talking about it that I could find out, but I think the old people are keeping quiet because they're afraid their wits are going, and the younger are afraid they'll lose their positions."

"That's—" Elayne shut her mouth. Clearly it was not impossible. Birgitte did not suffer from sudden fancies. Naris' reluctance to leave her apartments suddenly made sense, and perhaps Reene's earlier puzzlement, too. She almost wished being with child really had befuddled her. But how? "Not the Forsaken," she said firmly. "If they could do something like this, they'd have done it long since, and worse than. . . . A good day to you, too, Lord Aubrem."

Lean and craggy and bald save for a thin white fringe, Aubrem Pensenor should have been dandling his grandchildren's children on his knee, but his back was straight, his eyes clear. He had been among the first to reach Caemlyn, with near to a hundred men and the first news that it was Arymilla Marne marching against the city, with Naean and Elenia supporting her. He began reminiscing about riding for her mother in the Succession, until Birgitte murmured that Lady Dyelin would be waiting for her.

"Oh, in that case, don't let me delay you, my Lady," the old man said heartily. "Please give my regards to Lady Dyelin. She's been so busy, I've not exchanged two words with her since reaching Caemlyn. My very best regards, if you will." House Pensenor had been allied to Dyelin's Taravin since time out of mind.

"Not the Forsaken," Birgitte said once Aubrem was out of earshot. "But what caused it is only the first question. Will it happen again? If it does, will the changes always be benign? Or might you wake up and find yourself in a room without doors or windows? What happens if you're sleeping in a room that disappears? If a corridor can go, so can a room. And what if it's more than the palace? We need to find out if all the streets still lead where they did. What if the next time, part of the city wall isn't there anymore?"

"You *do* think dark thoughts," Elayne said bleakly. Even with the Power in her, the possibilities were enough to give her a sour stomach.

Birgitte fingered the four golden knots on the shoulder of her white-collared red coat. "They came with these." Strangely, the worry carried by the bond was less now that she had shared her concerns. Elayne hoped the woman did not think *she* had answers. No, that really was impossible. Birgitte knew her too well for that.

"Does this frighten you, Deni?" she asked. "I'll admit it does me."

"No more than needful, my Lady," the blocky woman answered without stopping her careful scan of what lay ahead. Where the others walked with a hand on their sword hilts, her hand rested on her long cudgel. Her voice was as placid, and as matter-of-fact, as her face. "One time a big wagon man named Eldrin Hackly came near breaking my neck. Not usually a rough man, but he was drunk beyond drunk that night. I couldn't get the angle right, and my cudgel seemed to bounce off his skull without making a dent. That frightened me more, because I knew certain sure I was about to die. This is just maybe, and any day you wake up, maybe you die."

Any day you wake up, maybe you die. There were worse ways to look at life, Elayne supposed. Still, she shivered. She was safe, at least till her babes were born, but no one else was.

The two guards at the wide, lion-carved doors to the Map Room were experienced Guardsmen, one short and the next thing to scrawny, the other wide enough to appear squat though he was of average height. Nothing visible picked them out from any other men in the Guards, but only good swordsmen, trusted men, got this duty. The short man nodded to Deni, then straightened his back stiffly at a disapproving frown from Birgitte. Deni smiled at him shyly—Deni! shyly!—while a pair of Guardswomen went through the inevitable routine. Birgitte opened her mouth, but Elayne laid a hand on her arm, and the other woman looked at her, then shook her head, thick golden braid swaying slowly.

"It's not good when they're on duty, Elayne. They should be seeing to their duties, not mooning over each other." She did not raise her voice, yet color appeared in Deni's round cheeks, and she stopped smiling and started watching the corridor again. It was better that way, perhaps, yet still a pity. *Somebody* ought to have a little pleasure in their lives.

The Map Room was the second-largest ballroom in the palace, and spacious, with four red-streaked marble fireplaces where small fires burned beneath the carved mantels, a domed ceiling worked with gilt and supported by widely spaced columns two spans from white marble walls that had been stripped of tapestries, and sufficient mirrored stand-lamps to light the room as well as if it had windows. The greatest part of its tile floor was a detailed mosaic map of Caemlyn, originally laid down more than a thousand years ago, after the New City had been completed though before Low Caemlyn began growing. Long before there was an Andor, before even Artur Hawkwing. It had been redone several times since, as tiles faded or became worn, so every street was exact—at least, they had been until today; the Light send they still were—and despite many buildings replaced over the years, even some of the alleys were unchanged from what the huge map showed.

There would be no dancing in the Map Room for the foreseeable future, however. Long tables between the columns held more maps, some large enough to spill over the edges, and shelves along the walls held stacks of reports, those not so sensitive they needed to be locked away or else committed to memory and burned. Birgitte's wide writing table, nearly covered with baskets, most full of papers, stood at the far end of the room. As Captain-General, she had her own study, but as soon as she discovered the Map Room, she had decided the map in the floor made it too good not to use.

A small wooden disc, painted red, marked the spot on the outer wall where the assault had just been beaten back. Birgitte scooped it up in passing and tossed it into a round basket full of the things on her writing table. Elayne shook her head. It was a small basket, but if there were enough attacks at once to need that many markers. . . .

"My Lady Birgitte, I have that report on available fodder you asked for," a graying woman said, holding out a page covered with neat lines. The White Lion was worked small on the breast of her neat brown dress. Five other clerks went on with their work, pens scritching. They were among Master Norry's most trusted, and Mistress Harfor had personally screened the half dozen messengers in red-and-white livery, swift young men—boys really—who stood against the wall behind the clerks' small writing tables. One, a pretty youth, began a bow before cutting it short with a blush. Birgitte had settled the question of courtesies, to her or other nobles, with very few words. Work came first, and any noble who disliked that could just avoid the Map Room.

"Thank you, Mistress Anford. I'll look at it later. If you and the others will wait outside, please?"

Mistress Anford quickly gathered up the messengers and the other clerks, giving them only time to stopper their ink jars and blot their work. No one showed a glimmer of surprise. They were accustomed to the need for privacy at times. Elayne had heard people call the Map Room the Secrets Room, though nothing very secret was kept there. All of that was locked away in her apartments.

While the clerks and messengers were filing out, Elayne strode to one of the long tables where a map showed Caemlyn and its surroundings for at least fifty miles in each direction. Even the Black Tower had been inked in, a square sitting less than two leagues south of the city. A growth on Andor, and no way to be rid of it. She still sent parties of Guardsman to inspect some days, via gateways, but the place was large enough that the Asha'man could have been up to anything without her learning of it. Pins with enameled heads marked Arymilla's eight camps around the city, and small metal figures various other camps. A falcon, finely wrought in gold and no taller than her little finger, showed where the Goshien were. Or had been. Were they gone yet? She slipped the falcon into her belt pouch. Aviendha was very much a falcon. On the other side of the table, Birgitte raised a questioning eyebrow.

"They're gone, or going," Elayne told her. There would be visits. Aviendha was not gone forever. "Sent somewhere by Rand. Where, I don't know, burn him."

"I wondered why Aviendha wasn't with you."

Elayne laid one finger atop a bronze horseman less than a hand tall, standing a few leagues west of the city. "Someone needs to take a look at Davram Bashere's camp. Find out whether the Saldaeans are leaving, too. And the Legion of the Dragon." It did not matter if they were, really. They had not interfered in matters, thank the Light, and the time when fear that they might restrained Arymilla was long past. But she disliked things happening in Andor without her knowledge. "Send Guardsmen to the Black Tower tomorrow, as well. Tell them to count how many Asha'man they see."

"So he's planning a big battle. Another big battle. Against the Seanchan, I suppose." Folding her arms beneath her breasts, Birgitte frowned at the map. "I'd wonder where and when, except we have enough in front of us to be going on with."

The map displayed the reasons Arymilla was pressing so hard. For one, to the northeast of Caemlyn, almost off the map, lay the bronze image of a sleeping bear, curled up with its paws over its nose. Two hundred thousand men, near enough, almost as many trained men as all of Andor could field.

Four Borderland rulers, accompanied by perhaps a dozen Aes Sedai they tried to keep hidden, searching for Rand, their reasons unstated. Borderlanders had no cause to turn against Rand that she could see—though the simple fact was, he had not bound them to him as he had other lands—but Aes Sedai were another matter, especially with their allegiance uncertain, and twelve approached a dangerous number even for him. Well, the four rulers had in part deciphered her motives for asking them into Andor, yet she had managed to mislead them concerning Rand's whereabouts. Unfortunately, the Borderlanders had belied every tale of how swiftly they could move as they crept south, and now they sat in place, trying to find a way to avoid coming near a city under siege. That was understandable, even laudable. Outland armies in close proximity to Andoran armsmen, on Andoran soil, would make for a touchy situation. There were always at least a few hotheads. Bloodshed, and maybe war, could start all too easily under those circumstances. Even so, bypassing Caemlyn was going to be difficult; the narrow country roads had been turned to bogs by the rains, giving hard passage to an army that large. Elayne could have wished they had marched another twenty or thirty miles toward Caemlyn, though. She had hoped their presence would have had a different effect by now. It might still.

More important, certainly to Arymilla and possibly to herself, a few leagues below the Black Tower stood a tiny silver swordsman with his blade upright in front of him and a silver halberdier, plainly by the same silversmith's hand, one to the west of the black square, the other to the east. Luan, Ellorien and Abelle, Aemlyn, Arathelle and Pelivar had close to sixty thousand men between them in those two camps. Their estates and those of the nobles tied to them must have been stripped near the bone. Those two camps were where Dyelin had been these past three days, trying to learn their intentions.

The spindly Guardsman opened one of the doors and held it for an elderly serving woman carrying a rope-work silver tray with two tall golden wine pitchers and a circle of goblets made of blue Sea Folk porcelain. Reene must have been uncertain how many would be present. The frail woman moved slowly, careful not to tilt the heavy tray and drop anything. Elayne channeled flows of Air to take the tray, then let them dissipate unused. Implying that the woman could not do her job would only be hurtful. She was effusive in her thanks, though. The old woman smiled broadly, clearly delighted, and offered her a deep curtsy once unburdened of the tray.

Dyelin arrived almost right behind the maid, an image of vigor, and shooed her out before grimacing over the contents of one pitcher—Elayne sighed; doubtless it held goat's milk—and filling a goblet from the other. Plainly Dyelin had confined her freshening to washing her face and brushing her hair, golden flecked with gray, because her dark gray riding dress, with a large round silver pin worked with Taravin's Owl and Oak on the high neck, had spots of half-dried mud on the skirts.

"There's something seriously amiss," she said, swirling the wine in her goblet without drinking. A frown deepened the fine lines at the corners of her eyes. "I've been in this palace more times than I can remember, and today I got lost twice."

"We know about that," Elayne told her, and quickly explained what little they had puzzled out, what she intended to do. Belatedly, she wove a ward against eavesdropping and was unsurprised to feel it slice through *saidar*. At least whoever had been listening in would get a jolt from that. A small jolt, since so little of the power was involved that she had not sensed it. Maybe there was a way to make it a *hard* jolt next time, though. Maybe that would begin to discourage eavesdroppers.

"So it might happen again," Dyelin said when Elayne was done. Her tone was calm, but she licked her lips and took a swallow of wine, as if her mouth was suddenly dry. "Well. Well, then. If you don't know what caused it, and you don't know whether it will happen again, what are we to do?"

Elayne stared. Again someone seemed to think she had answers she did not. But then, that was what it meant to be queen. You were always expected to have an answer, to find one. That was what it meant to be Aes Sedai. "We can't stop it, so we'll live with it, Dyelin, and try to keep people from growing too afraid. I'll announce what happened, as much as we know, and have the other sisters do the same. That way, people will know that Aes Sedai are aware, and that should provide some comfort. A little. They'll still be frightened, of course, but not as much as they'll be if we say nothing and it does happen again."

That seemed a feeble effort to her, but surprisingly Dyelin agreed without hesitation. "I myself can suggest nothing else to be done. Most people think you Aes Sedai can handle anything. It should suffice, in the circumstances."

And when they realized that Aes Sedai could not handle anything, that *she* could not? Well, that was a river that she would cross when she reached it. "Is the news good, or bad?"

Before Dyelin could answer, the door opened again.

"I heard that Lady Dyelin had returned. You should have sent for us, Elayne. You aren't queen yet, and I dislike you keeping secrets from me. Where is Aviendha?" Catalyn Haevin, a cool-eyed, ungovernable young woman—a girl in truth, still long months short of her majority, though her guardian had abandoned her to go her own way—was pride to her toenails, her plump chin held high. Of course, that might have been because of the large enameled pin of Haevin's Blue Bear that decorated the high neck of her blue riding dress. She had begun showing Dyelin respect, and a certain wariness, shortly after she started sharing a bed with her and Sergase, but with Elayne she insisted on every perquisite of a High Seat.

"We all heard," Conail Northan said. Lean and tall in a red silk coat, with laughing eyes and an eagle's beak of a nose, he was of age, just, a few months past his sixteenth name day. He swaggered and caressed the hilt of his sword much too fondly, but there seemed no harm in him. Only boyishness, an unfortunate trait in a High Seat. "And none of us could wait to hear when Luan and the others will join us. This pair would have run the whole way." He ruffled the hair of the two younger boys with him, Perival Mantear and Branlet Gilyard, who gave him a dark look and raked fingers through his hair to straighten it. Perival blushed. Quite short but already pretty, he was the youngest at twelve, yet Branlet had only a year on him.

Elayne sighed, but she could not ask them to leave. Children most of them might be—perhaps all, considering Conail's behavior—yet they were the High Seats of their Houses, and along with Dyelin, her most important allies. She did wish she knew how they had learned the purpose of Dyelin's journey. That had been intended to be a secret until she knew what news Dyelin brought. Another task for Reene. Gossip unchecked, the wrong gossip, could be as dangerous as spies.

"Where is Aviendha?" Catalyn demanded. Strangely, she had become quite taken with Aviendha. Fascinated might have been a better word. Of all things, she had persisted in trying to make Aviendha teach her to use a spear!

"So, my Lady," Conail said, strolling over to fill a blue goblet with wine, "when are they joining us?"

“The bad news is that they aren’t,” Dyelin said calmly. “The good news is that they’ve each rejected an invitation to join Arymilla.” She cleared her throat loudly as Branlet reached for the wine pitcher. His cheeks reddened, and he picked up the other pitcher as if he had really meant to all along. The High Seat of House Gilyard, yet still a boy for all of the sword on his hip. Perival also wore a sword, one that dragged on the floor tiles and looked too big for him, but he had already taken goat’s milk. Pouring her own wine, Catalyn smirked at the younger boys, a superior smile that vanished when she noticed Dyelin looking at her.

“That’s small turnips to call good news,” Birgitte said. “Burn me, if it isn’t. You bring back a bloody half-starved squirrel and call it a side of beef.”

“Pungent as always,” Dyelin said dryly. The two women glared at each other, Birgitte’s hands balling into fists, Dyelin fingering the dagger at her belt.

“No arguing,” Elayne said, making her voice sharp. The anger in the bond helped. At times she feared the pair might come to blows. “I won’t put up with your bickering today.”

“Where is Aviendha?”

“Gone, Catalyn. What else did you learn, Dyelin?”

“Gone where?”

“Gone away,” Elayne said calmly. *Saidar* or no *saidar*, she wanted to slap the girl’s face. “Dyelin?”

The older woman took a sip of wine to cover breaking off her staring match with Birgitte. Coming to stand beside Elayne, she picked up the silver swordsman, turned him over, set him down again. “Aemlyn, Arathelle and Pelivar tried to convince me to announce a claim to the throne, but they were less adamant than when I spoke with them last. I believe I’ve almost convinced them I won’t do it.”

“Almost?” Birgitte put a hundredweight of derision in the word. Dyelin ignored her pointedly. Elayne frowned at Birgitte, who shifted uncomfortably and stalked off long enough to get herself a goblet of wine. Very satisfying. Whatever she was doing right, she hoped it continued to work.

“My Lady,” Perival said with a bow, extending one of two goblets he held to Elayne. She managed a smile and a curtsy before taking the offering. Goat’s milk. Light, but she was beginning to revile the stuff!

“Luan and Abelle were . . . noncommittal,” Dyelin continued, frowning at the halberdier. “They may be swaying toward you.” She hardly sounded as though she believed it, however. “I reminded Luan that he helped me arrest Naean and Elenia, back in the beginning, but that may have done no more good than it did with Pelivar.”

“So they may all be waiting for Arymilla to win,” Birgitte said grimly. “If you survive, they’ll declare for you against her. If you don’t, one of them will make her own claim. Ellorien has the next best right after you, doesn’t she?” Dyelin scowled, but she offered no denials.

“And Ellorien?” Elayne asked quietly. She was sure she knew the answer there already. Her mother had had Ellorien flogged. That had been under Rahvin’s influence, but few seemed to believe that. Few seemed to believe Gaebril had even been Rahvin.

Dyelin grimaced. “The woman’s head is stone! She’d announce a claim in my name if she thought it would do any good. At least she has enough sense to see it won’t.” Elayne noted that she made no mention of any claims in Ellorien’s own name. “In any case, I left Keraille Surtovni and Julanya Fote to watch them. I doubt they’ll move, but if they do, we’ll know straightaway.” Three Kinswomen who needed to form a circle to Travel were watching the Borderlanders for the same reason.

No good news at all, then, no matter what face Dyelin tried to put on it. Elayne had hoped the threat of the Borderlanders would drive some of the Houses to support her. *At least one reason I let them cross Andor still holds*, she thought grimly. Even if she failed to gain the throne, she had done that service for Andor. Unless whoever did take the throne bungled matters completely. She could see Arymilla doing just that. Well, Arymilla was not going to wear the Rose Crown, and that was that. One way or another, she had to be stopped.

“So it’s six, six and six,” Catalyn said, frowning and thumbing the long signet ring on her left hand. She looked thoughtful, unusual for her. Her usual style was to speak her mind with no consideration whatsoever. “Even if Candraed joins us, we are short of ten.” Was she wondering whether she had tied Haevin to a hopeless cause? Unfortunately, she had not tied her House so tightly the knots could not be undone.

“I was certain Luan would join us,” Conail muttered. “And Abelle and Pelivar.” He took a deep swallow of wine. “Once we beat Arymilla, they’ll come. You mark me on it.”

“But what are they thinking?” Branlet demanded. “Are they trying to start a war with *three* sides?” His voice went from treble to bass halfway through that, and his face flooded with red. He buried his face in his goblet, but grimaced. Apparently he liked goat’s milk as little as she did.

“It’s the Borderlanders.” Perival’s voice was a boy’s piping, but he sounded sure of himself. “They’re holding back because whoever wins here, the Borderlanders still have to be dealt with.” He picked up the bear, hefting it as if its weight would give him answers. “What I don’t understand is why they’re invading us in the first place. We’re so far from the Borderlands. And why haven’t they marched on and attacked Caemlyn? They could sweep Arymilla aside, and I doubt we could keep them out as easily as we do her. So why are they here?”

Smiling, Conail clapped him on the shoulder. “Now that will be a battle to see, when we face the Borderlanders. Northan’s Eagles and Mantear’s Anvil will do Andor proud that day, eh?” Perival nodded, but he did not look happy at the prospect. Conail certainly did.

Elayne exchanged glances with Dyelin and Birgitte, both of whom looked amazed. Elayne felt astonished herself. The other two women knew, of course, but little Perival had come near touching a secret that had to be kept. Others might puzzle out eventually that the Borderlanders had been meant to push Houses into joining her, but it *must* not be confirmed.

“Luan and the others sent to Arymilla asking for a truce until the Borderlanders were turned back,” Dyelin said after a moment. “She asked time to consider. As near as I can calculate, it was then that she began increasing her efforts at the walls. She tells them she’s still considering.”

“Aside from anything else,” Catalyn said heatedly, “that shows why Arymilla doesn’t deserve the throne. She puts her own ambition above Andor’s safety. Luan and the others must be fools not to see it.”

“Not fools,” Dyelin replied. “Just men and women who think they see the future better than they do.”

What if she and Dyelin were the ones who were not seeing the future clearly, Elayne wondered. To save Andor, she would have thrown her support to Dyelin. Not gladly, but to save Andor’s blood, she would have. Dyelin would have the support of ten Houses, more than ten. Even Danine Candraed might finally decide to stir herself in support of Dyelin. Except that Dyelin did not want to be queen. She believed that Elayne was the one to wear the Rose Crown. So did Elayne. But what if they were wrong? Not the first time that question had come to her, but now, staring at the map with all of its ill tidings, she could not shake free of it.

That evening, after a dinner memorable only for the surprise of tiny strawberries, she sat in the large sitting room of her apartments, reading. Trying to read. The leather-bound book was a history of Andor, as was most of her reading of late. It was necessary to read as many as possible to gain any real version of truth, cross-checking one against another. For one thing, a book first published during any monarch's reign never mentioned any of her missteps, or those of her immediate predecessors if they were of her own House. You had to read books written while Trakand held the throne to learn of Mantear's mistakes, and books written under Mantear to learn of Norwelyn's errors. Others' mistakes could teach her how not to make the same herself. Her mother had made that almost her first lesson.

She could not concentrate, however. She often found herself staring at a page without seeing a word, thinking of her sister, or starting to say something to Aviendha before remembering that she was not there. She felt very lonely, which was ridiculous. Sephanie stood in a corner against the possibility she wanted anything. Eight Guardswomen were standing outside the door to the apartments, and one of them, Yurith Azeri, was an excellent conversationalist, an educated woman though silent on her past. But none of them was Aviendha.

When Vandene glided into the room followed by Kirstian and Zarya, it seemed a relief. The two white-clad women stopped by the doorway, expressions meek. Untouched by the Oath Rod, pale Kirstian, hands folded at her waist, appeared just into her middle years; Zarya, with her tilted eyes and hooked nose, well short of them. She held something wrapped in white toweling.

"Forgive me if I'm interrupting," Vandene began, then frowned. The white-haired Green's face somehow gave an impression of age despite her Aes Sedai features. Those could have been twenty, or forty, or anything in between; that seemed to change at every blink. Perhaps it was her dark eyes, luminous and deep and pained, which had seen so much. There was an air of tiredness about her, too. Her back was straight, but she still looked weary. "It is none of my business, of course," she said delicately, "but is there a reason you are holding so much of the Power? I thought you must be weaving something very complex when I felt you in the corridor."

With a start, Elayne realized that she held nearly as much of *saidar* as she could contain safely. How had that happened? She did not recall drawing any deeper. Hastily, she released the Source, regret filling her as the Power drained away and the world became . . . ordinary again. On the instant, her mood bounced sideways.

"You aren't interrupting anything," she said peevishly, setting her book down on the table in front of her. She had not finished three pages of the thing anyway.

"May I make us private, then?"

Elayne gave a curt nod—it *was* none of the woman's bloody business how much of the Power she held; she knew the protocols as well as Elayne, or better—and told Sephanie to wait in the anteroom while Vandene wove a ward against eavesdropping.

Ward or no ward, Vandene waited until the door closed behind the maid before speaking. "Reanne Corly is dead, Elayne."

"Oh, Light, no." Temper vanished into sobs, and she hastily snatched a lace-edged handkerchief from her sleeve to blot the tears suddenly streaming down her cheeks. Her cursed shifting moods at work, yet Reanne surely deserved tears. She had so wanted to become a Green. "How?" Burn her, she wished she could stop blubbering!

There were no tears from Vandene. Perhaps there were no more tears in her. "She was smothered with the Power. Whoever did it used much more than was needed. The residues of *saidar* were thick on her and in the room where she was found. The murderer wanted to be sure no one would miss seeing how she died."

"That makes no sense, Vandene."

"Perhaps it does. Zarya?"

The Saldaean woman laid her small bundle on the table and unwrapped it to reveal an articulated wooden doll. It was very old, the simple dress threadbare, the painted face flaking and missing an eye, half of its long dark hair gone.

"This belonged to Mirane Larinen," Zarya said. "Derys Nermala found it behind a cupboard."

"I don't see what Mirane leaving a doll behind has to do with Reanne's death," Elayne said, wiping her eyes. Mirane was one of the Kinswomen who had run away.

“Only this,” Vandene answered. “When Mirane went to the Tower, she hid this doll outside because she had heard that everything she owned would be burned. After she was put out, she retrieved it and always carried it with her. Always. She had a quirk, though. Wherever she stopped for a time, she hid the doll again. Do not ask me why. But she would not have run away and abandoned it.”

Still dabbing at her eyes, Elayne leaned back in her chair. Her weeping had dwindled to sniffles, but her eyes still leaked tears. “So Mirane didn’t run away. She was murdered and . . . disposed of.” A grisly way to put it. “The others, too, you think? All of them?”

Vandene nodded, and for a moment her slender shoulders slumped. “I very much fear so,” she said, straightening. “I expect clues were left among the things they left behind, treasured keepsakes like this doll, a favorite piece of jewelry. The murderer wanted us to think she was being clever at hiding her crimes but not clever enough, only *we* weren’t clever enough to find those clues, so she decided to become more blatant.”

“To frighten the Kinswomen into fleeing,” Elayne muttered. That would not cripple her, but it would throw her back on the mercies of the Windfinders, and those seemed to be growing mingy. “How many of them know of this?”

“All, by now, I should think,” Vandene said dryly. “Zarya told Derys to keep quiet, but that woman likes the sound of her own voice.”

“This seems aimed at me, at helping Arymilla gain the throne, but why would a Black sister have any interest in that? I can’t think we have *two* murderers among us. At least this settles the question of Merilille. Speak with Sumeko and Alise, Vandene. They can make sure the rest don’t panic.” Sumeko ranked next after Reanne, as the Kin ordered their hierarchy, and while Alise stood much lower, she was a woman of great influence. “From now on, none of them is to be alone, not ever. Always at least two together, and three or four would be better. And warn them to be careful of Careane and Sareitha.”

“I’d advise against that,” Vandene said quickly. “They should be safe in groups, and word would reach Careane and Sareitha. Warned against Aes Sedai? The Kin would give themselves away in a minute.” Kirstian and Zarya nodded solemnly.

After a moment, Elayne reluctantly agreed to the continued secrecy. The Kin *should* be safe in groups. “Let Chanelle know about Reanne and the others. I can’t imagine the Windfinders are in any danger—losing them wouldn’t hurt me the way losing the Kin would—but wouldn’t it be wonderful if they did decide to leave?”

She did not expect that they would—Chanelle feared returning to the Sea Folk with the bargain unfulfilled—yet it would be a bright spot in an otherwise miserable day if they did. At least it seemed unlikely anything could darken the day further. The thought sent a chill through her. The Light send nothing would darken it more.

Arymilla pushed her plate of stew away with a grimace. She had been offered her choice of beds for the night—Arlene, her maid, was making the choice now; the woman knew what she liked—and the least she had expected was a decent meal, but the mutton was fatty, and definitely beginning to go rancid besides. There had been too much of that lately. This time the cook was going to be flogged! She was unsure which of the nobles in this camp employed him, just that he was supposed to be the best at hand—the best!—but that did not matter. He would be flogged to make an example. And then sent away, of course. You could never trust a cook after he had been punished.

The mood in the tent was far from lively. Several of the nobles in the camp had hoped for invitations to dine with her, but none stood high enough. She was beginning to regret not asking one or two, even some of Naean’s or Elenia’s people. They might have been entertaining. Her closest allies at table together, and you might have thought they sat over funeral meats. Oh, scrawny old Nasin, his thinning white hair uncombed, was eating away heartily, apparently not noticing that the meat was nearly rotten, and giving her fatherly pats on the hand. She met his smiles like a dutiful daughter. The fool was wearing one of his flower-embroidered coats tonight. The thing could have passed for a woman’s dressing robe! Happily, his leers were all directed down the table at Elenia; the honey-haired woman flinched, her foxlike face paling whenever she glanced at him. She controlled House Sarand as if she were the High Seat instead of her husband, yet she feared that Arymilla would still let Nasin have his way with her. That threat was unneeded, now, but it was well to have it to hand just in case. Yes, Nasin was happy enough in his futile pursuit of Elenia, but the others were sunk in gloom. Their plates were abandoned barely touched, and they kept her two serving men trotting to refill wine cups. She never liked trusting others’ servants. At least the wine had not turned.

“I still say we should make a heavier push,” Lir grumbled drunkenly into his cup. A whip of a man, his red coat showing the wear of armor straps, the High Seat of Baryn was ever eager to strike. Subtlety was simply beyond him. “My eyes-and-ears report more armsmen entering the city every day through these ‘gateways.’ ” He shook his head and muttered something under his breath. The man actually believed those rumors of dozens of Aes Sedai in the Royal Palace. “All these pinprick attacks do is lose men.”

“I agree,” Karind said, fiddling with a large golden pin, enameled with the running Red Fox of Anshar, that was fastened to her bosom. She was not much less intoxicated than Lir. Her square face had a slackness about it. “We need to press home instead of throwing men away. Once we’re over the walls, our advantage in numbers will pay off.”

Arymilla’s mouth tightened. They might at least show her the respect due a woman who was soon to be Queen of Andor, rather than disagreeing with her all the time. Unfortunately, Baryn and Anshar were not bound to her so tightly as Sarand and Arawn. Unlike Jarid and Naean, Lir and Karind had announced their support of her without publishing it in writing. Neither had Nasin, but she had no fear of losing him. Him, she had wound around her wrist for a bracelet.

Forcing a smile, she made her voice jovial. “We lose mercenaries. What else are mercenaries good for if not dying in place of our armsmen?” She held up her winecup and a lean man in her silver-trimmed blue hastened to fill it. In fact, he was so hasty that he spilled a drop on her hand. Her scowl made him snatch a handkerchief from his pocket to blot up the drop before she could pull her hand away. His handkerchief! The Light only knew where that filthy thing had been, and he had *touched* her with it! His mouth writhed with fear as he retreated, bowing and mumbling apologies. Let him serve out the meal. He could be dismissed after. “We will need all of our armsmen when I ride against the Borderlanders. Don’t you agree, Naean?”

Naean twitched as though stuck with a pin. Slim and pale in yellow silk worked with silver patterns of Arawn’s Triple Keys on the breast, she had begun looking haggard in recent weeks, her blue eyes drawn and tired. All of her supercilious airs were quite gone. “Of course, Arymilla,” she said meekly and drained her cup. Good. She and Elenia were definitely tamed, but Arymilla liked to check now and then to make sure neither was growing a new backbone.

“If Luan and the others will not support you, what good will taking Caemlyn do?” Sylvase, Nasin’s granddaughter and heir, spoke so seldom that the question came as a shock. Sturdy and not quite pretty, she usually had a vapid gaze, but her blue eyes appeared quite sharp at the moment. Everyone stared at her. That seemed not to faze her a bit. She toyed with a winecup, but Arymilla thought it no more than her second. “If we must fight the Borderlanders, why not accept Luan’s truce so Andor can field its full strength unhindered by divisions?”

Arymilla smiled. She wanted to slap the silly woman. Nasin would be angered by that, however. He wanted her kept as Arymilla’s “guest” to prevent his removal as High Seat—part of him seemed aware that his wits were gone; all of him intended holding on as High Seat until he died—but he did love her. “Ellorien and some of the others will come to me yet, child,” she said smoothly. Smoothness required some effort. Who did the chit think she was? “Aemlyn, Arathelle, Pelivar. They have grievances against Trakand.” Surely they would come once Elayne and Dyelin were out of the way. Those two would not survive Caemlyn’s fall. “Once I have the city, they will be mine in any event. Three of Elayne’s supporters are children, and Conail Northan is little more than a child. I trust I can convince them to publish their support of me easily enough.” And if she could not, Master Lounalt surely could. A pity if children had to be handed over to him and his cords. “I will be queen by sunset of the day Caemlyn falls to me. Isn’t that right, father?”

Nasin laughed, spraying gobbets of half-chewed stew across the table. “Yes, yes,” he said, patting Arymilla’s hand. “You listen to your aunt, Sylvase. Do as she tells you. She’ll be Queen of Andor soon.” His smile faded, and an odd note entered his voice. It might almost have been . . . pleading. “Remember, you will be High Seat of Caeren after I’m gone. After I’m gone. You will be High Seat.”

“As you say, Grandfather,” Sylvase murmured, inclining her head briefly. When she straightened, her gaze was as insipid as ever. The sharpness must have been a trick of the light. Of course.

Nasin grunted and went happily back to wolfing down the stew. “Best I’ve had in days. I think I’ll have another plate. More wine here, man. Can’t you see my cup’s dry?”

The silence around the table stretched in discomfort. Nasin's more open displays of senility had a way of causing that.

"I still say," Lir began finally, only to cut off as a stocky armsman with Marne's four Silver Moons on his chest entered the tent.

Bowing respectfully, the fellow made his way around the table and bent to whisper in Arymilla's ear. "Master Hernvil asks a word in private, my Lady."

Everyone but Nasin and his granddaughter pretended to concentrate on their wine, certainly not attempting to eavesdrop. He went on eating. She watched Arymilla, bland-faced. That sharpness *must* have been a trick of the light.

"I'll be but a few moments," Arymilla said, rising. She waved a hand, indicating the food and wine. "Enjoy yourselves until I return. Enjoy." Lir called for more wine.

Outside, she did not bother raising her skirts to keep them clear of the mud. Arlene would already have to clean them, so what did a little more mud matter? Light showed in some tents, but by and large the camp was dark beneath a half moon. Jakob Hernvil, her secretary, waited a little away from the tent in a plain coat, holding a lantern that made a yellow pool around him. He was a little man, and lean, as if all the fat had been boiled from him. Discretion was bred in his bones, and she ensured his loyalty by paying him enough that only the largest bribes could be of interest, far more than anyone would offer a scrivener.

"Forgive me for interrupting your meal, my Lady," he said with a bow, "but I was sure you would want to hear right away." It was always a surprise, hearing such a deep voice from such a tiny man. "They have agreed. But they want the whole amount of gold first."

Her lips compressed of their own accord. The whole amount. She had hoped to get off with paying only the first half. After all, who would dare dun her once she was queen? "Draw up a letter to Mistress Andscale. I'll sign and seal it first thing in the morning." Transferring that much gold would require days. And how long to have the armsmen ready? She had never really paid attention to that sort of thing. Lir could tell her, but she hated showing weakness. "Tell them a week from tomorrow, to the day." That should be enough. In a week, Caemlyn would be hers. The throne would be hers. Arymilla, by the Grace of the Light, Queen of Andor, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Marne. Smiling, she went back inside to tell the others the wonderful news.

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CHAPTER 18

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News for the Dragon

Enough, Loial,” Rand said firmly, thumbing tabac into his short-stemmed pipe from a goatskin pouch. It was Tairen leaf, with a slightly oily taste from the curing, but that was all that was to be had. Thunder rolled overhead, slow and ponderous. “You’ll talk me hoarse with all these questions.”

They were seated at a long table in one of the larger rooms in Lord Algarin’s manor house, the remains of the midday meal pushed down to one end. The servants were old, for the most part, and slower moving than ever since Algarin left for the Black Tower. The rain pouring down outside seemed to be slackening, though strong gusts of wind still pelted the windows with raindrops hard enough to rattle the glass in the six yellow-painted casements. Many of those panes held bubbles; some distorted what lay outside almost beyond recognition. The table and chairs were simply carved, no more elaborate than might be found in many farmhouses, and the yellow cornices beneath the high, beamed ceiling little more so. The two fireplaces, at either end of the room, were broad and tall but of plain stone, the andirons and firetools sturdy wrought iron and simple. Lord or no, Algarin was far from wealthy.

Tucking the tabac pouch into his pocket, Rand strolled to one of the fireplaces and used small brass tongs from the mantel to lift a burning sliver of oak for lighting his pipe. He hoped no one thought that strange. He avoided channeling any more than absolutely necessary, especially if anyone else was present—the dizziness that hit him when he did was difficult to conceal—but no one had mentioned it so far. A gust of wind brought a squeaking as though tree branches had scraped across the windowpanes. Imagination. The nearest trees were beyond the fields, more than half a mile away.

Loial had brought down a vine-carved chair from the Ogier rooms that put his knees level with the tabletop, so he had to lean forward sharply to write in his leather-bound notebook. The volume was small for him, little enough to fit neatly into one of his capacious coat pockets, but still as large as most human books Rand had seen. Fine hair decorated Loial’s upper lip and a patch beneath his chin; he was attempting a beard and mustaches, though with only a few weeks’ growth, it did not seem a very successful attempt so far.

“But you’ve told me almost nothing really useful,” the Ogier rumbled, a drum booming its disappointment. His tufted ears drooped. Even so, he began wiping the steel nib of his polished wooden pen. Fatter than Rand’s thumb and long enough to seem slender, it fitted Loial’s thick fingers perfectly. “You never mention heroics, except by somebody else. You make it all sound so everyday. To hear you tell it, the fall of Illian was as exciting as watching a weaver repair her loom. And cleansing the True Source? You and Nynaeve linked, then you sat and channeled while everybody else was off fighting Forsaken. Even Nynaeve told me more than that, and she claims to remember almost nothing.”

Nynaeve, wearing all of her jeweled *ter’angreal* and her strange bracelet-and-rings *angreal*, shifted in her chair in front of the other fireplace, then went back to watching Alivia. Every so often she glanced toward the windows and tugged at her thick braid, but for the most part she focused on the yellow-haired Seanchan woman. Standing beside the doorway like a guard, Alivia gave a small, brief smile of amusement. The former *damane* knew Nynaeve’s display was meant for her. The intensity never left her hawkish blue eyes, though. It seldom had, ever since her collar had been removed in Caemlyn. The two Maidens squatting on their heels near her playing cat’s cradle, Harilin of the Iron Mountain Taardad and Enaila of the Jarra Chareen, were making their own display. *Shoufa* wrapped around their heads and black veils hanging down their chests, each had three or four spears stuck through the harness holding her bow case on her back and a bull-hide buckler lying on the floor. There were fifty Maidens in the manor house, several of them Shaido, and they all went about ready to dance the spears in a heartbeat. Perhaps with him. They seemed torn between delight at providing a guard for him again and displeasure over how long he had avoided them.

As for himself, he could not look at any of them without the litany of women who had died for him, women he had killed, starting up in his head. *Moiraine Damodred*. Her above all. Her name was written inside his skull in fire. *Liah of the Cosaida Chareen, Sendara of the Iron Mountain Taardad, Lamelle of the Smoke Water Miagoma, Andhilin of the Red Salt Goshien, Desora of the Musara Reyn*. . . . So many names. Sometimes he woke in the middle of the night muttering that list, with Min holding him and murmuring to him as if soothing a child. He always told her he was all right and wanted to go back to sleep, yet after he closed his eyes, he did not sleep until the list had been completed. Sometimes Lews Therin chanted it with him.

Min looked up from the volume she had open on the table, one of Herid Fel's books. She devoured those, and used the note he had sent Rand before his murder, the one where he said she was a distraction because she was so pretty, as a bookmark. Her short blue coat, embroidered with white flowers on the sleeves and lapels, was cut to fit snugly over her bosom, where her creamy silk blouse showed a touch of cleavage, and her big dark eyes, framed by dark ringlets to her shoulders, held a pleased light. He could feel her pleasure through the bond. She liked him looking at her. Without a doubt the bond told her how much he liked looking. Oddly enough, it said she liked looking at him, too. Pretty? He hummed, thumbing his earlobe. She was beautiful. And tied to him tighter than ever. She and Elayne and Aviendha. How was he to keep them safe now? He forced himself to smile back at her around his pipestem, unsure how well the deception was working. A touch of irritation had entered the bond from her end, though why she should become irritable whenever she thought he was worrying about her was beyond him. Light, *she* wanted to protect *him*!

"Rand isn't very talkative, Loial," she said, no longer smiling. Her low, almost musical voice held no anger, but the bond told another story. "In fact, sometimes he's about as talkative as a mussel." The look she directed at Rand made him sigh. It seemed there would be a great deal of talking once they were alone together. "I can't tell you much, myself, but I'm sure Cadsuane and Verin will tell you anything you want to know. Others will, too. Ask them if you want more than yes and no and two words besides."

Stout little Verin, knitting in a chair beside Nynaeve, appeared startled to hear her name mentioned. She blinked vaguely, as though wondering why it had been. Cadsuane, at the far end of the table with her sewing basket open beside her, only took her attention away from her embroidery hoop long enough to glance at Loial. Golden ornaments swayed, dangling from the iron-gray bun atop her head. It was only that, a glance, not a frown, yet Loial's ears twitched. Aes Sedai always impressed him, and Cadsuane more than any other.

"Oh, I will, Min, I will," he said. "But Rand is central to my book." With no sand jar at hand, he began blowing gently on the page of his notebook to dry the ink, but Loial being Loial, he still talked between puffs. "You never give enough detail, Rand. You make me drag everything out of you. Why, you never even mentioned being imprisoned in Far Madding until Min did. Never mentioned it! What did the Council of Nine say when they offered you the Laurel Crown? And when you renamed it? I can't think they liked that. What was the coronation like? Was there feasting, a festival, parades? How many Forsaken came against you at Shadar Logoth? Which ones? What did it *look* like at the end? What did it *feel* like? My book won't be very good without the details. I hope Mat and Perrin give me better answers." He frowned, long eyebrows grazing his cheeks. "I hope they're all right."

Colors spun in Rand's head, twin rainbows swirled in water. He knew how to suppress them, now, but this time he did not try. One resolved into a brief image of Mat riding through forest at the head of a line of mounted folk. He seemed to be arguing with a small, dark woman who rode beside him, taking his hat off and peering into it, then cramming it back onto his head. That lasted only moments, then was replaced by Perrin sitting over winecups in a common room or tavern with a man and a woman who wore identical red coats ornately trimmed with blue and yellow. Odd garments. Perrin looked grim as death, his companions wary. Of him?

"They're well," he said, calmly ignoring a piercing look from Cadsuane. She did not know everything, and he intended to keep it that way. Calm on the surface, content, blowing smoke rings. Inside was another matter. *Where are they?* he thought angrily, pushing down another appearance of the colors. That was as easy as breathing, now. *I need them, and they're off for a day at the Ansaline Gardens!*

Abruptly another image was floating in his head, a man's face, and his breath caught. For the first time, it came without any dizziness. For the first time, he could see it clearly in the moments before it vanished. A blue-eyed man with a square chin, perhaps a few years older than himself. Or rather, he saw it clearly for the first time in a long while. It was the face of the stranger who had saved his life in Shadar Logoth when he fought Sammael. Worse. . . .

He was aware of me, Lews Therin said. He sounded sane for a change. Sometimes he did, but the madness always returned eventually. *How can a face appearing in my mind be* aware *of me?*

If you don't know, how do you expect me to? Rand thought. *But I was aware of him, as well.* It had been a strange sensation, as if he were . . . touching . . . the other man somehow. Only not physically. A residue hung on. It seemed he only had to move a hair’s breadth, in any direction, to touch him again. *I think he saw my face, too.*

Talking to a voice in his head no longer seemed peculiar. In truth, it had not for quite a long time. And now . . . ? Now, he could see Mat and Perrin by thinking of them or hearing their names, and he had this other face coming to him unbidden. More than a face, apparently. What was holding conversations inside his own skull alongside that? But the man *had* been aware, and Rand of him.

When our streams of balefire touched in Shadar Logoth, it must have created some sort of link between us. I can’t think of any other explanation. That was the only time we ever met. He was using their so-called True Power. It had to be that. I felt nothing, saw nothing except his stream of balefire. Having bits of knowledge seem his when he knew they came from Lews Therin no longer seemed odd, either. He could *remember* the Ansaline Gardens, destroyed in the War of the Shadow, as well as he did his father’s farm. Knowledge drifted the other way, too. Lews Therin sometimes spoke of Emond’s Field as if he had grown up there. *Does that make any sense to you?*

Oh, Light, why do I have this voice in my head? Lews Therin moaned. *Why can I not die? Oh, Ilyena, my precious Ilyena, I want to join you.* He trailed off into weeping. He often did when he spoke of the wife he had murdered in his madness.

It did not matter. Rand suppressed the sound of the man crying, pushed it down to a faint noise on the edge of hearing. He was certain that he was right. But who was the fellow? A Darkfriend, for sure, but not one of the Forsaken. Lews Therin knew their faces as well as he knew his own, and now Rand did, too. A sudden thought made him grimace. *How* aware of him was the other man? *Ta’veren* could be found by their effect on the Pattern, though only the Forsaken knew how. Lews Therin certainly had never mentioned knowing—their “conversations” were always brief, and the man seldom gave information willingly—and nothing had drifted across from him on the subject. At least, Lanfear and Ishamael had known how, but no one had found him that way since they had died. Could this link be used in the same fashion? They could all be in danger. More danger than usual, as if the usual were not enough.

“Are you well, Rand?” Loial asked worriedly, screwing the leaf-engraved silver cap onto his ink jar. The glass of that was so thick it could have survived anything short of being hurled against stone, but Loial handled it as though it were fragile. In his huge hands, it looked fragile. “I thought the cheese tasted off, but you ate a good bit of it.”

“I’m fine,” Rand said, but of course, Nynaeve paid him no heed. She was out of her chair and gliding down the room in a flash, blue skirts swirling. Goose bumps popped out on his skin as she embraced *saidar* and stretched to lay her hands on his head. An instant later, a chill rippled through him. The woman never *asked*! Sometimes she behaved as if she were still the Wisdom in Emond’s Field and he would be heading back to the farm come morning.

“You’re not ill,” she said in tones of relief. Spoiled food was causing all sorts of sickness among the servants, some of it serious. People would have died except for the presence of Asha’man and Aes Sedai to give Healing. Reluctant to cost their lord scarce money by throwing food out, despite all the admonitions Cadsuane and Nynaeve and the other Aes Sedai gave them, they fed themselves things that should have been tossed on the midden heap. A different tingling centered briefly around the double wound in his left side.

“That wound is no better,” she said with a frown. She had tried Healing it, succeeding no better than Flinn had. That did not sit well with her. Nynaeve took failure as a personal insult. “How can you even stand up? You must be in agony.”

“He ignores it,” Min said flatly. Oh, yes, there would be words.

“It hurts no worse standing than sitting,” he told Nynaeve, gently taking her hands from his head. Simple truth. So was what Min had said. He could not afford to let pain make him a prisoner.

One of the twinned doors creaked open to admit a white-haired man in a worn yellow coat trimmed with red and blue that hung loosely on his bony frame. His bow was halting, a fault of his joints rather than disrespect. “My Lord Dragon,” he said in a voice nearly as creaky as the hinges, “Lord Logain has returned.”

Logain did not wait on invitations, entering practically on the serving man’s heels. A tall man with dark hair curling to his shoulders, and dark for a Ghealdanin, women likely thought him handsome, yet there was a streak of darkness inside him as well. He wore his black coat with the Sword and the Dragon on the high collar, and a long-hilted sword on his hip, but he had made an addition, a round enameled pin on his shoulder showing three golden crowns in a field of blue. Had the man adopted a sigil? The old man's hairy eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he looked to Rand as if inquiring whether he wanted Logain removed.

"The news from Andor is fair enough, I suppose," Logain said, tucking black gauntlets behind his sword belt. He offered Rand a minimal bow, the slightest bending of his back. "Elayne still holds Caemlyn, and Arymilla still holds her siege, but Elayne has the advantage since Arymilla can't even stop food getting in, much less reinforcements. No need to scowl. I kept out of the city. Black coats aren't exactly welcome there, in any case. The Borderlanders are still in the same place. You were wise to stay clear of them, it seems. Rumor says there are thirteen Aes Sedai with them. Rumor says they're looking for you. Has Bashere gotten back yet?" Nynaeve gave him a scowl and moved away from Rand gripping her braid tightly. Aes Sedai bonding Asha'man was all very well in her book, but not the reverse.

Thirteen and looking for him? He had stayed clear of the Borderlanders because Elayne did not welcome his help—interference, she called it, and he had begun to see that she had the right of it; the Lion Throne was hers to gain, not his to give—but perhaps it was as well that he had. The Borderland rulers all had ties to the White Tower, and no doubt Elaida was still eager to get her hands on him. Her and that mad proclamation about no one approaching him except through her. If she believed that would force him to come to her, she was a fool.

"Thank you, that will be all, Ethin. *Lord* Logain?" he asked as the serving man bowed himself out with a last disgruntled glance at Logain. Rand thought the man would have tried had he told him to haul Logain out.

"The title is his by birth," Cadsuane said without looking up from her embroidery. She would know; she had helped capture him back when he was calling himself the Dragon Reborn, him and Taim both. Her hair ornaments bobbed as she nodded to herself. "Phaw! A minor lordling with a scrap of land in the mountains, most of it all but straight up and down. But King Johanin and the Crown High Council stripped him of his lands and title after he became a false Dragon."

Small spots of color appeared in Logain's cheeks, yet his voice was cool and composed. "They could take my estate, but they could not take away who I am."

Still seemingly intent on her embroidery needle, Cadsuane laughed softly. Verin's knitting needles had stopped. She was studying Logain, a plump sparrow studying an insect. Alivia had shifted her intense gaze to the man, too, and Harilin and Enaila seemed to be just going through the motions of their game. Min appeared to be reading still, but each hand rested near the opposite cuff of her coatsleeves. She kept some of her knives hidden there. None of them trusted him.

Rand frowned. The man could call himself whatever he wanted so long as he did what he was supposed to, but Cadsuane prodded him and anyone else in a black coat nearly as much as she did Rand himself. He was unsure how far to trust Logain either, yet he had to work with the tools he had to hand. “Is it done?” With Logain here, Loial was uncapping his ink jar again.

“More than half the Black Tower is in Arad Doman and Illian. I sent all the men with bonded Aes Sedai except those here, as you ordered.” Logain walked to the table while he talked, found a blue-glazed pitcher that still held wine among the plates and scraps, and filled a green-glazed cup. There was very little silver in the house. “You should have let me bring more men here. The numbers tilt too much to Aes Sedai for my liking.”

Rand grunted. “Since part of that is your doing, you can live with it. Others will have to, as well. Go on.”

“Dobraine and Rhuarc will send a Soldier with a message as soon as they find anyone in charge of more than a village. The Council of Merchants claim King Alsalam still reigns, but they wouldn’t or couldn’t produce him or say where he is, they seem to be at one another’s throats themselves, and Bandar Eban is more than half deserted and given over to the mob.” Logain grimaced into his winecup. “Gangs of strongarms provide what little order there is, and they extort food and coin from the people they claim to protect and take whatever else they want, including women.” The bond suddenly held white-hot rage, and Nynaeve growled in her throat. “Rhuarc has set about putting an end to that, but it was already turning into a battle when I left,” Logain finished.

“Strongarms won’t hold out long against Aiel. If Dobraine can’t find anyone in charge, then he will have to be, for the time being.” If Alsalam was dead, as seemed likely, he would have to appoint a Steward for the Lord Dragon in Arad Doman. But who? It would have to be someone the Domani would accept.

The other man took a long swallow of wine. “Taim wasn’t pleased at me taking so many men out of the Tower and not telling him where they were going. I thought he was going to rip up your order. He tried every trick to learn where you are. Oh, he burns to know that. His eyes were practically on fire. I wouldn't put it past him to have had me put to the question if I'd been fool enough to meet him without company. One thing pleased him, though: that I didn't take any of his cronies. That was plain on his face." He smiled, a dark smile, not amused. "There are forty-one of those now, by the way. He's given over a dozen men the Dragon pin in the past few days, and he has above fifty more in his 'special' classes, most of them men recruited just lately. He's planning something, and I doubt you'll like it."

I told you to kill him when you had the chance, Lews Therin cackled in mad mirth. *I told you. And now it's too late. Too late.*

Rand angrily expelled a stream of blue-gray smoke. "Give over," he said, meaning it for both Logain and Lews Therin. "Taim built the Black Tower till it nearly matches the White Tower for numbers, and it grows every day. If he's a Darkfriend the way you claim, why would he do that?"

Logain met his stare levelly. "Because he couldn't stop it. From what I've heard, even in the beginning there were men who could Travel who weren't his toad-eaters, and he had no excuse to do *all* the recruiting himself. But he's made a Tower of his own hidden inside the Black Tower, and the men in it are loyal to him, not you. He amended the deserters' list and sends his apologies for an 'honest mistake,' but you can wager all you own it was no mistake."

And how loyal was Logain? If one false Dragon chafed at following the Dragon Reborn, why not another? He might think he had cause. He had been far more famous as a false Dragon than Taim, more successful, gathering an army that swept out of Ghealdan and nearly reached Lugard on its way to Tear. Half the known world had trembled at the name Logain. Yet Mazrim Taim commanded the Black Tower while Logain Ablar was only another Asha'man. Min still saw an aura of glory around him. Just how that glory was to be achieved was beyond her viewing, however.

He took the pipe from his mouth, and the bowl was hot against the heron branded into his palm. He must have been puffing away furiously without being aware of it. The trouble was, Taim and Logain were lesser problems. They had to wait. The tools at hand. He made an effort to keep his voice even. "Taim took their names off the list. That's the important thing. If he's showing favoritism, I'll put an end to it when I have time. But the Seanchan have to come first. And maybe Tarmon Gai'don, too."

"If?" Logain growled, slamming his cup down on the table so hard that it broke. Wine spread across the tabletop and dripped over the edge. Scowling, he wiped his damp hand on his coat. "Do you think I'm imagining things?" His tone grew more heated by the word. "Or making them up? Do you think this is *jealousy*, al'Thor? Is that what you think?"

"You listen to me," Rand began, raising his voice against a peal of thunder.

"I told you I expected you and your friends in black coats to be civil to me, my friends and my guests," Cadsuane said sternly, "but I've decided that must be expanded to include each other." Her head was still bent over her embroidery hoop, but she spoke as if she were shaking a finger under their noses. "At least when I am present. That means if you continue squabbling, I may have to spank both of you." Harilin and Enaila began laughing so hard they got the string of their game in a snarl. Nynaeve laughed, too, though she tried to hide it behind her hand. Light, even *Min* smiled!

Logain bristled, jaw tightening until Rand thought he should hear the man's teeth grating. He was trying hard not to bristle himself. Cadsuane and her bloody rules. Her *conditions* for becoming his advisor. She pretended that he had *asked* for them, and every so often she added another to her list. The rules were not precisely onerous, though their existence was, but her way of presenting them was always like a poke with a sharp stick. He opened his mouth to tell her he was finished with her rules, and with her, too, if need be.

"Taim very likely will have to wait on the Last Battle, whatever he's about," Verin said suddenly. Her knitting, a shapeless lump that might have been anything, sat in her lap. "It will come soon. According to everything I've read on the subject, the signs are quite clear. Half the servants have recognized dead people in the halls, people they knew alive. It's happened often enough that they aren't frightened by it any longer. And a dozen men moving the cattle to spring pasture watched a considerable town melt into mist just a few miles to the north."

Cadsuane had raised her head and was staring at the stout Brown sister. "Thank you for repeating what you told us yesterday, Verin," she said dryly. Verin blinked, then took up her knitting again, frowning at it as though she, too, were unsure what it was going to be.

Min caught Rand's eyes, shaking her head slowly, and he sighed. The bond held irritation and wariness, the last a deliberate warning to him, he suspected. At times, she seemed able to read his mind. Well, if he needed Cadsuane, and Min said he did, then he needed her. He just wished he knew what she was supposed to teach him aside from how to grind his teeth.

"Advise me, Cadsuane. What do you think of my plan?"

"At last the boy asks," she murmured, setting her embroidery down beside her sewing basket. "All his schemes in motion, some I've not been made privy to, and *now* he asks. Very well. Your peace with the Seanchan will be unpopular."

"A truce," he broke in. "And a truce with the Dragon Reborn will last only as long as the Dragon Reborn. When I die, everyone will be free to go to war with the Seanchan again if they wish."

Min slammed her book shut and folded her arms beneath her breasts. "Don't you talk that way!" she said, red-faced with anger. The bond also carried fear.

"The Prophecies, Min," he said sadly. Not sad for himself, but for her. He wanted to protect her, her and Elayne and Aviendha, but he would hurt them in the end.

"I said don't you talk that way! The Prophecies *don't* say you have to die! I'm not going to let you die, Rand al'Thor! Elayne and Aviendha and I won't let you!" She glared at Alivia, who her viewing had said would help Rand die, and her hands slid down her arms toward her cuffs.

"Behave, Min," he said. Her hands shot away from her cuffs, but she set her jaw, and the bond suddenly was flooded with stubbornness. Light, was he going to have to worry about Min trying to kill Alivia? Not that she was likely to succeed—as well try throwing a knife at an Aes Sedai as at the Seanchan woman—but she might get herself injured. He was not sure Alivia *knew* any weaves but those for weapons.

"Unpopular, as I say," Cadsuane said firmly, raising her voice. She favored Min with a brief frown before turning her attention back to Rand. Her face was smooth, composed, an Aes Sedai's face. Her dark eyes were hard, like polished black stones. "Especially in Tarabon, Amadicia and Altara, but also elsewhere. If you agree to allow the Seanchan to keep what they've already taken, what lands will you give away next? That is how most rulers will see matters."

Rand dropped back into his chair, stretching his legs in front of him and crossing his ankles. “It doesn’t matter how unpopular it is. I went through that doorframe *ter’angreal* in Tear, Cadsuane. You know about that?” Golden ornaments bobbled as she nodded impatiently. “One of my questions for the Aelfinn was ‘How can I win the Last Battle?’ ”

“A dangerous question to pose,” she said quietly, “touching on the Shadow as it does. Supposedly, the results can be quite unpleasant. What was the answer?”

“ ‘The north and the east must be as one. The west and the south must be as one. The two must be as one.’ ” He blew a smoke ring, put another in the middle of it as it expanded. That was not the whole of it. He had asked how to win and survive. The last part of his answer had been ‘To live, you must die.’ Not something he was going to bring up in front of Min anytime soon. In front of anyone except Alivia, for that matter. Now he just had to figure out how to live by dying. “At first, I thought it meant I had to conquer everywhere, but that wasn’t what they said. What if it means the Seanchan hold the west and south, as you could say they already do, and there’s an alliance to fight the Last Battle, the Seanchan with everybody else?”

“It’s possible,” she allowed. “But if you’re going to make this . . . truce . . . why are you moving what seems to be a considerable army to Arad Doman and reinforcing what is already in Illian?”

“Because Tarmon Gai’don *is* coming, Cadsuane, and I can’t fight the Shadow and the Seanchan at the same time. I’ll have a truce, or I’ll crush them whatever the cost. The Prophecies say I have to bind the nine moons to me. I only understood what that meant a few days ago. As soon as Bashere returns, I’ll know when and where I’m to meet the Daughter of the Nine Moons. The only question now is how do I bind her, and she’ll have to answer that.”

He spoke matter-of-factly, now and then blowing a smoke ring for punctuation. Reactions varied. Loial just wrote very fast, trying to capture every word, while Harilin and Enaila went on with their game. If the spears had to be danced, they were ready. Alivia nodded fiercely, doubtless hoping it would come to crushing those who had kept her wearing an *a’dam* for five hundred years. Logain had found another winecup and filled it with the last of what was in the pitcher, but he merely held the cup rather than drinking, his expression unreadable. Now it was Rand whom Verin studied intently. But then, she had always been curious about him. But why in the Light would Min feel bone-deep sadness? And Cadsuane. . . .

“Stone cracks from a hard enough blow,” she said, her face an Aes Sedai mask of calm. “Steel shatters. The oak fights the wind and breaks. The willow bends where it must and survives.”

“A willow won’t win Tarmon Gai’don,” he told her.

The door creaked open again, and Ethin tottered in. “My Lord Dragon, three Ogier have arrived. They were most pleased to learn that Master Loial is here. One of them is his mother.”

“My mother?” Loial squeaked, and even that sounded like a hollow wind gusting in caverns. He leaped up so fast that his chair fell over backward, wringing his hands, ears wilting. His head swung from side to side as if he were hunting for a way out besides the door. “What am I going to do, Rand? The other two must be Elder Haman and Erith. What am I going to do?”

“Mistress Covril said she was most anxious to speak with you, Master Loial,” Ethin said in that creaky voice. “Most anxious. They are all damp from the rain, but she said they will wait for you in the Ogier sitting room upstairs.”

“What am I going to do, Rand?”

“You said you want to marry Erith,” Rand said as gently as he could. Gentleness was difficult except with Min.

“But my book! My notes aren’t complete, and I’ll never find out what happens next. Erith will take me back to Stedding Tsofu with her.”

“Phaw!” Cadsuane picked up her embroidery again and began working the needle delicately. She was making the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai, the Dragon’s Fang and the Flame of Tar Valon melded into a disc, black and white separated by a sinuous line. “Go to your mother, Loial. If she’s Covril, daughter of Ella daughter of Soong, you don’t want to keep her waiting. As I expect you know.”

Loial seemed to take Cadsuane’s words as a command. He began wiping his pen nib again, capping his ink jar. But he did everything very slowly, with his ears drooping. Every so often he moaned sadly, half under his breath, “My book!”

“Well,” Verin said, holding up her knitting for inspection, “I believe I have done all that I can here. I think I’ll go find Tomas. The rain makes his knee ache, though he denies it even to me.” She glanced at the window. “It does seem to be slowing.”

“And I think I’ll go find Lan,” Nynaeve said, gathering her skirts. “The company is better where he is.” That with a sharp tug on her braid and a glare divided between Alivia and Logain. “The wind tells me a storm is coming, Rand. And you know I don’t mean rain.”

“The Last Battle?” Rand asked. “How soon?” When it came to weather, listening to the wind could sometimes tell her when the rains would come to the hour.

“It may be, and I don’t know. Just remember. A storm is coming. A terrible storm.” Overhead, thunder rolled.

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CHAPTER 19

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Vows

Uneasy, Loial watched Nynaeve glide off down the lamp-lit corridor in one direction and Verin in the other. Neither was much taller than his waist, but they were Aes Sedai. The fact knotted his tongue sufficiently that by the time he had worked up his nerve to ask one of them to accompany him, both were out of sight around sharp corners. The manor house was a rambling place, added to over many years with no real overall plan that he could discern, and hallways frequently met at odd angles. He really wished he had an Aes Sedai for company when he faced his mother. Even Cadsuane, although she made him very nervous with how she was always pinching at Rand. Sooner or later, Rand was going to explode. He was not the same man Loial first met in Caemlyn, or even the man he had left in Cairhien. The mood around Rand was dark and stony now, a dense patch of lion's claw and treacherous ground underfoot. The whole house felt that way with Rand in it.

A lean, gray-haired serving woman carrying a basket of folded towels gave a start, then shook her head and muttered something under her breath before offering him a brief curtsy and walking on. She made a small sidestep as though she was moving around something. Or someone. He stared at the spot and scratched behind his ear. Maybe he could only see Ogier dead. Not that he actually wanted to. It was sad enough just knowing that human dead could no longer rest. Having the same confirmed for Ogier would be enough to break his heart. Most likely they would appear only inside *stedding*, in any case. He would very much like to see a town vanish, though. Not a real town, but a town that was as dead as those spirits the humans claimed to see. You might be able to walk its streets before it melted and see what people were like before the War of the Hundred Years, or even the Trolloc Wars. So Verin said, and she seemed to know a very great deal about it. That would certainly be worth a mention in his book. It was going to be a fine book. Scratching his beard with two fingers—the thing itched!—he sighed. It would have been a fine book.

Standing there in the corridor was only putting off the inevitable. Put off clearing the brush and you always find chokevine in it, so the old saying went. Only he felt as though the chokevine was tight around him instead of a tree. Breathing hard, he followed the serving woman all the way to the wide stairs that led up to the Ogier rooms. The staircase had two sturdy bannisters, shoulder-high on the gray-haired woman and stout enough to give a decent handhold. He was often afraid just to brush against stair rails made for humans for fear he might break them. One ran down the middle, with the steps along the wood-paneled wall pitched for human feet, those on the outside for Ogier.

The woman was old as humans counted years, yet she climbed more quickly than he and was scurrying down the corridor by the time he reached the top. Doubtless she was taking the towels to his mother’s room, and to Elder Haman’s and Erith’s. Surely they would prefer to get dry before talking. He would suggest that. It would gain him time to think. His thoughts seemed as sluggish as his feet, and his feet felt like millstones.

There were six bedrooms built for Ogier along the corridor, which itself was properly scaled for them—his upstretched hands would have come a pace short of touching the ceiling beams—along with a storeroom, a bathing room with a large copper tub, and the sitting room. This was the oldest part of the house, dating back nearly five hundred years. A lifetime for a very old Ogier, but many lifetimes for humans. They lived such brief lives, except for Aes Sedai; that had to be why they flitted about like hummingbirds. But even Aes Sedai could be nearly as precipitous as the rest. That was a puzzlement.

The sitting room door was carved with a Great Tree, not Ogier work, yet finely detailed and instantly recognizable. He stopped, tugging his coat straight, combing his hair with his fingers, wishing he had time to black his boots. There was an ink stain on his cuff. No time to do anything about that, either. Cadsuane was right. His mother was not a woman to be kept waiting. Strange that Cadsuane knew of her. Perhaps knew her, by the way she had spoken. Covril, daughter of Ella daughter of Soong, was a famous Speaker, but he had not realized she was known Outside. Light, he was all but panting with anxiety.

Trying to control his breathing, he went in. Even here the hinges creaked. The servants had been aghast when he asked after some oil to put on them—that was their task; he was a guest—but they still had not gotten around to it themselves.

The high-ceilinged room was quite spacious, with dark polished wallpapers and vine-carved chairs and small vine-carved tables and wrought-iron stand-lamps of a proper size, their mirrored flames dancing above his head. Except for a shelf of books, all old enough that the leather bindings were flaking and all of which he had read before, only a small bowl of sung wood was Ogier made. A nice piece; he wished he knew who had sung it, but it was aged enough that singing to it had failed to raise so much as an echo. Yet everything had been made by someone who at least had been to a *stedding*. The pieces would have looked at home in any dwelling. Of course, the room looked nothing like a room in a *stedding*, but Lord Algarin's ancestor had made an effort to have his visitors feel comfortable.

His mother was standing in front of one of the brick fireplaces, a strong-faced woman with her vine-embroidered skirts spread to let the flames dry them. He heaved a sigh of relief at seeing she was not as wet as he had expected, although it put paid to suggesting they take the time to get dry. Their raincloaks must have developed leaks. They did that after a time, as the anseed oil wore off. Maybe her temper would not be as bad as he feared, either. White-haired Elder Haman, his flaring coat dark with damp in several large patches, was examining one of the axes from the wall, shaking his head over it. Its haft was as long as he was tall. Made during the Trolloc Wars or even before, there were a pair of those, the long axe heads inlaid with gold and silver, and a pair of ornate pointed pruning knives with long shafts, as well. Of course, pruning knives, sharp on one side and sawtoothed on the other, always had long handles, but the inlays and long red tassels indicated that these had been made for weapons, too. Not the most felicitous choices for hanging in a room meant for reading or conversation or the quiet contemplation of stillness.

But Loial's eyes swept past his mother and Elder Haman to the other fireplace, where Erith, small and almost fragile appearing, was drying her own skirts. Her mouth was straight, her nose short and well-rounded, her eyes the exact color of a silverbell's ripe seedpod. In short, she was beautiful! And her ears, sticking up through the glossy black hair that hung down her back. . . . Curving and plump, tipped with fine tufts that looked as soft as dandelion down, they were the most gorgeous ears he had ever seen. Not that he would be crude enough to say so. She smiled at him, a very mysterious smile, and his own ears quivered with embarrassment. Surely she could not know what he had been thinking. Could she? Rand said women could sometimes, but that was human women.

"So, here you are," his mother said, planting her fists on her hips. There were no smiles from her. Her brows were drawn down, her jaw set. If this was her better temper, she might as well have been drenched. “I must say, you’ve led me a merry chase, but I have you in hand now, and I do not mean to let you run—What is that on your lip? And your chin! Well, you can shave those right off again. Don’t you grimace at me, Son Loial.”

Fingering the growth on his upper lip uneasily, he tried to smooth his face—when your mother named you Son, she was in no mood to trifle with—but it was hard. He *wanted* his beard and mustaches. Some might think it pretentious, as young as he was, but just the same. . . .

“A merry chase indeed,” Elder Haman said dryly, hanging the axe back on its hooks. *He* had long white mustaches that fell past his chin and a long narrow beard that hung to his chest. True, he was well above three hundred years old, but it still seemed unfair. “A very merry chase. First we walked to Cairhien, having heard you were there, only you had gone. After a stop at Stedding Tsofu, we walked to Caemlyn, where young al’Thor informed us you were in the Two Rivers and took us there. But you were gone again. To Caemlyn, it seemed!” His eyebrows rose almost to his hairline. “I began to think we were playing ring-in-the-dell.”

“The people in Emond’s Field told us how heroic you were,” Erith said, her high voice like music. Clutching her skirts with both hands, ears fluttering with excitement, she seemed about to bounce up and down. “They told us all about you fighting Trollocs and Myrddraal, and going out among them by yourself to seal the Manetheren Waygate so no more could come.”

“I wasn’t by myself,” Loial protested, waving his hands. He thought his ears might fly from his head, they were twitching so with embarrassment. “Gaul was with me. We did it together. I’d never have reached the Waygate without Gaul.” She wrinkled her delicate nose at him, dismissing Gaul’s participation.

His mother sniffed. *Her* ears were rigid with distaste. “Foolishness. Fighting in battles. Putting yourself in danger. *Gambling*. All of it. Pure foolishness, and there will be no more of it.”

Elder Haman harrumphed, ears twitching irritably, and folded his hands behind his back. He disliked being interrupted. “So we returned to Caemlyn, to find you gone, and then to Cairhien once more, to find you gone yet again.”

“And you put yourself in danger again in Cairhien,” Loial’s mother broke in, shaking a finger at him. “Have you no sense at all?”

“The Aiel said you were very brave at Dumai’s Wells,” Erith murmured, looking at him through her long eyelashes. He swallowed hard. Her gaze made his throat feel tight. He knew he should look away, but how could he be demure when she was looking at him?

“In Cairhien your mother decided she couldn’t stay away from the Great Stump any longer, though why I cannot say, since they aren’t likely to reach any sort of decision for another year or two, so we set out to return to Stedding Shangtai in the hope we could find you later.” Elder Haman said all of that very fast, glaring at the two women as if he thought they might break in on him again. His beard and mustaches seemed to bristle.

Loial’s mother gave another sniff, sharper. “I expect to bring a decision very quickly, in a month or two, or I’d never have given over the search for Loial even temporarily. Now that I’ve found him, we can finish matters and be on our way without any more delay.” She took in Elder Haman, who was frowning, his ears slanted back, and amended her tone. He was an Elder, after all. “Forgive me, Elder Haman. I meant to say, if it pleases you, will you perform the ceremony?”

“I believe that it does please me, Covril,” he said mildly. Much too mildly. When Loial heard that tone from his teacher, with ears back, he had always known that he had put a foot very badly wrong. Elder Haman had been known to throw a piece of chalk at a pupil when he used that tone. “Since I abandoned my students, not to mention speaking to the Great Stump, to follow you on this wild chase for that very reason, I believe it does please me indeed. Erith, you are very young.”

“She’s past eighty, old enough to marry,” Loial’s mother said sharply, folding her arms across her chest. Her ears twitched with impatience. “Her mother and I reached agreement. You yourself witnessed us signing the betrothal and Loial’s dowry.”

Elder Haman’s ears tilted back a little further, and his shoulders hunched as if he was gripping his hands together very hard behind his back. His eyes never left Erith. “I know you want to marry Loial, but are you sure you are ready? Taking a husband is a grave responsibility.”

Loial wished someone would ask *him* that question, but that was not the way. His mother and Erith’s had reached their agreement, and only Erith could stop it now. If she wanted to. Did he want her to? He could not stop thinking of his book. He could not stop thinking of Erith.

She certainly looked grave. “My weaving sells well, and I am ready to buy another loom and take an apprentice. But that may not be what you mean. I am ready to tend a husband.” Suddenly, she grinned, a lovely grin that divided her face in two. “Especially one with such beautiful long eyebrows.”

Loial’s ears quivered, and so did Elder Haman’s, if not so much. Women were very free in their talk among themselves, so he had heard, but usually they tried not to embarrass men with it. Usually. His mother’s ears actually trembled with amusement!

The older man cleared his throat. “This is serious, Erith. Come now. If you are sure, take his hands.”

Without hesitation, she came to stand in front of Loial, smiling up at him as she took his hands in hers. Her small hands felt very warm. His felt numb and cold. He swallowed. It really was going to happen.

“Erith, daughter of Iva daughter of Alar,” Elder Haman said, holding one hand palm down over each of their heads, “will you take Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, as husband and vow under the Light and by the Tree to treasure, esteem and love him so long as he lives, to care for him and tend him, and to guide his feet on the path they should follow?”

“Under the Light and by the Tree, I so vow.” Erith’s voice was firm and clear, and her smile seemed to have grown wider than her face.

“Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, will you accept Erith, daughter of Iva daughter of Alar, as wife and vow under the Light and by the Tree to treasure, esteem and love her so long as she lives, to care for her and to heed her guidance?”

Loial took a deep breath. His ears trembled. He wanted to marry her. He did. Just not yet. “Under the Light and by the Tree, I so vow,” he said hoarsely.

“Then under the Light and by the Tree, I declare you wed. May the blessings of the Light and the Tree be upon you always.”

Loial looked down at his wife. His wife. She raised a hand and stroked slender fingers along his mustaches. The beginnings of mustaches, anyway.

“You are very handsome, and I think mustaches will be beautiful on you. A beard, too.”

“Nonsense,” his mother said. Surprisingly, she was dabbing at her eyes with a small lace handkerchief. She was never emotional. “He’s much too young for that sort of thing.”

For a moment, he thought Erith's ears began to slant back. That had to be his imagination. He had had a number of long talks with her—she was a wonderful conversationalist; though come to think of it, for the most part she listened, but what little she did say was always very cogent—and he was sure she possessed no sort of temper at all. He had no time to think on it, in any event. Resting her hands on his arms, she rose on tiptoes, and he bent to rub his nose against hers. In truth, they nosed for longer than they should have with Elder Haman and his mother present, but others faded from his thoughts as he inhaled his wife's scent and she his. And the *feel* of her nose on his! Pure bliss! He cupped the back of her head and barely had the presence of mind not to finger her ear. She tugged the tuft on one of his! After a while, a very long while it seemed, voices intruded.

"It is still raining, Covril. You cannot seriously be suggesting we set out again when we have a sound roof over our heads and proper beds to sleep in for a change. No, I say. No! I will not sleep on the ground tonight, or in a barn, or worst of all, in a house where my feet and knees hang over the end of the largest bed available. There have been times I've seriously thought of refusing hospitality, and to the Pit with rudeness."

"If you insist," his mother said grudgingly, "but I want an early start come morning. I refuse to waste an hour more than I must. The Book of Translation *must* be opened as soon as possible."

Loial jerked erect, aghast. "*That's* what the Great Stump is discussing? They can't do that, not now!"

"We must leave this world eventually, so we can come to it when the Wheel turns," his mother said, striding to the nearest fireplace to spread her skirts again. "That is written. Now is exactly the right time, and the sooner the better."

"Is that what you think, Elder Haman?" Loial asked worriedly.

"No, my boy, not at all. Before we left, I gave a speech of three hours that I think swayed a few minds in the right direction." Elder Haman picked up a tall yellow pitcher and filled a blue cup, but rather than drink, he frowned into the tea. "Your mother has swayed more, I fear. She may even get her decision in months, as she says."

Erith filled a cup for his mother, then two more, bringing one to him. His ears quivered with embarrassment yet again. He should have done that. He had a great deal to learn about being a husband, but he knew that much.

"I wish *I* could address the Stump," he said bitterly.

"You sound eager, Husband." Husband. That meant Erith was very serious. It was almost as bad as being called Son Loial. "What would you say to the Stump?"

"I won't have him embarrassed, Erith," his mother said before he could open his mouth. "Loial writes well, and Elder Haman says he may have the makings of a scholar about him, but he gets tongue-tied before even a hundred. Besides, he is only a boy."

Elder *Haman* had said that? Loial wondered when his ears would stop quivering.

"Any married man may address the Stump," Erith said firmly. There was no doubt this time. Her ears definitely slanted back. "Will you allow me to tend my own husband, Mother Covril?" His mother's mouth moved, but no sound came out, and her eyebrows were halfway up her forehead. He did not think he had ever seen her so taken aback, though she must have expected this. A wife always took precedence with her husband over his mother. "Well, Husband, what would you say?"

He was not eager, he was desperate. He took a long swallow of the spice-scented tea, but his mouth felt just as dry afterward. His mother was right; the more people were listening, the more he tended to forget what he intended to say and go off on tangents. In truth, he had to admit that sometimes he rambled a bit with only a few listeners. Just a bit. Now and then. He knew the forms—a child of fifty knew the forms—yet he could not make the words come. The few listening to him now were not just any few. His mother was a famous Speaker, Elder Haman a noted one, not to mention being an Elder. And there was Erith. A man wanted to stand well in his wife's eyes.

Turning his back on them, he strode to the nearest window and stood rolling the teacup between his palms. The window was sized decently, though the panes set in the carved casement were no larger than those in the rooms below. The rain had dwindled to a drizzle falling from a gray sky, and despite bubbles in the glass he could make out the trees beyond the fields, pine and sourgum and the occasional oak, all full of new growth. Algarin's people tended their forest well, clearing out the deadfall to rob wildfire of its tinder. Fire had to be used carefully.

The words came more easily now that he could not see the others watching him. Should he begin with the Longing? Could they dare leave if they would begin dying in a handful of years? No, that question would have been addressed first thing and suitable answers found, else the Stump would have finished inside a year. Light, if he did address the Stump. . . . For a moment, he saw the crowds standing all around him, hundreds and hundreds of men and women waiting to hear his words, perhaps several thousand. His tongue tried to cling to the roof of his mouth. He blinked, and there was only the bubbled glass before him, and the trees. He had to do it. He was not particularly brave, whatever Erith thought, but he had learned about bravery watching humans, watching them hang on no matter how strong the winds grew, fight when they had no hope, fight and win because they fought with desperate courage. Suddenly, he knew what to say.

“In the War of the Shadow, we did not huddle in our *stedding*, hoping no Trollocs or Myrddraal would be driven to enter. We did not open the Book of Translation and flee. We marched alongside the humans and fought the Shadow. In the Trolloc Wars, we neither hid in the *stedding* nor opened the Book of Translation. We marched with the humans and fought the Shadow. In the darkest years, when hope seemed gone, we fought the Shadow.”

“And by the War of the Hundred Years we had learned not to get ourselves tangled in human affairs,” his mother put in. That was allowed. Speaking could turn into a debate unless the pure beauty of your words held the listeners. She had once spoken from sunrise to sunset in favor of a very unpopular position without a single interruption, and the next day, no one had risen to Speak against her. He could not form beautiful sentences. He could only say what he believed. He did not turn from the window.

“The War of the Hundred Years was a human affair, and none of ours. The Shadow *is* our affair. When it is the Shadow that must be fought, our axes have always grown long handles. Perhaps in a year, or five, or ten, we will open the Book of Translation, but if we do it now, we cannot run away with any real hope of safety. Tarmon Gai’don is coming, and on that hangs the fate not only of this world, but of any world we might flee to. When fire threatens the trees, we do not run away and hope that the flames will not follow us. We fight. Now the Shadow is coming like wildfire, and we dare not run from it.” Something was moving among the trees, all along the line he could see. A herd of cattle? A very big herd, if so.

“That isn’t bad,” his mother said. “Much too plainspoken to carry any weight at a *stedding* Stump much less the Great Stump, of course, but not bad. Go on.”

“Trollocs,” he breathed. That was what it was, thousands of Trollocs in black, spiked mail spilling out of the trees at a run with scythe-curved swords raised, shaking their spiked spears, some carrying torches. Trollocs as far as he could see to left and right. Not thousands. Tens of thousands.

Erith pushed in beside him at the window and gasped. “So many! Are we going to die, Loial?” She did not sound afraid. She sounded . . . excited!

“Not if I can warn Rand and the others.” He was already starting for the door. Only Aes Sedai and Asha’man could save them now.

“Here, my boy, I think we may need these.”

He turned just in time to catch the long-handled axe that Elder Haman tossed him. The other man’s ears were back all the way, laid flat against his skull. Loial realized his own were, too.

“Here, Erith,” his mother said calmly, lifting down one of the pruning knives. “If they get inside, we will try to hold them at the stairs.”

“You are my hero, Husband,” Erith said as she took the knife’s shaft in hand, “but if you get yourself killed, I will be very angry with you.” She sounded as if she meant it.

And then he and Elder Haman were running down the corridor together, pounding down the stairs, bellowing at the tops of their lungs a warning, and a battle cry that had not been heard in over two thousand years. “Trollocs coming! Up axes and clear the field! Trollocs coming!”

“. . . so I will take care of Tear, Logain, while you—” Abruptly Rand wrinkled his nose. It was not that he actually smelled a rotting midden heap suddenly, but he felt as if he did, and the feeling was getting stronger.

“Shadowspawn,” Cadsuane said quietly, putting down her embroidery and rising. His skin tingled as she embraced the Source. Or maybe it was Alivia, walking briskly toward the windows after the Green sister. Min stood, drawing a pair of throwing knives from her coatsleeves.

At the same instant, through the thick walls, he faintly heard Ogier shouting. There was no mistaking those deep, drumlike voices. “Trollocs coming! Up axes and clear the field!”

With an oath, he leaped to his feet and ran to a window. Trollocs in the thousands came running through the light rain across the newly planted fields, Trollocs as tall as Ogier and taller, Trollocs with rams’ horns and goats’ horns, wolves’ snouts, boars’ snouts, Trollocs with eagles’ beaks and crests of feathers, muddy earth splashing beneath boots and hooves and paws. Silent as death they ran. Black-clad Myrddraal galloped behind them, cloaks hanging as if they were standing still. He could see thirty or forty. How many more on other sides of the house?

Others had heard the Ogier's cries, or maybe just looked out a window. Lightning began to fall among the charging Trollocs, silvery bolts that struck with a roar and hurled huge bodies in every direction. In other places, the ground erupted in flames, fountaining dirt and parts of Trollocs, heads, arms, legs wheeling through the air. Balls of fire struck them and exploded, each killing dozens. But on they ran, as fast as horses if not faster. Rand could not see the weaves that drew some of those lightning bolts. Now that they were discovered, the Trollocs began to shout, a wordless roar of rage. In the thatch-roofed outbuildings, large sturdy barns and stables, some of Bashere's Saldaeans stuck their heads out and quickly pulled them back again, drawing the doors shut behind them.

"You told your Aes Sedai they could channel to defend themselves?" he said calmly.

"Do I look fool enough not to?" Logain snarled. At another window, he already held *saidin*, nearly as much as Rand could draw. He was weaving as fast as he could. "Do you intend to help or just watch, my Lord Dragon?" There was entirely too much sarcasm in that, but now was not the time to bring it up.

Drawing a deep breath, Rand gripped the casement on either side of the window against the dizziness that would come—the Dragons' golden-maned heads on the backs of his hands seemed to writhe—and reached out to seize the Power. His head spun as *saidin* flooded into him, icy flames and crumbling mountains, a chaos trying to pull him under. But blessedly clean. He still felt the wonder of that. His head spun and his stomach wanted to empty itself, the odd illness that should have gone with the taint, yet that was not why he clung to the casement even harder. The One Power filled him—but in that moment of dizziness, Lews Therin had seized it away from him. Numb with horror, he stared at the Trollocs and Myrddraal racing toward the outbuildings. With the Power in him, he could make out the pins fastened to massive mailed shoulders. The silver whirlwind of the Ahf'frait band and the blood-red trident of the Ko'bal. The forked lightning of the Ghraem'lan and the hooked axe of the Al'ghol. The iron fist of the Dhai'mon and the red, bloodstained fist of the Kno'mon. And there were skulls. The horned skull of the Dha'vol and the piled human skulls of the Ghar'ghael and the skull cloven by a scythe-curved sword of the Dhjin'nen and the dagger-pierced skull of the Bhan'sheen. Trollocs liked skulls, if they could be said to like anything. It seemed the twelve principal bands might all be involved, and some of the lesser. He saw pins he did not recognize. What seemed a staring eye, a dagger-pierced hand, a man-shape wrapped in flames. They neared the outbuildings, where swords were beginning to thrust through the thatch as the Saldaeans tried to cut ways onto the roofs. Thatch was tough. They would need to work desperately hard. Odd, the thoughts that came when a madman who wanted to die might well kill you in the next heartbeat.

Flows of Air pushed the casement in front of him out in a shower of shattered glass and fragmented wood. *My hands*, Lews Therin panted. *Why can't I move my hands? I need to raise my hands!* Earth, Air and Fire went into a weave Rand did not know, six of them at once. Except that as soon as he saw the spinning, he did know. Blossom of Fire. Six vertical red shafts appeared among the Trollocs, ten feet tall and thinner than Rand's forearm. The nearest Trollocs would be hearing their shrill whine, but unless memories had been passed down from the War of the Shadow, they would not realize they were hearing death. Lews Therin spun the last thread of Air, and fire blossomed. With a roar that shook the manor house, each red shaft expanded in a heartbeat to a disc of flame thirty feet across. Horned heads and snouted heads flew into the air, and pinwheeling arms, booted legs and legs that ended in paws or hooves. Trollocs a hundred paces and more away from the explosions went down, and only some got up again. Even as he was spinning those webs, Lews Therin spun six others, Spirit touched with Fire, the weave for a gateway, but then he added touches of Earth, so, and so. The familiar silvery-blue vertical streaks appeared, spaced out not far from the manor house, ground Rand knew well, rotating into—not openings, but the misty back of a gateway, four paces by four. Rather than remaining open, they rotated shut again, opening and shutting continuously. And rather than remaining fixed, they sped toward the Trollocs. Gateways and yet not. Deathgates. As soon as the Deathgates began to move, Lews Therin knotted the webs, a loose knotting that would hold only for minutes before allowing the whole weave to dissipate, and began spinning again. More Deathgates, more Blossoms of Fire, rattling the walls of the house, blowing Trollocs apart, flinging them down. The first of the speeding Deathgates struck the Trollocs and carved through them. It was not just the slicing edge of the constantly opening and closing gateways. Where a

Deathgate passed, there simply were no Trollocs remaining. *My hands!* the madman howled. *My hands!*

Slowly Rand raised his hands, stuck them through the opening. Immediately Lews Therin wove Fire and Earth in intricate combination, and red filaments flashed from Rand's fingertips, ten from each, fanning out. Arrows of Fire, this. He knew. As soon as those vanished, more appeared, so fast that they seemed to flicker rather than actually go away. Trollocs struck by the filaments jerked as flesh and blood, heated in a flash beyond boiling, erupted, jerked and fell, holes blown entirely through their thick bodies. Often, two or three behind fell victim as well before a filament died. He spread his fingers and moved his hands slowly from side to side, spreading death across the whole line. Blossoms of Fire appeared that were not his weaving, and Deathgates, slightly smaller than Lews Therin's, and Arrows of Fire that must have been Logain's. The other Asha'man were paying attention, but few would be where they could see those last two webs spun.

Trollocs fell by the hundreds, the thousands, riven by lightning bolts and balls of fire, Blossoms of Fire and Deathgates and Arrows of Fire, the earth itself exploding beneath their feet, yet on they raced, roaring and waving their weapons, Myrddraal riding close behind, black-bladed swords in hand. As they reached the outbuildings, some of the Trollocs surrounded them, pounding on the doors with their fists, prying at the boards of the walls with their swords and spears, tossing flaming torches onto the thatched roofs. Saldaeans up there, working their horsebows as fast as they could, kicked the torches back down, but some hung up on the edges of the roof, and flames began catching even on damp thatch.

The fires, Rand thought at Lews Therin. *The Saldaeans will burn! Do something!*

Lews Therin made no reply, only wove death as fast as he could and hurled it at the Trollocs, Deathgates and Arrows of Fire. A Myrddraal, riddled by half a dozen red filaments, was flung from its saddle, then another. A third lost its head to an Arrow of Fire in an explosion of boiled blood and flesh, but that one rode on, waving its sword, as if it did not know it was dead. Rand was seeking them out. If the Myrddraal were all killed, the Trollocs might well turn and run.

Deathgates and Arrows of Fire only, Lews Therin spun now. The mass of Trollocs was too close to the manor house for Blossoms of Fire. Some of the Asha'man apparently did not realize that right away. The room shook to great booms, the whole manor house shook, as if struck by huge sledgehammers, shook as though about to shake apart, and then there were no more explosions, except where a fireball erupted or the ground itself exploded to throw Trollocs like broken toys. The sky seemed to rain lightning. Silver-blue bolts struck continuously so close to the house that the hair on Rand's arms and chest tried to lift, the hair on his head.

Some of the Trollocs succeeded in forcing open the doors to one of the barns and began flooding inside. He shifted his hands, cutting down those still outside with flickering red filaments that blew holes in them. Some had managed to get inside, but those the Saldaeans would have to deal with themselves. On another barn and a stable, flames were beginning to ripple up the thatch, men coughing from the acrid smoke as they shot their bows.

Listen to me, Lews Therin. The fire. You must do something!

Lews Therin said nothing, just spun his webs to kill Trollocs and Myrddraal.

"Logain," Rand shouted. "The fires! Put them out!"

The other man did not answer either, but Rand saw the weaves that pulled the heat from the flames, killing them. They just vanished, leaving behind cold blackened thatch where not even tendrils of smoke rose. Death walked among the Trollocs, but they were so close that even the explosions of fireballs rattled the house, now.

Suddenly there was a Myrddraal afoot beside the window, pale eyeless face as calm as an Aes Sedai's, black sword already stabbing toward him. Two thrown Aiel spears took it in the chest, and a throwing knife blossomed in its throat, but it only staggered before resuming the thrust. Rand bunched his fingers together, and just before the blade reached him, a hundred Arrows of Fire ripped through the Myrddraal, flinging it back twenty paces to lie riddled and leaking black blood onto the ground. Myrddraal seldom died right away, but this one never twitched.

Hurriedly, Rand searched for more targets, but he realized that Lews Therin had stopped channeling. He could still feel the goose bumps that told him Cadsuane and Alivia held the Power, still feel *saidin* in Logain, but the other man was weaving no more webs either. Outside, the ground lay carpeted with bodies and parts of bodies from the fields almost to the manor house walls. Within paces of them. A few horses belonging to Myrddraal still stood, one holding up a foreleg as if it were broken. A headless

Myrddraal staggered about, flailing wildly with its sword, and here and there a Trolloc jerked or tried to lift itself and failed, but nothing else moved.

It's done, he thought. *It's done, Lews Therin. You can release* saidin *now.* Harilin and Enaila were standing on the table, veiled and spears in hand. Min stood beside them, her face grim, a throwing knife in either hand. The bond was full of fear, and not for herself, he suspected. They had saved his life, but he had to save it himself, now.

"A close run thing," Logain muttered. "If this had happened before I arrived. . . . A close-run thing." He gave himself a shake and released the Source, turning away from his glassless window. "Did you intend keeping these new weaves for your favorites, like Taim? Those gateways. Where did we send those Trollocs? I just copied your weave exactly."

"It doesn't matter where they went," Rand said absently. His attention was focused on Lews Therin. The madman, the bloody voice in his head, drew a little deeper on the Power. *Let go, man.* "Shadowspawn can't survive passing through a gateway."

I want to die, Lews Therin said. *I want to join Ilyena.*

If you really wanted to die, why did you kill Trollocs? Rand thought. *Why kill that Myrddraal?* "People will find groups of dead Trollocs and maybe Myrddraal without a mark on them," he said aloud.

I seem to remember dying, Lews Therin murmured. *I remember how I did it.* He drew deeper still, and small pains grew in Rand's temples.

"Not too many in any one place, though. The destination shifts every time a Deathgate opens." Rand rubbed at his temples. That pain was a warning. He was close to the amount of *saidin* he could hold without dying or being burnt out. *You can't die yet*, he told Lews Therin. *We have to reach Tarmon Gai'don or the* world *dies.*

"A Deathgate," Logain said, his voice tinged with distaste. "Why are you still holding the Power?" he asked suddenly. "And so much. If you're trying to show me that you're stronger than I am, I already know it. I saw how large your . . . your *Deathgates* were compared to mine. And I'd say you're holding every drop of *saidin* that you can safely."

That certainly caught everyone's attention. Min tucked her knives away and leapt down from the table, the bond suddenly so full of fear it seemed to throb with it. Harilin and Enaila exchanged worried glances, then went back to staring out the windows. They did not trust Trollocs to be dead until the corpses were three days buried. Alivia took a step toward him, frowning, but he shook his head slightly, and she turned back to her window, though her frown remained.

Cadsuane glided down the room, her smooth face sternly composed. “What does he feel?” she demanded of Min. “Don’t toy with me, girl. You know the cost of that. I know that he bonded you, and you know I know. Is he afraid?”

“He’s never afraid,” Min said. “Except for me or. . . .” She set her jaw stubbornly and folded her arms beneath her breasts, fixing Cadsuane with a glare that dared the Green sister to do her worst. By the tangled mix of emotions ranging from fear to shame that she tried to keep out of the bond and failed, she had some idea of what Cadsuane’s worst could be.

“I’m standing under your nose,” Rand said. “If you want to know how I feel, ask me.” *Lews Therin?* he thought. There was no answer, and the *saidin* filling him did not slacken. His temples began to throb.

“Well?” Cadsuane said impatiently.

“I feel right as well water.” *Lews Therin?* “But I have a rule for you, Cadsuane. Don’t threaten Min again. In fact, leave her alone altogether.”

“Well, well. The boy shows some teeth.” Golden birds and fish, stars and moons, swayed as she shook her head. “Just don’t show too many. And you might ask the young woman whether she wants your protection.” Strangely, Min had shifted her frown to him, and the bond was threaded with irritation. Light, it was bad enough that she did not like him worrying about her. Now she seemed to want to take on Cadsuane single-handed, something he would not be eager to do himself.

We can die at Tarmon Gai’don, Lews Therin said, and suddenly, the Power drained out of him.

“He released,” Logain said, as if he were suddenly on Cadsuane’s side.

“I know,” she told him. He whipped his head around in surprise.

“Min can deal with you in your own way if she wishes,” Rand said starting for the door. “But don’t threaten her.” *Yes*, he thought. *We can die at Tarmon Gai’don.*

* * *

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CHAPTER 20

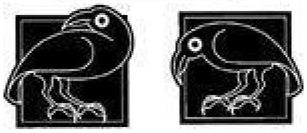

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The Golden Crane

The wind had died away as the rain diminished, but gray clouds still hid the sun. The fine drizzle was enough to dampen Rand's hair, however, and begin soaking into his gold-embroidered black coat as he walked through the dead Trollocs. Logain had spun a shield of Air so that raindrops bounced from it or apparently slid down nothing to cascade around him, but Rand refused to risk Lews Therin seizing *saidin* again. The man had said he could wait until the Last Battle to die, but how far could you trust a madman on anything?

Madman? Lews Therin whispered. *Am I any madder than you?* He cackled with wild laughter.

Now and then Nandera looked over her shoulder at Rand. A tall, sinewy woman, her graying hair hidden beneath her brown *shoufa*, she led the Maidens, those on this side of the Dragonwall, at least, but she had chosen to lead his bodyguard of Maidens personally. Her green eyes, all he could see of her sun-dark face above her black veil, carried little expression, yet he was sure she was worried over him not protecting himself from the rain. Maidens noticed what seemed out of the ordinary. He hoped she would keep quiet.

You have to trust me, Lews Therin said. *Trust me. Oh, Light, I'm pleading with a voice in my head! I* must *be mad.*

Nandera and the rest of the fifty veiled Maidens made a large ring around Rand, almost shoulder-to-shoulder, prodding their spears into every Trolloc and Myrddraal they passed, casually stepping over huge severed arms and legs, severed heads bearing horns or tusks or sharp teeth. Occasionally a Trolloc groaned or feebly tried to crawl away—or to lunge at them, snarling—but not for long. War with Trollocs was like war with rabid dogs. You killed them, or they killed you. There was no parley, no surrender, no middle ground.

Rain had kept the vultures away so far, yet crows and ravens flapped everywhere, black feathers glistening wetly, and if any were the Dark One's eyes, it did not stop them alighting to pluck out Trollocs' eyes or see whether they could wrench loose some other gobbet. Enough of the Trollocs had been torn apart that the birds had rich feasting. None went near any dead Myrddraal, though, and they shunned Trollocs too near a Myrddraal. That indicated nothing beyond caution. Very likely the

Myrddraal smelled wrong to the birds. A Myrddraal's blood would etch steel if left on it very long. To ravens and crows, it must have smelled like poison.

The surviving Saldaeans shot the birds with arrows or skewered them on their sinuously curved swords or simply bludgeoned them with shovels or hoes or rakes, anything that could make a handy club—in the Borderlands, leaving a crow or raven alive was unthinkable; there, they were all too often the Dark One's eyes—yet there were too many. Hundreds of black-feathered shapes lay crumpled among the Trollocs, and for every corpse there seemed to be hundreds more squabbling loudly over the softer bits, including pieces of their dead fellows. The Asha'man and Aes Sedai had long since given up trying to kill them all.

"I don't like my men tiring themselves this way," Logain said. *His* men. "Or the sisters, for that matter. Gabrelle and Toveine will be near exhaustion by nightfall." He had bonded the two Aes Sedai, so he should know. "What if there's another attack?"

All around the manor house and outbuildings brief fires flared, so hot that people shielded their eyes against them, as Aes Sedai and Asha'man incinerated Trolloc and Myrddraal dead where they lay. There were too many to afford the labor of gathering them into heaps. With fewer than twenty Aes Sedai, fewer than a dozen Asha'man, and maybe a hundred thousand Trollocs, it was going to be a long job. Very likely, before it was done the stench of decay would be added to the already foul odors in the air, the fetid, coppery smell of Shadowspawn blood, the stink of whatever had been in the Trollocs' intestines when they were ripped open. Best not to think too closely on that. There might not be a farmer or villager left alive between the manor house and the Spine of the World. That had to be where the Trollocs had come from, the Waygate outside Stedding Shangtai. At least Loial's home itself was safe. Neither Trollocs nor Myrddraal would enter a *stedding* unless driven, and it required considerable driving.

"Would you rather let them rot where they are?" Cadsuane inquired, sounding as if she herself had no preference in the matter. She held her green skirts up so the silk did not trail in the blood-soaked mud or the offal that littered the ground, yet she stepped over legs and around heads as casually as did the Maidens. She also had woven a parasol against the rain, as had Alivia, although not until she saw the Green do so. Rand had tried to make the sisters sworn to him teach the Seanchan woman more about the

Power, but to their minds, that had nothing to do with their oaths of fealty. She was safe to herself and seemed safe to others, and they were content to leave matters as they were. Nynaeve had refused, too, because of Min's viewing. Cadsuane had coolly informed him that she was not in the business of instructing wilders.

"This truly would be a charnel house then," Min said. Her walk had a fetching sway to it, though she was plainly trying not to think of what lay underfoot while avoiding planting a heeled blue boot on any of it at the same time, and that made her stumble now and again. She was getting wet, too, her ringlets beginning to cling to her head, though the bond carried no hint of vexation. Only anger, and that seemed directed at Logain from the sharp stare she was giving him. "Where would the servants go, and the people who work the fields and stables and barns? How would they live?"

"There won't be another attack," Rand said. "Not until whoever sent this one learns it failed, and maybe not then. This is all they sent. The Myrddraal wouldn't have attacked piecemeal." Logain grunted, but he could not argue with that.

Rand looked back toward the manor house. In some places, dead Trollocs lay right at the foundations. None had made it inside, but. . . . *Logain was right*, he thought, surveying the carnage. It *had* been a close-run thing. Minus the Asha'man and Aes Sedai Logain had brought, the end might well have been different. A very close-run thing. And if there *was* another attack, later . . . ? Plainly someone knew Ishamael's trick. Or that blue-eyed man in his head really could locate him. Another attack would be larger. That, or come from some unexpected direction. Perhaps he should let Logain bring a few more Asha'man.

You should have killed them, Lews Therin wept. *Too late, now. Too late.*

The Source is clean now, fool, Rand thought.

Yes, Lews Therin replied. *But are they? Am I?*

Rand had wondered that about himself. Half of the double wound in his side had come from Ishamael, the other half from Padan Fain's dagger that carried the taint of Shadar Logoth. They often throbbed, and when they did, they seemed alive.

The circle of Maidens parted slightly to let through a white-haired serving man with a long sharp nose who looked even frailer than Ethin. He was trying to shelter beneath a two-tiered Sea Folk parasol missing half its fringe, of all things, but the aged blue silk had several ragged holes worn in it, so small rivulets fell on his yellow coat and one on his head. His thinning hair clung to his skull and dripped. He seemed wetter than if he had gone without. Doubtless one of Algarin's forebears had obtained the thing somehow as a memento, but the obtaining must have been a story in itself. Rand doubted the Sea Folk gave up a clan Wavemistress's parasol lightly.

"My Lord Dragon," the old man said with a bow that spilled more water down his back, "Verin Sedai instructed me to give this to you straightaway." From beneath his coat, he produced a paper, folded and sealed.

Rand hastily stuffed it into a pocket of his own coat against the rain. Ink ran easily. "Thank you, but it could have waited till I returned to the house. Best you get back inside before you're soaked through completely."

"She *did* say straightaway, my Lord Dragon." The fellow sounded offended. "She is Aes Sedai."

At Rand's nod, he bowed again and started slowly back toward the manor house, his back stiff with pride, the parasol showering him with streams of water. She was Aes Sedai. Everyone hopped for Aes Sedai, even in Tear, where they were not much liked. What did Verin have to say that she needed to put in a letter? Thumbing the seal, Rand walked on.

His destination was one of the barns, its thatched roof partially blackened. This was the barn the Trollocs had gotten into. A burly fellow in a rough brown coat and muddy boots, leaning against a jamb in the open doors, straightened and for some reason hastily looked inside over his shoulder as Rand approached, the Maidens spreading out to surround the barn.

He stopped dead in the doorway, Min and the others halting beside him. Logain growled an oath. A pair of lanterns hanging from uprights that supported the loft gave a dim light, enough to see that every single surface was thick with crawling flies, even the straw-covered dirt floor. As many more buzzed around in the air, it seemed.

"Where did they come from?" Rand asked. Algarin might not be wealthy, yet his barns and stables were kept as clean as such places could be. The burly man gave a guilty start. He was younger than most of the servants in the house, but his head was bald halfway back, and creases bracketed his wide mouth, fanned out from his eyes.

“Don’t know, my Lord,” he muttered, knuckling his forehead with a grimy hand. He focused on Rand so hard that it was plain he did not want to look into the barn. “I stepped to the door for a breath of fresh, and when I turned around, they was all over everything. I thought. . . . I thought maybe they’s *dead* flies.”

Rand shook his head in disgust. These flies were all too alive. Not every Saldaean defending this barn had died, but all of the Saldaean dead had been gathered here. Saldaeans disliked burials in rain. None of them could say why, but you just did not bury people while it was raining. Nineteen men lay in a neat row on the floor, as neat as it could be when some were missing limbs or had their heads split open. But they had been laid out carefully by their friends and companions, their faces washed, their eyes closed. They were why he had come there. Not to say good-bye or anything sentimental; he had not known any of these men more than to recognize a face here and there. He had come to remind himself that even what seemed a complete victory had its cost in blood. Still, they deserved better than to be crawling with flies.

I *need no reminders*, Lews Therin growled.

I’m not you, Rand thought. *I have to harden myself.* “Logain, get rid of these bloody things!” he said aloud.

You’re harder than I ever was, Lews Therin said. Suddenly he giggled. *If you’re not me, then who are you?*

“Now I’m a flaming fly-whisk?” Logain muttered.

Rand rounded on him angrily, but Alivia spoke in that slurred drawl before he could get a word out.

“Let me try, my Lord.” She asked, in a manner of speaking, but like an Aes Sedai, she did not await permission. His skin tingled with goose bumps as she embraced *saidar* and channeled.

Flies always took shelter from even the lightest rain because one raindrop was enough to put a fly on the ground, easy prey until its wings dried off, yet suddenly the doorway was billowing with buzzing flies as if the rain were far preferable to the barn. The air seemed solid with them. Rand batted flies away from his face, and Min covered her face with her hands, the bond heavy with distaste, but they were interested only in flight. In moments, they were all gone. The balding man, staring at Alivia with his mouth hanging open, suddenly coughed and spat out two flies onto his hand. Cadsuane gave him a look that snapped his mouth shut and sent his rough knuckle flying to his forehead. Just a look, yet she was who she was.

"So you watch," she said to Alivia. Her dark eyes were fixed on the Seanchan woman's face, but Alivia did not start or stammer. She was much less impressed by Aes Sedai than most people.

"And remember what I see. I must learn somehow if I am to help the Lord Dragon. I have learned more than you are aware of." Min made a sound in her throat, very nearly a growl, and the bond swelled with anger, but the yellow-haired woman ignored her. "You are not angry with me?" she asked Rand, her voice anxious.

"I'm not angry. Learn as much as you can. You're doing very well."

She blushed and dropped her eyes like a girl startled by an unexpected compliment. Fine lines decorated the corners of her eyes, but sometimes it was hard to remember that she was a hundred years older than any living Aes Sedai, rather than half a dozen years younger than himself. He *had* to find someone to teach her more.

"Rand al'Thor," Min said angrily, folding her arms beneath her breasts, "you are *not* going to let that woman—"

"Your viewings are never wrong," he broke in. "What you see always happens. You've tried to change things, and it never worked. You told me so yourself, Min. What makes you think this time can be different?"

"Because it *has* to be different," she told him fiercely. She leaned toward him as though ready to launch herself at him. "Because I *want* it to be different. Because it *will* be different. Anyway, I don't know about everything I've seen. People move on. I was wrong about Moiraine. I saw all sorts of things in her future, and she's dead. Maybe some of the other things I saw never came true either."

It must not be different this time, Lews Therin panted. *You promised!*

A faint scowl appeared on Logain's face, and he shook his head slightly. He could not like hearing Min question her ability. Rand almost regretted telling him about her viewing of him, though it had seemed harmless encouragement at the time. The man had actually asked Aes Sedai to confirm Min's ability, though he had been wise enough to try to keep his doubting from Rand.

"I cannot see what makes this young woman so vehement for you, boy," Cadsuane mused. She pursed her lips in thought, then shook her head, ornaments swaying. “Oh, you’re pretty enough, I suppose, but I just cannot see it.”

To avoid another argument with Min—she did not call them that; she called them “talking,” but he knew the difference—Rand took out Verin’s letter and broke the blob of yellow sealing wax impressed with the head of a Great Serpent ring. The Brown sister’s spidery hand covered most of the page, a few letters blotted where raindrops had soaked the paper. He walked closer to the nearest lantern. It gave off a faint stink of spoiled oil.

> *As I said, I have done what I can do here. I believe that I can fulfill my oath to you better elsewhere, so I have taken Tomas and gone to be about it. There are many ways to serve you, after all, and many needs. I am convinced that you can trust Cadsuane, and you certainly should heed her advice, but be wary of other sisters, including those who have sworn fealty to you. Such an oath means nothing to a Black sister, and even those who walk in the Light may interpret it in ways you would disapprove of. You already know that few see that oath as invoking absolute obedience in all things. Some may find other holes. So whether or not you follow Cadsuane’s advice, and I repeat that you should, follow mine. Be very wary.*

It was signed simply, “Verin.”

He grunted sourly. *Few* thought the oath meant absolute obedience? It was more like none. They obeyed, usually, yet the letter was not always the spirit. Take Verin herself. She warned him against the others doing things he might disapprove of, but she had not said where she was going or what she intended to do there. Was she afraid he might not approve? Maybe it was just Aes Sedai concealment. Sisters kept secrets as naturally as they breathed.

When he held out the letter to Cadsuane, her left eyebrow twitched slightly. She must have been truly startled to show so much, but she took the letter and held it where the lantern’s light illuminated it.

“A woman of many masks,” she said finally, handing the page back. “But she gives good advice here.”

What did she mean about masks? He was about to ask her when Loial and Elder Haman suddenly appeared in the doorway, each carrying a long-handled axe, with an ornately decorated head, on his shoulder. The white-haired Ogier's tufted ears were laid back, his face grim, and Loial's ears were flickering. With excitement, Rand guessed. It could be difficult to tell.

"I trust we are not interrupting?" Elder Haman said, his ears rising as he looked sadly at the line of bodies.

"You are not," Rand told him, sticking the letter back in his pocket. "I wish I could come to your wedding, Loial, but—"

"Oh, that's done, Rand," Loial said. He *must* be excited; it was unlike him to interrupt. "My mother insisted. There won't even be time for much of a wedding feast, maybe none, what with the Stump and me having to—" The older Ogier laid a hand on his arm. "What?" Loial said, looking at him. "Oh. Yes. Of course. Well." He scrubbed under his broad nose with a finger the size of a fat sausage.

Something he was not supposed to be told? Even Ogier had secrets, it seemed. Rand fingered the letter in his pocket. But then, so did everyone else.

"I promise you this, Rand," Loial said. "Whatever happens, I will be there with you at Tarmon Gai'don. Whatever happens."

"My boy," Elder Haman murmured, "I don't think you should. . . ." He trailed off, shaking his head and rumbling under his breath, like a distant earthquake.

Rand crossed the straw in three strides and offered his right hand. Smiling widely, and with an Ogier that meant very wide, Loial took it in a hand that enveloped his. This close, Rand had to crane his neck to look up at his friend's face. "Thank you, Loial. I can't tell you how much hearing that means to me. But I'll need you before then."

"You . . . need me?"

"Loial, I've sealed the Waygates I know, in Caemlyn and Cairhien, Illian and Tear, and I put a very nasty trap on the one that was cut open near Fal Dara, but I couldn't find the one near Far Madding. Even when I know there's a Waygate actually in a city, I can't find it by myself, and then there are all those cities that don't exist anymore. I need you to find the rest for me, Loial, or Trollocs will be able to flood into every country at once, and no one will know they're coming until they're in the heart of Andor or Cairhien."

Loial's smile vanished. His ears trembled and his eyebrows drew down till the ends lay on his cheeks. "I can't, Rand," he said mournfully. "I must leave first thing tomorrow morning, and I don't know when I'll be able to come Outside again."

"I know you've been out of the *stedding* a long time, Loial." Rand tried to make his voice gentle, but it came out hard. Gentleness seemed a fading memory. "I'll speak to your mother. I'll convince her to let you leave after you've had a little rest."

"He needs more than a little rest." Elder Haman planted the butt of his axe haft on the floor, gripping the axe with both hands, and directed a stern look at Rand. Ogier were peaceful folk, yet he looked anything but. "He has been Outside more than five years, far too long. He needs weeks of rest in a *stedding* at the least. Months would be better."

"My mother doesn't make those decisions anymore, Rand. Though truth to tell, I think she's still surprised to realize it. Erith does. My wife." His booming voice put so much pride into that word that he seemed ready to burst with it. His chest certainly swelled, and his smile split his face in two.

"And I haven't even congratulated you," Rand said, clapping him on the shoulder. His attempt at heartiness sounded false in his own ears, but it was the best he could manage. "If you need months, then months you shall have. But I still need an Ogier to find those Waygates. In the morning, I'll take you all to Stedding Shangtai myself. Maybe I can convince someone there to do the job." Elder Haman shifted his frown to his hands on the axe haft and began muttering again, too softly to make out words, like a bumblebee the size of a huge mastiff buzzing in an immense jar in the next room. He seemed to be arguing with himself.

"That might take time," Loial said doubtfully. "You know we don't like to make hasty decisions. I'm not certain they will even let a human into the *stedding*, because of the Stump. Rand? If I can't come back before the Last Battle. . . . You will answer my questions about what happened while I was in the *stedding*, won't you? I mean, without making me drag everything out of you?"

"If I can, I will," Rand told him.

If you can, Lews Therin snarled. *You agreed we could finally die at Tarmon Gai'don. You* agreed, *madman!*

"He'll answer questions to your heart's delight, Loial," Min said firmly, "if I have to stand over him the whole while." Anger suffused the bond. She really did seem to know what he was thinking.

Elder Haman cleared his throat. “It seems to me that I myself am more accustomed to Outside than almost anyone except the stonemasons. Um. Yes. In fact, I think I am likely to be the best candidate for your task.”

“Phaw!” Cadsuane said. “It seems you infect even Ogier, boy.” Her tone was stern, but her face was all Aes Sedai composure, unreadable, hiding whatever was passing behind those dark eyes.

Loial’s ears went rigid with shock, and he almost dropped his axe, fumbling to catch it. “You? But the Stump, Elder Haman! The Great Stump!”

“I believe I can safely leave that in your hands, my boy. Your words were simple yet eloquent. Um. Um. My advice is, don’t try for beauty. Keep the simple eloquence, and you may surprise quite a few. Including your mother.”

It seemed impossible that Loial’s ears could grow any stiffer, but they did. His mouth moved, but no words came out. So he was to speak to the Stump. What was so secret about that?

“My Lord Dragon, Lord Davram has returned.” It was Elza Penfell who escorted Bashere into the barn. She was a handsome woman in a dark green riding dress; her brown eyes seemed to grow feverish when they found Rand. She, at least, was one he did not have to worry about. Elza was fanatical in her devotion.

“Thank you, Elza,” he said. “Best you return to help with the cleanup. There’s a long way to go, yet.”

Her mouth tightened slightly, and her gaze took in everyone from Cadsuane to the Ogier with an air of jealousy before she offered a curtsy and left. Yes, fanatical was the word.

Bashere was a short, slender man in a gold-worked gray coat with the ivory baton of the Marshal-General of Saldaea, tipped with a golden wolf’s head, tucked behind his belt opposite his sword. His baggy trousers were tucked into turned-down boots that had been waxed till they shone despite a light splattering of mud. His recent work had required as much formality and dignity as he could supply, and he could supply a great deal. Even the Seanchan must have heard his reputation by now. Gray streaked his black hair and the thick mustaches that curled around his mouth like down-turned horns. Dark tilted eyes sad, he walked right past Rand with the rolling gait of a man more accustomed to a saddle than his own feet, walked slowly along the line of dead men, staring intently at each face. Impatient as Rand was, he gave him his time to mourn.

“I’ve never seen anything like what’s outside,” Bashere said quietly as he walked. “A big raid out of the Blight is a thousand Trollocs. Most are only a few hundred. Ah, Kirkun, you never did guard your left the way you should. Even then, you need to outnumber them three or four times to be assured you won’t go into their cookpots. Out there. . . . I think I saw a foreshadowing of Tarmon Gai’don. A small part of Tarmon Gai’don. Let’s hope it really is the Last Battle. If we live through that, I don’t think we’ll ever want to see another. We will, though. There’s always another battle. I suppose that will be the case until the whole world turns Tinker.” At the end of the row, he stopped in front of a man whose face was split almost down to his luxuriant black beard. “Ahzkan here had a bright future ahead of him. But you could say the same of a lot of dead men.”

Sighing heavily, he turned to face Rand. “The Daughter of the Nine Moons will meet you in three days at a manor house in northern Altara, near the border of Andor.” He touched the breast of his coat. “I have a map. She’s already near there somewhere, but they say it isn’t in lands they control. When it comes to secrecy, these Seanchan make Aes Sedai look as open as village girls.” Cadsuane snorted.

“You suspect a trap?” Logain eased his sword in its scabbard, perhaps unconsciously.

Bashere made a dismissive gesture, but he eased his sword, too. “I always suspect a trap. It isn’t that. The High Lady Suroth still didn’t want me or Manfor to talk to anyone but her. Not anyone. Our servants were mutes, just as when we went to Ebou Dar with Loial.”

“Mine had had her tongue cut out,” Loial said in tones of disgust, his ears tilting back. His knuckles paled on the haft of his axe. Haman made a shocked sound, his ears going stiff as fence posts.

“Altara just crowned a new King,” Bashere went on, “but everybody in the Tarasin Palace seemed to be walking on eggshells and looking over their shoulders, Seanchan and Altaran alike. Even Suroth looked as though she felt a sword hovering above her neck.”

“Maybe they’re frightened of Tarmon Gai’don,” Rand said. “Or the Dragon Reborn. I’ll have to be careful. Frightened people do stupid things. What are the arrangements, Bashere?”

The Saldaean pulled the map from inside his coat and walked back to Rand unfolding it. "They're very precise. She will bring six *sul'dam* and *damane,* but no other attendants." Alivia made a noise like an angry cat, and he blinked before going on, no doubt uncertain of a freed *damane*, to say the least. "You can bring five people who can channel. She'll assume any man with you can, but you can bring a woman who can't to make the honors even."

Min was suddenly at Rand's side, wrapping her arm around his.

"No," he said firmly. He was not about to take her into a possible trap.

"We'll talk about it," she murmured, the bond filling with stubborn resolve.

The most dire words a woman can say short of "I'm going to kill you," Rand thought. Suddenly he felt a chill. *Had* it been him? Or Lews Therin? The madman chuckled softly in the back of his head. No matter. In three days, one difficulty would be resolved. One way or another. "What else, Bashere?"

Lifting the damp cloth that lay across her eyes, carefully so she did not catch the bracelet-and-rings *angreal* in her hair—she wore that and her jeweled *ter'angreal* every waking moment now—Nynaeve sat up on the edge of her bed. With men needing Healing from dreadful wounds, some missing a hand or an arm, it had seemed petty to ask Healing for a headache, but the willow bark seemed to have worked as well. Only more slowly. One of her rings, set with a pale green stone that now appeared to glow with a faint internal light, seemed to vibrate continually on her finger though it did not really move. The pattern of vibrations was mixed, a reaction to *saidar* and *saidin* being channeled outside. For that matter, someone could have been channeling inside. Cadsuane was sure it should be able to indicate direction, but she could not say how. Ha! for Cadsuane and her supposed superior knowledge! She wished she could say that to the woman's face. It was not that Cadsuane intimidated her—certainly not; she stood above Cadsuane—just that she wanted to maintain some degree of harmony. That was the reason she held her tongue around the woman.

The rooms she shared with Lan were spacious, but also drafty, with no casement fitting its window properly, and over the generations the house had settled enough that the doors had been trimmed so they could close all the way, making more gaps to let every breeze whistle through. The fire on the stone hearth danced as though it were outdoors, crackling and spitting sparks. The carpet, so faded she could no longer really make out the pattern, had more holes burned in it than she could count. The bed with its heavy bedposts and worn canopy was large and sturdy, but the mattress was lumpy, the pillows held more feathers that poked through than they did down, and the blankets seemed almost more darns than original material. But Lan shared the rooms, and that made all the difference. That made them a palace.

He stood at one of the windows where he had been since the attack began, staring down now at the work going on outside. Or perhaps studying the slaughter yard the manor house grounds had become. He was so still, he might have been a statue, a tall man in a well-fitting dark green coat, his shoulders broad enough to make his waist appear slender, with the leather cord of his *hadori* holding back his shoulder-length hair, black tinged with white at the temples. A hard-faced man, yet beautiful. In her eyes he was, let anyone else say what they would. Only they had best not say it in her hearing. Even Cadsuane. A ring bearing a flawless sapphire was cold on her right hand. It seemed more likely he was feeling anger than hostility. That ring did have a flaw, in her estimation. It was all very well to know someone nearby was feeling angry or hostile, but that did not mean the emotion was directed at you.

“It’s time for me to go back outside and lend a hand again,” she said as she stood.

“Not yet,” he told her without turning from the window. Ring or no ring, his deep voice was calm. And quite firm. “Moiraine used to say a headache was sign she had been channeling too much. That’s dangerous.”

Her hand strayed toward her braid before she could snatch it down again. As if he knew more about channeling than she! Well, in some ways he did. Twenty years as Moiraine’s Warder had taught him as much as a man could know of *saidar*. “My headache is completely gone. I’m perfectly all right now.”

“Don’t be petulant, my love. There are only a few hours till twilight. Plenty of work will be left tomorrow.” His left hand tightened on the hilt of his sword, relaxed, tightened. Only that hand moved.

Her lips compressed. Petulant? She smoothed her skirt furiously. She was *not* petulant! He seldom invoked his right to command in private—curse those Sea Folk for ever thinking of such a thing!—but when he did, the man was unbending. Of course, she could go anyway. He would not try to stop her physically. She was certain of that. Fairly certain. Only she did not intend to violate her marriage vows in the slightest way. Even if she did want to kick her beloved husband's shins.

Kicking her skirts instead, she went to stand beside him at the window and slip her arm through his. His arm was rock hard, though. His muscles *were* hard, wonderfully so, but this was the hardness of tension, as though he were straining to lift a great weight. How she wished she had his bond, to give her hints of what was troubling him. When she laid hands on Myrelle. . . . No, best not to think of *that* hussy! Greens! They simply could not be trusted with men!

Outside, not far from the house, she could see a pair of those black-coated Asha'man, and the sisters bonded to them. She had avoided that whole lot as much as possible—the Asha'man for obvious reasons, the sisters because they supported Elaida—yet you could not spend time in the same house with people, even a house as large and rambling as Algarin's, and avoid coming to recognize them. Arel Malevin was a Cairhienin who seemed even wider than he actually was because he stood barely chest-high to Lan, Donalo Sandomere a Tairen with a garnet in his left ear and his gray-streaked beard trimmed to a point and oiled, although she doubted very much that his creased, leathery face belonged to a noble. Malevin had bonded Aisling Noon, a fierce-eyed Green who peppered her speech with Borderland oaths that sometimes made Lan wince. Nynaeve wished she understood them, but he refused to explain. Sandomere's captive was Ayako Norsoni, a diminutive White with wavy waist-length black hair who was nearly as brown-skinned as a Domani. She seemed shy, a rarity among Aes Sedai. Both women wore their fringed shawls. The captives almost always did, perhaps as gestures of defiance. But then, they seemed to get on strangely well with the men. Often Nynaeve had seen them chatting companionably, hardly the behavior of defiant prisoners. And she suspected that Logain and Gabrelle were not the only pair sharing a bed outside wedlock. It was disgraceful!

Suddenly fires bloomed below, six enveloping dead Trollocs in front of Malevin and Aisling, seven in front of Sandomere and Ayako, and she squinted against the blinding glare. It was like trying to look at thirteen noonday suns blazing in a cloudless sky. They were linked. She could tell from the way the flows of *saidar* moved, stiffly, as though they were being forced into place rather than guided. Or rather, the men were trying to force them. That never worked with the female half of the Power. It was pure Fire, and the blazes were ferocious, fiercer than she would have expected from Fire alone. But of course they would be using *saidin* as well, and who could say what they were adding from that murderous chaos? The little she could recall of being linked with Rand left her with no desire ever again to go near *that*. In just a few minutes the fires vanished, leaving only low heaps of grayish ash lying on seared earth that looked hard and cracked. That could not do the soil much good.

"You can't find this very entertaining, Lan. What are you thinking?"

"Idle thoughts," he said, his arm hard as stone beneath her hand. New fires flared outside.

"Share them with me." She managed to put a hint of question in that. He seemed amused by the nature of their vows, yet he absolutely refused to follow the smallest instruction when they were alone. Requests, he granted instantly—well, most of the time—but the man would quietly leave his boots muddy till the mud flaked off if she *told* him not to track in mud.

"Unpleasant thoughts, but if you wish. The Myrddraal and Trollocs make me think of Tarmon Gai'don."

"Unpleasant thoughts, indeed."

Still staring out the window, he nodded. There was no expression on his face—Lan could teach Aes Sedai about hiding emotions!—but a touch of heat entered his voice. "It's coming soon, Nynaeve, yet al'Thor seems to think he has forever to dance with the Seanchan. Shadowspawn could be moving down through the Blight while we stand here, down through—" His mouth snapped shut. Down through Malkier, he had almost said, dead Malkier, the murdered land of his birth. She was sure of it. He went on as if he had not paused. "They could strike at Shienar, at the whole Borderlands, next week, or tomorrow. And al'Thor sits weaving his Seanchan schemes. He should send someone to convince King Easar and the others to return to their duty along the Blight. He should be marshaling all the force he can gather and taking it to the Blight. The Last Battle will be there, and at Shayol Ghul. The *war* is there."

Sadness welled up in her, yet she managed to keep it out of her voice. "You have to go back," she said quietly.

At last he turned his head, frowning down at her. His clear blue eyes were so cold. They held less of death than they had, of that she was certain, but they were still so cold. “My place is with you, heart of my heart. Ever and always.”

She gathered all of her courage and held on to it hard, so hard that she ached. She wanted to speak fast, to get the words out before courage failed, but she forced herself to a steady tone and an even pace. “A Borderland saying I heard from you once. ‘Death is lighter than a feather, duty heavier than a mountain.’ My duty lies here, making sure Alivia doesn’t kill Rand. But I will take you to the Borderlands. Your duty lies there. You want to go to Shienar? You mentioned King Easar and Shienar. And it is close to Malkier.”

He looked down at her for a long time, but at last he exhaled softly, and the tension left his arm. “Are you sure, Nynaeve? If you are, then, yes, Shienar. In the Trolloc Wars, the Shadow used Tarwin’s Gap to move large numbers of Trollocs, just as it did a few years back, when we sought the Eye of the World. But only if you are completely sure.”

No, she was not sure. She wanted to cry, to scream at him that he was a fool, that his place *was* with her, not dying alone in a futile private war with the Shadow. Only, she could not say any of that. Bond or no bond, she knew he was torn inside, torn between his love of her and his duty, torn and bleeding as surely as if he had been stabbed with a sword. She could not add to his wounds. She could try to make sure he survived, though. “Would I make the offer if I wasn’t sure?” she said dryly, surprised at how calm she sounded. “I won’t like sending you away, but you have your duty, and I have mine.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he hugged her to his chest, gently at first, then harder, until she thought he might squeeze all the air from her lungs. She did not care. She hugged him just as fiercely, and had to pry her hands from his broad back when she was done at last. Light, she wanted to weep. And knew she must not.

As he began packing his saddlebags, she hurriedly changed into a riding dress of yellow-slashed green silk and stout leather shoes, then slipped from the room before he was done. Algarin’s library was large, a square, high-ceilinged room lined with shelves. Half a dozen cushioned chairs stood scattered around the floor, and a long table and a tall map-rack completed the furnishings. The stone hearth was cold and the iron stand-lamps unlit, but she channeled briefly to light three of them. A hasty search found the maps she needed in the rack’s diamond-shaped compartments.

They were as old as most of the books, yet the land did not change greatly in two or three hundred years.

When she returned to their rooms, Lan was in the sitting room, saddlebags on his shoulder, Warder’s color-shifting cloak hanging down his back. His face was still, a stone mask. She took only time to get her own cloak, blue silk lined with velvet, and they walked in silence, her right hand resting lightly on his left wrist, out to the dimly lit stable where their horses were kept. The air there smelled of hay and horses and horse dung, as it always did in stables.

A lean, balding groom with a nose that had been broken more than once sighed when Lan told him they wanted Mandarb and Loversknot saddled. A gray-haired woman began work on Nynaeve’s stout brown mare, while three of the aging men made a job of getting Lan’s tall black stallion bridled and out of his stall.

“I want a promise from you,” Nynaeve said quietly as they waited. Mandarb danced in circles so that the plump fellow trying to lift the saddle onto the stallion’s back had to run trying to catch up. “An oath. I mean it, Lan Mandragoran. We aren’t alone any longer.”

“What do you want my oath on?” he asked warily. The balding groom called for two more men to help.

“That you’ll ride to Fal Moran before you enter the Blight, and that if anyone wants to ride with you, you’ll let him.”

His smile was small, and sad. “I’ve always refused to lead men into the Blight, Nynaeve. There were times men rode with me, but I would not—”

“If men have ridden with you before,” she cut in, “men can ride with you again. Your oath on it, or *I* vow I’ll let you ride the whole long way to Shienar.” The woman was fastening the cinches on Loversknot’s saddle, but the three men were still struggling to get Mandarb’s saddle on his back, to keep him from shaking off the saddle blanket.

“How far south in Shienar do you mean to leave me?” he asked. When she said nothing, he nodded. “Very well, Nynaeve. If that’s what you want. I swear it under the Light and by my hope of rebirth and salvation.”

It was very hard not to sigh with relief. She had managed it, and without lying. She was trying to do as Egwene wanted and behave as though she had already taken the Three Oaths on the Oath Rod, but it was very hard dealing with a husband if you could not lie even when it was absolutely necessary.

“Kiss me,” she told him, adding hastily, “that wasn’t an order. I just want to kiss my husband.” A good-bye kiss. There would be no time for one later.

“In front of everyone?” he said, laughing. “You’ve always been so shy about that.”

The woman was nearly done with Loversknot, and one of the grooms was holding Mandarb as steady as he could while the other two hurriedly buckled the cinches.

“They’re too busy to see anything. Kiss me, or I’ll think you’re the one who’s—” His lips on hers shut off words. Her toes curled.

Some time later, she was leaning on his broad chest to catch her breath while he stroked her hair. “Perhaps we can have one last night together in Shienar,” he murmured softly. “It may be some time before we’re together again, and I’ll miss having my back clawed.”

Her face grew hot, and she pushed away from him unsteadily. The grooms were done, and staring very pointedly at the straw-covered floor, but they might well be close enough to overhear! “I think not.” She was proud that she did not sound breathless. “I don’t want to leave Rand alone with Alivia that long.”

“He trusts her, Nynaeve. I don’t understand it, but there it is, and that’s all that matters.”

She sniffed. As if any man knew what was good for him.

Her stout mare whickered uneasily as they rode among dead Trollocs to a patch of ground not far from the stable that she knew well enough to weave a gateway. Mandarb, a trained warhorse, reacted not at all to the blood and the stench and the huge corpses. The black stallion seemed as calm as his rider, now that Lan was on his back. She could understand that. Lan had a very calming effect on her, too. Usually. Sometimes, he had exactly the opposite effect. She wished they *could* have one more night together. Her face grew hot again.

Dismounting, she drew on *saidar* without using the *angreal* and wove a gateway just tall enough for her to lead Loversknot through onto grassland dotted with thickets of black-spotted beech and trees she did not recognize. The sun was a golden ball only a little down from its peak, yet the air was decidedly cooler than in Tear. Cold enough to make her gather her cloak, in fact. Mountains topped with snow and clouds rose to the east and north and south. As soon as Lan was through, she let the weave dissipate and immediately wove another gateway, larger, while she climbed into her saddle and settled the cloak around her again.

Lan led Mandarb a few steps westward, staring. Land ended abruptly in what was obviously a cliff no more than twenty paces from him, and from there ocean stretched to the horizon. “What is the meaning of this?” he demanded, turning back. “This isn’t Shienar. It’s World’s End, in Saldaea, as far from Shienar as you can get and still be in the Borderlands.”

“I told you I would take you to the Borderlands, Lan, and I have. Remember your oath, my heart, because I surely will.” And with that she dug her heels in the mare’s flanks and let the animal bolt through the open gateway. She heard him call her name, but she let the gateway close behind her. She *would* give him a chance to survive.

Only a few hours past midday, less than half a dozen tables were occupied in the large common room of The Queen’s Lance. Most of the well-dressed men and women, with clerks and bodyguards standing attentively behind them, were there to buy or sell ice peppers, which grew well in the foothills on the landward side of the Banikhan Mountains, called the Sea Wall by many in Saldaea. Weilin Aldragoran had no interest in peppers. The Sea Wall had other crops, and richer.

“My final price,” he said, waving a hand over the table. Every finger bore a jeweled ring. Not large stones, but fine. A man who sold gems should advertise. He traded in other things as well—furs, rare woods for cabinetmakers, finely made swords and armor, occasionally other things that offered a good return—but gems brought in the greater part of his profit in any year. “I’ll come no lower.” The table was covered with a piece of black velvet, the better to show off a good portion of his stock. Emeralds, firedrops, sapphires, and best of all, diamonds. Several of those were large enough to interest a ruler, and none was small. None held a flaw, either. He was known throughout the Borderlands for his flawless stones. “Accept it, or someone else will.”

The younger of the two dark-eyed Illianers across from him, a clean-shaven fellow named Pavil Geraneos, opened his mouth angrily, but the older, Jeorg Damentanis, his gray-streaked beard practically quivering, laid a fat hand on Geraneos’ arm and gave him a horrified look. Aldragoran made no effort to conceal his smile, showing a little tooth.

He had been only a toddler when the Trollocs swept down into Malkier, and he had no memories of that land at all—he seldom even thought of Malkier; the land *was* dead and gone—yet he was glad he had let his uncles give him the *hadori*. At another table, Managan was in a shouting match with a dark Tairen woman wearing a lace ruff and rather inferior garnets in her ears, the pair of them nearly drowning out the young woman playing the hammered dulcimer on the low platform beside one of the tall stone fireplaces. That lean young man had refused the *hadori*, as had Gorenellin, who was near Aldragoran's age. Gorenellin was bargaining hard with a pair of olive-skinned Altarans, one of whom had a nice ruby in his left ear, and there was sweat on Gorenellin's forehead. No one shouted at a man who wore the *hadori* and a sword, as Aldragoran did, and they tried to avoid making him sweat. Such men carried a reputation for sudden, unpredictable violence. If he had seldom been forced to use the sword at his hip, it was widely known that he could and would.

"I do accept, Master Aldragoran," Damentanis said, giving his companion a sidelong glare. Not noticing, Geraneos bared his teeth in what he probably hoped Aldragoran would take for a smile. Aldragoran let it pass. He *was* a merchant, after all. A reputation was a fine thing when it enhanced your bargaining power, but only a fool went looking for fights.

The Illianers' clerk, a weedy, graying fellow and also Illianer, unlocked their iron-strapped coin box under the watchful eyes of their two bodyguards, bulky men with those odd beards that left the upper lip bare, in leather coats sewn with steel discs. Each carried a sword and stout cudgel at his belt. Aldragoran had a clerk at his own back, a hard-eyed Saldaean who did not know one end of a sword from the other, but he never used bodyguards. Guards on his premises, to be sure, but not bodyguards. That only added its bit to his reputation. And of course, he had no need of them.

Once Damentanis had endorsed two letters-of-rights and passed over three leather purses fat with gold—Aldragoran counted the coins but did not bother weighing them; some of those thick crowns from ten different lands would be lighter than others, yet he was willing to accept the inevitable loss—the Illianers carefully gathered up the stones, sorting them into washleather purses that went into the coin box. He offered them more wine, but the stout man declined politely, and they departed with the bodyguards carrying the iron-strapped box between them. How they were to protect anything burdened so was beyond him. Kayacun was far from a lawless town, but there were more footpads abroad than usual of late, more footpads, more murderers, more arsonists, more of every sort of crime, not to mention madness of the sort a man just did not want to think on. Still, the gems were the Illianers' concern now.

Ruthan had Aldragoran's coin box open—a pair of bearers were waiting outside to carry it—but he sat staring at the letters-of-rights and the purses. Half again what he had expected to get. Light coins from Altara and Murandy or no light coins, at least half again. This would be his most profitable year ever. And all due to Geraneos letting his anger show. Damentanis had been afraid to bargain further after that. A wonderful thing, reputation.

"Master Aldragoran?" a woman said, leaning on the table. "You were pointed out to me as a merchant with a wide correspondence by pigeon."

He noticed her jewelry first, of course, a matter of habit. The slim golden belt and long necklace were set with very good rubies, as was one of her bracelets, along with some pale green and blue stones he did not recognize and so dismissed as worthless. The golden bracelet on her left wrist, an odd affair linked to four finger rings by flat chains and the whole intricately engraved, held no stones, but her remaining two bracelets were set with fine sapphires and more of the green stones. Two of the rings on her right hand held those green stones, but the other two held particularly fine sapphires. Particularly fine. Then he realized she wore a fifth ring on that hand, stuck against one of the rings with a worthless stone. A golden serpent biting its own tail.

His eyes jerked to her face, and he suffered his second shock. Her face, framed by the hood of her cloak, was very young, but she wore the ring, and few were foolish enough to do that without the right. He had seen young Aes Sedai before, two or three times. No, her age did not shock him. But on her forehead, she wore the *ki'sain*, the red dot of a married woman. She did not look Malkieri. She did not sound Malkieri. Many younger folk had the accents of Saldaea or Kandor, Arafel or Shienar—he himself sounded of Saldaea—but she did not sound a Borderlander at all. Besides, he could not recall the last time he had heard of a Malkieri girl going to the White Tower. The Tower had failed Malkier in need, and the Malkieri had turned their backs on the Tower. Still, he stood hurriedly. With Aes Sedai, courtesy was always wise. Her dark eyes held heat. Yes, courtesy was wise.

"How may I help you, Aes Sedai? You wish me to send a message for you via my pigeons? It will be my pleasure." It was also wise to grant Aes Sedai any favors they asked, and a pigeon was a small favor.

“A message to each merchant you correspond with. Tarmon Gai’don is coming soon.”

He shrugged uneasily. “That is nothing to do with me, Aes Sedai. I’m a merchant.” She was asking for a good many pigeons. He corresponded with merchants as far away as Shienar. “But I will send your message.” He would, too, however many birds it required. Only stone-blind idiots failed to keep promises to Aes Sedai. Besides which, he wanted rid of her and her talk of the Last Battle.

“Do you recognize this?” she said, fishing a leather cord from the neck of her dress.

His breath caught, and he stretched out a hand, brushed a finger across the heavy gold signet ring on the cord. Across the crane in flight. How had she come by this? Under the Light, how? “I recognize it,” he told her, his voice suddenly hoarse.

“My name is Nynaeve ti al’Meara Mandragoran. The message I want sent is this. My husband rides from World’s End toward Tarwin’s Gap, toward Tarmon Gai’don. Will he ride alone?”

He trembled. He did not know whether he was laughing or crying. Perhaps both. She was *his* wife? “I will send your message, my Lady, but it has nothing to do with me. I am a merchant. Malkier is dead. Dead, I tell you.”

The heat in her eyes seemed to intensify, and she gripped her long, thick braid with one hand. “Lan told me once that Malkier lives so long as one man wears the *hadori* in pledge that he will fight the Shadow, so long as one woman wears the *ki’sain* in pledge that she will send her sons to fight the Shadow. I wear the *ki’sain*, Master Aldragoran. My husband wears the *hadori*. So do you. Will Lan Mandragoran ride to the Last Battle alone?”

He *was* laughing, shaking with it. And yet, he could feel tears rolling down his cheeks. It was madness! Complete madness! But he could not help himself. “He will not, my Lady. I cannot stand surety for anyone else, but I swear to you under the Light and by my hope of rebirth and salvation, he will not ride alone.” For a moment, she studied his face, then nodded once firmly and turned away. He flung out a hand after her. “May I offer you wine, my Lady? My wife will want to meet you.” Alida was Saldaean, but she definitely would want to meet the wife of the Uncrowned King.

“Thank you, Master Aldragoran, but I have several more towns to visit today, and I must be back in Tear tonight.”

He blinked at her back as she glided toward the door gathering her cloak. She had several more towns to visit today, and she had to be back in Tear *tonight*? Truly, Aes Sedai were capable of marvels!

Silence hung in the common room. They had not been keeping their voices low, and even the girl with the dulcimer had ceased plying her hammers. Everyone was staring at him. Most of the outlanders had their mouths hanging open.

“Well, Managan, Gorenellin,” he demanded, “do you still remember who you are? Do you remember your blood? Who rides with me for Tarwin’s Gap?”

For a moment, he thought neither man would speak, but then Gorenellin was on his feet, tears glistening his eyes. “The Golden Crane flies for Tarmon Gai’don,” he said softly.

“The Golden Crane flies for Tarmon Gai’don!” Managan shouted, leaping up so fast he overturned his chair.

Laughing, Aldragoran joined them, all three shouting at the top of their lungs. “The Golden Crane flies for Tarmon Gai’don!”

* * *

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CHAPTER 21

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Within the Stone

The mud of the outer city gave way to paved streets at the walls of Tear, where the first thing Rand noticed was the absence of guards. Despite the lofty stone ramparts with their towers, the city was less defended than Stedding Shangtai, where he and every other human had been gently but firmly refused entrance at first light. Here, the archers' balconies on the towers were empty. The iron-strapped door of the squat gray guardhouse just inside the broad gates stood wide open, and a hard-faced woman in rough woolens, her sleeves shoved up her thin arms, sat there at a wooden tub scrubbing clothes with a washboard. She appeared to have taken up residence; two small, grubby children sucking their thumbs stared wide-eyed past her at him and his companions. At their horses, at least.

Tai'daishar was a sight to stare at, a sleek black stallion with a massive chest, a horse that drew attention, yet he had chosen to ride the animal anyway. If the Forsaken could find him as easily as they had at Algarin's manor house, there was little point to hiding. Or at least to putting too much effort into it. He wore black riding gloves to conceal the dragons' heads on his hands and the herons branded into his palms. His coat was dark gray wool without a stitch of embroidery, the stallion's saddle cloth simple, and his sword's hilt and scabbard had been covered in unworked boarhide ever since it came into his possession, nothing to pull a second glance. Cadsuane, in unadorned gray wool, wore the hood of her dark green cloak well up to shield her Aes Sedai face, but Min, Nynaeve and Alivia had no need for hiding. Though Min's flower-embroidered red coat and snug breeches might attract a little notice, not to mention her heeled red boots. He had seen women in Cairhien wearing clothes like that, copying her, yet it seemed unlikely that her fashion had spread to Tear, where modesty held sway. In public, at least. Nynaeve was wearing yellow-slashed blue silk and all of her jewelry, just partly concealed by her blue cloak, but Tear would be full of silks. She had wanted to wear her shawl! That was in her saddlebags, though. A little effort only.

The second thing he noticed was the sound, a rhythmic racketing clatter accompanied periodically by a piercing whistle. Faint at first, it seemed to be coming closer rapidly. Despite the early hour, the streets he could see from the gates were crowded. Half the people in sight appeared to be Sea Folk, the men bare-chested, the women in bright linen blouses, all wearing long sashes more colorful than those worn by Tairen commoners. Every head appeared to be turned toward that sound. Children darted through the throng, dodging carts most often pulled by oxen with wide horns, racing toward the noise. Several well-dressed men and women had dismounted from their sedan chairs and stood with the bearers to watch. A fork-bearded merchant with silver chains across the chest of his coat was half out of the window of a red-lacquered coach, shouting at his driver to manage the nervously dancing team while he strained for a better view.

White-winged pigeons, startled from pointed slate rooftops by a particularly sharp whistle, suddenly wheeled into the air. And two large flocks crashed into each other, pelting the folk below with stunned birds. Every single bird fell. A few people actually stopped staring toward the approaching noise and gaped at the sky. A surprising number snatched up fallen birds and wrung their necks, though, and not just barefoot people in worn woolens. A woman in silk and lace, standing beside one of the sedan chairs, quickly gathered half a dozen before gazing toward the noise with the birds dangling from her hands by their feet.

Alivia made a startled sound. "Is that ill luck or good?" she drawled. "It must be ill. Unless pigeons here are different?" Nynaeve gave her a sour look, but said nothing. She had been very quiet since Lan vanished the day before, a subject on which she was doubly silent.

"Some of those people are going to die of hunger," Min said sadly. The bond quivered with sorrow. "Every last one I can see something about."

How can I hide? Lews Therin laughed. *I am* ta'veren!

You're dead, Rand thought at him sharply. People in front of him were going to starve, and he laughed? There was nothing to be done, of course, not when Min spoke, but laughing was another matter. I *am* ta'veren. *Me!*

What else was happening in Tear because of his presence? His being *ta'veren* did not always have any effect at all, but when it did, the result could blanket an entire city. Best to get on with what he had come for before the wrong people figured out what things like pigeons flying into one another meant. If the Forsaken were sending armies of Trollocs and Myrddraal after him, it was likely that Darkfriends would take any opportunity to put an arrow through his ribs. Making little effort to hide was not the same as making no effort.

"You might as well have brought the Banner of Light and an honor guard of thousands instead of six," Cadsuane murmured dryly, eyeing the

Maidens who were trying to pretend they had nothing to do with Rand's party while standing in a wide circle around it, *shoufa* covering their heads and veils hanging down their chests. Two were Shaido, fierce-eyed whenever they looked at him. The Maidens' spears were all on their backs, stuck through the harness of their bowcases, but only because Rand had offered to leave them behind and take someone else otherwise. Nandera had insisted on at least a few Maidens, staring at him with eyes as hard as emeralds. He had never considered refusing. The only child of a Maiden any Maiden had ever known, he had obligations to meet.

He gathered Tai'daishar's reins, and abruptly a large wagon full of machinery came into sight, clanking and hissing, wide iron-studded wheels striking sparks from the gray paving stones as it moved along the street as fast as a man could trot. The machinery seemed to sweat steam; a heavy wooden shaft swung up and down pushing another, vertical shaft, and gray woodsmoke drifted from a metal chimney; but there was no sign of a horse, just an odd sort of tiller in the front to turn the wheels. One of the three men standing in the wagon pulled a long cord, and steam rushed in a shrill whistle out of a tube atop a huge iron cylinder. If the onlookers stared in awe and maybe covered their ears, the fork-bearded merchant's team was in no such mood. Whinnying wildly, they bolted, scattering people as they ran and nearly pitching the man out on his head. Curses pursued them, and several braying mules that galloped off with their drivers in bouncing carts sawing at the reins. Even a few oxen began to lumber along more quickly. Min's astonishment filled the bond.

Controlling the black with his knees—trained as a warhorse, Tai'daishar responded immediately, though he still snorted—Rand stared in amazement, too. It seemed Master Poel actually had made his steamwagon work. "But how did the thing get to Tear?" he asked the air. The last he had seen, it had been at the Academy of Cairhien, and seizing up every few paces.

"It's called a steamhorse, my Lord," a barefoot, dirty-faced urchin in a ragged shirt said, bouncing on the pavement. Even the sash holding up his baggy breeches seemed as much holes as cloth. "I've seen it nine times! Com here's only seen it seven."

"A steamwagon, Doni," his equally ragged companion put in. "A steam-*wagon*." Neither of them could have been more than ten, and they were gaunt rather than skinny. Their muddy feet, torn shirts and holed breeches meant they came from outside the walls, where the poorest folk lived. Rand had changed a number of laws in Tear, especially those that weighed heavily on the poor, but he had been unable to change everything. He had not even known how to begin. Lews Therin began to maunder on about taxes and money creating jobs, but he might as well have been spilling out words at random for all the sense he made. Rand muted the voice to a buzz, a fly on the other side of a room.

“Four of them hitched together, one behind the other, pulled a hundred wagons all the way from Cairhien,” Doni went on, ignoring the other boy. “They covered near a hundred miles every day, my Lord. A hundred miles!”

Com sighed heavily. “There were six of them, Doni, and they only pulled fifty wagons, but they covered *more* than a hundred miles every day. A hundred and twenty some days, I heard, and it was one of the steam-men said it.” Doni turned to scowl at him, the pair of them balling up fists.

“Either way, it’s a remarkable achievement,” Rand told them quickly, before they could begin trading blows. “Here.”

Dipping into his coat pocket, he pulled out two coins and tossed one toward each boy without looking to see what they were. Gold glittered in the air before the boys eagerly snatched the coins. Exchanging startled glances, they went running out through the gates as fast as they could go, no doubt fearful he would demand the coins back. Their families could live for months on that much gold.

Min gazed after them with an expression of misery that the bond echoed even after she shook her head and smoothed her face. What had she seen? Death, probably. Rand felt anger, but no sorrow. How many tens of thousands would die before the Last Battle was done? How many would be children? He had no room left in him for sorrow.

“Very generous,” Nynaeve said in a tight voice, “but are we going to stand here all morning?” The steamwagon was moving on out of sight quickly, yet her plump brown mare was still blowing anxiously and tossing her head, and she was having difficulty with the animal, placid as it was by nature. She was far from as good a rider as she thought herself. For that matter, Min’s mount, an arch-necked gray mare from Algarin’s stables, danced so that only Min’s firm, red-gloved grip on the reins kept her from running, and Alivia’s roan was trying to dance, though the former *damane* controlled the animal as easily as Cadsuane did her bay. Alivia sometimes displayed surprising talents. *Damane* were expected to ride well.

As they rode into the city, Rand took a last glance at the disappearing steamwagon. Remarkable was hardly the word. A hundred wagons or only fifty—only!—incredible was more like it. Would merchants start using those things instead of horses? It hardly seemed likely. Merchants were conservative folk, not known for leaping at new ways of doing things. For some reason, Lews Therin began laughing again.

Tear was not beautiful, like Caemlyn or Tar Valon, and few of its streets could be called particularly broad, but it was large and sprawling, one of the great cities of the world, and, like most great cities, a jumble that had grown up willy-nilly. In those tangled streets, tile-roofed inns and slate-roofed stables, the roof corners slanted sharply, stood alongside palaces with squared white domes and tall, balcony-ringed towers that often came to points, the heights of domes and towers gleaming in the early-morning sun. Smithies and cutlers, seamstresses and butchers, fishmongers and rug-weavers' shops rubbed against marble structures with tall bronze doors behind massive white columns, guild halls and bankers and merchants' exchanges.

At this hour, the streets themselves were still cast in deep shadows, yet they bustled with that storied southern industry. Sedan chairs borne by pairs of lean men wove through the crowds almost as quickly as the children who raced about in play while coaches and carriages behind teams of four or six moved as slowly as the carts and wagons, most drawn by large oxen. Porters trudged along, their bundles slung beneath poles carried on two men's shoulders, and apprentices carried rolled carpets and boxes of the masters' handiwork on their backs. Hawkers cried their wares from trays or handbarrows, pins and ribbons, a few with roasted nuts and meat pies, and tumblers or jugglers or musicians performed at nearly every intersection. You would never have thought this city was the site of a siege.

Not everything was peaceful, though. Early morning or not, Rand saw obstreperous drunks being thrown out of inns and taverns and so many fistfights and men wrestling on the pavement that it seemed one pair was not well out of sight before the next came into view. A good many obvious armsmen mingled in the crowd, swords at their hips and the fat sleeves of their woolen coats striped in various House colors, but even those wearing breastplates and helmets made no move to break up the rows. A fair number of the fights involved armsmen, with one another, with Sea Folk, with roughly clad fellows who might have been laborers or apprentices or shoulder-thumpers. Soldiers with nothing to do grew bored, and bored soldiers got drunk and fought. He was glad to see the rebels' armsmen bored.

The Maidens, drifting through the throng and still trying to pretend they had no association with Rand, drew puzzled looks and head-scratching, mainly from dark-faced Sea Folk, though a gaggle of children trailed after them gaping. The Tairens, many of whom were not all that much fairer than the Sea Folk, had seen Aiel before, and if they wondered why they had returned to the city, it appeared they had different business at hand this morning, and more important. No one seemed to give Rand or his other companions a second glance. There were other mounted men and women in the streets, most of them outlanders, here a pale Cairhienin merchant in a somber coat, there an Arafellin with silver bells fastened to his dark braids, here a copper-skinned Domani in a barely opaque riding dress barely hidden by her cloak followed by a pair of hulking bodyguards in leather coats sewn with steel discs, there a Shienaran with his head shaved except for a gray topknot and his belly straining his buttons. You could not move ten paces in Tear without seeing outlanders. Tairen commerce had long arms.

Which was not to say that he passed through the city without incident. Ahead of him, a running baker's boy tripped and fell, flinging his basket into the air, and when the boy levered himself off the paving stones as Rand rode by, he stopped halfway up with his mouth hanging open, staring at the long loaves standing on end near the basket, propped together in a rough cone. A fellow in his shirtsleeves, drinking in a second-story window of an inn, overbalanced and toppled toward the street with a shriek that cut off when he landed on his feet not ten paces from Tai'daishar, mug still in hand. Rand left him behind wide-eyed and feeling at himself in wonderment. Ripples of altered chance were following Rand, spreading across the city.

Not every event would be as harmless as the loaves, or as beneficial as the man landing on his feet rather than his head. Those ripples could turn what should be a bruiseless tumble into broken bones or a broken neck. Lifelong feuds could be started by men speaking words they had never thought to hear come from their own lips. Women could decide to poison their husbands over trivial offenses they had tolerated complacently for years. Oh, some fellow might find a rotting sack full of gold buried in his own basement without really knowing why he had decided to dig in the first place, or a man might ask and gain the hand of a woman he had never before had the courage to approach, but as many would find ruination as found good fortune. Balance, Min had called it. A good to balance every ill. He saw an ill to balance every good. He needed to be done in Tear and gone as soon as possible. Galloping in those crowded streets was out of the question, but he picked up his pace enough that the Maidens had to trot.

His destination had been in sight since long before he entered the city, a mass of stone like a barren, sheer-sided hill that stretched from the River Erinin into the city's heart, covering at least eight or nine marches, a good square mile or more, and dominating the city's sky. The Stone of Tear was mankind's oldest stronghold, the oldest structure in the world, made with the One Power in the last days of the Breaking itself. One solid piece of stone it was, without a single join, though better than three thousand years of rain and wind had weathered the surface to roughness. The first battlements stood a hundred paces above the ground, though there were arrowslits aplenty lower, and stone spouts for showering attackers with boiling oil or molten lead. No besieger could stop the Stone from being supplied through its own wall-shielded docks, and it contained forges and manufactories to replace or mend every sort of weapon should its armories fall short. Its highest tower, rearing over the very center of the Stone, held the banner of Tear, half red, half gold, with a slanting line of three silver crescents, and so large that it could be made out plainly as it curled in a strong breeze. It had to be strong to move that flag. Lower towers supported smaller versions, but here they alternated with another rippling banner, the ancient symbol of Aes Sedai black-and-white on a field of red. The Banner of Light. The Dragon Banner, some called it, as if there were not another that bore that name. The High Lord Darlin was flaunting his allegiance, it seemed. That was well.

Alanna was in there, and whether or not that was well he would have to learn. He was not as sharply aware of her as before Elayne and Aviendha and Min jointly bonded him—he thought he was not; they had pushed her aside to take primacy somehow, and she had told him she could sense little more of him than his presence—yet she still lay in the back of his head, a bundle of emotions and physical sensations. It seemed a long time since he had been near enough to her to sense those. Once again, the bond with her felt an intrusion, a would-be usurper of his bond to Min and Elayne and Aviendha. Alanna was weary, as if perhaps she had not been getting enough sleep lately, and frustrated, with strong streaks of anger and sulkiness. Were the negotiations going badly? He would find out soon enough. She would be aware he was in the city, aware he was coming closer if little more. Min had tried to teach him a trick called masking that supposedly could hide him from the bond, but he had never been able to make it work. Of course, she admitted she had never been able to make it work either.

Soon he found himself on a street that ran directly to the plaza that surrounded the Stone on three sides, but he had no intention of riding straight there. For one thing, every massive iron-strapped gate would be barred tight. For another, he could see several hundred armsmen at the foot of the street. He expected there would be the same in front of every gate. They hardly gave the impression of men besieging a fortress. They seemed to be lounging about with no order—many had their helmets off and their halberds propped against the buildings lining the street, and serving women from nearby taverns and inns circulated among them selling mugs of ale or wine from trays—yet it was highly unlikely they would remain complacent about anyone trying to enter the Stone. Not that they could stop him, of course. He could sweep aside a few hundred men like so many moths.

He had not come to Tear to kill anyone, though, not unless he had to, so he rode into the stableyard of a tile-roofed inn, three stories of dark gray stone with a prosperous look. The sign out front was freshly painted with, of all things, a rough approximation of the creatures encircling his forearms. The artist apparently had decided the thing was inadequate as described, though, because he had added long, sharp teeth and leathery, ribbed wings. Wings! They almost looked copied from one of those Seanchan flying beasts. Cadsuane looked at the sign and snorted. Nynaeve looked at it and giggled. So did Min!

Even after Rand gave the barefoot stableboys silver to curry the horses, they stared at the Maidens harder than at the coins, but no harder than the patrons stared in The Dragon’s beam-ceilinged common room. Conversation trailed off when the Maidens followed Rand and the others inside, spearpoints sticking up above their heads and bullhide bucklers in hand. Men and women, most in plain if good quality wool, turned in their low-backed chairs to stare. They seemed to be middling merchants and solid craftsfolk, yet they gaped like villagers seeing a city for the first time. The serving women, in dark high-necked dresses and short white aprons, stopped trotting and goggled over their trays. Even the woman playing a hammered dulcimer between the two stone fireplaces, cold on this fine morning, fell silent.

A very dark fellow with tightly curled hair, at a square table beside the door, seemed not to notice the Maidens at all. Rand took him for one of the Sea Folk at first, though he wore a peculiar coat without collar or lapels, once white but now stained and wrinkled. “I tell you, I have many, many of the . . . the worms that make . . . yes, make . . . silk on a ship,” he said haltingly in an odd, musical accent. “But I must have the . . . the . . . andberry . . . yes, andberry leaves to feed them. We will be rich.”

His companion waved a plump, dismissive hand even while staring at the Maidens. “Worms?” he said absently. “Everybody knows silk grows on trees.”

Walking deeper into the common room, Rand shook his head as the proprietor advanced to meet him. Worms! The tales people could come up with to try prying coin out of somebody else.

“Agardo Saranche at your service, my Lord, my Ladies,” the lean, balding man said with a deep bow, sweeping his hands wide. Not all Tairens were dark by any means, but he was nearly as fair complected as a Cairhienin. “How may I serve?” His dark eyes kept drifting to the Maidens, and every time they did, he tugged at his long blue coat as though it suddenly felt too tight.

“We want a room with a good view of the Stone,” Rand said.

“It *is* worms that make silk, friend,” a man drawled behind him. “My eyes on it.”

At that familiar accent, Rand spun to find Alivia staring, wide-eyed and her face bloodless, at a man in a dark coat who was just passing through the doorway into the street. With an oath, Rand ran to the door, but there were close to a dozen men in dark coats walking away from the inn, any one of whom might have spoken. There was no way to pick out one man of average height and width seen only from behind. What was a Seanchan doing in Tear? Scouting for another invasion? He would put paid to that soon enough. But he turned from the door wishing he could have laid hands on the man. Knowing would be better than having to guess.

He asked Alivia whether she had gotten a good look at the fellow, but she shook her head silently. Her face was still pale. She was ferocious when she talked of what she wanted to do to *sul’dam*, yet it seemed just hearing the accents of her native land was enough to shake her. He hoped that did not turn out to be weakness in her. She was going to help him, somehow, and he could not afford her to be weak.

“What do you know of the man who just left?” he demanded of Saranche. “The one with the slurred way of talking.”

The innkeeper blinked. “Nothing, my Lord. I’ve never seen him before. You want *one* room, my Lord?” He ran his eyes over Min and the other women, and his lips moved as if he were counting.

“If you’re thinking of any impropriety, Master Saranche,” Nynaeve said indignantly, tugging at the braid hanging from the cowl of her cloak, “you had best think twice and again. Before I box your ears.” Min hissed softly, and one hand drifted toward her other wrist before she checked the motion. Light, but she was quick to reach for her knives!

“What impropriety?” Alivia asked in tones of puzzlement. Cadsuane snorted.

“One room,” Rand said patiently. *Women can always find a reason to be indignant,* he thought. Or had that been Lews Therin? He shrugged in discomfort. And a touch of irritation that he only just managed to keep out of his voice. “Your largest with a view of the Stone. We don’t want it for long. You’ll be able to rent it out again for tonight. You may have to keep our horses a day or two, though.”

A look of relief crept over Saranche’s narrow face, though patently false rue filled his voice. “I regret that my largest room is taken, my Lord. In fact, all of my large rooms are taken. But I will be more than happy to escort you up the street to The Three Moons and—”

“Phaw!” Cadsuane pushed back her hood enough to reveal her face and some of her golden hair ornaments. She was all cool composure, her gaze implacable. “I think you can find a way to make that room available, boy. I think you had better find a way. Pay him well,” she added to Rand, ornaments swaying on their chains. “That was advice, not an order.”

Saranche took Rand’s fat golden crown with alacrity—it was doubtful the entire inn earned much more in a week—but it was Cadsuane’s ageless face that sent him bounding up the staircase at the back of the common room to return in a handful of minutes and show them to a room on the second floor with dark polished paneling and a rumpled bed wide enough for three flanked by a pair of windows filled by the Stone looming over the rooftops. The previous occupant had been hustled out so quickly that he had left a woolen stocking crumpled at the foot of the bed and a carved horn comb on the washstand in the corner. The innkeeper offered to have their saddlebags brought up, and wine, and seemed surprised when Rand refused, but one glance at Cadsuane's face, and he bowed his way out again hurriedly.

The room was fairly large as inn rooms went, yet not compared to most chambers in Algarin's manor house, much less in a palace. Especially not with near a dozen people filling the space. The walls seemed to close in on Rand. His chest suddenly felt tight. Every breath came with difficulty. The bond was suddenly full of sympathy and concern.

The box, Lews Therin panted. *Have to get out of the box!*

Keeping his eyes on the windows—being able to see the Stone was a necessity, and seeing open air between the Dragon and the Stone, the open air above, loosened his breathing a little. Just a little—keeping his eyes fixed on the sky above the Stone, he ordered everyone to stand against the walls. They obeyed with speed. Well, Cadsuane gave him a sharp look before gliding to the wall, and Nynaeve sniffed before flouncing over, but the rest moved quickly. If they thought he wanted space for safety's sake, in a way he did. Having them out of his line of sight made the room seem a little larger. Only a little, yet every inch was a blessed relief. The bond was filled with concern.

Must get out, Lews Therin moaned. *Have to get out.*

Stiffening himself against what he knew would come, watchful of any attempt by Lews Therin, Rand seized the male half of the True Source, and *saidin* flooded into him. Had the madman tried to seize it first? He had brushed it, certainly, touched it, but it was Rand's. Mountains of flame collapsing in fiery avalanches tried to scour him away. Waves that made ice seem warm tried to crush him in raging seas. He gloried in it, suddenly so alive it seemed he had been sleepwalking before. He could hear the breath of everyone in the room, could see that great banner atop the Stone so clearly he almost thought he could make out the weave of the fabric. The double wound in his side throbbed as if trying to rip itself out of his body, but with the Power filling him, he could ignore that pain. He thought he could have ignored a sword thrust.

Yet with *saidin* came the inevitable violent nausea, the almost overwhelming desire to double over and empty himself of every meal he had ever eaten. His knees trembled with it. He fought that as hard as he fought the Power, and *saidin* had to be fought ever and always. A man forced *saidin* to his will, or it destroyed him. The face of the man from Shadar Logoth floated in his head for a moment. He looked furious. And near to sicking up. Without any doubt he was *aware* of Rand in that moment, and Rand of him. Move a hair in any direction, and they would touch. No more than a hair.

“What’s the matter?” Nynaeve demanded, moving close and peering up at him in concern. “Your face has gone all gray.” She reached for his head, and his skin popped out in goose bumps.

He brushed her hands away. “I’m all right. Stand clear.” She stood there giving him one of those looks women carried in their belt pouches. This one said she knew he was lying even if she could not prove it. Did they practice those looks in front of mirrors? “Stand clear, Nynaeve.”

“He’s all right, Nynaeve,” Min said, though her face had a touch of gray about it, too, and she had both red-gloved hands pressed to her middle. She knew.

Nynaeve sniffed at him, wrinkling her nose in disdain, but she finally moved out of his way. Maybe Lan had had enough and run away. No, not that. Lan would not leave her unless she told him to, and then only for as long as was needful. Wherever he was, Nynaeve knew and likely had sent him there for reasons of her own. Aes Sedai and their bloody secrets.

He channeled, Spirit touched with Fire, and the familiar vertical silvery slash appeared at the foot of the bed, seemed to rotate into a dim view of massive columns in darkness. Light from the inn room gave all the illumination. The opening, standing inches above the floor, was no larger than the door to the room, yet as soon as it was fully open, three of the Maidens, already veiled, darted through pulling spears free, and Rand’s skin pebbled again as Alivia leaped after them. Protecting him was a self-imposed duty, but one she took as seriously as the Maidens did.

There would be no ambush here, though, no dangers, so he stepped through, and down. At the other end, the gateway sat more than a foot above the huge gray slabs of stone that he had not wanted to damage any more than he already had. This was the Heart of the Stone, and with the Power in him, and the light spilling through the gateway from the room in The Dragon, he could see the narrow hole in one of those stones where he had driven Callandor into the floor. *Who draws it out shall follow after.* He had thought long and hard before sending Narishma to bring Callandor to him. However the Prophecies meant the man was to follow him, Narishma was otherwise occupied today. A forest of immense redstone columns surrounded him, stretching up into the dark that hid the unlit golden lamps and the vaulted ceiling and the great dome. His boots echoed hollowly in the vast chamber, and even the whispers of the Maidens' soft boots. In this space, the sense of confinement vanished.

Min hopped down right behind him—with a throwing knife in either hand, and her head swiveling, eyes searching the darkness—but Cadsuane, standing at the edge of the gateway, said, "I don't jump unless I absolutely have to, boy." She held out a hand, waiting for him to take it.

He handed her down, and she nodded thanks. It could have been meant for thanks. It could have meant "You took your bloody time about it," too. A ball of light appeared over her upturned palm, and a moment later Alivia was balancing a globe of light, too. The pair created a pool of brightness that turned the surrounding darkness deeper. Nynaeve required the same courtesy, and had the grace to murmur thanks—she quickly gained her own ball of light—but when he offered a hand to one of the Maidens—he thought it was Sarendhra, one of the Shaido, though all he could see of her face was blue eyes above her black veil—she grunted contemptuously and leaped down, spear in hand, followed by the other two. He let the gateway close, but held on to *saidin* despite the roiling in his stomach and head. He did not expect to need to channel again before he left the Stone, yet he did not want to give Lews Therin another opportunity to seize the Power, either.

You have to trust me, Lews Therin snarled. *If we're going to make it to Tarmon Gai'don so we can die, you have to trust me.*

You told me once not to trust anyone, Rand thought. *Including you.*

Only madmen trust no one, Lews Therin whispered. Abruptly he began to weep. *Oh, why do I have a madman in my head?* Rand pushed the voice away.

On striding through the tall arch that led from the Heart, he was surprised to find two Defenders of the Stone in ridged helmets and shining breastplates, the puffy sleeves of their black coats striped in black and gold. Swords drawn, they were staring at the archway with expressions that combined confusion with grim resolution. Doubtless they had been startled to see lights and hear footsteps echoing in a room with only one entrance, an entrance they were guarding. The Maidens crouched, spears coming up, spreading out to either side, slowly curling in toward the pair.

“By the Stone, it’s him,” one of the men said, sheathing his sword hurriedly. Stocky, with a puckered scar that began on his forehead and journeyed across the bridge of his nose and down to his jaw, he bowed deeply, hands in steel-backed gauntlets spreading wide. “My Lord Dragon,” he said. “Iagin Handar, my Lord. The Stone stands. I got this that day.” He touched the scar on his face.

“An honorable wound, Handar, and a day to remember,” Rand told him as the other, leaner man hastily put up his blade and bowed. Only then did the Maidens lower their spears, but their faces remained veiled. A day to remember? Trollocs and Myrddraal inside the Stone. The second time he had truly wielded Callandor, using the Sword that was Not a Sword as it was meant to be used. The dead lying everywhere. A dead girl he could not make live again. Who could forget such a day? “I know I gave orders for the Heart to be guarded while Callandor was there, but why are you still standing guard?”

The two men exchanged puzzled looks. “You gave the order to set guards, my Lord Dragon,” Handar said, “and the Defenders obey, but you never said anything about Callandor except that no one was to approach it unless they had proof they came from you.” Suddenly the stocky man gave a start and bowed again, more deeply still. “Forgive me, my Lord, if I seem to question you. I don’t mean to. Shall I summon the High Lords to your apartments? Your rooms have been kept in readiness for your return.”

“No need,” Rand told him. “Darlin will be expecting me, and I know where to find him.”

Handar winced. The other man suddenly found something interesting on the floor to study. “You may require a guide, my Lord,” Handar said slowly. “The corridors. . . . Sometimes the corridors change.”

So. The Pattern truly was loosening. That meant the Dark One was touching the world more than he had since the War of the Shadow. If it loosened too much before Tarmon Gai’don, the Age Lace might unravel. An end to time and reality and creation. Somehow he had to bring about the Last Battle before that happened. Only he did not dare. Not yet.

He assured Handar and the other man that he needed no guide, and the pair of them bowed yet again, apparently accepting that the Dragon Reborn could do anything he said he could do. In simple truth, he knew he could locate Alanna—he could have pointed straight at her—and she had moved since he first felt her. To find Darlin and inform him that Rand al’Thor was approaching, he was sure. Min had named her as one he held in his hand, yet Aes Sedai always found a way to play both ends against the middle. They always had schemes of their own, goals of their own. Witness Nynaeve and Verin. Witness any of them.

"They hop when you say toad," Cadsuane said coolly, pushing the cowl of her cloak down her back, as they walked away from the Heart. "That can be bad for you, when too many people jump at your word." *She* had the nerve to say that! Cadsuane bloody Melaidhrin!

"I'm fighting a war," he told her harshly. The nausea had his temper on edge. That was part of the reason he was harsh. "The fewer people who obey, the more chance I'll lose, and if I lose, everybody loses. If I could make everyone obey, I would." There were far too many who did not obey as it was, or obeyed in their own way. Why in the Light would Min feel *pity*?

Cadsuane nodded. "As I thought," she murmured, half to herself. And what was *that* supposed to mean?

The Stone had all the trappings of a palace, from silk tapestries and rich runners in the corridors from Tarabon and Altara and Tear itself to golden stands holding mirrored lamps. Chests standing against the stone walls might be for storing what the servants needed for cleaning, yet they were of rare woods, often elaborately carved and always with gilded banding. Niches held bowls and vases of Sea Folk porcelain, thin as leaves and worth many times their weight in gold, or massive, gem-studded figures, a golden leopard with ruby eyes trying to pull down a silver deer with pearl-covered antlers that stood a pace tall, a golden lion that was even taller, with emerald eyes and firedrops for claws, others set so extravagantly with gems that no metal showed. Servants in black-and-gold livery bowed or curtsied as Rand climbed through the Stone, those who recognized him very deeply indeed. Some eyes widened at sight of the Maidens trailing behind, but their surprise never slowed their courtesies.

All the trappings of a palace, yet the Stone had been designed for war within as well as without. Wherever two corridors crossed, murderholes dotted the ceiling. Between the tapestries, arrowslits pierced the walls high up, angled to cover the corridors in both directions, and no flight of sweeping stairs but had arrowslits placed so the staircase could be swept by arrows or crossbow bolts. Only one assailant had ever succeeded in forcing a way into the Stone, the Aiel, and they had swept over the opposition too quickly for many of those defenses to come into play, but any other enemy that managed to get inside the Stone would pay a price in blood for every hallway. Except that Traveling had changed warfare forever. Traveling and Blossoms of Fire and so much more. That blood price would still be paid, yet stone walls and high towers could no longer hold back an assault. The Asha'man had made the Stone as obsolete as the bronze swords and stone axes men had often been reduced to in the Breaking. Mankind's oldest stronghold was now a relic.

The bond with Alanna led him up and up, until he came to tall, polished doors with golden leopards for door handles. She was on the other side. Light, but his stomach wanted to empty itself. Hardening himself, he pulled open one of the doors and went in, leaving the Maidens to stand guard. Min and the others followed him in.

The sitting room was almost as ornate as his own apartments in the Stone, the walls hung with broad silk tapestries showing scenes of the hunt and battle, the large, patterned Taraboner carpet on the floor worth sufficient gold to feed a large village for a year, the black marble fireplace tall enough for a man to walk into and wide enough to hold eight abreast. Every piece of furnishing, all massively made, was elaborately carved, crusted with gilt and dotted with gems, as were the tall golden stand-lamps, their mirrored flames adding to the light let in by the glass-paned ceiling. A golden bear with ruby eyes and silver claws and teeth, more than a pace high, stood atop a gilded plinth on one side of the room, while an identical plinth held an emerald-eyed, ruby-taloned eagle nearly as tall. Restrained pieces for Tear.

Seated in an armchair, Alanna looked up as he walked in, and held out a golden goblet for one of the two young serving women in black and gold to fill with dark wine from a tall golden pitcher. Slender in a gray riding dress slashed with green, Alanna was beautiful enough that Lews Therin began humming to himself. Rand almost thumbed his earlobe before snatching his hand down, suddenly unsure whether that gesture was his or the madman's. She smiled, but darkly, and as her eyes swept across Min and Nynaeve, Alivia and Cadsuane, the bond carried her suspicion, not to mention anger and sulkiness. The last two heightened for Cadsuane. And there was joy, as well, mixed in with all the rest, when her gaze touched him. Not that it showed in her voice. "Why, who would have expected you, my Lord Dragon?" she murmured, with a hint of asperity in the title. "Quite a surprise, wouldn't you say, my Lord Astoril?" So she had not warned anyone after all. Interesting.

"A very pleasant surprise," an elderly man in a coat with red-and-blue striped sleeves said as he rose to bow, stroking his oiled beard, trimmed to a point. The High Lord Astoril Damara's face was creased, the hair that hung to his shoulders snow white and thinning, but his back was straight and his dark eyes sharp. "I've been looking forward to this day for some time." He bowed again, to Cadsuane, and after a moment, to Nynaeve. "Aes Sedai," he said. Very civil for Tear, where channeling if not Aes Sedai themselves had been outlawed before Rand altered the law.

Darlin Sisnera, High Lord and Steward in Tear for the Dragon Reborn, in a green silk coat with yellow-striped sleeves and gold-worked boots, was less than a head shorter than Rand, with close-cut hair and a pointed beard, a bold nose and blue eyes that were rare in Tear. Those eyes widened as he turned from a conversation with Caraline Damodred near the fireplace. The Cairhienin noblewoman gave Rand a jolt, though he had expected to see her here. The litany he used to forge his soul in fire almost started up in his head before he could stop it. Short and slim and pale, with large dark eyes and a small ruby dangling onto her forehead from a golden chain woven into the black hair falling in waves to her shoulders, she was the very image of her cousin Moiraine. Of all things, she wore a long blue coat, embroidered in golden scrolls except for the horizontal stripes of red, green and white that ran from neck to hem, over snug green breeches and heeled blue boots. It seemed the fashion had traveled after all. She made a curtsy, even so, though it looked odd in that garb. Lews Therin hummed even harder, making Rand wish the man had a face so he could hit him. Moiraine was a memory for hardening his soul, not for humming at.

"My Lord Dragon," Darlin said, bowing stiffly. He was not a man accustomed to offering the first courtesy. He gave no bow for Cadsuane, just a sharp look before he seemed to dismiss her presence entirely. She had kept him and Caraline as "guests" for a time in Cairhien. He was unlikely to forget that, or forgive. At his gesture, the two serving women moved quickly to offer wine. As might have been expected, Cadsuane with her ageless face received the first goblet, but surprisingly, Nynaeve got the second. The Dragon Reborn was one thing, a woman wearing the Great Serpent ring something else again, even in Tear. Throwing her cloak back, Cadsuane retreated to the wall. It was unlike her to be retiring. But then, from there, she could observe everyone at once. Alivia took a place by the door, doubtless for much the same reason. “I am glad to see you better than when I saw you last,” Darlin went on. “You’ve done me great honor. Though I may yet lose my head for it, if your Aes Sedai make no more progress than they have.”

“Do not be sulky, Darlin,” Caraline murmured, her throaty voice sounding amused. “Men do sulk, do they not, Min?” For some reason, Min barked a laugh.

“What are you doing here?” Rand demanded of the two people he had not expected to see. He took a goblet from one of the serving women while the other hesitated between Min and Alivia. Min won out, perhaps because Alivia’s blue dress was plain. Sipping her wine, Min strolled over to Caraline—at a glance from the Cairhienin woman, Darlin moved away, grinning—and the two women stood with their heads together, whispering. Filled with the Power, Rand could catch the occasional word. His name, Darlin’s.

Weiramon Saniago, also a High Lord of Tear, was not short, and he stood as straight as a sword, yet there was something of a strutting rooster about him. His gray-streaked beard, trimmed to a point and oiled, practically quivered with pride. “Hail to the Lord of the Morning,” he said, bowing. Or rather, he intoned it. Weiramon was a great one for intoning and declaiming. “Why am I here, my Lord Dragon?” He sounded puzzled at the question. “Why, when I heard that Darlin was besieged in the Stone, what could I do but come to his aid? Burn my soul, I tried to talk some of the others into accompanying me. We’d have put a quick end to Estanda and that lot, I vow!” He clutched a fist to demonstrate how he would have crushed the rebels. “But only Anaiyella had the courage. The Cairhienin were a complete lot of lily-hearts!” Caraline paused her talk with Min to give him a look that would have had him hunting for the stab wound had he noticed it. Astoril pursed his lips and commenced a study of his wine.

The High Lady Anaiyella Narencelona also wore a coat and snug breeches with heeled boots, though she had added a white lace ruff, and her green coat was sewn with pearls. A close cap of pearls sat atop her dark hair. A slim, pretty woman, she offered a simpering curtsy, and somehow made it seem she wanted to kiss Rand’s hand. Courage was not a word he would have applied to her. Nerve, on the other hand. . . . “My Lord Dragon,” she cooed. “I wish we could report complete success, but my

Master of the Horse died fighting the Seanchan, and you left most of my armsmen in Illian. Still, we managed to strike a blow in your name."

"Success? A blow?" Alanna's scowl took in Weiramon and Anaiyella both before she twisted back around to face Rand. "They landed at the Stone's docks with one ship, but they put most of their armsmen and all the mercenaries they hired in Cairhien ashore from the rest upriver. With orders to enter the city and attack the rebels." She made a sound of disgust. "The only result was a great many men dead and our negotiations with the rebels thrown back to the beginning." Anaiyella's simper took on a sickly twist.

"My plan was to sortie from the Stone and attack them from both sides," Weiramon protested. "Darlin refused. Refused!"

Darlin was not grinning now. He stood with his feet apart, and looked a man who wished he had a sword in his hand rather than a goblet. "I told you then, Weiramon. If I stripped the Stone of Defenders, the rebels would still have outnumbered us badly. Too badly. They've hired every sell-sword from the Erinin to the Bay of Remara."

Rand took a chair, flinging one arm over the back. The heavy arms had no supports at the front, so his sword was no problem. Caraline and Min seemed to have switched their talk to clothing. At least, they were fingering each other's coats, and he heard words like back-stitch and bias-cut, whatever that meant. Alanna's gaze drifted between him and Min, and he felt disbelief warring with suspicion along the bond. "I left you two in Cairhien because I wanted you in Cairhien," he said. He trusted neither, but they could cause small harm in Cairhien, where they were outlanders without power. Anger heated by nausea entered his voice. "You will make plans to return there as soon as possible. As soon as possible."

Anaiyella's simper grew more sickly, and she cringed slightly.

Weiramon was made of sterner stuff. "My Lord Dragon, I will serve you where you command, but I can serve best on my native soil. I know these rebels, know where they can be trusted and where—"

"As soon as possible!" Rand snapped, slamming his fist down on the chair arm hard enough to make the wood creak loudly.

"One," Cadsuane said, quite clearly and quite incomprehensibly.

"I strongly suggest you do as he says, Lord Weiramon." Nynaeve eyed Weiramon blandly, took a sip of wine. "He has a temper lately, worse than ever, and you don't want it directed at you."

Cadsuane exhaled a heavy breath. “Stay out of this, girl,” she said sharply. Nynaeve glared at her, opened her mouth, then grimaced and closed it again. Gripping her braid, she glided across the carpet to join Min and Caraline. She had gotten very good at gliding.

Weiramon studied Cadsuane for a moment, tilting back his head so he was staring down his nose. “As the Dragon Reborn commands,” he said finally, “so does Weiramon Saniago obey. My ship can be readied to sail by tomorrow, I wager. Will that suffice?”

Rand nodded curtly. It would have to answer. He was not about to waste a moment making a gateway to send this pair of fools where they belonged today. “There’s hunger in the city,” he said, eyeing the golden bear—how many days would that much gold feed Tear? The thought of food made his stomach clench—and waited for a response that was quick in coming, if not from the direction he expected.

“Darlin had cattle and sheep herded down to the city,” Caraline said with some considerable warmth. Rand was the one getting the dagger look, now. “These days. . . .” She faltered for a moment, though the heat never left her gaze. “These days, meat is inedible two days after slaughter, so he had the animals brought, and wagons full of grain. Estanda and her companions seized it all for themselves.”

Darlin gave her a fond smile, but his voice was apologetic. “I’ve tried three times, but Estanda is greedy, it seems. I saw no point in continuing to supply my enemies. Your enemies.”

Rand nodded. At least the man was not ignoring the situation in the city. “There are two boys who live outside the walls. Doni and Com. I don’t know any more name than that. About age ten. Once the rebels are settled and you can leave the Stone, I would appreciate it if you found them and kept an eye on them.” Min made a sound in her throat, and the bond carried sadness so bleak it almost overwhelmed the burst of love that came with it. So. It must have been death she saw. But she had been wrong about Moiraine. Maybe this viewing could be changed by a *ta’veren*.

No, Lews Therin growled. *Her viewings must not change.* We *have to die!* Rand ignored him.

Darlin appeared puzzled by the request, but he acceded, as what else was he to do when the Dragon Reborn made it?

Rand was about to bring up the purpose of his visit when Bera Harkin, another of the Aes Sedai he had sent to Tear to deal with the rebels, entered the room frowning over her shoulder as if the Maidens had made some difficulty for her. They might well have. The Aiel considered the Aes Sedai sworn to him to be Wise Ones' apprentices, and Maidens took every opportunity to remind apprentices that they were not Wise Ones yet. She was a stocky woman, with brown hair cut close around a square face, and despite her green silks, lacking Aes Sedai agelessness she would have looked a farmwife. A farmwife who ruled her house and farm with a firm hand, though, and would tell a king not to track mud into her kitchen. She was Green Ajah, after all, with every scrap of Green Ajah pride and haughtiness. She frowned at Alivia, too, with all the disdain of Aes Sedai for wilder, and that faded only to coolness when she caught sight of Rand.

"Well, I must say I shouldn't be surprised to see you, considering what's happened this morning," she said. Unpinning her simple silver cloak brooch, she fastened it to her belt pouch and folded the cloak over her arm. "Though it might have been the news that the others are no more than a day west of the Erinin."

"The others?" Rand said quietly. Quietly and steely hard.

Bera did not seem impressed. She went on arranging the folds of her cloak. "The other High Lords and Ladies, of course. Sunamon, Tolmeran, all of them. Apparently they're traveling hot-foot for Tear as fast their armsmen's horses can move."

Rand leaped up so fast that his sword bound for a moment on the chair arm. Only a moment because the gilded wood, weakened by his earlier blow, split with a loud crack, and the arm dropped to the carpet. He never so much as glanced at it. The fools! The Seanchan at the border with Altara, and they were coming back to Tear? "Doesn't anybody remember how to obey?" he thundered. "I want messengers sent to them immediately! They're to return to Illian faster than they left or I'll have the lot of them hanged!"

"Two," Cadsuane said. What in the Light was she counting? "A bit of advice, boy. Ask her what happened this morning. I smell good news."

Bera gave a little start at realizing Cadsuane was in the room. Eyeing her sideways, and cautiously, she stopped fiddling with her cloak. "We've reached agreement," she said as if the question had been asked. "Tedosian and Simaan were wavering, as usual, but Hearne was nearly as adamant as Estanda." She shook her head. "I think Tedosian and Simaan might have come around sooner, but some fellows with strange accents have been promising them gold and men."

"Seanchan," Nynaeve said. Alivia opened her mouth, then closed it without speaking.

"They might be," Bera allowed. "They keep clear of us and look at us like we were mad dogs that might bite any moment. That sounds like what little I've heard of Seanchan. In any case, less than an hour gone, Estanda suddenly began asking whether the Lord Dragon would restore her title and lands, and they all collapsed right behind her. The agreement is this. Darlin is accepted as Steward in Tear for the Dragon Reborn, all laws you made remain unchanged, and they pay for feeding the city for one year as a fine for rebellion. In return, they receive full restoration, Darlin is crowned King of Tear, and they swear fealty to him. Merana and Rafela are preparing the documents for signatures and seals."

"King?" Darlin said incredulously. Caraline swayed over to take his arm.

"Restoration?" Rand growled, hurling his goblet aside in a spray of wine. The bond carried caution, a warning from Min, but he was too angry to pay heed. The sickness twisting his insides twisted his rage, too. "Blood and bloody ashes! I stripped them of lands and titles for rebelling against me. They can stay commoners and swear fealty to me!"

"Three," Cadsuane said, and Rand's skin popped out in goose bumps an instant before something struck him across the bottom like a hard-swung switch. Bera's lips parted in shock, and the cloak slid off her arm to the floor. Nynaeve laughed. She smothered it quickly, but she laughed! "Don't make me have to keep reminding you about manners, boy," Cadsuane went on. "Alanna told me the terms you offered before she left—Darlin as Steward, your laws kept, everything else on the table—and it seems they've been met. You can do as you wish, of course, but another piece of advice. When the terms you offer are accepted, hold to them."

Else no one will trust you, Lews Therin said, sounding entirely sane. For the moment.

Rand glared at Cadsuane, fists clenched hard, on the brink of weaving something that would singe her. He could feel a welt on his bottom, and would feel it more in the saddle. It seemed to pulse, and his anger pulsed with it. She peered back calmly over her wine. Was there a hint of challenge in her gaze, of daring him to channel? The woman spent every moment in his presence challenging him! The trouble was, her advice was good. He *had* given Alanna those terms. He had expected them to bargain harder, gain more, but they had gotten what he actually asked for. More. He had not thought of fines.

“It seems your fortunes have risen, King Darlin,” he said. One of the serving women curtsied and handed Rand another goblet full of wine. Her face was as calm as any Aes Sedai’s. You might have thought men arguing with sisters was a matter of every day with her.

“All hail King Darlin,” Weiramon intoned, sounding half strangled, and after a moment Anaiyella echoed him, as breathless as if she had run a mile. Once, she had talked of herself for a crown in Tear.

“But why would they want me as King?” Darlin said, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Or anyone. There’ve been no kings in the Stone since Moreina died, a thousand years ago. Or did you demand that, Bera Sedai?”

Bera straightened from picking up her cloak and began shaking it out. “It was their . . . ‘demand’ would be too strong . . . their suggestion. Any of them would have leapt at the chance of a throne, especially Estanda.” Anaiyella made a choking sound. “But of course, they knew there was no hope of that. This way, they can swear to you instead of to the Dragon Reborn, making it slightly less distasteful.”

“And if you are king,” Caraline put in, “it means that Steward in Tear for the Lord Dragon becomes a lesser title.” She laughed throatily. “They may even tack on three or four more noble sounding titles to try pushing it down to obscurity.” Bera pursed her lips as though she had been about to bring up that very point.

“And would you marry a king, Caraline?” Darlin asked. “I’ll accept the crown, if you will. Though I’ll have to have a crown made.”

Min cleared her throat. “I can tell you how it should look, if you like.”

Caraline laughed again and released Darlin’s arm, swaying away from him. “I will have to see you in it before I could answer that. Have Min’s crown made, and if it makes you look pretty. . . .” She smiled. “Then perhaps I will consider it.”

“I wish you both the best,” Rand said curtly, “but there are more important matters to go into right now.” Min gave him a sharp look, disapproval flooding the bond. *Nynaeve* gave him a sharp look. What was *that* about? “You *will* accept that crown, Darlin, and as soon as those documents are signed, I want you to arrest those Seanchan, then gather every man in Tear who knows one end of sword or halberd from the other. I’ll arrange for Asha’man to take you to Arad Doman.”

“And me, my Lord Dragon?” Weiramon asked avidly. He all but quivered with eagerness, managing to strut while standing still. “If there is fighting to be done, I can serve you better there than languishing in Cairhien.”

Rand studied the man. And Anaiyella. Weiramon was a bungling idiot, and he trusted neither, but he could not see what harm they could do with no more than a handful of followers. “Very well. You two may accompany the High Lord . . . that is, King Darlin.” Anaiyella gulped as though she for one would rather return to Cairhien.

“But what am I supposed to do in Arad Doman?” Darlin wanted to know. “The little I’ve heard of that land, it’s a madhouse.” Lews Therin laughed wildly in Rand’s head.

“Tarmon Gai’don is coming soon,” Rand said. The Light send not too soon. “You are going to Arad Doman to get ready for Tarmon Gai’don.”

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CHAPTER 22

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To Make an Anchor Weep

Despite the pitching induced by the long blue rollers, Harine din Togara sat very straight alongside her sister, just ahead of their parasol bearers and the steersman at his long tiller. Shalon seemed intent on studying the twelve men and women working the oars. Or perhaps she was deep in thought. There was plenty to think on of late, not least this meeting Harine had been summoned to, but she let her thoughts drift blindly. Composing herself. Every time the First Twelve of the Atha'an Miere met since she had attained Illian, she had needed to compose herself before attending. When she reached Tear and found Zaida's *Blue Gull* still anchored in the river, she had been sure the woman was in Caemlyn yet, or at least trailing far behind her own wake. A painful mistake, that. Though in truth, very little would have been altered had Zaida been weeks behind. Not for Harine, at least. No. No thoughts of Zaida.

The sun stood only a fist above the horizon in the east, and several vessels of the shorebound were making for the long breakwater that guarded Illian's harbor. One carried three masts and a semblance of a high-rig, all the major sails square, yet he was squat and ill-handled, wallowing through the low rolling seas in fountains of spray rather than slicing them. Most were small and low-rigged, their triangular sails nearly all high-boomed. Some seemed quick enough, but since the shorebound seldom sailed beyond sight of land and usually anchored at night for fear of shoals, their quickness availed them little. Cargo that required true speed went to Atha'an Miere ships. At a premium price, to be sure. It was a small portion of what Atha'an Miere carried, in part because of the price, in part because few things actually required their speed. Besides, cargo hire guaranteed some profit, but when the Cargomaster traded on his own for the ship, all of the profit went to vessel and clan.

As far as the eye could see to east and west along the coastline, Atha'an Miere ships lay at anchor, rakers and skimmers, soarers and darters, most surrounded by bumboats so cluttered they looked like drunken shore festivals. Rowed out from the city, the bumboats offered for sale everything from dried fruit to quartered beeves and sheep, from iron nails and iron stock to swords and daggers, from gaudy trinkets of Illian that might catch a deckhand's eye to gold and gems. Though the gold was usually a thin plate that wore off in a few months to show the brass beneath and the gems colored glass. They brought rats, too, if not for sale. Anchored so long, every ship was plagued by rats, now. Rats and spoilage made sure there was always a market for the peddlers.

Bumboats also surrounded the massive Seanchan-built vessels, dozens upon dozens of them, that had been used in the Escape. That was what it was being called, now, the great Escape from Ebou Dar. Say the Escape, and no one asked what escape you meant. Great bluff-bowed things they were, twice the beam of a raker and more, some, suitable for battering through heavy seas perhaps, but strangely rigged and with odd ribbed sails too stiff for proper setting. Men and women were swarming over those masts and yards now, altering the rigging to something more usable. No one wanted the craft, but the shipyards would require years to replace all of the vessels lost at Ebou Dar. And the expense! Overly beamy or not, those ships would see many years of use. No Sailmistress had any desire to sink into debt, borrowing from the clan coffers, when most if not all of her own gold was being salvaged by the Seanchan in Ebou Dar, not unless she had no other choice. Some, unlucky enough to have neither their own ships nor one of the Seanchan's, did have no other choice.

Harine's twelve passed the heavy wall of the breakwater, thick with dark slime and long hairy weed that the breakers crashing against the gray stone failed to dislodge, and the broad, gray-green harbor of Illian opened up before her, ringed with deep expanses of marsh, just turning from winter brown to green in patches, where long-legged birds waded. A line of mist drifted across the boat on a gentle breeze, dampening her hair before it passed on up the harbor. Small fishing boats were pulling their nets along the edges of the marsh, a dozen sorts of gull and tern wheeling overhead to steal what they could. The city did not interest her beyond the long stone docks, lined with trading craft, but the harbor. . . . That broad, nearly circular expanse of water was the greatest anchorage known, and filled with shipping and river craft, most waiting their turn at the docks. It truly was filled, by hundreds of vessels in every shape and size, and not all of those ships belonged to the shorebound. There were only rakers here, those slender three-masters that could race porpoises. Rakers and three of the ungainly Seanchan monstrosities. They were the vessels of Wavemistresses and of Sailmistresses who formed the First Twelve of each clan, those that could be fitted into the harbor before there was no more room. Even Illian's anchorage had its limits, and the Council of Nine, not to mention this

Steward in Illian for the Dragon Reborn, would have made trouble had the Atha'an Miere begun crowding their trade.

Abruptly a strong, icy wind came up out of the north. No, it did not come up; it just suddenly was there full strength, whipping the harbor to choppy whitecaps and carrying a smell of pines and something . . . earthy. She knew little of trees, but much of timbers used in building ships. Though she did not think there were many pines anywhere near to Illian. Then she noticed the mist line. While ships rocked and pitched under that southerly blast, the mist continued its slow drift northward. Keeping her hands on her knees required effort. She wanted very much to wipe the dampness out of her hair. She had thought after Shadar Logoth that nothing ever would shake her again, but she had seen too many . . . oddities . . . of late, oddities that spoke of the world twisting.

As abruptly as it had come, the wind was gone. Murmurs rose, the stroke faltered, and the number four port oar caught a crab, splashing water into the boat. The crew knew winds did not behave that way.

"Steady there," Harine said firmly. "Steady!"

"Give way together, you shorebound ragpickers," her deckmistress shouted from the bow. Lean and leathery, Jadein had leather lungs as well. "Do I need to call the stroke for you?" The twin insults tightened some faces in anger, others in chagrin, but the oars began moving smoothly again.

Shalon was studying the mist, now. Asking what she saw, what she thought, would have to wait. Harine was not sure she wanted the answer heard by any of her crew. They had seen enough to have them frightened already.

The steersman turned the twelve toward one of the bulky Seanchan ships, where any bumboat that ventured near was being chased away before the peddler could get out two words. It was one of the largest of them, with a towering sterncastle that had three levels. Three! And the thing actually had a pair of *balconies* across the stern! She would not care to see what a following sea driven by a cemaros or one of the Aryth Ocean's soheens would do to those. Other twelves and a few eights waited their turn to sidle up to the vessel in the order of precedence of their passengers.

Jadein stood up in the bow and bellowed, "Shodein!" Her voice carried well, and a twelve that was approaching the ship circled away. The others continued their waiting.

Harine did not stand until the crew had backed oars, and drawn them in on the starboard, bringing the twelve to a smooth halt right where Jadein could catch a dangling line and hold the small craft alongside the larger. Shalon sighed.

"Courage, sister," Harine told her. "We have survived Shadar Logoth, though the Light help me, I am unsure *what* we survived." She barked a laugh. "More than that, we survived Cadsuane Melaidhrin, and I doubt anyone else here could do that."

Shalon smiled weakly, but at least she smiled.

Harine scrambled up the rope ladder as easily as she could have twenty years before and was piped aboard by the deckmaster, a squat fellow with a fresh scar running under the leather patch that covered where his right eye had been. Many had taken wounds in the Escape. Many had died. Even the deck of this ship felt strange beneath her bare feet, the planking laid in an odd pattern. The side was manned properly, however, twelve bare-chested men to her left, twelve women in bright linen blouses to her right, all bowing till they were looking straight down at the deck. She waited for Shalon and the parasol bearers to join her before starting forward. The vessel's Sailmistress and Windfinder, at the end of the rows, bowed less deeply while touching hearts, lips and foreheads. Both wore waist-long white mourning stoles that all but hid their many necklaces, as did she and Shalon.

"The welcome of my ship to you, Wavemistress," the Sailmistress said, sniffing her scent box, "and the grace of the Light be upon you until you leave his decks. The others await you in the great cabin."

"The grace of the Light be upon you also," Harine replied. Turane, in blue silk trousers and a red silk blouse, was stocky enough to make her Windfinder, Serile, look slender rather than average, and she had a gimlet eye and a sour twist to her mouth, but neither those nor the sniffing was meant for discourtesy. Turane was not *that* bold. The gaze was the same she gave everyone, her own vessel lay at the bottom of the harbor at Ebou Dar, and the harbor did stink after the clean air of the open salt.

The great cabin ran nearly the whole length of the tall sterncastle, a space clear of any furniture save for thirteen chairs and a table against the bulkhead that held tall-necked wine pitchers and goblets of yellow porcelain, and two dozen women in brocaded silks could not come near filling it. She was the last of the First Twelve of the Atha'an Miere to arrive, and the reaction to her among the other Wavemistresses was what she had come to expect. Lincora and Wallein turned their backs very deliberately. Round-faced Niolle gave her a scowl, then stalked over to refill her goblet. Lacine, so slender that her bosom seemed immense, shook her head as if wondering at Harine's presence. Others went on chatting as if she were not there. All wore the mourning stoles, of course.

Pelanna strode across the deck to her, the long pink scar down the right side of her square face giving her a dangerous look. Her tightly curled hair was nearly all gray, the honor chain across her left cheek heavy with gold medallions recording her triumphs, including one for her part in the Escape. Her wrists and ankles still bore the marks of Seanchan chains, though hidden by her silks now. "I hope you are quite recovered, Harine, the Light willing," she said, tilting her head to one side and clasping her plump, tattooed hands in mock sympathy. "Not still sitting tender, are you? I put a cushion on your chair just in case."

She laughed uproariously, looking to her Windfinder, but Caire gave her a blank look, as if she had not heard, then added a faint laugh. Pelanna frowned. When she laughed at anything, she expected those under her to laugh as well. The stately Windfinder had her own worries, however, a daughter missing among the shorebound, abducted by Aes Sedai. There *would* be repayment for that. One did not need to like Caire or Pelanna to know that was necessary.

Harine favored the pair with a tight smile and brushed by Pelanna closely enough that the woman had to step back or have her feet trodden on, scowling as she did. *Daughter of the sands,* Harine thought sourly.

Mareil's approach brought a genuine smile, however. The tall, slender woman, her shoulder-length hair as much white as black, had been her friend since they began as deckhands together on an aging raker with an iron-handed Sailmistress embittered by her lack of prospects. Learning that Mareil had escaped Ebou Dar, and unharmed, had been a joy. She favored Pelanna and Caire with a frown. Tebreille, her Windfinder, also grimaced at the pair, but unlike them, it was not because Mareil demanded wrist-licking. Sisters, Tebreille and Caire shared a deep concern for Talaan, Caire's daughter, yet beyond that, either would have slit the other's throat for a copper. Or better, in their view, seen her sister reduced to cleaning the bilges. There was no hatred deeper than hatred between siblings.

“Don’t let those mud-ducks peck at you, Harine.” Mareil’s voice was deep for a woman, but melodious. She handed Harine one of the two goblets she carried. “You did what you felt you had to do, and the Light willing, all will come right.”

Against her will, Harine’s eyes went to the ringbolt set in one of the beams of the overhead. It could have been removed by now. She was sure it remained for the purpose of provoking her. That strange young woman Min had been right. Her Bargain with the Coramoor had been judged deficient, giving away too much and demanding too little in return. In this same cabin, with the rest of the First Twelve and the new Mistress of the Ships watching, she had been stripped and hung by her ankles from that ringbolt, stretched tight to another set in the deck, then strapped until she howled her lungs out. The welts and bruises had faded, but the memory lingered however hard she tried to suppress it. Not howls for mercy or respite, though. Never that, else she would have had no alternative to stepping aside, becoming just a Sailmistress again while someone else was chosen Wavemistress of Clan Shodein. Most of the women in this room believed she should have done so anyway after such a punishment, perhaps even Mareil. But she had the other part of Min’s foretelling to bolster her courage. She would be Mistress of the Ships one day. In law, the First Twelve of the Atha’an Miere could choose any Sailmistress as Mistress of the Ships, yet only five times in more than three thousand years had they reached outside their own number. The Aes Sedai said Min’s peculiar visions always came true, but she did not intend to gamble.

“All will come right, Mareil, the Light willing,” she said. Eventually. She just had to have the courage to ride out whatever came before.

As usual, Zaida arrived without ceremony, striding in followed by Shielyn, her Windfinder, tall and slim and reserved, and Amylia, the bosomy, pale-haired Aes Sedai Zaida had brought back with her from Caemlyn. Ageless face seeming permanently surprised, her startling blue eyes very wide, the Aes Sedai was breathing heavily for some reason. Everyone bowed, but Zaida paid the courtesies no heed. In green brocades and white mourning stole, she was short, with a close cap of graying curls, yet she managed to make herself seem every bit as tall as Shielyn. A matter of presence, Harine had to admit. Zaida had that, and a coolness of thought that being caught by a cemaros on a lee shore could not shake. In addition to returning with the first of the Aes Sedai agreed to in the bargain for use of the Bowl of the Winds, she also had returned with her own bargain, for land in Andor under Atha'an Miere law, and where Harine's Bargain had been judged wanting, Zaida's had found great favor. That and the fact that she had come straight to Illian via one of those peculiar gateways, woven by her own Windfinder, were not the only reasons that she was now Mistress of the Ships, but neither had hurt her cause. Harine herself thought this Traveling overrated. Shalon could make a gateway, now, but making one to the deck of a ship without causing damage, even on still waters like these, especially from the deck of another ship, was chancy at best, and no one could make one large enough to sail a ship through. Very overrated.

"The man has not arrived yet," Zaida announced, taking the chair with its back to the large stern windows and arranging her long, fringed red sash just so, adjusting the angle of the emerald-studded dagger thrust through the sash. She was a very particular woman. It was natural enough to want everything in its place on board a ship—tidiness became a habit as well as a necessity—yet she was exacting even by the usual standards. The remaining chairs, none fastened to the deck in proper fashion, made two rows facing each other, and the Wavemistresses began taking their seats, each woman's Windfinder standing behind her chair. "It appears he intends us to wait on him. Amylia, see that the goblets are all filled." Ah. It seemed the woman had put her foot wrong yet again.

Amylia jumped, then gathered her bronze-colored skirts to her knees and went racing for the table where the wine pitchers sat. Badly wrong, it appeared. Harine wondered how long Zaida would continue to allow her to wear dresses rather than trousers, which were much more practical shipboard. It would surely be a shock to her when they passed beyond sight of land and blouses were abandoned. Of the Brown Ajah, Amylia had wanted to study the Atha'an Miere, but she was given little time for study. Her purpose was to work, and Zaida saw that she did. She was there to teach the Windfinders all that the Aes Sedai knew. She still dithered over that, but shorebound instructors, rare as they were, ranked barely a whisker above the deckhands—in the beginning, the woman apparently had believed her dignity fully equal to Zaida's if not more!—and the deckmaster's flail laid with some frequent regularity across her rump supposedly was changing her mind, if slowly. Amylia had actually tried to desert three times! Strangely, she did not know how to make a gateway, knowledge that carefully was being kept from her, and she should have known she was being watched too closely to bribe her way onto a bumboat. Well, she was unlikely to try again. Reportedly she had been told that a fourth attempt would earn a public strapping this time followed by being hung by her ankles in the rigging. No one would risk that shame, surely. Sailmistresses and even Wavemistresses had been reduced to deckhands and gone willingly after that, eager to lose themselves and their disgrace in the mass of men and women hauling lines and handling sail.

Removing the cushion from the seat of her chair and dropping it disdainfully on the deck, Harine took her place at the bottom of the left-hand row, Shalon at her back. She was the least senior except for Mareil, seated across from her. But then, Zaida would have sat only one chair farther up had she not gained the sixth fat golden earring for each ear and the chains that connected them. Her lobes might still be sore from the piercings. A pleasant thought. “As he makes us wait, perhaps we should make him wait when he finally does appear.” With an untouched goblet in hand, she waved away the anxious Aes Sedai, who scurried over to Mareil. Foolish woman. Did she not know she should have served the Mistress of the Ships first and then followed with the Wavemistresses *by seniority*?

Zaida toyed with her piercework scent box, hanging on a very heavy golden chain around her neck. She wore a wide, close-fitting collar of heavy gold links, too, a gift from Elayne of Andor. “He comes from the Coramoor,” she said dryly, “whom you were supposed to stick to like a barnacle.” Her voice never hardened, but every word cut at Harine. “This man will be as close as I can come to speaking to the Coramoor without dire need, since you agreed he did not have to attend me more than three times in any period of two years. Because of you, I must accept this man’s discourtesy if he turns out to be a scabrous drunkard who must run to the rail and empty his stomach every second sentence. The ambassador *I* send to the Coramoor will be someone who knows how to obey her orders.” Pelanna tittered and smirked. She thought everyone was like herself.

Shalon squeezed Harine’s shoulder reassuringly, but she did not need it. Stay with the Coramoor? There was no way she could explain to anyone, even Shalon, Cadsuane’s rude methods of enforcing her will or her total lack of respect for Harine’s dignity. She had been an ambassador from the Atha’an Miere in name, and forced to dance to any tune the Aes Sedai piped. She was willing to admit, if only to herself, that she had almost wept with relief when she realized that cursed woman was going to let her leave.

Besides, that girl's visions always came true. So the Aes Sedai said, and they could not lie. It was enough.

Turane slipped into the cabin and bowed to Zaida. "The Coramoor's emissary has arrived, Shipmistress. He . . . he stepped out of a gateway on the quarterdeck." That created murmurs among the Windfinders, and Amylia jerked as though she had felt the deckmaster's flail again.

"I hope he did not damage your deck too badly, Turane," Zaida said. Harine sipped wine to hide her small smile. Apparently the man was to be made to wait a little, at least.

"Not at all, Shipmistress." Turane sounded surprised. "The gateway opened a good foot above the deck, and he stepped through from one of the city's docks."

"Yes," Shalon whispered. "I can see how to do that." She thought anything to do with the Power was wonderful.

"That must have a shock, seeing a stone dock above your quarterdeck," Zaida said. "Very well. I will see whether the Coramoor has sent me a scabrous drunkard. Send him in, Turane. But do not rush. Amylia, am I to get any wine before nightfall?"

The Aes Sedai gasped and, making little whimpers as if on the point of tears, rushed to fetch a goblet as Turane bowed and left. Light, what *had* Amylia done? Long moments passed, and Zaida had her wine well before a large man with dark hair curling to his broad shoulders entered the cabin. He certainly was not scabrous, nor did he appear drunk. The high collar of his black coat held a silver pin in the shape of a sword on one side, and on the other a red-and-gold pin shaped like one of the creatures that entwined the Coramoor's forearms. A dragon. Yes, that was what it was called. A round pin fastened to his left shoulder showed three golden crowns against blue enamel. A sigil, perhaps? Was he a shorebound noble? Could the Coramoor actually have done Zaida honor in sending this man? Knowing Rand al'Thor as she did, she doubted it had been intentional. It was not that he tried to dishonor anyone, yet he cared little for the honors of others.

He bowed to Zaida, handling the sword at his side smoothly, but he failed to touch heart and lips and forehead. Still, some shortcomings had to be overlooked with the shorebound. "I apologize if I arrive late, Shipmistress," he said, "but it seemed unnecessary to come before all of your number were here." He must have a very good looking glass to have observed that from the docks.

Studying him up and down with a frown, Zaida sipped her wine. "You have a name?"

"I am Logain," he said simply.

Half the women in the room exhaled sharply, and most of the rest let their jaws drop. More than one slopped wine from her goblet. Not Zaida, and not Harine, but the others. Logain. That was a name known even to the Atha'an Miere.

"May I speak, Shipmistress?" Amylia asked breathily. She was clutching the porcelain pitcher so hard that Harine feared it might shatter in her hands, but the woman had learned enough sense to say no more until Zaida nodded. Then words spilled from her in a breathless rush. "This man was a false Dragon. He was gentled for it. How it is he can channel again, I cannot know, but he channels *saidin*. *Saidin*! He is tainted, Shipmistress. If you deal with him, you will incur the wrath of the White Tower. I know—"

"Enough," Zaida cut in. "You should be well aware by now how much I fear the wrath of the White Tower."

"But—!" Zaida held up a single finger, and the Aes Sedai's mouth snapped shut, her lips twisting in a sickly fashion. That one word might lead to her kissing the deckmaster's sister again, and she knew it.

"What she says is true in part," Logain said calmly. "I am an Asha'man, but there is no taint any longer. *Saidin* is clean. The Creator decided to show us mercy, it seems. I have a question for her. Whom do you serve, Aes Sedai, Egwene al'Vere or Elaida a'Roihan?" Wisely, Amylia kept her mouth shut.

"For the next year, she serves *me*, Logain," Zaida said firmly. The Aes Sedai squeezed her pale eyes shut for a moment, and when they opened again, they were even wider than before, impossible as that seemed, and they held a look of horror. Was it possible she had believed Zaida might relent and let her go early? "You can confine your questions to me," the Shipmistress went on, "but first, I have two for you. Where is the Coramoor? I must send an ambassador to him, and he must keep her close, in accordance with the Bargain. Remind him of that. And what message do you bring from him? A request for some service, I suppose."

"As to where he is, I cannot say." The man smiled slightly, as if he had made a joke. He smiled!

"I demand," Zaida began, but he cut her off, provoking angry mutters and hot glares from the other women. The fool seemed to think he was an equal to the Mistress of the Ships!

"He wants his whereabouts kept secret for now, Shipmistress. The Forsaken have made efforts to kill him. I am willing to take Harine din Togara with me, however. From what I heard, I think he found her acceptable."

Harine jerked so hard she spilled wine over the back of her hand, then took another long swallow. But, no, Zaida would divorce Amel and marry a ballast stone before she sent Harine din Togara as her ambassador. Still, even the thought of it was enough to make her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth. Even becoming Mistress of the Ships might be insufficient recompense for being forced to endure Cadsuane any longer.

Studying Logain with a stony face, Zaida told Amylia to pour wine for him. The Aes Sedai flinched, and by the time she reached the table, she was trembling so hard that the pitcher's spout clattered on the rim of the goblet. Almost as much wine went onto the deck as inside the goblet. Strangely, Logain walked over to her and put his hands on hers to steady her. Was he one of those who could not leave others to do their own work?

"You've nothing to fear from me, Amylia Sedai," he told her. "It's been a long time since I ate anyone for breakfast." She stared up at him with her mouth hanging open as though uncertain whether he was making a joke.

"And the service he requests?" Zaida said.

"Not a request, Shipmistress." He had to straighten the pitcher to keep the goblet from overflowing. Taking the goblet, he stepped away from Amylia, but she stood gaping at his back. Light, but the woman found no end of ways to get into trouble. "A call on your side of the Bargain with the Coramoor. Among other things, you promised him ships, and he needs ships to carry food and other supplies to Bandar Eban from Illian and Tear."

"That can be done," Zaida said, not quite masking her relief, though she shot a frown at Harine. Pelanna glared as well, of course, but so did Lacine and Niolle and several others. Harine suppressed a sigh.

Some of the details of the Bargain were quite onerous, she had to admit, such as the requirement that the Mistress of the Ships be prepared to attend *him* up to three times in any two years. The Jendai Prophecy said the Atha'an Miere were to serve the Coramoor, yet few opinions of how they were to serve included the Mistress of the Ships going running when he called. But the others had not been there, bargaining with Aes Sedai convinced that she had no alternative to making whatever Bargain she could. Truth of the Light, it was a wonder she had gotten as much as she had!

“Supplies for more than a million people, Shipmistress,” Logain added as casually as if he were asking for another goblet of wine. “How many more, I cannot say, but Bandar Eban itself is starving. The ships must arrive as soon as possible.”

Shock rippled through the cabin. Harine was not alone in taking a long drink of wine. Even Zaida’s eyes widened in amazement. “That might require more rakers than we possess,” she said at last, unable to keep the incredulity from her voice.

Logain shrugged as though that were of no account. “Even so, that is what he requires of you. Use other ships if you must.”

Zaida stiffened in her chair. Required. Bargain or no Bargain, that was imprudent language to use with her.

Turane slipped into the cabin again, and in breach of all protocol, ran to Zaida, her bare feet slapping the deck. Bending close, she whispered into the Shipmistress’s ear. Zaida’s face slowly took on a look of horror. She half-raised her scent box, then shuddered and let it fall to her bosom.

“Send her in,” she said. “Send her in immediately. There is news to make an anchor weep,” she went on as Turane raced from the cabin. “I will let you hear it from she who brought it. You must wait,” she added when Logain opened his mouth. “You must wait.” He had sufficient sense to hold his peace, but not enough to hide his impatience, stalking to the side of the cabin to stand with his mouth tight and his brows drawn down.

The young woman who entered and bowed deeply to Zaida was tall and lean, and she might have been lovely except that her face was haggard. Her blue linen blouse and green trousers looked as if they had been worn for days, and she swayed on her feet with weariness. Her honor chain held only a handful of medallions, as befitted her youth, yet Harine could see that no fewer than *three* commended acts of great courage.

“I am Cemeille din Selaan Long Eyes, Shipmistress,” she said hoarsely, “Sailmistress of the darter *Wind Racer*. I sailed as fast as I could, but I fear it is too late for anything to be done. I stopped at every island between Tremalking and here, but I was always too late.” Tears began to trickle down her cheeks, yet she seemed unaware of them.

“Tell the First Twelve your sad news in your own way, at your own pace,” Zaida said gently. “Amylia, give her wine!” Not gently said at all. The Aes Sedai leaped to obey.

“Almost three weeks ago,” Cemeille said, “Amayar on Tremalking began asking the gift of passage to every island. Always a man and a woman to each island. Those who asked for Aile Somera requested they be put off in boats out of sight of land when they were told that the Seanchan hold all of Somera.” She took a full goblet from Amylia, nodding her thanks, then drank deeply.

Harine exchanged questioning glances with Mareil, who shook her head slightly. No Amayar had ever requested the gift of passage in Harine’s memory, though for them, it truly was a gift, with no gift expected in return. And they avoided the salt, keeping their small fishing boats close to shore, so asking to be put off out of sight of land was as strange as asking passage. But what could be so dire in this?

“All of the Amayar in the ports left, even those owed money from the shipyards or the ropewalks, but no one thought anything of it for two or three days.” The wine had not wet Cemeille’s throat enough to mitigate her hoarseness. She scrubbed at the tears on her cheeks with the back of her hand. “Not until we realized none had come back. The governor sent people to the Amayar villages, and they found. . . .” She squeezed her eyes shut. “The Amayar were all dead or dying. Men, women”—her voice broke—“children.”

Funeral keening rose in the cabin, and Harine was surprised to realize that shrill sound was coming from her mouth, too. Sad enough to make an anchor weep? This should make the heavens sob. No wonder the Sailmistress was hoarse. How many hours, how many days, had she cried since learning of this catastrophe?

“How?” Pelanna demanded when the keening died. Face distraught, she leaned forward in her chair. She was holding her scent box to her nose as if the scent could somehow ward off the stench of this news. “Some sickness? Speak, woman!”

“Poison, Wavemistress,” Cemeille replied. She struggled to compose herself, but tears still leaked down her face. “Everywhere I have been, it was the same. They gave their children a poison that put them into a deep sleep from which they did not waken. It seems there was not enough of that to go around, so many of the adults took slower poisons. Some lived long enough to be found and tell the tale. The Great Hand on Tremalking melted. The hill where it stood reportedly is now a deep hollow. It seems the Amayar had prophecies that spoke of the Hand, and when it was destroyed, they believed this signaled the end of time, what they called the end of Illusion. They believed it was time for them to leave this . . . this illusion”—she laughed the word bitterly—“we call the world.”

“Have none been saved?” Zaida asked. “None at all?” Tears glistened on her cheeks, too, but Harine could not fault her on that. Her own cheeks were wet.

“None, Shipmistress.”

Zaida stood, and tears or no tears, she held the aura of command, and her voice was steady. “The fastest ships must be sent to every island. Even to those of Aile Somera. A way must be found. When the salt first stilled after the Breaking, the Amayar asked our protection from brigands and raiders, and we owe them protection still. If we can find only a handful who still live, we still owe it.”

“This is as sad a story as I have ever heard.” Logain’s voice sounded too loud as he walked back out in front of Zaida. “But your ships are committed to Bandar Eban. If you don’t have enough rakers, then you must use your other fast ships, too. All of them if necessary.”

“Are you mad as well as heartless?” Zaida demanded. Fists on her hips and feet apart, she seemed to be standing on a quarterdeck. Her glare stabbed at Logain. “We must mourn. We must save who we can, and mourn for the countless thousands we cannot save.”

She might as well have smiled for all the effect her glares had on Logain. As he spoke, it seemed to Harine that the space turned chill and the light dimmed. She was not the only woman to hug herself against that cold. “Mourn if you must,” he said, “but mourn on the march for Tarmon Gai’don.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 23

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Call to a Sitting

With Magla and Salita out for the morning, Romanda had the patched brown tent to herself, a blessed opportunity to read, though the two mismatched brass lamps on the small table gave off a faint yet nose-wrinkling scent of rancid oil. One had to live with such things these days. Some might consider *The Flame, the Blade and the Heart* unseemly for one of her attainments and position—as a girl in Far Madding, she had been forbidden such books—but it made an agreeable change from dry histories and terrifying reports of food spoilage. She had seen a side of beef kept for months as fresh as the day the cow was slaughtered, but now the Keepings were failing one by one. Some had taken to muttering that there must be a flaw in Egwene's creation, yet that was arrant blather. If a weave worked once, then properly done, it always worked, barring something to disrupt the weave, and Egwene's new weaves always worked as claimed. She had to give the woman that. And try as they might, and they had tried very hard, no one could detect any interference. It was as if *saidar* itself were failing. It was unthinkable. And inescapable. Worst of all, no one could think of anything to do! She certainly could not. A brief interlude with tales of romance and adventure was much preferable to contemplating utter futility and the failure of what was by its very nature unfailing.

The novice straightening the tent had sense enough not to comment on her reading, or to glance at the wood-bound book twice. Bodewhin Cauthon was quite pretty, but she was an intelligent girl even so, though she had something of her brother around the eyes and rather more of him in her head than she was willing to admit. Undoubtedly she was already hard on the path to the Green, or perhaps the Blue. The girl wanted to *live* adventure, not just read about it, as if an Aes Sedai's life would not bring her more adventure than she wished without searching for it. Romanda felt no regret over the girl's path. The Yellow would have plenty to choose from among more suitable novices. There could be no question of accepting any of the older women, of course, yet that left a wealth of choice. She tried to focus on the page. She did enjoy the story of Birgitte and Gaidal Cain.

The tent was not particularly large and was quite crowded. It held a trio of hard canvas cots barely softened by thin mattresses stuffed with lumpy wool, three ladderback chairs made by distinctly different hands, a rickety washstand with a cracked mirror and a chipped blue pitcher standing in the white basin, and, along with the table, made steady by a small block of wood under one leg, brassbound chests for clothing, bed linens and personal possessions. As a Sitter, she could have had the space to herself, but she liked being able to keep a close eye on Magla and Salita. Just because they all sat for the Yellow was no reason to trust too far. Magla supposedly was her ally in the Hall yet went her own way much too often, and Salita seldom did anything else. Still, it made for inconvenience aside from crowding. Bodewhin had a great deal of work, mainly putting away the dresses and slippers Salita scattered across the tattered carpets after deciding they would not do. That woman was frivolous enough for a Green. She went through her entire wardrobe every single morning! Likely she thought Romanda would have her serving woman straighten—she always seemed to think Aelmara was as much in her service as Romanda's—but Aelmara had served Romanda for years before she went into retirement, not to mention helping her escape Far Madding after a slight misunderstanding a short time later. There was no possibility she would require Aelmara to look after another sister as well as herself.

She frowned at the book, not seeing a word. Why in the Light had Magla insisted on Salita back in Salidar? In truth, Magla had bandied several names about, each more ridiculous than the last, but had settled on Salita once she decided the plump Tairen had the best chance of being raised to a chair. Romanda had thrown her own support behind Dagdara, a far more suitable candidate, not to mention one she thought she could sway without too much difficulty, yet she herself had been trying for a chair while Magla already held one. That carried weight, and no matter that Romanda had previously held a chair longer than anyone in living memory. Well, it was done, and that was that. What could not be cured must be endured.

Nisao ducked into the tent, the light of *saidar* around her winking out as she did so. In the brief instant before the tentflap fell shut, Sarin, her bald-headed stump of a Warder, was visible outside, a hand resting on his sword hilt and his head swiveling, plainly standing guard.

"May I speak with you alone?" the diminutive sister said. Short enough to make Sarin seem tall, she always minded Romanda of a large-eyed sparrow. There was nothing tiny about her powers of observation or her intellect, however. She had been a natural choice for the council the Ajahs created to try keeping an eye on Egwene, and it was certainly no fault of hers that said council had had little or no restraining effect on the woman.

“Of course, Nisao.” Romanda casually closed the book and eased up to tuck it beneath the yellow-tasseled cushion on her chair. It would never do to have word get around that she was reading that. “It must be almost time for your next class, Bodewhin. You don’t want to be late.”

“Oh, no, Aes Sedai! Sharina would be very upset.” Spreading her white skirts in a deep curtsy, the novice darted from the tent.

Romanda compressed her lips. *Sharina* would be upset. That woman was emblematic of all that was wrong with allowing those above eighteen into the novice ranks. Her potential was beyond incredible, but that was beside the point. Sharina Melloy was a disruption. But how to be rid of her? Her and all the other women too old to have had their names written in the novice book in the first place. Provisions were strictly limited for putting a woman out once her name was in the book. Unfortunately, over the years a number of women had been found to have lied about their age to gain entrance to the Tower. By a few years only in most cases, but allowing them to remain had set precedents. And Egwene al’Vere had set another, and worse. There had to be some way to overcome it.

“May I make us private?” Nisao asked.

“If you wish. Have you learned something about the negotiations?” Despite Egwene’s capture, talks continued under the pavilion at the foot of the bridge in Darein. Or rather, the semblance of talks. They were a farce, a dumb-show of obstinacy, yet it was necessary to keep a close eye on the negotiators. Varilin had snatched most of that work to herself, claiming Gray Ajah prerogative, but Magla found ways to wriggle into the matter whenever she could, and so did Saroiya and Takima and Faiselle. Worse than the fact that none of them seemed to trust the others to carry out the negotiations—or much at all, for that matter—at times, all of them almost seemed to be negotiating for Elaida. Well, perhaps it was not that bad. They held fast against the woman’s ridiculous demand that the Blue Ajah be dissolved and argued, if not nearly with sufficient force, for Elaida stepping down, but if she—and Lelaine, she was forced to admit—did not stiffen their backbones now and then, they might well accede to some of Elaida’s other odious conditions. Light, at times it was as if they had forgotten the entire purpose of marching on Tar Valon! “Pour us tea,” she went on, gesturing to a painted wooden tray sitting atop two stacked chests that held a silver pitcher and several battered pewter cups, "and tell me what you've heard."

The glow surrounded Nisao briefly while she warded the tent and tied off the weave. "I know nothing of the negotiations," she said, filling two of the cups. "I want to ask you to speak to Lelaine."

Romanda took the proffered cup and used taking a slow swallow to give herself time for thought. At least this tea had not yet turned. Lelaine? What could there be about Lelaine that required warding? Still, anything that gave her leverage against the other woman would be useful. Lelaine seemed entirely too smug of late for her to be entirely comfortable about it. She shifted on the seat cushion. "Regarding what? Why don't you speak to her yourself? We haven't fallen as low as it seems the White Tower has under Elaida."

"I have spoken to her. Or rather, she has spoken to me, and rather forcefully." Nisao sat down, and set her cup on the table while she arranged her yellow-slashed skirts with overly elaborate care. She wore a small frown. It seemed she was fiddling for time, too. "Lelaine demanded that I stop asking questions about Anaiya and Kairen," she said finally. "According to her, their murders are Blue Ajah business."

Romanda snorted, shifting again. The book's wooden cover was a hard lump beneath her, its corners digging into her hip. "That is utter nonsense. But why were you asking questions? I don't recall you being inquisitive about such matters."

The other woman touched her cup to her lips, but if she drank, it was the tiniest sip. Lowering the cup, she almost seemed to grow taller, she sat up so straight. A sparrow becoming a hawk. "Because the Mother ordered me to."

Romanda kept her eyebrows from rising only with an effort. So. In the beginning, she had accepted Egwene for the same reason she suspected every other Sitter had. Certainly Lelaine had done so, once she realized she could not attain the stole and staff herself. A malleable young girl would be a puppet in the hands of the Hall, and Romanda had fully intended to be the one pulling her strings. Later, it had seemed obvious that Siuan was the true puppeteer, and there had been no way to stop her short of rebelling against a second Amyrlin, which surely would have shattered the rebellion against Elaida. She hoped Lelaine had ground her teeth over that half as much as she had. Now Egwene was in Elaida's hands, yet in several meetings she had remained cool and collected, determined in her course of action and that of the sisters outside Tar Valon’s walls. Romanda found in herself a grudging respect for the girl. Very grudging, but she could not deny it. It had to be Egwene herself. The Hall kept a tight fist on the dream *ter’angreal,* and though no one could find the one Leane had been loaned before that dire night, she and Siuan had been practically at each other’s throats. There was no question of Siuan slipping into *Tel’aran’rhiod* to tell the woman what to say. Was it possible that Nisao had come to the same conclusion about Egwene without seeing her in the Unseen World? That council had stuck very close to her.

“That is reason enough for you, Nisao?” She could hardly slip the book back out without the other woman noticing. She shifted again, but there was no comfortable position on the thing. She was going to have a bruise if this continued.

Nisao twisted her pewter cup about on the tabletop, but she still did not look away. “It is my major reason. In the beginning, I thought she would end up as your pet. Or Lelaine’s. Later, when it was clear she had evaded both of you, I thought Siuan must be holding the leash, but I soon learned I was wrong. Siuan has been a teacher, I’m sure, and an advisor, and perhaps even a friend, but I’ve seen Egwene call her up short. No one has a leash on Egwene al’Vere. She is intelligent, observant, quick to learn and deft. She may become one of the great Amyrlins.” The bird-like sister gave a sudden, brief laugh. “Do you realize she will be the longest sitting Amyrlin in history? No one will ever live long enough to top her unless she chooses to step down early.” Smiles faded to solemnity, and perhaps worry. Not because she had skirted the edge of violating custom, however. Nisao schooled her face well, but her eyes were tight. “If we manage to unseat Elaida, that is.”

Hearing her own thoughts thrown back at her, with emendations, was unnerving. A great Amyrlin? Well! It would take many years to see whether that came about. But whether or not Egwene managed that considerable and unlikely feat, she would discover that the Hall was much less amenable once her war powers expired. Romanda Cassin certainly would be. Respect was one thing, becoming a lapdog quite another. Standing on the pretext of straightening her deep yellow skirts, she drew the book from beneath the cushion as she sat back down and tried to drop it surreptitiously. It hit the carpet with a thud, and Nisao's eyebrows twitched. Romanda ignored that, pulling the book under the edge of the table with her foot.

"We will." She put more confidence than she felt into that. The peculiar negotiations and Egwene's continuing imprisonment gave her pause, forget the girl's claims that she could undermine Elaida from within. Though it seemed half her work had been done by others, if her reporting on the situation in the Tower was accurate. But Romanda believed because she had to believe. She had no intention of living cut off from her Ajah, accepting penance until Elaida thought her *fit* to be fully Aes Sedai again, no intention of accepting Elaida a'Roihan as Amyrlin. Better Lelaine than that, and one argument in her own mind for raising Egwene had been that it kept the stole and staff from Lelaine. No doubt Lelaine had thought the same concerning her. "And I will inform Lelaine in no uncertain terms that you can ask any questions you wish. We *must* solve those murders, and the murder of any sister is every sister's concern. What have you learned so far?" Not a proper question, perhaps, but being a Sitter gave you certain privileges. At least, she had always believed it did.

Nisao displayed no pique at being questioned, no hesitation in answering. "Very little, I fear," she said ruefully, frowning at her winecup. "It seemed there must be some link between Anaiya and Kairen, some reason they two were picked out, but all I've learned so far is that they had been close friends for many years. Blues called them and another Blue sister, Cabriana Mecandes, 'the Three,' because they were so close. But they were all closemouthed, too. No one recalls any of them talking about their own affairs except with one another. In any event, friendship seems a feeble motive for murder. I hope I can find some reason why anyone would want to murder them, especially a man who can channel, but I confess, it's a small hope."

Romanda furrowed her brow. Cabriana Mecandes. She paid little attention to the other Ajahs—only the Yellow had any truly useful function; how could any of their passions compare to Healing?—yet that name chimed a small gong in the back of her head. Why? It would come to her or not. It could not be important. "Small hopes can grow surprising fruit, Nisao. That's an old saying in Far Madding, and it's true. Continue your investigation. In Egwene's absence, you may report what you learn to me."

Nisao blinked, and her jaw tightened briefly, but whether or not reporting to Romanda sat well with her, there was little she could do but obey. She could hardly claim interference in her affairs. Murder could not be one sister's affair. Besides, Magla might have gotten her ridiculous choice for the third Yellow Sitter, yet Romanda had secured the position of First Weaver for herself easily. After all, she had been head of the Yellow before she retired, and even Magla had been unwilling to stand against her. The position carried much less power than she would have liked, but at least she could count on obedience in most things. From Yellow sisters if not Sitters, at least.

As Nisao untied her ward against eavesdropping and let it dissipate, Theodrin popped into the tent. She was wearing her shawl spread across her shoulders and down her arms to display the long fringe, as newly raised sisters often did. The willowy Domani had chosen Brown after Egwene granted her that shawl, but the Brown had not known what to do with her despite finally accepting her. They had seemed ready to largely ignore her, entirely the wrong thing, so Romanda had taken her in. Theodrin tried to behave as if she really were Aes Sedai, yet she was a bright, levelheaded girl for all that. She spread her brown woolen skirts in a curtsy. A small curtsy, but a curtsy. She was well aware that she had no right to the shawl until she had been tested. And passed. It would have been cruel not to make sure she understood.

"Lelaine has called a sitting of the Hall," she said breathlessly. "I couldn't find out why. I ran to tell you, but I didn't want to intrude while the ward was up."

"And rightly not," Romanda said. "Nisao, if you will excuse me, I must see what Lelaine is about." Gathering her yellow-fringed shawl from atop one of the chests holding her clothing, she arranged it over her arms and checked her hair in the cracked mirror before herding the others outside and seeing them on their way. It was not so much that she thought Nisao would have looked for what had made that thud if left in the tent alone, but it was better to take no chances. Aelmara would replace the book where it belonged, with several similar volumes in the chest that held Romanda's personal possessions. That had a very stout lock with only two keys, one kept in her belt pouch, the other in Aelmara's.

The morning was crisp, yet spring had arrived with a rush. The dark clouds massing behind Dragonmount's shattered peak would deliver rain rather than snow, though not on the camp, it was to be hoped. Many of the tents leaked, and the camp streets were a bog already. Horse carts making deliveries splashed mud from their high wheels as they made new ruts, driven by women for the most part, and a few gray-haired men. Male access to the Aes Sedai camp was strictly limited, now. Even so, nearly every sister she saw glided along the uneven wooden walkways wrapped in the light of *saidar* and followed by her Warder if she had one. Romanda refused to embrace the Source whenever she went outside—someone had to set an example of proper behavior with every sister in the camp on tenterhooks—yet she was very conscious of the lack. Conscious of the lack of a Warder, too. Keeping most men out of the camp was all very well, but a murderer was unlikely to pay any heed to the restriction.

Ahead, Gareth Bryne rode out of a crossing street, a stocky man with mostly gray hair, his breastplate strapped over a buff-colored coat and his helmet hanging from his saddle bow. Siuan was with him, swaying on a plump shaggy mare and looking such a pretty girl that it was almost possible to forget she had been hard-bitten and sharp-tongued as Amyrlin. Easy to forget she was still an accomplished schemer. Blues always were. The mare plodded along, but Siuan nearly fell off before Bryne reached out to steady her. At the edge of the Blue quarters—the camp was laid out in rough approximation of the Ajah quarters in the Tower—he dismounted long enough to help her down, then climbed back into his bay's saddle and left her standing there holding the mare's reins and gazing after him. Now, why would she do that? Blacking the man's boots, doing his laundry. That relationship was abhorrent. The Blue should put an end to it, and to the Pit of Doom with custom. However strong, custom should not be abused to hold all Aes Sedai up to ridicule.

Turning her back on Siuan, she started toward the pavilion that served as their temporary Hall of the Tower. As pleasant as it was to meet in the true Hall, not to mention under Elaida's very nose, few sisters could manage to put themselves to sleep at any hour, so the pavilion must continue to serve. She glided along the walkway without haste. She was not about to be seen hurrying to answer Lelaine's call. What *could* the woman want now?

A gong sounded, magnified with the Power so it carried across the camp clearly—another of Sharina's suggestions—and suddenly the walkways were crowded with novices hurrying to their next class or to chores, all clustered by family. Those families of six or seven always attended class together, did chores together, in fact, did everything together.

It was an effective way to manage so many novices—nearly fifty more had wandered into the camp in just the last two weeks, pushing the total back near a thousand in spite of runaways, and almost a quarter of those were young enough to be proper novices, more than the Tower had held in centuries!—yet she wished it were not Sharina's work. The woman had not even suggested it to the Mistress of Novices. She had organized the thing herself and presented it to Tiana whole and complete! The novices, some of them graying or with lines in their faces so that it was difficult to think of them as children despite their white dresses, squeezed to the edge of the walkway to let sisters pass while they offered curtsies, but none stepped into the muddy street to make more room. Sharina again. *Sharina* had spread the word that she did not want to see the girls dirtying their nice white woolens unnecessarily. It was enough to make Romanda grind her teeth. The novices who curtsied to *her* straightened hurriedly and practically ran.

Ahead of her, she spotted Sharina herself, talking to Tiana, who was shrouded in the glow of *saidar*. Doing all of the talking, with Tiana merely nodding now and then. There was nothing disrespectful in Sharina's demeanor, but despite novice white, with her creased face and gray hair in a tight bun on the back of her head, she looked exactly what she was, a grandmother. And Tiana had an unfortunately youthful appearance. Something about her bone structure and large brown eyes overwhelmed the ageless look of Aes Sedai. Lack of disrespect or no, there was too much appearance of a woman instructing her granddaughter to suit Romanda. As she approached them, Sharina offered a proper curtsy—a very proper curtsy, Romanda had to admit—and hurried off the other way to join her own family, waiting for her. Were there fewer lines in her face than there had been? Well, there was no saying what might happen when a woman began with the Power at her age. Sixty-seven and a novice!

"Is she giving you difficulties?" she asked, and Tiana leaped as though an icicle had slid down the back of her dress. The woman lacked the dignity, the gravity, necessary in a Mistress of Novices. At times, she seemed smothered by the number of her charges, too. And she was much too lenient besides, accepting excuses where there could be none.

She recovered quickly, however, falling in beside Romanda, though she smoothed her dark gray skirts unnecessarily. "Difficulties? Of course not. Sharina is the best-behaved novice in the book. Truth to tell, most are well-behaved. The greatest number sent to my study are mothers upset because their daughters are learning faster than they or have a higher potential, or aunts with the same complaint of nieces. They seem to believe the matter can be rectified somehow. They can be surprisingly adamant about it until I set them straight about being adamant with any sister. Although a good many have been sent to me more than once, I fear. A handful still seem surprised that they can be switched."

"Is that so," Romanda said absently. Her eye had caught pale-haired Delana hurrying in the same direction, gray-fringed shawl looped over her arms and her so-called secretary striding at her side. Delana wore an almost somber dark gray, but the Saranov trollop was in blue-slashed green silk that left half her bosom on display and fit much too snugly over hips that she rolled blatantly. Of late, the pair of them seemed to have abandoned the story that Halima was merely Delana's servant. Indeed, the woman was gesturing emphatically while Delana merely nodded in the meekest manner imaginable. Meek! It was always a mistake to choose a pillow-friend who did not wear the shawl. Especially if you were fool enough to let her take the lead.

"Sharina isn't only well-behaved," Tiana continued blithely, "she is showing a great skill with Nynaeve's new way of Healing. Like a number of the older novices. Most were village Wise Women of one sort or another, though I don't see how that can have any bearing. One was a noble in Murandy."

Romanda tripped over her own heel and staggered two steps, arms flailing for balance, before she could catch herself and gather her shawl. Tiana put a hand on her arm to steady her, murmuring about the unevenness of the walkway's planking, but she shook it off. *Sharina* had a gift for the new Healing? And a *number* of the older women? She herself had learned the new way, but while it was different enough from the old that the second-learned weave limitation seemed not to apply, she had no great gift for it. Not nearly what she had for the old method.

"And why are *novices* being allowed to practice that, Tiana?"

Tiana flushed, as well she should. Such weaves were much too complex for novices, not to mention dangerous if misapplied. Done improperly, Healing could kill rather than cure. The woman channeling as well as the patient. "I can hardly stop them from seeing Healing done, Romanda," she said defensively, moving her arms as if adjusting a shawl she was not wearing. “There are always broken bones or some fool who’s managed to cut himself badly, not to mention all the illness we have to deal with lately. Most of the older women only have to see a weave once to have it down.” Abruptly, for a bare instant, red returned to her cheeks. Smoothing her face, she drew herself up, and defensiveness fell away from her voice. “In any event, Romanda, I shouldn’t need to remind you that the novices and Accepted are mine. As Mistress of Novices, *I* decide what they can learn and when. Some of those women could test for Accepted today, after only months. When it comes to the Power, at least. If I choose not to make them twiddle their thumbs idly, it is my decision to make.”

“Perhaps you should run to see whether Sharina has any further instructions for you,” Romanda said coldly.

Spots of crimson staining her cheeks, Tiana turned on her heel and strode away without another word. Not quite forbidden rudeness, but close. Even from behind she was the image of indignation, her back stiff as an iron rod, her steps quick. Well, Romanda was willing to admit she had come near rudeness herself. But with cause.

Trying to put the Mistress of Novices out of her mind, she set out toward the pavilion again, but had to restrain herself to keep from walking as fast as Tiana. Sharina. And *several* of the other older women. Should she rethink her position? No. Of course not. Their names should never have been allowed in the novice book in the first place. Yet their names were there, and it seemed they had mastered this wonderful new Healing. Oh, it was a tangled snarl. She did not want to think about it. Not now.

The pavilion stood at the heart of the camp, a much-patched piece of heavy canvas surrounded by a walkway three times as wide as any of the others. Holding her skirts well up out of the mud, she hurried across to it. She did not mind haste when it got her out of the mud more quickly. Even so, Aelmara would have a time cleaning her shoes. And her petticoats, she thought as she let her skirts down, decently concealing her ankles once more.

Word of the Hall sitting always drew sisters hoping for news of the negotiations or of Egwene, and a good fifty or more were already gathered around the pavilion with their Warders, or standing just inside, behind where their Sitters would sit. Even here, most shone with the Light of the Power. As if they were in any danger surrounded by other Aes Sedai. She found herself with a strong urge to walk around the pavilion boxing ears.

That was impossible, of course. Even if custom could be set aside, which she had no desire to do, a chair in the Hall gave no authority for such a thing.

Sheriam, the narrow blue stole of the Keeper vivid on her shoulders, stood out in the crowd, in part because there was a clear space around her. Other sisters were avoiding looking at her, much less approaching her. The flame-haired woman embarrassed many of the sisters, appearing every time the Hall was called to sit as she did. The law was quite clear. Any sister could attend a sitting of the Hall unless it was closed, yet the Amyrlin could not enter the Hall of the Tower without being announced by the Keeper, and the Keeper was not allowed in without the Amyrlin. Sheriam's green eyes were tight, as usual, and she fidgeted in an unbecoming manner, like a novice who knew she was due another visit to the Mistress of Novices. At least she was not embracing the Source, and her Warder was nowhere in sight.

Before stepping beneath the pavilion, Romanda glanced over her shoulder and sighed. The great bulk of black clouds behind Dragonmount was gone. Not drifting apart, simply gone entirely. Very likely there would be another wave of panic among the grooms and laborers, and the serving women. Surprisingly, the novices seemed to take these strange occurrences more in stride. Perhaps that was because they were trying to take their cues from the sisters, but she suspected Sharina's hand again. What *was* she to do about the woman?

Inside, eighteen cloth-covered boxes, colored for the six Ajahs represented in the camp, made platforms for polished benches, two slanting rows atop the layered carpets, widening toward a box covered with stripes in all seven colors. Wisely, Egwene had insisted on including red despite considerable opposition. Where Elaida seemed determined to divide every Ajah from every other, Egwene was determined to hold them all together, including the Red. The wooden bench atop that platform had the Amyrlin's seven-striped stole laid across it. No one claimed responsibility for placing it there, but no one had removed it, either. Romanda was uncertain whether it was meant to be a reminder of Egwene al'Vere, the Amyrlin Seat, an echo of her presence, or a reminder that she was absent and a prisoner. How it was seen doubtless depended on the sister looking.

She was not the only Sitter taking her time to answer Lelaine's call. Delana was there, of course, slumped on her bench and rubbing the side of her nose, her watery blue eyes pensive. Once, Romanda had considered her levelheaded. Unsuitable for a chair, but levelheaded. At least she had not allowed Halima to follow her into the Hall and continue her harangue. Or rather, at least Halima had chosen not to. No one who had heard the woman shouting at Delana possessed any doubts who gave the orders there. Lelaine herself was already on her bench, just below the Amyrlin's, a slender, hard-eyed woman in blue-slashed silk who rationed her smiles tightly. Which made it doubly odd that now and then she glanced toward the seven-colored stole and gave a small smile. That smile made Romanda uneasy, and few things could do that. Moria, in blue wool embroidered with silver, was striding up and down in front of the blue-covered platforms. Was her frown because she knew why Lelaine had called the Hall and disapproved, or because she was worried over not knowing?

"I saw Myrelle walking with Llyw," Malind said, hitching up her green-fringed shawl as Romanda entered the pavilion, "and I don't think I've ever seen a sister looking so harassed." Despite the sympathy in her tone, her eyes sparkled and her full lips quirked with amusement. "How did you ever talk her into bonding him? I was there when someone suggested it to her, and I vow, she turned *pale*. The man could almost pass for an Ogier."

"I expressed myself forcefully on duty." Faiselle, stocky and square-faced, was forceful in everything; in truth, a hammer of a woman. She mocked every tale of seductive Domani. "I pointed out that Llyw had been becoming more and more dangerous to himself and others since Kairen died, and I told her it couldn't be allowed to continue. I made her see that as the only sister ever to save two other Warders in the same circumstances, she was the only choice to try doing it again. I'll admit I had to twist her arm a little, but she eventually saw the right of the matter."

"How under the Light could you twist Myrelle's arm?" Malind leaned forward eagerly.

Romanda passed them by. How *could* anyone have twisted Myrelle's arm? No. No gossip.

Janya was on her bench for the Brown, squinting in thought. At least, she was squinting, but the woman always seemed to be thinking of something else even when she was talking to you. Maybe her eyes were bad. The rest of the benches still stood empty, though. Romanda wished she had been more leisurely. She would much rather have been the last to arrive than one of the first.

After a moment's hesitation, she approached Lelaine. "Would you care to give an idea of why you called the Hall?"

Lelaine smiled down at her, an amused smile, yet unpleasant even so. "You might as well wait until we have enough Sitters to proceed. I don't care to repeat myself. I will tell you this much. It will be dramatic." Her eyes drifted to the striped stole, and Romanda felt a chill.

She did not let it show, however, merely taking her bench across from Lelaine. She could not help glancing uneasily at the stole herself. Was this some move to unseat Egwene? It seemed unlikely the other woman could say anything that would convince her to stand for the greater consensus. Or many of the other Sitters, since that would throw them back to the struggle between her and Lelaine for control and weaken their position against Elaida. Yet Lelaine's air of confidence was unnerving. She schooled her features to calmness and waited. There was nothing else to do.

Kwamesa all but darted into the pavilion, her sharp-nosed face chagrined at not being first to arrive, and joined Delana. Salita appeared, dark and cool-eyed in yellow-slashed green embroidered with yellow scrollwork on the bosom, and suddenly there was a rush. Lyrelle glided in, graceful and elegant in brocaded blue silk, to take her place with the Blues, then Saroiya and Aledrin with their heads together, the blocky Domani seeming almost slender alongside the stout Taraboner. As they took their places on the White benches, fox-faced Samalin joined Faiselle and Malind, and tiny Escaralde scurried in. She scurried! The woman was from Far Madding, too. She should know better how to behave.

"Varilin is in Darein, I believe," Romanda said as Escaralde climbed up beside Janya, "but even if some others arrive later, we have more than eleven. Are you content to begin, Lelaine, or do you wish to wait?"

"I am content to begin."

"Do you wish a formal sitting?"

Lelaine smiled again. She was being very free with those this morning. They did nothing to warm her face. "That won't be necessary, Romanda." She rearranged her skirts slightly. "But I ask that what is said here be Sealed to the Hall for the time being." A murmur rose from the growing crowd of sisters standing behind the benches and those outside the pavilion. Even some of the Sitters showed surprise. If the sitting was not formal, what need could there be to restrict knowledge of what was said so closely?

Romanda nodded as though it were the most reasonable request in the world, though. “Let all depart who do not hold a chair. Aledrin, will you make us private?”

Despite dark yellow hair of a silky texture and large, liquid brown eyes, the Taraboner White fell short of pretty, but she had a good head on her shoulders, which was far more important. Standing, she seemed uncertain whether she should speak the formal words, and finally contented herself with weaving the ward against eavesdropping around the pavilion and holding it. The murmuring faded as sisters and Warders passed through that ward, until the last was gone and silence fell. They stood in ranks shoulder-to-shoulder on the walkway watching, however, the Warders all crowded to the rear so everyone could see.

Adjusting her shawl, Lelaine stood. “A Green sister was brought to me when she came asking for Egwene.” The Green Sitters stirred, exchanging glances, no doubt wondering why the sister was not brought to them instead. Lelaine affected not to notice. “Not for the Amyrlin Seat, for Egwene al’Vere. She has a proposal that meets some of our needs, though she was reluctant to say very much of it to me. Moria, will you bring her so she can present her proposal to the Hall?” She resumed her seat.

Moria left the pavilion still frowning, and the crowd outside opened enough to let her through. Romanda could see sisters trying to question her, but she ignored them, disappearing across the street and into the Blue Ajah quarters. Romanda had a dozen questions she would have liked to ask in the interval, but informal session or not, questions would have been improper at this point. The Sitters did not wait in silence, however. At every Ajah except the Blue, women stepped down so they could come together and speak in low voices. Except the Blue and the Yellow. Salita climbed down and walked over to Romanda’s platform, but Romanda raised a hand slightly as soon as she opened her mouth.

“What is there to discuss until we know what the proposal is, Salita?”

The Tairen Sitter’s round face was as unreadable as a stone, but after a moment she nodded and resumed her seat. She was not unintelligent, far from it. Just unsuitable.

At last Moria returned leading a tall woman in dark green, her dark hair pulled back severely from a stern ivory face and held by a silver comb, and everyone climbed back to their benches. Three men with swords at their hips trailed after her through the watching sisters and into the pavilion.

Unusual, that. Very unusual when matters had been Sealed to the Hall. Romanda paid them little mind at first, though. She had had no real interest in Warders since her last had died, a good many years earlier. But someone among the Greens gasped, and Aledrin squeaked. She actually squeaked! And she was staring at the Warders. That had to be what they were, and not only because they were heeling the Green. There was no mistaking a Warder's deadly grace.

Romanda took a longer look, and nearly gasped herself. They were disparate men, alike only in the way a leopard was like a lion, but one, a pretty, sun-dark boy with his hair in belled braids, garbed all in black, wore a pair of pins on the tall collar of his coat. A silver sword, and a sinuous, maned creature in red and gold. She had heard enough descriptions to know she was looking at an Asha'man. An Asha'man who had been bonded, apparently. Gathering her skirts, Malind jumped down and rushed out into the crowd of sisters. Surely she was not *frightened*. Although Romanda admitted to a hint of unease herself, if only *to* herself.

"You are not one of us," Janya said, speaking up where she should not as always. She leaned forward, squinting at the new-come sister. "Should I take it you have not come here to join us?"

The Green's mouth twisted in obvious distaste. "You take it correctly," she said in a strong Taraboner accent. "My name is Merise Haindehl, and me, I will stand with no sister who wishes to contend against other sisters while the world hangs in the balance. Our enemy, it is the Shadow, not women who wear the shawl as we do." Mutters rose in the pavilion, some angry, some, Romanda thought, shamed.

"If you disapprove of what we do," Janya went on, as if she had a right to speak before Romanda, "why do you bring us any sort of proposal?"

"Because the Dragon Reborn, he asked Cadsuane, and Cadsuane, she asked me," Merise replied. The Dragon Reborn? The tension in the Hall was suddenly palpable, but the woman continued as if she were senseless to it. "Properly, it is not my proposal. Jahar, speak to them."

The sun-dark youth stepped forward, and as he passed her, Merise reached up to pat him on the shoulder encouragingly. Romanda's respect for her rose. To bond an Asha'man was accomplishment enough. To pat one as you might a hunting hound took a level of courage and self-confidence she herself was unsure she possessed.

The boy strode to the center of the pavilion staring at the bench where the Amyrlin's stole lay, then turned about slowly, running his gaze over the Sitters with an air of challenge. It came to Romanda that he was unafraid, too. An Aes Sedai held his bond, he was alone and surrounded by sisters, yet if there was a scrap of fear in him, he had it under complete control. "Where is Egwene al'Vere?" he demanded. "I was ordered to lay the offer before her."

"Manners, Jahar," Merise murmured, and his face colored.

"The Mother is unavailable at the moment," Romanda said smoothly. "You can tell us, and we will tell her as soon as we can. This offer comes from the Dragon Reborn?" And Cadsuane. But learning what *that* woman was doing in company with the Dragon Reborn was secondary.

Instead of answering, he snarled and spun to face Merise. "A man just tried to listen in," he said. "Or maybe it was that Forsaken who killed Eben."

"He is right." Aledrin's voice was unsteady. "At least, something touched my warding, and it wasn't *saidar*."

"He's *channeling*?" someone said incredulously. A flurry broke out of Sitters shifting on the benches, and the light of the Power enveloped several.

Abruptly, Delana stood. "I need a breath of fresh air," she said, glowering at Jahar as though she wanted to rip his throat out.

"There's no need to be uneasy," Romanda said, though she was not sure herself, but Delana, wrapped in her shawl, hurried from the pavilion.

Malind passed her coming in, as did Nacelle, a tall slender Malkieri, one of the handful remaining in the Tower. A good many had died in the years after Malkier fell to the Shadow, letting themselves be pulled into schemes to avenge their native land, and replacements had been few and far between since. Nacelle was not particularly intelligent, but then, Greens did not need intelligence, only courage.

"This session has been Sealed to the Hall, Malind," Romanda said sharply.

"Nacelle needs only moments," Malind replied, rubbing her hands together. Irritatingly, she did not even bother to look at Romanda, keeping her eyes on the other Green. "This is her first chance to test a new weave. Go ahead, Nacelle. Try it."

The glow of *saidar* appeared around the slim Green. Shocking! The woman neither asked permission nor told them what weave she intended, although tight strictures held on what uses of the Power were allowed in the Hall. Channeling all of the Five Powers, she wove around the Asha’man something that seemed akin to the weave for detecting residues, a thing Romanda had small facility for. Nacelle’s blue eyes widened. “He is channeling,” she breathed. “Or at least holding *saidin*.”

Romanda’s eyebrows climbed. Even Lelaine gasped. Finding a man who could channel was always a matter of reading the residues of what he had done, then arduously narrowing the suspects down to the true culprit. Or rather, it had been. This was truly wondrous. Or would have been before men who could channel started wearing black coats and strutting around openly. Still, it negated one advantage those men had always had over Aes Sedai. The Asha’man seemed not to care. His lip curled in what might have been a sneer.

“Can you tell what he is channeling?” she asked, and disappointingly, Nacelle shook her head.

“I thought I’d be able to, but no. On the other hand. . . . You there, Asha’man. Extend a flow toward one of the Sitters. Nothing dangerous, mind, and do not touch her.” Merise glowered at her, fists planted on her hips. Maybe Nacelle failed to realize he was one of her Warders. She certainly gestured at him in peremptory fashion.

A stubborn cast to his eyes, Jahar opened his mouth.

“Do it, Jahar,” Merise said. “He is mine, Nacelle, but I will let you give him an order. This once.” Nacelle looked shocked. Apparently she *had* failed to realize.

For the Asha’man’s part, that stubborn look remained, yet he must have obeyed because Nacelle clapped her hands delightedly and laughed.

“Saroiya,” she said excitedly. “You extended a flow toward Saroiya. The Domani White. Am I right?”

Saroiya’s coppery skin paled, and gathering her white-fringed shawl around her, she hastily slid back on her bench as far as she could. For that matter, Aledrin edged away on her own bench.

“Tell her,” Merise said. “Jahar, he can be stubborn, but he is the good boy for all that.”

“The Domani White,” Jahar agreed reluctantly. Saroiya swayed as if she were going to fall over, and he glanced at her contemptuously. “It was only Spirit, and it's gone now." Saroiya's face darkened, but whether from anger or embarrassment there was no telling.

"A remarkable discovery," Lelaine said, "and I'm sure that Merise will allow you to test further, Nacelle, but the Hall has business to conclude. I'm certain you agree, Romanda."

Romanda barely managed to stop herself from glaring. Lelaine overstepped herself too often. "If your demonstration is at an end," she said, "you may withdraw, Nacelle." The Malkieri Green was reluctant to go, perhaps because she could tell from Merise's expression that there would be no further testing—really, you would think a Green of all people would be careful with any man who might be another sister's Warder—yet she had no choice, of course. "What proposal does the Dragon Reborn have for us, boy?" Romanda asked once Nacelle was on the other side of the warding.

"This," he said, facing her proudly. "Any sister who is faithful to Egwene al'Vere may bond an Asha'man, to a total of forty-seven. You cannot ask for the Dragon Reborn, nor any man who wears the dragon, but any Soldier or Dedicated you ask cannot refuse." Romanda felt as if all the breath had been squeezed from her lungs.

"You will agree this meets our needs?" Lelaine said calmly. The woman must have known the gist of it from the start, burn her.

"I do," Romanda replied. With forty-seven men who could channel, surely they could expand their circles as far as they would go. Perhaps even a circle that included all of them. If there were limits, they would need to be worked out.

Faiselle popped to her feet, as if this were a formal sitting. "This must be debated. I call for a formal session."

"I see no need for that," Romanda told her without rising. "This is much better than . . . what we previously agreed on." There was no point in saying too much in front of the boy. Or Merise. What was her connection to the Dragon Reborn? Could she be one of the sisters said to have sworn oaths to him?

Saroiya was on her feet before the last word left Romanda's mouth. "There is still the question of covenants, to be sure we are in control. We still have not agreed on those."

"I should think the Warder bond will make any other covenants moot," Lyrelle said dryly.

Faiselle rose hurriedly, and she and Saroiya spoke atop each other. “The taint—” They stopped, staring at each other suspiciously.

“*Saidin* is clean,” Jahar said, though no one had addressed him. Merise really should teach the boy how to behave if she was going to bring him before the Hall.

“Clean?” Saroiya said derisively.

“It has been tainted for more than three thousand years,” Faiselle put in sharply. “How can be it clean?”

“Order!” Romanda snapped, trying to regain control. “Order!” She stared at Saroiya and Faiselle until they resumed their seats, then turned her attention to Merise. “Can I assume that you have linked with him?” The Green simply nodded once. She really did not like her present company, and did not want to say a word more than necessary. “Can you say that *saidin* is free of the taint?”

The woman did not hesitate. “I can. I took time to be convinced. The male half of the Power, it is more alien than you can imagine. Not the inexorable yet gentle power of *saidar*, but rather a raging sea of fire and ice whipped by a tempest. Yet I am convinced. It is clean.”

Romanda let out a long breath. A marvel to balance some of the horrors. “We are not formal, but I call the question. Who stands to accept this offer?” She was on her feet as soon as she finished, but no faster than Lelaine, and Janya beat both of them. In moments, everyone was on her feet save Saroiya and Faiselle. Outside the warding, heads turned as sisters doubtless began discussing what might have just been voted on. “The lesser consensus standing, the offer to bond forty-seven Asha’man is accepted.” Saroiya’s shoulders slumped, and Faiselle exhaled heavily.

She called for the greater consensus in the name of unity, but it did not surprise her when the pair remained firmly on their benches. After all, they had fought approaching the Asha’man at every turn, struggled despite law and custom to impede it even after it had been decided on. In any event, it was done, and without need of even a temporary alliance. Bonding would last a lifetime, of course, yet it was better than any sort of alliance. That implied too much equality.

“A peculiar number, forty-seven,” Janya mused. “May I question your Warder, Merise? Thank you. How did the Dragon Reborn come to that number, Jahar?” A very good question, Romanda thought. In the shock of achieving what they needed without any requirement for partnership, it had eluded her.

Jahar drew himself up as if he had anticipated this, and dreaded answering. His face remained hard and cold, though. “Fifty-one sisters have been bonded by Asha’man already, and four of us are bonded to Aes Sedai. Forty-seven makes the difference. There were five of us, but one died defending his Aes Sedai. Remember his name. Eben Hopwil. Remember him!”

There was a stunned silence from the benches. Romanda felt a lump of ice in her middle. Fifty-one sisters? Bonded by Asha’man? It was an abomination!

“Manners, Jahar!” Merise snapped. “Do not make me tell you again!”

Shockingly, he rounded on her. “They need to know, Merise. They need to know!” Turning back, he ran his gaze along the benches. His eyes seemed hot. He had been dreading nothing. He had been angry, and still was. “Eben was linked with his Daigian and Beldeine, with Daigian controlling the link, so when they found themselves facing one of the Forsaken, all he could do was shout, ‘She’s channeling *saidin,’* and attack her with his sword. And despite what she did to him, ruined as he was, he managed to hang on to life, hang on to *saidin*, long enough for Daigian to drive her off. So you remember his name! Eben Hopwil. He fought for his Aes Sedai long after he should have been dead!”

When he fell silent, no one spoke until Escaralde finally said, very quietly, “We will remember him, Jahar. But how did fifty-one sisters come to be . . . bonded to Asha’man?” She leaned forward as if his answer would be pitched as low.

The boy shrugged, still angry. It was of no matter to him, Asha’man bonding Aes Sedai. “Elaida sent them to destroy us. The Dragon Reborn has a standing order that no Aes Sedai can be harmed unless she tries to harm one of us first, so Taim decided to capture and bond them before they had the chance.”

So. They were Elaida’s supporters. Should that make a difference? Somehow it did, a little. But any sisters held by Asha’man brought it all back to a matter of equality, and that was intolerable.

“I have another question for him, Merise,” Moria said, and waited until the Green nodded. “Twice now, you did speak as if a woman did channel *saidin*. Why? That do be impossible.” Murmurs of agreement rippled around the pavilion.

“It might be impossible,” the boy replied coolly, “but she did it. Daigian told us what Eben said, and she couldn’t detect anything at all even while the woman was channeling. It had to be *saidin*.”

Suddenly that small chime sounded again in the back of Romanda’s head, and she knew where she had heard the name Cabriana Mecandes. “We must order the arrest of Delana and Halima immediately,” she said.

She had to explain, of course. Not even the Amrylin Seat could order the arrest of a Sitter without explanation. The murders with *saidin* of two sisters who had been close friends of Cabriana, a woman Halima had claimed friendship with as well. A female Forsaken who channeled the male half of the Power. They were hardly convinced, especially Lelaine, not until a thorough search of the camp turned up no trace of either woman. They had been seen walking toward one of the Traveling grounds with Delana and her serving woman both carrying large bundles and scurrying along behind Halima, but they were gone.

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CHAPTER 24

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Honey in the Tea

Egwene knew from the start that her strange captivity would be difficult, yet she believed that embracing pain as the Aiel did would be the easiest part. After all, she had been beaten severely when she paid her *toh* to the Wise Ones for lying, strapped by one after another in turn, so she had experience. But embracing pain did not mean just giving way to it rather than fighting. You had to draw the pain inside of you and welcome it as a part of you. Aviendha said you must be able to smile and laugh with joy or sing while the worst of the pain still gripped you. That was not so easy at all.

That first morning before dawn, in Silviana's study, she did her best while the Mistress of Novices plied a hard-soled slipper on her bared bottom. She made no effort to stifle her sobs when they came, or later her wordless howls. When her legs wanted to kick, she allowed them to flail until the Mistress of Novices trapped them under one of hers, awkwardly because of Silviana's skirts, and then she let her toes drum the floor while her head tossed wildly. She tried to draw the pain inside her, to drink it in like breath. Pain was as much a part of life as breathing. That was how the Aiel saw life. But, oh, Light, it hurt!

When she was finally allowed to straighten, after what seemed a very long time, she flinched when her shift and dress fell against her flesh. The white wool seemed heavy as lead. She attempted to welcome the scalding heat. It was hard, though. So very hard. Still, it seemed that her sobbing stopped very quickly of its own accord, and her flow of tears dried up rapidly. She did not snivel or writhe. She studied herself in the mirror on the wall, with its fading gilt. How many thousands of women had peered into that mirror over the years? Those who were disciplined in this room were always required to study their own reflection afterward and think over why they had been punished, but that was not why she did it. Her face was still red, yet already it looked . . . calm. Despite the painful heat in her bottom, she actually felt calm. Perhaps she should try singing? Perhaps not. Plucking a white linen handkerchief from her sleeve, she carefully dried her cheeks.

Silviana studied her with a look of satisfaction before replacing the slipper in the narrow cabinet opposite the mirror. "I think I got your attention from the start, or I'd have gone harder," she said dryly, patting the bun on the back of her head. “I doubt I will see you again soon in any case. You may like to know that I asked questions as you requested. Melare had already begun asking. The woman *is* Leane Sharif, though the Light knows how. . . .” Trailing off, shaking her head, she pulled her chair back around behind the writing table and sat. “She was most anxious about you, more so than about herself. You may visit her in your free time. If you have any free time. I’ll give instructions. She’s in the open cells. And now you had better run if you want anything to eat before your first class.”

“Thank you,” Egwene said, and turned toward the door.

Silviana sighed heavily. “No curtsy, child?” Dipping her pen in the silver-mounted ink jar, she began to write in the punishment ledger, a neat, precise hand. “I will see you at midday. It seems you will eat both of your first two meals back in the Tower standing.”

Egwene could have left it there, but in the night, while waiting for the Sitters to gather in the Hall in *Tel’aran’rhiod*, she had decided on the fine line she must walk. She meant to fight, yet she had to do it while appearing to go along. To some extent, at least. Within the limits she set herself. Refusing every order would mean appearing merely obstinate—and perhaps would get her confined to a cell, where she would be useless—but some commands she must not obey if she was to maintain any scrap of dignity. And that, she had to do. More than scraps. She could not allow them to deny who she was, however hard they insisted. “The Amyrlin Seat curtsies to no one,” she said calmly, knowing full well the reaction she would get.

Silviana’s face hardened, and she took up her pen again. “I will see you at the dinner hour, as well. I suggest you leave without speaking further, unless you wish to end spending the entire day over my knee.”

Egwene left without speaking. And without curtsying. A fine line, like a wire suspended over a deep pit. But she had to walk it.

To her surprise, Alviarin was pacing up and down in the hall outside, wrapped in her white-fringed shawl and hugging herself, staring at something in the unseen distance. She knew the woman was no longer Elaida’s Keeper, if not why she had been removed so suddenly. Spying in *Tel’aran’rhiod* gave only glimpses and snatches; it was an uncertain reflection of the waking world in so many ways. Alviarin must have heard her yowling, but strangely, Egwene felt no shame. She was fighting an odd battle, and in battle, you took wounds. The normally icy White did not appear so cool today. In fact, she seemed quite agitated, her lips parted and her eyes hot. Egwene offered her no courtesies, yet Alviarin only gave her a baleful glare before entering Silviana's study. A fine line.

A little down the corridor, a pair of Reds stood watching, one round-faced, the other slender, both cool-eyed, with shawls draped along their arms so the long red fringe was displayed prominently. Not the same pair who had been there when she woke, but they were not present by happenstance. They were not precisely guards, and then again, they were not precisely not guards. She did not curtsy to these, either. They watched her without expression.

Before she had taken more than half a dozen steps along the red-and-green floor tiles, she heard a woman's pained howling start up behind her, hardly muffled at all by the heavy door to Silviana's study. So Alviarin was taking a penance, and not doing well to be shrieking at the top of her lungs so soon. Unless she also was trying to embrace pain, which seemed unlikely. Egwene wished she knew *why* Alviarin was undergoing penance, if it *was* an imposed penance. A general had scouts and eyes-and-ears to inform him on his enemy. She had only her own eyes and her own ears, and what little she could learn in the Unseen World. Any scrap of knowledge might prove useful, though, so she must dig for every one possible.

Breakfast or no breakfast, she returned to her tiny room in the novice quarters long enough to wash her face in cool water at the washstand and comb her hair. That comb, which had been in her belt pouch, was among the few personal belongings she retained. In the night, the clothes she had been wearing when captured vanished, replaced by novice white, but the dresses and shifts that hung from pegs on the white wall truly were hers. Stored away when she was raised Accepted, they still carried small tags stitched with her name sewn into their hems. The Tower was never wasteful. You never knew when a new girl would fit an old set of clothes. But having nothing to wear save novice white did not make her a novice, whatever Elaida and the others believed.

Not until she was sure that her face was no longer red and she looked as collected as she felt did she leave. When you had few weapons, your appearance could be one. The same two Reds were waiting on the railed gallery to shadow her.

The dining hall where novices ate lay on the lowest level of the Tower, to one side of the main kitchen. It was a large white-walled chamber, plain though the floor tiles showed all the Ajah colors, and filled with tables, each of which could accommodate six or eight women on small benches. A hundred or more white-clad women were sitting at those tables, chattering away over breakfast. Elaida must be very set up over their number. The Tower had not held so many novices in years. Doubtless even news of the Tower breaking had been enough to put the thought of going to Tar Valon into some heads. Egwene was not impressed. These women filled barely half the dining hall if that, and there was another like it one floor up, closed now for centuries. Once she gained the Tower, that second kitchen would be opened again, and the novices still would need to eat by shifts, something unknown since well before the Trolloc Wars.

Nicola caught sight of her as soon as she walked in—the woman appeared to have been watching for her—and nudged the novices to either side. Silence slid across the tables in a wave, and every head turned as Egwene glided down the central aisle. She looked neither to left nor right.

Halfway to the kitchen door, a short slim novice with long dark hair suddenly stuck out a foot and tripped her. Catching her balance just short of falling on her face, she turned coolly. Another skirmish. The young woman had the pale look of a Cairhienin. This close, Egwene could be sure that she would be tested for Accepted unless she had other failings. But the Tower was good at rooting out such things. “What is your name?” she said.

“Alvistere,” the young woman replied, her accent confirming her face. “Why do you want to know? So you can carry tales to Silviana? It will do you no good. Everyone will say they saw nothing.”

“A pity, that, Alvistere. You want to become Aes Sedai and give up the ability to lie, yet you want others to lie for you. Do you see any inconsistency in that?”

Alvistere’s face reddened. “Who are you to lecture me?”

“I am the Amyrlin Seat. A prisoner, but still the Amyrlin Seat.” Alvistere’s big eyes widened, and whispers buzzed through the room as Egwene walked on to the kitchen. They had not believed she would still claim the title while garbed in white and sleeping among them. As well to disabuse them of that notion quickly.

The kitchen was a large, high-ceilinged room with gray-tiled floors, where the roasting spits in the long stone fireplace were still but the iron stoves and ovens radiated enough heat that she would have begun perspiring immediately had she not known how to ignore it. She had labored in this kitchen often enough, and it seemed certain she would again.

Dining halls surrounded it on three sides, for the Accepted and for Aes Sedai as well as novices. Laras, the Mistress of the Kitchens, was waddling about sweaty-faced in a spotless white apron that could have made three novice dresses, waving her long wooden spoon like a scepter as she directed cooks and under-cooks and scullions who scurried for her as fast as they would have for any queen. Perhaps faster. A queen would be unlikely to give anyone a smack with her scepter for moving too slowly.

A great deal of the food seemed to be going onto trays, sometimes worked silver, sometimes carved wood and perhaps gilded, that women carried away through the door to the sisters' main dining hall. Not kitchen serving women with the white Flame of Tar Valon on their bosoms, but dignified women in well-cut woolens with an occasional touch of embroidery, sisters' personal servants who would make the long climb back to the Ajah quarters.

Any Aes Sedai could eat in her own rooms if she wished, though it meant channeling to warm the food again, yet most enjoyed company at meals. At least, they had. That steady stream of women carrying out cloth-covered trays was a confirmation that the White Tower was spiderwebbed with cracks. She should have felt pleasure at that. Elaida stood on a platform that was ready to crumble beneath her. But the Tower *was* home. All she felt was sadness. And anger at Elaida, too. That one deserved to be pulled down simply for what she had done to the Tower since gaining the stole and staff!

Laras gave her one long look, drawing in her chin until she had a fourth, then returned to brandishing her spoon and looking over an under-cook's shoulder. The woman had helped Siuan and Leane escape, once, so her loyalties to Elaida were weak. Would she help another now? She was certainly making every effort to avoid looking in Egwene's direction again. Another under-cook, who likely did not know her from any other novice, a smiling woman still working on her second chin, handed her a wooden tray with a large, stout cup of steaming tea and a thick, white-glazed plate of bread, olives and crumbly white cheese that she carried back into the dining hall.

Silence fell again, and once more every eye centered on her. Of course. They knew she had been summoned to the Mistress of Novices. They were waiting to see whether she would eat standing. She wanted very much to ease herself onto the hard wooden bench, but she made herself sit down normally. Which reignited the flames, of course. Not as strongly as before, yet strong enough to make her shift before she could stop herself. Strangely, she felt no real desire to grimace or squirm. To stand, yes, but not the other. The pain was part of her. She accepted it without struggle. She tried to welcome it, yet that still seemed beyond her.

She tore a piece of bread—there were weevils in the flour here, too, it appeared—and slowly the conversation in the room started up again, quietly because novices were expected not to make too much noise. At her table also the talk resumed, though no one made any effort to include her. That was just as well. She was not here to make friends among the novices. Nor to have them see her as one of themselves. No, her purpose was far different.

Leaving the hall with the novices after returning her tray to the kitchen, she found another pair of Reds waiting for her. One was Katerine Alruddin, vulpine in copiously red-slashed gray, a mass of raven hair falling in waves to her waist and her shawl looped over her elbows.

“Drink this,” Katerine said imperiously, extending a pewter cup in one slim hand. “All of it, mind.” The other Red, dark and square-faced, adjusted her shawl impatiently and grimaced. Apparently she disliked acting as a serving woman even by association. Or perhaps it was dislike for what was in the cup.

Suppressing a sigh, Egwene drank. The weak forkroot tea looked and tasted like water tinged a faint brown, with just a hint of mint. Almost a memory of mint rather than the taste itself. Her first cup had been soon after waking, the Red sisters on duty eager to be done with shielding and about their own business. Katerine had let the hour slip a little, yet even without this cup, she doubted she would have been able to channel very strongly for some time yet. Certainly not with enough strength to be useful.

“I don’t want to be late for my first class,” she said, handing the cup back. Katerine took it, though she seemed surprised to realize that she had. Egwene glided on after the novices before the sister could object. Or remember to call her down for failing to curtsy.

That first class, in a plain, windowless room where ten novices occupied benches for thirty or more, was every bit the disaster she expected. Not a disaster for her, however, no matter the outcome. The instructor was Idrelle Menford, a lanky, hard-eyed woman who had already been Accepted when Egwene first came to the Tower. She still wore the white dress with the seven bands of color at hem and cuffs. Egwene took a seat at the end of a bench, once again without consideration for her tenderness. That had lessened, though not very far. Drink in the pain.

Standing on a small dais at the front of the room, Idrelle looked down her long nose with more than a spark of satisfaction at seeing Egwene in white once more. It almost softened her frown, a fixture with Idrelle. “You have all gone beyond making simple balls of fire,” she told the class, “but let’s see what our new girl is capable of. She used to think a great deal of herself, you know.” Several of the novices tittered. “Make a ball of fire, Egwene. Go on, child.” A ball of *fire*? That was one of the earliest things novices learned. What *was* she about?

Opening herself to the Source, Egwene embraced *saidar*, let it rush into her. The forkroot allowed only a trickle, a thread where she was accustomed to torrents, yet it was the Power, and trickle or no, it brought all of the life and joy of *saidar*, all the heightened awareness of herself and the room around her. Awareness of herself meant her smarting bottom suddenly felt freshly slippered again, but she did not shift. Breathe in the pain. She could smell the faint aroma of soap from the novices’ morning wash, see a tiny vein pulsing on Idrelle’s forehead. Part of her wanted to clout the woman’s ear with a flow of Air, but given the amount of the Power she commanded now, Idrelle would barely feel it. Instead, she channeled Fire and Air to produce a small ball of green fire that floated in front of her. A pale, pitiful thing it was, actually transparent.

“Very good,” Idrelle said sarcastically. Ah, yes. She had just wanted to begin by showing the novices how weak Egwene’s channeling was. “Release *saidar*. Now, class—”

Egwene added a blue ball, then a brown, and a gray, making them spin around one another.

“Release the Source!” Idrelle said brusquely.

A yellow ball joined the others, a white, and finally, a red ball. Quickly she added rings of fire one inside the other around the whirling balls. Red came first this time, because she wanted it smallest, green last and largest. Had she been able to choose an Ajah, it would have been the Green. Seven rings of fire rotated, no two in the same direction, around seven balls of fire that carried out an intricate dance at the heart. Pale and thin they might be, yet it was an impressive display beyond dividing her flows fourteen ways.

Juggling with the Power was not all that much easier than juggling with your hands.

"Stop that!" Idrelle shouted. "Stop it!" The glow of *saidar* enveloped the teacher, and a switch of Air struck Egwene hard across the back. "I said stop it!" The switch struck again, then again.

Egwene calmly kept the rings spinning, the balls dancing. After Silviana's hard-swung slipper, it was easy to drink in the pain of Idrelle's blows. If not to welcome it. Would she ever be able to smile while she was being beaten?

Katerine and the other Red appeared in the doorway. "What is going on in here?" the raven-haired sister demanded. Her companion's eyes widened when she saw what Egwene was doing. It was very unlikely that either of them could divide their flows so far.

The novices all popped to their feet and curtsied when the Aes Sedai entered, of course. Egwene remained seated.

Idrelle spread her banded skirts looking flustered. "She won't stop," she wailed. "I told her to, but she won't!"

"Stop that, Egwene," Katerine ordered firmly.

Egwene maintained her weaves until the woman opened her mouth again. Only then did she release *saidar* and stand.

Katerine's mouth snapped shut, and she took a deep breath. Her face retained its Aes Sedai serenity, but her eyes glittered. "You will run to Silviana's study and tell her that you disobeyed your instructor and disrupted a class. Go!"

Pausing long enough to straighten her skirts—when she obeyed, she must not do so with any appearance of eagerness or haste—Egwene squeezed past the two Aes Sedai and glided up the hallway.

"I told you to run," Katerine said sharply behind her.

A flow of Air struck her still sensitive bottom. Accept the pain. Another blow. Drink in the pain like breath. A third, hard enough to stagger her. Welcome the pain.

"Unhand me, Jezrail," Katerine snarled.

"I'll do no such thing," the other sister said with a strong Tairen accent. "You go too far, Katerine. A swat or two is permitted, but punishing her further belongs to the Mistress of Novices. Light, at this rate, you'll leave her unable to walk before she reaches Silviana."

Katerine breathed heavily. “Very well,” she said at last. “But she can add disobeying a sister to her list of offenses. I *will* inquire, Egwene, so don’t think you can let it slip your mind.”

When she stepped into the Mistress of Novices’ study, Silviana’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Again so soon? Fetch the slipper from the cabinet, child, and tell me what you’ve done now.”

After two more classes and two more visits to Silviana’s study—she refused to be made mock of, and if an Accepted did not want her doing a thing better than the Accepted herself could, the woman should not ask her to do it at all—plus her foreordained midday appointment between, the stern-faced woman decided that she was to have Healing to begin each day.

“Else you’ll soon be too bruised to spank without bringing blood. But don’t think this means I am going easy on you. If you require Healing *three* times a day, I’ll just spank all the harder to make up. If need be, I’ll go to the strap or the switch. Because I will make your head straight, child. Believe me on that.”

Those three classes, leaving three very embarrassed Accepted, had another result. Her teaching was shifted to sessions alone with Aes Sedai, something normally reserved for Accepted. That meant climbing the long, tapestry-lined spiraling corridors to the Ajah quarters, where sisters stood at the entrances like guards. They were guards, in truth. Visitors from other Ajahs were unwelcome, to say the least. In fact, she never saw any Aes Sedai near the quarters of another Ajah.

Except for Sitters, she seldom saw sisters in the hallways outside the quarters other than in groups, always wearing their shawls, usually with Warders following close behind, but this was not like the fear that gripped the encampment outside the walls. Here it was always sisters of the same Ajah together, and when two groups passed, they cut each other dead if they did not glare. In the worst of summer the Tower remained cool, yet the air seemed feverish and gelid when sisters of different Ajahs came too close. Even the Sitters she recognized walked quickly. The few who realized who she was gave her long, studying looks, but most appeared distracted. Pevara Tazanovni, a plumply pretty Sitter for the Red, almost walked into her one day—she was not going to jump aside, even for Sitters—but Pevara hurried on as if she had not noticed. Another time Doesine Alwain, boyishly slim if elegantly dressed, did the same while deep in conversation with another

Yellow sister. Neither glanced at her twice. She wished she had some idea who the other Yellow was.

She knew the names of the ten "ferrets" Sheriam and the others had sent into the Tower to try undermining Elaida, and she very much would have liked to make contact with them, but she did not know their faces, and asking after them would only draw attention to them. She hoped one of them would pull her aside or hand her a note, but none did. Her battle would have to be fought alone except for Leane unless she overheard something that put faces to some of those names.

She did not neglect Leane, of course. Her second night back in the Tower she went down to the open cells after supper despite her bone-deep weariness. Those half-dozen rooms in the first basement were where women who could channel were held if not to be closely confined. Each held a large cage of iron latticework that ran from stone floor to stone ceiling, with a space around it four paces wide and iron stand-lamps to provide light. At Leane's cell, two Browns were sitting on benches against the wall with a Warder, a wide-shouldered man with a beautiful face and touches of white at his temples. He looked up when Egwene walked in, then returned to honing his dagger on a stone.

One of the Browns was Felaana Bevaine, slender with long yellow hair that gleamed as if she brushed it several times a day. She stopped writing in a leather-bound notebook on a lapdesk long enough to say in a raspy voice, "Oh. It's you, is it? Well, Silviana said you can visit, child, but don't give her anything without showing it to Dalevien or me, and don't make any fuss." She promptly returned to her writing. Dalevien, a stocky woman with gray streaking her short dark hair, never looked up from her comparison of the text of two books, one held open on either knee. The glow of *saidar* shone around her, and she was maintaining a shield on Leane, but there was no reason for her to look once it had been woven.

Egwene lost no time in rushing to thrust her hands through the iron lattice and clasp Leane's. "Silviana told me they finally believe who you are," she said, laughing, "but I didn't expect to find you in such luxury."

It was luxury only when held up alongside the small dark cells where a sister might be held for trial, with rushes on the floor for a mattress and a blanket only if you were lucky, yet Leane's accommodations did appear reasonably comfortable. She had a small bed that looked softer than those in the novice quarters, a ladder-back chair with a tasseled blue cushion, and a table that held three books and a tray with the remains of her supper. There was even a washstand, though the white pitcher and bowl both had chips and the mirror was bubbled, and a privacy screen, opaque enough that she would be only a shadowy shape behind it, hid the chamber pot.

Leane laughed, too. “Oh, I am very popular,” she said briskly. Even the way she stood seemed languorous, the very image of a seductive Domani despite plain dark woolens, but that brisk voice remained from before she had decided to remake herself as she wanted to be. “I’ve had a steady stream of visitors all day, from every Ajah except the Red. Even the Greens try to convince me to teach them how to Travel, and they mainly want to get their hands on me because I ‘claim’ to be Green now.” She shivered much too ostentatiously for it to be real. “That would be as bad as being back with Melare and Desala. Dreadful woman, Desala.” Her smile faded away like mist in a noonday sun. “They told me they’d put you in white. Better than the alternatives, I suppose. They give you forkroot? Me, too.”

Surprised, Egwene glanced toward the sister holding the shield, and Leane snorted.

“Custom. If I weren’t shielded, I could swat a fly and not hurt it, but custom says a woman in the open cells is always shielded. But they just let you wander around otherwise?”

“Not exactly,” Egwene said dryly. “There are two Reds waiting outside to escort me to my room and shield me while I sleep.”

Leane sighed. “So. I’m in a cell, you are being watched, and we’re both full of forkroot tea.” She cast a sidelong look at the two Browns. Felaana was still intent on her writing. Dalevien turned pages in the two books on her knees and began muttering under her breath. The Warder must have intended to shave with that dagger, he was honing it so keen. His main attention seemed to be on the doorway, though. Leane lowered her voice. “So when do we escape?”

“We don’t,” Egwene told her, and related her reasons and her plan in a near whisper while watching the sisters out of the corner of her eye. She told Leane everything she had seen. And done. It was hard to tell how many times she had been spanked that day, and how she had behaved during, but necessary to convince the other woman that she would not be broken.

“I can see any sort of raid is out of the question, but I had hoped—” The Warder shifted, and Leane cut off, but he was merely sheathing his dagger. Folding his arms across his chest and stretching his legs out, he leaned back against the wall, his eyes on the doorway. He looked as if he could be on his feet in the blink of an eye. “Laras helped me escape once,” she went on softly, “but I don’t know that she would do it again.” She shivered, and there was nothing fake about it this time. She had been stilled when Laras helped her and Siuan escape. “She did it for Min more than for Siuan or me, anyway. Are you certain about this? A hard woman, Silviana Brehon. Fair, so I hear, but hard enough to break iron. Are you absolutely certain, Mother?” When Egwene said that she was, Leane sighed again. “Well, we’ll be two worms gnawing at the root then, won’t we.” It was not a question.

She visited Leane every night that exhaustion failed to drag her to her bed straight after supper, and found her astonishingly sanguine for a prisoner confined to a cell. Leane’s stream of visiting sisters was continuing, and she slipped the tidbits Egwene suggested into every conversation. Those visitors could not order an Aes Sedai punished, even one held in the open cells, though a few grew angry enough to wish they could, and besides, hearing those things from a sister carried more weight than hearing them from one they saw as a novice. Leane could even argue openly, at least until the visitors stalked out. But she reported that many did not. A few agreed with her. Cautiously, hesitantly, perhaps on one point and not others, but they agreed. Almost as important, to Leane at least, some of the Greens decided that since she had been stilled and thus was no longer Aes Sedai for a time, she had the right to ask admission to any Ajah once she was a sister again. Not all by any means, but “few” was better than “none.” Egwene began to think that Leane in her cell was having more effect than she was roaming free. Well, free after a fashion. She was not exactly jealous. This was important work they were doing, and it did not matter which of them did it better so long as it got done. But there were times when it made the trek to Silviana’s study much harder. Still, she had successes. Of a sort.

That first afternoon, in Bennae Nalsad’s cluttered sitting room—books stood in haphazard stacks everywhere on the floor tiles, and the shelves were full of bones and skulls and the preserved skins of animals, birds and snakes along with stuffed examples of some of the smaller specimens; a large brown lizard was perched on the huge skull of a bear, so still you would have thought it stuffed as well until it blinked—that first afternoon, the Shienaran Brown asked her to perform an exhaustive set of weaves one after the other. Bennae sat in a high-backed chair on one side of the brown-streaked marble fireplace, Egwene, with decided discomfort, in one on the other. She had not been invited to sit, but neither had Bennae objected.

Egwene performed each weave as asked until Bennae casually asked for the weave for Traveling, and then she merely smiled and folded her hands in her lap. The sister leaned back and adjusted her deep brown silk skirts a hair. Bennae's eyes were blue and sharp, her dark hair, caught in a silver net, liberally streaked with gray. Ink stains marked two of her fingers, and another smudged the side of her nose. She held a porcelain cup of tea, but she had not offered any to Egwene.

"I think there is little of the Power that remains for you to learn, child, especially considering your wonderful discoveries." Egwene inclined her head, accepting the compliment. Some of those things truly were her discoveries, and it hardly mattered now in any case. "But that hardly means you have nothing to learn. You had few novice classes before you were. . . ." The Brown frowned at Egwene's white dress and cleared her throat. "And fewer lessons as . . . well, later. Tell me if you can, what mistakes did Shein Chunla make that caused the Third War of Garen's Wall? What were the causes of the Great Winter War between Andor and Cairhien? What caused the Weikin Rebellion and how did it end? Most of history seems to be the study of wars, and the important parts of that are how and why they began and how and why ended. A great many wars would never have taken place if people had paid attention to the mistakes others had made. Well?"

"Shein didn't make any mistakes," Egwene said slowly, "but you're right. I do have a lot to learn. I don't even know the names of those other wars." Rising, she poured herself a cup of tea from the silver pitcher on the side table. Aside from the ropework silver tray, the tabletop held a stuffed lynx and the skull of a serpent. That was as big as a *man's* skull!

Bennae frowned, but not for the tea. She hardly seemed to notice that. "What do you mean Shein didn't make any mistakes, child? Why, she bungled the situation as badly as ever I've heard of."

"Well before the Third War of Garen's Wall," Egwene said, returning to her chair, "Shein was doing exactly as the Hall told her and nothing they didn't." She might be lacking in other areas of history, but Siuan had tutored her thoroughly in the mistakes made by other Amyrlins. And this particular question gave her an opening. Sitting down normally took a great effort.

“What *are* you talking about?”

“She tried running the Tower with an iron hand, never a compromise on anything, running roughshod over any opposition. The Hall grew tired of it, but they couldn’t settle on a replacement, so rather than deposing her, they did worse. They left her in place and forced a penance on her whenever she tried to issue an order of any kind. Any kind at all.” She knew she was going on, sounding as if she were the one giving a lecture, but she had to get it all out. Not easing herself on the hard wood of the chair seat was difficult. Welcome the pain. “The Hall ran Shein and the Tower. But they mishandled a great deal themselves, largely because each Ajah had its own goals and there was no hand to shape them into a goal for the Tower. Shein’s reign was marked by wars all over the map. Eventually, the sisters themselves got tired of the Hall’s bungling. In one of the six mutinies in Tower history, Shein *and* the Hall were pulled down. I know she supposedly died in the Tower of natural causes, but, in fact, she was smothered in her bed in exile fifty-one years later after the discovery of a plot to put her back on the Amyrlin Seat.”

“Mutinies?” Bennae said incredulously. “Six of them? Exiled and *smothered*?”

“It’s all recorded in the secret histories, in the Thirteenth Depository. Though I suppose I shouldn’t have told you that.” Egwene took a sip of tea and grimaced. It was all but rancid. No wonder Bennae had not touched hers.

“*Secret* histories? A *thirteenth* Depository? If such a thing existed, and I think I would know, why should you not have told me?”

“Because by law the existence of the secret histories as well as their contents can be known only to the Amyrlin, the Keeper, and the Sitters. Them and the librarians who keep the records, anyway. Even the law itself is part of the Thirteenth Depository, so I guess I shouldn’t have told that either. But if you can gain access somehow, or ask someone who knows and will tell you, you’ll find out I’m right. Six times in the history of the Tower, when the Amyrlin was dangerously divisive or dangerously incompetent and the Hall failed to act, sisters have risen up to remove her.” There. She could not have planted the seed deeper with a shovel. Or driven it home more bluntly with a hammer.

Bennae stared at her for a long moment, then raised the cup to her lips. She spluttered as soon as the tea touched her tongue, and began dabbing at the spots on her dress with a delicate, lace-edged handkerchief. “The Great Winter War,” she said huskily as she set the cup on the floor beside her chair, “began late in the year six hundred seventy-one. . . .” She did not mention secret records or mutinies again, but she did not have to. More than once during the lesson she trailed off, frowning at something beyond Egwene, and Egwene had little doubt what it was.

Later that day, Lirene Doirellin said, “Yes, Elaida made a vital mistake there,” pacing up and down in front of her sitting room’s fireplace. The Cairhienin sister was only a little shorter than Egwene, but the nervous way her eyes darted gave her the air of a hunted thing, a sparrow fearful of cats and convinced there were lots of cats in the vicinity. Her dark green skirts had only four discreet slashes of red, though she had been a Sitter once. “That proclamation of hers, on top of trying to kidnap him, could not have been better calculated to keep the al’Thor boy as far from the Tower as he can stay. Oh, she has made mistakes, Elaida has.”

Egwene wanted to ask about Rand and the kidnapping—kidnapping?—but Lirene left no opening as she went on about Elaida’s many mistakes, all the while pacing back and forth, her eyes darting and her hands twisting unconsciously. Egwene was unsure whether or not that session could be called a success, but at least it was not a failure. And she had learned something.

Not all of her forays went so well, of course.

“This is not a discussion,” Pritalle Nerbaijan said. Her tone was utterly calm, yet her tilted green eyes were heated. Her rooms looked more those of a Green than a Yellow, with several bared swords hanging on the walls and a silk tapestry showing men fighting Trollocs. She was gripping the hilt of the dagger at her woven silver belt. Not a simple belt knife; a dagger with a blade near a foot long and an emerald capping its pommel. Why she had agreed to lecture Egwene was a mystery, given her dislike of teaching. Perhaps because it was Egwene. “You are here for a lesson on the limits of power. A very *basic* lesson, suitable for a novice.”

Egwene wanted to shift on the three-legged stool that Pritalle had given her for a seat, but instead she concentrated on the smarting, focused on drinking it in. On welcoming it. The day had already seen three visits to Silviana, and she could sense a fourth coming, with the midday meal an hour off yet. “I merely said that if Shemerin could be reduced from Aes Sedai to Accepted then Elaida’s power has no limits. At least, she thinks it doesn’t. But if you accept that, then it really doesn’t.”

Pritalle’s grip tightened on the dagger’s hilt until her knuckles showed white, yet she seemed unaware. “Since you think you know better than I,” she said coolly, “you can visit Silviana when we finish.” A partial success, perhaps. Egwene did not think Pritalle’s anger was for her.

“I expect proper behavior out of you,” Serancha Colvine told her firmly another day. The word to describe the Gray sister was “pinched.” A pinched mouth, and a pinched nose that constantly seemed to be detecting a bad smell. Even her pale blue eyes seemed pinched with disapproval. She might well have been pretty otherwise. “Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Egwene said, sitting down on the stool that had been placed in front of Serancha’s high-backed chair. The morning was cool, and a small fire burned on the stone hearth. Drink in the pain. Welcome the pain.

“An incorrect response,” Serancha said. “The correct response would have been a curtsy and ‘I understand, Serancha Sedai.’ I intend to make a list of your failures for you to carry to Silviana when we’re done. We’ll begin again. Do you understand, child?”

“I understand,” Egwene said without rising. Aes Sedai serenity or no Aes Sedai serenity, Serancha’s face turned purple. In the end, her list covered four pages in a tight, cramped hand. She spent more time writing than she did lecturing! Not a success.

And then there was Adelorna Bastine. The Saldaean Green somehow managed stateliness in spite of being slim and no taller than Egwene, and she had a regal, commanding air that might have been intimidating had Egwene let it. “I hear you make trouble,” she said, picking up an ivory-backed hairbrush from a small inlaid table beside her chair. “If you try to make trouble with me, you’ll learn that I know how to use this.”

Egwene did learn, without trying. Three times she went across Adelorna’s lap, and the woman did indeed know how to use a hairbrush for more than brushing her hair. That managed to stretch an hour lecture to two.

“May I go now?” Egwene said at last, calmly drying her cheeks as well as she could with a handkerchief that was already damp. Breathe in the pain. Absorb the fire. “I’m supposed to fetch water up for the Red, and I don’t want to be late.”

Adelorna frowned at her hairbrush before returning it to the table that Egwene had overset twice with her kicking. Then she frowned at Egwene, studying her as if trying to see inside her skull. “I wish Cadsuane were in the Tower,” she murmured. “I think she’d find you a challenge.” There seemed a touch of respect in her voice.

That day was a turning point in some ways. For one thing, Silviana decided that Egwene was to receive Healing twice each day.

“You seem to *invite* being beaten, child. It’s pure stubbornness, and I won’t put up with it. You *will* face reality. The next time you visit me, we’ll see how you like the strap.” The Mistress of Novices folded Egwene’s shift over her back, then paused. “Are you *smiling*? Did I say something amusing?”

“I just thought of something funny,” Egwene said. “Nothing of consequence.” Not of consequence to Silviana, anyway. She had realized how to welcome the pain. She was fighting a war, not a single battle, and every time she was beaten, every time she was sent to Silviana, it was a sign that she had fought another battle and refused to yield. The pain was a badge of honor. She howled and kicked as hard as ever during that slippering, but while she was drying her cheeks afterward, she hummed quietly to herself. It was easy to welcome a badge of honor.

Attitudes among the novices began to shift by the second day of her captivity. It seemed that Nicola—and Areina, who was working in the stables and often came to visit Nicola; they seemed so close that Egwene wondered whether they had become pillow-friends, always with their heads together and smiling mysterious smiles—Nicola and Areina had regaled them all with tales of her. Very inflated tales. The two women had made her seem a combination of every legendary sister in the histories, along with Birgitte Silverbow and Amaresu herself, carrying the Sword of the Sun into battle. Half of them seemed in awe of her, the others angry with her for some reason or outright scornful. Foolishly, some tried to emulate her behavior in their classes, but a flurry of visits to Silviana quelled that. At the midday meal of the third day, nearly two dozen novices ate standing up and red-faced with embarrassment, Nicola among them. And Alvistere, surprisingly. That number dropped to seven at supper, and on the fourth day, only Nicola and the Cairhienin girl did so. And that was the end of that.

She expected some might resent the fact that she continued to refuse to bend while they had been put back on the straight and narrow so quickly, but to the contrary, it only seemed to decrease the number who were angry or scornful and increase the respect. No one tried to become her friend, which was just as well. White dress or no white dress, she was Aes Sedai, and it was improper for an Aes Sedai to befriend a novice. There was too much risk the girl would start feeling above herself and get into trouble for it. Novices began coming to her for advice, for help learning their lessons, though. Only a handful at first, but the number grew day by day. She was willing to help them learn, which was usually just a matter of strengthening a girl's confidence or convincing a young woman that caution was wise, or taking them patiently through the steps of a weave that was giving trouble. Novices were forbidden to channel without an Aes Sedai or Accepted present, though they nearly always did in secret anyway, but she *was* a sister. She refused to help more than one at a time, however. Word of groups would surely leak out, and she would not be the only one sent to Silviana. She would make that trip as often as necessary, but she did not want to earn it for others. And as for advice. . . . With the novices kept strictly clear of men, advice was easy. Though strains between pillow-friends could be as harsh as anything men ever caused.

One evening, returning from yet another session with Silviana, she overheard Nicola talking to two novices who could not have been more than fifteen or sixteen. Egwene hardly remembered being that young. It seemed a lifetime ago. Marah was a stocky Murandian with mischievous blue eyes, Namene a tall, slim Domani who giggled incessantly.

"Ask the Mother," Nicola said. A few of the novices had taken to calling Egwene that, though never where anyone not wearing white could hear. They were foolish, but not utter fools. "She's always willing to give advice."

Namene giggled nervously and wriggled. "I wouldn't want to bother her."

"Besides," Marah said, a lilt in her voice, "they say she always gives the same advice, she does."

"And good advice it is, too." Nicola held up one hand to tick off fingers. "Obey the Aes Sedai. Obey the Accepted. Work hard. Then work harder."

Gliding on toward her room, Egwene smiled. She had been unable to make Nicola behave properly while she was openly Amyrlin, but it seemed she might have succeeded while masquerading as a novice herself. Remarkable.

There was one more thing she could do for them: comfort them. Impossible as it seemed at first, the interior of the Tower sometimes changed. People got lost trying to find rooms they had been to dozens of times. Women were seen walking out of walls, or into them, often in dresses of old-fashioned cut, sometimes in bizarre garb, dresses that seemed simply lengths of brightly colored cloth folded around the body, embroidered ankle-length tabards worn over wide trousers, stranger things still. Light, when could any woman have wanted to wear a dress that left her bosom completely exposed? Egwene was able to discuss it with Siuan in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, so she knew that these things were signs of the approach of Tarmon Gai'don. An unpleasant thought, yet there was nothing to be done about it. What was, was, and it was not as if Rand himself was not a herald of the Last Battle. Some of the sisters in the Tower must have known what it all meant, too, but wrapped up in their own affairs they made no effort to comfort novices who were weeping with fright. Egwene did.

"The world is full of strange wonders," she told Coride, a pale-haired girl who was sobbing facedown on her bed. Only a year younger than herself, Coride was most definitely still a girl despite a year and a half in the Tower. "Why be surprised if some of those wonders appear in the White Tower? What better place?" She never mentioned the Last Battle to these girls. That was hardly likely to be any comfort.

"But she walked into a wall!" Coride wailed, raising her head. Her face was red and blotchy, and her cheeks glistened damply. "A wall! And then none of us could find the classroom, and Pedra couldn't either, and she got cross with us. Pedra never gets cross. She was frightened, too!"

"I'll wager Pedra didn't start crying, though." Egwene sat down on the edge of the girl's bed, and was pleased that she did not wince. Novice mattresses were not noted for softness. "The dead can't harm the living, Coride. They can't touch us. They don't even seem to see us. Besides, they were initiates of the Tower or else servants here. This was their home as much as it is ours. And as for rooms or hallways not being where they're supposed to be, just remember that the Tower is a place of wonders. Remember that, and they won't frighten you."

It seemed feeble to her, but Coride wiped her eyes and swore she would never be frightened again. Unfortunately, there were a hundred and two like her, not all so easily comforted. It was enough to make Egwene angrier at the sisters in the Tower than she already had been.

Her days were not all lessons and comforting novices and being punished by the Mistress of Novices, though the last did take up an unfortunate amount of each day. Silviana had been right to doubt that she would have much free time. Novices were always given chores. Often it was make-work, since the Tower had well over a thousand serving men and women without counting laborers, but physical work helped build character, so the Tower had always believed. Plus, it helped keep the novices too tired to think of men, supposedly. She was loaded down with chores beyond what the novices were given, though. Some were assigned by sisters who considered her a runaway, others by Silviana in the hope that weariness would dull the edge of her "rebellion."

Daily, after one meal or another, she scrubbed dirty pots with coarse salt and a stiff brush in the workroom off the main kitchen. From time to time Laras would put her head in, but she never spoke. And she never used her long spoon, even when Egwene was massaging the small of her back, aching from being head-down in a large kettle, rather than scrubbing. Laras dealt out smacks aplenty to scullions and under-cooks who tried to play pranks on Egwene, as was customary with novices sent to work in the kitchen. Supposedly that was just because, as she announced loudly every time she gave a thwack, they had plenty of time to play when they were not supposed to be working, but Egwene noticed that Laras was not so quick when someone goosed one of the true novices or tipped a cup of cold water down the back of her neck. It seemed she did have an ally of sorts. If she could only figure out how to make use of her.

She hauled water in buckets hanging from the ends of a pole balanced across her shoulders, to the kitchen, to the novices' quarters, to the Accepted's quarters, all the way up to the Ajah's quarters. She carried meals to sisters in their rooms, raked garden paths, pulled weeds, ran errands for sisters, attended Sitters, swept floors, mopped floors, scrubbed floors on her hands and knees, and that was only a partial list. She never shirked at these tasks, and only in part because she would not give anyone an excuse to call her lazy. In a way, she viewed them as penance for not having prepared properly before turning the harbor chain to *cuendillar*. Penances were to be borne with dignity. As much dignity as anyone can have while scrubbing a floor, anyway.

Besides, visiting the Accepted’s quarters gave her a chance to see how they viewed her. There were thirty-one in the Tower, but at any given time some were teaching novices and others taking lessons of their own, so she seldom found more than ten or twelve in their rooms around the nine-tiered well surrounding a small garden. Word of her arrival always spread quickly, though, and she never lacked an audience. At first, many of them tried to overwhelm her with orders, especially Mair, a plump blue-eyed Arafellin, and Asseil, a slim Taraboner with pale hair and brown eyes. They had been novices when she came to the Tower, and already jealous of her quick rise to Accepted when she left. With them, every second sentence was fetch that, or carry this there. For all of them she was the “novice” who had caused so much difficulty, the “novice” who thought she was the Amyrlin Seat. She carried pails of water till her back ached, uncomplaining, yet she refused to obey their commands. Which earned her more visits to the Mistress of Novices, of course. As the days passed, as her continual trips to Silviana’s study showed no effect, however, that flow of commands dwindled and finally ceased. Even Asseil and Mair had not really been trying to be mean, only to behave as they thought they should in the circumstances, and they were at a loss as to what to do with her.

Some of the Accepted showed signs of fright at the dead walking and the interior of the Tower changing, and whenever she saw a bloodless face or teary eyes she would say the same things she told the novices. Not addressing the woman directly, which might have gotten her back up rather than soothing her, but as if talking to herself. It worked as well with Accepted as with novices. Many gave a start when she began, or opened their mouths as though to tell her to be quiet, yet none did, and she always left a thoughtful expression behind. The Accepted continued to come out onto the stone-railed galleries when she entered, but they watched her in silence as though wondering what she was. Eventually she would teach them what she was. Them and the sisters, too.

Attending Sitters and sisters, a woman in white standing quietly in the corner quickly became part of the furniture even when she was notorious. If they noticed her, they changed their conversation, yet she overheard many snippets, often of plots to avenge some slight given or wrong done by another Ajah. Oddly, most of the sisters seemed to see the other Ajahs inside the Tower as more their enemies than they did the sisters in the camp outside the city, and the Sitters were not much better. It made her want to slap them. True, it boded well for relations when the other sisters returned to the Tower, but still. . . .

She did pick up other things. The unbelievable disaster that had befallen an expedition sent against the Black Tower. Some of the sisters seemed not to believe it, yet they appeared to be trying to convince themselves it could not have happened. More sisters captured after a great battle and somehow forced to swear fealty to Rand. She had already had inklings of that, and she could not like it any more than she did sisters being bonded by Asha'man. Being *ta'veren* or the Dragon Reborn was no excuse. No Aes Sedai had ever before sworn fealty to any man. The sisters and Sitters argued over who was to blame, with Rand and the Asha'man at the head of the list. But one name came up again and again. Elaida do Avriny a'Roihan. They talked of Rand, too, of how to find him before Tarmon Gai'don. They knew it was coming despite their failure to console the novices and Accepted, and they were desperate to lay hands on him.

Sometimes she risked a comment, a mention of Shemerin being stripped of the shawl against all custom, a suggestion that Elaida's edict regarding Rand was the best way in the world to make him dig in his heels. She offered sympathy for the sisters captured by the Asha'man, for those taken at Dumai's Wells—with Elaida's name dropped in—or regretted the neglect that saw garbage rotting in the once pristine streets of Tar Valon. There was no need to mention Elaida there; they knew who was responsible for Tar Valon. At times, those comments earned her still more trips to Silviana's study, and more chores besides, yet surprisingly often they did not. She made careful note of the sisters who merely told her to be quiet. Or better still, said nothing. Some even nodded agreement before they caught themselves.

Some of those chores led to interesting encounters.

On the morning of her second day she was using a long-handled bamboo rake to fish detritus from the ponds of the Water Garden. There had been a rainstorm the night before, and the heavy winds had deposited leaves and grasses in the ponds among the bright green lily pads and budding water irises, and even a dead sparrow that she calmly buried in one of the flower beds. A pair of Reds stood on one of the arching pond bridges, leaning on the lacy stone railing and watching her and the fish swirling below them in a flurry of red and gold and white. A half-dozen crows burst up out of one of the leatherleafs and silently winged their way north.

Crows! The Tower grounds were supposed to be warded against crows and ravens. The Reds did not seem to have noticed.

She was squatting on her heels beside one of the ponds, washing the dirt from her hands after burying that pitiful bird, when Alviarin appeared, her white-fringed shawl wrapped tightly around her as if the morning were still windy rather than bright and fair. This was the third time she had seen Alviarin, and every time she had been alone rather than in company with other Whites. She had seen clusters of Whites in the hallways, though. Was there a clue in that? If so, she could not imagine to what, unless Alviarin was being shunned by her own Ajah for some reason. Surely the rot had not gone that deep.

Eyeing the Reds, Alviarin approached Egwene along the coarse gravel path that wound among the ponds. “You have fallen far,” she said when she was close. “You must feel it keenly.”

Egwene straightened and blotted her hands on her skirt, then picked up the rake. “I’m not the only one.” She had had another session with Silviana before dawn, and when she left the woman’s study, Alviarin had been waiting to go in again. That was a daily ritual for the White, and the talk of the novices’ quarters, with every tongue speculating on the why of it. “My mother always says, don’t weep over what can’t be mended. It seems good advice under the circumstances.”

Faint spots of color appeared in Alviarin’s cheeks. “But you seem to be weeping a good deal. Endlessly, by all reports. Surely you would escape that if you could.”

Egwene caught another oak leaf on the broom and brushed it off into the wooden pail of damp leaves at her feet. “Your loyalty to Elaida isn’t very strong, is it?”

“Why do you say that?” Alviarin said suspiciously. Glancing at the two Reds, who appeared to be paying more mind now to the fish than Egwene, she stepped closer, inviting lowered voices.

Egwene fished at a long strand of grass that had to have come all the way from the plains beyond the river. Should she mention the letter this woman had written to Rand practically promising him the White Tower at his feet? No, that piece of information might prove valuable, but it seemed the sort of thing that could only be used once. “She stripped you of the Keeper’s stole and ordered your penance. That’s hardly an inducement to loyalty.”

Alviarin’s face remained smooth, yet her shoulders relaxed visibly. Aes Sedai seldom showed so much. She must feel under phenomenal strain to be so little in control of herself. She darted a look at the Reds again. “Think on your situation,” she said in near a whisper. “If you want an escape from it, well, you may be able to find one.”

“I am content with my situation,” Egwene said simply.

Alviarin’s eyebrows quirked upward in disbelief, but with another glance at the Reds—one was watching them now rather than the fish—she glided away, a very fast glide on the verge of breaking into a trot.

Every two or three days she would appear while Egwene was doing chores, and while she never openly offered help with an escape, she used that word frequently, and she began to show frustration when Egwene refused to rise to her bait. Bait it was, to be sure. Egwene did not trust the woman. Perhaps it was that letter, surely designed to draw Rand to the Tower and into Elaida’s clutches, or maybe it was the way she kept waiting for Egwene to make the first move, to beg possibly. Likely Alviarin would try to set conditions, then. In any case, she had no intention of escaping unless there was no other choice, so she always gave the same response.

“I am content with my situation.”

Alviarin began grinding her teeth audibly when she heard that.

On the fourth day, she was on her hands and knees scrubbing blue-and-white floor tiles when the boots of three men accompanied by a sister in elaborately red-embroidered gray silk passed her. A few paces on, the boots stopped.

“That be her,” a man’s voice said in the accents of Illian. “She did be pointed out to me. I think me I will speak to her.”

“She’s only another novice, Mattin Stepaneos,” the sister told him. “You wanted to walk in the gardens.” Egwene dipped her scrub brush in the bucket of soapy water and began another stretch of tiles.

“Fortune stab me, Cariandre, this may be the White Tower, but I do still be the lawful King of Illian, and if I want to speak to her—with you for chaperone; all very proper and decent—then I will speak with her. I did be told she did grow up in the same village with al’Thor.” One set of boots, blacked till they glistened, approached Egwene.

Only then did she stand, the dripping brush in one hand. She used the back of the other to brush her hair out of her face. She refrained from knuckling the small of her back, much as she wanted to.

Mattin Stepaneos was stocky and almost entirely bald, with a neatly trimmed white beard in the Illianer fashion and a heavily creased face. His eyes were sharp, and angry. Armor would have suited him better than the green silk coat embroidered with golden bees on the sleeves and lapels. “Just another novice?” he murmured. “I think you be mistaken, Cariandre.”

The plump Red, her lips compressed, left the two serving men with the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests and joined the balding man. Her disapproving gaze touched Egwene briefly before shifting to him. “She’s a much-punished novice who has a floor to scrub. Come. The gardens should be very pleasant this morning.”

“What be pleasant,” he said, “do be talking to someone other than Aes Sedai. And only of the Red Ajah at that, since you do manage to keep me from any others. On top of which, the servants you did give me might as well be mutes, and I think me the Tower Guards do have orders to hold their tongues around me as well.”

He fell silent as two more Red sisters approached. Nesita, plump and blue eyed and mean as a snake with the itch, nodded companionably to Cariandre while Barasine handed Egwene the by now all too familiar pewter cup. The Red seemed to have custody of her in a way—at least, her watchers and minders were always Reds—and they seldom let much more than the promised hour pass before someone appeared with the cup of forkroot tea. She drained it and handed it back. Nesita seemed disappointed that she did not protest or refuse, but there seemed little point. She had, once, and Nesita had helped pour the vile stuff down her throat using a funnel she had ready in her belt pouch. That would have been a fine show of dignity in front of Mattin Stepaneos.

He watched the silent exchange with puzzled interest, though Cariandre plucked at his sleeve, urging him again to his walk in the gardens. “Sisters bring you water when you thirst?” he asked when Barasine and Nesita glided away.

“A tea they think will improve my mood,” she told him. “You look well, Mattin Stepaneos. For a man Elaida had kidnapped.” That tale was the talk of the novices’ quarters, too.

Cariandre hissed and opened her mouth, but he spoke up first, his jaw tight. “Elaida did save me from murder by al’Thor,” he said. The Red nodded approvingly.

“Why would you think yourself in danger from him?” Egwene asked.

The man grunted. “He did murder Morgase in Caemlyn, and Colavaere in Cairhien. He destroyed half the Sun Palace killing her, I did hear. And I did hear of Tairen High Lords poisoned or stabbed to death in Cairhien. Who can say what other rulers he did murder and destroy the bodies?” Cariandre nodded again, smiling. You might have thought him a boy reciting his lessons. Did the woman have *no* understanding of men? He certainly saw it. His jaw grew harder still, and his hands clenched into fists for a moment.

“Colavaere hanged herself,” Egwene said, making sure she sounded patient. “The Sun Palace was damaged later by someone trying to kill the Dragon Reborn, maybe the Forsaken, and according to Elayne Trakand, her mother was murdered by Rahvin. Rand has announced his support for her claims to both the Lion Throne and the Sun Throne. He hasn’t killed any of the Cairhienin nobles rebelling against him, or the High Lords in rebellion. In fact, he named one of them his Steward in Tear.”

“I think that is quite—” Cariandre began, pulling her shawl up onto her shoulders, but Egwene went on right over her.

“Any sister could have told you all that. If she wanted to. If they were speaking to one another. Think why you see only Red sisters. Have you seen sisters of *any* two Ajahs speaking? You’ve been kidnapped and brought aboard a sinking ship.”

“That is more than enough,” Cariandre snapped right atop Egwene’s last sentence. “When you finish scrubbing this floor, you will run to the Mistress of Novices and ask her to punish you for shirking. And for showing disrespect to an Aes Sedai.”

Egwene met the woman’s furious gaze calmly. “I have barely enough time after I finish to get clean before my lesson with Kiyoshi. Could I visit Silviana after the lesson?”

Cariandre shifted her shawl, seemingly taken aback by her calmness. “That is a problem for you to work out,” she said at last. “Come, Mattin Stepaneos. You have helped this child shirk long enough.”

There was no time to change out of her damp dress or even comb her hair after leaving Silviana’s study, not if she were to have any hope of being on time for Kiyoshi without running, which she refused to do. That made her late, and it turned out that the tall, slender Gray was a stickler for both punctuality and neatness, which put her back yelping and kicking under Silviana’s hard-swung strap little more than an hour later. Quite aside from embracing pain, something else helped see her through that. The memory of Mattin Stepaneos' thoughtful expression as Cariandre led him off down the corridor and how he twice looked back over his shoulder at her. She had planted another seed. Enough seeds planted, and perhaps what sprouted from them would splinter those cracks in the platform beneath Elaida. Enough seeds would bring Elaida down.

Early on her seventh day of captivity, she was carrying water up the Tower again, to the White Ajah quarters this time, when she suddenly stopped in her tracks feeling as if she had been punched in her stomach hard. Two women in gray-fringed shawls were walking down the spiraling corridor toward her, trailed by a pair of Warders. One was Melavaire Someinellin, a stout Cairhienin in fine gray wool with white flecking her dark hair. The other, with blue eyes and dark honey hair, was Beonin!

"So you're the one who betrayed me!" Egwene said angrily. A thought occurred to her. How *could* Beonin have betrayed her after swearing fealty? "You must be Black Ajah!"

Melavaire drew herself up as much as she could, which was not very far since she was inches shorter than Egwene, and planted her fists on her ample hips as she opened her mouth to deliver a blast. Egwene had had one lesson from her, and while she was a kindly woman usually, when she became angry, she could be fearsome.

Beonin laid a hand on the other sister's plump arm. "Let me speak to her alone please, Melavaire."

"I trust you will speak sharply," Melavaire said in a stiff voice. "To even *think* of making such a charge . . . ! To even *mention* some things . . . !" Shaking her head in disgust, she retreated a little up the corridor followed by her Warder, squat and even wider than she, a bear of a man though he moved with the expected Warder grace.

Beonin gestured and waited until her own Warder, a lean man with a long scar on his face, joined them. She adjusted her shawl several times. "Me, I betrayed nothing," she said quietly. "I would not have sworn to you except that the Hall, it would have had me birched if it learned the secrets you knew. Perhaps more than once, even. Reason enough to swear, no? I never pretended to love you, yet I maintained that oath until you were captured. But you are no longer Amyrlin, yes? Not as a captive, not when there was no hope of rescuing you, when you refused rescue. And you are a novice once more, so that oath, it has two reasons to hold no longer. The talk of rebellion, it was wild talk. The rebellion is finished. The White Tower, it will soon be whole again, and I will not be sorry to see it so."

Lifting the pole from her shoulders, Egwene set down the pails of water and folded her arms beneath her breasts. She had tried to maintain a calm demeanor since being captured—well, except when she was being punished—but this encounter would have tried a stone. "You explain yourself at great length," she said dryly. "Are you trying to convince yourself? It won't do, Beonin. It won't do. If the rebellion is finished, where is the flood of sisters coming to kneel before Elaida and accept her penance? Light, what else have you betrayed? Everything?" It seemed likely. She had visited Elaida's study a number of times in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, but the woman's correspondence box had always been empty. Now she knew why.

Sharp spots of red appeared in Beonin's cheeks. "I tell you, I have betrayed n—!" She finished with a strangled grunt and put a hand to her throat as if it refused to let the lie leave her tongue. That proved she was not Black Ajah; but it proved something more.

"You betrayed the ferrets. Are they all down in the basement cells?"

Beonin's eyes flashed up the corridor. Melavaire was talking with her Warder, his head bent close to hers. Squat or not, he was taller than she. Beonin's Tervail was watching her with a worried expression. The distance was too far for any of the three to have overheard, but Beonin stepped closer and lowered her voice. "Elaida, she is having them watched, though I think the Ajahs, they keep what they see to themselves. Few sisters want to tell Elaida any more than they must. It was necessary, you understand. I could hardly return to the Tower and keep them secret. It would have been discovered eventually."

"Then you'll have to warn them." Egwene could not keep her voice clear of her disdain. This woman split hairs with a razor! She took the thinnest excuse to decide her oath no longer applied, and then she *betrayed* the very women she had helped choose. Blood and bloody ashes!

Beonin remained silent for a long moment, fiddling with her shawl, but at last she said, surprisingly, "I have already warned Meidani and Jennet." They were the two Grays among the ferrets. "I have done what I can for them. The others, they must sink or swim by themselves. Sisters have been assaulted for simply going too near another Ajah's quarters. Me, I will not walk back to my rooms clad only in my shawl and the welts just to try—"

"Think of it as a penance," Egwene cut in. Light! Sisters *assaulted*? Things were even worse than she had thought. She had to remind herself that well-manured ground would help her seeds to grow.

Beonin glanced up the hallway again, and Tervail took a step toward her before Beonin shook her head. Her face was smooth despite the color staining her cheeks, but inside, she must have been in turmoil. "You know I could send you to the Mistress of Novices, yes?" she said in a tight voice. "I hear you spend half of each day squealing for her. I think you would dislike more visits, yes?"

Egwene smiled at her. Not two hours earlier she had managed to smile the moment Silviana's strap stopped falling. This was much harder. "And who can say what I might squeal? About oaths, perhaps?" The color drained from the other woman's cheeks, leaving her face bloodless pale. No, she did not want that getting out. "You may have convinced yourself I am no longer Amyrlin, Beonin, but it's time to start convincing yourself that I still am. You will warn the others, whatever the cost to yourself. Tell them to stay away from me unless I send word otherwise. They've had more than enough attention drawn to them. But from now on, you'll seek me out every day in case I have instructions for them. I have some now." Quickly she listed the things she wanted them to bring up in conversation, Shemerin being stripped of the shawl, Elaida's complicity in the disasters at the Black Tower and Dumai's Wells, all the seeds she had been planting. They would not be planted one by one now, but broadcast by handfuls.

"Me, I cannot speak for other Ajahs," Beonin said when she finished, "but in the Gray, sisters speak of most of these things often. The eyes-and-ears, they are busy of late. Secrets Elaida hoped to hold, they are coming out. I am sure it must be the same in the others. Perhaps it is not necessary for me to—"

"Warn them, and deliver my instructions, Beonin." Egwene lifted the pole back onto her shoulders, shifting it to the most comfortable position she could find. Two or three of the Whites would use a hairbrush or slipper on her *and* send her to Silviana if they thought her slow. Embracing pain, even welcoming it, did not mean seeking it out unnecessarily. "Remember. It's a penance I've set you."

"I will do as you say," Beonin said with obvious reluctance. Her eyes hardened suddenly, but it was not for Egwene. "It would be enjoyable to see

Elaida pulled down," she said in an unpleasant voice before hurrying away to join Melavaire.

That shocking meeting, turned into an unexpected victory, left Egwene feeling very good about the day, and no matter that Ferane did turn out to think she had been slow. The White Sitter was plump, but she had an arm as strong as Silviana's.

That night, she dragged herself down to the open cells after supper despite wanting her bed in the worst way. Aside from lessons and howling under Silviana's strap—the last time just before supper—most of the rest of the day had been given to hauling water. Her back and shoulders ached. Her arms ached, her legs. She was swaying on her feet with weariness. Strangely, she had not had one of those wretched headaches since being taken prisoner, nor any of those dark dreams that left her disturbed even though she could never remember them, but she thought she might be heading for a fine headache tonight. That would make telling true dreams difficult, and she had had some fine ones lately, about Rand, Mat, Perrin, even Gawyn, though most dreams of him were just that.

Three White sisters she knew in passing were guarding Leane: Nagora, a lean woman with pale hair worn in a roll on her nape who sat very straight to make up for her lack of stature; Norine, lovely with her large liquid eyes but often as vague as any Brown; and Miyasi, tall and plump with iron-gray hair, a stern woman who brooked no nonsense and saw nonsense everywhere. Nagora, surrounded by the light of *saidar*, held the shield on Leane, but they were arguing over some point of logic that Egwene could not make out from the little she heard. She could not even tell whether there were two sides to the argument, or three. There were no raised voices, no shaken fists, and their faces remained smooth Aes Sedai masks, but the coldness in their voices left no doubt that had they not been Aes Sedai, they would have been shouting if not trading blows. She might as well not have existed for all the attention they paid her entrance.

Watching the three from the edge of her eye, she moved as close to the iron latticework as she could and gripped it with both hands to steady herself. Light, she was tired! "I saw Beonin today," she said softly. "She's here in the Tower. She claimed her oath to me no longer held because I was no longer the Amyrlin Seat."

Leane gasped and stepped near enough that she was brushing the iron bars. "*She* betrayed us?"

“The inherent impossibility of dissimulated structures is a given,” Nagora said firmly. Her voice was an icy hammer. “A given.”

“She denies it, and I believe her,” Egwene whispered. “But she admitted betraying the ferrets. Elaida is only having them watched for the moment, but I told Beonin to warn them, and she said she would. She said she had already warned Meidani and Jennet, but why would she betray them and then tell them about it? And she said she would like to see Elaida pulled down. Why would she flee to Elaida if she still wants her brought down? She as much as admitted no one else has abandoned our cause. I’m missing something, and I’m too tired to see what it is.” A yawn that she barely managed to cover with a hand cracked her jaw.

“Dissimulated structures are implied by four of the five axioms of sixth-order rationality,” Miyasi said just as firmly. “Strongly implied.”

“So-called sixth-order rationality has been discarded as an aberration by anyone with intellect,” Norine put in, a touch sharply. “But dissimulated structures are fundamental to any possibility of understanding what is happening right here in the Tower every day. Reality itself is shifting, changing day by day.”

Leane glanced at the Whites. “Some always thought Elaida had spies among us. If Beonin was one, her oath to you would have held her until she could convince herself you were no longer Amyrlin. But if her reception here wasn’t what she expected, it might have changed her loyalties. Beonin was always ambitious. If she didn’t get her due as she sees matters. . . .” She spread her hands. “Beonin always expected her due and perhaps a little more.”

“Logic is always applicable to the real world,” Miyasi said dismissively, “but only a novice would think the real world can be applied to logic. Ideals *must* be first principles. *Not* the mundane world.” Nagora snapped her mouth shut with a dark look, as if she felt words had been snatched right off her tongue.

Coloring faintly, Norine rose and glided away from the benches toward Egwene. The other two followed her with their eyes, and she seemed to feel their gazes, shifting her shawl uncomfortably first one way than another. “Child, you look exhausted. Go to your bed now.”

Egwene wanted nothing more than her bed, but she had a question to be answered first. Only she had to be careful. The three Whites were all paying attention now. “Leane, do the sisters who visit you still ask the same questions?”

“I told you to go to your bed,” Norine said sharply. She clapped her hands together as if that would somehow make Egwene obey.

“Yes,” Leane said. “I see what you mean. Perhaps there can be a measure of trust.”

“A small measure,” Egwene said.

Norine planted her fists on her hips. There was little coolness in her face or her voice, and no vagueness at all about her. “Since you refuse to go to your bed, you can go to the Mistress of Novices and tell her you disobeyed a sister.”

“Of course,” Egwene said quickly, turning to go. She had her answer —Beonin had not passed on Traveling, and that meant she likely had not passed on anything else; perhaps there could be a little trust—and besides, Nagora and Miyasi were advancing on her. The last thing she wanted was to be dragged bodily to Silviana’s study, something Miyasi at least was quite capable of. She had even stronger arms than Ferane.

On the morning of her ninth day back in the Tower, before first light, Doesine herself came to Egwene’s small room to give her her morning dose of Healing. Outside, rain was falling with a dull roar. The two Reds who had been watching over her sleep gave her her forkroot, frowning at Doesine, and hurried away. The Yellow Sitter snorted in contempt when the door closed behind them. She used the old method of Healing that made Egwene gasp as though doused in an icy pond and left her ravenously eager for breakfast. As well as free of the pain in her bottom. That actually felt peculiar; you could adapt to anything over time, and a bruised bottom already seemed normal. But the use of the old way, the way used every time she had been given Healing since being captured, reaffirmed that Beonin had kept some secrets, though how she had managed it was still a mystery. Beonin herself had only said that most sisters thought the tales of new weaves were merely rumors.

“You don’t mean to bloody surrender, do you, child?” Doesine said while Egwene was pulling her dress over her head. The woman’s language was very much at odds with her elegant appearance, in gold-embroidered blue with sapphires at her ears and in her hair.

“Should the Amyrlin Seat ever surrender?” Egwene asked as her head popped out at the top of her dress. She doubled her arms behind her to do up the buttons of white-dyed horn.

Doesine snorted again, though not in contempt, Egwene thought. “A brave course, child. Still, my wager is that Silviana will bloody well have you sitting straight and walking right before much longer.” But she left without calling Egwene down for naming herself the Amyrlin Seat.

Egwene had yet another appointment with the Mistress of Novices before breakfast—she had not missed a day, so far—and following a determined effort to undo Doesine’s work in one go, her tears ceased as soon as Silviana’s strap stopped falling. When she lifted herself off the end of the writing table, where a leather pad was attached just for bending over, its surface worn down by who knew how many women, and her skirt and shift fell against her fiery skin, she felt no urge to flinch. She accepted the painful heat, welcomed it, warmed herself with it as she would have warmed her hands in front of a fireplace on a cold winter morning. There seemed a strong resemblance between her bottom and a blazing fireplace right at that moment. Yet looking into the mirror, she saw an unruffled face. Red-cheeked, but calm.

“How could Shemerin have been reduced to Accepted?” she asked, wiping her tears away with her handkerchief. “I’ve inquired, and there’s no provision for it in Tower law.”

“How often have you been sent to me because of those ‘inquiries’?” Silviana asked, hanging the split-tailed strap in the narrow cabinet alongside the leather paddle and the limber switch. “I’d think you would have given over long since.”

“I’m curious. How, when there’s no provision?”

“No provision, child,” Silviana said gently, as if explaining to a child in truth, “but no prohibition, either. A loophole that. . . . Well, we won’t go into that. You’d only find a way to get yourself another strapping with it.” Shaking her head, she took her seat behind the writing table and rested her hands on the tabletop. “The problem was that Shemerin accepted it. Other sisters told her to ignore the edict, but once she realized pleading wouldn’t change the Amyrlin’s mind, she moved into the Accepted’s quarters.”

Egwene’s stomach growled loudly, anxious for breakfast, but she was not done. She was actually having a conversation with Silviana. A conversation, however odd the topic. “But why would she run away? Surely her friends didn’t stop trying to talk sense into her.”

“Some talked sense,” Silviana said dryly. “Others. . . .” She moved her hands like the pans of a balance scale, first one up then the other. “Others tried to force her to see sense. They sent her to me nearly as often as you are sent. I treated her visits as private penances, but she lacked your—” She stopped abruptly, leaning back in her chair and studying Egwene over steepled fingers. “Well, now. You actually have me chatting. Not prohibited certainly, yet hardly proper in these circumstances. Go on to breakfast,” she said, picking up her pen and opening the silver cap of her ink jar. “I’ll mark you down for midday again, since I know you have no intention of curtsying.” The faintest hint of resignation tinged her voice.

When Egwene entered the novices’ dining hall, the first novice to see her stood, and suddenly there was a loud scraping of benches on the colorful floor tiles as the others rose, too. They stood there at their benches in silence as Egwene walked down the center aisle toward the kitchen. Suddenly Ashelin, a plump, pretty girl from Altara, darted into the kitchen. Before Egwene reached the kitchen door, Ashelin was back with a tray in her hands that held the usual thick cup of steaming tea and plate of bread, olives and cheese. Egwene reached for the tray, but the olive-skinned girl hurried to the nearest table and set it down in front of an empty bench, offering a suggestion of a curtsy as she backed away. Lucky for her, neither of Egwene’s escorts this morning had chosen that moment to peer into the dining hall. Lucky for all those novices on their feet.

A cushion rested on the bench in front of Egwene’s tray. A tattered thing that was more patches in different colors than original material, but still a cushion. Egwene picked it up and set it on the end of the table before sitting down. Welcoming the pain was easy. She basked in the warmth of her own fires. A soft susurration gusted through the room, a collective sigh. Only when she popped an olive into her mouth did the novices sit.

She almost spat it out again—it was not far short of spoiled—but she was famished after her Healing, so she spat only the pit into the palm of her hand and deposited it on the plate, washing the taste away with a sip of tea. There was honey in the tea! Novices got honey only on special occasions. She tried not to smile as she cleaned her plate, and clean it she did, even picking up crumbs of bread and cheese with a dampened finger. Not smiling was difficult, though. First Doesine—a Sitter!—then Silviana’s resignation, now this. The two sisters were far more important than the novices or the honey, but they all indicated the same thing. She was winning her war.

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CHAPTER 25

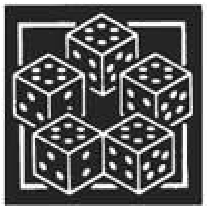

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Attending Elaida

Gold-embossed leather folder under her arm, Tarna kept to the central core of the Tower as she climbed toward Elaida’s apartments, although it meant using a seemingly endless series of staircases—twice those stairs were not located where she remembered them, but so long as she continued upward, she would reach her destination—rather than the gently spiraling corridors. On the stairs, she met no one but occasional liveried servants who bowed or curtsied before hurrying on about their tasks. In either of the spiraling hallways she would have to pass the entrances to the Ajah quarters and perhaps encounter other sisters. Her Keeper’s stole allowed her to enter any Ajah’s quarters, yet she avoided all except the Red save when duty called. Among sisters of the other Ajahs she was all too aware that her narrow stole was red, all too aware of hot eyes watching her from cold faces. They did not unnerve her—little did; she took the shifting interior of the Tower in stride—but still. . . . She thought matters had not gone so far that anyone would actually attack the Keeper, yet she took no chances. Retrieving the situation was going to be a long, hard struggle, whatever Elaida thought, and an assault on the Keeper might make it irretrievable.

Besides, not having to watch over her shoulder allowed her to think on Pevara’s troubling question, one she had not considered before suggesting the bonding of Asha’man. Who in the Red actually could be trusted with the task? Hunting men who could channel led Red sisters to look askance at all men, and a fair number hated them. A surviving brother or father might well escape hatred, a favorite cousin or uncle, but once they were all gone, so was affection. And trust. And there was another matter of trust. Bonding any man violated custom strong as law. Even with Tsutama’s blessings, who might run to Elaida when bonding Asha’man was broached? She had removed three more names from her mental list of possibilities by the time she reached the entrance to Elaida’s apartments, only two floors below the top of the Tower. After almost two weeks, her list of those she could be certain of still contained only a single name, and that one was impossible for the task.

Elaida was in her sitting room, where the furnishings were all gilt and ivory inlays and the large patterned carpet was one of Tear’s finest creations. She was sitting in a low-backed chair before the marble fireplace sipping wine with Meidani. Seeing the Gray was no surprise despite the early hour. Meidani dined with the Amyrlin most nights, and visited often during the day by invitation. Elaida, her six-striped stole wide enough to cover her shoulders, was regarding the taller woman over her crystal goblet, a dark-eyed eagle regarding a mouse with big blue eyes. Meidani, emeralds at her ears and on a wide collar around her slim throat, seemed very conscious of that gaze. Her full lips smiled, but they seemed tremulous. The hand not holding her goblet moved constantly, touching the emerald comb over her left ear, patting her hair, covering her bosom, which was largely exposed by her snug bodice of brocaded silvery-gray silk. Her bosom was hardly excessive, yet her slenderness made it seem so, and she appeared about to pop free of the garment. The woman was garbed for a ball. Or a seduction.

“The morning reports are ready, Mother,” Tarna said, bowing slightly. Light! She felt as if she had intruded on lovers!

“You won’t mind leaving us, Meidani?” Even the smile Elaida directed at the yellow-haired woman was predatory.

“Of course not, Mother.” Meidani set her goblet on the small table beside her chair and leaped to her feet, offering a curtsy that nearly had her out of her dress. “Of course not.” She scurried from the room breathing hard, her eyes wide.

When the door closed behind her, Elaida laughed. “We were pillow-friends as novices,” she said, rising, “and I believe she wants to renew the relationship. I may let her. She might reveal more on the pillows than she’s let slip so far. Which is nothing, truth to tell.” She strode to the nearest window and stood staring down toward where her fantastical palace would rise to overtop the Tower itself. Eventually. If sisters could be convinced to work on it again. The heavy rain that had begun during the night was still falling, and it seemed unlikely she could see anything of that palace’s foundations, all that had been completed so far. “Help yourself to wine if you wish.”

Tarna kept her face smooth with an effort. Pillow-friends were common among novices and Accepted, but girlhood things should be left behind with girlhood. Not all sisters saw it so, certainly. Galina had been quite surprised when Tarna refused her advances after gaining the shawl. She herself found men far more attractive than women. Most seemed heavily intimidated by Aes Sedai, to be sure, especially if they learned you were Red Ajah, but over the years she had come across a few who were not.

“That seems odd, Mother,” she said, putting the leather folder down on the side table that held an ornately wrought golden tray bearing a crystal wine pitcher and goblets. “She appears frightened of you.” Filling a goblet, she sniffed the wine before sipping. The Keepings seemed to be working. For now. Elaida had finally agreed that that weave, at least, must be shared. “Almost as if she knew that you know about her being a spy.”

“Of course she’s afraid of me.” Sarcasm dripped heavily from Elaida’s voice, but then hardened to stone. “I want her afraid. I intend to put her through the mangle. By the time I have her birched, she’ll tie herself to the birching frame if I order it. If she knew I knew, Tarna, she’d be fleeing instead of delivering herself into my hands.” Still staring out into the rainstorm, Elaida sipped at her wine. “Have you any news of the others?”

“No, Mother. If I could inform the Sitters of why they’re to be watched —”

“No!” Elaida snapped, spinning to face her. Her dress was such a mass of intricate red scrollwork that the embroidery all but hid the gray silk beneath. Tarna had suggested that less flaunting of her former Ajah—she had phrased it more diplomatically, but that was what she meant—might help bring the Ajahs together again, yet Elaida’s eruption of fury had been sufficient to keep her quiet on the topic since. “What if some of the Sitters are working with them? I wouldn’t put it past them. Those ridiculous talks continue at the bridge despite my orders. No, I wouldn’t put it past them at all!”

Tarna inclined her head over her goblet, accepting what she could not change. Elaida refused to see that if the Ajahs disobeyed her order to break off the talks, they were unlikely to spy on their own sisters at her command without knowing why. Saying so would only result in another tirade, though.

Elaida stared at her as if to make sure she was not going to argue. The woman seemed harder than ever. And more brittle. “A pity the rebellion in Tarabon failed,” she said at last. “There’s nothing to be done about it, I suppose.” But she mentioned it frequently, at odd moments, since word came that the Seanchan were reasserting their grip on that country. She was not so resigned as she pretended. “I want to hear some good news, Tarna. Is there any word of the seals on the Dark One’s prison? We must make sure no more get broken.” As if Tarna did not know that!

"Not that the Ajahs have reported, Mother, and I don't think they would hold that back." She wished she had those last words back as soon as they were spoken.

Elaida grunted. The Ajahs released only trickles of what their eyes-and-ears told them, and she resented that bitterly. Her own eyes-and-ears were concentrated in Andor. "How is the work coming at the harbors?"

"Slowly, Mother." With the flow of trade stifled, the city was already feeling hunger. It would begin starving soon, unless the harbor mouths were cleared. Even cutting away the portion of the Southharbor chain that was still iron had proved not enough to allow sufficient ships in to feed Tar Valon. Once Tarna was able to convince her of the necessity, Elaida had ordered the chain towers dismantled so those huge pieces of *cuendillar* could be removed. Like the city walls, however, the towers had been built and strengthened with the Power, and only the Power could disassemble them. It was far from easy. The original builders had done good work, and *those* wards seemed not to have weakened a hair. "Reds are doing most of the work for the time being. Sisters from other Ajahs come now and then, but only a few. I expect that will change soon, though." They knew the necessity of the work, however much they might resent it—no sister could like having to labor in that fashion; the Reds doing most of it certainly grumbled enough—but the order had come from Elaida, and these days, that resulted in foot-dragging.

Elaida breathed heavily, then took a long drink. She seemed to need it. Her hand gripped the goblet so hard that tendons stood out on its back. She advanced across the patterned silk carpet as if she meant to strike at Tarna. "They defy me again. Again! I *will* have obedience, Tarna. I *will* have it! Write out an order, and once I sign and seal it, post it in every Ajah's quarters." She stopped almost nose-to-nose with Tarna, her dark eyes glittering like a raven's. "The Sitters of any Ajah that fails to send its fair share of sisters to work on the chain towers will take a daily penance from Silviana until the matter is rectified. Daily! And the Sitters of any Ajah that sends sisters to those . . . those *talks* will do the same. Write it out for me to sign!"

Tarna drew a deep breath. Penances might work and they might not, depending on how set the Sitters were, and the Ajah heads—she did not think things had gone so wrong that they might refuse to accept penance at all; that would be an end to Elaida for sure, perhaps an end to the Tower.

But posting the order publicly, not allowing the Sitters a scrap to hide behind and maintain their dignity, was the wrong way to go about it. In truth, it might well be the very worst way. “If I may make a suggestion,” she began as delicately as she could manage. She had never been known for delicacy.

“You may not,” Elaida cut in harshly. She took another long drink, draining her goblet, and glided across the carpet to refill it. She drank too much, of late. Tarna had even seen her drunk once! “How is Silviana doing with the al’Vere girl?” she said as she poured.

“Egwene spends near enough half of every day in Silviana’s study, Mother.” She was careful to keep her tone neutral. This was the first time Elaida had asked after the young woman since her capture, nine days ago.

“So much? I want her tamed to the Tower’s harness, not broken.”

“I . . . doubt she will be broken, Mother. Silviana will be careful of that.” And then there was the girl herself. That was not for Elaida’s ears, though. Tarna had been shouted at more than enough. She had learned to avoid subjects that only resulted in shouting. Advice and suggestions unoffered were no more useless than advice and suggestions untaken, and Elaida almost never took either. “Egwene’s stubborn, but I expect she must come around soon.” The girl had to. Galina, beating Tarna’s block out of her, had not expended a tenth of the effort Silviana was putting into Egwene. The girl had to yield to that soon.

“Excellent,” Elaida murmured. “Excellent.” She looked over her shoulder, her face a mask of serenity. Her eyes still glittered, though. “Put her name on the roster to attend me. In fact, have her attend me tonight. She can serve supper for Meidani and me.”

“It will be as you command, Mother.” It seemed yet another visit to the Mistress of Novices was inevitable, but no doubt Egwene would earn just as many of those if she never came near Elaida.

“And now your reports, Tarna.” Elaida sat down again and crossed her legs.

Replacing her barely touched goblet on the tray, Tarna took up her folder and sat in the chair Meidani had been using. “The redone wards appear to be keeping rats out of the Tower, Mother,” for how long was another question; she checked those wards herself every day, “but ravens and crows have been seen in the Tower grounds, so the wards on the walls must be. . . .”

The midday sun cast dappled light through the leafy branches of the tall trees, mostly oak and leatherleaf and sourgum with a smattering of cottonwoods and massive pines. Apparently there had been a fierce windstorm some years back, because fallen timber, scattered about here and there but all stretched in the same general direction, provided good seating with only a little hatchet work to hack away a few limbs. Sparse undergrowth allowed a good view in all directions, and not far off, a small clear stream splashed over mossy stones. It would have been a good campsite if Mat had not been intent on covering as much ground as he could every day, but it did just as well as a place to rest the horses and eat. The Damona Mountains still lay at least three hundred miles to the east, and he intended to reach them in a week. Vanin said he knew a smugglers' pass—purely by hearsay, of course; just something he had overheard by chance, but he knew right where to find it—that would have them inside Murandy two days after that. Much safer than trying to go north into Andor or south toward Illian. In either direction, the distance to safety would be further and the chance of encountering Seanchan greater.

Mat gnawed the last scrap of meat from a rabbit's hind leg, and tossed the bone on the ground. Balding Lopin darted in, stroking at his beard in consternation, to pick it up and drop it in the pit he and Nerim had made in the mulch-covered forest floor, though the pit would be dug up by animals within a half-hour after their departure. Mat moved to wipe his hands on his breeches. Tuon, nibbling at a grouse leg on the other side of the low fire, gave him a very direct look, her eyebrows raised, while the fingers of her free hand wiggled at Selucia, who had ravaged half a grouse by herself. The bosomy woman did not reply, but she sniffed. Loudly. Meeting Tuon's gaze, he deliberately wiped his hands on his breeches. He could have gone over to the stream, where the Aes Sedai were washing their hands, but no one's clothing was going to be pristine by the time they reached Murandy in any case. Besides, when a woman named you Toy all the time, it was natural to take any chance to let her know you were nobody's toy. She shook her head and waggled her fingers again. This time, Selucia laughed, and Mat felt his face heat. He could imagine two or three things she might have said, none of which he would have enjoyed hearing.

Setalle, sitting on the end of his log, made sure he heard some of them anyway. Reaching an agreement with the onetime Aes Sedai had not shifted her attitudes a hair. "She might have said men are pigs," she murmured without lifting her eyes from her embroidery hoop, “or just that you are.” Her dark gray riding dress had a high neck, but she still wore her snug silver necklace with the marriage knife hanging from it. “She may have said you’re a mud-footed country lout with dirt in your ears and hay in your hair. Or she might have said—”

“I think I see the direction you’re going,” he told her through gritted teeth. Tuon giggled, though the next instant her face belonged on an executioner once more, cold and stern.

Pulling his silver-mounted pipe and goatskin tabac pouch from his coat pocket, he thumbed the bowl full and lifted the lid on the box of strikers at his feet. It fascinated him the way fire just sprang up, spikes of it darting in all directions at first, when he scratched the lumpy, red-and-white head of a striker down the rough side of the box. He waited until the flame burned away from the head before using it to light his pipe. Pulling the taste and smell of sulphur into his mouth once had been enough for him. He dropped the burning stick and ground it firmly under his boot. The mulch was still damp from the last rain to fall here, but he took no chances with fire in woods. In the Two Rivers, men turned out from miles around when the woods caught fire. Sometimes hundreds of marches burned, even so.

“The strikers, they should not be wasted,” Aludra said, lifting her eyes from the small stones board balanced atop a nearby log. Thom, stroking his long white mustaches, continued to contemplate the cross-hatched board. He rarely lost at stones, yet she had managed to win two games from him since they left the show. Two out of a dozen or more, but Thom took care with anyone who could defeat him even once. She swept her beaded braids back over her shoulders. “Me, I must be in the same place for two days to make more. Men always find ways to make work for women, yes?”

Mat puffed away, if not contentedly, at least with some degree of pleasure. Women! A delight to look at and a delight to be with. When they were not finding ways to rub salt into a man’s hide. It seemed six up and a half dozen down. It truly did.

Most of the party had finished eating—the best part of two grouse and one rabbit were all that remained on the spits over the fire, but they would be taken along wrapped in linen; the hunting had been good during the morning’s ride, yet there was no certainty the afternoon would be as profitable, and flatbread and beans made a poor meal. Those who had finished were taking their ease or, in the case of the Redarms, checking the hobbled packhorses, better than sixty of them on four leads. Buying so many in Maderin had been expensive, but Luca had rushed into town to take care of the bargaining himself once he heard about a merchant dead in the street. He almost—almost but not quite—had been ready to give them packhorses from the show's animals to be rid of Mat after that. Many of the animals were loaded with Aludra's paraphernalia and her supplies. Luca had ended up with the greater part by far of Mat's gold, one way and another. Mat had slipped a fat purse to Petra and Clarine, too, but that was friendship, to help them buy their inn a little sooner. What remained in his saddlebags was more than enough to see them comfortably to Murandy, though, and all he needed to replenish it was a common room where dice were being tossed.

Leilwin, with a curved sword hanging from a broad leather strap that slanted across her chest, and Domon, with a shortsword on one side of his belt and a brass-studded cudgel on the other, were chatting with Juilin and Amathera on yet another log close by. Leilwin—he had come to accept that that was the only name she would stomach—made a point of showing that she would not avoid Tuon or Selucia, or lower her eyes when they met, though she had to steel herself visibly to carry it off. Juilin had the cuffs of his black coat turned back, a sign he felt among friends, or at least people he could trust. The onetime Panarch of Tarabon still clutched the thief-catcher's arm tightly, but she met Leilwin's sharp blue eyes with little flinching. In fact, she often seemed to gaze at the other woman with something approaching awe.

Seated cross-legged on the ground and unmindful of the dampness, Noal was playing Snakes and Foxes with Olver and spinning wild tales about the lands beyond the Aiel Waste, about some great coastal city that foreigners were not allowed to leave except by ship and the inhabitants were not allowed to leave at all. Mat wished they would find another game to play. Every time they brought out that piece of red cloth with its spiderweb of black lines, it reminded him of his promise to Thom, reminded him the bloody Eelfinn were inside his head somehow, and maybe the flaming Aelfinn, too. The Aes Sedai came up from the stream, and Joline stopped to talk with Blaeric and Fen. Bethamin and Seta, trailing along behind, hesitated until a gesture from the Green sent them to stand behind the log where Teslyn and Edesina sat, as far apart as they could manage, with uncut branches between, and began reading small leather-bound books taken from their belt pouches. Both Bethamin and Seta stood behind Edesina.

The yellow-haired former *sul'dam* had come round in spectacular, and painful, fashion. Painful for her and for the sisters. When she first hesitantly asked them to teach her, too, at supper the night before, they refused. They were only teaching Bethamin because she had already channeled. Seta was too old to become a novice, she had not channeled, and that was that. So she duplicated whatever it was that Bethamin had done and had all three leaping about the cookfire and squealing in showers of dancing sparks for as long as she could hold on to the Power. They agreed to teach her then. At least, Joline and Edesina did. Teslyn still was having none of any *sul'dam*, former or not. All three of them took a hand in switching her, though, and she had spent the morning continually easing herself in her saddle. She still looked afraid, of the One Power and maybe of the Aes Sedai, but strangely, her face somehow seemed . . . content, too. How to understand that was beyond Mat.

He should have felt content himself. He had avoided a charge of murder, avoided riding blindly into a Seanchan trap that would have killed Tuon, and left the *gholam* behind for good this time. It would be following Luca's show, and Luca had been warned, for whatever good that would do. In well under two weeks he would be over the mountains into Murandy. The need to figure out how to get Tuon back to Ebou Dar safely, no easy task at all now, especially since he would have to guard against Aes Sedai trying to spirit her away, would mean that much longer to look at her face. And to try puzzling out what went on behind those big beautiful eyes. He should have been as happy as a goat in a corn crib. He was far from it.

For one thing, all those sword-cuts he had received in Maderin hurt. Some of them were inflamed, though he had managed to keep that from anyone so far. He hated being fussed over nearly as much as he hated anyone using the Power on him. Lopin and Nerim had sewed him up as well as they could, and he had refused Healing despite attempted bullying by all three Aes Sedai. He had been surprised that Joline, of all people, tried to insist, but she did, and flung up her hands in disgust when he failed to relent. Another surprise had been Tuon.

"Don't be foolish, Toy," she had drawled in his tent, standing over him, arms folded beneath her breasts, while Lopin and Nerim plied their needles and he gritted his teeth. Her proprietary air, very much a woman making sure her property was repaired properly, had been enough to make him grind his teeth, never mind the needles. Or that he was down to his smallclothes! She had just walked in and refused to leave short of manhandling, and he had felt in no condition to manhandle a woman he suspected might be able to break his arm. “This Healing is a wonderful thing. My Mylen knows it, and I taught it to my others, too. Of course, many people are foolish about having the Power touch them. Half my servants would faint at the suggestion, and most of the Blood, too, I shouldn’t be surprised. But I wouldn’t have expected it of you.” If she had a quarter his experience of Aes Sedai, she would have.

They had ridden off up the road from Maderin as if setting out for Lugard, then taken to the forest as soon as the last farms were out of sight. The moment they entered the trees, the dice started up in his head again. That was the other thing that soured his mood, those bloody dice drumming inside his head for two days. There hardly seemed any way they could stop here in the forest. What kind of momentous event could happen in the woods? Still, he had stayed well clear of the small villages they had passed. Sooner or later the dice would stop, though, and he could only wait for it.

Tuon and Selucia headed for the stream to wash, wiggling their fingers at one another rapidly. Talking about him, he was sure. When women started putting their heads together, you could be sure—

Amathera screamed, and every head whipped around toward her. Mat spotted the cause as quickly as Juilin did, a black-scaled snake a good seven feet long wriggling quickly away from the log Juilin was seated on. Leilwin cursed and leaped to her feet drawing her sword, but no faster than Juilin, who tugged his shortsword free of its scabbard and started after the snake so swiftly that his conical red cap fell off.

“Let it go, Juilin,” Mat said. “It’s heading away from us. Let it go.” The thing probably had a den under that log and had been surprised to come out and find people. Luckily, blacklances were solitary snakes.

Juilin hesitated before deciding that comforting a shivering Amathera was more important than chasing a snake. “What kind is it, anyway?” he said, folding her in his arms. He was a city man, after all. Mat told him, and for a moment, he looked as though he meant to go after it again. Wisely, he decided against. Blacklances were quick as lightning, and with a shortsword, he would have needed to get close. Anyway, Amathera was clinging to him so hard he would have had a time getting free of her.

Taking his hat from the butt of his *ashandarei*, which was driven point-down into the ground, Mat settled it on his head. “Daylight’s wasting,” he said around his pipestem. “Time we were moving on. Don’t dawdle over there, Tuon. Your hands are clean enough.” He had tried calling her Precious, but since her claim of victory back in Maderin, she refused to acknowledge that he had even spoken when he did.

She did not hurry in the slightest, of course. By the time she returned, drying her small hands on a small piece of toweling that Selucia would drape across the pommel of her saddle to dry, Nerim and Lopin had filled in the refuse pit, wrapped the remains of the meal and tucked them into Nerim’s saddlebags, and doused the fire with water brought from the stream in folding leather buckets. *Ashandarei* in hand, Mat was ready to mount Pips.

“A strange man, who lets poisonous serpents go,” Tuon said. “From the fellow’s reaction, I assume a blacklance *is* poisonous?”

“Very,” he told her. “But snakes don’t bite anything they can’t eat unless they’re threatened.” He put a foot in the stirrup.

“You may kiss me, Toy.”

He gave a start. Her words, not spoken softly, had made them the object of every eye. Selucia’s face was so stiffly expressionless her disapproval could not have been plainer. “Now?” he said. “When we stop tonight, we could take a stroll alone—”

“By tonight, I may have changed my mind, Toy. Call it a whim, for a man who lets poisonous snakes go.” Maybe she saw one of her omens in that?

Taking off his hat and sticking the black spear back into the ground, he took the pipe from between his teeth and planted a chaste kiss on her full lips. A first kiss was nothing to be rough with. He did not want her to think him pushy, or crude. She was no tavern maid to enjoy a bit of slap and tickle. Besides, he could almost feel all those eyes watching. Someone snickered. Selucia rolled her eyes.

Tuon folded her arms beneath her breasts and looked up at him through her long eyelashes. “Do I remind you of your sister?” she asked in a dangerous tone. “Or perhaps your mother?” Somebody laughed. More than one somebody, in fact.

Grimly, Mat tapped the dottle from his pipe on the heel of his boot and stuffed the warm pipe into his coat pocket. He hung his hat back on the *ashandarei*. If she wanted a real kiss. . . . Had he really thought she would not fill his arms? Slim, she was to be sure, and small, but she filled them very nicely indeed. He bent his head to hers. She was far from the first woman he had kissed. He knew what he was about. Surprisingly—or then again, perhaps not so surprisingly—she did not know. She was a quick pupil, though. Very quick.

When he finally released her, she stood there looking up at him and trying to catch her breath. For that matter, his breath came a little raggedly, too. Metwyn whistled appreciatively. Mat smiled. What would she think of what plainly was her first real kiss ever? He tried not to smile too widely, though. He did not want her to think he was smirking.

She laid fingers against his cheek. "I thought so," she said in that slow honey drawl. "You're feverish. Some of your wounds must be infected."

Mat blinked. He gave her a kiss that had to have curled her toes, and all she said was that his face was hot? He bent his head again—this time, she would bloody well need help to stay standing!—but she put a hand against his chest, fending him off.

"Selucia, fetch the box of ointments I got from Mistress Luca," she commanded. Selucia went scurrying for Tuon's black-and-white mount.

"We don't have time for that now," Mat said. "I'll smear on something tonight." He might as well have kept his mouth shut.

"Strip off, Toy," she said in the same tone she had used with her maid. "The ointment will sting, but I expect you to be brave."

"I am *not* going to—!"

"Riders coming," Harnan announced. He was already in his saddle, on a dark bay gelding with white forefeet, holding the lead to one of the strings of packhorses. "One of them's Vanin."

Mat swung up onto Pips for a better vantage. A pair of horsemen were approaching at a gallop, dodging around fallen trees when they had to. Aside from recognizing Chel Vanin's dun, there was no mistaking the man himself. Nobody else who was that wide and sat his saddle like a sack of suet could have maintained his seat at that pace without any apparent effort. The man could have stayed in the saddle on a wild boar. Then Mat recognized the other rider, whose cloak was flailing behind him, and felt as if he had been punched in the belly. He would not have been surprised in the least had the dice stopped then, but they kept bouncing off the inside of his skull. What in the Light was Talmanes bloody well doing in Altara?

The two riders slowed to a walk short of Mat, and Vanin reined in to let Talmanes approach alone. It was not shyness. There was nothing shy about Vanin. He leaned lazily on the tall pommel of his saddle and spat to one side through a gap in his teeth. No, he knew Mat would not be best pleased, and he meant to stay clear.

"Vanin brought me up to date, Mat," Talmanes said. Short and wiry, with the front of his head shaved and powdered, the Cairhienin had the right to wear stripes of color across his chest in considerable number, but a small red hand sewn to the breast of his dark coat was its only decoration unless you counted the long red scarf tied around his left arm. He never laughed and seldom smiled, but he had his reasons. "I was sorry to hear about Nalesean and the others. A good man, Nalesean. They all were."

"Yes, they were," Mat said, keeping a tight rein on his temper. "I assume Egwene never came to you for help getting away from those fool Aes Sedai, but what in the bloody flaming Light are you doing here?" Well, maybe he did not have such a tight rein after all. "At least tell me you haven't brought the whole bloody Band three hundred bloody miles into Altara with you."

"Egwene is still the Amyrlin," the other man said calmly, straightening his cloak. Another red hand, larger, marked that. "You were wrong about her, Mat. She really is the Amyrlin Seat, and she has those Aes Sedai by the scruff of the neck. Though some of them might not know it yet. The last I saw, she and the whole lot of them were off to besiege Tar Valon. She might have it by now. They can make holes in the air like the one the Dragon Reborn made to take us near Salidar." The colors spun in Mat's head, resolving for an instant into Rand talking to some woman with gray hair in a bun atop her head, an Aes Sedai, he thought, but his anger blew the image away like mist.

All that talk of the Amyrlin Seat and Tar Valon attracted the sisters, of course. They heeled their horses up beside Mat and tried to take over. Well, Edesina hung back a little the way she did when Teslyn or Joline had the bit in her teeth, but the other two. . . .

"Who do you be talking about?" Teslyn demanded while Joline was still opening her mouth. "Egwene? There did be an Accepted named Egwene al'Vere, but she be a runaway."

"Egwene al'Vere is the one, Aes Sedai," Talmanes said politely. The man was always polite to Aes Sedai. "And she is no runaway. She is the

Amyrlin Seat, my word on it.” Edesina made a sound that would have been called a squeak coming from anyone but an Aes Sedai.

“Later for that,” Mat muttered. Joline opened her mouth again, angrily. “Later, I said.” That was not enough to stop the slender Green, but Teslyn laid a hand on her arm and murmured something, and that was. Joline still glared daggers, though, promising to drag out everything she wanted to know later. “The Band, Talmanes?”

“Oh. No, I only brought three banners of horse and four thousand mounted crossbowmen. I left three banners of horse and five of foot, a little short of crossbows, in Murandy with orders to move north to Andor. And the Mason’s Banner, of course. Handy to have masons ready to hand if you need a bridge built or the like.”

Mat squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Six banners of horse and five of foot. And a banner of masons! The Band had only been two banners counting horse *and* foot when he left them in Salidar. He wished he had back half the gold he had handed over to Luca so freely. “How am I supposed to pay that many men?” he demanded. “I couldn’t find enough dice games in a year!”

“Well, as to that, I made a small deal with King Roedran. Finished with, now, and not before time—I think he was about ready to turn on us; I will explain later—but the Band’s coffers hold a year’s pay and more. Besides, sooner or later the Dragon Reborn will give you estates, and grand ones. He has raised men to rule nations, so I hear, and you grew up with him.”

This time, he did not fight the colors as they resolved into Rand and the Aes Sedai. It was an Aes Sedai, for sure. A hard woman, she looked. If Rand tried to give him any titles, he would stuff them down Rand’s bloody throat is what he would do. Mat Cauthon had no liking for nobles—well, a few like Talmanes were all right; and Tuon; never forget Tuon—and he certainly had no bloody desire to become one! “That’s as may be,” was all he said, though.

Selucia cleared her throat loudly. She and Tuon moved their horses up beside Mat, and Tuon was so straight in her mare’s saddle, so cool-eyed, cold-faced and regal, that he expected Selucia to start proclaiming her titles. She did nothing of the sort. Instead, she shifted on her dun and scowled at him, eyes like blue coals in a fire, then cleared her throat again. Very loudly. Ah.

“Tuon,” Mat said, “allow me to present Lord Talmanes Delovinde of Cairhien. His family is distinguished and ancient, and he has added honors to its name.” The little woman inclined her head. Perhaps all of an inch. “Talmanes, this is Tuon.” So long as she called him Toy, she would get no titles from him. Selucia glared, eyes hotter than ever, impossible as that seemed.

Talmanes blinked in surprise, though, and bowed very low in his saddle. Vanin pulled the sagging brim of his hat lower, half hiding his face. He still avoided looking directly at Mat. So. It seemed the man had already told Talmanes exactly who Tuon was.

Growling under his breath, Mat leaned from the saddle to snatch his hat from the spear and pull up the *ashandarei*. He clapped the hat on his head. “We were ready to move on, Talmanes. Take us to where your men are waiting, and we’ll see if we can have as good luck avoiding Seanchan on the way out of Altara as you had on the way in.”

“We saw a good many Seanchan,” Talmanes said, turning his bay to fall in beside Pips. “Though most of the men we saw seemed to be Altaran. They have camps scattered everywhere, it seems. Luckily, we saw none of those flying creatures I have heard tell of. But there is a problem, Mat. There was a landslide. I lost my rear guard and some of the packhorses. The pass is well and truly blocked, Mat. I sent three men to try climbing over with the orders sending the Band to Andor. One broke his neck, and another his leg.”

Mat stopped Pips short. “I’m guessing this is the same pass Vanin was talking about?”

Talmanes nodded, and Vanin, waiting to fall in farther back, said, “Bloody right, it was. Passes don’t grow on trees, not in mountains like the Damonas.” He was no respecter of rank.

“Then you’ll have to find another one,” Mat told him. “I’ve heard you can find your way blindfolded at midnight. It should be easy for you.” Flattery never hurt. Besides, he had heard that about the man.

Vanin made a sound like he was swallowing his tongue. “Find another pass?” he muttered. “Find another pass, the man says. You don’t just go find another pass in new mountains like the Damonas. Why do you think I only knew the one?” He was shaken to admit that much. Before this, he had been adamant that he had only heard of it.

“What are you talking about?” Mat demanded, and Vanin explained. At great length, for him.

“An Aes Sedai explained it to me, once. You see, there’s old mountains. They was there before the Breaking, maybe on the bottom of the sea or the like. They have passes all over, broad and gentle. You can ride into those and as long you keep your head and your direction and have enough supplies, sooner or later you come out the other side. And then there’s mountains made during the Breaking.” The fat man turned his head and spat copiously. “Passes in those are narrow, twisty things, and sometimes they aren’t really what you’d call passes at all. Ride into one of those, and you can wander around till your food runs out trying to find a way to the other side. Loss of that pass is going to hurt a lot of folks who use it for what you might call untaxed goods, and men’ll die before they find a new one that gets them all the way through. We go into the Damonas with that pass gone, likely we’ll all die, too. Them as doesn’t turn back in time and hasn’t gotten their heads so turned around they can’t find the way back.”

Mat looked around, at Tuon, the Aes Sedai, at Olver. They were all depending on him to get them to safety, but his safe route out of Altara was not there any more. “Let’s ride,” he said. “I have to think.” He had to bloody think for all he was worth.

* * *

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CHAPTER 26

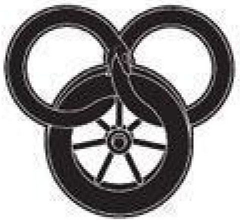

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Toy set a fast pace through the forest, but Tuon rode close behind him—with Selucia at her side, of course—so she could listen in on him and Talmanes. Her own thoughts interfered with eavesdropping, however. So he had grown up with the Dragon Reborn, had he? The Dragon Reborn! And he had denied knowing anything at all of the man. That was one lie of his she had failed to catch, and she was good at catching lies. In Seandar, the undetected lie might be the one that killed you or sent you to the sale block as property. Had she known of his prevarication, she might have slapped his face rather than allowing him to kiss her. Now, *that* had been a shock, one she was not sure she had recovered from yet. Selucia had described being kissed by a man, but the actuality made the other woman's descriptions pale. No, she had to listen.

"You left *Estean* in charge?" Toy erupted, so loudly that a covey of gray doves burst from cover in the thin undergrowth with a mournful whirring sound. "The man's a fool!"

"Not too much of a fool to listen to Daerid," Talmanes replied calmly. He did not seem a man to get overly excited. He kept a careful watch, head swiveling constantly. Every so often he scanned the sky through the thick branches overhead, too. He had only heard of *raken*, yet he watched for them. His words were even crisper and quicker than Toy's, and difficult to follow. These people all spoke so fast! "Carlomin and Reimon are not fools, Mat—at least, Reimon is only a fool sometimes—but neither will they listen to a commoner, no matter how much more he knows about warfare than they do. Edorion will, but I wanted him with me."

That red hand symbol Talmanes wore was intriguing. More than intriguing. Much more. Of an old and distinguished House, was he? But Toy was the one. He remembered Hawkwing's face. That seemed utterly impossible, yet his denial of it had plainly been a lie, as plain as the spots on a leopard. Could the Red Hand be Toy's sigil? But if so, what about his ring? She had almost fainted when she first saw that. Well, she had come as close to it as she had since childhood.

"That's going to change, Talmanes," Toy growled. "I let it go on too long as it is. If Reimon and the others command banners now, that makes them Banner-Generals. And you a Lieutenant-General. Daerid commands five banners, and that makes him a Lieutenant-General, too. Reimon and the others will obey his orders or they can go home. Come Tarmon Gai'don, I'm not going to have my skull split open because they bloody refuse to listen to somebody who doesn't have bloody estates."

Talmanes turned his horse to ride around a patch of briars, and everyone followed. The tangled vines seemed to have particularly long thorns, and hooked besides. "They will not like it, Mat, but they will not go home, either. You know that. Have you any ideas yet how we are to get out of Altara?"

"I'm thinking on it," Toy muttered. "I'm thinking on it. Those crossbowmen. . . ." He exhaled heavily. "That wasn't wise, Talmanes. For one thing, they're used to marching on their own feet. Half of them will have all they can do to stay in the saddle if we're moving fast, and we're going to have to. They can be useful in woods like these, or anywhere they have plenty of cover, but if we're on open ground, with no pikes, they'll be ridden down before they can loose a second flight."

In the distance, a lion coughed. In the distance, but it was still enough to make the horses whicker nervously and dance a few steps. Toy leaned forward on his gelding's neck and appeared to whisper in the animal's ear. It quieted immediately. So that had not been another of his fanciful tales after all. Remarkable.

"I picked men who could ride, Mat," Talmanes said once his bay stopped frisking. "And they all have the new crank." A touch of excitement entered his voice now. Even restrained men tended to warmth over weapons. "Three turns of the crank," his hands moved in a quick circle, demonstrating, "and the bowstring is latched. With a little training, a man can get off seven or eight quarrels in a minute. With a heavy crossbow."

Selucia made a small sound in her throat. She was right to be startled. If Talmanes was telling the truth, and he had no reason to lie that Tuon could find, then she had to obtain one of these marvelous cranks somehow. With one for a pattern, artisans could make more. Archers could shoot faster than crossbowmen, but they took longer to train, too. There were always more crossbowmen than archers.

"*Seven*?" Toy exclaimed incredulously. "That would be more than useful, but I never heard of such a thing. Ever." He muttered that as if it had some special significance, then shook his head. "How did you come by it?"

"Seven or eight. There was a mechanic in Murandy who wanted to take a wagonload of things he had invented up to Caemlyn. There is a school of some sort there for scholars and inventors. He needed money for the journey, and he was willing to teach the Band’s armorers to make the things. Smother your enemy with arrows at every opportunity. It is always better to kill your enemies far off than close at hand.”

Selucia held her hands up so Tuon could see them, slim fingers moving quickly. WHAT IS THIS BAND THEY SPEAK OF? She used the proper form, inferior to superior, yet her impatience was almost palpable. Impatience with everything that was happening. Tuon kept few secrets from her, but some seemed advisable for the present. She would not put it past Selucia to return her to Ebou Dar forcibly, so she would not be breaking her word. A shadow’s duties were many, and sometimes required paying the final sacrifice. She did not want to have to order Selucia’s execution.

She replied in the imperative form. TOY’S PERSONAL ARMY, OBVIOUSLY. LISTEN AND WE MAY LEARN MORE.

Toy commanding an army seemed very odd. He was charming at times, even witty and amusing, but often a buffoon and always a rapscallion. He had seemed very much in his element as Tylin’s pet. Yet he had seemed in his element among the show’s performers, too, and with the *marath’damane* and the two escaped *damane*, and in the hell. That had been such a disappointment. Not even one fight! Events later had not compensated for that. Getting swept up in a street brawl was hardly the same as seeing fights in a hell. Which admittedly had been far more boring than rumor heard in Ebou Dar had made it seem. Toy had displayed an unexpected side of himself in that street brawl. A formidable man, though with a peculiar weakness. For some reason, she found that strangely endearing.

“Good advice,” he said absently, tugging at the black scarf tied around his neck. She wondered about the scar he took such pains to hide. That he did was understandable. Why had he been hanged, and how had he survived? She could not ask. She did not mind lowering his eyes a little—in fact, it was enjoyable making him writhe; it took so little effort—but she did not want to destroy him. At least, not for the moment.

“Do you not recognize it?” Talmanes said. “It is from your book. King Roedran has two copies in his library. He has it memorized. The man thinks it will make him a great captain. He was so pleased with how our bargain worked out that he had a copy printed and bound for me.”

Toy gave the other man a mystified look. “My book?”

"The one you told us about, Mat. *Fog and Steel*, by Madoc Comadrin."

"Oh, that book." Toy shrugged. "I read it a long time ago."

Tuon gritted her teeth. Her fingers flashed. WHEN WILL THEY STOP TALKING OF BOOKS AND GO BACK TO INTERESTING THINGS?

PERHAPS IF WE LISTEN WE MAY LEARN MORE, Selucia replied. Tuon glared at her, but the woman wore such an innocent look that she could not maintain her scowl. She laughed—softly, so as not to let Toy realize how close behind him she was—and Selucia joined in. Softly.

Toy had fallen silent, though, and Talmanes seemed content to leave it so. They rode in silence save for the sounds of the forest, birds singing, strange black-tailed squirrels chittering on branches. Tuon set herself to watching for omens, but nothing caught her eye. Bright-feathered birds darted among the trees. Once they spotted a herd of perhaps fifty tall, lean cattle with very long horns that stuck out almost straight to either side. The animals had heard them coming and were squared up, facing them. A bull tossed his head and pawed at the ground. Toy and Talmanes led the careful way around the herd, keeping their distance. She looked over her shoulder. The Redarms—why were they called that? She would have to ask Toy—the Redarms were leading the packhorses, but Gorderan had raised his crossbow, and the others had arrows nocked to their bows. So these cattle were dangerous. There were few omens concerning cattle, and she was relieved when the herd dwindled behind them. She had not come all this way to be killed by a cow. Or to see Toy killed by one.

After a time, Thom and Aludra came up to ride beside her. The woman glanced at her once, then looked straight ahead. The Taraboner's face, framed by those brightly beaded braids, was always wooden when she looked at her or Selucia, so clearly she was one of those who refused to accept the Return. She was watching Toy, and she looked . . . satisfied. As if something had been confirmed for her, perhaps. Why had Toy brought her along? Surely not for her fireworks. Those were pretty enough, but they could not compare with Sky Lights performed by even a half-trained *damane*.

Thom Merrilin was much more interesting. Patently, the white-haired old man was an experienced spy. Who had sent him to Ebou Dar? The White Tower seemed the most obvious candidate. He spent little time around the three who called themselves Aes Sedai, but a well-trained spy would not give himself away in that fashion. His presence troubled her.

Until the last Aes Sedai was leashed, the White Tower was something to be wary of. Despite everything, she still had troubling thoughts at times that somehow, Toy was part of a White Tower plot. That was impossible unless some of the Aes Sedai were omniscient, yet the thought sometimes came to her.

"A strange coincidence, wouldn't you say, Master Merrilin?" she said. "Encountering part of Toy's army in the middle of an Altaran forest."

He stroked his long mustaches with a knuckle, failing to mask a small smile. "He's *ta'veren*, my Lady, and you can never tell what will happen around a *ta'veren*. It's always . . . interesting . . . when you travel with one of those. Mat has a tendency to find what he needs when he needs it. Sometimes before he knows he needs it."

She stared at him, but he seemed serious. "He's tied to the Pattern?" That was how the word would translate. "What is that supposed to mean?"

The old man's blue eyes widened in astonishment. "You don't know? But it's said Artur Hawkwing was the strongest *ta'veren* anyone had ever seen, perhaps as strong as Rand al'Thor. I'd have thought you of all people would. . . . Well, if you don't, you don't. *Ta'veren* are people the Pattern shapes itself around, people who were spun out by the Pattern itself to maintain the proper course of the weaving, perhaps to correct flaws that were creeping in. One of the Aes Sedai could explain better than I." As if she would have conversation with a *marath'damane*, or worse, a runaway *damane*.

"Thank you," she told him politely. "I think I've heard enough." *Ta'veren*. Ridiculous. These people and their endless superstitions! A small brown bird, surely a finch, flew out of a tall oak and circled widdershins three times above Toy's head before flying on. She had found her omen. Stay close to Toy. Not that she had any intention of doing otherwise. She had given her word, playing the game as it had to be played, and she had never broken her word in her life.

Little more than an hour after setting out, as a bird warbled ahead, Selucia pointed out the first sentry, a man with a crossbow up in the thick branches of a spreading oak cupping a hand to his mouth. Not a bird, then. More birdcalls heralded their advance, and soon they were riding through a tidy encampment. There were no tents, but the lances were neatly stacked, the horses picketed on scattered lines among the trees, near to the blankets of the men who would ride them, with a saddle or packsaddle at every animal's head. It would not take long for them to break camp and be on the march. Their fires were small and gave off little smoke.

As they rode in, men in dull green breastplates with that red hand on their coatsleeves and red scarves tied to their left arms began rising to their feet. She saw grizzled faces with scars and fresh young faces, all with their eyes on Toy and expressions she could only call eager. A growing murmur of voices rose, rustling through the trees like a breeze.

"It's Lord Mat."

"Lord Mat is back."

"Lord Mat's found us."

"Lord Mat."

Tuon exchanged glances with Selucia. The affection in those voices was unfeigned. That was rare, and often went with a commander who had a slack hand at discipline. But then, she expected any army of Toy's to be a ragtag affair, full of men who spent their time drinking and gambling. Only, these men looked no more ragtag than any regiment that had crossed a mountain range and ridden several hundred miles. No one looked unsteady on his feet with drink.

"Mostly we camp during the day and move at night to avoid being seen by the Seanchan," Talmanes said to Toy. "Just because we have seen none of those flying beasts does not mean some might not be around. Most of the Seanchan seem to be farther north or farther south, but apparently they have a camp not thirty miles north of here, and rumor says there is one of the creatures there."

"You seem pretty well informed," Toy said, studying the soldiers they passed. He nodded suddenly, as if he had reached a decision. He seemed grim and . . . could it be resigned?

"I am that, Mat. I brought half the scouts, and I also signed some Altarans who were fighting the Seanchan. Well, most of them seem to have been stealing horses more than anything else, but some were willing to give that up for a chance to really fight them. I think I know where most of the Seanchan camps are from the Malvide Narrows south to here."

Suddenly a man began to sing in a deep voice, and others joined in, the song spreading rapidly.

There're some delight in ale and wine,
and some in girls with ankles fine,

but my delight, yes, always mine,
is to dance with Jak o' the Shadows.

Every man in the camp was singing, now, thousands of voices roaring the song.

We'll toss the dice however they fall,
and snuggle the girls be they short or tall,
then follow Lord Mat whenever he calls,
to dance with Jak o' the Shadows.

They finished with shouts, laughing and clapping one another on the shoulder. Who under the Light was this Jak o' the Shadows?

Reining in, Toy raised the hand holding his odd spear. That was all, yet silence spread through the soldiers. So he was not soft with discipline. There were a few other reasons for soldiers to be fond of their officers, but the most common seemed unlikely to apply to Toy, of all people.

"Let's not let them know we're here until we want them to know," Toy said loudly. He was not orating, just making sure his voice carried. And the men heard, repeating his words over their shoulders to be passed back to men beyond the sound of his voice. "We're a long way from home, but I mean to get us home. So be ready to move, and move fast. The Band of the Red Hand can move faster than anybody else, and we're going to have to prove it." There was no cheering, but plenty of nods. Turning to Talmanes, he said, "Do you have maps?"

"The best to be found," Talmanes replied. "The Band has its own mapmaker, now. Master Roidelle already had good maps of everything from the Aryth Ocean to the Spine of the World, and since we crossed the Damonas, he and his assistants have been making new maps of the country we crossed. They even marked a map of eastern Altara with what we have learned of the Seanchan. Most of those camps are temporary, though. Soldiers heading somewhere else."

Selucia shifted in her saddle, and Tuon signed PATIENCE in high imperative form, a command. She kept her face smooth, but inside, she was furious. Knowing where soldiers were gave clues to where they were going. There had to be some way to burn that map. That would be as important as laying hands on one of the crossbow cranks.

"I'll want to talk with Master Roidelle, too," Toy said.

Soldiers came to take the horses, and for a while all seemed confusion and milling about. A gap-toothed fellow took Akein's reins, and Tuon gave him explicit instructions on caring for the mare. He returned her a sour look along with his bow. Commoners in these lands seemed to believe themselves equal to everyone. Selucia gave the same sort of instructions to the lanky young man who took Rosebud. She thought that an appropriate name for a dresser's horse. The young man stared at Selucia's chest, until she slapped him. Hard. He only grinned and led the dun away rubbing his cheek. Tuon sighed. That was all very well for Selucia, but for herself, striking a commoner would lower her eyes for months.

Soon enough, though, she was settled on a folding stool with Selucia at her back, and stout Lopin presented them with tin cups full of dark tea, bowing quite properly to Selucia as well as to her. Not deeply enough, but the balding man did try. Her tea was honeyed to perfection, lightly, but then, he had served her often enough to know how she liked it. Activity bustled about them. Talmanes had a brief reunion with gray-haired Nerim, who apparently was his serving man, and happy to be reunited with him. At least, the thin man's normally mournful countenance actually flashed a momentary smile. That sort of thing should have been done in private. Leilwin and Domon allowed Master Charin to lead Olver off to explore the camp with Juilin and Thera—Thom and Aludra went too, to stretch their legs—then deliberately took stools close by. Leilwin even went so far as to stare unblinking at Tuon for a long moment. Selucia made a low sound very like a growl, but Tuon ignored the provocation and gestured Mistress Anan to bring her stool over beside her. Eventually, the traitors would be punished, and the thief, the property restored to its rightful owners, and the *marath'damane* leashed, but those things had to wait on what was more important.

Three more officers appeared, young noblemen with that red hand on their dark silk coats, and had their own reunion with Toy, with a great deal of laughing and hitting each other on the shoulder, which they seemed to take as a sign of fondness. She soon had them sorted out. Edorion was the dark, lean man with the serious expression except when smiling, Reimon the broad-shouldered fellow who smiled a great deal, and Carlomin the tall, slender one. Edorion was clean-shaven, while Reimon and Carlomin both had dark beards that were trimmed to points and glistened as if oiled. All three made much over the Aes Sedai, bowing deeply. They even bowed to Bethamin and Seta! Tuon shook her head.

“I’ve told you often enough it’s a different world than you’re used to,” Mistress Anan murmured, “but you still don’t quite believe it, do you?”

“Just because a thing is a certain way,” Tuon replied, “doesn’t mean it should be that way, even if it has been for a long time.”

“Some might say the same of your people, my Lady.”

“Some might.” Tuon let it rest there, though she usually enjoyed her private conversations with the woman. Mistress Anan argued against leashing *marath’damane*, as might be expected, and even against keeping *da’covale* of all things, yet they were discussions rather than arguments, and Tuon had made her concede a few points. She had hopes of bringing the woman around eventually. Not today, though. She wanted her mind focused on Toy.

Master Roidelle appeared, a graying, round-faced man whose bulk strained his dark coat, followed by six fit-appearing younger men each carrying a long, cylindrical leather case. “I brought all the maps of Altara I have, my Lord,” he told Talmanes in a musical accent as he bowed. Did everyone in these lands speak as if racing to get the words out? “Some cover the whole country, they do, some no more than a hundred square miles. The best are my own, of course, those I made these past weeks.”

“Lord Mat will tell you what he wants to see,” Talmanes said. “Shall we leave you to it, Mat?”

But Toy was already telling the mapmaker what he wanted, the map marked with the Seanchan camps. In short order it was sorted out from the others in one of the cases and spread on the ground with Toy squatting on his heels beside it. Master Roidelle sent one of his assistants running to fetch him a stool. He would have burst his coat buttons trying to imitate Toy, and likely have fallen over besides. Tuon stared at that map hungrily. How to get her hands on it?

Exchanging glances and laughing as if being snubbed were the funniest thing in the world, Talmanes and the other three men strolled toward Tuon. The Aes Sedai gathered around the map on the ground until Toy told them to quit peering over his shoulder. They moved off a little, Bethamin and Seta heeling them at a distance, and began talking quietly among themselves, occasionally glancing in his direction. If Toy had been paying any heed to their expressions, especially Joline’s, he might have been worried in spite of the incredible *ter'angreal* Mistress Anan said he carried.

"We're about here, right?" he said, marking a spot with his finger. Master Roidelle murmured that they were. "So this is the camp where the *raken* supposedly is? The flying beast?" Another murmur of assent. "Good. What kind of camp is it? How many men are there?"

"Reportedly it's a supply camp, my Lord. For resupplying patrols." The young man returned with another folding stool, and the stout man eased himself down with a grunt. "Supposedly about a hundred soldiers, mostly Altaran, and about two hundred laborers, but I'm told there can be as many as five hundred more soldiers at times." A careful man, Master Roidelle.

Talmanes made one of those odd bows, with one foot forward, and the other three mirrored him. "My Lady," Talmanes said, "Vanin told me of your circumstances, and the promises Lord Mat made. I just want to tell you, he keeps his word."

"That he does, my Lady," Edorion murmured. "Always." Tuon motioned him to step aside so she could continue to watch Toy, and he did so with a surprised glance at Toy and another for her. She gave him a stern look. The last thing she wanted was for these men to start imagining things. Not everything had fallen out as it had to, yet. There was still a chance this could all go awry.

"Is he a lord or is he not?" she demanded.

"Excuse me," Talmanes said, "but would you say that again? I apologize. I must have dirt in my ears." She repeated herself carefully, but it still took them a minute to puzzle out what she had said.

"Burn my soul, no," Reimon said finally with a laugh. He stroked his beard. "Except to us. Lord enough for us."

"He dislikes nobles for the most part," Carlomin said. "I count it an honor to be among the few he doesn't dislike."

"An honor," Reimon agreed. Edorion contented himself with nodding.

"Soldiers, Master Roidelle," Toy said firmly. "Show me where the soldiers are. And more than any few hundred."

"What is he doing?" Tuon said, frowning. "He can't think to *sneak* this many men out of Altara even if he knows where every last soldier is. There are always patrols, and sweeps by *raken*." Again they took their time before answering. Perhaps she should try speaking very fast.

“We’ve seen no patrols in better than three hundred miles, and no—*raken*?—no *raken*,” Edorion said quietly. He was studying her. Too late to stop his imaginings.

Reimon laughed again. “If I know Mat, he’s planning us a battle. The Band of the Red Hand rides to battle again. It’s been too long, if you ask me.”

Selucia sniffed, and so did Mistress Anan. Tuon had to agree with them. “A battle won’t get you out of Altara,” she said sharply.

“In that case,” Talmanes said, “he’s planning us a war.” The other three nodded agreement as if that were the most normal thing under the Light. Reimon even laughed. He seemed to think everything was humorous.

“Three thousand?” Toy said. “You’re sure? Sure enough, man. Sure enough will do. Vanin can locate them if they haven’t moved too far.”

Tuon looked at him, squatting there by the map, moving his fingers over its surface, and suddenly she saw him in a new light. A buffoon? No. A lion stuffed into a horse-stall might look like a peculiar joke, but a lion on the high plains was something very different. Toy was loose on the high plains, now. She felt a chill. What sort of man had she entangled herself with? After all this time, she realized, she had hardly a clue.

The night was cool enough to send a small shiver through Perrin whenever the breeze gusted despite his fur-lined cloak. A halo around the fat crescent moon said there would be more rain before long. Thick clouds drifting across the moon made the pale light dim and strengthen, dim and strengthen, yet it was enough for his eyes. He sat Stepper just inside the edge of the trees and watched the cluster of four tall gray stone windmills in a clearing atop the ridge, their pale sails gleaming and shadowed by turns as they rotated. The machinery of the windmills groaned loudly. It seemed doubtful the Shaido even knew they should grease the works of the things. The stone aqueduct was a dark bar stretching east on high stone arches past abandoned farms and rail-fenced fields—the Shaido had planted, too early, with this much rain—toward another ridge and the lake beyond. Malden lay one more ridge west. He eased the heavy hammer in its loop on his belt. Malden and Faile. In a few hours, he would add a fifty-fourth knot to the leather cord in his pocket.

He cast his mind out. *Are you ready, Snowy Dawn?* he thought. *Are you close enough yet?* Wolves avoided towns, and with Shaido hunting parties in the surrounding forest during the day, they stayed farther from Malden than usual.

Patience, Young Bull, came the reply, touched with irritation. But then, Snowy Dawn was irascible by nature, a scarred male of considerable age for a wolf who had once killed a leopard by himself. Those old injuries sometimes kept him from sleeping very long at a stretch. *Two days from now, you said. We will be there. Now let me try to sleep. We must hunt well tomorrow, since we cannot hunt the day after.* They were images and smells rather than words, of course—"two days" was the sun crossing the sky twice, and "hunt" a pack trotting with noses into the breeze blended with the scent of deer—but Perrin's mind converted the images to words even as he saw them in his head.

Patience. Yes. Haste spoiled the work. But it was hard now that he was so close. Very hard.

A form appeared from the dark door at the base of the nearest windmill and waved an Aiel spear back and forth overhead. The groaning had convinced him the windmills must still be deserted—they had been when the Maidens scouted them earlier, and no one would put up with that noise any longer than they had to—but he had sent Gaul and some of the Maidens to be sure one way or another.

"Let's go, Mishima," he said, gathering his reins. "It's done." One way or another.

"How can you make out anything?" the Seanchan muttered. He avoided looking at Perrin, whose golden eyes would be glowing in the night. That had made the scarred man jump the first time he saw it. He did not smell amused tonight. He smelled tense. But he called softly over his shoulder. "Bring the carts ahead. Quickly, now. Quickly. And be quiet about it, or I'll have your ears!"

Perrin heeled his dun stallion forward without waiting on the others, or the six high-wheeled carts. Liberally greased axles made them as silent as carts could be. They still sounded noisy to him, the cart horses' hooves squelching in the mud, the carts themselves creaking as wood flexed and rubbed, but he doubted anyone else could have heard them fifty paces off, and maybe not closer. At the top of the gentle slope he dismounted and let Stepper's reins fall. A trained warhorse, the stallion would stand there as if hobbled so long as his reins hung down. The windmill heads squealed, turning slightly as the breeze shifted. The slowly spinning arms were long enough that Perrin could have touched one by jumping when it swung low. He stared toward the last ridge that hid Malden. Nothing grew there taller than a bush. Nothing moved in the darkness. Just one ridge between him and Faile. The Maidens had come outside to join Gaul, all of them still veiled.

“There was no one,” Gaul said, not quietly. This close, the grinding of the windmills’ gears would have swallowed quiet words.

“The dust has not been disturbed since I was here last,” Sulin added.

Perrin scratched his beard. Just as well. Had they needed to kill Shaido, they could have carried away the bodies, but the dead would have been missed, and it would have drawn attention to the windmills and aqueduct. It might have started someone thinking about the water.

“Help me get the lids off, Gaul.” There was no need for him to do that. It would save only minutes, but he needed to be doing something. Gaul simply stuck his spear through the harness holding his bowcase to join the others on his back.

The aqueduct ran along the ground on the ridgetop, between the four windmills, and stood shoulder-high on Perrin, less on Gaul, who climbed over. Just beyond the last pair of windmills, bronze handles on either side allowed them to lift off heavy pieces of stone two feet wide and five feet long until they had cleared a stretch of six feet. What the opening was used for, he did not know. There was another like it on the other side. Maybe to work on the flaps that made sure water flowed only one way, or to get inside to repair any leaks. He could see small ripples of motion as it streamed toward Malden, filling more than half the stone channel.

Mishima joined them and dismounted to stand peering uncertainly at Sulin and the Maidens. He probably believed the night hid his expression. He smelled wary, now. He was followed quickly by the first of the red-coated Seanchan soldiers scrambling up the muddy slope, each carrying two middling-sized jute sacks. Middling, but not heavy. Each contained only ten pounds. Eyeing the Aiel suspiciously, the wiry woman set her sacks down and slashed one open with her dagger. A handful of fine dark grains spilled on the muddy ground.

“Do that over the opening,” Perrin said. “Make sure every grain goes into the water.”

The wiry woman looked to Mishima, who said firmly, “Do as Lord Perrin commands, Arrata.”

Perrin watched as she emptied the sack into the aqueduct, hands lifted over her head. The dark grains floated away toward Malden. He had dropped a pinch into a cup of water, hating to waste even that, and they took some time to absorb enough water to sink. Long enough to reach the big cistern in the town, he hoped. And if not, they could steep in the aqueduct itself. The cistern would still turn to forkroot tea eventually. The Light send it would be strong enough. With luck, maybe even strong enough to affect the *algai'd'siswai*. The Wise Ones who could channel were his target, but he would take any advantage he could gain. The Light send it did not grow strong faster than he expected. If those Wise Ones began staggering too soon, they might puzzle out the cause before he was ready. But all he could do was go ahead as if he knew exactly. That, and pray.

By the time the second sack was being poured into the stone channel, the others began crowding up the slope. First came Seonid, a short woman holding her dark divided skirts up out of the mud. Shifting his attention from the Maidens to her, Mishima made one of those small gestures to ward off evil. Strange that they could believe a thing like that worked. The soldiers lined up with their sacks stared at her, wide-eyed for the most part, and shifted their feet. The Seanchan were none too easy about working with Aes Sedai. Her Warders, Furen and Teryl, were at her heels, each with a hand resting on his sword hilt. They were just as uneasy about the Seanchan. The one was dark with gray streaking his curly black hair, the other fair and young, with curled mustaches, yet they were alike as two beans, tall, lean and hard. Rovair Kirklin came a little behind them, a compact man with dark receding hair and a glum expression. He did not like being separated from Masuri. All three of the men had small bundles containing food strapped to their backs and fat waterskins hanging from their shoulders. A lanky man rested his sacks on the side of the opening as the wiry woman headed downslope to fetch more. The carts were piled high with them.

“Remember,” Perrin told Seonid, “the biggest danger will be getting from the cistern to the fortress. You’ll have to use the guardwalk on the wall, and there might be Shaido in the town even at this hour.” Alyse had seemed unsure on that. Thunder boomed hollowly in the distance, then again. “Maybe you’ll have rain to hide you.”

“Thank you,” she said icily. Her moonshadowed face was a mask of Aes Sedai serenity, but her scent spiked with indignation. “I would not have known any of that if you had not told me.” The next moment her expression softened, and she laid a hand on his arm. “I know you are worried about her. We will do what can be done.” Her tone was not exactly warm—it never was—but not so chill as before, and her scent had mellowed to sympathy.

Teryl lifted her up onto the edge of the aqueduct—the Seanchan emptying forkroot into the thing, a tall fellow with almost as many scars as Mishima, nearly dropped his sack—and she grimaced faintly before swinging her legs over and lowering herself into the water with a small gasp. It must have been cold. Ducking her head, she moved out of sight toward Malden. Furen climbed in after her, then Teryl, and finally Rovair. They had to bend sharply to fit under the roof of the aqueduct.

Elyas clapped Perrin on the shoulder before hoisting himself up. “Should have trimmed my beard short like yours to keep it out of that,” he said, gazing down at the water. That graying beard, ruffled by the breeze, spread across his chest. For that matter, his hair, gathered at the back of his neck with a leather cord, hung to his waist. He carried a small bundle of food and a waterskin, too. “Still, a cold bath helps a man keep his mind off his troubles.”

“I thought that was for keeping your mind off women,” Perrin said. He was in no mood for joking, but he could not expect everyone to be as grim as he was.

Elyas laughed. “What else causes a man’s troubles?” He disappeared into the water, and Tallanvor replaced him.

Perrin caught his dark coatsleeve. “No heroics, mind.” He had been of two minds about letting the man be part of this.

“No heroics, my Lord,” Tallanvor agreed. For the first time in a long time, he looked eager. The smell of him quivered with eagerness. But there was an edge of caution in it, too. That caution was the only reason he was not back in their camp. “I won’t put Maighdin at risk. Or the Lady Faile. I just want to see Maighdin that much quicker.”

Perrin nodded and let him go. He could understand that. Part of him wanted to climb into the aqueduct, too. To see Faile again that much quicker. But every piece of the work had to be done properly, and he had other tasks. Besides, if he were actually inside Malden, he was not sure he could restrain himself from trying to find her. He could not catch his own scent, of course, but he doubted there was any caution in it now. The windmill heads turned again with loud squeaks as the wind shifted back. At least it never seemed to die up here. Any stoppage of the water flow would be disastrous.

The ridgetop was becoming crowded, now. Twenty of Faile's hangers-on were waiting their turn at the aqueduct, all that remained save the two who were spying on Masema. The women wore men's coats and breeches and had their hair cut short except for a tail at the back in imitation of the Aiel, though no Aiel would have worn a sword as they did. Many of the Tairen men had shaved their beards because Aiel did not wear them. Behind them fifty Two Rivers men carried halberds and unstrung bows, their bowstrings safely tucked away inside their coats and each with three bristling quivers tied to his back along with a parcel of food. Every man in the camp had volunteered for this, and Perrin had had to let them choose lots. He had considered doubling the number, or more. Hangers-on and Two Rivers men had their bundles of food and their waterskins. The constant flow of Seanchan soldiers continued, carrying full sacks up the slope and empty sacks back down. They were disciplined. When a man slipped in the mud and fell, as happened with some regularity, there was no cursing or even mutters. They just got up and went ahead.

Selande Darengil, wearing a dark coat with six horizontal stripes of color across the chest, stopped to offer Perrin her hand. She only came up to his chest, but Elyas claimed she handled the sword at her hip credibly. Perrin no longer thought she and the others were fools—well, not all the time—in spite of their attempts to copy Aiel ways. With differences, of course. The tail of dark hair at Selande's nape was tied with a length of dark ribbon. There was no fear in her scent, only determination. "Thank you for allowing us to be part of this, my Lord," she said in that precise Cairhienin accent. "We will not let you down. Or the Lady Faile."

"I know you won't," he said, shaking her hand. There had been a time when she had been pointed about serving Faile, and not him. He shook the hand of every one of them before they climbed into the aqueduct. They all smelled determined. So did Ban al'Seen, who commanded the Two Rivers men going into Malden.

"When Faile and the others come, wedge the outer doors shut, Ban." Perrin had told him this before, but he could not help repeating himself. "Then see if you can get them back up the aqueduct." That fortress had not kept the Shaido out the first time, and if anything went wrong, he doubted it would keep them out this time either. He did not mean to renege on his bargain with the Seanchan—the Shaido were going to pay for what they had done to Faile, and besides, he could not leave them behind to continue ravaging the countryside—but he wanted her out of harm's way as soon as possible.

Ban propped his bowstave and halberd against the aqueduct and hoisted himself up to reach a hand down inside. When he lowered himself back to the ground, he wiped his damp hand on his coat then rubbed the side of his prominent nose. "Below the water, it's coated with something feels like pond slime. We're going to have a hard enough time getting down that last slope without sliding the whole way, Lord Perrin, much less trying to climb it again. I expect the best thing is to wait in that fortress till you reach us."

Perrin sighed. He had thought of sending ropes, but they would have needed nearly two miles of it to span that last slope, a lot to be carried, and if any Shaido spotted the butt end of it in the Malden end of the aqueduct, they would search every nook and cranny in the town. A small risk, perhaps, yet the bitter loss that might result made it loom large. "I'll be there as fast as I can, Ban. I promise you that."

He shook hands with every one of them, too. Lantern-jawed Tod al'Caar and Leof Torfinn, with a white streak through his hair where a scar ran, given to him by Trollocs. Young Kenly Maerin, who was making a stab at growing a beard again unfortunately, and Bili Adarra, who was almost as wide as Perrin if a hand shorter. Bili was a distant cousin, and some of the closest kin Perrin had living. He had grown up with many of these men, though some were a few years older than he. Some were a few years younger, too. By now, he knew the men from down to Deven Ride and up to Watch Hill as well as he did those from around Emond's Field. He had more reason than Faile alone to reach that fortress as fast as he could.

Had al'Lora, a lean fellow with thick mustaches like a Taraboner, was the last of the Two Rivers men. As he climbed into the aqueduct, Gaul appeared, face still veiled and four spears gripped in the hand that held his bull-hide buckler. He put a hand on the edge of the aqueduct and leapt up to sit on the stone coping.

"You're going in?" Perrin said in surprise.

"The Maidens can do any scouting you need, Perrin Aybara." The big Aiel glanced over his shoulder toward the Maidens. Perrin thought he scowled, though it was hard to be sure because of the black veil that hid all but his eyes. “I heard them talking when they thought I was not listening. Unlike your wife and the others, Chiad is properly *gai’shain*. Bain, too, but I care nothing about her. Chiad still has the rest of her year and a day to serve after we rescue her. When a man has a woman as *gai’shain*, or a woman a man, sometimes a marriage wreath is made as soon as white is put off. It is not uncommon. But I heard the Maidens say they would reach Chiad first, to keep her from me.” Behind him, Sulin’s finger flashed in Maiden handtalk, and one of the others slapped a hand over her mouth as if stifling laughter. So they had been goading him. Maybe they were not so hard against his suit for Chiad as they pretended. Or maybe there was something Perrin was missing. Aiel humor could be rough.

Gaul slipped into the water. He had to bend almost parallel to the surface to get under the aqueduct’s top. Perrin stared at the opening. So easy to follow Gaul. Turning away was hard. The line of Seanchan soldiers still snaked up and down the slope.

“Mishima, I’m going back to my camp. Grady will take you to yours when you’re done here. Do what you can to blur the tracks before you go.”

“Very well, my Lord. I’ve told off some men to scrape grease from the axles and grease these windmills. They sound as if they could seize up any minute. We can do those at the far ridge, too.”

Taking up Stepper’s reins, Perrin looked up at the slow-turning sails. Slow, but steady. They had never been made to turn fast. “And if some Shaido decide to come out here tomorrow and wonder where the fresh grease came from?”

Mishima regarded him for a long moment, his face half-hidden by moonshadows. For once, he did not seem put off by glowing yellow eyes. His scent. . . . He smelled as if he saw something unexpected. “The Banner-General was right about you,” he said slowly.

“What did she say?”

“You’ll have to ask her, my Lord.”

Perrin rode down the slope and back to the trees thinking how easy it would be to turn around. Gallenne could handle everything from here. It was all laid out. Except that the Mayener believed every battle climaxed with a grand charge of horse. And preferably began with one, too. How long would he stick to the plan? Arganda was more sensible, but he was so anxious for Queen Alliandre that he might well order that charge, as well.

That left himself. The breeze gusted hard, and he pulled his cloak around him.

Grady, elbows on his knees, was in a small clearing sitting on a half-worked mossy stone that was partially sunken into the ground and no doubt left over from building the aqueduct. A few others like it stood around. The breeze kept his scent from Perrin's nose. He did not look up until Perrin drew rein in front of him. The gateway they had used to come here still stood open, showing another clearing among tall trees, not far from where the Seanchan were now camped. It might have been easier to have had them set up close to Perrin's camp, but he wanted to keep the Aes Sedai and Wise Ones as far from the *sul'dam* and *damane* as possible. He was not afraid of the Seanchan breaking Tylee's word, but the Aes Sedai and Wise Ones practically came down with the pip just thinking about *damane*. Probably the Wise Ones and Annoura would stay their hands for the time being. Probably. Masuri, he was not so sure of. In a number of ways. Better to keep a few leagues between them for as long as it could be managed.

"Are you all right, Grady?" The man's weathered face seemed to have new lines in it. That might have been a trick of moonshadows cast by the trees, but Perrin did not think so. The carts had passed through the gateway easily, but was it a little smaller than the first he had seen Grady make?

"Just tired a little, my Lord," Grady said wearily. He remained seated with his elbows on his knees. "All this Traveling we've been doing lately. . . . Well, I couldn't have held the gateway open long enough for all those soldiers to ride through yesterday. That's why I've taken to tying them off."

Perrin nodded. Both of the Asha'man were tired. Channeling took strength out of a man as surely as swinging a hammer all day at a forge. More so, in truth. The man with the hammer could keep going far longer than any Asha'man. That was why the aqueduct was the route into Malden and not a gateway, why there would be no gateway to bring Faile and the others out again, much as Perrin wished there could be. The two Asha'man only had so much more left in them until they could rest, and that little had to be used where it was needed most. Light, but that was a hard thought. Only, if Grady or Neald fell one gateway short of what was needed, a lot of men were going to die. A hard decision.

"I'm going to need you and Neald the day after tomorrow." That was like saying he needed air. Without the Asha'man, everything became impossible. “You’re going to be busy then.” Another gross understatement.

“Busy as a one-armed man plastering a ceiling, my Lord.”

“Are you up to it?”

“Have to be, don’t I, my Lord.”

Perrin nodded again. You did what had to be done. “Send me back to our camp. After you return Mishima and his people to his, you and the Maidens can sleep there if you’d like.” That would spare Grady a little against two days from now.

“Don’t know about the Maidens, my Lord, but I’d as soon come on home tonight.” He turned his head to look at the gateway without rising, and it dwindled in the reverse of how it had opened, the view through it seeming to rotate as it narrowed, finishing with a vertical slash of silvery blue light that left a faint purplish bar in Perrin’s vision when it winked out. “Those *damane* fair make my skin crawl. They don’t want to be free.”

“How would you know that?”

“I talked to some of them when none of those *sul’dam* was close by. Soon as I brought up maybe they’d like those leashes off, just hinting like, they started screaming for the *sul’dam*. The *damane* were crying, and the *sul’dam* petting them and stroking them and glaring daggers at me. Fair made my skin crawl.”

Stepper stamped an impatient hoof, and Perrin patted the stallion’s neck. Grady was lucky those *sul’dam* had let him go with a whole hide. “Whatever happens with the *damane*, Grady, it won’t be this week, or next. And it won’t be us who fixes it. So you let the *damane* be. We have a job of work in front of us that needs doing.” And a deal with the Dark One to do it. He pushed the thought away. Anyway, it had grown hard to think of Tylee Khirgan being on the Dark One’s side. Or Mishima. “You understand that?”

“I understand, my Lord. I’m just saying it makes my skin crawl.”

At last another silvery blue slash appeared, widening into an opening that showed a clearing among large, widely spaced trees and a low stone outcrop. Leaning low on Stepper’s neck, Perrin rode through. The gateway winked out behind him, and he rode on through the trees until he came to the large clearing where the camp lay, near what had once been the tiny village of Brytan, a collection of flea-riddled hovels that the most rain-soaked night could not tempt a man into. The sentries up in the trees gave no warnings, of course. They recognized him.

He wanted nothing so much as he wanted his blankets right then. Well, Faile, certainly, but lacking her, he wanted to be alone in the dark. Likely, he would fail to find sleep again, but he would spend the night as he had so often before, thinking of her, remembering her. Short of the ten-pace wide thicket of sharpened stakes that surrounded the camp, though, he reined in. A *raken* was crouched just outside the stakes, its long gray neck lowered so a woman in a hooded brown coat could scratch its leathery snout. Her hood hung down her back, revealing short-cropped hair and a hard, narrow face. She looked at Perrin as if she recognized him, but went right on scratching. The saddle on the creature's back had places for two riders. A messenger had come, it seemed. He turned into one of the narrow, angled lanes through the stakes that had been left to allow horses through. Just not quickly.

Most everybody had turned in already. He sensed movement on the horselines, in the heart of the camp, likely some of the Cairhienin grooms or farriers, but the patched canvas tents and small huts of woven evergreen branches, now long since brown, lay dark and quiet. Nothing moved among the low Aiel tents, and only a few sentries walking up and down in the nearest Mayener section of the camp. The Mayeners and Ghealdanin put little trust in the Two Rivers men in the trees. His tall, red-striped tent was alight, however, and the shadows of a number of people shifted on the tent walls. When he climbed down in front of the tent, Athan Chandin appeared to take the reins and knuckle his forehead while he hunched a sort of bow. Athan was a good bowshot or he would not have been here, but he had a truckling manner. Perrin went in unpinning his cloak.

"There you are," Berelain said brightly. She must have dressed hastily, because her long black hair looked as though it had had just a lick and a promise from a brush, but her high-necked gray riding dress appeared neat and fresh. Her serving women never let her don anything unless it was freshly ironed. She held out a silver winecup for Breane to refill from a long-necked wine pitcher, which the Cairhienin woman did with a grimace. Faile's maid disliked Berelain with a passion. Berelain seemed not to notice, though. "Forgive me for entertaining in your tent, but the Banner-General wanted to see you, and I thought I'd keep her company. She's been telling us about some Whitecloaks."

Balwer was standing unobtrusively in a corner—the bird-like little man could be as unnoticeable as a lizard on a branch when he wished to be

—but his scent sharpened at the mention of Whitecloaks.

Tylee, her shoulders straining a coat like that of the flier, made a straight-legged bow while keeping one eye on Annoura. She seemed to believe the Aes Sedai might turn into ravening wild dogs at any moment. Perrin thought she smelled of distress, though none showed on her dark face. “My Lord, I have two pieces of news I felt I had to bring you immediately. Have you begun putting the forkroot into the town’s water?”

“I have,” he said worriedly, tossing his cloak down atop one of the brass-banded chests. Tylee sighed. “I told you I would. I’d have done it two days ago if that fool woman in Almizar hadn’t dragged her heels so. What’s happened?”

“Forgive me,” Lini announced, “but I was roused from my blankets, and I would like to return to them. Does anyone require anything else of me tonight?” There were no curtsies or ‘my Lords’ from the frail-appearing woman with her white hair in a loose braid for sleeping. Unlike with Berelain, her brown dress looked hastily donned, unusual for her. Her scent was crisp and sharp with disapproval. She was one of those who believed the ridiculous tale that Perrin had slept with Berelain on the very night after Faile had been captured. She managed to avoid looking at him while her gaze swept around the tent’s interior.

“I’ll have some more wine,” Aram announced, holding out his cup. Grim-faced and haggard in a red-striped coat, his eyes hollow, he was attempting to lounge in one of the folding camp chairs, but the sword strapped to his back made leaning against the gilt-edged back impossible. Breane started toward him.

“He’s had enough,” Lini said sharply, and Breane turned away. Lini had a firm hand with Faile’s servants.

Aram muttered an oath and leaped to his feet, tossing his cup down on the flowered carpet that served as a floor. “I might as well go somewhere I won’t have some old woman nagging at me every time I take a drink.” He gave Perrin a sullen glare before stalking out of the tent. Doubtless on his way to Masema’s camp. He had pleaded to be one of the party sent into Malden, but his hot head could not be trusted with that.

“You can go, Lini,” Berelain said. “Breane can look after us well enough.” A snort was the acknowledgment Lini gave—she made it sound almost delicate—before she stalked out, stiff-backed and reeking of disapproval. And still not looking at Perrin.

“Forgive me, my Lord,” Tylee drawled in careful tones, “but you seem to run your household more . . . loosely . . . than I’m accustomed to.”

“It’s our way, Banner-General,” Perrin said, picking up Aram’s cup. No need to dirty another. “Nobody around here is property.” If that sounded sharp, so be it. He had come to like Tylee after a fashion, but these Seanchan had ways that would make a goat gag. He took the pitcher from Breane—she actually tried to hold on to it for a moment, frowning at him as if she would deny him a drink—and poured for himself before handing it back. She snatched the pitcher out of his hand. “Now, what happened? What about these Whitecloaks?”

“I sent *raken* out scouting as far as they could go just before dawn, and again just after sunset. One of the fliers tonight turned back sooner than expected. She saw seven thousand Children of the Light on the move not fifty miles from my camp.”

“On the move toward you?” Perrin frowned at his wine instead of drinking. “Seven thousand seems a very exact count to make in the dark.”

“It seems these men, they are deserters,” Annoura broke in. “At least, the Banner-General sees them so.” In gray silk, she appeared as neat as if she had spent an hour dressing. Her thrusting nose made her look like a crow wearing beaded braids as she peered at Tylee, and the Banner-General a particularly interesting bit of carrion. She held a winecup, but it seemed untouched. “I have heard rumors that Pedron Niall died fighting the Seanchan, but apparently Eamon Valda, who replaced Niall, swore fealty to the Seanchan Empress.” Tylee mouthed, “may she live forever,” under her breath; Perrin doubted anyone but himself heard. Balwer opened his mouth, too, but closed it again without speaking. The Whitecloaks were a bugbear to him. “Something over a month ago, however,” the Gray sister went on, “Galad Damodred killed Valda and led seven thousand Whitecloaks to leave the Seanchan cause. A pity he became enmeshed with Whitecloaks, but perhaps some good has come of it. In any case, it appears there is a standing order that these men are all to be killed as soon as found. I have summed it up nicely, yes, Banner-General?”

Tylee’s hand twitched as if it wanted to make one of those signs against evil. “That’s a fair summing up,” she said. To Perrin, not Annoura. The Seanchan woman seemed to find speaking to an Aes Sedai difficult. “Except the part about good coming of it. Oath-breaking and desertion can never be called good.”

"I take it they're not moving toward you, or you'd have said." Perrin put a hint of question into that, though there was no question in his mind.

"North," Tylee answered. "They're heading north." Balwer half opened his mouth again, then shut it with a click of teeth.

"If you have advice," Perrin told him, "then give it. But I don't care how many Whitecloaks desert the Seanchan. Faile is the *only* thing I care about. And I don't think the Banner-General will give up the chance to collar three or four hundred more *damane* to chase after them." Berelain grimaced. Annoura's face remained smooth, but she took a long swallow of her wine. None of the Aes Sedai felt very complacent about that part of the plan. None of the Wise Ones did, either.

"I will not," Tylee said firmly. "I think I'll take some wine after all." Breane took a deep breath before moving to comply, and a hint of fear entered her scent. Apparently the tall dark woman intimidated her.

"I won't deny I would enjoy a chance to strike a blow at the Whitecloaks," Balwer said in that dry-as-dust voice, "but in truth, I feel I owe this Galad Damodred a debt of gratitude." Perhaps his grudge was against this Valda personally. "In any case, you have no need of my advice here. Events are in motion in Malden, and if they weren't, I doubt you'd hold back even a day. Nor would I have advised it, my Lord. If I may be so bold, I am quite fond of the Lady Faile."

"You may," Perrin told him. "Banner-General, you said two pieces of news?"

The Seanchan took the proffered winecup from Breane and looked at him so levelly it was clear she was avoiding a glance at the others in the tent. "May we speak alone?" she asked quietly.

Berelain glided across the carpet to rest a hand on his arm and smile up at him. "Annoura and I don't mind leaving," she said. Light, how could anyone believe there was anything between him and her? She was as beautiful as ever, true, yet the scent that had minded him of a hunting cat was so long gone from her smell that he barely remembered it. The bedrock of her scent was patience and resolve, now. She had come to accept that he loved Faile and only Faile, and she seemed as determined to see Faile freed as he was.

"You can stay," he said. "Whatever you have to say, Banner-General, you can say in front of everyone here."

Tylee hesitated, glancing at Annoura. “There are two large parties of Aiel heading toward Malden,” she said at last, reluctantly. “One to the southeast, one to the southwest. The *morat’raken* estimate they could be there in three days.”

Suddenly, everything seemed to ripple in Perrin’s sight. He felt *himself* ripple. Breane gave a cry and dropped the pitcher. The world rippled again, and Berelain clutched his arm. Tylee’s hand seemed frozen in that odd gesture, thumb and forefinger forming a crescent. Everything rippled for a third time, and Perrin felt as if he were made of fog, as if the world were fog with a high wind coming. Berelain shuddered, and he put a comforting arm around her. She clung to him, trembling. Silence and the scent of fear filled the tent. He could hear voices being raised outside, and they sounded afraid, too.

“What was that?” Tylee demanded finally.

“I don’t know.” Annoura’s face remained serene, but her voice was unsteady. “Light, I have no idea.”

“It doesn’t matter what it was,” Perrin told them. He ignored their stares. “In three days, it will all be over. That’s all that matters.” Faile was all that mattered.

The sun stood short of its noonday peak, but Faile already felt harassed. The water for Sevanna’s morning bath—she bathed twice a day, now!—had not been hot enough, and Faile had been beaten along with everyone else, although she and Alliandre had only been there to scrub the woman’s back. More than twenty wetlander *gai’shain* had begged to be allowed to swear fealty just since sunrise. Three had suggested rising up, pointing out that there were more *gai’shain* in all these tents than Shaido. They had seemed to listen when she pointed out that nearly all of the Aiel knew how to use a spear, while most of the wetlanders were farmers or craftsfolk. Few had ever held a weapon, and fewer still used one. They had seemed to listen, but this was the first day anyone had suggested such a thing right after swearing. Usually they took several days to work themselves around to it. The pressure was building. Toward a slaughter unless she could thwart it. And now this. . . .

“It is only a game, Faile Bashere,” Rolan said, towering over her as they walked along one of the muddy streets that wound through the Shaido tents. He sounded amused, and a very small smile curved his lips. A beautiful man to be sure.

“A kissing game, you said.” She shifted the lengths of striped toweling folded over her arm to draw his attention. “I have work to do, and no time for games. Especially kissing games.”

She could see a few Aiel, several of them men staggering drunk even at this hour, but most of the people in the street were wetlanders wearing dirty *gai’shain* robes or children splashing happily in the mud puddles left by the night’s heavy rain. The street was thronged with men and women in mud-stained white carrying baskets or buckets or pots. Some actually went about chores. There were so many *gai’shain* in the camp that there really was not enough work to go around. That would not stop a Shaido from ordering what were seen as idle hands to some work or other if those hands stuck out of white sleeves, however, even if it was make-work. To avoid having to dig useless holes in muddy fields or scrub pots that were already clean, a good many of the *gai’shain* had taken to carrying something that made them look as if they were working. That did not help anyone avoid the real work, but it did help avert the other kind. Faile did not have to worry about that with most of the Shaido, not so long as she wore those thick golden chains around her waist and neck, but the necklace and belt were inadequate for deterring Wise Ones. She had scrubbed clean pots for some of them. And sometimes had been punished for not being available when Sevanna wanted her. Thus the toweling.

“We could start with a kissing game children play,” he said, “though the forfeits in that are sometimes embarrassing. In the game adults play, the forfeits are fun. Losing can be as pleasant as winning.”

She could not help laughing. The man certainly was persistent. Suddenly she saw Galina hurrying through the crowd in her direction, holding her white silk robes up out of the mud, eyes searching avidly. Faile had heard the woman was allowed clothing again as of this morning. Of course, she had never been without the tall necklace and wide belt of gold and firedrops. A cap of hair less than an inch long covered her head, and of all things, a large red bow was pinned in it. It seemed unlikely that was by the woman’s choice. Only a face Faile could not put an age to convinced her that Galina really was Aes Sedai. Beyond that, she was unsure of anything about her except the danger she presented. Galina spotted her and stopped dead, hands kneading her robes. The Aes Sedai eyed Rolan uncertainly.

“I’ll have to think on it, Rolan.” She was not about to chase him away until she was sure of Galina. “I need time to think.”

“Women always want time to think. Think on forgetting your troubles in the pleasure of a harmless game.”

The finger he drew softly down her cheek before walking away made her shiver. To Aiel, touching someone’s cheek in public was as much as a kiss. It surely had felt like a kiss to her. Harmless? Somehow, she doubted that any game that involved kissing Rolan would end with just kissing. Luckily, she would not have to find out—or hide anything from Perrin—if Galina proved true. If.

The Aes Sedai darted to her as soon as Rolan was gone. “Where is it?” Galina demanded, seizing her arm. “Tell me! I know you have it. You must have it!” The woman sounded almost pleading. Therava’s treatment of her had shattered that fabled Aes Sedai composure.

Faile shook off her grip. “First tell me again that you will take my friends and me with you when you go. Tell me straight out. And tell me when you are going.”

“Don’t you *dare* talk to me that way,” Galina hissed.

Faile saw black flecks floating in her vision before she realized that she had been slapped. To her surprise, she slapped the other woman back as hard as she could, staggering her. She refrained from putting a hand to her stinging face, but Galina rubbed her own cheek, her eyes wide with shock. Faile steeled herself, perhaps for a blow with the Power or something worse, but nothing happened. Some of the passing *gai’shain* stared at them, but none stopped or even slowed. Anything that looked like a gathering of *gai’shain* would draw Shaido eyes, and earn punishments for everyone involved.

“Tell me,” she said again.

“I will take you and your friends with me,” Galina practically snarled, snatching her hand down. “I leave tomorrow. *If* you have it. If not, Sevanna will know who you are within the hour!” Well, that was certainly speaking straight out.

“It’s hidden in the town. I’ll get it for you now.”

But as she turned, Galina grabbed her arm again. The Aes Sedai’s eyes darted, and she lowered her voice as if suddenly concerned about being overheard. She sounded frightened. “No. I’ll take no chances on anyone seeing. You’ll give it to me tomorrow morning. In the town. We’ll meet there. In the south end of the town. I’ll mark the building. With a red scarf.”

Faile blinked. The southern half of Malden was a burned-out shell. “Why there?” she asked incredulously.

“Because no one goes there, fool! Because no one will see us!” Galina’s eyes were still darting. “Tomorrow morning, early. Fail me, and you’ll regret it!” Gathering the skirts of her silk robe, she scurried away into the crowd.

Faile frowned as she watched the woman go. She should have felt exultation, but she did not. Galina seemed almost a wild thing, unpredictable. Still, Aes Sedai could not lie. There seemed no way for her to wriggle out of her promise. And if she found one, there were still her own plans for an escape, though those seemed no further along, if much more dangerous, than they had when first begun. Which left Rolan. And his kissing games. Galina had to prove true. She had to.

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CHAPTER 27

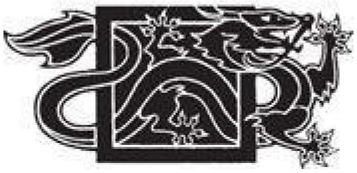

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A Plain Wooden Box

The midday Altaran sun was warm, though a gusting breeze sometimes whipped Rand's cloak. They had been on the hilltop for two hours, now. A great mass of dark clouds creeping down from the north above blue-gray haze spoke of rain to come, and a cooling. Andor lay only a few miles in that direction across low, forested hills of oak and pine, leatherleaf and sourgum. That border had seen countless generations of cattle raids going in both directions. Was Elayne watching it rain in Caemlyn? That lay a good hundred and fifty leagues east, too far for her to be more than a faint presence in the back of his head. Aviendha, in Arad Doman, was fainter still. He had not considered that the Wise Ones would take her along. Still, she would be safe among tens of thousands of Aiel, as safe as Elayne behind Caemlyn's walls. Tai'daishar stamped a hoof and tossed his head, eager to be moving. Rand patted the big black's neck. The stallion could reach the border in under an hour, but their way was west today. A short way west in just a short while, now.

He had to impress at today's meeting, and he had chosen his garb with care. The Crown of Swords sat on his head for more reason than making an impression, though. Half the small swords nestled among the wide band of laurel leaves pointed down, making it uncomfortable to wear, giving constant reminders of its weight, in gold and in responsibility. A small chip in one of those laurel leaves dug at his temple to remind him of the battle against the Seanchan where it had been made. A battle lost when he could not afford to lose. His dark green silk coat was embroidered in gold on the sleeves, shoulders and high collar, a gold-inlaid buckle in the shape of a dragon fastened his swordbelt, and he had the Dragon Scepter in hand, a two-foot length of spearhead with a long green-and-white tassel below the polished steel point. If the Daughter of the Nine Moons recognized it for part of a Seanchan spear, she must also see the dragons that Maidens had carved winding around the remaining haft. Today, he wore no gloves. The golden-maned dragonheads on the backs of his hands glittered metallically in the sun. However high she stood among the Seanchan, she would know whom she faced.

A fool. Lews Therin's wild laughter echoed inside his head. *A fool to walk into a trap.* Rand ignored the madman. It might be a trap, but he was ready to spring it if it was. It was worth the risk. He needed this truce. He could crush the Seanchan, but at what cost in blood, and in time he might not have? He glanced north again. The sky above Andor was clear except for a few high white clouds, drifting wisps. The Last Battle was coming. He had to take the risk.

Min, toying with the reins of her gray mare nearby, was feeling smug, and that irritated him. She had inveigled a promise from him in a weak moment and refused to release him. He could just break it. He should break it. As if she had heard his thoughts, she looked at him. Her face, surrounded by dark shoulder-length ringlets, was smooth, but the bond suddenly carried suspicion and hints of anger. She seemed to be trying to suppress both, yet she adjusted the cuffs of her ornately embroidered red coat the way she did when checking her knives. Of course, she would not use one of her blades on him. Of course not.

A woman's love can be violent, Lews Therin murmured. *Sometimes they hurt a man worse than they think they have, worse than they mean to. Sometimes, they're even sorry afterwards.* He sounded sane for the moment, but Rand shoved the voice down.

"You should let us scout farther out, Rand al'Thor," Nandera said. She and the two dozen other Maidens on the sparsely wooded hilltop wore their black veils up. Some had their bows in hand and arrows nocked. The rest of the Maidens were among the trees well out from the hill, keeping watch against unpleasant surprises. "The land is clear all the way to the manor house, but this still smells of a trap to me." There had been a time when words like "manor" and "house" sounded awkward on her tongue. She had been a long time in the wetlands now, though.

"Nandera speaks truth," Alivia muttered sullenly, heeling her roan gelding closer. Apparently the golden-haired woman still resented the fact that she would not be going with him, but her reaction to hearing her native accents in Tear made that impossible. She admitted having been shaken, but claimed it had been the surprise of the thing. He could not chance it, though. "You cannot trust any of the High Blood, especially not a daughter of the Empress, may she—" Her mouth snapped shut, and she smoothed her dark blue skirts unnecessarily, grimacing at what she had almost said. He trusted her, literally with his life, but she had too many deep-buried instincts to risk putting her face-to-face with the woman he was going to meet. The bond carried anger with no effort to suppress it, now. Min disliked seeing Alivia near him.

“It smells of a trap to me, too,” Bashere said, easing his sinuously curved sword in its scabbard. He was plainly clad, in burnished helmet and breastplate, his gray silk coat alone marking him out from the eighty-one Saldaean lancers arrayed around the hilltop. His thick, down-curved mustaches almost bristled behind the face-bars of his helmet. “I’d give ten thousand crowns to know how many soldiers she has out there. And how many *damane*. This Daughter of the Nine Moons is the heir to their throne, man.” He had been shocked when Alivia revealed that. No one in Ebou Dar had mentioned it to him, as if it were of no importance. “They may claim their control ends far south of here, but you can wager she has at least a small army to see to her safety.”

“And if our scouts find this army,” Rand replied calmly, “can we be sure they won’t be seen?” Nandera made a scornful sound. “Best not to assume you’re the only one with eyes,” he told her. “If they think we’re planning to attack them or kidnap the woman, everything falls apart.” Maybe that was why they had kept their secret. The Imperial heir would be a more tempting target for a kidnapping than a mere high-ranking noblewoman. “You just keep watch to make sure they don’t catch *us* by surprise. If it all goes wrong, Bashere, you know what to do. Besides, she may have an army, but so do I, and not so small.” Bashere had to nod at that.

Aside from the Saldaeans and the Maidens, the hilltop was crowded with Asha’man and Aes Sedai and Warders, better than twenty-five all told, and as formidable a group as any small army. They mingled with surprising ease, and few outward signs of tension. Oh, Toveine, a short, coppery-skinned Red, was scowling at Logain, but Gabrelle, a dusky Brown with sooty green eyes, was talking with him quite companionably, perhaps even coquettishly. That might have been the reason for Toveine’s scowl, though disapproval seemed more likely than jealousy. Adrielle and Kurin each had an arm around the other’s waist, though she was tall enough to overtop the Domani Asha’man, and beautiful where he was plain and had gray at his temples. Not to mention that he had bonded the Gray against her will. Beldeine, new enough to the shawl that she simply looked like any young Saldaean woman with slightly tilted brown eyes, reached out every now and then to touch Manfor, and he smiled at her whenever she did. Her bonding of him had been a shock, but apparently the yellow-haired man had been more than willing. Neither had asked Rand his opinion before the bonding.

Strangest of all perhaps were Jenare, pale and sturdy in a gray riding dress embroidered with red on the skirts, and Kajima, a clerkish fellow in his middle years who wore his hair like Narishma, in two braids with silver bells at the ends. She laughed at something Kajima said, and murmured something that made him laugh in turn. A *Red* joking with a man who could channel! Maybe Taim had effected a change for the better, whatever he had intended. And maybe Rand al'Thor was living in a dream, too. Aes Sedai were famous for their dissembling. But could a Red dissemble that far?

Not everyone felt agreeable today. Ayako's eyes seemed almost black as she glared at Rand, but then, considering what happened to a Warder when his Aes Sedai died, the dark-complected little White had reason to fear Sandomere going into possible danger. The Asha'man bond differed from the Warder bond in some respects, but in others it was identical, and no one yet knew the effects of an Asha'man's death on the woman he had bonded. Elza was frowning at Rand, too, one hand on the shoulder of her tall, lean Warder Fearil as if she were gripping a guard dog's collar and thinking of loosing him. Not against Rand, certainly, but he worried for anyone she thought might be threatening him. He had given her orders about that, and her oath should see them obeyed, yet Aes Sedai could find loopholes in almost anything.

Merise was speaking firmly to Narishma, with her other two Warders sitting their horses a little way off. There was no mistaking the way the stern-faced woman gestured as she spoke, leaning close to him so she could speak in a low voice. She was instructing him about something. Rand disliked that in the circumstances, yet there seemed little he could do. Merise had sworn no oaths, and she would ignore him when it came to one of her Warders. Or much of anything else, for that matter.

Cadsuane was watching Rand, too. She and Nynaeve were wearing all of their *ter'angreal* jewelry. Nynaeve was making a good try at Aes Sedai calm. She seemed to practice that a great deal since sending Lan wherever she had sent him. Half the hilltop separated her plump brown mare from Cadsuane's bay, of course. Nynaeve would never admit it, but Cadsuane intimidated her.

Logain rode up between Rand and Bashere, his black gelding prancing. The horse was almost the exact shade of his coat and cloak. "The sun is almost straight overhead," he said. "Time we go down?" There was only a mere hint of question in that. The man chafed at taking orders. He did not wait on a reply. “Sandomere!” he called loudly. “Narishma!”

Merise held Narishma by his sleeve for another moment of instructions before letting him ride over, which made Logain scowl. Sun-dark Narishma with his dark, belled braids looked years younger than Rand, though he was a few years older in truth. Sitting his dun as straight as a sword, he nodded to Logain as to an equal, producing another scowl. Sandomere spoke a quiet word to Ayako before mounting his dapple, and she touched his thigh once he was in the saddle. Wrinkled, with receding hair and a gray-streaked beard trimmed to a point and oiled, he made her appear youthful rather than ageless. He wore the red-and-gold dragon on his high black collar, now, as well as the silver sword. Every Asha’man on the hill did, even Manfor. He had only recently been raised to Dedicated, but he had been one of the first to come to the Black Tower, before there was a Black Tower. Most of the men who had begun with him were dead. Even Logain had not denied he deserved it.

Logain had enough sense not to call Cadsuane or Nynaeve, but they rode to join Rand anyway, placing themselves to either side of him, each briefly eyeing him, faces so smooth they might have been thinking anything. Their eyes met, and Nynaeve looked away quickly. Cadsuane gave a faint snort. And Min came, too. His “one more” to balance the honors. A man should never give promises in bed. He opened his mouth, and she arched an eyebrow, looking at him very directly. The bond felt full of . . . something dangerous.

“You stay behind me once we get there,” he told her, not at all what he had intended to say.

Danger faded to what he had come to recognize as love. There was wry amusement in the bond, too, for some reason. “I will if I want to, you woolheaded sheepherder,” she said with more than a little asperity, just as if the bond would not tell him her true feelings. Hard as those might be to decipher.

“If we’re going to do this fool thing, let’s get it done with,” Cadsuane said firmly, and heeled her dark bay down the hill.

A short distance from the hill, farms began to appear along a meandering dirt road through the forest, hard-packed by long years of use but still carrying a slick of mud from the last rainfall. The chimneys of thatched stone houses smoked with the midday meal-cooking. Sometimes girls and women sat out in the sun at their spinning wheels. Men in rough coats walked in the stone-walled fields checking their sprouting crops amid boys hoeing weeds. The pastures held brown-and-white cattle or black-tailed sheep, usually watched by a boy or two with bows or slings. There were wolves in these forests, and leopards and other things that enjoyed the taste of beef and mutton. Some people shaded their eyes to peer at the passersby, doubtless wondering who these finely dressed folk were who had come to visit the Lady Deirdru. Surely there could be no other reason for their presence, heading toward the manor house and so far from anywhere important. No one seemed agitated or frightened, though, just going about their day's work. Rumors of an army in the region surely would have upset them, and rumors of that sort spread like wildfire. Strange. The Seanchan could not Travel and arrive without news speeding ahead of them. It was very strange.

He felt Logain and the other two men seize *saidin*, filling themselves with it. Logain held almost as much as he could have himself, Narishma and Sandomere somewhat less. They were the strongest among the other Asha'man, though, and both had been at Dumai's Wells. Logain had proven he could handle himself in other places, other battles. If this was a trap, they would be ready, and the other side would never know it until too late. Rand did not reach for the Source. He could feel Lews Therin lurking in his head. This was no time to give the madman a chance to get hold of the Power.

"Cadsuane, Nynaeve, you'd better embrace the Source now," he said. "We're getting close."

"I've been holding *saidar* since back on that hill," Nynaeve told him. Cadsuane snorted and gave him a look that called him an idiot.

Rand stilled a grimace before it could begin. His skin felt no tingling, no goosebumps. They had masked their ability, and with it, shielded him from sensing the Power in them. Men had had few advantages over women when it came to channeling, but now they had lost those few while women retained all of theirs. Some of the Asha'man were trying to puzzle out how to duplicate what Nacelle had created, to find a weave that would allow men to detect women's weaves, but so far without success. Well, it would have to be dealt with by someone else. He had all he could manage on his plate at the moment.

The farms continued, some alone in a clearing, others clustered three or four or five together. If they followed the road far enough they would reach the village of King’s Crossing in a few miles, where a wooden bridge spanned a narrow river called the Reshalle, but well short of that the road passed by a large clearing marked by a pair of tall stone gateposts, though there were neither gates nor fence. A hundred paces or more beyond it, at the end of a mud-slicked clay lane, lay Lady Deirdru’s manor, two stories of thatch-roofed gray stone saved from looking a large farmhouse only by the gateposts and the tall twinned doors at the front. The stables and outbuildings had the same practical appearance, sturdy and unornamented. There was no one in sight, no stablemen, no servant on her way to fetch eggs, no men in the fields that flanked the lane. The house’s tall chimneys stood smokeless. It *did* smell of a trap. But the countryside was quiet, the farmers unruffled. There was only one way to find out.

Rand turned Tai’daishar in through the gateposts, and the others followed. Min did not heed his warning. She pushed her gray in between Tai’daishar and Nynaeve’s mare and grinned at him. The bond carried nervousness, but the woman grinned!

When he was halfway to the house, the doors opened, and two women came out, one in dark gray, the other in blue with red panels on her breast and ankle-length skirts. Sunlight glinted off the silvery leash connecting them. Two more appeared, and two more, until three pairs stood in a row to either side of the door. As he reached the three-quarter point, another woman stepped into the doorway, very dark and very small, dressed in pleated white, her head covered by a transparent scarf that fell over her face. The Daughter of the Nine Moons. She had been described to Bashere right down to her shaven head. A tension in his shoulders he had not been aware of melted. That she was actually here did away with the possibility of a trap. The Seanchan would not risk the heir to their throne in anything so dangerous. He drew rein and dismounted.

“One of them is channeling,” Nynaeve said, just loudly enough for him to hear, as she climbed down from her saddle. “I can’t see anything, so she’s masked her ability and inverted the weave—and I wonder how the Seanchan learned *that*!—but she’s channeling. Only one; there isn’t enough for it to be two.” Her *ter’angreal* could not tell whether it was *saidin* or *saidar* being channeled, but it was unlikely to be a man.

I told you it was trap, Lews Therin groaned. *I told you!*

Rand pretended to check his saddle girth. “Can you tell which one?” he asked quietly. He still did not reach for *saidin*. There was no telling what

Lews Therin might do in these circumstances if he managed to grab control again. Logain was fiddling with his girth, too, and Narishma was watching Sandomere check one of the dapple's hooves. They had heard. The small woman was waiting in the doorway, very still but no doubt impatient and likely offended by their apparent interest in their horses.

"No," Cadsuane replied grimly. "But I can do something about it. Once we're closer." Her golden hair ornaments swayed as she tossed her cloak back as though unmasking a sword.

"Stay behind me," he told Min, and to his relief, she nodded. Her face wore a small frown, and the bond carried worry. Not fear, though. She knew he would protect her.

Leaving the horses standing, he started toward the *sul'dam* and *damane* with Cadsuane and Nynaeve a little distance to either side of him. Logain, hand resting on his sword hilt as if that were his real weapon, strode along on the other side of Cadsuane, Narishma and Sandomere beyond Nynaeve. The small dark woman began walking toward them slowly, holding her pleated skirts up off the damp ground.

Abruptly, no more than ten paces away, she . . . flickered. For an instant, she was taller than most men, garbed all in black, surprise on her face, and though she still wore the veil, her head was covered with shortcut wavy black hair. Only an instant before the small woman returned, her step faltering as she let her white skirts fall, but another flicker, and the tall dark woman stood there, her face twisted in fury behind the veil. He recognized that face, though he had never seen it before. Lews Therin had, and that was enough.

"Semirhage," he said in shock before he could stop the word, and suddenly everything seemed to happen at once.

He reached for the Source and found Lews Therin clawing for it, too, each of them jostling the other aside from reaching it. Semirhage flicked her hand, and a small ball of fire streaked toward him from her fingertips. She might have shouted something, an order. He could not leap aside; Min stood right behind him. Frantically trying to seize *saidin*, he flung up the hand holding the Dragon Scepter in desperation. The world seemed to explode in fire.

His cheek was pressed against the damp ground, he realized. Black flecks shimmered in his vision, and everything seemed faintly hazy, as if seen through water. Where was he? What had happened? His head felt stuffed with wool. Something was prodding him in the ribs. His sword hilt. The old wounds were a hard knot of pain just above that. Slowly, he realized he was looking at the Dragon Scepter, or what was left of it. The spearpoint and a few inches of charred haft lay three paces away. Small, dancing flames were consuming the long tassel. The Crown of Swords lay beyond it.

Abruptly it came to him that he could feel *saidin* being channeled. His skin was goose bumps all over from *saidar* being wielded. The manor house. Semirhage! He tried to push himself up, and collapsed with a harsh cry. Slowly he pulled a left arm that seemed all pain up where he could see his hand. See where his hand had been. Only a mangled, blackened ruin remained. A stub sticking out of a cuff that gave off thin streamers of smoke. But the Power was still being channeled around him. His people were fighting for their lives. They might be dying. Min! He struggled to rise, and fell again.

As though thinking of her had summoned her, Min was crouching over him. Trying to shield him with her body, he realized. The bond was full of compassion and pain. Not physical pain. He would have known if she had the smallest injury. She was feeling pain for him. “Lie still,” she said. “You’ve. . . . You’ve been hurt.”

“I know,” he said hoarsely. Again, he reached for *saidin*, and for a wonder, this time Lews Therin did not try to interfere. The Power filled him, and that gave him the strength to push himself to his feet one-handed, preparing several very nasty weaves as he did so. Careless of his muddy coat, Min gripped his good arm as though she were trying to hold him upright. But the fighting was over.

Semirhage was standing stiffly with her arms at her sides, her skirts pressed against her legs, doubtless wrapped up in flows of Air. The hilt of one of Min’s knives stood out from her shoulder, and she must have been shielded, too, but her dark, beautiful face was contemptuous. She had been a prisoner before, briefly, during the War of the Shadow. She had escaped from high detention by frightening her jailers to the point that they actually smuggled her to freedom.

Others had been injured more seriously. A short dark *sul’dam* and tall pale-haired *damane*, linked by an *a’dam*, lay sprawled on the ground, staring up at the sun with already glazed eyes, and another pair were on their knees and clinging to one another, blood running down their faces and matting their hair. The other pairs stood as stiffly as Semirhage, and he could see the shields on three of the *damane*. They looked stunned. One of the *sul'dam*, a slender, dark-haired young woman, was weeping softly. Narishma's face was bloodied, too, and his coat appeared singed. So did Sandomere's, and a bone jutted through his left coatsleeve, white smeared with red, until Nynaeve firmly pulled his arm straight and guided the bone back into place. Grimacing in pain, he gave a guttural groan. She cupped her hands around his arm over the break, and moments later he was flexing his arm and moving his fingers and murmuring thanks. Logain appeared untouched, as did Nynaeve and Cadsuane, who was studying Semirhage the way a Brown might study an exotic animal never before seen.

Suddenly gateways began opening all around the manor house, spilling out mounted Asha'man and Aes Sedai and Warders, veiled Maidens and Bashere riding at the head of his horsemen. An Asha'man and Aes Sedai in a ring of two could make a gateway considerably larger than those Rand could alone. So someone had managed to give the signal, a red sunburst in the sky. Every Asha'man was full of *saidin*, and Rand assumed the Aes Sedai were equally full of *saidar*. The Maidens began spreading out into the trees.

"Aghan, Hamad, search the house!" Bashere shouted. "Matoun, form the lancers! They'll be on us as soon as they can!" Two soldiers thrust their lances into the ground and leapt down to run inside drawing their swords while the others began arraying themselves in two ranks.

Ayako flung herself from her saddle and rushed to Sandomere not even bothering to hold her skirts out of the mud. Merise rode to Narishma before swinging down right in front of him and taking his head in her hands without a word. He jerked, his back arching and nearly pulling his head free, as she Healed him. She had little facility with Nynaeve's method of Healing.

Ignoring the turmoil, Nynaeve gathered her skirts in bloodied hands and hurried to Rand. "Oh, Rand," she said when she saw his arm, "I'm so sorry. I. . . . I'll do what I can, but I can't fix it the way it was." Her eyes were filled with anguish.

Wordlessly, he held out his left arm. It throbbed with agony. Strangely, he could still feel his hand. It seemed he should be able to make a fist with the fingers that were no longer there. His goose bumps intensified as she drew more deeply on *saidar*, the tendrils of smoke vanished from his cuff, and she gripped his arm above the wrist. His entire arm began tingling, and the pain drained away. Slowly, blackened skin was replaced by smooth skin that seemed to ooze down until it covered the small lump that had been the base of his hand. It was a miraculous thing to see. The scarlet-and-gold scaled dragon grew back, too, as much as it could, ending in a bit of the golden mane. He could *still* feel the whole hand.

"I'm so sorry," Nynaeve said again. "Let me delve you for any other injuries." She asked, but did not wait, of course. She reached up to cup his head between her hands, and a chill ran through him. "There's something wrong with your eyes," she said with a frown. "I'm afraid to try fixing that without studying on it. The smallest mistake could blind you. How well can you see? How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Two. I can see fine," he lied. The black flecks were gone, but everything still seemed seen through water, and he wanted to squint against a sun that appeared to glare ten times brighter than it had. The old wounds in his side were knotted with pain.

Bashere climbed down from his compact bay in front of him and frowned at the stump of his left arm. Unbuckling his helmet, he took it off and held it under his arm. "At least you're alive," he said gruffly. "I've seen men hurt worse."

"Me, too," Rand said. "I'll have to learn the sword all over again, though." Bashere nodded. Most forms required two hands. Rand bent to pick up the crown of Illian, but Min released his arm and hurriedly handed the crown to him. He settled it on his head. "I'll have to work out new ways to do everything."

"You must be in shock," Nynaeve said slowly. "You've just suffered a grievous injury, Rand. Maybe you'd better lie down. Lord Davram, have one of your men bring a saddle to put his feet up."

"He's not in shock," Min said sadly. The bond was full of sadness. She had taken hold of his arm as if to hold him up again. "He lost a hand, but there's nothing to do about it, so he's left it behind already."

"Wool-headed fool," Nynaeve muttered. Her hand, still smeared with Sandomere's blood, drifted toward the thick braid hanging over her shoulder, but she yanked it back down. "You've been hurt badly. It's all right to grieve. It's all right to feel stunned. It's normal!"

"I don't have time," he told her. Min's sadness threatened to overflow the bond. Light, he was all right! Why did she feel so sad?

Nynaeve muttered half under her breath about “woolhead” and “fool” and “man-stubborn,” but she was not finished. “Those old wounds in your side have broken open,” she almost growled. “You aren’t bleeding badly, but you *are* bleeding. Maybe I can finally do something about them.”

But as hard as she tried—and she tried three times—nothing changed. He still felt the slow trickle of blood sliding down his ribs. The wounds were still a throbbing knot of pain. Finally, he pushed her hand gently away from his side.

“You’ve done what you can, Nynaeve. It’s enough.”

“Fool.” She did growl, this time. “How can it be enough when you’re still bleeding?”

“Who is the tall woman?” Bashere asked. He understood, at least. You did not waste time on what could not be mended. “They didn’t try passing *her* off as the Daughter of the Nine Moons, did they? Not after telling me she was a little thing.”

“They did,” Rand replied, and explained briefly.

“Semirhage?” Bashere muttered incredulously. “How can you be sure?”

“She’s Anath Dorje, not . . . not what you called her,” a honey-skinned *sul’dam* said loudly in a twangy drawl. Her dark eyes were tilted, and her hair was streaked with gray. She looked the eldest of the *sul’dam*, and the least frightened. It was not that she did not look afraid, but she controlled it well. “She’s the High Lady’s Truthspeaker.”

“Be silent, Falendre,” Semirhage said coldly, looking over her shoulder. Her gaze promised pain. The Lady of Pain was good at delivering on her promises. Prisoners had killed themselves on learning it was she who held them, men and women who managed to open a vein with teeth or fingernails.

Falendre did not seem to see it, though. “You don’t command me,” she said scornfully. “You’re not even *so’jhin*.”

“How *can* you be sure?” Cadsuane demanded. Those golden moons and stars, birds and fishes, swung as she moved her piercing gaze from Rand to Semirhage and back.

Semirhage saved him the effort of thinking up a lie. “He’s insane,” she said coolly. Standing there stiff as a statue, Min’s knife hilt still sticking out beside her collarbone and the front of her black dress glistening with blood, she might have been a queen on her throne. “Graendal could explain it better than I. Madness was her specialty. I will try, however. You know of people who hear voices in their heads? Sometimes, very rarely, the voices they hear are the voices of past lives. Lanfear claimed he knew things from our own Age, things only Lews Therin Telamon could know. Clearly, he is hearing Lews Therin's voice. It makes no difference that his voice is real, however. In fact, that makes his situation worse. Even Graendal usually failed to achieve reintegration with someone who heard a real voice. I understand the descent into terminal madness can be . . . abrupt." Her lips curved in a smile that never touched her dark eyes.

Were they looking at him differently? Logain's face was a carved mask, unreadable. Bashere looked as though he still could not believe. Nynaeve's mouth hung open, and her eyes were wide. The bond. . . . For a long moment, the bond was full of . . . numbness. If Min turned away from him, he did not know whether he could stand it. If she turned away, it would be the best thing in the world for her. But compassion and determination as strong as mountains replaced numbness, and love so bright he thought he could have warmed his hands over it. Her grip on his arm tightened, and he tried to put a hand over hers. Too late, he remembered and snatched the nub of his hand away, but not before it had touched her. Nothing in the bond wavered by a hair.

Cadsuane moved closer to the taller woman and looked up at her. Facing one of the Forsaken seemed to faze her no more than facing the Dragon Reborn did. "You're very calm for a prisoner. Rather than deny the charge, you give evidence against yourself."

Semirhage shifted that cold smile from Rand to Cadsuane. "Why should I deny myself?" Pride dripped from every word. "I am Semirhage." Someone gasped, and a number of the *sul'dam* and *damane* started trembling and weeping. One *sul'dam*, a pretty, yellow-haired woman, suddenly vomited down the front of herself, and another, stocky and dark, looked as if she might.

Cadsuane simply nodded. "I am Cadsuane Melaidhrin. I look forward to long talks with you." Semirhage sneered. She had never lacked courage.

"We thought she was the High Lady," Falendre said hurriedly, and haltingly at the same time. Her teeth seemed near to chattering, but she forced words out. "We thought we were being honored. She took us to a room in the Tarasin Palace where there was a . . . a hole in the air, and we stepped through to this place. I swear it on my eyes! We thought she was the High Lady."

"So, no army rushing toward us," Logain said. You could not have told from his tone whether he was relieved or disappointed. He bared an inch of his sword and thrust it back into its scabbard hard. "What do we do with them?" He jerked his head toward the *sul'dam* and *damane*. "Send them to Caemlyn like the others?"

"We send them back to Ebou Dar," Rand said. Cadsuane turned to stare at him. Her face was a perfect mask of Aes Sedai serenity, yet he doubted she was anywhere near serene inside. The leashing of *damane* was an abomination that Aes Sedai took personally. Nynaeve was anything but serene. Angry-eyed, gripping her braid in a tight, blood-daubed fist, she opened her mouth, but he spoke over her. "I need this truce, Nynaeve, and taking these women prisoner is no way to get one. Don't argue. That's what they'd call it, including the *damane*, and you know it as well as I do. They can carry word that I want to meet the Daughter of the Nine Moons. The heir to the throne is the only one who can make a truce stand."

"I still don't like it," she said firmly. "We could free the *damane*. The others will do as well for carrying messages." The *damane* who had not been weeping before burst into tears. Some of them cried to the *sul'dam* to save them. Nynaeve's face took on sickly cast, but she threw up her hands and gave over arguing.

The two soldiers Bashere had sent into the house came out, young men who walked with a rolling motion, more accustomed to saddles than their own feet. Hamad had a luxuriant black beard that fell below the edge of his helmet and a scar down his face. Aghan wore thick mustaches like Bashere's and carried a plain wooden box with no lid under his arm. They bowed to Bashere, free hands swinging their swords clear.

"The house is empty, my Lord," Aghan said, "but there's dried blood staining the carpets in several rooms. Looks like a slaughter yard, my Lord. I think whoever lived here is dead. This was sitting by the front door. It didn't look like it belonged, so I brought it along." He held out the box for inspection. Within lay coiled *a'dam* and a number of circlets made of segmented black metal, some large, some small.

Rand started to reach in with his left hand before he remembered. Min caught the movement and released his right arm so he could scoop up a handful of the black metal pieces. Nynaeve gasped.

“You know what these are?” he asked.

“They’re *a’dam* for men,” she said angrily. “Egeanin said she was going to drop the thing in the ocean! We *trusted* her, and she gave it to somebody to copy!”

Rand dropped the things back into the box. There were six of the larger circlets, and five of the silvery leashes. Semirhage had been prepared no matter who he brought with him. “She really thought she could capture all of us.” That thought should have made him shiver. He seemed to feel Lews Therin shiver. No one wanted to fall into Semirhage’s hands.

“She shouted for them to shield us,” Nynaeve said, “but they couldn’t because we were all holding the Power already. If we hadn’t been, if Cadsuane and I hadn’t had our *ter’angreal*, I don’t know what would have happened.” She *did* shiver.

He looked at the tall Forsaken, and she stared back, utterly composed. Utterly cold. Her reputation as a torturer loomed so large that it was easy to forget how dangerous she was otherwise. “Tie off the shields on the others so they’ll unravel in a few hours, and send them to somewhere near Ebou Dar.” For a moment, he thought Nynaeve was going to protest again, but she contented herself with giving her braid a strong tug and turning away.

“Who are you to ask for a meeting with the High Lady?” Falendre demanded. She emphasized the title for some reason.

“My name is Rand al’Thor. I’m the Dragon Reborn.” If they had wept at hearing Semirhage’s name, they wailed at hearing his.

Ashandarei slanted across his saddle, Mat sat Pips in the darkness among the trees and waited, surrounded by two thousand mounted crossbowmen. The sun was not long down, and events should be in motion. The Seanchan were going to be hit hard tonight in half a dozen places. Some small and some not so small, but hard in every case. Moonlight filtering through the branches overhead gave just enough illumination for him to make out Tuon’s shadowed face. She had insisted on staying with him, which meant Selucia was at her side on her dun, of course, glaring at him as usual. There were not enough moonshadows to obscure that, unfortunately. Tuon must be unhappy about what was to happen tonight, yet nothing showed on her face. What was she thinking? Her expression was all the stern magistrate.

“Your scheme do entail a good deal of luck,” Teslyn said, not for the first time. Even shadowed, her face looked hard. She shifted in her saddle, adjusting her cloak. “It be too late to change everything, but this part can be abandoned certainly.” He would have preferred to have Bethamin or Seta, neither bound by the Three Oaths and both knowing the weaves *damane* used for weapons, something that horrified the Aes Sedai. Not the weaves; just that Bethamin and Seta knew them. At least, he thought he would. Leilwin had flatly refused to fight any Seanchan except to defend herself. Bethamin and Seta might have done the same, or found at the last minute that they could not act against their countrymen. In any case, the Aes Sedai had rejected allowing the two women to be involved, and neither had opened her mouth once that was said. That pair were too meek around Aes Sedai to say boo to a goose.

“Grace favor you, Teslyn Sedai, but Lord Mat *is* lucky,” Captain Mandevwin said. The stocky one-eyed man had been with the Band since the first days in Cairhien, and he had earned the gray streaks in his hair, hidden now beneath his green-painted helmet, an open-faced footman’s helmet, in battles against Tear and Andor before that. “I remember times we were outnumbered, with enemies on every side, and he danced the Band around them. Not to slip away, mind, but to beat them. Beautiful battles.”

“A beautiful battle is one you don’t have to fight,” Mat said, more sharply than he intended. He did not like battles. You could get holes poked in you in a battle. He just kept getting caught in them, that was all. Most of that dancing around *had* been trying to slip away. But there would be no slipping away tonight, or for many days to come. “Our part of it is important, Teslyn.” What was keeping Aludra, burn her? The attack at the supply camp must be under way already, just strong enough that the soldiers defending it would think they could hold until help arrived, strong enough to make them sure they needed help. The others would be full strength from the start, to overwhelm the defenders before they knew what was on them. “I mean to bloody the Seanchan, bloody them so hard and fast and often that they’re reacting to what we’re doing instead of making their own plans.” As soon as the words left his tongue he wished he had phrased that another way.

Tuon leaned close to Selucia, and the taller woman put her scarf-covered head down to exchange whispers. It was too dark for their bloody finger-talk, but he could not hear a word they were saying. He could imagine. She had promised not to betray him, and that had to cover trying to betray his plans, yet she must wish she had that promise back. He should have left her with Reimon or one of the others. That would have been safer than letting her stay with him. He could have if he had tied her up, her and Selucia both. And probably Setalle as well. That bloody woman still took Tuon's side every time.

Mandevwin's bay stamped a hoof, and he patted the animal's neck with a gauntleted hand. "You cannot deny there is battle luck, when you find a weakness in your enemy's lines that you never expected, that should not be there, when you find him arrayed to defend against attack from the north only you are coming from the south. Battle luck rides on your shoulder, my Lord. I have seen it."

Mat grunted and resettled his hat on his head irritably. For every time a banner got lost and blundered into a bloody chink in the enemy's defenses, there were ten when it just was not bloody where you expected when you bloody well needed it. That was the truth of battle luck.

"One green nightflower," a man called from above. "Two! Both green!" Scrapings told of him climbing down hurriedly.

Mat heaved a small sigh of relief. The *raken* was away and headed west. He had counted on that—the nearest large body of soldiers loyal to the Seanchan lay west—and even cheated by riding as far west as he dared. Just because you were sure your opponent would react in a certain way did not mean he would. Reimon would be overrunning the supply camp any minute, smothering the defenders with ten times their number and securing much-needed provisions.

"Go, Vanin," he said, and the fat man dug his heels in, sending his dun off into the night at a canter. He could not outpace the *raken*, but so long as he brought word in time. . . . "Time to move, Mandevwin."

A lean fellow dropped the last distance from a lower limb, carefully cradling a looking glass that he handed up to the Cairhienin.

"Get mounted, Londraed," Mandevwin said, stuffing the looking glass into the cylindrical leather case tied to his saddle. "Connl, form the men by fours."

A short ride took them to a narrow hard-packed road, winding through low hills, that Mat had avoided earlier. There were few farms and fewer villages in this area, but he did not want to spread rumors of large parties of armed men. Not until he wanted them to spread, anyway. Now he needed speed, and rumor could not outrun him in tonight's business. Most of the farmhouses they trotted by were dark shapes in the moonlight, lamps and candles already extinguished. The thud of hooves and the creak of saddle leather were the only sounds aside from the occasional thin, reedy cry of some night bird or an owl's hooting, but two thousand or so horses made a fair amount of noise. They passed through a small village where only a handful of thatch-roofed houses and the tiny stone inn showed any light, but people stuck their heads out of doors and windows to gape. Doubtless they thought they were seeing soldiers loyal to the Seanchan. There seemed to be few of any other kind remaining in most of Altara. Somebody raised a cheer, but he was a lone voice.

Mat rode alongside Mandevwin with Tuon and the other women behind, and now and then he looked over his shoulder. Not to make sure she was still there. Strange as it was, he had no doubt she would keep her word not to escape, even now. And not to make sure she was keeping up. The razor had an easy stride, and she rode well. Pips could not have outrun Akein had he tried. No, he just liked looking at her, even by moonlight. Maybe especially by moonlight. He had tried kissing her again the night before, and she had punched him in the side so hard that at first he thought she had broken one of his shortribs. But she had kissed him just before they started out this evening. Only once, and said not to be greedy when he attempted a second. The woman melted in his arms while he was kissing her, and turned to ice the moment she stepped back. What was he to make of her? A large owl passed overhead, wings flapping silently. Would she see some omen in that? Probably.

He should not be spending so much time thinking about her, not tonight. In truth, he *was* depending on luck to some extent. The three thousand lancers Vanin had found, mostly Altarans with a few Seanchan, might or might not be those Master Roidelle had marked on his map, though they had not been too far from where he placed them, but there was no telling for sure in which direction they had moved since. Northeast, almost certainly, toward the Malvide Narrows, and the Molvaine Gap beyond. It seemed that except for the last stretch, the Seanchan had taken to avoiding the Lugard Road for moving soldiers, doubtless to conceal their numbers and destinations in the country roads. Certain was not absolutely sure, however. If they had not moved too far, this was the road they would use to reach that supply camp. If. But if they had ridden farther than he expected, they might use another road. No danger there; just a wasted night.

Their commander might decide to cut straight across the hills, too. That could prove nasty if he decided to join this road at the wrong point.

About four miles beyond the village, they came to a place where two gently sloping hills flanked the road, and he called a halt. Master Roidelle's own maps were fine, but those he had from other men were the work of masters, too. Roidelle acquired only the best. Mat recognized this spot as if he had seen it before.

Mandevwin wheeled his horse around. "Admar, Eyndel, take your men up the north slope. Madwin, Dongal, the south slope. One man in four to hold horses."

"Hobble the horses," Mat said, "and put the feedbags on to stop whinnying." They were facing lancers. If it all turned sour and they tried to run, those lancers would ride them down like they were hunting wild pigs. A crossbow was no good from horseback, especially if you were trying to get away. They had to win here.

The Cairhienin stared at him, any expression hidden by the face-bars of his helmet, but he did not hesitate. "Hobble the horses and put on their nosebags," he ordered. "Every man on the line."

"Tell off some to keep watch north and south," Mat told him. "Battle luck can run against you as easily as in your favor." Mandevwin nodded and gave the order.

The crossbowmen divided and rode up the thinly treed slopes, their dark coats and dull green armor fading into the shadows. Burnished armor was all very well for parades, but it could reflect moonlight as well as sunlight. According to Talmanes, the hard part had been convincing the lancers to give up their bright breastplates and the nobles their silvering and gilding. The foot had seen sense straight off. For a time there was the rustle of men and horses moving across the mulch, moving through brush, but finally silence fell. From the road, Mat could not have told there was anyone on either slope. Now he just had to wait.

Tuon and Selucia kept him company, and so did Teslyn. A gusting breeze had sprung up from the west that tugged at cloaks, but of course, Aes Sedai could ignore such things, though Teslyn held hers shut. Selucia let the gusts take her cloak where it would, oddly, but Tuon took to holding hers closed with one hand.

"You might be more comfortable among the trees," he told her. "They'll cut the wind."

For a moment, she shook with silent laughter. “I’m enjoying watching you take your ease on your hilltop,” she drawled.

Mat blinked. Hilltop? He was sitting Pips in the middle of the bloody road with flaming gusts cutting through his coat like winter was coming back. What was she talking about, hilltop?

“Have a care with Joline,” Teslyn said, suddenly and unexpectedly. “She be . . . childish . . . in some ways, and you do fascinate her the way a shiny new toy do fascinate a child. She will bond you if she can decide how to convince you to agree. Perhaps even if you do no realize you be agreeing.”

He opened his mouth to say there was no bloody flaming chance of that, but Tuon spoke first.

“She cannot have him,” she said sharply. Drawing a breath, she went on in amused tones. “Toy belongs to me. Until I am through playing with him. But even then, I won’t give him to a *marath’damane*. You understand me, Tessi? You tell Rosi that. That’s the name I intended to give her. You can tell her that, too.”

The sharp gusts might not have affected Teslyn, but she shivered at hearing her *damane* name. Aes Sedai serenity vanished as rage contorted her face. “What I do understand—!”

“Give over!” Mat cut in. “Both of you. I’m in no mood to listen to the pair of you trying to jab each other with needles.” Teslyn stared at him, indignation plain even by moonlight.

“Why, Toy,” Tuon said brightly, “you’re being masterful again.” She leaned over to Selucia and whispered something that made the bosomy woman give a loud guffaw.

Hunching his shoulders and pulling his cloak around him, he leaned on the high pommel of his saddle and watched the night for Vanin. Women! He would give up all of his luck—well, half—if he could understand women.

“What do you think you can achieve with raids and ambushes?” Teslyn said, again not for the first time. “The Seanchan will only send enough soldiers to hunt you down.” She and Joline had kept trying to stick their noses into his planning, and so had Edesina to a lesser extent, until he chased them away. Aes Sedai thought they knew everything, and while Joline at least did know something of war, he had not needed advice. Aes Sedai advice sounded an awful lot like telling you what to do. This time, he decided to answer her.

“I’m counting on them sending more soldiers, Teslyn,” he said, still watching for Vanin. “The whole army they have in the Molvaine Gap, in fact. Enough of it, anyway. They’re more likely to use that than any other. Everything Thom and Juilin picked up says their big push is aimed at Illian. I think the army in the Gap is to guard against anything coming at them out of Murandy or Andor. But they’re the stopper in the jar for us. I mean to pull that stopper out so we can pass through.”

After several minutes of silence, he looked over his shoulder. The three women were just sitting their horses and watching him. He wished he had enough light to make out their expressions. Why were they bloody staring? He settled back to looking for Vanin, yet it seemed he could feel their eyes on his back.

Perhaps two hours by the shifting of the fat crescent moon went by, with the wind slowly picking up strength. It was enough to take the night beyond cool into cold. Periodically he tried to make the women take shelter among the trees, but they resisted stubbornly. He had to remain, to catch Vanin without having to shout—the lancers would be close behind the man; perhaps very close if their commander was a fool—but they did not. He suspected that Teslyn refused because Tuon and Selucia did. That made no sense, but there it was. As for why Tuon refused, he could not have said unless it was because she liked to listen to him arguing himself hoarse.

Eventually the wind brought the sound of a running horse, and he sat up straight in his saddle. Vanin’s dun cantered out of the night, the bulky man as always an improbable sight in a saddle.

Vanin drew rein and spat through a gap in his teeth. “They’re a mile or so behind me, but there’s maybe a thousand more than there was this morning. Whoever’s in charge knows his business. They’re pushing hard without blowing their horses.”

“If you be outnumbered two to one,” Teslyn said, “perhaps you will reconsider—”

“I don’t intend to give them a stand-up fight,” Mat broke in. “And I can’t afford to leave four thousand lancers loose to make trouble for me. Let’s join Mandevwin.”

The kneeling crossbowmen on the slope of the northern hill made no sound when he rode through their line with the women and Vanin, just shuffled aside to let them through. He would have preferred at least two ranks, but he needed to cover a wide front. The sparse trees did cut the wind, but not by much, and most of the men were huddled in their cloaks. Still, every crossbow he could see was drawn, with a bolt in place. Mandevwin had seen Vanin arrive and knew what it meant.

The Cairhienin was pacing just behind the line until Mat appeared and swung down from Pips. Mandevwin was relieved to hear that he no longer needed to keep a watch to his rear. He merely nodded thoughtfully at hearing of a thousand more lancers than expected and sent a man racing off to bring the watchers down from the crest to take their places in the line. If Mat Cauthon took it in stride, so would he. Mat had forgotten that about the Band. They trusted him absolutely. Once, that had almost made him break out in a rash. Tonight, he was glad of it.

An owl hooted twice, somewhere behind him, and Tuon sighed.

"Is there an omen in that?" he asked, just for something to say.

"I'm glad you are finally taking an interest, Toy. Perhaps I will be able to educate you yet." Her eyes were liquid in the moonlight. "An owl hooting twice means someone will die soon." Well, that put a bloody end to conversation.

Soon enough, the Seanchan appeared, four abreast and leading their horses at a trot, lances in hand. Vanin had been right about their commander knowing his job. Cantered for a time then led at a trot, horses could cover a lot of ground quickly. Fools tried to gallop long distances and ended with dead or crippled horses. Only the first forty or so wore the segmented armor and strange helmets of Seanchan. A pity, that. He had no idea how the Seanchan would feel about casualties to their Altaran allies. Losses to their own would catch notice, though.

When the middle of the column was right in front of him, a deep voice on the road suddenly shouted, "Banner! Halt!" Those two words carried the familiar slurred drawl of the Seanchan. The men in segmented armor stopped sharply. The others straggled to a halt.

Mat drew breath. Now that had to be *ta'veren* work. They could hardly have been better placed if he had given the order himself. He rested a hand on Teslyn's shoulder. She flinched slightly, but he needed to get her attention quietly.

"Banner!" the deep voice shouted. "Mount!" Below, soldiers moved to obey.

"Now," Mat said quietly.

The foxhead went cold on his chest, and suddenly a ball of red light was floating high above the road, bathing the soldiers below in an unearthly glow. They had only a heartbeat to gape. Along the line below Mat, a thousand crossbow strings gave what sounded like one loud snap, and a thousand bolts streaked into the formation, punching through breastplates at that short range, knocking men from their feet, sending horses rearing and screaming, just as a thousand more struck from the other side. Not every shot struck squarely, but that hardly mattered with a heavy crossbow. Men went down with shattered legs, with legs ripped half off. Men clutched at the stumps of ruined arms trying to stem the flow of blood. Men screamed as loudly as the horses.

He watched a crossbowman nearby as the fellow bent to fasten the paired hooks of the bulky, boxlike crank, hanging from a strap at the front of his belt, to his crossbow string. As the man straightened, the cord streamed out of the crank, but once he was erect, he set the crank on the butt of the upended crossbow, moved a small lever on the side of the box, and began to work the handles. Three quick turns with a rough whirring sound, and the string caught on the latch.

“Into the trees!” the deep voice shouted. “Close with them before they can reload! Move!”

Some tried to mount, to ride into the attack, and others dropped reins and lances to draw swords. None made it as far as the trees. Two thousand more bolts slashed into them, cutting men down, punching through men to kill men behind or topple horses. On the hillside, men began working their cranks furiously, but there was no need. On the road, a horse kicked feebly here and there. The only men moving were frantically trying to use whatever they had to hand for tourniquets to keep from bleeding to death. The wind brought the sound of running horses. Some might have riders. There were no more shouts from the deep voice.

“Mandevwin,” Mat shouted, “we’re done here. Mount the men. We have places to be.”

“You must stay to offer aid,” Teslyn said firmly. “The rules of war do demand it.”

“This is a new kind of war,” he told her harshly. Light, it was silent on the road, but he could still hear the screaming. “They’ll have to wait for their own to give them aid.”

Tuon murmured something half under her breath. He thought it was, “A lion can have no mercy,” but that was ridiculous.

Gathering his men, he led them down the north side of the hill. There was no need to let the survivors see how many they were. In a few hours they would join up with the men from the other hill, and in a few hours more, with Carlomin. Before sunrise they were going to hit the Seanchan again. He intended to make them *run* to pull that bloody stopper for him.

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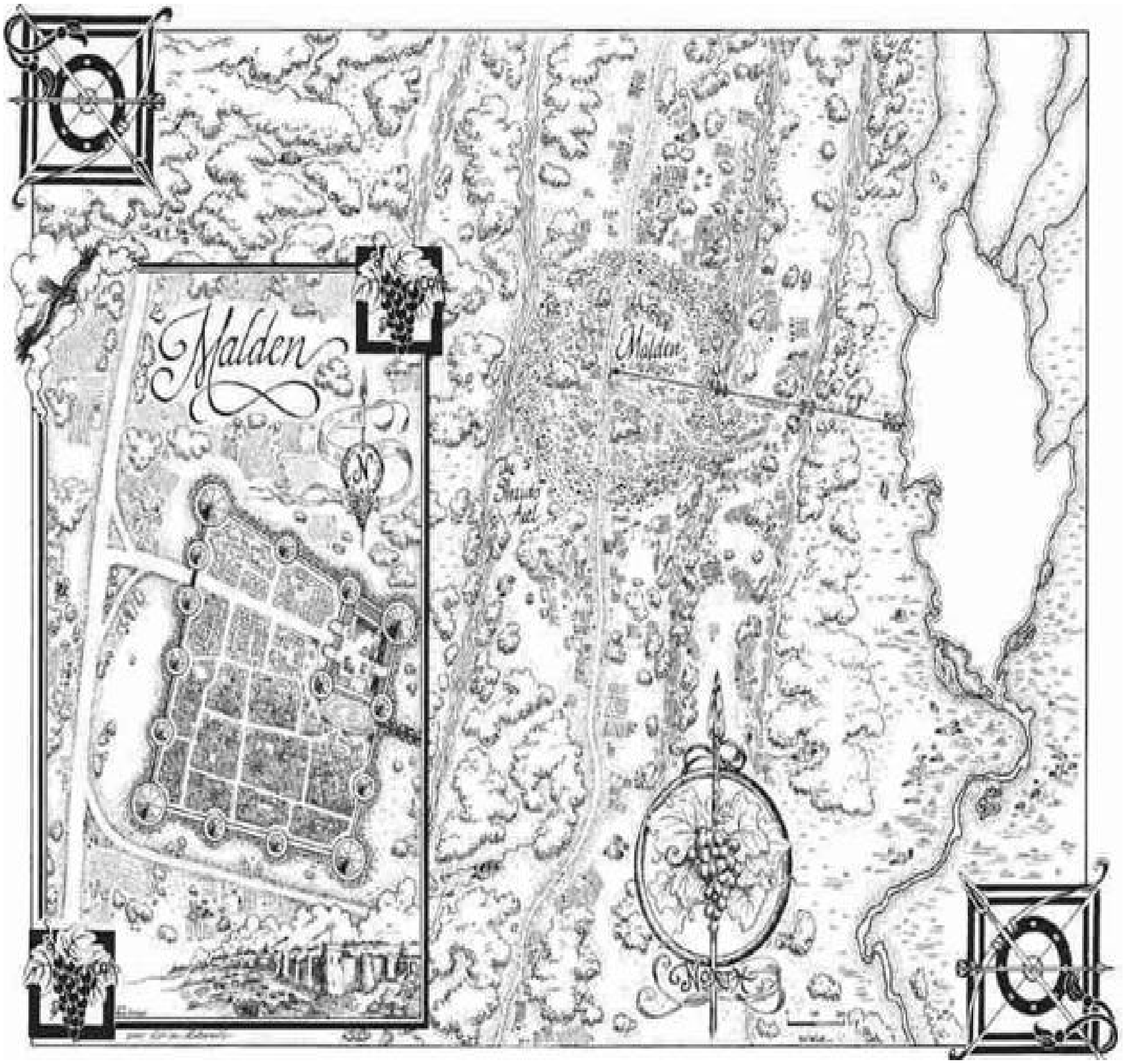
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CHAPTER 28

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In Malden

Just before first light, Faile was fastening the wide belt of golden links around her waist for the last time when Dairaine entered the small, already crowded peaked tent where they all slept. Outside, the sky would be starting to turn gray, but inside, it might still have been night. Faile's eyes had adapted to the darkness, though. The slender little woman with black hair that spilled to her waist in waves was frowning around her yawns. She had stood just below the High Seat of her House in Cairhien, but she had been wakened in the night because Sevanna could not sleep and wanted to be read to. Sevanna enjoyed Dairaine's voice, and likely the tales she carried of supposed misdeeds among Sevanna's *gai'shain*. The Cairhienin woman was never chosen out as one of those who had failed to please. Her hands went to her golden collar, then hesitated when she took in Faile, Alliandre and Maighdin, already dressed and on their feet.

"I forgot to put the book back in the proper place," she said in a voice like crystal chimes, turning back toward the tentflap. "Sevanna will have me beaten if she sees it out of place when she wakes."

"She's lying," Maighdin growled, and Dairaine darted for outside.

That was enough to convince Faile. She grabbed the woman's cowl and hauled her back into the tent. Dairaine opened her mouth to scream, but Alliandre clapped her hand over it, and the three of them wrestled the woman to the blanket-strewn ground-cloth. It took all three. Dairaine was small, but she writhed like a snake, tried to claw at them, to bite. While the other two held the woman down, Faile produced the second knife she had secured, a quite serviceable dagger with a ridged steel hilt and a blade longer than her hand, and began slicing strips from one of the blankets.

"How did you know?" Alliandre said, struggling to contain one of Dairaine's arms while keeping her mouth covered without being bitten. Maighdin had taken care of the woman's legs by sitting on them and had her other arm twisted to her shoulder blades. Dairaine still managed to twist, if uselessly.

"She was frowning, but when she spoke, her face went smooth. I could just make it out. If she were really worried about being beaten, she'd have frowned harder, not stopped." The golden-haired woman was not a very skilled lady's maid, yet she was a very observant one.

"But what made her suspicious?"

Maighdin shrugged. “Maybe one of us looked surprised, or guilty. Though I can’t say how she could have noticed without any light.”

Soon enough they had Dairaine trussed up with her ankles and wrists tied together behind her back. She would not wriggle far like that. A wadded length torn from her shift and tied in place with another piece of blanket served for a gag that let her emit only grunts. She twisted her head to glare up at them. Faile could not see her face very well, but the woman’s expression had to be either glaring or pleading, and Dairaine only pleaded with Shaido. She used her position as one of Sevanna’s *gai’shain* to bully *gai’shain* who were not, and her tale-carrying to bully those who were. The trouble was, they could not leave her here. Someone might come at any moment to summon one of them to serve Sevanna.

“We can kill her and hide the body,” Alliandre suggested, smoothing her long hair. It had become disarrayed in the struggle.

“Where?” Maighdin said, combing her own sun-gold hair with her fingers. She did not sound a lady’s maid speaking to a queen. Prisoners were equals in their captivity or else they aided their captors. It had taken time to teach Alliandre that. “It has to be somewhere she won’t be found for at least a day. Sevanna might send men after Galina to bring us back if we’re suspected of killing one of her *belongings*.” She vested that word with all the scorn it would bear. “And I don’t trust Galina not to let them bring us back.” Dairaine began struggling against her bonds again and grunting harder than ever. Maybe she had decided to plead after all.

“We aren’t going to kill her,” Faile told them. She was being neither squeamish nor merciful. There simply was nowhere they could be sure a body would remain hidden long enough, not that they could reach without being seen. “I’m afraid our plans have changed a little. Wait here.”

Ducking outside, where the sky was indeed beginning to pearl, she found what had made Dairaine suspicious. Bain and Chiad were there in their plain white robes as expected, to escort them as far as the meeting place. Rolan and his friends might not be done breakfasting yet—she hoped they were not; they might do something foolish and ruin everything—and Bain and Chiad had volunteered to divert any men who tried to interfere with them. She had not been able to make herself ask how they intended to do that. Some sacrifices deserved a veil of secrecy. And all of a heart’s gratitude. Two *gai’shain* holding wicker baskets were not enough to rouse suspicion in the Cairhienin woman, but thirty or forty *gai’shain* were, crowding the narrow muddy lane through the *gai'shain* tents. Aravine's plump plain face watched her from a white cowl, and Lusara's beautiful one. Alvon was there with his son Theril in their robes of muddy tentcloth, and Alainia, a plump Amadician silversmith in dirty coarse white linen, and Dormin, a stocky Cairhienin bootmaker, and Corvila, a lean weaver from right here in Altara, and. . . . They represented not a tenth part of those who had sworn to her, but a gathering of *gai'shain* this large would have planted suspicion in a stone. At least when added to the three of them being dressed. Dairaine likely had heard who had been summoned to Sevanna this morning. How had they learned she was leaving today? It was too late to worry about that. If any Shaido knew, they would all have been dragged from the tent before this.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"We wanted to see you go, my Lady," Theril said in his rough, barely intelligible accents. "We were very careful to come by ones and twos." Lusara nodded happily, and she was not the only one.

"Well, we can say good-bye now," Faile said firmly. No need to tell them how close they had come to ruining the escape. "Until I come back for you." If her father would not give her an army, then Perrin would. His friendship with Rand al'Thor would provide it. Light, where *was* he? No! She had to be glad he had not caught up yet, had not gotten himself killed trying to sneak into the camp and rescue her. She had to be glad, and not think of what might be delaying him. "Now go before someone sees you here and runs to tell tales. And don't talk to *anyone* about this." Her adherents were safe enough, otherwise she would already be chained, but there were too many like Dairaine among the *gai'shain,* and not only among the long-held Cairhienin. Some people naturally set to licking wrists wherever they were.

They bowed or curtsied or knuckled their foreheads, just as if nobody might be poking their heads out to see, and scattered in every direction with chagrined expressions. They really had expected to watch her leave! She had no time to fritter away on exasperation. Hurrying to Bain and Chiad, she hastily explained the situation inside the tent.

They exchanged glances when she finished and put down the baskets to free fingers for Maiden handtalk. She avoided looking at their hands, since they plainly wanted privacy. Not that she could have understood much in any case. Their hands moved very fast. Flame-haired Bain with her dark blue eyes stood nearly half a hand taller than she, gray-eyed Chiad just a finger taller. They were her close friends, but they had adopted each other as first-sisters, and that created bonds closer than any friendship.

"We will take care of Dairaine Saighan," Chiad said at last. "But it means you must go into the town alone."

Faile sighed, but there was no helping it. Perhaps Rolan *was* already awake. He could be watching her that minute. He always seemed to appear out of nowhere when she needed him. Surely he would not interfere with her leaving, not when he had promised to take her when he himself left. Yet he still had hopes, so long as she wore white. Him and his kissing games! He might want to keep her in *gai'shain* robes a little longer. When men wanted to help, they always thought their way was the only way.

Bain and Chiad ducked into the small peaked tent, and Alliandre and Maighdin came out. There really was not room inside for five. Maighdin went around the side of the tent and returned with a basket like those the other women had been carrying. Dirty *gai'shain* robes bulged out of the top of each, making them appear loads of laundry, but beneath were dresses that came near enough fitting, a hatchet, a sling, cords for making snares, flint and steel, packets of flour, meal, dried beans, salt and yeast, a few coins they had been able to find, everything they would need to make their way west to find Perrin. Galina would take them out of the camp, but there was no saying which direction her "Aes Sedai business" would take her then. They had to be self-reliant from the start. Faile would not put it past the Aes Sedai to abandon them as soon as she was able.

Maighdin stood over her basket with an air of determination, her jaw set and her eyes firm, but Alliandre's face was wreathed in smiles.

"Try not to look so happy," Faile told her. Wetlander *gai'shain* seldom smiled, and never so joyfully.

Alliandre tried to moderate her expression, but every time she smoothed her smiles away, they crept back. "We're escaping today," she said. "It's hard not to smile."

"You'll stop if some Wise One sees you and decides to find out why you're happy."

"We're hardly likely to meet a Wise One among the *gai'shain* tents or in Malden," the woman said through a smile. Determined or not, Maighdin nodded agreement.

Faile gave up. In truth, she felt a little giddy herself in spite of Dairaine. They were escaping today.

Bain came out of the tent, holding the tentflap for Chiad, who was carrying on her back a blanket-wrapped bundle just large enough to be a small woman doubled-up. Chiad was strong, but she had to lean forward a little to support the weight.

"Why is she so still?" Faile asked. She had no fear they had killed Dairaine. They were fierce about following the rules for *gai'shain*, and violence was forbidden. But that blanket could have been full of wood for all that it moved.

Bain spoke softly, an amused light in her eyes. "I stroked her hair and told her I would be very upset if I had to hurt her. Simple truth, considering how much *toh* even slapping her would cost me." Chiad chuckled. "I think Dairaine Saighan thought we were threatening her. I think she will be very quiet and very still until we let her go." She shook with silent laughter. Aiel humor was still a mystery to Faile. She knew they would be punished severely for this, though. Aiding an escape attempt was dealt with as harshly as trying to escape.

"You have all my gratitude," she said, "you and Chiad both, now and forever. I have great *toh*." She kissed Bain lightly on the cheek, which made the woman blush as red as her hair, of course. Aiel were almost prudishly restrained in public. In some ways.

Bain glanced at Chiad, and a faint smile appeared on her lips. "When you see Gaul, tell him Chiad is *gai'shain* to a man with strong hands, a man whose heart is fire. He will understand. I need to help her carry our burden to a safe place. May you always find water and shade, Faile Bashere." She touched Faile's cheek lightly with her fingertips. "One day, we will meet again."

Going over to Chiad, she took one end of the blanket, and they hurried away carrying it between them. Gaul might understand, but Faile did not. Not the heart of fire, anyway, and she doubted that Manderic's hands interested Chiad in the slightest. The man had bad breath and started getting drunk as soon as he woke unless he was going on a raid or hunting. But she put Gaul and Manderic out of her mind and shouldered her basket. They had wasted too much time already.

The sky was beginning to take on the appearance of actual daylight, and *gai'shain* were stirring among the wildly diverse tents of the camp close on Malden’s walls, scurrying off to be about some chore or at least carrying something to give a semblance of working, but none paid any mind to three women in white carrying baskets of laundry toward the town’s gates. There always seemed to be laundry to be done, even for Sevanna’s *gai’shain*. There were far too many wetlander *gai’shain* for Faile to know everyone, and she saw no one she knew until they came on Arrela and Lacile, shifting from foot to foot with baskets on their shoulders. Taller than most Aiel women and dark, Arrela kept her black hair cut as short as any Maiden and strode like a man when she walked. Lacile was short and pale and slim, and had red ribbons tied in her hair, which was not much longer. Her walk was graceful in robes, and had been a scandalous sway when she had worn breeches. Their sighs of relief were nearly identical, though.

“We thought something had happened,” Arrela said.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Faile told her.

“Where are Bain and Chiad?” Lacile asked anxiously.

“They have another task,” Faile said. “We go alone.”

They exchanged glances, and their sighs were far from relieved this time. Of course Rolan would not interfere. Not with them getting away. Of course not.

The iron-strapped gates of Malden stood open, shoved back against the granite walls, as they had since the city fell. Rust had turned the broad iron straps brown, and the hinges were so rusty that pushing the gates shut again might be impossible. Pigeons nested in the gray stone towers flanking them, now.

They were the first to arrive. At least, Faile could see no one ahead of them down the street. As they walked through the gates, she retrieved her dagger from the pocket inside her sleeve and held it with the blade pressed against her wrist, pointing up her arm.

The other women made similar motions, if not so deftly. Without Bain and Chiad, and hoping that Rolan and his friends were otherwise occupied, they had to provide their own protection. Malden was not as dangerous for a woman—for a *gai’shain* woman; Shaido who tried to prey on their own got short shrift—not as dangerous as the Shaido portion of the camp, yet women had been assaulted there, sometimes by groups of men. The Light send if they were accosted, it was only by one or two. One or two they might catch by surprise and kill before they realized these *gai’shain* had teeth. If there were more than two, they would do what they could, but an

Aiel weaver or potter was as dangerous as most trained armsmen. Baskets or no baskets, they walked on their toes, heads swiveling, ready to spring in any direction.

This part of the town had not been burned, yet it had a look of desolation. Broken dishes and pottery crunched beneath their soft white boots. Bits of clothing, cut off men and women made *gai'shain*, still littered the gray paving stones. Those sorry, bedraggled rags had lain first in the snow and then in the rain for well over a month, and she doubted any ragpicker would have gathered them, now. Here and there lay children's toys, a wooden horse or a doll whose paint was beginning to flake, dropped by the very young who had been allowed to flee, like the very old, the ill and infirm. Slate-roofed buildings of wood or stone along the street showed gaping holes where their doors and windows had been. Along with anything the Shaido considered valuable or useful, the town had been stripped of every easily removable piece of wood, and only the fact that tearing down houses was less efficient than cutting firewood in the surrounding forests had spared the wooden structures themselves. Those openings minded Faile of eye sockets in skulls. She had walked along this street countless times, yet this morning, they seemed to be watching her. They made her scalp crawl.

Halfway across the town, she looked back toward the gates, no more than a hundred and fifty paces behind. The street was still empty for the moment, but soon the first white-clad men and women would materialize with their water buckets. Fetching water was a task that began early and lasted all day. They had to hurry, now. Turning down a narrower side street, she started to walk faster, although she had trouble keeping her basket balanced. The others must have been having the same difficulty, yet no one complained. They had to be out of sight before those *gai'shain* appeared. There was no reason for any *gai'shain* entering the town to leave the main street until they reached the cistern below the fortress. An attempt to curry favor or just a careless word could send Shaido into the town hunting for them, and there was only one way out, short of climbing onto the walls and dropping ten paces to the ground hoping that no one broke a leg.

At a now signless inn, three stories of stone and empty windows, she darted into the common room followed by the others. Lacile set down her basket and pressed herself against the doorframe to keep watch up the street. The beam-ceilinged room was bare to the dusty floorboards, and the stone fireplaces were missing their andirons and firetools. The railing had been stripped from the staircase at the back of the room, and the door to the kitchen was gone, too. The kitchen was just as empty. She had checked. Pots and knives and spoons were useful. Faile lowered her basket to the floor and hurried to the side of the staircase. It was a sturdy piece of work, of heavy timbers and made to last for generations. Tearing it down would have been nearly as hard as tearing down a house. She felt underneath, along the top of the wide outer support, and her hand closed on the wrist-thick, not quite glassy rod. It had seemed as good a hiding place as she could find, a place no one would have any reason to look, but she was surprised to find she had been holding her breath.

Lacile remained by the doorway, but the others hurried to Faile without their baskets.

“At last,” Alliandre said, gingerly touching the rod with her fingertips. “The price of our freedom. What is it?”

“An *angreal*,” Faile said, “or perhaps a *ter’angreal*. I don’t know for certain, except that Galina wants it very badly, so it must be one or the other.”

Maighdin put her hand on the rod boldly. “It could be either,” she murmured. “They often have an odd feel. So I’ve been told, anyway.” She claimed never to have been to the White Tower, but Faile was not so sure as she once had been. Maighdin could channel, but so weakly and with so much difficulty that the Wise Ones saw no danger in letting her walk free. Well, as free as any *gai’shain* was. Her denials might well be a matter of shame. Faile had heard that women who had been put out of the Tower because they could not become Aes Sedai sometimes denied ever having gone in order to hide their failure.

Arrela gave a shake of her head and backed away a step. She was Tairen, and despite traveling with Aes Sedai, she was still uncomfortable over the Power or anything to do with it. She looked at the smooth white rod as if at a red adder and licked her lips. “Galina might be waiting on us. She might get angry if we make her wait long.”

“Is the way still clear, Lacile?” Faile asked as she stuck the rod far down into her basket. Arrela exhaled heavily, clearly as relieved at having the thing out of her sight as she had been to see Faile earlier.

“Yes,” the Cairhienin replied, “but I do not understand why.” She still stood so that one eye could peek around the corner of the doorframe. “The first *gai'shain* should be coming for water by now."

"Maybe something has happened in the camp," Maighdin said. Suddenly, her face was grim and her knife was in her hand, a wooden-handled affair with a chipped and pitted blade.

Faile nodded slowly. Maybe something such as Dairaine having been found already. She could not tell where Faile and the others had been going, but she might have recognized some among the waiting *gai'shain*. How long would they hold out if put to the question? How long would Alvon hold out if Theril were? "There's nothing we can do about it, in any case. Galina will get us out."

Even so, when they left the inn, they ran, carrying the baskets in front of them and trying to hold up their long robes so they did not trip. Faile was not the only one to look over her shoulder frequently and stumble. She was not sure whether or not she was relieved to finally see *gai'shain* carrying buckets on yokes drift across the crossing of the town's main street. She certainly did not slow down.

They did not have far to run. In moments, the smell of charred wood that had faded from the rest of Malden began to grow. The southern end of Malden was a ruin. They halted at the edge of the devastation and edged around a corner so they would not be seen by anyone glancing down the street. From where they stood to the southern wall, near two hundred paces, marched roofless shells with blackened stone walls interspersed with piles of charred beams washed clean of ash by the rains. In places, not even the heaviest timbers remained. Only on the south side of this street were there any structures even close to whole. This was where the fire that raged after the Shaido took the city had been finally stopped. Half a dozen buildings stood without roofs, though the lower floors looked intact, and twice as many were leaning piles of black timbers and half-burned boards that appeared on the edge of collapse.

"There," Maighdin said, pointing east along the street. A long length of red cloth fluttered in the breeze where she pointed. It was tied to a house that seemed ready to fall in. Walking to it slowly, they rested their baskets on the paving stones. The red cloth fluttered again.

"Why would she want to meet us *here*?" Alliandre muttered. "That could cave in if anybody sneezed." She rubbed at her nose as though the word had given her the urge.

“It is quite sound. I inspected it.” Galina’s voice behind them jerked Faile’s head around. The woman was striding toward them, plainly from one of the sound buildings on the north side of the street. After so long seeing her in that belt and collar of gold and firedrops, she looked odd without them. She still wore her white silk robes, but the absence of the jewelry was convincing. Galina had not somehow managed to turn truth on its head. She was leaving today.

“Why not in one of the sound buildings?” Faile demanded. “Or right here?”

“Because I don’t want anyone to see it in my hands,” Galina said, walking past her. “Because no one will look inside that ruin. Because I say so.” She stepped through what had been a doorway, ducking under a heavy, charred roof beam that slanted across the opening, and immediately turned to her right and began descending stairs. “Don’t dawdle.”

Faile exchanged looks with the other women. This was more than passing strange.

“If she’ll get us out of here,” Alliandre growled, snatching up her basket, “I’m willing to hand her the thing in a privy.” Still, she waited on Faile to pick up her own basket and lead the way.

Charred timbers and blackened boards hung low over the stone stairs that led downward, but Galina’s ease at entering reassured Faile. The woman would not risk being buried alive or crushed at the very moment she finally gained the rod. Bars and beams of light filtering through gaps in the wreckage gave enough illumination to show that the basement was quite clear despite the treacherous nature of what lay above. Large barrels stacked along one stone wall, most scorched and with staves sprung from the heat, said this had been an inn or a tavern. Or perhaps a wine merchant’s shop. The area around Malden had produced a great deal of mediocre wine.

Galina stood in the middle of the grit-covered stone floor, in a small beam of light. Her face was all Aes Sedai calm, her agitation of the previous day completely subdued. “Where is it?” she said coolly. “Give it to me.”

Faile set her basket down and shoved her hand deep inside. When she brought out the white rod, Galina’s hands twitched. Faile extended the rod toward her, and she reached for it almost hesitantly. If she had not known better, Faile would have said she was afraid to touch it. Galina’s fingers closed around the rod, and she exhaled heavily. She jerked the rod away before Faile could release it. The Aes Sedai seemed to be trembling, but her smile was . . . triumphant.

"How do you intend to get us away from the camp?" Faile asked. "Should we change our clothes now?"

Galina opened her mouth, then suddenly raised her free hand, palm out. Her head tilted toward the stairs as if listening. "It may be nothing," she said softly, "but it's best if I check. Wait here and be quiet. Be quiet," she hissed when Faile started to speak. Lifting the hem of her silk robes, the Aes Sedai scurried to the stairs and started up like a woman uneasy about what she might find at the top. Her feet passed out of sight behind the sagging boards and beams.

"Did any of you hear anything?" Faile whispered. They all shook their heads. "Maybe she's holding the Power. I've heard that can—"

"She wasn't," Maighdin interrupted. "I've never seen her embracing —"

Suddenly, wood groaned overhead, and with a thunderous crash charred beams and boards collapsed, sending out blinding billows of black dust and grit that sent Faile into paroxysms of coughing. The smell of charring suddenly was as thick in the air as it had been the day Malden burned. Something falling from above hit her shoulder hard, and she crouched, trying to protect her head. Someone cried out. She heard other falling objects hit the basement's stone floor, boards or pieces of boards. Nothing made a loud enough noise to be a roof beam or a heavy joist.

Eventually—it seemed like hours; it might have been minutes—the rain of debris stopped. The dust began to thin. Quickly she looked around for her companions, and found them all huddling on the floor with their arms around their heads. There seemed to be more light than before. A little more. Some of the gaps overhead were wider, now. A trickle of blood ran down Alliandre's face from her scalp. Everyone was dusted with black from head to foot.

"Is anyone injured?" Faile asked, finishing with a cough. The dust had not cleared completely, and her throat and tongue felt coated with it. The stuff tasted like charcoal.

"No," Alliandre said, touching her scalp gingerly. "A scrape, that's all." The others denied injury as well, though Arrela seemed to be moving her right arm carefully. No doubt they had all suffered bruises, and Faile thought her left shoulder was going to be black and blue shortly, but she would not count that a real injury.

Then her eyes fell on the stairs, and she wanted to weep. Wreckage from above filled the whole space where the staircase had been. They might have been able to squeeze through some of the gaps overhead. Faile thought she could reach them standing on Arrela's shoulders, but she doubted she could pull herself through with one good arm. Or that Arrela could. And if either managed, she would be in the middle of a burned-out ruin and likely as not to make the rest of the thing fall in, too.

"No!" Alliandre moaned. "Not now! Not when we were so close!" Rising, she rushed as near to the rubble as she could get, almost pressing against it, and began to shout. "Galina! Help us! We're trapped! Channel and lift the boards away! Clear a path for us to get out! Galina! Galina! Galina!" She sagged against the tangle of timbers, shoulders shaking. "Galina," she wept. "Galina, help us."

"Galina's gone," Faile said bitterly. The woman would have answered if she was still above or had any intention of aiding them. "With us trapped down here, maybe dead, she has the perfect excuse for leaving us behind. Anyway, I don't know whether an Aes Sedai could move some of those timbers if she tried." She did not want to mention the possibility that Galina had arranged that excuse herself. Light, she should never have slapped the woman. It was too late for self-recrimination, though.

"What are we going to do now?" Arrela asked.

"Dig ourselves out," Faile and Maighdin said at the same instant. Faile looked at the other woman in surprise. Her maid's dirty face wore a queen's resolve.

"Yes," Alliandre said, straightening. She turned around, and if runnels of tear-tracks marked the dust on her face, no new tears appeared. She really was a queen, and could not like being shamed by the courage of a lady's maid. "We'll dig ourselves out. And if we fail. . . . If we fail, I will not die wearing *this*!" Unfastening her golden belt, she flung it contemptuously into a corner of the basement. Her golden collar followed.

"We'll need those to make our way through the Shaido camp," Faile said gently. "Galina may not be taking us out, but I intend leaving today." Dairaine made that imperative. Bain and Chiad could not keep her hidden long. "Or as soon we can dig out, anyway. We'll pretend we've been sent to pick berries." She did not want to step on her liege-woman's bold gesture, though. “However, we don’t need to wear them now.” Removing her belt and collar, she righted her basket and set them atop the dirty *gai’shain* robes. The others emulated her. Alliandre retrieved her own belt and collar with a rueful laugh. At least she could laugh again. Faile wished she could.

The jumble of charred timbers and half-burned boards filling the staircase resembled one of those blacksmith’s puzzles her Perrin enjoyed. Almost everything seemed to be propping up something else. Worse, the heavier timbers might be beyond all of them working together. But if they could clear enough for them to be able to crawl through, writhing between the thick beams. . . . It would be dangerous, that crawl. But when a dangerous path was your only route to safety, you had to take it.

A few boards came away easily and were piled at the back of the basement, but after that everything had to be chosen with care, examined to see whether anything would fall if it were removed, hands feeling back as far as they could go into the tangle, groping for nails that might have caught, trying not to think about the whole pile shifting and trapping an arm, crushing it. Only then could they begin pulling, sometimes two of them together, tugging harder and harder until the piece suddenly gave. That work went slowly, with the great pile occasionally groaning, or shifting slightly. Everyone darted back, holding their breath, when that happened. Nobody moved again until they were sure the snarl of timbers was not going to collapse. The work became the focus of their world. Once, Faile thought she heard wolves howling. Wolves generally made her think of Perrin, but not this time. The work was all.

Then Alliandre wrenched a charred board free, and with a great groan, the mass began to shift. Toward them. Everyone ran toward the back of the basement as the pile fell in with a deafening rumble, sending up more billows of dust.

When they stopped coughing and could see again, dimly, with dust still hanging in the air, perhaps a quarter of the basement was filled. All of their work undone, and worse, the jumble was leaning toward them precariously. Groaning, it sagged a little more toward them and stopped. Everything about it said the first board pulled free would bring the whole mass down on their heads. Arrela began to cry softly. Tantalizing gaps admitted sunlight and allowed them to see the street, the sky, but nothing anyone could wriggle through, even Lacile. Faile could see the red scarf Galina had used to mark the building. It fluttered for a moment in the breeze.

Staring at the scarf, she seized Maighdin's shoulder. "I want you to try to make that scarf do something the wind wouldn't make it do."

"You want to attract attention?" Alliandre said hoarsely. "It's far more likely to be Shaido than anyone else."

"Better that than dying down here of thirst," Faile replied, her voice harsher than she wanted. She would never see Perrin again, then. If Sevanna had her chained, she would at least be alive for him to rescue. He would rescue her; she knew it. Her duty now was to keep the women who followed her alive. And if that meant captivity, so be it. "Maighdin?"

"I might spend all day trying to embrace the Source and never succeed," the sun-haired woman said in dull tones. She stood slumped, staring at nothing. Her face suggested that she saw an abyss beneath her feet. "And if I do embrace it, I can almost never weave anything."

Faile loosened her grip on Maighdin and smoothed her hair instead. "I know it's difficult," she said soothingly. "Well, in truth, I don't know. I've never done it. But you have. And you can do it again. Our lives depend on you, Maighdin. I know the strength that's in you. I've seen it time and again. There is no surrender in you. I know you can do it, and so do you."

Slowly, Maighdin's back straightened, and despair slid off her face. She might still see the abyss, but if she fell, she would fall without flinching. "I'll try," she said.

For a long while she stared up at the scarf, then shook her head dejectedly. "The Source is there, like the sun just beyond the edge of sight," she whispered, "but every time I try to embrace it, it's like trying to catch smoke with my fingers."

Faile hastily pulled the *gai'shain* robes from her basket and another, careless of the gold belts and collars falling to the stone floor. "Sit down," she said, arranging the robes in a pile. "Make yourself comfortable. I know you can do it, Maighdin." Pressing the other woman down, she folded her legs and sat beside her.

"You can do it," Alliandre said softly, sitting down on Maighdin's other side.

"Yes, you can," Lacile whispered, joining them.

"I know you can," Arrela said as she lowered herself to the floor.

Time passed, with Maighdin staring at the scarf. Faile whispered encouragement and held on to hope hard. Suddenly the scarf went rigid, as if something had pulled it taut. A wondrous smile appeared on Maighdin's face as the scarf began to swing back and forth like a pendulum. Six, seven, eight times it swung. Then it fluttered in the breeze and fell limp.

“That was marvelous,” Faile said.

“Marvelous,” Alliandre said. “You’re going to save us, Maighdin.”

“Yes,” Arrela murmured, “you’re going to save us, Maighdin.”

There were many kinds of battle. Sitting on the floor, whispering encouragement, Maighdin fighting to find what she could seldom find, they fought for their lives while the scarf swung, then fell to the breeze, swung and fell limp. But they fought on.

Galina kept her head down and tried not to hurry as she made her way out of Malden, past the streams of white-clad men and women carrying empty buckets into the town and full buckets back out. She did not want to attract attention, not without that cursed belt and necklace. She had donned the things when she dressed in the night, while Therava was still asleep, but it had been such a pleasure to remove them and hide them with the clothes and other things she had secreted away for her escape that she could not resist. Besides, Therava would have been angered to wake and find her missing. She would have ordered a watch for her “little Lina,” and everyone marked her by those jewels. Well, they would pay to help her return to the Tower, now, return to her rightful place. That arrogant Faile and the other fools were dead or as good as, and she was free. She stroked the rod, hidden in her sleeve, and shivered with delight. Free!

She did hate leaving Therava alive, but if anyone had entered the woman’s tent and found her with a knife through her heart, Galina would have been the first suspect. Besides. . . . Images rose in her head, of her bending stealthily over the sleeping Therava, the woman’s own belt knife in hand, of Therava’s eyes snapping open, meeting hers in the darkness, of her screaming, of her hand opening nervelessly to drop the knife, of her begging, of Therava. . . . No. No! It would not have been that way. Certainly not! She had left Therava alive of necessity, not because she was. . . . Not for any other reason.

Suddenly wolves howled, wolves in every direction, a dozen or more. Her feet stopped of their own accord. A motley collection of tents surrounded her, walled tents, peaked tents, low Aiel tents. She had walked right through the *gai’shain* portion of the camp without realizing it. Her eyes rose to the ridge west of Malden, and she flinched. Thick fog curled along the whole length of it, concealing the trees as far as she could see in either direction. The town walls hid the ridge to the east, yet she was sure there would be thick fog there, too. The man had come! The Great Lord preserve her, she had been just in time. Well, he would not find his fool wife even if he managed to survive whatever he was about to try, nor would he find Galina Casban.

Thanking the Great Lord that Therava had not forbidden her to ride—the woman had much preferred dangling the possibility that she might be allowed, if she groveled sufficiently—Galina hurried toward her hidden stores. Let the fools who wanted to die here, die. She was free. Free!

* * *

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CHAPTER 29

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The Last Knot

Perrin stood just below the ridgetop, near the edge of the fog, and studied the encampment and stone-walled town below. Two hundred paces of fairly steep slope sparsely dotted with low brush down to level ground, perhaps seven hundred more of cleared ground to the first tents, then better than a mile to the town. It seemed so close, now. He did not use his looking glass. A glint off the lens from the sun just peeking over the horizon, a fingernail edge of golden-red, might ruin everything. The grayness around him curled but did not really move with the breeze, even when it gusted and made his cloak stir. The dense mist on the far ridge, obscuring the windmill there, seemed too still as well, if you studied it a while. How long before someone among those tents noticed? There was nothing to be done for it. The fog felt like any fog, damp and a little cool, but somehow Neald had fixed these mists in place before he went off to his other tasks. The sun would not burn them off even at noonday, or so the Asha'man claimed. Everything would be done by noon, one way or another, but Perrin hoped the man was right. The sky was clear, and the day looked to be warm for early spring.

Only a few Shaido seemed to be outside in the camp, relatively speaking, but thousands of white-clad figures bustled about among the tents. Tens of thousands. His eyes ached to find Faile among them, his heart ached to see her, but he could as well try to pick out one particular pin from a barley-basket of them spilled on the ground. Instead, he stared at the town's gates, standing wide open as they had every time he had gazed on them. Invitingly wide. They called to him. Soon, Faile and her companions would know it was time to head for those gates, and the towered fortress that bulked at the north end of the town. She might be at chores, if the Maidens were right about how the prisoners would be treated as *gai'shain*, but she would know to slip away and go to the fortress. She and her friends, and likely Alyse as well. Whatever her scheme with the Shaido, the Aes Sedai would not want to remain on a battleground. A second sister in the fortress might come in handy. The Light send it did not come to that.

He had planned with care for every eventuality he could imagine down to outright disaster, yet this was no blacksmith's puzzle however much he wished it were. The twisted iron pieces of a blacksmith's puzzle moved only in certain ways. Move them in the right way, and the puzzle came apart. People could move in a thousand ways, sometimes in directions you never believed possible till it happened. Would his plans stand up when the Shaido did something unexpected? They would do it, almost certainly, and all he could do in return was hope it would not lead to that disaster. With a last, longing look at Malden's gates, he turned and walked back up the ridge.

Inside the fog, even he could not see ten paces, but he soon found Dannil Lewin among the trees on the ridgetop. Lean to the point of skinny, with a pickaxe for a nose and thick mustaches in the Taraboner style, Dannil stood out even when you could not see his face clearly. Other Two Rivers men were shapes beyond him, growing dimmer and dimmer with distance. Most were squatting or sitting on the ground, resting while they had the chance. Jori Congar was trying to entice some of the others into a game of dice, but he was quiet about it, so Perrin let it pass. No one was accepting the offer anyway. Jori was uncommon lucky with his dice.

Dannil made a leg when he saw Perrin and murmured, "My Lord." The man had been spending too much time with Faile's people. He called it acquiring polish, whatever that was supposed to mean. A man was not a piece of brass.

"Make sure nobody does anything woolhead foolish like I just did, Dannil. Sharp eyes below might spot movement near the edge of the fog and send men to investigate."

Dannil coughed discreetly into his hand. Light, he was getting as bad as any of those Cairhienin and Tairens. "As you say, my Lord. I'll keep everybody back."

"My Lord?" Balwer's dry voice said out of the mist. "Ah, there you are, my Lord." The little stick of a man appeared, followed by two larger shapes, though one was not much taller. They halted at a gesture from him, indistinct forms in the fog, and he came on alone. "Masema has put in an appearance below, my Lord," he said quietly, folding his hands. "I thought it best to keep Haviar and Nerion out of his sight, and his men's, under the circumstances. I don't believe he is suspicious of them. I think he has anyone he is suspicious of killed. But out of sight, out of mind is best."

Perrin's jaw tightened. Masema was supposed to be beyond the eastern ridge with his army, if it could be called that. He had counted those men—and a few women—as they shuffled uneasily through gateways made by the two Asha'man, and they were twenty thousand if they were one. Masema had always been vague about their numbers, and Perrin had not had an accurate count until last night. Ragged and dirty, only one here or there wore a helmet much less a breastplate, but every hand had gripped sword or spear or axe, halberd or crossbow, the women included. The women among Masema's followers were worse than the men by far, and that was saying something. For the most part the lot of them were only good for terrorizing people into swearing to follow the Dragon Reborn—the colors whirled in his head and were shattered by his anger—that and murdering them if they refused. They had a better purpose today. "Maybe it's time for Haviar and Nerion to start staying away from Masema's people for good," he said.

"If you wish it, my Lord, but in my judgment, they still are as safe as any man can be doing what they do, and they're eager." Balwer tilted his head, a curious sparrow in a branch. "They haven't been corrupted, if that's what you fear, my Lord. That's always a danger when you send a man to pretend to be what he isn't, but I have a keen nose for the signs."

"Keep them close, Balwer." After today, with luck, there might not be much of Masema's army left to spy on in any case. There might not even be a Masema to worry about.

Perrin scrambled down the brushy reverse slope, past where the Mayener and Ghealdanin lancers were waiting beside their horses in the thick mist, streamered lances propped on their shoulders or steel heads driven into the ground. The Winged Guards' red-painted helmets and breastplates might have been safe enough on the ridgetop, but not the Ghealdanin's burnished armor, and since Gallenne and Arganda both bristled if one was favored over the other, both waited here. The fog extended quite some distance—Neald claimed that was intentional, but the man had smelled surprised, and pleased, when he realized what he had done—so Perrin was still walking through grayness when he reached the bottom of the ridge, where all of the high-wheeled carts stood in a line with horses hitched. The dim figures of the Cairhienin cart drivers moved about them, checking harness, tightening the ropes that held the canvas covers on.

Masema was waiting, and Perrin wanted nothing so much as to chew off the man's arm, but he spotted the stout shape of Basel Gill beside one of the carts and headed that way. Lini was with him, wrapped in a dark cloak, and Breane with her arm around the waist of Lamgwin, Perrin's hulking manservant. Master Gill snatched off his brimmed hat to reveal thin graying hair combed back over a bald spot that it failed to cover. Lini sniffed and pointedly avoided looking at Perrin while pretending to adjust her cowl. She smelled of anger and fear. Master Gill just smelled of fear.

"It's time for you to start north, Master Gill," Perrin said. "When you reach the mountains, follow them until you strike the Jehannah Road. With luck, we'll catch you up before you reach the mountains, but if not, send Alliandre's servants off to Jehannah, then you head east through the pass, then north again. We'll be as close behind you as we can." If his plan did not go too far awry. Light, he was a blacksmith, not a soldier. But even Tylee had finally agreed it was a good plan.

"I will not leave this spot until I know that Maighdin is safe," Lini told the fog, her thin voice a reed of iron. "And the Lady Faile, of course."

Master Gill rubbed a hand back over his head. "My Lord, Lamgwin and I were thinking maybe we could help out. The Lady Faile means a great deal to us, and Maighdin . . . Maighdin is one of our own. I know one end of a sword from the other, and so does Lamgwin." He was wearing one belted around his bulk, yet if he had handled a sword these past twenty years, Perrin would eat the whole great length of that belt. Breane's grip on Lamgwin tightened, but the big man patted her shoulder and rested his other hand on the hilt of a shortsword. The fog obscured his scarred face and sunken knuckles. He was a tavern brawler, though a good man even so, but never a swordsman.

"You're my *shambayan*, Master Gill," Perrin said firmly. "It's your duty to get the cart drivers and grooms and servants to safety. Yours and Lamgwin's. Now go on with you and see to it." The stout man nodded reluctantly. Breane breathed a small sigh of relief when Lamgwin knuckled his forehead in acquiescence. Perrin doubted that the man could have heard the sigh, though Lamgwin put his arm around her and murmured comforting words.

Lini was not so compliant. Back stiff as a rod, she addressed the fog again. "I will not leave this spot until I know—"

Perrin slapped his hands together with a loud crack, startling her into looking at him in surprise. "All you can do here is catch the ague from standing in the damp. That and die, if the Shaido manage to break through. I'll bring Faile out. I'll bring Maighdin and the others out." He would, or die himself in the attempt. There was no point saying that, though, and reason not to. They had to believe in their bones that he would be following with Faile and the rest. "And you are going north, Lini. Faile will be upset with me if I let anything happen to you. Master Gill, you make sure she rides with you if you have to tie her up and put her in the back of a cart."

Master Gill jerked, crumpling his hat between his hands. He smelled of alarm, suddenly, and Lini of pure indignation. Amusement filled Lamgwin's scent, and he rubbed at his nose as though concealing a smile, but strangely, Breane was indignant, too. Well, he had never claimed to understand women. If he could not understand the woman he was married to, which he could not half the time, then it was unlikely he ever would understand the rest of them.

In the end, Lini actually climbed up beside the driver of a cart without having to be forced, though she slapped away Master Gill's hand when he tried to assist her, and the line of carts began to trundle off northward though the fog. Behind one of the carts, laden with the Wise Ones' tents and possessions, marched a cluster of white-clad *gai'shain*, meek even now, men and women with their cowls up and their eyes lowered. They were Shaido, taken at Cairhien, and in a few months they would put off white and return to their clan. Perrin had had them watched, discreetly, despite the Wise Ones' assurances that they would adhere to *ji'e'toh* in this regard whatever others they abandoned, yet it appeared the Wise Ones were right. They still numbered seventeen. None had tried to run off and warn the Shaido beyond the ridge. The carts' axles had been greased liberally, but they still creaked and squealed to his ears. With luck, he and Faile *would* catch up to them shy of the mountains.

As the strings of spare horses began to pass him, on long leads held by mounted grooms, a Maiden appeared in the mist coming down the line of carts. Slowly she resolved into Sulin, *shoufa* around her neck to bare her short white hair and black veil hanging down onto her chest. A fresh slash across her left cheek would add another scar to her face unless she accepted Healing from one of the sisters. She might not. Maidens seemed to have odd attitudes about Wise Ones' apprentices, or maybe it was just that these apprentices were Aes Sedai. They even saw Annoura as an apprentice, though she was not.

"The Shaido sentries to the north are dead, Perrin Aybara," she said. "And the men who were going out to replace them. They danced well, for Shaido."

"You took casualties?" he asked quietly.

“Elienda and Briain woke from the dream.” She might have been speaking of the weather rather than two deaths among women she knew. “We all must wake eventually. We had to carry Aviellin the last two miles. She will need Healing.” So. She would accept it.

“I’ll send one of the Aes Sedai with you,” he said, looking around in the fog. Aside from the line of horses passing him, he could see nothing. “As soon as I can find one.”

They found him almost as he spoke, Annoura and Masuri striding out of the fog leading their horses with Berelain and Masema, his shaven head glistening damply. Even in the mist, there was no mistaking the rumpled nature of the man’s brown coat, or the crude darn on the shoulder. None of the gold his followers looted stuck to his hands. It all went to the poor. That was the only good that could be said of Masema. But then, a fair number of the poor that gold went to feed had been made poor by having their possessions stolen and their shops or farms burned by Masema’s people. For some reason, Berelain was wearing the coronet of the First of Mayene this morning, the golden hawk in flight above her brow, though her riding dress and cloak were plain dark gray. Beneath her light, flowery perfume, her scent was patience and anxiety, as odd a combination as Perrin had ever smelled. The six Wise Ones were with them, too, dark shawls draped over their arms, folded kerchiefs around their temples holding back their long hair. With all their necklaces and bracelets of gold and ivory, they made Berelain appear simply dressed for once. Aram was one of their number as well, the wolfhead pommel of his sword rising above one red-striped shoulder, and the fog could not hide the absence of his habitual glower. The man gravitated toward Masema and seemed almost to bask in some light that Masema gave off. Perrin wondered whether he should have sent Aram with the carts. But if he had, he was sure Aram would have leaped off and sneaked back as soon as he was out of Perrin’s sight.

He explained Aviellin’s need to the two Aes Sedai, but to his surprise, when Masuri said she would come, fair-haired Edarra raised a hand that stopped the slim Brown in her tracks. Annoura shifted uncomfortably. She was no apprentice, and uneasy over Seonid and Masuri’s relationship with the Wise Ones. They tried to include her in it, and sometimes succeeded.

“Janina will see to it,” Edarra said. “She has more skill than you, Masuri Sokawa.”

Masuri’s mouth tightened, but she kept silent. The Wise Ones were quite capable of switching an apprentice for speaking up at the wrong time, even if she did happen to be an Aes Sedai. Sulin led Janina, a flaxen-haired woman who never seemed to be ruffled by anything, off into the fog, Janina striding as quickly as Sulin despite her bulky skirts. So the Wise Ones had learned Healing, had they? That might be useful later in the day; the Light send it was not needed often.

Watching the pair disappear into the murk, Masema grunted. The thick mist hid the ever-burning intensity of his deep-set eyes and obscured the triangular white scar on his cheek, but his scent was full in Perrin’s nose, hard and sharp as a freshly stropped razor yet twitching in a frenzy. That smell of madness sometimes made him think his nose must bleed from breathing it.

“Bad enough you use these blasphemous women who do what only the Lord Dragon, blessed be his name, may do,” Masema said, his voice full of the heat that the fog concealed in his eyes.

The colors spinning in Perrin’s head turned into a brief image of Rand and Min and a tall man in a black coat, an Asha’man, and he felt a shock right down to his boots. Rand’s left hand was gone! No matter. Whatever had happened, had happened. And today his business lay elsewhere.

“. . . but if they know Healing,” Masema continued, “it will be that much harder to kill the savages. A pity you won’t let the Seanchan leash all of them.”

His sidelong glance at Annoura and Masuri said he included them, despite the fact both had visited him in secret more than once. They regarded him with Aes Sedai calm, though Masuri’s slim hands moved once as if to smooth her brown skirts. She said she had changed her mind and now believed the man must be killed, so why was she meeting him? Why was Annoura? Why did Masema allow them? He more than hated Aes Sedai. Perhaps answers could be found now that Haviar and Nerion no longer needed protection.

Behind Masema, the Wise Ones stirred. Fire-haired Carelle, who looked as if she possessed a temper though she did not, actually stroked the hilt of her belt knife, and Nevarin, who could have given Nynaeve lessons in getting angry, gripped hers. Masema should have felt those eyes boring into his back, but his scent never shifted. Insane he might be, but never a coward.

“You wanted to speak to Lord Perrin, my Lord Prophet,” Berelain said gently, though Perrin could smell the strain of her smile.

Masema stared at her. “I am simply the Prophet of the Lord Dragon, not a lord. The Lord Dragon is the only lord, now. His coming has shattered all bonds and destroyed all titles. King and queens, lords and ladies, are but dust beneath his feet.”

Those whirling hues threatened again, but Perrin crushed them. “What are you doing here?” he demanded. There was no way to soften moments with Masema. The man was as hard as a good file. “You’re supposed to be with your men. You risked being seen by coming here, and you’ll risk it again going back. I don’t trust your people to hold for five minutes without you there to stiffen their spines. They’ll run as soon as they see the Shaido coming their way.”

“They are not my people, Aybara. They are the Lord Dragon’s people.” Light, being around Masema meant having to stomp on those colors every few minutes! “I left Nengar in charge. He has fought more battles than you have dreamed of. Including against the savages. I also gave the women orders to kill any man who tries to run and have let it be known that I will hunt down anyone who escapes the women. They will hold to the last man, Aybara.”

“You sound as if you’re not going back,” Perrin said.

“I intend to stay close to you.” Fog might hide the heat in Masema’s eyes, but Perrin could *feel* it. “A pity if any misfortune should befall you just as you reclaim your wife.”

So a small part of his plan had unraveled already. A hope really, rather than part of the plan. If all else went well, the Shaido who managed to flee would carve a way through Masema’s people without more than slowing a step, but instead of taking a Shaido spear through his ribs, Masema would be . . . keeping an eye on him. Without any doubt, the man’s bodyguard was not far off in the fog, two hundred or so ruffians better armed and better mounted than the rest of his army. Perrin did not look at Berelain, but the scent of her worry had strengthened. Masema had reason to want both of them dead. He would warn Gallenne that his primary task today would be protecting Berelain from Masema’s men. And he would have to watch his own back.

Off in the fog, a brief flash of silver-blue light appeared, and he frowned. It was too early yet for Grady. Two figures coalesced out of the mist. One was Neald, not strutting for once. In fact, he stumbled. His face looked tired. Burn him, why was he wasting his strength this way? The other was a young Seanchan in lacquered armor with a single thin plume on the peculiar helmet he carried beneath his arm. Perrin recognized him, Gueye Arabah, a lieutenant Tylee thought well of. The two Aes Sedai gathered their skirts as if to keep him from brushing against them, though he went nowhere near them. For his part, he missed a step when he came close enough to make out their faces, and Perrin heard him swallow hard. He smelled skittish, of a sudden.

Arabah's bow included Perrin and Berelain, and he frowned slightly at Masema as though wondering what such a ragged fellow was doing in their company. Masema sneered, and the Seanchan's free hand drifted toward his sword hilt before he stopped it. They seemed touchy folk, Seanchan did. But Arabah did not waste time. "Banner-General Khirgan's compliments, my Lord, my Lady First. *Morat'raken* report those bands of Aiel are moving faster than expected. They will arrive some time today, possibly as soon as noon. The group to the west is perhaps twenty-five or thirty thousand, the one to the east larger by a third. About half of them are wearing white, and there will be children, of course, but that is still a lot of spears to have behind you. The Banner-General wishes to know if you would like to discuss altering the deployments. She suggests moving a few thousand of the Altaran lancers to join you."

Perrin grimaced. There would be at least three or four thousand *algai'd'siswai* with each of those bands. A lot of spears to have at his back for certain sure. Neald yawned. "How are you feeling, Neald?"

"Oh, I'm ready to do whatever needs doing, I am, my Lord," the man said with just a hint of his usual jauntiness.

Perrin shook his head. The Asha'man could not be asked to make one gateway more than necessary. He prayed that they would not fall one short. "By noon, we'll be done here. Tell the Banner-General we go ahead as planned." And pray that nothing else went amiss. He did not add that aloud, though.

Out in the fog, wolves howled, an eerie cry that rose all around Malden. It was truly begun, now.

"You're doing wonderfully, Maighdin," Faile croaked. She felt light-headed, and her throat was dry from encouraging the woman. Everyone's throat was dry. By the slant of the light coming through the gaps overhead, it was near midmorning, and they had been talking without cease for most of that. They had tried tapping the unbroken barrels, but the wine inside was too rancid even for wetting lips. Now they were taking turns with the encouragement. She was sitting alongside her sun-haired maid while the others rested against the back wall, as far from that leaning jumble of boards and timbers as they could get. "You're going to save us, Maighdin."

Above them, the red scarf was just visible through that narrow gap in the tangle. It had hung limply for some time, now, except when the breeze caught it. Maighdin stared at it fixedly. Her dirty face glistened with sweat, and she breathed as if she had been running hard. Suddenly the scarf went taut and began to swing, once, twice, three times. Then the breeze sent it fluttering, and it fell. Maighdin continued to stare.

"That was beautiful," Faile said hoarsely. The other woman was getting tired. More time was passing between each success, and the successes were lasting a shorter time. "It was—"

Abruptly a face appeared beside the scarf, one hand gripping the length of red. For a moment, she thought she must be imagining it. Aravine's face framed by her white cowl.

"I see her!" the woman said excitedly. "I see the Lady Faile and Maighdin! They're alive!" Voices raised a cheer, quickly stilled.

Maighdin swayed as if she might fall over, but a beautiful smile wreathed her face. Faile heard weeping behind her, and wanted to weep with joy herself. Friends had found them, not Shaido. They might escape yet.

Pushing herself to her feet, she moved closer to the leaning pile of charred rubble. She tried to work moisture into her mouth, but it was thick. "We're all alive," she managed in husky voice. "How in the Light did *you* find us?"

"It was Theril, my Lady," Aravine replied. "The scamp followed you despite your orders, and the Light bless him for it. He saw Galina leave, and the building fall in, and he thought you were dead. He sat down and cried." A voice protested in rough Amadician accents, and Aravine turned her head for a moment. "I know someone who's been crying when I see him, boy. You just be thankful you stopped to cry. When he saw the scarf move, my Lady, he came running for help."

"You tell him there's no shame in tears," Faile said. "Tell him I've seen my husband cry when tears were called for."

"My Lady," Aravine said hesitantly, "he said Galina pulled on a timber when she came out. It was set like a lever, he said. He said she made the building collapse."

"Why would she do that?" Alliandre demanded. She had helped Maighdin to her feet and half supported her to reach Faile's side. Lacile and Arrela joined them, alternating between tears and laughter. Alliandre's face was a thunderhead.

Faile grimaced. How often in the last few hours had she wished she had that slap back? Galina had *promised*! Could the woman be Black Ajah? "That doesn't matter now. One way or another, I'll see her repaid." How was another matter. Galina *was* Aes Sedai, after all. "Aravine, how many people did you bring? Can you—?"

Large hands took Aravine by the shoulders and moved her aside. "Enough talk." Rolan's face appeared in the gap, *shoufa* around his neck and veil hanging onto his chest. Rolan! "We cannot clear anything with you standing there, Faile Bashere. This thing may fall in when we start. Go to the other end and huddle against the far wall."

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

The man chuckled. He chuckled! "You still wear white, woman. Do as you are told, or when I have you out of there, I will smack your bottom soundly. And then maybe we will soothe your tears with a kissing game."

She showed him her teeth, hoping he did not take it for a grin. But he was right about them needing to move away, so she led her companions across the board-strewn stone floor to the far end of the basement where they crouched against the wall. She could hear voices muttering outside, likely discussing exactly how to go about clearing a path without making the rest of the building collapse on her head.

"All this for nothing," Alliandre said bitterly. "How many Shaido do you suppose are up there?"

Wood scraped loudly, and with a groan, the leaning pile of rubble leaned inward a little more. The voices began again.

"I haven't any idea," Faile told her. "But they must all be *Mera'din*, not Shaido." The Shaido did not mingle with the Brotherless. "There might be some hope in that." Surely Rolan would let her go once he learned about Dairaine. Of course, he would. And if he remained stubborn. . . . In that case, she would do whatever was necessary to convince him. Perrin would never have to find out.

Wood scraped on wood again, and once more the heap of burned timbers and boards tilted inward a little further.

The fog hid the sun, but Perrin estimated it must be near midmorning. Grady would be coming soon. He should have been there by now. If the man had grown too tired to make another gateway. . . . No. Grady would come. Soon. But his shoulders were as tight as if he had been working a forge for a full day and longer.

"I tell you, I don't like this one bit," Gallenne muttered. In the thick mist, his red eyepatch was just another shadow. His heavy-chested bay nosed his back, impatient to be moving, and he patted the animal's neck absently. "If Masema really wants to kill the Lady First, I say we finish him now. We outnumber him. We can overwhelm his bodyguard in minutes."

"Fool," Arganda growled, glancing off to his right as if he could see Masema and his men through the curling grayness. Unlike the Mayener, he had put on his silvered helmet with its three fat white plumes. It and his breastplate, worked in gold and silver, glistened with condensation. Fog or no fog, his armor seemed almost to glow. "You think we can kill two hundred men without making a sound? Shouts will be heard the other side of this ridge. You have your ruler where you can surround her with nine hundred men and maybe get her away. Alliandre is still in that bloody town, and surrounded by Shaido."

Gallenne bristled, hand going to his sword hilt, as though he might practice on Arganda before moving on to Masema.

"We're not killing anybody but Shaido today," Perrin said firmly. Gallenne grunted, but he did not try to argue. He stank of discontent, though. Protecting Berelain would keep the Winged Guards out of the fighting.

Off to the left, a bluish flash appeared, dimmed by the thick mist, and the tightness in Perrin's shoulders loosened. Grady appeared in the fog, peering about him. His step picked up when he saw Perrin, but it was unsteady. Another man was with him, leading a tall, dark horse. Perrin smiled for the first time in a long while.

"It's good to see you, Tam," he said.

"Good to see you, too, my Lord." Tam al'Thor was still a blocky man who looked ready to work from sunup to sundown without slacking, but the hair on his head had gone completely gray since Perrin had seen him last, and he had a few more lines on his bluff face. He took in Arganda and Gallenne with a steady gaze. Fancy armor did not impress him.

“How are you holding up, Grady?” Perrin asked.

“I’m holding up, my Lord.” The weathered man’s voice sounded bone weary. Shadowed by the fog as it was, his face still looked older than Tam’s.

“Well, as soon as you’re done here, join Mishima. I want somebody keeping an eye on him. Somebody who makes him too nervous to think they can change what they agreed to.” He would have liked to tell Grady to tie off this gateway. It would make a short path to take Faile back to the Two Rivers. But if things went wrong today, it would make a short path for the Shaido, too.

“Don’t know as I could make a cat nervous right now, my Lord, but I’ll do what I can.”

Frowning, Tam watched Grady vanish into the gray murk. “I could wish I’d had some other way to get here,” he said. “Fellows like him visited the Two Rivers a while back. One called himself Mazrim Taim, a name we’d all heard. A false Dragon. Only now he wears a black coat with fancy embroidery and calls himself the M’Hael. They talked everywhere about teaching men to channel, about this Black Tower.” He freighted the words with sourness. “The Village Councils tried to put a stop to it, and the Women’s Circles, but they ended up taking above forty men and boys with them. Thank the Light some listened to sense, or I think they’d have had ten times that.” His gaze shifted to Perrin. “Taim said Rand sent him. He said Rand is the Dragon Reborn.” There was a touch of questioning in that, perhaps a hope for denial, perhaps a demand to know why Perrin had kept silent.

Those hues whirled in Perrin’s head, but he batted them away and answered by not answering. What was, was. “Nothing to be done about it now, Tam.” According to Grady and Neald, the Black Tower did not just let men go once they signed on.

Sadness entered Tam’s scent, though he let nothing show on his face. He knew the fate of men who could channel. Grady and Neald claimed the male half of the Source was clean, now, but Perrin could not see how that could be. What was, was. You did the job you were given, followed the road you had to follow, and that was that. There was no point complaining about blisters, or rocks underfoot.

Perrin went on. “This is Bertain Gallenne, Lord Captain of the Winged Guards, and Gerard Arganda, First Captain of the Legion of the Wall.” Arganda shrugged uncomfortably. That name carried political weight in Ghealdan, and apparently Alliandre had not felt strong enough to announce that she was reconstituting the Legion. Balwer had a nose for sniffing out secrets, though. This one made sure Arganda would not go wild trying to reach his queen. “Gallenne, Arganda, this is Tam al’Thor. He’s my First Captain. You studied the map, Tam, and my plan?”

“I studied them, my Lord,” Tam said dryly. Of course he would have. “It looks a good plan to me. As good as any till the arrows start flying.”

Arganda put a booted foot in his roan’s stirrup. “So long as he’s *your* First Captain, my Lord, I have no objections.” He had offered plenty earlier. Neither he nor Gallenne had been pleased that Perrin was putting someone over them.

From up the slope came a black-winged mocker’s shrill cry of alarm. Only one. If it had been a real bird, the call would have been repeated.

Perrin scrambled up the slope as fast as he could. Arganda and Gallenne passed him on their mounts, but they divided to ride to their men, disappearing into the thick gray haze. Perrin continued to the top and beyond. Dannil was standing almost at the edge of the fog, peering toward the Shaido encampment. He pointed, but the reason for the alarm was obvious. A large group of *algai’d’siswai* was leaving the tents, maybe four hundred or more. The Shaido sent out raiding parties frequently, but this one was aimed straight at Perrin. They were just walking, but it would not take them long to reach the ridge.

“It’s time to let them see us, Dannil,” he said, unpinning his cloak and draping it over a low bush. He would come back for it later. If he could. It would only get in his way, now. Dannil sketched a bow before hurrying back into the trees as Aram appeared, sword already in hand. He smelled eager. The cloak pin Perrin put into his pocket carefully. Faile had given him that. He did not want to lose it. His fingers found the leather cord he had knotted for every day of her captivity. Pulling it out, he let it fall to the ground without glancing at it. This morning had seen the last knot.

Tucking his thumbs behind the wide belt that supported his hammer and belt knife, he strolled out of the fog. Aram advanced up on his toes, already in one of those sword stances. Perrin just walked. The morning sun, indeed halfway to its noon peak, was in his eyes. He had considered taking the eastern ridge and putting Masema's men here, but it would have meant that much farther to reach the town gates. A foolish reason, yet those gates drew him as a lodestone drew iron filings. He eased his heavy hammer in its loop on his belt, eased his belt knife. That had a blade as long as his hand.

The appearance of two men, apparently walking idly toward them, was enough to halt the Shaido. Well, perhaps not so idly, considering Aram's sword. They would have to be blind to miss the sun glinting off his long blade. They must have been wondering whether they were watching madmen. Halfway down the slope, he stopped.

"Relax," he told Aram. "You're going to tire yourself out that way."

The other man nodded without taking his eyes from the Shaido and planted his feet firmly. His scent was that of a hunter after dangerous quarry and determined to pull it down.

After a moment, half a dozen of the Shaido started toward them, slowly. They had not veiled. Likely they were hoping he and Aram would not be frightened into running. Among the tents, people were pointing at the two fools on the slope.

The sound of running boots and hooves and snorting horses made him look over his shoulder. Arganda's Ghealdanin appeared out of the fog first, in their burnished breastplates and helmets, riding behind a rippling red banner that bore the three six-pointed silver stars of Ghealdan, and then the Winged Guards in their red armor behind the golden hawk on a field of blue of Mayene. Between them, Dannil began arraying the Two Rivers men in three ranks. Every man carried a pair of bristling quivers at his belt and also a bundle of shafts that he stuck point down into the slope before slicing the binding cords. They wore their swords and shortswords, but the halberds and other polearms had been left on the carts this morning. One of them had brought along the red wolfhead banner, but the staff was stuck aslant into the ground behind them. No one could be spared to carry the thing. Dannil carried a bow, too.

Masema and his bodyguard of lancers took position on the Winged Guards' right, their poorly handled horses plunging and rearing. Their armor showed patches of speckled brown where rust had been scraped away instead of properly cleaned. Masema himself was out in front, a sword at his hip but helmetless and without a breastplate. No, he did not lack courage. He was glaring at the Mayeners, where Perrin could just make out Berelain in the middle of that forest of lances. He could not get a clear view of her face, but he imagined it was still frosty. She had objected strenuously to her soldiers being held back from the fighting, and he had needed to be very firm to make her see reason. Light, the woman had half suggested she might *lead* them in a charge!

The Wise Ones and the two Aes Sedai filed down between the Ghealdanin and the Two Rivers men accompanied by the Maidens, each of whom had long strips of red cloth tied around her upper arms and dangling to the wrist. He could not pick out Aviellin, but by their number she must be among them, newly Healed or not. Black veils covered their faces except for their eyes, yet he did not need to see their faces or catch their scents to know they were indignant. The markings were necessary to avoid accidents, but Edarra had had to put her foot down to make them wear the things.

Bracelets of gold and ivory rattled as Edarra adjusted her dark shawl. With smooth sun-dark cheeks that seemed darker because of her pale-yellow hair, she looked little older than Perrin, but her blue eyes held an unshakable calm. He suspected she was far older than she appeared. Those eyes had seen a great deal. “I think it will begin soon, Perrin Aybara,” she said.

Perrin nodded. The gates called to him.

The appearance of near enough two thousand lancers and two hundred-odd bowmen was sufficient to make the Shaido below raise their veils and spread out while more began rushing from the tents to join them in a thick, lengthening line. Pointing fingers along that line, pointing spears, made him look back again.

Tam was on the slope, now, and more Two Rivers men were pouring out of the fog with longbows in hand. Some tried to mingle with the men who had followed Perrin, to reunite with brothers, sons, nephews, friends, but Tam chivvied them away, trotting his black gelding up and down as he arranged them in three ever-expanding ranks to either side of the horsemen. Perrin spotted Hu Barran and his equally lanky brother Tad, the stablemen from the Winespring Inn, and square-faced Bar Dowtry, only a few years older than he himself was, who was making a name for himself as a cabinetmaker, and skinny Thad Torfinn, who seldom left his farm except to come into Emond’s Field. Oren Dautry, lean and tall, stood between Jon Ayellin, who was hulking and bald, and Kev Barstere, who finally had gotten out from under his mother’s thumb if he was here. There were Marwins and al’Dais, al’Seens and Coles, Thanes and al’Caars and Crawes, men from every family he knew, men he did not recognize, from down to Deven Ride or up to Watch Hill or Taren Ferry, all grim-faced and burdened with pairs of bristling quivers and extra sheaves of arrows. And among them stood others, men with coppery skins, men with transparent veils across the lower half of their faces, fair-skinned men who just did not have the look of the Two Rivers. They carried shorter bows, of course—it took a lifetime to learn the Two Rivers longbow—but every face he could make out looked as determined as any Two Rivers man. What in the Light were the outlanders doing here? On and on the streams of running men continued until finally those three long lines held at least three thousand men, maybe four.

Tam walked his horse down the slope to Perrin and sat studying the swelling Shaido ranks below, yet he seemed to hear Perrin's unspoken question. "I asked for volunteers from the Two Rivers men and picked the best bowshots, but those you took in started coming forward in groups. You gave them and their families homes, and they said they were Two Rivers men too, now. Some of those bows won't carry much more than two hundred paces, but the men I chose hit what they aim at."

Below, the Shaido began beating their spears rhythmically against their bull-hide bucklers. RAT-tat-tat-tat! RAT-tat-tat-tat! RAT-tat-tat-tat! The sound rose like thunder. The flow of veiled shapes running out from the tents slowed to a trickle that dwindled further and then ceased. All of the *algai'd'siswai* had been drawn out, it seemed. That was the plan, after all. There must have been twenty thousand of them, near enough, all pounding their bucklers. RAT-tat-tat-tat! RAT-tat-tat-tat! RAT-tat-tat-tat!

"After the Aiel War, I hoped never to hear that again," Tam said loudly, to be heard. That noise could get on a man's nerves. "Will you give the command, Lord Perrin?"

"You do it." Perrin eased his hammer again, his belt knife. His eyes kept going from the Shaido to the town gates, and the dark mass of the fortress inside the town. Faile was in there.

"Soon now we will know," Edarra said. About the tea, she meant. If they had not waited long enough, they were all dead. Her voice was calm, though. Aram shifted, up on his toes again, sword upright before him in both hands.

Perrin could hear Tam calling as he rode along the lines of bowmen. "Longbows, nock! Shortbows, hold till you're close! Longbows, nock!

Shortbows, hold till you’re close! Don’t draw, you fool! You know better! Longbows . . . !”

Below, perhaps a quarter of the Shaido turned and began trotting north, paralleling the ridge, still beating their bucklers. Another quarter began trotting south. They intended to sweep around and catch the men on the slope from either side. Flanking, Tylee called it. A ripple passed through those remaining as they began sticking their spears through the harness holding their bowcases, hanging their bucklers on their belts, unlimbering their bows.

“Very soon,” Edarra murmured.

A fireball larger than a man’s head arched out from the tents toward the ridge, then another, twice the size, and more, streams of them. Sailing high, the first turned down. And exploded with loud roars a hundred paces overhead. In rapid succession, the others began exploding harmlessly, too, but more followed, spheres of flame speeding toward the ridge in a continuous flow. Forked silver lightning stabbed down from a cloudless sky and erupted with booming crashes of thunder and great showers of sparks without ever coming near the ground.

“Perhaps fifteen or twenty Wise Ones escaped the tea,” Edarra said, “otherwise more would have joined in by now. I can see only nine women channeling. The rest must be among the tents.” She disliked the agreement he had with the Seanchan almost as much as the Aes Sedai did, yet her voice was calm. In her book, the Shaido had violated *ji’e’toh* to such a degree that it was questionable whether they could be called Aiel any longer. To her, they were something that had to be cut out of the body of the Aiel, and their Wise Ones were the worst of the sickness for allowing it. Masuri drew her arm back, but Edarra laid a hand on her shoulder. “Not yet, Masuri Sokawa. We will tell you when.” Masuri nodded obediently, though she smelled of impatience.

“Well, I for one feel in danger,” Annoura said firmly, drawing her arm back. Edarra looked at her levelly. After a moment, the Aes Sedai lowered her arm. Her beaded braids clicked together as she twisted her head away from the Wise One’s stare. Her scent was of strong unease. “Perhaps I can wait a little longer,” she muttered.

The fireballs hurtling across the sky continued to explode far above, the lightning jabbed toward the ridge, but the Shaido below were not waiting. With a shout, the main mass began trotting quickly toward the ridge. And singing at the tops of their lungs. Perrin doubted anyone else on the slope could make out more than a roar, but his ears caught words faintly. They were singing in parts.

Wash the spears . . .
. . . while the sun climbs high.
Wash the spears . . .
. . . while the sun falls low.
Wash the spears . . .
. . . who fears to die?
Wash the spears . . .
. . . no one I know!

He shut the sound out, ignoring it while his eyes drifted beyond the onrushing mass of veiled figures to the gates of Malden. Iron filings to a lodestone. The shapes below seemed to have slowed half a step, though he knew they had not. Everything seemed to slow down for him at times like this. How long before they came in range? They had covered little more than half the distance to the ridge.

"Longbows, raise! On my signal!" Tam shouted. "Longbows, raise! On my signal!"

Perrin shook his head. It was too soon. Thousands of bowstrings snapped behind him. Arrows arced over his head. The sky seemed black with them. Seconds later another flight followed, then a third. Fireballs burned swathes through them, but it was still thousands of arrows that fell in a deadly hail onto the Shaido. Of course. He had forgotten to factor in the bowmen's elevation. That gave them a little more distance. Trust Tam to see it right away. Not every arrow struck a man, of course. Many plunged into the ground. Perhaps half struck *algai'd'siswai*, piercing arms or legs, striking bodies. Wounded Shaido hardly slowed, even when they had to struggle up from the ground. They left hundreds lying still, though, and the second flight put down hundreds more, as did the third, with the fourth and fifth already on the way. The Shaido kept coming, leaning forward as if trotting into a driving rain while their Wise Ones' balls of fire and lightnings exploded far overhead. They were no longer singing. Some raised their bows and shot. An arrow grazed Perrin's left arm, but the rest fell short. Not by far, though. Another twenty paces, and—

The sudden sharp sound of Seanchan horns pulled his gaze north and south just in time to see the ground erupt in fountains of fire among the flanking parties. Spears of lightning stabbed into them. The *damane* were being kept back in the trees, for the time, but they did deadly work. Again and again, explosions of fire or lightning hurled men like twigs. Those *algai'd'siswai* could have no idea where the attack was coming from. They began to run toward the trees, toward their killers. Some of the fireballs coming out of the camp began flying toward the forests where the *damane* were, and lightnings jabbed toward the trees, but with as little effect as they had against the ridge. Tylee claimed *damane* were used for all sorts of tasks, but the truth was, they were weapons of war, and they and the *sul'dam* were very good at it.

"Now," Edarra said, and fireballs began raining down on the Shaido below. The Wise Ones and Aes Sedai made throwing motions with both arms as fast as they could, and every time, a ball of flame seemed to rise from their fingertips. Many of those exploded too soon, of course. The Shaido Wise Ones were working to defend their own. But the *algai'd'siswai* were much nearer to the ridge, so they had less time to react. Fireballs burst among the Shaido, hurling men aside, flinging severed arms and legs into the air. Silver-blue lightning bolts forked down, and most of those struck, too. The hair on Perrin's arms stirred. The hair on his head tried to stand. The air seemed to crackle with the lightnings' discharges.

Even as they flung death at the men below, Edarra and the others continued to parry the Shaido Wise Ones' attacks, and all the while, the Two Rivers men worked their bows as fast as they could. A trained man could loose twelve shafts in a minute, and the range was shorter now. The Shaido lacked no more than two hundred paces of reaching the bottom of the ridge. Their arrows still fell short of Perrin, but the Two Rivers arrows were striking home every time at this range. Each bowman was picking his own target, of course, so Perrin saw *algai'd'siswai* fall pierced by two, three, even four shafts.

Flesh could only take so much. The Shaido began to fall back. It was not a rout. They did not flee. Many shot arrows back at the ridge despite no hope of making the range. But they turned as if on a command and ran, trying to outpace the Two Rivers shafts and the rain of fire and lightning that pursued them. The flankers were falling back, too, as lancers appeared out of the trees forming ranks a thousand horses wide, advancing slowly while fire and lightning harried the Shaido.

“By ranks,” Tam shouted, “advance three paces and loose!”

“Advance at a walk!” Arganda bellowed.

“With me!” Masema shouted.

Perrin was supposed to make that slow advance with the others, but he began to walk down the slope faster and faster. The gates tugged at him. His blood was becoming fire. Elyas claimed it was a natural feeling when you were in danger of your life, but he could not see it. He had almost drowned in the Waterwood once, and he had felt nothing like this thrill that was surging through him now. Someone behind shouted his name, but he trotted on, picking up speed. Freeing his hammer from its belt loop, he drew his belt knife with his left hand. Aram was running beside him, he realized, but his own focus was on the gates, on the Shaido who still stood between him and Faile. Fire, lightning and arrows fell among them like hail, and they were no longer turning to fire their own arrows, though they often looked over their shoulders. But many were supporting wounded, men who dragged a leg or clutched a side with a Two Rivers shaft jutting from it, and he was catching up.

Abruptly, half a dozen veiled men turned back gripping spears and started toward him and Aram at the run. Not using their bows meant they had expended their arrows. He had heard tales of champions, of men who decided the future by single combat between two armies that would abide by the outcome. The Aiel had no such tales. He did not slow down, though. His blood *was* fire. *He* was fire.

A Two Rivers shaft took one Shaido in the middle of his chest, and even as he fell, three more were feathered with at least a dozen arrows each. But now he and Aram were too close to the remaining two. Anyone but the very best bowshots would risk hitting him or Aram if he fired. Aram flowed toward one of the Shaido as if dancing, his blade a bright blur, but Perrin had no time to watch anyone else fight if he had wanted to. A veiled man who overtopped him by a head stabbed at him with a short spear held near its base. Blocking the spear with his belt knife, Perrin swung his hammer. The Shaido tried to stop it with his buckler, but he altered the swing slightly, and heard the bones in the man’s forearm snap under ten pounds of steel swung by a blacksmith’s arm. He was inside the spear, now, and without slowing, he slashed across the man’s throat with his knife. Blood gouted, and he was running again while the man was falling. He had to reach Faile. Fire in his blood, fire in his heart. Fire in his head. No one and nothing would keep him from Faile.

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CHAPTER 30

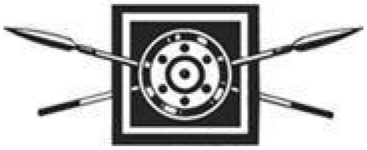

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Outside the Gates

Faile tried to estimate the time by the slant of light falling through the gaps in the ruined building overhead; it seemed still short of noon. All that had been cleared was a small space at the very top of the basement stairs. Any of them could have passed through it, if they dared to try climbing the slanting pile of blackened rubble, but that still looked as though it might fall in any moment. The tangled heap still creaked alarmingly at times. The only good thing was that it had not started raining on their heads. How long that would last was a question. She had been hearing thunder for some time, quite a lot of it, and slowly coming closer. The booms were almost continuous. A storm that fierce might be enough to make the building finish collapsing. Light, she was thirsty.

Rolan suddenly appeared in the opening and lay down on the stone landing. He was not wearing the harness that held his bow case. Carefully he wriggled his way out *onto* the rubble. The pile groaned softly under his weight. Kinhuin, a green-eyed man a good hand or more shorter than he, knelt to grip his ankles. There were only three of the Brotherless up there, it seemed, but that was three too many.

Head and shoulders sticking over the edge of the rubble, Rolan lowered one arm. “There is no more time, Faile Bashere. Take my hand.”

“Maighdin first,” Faile said thickly, waving away the sun-haired woman’s weary protests. Light, but her mouth was coated with grit and too dry to spit any of it out. “Arrela and Lacile next. I’ll go last.” Alliandre nodded approvingly, but Arrela and Lacile tried to object, too. “Be quiet and do as I say,” she told them firmly. Thunder crashed and crashed. The storm that produced that much thunder would bring a deluge, not simple rainfall.

Rolan laughed. How could the man *laugh* at a time like this? He only stopped when the charred timbers beneath him groaned again from his shaking. “You still wear white, woman. So be quiet and do as *I* say.” There was a touch of mocking in his tone at that, but not when he added, “No one will be taken out before you.” That sounded like cast iron.

“My Lady,” Alliandre said quietly, hoarsely, “I believe he means it. I will send the others out in the order you gave.”

“Stop pouting and give me your hand,” Rolan commanded.

She was *not* pouting! The man could be as infuriatingly stubborn as her Perrin. Only, in Perrin, it was intriguing, not really infuriating. Raising her right hand as high as it would go, she let Rolan's hand envelop hers. He lifted her easily, till her face was just below his.

"Catch hold of my coat." There was no hint of strain in his voice despite the awkward angle of his arm. "You will have to climb over me."

She swung her left hand up and caught a fistful of the rough wool, holding on hard. The pain in her shoulder told her it was bruised as badly as she feared. When he released her other hand, she gasped at the jolt of agony and quickly grabbed his coat with that one, too. Grasping her waist in both hands, he boosted her higher, so she was lying on his broad back. Thunder boomed and boomed without ceasing. The rain must start falling soon. That would make getting the others out more difficult.

"I like feeling your weight on me, Faile Bashere, but maybe you could climb a little faster so I can bring the others out." He pinched her bottom, and she laughed in spite of herself. The man just would not stop trying!

The climb over him was slower than she could have hoped for. She did not believe anything was broken in her shoulder, but it *hurt*. Once, she thought she kicked Rolan in the head. Pinch her, would he?

At last she was outside and past Kinhuin, on her feet under the sky once more. Her first sight of the building from outside made her swallow, and then cough vigorously as bits of grit entered her throat. The charred timbers were tilting to an alarming degree, ready to crash into the basement. The third Brotherless, Jhoradin, a blue-eyed man with red-gold hair and a face that fell not far short of prettiness, was watching Kinhuin and Rolan, but every so often he glanced at the building as if expecting to see it fall. He was squat for an Aiel, not quite as tall as Perrin but half again as wide. There must have been at least a hundred of her people in the street, staring at her anxiously, some of their white robes stained with soot from their efforts at digging her out. A hundred! She could not find it in her heart to upbraid them, however. Especially after Aravine thrust a plump waterskin into her hands. The first mouthful went to wash away grit and dust, though she wanted desperately to swallow it anyway, but after that, she held up the skin and all but poured water down her throat. Her bruised shoulder protested. She ignored it and drank and drank.

Suddenly she became aware of lightning striking outside the town to the west and lowered the waterskin to stare. Close outside the town. Out of a cloudless sky. And sometimes not striking. Many of those forked silvery bolts erupted with thunderous roars far above the ground. Balls of fire hurtled across the sky, sometimes bursting in air with a boom like thunder. Someone was fighting a battle with the Power! But who? Could Perrin have found enough Aes Sedai or Asha'man to attack the camp? But something was very odd. She knew how many Wise Ones in the camp could channel, and there did not seem to be enough lightning or fireballs. Perhaps it was not Perrin after all. There were factions among the Wise Ones. Not just between those supporting or opposing Sevanna, but between septs with old alliances or animosities. Maybe one of those factions was fighting another. That seemed highly unlikely, but less so than Perrin finding enough Aes Sedai to attack and the Wise Ones not fighting back with everything they could muster.

"When the lightnings started, Rolan said there was a battle," Aravine said when Faile asked her. "That's all. Nobody wanted to go find out more until we knew you were safe."

Faile ground her teeth in frustration. Even if she did not have to deal with Rolan, whatever was going on outside the walls might make escaping that much more difficult. If only she knew what it was, she might be able to see how to avoid it. Or use it. "No one is to go anywhere, Aravine. It might be dangerous." And they might inadvertently lead Shaido back when they returned. Light, what was going on?

Maighdin staggered out past Kinhuin rubbing her hip. "He pinched me!" Her voice was thick, but indignation came through. Faile felt a stab of. . . . Not jealousy. Certainly not that. The bloody man could pinch any woman he wanted to. He was not Perrin.

Grimacing, she handed the sun-haired woman the waterskin, and Maighdin washed out her mouth hurriedly before beginning to gulp thirstily. She was not so sun-haired at the moment, her curls all sweat-matted and as coated with dust as her sweaty face. She was not even pretty at the moment.

Arrela came out of the ruin rubbing her bottom and looking grim as death, but she eagerly took the waterskin that Aldin offered. The tall young Amadician, a square-shouldered fellow who looked more a soldier than the bookkeeper he was, gazed at her avidly as she drank. Arrela did not like men that way, but Aldin refused to accept that he could not convince her to marry him. Lacile appeared—rubbing *her* bottom!—and Jhoradin handed her another waterskin, drawing a finger down her dirty cheek. She smiled up at him before beginning to drink. Already preparing her way back into his blankets if Rolan proved obstinate. At least, Faile thought that was what she was doing.

At last Alliandre stalked past Kinhuin, and if she was not rubbing herself, her expression of frosty ire told the tale plainly enough. Kinhuin backed out of the opening and stood while Rolan began working his way back across the dangerous pile of timbers.

"My Lady," Aravine called anxiously, and Faile turned to find the plump-faced woman kneeling on the paving stones and lifting Maighdin's head onto her lap. Maighdin's eyelids fluttered but never came more than half open. Her lips moved weakly, but only mumbles emerged.

"What happened?" Faile said, hurrying to kneel beside them.

"I don't know, my Lady. She was drinking as if she intended to empty the skin, and suddenly she staggered. The next I knew, she just collapsed." Aravine's hands fluttered like falling leaves.

"She must be very tired," Faile said, smoothing her maid's hair and trying not to think of how they were to get the woman out of the camp if she could not walk. It would be done if they had to carry her. Light, she felt a touch wobbly herself. "She saved us, Aravine." The Amadician woman nodded gravely.

"I will hide you somewhere safe until tonight, Faile Bashere," Rolan said, fastening the last buckles of his bow case harness. His brown *shoufa* was already wrapped around his head. "Then I will take you to the forest." Taking three short spears from Jhoradin, he thrust them up through the harness behind so the long spearpoints, glinting in the sun, stuck up above his head.

Faile almost collapsed beside Maighdin with relief. There would be no need to conceal anything from Perrin. But she could not afford weakness, not now. "Our supplies," she began, and as if the sound of her voice were the last straw, the building gave a squealing groan and fell in with a crash that drowned out the explosions for a moment.

"I will see that you have what you need," Rolan told her, raising the black veil across his face. Jhoradin handed him another spear and his buckler, which he hung on his belt knife before seizing her right arm and drawing her to her feet. "We must move quickly. I do not know who we are dancing the spears with, but the *Mera'din* will dance today."

"Aldin, will you carry Maighdin?" was all she managed to get out before Rolan strode away pulling her with him.

She looked over her shoulder to see Aldin lifting a limp Maighdin in his arms. Jhoradin had Lacile by her arm as firmly as Rolan had her. The three Brotherless were leading a parade of white-garbed men and women. And one boy. Theril wore a grim expression. Fumbling in her sleeve, no easy matter with Rolan’s big hand on her arm, she closed her fingers around the ridged hilt of her dagger. Whatever was happening outside the walls, she might have need of that blade before nightfall.

Perrin ran along the winding street through the tents. No one moved in his sight, but through the roar of exploding fireballs and lightnings, he could hear other sounds of battle. Steel clashing on steel. Men shouting, as they killed or died. Men screaming. Blood ran down the left side of his face from a gash in his scalp, and he could feel it oozing down his right side from where a spear had grazed him, oozing down his left thigh from a spear that had bitten deeper. Not all of the blood on him was his own. A face appeared at the opening to a low, dark tent and drew back hurriedly. A child’s face, and frightened, not the first he had seen. The Shaido were being pressed so hard that a good many children had been left behind. They would be a problem for later, though. Over the tents, he could see the gates little more than a hundred paces ahead. Beyond them lay the fortress and Faile.

Two veiled Shaido darted out from beside a dirty brown wall-tent, spears at the ready. But not for him. They were looking at something off to the left. Without slowing, he ran into them. Both were larger than he, but the force of his rush carried them all to the ground, and he fell already fighting. His hammer smashed into the bottom of one man’s chin while he stabbed and stabbed at the other man, blade biting deep. The hammer rose and crushed the first man’s face, splashing blood, rose and fell again while he stabbed. The man with the ruined face twitched once as Perrin rose. The other lay staring at the sky.

A hint of motion at the corner of his left eye made him throw himself to the right. A sword whisked through the air where his neck would have been. Aram’s sword. The onetime Tinker had taken wounds, too. Blood coated half his face like a strange mask, there were blood-wet rents in his red-striped coat, and his eyes looked almost glazed, like those of a corpse, but he still seemed to be dancing with that blade in his hands. His scent was the scent of death, a death he sought.

“Have you gone mad?” Perrin growled. Steel rang against steel as he blocked that sword away with the head of his hammer. “What are you doing?” He blocked another slice of the blade, tried to grapple the other man, and barely danced back in time to get away with only a gash across his ribs.

“The Prophet explained it to me.” Aram sounded in a daze, yet his sword moved with liquid ease, blows barely diverted with hammer or belt knife as Perrin backed away. All he could do was hope he did not trip over a tent rope or come up against a tent. “Your eyes. You’re really Shadowspawn. It was you who brought the Trollocs to the Two Rivers. He explained it all. Those eyes. I should have known the first time I saw you. You and Elyas with those Shadowspawn eyes. I have to rescue the Lady Faile from you.”

Perrin gathered himself. He could not keep moving ten pounds of steel as quickly as Aram moved a sword that weighed a third of that. Somehow, he had to get close, get beyond that blade blurring with the speed of its motion. He could not do so without getting cut, and likely badly, but if he waited much longer, the man was going to kill him. Something caught his heel, and he staggered backward, nearly falling.

Aram darted in, sword chopping down. Suddenly, he stiffened, eyes going wide, and the blade dropped from his hands. He toppled forward to lie on his face, two arrows jutting from his back. Thirty paces beyond him, a pair of veiled Shaido already had arrows nocked and drawn again. Perrin leaped sideways, behind a green, peaked tent, rolling to his feet quickly. At the corner of the tent, an arrow poked through the canvas, still quivering. Crouching, he made his way past the green tent and then a faded blue one, a low tent of dingy brown, hammer in one hand, knife in the other. This was not the first time he had played this game today. Cautiously, he peeked around the edge of the brown tent. The two Shaido were nowhere to be seen. They might be stalking him in turn, or off hunting someone else already. The game had turned both ways before. He could see Aram, lying where he had fallen. A scrap of breeze ruffled the dark fletchings on the arrows sticking up from his back. Elyas had been right. He should never have let Aram pick up that sword. He should have sent him away with the carts, or made him go back to the Tinkers. So many things he should have done. Too late, now.

The gates called to him. He glanced over his shoulder. So close, now. Still crouching, he began to run again along those twisting streets, wary of those two Shaido or any others that might be lurking. The sounds of battle were ahead of him, now, coming from north and south, but that did not mean there would be no stragglers.

Rounding a corner only a few paces from the wide-open gates, he found them filled with people. Most were garbed in dirty white robes, but three were veiled *algai'd'siswai*, one of them a hulking fellow who would have dwarfed Lamgwin. That one had Faile's arm in his fist. She looked as if she had been rolled in the dirt.

With a roar, Perrin rushed forward raising his hammer, and the huge man flung Faile back and ran toward him, spear coming up as he plucked his buckler from his belt.

"Perrin!" Faile screamed.

The big Shaido seemed to hesitate for a heartbeat, and Perrin took advantage of it. His hammer hit the side of the man's head so hard that his feet left the ground as he fell. Another was right behind him, though, spear ready to stab. Suddenly the man grunted, surprise in the green eyes above his black veil, and dropped to his knees peering over his shoulder at Faile, who stood close. Slowly he fell forward, revealing a ridged steel hilt rising from his back. Perrin looked hastily for the third, and found him also lying on his face, with two wooden knife hilts sticking out of his back. Lacile was leaning against Arrela, weeping. No doubt she had found actually killing someone not so easy as she had supposed.

Alliandre was at the front of the crowd, too, and Maighdin right behind her, carried by a tall young man in white, but Perrin had eyes only for Faile. Letting knife and hammer fall, he stepped over the dead men and gathered her in his arms. The smell of her filled his nose. It filled his head. She smelled strongly of charred wood, of all things, but he could still smell *her*.

"I've dreamed of this moment so long," he breathed.

"I have, too," she said against his chest, hugging him hard. Her scent was full of joy, but she was trembling.

"Did they hurt you?" he asked gently.

"No. They. . . . No, Perrin, they didn't hurt me." There were other smells mixed in with her joy, though, laced through it inextricably. The dull, aching scent of sadness and the greasy aroma of guilt. Shame, like thousands of hair-fine needles pricking. Well, the man was dead, and a woman had the right to keep her secrets if she wanted.

“All that matters is that you’re alive, and we’re together again,” he told her. “That’s all that matters in the world.”

“All that matters,” she agreed, hugging him even harder. Hard enough that she actually groaned with the effort. But the next instant, she had pushed back and was examining his wounds, fingering open tears in his coat to look at them. “These don’t look too bad,” she said briskly, though all of those emotions still lay tangled in her joy. She reached up to part his hair and tugged until he bent his head so she could examine the slash along his scalp. “You’ll need Healing, of course. How many Aes Sedai did you bring? How did you—? No, that’s of no matter right now. There are enough of them to defeat the Shaido, and that is what’s important.”

“This lot of Shaido,” he said, straightening to look down at her. Light, dirt or no dirt, she was so beautiful. “There’ll be another six or seven thousand spears here in . . .” he glanced at the sun; it seemed it should be higher, “less than two hours, maybe. We need to finish up here and be moving before then, if we can. What’s wrong with Maighdin?” She was limp as a feather pillow against the young man’s chest. Her eyelids were fluttering without opening fully.

“She tired herself out saving our lives,” Faile said, abandoning his injuries and turning to the other people in white. “Aravine, all of you, start gathering up *gai’shain*. Not just those sworn to me. Everybody in white. We leave no one we can reach behind. Perrin, what direction is safest?”

“North,” he told her. “North is safe.”

“Start them moving north,” Faile went on. “Gather carts, wagons, packhorses, and load them with whatever you think we’ll need. Hurry!” People started moving. Running. “No, you stay here, Aldin. Maighdin still needs to be carried. You stay, too, Alliandre. And Arrela. Lacile needs a shoulder to cry on for a while.”

Perrin grinned. Put his wife down in the middle of a house engulfed in flames, and she would calmly set about putting the fire out. She *would* put it out, too. Bending, he cleaned his belt knife on the green-eyed man’s coat before sheathing it. His hammer needed a good wiping, too. He tried not to think about what he was smearing on the man’s coat. The fire was fading from his blood. There was no thrill remaining, only tiredness. His wounds were beginning to throb. “Will you send someone to the fortress to let Ban and Seonid know they can come out now?" he said as he slipped the hammer's haft back through the loop on his belt.

Faile stared at him in amazement. "They're in the *fortress*? How? Why?"

"Alyse didn't tell you?" He had always been slow to anger until Faile was taken. Now, he felt fury bubbling up in him. Bubbles like white-hot iron. "She said she was taking you with her when she left, but she promised to tell you to go to the fortress when you saw fog on the ridges and heard wolves howl by daylight. I'd swear she said it straight out. Burn me, you can't trust Aes Sedai an inch."

Faile glanced toward the western ridge, where the fog still clung thickly, and grimaced. "Not Alyse, Perrin. Galina. If that wasn't a lie, too. It has to be her. And she has to be Black Ajah. Oh, how I wish I knew her real name." She moved her left arm and winced. She *had* been hurt. Perrin found himself wanting to kill the big Shaido all over again. Faile did not let her injury slow her, though. "Theril, come out from there. I see you peeking around the gate."

A skinny young man edged shyly around the corner of the gate. "My father told me to stay and keep an eye on you, my Lady," he said in an accent so rough that Perrin could barely understand.

"That's as may be," Faile said firmly, "but you run to the fortress as fast as you can and tell whoever you find there that Lord Perrin says they're to come. Run, now." The boy knuckled his forehead and ran.

In a quarter of an hour or so he reappeared, still running, followed by Seonid and Ban and all the others. Ban made a leg to Faile and murmured smoothly how pleased he was to see her again before ordering the Two Rivers men to set up a guard ring around the gate, bows at the ready and halberds stuck in the ground. He used his normal voice for that. He was another who was trying to acquire polish. Selande and Faile's other hangers-on rushed around her, all babbling with excitement and saying how worried they had been when she failed to appear after the wolves howled.

"I'm going to Masuri," Kirklin announced in tones that dared challenge. He did not wait for one, though, simply drawing his sword and running off along the wall to the north.

Tallanvor gave a cry when he saw Maighdin being held by the tall young man and had to be convinced that she was only exhausted. He still took her away from the fellow and held her against his own chest, whispering to her.

“Where is Chiad?” Gaul demanded. On learning that she had never been with them, he lifted the veil across his face. “The Maidens tricked me,” he said grimly, “but I will find her before them.”

Perrin caught his arm. “There are a lot of men out there who’ll take you for a Shaido.”

“I have to find her first, Perrin Aybara.” There was something in the Aiel’s voice, something in his scent, that Perrin could only call heartache. He understood the sorrow of thinking the woman you loved might be lost to you forever. He let go of Gaul’s sleeve, and the man darted through the line of bowmen, spear and buckler in hand.

“I’ll go with him.” Elyas grinned. “Maybe I can keep him out of trouble.” Drawing the long knife that had given him his name among the wolves, Long Tooth, he went running after the tall Aielman. If the two of them could not make their way safely out there, then no one could.

“If you are done jabbering, perhaps you will stand still for Healing,” Seonid told Perrin. “You look as if you need it.” Furen and Teryl were heeling her, hands on their sword hilts and eyes trying to watch in every direction. The ring of Two Rivers men were all very well, their attitude seemed to say, but Seonid’s safety was their charge. They looked like leopards heeling a house cat. Only she was no house cat.

“See to Faile first,” he said. “Her arm is hurt.” Faile was talking with Alliandre, both of them so angry they should have had tails to bristle. No doubt angry over Alyse or Galina or whatever her name was.

“I do not see *her* bleeding like a stuck pig.” Seonid lifted her hands to cup his head, and that too familiar chill hit him, like suddenly being immersed in a winter pond on the brink of freezing. He gasped and jerked, arms flailing out of his control, and when she released him, his wounds were gone, if not the blood smeared on his face and staining his coat and breeches. He also felt he could eat a whole deer by himself.

“What was that?” The diminutive Green turned away from him toward Faile. “Did you mention Galina Casban?”

“I don’t know her last name,” Faile said. “A round-faced Aes Sedai with a plump mouth and black hair and big eyes. Pretty in a way, but an unpleasant woman. Do you know her? I think she must be Black Ajah.”

Seonid stiffened, hands knotting in her skirts. “That sounds like Galina. A Red, and decidedly unpleasant. But why would you make such an accusation? It is not a charge to bring against a sister lightly, even against one as disagreeable as Galina.”

As Faile explained, beginning with the first meeting with Galina, Perrin’s anger grew again. The woman had blackmailed her, threatened her, lied to her, then tried to murder her. His fists clenched so tight that his arms shook. “I’ll break her neck when I get my hands on it,” he growled when she fell silent.

“That is not your right,” Seonid said sharply. “Galina must be tried before three sisters sitting as a court, and for this charge, they must be Sitters. The entire Hall of the Tower might sit for it. If she is found guilty, she will be stilled and executed, but justice in this lies with Aes Sedai.”

“If?” he said incredulously. “You heard what Faile said. Can you have any doubt?” He must have looked threatening, because Furen and Teryl glided in to flank Seonid, their hands resting lightly on sword hilts, their eyes hard on his face.

“She’s right, Perrin,” Faile said gently. “When Jac Coplin and Len Congar were accused of stealing a cow, you knew they were thieves, but you made Master Thane prove they had stolen it before you let the Village Council have them strapped. It’s just as important with Galina.”

“The Village Council wouldn’t have strapped them without a trial whatever I’d said,” he muttered. Faile laughed. She laughed! Light, it was good to hear again. “Oh, all right. Galina belongs to the Aes Sedai. But if they don’t take care of her, I will if I ever find her again. I don’t like people hurting you.”

Seonid sniffed at him, her scent disapproving. “Your arm is injured, my Lady?”

“See to Arrela first, please,” Faile said. The Aes Sedai rolled her eyes in exasperation and took Faile’s head between her hands. Faile shivered and exhaled, hardly more than a heavy sigh. Not a bad injury, then, and gone now in any case. She thanked Seonid while leading her to Arrela.

Suddenly Perrin realized he could not hear the explosions any longer. In fact, he could not recall hearing one for some time. That had to be good. “I need to find out what’s happening. Ban, you keep a close guard on Faile.”

Faile protested his going alone, and by the time he finally agreed to take ten of the Two Rivers men, a rider in lacquered armor had appeared rounding the northern corner of the town wall. Three thin blue plumes marked her as Tylee. As she rode closer, he realized she had a nude woman draped across her tall bay in front of the saddle. A woman bound at ankles and knees, wrists and elbows. Her long golden hair almost brushed the ground, and there were jeweled necklaces and ropes of pearls caught in it. A strand of large green stones and gold slid free and fell to the dirt as Tylee reined in. Removing her peculiar helmet with gauntleted hands, she rested it on the woman's upturned bottom.

"A remarkable weapon, those bows of yours," she drawled, eyeing the Two Rivers men. "I wish we had the like. Kirklin told me where to find you, my Lord. They've begun surrendering. Masema's men held to the point of suicide—most of them are dead or dying, I think—and the *damane* turned that ridge into a deathtrap only a madman would walk into. Best of all, the *sul'dam* have already fitted *a'dam* to over two hundred women. That 'cold tea' of yours was enough that most of them could not stand without help. I'll have to send for *to'raken* to fly them all out."

Seonid made a sound in her throat. Her face was smooth, but her scent was dagger-sharp fury. She stared at Tylee as though trying to stare a hole through her. Tylee paid her no mind at all except to shake her head slightly.

"After my people and I are gone," Perrin said. His agreement was with her. He did not want to risk testing it with anyone else. "What are our losses aside from Masema's men?"

"Light," Tylee replied. "Between your archers and the *damane*, they never really managed to close with us. I've never seen a battle plan come off so smoothly. If we have a hundred dead between us, I'll be surprised."

Perrin winced. He supposed those were light casualties under the circumstances, but some would be Two Rivers men. Whether or not he knew them, they were his responsibility. "Do you know where Masema is?"

"With what's left of his army. He's no coward, I'll say that for him. He and his two hundred—well, about one hundred, now—cut a path all the way through the Shaido to the ridge."

Perrin ground his teeth. The man was back surrounded by his rabble. It would be his word against Masema's about why Aram had tried to kill him, and in any event, it was unlikely the man's followers would surrender him for trial. "We need to start moving before the others get here. If the Shaido think rescue is at hand, they might decide to forget they surrendered. Who's your prisoner?"

"Sevanna," Faile said in a cold voice. The smell of her hatred was nearly as strong as it had been while speaking of Galina.

The golden-haired woman twisted herself upward, shaking hair out of her face and losing several more necklaces in the process. Her eyes, glaring at Faile, were green fire above a strip of cloth that had been tied for a gag. She stank of rage.

"Sevanna of the Jumai Shaido." Satisfaction was strong in Tylee's voice. "She told me so proudly. She's no coward, either. Met us wearing nothing but a silk robe and her jewels, but she managed to spear two of my Altarans before I took it away from her." Sevanna snarled through her gag and struggled as if to throw herself from the horse. Until Tylee smacked her bottom, anyway. After that, she contented herself with glaring at everyone in sight. She was nicely rounded, though he should not be noticing something like that with his wife there. Except that Elyas said she would expect him to notice, so he made himself study her openly.

"I claim the contents of her tent," Faile announced, shooting him a sharp look. Maybe he was not supposed to be that open. "She has a huge chest of jewels in there, and I want them. Don't look at me like a looby, Perrin. We have a hundred thousand people to feed, clothe and help get back to their homes. A hundred thousand at least."

"I want to come with you, my Lady, if you'll have me," the young fellow who had been holding Maighdin piped up. "I won't be the only one, if you'll have us."

"Your lady wife, I presume, my Lord," Tylee said, eyeing Faile.

"She is. Faile, allow me to present Banner-General Tylee Khirgan, in service to the Empress of Seanchan." Perhaps he was acquiring some of that polish himself. "Banner-General, my wife, Lady Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara." Tylee bowed in her saddle. Faile made a small curtsy, inclined her head slightly. Dirty face or no dirty face, she was regal. Which made him think of the Broken Crown. Discussion of that little matter would have to come later. No doubt it would be a prolonged discussion. He thought he might not find it so hard to raise his voice, the way she apparently wanted, this time. "And this is Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, Queen of Ghealdan, Blessed of the Light, Defender of Garen's Wall. And my liege woman. Ghealdan is under my protection." Fool thing to say, but it had to be said.

“Our agreement doesn’t speak to that, my Lord,” Tylee said carefully. “I don’t decide where the Ever Victorious Army goes.”

“Just so you know, Banner-General. And tell those above you they can’t have Ghealdan.” Alliandre smiled at him so widely, so gratefully, he almost wanted to laugh. Light, Faile was smiling, too. A proud smile. He rubbed the side of his nose. “We really do need to begin moving before those other Shaido arrive. I don’t want to find myself with them in front of me and all those prisoners behind me thinking about picking up a spear again.”

Tylee chuckled. “I have a little more experience with these people than you, my Lord. Once they surrender, they won’t fight again or try to escape for three days. Besides, I have some of my Altarans making bonfires out of their spears and bows just to make sure. We have time to make our deployments. My Lord, I hope I never have to face you in the field,” she said, pulling the steel-backed gauntlet from her right hand. “I would be honored if you’d call me Tylee.” She bent over Sevanna to offer her hand.

For a moment, Perrin could only stare. It was a strange world. He had gone to her thinking he was making a deal with the Dark One, and the Light knew, some of what the Seanchan did was beyond repugnant, but the woman was stalwart and true to her word.

“I’m Perrin, Tylee,” he said, clasping her hand. A very strange world.

Stripping off her shift, Galina tossed it down atop the silk robe and bent to pick up the riding dress she had pulled from Swift’s saddlebags. The thing had been sewn for a slightly larger woman, but it would suffice until she could sell one of those firedrops.

“Stand as you are, Lina,” came Therava’s voice, and suddenly Galina could not have straightened if the forest around her had been on fire. She could scream, though. “Be silent.” She choked as her throat swallowed the scream convulsively. She could still weep, silently, and tears began to fall on the mulch of the forest floor. A hand slapped her rudely. “Somehow, you have the rod,” Therava said. “You would not be out here, else. Give it to me, Lina.”

There was no question even of resisting. Straightening, Galina dug the rod out of her saddlebags and handed it to the hawk-eyed woman, tears sliding down her cheeks.

“Stop sniveling, Lina. And put on your necklace and collar. I will have to punish you for taking them off.”

Galina flinched. Even Therava's command could not shut off her tears, and she knew she would be punished for that, too. Golden necklace and collar came out of the saddlebags and went onto her. She stood there wearing only her pale woolen stockings and soft laced white boots, and the weight of the firedrop-studded collar and belt seemed enough to bear her to the ground. Her eyes fastened themselves to the white rod in Therava's hands.

"Your horse will do for a pack animal, Lina. As for you, you are forbidden to ride ever again."

There had to be some way to get that rod again. There had to be! Therava turned the thing over and over in her hands, taunting her.

"Stop playing with your pet, Therava. What are we going to do?" Belinde, a slender Wise One with hair bleached almost white by the sun, strode up to glare at Therava with pale blue eyes. She was bony, with a face well suited to glaring.

That was the first Galina realized that Therava was not alone. Several hundred men, women and children stood among the trees behind them, some of the men carrying women slung over their shoulders of all things. She covered herself with her hands, her face heating. Those long days of enforced nakedness had not inured her to being unclothed in front of men. Then she noticed another oddity. Only a handful were *algai'd'siswai,* with bow cases on their backs and quivers at their hips, but every man and every woman except the Wise Ones among them was carrying at least one spear. They had their faces veiled, too, with a scarf or just a scrap of cloth. What could it mean?

"We are returning to the Three-fold Land," Therava said. "We will send runners to find every sept that can be found and tell them to abandon their wetlander *gai'shain,* abandon everything they must, and make their way by stealth back to the Three-fold Land. We will rebuild our clan. The Shaido will rise from the disaster Sevanna led us to."

"That will take generations!" Modarra protested. Slim and quite pretty, but even taller than Therava, as tall as most Aielmen, she stood up to Therava unflinchingly. Galina could not understand how she did that. The woman made her flinch with a glance.

"Then we will take generations," Therava said firmly. "We will take whatever time is necessary. And we will never leave the Three-fold Land again." Her gaze shifted to Galina. Who flinched. "You will never touch this again," she said, raising the rod briefly. "And you will never try to escape me again. She has a strong back. Load her, and let us be on our way. They may try to pursue us."

Burdened with waterskins and pots and kettles till she almost felt decently covered, Galina staggered through the forest at Therava's heels. She did not think of the rod, or escape. Something had broken in her. She was Galina Casban, Highest of the Red Ajah, who sat on the Supreme Council of the Black Ajah, and she was going to be Therava's plaything for the rest of her life. She was Therava's little Lina. For the rest of her life. She knew that to her bones. Tears rolled silently down her face.

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CHAPTER 31

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The House on Full Moon Street

“They must stay together,” Elayne said firmly. “The two of you shouldn’t be out by yourselves, for that matter. Always three or four together anywhere in Caemlyn. That’s the only way to be safe.” Just two of the mirrored stand-lamps were lit, six flames filling the sitting room with a dim light and the scent of lilies—so much of the lamp oil had gone bad that it was always perfumed, now—but a crackling fire on the hearth was beginning to take away some of the early hour’s coolness.

“There are times a woman wants a little privacy,” Sumeko replied calmly, as if yet another Kinswoman had not just died from wanting privacy. Her voice was calm, at least, but plump hands smoothed her dark blue skirts.

“If you won’t put the fear of the Light into them, Sumeko, I will,” Alise said, her usually mild face stern. She looked the elder of the two, with touches of gray in her hair compared to the glossy black hair that fell below Sumeko’s stout shoulders, yet she was the younger by better than two hundred years. Alise had been intrepid when Ebou Dar fell and they were forced to flee the Seanchan, but her hands moved on her brown skirts, too.

It was long past the bedtime that Essande’s niece Melfane had decreed, but tired as she was all the time, once Elayne woke, she could never get back to sleep, and warm goat’s milk did not help. Warm goat’s milk tasted worse than cool. She was going to make Rand bloody al’Thor drink warm bloody goat’s milk till it came out of his ears! Right after she found out what had hurt him badly enough that she sensed a small jolt of pain while everything else in that small knot in the back of her head that was him remained as vague as a stone. It had been all a stone again ever since, so he was all right, yet something had hurt him deeply for her to sense anything at all. And why was he Traveling so often? One day, he was far to the southeast, the next to the northwest and even more distant, the day after that somewhere else. Was he running from whoever had hurt him? But she had her own worries at the moment.

Unable to sleep and restless, she had dressed herself in the first thing that came to hand, a dark gray riding dress, and gone for a walk to enjoy the stillness of the palace in the small hours of the morning, when even the servants were abed and flickering stand-lamps were the only things that moved in the hallways aside from her. Her and her bodyguards, but she was learning to ignore their presence. She did enjoy the solitude, until the two women encountered her and delivered the sad news that would have awaited sunrise otherwise. She had brought them back to her smaller sitting room to discuss the matter behind a ward against listeners.

Sumeko shifted her bulk in her armchair to glare at Alise. “Reanne let you press boundaries, but as Eldest, I expect—”

“You’re not Eldest, Sumeko,” the smaller woman said coolly. “You have the authority here, but by the Rule, the Knitting Circle consists of the thirteen eldest of us in Ebou Dar. We aren’t in Ebou Dar any longer, so there is no Knitting Circle.”

Sumeko’s round face grew hard as granite. “At least you admit I have the authority.”

“And I expect you to use it to prevent any more of us being murdered. Suggesting isn’t enough, Sumeko, no matter how strongly you say you suggest. It isn’t enough.”

“Arguing will get us nowhere,” Elayne said. “I know you’re on edge. I am, too.” Light, three women murdered with the One Power in the last ten days, and very likely seven more before that, were enough to put an anvil on edge. “But snapping at each other is the worst thing we can do. Sumeko, you need to put your foot down. I don’t care how much anyone wants privacy, *no* one can be by herself for a minute. Alise, use your persuasion.” Persuasion was not exactly the word. Alise did not persuade. She simply expected people to do as she said, and they nearly always did. “Convince the others that Sumeko is right. Between the two of you, you have to—”

The door opened to admit Deni, who closed it again behind her and bowed, one hand on her sword hilt, the other on her long cudgel. The red-lacquered breastplates and helmets, trimmed in white, had been delivered only yesterday, and the stocky woman had been smiling ever since she donned hers, but she looked solemn behind the face-bars now. “Pardon for interrupting, my Lady, but there’s an Aes Sedai here demanding to see you. A Red, by her shawl. I told her you were likely sleeping, but she was ready to come in and wake you herself.”

A Red. There were reports of Reds in the city from time to time, though not so often as once—most Aes Sedai in the city went without their shawls, concealing their Ajahs—yet what would a Red want with her? Surely they all knew by now that she stood with Egwene and against

Elaida. Unless someone was finally trying to bring her to book for the bargain with the Sea Folk.

“Tell her that I’m—”

The door opened again, bumping Deni’s back, pushing her out of the way. The woman who entered, vine-woven shawl draped along her arms so the long red fringe displayed itself to advantage, was tall and slim and copper-skinned. She would have been pretty, except that her mouth was compressed until her full lips seemed thin. Her riding dress was so dark it might have been black, but the pale light of the stand-mirrors picked up hints of red, and the divided skirts were slashed with brighter red. Duhara Basaheen never made any secret of her Ajah. Once, Sumeko and Alise would have been on their feet and curtsying for an Aes Sedai in a flash, but now they remained seated, studying her. Deni, normally placid, in appearance at least, scowled and fingered her cudgel.

“I see the tales of you gathering wilders are true,” Duhara said. “A great pity, that. The two of you get out. I wish to speak with Elayne privately. If you’re wise, you will leave tonight, heading in different directions, and tell any others like you to do the same. The White Tower looks amiss on wilders gathering together. When the Tower looks on something amiss, thrones have been known to tremble.” Neither Sumeko nor Alise moved. Alise actually arched an eyebrow.

“*They* can stay,” Elayne said coldly. With the Power in her, her emotions were not bouncing. They were steady in an icy anger. “*They* are welcome here. *You*, on the other hand. . . . Elaida tried to have me *kidnapped*, Duhara. Kidnapped! *You* can leave.”

“A poor welcome, Elayne, when I came to the palace as soon as I arrived. And after a journey that would be as torturous to describe as it was to endure. Andor has always had good relations with the Tower. The Tower intends to see they remain good. Are you sure you want these wilders to hear everything I have to say to you? Very well. If you insist.” Gliding to one of the carved sideboards, she wrinkled her nose at the silver pitcher holding goat’s milk and poured herself a cup of dark wine before taking a chair across from Elayne. Deni made a move as if to try dragging her out, but Elayne shook her head. The Domani sister ignored the Kinswomen as if they had ceased to exist. “The woman who drugged you has been punished, Elayne. She was flogged in front of her own shop with everyone in her village watching.” Duhara sipped her wine, waiting for Elayne to respond.

She said nothing. She knew very well that Ronde Macura had been flogged for failure rather than for feeding her that vile tea, but saying so would make Duhara wonder how she knew, and that might lead to things that needed to remain hidden.

The silence stretched, and finally the other woman went on. “You must know that the White Tower wants very much for you to mount the Lion Throne. To achieve that end, Elaida has sent me to be your advisor.”

In spite of herself, Elayne laughed. *Elaida* had sent her an advisor? It was ludicrous! “I have Aes Sedai to advise me when I need advice, Duhara. You *must* know I oppose Elaida. I wouldn’t accept a pair of stockings from that woman.”

“Your so-called advisors are rebels, child,” Duhara said chidingly, with a heavy dose of distaste on the word “rebels.” She gestured with the silver winecup. “Why do you think you have so many Houses opposing you, so many standing aside? They surely know you don’t really have the backing of the Tower. With me as your advisor, that changes. I might be able to put the crown on your head inside a week. At most, it should take no more than a month or two.”

Elayne met the other woman’s gaze with a level gaze of her own. Her hands wanted to make fists, but she kept them still in her lap. “Even *were* that so, I’d refuse you. I expect to hear any day that Elaida has been deposed. The White Tower will be whole again, and no one will be able to claim I lack its backing then.”

Duhara studied her wine for a moment, her face a mask of Aes Sedai serenity. “It won’t be entirely smooth going for you,” she said as if Elayne had not spoken. “This is the part I thought you wouldn’t want the wilders to hear. And that guard. Does she think I’m going to attack you? No matter. Once you have the crown firmly on your head, you will have to appoint a regent, because you must return to the Tower then, to complete your training and eventually be tested for the shawl. You need have no fear of being birched as a runaway. Elaida accepts that Siuan Sanche ordered you to leave the Tower. Your pretense of being Aes Sedai is another matter. That, you will pay for with tears.” Sumeko and Alise stirred, and Duhara took notice of them again. “Ah, you didn’t know that Elayne is really only one of the Accepted?”

Elayne rose and stared down at Duhara. Usually, someone seated held the advantage over someone standing, but she made her stare hard and her voice harder. She wanted to slap the woman's face! "I was raised Aes Sedai by Egwene al'Vere on the day she herself was raised Amyrlin. I chose the Green Ajah and was admitted. Don't you *ever* say I'm not Aes Sedai, Duhara. Burn me if I'll stand still for it!"

Duhara's mouth pinched down till her lips seemed a gash. "Think, and you will see the reality of your situation," she said finally. "Think hard, Elayne. A blind woman could see how much you need me, and the White Tower's blessing. We will talk again later. Have someone show me to my rooms. I am more than ready for my bed."

"You'll have to find a room at an inn, Duhara. Every bed in the palace already has three or four people sleeping in it." If dozens of beds had been free, she would not have offered Duhara one. Turning her back, she walked to the fireplace and stood warming her hands. The gilded pendulum clock on the scroll-carved marble mantel chimed three times. Perhaps as many hours remained till sunrise. "Deni, have someone escort Duhara to the gates."

"You won't fend me off so easily, child. No one fends off the White Tower easily. Think, and you'll see I'm your only hope." Silk whisked against silk as she left the room, and the door clicked shut behind her. It seemed very possible Duhara would cause trouble trying to make herself needed, but one problem at a time.

"Did she put doubts in your minds?" Elayne said, turning from the fire.

"None," Sumeko replied. "Vandene and the other two accept you as Aes Sedai, so you must be." Conviction was strong in her voice, but then, she had reason to want to believe. If Elayne were a liar, her dreams of returning to the Tower, of joining the Yellow Ajah, died.

"But this Duhara believes she was speaking the truth." Alise spread her hands. "I'm not saying I doubt you. I don't. But the woman believes."

Elayne sighed. "The situation is . . . complicated." That was like saying water was moist. "I am Aes Sedai, but Duhara doesn't believe. She can't, because that would be admitting Egwene al'Vere truly is the Amyrlin Seat, and Duhara won't do that until Elaida has been brought down." She hoped Duhara would believe then. Accept, at least. The Tower *had* to be made whole. "Sumeko, you will *order* the Kinswomen to stay in groups? Always?" The stout woman muttered that she would. Unlike Reanne, Sumeko had no flair for leadership, or liking for it, either. A pity no older Kinswoman had appeared to take the burden from her. "Alise, you'll make sure they obey?” Alise’s agreement was firm and quick. She would have been the perfect candidate if the Kin did not determine their rankings by age. “Then we’ve done what we can. It’s long past time you were in your beds.”

“Long past time for you, too,” Alise said as she stood. “I could send for Melfane.”

“No need to rob her of sleep, too,” Elayne said hastily. And firmly. Melfane was short and stout, a merry woman with a ready laugh, and unlike her aunt in other ways, as well. Merry or not, the midwife was a tyrant who would not be pleased to learn that she was awake. “I’ll sleep when I can.”

Once they left, she released *saidar* and took up a book from several on the second sideboard, yet another history of Andor, but she could not concentrate. Bereft of the Power, she felt grumpy. Burn her, she was so weary that her eyes felt grainy. She knew that if she lay down, though, she would stare at the ceiling till the sun rose. In any case, she had stared at the page for only minutes when Deni appeared again.

“Master Norry is here, my Lady, with that Hark fellow. Said he’d heard you were up and wondered if you could spare him a few minutes.”

He had *heard* she was up? If he was having her *watched* . . . ! The import broke through her grumpiness. Hark. He had not brought Hark since that first visit, ten days ago. No, eleven days, now. Ebullience replaced peevishness. Telling Deni to send them in, she followed the woman as far as the anteroom, where a patterned carpet covered most of the red-and-white floor tiles. Here, too, only a pair of stand-lamps were lit, giving off a dim, wavering light and a scent of roses.

Master Norry looked more than ever a white-crested wading bird with his long, spindly shanks, and tufts of hair sticking up behind his ears, but for once, he almost seemed excited. He was actually rubbing his hands together. He was not carrying his leather folder tonight; even in the dim light, the ink stains on his crimson tabard showed. One had turned the tuft of the White Lion’s tail black. He offered a stiff bow, and the nondescript Hark imitated him awkwardly, then knuckled his forehead for good measure. He was wearing a darker brown than he had previously, but the same belt and buckle. “Forgive the hour, my Lady,” Norry began in that dry voice.

“How *did* you know I was awake?” she demanded, emotions bouncing again.

Norry blinked, startled by the question. "One of the cooks mentioned sending up warm goat's milk for you when I went to get some for myself, my Lady. I find warm goat's milk very soothing when I can't sleep. But she mentioned wine, too, so I assumed you had visitors and might still be awake."

Elayne sniffed. She still wanted to snap at someone. Keeping that out of her voice required an effort. "I suppose you've success to report, Master Hark?"

"I followed him like you said, my Lady, and he's been to the same house three nights, counting this one. It's on Full Moon Street in the New City, it is. Only place he ever goes except taverns and common rooms. He drinks some, he does. Dices a lot, too." The man hesitated, dry-washing his hands nervously. "I can go now, right, my Lady? You'll take off whatever it was you put on me?"

"According to the tax rolls," Norry said, "the house is owned by the Lady Shiaine Avarhin, my Lady. She seems to be the last of the House."

"What else can you tell me about the place, Master Hark? Who else lives there besides this Lady Shiaine?"

Hark rubbed his nose uneasily. "Well, I don't know as they lives there, my Lady, but there's two Aes Sedai there tonight. I saw one of them letting Mellar out while the other was coming in, and the one who was coming in said, 'A pity there are only two of us, Falion, the way Lady Shiaine works us.' Only, she said Lady like she didn't mean it, she did. Funny. She was carrying a stray cat, a thing scrawny as she was." He bobbed a sudden, nervous bow. "Begging your pardon, my Lady. Didn't mean no offence, speaking of an Aes Sedai that way, but it took me a minute to realize she *was* Aes Sedai, it did. There was good light from the entry hall, there was, but she was so thin and plain, with a wide nose, that nobody would take her for Aes Sedai without some study."

Elayne laid a hand on his arm. Excitement bubbled in her voice, and she let it. "What were their accents?"

"Their accents, my Lady? Well, the one with the cat, she's from right here in Caemlyn I'd say. The other. . . . Well, she didn't say above two sentences, but I'd say she was Kandori. Called the other Marillin, if that helps, my Lady."

Laughing, Elayne capered a few steps. She knew who had set Mellar on her now, and it was worse than she had feared. Marillin Gemalphin and

Falion Bhoda, two Black sisters who had fled the Tower after doing murder. That had been to facilitate theft, but it was the murders that would see them stilled and beheaded. It had been to find them, and the others with them, that she, Egwene and Nynaeve had been sent out of the Tower. The Black Ajah had planted Mellar next to her, to spy most likely, but still a chilling thought. Worse than she had feared, and yet, finding the two now was like completing the circle.

Hark was staring at her with his mouth hanging open, she realized. Master Norry was studiously examining the lion's stained tail. She stopped dancing and folded her hands. Fool men! "Where is Mellar now?"

"In his rooms, I believe," Norry said.

"My Lady, you'll take it off now?" Hark said. "And I can go? I did what you asked."

"First you have to lead us to this house," she said, darting past him to the twinned doors. "Then we'll talk." Putting her head out into the corridor, she found Deni and seven more Guardswomen lined up on either side of the doors. "Deni, send someone to fetch the Lady Birgitte as fast as possible, and someone else to wake the Aes Sedai and ask them to come, too, with their Warders and prepared to take a ride. Then you go and wake however many Guardswomen you think you need to arrest Mellar. You needn't be too gentle about it. The charges are murder and being a Darkfriend. Lock him in one of the basement storerooms with a strong guard." The stocky woman smiled broadly and began giving orders as Elayne went back inside.

Hark was wringing his hands and shifting from one foot to the other anxiously. "My Lady, what do you mean we'll talk? You promised to take this thing off me if I followed the man, you did. And I did, so you have to keep your word."

"I never said I'd remove the Finder, Master Hark. I said you'd be exiled to Baerlon instead of hanging, but wouldn't you rather remain in Caemlyn?"

The man widened his eyes, trying to look sincere. And failing. He even smiled. "Oh, no, my Lady. I've been dreaming about the fresh country air in Baerlon, I has. I'll wager there's never a worry about getting rotten meat in your stew there. Here, you got to sniff careful before you eat anything. I'm looking forward to it, I am."

Elayne put on the stern face her mother had always worn passing judgment. "You'd be out of Baerlon two minutes behind the Guardsmen who escorted you there. And then you'd hang for breaking your exile. Much better for you to remain in Caemlyn and take on a new line of work. Master Norry, could you use a man with Hark's talents?"

"I could, my Lady," Norry replied without even a pause for thought. A satisfied smile touched his thin lips, and Elayne realized what she had done. She had given him a tool to encroach on Mistress Harfor's ground. But there was no undoing it, now.

"The work won't be so remunerative as your former 'trade,' Master Hark, but you won't hang for it."

"Not so what, my Lady?" Hark said, scratching his head.

"It won't pay so well. What do you say? Baerlon, where you'll surely cut a purse or bolt, and hang for either one, or Caemlyn, where you'll have steady work and no fear of the hangman. Unless you take up cutting purses again."

Hark swayed on his feet, scrubbing the back of his hand across his mouth. "I needs a drink, I does," he muttered hoarsely. Very likely he believed the Finder would allow her to know if he cut a purse. If so, she had no intention of disabusing him.

Master Norry scowled at the man, but when he opened his mouth, she said, "There's wine in the small sitting room. Let him have one cup, then join me in the large sitting room."

The large sitting room was dark when she walked in, but she channeled to light the mirrored stand-lamps against the dark-paneled walls, and the kindling of the fires neatly laid on the facing hearths. Then she took a seat in one of the low-backed chairs around the scroll-edged table and released *saidar* again. Since her experiment at holding the Power all day, she had not held it longer than necessary. Her mood swung from joyful excitement to morose worry and back. On the one hand, she was done with having to put up with Mellar, and soon she would have her hands on two Black sisters. Questioning them might lead to the rest, or at least reveal their plans. And if not, this Shiaine would have her own secrets. Anyone who was "working" two Darkfriend sisters would have secrets worth knowing. On the other hand, what would Duhara do to try forcing her acceptance as an advisor? Duhara would try to meddle somehow, but she could not see how. Burn her, she did not need any more difficulties between her and the throne. With a little luck, tonight would not only snare two Black sisters, it might uncover a third, a murderer ten times over. Back and forth she went, from Falion and Marillin to Duhara, even after Master Norry and Hark joined her.

Hark, a silver cup in his hand, tried to take a seat at the table, but Master Norry tapped him on the shoulder and jerked his head toward a corner. Sullenly, Hark went where he was directed. He must have begun drinking as soon as the cup was filled, because he emptied it in one long pull then stood turning it over in his hands and staring at it. Suddenly he gave a start and directed an ingratiating grin at her. Whatever he saw on her face made him flinch. Scuttling to the long table against the wall, he set the cup down with exaggerated care, then scuttled back to his corner.

Birgitte was the first to arrive, the bond filled with weary discontent. “A ride?” she said, and when Elayne explained, she began raising objections. Well, some of it was objections; the rest was just insults.

“What hare-brained, crack-pated scheme are you talking about, Birgitte?” Vandene said as she entered the room. She wore a riding dress that hung loose on her. One of her sister’s, it would have fit her perfectly while Adeleas was alive, but the white-haired woman had lost weight. Her Jaem, wiry and gnarled, took one look at Hark and placed himself where he could watch the man. Hark ventured a smile, but it faded when Jaem’s expression remained hard as iron. The Warder’s graying hair was thin, but there was nothing soft about him.

“She intends to try capturing two Black sisters tonight,” Birgitte replied, shooting a hard look at Elayne.

“Two Black sisters?” Sareitha exclaimed walking through the door. She gathered her dark cloak around her as though the words had given a chill. “Who?” Her Warder Ned, a tall, broad-shouldered young man with yellow hair, eyed Hark and touched his sword hilt. *He* chose a spot where he could watch the man, too. Hark shifted his feet. He might have been thinking of trying to run.

“Falion Bhoda and Marillin Gemalphin,” Elayne said. Sareitha’s mouth hardened.

“What about Falion and Marillin?” Careane asked as she glided into the room. Her Warders were disparate men, a tall, gangly Tairen, a blade-slender Saldaean, and a broad-shouldered Cairhienin. They exchanged glances, and Tavan, the Cairhienin, leaned against the wall watching Hark while Cieryl and Venr stood in the doorway. Hark’s mouth took on a sickly twist.

There was nothing for it but to explain again from the beginning. Which Elayne did with a rising impatience that had nothing to do with her shifting moods. The longer this took, the more chance that Falion and Marillin might be gone by the time she reached the house on Full Moon Street. She *wanted* them. She intended to *have* them! She should have made Birgitte wait until everyone had gathered.

"A good plan, I think," Vandene said when she finished. "Yes, it will do nicely." Others were not so agreeable.

"It isn't a plan, it's bloody madness!" Birgitte said sharply. Arms folded beneath her bosom, she scowled down at Elayne, the bond such a turmoil of emotions that Elayne could barely make them out. "The four of you enter the house alone. Alone! That isn't a plan. It's flaming insanity! Warders are supposed to guard their Aes Sedai's backs. Let us come with you." The other Warders put in emphatic agreements, but at least she was not trying to stop the whole thing any more.

"There are four of us," Elayne told her. "We can watch our own backs. And sisters do *not* ask their Warders to face other sisters." Birgitte's face darkened. "If I need you, I'll shout so loud you'd be able to hear me if you were back here in the palace. The Warders remain outside!" she added when Birgitte opened her mouth. The bond filled with frustration, but Birgitte's jaw snapped shut.

"Perhaps this man can be trusted," Sareitha said, glancing at Hark with no trust at all, "but even if he heard correctly, nothing says there are still only two sisters in the house. Or any. If they have gone, there's no danger, but if others have joined them, we might as well put our necks in a noose and spring the trap ourselves."

Careane folded her sturdy arms and nodded. "The danger is too great. You yourself told us that when they fled the Tower, they stole a number of *ter'angreal*, some very dangerous indeed. I've never been called a coward, but I don't fancy trying to sneak up on someone who might have a rod that can make balefire."

"He could hardly have misheard something as simple as 'there are only two of us,' " Elayne replied firmly. "And they spoke as if they didn't expect any others." Burn her, considering her standing with respect to them, they should have been jumping to obey rather than arguing. "In any case, this isn't a discussion." A pity both objected. If only one had, it could have been a clue. Unless they both were Black Ajah. A bone-freezing thought, that, yet her plan took the possibility into account. “Falion and Marillin won’t know we are coming until it’s too late. If they’re gone, we’ll arrest this Shiaine, but we are going.”

It was a larger party than Elayne had expected that rode out of the Queen’s Stableyard behind her and Hark. Birgitte had insisted on bringing fifty Guardswomen, though all they would be doing was missing sleep, a column of twos in red-lacquered helmets and breastplates, black in the night, that snaked along the palace behind the Aes Sedai and Warders. Reaching the front of the palace, they skirted the edge of the Queen’s Plaza, the great oval crowded now with rude shelters that housed sleeping Guardsmen and nobles’ armsmen. Men were billeted everywhere room could be found, but there were insufficient basements and attics and spare rooms near enough the palace, and the parks where circles of Kinswomen would take the men to the places where they were needed. The fighting they did was afoot, on the walls, so their horses were all picketed in nearby parks and in the larger palace gardens. A few sentries shifted as they passed, heads swiveling to follow, but with her hood up, all they could be sure of was that a large contingent of Guardswomen were escorting a party through the night. The sky to the east was still dark, but it must be less than two hours till first light. The Light send dawn would see Falion and Marillin in custody. And one more. At least one more.

Winding streets led over and around the hills past narrow, tile-covered towers that would glitter with a hundred colors when the sun rose and glittered faintly in the cloud-dappled moonlight, past silent shops and lightless inns, simple stone houses with slate roofs and small palaces that might have fit in Tar Valon. The ring of horseshoes on the paving stones and the faint creak of saddle leather sounded loud in the silence. Except for an occasional dog that slunk away into the deeper shadows of alleys, nothing else moved. The streets were dangerous at this hour, but no footpad would be mad enough to come in sight of so large a party. Half an hour after leaving the Royal Palace, Elayne rode Fireheart through the Mondel Gate, a wide, twenty-foot-high arch in the Inner City’s tall white wall. Once there would have been Guardsmen on duty there, to keep the peace, but the Queen’s Guards were spread too thin now for that.

Almost as soon as they were into the New City, Hark turned east into a warren of streets that meandered in every direction through the city’s hills. He rode awkwardly, on a bay mare that had been found for him. Cutpurses seldom spent time in the saddle. Some of the streets were quite narrow here, and it was in one of those that he finally drew rein, surrounded by stone houses of two or three or even four stories. Birgitte raised a hand to halt the column. The sudden silence seemed deafening.

“It’s just around that corner there, it is, my Lady, the other side of the street,” Hark said in a near whisper, “but if we go riding out there, they might hear us or see us. Pardon, my Lady, but if these Aes Sedai are what you says they are, I don’t want them seeing me.” He scrambled down from his saddle clumsily and looked up her, wringing his hands, his moonshadowed face anxious.

Dismounting, Elayne led Fireheart to the corner and peeked around the corner of a narrow, three-story house. The houses along the other street stood dark except for one, four substantial stories of stone with the closed gate of a stableyard beside it. Not an ornate building, but large enough for a wealthy merchant or banker. Bankers and merchants were unlikely to be awake at this hour, however.

“There,” Hark whispered hoarsely, pointing. He stood far back, so he had to lean forward to point. He really did fear being seen. “The one with the light on the second floor, it is.”

“Best to find out if anyone else is awake in there,” Vandene said, peering past Elayne. “Jaem? Don’t go inside the house.”

Elayne expected the lean old Warder to sneak across the street, but he just strolled out holding his cloak close around him against the early morning chill. Even the dangerous grace of a Warder appeared to have deserted him. Vandene seemed to sense her surprise.

“Skulking draws the eye and creates suspicion,” she said. “Jaem is just a man walking, and if it’s early to be out in the streets, he isn’t sneaking, so anyone who sees him will think of some mundane reason for him to be out.”

Reaching the stableyard gate, Jaem pulled it open and walked through as if he had a perfect right. Long minutes passed before he came back out, shutting the gate carefully behind him, and strolled back along the street. He rounded the corner and the leopard-like grace reappeared in his step.

“All the windows are dark except that one,” he told Vandene quietly. “The kitchen door is unlatched. So is the back door. That lets onto an alley. Trusting, for Darkfriends. Or else dangerous enough they don’t worry about burglars. There’s a big fellow sleeping in the barn, up in the loft. Big enough to scare any burglar, but he's so drunk he didn't wake while I was tying him up." Vandene raised a questioning eyebrow. "I thought I'd better be safe. Drunks sometimes wake when you least expect. You wouldn't want him seeing you go in and start making noise." She nodded approval.

"It's time to get ready," Elayne said. Moving back from the corner and handing her reins to Birgitte, she tried to embrace the Source. It was like trying to catch smoke with her fingers. Frustration and anger welled up, all the things you needed to suppress if you were to channel. She tried again, and failed again. Falion and Marillin were going to get away. To come this close. . . . They had to be in that lighted room. She knew it. And they were going to escape. Sadness replaced anger, and suddenly *saidar* flowed into her. She barely stifled a sigh of relief. "I'll meld the flows, Sareitha. Vandene, you meld for Careane."

"I don't understand why we have to link," the Tairen Brown muttered, but she put herself on the edge of embracing the Power. "With two of them and four of us, we outnumber them, but linked, it's two and two." A clue? Perhaps she wished it to be three and three?

"Two strong enough to overwhelm them even if they're holding the Power, Sareitha." Elayne reached through her as if she were an *angreal*, and the glow of *saidar* surrounded the other woman as the link was completed. In truth, it surrounded both of them, but she could only see the part around Sareitha—until she wove Spirit around her. Then the glow vanished. She placed the same weave on herself and prepared four shields and several other weaves, all inverted. She felt almost giddy with excitement, but she did not intend to be caught by surprise. Frustration still pulsed along the bond, but for the rest, Birgitte felt like a drawn arrow. Elayne touched her arm. "We will be all right." Birgitte snorted and flung her thick braid back over her shoulder. "Keep an eye on Master Hark, Birgitte. It would be a shame if he had to be hanged because he was tempted to run." Hark squeaked.

She exchanged glances with Vandene, who said, "We might as well be about it."

The four of them walked up Full Moon Street, slowly, as if out for a stroll, and slipped into the shadow-shrouded stableyard. Elayne opened the kitchen door slowly, but the hinges were well-oiled, emitting not a squeak. The brick-walled kitchen was lit only by a tiny fire in the wide stone fireplace where a kettle hung steaming, yet that was enough for them to cross the floor without bumping into the table or chairs. Someone sighed, and she pressed a warning finger to her lips. Vandene frowned at Careane, who looked embarrassed and spread her hands.

A short hall led to stairs at the front of the house. Gathering her skirts, Elayne started up, silent on slippered feet. She was careful to keep Sareitha where she could see her. Vandene was doing the same with Careane. They could do nothing with the Power, but that hardly meant they could do nothing. On the second flight of stairs, she began hearing the murmur of voices. Light spilled from an open door.

“. . . . don’t care what you think,” a woman said in that room. “You leave the thinking to me and do as you’re told.”

Elayne moved to the door. It was a sitting room, with gilded stand-lamps and rich carpets on the floor and a tall fireplace of blue marble, but she had eyes only for the three women in it. Only one, a sharp-faced woman, was seated. That must be Shiaine. The other two stood with their backs to the door, heads bowed like penitents. The sharp-faced woman’s eyes widened when she saw her in the doorway, but Elayne gave her no time to open her mouth. The two Black sisters cried out in alarm as shields went onto them, and flows of Air bound their arms to their sides, tightened their skirts around their legs. More flows of Air fastened Shiaine to her gilded armchair.

Elayne drew Sareitha into the room with her and moved to where she could see all of their faces. Sareitha tried to step back. She might only have been trying to give her the place of prominence, but Elayne caught her sleeve again, keeping her in view, too. Vandene and Careane joined them. Marillin’s narrow face held Aes Sedai calm, but Falion snarled silently.

“What is the meaning of this?” Shiaine demanded. “I recognize you. You’re Elayne Trakand, the Daughter-Heir. But that gives you no right to invade my home and assault me.”

“Falion Bhoda,” Elayne said calmly, “Marillin Gemalphin, Shiaine Avarhin, I arrest you as Darkfriends.” Well, her voice was calm. Inside, she wanted to skip with glee. And Birgitte thought this would be dangerous!

“That is ridiculous,” Shiaine said in icy tones. “I walk in the Light!”

“Not if you walk with these two,” Elayne told her. “To my certain knowledge they’ve proven themselves Black Ajah in Tar Valon, Tear and Tanchico. You don’t hear them denying it, do you? That’s because they know I—”

Suddenly sparks danced all over her from head to toe. She twitched helplessly, muscles spasming, *saidar* slipping from her grasp. She could see Vandene and Careane and Sareitha jerking as sparks flickered across them as well. Only a moment it lasted, but when the sparks vanished, Elayne felt as if she had been fed through a mangle. She had to hold on to Sareitha to stay on her feet, and Sareitha clung to her as hard. Vandene and Careane were supporting one another, swaying, each with her chin on the other's shoulder. Falion and Marillin wore startled expressions, but the light of the Power enveloped them in heartbeats. Elayne felt the shield fasten on to her, saw them settle on the other three. There was no need for binding. Any of them would have fallen over without support. She would have shouted if she could have. If she thought that Birgitte and the others could do more than die.

Four women Elayne recognized entered the room. Asne Zeramene and Temaile Kinderode. Chesmal Emry and Eldrith Jhondar. Four Black sisters. She could have wept. Sareitha groaned softly.

"Why did you wait so long?" Asne demanded of Falion and Marillin. The Saldaean's dark tilted eyes were angry. "I used this so they wouldn't feel us embrace *saidar*, but why did you just stand there?" She waved a small, bent black rod, perhaps an inch in diameter, that had a strangely dull look. The thing seemed to fascinate her. "A 'gift' from Moghedien. A weapon from the Age of Legends. I can kill a man at a hundred paces with this, or just stun him if I want to put him to the question."

"I can kill a man if I can see him," Chesmal said scornfully. Tall and handsome, she was the image of icy arrogance.

Asne sniffed. "But *my* target could be surrounded by a hundred sisters, and not one would know what killed him."

"I suppose it has its uses," Chesmal admitted in grudging tones. "Why *did* you just stand there?"

"They had us shielded," Falion said bitterly.

Eldrith's breath caught, and she put a plump hand to a round cheek. "That's impossible. Unless. . . ." Her dark eyes sharpened. "They've discovered a way to hide the glow, to hide their weaves. Now, that would be most useful."

"You have my thanks for your timely rescue," Shiaine said, rising, "but do you have a reason for coming here tonight? Did Moridin send you?"

Asne channeled a flow of Air that struck Shiaine’s cheek with a loud crack, staggering her. “Keep a civil tongue in your mouth, and perhaps we’ll let you leave with us. Or we can leave you behind dead.” Shiaine’s cheek was reddened, but her hands remained at her sides. Her face was expressionless.

“Elayne’s the only one we need,” Temaile said. She was pretty in a fox-faced way, almost a fragile child in appearance despite her ageless face, but her blue eyes held an unhealthy light. She touched her lips with the tip of her tongue. “I’d enjoy playing with the others, but they’d be a burden we don’t need.”

“If you’re going to kill them,” Marillin said as though discussing the price of bread, “spare Careane. She is one of us.”

“A gift from Adeleas,” Vandene murmured, and Careane’s eyes went very wide. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. The two women sagged and fell to the carpet. Vandene began trying to push herself up, but Careane lay staring at the ceiling, the hilt of Vandene’s belt knife protruding from beneath her breastbone.

The glow surrounded Chesmal, and she touched Vandene with a complex weave of Fire, Earth and Water. The white-haired woman collapsed as if her bones had melted. The same weave touched Sareitha, and she pulled Elayne down atop her as she fell. Sareitha’s eyes were already glazing.

“Their Warders will be coming now,” Chesmal said. “A little more killing to do.”

Run, Birgitte, Elayne thought, wishing the bond could carry words. *Run*!

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CHAPTER 32

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To Keep the Bargain

Birgitte was leaning against the stone wall of the three-story house, thinking sadly of Gaidal, when the bundle of emotions and physical sensations in the back of her head, her awareness of Elayne, suddenly spasmed. That was the only word for it. Whatever it was lasted just a moment, but afterward, the bond was full of . . . limpness. Elayne was conscious, but unsteady. She was unafraid, however. Still, Birgitte threw back her cloak and moved to the corner to peer up Full Moon Street. Elayne could be too brave for her own good. The hardest thing about being Elayne's Warder was keeping her from endangering herself beyond need. Nobody was indestructible, but the bloody woman thought she bloody well was. Her sigil should have been an iron lion rather than a golden lily. That light shone in the window, spilling a pale pool into the narrow street, and there was not a sound except for a cat yowling somewhere in the night.

"Sareitha feels . . . muzzy," Ned Yarman muttered beside her. The tall young Warder's boyish face was a grim shadowed mask inside the hood of his cloak. "She feels weak."

Birgitte became aware of the other Warders crowding her close, stone-faced and hard-eyed. That was clear enough even by moonlight. Something had happened to all of the Aes Sedai, it seemed. But what? "The Lady Elayne said she'd shout if she needed us," she told them, as much to reassure herself as anything else. Even if *both* Careane and Sareitha were Darkfriends, they would have been helpless to do anything linked, and apparently whatever had happened had happened to them, as well. Burn her, she should have insisted that she and the other Warders go along.

"Careane won't be pleased if we interfere needlessly," Venr Kosaan said quietly. Blade slim and dark, with touches of white in his tightly curled black hair and short beard, he appeared completely at ease. "I say we wait. She feels confident, whatever's going on."

"More so than she did going in," Cieryl Arjuna added, earning him a sharp glance from Venr. Still short of his middle years, Cieryl seemed all bones, though his shoulders were wide.

Birgitte nodded. Elayne was confident, too. But then, Elayne would feel self-assured walking an unraveling rope stretched over a pit full of sharp stakes. A dog began barking in the distance, and the yowling cat went silent, but other dogs answered the first in a spreading ripple that faded away as suddenly as it had begun.

They waited, with Birgitte fretting in silence. Suddenly, Venr growled an oath and shed his cloak. The next instant, his blade was in his hand and he was running up the street followed by Cieryl and Tavan, cloaks billowing behind, their blades bared, too. Before they had gone two steps, Jaem gave a wild cry. Unsheathing his sword, he threw his cloak down and raced after the other three at a speed that belied his age. Bellowing with rage, Ned ran, too, the steel in his fist glittering in the moonlight. Fury stabbed through the bond, like the battle fury that took some men. And sadness, too, but still no fear.

Birgitte heard the soft rasp of swords being unsheathed behind her and spun, cloak flaring. "Put those up! They're no use here."

"I know what the Warders running in means as well as you, my Lady," Yurith said in courtly accents, obeying smoothly. And with clear reluctance. Lean and as tall as most men, the Saldaean denied being nobly born, but whenever the conversation came around to what she had done before swearing the oath as a Hunter for the Horn, she always gave one of her rare smiles and changed the subject. She was skilled with that sword, however. "If the Aes Sedai are dying—"

"Elayne is alive," Birgitte cut in. Alive, and in trouble. "*She's* our concern, now, but we'll need a lot more swords to rescue her." And more than swords. "Somebody collar that man!" Two Guardswomen seized Hark's coat before he could slip away into the darkness. Apparently he had no wish to stay near where Aes Sedai had died. Neither did she. "Gather the . . . the extra horses and follow me," she said, swinging into Arrow's saddle. "And ride like fire!" She suited her words, digging her heels into the rangy gray gelding's flanks without waiting.

It was a wild gallop through dark, twisting streets where people were just beginning to appear. She reined Arrow around the few carts and wagons out this early, but men and women had to leap from her path, often shaking fists and shouting curses. She only urged the gelding for more speed, her cloak flapping behind. Before she reached the Mondel Gate, Elayne was moving. She had been uncertain at first, but there could be no mistaking it now. Elayne was moving northeast at about walking speed. The bond said she was too wobbly to walk far, maybe to walk at all, but a wagon would make the same pace. The sky was turning gray. How long before she could gather what was needed? In the Inner City, the street spiraled inward, rising past towers glittering in a hundred colors toward the golden domes and pale spires of the Royal Palace, atop the highest of Caemlyn's hills. As she galloped around the rim of the Queen's Plaza, soldiers stared at her. They were being fed from black kettles atop pushbarrows, cooks ladling some sort of brown stew onto tin plates, and every man she could see wore his breastplate and had his helmet hanging from his sword hilt. Good. Every moment saved was a moment toward saving Elayne.

Two lines of Guardswomen were practicing the sword in the Queen's Stableyard when she galloped in, but the lath blades stopped rattling when she flung herself out of the saddle, let Arrow's reins drop and ran toward the colonnade. "Hadora, run tell the Windfinders to meet me in the Map Room right away!" she shouted without slowing. "All of them! Sanetre, you do the same for Captain Guybon! And have another horse saddled for me!" Arrow was played out for today. She was past the columns by that time, but she did not look back to see whether they were obeying. They would be.

She raced through tapestry-hung hallways and up sweeping marble stairs, got lost and shouted curses as she retraced her steps at a run. Liveried serving men and women gaped as they dodged out of her way. At last she reached the lion-carved doors of the Map Room, where she paused only long enough to tell the two burly Guardsmen on duty to admit the Windfinders as soon as they appeared, then went in. Guybon was already there, in his burnished breastplate with the three golden knots on his shoulder, and Dyelin, delicately holding her blue silk skirts up as she moved, the pair of them frowning at the huge mosaic map, where well over a dozen red discs marked the city's northern wall. Never before had there been so many assaults at once, not even ten, but Birgitte spared the discs barely a glance.

"Guybon, I need every horse and halberd you can muster," she said, unpinning her cloak and tossing it down on her long writing table. "The crossbowmen and archers will have to handle anything that crops up by themselves for a few hours. Elayne's been captured by Darkfriend Aes Sedai, and they're trying to carry her out of the city." Some of the clerks and messengers began murmuring, but Mistress Anford silenced them with a sharp order to see to their work. Birgitte eyed the colorful map in the floor, measuring distances. Elayne seemed to be moving toward the Sunrise Gate and the road to the River Erinin, but even if they used one of the smaller gates, they had gone too far to be aiming at anything but the eastern wall. "They'll probably have her through the gates by the time we're ready to move. We're going to Travel to just this side of the ridge east of the city." And take what was going to happen out of the streets, away from people's homes. It would be better out in the open in any case. In that tangle of streets, with horsemen and halberdmen jammed together, there would be too many people to get in the way, too much chance of accidents.

Guybon nodded, already issuing terse orders that brown-clad clerks copied down hastily for him to sign and pass to young messengers in red-and-white who went running as soon as the paper was in hand. The boys' faces were frightened. Birgitte had no time for her own fear. Elayne felt none, and she was a prisoner. Sadness, yes, but no fear.

"We certainly need to rescue Elayne," Dyelin said calmly, "but she'll hardly thank you if you give Arymilla Caemlyn by doing it. Not counting the men in the towers and holding the gates, almost half the trained soldiers and armsmen in the city are on the northern wall. If you strip away the rest, one more attack will gain a stretch of the wall. Crossbows and bows alone won't stop them. Once they have that, Arymilla's forces will pour into the city, enough to overwhelm what you propose to leave. You will have neatly reversed our positions, and worsened yours. Arymilla will have Caemlyn, and Elayne will be outside without enough armsmen to get back in. Unless these Darkfriends have somehow smuggled an army inside Caemlyn, a few hundred men will do as well as thousands."

Birgitte scowled at her. She had never been able to like Dyelin. She did not know why, exactly, but Dyelin had just made her bristle at first sight. She was fairly certain the other woman felt the same about her. She could never say "up" without Dyelin saying "down." "You care about putting Elayne on the throne, Dyelin. I care about keeping her alive to mount that throne. Or not, so long as she's alive. I owe her my life, and I won't let hers trickle away in Darkfriend hands." Dyelin sniffed and went back to studying the red discs as if she could see the soldiers fighting, her frown deepening the lines at the corners of her eyes.

Birgitte clasped her hands behind her back and forced herself to stand still. She wanted to pace with impatience. Elayne was still trundling toward the Sunrise Gate. "There's something you need to know, Guybon. We'll be facing at least two Aes Sedai, likely more, and they may have a weapon, a *ter'angreal* that makes balefire. Have you ever heard of that?"

“Never. It sounds dangerous, though.”

“Oh, it is. Dangerous enough that it’s prohibited for Aes Sedai. In the War of the Shadow, even Darkfriends stopped using it.” She barked a bitter laugh. All she knew of balefire now was what Elayne had told her. It had come from her in the first place, yet that only made matters worse. Would all of her memories go? She did not think she had lost any recently, but how would she know if she had? She could remember bits of the founding of the White Tower, pieces of what she and Gaidal had done to help it be founded, but nothing before that. All of her earlier memories were yesterday’s smoke.

“Well, at least we’ll have Aes Sedai of our own,” Guybon said, signing another order.

“They’re all dead, except for Elayne,” she told him flatly. There was no way to gild that. Dyelin gasped, her face growing pale. One of the clerks clasped her hands to her mouth, and another knocked over his ink jar. The ink fanned across the tabletop in a black stream and began dripping onto the floor. Rather than reprimanding the man, Mistress Anford steadied herself with a hand on another clerk’s writing table. “I hope to make up for that,” Birgitte went on, “but I can’t promise anything except that we’re going to lose men today. Maybe a lot of men.”

Guybon straightened. His expression was thoughtful, his hazel eyes steady. “That will make for an interesting day,” he said finally. “But we’ll get the Daughter-Heir back, whatever the cost.” A solid man, Charlz Guybon, and brave. He had demonstrated that often enough on the walls. Too good-looking for her taste, of course.

Birgitte realized she had begun pacing back and forth across the mosaic and stopped. She knew nothing of being a general, whatever Elayne thought, but she knew that showing nerves could infect others with them. Elayne was alive. That was all that was important. Alive and moving farther away by the minute. The left-hand door opened, and one of the burly Guardsmen announced that Julanya Fote and Keraille Surtovni had returned. Guybon hesitated, looking to her, but when she said nothing, he told the man to admit them.

They were very different women, in appearance at least, though each carried a wooden walking staff. Julanya was plump and pretty, with touches of white in her dark hair, while Keraille was short and slim, with tilted green eyes and fiery red curls. Birgitte wondered whether those were their real names. These Kinswomen changed names as easily as other women changed stockings. They wore plain woolens suitable for country peddlers, which each had been in the past, and each was a keen observer, skilled at taking care of herself. They could talk their way out of most situations, but their simple belt knives were not the only blades they carried and they could surprise a strong man with what they could do with those walking staffs. Both offered curtsies. Julanya's skirts and cloak were damp and splashed with mud around the hem.

"Ellorien, Luan and Abelle began breaking camp early this morning, my Lady," she said. "I only stayed long enough to make sure of their direction—north—before coming to report."

"The same is true with Aemlyn, Arathelle and Pelivar, my Lady," Keraille added. "They're coming for Caemlyn."

Birgitte did not need to examine the large map spread out on the table with its markers. Depending on how muddy the roads were, how much rain they had to contend with, they could reach the city by that afternoon. "You've done well, both of you. Go find yourselves hot baths. Do you think they've had a change of heart?" she asked Dyelin once the two women had left.

"No," the woman replied without hesitation, then sighed and shook her head. "I fear the most likely thing is that Ellorien has convinced the others to support her for the Lion Throne. They may be thinking to defeat Arymilla and take over the siege. They have half again her numbers, and double ours." She let that hang. There was no need to say the rest. Even using Kinswomen to shift men, they would be hard pressed to hold the wall against that many.

"First we get Elayne back, then we can worry about that lot," Birgitte said. Where were those bloody Windfinders?

No sooner did she have the thought than they were padding into the room behind Chanelle, a riotous rainbow of silks. Except for Renaile, last in line in her linens, yet a red blouse, green trousers and a deep yellow sash made her bright enough, though even Rainyn, a round-cheeked young woman with just half a dozen golden medallions dangling onto her cheek, made Renaile's honor chain look bare. Renaile's face wore an expression of stoic endurance.

"I do not appreciate being threatened!" Chanelle said angrily, sniffing the golden scent box on its golden chain around her neck. Her dark cheeks were flushed. “That Guardswoman said if we did not run, she would kick—! Never mind what she said, exactly. It was a threat, and I will not be—!”

“Elayne has been captured by Darkfriend Aes Sedai,” Birgitte cut in. “I need you to make a gateway for the men who are going to rescue her.” A murmur rose among the other Windfinders. Chanelle gestured sharply, but only Renaile fell silent. The others just lowered their voices to whispers, to her obvious displeasure. By the medallions crowding their honor chains, several of them matched Chanelle’s rank.

“Why did you summon all of us for one gateway?” she demanded. “I keep the bargain, you can see. I brought everyone as you ordered. But why do you need more than one?”

“Because you’re all going to form a circle and make a gateway big enough to take thousands of men and horses.” That was one reason.

Chanelle stiffened, and she was not alone. Kurin, her face like a black stone, practically quivered with outrage, and Rysael, normally a very dignified woman, did quiver. Senine, with her weathered face and old marks indicating she once had worn more than six earrings, and fatter ones, fingered the jeweled dagger thrust behind her green sash.

“Soldiers?” Chanelle said indignantly. “That is forbidden! Our bargain says we will take no part in your war. Zaida din Parede Black Wing commanded it so, and now that she is Mistress of the Ships, that command carries even greater weight. Use the Kinswomen. Use the Aes Sedai.”

Birgitte stepped close to the dark woman, looking her straight in the eyes. The Kin were useless for this. None of them had ever used the Power as a weapon. They might not even know how. “The other Aes Sedai are dead,” she said softly. Someone behind her moaned, one of the clerks. “What is your bargain worth if Elayne is lost? Arymilla certainly won’t honor it.” Keeping her voice steady saying that took effort. It wanted to shake with anger, shake with fear. She needed these women, but she could not let them know why or Elayne *would* be lost. “What will Zaida say if you ruin her bargain with Elayne?”

Chanelle’s tattooed hand half-lifted the piercework scent box to her nose again, then let it fall among her many jeweled necklaces. From what Birgitte knew of Zaida din Parede, she would be more than displeased with anyone who wrecked that bargain, and it was beyond doubtful that Chanelle wished to face the woman’s anger, yet she only looked pensive. “Very well," she said after a moment. "For transport only, though. It is agreed?" She kissed the fingertips of her right hand, prepared to seal the bargain.

"You only need do what you want," Birgitte said, turning away. "Guybon, it's time. They must have her to the gate by now."

Guybon buckled on his sword, took up his helmet and steel-backed gauntlets, and followed her and Dyelin out of the Map Room trailed by the Windfinders, with Chanelle loudly insisting that they would provide a gateway only. Birgitte whispered instructions to Guybon before leaving him striding toward the front of the palace while she hurried to the Queen's Stableyard where she found a hammer-nosed dun gelding wearing her saddle and waiting, the reins held by a young groom with her hair in a braid not much different from her own. She also found all hundred and twenty-one Guardswomen armored and mounted. Climbing into the dun's saddle, she motioned them to follow her. The sun was a golden ball clear of the horizon in a sky with only a few high white clouds. At least they would not have rain to contend with, too. Even a wagon might have been able to slip away in some of the heavy rainstorms Caemlyn had seen lately.

A thick snake of men ten and twelve abreast spanned the Queen's Plaza, now, stretching out of sight in both directions, horsemen in helmets and breastplates alternating with men in every sort of helmet imaginable carrying shouldered halberds, most wearing mail shirts or jerkins sewn with steel discs and only rarely a breastplate, each group large or small headed by the banner of its House. Or the banner of a mercenary company. The sell-swords would have too many watchers to try slacking off today. Minus the crossbowmen and archers, there would be close on twelve thousand men in that column, two-thirds of them mounted. How many would be dead before noon? She pushed that thought out of her mind. She needed every one of them to convince the Sea Folk. Any man who died today could die as easily on the wall tomorrow. Every man of them had come to Caemlyn prepared to die for Elayne.

At the head of the column were better than a thousand Guardsmen, helmets and breastplates gleaming in the sun, steel-tipped lances slanted precisely, the first of them waiting behind the banner of Andor, the rearing White Lion on a field of scarlet, and Elayne's banner, the Golden Lily on blue, at the edge of one of Caemlyn's many parks. It had been a park, anyway, but oaks hundreds of years old had been cut down and hauled away along with all the other trees and the flowering bushes, their roots dug out to clear a smooth space a hundred paces wide. The graveled paths and grassy ground had long since been trampled to mud by hooves and boots. Three other parks around the palace had received the same treatment, to make places for weaving gateways.

Guybon and Dyelin were already there, along with all the lords and ladies who had answered Elayne's call, from young Perival Mantear to Brannin Martan and his wife, all mounted. Perival wore helmet and breastplate like every other male present. Brannin's were plain and dull and slightly dented where the armorer's hammer had failed its task, tools of his trade as surely as the plain-hilted sword scabbarded at his side. Perival's were as gilded as Conail's and Branlet's, worked with the silver Anvil of Mantear where theirs were lacquered with Northan's Black Eagles and Gilyard's Red Leopards. Pretty armor, for being seen in. Birgitte hoped the women had sense enough to keep those boys out of any fighting. Looking at some of those women's faces, grim and determined, she hoped they had sense enough to stay clear themselves. At least none was wearing a sword. The simple truth was, a woman had to be more skilled than a man to face him with a sword. Stronger arms made too much difference, otherwise. Much better to use a bow.

The Windfinders were grimacing as they shifted their bare feet uneasily on ground still muddy from yesterday's downpour. Wet, they were more than accustomed to, but not mud.

"This man will not tell me where the gateway is to reach," Chanelle said furiously, pointing to Guybon as Birgitte dismounted. "I want to be done so I can wash my feet."

"My Lady!" a woman's voice called from back down the street. "My Lady Birgitte!" Reene Harfor came running up the line of Guardsmen, her red skirts held high, exposing her stockinged legs to the knee. Birgitte did not think she had ever seen the woman so much as trot. Mistress Harfor was one of those women who always did everything perfectly. Every time they met she made Birgitte conscious of every last mistake she herself had ever made. Two men in red-and-white livery were running behind her, carrying a litter between them. When they came closer, Birgitte saw that it held a lanky, helmetless Guardsman with an arrow piercing his right arm and another jutting from his right thigh. Blood trickled down both shafts, so he left a thin trail of drops on the paving stones. "He insisted on being brought to you or Captain Guybon immediately, my Lady," Mistress Harfor said breathlessly, fanning herself with one hand.

The young Guardsman struggled to sit up until Birgitte pressed him back down. "Three or four companies of mercenaries are attacking the Far Madding Gate, my Lady," he said, pain wracking his face and tinging his voice. "From inside the city, I mean. They placed archers to shoot anyone who tried to wave the signal flags for help, but I managed to get away, and my horse lasted just long enough."

Birgitte growled an oath. Cordwyn, Gomaisen and Bakuvun would be among them, she was ready to wager. She should have pressed Elayne to put them out of the city as soon as they made their demands. She did not realize she had spoken aloud until the wounded Guardsman spoke up.

"No, my Lady. Leastwise, not Bakuvun. Him and a dozen or so of his men dropped by to toss . . . uh, to pass the time, and the lieutenant figures they're the only reason we've managed to hold on. If they are still holding. They were using battering rams on the tower doors when I looked back. But there's more, my Lady. There's men massing in Low Caemlyn outside the gates. Ten thousand, maybe twice that. Hard to tell, the way those streets twist."

Birgitte winced. Ten thousand men would be enough to carry an assault from the outside whether or not the mercenaries were held off unless she sent everything, and she could not. What in the Light was she to do? Burn her, she could plan a raid to rescue someone from a fortress or scout in country held by the enemy with confidence that she knew what she was doing, but this was a battle, with the fate of Caemlyn and maybe the throne in the balance. Still, she had it to do. "Mistress Harfor, take this man back to the palace and see his wounds tended, please." There was no point in asking the Windfinders for Healing. They had already made it clear that was taking part in the war, in their view. "Dyelin, leave me all of the horse and a thousand halberdmen. You take the rest and all of the crossbowmen and archers available. And every man you can scrape together who can hold a sword. If the gate is still holding when the Kinswomen get you there, make sure it continues to hold. If it's fallen, take it back. And hold that bloody wall till I can get there."

"Very well," Dyelin said as if those were the easiest orders in the world to carry out. "Conail, Catalyn, Branlet, Perival, you come with me. Your foot will fight better with you there." Conail looked disappointed, no doubt seeing himself riding in a gallant charge, but he gathered his reins and whispered something that made the two younger boys chuckle.

"So will my horse fight better," Catalyn protested. "I want to help rescue Elayne."

"You came to help her secure the throne," Dyelin said sharply, "and you'll go where you're needed to see to that, or you and I will have another talk later." Whatever that meant, Catalyn's plump face reddened, but she sullenly followed Dyelin and the others when they rode away.

Guybon looked at Birgitte, yet he said nothing, though likely he was wondering why she was not sending more. He would not challenge her publicly. The problem was, she did not know how many Black sisters would be with Elayne. She needed every Windfinder, needed them to believe they were all necessary. Had there been time, she would have stripped the sentries from the outer towers, stripped even the gates.

"Make the gateway," she told Chanelle. "To just this side of the ridge east of the city, right on top of the Erinin Road and facing away from the city."

The Windfinders gathered in a circle, doing whatever they had to do to link and taking their bloody time about it. Suddenly the vertical silver-blue slash of a gateway appeared, widening into an opening, five paces tall and covering the whole width of the cleared ground, that showed a wide road of hard-packed clay climbing the gentle slope of the ten-span-high ridge on its way to the River Erinin. Arymilla had camps beyond that ridge. Given the news, they might be empty—with luck, they were—but she could not concern herself with them now in any event.

"Forward and deploy as ordered!" Guybon shouted, and spurred his tall bay through followed by the gathered nobles and the Guardsmen ten abreast. The Guardsmen began curling off to the left and out of sight while the nobles took a position a little up the ridge. Some began peering toward the city through looking glasses. Guybon dismounted and ran, crouching, to peer over the crest through his. Birgitte could almost feel the impatience of the Guardswomen waiting behind her.

"You did not need a gateway this large," Chanelle said, frowning at the column of horsemen flowing into the gateway. "Why—?"

"Come with me," Birgitte said, taking the Windfinder by her arm. "I want to show you something." Pulling the dun along by his reins, she began drawing the woman toward the gateway. "You can come back once you've seen it.” If she knew the least thing about Chanelle, she was the one guiding the circle. For the rest, she was counting on human nature. She did not look back, yet she nearly sighed with relief when she heard the other Windfinders murmuring among themselves behind her. Following.

Whatever Guybon had seen, it was good news, because he straightened up before running back down to his horse. Arymilla must have stripped her camps to the bone. Make it twenty thousand at the Far Madding Gate, then, if not more. The Light send it was holding. The Light send everywhere was holding. But Elayne first. First and above all else.

When she reached Guybon, who was back on his bay, the Guardswomen arrayed themselves in three lines behind Caseille off to one side. The whole hundred-pace width of the gateway was filled with men and horses now, trotting as they hurried left and right to join the others already forming in three ranks that grew to either side of the road. Good. There would be no easy way for the Windfinders to duck back through for a little while. A wagon with an arched canvas cover and a four-horse team, surrounded by a small mounted party, was halted in the road just beyond the last buildings of Low Caemlyn, perhaps a mile distant. Beyond it, people bustled in the open brick markets that lined the road, going about their lives as best they could, but they might as well not have existed. Elayne was in that wagon. Birgitte raised her hand without taking her eyes from the vehicle, and Guybon put his brass-mounted looking glass in her palm. Wagon and riders leaped closer when she raised the tube to her eye.

“What did you want me to see?” Chanelle demanded.

“In a moment,” Birgitte replied. There were four men, three of them mounted, but more important were the seven women on horseback. It was a good looking glass, but not good enough for her to make out an ageless face at that distance. Still, she had to assume all seven were Aes Sedai. Eight against seven might have seemed almost even odds, but not when the eight were linked. Not if she could make the eight take part. What were the Darkfriends thinking, seeing thousands of soldiers and armsmen appear from behind what would seem to them a heat haze hanging in the air? She lowered the glass. Noblemen were beginning to ride down as their armsmen came out and went to join the lines.

However surprised the Darkfriends were, they did not dither long. Lightning began flashing down out of a clear sky, silver-blue bolts that struck the ground with thunderous crashes and threw men and horses like splashed mud. Horses reared and plunged and screamed, but men fought to control their mounts, to hold their places. No one ran. The booming thunder that accompanied those blasts struck Birgitte like blows, staggering her. She could feel her hair stirring, trying to rise out of her braid. The air smelled . . . sharp. It seemed to tingle. Again lightning lashed the ranks. In Low Caemlyn, people were running. Most were running away, but some fools actually ran to where they could have a better view. The ends of narrow streets opening onto the countryside began filling with spectators.

“If we’re going to face that, we might as well be moving and make it harder for them,” Guybon said, gathering his reins. “With your permission, my Lady?”

“We’ll lose fewer if you’re moving,” Birgitte agreed, and he spurred down the ridge.

Caseille halted her horse in front of Birgitte and saluted, an arm across her chest. Her narrow face was grim behind the face-bars of her lacquered helmet. “Permission for the Bodyguard to join the line, my Lady?” You could hear the capital. They were not just any bodyguard, they were the Daughter-Heir’s Bodyguard and would be the Queen’s Bodyguard.

“Granted,” Birgitte said. If anyone had a right, these women did.

The Arafellin whirled her horse and galloped down the slope followed by the rest of the Bodyguard to take their place in those lightning-torn ranks. A company of mercenaries, perhaps two hundred men in black-painted helmets and breastplates, riding behind a red banner bearing a running black wolf, halted when they saw what they were riding into, but men behind the banners of half a dozen Houses pushed past them, and they had no choice but to go on. More noblemen rode down to lead their men, Brannin and Kelwin, Laerid and Barel, others. None hesitated once he saw his own banner appear. Sergase was not the only woman to move her horse a few paces as if she, too, meant to join with her armsmen when her banner came out of the gateway.

“At a walk!” Guybon shouted, to be heard over the explosions. All along the line, other voices echoed him. “Advance!” Wheeling his bay, he rode slowly toward the Darkfriend Aes Sedai while lightning boomed and crashed and men and horses flew in fountains of earth.

“What did you want me to see?” Chanelle demanded again. “I want to be away from this place.” Small danger of that for the moment. Men were still coming out of the gateway, galloping or running to catch up. Fireballs fell among the ranks, too, now, adding their own eruptions of dirt, arms, legs. A horse's head spun lazily into the air.

"This," Birgitte said, gesturing to the scene in front of them. Guybon had begun to trot, pulling the others with him, the three ranks holding steady in their advance, others coming as hard as they could to join them. Abruptly a leg-thick bar of what appeared to be liquid white fire shot out from one of the women beside the wagon. It quite literally carved a gap fifteen paces wide in the lines. For a heartbeat, shimmering flecks floated in the air, the shapes of men and horses struck, and then were consumed. The bar suddenly jerked up into the air, higher and higher, then winked out leaving dim purple lines across Birgitte's vision. Balefire, burning men out of the Pattern so that they were dead before it struck them. She swung the looking glass up to her eye long enough to spot the woman holding a slim black rod that appeared to be perhaps a pace long.

Guybon began to charge. It was too soon, but his only hope was to close while he still had men alive. His only hope but one. Over the thunderous explosions of fireballs and lightning rose a ragged cry of, "Elayne and Andor!" Ragged, but full-throated. The banners were all streaming. A brave sight, if you could ignore how many were falling. A horse and rider struck squarely by a fireball simply disintegrated, men and horses all around them going down as well. Some managed to rise again. A riderless horse stood on three legs, tried to run and fell over thrashing.

"This?" Chanelle said incredulously. "I have no desire to watch men die." Another bar of balefire sliced a breach of nearly twenty paces in the charging ranks before knifing down into the ground, cutting a trench halfway back to the wagon before it vanished. There were a good many dead, though not so many as it seemed there should be. Birgitte had seen the same in battles during the Trolloc Wars where the Power had been used. For every man who lay still, two or three were staggering to their feet or trying to stem a flow of blood. For every horse stiff-legged in death, two more stood on wobbly legs. The hail of fire and lightning continued unabated.

"Then stop it," Birgitte said. "If they kill all the soldiers, or just enough to make the rest break, then Elayne is lost." Not forever. Burn her, she would track her for the rest of her life to see her free, but the Light only knew what they might do to her in that time. "Zaida's bargain is lost. *You* will have lost it."

The morning was not warm, yet sweat beaded on Chanelle’s forehead. Fireballs and lightning erupted among the riders following Guybon. The woman holding the rod raised her arm again. Even without using the looking glass, Birgitte was sure it was pointed straight at Guybon. He had to see it, but he never swerved a hair.

Suddenly another bolt of lightning slashed down. And struck the woman holding the rod. She flew in one direction, her mount in another. One of the wagon team sagged to the ground while the others danced and reared. They would have run except for their dead trace-mate. The other horses around the wagon were rearing and plunging, too. The rain of fire and lightning ceased as the Aes Sedai fought to control their horses, to maintain their saddles. Rather than trying to calm his team, the man on the driver’s seat leaped down and drew his sword as he began to run toward the charging horsemen. The onlookers in Low Caemlyn were running again, too, this time away.

“Take the others alive!” Birgitte snapped. She did not much care whether they lived—they would die soon enough for being Darkfriends and murderers—but Elayne was in that bloody wagon!

Chanelle nodded stiffly, and around the wagon, riders began toppling from their fractious mounts to lie struggling on the ground as if bound hand and foot. Which they were, of course. The running man fell on his face and lay writhing. “I shielded the women, too,” Chanelle said. Even holding the Power, they would have been no match for a circle of eight.

Guybon raised his hand, slowing the charge to a walk. It was remarkable how short a time it all had taken. He was less than halfway to the wagon. Men mounted and afoot were still pouring out of the gateway. Swinging into the dun’s saddle, Birgitte galloped toward Elayne. *Bloody woman*, she thought. The bond had never once carried any hint of fear.

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CHAPTER 33

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Nine Out of Ten

The Darkfriends had taken no chances with Elayne. Aside from shielding her, Temaile had taken seemingly malicious pleasure in tying her in a tight knot with her head between her knees. Her muscles already ached from the cramped position. The gag, a dirty piece of rag with a vile, oily taste, tied so tightly that it dug into the corners of her mouth, had been meant to keep her from shouting for help at the gates. Not that she would have; all that would have done was sentence the men guarding the gates to death. She could feel the six Black sisters holding *saidar* until they were through the gate. But the blindfold had been an unnecessary touch. She thought they wanted to add to her sense of helplessness, yet she refused to feel helpless. After all, she was perfectly safe until her babies were born, and so were her babies. Min had said so.

She knew she was in a wagon or cart by the sound of harness and the feel of rough boards beneath her. They had not bothered to pad the floorboards with a blanket. A wagon, she thought. There seemed to be more than one horse pulling it. The wagon box smelled of old hay so strongly that she wanted to sneeze. Her situation seemed hopeless, but Birgitte would not fail her.

She felt Birgitte leap from somewhere miles behind her to perhaps a mile ahead, and she wanted to laugh. The bond said Birgitte was aimed at her target, and Birgitte Silverbow never missed. When the channeling started on both sides of the wagon, the desire to laugh faded. Determination held rock-steady in the bond, but there was something else as well, now, a strong distaste and a rising . . . not anger, but close. Men would be dying out there. Instead of laughing, Elayne wanted to weep for them. They deserved someone to weep for them, and they were dying for her. As Vandene and Sareitha had died. Sadness for them welled up in her again. No guilt, though. Only by letting Falion and Marillin walk free could they have been spared, and neither would have countenanced that. There had been no way to anticipate the arrival of the others, or that strange weapon Asne had.

A thunderous crash came close at hand, and her conveyance was jolted so violently that she bounced on the floorboards. Her knees and shins were going to be bruised from that. She sneezed in the dust that had risen with her, sneezed again. She could feel individual hairs lifting where they were not held down by the gag and blindfold. The air smelled peculiar. A lightning strike, it appeared. She hoped Birgitte had managed to involve the Windfinders, unlikely as that seemed. The time would come when the Kin would have to use the Power as a weapon—no one could stand aside from Tarmon Gai'don—but let them preserve their innocence a little longer. Moments later, the shield on her vanished.

Unable to see, she could not channel to any real purpose, but she could sense weaves near her, some of Spirit, some of Air. Without seeing the weaves, she was unable to know what they were, yet she could make a reasonable guess. Her captors were themselves captives now, shielded and bound. And all she could do was wait impatiently. Birgitte was coming closer rapidly, yet now she felt anxious to have that bloody web of ropes off her.

The wagon box creaked as someone heaved herself in. Birgitte. The bond carried a flash of joy. In moments, the ropes fell away from her and Birgitte's hands went to the knot of the gag. Moving a little stiffly, Elayne untied the blindfold herself. Light, she was going to ache like fury until she could ask for Healing. That reminded her that she would have to ask the Windfinders, and the sadness rose all over again for Vandene and Sareitha.

Once she could spit out the gag, she wanted to ask for water to wash away the oily taste, but instead, she said, "What kept you?" Her laughter at the other woman's sudden consternation was cut short by another sneeze. "Let's get out of here, Birgitte. The Kin?"

"Windfinders," Birgitte answered, holding open the canvas flap at the back of the wagon. "Chanelle decided she'd rather not report losing her bargain to Zaida."

Elayne sniffed in disdain, a mistake. Sneezing repeatedly, she climbed down from the wagon as quickly as she could manage. Her legs were as stiff as her arms. Burn her, but she wanted a hot bath. And a hairbrush. Birgitte's white-collared red coat looked somewhat rumpled, but Elayne suspected she made her warder appear fresh from the dressing room.

When her feet hit the ground, mounted Guardsmen in a thick ring around the wagon raised a loud cheer, shaking their lances in the air. Guardswomen whooped, too, apparently almost every last one of them. Two of the men bore Andor's White Lion and her Golden Lily. That brought a smile. The Queen's Guards were sworn to defend Andor, the Queen and the Daughter-Heir, yet the decision to carry her personal banner had to have been Charlz Guybon’s. Sitting a tall bay with his helmet resting on the saddlebow, he bowed to her, a broad smile on his lips. The man *was* a pleasure to look at. Perhaps he would do for a third Warder. Beyond the Guards rose House banners and banners of mercenary companies, banner after banner. Light, how many men had Birgitte brought? That could be answered later, though. First Elayne wanted to see her prisoners.

Asne lay spreadeagled on the road, her empty eyes staring at the sky; the shield on her was unneeded. The others lay as still, bound with flows of Air that held their arms to their sides and snugged their divided skirts against their legs. A *much* more comfortable position than she had been in. Most seemed remarkably composed considering their situation, though Temaile scowled at her and Falion appeared about to sick up. Shiaine’s mud-smeared face would have done credit to any Aes Sedai. The three men bound with Air were anything but composed. They writhed and struggled, glaring at the riders surrounding them as if they wanted nothing more than to attack them all. That was enough to identify them as Asne’s Warders, though not necessarily as Darkfriends. Whether they were or not, they would still have to be imprisoned, to protect others from the death-rage that Asne’s death had filled them with. They would do anything to kill whomever they held responsible.

“How did they find us?” Chesmal demanded. If she had not been lying in the road with a dirty face, no one would have thought her a prisoner.

“My Warder,” Elayne said, smiling at Birgitte. “One of them.”

“A *woman* Warder?” Chesmal said disdainfully.

Marillin shook in her bonds with silent laughter for a moment. “I’d heard that,” she said when the shaking ceased, “but it seemed too incredible to be true.”

“You heard this, and you never mentioned it?” Temaile said, twisting around to transfer her scowl to Marillin. “You great fool!”

“You forget yourself,” Marillin said sharply, and the next instant they were arguing about whether Temaile should defer to her! In truth, Temaile should—Elayne could sense their relative strengths—yet it hardly seemed a topic they would argue over now!

“Somebody gag these women,” Elayne ordered. Caseille dismounted, handing her reins to another Guardswoman, and strode over to begin cutting a strip from Temaile’s skirts with her dagger. “Load them into the wagon and cut away that dead horse. I want to get back inside the walls before

Arymilla’s people beyond the ridge feel tempted.” The last thing she needed now was a pitched battle. Whatever the outcome, Arymilla could afford to lose more men than she. “Where are the Windfinders, Birgitte?”

“Still on the ridge. I think they believe they can deny taking part if they don’t get too near the carnage. But you don’t have to worry about being attacked here. The camps beyond the ridge are empty.” Caseille hoisted Temaile over her shoulder and staggered over to heave her into the wagon like a sack of grain. Guardswomen were picking up the other women, too. They wisely left the struggling Warders to the Guardsmen. It required two to handle each of them. A pair of tall Guardsmen were unfastening the dead horse’s harness.

“All I saw were camp followers, grooms and the like,” Charlz put in.

“I think all of her camps may be empty,” Birgitte went on. “She sent heavy assaults against the northern wall this morning to draw as many of our men as possible, and she has twenty thousand or more in Low Caemlyn below the Far Madding Gate. Some of the mercenaries changed colors and are attacking it from inside, but I sent Dyelin with everything I could spare. As soon as you’re safe inside the walls, I’ll take the rest to help her. To add to the good news, Luan and the rest of that lot are riding north. They could be here this afternoon.”

Elayne’s breath caught. Luan and the rest would have to be dealt with when they appeared, but the other news . . . ! “Do you remember what Mistress Harfor reported, Birgitte? Arymilla and the others all intend to be with the first party to ride into Caemlyn. They must be outside the Far Madding Gate, too. How many men do you have here?”

“What’s the butcher’s bill, Guybon?” Birgitte asked, eyeing Elayne warily. The bond carried wariness, too. Great wariness.

“I don’t have a full tally yet, my Lady. Some of the bodies. . . .” Charlz grimaced. “I’d say as many as five or six hundred dead, though, perhaps a few more. Twice as many wounded one way and another. As nasty a few minutes as I’ve ever seen.”

“Call it ten thousand, Elayne,” Birgitte said, thick braid swaying as she shook her head. She tucked her thumbs behind her belt, and determination filled the bond. “Arymilla has to have at least twice that at the Far Madding Gate, maybe three times if she’s really stripped her camps. If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking. . . . I told Dyelin to retake the gate if it had fallen, but it’s more likely she’s fighting Arymilla inside the city. If, by some miracle, the gate is holding, you’re talking better than two to one odds against us.”

“If they’re through the gate,” Elayne said stubbornly, “it’s unlikely they closed it behind them. We’ll take them in the rear.” It was not all stubbornness. Not entirely. She had not trained with weapons, but she had received all of the other lessons Gawyn had gotten from Gareth Bryne. A queen had to understand the battle plans her generals gave her rather than simply accept them blindly. “If the gate is holding, we’ll have them trapped between us and the wall. Numbers won’t count so much in Low Caemlyn. Arymilla won’t be able to line up any more men across a street than we can. We *are* going to do it, Birgitte. Now somebody find me a horse.”

For a moment, she thought the other woman was going to refuse, which ratcheted up her stubbornness, but Birgitte exhaled heavily. “Tzigan, catch up that tall gray mare for Lady Elayne.”

It seemed that everyone around them except the Darkfriends sighed. They must have thought they were going to see a display of Elayne Trakand’s fabled temper. Knowing that almost sparked one. Burn her bouncing moods!

Stepping closer, Birgitte lowered her voice. “But you’ll ride surrounded by your bodyguard. This isn’t some fool story with a queen carrying her banner into battle to lead her troops. I know one of your ancestors did that, but you’re not her, and you don’t have a broken army to rally.”

“Why, that was exactly my plan,” Elayne said sweetly. “*How ever* did you guess?”

Birgitte snorted with laughter and muttered “Bloody woman” not quite softly enough to escape detection. Affection flowed in the bond, though.

It was not so simple, of course. Men had to be told off to help the wounded. Some could walk, but many could not. Too many had tourniquets around the bloody stump of an arm or a leg. Charlz and the nobles gathered around Elayne and Birgitte to hear the plan of attack, which *was* simple of necessity, but then Chanelle refused to change the gateway until Elayne agreed that this time they need provide transport only and sealed the agreement with them both kissing their fingertips and pressing them to the other’s lips. Only then did the gateway dwindle to a vertical silvery slash and widen again into a hundred-pace-wide view of Caemlyn from the south.

There were no people in the brick markets lining the wide road that ran north from the gateway to the Far Madding Gate, but a great mass of men, mounted and afoot, crowded the road out of bowshot from the walls. The first of them was only a few hundred paces from the gateway. It appeared that they spilled into the side streets, too. The mounted men were to the front with a thicket of banners, but cavalry or infantry, they were all looking toward the gates of Caemlyn itself. The closed gates. Elayne could have shouted for joy.

She rode through first, but Birgitte was taking no chances. Her bodyguard gathered around her, herding her off to one side. Birgitte was right by her side, but somehow they did not seem to be herding *her*. Fortunately, no one tried to object to her pushing the gray forward until only a single line of Guardswomen was between her and the road. *That* line might as well have been a stone wall. The gray was indeed tall, however, so she could see without standing in the stirrups. She should have lengthened those. They were just a little short for her. That made this Chesmal's horse, since she was the only one who came close to her own height. A horse could not be tainted by its rider—just because Chesmal was Black Ajah did not make the *horse* evil—but she felt uncomfortable on the animal for more than short stirrups. The gray would be sold, the gray and all the other horses the Darkfriends had been riding, and the money distributed to the poor.

Cavalry and foot came out of the gateway behind Charlz, enough to fill it from side to side. Followed by the White Lion and the Golden Lily, he started up the road at a trot with five hundred Guardsmen, spread out to cover the width of the road. Other parties of similar size split off and vanished into the streets of Low Caemlyn. When the last men exited the gateway, it dwindled and vanished. Now, there was no quick escape if anything went wrong. Now, they had to win, or Arymilla would as good as have the throne whether or not she had Caemlyn.

"We need Mat Cauthon's bloody luck today," Birgitte muttered.

"You said something like that before," Elayne said. "What do you mean?"

Birgitte gave her a peculiar look. The bond carried . . . amusement! "Have you ever seen him dicing?"

"I hardly spend much time in places where there's dicing, Birgitte."

"Let's just say he's luckier than any other man I've ever met."

Shaking her head, Elayne put Mat Cauthon out of her mind. Charlz’s men were shutting off her view as they rode forward. Not charging yet, trying to make no more noise than absolutely necessary. With a little luck, her men would have Arymilla’s surrounded before they knew what was happening. And then they would hit Arymilla from every side. Mat was the luckiest man Birgitte had ever met? In that case, he must be very lucky indeed.

Suddenly Charlz’s Guardsmen were moving faster, their steel-tipped lances swinging down. Someone must have looked back. Shouts rose, cries of alarm and one thunderous shout she heard repeated from many directions. “Elayne and Andor!”

There were other cries, as well. “The Moons!” and “The Fox!” “The Triple Keys!” and “The Hammer!” and “The Black Banner!” Others, for lesser Houses. But from her side came only the one, repeated again and again. “Elayne and Andor!”

Suddenly she was shaking, half laughing, half weeping. The Light send she was not consigning those men to their deaths for nothing.

The cries faded, largely replaced by the clash of steel on steel, by shouts and screams as men killed or died. Abruptly she realized the gates were swinging out. And she could not see! Kicking her feet free of the stirrups, she clambered up to stand on the high-cantled saddle. The gray shifted nervously, unaccustomed to being a stepstool, but not enough to disturb her balance. Birgitte muttered a particularly pungent oath, but the next moment she was standing on her saddle, too. Hundreds of crossbowmen and archers were pouring out of the Far Madding Gate, but were they her men, or the renegade mercenaries?

For answer, archers began firing at Arymilla’s massed cavalry as fast as they could nock and draw. The first crossbows went up and loosed a volley. Immediately those men began working their cranks to rewind their crossbows, but others rushed past them to loose a second flight of bolts that cut down men and horses like scythes reaping barley. More archers spilled out of the gate, firing as fast as they could. A third rank of crossbowmen ran forward to fire, a fourth, a fifth, and then men wielding halberds were pushing past the crossbowmen still running out of the gate. A halberd was a fearsome weapon, combining spearpoint and axe blade with a hook for pulling men out of the saddle. Horsemen with no room to charge their lances, their swords out-reached by the halberd’s long haft, began falling.

Men in red coats and burnished breastplates were galloping out of the gate now, Guardsmen swinging to left and right to find another way to get at Arymilla's ranks. The flow of them went on and on, unceasing. How in the Light could Dyelin have so many of the Guards? Unless. . . . Burn the woman, she must have scooped up the half-trained men! Well, half-trained or not, they would be anointed in blood today.

Suddenly three figures in gilded helmets and breastplates rode through the gates, swords in hand. Two of them were very small. The shouts that rose when they appeared were thin with distance, but still audible over the din of battle. "The Black Eagles!" and "The Anvil!" and "The Red Leopards!" Two mounted women appeared in the gate, struggling until the taller managed to pull the other's horse back out of sight.

"Blood and bloody ashes!" Elayne snapped. "Conail's old enough, I suppose, but Branlet and Perival are boys! Somebody should have kept them out of that!"

"Dyelin held them back long enough," Birgitte said calmly. The bond carried bone-deep calm. "Longer than I thought she could hold Conail. And she did manage to keep Catalyn out of it. Anyway, the boys have a few hundred men between them and the forefront, and I don't see anyone trying to make room for them to squeeze forward." It was true. The three were waving their swords impotently at least fifty paces from where men were dying. But then, fifty paces was a short range for bow or crossbow.

Men began appearing on the rooftops, first dozens then hundreds, archers and crossbowmen climbing over the roof peaks, working their way across the slates like spiders until they could shoot down into the packed mass below. One slipped and fell, his body lying atop the men in the street and jerking as it was stabbed repeatedly. Another suddenly reared up, a shaft sticking out of his side, and toppled from his perch. He also lay atop the men in the street, twitching as he was stabbed again and again.

"They're jammed together too tightly," Birgitte said excitedly. "They can't raise a bow much less draw one. I'll wager the dead don't even have room to fall down. It won't be long, now."

But the slaughter continued for a good half-hour before the first shouts of "Quarter!" rose. Men began hanging their helmets on sword hilts and raising them overhead, risking death in the hope of life. Footmen stripped off helmets and held their hands up empty. Horsemen flung down lances, helmets, swords, and raised their hands. It spread like a fever, the cry bellowing from thousands of throats. “Quarter!”

Elayne sat down on her saddle properly. It was done. Now to learn how well it had been done.

The fighting did not stop immediately, of course. Some tried to fight on, but they fought alone and died or were pulled down by men around them who were no longer ready to die. At last, however, even the most diehard began shedding weapons and armor, and if not every voice cried for quarter, the roar was still thunderous. Weaponless men shorn of helmets and breastplates and any other armor they might have worn began staggering through the line of Guardsmen, hands above their heads. Halberdmen herded them like sheep. They had something of the stunned look of sheep in a slaughter yard. The same thing must have been being repeated on dozens of Low Caemlyn’s narrow streets, and at the gates, because the only shouts she heard were for quarter, and those were beginning to dwindle as men realized it was being granted.

The sun lacked no more than an hour of its noonday peak by the time the nobles were all separated out. The lesser were escorted inside the city, where they would be held for ransom. To be paid once the throne was secure. The first of the greater nobles to be brought to her, escorted by Charlz and a dozen Guardsmen, were Arymilla, Naean and Elenia. Charlz had a bloody gash down his left sleeve, and a dent in his shining breastplate that must have been made by a hammer blow, but his features were composed behind the face-bars of his helmet. She heaved a huge sigh of relief to see the three women. Among the dead or among the captives, the others would be found. She had decapitated her opposition. At least until Luan and the others arrived. The Guardswomen in front of her at last moved aside so she could confront her prisoners.

The three were garbed as if they had intended to attend Arymilla’s coronation that very day. Her red silk dress was sewn with seed pearls on the bosom and embroidered with rearing white lions marching up the sleeves. Swaying in her saddle, she had the same stunned look in her brown eyes that her soldiers had. Naean, slim and straight-backed in blue with the silver Triple Keys of Arawn climbing her sleeves and silver scrollwork across her bosom, her gleaming black hair caught in a silver net set with sapphires, seemed subdued rather than numb. She even managed a sneer, though it was weak. Honey-haired Elenia, in green elaborately embroidered with gold, shared her glares between Arymilla and Elayne. The bond carried equal measures of triumph and disgust. Birgitte's dislike of these women was as personal as Elayne's own.

"You will be my guests in the palace for the time being," Elayne told them. "I hope your coffers are deep. Your ransoms will pay for this war you've caused." That was malicious of her, but she felt spiteful all of a sudden. Their coffers were not deep at all. They had borrowed far more than they could repay in order to hire mercenaries. And bribe mercenaries. They faced ruin without any ransom. With, they faced devastation.

"You cannot believe it ends this way," Arymilla said hoarsely. She sounded as if she were trying to convince herself. "Jarid is still in the field with a considerable force. Jarid and others. Tell her, Elenia."

"Jarid will try to preserve what he can of Sarand from this disaster you've forced us into," Elenia snarled. They began shouting at one another, but Elayne ignored them. She wondered how they would enjoy sharing a bed with Naean.

Next to appear under escort was Lir Baryn, and moments later Karind Anshar. As slender as a blade, and as strong, Lir wore a thoughtful expression rather than defiant or sullen. His green coat, embroidered with the silver Winged Hammer of House Baryn on the high collar, bore the marks of the breastplate he was no longer wearing, and his dark hair was matted with sweat. More glistened on his face. He had not gotten so sweaty watching other men fight. Karind was garbed as grandly as the other women, in shimmering blue silk heavy with silver braid and pearls in her gray-streaked hair. Her square face looked resigned, especially after Elayne told them about their ransoms. Neither had borrowed as heavily as the other three so far as she knew, but that ransom would still cut deep.

Then two Guardsmen appeared with a woman a little older than Elayne, in simple blue, a woman she thought she recognized. A single enameled brooch, a red star and silver sword on glittering black, appeared to be her only jewelry. But why was Sylvase Caeren being brought to her? A pretty woman with alert blue eyes that held steady on Elayne's face, she was Lord Nasin's heir, not the High Seat of Caeren.

"Caeren stands for Trakand," Sylvase said shockingly as soon as she reined in. The bond echoed Elayne's startlement. Arymilla gaped at Sylvase as if she were mad. "My grandfather suffered a seizure, Arymilla," the young woman said calmly, “and my cousins fell over themselves affirming me as High Seat. I will publish it, Elayne, if you wish.”

“That might be best,” Elayne said slowly. Publication would make her support irrevocable. This would not be the first time a House had switched sides, even without the death of a High Seat, but best to be certain. “Trakand welcomes Caeren warmly, Sylvase.” Best not to be too distant, either. She knew little of Sylvase Caeren.

Sylvase nodded, accepting. So she had at least a degree of intelligence. She knew she would not be fully trusted until she demonstrated her loyalty by sending out the proclamations of support. “If you trust me a little, may I have custody of Arymilla, Naean and Elenia? In the Royal Palace, of course, or wherever you choose to house me. I believe my new secretary, Master Lounalt, may be able to convince them to throw their support to you.”

For some reason, Naean gave a loud cry and would have fallen from her saddle if a Guardsman had not grabbed her arm to support her. Arymilla and Elenia both appeared ready to sick up.

“I think not,” Elayne said. No proposed conversation with a secretary produced those reactions. It seemed Sylvase had a hard core to her. “Naean and Elenia have published their support of Arymilla. They’ll hardly destroy themselves by recanting.” That truly would destroy them. Smaller Houses sworn to them would begin falling away until their own House dwindled in importance. They themselves might not survive as High Seats much beyond announcing that they now stood for Trakand. And as for Arymilla. . . . Elayne would not allow Arymilla to change her tune. She would refuse the woman’s support if it were offered!

Something grim entered Sylvase’s gaze as she glanced at the three women. “They might, with the proper persuasion.” Oh, yes; a very hard core. “But as you wish, Elayne. Be very careful of them, though. Treachery is in their blood and bones.”

“Baryn stands for Trakand,” Lir announced suddenly. “I, too, will publish it, Elayne.”

“Anshar stands for Trakand,” Karind said in firm tones. “I will send the proclamations out today.”

“Traitors!” Arymilla cried. “I’ll see you dead for this!” She fumbled at her belt, where a dagger’s scabbard hung, jeweled and empty, as if she intended to see to the matter herself. Elenia began to laugh, but she did not sound amused. It sounded almost like weeping.

Elayne drew a deep breath. Now she had nine of the ten Houses needed. She was under no illusions. Whatever Sylvase’s reasons, Lir and Karind were trying to salvage what they could by cutting themselves loose from a lost cause and hitching themselves to one that suddenly appeared to be rising. They would expect her to give them preferment for standing for her before she had the throne while forgetting that they had ever supported Arymilla. She would do neither. But neither could she reject them out of hand. “Trakand welcomes Baryn.” Never warmly, though. Never that. “Trakand welcomes Anshar. Captain Guybon, get the prisoners into the city as soon as you can. Armsmen for Caeren, Baryn and Anshar will be restored their weapons and armor once the proclamations have been sent out, but they can have their banners back now.” He saluted her and wheeled his bay, already shouting orders.

As she heeled the gray toward Dyelin, who was riding out of a side street followed by Catalyn and the three young fools in their gilded armor, Sylvase, Lir and Karind fell in behind her and Birgitte. She felt no disquiet having them at her back, not with a hundred Guardswomen at theirs. They would be watched very closely until those proclamations were sent. Including Sylvase. Elayne’s mind was already casting itself ahead.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Birgitte said softly. “You’ve just won a great victory.”

“And in a few hours,” she replied, “I’ll learn whether I have to win another.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 34

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A Cup of Kaf

Furyk Karede pressed his gauntleted fist to his heart, returning the sentry's salute, and ignored the fact that the man spat as he rode past. He hoped the eighty men and twenty-one Ogier behind him ignored it, too. They had better, if they knew what was good for them. He was here for information, and a killing would make getting it more difficult. Since his manservant Ajimbura had planted his knife in a Standardbearer's heart over a perceived insult to his master—in truth, a real insult, but Ajimbura should have held his temper the way he himself had—since then, he had taken to leaving the wiry little hill-tribesman in the forest with the *sul'dam* and *damane* and some of the Guards to watch over the packhorses when he entered a camp. He had come a long way from Ebou Dar chasing the wind, almost four weeks of haring after rumors, until the news brought him here to this camp in east central Altara.

The neat rows of pale tents and horselines stood in a forest clearing large enough for *raken* to land, but there was no sign of *raken* or fliers, no ground company with its wagons and *raken*-grooms. But then, he had not seen a *raken* in the skies for some time now. Supposedly almost all had been sent west. Why, he did not know and did not care. The High Lady was his goal and his entire world. A tall thin message pole cast its long shadow in the early morning sun, though, so there must be *raken* somewhere about. He thought the camp might contain a thousand men, not counting farriers and cooks and the like. Interestingly, every last soldier he could see wore familiar armor from home rather than those solid breastplates and barred helmets. Practice was to pad out most forces with men from this side of the ocean. It was interesting that they were all armored, too. A rare commander kept his soldiers in armor unless he expected action soon. From the rumors he had picked up, that might be the case here.

Three flagstaffs marked the command tent, a tall, walled affair of pale canvas with air vents along the peak that doubled as smoke holes. No smoke issued from them now, for the morning was only a little cool, though the sun hung not far above the horizon. On one flagstaff the blue-bordered Imperial Banner hung in limp folds, hiding the spread-winged golden hawk clutching lightning in its talons. Some commanders hung it from a horizontal staff so it was always visible in full, but he thought that ostentatious. The other two banners, on shorter flanking staffs, would be of the regiments these men belonged to.

Karede dismounted in front of that tent and removed his helmet. Captain Musenge emulated him, revealing a grim expression on his weathered face. The other men climbed down too, to rest their horses, and stood by their animals. The Ogier Gardeners leaned on their long-hafted, black-tasseled axes. Everyone knew they would not be staying long.

“Keep the men out of trouble,” he told Musenge. “If that means accepting insults, so be it.”

“There’d be fewer insults if we killed a few of them,” Musenge muttered. He had been in the Deathwatch Guards even longer than Karede, though his hair was unbroken black, and he would suffer insults to the Empress, might she live forever, as gladly as insults to the Guards.

Hartha scratched one of his long gray mustaches with a finger the size of a fat sausage. The First Gardener, commander of all the Ogier in the High Lady Tuon’s bodyguard, was almost as tall as a man in the saddle, and wide with it. His red-and-green lacquered armor contained enough steel to make armor for three or four humans. His face was as dour as Musenge’s, yet his booming voice was calm. Ogier were always calm except in battle. Then they were as cold as deep winter in Jeranem. “After we rescue the High Lady we can kill as many of them as need killing, Musenge.”

Recalled to his duty, Musenge flushed for having allowed himself to stray. “After,” he agreed.

Karede had schooled himself too hard over the years, had been schooled too hard by his trainers, to sigh, but had he been other than a Deathwatch Guard, he might have done so now. Not because Musenge wanted to kill someone and almost anyone would do. Rather it was because the insults he had walked away from these past weeks chafed him as much as they did Musenge and Hartha. But the Guards did whatever was necessary to carry out their assignments, and if that meant walking away from men who spat on the ground at the sight of armor in red and the dark green most called black, or dared to murmur about lowered eyes in his hearing, then walk away he must. Finding and rescuing the High Lady Tuon was all that mattered. Everything else was dross beside that.

Helmet under his arm, he ducked into the tent to find what must have been most of the camp’s officers gathered around a large map spread out on a folding camp table. Half wore segmented breastplates lacquered in horizontal red and blue stripes, the other half red and yellow. They straightened and stared when he walked in, men from Khoweal or Dalenshar with skin blacker than charcoal, honey-brown men from N'Kon, fair-haired men from Mechoacan, pale-eyed men from Alqam, men from every part of the Empire. Their stares held not the wariness often tinged with admiration that he had always been used to, but very nearly challenges. It seemed everyone believed the filthy tale of Guards' involvement with a girl pretending to be the High Lady Tuon and extorting gold and jewels from merchants. Likely they believed that other, whispered tale about the girl, not merely vile but horrific. No. That the High Lady was in danger of her life from the Ever Victorious Army itself went beyond horrific. That was a world gone mad.

"Furyk Karede," he said coolly. His hand wanted to go to his sword hilt. Only discipline kept it at his side. Discipline and duty. He had accepted sword thrusts for duty. He could accept insults for it. "I wish to speak to the commander of this camp." For a long moment the silence stretched.

"Everybody out," a tall lean man barked at last in the sharp accents of Dalenshar. The others saluted, gathered their helmets from another table and filed out. Not one offered Karede a salute. His right hand twitched once, *feeling* a phantom hilt against his palm, and was still.

"Gamel Loune," the lean man introduced himself. Missing the top of his right ear, he had a slash of solid white there through his tight black curls and flecks of white elsewhere. "What do you want?" There was the barest touch of wariness in that. A hard man, and self-controlled. He would have had to be to earn the three red plumes decorating the helmet atop his sword-rack. Weak men without mastery of themselves did not rise to Banner-General. Karede suspected the only reason Loune was willing to talk to him was that his own helmet bore three black plumes.

"Not to interfere in your command." Loune had cause to fear that. Ranks in the Deathwatch Guard stood half a step higher than those outside. He could have co-opted the man's command had he needed to, though he would have been required to explain his reasons later. They would have had to be good reasons for him to avoid losing his head. "I understand there have been . . . difficulties in this part of Altara recently. I want to know what I am riding into."

Loune grunted. " 'Difficulties.' That's one word for it."

A stocky man in a plain brown coat, a narrow beard dangling from the point of his chin, entered the tent, carrying a heavily carved wooden tray with a silver pitcher and two sturdy white cups, the sort that would not break easily while being carried about in wagons. The scent of freshly brewed *kaf* began to suffuse the air.

"Your *kaf*, Banner-General." Setting the tray on the edge of table holding the map, he carefully filled one cup with the black liquid while watching Karede from the corner of his eye. Somewhere in his middle years, he wore a pair of long knives at his belt, and his hands had a knifeman's calluses. Karede sensed close kin to Ajimbura, in spirit but not blood. Those dark brown eyes never came from the Kaensada Hills. "I waited till the others left since there's hardly enough for you any more. Don't know when I'm going to get more, I don't."

"Will you take *kaf*, Karede?" Loune's reluctance was obvious, but he could hardly fail to offer. For an insult that large, Karede would have been forced to kill him. Or so the man would think.

"With pleasure," Karede replied. Placing his helmet alongside the tray, he doffed his steel-backed gauntlets and laid them beside it.

The serving man filled the second cup, then started toward a corner of the tent, but Loune said, "That will be all for now, Mantual." The stocky man hesitated, eyeing Karede, before making a bow to Loune, touching eyes and lips with his fingertips, and departing.

"Mantual is over-protective of me," Loune explained. Clearly he did not want to explain, but he did want to avoid what might be taken for open insult. "Odd fellow. Attached himself to me years ago in Pujili, wormed his way into becoming my manservant. I think he'd stay if I stopped paying him." Yes, very close kin to Ajimbura.

For a time they simply sipped *kaf*, balancing the cups on fingertips and enjoying the pungent bitterness. It seemed to be a pure Ijaz Mountains brew, and if so, very expensive. Karede's own supply of black beans, most definitely not Ijaz Mountains, had run out a week ago, and he had been surprised at how much he missed having *kaf*. He never used to mind going without anything at need. The first cups done, Loune refilled them.

"You were going to tell me about the difficulties," Karede prompted now that conversation would not be impolite. He always tried to be polite even with men he was going to kill, and rudeness here would dam up the man's tongue.

Loune set his cup down and leaned his fists on the table, frowning at the map. Small red wedges supporting tiny paper banners were scattered across it, marking Seanchan forces on the move, and red stars indicating forces holding in place. Little black discs marking engagements peppered the map, but strangely, no white discs to indicate the enemy. None.

"Over the last week," Loune said, "there have been four sizeable engagements and upwards of sixty ambushes, skirmishes and raids, many quite large, all spread out across three hundred miles." That encompassed almost the entire map. His voice was stiff. Plainly, given a choice, he would have told Karede nothing. That half-step gave him none, however. "There must be six or eight different armies involved on the other side. The night after the first large engagement saw nine major raids, each forty to fifty miles from the site of the battle. Not small armies, either, at least not taken altogether, but we can't find them, and nobody has any eyeless idea where they came from. Whoever they are, they have *damane*, those Aes Sedai, with them, and maybe those cursed Asha'man. Men have been torn apart by explosions our *damane* say weren't caused by the Power."

Karede sipped his *kaf*. The man was not thinking. If the enemy had Aes Sedai and Asha'man, they could use the thing called Traveling to move as far as they wished in a step. But if they could do that, why had they not used it to step all the way to safety with their prize? Perhaps not all Aes Sedai and Asha'man could Travel, yet that begged another question. Why had they not sent those who could? Maybe the only Aes Sedai were the *damane* stolen from the Tarasin Palace. Reportedly, none of them had had any idea how to Travel. That made sense. "What do the prisoners say about who sent them?"

Loune's laugh was bitter. "Before you can have eyeless prisoners, you need an eyeless victory. What we've had are a string of eyeless defeats." Picking up his cup, he took a sip. His voice loosened as if he had forgotten the colors of Karede's armor. He was just a soldier talking his trade, now. "Gurat thought he had some of them two days ago. He lost four banners of horse and five of foot almost to the last man. Not all dead, but most of the wounded are the next thing to it. Pincushioned with crossbow bolts. Mostly Taraboners and Amadicians, but that isn't supposed to matter, is it. Had to be twenty thousand or more crossbowmen to put out that volume. Thirty thousand, maybe. And yet they manage to hide from the *morat'raken*. I know we've killed some—the reports claim it, at least—but they don't even leave their dead behind. Some fools have begun whispering that we're fighting spirits." Fools he might consider them, but the fingers of his left hand hooked in a sign to ward off evil. "I'll tell you one thing I know, Karede. Their commanders are very good. Very, very good. Every man to face them has been fought off his feet, outmaneuvered and outfought completely."

Karede nodded thoughtfully. He had speculated that the White Tower must have tasked one of its best to kidnap the High Lady Tuon, but he had not been thinking along the lines of what people this side of the ocean called the great captains. Perhaps Thom Merrilin's real name was Agelmar Jagad or Gareth Bryne. He looked forward to meeting the man, not least to ask him how he had known she would be coming to Ebou Dar. He might hide Suroth's involvement, but then again, he might not. On the heights, today's ally could be tomorrow's sacrifice. Except for the Gardeners, the Deathwatch Guards were *da'covale* to the Empress herself, might she live forever, yet they lived on the heights. "There must be some plan for finding them and pinning them. Are you in charge of it?"

"No, praise be to the Light!" Loune said fervently. He took a long drink as though wishing it were brandy. "General Chisen is bringing his entire army back through the Malvide Narrows. Apparently the Tarasin Palace decided this was important enough to risk thrusts out of Murandy or Andor, though from what I've heard, neither one is capable of striking at anyone at the moment. I just have to wait here until Chisen arrives. We'll see a different result then, I think. More than half Chisen's men will be veterans from home."

Abruptly Loune seemed to recall who he was talking to. His face turned to dark wood, a hard mask. It did not matter. Karede was convinced this was the work of Merrilin or whatever his name was. And he knew why the man was doing what he was doing. Under different circumstances, he would have told Loune his reasoning, but the High Lady would not be safe until she was back in the Tarasin Palace among those who knew her face. If the man failed to believe him on the key point, that she *was* the High Lady, he would have increased her danger for nothing.

"I thank you for the *kaf*," he said, setting the cup down and taking up his helmet and gauntlets. "The Light see you safe, Loune. We will meet in Seandar someday."

“The Light see you safe, Karede,” Loune said after a moment, plainly surprised by the polite farewell. “We will meet in Seandar someday.” The man had shared *kaf*, and Karede had no quarrel with him. Why should he be surprised?

Karede did not speak to Musenge until they had ridden out of the camp, the Ogier Gardeners striding along just ahead of the human Guards. Hartha was walking on Karede’s other side, his long axe propped on his shoulder, his head nearly level with theirs.

“We head northeast,” he said, “for the Malvide Narrows.” If he remembered the maps correctly, and he seldom forgot any map he had more than glimpsed, they could reach it in four days. “The Light shine on us that we arrive before the High Lady.” If they did not, the pursuit would continue, all the way to Tar Valon if necessary. The thought of turning back without the High Lady never occurred to him. If he had to bring her out of Tar Valon, he would.

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CHAPTER 35

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The Importance of Dyelin

"They want *safe conduct*?" Elayne said incredulously. "To enter *Caemlyn*?" Lightning flashed outside the windows, and thunder boomed. Outside, a deluge fell on Caemlyn, a hammering downpour. The sun must have been well above the horizon, but the stand-lamps were lit against twilight darkness.

The slender young man standing in front of her low-backed chair colored with embarrassment, yet he continued to look her in the eye. He was little more than a boy, really, his smooth cheeks likely shaved as much for form as because he needed a razor very often. Very properly, Hanselle Renshar, Arathelle's grandson, wore neither sword nor armor, but the marks of breastplate straps remained on his green coat, imprinted by long wear. A large damp spot on his left shoulder showed where his cloak had leaked through. Odd, the things you noticed at times like this. "I was instructed to ask for it, my Lady," he said, his voice steady.

Dyelin, arms folded beneath her breasts, grunted sourly. She was not far from scowling. Mistress Harfor, resplendent as always in her crimson tabard with the White Lion spotless on her formidable bosom, sniffed audibly. Hanselle colored again. They were in Elayne's smaller sitting room, where a small fire on the marble hearth took away most of the morning's chill and lamp oil scented the air with roses. She wished Birgitte was there. From the mild irritation flowing through the bond, she was dealing with reports. Her annoyance was not great enough for it to be anything more urgent.

The arrival of Luan and the others below the city two days ago with their sixty thousand armsmen had occasioned more than a little excitement, and impromptu celebrations in the streets by the citizens, once it became clear they were not going to occupy the camps abandoned when Jarid Sarand left. Taking with him men from Houses that now sided with Elayne, though they could not know it yet. The Light only knew what trouble *that* bloody man was going to cause. But Hanselle's message put a new complexion on the huge encampment just a mile south of Low Caemlyn. If Arathelle, Luan and the others knew about the city being supplied from Tear and Illian through gateways, and surely everyone in Andor knew by this time, perhaps they had decided a siege would accomplish nothing. Safe conduct was a matter of battle lines. Perhaps they intended to call for

Caemlyn's surrender to avoid a grand assault. The proclamations of support, carried by Kinswomen rather than riders, had been posted from Aringill to the mining villages in the Mountains of Mist, or soon would be, but even with Sumeko and other Kinswomen wearing themselves out in Healing, the armsmen of Caeren, Anshar and Baryn who had not been carried off by Jarid did not bring her numbers anywhere near sixty thousand. Small bands of armsmen were beginning to flow into the city as word spread that it was safe to approach Caemlyn, but not enough yet. It might be a week or more before sizeable parties appeared. Those had been staying clear of the city for fear of Arymilla's army. The outcome of a massive assault was not a foregone conclusion—men atop a wall had considerable advantage over those trying to scale it—but it would be a near-run thing at best, and no hope for more help soon. Dyelin had paid another visit to Danine Candraed in the west, but the woman still dithered. Elayne had nine Houses where she needed ten, everything hung in the balance, and Danine could not bloody decide whether or not to stand for Trakand.

"Why do they wish to speak with me?" She managed to keep Birgitte's irritation from tinging her voice. Birgitte's and her own.

Hanselle reddened yet again. He seemed to do that easily. Burn her, they truly had sent a boy! "I was not informed, my Lady. I was simply told to ask for safe conduct." He hesitated. "They will not enter Caemlyn without it, my Lady."

Rising, she went to her writing desk, removed a smooth sheet of good white paper from the rosewood paper-box and dipped a pen in the silver-mounted crystal ink jar. Precise letters flowed onto the page without her usual flourishes. She was short and to the point.

> *Lord Luan Norwelyn, Lady Arathelle Renshar, Lord Pelivar Coelan, Lady Aemlyn Carand, Lady Ellorien Traemane and Lord Abelle Pendar may feel safe in entering Caemlyn and be assured that they and their retinues may depart the city at any time they wish. I will receive them informally this afternoon in the Grand Hall as befits their stations. We must speak of the Borderlanders.*
>
> *Elayne Trakand Daughter-Heir of Andor High Seat of House Trakand*

She tried to maintain calm, but the steel nib dug into the paper with the last letters. Safe conduct. She channeled a sealing candle alight, and her hand trembled as she dribbled golden yellow wax onto the page. They implied she would try to hold them by force. No, more than implied! They as good as said it! She pressed her seal, a blossoming lily, into the wax as if trying to drive it through the tabletop.

"Here," she said, handing the sheet to the young man. Her voice was ice, and she made no effort to warm it. "If this fails to make them feel safe, perhaps they might try wrapping themselves in swaddling." Thunder boomed for punctuation.

He colored once more, this time plainly in anger, but wisely confined himself to offering thanks as he folded the page. He was carefully tucking it inside his coat when Mistress Harfor showed him out. She would escort him to his horse personally. A messenger from nobles as powerful as Luan and the others had to be given a certain level of honor.

Suddenly Elayne's anger turned to sadness. She could not have said *what* she was sad over. Her moods often seemed to change without cause. Perhaps for all those who had died and all those who would. "Are you *certain* you don't want to be queen, Dyelin? Luan and that lot would stand for you in a heartbeat, and if I stand for you, those who've stood for me will stand with me. Burn me, Danine would probably stand for you."

Dyelin took a chair, spreading her blue skirts carefully, before answering. "I'm *absolutely* certain. Running my own House is work enough for me without adding all of Andor to it. Besides, I disapprove of the throne changing Houses without good cause—the lack of a Daughter-Heir, or worse, one who's a fool or incompetent, cruel or greedy. You're none of those things. Continuity provides stability, and stability brings prosperity." She nodded; she liked that turn of phrase. "Mind, had you died before returning to Caemlyn and making your claim, I would have entered my own, but the simple truth is, you'll make a better ruler than I would. Better for Andor. In part that's because of your connection to the Dragon Reborn." Dyelin's raised eyebrow invited Elayne to expound on that connection. "But in large part," she went on when Elayne said nothing, "it's you yourself. I watched you grow up, and by the time you were fifteen I knew you'd be a good queen, perhaps as good as Andor has ever had."

Elayne's face grew hot, and tears welled in her eyes. Burn her bouncing moods! Only she knew she could not blame her pregnancy this time. Praise from Dyelin was like praise from her mother, never grudging, but never given unless she felt it was deserved.

Her morning was busy, and she had only Caemlyn and the palace to deal with rather than all of Andor. Mistress Harfor reported that the spies in the palace who could be confirmed as reporting to Arymilla or her allies had grown very quiet and still, like mice that feared a cat might be watching.

"At least it's safe to dismiss them now, my Lady," Reene said in tones of great satisfaction. She disliked having spies in the Royal Palace as much as Elayne did, perhaps more. Daughter-Heir or Queen might live in the palace, but in the First Maid's eyes, it belonged to her. "All of them." Spies for others had been left in place so that no one would suspect that Reene knew.

"Keep them all on and continue to watch them," Elayne told her. "They're the most likely to take coin from someone else, and we know who they are." A spy who was known could be kept from learning anything they should not, and you could make sure they learned exactly what you wanted them to. That went for the Ajah eyes-and-ears Mistress Harfor had uncovered, too. The Ajahs had no right to spy on her, and if she occasionally spoon-fed them false information, it would be their own fault if they acted on it. She could not do that too often or they would realize she had uncovered their spies, but she could at need.

"As you say, my Lady. The world has changed, hasn't it?"

"I'm afraid it has, Mistress Harfor."

The round woman nodded sadly, but she quickly returned to business. "One of the windows in the Grand Hall has developed a leak, my Lady. I'd have seen to anything minor without bothering you, but this is a crack in the glass, which means calling in. . . ." The list of problems that needed Elayne's approval and papers that needed her signature went on.

Master Norry reported on wagonloads of grain and beans and trade goods in that dusty voice of his, and announced with some surprise that the number of arsons had not decreased. Seventeen buildings had burned in the night. He had been sure the capture of Arymilla would see an end to that, and he was rueful over being wrong. He brought death warrants in the names of Rhys a'Balaman and Aldred Gomaisen for her to sign and seal. Mercenaries who turned their colors could expect no more unless their new masters prevailed. Evard Cordwyn had died at the gate or he would have gone to the gallows, too. Hafeen Bakuvun had sent a petition asking a reward for his actions at the Far Madding Gate, yet that was easy enough to reject. The presence of the Domani mercenary and his men might well have been the difference in the gate holding until Dyelin arrived, but they had been earning their pay, no more.

"The prisoners are still being closemouthed, I fear," Norry said, sliding the refused petition back into his leather folder. He seemed to feel that if he did that quickly enough it was the same as never having removed it. "The Darkfriend Aes Sedai, I mean, my Lady. And the other two. Very closemouthed except for . . . um . . . invective. Mellar is the worst with that, shouting about what he intends to do to the women who arrested him," Deni had taken her instuctions literally; the Guardswomen had pummeled Mellar severely, leaving him a mass of bruises from head to foot, "but the Aes Sedai can be quite . . . um . . . vituperative, as well. I fear it may be necessary to put them to the question if we hope to learn anything useful."

"Don't call them Aes Sedai," she snapped. Hearing "Aes Sedai" linked with "Darkfriend" made her stomach writhe. "Those women have given up any right to be called Aes Sedai." She had taken their Great Serpent rings herself and had them melted down. That was Egwene's prerogative, not hers, and she might well be reprimanded for it, but she could not restrain herself. "Ask the Lady Sylvase for the use of her secretary." She had no questioners among her people, and according to Aviendha, an unskilled questioner was likely to kill the one being put unsuccessfully to the question. When *was* her sister going to be allowed to visit? Light, she missed Aviendha. "I suspect he's no such thing." Lightning lit up the windows of the sitting room, the glassed casements rattling with the boom of its thunder.

Norry pressed his fingertips together, holding the folder against his ink-stained tabard with the heels of his hands and frowning gravely. "Few people keep a private questioner, my Lady. It suggests . . . um . . . a dark side. But then, as I understand matters, her grandfather chased away every man who showed interest in her until men stopped showing interest, and she has been virtually a prisoner since reaching her majority. That would tend to give anyone a dark view of the world. She may not . . . um . . . be as trustworthy as you could wish, my Lady."

"Do you think you can bribe some of her servants to be my eyes-and-ears?" How easy it was to ask that. Spies had become a part of her life, as much as masons or glaziers.

"That should be possible, my Lady. I will know for certain in a day or two." Once, he would have been horrified by the very idea of having anything to do with spying. All things changed eventually, it seemed. His hands shifted on the folder, almost but not quite opening it. “I fear the sewers in the southern part of the New City need attention urgently.”

Elayne sighed. Not everything changed. Burn her, once she did have all of Andor, she suspected she would seldom have an hour to herself. What *did* Luan and the others want?

Not long after midmorning, Melfane Dawlish appeared and had Essande and Neris strip Elayne to the skin so she could be weighed in a huge, wooden-armed balance scale the midwife had brought along, a daily ritual. The brass pan was padded with a blanket, thank the Light! The stout little woman listened to her heart though a hollow wooden tube pressed to her chest and back, thumbed back her eyelids to examine her eyes, and smelled her breath. She had Elayne make water, then held the glass jar up to the light of a stand-lamp to study it. She smelled that, too, and even dipped a finger in and licked it! It was another daily ritual. Elayne averted her eyes, pulling her flower-embroidered silk robe tight around her, but she still shuddered. This time, Melfane noticed.

“I can tell some sickness from changes in the taste, my Lady. Anyway, there’s worse things. My boy Jaem, the one who carried the scale for me, his first paid job of work was mucking out in a stable. He claimed everything he ate tasted like—” Her round belly shook with laughter. “Well, you can imagine, my Lady.” Elayne could, and was glad she was not prone to nausea. She shuddered again anyway. Essande seemed quite composed, hands folded at her waist and watching her niece with approval, but Neris looked about to sick up. “Pity he can’t learn my craft, but no one would buy herbs from a man. Or have a man midwife.” Melfane laughed uproariously at that ridiculous notion. “Wants to be apprenticed to an armorer, of all things. Old for it, but there it is. Now, you be sure to read to your babe.” She was more than doubtful of Elayne’s claim that she would have a boy and a girl. She would not accept it until she could hear their heartbeats, and that would be some few weeks yet. “And have musicians play for her. She’ll learn the sound of your voice. Learn to like reading and music, too. It helps in other ways besides. Makes the child brighter.”

“You say that every time, Mistress Dawlish,” Elayne said peevishly. “I *can* remember, you know. And I *am* doing it.”

Melfane laughed again, a twinkle in her dark eyes. She accepted Elayne’s bouncing moods the way she accepted rain and lightning. “You’d be surprised how many don’t believe a babe in the womb can hear, but I can see the difference in those who get read to and those who don’t. Do you mind if I have a few words with my aunt before I go, my Lady? I brought her a pie and an ointment for her joints.” Essande’s face reddened. Well, now that her lie was exposed, she would accept Healing or Elayne would know the reason why.

At the end of the midday meal, Elayne brought up the intentions of Luan and the others with Birgitte. It was a wonderful meal, and she ate ravenously. Melfane had lambasted the cooks and every other woman in earshot for the bland diet they had been feeding her. Today there were small pond trout grilled to perfection, cabbage rolls stuffed with crumbly white ewe’s milk cheese, broad beans with pinenuts, and a tangy apple tart. Another reason it was marvelous was that nothing had the faintest hint of spoiling. To drink, there was good black tea with mint that made her tense for a moment until she realized it really was mint. The only thing Melfane had forbidden was wine, however well watered. Birgitte had even given up drinking herself, though it seemed impossible it could have any effect through the bond. Elayne refrained from pointing that out. Birgitte had been drinking too much to dull the pain of losing her Gaidal. Elayne understood even if she did not approve. She could not imagine what she would do if Rand died.

“I don’t know,” Birgitte said after wolfing down the last of her tart. “My best guess is they’ve come to ask you to help them move against the Borderlanders. The one bloody thing that’s sure is that they didn’t bloody come to throw their support to you.”

“That’s my best guess, too.” Elayne picked up crumbs of cheese with a damp fingertip and popped them into her mouth. She could have eaten as much again as had been on her plate, but Melfane had announced her strict intention to limit her weight gain. Just enough and not too much. Perhaps a cow being fattened for market felt like this. “Unless they’re going to demand I surrender Caemlyn.”

“There’s always that,” Birgitte said, sounding almost cheerful. The bond said she was anything but. “We still have watchers in the towers, though, and Julanya and Keraille have gotten work as laundresses in their camp, so we’ll know if they begin to move against the city before the first man sets out.”

Elayne wished she did not sigh so often. Burn her, she had Arymilla, Naean and Elenia under guard and definitely *not* enjoying sharing a bed—she knew the thought should not give her pleasure but it did—and she had gained three more allies, if not necessarily the most solid. At least they were tied to her inextricably, now. She should have been feeling triumphant.

That afternoon, Essande and Sephanie dressed her in dark green slashed with emerald on the skirts and embroidered with silver across the bosom, down the sleeves and around the hem. For jewelry, she wore her Great Serpent ring and a large silver pin enameled blue except for the shape of Trakand's Keystone. The pin made her morose. Inside the House it was said that Trakand was the keystone that held Andor together. She had not done a very good job of it so far.

She and Birgitte took turns reading aloud to her babes. From histories, of course; if Melfane was right, she did not want to direct them to frivolous tales. Dry stuff, it was. A plump man in red and white played the flute while a lean woman in livery played the twelve-string bittern, producing lively, joyous tunes. At least when crashes of thunder did not drown them out. Bards did not grow on trees, and Birgitte had been uncertain about allowing anyone from outside the palace near Elayne, but Mistress Harfor had found a number of accomplished musicians who had leapt at the chance to put on livery. Their pay was considerably better in the palace than in a common room, and their clothing was provided with it. Elayne thought of trying to hire a gleeman, but that made her think of Thom. Was he dry? Was he even alive? All she could do was pray. The Light send it so. Please.

Mistress Harfor came to announce the arrival of Luan, Arathelle and the others, and Elayne donned the coronet of the Daughter-Heir, a simple gold band that held a single golden rose surrounded by thorns above her brows. Caseille, along with eight Guardswomen, fell in behind her, Birgitte and Essande as they left her apartments, boots thudding loudly on the floor tiles in step. Nine Guardswomen had been among the dead when she was rescued from the Darkfriends, and that seemed to have bonded the others together even more tightly. They got lost twice finding their way to the Grand Hall, but no one so much as murmured. What were shifting corridors when you had faced Power-wrought fire and lightning? The great arched doors of the Grand Hall, carved with tall lions on both sides, stood open, and Caseille took the Guardswomen to stand in front of them while she, Birgitte and Essande went in.

The tall windows in the walls were dark with rain except when lightning flashed, but the mirrored stand-lamps, against the walls and around the white columns that marched in rows along the sides of the chamber, were all lit. A loud, steady plunk-plunk-plunk echoed in the vast space, drops falling into a prosaic wooden bucket standing beneath one of the colored windows set in the ceiling twenty paces overhead, where one of the rearing White Lions had beads of water glistening along a crack, near scenes of battle and the faces of Andor's earliest queens. As always in this hall, Elayne felt those women judging her as she crossed the red-and-white floor tiles. They had built Andor with the sharpness of their minds and the blood of their sons and husbands, beginning with a single city and molding a strong nation out of the rubble of Artur Hawkwing's empire. They had a right to judge any woman who sat on the Lion Throne. She suspected their visages had been placed there so every queen would feel her actions judged by history.

The throne itself sat atop a white marble dais at the far end of the chamber, carved and gilded and sized for a woman, yet massive on its lion-pawed legs. The White Lion, formed from moonstones set in a field of glittering rubies on its tall back, would stand above the head of the tallest woman who sat on that throne. Dyelin was already standing at the foot of the dais's steps, watching Sylvase converse with Conail and Catalyn while Branlet and Perival listened closely. Perival raked his fingers through his hair and nodded. Did Dyelin have questions about Sylvase, too? Lir and Karind stood apart from the rest, and apart from each other as well. Neither even glanced at the other. Having been allies against Elayne, they would not want her to think they were allied still. Essande went to join the serving men and women in the liveries of the eight other Houses, gathered around a table that held tall silver pitchers of wine and tea. That was what informal meant in this context. Each of them would bring a single servant in attendance. For a formal meeting, Elayne would have provided all of the servants, and the Grand Hall would have been crowded with every noble in Caemlyn, every noble from the encampment below Caemlyn.

"Ellorien may well be provocative, Elayne," Dyelin said for about the fifth time since hearing of the safe conduct request. Her face was cool and calm, yet she must have been feeling her nerves. Her hands smoothed unnecessarily at her gold-embroidered skirts.

“I won’t let her provoke me,” Elayne replied. “Neither will anyone else. I mean you, Conail, and you, Lir.” Conail, in gold-worked blue, colored as quickly as Hanselle had. He had gotten into a fight with a mercenary he thought had spoken disparagingly of Elayne and almost killed the man. It was well for him the other man had begun drawing his sword first. Even mercenaries deserved justice, and Andor was not Tear, where nobles could kill commoners with impunity. Well, before Rand changed so many of their laws. Burn him, why *was* he leaping about so?

“I stood for you, Elayne, and that means I always stand up for you,” Lir said smoothly. He looked every inch the self-confident courtier in silver-embroidered green silk with House Baryn’s silver Winged Hammer on the collar, yet he was too smooth by half, Lir was. “But I’ll hold my temper whatever Ellorien says.” The bond surged with fleeting contempt. Trying to demonstrate how loyal he was to Elayne, Lir had fought with mercenaries three times. In two days. The man had to have been *searching* for fights to manage that.

“If she tries to goad us, why should we bite our tongues?” Catalyn demanded. Her red dress, embroidered with broad bands of gold at the hem and on the sleeves, did not suit her coloring, especially when her plump cheeks were crimson with anger. Her chin was raised. Perhaps she wore that large enameled pin bearing Haevin’s Blue Bear where she did so she would be forced to keep her chin high and look down her nose at everyone. “I’ve never allowed anyone to poke at me and walk away unscathed.”

“An ox responds to the goad and does as the ox-herd wants,” Dyelin said drily. “The same way you will be doing what Ellorien wants if you respond to her goads.” The crimson remained in Catalyn’s cheeks, no doubt from embarrassment, now.

Reene Harfor appeared in the doorway. “My Ladies,” she said loudly, her voice echoing in the nearly empty chamber. “My Lords.”

This was informality, when two sides met and there was no knowing how far apart they were. Mistress Harfor announced the newly arrived lords and ladies in strict order of precedence, though among the Houses gathered here, there was not a great deal between them. Luan Norwelyn, hard-faced and more gray-haired than when Elayne last saw him, his blue coat undecorated except for Norwelyn’s Silver Salmon on the high collar. Arathelle Renshar, her face creased and her brown hair thick with gray, in a red riding dress ornately worked with gold and a large ruby-studded pin that displayed the three Golden Hounds. Pelivar Coelan, tall and lean, his dark hair receding till he almost looked as if he had shaved the front of his head like a Cairhienin, in silver-embroidered blue with twinned red roses worked on his collar, the Roses of Coelan. Aemlyn Carand, plump in gray silk with the three Golden Arrows climbing her sleeves and so thick on her bosom she looked like a bristling quiver. Ellorien Traemane, not so plump as Elayne recalled but still pretty in green-slashed blue embroidered with golden-antlered white stags, the White Stag of Traemane, on the sleeves. Abelle Pendar, his angular face stern beneath gray hair, in dark gray with the three Golden Stars on his collar. They walked up the Grand Hall together, trailed by their servants, but not grouped as announced. Ellorien and Abelle walked with Luan, Pelivar and Aemlyn with Arathelle, two paces between the groups. So. They asked for safe conduct as one, yet they were not one. That made a demand for surrender a little less likely. Even open enemies could act in concert at times. Divided skirts and snug breeches glistened damply. The finest cloak could not protect a person completely in a downpour like this. They would not be in their best tempers.

“Be welcome,” she told them as their servants peeled away to join the others. “Will you take wine, or tea? The wine is hot and spiced. This seems a wintery day for spring.”

Luan opened his mouth, but Ellorien spoke first. “At least you’re not sitting on the throne.” Her face might have been carved from marble, and her voice was that hard and cold. “I half expected you to be.” Thunder rolled overhead.

Luan looked pained. Arathelle rolled her eyes as if she were hearing something she had heard all too often before. Lir stirred, but Elayne fixed him with a steady look, and he gave a small, apologetic bow.

“I have no right to sit on the throne, Ellorien,” she replied calmly. Light, please let her mood hold steady now. “Yet.” There was an unintended touch of bite in that. Perhaps she was not so calm as she wished to be.

Ellorien sneered. “If you’re waiting for Danine to make your ten, you’ll have a long wait. Danine spent the last Succession visiting her manors. She never declared for anyone.”

Elayne smiled, but it was difficult. A Succession was when one House succeeded another on the throne. “I will have tea.”

Ellorien blinked, but it sparked the others to announce what they would take. Only Elayne, Birgitte, Branlet and Perival took tea. Everyone sniffed at their cups, whether silver cups of wine or porcelain teacups, before taking a sip. Elayne felt no insult. Food and wine could be fine in the kitchens and tainted by the time it reached the table. There was never any telling where or when spoilage would strike. The tea had a faint tang of ginger, but not enough to overwhelm the taste of good Tremalking black.

"I see you've gathered most of your support among the children and Arymilla's leavings," Ellorien said. Catalyn turned as red as her dress, and Branlet straightened angrily, until Perival put a hand on his arm and shook his head. A level-headed boy, Perival, and bright beyond his years. Lir managed to restrain himself this time, but Conail started to say something sharp before Elayne's firm look snapped his teeth shut. Karind merely returned Ellorien's spiteful stare stolidly. Karind was not very intelligent, but little ruffled her.

"You must have had a reason for asking this meeting," Elayne said. "If it was merely to offer insults. . . ." She let that trail off. She had her own reasons for wanting this meeting. If they had asked for her to come to them, she would have. *Without* asking for safe conduct. Feeling a pulse of anger through the bond, she took a firm rein on hers. Birgitte wore a scowl directed at Ellorien like a dagger. If they began feeding one another's temper. . . . That did not bear thinking about, not here, not now.

Ellorien opened her mouth again, and this time, Luan cut her off. "We've come to ask for a truce, Elayne." A flash of lightning lit the northern windows, and those in the ceiling, but the interval to thunder said it had been some distance off.

"A truce? Are we at war, Luan? Has someone declared for the throne that I haven't heard of?" Six sets of eyes swung to Dyelin, who grunted.

"Fools. I told you and told you, and you wouldn't believe me. Perhaps you'll believe this. When Sylvase, Karind and Lir sent their proclamations of support, I sent my own. Taravin stands for Trakand, and the whole of Andor will know it soon enough."

Ellorien colored angrily and managed to make even that seem cold. Aemlyn took a long drink, looking thoughtful. Arathelle allowed a touch of disappointment to touch her face before it returned to a mask nearly as hard as Ellorien's.

“Be that as it may,” Luan said, “we still want . . . if not a truce, then a temporary agreement.” He drank a small swallow from his winecup and shook his head sadly. “Even gathering everything we can, we’ll have a difficult time defeating the Borderlanders, but if we fail to act together, they’ll carve up Andor once they decide to move. Frankly, I’m surprised they’ve remained in one place this long. Their men ought to be well rested by now even after a thousand-league march.” Lightning lit the southern windows brightly, and thunder crashed so loudly it seemed the glass panes should shiver. Close, that one.

“I expected them to be into Murandy by now myself,” Elayne said. “But I believe their reason for sitting in one place is a fear of sparking a war if they come too near Caemlyn. They seem to be trying to find a way to Murandy using country roads. You know what condition *those* are in this time of year. They want no war with us. When I gave them permission to cross Andor, they told me they were looking for the Dragon Reborn.”

Ellorien spluttered, and chips of ice should have come from her mouth. “When you *what*? You prate of how you have no right to sit on the throne—*yet*—and then you arrogate to yourself the right of—!”

“Of an Aes Sedai, Ellorien.” Elayne held up her right hand so they could not miss the golden Great Serpent encircling the third finger. Her own voice was frosty despite all she could do. “I did not speak as Daughter-Heir or even High Seat of House Trakand. I spoke as Elayne Aes Sedai of the Green Ajah. Had I not, they would have come anyway. They were very short of food and fodder. Had I tried to stop them, had anyone tried to stop them, there *would* have been war. They are determined to find the Dragon Reborn. It would have been a war Andor had faint chance of winning. You speak of acting together, Luan? Gather all of Andor’s strength, and we could nearly match their numbers, but two in three of ours would be men who can handle a halberd or spear but spend most of their days behind a plow. Every man of theirs is a long-serving armsman who would not be surprised to face Trollocs any day of his life. Instead of a war that would soak Andor in blood and cripple her for a generation, we have the Borderlanders crossing our nation peacefully. I have them watched. They pay for the food and fodder they need, and pay well.” Another time, with other listeners, she would have laughed over that. Andoran farmers would try to pry high prices out of the Dark One. “The worst they’ve done is flog a few horsethieves, and if they should have been handed over to a magistrate, I can’t fault the Borderlanders for it. Now tell me, Ellorien. What would you have done differently, and how?”

Ellorien blinked, icily sullen, then sniffed dismissively and sipped at her wine.

“And what do you plan for this Black Tower?” Abelle asked quietly. “I . . . suspect you have a plan for them, too.” Did he suspect her other reason for letting the Borderlanders cross Andor? Let him, so long as he did not give it voice. So long as he kept silent, her motives seemed purely for Andor’s good. That was hypocritical, no bones about it, but realistic as well. She had spoken truthfully concerning her other reasons, but that one, spoken aloud, could cost her. She still needed one more House, and it looked as if Candraed had to be it, but Danine would never move if she thought Elayne was trying to force her into it.

“Nothing,” she told him. “I send Guardsmen periodically to ride around the Black Tower grounds and remind them they *are* in Andor and subject to Andor’s laws, but aside from that, I can do no more than I could if the White Tower were somehow transported to Caemlyn.” For a long moment they stared at her, all six of them unblinking.

“Pendar stands for Trakand,” Abelle said suddenly, and right atop him, Luan said, “Norwelyn stands for Trakand.” Lightning flashed overhead, brightening the colored windows in the ceiling.

Elayne kept herself from swaying with an effort. Birgitte’s face was smooth, but the bond carried amazement. It was done. She had eleven, and the throne was hers.

“The more who stand for her, the better for Andor.” Dyelin sounded a touch dazed herself. “Stand with me for Trakand.”

There was another pause, longer, full of exchanged glances, but then, one by one, Arathelle, Pelivar and Aemlyn announced that their Houses stood for Trakand. Doing so for Dyelin, though. Elayne would have to remember that. Perhaps she could win their loyalty in time, but for the present, they supported her for Dyelin’s sake.

“She has the throne,” Ellorien said, as cold as ever. “The rest is fluff and feathers.”

Elayne tried to make her voice warm. “Will you dine with us this evening, Ellorien? At least remain until the rain abates.”

“I have my own cooks,” Ellorien replied, turning away toward the doors. Her serving woman came running to take her cup and return it to the table. “As soon as the rain stops, I will be leaving for Sheldyn. I’ve been away too long.”

“Tarmon Gai’don is coming soon, Ellorien,” Elayne said. “You won’t be able to remain on your estates then.”

Ellorien paused, looking over her shoulder. “When Tarmon Gai’don comes, Traemane rides for the Last Battle, and we ride behind the Lion of Andor.” Thunder boomed as she strode out of the Grand Hall with her serving woman at her heels.

“Will you all join me in my apartments?” Elayne asked the others.

Behind the Lion of Andor, but not a word about behind Elayne Trakand. Nearly half her support was suspect one way or another, Jarid Sarand was still on the loose with a not inconsiderable force, and she would have trouble from Ellorien eventually. It was never this way in stories. In stories, everything was always wrapped up neatly by the end. Real life was much . . . messier. Still, she had the throne at last. There was still the coronation, but that was a formality now. As she led the procession from the Grand Hall, chatting with Luan and Pelivar, thunder rolled overhead like martial drums beating the march for Tarmon Gai’don. How long before Andor’s banners had to march to the Last Battle?

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CHAPTER 36

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Under an Oak

The sun stood well above the mountains as Karede rode through the trees toward the so-called Malvide Narrows, perhaps two leagues ahead. The five-mile-wide gap in the mountains carried the road from Ebou Dar to Lugard, a mile south of him. Well short of the Narrows, though, he would find the camp Ajimbura had located for him. Ajimbura had not been fool enough to try entering the camp, so Karede still did not know whether he was riding into a deathtrap for nothing. No, not for nothing. For the High Lady Tuon. Any Deathwatch Guard was ready to die for her. Their honor was duty, and duty often meant death. The sky held only billowing white clouds with no threat of rain. He had always hoped to die in sunlight.

He had brought just a small party. Ajimbura on his white-footed chestnut to show the way, of course. The wiry little man had cut off his white-streaked red braid, a measure of his great devotion. The hill tribes took those braids as trophies from those they killed in their endless feuds, and to be without one was to be disgraced in the eyes of all the tribes and families, a self-proclaimed coward. That devotion was to Karede rather than the High Lady or the Crystal Throne, but Karede's own devotion was such that it came to the same thing. Two of the Guards rode at Karede's back, their red-and-green armor buffed till it shone, like his own. Hartha and a pair of Gardeners strode along with their long-hafted axes on their shoulders, easily keeping pace with the horses. Their armor glistened as well. Melitene, the High Lady's *der'sul'dam*, her long, graying hair tied with a bright red ribbon today, was on a high-stepping gray, the silvery length of an *a'dam* connecting her left wrist to Mylen's neck. There had been little that could be done to make those two appear more impressive, but the *a'dam* and Melitene's blue dress, the red panels on skirts and bosom holding silver forked lightning bolts, should draw the eye. Taken altogether, no one should notice Ajimbura at all. The rest were back with Musenge, in case it truly was a deathtrap.

He had considered using another *damane* than Mylen. The tiny woman with the face he could never put an age to almost bounced in her saddle with eagerness to lay eyes on the High Lady again. She was not properly composed. Still, she could do nothing without Melitene, and she was useless as a weapon, a fact that had made her hang her head when he pointed it out to the *der'sul'dam*. She had needed consoling, her *sul'dam* petting her and telling her what beautiful Sky Lights she made, how wonderful her Healing was. Even thinking about that made Karede shudder. Taken in the abstract, it might seem a wonderful thing, wounds undone in moments, but he thought he would need to be near death before he would let anyone touch him with the Power. And yet, if it could have saved his wife Kalia. . . . No, the weapons had been left with Musenge. If there was a battle today, it would be of a different sort.

The first birdcall he heard seemed no different from others he had heard that morning, but it was repeated ahead, and then again. Just one call each time. He spotted a man up in a tall oak with a crossbow that tracked him as he rode. Seeing him was not easy; his breastplate and open-faced helmet were painted a dull green that faded into the tree's foliage. A length of red cloth tied around his left arm helped, though. If he really wanted to hide, he should have removed that.

Karede motioned to Ajimbura and the wiry little man grinned at him, a wizened, blue-eyed rat, before allowing his chestnut to fall back behind the Guards. His long knife was under his coat today. He should pass for a servant.

Soon enough Karede was riding into the camp itself. It had no tents or shelters of any kind, but there were long horselines laid out in orderly fashion, and many more men in green breastplates. Heads turned to watch his party pass, but few men were on their feet, and fewer held a crossbow. A fair number of them were asleep on their blankets, doubtless tired from all the hard riding they had been doing by night. So the birdcall had told them he was not enough to present a danger. They had the look of well-trained soldiers, but he had expected as much. What he had not expected was how few they were. Oh, the trees might be hiding some, but surely the camp held no more than seven or eight thousand men, far too few to have carried out the campaign Loune had described. He felt a sudden tightness in his chest. Where were the rest? The High Lady might be with one of the other bands. He hoped Ajimbura was taking note of the numbers.

Before he had gone far, a short man mounted on a tall dun met him and reined in where he had to stop or ride the man down. The front half of his head was shaved, and appeared to be powdered, of all things. He was no popinjay, though. His dark coat might be silk, yet he wore the same dull green breastplate as the common soldiers. His eyes were hard and expressionless as he scanned Melitene and Mylen, the Ogier. His face did not change as his gaze returned to Karede. “Lord Mat described that armor to us,” he said in accents even quicker and more clipped than those of the Altarans. “To what do we owe the honor of a visit from the Deathwatch Guard?”

Lord Mat? Who under the Light was Lord Mat? “Furyk Karede,” Karede said. “I wish to speak with the man who calls himself Thom Merrilin.”

“Talmanes Delovinde,” the man said, finding manners. “You want to talk to *Thom*? Well, I see no harm in it. I will take you to him.”

Karede heeled Aldazar after Delovinde. The man had made no mention of the obvious, that he and the others could not be allowed to leave and carry word of this army’s location. He had some manners. At least, they would not be allowed to leave unless Karede’s mad plan worked. Musenge gave him only one chance in ten of success, one in five of living. Personally, he himself believed the odds longer, but he had to make the attempt. And Merrilin’s presence argued in favor of the High Lady’s presence.

Delovinde dismounted at an oddly domestic scene among the trees, people on camp stools or blankets around a small fire beneath a spreading oak where a kettle was heating. Karede stepped down from his saddle, motioning the Guards and Ajimbura to dismount as well. Melitene and Mylen remained on their mounts for the advantage of height. Of all people, Mistress Anan, who had once owned the inn where he stayed in Ebou Dar, was sitting on one of the three-legged stools reading a book. She no longer wore one of those revealing dresses he had enjoyed looking at, but her close-fitting necklace still dangled that small, jeweled knife onto her impressive bosom. She closed her book and gave him a small nod as if he had returned to the Wandering Woman after an absence of a few hours. Her hazel eyes were quite composed. Perhaps the plot was even more intricate than the Seeker Mor had thought.

A tall, lean white-haired man with mustaches nearly as long as Hartha’s was sitting cross-legged on a striped blanket across a stones board from a slender woman with her hair in many beaded braids. He quirked an eyebrow at Karede, shook his head and returned to perusing the cross-hatched board. She glared pure hatred at Karede and those behind him. A gnarled old fellow with long white hair was lying on another blanket with a remarkably ugly young boy, playing some game or other on a piece of red cloth spiderwebbed with black lines. They sat up, the boy studying the Ogier with interest, the man with one hand hovering as if to reach for a knife beneath his coat. A dangerous man, and wary. Perhaps he was Merrilin.

Two men and two women sitting together on camp stools had been conversing when Karede rode up, but as he was stepping down, a stern-faced woman stood and fixed her blue eyes on his in very nearly a challenge. She wore a sword on a wide leather strap slanting across her chest, the way some sailors did. Her hair was close-cropped rather than cut in the style of the low Blood, her fingernails were short and none were lacquered, but he was certain she was Egeanin Tamarath. A heavyset man with hair as short as hers and one of those odd Illianer beards stood beside her, one hand on the hilt of a shortsword, staring at Karede as if he intended to second her challenge. A pretty woman with dark, waist-long hair and the same rosebud mouth as the Taraboner stood, and for a moment it seemed she might kneel or prostrate herself, but then she straightened and looked him right in the eyes. The last man, a lean fellow in a peculiar red cap who looked carved from dark wood, gave a loud laugh and flung his arms around her. The grinning stare *he* gave Karede could only be called triumphant.

"Thom," Delovinde said, "this is Furyk Karede. He wants to talk with a man who 'calls himself' Thom Merrilin."

"With me?" the lean, white-haired man said, rising awkwardly. His right leg appeared slightly stiff. An old battle injury, perhaps? "But I don't 'call myself' Thom Merrilin. It's my name, though I'm surprised you know it. What do you want of me?"

Karede removed his helmet, but before he could open his mouth, a pretty woman with large brown eyes rushed up, pursued by two others. All three had those Aes Sedai faces, one minute looking twenty, the next twice that, the third somewhere in the middle. It was very disconcerting.

"That's Sheraine!" the pretty woman cried, staring at Mylen. "Release her!"

"You do no understand, Joline," one of the women with her said angrily. Thin-lipped, with a narrow nose, she looked as if she could chew rocks. "She do no be Sheraine any longer. She would have betrayed us, given a chance."

“Teslyn is right, Joline,” the third woman said. Handsome rather than pretty, she had long black hair that fell in waves to her waist. “She would have betrayed us.”

“I don’t believe it, Edesina,” Joline snapped. “You will free her immediately,” she told Melitene, “or I’ll—” Suddenly she gasped.

“I did tell you,” Teslyn said bitterly.

A young man in a wide-brimmed black hat galloped up on a dark, blunt-nosed chestnut with a deep chest and flung himself out of the saddle. “What’s bloody going on here?” he demanded, striding up to the fire.

Karede ignored him. The High Lady Tuon had ridden up with the young man, on a black-and-white horse with markings like none he had ever seen. Selucia was at her side, on a dun, her head wrapped in a scarlet scarf, but he had eyes only for the High Lady. Short black hair covered her head, but he could never mistake that face. She spared him only one expressionless glance before returning to a study of the young man. Karede wondered whether she recognized him. Probably not. It had been a long time since he had served in her bodyguard. He did not look over his shoulder, but he knew that the reins of Ajimbura’s chestnut were now held by one of the Guards. Apparently unarmed and his distinctive braid gone, he should have no problem leaving the camp. The sentries would never see the little man. Ajimbura was a good runner as well as stealthy. Soon, Musenge would know that the High Lady was indeed here.

“She has us shielded, Mat,” Joline said, and the young man snatched off his hat and strode to Melitene’s horse as if he intended to seize the bridle. He was long-limbed, though he could not be called tall, and he wore a black silk scarf tied around his neck and dangling onto his chest. That made him the one everyone had called Tylin’s Toy, as if being the queen’s plaything were the most important feature of him. Likely it was. Playthings seldom had another side to them. Strange, but he hardly seemed handsome enough for that. He did look fit, though.

“Release the shield,” he told her as if he expected obedience. Karede’s eyebrows rose. *This* was the plaything? Melitene and Mylen gasped almost as one, and the young man barked a laugh. “You see, it doesn’t work on me. Now you bloody well release the shields, or I’ll bloody well haul you out of the saddle and paddle your bottoms.” Melitene’s face darkened. Few people dared speak so to a *der’sul’dam*.

“Release the shields, Melitene,” Karede said.

“The *marath’damane* was on the point of embracing *saidar*,” she said instead of obeying. “There’s no telling what she might have—”

“Release the shields,” he said firmly. “And release the Power.”

The young man gave a satisfied nod, then suddenly spun, pointing a finger at the three Aes Sedai. “Now don’t you bloody well start! She’s let go of the Power. You do it, too. Go ahead!” Again he nodded, for all the world as if he was sure they had obeyed. From the way Melitene was staring at him, perhaps he was. Maybe he was an Asha’man? Perhaps Asha’man could detect a *damane*’s channeling somehow. That hardly seemed likely, but it was all Karede could think of. Yet that hardly squared with how Tylin reportedly had treated the young man.

“One of these days, Mat Cauthon,” Joline said acidly, “someone will teach you to show proper respect to Aes Sedai, and I hope I am there to see it.”

The High Lady and Selucia laughed uproariously. It was good to see she had managed to keep her spirits up in captivity. Doubtless her maid’s companionship had helped. But it was time to get on, too. Time to take his mad gamble.

“General Merrilin,” Karede said, “you fought a short but remarkable campaign and achieved miracles at keeping your forces undetected, but your luck is about to run out. General Chisen deduced your real purpose. He has turned his army around and is marching for the Malvide Narrows as fast as he can. He will be here in two days. I have ten thousand men not far from here, enough to pin you until he arrives. But the High Lady Tuon would be in danger, and I want to avoid that. Let me leave with her, and I will allow you and your men to depart unhindered. You can be well the other side of the mountains, into the Molvaine Gap, before Chisen arrives, and into Murandy before he can catch you. The only other choice is annihilation. Chisen has enough men to wipe you out. It won’t be a battle. A hundred thousand men against eight thousand will be a slaughter.”

They heard him out, every face as blank as if they were stunned. They schooled themselves well. Or perhaps they were stunned at Merrilin’s plan apparently unraveling at the last instant.

Merrilin stroked one of his white mustaches with a long finger. He seemed to be hiding a smile. “I fear you have mistaken me, Banner-General Karede.” For the space of a sentence his voice became extremely resonant. “I am a gleeman, a position higher than court-bard to be sure, but no general. The man you want is Lord Matrim Cauthon." He made a small bow toward the young man, who was settling his flat-topped hat back on his head.

Karede frowned. Tylin's *Toy* was the general? Were they playing a game with him?

"You have about a hundred men, Deathwatch Guards, and maybe twenty Gardeners," Cauthon said calmly. "From what I hear, that could make an even fight against five times their number for most soldiers, but the Band aren't most soldiers, and I have a sight more than six hundred. As for Chisen, if that's the fellow who pulled back through the Narrows, even if he has figured out what I was up to, he couldn't get back in less than five days. My scouts' last reports had him pushing southwest along the Ebou Dar Road as fast he could march. The real question is this, though. Can you get Tuon to the Tarasin Palace safely?"

Karede felt as if Hartha had kicked him in the belly, and not only because the man had used the High Lady's name so casually. "You mean to let me take her away?" he said incredulously.

"If she trusts you. If you can get her to the palace safely. She's in danger till she reaches that. In case you don't know it, your whole bloody Ever Victorious flaming Army is ready to slit her throat or bash in her head with a rock."

"I know," Karede said, more calmly than he felt. Why would this man just release the High Lady after the White Tower had gone to all the trouble of kidnapping her? Why, after fighting that short, bloody campaign? "We will die to the man if that is what is needed to see her safe. It will be best if we set out immediately." Before the man changed his mind. Before Karede woke from this fever-dream. It surely seemed a fever-dream.

"Not so fast." Cauthon turned toward the High Lady. "Tuon, do you trust this man to see you safe to the palace in Ebou Dar?" Karede stifled an impulse to wince. General and lord the man might be, but he had no right to use the High Lady's name so!

"I trust the Deathwatch Guards with my life," the High Lady replied calmly, "and him more than any other." She favored Karede with a smile. Even as a child, smiles from her had been rare. "Do you by any chance still have my doll, Banner-General Karede?"

He bowed to her formally. The manner of her speaking told him she was still under the veil. "Forgiveness, High Lady. I lost everything in the

Great Fire of Sohima."

"That means you kept it for ten years. You have my commiseration on the loss of your wife, and of your son, though he died bravely and well. Few men will enter a burning building once. He saved five people before he was overcome."

Karede's throat tightened. She had followed news of him. All he could do was bow again, more deeply.

"Enough of that," Cauthon muttered. "You're going to knock your head on the ground if you keep that up. As soon as she and Selucia can get their things together, you take them out of here and ride hard. Talmanes, roust the Band. It isn't that I don't trust you, Karede, but I think I'll sleep easier beyond the Narrows."

"Matrim Cauthon is my husband," the High Lady said in a loud, clear voice. Everyone froze where they stood. "Matrim Cauthon is my husband."

Karede felt as if Hartha had kicked him again. No, not Hartha. Aldazar. What madness was this? Cauthon looked like a man watching an arrow fly toward his face, knowing he had no chance to dodge.

"Bloody Matrim Cauthon is my husband. That *is* the wording you used, is it not?"

This had to be a fever-dream.

It took a minute before Mat could speak. Burn him, it seemed to take a bloody hour before he could move. When he could, he snatched off his hat, strode to Tuon and seized the razor's bridle. She looked down at him, cool as any queen on a bloody throne. All those battles with the flaming dice rattling away in his head, all those skirmishes and raids, and they had to stop when she said a few words. Well, at least this time he knew what had happened that was bloody fateful for Mat bloody Cauthon. "Why? I mean, I knew you were going to sooner or later, but why now? I like you, maybe more than like you, and I enjoy kissing you," he thought Karede grunted, "but you haven't behaved like a woman in love. You're ice half the time and spend most of the rest digging under my skin."

"Love?" Tuon sounded surprised. "Perhaps we will come to love one another, Matrim, but I have always known I would marry to serve the Empire. What do you mean, you *knew* that I was going to speak the words?"

"Call me Mat." Only his mother had ever called him Matrim, when he was in trouble, and his sisters when they were carrying tales to get him in trouble.

“Your name is Matrim. What did you mean?”

He sighed. The woman never wanted much. Just her own way. Like just about every other woman he had ever known. “I went through a *ter’angreal* to somewhere else, another world maybe. The people there aren’t really people—they look like snakes—but they’ll answer three questions for you, and their answers are always true. One of mine was that I’d marry the Daughter of the Nine Moons. But you haven’t answered my question. Why now?”

A faint smile on her lips, Tuon leaned down from her saddle. And rapped him hard on the top of his head with her knuckles! “Your superstitions are bad enough, Matrim, but I won’t tolerate lies. An amusing lie, true, but still a lie.”

“It’s the Light’s own truth,” he protested, clapping his hat on. Maybe it would give him some protection. “You could learn for yourself if you could make yourself talk to an Aes Sedai. They could tell you about the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn.”

“It could be the truth,” Edesina piped up as if she were being helpful. “The Aelfinn can be reached through a *ter’angreal* in the Stone of Tear, so I understand, and supposedly they give true answers.” Mat glared at her. A fat lot of help she was, with her “so I understands” and “supposedlies.” Tuon continued to stare at him as if Edesina had not opened her mouth.

“I answered your question, Tuon, so you answer mine.”

“You know that *damane* can tell fortunes?” She gave him a stern look, likely expecting him to call it superstition, but he nodded curtly. Some Aes Sedai could Foretell the future. Why not a *damane*? “I asked Lidya to tell mine just before I landed at Ebou Dar. This is what she said. ‘Beware the fox that makes the ravens fly, for he will marry you and carry you away. Beware the man who remembers Hawkwing’s face, for he will marry you and set you free. Beware the man of the red hand, for him you will marry and none other.’ It was your ring that caught my eye first.” He thumbed the long ring unconsciously, and she smiled. A small smile, but a smile. “A fox apparently startling two ravens into flight and nine crescent moons. Suggestive, wouldn’t you say? And just now you fulfilled the second part, so I knew for certain it was you.” Selucia made a sound in her throat, and Tuon waggled fingers at her. The bosomy little woman subsided, adjusting her head scarf, but the look she shot at Mat should have been accompanied by a dagger in her hand.

He laughed mirthlessly. Blood and bloody ashes. The ring was a carver's try-piece, bought only because it stuck on his finger; he would give up those memories of Hawkwing's face along with every other old memory, if it would get the bloody snakes out of his head; and yet those things had gained him a wife. The Band of the Red Hand would never have existed without those old memories of battles.

"Seems to me being *ta'veren* works on me as much as it does on anybody else." For a moment, he thought she was going to rap him again. He gave her his best smile. "One more kiss before you leave?"

"I'm not in the mood at the moment," she said coolly. That hanging magistrate was back. All prisoners to be condemned immediately. "Perhaps later. You could return to Ebou Dar with me. You have an honored place in the Empire, now."

He did not hesitate before shaking his head. There was no honored place waiting for Leilwin or Domon, no place at all for the Aes Sedai or the Band. "The next time I see Seanchan, I expect it will be on the field somewhere, Tuon." Burn him, it would be. His life seemed to run that way no matter what he did. "You're not my enemy, but your Empire is."

"Nor are you my enemy, husband," she said coolly, "but I live to serve the Empire."

"Well, I suppose you'd better get your things. . . ." He trailed off at the sound of a cantering horse approaching.

Vanin reined in a rangy gray beside Tuon, eyed Karede and the other Deathwatch Guards, then spat through a gap in his teeth and leaned on the high pommel of his saddle. "There's ten thousand or so soldiers at a little town about five miles west of here," the fat man told Mat. "Only one man Seanchan, near as I could learn. Rest are Altarans, Taraboners, Amadicians. All mounted. Thing is, they're asking after fellows wearing armor like that." He nodded toward Karede. "And rumor says the one of them that kills a girl that sounds a lot like the High Lady gets himself a hundred thousand crowns gold. Their mouths are dripping for it."

"I can slip past them," Karede said. His bluff face looked fatherly. His voice sounded like a drawn sword.

"And if you can't?" Mat asked quietly. "It can't be chance they're this close. They've caught some sniff of you. One more smell might be all it takes to kill Tuon." Karede's face darkened.

"Do you intend to go back on your word?" A drawn blade that might be used soon. Worse, Tuon was watching, looking at Mat like that hanging magistrate in truth. Burn him, if she died, something would shrivel up inside him. And the only way to stop it, to be sure it was stopped, was to do what he hated worse than work. Once, he had thought that fighting battles, much as he hated it, was still better than work. Near enough nine hundred dead in the space of a few days had changed his mind.

"No," he said. "She goes with you. But you leave me a dozen of your Deathwatch Guards and some of the Gardeners. If I'm going to take these people off your back, I need them to think I'm you."

Tuon abandoned most of the clothing Matrim had bought for her, since she would need to travel light. The little cluster of red silk rosebuds he had given her she tucked away in her saddlebags, folded in a linen cloth, as carefully as if it were blown glass. She had no farewells to make except for Mistress Anan—she really would miss their discussions—so she and Selucia were ready to ride quickly. Mylen smiled so broadly at the sight of her that she had to pat the little *damane*. It seemed that word of what had happened had spread, because as they rode through the camp with the Deathwatch Guards, men of the Band stood and bowed to her. It was very like reviewing regiments in Seandar.

"What do you make of him?" she asked Karede once they were away from the soldiers and beginning to canter. There was no need to say which "he" she meant.

"It is not my place to make judgments, High Lady," he said gravely. His head swivelled, keeping watch on the surrounding trees. "I serve the Empire and the Empress, may she live forever."

"As do we all, Banner-General. But I ask your judgment."

"A good general, High Lady," he replied without hesitation. "Brave, but not overly brave. He won't get himself killed just to show how brave he is, I think. And he is . . . adaptable. A man of many layers. And if you will forgive me, High Lady, a man in love with you. I saw how he looked at you."

In love with her? Perhaps. She thought she might be able to come to love him. Her mother had loved her father, it was said. And a man of many layers? Matrim Cauthon made an onion look like an apple! She rubbed a hand over her head. She still was not accustomed to the feel of hair on her head. “I will need a razor first thing.”

“It may be best to wait until Ebou Dar, High Lady.”

“No,” she said gently. “If I die, I will die as who I am. I have removed the veil.”

“As you say, Highness.” Smiling, he saluted, gauntleted fist striking over his heart hard enough that steel clanged on steel. “If we die, we will die as who we are.”

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CHAPTER 37

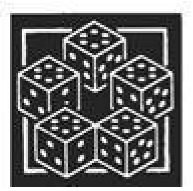

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Prince of the Ravens

Leaning on the tall pommel of his saddle, *ashandarei* slanted across Pips' neck, Mat frowned at the sky. The sun was well past its noon height. If Vanin and those Deathwatch Guards did not return soon, he might find himself fighting a battle with the sun in the crossbowmen's eyes, or worse, in twilight. Worst of all, dark clouds loomed over the mountains to the east. The gusting wind was out of the north. No help there. Rain would put the weasel in the hen yard. Bowstrings fared poorly in rain. Well, any rain was a few hours off, with luck, but he had never noticed his luck saving him from getting soaked in a downpour. He had not dared wait until tomorrow. Those fellows hunting Tuon might have gotten another whiff of Karede's men, and then he would have had to try attacking them, or laying an ambush, and carry it out before they could catch Karede. Better to have them come to him, at a place of his choosing. Finding the proper spot had not been difficult, between Master Roidelle's collection of maps on the one hand and Vanin and the other scouts on the other.

Aludra was fussing over one of her tall, metal-bound lofting tubes, beaded braids hiding her face as she examined something at the broad wooden base. He wished she had been willing to remain with the pack animals like Thom and Mistress Anan. Even Noal had been willing to stay, if only to help Juilin and Amathera make sure Olver did not run off to watch the battle. The boy was dead eager, which could soon lead to plain dead. Matters had been bad enough when only Harnan and the other three had been corrupting Olver, but now he had half the men teaching him how to use a sword or dagger or fight with his hands and feet, and apparently filling his head with tales of heroes from the way he had been behaving, begging to go on raids with Mat and the like. Aludra was near as bad. Anybody could have used one of those strikers to light the fuse once she had loaded that tube, but she insisted on doing it herself. She was a fierce woman, Aludra was, and none too pleased at finding herself on the same side as Seanchan, however temporary the arrangement was. It seemed wrong to her that they would see some of her handiwork without being on the receiving end. Leilwin and Domon sat their horses nearby keeping an eye on her, as much to make sure she did nothing foolish as to protect her. Mat hoped Leilwin did nothing foolish herself. Since there was apparently only one Seanchan with the people they would fight today, she had decided it was all right to be there, and the way she glared at Musenge and the other Deathwatch Guards, it seemed she might think she had something to prove to them.

The three Aes Sedai, standing together with their reins in hand, cast dark looks at the Seanchan, too, as did Blaeric and Fen, who caressed their sword hilts perhaps unconsciously. Joline and her two Warders had been the only ones aghast at Sheraine's willing departure with Tuon—what an Aes Sedai felt on any subject was usually how her Warders felt on it, too—but the memory of being leashed had to be too fresh for Edesina or Teslyn to feel comfortable around Seanchan soldiers. Bethamin and Seta stood very meekly, hands folded at their waists, a little apart from the sisters. Bethamin's light-colored bay nudged her shoulder with his nose, and the tall, dark woman half reached up to stroke the animal before snatching her hand back down and resuming her humble pose. They still would take no part. Joline and Edesina had made that plain, yet it seemed they wanted the two women under their eyes to make sure of it. The Seanchan women plainly were looking at anything *but* the Seanchan soldiers. For that matter, Bethamin, Seta *and* Leilwin might as well not have existed for all of Musenge and that lot. Burn him, there were so many tensions in the air he could almost feel that hanging rope around his neck again.

Pips stamped a hoof, impatient at standing in one place so long, and Mat patted his neck then scratched the scar forming on his own jaw. Tuon's ointments had stung as badly as she had said they would, but they worked. His new collection of scars did itch yet, though. Tuon. His wife. He was *married*! He had known it was coming, had known for a long time, but just the same. . . . Married. He should have felt . . . different . . . somehow, but he still felt like himself. He intended to keep it that way, burn him if he did not! If Tuon expected Mat Cauthon to settle down, to give up gambling or some such, she had another think coming. He supposed he would have to give over chasing after women, much less catching them, but he would still enjoy dancing with them. And looking at them. Just not when he was with her. Burn him if he knew when that would be. He was not about to go anywhere she had the upper hand, her and her talk of cupbearers and running grooms and marrying to serve the Empire. How was marrying him supposed to serve the flaming Empire?

Musenge left the other ten men and five Ogier in red-and-black armor and trotted his black gelding up to Mat. The horse had good lines, built for speed and endurance both, as far as Mat could tell without a thorough examination. Musenge looked built for endurance, a stocky, stolid man, his face worn but hard, his eyes like polished stones. “Forgiveness, Highness,” he drawled, banging a gauntleted fist against his breastplate, “but shouldn’t the men be back to work?” He slurred his words worse than Selucia, almost to unintelligibility. “Their rest break has stretched a long time. I doubt they can complete the wall before the traitor arrives as it is.” Mat had wondered how long it would take him to mention that. He had expected it earlier.

Open-faced helmets off but breastplates strapped on, the crossbowmen were sitting on the ground behind a long curving wall, perhaps a third of a circle made of earth thrown up out of the four-foot-deep trench fronting it, with a thicket of sharpened stakes driven into the ground in front of that and extending a little beyond the ends of the trench. They had finished that in short order. Infantry needed to be as handy with shovel, mattock and axe as they were with weapons. Even cavalry did, but making horsemen believe was harder. Footmen knew it was better to have something between you and the enemy if you could. The tools lay scattered along the trench, now. Some of the men were dicing, others just taking their ease, even napping. Soldiers slept any chance they got. A few were reading books, of all things. Reading! Mandevwin moved among them, fingering his eyepatch and now and then bending to say a few words to a bannerman. The only lancer present, standing beside his horse, every line of him saying he had nothing to do with the crossbowmen, held no lance, but rather a long banner-staff cased for half its length in leather.

It was perfect terrain for what Mat had in mind. Near two miles of grassy meadow dotted with wildflowers and a few low bushes stretched from the wall to the tall trees at the western end. To the north was a blackwater swamp, full of oaks and odd, white-flowering trees that seemed half thick roots, with a lake clinging to its western edge and forest below the lake. A small river flowed south out of the swamp, half a mile behind Mat, before curving away to the west on his left. A small river, but wide enough and deep enough that horses would have to swim it. The far bank lay beyond bowshot. There was only one way for any attacker to get at the wall. Come straight for it.

“When they arrive, I don’t want them stopping to count how many men in red and black are here,” he replied. Musenge winced slightly for some reason. “I want them to see an unfinished wall and tools thrown down because we learned they were close. The promise of a hundred thousand crowns gold has to have their blood up, but I want them too excited to think straight. They'll see us vulnerable, our defenses incomplete, and with any luck, they'll rush in straight away. They'll figure close to half of them will die when we loose, but that will just raise the chances for one of the others to get that gold. They'll only expect us to manage one volley." He slapped his hands together, and Pips shifted. "Then the trap closes."

"Still, Highness, I wish we had more of your crossbowmen. I've heard you may have as many as thirty thousand." Musenge had heard him tell Tuon he would fight the Seanchan, too. The man was probing for information.

"I have fewer than I did," Mat said with a grimace. His victories had hardly been bloodless, only remarkably close to it. Near four hundred crossbowmen lay in Altaran graves, and close to five hundred of the cavalry. A small enough butcher's bill, considering, yet he liked it best when the butcher presented no bill. "But what I have is enough for the day."

"As you say, Highness." Musenge's voice was so neutral he could have been commenting on the price of beans. Strange. He did not look like a diffident man. "I have always been ready to die for her." There was no need for him to say which "her" he meant.

"I guess I am, too, Musenge." Light, he thought he meant that! Yes, he did mean it. Did that mean he was in love? "Better to live for her, though, wouldn't you say?"

"Should you not be donning your armor, Highness?"

"I don't intend getting close enough to the fighting to need armor. A general who draws his sword has put aside his baton and become a common soldier."

He was only quoting Comadrin again—he seemed to do that a lot when discussing soldiering, but then, the man had known just about everything there was to know about the craft—just quoting, yet it appeared to impress the weathered man, who saluted him again and asked bloody permission before riding back to his men. Mat was tempted to ask what that "Highness" foolishness was about. Likely it was just some Seanchan way of calling him a lord, but he had not heard anything like it in Ebou Dar, and he had been surrounded by Seanchan there.

Five figures appeared out of the forest at the foot of the meadow, and he did not need a looking glass to know them. The two Ogier in armor striped bright red and black would have told him even if Vanin’s bulk had not. The mounted men were at a flat gallop, yet the Ogier kept pace, long arms swinging, axes swinging like a sawmill’s drive-shaft.

“Sling-men get ready!” Mat shouted. “Everybody else go pick up a shovel!” The appearance had to be just right.

As most of the crossbowmen scattered to pick up tools and make a show of working on the trench and wall, fifty others strapped on their helmets and lined up in front of Aludra. Tall men, they still carried the shortswords they called cat-gutters, but instead of crossbows, they were armed with four-foot-long sling-staffs. He would have liked more than fifty, but Aludra only had so much of her powders. Each man wore a cloth belt sewn with pockets slung across his breastplate, and each pocket held a stubby leather cylinder larger than a man’s fist with a short length of dark fuse sticking out of the end. Aludra had not come up with a fancy name for them yet. She would, though. She was one for fancy names. Dragons, and dragons’ eggs.

One by one the men held up long pieces of slow-match for her to light with a striker. She did it quickly, using each striker until the long wooden stick had burned down nearly to her fingertips, but she never winced, just dropped the thing and lit another while telling the sling-men to be faster, she was getting low on strikers. Light, but she was tight with the things. She had five more boxes that Mat knew of. As each man turned away from her, he put the smoking slow-match between his teeth and secured one of the cylinders to his sling-staff as he walked to the wall. There were wide intervals between sling-men. They had to cover the whole length of the wall.

“Time to get your people in place, Musenge,” Mat said loudly.

The Deathwatch Guards formed a single line abreast with the Gardeners on the end. Anybody who took one glance through a looking glass would know what they were. Light, all they needed was to see Ogier in armor and the sun glinting off all that red and black. And if they stopped to think how few of the Guards there were, they would still see they had Mat outnumbered, and there would be only one way to find out whether Tuon was with him.

Vanin galloped behind the wall, flung himself out of the saddle and immediately began walking his lathered dun to cool the animal down. As soon as he passed the wall, crossbowmen began dropping the tools and running to put on helmets and pick up crossbows. Those had been laid so that the men formed three spaced ranks with gaps where the sling-men stood. It no longer mattered if anyone was watching from the forest. What they saw would seem natural.

Mat trotted Pips to Vanin and dismounted. The two human Deathwatch Guards and the two Ogier went to join the others. The horses' nostrils flared with their heavy breathing, but the Ogier were panting no harder. One was Hartha, a stone-eyed fellow who apparently ranked very close to Musenge.

Vanin scowled at the men who had not gotten down to walk their horses. A horsethief he might be, reformed or not, but he disliked mistreating horseflesh. "They went up like one of her nightflowers when they glimpsed us," he said, nodding toward Aludra. "We made sure they got a good look at that fancy armor, then high-tailed it as soon as they started getting mounted. They're coming hard behind us. Harder than they should." He spat on the ground. "I didn't get a good look at their animals, but I doubt they're all good for that run. Some'll founder before they get here."

"The more the better," Mat said. "The fewer who make it, the better in my book." All he needed was to give Tuon a day or two head start on them, and if that came from their ruining horses, if they rode out of the trees and decided he had too many men to take on, he would take that over a battle any day. After today's six-mile gallop, they would need to rest their horses a few days before they were fit to travel any distance at all. Vanin directed that scowl at him. Others might go around calling him my Lord and Highness, but not Chel Vanin.

Mat laughed and clapped him on the shoulder before swinging back into Pips' saddle. It was good there was someone who did not think he was a fool noble, or at least, did not care whether or not he was. He rode to join the Aes Sedai, who were mounted now.

Blaeric and Fen, the one on a bay gelding, the other on a black, gave him stares almost as dark as those they had directed at Musenge. They still suspected he had something to do with what had happened to Joline. He thought of telling Fen that his stub of a topknot looked ridiculous. Fen shifted in his saddle and stroked his sword hilt. Then again, maybe not.

". . . . what I told you," Joline was telling Bethamin and Seta, shaking an admonitory finger. Her dark bay gelding looked a warhorse, but was not. The animal had a good turn of speed, yet its temperament was mild as milk-water. "If you even think about embracing *saidar*, you'll regret it."

Teslyn grunted sourly. She patted her white-faced chestnut mare, a much more feisty creature than Joline's mount, and spoke to the air. "She does train wilders and expects them to behave once out of her sight. Or perhaps she does think the Tower will accept over-age novices." Spots of color appeared in Joline's cheeks, but she straightened in her saddle without saying anything. As usual when those two got into a conflict, Edesina concentrated on something else, in this case brushing imaginary dust from her divided skirts. Enough tension to choke on.

Suddenly riders poured out of the trees at the far end of the meadow in a torrent that swelled into a spreading lake of steel-tipped lances as they drew rein, no doubt in surprise at what lay before them. It seemed that not as many horses had foundered as Mat had hoped for. Pulling the looking glass from its scabbard tied to his saddle's pommel, he raised it to his eye. The Taraboners were easy to pick out, with mail veils hiding their faces to the eyes, but the others wore every sort of helmet, rounded or conical, with face-bars and without. He even saw a few ridged Tairen helmets, though that did not mean there were Tairens among them. Most men used whatever armor they could find. *Don't think*, he thought. *The woman is here. That hundred thousand gold crowns is waiting. Don't bloody—*

A shrill Seanchan bugle sounded, thin with the distance, and the horsemen began advancing at a walk, already spreading out to extend beyond the wall's edges.

"Uncase the banner, Macoll," Mat ordered. So these flaming sons of goats thought they were coming to murder Tuon, did they? "This time, we'll let them know who's killing them. Mandevwin, you have the command."

Mandevwin turned his bay to face front. "Stand ready!" he shouted, and under-officers and bannermen echoed the cry.

Macoll pulled the leather case off, carefully fastening it to his saddle, and the banner streamed on the wind, a red-fringed white square with a large, open red hand in the center, and beneath it, embroidered in red, the words *Dovie'andi se tovya sagain. It's time to toss the dice*, Mat thought, translating. And so it was. He saw Musenge eyeing it. He seemed very calm for a man with ten thousand lances coming toward him.

"Are you ready, Aludra?" Mat called.

"Of course I am ready," she replied. "I only wish I had my dragons!" Musenge shifted his attention to her. Burn her, she needed to watch her tongue! Mat wanted those dragons to be a shock when the Seanchan first faced them.

Perhaps twelve hundred paces from the wall, the ranks of lancers began to trot, and at six hundred they began to gallop, but not as hard as they might have. Those horses were tired after a long run already. They lumbered. None of the lances had come down, yet. They would not until the last hundred paces. Some of those carried streamers that floated behind them in the air, a large knot of red here, a clump of green or blue there. They might have been House colors, or perhaps they marked mercenary companies. All those hooves made a noise like distant thunder rolling.

"Aludra!" Mat shouted without looking back. A hollow thump and an acrid sulphur smell announced the lofting tube sending its nightflower aloft, and a loud pop the blooming of a ball of red streaks overhead. Some of the galloping horsemen pointed to it as if in amazement. None looked behind them to see Talmanes leading the three banners of horse out of the forest below the lake. Their lances had been left with the pack animals, but every man would have his horsebow out. Spreading out in a single line, they began following the galloping riders, increasing speed as they came. Their horses had been ridden far last night, but not pressed too hard, and they had been rested all morning. The distance between the two groups of riders began to narrow.

"Front rank!" Mandevwin shouted when the horsemen were four hundred paces away. "Loose!" Above a thousand bolts flashed out, dark streaks in the air. Immediately the front rank bent to fasten their cranks to their crossbows and the second rank raised their weapons. "Second rank!" Mandevwin shouted. "Loose!" Another thousand quarrels streaked for the oncoming horsemen.

At that range, they could not punch through a breastplate despite heads designed to do just that, but men with shattered legs toppled from their saddles and men with ruined arms reined in frantically to try stemming the flow of blood. And the horses. . . . Ah, Light, the poor horses. Horses fell by the hundreds, some kicking and screaming, struggling to stand, others not moving at all, many of them tripping more animals. Catapulted riders tumbled across the meadow grass until they were trampled by the riders behind.

"Third rank! Loose!" Mandevwin shouted, and as soon as those bolts were away, the front rank straightened. "Front rank!" Mandevwin called.

“Loose!” And another thousand bolts added to the carnage. “Second rank! Loose!”

It was not so one-sided as an ambush, of course. Some of the galloping horsemen had flung down their lances and uncased their horsebows. Arrows began to fall among the crossbowmen. Shooting accurately from a galloping horse was no easy task, and the range was too far at the start for the arrows to kill, but more than one man struggled to work his crossbow with a shaft jutting from an arm. The wall protected their legs, yet. Too far to kill unless your target’s luck had run out. Mat saw a man fall with an arrow in his eye, another with a shaft taken in the throat. There were other gaps in the ranks, as well. Men shuffled forward quickly to fill them.

“You could join in any time, Joline,” he said.

“Third rank! Loose!”

The Aes Sedai shook her head irritably. “I must be in danger. I don’t feel in danger yet.” Teslyn nodded. She was watching the charge as if it were a parade, and a not very interesting one at that.

“If you would allow Seta and me,” Bethamin began, but Joline looked over her shoulder coldly, and the Seanchan woman subsided and dropped her eyes to her hands on the reins. Seta smiled nervously, but it slid off her face under Joline’s stare.

“Front rank! Loose!”

Mat rolled his eyes to the heavens and muttered a prayer that was half curse. The bloody women did not feel in danger! *He* felt as though his bloody head was on the chopping block!

“Second rank! Loose!”

Talmanes had come in range, now, and announced himself with a volley from four thousand bows at three hundred paces that cleared saddles. Closing the distance, they fired again. Again. The enemy ranks seemed to ripple with the shock. Some men whirled about and charged at Talmanes’ line with lances coming down. Others began returning his hail of arrows with their own. Most continued on, though.

“Form square!” Mandevwin shouted a heartbeat before Mat could. He hoped the man had not left it too bloody late.

The Band was well-trained, though. The men on the flanks fell back at the run, as calmly as if arrows were not pelting them, clanging off breastplates and helmets. And sometimes not. Men fell. The three ranks never lost cohesion, though, as they bent into a hollow box with Mat at its center. Musenge and the other human Deathwatch Guards had their swords out, and the Ogier were hefting their long axes.

"Sling-men!" Mandevwin shouted. "Loose at will! Front rank, west! Loose!" Sling-men along the western rank shifted their sling-staffs so they could touch the fuses coming from the stubby cylinders to the slow-matches held in their teeth and, as the volley lanced out from the crossbows, whipped their slings back and then forward. The dark cylinders flew more than a hundred paces to land among the onrushing horsemen. The sling-men were already fitting more of the cylinders to their slings before the first fell. Aludra had marked each fuse with pieces of thread to indicate different burning times, and each cylinder erupted with a roar in a burst of flame, some on the ground, some as high as a mounted man's head. The explosion was not the real weapon, though a man struck in the face was suddenly headless. He stayed upright in the saddle for three strides before toppling. No, Aludra had wrapped a layer of hard pebbles around the powder inside each cylinder, and those pierced flesh deeply when they hit. Shrieking horses fell to thrash on the ground. Riders fell to lie still.

An arrow tugged at Mat's left sleeve, another pierced his right sleeve, only the fletchings keeping it from going through cleanly, and a third ripped open the right shoulder of his coat. He put a finger behind the scarf around his neck and tugged. The bloody thing felt awfully tight of a sudden. Maybe he *should* consider wearing armor at times like this. The enemy flanks were beginning to curl in, now, preparing to envelop the crossbowmen behind the wall. Talmanes' men still peppered their rear with arrows, but several hundred men had been forced to drop their bows to defend themselves with swords, and it was unlikely that all of the horses with empty saddles out there had belonged to Taraboners or Amadicians. He had left a gap in the center of his line, a path for anyone who decided to flee, yet no one was taking the offering. They could smell that hundred thousand crowns gold.

"I think," Joline said slowly. "Yes, I feel in danger, now." Teslyn simply drew back her hand and threw a sphere of fire larger than a horse's head. The explosion hurled dirt and pieces of men and horses into the air. It was about bloody time!

Facing in three directions, the Aes Sedai began hurling fireballs as fast as they could swing their arms, but the devastation they wrought did nothing to slow the attack. Those men should have been able to see there was no woman matching Tuon's description inside the square by this time, but their blood was no doubt on fire, the scent of riches in their nostrils. A man could live the rest of his life like a noble with a hundred thousand crowns gold. The square was encircled, and they fought to close on it, fought and died as volleys from the crossbows lashed them and sling-men killed them. Another wall began to rise, made of dead and dying men and horses, a wall that some tried to ride over and joined in the attempt. More scrambled down from their saddles and tried to clamber over. Crossbow bolts hurled them back. This close, bolts penetrated breastplates like hot knives going into butter. On they came, and died.

The silence seemed to come suddenly. Not quite silence. The air was full of the sound of panting men who had been working those cranks as fast as they could. And there was moaning from the wounded. A horse was still shrieking, somewhere. But Mat could see no one on his feet between the wall of dead and Talmanes, no one in the saddle except men in green helmets and breastplates. Men who had lowered their bows and swords. The Aes Sedai folded their hands on the high pommels of their saddles. They were breathing hard, too.

“It is done, Mat!” came Talmanes’ shout. “Those who are not dead are dying. Not one of the fools tried to escape.”

Mat shook his head. He had expected them to be half-mad with the lust for gold. They had been completely mad with it.

It would be necessary to haul away dead men and horses for Mat and the others to get out, and Talmanes set men to work, fastening ropes to horses to drag them aside. No one wanted to climb over that. No one but the Ogier.

“I want to see if I can find the traitor,” Hartha said, and he and the other six Gardeners shouldered their axes and walked over the mound of bodies as if it were dirt.

“Well, at least we settled this,” Joline said, patting her face with a lace-edged handkerchief. Sweat dotted her forehead. “You owe a debt, Mat. Aes Sedai do not become involved in private wars as a rule. I shall have to think on how you can pay it.” Mat had a pretty good idea what she would come up with. She was mad herself if she thought he would agree.

“Crossbows settled this, *marath’damane*,” Musenge said. His helmet, breastplate and coat were off, his left shirt-sleeve ripped away so one of the other Guards could wrap a bandage around where an arrow had gone through. The sleeve had come away very neatly, as if the stitching had been weak. He had a raven tattooed on his shoulder. “Crossbows and men with heart. You never had more than this, did you, Highness.” That was not a question. “This and whatever losses you suffered.”

“I told you,” Mat said. “I had enough.” He was not going to reveal anything more to the man than he could not avoid, but Musenge nodded as if he had confirmed everything.

By the time an opening could be cleared so that Mat and the others could ride through, Hartha and the Gardeners had returned. “I found the traitor,” Hartha said, holding up a severed head by its hair.

Musenge’s eyebrows climbed at the sight of that dark, hook-nosed face. “She will be very interested to see this,” he said softly. Softly as the sound of sword being drawn is soft. “We must carry it to her.”

“You know him?” Mat asked.

“We know him, Highness.” Musenge’s face, suddenly seeming carved from stone, said he would say no more on the subject.

“Look, would you stop calling me that? My name is Mat. After today, I’d say you have a right to use it.” Mat surprised himself by sticking out his hand.

That stone mask crumpled in astonishment. “I could not do that, Highness,” he said in scandalized tones. “When she married you, you became Prince of the Ravens. To speak your name would lower my eyes forever.”

Mat took off his hat and scrubbed fingers through his hair. He had told everyone who would listen that he did not like nobles, did not want to be one, and he had meant it. He still meant it. And now he bloody was one! He did the only thing he could. He laughed until his sides ached.

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EPILOGUE

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Remember the Old Saying

The red-walled room, its ceiling painted fancifully with birds and fish cavorting among clouds and waves, bustled with brown-clad clerks scurrying along the aisles between the long tables that covered the floor. None seemed to be trying to listen—most seemed stunned, with cause—but Suroth disliked their presence. They had to overhear some of what was being said, and it was potentially dire news. Galgan had insisted, though. They needed to work to keep their minds off the disastrous news from home, and they were all trusted men and women. He insisted! At least the white-haired old man was not dressed as a soldier, this morning. His voluminous blue trousers and short, high-collared red coat with rows of gold buttons embossed with his sigil were the height of Seandar fashion, which meant the height of fashion for the Empire. When he wore armor, or even just his red uniform, he sometimes looked at her as if she were a soldier under his command!

Well, once Elbar brought word that Tuon was dead, she could have Galgan killed. His cheeks were smeared with ashes, as were hers. The ship Semirhage had promised had brought word of the Empress's death and the Empire was racked by rebellion in every quarter. There was no Empress, no Daughter of the Nine Moons. To commoners, the world trembled on the brink of destruction. To some of the Blood, too. With Galgan and a few more dead, there would be none to object to Suroth Sabelle Meldarath proclaiming herself Empress. She tried not to think of the new name she would take. Thinking on a new name beforehand was bad luck.

A frown creasing his face, Galgan looked down at the map spread out before them, and placed a red-lacquered fingernail atop mountains on the southern coast of Arad Doman. Suroth did not know what the mountains were called. The map showed all of Arad Doman and held three markers, one red wedge and two white circles, spaced out in a long line north to south. "Has Turan gotten an accurate count of how many men came out of these mountains to join Ituralde when he crossed into Arad Doman, Yamada?"

Efraim Yamada wore the ashes, too, since he was of the Blood, if only the low Blood, his hair cut in the bowl-and-tail rather than a narrow crest across an otherwise shaved scalp. Only the commoners around the table, whatever their rank, were without. Graying and tall in a blue-and-gold breastplate, with broad shoulders and lean hips, Yamada still held some of the beauty of his youth. “He reports at least one hundred thousand, Captain-General. Perhaps half again that.”

“And how many came out after Turan crossed the border?”

“Possibly two hundred thousand, Captain-General.”

Galgan sighed and straightened. “So Turan has one army ahead of him and another behind, very likely the whole of Arad Doman’s strength, and between them he is outnumbered.” The fool! Stating the blindingly obvious.

“Turan should have stripped Tarabon of every sword and lance!” Suroth snapped. “If he survives this debacle, I will have his head!”

Galgan quirked a white eyebrow at her. “I hardly think Tarabon is loyal enough to support that just yet,” he said drily. “Besides, he has *damane* and *raken*. They should offset his lesser numbers. Speaking of *damane* and *raken*, I’ve signed the orders raising Tylee Khirgan to Lieutenant-General and the low Blood, since you’ve dithered over it, and orders to return most of those *raken* to Amadicia and Altara. Chisen still hasn’t found whoever created that little mess in the north, and I don’t like the notion that whoever it was is lying in wait to spring out as soon as Chisen returns to the Molvaine Gap.”

Suroth hissed, gripping her pleated blue skirts in her fists before she could stop her hands. She would not let the man make her show emotion! “You overstep yourself, Galgan,” she said coldly. “I command the Forerunners. For the time being, I command the Return. You will sign no orders without my approval.”

“You commanded the Forerunners, who have been subsumed into the Return,” he replied calmly, and Suroth tasted bitterness. The news from the Empire had emboldened him. With the Empress dead, Galgan intended to make himself the first Emperor in nine hundred years. It seemed he would have to die by tonight. “As for you commanding the Return—” He cut off at the sound of heavy boots from the corridor.

Suddenly Deathwatch Guards filled the doorway, armored and hands on their sword hilts. Hard eyes stared out of their red-and-green helmets to survey the room. Only when they were satisfied did they step aside to reveal that the corridor was filled with Deathwatch Guards, human and Ogier. Suroth barely noticed them. She had eyes only for the small dark woman in pleated blue with a shaven head and ashes on her cheeks. The news was all over the city. She could not have reached the palace without hearing of her mother’s death, her family’s deaths, but her face was a stern mask. Suroth’s knees hit the floor automatically. Around her the Blood knelt, the commoners prostrated themselves.

“The Light’s blessings for your safe return, Highness,” she said in chorus with the rest of the Blood. So Elbar had failed. No matter. Tuon would not take a new name or become empress until the mourning was finished. She could still die, clearing the way for a new empress.

“Show them what Captain Musenge brought me, Banner-General Karede,” Tuon said.

A tall man with three dark plumes on his helmet bent to carefully empty a large lump from a canvas bag onto the green floor tiles. The gagging smell of decay began to permeate the room. Dropping the bag, he strode across the floor to stand beside Suroth.

It took her a moment to recognize Elbar’s hook-nosed face in that rotting mass, but as soon as she did, she fell forward, prostrating herself, kissing the floor tiles. Not in desperation, though. She could recover from this. Unless they had put Elbar to the question. “My eyes are lowered, Highness, that one of mine has offended you so deeply that you took his head.”

“Offended me.” Tuon seemed to be weighing the words. “It might be said he offended me. He tried to kill me.”

Gasps filled the room, and before Suroth could more than open her mouth, the Deathwatch Guard Banner-General planted a boot on her bottom, seized her crest in his fist, and hauled her upper body clear of the floor. She did not struggle. That would only have added to the indignity.

“My eyes are deeply lowered that one of mine should be a traitor, Highness,” she said hoarsely. She wished she could have spoken naturally, but the cursed man had her back arched till it was a wonder she could speak at all. “Had I even suspected, I would have had him put to the question myself. But if he tried to implicate me, Highness, he lied to protect his true master. I have some thoughts on that which I would share with you in private, if I may be allowed.” With a little luck, she could lay this to Galgan. His usurpation of her authority would help.

Tuon looked over Suroth’s head. She met Galgan’s eyes, and Abaldar’s and Yamada’s, and those of everyone of the Blood, but not Suroth’s. “It is well known that Zaired Elbar was Suroth’s man completely. He did nothing that she did not order. Therefore Suroth Sabelle Meldarath is no more. This *da'covale* will serve the Deathwatch Guard as they wish until her hair has grown enough for her to be decent when she is sent to the block for sale."

Suroth never thought of the knife she had intended to use to open her veins, a knife beyond reach in her apartments. She could not think at all. She started screaming, a wordless howl, before they even began cutting her clothing off.

The Andoran sun was warm after Tar Valon. Pevara removed her cloak and began tying it behind her saddle as the gateway winked shut, hiding the view of the Ogier grove in Tar Valon. None of them had wanted anyone to see them leaving. They would return to the grove for the same reason, unless matters went very badly. In which case, they might never return. She had thought this task must be carried out by someone who combined the highest diplomatic skills with the courage of a lion. Well, she was no coward, at least. She could say that much of herself.

"Where did you learn the weave for bonding a Warder?" Javindhra asked abruptly, stowing her own cloak in similar fashion.

"You should recall that I once suggested Red sisters would be well served by having Warders." Pevara snugged her red riding gloves, showing no concern for the question. She had expected it before this. "Why would you be surprised I know the weave?" In truth, she had needed to ask Yukiri, and had been hard pressed to dissemble her reason for asking. She doubted that Yukiri was suspicious, though. A Red bonding a Warder was as likely as a woman flying. Except, of course, that that was why she had come to Andor. Why they had all come.

Javindhra was there only at Tsutama's command, given when Pevara and Tarna could not come up with enough names to suit the Highest. The angular Sitter did not bother to hide her displeasure over that, not from Pevara, although she had buried it deeply around Tsutama. Tarna was there, of course, pale-haired and icy cold, her Keeper's stole left behind but her divided gray skirts embroidered in red to the knee. For Elaida's Keeper to have a Warder would be difficult, though the men were to be housed in the city, away from the Tower, yet it had all been her idea in the first place, and she was, if not eager, then determined to take part in this first experiment. Besides, the need for numbers was paramount, because they had found only three other sisters willing to entertain the idea. The primary task of the Red for so long, finding men who could channel and bringing them to the Tower to be gentled, tended to sour women on all men, so the clues had been few and far between. Jezrail was a square-faced Tairen who kept a painted miniature of the boy she had almost married instead of coming to the Tower. His grandchildren would be grandparents now, but she still spoke of him fondly. Desala, a beautiful Cairhienin with large dark eyes and an unfortunate temper, when given the chance would dance any number of men to exhaustion in a night. And Melare, plump and witty, with a love of conversation, sent money to Andor to pay for her grandnephews' education as she had for her nephews and nieces.

Weary of searching out such tiny clues, weary of probing delicately to learn whether they meant what they might, Pevara had convinced Tsutama that six would be enough to begin. Too, a larger party might cause some unfortunate reaction. After all, the whole Red Ajah appearing at this so-called Black Tower, or even half, might well make the men think themselves under attack. There was no telling how sane they all still were. That was one thing they had agreed on, behind Tsutama's back. They would bond no men who showed any signs of madness. That was, if they were allowed to bond any.

Ajah eyes-and-ears in Caemlyn had sent copious reports on the Black Tower, and some had even found employment inside it, so they had no difficulty locating the well-worn dirt track that led down from the city to a grandiose double-arched black gate, near fifty feet tall and ten spans wide, topped by crenelations over a down-pointing central spike of stone and flanked by a pair of thick, crenelated black towers that stood at least fifteen spans high. There were no actual gates to close up the opening, and the black stone wall that stretched out of sight east and west, marked at intervals by the foundations of bastions and towers, was nowhere higher than four or five paces that she could see. Weeds grew along the uneven top, and grasses ruffled by the breeze. Those unfinished walls, looking as if they might never be finished, made the gate seem ludicrous.

The three men who stepped out into the opening were not at all ludicrous, however. They wore long black coats, and swords at their hips. One, a lean young fellow with curled mustaches, had a silver pin in the shape of a sword on his high collar. One of the Dedicated. Pevara resisted the instinct to think of him as equivalent to an Accepted and the other two as novices. Novices and Accepted were kept safe and guided until they knew enough of the Power to become Aes Sedai. By all reports, Soldiers and Dedicated were considered ready for battle almost as soon as they learned to channel. And they were forced from the first day, pressed to seize as much of *saidin* as they could, made to use it almost continually. Men died from that, and they called it "training losses," as if they could hide death behind bland words. The thought of losing novices or Accepted in that fashion curdled Pevara's stomach, but it seemed that the men took it in stride.

"A fine morning to you, Aes Sedai," the Dedicated said with a small bow as they reined in before him. A very small bow, never taking his eyes from them. His accents were those of Murandy. "Now what would six sisters be wanting here at the Black Tower this fine morning?"

"To see the M'Hael," Pevara replied, managing to avoid choking on the word. It meant "leader" in the Old Tongue, but the implication of taking that alone as a title gave the word much stronger meaning, as if he led everyone and everything.

"Ah, to see the M'Hael, is it? And of what Ajahs should I say?"

"The Red," Pevara replied and watched him blink. Very satisfying. But not very helpful.

"The Red," he said flatly. He had not remained startled very long. "Well, then. Enkazin, al'Seen, you keep watch while I see what the M'Hael has to say to this."

He turned his back, and the vertical silvery slash of a gateway appeared in front of him, widening into an opening no larger than a door. Was that as large as he could make? There had been some discussion about whether to bond men who were as strong as possible or those who were weak. The weak might be more easily controlled, while the strong might—would definitely—be more useful. They had reached no consensus; each sister would have to decide for herself. He darted through the gateway and closed it before she had a chance to see more than a white stone platform with steps leading up one side and a squared-off black stone that might have been one of the building blocks for the wall, polished till it shone in the sun, sitting atop it.

The two who remained stayed in the middle of the double arch as if to bar the sisters from riding in. One was a Saldaean, a skinny broad-nosed man just short of his middle years who had something of the look of a clerk about him, a bit of a stoop as from hunching for long hours over a writing table, the other a boy, little more than a child, who raked dark hair out of his eyes with his fingers though the breeze quickly put it back again. Neither seemed the slightest uneasy over confronting six sisters alone. If they *were* alone. Were there others in those towers? Pevara refrained from glancing at the tower tops.

“You there, boy,” Desala said in a voice like chimes. Chimes tinged with anger. The surest way to set off her temper was to harm a child. “You should be at home with your mother studying your letters. What are you doing here?” The boy flushed bright red and raked hair from his face again.

“Saml’s all right, Aes Sedai,” the Saldaean said, patting the boy’s shoulder. “He’s a quick learner, and you don’t need to show him anything twice before he knows it.” The boy stood up very straight, pride on his face, and tucked his thumbs behind his sword belt. A sword, at his age! True, a noble’s son would have been learning the sword for several years at Saml al’Seen’s age, but he would not be allowed to wear the thing about!

“Pevara,” Tarna said coolly, “no children. I knew they had children here, but no children.”

“Light!” Melare breathed. Her white mare sensed her agitation and tossed her head. “Certainly no children!”

“That would be an abomination,” Jezrail said.

“No children,” Pevara agreed quickly. “I think we should wait to say more until we see Master . . . the M’Hael.” Javindhra sniffed.

“No children what, Aes Sedai?” Enkazin asked, frowning. “No children what?” he said again when no one answered.

He no longer appeared so much like a clerk. The stoop remained, but something in his tilted eyes suddenly seemed . . . dangerous. Was he holding the male half of the Power? The possibility sent a chill down Pevara’s spine, but she resisted the desire to embrace *saidar*. Some men who could channel seemed able to sense when a woman was holding the Power. Enkazin looked like he might be hasty, now.

They waited in silence except for the occasional stamp of a hoof, Pevara schooling herself to patience, Javindhra grumbling under her breath. Pevara could not make out the words, but she knew grumbling when she heard it. Tarna and Jezrail took books from their saddlebags and read. Good. Let these Asha’man see that they were unconcerned. Only, not even the boy seemed impressed. He and the Saldaean just stood there in the middle of the gate watching, hardly blinking.

After perhaps half an hour, a larger gateway opened and the Murandian strode through. “The M’Hael will be receiving you at the palace, Aes Sedai. Go on through.” He jerked his head toward the opening.

“You will show us the way?” Pevara said, dismounting. The gateway was larger, but she would have had to crouch to ride through.

“There’ll be someone on the other side to guide you.” He barked a laugh. “The M’Hael doesn’t associate with the likes of me.” Pevara filed that away to chew over later.

As soon as the last of them was through, near the white stone platform with its mirror-bright black stone, the gateway winked shut, but they were not alone. Four men and two women in rough woolens took the reins of their horses, and a dark, heavyset man with both the silver sword and a sinuous red-and-gold figure, a dragon, on his tall black collar gave them a minimal bow.

“Follow me,” he said curtly in a Tairen accent. His eyes were like augers.

The palace the Murandian had spoken of was just that, two stories of white marble topped with pointed domes and spires in the style of Saldaea, separated from a large space of bare, hard-packed ground by the white platform. It was not large among palaces, but most nobles lived in buildings far smaller and less grand. Broad stone stairs rose to a wide landing in front of tall twinned doors. Each bore a gauntleted fist gripping three lightning bolts, carved large and gilded. Those doors swung open before the Tairen reached them, but there were no servants in evidence. The man must have channeled. Pevara felt that chill again. Javindhra muttered under her breath. With a sound of prayer, this time.

The palace might have belonged to any noble with a taste for tapestries showing battles and red-and-black floor tiles, except that there were no servants in evidence. He had servants, though unfortunately no Red Ajah eyes-and-ears among them, but did he expect them to remain out of sight when not needed or had he ordered them from the halls? Perhaps to avoid having anyone see six Aes Sedai arrive. That line of reasoning ran toward thoughts she would rather not consider. She had acknowledged the dangers before leaving the White Tower. There was no point dwelling on them.

The chamber the Tairen led them to was a throne room, where a ring of spiral-cut black columns supported what must have been the palace’s largest dome, its interior layered with gilt and half filled with gilded lamps hanging on gilded chains. Tall mirrored stand-lamps stood along the curved walls, too. Perhaps a hundred men in black coats were standing to either side of the room. Every man she could see wore the sword and the dragon, men with hard faces, leering faces, cruel faces. Their eyes focused on her and the other sisters.

The Tairen did not announce them, but rather simply joined the mass of Asha'man and left them to make their own way across the room. The floor tiles were red and black here, too. Taim must particularly like those colors. The man himself was lounging on what could only be called a throne, a massive chair as heavily carved and gilded as any throne she had seen, atop a white marble dais. Pevara focused on him, and not only to avoid feeling all those eyes of men who could channel following her. Mazrim Taim drew the eye. He was tall, with a strongly hooked nose and an air of physical strength about him. An air of darkness, too. He sat there with his ankles crossed and one arm hanging over the heavy arm of the throne, yet he seemed ready to explode into violence. Interestingly, though his black coat was embroidered with blue-and-gold dragons that twined around the sleeves from elbows to cuffs, he did not wear the collar pins.

"Six sisters of the Red Ajah," he said when they stopped short of the dais. His eyes. . . . She had only thought the Tairen's eyes were augers. "Plainly you didn't come to try gentling us all." Chuckles rippled around the room. "Why *did* you come asking to speak to me?"

"I am Pevara Tazanovni, Sitter for the Red," she said. "This is Javindhra Doraille, also a Red Sitter. The others are Tarna Feir, Desala Nevanche—"

"I didn't ask your names," Taim cut in coldly. "I asked why you came here."

This was not going well. She managed not to take a deep breath, but she wanted to. Outwardly, she was cool and calm. Inside, she wondered whether she would end the day forcibly bonded. Or dead. "We want to discuss bonding Asha'man as Warders. After all, you've bonded fifty-one sisters. Against their will." As well to let him know they were aware of that from the start. "We do not propose bonding any man against his will, however."

A tall, golden-haired man standing near the dais sneered at her. "Why should we allow Aes Sedai to take any m—" Something unseen struck the side of his head so hard that his feet left the floor tiles before he fell in a heap, eyes closed and blood trickling from his nostrils.

A lean man with receding gray-streaked hair and a forked beard bent to touch a finger to the fallen man's head. "He's alive," he said as he straightened, "but his skull's cracked and his jaw's broken." He might have been talking about the weather. None of the men made any move to offer Healing. Not one!

"I have some small skill in Healing," Melare said, gathering her skirts and already moving toward the fallen man. "Enough for this, I think. With your permission."

Taim shook his head. "You do not have my permission. If Mishraile survives till nightfall, he'll be Healed. Perhaps the pain will teach him to guard his tongue. You say *you* want to bond Warders? *Reds*?"

That last word carried a great deal of contempt, which Pevara chose to ignore. Tarna's eyes could have turned the sun to an icicle, though. Pevara laid a cautionary hand on the other woman's arm as she spoke. "Reds have experience with men who can channel." Mutters rose among the watching Asha'man. Angry mutters. She ignored that, too. "We are not afraid of them. Custom can be as hard to change as law, harder at times, but it has been decided to change ours. Henceforth, Red sisters may bond Warders, but only men who can channel. Each sister may bond as many as she feels comfortable with. Given the Green, for example, I think that is unlikely to be more than three or four."

"Very well."

Pevara blinked in spite of herself. " 'Very well'?" She must have misunderstood him. He could not have been convinced so easily.

Taim's eyes seemed to bore into her head. He spread his hands, and it was a mocking gesture. "What would you have me say? Fair is fair? Equal shares? Accept 'very well' and ask who will let you bond them. Besides, you must remember the old saying. Let the lord of chaos rule." The chamber erupted with men's laughter.

Pevara had never heard any saying like that. The laughter made the hair on the back of her neck try to stand.

The End of the Eleventh Book of *The Wheel of Time*

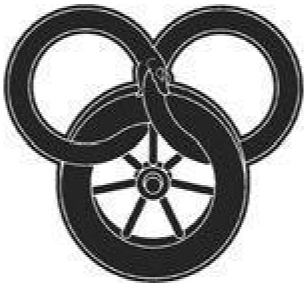

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Aelfinn: A race of beings, largely human in appearance but with snake-like characteristics, who will give true answers to three questions. Whatever the question, their answers are always correct, if frequently given in forms that are not clear, but questions concerning the Shadow can be extremely dangerous. Their true location is unknown, but they can be visited by passing through a *ter'angreal*, once a possession of Mayene but in recent years held in the Stone of Tear. There are reports that they can also be reached by entering the Tower of Ghenjei. They speak the Old Tongue, mention treaties and agreements, and ask if those entering carry iron, instruments of music or devices that can make fire. *See also* Eelfinn.

Amayar, the: The land-dwelling inhabitants of the Sea Folk islands. Known to few people other than the Atha'an Miere, the Amayar are the craftsmen who make what is known as Sea Folk porcelain. Followers of the Water Way, which prizes acceptance of what is rather than what might be wished for, they are very uncomfortable at sea and only venture onto the water in small boats for fishing, never leaving sight of land. Their way of life is very peaceful, and requires very little oversight from the governors appointed from among the Atha’an Miere. Since Atha’an Miere governors have little desire to go far from the sea, the Amayar essentially run their villages according to their own rules and customs.

Arad Doman: A nation on the Aryth Ocean, currently racked by civil war and by wars against those who have declared for the Dragon Reborn. Its capital is Bandar Eban. In Arad Doman, those who are descended from the nobility at the time of the founding of the nation, as opposed to those raised later, are known as the bloodborn. The ruler (king or queen) is elected by a council of the heads of merchant guilds (the Council of Merchants), who are almost always women. He or she must be from the noble class, not the merchant, and is elected for life. Legally the king or queen has absolute authority, except that he or she can be deposed by a three-quarter vote of the Council. The current ruler is King Alsalam Saeed Almadar, Lord of Almadar, High Seat of House Almadar. His present whereabouts are much shrouded in mystery.

area, units of: (1) Land: 1 ribbon = 20 paces × 10 paces (200 square paces); 1 cord = 20 paces × 50 paces (1000 square paces); 1 hide = 100 paces × 100 paces (10,000 square paces); 1 rope = 100 paces × 1000 paces (100,000 square paces); 1 march = 1000 paces × 1000 paces (1/4 square mile). (2) Cloth: 1 pace = 1 pace and 1 hand × 1 pace and 1 hand.

armsmen: Soldiers who owe allegiance or fealty to a particular lord or lady.

Asha’man: (1) In the Old Tongue, “Guardian” or “Guardians,” but always a guardian of justice and truth. (2) The name given, both collectively and as a rank, to the men who have come to the Black Tower, near Caemlyn in Andor, in order to learn to channel. Their training largely concentrates on the ways in which the One Power can be used as a weapon, and in another departure from the usages of the White Tower, once they learn to seize *saidin*, the male half of the Power, they are required to perform all chores and labors with the Power. When newly enrolled, a man is termed a Soldier; he wears a plain black coat with a high collar, in the Andoran fashion. Being raised to Dedicated brings the right to wear a silver pin, called the Sword, on the collar of his coat. Promotion to Asha’man brings the right to wear a Dragon pin, in gold and red enamel, on the collar opposite the

Sword. Although many women, including wives, flee when they learn that their men actually can channel, a fair number of men at the Black Tower are married, and they use a version of the Warder bond to create a link with their wives. This same bond, altered to compel obedience, has recently been used to bond captured Aes Sedai as well. Some Asha'man have been bonded by Aes Sedai, although the traditional Warder bond is used. The Asha'man are led by Mazrim Taim, who has styled himself the M'Hael, Old Tongue for "leader."

Balwer, Sebban: Formerly secretary to Pedron Niall (the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light) in public, and secretly Niall's spymaster. After Niall's death, Balwer aided the escape of Morgase (once Queen of Andor) from the Seanchan in Amador for his own reasons, and was employed as secretary to Perrin t'Bashere Aybara and Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara. His duties expanded, however, and he now directs *Cha Faile* in their activities, acting as a spymaster for Perrin, though Perrin doesn't think of him so. *See Cha Faile.*

Band of the Red Hand: *See Shen an Calhar.*

Blood, the: Term used by the Seanchan to designate the nobility. There are four degrees of nobility, two of the High Blood and two of the low, or lesser, Blood. The High Blood let their fingernails grow to a length of one inch and shave the sides of their heads, leaving a crest down the center, narrower for men than for women. The length of this crest varies according to fashion. The low Blood also grow their fingernails long, but they shave the sides and back of the head leaving what appears to be a bowl of hair, with a wide tail at the back allowed to grow longer, often to the shoulder for men or to the waist for women. Those of the highest level of the High Blood are called High Lady or High Lord and lacquer the first two fingernails on each hand. Those of the next level of the High Blood are called simply Lord or Lady and lacquer only the nails of the forefingers. Those of the low Blood also are called simply Lady or Lord, but those of the higher rank lacquer the nails of the last two fingers on each hand, while those on the lowest level lacquer only the nails of the little fingers. The Empress and immediate members of the Imperial family shave their heads entirely and lacquer all of their fingernails. One can be raised to the Blood as well as born to it, and this is frequently a reward for outstanding accomplishment or service to the Empire.

calendar: There are 10 days to the week, 28 days to the month and 13 months to the year. Several feast days are not part of any month; these include Sunday (the longest day of the year), the Feast of Thanksgiving (once every four years at the spring equinox) and the Feast of All Souls Salvation, also called All Souls Day (once every ten years at the autumn equinox). While the months have names—Taisham, Jumara, Saban, Aine, Adar, Saven, Amadaine, Tammaz, Maigdhal, Choren, Shaldine, Nesan and Danu—these are seldom used except in official documents and by officials. For most people, using the seasons is good enough.

Captain-General: (1) The military rank of the leader of the Queen's Guard. This position is currently held by Lady Birgitte Trahelion. (2) The title given to the head of the Green Ajah, though known only to members of the Green. This position is currently held by Adelorna Bastine in the Tower, and Myrelle Berengari among the rebel Aes Sedai contingent under Egwene al'Vere. (3) A Seanchan rank, the highest in the Ever Victorious Army except for Marshal-General, which is a temporary rank sometimes given to a Captain-General put in charge of a war.

***Cha Faile*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "the Falcon's Talon." (2) Name taken by the young Cairhienin and Tairen nobles, attempted followers of *ji'e'toh*, who have sworn fealty to Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara. In secret, they act as her personal scouts and spies. Since her capture by the Shaido, they continue their activities under the guidance of Sebban Balwer.

Children of the Light: Society of strict ascetic beliefs, owing allegiance to no nation and dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar to proselytize against an increase in Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military society. They are extremely rigid in their beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. They consider Aes Sedai and any who support them to be Darkfriends. Known disparagingly as Whitecloaks, a name they themselves despise, they were formerly headquartered in Amador, Amadicia, but were forced out when the Seanchan conquered the city. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white. *See also* Questioners.

***Corenne*:** In the Old Tongue, "the Return." The name given by the Seanchan both to the fleet of thousands of ships and to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers, craftsmen and others carried by those ships, who came behind the Forerunners to reclaim the lands stolen from Artur

Hawkwing's descendants. The *Corenne* is led by Captain-General Lunal Galgan. *See also Hailene, Rhyagelle*.

***cuendillar*:** A supposedly indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any known force used in an attempt to break it, including the One Power, is absorbed, making *cuendillar* stronger. Although the making of *cuendillar* was thought lost forever, new objects made from it have surfaced. It is also known as heartstone.

currency: After many centuries of trade, the standard terms for coins are the same in every land: crowns (the largest coin in size), marks and pennies. Crowns and marks can be minted of gold or silver, while pennies can be silver or copper, the last often called simply a copper. In different lands, however, these coins are of different sizes and weights. Even in one nation, coins of different sizes and weights have been minted by different rulers. Because of trade, the coins of many nations can be found almost anywhere, and for that reason, bankers, moneylenders and merchants all use scales to determine the value of any given coin. Even large numbers of coins are weighed.

The heaviest coins come from Andor and Tar Valon, and in those two places the relative values are: 10 copper pennies = 1 silver penny; 100 silver pennies = 1 silver mark; 10 silver marks = 1 silver crown; 10 silver crowns = 1 gold mark; 10 gold marks = 1 gold crown. By contrast, in Altara, where the larger coins contain less gold or silver, the relative values are: 10 copper pennies = 1 silver penny; 21 silver pennies = 1 silver mark; 20 silver marks = 1 silver crown; 20 silver crowns = 1 gold mark; 20 gold marks = 1 gold crown.

The only paper currency is "letters-of-rights," which are issued by bankers, guaranteeing to present a certain amount of gold or silver when the letter-of-rights is presented. Because of the long distances between cities, the length of time needed to travel from one to another, and the difficulties of transactions at long distance, a letter-of-rights may be accepted at full value in a city near to the bank which issued it, but it may be accepted only at a lower value in a city farther away. Generally, someone intending to be traveling for a long time will carry one or more letters-of-rights to exchange for coin when needed. Letters-of-rights are usually accepted only by bankers or merchants, and would never be used in shops.

***da'covale*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "one who is owned," or "person who is property." (2) Among the Seanchan, the term often used, along with property, for slaves. Slavery has a long and unusual history among the Seanchan, with slaves having the ability to rise to positions of great power and open authority, including authority over those who are free. It is also possible for those in positions of great power to be reduced to *da'covale*. *See also so'jhin*.

Deathwatch Guard, the: The elite military formation of the Seanchan Empire, including both humans and Ogier. The human members of the Deathwatch Guard are all *da'covale*, born as property and chosen while young to serve the Empress, whose personal property they are. Fanatically loyal and fiercely proud, they often display the ravens tattooed on their shoulders, the mark of a *da'covale* of the Empress. The Ogier members are known as Gardeners, and they are not *da'covale*. The Gardeners are as fiercely loyal as the human Deathwatch Guards, though, and are even more feared. Human or Ogier, the Deathwatch Guards not only are ready to die for the Empress and the Imperial family, but believe that their lives are the property of the Empress, to be disposed of as she wishes. Their helmets and armor are lacquered in dark green (so dark that it is often mistakenly called black) and blood-red, their shields are lacquered black, and their swords, spears, axes and halberds carry black tassels. *See also da'covale*.

Defenders of the Stone, the: The elite military formation of Tear. The current Captain of the Stone (commander of the Defenders) is Rodrivar Tihera. Only Tairens are accepted into the Defenders, and officers are usually of noble birth, though often from minor Houses or minor branches of strong Houses. The Defenders are tasked to hold the great fortress called the Stone of Tear, in the city of Tear, to defend the city, and to provide police services in place of any City Watch or the like. Except in times of war, their duties seldom take them far from the city. Then, as with other such elite formations, they are the core around which the army is formed. The uniform of the Defenders consists of a black coat with padded sleeves striped black-and-gold with black cuffs, a burnished breastplate and a rimmed helmet with a faceguard of steel bars. The Captain of the Stone wears three short white plumes on his helmet, and on the cuffs of his coat three intertwined golden braids on a white band. Captains wear two white plumes and a single line of golden braid on white cuffs, lieutenants one white plume and a single line of black braid on white cuffs, and under-lieutenants one short black plume and plain white cuffs. Bannermen have gold-colored cuffs on their coats, and squadmen have cuffs striped black-and-gold.

Delving: (1) Using the One Power to diagnose physical condition and illness. (2) Finding deposits of metal ores with the One Power. That this has long been a lost ability among Aes Sedai may account for the name becoming attached to another ability.

Depository: A division of the Tower Library. There are twelve publicly known Depositories, each having books and records pertaining to a particular subject, or to related subjects. A Thirteenth Depository, known only to some Aes Sedai, contains secret documents, records and histories which may be accessed only by the Amyrlin Seat, the Keeper of the Chronicles and the Sitters in the Hall of the Tower. And, of course, by that handful of librarians who maintain the depository.

***der'morat-*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "master handler." (2) Among the Seanchan, the prefix applied to indicate a senior and highly skilled handler of one of the exotics, one who trains others, as in *der'morat'raken. Der'morat* can have a fairly high social status, the highest of all held by *der'sul'dam*, the trainers of *sul'dam*, who rank with fairly high military officers. *See also morat-*.

Eelfinn: A race of beings, largely human in appearance but with fox-like characteristics, who will grant three wishes, although they ask for a price in return. If the person asking does not negotiate a price, the Eelfinn choose it. The most common price in such circumstances is death, but they still fulfill their part of the bargain, although the manner in which they fulfill it is seldom the manner the one asking expects. Their true location is unknown, but it was possible to visit them by means of a *ter'angreal* that was located in Rhuidean. That *ter'angreal* was taken by Moiraine Damodred to Cairhien, where it was destroyed. It is also reported that they may be reached by entering the Tower of Ghenjei. They ask the same questions as the Aelfinn regarding fire, iron and musical instruments. *See also* Aelfinn.

Fain, Padan: Former Darkfriend, now more and worse than a Darkfriend, and an enemy of the Forsaken as much as he is of Rand al'Thor, whom he hates with a passion. Last seen in Far Madding in company with Toram Riatin, who died there.

Fel, Herid: The author of *Reason and Unreason* and other books. Fel was a student (and teacher) of history and philosophy at the Academy of

Cairhien. He was discovered in his study torn limb from limb.

First Reasoner: The title given to the head of the White Ajah. This position is currently held by Ferane Neheran, an Aes Sedai in the White Tower. Ferane Sedai is one of only two Ajah heads to sit in the Hall of the Tower at present.

First Weaver: The title given to the head of the Yellow Ajah. This position is currently held by Suana Dragand in the White Tower. Suana Sedai is one of only two Ajah heads to sit in the Hall of the Tower at present. Among the rebel Aes Sedai, Romanda Cassin holds this position.

forcing; forced: When someone with the ability to channel handles as much of the One Power as they can over long periods of time and channels continually, they learn faster and gain strength more rapidly. This is called forcing, or being forced, by Aes Sedai, who abjure the practice with novices and Accepted because of the danger of death or being burned out.

Forerunners, the: *See Hailene.*

Forsaken, the: The name given to thirteen powerful Aes Sedai, men and women both, who went over to the Shadow during the Age of Legends and were trapped in the sealing of the Bore into the Dark One's prison. While it has long been believed that they alone abandoned the Light during the War of the Shadow, in fact others did as well; these thirteen were only the highest-ranking among them. The Forsaken (who call themselves the Chosen) are somewhat reduced in number since their awakening in the present day. Some of those killed have been reincarnated in new bodies and given new names, but much is as yet unknown about their identities and locations.

***Hailene*:** In the Old Tongue, "Forerunners," or "Those Who Come Before." The term applied by the Seanchan to the massive expeditionary force sent across the Aryth Ocean to scout out the lands where Artur Hawkwing once ruled. Now under the command of the High Lady Suroth, its numbers swollen by recruits from conquered lands, the *Hailene* has gone far beyond its original goals, and has in fact been succeeded by the *Corenne. See Corenne, Rhyagelle*.

Hand: In Seanchan, Hand refers to a primary assistant or one of a hierarchy of imperial functionaries. A Hand of the Empress is of the First Rank, and Lesser Hands will be found at lower ranks. Some Hands operate in secret, such as those who guide the Seekers and Listeners; others are known and display their rank by wearing the appropriate number of golden hands embroidered on their clothing.

Hanlon, Daved: A Darkfriend, formerly commander of the White Lions in service to the Forsaken Rahvin while he held Caemlyn using the name Lord Gaebril. From there, Hanlon took the White Lions to Cairhien under orders to further the rebellion against the Dragon Reborn. The White Lions were destroyed by a "bubble of evil," and Hanlon was ordered back to Caemlyn and, under the name Doilin Mellar, ingratiated himself with Elayne, the Daughter-Heir. According to rumor, he did considerably more than ingratiate himself.

heart: The basic unit of organization in the Black Ajah. In effect, a cell. A heart consists of three sisters who know each other, with each member of the heart knowing one additional sister of the Black who is unknown to the other two of her heart.

Illuminators, Guild of: A society that held the secret of making fireworks. It guarded this secret very closely, even to the extent of doing murder to protect it. The Guild gained its name from the grand displays, called Illuminations, that it provided for rulers and sometimes for greater lords. Lesser fireworks were sold for use by others, but with dire warnings of the disaster that could result from attempting to learn what was inside them. The Guild once had chapter houses in Cairhien and Tanchico, but both are now destroyed. In addition, the members of the Guild in Tanchico resisted the invasion by the Seanchan and were made *da'covale*, and the Guild as such no longer exists. However, individual Illuminators still exist outside of Seanchan rule and work to make sure that the Guild will be remembered. *See also da'covale.*

Ishara: The first Queen of Andor (circa FY 994–1020). At the death of Artur Hawkwing, Ishara convinced her husband, one of Hawkwing's foremost generals, to raise the siege of Tar Valon and accompany her to Caemlyn with as many soldiers as he could break away from the army. Where others tried to seize the whole of Hawkwing's empire and failed, Ishara took a firm hold on a small part and succeeded. Today, nearly every noble House in Andor contains some of Ishara's blood, and the right to claim the Lion Throne depends both on direct descent from her and on the number of lines of connection to her that can be established.

Kaensada: An area of Seanchan that is populated by less-than-civilized hill tribes. These tribes fight a great deal among themselves, as do individual families within the tribes. Each tribe has its own customs and taboos, the latter of which often make no sense to anyone outside that tribe. Most of the tribesmen avoid the more civilized residents of Seanchan.

Kin, the: Even during the Trolloc Wars, more than two thousand years ago (circa 1000–1350 AB), the White Tower continued to maintain its standards, putting out women who failed to measure up. One group of these women, fearing to return home in the midst of the wars, fled to Barashta (near the present-day site of Ebou Dar), as far from the fighting as was possible to go at that time. Calling themselves the Kin, and Kinswomen, they kept in hiding and offered a safe haven for others who had been put out. In time, their approaches to women told to leave the Tower led to contacts with runaways, and while the exact reasons may never be known, the Kin began to accept runaways, as well. They made great efforts to keep these girls from learning anything about the Kin until they were sure that Aes Sedai would not swoop down and retake them. After all, everyone knew that runaways were always caught sooner or later, and the Kin knew that unless they held themselves secret, they themselves would be punished severely.

Unknown to the Kin, Aes Sedai in the Tower were aware of their existence almost from the very first, but prosecution of the wars left no time for dealing with them. By the end of the wars, the Tower realized that it might not be in their best interests to snuff out the Kin. Prior to that time, a majority of runaways actually had managed to escape, whatever the Tower’s propaganda, but once the Kin began helping them, the Tower knew exactly where any runaway was heading, and they began retaking nine out of ten. Since Kinswomen moved in and out of Barashta (and later Ebou Dar) in an effort to hide their existence and their numbers, never staying anywhere more than ten years lest someone notice that they did not age at a normal speed, the Tower believed they were few, and they certainly were keeping themselves low. In order to use the Kin as a trap for runaways, the Tower decided to leave them alone, unlike any other similar group in history, and to keep the very existence of the Kin a secret known only to full Aes Sedai.

The Kin do not have laws, but rather rules (called “the Rule”) based in large part on the rules for novices and Accepted in the White Tower, and in part on the necessity of maintaining secrecy. As might be expected given the origins of the Kin, all of their members maintain their rules very firmly.

Recent open contacts between Aes Sedai and Kinswomen, while known only to a handful of sisters, have produced a number of shocks, including the facts that there are twice as many Kinswomen as Aes Sedai and that some have lived more than a hundred years longer than any Aes Sedai since before the Trolloc Wars. The effect of these revelations, both on Aes Sedai and on Kinswomen, is as yet a matter for speculation. *See also* Knitting Circle, the.

Knitting Circle, the: The leaders of the Kin. Since no member of the Kin has ever known how Aes Sedai arrange their own hierarchy—knowledge passed on only when an Accepted has passed her test for the shawl—they put no store in strength in the Power but give great weight to age, with the older woman always standing above the younger. The Knitting Circle (a title chosen, like the Kin, because it is innocuous) thus consists of the thirteen oldest Kinswomen resident in Ebou Dar, with the oldest given the title of Eldest. By the rules, all will have to step down when it is time for them to move on, but so long as they are resident in Ebou Dar, they have supreme authority over the Kin, to a degree that any Amyrlin Seat would envy. Since the Kin have left Ebou Dar, the Knitting Circle does not technically exist. *See also* Kin, the.

Lance-Captain: In most lands, noblewomen do not personally lead their armsmen into battle under normal circumstances. Instead, they hire a professional soldier, almost always a commoner, who is responsible both for training and leading their armsmen. Depending on the land, this man can be called a Lance-Captain, Sword-Captain, Master of the Horse or Master of the Lances. Rumors of closer relationships than Lady and servant often spring up, perhaps inevitably. Sometimes they are true.

Legion of the Dragon, the: A large military formation, all infantry, giving allegiance to the Dragon Reborn, trained by Davram Bashere along lines worked out by himself and Mat Cauthon, lines which depart sharply from the usual employment of foot. While many men simply walk in to volunteer, large numbers of the Legion are scooped up by recruiting parties from the Black Tower, who first gather all of the men in an area who are willing to follow the Dragon Reborn, and only after taking them through gateways near Caemlyn winnow out those who can be taught to channel. The remainder, by far the greater number, are sent to Bashere’s training camps.

Legion of the Wall: Formerly an elite military formation of Ghealdan which provided not only a core to any army that was raised from the Ghealdanin nobilty's armsmen but also provided a bodyguard for the ruler of Ghealdan, and policed Jehannah, the capital, in place of a City Watch. After they were slaughtered and the survivors dispersed by the followers of the Prophet Masema, the nobles of the Crown High Council decided that without the Legion, their own power and their influence over any ruler was increased, so they managed to stop the Legion from being re-formed. The current Queen, Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, has plans to do just that, however; plans which would have an explosive effect if they became known to the Crown High Council.

length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Listeners: A Seanchan spy organization. Almost anyone in the household of a Seanchan noble, merchant or banker may be a Listener, including *da'covale* occasionally, though seldom *so'jhin*. They take no active role, merely watching, listening and reporting. Their reports are sent to Lesser Hands who control both them and the Seekers and decide what should be passed on to the Seekers for further action. *See also* Seekers, Hand.

marath'damane**:** In the Old Tongue, "those who must be leashed," and also "one who must be leashed." The term applied by the Seanchan to any woman capable of channeling who has not been collared as a *damane*.

march: *See* area, units of

Master of the Horse; Master of the Lances: *See* Lance-Captain.

Mellar, Doilin: *See* Hanlon, Daved.

Mera'din**:** In the Old Tongue, "the Brotherless." The name adopted, as a society, by those Aiel who abandoned clan and sept and went to the Shaido because they could not accept Rand al'Thor, a wetlander, as the *Car'a'carn*, or because they refused to accept his revelations concerning the history and origins of the Aiel. Deserting clan and sept for any reason is anathema among the Aiel, therefore their own warrior societies among the Shaido were unwilling to take them in, and they formed this society, the Brotherless.

morat-: In the Old Tongue, "handler." Among the Seanchan, it is used for those who handle exotics, such as *morat'raken*, a *raken* handler or rider, also informally called a flier. *See also der'morat-*.

Prophet, the: More formally, the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. Once known as Masema Dagar, a Shienaran soldier, he underwent a revelation and decided that he had been called to spread the word of the Dragon's Rebirth. He believes that nothing—nothing!—is more important than acknowledging the Dragon Reborn as the Light made flesh and being ready when the Dragon Reborn calls, and he and his followers will use any means to force others to sing the glories of the Dragon Reborn. Those who refuse are marked for death, and those who are slow may find their homes and shops burned and themselves flogged. Forsaking any name but "the Prophet," he has brought chaos to much of Ghealdan and Amadicia, large parts of which he controlled, although with him gone, the Seanchan are reestablishing order in Amadicia and the Crown High Council in Ghealdan. He joined with Perrin Aybara, who was sent to bring him to Rand, and has, for reasons unknown, stayed with him even though this delays his going to the Dragon Reborn. He is followed by men and women of the lowest sort; if they were not so when they were pulled in by his charisma, they have become so under his influence.

Queen's Guards, the: The elite military formation in Andor. In peacetime the Guard is responsible for upholding the Queen's law and keeping the peace across Andor. The uniform of the Queen's Guard includes a red undercoat, gleaming mail and plate armor, a brilliant red cloak and a conical helmet with a barred faceguard. High-ranking officers wear knots of rank on their shoulder and golden lion-head spurs. A recent addition to the Queen's Guards is the Daughter-Heir's personal bodyguard, which is composed entirely of women with the sole exception of its captain, Doilin Mellar. These Guardswomen wear much more elaborate uniforms than their male counterparts, including broad-brimmed hats with white plumes, red-lacquered breastplates and helmets trimmed in white and lace-edged sashes bearing the White Lion of Andor.

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. They refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light—they intensely dislike being called Questioners—and their avowed purposes are to discover the truth in disputations and uncover Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is torture; their normal manner is that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. At times they act as if they are entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the

Questioners is the High Inquisitor, at present Rhadam Asunawa, who sits on the Council of the Anointed. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd's crook.

Redarms: Soldiers of the Band of the Red Hand, who have been chosen out for temporary police duty to make sure that other soldiers of the Band cause no trouble or damage in a town or village where the Band has stopped. So named because, while on duty, they wear very broad red armbands that reach from cuff to elbow. Usually chosen from among the most experienced and reliable men. Since any damages must be paid for by the men serving as Redarms, they work hard to make sure all is quiet and peaceful. A number of former Redarms were chosen to accompany Mat Cauthen to Ebou Dar. *See also Shen an Calhar*.

Return, the: *See Corenne*.

***Rhyagelle*, the:** Old Tongue for "Those Who Come Home." Another name for the Seanchan who have returned to the lands once held by Artur Hawkwing. *See also Corenne, Hailene*.

Sea Folk hierarchy: The Atha'an Miere, the Sea Folk, are ruled by the Mistress of the Ships to the Atha'an Miere. She is assisted by the Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships, and by the Master of the Blades. Below this come the clan Wavemistresses, each assisted by her Windfinder and her Swordmaster. Below each Wavemistress are the Sailmistresses (ship captains) of her clan, each assisted by her Windfinder and her Cargomaster. The Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships has authority over all Windfinders to clan Wavemistresses, who in turn have authority over all the Windfinders of her clan. Likewise, the Master of the Blades has authority over all Swordmasters, and they in turn over the Cargomasters of their clans. Rank is not hereditary among the Sea Folk. The Mistress of the Ships is chosen, for life, by the First Twelve of the Atha'an Miere, the twelve most senior clan Wavemistresses. A clan Wavemistress is elected by the twelve seniormost Sailmistresses of her clan, called simply the First Twelve, a term which is also used to designate the senior Sailmistresses present anywhere. She can also be removed by a unanimous vote of her clan's First Twelve. In fact, anyone other than the Mistress of the Ships can be demoted, even all the way down to deckhand, for malfeasance, cowardice or other crimes. Also, the Windfinder to a Wavemistress or Mistress of the Ship who dies will, of necessity, have to serve a lower ranking woman, and her own rank thus decreases to the lowest level, equivalent to one who was first raised from apprentice to Windfinder on the day she herself put off her higher honors. The Atha'an Miere, who have until recently kept their distance from Aes Sedai by various means and diversions, are aware that women who can channel have much longer life spans than other people, though life at sea is dangerous enough that they seldom live out their entire life span, and thus they know that a Windfinder may rise to a height and fall to the depths to begin again many times before she dies.

Seandar: The Imperial capital of Seanchan, located in the northeast of the Seanchan continent. It is also the largest city in the empire.

Seekers: More formally, Seekers for Truth, they are a police/spy organization of the Seanchan Imperial Throne. Although most Seekers are *da'covale* and the property of the Imperial family, they have wide-ranging powers. Even one of the Blood can be arrested for failure to answer any question put by a Seeker, or for failure to cooperate fully with a Seeker, this last defined by the Seekers themselves, subject only to review by the Empress. Their reports are sent to Lesser Hands, who control both them and the Listeners. Most Seekers feel that the Hands do not pass on as much information as they should. Unlike the Listeners', the Seekers' role is active. Those Seekers who are *da'covale* are marked on either shoulder with a raven and a tower. Unlike the Deathwatch Guards, Seekers are seldom eager to show their ravens, in part because it necessitates revealing who and what they are. *See also* Hand, Listeners.

***sei'mosiev*:** In the Old Tongue, "lowered eyes," or "downcast eyes." Among the Seanchan, to say that one has "become *sei'mosiev*" means that one has "lost face." *See also sei'taer.*

***sei'taer*:** In the Old Tongue, "straight eyes," or "level eyes." Among the Seanchan, it refers to honor or face, to the ability to meet someone's eyes. It is possible to "be" or "have" *sei'taer*, meaning that one has honor and face, and also to "gain" or "lose" *sei'taer. See also sei'mosiev*.

Shara: A mysterious land to the east of the Aiel Waste which is the source of silk and ivory, among other trade goods. The land is protected both by inhospitable natural features and by man-made walls. Little is known about Shara, as the people of that land work to keep their culture secret. The Sharans deny that the Trolloc Wars touched them, despite Aiel statements to the contrary. They deny knowledge of Artur Hawkwing's attempted invasion, despite the accounts of eyewitnesses from the Sea Folk. The little information that has leaked out reveals that the Sharans are ruled by a single absolute monarch, a Sh’boan if a woman and a Sh’botay if a man. That monarch rules for exactly seven years, then dies. The rule then passes to the mate of that ruler, who rules for seven years and then dies. This pattern has repeated itself since the time of the Breaking of the World. The Sharans believe that the deaths are the “Will of the Pattern.”

There are channelers in Shara, known as the Ayyad, who are tattooed on their faces at birth. The women of the Ayyad enforce the Ayyad laws stringently. A sexual relationship between Ayyad and non-Ayyad is punishable by death for the non-Ayyad, and the Ayyad is also executed if force on his or her part can be proven. If a child is born of the union, it is left exposed to the elements, and dies. Male Ayyad are used as breeding stock only. They are not educated in any fashion, not even how to read or write, and when they reach their twenty-first year or begin to channel, whichever comes first, they are killed and the body cremated. Supposedly, the Ayyad channel the One Power only at the command of the Sh’boan or Sh’botay, who is always surrounded by Ayyad women.

Even the name of the land is in doubt. The natives have been known to call it many different names, including Shamara, Co’dansin, Tomaka, Kigali and Shibouya.

Shen an Calhar**:** In the Old Tongue, “the Band of the Red Hand.” (1) A legendary group of heroes who had many exploits, finally dying in the defense of Manetheren when that land was destroyed during the Trolloc Wars. (2) A military formation put together almost by accident by Mat Cauthon and organized along the lines of military forces during what is considered the height of the military arts, the days of Artur Hawkwing and the centuries immediately preceding.

Sisnera, Darlin: A High Lord in Tear, he was formerly in rebellion against the Dragon Reborn, but now serves as Steward for the Dragon Reborn in Tear.

Snakes and Foxes: A game that is much loved by children until they mature enough to realize that it can never be won without breaking the rules. It is played with a board that has a web of lines with arrows indicating direction. There are ten discs inked with triangles to represent the foxes, and ten discs inked with wavy lines to represent the snakes. The game is begun by saying “Courage to strengthen, fire to blind, music to dazzle, iron to bind,” while describing a triangle with a wavy line through it with one’s hand. Dice are rolled to determine moves for the players and the snakes and foxes. If a snake or fox lands on a player's piece, he is out of the game, and as long as the rules are followed, this always happens.

***so'jhin*:** The closest translation from the Old Tongue would be "a height among lowness," though some translate it as meaning "both sky and valley" among several other possibilities. *So'jhin* is the term applied by the Seanchan to hereditary upper servants. They are *da'covale*, property, yet occupy positions of considerable authority and often power. Even the Blood step carefully around *so'jhin* of the Imperial family, and speak to *so'jhin* of the Empress herself as to equals. *See also* Blood, the; *da'covale*.

Standardbearer: A Seanchan rank equivalent to Bannerman.

Stump: A public meeting among the Ogier. The meeting can be within or between *stedding*. It is presided over by the Council of Elders of a *stedding*, but any adult Ogier may speak, or may choose an advocate to speak for him. A Stump is often held at the largest tree stump in a *stedding*, and may last for several years. When a question arises that affects all Ogier, a Great Stump is held, and Ogier from all *stedding* meet to address the question. The various *stedding* take turns hosting the Great Stump.

Succession: In general, when one House succeeds another on the throne. In Andor, the term is widely used for the struggle for the throne that arose upon Mordrellen's death. Tigraine's disappearance had left Mantear without a Daughter-Heir, and two years passed before Morgase, of House Trakand, took the throne. Outside of Andor, this conflict was known as the Third War of Andoran Succession.

Sword-Captain: *See* Lance-Captain.

Taborwin, Breane: Once a bored noblewoman in Cairhien, she lost her wealth and status and is now not only a servant, but in a serious romantic relationship with a man whom once she would have scorned.

Taborwin, Dobraine: A lord in Cairhien. He presently serves as Steward for the Dragon Reborn in Cairhien.

Tarabon: A nation on the Aryth Ocean. Once a great trading nation, a source of rugs, dyes and the Guild of Illuminators' fireworks, among other things, Tarabon has fallen on hard times. Racked by anarchy and civil war compounded by simultaneous wars against Arad Doman and the Dragonsworn, it was ripe for the picking when the Seanchan arrived. It is now firmly under Seanchan control, the chapter house of the Guild of Illuminators has been destroyed and the Illuminators themselves have been made *da'covale*. Most Taraboners appear grateful that the Seanchan have restored order, and since the Seanchan allow them to continue living their lives with minimal interference, they have no desire to bring on more warfare by trying to chase the Seanchan out. There are, however, some lords and soldiers who remain outside the Seanchan sphere of influence and are fighting to reclaim their land.

weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Winged Guards, the: The personal bodyguards of the First of Mayene, and the elite military formation of Mayene. Members of the Winged Guards wear red-painted breastplates and helmets shaped like rimmed pots that come down to the nape of the neck in the back, and carry red-streamered lances. Officers have wings worked on the sides of their helmets, and rank is denoted by slender plumes.

Wise Woman: Honorific used in Ebou Dar for women famed for their incredible abilities at healing almost any injury. A Wise Woman is traditionally marked by a red belt. Some have noted that many, indeed most, Ebou Dari Wise Women are not even from Altara, much less Ebou Dar, but only few have recently learned that all Wise Women are in fact Kinswomen and use various versions of Healing, giving out herbs and poultices largely as a cover. With the flight of the Kin from Ebou Dar after the Seanchan took the city, no Wise Women remain there. *See also* Kin, the.

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About the Author

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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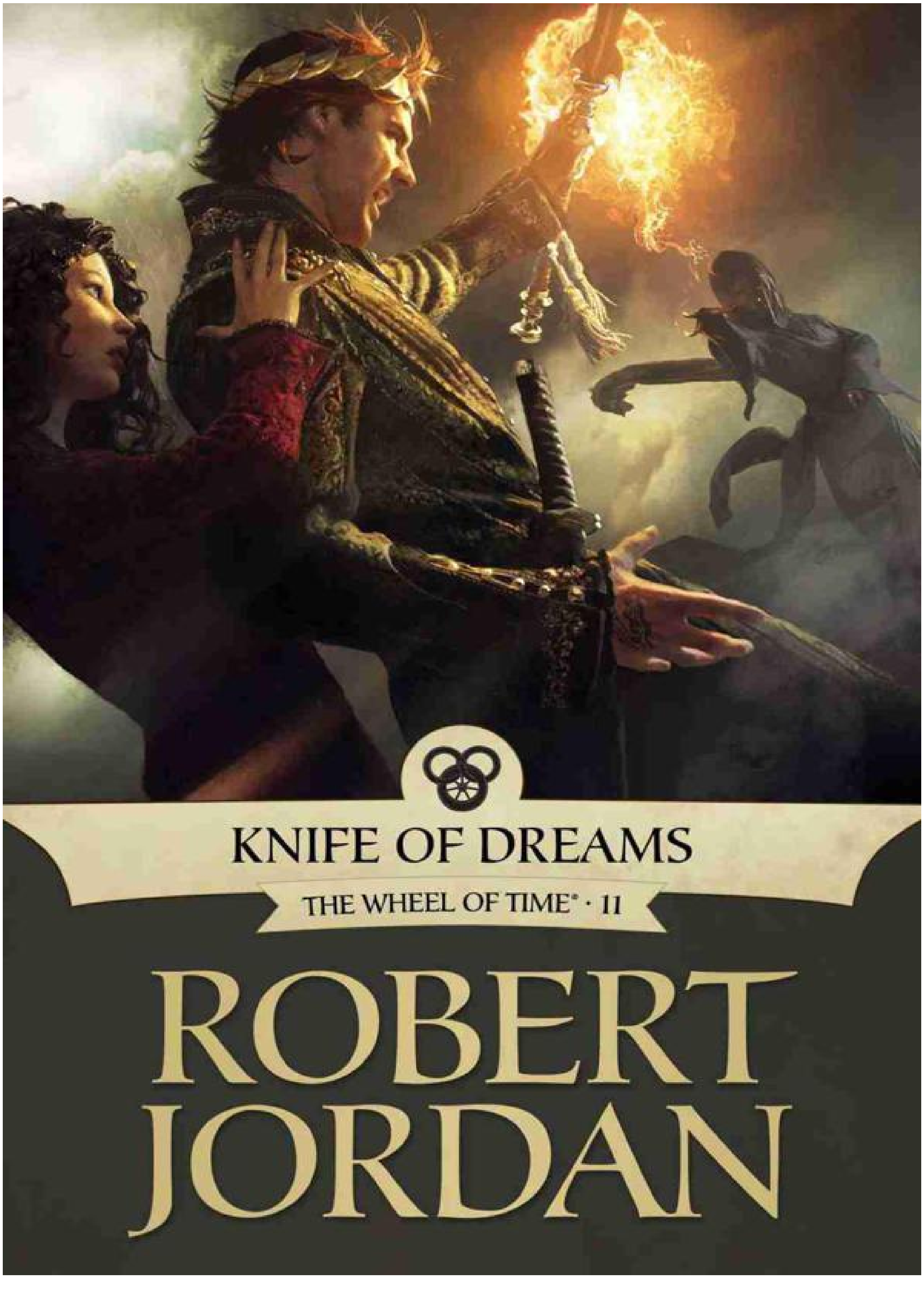
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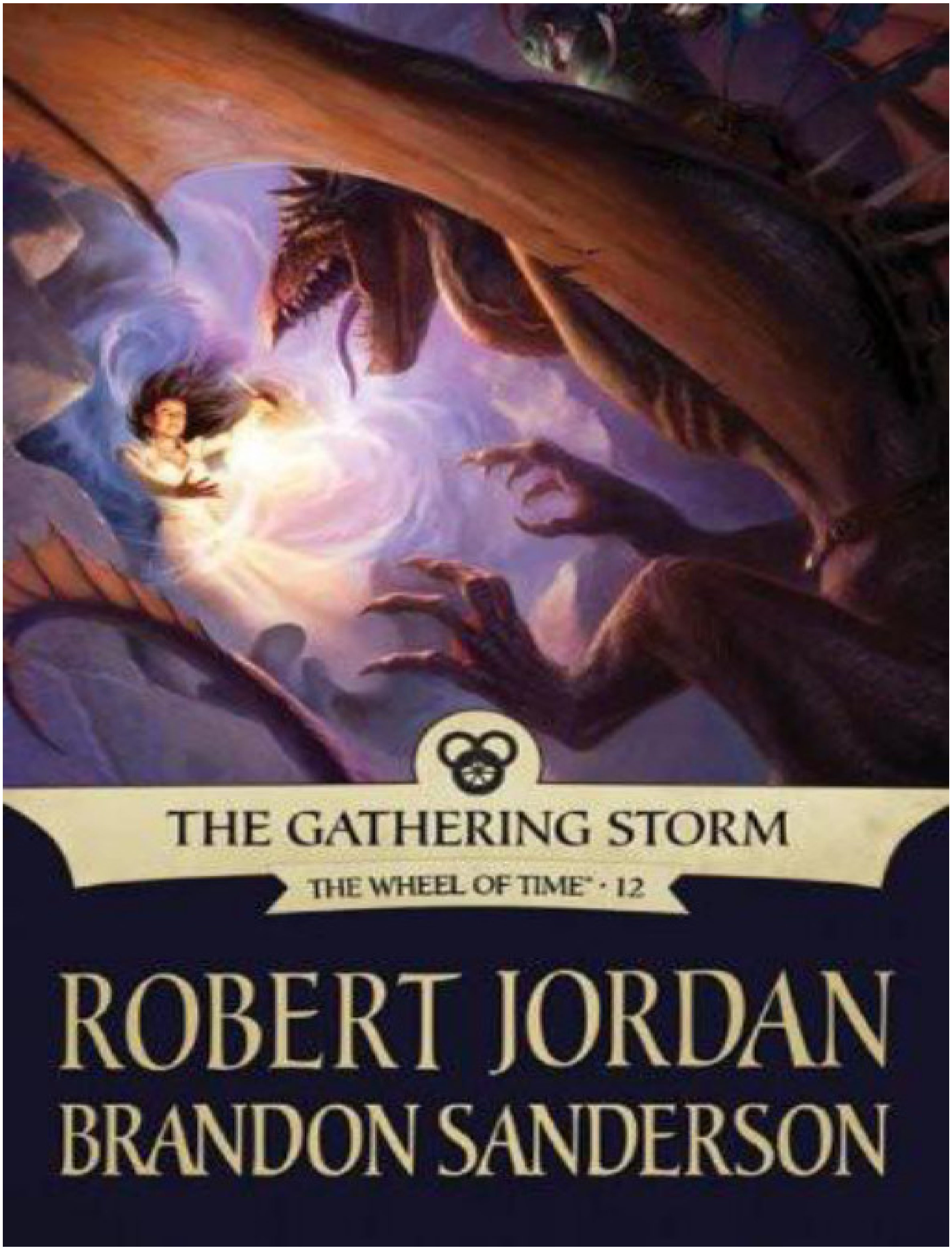
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—Robert Knox, *MPG Newspapers*

“Adventure and mystery and dark things that move in the night—a combination of Robin Hood and Stephen King that is hard to resist. Furthermore, Jordan makes the reader put down the book regretting the wait for the next title in the series.”

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“The Wheel of Time [is] rapidly becoming the definitive American fantasy saga. It is a fantasy tale seldom equaled and still less often surpassed in English.”

—Chicago Sun-Times

“In the decades since J. R. R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy was published, many fantasy writers have tried to capture the spirit of that seminal work. While many have been able to imitate the style, develop a similarly swift and complex plot, and create convincing characters, none have captured the spirit of small men and mighty, struggling against a force of overwhelming evil. Robert Jordan has.”

—Ottawa Citizen

“Jordan has a powerful vision of good and evil—but what strikes me as most pleasurable . . . is all the fascinating people moving through a rich and interesting world.”

—Orson Scott Card

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—Publishers Weekly

“Jordan continues to utilize his towering imagination to construct plots of incredible ingenuity and develop themes hidden, sometimes quite deeply, in earlier installments. As ever, Jordan writes intelligently and lyrically—one of the most literary exponents of the genre.”

—SFX

“Beware, there is magic in these books. They are liable to make you neglect your work and keep you up way past your bedtime. . . . This is the genuine article.”

—John Lee, *The Suffolk County News*

“Jordan’s bestselling high-fantasy series carries on . . . colossal, dauntingly complex storytelling . . . the narrative employs elements of realism rare in high fantasy.”

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—*The Post and Courier* (Charleston, S.C.)

"Jordan writes with the stark vision of light and darkness, and sometimes childlike sense of wonder, that permeates J. R. R. Tolkien's works. His style is undebatably his own."

—*The Pittsburgh Press*

"[The Wheel of Time] will be the definitive American exploration of Tolkien's territory for many years to come. Jordan can spin as rich a world and as event-filled a tale as the master, and the presence of women and a certain sense of the comic possibilities of a high destiny add further dimension to the work."

—*Booklist*

"Jordan's multivolume epic continues to live up to its high ambitions. Complex plotting, an array of strong characters, lavish detail, and a panoramic scope make this series a feast for fantasy aficionados. . . . Richly detailed and vividly imagined."

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Towers of Midnight (forthcoming)

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THE GATHERING STORM

ROBERT JORDAN AND BRANDON SANDERSON

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THE GATHERING STORM

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FOREWORD

In November 2007, I received a phone call that would change my life forever. Harriet McDougal, wife and editor of the late Robert Jordan, called to ask me if I would complete the last book of The Wheel of Time.

For those who did not know Mr. Jordan had passed away, it pains me to be the one to break the news. I remember how I felt when—while idly browsing the Internet on September 16, 2007—I discovered that he had died. I was shocked, stunned, and disheartened. This wonderful man, a hero to me in my writing career, was gone. The world suddenly became a different place.

I first picked up *The Eye of the World* in 1990, when I was a teenage fantasy addict visiting my corner bookstore. I became a fan instantly and eagerly awaited *The Great Hunt*. Over the years, I've read the books numerous times, often re-reading the entire series when a new book was released. Time passed, and I decided I wanted to become a fantasy author—influenced, in large part, by how much I loved The Wheel of Time. And yet, never did I think that I would one day get that phone call from Harriet. It came to me as a complete surprise. I had not asked, applied, or dared wish for this opportunity—though when the request was made, my answer was immediate. I love this series as I have loved none other, and the characters feel like old, dear friends from my childhood.

I cannot replace Robert Jordan. Nobody could write this book as well as he could have. That is a simple fact. Fortunately, he left many notes, outlines, completed scenes, and dictated explanations with his wife and assistants. Before his passing, he asked Harriet to find someone to complete the series for his fans. He loved you all very much and spent the very last weeks of his life dictating events for the final volume. It was to be called *A Memory of Light.*

Eighteen months later, we are here. Mr. Jordan promised that the final book would be big. But the manuscript soon grew prohibitively huge; it would be three times the size of a regular Wheel of Time book, and the decision was made by Harriet and Tor to split *A Memory of Light* into thirds. There were several excellent breaking points that would give a full and complete story in each third. You may think of *The Gathering Storm* and its two followers as the three volumes of *A Memory of Light* or as the final three books of The Wheel of Time. Both are correct.

As of this writing, I am halfway done with the second third. We are working as quickly as is reasonable, and we don’t want you to have to wait too long to get the ending we were all promised nearly twenty years ago. (Mr. Jordan did write this ending himself before he passed away, and I have read it. And it is fantastic.) I have not tried to imitate Mr. Jordan’s style. Instead, I’ve adapted my style to be appropriate to The Wheel of Time. My main goal was to stay true to the souls of the characters. The plot is, in large part, Robert Jordan’s, though many of the words are mine. Imagine this book as the product of a new director working on some of the scenes of a movie while retaining the same actors and script.

But this is a big project, and it will take time to complete. I beg your patience as we spend these next few years perfecting this story. We hold in our hands the ending of the greatest fantasy epic of our time, and I intend to see it done *right*. I intend to remain true to Mr. Jordan’s wishes and notes. My artistic integrity, and love for the books, will not let me do anything less. In the end, I let the words herein stand as the best argument for what we are doing.

This is not my book. It is Robert Jordan’s book, and to a lesser extent, it is your book.

Thank you for reading.

BRANDON SANDERSON
June 2009

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For Maria Simons and Alan Romanczuk, without whom this book wouldn’t have been possible

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Ravens and crows. Rats. Mists and clouds. Insects and corruption. Strange events and odd occurrences. The ordinary twisted and strange. Wonders!

The dead are beginning to walk, and some see them. Others do not, but more and more, we all fear the night.

These have been our days. They rain upon us beneath a dead sky, crushing us with their fury, until as one we beg: “Let it begin!”

—Journal of the Unknown Scholar,
entry for The Feast of Freia, 1000 NE

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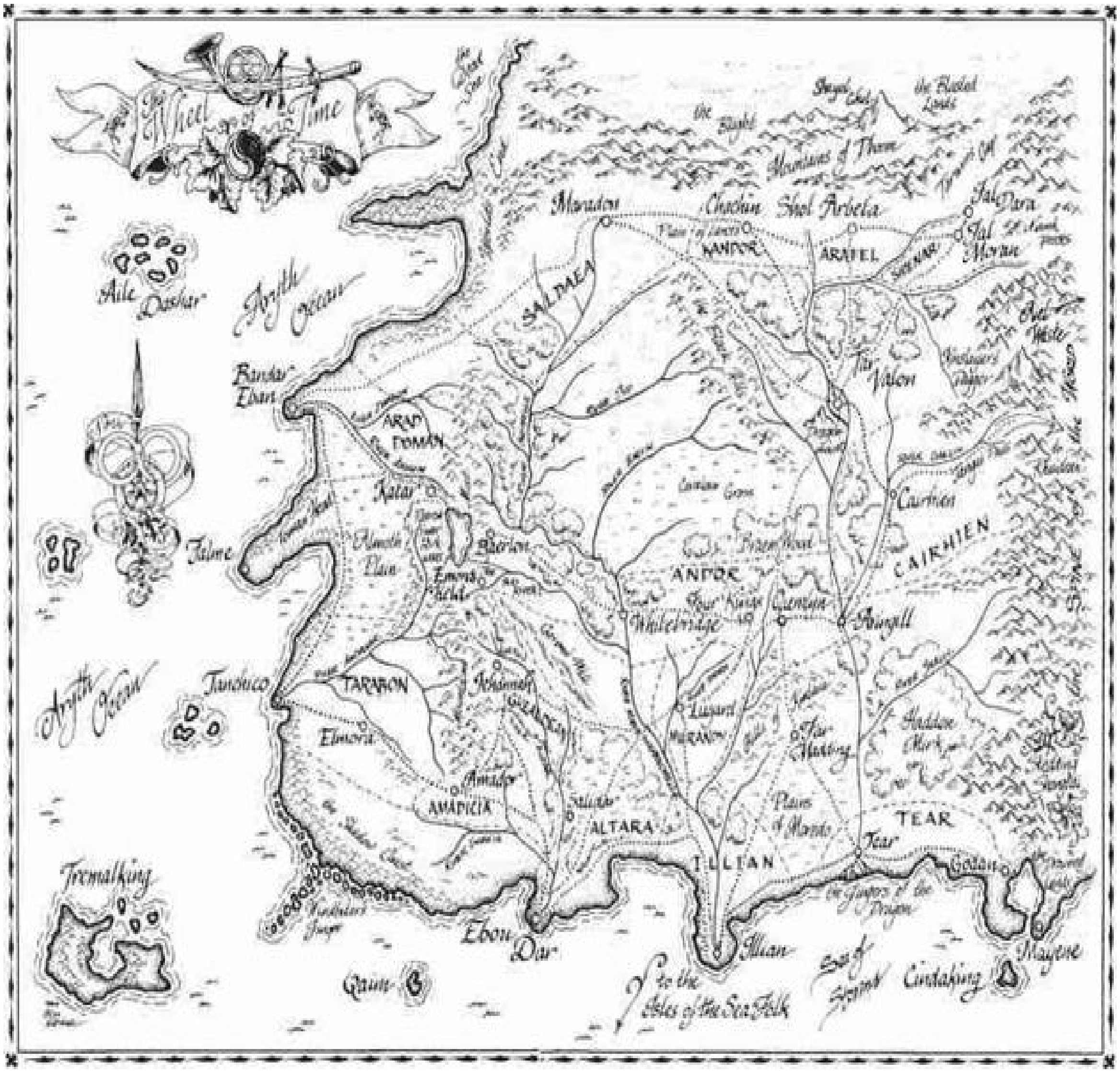
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PROLOGUE

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What the Storm Means

Renald Fanwar sat on his porch, warming the sturdy blackoak chair crafted for him by his grandson two years before. He stared northward.

At the black and silver clouds.

He'd never seen their like before. They blanketed the entire horizon to the north, high in the sky. They weren't gray. They were *black* and *silver*. Dark, rumbling thunderheads, as dark as a root cellar at midnight. With striking silver light breaking between them, flashes of lightning that gave off no sound.

The air was *thick*. Thick with the scents of dust and dirt. Of dried leaves and rain that refused to fall. Spring had come. And yet his crops didn't grow. Not a sprout had dared poke through the earth.

He rose slowly from his chair, wood creaking, chair rocking softly behind him, and walked up to the edge of the porch. He chewed on his pipe, though its fire had gone out. He couldn't be bothered to relight it. Those clouds transfixed him. They were so black. Like the smoke of a brushfire, only no brushfire smoke ever rose that high up in the air. And what to make of *silver* clouds? Bulging between the black ones, like places where polished steel shone through metal crusted with soot.

He rubbed his chin, glancing down at his yard. A small, whitewashed fence contained a patch of grass and shrubs. The shrubs were dead now, every one of them. Hadn't lasted through that winter. He'd need to pull them out soon. And the grass . . . well, the grass was still just winter thatch. Not even any weeds sprouted.

A clap of thunder shook him. Pure, sharp, like an enormous crash of metal against metal. It rattled the windows of the house, shook the porch boards, seemed to vibrate his very bones.

He jumped back. That strike had been close—perhaps on his property. He itched to go inspect the damage. Lightning fire could destroy a man, burn him out of his land. Up here in the Borderlands, so many things were unintentional tinder—dry grass, dry shingles, dry seed.

But the clouds were still distant. That strike *couldn't* have been on his property. The silver and black thunderheads rolled and boiled, feeding and consuming themselves.

He closed his eyes, calming himself, taking a deep breath. Had he imagined the thunder? Was he going off the side, as Gaffin always joked?

He opened his eyes.

And the clouds were right there, directly above his house.

It was as if they had suddenly rolled forward, intending to strike while his gaze was averted. They dominated the sky now, sweeping distantly in either direction, massive and overwhelming. He could almost feel their weight pressing the air down around him. He drew in a breath that was heavy with sudden humidity, and his brow prickled with sweat.

Those clouds churned, dark black and silver thunderheads shaking with white blasts. They suddenly boiled downward, like the funnel cloud of a twister, coming for him. He cried out, raising a hand, as a man might before a powerfully bright light. That blackness. That endless, suffocating *blackness*. It would take him. He knew.

And then the clouds were gone.

His pipe hit the porch's floorboards, clicking softly, tossing burned tabac out in a spray across the steps. He hadn't realized he'd let it slip free. Renald hesitated, looking up at empty blue sky, realizing that he was cringing at nothing.

The clouds were off on the horizon again, some forty leagues distant. They thundered softly.

He picked up his pipe with a shaking hand, spotted from age, tanned from years spent in the sun. *Just a trick of your mind, Renald,* he told himself. *You're going off the side, sure as eggs is eggs.*

He was on edge because of the crops. That had him on edge. Though he spoke optimistic words for the lads, it just wasn't natural. Something should have sprouted by now. He'd farmed that land for forty years! Barley didn't take this long to sprout. Burn him, but it didn't. What was going on in the world these days? Plants couldn't be depended on to sprout, and clouds didn't stay where they should.

He forced himself to sit back down in his chair, legs shaking. *Getting old, I am. . . .* he thought.

He'd worked a farm all of his life. Farmsteading in the Borderlands was not easy, but if you worked hard, you could grow a successful life while you grew strong crops. "A man has as much luck as he has seeds in the field," his father had always said.

Well, Renald was one of the most successful farmers in the area. He'd done well enough to buy out the two farms beside his, and he could run thirty wagons to market each fall. He now had six good men working for him, plowing the fields, riding the fences. Not that he didn't have to climb down in the muck every day and show them what good farming was all about. You couldn't let a little success ruin you.

Yes, he'd worked the land, lived the land, as his father always used to say. He understood the weather as well as a man could. Those clouds weren't natural. They rumbled softly, like an animal growling on a dark night. Waiting. Lurking in the nearby woods.

He jumped at another crash of thunder that seemed too close. Were those clouds forty leagues away? Is that what he'd thought? Looked more like ten leagues away, now that he studied them.

"Don't get like that," he grumbled at himself. His own voice sounded good to him. Real. It was nice to hear something other than that rumbling and the occasional creak of shutters in the wind. Shouldn't he be able to hear Auaine inside, getting supper ready?

"You're tired. That's it. Tired." He fished in his vest pocket and pulled out his tabac pouch.

A faint rumbling came from the right. At first, he assumed it was the thunder. However, this rumbling was too grating, too regular. That wasn't thunder. It was wheels turning.

Sure enough, a large, oxen-drawn wagon crested Mallard's Hill, just to the east. Renald had named that hill himself. Every good hill needed a name. The road was Mallard's Road. So why not name the hill that too?

He leaned forward in his chair, pointedly ignoring those clouds as he squinted toward the wagon, trying to make out the driver's face. Thulin? The smith? What was he doing, driving a wagon laden halfway to the heavens? He was supposed to be working on Renald's new plow!

Lean for one of his trade, Thulin was still twice as muscled as most farmhands. He had the dark hair and tan skin of a Shienaran, and kept his face shaved after their fashion, but he did not wear the topknot. Thulin's family might trace its roots back to Borderland warriors, but he himself was just a simple country man like the rest of them. He ran the smithy over in Oak Water, five miles to the east. Renald had enjoyed many a game of stones with the smith during winter evenings.

Thulin was getting on—he hadn't seen as many years as Renald, but the last few winters had prompted Thulin to start speaking of retirement. Smithing wasn't an old man's trade. Of course, neither was farming. *Were* there really any old man's trades?

Thulin’s wagon approached along the packed earthen road, approaching Renald’s white-fenced yard. *Now, that’s odd,* Renald thought. Behind the wagon trailed a neat string of animals: five goats and two milkcows. Crates of black-feathered chickens were tied on the outside of the wagon, and the bed of the wagon itself was piled full of furniture, sacks and barrels. Thulin’s youthful daughter, Mirala, sat on the seat with him, next to his wife, a golden-haired woman from the south. Twenty-five years Thulin’s wife, but Renald still thought of Gallanha as “that southern girl.”

The whole family was in the wagon, leading their best livestock. Obviously on the move. But where? Off to visit relatives, perhaps? He and Thulin hadn’t played a round of stones in . . . oh, three weeks now. Not much time for visiting, what with the coming of spring and the hurried planting. Someone would need to mend the plows and sharpen the scythes. Who would do it if Thulin’s smithy went cold?

Renald tucked a pinch of tabac into his pipe as Thulin pulled the wagon up beside Renald’s yard. The lean, gray-haired smith handed the reins to his daughter, then climbed down from the wagon, feet throwing puffs of dust into the air when he hit the ground. Behind him the distant storm still brewed.

Thulin pushed open the fence gate, then strode up to the porch. He looked distracted. Renald opened his mouth to give greeting, but Thulin spoke first.

“I buried my best anvil in Gallanha’s old strawberry patch, Renald,” the big smith said. “You remember where that is, don’t you? I packed my best set of tools there as well. They’re well greased and inside my best chest, lined to keep it dry. That should keep the rust off of them. For a time at least.”

Renald closed his mouth, holding his pipe half-full. If Thulin was burying his anvil . . . well, it meant he wasn’t planning to come back for a while. “Thulin, what—”

“If I don’t return,” Thulin said, glancing northward, “would you dig my things out and see that they’re cared for? Sell them to someone who cares, Renald. I wouldn’t have just anyone beating that anvil. Took me twenty years to gather those tools, you know.”

“But Thulin!” Renald sputtered. “Where are you going?”

Thulin turned back to him, leaning one arm on the porch railing, those brown eyes of his solemn. “There’s a storm coming,” he said. “And so I figure I’ve got to head on to the north.”

“Storm?” Renald asked. “That one on the horizon, you mean? Thulin, it looks bad—burn my bones, but it does—but there’s no use running from it. We’ve had bad storms before.”

“Not like this, old friend,” Thulin said. “This ain’t the sort of storm you ignore.”

“Thulin?” Renald asked. “What are you talking about?”

Before he could answer, Gallanha called from the wagon box. “Did you tell him about the pots?”

“Ah,” Thulin said. “Gallanha polished up that set of copper-bottom pots that your wife always liked. They’re sitting on the kitchen table, waiting for Auaine, if she wants to go claim them.” With that, Thulin nodded to Renald and began to walk back toward the wagon.

Renald sat, stupefied. Thulin always *had* been a blunt one; he favored saying his mind, then moving on. That was part of what Renald liked about him. But the smith could also pass through a conversation like a boulder rolling through a flock of sheep, leaving everyone dazed.

Renald scrambled up, leaving his pipe on the chair and following Thulin down into the yard and to the wagon. *Burn it*, Renald thought, glancing to the sides, noticing the brown grass and dead shrubs again. He’d worked hard on that yard.

The smith was checking on the chicken crates tied to the sides of his vehicle. Renald caught up to him, reaching out a hand, but Gallanha distracted him.

“Here, Renald,” she said from the wagon box. “Take these.” She held out a basket of eggs, one lock of golden hair straying from her bun. Renald reached over to take the basket. “Give these to Auaine. I know you’re short on chickens on account of those foxes last fall.”

Renald took the basket of eggs. Some were white, some were brown. “Yes, but where are you *going*, Gallanha?”

“North, my friend,” Thulin said. He walked past, laying a hand on Renald’s shoulder. “There will be an army gathering, I figure. They’ll need smiths.”

“Please,” Renald said, gesturing with the basket of eggs. “At least take a few minutes. Auaine just put some bread in, one of those thick honey loaves that you like. We can discuss this over a game of stones.”

Thulin hesitated.

“We’d better be on the move,” Gallanha said softly. “That storm is coming.”

Thulin nodded, then climbed up into the wagon. “You might want to come north too, Renald. If you do, bring everything you can.” He paused. “You’re good enough with the tools you have here to do some small metalwork, so take your best scythes and turn them into polearms. Your two best scythes; now don’t go skimping around with anything that’s a second best or a third best. Get your best, because it’s the weapon you’re going to use.”

Renald frowned. “How do you know that there will be an army? Thulin, burn me, I’m no soldier!”

Thulin continued as if he hadn’t heard the comments. “With a polearm you can pull somebody off of a horse and stab them. And, as I think about it, maybe you can take the third best and make yourself a couple of swords.”

“What do I know about making a sword? Or about using a sword, for that matter?”

“You can learn,” Thulin said, turning north. “Everyone will be needed, Renald. Everyone. They’re coming for us.” He glanced back at Renald. “A sword really isn’t all that tough to make. You take a scythe blade and straighten it out, then you find yourself a piece of wood to act as a guard, to keep the enemy’s blade from sliding down and cutting your hand. Mostly you’ll just be using things that you’ve already got.”

Renald blinked. He stopped asking questions, but he couldn’t stop thinking them. They bunched up inside his brain like cattle all trying to force their way through a single gate.

“Bring all your stock, Renald,” Thulin said. “You’ll eat them—or your men will eat them—and you’ll want the milk. And if you don’t, then there’ll be men you can trade with for beef or mutton. Food will be scarce, what with everything spoiling so much and the winter stores having run low. Bring everything you’ve got. Dried beans, dried fruit, everything.”

Renald leaned back against the gate to his yard. He felt weak and limp. Finally, he forced out just one question. “Why?”

Thulin hesitated, then stepped away from the wagon, laying a hand on Renald’s shoulder again. “I’m sorry to be so abrupt. I . . . well, you know how I am with words, Renald. I don’t know what that storm is. But I know what it means. I’ve never held a sword, but my father fought in the Aiel

War. I’m a Borderlander. And that storm means the end is coming, Renald. We need to be there when it arrives.” He stopped, then turned and looked to the north, watching those building clouds as a farmhand might watch a poisonous snake he found in the middle of the field. “Light preserve us, my friend. We need to be there.”

And with that, he removed his hand and climbed back into the wagon. Renald watched them ease off, nudging the oxen into motion, heading north. Renald watched for a long time, feeling numb.

The distant thunder cracked, like the sound of a whip, smacking against the hills.

The door to the farmhouse opened and shut. Auaine came out to him, gray hair in a bun. It had been that color for years now; she’d grayed early, and Renald had always been fond of the color. Silver, more than gray. Like the clouds.

“Was that Thulin?” Auaine asked, watching the distant wagon throw up dust. A single black chicken feather blew across the roadway.

“Yes.”

“And he didn’t stay, even to chat?”

Renald shook his head.

“Oh, but Gallanha sent eggs!” She took the basket and began to transfer the eggs into her apron to carry them inside. “She’s such a dear. Leave the basket there on the ground; I’m sure she’ll send someone for it.”

Renald just stared northward.

“Renald?” Auaine asked. “What’s gotten into you, you old stump?”

“She polished up her pots for you,” he said. “The ones with the copper bottoms. They’re sitting on her kitchen table. They’re yours if you want them.”

Auaine fell silent. Then he heard a sharp sound of cracking, and he looked over his shoulder. She had let her apron grow slack, and the eggs were slipping free, plopping to the ground and cracking.

In a very calm voice, Auaine asked, “Did she say anything else?”

He scratched his head, which hadn’t much hair left to speak of. “She said the storm was coming and they had to head north. Thulin said we should go too.”

They stood for another moment. Auaine pulled up the edge of her apron, preserving the majority of the eggs. She didn’t spare a glance for those that had fallen. She was just staring northward.

Renald turned. The storm had jumped forward again. And it seemed to have grown *darker* somehow.

“I think we ought to listen to them, Renald,” Auaine said. “I’ll . . . I’ll go fix up what we’ll need to bring with us from the house. You can go around back and gather the men. Did they say how long we’ll be gone?”

“No,” he said. “They didn’t even really say why. Just that we need to go north for the storm. And . . . that this is the end.”

Auaine inhaled sharply. “Well, you just get the men ready. I’ll take care of the house.”

She bustled inside, and Renald forced himself to turn away from the storm. He rounded the house and entered the barnyard, calling the farmhands together. They were a stout lot, good men, all of them. His own sons had sought their fortunes elsewhere, but his six workers were nearly as close to him as sons. Merk, Favidan, Rinnin, Veshir and Adamad gathered round. Still feeling dazed, Renald sent two to gather up the animals, two more to pack what grain and provisions they had left from the winter and the final man off to fetch Geleni, who had gone into the village for some new seed, just in case the planting had gone bad on account of their stores.

The five men scattered. Renald stood in the farmyard for a moment, then went into the barn to fetch his lightweight forge and pull it out into the sunlight. It wasn’t just an anvil, but a full, compact forge, made for moving. He had it on rollers; you couldn’t work a forge in a barn. All that dust could take fire. He heaved the handles, wheeling it out to the alcove set off to the side of the yard, built from good bricks, where he could do minor repairs when he needed to.

An hour later, he had the fire stoked. He wasn’t as skilled as Thulin, but he’d learned from his father that being able to handle a little of your own forgework made a big difference. Sometimes, you couldn’t squander the hours it would take to go to town and back just to fix a broken hinge.

The clouds were still there. He tried not to look at them as he left the forge and headed into the barn. Those clouds were like eyes, peeping over his shoulder.

Inside the barn, light sprinkled down through cracks in the wall, falling on dust and hay. He’d built the structure himself some twenty-five years back. He kept planning to replace some of those warped roofing planks, but now there wouldn’t be time.

At the tool wall, he reached for his third-best scythe, but stopped. Taking a deep breath, he took the best scythe off the wall instead. He walked back out to the forge and knocked the haft off the scythe.

As he tossed the wood aside, Veshir—eldest of his farmhands—approached, pulling a pair of goats. When Veshir saw the scythe blade on the forge, his expression grew dark. He tied the goats to a post, then trotted over to Renald, but said nothing.

How to make a polearm? Thulin had said they were good for yanking a man off his horse. Well, he would have to replace the snath with a longer straight shaft of ashwood. The flanged end of the shaft would extend beyond the heel of the blade, shaped into a crude spearpoint and clad with a piece of tin for strength. And then he would have to heat the blade and bang off the toe about halfway, making a hook that could tug a man off his horse and maybe cut him at the same time. He slid the blade into the burning coals to heat it, then began to tie on his apron.

Veshir stood there for a minute or so, watching. Finally, he stepped up, taking Renald by the arm. “Renald, what are we doing?”

Renald shook his arm free. “We’re going north. The storm is coming and we’re going north.”

“We’re going north for just a storm? It’s insanity!”

It was nearly the same thing Renald had said to Thulin. Distant thunder sounded.

Thulin was right. The crops . . . the skies . . . the food going bad without warning. Even before he’d spoken to Thulin, Renald had known. Deep within, he’d known. This storm would not pass overhead then vanish. It had to be confronted.

“Veshir,” Renald said, turning back to his work, “you’ve been a hand on this farm for . . . what, fifteen years now? You’re the first man I hired. How well have I treated you and yours?”

“You’ve done me well,” Veshir said. “But burn me, Renald, you’ve never decided to *leave* the farm before! These crops, they’ll wither to dust if we leave them. This ain’t no southerner wetfarm. How can we just go off?”

“Because,” Renald said, “if we don’t leave, then it won’t matter if we planted or not.”

Veshir frowned.

“Son,” Renald said, “you’ll do as I say, and that’s all we’ll have of it. Go finish gathering the stock.”

Veshir stalked away, but he did as he was told. He was a good man, if hotheaded.

Renald pulled the blade out of the heat, the metal glowing white. He laid it against the small anvil and began to beat on the knobby section where heel met beard, flattening it. The sound of his hammer on the metal seemed louder than it should have been. It rang like the pealing thunder, and the sounds blended. As if each beat of his hammer was itself a piece of the storm.

As he worked, the peals seemed to form words. Like somebody muttering in the back of his head. The same phrase over and over.

The storm is coming. The storm is coming. . . .

He kept on pounding, keeping the edge on the scythe, but straightening the blade and making a hook at the end. He still didn't know why. But it didn't matter.

The storm was coming and he had to be ready.

Watching the bowlegged soldiers tie Tanera's blanket-wrapped body across a saddle, Falendre fought the desire to begin weeping again, the desire to vomit. She was senior, and had to maintain some composure if she expected the four other surviving *sul'dam* to do so. She tried to tell herself she had seen worse, battles where more than a single *sul'dam* had died, more than one *damane*. That brought her too near thinking of exactly how Tanera and her Miri met their deaths, though, and her mind shied from it.

Huddling by her side, Nenci whimpered as Falendre stroked the *damane*'s head and tried to send soothing feelings through the *a'dam*. That often seemed to work, but not so well today. Her own emotions were too roiled. If only she could forget that the *damane* was shielded, and by whom. By what. Nenci whimpered again.

"You will deliver the message as I directed you?" a man said behind her.

No, not just any man. The sound of his voice stirred the pool of acid in her belly. She made herself turn to face him, made herself meet those cold, hard eyes. They changed with the angle of his head, now blue, now gray, but always like polished gemstones. She had known many hard men, but had she ever known one hard enough to lose a hand and moments later take it as if he had lost a glove? She bowed formally, twitching the *a'dam* so that Nenci did the same. So far they had been treated well for prisoners under the circumstances, even to being given washwater, and supposedly they would not remain prisoners much longer. Yet with this man, who could say what might make that change? The promise of freedom might be part of some scheme.

“I will deliver your message with the care it requires,” she began, then stumbled over her tongue. What honorific did she use for him? “My Lord Dragon,” she finished hurriedly. The words dried her tongue, but he nodded, so it must have sufficed.

One of the *marath’damane* appeared through that impossible hole in the air, a young woman with her hair in a long braid. She wore enough jewelry for one of the Blood, and of all things, a red dot in the middle of her forehead. “How long do you mean to stay here, Rand?” she demanded as if the hard-eyed young man were a servant rather than who he was. “How close to Ebou Dar are we here? The place is full of Seanchan, you know, and they probably fly *raken* all around it.”

“Did Cadsuane send you to ask that?” he said, and her cheeks colored faintly. “Not much longer, Nynaeve. A few minutes.”

The young woman shifted her gaze to the other *sul’dam* and *damane*, all taking their lead from Falendre, pretending there were no *marath’damane* watching them, and especially no men in black coats. The others had straightened themselves as best they could. Surya had washed the blood from her face, and from her Tabi’s face, and Malian had tied large compresses on them that made them appear to be wearing odd hats. Ciar had managed to clean off most of the vomit she had spilled down the front of her dress.

“I still think I should Heal them,” Nynaeve said abruptly. “Hits to the head can cause odd things that don’t come on right away.”

Surya, her face hardening, moved Tabi behind her as if to protect the *damane*. As if she could. Tabi’s pale eyes had widened in horror.

Falendre raised a pleading hand toward the tall young man. Toward the Dragon Reborn, it seemed. “Please. They will receive medical aid as soon as we reach Ebou Dar.”

“Give over, Nynaeve,” the young man said. “If they don’t want Healing, they don’t want it.” The *marath’damane* scowled at him, gripping her braid so hard that her knuckles turned white. He turned his own attention back to Falendre. “The road to Ebou Dar lies about an hour east of here. You can reach the city by nightfall if you press. The shields on the *damane* will evaporate in about half an hour. Is that right for the *saidar*-

woven shields, Nynaeve?” The woman scowled at him in silence. “Is that right, Nynaeve?”

“Half an hour,” she replied finally. “But none of this is right, Rand al’Thor. Sending those *damane* back. It isn’t right, and you know it.”

For a moment, his eyes were even colder. Not harder. That would have been impossible. But for that long moment, they seemed to hold caverns of ice. “Right was easy to find when all I had to care for was a few sheep,” he said quietly. “Nowadays, sometimes it’s harder to come by.” Turning away, he raised his voice. “Logain, get everyone back through the gateway. Yes, yes, Merise. I’m not trying to command you. If you’ll deign to join us, though? It will be closing soon.”

Marath’damane, the ones who called themselves Aes Sedai, began filing through that mad opening in the air, as did the black-coated men, the Asha’man, all mingling with the hook-nosed soldiers. Several of those finished tying Tanera to the saddle of the horse. The beasts had been provided by the Dragon Reborn. How odd, that he should give them gifts after what had happened.

The hard-eyed young man turned back to her. “Repeat your instructions.”

“I am to return to Ebou Dar with a message for our leaders there.”

“The Daughter of the Nine Moons,” the Dragon Reborn said sternly. “You will deliver my message to her.”

Falendre stumbled. She was not in any way worthy to speak to one of the Blood, let alone the High Lady, daughter of the Empress, might she live forever! But this man’s expression allowed no argument. Falendre would find a way. “I will deliver your message to her,” Falendre continued. “I will tell her that . . . that you bear her no malice for this attack, and that you desire a meeting.”

“I *still* desire one,” the Dragon Reborn said.

As far as Falendre knew, the Daughter of the Nine Moons had never known about the original meeting. It had been arranged in secret by Anath. And that was why Falendre *knew* for certain that this man must be the Dragon Reborn. For only the Dragon Reborn himself could face one of the Forsaken and not only survive, but come out the victor.

Was that really what she had been? One of the Forsaken? Falendre’s mind reeled at the concept. Impossible. And yet, here was the Dragon Reborn. If he lived, if he walked the land, then the Forsaken would, too.

She was muddled, her thoughts going in circles, she knew. She bottled up her terror—she would deal with that later. She needed to be in control.

She forced herself to meet those frozen gemstones this man had for eyes. She had to preserve some dignity if only to reassure the four other surviving *sul'dam*. And the *damane*, of course. If the *sul'dam* lost composure again, there would be no hope for the *damane*.

"I will tell her," Falendre said, managing to keep her voice even, "that you *still* desire a meeting with her. That you believe there must be peace between our peoples. And I am to tell her that Lady Anath was . . . was one of the Forsaken."

To the side, she saw some of the *marath'damane* push Anath through the hole in the air, maintaining a stately bearing despite her captivity. She always *had* tried to dominate above her station. Could she really be what this man said she was?

How was Falendre to face the *der'sul'dam* and explain this tragedy, this terrible mess? She itched to be away from it, to find someplace to hide.

"We *must* have peace," the Dragon Reborn said. "I will see it happen. Tell your mistress that she can find me in Arad Doman; I will quell the battle against your forces there. Let her know that I give this as a sign of good faith, just as I release you out of good faith. It is no shame to be manipulated by one of the Forsaken, particularly not . . . that creature. In a way, I rest more easily, now. I worried that one of them would have infiltrated the Seanchan nobility. I should have guessed that it would be Semirhage. She always preferred a challenge."

He spoke of the Forsaken with an incredible sense of familiarity, and it gave Falendre chills.

He glanced at her. "You may go," he said, then walked over and passed through the rip in the air. What she would give to have that traveling trick for Nenci. The last of the *marath'damane* passed through the hole, and it closed, leaving Falendre and the others alone. They were a sorry group. Talha was still crying, and Malian looked ready to sick up. Several of the others had had bloodied faces before they washed, and faint red smears and flakes of crusted blood still marred their skin. Falendre was glad she had been able to avoid accepting Healing for them. She had seen one of those *men* Healing members of the Dragon's party. Who knew what taint it would leave on a person to be beneath those corrupt hands?

"Be strong," she commanded the others, feeling far more uncertain than she sounded. He had actually let her free! She'd barely dared hope for that. Best to be away soon. Very soon. She chivvied the others onto the horses he had given, and within minutes they were riding south, toward Ebou Dar, each *sul'dam* riding with her companion *damane* at her side.

The events of this day could mean having her *damane* stripped from her, being forbidden to hold the *a'dam* ever again. With Anath gone, punishment would be demanded of someone. What would High Lady Suroth say? *Damane* dead, the Dragon Reborn insulted.

Surely losing access to the *a'dam* was the worst that could happen to her. They wouldn't make one such as Falendre *da'covale*, would they? The thought made the bile twist inside of her again.

She would have to explain the events of this day very carefully. There *had* to be a way she could present these matters in a way that would save her life.

She had given her word to the Dragon to speak directly to the Daughter of the Nine Moons. And she would. But she might not do so immediately. Careful consideration would have to be given. Very careful consideration.

She leaned in close to her horse's neck, nudging her mount forward, ahead of the others. That way, they wouldn't see the tears of frustration, pain and terror in her eyes.

Tylee Khirgan, Lieutenant-General of the Ever Victorious Army, sat her horse atop a forested hilltop, looking northward. Such a different place this land was. Her homeland, Maram Kashor, was a dry island on the very southeastern tip of Seanchan. The lumma trees there were straight, towering monsters, with fronds sprouting from the top like the hair crest of a member of the High Blood.

The things that passed for trees in this land were gnarled, twisting, branching shrubs by comparison. Their limbs were like the fingers of old soldiers, gone arthritic from years holding the sword. What had the locals called these plants? Brushwood trees? So odd. To think that some of her ancestors might have come from this place, traveling with Luthair Paendrag to Seanchan.

Her army marched down the road below, throwing dust into the air. Thousands upon thousands of men. Fewer than she'd had before, but not by many. It had been two weeks since her fight with the Aiel, where Perrin

Aybara’s plan had worked impressively. Fighting alongside a man like him was always a bittersweet experience. Sweet for the sheer genius of it. Bitter for the worry that one day, they would face each other on the battlefield. Tylee was not one who enjoyed a challenge in a fight. She’d always preferred to win straight out.

Some generals said that never struggling meant never being forced to improve. Tylee figured that she and her men would do *their* improving on the practice field, and leave the struggling to her enemies.

She would not like to face Perrin. No, she would not. And not just because she was fond of him.

Slow hoofbeats sounded on the earth. She glanced to the side as Mishima rode his horse, a pale gelding, up next to hers. He had his helm tied to his saddle, and his scarred face was thoughtful. They were a pair, the two of them. Tylee’s own face bore its share of old scars.

Mishima saluted her, more respectful now that Tylee had been raised to the Blood. That particular message, delivered by *raken*, had been an unexpected one. It was an honor, and one she still wasn’t accustomed to.

“Still mulling over the battle?” Mishima asked.

“I am,” Tylee said. Two weeks, and still it dominated her mind. “What do you think?”

“Of Aybara, you mean?” Mishima asked. He still spoke to her like a friend, even if he kept himself from meeting her eyes. “He is a good soldier. Perhaps too focused, too driven. But solid.”

“Yes,” Tylee said, then shook her head. “The world is changing, Mishima. In ways we cannot anticipate. First Aybara, and then the oddities.”

Mishima nodded thoughtfully. “The men don’t want to speak of them.”

“The events have happened too often to be the work of delusion,” Tylee said. “The scouts are seeing *something*.”

“Men don’t just vanish,” Mishima said. “You think it’s the One Power?”

“I do not know what it is,” she said. She glanced over the trees around her. Some trees she’d passed earlier had begun to send out spring growth, but not a one of these had done so. They looked skeletal, though the air was warm enough for it to be planting season already. “Do they have trees like this in Halamak?”

"Not exactly like them," Mishima said. "But I've seen their like before."

"Should they have budded by now?"

He shrugged. "I'm a soldier, General Tylee."

"I hadn't noticed," she said dryly.

He grunted. "I mean that I don't pay attention to trees. Trees don't bleed. Perhaps they should have budded, but perhaps not. Few things make sense on this side of the ocean. Trees that don't bud in spring, that's just another oddity. Better that than more *marath'damane* acting like they were of the Blood, everyone bowing and scraping to them." He shuddered visibly.

Tylee nodded, but she didn't share his revulsion. Not completely. She wasn't certain what to think of Perrin Aybara and his Aes Sedai, let alone his Asha'man. And she didn't know much more about trees than Mishima. But it felt to her that they should have started to bud. And those men the scouts kept seeing in the fields, how could they vanish so quickly, even with the One Power?

The quartermaster had opened up one of their packs of travel rations today and found only dust. Tylee would have started a search for a thief or a prankster if the quartermaster hadn't insisted that he'd checked that pack just moments before. Karm was a solid man; he'd been her quartermaster for years. He did not make mistakes.

Rotting food was so common here. Karm blamed the heat of this strange land. But travel rations couldn't rot or spoil, at least not this unpredictably. The omens were all bad, these days. Earlier today, she'd seen two dead rats lying on their backs, one with a tail in the mouth of the other. It was the worst omen she'd ever seen in her life, and it still chilled her to think of it.

Something was happening. Perrin hadn't been willing to speak of it much, but she saw a weight upon him. He knew much more than he had spoken.

We can't afford to be fighting these people, she thought. It was a rebellious thought, one she wouldn't speak to Mishima. She didn't dare ponder it. The Empress, might she live forever, had ordered that this land be reclaimed. Suroth and Galgan were the Empire's chosen leaders in the venture, until the Daughter of the Nine Moons revealed herself. While Tylee couldn't know the High Lady Tuon's thoughts, Suroth and Galgan were united in their desire to see this land subdued. It was practically the only thing they *did* agree upon.

None of them would listen to suggestions that they should be looking for allies among the people of this land, rather than enemies. Thinking about it was close to treason. Insubordination, at least. She sighed and turned to Mishima, prepared to give the order to begin scouting for a place to camp for the night.

She froze. Mishima had an arrow through his neck, a wicked, barbed thing. She hadn't heard it strike. He met her eyes, stunned, trying to speak and only letting out blood. He slid from the saddle and collapsed in a heap as something enormous charged through the underbrush beside Tylee, cracking gnarled branches, throwing itself at her. She barely had time to pull free her sword and shout before Duster—a good, solid warhorse that had never failed her in battle—reared in panic, tossing her to the ground.

That probably saved her life, as her attacker swung a thick-bladed sword, cutting into the saddle where Tylee had been. She scrambled to her feet, armor clanking, and screamed the alert. "To arms! Attack!"

Her voice joined hundreds who made the same call at virtually the same time. Men screamed. Horses whinnied.

An ambush, she thought, raising her blade. *And we walked right into it! Where are the scouts? What happened?* She launched herself at the man who had tried to kill her. He spun, snorting.

And for the first time, she saw just what he was. Not quite a man—instead, some creature with twisted features, the head covered in coarse brown hair, the too-wide forehead wrinkled with thick skin. Those eyes were disturbingly human-like, but the nose below was flattened like that of a boar and the mouth jutted with two prominent tusks. The creature roared at her, spittle spraying from its nearly human lips.

Blood of my Fathers Forgotten, she thought. *What have we stumbled into?* The monster was a nightmare, given a body and let loose to kill. It was a thing she had always dismissed as superstition.

She charged the creature, knocking aside its thick sword as it tried to attack. She spun, falling into Beat the Brushes, and separated the beast's arm from its shoulder. She struck again, and its head followed the arm to the ground, cut free. It stumbled, somehow still walking three steps, before collapsing.

The trees rustled, more branches snapping. Just down from her hillside, Tylee saw that hundreds of the creatures had broken out of the underbrush, attacking the line of her men near the middle, causing chaos. More and more of the monsters poured between the trees.

How had this happened? How had these things gotten so close to Ebou Dar! They were well inside the Seanchan defensive perimeter, only a day's march from the capital.

Tylee charged down the hillside, bellowing for her honor guard as more of the beasts roared out of the trees behind her.

Graendal lounged in a stonework room lined with adoring men and women, each one a perfect specimen, each one wearing little more than a robe of diaphanous white cloth. A warm fire played in the hearth, illuminating a fine rug of blood red. That rug was woven in the design of young women and men entangled in ways that would have made even an experienced courtesan blush. The open windows let in afternoon light, the lofty position of her palace giving a view of pines and a shimmering lake below.

She sipped sweetbristle juice, wearing a pale blue dress after the Domani cut—she was growing fond of their fashions, though her dress was far more filmy than the ones they wore. These Domani were too fond of whispering when Graendal preferred a nice sharp scream. She took another sip of juice. What an interestingly sour flavor it had. It was exotic during this Age, since the trees now grew only on distant islands.

Without warning, a gateway spun open in the center of the room. She cursed under her breath as one of her finest prizes—a succulent young woman named Thurasa, a member of the Domani merchant council—nearly lost an arm to the thing. The gateway let in a sweltering heat that marred the perfect mix of chill mountain air and fireplace warmth she had cultivated.

Graendal kept her composure, forcing herself to lounge back in her overstuffed velvet chair. A messenger in black strode through the portal, and she knew what he wanted before he spoke. Only Moridin knew where to find her, now that Sammael was dead.

"My Lady, your presence is required by—"

"Yes, yes," she said. "Stand straight and let me see you."

The youth stood still, just two steps into the room. And my, he was attractive! Pale golden hair as was so rare in many parts of the world, green eyes that shimmered like moss-grown pools, a lithe figure taut with just enough muscle. Graendal clicked her tongue. Was Moridin trying to tempt her by sending his very most pretty, or was the choice coincidental?

No. Among the Chosen, there were no coincidences. Graendal nearly reached out with a weave of Compulsion to seize the boy for herself. However, she restrained herself. Once a man had known that level of Compulsion, there was no way to recover him, and Moridin might be angered. She did need to worry about his whims. The man never had been stable, even during the early years. If she intended to see herself as Nae'blis someday, it was important not to rile him until it was time to strike.

She turned her attention away from the messenger—if she couldn't have him, then she wasn't interested in him—and looked through the open gateway. She hated being forced to meet with one of the other Chosen on their terms. She hated leaving her stronghold and her pets. Most of all, she hated being forced to grovel before one who should have been her subordinate.

There was nothing to be done about it. Moridin was Nae'blis. For now. And that meant, hate it or not, Graendal had no choice but to answer his summons. So she set aside her drink, then stood and walked through the gateway, her diaphanous pale blue gown shimmering with golden embroidery.

It was distractingly hot on the other side of the gateway. She immediately wove Air and Water, cooling the air around her. She was in a black stone building, with ruddy light coming in the windows. They had no glass in them. That reddish tint implied a sunset, but it was barely midafternoon back in Arad Doman. Surely she hadn't traveled *that* far, had she?

The room was furnished only with hard chairs of the deepest black wood. Moridin certainly was lacking in imagination lately. Everything of black and red, and all focused on killing those fool boys from the village of Rand al'Thor. Was she the only one who saw that al'Thor himself was the real threat? Why not just kill him and be done with it?

The most obvious answer to that question—that none of them so far had proven strong enough to defeat him—was one she did not enjoy contemplating.

She walked to the window and found the reason for the rust-colored light. Outside, the claylike ground was stained red from the iron in the soil. She was on the second level of a deep black tower, the stones drawing in the burning heat of the sky. Very little vegetation sprouted outside, and that which did was spotted with black. So, it was the deep northeastern Blight. It had been some time since she'd been here. Moridin seemed to have located a fortress, of all things.

A collection of shoddy huts stood in the shadow of the fortress, and a few patches of blightstrain crops marked fields in the distance. They were probably trying a new strain, coaxing it to grow in the area. Perhaps several different crops; that would explain the patches. Guards prowled the area, wearing black uniforms despite the heat. Soldiers were necessary to fight off attacks from the various Shadowspawn that inhabited the lands this deep within the Blight. Those creatures obeyed no master save for the Great Lord himself. What was Moridin doing all the way out here?

Her speculation was cut short as footsteps announced other arrivals. Demandred entered through the doorway to the south, and he was accompanied by Mesaana. Had they arrived together, then? They assumed that Graendal did not know of their little alliance, a pact that included Semirhage. But honestly, if they wanted to keep that a secret, couldn't they see that they shouldn't answer a summons together?

Graendal hid a smile as she nodded to the two of them, then selected the largest and most comfortable-looking of the room's chairs to sit in. She ran a finger along the smooth, dark wood, feeling the grain beneath the lacquer. Demandred and Mesaana regarded her coldly, and she knew them well enough to pick out hints of their surprise at seeing her. So. They had anticipated this meeting, had they? But not Graendal's presence at it? Best to pretend that she herself was not confused. She smiled knowingly at the two of them and caught a flash of anger in Demandred's eyes.

That man frustrated her, though she would never admit it out loud. Mesaana was in the White Tower, pretending to be one of what passed for an Aes Sedai in this Age. She was obvious and easy to read; Graendal's agents in the White Tower kept her well apprised of Mesaana's activities. And, of course, Graendal's own newly minted association with Aran'gar was helpful as well. Aran'gar was playing with the rebel Aes Sedai, the ones who were besieging the White Tower.

Yes, Mesaana did not confuse her, and the others were equally easy to track. Moridin was gathering the Great Lord's forces for the Last Battle, and his war preparations left him very little time for the south—though his two minions, Cyndane and Moghedien, occasionally showed their faces there. They spent their time rallying the Darkfriends and occasionally trying to follow Moridin’s orders that the two *ta’veren*—Perrin Aybara and Matrim Cauthon—be killed.

She was certain Sammael had fallen to Rand al’Thor during the struggle for Illian. In fact—now that Graendal had a clue that Semirhage had been pulling strings with the Seanchan—she was confident she knew the plans of every one of the other seven remaining Chosen.

Except Demandred.

What was that blasted man up to? She’d have traded all of her knowledge of Mesaana’s and Aran’gar’s doings for even a hint of Demandred’s plans. He stood there, handsome and hawk-nosed, his lips drawn in perpetual anger. Demandred never smiled, never seemed to enjoy anything. Though he was one of the foremost generals among the Chosen, warfare had never seemed to bring him joy. Once she had heard him say that he would laugh the day he could snap the neck of Lews Therin. And only then.

He was a fool to bear that grudge. To think he might have been on the other side—might have become the Dragon himself, had things turned out differently. Still, fool or not, he was extremely dangerous, and Graendal did *not* like being ignorant of his plans. Where had he set up? Demandred liked having armies to command, but there were none left moving in the world.

Save perhaps for those Borderlanders. Could he have managed to infiltrate *them*? That certainly would have been a coup. But surely she’d have heard something; she had spies in that camp.

She shook her head, wishing for a drink to wet her lips. This northern air was too dry; she much preferred the Domani humidity. Demandred folded his arms, remaining standing as Mesaana seated herself. She had chin-length dark hair and watery blue eyes. Her floor-length white dress bore no embroidery, and she wore no jewelry. A scholar to the core. Sometimes Graendal thought Mesaana had gone over to the Shadow because it offered a more interesting opportunity for research.

Mesaana was fully dedicated to the Great Lord now, just like the rest of them, but she seemed a second-rate member of the Chosen. Making boasts she couldn’t fulfill, allying herself to stronger parties but lacking the skill to manipulate them. She’d done evil works in the Great Lord’s name, but had never managed the grand achievements of Chosen like Semirhage and Demandred. Let alone Moridin.

And, as Graendal began to think on Moridin, the man entered. Now, *there* was a handsome creature. Demandred looked like a knob-faced peasant compared with him. Yes, this body was *much* better than his previous one. He was almost pretty enough to be one of her pets, though that chin spoiled the face. Too prominent, too strong. Still, that stark black hair atop a tall, broad-shouldered body. . . . She smiled, thinking of him kneeling in a filmy outfit of white, looking at her adoringly, his mind wrapped in Compulsion to the point that he saw nobody—nothing—other than Graendal.

Mesaana rose as soon as Moridin entered, and Graendal reluctantly did likewise. He wasn't her pet, not yet. He was Nae'blis, and he had begun to demand more and more shows of obedience from them in recent days. The Great Lord gave him the authority. All three of the other Chosen reluctantly bowed their heads to him; only to him among all men would they show deference. He noted their obedience with stern eyes as he stalked to the front of the room, where the wall of charcoal black stones was set with a mantel. What had possessed someone to build a fortress out of *black* rock in the Blight's heat?

Graendal sat back down. Were the other Chosen coming? If not, what did it mean?

Mesaana spoke before Moridin could say anything. "Moridin," she said, stepping forward, "we need to rescue her."

"You will speak when I give you leave, Mesaana," he replied coldly. "You are not yet forgiven."

She cringed, then obviously grew angry at herself for it. Moridin ignored her, glancing over at Graendal, eyes narrow. What was that look for?

"You may continue," he finally said to Mesaana, "but remember your place."

Mesaana's lips formed a line, but she did not argue. "Moridin," she said, tone less demanding. "You saw the wisdom in agreeing to meet with us. Surely that was because you are as shocked as we are. We do not have the resources to help her ourselves; she is bound to be well guarded by Aes Sedai and those Asha'man. You need to help us free her."

"Semirhage deserves her imprisonment," Moridin said, resting his arm on the mantel, still turned away from Mesaana.

Semirhage, captured? Graendal had just barely learned that the woman was impersonating an important Seanchan! What had she done to get herself captured? If there were Asha'man, then it seemed she'd managed to be taken by al'Thor himself!

Despite her startlement, Graendal maintained her knowing smile. Demandred glanced at her. If he and Mesaana had asked for this meeting, then why had Moridin sent for Graendal?

"But think of what Semirhage might reveal!" Mesaana said, ignoring Graendal. "Beyond that, she is one of the Chosen. It is our duty to aid her."

And beyond that, Graendal thought, *she is a member of the little alliance you two made. Perhaps the strongest member. Losing her will be a blow to your bid for control of the Chosen.*

"She disobeyed," Moridin said. "She was not to try to kill al'Thor."

"She didn't intend to," Mesaana said hastily. "Our woman there thinks that the bolt of Fire was a reaction of surprise, not an intention to kill."

"And what say you of this, Demandred?" Moridin said, glancing at the shorter man.

"I want Lews Therin," Demandred said, his voice deep, his expression dark, as always. "Semirhage knows that. She also knows that if she'd killed him, I would have found her and claimed her life in retribution. Nobody kills al'Thor. Nobody but me."

"You or the Great Lord, Demandred," Moridin said, voice dangerous. "His will dominates us all."

"Yes, yes, of course it does," Mesaana cut in, stepping forward, plain dress brushing the mirror-bright black marble floor. "Moridin, the fact remains that she didn't intend to kill him, just to capture him. I—"

"Of course she intended to capture him!" Moridin roared, causing Mesaana to flinch. "That was what she was *ordered* to do. And she failed at it, Mesaana. Failed spectacularly, leaving him wounded despite my express command that he wasn't to be harmed! And for that incompetence, she will suffer. I will give you no aid in rescuing her. In fact, I *forbid* you to send her aid. Do you understand?"

Mesaana flinched again. Demandred did not; he met Moridin's eyes, then nodded. Yes, he was a cold one. Perhaps Graendal underestimated him. He very well might be the most powerful of the three, more dangerous than Semirhage. She was emotionless and controlled, true, but sometimes emotion was appropriate. It could drive a man like Demandred to actions that a more coolheaded person couldn't even contemplate.

Moridin looked down, flexing his left hand, as if it were stiff. Graendal caught a hint of pain in his expression.

"Let Semirhage rot," Moridin growled. "Let her see what it is to be the one questioned. Perhaps the Great Lord will find some use for her in the coming weeks, but that is *his* to determine. Now. Tell me of your preparations."

Mesaana paled just slightly, glancing at Graendal. Demandred's face grew red, as if he was incredulous that they would be interrogated in front of another Chosen. Graendal smiled at them.

"I am perfectly poised," Mesaana said, turning back to Moridin with a sweep of her head. "The White Tower and those fools who rule it will shortly be mine. I will deliver not just a broken White Tower to our Great Lord, but an entire brood of channelers who—one way or another—will serve our cause in the Last Battle. This time, the Aes Sedai will fight for us!"

"A bold claim," Moridin said.

"I will make it happen," Mesaana said evenly. "My followers infest the Tower like an unseen plague, festering inside of a healthy-looking man at market. More and more join our cause. Some intentionally, others unwittingly. It is the same either way."

Graendal listened thoughtfully. Aran'gar claimed that the rebel Aes Sedai would eventually secure the Tower, though Graendal herself wasn't certain. Who would be victorious, the child or the fool? Did it matter?

"And you?" Moridin asked Demandred.

"My rule is secure," Demandred said simply. "I gather for war. We will be ready."

Graendal itched for him to say more than that, but Moridin did not push. Still, it was much more than she'd been able to glean on her own. Demandred apparently held a throne and had armies. Which were gathered. The Borderlanders marching through the east seemed more and more likely.

"You two may withdraw," Moridin said.

Mesaana sputtered at the dismissal, but Demandred simply turned and stalked away. Graendal nodded to herself; she'd have to watch him. The Great Lord favored action, and often those who could bring armies to his name were best rewarded. Demandred could very well be her most important rival—following Moridin himself, of course.

He had not dismissed her, and so she remained seated as the other two withdrew. Moridin stayed where he was, one arm leaning against the mantel. There was silence in the too-black room for a time, and then a servant in a crisp red uniform entered, bearing two cups. He was an ugly thing, with a flat face and bushy eyebrows, worth no more than a passing glance.

She took a sip of her drink and tasted new wine, just slightly tart, but quite good. It was growing hard to find good wine; the Great Lord's touch on the world tainted everything, spoiling food, ruining even that which never should have been able to spoil.

Moridin waved the servant away, not taking his own cup. Graendal feared poison, of course. She always did when drinking from another's cup. However, there would be no reason for Moridin to poison her; he was Nae'blis. While most of them resisted showing subservience to him, more and more he was exerting his will on them, pushing them into positions as his lessers. She suspected that, if he wished, he could have her executed in any manner of ways and the Great Lord would grant it to him. So she drank and waited.

"Did you glean much from what you heard, Graendal?" Moridin asked.

"As much as could be gleaned," she answered carefully.

"I know how you crave information. Moghedien has always been known as the spider, pulling strings from afar, but you are in many ways better at it than she. She winds so many webs that she gets caught in them. You are more careful. You strike only when wise, but are not afraid of conflict. The Great Lord approves of your initiative."

"My dear Moridin," she said, smiling to herself, "you flatter me."

"Do not toy with me, Graendal," he said, voice hard. "Take your compliments and be silent."

She recoiled as if slapped, but said no more.

"I gave you leave to listen to the other two as a reward," Moridin said. "Nae'blis has been chosen, but there will be other positions of high glory in the Great Lord's reign. Some much higher than others. Today was a taste of the privileges you might enjoy."

"I live only to serve the Great Lord."

“Then serve him in this,” Moridin said, looking directly at her. “Al’Thor moves for Arad Doman. He is to live unharmed until he can face me at that last day. But he *must not* be allowed to make peace in your lands. He will attempt to restore order. You must find ways to prevent that from happening.”

“It will be done.”

“Go, then,” Moridin said, waving a hand sharply.

She rose, thoughtful, and started toward the door.

“And Graendal,” he said.

She hesitated, glancing at him. He stood against the mantel, back mostly to her. He seemed to be staring at nothing, just looking at the black stones of the far wall. Strangely, he looked a great deal like al’Thor—of whom she had numerous sketches via her spies—when he stood like that.

“The end is near,” Moridin said. “The Wheel has groaned its final rotation, the clock has lost its spring, the serpent heaves its final gasps. He must know pain of heart. He must know frustration, and he must know anguish. Bring these to him. And you will be rewarded.”

She nodded, then made her way through the provided gateway, back to her stronghold in the hills of Arad Doman.

To plot.

Rodel Ituralde’s mother, now thirty years buried in the clay hills of his Domani homeland, had been fond of a particular saying: “Things always have to get worse before they can get better.” She’d said it when she’d yanked free his festering tooth as a boy, an ailment he’d earned while playing at swords with the village boys. She’d said it when he’d lost his first love to a lordling who wore a hat with feathers and whose soft hands and jeweled sword had proven he’d never known a real battle. And she’d say it now, if she were with him on the ridge, watching the Seanchan march upon the city nestled in the shallow valley below.

He studied the city, Darluna, through his looking glass, shading the end with his left hand, his gelding quiet beneath him in the evening light. He and several of his Domani kept to this small stand of trees; it would take the Dark One’s own luck for the Seanchan to spot him, even with looking glasses of their own.

Things always had to get worse before they could get better. He’d lit a fire under the Seanchan by destroying their supply depots all across Almoth Plain and into Tarabon. He shouldn’t be surprised, then, to see a grand army like this one—a hundred and fifty thousand strong at least—come to quench that fire. It showed a measure of respect. They did not underestimate him, these Seanchan invaders. He wished that they did.

Ituralde moved his looking glass, studying a group of riders among the Seanchan force. They rode in pairs, one woman of each pair wearing gray, the other red and blue. They were far too distant, even with the glass, for him to make out the embroidered lightning bolts on the dresses of those in red and blue, nor could he see the chains that linked each pair together. *Damane* and *sul'dam*.

This army had at least a hundred pairs, probably more. If that weren't enough, he could see one of the flying beasts above, drawing close for its rider to drop a message to the general. With those creatures to carry their scouts, the Seanchan army had an unprecedented edge. Ituralde would have traded ten thousand soldiers for one of those flying beasts. Other commanders might have wanted the *damane*, with their ability to throw lightnings and cause the earth to heave, but battles—like wars—were won by information as often as they were by weapons.

Of course, the Seanchan had superior weapons as well as superior scouts. They also had superior troops. Though Ituralde was proud of his Domani, many of his men were ill trained or too old for fighting. He almost lumped himself in that latter group, as the years were beginning to pile on him like bricks on a pallet. But he gave no thought to retiring. When he'd been a boy, he'd often felt a sense of urgency—a worry that by the time he came of age, the great battles would all be done, all the glory won.

Sometimes, he envied boys their foolishness.

"They march hard, Rodel," Lidrin said. He was a youth with a scar across the left side of his face, and he wore a fashionable thin black mustache. "They badly want to capture that city." Lidrin had been untested as an officer before this campaign began. He was a veteran now. Although Ituralde and his forces had won nearly every engagement they'd had with the Seanchan, Lidrin had seen three of his companion officers fall, poor Jaalam Nishur among them. From their deaths, Lidrin had learned one of the bitter lessons of warfare: winning didn't necessarily mean living. And following orders often didn't mean either winning or living.

Lidrin didn't wear his customary uniform. Neither did Ituralde or any of the men with him. Their uniforms had been needed elsewhere, and that left them with simple worn coats and brown trousers, many borrowed or bought from locals.

Ituralde raised his looking glass again, thinking on Lidrin's comment. The Seanchan did indeed march with speed; they were planning to take Darluna quickly. They saw the advantage it would offer, for they were a clever foe, and they had returned to Ituralde an excitement he had assumed that he'd left behind years ago.

"Yes, they push hard," he said. "But what would you do, Lidrin? An enemy force of two hundred thousand behind you, another of a hundred and fifty thousand ahead of you. With enemies on all sides, would you march your men maybe just a little too hard if you knew that you'd find refuge at the end?"

Lidrin did not respond. Ituralde turned his looking glass, examining spring fields clustered with workers going about their planting. Darluna was a large city for these parts. Nothing here in the west could match the grand cities of the east and south, of course, regardless of what people from Tanchico or Falme would like to claim. Still, Darluna had a sturdy granite wall a good twenty feet tall. There was no beauty to the fortification, but the wall was solid, and it wrapped a city big enough to make any country boy gawk. In his youth, Ituralde would have called it grand. That was before he'd gone to fight the Aiel at Tar Valon.

Either way, it was the best fortification to be found in the area, and the Seanchan commanders no doubt knew it. They could have chosen to hunker down on a hilltop; fighting surrounded would make full use of those *damane*. However, that would not only leave no retreat, but would leave them minimal opportunities for supply. A city would have wells and perhaps leftover winter stores inside the wall. And Darluna, which had had its garrisons pressed into service elsewhere, was far too small to offer serious resistance. . . .

Ituralde lowered his looking glass. He didn't need it to know what was happening as the Seanchan scouts reached the city, demanding that the gates be opened to the invading force. He closed his eyes, waiting.

Lidrin exhaled softly beside him. "They didn't notice," he whispered. "They're moving the bulk of their forces up to the walls, waiting to be let in!"

"Give the order," Ituralde said, opening his eyes. There was one problem with superior scouts like the *raken*. When you had access to a tool so useful, you tended to rely upon it. And reliance like that could be exploited.

In the distance, the “farmers” on the fields tossed aside their tools and pulled bows from hidden clefts in the ground. The gates to the city opened, revealing the soldiers hiding inside—soldiers that the Seanchan *raken* scouts had claimed were a four-day ride away.

Ituralde raised his looking glass. The battle began.

The Prophet’s fingers bit dirt, tearing trenches in the soil as he scrambled up to the top of the forested hillside. His followers straggled behind. So few. So few! But he would rebuild. The glory of the Dragon Reborn followed him, and no matter where he went, he found willing souls. Those with hearts that were pure, those who had hands that burned to destroy the Shadow.

Yes! Think not of the past, think of the future, when the Lord Dragon would rule all of the land! When men would be subject only to him, and to his Prophet beneath him. Those days would be glorious indeed, days when none would dare scorn the Prophet or deny his will. Days when the Prophet wouldn’t have to suffer the indignity of living near the very camp—the *very* one—as Shadowspawn like that creature Aybara. Glorious days. Glorious days were coming.

It was difficult to keep his thoughts on those future glories. The world around him was filthy. Men denied the Dragon and sought the Shadow. Even his own followers. Yes! That must have been why they had fallen. That must have been why so many died when assaulting the city of Malden and its Darkfriend Aiel.

The Prophet had been so certain. He had assumed that the Dragon would protect his people, lead them to a powerful victory. Then the Prophet would finally have gotten his wish. He could have killed Perrin Aybara with his own hands! Twist that too-thick bull’s neck in his fingers, twist it around, squeezing, feeling the bones crack, the flesh wring, the breath stop.

The Prophet reached the top of the ridge and brushed the dirt from his fingers. He breathed in and out, scanning around him, underbrush rustling as his few remaining followers climbed up toward him. The canopy was dense overhead, and very little sunlight peeked through. Light. Radiant light.

The Dragon had appeared to him the night before the attack. Appeared in glory! A figure of light, glowing in the air in shimmering robes. Kill

Perrin Aybara! the Dragon had commanded. Kill him! And so the Prophet had sent his very best tool, Aybara's own dear friend.

That boy, that tool, had failed. Aram was dead. The Prophet's men had confirmed it. Tragedy! Was that why they had not prospered? Was that why, out of his thousands of followers, he now only had a bare handful? No. No! They must have turned against him, secretly worshipping the Shadow. Aram! Darkfriend! That was why he had failed.

The first of his followers—battered, dirtied, bloodied, exhausted—reached the top of the ridge. They wore threadbare clothing. Clothing that did not set them above others. The clothing of simplicity and goodness.

The Prophet counted them off. Fewer than a hundred. So few. This cursed forest was so dark, despite the daylight. Thick trunks stood shoulder-to-shoulder, and the sky overhead had grown dim with cloud cover. The underbrush of thin-branched boneweed shrubs matted together, forming an almost unnatural barrier, and those shrubs scratched like claws on his skin.

With that underbrush and the sharp earthen bank, the army could not follow this way. Though the Prophet had escaped from Aybara's camp barely an hour before, he already felt safe. They would go north, where Aybara and his Darkfriends would not find them. There, the Prophet could rebuild. He had stayed with Aybara only because his followers had been strong enough to keep Aybara's Darkfriends away.

His dear followers. Brave men, and true, every one. Killed by Darkfriends. He mourned them, bowing his head and muttering a prayer. His followers joined him. They were weary, but the light of zeal shone in their eyes. Any who were weak, or who lacked dedication, had fled or been killed long ago. These were the best, the mightiest, the most faithful. Each one had killed many Darkfriends in the name of the Dragon Reborn.

With them, he could rebuild. But first he had to escape Aybara. The Prophet was too weak, now, to face him. But later he would kill him. Yes . . . Fingers on that neck . . . Yes . . .

The Prophet could remember a time when he'd been called something else. Masema. Those days were growing very blurry to him, like memories from a former life. Indeed, just as all men were reborn into the Pattern, so had Masema been reborn—he had cast off his old, profane life and had become the Prophet.

The last of his followers joined him atop the cliff face. He spat at their feet. They had failed him. Cowards. They should have fought better! He should have been able to win that city.

He turned north and pushed his way forward. This landscape was growing familiar to him, though they had nothing like it up in the Borderlands. They would climb to the highlands, then cross over and enter Almoth Plain. There were Dragonsworn there, followers of the Prophet, even if many didn't know of him. There he could rebuild quickly.

He pushed through a patch of the dark brush and entered a small clearing. His men followed quickly. They would need food, soon, and he would have to send them hunting. No fires. They couldn't afford to alert—

"Hello, Masema," a quiet voice said.

He hissed, spinning, his followers bunching around him and pulling out weapons. Swords for some, knives, quarterstaffs, and the occasional polearm. The Prophet scanned the dim afternoon clearing, searching for the one who had spoken. He found her standing on a little outcrop of rock a short distance away, a woman with a prominent Saldaean nose, slightly tilted eyes, and shoulder-length black hair. She wore green, with skirts divided for riding, her arms folded in front of her.

Faile Aybara, wife of the Shadowspawn, Perrin Aybara. "Take her!" the Prophet screamed, pointing. Several of his followers scrambled forward, but most hesitated. They had seen what he had not. Shadows in the forest behind Aybara's wife, a half-circle of them. They were the shapes of men, with bows pointed into the clearing.

Faile waved with a sharp motion, and the arrows flew. Those of his followers who had run at his bidding fell first, crying out in the silent forest before falling to the loamy earth. The Prophet bellowed, each arrow seeming to pierce his own heart. His beloved followers! His friends! His dear brothers!

An arrow slammed into him, throwing him backward to the ground. Around him, men died, just as they had earlier. Why, why hadn't the Dragon protected them? Why? Suddenly, the horror of it all returned to him, the sinking terror of watching his men fall in waves, at watching them die at the hands of those Darkfriend Aiel.

It was Perrin Aybara's fault. If only the Prophet had seen earlier, back in the early days, before he'd even recognized the Lord Dragon for who he was!

"It's my fault," the Prophet whispered as the last of his followers died. It had taken several arrows to stop some of them. That made him proud.

Slowly, he forced himself back to his feet, hand to his shoulder, where the shaft sprouted. He'd lost too much blood. Dizzy, he fell to his knees.

Faile stepped down off her stone and entered the clearing. Two women wearing trousers followed. They looked concerned, but Faile ignored their protests that she stay back. She walked right up to the Prophet, then slid her knife from her belt. It was a fine blade, with a cast hilt that showed a wolf's head. That was well. Looking at it, the Prophet remembered the day when he'd earned his own blade. The day his father had given it to him.

"Thank you for helping to assault Malden, Masema," Faile said, stopping right in front of him. Then she reached up and rammed that knife into his heart. He fell backward, his own blood hot on his chest.

"Sometimes, a wife must do what her husband cannot," he heard Faile tell her women as his eyes fluttered, trying to close. "It is a dark thing we did this day, but necessary. Let no one speak of it to my husband. He must never know."

Her voice grew distant. The Prophet fell.

Masema. That had been his name. He'd earned his sword on his fifteenth birthday. His father had been so proud.

It's over, then, he thought, unable to keep his eyes open. He closed them, falling as if through an endless void. *Did I do well, Father, or did I fail?*

There was no answer. And he joined with the void, tumbling into an endless sea of blackness.

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CHAPTER 1

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Tears from Steel

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose around the alabaster spire known as the White Tower. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

The wind twisted around the magnificent Tower, brushing perfectly fitted stones and flapping majestic banners. The structure was somehow both graceful and powerful at the same time; a metaphor, perhaps, for those who had inhabited it for over three thousand years. Few looking upon the Tower would guess that at its heart, it had been both broken and corrupted. Separately.

The wind blew, passing through a city that seemed more a work of art than a workaday capital. Each building was a marvel; even the simple granite shopfronts had been crafted by meticulous Ogier hands to evoke wonder and beauty. Here a dome hinted at the form of a rising sun. There a fountain sprang from the top of a building itself, cresting what appeared to be two waves crashing together. On one cobbled street, a pair of steep three-story buildings stood opposite one another, each crafted into the form of a maiden. The marble creations—half-statue, half-dwelling—reached with stone hands toward one another as if in greeting, hair billowing behind, immobile, yet carved with such delicacy that every strand seemed to undulate in the wind's passing.

The streets themselves were far less grand. Oh, they had been laid out with care, radiating from the White Tower like streaks of sunlight. Yet that sunlight was dimmed by refuse and clutter, hints at the crowding the siege had caused. And perhaps the crowding wasn't the only reason for the disrepair. The storefront signs and awnings hadn't seen wash or polish in far too long. Rotting garbage piled where it had been dumped in alleys, drawing flies and rats but driving away all others. Dangerous toughs lounged on the street corners. Once, they'd never have dared do that, and certainly not with such arrogance.

Where was the White Tower, the law? Young fools laughed, saying that the city's troubles were the fault of the siege, and that things would settle down once the rebels were quelled. Older men shook their gray-streaked heads and muttered that things had never been this bad, even when the savage Aiel had besieged Tar Valon some twenty years previously.

Merchants ignored both young and old. They had their own problems, mainly on Southharbor, where trade into the city by way of the river had nearly come to a halt. Thick-chested workers toiled beneath the eyes of an Aes Sedai wearing a red-fringed shawl; she used the One Power to remove wards and weaken the stone, while the workmen broke the rock apart and hauled it away.

The workmen had sleeves rolled up, exposing curls of dark hair along burly arms, as they swung pick or hammer, pounding at the ancient stones. They dripped sweat onto rock or into the water below as they dug at the roots of the chain that blocked passage into the city by river. Half of that chain was now indestructible *cuendillar*, called heartstone by some. The effort to tear it free and allow passage into the city was an exhausting one; the harbor stoneworks—magnificent and strong, shaped by the Power itself—were only one of the more visible casualties of the silent war between the rebel Aes Sedai and those who held the Tower.

The wind blew through the harbor, where idling porters stood watching the workers chip the stones away, one by one, sending flakes of gray-white dust to float on the water. Those with too much sense—or perhaps too little—whispered that such portents could mean only one thing. Tarmon Gai'don, the Last Battle, must quickly be approaching.

The wind danced away from the docks, passing over the tall white bulwarks known as the Shining Walls. Here, at least, one could find cleanliness and attention in the Tower Guard who stood watch, holding bows. Clean-shaven, wearing white tabards free from stain or wear, the archers watched over their barricades with the dangerous readiness of snakes prepared to strike. These soldiers had no intention of letting Tar Valon fall while they were on duty. Tar Valon had repelled every enemy. Trollocs had breached the walls, but been defeated in the city. Artur Hawkwing had failed to take Tar Valon. Even the black-veiled Aiel, who had ravaged the land during the Aiel War, had never taken the city. Many claimed this as a great victory. Others wondered what would have happened if the Aiel had actually *wanted* to cross into the city.

The wind passed over the western fork of the River Erinin, leaving the island of Tar Valon behind, passing the Alindaer Bridge soaring high to the right, as if taunting enemies to cross it and die. Past the bridge, the wind swept into Alindaer, one of the many villages near Tar Valon. It was a village mostly depopulated, as families had fled across the bridge for refuge in the city. The enemy army had appeared suddenly, without warning, as if brought by a blizzard. Few wondered at it. This rebel army was headed by Aes Sedai, and those who lived in the White Tower's shadow rarely gambled on just what Aes Sedai could and couldn't do.

The rebel army was poised, but uncertain. Over fifty thousand strong, it camped in a massive ring of tents around the smaller camp of Aes Sedai. There was a tight perimeter between the inner camp and the outer one, a perimeter that had most recently been intended to exclude men, particularly those who could wield *saidin*.

Almost, one could think that this camp of rebels intended to set up permanently. It had an air of common daily life about its workings. Figures in white bustled about, some wearing formal novice dresses, many others clothed in near approximations. Looking closely, one could see that many of these were far from young. Some had already reached their graying. But they were referred to as "children," and obedient they were as they washed clothing, beat rugs, and scrubbed tents beneath the eyes of serene-faced Aes Sedai. And if those Aes Sedai glanced with uncommon frequency at the nail-like profile of the White Tower, one would be mistaken in assuming them uncomfortable or nervous. Aes Sedai were in control. Always. Even now, when they had suffered an indelible defeat: Egwene al'Vere, the rebel Amyrlin Seat, had been captured and imprisoned within the Tower.

The wind flicked a few dresses, knocked some laundry from its hangings, then continued westward in a rush. Westward, past towering Dragonmount, with its shattered and smoking apex. Over the Black Hills and across the sweeping Caralain Grass. Here, pockets of sheltered snow clung to shadows beneath craggy overhangs or beside the occasional stands of mountain blackwood. It was time for spring to arrive, time for new shoots to peek through the winter's thatch and for buds to sprout on the thin-branched willows. Few of either had actually come. The land was still dormant, as if waiting, holding its breath. The unnatural heat of the previous autumn had stretched well into winter, pressing upon the land a drought that had baked the life from all but the most vigorous plants. When winter had finally arrived, it had come in a tempest of ice and snow, a lingering, killing frost. Now that the cold had finally retreated, the scattered farmers looked in vain for hope.

The wind swept across brown winter grass, shaking the trees' still-barren branches. To the west, as it approached the land known as Arad Doman—cresting hills and short peaks—something suddenly slammed against it. Something unseen, something spawned by the distant darkness to the north. Something that flowed against the natural tide and currents of the air. The wind was consumed by it, blown southward in a gust, across low peaks and brown foothills to a log manor house, isolated, set upon the pine-forested hills in eastern Arad Doman. The wind blew across the manor house and the tents set up in the wide, open field before it, rattling pine needles and shaking tents.

Rand al'Thor, the Dragon Reborn, stood, hands behind his back as he looked out the open manor window. He still thought of them that way, his "hands," though he now had only one. His left arm ended in a stump. He could feel the smooth, *saidar*-healed skin with the fingers of his good hand. Yet he *felt* as if his other hand should be there to touch.

Steel, he thought. *I am steel. This cannot be fixed, and so I move on.*

The building—a thick-logged structure of pine and cedar after a design favored by the Domani wealthy—groaned and settled in the wind. Something on that wind smelled of rotten meat. Not an uncommon scent, these days. Meat spoiled without warning, sometimes only a few minutes after butchering. Drying it or salting it didn't help. It was the Dark One's touch, and it grew with each passing day. How long until it was as overwhelming, as oily and nauseating, as the taint that had once coated *saidin,* the male half of the One Power?

The room he stood in was wide and long, thick logs making up the outer wall. Planks of pine—still smelling faintly of sap and stain—made up the other walls. The room was furnished sparsely: fur rug on the floor, a pair of aged crossed swords above the hearth, furniture of wood with the bark left on in patches. The entire place had been decorated in a way to say that this was an idyllic home in the woods, away from the bustle of larger cities. Not a cabin, of course—it was far too large and lavish for that. A retreat.

"Rand?" a soft voice asked. He didn't turn, but felt Min's fingers touch his arm. A moment later, her hands moved to his waist and he felt her head rest upon his arm. He could feel her concern for him through the bond they shared.

Steel, he thought.

"I know you don't like—" Min began.

"The boughs," he said, nodding out the window. "You see those pines, just to the side of Bashere's camp?"

"Yes, Rand. But—"

"They blow the wrong direction," Rand said.

Min hesitated, and though she gave no physical reaction, the bond brought him her spike of alarm. Their window was on the upper floor of the manor, and outside of it, banners set above the camp flapped against themselves: the Banner of Light and the Dragon Banner for Rand, a much smaller blue flag bearing the three red kingspenny blossoms to mark the presence of House Bashere. All three flew proud . . . yet just to the side of them, the needles on the pines blew in the *opposite* direction.

"The Dark One stirs, Min," Rand said. He could almost think these winds a result of his own *ta'veren* nature, but the events he caused were always possible. The wind blowing in two directions at once . . . well, he could feel the wrongness in the way those pines moved, even if he did have trouble distinguishing the individual needles. His eyesight hadn't been the same since the attack on that day he'd lost his hand. It was as if . . . as if he looked through water at something distorted. It was getting better, slowly.

This building was one in a long line of manors, estates and other remote hiding places Rand had used during the last few weeks. He'd wanted to keep moving, jumping from location to location, following the failed meeting with Semirhage. He'd wanted time to think, to consider, and hopefully time to confuse the enemies that might be searching for him. Lord Algarin's manor in Tear had been compromised; a pity. That had been a good place to stay. But Rand had to keep moving.

Below, Bashere's Saldaeans had set up a camp on the manor's green—the open patch of grass out front, bounded by rows of fir and pine trees. Calling it the "green" seemed an irony, these days. Even before the army's arrival, it hadn't been green—it had been a patchy brown, winter thatch broken only occasionally by hesitant new shoots. Those had been sickly and yellow, and they had now been trampled by hooves or booted feet.

Tents covered the green. From Rand's vantage on the second floor, the neat lines of small, peaked tents reminded him of squares on a stones board.

The soldiers had noticed the wind. Some pointed, others kept their heads down, polishing armor, carrying buckets of water to the horselines, sharpening swords or lance points. At least it was not the dead walking again. The most firm-hearted of men could lose their will when spirits rose from their graves, and Rand needed his army to be strong.

Need. No longer was it about what Rand wanted or what he wished. Everything he did focused only on need, and what he needed most was the lives of those who followed him. Soldiers to fight, and to die, to prepare the world for the Last Battle. Tarmon Gai'don was coming. What he *needed* was for them all to be strong enough to win.

To the far left of the green, running below the modest hill where the manor rested, a twisting stream cut the ground, sprouting with yellow stickfinger reeds and scrub oak that had yet to send out spring buds. A small waterway, to be certain, but a fine source of fresh water for the army.

Just outside the window, the winds suddenly righted themselves, and the flags whipped around, blowing in the other direction. So it hadn't been the needles after all, but the banners that had been in the wrong. Min let out a soft sigh, and he could feel her relief, though she still worried about him. That emotion was perpetual, lately. He felt it from all of them, each of the four bundles of emotions tucked away in the back of his mind. Three for the women he had allowed to place themselves there, one for the woman who had forced her way in against his will. One of them was drawing closer. Aviendha, coming with Rhuarc to meet with Rand at the manor house.

Each of the four women would regret their decision to bond him. He wished he could regret his decision to let them—or, at least, his decision to allow the three he loved. But the truth was that he needed Min, needed her strength and her love. He would use her as he used so many others. No, there was no place in him for regret. He just wished he could banish guilt as easily.

Ilyena! a voice said distantly in Rand's head. *My love. . . .* Lews Therin Telamon, Kinslayer, was relatively quiet this day. Rand tried not to think too hard about the things Semirhage had said on the day when Rand had lost his hand. She was one of the Forsaken; she would say anything if she thought it would bring her target pain.

She tortured an entire city to prove herself, Lews Therin whispered. *She has killed a thousand men a thousand different ways to see how their screams would differ from one another. But she rarely lies. Rarely.*

Rand pushed the voice away.

"Rand," Min said, softer than before.

He turned to look at her. She was lithe and slight of build, and he often felt that he towered over her. She kept her hair in short ringlets, the color dark—but not as dark as her deep, worried eyes. As always, she had chosen to wear a coat and trousers. Today, they were of a deep green, much like the needles on the pines outside. Yet, as if to contradict her tailored choice, she had had the outfit made to accentuate her figure. Silver embroidery in the shape of bonabell flowers ran around the cuffs, and lace peeked out from the sleeves beneath. She smelled faintly of lavender, perhaps from the soap she'd taken to most recently.

Why wear trousers only to trim herself up with lace? Rand had long abandoned trying to understand women. Understanding them would not help him reach Shayol Ghul. Besides, he didn't need to understand women in order to use them. Particularly if they had information he needed.

He gritted his teeth. *No,* he thought. *No, there are lines I will not cross. There are things even I will not do.*

"You're thinking about her again," Min said, almost accusatory.

He often wondered if there was such a thing as a bond that worked only one way. He would have given much for one of those.

"Rand, she's one of the Forsaken," Min continued. "She would have killed all of us without a second thought."

"She wasn't intending to kill me," Rand said softly, turning away from Min and looking out the window again. "Me she would have held."

Min cringed. Pain, worry. She was thinking of the twisted male *a'dam* that Semirhage had brought, hidden, when she'd come impersonating the Daughter of the Nine Moons. The Forsaken's disguise had been disrupted by Cadsuane's *ter'angreal,* allowing Rand to recognize Semirhage. Or, at least, allowing Lews Therin to recognize her.

The exchange had ended with Rand losing a hand but gaining one of the Forsaken as his prisoner. The last time he'd been in a similar situation, it hadn't ended well. He still didn't know where Asmodean had gone or why the weasel of a man had fled in the first place, but Rand did suspect that he had betrayed much about Rand's plans and activities.

Should have killed him. Should have killed them all.

Rand nodded, then froze. Had that been Lews Therin's thought or his own? *Lews Therin,* Rand thought. *Are you there?*

He thought he heard laughter. Or perhaps it was sobbing.

Burn you! Rand thought. *Talk to me! The time is coming. I need to know what you know! How* did *you seal the Dark One's prison? What went wrong, and why did it leave the prison flawed? Speak to me!*

Yes, that was definitely sobbing, not laughter. Sometimes it was hard to tell with Lews Therin. Rand continued to think of the dead man as a separate individual from himself, regardless of what Semirhage had said. He had cleansed *saidin*! The taint was gone and it could touch his mind no longer. He was *not* going to go insane.

The descent into terminal madness can be . . . abrupt. He heard her words again, spoken for the others to hear. His secret was finally out. But Min had seen a viewing of Rand and another man melded together. Didn't that mean that he and Lews Therin were two separate people, two individuals forced into one body?

It makes no difference that his voice is real, Semirhage had said. *In fact, it makes his situation worse. . . .*

Rand watched a particular group of six soldiers inspect the horselines that ran along the right side of the green, between the last line of tents and the line of trees. They checked the hooves one at a time.

Rand couldn't think about his madness. He also couldn't think about what Cadsuane was doing with Semirhage. That left only his plans. *The north and the east must be as one. The west and the south must be as one. The two must be as one.* That was the answer he'd received from the strange creatures beyond the red stone doorway. It was all he had to go on.

North and east. He had to force the lands into peace, whether they wanted it or not. He had a tenuous balance in the east, with Illian, Mayene, Cairhien and Tear all under his control in one way or another. The Seanchan ruled in the south, with Altara, Amadicia and Tarabon under their control. Murandy might soon be theirs, if they were pressing in that direction. That left Andor and Elayne.

Elayne. She was distant, far to the east, but he could still feel her bundle of emotions in his head. At such a distance, it was difficult to tell much, but he thought she was . . . relieved. Did that mean that her struggle for power in Andor was going well? What of the armies that had besieged her? And what *were* those Borderlanders up to? They had left their posts, joining together and marching south to find Rand, but giving no explanation of what they wanted of him. They were some of the best soldiers west of the

Spine of the World. Their help would be invaluable at the Last Battle. But they had left the northlands. Why?

He was loath to confront them, however, for fear it could mean yet another fight. One he couldn't afford at the moment. Light! He would have thought that, of all people, he could have depended on the Borderlanders to support him against the Shadow.

No matter, not for the moment. He had peace, or something close to it, in most of the land. He tried not to think about the recently placated rebellion against him in Tear or the volatility of the borders with Seanchan lands, or the plottings of the nobility in Cairhien. Every time he thought he had a nation secure, it seemed a dozen others fell apart. How could he bring peace to a people who refused to accept it?

Min's fingers tightened on his arm, and he took a deep breath. He did what he could, and for now, he had two goals. Peace in Arad Doman and a truce with the Seanchan. The words he'd received beyond the doorway were now clear: He could not fight both the Seanchan and the Dark One. He had to keep the Seanchan from advancing until the Last Battle was over. After that, the Light could burn them all.

Why had the Seanchan ignored his requests for a meeting? Were they angered that he had captured Semirhage? He had let the *sul'dam* go free. Did that not speak of his good faith? Arad Doman would prove his intentions. If he could end the fight in Almoth Plain, he could show the Seanchan that he was serious in his suits for peace. He would *make* them see!

Rand took a deep breath, studying out the window. Bashere's eight thousand soldiers were erecting peaked tents and digging an earthen moat and wall around the green. The growing bulwark of deep brown contrasted with the white tents. Rand had ordered the Asha'man to help with the digging, and though he doubted they enjoyed the humble work, it did speed the process greatly. Besides, Rand suspected that they—like he himself—secretly savored any excuse to hold *saidin*. He could see a small group of them in their stiff black coats, weaves spinning around them as they dug up another patch of ground. There were ten of them in the camp, though only Flinn, Naeff and Narishma were full Asha'man.

The Saldaeans worked quickly, wearing their short coats as they cared for their mounts and set pickets. Others took shovelfuls of dirt from the Asha'man mound and used it to pack into the bulwark. Rand could see there was that displeasure on the faces of many of the hawk-nosed Saldaeans. They didn't like making camp in a wooded area, even one as sparsely flecked with pine as this hillside. Trees made cavalry charges difficult and could hide enemies as they approached.

Davram Bashere himself rode slowly through the camp, barking orders through that thick mustache of his. Beside him walked Lord Tellaen, a portly man in a long coat and wearing a thin Domani mustache. He was an acquaintance of Bashere's.

Lord Tellaen put himself at risk by housing Rand; sheltering the troops of the Dragon Reborn could be seen as treason. But who was there to punish him? Arad Doman was in chaos, the throne under threat from several rebel factions. And then there was the great Domani general Rodel Ituralde and his surprisingly effective war against the Seanchan to the south.

Like his men, Bashere went about unarmored in a short blue coat. He also wore a pair of the baggy trousers that he favored, the bottoms tucked into his knee-high boots. What did Bashere think of being caught in Rand's *ta'veren* web? In being, if not in direct opposition to the will of his queen, at least uncomfortably to the side of it? How long had it been since he had reported to his rightful ruler? Hadn't he promised Rand that his queen's support would be speedy in coming? How many months ago had that been?

I am the Dragon Reborn, Rand thought. *I break all covenants and vows. Old allegiances are unimportant. Only Tarmon Gai'don matters.* Tarmon Gai'don, and the servants of the Shadow.

"I wonder if we'll find Graendal here," Rand said thoughtfully.

"Graendal?" Min asked. "What makes you think she might be?"

Rand shook his head. Asmodean had said Graendal was in Arad Doman, though that had been months ago. Was she still here? It seemed plausible; it was one of the few major nations where she could be. Graendal liked to have a hidden base of power far from where the other Forsaken lurked; she wouldn't have set up in Andor, Tear or Illian. Nor would she have been caught in the lands to the southwest, not with the Seanchan invasion.

She would have a hidden retreat somewhere. That was how she operated. Probably in the mountains, secluded, somewhere here in the north. He couldn't be sure she was in Arad Doman, though it felt *right* to him, from what he knew of her. From what Lews Therin knew of her.

But it was only a possibility. He would be careful, watching for her. Each of the Forsaken that he removed would make the Last Battle that much easier to fight. It would—

Soft footsteps approached his closed door.

Rand released Min and they both spun, Rand reaching for his sword—a useless gesture, now. The loss of his hand, though it wasn't his primary sword hand, would leave him vulnerable if he were to face a skilled opponent. Even with *saidin* to provide a far more potent weapon, his first instinct was for the sword. He'd have to change that. It might get him killed someday.

The door opened and Cadsuane strode in, as confident as any queen at court. She was a handsome woman, with dark eyes and an angular face. Her dark gray hair was up in a bun, a dozen tiny golden ornaments—each one a *ter'angreal* or *angreal*—hanging in their places atop it. Her dress was of a simple, thick wool, tied at the waist with a yellow belt, with more yellow embroidery across the collar. The dress itself was green, which was not uncommon, as that was her Ajah. Rand sometimes felt that her stern face—ageless, like that of any Aes Sedai who had worked long enough with the Power—would have fit better in the Red Ajah.

He relaxed his hand on his sword, though he did not release it. He fingered the cloth-tied hilt. The weapon was long, slightly curved, and the lacquered scabbard was painted with a long, sinuous dragon of red and gold. It looked as if it had been designed specifically for Rand—and yet it was centuries old, unearthed only recently. *How odd, that they should find this now,* he thought, *and make a gift of it to me, completely unaware of what they were holding. . . .*

He had taken to wearing the sword immediately. It felt *right* beneath his fingers. He had told no one, not even Min, that he had recognized the weapon. And not, oddly, from Lews Therin's memories—but Rand's own.

Cadsuane was accompanied by several others. Nynaeve was expected; she often followed Cadsuane these days, like a rival cat she found encroaching on her territory. She did it for him, likely. The dark-haired Aes Sedai had never quite given up being Wisdom of Emond's Field, no matter what she said, and she gave no quarter to anyone she thought was abusing one under her protection. Unless, of course, Nynaeve herself was the one doing the abusing.

Today, she wore a dress of gray with a yellow sash at the waist over her belt—a new Domani fashion, he had heard—and had the customary red dot on her forehead. She wore a long gold necklace and slim gold belt, with matching bracelets and finger rings, both studded with large red, green and blue gems. The jewelry was a *ter'angreal*—or, rather, several of them and an *angreal* too—comparable to what Cadsuane wore. Rand had occasionally heard Nynaeve muttering that *her ter'angreal*, with the gaudy gems, were impossible to match to her clothing.

Where Nynaeve wasn't a surprise, Alivia was. Rand hadn't been aware that the former *damane* had been involved in the . . . information gathering. Still, she was supposed to be even stronger than Nynaeve in the One Power, so perhaps she had been brought for support. One could never be too careful where the Forsaken were concerned.

There were streaks of white in Alivia's hair, and she was just a bit taller than Nynaeve. That white in her hair was telling—any white or gray on a woman who wielded the One Power meant age. A great deal of it. Alivia claimed to be four centuries old. Today, the former *damane* wore a strikingly red dress, as if in an attempt to be confrontational. Most *damane*, once unleashed, remained timid. Not so with Alivia—there was an intensity to her that almost suggested a Whitecloak.

He felt Min stiffen, and he felt her displeasure. Alivia would help Rand die, eventually. That had been one of Min's viewings—and Min's viewings were never wrong. Except that she'd said she'd been wrong about Moiraine. Perhaps that meant that he wouldn't have to . . .

No. Anything that made him think of living through the Last Battle, anything that made him hope, was dangerous. He had to be hard enough to accept what was coming to him. Hard enough to die when the time came.

You said we could die, Lews Therin said in the back of his mind. *You promised!*

Cadsuane said nothing as she walked across the room, helping herself to a cup of the spiced wine that sat on a small serving table beside the bed. Then she sat down in one of the red cedar chairs. At least she hadn't demanded that he pour the wine for her. That sort of thing wasn't beyond her.

"Well, what did you learn?" he asked, walking from the window and pouring himself a cup of wine as well. Min walked to the bed—with its frame of cedar logs and a skip-peeled headboard stained deeply reddish brown—and sat down, hands in her lap. She watched Alivia carefully.

Cadsuane raised an eyebrow at the sharpness in Rand's voice. He sighed, forcing down his annoyance. He had asked her to be his counselor, and he had agreed to her stipulations. Min said there was something important he would need to learn from Cadsuane—that was another viewing—and in truth, he had found her advice useful on more than one occasion. She was worth her constant demands for decorum.

"How did the questioning go, Cadsuane Sedai?" he asked in a more moderate tone.

She smiled to herself. "Well enough."

"Well enough?" Nynaeve snapped. *She* had made no promises to Cadsuane about civility. "That woman is infuriating!"

Cadsuane sipped her wine. "I wonder what else one could expect from one of the Forsaken, child. She has had a great deal of time to practice being . . . infuriating."

"Rand, that . . . creature is a *stone*," Nynaeve said, turning to him. "She's yielded barely a single useful sentence despite days of questioning! All she does is explain how inferior and backward we are, with the occasional aside that she's eventually going to kill us all." Nynaeve reached up to her long, single braid—but stopped herself short of tugging on it. She was getting better about that. Rand wondered why she bothered, considering how obvious her temper was.

"For all the girl's dramatic talk," Cadsuane said, nodding to Nynaeve, "she has a reasonable grasp on the situation. Phaw! When I said 'well enough' you were to interpret it as 'as well as you might expect, given our unfortunate constraints.' One cannot blindfold an artist, then be surprised when he has nothing to paint."

"This isn't art, Cadsuane," Rand said dryly. "It's torture." Min shared a glance with him, and he felt her concern. Concern for him? He wasn't the one being tortured.

The box, Lews Therin whispered. *We should have died in the box. Then . . . then it would be over.*

Cadsuane sipped her wine. Rand hadn't tasted his—he already knew that the spices were so strong as to render the drink unpalatable. Better that than the alternative.

“You press us for results, boy,” Cadsuane said. “And yet you deny us the tools we need to get them. Whether you name it torture, questioning, or *baking*, I call it foolishness. Now, if we were allowed to—”

“No!” Rand growled, waving a hand . . . a stump . . . at her. “You will *not* threaten or hurt her.”

Time spent in a dark box, being pulled forth and being beaten repeatedly. He would *not* have a woman in his power treated the same way. Not even one of the Forsaken. “You may question her, but some things I will not allow.”

Nynaeve sniffed. “Rand, she’s one of the *Forsaken*, dangerous beyond reason!”

“I am aware of the threat,” Rand said flatly, holding up the stump where his left hand had been. The metallic gold and red tattoo of a dragon’s body sparkled in the lamplight. Its head had been consumed in the Fire that had nearly killed him.

Nynaeve took a deep breath. “Yes, well, then you *must* see that normal rules shouldn’t apply to her!”

“I said no!” Rand said. “You will question her, but you will not hurt her!” *Not a woman. I will keep to this one shred of light inside me. I’ve caused the deaths and sorrows of too many women already.*

“If that is what you demand, boy,” Cadsuane said tersely, “then that is what shall be done. Just don’t whine when we are unable to drag out of her what she had for breakfast yesterday, let alone the locations of the other Forsaken. One begins to wonder why you insist we continue this farce at all. Perhaps we should simply turn her over to the White Tower and be done with it.”

Rand turned away. Outside, the soldiers had finished with the horselines. They looked good. Even and straight, the animals given just the right amount of slack.

Turn her over to the White Tower? That would never happen. Cadsuane wouldn’t let Semirhage out of her grip until she got the answers she wanted. The wind still blew outside, his own banners flapping before his eyes.

“Turn her over to the White Tower, you say?” he said, glancing back into the room. “Which White Tower? Would you entrust her to Elaida? Or did you mean the others? I doubt that Egwene would be pleased if I dropped one of the Forsaken in her lap. Egwene might just let Semirhage go and take *me* captive instead. Force me to kneel before the White Tower's justice and gentle me just to give her another notch in her belt."

Nynaeve frowned. "Rand! Egwene would never—"

"She's Amyrlin," he said, downing his cup of wine in one gulp. It was as putrid as he recalled. "Aes Sedai to the core. I'm just another pawn to her."

Yes, Lews Therin said. *We need to stay away from all of them. They refused to help us, you know. Refused! Said my plan was too reckless. That left me with only the Hundred Companions, no women to form a circle. Traitors! This is their fault. But . . . but I'm the one who killed Ilyena. Why?*

Nynaeve said something, but Rand ignored her. *Lews Therin?* he said to the voice. *What was it you did? The women wouldn't help? Why?*

But Lews Therin had begun sobbing again, and his voice grew distant.

"Tell me!" Rand yelled, throwing his cup down. "Burn you, Kinslayer! Speak to me!"

The room fell silent.

Rand blinked. He'd never . . . never tried speaking to Lews Therin out loud where others could hear. And they knew. Semirhage had spoken of the voice that he heard, dismissing Rand as if he were a common madman.

Rand reached up, running a hand through his hair. Or he tried to . . . but he used the arm that was only a stump, and it accomplished nothing.

Light! he thought. *I'm losing control. Half the time, I don't know which voice is mine and which is his. This was supposed to get better when I cleansed* saidin! *I was supposed to be safe. . . .*

Not safe, Lews Therin muttered. *We were already mad. Can't turn back from that now.* He began to cackle, but the laughter turned to sobs.

Rand looked around the room. Min's dark eyes were so worried he had to turn away. Alivia—who had watched the exchange about Semirhage with those penetrating eyes of hers—seemed too knowing. Nynaeve finally gave in and tugged on her braid. For once, Cadsuane didn't chastise him for his outburst. Instead she just sipped her wine. How could she stand the stuff?

The thought was trivial. Ridiculous. He wanted to laugh. Only, the sound wouldn't come out. He couldn't summon even a wry humor, not anymore. *Light! I can't keep this up. My eyes see as if in a fog, my hand is burned away, and the old wounds in my side rip open if I do anything more strenuous than breathe. I'm dry, like an overused well. I need to finish my work here and get to Shayol Ghul.*

Otherwise, there won’t be anything left of me for the Dark One to kill.

That wasn’t a thought to cause laughter; it was one to cause despair. But Rand did not weep, for tears could not come from steel.

For the moment, Lews Therin’s cries seemed enough for both of them.

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CHAPTER 2

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The Nature of Pain

Egwene stood up straight, backside aflame with the now-familiar agony of a solid beating beneath the hands of the Mistress of Novices. She felt like a rug that had just been pounded free of its dust. Despite that, she calmly straightened her white skirts, then turned to the room's mirror and calmly dabbed the tears from the corners of her eyes. Only one tear in each eye this time. She smiled to her reflection, and her twin selves nodded to one another in satisfaction.

A small, dark-paneled room reflected behind her on the mirror's silvery surface. Such a stern place it was, a sturdy stool in the corner, the top darkened and smoothed from years and years of use. A blockish desk, set with the Mistress of Novices' thick tome. The narrow table directly behind Egwene had some carvings, but its leather padding was far more distinctive. Many a novice—and not a few Accepted—had bent down across that table, bearing the punishment for disobedience. Egwene could almost imagine that the table's dark color had come from repeated tearstains. Many of her own had been shed there.

But none today. Only two tears, and neither had fallen from her cheeks. Not that she didn't hurt; her entire body seemed to burn from the pain. Indeed, the severity of those beatings had increased the longer she continued to defy the powers in the White Tower. But as the beatings had grown more frequent and more painful, Egwene's resolve to endure had grown as well. She hadn't yet managed to embrace and accept the pain as the Aiel did, but she felt that she was close. The Aiel could laugh during the most cruel of tortures. Well, she could smile the moment she stood up.

Each lash she endured, each pain she suffered, was a victory. And victory was always a reason for happiness, no matter how one's pride or one's skin burned.

Standing beside the table behind Egwene, reflected in the mirror, was the Mistress of Novices herself. Silviana looked down at the leather strap in her hands, frowning. Her ageless square face seemed just faintly confused; she regarded the strap as one might a knife that refused to cut or a lamp that refused to light.

The woman was of the Red Ajah, a fact reflected in the trim on the hem of her simple gray dress and the fringed shawl on her shoulders. She was tall and stocky and she had her black hair back in a bun. In most ways

Egwene considered her a superior Mistress of Novices. Even if she *had* administered a ridiculous number of punishments to Egwene. Perhaps because of that. Silviana did her duty. Light knew there were few enough in the Tower lately of whom that could be said!

Silviana looked up and met Egwene's eyes in the mirror. She quickly put down the strap and washed all emotion from her face. Egwene turned around calmly.

Uncharacteristically, Silviana sighed. "When will you give this up, child?" she asked. "You've proven your point quite admirably, I must say, but you must know that I will continue to punish you until you submit. Proper order must be maintained."

Egwene held in her shock. The Mistress of Novices rarely addressed Egwene except to offer instruction or reprobation. Still, there had been cracks before. . . .

"Proper order, Silviana?" Egwene asked. "As it has been maintained elsewhere in the Tower?"

Silviana's lips drew back in a line. She turned and made a notation in her book. "I will see you in the morning. Off to dinner with you."

The morning punishment would be because Egwene had called the Mistress of Novices by her name without adding the honorific "Sedai" to the end. And likely because both knew that Egwene would not curtsy before she left.

"I will return in the morning," Egwene said, "but dinner must wait. I have been ordered to attend Elaida this evening as she eats." This session with Silviana had gone long—Egwene had brought quite a list of infractions with her—and now she wouldn't have time to eat. Her stomach complained at the prospect.

Silviana showed just a brief moment of emotion. Was it surprise? "And you said nothing of this earlier?"

"Would it have changed anything if I had?"

Silviana did not respond to the question. "You will eat after attending the Amyrlin, then. I shall leave instructions for the Mistress of the Kitchens to hold you some food. Considering how often you are being given Healing these days, child, you will need to take your meals. I won't have you collapsing from lack of nourishment."

Stern, yet fair. A pity this one had found her way to the Red. "Very well," Egwene said.

“And after eating,” Silviana said, raising a finger, “you shall return to me for showing disrespect to the Amyrlin Seat. She is never to be known as simply ‘Elaida’ to you, child.” She turned down to her ledger, adding, “Besides, Light only knows what kind of trouble you’ll be in by this evening.”

As Egwene left the small chamber behind—entering a wide, gray-stoned hallway with floor tiles of green and red—she considered that last comment. Perhaps it *hadn’t* been surprise that Silviana had shown upon hearing of Egwene’s visit to Elaida. Perhaps it had been sympathy. Elaida would not react well when Egwene stood up to her the way she had to all others in the Tower.

Was that why Silviana had decided to bring Egwene back for a final strapping after eating? With the orders Silviana had given, Egwene would be *required* to take food before returning for her punishment, even if Elaida heaped the strappings upon her.

It was a small kindness, but Egwene was grateful for it. Enduring the daily punishments was difficult enough without skipping meals.

As she pondered, two Red sisters—Katerine and Barasine—approached her. Katerine held a brass cup. Another dose of forkroot. Elaida wanted to make certain that Egwene couldn’t channel a trickle during the meal, it seemed. Egwene took the cup without protesting and downed it in a single gulp, tasting the faint, yet characteristic, hint of mint. She handed the cup back to Katerine with an offhanded gesture, and the woman had no choice but to accept it. Almost as if she were a royal cupbearer.

Egwene didn’t head for Elaida’s quarters immediately. The overly long punishment’s intrusion into the dinner hour ironically left her with a few spare moments—and she didn’t want to arrive early, for that would show Elaida deference. So instead she lingered outside the door of the Mistress of Novices with Katerine and Barasine. Would a certain figure come to visit the study?

In the distance, small clusters of sisters walked the hallway’s tiles of green and red. There was a furtive cast to their eyes, like hares venturing into a clearing to nibble at leaves, yet fearing the predator who hid in the shadows. Sisters in the Tower these days always wore their shawls, and they never went about alone. Some even held the Power, as if afraid of being jumped by footpads here in the White Tower itself.

“Are you pleased with this?” Egwene found herself asking. She glanced at Katerine and Barasine; both were, coincidentally, also part of the group that had first captured Egwene.

“What was that, child?” Katerine asked coolly. “Speaking to a sister without being asked a question first? Are you so eager for more punishment?” She wore a conspicuous amount of red, her dress a bright crimson slashed with black. Her dark hair curled slightly in its cascade down her back.

Egwene ignored the threat. What more could they do to her? “Set aside the bickering for a moment, Katerine,” Egwene said, watching a group of Yellows pass, their step quickening as they saw the two Reds. “Set aside the posturing for authority and the threats. Put these things away and *look*. Are you proud of this? The Tower spent centuries without an Amyrlin being raised from the Red. Now, when you finally have a chance, your chosen leader has done *this* to the Tower. Women who won’t meet the eyes of those they do not know familiarly, sisters who travel in clusters. The Ajahs behave as if they are at war with one another!”

Katerine sniffed at the comment, though the lanky Barasine hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at the group of Yellows hurrying down the corridor, several of them firing glances back at the two Reds.

“This was not caused by the Amyrlin,” Katerine said. “It was created by your foolish rebels and their betrayal!”

My rebels? Egwene thought with an inward smile. *So you now see them as “mine,” rather than regarding me as just a poor Accepted who was duped? That’s progress.*

“Were we the ones who pulled down a sitting Amyrlin?” Egwene asked. “Were we the ones who turned Warder against Warder, or the ones who failed to contain the Dragon Reborn? Have we chosen an Amyrlin who is so power-hungry, she’s ordered the construction of her own *palace*? A woman who has every sister wondering if she’ll be the next to be stripped of the shawl?”

Katerine didn’t respond, as though realizing that she shouldn’t be drawn into an argument with a mere novice. Barasine still watched the distant Yellows, her eyes wide. Worried.

“I should think,” Egwene said, “that the Red should not be the ones sheltering Elaida, but should instead provide her fiercest critics. For Elaida’s legacy will be your own. Remember that.”

Katerine glanced at her, eyes flaring, and Egwene suppressed a cringe. Perhaps that last had been too straightforward.

"You will report to the Mistress of Novices tonight, *child,*" Katerine informed her. "And explain how you showed disrespect to sisters and to the Amyrlin herself."

Egwene held her tongue. Why was she wasting her time trying to convince Reds?

The aged wooden door behind her snapped shut, making Egwene jump and glance over her shoulder. The tapestries to either side stirred slightly, then went still. Egwene hadn't realized that she'd left the door open just a crack as she'd left. Had Silviana listened to the conversation?

There was no more time to dawdle. It appeared that Alviarin wasn't going to come this evening. Where was she? She always arrived for punishment right around the time that Egwene finished. Egwene shook her head, then strode away down the hallway. The two Reds followed—they stayed with her increasingly now, following her, watching her, at all times except when Egwene visited the quarters of other Ajahs for training. She tried to act as if those two sisters were an honorary retinue, rather than her jailers. She also tried to ignore the pain of her backside.

All signs indicated that Egwene was winning her war against Elaida. Earlier, at lunch, Egwene had heard the novices gossiping about the dramatic failure Elaida had suffered in failing to keep Rand captured. The event was several months past, now, and was supposed to have been secret. And then there was the rumor of Asha'man bonding sisters who had been sent to destroy them. Another mission of Elaida's that wasn't supposed to be known. Egwene had taken steps to keep these failures strong in the minds of the Tower's occupants, much as she had with Elaida's irregular treatment of Shemerin.

Whatever the novices were gossiping about, the Aes Sedai were hearing. Yes, Egwene was winning. But she was beginning to lose the satisfaction she'd once felt at that victory. Who could take joy in seeing the Aes Sedai unraveling like aged canvas? Who could feel glad that Tar Valon, the grandest of all great cities, was piled with refuse? As much as Egwene might despise Elaida, she could not exult at seeing an Amyrlin Seat lead with such incompetence.

And now, tonight, she would face Elaida in person. Egwene walked slowly through the hallways, pacing herself so as to not arrive early. How should she proceed at the dinner? During her nine days back in the Tower, Egwene had not so much as glimpsed Elaida. Attending the woman would be dangerous. If she offended Elaida just a hair too much, she could find herself being sent for execution. And yet, she could not simper and pander. She would *not* bow before the woman, not if it cost her life.

Egwene turned a corner, then pulled up short, nearly stumbling. The hallway ended abruptly in a stonework wall set with a bright tile mural. The image was that of an ancient Amyrlin, sitting on an ornate golden seat, holding forth her hand in warning to the kings and queens of the land. The plaque at the bottom declared it to be a depiction of Caraighan Maconar, ending the rebellion in Mosadorin. Egwene vaguely recognized the mural; the last she'd seen it, it had been on the wall of the Tower library. But when she'd seen it there, the Amyrlin's face hadn't been a mask of blood. The dead bodies depicted hanging from the eaves hadn't been there either.

Katerine stepped up beside Egwene, face paling. Nobody liked to speak of the unnatural way rooms and corridors changed places in the Tower. The transformations made for a solemn reminder that squabbles over authority were secondary to larger, horrible troubles in the world. This was the first time Egwene had seen not only a corridor moved, but a depiction altered as well. The Dark One stirred, and the very Pattern itself was shaking.

Egwene turned and stalked away from the misplaced mural. She couldn't focus on those problems right now. You scrubbed a floor clean by first picking a single spot and getting to work. She'd picked her spot. The White Tower *had* to be made whole.

Unfortunately, this detour was going to take more time. Egwene reluctantly hastened her pace; it wouldn't do to be early, but she'd prefer not to be late either. Her two watchers hurried as well, skirts swishing as they backtracked through several corridors. As they did, Egwene caught sight of Alviarin hurrying around a corner, head down, walking toward the study of the Mistress of Novices. So she was going to her punishment after all. What had caused her to delay?

Two more turns and one flight of cold stone steps later, Egwene found herself cutting through the Red Ajah section of the Tower, as that now provided the quickest route up to the Amyrlin's quarters. Red tapestries hung on the walls, accented by crimson tiles on the floor. The women walking the corridors wore expressions of a near uniform austerity, their shawls draped carefully over their shoulders and arms. Here, in their own Ajah's quarters where they should be confident, they seemed insecure and suspicious, even of those servants who bustled about, bearing the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests. Egwene passed through the hallways, wishing she didn't have to hurry so, as it made her look cowed. There was nothing to be done about it. At the center of the Tower, she climbed several flights of stairs, eventually reaching the hallway that led to the Amyrlin's quarters.

Her busyness with novice chores and lessons had left her with little time to consider her confrontation with the false Amyrlin. This was the woman who had pulled down Siuan, the woman who had beaten Rand, and the woman who had pushed the Aes Sedai themselves to the very brink of collapse. Elaida needed to know Egwene's anger, she needed to be humiliated and made ashamed! She. . . .

Egwene stopped in front of Elaida's gilded door. *No.*

She could imagine the scene easily. Elaida enraged, Egwene banished to the dark cells beneath the Tower. What good would that do? She could *not* confront the woman, not yet. That would only lead to momentary satisfaction followed by a debilitating failure.

But light, she couldn't bow to Elaida either! The Amyrlin did no such thing!

Or . . . no. The Amyrlin did what was required of her. Which was more important? The White Tower, or Egwene's pride? The only way to win this battle was to let Elaida think that *she* was winning. No . . . No, the only way to win was to let Elaida think there *was no battle*.

Could Egwene keep a civil tongue long enough to survive this night? She wasn't certain. However, she *needed* to leave this dinner with Elaida feeling that she was in control, that Egwene was properly cowed. The best way to achieve that while maintaining some measure of pride would be to say nothing at all.

Silence. That would be her weapon this evening. Steeling herself, Egwene knocked.

Her first surprise came when an Aes Sedai opened the door. Didn't Elaida have servants to perform that function? Egwene didn't recognize the sister, but the ageless face was obvious. The woman was of the Gray, as indicated by her shawl, and she was slender with a full bust. Her golden brown hair fell to the middle of her back, and she had a haunted cast to her eyes, as if she'd been under great strain recently.

Elaida sat inside. Egwene hesitated in the doorway, looking in at her rival for the first time since departing from the White Tower with Nynaeve and Elayne to hunt the Black Ajah, a turning point that seemed an eternity ago. Handsome and statuesque, Elaida seemed to have lost a small measure of her sternness. She sat, secure and smiling faintly, as if thinking on some joke that only she understood. Her chair was almost a throne, carved, gilded and painted with red and white. There was a second place set at the table, presumably for the nameless Gray sister.

Egwene had never visited an Amyrlin's own quarters before, but she could imagine what Siuan's might have looked like. Simple, yet not stark. Just enough ornamentation to indicate that this was the room of someone important, but not enough to become a distraction. Under Siuan, everything would have served a function—perhaps several functions at once. Tables with hidden compartments. Wall hangings that doubled as maps. Crossed swords over the hearth that were oiled, should the Warders need them.

Or perhaps that was just fancy. Regardless, not only had Elaida taken different rooms for her quarters; her decorations were notably rich. The entire suite hadn't been decorated yet—there was talk that she was adding to her rooms day by day—but what was there was very lavish. New silk brocades, all of red, hung from the walls and ceilings. The Tairen rug underfoot depicted birds aflight, and was so finely woven that it could almost be mistaken for a painting. Scattered through the room were pieces of furniture of a dozen different styles and makes, each one lavishly carved and inlaid with ivory. Here a series of vines, there a knobby ridged design, there crisscrossing serpents.

More infuriating than the extravagance was the stole across Elaida's shoulders. It was striped with six colors. Not seven, but six! Though Egwene had not chosen an Ajah herself, she would have taken the Green. But that didn't stop her from feeling a surge of anger at seeing that shawl with blue removed. One did not simply *disband* one of the Ajahs, even if one were the Amyrlin Seat!

But Egwene held her tongue. This meeting was about survival. Egwene could bear straps of pain for the good of the Tower. Could she bear Elaida's arrogance as well?

"No curtsy?" Elaida asked as Egwene entered the room. "They *said* that you were stubborn. Well, then, you shall visit the Mistress of Novices when this supper is through and inform her of the lapse. What do you say to that?”

That you are a plague upon this structure as vile and destructive as any disease that has struck city and people in all years past. That you—

Egwene broke her gaze away from Elaida’s. And—feeling the shame of it vibrate through her very bones—she bowed her head.

Elaida laughed, obviously taking the gesture the right way. “Honestly, I expected you to be more trouble. It appears that Silviana *does* know her duty. That is well; I had worried that she, like far too many in the Tower lately, had been shirking. Well, be busy with you. I won’t wait all night to dine.”

Egwene clenched her fists, but said nothing. The back wall was set with a long serving table bearing several silver platters, their polished domed lids dripping with condensation from the heated contents. There was also a silver soup tureen. To the side, the Gray sister hovered near the door. Light! The woman was terrified. Egwene had rarely seen such an expression on a sister. What was causing it?

“Come, Meidani,” Elaida said to the Gray. “Are you going to hover all night? Sit down!”

Egwene covered a moment of shock. Meidani? She was one of those sent by Sheriam and the others to spy on the White Tower! As Egwene checked the contents of each platter, she shot a glance over her shoulder. Meidani had found her way to the small, less ornate seat at Elaida’s side. Did the Gray always wear such finery to supper? Her neck sparkled with emeralds and her muted green dress was of the most expensive silk, accentuating a bosom that might have been average on another woman, but that seemed ample on Meidani’s slender body.

Beonin said she’d warned the Gray sisters that Elaida knew they were spies. So why hadn’t Meidani fled the Tower? What was holding her here?

Well, at least now the woman’s expression of terror made sense. “Meidani,” Elaida said, sipping from a goblet of wine, “you are rather wan this day. Have you been getting enough sun?”

“I have been spending a great deal of time with historical records, Elaida,” Meidani said, voice uneven. “Have you forgotten?”

“Ah, that is right,” Elaida said musingly. “It will be good to know how traitors have been treated in the past. Beheading seems too easy and simple a punishment to me. Those who split our Tower, those who flaunt their defection, a very *special* reward will be needed for them. Well, continue your search then."

Meidani sat down, hands in lap. Anyone other than an Aes Sedai would have had to mop her brow free of sweat. Egwene stirred the silver tureen, hand clutching the ladle with a white-knuckled grip. Elaida *knew*. She knew that Meidani was a spy, and yet she still invited the woman to dinner. To play with her.

"Hurry up, girl," Elaida snapped at Egwene.

Egwene plucked up the tureen, the handles warm beneath her fingers, and walked over to the small table. She filled the bowls with a brownish broth bobbing with Queen's Crown mushrooms. It smelled so heavily peppered that any other flavor would be indistinguishable. So much food had gone bad that without spice, the soup would be inedible.

Egwene worked mechanically, like a wagon wheel rolling behind the oxen. She didn't have to make choices; she didn't have to respond. She just worked. She filled the soup bowls precisely, then fetched the bread basket and placed one piece—not too crusty—on each small porcelain bread saucer. She returned with a circular dab of butter for each, cut quickly but precisely from the larger brick with a couple of flicks of the knife. One did not spend long as an innkeeper's daughter without learning to serve a proper meal.

Even as she worked, she stewed. Each step was agony, and not because of her still-burning backside. That physical pain, oddly, seemed insignificant now. It was secondary to the pain of remaining silent, the pain of not allowing herself to confront this awful woman, so regal, so arrogant.

As the two women began their soup—pointedly ignoring the weevils in their bread—Egwene retreated to the side of the room and stood, hands clasped before her, posture stiff. Elaida glanced at her, then smiled, apparently seeing another sign of subservience. In reality, Egwene didn't trust herself to move, for she feared that any activity would end with her slapping Elaida across the face. Light, but this was hard!

"What talk is there in the Tower, Meidani?" Elaida asked, dipping her bread in the soup.

"I . . . don't have much time to listen. . . ."

Elaida leaned forward. "Oh, surely you know something. You have ears, and even Grays must gossip. What are they saying about those rebels?"

Meidani paled further. “I . . . I . . .”

“Hmm,” Elaida said. “When we were novices, I don’t remember you being so slow of wit, Meidani. You haven’t impressed me these last few weeks; I begin to wonder why you were ever given the shawl. Perhaps it never belonged on your shoulders in the first place.”

Meidani’s eyes opened wide.

Elaida smiled at her. “Oh, I’m only teasing you, child. Back to your meal.”

She joked! Joked about how she had stolen the shawl from a woman, humiliating her to such an extent that she fled the Tower. Light! What had happened to Elaida? Egwene had met this woman before, and Elaida had struck her as stern, but not tyrannical. Power changed people. It appeared that in Elaida’s case, holding the Amyrlin Seat had taken her sternness and solemnity and replaced them with a heady sense of entitlement and cruelty.

Meidani looked up. “I . . . I have heard sisters express worry about the Seanchan.”

Elaida waved an indifferent hand, sipping her soup. “Bah. They are too distant to be of danger to us. I wonder if they’re secretly working for the Dragon Reborn. Either way, I suspect that the rumors about them are largely exaggerated.” Elaida glanced at Egwene. “It’s a source of constant amusement to me that *some* will believe anything that they hear.”

Egwene couldn’t speak. She could barely have sputtered. How would Elaida feel about these “exaggerated” rumors if the Seanchan slapped a cold *a’dam* around her idiot neck? Egwene could sometimes feel that band on her own skin, itching, impossible to move. Sometimes, it still made her faintly sick to move around freely, as if she felt that she should be locked away, chained to the post on the wall by a simple loop of metal.

She *knew* what she had dreamed, and knew those dreams to be prophetic. The Seanchan would strike at the White Tower itself. Elaida, obviously, discounted her warnings.

“No,” Elaida said, waving for Egwene to bring another ladle of soup. “These Seanchan are not the problem. The *real* danger is the complete lack of obedience shown by the Aes Sedai. What will I have to do to end those foolish talks at the bridges? How many sisters will have to do penance before they acknowledge my authority?” She sat, tapping her spoon against her soup cup. Egwene, at the serving table, picked up the tureen, retrieving the ladle from its silver holder.

"Yes," Elaida mused, "if the sisters had been *obedient*, then the Tower wouldn't be divided. Those rebels would have obeyed rather than running off like a silly flock of startled birds. If the sisters were *obedient*, we would have the Dragon Reborn in our hands, and those horrid men training in their 'Black Tower' would have been dealt with long ago. What do you think, Meidani?"

"I . . . obedience is certainly important, Elaida."

Elaida shook her head as Egwene ladled soup into her bowl. "Anyone would admit *that*, Meidani. I asked what should be done. Fortunately, I have an idea myself. Doesn't it strike you as strange that the Three Oaths contain no mention of obedience to the White Tower? Sisters cannot lie, cannot make a weapon for men to kill other men, and cannot use the Power as a weapon against others except in defense. Those oaths have always seemed too lax to me. Why no oath to obey the Amyrlin? If that simple promise were part of all of us, how much pain and difficulty could we have avoided? Perhaps some revision is in order."

Egwene stood still. Once, she herself hadn't understood the importance of the oaths. She suspected that many a novice and Accepted had questioned their usefulness. But she had learned, as every Aes Sedai must, their importance. The Three Oaths were what *made* the Aes Sedai. They were what kept the Aes Sedai doing what was best for the world, but more than that, they were a shelter from accusations.

Changing them . . . well, it would be an unprecedented disaster. Elaida should *know* that. The false Amyrlin just turned back to her soup, smiling to herself, no doubt contemplating a fourth oath to demand obedience. Couldn't she see how that would undermine the Tower itself? It would transform the Amyrlin from a leader to a despot!

Egwene's rage boiled within her, steaming like the soup in her hands. This woman, this . . . creature! *She* was the cause of the problems in the White Tower, *she* was the one who caused division between rebels and loyalists. *She* had taken Rand captive and beaten him. She was a disaster!

Egwene felt herself shaking. In another moment, she'd burst and let Elaida hear truth. It was boiling free from her, and she could barely contain it.

No! she thought. *If I do that, my battle ends. I lose my war.*

So Egwene did the only thing she could think of to stop herself. She dumped the soup on the floor.

Brownish liquid sprayed across the delicate rug of red, yellow and green birds aflight. Elaida cursed, jumping up from her seat and backing away from the spill. None of the liquid had gotten on her dress, which was a shame. Egwene calmly snatched a serving towel off of the table and began to mop up the spill.

"You clumsy idiot!" Elaida snapped.

"I'm sorry," Egwene said, "I wish that hadn't happened." And she did. She wished none of this evening had occurred. She wished Elaida weren't in control; she wished the Tower had never been broken. She wished she hadn't been forced to spill the soup on the floor. But she had. And so she dealt with it, kneeling and scrubbing.

Elaida sputtered, pointing. "That rug is worth more than your entire village, wilder! Meidani, help her!"

The Gray didn't offer a single objection. She scurried over and grabbed a bucket of chilled water, which had been cooling some wine, and hurried back to help Egwene. Elaida moved over to a door on the far side of the room to call for servants.

"Send for me," Egwene whispered as Meidani knelt down to help clean.

"What?"

"Send for me to give me instruction," Egwene said quietly, glancing at Elaida, whose back was turned. "We need to speak."

Egwene had originally intended to avoid the Salidar spies, letting Beonin act as her messenger. But she had too many questions. Why hadn't Meidani fled the Tower? What were the spies planning? Had any of the others been adopted by Elaida and beaten down as soundly as Meidani?

Meidani glanced at Elaida, then back at Egwene. "I may not seem it sometimes, but I'm still Aes Sedai, *girl*. You cannot order me."

"I am your Amyrlin, Meidani," Egwene said calmly, wringing a towelful of soup into a pitcher. "And you would do best to remember it. Unless you want the Three Oaths replaced with vows to serve Elaida for eternity."

Meidani glanced at her, then cringed at Elaida's shrill calls for servants. The poor woman had obviously seen a hard time lately.

Egwene laid a hand on her shoulder. "Elaida *can* be unseated, Meidani. The Tower *will* be reunited. I will see it happen, but we must keep courage. Send for me."

Meidani looked up, studying Egwene. “How . . . how do you do it? They say you are punished three and four times a day, that you need Healing between so that they can beat you further. How can you take it?”

“I take it because I must,” Egwene said, lowering her hand. “Just as we all do what we must. Your service here watching Elaida is difficult, I can see, but know that your work is noticed and appreciated.”

Egwene didn’t know if Meidani really had been sent to spy on Elaida, but it was always better for a woman to think that her suffering was for a good purpose. It seemed to have been the right thing to say, for Meidani straightened, taking heart and nodding. “Thank you.”

Elaida was returning, behind her three servants.

“Send for me,” Egwene ordered Meidani again, voice a whisper. “I am one of the few in this Tower who has a good excuse to move between the various Ajah quarters. I can help heal what has been broken, but I will need your help.”

Meidani hesitated, then nodded. “Very well.”

“You!” Elaida snapped, stepping up to Egwene. “Out! I want you to tell Silviana to strap you as she’s never strapped a woman before! I want her to punish you, then Heal you on the spot, then beat you again! Go!”

Egwene stood, handing her towel to one of the servants. Then she walked to the exit.

“And don’t think that your clumsiness has allowed you to escape your duties,” Elaida continued from behind. “You will return and serve me again on another date. And if you so much as spill another *drop*, I will have you locked away in a cell with no windows or lights for a week. Do you understand?”

Egwene left the room. Had this woman ever been a true Aes Sedai, in control of her emotions?

Yet Egwene herself had lost control of her emotions. She should never have let herself get to a point where she’d been forced to drop the soup. She had underestimated how infuriating Elaida could be, but that would not happen again. She calmed herself as she walked, breathing in and out. Rage did her no good. You didn’t get mad at the weasel who was sneaking into your yard and eating your hens. You simply laid a trap and disposed of the animal. Anger was pointless.

Hands still smelling faintly of pepper and spices, she made her way down to the lowest level of the Tower, to the novices’ dining hall beside the main kitchens. Egwene had worked in those kitchens herself frequently during the last nine days; every novice was required to work chores. The smells of the place—charcoal and smoke, simmering soups and sharp, unscented soaps—were very familiar to her. The smells weren't that different, actually, from the kitchen of her father's inn back in the Two Rivers.

The white-walled room was empty, the tables sitting unattended, though there was a small tray on one of them, covered with a pot lid to keep it warm. Her cushion was there as well, left by the novices to soften the hard bench. Egwene approached, but ignored the cushion as she always did, though she was grateful for the gesture. She sat and removed the lid from the meal. Unfortunately, all she found was a bowl of the same brownish soup. There was no hint of the roast, gravy or long, thin buttered beans that had made up the rest of Elaida's meal.

Still, it was food, and Egwene's stomach was grateful for it. Elaida hadn't ordered that she *immediately* go for punishment, and so Silviana's order that she eat first took precedence. Or, at least, there was enough of an argument there to protect her.

She ate quietly, alone. The soup was indeed spicy, and it tasted as much of pepper as it had smelled, but she didn't mind. Other than that, it was actually quite good. She'd also been left a few slices of bread, though she'd gotten the ends of the loaf. All in all, not a bad meal for someone who had thought she might get nothing.

Egwene ate contemplatively, listening to Laras and the scullions bang pots at washing up in the other room, surprised at how calm she felt. She had changed; something was different about her. Watching Elaida, finally confronting the woman who had been her rival all of these months, forced her to look at what she was doing in a new light.

She had imagined herself undermining Elaida and seizing control of the White Tower from within. Now she realized that she didn't need to undermine Elaida. The woman was fully capable of doing that herself. Why, Egwene could picture the reaction of the Sitters and Ajah heads when Elaida announced her intention to change the Three Oaths!

Elaida would topple eventually, with or without Egwene's help. Egwene's duty, as Amyrlin, wasn't to speed that fall—but to do whatever she could to hold the Tower and its occupants together. They couldn't afford to fracture further. Her duty was to hold back the chaos and destruction that threatened them all, to reforge the Tower. As she finished off her soup, using the last piece of bread to wipe the remnants from the bowl, she realized she had to do *whatever* she could to be a strength to the sisters in the Tower. Time was growing very short. What was Rand doing to the world without guidance? When would the Seanchan attack to the north? They'd have to cut through Andor to get to Tar Valon, and what destruction would that cause? Surely she had some time to reforge the Tower before the attack came, but no moments to waste.

Egwene took her dish into the kitchen proper and washed it herself, earning a nod of approval from the hefty Mistress of the Kitchens. After that, Egwene made her way up to Silviana's study. She needed to get her punishment done quickly; she still intended to visit Leane tonight, as was her custom. Egwene knocked, then entered, finding Silviana at her desk, leafing through a thick tome by the light of two silver lamps. When Egwene entered, Silviana marked the page with a small length of red cloth, then shut it. The worn cover read *Meditations on the Kindling Flame*, a history of the rise of various Amyrlins. Curious.

Egwene sat down on a stool before the desk—not flinching at the immediate sharp pain of her backside—and spoke calmly about the evening, omitting the fact that she'd dropped the bowl of soup on purpose. She did, however, say that she'd dropped it after Elaida had talked of revoking and changing the Three Oaths.

Silviana looked very thoughtful at that.

"Well," the woman said, standing up and fetching her lash, "the Amyrlin has spoken."

"Yes, I have," Egwene said, standing up and positioning herself on the table, skirts and shift up for the beating.

Silviana hesitated, and then the strapping began. Oddly, Egwene felt no desire to cry out. It hurt, of course, but she just couldn't scream. How ridiculous the punishment was!

She remembered her pain at seeing the sisters pass in the hallways, regarding one another with fear, suspicion and distrust. She remembered the agony of serving Elaida while holding her tongue. And she remembered the sheer horror at the idea of everyone in the Tower being bound by oath to obey such a tyrant.

Egwene remembered her pity for poor Meidani. No sister should be treated in such a way. Imprisonment was one thing. But beating a woman down, toying with her, hinting at the torture to come? It was insufferable.

Each of these things was a pain inside of Egwene, a knife to the chest, piercing the heart. As the beating continued, she realized that nothing they could do to her body would *ever* compare to the pain of soul she felt at seeing the White Tower suffer beneath Elaida's hand. Compared with those internal agonies, the beating was ridiculous.

And so she began to laugh.

It wasn't a forced laugh. It wasn't a defiant laugh. It was the laughter of disbelief. Of incredulity. How could they think that beating her would solve anything? It was ludicrous!

The lashing stopped. Egwene turned. Surely that wasn't all of it!

Silviana was regarding her with a concerned expression. "Child?" she asked. "Are you all right?"

"I am quite well."

"You . . . are certain? How are your thoughts?"

She thinks I've broken under the strain, Egwene realized. *She beats me and I laugh from it.*

"My thoughts are well," Egwene said. "I don't laugh because I've been broken, Silviana. I laugh because it is absurd to beat me."

The woman's expression darkened.

"Can't you see it?" Egwene asked. "Don't you feel the pain? The agony of watching the Tower crumble around you? Could any beating compare to that?"

Silviana did not respond.

I understand, Egwene thought. *I didn't realize what the Aiel did. I assumed that I just had to be harder, and that was what would teach me to laugh at pain. But it's not hardness at all. It's not strength that makes me laugh. It's understanding.*

To let the Tower fall, to let the Aes Sedai fail—the pain of that would destroy her. She had to stop it, for she was the Amyrlin Seat.

"I cannot refuse to punish you," Silviana said. "You realize that."

"Of course," Egwene said. "But please remind me of something. What was it you said about Shemerin? Why was it Elaida got away with taking the shawl from her?"

"It was because Shemerin accepted it," Silviana replied. "She treated herself as if she really *had* lost the shawl. She didn't fight back."

“I will not make the same mistake, Silviana. Elaida can *say* whatever she wants. But that doesn’t change who I am, or who any of us are. Even if she tries to change the Three Oaths, there will be those who resist, who hold to what is correct. And so, when you beat me, you beat the Amyrlin Seat. And that should be amusing enough to make us both laugh.”

The punishment continued, and Egwene embraced the pain, took it into herself, and judged it insignificant, impatient for the punishment to cease.

She had a lot of work to do.

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CHAPTER 3

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The Ways of Honor

Aviendha crouched with her spear-sisters and some True Blood scouts atop the low, grassy hill, looking down at the refugees. They were a sorry lot, these Domani wetlanders, with dirtied faces that had not seen a sweat tent in months, their emaciated children too hungry to cry. One sad mule pulled a single cart among the hundred struggling people; what they hadn't piled in the vehicle they carried. There wasn't much of either. They plodded northeast along a pathway that couldn't quite be called a road. Perhaps there was a village in that direction. Perhaps they were just fleeing the uncertainty of the coastal lands.

The hilly landscape was open save for the occasional stand of trees. The refugees hadn't seen Aviendha and her companions, despite the fact that they were less than a hundred paces away. She'd never understood how wetlanders could be so blind. Didn't they watch, noting any oddities on the horizon? Couldn't they see that traveling so near to a hilltop practically invited scouts to spy on them? They should have secured the hill with their own scouts before coming anywhere near.

Didn't they care? Aviendha shivered. How could you *not* care about eyes watching you, eyes that might belong to a man or Maiden holding a spear? Were they so eager to wake from the dream? Aviendha did not fear death, but there was a very big difference between embracing death and wishing for it.

Cities, she thought, *they're the problem.* Cities were stinking, festering places, like sores that never healed. Some were better than others—Elayne did an admirable job with Caemlyn—but the best of them gathered too many people and taught them to grow comfortable staying in one place. If those refugees had been accustomed to travel and had learned to use their own feet, rather than relying on horses as wetlanders so often did, then it would not be so difficult for them to leave their towns. Among the Aiel, the craftsmen were trained to defend themselves, the children could live off the land for days, and even blacksmiths could travel great distances quickly. An entire sept could be on the move within an hour, carrying everything they needed on their backs.

Wetlanders were strange, doubtless. Still, she felt pity for the refugees. The emotion surprised her. While she was not heartless, her duty lay elsewhere, with Rand al'Thor. She had no reason to feel heartsore for a group of wetlanders she'd never met. But time spent with her first-sister, Elayne Trakand, had taught her that not all wetlanders were soft and weak. Just most of them. There was *ji* in caring for those who could not care for themselves.

Watching these refugees, Aviendha tried to see them as Elayne would, but she still struggled to understand Elayne's form of leadership. It was not the simple leadership of a group of Maidens on a raid—that was both instinctive and efficient. Elayne would not watch these refugees for signs of danger or hidden soldiers. Elayne would feel a responsibility to them, even if they were not of her own people. She would find a way to send food, perhaps use her troops to secure a safe area for them to homestead—and in doing so, acquire a piece of this country for herself.

Once, Aviendha would have left these thoughts to clan chiefs and roofmistresses. But she wasn't a Maiden any longer, and she had accepted that. She now lived under a different roof. She was ashamed that she had resisted the change for so long.

But that left her with a problem. What honor was there for her now? No longer a Maiden, not quite a Wise One. Her entire identity had been wrapped up in those spears, her *self* forged into their steel as surely as the carbon that strengthened them. She had grown from childhood certain that she would be *Far Dareis Mai*. Indeed, she had joined the Maidens as soon as possible. She had been proud of her life and of her spear-sisters. She would have served her clan and sept until the day when she finally fell to the spear, bleeding her last water onto the parched earth of the Three-fold Land.

This was not the Three-fold Land, and she had heard some *algai'd'siswai* wonder if the Aiel would ever return there. Their lives had changed. She didn't trust change. It couldn't be spotted or stabbed; it was more silent than any scout, more deadly than any assassin. No, she'd never trust it, but she would accept it. She would learn Elayne's ways and how to think like a chief.

She *would* find honor in her new life. Somehow.

"They are no threat," whispered Heirn, crouching with the True Bloods on the other side of the Maidens.

Rhuarc watched the refugees, alert. "The dead walk," the Taardad clan chief said, "and men fall at random to Sightblinder's evil, their blood corrupted like the water of a bad well. Those might be poor folk fleeing the ravages of war. Or they might be something else. We keep our distance."

Aviendha glanced at the increasingly distant line of refugees. She did not think Rhuarc was right; these were not ghosts or monsters. There was always something . . . wrong about those. They left her with an itch, as if she were about to be attacked.

Still, Rhuarc was wise. One learned to be careful in the Three-fold Land, where a tiny twig could kill. The group of Aiel slipped off the hilltop and down onto the brown-grassed plain beyond. Even after months spent in the wetlands, Aviendha found the landscape strange. Trees here were tall and long-limbed, with too many buds. When the Aiel crossed patches of yellow spring grass among the fallen winter leaves, they all seemed so full of water that she half-expected the blades and leaves to burst beneath her feet. She knew the wetlanders said that this spring was unnaturally slow starting, but already it was more fertile than her homeland.

In the Three-fold Land, this meadow—with the hills to provide watchpoints and shelter—would have immediately been seized by a sept and used for farming. Here, it was just one of a thousand different untouched patches of land. The fault lay again in those cities. The nearest ones were too distant from this location to make it a good spot for a wetlander farmstead.

The eight Aiel quickly crossed the grasses, weaving between hillsides, moving with speed and stealth. Horses could not match a man's feet, what with their thunderous galloping. Terrible beasts—why did the wetlanders insist on riding them? Baffling. Aviendha could begin to understand how a chief or queen must think, but she knew that she'd never completely understand wetlanders. They were just too strange. Even Rand al'Thor.

Especially Rand al'Thor. She smiled, thinking of his earnest eyes. She remembered the scent of him—wetlander soaps, which smelled of oil, mixed with that particular earthy musk that was all his own. She *would* marry him. She was as determined as Elayne in that regard; now that they were first-sisters, they could marry him together as was proper. Only, how could Aviendha marry anyone, now? Her honor had been in her spears, but Rand al'Thor now wore those at his waist, beaten and forged into a belt buckle, given to him by her own hand.

He had offered her marriage once. A man! Offering marriage! Another of those strange wetlander customs. Even disregarding the strangeness of it

—disregarding the insult his proposal had shown Elayne—Aviendha could never have accepted Rand al’Thor as her husband. Couldn’t he understand that a woman must bring honor to a marriage? What could a mere apprentice offer? Would he have her come to him as an inferior? It would shame her completely to do that!

He must not have understood. She did not think him cruel, only dense. She would come to him when *she* was ready, then lay the bridal wreath at his feet. And she couldn’t do that until she knew who she was.

The ways of *ji’e’toh* were complex. Aviendha knew how to measure honor as a Maiden, but Wise Ones were different creatures entirely. She had thought she was gaining some small amount of honor in their eyes. They had allowed her, for instance, to spend a great deal of time with her first-sister in Caemlyn. But then, suddenly, Dorindha and Nadere had arrived and informed Aviendha that she had been ignoring her training. They had seized her like a child caught listening furtively outside the sweat tent, towing her away to join the rest of her clan as they left for Arad Doman.

And now . . . and now the Wise Ones treated her with *less* respect than they had before! They offered her no teaching. Somehow, she had misstepped in their eyes. That made her stomach twist. To shame herself before the other Wise Ones was almost as bad as showing fear before one as brave as Elayne!

So far, the Wise Ones had allowed Aviendha some honor by letting her serve punishments, but she didn’t know *how* she had shamed herself in the first place. Asking would—of course—only bring more shame. Until she unwove the problem, she could not meet her *toh*. Worse, there was a real danger of her making the mistake again. Until she sorted out this problem, she would remain an apprentice, and she would *never* be able to bring an honorable bridal wreath to Rand al’Thor.

Aviendha gritted her teeth. Another woman might have wept, but what good would that have done? Whatever her mistake, she had brought it upon herself, and it was her duty to right it. She *would* find honor again and she *would* marry Rand al’Thor before he died at the Last Battle.

That meant that whatever it was she had to learn, she needed to do so quickly. Very quickly.

They met up with another group of Aiel waiting in a small clearing amid a stand of pine trees. The ground was thick with discarded brown needles, the sky broken by the towering trunks. The group was small by the standards of clans and septs, barely two hundred people. In the middle of the clearing stood four Wise Ones, each wearing the characteristic brown woolen skirt and white blouse. Aviendha wore similar attire, which now felt as natural to her as the *cadin'sor* once had. The scouting party split up, men and Maidens moving to join members of their clans or societies. Rhuarc joined the Wise Ones, and Aviendha followed him.

Each of the Wise Ones—Amys, Bair, Melaine, and Nadere—gave her a glance. Bair, the only Aiel with the group who wasn't Taardad or Goshien, had arrived only recently, perhaps to coordinate with the others. Whatever the reason, none of them seemed pleased. Aviendha hesitated. If she left now, would it seem as if she were trying to avoid their attention? Did she instead dare stay, and risk incurring their further displeasure?

"Well?" Amys said to Rhuarc. Though Amys had white hair, she looked quite young. In her case, this wasn't due to working the Power—her hair had started turning silver when she'd been a child.

"It was as the scouts described, shade of my heart," Rhuarc said. "Another pitiful band of wetlander refugees. I saw no hidden danger in them."

The Wise Ones nodded, as if this was what they had expected. "That is the tenth band of refugees in less than a week," said aged Bair, her watery blue eyes thoughtful.

Rhuarc nodded. "There are rumors of Seanchan attacks on harbors to the west. Perhaps the people move inland to avoid the raids." He glanced at Amys. "This country boils like water spilled on a hearthstone. The clans are uncertain what Rand al'Thor wishes of them."

"He was very clear," Bair noted. "He will be pleased that you and Dobraine Taborwin secured Bandar Eban, as he asked."

Rhuarc nodded. "But still, his intentions are not clear. He asked for us to restore order. Are we then to be like wetlander city guardsmen? That is no place for the Aiel. We are not to conquer, so we do not get the fifth. And yet it feels very much like conquest, what we do. The *Car'a'carn*'s orders can be clear yet confusing at the same time. He has a gift in that area, I think."

Bair smiled, nodding. "Perhaps he intends for us to do something with these refugees."

"And what would we do?" Amys asked, shaking her head. "Are we Shaido, expected to make *gai'shain* from wetlanders?" Her tone left little doubt as to what she thought of both Shaido *and* the idea of making wetlanders *gai'shain.*

Aviendha nodded in agreement. As Rhuarc said, the *Car'a'carn* had sent them to Arad Doman to "restore order." But that was a wetlander concept; Aiel brought their own order with them. There was chaos to war and battle, true, but each and every Aiel understood his place, and would act within that place. The little children understood honor and *toh*, and a hold would continue to function after all of the leaders and Wise Ones were killed.

It was not so with wetlanders. They ran about like a basket of wild lizards suddenly dropped onto hot stones, taking no care for provisions when they fled. As soon as their leaders were occupied or distracted, banditry and chaos ruled. The strong took from the weak, and even blacksmiths were not safe.

What could Rand al'Thor expect the Aiel to do about it? They could not teach *ji'e'toh* to an entire nation. Rand al'Thor had told them to *avoid* killing Domani troops. But those troops—often corrupt and turned to banditry themselves—were part of the problem.

"Perhaps he will explain more when we arrive at this manor house of his," said Melaine, shaking her head, red-gold hair catching the light. Her pregnancy was just beginning to show beneath her Wise One blouse. "And if he does not, then surely it is better for us to be here in Arad Doman than to spend yet more time lounging back in the land of the treekillers."

"As you say," Rhuarc agreed. "Let us move on, then. There is still a distance to run." He moved off to speak with Bael. Aviendha took a step away, but a harsh glance from Amys made her freeze.

"Aviendha," said the hard, white-haired woman. "How many Wise Ones went with Rhuarc to scout this refugee train?"

"None but me," Aviendha admitted.

"Oh, and are you a Wise One now?" Bair asked.

"No," Aviendha said, quickly, then shamed herself further by blushing. "I spoke poorly."

"Then you shall be punished," Bair said. "You are no longer a Maiden, Aviendha. It is not your place to scout; that is a task for others."

"Yes, Wise One," Aviendha said, looking down. She had not thought that going with Rhuarc would bring her shame—she had seen other Wise Ones do similar tasks.

But I am not a Wise One, she reminded herself. *I am an apprentice only.* Bair had not said that a Wise One could not scout; only that it had not been Aviendha's place to go. It was about Aviendha herself. And about whatever it was she had done—or perhaps continued to do—to provoke the Wise Ones.

Did they think she had grown soft by spending time with Elayne? Aviendha herself worried that that was true. During her days in Caemlyn, she had begun to find herself enjoying the silks and baths. By the end, she had objected only feebly when Elayne had come up with an excuse to dress her in some impractical and frivolous garment with embroidery and lace. It was well that the others had come for her.

The others just stood there, looking at her expectantly, faces like red desert stones, impassive and stern. Aviendha gritted her teeth again. She would complete her apprenticeship and find honor. She *would*.

The call came to begin moving, and *cadin'sor*-clad men and women did so, running together in small groups. The Wise Ones moved as easily as the soldiers, despite their bulky skirts. Amys touched Aviendha's arm. "You will run with me so that we can discuss your punishment."

Aviendha fell into pace beside the Wise One at a brisk jog. It was a speed any Aiel could maintain almost indefinitely. Her group, from Caemlyn, had met up with Rhuarc as he was traveling from Bandar Eban to meet with Rand al'Thor in the western part of the country. Dobraine Taborwin, a Cairhienin, was still maintaining order in the capital city, where he'd reportedly located a member of the Domani ruling body.

Perhaps the group of Aiel could have Traveled through a gateway the rest of the distance. But it was not far—only a few days by foot—and they had left early enough to arrive at the appointed time without using the One Power. Rhuarc wanted to scout for himself some of the landscape near the manor house Rand al'Thor was using as a base. Other bodies of Goshien or Taardad Aiel would join them at the base, using gateways, if needed.

"What do you think of the *Car'a'carn*'s demands of us here in Arad Doman, Aviendha?" Amys asked as they ran.

Aviendha stifled a frown. What of her punishment? "It is an irregular request," she said, "but Rand al'Thor has many strange ideas, even for a wetlander. This will not be the most unusual duty he has set for us."

"And the fact that Rhuarc finds the duty discomforting?"

“I doubt that the clan chief is uncomfortable,” Aviendha said. “I suspect that Rhuarc speaks what he has heard others say, passing the information to the Wise Ones. He does not wish to shame others by revealing who has spoken of their fears.”

Amys nodded. What was the purpose of the questions? Surely the woman had guessed the same thing. She would not come to Aviendha for counsel.

They ran in silence for a time, with no mention of punishments. Had the Wise Ones forgiven her unknown slight? Surely they wouldn’t dishonor her in that way. Aviendha had to be given time to think out what she had done, otherwise her shame would be unbearable. She might err again, this time worse.

Amys gave no clue as to her thoughts. The Wise One had been a Maiden once, like Aviendha. She was hard, even for an Aiel. “And al’Thor himself?” Amys asked. “What do you think of him?”

“I love him,” Aviendha said.

“I did not ask Aviendha the silly girl,” Amys said curtly. “I asked Aviendha the Wise One.”

“He is a man of many burdens,” Aviendha said more carefully. “I fear that he makes many of those burdens heavier than they need be. I once thought that there was only one way to be strong, but I have learned from my first-sister that I was wrong. Rand al’Thor . . . I do not think he has learned this yet. I worry that he mistakes hardness for strength.”

Amys nodded again, as if in approval. Were these questions a test of some sort?

“You would marry him?” Amys asked.

I thought we weren’t talking about Aviendha the “silly girl,” Aviendha thought, but of course didn’t say it. One did not say such things to Amys.

“I *will* marry him,” she said instead. “It is not a possibility, but a certainty.” The tone earned her a glance from Amys, but Aviendha held her ground. Any Wise One who misspoke deserved to be corrected.

“And the wetlander Min Farshaw?” Amys asked. “She obviously loves him. What will you do about her?”

“She is my concern,” Aviendha said. “We will reach an accommodation. I have spoken with Min Farshaw, and I believe she will be easy to work with.”

“You would become first-sisters with her as well?” Amys asked, sounding just faintly amused.

“We will reach an accommodation, Wise One.”

“And if you cannot?”

“We will,” Aviendha said firmly.

“And how can you be so certain?”

Aviendha hesitated. Part of her wished to return only silence to that question, passing the leafless brush thickets and giving Amys no answer. But she was just an apprentice, and while she could not be forced to speak, she knew that Amys would keep pushing until the answer came out. Aviendha hoped she would not incur too much *toh* by her response.

“You know of the woman Min’s viewings?” Aviendha said.

Amys nodded.

“One of those viewings relates to Rand al’Thor and the three women he will love. Another relates to my children by the *Car’a’carn*.”

She said no more, and Amys pressed no more. It was enough. Both knew that one would sooner find a Stone Dog who would retreat than find a viewing of Min’s that went wrong.

On one hand, it was good to know that Rand al’Thor would be hers, although she would have to share him. She did not begrudge Elayne, of course, but Min . . . well, Aviendha did not really know her. Regardless, the viewing was a comfort. But it was also bothersome. Aviendha loved Rand al’Thor because *she* chose to, not because she was destined to. Of course, Min’s viewing didn’t guarantee that Aviendha would actually be able to marry Rand, so perhaps she had misspoken to Amys. Yes, he would love three women and three women would love him, but would Aviendha find a way to marry him?

No, the future was not certain, and for some reason that brought her comfort. Perhaps she should have worried, but she did not. She would get her honor back, and then she would marry Rand al’Thor. Perhaps he would die soon after, but perhaps an ambush would come and she would fall to an arrow this day. Worrying solved nothing.

Toh, however, was another matter.

“I misspoke, Wise One,” Aviendha said. “I implied that the viewing said I would marry Rand al’Thor. That is not true. All three of us will love him, and while that implies marriage, I do not know for certain.”

Amys nodded. There was no *toh*; Aviendha had corrected herself quickly enough. That was well. She would not add more shame on top of what she had already earned.

“Very well, then,” Amys said, watching the path ahead of her. “Let us discuss today’s punishment.”

Aviendha relaxed slightly. So she still had time to discover what she had done wrong. Wetlanders often seemed confused by Aiel ways with punishment, but wetlanders had little understanding of honor. Honor didn’t come from *being* punished, but *accepting* a punishment and bearing it restored honor. That was the soul of *toh*—the willing lowering of oneself in order to recover that which had been lost. It was strange to her that wetlanders couldn’t see this; indeed, it was strange that they didn’t follow *ji’e’toh* instinctively. What was life without honor?

Amys, rightly, wouldn’t tell Aviendha what she had done wrong. However, she was having no success thinking through the answer on her own, and it would cause less shame if she discovered the answer through conversation. “Yes,” Aviendha said carefully. “I should be punished. My time in Caemlyn threatened to make me weak.”

Amys sniffed. “You are no more weak than you were when you carried the spears, girl. A fair bit stronger, I should think. Your time with your first-sister was important for you.”

So that wasn’t it. When Dorindha and Nadere had come for her, they had said she needed to continue her training as an apprentice. Yet in the time since the Aiel had departed for Arad Doman, Aviendha had been given no lessons. She had been assigned to carry water, to mend shawls, and to serve tea. She had been given all manner of punishments with little explanation of what she had done wrong. And when she did something obvious—like going scouting when she shouldn’t have—the severity of her punishment was always greater than the infraction should have merited.

It was almost as if the punishment *was* the thing the Wise Ones wanted her to learn, but that could not be. She was not some wetlander who needed to be taught the ways of honor. What good would constant and unexplained punishment do, other than to warn of some grave mistake she had made?

Amys reached to her side, untying something hanging at her waist. The woolen bag she held up was about the size of a fist. “We have decided,” she said, “that we have been too lax in our instruction. Time is precious and we have no room left for delicacy.”

Aviendha covered her surprise. Their previous punishments were *delicate*?

"Therefore," Amys said, handing over the small sack, "you will take this. Inside are seeds. Some are black, others are brown, others are white. This evening, before we sleep, you will separate the colors, then count how many there are of each one. If you are wrong, we will mix them together and you will start again."

Aviendha found herself gaping, and she nearly stumbled to a stop. Hauling water was necessary work. Mending clothing was necessary work. Cooking meals was important work, particularly when no *gai'shain* had been brought with the small advance group.

But this . . . this was *useless* work! It was not only unimportant, it was frivolous. It was the kind of punishment reserved for only the most stubborn, or most shameful, of people. It almost . . . almost felt as though the Wise Ones were calling her *da'tsang*!

"By Sightblinder's eyes," she whispered as she forced herself to keep running. "What did I *do*?"

Amys glanced at her, and Aviendha looked away. Both knew that she didn't want an answer to that question. She took the bag silently. It was the most humiliating punishment she had ever been given.

Amys moved off to run with the other Wise Ones. Aviendha shook off her stupor, her determination returning. Her mistake must have been more profound than she had thought. Amys' punishment was an indication of that, a hint.

She opened the bag and glanced inside. There were three little empty *algode* bags inside to help with the separation, and thousands of tiny seeds nearly engulfed them. This punishment was *meant* to be seen, meant to bring her shame. Whatever she'd done, it was offensive not just to the Wise Ones, but to all around her, even if they—like Aviendha herself—were ignorant of it.

That only meant she had to be more determined.

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CHAPTER 4

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Nightfall

Gawyn watched the sun burn the clouds to death in the west, the final light fading. That haze of perpetual gloom kept the sun itself shrouded. Just as it hid the stars from his sight at night. Today the clouds were unnaturally high in the air. Often, Dragonmount’s tip would be hidden on cloudy days, but this thick, gray haze hovered high enough that most of the time, it barely brushed the mountain’s jagged, broken tip.

“Let’s engage them,” Jisao whispered from where he crouched beside Gawyn on the hilltop.

Gawyn glanced away from the sunset, back toward the small village below. It should have been still, save perhaps for a goodman checking on his livestock one last time before turning in. It should have been dim, unlit save for a few tallow candles burning in windows as people finished evening meals.

But it was not dim. It was not quiet. The village was alight with angry torches carried by a dozen sturdy figures. By that torchlight and the light of the dying sun, Gawyn could make out that each was wearing a nondescript uniform of brown and black. Gawyn couldn’t see the three-starred insignia on their uniforms, but he knew it was there.

From his distant vantage, Gawyn watched a few latecomers stumble from their homes, looking frightened and worried as they gathered with the others in the crowded square. These villagers welcomed the armed force with reluctance. Women clutched children, men were careful to keep their eyes downcast. “We don’t want trouble,” the postures said. They’d undoubtedly heard from other villages that these invaders were orderly. The soldiers paid for goods they took, and no young men were pressed into service—though they weren’t turned away either. A very odd invading army indeed. However, Gawyn knew what the people would think. This army was led by Aes Sedai, and who could say what was odd or normal when Aes Sedai were involved?

There were no sisters with this particular patrol, thank the Light. The soldiers, polite but stern, lined up the villagers and looked them over. Then a pair of soldiers entered each house and barn, inspecting it. Nothing was taken and nothing was broken. All very neat and cordial. Gawyn could almost hear the officer offering apologies to the village mayor.

“Gawyn?” Jisao asked. “I count barely a dozen of them. If we send Rodic’s squad to come in from the north, we’ll cut off both sides and smash them between us. It’s getting dark enough that they won’t see us coming. We could take them without so much as running up a lather.”

“And the villagers?” Gawyn asked. “There are children down there.”

“That hasn’t stopped us other times.”

“Those times were different,” Gawyn said, shaking his head. “The last three villages they’ve searched point a direct line toward Dorlan. If this group vanishes, the next one will wonder what it was they nearly uncovered. We’d draw the entire army’s eye in this direction.”

“But—”

“No,” Gawyn said softly. “We have to know when to fall back, Jisao.”

“So we came all this way for nothing.”

“We came all this way for an opportunity,” Gawyn said, backing away from the hilltop, making certain he didn’t show a profile on the horizon. “And now that I’ve inspected that opportunity, we’re not going to take it. Only a fool looses his arrow just because he’s got a bird in front of him.”

“Why wouldn’t you loose it if it’s right there in front of you?” Jisao asked as he joined Gawyn.

“Because sometimes the prize isn’t worth the arrow,” Gawyn said. “Come on.”

Below, waiting in the dark with lanterns hooded, were some of the very men the soldiers in the village were searching for. Gareth Bryne must have been very displeased to learn there was a harrying force hiding somewhere nearby. He’d been diligent in trying to flush it out, but the countryside near Tar Valon was liberally sprinkled with villages, forests and secluded valleys that could hide a small, mobile strike force. So far, Gawyn had managed to keep his Younglings out of sight while pulling off the occasional raid or ambush on Bryne’s forces. There was only so much you could do with three hundred men, however. Particularly when you faced one of the five Great Captains.

Am I destined to end up fighting against each and every man who has been a mentor to me? Gawyn took the reins of his horse and gave a silent order to withdraw by raising his right hand, then gestured sharply away from the village. The men moved without comment, dismounting and leading their mounts for both stealth and safety.

Gawyn had thought he was over Hammar and Coulin’s deaths; Bryne himself had taught Gawyn that the battlefield sometimes made allies into sudden foes. Gawyn had fought his former teachers, and Gawyn had won. That was the end of it.

Recently, however, his mind seemed determined to dredge up those corpses and carry them about. Why now, after so long?

He suspected his sense of guilt had to do with facing Bryne, his first and most influential instructor in the arts of war. Gawyn shook his head as he guided Challenge across the darkening landscape; he kept his men away from the road in case Bryne’s scouts had placed watchers. The fifty men around Gawyn walked as quietly as possible, the horses’ hoofbeats deadened by the springy earth.

If Bryne had been shocked to discover a harrying force striking at his outriders, then Gawyn had been equally shocked to discover those three stars on the uniforms of the men he slew. How had the White Tower’s enemies recruited the greatest military mind in all of Andor? And what was the Captain-General of the Queen’s Guard doing fighting with a group of Aes Sedai rebels in the first place? He should have been in Caemlyn protecting Elayne.

Light send that Elayne *had* arrived in Andor. She couldn’t still be with the rebels. Not with her homeland lacking a queen. Her duty to Andor outweighed her duty to the White Tower.

And what of your duty, Gawyn Trakand? he thought to himself.

He wasn’t certain he had duty, or honor, left to him. Perhaps his guilt about Hammar, his nightmares of war and death at Dumai’s Wells, were due to the slow realization that he might have given his allegiance to the wrong side. His loyalty belonged to Elayne and Egwene. What, then, was he still doing fighting a battle he didn’t care about, helping a side that—by all accounts—was *opposed* to the one Elayne and Egwene had chosen?

They’re just Accepted, he told himself. *Elayne and Egwene didn’t choose this side—they are just doing what they’ve been ordered to do!* But the things that Egwene had said to him all those months ago, back in Cairhien, suggested that she had made her decision willingly.

She had chosen a side. Hammar had chosen a side. Gareth Bryne had, apparently, chosen a side. But Gawyn continued to want to be on *both* sides. The division was ripping him apart.

An hour out of the village, Gawyn gave the order to mount and take to the road. Hopefully, Bryne's scouts wouldn't think to search the land outside the village. If they did, the tracks of fifty horsemen would be hard to miss. There was no avoiding that. The best thing now was to reach firm ground, where the signs of their passing would be hidden by a thousand years of footfalls and traffic. Two pairs of soldiers rode off in front and two pairs hung back to watch. The rest maintained their silence, though their horses now pounded a thunderous gallop. None asked why they were withdrawing, but Gawyn knew that they were wondering, just as Jisao had.

They were good men. Perhaps too good. As they rode, Rajar pulled his mount up beside Gawyn's. Just a few months ago, Rajar had been a youth. But now Gawyn couldn't think of him as anything other than a soldier. A veteran. Some men gained experience through years spent living. Other men gained experience through months spent watching their friends die.

Glancing upward, Gawyn missed the stars. They hid their faces from him behind those clouds. Like Aiel behind black veils. "Where did we go wrong, Rajar?" Gawyn asked as they rode.

"Wrong, Lord Gawyn?" Rajar asked. "I don't know that we did anything wrong. We couldn't have known which villages that patrol would choose to inspect, or that they wouldn't turn along the old Wagonright Road, as you had hoped. Some of the men may be confused, but it was right to withdraw."

"I wasn't talking about the raid," Gawyn said, shaking his head. "I'm talking about this whole bloody situation. You shouldn't have to go on supply raids or spend your time killing scouts; you should have become a Warder to some freshly minted Aes Sedai by now." *And I should be back in Caemlyn, with Elayne*.

"The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills," the shorter man said.

"Well, it wove us into a hole," Gawyn muttered, glancing at the overcast sky once again. "And Elaida doesn't seem too eager to pull us out of it."

Rajar looked at Gawyn reproachfully. "The White Tower's methods are its own, Lord Gawyn, and so are its motives. It isn't for us to question. What good is a Warder who questions the orders of his Aes Sedai? A good way to get both of you killed, that is."

You're not a Warder, Rajar. That's the problem! Gawyn said nothing. None of the other Younglings seemed to be plagued with these questions.

To them, the world was much simpler. One did as the White Tower, and the Amyrlin Seat, commanded. Never mind if those commands seemed designed to get you killed.

Three hundred youths against a force of over fifty thousand hardened soldiers, commanded by Gareth Bryne himself? Will of the Amyrlin or not, that was a deathtrap. The only reason the Younglings had survived as long as they had was because of Gawyn's familiarity with his teacher's ways. He knew where Bryne would send patrols and outriding scouts, and knew how to evade his search patterns.

It was still a futile effort. Gawyn didn't have nearly the troops needed for a true harrying force, particularly with Bryne entrenched in his siege. Beyond that, there was the remarkable matter of the army's complete lack of a supply line. How were they getting food? They purchased supplies from the surrounding villages, but not nearly enough to feed themselves. How could they possibly have carried all they needed while still moving quickly enough to appear, without warning, in the middle of winter?

Gawyn's attacks were next to meaningless. It was enough to make a man think that the Amyrlin just wanted him, and the other Younglings, out of the way. Before Dumai's Wells, Gawyn had suspected that was the case. Now he was growing certain. *And yet you continue to follow her orders,* he thought to himself.

He shook his head. Bryne's scouts were getting dangerously close to his base of operations, and Gawyn couldn't risk killing any more of them without giving himself away. It was time to head back to Dorlan. Perhaps the Aes Sedai there would have a suggestion on how to proceed.

He hunkered down on his horse and continued riding into the night. *Light, I wish I could see the stars,* he thought.

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CHAPTER 5

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A Tale of Blood

Rand crossed the trampled manor green, banners flapping before him, tents surrounding him, horses whinnying in their pickets on the far west side. In the air hung the scents of an efficient war camp: smoke and savor from the stewpots were much stronger than the occasional whiff of horse dung or an unwashed body.

Bashere’s men maintained a tidy camp, busying themselves with the hundreds of little tasks that allowed the army to function: sharpening swords, oiling leathers, mending saddles, fetching water from the stream. Some practiced charges to the left, on the far side of the green, in the space between tent lines and the scraggly trees growing alongside the stream. The men held gleaming lances at the level as their horses trampled the muddy ground in a long swath. The maneuvers not only kept their skills sharp, but exercised the horses as well.

As always, Rand was trailed by a flock of attendants. Maidens were his guards, and the Aiel watched the Saldaean soldiers with wariness. Beside him were several Aes Sedai. They were always about him, now. The Pattern had no place for his onetime insistence that all Aes Sedai be kept at arm’s length. It wove as it willed, and experience had shown that Rand needed these Aes Sedai. What he wanted no longer mattered. He understood that now.

It was little comfort that many of these Aes Sedai in his camp had sworn allegiance to him. Everyone knew that Aes Sedai followed their oaths in their own ways, and they would decide what their “fealty” to him would require.

Elza Penfell—who accompanied him this day—was one of those who had sworn to him. Of the Green Ajah, she had a face that might be considered pretty, if one didn’t recognize the ageless quality that marked her as Aes Sedai. She was pleasant, for an Aes Sedai, despite the fact that she had helped kidnap Rand and lock him in a box for days, to be pulled out only for the occasional beating.

In the back of his mind, Lews Therin growled.

That was past. Elza had sworn. That was enough to allow Rand to use her. The other woman attending him today was less predictable; she was a member of Cadsuane’s retinue. Corele Hovian—a slim Yellow with blue eyes, wild dark hair, and a perpetual smile—had sworn no oaths to do as he said. Despite that, he felt a temptation to trust her, since she had once tried to save his life. It was only because of her, Samitsu and Damer Flinn that Rand had survived. One of two wounds in Rand's side that would not heal—a gift from Padan Fain's cursed dagger—still lingered as a reminder of that day. The constant pain of that festering evil overlaid the equal pain of an older wound beneath, the one Rand had taken while fighting Ishamael so long ago.

Soon, one of those wounds—or perhaps both—would spill Rand's blood onto the rocks of Shayol Ghul. He wasn't certain if they would be what killed him or not; with the number and variety of the different factors competing to take Rand's life, even Mat wouldn't have known which one was the best bet.

As soon as Rand thought of Mat, the colors swirled in his vision, forming into the image of a wiry, brown-eyed man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and tossing dice before a small crowd of watching soldiers. Mat wore a grin and seemed to be showing off, which was not unusual, though there didn't seem to be any coin changing hands for his throws.

The visions came whenever he thought of Mat or Perrin, and Rand had stopped dismissing them. He did not know what caused the images to appear; probably his *ta'veren* nature interacting with the other two *ta'veren* from his home village. Whatever it was, he used it. Just another tool. It appeared that Mat was still with the Band, but was no longer camped in a forested land. It was hard to tell from the angle, but he looked to be outside a city somewhere. At least, that was a large road in the near distance. Rand had not seen the small, dark-skinned woman with Mat for some time. Who was she? Where had she gone?

The vision faded. Hopefully, Mat would return to him soon. He would need Mat and his tactical skills at Shayol Ghul.

One of Bashere's quartermasters—a thick-mustached man with bowlegs and a squat body—saw Rand and approached with a quick step. Rand waved the Saldaean back; he had no mind for supply reports at the moment. The quartermaster saluted immediately and retreated. Once, Rand might have been surprised at how quickly he was obeyed, but no longer. It was right for the soldiers to obey. Rand was a king, though he didn't wear the Crown of Swords at the moment.

Rand passed through the green, filled with tents and horse pickets now. He left the camp, passing the unfinished earthen bulwark. Here, pine trees continued down the sides of the gentle slope. Tucked into a stand of trees just to the right was the Traveling ground, a square section of ground roped off to provide a safe location for gateways.

One hung in the air at that moment, an opening to another place. A small group of people was making their way through, walking out onto the pinecone-strewn ground. Rand could see the weaves that made up the gateway; this one had been crafted with *saidin*.

Most of the people in the group wore the colorful clothing of Sea Folk—the men bare-chested, even in the chill spring air, the women in loose bright blouses. All wore loose trousers, and all had piercings in their ears or noses, the complexity of the adornments an indication of each person's relative status.

As he waited for the Sea Folk, one of the soldiers who guarded the Traveling ground approached Rand with a sealed letter. The letter would be one sent via Asha'man from one of Rand's interests in the east. Indeed, as he opened it, he found it was from Darlin, the Tairen king. Rand had left him with orders to gather an army and prepare it for marching into Arad Doman. That gathering had been completed for some time now, and Darlin wondered—yet again—about his orders. Could no one simply do as they were told?

"Send a messenger," Rand said to the soldier, impatiently tucking the letter away. "Tell Darlin to continue recruiting. I want him to draft every Tairen who can hold a sword and either train him for combat or set him to work in the forges. The Last Battle is close. Very close."

"Yes, my Lord Dragon," the soldier said, saluting.

"Tell him that I will send an Asha'man when I want him to move," Rand said. "I still intend to use him in Arad Doman, but I need to see what the Aiel have discovered first."

The soldier bowed and retreated. Rand turned back to the Sea Folk. One of them approached him.

"Coramoor," she said, nodding. Harine was a handsome woman in her middle years, with white streaking her hair. Her Atha'an Miere blouse was of a bright blue, colorful enough to impress a Tinker, and she had an impressive five gold rings in each ear as well as a nose chain strung with gold medallions.

"I did not expect you to come and meet us personally," Harine continued.

“I have questions for you that could not wait.”

Harine looked taken aback. She was the Sea Folk ambassador to the Coramoor, which was their name for Rand. They were angry with Rand for the weeks he had spent without a Sea Folk minder—he had promised to keep one with him at all times—yet Logain had mentioned their hesitation to send Harine back. Why was that? Had she achieved greater rank, making her too important to attend him? *Could* one be too important to attend the Coramoor? Much about the Sea Folk made little sense to him.

“I will answer if I can,” Harine said guardedly. Behind her, porters moved the rest of her belongings through the gateway. Flinn stood on the other side, holding the portal open.

“Good,” Rand said, pacing back and forth before her as he spoke. At times, he felt so tired—so weary to his bones—that he knew he had to keep moving. Never stopping. If he did, his enemies would find him. Either that, or his own exhaustion, both mental and physical, would drag him down.

“Tell me this,” he demanded as he paced. “Where are the ships which have been promised? The Domani people starve while grain rots in the east. Logain said you had agreed to my demands, but I have seen nothing of your ships. It has been weeks!”

“Our ships are swift,” Harine said testily, “but there is a great distance to travel—and we must go *through* seas controlled by the Seanchan. The invaders have been extremely diligent with their patrols, and our ships have had to turn back and flee on several occasions. Did you expect that we would be able bring your food in an instant? Perhaps the convenience of these gateways has made you impatient, Coramoor. We must deal with the realities of shipping and war even if you do not.”

Her tone implied that he *would* have to deal with those realities in this case. “I expect results,” Rand said, shaking his head. “I expect no delays. I know you do not like being forced to keep your agreement, but I will suffer no lagging to prove a point. People die because of your slowness.”

Harine looked as if she’d been slapped. “Surely,” she said, “the Coramoor does not imply that we would not keep to our Bargain.”

The Sea Folk were stubborn and prideful, Wavemistresses more than most. They were like an entire race of Aes Sedai. He hesitated. *I should not insult her so, not because I am frustrated about other things.* “No,” he finally said. “No, I do not imply that. Tell me, Harine, were you punished much for your part in our agreement?”

"I was hung up by my ankles naked and strapped until I could scream no more." As soon as the words left her mouth, her eyes opened in shock. Often, when influenced by Rand's *ta'veren* nature, people said things they did not intend to admit.

"So harsh?" Rand said, genuinely surprised.

"It was not so bad as it could have been. I retain my position as Wavemistress for my clan."

But it was obvious she had lost a great deal of face, or incurred great *toh,* or whatever the blasted Sea Folk called honor. Even when he wasn't present, he caused pain and suffering!

"I am glad you have returned," he forced himself to say. No smile, but a softer tone. That was the best he could do. "You have impressed me, Harine, with your levelheadedness."

She nodded in thanks to him. "We will keep our Bargain, Coramoor. You needn't fear."

Something else struck him, one of the original questions he'd come to ask her. "Harine. I would ask you a somewhat delicate question about your people."

"You may ask," she said carefully.

"How do the Sea Folk treat men who can channel?"

She hesitated. "That is not a matter for the shorebound to know."

Rand met her eyes. "If you agree to answer, then I will answer a question for you in return." The best way to deal with the Atha'an Miere was not to push or bully, but to offer trade.

She paused. "If you give me two questions," she said, "I will answer."

"I will give you one question, Harine," he said, raising a finger. "But I promise to answer you as truthfully as I can. It is a fair bargain, and you know it. I have little patience right now."

Harine touched her fingers to her lips. "It is agreed, then, under the Light."

"It is agreed," Rand said. "Under the Light. My question?"

"Men who can channel are given a choice," Harine said. "They can either step from the bow of their ship holding a stone which is also tied to their legs, or they can be dropped off on a barren isle with no food or water. The second is considered the more shameful option, but some few do take it, to live for a brief time longer."

Not much different from what his own people did in gentling men, truth be told. “*Saidin* is cleansed now,” he said to her. “This practice must stop.”

She pursed her lips, regarding him. “Your . . . man spoke of this, Coramoor. Some find it difficult to accept.”

“It is true,” he said firmly.

“I do not doubt that you believe it to be so.”

Rand gritted his teeth, forcing down another burst of anger, his hand forming a fist. He had *cleansed* the taint! He, Rand al’Thor, had performed a deed the likes of which had not been seen since the Age of Legends. And how was it treated? With suspicion and doubt. Most assumed that he was going mad, and therefore seeing a “cleansing” that had not really happened.

Men who could channel were always distrusted. Yet they were the only ones who could confirm what Rand said! He’d imagined joy and wonder at the victory, but he should have known better. Though male Aes Sedai had once been as respected as their female counterparts, that had been long ago. The days of Jorlen Corbesan had been lost in time. All people could remember now was the Breaking and the Madness.

They hated male channelers. Yet, in following Rand, they served one. Did they not see the contradiction? How could he convince them that there was no longer reason to murder men who could touch the One Power? He *needed* them! Why, there might be another Jorlen Corbesan among the very men the Sea Folk tossed into the ocean!

He froze. Jorlen Corbesan had been one of the most talented Aes Sedai before the Breaking, a man who had crafted some of the most amazing *ter’angreal* Rand had ever seen. Except Rand had *not* seen them. Those were Lews Therin’s memories, not his. Jorlen’s research facility of Sharom had been destroyed—the man himself killed—by the backlash of Power from the Bore.

Oh, Light, Rand thought with despair. *I’m losing myself. Losing myself in him.*

The most terrifying part was that Rand could no longer make himself wish to banish Lews Therin. Lews Therin had known a way to seal the Bore, if imperfectly, but Rand had no idea how to approach the task. The safety of the world might depend on the memories of a dead madman.

Many of the people around Rand appeared shocked, and Harine’s eyes were both uncomfortable and a little frightened. Rand had been muttering to himself again, he realized, and he cut off abruptly.

“I accept your answer,” he said stiffly. “What is your question of me?”

“I will ask it later,” she said. “Once I have had a chance to consider.”

“As you wish.” He turned away, his retinue of Aes Sedai, Maidens and attendants following. “The Traveling ground guards will see you to your room and carry your luggage.” There was a veritable mountain of *that*. “Flinn, to me!”

The elderly Asha’man jumped through the gateway, motioning for the last of the porters to trot back to the docks on the other side. He let the portal twist back into a slash of light and vanish, then hurried after Rand. He spared a glance and a smile for Corele, who had bonded him as her Warder.

“I apologize for taking so long to return, Lord Dragon.” Flinn had a leathery face and only a few wisps of hair on his head. He looked a lot like some of the farmers Rand had known back in Emond’s Field, though he had been a soldier for most of his life. Flinn had come to Rand because he wanted to learn Healing. Rand had turned him into a weapon instead.

“You did as ordered,” Rand said, walking back toward the green. He wanted to blame Harine for the prejudices of an entire world, but that was not fair. He needed a better way, a way to *make* everyone see.

“I’ve never been exceptional at making gateways,” Flinn continued. “Not like Androl. I needed to—”

“Flinn,” Rand said, cutting in. “Enough.”

The Asha’man blushed. “I apologize, my Lord Dragon.”

To the side, Corele laughed softly, patting Flinn on the shoulder. “Don’t mind him, Damer,” she said in a lilting Murandian accent. “He’s been as surly as a winter thunderhead all morning.”

Rand glared at her, but she just smiled good-naturedly. Regardless of what the Aes Sedai thought of men who could channel in general, the ones who had taken Asha’man as Warders seemed as protective of them as mothers of their children. She had bonded one of his men, but that did not change the fact that Flinn *was* one of his men. An Asha’man first and foremost, a Warder second.

“What do you think, Elza?” Rand said, turning from Corele to the other Aes Sedai. “About the taint and what Harine said?”

The round-faced woman hesitated. She walked with hands behind her back, dark green dress marked only by subtle embroideries. Utilitarian, for an Aes Sedai. “If my Lord Dragon says that the taint has been cleansed,” the woman said carefully, “then it is certainly improper to express doubt of him where others can hear.”

Rand grimaced. An Aes Sedai answer for certain. Oath or no oath, Elza did as she wished.

“Oh, we were both there at Shadar Logoth,” Corele said, rolling her eyes. “We saw what you did, Rand. Besides, I can feel male power through dear Damer here when we link. It *has* changed. The taint is gone. Right as sunlight, it is, though channeling the male half still feels like wrestling with a summer whirlwind.”

“Yes,” Elza said, “but be that as it is, you must realize how difficult it will be for others to believe this, Lord Dragon. During the Time of Madness, it took decades for some people to accept that the male Aes Sedai were doomed to go insane. It will likely take longer for them to overcome their distrust, now that it has been ingrained for so long.”

Rand gritted his teeth. He had reached a small hill at the side of the camp, just beside the bulwark. He continued up to the top, Aes Sedai following. Here, a short wooden platform had been erected—a fire tower for launching arrows over the bulwark.

Rand stopped at the top of the hill, Maidens surrounding him. He barely noticed the soldiers who saluted him as he looked over the Saldaean camp with its neat tent lines.

Was this all he would leave to the world? A taint cleansed, yet men still killed or exiled for something they could not help? He had bound most nations to him. Yet he knew well that the tighter one tied a bale, the sharper the snap of the cords when they were cut. What would happen when he died? Wars and devastation to match the Breaking? He hadn’t been able to help that last time, for his madness and grief at Ilyena’s death had consumed him. Could he prevent something similar this time? Did he have a choice?

He was *ta’veren*. The Pattern bent and shaped around him. And yet, he had quickly learned one thing from being a king: the more authority you gained, the less control you had over your life. Duty was truly heavier than a mountain; it forced his hand as often as the prophecies did. Or were they both one and the same? Duty and prophecy? His nature as a *ta’veren* and his place in history? *Could* he change his life? Could he leave the world better for his passing, rather than leaving the nations scarred, torn and bleeding?

He watched the camp, men moving about their tasks, horses nosing at the ground, searching for patches of winter grass that had not already been chewed to their roots. Though Rand had ordered this army to travel light, there were still camp followers. Women to help with meals and laundry, blacksmiths and farriers to tend horses and equipment, young boys to run messages and to train on the weapons. Saldaea was a Borderland, and battle was a way of life for its people.

"I envy them, sometimes," Rand whispered.

"My Lord?" Flinn asked, stepping up to him.

"The people of the camp," Rand said. "They do as they are told, working each day under orders. Strict orders, at times. But orders or not, those people are more free than I."

"You, Lord?" Flinn said, rubbing his leathery face with an aged finger. "You are the most powerful man alive! You're *ta'veren*. Even the Pattern obeys your will, I should think!"

Rand shook his head. "It doesn't work that way, Flinn. Those people out there, any one of them could just ride away. Escape, if they felt like it. Leave the battle to others."

"I've known a few Saldaeans in my day, my Lord," Flinn said. "Forgive me, but I have doubts that any one of them would do that."

"But they *could*," Rand said. "It's possible. For all their laws and oaths, they are free. Me, I *seem* as if I can do as I wish, but I am tied so tightly the bonds cut my flesh. My power and influence are meaningless against fate. My freedom is all just an illusion, Flinn. And so I envy them. Sometimes."

Flinn folded his hands behind his back, obviously uncertain how to respond.

We all do as we must, Moiraine's voice from the past returned to his memory. *As the Pattern decrees. For some there is less freedom than for others. It does not matter whether we choose or are chosen. What must be, must be.*

She had understood. *I'm trying, Moiraine,* he thought. *I will do what must be done.*

"My Lord Dragon!" a voice called. Rand turned toward the sound and saw one of Bashere's scouts running up the hill. The Maidens cautiously allowed the youthful, dark-haired man to approach.

"My Lord," the scout said, saluting. "There are Aiel on the outskirts of the camp. We saw two of them prowling through the trees about half a mile down the slope."

The Maidens immediately began to move their hands, speaking in their clandestine handtalk.

"Did any of those Aiel wave at you, soldier?" Rand asked dryly.

"My Lord?" the man asked. "Why would they do that?"

"They're Aiel. If you saw them, that means they wanted you to—and that means they're allies, not foes. Inform Bashere that we'll be meeting with Rhuarc and Bael shortly. It is time to secure Arad Doman."

Or maybe it was time to destroy it. Sometimes, it was difficult to tell the difference.

Merise spoke. "Graendal's plans. Tell me again what you know of them." The tall Aes Sedai—of the Green Ajah, like Cadsuane herself—maintained a stern expression, arms folded beneath her breasts, a silver comb slid into the side of her black hair.

The Taraboner woman was a good choice to lead the interrogation. Or, at least, she was the best choice Cadsuane had. Merise didn't show a bit of discomfort at being so near to one of the most feared beings in all of creation, and she was relentless in her questioning. She did try a little too hard to prove how stern she was. The way she kept her hair pulled back into its bun with such force, for instance, or the way she flaunted her Asha'man Warder.

The room was on the second floor of Rand al'Thor's Domani mansion, the outer wall made of thick round pine logs, the inner walls of wood planks, all stained a matching dark color. This chamber, which had once been a bedroom, had been emptied of nearly all furniture; there was not even a rug on the sanded wood floor. In fact, the only furniture in it now was the stout chair Cadsuane sat in.

Cadsuane sipped her tea, intentionally projecting an air of composure. That was important, especially if one wasn't anything *near* composed on the inside. At the moment, for instance, Cadsuane wanted to crush the teacup between her hands, then perhaps spend an hour or so stamping on the shards.

She took another sip.

The source of her frustration—and the object of Merise's questioning—hung in the air, held upside down by weaves of Air with her arms tied behind her back. The captive had short wavy hair and dark skin. Her face matched Cadsuane's own for composed serenity, despite her circumstances. Wearing a simple brown dress—the hem held up around her legs by a weave of Air to keep it from obscuring her face—held bound and shielded, the prisoner somehow seemed the one in control.

Merise stood in front of the prisoner. Narishma leaned against the wall, the only other one in the room.

Cadsuane did not control the questioning herself, not yet. Letting another lead the interrogation worked to her advantage; it let her think and plan. Outside the room, Erian, Sarene, and Nesune held the prisoner's shield, two more than were normally considered necessary.

One did not take chances with the Forsaken.

Their prisoner was Semirhage. A monster who many thought was simply a legend. Cadsuane did not know how many of the stories about the woman were true. She did know that Semirhage was not easily intimidated, unsettled or manipulated. And that was a problem.

"Well?" Merise demanded. "My question: you have an answer?"

Semirhage regarded Merise, icy contempt in her voice as she spoke. "Do you know what happens to a man when his blood is replaced with something else?"

"I did not—"

"He dies, of course," Semirhage said, cutting Merise off with words like knives. "The death often happens instantly, and quick deaths are of little interest. With experiment, I discovered that some solutions can replace blood more effectively, allowing the subject to live for a short time after the transfusion."

She fell silent.

"Answer the question," Merise said, "or out the window you will hang again and—"

"The transfusion itself requires use of the Power, of course," Semirhage interrupted again. "Other methods are not quick enough. I invented the weave myself. It can suddenly and instantly pull the blood from a body and deposit it in a bin, while at the same time taking a solution and pressing it into the veins."

Merise gritted her teeth, glancing at Narishma. The Asha'man wore a coat and trousers of black, as usual, his long dark hair in braids woven with bells on the ends. He lounged against the log wall. He had a boyish face, but displayed a growing edge of danger. Perhaps that came from training with Merise's other Warders. Perhaps it came from associating with people who would put one of the Forsaken to the question.

"My warning—" Merise began again.

"I had one subject survive an entire hour after the transfusion," Semirhage said in a calm, conversational tone. "I count it as one of my greatest victories. He was in pain the entire time, of course. True pain, agony that he could feel in every *vein* of his body, right down to the near-invisible ones in his fingers. I know of no other way to bring such suffering to every part of the body at once."

She met Merise's eyes. "I will show you the weave someday."

Merise paled just slightly.

With a whip of her hand, Cadsuane wove a shield of Air around Semirhage's head to block her from hearing, then wove Fire and Air into two small balls of light, which she placed directly in front of the Forsaken's eyes. The lights weren't bright enough to blind or damage her eyes, but they would keep her from seeing. That was a particular trick of Cadsuane's; too many sisters would think to deafen a captive, yet leave them capable of watching. One never knew who had learned to read lips, and Cadsuane had little inclination to underestimate her current captive.

Merise glanced at Cadsuane, a flash of annoyance in her eyes.

"You were losing control of her," Cadsuane said firmly, setting her tea on the floor beside her chair.

Merise hesitated, then nodded, looking truly angry. Likely at herself. "This woman, nothing works on her," she said. "She never changes the tone of her voice, no matter what we do to her. Every punishment I can think of only creates more threats. Each one more gruesome than the last! Light!" She gritted her teeth again, refolding her arms and breathing deeply through her nose. Narishma straightened as if to walk over to her, but she waved him back. Merise was appropriately firm with her Warders, though she did snap at anyone else who tried to keep them in their places.

"We *can* break her," Cadsuane said.

"Can we, Cadsuane?"

"Phaw! Of course we can. She is human, just like anyone else."

“True,” Merise said. “Though she’s lived for three thousand years. Three *thousand*, Cadsuane.”

“She spent the bulk of that time imprisoned,” Cadsuane said with a dismissive sniff. “Centuries locked up in the Dark One’s prison, likely in a trance or hibernation. Subtract those years, and she’s no older than any of us. A fair sight younger than some, I would imagine.”

It was a subtle reminder of her own age, something rarely discussed among Aes Sedai. The entire conversation about age was, in fact, a sign of how uncomfortable the Forsaken made Merise. Aes Sedai were practiced at appearing calm, but there was a reason that Cadsuane had kept those holding the shield outside the room. They gave away too much. Even the normally unflappable Merise lost control far too often during these interrogations.

Of course, Merise and the others—like all the women in the Tower these days—still fell short of what an Aes Sedai should be. These younger Aes Sedai had been allowed to grow soft and weak, prone to bickering. Some had allowed themselves to be bullied into swearing fealty to Rand al’Thor. Sometimes, Cadsuane wished she could simply send them all to penance for a few decades.

Or maybe that was just Cadsuane’s age speaking. She was old, and that was making her increasingly intolerant of foolishness. Over two centuries ago, she’d sworn to herself that she’d live to attend the Last Battle, no matter how long that took. Using the One Power lengthened one’s years, and she’d found that determination and grit could stretch those years even further. She was one of the oldest people alive.

Unfortunately, her years had taught her that no measure of planning or determination could make life turn out as you wanted. That didn’t stop her from being annoyed when it didn’t. One might have thought that the years would also have taught her patience, but it had done the opposite. The older she grew, the less inclined she was to wait, for she knew she didn’t have many years left.

Anyone who claimed that old age had brought them patience was either lying or senile.

“She *can* and *will* be broken,” Cadsuane repeated, “I am not going to allow a person who knows weaves from the Age of Legends to simply dance herself to execution. We are going to pull every scrap of knowledge from that woman's brain, if we have to turn a few of her own 'creative' weaves on her."

"The *a'dam*. If only the Lord Dragon would let us use it on her . . ." Merise said, glancing at Semirhage.

If ever Cadsuane had been tempted to break her word, it was regarding that. Slip an *a'dam* on the woman . . . but no, in order to force someone to talk with an *a'dam*, you had to give them pain. It was the same as torture, and al'Thor had forbidden it.

Semirhage had closed her eyes against Cadsuane's lights, but she was still composed, controlled. What was going on in that woman's mind? Did she wait for rescue? Did she think to force them to execute her so that she could avoid true torture? Did she really assume that she'd be able to escape, then wreak vengeance on the Aes Sedai who had questioned her?

Likely the last—and it was hard not to feel at least a hint of apprehension. The woman knew things about the One Power that hadn't survived even in legends. Three thousand years was a long, long time. Could Semirhage break through a shield in a way that was unknown? If she could, why hadn't she already? Cadsuane wouldn't be entirely comfortable until she was able to get her hands on some of that forkroot tea.

"Your weaves, you can release them, Cadsuane," Merise said, standing. "I have composed myself. I fear we will have to hang her out the window for a time, as I said. Perhaps we can threaten her with pain. She can't know of al'Thor's foolish requirements."

Cadsuane leaned forward, releasing the weaves that hung the lights before the Forsaken's eyes, but not removing the shield of Air that kept her from hearing. Semirhage's eyes snapped open, then quickly found Cadsuane. Yes, she knew who was in charge. The two locked eyes.

Merise continued to question, asking about Graendal. Al'Thor thought the other Forsaken might be somewhere in Arad Doman. Cadsuane was far more interested in other questions, but Graendal made an acceptable starting point.

Semirhage responded to Merise's questions with silence this time, and Cadsuane found herself thinking about al'Thor. The boy had resisted her teaching as stubbornly as Semirhage resisted questioning. Oh, true, he had learned some minor things—how to treat her with a measure of respect, how to at least feign civility. But nothing more.

Cadsuane hated admitting failure. And this was *not* a failure, not yet, but she was close. That boy was destined to destroy the world. And maybe save it, too. The first was inevitable; the second conditional. She could wish the two were reversed, but wishes were about as useful as coins carved from wood. You could paint them however you wanted, but they remained wood.

She gritted her teeth, putting the boy out of her mind. She needed to watch Semirhage. Each time the woman spoke, it could be a clue. Semirhage returned her stare, ignoring Merise.

How did you break one of the most powerful women who had ever lived? A woman who had perpetrated countless atrocities during the days of wonder before, even, the Dark One's release? Meeting those black, onyx eyes, Cadsuane realized something. Al'Thor's prohibition on hurting Semirhage was meaningless. They could not break this woman with pain. Semirhage was the great torturer of the Forsaken, a woman intrigued by death and agony.

No, she would not break that way, even if the means had been allowed them. With a chill, looking into those eyes, Cadsuane thought she saw something of herself in the creature. Age, craftiness and unwillingness to budge.

That, then, left a question for her. If given the task, how would Cadsuane go about breaking herself?

The concept was so disturbing that she was relieved when Corele interrupted the interrogation a few moments later. The slender, cheerful Murandian was loyal to Cadsuane and had been on duty watching over al'Thor this afternoon. Corele's word that al'Thor would be meeting soon with his Aiel chiefs brought an end to the interrogation, and the three sisters maintaining the shield entered and towed Semirhage off to the room where they would set her bound and gagged with flows of Air.

Cadsuane watched the Forsaken go, carried on weaves of Air, then shook her head. Semirhage had been only the day's opening scene. It was time to deal with the boy.

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CHAPTER 6

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When Iron Melts

Rodel Ituralde had seen a lot of battlefields. Some things were always the same. Dead men like piles of rags, lying in heaps. Ravens eager to dine. Groans, cries, whimpers and mumbles from those unlucky enough to need a long time to die.

Each battlefield also had its own individual print. You could read a battle like the trail of passing game. Corpses lying in rows that were disturbingly straight indicated a charge of footmen who had been pressed against volleys of arrows. Scattered and trampled bodies were the result of infantry breaking before heavy cavalry. This battle had seen large numbers of Seanchan crushed up against the walls of Darluna, where they had fought with desperation. Hammered against the stone. One section of wall was completely torn away where some *damane* had tried to escape into the city. Fighting in streets and among homes would have favored the Seanchan. They hadn’t made it in time.

Ituralde rode his roan gelding through the mess. Battle was always a mess. The only neat battles were the ones in stories or history books. Those had been cleansed and scoured by the abrasive hands of scholars looking for conciseness. “Aggressor won, fifty-three thousand killed” or “Defender stood, twenty thousand fallen.”

What would be written of this battle? It would depend on who was writing. They would neglect to include the blood, pounded into the earth to make mud. The bodies, broken, pierced and mangled. The ground torn in swaths by enraged *damane*. Perhaps they would remember the numbers; those often seemed important to scribes. Half of Ituralde’s hundred thousand, dead. On any other battlefield, fifty thousand casualties would have shamed and angered him. But he’d faced down a force three times his size, and one with *damane* at that.

He followed the young messenger who had fetched him, a boy of perhaps twelve, wearing a Seanchan uniform of red and green. They passed a fallen standard, hanging from a broken pole with the tip driven into mud. It bore the sign of a sun being crossed by six gulls. Ituralde hated not knowing the houses and names of the men he was fighting, but there was no way to tell with the foreign Seanchan.

The shadows cast by a dying evening sun striped the field. Soon a blanket of darkness would cradle the bodies, and the survivors could pretend for a time that the grassland was a grave for their friends. And for the people their friends had killed. He rounded a small hillock, coming to a scattered pattern of fallen Seanchan elite. Most of these dead wore those insectlike helms. Bent, cracked, or dented. Dead eyes stared blankly from openings behind twisted mandibles.

The Seanchan general was alive, if just barely. His helmet was off, and there was blood on his lips. He leaned against a large, moss-covered boulder, back supported by a bundled cloak, as if he were waiting for a meal to be delivered. Of course, that image was marred by his twisted leg and the broken haft of a spear punching through the front of his stomach.

Ituralde dismounted. Like most of his men, Ituralde wore worker's clothing—simple brown trousers and coat, borrowed off of the man who had taken Ituralde's uniform as part of the trap.

It felt odd to be out of uniform. A man like this General Turan did not deserve a soldier in drab. Ituralde waved the messenger boy to stand back, out of earshot, then approached the Seanchan alone.

"You're him, then," Turan said, looking up at Ituralde, speaking with that slow Seanchan drawl. He was a stout man, far from tall, with a peaked nose. His close-cropped black hair was shaved two finger widths up each side of his head, and his helm lay beside him on the ground, bearing three white plumes. He reached up with an unsteady black-gloved hand and wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth.

"I am," Ituralde said.

"They call you a 'Great Captain' in Tarabon."

"They do."

"It's deserved," Turan said, coughing. "How did you do it? Our scouts. . . ." His cough consumed him.

"*Raken*," Ituralde said once the cough subsided. He squatted down beside his foe. The sun was still a sliver in the west, lighting the battlefield with a glimmer of golden red light. "Your scouts see from the air, and truth is easy to hide from a distance."

"The army behind us?"

"Women and youths, mostly," Ituralde said. "A fair number of farmers as well. Wearing uniforms taken from my troops here."

"And if we'd turned and attacked?"

"You wouldn't have. Your *raken* told you that you were outnumbered. Better to chase after the smaller force ahead of you. Better than that to head for the city your scouts say is barely defended, even if it means marching your men near to exhaustion."

Turan coughed again, nodding. "Yes. Yes, but the city was empty. How did you get troops into it?"

"Scouts in the air," Ituralde said, "can't see inside buildings."

"You ordered your troops to hide inside for that long?"

"Yes," Ituralde said. "With a rotation allowing a small number out each day to work the fields."

Turan shook his head in disbelief. "You realize what you have done," he said. There was no threat in his voice. In fact, there was a fair amount of admiration. "High Lady Suroth will never accept this failure. She will *have* to break you now, if only to save face."

"I know," Ituralde said, standing. "But I can't drive you back by attacking you in your fortresses. I need you to come to me."

"You don't understand the numbers we have . . ." Turan said. "What you destroyed today is but a breeze compared to the storm you've raised. Enough of my people escaped today to tell of your tricks. They will not work again."

He was right. The Seanchan learned quickly. Ituralde had been forced to cut short his raids in Tarabon because of the swift Seanchan reaction.

"You know you can't beat us," Turan said softly. "I see it in your eyes, Great Captain."

Ituralde nodded.

"Why, then?" Turan asked.

"Why does a crow fly?" Ituralde asked.

Turan coughed weakly.

Ituralde did know that he could not win his war against the Seanchan. Oddly, each of his victories made him more certain of his eventual failure. The Seanchan were smart, well equipped and well disciplined. More than that, they were persistent.

Turan himself must have known from the moment those gates opened that he was doomed. But he had not surrendered; he had fought until his army broke, scattering in too many directions for Ituralde's exhausted troops to catch. Turan understood. Sometimes, surrender wasn't worth the cost. No man welcomed death, but there were far worse ends for a soldier. Abandoning one's homeland to invaders . . . well, Ituralde couldn't do that. Not even if the fight was impossible to win.

He did what needed to be done, when it needed to be done. And right now, Arad Doman needed to fight. They would lose, but their children would always know that their fathers *had* resisted. That resistance would be important in a hundred years, when a rebellion came. If one came.

Ituralde stood up, intending to return to his waiting soldiers.

Turan struggled, reaching for his sword. Ituralde hesitated, turning back.

“Will you do it?” Turan asked.

Ituralde nodded, unsheathing his own sword.

“It has been an honor,” Turan said, then closed his eyes. Ituralde’s sword—heron-marked—took the man’s head a moment later. Turan’s own blade bore a heron, barely visible on the gleaming length of blade the Seanchan had managed to pull. It was a pity that the two of them hadn’t been able to cross swords—though, in a way, these past few weeks had been just that, on a different scale.

Ituralde cleaned his sword, then slid it back into its sheath. In a final gesture, he slid Turan’s sword out and rammed it into the ground beside the fallen general. Ituralde then remounted and, nodding farewell to the messenger, made his way back across the shadowed field of corpses.

The ravens had begun.

“I’ve tried encouraging several of the serving men and Tower Guards,” Leane said softly, sitting beside the bars of her cell. “But it’s hard.” She smiled, glancing at Egwene, who sat on a stool outside the cell. “I don’t exactly feel alluring these days.”

Egwene’s responding smile was wry, and she seemed to understand. Leane wore the same dress that she’d been captured in, and it had not yet been laundered. Every third morning, she removed it and used the morning’s bucket of water—after washing herself clean with a damp rag—to clean the dress in her basin. But there was only so much one could do without soap. She’d braided her hair to give it a semblance of neatness, but could do nothing about her ragged nails.

Leane sighed, thinking of those mornings spent standing in the corner of her cell, hidden from sight, wearing nothing while she waited for the dress and shift to dry. Just because she was Domani didn’t mean she liked parading about without a scrap on. Proper seduction required skill and subtlety; nudity used neither.

Her cell wasn't bad as cells went—she had a small bed, meals, plenty of water, a chamber pot that was changed daily. But she was never allowed out, and was always guarded by two sisters who kept her shielded. The only one who visited her—save for those trying to pry information from her regarding Traveling—was Egwene.

The Amyrlin sat on her stool, expression thoughtful. And she *was* Amyrlin. It was impossible to think of her any other way. How could a child so young have learned so quickly? That straight back, that poised expression. Being in control wasn't so much about the power you had, but the power you implied that you had. It was much like dealing with men, actually.

"Have you . . . heard anything?" Leane asked. "About what they plan to do with me?"

Egwene shook her head. Two Yellow sisters sat chatting nearby on the bench, lit by a lamp on the table beside them. Leane hadn't answered any of the questions her captors put to her, and Tower law was very strict about the questioning of fellow sisters. They couldn't harm her, particularly not with the Power. But they *could* just leave her alone, to rot.

"Thank you for coming to see me these evenings," Leane said, reaching through the lattice of bars to take Egwene's hand. "I believe I owe my sanity to you."

"It is my pleasure," Egwene said, though her eyes showed a hint of the exhaustion she undoubtedly felt. Some of the sisters who visited Leane mentioned the beatings Egwene was suffering as "penances" for her insubordination. Odd, how a novice to be instructed could be beaten but a prisoner to be interrogated could not. And despite the pain, Egwene came to visit Leane in the cell virtually every night.

"I *will* see you free, Leane," Egwene promised, still holding her hand. "Elaida's tyranny cannot last. I'm confident it won't be long now."

Leane nodded, letting go and standing up. Egwene took hold of the bars and pulled herself to her feet, cringing ever so slightly at the motion. She nodded farewell to Leane, then hesitated, frowning.

"What is it?" Leane asked.

Egwene took her hands off of the bars and looked at her palms. They seemed to be coated with a reflective, waxy substance. Frowning, Leane looked at the bars, and was shocked to see Egwene's handprints on the iron.

“What in the Light—” Leane said, poking at one of the bars. It bent beneath her finger like warm wax on the lip of a candle’s bowl.

Suddenly, the stones beneath Leane’s feet shifted, and she felt herself sinking. She cried out. Globs of melted wax starting to rain down from the ceiling, splattering across her face. They weren’t warm, but they were somehow liquid. They had the color of stone!

She gasped, panicked, stumbling and sliding as her feet sank deeper in the too-slick floor. A hand caught hers; she looked up to where Egwene had grabbed her. The bars melted out of the way as Leane watched, the iron drooping to the sides, then liquefying.

“Help!” Egwene screamed at the Yellows outside. “Burn you! Stop staring!”

Leane scrambled for purchase, terrified, trying to pull herself along the bars toward Egwene. She grasped only wax. A lump of bar came loose in her hand, squishing between her fingers, and the floor warped around her, sucking her down.

And then threads of Air seized her, yanking her free. The room lurched as she was tossed forward into Egwene, knocking the younger woman backward. The two Yellows—white-haired Musarin and short Gelarna—had jumped to their feet, and the glow of *saidar* surrounded them. Musarin called for help, watching the melting cell with wide eyes.

Leane righted herself, scrambling off of Egwene, her dress and legs coated with the strange wax, and stumbled back away from the cell. The floor here in the hallway felt stable. Light, how she wished she could embrace the source herself! But she was too full of forkroot, not to mention the shield.

Egwene climbed to her feet with a hand from Leane. The room fell still, lamp flickering, all of them staring at the cell. The melting had stopped, the bars split, the top halves frozen with drips of steel on their tips, the lower halves bent inward. Many had been flattened to the stones by Leane’s escape. The floor inside the room had bowed inward, like a funnel, the rocks stretching. Those stones bore gashes where Leane’s scrambling had scored them.

Leane stood, her heart beating, realizing that only seconds had passed. What should they do? Scuttle away in fear? Was the rest of the hallway going to melt, too?

Egwene stepped forward, tapping her toe against one of the bars. It resisted. Leane took a step forward, and her dress *crunched*, bits of stone—like mortar—falling free. She reached down and brushed at her skirt, and felt rough rock coating it instead of wax.

"These sorts of events are more frequent," Egwene said calmly, glancing at the two Yellows. "The Dark One is getting stronger. The Last Battle approaches. What is your Amyrlin doing about it?"

Musarin glanced at her; the tall, aging Aes Sedai looked deeply disturbed. Leane took Egwene's lead, forcing herself to be calm as she stepped up beside the Amyrlin, chips of stone falling from her dress.

"Yes, well," Musarin said. "You shall return to your rooms, novice. And you . . ." She glanced at Leane, then at the remains of the cell. "We will . . . have to relocate you."

"And get me a new dress as well, I assume," Leane said, folding her arms.

Musarin's eyes flickered at Egwene. "Go. This is no longer your business, child. We will care for the prisoner."

Egwene gritted her teeth, but then she turned to Leane. "Stay strong," she said, and hurried away, heading down the hallway.

Exhausted, disturbed by the stone-warping bubble of evil, Egwene walked with swishing skirts toward the Tower wing that contained the novices' quarters. What would it take to convince the foolish women that there wasn't time to spare for squabbling!

The hour was late, and few women walked the corridors, none of them novices. Egwene passed several servants bustling at late-night duties, their slippered feet falling softly on the floor tiles. These sectors of the Tower were populated enough that lamps burned on the walls, trimmed low, giving an orange light. A hundred different polished tiles reflected the flickering flames, looking like eyes that watched Egwene as she walked.

It was hard to comprehend that this quiet evening had turned into a trap that nearly killed Leane. If even the ground itself could not be trusted, then what could? Egwene shook her head, too tired, too sore, to think of solutions at the moment. She barely noticed when the floor tiles turned from gray to a deep brown. She just continued on, into the Tower wing, counting the doors she passed. Hers was the seventh . . .

She froze, frowning at a pair of Brown sisters: Maenadrin—a Saldaean—and Negaine. The two had been speaking in hushed whispers, and they frowned at Egwene as she passed them. Why would they be in the novices' quarters?

But wait. The novices' quarters didn't have brown floor tiles. This section should have had nondescript gray tiles. And the doors in the hallway were spaced far too widely. This didn't look at all like the novices' quarters! Had she been so tired that she'd walked in completely the wrong direction?

She retraced her steps, passing the two Brown sisters again. She found a window and looked out. The rectangular white expanse of the Tower wing extended around her, just as it should. She wasn't lost.

Perplexed, she looked back down the hallway. Maenadrin had folded her arms, regarding Egwene with a set of dark eyes. Negaine, tall and spindly, stalked up to Egwene. "What business have you here this time of night, child?" she demanded. "Did a sister send for you? You should be back in your room for sleep."

Wordlessly, Egwene pointed out the window. Negaine glanced out, frowning. She froze, gasping softly. She looked back in at the hallway, then back out, as if unable to believe where she was.

In minutes, the entire Tower was in a frenzy. Egwene, forgotten, stood at the side of a hallway with a cluster of bleary-eyed novices as sisters argued with one another in tense voices, trying to determine what to do. It appeared that two sections of the Tower had been swapped, and the slumbering Brown sisters had been moved from their sections on the upper levels down into the wing. The novices' rooms—intact—had been placed where the section of Brown sisters had been. Nobody remembered any motion or vibration when the swap happened, and the transfer appeared seamless. A line of floor tiles had been split right down the middle, then melded with tiles from the section that had shifted.

It's getting worse and worse, Egwene thought as the Brown sisters decided—for now—that they would have to accept the switch. They couldn't very well move sisters into rooms the size that novices used.

That would leave the Browns divided, half in the wing, half in their old location—with a clump of novices in the middle of them. A division aptly representative of the less-visible divisions the Ajahs were suffering.

Eventually, exhausted, Egwene and the others were sent off to sleep—though now she had to trudge up many flights of stairs before reaching her bed.

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CHAPTER 7

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The Plan for Arad Doman

“A storm is coming,” Nynaeve said, looking out the window of the manor.

“Yes,” replied Daigian from her chair by the hearth without bothering to glance at the window. “I think you might be right, dear. I swear, it seems as if it has been overcast for weeks!”

“It has been a single week,” Nynaeve said, holding her long, dark braid in one hand. She glanced at the other woman. “I haven’t seen a patch of clear sky in over ten days.”

Daigian frowned. Of the White Ajah, she was plump and curvaceous. She wore a small stone on her forehead as Moiraine had so long ago, though Daigian’s was an appropriately white moonstone. The tradition apparently had something to do with being a Cairhien noblewoman, as did the four colored slashes the woman wore on her dress.

“Ten days, you say?” Daigian said. “Are you certain?”

Nynaeve was. She paid attention to the weather; that was one of the duties of a village Wisdom. She was Aes Sedai now, but that didn’t mean she stopped being who she was. The weather was always there, in the back of her mind. She could sense the rain, sun, or snow in the wind’s whispers.

Lately, however, the sensations hadn’t been like whispers at all. More like distant shouts, growing louder. Or like waves crashing against one another, still far to the north, yet harder and harder to ignore.

“Well,” Daigian said, “I’m certain this isn’t the only time in history that it has been cloudy for ten days!”

Nynaeve shook her head, tugging on her braid. “It’s not normal,” she said. “And those overcast skies aren’t the storm I’m talking about. It’s still distant, but it’s coming. And it is going to be terrible. Worse than any I’ve ever seen. Far worse.”

“Well, then,” Daigian said, sounding slightly uncomfortable, “we will deal with it when it arrives. Are you going to sit down so that we can continue?”

Nynaeve glanced at the plump Aes Sedai. Daigian was extremely weak in the Power. The White might just be the weakest Aes Sedai that Nynaeve had ever met. By traditional—yet unspoken—rules, that meant that Nynaeve should be allowed to take the lead.

Unfortunately, Nynaeve's position was still questionable. Egwene had raised her to the shawl by decree, just as she'd raised Elayne: there had been no testing, nor had Nynaeve sworn on the Oath Rod. To most—even those who accepted Egwene's place as the true Amyrlin—those omissions made Nynaeve something less than Aes Sedai. Not an Accepted, but hardly equal to a sister.

The sisters with Cadsuane were particularly bad, as they hadn't declared for either the White Tower or the rebels. And the sisters sworn to Rand were worse; most were still loyal to the White Tower, not seeing a problem with supporting both Elaida and Rand. Nynaeve still wondered what Rand had been thinking, allowing sisters to swear fealty to him. She'd explained his mistake to him on several occasions—quite rationally—but talking to Rand these days was like talking to a stone. Only less effective and infinitely more infuriating.

Daigian was still waiting for her to sit. Rather than provoke a contest of wills, Nynaeve did so. Daigian was still suffering from having lost her Warder—Eben, an Asha'man—during the fight with the Forsaken. Nynaeve had spent that fight completely absorbed by providing Rand with immense amounts of *saidar* to weave.

Nynaeve could still remember the sheer joy—the awesome euphoria, strength, and sheer feel of *life*—that had come from drawing that much power. It frightened her. She was glad the *ter'angreal* she'd used to touch that power had been destroyed.

But the male *ter'angreal* was still intact: an access key to a powerful *sa'angreal*. As far as Nynaeve knew, Rand had not been able to persuade Cadsuane to return it to him. As well she shouldn't. No human being, not even the Dragon Reborn, should channel that much of the One Power. The things one could be tempted to do. . . .

She'd *told* Rand that he needed to forget about the access key. Like talking to a stone. A big, red-haired, iron-faced idiot of a stone. Nynaeve harrumphed to herself. That caused Daigian to raise an eyebrow. The woman was quite good at controlling her grief, though Nynaeve—whose room in the Domani mansion was beside Daigian's—heard the woman crying to herself at night. It was not easy to lose one's Warder.

Lan. . . .

No, best not to think of *him* at the moment. Lan would be fine. Only at the end of his journey of thousands of miles would he be in danger. It was there he intended to throw himself at the Shadow like a lone arrow loosed at a brick wall . . .

No! she thought to herself. *He will not be alone. I saw to that.*

"Very well," Nynaeve said, forcing herself to focus, "let us continue." She showed no deference to Daigian. She was doing this woman a favor, distracting her from her grief. That was how Corele had explained it, anyway. It wasn't, certainly, for *Nynaeve*'s benefit that they met. She had nothing to prove. She *was* Aes Sedai, no matter what the others thought or implied.

This was all just a ruse to help Daigian. That was it. Nothing else.

"Here is the eighty-first weave," the White said. The glow of *saidar* sprang up around her, and she channeled, crafting a very complex weave of Fire, Air and Spirit. Complex, but useless. The weave created three burning rings of fire in the air which glowed with unusual light, but what was the point of that? Nynaeve already knew how to make fireballs and balls of light; why waste time learning weaves that repeated what she already knew, only in a far more complicated way? And why did each ring have to be a slightly different color?

Nynaeve waved an indifferent hand, repeating the weave exactly. "Honestly," she said, "that one seems the most useless of the bunch! What is the point of all of these?"

Daigian pursed her lips. She said nothing, but Nynaeve knew that Daigian thought that this all should be far more difficult for Nynaeve than it was. Eventually, the woman spoke. "You cannot be told much about the testing. The only thing I can say is that you will need to repeat these weaves exactly, and do so while undergoing extreme distraction. When the time comes, you will understand."

"I doubt it," Nynaeve said flatly, copying the weave three times over while she spoke. "Because—as I *believe* I've told you a dozen times already—I'm not going to be taking the test. I'm already Aes Sedai."

"Of course you are, dear."

Nynaeve ground her teeth. This had been a bad idea. When she'd approached Corele—supposedly a member of Nynaeve's own Ajah—the woman had refused to acknowledge her as an equal. She'd been pleasant about it, as Corele often was, but the implication had been clear. She'd even seemed sympathetic. Sympathetic! As if Nynaeve needed her pity. She had suggested that if Nynaeve knew the hundred weaves each Accepted learned for the test to become Aes Sedai, it might help with her credibility.

The problem was, this placed Nynaeve in a situation where she was all but treated as a student again. She *did* see the use in knowing the hundred weaves—she'd spent far too short a time studying them, and virtually every sister knew it. However, by accepting the lessons, she hadn't meant to imply that she *saw* herself as a student!

She reached for her braid, but stopped herself. Her visible expressions of emotion were another factor in how she was treated by the other Aes Sedai. If only she had that ageless face! Bah!

Daigian's next weave made a popping sound in the air, and once again the weave itself was needlessly complex. Nynaeve copied it with barely a thought, committing it to memory at the same time.

Daigian stared at the weave for a moment, a distant look on her face.

"What?" Nynaeve asked testily.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing. I just . . . the last time I made that weave, I used it to startle . . . I . . . never mind."

Eben. Her Warder had been young, maybe fifteen or sixteen, and she had been very fond of him. Eben and Daigian had played games together like a boy and an elder sister rather than Aes Sedai and Warder.

A youth of only sixteen, Nynaeve thought, *dead. Did Rand have to recruit them so young?*

Daigian's face grew stiff, controlling her emotions far better than Nynaeve would have been able to.

Light send that I'm never in the same situation, she thought. *At least not for many, many years.* Lan wasn't her Warder yet, but she meant to have him as soon as possible. He was already her husband, after all. It still angered her that Myrelle had the bond.

"I might be able to help, Daigian," Nynaeve said, leaning forward, laying her hand on the other woman's knee. "If I were to attempt a Healing, perhaps. . . ."

"No," the woman said curtly.

"But—"

"I doubt you could help."

"Anything can be Healed," Nynaeve said stubbornly, "even if we don't know how yet. Anything save death."

“And what would you do, dear?” Daigian asked. Nynaeve wondered if she refused to call her by name on purpose, or if it was an unconscious effect of their relationship. She couldn’t use “child,” as she would with an actual Accepted, but to call her “Nynaeve” might imply equality.

“I could do something,” Nynaeve said. “This pain you feel, it *has* to be an effect of the bond, and therefore something to do with the One Power. If the Power causes your pain, then the Power can take that pain away.”

“And why would I want that?” Daigian asked, in control once again.

“Well . . . well, because it’s pain. It hurts.”

“It should,” Daigian said. “Eben is dead. Would *you* want to forget your pain if you lost that hulking giant of yours? Have your feelings for him cut away like some spoiled chunk of flesh in an otherwise good roast?”

Nynaeve opened her mouth, but stopped. Would she? It wasn’t that simple—her feelings for Lan were genuine, and not due to a bond. He was her husband, and she loved him. Daigian had been possessive of her Warder, but it had been the affection of an aunt for her favored nephew. It wasn’t the same.

But *would* Nynaeve want that pain taken away? She closed her mouth, suddenly realizing the honor in Daigian’s words. “I see. I’m sorry.”

“It is nothing, dear,” Daigian continued. “The logic of it seems simple to me at times, but I fear that others do not accept it. Indeed, some might argue that the logic of the issue depends on the moment and the individual. Shall I show you the next weave?”

“Yes, please,” Nynaeve said, frowning. She herself was so strong in the Power—one of the strongest alive—that she often took little thought for her ability. It was much as a very tall man rarely paid attention to other people’s heights; everyone else was shorter than he, and so their different heights didn’t matter much.

What was it like to be this woman, who had spent longer as an Accepted than anyone else in memory? A woman who had barely attained the shawl, doing so—many said—by an eyelash and a whisper? Daigian had to show deference to all other Aes Sedai. If two sisters met, Daigian was always the lesser. If more than two sisters met, Daigian served them tea. Before the more powerful sisters, she was expected to scrape and grovel. Well, not that, she *was* Aes Sedai, but still. . . .

“There is something wrong with this system, Daigian,” Nynaeve said absently.

“With the testing? It seems appropriate that there should be *some* kind of test to determine worthiness, and the performing of difficult weaves under stress strikes me as fulfilling that need.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Nynaeve said, “I mean the system that determines how we are treated. By each other.”

Daigian flushed. It was inappropriate to refer to another’s power, in any way. But, well, Nynaeve had never been very good at conforming to other people’s expectations. Particularly when they expected foolishness. “There you sit,” she said, “knowing as much as any other Aes Sedai—knowing *more* than many, I’d wager—and the moment any Accepted just off apron strings gains the shawl, you have to do what she says.”

Daigian’s blush deepened. “We should move on.”

It just wasn’t right. Nynaeve let the matter drop, however. She’d stepped in this particular pit once before in teaching the Kinswomen to stand up for themselves in front of Aes Sedai. Before long, they’d been standing up to Nynaeve too, which had *not* been her intention. She wasn’t certain she wanted to attempt a similar revolution among the Aes Sedai themselves.

She tried to turn back to the tutoring, but that sense of an impending storm kept drawing her eyes to the window. The room was on the second floor and had a good view of the camp outside. It was by pure happenstance that Nynaeve caught a glimpse of Cadsuane; that gray bun set with innocent-looking *ter’angreal* was obvious even from a distance. The woman was crossing the courtyard, Corele at her side, walking at a fair clip.

What is she doing? Nynaeve wondered. Cadsuane’s pace made her suspicious. What had happened? Something to do with Rand? If that man had gotten himself hurt again . . .

“Excuse me, Daigian,” Nynaeve said, standing. “I just remembered something that I must see to.”

The other woman started. “Oh. Well, all right then, Nynaeve. We can continue another time, I suppose.”

It wasn’t until Nynaeve had hurried out the door and down the stairs that she realized Daigian had actually used her name. She smiled as she walked out onto the green.

There were Aiel in the camp. That itself wasn’t uncommon; Rand often had a complement of Maidens to act as guards. But these Aiel were men, wearing the dusty brown *cadin'sor* and carrying spears at their sides. A fair number of them wore the headbands bearing Rand's symbol on them.

That was why Cadsuane had been in such a hurry; if the Aiel clan chiefs had arrived, then Rand would be wanting to meet with them. Nynaeve strode across the green—which wasn't very green at all—in a huff. Rand hadn't sent for her. Probably not because he didn't want to include her, but because he was just too wool-headed to think of it. Dragon Reborn or not, the man rarely thought to share his plans with others. She would have thought that after all this time, he would have realized the importance of getting advice from someone a little more experienced than he. How many times now had he gotten himself kidnapped, wounded or imprisoned because of his rashness?

All these others in camp might bow and scrape and dote on him, but Nynaeve knew that he was really just a sheepherder from Emond's Field. He still got into trouble the same way he had when he and Matrim had pulled pranks as boys. Only now instead of flustering the village girls he could throw entire nations into chaos.

On the far northern side of the green—directly opposite the manor house, close to the front of the bulwark—the Aiel newcomers were setting up their camp, complete with tan tents. They arranged them differently than the Saldaeans; instead of straight rows, the Aiel preferred small groups, organized by society. Some of Bashere's men called greetings to passing Aiel, but none moved to help. Aiel could be a prickly bunch, and while Nynaeve found the Saldaeans to be far less irrational than most, they *were* Borderlanders. Skirmishes with Aiel had been a way of life for them in earlier years, and the Aiel war itself was not so distant. For now, they all fought on the same side, but that didn't keep the Saldaeans from stepping a little more carefully now that the Aiel had arrived in force.

Nynaeve scanned for signs of Rand or any Aiel she knew. She doubted that Aviendha would be with the group; she would be back in Caemlyn with Elayne, helping secure the throne of Andor. Nynaeve still felt guilty for leaving them, but *somebody* had needed to help Rand cleanse *saidin*. That wasn't the sort of thing you left him to do alone. Now, where *was* he?

Nynaeve stopped at the boundary between the Saldaeans and the new Aiel camp. Soldiers carrying lances nodded to her in respect. Aiel in brown and green glided across the grass, their motions smooth as water. Women in blues and greens carried wash from the stream beside the manor house.

Broad-needled pines shivered in the wind. The camp bustled like the village green at Bel Tine. Which way had Cadsuane gone?

She sensed channeling in the northeast. Nynaeve smiled, setting off with a determined step, yellow skirt swishing. The channeling would either be an Aes Sedai or a Wise One. Sure enough, she soon saw a larger Aiel tent erected at the corner of the green. She strode straight for it, her stares—or perhaps her reputation—encouraging Saldaean soldiers to get out of her way. The Maidens guarding the entrance did not try to stop her.

Rand stood inside, wearing black and red, leafing through maps on a sturdy wooden table, his left arm held behind his back. Bashere stood at his side, nodding to himself and studying a small map he held before him.

Rand looked up as Nynaeve entered. When had he started looking so much like a Warder, with that instant glance of assessment? Those eyes which picked out every threat, body tense as if expecting an attack at any time? *I should never have let that woman take him from the Two Rivers,* she thought. *Look what it's done to him.*

She immediately frowned at her own foolishness. If Rand had stayed in the Two Rivers, he would have gone mad and perhaps destroyed them all—assuming, of course, the Trollocs, the Fades or the Forsaken themselves hadn't accomplished the task first. If Moiraine hadn't come for Rand, he'd now be dead. With him would have gone the light and hope of the world. It was just hard to abandon her old prejudices.

"Ah, Nynaeve," Rand said, relaxing and turning back to his maps. He motioned for Bashere to inspect one of them, then turned back to her. "I was about to send for you. Rhuarc and Bael are here."

Nynaeve raised an eyebrow, folding her arms. "Oh?" she asked flatly. "And here I'd assumed that all the Aiel in the camp meant we had been attacked by Shaido."

His face hardened at her tone, and those eyes of his grew . . . dangerous. But then he lightened, shaking his head, almost as if to clear it. Some of the old Rand—the Rand who had been an innocent sheepherder—seemed to return. "Yes, of course you would have noticed," he said. "I'm glad you are here. We will begin as soon as the clan chiefs return. I insisted they see their people settled before we began."

He waved for her to sit; there were cushions on the floor, but no chairs. Aiel spurned those, and Rand would want them to be comfortable. Nynaeve eyed him, surprised at how tight her own nerves had become. He was just a wool-headed villager, no matter how much influence he'd found. He *was*.

But she could not shake away that look in his eyes, that flash of anger. Holding a crown was said to change many men for the worse. She intended to see that didn't happen to Rand al'Thor, but what recourse would she have if he suddenly decided to have her imprisoned? He wouldn't do that, would he? Not Rand.

Semirhage said he was mad, Nynaeve thought. *Said that . . . he heard voices from his past life. Is that what is happening when he cocks his head, as if listening to things that nobody else can hear?*

She shivered. Min was there in the tent, of course, sitting and reading a book in the corner: *The Wake of the Breaking*. Min looked too intently at the pages; she'd listened to the exchange between Rand and Nynaeve. What did she think of the changes in him? She was closer to him than anyone—close enough that, if they'd all been back in Emond's Field, Nynaeve would have given the two of them a tongue-lashing strong enough to make their heads spin. Even though they *weren't* in Emond's Field and she was no longer Wisdom, she'd made certain that Rand knew of her displeasure. His response had been simple: "If I marry her, my death will bring her even more pain."

More idiocy, of course. If you were planning to go into danger, then it was all the *more* reason to get married. Obviously. Nynaeve seated herself on the floor, arranging her skirts, and pointedly did *not* think of Lan. He had such a long distance to cover, and. . . .

And she had to make *sure* that she was given his bond before he reached the Blight. Just in case.

Suddenly, she sat upright. Cadsuane. The woman wasn't there; besides guards, the tent contained only Rand, Nynaeve, Min and Bashere. Was she off planning something that Nynaeve—

Cadsuane entered. The gray-haired Aes Sedai wore a simple tan dress. She relied on presence, not clothing, to draw attention, and of course her hair sparkled with its golden ornaments. Corele followed her in.

Cadsuane wove a ward against eavesdropping, and Rand did not object. He should stick up for himself more—that woman practically had him tamed, and it was unsettling how much he let her get away with. Like questioning Semirhage. The Forsaken were far too powerful and dangerous to treat lightly. Semirhage should have been stilled the moment they captured her . . . though Nynaeve's opinion in that regard was directly related to her own experience in keeping Moghedien captive.

Corele gave Nynaeve a smile; she tended to have one of those for everyone. Cadsuane, as usual, ignored Nynaeve. That was fine. Nynaeve had no need for her approval. Cadsuane thought she could order everyone around just because she'd outlived every other Aes Sedai. Well, Nynaeve knew for a fact that age had little to do with wisdom. Cenn Buie had been as old as rain, but had about as much sense as a pile of rocks.

Many of the camp's other Aes Sedai and camp leaders trickled into the tent over the next few minutes; perhaps Rand really *had* sent messengers, and would have called for Nynaeve. The newcomers included Merise and her Warders, one of whom was the Asha'man Jahar Narishma, bells tinkling on the ends of his braids. Damer Flinn, Elza Penfell, a few of Bashere's officers also arrived. Rand glanced up when each one entered, alert and wary, but he quickly turned back to his maps. Was he growing paranoid? Some madmen grew suspicious of everyone.

Eventually, Rhuarc and Bael made their appearance, along with several other Aiel. They stalked through the tent's large entrance like cats on the prowl. In an odd turn, a batch of Wise Ones—whom Nynaeve had been able to sense when they got close—were among the group. Often, with Aiel, an event was either considered clan chief business or Wise One business—much as things happened back in the Two Rivers with the Village Council and the Women's Circle. Had Rand asked for them all to attend, or had they decided to come together for reasons of their own?

Nynaeve had been wrong about Aviendha's location; she was shocked to see the tall, red-haired woman hovering at the back of the group of Wise Ones. When had she left Caemlyn? And why was she carrying that worn cloth with a frayed edge?

Nynaeve didn't get a chance to ask Aviendha any questions, as Rand nodded to Rhuarc and the others, motioning for them to sit, which they did. Rand himself remained standing beside his map table. He placed his arms behind his back, hand clasping stump, a thoughtful look on his face. He offered no preamble. "Tell me of your work in Arad Doman," he said to Rhuarc. "My scouts inform me that this land is hardly at peace."

Rhuarc accepted a cup of tea from Aviendha—so she was still considered an apprentice—and turned to Rand. The clan chief did not drink. "We have had very little time, Rand al'Thor."

“I don’t look for excuses, Rhuarc,” Rand said. “Only results.”

This brought flashes of anger to the faces of several of the other Aiel, and the Maidens at the doorway exchanged a furious burst of hand signals.

Rhuarc himself displayed no anger, though Nynaeve did think his hand tightened on his cup. “I have shared water with you, Rand al’Thor,” he said. “I would not think that you would bring me here to offer insults.”

“No insults, Rhuarc,” Rand said. “Just truths. We don’t have time to waste.”

“No time, Rand al’Thor?” Bael said. The clan chief of the Goshien Aiel was a very tall man, and he seemed to tower, even when sitting down. “You left many of us in Andor for months with nothing to do but polish spears and scare wetlanders! Now you send us to this land with impossible orders, then follow a few weeks later and demand results?”

“You were in Andor to help Elayne,” Rand said.

“She did not want or need help,” Bael said with a snort. “And she was right to refuse aid. I’d rather run across the entire Waste with a single skin of water than have leadership of my clan handed to me by another.”

Rand’s expression grew dark again, his eyes stormy, and Nynaeve was again reminded of the tempest brewing to the north.

“This land is broken, Rand al’Thor,” Rhuarc said, his voice calmer than Bael’s. “It is not making excuses to explain that fact, and it is not cowardice to be cautious about a difficult task.”

“We *must* have peace here,” Rand growled. “If you can’t manage—”

“Boy,” Cadsuane said, “perhaps you want to stop and think. How often have you known the Aiel to fail you? How often have you failed, hurt, or offended them?”

Rand snapped his mouth closed, and Nynaeve gritted her teeth at not having spoken up herself. She glanced at Cadsuane, who had been given a chair to sit upon—Nynaeve couldn’t recall ever seeing her sit on the floor. The chair had obviously been taken from the manor; it was constructed from pale elgilrim horns—which stretched out like open palms—and had a red cushion. Aviendha handed Cadsuane a cup of tea, which she sipped carefully.

With obvious effort, Rand pulled his temper back under control. “I apologize, Rhuarc, Bael. It has been a . . . wearing few months.”

“You have no *toh*,” Rhuarc said. “But please, sit. Let us share shade and speak with civility.”

Rand sighed audibly, then nodded, seating himself before the other two. The several Wise Ones in attendance—Amys, Melaine, Bair—didn't seem inclined to participate in the discussion. They were observers, much—Nynaeve realized—as she herself was.

"We *must* have peace in Arad Doman, my friends," Rand said, unrolling a map between them on the tent rug.

Bael shook his head. "Dobraine Taborwin has done well with Bandar Eban," he said, "but Rhuarc spoke rightly when he called this land broken. It is like a piece of Sea Folk porcelain dropped from the tip of a high mountain. You told us to discover who was in charge and see if we could restore order. Well, as far as we can tell, *no one* is in charge. Each city has been left to fend for itself."

"What of the Council of Merchants?" Bashere said, sitting down with them, knuckling his mustache as he studied the map. "My scouts say that they still hold some measure of power."

"In the cities where they rule, this is true," Rhuarc said. "But their influence is weak. There is only one member still in the capital, and she has little control there. We have stopped the fighting in the streets, but only with great effort." He shook his head. "This is what comes from trying to control more lands than holds and clan. Without their king, these Domani do not know who is in charge."

"Where is he?" Rand asked.

"Nobody knows, Rand al'Thor. He vanished. Some say months ago, others say it has been years."

"Graendal might have him," Rand whispered, studying the map intently. "If she's here. Yes, I think she probably is. But where? She won't be in the king's palace, that's not her way. She will have some place that is *hers*, a place where she can display her trophies. A location that would make a trophy itself, but not a place that one would think of immediately. Yes, I know. You're right. That's how she did it before. . . ."

Such familiarity! Nynaeve shivered. Aviendha knelt beside her, holding out a cup of tea. Nynaeve took it, meeting the woman's eyes, then began to whisper a question. Aviendha shook her head curtly. Later, her expression seemed to imply. Aviendha rose and retreated to the back of the room and then, grimacing, took out her frayed cloth and began pulling the threads out one at a time. What was the point of that?

“Cadsuane,” Rand said, stopping his whispering, speaking up. “What do you know of the Council of Merchants?”

“They are mostly women,” Cadsuane said, “and women of great cunning at that. However, they are also a selfish lot. It is their duty to choose the king, and with Alsalam’s disappearance, they should have found a replacement. Too many of them see this as an opportunity, and that keeps them from reaching an agreement. I can assume that they’ve separated in face of this chaos to secure power in their home cities, fighting for position and alliances as they each offer their own choice of king for the others to consider.”

“And this Domani army fighting the Seanchan?” Rand asked. “Is that their doing?”

“I know nothing of that.”

“You speak of the man Rodel Ituralde,” Rhuarc said.

“Yes.”

“He fought well twenty years ago,” Rhuarc said, rubbing his square chin. “He is of the ones you call a Great Captain. I should like to dance the spears with him.”

“You will not,” Rand said sharply. “Not while I live, at least. We will secure this land.”

“And you expect us to do this without fighting?” Bael asked. “This Rodel Ituralde reportedly fights like a sandstorm against the Seanchan, drawing their ire better—even—than you yourself, Rand al’Thor. He will not sleep while you conquer his homeland.”

“Once again,” Rand said, “we are *not* here to conquer.”

Rhuarc sighed. “Then why send us, Rand al’Thor? Why not use your Aes Sedai? They understand wetlanders. This country is like an entire *kingdom* of children, and we are too few adults to bring them to obedience. Particularly if you forbid us to spank them.”

“You can fight,” Rand said, “but only when you need to. Rhuarc, this has gone beyond the ability of Aes Sedai to fix. You *can* do this. People are intimidated by the Aiel; they will do as you say. If we can stop the Domani war with the Seanchan, perhaps this Daughter of the Nine Moons will see that I am serious in my desire for peace. Then maybe she’ll agree to meet with me.”

“Why not do as you’ve done before?” Bael asked. “Seize the land for your own?”

Bashere nodded, glancing at Rand.

"It won't work, not this time," Rand said. "A war here would take too many resources. You spoke of this Ituralde—he's holding off the Seanchan with virtually no supplies and few men. Would you have us engage a man that resourceful?"

How thoughtful Bashere seemed, as if he were indeed considering engaging this Ituralde. Men! They were all the same. Offer them a challenge, and they'd be curious, no matter that the challenge would likely end with them spitted on a lance.

"There are few men alive like Rodel Ituralde," Bashere said. "He would be a great help to our cause, for certain. I've always wondered if I could beat him."

"No," Rand said again, looking over the map. From what Nynaeve could see, it showed troop concentrations, marked with annotations. The Aiel were an organized mess of charcoal marks across the top of Arad Doman; Ituralde's forces were deep into Almoth Plain, fighting Seanchan. The middle of Arad Doman was a sea of chaotic black annotations, likely the personal forces of various nobles.

"Rhuarc, Bael," Rand said. "I want you to seize the members of the Council of Merchants."

The tent was silent.

"Are you certain that is wise, boy?" Cadsuane finally asked.

"They're in danger from the Forsaken," Rand said, idly tapping the map with his fingers. "If Graendal really has taken Alsalam, then getting him back will do us no good. He'll be so far beneath her Compulsion that he'll barely have the mind of a child. She's not subtle; she never has been. We need the Council of Merchants to choose a new king. That's the only way to bring this kingdom peace and order."

Bashere nodded. "It's bold."

"We are not kidnappers," Bael said, frowning.

"You are what I say you are, Bael," Rand said quietly.

"We are still free people, Rand al'Thor," Rhuarc said.

"I will change the Aiel with my passing," Rand said with a shake of his head. "I don't know what you'll be once this is all through, but you cannot remain what you were. I will have you take up this task. Of all those who follow me, I trust you the most. If we're going to take the members of the Council without throwing this land further into war, I will need your cunning and stealth. You can prowl into their palaces and manors as you infiltrated the Stone of Tear."

Rhuarc and Bael regarded one another, sharing a frown.

"Once you take the Council of Merchants," Rand continued, apparently unconcerned about their worries, "move the Aiel into the cities where those merchants ruled. Make sure those cities don't degenerate. Restore order as you did in Bandar Eban. From there, begin hunting bandits and enforcing the law. Supplies will soon arrive from the Sea Folk. Take cities on the coast first, then move inland. Within a month's time, the Domani should be flowing *toward* you, rather than running away from you. Offer them safety and food, and order will take care of itself."

A surprisingly rational plan. Rand really did have a clever mind, for a man. There was a lot of good in him, perhaps the very soul of a leader, if he could keep his temper in check.

Rhuarc continued to rub his chin. "It would help if we had some of your Saldaeans, Davram Bashere. Wetlanders do not like following Aiel. If they can pretend that wetlanders are in charge, then they will be more likely to come to us."

Bashere laughed. "We'll also make nice targets. As soon as we seize a few members of the merchant council, the rest will send assassins after us for certain!"

Rhuarc laughed as if he thought that a grand joke. The Aiel sense of humor was its own sort of oddity. "We will keep you alive, Davram Bashere. If we do not, we will stuff you and set you on that horse of yours, and you will make a grand quiver for their arrows!"

Bael laughed loudly at this, and the Maidens by the doors began another round of handtalk.

Bashere chuckled, though he didn't seem to understand the humor either. "You sure this is what you want to do?" he asked Rand.

Rand nodded. "Divide some of your forces, send them with Aiel groups as Rhuarc decides."

"And what of Ituralde?" Bashere asked, looking back at the map. "There won't be peace for long once he realizes we've invaded his homeland."

Rand tapped the map softly for a moment. "I will deal with him personally," he finally said.

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CHAPTER 8

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Clean Shirts

A dockmaster's sky, it was called. Those gray clouds, blotting out the sun, temperamental and sullen. Perhaps the others—here in the camp just outside of Tar Valon—hadn't noticed the persistent clouds, but Siuan had. No sailor would miss them. Not dark enough to promise a storm, not light enough to imply smooth waters either.

A sky like that was ambiguous. You could set out and never see a drop of rain or a hint of stormwinds. Or, with barely a moment's notice, you could find yourself in the middle of a squall. It was deceitful, that blanket of clouds.

Most ports charged a daily fee to each vessel moored in their harbors, but on days of storm—when no fisher could make a catch—the fee would be halved, or spared entirely. On a day like this, however, when there were gloomy clouds but no proof of storms, the dockmasters would charge a full day's rent. And so the fisher had to make a choice. Stay in the harbor and wait, or go fishing to recoup the dock fees. Most days like this didn't turn stormy. Most days like this were safe.

But if a storm did come on a day like this, it tended to be very bad. Many of the most terrible tempests in history had sprung from a dockmaster's sky. That's why some fishers had another name for clouds like those. They called them a lionfish's veil. And it had been days since the sky had offered anything different. Siuan shivered, pulling her shawl close. It was a bad sign.

She doubted many fishers had chosen to go out this day.

"Siuan?" Lelaine asked, voice tinged with annoyance. "Do hurry up. And I don't want to hear any more superstitious nonsense about the sky. Honestly." The tall Aes Sedai turned away and continued along the walk.

Superstitious? Siuan thought indignantly. *A thousand generations of wisdom isn't superstition. It's good sense!* But she said nothing, and hurried after Lelaine. Around her, the camp of Aes Sedai loyal to Egwene continued its daily activities, as steady as a clock's gears. If there was one thing Aes Sedai were good at, it was creating order. Tents were arranged in clusters, by Ajah, as if to imitate the White Tower's layout. There were few men, and most of those who passed—soldiers on errands from Gareth Bryne's armies, grooms caring for horses—were quick to be about their duties. They were far outnumbered by worker women, many of whom had gone so far as to embroider the pattern of the Flame of Tar Valon on their skirts or bodices.

One of the only oddities about the village—if one ignored the fact that there were tents instead of rooms and wooden walkways instead of tiled hallways—was the number of novices. There were hundreds and hundreds. In fact, the number had to be over a thousand now, many more than the Tower had held in recent memory. Once the Aes Sedai were reunited, novices' quarters that hadn't been used in decades would have to be reopened. They might even need the second kitchen.

These novices bustled around in families, and most of the Aes Sedai tried to ignore them. Some did this out of habit; who paid attention to novices? But others did so out of displeasure. By their estimation, women aged enough to be mothers and grandmothers—indeed, many who *were* mothers and grandmothers—shouldn't have been entered into the novice book. But what could be done? Egwene al'Vere, the Amyrlin Seat, had declared that it should happen.

Siuan could still sense shock in some of the Aes Sedai she passed. Egwene was to have been carefully controlled. What had gone wrong? When had the Amyrlin gotten away from them? Siuan would have taken more smug delight from those looks if she hadn't herself worried about Egwene's continued captivity in the White Tower. That was a lionfish's veil indeed. Potential for great success, but also for great disaster. She hurried after Lelaine.

"What is the status of the negotiations?" Lelaine asked, not bothering to look at Siuan.

You could go to one of the sessions yourself and find out, Siuan thought. But Lelaine wanted to be seen supervising, not taking an active hand. And asking Siuan, in the open, was also a calculated move. Siuan was known as one of Egwene's confidants and still carried some measure of notoriety for having been Amyrlin herself. The things Siuan said to Lelaine weren't important; being seen saying them, however, increased the woman's influence in camp.

"They don't go well, Lelaine," Siuan said. "Elaida's emissaries never promise anything, and seem indignant any time we raise important topics, like reinstating the Blue Ajah. I doubt they have any real authority from Elaida to make binding agreements."

"Hmm," Lelaine said thoughtfully, nodding to a group of novices. They bobbed into curtsies. In a shrewd decision, Lelaine had begun talking very acceptingly of the new novices.

Romanda's dislike of them was well known; now that Egwene was gone, Romanda had begun to imply that once reconciliation was achieved, this "foolishness" with the aged novices would have to be dealt with swiftly. However, more and more of the other sisters were seeing Egwene's wisdom. There was great strength among the new novices, and not a few would be raised to Accepted the moment the White Tower was achieved. Recently—by offering tacit acceptance of these women—Lelaine had given herself yet another tie to Egwene.

Siuan eyed the retreating family of novices. They had curtsied to Lelaine almost as quickly and as deferentially as they would have to the Amyrlin. It was becoming clear that, after months at a stalemate, Lelaine was winning the battle against Romanda for superiority.

And that was a very large problem.

Siuan didn't dislike Lelaine. She was capable, strong-willed and decisive. They had been friends once, though their relationship had changed drastically with Siuan's changed position.

Yes, she might say she liked Lelaine. But she *didn't* trust the woman, and she particularly didn't want to see her as Amyrlin. In another era, Lelaine would have done well in the position. But this world *needed* Egwene, and—friendship or not—Siuan couldn't afford to let this woman displace the rightful Amyrlin. And she had to make certain Lelaine wasn't taking action to prevent Egwene's return.

"Well," Lelaine said, "we shall have to discuss the negotiations in the Hall. The Amyrlin wants them to continue, so we certainly can't let them stop. Yet there must be a way to make them effective. The Amyrlin's desires must be seen to, wouldn't you say?"

"Undoubtedly," Siuan replied flatly.

Lelaine eyed her, and Siuan cursed herself for letting her emotions show. Lelaine needed to believe that Siuan was on her side. "I'm sorry, Lelaine. That woman has me in a fury. Why does Elaida hold talks if she won't concede a single point?"

Lelaine nodded. "Yes. But who can say why Elaida does what she does? The Amyrlin's reports indicate that Elaida's leadership of the Tower has been . . . erratic at best."

Siuan simply nodded. Fortunately, Lelaine didn't seem to suspect Siuan's disloyalty. Or she didn't care about it. It was remarkable how innocuous the women thought Siuan was, now that her power had been so greatly reduced.

Being weak was a new experience. From her very early days in the White Tower, sisters had noted her strength and her sharpness of mind. Whispers of her becoming Amyrlin had begun almost immediately—at times, it seemed that the Pattern itself had pushed Siuan directly into the Seat. Though her hasty ascent to Amyrlin while so young had come as a surprise to many, she herself had not been shocked. When you fished with squid as bait, you shouldn't be surprised to catch fangfish. If you wanted to catch eels, you used something else entirely.

When she'd first been Healed, her reduced power had been a disappointment. But that was changing. Yes, it was infuriating to be beneath so many, to lack respect from those around her. However, because she was weaker in power, many seemed to assume she was weaker in political skill as well! Could people really forget so quickly? She was finding her new status among the Aes Sedai to be liberating.

"Yes," Lelaine said as she nodded to another group of novices, "I believe that it is time to send envoys to the kingdoms that al'Thor hasn't conquered. We may not hold the White Tower itself, but that is no reason to abandon our political stewardship of the world."

"Yes, Lelaine," Siuan said. "But are you certain that Romanda won't argue against that?"

"Why would she?" Lelaine said dismissively. "It wouldn't make sense."

"Little Romanda does makes sense," Siuan said. "I think she disagrees just to spite you. But I *did* see her chatting with Maralenda earlier in the week."

Lelaine frowned. Maralenda was a distant cousin to the Trakand line.

Siuan covered a smile. It was amazing how much you could accomplish when people dismissed you. How many women had *she* dismissed because they lacked visible power? How often had *she* been manipulated much as she now manipulated Lelaine?

"I shall look into it," Lelaine said. It didn't matter what she discovered; as long as she was kept busy worrying about Romanda, she wouldn't be able to spend as much time stealing power from Egwene.

Egwene. The Amyrlin needed to hurry up and finish with her plotting in the White Tower. What good would it do to undermine Elaida if the Aes Sedai outside crumbled while Egwene wasn't watching? Siuan could only keep Romanda and Lelaine distracted for so long, particularly now that Lelaine held such a distinct advantage. Light! Some days, she felt that she was trying to juggle buttered live silverpike.

Siuan checked the position of the sun behind that dockmaster's sky. It was late afternoon. "Fish guts," she muttered. "I'll need to be going, Lelaine."

Lelaine glanced at her. "You have washing, I presume? For that ruffian of a general of yours?"

"He's *not* a ruffian," Siuan snapped, then cursed herself. She'd lose much of her advantage if she kept snapping at those who thought themselves her betters.

Lelaine smiled, eyes twinkling as if she knew something special. Insufferable woman. Friend or not, Siuan had half a mind to wipe . . .

No. "I apologize, Lelaine," Siuan forced out. "I get on edge, thinking of what that man demands of me."

"Yes," Lelaine said, downturning her lips. "I've considered on this, Siuan. The Amyrlin may have suffered Bryne's bullying of a sister, but I won't stand for it. You're one of my attendants now."

One of your attendants? Siuan thought. *I thought that I was just supposed to support you until Egwene returned.*

"Yes," Lelaine mused, "I should think it's time to put an end to your servitude to Bryne. I shall pay off your debt, Siuan."

"Pay off my debt?" Siuan said, feeling a moment of panic. "Is that wise? Not that I wouldn't mind being free of that man, of course, but my position offers me quite useful opportunities for listening in on his plans."

"Plans?" Lelaine asked, frowning.

Siuan cringed inwardly. The last thing she wanted was to imply wrongdoing on Bryne's part. Light, the man was strict enough to make *Warders* look sloppy in keeping their oaths.

She should just let Lelaine end this foolish servitude, but the thought made her stomach churn. Bryne was already disappointed that she'd broken her oath to him months before. Well, she *hadn't* broken that oath—she'd just postponed her period of service. But try convincing the stubborn fool of that fact!

If she took the easy way out now, what would he think of her? He'd think that he'd won, that she'd proven herself unable to keep her word. There was no way she'd let that happen.

Besides, she wasn't about to let Lelaine be the one who freed her. That would just move her debt from Bryne to Lelaine. The Aes Sedai would collect it in far more subtle ways, but each coin would end up being paid one way or another, if only through demands of loyalty.

"Lelaine," Siuan said softly, "I don't suspect the good general of anything. However, he controls our armies. Can he really be trusted to do as required without any supervision?"

Lelaine sniffed. "I'm not certain *any* man can be trusted without direction."

"I hate doing his laundry," Siuan said. Well, she did. Even if she wouldn't be stopped from doing it for all of the gold in Tar Valon. "But if the duty keeps me close, with a listening ear. . . ."

"Yes," Lelaine said, nodding slowly. "Yes, I see that you are right. I will not forget your sacrifice, Siuan. Very well, you are dismissed."

Lelaine turned, glancing down at her hand, as if longing for something. Probably wishing for the day when—as Amyrlin—she could offer her Great Serpent ring for a kiss when she parted ways with another sister. Light, but Egwene needed to return soon. Buttered silverpike! Buttered, flaming silverpike!

Siuan made her way toward the edge of the Aes Sedai camp. Bryne's army surrounded the Aes Sedai camp in a large ring, but she was on the far side of the ring from Bryne. It would take a good half-hour to walk to his command post. Fortunately, she found a wagon driver who was taking a load of supplies, brought through a gateway, to the army. The short, grizzled man immediately agreed to let her ride with the turnips, though he did seem puzzled why she didn't go get a horse, as befitted an Aes Sedai's station. Well, it wasn't *that* far, and riding with vegetables was a fate *far* less undignified than being forced to jounce around on the back of a horse. If Gareth Bryne wanted to complain about her tardiness, then he'd get an earful, he would!

She settled back against a lumpy sack of turnips, brown-skirted legs hanging over the back of the wagon. As the cart rolled up a slight incline, she could see over the Aes Sedai camp—with its white tents and citylike organization. Ringed around it was the army, with smaller tents in neat straight lines, and ringed around *them* was a growing ring of camp followers.

Beyond it all, the landscape was brown, the winter snows melted, but spring sprouts scarce. The countryside was pocketed with thickets of scrub oak; shadows in valleys and twisting lines of chimney smoke pointed to distant villages. It was surprising how familiar, how welcome, these grasslands felt. When she had first come to the White Tower, she'd been sure she'd never come to love this landlocked countryside.

Now she had lived much more of her life in Tar Valon than she had in Tear. It was difficult at times to recall that girl who had sewn nets and gone on early-morning trawling trips with her father. She'd become something else, a woman who traded in secrets rather than fish.

Secrets, those powerful, dominating secrets. They had become her life. No love save for youthful dalliances. No time for entanglements, or much room for friendships. She'd focused on only one thing: finding the Dragon Reborn. Helping him, guiding him, hopefully controlling him.

Moiraine had died following that same quest, but at least she had been able to go out and see the world. Siuan had grown old—in spirit, if not in body—cooped up in the Tower, pulling her strings and nudging the world. She'd done some good. Time would tell if those efforts had been enough.

She didn't regret her life. Yet, at this moment, passing army tents—holes and broken ruts in the path shaking the cart, making it rattle like dried fishbones in a kettle—she envied Moiraine. How often had Siuan bothered to look out of her window toward the beautiful green landscape, before it all had started going sickly? She and Moiraine had fought so hard to save this world, but they had left themselves without anything to enjoy in it.

Perhaps Siuan had made a mistake in staying with the Blue, unlike Leane, who had taken the opportunity in their stilling and Healing to change to the Green Ajah. *No,* Siuan thought, wagon rattling, smelling of bitter turnips. *No, I'm still focused on saving this blasted world.* There would be no switching to the Green for her. Though, thinking of Bryne, she did wish that the Blue were a little more like the Green in certain ways.

Siuan the Amyrlin hadn't had any time for entanglements, but what of Siuan the attendant? Guiding people with quiet manipulations required a lot more skill than bullying them with the power of the Amyrlin Seat, and it was proving more fulfilling. But it also left her without the crushing weight of responsibility she'd felt during her years leading the White Tower. Was there, perhaps, room in her life for a few more changes?

The wagon reached the far side of the army camp, and she shook her head at her own foolishness as she hopped down, then nodded her thanks to the wagon driver. Was she a girl, barely old enough for her first full-day blackfish trawl? There was no use in thinking of Bryne that way. At least not right now. There was too much to do.

She walked along the perimeter of the camp, army tents to her left. It was growing dark, and lanterns burning precious oil illuminated disorganized shanties and tents to her right. Ahead of her, a small circular palisade rose on the army side. It didn't enclose the entire army—in fact, it was only big enough for several dozen officer tents and some larger command tents. It was to act as a fortification in an emergency, but always as a center of operations—Bryne felt it good to have a physical barrier separating the larger camp from the place where he held conference with his officers. With the confusion of the civilian camp, and with such a long border to patrol, it would be too easy for spies to approach his tents otherwise.

The palisade was only about three-quarters done, but work was progressing quickly. Perhaps he would choose to surround the entire army, eventually, if the siege continued long enough. For now, Bryne felt that the small, fortified command post would not only suggest security to the soldiers, but also lend them a sense of authority.

The eight-foot wooden stakes rose from the ground ahead, a line of sentinels standing side by side, points raised to the sky. While holding a siege one generally had a lot of manpower for work like this. The guards at the palisade gate knew to let her pass, and she quickly made her way to Bryne's tent. She *did* have washing to do, but most of it would probably have to wait until the morning. She was supposed to meet Egwene in *Tel'aran'rhiod* as soon as it grew dark, and the glow of the sunset was already beginning to fade.

Bryne's tent, as usual, shone with only a very faint light. While people outside squandered their oil, he scrimped. Most of his men lived better than he did. Fool man. Siuan pushed her way into the tent without calling. If he was foolish enough to change without going behind the screen, then he was foolish enough to be seen doing it.

He was seated at his desk working by the light of a solitary candle. He appeared to be reading scout reports.

Siuan sniffed, letting the tent flaps droop closed behind her. Not a single lamp! That man! “You will ruin your eyes reading by such poor light, Gareth Bryne.”

“I have read by the light of a single candle for most of my life, Siuan,” he said, turning over a page and not looking up. “And I’ll have you know that my eyesight is the same as it was when I was a boy.”

“Oh?” Siuan said. “So you’re saying that your eyesight was poor to begin with?”

Bryne grinned, but continued his reading. Siuan sniffed again, loudly, to make sure he heard. Then she wove a globe of light and sent it hovering over beside his desk. Fool man. She wouldn’t have him going so blind he fell in battle to an attack he didn’t see. After setting the light beside his head—perhaps too close for him to be comfortable with it without scooting over—she walked over to pluck clothing off the drying line she’d strung across the center of the tent. He’d voiced no complaint about her using the *inside* of his tent for drying laundry, and hadn’t taken it down. That was a disappointment. She’d been anticipating chastising him for that.

“A woman from the camp outside approached me today,” Bryne said, shifting his chair to the side, then picking up another stack of pages. “She offered me laundry service. She’s organizing a group of washwomen in the camp, and she claimed that she could do my wash more quickly and effectively than a single distracted maidservant could.”

Siuan froze, sparing a glance at Bryne, who was looking through his papers. His strong jaw was lit on the left by the even white light of her globe and on the right by the flickering orange candlelight. Some men were made weak by age, others were made to look tired or slovenly. Bryne had simply become distinguished, like a pillar, crafted by a master stonemason, then left to the elements. Age hadn’t reduced Bryne’s effectiveness or his strength. It had simply given him character, dusting his temples with silver, creasing his firm face with lines of wisdom.

“And what did you tell this woman?” she asked.

Bryne turned a page over. “I told her that I was satisfied with my laundry.” He looked up at her. “I have to say, Siuan, that I’m surprised. I had assumed that an Aes Sedai would know little of work such as this, but rarely have my uniforms known such a perfect combination of stiffness and comfort. You are to be commended.”

Siuan turned away from him, hiding her blush. Fool man! She had caused kings to kneel before her! She manipulated the Aes Sedai and planned for the deliverance of mankind itself! And he complimented her on her *laundering* skills?

The thing was, from Bryne, that was an honest and meaningful compliment. He didn’t look down on washwomen, or on runner boys. He treated all with equity. A person didn’t gain stature in Gareth Bryne’s eyes by being a king or queen; one gained stature by keeping to one’s oaths and doing one’s duty. To him, a compliment on laundry well done was as meaningful as a medal awarded to a soldier who had stood his ground before the enemy.

She glanced back at him. He was still watching her. Fool man! She hurriedly took down another of his shirts and began folding it.

“You never did explain to my satisfaction why you broke your oath,” he said.

Siuan froze, looking at the back wall of the tent, splayed with shadows of the still-hanging laundry. “I thought that you understood,” she said, continuing to fold. “I had important information for the Aes Sedai in Salidar. Besides, I couldn’t very well let Logain run about free, now could I? I had to find him and get him to Salidar.”

“Those are excuses,” Bryne said. “Oh, I know that they’re true. But you’re Aes Sedai. You can cite four facts and use them to hide the real truth as effectively as another might use lies.”

“So you claim I’m a liar?” she demanded.

“No,” he said. “Just an oathbreaker.”

She glanced at him, eyes widening. Why, she’d let him hear the rough side of. . . .

She hesitated. He was watching her, bathed in the glow of the two lights, eyes thoughtful. Reserved, but not accusatory. “That question drove me here, you know,” he said. “It’s why I hunted you all that way. It’s why I finally swore to these rebel Aes Sedai, though I had little wish to be pulled into yet another war at Tar Valon. I did it all because I needed to understand. I had to know. Why? Why did the woman with those eyes—those passionate, haunting eyes—break her oath?”

"I told you I was going to return to you and fulfill that oath," Siuan said, turning away from him and snapping a shirt in front of her to unwrinkle it.

"Another excuse," he said softly. "Another answer from an Aes Sedai. Will I ever have the full truth from you, Siuan Sanche? Has anyone ever had it?" He sighed, and she heard papers rustle, the candle's light flickering in the faint stir of his movements as he turned back to his reports.

"When I was still an Accepted in the White Tower," Siuan said softly, "I was one of four people present when a Foretelling announced the imminent birth of the Dragon Reborn on the slopes of Dragonmount."

His rustling froze.

"One of the three others present," Siuan continued, "died on the spot. Another died soon after. I'm confident that she—the Amyrlin Seat herself—was murdered by the Black Ajah. Yes, it exists. If you tell anyone that I admitted that fact, I'll have your tongue.

"Anyway, before she died, the Amyrlin sent Aes Sedai out hunting the Dragon. One by one, those women vanished. The Blacks must have tortured their names out of Tamra before killing her. She would not have given up those names easily. I still shiver, sometimes, thinking about what she must have gone through.

"Soon, there were just the two of us left who knew. Moiraine and me. We weren't supposed to hear the Foretelling. We were just Accepted, in the room by happenstance. I believe that Tamra was somehow able to withhold our names from the Blacks, for if she hadn't, we'd have undoubtedly been murdered like the others.

"That left two of us. The only two in all of the world who knew what was coming. At least, the only two who served the Light. And so I did what I had to, Gareth Bryne. I dedicated my life to preparing for the Dragon's coming. I swore to see us through the Last Battle. To do whatever was necessary—*whatever* was necessary—to bear the burden I had been given. There was only one other person I knew I could trust, and she is now dead."

Siuan turned, meeting his eyes across the tent. A breeze rippled the walls and fluttered the candle, but Bryne sat still, watching her.

"So you see, Gareth Bryne," she said. "I *had* to delay fulfilling my oath to you because of other oaths. I swore to see this through to the end, and the Dragon has not yet met his destiny at Shayol Ghul. A person's oaths must follow their order of importance. When I swore to you, I did *not* promise to serve you immediately. I was intentionally careful on that point. You will call it an Aes Sedai wordplay. I would call it something else."

"Which is?" he asked.

"Doing what was necessary to protect you, your lands and your people, Gareth Bryne. You blame me for the loss of a barn and some cows. Well, then I suggest that you consider the cost to your people should the Dragon Reborn fail. Sometimes, prices must be paid so that a more important duty can be served. I would expect a soldier to understand that."

"You should have told me," he said, still meeting her eyes. "You should have explained who you were."

"What?" Siuan asked. "Would you have believed me?"

He hesitated.

"Besides," she said frankly, "I didn't trust you. Our previous meeting had not been particularly . . . amicable, as I recall. Could I have taken that risk, Gareth Bryne, on a man I did not know? Could I have given him control over the secrets I alone know, secrets that needed to be passed on to the new Amyrlin Seat? Should I have spared even a moment when the entire world was wearing the hangman's noose?"

She held those eyes, demanding an answer.

"No," he finally admitted. "Burn me, Siuan, but no. You shouldn't have waited. You shouldn't have made that oath in the first place!"

"*You* should have been more careful to listen," she said, finally breaking his gaze with a sniff. "I suggest that if you swear someone into service in the future, you be careful to stipulate a time frame for that service."

Bryne grunted and Siuan whipped the final shirt off of the drying line, causing it to shake, making a blurry shadow on the back wall of the tent.

"Well," Bryne said, "I told myself I'd only hold you to work as long as it took me to get that answer. Now I know. I would say that—"

"Stop!" Siuan snapped, spinning on him and pointing.

"But—"

"Don't say it," she threatened. "I'll gag you and leave you hanging in the air until sundown tomorrow. Don't think that I won't."

Bryne sat, silent.

"I'm not finished with you yet, Gareth Bryne." She whipped the shirt in her hands, then folded it. "I shall tell you when I am."

“Light, woman,” he muttered, almost under his breath. “If I’d known you were Aes Sedai before chasing you to Salidar . . . if I’d known what I was doing. . . .”

“What?” she demanded. “You wouldn’t have hunted me down?”

“Of course I would have,” he said indignantly. “I’d have just been more careful, and perhaps come better prepared. I went off hunting boars with a rabbit knife instead of a spear!”

Siuan set the folded shirt on top of the others, then picked up the stack. She gave him a suffering look. “I will do my best to pretend that you *didn’t* just compare me to a boar, Bryne. Kindly be a little more cautious with your tongue. Otherwise, you’ll find yourself without a maidservant, and you’ll *have* to let those ladies in the camp take up your laundry.”

He gave her a bemused look. Then he just laughed. She failed at keeping her own grin to herself. Well, after that exchange, he would know who was in control of this association.

But . . . Light! Why had she told him about the Foretelling? She’d rarely told anyone about that! As she packed the shirts in his trunk, she glanced at Bryne, who was still shaking his head and chuckling.

When other oaths no longer have a hold on me, she thought. *When I’m certain the Dragon Reborn is doing what he is supposed to, perhaps there will be time. For once, I’m actually starting to look forward to being done with this quest.* How remarkable.

“You should be bedding down, Siuan,” Bryne said.

“It’s early yet,” she said.

“Yes, but it’s sunset. Every third day you bed down uncharacteristically early, wearing that odd ring you have hidden between the cushions of your pallet.” He turned over a paper on his desk. “Please give my kind regards to the Amyrlin.”

She turned toward him, slack-jawed. He *couldn’t* know about *Tel’aran’rhiod*, could he? She caught him smiling in satisfaction. Well, perhaps he didn’t know about *Tel’aran’rhiod*, but he’d obviously guessed that the ring and her schedule had something to do with communicating with Egwene. Sly. He glanced over the top of his papers at her as she passed, and his eyes had a twinkle to them.

“Insufferable man,” she muttered, sitting down on her pallet and dismissing her globe of light. Then she sheepishly fished out the ring *ter’angreal* and put it around her neck, turned her back on him and lay down, trying to will herself to sleep. She made certain to rise early every third day so that she'd be tired at night. She wished she could put herself to sleep as easily as Egwene did.

Insufferable . . . *insufferable* man! She'd have to do something to get back at him. Mice in the bedsheets. That would be a good payback.

She lay for too long a time, but eventually coaxed herself to sleep, smiling faintly to herself at the prospect of an apt revenge. She awoke in *Tel'aran'rhiod* wearing nothing but a scandalous, barely covering shift. She yelped, immediately replacing that—through concentration—with a green dress. Green? Why green? She made it blue. Light! How was it that Egwene was always so good at controlling things in *Tel'aran'rhiod* while Siuan could barely keep her clothing from switching at every idle thought? It must have something to do with the fact that Siuan had to wear this inferior *ter'angreal* copy, which didn't work as well as the original. It made her look insubstantial to others who saw her.

She was standing in the middle of the Aes Sedai camp, surrounded by tents. The flaps of any given structure would be open one moment, then closed the next. The sky was troubled by a violent, yet strangely silent, storm. Curious, but things were often strange in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. She closed her eyes, willing herself to appear in the study of the Mistress of Novices in the White Tower. When she opened her eyes, she was there. A small, wood-paneled room with a stout desk and a table for strappings.

She would have liked to have the original ring, but Elayne had taken that one with her. She should be thankful for even a small catch, as her father had been fond of saying. She *could* have been left without any of the rings. The Sitters thought this one had been with Leane when she'd been captured.

Was Leane all right? At any moment, the false Amyrlin could opt for execution. Siuan knew all too well how spiteful Elaida could be; she still felt a stab of sorrow when she thought of poor Alric. Had Elaida felt a single moment of guilt over murdering a Warder in cold blood, before the woman she was tearing down had been properly deposed?

"A sword, Siuan?" Egwene's voice suddenly asked. "That's novel."

Siuan looked down, shocked to find herself holding a bloody sword, likely intended for Elaida's heart. She made it vanish, then regarded Egwene. The girl looked the part of the Amyrlin, wearing that magnificent golden gown, her brown hair in an intricate arrangement set with pearls.

Her face wasn’t ageless yet, but Egwene was getting *very* good at the calm serenity of an Aes Sedai. In fact, she seemed to have grown measurably better at that since her capture.

“You look well, Mother,” Siuan said.

“Thank you,” Egwene said, with a faint smile. She showed more of herself around Siuan than she did the others. They both knew how heavily Egwene had relied on Siuan’s teaching to get where she was.

Though she’d probably have made it there anyway, Siuan admitted. *Just not quite as quickly.*

Egwene glanced at the room around them, then grimaced faintly. “I realize I suggested this location last time, but I have seen enough of this room lately. I will meet you in the novices’ dining hall.” She vanished.

An odd choice, but very unlikely to conceal unwanted ears. Siuan and Egwene weren’t the only ones who used *Tel’aran’rhiod* for clandestine meetings. Siuan closed her eyes—she didn’t need to, but it seemed to help her—and imagined the novices’ dining hall, with its rows of benches and its bare walls. When she opened her eyes, she was there, as was Egwene. The Amyrlin settled back and a majestic stuffed chair appeared behind her, catching her gracefully as she sat. Siuan didn’t trust herself to do anything so complicated; she simply sat down on one of the benches.

“I think we may want to start meeting more frequently, Mother,” Siuan said, tapping the table as she ordered her thoughts.

“Oh?” Egwene asked, sitting up straighter. “Has something happened?”

“Several somethings,” Siuan said, “and I’m afraid a few of them smell as ripe as last week’s catch.”

“Tell me.”

“One of the Forsaken was in our camp,” Siuan said. She hadn’t wanted to think about *that* too frequently. The knowledge made her skin crawl.

“Is anyone dead?” Egwene asked, voice calm though her eyes looked to be steel.

“No, bless the Light,” Siuan said. “Other than those you already know about. Romanda made the connection. Egwene, the creature had been with us for some time, in hiding.”

“Who?”

“Delana Mosalaine,” Siuan said. “Or her serving woman, Halima. Most likely Halima, as I’ve known Delana for a great long time.” Egwene’s eyes widened just faintly. Halima had waited on Egwene. Egwene had been touched and served by one of the Forsaken. She took the news well. Like an Amyrlin.

“But Anaiya was killed by a man,” Egwene said. “Were those murders different?”

“No. Anaiya wasn’t murdered by a man, but by a woman wielding *saidin*. It must have been—it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Egwene nodded slowly. Anything was possible where the Dark One was concerned. Siuan smiled in satisfaction and pride. This girl was learning to be Amyrlin. Light, she *was* Amyrlin!

“There’s more?” Egwene asked.

“Not much more on this topic,” Siuan said. “They got away from us, unfortunately. Disappeared the very day we discovered them.”

“What warned them, I wonder.”

“Well, that involves one of the other things I need to tell you.” Siuan took a deep breath. The worst of it was out, but this next part wouldn’t be much easier to stomach. “There was a meeting of the Hall that day, attended by Delana. In that meeting, an Asha’man announced that he could sense a man channeling in the camp. We think that is what informed her. It wasn’t until after Delana fled that we made the connection. It was that same Asha’man who told us that his fellow had encountered a woman who could channel *saidin*.”

“And why was an Asha’man in the camp?” Egwene asked coolly.

“He’d been sent as an envoy,” Siuan explained. “From the Dragon Reborn. Mother, it appears some of the men who follow al’Thor have bonded Aes Sedai.”

Egwene blinked a single time. “Yes. I had heard rumors of this. I had hoped that they were exaggerated. Did this Asha’man say who gave Rand permission to commit such an atrocity?”

“He’s the Dragon Reborn,” Siuan said, grimacing. “I don’t think he feels he *needs* permission. But, in his defense, it appears he didn’t know it was happening. The women his men bonded were sent by Elaida to destroy the Black Tower.”

“Yes.” Egwene finally showed a sliver of emotion. “So the rumors are accurate. All too accurate.” Her beautiful dress retained its shape, but bled to a deep brown in color, like Aiel clothing. Egwene didn’t seem to notice the change. “Will Elaida’s reign of disasters never cease?”

Siuan just shook her head. “We’ve been offered forty-seven Asha’man to bond as restitution, of sorts, for the women al’Thor’s men bonded. Hardly a fair trade, but the Hall decided to accept the offer nonetheless.”

“As well they should have,” Egwene said. “We shall have to deal with the Dragon’s foolishness at a later date. Perhaps his men acted without his direct orders, but Rand must take responsibility. Men. Bonding women!”

“They claim *saidin* is cleansed,” Siuan said.

Egwene raised an eyebrow, but did not object. “Yes,” she said, “I suppose that might be a reasonable possibility. We will need further confirmation, of course. But the taint arrived when all seemed won; why should it not leave when all seems to be approaching pure madness?”

“I hadn’t considered it that way,” Siuan said. “Well, what should we do, Mother?”

“Let the Hall deal with it,” Egwene said. “It seems they have matters in hand.”

“They’d be better at *keeping* them in hand if you’d return, Mother.”

“Eventually,” Egwene said. She sat back and laced her fingers in her lap, somehow looking far older than her face would suggest. “My work is here, for now. You’ll have to see that the Hall does as it should. I have great faith in you.”

“And it’s appreciated, Mother,” Siuan said, keeping her frustration inside. “But I’m losing control of them. Lelaine has begun to set herself up as a second Amyrlin—and is doing it by pretending to support you. She’s seen that appearing to act in your name serves herself.”

Egwene pursed her lips. “I would have thought Romanda would take the advantage, considering that she discovered the Forsaken.”

“I think she assumed she’d hold the advantage,” Siuan said, “but she spent too long basking in her victory. Lelaine has, with no small effort, become the most devoted servant of the Amyrlin who has ever lived. You would think that you and she were the closest of confidants, to hear her speak! She’s appropriated me as her attendant, and each time the Hall meets it’s ‘Egwene wanted this’ and ‘Remember what Egwene said when we did that.’ ”

“Clever,” Egwene said.

“Brilliant,” Siuan said, sighing. “But we knew one of them was eventually going to claw her way ahead of the other. I keep diverting her toward Romanda, but I don’t know how long I can keep her distracted.”

“Do your best,” Egwene said. “But don’t worry if Lelaine refuses to be diverted.”

Siuan frowned. “But she’s usurping your place!”

“By building upon it,” Egwene said, smiling. She finally noticed that her dress had changed to brown, for she switched it back in a heartbeat, not breaking the conversation. “Lelaine’s gambit will only succeed if I fail to return. She is using *me* as a source of authority. When I return, she’ll have no choice but to accept my leadership. She’ll have spent all of her effort building me up.”

“And if you don’t return, Mother?” Siuan asked softly.

“Then it will be better for the Aes Sedai to have a strong leader,” Egwene said. “If Lelaine has been the one to secure that strength, then so be it.”

“She has good reason to make *certain* you don’t return, you know,” Siuan said. “At the very least, she’s betting against you.”

“Well, she can’t very well be blamed for that.” Egwene let down her guard enough to show a grimace. “I’d be tempted to bet against myself, if I were on the outside. You’ll simply have to deal with her, Siuan. I can’t let myself be distracted. Not when I see so much potential for success here, and not when there is an even greater price for failure.”

Siuan knew that stubborn set to Egwene’s jaw. There would be no persuading her tonight. Siuan would simply have to try again during their next meeting.

All of it—the cleansing, the Asha’man, the crumbling of the Tower—made her shiver uncomfortably. Though she’d been preparing for these days for most of her life, it was still unsettling to have them finally arrive. “The Last Battle really is coming,” Siuan said, mostly to herself.

“It is,” Egwene said, voice solemn.

“And I’m going to face it with barely a lick of my former power,” Siuan said, grimacing.

“Well, perhaps we can get you an *angreal* once the Tower is whole again,” Egwene said. “We’ll be using everything we have when we ride against the Shadow.”

Siuan smiled. “That would be nice, but not necessary. I’m just grumbling out of habit, I suppose. I’m actually learning to deal with my . . . new situation. It’s not so difficult to stomach, now that I see that it has some advantages.”

Egwene frowned, as if trying to figure out what advantages there could be in lessened power. Finally, she shook her head. “Elayne once mentioned a room to me in the Tower, filled with objects of power. I assume it really exists?”

“Of course,” Siuan said. “The basement storeroom. It’s in the second level of the basement, on the northeast side. Little room with a plain wooden door, but you can’t miss it. It’s the only one in the hallway that is locked.”

Egwene nodded to herself. “Well, I can’t defeat Elaida through brute force. Still, it is nice to know of that. Is there anything else remarkable to report?”

“Not at the moment, Mother,” Siuan said.

“Then return and get some sleep.” Egwene hesitated. “And next time, we’ll meet in two days. Here in the novices’ dining hall, though we may want to begin meeting out in the city. I don’t trust this place. If there was a Forsaken in our camp, I’d bet half my father’s inn that there’s one spying on the White Tower too.”

Siuan nodded. “Very well.” She closed her eyes, and soon found herself blinking awake back in Bryne’s tent. The candle was out, and she could hear Bryne breathing quietly from his pallet on the other side of the tent. She sat up and looked across at him, though it was too dark to see anything more than shadows. Strangely, after talking about Forsaken and Asha’man, the sturdy general’s presence comforted her.

Is there anything else remarkable to report, Egwene? Siuan thought idly, rising to change out of her dress behind the screen and put on her sleeping gown. *I think I might be in love. Is that remarkable enough?* To her, it seemed stranger than the taint being cleansed or a woman channeling *saidin*.

Shaking her head, she tucked the dream *ter’angreal* back in its hiding place, then snuggled down beneath her blankets.

She’d forgo the mice, just this once.

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CHAPTER 9

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Leaving Malden

A cool spring breeze tickled Perrin’s face. Such a breeze should have carried with it the scents of pollen and crisp morning dew, of dirt overturned by sprouts pushing into the light, of new life and an earth reborn.

This breeze carried with it only the scents of blood and death.

Perrin turned his back to the breeze, knelt down and inspected the wagon’s wheels. The vehicle was a sturdy construction of hickory, wood darkened with age. It appeared to be in good repair, but Perrin had learned to be careful when dealing with equipment from Malden. The Shaido didn’t scorn wagons and oxen as they did horses, but they—like all Aiel—believed in traveling light. They hadn’t maintained the wagons or carts, and Perrin had found more than one hidden flaw during his inspection.

“Next!” he bellowed as he checked the first wheel’s hub. The comment was directed at the crowd of people waiting to speak with him.

“My Lord,” a voice said. It was deep and rough, like wood scraping against wood. Gerard Arganda, First Captain of Ghealdan. His scent was of well-oiled armor. “I must press the issue of our departure. Allow me to ride ahead with Her Majesty.”

The “Her Majesty” he referred to was Alliandre, Queen of Ghealdan. Perrin continued working with the wheel; he wasn’t as familiar with carpentry as he was with smithing, but his father had taught each of his sons to recognize signs of trouble in a wagon. Better to fix the problem before leaving than to be stranded halfway to the destination. Perrin ran his fingers across the smooth, brown hickory. The grain was clearly visible, and he tested for cracks with questing fingers, searching each point of stress. All four wheels looked good.

“My Lord?” Arganda asked.

“We all march together,” Perrin said. “That’s my order, Arganda. I won’t have the refugees thinking that we’re abandoning them.”

Refugees. There were over a hundred thousand of those to care for. A hundred thousand! Light, that was far more than lived in the entire Two Rivers. And Perrin was in charge of feeding every one of them. Wagons. Many men didn’t understand the importance of a good wagon. He lay down on his back, preparing to inspect the axles, and that gave him a view of the overcast sky, partially blocked by Malden’s nearby city wall.

The city was large for one this far north in Altara. It was almost more of a fortress than a city, with daunting walls and towers. Until the day before, the land around this city had been home to the Shaido Aiel, but they were gone now, many killed, others fled, their captives freed by an alliance between Perrin's forces and the Seanchan.

The Shaido had left him two things: a scent of blood on the air and a hundred thousand refugees to care for. Though he was happy to give them their freedom, his goal in liberating Malden had been far different: the rescue of Faile.

Another Aiel group had been advancing on his position, but they'd slowed, then camped, and were no longer rushing toward Malden. Perhaps they'd been warned by Shaido fleeing the battle that they had a large army before them, one that had defeated the Shaido despite their channelers. It seemed this new group behind Perrin had as little desire to engage him as he had to engage them.

That gave him time. A little bit, at least.

Arganda was still watching. The captain wore his polished breastplate and had his slotted helmet under his arm. The squat man wasn't a puffed-up fluff of an officer, but a common man who had risen through the ranks. He fought well and did as instructed. Usually.

"I'm not going to bend on this, Arganda," Perrin said, pulling himself along the damp ground beneath the wagon.

"Could we at least use gateways instead?" Arganda asked, kneeling down, graying hair—shorn short—nearly brushing the ground as he peeked under the wagon.

"The Asha'man are near dead from fatigue," Perrin snapped. "You know that."

"They're too tired for a large gateway," Arganda said, "but maybe they could send a small group. My lady is exhausted from her captivity! Surely you don't mean for her to march!"

"The refugees are tired too," Perrin said. "Alliandre can have a horse to ride, but she's leaving when the rest of us do. Light send that's soon."

Arganda sighed, but nodded. He stood up as Perrin ran fingers along the axle. He could tell stress in wood with a glance, but he preferred touch. Touch was more reliable. There was always a crack or a splintering where wood weakened, and you could feel it near to breaking. Wood was reliable like that.

Unlike men. Unlike himself.

He gritted his teeth. He didn’t want to think about that. He had to keep working, had to keep doing *something* to distract himself. He liked to work. He’d been given far too few opportunities for it lately. “Next!” he said, voice echoing against the bottom of the wagon.

“My Lord, we should attack!” a boisterous voice declared from beside the vehicle.

Perrin thumped his head back against the well-trampled grass, closing his eyes. Bertain Gallenne, Lord Captain of the Winged Guards, was to Mayene what Arganda was to Ghealdan. Aside from that single similarity, the two captains were about as different as men could be. Perrin could see Bertain’s large, beautifully worked boots, with clasps shaped like hawks, from beneath the wagon.

“My Lord,” Bertain continued. “A fine charge from the Winged Guard would scatter that Aiel rabble, of this I’m certain. Why, we easily dealt with the Aiel here in the city!”

“We had the Seanchan, then,” Perrin said, finishing with the rear axle and wriggling his way to the front to check the other one. He wore his old, stained coat. Faile would chastise him for that. He was supposed to present himself as a lord. But would she really expect him to wear a fine coat if he was going to spend an hour lying in the muddy grass, looking at the bottoms of wagons?

Faile wouldn’t want him to be in the muddy grass in the first place. Perrin hesitated, hand on the front axle, thinking of her raven hair and distinctive Saldaean nose. She held the sum total of his love. She was everything to him.

He had succeeded—he’d saved her. So why did he feel as if things were nearly as bad as they had been? He should rejoice, he should be ecstatic, should be relieved. He’d worried so much about her during her captivity. And yet now, with her safety secure, everything still felt wrong. Somehow. In ways he couldn’t explain.

Light! Would *nothing* just work as it was supposed to? He reached down for his pocket, wanting to finger the knotted cord he’d once carried there. But he’d thrown that away. *Stop it!* he thought. *She’s back. We can go back to the way it was before. Can’t we?*

“Yes, well,” Bertain continued, “I suppose the departure of the Seanchan could be a problem in an assault. But that Aiel group camped out there is smaller than what we already defeated. And if you are worried, you could send word to that Seanchan general and bring her back. Surely she would wish to fight alongside us again!”

Perrin forced himself back to the moment. His own foolish problems were irrelevant; right now, he needed to get these wagons moving. The front axle was good. He turned and pushed himself out from underneath the wagon.

Bertain was of medium height, though the three plumes rising from his helmet made him look taller. He had on his red eye patch—Perrin didn’t know where he’d lost the eye—and his armor gleamed. He seemed excited, as if he thought Perrin’s silence meant they would attack.

Perrin stood, dusting off his plain brown trousers. “We’re leaving,” he said, then held up a hand to forbid further argument. “We defeated the septs here, but we had them dosed with forkroot and there were *damane* on our side. We’re tired, wounded, and we have Faile back. There’s no further reason to fight. We run.”

Bertain didn’t look satisfied, but he nodded and turned away, stomping across the muddy ground toward where his men sat their mounts. Perrin looked at the small group of people who waited in a cluster around the wagon to speak with him. Once, this kind of business had frustrated Perrin. It seemed like pointless work, as many of the supplicants already knew what his answer would be.

But they needed to hear those answers from him, and Perrin had come to understand the importance of that. Besides, their questions helped distract him from the strange tension he felt at having rescued Faile.

He walked toward the next wagon in line, his small entourage following him. There were a good fifty of the wagons set in a long caravan train. The first ones were loaded with salvage from Malden; the middle ones were in the process of being treated likewise, and he had only two left to inspect. He had wanted to be well out of Malden before sunset. That would probably carry him far enough away to be safe.

Unless these new Shaido decided to give chase in revenge. With the number of people Perrin had to move, a blind man would be able to track them.

The sun drooped toward the horizon, a shining spot behind the cloud cover. Light, but this was a mess, with the chaos of organizing refugees and separate army camps. Getting away was supposed to be the easy part!

The Shaido camp was a disaster. His people had scavenged and packed many of the abandoned tents. Now cleared, the ground around the city was trampled weeds and mud, littered with refuse. The Shaido, being Aiel, had preferred to camp *outside* the city walls, rather than within them. They were a strange people, no denying that. Who would spurn a nice bed, not to mention a better military position, to stay outside in tents?

Aiel despised cities, though. Most of the buildings had either been burned during the initial Shaido assault or looted for riches. Doors beaten down, windows shattered, possessions abandoned on the streets and trampled by *gai'shain* running back and forth to fetch water.

People still scurried about like insects, moving through the city gates and around the former Shaido camp, grabbing what they could to stow it for transport. They'd have to leave the wagons behind once they decided to Travel—Grady couldn't make a gateway big enough to pass a wagon through—but for now, the vehicles would be a big help. There were also a good number of oxen; someone else was inspecting those, making certain they were fit to pull the wagons. The Shaido had let many of the city's horses run off. A shame, that. But you made use of what you had.

Perrin reached the next wagon, beginning his inspection with the vehicle's long tongue, to which oxen would be harnessed. "Next!"

"My Lord," said a scratchy voice, "I believe that I am next."

Perrin glanced over at the speaker: Sebban Balwer, his secretary. The man had a dry, pinched face and a perpetual stoop that made him look almost like a roosting vulture. Though his coat and breeches were clean, it seemed to Perrin that they should shed puffs of dust each time Balwer stepped. He smelled musty, like an old book.

"Balwer," Perrin said, running his fingers over the tongue, then checking the harness straps, "I thought you were speaking with the captives."

"I have, indeed, been busy with my work there," Balwer said. "However, I grew curious. Did you have to let the Seanchan take *all* of the captive Shaido channelers with them?"

Perrin glanced at the musty secretary. The Wise Ones who could channel had been knocked unconscious by forkroot; they'd been given over to the Seanchan while still unconscious, to do with as they pleased. The decision had not made Perrin popular with the Aiel among his allies, but he would *not* have those channelers running about to take revenge on him.

“I don’t see why I would want them,” he said to Balwer.

“Well, my Lord, there is much of great interest to learn. For instance, it appears that many of the Shaido are ashamed of their clan’s behavior. The Wise Ones themselves were at odds. Also, they have had dealings with some very curious individuals who offered them objects of power from the Age of Legends. Whoever they were, they could make gateways.”

“Forsaken,” Perrin said with a shrug, stooping down on one knee to check the right front wheel. “I doubt we’ll figure out which ones. Probably had a disguise on.”

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Balwer purse his lips at that comment.

“You disagree?” Perrin asked.

“No, my Lord,” he said. “The ‘objects’ the Shaido were given are very suspect, by my estimation. The Aiel were duped, though for what reason, I cannot yet fathom. However, if we had more time to search the city. . . .”

Light! Was *every* person in the camp going to ask him for something they knew they couldn’t have? He got down on the ground to check the back of the wheel hub. Something about it bothered him. “We already know that the Forsaken oppose us, Balwer. They won’t rightly welcome Rand in with open arms to seal them away again, or whatever it is he’s going to do.”

Blasted colors, showing Rand in his mind’s eye! He pushed those away again. They appeared whenever he thought of Rand or Mat, bringing visions of them.

“Anyway,” Perrin continued, “I don’t see what you need me to do. We’ll take the Shaido *gai’shain* with us. The Maidens captured their fair share. You can interrogate them. But we’re leaving this place.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Balwer said. “It’s just a shame we lost those Wise Ones. My experience has been that they are those among the Aiel with the most . . . understanding.”

“The Seanchan wanted them,” Perrin said. “So they got them. I wouldn’t let Edarra bully me on the point, and what is done is done. What do you expect of me, Balwer?”

“Perhaps a message could be sent,” Balwer said, “to ask some questions of the Wise Ones when they awake. I. . . .” He stopped, then stooped down to glance at Perrin. “My Lord, this is rather distracting. Couldn’t we find someone else to inspect the wagons?”

“Everyone else is either too tired or too busy,” Perrin said. “I want most of the refugees waiting in the camps to move when we give the marching order. And most of our soldiers are scavenging the city for supplies—each handful of grain they find will be needed. Half the stuff’s spoiled anyway. I can’t help with that work, since I need to be where people can find me.” He’d accepted that, cross though it made him.

“Yes, my Lord,” Balwer said. “But surely you can be somewhere accessible *without* crawling under wagons.”

“It’s work I can do while people talk to me,” Perrin said. “You don’t need my hands, just my tongue. And that tongue is telling you to forget the Aiel.”

“But—”

“There is nothing more I can do, Balwer,” Perrin said firmly, glancing up at him through the spokes of the wheel. “We’re heading north. I’m done with the Shaido; they can burn for all I care.”

Balwer pursed his thin lips again, and he smelled just slightly of annoyance. “Of course, my Lord,” he said, giving a quick bow. Then he withdrew.

Perrin squirmed out and stood up, nodding to a young woman who stood in a dirty dress and worn shoes at the side of the line of wagons. “Go fetch Lyncon,” he said. “Tell him to have a look at this wheel hub. I think the bearing’s been stripped, and the blasted thing looks ready to roll right off.”

The young woman nodded, running away. Lyncon was a master carpenter who had been unfortunate enough to be visiting relatives in Cairhien when the Shaido attacked. He’d had the will beaten nearly out of him. Perhaps he should have been the one to inspect the wagons, but with that haunted look in his eyes, Perrin wasn’t sure how far he trusted the man to do a proper inspection. He seemed good enough at fixing problems when they were pointed out to him, though.

And the truth was, as long as Perrin kept moving, he felt he was doing something, making progress. Not thinking about other issues. Wagons were easy to fix. They weren’t like people, not at all.

Perrin turned, glancing across the empty camp, pocked with firepits and discarded rags. Faile was walking back toward the city; she’d been organizing some of her followers to scout the area. She was striking. Beautiful. That beauty wasn’t just in her face or her lean figure, it was in how easily she commanded people, how quickly she always knew what to do. She was clever in a way Perrin never had been.

He wasn't stupid; he just liked to think about things. But he'd never been good with people, not like Mat or Rand. Faile had shown him that he didn't need to be good with people, or even with women, as long as he could make *one* person understand him. He didn't have to be good at talking to anyone else as long as he could talk to her.

But now he couldn't find the words to say. He worried about what had happened to her during her captivity, but the possibilities didn't bother him. They made him angry, but none of what had happened was her fault. You did what you had to to survive. He respected her for her strength.

Light! he thought. *I'm thinking again! Need to keep working.* "Next!" he bellowed, stooping down to continue his inspection of the wagon.

"If I'd seen your face and nothing else, lad," a hearty voice said, "I'd assume that we'd lost this battle."

Perrin turned with surprise. He hadn't realized that Tam al'Thor was one of those waiting to speak with him. That crowd had thinned, but there were still some messengers and attendants. At the back, the blocky, solid sheepherder leaned on his quarterstaff as he waited. His hair had all gone to silver. Perrin could remember a time when it had been a deep black. Back when Perrin had just been a boy, before he'd known a hammer or a forge.

Perrin's fingers reached down, touching the hammer at his waist. He'd chosen it over the axe. It had been the right decision, but he'd still lost control of himself in the battle for Malden. Was that what bothered him?

Or was it how much he'd enjoyed the killing?

"What do you need, Tam?" he asked.

"I'm only bringing a report, my Lord," Tam said. "The Two Rivers men are organized for the march, each man with two tents on his back, just in case. We couldn't use water from the city, on account of the forkroot, so I sent some lads to the aqueduct to fill some barrels there. We could use a wagon to bring them back."

"Done," Perrin said, smiling. Finally, someone who did things that were needed without having to ask first! "Tell the Two Rivers men that I intend to have them back home as soon as possible. The moment Grady and Neald are strong enough to make a gateway. That could be a while, though."

“That’s appreciated, my Lord,” Tam said. It felt so strange for him to use a title. “Can I speak to you alone for a moment, though?”

Perrin nodded, noticing that Lyncon was coming—his limp was distinctive—to look at the wagon. Perrin moved with Tam away from the group of attendants and guards, walking into the shadow of Malden’s wall. Moss grew green against the base of the massive blocks making up the fortification; it was strange that the moss was far brighter than the trampled, muddied weeds under their feet. Nothing but moss seemed green this spring.

“What is it, Tam?” Perrin asked as soon as they were far enough away.

Tam rubbed his face; there was gray stubble coming in. Perrin had pushed his men hard these last few days, and there hadn’t been time for shaving. Tam wore a simple blue wool coat, and the thick cloth was probably a welcome shield against the mountain breeze.

“The lads are wondering, Perrin,” Tam said, a little less formal now that they were alone. “Did you mean what you said about giving up on Manetheren?”

“Aye,” Perrin said. “That banner has been nothing but trouble since it first came out. The Seanchan, and everyone else, might as well know. I’m no king.”

“You have a queen who’s sworn you as her liege.”

He considered Tam’s words, working out the best response. Once that kind of behavior had made people think he was slow of thought. Now people assumed his thoughtfulness meant that Perrin was crafty and keen minded. What a difference a few fancy words in front of your name made!

“I think you’re right, in what you did,” Tam said, surprisingly. “Calling the Two Rivers Manetheren would not only have antagonized the Seanchan, but the Queen of Andor herself. It would imply that you meant to hold more than just the Two Rivers, that perhaps you wanted to conquer all that Manetheren once held.”

Perrin shook his head. “I don’t mean to conquer anything, Tam. Light! I don’t mean to hold what people say I’ve got. The sooner that Elayne takes her throne and sends a proper lord out to the Two Rivers, the better. We can be done with all of this Lord Perrin business and things can go back to normal.”

“And Queen Alliandre?” Tam asked.

“She can swear to Elayne instead,” Perrin said stubbornly. “Or maybe directly to Rand. He seems to like scooping up kingdoms. Like a child playing a game of wobbles.”

Tam smelled concerned. Troubled. Perrin looked away. Things should be simpler. They *should* be. “What?”

“I just thought you were over this,” Tam said.

“Nothing has changed from the days before Faile was taken,” Perrin said. “I still don’t like that wolf head banner either. I think maybe it’s time to take that one down too.”

“The men believe in that banner, Perrin, lad,” Tam said quietly. He had a soft way about him, but that made you listen when he spoke. Of course, he also usually spoke sense. “I pulled you aside because I wanted to warn you. If you provide a chance for the lads to return to the Two Rivers, some will go. But not many. I’ve heard most swear that they’ll follow you to Shayol Ghul. They know the Last Battle is coming—who couldn’t know that, with all of the signs lately? They don’t intend to be left behind.” He hesitated. “And neither do I, I reckon.” He smelled of determination.

“We’ll see,” Perrin said, frowning. “We’ll see.”

He sent Tam off with orders to requisition a wagon and take it for those water barrels. The soldiers would listen; Tam was Perrin’s First Captain, though that seemed backward to Perrin. He didn’t know much of the man’s past, but Tam had fought in the Aiel War, long ago; he’d held a sword before Perrin had been born. And now he followed Perrin’s orders.

They all did. And they wanted to keep doing so! Hadn’t they learned? He rested back against the wall, not walking back to his attendants, standing in the shadow.

Now that he seized upon it, he realized that was a part of what was bothering him. Not the whole of it, but some, tied in with what was troubling him. Even now that Faile had returned.

He hadn’t been a good leader lately. He’d never been a model one, of course, not even when Faile had been there to guide him. But during her absence, he’d been worse. Far worse. He’d ignored his orders from Rand, ignored everything, all to get her back.

But what else was a man supposed to do? His wife had been kidnapped!

He’d saved her. But in doing so, he’d abandoned everyone else. And because of him, men were dead. Good men. Men who had trusted in him.

Standing in that shadow, he remembered a moment—only a day past—when an ally had fallen to Aiel arrows, his heart poisoned by Masema. Aram had been a friend, one that Perrin had discarded in his quest to save Faile. Aram had deserved better.

I should never have let that Tinker pick up a sword, he thought, but he didn't want to deal with this problem right now. He *couldn't*. There was too much to do. He moved away from the wall, planning to inspect the last wagon in line.

"Next!" he barked as he began again.

Aravine Carnel stepped forward. The Amadician woman no longer wore her *gai'shain* robes; instead she had on a simple light green dress, not clean, that had been pulled out of the salvage. She was plump but her face still bore a haggard cast from her days as a captive. There was a determination about her. She was surprisingly good at organization, and Perrin suspected she was of noble heritage. She had the scent of it about her: self-confidence, an ease giving commands. It was a wonder those things had survived her captivity.

As he knelt down to look at the first wheel, he figured it was odd that Faile had chosen Aravine to supervise the refugees. Why not one of the youths from *Cha Faile*? Those dandies could be annoying, but they'd shown a surprising measure of competence.

"My Lord," Aravine said, her practiced curtsy another indication of her background. "I have finished organizing the people for departure."

"So soon?" Perrin asked, looking up from the wheel.

"It was not so difficult as we expected, my Lord. I commanded them to gather by nationality, then by town of birth. Not surprisingly, the Cairhienin form the largest bulk of them, followed by Altarans, then Amadicians, with some smattering of others. A few Domani, some Taraboners, the occasional Borderlander or Tairen."

"How many can stand a day or two of marching without a ride in the wagons?"

"Most of them, my Lord," she said. "The sick and elderly were expelled from the city when the Shaido took it. The people here are accustomed to being worked hard. They're exhausted, Lord, but none too eager to be waiting here with those other Shaido camped not half a day's march away."

"All right," Perrin said. "Start them marching immediately."

“Immediately?” Aravine asked with surprise.

He nodded. “I want them on that road, marching northward, as soon as you can get them going. I’ll send Alliandre and her guard to lead the way.” That ought to keep Arganda from complaining, and it would get the refugees out of the way. The Maidens would be far better, and far more efficient, at gathering supplies alone. The scavenging was nearly finished anyway. His people would have to survive on the road for only a few weeks. After that, they could jump via gateway to someplace more secure. Andor, perhaps, or Cairhien.

Those Shaido behind had him anxious. They could decide to attack at any time. Better to get away and remove the temptation.

Aravine curtsied and hurried away to make preparations, and Perrin thanked the Light for someone else who didn’t see a need to question or second-guess him. He sent a boy to inform Arganda of the impending march, then finished his inspection of the wagon. After that, he stood up, wiping his hands on his trousers. “Next!” he said.

Nobody stepped forward. The only people remaining around him were guards, messenger boys and a few wagoneers waiting to hitch up their oxen and move the wagons off for loading. The Maidens had made a large pile of foodstuffs and supplies in the middle of the former camp, and Perrin could make out Faile there working to organize it.

Perrin sent the ring of attendants with him over to help her, then found himself alone. With nothing to do.

Just what he’d wanted to avoid.

The wind blew past again, carrying that awful stench of death. It also carried memories. The fury of the battle, the passion and thrill of each swing. Aiel were excellent warriors—the best the land knew. Each exchange had been close, and Perrin had earned his share of cuts and bruises, though those had since been Healed.

Fighting the Aiel had made him feel alive. Each one he’d slain had been an expert with the spears; each one could have killed him. But he’d won. During those moments of fighting, he’d felt a driving passion. The passion of finally *doing* something. After two months of waiting, each blow had meant a step closer to finding Faile.

No more talking. No more planning. He’d found purpose. And now it was gone.

He felt hollow. It was like . . . like the time when his father had promised him something special as a gift for Winternight. Perrin had waited months, eager, doing his chores to earn the unknown gift. When he’d finally received the small wooden horse, he’d been excited for a moment. But the next day, he’d been shockingly melancholy. Not because of the gift, but because there had no longer been anything to strive for. The excitement was gone, and only then had he realized how much more precious he’d found that anticipation than the gift itself.

Soon after that he’d begun visiting Master Luhhan’s forge, eventually becoming his apprentice.

He was glad to have Faile back. He rejoiced. And yet, now what was there for him? These blasted men saw him as their leader. Some even thought of him as their king! He’d never asked for that. He’d had them put away the banners every time they put them out, up until Faile had persuaded him that using them would be an advantage. He still didn’t believe that the wolfhead banner belonged there, flapping insolently above his camp.

But could he take it down? The men *did* look to it. He could smell pride on them every time they passed it. He couldn’t turn them away. Rand would need their aid—he’d need everyone’s aid—at the Last Battle.

The Last Battle. Could a man like him, a man who didn’t want to be in charge, lead these forces to the most important moment in their lives?

The colors swirled, showing him Rand, sitting in what appeared to be a stone Tairen home. Perrin’s old friend had a dark cast to his expression, like a man troubled by weighty thoughts. Even sitting like that, Rand looked regal. *He* was what a king was supposed to be, with that rich red coat, that noble bearing. Perrin was just a blacksmith.

He sighed, shaking his head and dispelling the image. He needed to seek out Rand. He could feel something tugging at him, *pulling* him.

Rand needed him. That had to be his focus now.

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CHAPTER 10

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The Last of the Tabac

Rodel Ituralde puffed quietly on his pipe, smoke curling from it like the sinuous coils of a snake. The smoke tendrils wrapped around themselves, pooling at the ceiling above him, then leaking out through cracks in the roof of the ramshackle shed. The boards in the walls were warped from age, opening slits to the outside, and the gray wood was cracked and splintering. A brazier burned in the corner and winds whistled through the cracks in the walls. Ituralde faintly worried those winds would blow over the entire building.

He sat on a stool, several maps on the table before him. At the corner of the table, his tabac pouch weighed down a wrinkled piece of paper. The small square was weathered and folded from being carried in his inside coat pocket.

"Well?" Rajabi asked. Thick of neck and determined of attitude, he was brown-eyed, with a wide nose and a bulbous chin. He was completely bald now, and faintly resembled a large boulder. He tended to act like a boulder, too. It could take a lot of work to get him rolling, but once you did, he was bloody hard to stop. He had been one of the first to join Ituralde's cause, for all the fact that he had been poised to rebel against the king just a short time before.

It had been nearly two weeks since Ituralde's victory at Darluna. He'd extended himself far for that victory. Perhaps too far. *Ah, Alsalam,* he thought. *I hope this was all worth it, old friend. I hope you haven't just gone mad. Rajabi might be a boulder, but the Seanchan are an avalanche, and we've brought them thundering down upon us.*

"What now?" Rajabi prodded.

"We wait," Ituralde said. Light, but he hated waiting. "Then we fight. Or maybe we run again. I haven't made up my mind yet."

"The Taraboners—"

"Won't come," Ituralde said.

"They promised!"

"They did." Ituralde had gone to them himself, had roused them, had asked them to fight the Seanchan just one more time. They'd yelled and cheered, but had not followed with any haste. They would drag their feet. He'd gotten them to fight "one last time" on half a dozen different occasions now. They could see where this war was going, and he could no longer depend on them. If he'd ever been able to in the first place.

"Bloody cowards," Rajabi muttered. "Light burn them, then! We'll do it alone. We have before."

Ituralde took a long, contemplative puff on his pipe. He'd chosen to finally use the Two Rivers tabac. This pipeful was the last in his store; he'd been saving it for months, now. Good flavor. Best there was.

He studied his maps again, holding a smaller one up before him. He could use better maps, that was certain. "This new Seanchan general," Ituralde said, "is marshaling over three hundred thousand men, with a good two hundred *damane*."

"We've beat large forces before. Look what we did at Darluna! You crushed them, Rodel!"

And doing so had required every bit of craftiness, skill and luck Ituralde could muster. Even then, he'd lost well over half his men. Now he ran, limping, before this second, larger force of Seanchan.

This time, they weren't making any mistakes. The Seanchan didn't rely solely on their *raken*. His men had intercepted several foot scouts, and that meant dozens *hadn't* been caught. This time, the Seanchan knew Ituralde's true numbers and his true location.

His enemies were done being herded and goaded; instead they hunted him, relentlessly, avoiding his traps. Ituralde had planned to retreat deeper and deeper into Arad Doman; that would favor his forces and stretch the Seanchan supply lines. He'd figured he could keep it up for another four or five months. But those plans were useless now; they'd been made before Ituralde had discovered there was an entire bloody army of Aiel running about Arad Doman. If the reports were to be believed—and reports about Aiel were often exaggerations, so he wasn't sure how much *to* believe—there were upwards of a hundred thousand of them holding large sections of the north, Bandar Eban included.

A hundred thousand Aiel. That was as good as two hundred thousand Domani troops. Perhaps more. Ituralde well remembered the Blood Snow twenty years ago, when it had seemed he'd lost ten men for each Aiel who fell.

He was trapped, a walnut crushed between two stones. The best he'd been able to do was retreat here, to this abandoned *stedding*. That would give him an edge against the Seanchan. But only a small one. The Seanchan had a force six times the size of his own, and the greenest of commanders knew that fighting those odds was suicide.

"Have you ever seen a master juggler, Rajabi?" Ituralde asked, studying the map.

From the corner of his eye, Ituralde saw the bull-like man frown in confusion. "I've seen gleemen who—"

"No, not a gleeman. A master."

Rajabi shook his head.

Ituralde puffed in thought before speaking. "I did, once. He was the court bard of Caemlyn. Spry fellow, with a wit that might better have belonged in a common room, for all the way he was decorated. Bards don't often juggle; but this fellow didn't mind the request. He liked juggling to please the young Daughter-Heir, so I understand."

He removed the pipe from his mouth, tapping down the tabac.

"Rodel," Rajabi said. "The Seanchan. . . ."

Rodel held up a finger, situating his pipe before continuing. "The bard started by juggling three balls. Then he asked us if we thought he could do another. We cheered him on. He went to four, then five, then six. With each ball he added, our applause grew greater, and he always asked if we thought he could do another. Of course we said yes.

"Seven, eight, nine. Soon he had ten balls going in the air, flying in a pattern so complex that I couldn't track them. He had to strain to keep them going; he kept having to reach down and grab balls that he nearly missed. He was too lost in concentration to ask us if he should add another, but the crowd called for it. Eleven! Go for eleven! And so, his assistant tossed another ball into the mess."

Ituralde puffed.

"He dropped them?" Rajabi asked.

Rodel shook his head. "That last 'ball' wasn't actually a ball at all. It was some kind of Illuminator's trick; once it got halfway to the bard, it flashed and gave off a sudden burst of light and smoke. By the time our vision cleared, the bard was gone, and ten balls were lined up on the floor. When I looked around, I found him sitting at one of the tables with the rest of the diners, drinking a cup of wine and flirting with Lord Finndal's wife."

Poor Rajabi looked completely dumbfounded. He liked his answers neat and straightforward. Ituralde usually felt the same way, but these days

—with their unnaturally overcast skies and sense of perpetual gloom—made him philosophic.

He reached out and took the worn, folded sheet of paper off the table from beneath his tabac pouch. He handed it to Rajabi.

“ ‘Strike hard against the Seanchan,’ ” Rajabi read. “ ‘Push them away, force them into their boats and back across their bloody ocean. I’m counting on you, old friend. King Alsalam.’ ” Rajabi lowered the letter. “I know of his orders, Rodel. I didn’t come into this because of him. I came because of you.”

“Yes, but *I* fight because of him,” Ituralde said. He was a king’s man; he always would be. He stood up, tapping out his tabac and grinding the embers beneath the heel of his boot. He set the pipe aside and took the letter from Rajabi, then walked to the door.

He needed to make a decision. Stay and fight, or flee for a worse location, but gain a little more time?

The shack groaned and wind shook the trees as Ituralde stepped outside into the overcast morning. The shed wasn’t Ogier-built, of course. It was too flimsy for that. This *stedding* had been abandoned for a long time. His men camped amid the trees. Hardly the best location for a war camp, but one made soup with the spices on hand; the *stedding* was far too useful to pass up. Another man might have fled to a city and hidden behind its walls, but here in these trees, the One Power was useless. Negating the Seanchan *damane* was better than walls, no matter how high.

We have to stay, Ituralde thought, watching his men work, digging in, erecting a palisade. He hated the thought of cutting down trees in a *stedding*. He’d known a few Ogier in his time, and respected them. These massive oaks probably held some lingering strength from the days when the Ogier had lived here. Cutting them down was a crime. But you did what you had to. Running might gain him more time, but it might just as easily *lose* him time. He had a few days here before the Seanchan hit him. If he could dig in well, he might force them into a siege. The *stedding* would make them hesitant, and the forests would work to the advantage of Ituralde’s smaller force.

He hated letting himself get pinned in. That was probably why he’d considered for so long, even though, deep down, he’d already known that it was time to stop running. The Seanchan had finally caught him.

He continued along the ranks, nodding to working men, letting himself be seen. He had forty thousand troops left, which was a marvel, considering the odds they had faced. These men should have deserted. But they'd seen him win impossible battle after impossible battle, tossing ball after ball into the air to greater and greater applause. They thought he was unstoppable. They didn't understand that when one tossed more balls into the air, it wasn't just the *show* that became more spectacular.

The fall at the end grew more spectacular as well.

He kept his dark thoughts to himself as he and Rajabi continued through the forested camp, inspecting the palisade. It was progressing nicely, the men setting thick tree trunks into freshly dug troughs. After his inspection, Ituralde nodded to himself. "We stay, Rajabi. Pass the word."

"Some of the others say that staying here means dying for sure," Rajabi responded.

"They're wrong," Ituralde said.

"But—"

"Nothing is sure, Rajabi," Ituralde said. "Fill these trees inside the palisade with archers; they'll be almost as effective as towers. We'll need to set up a killing field outside. Cut down as many trees around the palisade here as possible, then set the logs inside as barriers, a second line of retreat. We'll hold strong. Perhaps I'm wrong about those Taraboners, and they'll ride to aid us. Or maybe the king has a hidden army stashed away to defend us. Blood and ashes, maybe we'll fight them off here on our own. We'll see how much they like fighting without their *damane*. We'll survive."

Rajabi straightened visibly, growing confident. That was the kind of talk Ituralde knew he expected. Like the others, Rajabi trusted the Little Wolf. They didn't believe he *could* fail.

Ituralde knew better. But if you were going to die, you did it with dignity. The young Ituralde had often dreamed of wars, of the glory of battle. The old Ituralde knew there was no such thing as glory to be had in battle. But there *was* honor.

"My Lord Ituralde!" a runner called, trotting along the inside of the unfinished palisade wall. He was a boy, young enough that the Seanchan would probably let him live. Otherwise Ituralde would have sent the lad, and those like him, away.

"Yes?" Ituralde asked, turning. Rajabi stood like a small mountain at his side.

"A man," the boy said, puffing. "The scouts caught him walking into the *stedding*."

"Come to fight for us?" Ituralde said. It was not uncommon for an army to draw recruits. There were always those tempted by the lure of glory, or at least by the lure of steady meals.

"No, my Lord," the boy said, puffing. "He says he's come to see you."

"Seanchan?" Rajabi barked.

The boy shook his head. "No. But he's got nice clothes."

Some lord's messenger, then. Domani, or perhaps a Taraboner renegade. Whoever he was, he could hardly make their situation worse. "And he came alone?"

"Yes, sir."

Brave man. "Bring him, then," Ituralde said.

"Where will you receive him, my Lord?"

"What?" Ituralde snapped. "You think I'm some fancy merchant with a palace? The field here will do. Go get him, but take your time getting back. And make sure he's properly guarded."

The boy nodded and ran off. Ituralde waved over some soldiers and sent them running for Wakeda and the other officers. Shimron was dead, burned to char by a *damane*'s fireball. Too bad, that. Ituralde would rather have kept him than many of the others.

Most of the officers arrived before the stranger. Lanky Ankaer. One-eyed Wakeda, who might otherwise have been a handsome man. Squat Melarned. Youthful Lidrin, who continued to follow Ituralde after his father's death.

"What is this I hear?" Wakeda asked, folding his arms as he strode up. "We're staying in this death trap? Rodel, we don't have the troops to resist. If they come, we'll be trapped here."

"You're right," Ituralde said simply.

Wakeda turned to the others, then back to Ituralde, a little of his irritation deflated in the face of Ituralde's frank answer. "Well . . . why don't we run, then?" He blustered a lot less now than he had just months ago, when Ituralde had first begun this campaign.

"I won't give you sugar and lies," Ituralde said, looking at them each in turn. "We're in a bad shape. But we'll be in a *worse* shape if we run. We've got no more holes to hide in. These trees will work to our advantage, and we can fortify. The *stedding* will negate the *damane*, and that alone is worth the price of staying. We fight here."

Ankaer nodded, seeming to understand the gravity of the situation. "We have to trust him, Wakeda. He's led us right so far."

Wakeda nodded. "I suppose."

Bloody fools. Four months ago, half of them would have killed him on sight for staying loyal to the king. Now they thought he could do the impossible. It was a pity; he was beginning to think he could have brought them back to Alsalam as loyalists. "All right," he said, pointing at various spots along their fortification. "Here's what we're going to do to shore up the weak points. I want . . ."

He trailed off as he saw a group approaching through the clearing. The messenger boy, accompanied by a squad of soldiers, escorting a man in red and gold.

Something about the newcomer drew Ituralde's eyes. Perhaps it was the height; the young man was as tall as an Aiel, and fair of hair like them as well. But no Aiel dressed in a fine red coat with sharp golden embroidery. There was a sword at his side, and the way the newcomer walked made Ituralde think he knew how to use it. He strode with firm, determined steps, as if he thought the soldiers around him an honor guard. A lord, then, and one accustomed to command. Why had he come in person, rather than sending a messenger?

The young lord stopped a short length in front of Ituralde and his generals, looking at each of them in turn, then focused on Ituralde. "Rodel Ituralde?" he asked. What accent was that? Andoran?

"Yes," Ituralde said cautiously.

The young man nodded. "Bashere's description was accurate. You appear to be boxing yourself in, here. Do you honestly expect to hold against the Seanchan army? They are many times your size, and your Tarabon allies do not appear . . . eager to join you in your defense."

He had good intelligence, whoever he was. "I am not in the habit of discussing my defenses with strangers." Ituralde studied the young lord. He was fit—lean and hard, though it was difficult to tell with the coat on. He favored his right hand, and on closer inspection, Ituralde noticed that the left hand was missing. Both of his forearms had some kind of strange red and gold tattoo on them.

Those eyes. Those were eyes which had seen death a number of times. Not just a young *lord*. A young *general*. Ituralde narrowed his eyes. “Who are you?”

The stranger met his eyes. “I am Rand al’Thor, the Dragon Reborn. And I need you. You and your army.”

Several of those with Ituralde cursed, and Ituralde glanced at them. Wakeda was incredulous, Rajabi surprised, young Lidrin openly dismissive.

Ituralde looked back at the newcomer. The Dragon Reborn? This youth? He supposed it could be possible. Most rumors agreed that the Dragon Reborn was a young man with red hair. But, then, rumors also claimed he was ten feet tall, and still others said his eyes glowed in dim light. And then there were the stories of him appearing in the sky at Falme. Blood and ashes, Ituralde didn’t know if he believed that the Dragon *had* been reborn in the first place!

“I haven’t time to argue,” the stranger said, face impassive. He seemed . . . older than he looked. He didn’t appear to care that he was surrounded by armed soldiers. In fact, his coming alone . . . it should have seemed like such a foolish act. Instead it made Ituralde thoughtful. Only one such as the Dragon Reborn himself could stride into a war camp like this, completely alone, and *expect* to be obeyed.

Burn him, if that fact by itself didn’t make Ituralde want to believe him. Either this man was who he claimed to be or he was an utter lunatic.

“If we go outside the *stedding*, I will prove I can channel,” the stranger said. “That should count for something. Give me leave, and I’ll have ten thousand Aiel here and several Aes Sedai, all of whom will swear to you that I am who I say.”

The rumors also said Aiel followed the Dragon Reborn. The men around Ituralde coughed and glanced about uncomfortably. Many had been Dragonsworn before coming to Ituralde. With the right words, this Rand al’Thor—or whoever he was—might be able turn Ituralde’s camp against itself.

“Even if we assume that I believe you,” Ituralde said carefully, “I don’t see that it matters. I have a war to fight. You have other business to concern you, I assume.”

“*You* are my concern,” al’Thor said, eyes so hard that they seemed ready to burrow into Ituralde’s skull and search about inside for anything of use. “You must make peace with the Seanchan. This war gains us nothing. I want you up on the Borderlands; I can’t spare men to guard the Blight, and the Borderlanders themselves have abandoned their duties.”

“I have orders,” Ituralde said, shaking his head. Wait. He wouldn’t do as this youth asked if he *didn’t* have orders. Except . . . those eyes. Alsalam had had eyes like that, when they were both younger. Eyes that demanded obedience.

“Your orders,” al’Thor said. “They are from the king? That is why you throw yourselves against the Seanchan as you do?”

Ituralde nodded.

“I’ve heard of you, Rodel Ituralde,” al’Thor said. “Men I trust, men I respect, trust and respect *you*. Rather than fleeing and hiding, you hunker down here to fight a battle you know will kill you. All because of your loyalty to your king. I commend that. But it is time to turn away and fight a battle that means something. One that means *everything*. Come with me, and I’ll give you the throne of Arad Doman.”

Ituralde stood up sharply, alert. “After commending my loyalty, you expect me to unseat my own king!”

“Your king is *dead*,” al’Thor said. “Either that, or his mind has been melted like wax. More and more, I think Graendal has him. I see her touch on the chaos in this land. Whatever orders you have likely came from her. Why she wants you fighting the Seanchan, I haven’t yet been able to determine.”

Ituralde snorted. “You speak of one of the Forsaken as if you’ve had her as a dinner guest.”

Al’Thor met his eyes again. “I remember each of them—their faces, their mannerisms, the way they speak and act—as if I’ve known them for a thousand years. I remember them better than I remember my own childhood, sometimes. I am the Dragon Reborn.”

Ituralde blinked. *Burn me,* he thought. *I believe him. Bloody ashes!* “Let’s . . . let’s see this proof of yours.”

There were objections, of course, mostly from Lidrin, who thought it too dangerous. The others were shaken. Here was the man they’d sworn themselves to without ever meeting him. There seemed to be a . . . a *force* about al’Thor, drawing Ituralde in, demanding that he do as asked. Well, he’d see the proof, first.

They sent runners for horses to ride out of the *stedding*, but al’Thor spoke as if Ituralde was his man already. “Perhaps Alsalam lives,” al’Thor said as they waited. “If so, I can see that you would not want his throne. Would you like Amadicia? I will need someone to rule there and keep an eye on the Seanchan. The Whitecloaks fight there now; I’m not sure if I’ll be able to stop that conflict before the Last Battle.”

The Last Battle. Light! “I won’t take it if you kill the king there,” Ituralde said. “If the Whitecloaks have already killed him, or if the Seanchan have, then perhaps.”

King! What was he saying? *Burn you!* he thought to himself. *At least wait until the proof is given before agreeing to accept thrones!* There was a way about this man, the way he discussed events like the Last Battle—events that mankind had been fearing for thousands of years—as if they were items on the daily camp report.

Soldiers arrived with their horses, and Ituralde mounted, as did al’Thor, Wakeda, Rajabi, Ankaer, Melarned, Lidrin and a half-dozen lesser officers.

“I’ve brought a large number of Aiel into your lands,” Rand al’Thor said as they began to ride. “I had hoped to use them to restore order, but they are taking longer than I’d wished. I’m planning to secure the members of the merchant council; perhaps once I have them in hand, I’ll be able to improve the stability of the area. What do you think?”

Ituralde didn’t know what to think. Securing the merchant council? That sounded like kidnapping them. What had Ituralde gotten himself into? “It could work,” he found himself saying. “Light, it’s probably the best plan, all things considered.”

Al’Thor nodded, looking forward as they passed out of the palisade and moved out along a trail toward the edge of the *stedding*. “I’ll have to secure the Borderlands, anyway. I will care for your homeland. Burn those Borderlanders! What are they up to? No. No, not yet. They can wait. No, he’ll do. He can hold it. I’ll send him with Asha’man.” Suddenly, al’Thor turned to Ituralde. “What could you do if I gave you a hundred men who could channel?”

“Madmen?”

“No, most of them are stable,” al’Thor said, taking no apparent offense. “Whatever madness they incurred before I cleansed the taint is still there—removing the taint didn’t heal them—but few of them were far gone. And they won’t get worse, now that *saidin* is clean.”

Saidin? Clean? If Ituralde had his own men who could channel. . . . His own *damane,* in a way. Ituralde scratched his chin. It was coming at him quickly—but, then, a general had to be able to react quickly. "I could use them well," he said. "Very well."

"Good," al'Thor said. They had left the *stedding*; the air felt different. "You've got a lot of land to watch, but many of the channelers I'll give you can spin gateways."

"Gateways?" Ituralde asked.

Al'Thor glanced at him, then seemed to grit his teeth, closing his eyes, shaking as if nauseated. Ituralde sat upright, suddenly alert, hand on his sword. Poison? Was the man wounded?

But no, al'Thor opened his eyes, and there seemed to be a look of ecstasy in those depths. He turned, waving his hand, and a line of light split the air in front of him. Men around Ituralde cursed, backing up. It was one thing for a man to claim he could channel; it was another to see him do so in front of you!

"That's a gateway," al'Thor said as the line of light turned around, opening a large black hole in the air. "Depending on the Asha'man's strength, a gateway can be made wide enough to drive wagons through. You can travel nearly anywhere with speed, sometimes instantly, depending on circumstances. With a few trained Asha'man, your army could dine in Caemlyn in the morning, then have lunch in Tanchico a few hours later."

Ituralde rubbed his chin. "Well now, *that*'s a thing to see. A thing to see indeed." If this man spoke truthfully, and these gateways really *did* work. . . . "With *this* I could clear the Seanchan out of Tarabon, and maybe off the land entirely!"

"No," al'Thor snapped. "We make peace with them. From what my scouts say, it's going to be hard enough to bring them to agreement without promising them your head. I won't rile them further. There is no *time* for squabbling. We have more important matters to be about."

"Nothing is more important than my homeland," Ituralde said. "Even if those orders are forged, I know Alsalam. He would agree with me. We won't stand for foreign troops on the soil of Arad Doman."

"A promise, then," al'Thor said. "I will see the Seanchan out of Arad Doman. I promise you this. But we don't fight them away any further than that. In exchange, you go to the Borderlands and protect against an invasion there. Hold back the Trollocs if they come, and lend me some of your officers to help secure Arad Doman. It will be easier to restore order if the people see that their own lords are working with me."

Ituralde considered, though he knew already what his answer would be. That gateway could spirit his men away from this death trap. With Aiel on his side—with the Dragon Reborn as an ally—he really *did* have a chance of keeping Arad Doman secure. An honorable death was a good thing. But the ability to keep on fighting with honor . . . that was a prize far more precious.

"Agreed," Ituralde said, holding out a hand.

Al'Thor took it. "Go break camp. You're to be in Saldaea by nightfall."

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CHAPTER 11

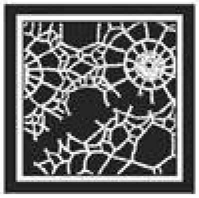

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The Death of Adrin

I think he should be beaten again, said Lerian, moving her fingers in the complex motions of Maiden handtalk. *He is like a child, and when a child touches something dangerous, the child is beaten. If a child hurts himself because he was not taught properly to stay away from knives, then the shame is upon his parents.*

The previous beating did not seem to do any good, Surial replied. *He accepted it like a man, not a child, but did not change his actions.*

Then we must try again, Lerian replied.

Aviendha dropped her rock into the pile by the watchpost, then turned around. She did not acknowledge the Maidens who watched the way into the camp, and they did not acknowledge her. Speaking to her while she was being punished would only heighten her shame, and her spear-sisters would not do that.

She also didn't indicate that she understood their conversation. While nobody expected a former Maiden to forget handtalk, it was best to be unobtrusive. The handtalk belonged to the Maidens.

Aviendha selected a large stone from a second pile, then began to walk back into camp. If the Maidens continued their conversation, she could not tell, as she could no longer see their hands. But their discussion lingered with her. They were angered that Rand al'Thor had gone to meet with the general Rodel Ituralde without guards. It was not the first time he had acted so foolishly, and yet he seemed unwilling—or unable—to learn the proper way. Each time he put himself in danger without protection, he insulted the Maidens as surely as if he had slapped each one in the face.

Aviendha probably had some small *toh* toward her spear-sisters. Teaching Rand al'Thor of Aiel ways had been her task, and she had quite obviously failed. Unfortunately, she had a much greater *toh* toward the Wise Ones, even if she still didn't know the reason. Her lesser duty to her spear-sisters would have to wait for an appropriate time.

Her arms ached from carrying rocks. They were smooth and heavy; she had been required to dig them out of the river beside the manor house. Only her time spent with Elayne—when she had been forced to bathe in water—had given her the strength to walk into that river. In that, she had not shamed herself. And at least this river was a small one—wetlanders might inaccurately call it a stream. A stream was a tiny mountain runoff in which you could dip your hands or fill a waterskin. Anything too large to step across was definitely a river.

The day was overcast, as usual, and the camp was subdued. Men who had bustled just days before—when the Aiel had arrived—were more lethargic now. The camp wasn't by any means unkempt; Davram Bashere was too careful a commander to allow that, wetlander though he was. However, the men *did* move more slowly. She had heard some of them complain that the dark sky was dampening their moods. How strange wetlanders were! What did the weather have to do with one's mood? She could understand being displeased that no raids were approaching, or that a hunt had gone poorly. But because there were clouds in the sky? Was shade so poorly appreciated here?

She shook her head, continuing on her way. She had chosen stones which would strain her muscles. To do otherwise would have been to make light of her punishment, and she wouldn't do that—although each step pained her honor. She had to cross through the entire camp, in full sight, doing work that was useless! She would rather have been naked before them all outside of the sweat tent. She would rather have run a thousand laps, or been beaten so hard that she couldn't walk.

She reached the side of the manor house and deposited her stone with a hidden sigh of relief. Two wetlander soldiers from Bashere's army stood guarding the door into the manor, a counterpart to the two Maidens at the other end of Aviendha's trek. As she stooped and picked up a large stone from a second pile by the wall, she overheard them speaking.

"Burn me, but it's hot," one of the men complained.

"Hot?" the other replied, glancing at the overcast sky. "You're jesting."

The first guard waved his hand at himself, puffing out and sweating. "How can you not feel that?"

"You must have a fever or something."

The first guard shook his head. "I just don't like the heat, that's all."

Aviendha picked up her rock and began to walk back across the green. After some contemplation, she had determined that being a wetlander required one common attribute: a fondness for complaining. During her first months in the wetlands, she had considered this shameful. Did that guard not care that he was losing face in front of his fellow by exposing his weakness?

They were all like that, even Elayne. If you listened to her talk about the aches, sicknesses and frustrations of her pregnancy, you would almost think she was approaching death! However, if complaining was something that Elayne did, then Aviendha refused to accept it as a sign of weakness. Her first-sister would not act in such a shameful way.

Therefore, there had to be some hidden honor in it. Perhaps the wetlanders exposed their weaknesses to their companions as a means of offering friendship and trust. If your friends knew of your weaknesses, it would give them an advantage should you dance the spears with them. Or, perhaps, the complaining was a wetlander way of showing humility, much as the *gai'shain* showed honor by being subservient.

She had asked Elayne about her theories and had received only a fond laugh in return. Was it some aspect of wetlander society that she was forbidden to discuss with outsiders, then? Had Elayne laughed because Aviendha had figured out something she was not meant to?

Either way, it was certainly a way to show honor, and that satisfied Aviendha. If only her own problems with the Wise Ones were as simple! It was expected that the wetlanders would act in erratic, unnatural ways. But what was she to do when Wise Ones behaved so strangely?

She was growing frustrated—not with the Wise Ones, but with herself. She was strong and brave. Not as brave as some others, of course; she could only wish to be as bold as Elayne. Still, Aviendha could think of only a few problems which she hadn't been able to solve with the application of spears, the One Power or her wits. Yet she had failed utterly at deciphering her current predicament.

She reached the other side of the camp and deposited her stone, then brushed off her hands. The Maidens stood motionless and contemplative. Aviendha moved to the other pile and picked up an oblong rock with a jagged edge. It was three handspans wide, and the smooth surface threatened to slip in her fingers. She had to shift it several times before getting a good purchase. She headed back across the trampled winter thatch, past Saldaean tents, toward the manor house.

Elayne would say that Aviendha hadn't thought the problem through. Elayne was calm and thoughtful when other people were tense. Aviendha sometimes grew frustrated with how much her first-sister liked to talk before committing to action. *I need to be more like her. I need to remember* *that I’m not a Maiden of the Spear any longer. I can’t charge in with weapon held high.*

She needed to approach problems as Elayne did. That was the only way she was going to get her honor back, and only then could she claim Rand al’Thor and make him hers as much as he was Elayne’s or Min’s. She could feel him through the bond; he was in his room, but was not sleeping. He pushed himself hard and slept too little.

The stone slipped in her fingers, and she nearly stumbled as she rebalanced her weight, hefting it in tired arms. Some of Bashere’s soldiers walked past, bemused expressions on their faces, and Aviendha felt herself blush. Although they might not know that she was being punished, she was shamed before them.

How would Elayne reason out this situation? The Wise Ones were angry at Aviendha for not “learning quickly enough.” And yet they didn’t teach her. They just asked those questions. Questions about what she thought of their situation, questions about Rand al’Thor or about the way Rhuarc had handled meeting with the *Car’a’carn*.

Aviendha couldn’t help feeling that the questions were tests. Was she answering incorrectly? If so, why didn’t they instruct her in the proper responses?

The Wise Ones didn’t think she was soft. What was left? What would Elayne say? Aviendha wished for her spears back so that she could stab something. Attack, test herself against another, work out her anger.

No, she thought forcefully. *I am going to learn to do this as a Wise One. I* will *find honor again!*

She reached the manor and dropped her rock. She wiped her brow; ignoring heat and cold as Elayne had taught her didn’t keep her from sweating when she worked her body this hard.

“Adrin?” one door guard asked his companion. “Light, you don’t look well. Truly.”

Aviendha glanced toward the doorway into the manor. The guard who had been complaining about the heat was sagging against the doorway, hand on his forehead. He really *didn’t* look well. Aviendha embraced *saidar*. She wasn’t the best at Healing, but perhaps she could—

The man reached up suddenly, scratching at the skin of his temples. His eyes rolled up in his head and his fingers tore gashes in his flesh. Only, instead of blood, the wounds spat out a black charcoal-like substance. Aviendha could feel the intense heat even from a distance.

The other guard gaped in horror as his friend ripped lines of black fire down the sides of his head. A blackish tar oozed out, boiling and hissing. The man's clothing burst into flames and his flesh shriveled from the heat.

He didn't utter a sound.

Aviendha shrugged off her shock, immediately weaving Air in a simple pattern to pull the unaffected guard to safety. His friend was now just a pulsing mound of black tar which, in places, sprouted blackened bones. There was no skull. The heat was so strong that Aviendha had to back away, pulling the guard with her.

"We . . . we're being attacked!" the man whispered. "Channelers!"

"No," Aviendha said, "this is something far more evil. Run for help!"

He seemed too shocked to move, but she shoved him into motion and he began to move. The tar itself didn't seem to be spreading, which was a blessing, but it had already ignited the doorframe of the manor. It could have the entire building in flames before anyone inside was aware of the danger.

Aviendha wove Air and Water, intending to extinguish the flame. However, her weaves frazzled and wavered when they got near the fire. They didn't unweave, but this fire somehow resisted them.

She took another step back from the awesome, burning intensity. Her brow prickled with sweat, and she had to raise her arm to shade her face from the heat. She could barely make out the black char at the center as it began to glow with the deep red and white of extremely hot coals. Soon, only hints of the black remained. The fire spread across the front wall of the building. Aviendha heard screams from inside.

Aviendha shook herself, then growled and wove Earth and Air, pulling chunks of the ground up around her. She hurled these at the fire, seeking to smother it. Her weave could not draw the heat out, but that did not stop her from using weaves to cast items *into* the fire. Chunks of grass-covered earth sizzled and hissed, wan blades flashing to ash before the incredible heat. Aviendha continued to work, sweating from both the exertion and the temperature.

In the distance, she heard people—perhaps the guard among them—calling for buckets.

Buckets? Of course! In the Three-fold Land, water was far too valuable to use in fighting fires. Dirt or sand was used. But here, they *would* use water. Aviendha took several steps backward, searching out the curling river that ran beside the manor. She could just barely make out its surface, reflecting the dancing reds and oranges of the flames. Already, the entire front of the manor was aflame! She felt channeling from inside—Aes Sedai or Wise Ones. Hopefully, they would escape out of the back of the building. The fire had engulfed the inner hallway, and the rooms off of it had no doors out.

Aviendha wove a massive column of Air and Water, pulling a spout of crystalline liquid from the river and drawing it toward her. The column of water undulated in the air like the creature on Rand’s banner, a glassy serpentine dragon that slammed against the flames. Steam hissed outward in an explosion, washing over her.

The heat was powerful and the wave of steam scalded her skin, but she did not back down. She pulled more water, hurling a thick column of it at the darkened mound, which she could only just make out through the steam.

That heat was so intense! Aviendha stumbled backward a few steps, gritting her teeth, continuing to work. Then there was a sudden explosion as another column of water burst from the river and slammed into the fire. This, along with her own, diverted nearly the entire flow of the river. Aviendha blinked. The other column was being directed by weaves she could not see, but she did notice a figure standing in a window up on the second floor, hand forward, face concentrating intensely. Naeff, one of Rand’s Asha’man. It was said he was particularly strong with Air.

The fires had retreated; only the tarry mound remained, radiating a powerful heat. The wall near it and the entryway inside had become a gaping, blackened hole. Aviendha continued to pull water and dump it on the charred black mass, though she was beginning to feel extremely tired. Handling so much water required her to channel almost to her capacity.

Soon the water stopped hissing. Aviendha slacked her flow, then let it dribble to a stop. The ground around her was a wet, blackened disarray that smelled heavily of soggy ash. Bits of wood and char floated in the muddy water, and the holes where she had ripped up earth were filled, making pools. She walked forward hesitantly, inspecting the lump that was the remains of the unfortunate soldier. It was glassy and black, like obsidian, and it sparkled wetly. She picked up a length of singed wood—broken from the wall by the force of her water column—and poked at the mass. It was hard and firm.

“Burn you!” a voice bellowed. Aviendha looked up. Rand al’Thor strode through the broken hole that now formed the front of the mansion. He stared at the sky, shaking his fist. “I am the one you want! You will have your war soon enough!”

“Rand,” Aviendha said hesitantly. Soldiers were milling about the green, looking concerned, as if expecting a battle. Bewildered servants peeked out of rooms inside the manor. The entire episode with the flames had taken less than five minutes.

“I will stop you!” Rand roared, causing calls of fright from both servants and soldiers. “Do you hear me! I am coming for you! Don’t waste your power! You will need it against me!”

“Rand!” Aviendha called.

He froze, then looked down at her, dazed. She met his eyes, and she could feel his anger, almost as she’d felt the intense flames just a short time before. He turned and stalked away, walking back into the building and up the blackened wooden steps.

“Light!” an anxious voice asked. “Does this sort of thing happen often when *he* is near?”

Aviendha turned to see a young man in an unfamiliar uniform standing and watching. He was lanky, with light brown hair and coppery skin—she didn’t remember his name, but she was fairly certain he was one of the officers Rand had brought back after meeting with Rodel Ituralde.

She turned back to the mess, listening to soldiers call orders in the distance. Bashere had arrived and was taking command, telling men to watch the perimeter, though he was likely just giving them something to do. This was not the beginning of an attack. It was just another of the Dark One’s touches on the world, like meat spoiling, beetles and rats appearing from nothing, and men dropping dead of strange diseases.

“Yes,” Aviendha said in response to the man’s question, “it happens often. More often around the *Car’a’carn* than in other places, at least. You have had similar events among your own men?”

“I have heard stories,” he said. “Only I dismissed them.”

“Not all stories are exaggerations,” she said, looking at the blackened remains of the soldier. “The Dark One’s prison is weak.”

"Bloody ashes," the young man said, turning away. "What have you gotten us into, Rodel?" The man shook his head and stalked off.

Bashere's officers began calling orders, organizing the men to clean up. Would Rand move out of the manor, now? When pockets of evil appeared, people often wanted to leave. And yet, through her bond with Rand, she felt no urgency. In fact . . . it seemed that he had gone back to rest! That man's moods were becoming as erratic as Elayne's during her pregnancy.

Aviendha shook her head and started gathering burned chunks of wood to help clean. As she worked, several Aes Sedai came out of the building and began inspecting the damage. The entire front of the manor was scored with black marks, and the hole where the entryway had been was at least fifteen feet across. One of the women, Merise, eyed Aviendha appreciatively. "A shame," she said.

Aviendha straightened up, lifting a piece of charred wood, her clothing still soaked. With those clouds covering the sun, it would be long before she was dry. "A shame?" she asked. "About the manor?" The portly Lord Tellaen, owner of the place, moaned to himself as he sat on a stool inside the entryway, wiping his brow and shaking his head.

"No," Merise said. "A shame about you, child. Your skill with weaves, it is impressive. If we had you in the White Tower, you'd have been an Aes Sedai by now. Your weaving, it has some roughness to it, but you'd learn to fix that quickly if taught by sisters."

There was an audible sniff, and Aviendha spun. Melaine stood behind her. The golden-haired Wise One had her arms folded beneath her breasts, and her stomach was starting to bulge with child. Her face was not amused. How had Aviendha let the woman walk up behind her without hearing? She was letting her fatigue make her careless.

Melaine and Merise stared at each other for a long moment; then the tall Aes Sedai spun in a flurry of green skirts and moved off to speak with the servants who had been trapped by the flames, asking if any of them needed Healing. Melaine watched her go, then shook her head. "Insufferable woman," she muttered. "To think, how we once regarded them!"

"Wise One?" Aviendha asked.

"I'm stronger than most Aes Sedai, Aviendha, and you're far stronger than I am. You have a control and understanding of weaves that puts most of us to shame. Others have to struggle to learn what comes naturally to you. ‘Roughness to your weaves,’ she says! I doubt any of the Aes Sedai, save perhaps Cadsuane Sedai, could have managed what you did with that column of water. Moving water that far required you to use the river’s own flow and pressure.”

“Is that what I did?” Aviendha asked, blinking.

Melaine eyed her, then snorted again, softly to herself. “Yes, that is what you did. You have *such* great talent, child.”

Aviendha swelled with the praise; from Wise Ones, it was rare, but always sincere.

“But you refuse to *learn*,” Melaine continued. “There isn’t much time! Here, I have another question for you. What do you think of Rand al’Thor’s plan to kidnap these Domani merchant chiefs?”

Aviendha blinked again, so tired it was hard to think. It defied reason that the Domani used merchants as leaders in the first place. How could a merchant lead people? Did not merchants have to focus on their wares? It was ridiculous. Would the wetlanders ever stop shocking her with their strange ways?

And why was Melaine asking her about this *now* of all times?

“His plan seems a good one, Wise One,” Aviendha said. “Yet the spears do not like being used for kidnapping. I think the *Car’a’carn* should have spoken in terms of offering protection—forced protection—for the merchants. The chiefs would have responded better to being told they were protecting rather than kidnapping.”

“They would be doing the very same thing, no matter what you call it.”

“But what you call a thing is important,” Aviendha said. “It is not dishonest if both definitions are true.”

Melaine’s eyes twinkled, and Aviendha caught a hint of a smile on her lips. “What else do you think of the meeting?”

“Rand al’Thor still seems to think that the *Car’a’carn* can make demands like a wetlander king. This is my shame. I failed to explain the right way.”

Melaine waved a hand. “You have no shame there. We all know how bullheaded the *Car’a’carn* is. The Wise Ones have tried as well, and none have been able to train him correctly.”

So. That wasn’t the reason for her dishonor before the Wise Ones. What was it then? Aviendha ground her teeth in frustration, then forced herself to continue. “Regardless, he needs to be reminded. Again and again. Rhuarc is a wise and patient man, but not all clan chiefs are so. I know that some of the others wonder if their decision to follow Rand al’Thor was an error.”

“True,” Melaine said. “But look at what happened to the Shaido.”

“I did not say they were right, Wise One,” Aviendha said. A group of soldiers were hesitantly trying to pry up the glassy black mound. It appeared to have fused to the ground. Aviendha lowered her voice. “They are wrong to question the *Car’a’carn*, but they *are* speaking to one another. Rand al’Thor needs to realize that they will not accept offense after offense from him without end. They may not turn against him like the Shaido, but I would not put it past Timolan—for instance—to simply return to the Three-fold Land and leave the *Car’a’carn* to his arrogance.”

Melaine nodded. “Do not worry. We are aware of this . . . possibility.”

That meant Wise Ones had been sent to soothe Timolan, who was chief of the Miagoma Aiel. It would not be the first time. Did Rand al’Thor know how hard the Wise Ones worked behind his back to maintain Aiel loyalty? Probably not. He saw them all as one homogeneous group, sworn to him, to be used. That was one of Rand’s great weaknesses. He could not see that Aiel, like other people, did not like being used as tools. The clans were far less tightly knit than he believed. Blood feuds had been put aside for him. Couldn’t he understand how incredible that was? Couldn’t he see how tenuous that alliance continued to be?

But not only was he a wetlander by birth, he was not a Wise One. Few Aiel themselves saw the work the Wise Ones did in a dozen different areas. How simple life had seemed when she had been a Maiden! It would have dazzled her to know how much went on beyond her sight.

Melaine stared blindly at the broken building. “A remnant of a remnant,” she said, as if to herself. “And if he leaves us burned and broken, like those boards? What will become of the Aiel then? Do we limp back to the Three-fold Land and continue as we did before? Many will not want to leave. These lands offer too much.”

Aviendha blinked at the weight of those words. She had rarely given thought to what would happen *after* the *Car’a’carn* was finished with them. She was centered on the now, upon regaining her honor and being there to protect Rand al’Thor at the Last Battle. But a Wise One could not just think of the now or the tomorrow. She had to think of the years ahead and the times that would be brought upon the winds.

A remnant of a remnant. He had broken the Aiel as a people. What *would* become of them?

Melaine glanced back at Aviendha, her face softening. “Go to the tents, child, and rest. You look like a *sharadan* that has crawled on his belly across three days of sand.”

Aviendha looked down at her arms, seeing the flakes of ash from the burnings. Her clothing was soaked and stained, and she suspected that her face was just as filthy. Her arms ached from carrying the stones all day. Once she acknowledged the fatigue, it seemed to crash upon her like a windstorm. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to remain upright. She would not shame herself by collapsing! But she did turn to leave, as instructed.

“Oh, and Aviendha,” Melaine called. “We will discuss your punishment tomorrow.”

She turned in shock.

“For not finishing with the stones,” Melaine said, surveying the wreckage again. “And for not learning quickly enough. Go.”

Aviendha sighed. Another round of questions, and another undeserved punishment. There *was* a correlation of some sort. But what?

She was too exhausted to think about it for now. All she wanted was her bed, and she found herself treacherously recalling the soft, luxurious mattresses back in the palace of Caemlyn. She forced those thoughts out of her mind. Sleep that soundly, muffled in pillows and down comforters, and you’d be too relaxed to wake if someone tried to kill you in the night! How had she let Elayne convince her to sleep in one of those soft-feathered death traps?

Another thought occurred to her as she pushed that one away—a treacherous one. A thought of Rand al’Thor, resting in his room. She could go to him. . . .

No! Not until she had her honor back. She would not go to him as a beggar. She would go to him as a woman of honor. Assuming that she could ever figure out what she was doing wrong.

She shook her head and trotted toward the Aiel camp at the side of the green.

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CHAPTER 12

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Unexpected Encounters

Egwene walked the cavernous halls of the White Tower, lost in thought. Her two Red keepers trailed along behind. They seemed a little sullen these days. Elaida ordered them to stay with Egwene more and more often; though the individuals changed, there were almost always two with her. And yet, it seemed that they could sense that Egwene considered them to be attendants rather than guards.

It had been well over a month since Siuan had conveyed her disturbing news in *Tel'aran'rhiod,* but still Egwene thought about it. The events were a reminder that the world was coming apart. This was a time when the White Tower should have been a source of stability. Instead, it divided against itself while Rand al'Thor's men bonded sisters. How could Rand have allowed such a thing? There was obviously little left of the youth with whom she'd grown up. Of course, there was little of the youthful *Egwene* left either. Gone were the days when the two of them had seemed destined to end up married, living on a little farm in the Two Rivers.

That, oddly, led her to thinking of Gawyn. How long had it been since she'd last seen him, stealing kisses in Cairhien? Where was he now? Was he safe?

Keep focused, she told herself. *Clean the patch of floor you're working on first before you move on to the rest of the house.* Gawyn could look after himself; he'd done a competent job of that in the past. Too competent, in some cases.

Siuan and the others would deal with the Asha'man matter. The other news was far more disturbing. One of the Forsaken, in the camp? A woman, yet channeling *saidin* instead of *saidar*? Egwene would have called it impossible, once. Yet she had seen ghosts in the halls of the White Tower, and the corridors seemed to rearrange on a daily basis. This was just another sign.

She shivered. Halima had *touched* Egwene, supposedly massaging her headaches away. Those headaches disappeared as soon as Egwene had been captured; why hadn't she considered that Halima might have been causing them? What else had the woman been plotting? What hidden knots would the Aes Sedai stumble over, what traps had she laid?

One section of the floor at a time. Clean what you could reach, then move on. Siuan and the others would have to deal with Halima's plots, too.

Egwene's backside hurt, but the pain was growing increasingly irrelevant to her. Sometimes she laughed when beaten, sometimes not. The strap was unimportant. The greater pain—what had been done to Tar Valon—was far more demanding. She nodded to a group of white-clothed novices as they passed her in the hallway, and they bobbed down in curtsies. Egwene frowned, but didn't chastise them—she just hoped that they wouldn't draw penances from the trailing Reds for showing deference to Egwene.

Her goal was the quarters of the Brown Ajah, the section that was now down in the wing. Meidani had taken her time volunteering to train Egwene today. The command had finally come today, weeks after the first dinner with Elaida. Oddly, however, Bennae Nalsad had *also* offered to give her instruction this day. Egwene hadn't spoken to the Shienaran Brown since that first conversation, some weeks before. She'd never repeated lessons with the same woman twice. And yet, the name had been given to her in the morning as the first of the day's visits.

When she reached the east wing, which now held the Brown sector of the Tower, her Red minders reluctantly took up positions in the hallway outside, waiting for her return. Elaida probably would have liked them to stay with Egwene, but after the Reds themselves had been so exacting in protecting their boundary, there was little chance of another Ajah—even the mild Browns—letting a pair of Red sisters infiltrate their quarters. Egwene hurried her pace as she entered the section with brown tiled floors, passing bustling women in nondescript, muted dresses. It was going to be a full day, with her appointments with sisters, her scheduled beatings, and her regular novice load of scrubbing floors or other chores.

She arrived at Bennae's door, but hesitated there. Most sisters agreed to train Egwene only when forced into the duty, and the experience was often unpleasant. Some of Egwene's teachers disliked her because of her affiliation with the rebels, others were annoyed by how easily she could craft weaves, and still others were infuriated to find that she would not show them respect like a novice.

These "lessons," however, had been among Egwene's best chances to sow seeds against Elaida. She'd planted one of those during her first visit with Bennae. Had it begun to sprout?

Egwene knocked, and then entered at the call to come in. The sitting room inside was cluttered with the refuse of scholarship. Stacks and stacks of books—like miniature city towers—leaned against one another. Skeletons of various creatures were mounted in various states of construction; the woman owned enough bones to populate a menagerie. Egwene shivered when she noticed a full human skeleton in the corner, held upright and bound together with threads, some detailed notations written directly on the bones in black ink.

There was barely room to walk and only one clear place to sit—Bennae's own stuffed chair, the armrests worn with a twin set of depressions, doubtless where the Brown's arms had rested during countless late-night reading sessions. The low ceiling felt lower for the several mummified fowl and astronomical contraptions which hung above. Egwene had to duck her head beneath a model of the sun in order to reach the place where Bennae stood rifling through a stack of leather-bound volumes.

"Ah," she said as she noticed Egwene. "Good." Slender in a bony sort of way, she had dark hair that was streaked with gray from age. The hair was in a bun, and she—like many Browns—wore a simple dress that hadn't been fashionable for a century or two.

Bennae moved over to her stuffed sitting chair, ignoring the stiffer chairs by the hearth—both of those had accumulated stacks of papers since Egwene's previous visit. Egwene cleared off a stool, placing the dusty skeleton of a rat on the floor between two stacks of books about the reign of Artur Hawkwing.

"Well, I suppose we should get on with your instruction, then," Bennae said, settling back in her chair.

Egwene kept her face calm. *Had* Bennae requested an opportunity to train Egwene again? Or had she been forced into it? Egwene could see an unsophisticated Brown sister getting repeatedly roped into a duty that nobody else wanted.

At Bennae's request, Egwene performed a number of weaves, work far beyond the skill of most novices but easy for Egwene, even with her power dampened by forkroot. She tried to tease out the Brown's feelings on the relocation of her quarters, but Bennae—like most of the Browns Egwene had spoken to—preferred to avoid that topic.

Egwene did some more weaves. After a time, she wondered just what the point of the meeting was. Hadn't Bennae asked her to demonstrate most of these very same weaves during her previous visit?

“Very well,” Bennae said, getting herself a cup of tea from a pot warming on a small coal brazier. She didn’t offer any tea to Egwene. “You are skilled enough at that. But I wonder. Do you have the sharpness of mind, the ability to deal with difficult situations, that an Aes Sedai is required to have?”

Egwene said nothing, though she did pointedly pour herself some tea. Bennae did not object.

“Let’s see . . .” Bennae mused. “Suppose that you were in a situation where you were in conflict with some members of your own Ajah. You have happened upon information you weren’t supposed to know, and your Ajah’s leaders are quite upset with you. Suddenly, you find yourself being sentenced to some most unpleasant duties, as if they are trying to sweep you under the rug and forget about you. Tell me, in this situation, how would you react?”

Egwene almost choked on her tea. The Brown wasn’t very subtle. She had begun asking about the Thirteenth Depository, had she? And that had landed her in trouble? Few were supposed to know about the secret histories that Egwene had mentioned so casually during her previous visit here.

“Well,” Egwene said, sipping her tea, “let me approach it with a clear mind. Best to view it from the perspective of the Ajah’s leaders, I should think.”

Bennae frowned faintly. “I suppose.”

“Now, in this situation you describe, can we assume that these secrets have been entrusted to the Ajah for safekeeping? Ah, good. Well, from their perspective, important and careful plans have been upset. Think of how it must look. Someone has learned secrets they should not. That whispers of a disturbing leak somewhere among your most trusted members.”

Bennae paled. “I suppose I could see that.”

“Then the best way to handle the situation would be twofold,” Egwene said, taking another sip of tea. It tasted terrible. “First, the leaders of the Ajah would have to be reassured. They need to know that it wasn’t *their* fault that the information leaked. If I were the hypothetical sister in trouble —and if I’d done nothing wrong—I’d go to them and explain. That way they could stop searching for the one who let information slip.”

“But,” Bennae said, “that probably won’t help the sister—the hypothetical one in trouble—get out of her punishments.”

"It couldn't hurt," Egwene said. "Likely, she's being 'punished' to keep her out of the way while the Ajah leaders search for a traitor. When they know there isn't one, they'll be more likely to look at the fallen sister's situation with empathy—particularly after she's offered them a solution."

"Solution?" Bennae asked. Her teacup sat in her fingers, as if forgotten. "And which solution would you offer?"

"The best one: competence. Obviously, *some* people among the Ajah know these secrets. Well, if this sister were to prove her trustworthiness and her capability, perhaps the leaders of her Ajah would realize the best place for her is as one of the caretakers of the secrets. An easy solution, if you consider it."

Bennae sat thoughtfully, a small mummified finch spinning slowly on its cord directly above her. "Yes, but will it work?"

"It is certainly better than serving in some forgotten storeroom cataloguing scrolls," Egwene said. "Unjust punishment sometimes cannot be avoided, but it is best never to let others forget that it *is* unjust. If she simply accepts the way people treat her, then it won't be long before they assume she deserves the position they've placed her in." *And thank you, Silviana, for that little bit of advice.*

"Yes," Bennae said, nodding. "Yes, I do suppose that you are correct."

"I am always willing to help, Bennae," Egwene said in a softer voice, turning back to her tea. "In, of course, hypothetical situations."

For a moment, Egwene worried that she'd gone too far in calling the Brown by her name. However, Bennae met her eyes, then actually went so far as to bow her head just slightly in thanks.

If the hour spent with Bennae had been isolated, Egwene would still have found it remarkable. However, she was shocked to discover—upon leaving Bennae's lair of a room—a novice waiting with a message instructing her to attend Nagora, a White sister. Egwene still had time before her meeting with Meidani, so she went. She couldn't ignore a summons from a sister, though she would undoubtedly have to do extra chores later to make up for skipping the floor scrubbing.

At the meeting with Nagora, Egwene found herself being trained in logic—and the "logical puzzles" presented sounded very similar to a request for help in dealing with a Warder who was growing frustrated with his increasing age and inability to fight. Egwene gave what help she could, which Nagora declared to be "logic without flaw" before releasing her.

After that, there was another message, this one from Suana, one of the Sitters of the Yellow Ajah.

A Sitter! It was the first time Egwene had been ordered to attend one of them. Egwene hurried to the appointment and was admitted by a maidservant. Suana's quarters looked more like a garden than proper rooms. As a Sitter, Suana could demand quarters with windows, and she made full use of her inset balcony as an herb garden. But beyond that, she had mirrors positioned to reflect light into the room, which was overgrown with small potted trees, shrubs growing in large basins of earth, and even a small garden for carrots and radishes. Egwene noticed with displeasure a small pile of rotted tubers in one container, likely just harvested but somehow already spoiled.

The room smelled strongly of basil, thyme and a dozen other herbs. Despite the problems in the Tower, despite the rotted plants, she was buoyed by the scent of *life* in the room—the freshly turned earth and growing plants. And Nynaeve complained that the sisters in the White Tower ignored the usefulness of herbs! If only she could spend some time with sturdy, square-faced Suana.

Egwene found the woman remarkably pleasant. Suana ran her through a series of weaves, many of them related to Healing, where Egwene had never particularly shone. Still, her skill must have impressed the Sitter, for midway through the lesson—Egwene seated on a cushioned stool between two potted trees, Suana sitting more properly in a stiff leather-covered chair—the tone of the conversation changed.

"We should very much like to have you in the Yellow, I think," the woman said.

Egwene started. "I've never shown particular skill for Healing."

"Being of the Yellow isn't about skill, child," Suana said. "It's about passion. If you love to make things well, to fix that which is broken, there would be a purpose for you here."

"My thanks," Egwene said. "But the Amyrlin has no Ajah."

"Yes, but she's raised from one. Consider it, Egwene. I think you would find a good home here."

It was a shocking conversation. Suana obviously didn't consider Egwene the Amyrlin, but the mere fact that she was recruiting Egwene to her Ajah said something. It meant she accepted Egwene's legitimacy, at least to some degree, as a sister.

“Suana,” Egwene said, testing how far she could push that sense of legitimacy, “have the Sitters spoken of what to do about the tensions between the Ajahs?”

“I don’t see what *can* be done,” Suana replied, glancing toward her overgrown balcony. “If the other Ajahs have decided to see the Yellow as their enemy, then I cannot compel them to be less foolish.”

They likely say the same about you, Egwene thought, but said, “Someone must make the first steps. The shell of distrust is growing so thick that soon it will be hard to crack. Perhaps if some of the Sitters of different Ajahs began taking meals together, or were seen traveling the hallways in one another’s company, it would prove instructive for the rest of the Tower.”

“Perhaps . . .” Suana said.

“They aren’t your enemies, Suana,” Egwene said, letting her voice grow more firm.

The woman frowned at Egwene, as if realizing suddenly who she was taking advice from. “Well, then, I think it’s best that you ran along. I’m certain there is a great deal for you to do today.”

Egwene let herself out, carefully avoiding drooping branches and clusters of pots. Once she left the Yellow sector of the Tower and collected her Red Ajah attendants, she realized something. She’d gone through all three meetings without being assigned a single punishment. She wasn’t certain what to think of that. She’d even called two of them by name directly to their faces!

They were coming to accept her. Unfortunately, that was only a small part of the battle. The larger part was making certain the White Tower survived the strains Elaida was placing upon it.

Meidani’s quarters were surprisingly comfortable and homey. Egwene had always viewed the Grays as similar to the Whites, lacking passion, perfect diplomats who didn’t have time for personal emotions or frivolities.

These rooms, however, hinted at a woman who loved to travel. Maps hung within delicate frames, centered on the walls like prized pieces of art. A pair of Aiel spears hung on either side of one map; another was a map of the Sea Folk islands. While many might have opted for the porcelain keepsakes that were so commonly associated with the Sea Folk, Meidani had a small collection of earrings and painted shells, carefully framed and displayed, along with a small plaque beneath listing dates of collection.

The sitting room was like a museum dedicated to one person’s journeys. An Altaran marriage knife, set with four twinkling rubies, hung beside a small Cairhienin banner and a Shienaran sword. Each had a small plaque explaining its significance. The marriage knife, for instance, had been presented to Meidani for her help in settling a dispute between two houses over the death of a particularly important landowner. His wife had given her the knife as a token of thanks.

Who would have thought that the cowering woman of the dinner a few weeks back would have such a proud collection? The rug itself was labeled, the gift of a trader who had purchased it on the closed docks of Shara, then bestowed it on Meidani in thanks for Healing his daughter. It was of strange design, woven from what seemed to be tiny, dyed reeds, with tufts of an exotic gray fur trimming the edges. The pattern depicted exotic creatures with long necks.

Meidani herself sat on a curious chair made from woven wicker boughs, crafted to look like a growing thicket of branches that just happened to take the shape of a chair. It would have been horribly out of place in any other room in the Tower, but it fit within these quarters, where each item was different, none of them related yet somehow all connected with the common theme of gifts received during travels.

The Gray’s appearance was surprisingly different from what it had been during the dinner with Elaida. Instead of the low-cut colorful dress, she wore a high-necked gown of plain white, long and tapering, cut as if to deemphasize her bosom. Her deep golden hair was up in a bun, and she didn’t wear a single glimmer of jewelry. Was the contrast intentional?

“You took your time summoning me,” Egwene said.

“I didn’t want to appear suspicious before the Amyrlin,” Meidani said as Egwene crossed the exotic Shara rug. “Besides, I’m still not certain how I regard you.”

“I don’t care how you regard me,” Egwene said evenly, seating herself on an oversized oak chair, bearing a plaque that identified it as a gift from a moneylender in Tear. “An Amyrlin needs not the regard of those who follow her, so long as she is obeyed.”

“You’ve been captured and overthrown.”

Egwene raised an eyebrow, meeting Meidani’s gaze. “Captured, true.”

“The Hall among the rebels will have chosen a new Amyrlin by now.”

“I happen to know that they have not.”

Meidani hesitated. Revealing the existence of contact with the rebel Aes Sedai was a gamble, but if she couldn't secure the loyalty of Meidani and the spies, then she was on shaky ground indeed. Egwene had assumed that it would be easy to gain the woman's support, considering how frightened Meidani had been at supper. But it seemed that the woman was not as easily cowed as it had appeared.

"Well," Meidani said. "Even if that is true, you must know that they picked you to be a figurehead. A puppet to be manipulated."

Egwene held the woman's gaze.

"You have no real authority," Meidani said, voice wavering slightly.

Egwene did not look away. Meidani studied her, brow wrinkling slowly, step by step, furrows appearing across her smooth, ageless Aes Sedai face. She searched Egwene's eyes, like a mason searching a piece of stone for flaws before setting it in place. What she found seemed to confuse her further.

"Now," Egwene said, as if she had not just been questioned, "you will tell me precisely why you have not fled the Tower. While I do believe that your spying on Elaida is valuable, you must know how much danger you are in now that Elaida is aware of your true allegiance. Why not leave?"

"I . . . cannot say," Meidani said, glancing away.

"I'm commanding you as your Amyrlin."

"I still cannot say." Meidani looked down at the floor, as if ashamed.

Curious, Egwene thought, hiding her frustration. "It is obvious that you do not understand the gravity of our situation. Either you accept my authority, or you accept that of Elaida. There is no middle ground, Meidani. And I promise you this: If Elaida retains the Amyrlin Seat, you will find her treatment of those she sees as traitors to be *quite* unpleasant."

Meidani continued to look down. Despite her initial resistance, it seemed that she had little strength of will remaining.

"I see." Egwene rose to her feet. "You've betrayed us, haven't you? Did you go to Elaida's side before you were exposed or after Beonin's confession?"

Meidani looked up immediately. "What? No! I never betrayed our cause!" She seemed sickened, face pale, mouth a thin line. "How could you *think* that I'd support that horrid woman? I hate what she has done to the Tower."

Well, that was straightforward enough; little room to wiggle around the Three Oaths in those statements. Either Meidani was true or she was Black—though Egwene had difficulty believing that a Black sister would endanger herself by telling a lie that could be exposed with such relative ease.

"Why not run, then?" Egwene asked. "Why stay?"

Meidani shook her head. "I cannot say."

Egwene took a deep breath. Something about the entire conversation irritated her. "Will you at least tell me why you take dinner with Elaida so often? Surely it's not because you enjoy such treatment."

Meidani blushed. "Elaida and I were pillow-friends during our days as novices. The others decided that if I were to renew the relationship, perhaps it would lead to my gaining valuable information."

Egwene folded her arms beneath her breasts. "It seems reckless to assume she would trust you. However, Elaida's thirst for power is guiding her to make reckless moves of her own, so perhaps the plan was not completely ill advised. Regardless, she'll never draw you into her confidence now that she knows of your true allegiances."

"I know. But it was decided that I shouldn't let on that I'm aware of her knowledge. If I were to back away now, it would let on that we've been warned—and that is one of the precious few edges we now hold."

Precious few enough that she should have just run from the Tower. There was nothing to be gained by staying. Why, then? Something was holding the woman back, it seemed. Something strong. A promise?

"Meidani," Egwene said, "I need to know what it is that you aren't telling me."

She shook her head; she almost looked afraid. *Light!* Egwene thought. *I won't do to her what Elaida does those evenings at supper.*

Egwene sat back down. "Straighten your back, Meidani. You're not some simpering novice. You're Aes Sedai. Start acting like one."

The woman looked up, eyes flashing at the taunt. Egwene nodded approvingly. "We *will* mend the damage that Elaida has done, and I *will* sit in my rightful place as Amyrlin. But we have work to do."

"I can't—"

"Yes," Egwene said. "You can't tell me what is wrong. I suspect that the Three Oaths are involved, though Light knows how. We can work around the problem. You can’t tell me why you’ve remained in the Tower. But can you show me?”

Meidani cocked her head. “I’m not sure. I could take you to—” She cut off abruptly. Yes, one of the Oaths was forcibly preventing her from continuing. “I might be able to show you,” Meidani finished lamely. “I’m not certain.”

“Then let’s find out. How dangerous will it be if those Red handlers of mine follow us?”

Meidani paled. “Dangerous.”

“Then we’ll have to leave them behind,” Egwene said, absently tapping the armrest of her oversized oak chair with one nail as she thought. “We could leave the Gray section of the Tower by another way, but if we are seen, it could raise difficult questions.”

“There have been a lot of Reds lurking near the entrances and exits of our quarters,” Meidani said. “I suspect all of the Ajahs are watching one another like that. It will be very difficult to get away without being noticed. They wouldn’t follow me alone, but if they see you . . .”

Spies, watching the other Ajah quarters? Light! Had it gotten so bad? That was like scouts being sent to watch enemy camps. She couldn’t risk being seen leaving with Meidani, but to go alone would draw attention, too—the Reds knew Egwene was supposed to be guarded.

That left a problem, one Egwene could think of only one way to solve. She eyed Meidani. How far to trust her? “You promise that you do not support Elaida, and that you accept my leadership?”

The woman hesitated, then nodded. “I do.”

“If I show you something, do you vow not to reveal it to anyone else without my permission first?”

She frowned. “Yes.”

Egwene made her decision. Taking a deep breath, she embraced the Source. “Watch closely,” she said, weaving threads of Spirit. Dampened by forkroot, she wasn’t strong enough to open a gateway, but she could still show Meidani the weaves.

“What is *that*?” Meidani asked.

“It’s called a gateway,” Egwene said. “Used for Traveling.”

“Traveling is impossible!” Meidani said immediately. “The ability has been lost for . . .” She trailed off, eyes opening more widely.

Egwene let the weave dissipate. Immediately, Meidani embraced the Source, looking determined.

"Think of the place you want to go," Egwene said. "You have to know the place you're leaving behind very well to make this work. I assume that you are familiar enough with your own quarters. Pick a destination where nobody is likely to be; gateways can be dangerous if they open in the wrong location."

Meidani nodded, golden bun bobbing as she concentrated. She did an admirable job of imitating Egwene's weave, and a gateway opened directly between the two of them, white line splitting the air and bending upon itself. The hole was on Meidani's side; Egwene saw only a shimmering patch, like a draft of heat warping the air. She rounded the gateway, looking through the hole at a darkened stone hallway beyond. The tiles on the floor were of a subdued white and brown, and there were no windows within sight. In the depths of the Tower, Egwene guessed.

"Quickly," Egwene said. "If I don't return from your quarters after about an hour, my Red minders might begin to wonder what is taking so long. It's already suspicious to have you, of all people, send for me. We can only hope that Elaida isn't careful enough to wonder at the coincidence."

"Yes, Mother," Meidani said, rushing over and taking a bronze lamp from her table, the flame flickering at the spout. Then she hesitated.

"What?" Egwene asked.

"I'm just surprised."

Egwene almost asked what was so surprising, but then she saw it in Meidani's eyes. Meidani was surprised at how quickly she'd found herself obeying. She was surprised by how natural it was to think of Egwene as Amyrlin. This woman hadn't been won over completely, not yet, but she was close.

"Quickly," Egwene said.

Meidani nodded, stepping through the gateway, and Egwene followed. Though the floor beyond was free of dust, the corridor was thick with the musty scent of uncirculated air. The walls were bare of the ornamentations one saw occasionally in the upper corridors, and the only sound was that of a few distant rats scratching. Rats. In the White Tower. Once, that would have been impossible. The failure of the wards was just one more impossibility atop an ever-growing stack.

This was not an area often given attention by the Tower servants. That was probably why Meidani had chosen it to open the gateway. That was well and good, but she was probably erring on the side of safety. This deep within the Tower, it would take precious minutes to return to the main hallways and find whatever it was Meidani wished to show her. And that would present its own problems. What would happen if other sisters took note of Egwene moving through the corridors without her normal complement of Red Ajah guards?

Before Egwene could voice this concern, Meidani began to walk away. Not up the hallway toward the stairwells, but down it, moving deeper. Egwene frowned, but followed.

"I'm not certain if I'll be allowed to show you," Meidani said softly, her skirts swishing, the sound not unlike that of the faint scrambling of the distant rats. "I must warn you, however, that you may be surprised at what you are stepping into. It could be dangerous."

Did Meidani mean physical danger or political danger? It seemed that Egwene was in about as much of the latter as was possible. Still, she nodded and accepted the warning with solemnity. "I understand. But if something dangerous *is* happening in the Tower, I must know of it. It is not only my right, but my duty."

Meidani said no more. She led Egwene through the twisting passage, muttering that she'd have liked to have been able to bring her Warder. He was apparently out in the city on some errand. The hall spiraled not unlike the undulating coils of the Great Serpent itself. Just when Egwene was growing impatient, Meidani stopped beside a closed door. It looked no different from the dozens of other near-forgotten storage rooms that budded off the main corridor. Meidani raised a hesitant hand, then knocked sharply.

The door opened immediately, revealing a keen-eyed Warder with ruddy hair and a square jaw. He eyed Meidani, then turned to Egwene, his expression growing darker. His arm flinched, as if he'd just barely stopped himself from reaching for the sword at his side.

"That will be Meidani," a woman's voice said from inside the room, "come to report on her meeting with the girl. Adsalan?"

The Warder stepped aside, revealing a small chamber set with boxes for chairs. It held four women, all Aes Sedai. And, shockingly, each was of a different Ajah! Egwene hadn't seen women of four different Ajahs so much as walk together in the hallways, let alone hold conference together. Not a single one of them was Red, and each of the four was a Sitter.

Seaine was the stately woman in white robes and silver trim. A Sitter from the White Ajah, she had thick black hair and eyebrows, and watery blue eyes that regarded Egwene with an even expression. Beside her was Doesine, a Sitter of the Yellow Ajah. She was slender and tall for a Cairhienin; her rich rose-colored dress was embroidered with gold. Her hair was adorned with sapphires, matched by the stone at her forehead.

Yukiri was the Gray sister sitting beside Doesine. Yukiri was one of the shortest women that Egwene had ever met, but she had a way of regarding others that always made her seem in control, even when accompanied by very tall Aes Sedai. The last woman was Saerin, an Altaran Sitter for the Brown. Like many Browns, she wore unornamented dresses, this one a nondescript tan. Her olive skin was marred by a scar on her left cheek. Egwene knew very little about her. Of all the sisters in the room, she seemed the least shocked to see Egwene.

“What have you done?” Seaine said to Meidani, aghast.

“Adsalan, bring them in here,” Doesine said, rising and gesturing urgently. “If someone were to walk by and see the al’Vere girl there. . . .”

Meidani cringed before the stern words—yes, she would require a great deal of work before she had the bearing of an Aes Sedai again. Egwene stepped into the room, moving before the brutish Warder could pull her forward. Meidani followed, and Adsalan closed the door with a thump. The room was lit by a pair of lamps that didn’t give quite enough light, as if to complement the conspiratorial nature of the women’s conference.

The boxes might as well have been thrones for the way the four Sitters occupied them, and so Egwene sat herself on one as well. “You were not given leave to sit, girl,” Saerin said coldly. “Meidani, what is the meaning of this outrage? Your oath was to have prevented this sort of lapse!”

“Oath?” Egwene asked. “And which oath would this be?”

“Quiet, girl,” Yukiri snapped, slapping Egwene across the back with a switch of Air. It was such a faint punishment that Egwene almost laughed.

“I didn’t break my oath!” Meidani said quickly, stepping up beside Egwene. “You ordered me not to tell anyone of these meetings. Well, I have obeyed—I didn’t tell her. I showed her.” There was a spark of defiance in the woman. That was good.

Egwene wasn’t certain what was going on in the room, but four Sitters together presented her with an unequaled opportunity. She’d never thought to get a chance to speak with so many at once, and if these were willing to meet together, then perhaps they were free of the fractures undermining the rest of the Tower.

Or was their meeting a hint of something more dark? Oaths Egwene didn’t know about, meetings away from the upper corridors, a Warder guarding the door . . . were these women of four Ajahs, or of one? Had she unwittingly bumbled her way into the center of a nest of Blacks?

Heart beginning to race, Egwene forced herself not to jump to conclusions. If they *were* Black, then she was caught. If they were not, then she had work to do.

“This is very unexpected,” calm Seaine was saying to Meidani. “We’ll take extra care with the wording of your future orders, Meidani.”

Yukiri nodded. “I didn’t think that you’d be so childish as to expose us out of spite. We should have realized that you, like all of us, would have experience pushing and bending oaths to suit your needs.”

Wait, Egwene thought. *That sounds like. . . .*

“Indeed,” Yukiri said. “I think that penance will be in order for this infraction. But what are we to do with this girl she brought? She’s not sworn on the Rod, and so it would be—”

“You gave her a *fourth oath*, didn’t you?” Egwene interrupted. “What under the Light were you thinking?”

Yukiri glanced at her, and Egwene felt another swish of Air. “You were not given leave to speak.”

“The Amyrlin needs no leave to speak,” Egwene said, staring the women down. “What have you *done* here, Yukiri? You betray all that we are! The Oaths are not to be used as tools of division. Has this entire Tower gone as insane as Elaida?”

“It’s not insanity,” Saerin said suddenly, butting into the conversation. The Brown shook her head, more commanding than Egwene would have expected for one of her Ajah. “It was only done out of necessity. This one couldn’t be trusted, not after siding with the rebels.”

“Do not think we’re unaware of your own involvement with that group, Egwene al’Vere,” Yukiri said. The haughty Gray was barely in control of her anger. “If we have our way, you will not be treated with such coddling as Elaida has shown you.”

Egwene gestured indifferently. “Still me, execute me or beat me, Yukiri, and the Tower will yet be in shambles. The ones you so easily label as rebels are not to blame for that. Secret meetings in the basements, oaths administered without warrant—these are crimes *at least* equal to that of dividing from Elaida.”

“You should not question us,” Seaine said in a quieter voice. She seemed more timid than the others. “Sometimes, difficult decisions must be made. We cannot have Darkfriends among the Aes Sedai, and measures have been taken to search them out. We here each proved to Meidani that we are not friends of the Shadow, and so there can be no harm in making her give an oath to us. It was a reasonable action to make certain we are all working for the same goals.”

Egwene kept her face calm. Seaine had all but admitted to the existence of the Black Ajah! Egwene had never expected to hear that from the mouth of a Sitter, particularly in front of so many witnesses. So these women were using the Oath Rod to search out Black sisters. If you took each sister, removed her oaths and made her reswear them, you could ask her if she were Black. A desperate method, but—Egwene decided—a legitimate one, considering the times.

“I concede that it is a reasonable plan,” Egwene said. “But swearing this woman to a new oath is unnecessary!”

“And if the woman is known to have other loyalties?” Saerin demanded. “Just because a woman isn’t a Darkfriend doesn’t mean she won’t betray us in other ways.”

And that oath of obedience was probably the reason Meidani couldn’t flee the Tower. Egwene felt a stab of sympathy for the poor woman. Sent by the Salidar Aes Sedai to return and spy on the Tower, discovered by these women—presumably—during their search for the Black, then revealed in her true purpose to Elaida. Three different factions, all pushing against her.

“It’s still inappropriate,” Egwene said. “But we can set that aside for now. What of Elaida herself? Have you determined if she is of the Black? Who gave you this charge, and how did your cabal form?”

“Bah! Why are we *speaking* with her?” Yukiri demanded, standing up and putting her hands on her hips. “We should be deciding what to do with her, not answering her questions!”

“If I am to help in your work,” Egwene said, “then I need to be aware of the facts.”

“You are *not* here to help, child,” Doesine said. The slender Cairhienin Yellow’s voice was firm. “Obviously, Meidani brought you to prove that we don’t have her completely beneath our thumbs. Like a child throwing a tantrum.”

“What of the others?” Seaine said. “We need to gather them and make certain that their orders are worded better. We wouldn’t want one of them to go to the Amyrlin before we know where her loyalties lie.”

Others? Egwene thought. *Have they sworn all of the spies, then?* It made sense. Discover one, and it would be easy to get the names of the others. “Have you found any actual members of the Black, then?” Egwene asked. “Who are they?”

“You are to remain quiet, child,” Yukiri said, focusing green eyes on Egwene. “One more word, and I shall see you taking penance until you run out of tears to weep.”

“I doubt you can order me to any more of it than I already have, Yukiri,” Egwene said calmly. “Unless I am to be in the Mistress of Novices’ study all day each day. Besides, if you sent me to her, what would I tell her? That you personally gave me penance? She’d know that I wasn’t scheduled to see you today. That might start raising questions.”

“We could just have Meidani order you to penance,” said Seaine the White.

“She won’t do such a thing,” Egwene said. “She accepts my authority as Amyrlin.”

The other sisters glanced at Meidani. Egwene held her breath. Meidani managed a nod, though she looked horrified to be defying the others. Egwene released a quiet breath of thanks.

Saerin looked surprised, but curious. Yukiri, still standing with her arms folded, was not so easily dissuaded. “That’s meaningless. We’ll just *order* her to send you to penance.”

“Will you?” Egwene said. “I thought that you told me that the fourth oath was meant to restore unity, to keep her from fleeing to Elaida with your secrets. Now you would use that oath like a cudgel, forcing her to become your tool?”

That brought silence to the room.

“This is why an oath of obedience is a terrible idea,” Egwene said. “No woman should have this much power over another. What you have done to these others is only one step shy of Compulsion. I’m still trying to decide if this abomination is in any way justified; the way you treat Meidani and the others will likely sway that decision."

"Must I repeat myself?" Yukiri snapped, turning to the others. "Why are we wasting time clucking with this girl like hens left to the range? We need to make a decision!"

"We're speaking with her because she seems determined to make herself a nuisance," Saerin said curtly, regarding Egwene. "Sit down, Yukiri. I will deal with the child."

Egwene met Saerin's eyes, heart thumping. Yukiri sniffed, then seated herself, finally seeming to remember that she was Aes Sedai as she calmed her expression. This group was under a great deal of pressure. If it became known what they were doing . . .

Egwene kept her eyes on Saerin. She'd assumed that Yukiri was in charge of the group—she and Saerin were near in power, and many Browns were docile. But that had been a mistake; it was too easy to prejudge someone based on their Ajah.

Saerin leaned forward, speaking firmly. "Child, we *must* have your obedience. We cannot swear you to the Oath Rod, and I doubt you'd make an oath of obedience anyway. But you cannot continue this charade of being the Amyrlin Seat. We all know how often you take penance, and we all know what little good it is doing. So let me try something that I assume nobody else has tried with you: reason."

"You may speak your mind," Egwene said.

The Brown sniffed in response. "All right. For one thing, you can't be Amyrlin. With that forkroot, you can barely channel!"

"Is the Amyrlin Seat's authority, then, in her power to channel?" Egwene asked. "Is she nothing more than a bully, obeyed because she can force others to do as she demands?"

"Well, no," Saerin said.

"Then I don't see why my having been given forkroot has anything to do with my authority."

"You've been demoted to novice."

"Only Elaida is foolish enough to assume one can remove an Aes Sedai's rank," Egwene said. "She should never have been allowed to assume she had *that* power in the first place."

"If she didn't assume it," Saerin said, "then you would be dead, girl."

Egwene met Saerin’s eyes again. “Sometimes, I feel it would be better to be dead than to see what Elaida has done to the women of this Tower.”

That brought silence to the room.

“I must say,” Seaine said quietly, “your claims are completely irrational. Elaida is the Amyrlin because she was raised properly by the Hall. Therefore, you *can’t* be Amyrlin.”

Egwene shook her head. “She was ‘raised’ after a shameful and unorthodox removal of Siuan Sanche from the seat. How can you call Elaida’s position ‘proper’ in the face of that?” Something occurred to her, a gamble, but it felt right. “Tell me this. Have you interrogated any women who are currently Sitters? Have you found any Blacks among them?”

While Saerin’s eyes remained even, Seaine glanced away, troubled. *There!* Egwene thought.

“You have,” Egwene said. “It makes sense. If I were a member of the Black, I’d try very hard to get one of my fellow Darkfriends named as a Sitter. From there they can manipulate the Tower best. Now tell me this. Were any of these Black Sitters among those who raised Elaida? Did any of them stand to depose Siuan?”

There was silence.

“*Answer me,*” Egwene said.

“We found a Black among the Sitters,” Doesine finally said. “And . . . yes, she was one of those who stood to depose Siuan Sanche.” Her voice was somber. She’d realized what Egwene was getting at.

“Siuan was deposed by the bare *minimum* number of Sitters required,” Egwene said. “One of them was Black, making her vote invalid. You stilled and deposed your Amyrlin, murdering her Warder, and you did it *unlawfully*.”

“By the Light,” Seaine whispered. “She’s right.”

“This is pointless,” Yukiri said, standing again. “If we begin second-guessing, trying to confirm which Amyrlins *might* have been raised by members of the Black, then we’d have reason to suspect every Amyrlin who ever held the seat!”

“Oh?” Egwene asked. “And how many of them were raised by a Hall filled by only the exact minimum number of currently sitting members? This is only one reason why it was a grave mistake to unseat Siuan this way. When I was raised, we made certain that every Sitter in the city was aware of what was happening.”

“False Sitters,” Yukiri said, pointing. “Given their places unlawfully!”

Egwene turned toward her, glad they couldn’t hear her nervously pounding heart. She had to remain in control. She *had* to. “You call us false, Yukiri? Which Amyrlin would you rather follow? The one who has been making novices and Accepted out of Aes Sedai, banishing an entire Ajah, and causing divisions in the Tower more dangerous than any army that ever assaulted it? A woman who was raised partially through the help of the Black Ajah? Or would you rather serve the Amyrlin who is trying to undo all of that?”

“Surely you’re not saying that you think we served the Black in raising Elaida,” Doesine said.

“I think we *all* are serving the interests of the Shadow,” Egwene said sharply, “so long as we allow ourselves to remain divided. How do you imagine the Black reacted to the near-secret deposing of an Amyrlin Seat, followed by a division among the Aes Sedai? I would not be surprised to find, after some investigation, that this nameless Black sister you discovered was not the only Darkfriend among the group who worked to unseat the rightful Amyrlin.”

This brought another round of silence to the room.

Saerin settled back and sighed. “We cannot change the past. Enlightening though your arguments are, Egwene al’Vere, they are ultimately fruitless.”

“I agree that we cannot change what has happened,” Egwene said, nodding to her. “However, we *can* look to the future. As admirable as I find your work to discover the Black Ajah, I am far more encouraged by your willingness to work together to do it. In the current Tower, cooperation between the Ajahs is rare. I challenge you to take *that* as your main goal, bringing unity to the White Tower. Whatever the cost.”

She stood up, and she half-expected a sister to rebuke her, but they almost seemed to have forgotten that they were speaking with a “novice” and a rebel. “Meidani,” Egwene said. “You accept me as Amyrlin.”

“Yes, Mother,” the woman said, bowing her head.

“I charge you, then, to continue your work with these women. They are not our enemies and they never were. Sending you back as a spy was a mistake, one I wish I’d been able to stop. Now that you are here, however, you can be of use. I regret that you must continue your performance before Elaida, but I commend you for your courage in that regard.”

“I will serve as needed, Mother,” she said, though she looked sick.

Egwene glanced at the others. “Loyalty is better earned than forced. Do you have the Oath Rod here?”

“No,” Yukiri said. “It’s difficult to sneak away. We can only take it on occasion.”

“A pity,” Egwene said. “I’d have liked to take the oaths. Regardless, you will promptly take it and release Meidani from the fourth oath.”

“We’ll consider it,” Saerin said.

Egwene raised an eyebrow. “As you wish. But know that once the White Tower is whole again, the Hall will learn of this action you have taken. I would like to be able to inform them that you were being careful, rather than seeking unwarranted power. If you need me in the next few days, you may send for me—but kindly find a way to deal with the two Red sisters who are watching me. I’d rather not use Traveling within the Tower again, lest I unwittingly reveal too much to those who would be better left ignorant.”

She left that statement hanging before walking to the door. The Warder didn’t stop her, though he did watch with those suspicious eyes of his. She wondered whose Warder he was—she didn’t believe any of the sisters inside the room had Warders, though she wasn’t certain. Perhaps he belonged to one of the other spies sent from Salidar, and had been drafted by Saerin and the others. That would explain his disposition.

Meidani quickly followed Egwene from the room, glancing over her shoulder, as if expecting argument or censure to fly out behind her. The Warder simply pulled the door shut.

“I can’t believe you succeeded,” the Gray said. “They should have strung you up by your heels and had you howling!”

“They are too wise for that,” Egwene said. “They’re the only ones in this blasted Tower—besides maybe Silviana—who have anything resembling heads sitting atop their shoulders.”

“Silviana?” Meidani asked with surprise. “Doesn’t she beat you every day?”

“Several times a day,” Egwene said absently. “She’s very dutiful, not to mention thoughtful. If we had more like her, the Tower wouldn’t have gotten to this state in the first place.”

Meidani regarded Egwene, an odd expression on her face. “You really *are* the Amyrlin,” she finally said. It was an odd comment. Hadn’t she just sworn that she accepted Egwene's authority?

"Come on," Egwene said, hastening her pace. "I need to get back before those Reds grow suspicious."

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Chapter 13

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An Offer and a Departure

Gawyn stood, sword at the ready, facing down two Warders. The barn let in slots of light, air sparkling with dust and bits of straw kicked up from the fighting. Gawyn backed slowly across the packed dirt floor, passing through patches of light. The air was warm on his skin. Trickles of sweat ran down from his temples, but his grip was firm as the two Warders advanced on him.

The one in front was Sleete, a limber, long-armed man with rough-hewn features. In the barn's uneven light, his face looked like an unfinished work one might find in a sculptor's workshop, with long shadows across his eyes, his chin divided by a cleft, his nose crooked from being broken and not Healed. He wore long hair and black sideburns.

Hattori had been quite pleased when her Warder had finally arrived at Dorlan; she'd lost him at Dumai's Wells, and his story was the sort gleemen and bards sang about. Sleete had lain wounded for hours before deliriously managing to grab his horse's reins and pull himself into the saddle. It had loyally carried him, near unconscious, for hours before arriving at a nearby village. The villagers there had been tempted to sell Sleete to a local band of bandits—their leader had visited earlier promising them safety as a reward for revealing any refugees from the nearby battle. However, the mayor's daughter had argued for Sleete's life, convincing them that the bandits must be Darkfriends if they were seeking wounded Warders. The villagers had chosen to hide Sleete instead, and the girl had nursed him to safety.

Sleete had been forced to sneak away once he was well enough to travel; the girl had apparently taken quite a liking to him. Whispers among the Younglings said that Sleete's escape had also come because he had begun feeling affection for the girl himself. Most Warders knew better than to let themselves grow attached. Sleete had left in the night, after the girl and her family fell asleep—but in return for the village's mercy, he'd hunted down the bandits and seen to it that they would never plague the village again.

It was the marrow of stories and legends—at least, among regular, lesser men. For a Warder, Sleete's story was almost commonplace. Men like him attracted legends as ordinary men attracted fleas. In fact, Sleete hadn't wanted to share his tale; it had come out only owing to a vigorous campaign of questions from the Younglings. He still acted as if his survival were nothing to brag about. He was a Warder. Surviving against the odds, riding in delirium over miles of rough terrain, cutting down an entire band of thieves with wounds not fully healed—these were just the sorts of things you did when you were a Warder.

Gawyn respected them. Even the ones he had killed. Especially the ones he had killed. It took a unique kind of man to show this kind of dedication, this kind of vigilance. This kind of humility. While Aes Sedai manipulated the world and monsters like al’Thor got the glory, men like Sleete quietly did the work of heroes, each and every day. Without glory or recognition. If they were remembered, it was usually only by association with their Aes Sedai. Or it was by other Warders. You didn’t forget your own.

Sleete attacked, sword lancing forward in a straight thrust delivered for maximum speed. The Viper Flicks Its Tongue, a bold strike, made more effective because Sleete fought in tandem with the narrow, short man rounding toward Gawyn’s left. Marlesh was the only other Warder in Dorlan—and his arrival had been far less dramatic than Sleete’s. Marlesh had been with the original group of eleven Aes Sedai who had escaped Dumai’s Wells, and he had stayed with them the entire time. His own Aes Sedai, a pretty young Domani Green named Vasha, watched idly from the side of the barn.

Gawyn countered The Viper Flicks Its Tongue with Cat Dances on the Wall, knocking aside the strike and going for the legs in one sweep. It wasn’t intended to hit, however; it was a defensive move, meant to enable him to keep an eye on both opponents. Marlesh tried Leopard’s Caress, but Gawyn moved into Folding the Air, carefully knocking aside the blow and waiting for another from Sleete, who was the more dangerous of the two. Sleete repositioned, taking smooth steps, his blade to the side as he set his back to the massive piles of hay at the rear of the stuffy barn.

Gawyn moved into Cat on Hot Sand as Marlesh tried Hummingbird Kisses the Honeyrose. Hummingbird wasn’t the right form to use in such an attack; it was rarely useful against someone on the defensive, but Marlesh was obviously tired of being parried. He was getting eager. Gawyn could use that. And would.

Sleete was advancing again. Gawyn brought his sword back in to guard as the Warders approached in tandem. Gawyn immediately moved into Apple Blossoms in the Wind. His blade flashed three times, pushing a wide-eyed Marlesh back. Marlesh cursed, throwing himself forward, but Gawyn brought his sword up from the previous form and moved fluidly into Shake Dew from the Branch. He stepped forward into a series of six sharp blows, three at each opponent, knocking Marlesh back and to the ground—the man had stepped back into the fight too quickly—and forcing Sleete's blade aside twice, then ending with his blade against the man's neck.

The two Warders looked at Gawyn, shocked. They had borne similar expressions the last time Gawyn had defeated them, and the time before that. Sleete carried a heron-mark blade and was near-legendary in the White Tower for his prowess. He was said to have bested even Lan Mandragoran twice out of seven bouts, back when Mandragoran had been known to spar with other Warders. Marlesh wasn't as renowned as his companion, but he was still a fully capable and trained Warder, no easy foe.

But Gawyn had won. Again. Things seemed so simple when he was sparring. The world contracted down—compressed like berries squeezed for their juice—into something smaller and easier to see from up close. All Gawyn had ever wanted was to protect Elayne. He wanted to defend Andor. Maybe learn to be a little more like Galad.

Why couldn't life be as simple as a sword match? Opponents clear and arranged before you. The prize obvious: survival. When men fought, they connected. You became brothers as you traded blows.

Gawyn removed his blade and stepped away, sheathing it. He offered a hand to Marlesh, who took it, shaking his head as he stood. "You are remarkable, Gawyn Trakand. Like a creature of light, color and shadow when you move. I feel like a babe holding a stick when I face you."

Sleete said nothing as he sheathed his own sword, but he did nod his head to Gawyn in respect—just as he had the last two times they'd fought. He was a man of few words. Gawyn appreciated that.

In the corner of the barn there was a half-barrel filled with water, and the men walked to it. Corbet, one of the Younglings, hurriedly dipped a ladleful and handed it to Gawyn. Gawyn gave it to Sleete. The older man nodded again and took a drink while Marlesh took a cup off the dusty windowsill and got himself a drink. "I'm saying, Trakand," the short man continued, "we'll need to find you a blade with some herons on it. No one should have to face you without knowing what they're getting into!"

“I’m not a blademaster,” Gawyn said quietly, taking the ladle back from crook-nosed Sleete and having a drink. It was warm, which felt good. Less of a shock, more natural.

“You killed Hammar, didn’t you?” Marlesh asked.

Gawyn hesitated. The simplicity he’d felt before, while fighting, was already crumbling. “Yes.”

“Well, then you’re a blademaster,” Marlesh said. “Should have taken his sword when he fell.”

“It wasn’t respectful,” Gawyn said. “Besides, I didn’t have time to claim prizes.”

Marlesh laughed, as if at a joke, though Gawyn hadn’t intended one. He glanced over at Sleete, who was watching him with curious eyes.

A rustle of skirts announced the approach of Vasha. The Green had long black hair and striking green eyes that at times seemed almost catlike. “Are you done playing, Marlesh?” she asked with a faintly Domani accent.

Marlesh chuckled. “You should be happy to see me play, Vasha. I seem to recall my ‘playing’ saving your neck a couple of times on the battlefield.”

She sniffed and raised an eyebrow. Gawyn had rarely seen an Aes Sedai and Warder with as casual a relationship as these two. “Come,” she said, turning on her heel and walking toward the open barn doors. “I want to see what has been keeping Narenwin and the others so long indoors. It smells of decisions being made.”

Marlesh shrugged and tossed the cup to Corbet. “Whatever they’re deciding, I hope it involves moving. I don’t like sitting around in this village with those soldiers creeping up on us. If it gets any more tense in camp, I’m likely to run off and join the Tinkers.”

Gawyn nodded at that comment. It had been weeks since he’d last dared send the Younglings to raid. Bryne’s search parties were getting closer and closer to the village, and that allowed fewer and fewer rides out across the countryside.

Vasha passed out the doors, but Gawyn could still hear her say, “You can sound like such a child at times.” Marlesh just shrugged, waving farewell to Gawyn and Sleete before stepping out of the barn.

Gawyn shook his head, refilling the ladle and taking another drink. “Those two remind me of nothing so much as a brother and sister at times.”

Sleete smiled.

Gawyn replaced the ladle, nodded to Corbet, then moved to leave. He wanted to check on the Younglings' evening meal and make certain it was being distributed properly. Some of the youths had taken to sparring and practicing when they should have been eating.

As he left, however, Sleete reached out and took his arm. Gawyn looked back in surprise.

"Hattori only has one Warder," the man said in his gravelly, soft voice.

Gawyn nodded. "That's not unheard-of for a Green."

"It isn't because she isn't open to having more," Sleete said. "Years ago, when she bonded me, she said that she would only take another if I judged him worthy. She asked me to search. She doesn't think much on these kinds of things. Too busy with other matters."

All right, Gawyn thought, wondering why he was being told this.

Sleete turned, meeting Gawyn's eyes. "It's been over ten years, but I've found someone worthy. She will bond you this hour, if you wish it."

Gawyn blinked in surprise at Sleete. The lanky man was shrouded once more in his color-shifting cloak, wearing nondescript brown and green beneath. Others complained that because of his long hair and sideburns, Sleete looked more scruffy than a Warder should. But "scruffy" was the wrong term for this man. Rough, perhaps, but natural. Like uncut stones or a gnarled—yet sturdy—oak.

"I'm honored, Sleete," Gawyn said. "But I came to the White Tower to study because of Andoran traditions, not because I was going to be a Warder. My place is beside my sister." *And if anyone is going to bond me, it will be Egwene.*

"You *came* for those reasons," Sleete said, "but those reasons have passed. You've fought in our war, you've killed Warders and defended the Tower. You are one of us. You belong with us."

Gawyn hesitated.

"You search," Sleete said. "Like a hawk, glancing this way and that, trying to decide whether to perch or to hunt. You'll tire of flying eventually. Join us, and become one of us. You'll find that Hattori is a good Aes Sedai. Wiser than most, far less prone to squabbles or foolishness than many in the Tower."

"I can't, Sleete," Gawyn said, shaking his head. "Andor. . . ."

"Hattori is not regarded as influential by the White Tower," Sleete said. "The others rarely care what she does. To have you, she'd see herself assigned to Andor. You could have both, Gawyn Trakand. Think on it."

Gawyn hesitated again, then nodded. "Very well. I'll think on it."

Sleete released his arm. "As much as a man can ask."

Gawyn moved to leave, but then stopped, looking back toward Sleete in the dusty barn. Then Gawyn gestured toward Corbet and gestured with a curt sign. *Leave and watch,* it meant. The Youngling nodded eagerly—he was one of the youngest among them, always looking for something to do to prove himself. He'd watch the doors and give warning if anyone approached.

Sleete watched with curiosity as Corbet positioned himself, hand on his sword. Gawyn then stepped forward and spoke more quietly, too soft for Corbet to hear. "What do *you* think of what happened in the Tower, Sleete?"

The rough man frowned, then stepped back and leaned against the inside barn wall. With a glance during the casual move, Sleete checked out the window to make certain nobody was listening from that side.

"It's bad," Sleet finally said, tone hushed. "Warder shouldn't fight Warder. Aes Sedai shouldn't fight Aes Sedai. Should never happen. Not now. Not ever."

"But it did," Gawyn said.

Sleete nodded.

"And now we've got two different groups of Aes Sedai," Gawyn continued, "with two different armies, one besieging the other."

"Just keep your head down," Sleete said. "There are hot tempers in the Tower, but there are wise minds as well. They'll do the right thing."

"Which is?"

"End it," Sleete said. "With killing if necessary, other ways if possible. Nothing is worth this division. Nothing."

Gawyn nodded.

Sleete shook his head. "My Aes Sedai, she didn't like the feel of things in the Tower. Wanted to get out. She's wise . . . wise and crafty. But she's also not influential, so the others don't listen to her. Aes Sedai. Sometimes, all they seem to care about is who carries the biggest stick."

Gawyn leaned closer. One rarely heard talk about Aes Sedai ranking and influence. They didn't have ranks, like the military, but they all instinctively knew who among them was in charge. How did it work? Sleete seemed to have some idea, but he didn't talk further on it, so it would have to remain a mystery for now.

“Hattori got out,” Sleete continued softly. “Went on this mission to al’Thor, never knowing the depth of what it was about. She just didn’t want to be in the Tower. Wise woman.” He sighed, standing upright and laying a hand on Gawyn’s shoulder. “Hammar was a good man.”

“He was,” Gawyn said, feeling a twist in his stomach.

“But he would have killed you,” Sleete said. “Killed you cleanly and quickly. He was the one on the offensive, not you. He understood why you did what you did. Nobody made any good decisions that day. There weren’t any good decisions to be made.”

“I . . .” Gawyn just nodded. “Thank you.”

Sleete removed his hand and walked toward the entrance. He glanced back, however. “Some say that Hattori should have gone back for me,” he said. “Those Younglings of yours, they think she abandoned me at Dumai’s Wells. She didn’t. She knew I lived. She knew I hurt. But she also trusted me to do my duty while she did hers. *She* needed to get news to the Greens of what had happened at Dumai’s Wells, of what the Amyrlin’s true orders with al’Thor had entailed. *I* needed to survive. We did our duty. But once that message had been sent, if she hadn’t felt me approaching on my own, she would have come for me. No matter what. And we both know it.”

With that, he left. Gawyn was left thinking on the curious parting words. Sleete was often an odd one to talk to. As fluid as he was as a swordsman, he didn’t make conversation smoothly.

Gawyn shook his head, leaving the barn and waving Corbet free of watch duty. There was no possibility of Gawyn agreeing to become Hattori’s Warder. The offer had been tempting for a heartbeat, but only as a way of escaping his problems. He knew that he would not be happy as her Warder, or anyone’s Warder save Egwene’s.

He’d promised Egwene anything. Anything, as long as it didn’t hurt Andor or Elayne. Light, he’d promised her not to kill al’Thor. At least, not until after Gawyn could prove for certain that the Dragon had killed his mother. Why couldn’t Egwene see that the man she’d grown up with had turned into a monster, twisted by the One Power? Al’Thor needed to be put down. For the good of them all.

Gawyn clenched and unclenched his fist, stalking across the village center, wishing he could extend the peace and stillness of sword fighting to the rest of his life. The air was pungent with the scent of cows and dung from the barns; he would be glad to get back to a proper city. Dorlan’s size and remoteness might make it a good place to hide, but Gawyn strongly wished that Elaida had chosen a less odorous place to house the Younglings. His clothing seemed likely to carry the scent of cattle for the rest of his days—assuming the rebel army didn't discover and slaughter them all in the next few weeks.

Gawyn shook his head as he approached the mayor's house. The two-story building had a peaked roof and sat at the very center of the village. The main body of the Younglings was camped in the small field out behind the building. Once, that patch had grown blackberries, but the too-hot summer followed by the blizzard of a winter had killed the bushes. They were one of many casualties that were going to lead to an even harsher winter this year.

The field wasn't the best place to camp—the men were constantly grumping about picking blackberry thorns out of their skin—but it was close to the center of the village while yet somewhat secluded. A few thorns were worth the convenience.

To reach the field, Gawyn had to cut across the unpaved village square and pass by the canal that ran past the front of the mayor's house. He nodded to a group of women washing clothes there. The Aes Sedai had recruited them to do the wash for the sisters and for Gawyn's officers. The pay was small for so much work, and Gawyn gave the women what little extra he could afford out of his own pocket, a gesture that had earned him laughter from Narenwin Sedai, but thanks from the village women. Gawyn's mother had always taught that the workers were the spine of a kingdom; break them, and you'd soon find that you could no longer move. This city's people might not be his sister's subjects, but he would not see them taken advantage of by his troops.

He passed the mayor's home, noting the closed shutters on the windows. Marlesh lounged outside, his petite Aes Sedai standing with hands on her hips and scowling at the door. Apparently, she had been refused entry. Why? Vasha didn't have a great deal of rank among the Aes Sedai, but she also wasn't as low as Hattori. If Vasha had been denied entrance . . . well, perhaps there *were* important words being shared inside the building. That made Gawyn curious.

His men would have ignored it—Rajar would have told him that Aes Sedai business was best left to their conferences, without unwanted ears flapping to make a mess of things. That was one reason that Gawyn wouldn’t make a good Warder. He didn’t trust Aes Sedai. His mother had, and look where that had gotten her. And how the White Tower had treated Elayne and Egwene . . . well, he might support the Aes Sedai, but he certainly didn’t trust them.

He rounded the back of the building, going about a perfectly legitimate inspection of the guards. Most of the Aes Sedai in the village didn’t have Warders—either they were Reds or they had left their Warders behind. Some few were old enough to have lost Warders to age and never chosen new ones. Two unfortunate women had lost their Warders at Dumai’s Wells. Gawyn and the others did their best to pretend they didn’t notice the red eyes or occasional sobs coming from their rooms.

The Aes Sedai, of course, claimed that they didn’t need the Youngling guards as protection. They were probably right. But Gawyn had seen dead Aes Sedai at Dumai’s Wells; they weren’t invincible.

At the back doors, Hal Moir saluted and let Gawyn enter to continue his inspection. Gawyn strode up a short, straight set of stairs and entered the upper hallway. There, he relieved Berden, the dark-skinned Tairen Youngling who was on watch. Berden was an officer, and Gawyn told him to go check on the food distribution in the camp. The man nodded, then left.

Gawyn hesitated in front of Narenwin Sedai’s room. If he wanted to hear what was going on between the Aes Sedai, the obvious thing to do would be to eavesdrop. Berden had been the only guard on the second floor, and there were no Warders to protect against unwanted ears. But the thought of listening in left a sour taste in Gawyn’s mouth. He shouldn’t *have* to eavesdrop. He was the commander of the Younglings, and the Aes Sedai were taking good advantage of his troops. They owed him information. Therefore, rather than trying to listen, he gave a firm knock on the door.

The knock was met by silence. Then the door cracked to show a sliver of Covarla’s frowning face. The light-haired Red had been in charge of the sisters in the city before being displaced, but she was still one of the more important women in Dorlan.

“We were not to be interrupted,” she snapped through the sliver of open doorway. “Your soldiers had orders to keep everyone out, even other sisters.”

“Those rules don’t apply to me,” Gawyn said, meeting her eyes. “My men are in serious danger in this village. If you won’t let me be part of the planning, then I demand at least to be able to listen.”

Covarla's impassive face seemed to show annoyance. "Your impudence seems to grow by the day, child," she said. "Perhaps you need to be removed and a more suitable replacement raised to captain that group."

Gawyn clenched his jaw.

"You think they wouldn't set you aside if a sister asked it of them?" Covarla asked, smiling faintly. "A sorry excuse for an army they may be, but they know their place. A pity the same cannot be said for their commander. Go back to your men, Gawyn Trakand."

With that, she shut the door on him.

Gawyn itched to force his way into the room. But that would be satisfying for all of about two breaths, which was how long it would take the Aes Sedai to truss him up with the Power. How would that be for the Younglings' morale? Seeing their commander, the brave Gawyn Trakand, cast out of the building with a gag of Air in his mouth? He ignored his frustration, turning back down the stairs. He went into the kitchen and leaned against the far wall, staring at the steps to the second floor. Now that he'd relieved Berden, he felt he needed to remain on watch himself or send a runner to fetch another man. He wanted to think for a few moments first; if their conference above took long, he'd appoint a replacement.

Aes Sedai. Sensible men stayed away from them when possible, and obeyed them with alacrity when staying away was impossible. Gawyn had trouble doing either; his bloodline prevented staying away, his pride interfered with obeying them. He had supported Elaida in the rebellion not because he liked her—she'd always been cold during her years acting as his mother's advisor. No, he'd supported her because he'd disliked Siuan's treatment of his sister and Egwene.

But would Elaida have treated the girls any better? Would any of them have? Gawyn had made his decision in a moment of passion; it hadn't been the coolheaded act of loyalty that his men assumed.

Where *was* his loyalty, then?

A few minutes later, footsteps on the stairs and faint voices from the hallway above announced that the Aes Sedai had finished their secret conference. Covarla came down the stairs in red and yellow, saying something to the sisters behind her. ". . . can't believe the rebels set up their own Amyrlin."

Narenwin—thin and square-faced—came next, nodding. Then, shockingly, Katerine Alruddin walked out of the stairwell behind them.

Gawyn stood up straight, stunned. Katerine had *left* the camp weeks before, the day after Narenwin's arrival. The raven-haired Red had not been part of the original group that was ordered to Dorlan, and had used that as an excuse to return to the White Tower.

When had she come back to Dorlan? *How* had she come back? His men would have reported to Gawyn if they'd seen her. He doubted the watchposts could have missed her arrival.

She eyed Gawyn as the three Aes Sedai passed through the kitchen, smiling slyly. She'd noticed his shock.

"Yes," Katerine said, turning to Covarla. "Imagine it—an Amyrlin without an actual seat to sit upon! They're a group of foolish girls creating a child's puppet show with dolls dressed up like their betters. Of course they would pick a wilder to do the duty, and a mere Accepted at that. They knew how pathetic the decision was."

"But at least she was captured," Narenwin noted, pausing at the doorway as Covarla passed through.

Katerine laughed sharply. "Captured and made to howl half the day. I wouldn't want to be that al'Vere girl right now. Of course, it's no less than she deserves for letting them put the Amyrlin's shawl on her shoulders."

What? Gawyn thought with shock.

The three passed out of the kitchen, voices fading. Gawyn barely noticed. He staggered back, hitting the wall for support. It couldn't be! It sounded like . . . Egwene . . . He *had* to have misheard!

But Aes Sedai couldn't lie. He'd heard rumors that the rebels had their own Hall and Amyrlin . . . but Egwene? It was ridiculous! She was only Accepted!

But who better to set up for a potential fall? Perhaps none of the sisters had been willing to put their necks on the line by taking the title. A younger woman like Egwene would have made a perfect pawn.

Pulling himself together, Gawyn hurried out of the kitchen and after the Aes Sedai. He passed into the late afternoon to find Vasha standing, mouth drooping, as she stared at Katerine. Apparently, Gawyn wasn't the only one shocked by the Red's sudden return.

Gawyn caught Tando, one of the Youngling guards at the front of the building, by the arm. "Did you see her enter the building?"

The young Andoran shook his head. "No, my Lord. One of the men inside reported seeing her meet with the other Aes Sedai—she came down out of the attic suddenly, it seems. But none of the guards knows *how* she got in!”

Gawyn released the soldier and dashed after Katerine. He caught up to the three women in the middle of the dusty town square. All three turned ageless faces toward him, wearing identical thin-mouthed frowns. Covarla’s eyes were particular harsh, but Gawyn didn’t care if they took the Younglings from him or if they tied him up in air. Humiliation didn’t matter. Only one thing mattered.

“Is it true?” he demanded. Then, cringing, he forced respect into his voice. “Please, Katerine Sedai. Is it true what I overheard you saying about the rebels and their Amyrlin?”

She eyed him, measuring him. “I suppose it would be good to pass this news among your soldiers. Yes, the rebel Amyrlin has been captured.”

“And her name?” Gawyn asked.

“Egwene al’Vere,” Katerine said. “Let the rumors spread truth, for once.” She nodded to him with dismissive curtness, then began walking with the other two again. “Put what I have taught you to good use. The Amyrlin insists that the raids be stepped up, and these weaves should lend you unprecedented mobility. Don’t be surprised if the rebels anticipate you, however. They know that we have their so-called Amyrlin, and have probably guessed that we have the new weaves as well. It won’t be long before Traveling is had by all. Use the edge you’ve been given before it dulls.”

Gawyn was barely listening. A piece of his mind was shocked. Traveling? A thing of legends. Was *that* how Gareth Bryne was keeping his army supplied?

However, the greater part of Gawyn’s brain was still numb. Siuan Sanche had been stilled and slated for execution, and she had simply been a deposed Amyrlin. What would they do with a *false* Amyrlin, a leader of a rebel faction?

Made to howl half the day. . . .

Egwene was being tortured. She would be stilled! She probably had been already. After that, she would be executed. Gawyn watched the three Aes Sedai walk away. Then he turned slowly, strangely calm, laying his hand on the pommel of his sword.

Egwene was in trouble. He blinked deliberately, standing in the square, cattle calling distantly, water bubbling in the canal beside him.

Egwene would be executed.

Where is your loyalty, Gawyn Trakand?

He crossed the village, walking with a strangely sure step. The Younglings would be unreliable in an action against the White Tower. He couldn't use them to mount a rescue. But he was unlikely to be able to manage one on his own. That left him with only one option.

Ten minutes later found him in his tent, carefully packing his saddlebags. Most of his things would have to stay. There were far scout outposts, and he had visited them before in surprise inspections. That would make a good excuse for him to leave the camp.

He couldn't arouse suspicions. Covarla was right. The Younglings followed him. They respected him. But they were not his—they belonged to the White Tower, and would turn on him as quickly as he had turned on Hammar if it were the will of the Amyrlin. If any of them got a *hint* of what he was planning, he wouldn't manage to get a hundred yards away.

He closed and latched his saddlebags. That would have to do. He pushed his way out of the tent, slinging the bags over his shoulder, then made his way toward the horse lines. As he walked, he flagged down Rajar, who was showing a squad of soldiers some advanced swordplay techniques. Rajar set another man in charge, then hurried over to Gawyn, frowning at the saddlebags.

"I'm going to inspect the fourth outpost," Gawyn said.

Rajar glanced at the sky; it was already dimming. "So late?"

"Last time I inspected in the morning," Gawyn said. Odd, how his heart wasn't racing. Calm and even. "Time before that, it was the afternoon. But the most dangerous time to be surprised is evening, when it's still light enough for an attack but late enough that men are tired and full of supper."

Rajar nodded, joining Gawyn as he walked. "Light knows we need them for watchful scouts now," he agreed. Bryne's own scouts had been investigating villages not half a day's ride from Dorlan. "I'll get you an escort."

"Not needed," Gawyn said. "Last time, Outpost Four saw me coming from a good half a mile. A squad raises too much dust. I want to see how keen their eyes are when it's just one rider."

Rajar frowned again.

"I'll be safe," Gawyn said, forcing out a wry smile. "Rajar, you know I will be. What? Are you afraid I'll be taken by bandits?"

Rajar relaxed, chuckling. “You? They’d sooner catch Sleete. All right, then. But make certain to send a messenger for me when you get back into camp. I’ll stay up half the night worrying if you don’t return.”

Sorry to cost you the sleep then, my friend, Gawyn thought, nodding. Rajar ran back to supervise the sparring, and Gawyn soon found himself just outside the camp, undoing Challenge’s hobble as a village boy—doubling as a stablehand—fetched his saddle.

“You have the look of a man who has made up his mind,” a quiet voice said suddenly.

Gawyn spun, hand falling to his sword. One of the shadows nearby was moving. Looking closely, he was able to make out the form of a shadowed man with a crooked nose. Curse those Warder cloaks!

Gawyn tried to feign casualness as he had with Rajar. “Happy to have something to do, I suppose,” he said, turning from Sleete as the stableboy approached. Gawyn tossed him a copper and took the saddle himself, dismissing the boy.

Sleete continued to watch from the shadow of a massive pine as Gawyn put the saddle on Challenge’s back. The Warder knew. Gawyn’s act had fooled everyone else, but he could sense that it wouldn’t work on this man. Light! Was he going to have to kill another man he respected? *Burn you, Elaida! Burn you, Siuan Sanche, and your entire Tower. Stop using people. Stop using me!*

“When shall I tell your men that you aren’t returning?” Sleete asked.

Gawyn pulled the saddle straps tight and waited for his horse to exhale. He looked over Challenge, frowning. “You don’t plan to stop me?”

Sleete chuckled. “I fought you thrice today and didn’t win a single bout, although I had a good man to lend me aid. You have the look about you of a man who will kill if needed, and I don’t thirst for death so eagerly as some might assume.”

“You’d fight me,” Gawyn said, finally doing up the saddle and lifting the bags into place, tying them on. Challenge snorted. The horse never did like carrying extra weight. “You’d die if you thought it was necessary. If you attacked, even if I killed you, it would raise a ruckus. I’d never be able to explain why I’d killed a Warder. You could stop me.”

“True,” Sleete said.

“Then why let me go?” Gawyn said, rounding the gelding and taking the reins. He met those shadowed eyes and thought he caught the faintest hint of a smile on the lips beneath them.

“Perhaps I just like to see men care,” Sleete said. “Perhaps I hope you’ll find a way to help end this. Perhaps I am feeling lazy and sore with a bruised spirit from so many defeats. May you find what you seek, young Trakand.” And with a rustle of the cloak, Sleete withdrew, fading into the darkness of oncoming night.

Gawyn slung himself into his saddle. There was only one place he could think to go for help in rescuing Egwene.

With a kick of the heels, he left Dorlan behind.

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CHAPTER 14

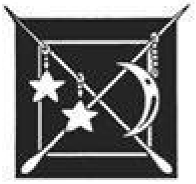

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A Box Opens

“So this is one of the Shadowsouled,” Sorilea said. The white-haired Wise One circled around the prisoner, looking thoughtfully at Semirhage. Of course, Cadsuane had not expected fear from one such as Sorilea. The Aiel woman was a rugged creature, like a statue that had weathered storm after storm, patient before the winds. Among the Aiel, this Wise One was a particular specimen of strength. She had arrived at the manor house only recently, coming with those who had brought al’Thor a report from Bandar Eban.

Cadsuane had anticipated finding many things among the Aiel who followed Rand al’Thor: fierce warriors, strange ways, honor and loyalty, inexperience with subtlety and politics. She had been right. One thing she had certainly *not* expected to find, however, was an equal. Certainly not in a Wise One who could barely channel. And yet, oddly, that was how she regarded the leathery-faced Aiel woman.

Not that she trusted Sorilea. The Wise One had her own goals, and they might not completely coincide with Cadsuane’s. However, she *did* find Sorilea capable, and there were blessed few people in the world these days who deserved that word.

Semirhage flinched suddenly, and Sorilea cocked her head. The Forsaken was not floating this time; she stood upright, wearing the stiff brown dress, her short, dark hair tangled from lack of brushing. She still projected superiority and control. Just as Cadsuane herself would have in a similar situation.

“What are these weaves?” Sorilea asked, gesturing. The weaves in question were the source of Semirhage’s occasional flinching.

“A personal trick of mine,” Cadsuane said, undoing the weaves and remaking them to show how they were done. “They ring a sound in your subjects’ ears every few minutes and flash a light in their eyes, keeping them from sleep.”

“You hope to make her so fatigued that she will talk,” Sorilea said, studying the Forsaken again.

Semirhage was warded to keep her from hearing them, of course. Despite two days without decent sleep, the woman wore a serene expression, eyes open but blocked by glowing lights. She had likely mastered some kind of mental trick to help her stave off exhaustion.

“I doubt it will break her,” Cadsuane admitted. “Phaw! It barely even makes her flinch.” She, Sorilea and Bair—an aged Wise One with no channeling ability—were the only ones in the room. The Aes Sedai maintaining Semirhage’s shield sat in their places outside.

Sorilea nodded. “One of the Shadowsouled will not be manipulated so easily. Still, you are wise to try, considering your . . . limitations.”

“We could speak to the *Car’a’carn*,” Bair said. “Convince him to turn this one over to us for a time. A few days of . . . delicate Aiel questioning and she would speak whatever you wish.”

Cadsuane smiled noncommittally. As if she would let another handle the questioning! This woman’s secrets were too valuable to risk, even in the hands of allies. “Well, you are welcome to ask,” she said, “but I doubt al’Thor will listen. You know how the fool boy can be when it comes to hurting women.”

Bair sighed. It was odd to think of this grandmotherly lady engaging in “delicate Aiel questioning.”

“Yes,” she said. “You are right, I suspect. Rand al’Thor is twice as stubborn as any clan chief I’ve known. And twice as arrogant too. To presume that women cannot bear pain as well as men!”

Cadsuane snorted at that. “To be honest, I considered having this one strung up and whipped, al’Thor’s prohibitions be blackened! But I don’t think it would work. Phaw! We’ll need to find something other than pain to break this one.”

Sorilea was still regarding Semirhage. “I would speak with her.”

Cadsuane made a motion, dismissing the weaves that kept Semirhage from hearing, seeing or speaking. The woman blinked—just once—to clear her vision, then turned to Sorilea and Bair. “Ah,” she said. “Aiel. You were such good servants, once. Tell me, how strongly does it bite, knowing how you betrayed your oaths? Your ancestors would cry for punishment if they knew how many deaths lay at the hands of their descendants.”

Sorilea gave no reaction. Cadsuane knew some tidbits of what al’Thor had revealed about the Aiel, things that had been said at second or third hand. Al’Thor claimed that the Aiel had once followed the Way of the Leaf, sworn not to do harm, before betraying their oaths. Cadsuane had been interested to learn of these rumors, and she was more interested to hear Semirhage corroborating them.

“She seems so much more human than I had anticipated,” Sorilea said to Bair. “Her expressions, her tone, her accent, while strange, are easy to understand. I had not expected that.”

Semirhage’s eyes narrowed for just a moment at that comment. Odd. That was a stronger reaction than virtually any of the punishments had produced. The flashes of light and sound prompted only slight involuntary twitches. This comment of Sorilea’s, however, seemed to affect Semirhage on an emotional level. Would the Wise Ones actually succeed so easily where Cadsuane had long failed?

“I think this is what we need to remember,” Bair said. “A woman is just a woman, no matter how old, no matter what secrets she remembers. Flesh can be cut, blood can be spilled, bones can be broken.”

“In truth, I feel almost disappointed, Cadsuane Melaidhrin,” Sorilea said, shaking a white-haired head. “This monster has very small fangs.”

Semirhage reacted no further. Her control was back, her face serene, her eyes imperious. “I have heard some little of you new, oathless Aiel and your interpretations of honor. I will very much enjoy investigating how much pain and suffering it will require before members of your clans will shame themselves. Tell me, how far do you think I would have to push before one of you would kill a blacksmith and dine on his flesh?”

She knew more than “some little” if she understood the near-sacred nature of blacksmiths among the Aiel. Sorilea stiffened at the comment, but let it go. She rewove the ward against listening, then paused, and placed the globes of light in front of Semirhage’s eyes as well. Yes, she was weak in the Power, but she was a very quick learner.

“Is it wise to keep her like this?” Sorilea asked, her tone implying that of any other she would have made a demand. For Cadsuane, she softened her words, and it almost brought a smile to Cadsuane’s lips. They were like two aged hawks, Sorilea and she, accustomed to roosting and reigning, now forced to nest in neighboring trees. Deference did not come easily to either one of them.

“If I were to choose,” Sorilea continued, “I think that I would have her throat slit and her corpse laid out on the dust to dry. Keeping her alive is like keeping a snapwood blacklance as a pet.”

“Phaw!” Cadsuane said, grimacing. “You’re right about the danger, but killing her now would be worse. Al’Thor cannot—or will not—give me an accurate count of the number of Forsaken he has slain, but he implies that at least half of them still live. They'll be there to fight at the Last Battle, and each weave we learn from Semirhage is one fewer they can use to surprise us."

Sorilea did not seem convinced, but she pressed the issue no further. "And the item?" she asked. "May I see it?"

Cadsuane almost snapped a no. But . . . Sorilea had taught Cadsuane Traveling, an incredibly powerful tool. That had been an offering, a hand extended. Cadsuane needed to work with these women, Sorilea most of all. Al'Thor was a bigger project than one woman could handle.

"Come with me," Cadsuane said, leaving the wooden room. The Wise Ones followed. Outside, Cadsuane instructed the sisters—Daigian and Sarene—to make certain that Semirhage was kept awake, eyes open. It was unlikely to work, but it was the best strategy Cadsuane had at the moment.

Though . . . she *did* also have Semirhage's momentary look, that hint of anger, displayed at Sorilea's comment. When you could control a person's anger, you could control their other emotions as well. That was why she had focused so hard on teaching al'Thor to rein in his temper.

Control and anger. What was it that Sorilea had said to get the reaction? That Semirhage seemed disappointingly human. It was as if Sorilea had come expecting one of the Forsaken to be as twisted as a Myrddraal or Draghkar. And why not? The Forsaken had been figures of legend for three thousand years, looming shadows of darkness and mystery. It could be disappointing to discover that they were, in many ways, the most human of the Dark One's followers: petty, destructive and argumentative. At least, that was how al'Thor claimed they acted. He was so strangely familiar with them.

Semirhage saw herself as more than human, though. That poise, that control of her surroundings, was a source of strength for her.

Cadsuane shook her head. Too many problems and far too little time. The wooden hallway itself was another reminder of the al'Thor boy's foolishness; Cadsuane could still smell smoke, strong enough to be unpleasant. The gaping hole in the front of the manor—draped only with a cloth—let in chill air during the spring nights. They should have moved, but he claimed that he would not be chased away.

Al'Thor seemed almost eager for the Last Battle. Or perhaps just resigned. To get there he felt he had to force his way through the petty squabbles of people like a midnight traveler pushing through banks of snow to arrive at the inn. The problem was, al'Thor wasn't ready for the Last Battle. Cadsuane could feel it in the way he spoke, the way he acted. The way he regarded the world with that dark, nearly dazed expression. If the man he was now faced the Dark One to decide the fate of the world, Cadsuane feared for all people.

Cadsuane and the two Wise Ones reached her chamber in the manor, a sturdy undamaged room with a good view of the trampled green and camp out front. She made few demands in the way of decoration: a stout bed, a lockable trunk, a mirror and stand. She was too old and impatient to bother with anything else.

The trunk was a decoy; she kept some gold and other relatively worthless items in it. Her most precious possessions she either wore—in the form of her *ter'angreal* ornaments—or kept locked in a dingy-looking document box that sat on her mirror stand. Of worn oak, the stain uneven, the box had enough dings and dents to look used—but wasn't so shabby as to be out of place with her other things. As Sorilea closed the door behind the three of them, Cadsuane disarmed the box's traps.

It was strange to her how few Aes Sedai learned to innovate with the One Power. They memorized time-tested and traditional weaves, but gave barely a thought for what else they could do. True, experimenting with the One Power could be disastrous, but many simple extrapolations could be made without danger. Her weave for this box was one such. Until recently, she'd used a standard weave of Fire, Spirit and Air to destroy any documents in the box if an intruder opened it. Effective, if a bit unimaginative.

Her new weave was much more versatile. It didn't destroy the items in the box—Cadsuane wasn't certain if they could be destroyed. Instead, the weaves—inverted to be invisible—sprang out in twisting threads of Air and captured anyone in the room when the box was opened. Then another weave set out a large sound, imitating a hundred trumpets playing while lights flashed in the air to give the alarm. The weaves would also go off if anyone opened the box, moved it, or barely touched it with the most delicate thread of the One Power.

Cadsuane flipped up the lid. The extreme precaution was necessary. For inside this box were two items that presented very serious danger.

Sorilea walked over, looking in at the contents. One was a figurine of a wise, bearded man holding aloft a sphere, about a foot tall. The other was a black metallic collar and two bracelets: an *a'dam* made for a man. With this *ter'angreal*, a woman could turn a man who could channel into her slave, controlling his ability to touch the One Power. Perhaps controlling him completely. They had not tested the collar. Al'Thor had forbidden it.

Sorilea hissed quietly, ignoring the statue and focusing on the bracelets and collar. "This thing is evil."

"Yes," Cadsuane said. Rarely would she have called a simple object "evil," but this one was. "Nynaeve al'Meara claims some familiarity with this thing. Though I have not been able to press out of the girl *how* she knows these things, she claims to know that there was only one male *a'dam*, and that she'd arranged for its disposal in the ocean. She also admits, however, that she didn't see it destroyed personally. It may have been used as a pattern by the Seanchan."

"This is unsettling to see," Sorilea said. "If one of the Shadowsouled, or even one of the Seanchan, captured him with this. . . ."

"Light protect us all," Bair whispered.

"And the people who have these are the same people with whom al'Thor wishes to make peace?" Sorilea shook her head. "Creation of these abominations alone should warrant a blood feud. I heard that there were others like it. What of those?"

"Stored elsewhere," Cadsuane said, shutting the lid. "Along with the female *a'dam* we took. Some acquaintances of mine—Aes Sedai who have retired from the world—are testing them trying to discover their weakness." They also had *Callandor*. Cadsuane was loath to let it out of her sight, but she felt that the sword still held secrets that could be teased out.

"I keep this one here because I intend to find a way to test it on a man," she said. "That would be the best way to discover its weaknesses. Al'Thor won't allow any of his Asha'man to be leashed by it, however. Not for the shortest time."

This made Bair uncomfortable. "A little like testing a spear's strength by stabbing it into someone," she muttered.

Sorilea, however, nodded in agreement. She understood.

One of the first things Cadsuane had done after capturing those female *a'dam* was put one on and practice ways to escape from it. She'd done so under carefully controlled circumstances, of course, with women she trusted to help her escape. They'd eventually had to do that. Cadsuane had been able to discover no way out on her own.

But if your enemy was planning to do something to you, you had to discover how to counter it. Even if that meant leashing yourself. Al'Thor couldn't see this. When she asked, he simply muttered about "that bloody box" and being beaten.

"We have to do something about that man," Sorilea said, meeting Cadsuane's eyes. "He has grown worse since we last met."

"He has," Cadsuane said. "He's surprisingly accomplished at ignoring my training."

"Then let us discuss," Sorilea said, pulling over a stool. "A plan must be arranged. For the good of all."

"For the good of all," Cadsuane agreed. "Al'Thor himself most of all."

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CHAPTER 15

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A Place to Begin

Rand woke on the floor of a hallway. He sat up, listening to the distant sound of water. The stream outside the manor house? No . . . no, that was wrong. The walls and floor here were stone, not wood. No candles or lamps hung from the stonework, and yet there was light, ambient in the air.

He stood, then straightened his red coat, feeling strangely unafraid. He recognized this place from somewhere, distant in his memory. How had he come here? The recent past was clouded, and seemed to slip from him, like fading trails of mist. . . .

No, he thought firmly. His memories obeyed, snapping back into place before the strength of his determination. He had been in the Domani manor house, awaiting a report from Rhuarc about the capture of the first few members of the merchant council. Min had been reading *Each Castle,* a biography, in the deep, green chair of the room they shared.

Rand had been exhausted, as he often was lately. He'd gone to lie down. He was asleep, then. Was this the World of Dreams? Though he had visited it on occasion, he knew very few specifics. Egwene and the Aiel dreamwalkers spoke of it only guardedly.

This place felt different from the dream world, and oddly familiar. He looked down the hallway; it was so long that it vanished into shadows, walls broken by doors at intervals, the wood dry and cracked. *Yes* . . . he thought, seizing at a memory. *I* have *been here before, but not in a long time.*

He chose one of the doors at random—he knew that it wouldn't matter which one he picked—and pushed it open. There was a room beyond, of modest size. The far side was a series of gray stone arches, beyond them a little courtyard and a sky of burning red clouds. The clouds grew and sprang from one another like bubbles in boiling water. They were the clouds of an impending storm, unnatural though they were.

He looked more closely, and saw that each new cloud formed the shape of a tormented face, the mouth open in a silent scream. The cloud would swell, expanding upon itself, face distorting, jaw working, cheeks twisting, eyes bulging. Then it would split, other faces swelling out of its surface, yelling and seething. It was transfixing and horrifying at the same time.

There was no ground beyond the courtyard. Just that terrible sky.

Rand did not want to look toward the left side of the room. The fireplace was there. The stones that formed floor, hearth and columns were warped, as if they had been melted by an extreme heat. At the edges of his vision, they seemed to shift and change. The angles and proportions of the room were wrong. Just as they had been when he'd come here, long ago.

Something was different this time, however. Something about the colors. Many of the stones were black, as if they'd been burned, and cracks laced them. Distant red light glowed from within, as if they had cores of molten lava. There had once been a table here, hadn't there? Polished and of fine wood, its ordinary lines a discomforting contrast to the distorted angles of the stones?

The table was gone, but two chairs sat before the fireplace, high backed and facing the flames, obscuring whomever might be sitting in them. Rand forced himself to walk forward, his boots clicking on stones that burned. He felt no heat, either from them or the fire. His breath caught and his heart pounded as he approached those chairs. He feared what he would find.

He rounded them. A man sat in the chair on the left. Tall and youthful, he had a square face and ancient blue eyes that reflected the hearthfire, turning his irises almost purple. The other chair was empty. Rand walked to it and sat down, calming his heart and watching the dancing flames. He had seen this man before in visions, not unlike the ones that appeared when he thought of Mat or Perrin.

The colors did not appear on this thought of his friends. That was odd, but somehow not unexpected. The visions he'd seen of the man in the other chair were different from the ones involving Perrin and Mat. They were more visceral, somehow, more real. At times during those visions, Rand had felt almost as if he could reach out and touch this man. He'd been afraid of what would happen if he did.

He had met the man only once. At Shadar Logoth. The stranger had saved Rand's life, and Rand had often wondered who he had been. Now, in this place, Rand finally knew.

"You are dead," Rand whispered. "I killed you."

The man didn't look from the fire as he laughed. It was a rough, low-throated laugh that held little true mirth. Once, Rand had known this man only as Ba'alzamon—a name for the Dark One—and had foolishly thought that in killing him, he had defeated the Shadow for good.

"I watched you die," Rand said. "I stabbed you through the chest with *Callandor*. Isha—"

"That is not my name," the man interrupted, still watching the flames. "I am known as Moridin, now."

"The name is irrelevant," Rand said angrily. "You are dead, and this is just a dream."

"Just a dream," Moridin said, chuckling. "Yes." The man was clad in a black coat and trousers, the darkness relieved only by red embroidery on the sleeves.

Moridin finally looked at him. Flames from the fire cast bright red and orange light across his angular face and unblinking eyes. "Why do you always whine that way? Just a dream. Do you not know that many dreams are more truthful than the waking world?"

"You are dead," Rand repeated stubbornly.

"So are you. I watched *you* die, you know. Lashing out in a tempest, creating an entire mountain to mark your cairn. So arrogant."

Lews Therin had—upon discovering that he'd killed all that he loved—drawn upon the One Power and destroyed himself, creating Dragonmount in the process. Mention of this event always brought on howls of grief and anger in Rand's mind.

But this time, there was silence.

Moridin turned back to watch the heatless flames. To the side, in the stones of the fireplace, Rand saw movement. Flickering bits of shadow, just barely visible through the cracks in the stones. The red-hot heat shone behind, like rock turned molten, and those shadows moved, frantic. Just faintly, Rand could hear scratching. Rats, he realized. There were rats behind the stones, being consumed by the terrible heat trapped on the other side. Their claws scratched, pushing through the cracks, as they tried to escape their burning.

Some of those tiny hands seemed almost human.

Just a dream, Rand told himself forcefully. Just a dream. But he knew the truth of what Moridin had said. Rand's enemy still lived. Light! How many of the others had returned as well? Anger made him grip the armrest of the chair. Perhaps he should have been terrified, but he had stopped running from this creature and his master long ago. Rand had no room left for fear. In fact, it should be Moridin who feared, for the last time they had met, Rand had killed him.

“How?” Rand demanded.

“Long ago, I promised you that the Great Lord could restore your lost love. Do you not think that he can easily recover one who serves him?”

Another name for the Dark One was Lord of the Grave. Yes, it was true, even if Rand wished he could deny it. Why should he be surprised to see his enemies return, when the Dark One could restore the dead to life?

“We are all reborn,” Moridin continued, “spun back into the Pattern time and time again. Death is no barrier to my master save for those who have known balefire. They are beyond his grasp. It is a wonder we can remember them.”

So some of the others really *were* dead. Balefire was the key. But how had Moridin gotten into Rand’s dreams? Rand set wards each night. He glanced at Moridin, noticing something odd about the man’s eyes. Small black specks floated about in the whites, crossing back and forth like bits of ash blown on a leisurely wind.

“The Great Lord can grant you sanity, you know,” Moridin said.

“Your last gift of sanity brought me no comfort,” Rand said, surprising himself with the words. That had been Lews Therin’s memory, not his own. Yet Lews Therin was gone from his mind. Oddly, Rand felt more stable—somehow—here in this place where all else appeared fluid. The pieces of himself fit together better. Not perfectly, of course, but better than they had in recent memory.

Moridin snorted softly, but said nothing. Rand turned back to the flames, watching them twist and flicker. They formed shapes, like the clouds, but these were headless bodies, skeletal, backs arching in pain, writhing for a moment in fire, spasming, before flashing into nothing.

Rand watched that fire for a time, thinking. One might have thought that they were two old friends, enjoying the warmth of a winter hearth. Except that the flames gave no heat, and Rand would someday kill this man again. Or die at his hands.

Moridin tapped his fingers on the chair. “Why have you come here?”

Come here? Rand thought, with shock. Hadn’t Moridin brought him?

“I feel so tired,” Moridin continued, closing his eyes. “Is that you, or is it me? I could throttle Semirhage for what she did.”

Rand frowned. Was Moridin mad? Ishamael had certainly seemed crazy, at the end.

"It is not time for us to fight," Moridin said, waving a hand at Rand. "Go. Leave me in peace. I do not know what would happen to us if we killed one another. The Great Lord will have you soon enough. His victory is assured."

"He has failed before and will fail again," Rand said. "I *will* defeat him."

Moridin laughed again, the same heartless laugh as before. "Perhaps you will," he said. "But do you think that matters? Consider it. The Wheel turns, time and time again. Over and over the Ages turn, and men fight the Great Lord. But someday, he will win, and when he does, the Wheel will stop.

"That is why his victory is assured. I think it will be this Age, but if not, then in another. When you are victorious, it only leads to another battle. When he is victorious, all things will end. Can you not see that there is no hope for you?"

"Is that what made you turn to his side?" Rand asked. "You were always so full of thoughts, Elan. Your logic destroyed you, didn't it?"

"There is no path to victory," Moridin said. "The only path is to follow the Great Lord and rule for a time before all things end. The others are fools. They look for grand rewards in the eternities, but there will be no eternities. Only the now, the last days."

He laughed again, and this time there was joy in it. True pleasure.

Rand stood. Moridin eyed him warily, but did not get up.

"There *is* a way to win, Moridin," Rand said. "I mean to kill him. Slay the Dark One. Let the Wheel turn without his constant taint."

Moridin gave no reaction. He was still staring at the flames. "We are connected," Moridin finally said. "That is how you came here, I suspect, though I do not understand our bond myself. I doubt you can understand the magnitude of the stupidity in your statement."

Rand felt a flash of anger, but fought it down. He would not be goaded. "We shall see."

He reached for the One Power. It was distant, far away. Rand seized it, and felt himself yanked away, as if on a line of *saidin*. The room vanished, and so did the One Power, as Rand entered a deep blackness.

Rand finally stopped thrashing in his sleep, and Min held her breath, hoping that he wouldn't start again. She sat, legs tucked underneath her, wrapped in a blanket as she read in her chair at the corner of the room. A small lamp flickered and danced on the short table beside her, illuminating her stack of musty books. *Falling Shale, Marks and Remarks, Monuments Past*. Histories, most of them.

Rand sighed softly, but did not move. Min released her breath and settled back into her chair, finger marking her place in a copy of Pelateos's *Ponderings*. With the shutters closed for the night, she could still hear the wind sough in the pines. The room smelled faintly of smoke from the strange fire. Aviendha's quick thinking had made a potential disaster into a mere inconvenience. Not that she was being rewarded for it. The Wise Ones continued to work her as hard as a merchant's last mule.

Min hadn't been able to get close enough to her to have a conversation, despite the fact that they'd been in the camp together for some time now. She didn't know how to think of the other woman. They had become a little more comfortable with one another that evening, sharing *oosquai*. But one day did not friends make, and she was definitely uncomfortable about sharing.

Min glanced again at Rand, lying on his back, eyes closed, breath coming evenly now. His left arm lay across his blankets, the stump exposed. She didn't know how he managed to sleep, with those wounds in his side. As soon as she thought of them, she could feel the pain—it was all part of the rolled-up ball of Rand's emotions in the back of her mind. She had learned to ignore the pain. She'd had to. For him, it would be much, much stronger. How he could stand it, she didn't know.

She wasn't Aes Sedai—thank the Light—but somehow she had bonded him. It was amazing; she could tell where he was, tell if he was distraught. She could mostly keep his emotions from overwhelming her except when they were passionate. But what woman didn't want to be overwhelmed during those moments? It was a particularly . . . exhilarating experience with the bond, which let her feel both her own desire and the raging tempest of fire that was Rand's desire for her.

The thought made her blush, and she pulled open *Ponderings* to distract herself. Rand needed his sleep, and she was going to let him have it. Besides, she needed to study, although she was confronted by conclusions that she didn't like.

These books had belonged to Herid Fel, the kindly old scholar who had joined Rand's school in Cairhien. Min smiled, remembering Fel's distracted way of talking and his confused—yet somehow brilliant—discoveries.

Herid Fel was dead now, murdered, torn apart by Shadowspawn. He'd discovered something in these books, something he'd intended to tell Rand. Something about the Last Battle and the seals on the Dark One's prison. Fel had been killed just before he could pass on the information. Perhaps it was coincidence; perhaps the books had nothing to do with his death. But perhaps they did. Min was determined to find the answers. For Rand, and for Herid himself.

She put down *Ponderings* and picked up *Thoughts Among the Ruins*, a work from over a thousand years ago. She'd marked a place with a small slip of paper, the very same now-worn note that Herid had sent to Rand shortly before the murder. Min turned it over in her fingers, reading it again.

> *Belief and order give strength. Have to clear rubble before you can build. Will explain when see you next. Do not bring girl. Too pretty.*

She figured—from reading among his books—that she could trace his thoughts. Rand had wanted information on how to seal the Dark One's prison. Could Fel have discovered what she thought she had?

She shook her head. What was *she* doing trying to solve a scholarly mystery? But who else was there? One of the Brown Ajah might be better suited, but could they be trusted? Even those who had made their oaths to him might decide that it was in Rand's best interests to keep secrets from him. Rand himself was far too busy, and he was too impatient for books lately anyway. That left Min. She was beginning to piece together some of what he would have to do, but there was more—so much more—that was still unknown. She felt she was getting close, but it worried her to reveal what she'd discovered to Rand. How would he respond?

She sighed, scanning the book. She'd never thought that she, of all people, would become a fool for some man. Yet here she was, following him wherever he went, putting his needs before her own. That didn't mean she was his pet, regardless what some of the people in camp said. She followed Rand because she loved him, and she could feel—literally—that he returned her love. Despite the harshness that was invading him bit by bit, despite the anger and the bleakness of his life, he loved her. And so she did what she could to help him.

If she could help solve this one puzzle, the puzzle of sealing the Dark One's prison, she could achieve something not just for Rand, but for the world itself. What did it matter if soldiers in the camp didn't know what her value was? It was probably better if everyone assumed her to be dismissible. Any assassin who came to kill Rand should think that he could ignore Min. The would-be killer would soon discover the knives hidden in Min's sleeves. She wasn't as good with them as Thom Merrilin was, but she knew more than enough to kill.

Rand turned in his sleep, but settled down again. She loved him. She hadn't chosen to do so, but her heart—or the Pattern, or the Creator, or whatever was in charge of these things—had made the decision for her. And now she wouldn't change her feelings if she could. If it meant danger, if it meant suffering the looks of men in the camp, if it meant . . . sharing him with others.

Rand stirred again. This time, he groaned and opened his eyes, sitting up. He raised his hand to his head, somehow managing to look more weary now than he had when he'd gone to sleep. He wore only his smallclothes, and his chest was bare. He sat like that for a long moment, then stood up, walking to the shuttered window.

Min pushed her book closed. "And what do you think you're doing, sheepherder? You barely slept for a couple of hours!"

He opened the shutters and the window, exposing the dark night beyond. A stray curl of wind made her lamp flame shiver.

"Rand?" Min asked.

She could barely hear his voice when he replied. "He's inside my head. He was gone during the dream. But he's back now."

She resisted sinking down in her chair. Light, but she hated hearing about Rand's madness. She'd hoped that when he healed *saidin,* he would be free of the taint's insanities. "He?" she asked, forcing her voice to be steady. "The voice of . . . Lews Therin?"

He turned, clouded night sky outside the window framing his face, the lamp's uneven illumination leaving his features mostly in shadows.

"Rand," she said, setting her book aside and joining him beside the window. "You have to talk to someone. You can't keep it all inside."

"I have to be strong."

She tugged on his arm, turning him toward her. "Keeping me away means you're strong?"

“I’m not—”

“Yes you are. There are things going on in there, behind those Aiel eyes of yours. Rand, do you think I will stop loving you because of what you hear?”

“You’ll be frightened.”

“Oh,” she said, folding her arms. “So I’m a fragile flower, am I?”

He opened his mouth, struggling for words, in the way he once had. Back when he’d been nothing more than a sheepherder on an adventure. “Min, I know you’re strong. You know I do.”

“Then trust me to be strong enough to bear what is inside you,” she said. “We can’t just pretend nothing has happened.” She forced herself onward. “The taint left marks on you. I know it did. But if you can’t share it with me, who can you share it with?”

He ran his hand through his hair, then turned away, beginning to pace. “Burn it all, Min! If my enemies discover my weaknesses, they will exploit them. I feel blind. I’m running in the dark on an unfamiliar path. I don’t know if there are breaks in the road, or if the whole cursed thing ends in a cliff!”

She laid a hand on his arm as he passed, stopping him. “Tell me.”

“You’ll think I’m mad.”

She snorted. “I *already* think you’re a wool-headed fool. Can it be much worse than that?”

He regarded her, and some of the tension left his face. He sat down on the edge of the bed, sighing softly. But it *was* progress.

“Semirhage was right,” Rand said. “I hear . . . things. A voice. The voice of Lews Therin, the Dragon. He speaks to me and responds to the world around me. Sometimes, he tries to seize *saidin* from me. And . . . and sometimes he succeeds. He’s wild, Min. Insane. But the things he can do with the One Power are amazing.”

He stared off into the distance. Min shivered. Light! He let the voice in his head wield the One Power? What did that mean? That he let the mad part of his brain take control?

He shook his head. “Semirhage claims that this is just insanity, tricks of my mind, but Lews Therin knows things—things that I don’t. Things about history, about the One Power. You had a viewing of me that showed two people merging into one. That means that Lews Therin and I are distinct! Two people, Min. He’s *real*.”

She walked over and sat next to him. “Rand, he’s *you*. Or you’re him. Spun out into the Pattern again. Those memories and things you can do, they’re remnants from who you were before.”

“No,” Rand said. “Min, he’s insane and I’m not. Besides, he failed. I won’t. I won’t do it, Min. I won’t hurt those I love, as he did. And when I defeat the Dark One, I won’t leave him able to return a short time later and terrorize us again.”

Three thousand years a “short time later”? She put her arms around him. “Does it matter?” she asked. “If there is another person, or if those are just memories from before, the information is useful.”

“Yes,” Rand said, seeming distant again. “But I’m afraid to use the One Power. When I do, I risk letting *him* take control. He can’t be trusted. He didn’t mean to kill her, but that doesn’t change the fact that he did. Light . . . Ilyena. . . .”

Was this how it happened to all of them? Each one assuming that they were really sane, and that it was the *other* person inside of them who did horrible things?

“It’s done now, Rand,” she said, holding him close. “Whatever this voice is, it won’t grow any worse. *Saidin* is cleansed.”

Rand didn’t respond, but he did relax. She closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of his warmth beside her, particularly since he’d left the window open.

“Ishamael lives,” Rand said.

She snapped her eyes open. “What?” Just when she was beginning to feel comfortable!

“I visited him in the World of Dreams,” Rand said. “And before you ask, no. It wasn’t just a nightmare and it wasn’t madness. It was real, and I can’t explain how I know. You will just have to trust me.”

“Ishamael,” she whispered. “You killed him!”

“Yes,” Rand said. “In the Stone of Tear. He has returned, bearing a new face and a new name, but it is him. We should have realized it would happen; the Dark One won’t abandon such useful tools without a fight. He can reach beyond the grave.”

“Then how can we win? If everyone we kill just comes back again. . . .”

“Balefire,” Rand said. “It will kill them for good.”

“Cadsuane said—”

"I don't *care* what Cadsuane said," he snarled. "She is my advisor, and she gives advice. Only advice. *I* am the Dragon Reborn, and *I* will decide how we fight." He stopped, taking a deep breath. "Anyway, it doesn't matter if the Forsaken return, it doesn't matter who or what the Dark One sends at us. In the end, I will destroy him, if possible. If not, then I will at least seal him away so tightly that the world can forget him."

He glanced down at her. "For that . . . I need the voice, Min. Lews Therin knows things. Or . . . or *I* know things. Whichever it is, the knowledge is there. In a way, the Dark One's own taint will destroy him, for it is what gave me access to Lews Therin."

Min glanced at her books. Herid's little slip of paper still peeked from the depths of *Thoughts Among the Ruins*. "Rand," she said. "You have to destroy the seals to the Dark One's prison."

He looked at her, frowning.

"I'm sure of it," she said. "I've been reading Herid's books all this time, and I believe that's what he meant by 'clearing away the rubble.' In order to rebuild the Dark One's prison, you will first need to open it. Clear away the patch made on the Bore."

She had expected him to be incredulous. Shockingly, he just nodded. "Yes," he said. "Yes, that sounds right. I doubt that many will wish to hear it. If those seals are broken, there is no way to tell what will happen. If I fail to contain him . . ."

The prophecies didn't say Rand would win. Only that he would fight. Min shivered again—blasted window!—but met Rand's gaze. "You'll win. You'll defeat him."

He sighed. "Faith in a madman, Min?"

"Faith in you, sheepherder." Suddenly viewings spun around his head. She ignored them most of the time, unless they were new, but now she picked them out. Fireflies consumed in darkness. Three women before a pyre. Flashes of light, darkness, shadow, signs of death, crowns, injuries, pain and hope. A tempest around Rand al'Thor, stronger than any physical storm.

"We still don't know what to do," he said. "The seals are brittle enough that I could break them in my hands, but what then? *How* do I stop him? Does it say anything of that in your books?"

"It's hard to tell," she admitted. "The clues—if that's what they are—are vague. I will keep looking. I promise. I'll find answers for you."

He nodded, and she was surprised to feel his trust through the bond. That was a frighteningly rare emotion from him recently, but he did seem softer than he had during previous days. Still stone, but perhaps with some few cracks, willing to let her inside. It was a beginning.

She tightened her arms around him and closed her eyes again. A place to begin, but with so little time left. It would have to do.

Carefully shielding her burning candle, Aviendha lit the pole-mounted lantern. It flickered alight, illuminating the green around her. Slumbering soldiers snored in rows of tents. The evening was cold, the air crisp, and branches rattled in the distance. A lonely owl hooted. And Aviendha was exhausted.

She'd crossed the grounds fifty times, lighting the lantern, blowing it out, then jogging back across the green and lighting her candle at the manor before walking carefully—shielding the flame—to light the lantern again.

Another month of these punishments and she'd probably go as mad as a wetlander. The Wise Ones would wake one morning and find her going for a swim, or carrying a half-full waterskin, or—even—riding a horse for pleasure! She sighed, too exhausted to think any further, and turned toward the Aiel section of camp to finally sleep.

Someone was standing behind her.

She started, hand going to her dagger, but relaxed as she recognized Amys. Of all the Wise Ones, only she—a former Maiden—could have sneaked up on Aviendha.

The Wise One stood with hands clasped before her, brown shawl and skirt flapping slightly in the wind. Aviendha's skin prickled at the particularly chilly gust. Amys' silver hair seemed almost ghostly in the evening light; a pine needle passing on the breeze had gotten lodged in it. "You approach your punishments with such . . . dedication, child," Amys said.

Aviendha looked down. Pointing out her activities was to shame her. Was she running out of time? Had the Wise Ones finally decided to give up on her? "Please, Wise One. I only do as duty demands."

"Yes, you do," Amys said. She reached up, running her hand through her hair, and found the pine needle, then let it drop to the dead grass. "And, also, you do not. Sometimes, Aviendha, we are so concerned with the things we have done that we do not stop to consider the things we have not."

Aviendha was glad for the darkness, which hid her shameful blush. In the distance, a soldier rang the evening bell to chime the hour, the soft metal ringing with eleven melancholy peals. How did she respond to Amys' comments? There didn't seem to be any proper response.

Aviendha was saved by a flash of light just beyond the camp. It was faint, but in the darkness, the flicker was easy to notice.

"What?" the Wise One asked, noticing Aviendha's gaze and turning to follow it.

"Light," Aviendha said. "From the Traveling grounds."

Amys frowned, then the two of them moved toward the grounds. Soon they encountered Damer Flinn, Davram Bashere, a small guard of Saldaeans and Aiel walking into the camp. What did one think of a creature such as Flinn? The taint had been cleansed, but this man—and many of the others—had come, asking to learn, before that had happened. Aviendha herself would have sooner embraced Sightblinder himself as done that, but they *had* proven to be powerful weapons.

Amys and Aviendha moved to the side as the small party hurried toward the manor house, lit only by the distant flickering torches and the cloud-covered sky above. Though most of the force sent to meet the Seanchan had been made up of Bashere's soldiers, there were several Maidens in the group. Amys locked eyes with one of them, an older woman named Corana. She hung back, and though it was difficult to tell in the darkness, she looked concerned. Perhaps angry.

"What news?" Amys asked.

"The invaders, these Seanchan," Corana nearly spat the word, "they have agreed to another meeting with the *Car'a'carn*."

Amys nodded. Corana, however, sniffed audibly, short hair ruffling in the chill breeze.

"Speak," Amys said.

"The *Car'a'carn* sues too hard for peace," Corana replied. "These Seanchan have given him reason to declare a blood feud, but he simpers and panders to them. I feel like a trained dog, sent to lick the feet of a stranger."

Amys glanced at Aviendha. "What do you say to this, Aviendha?"

"My heart agrees with her words, Wise One. But, while the *Car'a'carn* is a fool in some things, he is not being one now. My mind agrees with him, and in this case, it is the mind I would follow."

“How can you say that?” Corana snapped. She emphasized the *you*, as if to imply that Aviendha—recently a Maiden—should understand.

“Which is more important, Corana?” Aviendha replied raising her chin. “The argument you have with another Maiden, or the feud your clan has with its enemy?”

“The clan comes first, of course. But what does that matter?”

“The Seanchan deserve to be fought,” Aviendha said, “and you are right that it pains to ask them for peace. But you forget that we have a greater enemy. Sightblinder himself has a feud with all men, and our duty is larger than feuds between nations.”

Amys nodded. “There will be time enough to show the Seanchan the weight of our spears at another date.”

Corana shook her head. “Wise One, you sound like a wetlander. What care have we for their prophecies and stories? Rand al’Thor’s duty as *Car’a’carn* is much greater than his duty to the wetlanders. He *must* lead us to glory.”

Amys stared harshly at the blond Maiden. “You speak like a Shaido.”

Corana locked her stare for a moment, then wilted, turning away. “Pardon, Wise One,” she finally said. “I have *toh*. But you should know that the Seanchan had Aiel in their camp.”

“What?” Aviendha asked.

“They were leashed,” Corana said, “like their tame Aes Sedai. They were being shown off like prizes for our arrival, I suspect. I recognized many Shaido among them.”

Amys hissed softly. Shaido or not, Aiel being held as *damane* was a grave insult. And the Seanchan were flaunting their captives. She gripped her dagger.

“What do you say now?” Amys glanced at Aviendha.

Aviendha gritted her teeth. “The same, Wise One, though I’d almost rather cut out my tongue than admit it.”

Amys nodded, looking back at Corana. “Do not think that we will ignore this insult, Corana. Vengeance *will* come. Once this war is done, the Seanchan will feel the storm of our arrows and the tips of our spears. But not until *after*. Go tell the two clan chiefs what you have told me.”

Corana nodded—she would meet her *toh* later, in private, with Amys—and left. Damer Flinn and the others had already reached the manor house; would they wake Rand? He was sleeping now, though Aviendha had been forced to mute her bond in the middle of her night’s punishment, lest she endure sensations that she’d rather have avoided. At least, she’d rather have avoided them secondhand.

“There will be dangerous words of this among the spears,” Amys said thoughtfully. “There will be calls to attack, demands that the *Car’a’carn* give up his attempts to make peace.”

“Will they stay with him when he refuses?” Aviendha asked.

“Of course they will,” Amys said. “They’re Aiel.” She glanced at Aviendha. “We haven’t much time, child. Perhaps it is time to stop coddling you. I will think up better punishments for you starting tomorrow.”

Coddling me? Aviendha watched Amys stalk away. *They couldn’t possibly come up with anything more useless or demeaning!*

But she’d learned long ago not to underestimate Amys. With a sigh, Aviendha broke into a trot, heading back toward her tent.

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CHAPTER 16

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In the White Tower

"I'm curious to hear the novice speak. Tell me, Egwene al'Vere, how would *you* have handled the situation?"

Egwene looked up from the bowl of shells, two-legged steel nutcracker in one hand, a bulbous walnut in the other. It was the first time any of the Aes Sedai present had addressed her. She had begun to think that attending the three Whites would turn out to be another waste of time.

The afternoon's location was a small inset balcony on the third level of the White Tower. Sitters could demand rooms with not only full windows, but balconies as well, something that was uncommon—though not unheard-of—for regular sisters. This one was shaped like a small turret, with a sturdy stone wall running around the rim in a curve, a similar stone hanging from the outcropping above. There was generous space between the two and the view was quite beautiful, eastward across the rising hills that eventually climbed to Kinslayer's Dagger. The Dagger itself might have been distantly visible on a clear day.

A cool breeze blew across the balcony, and this high up it was fresh and unsullied by the stink of the city below. A sinuous pair of sticklesharps—with their three-pronged leaves and clinging vines—grew on each side of the balcony, their creeping tendrils covering the inside of the stonework and making it look almost like a deep forest ruin. The plants were more ornamentation than Egwene would have expected in the quarters of a White, but Ferane was reported to be a shade on the vain side. She probably liked it that her balcony was so distinctive, even if protocol required her to keep the vines pruned as to not mar the gleaming profile of the Tower itself.

The three Whites sat in wicker chairs at a low table. Egwene sat before them on a wicker stool, back to the open air, denied the view as she cracked nuts for the others. Any number of servants or kitchen workers could have done the work. But this was the sort of thing that sisters found to fill the time of novices whom they thought might be lounging about too much.

Egwene had thought that cracking the walnuts was just a pretense. After being ignored for the better part of an hour, she had begun to wonder, but all three were looking at her now. She shouldn't have doubted her instincts.

Ferane had the coppery skin of a Domani, and a temperament to match, odd for a White. She was short, with an apple-shaped face and dark, lustrous hair. Her auburn dress was filmy but decent with a wide white sash at the waist to match her shawl, which she was currently wearing. The dress didn’t lack for embroidery, and the fabric did seem an indication, perhaps intentional, of her Domani heritage.

The other two, Miyasi and Tesan, both wore white, as if they feared that dresses of any other colors were a betrayal of their Ajah. That notion was becoming more and more common among all of the Aes Sedai. Tesan was a Taraboner, with her dark hair in beaded braids. The beads were white and gold, and they framed a narrow face that looked as if it had been pinched at top and bottom and pulled. She always looked worried about something. Though perhaps that was just the times. Light knew they all had a great deal to worry over.

Miyasi was more calm, her head topped by iron-gray hair in a bun. Her Aes Sedai face betrayed none of the many years that she must have seen for her hair to silver so fully. She was tall and plump, and she preferred her walnuts shelled very particularly. No fragments or broken pieces of nut for her, only full halves. Egwene carefully pried one from the shell she had cracked, then handed it over; the small brown lump was wrinkled and ridged, like the brain of a tiny animal.

“What was it you asked, Ferane?” Egwene asked, cracking another walnut and discarding the shell in a pail at her feet.

The White barely frowned at Egwene’s improper response. They were all growing accustomed to the fact that this “novice” seldom acted her presumed station. “I asked,” Ferane said coolly, “what *you* would have done in the Amyrlin’s place. Consider this part of your instruction. You know that the Dragon has been reborn and you know that the Tower *must* control him in order for the Last Battle to proceed. How would you handle him?”

A curious question. It didn’t sound much like “instruction.” But Ferane’s tone didn’t make it sound like an offer to complain about Elaida either. There was too much contempt for Egwene in that voice.

The other two Whites remained quiet. Ferane was a Sitter, and they deferred to her.

She’s heard how often I mention Elaida’s failure with Rand, Egwene thought, looking into Ferane’s steely black eyes. *So. A test, is it?* This would have to be handled very carefully.

Egwene reached for another walnut. “First, I would send a group of sisters to his home village.”

Ferane raised an eyebrow. “To intimidate his family?”

“Of course not,” Egwene said. “To interrogate them. Who is this Dragon Reborn? Is he a man of temper, a man of passions? Or is he a calm man, careful and cautious? Was he the type to spend time alone in the fields, or did he make quick friends of the other youths? Would you be more likely to find him in a tavern or a workshop?”

“But *you* already know him,” Tesan piped in.

“I do,” Egwene said, cracking the walnut. “But we were speaking of a hypothetical situation.” *Best you remember that in the real world, I know the Dragon Reborn personally. As nobody else in this Tower does.*

“Let us assume that you are you,” Ferane said. “And that he is Rand al’Thor, your childhood friend.”

“Very well.”

“Tell me,” Ferane said, leaning forward. “Of the types of men you listed just before, which best fits this Rand al’Thor?”

Egwene hesitated. “All of them,” she said, dropping a fragmented walnut into a small bowl with others. Miyasi wouldn’t touch it, but the other two weren’t so picky. “If I were me and the Dragon were Rand, I’d know him to be a rational person, for a man—if somewhat bullheaded at times. Well, most of the time. More importantly, I’d know him to be a good man at heart. And so, my next step would be to send sisters to him to offer guidance.”

“And if he rejected them?” Ferane asked.

“Then I’d send spies,” Egwene said, “and watch to see if he has changed from the man I once knew.”

“And while you waited and spied, he would terrorize the countryside, wreaking havoc and bringing armies to his banner.”

“And is that not what we want him to do?” Egwene asked. “I don’t believe he could have been prevented from taking *Callandor*, should we have wanted him to be. He has managed to restore order to Cairhien, unite Tear and Illian beneath one ruler, and presumably has gained the favor of Andor as well.”

“Not to mention subjugating those Aiel,” Miyasi said, reaching for a handful of nuts.

Egwene caught her with a sharp gaze. “Nobody *subjugates* the Aiel. Rand gained their respect. I was with him at the time.”

Miyasi froze, hand partway to the bowl of nutmeats. She shook herself, breaking Egwene's gaze, grabbing the bowl and retreating back to her chair. A cool breeze blew across the balcony, rustling the vines, which Ferane had complained were not greening this spring like they should. Egwene returned to shelling walnuts.

"It seems," Ferane said, "that you would simply let him sow chaos as he saw fit."

"Rand al'Thor is like a river," Egwene said. "Calm and placid when not agitated, but a furious and deadly current when squeezed too tightly. What Elaida did to him was the equivalent of trying to force the Manetherendrelle through a canyon only two feet wide. Waiting to discover a man's temperament is not foolish, nor is it a sign of weakness. Acting without information is lunacy, and the White Tower deserved the tempest it riled up."

"Perhaps," Ferane said. "But you have still not told me how *you* would deal with the situation, once your information was collected and the time for waiting had passed." Ferane was known for her temper, but at the moment her voice held the coldness common among Whites. It was the coldness of one who spoke without emotion, thinking about logic without tolerating outside influences.

It was not the best way to approach problems. People were much more complex than a set of rules or numbers. There was a time for logic, true, but there was also a time for emotion.

Rand was a problem she hadn't allowed herself to dwell on—she needed to deal with one problem at a time. But there was also much to be said for planning ahead. If she *didn't* consider how to deal with the Dragon Reborn, she'd eventually find herself in as bad a situation as Elaida.

He *had* changed from the man she had known. And yet the seeds of personality within him must be the same. She'd seen his rage during their months traveling together into the Aiel Waste. That hadn't often come out during his childhood, but she could see now that it must have been lurking. It wasn't that he had suddenly developed a temper; it was simply that nothing in the Two Rivers had upset him.

During the months she'd traveled with him, he'd seemed to harden with each step. He was under extraordinary pressures. How did one deal with such a man? She frankly had no idea.

But this conversation wasn't about what to do with Rand, not really. It was about Ferane trying to determine what kind of woman Egwene was.

"Rand al'Thor sees himself as an emperor," Egwene said. "And I suppose he is one, now. He will react poorly if he thinks he is being pushed or shoved in any particular direction. If I were to deal with him, I would send a delegation to honor him."

"A lavish procession?" Ferane asked.

"No," Egwene said. "But not a threadbare one either. A group of three Aes Sedai, led by a Gray, accompanied by a Green and a Blue. He views the Blue favorably because of past associations, and Greens are often perceived as the opposites to Reds, a subtle indication that we are willing to work with him rather than gentle him. A Gray because it would be expected, but also because if a Gray is sent, then it means negotiations, not armies, will follow."

"Good logic," Tesan said, nodding.

Ferane was not so easily convinced. "Delegations like this one have failed in the past. I believe that Elaida's own delegation was led by a Gray."

"Yes, but Elaida's delegation was fundamentally flawed," Egwene said.

"And why is that?"

"Why, because it was sent by a *Red,* of course," Egwene said, cracking a nut. "I have trouble seeing the logic in raising a member of the Red Ajah to Amyrlin during the days of the Dragon Reborn. Doesn't that seem destined to create animosity between him and the Tower?"

"One might say," Ferane countered, "that a Red is needed during these troubled times, for the Red are the most experienced at dealing with men who can channel."

" 'Dealing' with is different from 'working' with," Egwene said. "The Dragon Reborn should *not* have been left to run free, but since when has the White Tower been in the business of *kidnapping* and forcing people to our will? Are we not known as the most subtle and careful of all people? Do we not pride ourselves on being able to make others do as they should, all the while letting them think it was *their* idea? When in the past have we locked kings in boxes and beaten them for disobedience? Why now—of all the times under the Light—have we forsaken our fine practice and become simple footpads instead?"

Ferane selected a walnut. The other two Whites were sharing an unsettled look. “There is sense in what you say,” the Sitter finally admitted.

Egwene set aside the nutcracker. “Rand al’Thor is a good man, in his heart, but he needs guidance. These days are when we should have been at our most subtle. He should have been led to trust Aes Sedai above all others, to rely on our counsel. He should have been shown the wisdom in listening. Instead, he has been shown that we will treat him like an unruly child. If he *is* one, he cannot be allowed to think we regard him in such a way. Because of our bungling, he has taken some Aes Sedai captive, and has allowed still others to be *bonded* to those Asha’man of his.”

Ferane sat up stiffly. “Best not to mention that atrocity.”

“What is this?” Tesan said, shocked, hand raised to her breast. Some Whites never seemed to pay attention to the world around them. “Ferane? Did you know of this?”

Ferane didn’t respond.

“I’ve . . . heard this rumor,” said stout Miyasi. “If it is true, then something must be done.”

“Yes,” Egwene said. “Unfortunately, we cannot focus on al’Thor right now.”

“He is the greatest problem facing the world,” pinch-faced Tesan said, leaning forward. “We must deal with him first.”

“No,” Egwene said. “There are other issues.”

Miyasi frowned. “With the Last Battle impending, I can’t see any other issues of importance.”

Egwene shook her head. “In dealing with Rand now, we’d be like a farmer, looking at his wagon and worrying that there aren’t any goods in the bed for him to sell—but ignoring the fact that his axle is cracked. Fill the bed before it is time, and you’ll just break the wagon and be worse off than when you started.”

“And what, exactly, are you implying?” Tesan demanded.

Egwene looked back at Ferane.

“I see,” Ferane said. “You are referring to the division in the White Tower.”

“Can a cracked stone be a good foundation for a building?” Egwene asked. “Can a frayed rope hold a panicky horse? How can *we*, in our current state, hope to manage the Dragon Reborn himself?”

Ferane said, “Why, then, do you continue to enforce the division by insisting that you are the Amyrlin Seat? You defy your own logic.”

“And renouncing my claim on the Amyrlin Seat would mend the Tower?” Egwene asked.

“It would help.”

Egwene raised an eyebrow. “Let us assume, for a moment, that by renouncing my claim, I could persuade the rebel faction to rejoin the White Tower and accept Elaida’s leadership.” She raised the eyebrow further, indicating how likely she thought *that* was. “Would the divisions be healed?”

“You just said they would be,” Tesan said, frowning.

“Oh?” Egwene said. “Would sisters stop scurrying through the hallways, frightened to be alone? Would groups of women from different Ajahs stop regarding each other with hostility when they pass in the hallways? With all due respect, would we no longer feel the need to wear our shawls at all times to reinforce who we are and where our allegiance is?”

Ferane glanced down, briefly, at her white-fringed shawl.

Egwene leaned forward, continuing. “Surely you, of all women in the White Tower, can see the importance of the Ajahs working together. We need women with different skills and interests to gather into Ajahs. But does it make sense for us to refuse to work together?”

“The White has not caused this . . . regrettable tension,” Miyasi said with a little snort. “The others acting with such abundance of emotion have created it.”

“The present leadership has caused it,” Egwene said, “a leadership which teaches that it’s all right to still fellow sisters in secret, to execute Warders before their Aes Sedai are even brought to trial. That there’s nothing wrong with removing a sister’s shawl and reducing her to an Accepted, that there’s nothing wrong with *disbanding* an entire Ajah. And what of acting without the counsel of the Hall in something as dangerous as kidnapping and imprisoning the Dragon Reborn? Is it unexpected that the sisters would be so frightened and worried? Is it not all completely *logical*, what has happened to us?”

The three Whites were quiet.

“I will not submit,” Egwene said. “Not while doing so leaves us fractured. I will continue to assert that Elaida is *not* the Amyrlin. Her actions have proven it. You want to help battle the Dark One? Well, your first step is not to deal with the Dragon Reborn. Your first step should be to reach out to sisters of the other Ajahs."

"Why us?" Tesan said. "The actions of others are not our responsibility."

"And you are not to blame at all?" Egwene asked, letting a little of her anger seep through. Would *none* of her sisters accept a modicum of responsibility? "You, of the White, should have seen where this road would lead. Yes, Siuan and the Blue were not without their flaws—but *you* should have seen the flaw in pulling her down, then allowing Elaida to disband the Blue. Besides, I believe that several members of your own Ajah were integral to the act of setting up Elaida as Amyrlin."

Miyasi recoiled slightly. The Whites did not like to be reminded of Alviarin and her failure as Elaida's Keeper. Instead of turning against Elaida for ousting the White, they seemed to have turned against their own member for the shame she had caused them.

"I still think that this is work for the Grays," Tesan said, but she sounded less convinced than she had just moments before. "You should speak with them."

"I have," Egwene said. Her patience was beginning to fray. "Some will not speak with me and continue to send me to penance. Others say these rifts are not their fault, but with some coaxing have agreed to do what they can. The Yellows have been very reasonable, and I think they're beginning to see the problems in the Tower as a wound to be healed. I'm still working with several Brown sisters—they seem more fascinated by the problems than worried about them. I've sent several of them looking through the histories for examples of division, hoping they'll run across the story of Renala Merlon. The connection should be easy to make, and perhaps they will begin to see that our problems here can be solved.

"The Greens have, ironically, been the most stubborn. They can be very like Reds in many ways, which is infuriating as they really should be willing to accept me as one who would have been among them. That only leaves the Blue, who have been banished, and the Red. I doubt that sisters of that last Ajah are going to be very receptive to my suggestions."

Ferane sat back, thoughtful, and Tesan sat with three forgotten walnuts in her hand, staring at Egwene. Miyasi scratched at her iron-gray hair, eyes wide with surprise.

Had Egwene given away too much? Aes Sedai were remarkably like Rand al'Thor; they did not like to know when they were being maneuvered.

"You are shocked," she said. "What, do you think I should simply sit—like most—and do nothing while the Tower crumbles? This white dress has been forced upon me, and I do not accept what it represents, but I *will* use it. A woman in novice white is one of the few who can pass from one Ajah quarter to another these days. Someone has to work to mend the Tower, and I am the best choice. Besides, it is my duty."

"How very . . . reasonable of you," Ferane said, her ageless brow furrowed.

"Thank you," Egwene said. Were they worried that she'd overstepped her bounds? Angered that she'd been manipulating Aes Sedai? Coldly determined to see her punished yet again?

Ferane leaned forward. "Let us say that we wished to work toward mending the Tower. What path would you recommend?"

Egwene felt a surge of excitement. She'd had nothing but setbacks during the last few days. Idiot Greens! They would feel foolish indeed once she was accepted as Amyrlin.

"Suana, of the Yellow Ajah, will soon be inviting you three to share a meal with her," Egwene said. At least, Suana would make the offer, once Egwene prodded her. "Accept and take your meal in a public place, perhaps one of the Tower gardens. Be seen enjoying one another's company. I will try to get a Brown sister to invite you next. Let yourself be seen by the other sisters mixing among the Ajahs."

"Simple enough," Miyasi said. "Very little effort required, but excellent potential for gain."

"We shall see," Ferane said. "You may withdraw, Egwene."

She didn't like being dismissed so, but there was no helping it. Still, the woman had shown Egwene respect by using her name. Egwene stood up, and then—very carefully—nodded her head to Ferane. Though Tesan and Miyasi gave no strong reactions, both pairs of eyes widened slightly. By now, it was well known in the Tower that Egwene never curtsied. And, shockingly, Ferane bowed her head, just a degree, returning the gesture.

"Should you decide to choose the White, Egwene al'Vere," the woman said, "know that you will find a welcome here. Your logic this day was remarkable for one so young."

Egwene hid a smile. Just four days back, Bennae Nalsad had all but offered Egwene a place in the Brown, and Egwene was still surprised at how vigilantly Suana recommended the Yellow to her. Almost they made her change her mind—but that was mostly her frustration with the Green at the moment. “Thank you,” she said. “But you must remember that the Amyrlin must represent all Ajahs. Our discussion was enjoyable, however. I hope that you will allow me to join you again in the future.”

With that, Egwene withdrew, letting herself smile broadly as she nodded to Ferane’s sturdy, bowlegged Warder standing guard just inside the balcony. Her smile lasted right up until she left the White sector of the Tower and found Katerine waiting in the hallway. The Red was not one of the two assigned to Egwene earlier in the day, and talk about the Tower said that Elaida was relying on Katerine more and more now that her Keeper had vanished on a mysterious mission.

Katerine’s sharp face bore a smile of its own. That was not a good sign. “Here,” the woman said, offering a wooden cup holding a clear liquid. It was time for Egwene’s afternoon dose of forkroot.

Egwene grimaced, but took the cup and drank the contents. She wiped her mouth with her handkerchief, then began to walk down the hallway.

“And where are you going?” Katerine asked.

The smugness in her tone made Egwene hesitate. Egwene turned, frowning. “My next lesson—”

“You will have no further lessons,” Katerine said. “At least, not of the kind you have been receiving. All agree that your skill with weaves is impressive, for a novice.”

Egwene frowned. Were they going to raise her to Accepted again? She doubted that Elaida would allow her any more freedom, and she rarely spent any time in her quarters, so the extra space would be unimportant.

“No,” Katerine said, toying idly with the fringe on her shawl. “What you need to learn, it has been decided, is humility. The Amyrlin has heard of your foolish refusal to curtsy to sisters. In her opinion, it’s the last symbol of your defiant nature, and so you are to receive a new form of instruction.”

Egwene felt a moment of fear. “What kind of instruction?” she said, keeping her voice even.

“Chores and work,” Katerine said.

“I already do chores, just like the novices.”

“You mistake me,” Katerine said. “From now on, *all* you will do is chores. You are to report to the kitchens immediately—you will spend every afternoon working there. In the evenings, you will scrub floors. In the mornings you will report to the groundsmaster and work the gardens. This will be your life, those same three activities every day—five hours at each one—until you give up your foolish pride and learn to curtsy to your betters.”

It was an end to Egwene’s freedom, what little she had. There was glee in Katerine’s eyes.

“Ah, so you understand,” Katerine said. “No more visiting sisters in their quarters, wasting their time as you practice weaves that you have already mastered. No more laziness; now you will work instead. What think you of that?”

It wasn’t the difficulty of the work that worried Egwene—she didn’t mind the chores she did each day. It was the lack of contact with other sisters that would ruin her. How would she mend the White Tower? Light! It was a disaster.

She gritted her teeth and forced down her emotion. She met Katerine’s eyes, saying, “Very well. Let us go.”

Katerine blinked. She’d obviously expected a tantrum, or at least a fight. But this was not the time. Egwene turned her step toward the kitchens, leaving the quarters of the Whites behind. She couldn’t let them know how effective this punishment was.

She forced down her panic as she walked, the cavernous hallways of the inner Tower lined with bracketed lamps, long and sinuous, like the heads of serpents spouting tiny flames up toward the stone ceiling. She could deal with this. She *would* deal with this. They would not break her.

Perhaps she should work for a few days, then pretend that she had been humbled. Should she give the curtsy Elaida demanded? It was a simple thing, really. One curtsy, and she could go back to her more important duties.

No, she thought. *No, that would not be the end of it. I’d lose the moment I gave that first curtsy*. Giving in would prove to Elaida that Egwene could be broken. Curtsying would begin a descent into destruction. Soon, Elaida would decide that Egwene needed to start using honorifics for the Aes Sedai. The false Amyrlin would send Egwene back to work detail, knowing it had been effective before. Would Egwene bend there too? How long before any credibility she had ended up forgotten, trampled into the tiles of the Tower hallways?

She could not bend. The beatings had not changed her behavior; work detail must not change her either.

Three hours of working the kitchens did little to improve her mood. Laras, the hefty Mistress of Kitchens, had set Egwene at scrubbing out one of the ovenlike fireplaces. It was dirty, grimy work, not conducive to thinking. Not that there were many ways out of her situation.

Egwene knelt back on her heels, raising an arm and wiping her brow. The arm came away smeared with soot. Egwene sighed softly, her mouth and nose protected by a damp cloth to keep her from breathing too much ash. Her breath was hot and stuffy against her face, and her skin was sticky with sweat. The drops that fell from her face were stained with black soot; through the cloth she could smell the dull, crusty scent of ash that had been burned over and over and over again.

The fireplace was a large square construction of burned red bricks. It was open on both sides and more than large enough to crawl into—which was exactly what Egwene had to do. Dark crusts built up on the inside of the flue and chimney, and they needed to be scrubbed free lest they clog the chimney or break free and fall into the food. Outside in the dining room, Egwene could hear Katerine and Lirene chatting and laughing with each other. The Reds periodically poked heads in to check on her, but her real supervisor was Laras, who was scrubbing pots on the other side of the room.

Egwene had changed into a work dress for the duty. While it had once been white, it had been repeatedly used by novices cleaning the fireplaces, and the soot had been ground into the fibers. Patches of gray stained the cloth, like shadows.

She rubbed the small of her back, got back on her hands and knees, and crawled farther into the fireplace. Using a small wooden scrape, she worked clumps of ash free from seams between the bricks, then gathered it up and deposited it in brass buckets, the rims of which were powdered white and gray with ash. Her first task had been to dig out all of the loose soot and pile it into the buckets. Her hands were so blackened from the work she worried that the most furious scrubbing wouldn’t get them clean. Her knees ached, and they seemed a strange counterpart to her backside, which still stung from her regular morning beating.

She continued, scratching with her scrape at a blackened section of brick, dimly lit by the lantern she'd left burning in a corner inside the fireplace. She itched to use the One Power; but the Reds outside would sense her channeling, and she'd discovered that her afternoon dose of forkroot had been uncharacteristically strong, leaving her unable to channel as much as a trickle. In fact, it had been strong enough to leave her drowsy, which made the work even harder.

Was this to be her life? Trapped inside a fireplace, scrubbing at bricks nobody saw, locked away from the world? She couldn't stand up to Elaida if everyone forgot about her. She coughed quietly, the sound echoing against the inside of the fireplace.

She needed a plan. Her only recourse seemed to be to use the sisters who were trying to root out the Black Ajah. But how to visit them? Without being trained by sisters, she had no way to escape her Red handlers by entering the domains of other Ajahs. Could she sneak away somehow while doing labor? If her absence were discovered, she'd probably end up in an even *worse* situation.

But she couldn't let her life be dominated by this menial labor! The Last Battle was approaching, the Dragon Reborn ran free, and the Amyrlin Seat was on her hands and knees cleaning fireplaces! She gritted her teeth, scrubbing furiously. The soot had been baked on for so long that it formed a glossy black patina on the stone. She'd never get it all off. She just needed to make sure it was clean enough that none would break free.

Reflected in that glossy patina, she saw a shadow move across the opening of the far side of the fireplace. Egwene immediately reached for the Source—but, of course, she found nothing. Not with forkroot clouding her mind. But there was *definitely* someone outside the fireplace, crouching down, moving quietly. . . .

Egwene gripped the scrape in one hand, slowly reaching down with the other to grab the brush she'd been using to scoop up ash. Then she spun.

Laras froze, peeking into the fireplace. The Mistress of Kitchens wore a large white apron, stained with a few soot marks itself. Her pudgy round face had seen its share of winters; her hair was starting to gray, and lines creased the sides of her eyes. Leaning over as she was, her jowls formed a second, third and fourth chin, and she gripped the side of the fireplace opening with a thick-fingered hand.

Egwene relaxed. Why had she been so certain that someone had been sneaking up on her? It was just Laras coming to check on her.

Yet why had the woman moved so silently? Laras glanced to the side, eyes narrowing. Then she raised a finger to her lips. Egwene felt herself tense again. What was going on?

Laras backed out of the fireplace, waving for Egwene to follow. The Mistress of Kitchens moved on light feet, far quieter than Egwene would have thought possible. Assistant cooks and scullions clanged away in other parts of the kitchen, but none were directly visible. Egwene crept free of the fireplace, tucking the scrape into her belt and wiping her hands on her dress. She pulled the cloth free from her face, breathing sweet, soot-free air. She took a deep breath, and received a harsh glare from Laras, followed by another finger to the lips.

Egwene nodded, following Laras through the kitchens. In a few moments she and Egwene stood in a pantry, thick with the scent of dried grains and aging cheeses. The tiles gave way to more durable brickwork here. Laras shoved aside a few sacks, then pulled open a piece of the floor. It was a wooden trapdoor, capped with shaved brickwork on the top to make it seem part of the floor. It revealed a small, rock-walled chamber underneath the pantry, large enough to hold a person, though a tall man would be cramped.

“You wait here until night,” Laras said in a low voice. “I can’t get you out right now, not with the Tower fluttery as a yard full of hens when the fox is about. But the garbage goes out late at night, and I’ll hide you among the girls who unload it. A dockworker will take you to a small boat and row you across the river. I have some friends among the guard; they’ll turn the other way. Once you reach the other side, it’s up to you what you do. I’d advise against going back to those fools who made you their puppet. Find some place to lie low until this all blows over, then come back and see if whoever’s in charge will take you in. Isn’t likely it will be Elaida, the way things are going. . . .”

Egwene blinked in surprise.

“Well,” the heavyset woman said. “In you go.”

“I—”

“No time for jabbering!” Laras said, as if she weren’t the one doing all of the talking. She was obviously nervous, the way she kept glancing about and tapping her foot. But she’d obviously *also* done this sort of thing before. Why was the simple cook in the White Tower so skilled at sneaking, so handy with a plan to get Egwene out of the fortified and besieged city? And why did she have a bolt-hole in the kitchens in the first place? Light! How had she created it?

"Don't worry about me," Laras said, eyeing Egwene. "I can handle myself. I'll keep all of the kitchen servants away from where you were working. Those Aes Sedai only check on you every half-hour or so—and since they just checked a minute ago, it will be a while before they look in again. When they *do* check, I can plead ignorance and everyone will assume you slipped out of the kitchens. We'll soon have you out of the city and nobody will be the wiser."

"Yes," Egwene said, finally finding her tongue, "but *why*?" She had assumed that, after helping Min and Siuan, Laras wouldn't be eager to help another fugitive.

Laras looked back at her, in the woman's eyes a determination as hard as any Aes Sedai's. Egwene certainly had overlooked this woman! Who was she really?

"I won't be a party to the breaking of a girl's spirit," Laras said sternly. "Those beatings are shameful! Fool Aes Sedai. I've served loyally these years, I have, but now they've told me that you're to be worked as hard as I can push you, indefinitely. Well, I can see when a girl has moved away from being instructed and into being beaten down. I won't have it, not in my kitchens. Light burn Elaida for thinking she could do such a thing! Execute you or make you a novice, I don't care. But this breaking is unacceptable!"

The woman stood, setting hands on hips, a puff of flour rising from her apron. Oddly, Egwene found herself considering the offer. She'd denied Siuan's offer to save her, but if she fled now, she would return to the rebel camp having freed herself. That would be far superior to being rescued. She could get away from all this, away from the beatings, away from the drudgery.

To do what? To sit on the outside and watch the Tower collapse?

"No," she said to Laras. "Your offer is very kind, but I can't take it. I'm sorry."

Laras frowned. "Now, you listen—"

"Laras," Egwene interrupted, "one does not take that tone with an Aes Sedai, no matter that one is the Mistress of Kitchens."

Laras hesitated. "Fool girl. You ain't Aes Sedai."

"Accept it or not, I still can't go. Unless you intend to try stuffing me into that hole yourself—gagging and tying me to keep me from crying out, followed by escorting me across the river in person—then I suggest letting me return to my work."

"But why?"

"Because," Egwene said, glancing back at the fireplace. "Someone has to fight her."

"You can't fight like this," Laras said.

"Each day is a battle," Egwene said. "Each day I refuse to bend means something. Even if Elaida and her Reds are the only ones who know it, that's something. A small something, but more than I could do from the outside. Come. I've still got two hours of work left."

She turned and began to walk back toward the fireplace. A reluctant Laras closed the hatch on her hidden chamber, then joined her. The woman made much more noise now as she walked, brushing against counters, her footfalls sounding on the bricks. Curious how she'd been able to be so quiet when she wanted to.

A flash of red cloth, like the blood of a dead rabbit in the snow, moved through the kitchens. Egwene froze as Katerine, wearing a dress with crimson skirts and yellow trim, spotted her. The Red's mouth was thin-lipped, her eyes narrow. Had she seen Egwene and Laras walk off?

Laras froze.

"I see now what I was doing wrong," Egwene quickly said to the Mistress of Kitchens, eyeing a second hearth, which lay near where they had been standing in the pantry. "Thank you for showing it to me. I'll be more careful now."

"See that you are," Laras said, shaking out of her shock. "Otherwise, you'll see what a *real* punishment is like, not those halfhearted paddlings the Mistress of Novices gives. Now back to work with you."

Egwene nodded, hurrying back toward the fireplace. Katerine held up a hand to forestall her. Egwene's heart thumped traitorously.

"No need," Katerine said. "The Amyrlin has demanded that the novice attend her tonight at dinner. I told the Amyrlin that one day of work would hardly break someone as foolishly stubborn as this child, but she is insistent. I guess you are to be given your first chance to prove your humility, child. I suggest you take it."

Egwene glanced down at her blackened hands and soiled dress.

“Go, run,” Katerine said. “Wash up and clean yourself. The Amyrlin will not be kept waiting.”

Washing up proved to be nearly as difficult as cleaning the fireplace. The soot had stained her hands much in the way it had the work dress. Egwene spent the better part of an hour washing in a tub full of lukewarm water, trying to make herself presentable. Her fingernails were ragged from scraping the bricks, and it seemed that each time she rinsed her hair, she washed out an entire bucket’s worth of soot flakes.

However, she was glad for the chance. She rarely had much time for bathing; usually she could not stop for more than a quick scrub. As she rinsed and scrubbed in the small, gray-tiled bathing chamber, she considered her next step.

She had turned down the opportunity to flee. That meant she had to work with Elaida and her Reds, the only sisters she saw. But could they be made to see their errors? She wished she could send the whole lot of them for penance and be rid of them.

But no. She was Amyrlin; she represented all Ajahs, including the Red. She couldn’t treat them as Elaida had treated the Blues. They were the most antagonistic toward her, but that meant a greater challenge. She seemed to be making some headway with Silviana, and hadn’t Lirene Doirellin admitted that Elaida had made serious mistakes?

Maybe the Reds weren’t the only ones she could influence. There were always chance meetings with other sisters in the hallways. If one of them approached her to speak, the Reds couldn’t very well tow her away. They would show some decorum, and that would give Egwene a chance to interact a bit with other sisters.

But how to treat Elaida herself? Was it wise to let the false Amyrlin continue to think that Egwene was nearly cowed? Or was it time to make a stand?

By the end of her bath, Egwene felt a great deal cleaner and a great deal more confident. Her war had taken a serious turn for the worse, but she could still fight. She ran a hurried brush through her wet hair, threw on a new novice dress—my, how good it felt to have the soft, clean fabric on her skin!—and left to join her handlers.

They escorted her up to the Amyrlin’s chambers. Egwene passed several groups of sisters, and she held herself carefully erect for their benefit. The handlers took her through the Red sector of the Tower, the tiles on the floor shifting to a pattern of red and charcoal. There were more people walking about here, women in their shawls, servants bearing the Flame of Tar Valon on their chests. Never any Warders; that always felt strange to Egwene, since they were so common in other parts of the Tower.

A long climb and a few twists later, they arrived at Elaida's quarters. Egwene checked her skirts unconsciously. She had determined during the walk that she needed to approach Elaida with silence, just as she had last time. Riling her further would only lead to more restrictions. Egwene would not debase herself, but neither would she go out of her way to insult Elaida. Let the woman think as she wished.

A servant opened the door, leading Egwene in, and into the dining chamber. There, she was shocked by what she found. She had assumed she'd attend Elaida alone, or maybe with Meidani. Egwene hadn't for a moment considered that the dining room would be filled with women. There were five, one from each Ajah save the Red and the Blue. And each woman was a Sitter. Yukiri was there, as was Doesine, both from the clandestine hunters of the Black Ajah. Ferane was there, though she seemed surprised to see Egwene; had the White not known about this dinner earlier, or had she simply not mentioned it?

Rubinde, of the Green Ajah, sat beside Shevan of the Brown, a sister whom Egwene had been wanting to meet. Shevan was one of those who supported negotiating with the rebel Aes Sedai, and Egwene hoped to be able to nudge her more toward helping unify the White Tower from within.

There wasn't a Red sister at the table other than Elaida. Was that because the Red Sitters were all out of the Tower? Perhaps Elaida thought the room balanced with her there, as she still thought of herself as Red, although she wasn't supposed to.

It was a long table, crystal goblets sparkling and reflecting light from the ornate bronze standlamps, running along the walls painted a rusty red-yellow in color. Each woman wore a fine gown in the color of her Ajah. The room smelled of succulent meats and steamed carrots. The women chatted. Amicable, but forced. Tense. They didn't want to be there.

Across the room, Doesine nodded to Egwene, almost in respect. It was an indication of something. "I'm here because you said that this sort of thing was important," it seemed to say. Elaida sat at the head of the table, wearing a red dress with full sleeves, uncut garnets trimming them and the bodice, her face bearing a satisfied smile. Servants bustled back and forth, pouring wine and bringing food. Why had Elaida called a dinner of Sitters? Was this an attempt to heal the rifts in the White Tower? Had Egwene misjudged her?

"Ah, good," Elaida said, noticing Egwene. "You've finally arrived. Come here, child."

Egwene did so, walking through the room, the last few Sitters catching notice of her. Some seemed confused, others made curious, by her presence. As she walked, Egwene realized something.

This one evening could easily undo all that she'd worked for.

If the Aes Sedai here saw her subserviently waiting on Elaida, Egwene would lose integrity in their eyes. Elaida had declared that Egwene was cowed—but Egwene had proven otherwise. If she bent to Elaida's will here, even a little, it would be seen as proof.

Light burn the woman! Why had she invited so many of the women that Egwene had been working to influence? Was it simple happenstance? Egwene joined the false Amyrlin at the head of the table, and a servant handed her a crystal pitcher of glistening red wine. "You are to keep my cup full," Elaida said. "Wait there, but don't come too close. I'd rather not have to smell the soot on you from your punishments this afternoon."

Egwene clenched her jaw. Smell the soot? After an hour of scrubbing? Doubtful. From the side, she could see the satisfaction in Elaida's eyes as she sipped her wine. Then Elaida turned to Shevan, who sat in the chair to Elaida's right. The Brown was a lanky woman, with knobbed arms and an angular face, like a person made of gnarled sticks. Her eyes were thoughtful as she studied her hostess.

"Tell me, Shevan," Elaida said. "Do you still insist on those foolish talks with the rebels?"

Shevan responded. "The sisters must be given a chance to reconcile."

"They've had their chance," Elaida said. "Honestly, I expected more of a Brown. You're behaving doggedly, without a whit of understanding how the real world works. Why, even Meidani agrees with me, and she's a Gray! You know how *they* are."

Shevan turned away, seeming more disturbed than before. Why did Elaida invite them to dinner, if only to insult them and their Ajahs? As Egwene watched, the Red turned her attention to Ferane, and complained to her about Rubinde, a Sitter from the Green who also resisted Elaida's efforts to end the talks. As she spoke, she raised her cup to Egwene, tapping it. Elaida had barely taken a few sips.

Egwene ground her teeth, filling the cup. The others had seen her do labor before—why, she'd cracked walnuts for Ferane. This wouldn't ruin her reputation, not unless Elaida forced her to abase herself somehow.

But what was the point of this dinner? Elaida didn't seem to be making any attempt to bring the Ajahs together. If anything, she was prying those rifts wider, the way she was dismissing those who disagreed with her. Occasionally, she would have Egwene refill her cup, but it never had room for more than a sip or two.

Slowly, Egwene began to understand. This dinner wasn't about working with the Ajahs. It was about bullying the Sitters into doing as Elaida felt they should. And Egwene was simply there to be shown off! This was all about proving to the others how much power Elaida had—she could take someone that others had named Amyrlin, put a novice dress on her and send her to penance every day.

Egwene felt herself grow angry again. Why could Elaida always stir her emotions? Soup bowls were removed and plates of steamed, buttered carrots were brought, a hint of cinnamon striking the air. Egwene had not been given dinner, but she felt too sick to care about eating.

No, she thought, steeling herself. *I will not end this early, like last time. I will endure. I am stronger than Elaida. I'm stronger than her madness.*

The conversation continued, Elaida making insulting comments to the others, sometimes with intent, sometimes with apparent unawareness. The others steered the talk away from the rebels and toward the strangely overcast skies. Eventually, Shevan mentioned a rumor about the Seanchan working with Aiel far to the south.

"The Seanchan again?" Elaida said with a sigh. "You needn't worry about them."

"My sources say otherwise, Mother," Shevan said stiffly. "I think we need to pay close attention to what they are doing. I have had some sisters ask this child about her experience with them, which has been extensive. You should hear the things they do to Aes Sedai."

Elaida laughed a tinkling, melodic laugh. "Surely you know how the child is prone to exaggerate!" She glanced at Egwene. "Have you been spreading lies for your friend, the fool al'Thor? What did he tell you to say about these invaders? They are working for him, are they not?"

Egwene didn't respond.

"Speak," Elaida said, gesturing with her cup. "Tell these women you have been speaking lies. Confess or I'll have you in penance again, girl."

The penance she would take for not speaking would be better than suffering Elaida's rage at contradicting her. Silence was the path to victory.

And yet, as Egwene glanced down the long mahogany table, set with bright white Sea Folk porcelain and flickering red candles, she saw five pairs of eyes studying her. She could see their questions. Egwene had spoken boldly to them when alone, but would she hold to her assertions now, faced by the most powerful woman in the world? A woman who held Egwene's life in her hands?

Was Egwene the Amyrlin? Or was she just a girl who liked to pretend?

Light burn you, Elaida, she thought, gritting her teeth, seeing that she had been wrong. Silence wouldn't lead to victory, not in front of these women. *You are* not *going to like how this proceeds.*

"The Seanchan are not working for Rand," Egwene said. "And they are a severe danger to the White Tower. I have spread no lies. To say otherwise would be to betray the Three Oaths."

"You haven't taken the Three Oaths," Elaida said sternly, turning toward her.

"I have," Egwene said. "I've held no Oath Rod, but it isn't the Rod that makes my words true. I have spoken the words of the oaths in my heart, and to me they are more dear, for I have nothing forcing me to hold to them. And by that oath holding me, I tell you again. I am a Dreamer, and I have Dreamed that the Seanchan will attack the White Tower."

Elaida's eyes flared for a moment, and she gripped her fork until her knuckles whitened. Egwene held her eyes, and finally Elaida laughed again. "Ah, stubborn as ever, I see. I shall have to tell Katerine that she was right. You'll have penance for your exaggerations, child."

"These women know I don't speak lies," Egwene said calmly. "And each time you insist that I do, you lower yourself in their eyes. Even if you disbelieve my Dream, you *must* admit that the Seanchan are a threat. They leash women who can channel, using them as weapons with a kind of twisted *ter'angreal*. I have felt the collar on my neck. I still feel it, sometimes. In my dreams. My nightmares."

The room fell still.

“You *are* a foolish child,” Elaida said, obviously trying to pretend that Egwene was no threat. She should have turned to look at the eyes of the others. If she had, she’d have seen the truth. “Well, you have forced my hand. You will kneel before me, child, and beg forgiveness. Right now. Otherwise, I will lock you away alone. Is that what you want? Don’t think that the beatings will stop, however. You’ll still get your daily penance, you’ll just be thrown back into your cell after each one. Now, kneel and beg forgiveness.”

The Sitters glanced at one another. There was no backing down now. Egwene *wished* it hadn’t come to this. But it had, and Elaida had demanded a fight.

It was time to give her one. “And if I do not bow before you?” Egwene asked, meeting the woman’s eyes. “What then?”

“You *will* kneel, one way or another,” Elaida growled, embracing the Source.

“You’ll use the Power on me?” Egwene asked calmly. “Do you have to resort to that? Have you no authority without channeling?”

Elaida paused. “It is within my rights to discipline one who isn’t showing proper respect.”

“And so you will *make* me obey,” Egwene said. “Is this what you will do to everyone in the Tower, Elaida? An Ajah opposes you, and it is disbanded. Someone displeases you, and you try to destroy her right to be Aes Sedai. You will have every sister bowing down before you by the end of this.”

“Nonsense!”

“Oh?” Egwene asked. “And have you told them about your idea for a new oath? Sworn on the Oath Rod by every sister, an oath to obey the Amyrlin and support her?”

“I—”

“Deny it,” Egwene said. “Deny that you made the statement. Will the Oaths let you?”

Elaida froze. If she were Black, she *could* deny it, Oath Rod or not. But either way, Meidani could substantiate what Egwene had said.

“It was idle talk,” Elaida said. “Just speculation, thoughts spoken out loud.”

“There is often truth in speculation,” Egwene said. “You locked the Dragon Reborn himself in a box; you just threatened to do the same to me, in front of all of these witnesses. People call him a tyrant, but you are the one destroying our laws and ruling by fear.”

Elaida’s eyes opened wide, her anger visible. She seemed . . . shocked. As if she couldn’t understand how she’d gone from disciplining an unruly novice into debating an equal. Egwene saw the woman begin to weave a thread of Air. That had to be stopped. A gag of Air would end this debate.

“Go ahead,” Egwene said calmly. “Use the Power to silence me. As Amyrlin, shouldn’t you be able to *talk* an opponent into obedience, rather than resorting to force?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Egwene saw diminutive Yukiri, of the Gray, nod at that comment.

Elaida’s eyes flared in anger as she dropped the thread of Air. “I don’t need to rebut a mere novice,” Elaida snapped. “The Amyrlin doesn’t explain herself to one such as you.”

“ ‘The Amyrlin understands the most complex of creeds and debates,’ ” Egwene said, quoting from memory. “ ‘Yet in the end, she is the servant of all, even the lowest of laborers.’ ” That had been said by Balladare Arandaille, the first Amyrlin to be raised from the Brown Ajah. She’d used the words in her last writings before her death; those writings had been an explanation of her reign and what she had done during the Kavarthen wars. Arandaille had felt that once a crisis was passed, it was the moral duty of an Amyrlin to explain herself to the common people.

Sitting beside Elaida, Shevan nodded appreciatively. The quote was somewhat obscure; Egwene blessed Siuan’s quiet training in the wisdom of the former Amyrlins. Much of what she’d said had come from the secret histories, but there had been a number of nuggets from women such as Balladare as well.

“What is this nonsense you’re sputtering?” Elaida spat.

“What did you intend to do with Rand al’Thor once you captured him?” Egwene said, ignoring the comment.

“I don’t—”

“You’re not answering *me*,” Egwene said, nodding to the table of women, “but *them*. Have you explained yourself, Elaida? What were your plans? Or will you dodge this question just as you have the others I’ve asked?”

Elaida’s face was turning red, but she calmed herself with some effort. “I would have kept him secure, and well shielded, here in the Tower until it was time for the Last Battle. That would have prevented him from causing the suffering and chaos he's created in many nations. It was worth the risk of angering him."

" 'As the plow breaks the earth shall he break the lives of men, and all that was shall be consumed in the fire of his eyes,' " Egwene said. " 'The trumpets of war shall sound at his footsteps, the ravens feed at his voice, and he shall wear a crown of swords.' "

Elaida frowned, taken aback.

"*The Karaethon Cycle*, Elaida," Egwene said. "When you had Rand locked away to be kept 'secure,' had he yet taken Illian? Had he yet worn what he was to name the Crown of Swords?"

"Well, no."

"And how did you expect him to fulfill the prophecies if he was hidden away in the White Tower?" Egwene said. "How was he to cause war, as the prophecies say he must? How was he to break the nations and bind them to him? How could he 'slay his people with the sword of peace' or 'bind the nine moons to serve him' if he was locked away? Do the prophecies say that he will be 'unfettered'? Do they not speak of the 'chaos of his passing'? How can anything pass at all if he is kept in chains?"

"I. . . ."

"Your logic is astounding, Elaida," Egwene said coldly. At that, Ferane smiled slyly; she was probably thinking yet again that Egwene would fit well in the White Ajah.

"Bah," Elaida said, "you ask meaningless questions. The prophecies would *have* to have been fulfilled. There was no other way."

"So you're saying that your attempt to bind him was destined to fail."

"No, not at all," Elaida said, red-faced again. "We shouldn't be bothering with this—it's not for you to decide upon. No, we should be talking about your rebels, and what *they've* done to the White Tower!"

A good turn of the conversation, an attempt to put Egwene on the defensive. Elaida wasn't completely incompetent. Just arrogant.

"I see *them* trying to heal the rift between us," Egwene said. "We cannot change what has happened. We can't change what you did to Siuan, even if those with me did discover a method of Healing her stilling. We can only move forward and try our best to smooth the scars. What are you doing, Elaida? Refusing talks, trying to bully the Sitters into withdrawing? Insulting Ajahs that are not your own?"

Doesine, of the Yellow, gave a quiet murmur of agreement. That drew Elaida's eyes, and she fell silent for a moment, as if realizing that she had lost control of the debate. "Enough of this."

"Coward," Egwene said.

Elaida's eyes flared wide. "How *dare* you!"

"I dare the truth, Elaida," Egwene said quietly. "You are a coward and a tyrant. I'd name you Darkfriend as well, but I suspect that the Dark One would perhaps be embarrassed to associate with you."

Elaida screeched, weaving in a flash of Power, slamming Egwene back against the wall, toppling the pitcher of wine from her hands. It shattered on a patch of wooden floor beside the rug, throwing a spray of bloodlike liquid across the table and half of its occupants, staining the white tablecloth with a smear of red.

"You name *me* Darkfriend?" Elaida screamed. "You are the Darkfriend. You and those rebels outside, who seek to distract me from doing what must be done."

A blast of woven Air slammed Egwene against the wall again, and she dropped to the ground, hitting shards of the broken pitcher that sliced open her arms. A dozen switches beat her, ripping her clothing. Blood seeped from her arms, and it began to splash into the air, smirching the wall as Elaida beat her.

"Elaida, stop it!" Rubinde said, standing, green dress swishing. "Are you mad?"

Elaida turned, panting. "Do *not* tempt me, Green!"

The switches continuing to beat Egwene. She bore it silently. With effort, she stood up. She could feel her face and arms swelling already. But she maintained a calm gaze at Elaida.

"Elaida!" Ferane yelled, standing. "You violate Tower law! You *cannot* use the Power to punish an initiate!"

"I *am* Tower law!" Elaida raved. She pointed at the sisters. "You mock me. I know you do it. Behind my back. You show me deference when you see me, but I know what you say, what you whisper. You ungrateful fools! After what I've done for you! Do you think I'll suffer you forever? Take this one as an example!"

She spun, pointing at Egwene, then stumbled back in shock to find Egwene calmly watching her. Elaida gasped softly, raising a hand to her breast as the switches beat. They could all see the weaves, and they could all see that Egwene did not scream, although her mouth was not gagged with Air. Her arms dripped blood, her body was beaten before them, and yet she found no reason to scream. Instead, she quietly blessed the Aiel Wise Ones for their wisdom.

"And what," Egwene said evenly, "am I to be an example of, Elaida?"

The beating continued. Oh, how it hurt! Tears formed in the corners of Egwene's eyes, but she had felt worse. Far worse. She felt it each time she thought of what this woman was doing to the institution she loved. Her true pain was not from the wounds, but from how Elaida had acted before the Sitters.

"By the Light," Rubinde whispered.

"I wish I weren't needed here, Elaida," Egwene said softly. "I wish that the Tower had a grand Amyrlin in you. I wish I could step down and accept your rule. I wish you deserved it. I would willingly accept execution, if it would mean leaving a competent Amyrlin. The White Tower is more important than I am. Can you say the same?"

"You want execution!" Elaida bellowed, recovering her tongue. "Well, you shall not have it! Death is too good for you, Darkfriend! I shall see you beaten—everyone shall see you beaten—until I am *through* with you. Only then will you die!" She turned to the servants, who stood, gaping, at the sides of the room. "Send for soldiers! I want this one cast into the deepest cell this Tower can provide! Let it be voiced through the city that Egwene al'Vere is a Darkfriend who has rejected the Amyrlin's grace!"

Servants ran to do as she demanded. The switches continued to beat, but Egwene was growing numb. She closed her eyes, feeling faint—she had lost much blood from her left arm, which bore the deepest of her gashes.

It had come to a head, as she'd feared that it would. She had cast her lot.

But she didn't fear for her life. Instead, she feared for the White Tower. As she leaned back against the wall, thoughts fading, she was overcome with sorrow.

Her battle from within the Tower was at an end, one way or another.

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CHAPTER 17

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Questions of Control

"You should be more careful," Sarene said from inside the room. "The Amyrlin Seat, we have much influence with her. Your punishments, we may be able to persuade her to lessen them, if you are helpful."

Semirhage's sniff of disdain was quite audible to Cadsuane, listening from the hallway outside the interrogation room, sitting in a comfortable log chair. Cadsuane sipped at a cup of warm sweetleaf. The hallway was of simple wood, carpeted with a long maroon and white rug, prismlike lamps on the walls flickering with light.

There were several others in the hallway with her—Daigian, Erian, Elza—whose turn it was to maintain Semirhage's shield. Aside from Cadsuane, each Aes Sedai in the camp took turns. It was too dangerous to risk forcing the duty only on the Aes Sedai of lesser stature, lest they grow weary. The shield had to remain strong. Light only knew what would happen if Semirhage got free.

Cadsuane sipped her tea, her back to the wall. Al'Thor had insisted that "his" Aes Sedai be allowed opportunities to interrogate Semirhage, instead of just those Cadsuane had chosen. She wasn't certain if this was some attempt at asserting his authority or if he genuinely thought that they might succeed where she—so far—had failed.

Anyway, that was why Sarene was doing the questioning today. The Taraboner White was a thoughtful person, completely unaware that she was one of the most beautiful women to gain the shawl in years. Her nonchalance was not unexpected, as she was of the White Ajah, who could often be as oblivious as Browns. Sarene also didn't know that Cadsuane was outside eavesdropping, through the use of a weave of Air and Fire. It was a simple trick, one often learned by novices. Mixing it with this newly found trick of inverting one's weaves meant that Cadsuane could listen in without anyone inside knowing that she was there.

The Aes Sedai outside saw what she was doing, of course, but none said anything. Even though two of them—Elza and Erian—were among the group of fools who had sworn fealty to the al'Thor boy, they stepped lightly around her; they knew how she regarded them. Idiot women. At times, it seemed that half of her allies were only determined to make her job harder.

Sarene continued her interrogation inside. Most of the Aes Sedai in the manor had now given questioning a try. Brown, Green, White and Yellow—

all had failed. Cadsuane herself had yet to address any questions to the Forsaken personally. The other Aes Sedai looked at her as an almost mythic figure, a reputation she had nurtured. She'd stayed away from the White Tower for many decades at a time, ensuring that many would assume she was dead. When she reappeared, it made a stir. She'd gone hunting false Dragons, both because it was necessary and because each man she captured added to her reputation with the other Aes Sedai.

All of her work pointed at these final days. Light blind her if she was going to let that al'Thor boy ruin it all now!

She covered her scowl by taking a sip of her tea. She was slowly losing control, thread by thread. Once, something as dramatic as the squabbles at the White Tower would have drawn her immediate attention. But she couldn't begin to work on that problem. Creation itself was unraveling, and her only way to fight that was to turn all her efforts on al'Thor.

And he resisted her every attempt to aid him. Step by step he was becoming a man with insides like stone, unmoving and unable to adapt. A statue with no feelings could *not* face the Dark One.

Blasted boy! And now there was Semirhage, continuing to defy her. Cadsuane itched to go in and confront the woman, but Merise had asked the very questions Cadsuane would have, and she had failed. How long would Cadsuane's image remain intact if she proved herself as impotent as the others?

Sarene began to talk again.

"The Aes Sedai, you should not treat them so," Sarene said, voice calm.

"Aes Sedai?" Semirhage responded, chuckling. "Don't you feel ashamed, using that term to describe yourselves? Like a puppy calling itself a wolf!"

"We may not know everything, I admit, but—"

"You know nothing," Semirhage replied. "You are children playing with your parents' toys."

Cadsuane tapped the side of her tea cup with her index finger. Again, she was struck by the similarities between herself and Semirhage—and again, those similarities made her insides itch.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a slender serving woman climb the steps carrying a plate of beans and steamed radishes for Semirhage's midday meal. Time already? Sarene had been interrogating the Forsaken for three hours, and she had been talked neatly in circles the entire time. The serving woman approached and Cadsuane waved for her to enter.

A moment later, the tray crashed to the floor. At the sound, Cadsuane leaped to her feet, embracing *saidar*, quite nearly rushing into the room. Semirhage's voice made Cadsuane hesitate.

"I will not eat that," the Forsaken said, in control, as always. "I have grown tired of your swill. You will bring me something appropriate."

"If we do," Sarene's voice said, obviously snatching for any advantage, "will you answer our questions?"

"Perhaps," Semirhage replied. "We shall see if it fits my mood."

There was silence, Cadsuane glanced at the other women in the hall, all of whom had leaped to their feet at the sound, although they couldn't hear the voices. She motioned them to sit down.

"Go and fetch her something else," Sarene said, speaking inside the room to the serving woman. "And send someone to clean this up." The door opened, then shut quickly as the servant hurried away.

Sarene continued, "This next question, it will determine if you actually get to eat that meal or not." Despite the firm voice, Cadsuane could hear a quickness to Sarene's words. The sudden drop of the tray of food had startled her. They were all so jumpy around the Forsaken. They weren't deferential, but they *did* treat Semirhage with a measure of respect. How could they not? She was a legend. One did not enter the presence of such a creature—one of the most evil beings ever to live—and *not* feel at least a measure of awe.

Measure of awe. . . .

"That's our mistake," Cadsuane whispered. She blinked, then turned and opened the door into the room.

Semirhage stood in the center of the small chamber. She had been retied in Air, the weaves likely woven the moment that she'd dropped her tray. The brass platter lay discarded, the beans soaking juice into the aged wooden boards. This room had no window; it had been a storage chamber at one point, converted into a "cell" to hold the Forsaken. Sarene—dark hair in beaded braids, beautiful face surprised at the intrusion—sat in a chair before Semirhage. Her Warder, Vitalien, broad-shouldered and ashen-faced, stood in the corner.

Semirhage's head was not bound, and her eyes flicked toward Cadsuane.

Cadsuane had committed herself; she had to confront the woman now. Fortunately, what she planned didn't require much delicacy. It all came back to a single question. How would Cadsuane break herself? The solution was easy, now that it occurred to her.

"Ah," Cadsuane said with a no-nonsense attitude. "I see that the child has refused her meal. Sarene, release your weaves."

Semirhage raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth to scoff, but as Sarene released her weaves of Air, Cadsuane grabbed Semirhage by the hair and—with a casual sweep of her foot—knocked the woman's legs out from beneath her, dropping her to the floor.

Perhaps she could have used the Power, but it felt *right* to use her hands for this. She prepared a few weaves, though she probably wouldn't need them. Semirhage, though tall, was a woman of willowy build, and Cadsuane herself had always been more stout than she was slim. Plus, the Forsaken seemed utterly dumbfounded at how she was being treated.

Cadsuane knelt down with one knee on the woman's back, then shoved her face forward into the spilled food. "Eat," she said. "I don't approve of wasted food, child, particularly during these times."

Semirhage sputtered, releasing a few phrases that Cadsuane could only assume were oaths, though she didn't recognize any of them. The meanings were likely lost in time. Soon, the oaths subsided and Semirhage grew still. She didn't fight back. Cadsuane wouldn't have either; that would only hurt her image. Semirhage's power as a captive came from the fear and respect that the Aes Sedai gave her. Cadsuane needed to change that.

"Your chair, please," she said to Sarene.

The White stood, looking shocked. They had tried all measure of torture available to them under al'Thor's requirements, but each of those had betrayed esteem. They were treating Semirhage as a dangerous force and a worthy enemy. That would only bolster her ego.

"Are you going to eat?" Cadsuane asked.

"I will kill you," Semirhage said calmly. "First, before all of the others. I will make them listen to you scream."

"I see," Cadsuane replied. "Sarene, go tell the three Sisters outside to come in." Cadsuane paused, thoughtful. "Also, I saw some maids cleaning rooms on the other side of the hallway. Fetch them for me as well."

Sarene nodded, rushing from the room. Cadsuane sat in the chair, then wove threads of Air and picked Semirhage up. Elza and Erian glanced into the room, looking very curious. Then they entered, Sarene following. A few moments later, Daigian entered with five servants: three Domani women in aprons, one spindly man, his fingers brown with stain from recoating logs, and a single serving boy. Excellent.

As they entered, Cadsuane used her threads of Air to turn Semirhage around across her knee. And then she proceeded to spank the Forsaken.

Semirhage held out at first. Then she began to curse. Then she began to sputter out threats. Cadsuane continued, her hand beginning to hurt. Semirhage's threats turned to howls of outrage and pain. The serving girl with the food returned in the middle of it, adding even more to Semirhage's shame. The Aes Sedai watched with slack jaws.

"Now," Cadsuane said after a few moments, breaking into one of Semirhage's howls of pain. "Will you eat?"

"I'll find everyone you've ever loved," the Forsaken said, tears in her eyes, "I'll feed them to each other while you watch. I'll—"

Cadsuane "tsk"ed and began again. The crowd in the room watched in amazed silence. Semirhage began to cry—not from the pain, but from the humiliation. That was the key. Semirhage could not be defeated by pain or by persuasion—but destroying her image, that would be more terrible in her mind than any other punishment. Just as it would have been for Cadsuane.

Cadsuane stilled her hand after a few more minutes, releasing the weaves that held Semirhage motionless. "Will you eat?" she asked.

"I—"

Cadsuane raised her hand, and Semirhage practically leaped off of her lap and scrambled onto the floor, eating the beans.

"She is a person," Cadsuane said, looking at the others. "Just a person, like any of us. She has secrets, but any young boy can have a secret that he refuses to tell. Remember that."

Cadsuane stood and walked to the door. She hesitated beside Sarene, who watched with fascination as the Forsaken ate beans off of the floor. "You may want to begin carrying a hairbrush with you," Cadsuane added. "That can be quite hard on your hands."

Sarene smiled. "Yes, Cadsuane Sedai."

Now, Cadsuane thought, leaving the room, *what to do about al'Thor?*

"My Lord," Grady said, rubbing his weathered face, "I don't think you understand."

"Then explain it to me," Perrin said. He stood on a hillside, looking down over the huge gathering of refugees and soldiers. Mismatched tents of many different designs—tan, single-peaked Aiel structures; colorful large Cairhienin ones; two-tipped tents of basic design—sprang up as the people prepared for the night.

The Shaido Aiel, as hoped, had not given chase. They had let Perrin's army withdraw, though his scouts said that they had now moved in to investigate the city. Either way, it meant Perrin had time. Time to rest, time to limp away, time—he'd hoped—to use gateways to transport away most of these refugees.

Light, but it was a big group. Thousands upon thousands of people, a nightmare to coordinate and administer to. His last few days had been filled with an endless stream of complaints, objections, judgments and papers. Where did Balwer find so much paper? It seemed to satisfy many of the people who came to Perrin. Judgments and the settlement of disputes seemed so much more official to them when a piece of paper outlined them. Balwer said Perrin would need a seal.

The work had been distracting, which was good. But Perrin knew he couldn't push aside his problems for long. Rand pulled him northward. Perrin *had* to march for the Last Battle. Nothing else mattered.

And yet, that very single-mindedness in him—ignoring everything but his objective—had been the source of much trouble during his hunt for Faile. He had to find a balance, somehow. He needed to decide for himself if he wanted to lead these people. He needed to make peace with the wolf inside himself, the beast that raged when he went into battle.

But before he could do any of that, he needed to get the refugees home. That was proving a problem. "You've had time to rest now, Grady," Perrin said.

"The fatigue is only one part of it, my Lord," Grady said. "Though, honestly, I *still* feel as if I could sleep a week's time."

He *did* look tired. Grady was a stalwart man, with the face of a farmer and the temperament of one, too. Perrin would trust this man to do his duty before most lords he'd known. But Grady could be pushed only so far. What did it do to a man, to have to channel so much? Grady had bags beneath his eyes, and his face was pale despite his tanned skin. Though he was still a young man, he'd started to go gray.

Light, but I used this man too hard, Perrin thought. *Him and Neald both*. That had been another effect of Perrin's single-mindedness, as he was beginning to see. What he'd done to Aram, how he'd allowed those around him to go without leadership. . . . *I have to fix this. I have to find a way to deal with it all.*

If he didn't, he might not *get* to the Last Battle.

"Here's the thing, my Lord." Grady rubbed his chin again, surveying the camp. The various contingents—Mayeners, Alliandre's guard, the Two Rivers men, the Aiel, the refugees from various cities—all camped separately, in their own rings. "There are some hundred thousand people who need to get home. The ones that will leave, anyway. Many say they feel safer here, with you."

"They can give over wanting that," Perrin said. "They belong with their families."

"And the ones whose families are in Seanchan lands?" Grady shrugged. "Before the invaders came, many of these people would be happy to return. But now . . . Well, they keep talking about staying where there's food and protection."

"We can still send the ones who want to go," Perrin said. "We'll travel lighter without them."

Grady shook his head. "That's the thing, my Lord. Your man, Balwer, he gave us a count. I can make a gateway big enough for about two men to walk through at once. If you figure them taking one second to go through . . . Well, it would take hours and hours to send them all. I don't know the number, but he claimed it would be days' worth of work. And he said that his estimates were probably too optimistic. My Lord, I could barely keep a gateway open an hour, with how tired I am."

Perrin gritted his teeth. He'd have to get those numbers from Balwer himself, but he had a sinking feeling that Balwer would be right.

"We'll keep marching, then," Perrin said. "Moving north. Each day, we'll have you and Neald make gateways and return some of the people to their homes. But don't tire yourselves."

Grady nodded, eyes hollow from fatigue. Perhaps it would be best to wait a few more days before starting the process. Perrin nodded a dismissal to the Dedicated, and Grady jogged back down into camp. Perrin remained on the hillside, inspecting the various sections of the camp as the people prepared for the evening meal. The wagons sat at the center of the camp, laden with food that—he feared—would run out before he could reach Andor. Or should he go around to Cairhien? That was where he had last seen Rand, though his visions of the man made it seem he wasn't in either country. He doubted the Queen of Andor would welcome him with open arms, after the rumors about him and that blasted Red Eagle banner.

Perrin left that problem alone for the moment. The camp seemed to be settling in. Each ring of tents sent representatives to the central food depot to claim their evening rations. Each group was in charge of its own meals; Perrin just oversaw the distribution of materials. He made out the quartermaster—a Cairhienin named Bavin Rockshaw—standing on the back of a wagon, dealing with each representative in turn.

Satisfied with his inspection, Perrin walked down into the camp, passing through the Cairhienin tents on the way to his own tents, which were with the Two Rivers men.

He took his enhanced senses for granted, now. They had come along with the yellowing of his eyes. Most people around him didn't seem to notice those anymore, but he was starkly reminded of the contrast when he met anyone new. Many of the Cairhienin refugees, for instance, paused in their labors setting up tents. They watched him as he passed, whispering, "Goldeneyes."

He didn't much care for the name. Aybara was the name of his family, and he bore it proudly. He was one of the few who could pass it on. Trollocs had seen to that.

He shot a glance at a nearby group of the refugees, and they hastily turned back to pounding in tent stakes. As they did, Perrin passed a couple of Two Rivers men—Tod al'Caar and Jori Congar. They saw him and saluted, fists to hearts. To them, Perrin Goldeneyes wasn't a person to fear, but one to respect, although they did still whisper about that night he'd spent in Berelain's tent. Perrin wished he could escape the shadow of *that* event. The men were still enthusiastic and energized by their defeat of the Shaido, but it hadn't been too long ago that Perrin had felt he wasn't welcome among them.

Still, for the moment, these two seemed to have set aside that displeasure. Instead, they saluted. Had they forgotten that Perrin had grown up with them? What of the times when Jori had made sport of Perrin's slow tongue, or the times when he'd stopped by the forge to brag about which girls he'd managed to steal a kiss from?

Perrin just nodded back. No use in digging up the past, not when their allegiance to "Perrin Goldeneyes" had helped rescue Faile. Though, as he left them, his too-keen ears caught the two of them chatting about the battle, just a few days past, and their part of it. One of them still smelled like blood; he hadn't cleaned his boots. He probably didn't even notice the bloodstained mud.

Sometimes, Perrin wondered if his senses weren't actually any better than anyone else's. He took the time to notice things that others ignored. How could they miss that scent of blood? And the crisp air of the mountains to the north? It smelled of home, though they were many leagues from the Two Rivers. If other men took the time to close their eyes and pay attention, would they be able to smell what he did? If they opened those eyes and looked closer at the world around them, would men call their eyes "keen" as they did Perrin's?

No. That was just fancy. His senses *were* better; his kinship with the wolves had changed him. He hadn't thought of that kinship in a while—he'd been too focused on Faile. But he'd stopped feeling so self-conscious about his eyes. They were part of him. No use grumbling about them.

And yet, that rage he felt when he fought . . . that loss of control. It worried him, more and more. The first time he'd felt it had been that night, so long ago, fighting Whitecloaks. For a time, Perrin hadn't known if he was a wolf or a man.

And now—during one of his recent visits to the wolf dream—he'd tried to kill Hopper. In the wolf dream, death was final. Perrin had almost lost himself that day. Thinking of it awakened old fears, fears he'd shoved aside. Fears relating to a man, behaving like a wolf, locked in a cage.

He continued down the pathway to his tent, making some decisions. He'd pursued Faile with determination, avoiding the wolf dream as he'd avoided all of his responsibilities. He'd claimed that nothing else had mattered. But he knew that the truth was much more difficult. He'd focused on Faile because he loved her so much, but—in addition—he'd done so because it had been convenient. Her rescue had been an excuse to avoid things like his discomfort with leadership and the blurred truce between himself and the wolf inside of himself.

He had rescued Faile, but so many things were still wrong. The answers might lie in his dreams.

It was time to return.

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CHAPTER 18

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A Message in Haste

Siuan froze—basket of dirty laundry on her hip—the moment she walked into the Aes Sedai camp. It was her own laundry, this time. She'd finally realized that she didn't need to do both hers and Bryne's. Why not let the novices put in some time on her washing? There were certainly enough of them these days.

And every one of them crowded the walkway around the pavilion at the center of camp. They stood arm-to-arm, a wall of white topped by heads of hair in every natural hue. No ordinary meeting of the Hall would have drawn such attention. Something must be going on.

Siuan set the wicker laundry basket on a stump, then pulled a towel over it. She didn't trust that sky, although it hadn't rained more than the occasional drizzle in the past week. Don't trust a dockmaster's sky. Words to live by. Even if the consequence only meant a basket of wet clothing, soiled at that.

She hurried across the dirt road and stepped up onto one of the wooden walkways. The rough boards shifted slightly underfoot and creaked with her footfalls as she hurried towards the pavilion. There was talk of replacing the walkways with something more permanent, perhaps as expensive as paving stones.

She reached the backs of the gathered women. The last meeting of the Hall that had drawn this level of attention had revealed that Asha'man had bonded sisters and that the taint itself had been cleansed. Light send that there weren't any surprises of *that* size waiting! Her nerves were taut enough, dealing with Gareth bloody Bryne. Suggesting that she let him teach her how to hold a sword, just in case. She'd never thought that swords were much use. Besides, who ever heard of an Aes Sedai with a weapon, fighting like a crazed Aiel? Honestly, that man.

She bullied her way through the novices, annoyed that she had to get their attention in order to make them let her pass. They gave way as soon as they saw a sister passing through them, of course, but they were so distracted that it took work to move them out of the way. She chided a few of them for not being about their duties. Where was Tiana? She should have had these girls back to their chores. If Rand al'Thor himself bloody appeared in camp, the novices should continue their lessons!

Finally, near the pavilion flaps, she found the woman she'd expected. Sheriam, as Egwene's Keeper, couldn't enter the Hall without the Amyrlin. And so she was reduced to waiting outside. It was probably better than stewing back in her tent.

The fire-haired woman had lost a fair bit of her plumpness over the previous weeks. She really needed to commission new dresses; her old ones were beginning to hang on her. Still, she seemed to have regained some calm recently, to be less erratic. Perhaps whatever had been ailing her had passed. She'd always insisted that nothing was wrong in the first place.

"Fish guts," Siuan grumbled as a novice accidentally elbowed her. Siuan glared at the girl, who wilted and scurried away, her family of novices reluctantly following. Siuan turned back to Sheriam. "So what is it? Did one of the stable boys turn out to be the King of Tear?"

Sheriam raised an eyebrow. "Elaida has Traveling."

"*What?*" Siuan asked, glancing into the tent. The seats were filled with Aes Sedai, and lanky Ashmanaille—of the Gray—was addressing them. Why hadn't this meeting been Sealed to the Flame?

Sheriam nodded. "We found out when Ashmanaille was sent to collect from Kandor." Tributes were one of the main sources of income for Egwene's Aes Sedai. For many centuries, each kingdom had sent such donations to Tar Valon. The White Tower no longer relied on that income—it had far better means of sustaining itself, ones that didn't rely on outside generosity. Still, tributes were never turned away, and many of the Borderland kingdoms still held to the old ways.

Before the White Tower broke, one of Ashmanaille's duties had been to keep track of these donations and send monthly thanks on behalf of the Amyrlin. The split of the White Tower, and the discovery of Traveling, had made it very easy for Egwene's Aes Sedai to send a delegation and collect tributes in person. The Kandori chief clerk hadn't cared which of the two White Tower sides he supported, so long as the tribute was sent, and had been happy to deliver the money to Ashmanaille directly.

The siege of Tar Valon had made it simple to siphon this coin away from tributes that might have gone to Elaida, instead using them to pay Bryne's soldiers. A very neat twist of fate. But no sea remained calm forever.

"The chief clerk was quite livid," Ashmanaille said in her no-nonsense voice. " 'I already paid your money this month,' he told me. 'I gave it to a woman who came not one day gone. The woman bore a letter from the Amyrlin herself, sealed properly, which told me to give the money *only* to a member of the Red Ajah.' "

"This doesn't say for certain Elaida has Traveling," Romanda noted from inside the tent. "The Red sister could have gotten to Kandor by other means."

Ashmanaille shook her head. "They saw a gateway made. The chief clerk discovered an accounting error and sent a scribe out after Elaida's delegation to give them a few extra coins. The man described what he saw *perfectly*. The horses were riding through a black hole in the air. It stunned him so deeply that he called for the guard—but by then Elaida's people were already gone. I interrogated him myself."

"I dislike trusting the word of one man," said Moria, sitting near the front of the group.

"The chief clerk described in detail the woman who took the money from him," Ashmanaille said. "I am confident that it was Nesita. Perhaps we could discover if she is in the Tower? That would give us further proof."

Others raised objections, but Siuan ceased to listen closely. Perhaps this was a very clever ruse intended to distract them, but they couldn't take that chance. Light! Was she the only one with a head on her shoulders?

She grabbed the nearest novice, a mousy girl who was probably older than she looked—she'd have to be, since she looked no older than nine. "I need a courier," Siuan informed her. "Fetch one of the messengers Lord Bryne left at the camp for running news to him. *Quickly*."

The girl yelped, dashing away.

"What was that about?" Sheriam asked.

"Saving our lives," Siuan said, glaring at the crowding novices. "All right!" she growled. "Enough gawking! If your classes are postponed because of this fiasco, then find some work to do. Any novice still standing on this walkway in ten seconds will find herself doing penance until she can't count straight!"

That initiated a mass exodus of white, the families of women bustling away with hurried steps. In moments, only the small group of Accepted remained, along with Sheriam and Siuan. The Accepted cringed when Siuan glanced at them, but she said nothing. Part of the privilege of being an Accepted was increased freedom. Besides, as long as Siuan could move without bumping someone, she was satisfied.

“Why wasn’t this meeting Sealed to the Flame in the first place?” she asked Sheriam.

“I don’t know,” Sheriam admitted, glancing into the large tent. “It’s daunting news, if it’s true.”

“This was bound to occur eventually,” Siuan said, though she was nowhere near that calm on the inside. “News of Traveling has to be spreading.”

What happened? she thought. *They didn’t break Egwene, did they? Light send it wasn’t her or Leane who was forced to give up this secret. Beonin. It had to be her. Burn it all!*

She shook her head. “Light send that we can keep Traveling secret from the Seanchan. When they *do* assault the White Tower, we’ll want at least that advantage.”

Sheriam eyed her, skepticism showing. Most of the sisters didn’t believe Egwene’s Dreaming of the attack. Fools—they wanted to catch the fish, but didn’t want to gut it. You didn’t raise a woman to Amyrlin, then treat her warnings lightly.

Siuan waited impatiently, tapping her foot, listening to the conversation inside the tent. Just as she was beginning to wonder if she’d need to send another novice, one of Bryne’s couriers trotted up to the tent on horseback. The ill-tempered brute he was riding was midnight black with white just above the hooves, and it snorted at Siuan as the rider pulled up short, wearing a neat uniform and close-cropped brown hair. Did he *have* to bring that creature with him?

“Aes Sedai?” the man asked, bowing to her from horseback. “You have a message for Lord Bryne?”

“Yes,” Siuan said. “And you’ll see it delivered with *all haste*. You understand me? All of our lives could depend on it.”

The soldier nodded sharply.

“Tell Lord Bryne . . .” Siuan began. “Tell him to watch his flanks. Our enemy has been taught the method we used to get here.”

“It shall be done.”

“Repeat it back to me,” Siuan said.

“Of course, Aes Sedai,” the slender man said, bowing again. “Just so you know, I have been a messenger in the general’s command for over a decade. My memory—”

“Stop,” Siuan interrupted. “I don’t care how *long* you’ve been doing this. I don’t care how good your memory is. I don’t care if, by some twist of fate, you’ve been asked to run this *very same message* a thousand times before. You *will* repeat it back to me.”

“Um, yes, Aes Sedai. I’m to tell the Lord General to watch his flanks. Our enemy has been taught the method we used to get here.”

“Good. Go.”

The man nodded.

“Now!”

He reared that awful horse and galloped out of the camp, cloak flapping behind him.

“What was *that* about?” Sheriam asked, glancing away from the proceedings inside the Hall.

“Making certain we don’t wake up with Elaida’s army surrounding us,” Siuan said. “I’ll bet I’m the only one who thought to warn our general that the enemy may have just undone our biggest tactical advantage. So much for a siege.”

Sheriam frowned, as if she hadn’t considered that. She wouldn’t be alone. Oh, some would think of Bryne, and would be planning to send word to the general eventually. But for many, the catastrophe here *wasn’t* the fact that Elaida could now move her armies to flank them, or that now Bryne’s siege was useless. The catastrophe would be more personal for them: the knowledge they’d worked to keep secret had fallen into the hands of others. Traveling was *theirs,* and now Elaida had it! Very Aes Sedai. Indignation first, implication second.

Or perhaps Siuan was just feeling bitter. Someone inside the tent finally thought to call for the meeting to be Sealed to the Flame, and so Siuan withdrew, stepping off the walkway and onto the hard-packed earth. Novices scuttled this way and that, heads bowed to avoid her eyes, though they were quick to curtsy. *I haven’t been doing a very good job of acting weak today,* Siuan thought with a grimace.

The White Tower was crumbling. The Ajahs weakened one another with petty infighting. Even here, in Egwene’s camp, more time was spent politicking than preparing for the coming storm.

And Siuan was partially responsible for those failures.

Elaida and her Ajah certainly bore the lionfish’s share of the blame. But would the Tower have split in the first place if Siuan had fostered cooperation between the Ajahs? Elaida hadn't had *that* long to work. Every rift that appeared in the Tower could likely be traced back to tiny cracks during Siuan's tenure as Amyrlin. If she'd been more of a mediator among the factions of the White Tower, could she have pounded strength into the bones of these women? Could she have kept them from turning on one another like razorfish in a blood frenzy?

The Dragon Reborn was important. But he was only one figure in the weaving of these final days. It was too easy to forget that, too easy to watch the dramatic figure of legend and forget everyone else.

She sighed, picking up her laundry and—out of habit—checking to make certain everything was there. As she did so, a figure in white approached her from one of the branching pathways. "Siuan Sedai?"

Siuan looked up, frowning. The novice before her was one of the strangest in the camp. Nearly seventy years old, Sharina had the weathered, creased face of a grandmother. She kept her silver hair up in a bun, and while she walked without a stoop, there was a certain distinct *weight* to her. She had seen so much, done so much, passed so many years. And unlike an Aes Sedai, Sharina had *lived* all of those years. Working, raising a family, even burying children.

She was strong in the power. Remarkably so; she would wear the shawl for certain, and as soon as she did, she'd be far above Siuan. For now, though, Sharina curtsied deeply. She gave an almost perfect show of deference. Of all of the novices, she was known to complain the least, make the least trouble, and study the most assiduously. As a novice, she understood things that most Aes Sedai had never learned—or had forgotten the moment they took the shawl. How to be humble when necessary, how to take a punishment, how to know when you needed to learn rather than pretend you already knew. *If only we had a few score more of her,* Siuan thought, *and a few score less Elaidas and Romandas.*

"Yes, child?" Siuan asked. "What is it?"

"I saw you picking up that wash, Siuan Sedai," Sharina said. "And I thought that perhaps I should carry it for you."

Siuan hesitated. "I wouldn't want you to tire yourself."

Sharina raised an eyebrow in a very un-novice-like expression. "These old arms carried loads twice that heavy back and forth from the river just last year, Siuan Sedai, juggling three grandchildren all the way. I think I'll be all right." There was something in her eyes, a hint that her offer was not all it seemed to be. This one was adept at more than just Healing weaves, it appeared.

Curious, Siuan let the aged woman take the basket. They began to walk down the pathway toward the novices' tents.

"It's curious," Sharina said, "that such a large disturbance could be caused by such a seemingly simple revelation, wouldn't you say, Siuan Sedai?"

"Elaida's discovery of Traveling *is* an important revelation."

"And yet nowhere near as important as the ones rumored to have come during the meeting a few months back, when that man who can channel visited. Odd that this should create such a scene."

Siuan shook her head. "The thinking of crowds is often odd at first consideration, Sharina. Everyone is still talking about that Asha'man visit, and they're thirsty for more. So they react with excitement at the chance to hear something else. In that way, the great revelations can come in secret, but then cause lesser ones to be received in an explosion of anxiety."

"One could put that observation to good use, I should think." Sharina nodded to a group of novices as they passed. "If one wanted to cause worry, that is."

"What are you saying?" Siuan asked, eyes narrowing.

"Ashmanaille reported first to Lelaine Sedai," Sharina said softly. "I've heard that Lelaine was the one who let the news slip. She spoke it out loud in the hearing of a family of novices while calling for the Hall to meet. She also deflected several early calls for the meeting to be Sealed to the Flame."

"Ah," Siuan said. "So *that's* why!"

"I relate only hearsay, of course," Sharina explained, pausing in the shade of a scraggly blackwood tree. "It is probably just foolishness. Why, an Aes Sedai of Lelaine's stature would *know* that if she let information slip in the hearing of novices, it would soon pass to all willing ears."

"And in the Tower, every ear is willing."

"Exactly, Siuan Sedai," Sharina said, smiling.

Lelaine had wanted to create a menagerie of a meeting—she'd wanted novices listening in, and every sister in the camp joining in the discussion. Why? And why was Sharina confiding her very un-novice-like opinions?

The answer was obvious. The more threatened the women in the camp felt—the more danger they saw from Elaida—the easier it would be for a firm hand to seize control. Though the sisters were indignant now over the mere loss of a closely guarded secret, they would soon realize the danger that Siuan had already seen. Soon there would be fear. Worry. Anxiety. The siege would never work, not now that the Aes Sedai inside it could Travel wherever and whenever they wished. Bryne's army at the bridges had become useless.

Unless Siuan missed her guess, Lelaine would be making certain that everyone else noticed the implications, too.

"She wants us scared," Siuan said. "She wants a crisis." It was clever. Siuan should have seen this coming. The fact that she hadn't—and the fact that she'd gotten no wind of Lelaine's plans—also whispered an important fact. The woman might not trust Siuan as deeply as she seemed to. Blast!

She focused on Sharina. The gray-haired woman stood patiently, waiting as Siuan worked through what she'd revealed.

"Why did you tell me this?" Siuan asked. "For all you know, I'm Lelaine's lackey."

Sharina raised her eyebrows. "Please, Siuan Sedai. These eyes aren't blind, and they see a woman working very hard to keep the Amyrlin's enemies occupied."

"Fine," Siuan said. "But you are still exposing yourself for very little reward."

"Little reward?" Sharina asked. "Excuse me, Siuan Sedai, but what do you suppose my fate will be if the Amyrlin doesn't return? No matter what she says now, we can sense Lelaine Sedai's true opinions."

Siuan hesitated. Though Lelaine now played the part of Egwene's pious advocate, not too long ago she had been as displeased as everyone else over the too-old novices. Few liked it when traditions changed.

Now that the new novices had been entered into the novice book, it would be very difficult to put them out of the Tower. But that didn't mean the Aes Sedai would continue to let older women in. Beyond that, there was a good chance that Lelaine—or whoever ended up with the Amyrlin Seat—would find a way to delay or disrupt the progression of the women who had been accepted against tradition. That would certainly include Sharina.

"I will let the Amyrlin know of your actions here," Siuan said. "You will be rewarded."

"My reward will be Egwene Sedai's return, Siuan Sedai. Pray it be swift. She entangled our fate with her own the moment she took us in. After what I've seen, and what I've felt, I have no intention of stopping my training." The woman hefted the basket. "I assume you wish these washed and returned to you?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"I am a novice, Siuan Sedai. It is my duty and my pleasure." The elderly woman bowed in respect and continued on down the path, walking with a step younger than her years.

Siuan watched her go, then stopped another novice. Another messenger to Bryne. Just in case. *Hurry up, girl,* Siuan thought to Egwene, glancing toward the spire of the White Tower. *Sharina isn't the only one whose fate is entangled with yours. You've got us all wound up in that net of yours.*

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CHAPTER 19

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Gambits

Chaos. The entire world was chaos.

Tuon stood on the balcony of her audience hall in the palace of Ebou Dar, hands clasped behind her back. In the palace grounds—flagstones washed white, like so many surfaces in the city—a group of Altaran armsmen in gold and black practiced formations beneath the watchful eyes of a pair of her own officers. Beyond them, the city proper rose, white domes banded with colors spreading alongside tall, white spires.

Order. Here in Ebou Dar, there was order, even in the fields of tents and wagons outside the city. Seanchan soldiers patrolled and kept the peace; there were plans to clean out the Rahad. Just because one was poor was not a reason—or an excuse—to live without law.

But this city was just a tiny, tiny pocket of order in a world of tempest. Seanchan itself was broken by civil war, now that the Empress had died. The Corenne had come, but recapturing these lands of Artur Hawkwing progressed slowly, stalled by the Dragon Reborn in the east and Domani armies in the north. She still waited to hear news of Lieutenant-General Turan, but the signs were not good. Galgan maintained that they might be surprised at the outcome, but Tuon had seen a black dove the hour she was informed of Turan’s predicament. The omen had been clear. He would not return alive.

Chaos. She glanced to the side, where faithful Karede stood in his thick armor, colored blood-red and a deep green, nearly black. He was a tall man, square face nearly as solid as the armor he wore. He had fully two dozen Deathwatch Guards with him this day—the day after Tuon’s return to Ebou Dar—along with six Ogier Gardeners, all standing along the walls. They lined the sides of the high-ceilinged, white-pillared room. Karede sensed the chaos, and did not intend to let her be taken again. Chaos was the most deadly when you made assumptions about what it could and couldn’t infect. Here in Ebou Dar, it manifested in the form of a faction intent on taking Tuon’s own life.

She had been dodging assassinations since she could walk, and she had survived them all. She anticipated them. In a way, she thrived because of them. How were you to know that you were powerful unless assassins were sent to kill you?

Suroth’s betrayal, however . . . Chaos, indeed, when the leader of the Forerunners herself turned traitor. Bringing the world back into order was going to be very, very difficult. Perhaps impossible.

Tuon straightened her back. She had not thought to become Empress for many years yet. But she would do her duty.

She turned away from the balcony and walked back into the audience chamber to face the crowd awaiting her. Like the others of the Blood, she wore ashes on her cheeks to mourn the loss of the Empress. Tuon had little affection for her mother, but affection was not needed for an empress. She provided order and stability. Tuon had only begun to understand the importance of these things as the weight had settled on her shoulders.

The chamber was wide and rectangular, lit with candelabras between the pillars and the radiant glow of sunlight through the wide balcony behind. Tuon had ordered the room’s rugs removed, preferring the bright white tiles. The ceiling bore a painted mural of fishers at sea, with gulls in the clear air, and the walls were a soft blue. A group of ten *da’covale* knelt before the candelabras to Tuon’s right. They wore filmy costumes, waiting for a command. Suroth was not among them. The Deathwatch Guard saw to her, at least until her hair grew out.

As soon as Tuon entered the room, all of the commoners bowed on knees with foreheads to the ground. Those of the Blood knelt, bowing their heads.

Across from the *da’covale,* on the other side of the hall, Lanelle and Melitene knelt in dresses emblazoned with silver lightning bolts in red panels on their skirts. Their leashed *damane* knelt facedown. Tuon’s kidnapping had been unbearable to several of the *damane*; they had taken to inconsolable weeping during her absence.

Her audience chair was relatively simple. A wooden seat with black velvet on the arms and back. She sat down, wearing a pleated gown of the deepest sea blue, a white cape fluttering behind her. As soon as she did, the people in the room rose from their positions of adulation—all save the *da’covale*, who remained kneeling. Selucia stood and stepped up beside the chair, her golden hair in a braid down her right side, the left side of her head shaven. She did not wear the ashes, since she was not of the Blood, but the white band on her arm indicated that she—like the entire Empire—mourned the loss of the Empress.

Yuril, Tuon's secretary and secretly her Hand, stepped up to the other side of the chair. The Deathwatch Guards moved in subtly around her, dark armor glittering faintly in the sunlight. They had been particularly protective of her lately. She didn't blame them, recent events considered.

Here I am, Tuon thought, *surrounded by my might,* damane *on one side and Deathwatch Guard on the other. And yet I feel no safer than I did with Matrim*. How odd, that she should have felt safe with him.

Directly in front of her, lit by indirect sunlight from the open balcony behind, was a collection of the Blood, Captain-General Galgan highest of them. He wore armor this day, the breastplate painted a deep blue, nearly dark enough to be black. His powdery white hair ran in a crest with the sides of his head shaven, and was plaited to his shoulders, for he was of the High Blood. With him were two members of the low Blood—Banner-General Najirah and Banner-General Yamada—and several commoner officers. They waited patiently, carefully not meeting Tuon's eyes.

A gathering of other members of the Blood stood several steps behind, to witness her acts. Wiry Faverde Nothish and long-faced Amenar Shumada led them. They were both important—important enough to be dangerous. Suroth wouldn't be the only one who saw opportunity in these times. If Tuon were to fall, practically anyone could become Empress. Or Emperor.

The war in Seanchan would not end quickly; but when it did, the victor would undoubtedly raise him- or herself to the Crystal Throne as well. And then there would be two leaders of the Seanchan Empire, divided by an ocean, united in desire to conquer one another. Neither could allow the other to live.

Order, Tuon thought, tapping the black wood of her armrest with a blue-lacquered fingernail. *Order must emanate from me. I will bring the calm airs to those beset by storms.*

"Selucia is my Truthspeaker," she announced to the room. "Let it be published among the Blood."

The statement was expected. Selucia bowed her head in acceptance, though she had no desire for any appointment other than to serve and protect Tuon. She would not welcome this position. But she was also honest and straightforward; she would make an excellent Truthspeaker.

At least this time, Tuon could be certain that her Truthspeaker wasn't one of the Forsaken.

Did she believe Falendre’s story, then? It stretched plausibility; it sounded like one of Matrim’s fanciful tales of imaginary creatures that lurked in the dark. And yet, the other *sul’dam* and *damane* had corroborated Falendre’s tale.

Some facts, at least, seemed straightforward. Anath had been working with Suroth. Suroth—after some persuasion—had admitted that she had met with one of the Forsaken. Or, at least, she thought she had. She hadn’t known that the Forsaken was the same as Anath, but she seemed to find the revelation believable.

Whether or not she really was Forsaken, Anath had met with the Dragon Reborn, imitating Tuon. And had then tried to kill him. *Order,* Tuon thought, keeping her face still. *I represent order*.

Tuon gestured rapidly to Selucia, who was still Tuon’s Voice—and her shadow—even with the added responsibility of Truthspeaker. When ordering those far beneath herself, Tuon would first pass the words to Selucia, who would speak them.

“You are required to send him in,” Selucia said to a *da’covale* beside the throne. He bowed himself to the ground, touching head to the floor, then hurried to the other end of the large room and opened the door.

Beslan, King of Altara and High Seat of House Mitsobar, was a slender youth with black eyes and hair. He had the olive skin common to the Altaran people, but he had taken to wearing clothing like that favored by the Blood. Loose trousers of yellow and a high-collared coat that came down only to the middle of his chest, a yellow shirt underneath. The Blood had left a clear passage down the middle of the room, and Beslan walked through it, eyes lowered. Upon reaching the supplication space before the throne, he went down on his knees, then bowed low. The perfect image of a loyal subject, except for the thin golden crown on his head.

Tuon gestured to Selucia.

“You are bidden to rise,” Selucia said.

Beslan rose, though he kept his gaze averted. He was a fine actor.

“The Daughter of the Nine Moons expresses her condolences to you for your loss,” Selucia said to him.

“I give the same to her for her loss,” he said. “My grief is but a candle to the great fire felt by the Seanchan people.”

He was *too* servile. He was a king; he was not required to bow himself so far. He was the equal of many of the Blood.

She could almost have believed he was just being submissive before the woman who would soon become Empress. But she knew too much of his temperament, through both spies and hearsay.

"The Daughter of the Nine Moons wishes to know the reason you have ceased holding court," Selucia said, watching Tuon's hands move. "She finds it distressing that your people cannot have audience with their king. Your mother's death was as tragic as it was shocking, but your kingdom needs you."

Beslan bowed. "Please have her know that I did not think it appropriate to elevate myself above her. I am uncertain how to act. I meant no insult."

"Are you certain that is the true reason?" Selucia Voiced. "It is not, perhaps, because you are planning a rebellion against us, and do not have time for your other duties?"

Beslan looked up sharply, eyes wide. "Your Majesty, I—"

"You need not speak any further lies, child of Tylin," Tuon said directly to him, causing gasps of surprise from the assembled Blood. "I know of the things you have said to General Habiger and your friend, Lord Malalin. I know of your quiet meetings in the basement of The Three Stars. I know of it all, King Beslan."

The room fell silent, Beslan bowed his head for a moment. Then, surprisingly, he rose to his feet and stared her directly in the eyes. She wouldn't have thought the soft-spoken youth had it in him. "I will not allow my people to—"

"I would still my tongue if I were you," Tuon interrupted. "You stand on sand as it is."

Beslan hesitated. She could see the question in his eyes. Wasn't she going to execute him? *If I intended to kill you,* she thought, *you would be dead already, and you would never have seen the knife*.

"Seanchan is in upheaval," Tuon said, regarding him. He appeared shocked at the words. "Oh, did you think I would ignore it, Beslan? I am not content to stare at the stars while my empire collapses around me. The truth must be acknowledged. My mother is dead. There is no empress.

"However, the forces of the Corenne are *more* than sufficient to maintain our positions here on this side of the ocean, Altara included." She leaned forward, trying to project a sense of *control,* of *firmness*. Her mother had been able to do so at all times. Tuon did not have her mother's height, but she would need that aura. Others had to feel safer, more secure, simply by entering her presence.

“In times such as these,” Tuon continued, “threats of rebellion cannot be tolerated. Many will see opportunity in the Empire’s weakness, and their divisive squabbling—if left unchecked—would prove the end of us all. Therefore, I must be firm. Very firm. With those who defy me.”

“Then why,” Beslan said, “am I still alive?”

“You started planning your rebellion *before* events in the Empire were made known.”

He frowned, dumbfounded.

“You began your rebellion when Suroth led here,” Tuon said, “and when your mother was still queen. Much has changed since then, Beslan. Very much. In times like these, there is potential for great accomplishment.”

“You must know I have no thirst for power,” Beslan said. “The freedom of my people is all I desire.”

“I do know it,” Tuon said, clasping her hands before her, lacquered nails curling, elbows on the armrests of her chair. “And that is the other reason you are still alive. You rebel not out of lust for station, but out of sheer ignorance. You are misguided, and that means you can change, should you receive the proper knowledge.”

He looked at her, confused. *Lower your eyes, fool. Don’t make me have you strapped for insolence!* As if he had heard her thoughts, he averted his eyes, then lowered them. Yes, she had judged correctly regarding this one.

How precarious her position was! True, she had armies—but so many of them had been thrown away by Suroth’s aggression.

All kingdoms on this side of the ocean would need to bow before the Crystal Throne, eventually. Each *marath’damane* would be leashed, each king or queen would swear the oaths. But Suroth had pushed too hard, particularly in the fiasco with Turan. A hundred thousand men, lost in one battle. Madness.

Tuon *needed* Altara. She needed Ebou Dar. Beslan was well loved by the people. Putting his head on a pike after the mysterious death of his mother. . . . Well, Tuon *would* have stability in Ebou Dar, but she would rather not have to leave battlefronts unmanned to accomplish it.

“Your mother’s death is a loss,” Tuon said. “She was a good woman. A good queen.”

Beslan’s lips tightened.

"You may speak," Tuon said.

"Her death . . . is unexplained," he said. The implication was obvious.

"I do not know if Suroth caused her to be killed," Tuon said, softening her voice. "She claims that she did not. But the matter is being investigated. If it turns out that Suroth was behind the death, you and Altara will have an apology from the throne itself."

Another gasp from the Blood. She silenced them with a glance, then turned back to Beslan. "Your mother's loss *is* a great one. You must know that she was loyal to her oaths."

"Yes," he said, voice bitter. "And she gave up the throne."

"No," Tuon said curtly. "The throne belongs to you. This is the ignorance of which I spoke. You *must* lead your people. They *must* have a king. I have neither time nor desire to do your duty for you.

"You assume that the Seanchan dominance of your homeland will mean your people lack freedom. That is false. They will be more free, more protected, and more powerful when they accept our rule.

"I sit above you. But is this so undesirable? With the might of the empire, you will be able to hold your borders and patrol your lands outside of Ebou Dar. You speak of your people? Well, I have ordered something prepared for you." She nodded to the side, where a willowy-limbed *da'covale* stepped forward with a leather satchel.

"Inside," Tuon said, "you will find numbers gathered by my scouts and guard forces. You can see directly the reports of crimes during our occupation here. You will have reports and manifests, comparing how the people were *before* the Return and *after* it.

"I believe you know what you will find. The Empire is a resource to you, Beslan. A powerful, powerful ally. I will not insult you by offering you thrones you do not want. I will entice you by promising stability, food, and protection for your people. All for the simple price of your loyalty."

He hesitantly accepted the satchel.

"I offer you a choice, Beslan," Tuon said. "You may choose execution, if you wish. I will not make you *da'covale*. I will let you die with honor, and it will be published that you died because you rejected the oaths and chose not to accept the Seanchan. If you wish it, I will allow it. Your people will know that you died in defiance.

"Or, you may choose to serve them better. You may choose to live. If you do so, you will be raised to the High Blood. You will step forward and reign as your people need you to do. I promise you that I will *not* direct the affairs of your people. I will demand resources and men for my armies, as is proper, and your word cannot countermand my own. Aside from that, your power in Altara will be absolute. No Blood will have the right to command, harm, or imprison your people without your permission.

"I will accept and review a list of noble families you feel should be raised to the low Blood, and I will raise no fewer than twenty of them. Altara will become the permanent seat of the Empress on this side of the ocean. As such, it will be the most powerful kingdom here. You may choose."

She leaned forward, unlacing her fingers. "But understand this. If you decide to join with us, you *will* give me your heart, and not just your words. I will not allow you to ignore your oaths. I have given you this chance because I believe you can be a strong ally, and I think that you were misguided, perhaps by Suroth's twisted webs.

"You have one day to make your decision. Think well. Your mother thought this to be the best course, and she was a wise woman. The Empire means stability. A rebellion would mean only suffering, starvation and obscurity. These are not times to be alone, Beslan."

She sat back as Beslan regarded the satchel in his hands. He bowed in supplication to withdraw, though the motion was jerky, as if he were distracted.

"You may go," she said to him.

He rose, but did not turn to leave. The room fell still as he stared down at his hands and the satchel. She could read his struggle in his expression. A *da'covale* approached to hasten him on his way, as he had been dismissed, but Tuon raised her hand, stilling the servant.

She leaned forward, several members of the Blood shuffling their feet as they waited. Beslan just stared at that satchel. Finally, he looked up, eyes determined. And then, surprisingly, he got back down on his knees.

"I, Beslan of House Mitsobar, pledge my fealty and service to the Daughter of the Nine Moons and through her to the Seanchan Empire, now and for all time, save that she chooses to release me of her own will. My lands and throne are hers, and I yield them to her hand. So I do swear before the Light."

Tuon let herself smile. Behind Beslan, Captain-General Galgan stepped forward, addressing the King. "That is not the proper way to—"

Tuon silenced him with a gesture. “We demand that this people adopt our ways, General,” she said. “It is fitting that we accept some of theirs.” Not too many of those ways, of course. But she could thank her long conversations with Mistress Anan for allowing her to understand this. The Seanchan had, perhaps, made a mistake with this people in making them swear Seanchan oaths of obedience. Matrim had sworn those oaths, but ignored them handily when the time came—yet he had been certain to keep his word to her, and his men had assured her he was a man of honor.

How strange that they would be willing to elevate one oath over another. These people were odd. But she would have to understand them in order to rule them—and she would have to rule them to gather strength for her return to Seanchan.

“Your oath is pleasing to me, King Beslan. I raise you to the High Blood and give you and your House dominance over the kingdom of Altara, for now and all time, your will for the administration and governance of it second only to that of the Imperial Throne itself. Rise.”

He stood, legs looking shaky. “Are you certain you’re not *ta’veren,* my Lady?” he asked. “Because I certainly wasn’t expecting to do *that* when I walked in here.”

Ta’veren. These people and their foolish superstitions! “I am pleased with you,” she said to him. “I knew your mother for only a short time, but I did find her quite capable. I would not have enjoyed being forced to execute her only remaining son.”

He nodded in appreciation. To the side, Selucia covertly signed, *That was well handled. Unconventional, perhaps, but very delicately done.*

Tuon felt a warm sense of pride. She turned to the white-haired General Galgan. “General. I realize you have been waiting to speak with me, and your patience is to be commended. You may now speak your thoughts. King Beslan, you may withdraw or remain. It is your right to attend any public conferences I have in your kingdom, and you need no permission or invitation to attend.”

Beslan nodded, bowing but retreating to the side of the room to watch.

“Thank you, Highest Daughter,” Galgan said reverently, stepping forward. He waved to his *so’jhin*, who stood in the hallway outside. They entered—first prostrating themselves before Tuon—then quickly set up a table and several maps. One servant brought Galgan a bundle, which he carried, approaching Tuon. Karede was at her right shoulder in a moment, Selucia at her left, but Galgan kept a respectful distance. He bowed and unrolled the item on the ground. It was a banner of red, bearing a circle in the center, split by a sinuous line. One half of the circle was black, the other white.

“What is it?” Tuon asked, leaning forward.

“The banner of the Dragon Reborn,” Galgan said. “He sent it with a messenger, asking yet again for a meeting.” He glanced up—not meeting her eyes, but showing a thoughtful, concerned face.

“This morning when I arose,” Tuon said, “I saw a pattern like three towers in the sky and a hawk, high in the air, passing between them.”

The various members of the Blood in the room nodded appreciatively. Only Beslan seemed confused. How did these people live, not knowing the omens? Had they no desire to understand the visions of fate the Pattern was giving them? The hawk and three towers were an omen of difficult choices to come. They indicated that boldness would be needed.

“What are your thoughts on the Dragon Reborn’s request for a meeting?” Tuon asked Galgan.

“Perhaps it would be unwise to meet with this man, Highest Daughter. I am not certain of his claims to his title. Beyond this question, does the Empire not have other concerns at this time?”

“You wonder why our forces have not retreated,” Tuon said. “Why we have not struck out for Seanchan to secure the throne.”

He bowed his head. “I trust your wisdom, Highest Daughter.”

“This *is* the Dragon Reborn,” Tuon said. “And not just an impostor. I am convinced of it. He must bow before the Crystal Throne before the Last Battle can begin. And so we must stay. It is not an accident that the Return happened now. We are needed here. More than we are needed, unfortunately, in our homeland.”

Galgan nodded slowly. He agreed with her on not retreating to Seanchan; he had simply assumed it would be what she wished. In declaring they would stay, she had earned his respect. Not that he wouldn’t still consider seizing the throne for himself. A man could not hold his position without a great deal of ambition.

However, he was known to be a prudent man as well as an ambitious one. He would not strike unless he was convinced it was for the best. He would have to believe that he had a strong potential for success and that removing Tuon would be better for the Empire. That was the difference between an ambitious fool and an ambitious wise man. The latter understood that killing someone was only the beginning. Taking Tuon's life and assuming the throne himself would gain him nothing if it alienated the rest of the Blood.

He walked to his table with maps. "If you wish to continue to prosecute the war, Highest Daughter, permit me to explain the condition of your army. One of our most ambitious plans is being organized by Lieutenant-General Yulan."

Galgan gestured to the assembled officers and a short, dark-skinned man of the low Blood stepped forward. He wore a black wig to hide his baldness, and he approached and knelt before Tuon, bowing.

"You are commanded to rise and speak, General," Selucia Voiced.

"The Highest Daughter should know my thanks," Yulan said, rising. At the map table, he gestured for several aides to hold up a map so that Tuon could see. "Aside from setbacks in Arad Doman, the process of reclaiming these lands has proceeded as expected. More slowly than we would wish, but not without great victories. The people of these kingdoms do not rally to the defense of their neighboring nations. We have had great success seizing them one at a time. Only two issues cause us worry. The first is this Rand al'Thor, the Dragon Reborn, who has been pursuing an aggressive war of unification to the north and east. The Highest Daughter's wisdom will be needed in teaching us to subdue him.

"The other concern has been the large number of *marath'damane* concentrated in the place known as Tar Valon. I believe the Highest Daughter has heard of the great weapon they used to destroy a large patch of land north of Ebou Dar."

Tuon nodded.

"The *sul'dam* have never seen its like," Yulan continued. "We assume it is a thing of *damane,* which can be taught to them, if the right *marath'damane* are taken. This wondrous ability they have to transport instantly from one place to another—if true—will prove a second technique of great tactical advantage that we *must* capture."

Tuon nodded again, studying the map, which showed the place called Tar Valon. Selucia Voiced, "The Highest Daughter is curious as to your plans. You will proceed."

"My thanks are expressed deeply," Yulan said, bowing. "As Captain of the Air, I have the honor of commanding the *raken* and *to'raken* serving the

Return. I believe that a strike at the very heart of our enemy's lands would not only be possible, but highly advantageous. We have not yet had to fight many of these *marath'damane* in combat, but as we advance into lands controlled by the Dragon Reborn, we will undoubtedly face them in great numbers.

"They assume that they are safe from us at this time. A strike now could have great impact on the future. Each *marath'damane* we leash is not only a powerful tool gained by our forces, but one lost by the enemy. Preliminary reports claim that there are hundreds upon hundreds of *marath'damane* congregated in this place called the White Tower."

That many? Tuon thought. A force like that could turn the war entirely. True, those *marath'damane* who had traveled with Matrim had said that they would not take part in wars. Indeed, *marath'damane* who had once been Aes Sedai had—so far—proven useless as weapons. But could there be some way to twist their supposed vows? Something Matrim had said in passing made her suspect they could. Her fingers flew.

"The Daughter of the Nine Moons wonders how a strike against them could be feasible," Selucia Voiced. "The distance is great. Hundreds of leagues."

"We would use a force of mostly *to'raken*," General Yulan said. "With some *raken* for scouting. Our captured maps show large grasslands with very few inhabitants, which could be used as resting points along the way. We could strike across Murandy here," he pointed at a second map, which aides held up, "and come at Tar Valon from the south. If it pleases the Highest Daughter, we could raid at night, while the *marath'damane* are asleep. Our objective would be to capture as many of them as possible."

"It is wondered if this really could be accomplished," Selucia Voiced. Tuon was intrigued. "What numbers would we be able to use for such a raid?"

"If we were fully committed?" Yulan asked. "I believe I could gather up between eighty and a hundred *to'raken* for the assault."

Eighty to a hundred *to'raken*. So, perhaps around three hundred soldiers, with equipment, leaving room to bring back captured *marath'damane*. Three hundred would be a considerable force for a raid like this, but they would have to move quickly and lightly, so as to not be trapped.

“If it pleases the Highest Daughter,” General Galgan said, stepping forward again. “I believe General Yulan’s plan has much merit. It is not without potential for great loss, but we will never have another such opportunity. If brought to bear in our conflict, those *marath’damane* could disable us. And if we could gain access to this weapon of theirs, or even their ability to travel great distances. . . . Well, I believe that the risk of every *to’raken* in our army is worth the gains.”

“If it pleases the Highest Daughter,” General Yulan continued. “Our plan calls for the use of twenty squads of the Fists of Heaven—two hundred troops total—and fifty linked *sul’dam*. We think that, perhaps, a small group of Bloodknives would be appropriate as well.”

Bloodknives, the most elite members of the Fist of Heaven, itself an exclusive group. Yulan and Galgan *were* dedicated to this action! One never committed Bloodknives unless one was very serious, for they did not return from their missions. Their duty was to stay behind after the Fists withdrew and cause damage—as much damage as possible—to the enemy. If they could place some of them in Tar Valon, with orders to kill as many *marath’damane* as possible. . . .

“The Dragon Reborn will not react well to this raid,” Tuon said to Galgan. “Is he not connected to these *marath’damane*?”

“By some reports,” Galgan said. “Others say he is opposed to them. Still others say they are his pawns. Our poor intelligence in this area lowers my eyes, Highest Daughter. I have not been able to sort the lies from the truths. Until we have better information, we must assume the worst, that this raid will anger him greatly.”

“And you still think it worthwhile?”

“Yes,” Galgan said without hesitation. “If these *marath’damane* are connected to the Dragon Reborn, then we have greater reason to strike now, before he can use them against us. Perhaps the raid will enrage him—but it will also weaken him, which will place you in a better position for negotiating with him.”

Tuon nodded thoughtfully. Undoubtedly, this was the difficult decision of the omen. But her choice seemed very obvious. Not a difficult decision at all. All of the *marath’damane* in Tar Valon *must* be collared, and this was an excellent way to weaken resistance to the Ever Victorious Army with a single, powerful blow.

But the omen spoke of a difficult decision. She gestured to Selucia. "Are there any in the room who disapprove of this plan?" the Voice asked. "Any who would offer objection to what General Yulan and his men have advanced?"

The Blood in the room regarded one another. Beslan might have stirred, but he remained silent. The Altarans had not made any objections to their *marath'damane* being collared; it seemed they had little trust for those who could channel. They had not been as prudent as Amadicia in outlawing these Aes Sedai, but neither were they welcoming. Beslan would not object to a strike against the White Tower.

She sat back, waiting . . . For what? Perhaps this wasn't the decision the omen had referred to. She opened her mouth to give the order to go forward with the raid, but at that moment the opening of the doors made her pause.

The Deathwatch Guards who guarded the door stepped aside a moment later, admitting a *so'jhin* who served in the hallway. The strong-armed man, Ma'combe, bowed himself low to the ground, the black braid over his right shoulder dropping to the side and hitting the tiled floor. "May it please the Daughter of the Nine Moons, Lieutenant-General Tylee Khirgan would like an audience."

Galgan looked shocked.

"What is it?" Tuon asked him.

"I had not realized that she had returned, Highest Daughter," he said. "I suggest in humility that she be given leave to speak. She is one of my finest officers."

"She may enter," Selucia Voiced.

A male *da'covale* in a white robe entered, preceding a woman in armor, her helm under her arm. Dark of skin, with short black hair worn in tight curls against her scalp, she was tall and lean. Her hair was sprinkled with white at the temples. The overlapping plates of her armor were striped with red, yellow and blue lacquer, and creaked as she walked. She was only of the low Blood—recently raised by General Galgan's order—but she had been informed of this via *raken*. She wore her hair barely shaved a finger's width up the sides of her head.

Tylee's eyes were red with fatigue. Judging by the scent of sweat and the stink of horse she gave off, she had come straight to Tuon upon arriving in the city. She was followed into the room by several younger soldiers, also exhausted, one bearing a large brown sack. Upon reaching the supplication space—a red square of cloth—all went down on their knees. The common soldiers proceeded to touch foreheads to the floor, and Tylee jerked as if to follow, but stopped herself. She was not yet accustomed to being one of the Blood.

"It is obvious that you are tired, warrior," Selucia Voiced. Tuon leaned forward. "It is presumed that you have news of great import?"

Tylee rose to one knee, then gestured to the side. One of her soldiers rose to his knees and lifted up his brown sack. It was stained on the bottom with a dark, crusted liquid. Blood.

"If it pleases the Highest Daughter," Tylee said, voice betraying exhaustion. She nodded to her man, and he opened his sack, dumping things onto the floor. The heads of several animals. A boar, a wolf, and . . . a hawk? Tuon felt a chill. That hawk's head was as large as a person's. Perhaps larger. But they were not . . . right. The heads were horribly deformed.

She could swear that the hawk's head, which rolled so that she could see the face clearly, had *human* eyes. And . . . the other heads had . . . human features as well. Tuon suppressed a shiver. What foul omen was this?

"What is the meaning of this?" Galgan demanded.

"I presume that the Highest Daughter knows of my military venture against the Aiel," Tylee said, still on one knee. Tylee had captured *damane* during that engagement, though Tuon didn't know much more than that. General Galgan had been awaiting her return with some curiosity to receive the full story.

"In my venture," Tylee continued, "I was joined by men of various nationalities, none of whom had sworn the oaths. I will give a full report on them when there is time." She hesitated, then glanced at the heads. "These . . . creatures . . . attacked my company during our return ride, ten leagues from Ebou Dar. We took heavy casualties. We brought several full bodies as well as these heads. They walked on two feet, like men, but had much the appearance of animals." She hesitated again. "I believe them to be what some on this side of the ocean speak of as Trollocs. I believe them to be coming here."

Chaos. The Blood began to argue about the implausibility of it. General Galgan immediately ordered his officers to organize patrols and send runners to warn of a potential attack on the city. The *sul'dam* at the side of the room hurried forward to inspect the heads while the Deathwatch Guards quietly surrounded Tuon, to give an extra layer of defense, watching everyone—Blood, servants, and soldiers—with equal care.

Tuon felt she should be shocked. But, oddly, she wasn't. *So Matrim was not mistaken about this,* she signed covertly to Selucia. And she had assumed Trollocs to be nothing more than superstition. She glanced at the heads again. Revolting.

Selucia seemed troubled. *Are there other things he said that we discounted, I wonder?*

Tuon hesitated. *We shall have to ask him. I should very much like to have him back.* She froze; she hadn't meant to admit so much. She found her own emotions curious, however. She *had* felt safe with him, ridiculous though it seemed. And she wished he were with her now.

These heads were yet another proof that she knew very little of him. She reasserted control of the chattering crowd. Selucia Voiced, "You will silence yourselves."

The room fell still, though the Blood and the *sul'dam* still looked very disturbed. Tylee still knelt, head bowed, the soldier who had borne the heads kneeling beside her. Yes, she would have to be *thoroughly* questioned.

"This news changes little," Selucia Voiced. "We were already aware that the Last Battle approaches. We appreciate Lieutenant-General Tylee's revelations. She is to be commended. But this only makes it *more* urgent that we subdue the Dragon Reborn."

There were several nods from those in the room, including General Galgan. Beslan did not seem so quickly persuaded. He just looked troubled.

"If it pleases the Highest Daughter," Tylee said, bowing.

"You are allowed to speak."

"These last few weeks, I have seen many things that have given me thought," Tylee said. "Even before my troops were attacked, I was worried. The wisdom and grace of the Highest Daughter undoubtedly let her see further than one such as I, but I believe that our conquests so far in this land have been easy compared to what might come. If I may be so bold . . . I believe that the Dragon Reborn and those associated with him may make better allies than enemies."

It *was* a bold statement. Tuon leaned forward, lacquered nails clicking on the armrests of her chair. Many of the low Blood would be so in awe at meeting one of the Empress's household, much less the Highest Daughter, that they would not dare speak. Yet this woman offered suggestions? In direct opposition to Tuon's published will?

"A difficult decision is not always a decision where both sides are equally matched, Tuon," Selucia said suddenly. "Perhaps, in this case, a difficult decision is one that is right, but requires an implication of fault as well."

Tuon blinked in surprise. *Yes,* she realized. *Selucia is my Truthspeaker now.* It would take time to accustom herself to the woman in that role. It had been years since Selucia had corrected or reproved her in public.

And yet, meeting with the Dragon Reborn, in person? She *did* need to contact him, and had planned to. But would it not be better to go to him in strength, his armies defeated, the White Tower torn down? She needed him brought to the Crystal Throne under very controlled circumstances, with the understanding that he was to submit to her authority.

And yet . . . with Seanchan in rebellion . . . with her position here in Altara barely stabilized . . . Well, perhaps some time to think—some time to take a few deep breaths and secure what she already had—would be worth delaying her strike on the White Tower.

"General Galgan, send *raken* to our forces in Almoth Plain and eastern Altara," she said firmly. "Tell them to hold our interests, but avoid confrontation with the Dragon Reborn. And reply to his request for a meeting. The Daughter of the Nine Moons will meet with him."

General Galgan nodded, bowing.

Order must be brought to the world. If she had to do that by lowering her eyes slightly and meeting with the Dragon Reborn, then so be it.

Oddly, she felt herself wishing—once again—that Matrim were still with her. She could have put his knowledge of this Rand al'Thor to good use in preparing for the meeting. *Stay well, you curious man,* she thought, glancing back at the balcony, northward. *Do not dig yourself into trouble deeper than you can climb to freedom. You are Prince of the Ravens now. Remember to act appropriately.*

Wherever it is you are.

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CHAPTER 20

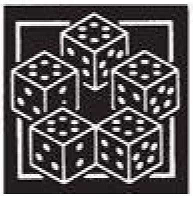

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On a Broken Road

“Women,” Mat declared as he rode Pips down the dusty, little-used road, “are like mules.” He frowned. “Wait. No. Goats. Women are like *goats*. Except every flaming one thinks she’s a horse instead, and a prize racing mare to boot. Do you understand me, Talmanes?”

“Pure poetry, Mat,” Talmanes said, tamping the tabac down into his pipe.

Mat flicked his reins, Pips continuing to plod along. Tall three-needle pines lined the sides of the stone roadway. They’d been lucky to find this ancient road, which must have been made before the Breaking. It was mostly overgrown, the stones shattered in many places, large sections of the roadway just . . . well, just gone.

Sapling pines had begun to sprout at the sides of the roadway and between rocks, miniature versions of their towering fathers above. The path was wide, if very rough, which was good. Mat had seven thousand men with him, all mounted, and they’d been riding hard in the little under a week they’d spent traveling since sending Tuon back to Ebou Dar.

“Reasoning with a woman is impossible,” Mat continued, eyes forward. “It’s like . . . Well, reasoning with a woman is like sitting down to a friendly game of dice. Only the woman refuses to acknowledge the basic bloody rules of the game. A man, he’ll cheat you—but he’ll do it honestly. He’ll use loaded dice, so that you think you’re losing by chance. And if you aren’t clever enough to spot what he’s doing, then maybe he deserves to take your coin. And that’s that.

“A woman, though, she’ll sit down to that same game and she’ll smile, and act like she’s going to play. Only when it’s her turn to throw, she’ll toss a pair of her *own* dice that are *blank* on all six sides. Not a single pip showing. She’ll inspect her throw, then she’ll look up at you and say, ‘Clearly I just won.’

“Now, you’ll scratch your head and look at the dice. Then you’ll look up at her, then down at the dice again. ‘But there aren’t any pips on these dice,’ you’ll say.

“ ‘Yes there are,’ she’ll say. ‘And both dice rolled a one.’

“ ‘That’s exactly the number you need to win,’ you’ll say.

“ ‘What a coincidence,’ she’ll reply, then begin to scoop up your coins. And you’ll sit there, trying to wrap your head ’bout what just happened.

And you'll realize something. A pair of ones *isn't* the winning throw! Not when you threw a six on your turn. That means she needed a pair of twos instead! Excitedly, you'll explain what you've discovered. Only then, do you know what she'll do?"

"No idea, Mat," Talmanes replied, chewing on his pipe, a thin wisp of smoke curling out of the bowl.

"Then she'll reach over," Mat said, "and rub the blank faces of her dice. And then, with a perfectly straight face, she'll say, 'I'm sorry. There was a spot of dirt on the dice. Clearly you can see that they *actually* came up as twos!' And she'll believe it. She'll bloody believe it!"

"Incredible," Talmanes said.

"Only that's not the end of it!"

"I had presumed that it wouldn't be, Mat."

"She scoops up all of your coins," Mat said, gesturing with one hand, the other steadying his *ashandarei* across his saddle. "And then every other woman in the room will come over and congratulate her on throwing that pair of twos! The more you complain, the more of those bloody women will join the argument. You'll be outnumbered in a moment, and each of those women will explain to you how those dice *clearly* read twos, and how you really need to stop behaving like a child. Every single *flaming* one of them will see the twos! Even the prudish woman who has hated your woman from birth—since your woman's granny stole the other woman's granny's honeycake recipe when they were both maids—*that* woman will side against you."

"They are nefarious creatures indeed," Talmanes said, voice flat and even. Talmanes rarely smiled.

"By the time they're done," Mat continued, almost more to himself, "you'll be left with no coin, several lists' worth of errands to run and what clothing to wear and a splitting headache. You'll sit there and stare at the table and begin to wonder, just maybe, if those dice didn't read twos after all. If only to preserve what's left of your sanity. *That's* what it's like to reason with a woman, I tell you."

"And you did so. At length."

"You aren't making sport of me, are you?"

"Why, Mat!" the Cairhienin said. "You know I'd never do such a thing."

“Too bad,” Mat muttered, glancing at him suspiciously. “I could use a laugh.” He looked over his shoulder. “Vanin! Where on the Dark One’s blistered backside are we?”

The fat former horsethief looked up. He rode a short distance behind Mat, and he carried a map of the area unrolled and folded across a board so he could read it in the saddle. He’d been poring over the bloody thing the better half of the morning. Mat had asked him to get them through Murandy quietly, not get them lost in the mountains for months!

“That’s Blinder’s Peak,” Vanin said, gesturing with a pudgy finger toward a flat-topped mountain just barely visible over the tips of the pines. “At least, I think it is. It might be Mount Sardlen.”

The squat hill didn’t look like much of a mountain; it barely had any snow atop it. Of course, few “mountains” in this area were impressive, not compared to the Mountains of Mist, back near the Two Rivers. Here, northeast of the Damona range, the landscape fell into a grouping of low foothills. It was difficult terrain, but navigable, if one were determined. And Mat *was* determined. Determined not to be pinned in by the Seanchan again, determined not to be seen by any who didn’t *have* to know he was there. He’d paid the butcher too much so far. He wanted out of this hangman’s noose of a country.

“Well,” Mat said, reining Pips back to ride beside Vanin, “which of those mountains is it? Maybe we should go ask Master Roidelle again.”

The map belonged to the master mapmaker; it was only because of his presence that they’d been able to find this roadway in the first place. But Vanin insisted on being the one to guide the troop—a mapmaker wasn’t the same thing as a scout. You didn’t have a dusty cartographer ride out and lead the way for you, Vanin insisted.

In truth, Master Roidelle didn’t have a lot of experience being a guide. He was a scholar, an academic. He could explain a map for you perfectly, but he had as much trouble as Vanin making sense of where they were, since this roadway was so disjointed and broken, the pines high enough to obscure landmarks, the hilltops all nearly identical.

Of course, there was also the fact that Vanin seemed threatened by the presence of the mapmaker, as if he were worried about being unseated from his position guiding Mat and the Band. Mat had never expected such an emotion from the overweight horsethief. It might have been enough to make him amused if they weren’t lost so much of the flaming time.

Vanin scowled. “I think that *has* to be Mount Sardlen. Yes. It’s got to be.”

“Which means . . . ?”

“Which means we keep heading along the roadway,” Vanin said. “The same thing I told you an hour ago. We can’t bloody march an army through a forest this thick, now can we? That means staying on the stones.”

“I’m just asking,” Mat said, pulling down the brim of his hat against the sun. “A commander’s got to ask things like this.”

“I should ride ahead,” Vanin said, scowling again. He was fond of scowls. “If that *is* Mount Sardlen, there should be a village of fair size an hour or two further along. I might be able to spot it from the next rise.”

“Go, then,” Mat said. They had advance scouts out, of course, but none of them were as good as Vanin. Despite his size, the man could sneak close enough to an enemy fortification to count the whiskers in the camp guards’ beards and never be seen. He’d probably make off with their stew, too.

Vanin shook his head as he regarded the map again. “Actually,” he muttered, “now that I think about it, maybe that’s Favlend Mountain. . . .” He set off at a trot before Mat could object.

Mat sighed, heeling Pips to catch up to Talmanes. The Cairhienin shook his head. He could be an intense one, Talmanes. Early in their association, Mat had assumed him to be stern, unable to have fun. He was learning better. Talmanes wasn’t stern, he was just reserved. But at times, there seemed to be a twinkle to the nobleman’s eyes, as if he were laughing at the world, despite that set jaw and his unsmiling lips.

Today, he wore a red coat, trimmed with gold, and his forehead was shaved and powdered after Cairhienin fashion. It looked bloody ridiculous, but who was Mat to judge? Talmanes might have terrible fashion sense, but he was a loyal officer and a good man. Besides, he had excellent taste in wine.

“Don’t look so glum, Mat,” Talmanes said, puffing on his gold-rimmed pipe. Where’d he gotten that, anyway? Mat didn’t remember him having it before. “Your men have full bellies, full pockets, and they just won a great victory. Not much more than that a soldier can ask for.”

“We buried a thousand men,” Mat said. “That’s no victory.” The memories in his head—the ones that weren’t his—said he should be proud. The battle *had* gone well. But there were still those dead who had depended on him.

“There are always losses,” Talmanes said. “You can’t let them eat you up, Mat. It happens.”

“There aren’t losses when you don’t fight in the first place.”

“Then why ride to battle so often?”

“I only fight when I can’t avoid it!” Mat snapped. Blood and bloody ashes, he *only* fought when he had to. When they trapped him! Why did that seem to happen every time he turned around?

“Whatever you say, Mat,” Talmanes said, taking out his pipe and pointing it at Mat knowingly. “But something’s got you on edge. And it isn’t the men we lost.”

Flaming noblemen. Even the ones you could stand, like Talmanes, always thought they knew so much.

Of course, Mat was now a nobleman himself. *Don’t think about that,* he told himself. Talmanes had spent a few days calling Mat “Your Highness” until Mat had lost his temper and yelled at the man—Cairhienin could be such sticklers for rank.

When Mat had first realized what his marriage to Tuon meant, he’d laughed, but it had been the laughter of incredulous pain. And men called him lucky. Well why couldn’t his luck have helped him avoid *this* fate! Bloody Prince of the Ravens? What did *that* mean?

Well, right now he had to worry about his men. He glanced over his shoulder, looking along the ranks of cavalrymen, with crossbowmen riding behind. There were thousands of both, though Mat had ordered their banners stowed. They weren’t likely to pass many travelers on this backwater path, but if anyone *did* see them, he didn’t want their tongues wagging.

Would the Seanchan chase him? He and Tuon both knew they were on opposing sides now, and she’d seen what his army could do.

Did she love him? He was married to her, but Seanchan didn’t think like regular people. She’d stayed in his possession, enduring captivity, never running. But he had little doubt that she’d move against him if she thought it best for her empire.

Yes, she’d send men after him, though potential pursuit didn’t trouble him half as much as the worry that she might not make it back to Ebou Dar safely. Someone had offered a very large pile of coin for Tuon’s head. That Seanchan traitor, the leader of the army Mat had destroyed. Had he been working alone? Were there others? What had Mat released Tuon into?

The questions haunted him. “Should I have let her go, do you think?” Mat found himself asking.

Talmanes shrugged. “You gave your word, Mat, and I think that rather large Seanchan fellow with the determined eyes and the black armor wouldn’t have reacted well if you’d tried to keep her.”

“She could still be in danger,” Mat said, almost to himself, still looking backward. “I shouldn’t have let her out of my sight. Fool woman.”

“Mat,” Talmanes said, pointing at him with the pipe again. “I’m surprised at you. Why, you’re starting to sound downright husbandly.”

That gave Mat a start. He twisted around in Pips’ saddle. “What was that? What does that mean?”

“Nothing, Mat,” Talmanes said hurriedly. “Just that, the way you’re mooning after her, I—”

“I’m *not* mooning,” Mat snapped, pulling the lip of his hat down, then adjusting his scarf. His medallion was a comfortable weight around his neck. “I’m just worried. That’s all. She knows a lot about the Band, and she could give away our strengths.”

Talmanes shrugged, puffing his pipe. They rode for a time in silence. The pine needles soughed in the wind, and Mat occasionally heard women’s laughter from behind, where the Aes Sedai rode in a little cluster. For all the fact that they didn’t like one another, they usually got along just fine when others could see them. But, as he’d said to Talmanes, women were only enemies with one another as long as there wasn’t a man around to gang up on.

The sun was marked by a blazing patch of clouds; Mat hadn’t seen pure sunlight in days. He hadn’t seen Tuon in as long either. The two events seemed paired in his head. Was there a connection?

Bloody fool, he thought to himself. *Next you’ll start thinking like her, reading portents into every little thing, looking for symbols and meaning every time a rabbit runs across your path or a horse lets wind.*

That kind of fortunetelling was all nonsense. Though he had to admit, he now cringed every time he heard an owl hoot twice.

“Have you ever loved a woman, Talmanes?” Mat found himself asking.

“Several,” the short man replied, riding with pipe smoke curling behind him.

“Ever consider marrying one of them?”

"No, thank the Light," Talmanes said. Then, apparently, he thought better of what he'd just said. "I mean, it wasn't right for me at the time, Mat. But I'm certain it will work out fine for you."

Mat scowled. If Tuon was going to bloody finally decide to go through with the marriage, couldn't she have picked a time when others couldn't hear?

But no. She'd gone and spoken in front of everyone, including the Aes Sedai. That meant Mat had been doomed. Aes Sedai were great at keeping secrets unless those secrets could in any way embarrass or inconvenience Matrim Cauthon. *Then* you could be certain the news would spread through the entire camp in a day's time, and likely be known three villages down the road as well. His own bloody *mother*—leagues and leagues away—had probably heard the news by now.

"I'm not giving up gambling," Mat muttered. "Or drinking."

"So I believe you've told me," Talmanes said. "Three or four times so far. I half believe that if I were to peek into your tent at night, I'd find you mumbling it in your sleep. 'I'm going to keep bloody gambling! Bloody, bloody gambling and drinking! Where's my bloody drink? Anyone want to gamble for it?' " He said it with a perfectly straight face, but once again, there was that hint of a smile in his eyes, if you knew just where to look.

"I just want to make sure everyone knows," Mat said. "I don't want anyone to start thinking I'm getting soft just because of . . . you know."

Talmanes shot him a consoling look. "You won't go soft just because you got married, Mat. Why, some of the Great Captains themselves are married, I believe. Davram Bashere is for certain, and Rodel Ituralde. No, you won't go soft because you're married."

Mat nodded sharply. Good that was settled.

"You might go *boring* though," Talmanes noted.

"All right, that's it," Mat declared. "Next village we find, we're going to go dicing at the tavern. You and me."

Talmanes grimaced. "With the kind of third-rate wine these little mountain villages have? Please, Mat. Next you'll be wanting me to drink ale."

"No arguing." Mat glanced over his shoulder as he heard familiar voices. Olver—ears sticking out to the sides, diminutive face as ugly as any Mat had seen—sat astride Wind, chatting with Noal, who rode beside him on a bony gelding. The gnarled old man was nodding appreciatively to what

Olver was saying. The little boy looked astonishingly solemn, and was undoubtedly explaining yet another of his theories on how to best sneak into the Tower of Ghenjei.

“Ho, now,” Talmanes said. “There’s Vanin.”

Mat turned to spot a rider approaching along the rocky path ahead. Vanin always looked so ridiculous, perched like a melon atop the back of his horse, his feet sticking out to the sides. But the man could ride, there was no doubting that.

“It *is* Mount Sardlen,” Vanin proclaimed as he rode up to them, wiping his sweaty, balding brow. “The village is just ahead; it’s called Hinderstap on the map. These *are* bloody good maps,” he added grudgingly.

Mat exhaled in relief. He’d begun to think that they might end up wandering these mountains until the Last Battle came and went. “Great,” he began, “we can—”

“A village?” a curt female voice demanded.

Mat turned with a sigh as three riders forced their way up to the front of the column. Talmanes reluctantly raised a hand to the soldiers behind, halting the march as the Aes Sedai descended on poor Vanin. The rotund man squatted down in his saddle, looking for all the world as though he’d rather have been discovered stealing horses—and therefore on his way to execution—than have to sit there and be interrogated by Aes Sedai.

Joline led the pack. Once, Mat might have described her as a pretty girl, with her slender figure and large, inviting brown eyes. But that ageless Aes Sedai face was an instant warning for him now. No, he wouldn’t dare *think* of the Green as pretty now. Begin letting yourself think of Aes Sedai as pretty, and in two clicks of the tongue you’d find yourself wrapped around her finger and hopping at her command. Why, Joline had already hinted that she’d like to have Mat as a Warder!

Was she still sore at him because he’d paddled her? She couldn’t hurt him with the Power, of course—even without his medallion, since Aes Sedai were sworn not to use the Power to kill except in very specific instances. But he was no fool. He’d noticed that those oaths of theirs didn’t say anything about using knives.

The two with Joline were Edesina, of the Yellow Ajah, and Teslyn, of the Red. Edesina was pleasant enough to look at, save for that ageless face, but Teslyn was about as appetizing as a stick. Sharp of face, the Illianer woman was bony and scrappy, like an aged cat left too long on its own. But she seemed to have a good head on her shoulders, from what Mat had seen, and he'd found her treating him with some measure of respect sometimes. Respect from a Red. Imagine that.

Still, from the way each of those Aes Sedai looked at Mat in turn as they reached the front of the line, you'd never know that they owed him their lives. That was the way of it with women. Save her life, and she'd inevitably claim that she'd been about to escape on her own, and therefore owed you nothing. Half the time, she'd berate you for messing up her supposed plans.

Why did he bother? One of these days, burn him, he was going to get smart and leave the next lot crying in their chains.

"What was this?" Joline demanded of Vanin. "You've finally determined where we are?"

"Bloody well have," Vanin said, then unabashedly scratched himself. Good man, Vanin. Mat smiled. Treated all people the same, Vanin did. Aes Sedai and all.

Joline stared Vanin straight in the eyes, looming like a gargoyle atop some lord's mansion stonework. Vanin actually cringed, then wilted, then finally looked downward, abashed. "I mean, I have indeed, Joline Sedai."

Mat felt his smile fade. *Burn it all, Vanin!*

"Excellent," Joline said. "And there is a village ahead, I heard? Finally, perhaps, we'll find a decent inn. I could use something other than the 'fare' these ruffians of Cauthon's call food."

"Here now," Mat said, "that isn't—"

"How far do we be from Caemlyn, Master Cauthon?" Teslyn cut in. She did her best to ignore Joline. The two of them seemed at one another's throats lately—in the most cool-faced and outwardly amiable of ways, of course. Aes Sedai didn't squabble. He'd gotten a talking to once for calling their "discussions" "squabbles." Never mind that Mat had sisters, and knew what a good squabble sounded like.

"What did you say earlier, Vanin?" Mat asked, looking at him. "That we're about two hundred leagues from Caemlyn?"

Vanin nodded. The plan was to head for Caemlyn first, as he needed to meet up with Estean and Daerid and secure needed information and supplies. After that, he could make good on his promise to Thom. The Tower of Ghenjei would have to wait a few more weeks.

"Two hundred leagues," Teslyn said. "How long until we arrive, then?"

“Well, I guess that depends,” Vanin said. “I could probably make two hundred leagues in a little over a week, if I were going alone, with a couple of good horses to ride in shifts and was crossing familiar terrain. The whole army, though, through these hills using a broken roadway? Twenty days, I’d say. Maybe longer.”

Joline glanced at Mat.

“We *aren’t* leaving the Band behind,” Mat said. “Not an option, Joline.”

She looked away, her expression dissatisfied.

“You’re welcome to go on your own,” Mat said. “That goes for each of you. You Aes Sedai aren’t my prisoners; leave any time you want, so long as you head north. I won’t risk you heading back to be taken by Seanchan.”

What would it be like, traveling with just the Band again, not an Aes Sedai in sight? Ah, if only.

Teslyn looked thoughtful. Joline glanced at her, but the Red didn’t give any indication if she’d be willing to leave or not. Edesina, however, hesitated, then nodded to Joline. She was willing.

“Very well,” Joline said to Mat with a haughty air. “It would be good to be away from your crudeness, Cauthon. Prepare for us, say, twenty-four mounts and we shall be off.”

“*Twenty-four?*” Mat asked.

“Yes,” Joline said. “Your man here mentioned that he’d need two horses to make the trip in a reasonable amount of time. So that he could remount, presumably, when one of the beasts grew tired.”

“I count two of you,” Mat said, his anger rising. “That means *four* horses. I figured you’d be smart enough to do *that* math, Joline.” And then, softer, he added, “If just barely.”

Joline’s eyes opened wide, and Edesina’s expression was painted with shock. Teslyn gave him a shocked glance, seeming disappointed. To the side, Talmanes just lowered his pipe and whistled quietly.

“That medallion of yours makes you impudent, Matrim Cauthon,” Joline said coldly.

“My mouth makes me impudent, Joline,” Mat replied with a sigh, fingering the medallion hidden beneath his loosely tied shirt. “The medallion just makes me truthful. I believe you were going to explain why you need to take twenty-four of my horses when I barely have enough for my men as it is?”

“Two each for Edesina, me, and my Warders,” Joline said stiffly. “Two each for the former *sul’dam*. You don’t presume that I’m going to leave them behind to be corrupted by your little band here?”

“Two Warders and two *sul’dam*,” Mat said. “That’s twelve horses.”

“Two for Setalle. I assume she’ll want to be away from all of this with us.”

“Fourteen.”

“Two more for Teslyn,” Joline said. “She will undoubtedly want to go with us, though she currently has nothing to say on the matter. And we’ll need about four pack animals’ worth to carry our things. They’ll have to trade their burdens too, so four more for that. Twenty-four.”

“Which you’ll feed how?” Mat asked. “If you’re riding that hard, you won’t have time to graze your horses. There’s barely anything for them to eat these days anyway.” That had proven a big problem; the spring grass wasn’t coming in. The meadows they passed were brown with fallen leaves, the dead winter weeds pressed flat by snow, barely a new shoot of grass or weed. Horses could feed on the dead leaves and winter grass, of course, but wild deer and other animals had been active, eating down whatever they could find.

If the land didn’t decide to start blooming soon . . . well, they were in for a difficult summer. But that was another problem entirely.

“We will need you to give us feed, of course,” Joline said. “And some coin for inns. . . .”

“And who is going to take care of all those horses? You going to brush them down each night, check their hooves, see that their feed is properly measured?”

“I suppose we should take a handful of your soldiers with us,” Joline said, sounding dissatisfied. “A necessary inconvenience.”

“The only thing that is *necessary*,” Mat said flatly. “Is for my men to stay where they’re wanted, not where they’re an *inconvenience*. No, they stay—and you’ll have no coin from me. If you want to go, you can take one horse each and a single packhorse to carry your things. I’ll give you some feed for the poor beasts, and giving you that much is generous.”

“But with only one horse each, we’ll barely be faster than the army!” Joline said.

“Imagine that,” Mat said. He turned away from her. “Vanin, go and tell Mandevwin to pass the word. We’ll be camping soon. I know it’s barely afternoon, but I want the Band far enough from that village not to be threatening, but close enough that a few of us can go down to feel things out."

"All right," Vanin said, with none of the respect he'd shown the bloody Aes Sedai. He turned his horse and began to ride down the line.

"And Vanin," Mat called. "Make sure Mandevwin is aware that when I say 'a few of us' will go down, I mean a very small group, led by myself and Talmanes. I won't have that village invaded by seven thousand soldiers looking for fun! I'll buy a cart in the town and what ale I can find, then send it back for the men. There is to be strict order in camp, with no one accidentally wandering down to visit, now. Understand?"

Vanin nodded, looking grim. It was never fun to be the one who had to inform the men that they weren't going to be getting leave. Mat turned back to the Aes Sedai. "Well?" he asked. "You taking my kind offer or not?"

Joline just sniffed, then trotted her horse back down the ranks, obviously turning down the chance to go alone. Pity, that. It would have made him smile each step of the way to think of it. Though, it probably would have taken Joline all of three days to find some sap in a village somewhere to give her his horses so that her crew could ride faster.

Edesina rode away, and Teslyn trailed after, regarding Mat with a curious expression. She still looked disappointed in him too. He glanced away, then felt annoyed at himself. What did *he* care what she thought?

Talmanes was looking at him. "That was odd of you, Mat," the man said.

"What?" Mat said. "The restriction on the men? They're a good lot, the Band, but I've never known a group of soldiers who weren't likely to get themselves in a little trouble now and then, particularly where there's ale to be found."

"I wasn't talking about the men, Mat," Talmanes said, bending to tap out his pipe against his stirrup, dottle falling to flutter back onto the stony roadway beside his horse. "I'm talking about how you treated the Aes Sedai. Light, Mat, we could have been rid of them! I'd count twenty-four horses and some coin a bargain to be free of two Aes Sedai."

"I won't be shoved around," Mat said stubbornly, waving for the Band to begin its march again. "Not even to get rid of Joline. If she wants something from me, let her ask with a grain of politeness, rather than trying to bully me into giving her whatever she wants. I’m no lap dog.” Burn it, he wasn’t! And he *wasn’t* husbandly either, whatever that meant.

“You really do miss her,” Talmanes said, sounding a little surprised as their horses fell into pace beside one another.

“What are you blathering about now?”

“Mat, you are not always the most refined of men, I’ll admit. Sometimes your humor is indeed a bit ripe and your tone on the brusque side. But you are rarely downright rude, nor *intentionally* insulting. You really are on edge, aren’t you?”

Mat said nothing, just pulled the brim of his hat down again.

“I’m sure that she will be fine, Mat,” Talmanes said, tone gentler. “She is royalty. They know how to take care of themselves. And she’s got those soldiers watching after her. Not to mention Ogier. Ogier warriors! Who would think of such a thing? She’ll be all right.”

“We’re done with this conversation,” Mat said, shifting his spear to hold it upright, curved blade toward the unseen sun above, butt in the lancer’s strap at the side of his saddle.

“I just—”

“Over,” Mat said. “You don’t have any more of that tabac, do you?”

Talmanes sighed. “It was the last pinch. Good tabac—Two Rivers grown. The only pouch of it I’ve seen in some time. It was a gift from King Roedran, along with the pipe.”

“He must have valued you.”

“It was good, honest work,” Talmanes said. “And terribly boring. Not like riding with you, Mat. It’s good to have you back, crust and all. But your talk of feed with the Aes Sedai does have me worried.”

Mat nodded. “How are we on rations?”

“Low,” Talmanes said.

“We’ll buy what we can at the village,” Mat said. “We’ve got coin coming out our ears, after what Roedran gave you.”

A small village wasn’t likely to have enough to supply the whole army. But, according to the maps, they’d soon be entering more populated lands. You’d pass a village or two every day in those areas, traveling with a quick force like the Band. To stay afloat, you scavenged and bought whatever little bit you could at each village you passed. A wagonload here, a cartful there, a bucket or two of apples from a passing farmstead. Seven thousand men was a lot to feed, but a good commander knew not to turn down even a handful of grain. It added up.

"Yes, but will the villagers sell?" Talmanes asked. "On our way down to meet you, we had a savage time getting anyone to sell us food. Seems there isn't much to be found these days. Food is getting scarce, no matter where you go and no matter how much money you have."

Bloody perfect. Mat ground his teeth, then grew annoyed at himself for doing so. Well, maybe he *was* a little on edge. Not because of Tuon, though.

Either way, he needed to relax. And that village ahead—what had Vanin called it? Hinderstap? "How much coin do you have on you?"

Talmanes frowned. "Couple of gold marks, pouch full of silver crowns. Why?"

"Not enough," Mat said, rubbing his chin. "We'll have to dig some more out of my personal chest first. Maybe bring the whole thing." He turned Pips around. "Come on."

"Wait, Mat," Talmanes said, reining in and following. "What are we doing?"

"You're going to kindly take me up on my offer to go enjoy ourselves at the tavern," Mat said. "And while we're at it, we're going to resupply. If my luck's with me, we'll do it for free."

If Egwene or Nynaeve had been there, they'd have boxed his ears and told him he was going to do no such thing. Tuon probably would have looked at him curiously and then said something that made him feel his shame right down into his boots.

The good thing about Talmanes, however, was that he simply spurred his horse forward, face stoic, eyes betraying just a hint of amusement. "Well, I've *got* to see this, then!"

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CHAPTER 21

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Embers and Ash

Perrin opened his eyes and found himself hanging in the air.

He felt a spike of terror, floundering in the sky. Black clouds boiled overhead, dark and ominous. Below, a plain of wild brown grasses rolled in the wind, no signs of humans. No tents, no roads, not even any footprints.

Perrin wasn't falling. He just hung there. He waved his arms reflexively, as if to swim, panicking as his mind tried to make sense of the disorientation.

The wolf dream, he thought. *I'm in the wolf dream. I went to sleep, hoping to come here.*

He forced himself to breathe in and out and still his flailing, though it was difficult to be calm while hanging hundreds of feet up in the sky. Suddenly, a gray-furred form shot past him, leaping through the air. The wolf soared down to the field below, landing easily.

"Hopper!"

Jump down, Young Bull. Jump. It is safe. As always, the Sending from the wolf came as a mixture of scents and images. Perrin was getting better and better at interpreting those—the soft earth as a representation of the ground, rushing wind as an image of jumping, the scent of relaxation and calmness to indicate there was no need to fear.

"But how?"

Times before, you always rushed ahead, like a pup newly weaned. Jump. Jump down! Far below, Hopper sat on his haunches in the field, grinning up at Perrin.

Perrin ground his teeth and muttered a curse or two for stubborn wolves. It seemed to him that the dead ones were particularly bullheaded. Though Hopper did have a point. Perrin had leaped before in this place, if never from the sky itself.

He took a deep breath, then closed his eyes and imagined himself jumping. Air rushed around him in a sudden burst, but then his feet hit soft ground. He opened his eyes. A large gray wolf, scarred from many fights, was sitting on the ground beside him, and wild millet spread out in a broad plain around him, heavily mixed with stands of long, thin grasses that reached high in the air. Scratchy stalks rubbed against Perrin's arms in the wind, making him itch. The grasses smelled too dry, like cut hay left in a barn over the winter.

Some things were transitory here in the Wolf Dream; leaves lay in a pile by his feet at one moment, but then were gone the next. Everything smelled just faintly stale, as if it weren't quite there.

He looked up. The sky was stormy. Normally, clouds in this place were as transitory as other things. It could be completely overcast; then, in a blink, it would suddenly be clear. This time, those dark storm clouds remained. They boiled, spun, and shot lines of lightning between different thunderheads. Yet the lightning never struck the ground, and it made no noise.

The plain was oddly silent. The clouds shrouded the entire sky, ominous. And they did not leave.

The Last Hunt comes. Hopper looked up at the sky. *We will run together, then. Unless we sleep instead.*

"Sleep?" Perrin said. "What of the Last Hunt?"

It comes, Hopper agreed. *If Shadowkiller falls to the storm, all will sleep forever. If he lives, then we will hunt together. You and us.*

Perrin rubbed his chin, trying to sort through the Sending of images, smells, sounds, feelings. It made little sense to him.

But, well, he was here now. He'd wanted to come, and he'd decided that he'd get some answers from Hopper, if he could. It was good to see Hopper again.

Run, Hopper sent. His Sending was not alarmed. It was an offer. Let us run together.

Perrin nodded, and began to jog through the grasses. Hopper loped beside him, sending amusement. *Two legs, Young Bull? Two legs are slow!* That Sending was an image of men stumbling over themselves, tripping because of their elongated, silly legs.

Perrin hesitated. "I have to keep control, Hopper," he said. "When I let the wolf take control . . . well, I do dangerous things."

The wolf cocked his head, trotting beside Perrin across the grassy field. The stalks crunched and scraped as the two of them passed through, finding a small game trail, turning along it.

Run, Hopper urged, obviously confused at Perrin's reluctance.

"I can't," Perrin said, stopping. Hopper turned and took a few bounds back to him. He smelled confused.

"Hopper, I frighten myself," Perrin said, "when I lose control. The first time it happened to me was just after I met the wolves. You need to help me understand.”

Hopper simply continued to stare at him, tongue hanging out the front of his mouth just slightly, jaws parted.

Why am I doing this? Perrin thought, shaking his head. Wolves didn’t think like men. What did it matter what Hopper thought of it all?

We will hunt together, Hopper sent.

“What if I don’t want to hunt with you?” Perrin said. Saying the words made his heart twist. He *did* like this place, the wolf dream, dangerous though it could be. There were wonderful things about what had happened to him since leaving the Two Rivers.

But he couldn’t continue to lose control. He had to find a balance. Throwing away the axe had made a difference. The axe and the hammer were different weapons—one could be used *only* for killing, while the other gave him a choice.

But he had to make good on that choice. He had to control himself. And the first step seemed to be learning to control the wolf within him.

Run with me, Young Bull, Hopper sent. *Forget these thoughts. Run like a wolf.*

“I can’t,” Perrin replied. He turned, scanning the plains. “But I need to know this place, Hopper. I need to learn how to use it, control it.”

Men, Hopper thought, Sending the smells of dismissiveness and anger. *Control. Always control.*

“I want you to teach me,” Perrin said, turning back to the wolf. “I want to master this place. Will you show me how?”

Hopper sat back on his haunches.

“Fine,” Perrin said. “I will search out other wolves who will.”

He turned, striking down the game trail. He didn’t recognize this place, but he’d learned that the wolf dream was unpredictable. This meadow with the waist-high grass and its stands of yew could be anywhere. Where would he find wolves? He quested out with his mind, and found that it was much more difficult to do here.

You don’t want to run. But you look for wolves. Why are you so difficult, cub? Hopper sat in front of him in the grass.

Perrin grumbled, then took a leap that launched him through the air a hundred yards. He landed with his foot falling to the grass as if it had been a normal step.

And there Hopper was ahead of him. Perrin hadn't seen the wolf leap. He had been in one place, and now in another. Perrin gritted his teeth, questing out again. For other wolves. He felt something, distant. He needed to push harder. He concentrated, drew more strength into himself, somehow, and managed to push his mind farther.

This is dangerous, Young Bull, Hopper sent. *You come here too strongly. You will die.*

"You always say that," Perrin replied. "Tell me what I want to know. Show me how to learn."

Stubborn pup, Hopper Sent. *Return when you aren't determined to poke your snout into a fireasp's den.*

With that, something slammed against Perrin, a weight against his mind. Everything vanished, and he was tossed—like a leaf before a storm—out of the wolf dream.

* * *

Faile felt her husband stir next to her as he slept. She glanced at him in the dark tent; though she lay beside him on the pallet, she hadn't been sleeping. She'd been waiting, listening to his breaths. He turned onto his back, muttering drowsily.

Of all the nights for him to be restless . . . she thought with annoyance.

They were a week out of Malden. The refugees had made camp—or, well, camps—near a waterway that led straight to the Jehannah Road, which was only a short distance away.

Things had gone smoothly these last few days, though Perrin had judged the Asha'man too tired still to make gateways. She had spent the evening with her husband, reminding him of several important reasons why he'd married her in the first place. He'd certainly been enthusiastic, though there *was* that odd edge to his eyes. Not a dangerous edge, just a sorrowful one. He had grown haunted while they were apart. She could understand that. She had a few ghosts of her own. One could not expect everything to remain the same, and she could tell that he still loved her—loved her fiercely. That was enough, and so she didn't worry on it further.

But she *was* planning an argument that would pull his secrets from him. She would wait a few more days for that. It was good to remind a husband that one would not sit content with everything he did, but it wouldn't do to make him think she was unappreciative to have him back.

Quite the opposite. She smiled, rolling over and laying her hand on his chest, furred with hair, her head on his bare shoulder. She loved this burly, tumbling avalanche of a man. Being back with him was sweeter, even, than the victory of her escape from the Shaido.

His eyes fluttered open and she sighed. Love him or not, she wished he'd remain asleep this night! Hadn't she tired him out enough?

He looked at her; his golden eyes seemed to glow just faintly in the darkness, though she knew it was a trick of the light. Then he pulled her a little closer. "I didn't sleep with Berelain," he said, voice gruff. "No matter what the rumors say."

Dear, sweet, *blunt* Perrin. "I know you didn't," she said consolingly. She'd heard the rumors. Virtually every woman she'd talked to in the camp, from Aes Sedai to servant, had pretended she was trying to hold her tongue, yet spilled the same news. Perrin, spending a night in the First of Mayene's tent.

"No, really," Perrin said, a pleading tone entering his voice. "I didn't, Faile. Please."

"I said I believed you."

"You sounded . . . I don't know. Burn it, woman, you sounded jealous."

Would he never learn? "Perrin," she said flatly. "It took me the better part of a *year*—not to mention considerable trouble—to seduce you, and then it only worked because there was a marriage involved! Berelain hasn't the skill to handle you."

He reached his right hand up, scratching his beard, seeming confused. Then he just smiled.

"Besides," she added, snuggling closer, "you spoke the words. And I trust you."

"So you're not jealous?"

"Of course I am," she said, swatting his chest. "Perrin, haven't I explained this? A husband *needs* to know his wife is jealous, otherwise he won't realize how much she cares for him. You guard that which you find most precious. Honestly, if you keep making me spell things out like this, then I won't have any secrets left!"

He snorted softly at that last comment. "I doubt that's possible."

He grew quiet, and she closed her eyes, hoping he'd go back to sleep. Outside the tent, she could hear the distant voices of guards chatting on patrol and the sound of one of the farriers—Jerasid, Aemin or Falton—working late into the night, pounding out a shoe or nail to ready one of the horses for the next day's march. It was good to hear that sound again. The Aiel were useless when it came to horses, and the Shaido had either released the ones they captured or turned them into workhorses. She had seen many fine saddle mares pulling carts during her days in Malden.

Should it feel strange to be back? She had spent less than two months as a captive, but it had seemed like years. Years spent running errands for Sevanna, being punished arbitrarily. But that time had not broken her. Strangely, she'd felt more like a noblewoman during those days than she had before.

It was as if she hadn't quite understood what it was to be a lady until Malden. Oh, she'd had her share of victories. *Cha Faile*, the people of the Two Rivers, Alliandre and Perrin's camp members. She'd put her training to use, helping Perrin learn to be a leader. All of this had been important, had required her to use what her mother and father had trained her to be.

But Malden had opened her eyes. There, she had found people who had needed her more than she'd ever been needed before. Beneath Sevanna's cruel dictatorship, there had been no time for games, no room for mistakes. She had been humiliated, beaten and nearly killed. And that had given her a true understanding of what it was to be a liege lady. She actually felt a stab of guilt for the times she had lorded over Perrin, trying to force him—or others—to bend to her will. Being a noblewoman meant going first. It meant being beaten so others were not. It meant sacrificing, risking death, to protect those who depended upon you.

No, it didn't feel strange to be back, for she'd taken Malden—the parts that mattered—with her. Hundreds had sworn allegiance to her among the *gai'shain*, and she had saved them. She had done it through Perrin, but she had made plans, and one way or another, she would have escaped and brought back an army to free those who had sworn to her.

There *had* been costs. But she would deal with those later tonight, Light willing. She opened an eye and peeked at Perrin. He seemed to be sleeping, but was his breath even? She slipped her arm free.

"I don't care what happened to you," he said.

She sighed. No, not asleep. "What happened to me?" she asked with confusion.

He opened his eyes, staring up at the tent. "The Shaido, the man who was with you when I saved you. Whatever he did . . . whatever you did to survive. It's all right."

Was that what was bothering him? Light! "You big ox," she said, thumping a fist on his chest, causing him to grunt. "What are you saying? That it would be all right for me to be unfaithful? Just after you were so concerned to tell me that you *hadn't* been?"

"What? No, it's different, Faile. You were a prisoner, and—"

"And I can't care for myself? You *are* an ox. No one touched me. They're Aiel. You *know* they wouldn't dare harm a *gai'shain*." It wasn't quite true; women had often been abused in the Shaido camp, for the Shaido had stopped acting like Aiel.

But there had been others in the camp, Aiel who hadn't been Shaido. Men who had refused to accept Rand as their *Car'a'carn*, but who also had trouble accepting Shaido authority. The Brotherless had been men of honor; though they'd called themselves cast off, they had been the only ones in Malden who had maintained the old ways. When the *gai'shain* women had started to be in danger, the Brotherless had chosen and protected those they could. They hadn't asked anything for their efforts.

Well . . . that wasn't true. They had *asked* for much, but had *demanded* nothing. Rolan had always been an Aiel to her in action, if not in word. But, like Masema's death, her relationship with Rolan was not something Perrin needed to know about. She had never so much as kissed Rolan, but she *had* used his desire for her as an advantage. And she suspected that he'd known what she was doing.

Perrin had killed Rolan. That was another reason that her husband didn't need to know about the Brotherless man's kindness. It would tear Perrin apart inside if he knew what he'd done.

Perrin relaxed, closing his eyes. He had changed during these two months, perhaps as much as she had. That was good. In the Borderlands, her people had a saying: "Only the Dark One stays the same." Men grew and progressed; the Shadow just remained as it was. Evil.

"We'll have to do some planning tomorrow," Perrin said, yawning. "Once gateways are available, we will have to decide whether to force the people to leave, and decide who goes first. Has anyone discovered what happened to Masema?"

“Not that I know of,” she said carefully. “But with so many of his possessions gone from his tent. . . .”

“Masema doesn’t care about possessions,” Perrin mumbled quietly, eyes still closed. “Though maybe he would have taken them to rebuild. I guess he *might* have run off, though it’s strange that nobody knows where or how.”

“He probably slipped away during the confusion after the battle.”

“Probably,” Perrin agreed. “I wonder . . .” He yawned. “I wonder what Rand will say. Masema was the point of this whole trip. I was to fetch him and bring him back, and I guess I’ve failed.”

“You destroyed the men who were murdering and robbing in the Dragon’s name,” Faile said, “and you cut out the heart of the Shaido leadership, not to mention all you’ve learned about the Seanchan. I think the Dragon will find that what you’ve accomplished here far outweighs not bringing Masema back.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Perrin mumbled sleepily. “Blasted colors. . . . I don’t want to watch you sleeping, Rand. What happened to your hand? Light-blinded fool, take better care of yourself. . . . You’re all we have. . . . Last Hunt coming. . . .”

She could barely make out that last part. Why was he talking about Rand’s hand going hunting? Was he actually falling asleep this time?

Sure enough, he soon started snoring softly. She smiled, shaking her head fondly. He *was* an ox, sometimes. But he was her ox. She climbed off of the pallet and moved through their tent, pulling on a robe and tying its belt. A pair of sandals followed, and then she slipped out through the tent flaps. Arrela and Lacile guarded there, along with two Maidens. The Maidens nodded to her; they would keep her secret.

Faile left the Maiden guards, but took Arrela and Lacile with her as she walked out into the darkness. Arrela was a dark-haired Tairen woman who was taller than most Maidens, with a brusque way about her. Lacile was short, pale, and very slender, and she walked with a graceful sway. They were as different as women could get, perhaps, though their captivity had united them all. Both members of *Cha Faile* had been captured with her and gone to Malden as *gai’shain*.

After traveling a short distance, they picked up two other Maidens—Bain and Chiad had spoken with them, likely. They passed out of the camp, moving to a spot where a pair of willow trees stood side by side. There, Faile was met by a pair of women who still wore *gai'shain* white. Bain and Chiad were Maidens themselves, first-sisters and dear to Faile. They were more loyal—even—than those who had sworn to her. Loyal to her, yet free of oaths to her. A contradiction only Aiel could pull off.

Unlike Faile and the others, Bain and Chiad would not put off the white just because their captors had been defeated. They would wear the clothing for a year and a day. In fact, coming here this night—acknowledging their lives from before they had been taken—stretched what their honor would allow. However, they admitted that being *gai'shain* in the Shaido camp had been anything but standard.

Faile met them with a smile, but did not shame them by calling them by name or by using Maiden handtalk. However, she couldn't keep herself from asking, "You are well?" as she accepted a small bundle from Chiad.

Chiad was a beautiful woman with gray eyes and short, reddish blond hair hidden beneath the hood of her *gai'shain* robe. She grimaced at the question. "Gaul searched the entire Shaido camp to find me, and reports say he defeated twelve *algai'd'siswai* with his spear. Perhaps I shall have to make a bridal wreath for him after all, once this is all through."

Faile smiled.

Chiad smiled back. "He did not expect that one of the men he killed would turn out to be the one to whom Bain was *gai'shain*. I do not think Gaul is happy to have both of us serving him."

"Foolish man," Bain—the taller of the two—said. "Very like him to not watch where he jabbed his spear. He couldn't kill the right man without accidentally slaying a few others." Both women chuckled.

Faile smiled and nodded; Aiel humor was beyond her. "Thank you very much for fetching these," she said, holding up the small, cloth-wrapped bundle.

"It was nothing," Chiad said. "There were too many hands working that day, so it was easy. Alliandre Maritha Kigarin already waits for you at the trees. We should return to the camp."

"Yes," Bain added. "Perhaps Gaul would like his back rubbed again, or water fetched for him. He grows so angry when we ask, but *gai'shain* gain honor only through service. What else are we to do?"

The women laughed again, and Faile shook her head as they ran back toward the camp, white robes swishing. She cringed at the thought of having to wear such clothing again, if only because it made her think about her days of service to Sevanna.

Lanky Arrela and graceful Lacile joined her at the base of the two willows. The Maiden guards stayed behind, watching from afar. A third Maiden joined those two, moving out of the shadows, likely sent by Bain and Chiad to protect Alliandre. Faile found the dark-haired queen standing at the base of the trees, looking like a lady again in a rich red gown with golden chains lacing her hair. It was an extravagant display, as if she were determined to disprove the days she'd spent acting as a servant. Alliandre's gown made Faile more aware of her simple robe. But there wasn't much she could have done without waking Perrin. Arrela and Lacile wore only the embroidered breeches and shirts common to those in *Cha Faile*.

Alliandre carried a small lantern with the shutters drawn, letting out only a crack of light that illuminated her youthful face, topped by dark hair. "Did they find anything?" she asked. "Please tell me that they did." She had always been impressively grounded, for a queen, if somewhat demanding. Her time in Malden seemed to have tempered the latter feature.

"Yes." Faile hefted the bundle. The four women huddled around her as she knelt on the ground, the tips of the short grass lit by the lantern, shining like tongues of flame. Faile unwrapped the bundle. The contents weren't anything extraordinary. A small handkerchief of yellow silk. A belt of worked leather which had a pattern of bird feathers pressed into its sides. A black veil. And a thin leather band with a stone tied at the center.

"That belt belonged to Kinhuin," Alliandre said, pointing to it. "I saw him wearing it, before. . . ." She trailed off, then knelt and picked it up.

"The veil is that of a Maiden," Arrela said.

"They're different?" Alliandre asked with surprise.

"Of course they are," Arrela said, picking up the veil. Faile had never met the Maiden who had become Arrela's protector, but the woman had fallen in the battle, though not as dramatically as Rolan and the others.

The piece of silk was Jhoradin's; Lacile hesitated, then took it in her hands, turning it over and revealing that there was a spot of blood on it. That left only the leather cord. Rolan had worn it at his neck, on occasion, beneath his *cadin'sor*. Faile wondered what it had meant to him, and if there was any significance to the single bit of stone, a rough-cut chunk of turquoise. She picked it up, then glanced at Lacile. Surprisingly, the slender woman seemed to be crying. Because Lacile had gone so quickly to the hefty Brotherless's bed, Faile had assumed that her relationship with him had been one of necessity, not affection.

"Four people are dead," Faile said, mouth suddenly dry. She spoke formally, for that was the best way to keep the emotion from her voice. "They protected us, even cared for us. Though they were the enemy, we mourn them. Remember, though, that they were Aiel. For an Aiel, there are far worse ends than death in combat."

The others nodded, but Lacile met Faile's eyes. For the two of them, it was different. When Perrin had barreled out of that alleyway—roaring in anger at seeing Faile and Lacile apparently being manhandled by Shaido—many things had happened very quickly. In the fray, Faile had distracted Rolan at just the right moment, making him hesitate. He'd done so out of concern for her, but that pause had allowed Perrin to kill him.

Had Faile done it intentionally? She still didn't know. So much had been going through her mind, so many emotions at seeing Perrin. She'd cried out, and . . . she could not decide if she'd been trying to distract Rolan to let him die by Perrin's hand.

For Lacile, there was no such wavering. Jhoradin had leaped in front of her, putting her behind him and raising his weapon against the intruder. She'd put a knife in his back, killing a man for the first time in her life. And it had been a man whose bed she'd shared.

Faile had killed Kinhuin, the other member of the Brotherless who had protected them. He wasn't the first man whose life she had taken—nor the first one she'd taken from behind. But he *was* the first man she'd killed who had seen her as a friend.

There was nothing else that could have been done. Perrin had seen only Shaido, and the Brotherless had seen only an invading enemy. That conflict could not have ended without Perrin or the Brotherless dead. No amount of screaming would have stopped any of the men.

But that made it more tragic. Faile steeled herself to keep her eyes from tearing up like Lacile's. She hadn't loved Rolan, and she was glad that Perrin was the one who had survived the conflict. But Rolan *had* been an honorable man, and she felt . . . dirtied, somehow, that his death had been her fault.

This shouldn't have had to be. But it was. Her father had often spoken of situations like this, when you had to kill people you liked just because you met them on the wrong side of the battlefield. She'd never understood.

If she had to go back and do it again, she would take the very same actions. She wouldn't be able to risk Perrin. Rolan had had to die.

But the world seemed a sadder place to her for the necessity of it.

Lacile turned away, sniffling softly. Faile knelt, taking a small flask of oil from the bundle Chiad had left. She took the leather strap and pulled off the stone, then set the strap in the center of the cloth bundle. She poured the oil on it, then used a tinder stick, lit at the lantern, to set the strap afire.

She watched it burn, tiny little flames of blue and green, topped by orange. The scent of burning leather was shockingly similar to that of burning human flesh. The night was still, no wind to shake the flames, and so they danced freely.

Alliandre doused the belt and put it on to the miniature fire. Arrela did the same with the veil. Finally, Lacile added the handkerchief. She was still crying.

This was all they could do. There hadn't been a way to see to the bodies in the chaos of leaving Malden. Chiad had said there was no dishonor in leaving them, but Faile had needed to do something. Some small way of honoring Rolan and the others.

"Dead by our hand," Faile said, "or simply dead from battle, these four showed us honor. As the Aiel would say, we have great *toh* to them. I don't think it can be repaid. But we can remember them. The Brotherless and one Maiden showed us kindness when they didn't need to. They kept their honor when others had abandoned it. If there is a redemption to be found for them, and for us, this will be it."

"There's a Brotherless in Perrin's camp," Lacile said, eyes reflecting the flames of their pyre. "Niagen is his name; he is *gai'shain* to Sulin, the Maiden. I went to tell him of what the others did for us. He is a kind man."

Faile closed her eyes. Lacile probably meant that she had gone to the bed of this Niagen. That wasn't forbidden of *gai'shain*. "You can't replace Jhoradin like that," she said, opening her eyes. "Or undo what you did."

"I know," Lacile said defensively. "But they were so full of humor, despite the terrible situation. There was something about them. Jhoradin wanted to take me back to the Three-fold Land, make me his wife."

And you'd never have done it, Faile thought. *I know you wouldn't have. But now that he's dead, you realize the opportunity you lost.*

Well, who was she to chastise? Let Lacile do as she wished. If this Niagen was half the man that Rolan or the others had been, then perhaps

Lacile would do well with him.

“Kinhuin had only just started looking out for me,” Alliandre said. “I know what he wished for, but he never demanded it. I think he was planning to leave the Shaido, and would have helped us escape. Even if I turned him down, he would have helped us.”

“Marthea hated what the other Shaido did,” Arrela said. “But she stayed with them for her clan. She died for that loyalty. There are worse things to die for.”

Faile watched the last embers of the miniature pyre flicker out. “I think Rolan actually loved me,” she said. And that was all.

The four rose and returned to the camp. The past was a field of embers and ash, an old Saldaean proverb said, the remnants of the fire that was the present. Those embers blew away behind her. But she kept Rolan’s turquoise stone. Not for regret, but for remembrance.

Perrin lay awake in the still night, smelling the canvas of his tent and the unique scent of Faile. She wasn’t there, though she had been recently. He’d dozed off, and now she was gone. Perhaps to the privy.

He stared up in the darkness, trying to make sense of Hopper and the wolf dream. The more he thought about it, the more determined he grew. He would march to the Last Battle—and when he did, he wanted to be able to control the wolf inside of him. He wanted either to be free of all of these people who followed him, or to learn how to accept their loyalty.

He had some decisions to make. They wouldn’t be easy, but he’d make them. A man had to do hard things. That was the way of life. That was what had gone wrong with the way he’d handled Faile’s capture. Instead of making decisions, he’d avoided them. Master Luhhan would have been disappointed in him.

And that led Perrin to another decision, the hardest of all. He was going to have to let Faile ride into danger, perhaps risk her again. Was that a decision? Could he *make* such a decision? The mere thought of her in danger made him want to sick up. But he would have to do something.

Three problems. He would face them and he would decide. But he would consider them first, because that was what he did. A man was a fool to make decisions without thinking first.

But the decision to face his problems brought him a measure of peace, and he rolled over and drifted back to sleep.

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CHAPTER 22

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The Last That Could Be Done

Semirhage sat alone in the small room. They had taken away her chair and given her no lantern or candle.

Blast this cursed Age and its cursed people! What she would have given for glowbulbs on the walls. During *her* days, prisoners hadn’t been denied light. Of course, she had locked several of her experiments away in total darkness, but that was different. It had been important to discover what effect the lack of light would have on them. These so-called Aes Sedai who held her, they had no rational reason for leaving her in darkness. They just did it to humiliate her.

She pulled her arms closer, huddling against the wooden wall. She did *not* cry. She was of the Chosen! So what if she had been forced to abase herself? She was not broken.

But . . . the fool Aes Sedai no longer regarded her as they had. Semirhage hadn’t changed, but they had. Somehow, in one swoop, that cursed woman with the paralis-net in her hair had unraveled Semirhage’s authority with the entire lot of them.

How? How had she lost control so quickly? She shuddered as she remembered being turned over the woman’s knees and spanked. And the nonchalance of it. The only emotion in the woman’s voice had been a slight annoyance. She’d treated Semirhage—one of the Chosen!—as if she were barely worthy of notice. That had galled more than the blows.

It would not happen again. Semirhage would be ready for the blows next time, and she would give them no weight. Yes, that would work. Wouldn’t it?

She shuddered again. She had tortured hundreds, perhaps thousands, in the name of understanding and reason. Torture made sense. You truly saw what a person was made of, in more ways than one, when you began to slice into them. That was a phrase she’d used on numerous occasions. It usually made her smile.

This time it did not.

Why couldn’t they have given her pain? Broken fingers, cuts into her flesh, coals in the pits of her elbows. She had steeled her mind to each of these things, preparing for them. A small, eager part of herself had looked forward to them.

But this? Being forced to eat food off the floor? Being treated like a child in front of those who had regarded her with such awe?

I will kill her, she thought, not for the first time. *I will remove her tendons, one at a time, using the Power to heal her so that she lives to experience the pain. No. No, I'll do something* new *to her. I will show her agony that hasn't been known to anyone in any Age!*

"Semirhage." A whisper.

She froze, looking up in the darkness. That voice had been soft, like a chill wind, yet still sharp and biting. Had she imagined it? *He* couldn't be there, could he?

"You have failed greatly, Semirhage," the voice continued, so soft. A faint light shone underneath the door, but the voice came from *inside* her cell. The light seemed to grow brighter, and it flushed a deep red, illuminating the hem of a figure in a black cloak standing before her. She looked up. The ruddy light revealed a face of white, the color of dead skin. The face had no eyes.

She immediately knelt to the floor, prostrating herself on the aged wood. Though the figure before her looked like a Myrddraal, it was much taller and much, *much* more important. She shivered as she remembered the voice of the Great Lord himself, speaking to her.

When you obey Shaidar Haran, you obey me. When you disobey. . . .

"You were to capture the boy, not kill him," the figure whispered in a hiss, like steam escaping through cracks between pot and lid. "You took his hand and nearly his life. You have revealed yourself and have lost valuable pawns. You have been captured by our enemies, and now they have broken you." She could hear the smile on its lips. Shaidar Haran was the only Myrddraal she had ever seen bear a smile. But, then, she did not think this thing was truly a Myrddraal.

She did not reply to its charges. One did not lie, or even make excuses, before this figure.

Suddenly, the shield blocking her vanished. Her breath caught. *Saidar* had returned! Sweet power. However, as she reached for it, she hesitated. Those imitation Aes Sedai outside would feel it if she channeled.

A cold, long-nailed hand touched her chin. The flesh of it felt like dead leather. It rotated her face upward to meet the eyeless gaze. "You have been given one last chance," the maggotlike lips whispered. "Do. Not. Fail."

The light faded. The hand at her chin withdrew. She continued to kneel, fighting down terror. One last chance. The Great Lord always rewarded failure in . . . imaginative ways. She had given such rewards before, and had no desire to receive them. They would make any torture or punishment these Aes Sedai could imagine look childish.

She forced herself to her feet, feeling her way around the room. She reached the door and, holding her breath, tried it.

The door opened. She slipped out of the room without letting the hinges creak. Outside, three corpses lay on the ground, slumped free of their chairs. The women who had been maintaining her shield. There was someone else there, kneeling on the floor before the three of them. One of the Aes Sedai. A woman in green, with brown hair, pulled back into a tail, her head bowed.

"I live to serve, Great Mistress," the woman whispered. "I am instructed to tell you that there is Compulsion in my mind you are to remove."

Semirhage raised an eyebrow; she hadn't realized there were any of the Black among those Aes Sedai here. Removing Compulsion could have a very . . . nasty effect on a person. Even if the Compulsion were weak or subtle, the brain could be harmed seriously by removing it. If the Compulsion were strong . . . well, it was quite interesting to watch.

"Also," the woman said, handing something forward, wrapped in cloth. "I am to give you this." She removed the cloth, revealing a dull-colored metallic collar, and two bracelets. The Domination Band. Crafted during the Breaking, strikingly similar to the *a'dam* Semirhage had spent so much time working with.

With this *ter'angreal*, a male channeler could be controlled. A smile finally broke through Semirhage's fear.

Rand had only visited the Blight on a single occasion, though he could faintly remember having come to this area on several occasions, before the Blight infected the land. Lews Therin's memories. Not his own.

The madman took to hissing and muttering angrily as they rode through the Saldaean scrub. Even Tai'daishar grew skittish as they moved northward.

Saldaea was a brown landscape of brushland and dark soil, nowhere near as barren as the Aiel Waste, but hardly a soft or lush land. Homesteads were common, but they had nearly the look of forts, and young children held themselves like trained warriors. Lan had once told him that among Borderlanders, a boy became a man when he earned the right to carry a sword.

“Has it occurred to you,” Ituralde said, riding on Rand’s left, “that what we are doing here could constitute an invasion?”

Rand nodded toward Bashere, who rode through the brush at Rand’s right. “I bring with me troops of their own blood,” he said. “The Saldaeans are my allies.”

Bashere laughed. “I doubt that the Queen will see it that way, my friend! It’s been many months since I last asked her for orders. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised to find that she’s demanded my head by now.”

Rand turned his eyes forward. “I am the Dragon Reborn. It is not an invasion to march against the forces of the Dark One.” Ahead of them rose the foothills of the Mountains of Dhoom. They had a dark cast, as if their slopes were coated with soot.

What would he himself do if another monarch used a gateway to deposit nearly fifty thousand troops within his borders? It *was* an act of war, but the Borderlanders’ forces were away doing Light only knew what, and he would not leave these lands undefended. Just an hour’s ride to the south, Ituralde’s Domani had set up a fortified camp beside a river that had its source up in the highlands of World’s End. Rand had inspected their camp and ranks. After that, Bashere had suggested that Rand ride up to inspect the Blight. The scouts had been surprised at how quickly the Blight was advancing, and Bashere thought it important that Ituralde and Rand see for themselves. Rand agreed. Maps sometimes couldn’t convey the truth eyes could see.

The sun was dipping toward the horizon like a drooping eye longing for sleep. Tai’daishar stamped a hoof, tossing his head. Rand raised a hand, halting his group—two generals, fifty soldiers and an equal number of Maidens, with Narishma at the back to weave gateways.

Northward, on the shallow slope, a scrub of broad-bladed grasses and squat brush swayed like waves in the wind. There was no specific line where the Blight began. A spot on a blade there, a sickly cast to a stem there. Each individual speck was innocent, yet there were too many, far too many. At the top of the hillside, not a single plant was free of the spots. The pox seemed to fester even as he watched.

There was an oily sense of death to the Blight, of plants barely surviving, kept alive like prisoners starved to the very edge of mortality. If Rand had seen anything like this back in a field in the Two Rivers, he would have burnt the entire crop, and would have been surprised that it hadn't been done already.

To his side, Bashere knuckled his long, dark mustaches. "I remember when it didn't start for another few leagues," he noted. "That wasn't so long ago."

"I have patrols running the length of it already," Ituralde said. He stared out at the sickly landscape. "All the reports are the same. It's quiet out there."

"That should be enough warning that something is wrong," Bashere said. "There are always patrols or raids of Trollocs to fight. If not that, then something worse, to scare them away. Worms or bloodwrasps."

Ituralde leaned one arm on his saddle, shaking his head as he continued staring at the Blight. "I've no experience with fighting such things. I know how men think, but Trolloc raiding parties keep no supply lines, and I've only heard *stories* of what worms can do."

"I will leave some of Bashere's officers with you as advisors," Rand said.

"That would help," Ituralde said, "but I wonder if it wouldn't be better to just leave *him* here. His soldiers could patrol this area, and you could use my troops in Arad Doman. No offense, my Lord, but don't you think it's odd to have us working in each other's kingdoms?"

"No," Rand said. It wasn't odd, it was bitter sense. He trusted Bashere, and the Saldaeans had served Rand well, but it would be dangerous to leave them in their own homelands. Bashere was uncle to the Queen herself, and what of his men? How would they react when their own people asked why they had become Dragonsworn? Strange as it was, Rand knew that he would cause a much smaller conflagration by leaving foreigners on Saldaean soil.

His reasoning with Ituralde was equally brutal. The man had sworn to him, but allegiances could change. Out here, near the Blight, Ituralde and his troops would have very little opportunity to turn against Rand. They were in hostile territory, and Rand's Asha'man would be their only quick means of getting back to Arad Doman. If left in his homeland, however, Ituralde could marshal troops and perhaps decide he didn't need the Dragon Reborn's protection.

It was much safer to keep the armies in hostile territory. Rand hated thinking that way, but that was one of the main differences between the man he had been and the man he had become. Only one of those men could do what needed to be done, no matter that he hated it.

"Narishma," Rand called. "Gateway."

He didn't have to turn to feel Narishma seize the One Power and begin weaving. The sensation prickled at Rand, enticing, but he fought it off. It was becoming more and more difficult for him to seize the Power without emptying his stomach, and he did *not* intend to sick up in front of Ituralde.

"You shall have a hundred Asha'man by the end of the week," Rand said, speaking to Ituralde. "I suspect you will make good use of them."

"Yes, I think I can do just that."

"I want daily reports, even if nothing happens," Rand replied. "Send the messengers through a gateway. I'll be breaking camp and moving to Bandar Eban in four days."

Bashere grunted; this was the first Rand had said of the move. Rand turned his horse toward the large, open gateway behind them. Some of the Maidens had already ducked through, going first, as always. Narishma stood to the side, his hair in its two dark braids set with bells. He had been a Borderlander, too, before he had become Asha'man. Too many clouded loyalties. Which would come first for Narishma? His homeland? Rand? The Aes Sedai to whom he was a Warder? Rand was fairly certain the man was loyal; he was one of those who had come to him at Dumai's Wells. But the most dangerous enemies were those you assumed you could trust.

None of them can be trusted! Lews Therin said. *We should never have let them get so close to us. They'll turn on us!*

The madman always had trouble with other men who could channel. Rand nudged Tai'daishar forward, ignoring Lews Therin's ramblings, though hearing the voice did take him back to that night. The night where he had dreamed of Moridin, and there had been no Lews Therin in his mind. It twisted Rand's belly to know that his dreams were no longer safe. He had come to rely on them as a refuge. Nightmares could take him, true, but they were his own nightmares.

Why had Moridin come to help Rand in Shadar Logoth, back during the fight with Sammael? What twisted webs was he weaving? He had claimed that Rand had invaded *his* dream, but was that just another lie?

I have to destroy them, he thought. *All of the Forsaken, and I must do it for good this time. I must be hard.*

Except that Min didn't want him to be hard. He didn't want to frighten her, of all people. There were no games with Min; she might call him a fool, but she did not lie, and that made him want to be the man *she* wished him to be. But did he dare? Could a man who could laugh also be the man who could face what needed to be done at Shayol Ghul?

To live you must die, the answer to one of his three questions. If he succeeded, his memory—his legacy—would live on after he died. It was not very comforting. He didn't want to die. Who did? The Aiel claimed they did not seek death, though they embraced it when it came.

He entered the gateway, Traveling back to the manor house in Arad Doman, with the ring of pines surrounding the trampled brown grounds and the long ranks of tents. It would take a hard man to face his own death, to fight the Dark One while his blood spilled on the rocks. Who could laugh in the face of that?

He shook his head. Having Lews Therin in his mind didn't help.

She's right, Lews Therin said suddenly.

She? Rand asked.

The pretty one. With the short hair. She says we need to break the seals. She's right.

Rand froze, pulling Tai'daishar up short, ignoring the groom who had come to take the horse. To hear Lews Therin agreeing. . . .

What do we do after that? Rand asked.

We die. You promised we could die!

Only if we defeat the Dark One, Rand said. *You know that if he wins, there will be nothing for us. Not even death.*

Yes . . . nothing, Lews Therin said. *That would be nice. No pain, no regret. Nothing.*

Rand felt a chill. If Lews Therin began to think that way . . . *No,* Rand said, *it wouldn't be nothing. He would have our soul. The pain would be worse, far worse.*

Lews Therin began to weep.

Lews Therin! Rand snapped in his mind. *What do we do? How did you seal the Bore last time?*

It didn't work, Lews Therin whispered. *We used* saidin, *but we touched it to the Dark One. It was the only way! Something has to touch him, something to close the gap, but he was able to taint it. The seal was weak!*

Yes, but what do we do differently? Rand thought.

Silence. Rand sat for a moment, then slid off of Tai'daishar and let the nervous groom lead him away. The rest of the Maidens were coming through the large gateway, Bashere and Narishma taking the rear. Rand didn't wait for them, though he noticed Deira Bashere—Davram Bashere's wife—standing outside the Traveling ground. The tall, statuesque woman had dark hair with lines of white at the temples. She gave Rand a measuring look. What would she do if Bashere died in Rand's service? Would she continue to follow, or would she lead the troops away, back to Saldaea? She was as strong of will as her husband. Perhaps more so.

Rand passed her with a nod and a smile and walked through the evening camp toward the manor house. So Lews Therin did not know how to seal the Dark One's prison. What good was the voice then? Burn him, but he had been one of Rand's few hopes!

Most people here were wise enough to move away when they saw him stalking across the grounds. Rand could remember when such moods hadn't struck him, when he had been a simple sheepherder. Rand the Dragon Reborn was a different man altogether. He was a man of responsibility and duty. He had to be.

Duty. Duty was like a mountain. Well, Rand felt as if he was trapped between a good dozen different mountains, all moving to destroy him. Among those forces, his emotions seemed to boil under pressure. Was it any wonder when they burst free?

He shook his head, approaching the manor. To the east lay the Mountains of Mist. The sun was near to setting, and the mountains were bathed in a red light. Beyond them and to the south, so strangely close, lay Emond's Field and the Two Rivers. A home he would never see again, for a visit would only alert his enemies to his affection for it. He had worked hard to make them think he was a man without affection. At times, he feared that his ruse had become reality.

Mountains. Mountains like duty. The duty of solitude in this case, for somewhere southward along those too-near mountains was his father. Tam. Rand hadn't seen him in so long. Tam *was* his father. Rand had decided that. He had never known his birth father, the Aiel clan chief named

Janduin, and while he had obviously been a man of honor, Rand had no desire to call him father.

At times, Rand longed for Tam's voice, his wisdom. Those were the times when Rand knew he had to be the most hard, for a moment of weakness—a moment running to his father for succor—would destroy nearly everything he had worked for. And it would likely mean the end of Tam's life as well.

Rand entered the manor house through the burned hole in the front, pushing aside the thick canvas that now formed an entry, and kept his back to the Mountains of Mist. He was alone. He *needed* to be alone. Relying on anyone would risk being weak when he reached Shayol Ghul. At the Last Battle, he would not be able to lean on anyone other than himself.

Duty. How many mountains must one man carry?

It still smelled of smoke inside the manor house. Lord Tellaen had complained about the fire hesitantly—yet persistently—until Rand had ordered compensation for the man, although the bubble of evil hadn't been Rand's fault. Or had it? Being *ta'veren* had many strange effects, from making people say things they wouldn't normally to bringing him the allegiance of those who had been wavering. He was a focus for trouble, bubbles of evil included. He hadn't chosen to be that focus, but he *had* chosen to stay in the manor house.

Either way, Tellaen had been compensated. It was a pittance compared with the amount of money Rand was spending to fund his armies, and even that was small compared with the funds he'd dedicated to bring food to Arad Doman and other troubled areas. At this rate, his stewards worried that he would soon bankrupt his assets in Illian, Tear and Cairhien. Rand had not told them that he didn't care.

He would see the world to the Last Battle.

And will you have no legacy other than that? a voice whispered in the back of his mind. Not Lews Therin, but his own thought, a small voice, the part of him that had prompted him to found schools in Cairhien and Andor. *You wish to live after you die? Will you leave all of those who follow you to war, famine and chaos? Will the destruction be how you live on?*

Rand shook his head. He couldn't fix everything! He was just one man. Looking beyond the Last Battle was foolish. He couldn't worry about the world then, he *couldn't*. To do so would be to take his eye off the goal.

And what is the goal? that voice seemed to say. *Is it to survive, or is it to thrive? Will you set the groundwork for another Breaking or for another Age of Legends?*

He had no answers. Lews Therin roused slightly, babbling incoherently. Rand climbed the stairs to the second floor of the manor. Light, he was tired.

What was it the madman had said? When he'd sealed the Bore into the Dark One's prison, he'd used *saidin*. That was because so many of the Aes Sedai at the time had turned against him, and he'd been left only with the Hundred Companions—the most powerful male Aes Sedai of his time. No women. The female Aes Sedai had called his plan too risky.

Eerily, Rand felt as if he could almost remember those events—not what had happened, but the anger, the desperation, the decision. Was the mistake, then, not using the female half of the power as well as the male? Was that what had allowed the Dark One to counterstrike and taint *saidin*, driving Lews Therin and the remaining men of the Hundred Companions insane?

Could it be that simple? How many Aes Sedai would he need? Would he need *any*? Plenty of Wise Ones could channel. Surely there was more to it than that.

There was a game children played, Snakes and Foxes. It was said that the only way to win was to break the rules. What of his other plan, then? Could he break the rules by slaying the Dark One? Was that something that even he, the Dragon Reborn, dared contemplate?

He crossed the creaking wood floor of the hallway and pushed open the door to his room. Min lay propped up by pillows on the log bed, wearing her embroidered green trousers and a linen shirt, as she leafed through yet another book by the light of a lamp. An elderly serving woman bustled about, collecting dishes from Min's evening meal. Rand threw off his coat, sighing to himself and flexing his hand.

He sat down on the side of the bed as Min set aside her book, a volume called *A Comprehensive Discussion of Pre-Breaking Relics*. She sat up and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. Bowls clinked as the serving woman gathered them, and she bowed in apology, moving with extra speed as she placed them in her carrying basket.

"You're pushing yourself too hard again, sheepherder," Min said.

"I have to."

She pinched his neck hard, and he flinched, grunting. “No you don’t,” she said, her voice close to his ear. “Haven’t you been listening to me? What good will you be if you wear yourself out before you reach the Last Battle? Light, Rand, I haven’t heard you laugh in months!”

“Is this really a time for laughter?” he asked. “You would have me be happy while children starve and men slaughter one another? I should *laugh* to hear that Trollocs are still getting through the Ways? I should be happy that the majority of the Forsaken are still out there somewhere, plotting how best to kill me?”

“Well, no,” Min said. “Of course not. But we can’t let the troubles in the world destroy us. Cadsuane says that—”

“Wait,” he snapped, twisting around so that he was facing her. She knelt on the bed, short dark hair curling down beneath her chin. She looked shocked by his tone.

“What does Cadsuane have to do with this?” he asked.

Min frowned. “Nothing.”

“She’s been telling you what to say,” Rand said. “She’s been using you to get to me!”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Min said.

“What has she said about me?”

Min shrugged. “She worries about how harsh you’ve become. Rand, what is this?”

“She’s trying to get to me, manipulate me,” he said. “She’s using you. What have you told her, Min?”

Min pinched him again sharply. “I don’t like that tone, looby. I thought Cadsuane was your counselor. Why should I need to watch what I say around her?”

The serving woman continued to clink dishes. Why couldn’t she just leave! This wasn’t the kind of discussion he wanted to have in front of strangers.

Min couldn’t be working *with* Cadsuane, could she? Rand didn’t trust Cadsuane by any measure. If she’d gotten to Min. . . .

Rand felt his heart twist. He wasn’t suspicious of *Min,* was he? She’d always been the one he could look to for honesty, the one who played no games with him. What would he do if he lost her? *Burn me!* he thought. *She’s right. I’ve grown too harsh. What will become of me if I begin to grow* *suspicious of those that I* know *love me? I'll be no better than mad Lews Therin.*

"Min," he said, softening his voice. "Maybe you're right. Perhaps I've gone too far."

She turned to look at him, relaxing. Then she stiffened, eyes widening in shock.

Something cold clicked around Rand's neck.

Rand immediately raised his hand to his neck, spinning. The serving woman stood behind him, but her form was shimmering. She vanished and was replaced by a woman with dark skin and black eyes, her sharp face triumphant. Semirhage.

Rand's hand touched metal. Too-cold metal that felt like ice, pressed against his skin. In a rage, he tried to pull free his sword from its black, dragon-painted sheath, but found that he could not do so. His legs strained as if against some incredible weight. He scratched at the collar—his fingers could still move—but the metal seemed to be a single solid piece.

At that moment, Rand felt terror. He met Semirhage's eyes anyway, and she smiled deeply. "I've been waiting for quite a long time to get a Domination Band on you, Lews Therin. Odd, how circumstances occur, isn't—"

Something flashed in the air, and Semirhage barely had time to cry out before something deflected the blade just barely—a weave of Air, Rand could only assume, though he could not see weaves made from *saidar*. Still, Min's knife had left a gash on the side of Semirhage's face before passing by and burying itself in the wood of the door.

"Guards!" Min cried. "Maidens, to arms! The *Car'a'carn* is in danger!"

Semirhage cursed, waving a hand, and Min cut off. Rand twisted anxiously, trying—and failing—to seize *saidin*. Something blocked him. Min was tossed off the bed by weaves of Air, her mouth locked shut. Rand tried to run to her, but again found that he could not. His legs simply refused to move.

At that moment, the door to his room opened. Another woman entered with a hurried step. She glanced out of the doorway, as if watching for something, then closed it behind her. Elza. Rand felt a surge of hope, but then the small woman joined Semirhage, taking up the other bracelet that controlled the *a'dam* around Rand's neck. She looked up at Rand, her eyes red, looking dazed—as if something had hit her soundly on the head. However, when she saw him kneeling, she smiled. “And so you finally come to your destiny, Rand al’Thor. You will face the Great Lord. And you will lose.”

Elza. Elza was Black, burn her! Rand’s skin prickled as he felt her embrace *saidar*, standing beside her mistress. They both confronted him, each one wearing a bracelet, and Semirhage looked supremely confident.

Rand growled, turning to Semirhage. He would *not* be trapped like this!

The Forsaken touched the bleeding gash on her cheek, then *tsked* to herself. She wore a drab brown dress. How had she escaped captivity? And where had she gotten this cursed collar? Rand had given that to Cadsuane for safekeeping. She had *vowed* that it would be safe!

“No guards will come, Lews Therin,” Semirhage said absently, holding up her braceleted hand; the bracelet matched the collar on his neck. “I’ve warded the room against listeners. You will find that you cannot so much as move unless I allow it. You’ve tried already, and you must see how futile it is.”

Desperate, Rand reached for *saidin* again, but found nothing. In his head, Lews Therin began to snarl and weep, and Rand felt almost as if he would join the man. Min! He had to get to her. He had to be strong enough!

He forced himself toward Semirhage and Elza, but it was as if he were trying to move someone else’s legs. He was trapped in his own head, like Lews Therin. He opened his mouth to curse, but nothing came out beyond a croak.

“Yes,” Semirhage said, “you cannot speak without permission either. And I would suggest that you not reach for *saidin* again. You will find the experience unpleasant. When I tested the Domination Band before, I found it to be a far more elegant tool than those Seanchan *a’dam*. Their *a’dam* allow some small measure of freedom, relying on nausea as an inhibitor. The Domination Band demands far more obedience. You will act exactly as I desire. For instance. . . .”

Rand stood up off the bed, his legs moving against his will. Then, his own hand whipped up and began to squeeze his throat just above the neck band. He gasped, stumbling. Frantic, he reached again for *saidin*.

He found pain. It was as if he’d reached into a burning vat of oil, then drawn the fiery liquid into his own veins. He screamed in shock and agony, collapsing to the wooden floor. The pain made him writhe, his vision growing black.

"You see." Semirhage's voice sounded distant. "Ah, I had forgotten how satisfying that is."

The pain was like a million ants burrowing through his skin and down to the bone. He twisted, muscles spasming.

We're in the box again! Lews Therin cried.

And suddenly, he was. He could see it, the black confines, crushing him. His body sore from repeated beatings, his mind frantic to remain sane. Lews Therin had been his only companion. It was one of the first times Rand could remember communicating with the madman; Lews Therin had started to respond to him only shortly before that day.

Rand hadn't been willing to see Lews Therin as part of himself. The mad part of himself, the part that could deal with the torture, if only because it was already so tortured. More pain and suffering was meaningless. You could not fill a cup that had already begun to overflow.

He stopped screaming. The pain was still there, it made his eyes water, but the screams would not come. All fell still.

Semirhage looked down at him, frowning, blood dripping from her chin. Another wave of pain washed across him. Whoever he was.

He stared up at her. Silent.

"What are you doing?" she said, compelling him. "Speak."

"No more can be done to me," he whispered.

Another wave of pain. It shocked him, and something inside of him whimpered, but he gave no outward reaction. Not because he held the screams in, but because he *couldn't* feel anything. The box, the two wounds in his side corrupting his own blood, beatings, humiliation, sorrows and his own suicide. Killing himself. He could suddenly and starkly remember that. After all of these things, what more could Semirhage do to him?

"Great Mistress," Elza said, turning to Semirhage, eyes still seeming faintly dazed by something. "Perhaps now we should—"

"Quiet, worm," Semirhage spat at her, wiping the blood from her chin. She looked at it. "That's twice now those knives have tasted my blood." She shook her head, then turned and smiled at Rand. "You say nothing more can be done to you? You forget, Lews Therin, to whom you speak. Pain is my specialty, and you are still little more than a boy. I've broken men ten times as strong as you. Stand."

He did. The pain had not gone away. She obviously intended to keep using it against him until she got a reaction.

He turned around, obeying her wordless command, and found Min hanging above the floor, tied by invisible ropes of Air. Her eyes were wild with fear, her arms bound behind her back, her mouth blocked by a woven Air gag.

Semirhage chuckled. “There is nothing more that I can do, you say?”

Rand seized *saidin*—not of his choice, but of hers. The roar of power slammed into him, bringing with it the strange nausea that he’d never been able to explain. He fell to his hand and knees, emptying his stomach with a groan as the room shook and spun around him.

“How odd,” he heard Semirhage say, as if distant. He shook his head, still holding the One Power—wrestling with it as he always had to with *saidin*, forcing that powerful, twisting flow of energy to his will. It was like chaining a tempest of wind, and was difficult even when he was strong and healthy. Now it was nearly impossible.

Use it, Lews Therin whispered. *Kill her while we can!*

I will not kill a woman, Rand thought stubbornly, a figment of a memory from the back of his mind. *That is the line I will not cross. . . .*

Lews Therin roared, trying to take *saidin* from Rand, but without success. In fact, Rand found that he couldn’t channel willfully any more than he could step without Semirhage’s permission.

He righted himself by her command, the room growing more steady, the nausea retreating. And then he began to form weaves, complicated ones of Spirit and Fire.

“Yes,” Semirhage said, almost to herself. “Now, if I can remember. . . . The male way of doing this is so odd, sometimes.”

Rand made the weaves, then pushed them toward Min. “No!” he screamed as he did so. “Not that!”

“Ah, so you see,” Semirhage said. “You weren’t so difficult to break after all.”

The weaves touched Min and she writhed in pain. Rand continued to channel, tears springing to his eyes as he was forced to send the complex weaves through her body. They brought agony only, but they did it very well. Semirhage must have released Min’s gag, for she began to scream, weeping.

“Please, Rand!” she begged. “Please!”

Rand roared in anger, trying to stop, unable to. He could *feel* Min's pain through the bond, feel it as he caused it.

"Stop this!" he bellowed.

"Beg," Semirhage said.

"Please," he said, weeping. "Please, I beg you."

Suddenly, he stopped, the torturing weaves unraveling. Min hung in the air, whimpering, eyes dazed from the shock of pain. Rand turned around, facing Semirhage and the smaller figure of Elza beside her. The Black looked terrified, as if she'd gotten herself into something she hadn't been prepared for.

"Now," the Forsaken said, "you see that you have always been intended to serve the Great Lord. We will leave this room and will deal with those so-called Aes Sedai who imprisoned me. We will Travel to Shayol Ghul and present you to the Great Lord, and then this can all be finished."

He bowed his head. There had to be a way out! He imagined her using him to tear through the ranks of his own men. He imagined them afraid to attack, lest they harm him. He saw the blood, death and destruction he would cause. And it chilled him, turned him to ice inside.

They have won.

Semirhage glanced at the door, then turned back to him and smiled. "But I'm afraid we must deal with her first. Let us be about it, then."

Rand turned and began to walk toward Min. "No!" he said. "You promised if I begged—"

"I promised nothing," Semirhage said with a laugh. "You begged quite prettily, Lews Therin, but I have chosen to ignore your pleas. You can release *saidin,* however. This needs to be somewhat more personal."

Saidin winked away, and Rand felt the withdrawal of power with regret. The world seemed more dull around him. He stepped up to Min, her pleading eyes meeting his. Then he pressed his hand to her throat, gripping it, and began to squeeze.

"No. . . ." he whispered in horror as his hand, against his will, cut off her air. Min stumbled, and he unwillingly forced her down to the ground, easily ignoring her struggles. He loomed above her, pressing his hand against her throat, gripping it and choking her. She looked at him, eyes beginning to bulge.

This can't be happening.

Semirhage laughed.

Ilyena! Lews Therin wailed. *Oh, Light! I've killed her!*

Rand squeezed harder, leaning down for leverage, his fingers squeezing Min's skin and pushing down on her throat. It was as if he gripped his own heart, and the world became black around him, everything darkened except for Min. He could feel her pulse throbbing beneath his fingers.

Those beautiful dark eyes of hers watched him, loving him even as he killed her.

This can't be happening!

I've killed her!

I'm mad!

Ilyena!

There had to be a way out! Had to be! Rand wanted to close his eyes, but he couldn't. She wouldn't let him—not Semirhage, but Min. She held his eyes with her own, tears lining her cheeks, dark, curled hair disheveled. So beautiful.

He scrambled for *saidin*, but could not take it. He tried with every bit of will he had to relax his fingers, but they just continued to squeeze. He felt horror, he *felt* her pain. Min's face grew purple, her eyes fluttered.

Rand wailed. *THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING! I WILL NOT DO THIS AGAIN!*

Something snapped inside of him. He grew cold; then that coldness vanished, and he could feel nothing. No emotion. No anger.

At that moment he grew aware of a strange force. It was like a reservoir of water, boiling and churning just beyond his view. He reached toward it with his mind.

A clouded face flashed before Rand's own, one whose features he couldn't quite make out. It was gone in a moment.

And Rand found himself filled with an alien power. Not *saidin*, not *saidar*, but something else. Something he'd never felt before.

Oh, Light, Lews Therin suddenly screamed. *That's impossible! We can't use it! Cast it away! That is death we hold, death and betrayal.*

It is HIM.

Rand closed his eyes as he knelt above Min, then he channeled the strange, unknown force. Energy and life surged through him, a torrent of power like *saidin*, only ten times as sweet and a hundred times as violent. It made him alive, made him realize that he'd never *been* alive before. It gave him such strength as he'd never imagined. It rivaled, even, the power he'd held when drawing from the Choedan Kal.

He screamed, in both rapture and rage, and wove enormous spears of Fire and Air. He slammed the weaves against the collar at his neck, and the room exploded with flames and bits of molten metal, each one distinct to Rand. He could feel each shard of metal blast away from his neck, warping the air with its heat, trailing smoke as it hit a wall or the floor. He opened his eyes and released Min. She gasped and sobbed.

Rand stood and turned, white-hot magma in his veins—as when Semirhage had tortured him, yet somehow opposite. As painful as this was, it was also pure ecstasy.

Semirhage looked utterly shocked. "But . . . that's impossible . . ." she said. "I felt nothing. You can't—" She looked up, staring at him with wide eyes. "The True Power. Why have you betrayed me, Great Lord? Why?"

Rand raised a hand and, filled with the power he did not understand, wove a single weave. A bar of pure white light, a cleansing fire, burst from his hand and struck Semirhage in the chest. She flashed and vanished, leaving a faint afterimage to Rand's vision. Her bracelet dropped to the floor.

Elza ran toward the door. She vanished before another bar of light, her entire figure becoming light for a moment. Her bracelet dropped to the floor, as well, the women who had held them burned completely from the Pattern.

What have you done? Lews Therin asked. *Oh, Light. Better to have killed again than to do this. . . . Oh, Light. We are doomed.*

Rand savored the power for a moment longer, then—regretfully—let it drop away. He would have held on, but he was simply too exhausted. The vanishing of it left him numb.

Or . . . no. That numbness had nothing to do with the power he'd held. He turned around, looking down at Min, who coughed quietly and rubbed her neck. She looked up at him, and seemed afraid. He doubted that she would ever see him the same way again.

He had been wrong; there *had* indeed been something more that Semirhage could do to him. He had felt himself killing one he loved dearly. Before, when he'd done it as Lews Therin, he had been mad and unable to control himself. He could barely remember slaying Ilyena, as if through a clouded dream. He’d realized what he had done only after Ishamael had awakened him.

Finally, now, he knew precisely what it was like to watch as he killed those he loved.

“It is done,” Rand whispered.

“What?” Min asked, coughing again.

“The last that could be done to me,” he said, surprised at his own calmness. “They have taken everything from me now.”

“What are you saying, Rand?” Min asked. She rubbed her neck again. Bruises were beginning to show.

He shook his head as—finally—voices sounded in the hallway outside. Perhaps the Asha’man had sensed him channeling when he’d tortured Min.

“I have made my choice, Min,” he said, turning toward the door. “You have asked for flexibility and laughter from me, but such things are no longer mine to give. I am sorry.”

Once, weeks ago, he had decided that he must become stronger—where he had been iron, he had decided to become steel. It appeared that steel was too weak.

He would be harder, now. He understood how. Where he had once been steel, he became something else. From now on, he was *cuendillar*. He had entered a place like the void that Tam had trained him to seek, so long ago. But within this void he had no emotion. None at all.

They could not break or bend him.

It was done.

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CHAPTER 23

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A Warp in the Air

"What of the sisters who were guarding her cell?" Cadsuane asked, stomping up the wooden steps beside Merise.

"Corele and Nesune are alive, thankfully, though they were left extremely weak," Merise said, holding her skirt up as she hurried along. Narishma followed them, the bells at the end of his braids ringing softly. "Daigian is dead. We're not certain why the other two were left alive."

"Warders," Cadsuane said. "Kill the Aes Sedai, and their Warders would know immediately—and we would have learned that something was wrong." The Warders should have noticed that something was wrong anyway—they'd have to interrogate the men to see what they had felt. But there was likely a correlation.

Daigian had no living Warder. Cadsuane felt a stab of regret for the pleasant sister, but shoved it aside. No time for it now.

"The other two were placed in some kind of trance," Merise said. "I could see no remnants of weaves, nor could Narishma. We discovered the sisters just before the alarm was sounded, then went for you as soon as we were assured that al'Thor was alive and our enemies had been dealt with."

Cadsuane nodded crossly. Of all the nights to be out visiting the Wise Ones in their tents! Sorilea and a small group of them followed behind Narishma, and Cadsuane didn't dare slow her pace, lest the Aiel women trample her in their haste to see al'Thor.

They reached the top of the stairs, then sped down the hallway toward al'Thor's room. How could he have gotten himself into this much trouble, *again*! And how had that blasted Forsaken gotten free of her cell? Someone must have helped her, but that meant a Darkfriend in their camp. It wasn't unlikely—if Darkfriends existed in the White Tower, then they could undoubtedly be found here. But what Darkfriend could incapacitate three Aes Sedai? Surely channeling on that level should have been felt by every sister or Asha'man in the camp.

"Was the tea involved?" Cadsuane asked Merise quietly.

"Not that we can tell," the Green replied. "We'll know more when the other two wake. They fell unconscious as soon as we brought them out of their trance."

Cadsuane nodded. Al'Thor's door was open, and Maidens swarmed outside it like wasps who had just discovered their nest was gone. Cadsuane couldn’t say that she blamed them. Apparently, al’Thor had said little of what had happened. The fool boy was lucky to still be alive! *What a Light-cursed mess,* Cadsuane thought, passing the Maidens and entering the chamber.

A small knot of Aes Sedai clustered on the far side of the room, speaking quietly. Sarene, Erian, Beldeine—all of those in the camp who weren’t either dead or incapacitated. Except Elza. Where was Elza?

The three nodded to Cadsuane as she entered, but she spared them barely a glance. Min sat on the bed, rubbing her neck, eyes red, short hair disheveled, face pale. Al’Thor stood beside the open far window, looking out at the night, his hand clasping his stump behind him. His coat lay rumpled on the floor, and he stood in white shirtsleeves, a cool wind blowing in and ruffling his red-gold hair. Nynaeve watched him, frowning.

Cadsuane surveyed the room; behind her, in the hall, the Wise Ones began to interrogate the Maidens. “Well?” Cadsuane said. “What happened?”

Min looked up. There were red marks on her neck, the beginnings of bruises. Rand did not turn from the window. *Insolent boy,* Cadsuane thought, coming farther into the room. “Speak up, boy!” she said. “We need to know if the camp is in danger.”

“The danger has been dealt with,” he said softly. Something in his voice made her hesitate. She had been expecting anger, or perhaps satisfaction, from him. Fatigue at the very least. Instead, his voice sounded cool.

“Will you explain what that means?” Cadsuane demanded.

Finally, he turned, looking at her. She took an involuntary step backward, though she couldn’t say why. He was still the same foolish boy. Too tall, too self-confident, and too blunt-headed. There was a strange serenity about him now, but it had a dark edge. Like the serenity one saw in the eyes of a condemned man the moment before he stepped up to the hangman’s noose.

“Narishma,” Rand said, looking past Cadsuane. “I have a weave for you. Memorize it; I will show it to you only once.” With that, al’Thor put his hand out to the side and a bar of brilliant white fire shot from between his fingers and struck his coat, which lay on the floor. It vanished in a burst of light.

Cadsuane hissed. “I told you never to use that weave, boy! You will *never* do so again. Do you hear me! This is not—”

“That is the weave we must use when fighting Forsaken, Narishma,” al’Thor said, his quiet voice cutting straight through Cadsuane’s. “If we kill them with anything else, they can be reborn. It is a dangerous tool, but still just a tool. Like any other.”

“It is forbidden,” Cadsuane said.

“I have decided that it is not,” al’Thor said calmly.

“You don’t have any idea what that weave can do! You’re a child playing with—”

“I have seen balefire destroy cities,” al’Thor said, eyes growing haunted. “I have seen thousands burned from the Pattern by its purifying flames. If you call me a child, Cadsuane, then what are those of you who are thousands of years my juniors?”

He met her gaze. Light! What had happened to him? She struggled to collect her thoughts. “So Semirhage is dead?”

“Worse than dead,” al’Thor said. “And far better off, in many ways, I should think.”

“Well, then. I suppose we can get on with—”

“Do you recognize that, Cadsuane?” al’Thor said, nodding toward something metallic sitting on the bed, mostly hidden by the sheets.

Hesitantly she walked forward. Sorilea looked over, expression unreadable. Apparently, she didn’t wish to be drawn into the conversation when al’Thor was in such a mood. Cadsuane didn’t blame her.

Cadsuane pulled back the sheets, revealing a familiar pair of bracelets. There was no collar.

“Impossible,” she whispered.

“That is what I assumed,” al’Thor said in that terribly calm voice of his. “I told myself that it obviously *couldn’t* be one of the same *ter’angreal* I relinquished to you. You promised they would be protected and hidden.”

“Well, then,” Cadsuane said, unnerved. She covered the things back up. “That is settled then.”

“It is. I sent people to your room. Tell me, is this box where you were keeping the bracelets? We found it open on the floor of your quarters.”

A Maiden brought out a familiar oak box. It was the same one, obviously. Cadsuane turned toward him in anger. “You searched my room!”

“I was unaware that you were visiting the Wise Ones,” al’Thor said. He gave a small nod of respect to Sorilea and Amys, which they hesitantly returned. “I sent servants to check on you, as I feared that Semirhage might have tried for revenge on you.”

“They shouldn’t have touched this,” Cadsuane said, taking the box from the Maiden. “It was prepared with very intricate wards.”

“Not intricate enough,” al’Thor said, turning away from her. He still stood by that darkened window, looking out over the camp.

The room fell silent. Narishma had been asking quietly after Min’s health, but he fell silent when al’Thor stopped speaking. Rand obviously felt that Cadsuane was responsible for the male *a’dam* being stolen, but that was preposterous. She had prepared the best ward she knew, but who knew what knowledge the Forsaken had for getting past wards?

How *had* al’Thor survived? And what of the other contents of that box? Did al’Thor now have the access key, or had the statuette been taken by Semirhage? Did Cadsuane dare ask? The silence continued. “What are you waiting for?” she finally asked with all the bravado she could summon. “Do you expect an apology from me?”

“From you?” al’Thor asked. There was no humor in his voice, just the same cold evenness. “No, I suspect that I could sooner extract an apology from a stone than from you.”

“Then—”

“You are exiled from my sight, Cadsuane,” he said softly. “If I see your face again after tonight, I will kill you.”

“Rand, no!” Min said, standing up beside the bed. He didn’t turn toward her.

Cadsuane felt an immediate stab of panic, but shoved it aside with her anger. “What?” she demanded. “This is foolishness, boy. I. . . .”

He turned, and again that gaze of his made her trail off. There was a danger to it, a shadowy cast to his eyes that struck her with more fear than she’d thought her aging heart could summon. As she watched, the air around him seemed to *warp*, and she could almost think that the room had grown darker.

“But. . . .” She found herself stuttering. “But you don’t kill women. Everyone knows it. You can hardly put the Maidens into danger for fear of them getting hurt!”

“I have been forced to revise that particular inclination,” al’Thor said. “As of tonight.”

“But—”

“Cadsuane,” he said softly, “do you believe that I could kill you? Right here, right now, without using a sword or the Power? Do you believe that if I simply willed it, the Pattern would bend around me and stop your heart? By . . . coincidence?”

Being *ta’veren* didn’t work that way. Light! It didn’t, did it? He couldn’t bend the very *Pattern* to his will, could he?

And yet, meeting his eyes, she *did* believe. Against all logic, she looked in those eyes and knew that if she didn’t leave, she would die.

She nodded slowly, hating herself, strangely weak.

He turned away from her, looking back out the window. “Be certain that I do not see your face. Ever again, Cadsuane. You may go now.”

Dazed, she turned—and from the corner of her eye, she saw a deep darkness emanating from al’Thor, warping the air even further. When she glanced back, it was gone. With gritted teeth, she left.

“Prepare yourselves and your armies,” al’Thor said to those who remained, voice echoing in the room behind. “I intend to be gone by week’s end.”

Cadsuane raised a hand to her head and leaned against the hallway wall outside, heart thumping, hand sweating. Before, she had been working against a stubborn but good-hearted boy. Someone had taken that child and replaced him with this man, a man more dangerous than any she had ever met. Day by day, he was slipping away from them.

And at the moment, she hadn’t a blasted clue what to do about it.

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CHAPTER 24

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A New Commitment

Exhausted from days of hard travel, Gawyn sat atop Challenge on a low hill southwest of Tar Valon.

This countryside should have been green with spring's arrival, but the hillside before him bore only scraggly dead weeds, slain by the winter snows. Tufts of yew and blackwood poked up here and there, breaking the brown landscape. He counted more than a few stands that were now populated only by stumps. A war camp devoured trees like hungry woodgnarls, using them for arrows, fires, buildings and siege equipment.

Gawyn yawned—he'd pushed hard through the night. Bryne's war camp was well dug in here, and was a bustle of motion and activity. An army this large spawned organized chaos at best. A small band of mounted cavalry could travel light, as Gawyn's Younglings had; a force like that could grow to several thousand and remain lean. Expert horsemen, like the Saldaeans, were said to manage larger bands of seven or eight thousand while keeping their mobility.

But a force like the one below was a different beast entirely. It was an enormous, sprawling thing, in the shape of an enormous bubble with a smaller camp at its center; that probably held the Aes Sedai. Bryne also had forces occupying all of the bridge towns on both sides of the River Erinin, effectively cutting off the island from ground supply.

The army squatted near Tar Valon like a spider eyeing a butterfly hovering just outside of its web. Lines of troops rode in and out patrolling, purchasing food, running messages. Dozens upon dozens of squads, some mounted, others walking. Like bees leaving the hive while others swarmed back in. The eastern side of the main camp was crowded with a mishmash of shanties and tents, the normal riffraff of camp followers that collected around an army. Near by, just inside the main war-camp boundary, a wooden palisade—perhaps fifty yards across—rose in a tall ring. Probably a command post.

Gawyn knew he had been seen by Bryne's scouts as he approached, yet none had stopped him. They probably wouldn't unless he tried to ride away. A single man—wearing a decent gray cloak and trousers, with a lacing shirt of white—wasn't of much interest. He could be a sell-sword, coming to ask for a place in the ranks. He could be a messenger from a local lord, sent to complain about a group of scouts. He could even be a member of the army. While many of those in Bryne's force wore uniforms, many others just wore a simple yellow band on their coatsleeves, not yet able to pay for proper insignia to be sewn on.

No, a single man approaching the army was not a danger. A single man riding *away* from it, however, was cause for alarm. A man coming to the camp could be friend, foe or neither. A man who inspected the camp then rode away was almost certainly a spy. So long as Gawyn didn't leave before making his intentions known, Bryne's outriders would be unlikely to bother him.

Light, but he could use a bed. He'd spent a restless two nights, sleeping only a couple of hours during each one, wrapped in his cloak. He felt irritable and cranky, partially just at himself for refusing to go to an inn, lest he be chased by the Younglings. He blinked bleary eyes, and spurred Challenge down the incline. He was committed now.

No. He'd been committed the moment he'd left Sleete behind in Dorlan. By now, the Younglings knew of their leader's betrayal. Sleete wouldn't allow them to waste time searching. He'd tell them what he knew. Gawyn wished he could convince himself that they'd be surprised, but he'd received more than one frown or look of confusion regarding the way he spoke of Elaida and the Aes Sedai.

The White Tower didn't deserve his allegiance, but the Younglings—he could never go back to them, now. It itched at him; this was the first time his wavering had been revealed to a large group. Nobody knew that he'd helped Siuan escape, nor was it widespread knowledge that he'd dallied with Egwene.

Yet leaving had been the right thing to do. For the first time in months, his actions matched his heart. Saving Egwene. *That* was something he could believe in.

He approached the outskirts of camp, keeping his face impassive. He hated the idea of working with the rebel Aes Sedai almost as much as he had hated abandoning his men. These rebels were no better than Elaida. They were the ones who had propped Egwene up as an Amyrlin, as a target. Egwene! A mere Accepted. A pawn. If they failed in their bid for the Tower, they themselves might be able to escape punishment. Egwene would be executed.

I'll get in, Gawyn thought. *I'll save her somehow. Then I'll talk some sense into her and bring her away from all of the Aes Sedai. Perhaps even* *talk sense into Bryne. We can all get back to Andor, to help Elayne.*

He rode forward with renewed determination, banishing some of his exhaustion. To reach the command post, he had to ride through the camp followers, who outnumbered the actual troops. Cooks to fix the food. Women to serve the food and wash the soiled dishes. Wagon drivers to carry the food. Wheelwrights to fix the wagons that carried the food. Blacksmiths to make horseshoes for the horses that pulled the wagons that carried the food. Merchants to buy the food, and quartermasters to organize it. Less reputable merchants who sought to profit off of the soldiers and their battle pay, and women who sought to do the same. Boys to run messages, hoping to someday carry a sword themselves.

It was a complete mess. A half-shanty conglomeration of tents and shacks, each of a different hue, design and state of disrepair. Even a capable general like Bryne could impose only so much order on camp followers. His men would keep the peace, more or less, but they couldn’t force followers to keep military discipline.

Gawyn passed through the middle of it all, ignoring those who called to him offering to shine his sword or sell him a sweetbun. The prices would be low—this was a place that fed off of soldiers—but with his warhorse and finer clothing, he’d be marked as an officer. If he bought from one, the others would smell coin, and he could end up surrounded by all who hoped to sell to him.

He ignored the calls, eyes forward, toward the army itself ahead. Its tents were generally organized in neat rows, grouped by squad and banner, though sometimes in smaller clusters. Gawyn could have guessed the layout without seeing it. Bryne liked organization, but also believed strongly in delegation. Bryne would allow officers to run their camps as they wished, and that led to a setup that was less uniform, yet was far better at running itself.

He headed directly for the palisade. The camp followers around him weren’t easy to ignore, however. Their calls to him lingered in the air, together with the scents of cooking, privies, horses and cheap perfume. The camp wasn’t as crowded as a city, but it also wasn’t as well maintained. Sweat mixed with burning cook fires mixed with stagnant water mixed with unwashed bodies. It made him want to hold a handkerchief to his face, though he refrained. It would make him look like a spoiled noble, turning his nose up at the common people.

The stink, the confusion and the yells didn't help his mood any. He had to grit his teeth to keep himself from cursing at each hawker. A figure stumbled onto the pathway in front of him—he reined in. The woman wore a brown skirt and a white blouse, her hands grimy. "Out of the way," Gawyn snapped. His mother would have been outraged to hear him speaking with such anger. Well, his mother was dead now, by al'Thor's hand.

The woman in front of him looked up and ran back out of the pathway. She had light hair tied in a yellow kerchief and a faintly plump body. Gawyn caught just a glimpse of her face as she turned.

Gawyn froze. That was an Aes Sedai face! It was unmistakable. He sat, shocked, as the woman pulled her kerchief down and hurried away.

"Wait!" he called, turning his horse. But the woman did not stop. He hesitated, lowering his arm as he saw the woman join a line of washwomen working between several wooden troughs a short distance away. If she was pretending to be a common woman, then she likely had her own blasted Aes Sedai reasons, and she wouldn't appreciate him exposing her. Very well. Gawyn forced down his annoyance. Egwene. He had to focus on Egwene.

When he reached the command palisade, the air improved measurably. A quartet of soldiers stood on guard, halberds held at their sides, steel caps gleaming and matched by breastplates emblazoned with Bryne's three stars. A banner bearing the flame of Tar Valon flapped beside the gateway.

"Recruit?" asked one of the soldiers as Gawyn rode up. The heavyset man bore a red stripe on his left shoulder, marking him as a watch sergeant. He carried a sword instead of a halberd. His breastplate barely fit his girth, and his chin bristled with red hairs. "You'll have to meet with Captain Aldan," the man said with a grunt. "Big blue tent about a quarter of the way around the outside of the camp. You've got your own horse and sword; that'll get you good pay." The man pointed toward a distant point in the main body of the army, outside the palisade. That wouldn't do. He could see Bryne's banner flying inside.

"I'm not a recruit," Gawyn said, turning Challenge to get a better look at the men. "My name is Gawyn Trakand. I need to speak with Gareth Bryne immediately about a matter of some urgency."

The soldier raised an eyebrow. Then he chuckled to himself.

"You don't believe me," Gawyn said flatly.

“You should go speak to Captain Aldan,” the man said lazily, pointing toward the distant tent again.

Gawyn took a calming breath, trying to force down his irritation. “If you’d just send for Bryne, you’d find that—”

“Are you going to be trouble?” the soldier asked, puffing himself up. The other men readied their halberds.

“No trouble,” Gawyn said evenly. “I just need—”

“If you’re going to be in our camp,” the soldier interrupted, stepping forward, “you’re going to have to learn how to do what you’re told.”

Gawyn met the man’s eyes. “Very well. We can do it this way. It will probably be faster anyway.”

The sergeant laid a hand on his sword.

Gawyn kicked his feet free of the stirrups and pushed himself out of the saddle. It would be too hard to keep from killing the man from horseback. He slid his blade free as his feet hit the muddy ground, the sheath rasping like an inhaled breath. Gawyn fell into Oak Shakes Its Branches, a form that wielded nonlethal blows, often used by masters for training their students. It was also very effective against a large group all using different weapons.

Before the sergeant had his sword free, Gawyn slammed into him, ramming an elbow into his gut just beneath the poorly fitting breastplate. The man grunted and bent, then Gawyn knocked him on the side of the head with the hilt of his sword—the man should have known better than to wear his cap askew like that. Then Gawyn fell into Parting the Silk to deal with the first halberdier. As another of the men screamed for help, Gawyn’s blade slashed across the first halberdier’s breastplate with a ringing sound, forcing the man back. Gawyn finished by sweeping the man’s feet from under him, then fell into Twisting the Wind to block a pair of blows from the other two men.

It was unfortunate, but he had to resort to striking the thighs of the two standing halberdiers. He’d have preferred to avoid wounding them, but fights—even one such as this, against far less skilled opponents—became unpredictable the longer they lasted. One had to control the battlefield quickly and soundly, and that meant dropping the two soldiers—clutching their bleeding thighs. The sergeant was out cold from the rap to the head, but the first halberdier was rising shakily. Gawyn kicked the man’s halberd aside, then planted a boot in his face, knocking him back and bloodying his nose.

Challenge whinnied from behind, snorting and stamping the ground. The warhorse sensed a fight, but was well trained. He knew that when his reins were dropped, he was to remain still. Gawyn wiped his blade on his trouser leg, then slid it back into its sheath, the wounded soldiers groaning on the ground. He patted Challenge on the nose and took up the reins again. Behind Gawyn, nearby camp followers backed away, then ran. A group of soldiers from inside the palisade approached with bows drawn. That was not good. Gawyn turned to face them, pulling his still-sheathed sword free from his belt and tossing it to the ground in front of the men.

“I am unarmed,” he said over the sounds of the wounded. “And none of these four will die this day. Go and tell your general that a lone blademaster just felled a squad of his guards in under ten heartbeats. I’m an old student of his. He’ll want to see me.”

One of the men scrambled forward to take Gawyn’s fallen sword while another signaled to a runner. The others kept their bows raised. One of the fallen halberdiers began to crawl away. Gawyn turned Challenge at an angle, making ready to duck behind the horse if the soldiers moved to draw. He’d much prefer it not come to that, but of the two of them, Challenge was far more likely to survive a few shortbow shafts than Gawyn.

Several of the soldiers risked coming forward to help their fallen friends. The heavyset watch sergeant was stirring, and he sat up, cursing under his breath. Gawyn made no threatening motions.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to fight the men, but he had already wasted too much time. Egwene could be dead by now! When a man like that sergeant tried to assert his authority, you really only had two options. You could talk your way up through the ranks of the bureaucracy, convincing each soldier each step of the way that you *were* important. Or you could make a disturbance. The second was faster, and the camp obviously had enough Aes Sedai support to Heal a few injured soldiers.

Eventually, a small group of men strode out from inside the palisade. Their uniforms were sharp, their postures dangerous, their faces worn. At their head came a square-faced man with graying temples and a strong, stocky build. Gawyn smiled. Bryne himself. The gamble had worked.

The Captain-General surveyed Gawyn, then moved on to a quick inspection of his fallen soldiers. At last, he shook his head. “Stand down,” he said to his men. “Sergeant Cords.”

The stocky sergeant stood up. “Sir!”

Bryne glanced back at Gawyn. “Next time a man comes to the gate claiming to be nobility and asking for me, send for an officer. Immediately. I don’t care if the man has two months of scruffy beard and reeks of cheap ale. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the sergeant said, blushing. “Understood, sir.”

“See your men to the infirmary, Sergeant,” Bryne said, still looking at Gawyn. “*You*, come with me.”

Gawyn clenched his jaw. He hadn’t received such an address from Gareth Bryne since before he’d started shaving. Still, he couldn’t really expect the man to be pleased. Just inside the palisade, Gawyn spotted a young boy who was likely a stablehand or messenger boy. He handed Challenge to the wide-eyed youth, instructing him to see the horse cared for. Then Gawyn retrieved his sword from the man holding it and hurried after Bryne.

“Gareth,” Gawyn said, catching up, “I—”

“Hold your tongue, young man,” Bryne said, not turning toward him. “I haven’t decided what I’m going to do with you.”

Gawyn snapped his mouth closed. That was uncalled for! Gawyn was still brother to the rightful Queen of Andor, and would be First Prince of the Sword should Elayne take and hold the throne! Bryne should show him respect.

But Bryne could be stubborn as a boar. Gawyn held his tongue. They reached a tall, peaked tent with two guards at the front. Bryne ducked inside and Gawyn followed. The inside was neat and clean, more so than Gawyn had expected. The desk was stacked with rolled maps and orderly sheets of paper, and the pallets in the corner were rolled carefully, blankets folded with sharp angles. Bryne was obviously relying on someone meticulous to tidy up for him.

Bryne clasped his hands behind his back, breastplate reflecting Gawyn’s face as he turned around. “All right. Explain what you’re doing here.”

Gawyn drew himself up. “General,” he said, “I think you mistake yourself. I’m no longer your student.”

“I know,” Bryne said curtly. “The boy *I* trained would never have pulled a childish stunt like that one to get my attention.”

“The watch sergeant was belligerent, and I had no patience for the posturing of a fool. This seemed the best way.”

“The best way to *what*?” Bryne asked. “Outrage me?”

“Look,” Gawyn said, “perhaps I was hasty, but I have an important task. You need to listen to me.”

“And if I don’t?” Bryne asked. “If I instead throw you out of my camp for being a spoiled princeling with too much pride and not enough sense?”

Gawyn frowned. “Be careful, Gareth. I’ve learned a great deal since we last met. I think you’ll find that your sword can no longer best mine as easily as it once did.”

“I have no doubt of that,” Bryne said. “Light, boy! You always were a talented one. But you think that just because you’re skilled with the sword, your words hold more weight? I should listen because you’ll kill me if I don’t? I thought I taught you far better than that.”

Bryne had aged since Gawyn had last seen him. But that age didn’t bow Bryne down—it rested comfortably on his shoulders. A few more traces of white at his temples, a few more wrinkles around the eyes, yet strong and lean enough of body that he looked years younger than he was. One couldn’t look at Gareth Bryne and see anything other than a man in—certainly not past—his prime.

Gawyn locked eyes with the general, trying to keep the anger from boiling out. Bryne held his gaze, calm. Solid. As a general should be. As Gawyn should be.

Gawyn looked away, suddenly feeling ashamed of himself. “Light,” he whispered, releasing his sword and raising a hand to his head. He suddenly felt very, very tired. “I’m sorry, Gareth. You’re right. I’ve been a fool.”

Bryne grunted. “Good to hear you say that. I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you.”

Gawyn sighed, wiping his brow, wishing for something cool to drink. His anger melted away, and he felt exhausted. “It has been a difficult year,” he said, “and I rode myself too hard getting here. I’m at the edge of my mind.”

“You aren’t the only one, lad,” Bryne said. He took a deep breath and walked to a small serving table, poured a cup of something for Gawyn. It was only warm tea, but Gawyn took it thankfully and sipped.

“These are times to test men,” Bryne said, pouring himself a cup. He took a sip and grimaced.

“What?” Gawyn asked, glancing down at his cup.

“It’s nothing. I despise this stuff.”

“Then why drink it?” Gawyn asked.

“It’s supposed to improve my health,” Bryne grumbled. Before Gawyn could ask further, the large general continued, “So are you going to make me throw you in the stocks before you’ll tell me why you decided to fight your way into my command post?”

Gawyn stepped forward. “Gareth. It’s Egwene. They have her.”

“The White Tower Aes Sedai?”

Gawyn nodded urgently.

“I know.” Bryne took another drink, then grimaced again.

“We have to go for her!” Gawyn said. “I came to ask you for help. I intend to mount a rescue.”

Bryne snorted softly. “A rescue? And how do you intend to get into the White Tower? Even the Aiel couldn’t break into that city.”

“They didn’t want to,” Gawyn said. “But I don’t need to take the city, I just need to sneak a small force in, then get one person out. Every rock has its cracks. I’ll find a way.”

Bryne set his cup aside. He looked at Gawyn, firm, weathered face an icon of nobility. “But tell me this, lad. How are you going to get her to come out with you?”

Gawyn started. “Why, she’ll be happy to come. Why wouldn’t she?”

“Because she’s forbidden us to rescue her,” Bryne said, clasping his hands behind his back again. “Or so I’ve been able to gather. The Aes Sedai tell me little. One would think they’d be more trusting toward a man they depend on to run this siege of theirs. Anyway, the Amyrlin can communicate with them somehow, and she’s instructed them to leave her be.”

What? That was ridiculous! Obviously, the Aes Sedai in camp were fudging the facts. “Bryne, she’s imprisoned! The Aes Sedai I heard talking said that she’s being beaten daily. They’ll execute her!”

“I don’t know,” Bryne said. “She’s been with them for weeks now and they haven’t killed her yet.”

“They’ll kill her,” Gawyn said urgently. “You know they will. Perhaps you parade a fallen enemy before your soldiers for a time, but eventually you have to mount his head on a pike to let them know he’s dead and gone. You know I’m right.”

Bryne regarded him, then nodded. “Perhaps I do. But there’s still nothing I can do. I’m bound by oaths, Gawyn. I can’t do anything unless that girl instructs me to.”

“You’d let her die?”

“If that’s what it takes to keep my oath, then yes.”

If Bryne was bound by oath . . . well, he’d sooner hear an Aes Sedai tell a lie than see Gareth Bryne break his word. But Egwene! There had to be something he could do!

“I’ll try to get you an audience with some of the Aes Sedai I serve,” Bryne said. “Perhaps they can do something. If you persuade them that a rescue is needed, and that the Amyrlin would want it, then we’ll see.”

Gawyn nodded. It was something at least. “Thank you.”

Bryne waved indifferently. “Though I *should* see you in the stocks. For wounding three of my men, if nothing else.”

“Have an Aes Sedai Heal them,” Gawyn said. “From what I’ve heard, you’ve no lack of sisters to bully you.”

“Bah,” Bryne said. “I can rarely get them to Heal anyone unless the soldier’s life is threatened. I had a man take a bad spill while riding the other day, and I was told that Healing would only teach him to be reckless. ‘Pain is its own lesson,’ the blasted woman said. ‘Perhaps next time he won’t see fit to make sport for his friends while riding.’ ”

Gawyn grimaced. “But surely they’ll make an exception for those men. After all, an enemy did do the wounding.”

“We’ll see,” Bryne said. “The sisters rarely visit the soldiers. They’ve their own business to be about.”

“There’s one in the outer camp now,” Gawyn said absently, glancing over his shoulder.

“Younger girl? Dark hair, without the ageless face?”

“No, this was an Aes Sedai. I could tell *because* of the face. She was kind of plump, with lighter hair.”

“Probably just scouting for Warders,” Bryne said, sighing. “They do that.”

“I don’t think so,” Gawyn said, glancing over his shoulder. “She was hiding among the washwomen.” As he thought about it, he realized that she could very well be a spy for the White Tower loyalists.

Bryne’s frown deepened. Perhaps he had the same thoughts. “Show me,” he said, striding toward the tent flaps. He threw them aside, walking back out into the morning light, Gawyn following.

“You never did explain what you are doing here, Gawyn,” Bryne said as they walked through the orderly camp, soldiers saluting their general as he passed.

“I told you,” Gawyn said, hand resting comfortably on the pommel of his sword. “I *am* going to find a way to get Egwene out of that death trap.”

“I didn’t mean what you’re doing in my camp. I meant why you were in the area in the first place. Why aren’t you back in Caemlyn, helping your sister?”

“You have news of Elayne,” Gawyn said, stopping. Light! He should have asked earlier. He really *was* tired. “I heard that she was in your camp earlier. She’s gone back to Caemlyn? Is she safe?”

“She hasn’t been with us for a long while,” Bryne said. “But she seems to be doing well.” He stopped, glancing at Gawyn. “You mean you don’t know?”

“What?”

“Well, rumors are unreliable,” Bryne said. “But I have confirmed many of them with the Aes Sedai, who have been Traveling to Caemlyn to listen for news. Your sister holds the Lion Throne. It seems that she’s undone much of the mess your mother left for her.”

Gawyn took a deep breath. *Thank the Light,* he thought, closing his eyes. Elayne lived. Elayne held the throne. He opened his eyes, and the overcast sky seemed a little more bright. He continued walking, Bryne falling into step beside him.

“You really didn’t know,” Bryne said. “Where have you been, lad? You’re the First Prince of the Sword now, or you will be once you return to Caemlyn! Your place is at your sister’s side.”

“Egwene first.”

“You made an oath,” Bryne said sternly. “Before me. Have you forgotten?”

“No,” Gawyn said. “But if Elayne has the throne, then she’s safe for now. I’ll get Egwene and tow her back to Caemlyn where I can keep an eye on her. Where I can keep an eye on both of them.”

Bryne snorted. “I think I’d like to watch you trying that first part,” he noted. “But regardless, why weren’t you there when Elayne was trying to take the throne? What have you been doing that is more important than that?”

“I . . . grew entangled,” Gawyn said, eyes forward.

“Entangled?” Bryne asked. “You were at the White Tower when all of this—” He cut off, falling silent. The two walked side by side for a moment.

“Where did you hear sisters talking about Egwene’s capture?” Bryne asked. “How would you know she’s being punished?”

Gawyn said nothing.

“Blood and bloody ashes!” Bryne exclaimed. The general rarely cursed. “I *knew* that the person leading those raids against me was too well informed. And here I was, looking for a leak among my officers!”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“I’ll judge that,” Bryne said. “You’ve been killing my men. Leading raids against me!”

“Leading raids against the rebels,” Gawyn said, turning hard eyes on Bryne. “You may blame me for bullying my way into your camp, but do you honestly expect me to feel guilty for helping the White Tower against the force *besieging* it?”

Bryne fell silent. Then he nodded curtly. “Very well. But that makes you an enemy commander.”

“No longer,” Gawyn said. “I’ve left that command.”

“But—”

“I helped them,” Gawyn said. “I no longer do. Nothing I see here will return to your enemies, Bryne. I swear it on the Light.”

Bryne didn’t respond immediately. They passed tents, likely for the high officers, approaching the palisade wall. “Very well,” Bryne said. “I can trust you haven’t changed enough to break your word.”

“I wouldn’t turn against that oath,” Gawyn said harshly. “How could you think that I would?”

“I’ve had experience with unexpected renunciations of oaths lately,” Bryne said. “I said I believe you, lad. And I do. But you *still* haven’t explained why you didn’t return to Caemlyn.”

“Egwene was with the Aes Sedai,” Gawyn said. “As far as I knew, Elayne was as well. This seemed a good place to be, although I wasn’t certain I liked Elaida’s authority.”

“And what is Egwene to you?” Bryne asked softly.

Gawyn met his eyes. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I wish I did.”

Strangely, Bryne chuckled. “I see. And I understand. Come, let’s find this Aes Sedai you think you saw.”

“I *did* see her, Gareth,” Gawyn said, nodding to the guards as they passed out the gates. The men saluted Bryne, but watched Gawyn as they would a blacklance. As well they should.

“We shall see what we find,” Bryne said. “Regardless, once I get you a meeting with the Aes Sedai leaders, I want your word that you’ll go back to Caemlyn. Leave Egwene to us. You need to help Elayne. It’s your place to be in Andor.”

“I could say the same of you.” Gawyn surveyed the teeming followers’ camp. Where had the woman been?

“You could,” Bryne said gruffly. “But it wouldn’t be true. Your mother saw to that.”

Gawyn glanced at him.

“She put me out to pasture, Gawyn. Banished me and threatened me with death.”

“Impossible!”

Bryne looked grim. “I felt the same way. But it is true nonetheless. The things she said . . . they stung, Gawyn. That they did indeed.”

That was all Bryne said, but from him, it spoke volumes. Gawyn had never heard the man offer a word of discontent about his station or his orders. He had been loyal to Morgase—loyal with the kind of steadfastness a ruler could only hope for. Gawyn had never known a man more sure, or a man less likely to complain.

“It must have been part of some scheme,” Gawyn said. “You know Mother. If she hurt you, there was a reason.”

Bryne shook his head. “No reason other than foolish love for that fop Gaebril. She nearly let her clouded head ruin Andor.”

“She’d never!” Gawyn snapped. “Gareth, you of all people should know that!”

“I should,” Bryne said, lowering his voice. “And I wish I did.”

“She had another motive,” Gawyn said stubbornly. He felt the heat of anger rise within him again. Around them, peddlers glanced at the two, but said nothing. They probably knew not to approach Bryne. “But now we’ll never know it. Not now that she’s dead. *Curse* al’Thor! The day can’t come soon enough when I can run him through.”

Bryne looked at Gawyn sharply. “Al’Thor saved Andor, son. Or as near to it as a man could.”

“How could you say that?” Gawyn said. “How could you speak well of that monster? He *killed* my mother!”

“I don’t know if I believe those rumors or not,” Bryne said, rubbing his chin. “But if I do, lad, then perhaps he did Andor a favor. You don’t know how bad it got, there at the end.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this,” Gawyn said, lowering his hand to his sword. “I won’t hear her name soiled like that, Bryne. I mean it.”

Bryne looked him directly in the eyes. His gaze was so *solid*. Like eyes carved of granite. “I’ll always speak truth, Gawyn. No matter who challenges me on it. It’s hard to hear? Well, it was harder to live. No good comes of spreading complaints. But her son needs to know. In the end, Gawyn, your mother turned against Andor by embracing Gaebril. She *needed* to be removed. If al’Thor did that for us, then we have need to thank him.”

Gawyn shook his head, rage and shock fighting one another. This was Gareth Bryne?

“These aren’t the words of a spurned lover,” Bryne said, face set, as if shoving aside emotions. He spoke softly as he and Gawyn walked, camp followers giving them a wide berth. “I can accept that a woman could lose affection for a man and bestow it on another. Yes, Morgase the woman I can forgive. But Morgase the Queen? She gave the kingdom to that snake. She sent her allies to be beaten and imprisoned. She wasn’t right in her mind. Sometimes, when a soldier’s arm festers, it needs to be cut free to save the man’s life. I’m pleased at Elayne’s success, and it is a wound to speak these words. But you have to bury that hatred of al’Thor. He wasn’t the problem. Your mother was.”

Gawyn kept his teeth clenched. *Never,* he thought. *I will* never *forgive al’Thor. Not for this.*

“I can see the intent behind that look,” Bryne said. “All the more reason to get you back to Andor. You’ll see. If you don’t trust me, ask your sister. See what she says of it.”

Gawyn nodded sharply. Enough of that. Ahead, he noted the place where he’d seen the woman. He glanced toward the distant lines of washwomen, then turned and strode toward them, edging between two merchants with pungent pens full of chickens, selling eggs. “This way,” he said, perhaps too sharply.

He didn’t look to see if Bryne followed. Soon the general caught up to him, looking displeased, but he kept his peace. They walked down a crowded, twisting pathway among people in browns and dull grays, and soon reached the line of women kneeling before two long wooden troughs of slowly flowing water. Men stood at the far end, pouring water down the troughs, and the line of women washed clothing in the sudsy one, then rinsed them off in the cleaner trough. No wonder the ground was so wet! At least here it smelled of suds and cleanliness.

The women had their sleeves rolled up to their upper arms, and most of them chatted idly as they worked, rubbing clothing against boards in the troughs. They were all dressed in those same brown skirts he had seen on the Aes Sedai. Gawyn rested his hand idly on his pommel, inspecting the women from behind.

“Which one?” Bryne asked.

“Just a moment,” Gawyn said. There were dozens of women. Had he really seen what he’d thought? Why would an Aes Sedai be in this camp, of all places? Surely Elaida wouldn’t send an Aes Sedai out to spy; their faces made them too easy to recognize.

Of course, if they were that easy to recognize, why couldn’t he spot her now?

And then he saw her. She was one of the only women who wasn’t chatting with those around her. She knelt with her head bowed, the yellow kerchief tied around her head, shading her face, a few locks of light hair sticking out from under the cloth. Her posture was so subservient that he almost missed her, but the shape of her body stood out. She was plump, and that kerchief was the only yellow one in the line.

Gawyn strode down the line of working women, several of whom stood up, hands on hips as they explained in no uncertain terms that “Soldiers with their big feet and awkward elbows” should stay out of the way of women at work. Gawyn ignored them, pressing on until he stood beside the yellow kerchief.

This is insane, Gawyn thought. *There’s never in all of history been an Aes Sedai who could force herself to adopt that kind of posture.*

Bryne stepped up beside him. Gawyn stooped down, trying to get a look at the woman’s face. She bowed down further, scrubbing more furiously at the shirt in the trough before her.

“Woman,” Gawyn said. “May I see your face?”

She didn't respond. Gawyn looked up at Bryne. Hesitantly, the general reached down and pushed back the plump woman's kerchief. The face underneath was *distinctly* Aes Sedai, with that unmistakable ageless quality. She didn't look up. She just kept working.

"I said it wouldn't work," said a hefty woman nearby. The woman rose and waddled down the line, wearing a tentlike dress of green and brown. " 'My Lady,' I told her, 'you can do as you wish, I ain't one to refuse such as you, but someone's going to notice you.' "

"You're in charge of the washwomen," Bryne said.

The large woman nodded firmly, her red curls bouncing. "Indeed I am, General." She turned to the Aes Sedai, curtsying. "Lady Tagren, I did warn you. Light burn me, but I did. I'm right sorry."

The woman called Tagren bowed her head. Were those tears on her cheeks? Was that even *possible*? What was going on?

"My Lady," Bryne said, squatting down beside her. "Are you Aes Sedai? If you are, and you command me to leave, I will do so without question."

A good way to approach it. If she really was Aes Sedai, she couldn't lie.

"I'm not Aes Sedai," the woman whispered.

Bryne looked up at Gawyn, frowning. What did it mean if she said that? An Aes Sedai couldn't lie. So. . . .

The woman softly said, "My name is Shemerin. I *was* Aes Sedai, once. But no more. Not since. . . ." She looked down again. "Please. Just leave me to work in my shame."

"I will," Bryne said. Then he hesitated. "But I'll need you to talk to some sisters from the camp first. They'd have my ears if I don't bring you in to speak with them."

The woman, Shemerin, sighed but stood up.

"Come on," Bryne said to Gawyn. "I have no doubt that they'll also want to talk to you. Best to get this over with quickly."

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CHAPTER 25

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In Darkness

Sheriam peeked into her dark tent, hesitant, but saw nothing inside. Allowing herself a smile of satisfaction, she stepped in and drew the flaps closed. Things were going quite well, for once.

Of course, she still checked her tent before she entered, searching for the one who had sometimes lurked inside. The one whom she'd never been able to sense, yet always felt as though she should. Yes, Sheriam still checked, and probably would for months yet—but there was no need, now. No phantom waited to punish her.

The square little tent was large enough to stand up in, with a cot along one side and a trunk along the other. There was just room for a desk, but it would so crowd the space that she'd barely be able to move. Besides, there was a perfectly acceptable desk nearby, in Egwene's unused tent.

There had been talk of giving that tent to someone else—most sisters had to share, though more tents were being brought in each week. However, the Amyrlin's tent was a symbol. As long as there was hope of Egwene's return, her tent should wait for her. It was kept neat by the inconsolable Chesa, whom Sheriam *still* caught crying about her mistress's captivity. Well, so long as Egwene was away, that tent was functionally Sheriam's for all but sleeping. After all, an Amyrlin's Keeper was expected to look after her affairs.

Sheriam smiled again, sitting down on her cot. Not long ago, her life had been a perpetual cycle of frustration and pain. Now that was over. Bless Romanda. Whatever else Sheriam thought of the fool woman, Romanda had been the one to chase Halima—and Sheriam's punishments—out of the camp.

Pain would come again. There was always agony and punishment involved in the service she gave. But she had learned to take the times of peace and cherish them.

At times, she wished she'd kept her mouth closed, not asked questions. But she had, and here she was. Her allegiances had brought her power, as promised. But nobody had warned her of the pain. Not infrequently she wished she'd chosen the Brown and hidden herself away in a library somewhere, never to see others. But now she was where she was. There was no use wondering about what could have happened.

She sighed, then removed her dress and changed her shift. She did so in the dark; candles and oil were both rationed, and with the rebels' funds drying up, she'd need to hide away what she had for later use.

She climbed onto the cot, pulling up the blanket. She wasn't so naive as to feel *guilty* about the things she'd done. Every sister in the White Tower tried to get ahead; that's what life was about! There wasn't an Aes Sedai who wouldn't stab her sisters in the back if she thought it would give her advantage. Sheriam's friends were just a little more . . . practiced at it.

But why had the end of days had to come *now* of all times? Others in her association spoke of the glory and great honor of being alive at this time, but Sheriam didn't agree. She'd joined to rise in White Tower politics, to have the power to punish those who spited her. She'd never wanted to participate in some final reckoning with the Dragon Reborn, and she'd certainly never desired to have *anything* to do with the Chosen!

But nothing could be done now. Best to enjoy the peace of being free of both the beatings and Egwene's self-righteous pratings. Yes indeed. . . .

There was a woman with great strength in the Power standing outside her tent.

Sheriam snapped her eyes open. She could sense other women who could channel, just like any other sister. *Bloody ashes!* she thought nervously, squeezing her eyes shut. *Not again!*

The tent flaps rippled. Sheriam opened her eyes to find a jet-black figure standing above her cot; slivers of moonlight passing through the fluttering tent flaps were just enough to outline the figure's form. It was clothed in an unnatural darkness, ribbons of black cloth fluttering behind it, the face obscured by a deep blackness. Sheriam gasped and threw herself from the cot, making obeisance on the canvas tent bottom. There was barely room enough for her to kneel. She cringed, expecting the pain to come upon her again.

"Ah . . ." a rasping voice said. "Very good. You are obedient. I am pleased."

It wasn't Halima. Sheriam had never been able to sense Halima, who it appeared had been channeling *saidin* all along. Also, Halima had never come in such a . . . dramatic way.

Such strength! It seemed likely that this was one of the Chosen. Either that, or at least a very powerful servant of the Great Lord, far above Sheriam. That worried her to the bone, and she trembled as she bowed. "I live to serve, Great Mistress," Sheriam said quickly. "I, who am blessed to bow before you, to live during these times, to—"

"Stop your babbling," the voice growled. "You are well placed in this camp, I understand?"

"Yes, Great Mistress," Sheriam said. "I am the Keeper of the Chronicles."

The figure sniffed. "Keeper to a ragged bunch of would-be Aes Sedai rebels. But that is no matter. I have need of you."

"I live to serve, Great Mistress," Sheriam repeated, growing more worried. What did this creature want of her?

"Egwene al'Vere. She must be deposed."

"What?" Sheriam asked, startled. A switch of Air cracked against her back, and it burned. Fool! Did she want to get herself killed? "My apologies, Great Mistress," she said quickly. "Forgive my outburst. But it was by orders from one of the Chosen that I helped raise her as Amyrlin in the first place!"

"Yes, but she has proven to have been a . . . poor choice. We needed a child, not a woman with merely the face of a child. She must be removed. You will make certain this group of foolish rebels stops supporting her. And end those blasted meetings in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. How is it so many of you get there?"

"We have *ter'angreal*," Sheriam said, hesitantly. "Several in the shape of an amber plaque, several others in the shape of an iron disc. Then a handful of rings."

"Ah, sleepweavers," the figure said. "Yes, those could be useful. How many?"

Sheriam hesitated. Her first instinct was to lie or hedge—this seemed like information she could hold over the figure. But lying to one of the Chosen? A poor choice. "We had twenty," Sheriam said truthfully. "But one was with the woman Leane, who was captured. That leaves us with nineteen." Just enough for Egwene's meetings in the World of Dreams—one for each of the Sitters and one for Sheriam herself.

"Yes," the figure hissed, shrouded in darkness. "Useful indeed. Steal the sleepweavers, then give them to me. This rabble has no business treading where the Chosen walk."

"I. . . ." Steal the *ter'angreal*? How was she going to manage *that*? "I live to serve, Great Mistress."

“Yes you do. Do these things for me, and you will find yourself greatly rewarded. Fail me. . . .” The figure contemplated for a moment. “You have three days. Each of the sleepweavers you fail to acquire in that time will cost you a finger or a toe.” With that, the Chosen opened a gateway right in the middle of the room, then vanished through it. Sheriam caught a glimpse of the familiar tiled hallways of the White Tower on the other side.

Steal the sleepweavers! All nineteen of them? In three days? *Darkness above!* Sheriam thought. *I should have lied about the number we had! Why didn’t I lie?*

She remained kneeling, breathing in and out, for a long time, thinking about her predicament. Her period of peace was at an end, it appeared.

It had been brief.

* * *

“She will be tried, of course,” Seaine said. The soft-spoken White sat on a chair provided for her by the two Reds guarding Egwene’s cell.

The cell door was open, and Egwene sat on a stool inside—also provided by the Reds. Those two guards, plump Cariandre and stern Patrinda, watched carefully from the hallway, both holding the Source and maintaining Egwene’s shield. They looked as if they expected her to dart away, scrambling for freedom.

Egwene ignored them. Her two days of imprisonment had not been pleasant, but she would suffer them with dignity. Even if they locked her away in a tiny room with a door that wouldn’t let in light. Even if they refused to let her change from the bloodied novice dress. Even if they beat her each day for how she had treated Elaida. Egwene would *not* bow.

The Reds reluctantly allowed her visitors, as stipulated by Tower law. Egwene was surprised she *had* visitors, but Seaine wasn’t the only one who had come to her. Several had been Sitters. Curious. Nevertheless, Egwene was starved for news. How was the Tower reacting to Egwene’s imprisonment? Were the rifts between the Ajahs still deep and wide, or had her work started to bridge them?

“Elaida broke Tower law quite explicitly,” Seaine explained. “And it was witnessed by five Sitters of five different Ajahs. She has tried to forestall a trial, but was unsuccessful. However, there were some who listened to her argument.”

“Which was?” Egwene asked.

“That you are a Darkfriend,” Seaine said. “And, because of it, she expelled you from the Tower, and *then* beat you.”

Egwene felt a chill. If Elaida was able to get enough support for that argument. . . .

“It will not stand,” Seaine said, consolingly. “This is not some backward village, where the Dragon’s Fang scrawled on someone’s door is enough to convict.”

Egwene raised an eyebrow. She’d been raised in “some backward village,” and they’d had enough sense to look for more than rumors in convicting someone, no matter what the crime. But she said nothing.

“Proving that accusation is difficult by Tower standards,” Seaine said. “And so I suspect that she will not try to prove it in trial—partially because doing so would require her to let you speak for yourself, and I suspect that she’ll want to keep you hidden.”

“Yes,” Egwene said, eyeing the Reds lounging nearby. “You are probably right. But if she can’t prove I’m a Darkfriend and she couldn’t stop this from going to trial . . .”

“It is not an offense worthy of deposing her,” Seaine said. “The maximum punishment is formal censure from the Hall and penance for a month. She would retain the shawl.”

But would lose a great deal of credibility, Egwene thought. It was encouraging. But how to make certain that Elaida didn’t just hide her away? She had to keep the pressure on Elaida—Light-cursed difficult while locked away in her tiny cell each day! It had been only a short time so far, but already the lost opportunities grated on her.

“You will attend the trial?” Egwene asked.

“Of course,” Seaine said, even-tempered, as Egwene had come to expect from the White. Some Whites were all coolness and logic. Seaine was much warmer than that, but was still very reserved. “I *am* a Sitter, Egwene.”

“I assume that you’re still seeing the effects of the Dark One’s stirring?” Egwene shivered and glanced at her cell floor, remembering what had happened to Leane. Her own cell was far more austere than Leane’s, perhaps because of the accusations of her being a Darkfriend.

“Yes.” Seaine’s voice grew softer. “They seem to be getting worse. Servants dying. Food spoiling. Entire sections of the Tower rearranging at random. The second kitchen moved to the sixth level last night, moving an entire section of the Yellow Ajah quarters into the basement. It’s like what happened with the Browns earlier, and that one *still* hasn’t been worked out.”

Egwene nodded. With the way the rooms had shifted, those few novices whose rooms hadn’t moved suddenly now had assigned accommodations on the twenty-first and twenty-second levels, where Brown Ajah quarters had been. The Browns were, reluctantly, all moving down to the wing. Would it be a permanent change? Always before, the sisters had lived in the Tower proper, the novices and Accepted living in the wing.

“You have to bring these things up, Seaine,” Egwene said softly. “Keep reminding the sisters that the Dark One stirs and that the Last Battle approaches. Keep their attention on working together, not dividing.”

Behind Seaine, one of the Red sisters checked the candle on the table. The time allotted for Egwene to receive visitors was ending. She’d soon be locked away again; she could smell the dusty, unchanged straw behind her.

“You *must* work hard, Seaine,” Egwene said, rising as the Reds approached. “Do what I cannot. Ask the others to do so as well.”

“I will try,” Seaine said. She stood and watched as the Reds took Egwene’s stool, then gestured her back into the cell. The ceiling was too low for her to stand without stooping.

Egwene moved reluctantly, bending down. “The Last Battle comes, Seaine. Remember.”

The White nodded, and the door shut, locking Egwene into darkness. Egwene sat down. She felt so blind! What would happen at the trial? Even if Elaida was punished, what would be done with Egwene?

Elaida would try to have her executed. And she still had grounds, as Egwene had—by the White Tower’s definition—impersonated the Amyrlin Seat.

I must stay firm, Egwene told herself in the darkness. *I warmed this pot myself, and now I must boil in it, if that is what will protect the Tower.* They knew she continued to resist. That was all she could give them.

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CHAPTER 26

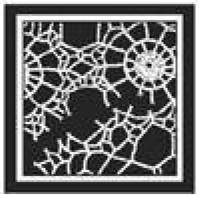

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A Crack in the Stone

Aviendha surveyed the manor grounds, swarming with people preparing to depart. Bashere's men and women were well trained for wetlanders, and they worked efficiently to stow their tents and prepare their gear. However, compared to the Aiel, the other wetlanders—those who weren't actual soldiers—were a mess. Camp women skittered this way and that, as if sure they would leave some task undone or some item unpacked. The messenger boys ran with their friends, trying to *look* busy so that they wouldn't have to do anything. The civilians' tents and equipment were only slowly being packed and stowed, and they would need horses, wagons and teams of drivers to get them all where they needed to go.

Aviendha shook her head. The Aiel brought only what they could carry, and their war band included only spears and Wise Ones. And when more than just spears were required for an extended campaign, all workers and craftspeople knew how to prepare themselves for departure with speed and efficiency. There was honor in that. Honor which demanded that each person be able to care for themselves and their own, not slowing the clan down.

She shook her head, turning back to her task. The only ones who truly lacked honor on a day like this were those who did not work. She dipped a finger into the pail of water on the ground in front of her, then raised her hand and let it hover over a second pail. A drop of water dripped free. She moved her hand and did it again.

It was the type of punishment in which no wetlander could have seen significance. They would have thought it easy work, sitting on the ground, leaning with her back against the wooden logs of the manor house. Moving her hand back and forth, emptying one pail and filling the other, one drop at a time. To them it would have been barely a punishment at all.

That was because wetlanders were often lazy. They would rather drip water into pails than carry rocks. Carrying rocks, however, involved activity—and activity was good for the mind and the body. Moving water was meaningless. Useless. It didn't allow her to stretch her legs or work her muscles. And she did it while the rest of the camp gathered tents for the march. That made the punishment ten times as shameful! She earned *toh* for every moment she did not help, and there was not a thing she could do about it.

Except move water. Drip, by drip, by drip.

It made her angry. Then that anger made her ashamed. The Wise Ones never let their emotions dominate them in such a way. She had to remain patient and try to understand why she was being punished.

Even trying to approach the problem made her want to scream. How many times could she go over the same conclusions in her mind? Perhaps she was too dense to sort it out. Perhaps she didn't deserve to be a Wise One.

She stuck her hand back in the bucket, then moved another drop of water. She didn't like what these punishments were doing to her. She was a warrior, even if she no longer carried the spear. She did not fear punishment, nor did she fear pain. But, more and more, she *did* fear that she would lose heart and become as useless as one who sandstared.

She *wanted* to become a Wise One, wanted it desperately. She was surprised to find that, for she'd never thought that she could desire anything with as much passion as she'd long ago wanted the spears. Yet as she had studied the Wise Ones during these last months, and her respect for them had grown, she had accepted herself as their equal, to help shepherd the Aiel in this most dangerous of days.

The Last Battle would be a test unlike any her people had ever known. Amys and the others were working to protect the Aiel, and Aviendha sat and moved drops of water!

"Are you all right?" a voice asked.

Aviendha started, looking up, reaching for her knife so abruptly that she nearly spilled the pails of water. A woman with short, dark hair stood in the shade of the building a short distance away. Min Farshaw's arms were folded and she wore a coat the color of cobalt with silver embroidery. She wore a scarf at her neck.

Aviendha settled back down, releasing her knife. Now she was letting wetlanders sneak up on her? "I am well," she said, struggling to keep from blushing.

Her tone and actions should have indicated that she didn't wish to be shamed by conversation, but Min didn't seem to notice that. The woman turned and looked out over the camp. "Don't . . . you have anything to be doing?"

Aviendha could not suppress the blush this time. "I am doing what I should."

Min nodded, and Aviendha forced herself to still her breathing. She could not afford to grow angry at this woman. Her first-sister had asked her to be kind to Min. She decided not to take offense. Min didn't know what she was saying.

"I thought that I could talk to you," Min said, still looking out at the camp. "I'm not sure who else I could approach. I don't trust the Aes Sedai, and neither does he. I'm not sure he trusts anyone, now. Maybe not even me."

Aviendha glanced to the side, and saw that Min was watching Rand al'Thor as he moved through the camp, wearing a coat of black, gold-red hair ablaze in the afternoon light. He seemed to tower over the Saldaeans who attended him.

Aviendha had heard about the events the night before, when he had been attacked by Semirhage. One of the Shadowsouled themselves; Aviendha wished she had seen the creature before she was killed. She shuddered.

Rand al'Thor had fought and won. Though he acted the fool much of the time, he was a skilled—and lucky—warrior. Who else alive could claim to have personally defeated as many of the Shadowsouled as he had? There was much honor in him.

His fight had left him scarred in ways she did not yet understand. She could feel his pain. She'd felt it during Semirhage's attack, too, though at first she'd mistakenly thought it to be a nightmare. She'd quickly realized that she was wrong. No nightmare could be that terrible. She could still feel echoes of that incredible pain, those waves of agony, the frenzy inside of him.

Aviendha had raised the alarm, but not quickly enough. She had *toh* to him for her mistake; she would deal with that once she was finished with her punishments. If she ever *did* finish.

"Rand al'Thor will deal with his problems," she said, dripping more water.

"How can you say that?" Min asked, glancing at her. "Can't you feel his pain?"

"I feel each and every moment of it," Aviendha said through gritted teeth. "But he must face his own trials, just as I face mine. Perhaps there will be a day when he and I can face ours together, but that time is not now."

I must be his equal, first, she added in her head. *I will not stand beside him as his inferior.*

Min studied her, and Aviendha felt a chill, wondering what visions the woman saw. Her predictions of the future were said always to come true.

“You are not what I expected,” Min finally said.

“I have deceived you?” Aviendha said, frowning.

“No, not that,” Min said with a small laugh. “I mean, I was wrong about you, I guess. I wasn’t certain what to think, after that night in Caemlyn when . . . well, that night when we bonded Rand together. I feel close to you, yet distant from you at the same time.” She shrugged. “I guess I expected you to come looking for me the moment you got into camp. We had things to discuss. When you didn’t, I worried. I thought perhaps I had offended you.”

“You have no *toh* to me,” Aviendha said.

“Good,” Min said. “I still worry sometimes that we’ll . . . come to a confrontation.”

“And what good would a confrontation serve?”

“I don’t know,” Min said with a shrug. “I figured it would be the Aiel way. Challenge me to a fight of honor. For him.”

Aviendha snorted. “Fight over a man? Who would do such a thing? If you had *toh* toward me, perhaps I could demand that we dance the spears—but only if you were a Maiden. And only if I were still one too. I suppose that we could fight with knives, but it would hardly be a fair fight. What honor would there to be gained in fighting one with no skill?”

Min flushed, as if Aviendha had offered her an insult. What a curious reaction. “I don’t know about that,” Min said, flipping a knife from her sleeve and spinning it across her knuckles. “I’m hardly defenseless.” She made the knife vanish up her other sleeve. Why was it that the wetlanders always showed off such flourishes with their knives? Thom Merrilin had been prone to that as well. Didn’t Min understand that Aviendha could have slit the woman’s throat thrice over during the time it took to flash that knife like a street performer? Aviendha said nothing, however. Min was obviously proud of the skill, and there was no need to embarrass the woman.

“It is unimportant,” Aviendha said, continuing her work. “I would not fight with you unless you gave me grave insult. My first-sister considers you a friend, and I would like to do so as well.”

“All right,” Min said, folding her arms and looking back at Rand. “Well, I guess that’s a good thing. I have to admit, I don’t much like the idea of sharing.”

Aviendha hesitated, then dipped her finger into the pail. “Neither do I.” At least, she didn’t like the idea of sharing with a woman she didn’t know very well.

“Then what do we do?”

“We continue as we have,” Aviendha said. “You have what you wish, and I am occupied by other matters. When it becomes a different time, I will inform you.”

“That’s . . . straightforward of you,” Min said, looking confused. “You have other matters to occupy you? Like dipping your finger in buckets of water?”

Aviendha blushed again. “Yes,” she snapped. “Just like that. You will excuse me.” She stood and strode away, leaving the buckets. She knew that she should not have lost her temper, but she could not help it. Min, repeatedly pointing out her punishment. Her inability to decipher what the Wise Ones wished of her. Rand al’Thor, constantly putting himself into danger, and Aviendha unable to lift a finger to help him.

She could stand it no longer. She crossed the brown thatch of the manor green, clenching and unclenching her fists, keeping her distance from Rand. The way this day was going, he’d notice her wrinkled finger and ask why she had been soaking it! If he discovered that the Wise Ones had been punishing her, he would probably do something rash and make a fool of himself. Men were like that, Rand al’Thor most of all.

She stalked across the springy ground, the brown thatch patterned with square impressions where tents had stood, threading her way through wetlanders scurrying this way and that. She passed a line of soldiers tossing sacks of grain to the next and loading them in a wagon hitched to two thick-hoofed draft horses.

She kept moving, trying to keep herself from exploding. The truth was, she felt just as likely to do something “rash” as Rand al’Thor would be. Why? Why couldn’t she decipher what she was doing wrong? The other Aiel in the camp seemed as ignorant as she, though of course they had not spoken to her of the punishments. She remembered well seeing similar punishments when she’d been a Maiden, and had always known to stay out of Wise Ones’ business.

She rounded the wagon, and found herself heading toward Rand al'Thor again. He was talking with three of Davram Bashere's quartermasters, taller than each of them by a head. One of them, a man with a long black mustache, pointed toward the horselines and said something. Rand caught sight of Aviendha and raised his hand toward her, but she turned away quickly, moving toward the Aiel campsite at the north side of the green.

She ground her teeth, trying—unsuccessfully—to tame her anger. Did she not have a right to anger, if only at herself? The world was close to ending and she spent her days being punished! Ahead, she spotted a small cluster of Wise Ones—Amys, Bair and Melaine—standing beside a pile of brown tent packs. The tight, oblong bundles had straps for ease of carrying over the shoulder.

Aviendha should have returned to her pails and redoubled her efforts. But she did not. Like a child with a stick charging a narshcat, she stalked up to the Wise Ones, fuming.

"Aviendha?" Bair asked. "Have you finished your punishment already?"

"No I have not," Aviendha said, stopping in front of them, hands fists at her sides. Wind tugged at her shirt, but she let it flap. Hurrying camp workers—both Aiel and Saldaean—gave the group a wide berth.

"Well?" Bair asked.

"You are not learning quickly enough," Amys added, shaking her white-haired head.

"Not learning quickly enough?" Aviendha demanded. "I have learned everything you have asked of me! I have memorized every lesson, repeated every fact, performed every duty. I have answered all your questions and have seen you nod in approval at each answer!"

She stared them down before continuing. "I can channel better than any Aiel woman alive," she said. "I have left behind the spears, and I welcome my place among you. I have done my duty and sought honor on each occasion. Yet you continue to give me punishments! I will have no more of it. Either tell me what it is you wish of me or send me away."

She expected anger from them. She expected disappointment. She expected them to explain that a mere apprentice was not to question full Wise Ones. She expected, at least, to be given greater punishment for her temerity.

Amys glanced at Melaine and Bair. “It is not we who punish you, child,” she said, seeming to choose her words with care. “These punishments come by your own hand.”

“Whatever I have done,” Aviendha said, “I cannot see that it would have you make me *da’tsang*. You shame yourselves by treating me so.”

“Child,” Amys said, meeting her eyes. “Are you *rejecting* our punishments?”

“Yes,” she said, heart thumping. “I am.”

“You think your stakes as strong as ours, do you?” Bair asked, shading her aged face with her hand. “You presume to be our equal?”

Their equal? Aviendha thought, panic setting in. *I’m not their equal! I have years left to study. What am I doing?*

Could she back down now? Beg forgiveness, meet her *toh* somehow? She should hurry back to her punishment and move the waters. Yes! That is what she needed to do. She had to go and—

“I see no more reason to study,” she found herself saying instead. “If these punishments are all you have left to teach me, then I must assume that I have learned all that I must. I am ready to join you.”

She gritted her teeth, waiting for an explosion of furious incredulity. What was she thinking? She shouldn’t have let Min’s foolish talk rile her so.

And then Bair started to laugh.

It was a full-bellied sound, incongruous coming from the small woman. Melaine joined her, the sun-haired Wise One holding her stomach, slightly bulging from her pregnancy. “She took even longer than you, Amys!” Melaine exclaimed. “As stubborn a girl as I’ve ever seen.”

Amys’ expression was uncharacteristically soft. “Welcome, sister,” she said to Aviendha.

Aviendha blinked. “What?”

“You are one of us now, girl!” Bair said. “Or soon will be.”

“But I defied you!”

“A Wise One cannot allow others to step upon her,” Amys said. “If she comes into the shade of our sisterhood thinking like an apprentice, then she will never see herself as one of us.”

Bair glanced at Rand al’Thor, who stood in the distance talking to Sarene. “I never realized how important our ways were until I studied these Aes Sedai. Those at the bottom simper and beg like hounds, and are ignored by those who consider themselves their betters. It is a wonder they achieve anything!”

“But there is rank among Wise Ones,” Aviendha said. “Is there not?”

“Rank?” Amys looked puzzled. “Some of us have more honor than others, earned by wisdom, actions and experience.”

Melaine held up a finger. “But it is important—*vital,* even—that each Wise One be willing to defend her own well. If she believes that she is right, she cannot let herself be shoved aside, even by other Wise Ones, no matter how aged or wise.”

“No woman is ready to join us until she has declared herself ready,” Amys continued. “She must present herself as our equal.”

“A punishment is not a true punishment unless you accept it, Aviendha,” Bair said, still smiling. “We thought you ready weeks ago, but you stubbornly continued to obey.”

“Almost, I began to think you prideful, girl,” Melaine added with a fond smile.

“Girl no longer,” Amys said.

“Oh, she’s still a girl,” Bair said. “Until one more thing is done.”

Aviendha felt dazed. They’d said she wasn’t learning quickly enough. Learning to stand up for herself! Aviendha had never allowed others to push her around, but these weren’t “others”—they were Wise Ones, and she the apprentice. What would have happened if Min hadn’t riled her? She would have to thank the woman, although Min didn’t realize what she’d done.

Until one more thing is done . . . “What must I still do?” Aviendha asked.

“Rhuidean,” Bair said.

Of course. A Wise One visited that most sacred city twice in her life. Once when she became an apprentice, once when she became a full Wise One.

“Things will be different, now,” Melaine said. “Rhuidean is no longer what it once was.”

“That is no reason to abandon the old ways,” Bair replied. “The city may be open, but nobody will be foolish enough to walk through the pillars. Aviendha, you must—”

“Bair,” Amys cut in, “if it is well with you, I would prefer to tell her.”

Bair hesitated, then nodded. “Yes, of course. It is only right. We turn our backs on you now, Aviendha. We will not see you again until you return to us as a sister returning from a long journey."

"A sister we had forgotten that we knew," Melaine said, smiling. The two turned from her, then Amys began to walk toward the Traveling ground. Aviendha hurried to catch up.

"You may wear your clothing this time," Amys said, "as it is the mark of your station. Normally, I would suggest that you travel to the city by foot, even though we know of Traveling now, but I think that custom is best bent in this case. Still, you should not Travel directly to the city. I suggest Traveling to Cold Rocks Hold and walk from there. You must spend time in the Three-fold Land to contemplate your journey."

Aviendha nodded. "I will need a waterskin and supplies there."

"Ready and waiting for you at the hold," Amys said. "We've been expecting you to leap this chasm soon. You should have leapt it days ago, considering all the hints we gave you." She eyed Aviendha, who glanced down at the ground.

"You have no reason for shame," Amys said. "That burden is upon us. Despite Bair's joking, you did well. Some women spend months and months being punished before deciding that they have had enough. We had to be hard on you, child—harder than I've ever seen a ready apprentice treated. There is just so little time!"

"I understand," Aviendha said. "And . . . thank you."

Amys snorted. "You forced us to be *very* creative. Remember this time you spent and the shame you felt, for it is the shame any *da'tsang* will know, should you consign them to their fate. And they cannot escape it simply by demanding release."

"What do you do if an apprentice declares herself ready to be a Wise One during her first few months of training?"

"Strap her a few times and set her digging holes, I suspect," Amys said. "I don't know of that ever happening. The closest was Sevanna."

Aviendha had wondered why the Wise Ones had accepted the Shaido woman without complaint. Her declaration had been enough: and so Amys and the others had been forced to accept her.

Amys pulled her shawl close. "There is a bundle for you with the Maidens guarding the Traveling ground. Once you reach Rhuidean, travel to the center of the city. You will find the pillars of glass. Pass through the center of them, then return here. Spend well your days running to the city.

We pushed you hard so that you would have this time for contemplation. It is likely the last you will have for some while."

Aviendha nodded. "The battle comes."

"Yes. Return quickly once you pass through the pillars. We will need to discuss how to best handle the *Car'a'carn*. He has . . . changed since last night."

"I understand," Aviendha said, taking a deep breath.

"Go," Amys said, "and return." She put emphasis on the final word. Some women did not survive Rhuidean.

Aviendha met Amys' eyes, and nodded. Amys had been a second mother to her in many ways. She was rewarded by a rare smile. Then Amys turned her back to Aviendha, just as the other two had.

Aviendha took another deep breath, glancing back across the trampled grass before the manor house to where Rand spoke with the quartermasters, his expression stern, the arm missing a hand held folded behind his back, the other arm gesturing animatedly. She smiled at him, though he wasn't looking in her direction.

I will be back for you, she thought.

Then she trotted to the Traveling ground, collected the pack and wove a gateway that would deposit her a safe distance from Cold Rocks Hold, beside a rock formation known as the Maiden's Spear, from which she could run to the hold and prepare herself. The gateway opened to the familiar, dry air of the Waste.

She ducked through the gateway, exulting—finally—in what had just happened.

Her honor had returned.

"I came out through a small watergate, Aes Sedai," Shemerin said, bowing her head before the others in the tent. "In truth, it wasn't so difficult, once I left the Tower and got into the city. I didn't dare leave by one of the bridges. I couldn't let the Amyrlin know what I was doing."

Romanda watched, arms folded. Her tent was lit by two brass lamps, flames dancing at the tips. Six women listened to the runaway's story. Lelaine was there, for all that Romanda had tried to keep her from hearing about the meeting. Romanda had hoped that the slender Blue would be too busy basking in her status in camp to bother with such a seemingly trivial event.

Beside her was Siuan. The former Amyrlin had latched herself on to Lelaine with the strength of a barnacle. Romanda was well enough pleased with the newfound ability to Heal a stilling—she *was* Yellow after all—but a part of her wished it hadn't happened to Siuan. As if Lelaine weren't bad enough to deal with. Romanda had not forgotten Siuan's crafty nature, even if so many others in camp seemed to have done so. Lesser strength in the Power did not mean decreased capacity for scheming.

Sheriam was there, of course. The red-haired Keeper sat beside Lelaine. Sheriam had been withdrawn lately, and barely maintained the dignity of an Aes Sedai. Foolish woman. She needed to be removed from her place; everyone could see that. If Egwene ever returned—and Romanda prayed that she did, if only because it would upset Lelaine's plans—then there would be an opportunity. A new Keeper.

The other person in the tent was Magla. Romanda and Lelaine had argued—with control, of course—over who would be first to interrogate Shemerin. They'd decided that the only fair way was to do it together. Because Shemerin was Yellow, Romanda had been able to call the meeting in her own tent. It had been a shock when Lelaine had shown up with not just Siuan but Sheriam in tow. But they'd never said how many attendants they could bring. And so Romanda was left with only Magla. The thick-shouldered woman sat beside Romanda, listening quietly to the confession. Should Romanda have sent for someone else? It would have looked very obvious, delaying the meeting for that.

It wasn't really an interrogation, however. Shemerin spoke freely, without resisting questions. She sat on a small stool before them. She'd refused a cushion for it. Romanda had rarely seen a woman as determined to punish herself as this poor child.

Not a child, Romanda thought. *A full Aes Sedai, whatever she says. Burn you, Elaida, for turning one of* us *into this!*

Shemerin had been Yellow. Burn it, she *was* Yellow. She'd been talking to them for the better part of an hour now, answering questions about the status of the White Tower. Siuan had been the first to ask how the woman had come to escape.

"Please forgive me for seeking work in the camp without coming to you, Aes Sedai," Shemerin said, head bowed. "But I have fled the Tower against the law. As an Accepted leaving without permission, I am a runaway. I knew I would be punished if discovered.

"I have stayed in this area because it is so familiar, and I cannot let it go. When your army came, I saw a chance for work, and I took it. But please, do not force me to go back. I will not be a danger. I will seek a life as a normal woman, careful not to use my abilities."

"You are Aes Sedai," Romanda said, trying to keep the edge out of her voice. This woman's attitude lent much credence to the things Egwene said about Elaida's power-hungry reign in the Tower. "No matter what Elaida says."

"I. . . ." Shemerin just shook her head. Light! She never *had* been the most poised of Aes Sedai, but it was shocking to see her fallen so far.

"Tell me about this watergate," Siuan said, leaning forward in her chair. "Where could we find it?"

"On the southwestern side of the city, Aes Sedai," Shemerin said. "About five minutes' walk eastward from where the ancient statues of Eleyan al'Landerin and her Warders stand." She hesitated, suddenly seeming anxious. "But it is a small gate. You couldn't take an army through it. I only know of it because I had the duty of caring for the beggars who live there."

"I want a map anyway," Siuan said, then she glanced at Lelaine. "At least, I think we should have one."

"It is a wise idea," Lelaine said in a nauseatingly magnanimous tone.

"I do want to know more of your . . . situation," Magla said. "How is it Elaida could *think* that demoting a sister was wise? Egwene did speak of this event, and I did find it incredible then, too. What was Elaida's thought?"

"I . . . cannot speak for the Amyrlin's thought," Shemerin said. She cringed as the women in the room gave her a set of not-so-subtle glares at calling Elaida the Amyrlin. Romanda didn't join in. Something small was creeping beneath the canvas floor of the tent, moving from one corner toward the center of the room. Light! Was that a mouse? No, it was too small. Perhaps a cricket. She shifted uncomfortably.

"But surely you did do something to earn her ire," Magla said. "Something worthy of such treatment?"

"I. . . ." Shemerin said. She kept glancing at Siuan for some reason.

Fool woman. Romanda almost thought Elaida had made the right move. Shemerin should never have been given the shawl. Of course, demoting her to Accepted was no way to handle the situation either. The Amyrlin couldn't be given that much power.

Yes, that was definitely something under the canvas, determinedly pushing its way to the center of the tent, a tiny lump moving in jerks and starts.

"I was weak before her," Shemerin finally said. "We were speaking of . . . events in the world. I could not stomach them. I did not show poise befitting an Aes Sedai."

"That's it?" Lelaine asked. "You didn't plot against her? You didn't contradict her?"

Shemerin shook her head. "I was loyal."

"I find that hard to believe," Lelaine said.

"I believe her," Siuan said dryly. "Shemerin showed well enough she was in Elaida's pocket on several occasions."

"This do be a dangerous precedent," Magla noted. "Burn my soul, but it do."

"Yes," Romanda agreed, watching the canvas-covered whatever-it-was inch along before her. "I suspect she used poor Shemerin as an example, acclimating the White Tower to the concept of demotion. That will let her use it on those who are actually her enemies."

The conversation hit a lull. The Sitters who supported Egwene would likely head the list of those to be demoted, if Elaida retained her power and the Aes Sedai reconciled.

"Is that a mouse?" Siuan asked, looking down.

"It's too small," Romanda said. "And it's not important."

"Small?" Lelaine said, leaning down.

Romanda frowned, glancing at the spot again. It *did* seem to have grown larger. In fact—

The bump jerked suddenly, pushing upward. The canvas floor split, and a thick-bodied cockroach—as wide as a fig—scrambled through. Romanda pulled back in revulsion.

The roach skittered across the canvas, antennae twitching. Siuan took off her shoe to swat it. But the bottom of the tent bubbled up near the rip, and a second cockroach climbed through. Then a third. And then a wave of them, pouring through the split like too-hot tea sprayed from a mouth. A black and brown carpet of scrambling, scratching, scurrying creatures, pushing over one another in their hurry to get out.

The women screeched in revulsion, throwing back stools and chairs as they stood. Warders were in the room a moment later; broad-shouldered Rorik bonded to Magla, and that coppery-skinned stone of a man was Burin Shaeren, bonded to Lelaine. They had swords drawn at the screams, but the cockroaches seemed to stump them. They stood, staring at the stream of filthy insects.

Sheriam hopped up on her chair. Siuan channeled and began to squash the creatures closest to her. Romanda hated to use the One Power for death, even on such vile creatures, but she too found herself channeling Air and smashing the insects in swaths, but the creatures were pouring in too quickly. Soon the ground was swarming with them, and the Aes Sedai were forced to scramble out of the tent and into the quiet darkness of the camp. Rorik pulled the flaps shut, though that wouldn't stop the insects from squeezing out.

Outside, Romanda couldn't stop herself from running her fingers through her hair, just in case, to make certain none of the creatures had gotten into it. She shivered as she imagined the creatures scrambling over her body.

"Is there anything in the tent that is dear to you?" Lelaine asked, looking back at the tent. Through the lamplight, she could see the shadowy insects scurrying up the walls.

Romanda spared a thought for her journal, but knew that she'd never be able to touch those pages after her tent had been infested this way. "Nothing that I'd care to keep now," she said, weaving Fire. "And nothing I can't replace."

The others joined her, and the tent burst into flames, Rorik jumping back as they channeled. Romanda thought she heard the insects popping and sizzling inside. The Aes Sedai moved back from the sudden heat. In moments, the entire tent was an inferno. Women rushed out of nearby tents to look.

"I do no think that was natural," Magla said softly. "Those did be four-spine roaches. Sailors do see them on ships that visit Shara."

"Well, it isn't the worst we've seen from the Dark One," Siuan said, folding her arms. "And we'll see worse yet, mark my words." She eyed Shemerin. "Come, I want that map from you."

They left with Rorik and the others, who would alert the camp that the Dark One had touched it this night. Romanda stood watching the tent burn.

Soon it was only smoldering coals.

Light, she thought. *Egwene is right*. *It* is *coming*. *Fast*. And the girl was imprisoned now; she'd met with the Hall the night before in the World of Dreams, informing them of her disastrous dinner with Elaida and the aftermath of insulting the false Amyrlin. And yet Egwene still refused rescue.

Torches were lit and Warders roused as a precaution against more evil. She smelled smoke. That was the remains of all she had owned in the world.

The Tower needed to be whole. Whatever it took. Would she be willing to bow before Elaida to make that happen? Would she put on an Accepted dress again if it would bring unity for the Last Battle?

She couldn't decide. And that disturbed her nearly as much as those scuttling roaches had.

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CHAPTER 27

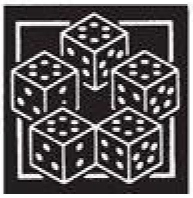

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The Tipsy Gelding

Mat didn't escape the camp without the Aes Sedai, of course. Bloody women.

He rode down the ancient stone roadway, no longer followed by the Band. He was, however, accompanied by the three Aes Sedai, two Warders, five soldiers, Talmanes, a pack animal and Thom. At least Aludra, Amathera and Egeanin hadn't insisted on coming. This group was too big as it was.

The three-needle pines guarded the road, smelling of pine sap, and the air was melodic with mountain finches' calls. It was still several hours until sundown; he'd halted the Band near noon. He rode slightly ahead of the clustered Aes Sedai and Warders. After he'd refused Joline horses and funds, they hadn't been *about* to let him win another point. Not when they could force him to take them down to the village, where they could spend at least one night in an inn with soft beds and warm baths.

He didn't argue too loudly. He hated to have more tongues wagging about the Band, and women *did* gossip, even Aes Sedai. But there was little chance of the Band passing without causing a stir in the village anyway. If any Seanchan patrols made it through these twisting mountain paths. . . . Well, Mat would just have to keep the Band on a steady pace northward and that was that. No use crying about it.

Besides, he was beginning to feel right again, riding Pips down that road, spring breeze crisp in the air. He'd taken to wearing one of his older coats, red with brown trim, unbuttoned to show his old tan shirt beneath.

This was what it was about. Traveling to new villages, throwing dice in the inns, pinching a few barmaids. He would *not* think of Tuon. Flaming Seanchan. She'd be all right, wouldn't she?

No. His hands almost itched to be at the dicing. It had been far too long since he'd sat down in a corner somewhere and thrown with the ordinary sort. They'd be a little dirtier of face and coarser of language, but as good of heart as any man. Better than most lords.

Talmanes rode just ahead. He'd probably wish for a nicer tavern than Mat, a place to join a game of cards rather than throwing dice. But they might not have much of a choice. The village was of decent size, probably worthy of being called a town, but was unlikely to have more than three or four inns. Their choices would be limited.

Decent size, Mat thought, grinning to himself as he took off his hat and scratched at the back of his head. Hinderstap would *only* have three or four inns, and that made it a “small” town. Why, Mat could remember when he’d thought Baerlon a large city, and it probably wasn’t much larger than this Hinderstap!

A horse pulled up beside him. Thom was looking at that blasted letter again. The lanky gleeman’s face was thoughtful, his white hair stirring in the breeze, as he stared down at the words. As if he hadn’t read them a thousand times already.

“Why don’t you put that away?” Mat said. Thom looked up. It had taken some talking to get the gleeman to come down to the village, but Thom needed it, needed some distraction.

“I mean it, Thom,” Mat said. “I know you’re eager to go for Moiraine. But it’ll be weeks before we can break away, and reading over those words won’t do anything but make you anxious.”

Thom nodded and folded the paper with reverent fingers. “You’re right, Mat. But I’d been carrying this letter for months. Now that I’ve shared it, I feel. . . . Well, I just want to be on with it.”

“I know,” Mat said, looking up toward the horizon. Moiraine. The Tower of Ghenjei. Mat almost felt as if he could see the building out there, looming. That’s where his path pointed, and Caemlyn was just a stepping-stone along the way. If Moiraine was still alive . . . Light, what would that mean? How would Rand react?

The rescue was another reason Mat felt he needed a good night dicing. Why had he agreed to go with Thom into the tower? Those burning snakes and foxes—he had no desire to see *them* again.

But . . . he also couldn’t let Thom go alone. There was an inevitability to it. As if a part of Mat had known all along that he had to go back and face those creatures again. They’d gotten the better of him twice now, and the Eelfinn had tied strings around his brain with those memories in his head. He had a debt to settle with them, that was for certain.

Mat had little love for Moiraine, but he wouldn’t leave her to them, no matter that she was Aes Sedai. Bloody ashes. He’d probably be tempted to ride in and save one of the Forsaken themselves if they were trapped there.

And . . . maybe one was. Lanfear had fallen through that same portal. Burn him, what would he do if he found her there? Would he really rescue her as well?

You're a fool, Matrim Cauthon. Not a hero. Just a fool.

"We'll get to Moiraine, Thom," Mat said. "You have my word, burn me. We'll find her. But we have to see the Band someplace safe, and we *need* information. Bayle Domon says he knows where the tower is, but I won't be comfortable until we can go to some large city and sniff for rumors and stories about this tower. Someone has to know something. Besides, we'll need supplies, and I doubt we'll find what we need in these mountain villages. We need to reach Caemlyn if possible, though maybe we'll stop at Four Kings on the way."

Thom nodded, though Mat could see he chafed at leaving Moiraine trapped, being tortured or who knows what. Thom's brilliant blue eyes got a far-off look to them. Why did he care so much? What was Moiraine to him but another Aes Sedai, one of those who had cost the life of Thom's nephew?

"Burn it," Mat said. "We're not supposed to be thinking about things like this, Thom! We're going to have a good night of dice and laughter. There'll probably be some time for a song or two as well."

Thom nodded, face growing lighter. He had his harp case strapped to the back of his horse; it would be good to see him open it again. "You plan to try juggling for your supper again, apprentice?" Thom asked, eyes twinkling.

"Better than trying to play that blasted flute," Mat grumbled. "Never was very good at that. Rand took to it right fine, though, didn't he?"

Colors swirled in Mat's head, resolving to an image of Rand, sitting alone in a room by himself. He sat splay-legged in a richly embroidered shirt, a coat of black and red tossed aside and crumpled next to the log wall beside him. Rand had one hand to his forehead as if trying to squeeze away the pain of a headache. His other was . . .

That arm ended in a stump. The first time Mat had seen that—a few weeks back—it had shocked him. How had Rand lost the hand? The man barely seemed alive, propped up like that, unmoving. Though his lips did seem to be moving, mumbling or muttering. *Light!* Mat thought. *Burn you, what are you doing to yourself?*

Well, at least Mat wasn't near him. *Count your fortunes in that,* Mat told himself. Life hadn't been so easy lately, but he *could* have been stuck near Rand. Sure, Rand was a friend. But Mat didn't mean to be there when Rand went insane and killed everyone he knew. There was friendship, and then there was stupidity. They'd fight together at the Last Battle, of course, no helping that. Mat just hoped to be on the other side of that battlefield from any *saidin*-wielding madmen.

"Ah, Rand," Thom said. "That boy could have made a life for himself as a gleeman, I warrant. Maybe even a proper bard, if he'd started when he was younger."

Mat shook his head, dispelling the vision. *Burn you, Rand. Leave me alone.*

"Those were better days, weren't they, Mat?" Thom smiled. "The three of us, traveling down the river Arinelle."

"Myrddraal chasing us for reasons unknown," Mat added grimly. Those days hadn't been so easy either. "Darkfriends trying to stab us in the back every time we turned around."

"Better than *gholam* and Forsaken trying to kill us."

"That's like saying you're grateful to have a noose around your neck instead of a sword in your gut."

"At least you can escape the noose, Mat." Thom knuckled his long, white mustache. "Once the sword is stuck into you, there's not much you can do about it."

Mat hesitated, then found himself laughing. He rubbed at the scarf around his neck. "I suppose you're right at that, Thom. I suppose you're right. Well, for today why don't we forget about all of that? We'll go back and pretend things are like they once were!"

"I don't know if that's possible, lad."

"Sure it is," Mat said stubbornly.

"Oh?" Thom asked, amused. "You're going to go back to thinking that old Thom Merrilin is the wisest, most well traveled man you've ever known? You'll play the gawking peasant again, clinging to my coat every time we pass a village with more than one inn in it?"

"Here now. I wasn't so bad as all that."

"I hasten to differ, Mat," Thom said, chuckling.

"I don't remember much." Mat scratched at his head again. "But I do recall that Rand and I did right well for ourselves after we split up with you. We made it to Caemlyn, at least. Brought your flaming harp back to you unharmed, didn't we?"

"I noticed a few nicks in the frame. . . ."

"Burn you, none of that!" Mat said, pointing at him. "Rand practically *slept* with that harp. Wouldn't *think* of selling it, even when we were so hungry we'd have gnawed on our own boots if we hadn't needed them to get to the next town." Those days were fuzzy to Mat, full of holes, like an iron bucket left too long to rust. But he had pieced together some things.

Thom chuckled. "We can't go back, Mat. The Wheel has turned, for better or worse. And it will keep on turning, as lights die and forests dim, storms call and skies break. Turn it will. The Wheel is not hope, and the Wheel does not care, the Wheel simply *is*. But so long as it turns, *folk* may hope, folk may care. For with light that fades, another will eventually grow, and each storm that rages must eventually die. As long as the Wheel turns. As long as it turns. . . ."

Mat guided Pips around a particularly deep cleft in the broken roadway. Ahead, Talmanes chatted with several of their guards. "That has the sound of a song about it, Thom."

"Aye," Thom said, almost with a sigh. "An old one, forgotten by most. I've discovered three versions of it, all with the same words, set to different tunes. I guess the area has me thinking of it; it's said that Doreille herself penned the original poem."

"The area?" Mat said with surprise, glancing at the three-needle pines.

Thom nodded, thoughtful. "This road is old, Mat. Ancient. Probably was here before the Breaking. Landmarks like this have a tendency to find their way into songs and stories. I think this area is what was once called the Splintered Hills. If that's true, then we're in what was once Coremanda, right near the Eagle's Reaches. I bet you if we climbed a few of those taller hills, we'd find old fortifications."

"And what does that have to do with Doreille?" Mat asked, uncomfortably. She'd been Queen of Aridhol.

"She visited here," Thom said. "Penned several of her finest poems in the Eagle's Reaches."

Burn me, Mat thought. *I remember.* He remembered standing on the walls of a high fort, cold on the mountaintop, looking down at a long, twisting roadway, broken and shattered, and an army of men with violet pennants charging up the hillside into a rain of arrows. The Splintered Hills. A woman on the balcony. The Queen herself.

He shivered, banishing the memory. Aridhol had been one of the ancient nations that had stood long ago, when Manetheren had been a power. The capital of Aridhol had another name. Shadar Logoth.

Mat hadn’t felt the pull of the ruby dagger in a very long time. He was nearly beginning to forget what it had been like to be tied to it, if it was possible to forget such a thing. But sometimes he remembered that ruby, red like his own blood. And the old lust, the old desire, would seep into him again . . .

Mat shook his head, forcing down those memories. Burn it, he was supposed to be enjoying himself!

“What a time we’ve had,” Thom said idly. “I feel old these days, Mat, like a faded rug, hung out to dry in the wind, hinting of the colors it once showed so vibrantly. Sometimes, I wonder if I’m any use to you anymore. You hardly seem to need me.”

“What? Of course I need you, Thom!”

The aging gleeman eyed him. “The trouble with you, Mat, is that you’re actually *good* at lying. Unlike those other two boys.”

“I mean it! Burn me, but I do. I suppose you could run off and tell stories and travel like you used to. But things around here might run a lot less smoothly, and I sure would miss your wisdom. Burn me, but I would. A man needs friends he can trust, and I’d trust you with my life any day.”

“Why Matrim,” Thom said, looking up, eyes glimmering with mirth, “bolstering a man’s spirits when he’s down? Convincing him to stay and do what is important, rather than running off to seek adventure? That sounds downright *responsible*. What’s gotten into you?”

Mat grimaced. “Marriage, I guess. Burn me, but I’m not going to stop drinking or gambling!” Ahead, Talmanes turned around and glanced at Mat, then rolled his eyes.

Thom laughed, watching Talmanes. “Well, lad, I didn’t mean to get your spirits down. Just idle talk. I still have a few things I can show this world. If I really can free Moiraine . . . well, we’ll see. Besides, somebody needs to be here to watch, then put this all to song, someday. There will be more than one ballad that comes from all of this.”

He turned, rifling through his saddlebags. “Ah!” he said, pulling out his patchwork gleeman’s cloak. He threw it on with a flourish.

“Well,” Mat said, “when you write about us, you might find a few gold marks in it if you saw your way to include a nice verse about Talmanes. You know, something about how he has one eye that stares in strange directions, and how he often carries this scent about him which reminds one of a goat pen.”

“I heard that!” Talmanes called from ahead.

“I meant you to!” Mat called back.

Thom just laughed, plucking at his cloak, arranging it for best display. “I can’t promise anything.” He chuckled some more. “Though, if you don’t mind, Mat, I think I’ll separate from the rest of you once we get into the village. A gleeman’s ears may pick up information that won’t be spoken in the presence of soldiers.”

“Information would be nice,” Mat said, rubbing his chin. The trail turned up ahead; Vanin said they’d find the village just beyond the turn. “I feel as though I’ve been traveling through a tunnel for months now, with no sight or sound of the outside world. Burn me, but it would be nice to know where Rand is, if only to know where *not* to go.” The colors spun, showing him Rand—but the man was standing in a room with no view of the outside, giving Mat no clue as to where he might be.

“Life’s that tunnel most times, I’m afraid,” Thom said. “People expect a gleeman to bring information, so we pull it out and brush it off for display—but much of the ‘news’ we tell is just another batch of stories, in many cases less true than the ballads from a thousand years ago.”

Mat nodded.

“And,” Thom added, “I’ll see if I can dig up hints for the incursion.”

The Tower of Ghenjei. Mat shrugged. “We’re more likely to find what we need in Four Kings or Caemlyn.”

“Yes, I know. But Olver made me promise to check. If you hadn’t set Noal to keeping the boy distracted, I’d expect to open our saddlebags and find him in there. He really wanted to come.”

“A night dancing and gambling is no place for a boy,” Mat muttered. “I just wish I could trust the men back at camp not to corrupt him worse than a tavern would.”

“Well, he stayed back quietly enough once Noal got out the board.” Olver was convinced that if he played Snakes and Foxes enough, he’d pick out some secret strategy for defeating the Aelfinn and Eelfinn. “The lad still thinks he’s coming with us into the tower,” Thom said more quietly. “He knows he can’t be one of the three, but he plans to wait outside for us. Maybe burst in to save us if we don’t come back soon enough. I don’t want to be there when he discovers the truth.”

“I don’t intend to be there myself,” Mat said. Ahead, the trees broke wide into a small valley with green pastures rising high along the hills to the sides. A town of several hundred buildings was nestled between the slopes, a mountain stream running down the middle. The houses were of a deep gray stone, each with a prominent chimney, most of which curled with smoke. The roofs were sloped to deal with what were probably very snowy winters, though the only white still visible now was on distant peaks. Workers were already busy on several of the roofs replacing winter-damaged shingles, and goats and sheep grazed the hillsides, watched over by shepherd boys.

There were a few hours of light remaining, and other men worked on shopfronts and fences. Others strolled through the streets of the village, no urgency in their gait. Overall, the little town had a relaxing air of mixed industry and laziness.

Mat pulled up beside Talmanes and the soldiers. “That’s a nice sight,” Talmanes noted. “I was beginning to think every town in the world was either falling apart, packed with refugees or under the thumb of invaders. At least this one doesn’t seem likely to vanish on us . . .”

“Light send it so,” Mat said, shivering, thinking of the town in Altara that had vanished. “Anyway, let’s hope they don’t mind dealing with a few strangers.” He eyed the soldiers; all five were Redarms, among the best he had. “Three of you five, go with the Aes Sedai. I suspect that they’ll want to stay at a different inn from myself. We’ll meet up in the morning.”

The soldiers saluted, and Joline sniffed as she passed on her horse, pointedly not looking at Mat. She and the others headed down the incline in a little cluster, three of Mat’s soldiers following.

“That looks like an inn there,” Thom said, pointing toward a larger building on the eastern side of the village. “You’ll find me there.” He waved, then kicked his mount into a trot and rode on ahead, gleeman’s cloak streaming. Arriving first would give him the best chance at a dramatic entrance.

Mat glanced at Talmanes, who shrugged. The two of them made their way down the slope with two soldiers as an escort. Because of the bend in the road, they were approaching from the southwest. To the northeast of the village, the ancient roadway continued. It looked strange to have such a large road leading past a village like this, even if that road was old and broken. Master Roidelle claimed that it would lead them straight up into

Andor. It was too uneven to be used as a major highway, and the direction it led no longer passed major cities, so it had been forgotten. Mat blessed their luck in finding it, though. The main passages into Murandy had been crowded with Seanchan.

According to Roidelle's maps, Hinderstap specialized in producing goat's cheese and mutton for the various towns and manor lands in the region. The villagers should be used to outsiders. Indeed, several boys came running from the fields the moment they spotted Thom and his gleeman's cloak. He'd make a stir, but a familiar one. The Aes Sedai, though, would be memorable.

Ah, well, he thought as he and Talmanes rode down the grass-lined road. He would retain his good humor; this time, he would *not* let the Aes Sedai ruin it.

By the time Mat and Talmanes reached the village, Thom had already gathered a small crowd. He stood upright on his saddle and juggled three colored balls in his right hand while talking of his travels in the south. The villagers here wore vests and green cloaks of a deep, velvety cloth. They looked warm, though upon closer inspection, Mat noticed that many of them—cloaks, vests and trousers—had been torn, and carefully mended.

Another group of people, mostly women, had gathered around the Aes Sedai. Good; Mat had half-expected the villagers to be frightened. One of those standing at the side of Thom's group eyed Mat and Talmanes appraisingly. He was a sturdy fellow, with thick arms and linen sleeves that were rolled to the elbows despite the chill spring air. His arms curled with dark hair that matched his beard and the locks on his head.

"You have the look of a lord about you," the man said, approaching Mat.

"He's a pr—" Talmanes began before Mat cut him off hastily.

"I suppose I do at that," Mat said, keeping an eye on Talmanes.

"I'm Barlden, the mayor here," the man said, folding his arms. "You're welcome to come and trade. Be aware that we don't have much to spare."

"Surely you at least have some cheese," Talmanes said. "That's what you produce, isn't it?"

"All that hasn't molded or spoiled is needed for our custom," Mayor Barlden said. "That's just the way of things, these days." He hesitated. "But if you have cloth or clothing you'll trade, we might be able to scrape something up to feed you for the day."

Feed us for a day? Mat thought. *All thirteen of us?* He'd need to bring a wagonload back at least, not to mention the ale he'd promised his men.

"You still need to hear about the curfew. Trade, warm yourselves by the hearths for a time, but know that all outsiders *must* be out of the town by nightfall."

Mat glanced up at the cloud-covered sky. "But that's barely three hours away!"

"Those are our rules," Barlden said curtly.

"It's ridiculous," Joline said, turning away from the village women. She nudged her horse a little closer to Mat and Talmanes, her Warders—as always—shadowing her. "Master Barlden, we *cannot* agree to this foolish prohibition. I understand your hesitation during these dangerous times, but surely you can see that your rules should not apply here."

The man kept his arms folded and said nothing.

Joline pursed her lips, rearranging her hands on her reins so that her great serpent ring was prominently visible. "Does the symbol of the White Tower mean so little these days?"

"We respect the White Tower." Barlden looked at Mat. He *was* wise. Meeting the gaze of an Aes Sedai tended to make one's resolve weaken. "But our rules are strict, my Lady. I'm sorry."

Joline sniffed. "I suspect that your innkeepers are less than satisfied with this requirement. How are they to make ends meet if they can't rent rooms to travelers?"

"The inns are compensated," the mayor said gruffly. "Three hours. Do your business and be on your way. We mean to be friendly to all who pass our way, but we can't see our rules broken." With that, he turned and left. As he walked away, he was joined by a small group of burly men, several carrying axes. Not threateningly. Casually, as if they'd been out chopping wood, and just happened to be walking through town. Together. In the same direction as the mayor.

"I should say this is quite the welcome," Talmanes muttered.

Mat nodded. At that moment, the dice started rattling in his head. *Burn it!* He decided to ignore them. They were never any help anyway. "Let's go find a tavern," he said, heeling Pips forward.

"Still determined to make a night of it, eh?" Talmanes said, smiling as he joined Mat.

“We’ll see,” Mat said, listening to those dice despite himself. “We’ll see.”

Mat spotted three inns on his initial ride through the village. There was one at the end of the main thoroughfare, and it had two bright lanterns burning out front, even though night hadn’t yet fallen. Those whitewashed walls and clean glass windows would draw the Aes Sedai like moths to a flame. That would be the inn for traveling merchants and dignitaries unfortunate enough to find themselves in these hills.

But outsiders couldn’t stay the night now. How long had that prohibition been in place? How did these inns maintain themselves? They could still provide a bath and meal, but without renting rooms. . . .

Mat didn’t buy the mayor’s comment about inns being “compensated.” If they weren’t doing anything useful for the village, why pay them? It was just plain odd.

Anyway, Mat didn’t head for the nice inn, nor the one Thom had chosen. That one wasn’t on the main road, but was on a wide street just to the northeast. It would serve the average visitor, respectable men and women who didn’t like to spend what they didn’t have to. The building was well cared for; the beds would be clean, and the meals satisfactory. The locals would visit for drinks on occasion, mostly when they felt that their wives were keeping a close eye on them.

The last inn would have been the most difficult to find, had Mat not known where to look for it. It was three streets out from the center, in the back west corner of the village. No sign hung out front; just a wooden board carved with what looked like a drunken horse that sat inside one of the windows. None of those windows had glass.

Light and laughter came from inside. Most outsiders would have been made uncomfortable by the lack of an inviting sign and street lanterns near this inn. It was really more of a tavern than an inn; Mat doubted if it had ever held anything other than a few pallets in the back that one could rent for a copper. This was the place for working locals to relax. With evening approaching, many would have already made their way here. It was a place for community and for relaxation, a place for smoking a pinch of tabac with your friends. And for throwing a few games of dice.

Mat smiled and dismounted, then hitched Pips to the post outside.

Talmanes sighed. “You realize that they probably water their drinks.”

“Then we’ll have to order twice as many,” Mat said, undoing a few bags of coins from his saddle and stuffing them in pockets inside his coat. He gestured for his soldiers to stay and guard the horses. The pack animal carried a coin chest. It contained Mat’s personal stash: he wouldn’t risk the Band’s wages on gambling.

“All right, then,” Talmanes said. “But you realize that I’m going to make *certain* that you and I go to a proper tavern once we reach Four Kings. I’ll have you educated yet, Mat. You’re a prince now. You’ll need—”

Mat held up a hand, cutting Talmanes off. Then he pointed at the post. Talmanes sighed again and slid free of the saddle, then hitched his horse. Mat stepped up to the tavern door, took a deep breath, and entered.

Men crowded around tables, their cloaks draped over chairs or hung on pegs, their ripped and resewn vests unbuttoned, their sleeves rolled up. Why *did* people here wear clothing that was once so nice, yet now torn and patched? They had plenty of sheep, and should therefore have wool to spare.

Mat ignored the oddity for the moment. The men in this place played at dice, drank mugs of ale off of sticky tables, and slapped at the backsides of passing barmaids. They seemed exhausted, many of their eyes drooping with fatigue. But that was to be expected after a day’s work. Despite the tired eyes, there was an almost palpable chatter in the room, voices overlapping one another in low, rumbling murmurs. A few people looked up as Mat entered, and some of them frowned at his nice clothing, but most people paid him no heed.

Talmanes followed reluctantly, but he wasn’t the type of nobleman who minded rubbing shoulders with those of lower station. He’d visited his share of seedy taverns in his time, even if he had taken to complaining about Mat’s choices. And so Talmanes was as quick as Mat to pull a chair up to a table where a few men already sat. Mat smiled broadly and flashed gold, tossing it to the passing barmaid and demanding some drinks. *That* got some attention, both from those around the table and from Talmanes.

“What are you doing,” Talmanes hissed, leaning toward Mat. “You want to see us slit open the moment we stumble out of here?”

Mat just smiled. One of the nearby tables had a dice game going. Looked like Cat’s Paw—or, at least, that’s what it had been called the night Mat had first been taught it. They called it Third Gem in Ebou Dar, and he’d heard it called Feathers Aloft in Cairhien. It was the perfect game for his purposes. There was only one dicer in the game, with the crowd of onlookers betting against or for his tosses.

Mat took a deep breath, then pulled his chair over to the table, snapping a gold crown onto the wood directly in the center of a wet ring of ale made by the bottom of a mug, now held by a short fellow who'd lost most of his mousy hair, but what he did have hung long down around his collar. He almost choked on his ale.

"Care if I make a throw?" Mat said to the table's occupants.

"I . . . don't know if we can match that," said a man with a short black beard. "M'lord," he added belatedly.

"My gold against your silver," Mat said lightly. "I haven't had a good game of dice in ages."

Talmanes pulled his chair over, interested. He'd seen Mat do this before, putting down gold coins and winning silvers. Mat's luck made up for the difference, and he always came out far ahead. Sometimes he could come out ahead playing gold for coppers. That didn't make him much money. It only took so long before the men involved either ran out of coin or decided to stop playing. And Mat would be left with a handful of silvers and nobody to dice with.

That wouldn't help. The army had plenty of coin. It needed food, and so it was time to try something different. Several of the men set down silver coins. Mat shook the dice in his hands, then tossed. Blessedly, the dice came up with one showing a single pip and the other showing two. An instant loss.

Talmanes blinked, and the men around the table glanced at Mat, looking chagrined—as if embarrassed to have bet against a lord who obviously wasn't expecting to lose. That was an easy way to get oneself in trouble.

"Well, look at that," Mat said. "Guess you win. It's yours." He rolled the gold crown to the center of the table, to be split among the men who had bet against him, as per the rules.

"How about another?" Mat said, slapping down two gold crowns. There were more takers this time. Again, he threw and lost, nearly sending Talmanes into a choking fit. Mat had lost throws before—it happened, even to him. But two throws in a row?

He sent the two crowns rolling, and then he pulled out four. Talmanes placed a hand on his arm. "No offense, Mat," the man said in a quiet voice.

"But maybe you should stop. Everyone has an off night. Let's finish our drinks and go buy what supplies we can before night falls."

Mat just smiled and watched as the bets piled up against his four coins. He had to lay down a fifth, since so many people wanted in on the toss. He ignored Talmanes and threw, losing yet again. Talmanes groaned, then reached over and took a mug from the serving girl, who had finally arrived to fill Mat's order.

"Don't look so grim," Mat said softly, hefting the pouch in his hand as he reached for his own mug. "This is what I wanted."

Talmanes raised an eyebrow, lowering his mug.

Mat said, "I can lose when I want to, if it's for the best."

"How can losing be for the best?" Talmanes asked, watching the men argue about how to divide Mat's gold.

"Wait." Mat took a slurp of ale. It was as watered-down as Talmanes had feared. Mat turned back to the table, counting out a few more gold coins.

As the time passed, more and more people began gathering around the table. Mat made sure to win a few tosses—just as he had to lose a bit when spending a night winning, he didn't want to arouse any suspicions about his losing streak. Yet bit by bit, the coins in his pouches ended up in the hands of the men playing against him. Before long, all was silent in the tavern, men crowding around Mat and waiting their turn to bet against him. Sons and friends had run to grab their fathers and cousins, dragging them to The Tipsy Gelding—as the inn was called.

At one point—during a break in the throws while Mat was waiting for another mug of ale—Talmanes pulled him aside. "I don't like this, Mat," the wiry man said in a low voice, leaning in. Sweat had long since streaked the powder on his shaved forehead, and he'd wiped it away, leaving the skin bare.

"I told you." Mat took a swig of watery ale. "I know what I'm doing." Men cheered to the side as one of them drank three mugs, one after another. The air smelt of sweat and muddy ale, spilled to the wood floor then trampled by the boots of those arriving from the pastures.

"Not that," Talmanes said, glancing at the cheering men. "You can waste your coin if you want, so long as you spare a few coins to buy me a drink now and then. That's not what's bothering me, not anymore."

Mat frowned. "What?"

“Something feels wrong about these folk, Mat.” Talmanes spoke very softly, glancing over his shoulder. “While you’ve been playing, I’ve been talking to them. They don’t care about the world. The Dragon Reborn, the Seanchan, nothing. Not a care.”

“So?” Mat said. “They’re simple folk.”

“Simple folk should worry even *more*,” Talmanes said. “They’re trapped here between gathering armies. But these just shrug when I talk, then drink some more. It’s as if they’re . . . they’re *too* focused on their revelry. As if it’s all that matters to them.”

“Then they’re perfect,” Mat said.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Talmanes said, glancing at the window. “We’ve used an hour, probably more. Maybe we should—”

At that moment, the door of the inn slammed open and the burly mayor entered, accompanied by the men who had joined him earlier, although they’d left their axes behind. They didn’t look pleased to find half the village inside the tavern gambling with Mat.

“Mat,” Talmanes began again.

Mat raised a hand, cutting him off. “This is what we’ve been waiting for.”

“It is?” Talmanes asked.

Mat turned back to the dicing table, smiling. He’d gone through most of his bags of coins, but he had enough for a few more throws—not counting what he’d brought along outside, of course. He picked up the dice and counted out some gold crowns, and the crowd began to throw down coins of their own—many of which, by now, were gold ones they’d won from Mat.

He tossed and lost, causing a roar of excitement from those watching. Barlden looked as if he wanted to toss Mat out—it *was* getting late, and sunset couldn’t be far off—but the man hesitated when he saw Mat pull out another handful of gold coins. Greed nibbled every man, and strict “rules” could be bent if opportunity walked past and winked suggestively enough.

Mat tossed again, and lost. More roars. The mayor folded his arms.

Mat reached into his pouch and found nothing but air. The men around him looked crestfallen, and one called for a round of drinks to “help the poor young lord forget about his luck.”

Not bloody likely, Mat thought, covering a smile. He stood up, raising his hands. “I see it’s getting late,” he said to the room.

“Too late,” Barlden interjected, pushing past a few smelly goatherds with fur-collared cloaks. “You should be going, outlander. Don’t be thinking I’ll make these men give back what you lost to them fairly, either.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Mat said, slurring his words just a tad. “Harnan and Delarn!” he bellowed. “Bring in the chest!”

The two soldiers from outside hurried in a moment later, bearing the small wooden chest from the packhorse. The tavern grew silent as the soldier carried it over to the table and set it down. Mat fished out the key, wobbling slightly, then unlocked the lid and revealed the contents.

Gold. A lot of it. Practically all he had left of his personal coin. “There’s time for one more throw,” Mat said to a stunned room. “Any takers?”

Men began to toss down coins until the pile contained most of what Mat had lost. It wasn’t nearly enough to match what was in his chest. He looked it over, tapping his chin. “That’s not going to be enough, friends. I’ll take a bad bet, but if I’ve only got one more throw tonight, I want a chance of walking out of here with something.”

“It’s all we’ve got,” one of the men said, amid a few calls for Mat to go ahead and toss anyway.

Mat sighed, then closed the lid to the chest. “No,” he said. Even Barlden was watching with a gleam in his eyes. “Unless.” Mat paused. “I came here for supplies. I guess I’d take barter. You can keep the coins you won, but I’ll bet this chest for supplies. Foodstuffs for my men, a few casks of ale. A cart to carry it on.”

“There isn’t enough time.” Barlden glanced at the darkening windows.

“Surely there is,” Mat said, leaning forward. “I’ll leave after this toss. You have my word on it.”

“We don’t bend rules here,” the mayor said. “The price is too high.”

Mat expected calls from the betting men, challenging the mayor, begging him to make an exception. But there were none. Mat felt a sudden spike of fear. After all of that losing . . . if they kicked him out anyway. . . .

Desperate, he pulled open the top of the chest again, revealing the gold coins inside.

“I’ll give you the ale,” the innkeeper said suddenly. “And Mardry, you’ve got a wagon and team. It’s only a street down.”

“Yes,” said Mardry, a bluff-faced man with short dark hair. “I’ll bet that.”

Men began to call that they could offer food—grain from their pantries, potatoes from their cellars. Mat looked to the mayor. “There’s still got to be what, half an hour until nightfall? Why don’t we see what they can gather? The village store can have a piece of this too, if I lose. I’ll bet you could use the extra coin, what with the winter we had.”

Barlden hesitated, then nodded, still watching the chest of coins. Men whooped and ran about, fetching the wagon, rolling out the ale. More than a few galloped off for their homes or the village store. Mat watched them go, waiting in the quickly emptying tavern room.

“I see what you’re doing,” the mayor said to Mat. He didn’t seem to be in a rush to gather anything.

Mat turned toward him, questioningly.

“I won’t have you cheating us with a miracle win at the end of the evening.” Barlden folded his arms. “You’ll use my dice. And you’ll move nice and slow as you toss. I know you lost many games here as the men report, but I suspect that if we search you, we’ll find a couple of sets of dice hidden on your person.”

“You’re welcome to give me a search,” Mat said, raising his arms to the side.

Barlden hesitated. “You will have thrown them away, of course,” he finally said. “It’s a fine scheme, dressing like a lord, loading dice so they make you lose instead of win. Never heard of a man bold enough to throw away gold like that on fake dice.”

“If you’re so certain that I’m cheating,” Mat said, “then why go through with this?”

“Because I know how to stop you,” the mayor replied. “Like I said, you’ll use my dice on this throw.” He hesitated, then smiled, grabbing a pair of dice off the table that Mat had been using. He tossed them. They came up a one and a two. He tossed them again, and got the same result.

“Better yet.” The mayor smiled deeply. “You’ll use these. In fact . . . I’ll make the throw for you.” Barlden’s face in the dim light took on a decidedly sinister cast.

Mat felt a stab of panic.

Talmanes took his arm. “All right, Mat,” he said. “I think we should go.”

Mat held up a hand. Would his luck work if someone else threw? Sometimes it worked to prevent him from being wounded in combat. He was sure of that. Wasn't he?

"Go ahead," he said to Barlden.

The man looked shocked.

"You can make the throw," Mat said. "But it counts the same as if I'd tossed. A winning hand, and I walk away with everything. A losing hand, and I'll be on my way with my hat and my horse, and you can keep the bloody chest. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

Mat stuck out his hand for a shake, but the mayor turned away, holding the dice in his hand. "No," he said. "You'll get no chance to swap these dice, traveler. Let's just go out front and wait. And you keep your distance."

They did as he said, leaving the muggy, ale-soaked stench of the tavern for the clear street outside. Mat's soldiers brought the chest. Barlden demanded that the chest remain open so that it couldn't be switched. One of his thugs poked around inside it, biting the coins, making certain that it really was full and that the coins were authentic. Mat waited, leaning against the door as a wagon rolled up, and men from inside the tavern began rolling casks of ale onto its bed.

The sun was barely a haze of light on the horizon, behind those blasted clouds. As Mat waited, he saw the mayor grow more and more anxious. Blood and bloody ashes, the man was a stickler for his rules! Well, Mat would show him, and all of them. He'd show them. . . .

Show them what? That he couldn't be beaten? What did that prove? As Mat waited, the cart piled higher and higher with foodstuffs, and he began to feel a strange sense of guilt.

I'm not doing anything wrong, he thought. *I've got to feed my men, don't I? These men are betting fair, and I'm betting fair. No loaded dice. No cheating.*

Except his luck. Well, his luck was his own—just as every man's luck was his own. Some men were born with a talent for music, and they became bards and gleemen. Who begrudged them earning coin with what the Creator gave them? Mat had luck, and so he used it. There was nothing wrong with that.

Still, as the men came back into the inn, he started to see what it was that Talmanes had noticed. There was an edge of desperation to these men. *Had* they been too eager to gamble? *Had* they been foolhardy with their betting? What *was* that look in their eyes, a look that Mat had mistaken for weariness? Had they been drinking to celebrate the end of the day, or had they been drinking to banish that haunted cast in their eyes?

“Maybe you were right,” Mat said to Talmanes, who was watching the sun with almost as much anxiety as the mayor. Its last light was dusting the tops of the peaked homes, coloring the tan tile a deeper orange. The sunset was a blaze behind the clouds.

“We can go, then?” Talmanes asked.

“No,” Mat said. “We’re staying.”

And the dice stopped rattling in his head. It was so sudden, the silence so unexpected, that he froze. It was enough to make him think he’d made the wrong decision.

“Burn me, we’re staying,” he repeated. “I’ve never backed down from a bet before, and I don’t plan to now.”

A group of riders returned, bearing sacks of grain on their horses. It was amazing what a little coin could do for motivation. As more riders arrived, a young boy came trotting up the road. “Mayor,” he said, tugging on Barlden’s purple vest. That vest bore a crisscross of patched rips across the front. “Mother says that the outlander women aren’t done bathing. She’s trying to hurry them, but. . . .”

The mayor tensed. He glanced at Mat angrily.

Mat snorted. “Don’t think I can do anything to hurry *that* lot,” he said. “If I were to go rush them, they’d likely dig in like mules and take twice as long. Let someone else bloody have a turn dealing with them.”

Talmanes kept glancing at the lengthening shadows along the road. “Burn me,” he muttered. “If those ghosts start appearing again, Mat. . . .”

“This is something else,” Mat said as the newcomers threw their grain onto the wagon. “It *feels* different.”

The wagon was already loaded high with foodstuffs; a good haul to have purchased from a village this size. It was just what the Band needed, enough to nudge them along, keep them fed until they reached the next town. That food wasn’t worth the gold in the coffer, of course, but it was about equal to what he’d lost dicing inside, particularly with the wagon and horses thrown in. They were good draft animals, sturdy, well cared for from the look of coat and hoof.

Mat opened his mouth to say it was enough, then hesitated as he noticed that the mayor was talking quietly with a group of men. There were six of them, their vests drab and ragged, their black hair unkempt. One was gesturing toward Mat and holding what looked to be a sheet of paper in his hand. Barlden shook his head, but the man with the paper gestured more insistently.

“Here now,” Mat said softly. “What’s this?”

“Mat, the sun . . .” Talmanes said.

The mayor pointed sharply, and the ragged men sidled away. The men who had brought the food were crowding around the dimming street, keeping to the center of it. Most were looking toward the horizon.

“Mayor,” Mat called. “That’s good enough. Make the throw!”

Barlden hesitated, glancing at him, then looked down at the dice in his hand almost as if he’d forgotten them. The men around him nodded anxiously, and so he raised his hand in a fist, rattling the dice. The mayor looked across the street to meet Mat’s eyes, then threw the dice onto the ground between them. They seemed too loud, a tiny rattling thunderstorm, like bones cracking against one another.

Mat held his breath. It had been a long while since he’d had reason to worry about a toss of the dice. He leaned down, watching the white cubes tumble against the dirt. How would his luck react to someone *else* throwing?

The dice came to a stop. A pair of fours. An outright winning throw. Mat released a long, relieved breath, though he felt a trickle of sweat down his temple.

“Mat . . .” Talmanes said softly, making him look up. The men standing on the road didn’t look so pleased. Several of them cheered in excitement until their friends explained that a winning throw from the mayor meant that Mat would take the prize. The crowd grew tense. Mat met Barlden’s eyes.

“Go,” the burly man said, gesturing in disgust toward Mat and turning away. “Take your spoils and leave this place. Never return.”

“Well,” Mat said, relaxing. “Thank you kindly for the game, then. We —”

“GO!” the mayor bellowed. He looked at the last slivers of sunlight on the horizon, then cursed and began waving for the men to enter The Tipsy Gelding. Some lingered, glancing at Mat with shock or hostility, but the mayor’s urgings soon bullied them into the low-roofed inn. He pulled the door shut and left Mat, Talmanes and the two soldiers standing alone on the street.

It suddenly seemed eerily quiet. There wasn't a villager on the street. Shouldn't there be some noise from inside the tavern, at least? Some clinking of mugs, some grumbling about the lost wager?

"Well," Mat said, voice echoing against silent housefronts, "I guess that's that." He walked over to Pips, calming the horse, who had begun to shuffle nervously. "Now, see, I told you, Talmanes. Nothing to be worried about at all."

And that's when the screaming began.

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CHAPTER 28

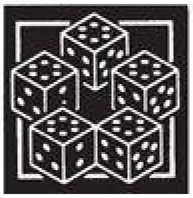

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Night in Hinderstap

"Burn you, Mat!" Talmanes said, yanking his sword free from the gut of a twitching villager. Talmanes almost *never* swore. "Burn you twice over and once again!"

"*Me?*" Mat snapped, spinning, his *ashandarei* flashing as he neatly hamstrung two men in bright green vests. They fell to the packed earthen street, eyes wide with rage as they sputtered and growled. "Me? I'm not the one trying to kill you, Talmanes. Blame *them*!"

Talmanes managed to pull himself into his saddle. "They *told* us to leave!"

"Yes," Mat said, grabbing Pips' reins and pulling the horse away from The Tipsy Gelding. "And *now* they're trying to kill us. I can't rightly be blamed for their unsociable behavior!" Howls, screams, and yells rose from all across the village. Some were angry, some were terrified, others were agonized.

More and more men piled out of the tavern, each one grunting and yelling, each one trying his best to kill every person around him. Some of them came for Mat, Talmanes or Mat's Redarms. But many just attacked their companions, hands ripping at skin, nails tearing gouges in faces. They fought with a primal lack of skill, and only a few thought to pick up rocks, mugs or lengths of wood as weapons.

This was far more than a simple bar fight. These men were trying to kill each other. Already there were a half-dozen corpses or near-corpses on the street, and from what Mat could see of the inside of the inn, the fighting was equally brutal inside.

Mat tried to edge closer to the wagon with its load of food, Pips clopping alongside him. His chest of gold still lay on the street. The fighting men ignored both food and coin, concentrating on one another.

Talmanes, as well as Harnan and Delarn—his two soldiers—backed away with him, nervously pulling their own mounts. A group of raving men soon descended on the two villagers Mat had hamstrung, beating their heads against the ground over and over until they stopped moving. Then the pack looked up at Mat and his men, bloodlust clouding their eyes. It was an incongruous expression on the clean faces of men in neat vests and combed hair.

“Blood and bloody ashes,” Mat said, swinging into his saddle. “Mount up!”

Harnan and Delarn needed no further instruction. They cursed, sheathing swords and swinging into saddles. The pack of villagers surged forward, but Mat and Talmanes cut off the attack. Mat tried to go for wounding blows only, but the villagers were deceptively strong and fast, and he found himself fighting just to keep them from pulling him out of the saddle. He cursed, reluctantly beginning to wield killing blows, taking two of the men with sweeps to the neck. Pips kicked out and knocked another to the ground with a hoof to the head. In a few moments, Harnan and Delarn joined the fight.

The villagers didn’t back away. They kept fighting in a frenzy until the entire pack of eight had dropped. Mat’s soldiers fought with wide-eyed terror, and Mat didn’t blame them. It was flaming eerie, seeing common villagers react like this! There didn’t seem to be an ounce of humanity left in them. They spoke only in grunts, hisses, and screams, their faces painted with anger and bloodlust. Now the other villagers—those not directly attacking Mat’s men—started forming into packs, slaughtering the groups smaller than themselves by bludgeoning them, clawing them, biting them. It was unnerving.

As Mat watched, a body broke through one of the tavern window frames. The corpse rolled to the ground, neck broken. On the other side, Barlden stood with wild, nearly inhuman eyes. He screamed into the night, then saw Mat and—for just a moment—seemed to show a hint of recognition. Then it was gone, and the mayor bellowed again, running forward to leap through the broken window and attack a pair of men whose backs were turned.

“Move!” Mat said, rearing Pips as another pack of villagers saw him.

“The gold!” Talmanes said.

“Burn the gold!” Mat said. “We can win more, and that food isn’t worth our lives. Go!”

Talmanes and the soldiers turned their mounts and galloped down the street, Mat kicking Pips to join them, leaving the gold and wagon behind. It *wasn’t* worth their lives—if possible, he’d bring the army in on the morrow to recover it. But they had to survive first.

They galloped for a short time, and Mat slowed them at the next corner, holding up a hand. He glanced over his shoulder. The villagers were still coming, but the gallop had left them behind for now.

“I’m still blaming you,” Talmanes said.

“I thought you *liked* fighting,” Mat said.

“I like *some* fights,” Talmanes said. “On the battlefield or a nice bar fight. This . . . this is insane.” The pack of villagers behind had fallen to all fours and were moving in a strange lope. Talmanes shivered visibly.

There was barely enough light to see by. Now that the sun had set, those mountains and the gray clouds blocked what light remained. Lanterns lined many of the streets, but it didn’t look as if anyone would be lighting them.

“Mat, they’re gaining,” Talmanes said, sword held at the ready.

“This isn’t just about our wager,” Mat said, listening to the screams and shouts. They came from all around the village. Down a side road, a couple of struggling bodies burst through the upper window of a house. They were women, clawing at each other as they fell, crashing to the ground with a sickening thud. They stopped moving.

“Come on,” Mat said, turning Pips. “We’ve got to find Thom and the women.” They galloped down a side street that would intersect with the main thoroughfare, passing packs of men and women fighting in the gutters. A fat man with bloodied cheeks stumbled into the road, and Mat reluctantly rode him down. There were too many people fighting at the sides for him to risk leading his men around the poor fool. Mat even saw *children* fighting, biting at the legs of those larger than they, throttling those their own age.

“The entire bloody town has gone insane,” Mat muttered grimly as the four of them barreled onto the main street and turned toward the fine inn. They’d pick up the Aes Sedai, then swing out eastward for Thom, as his inn was the most distant.

Unfortunately, the main street was worse than the one Mat had left. It was almost completely dark now. Indeed, it seemed to him that the darkness had come *too* quickly here. Unnaturally swift. The road’s length squirmed with shadows, figures battling, screeching, struggling in the deepening gloom. In that darkness, the fights looked at times to be solid, single creatures—horrific monstrosities with a dozen waving limbs and a hundred mouths to scream from the blackness.

Mat spurred Pips forward. There was nothing to do but charge down the middle of it.

“Light,” Talmanes yelled as they galloped toward the inn. “Light!”

Mat gritted his teeth and leaned forward on Pips, spear held close to his side as he rode through the nightmare. Roars shook the darkness and bodies rolled across the street. Mat shivered at the horror of it, cursing under his breath. The night itself seemed to be trying to smother them, to strangle them, and to spawn beasts of blackness and murder.

Pips and the other horses were well trained, and the four of them charged straight down the street. Mat narrowly avoided being pulled from the saddle as dark forms leapt for his legs, trying to yank him free. They screamed and hissed, like legions of the drowned trying to pull him down into a deep, unearthly sea.

Beside Mat, Delarn's horse suddenly pulled to a halt, then, as a mass of black figures leaped in front of it, the gelding reared in panic, throwing Delarn from his saddle.

Mat reined in Pips, turning at the man's scream, which was somehow more distinct and more *human* than the howls around them.

"Mat!" Talmanes yelled, charging past. "Keep going! We can't stop!"

No, Mat thought, shoving down his panic. *No, I'm not leaving someone to this.* He took a deep breath and ignored Talmanes, kicking Pips back toward the black clot of bodies where Delarn had fallen. Sweat sprayed from his forehead, chilled by the wind of the gallop. Moans, screams, and hisses all around him seemed to descend on him.

Mat roared and threw himself from Pips' back—he couldn't bring his mount in without risking trampling the man he wanted to save. He hated fighting in darkness, he bloody *hated* it. He attacked those dark figures, whose faces he couldn't see save for an occasional flash of teeth or insane eyes reflecting the dying light. It reminded him, briefly, of another night, killing Shadowspawn in the dark. Save these figures he fought didn't have the grace of a Myrddraal. They didn't even have the coordination of Trollocs.

For a moment, it seemed Mat fought the shadows themselves—shadows made by sputtering firelight, random and uncoordinated, yet all the more deadly for his inability to anticipate them. He narrowly escaped getting his skull crushed by attacks that made no sense. During the day, those attacks would have been laughable, but from this darkened pack of men—and women—who didn't care what they hit or who they hurt, the attacks were overwhelming. Mat found himself fighting just to stay alive, spinning his *ashandarei* in wide arcs, using it to trip as often as he used it to kill. If something moved in the darkness, he struck. How in the light was he going to find Delarn in this!

A shadow moved just a short distance away, and Mat instantly recognized a sword-form. Rat Gnawing the Grain? A villager wouldn’t know that. Good man!

Mat spun toward that shadow, slashing two other shadows across the chest, earning grunts and howls of pain. Delarn’s figure fell beneath a pile of several others, and Mat bellowed in denial, leaping across a fallen body and landing with his spear descending in a broad sweep. Shadows bled where he struck, the blood just another patch of darkness, and Mat used the butt of his weapon to beat back another. He reached down, pulling one of the shadows to its feet, and heard a muttered curse. It was Delarn.

“Come on,” Mat said, pulling the man toward Pips, who stood firm, snorting, in the darkness. The attacking men seemed to ignore animals, which was fortunate. Mat shoved the stumbling Delarn toward the horse, then turned and engaged the pack he’d known would chase after him. Again, Mat danced with the darkness, striking again and again, trying to disengage so that he could climb into the saddle. He risked a glance over his shoulder, and found that Delarn had managed to get onto Pips’ back—but the soldier sat slumped, a huddled mound. How badly was he wounded? He barely seemed able to keep himself upright. Blood and bloody ashes!

Mat turned back to the attackers, spinning his spear, trying to force them back. But they didn’t care about being wounded, they didn’t care how dangerous Mat was. They just kept coming! Surrounding him. Coming at him from every side. Bloody ashes! He twisted just in time to see a dark shape rush him from behind.

Something flashed in the night, reflecting some very distant light. The dark figure behind Mat slumped to the ground. Another flash, and one of the ones in front of Mat fell. Suddenly, a figure on a white horse rushed past, and another knife flashed in the air, dropping a third man.

“Thom!” Mat called, recognizing the cloak.

“Get on your horse!” Thom’s voice called back. “I’m running out of knives!”

Mat swept out with his spear, dropping two more villagers, then dashed forward and leaped into his saddle, trusting Thom to cover his retreat. Indeed, he heard a few cries of pain from behind. A moment later, a thundering sound on the road announced the imminent approach of horses.

Mat pulled himself into his saddle as the creatures tore through the black morass, scattering the villagers.

"Mat, you fool!" Talmanes shouted from one of the horses, barely visible as a silhouette against the night.

Mat smiled gratefully at Talmanes, turning Pips, and caught Delarn as the man almost slid free. The Redarm was alive, for he struggled weakly, but there was a slick wet patch at his side. Mat held the man in front of him, ignoring the reins in the darkness and controlling Pips with a quick twist of the knees. He didn't know horseback battle commands himself, but those blasted memories did, and so he'd trained Pips to obey.

Thom galloped past, and Mat turned Pips to follow, steadying Delarn with one hand and carrying his spear in the other. Talmanes and Harnan rode to either side of him, charging down the corridor of madness toward the inn at the end.

"Come on, man," Mat whispered to Delarn. "Hang on. The Aes Sedai are just ahead. They'll fix you up."

Delarn whispered something back.

Mat leaned forward. "What was that?"

". . . and toss the dice until we fly," Delarn whispered. "To dance with Jak o' the Shadows. . . ."

"Great," Mat muttered. There were lights ahead, and he could see they were coming from the inn. Perhaps they'd find one place in this flaming village where the people's brains hadn't turned inside out.

But no. Those bursts of light were familiar. Balls of fire, flashing in the upper-story windows of the inn.

"Well," Talmanes noted from his left, "looks like the Aes Sedai still live. That's something, at least."

Figures clustered around the front of the inn, fighting in the darkness, their forms periodically lit from above by the flashes in the windows.

"Round to the back," Thom suggested.

"Go," Mat said to them, charging past the fighting figures. Talmanes, Thom and Harnan followed close on Pips' hooves. Mat blessed his luck that they didn't hit a hole or rut in the ground as they crossed the softer earth coming around behind the inn. The horses could easily have tripped and broken a leg, throwing all of them into disaster.

The back of the inn was silent, and Mat reined in. Thom leaped from his horse, his agility defying his earlier complaints about his age. He took up position watching the side of the building to see that they weren't followed.

"Harnan!" Mat said, thrusting his spear toward the stables. "Get the women's horses out and ready them. Saddle them if you can, but be ready to go without those if we have to. Light willing, we won't have to ride far, just a mile or so to get out of the village and away from this insanity."

Harnan saluted in the darkness, then dismounted and dashed over to the stables. Mat waited long enough to determine that nobody was going to jump out at him from the darkness, then spoke to Delarn, still held in front of him. "You still conscious?"

Delarn nodded weakly. "Yes, Mat. But I've taken a gut wound. I. . . ."

"We'll get the Aes Sedai," Mat said. "All you need to do is sit right here. Stay in the saddle, all right?"

Delarn nodded again. Mat hesitated at the weakness in the man's motions, but Delarn took Pips' reins, and seemed determined. So Mat slid out of the saddle, holding his *ashandarei* at the ready.

"Mat," Delarn said from the saddle.

Mat turned back.

"Thank you. For coming back for me."

"I wasn't going to leave a man to that," Mat said, shivering. "Dying on the battlefield is one thing, but to die out there, in that darkness. . . . Well, I wasn't going to let it happen. Talmanes! See if you can find some light."

"Working on it," the Cairhienin said from beside the inn's back door. He had found a lantern hanging there. A few strikes of flint and steel later, and a small, soft glow lit the backyard of the inn. Talmanes quickly closed the shield, keeping the light mostly hidden.

Thom trotted back to them. "No one following, Mat," he said.

Mat nodded. By the lanternlight, he could see that Delarn was in bad shape. Not just the gut wound, but scrapes across the face, rips in his uniform, one eye swollen shut.

Mat whipped out a handkerchief and pressed it against the gut wound, standing beside Pips and reaching up to the man in the saddle. "Hold this tight. How'd the wound happen? They don't use weapons."

"One got my own sword away from me," Delarn said with a grunt. "He used it well enough once he had it."

Talmanes had opened the back door of the inn. He looked to Mat and nodded. The way inside was clear.

“We’ll be back soon,” Mat promised Delarn. Holding his *ashandarei* in a loose grip, he crossed the short distance to the door and nodded to Talmanes and Thom. The three of them ducked inside.

The door led to the kitchens. Mat scanned the dark room, and Talmanes nudged him, pointing at several lumps on the floor. The sliver of lantern light revealed a pair of kitchen boys, barely ten years old, dead on the ground, their necks twisted. Mat glanced away, steeling himself, and inched into the room. Light! Only lads, and now dead by this insanity.

Thom shook his head grimly, and the three of them crept forward. They found the cook in the next hallway, grunting as he beat on the head of what appeared to be the innkeeper. It was a man in a white apron, at least. He was already dead. The fat cook turned toward Mat and Talmanes the moment they entered the hallway, feral rage in his eyes. Mat reluctantly struck, silencing him before he could howl and bring more people against them.

“There’s fighting on the stairs,” Talmanes said, nodding forward.

“I’ll bet there’s a servants’ stairwell,” Thom noted. “This looks like a nice enough place for it.”

Sure enough, by cutting through two hallways in the back, they found a narrow, rickety stairwell leading up into darkness. Mat took a deep breath, then started up the stairs, holding his *ashandarei* at the ready. The inn was only two stories high, and the flashes had been coming from the second floor, near the front.

They entered the second floor, pushing open the door to the acrid scent of burned flesh. The hallways here were of wood, the grain obscured by thick white paint. The floor lay under a deep chestnut carpet. Mat nodded to Talmanes and Thom, and—weapons at the ready—they burst out of the stairwell and into the hallway.

Immediately, a ball of fire whooshed in their direction. Mat cursed, throwing himself backward and into Talmanes, narrowly avoiding the fire. Thom flattened himself with a gleeman’s agility, getting under the fire. Mat and Talmanes almost tumbled back down the stairs.

“Bloody ashes!” Mat yelled into the hallway. “What do you think you’re doing?”

There was silence. Followed, finally, by Joline’s voice. “Cauthon?” she called.

“Who do you bloody think it is!” he shouted back.

“I don’t know!” she said. “You came around so quickly, weapons out. Are you *trying* to get killed?”

“We’re *trying* to rescue you!” Mat yelled.

“Do we look like we need rescuing?” came the response.

“Well, you’re still here, aren’t you?” Mat called back.

That was met with silence.

“Oh, for Light’s sake,” Joline finally called back. “Will you come out here?”

“You’re not going to throw another fireball at me, are you?” Mat muttered, stepping out into the hallway as Thom climbed to his feet, Talmanes following. He found the three Aes Sedai standing at the head of the wide, handsome stairs at the other end of the hallway. Teslyn and Edesina continued to throw fireballs down at unseen villagers below, their hair wet, their dresses disheveled as if they’d been donned hastily. Joline wore only an enveloping white dressing robe, her pretty face calm, her dark hair slick and wet and hanging down over the front of her right shoulder. The robe was parted slightly at the top, giving a hint of what hid inside. Talmanes whistled softly.

“She’s not a woman, Talmanes,” Mat whispered warningly. “She’s an Aes Sedai. Don’t think of her as a woman.”

“I’m trying, Mat,” Talmanes said. “But it’s hard.” He hesitated, then added, “Burn me.”

“Be careful or she will,” Mat said, tugging his hat down slightly in the front. “In fact, she nearly did that just a moment ago.”

Talmanes sighed, and the three of them crossed the hallway to the women. Joline’s two Warders and the three Redarms, who had their weapons out, stood just inside the bathing chamber. A dozen or so servants were tied up in the corner: a pair of young girls—probably bathing attendants—and several men in vests and trousers. Apparently Joline’s dress had been cut to strips and used for bonds. The silk would work far better than wool towels. Near the top of the stairs, just below the Aes Sedai, Mat could barely make out a cluster of corpses that had fallen to swords, not fire.

Joline eyed Mat as he approached, a look implying that she considered all this to be *his* fault somehow. She folded her arms, closing up the top of the robe, though he wasn’t sure if that was because of Talmanes’ gawking or if the move was coincidental.

"We need to move," Mat told the women. "The whole city has gone mad."

"We can't go," Joline said. "Not and leave those servants to the mob. Besides, we need to find Master Tobrad and make certain he is safe."

"Master Tobrad is the innkeeper?" Mat asked. A fireball whooshed down the stairs.

"Yes," Joline said.

"Too late," Mat said. "His brains are already decorating the walls downstairs. Look, like I said, the *entire village* is crazy. Those servants tried to kill you, didn't they?"

Joline hesitated. "Yes."

"Leave them," Mat said. "We can't do anything for them."

"But if we wait until dawn . . ." Joline said hesitantly.

"And what?" Mat said. "Burn to ash every person who tries to climb those stairs? You're making a ruckus here, and it's drawing more and more people. You're going to have to kill them all to stop them."

Joline glanced at the other two women.

"Look," Mat said. "I have a wounded Redarm down below, and I intend to get him out of this alive. You can't do any good for these people here. I suspect the men had to kill that group at the top of the stairs before you all felt threatened enough to use the Power. You know how determined they are."

"All right," Joline said. "I'll come. But we're bringing the two serving girls. Blaeric and Fen can carry them."

Mat sighed—he'd have liked the Warders' blades free to help in case they ran into trouble—but said nothing more. He nodded to Talmanes and Thom, and waited impatiently as the Warders picked up the two bound serving girls and slung them over shoulders. After that, the whole group hustled back down the servants' stairwell, Talmanes leading and Mat and the Redarms at the rear. He could hear screams that sounded half angry, half joyous as the villagers at the base of the stairs realized no more fire would fall. There were thumps and shouts, followed by doors opening, and Mat cringed, imagining the other servants—left tied up in the bathing chamber—falling to the crowd.

Mat and the others burst out into the backyard of the inn, only to find Delarn on the ground beside Pips. Harnan knelt beside him, and the bearded soldier looked up with anxiety. “Mat!” he said. “He fell from the saddle. I—”

Edesina cut him off, rushing over and kneeling beside Delarn. She closed her eyes, and Mat felt a chill from his medallion. It made him shiver as he imagined the One Power leaking out of her and into the man. That was almost as bad as dying, bloody ashes but it was! He gripped the medallion beneath his shirt.

Delarn stiffened, but then gasped, eyes fluttering open.

“It is done,” Edesina said, standing up. “He will be weak from the Healing, but I reached him in time.”

Harnan had gathered and saddled all of their horses, Light bless him. Good man. The women mounted, and spared several glances over their shoulders at the inn.

“It’s as if the darkness itself intoxicates them,” Thom said while Mat helped Delarn into his saddle. “As if Light itself has forsaken them, leaving them only to the Shadow. . . .”

“Nothing we can do,” Mat said, pulling himself into his saddle behind Delarn. The soldier was too weak to ride on his own, after that Healing. Mat eyed the serving girls that the Warders had slung over the fronts of their horses. They struggled against their bonds, hate in their eyes. He turned and nodded to Talmanes, who had affixed the lantern to a saddle pole. The Cairhienin opened the shield, bathing the inn’s stableyard in light. A path led northward, out of the yard into the dark. Away from the army, but also directly out of the village, toward the hills. That was good enough for Mat.

“Ride,” he said, kicking Pips into motion. The group fell in beside him.

“I told you we should leave,” Talmanes noted, looking over his shoulder, riding at Mat’s left. “But you had to stay for one more toss.”

Mat didn’t look back. “Not my fault, Talmanes. How was I to know that staying would cause them all to start tearing each other’s throats out?”

“What?” Talmanes asked, glancing at him. “Isn’t this *usually* how people react when you tell them you’re going to spend the night?”

Mat rolled his eyes, but didn’t feel much like laughing as he led the group out of the village.

Hours later, Mat sat on a rock outcropping on a dark hillside, looking down at Hinderstap. The village was dark. Not a light burned. It was impossible to tell what was going on, but still he watched. How could a man sleep, after what they’d been through?

Well, the soldiers *did* sleep. He didn't blame Delarn. An Aes Sedai Healing could drain a man. Mat had felt that icy chill himself on occasion, and he didn't intend to repeat the experience. Talmanes and the other Redarms hadn't the excuse of a Healing, but they were soldiers. Soldiers learned to sleep when they could, and the night's experience didn't seem to have disturbed them nearly as much as it had Mat. Oh, they'd been worried while in the thick of it, but now it was just another battle passed. Another battle survived. That had led stout Harnan to joking and smiling as they bedded down.

Not Mat. There was an odd *wrongness* about the entire experience. Was the curfew intended to keep this from happening, somehow? Had Mat, by staying, *caused* all of these deaths? Blood and bloody ashes. Did no place in the world make sense anymore?

"Mat, lad," Thom said, joining him, walking with his familiar limp. He'd had a fractured arm, though he hadn't mentioned it until Edesina had noticed him flinching and insisted on Healing him. "You should sleep." Now that the moon had risen—hidden behind the clouds—there was enough light for Mat to see Thom's concern.

The group had stopped in a small hollow off one side of the trail. It gave a good view back toward the village, and—more importantly—it overlooked the path that Mat and the others had used to escape. The hollow lay on a steep hillside, the only approach from below. One person on watch could keep a good eye out for anyone trying to sneak into the camp.

The Aes Sedai had bedded down near the back of the hollow, though Mat didn't think they were actually sleeping. Joline's Warders had thought to bring bedrolls, just in case. Warders were like that. Mat's men only had their cloaks, but that hadn't deterred them from sleeping. Talmanes was even snoring softly, despite the spring chill. Mat had forbidden a fire. It wasn't so cold that they needed one, and it would just signal anyone looking for them.

"I'm fine, Thom," Mat said, making room on his rock as the gleeman settled down. "You're the one who should get some sleep."

Thom shook his head. "One nice thing I've noticed about getting older is that your body doesn't seem to need its sleep as much anymore. Dying doesn't take as much energy as growing, I guess."

"Don't start that again," Mat said. "Do I need to remind you about how you hauled my skinny backside out of trouble back there? What was that you were worried about earlier? That I didn't *need* you anymore? If you hadn't been with me today, if you hadn't come looking for me, I'd be dead in that village. Delarn too."

Thom grinned, eyes bright in the moonlight. "All right, Mat," he said. "No more. I promise."

Mat nodded. The two of them sat for a time on their rock, looking out at the city. "It's not going to leave me alone, Thom," Mat finally said.

"What?"

"All of this," Mat said tiredly. "The bloody Dark One and his spawn. They've been chasing me since that night in the Two Rivers, and nothing has stopped them."

"You think this was him?"

"What else could it have been?" Mat asked. "Quiet village folk, turning into violent madmen? It's the Dark One's own work, and you know it."

Thom was silent. "Yes," he finally said. "I suppose it is at that."

"They're still coming for me," Mat said angrily. "That bloody *gholam* is out there, I know it is, but that's just part of it. Myrddraal and Darkfriends, monsters and ghosts. Chasing me and hunting me. I've stumbled from one disaster to another, barely keeping my neck above water, ever since this began. I keep saying I just need to find a hole somewhere to dice and drink, but that won't stop it. Nothing will."

"You're *ta'veren,* lad," Thom said.

"I didn't ask to be. Burn me, I wish they'd all just go bother Rand. He likes it." He shook his head, dispelling the image that formed, showing Rand asleep in his bed, Min curled up beside him.

"You really think that?" Thom asked.

Mat hesitated. "I wish I did," he admitted. "It would make things easier."

"Lies never make things easier in the long run. Unless they're to exactly the right person—usually a woman—at exactly the right time. When you tell them to yourself, you just bring more trouble."

"I brought those people trouble. In the village." He glanced toward the back of the camp, where the two Warders sat, guarding the still-bound serving girls. They continued to struggle. Light! Where did they get the strength? It was inhuman.

"I don't think this was you, Mat," Thom said thoughtfully. "Oh, I don't disagree that trouble hunts you—the Dark One himself seems to do so. But Hinderstap . . . well, when I was singing in that common room, I heard some tidbits. They seemed like nothing. But looking back, it strikes me that the people were *expecting* this. Or something like it."

"How could they have been?" Mat said. "If this had happened before, they'd all be dead."

"Don't know," Thom said thoughtfully. Then something seemed to strike him. He began fishing inside his cloak. "Oh, I forgot. Maybe there *is* some connection between you and what happened. I managed to take this away from a man who was too drunk for his own good." The gleeman pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to Mat.

Mat took the paper, frowning, and unfolded it. He squinted in the diffuse moonlight, leaning close, and grunted when he made out what the paper contained—not words, but a very accurate drawing of Mat's face, hat atop his head. It even had the foxhead medallion drawn in around his neck. Bloody ashes.

He contained his annoyance. "Handsome fellow. Good nose, straight teeth, dashing hat."

Thom snorted.

"I saw some men showing a paper to the mayor," Mat said, refolding the drawing. "I didn't see what was on it, but I'll bet it was the same as this. What did the man you took this from say about it?"

"An outlander woman in some village north of here is giving them out and offering a reward to anyone who has seen you. The man got the paper from a friend, so he didn't have a description of her or the town's name. Either his friend kept him ignorant, wanting the reward for himself, or he was just too drunk to remember."

Mat tucked the paper into his coat pocket. The light of false dawn was beginning to glow to the east. He'd sat up all night, but he didn't feel tired. Just . . . drained. "I'm going back," he said.

"What?" Thom asked, surprised. "To Hinderstap?"

Mat nodded, rising. "As soon as it's light. I need to—"

A muffled curse interrupted him. He spun, reaching for his *ashandarei*. Thom had a pair of knives in his hands in the blink of an eye. Fen, Joline's Saldaean Warder, was the one who had cursed. He stood, hand on his sword, searching the ground around him. Blaeric stood by the Aes Sedai, sword out, alert and on guard.

“What?” Mat asked tersely.

“The prisoners,” Fen said.

Mat started, realizing that the lumps that had lain near the Warders were gone. He dashed over, cursing. Talmanes’ snores stopped as the sounds woke him and he sat up. The bonds made from strips of Joline’s dress lay on the ground, but the serving girls were gone.

“What happened?” Mat asked, looking up.

“I . . .” The dark-haired Warder looked dumbfounded. “I have no idea. They were here just a moment ago!”

“Did you doze off?” Mat demanded.

“Fen wouldn’t have done such a thing,” Joline said, sitting up in her bedroll, her voice calm. She still wore only that dressing robe.

“Lad,” Thom said, “we both saw those girls here barely a minute ago.”

Talmanes cursed and woke the five Redarms. Delarn was looking a great deal better, his weakness from the Healing barely seeming to bother him as he climbed to his feet. The Warders called for a search, but Mat just turned back to the village below. “The answers are there,” Mat said. “Thom, you’re with me. Talmanes, watch the women.”

“We have little need of being ‘watched,’ Matrim,” Joline said grumpily.

“Fine,” he snapped. “Thom, you’re with me. Joline, you watch the soldiers. Either way, you all stay here. I can’t worry about a whole group right now.”

He didn’t give them a chance to argue. Within minutes, Mat and Thom were on their horses, riding down the path back toward Hinderstap.

“Lad,” Thom said, “what is it you expect to find?”

“I don’t know,” Mat replied. “If I did, I wouldn’t be so keen to look.”

“Fair enough,” Thom said softly.

Mat spotted the oddities almost immediately. Those goats out on the western pasture. He couldn’t tell for certain in the dawn light, but it looked like someone was herding them. And were those lights winking on in the village? There hadn’t been a single one of those all night long! He hastened Pips’ pace, Thom following silently.

It took the better part of an hour to arrive—Mat hadn’t wanted to risk camping too close, though he’d also been disinclined to hunt a way around and back to the army in the dark. It was fully light, if still very early, by the time they rode back into the inn's yard. A couple of men in dun coats were working on the back door, which had apparently been broken off its hinges sometime after Mat and the others left. The men looked up as Mat and Thom rode into the yard, and one of them pulled off his cap, looking anxious. Neither one made a threatening move.

Mat slowed Pips to a halt. One of the men whispered to the other, who ran inside. A moment later, a balding man with a white apron stepped out through the doorway. Mat felt himself go pale.

"The innkeeper," Mat said. "Burn me, I saw you dead!"

"Best go get the mayor, son," the innkeeper said to one of the working men. He glanced back at Mat. "*Quickly.*"

"What in the bloody name of Hawkwing's left hand is going on here?" Mat demanded. "Was it all some kind of twisted show? You—"

A head stuck out of the inn door, peeking around the innkeeper toward Mat. The pudgy face had curly blond hair. Last time he'd seen this man, the cook, Mat had been forced to gut the man and slit his throat.

"You!" he said, pointing. "I *killed* you!"

"Calm down, now, son," the innkeeper said. "Come in, we'll get you some tea, and—"

"I'm not going anywhere with you, spirit," Mat said. "Thom, you seeing this?"

The gleeman rubbed his chin. "Perhaps we should hear the man out, Mat."

"Ghosts and spirits," Mat muttered, turning Pips. "Come on." He urged Pips forward, charging around to the front of the inn, Thom following. Here he caught a glimpse of many workers inside, carrying buckets of white paint. To fix the places where Aes Sedai fire had scored the building, likely.

Thom pulled up beside Mat. "I've never seen anything like this, Mat," he said. "Why would spirits need to paint walls and repair doors?"

Mat shook his head. He'd spotted the place where he'd fought the villagers to save Delarn. He pulled Pips to a halt suddenly, making Thom curse and round his own mount around to come back.

"What?" Thom asked.

Mat pointed. There was a stain of blood on the ground and across several rocks beside the road. "Where they stabbed Delarn," he said.

"All right," Thom said. Around them, men passed on the street, gazes averted. They gave Mat and Thom a wide berth.

Blood and bloody ashes, Mat thought. *I've gotten us surrounded again. What if they attack? Bloody fool!*

"So there's blood," Thom said. "What did you expect?"

"Where's the rest of the blood, Thom?" Mat growled. "I killed a good dozen men here, and I saw them bleed. You dropped three with your knives. Where's the *blood*?"

"It vanishes," a voice said.

Mat spun Pips to find the burly, hairy-armed mayor standing on the road a short distance away. He must have been near already; there was no way the workers could have fetched him that quickly. Of course, the way things seemed to be going in this village, who could tell that for certain? Barlden wore a cloak and shirt with several fresh rips in them.

"The blood vanishes," he said, sounding exhausted. "None of us have seen it. We just wake up and it's gone."

Mat hesitated, looking around the village. Women peeked out of houses, holding children. Men left for the fields, carrying crooks or hoes. Save for the air of anxiety at Mat and Thom's presence, one would never know anything had gone wrong in the village.

"We won't hurt you," the mayor said, turning away from Mat. "So you needn't look so worried. At least, not until the sun sets. I'll give you an explanation, if you want one. Either come and listen or be gone with you. I don't really care, so long as you stop disturbing my town. We've work to do. Much more than usual, thanks to you."

Mat glanced at Thom, who shrugged. "It never hurts to listen," Thom said.

"I don't know," Mat said, eyeing Barlden. "Not unless you think it could hurt to end up surrounded by *crazy, homicidal mountainfolk*."

"We leave, then?"

Mat shook his head slowly. "No. Burn me, they've still got my gold. Come on, let's see what he has to say."

"It started several months back," the mayor said, standing beside the window. They were in a neat—yet simple—sitting room in his manor. The curtains and carpet were of a soft pale green, almost the color of oxeye leaves, with light tan wood paneling. The mayor's wife had brought tea made from dried sweetberries. Mat hadn't chosen to drink any, and he had made certain to lean against the wall near the street door. His spear rested beside him.

Barlden's wife was a short, brown-haired woman, faintly pudgy, with a motherly air. She returned from the kitchen, carrying a bowl of honey for the tea, then hesitated as she saw Mat leaning by the wall. She eyed the spear, then put the bowl on the table and retreated.

"What happened?" Mat asked, glancing at Thom, who had also declined a seat. The old gleeman stood with arms crossed beside the door from the kitchens. He nodded to Mat; the woman wasn't listening at the door. He'd make a motion if he heard someone approach.

"We aren't sure if it was something *we* did, or just a cruel curse by the Dark One himself," the mayor said. "It was a normal day, early this year, just before the Feast of Abram. Nothing really special about it that I can remember. The weather had broken by then, though the snows hadn't come yet. A lot of us went about our normal activities the next morning, thinking nothing of it.

"The oddities were small, you see. A broken door here, a rip in someone's clothing they didn't remember. And the nightmares. We all shared them, nightmares of death and killing. A few of the women started talking, and they realized that they couldn't remember turning in the previous evening. They could remember waking, safe and comfortable in their beds, but only a few remembered actually *getting into* bed. Those who could remember had gone to sleep early, before sunset. For the rest of us, the late evening was just a blur."

He fell silent. Mat glanced at Thom, who did not respond. Mat could see in those blue eyes of his that he was memorizing the tale. *He'd better get it* right *if he puts me in any ballads,* Mat thought, folding his arms. *And he'd better include my hat. This is a good bloody hat.*

"I was in the pastures that night," the mayor continued. "I was helping old man Garken with a broken strip of fencing. And then . . . nothing. A fuzzing. I awoke the next morning in my own bed, next to my wife. We felt tired, as if we hadn't slept well." He stopped, then more softly, he added, "And I had the nightmares. They're vague, and they fade. But I can remember one vivid image. Old man Garken, dead at my feet. Killed as if by a wild beast."

Barlden stood next to a window in the eastern wall, opposite Mat, staring out. "But I went to see Garken the next day, and he was fine. We finished fixing the fence. It wasn't until I got back to town that I heard the chattering. The shared nightmares, the missing hours just after sunset. We gathered, talking it through, and then it happened again. The sun set, and when it rose I woke up in bed again, tired, mind full of nightmares." He shivered, then walked over to the table and poured himself a cup of tea.

"We don't know what happens at night," the mayor said, stirring in a spoonful of honey.

"You don't know?" Mat demanded. "I can bloody *tell* you what happens at night. You—"

"We *don't* know what happens," the mayor interrupted, looking up sharply. "And have no care to know."

"But—"

"We have no *need* to know, outlander," the mayor said harshly. "We want to live our lives as best we can. Many of us turn in early, lying down before sunset. There are no holes in our memories that way. We go to bed, we wake up in that same bed. There are nightmares, perhaps some damage to the house, but nothing that can't be fixed. Others prefer to visit a tavern and drink to the setting of the sun. There's a blessing in that, I suppose. Drink all you want, and you never have to worry about getting home. You always wake safe and sound in bed."

"You can't avoid this entirely," Thom said softly. "You can't pretend nothing is different."

"We don't." Barlden took a drink of tea. "We have the rules. Rules that *you* ignored. No fires lit after sunset—we can't have a blaze starting in the night, without anyone to fight it. And we forbid outsiders inside the town after sunset. We learned that lesson quickly. The first people trapped here after nightfall were relatives of Sammrie the cooper. We found blood on the walls of his home the next morning. But his sister and her family were safely asleep in the beds he'd given them." The mayor paused. "Now they have the same nightmares we do."

"So just leave," Mat said. "Leave this bloody place and go somewhere else!"

"We've tried," the mayor said. "We always wake up back here, no matter how far we go. Some have tried ending their lives. We buried the bodies. They woke up the next morning in their beds."

The room fell silent.

"Blood and bloody ashes," Mat whispered. He felt chilled.

"You survived the night," the mayor said, stirring his tea again. "I assumed that you hadn't, after seeing that bloodstain. We were curious to see where you'd wake up. Most of the rooms in the inns are permanently taken by travelers who are now, for better or worse, part of our village. We aren't able to choose where someone awakens. It just happens. An empty bed gets a new occupant, and from then on they wake up there each morning.

"Anyway, when I heard you talking to one another about what you'd seen, I realized that you must have escaped. You remember the night too vividly. Anyone who . . . joins us simply has the nightmares. Count yourselves lucky. I suggest you move on and forget Hinderstap."

"We have Aes Sedai with us," Thom said. "They might be able to do something to help you. We could tell the White Tower, have them send—"

"No!" Barlden said sharply. "Our lives aren't so bad, now that we know how to deal with our situation. We don't want Aes Sedai eyes on us." He turned away. "We nearly turned your group away flat. We do that, sometimes, if we sense that the travelers won't obey our rules. But you had Aes Sedai with you. They ask questions, they get curious. We worried that if we turned you away, they'd get suspicious and force entrance."

"Forcing them to leave at sunset made them even more curious," Mat said. "And having their bathing attendants bloody try to *kill* them isn't a good way to keep the secret either."

The mayor looked wan. "Some wished . . . well, that you'd be trapped here. They thought that if Aes Sedai were bound here, they'd find a way out for all of us. We don't all agree. Either way, it's *our* problem. Please, just. . . . Just go."

"Fine." Mat stood up straight and picked up his spear. "But first, tell me where *these* came from." He pulled the paper from his pocket, the one that bore a drawing of his face.

Barlden glanced at it. "You'll find those spread around the nearby villages," he said. "Someone's looking for you. As I told Ledron last night, I'm not in the business of selling out guests. I wasn't about to kidnap you and risk keeping you here overnight just for some reward."

"Who's looking for me?" Mat repeated.

"About twenty leagues to the northeast, there's a small town called Trustair. Rumor says that if you want a little coin, you can bring news about a man who looks like the one in this picture, or the other one. Visit an inn in Trustair called The Shaken Fist to find the one looking for you."

"Other picture?" Mat asked, frowning.

"Yes. A burly fellow with a beard. A note at the bottom says he has golden eyes."

Mat glanced at Thom, who'd raised a bushy eyebrow.

"Blood and bloody ashes," Mat muttered and pulled the side of his hat down. Who was looking for him and Perrin, and what did they want? "We'll be going, I suppose," he said. He glanced at Barlden. Poor fellow. That went for the entire village. But what was Mat to do about it? There were fights you could win, and others you just had to leave for someone else.

"Your gold is on the wagon outside," the mayor said. "We didn't take any from your winnings. The food is there too." He met Mat's eyes. "We hold to our word, here. Other things are out of our control, particularly for those who don't listen to the rules. But we aren't going to rob a man just because he's an outsider."

"Mighty tolerant of you," Mat said flatly, pulling open the door. "Have a good day, then, and when night comes, try not to kill anyone I wouldn't kill. Thom, you coming?"

The gleeman joined him, limping slightly from his old wound. Mat glanced back at Barlden, who stood with sleeves rolled up in the center of the room, looking down at his teacup. He seemed like he was wishing that cup held something a little stronger.

"Poor fellow," Mat said, then stepped out into the morning light after Thom and pulled the door shut behind him.

"I assume we're going after that person spreading around pictures of you?" Thom asked.

"Right as Light, we are," Mat said, tying his *ashandarei* to Pips' saddle. "It's on the way to Four Kings anyway. I'll lead your horse if you can drive the wagon."

Thom nodded. He was studying the mayor's home.

"What?" Mat asked.

"Nothing, lad," the gleeman said. "It's just . . . well, it's a sad tale. Something's wrong in the world. There's a snag in the Pattern here. The town unravels at night, and then the world tries to reset it each morning to make things right again."

“Well, they should be more forthcoming,” Mat said. The villagers had pulled the food-filled wagon up while Mat and Thom had been chatting with the mayor. It was hitched to two strong draft horses, tan of coloring and wide of hoof.

“More forthcoming?” Thom asked. “How? The mayor is right, they *did* try to warn us.”

Mat grunted, walking over to open the chest and check on his gold. It was there, as the mayor had said. “I don’t know,” he said. “They could put up a warning sign or something. Hello. Welcome to Hinderstap. We will murder you in the night and eat your *bloody* face if you stay past sunset. Try the pies. Martna Baily makes them fresh daily.”

Thom didn’t chuckle. “Poor taste, lad. There’s too much tragedy in this town for levity.”

“Funny,” Mat said. He counted out about as much gold as he figured would be a good price for the food and the wagon. Then, after a moment, he added ten more silver crowns. He set all of this in a pile on the mayor’s doorstep, then closed the chest. “The more tragic things get, the more *I* feel like laughing.”

“Are we really going to take this wagon?”

“We need the food,” Mat said, lashing the chest to the back of the wagon. Several large wheels of white cheese and a half dozen legs of mutton lay prominently alongside the casks of ale. The food smelled good, and his stomach rumbled. “I won it fair.” He glanced at the villagers passing on the street. When he’d first seen them the day before, he’d thought the slowness of their pace was due to the lazy nature of the mountain villagers. Now it struck him that there was another reason entirely.

He turned back to his work, checking the horses’ harness. “And I don’t feel a bit bad taking the wagon and horses. I doubt these villagers are going to be doing much traveling in the future. . . .”

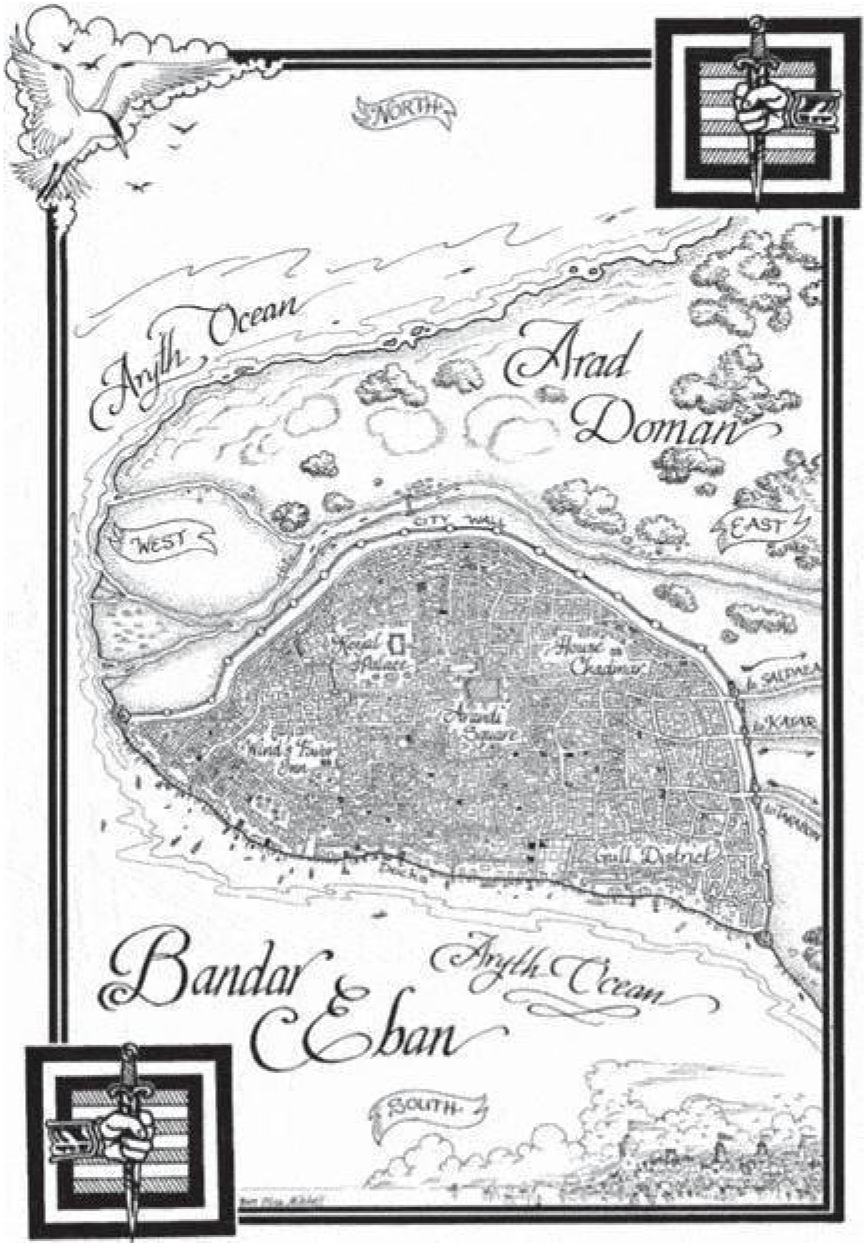
NORTH
Aryth Ocean
Arad Doman
WEST
CITY WALL
EAST
Royal Palace
House of Chadmar
to SALPALA
Arandi Square
to KAVAR
Wind's Four Inn
Gull District
Docks
Bandar Eban
Aryth Ocean
SOUTH

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Chapter 29

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Into Bandar Eban

Moiraine Damodred, who died because of my weakness.

Rand slowed Tai'daishar to a walk as he passed through the massive gateway to Bandar Eban, his entourage following, ranks of Aiel leading him. The gates were said to be carved with the city's seal, but swung open as they were, Rand couldn't see them.

The nameless Darkfriend I beheaded in those Murandian hills. I've forgotten the looks of the others with her, but I will never forget her face.

The list ran through his head. Almost a daily ritual now, the name of every woman who had died by his hand or because of his actions. The street inside the city was of packed earth, lined with ruts that crisscrossed at the intersections. The dirt was lighter here than he was used to.

Colavaere Saighan, who died because I made her a pauper.

He rode past ranks of Domani, women in diaphanous gowns, men with thin mustaches and colorful coats. The roadways here had wooden boardwalks at the sides, and the people crowded them, watching. Rand could hear banners and flags flapping in the wind. There seemed to be a lot of them in the city.

The list always began with Moiraine. That name hurt the most of all, for he could have saved her. He should have. He hated himself for allowing her to sacrifice herself for him.

A child stepped off the boardwalk and started to run out into the street, but his father caught him by the hand and hauled him back into the press of people. Some coughed and muttered, but most were silent. The sounds of Rand's troops marching on the packed earth seemed a thunder by comparison.

Was Lanfear alive again? If Ishamael could be returned, what about her? In that case, Moiraine's death had been for naught, and his cowardice was even more galling. Never again. The list would remain, but he would never again be too weak to do what must be done.

There were no cheers from the people on those boardwalks. Well, he had not come to liberate. He had come to do what must be done. Perhaps he would find Graendal here; Asmodean said she had been in the country, but that had been so long ago. If he found her, perhaps that would assuage his conscience at invading.

Did he have one of those anymore? He could not decide.

Liah, of the Cosaida Chareen, whom I killed, telling myself it was for her own good. Oddly, Lews Therin started to chant with him, reading off the names, a strange, echoing chant inside his head.

Ahead, a large group of Aiel stood waiting for him in a city square set with copper fountains in the shape of horses leaping from a frothy wave. A man on horseback waited before the fountain, an honor guard around him. He was a solid, square-faced man with furrowed skin and gray hair. His forehead was shaved and powdered, after the fashion of Cairhienin soldiers. Dobraine was trustworthy, as much as any Cairhienin was, at least.

Sendara of the Iron Mountain Taardad, Lamelle of the Smoke Water Miagoma, Andhilin of the Red Salt Goshien.

Ilyena Therin Moerelle, Lews Therin said, slipping the name in between two others. Rand let it stand. At least the madman didn't scream again.

"Lord Dragon," Dobraine said smoothly, bowing to Rand as he approached. "I deliver to you the city of Bandar Eban. Order has been restored, as you commanded."

"I asked you to restore order to the entire country, Dobraine," Rand said softly. "Not just one city."

The nobleman wilted slightly.

"You have one of the merchant council for me?" Rand asked.

"Yes," Dobraine said. "Milisair Chadmar, last to flee the city's chaos." His eyes were eager. He had always been stalwart, but was that a ruse? Rand had trouble trusting anyone lately. The ones who seemed most trustworthy were the ones you needed to watch the most. And Dobraine was Cairhienin. Dared Rand trust anyone from Cairhien, with their games?

Moiraine was Cairhienin. I trusted her. Mostly.

Perhaps Dobraine hoped that Rand would choose him as king in Arad Doman. He had been steward of Cairhien, but he—like most others—knew that Rand intended Elayne for the Sun Throne.

Well, Rand might give this kingdom to Dobraine at that. He was better than most. Rand nodded for him to lead the way, and he did so, turning with the group of Aiel to march down a large side street. Rand continued, list still running through his mind.

The buildings here were tall and square, with the shape of boxes stacked atop one another. Many of them had balconies, packed with people, like the boardwalks beneath.

Each name on Rand’s list pained him, but that pain was a strange, distant thing now. His feelings were . . . different since the day he had killed Semirhage. She had taught him how to bury his guilt and his hurt. She had thought to chain him, but instead had given him strength.

He added her name and Elza’s name to the list. They didn’t have any right to be there. Semirhage was less a woman and more a monster. Elza had betrayed him, serving the Shadow all along. But he added the names. They had as much claim on him for killing them as any. More, even. He had been unwilling to kill Lanfear to save Moiraine, but he had used balefire to burn Semirhage out of existence rather than allow himself to be captured again.

He fingered the object he carried in a pouch on his saddle. It was a smooth figurine. He had not told Cadsuane that his servants had recovered it from her room. Now that Cadsuane was exiled from his presence, he never would. He knew that she tagged along still with his entourage, pushing the limits of his command to never let him see her face. But she did as ordered, and so he let it be. He would not speak to her, and she would not speak to him.

Cadsuane had been a tool, and that tool had proven ineffective. He did not regret casting it aside.

Jendhilin, Maiden of the Cold Peak Miagoma, he thought, Lews Therin muttering alongside him. The list was so long. It would grow before he died.

Death no longer worried him. Finally, he understood Lews Therin’s cries to let it end. Rand deserved to die. Was there a death so strong that a man would never have to be reborn? He reached the end of the list, finally. Once, he’d repeated it to keep himself from forgetting the names. That was not possible now; he could not forget them if he wished. He repeated them as a reminder of what he was.

But Lews Therin had one more name to add. *Elmindreda Farshaw,* he whispered.

Rand pulled Tai’daishar up short, stopping his column of Aiel, Saldaean cavalry, and camp attendants in the middle of the street. Dobraine turned back questioningly on his white stallion.

I did not kill her! Rand thought. *Lews Therin, she lives on. We didn’t kill her! That was Semirhage who was to blame, in any case.*

Silence. He could still feel his fingers on her flesh, squeezing, impotent yet incredibly strong. Even if Semirhage had been behind the actions, Rand was the one who had been too weak to send Min away and protect her.

He hadn't sent her away. Not because he was too weak, but because something in him had stopped caring. Not about her—he loved her fiercely, and always would. But he knew that death, pain and destruction came in his wake, and he dragged them behind him like a cloak. Min might die here, but if he sent her away, she would be in just as much danger. His enemies likely suspected that he loved her.

There was no safety. If she died, he would add her to the list and suffer for it.

He started moving again before question could be called to his actions. Tai'daishar's hooves thumped on the earthen streets, made soft by the humidity. Rains came often here; Bandar Eban was the prime port city of the northwest. If it wasn't a great city like those in the south, it was still impressive. Row upon row of square houses, built of wood, ridged at the second and third stories. They looked like children's blocks, stacked on top of one another, so perfectly square with the stories divided. They filled the city, rolling down a gentle incline to the massive port.

The city was widest at the port, making it seem like the head of a man opening his mouth wide, as if to drink in the ocean itself. The docks were nearly empty; the only ships moored were a cluster of Sea Folk vessels—three-masted rakers—and some fishing trawlers. The massive size of the port only made it look more desolate for the lack of ships.

That was the first sign that all was not well in Bandar Eban.

Other than the virtually unoccupied harbor, the most distinctive aspect of the city was the banners. They flew above—or hung from—every building, no matter how humble. Many of those banners proclaimed the trade practiced in a given building—much as a simple wooden sign would in Caemlyn. The banners were far more extravagant than most, bright-colored and fluttering in the wind above the buildings. Matching tapestry-like banners hung from the sides of most buildings, announcing in bright lettering the owner, master craftsman and merchant of each shop. Even homes bore banners with the names of the families who lived therein.

Copper-skinned and dark-haired, the Domani favored bright clothing. Domani women were infamous for their dresses, which were filmy enough to be scandalous. It was said that very young Domani girls practiced the art of manipulating men, preparing for the day when they would be of age.

The sight of them all standing along the roads, watching, was nearly spectacle enough to draw Rand out of his brooding. Perhaps a year ago, he would have gawked, but now he barely gave them a glance. In fact, it came to him that Domani people were far less striking when gathered together like this. A flower in a field of weeds was always a sight, but if you passed cultivated flower beds every day, none of them drew your notice.

Distracted though he was, he did pick out the signs of starvation. There was no mistaking that haunted cast to the children, that lean look to the faces of the adults. This city had been in chaos just weeks ago, though Dobraine and the Aiel had restored the law. Some of the buildings bore poorly mended windows or broken boards, and some of the banners had obviously been ripped recently and shoddily mended. Law had been restored, but the lack of it was still a fresh memory.

Rand's group reached a central crossroads, proclaimed by large flapping banners to be Arandi Square, and Dobraine turned the procession to the east. Many of the Aiel with the Cairhienin wore the red headband marking them as *siswai'aman*. Spears of the Dragon. Rhuarc had some twenty thousand Aiel camped around the city and in the nearby towns; by now most Domani would know that these Aiel followed the Dragon Reborn.

Rand was glad to find that the Sea Folk rakers had arrived—finally—with grain from the south. Hopefully, that would do as much to restore order as Dobraine and the Aiel had.

The procession turned into the wealthy section of the city. He knew where they'd find it long before the homes started looking more lavish: as far from the docks as possible, while still remaining a comfortable distance from the city walls. Rand could have found the rich even without looking at a map. The city's landscape all but demanded their location.

A horse clopped up beside Rand. At first, he assumed it would be Min—but no, she was riding behind, with the Wise Ones. Did she look at him differently now, or was he just imagining it? Did she remember his fingers at her throat every time she saw his face?

It was Merise who had moved up beside him, riding a placid dun mare. The Aes Sedai was infuriated by Rand's exile of Cadsuane. Unsurprising. Aes Sedai liked to maintain a very calm and controlled front, but Merise and the others had pandered to Cadsuane much like a village innkeeper simpering over a visiting king.

The Taraboner woman had chosen to wear her shawl today, proclaiming her affiliation to the Green Ajah. She wore it, perhaps, in an effort to reinforce her authority. Inwardly, Rand sighed. He had been expecting a confrontation, but he had hoped that the business of the move would delay it until tempers subsided. He respected Cadsuane, after a fashion, but he had never trusted her. There had to be consequences for failure, and he felt a great relief from having dealt with her. There would be no more of her strings wrapping themselves around him.

Or, at least, fewer of them.

"This exile, it is foolish, Rand al'Thor," Merise said dismissively. Was she intentionally trying to rile him, perhaps to make him easier to bully? After months of dealing with Cadsuane herself, this woman's pale imitation was almost amusing.

"You should beg for her forgiveness," Merise continued. "She has condescended to continue with us, though your inane restriction has forced her to wear a cloak with the hood up, despite the warmth of the day. You should be ashamed."

Cadsuane again. He shouldn't have left her room to wiggle around his command.

"Well?" Merise asked.

Rand turned his head and looked Merise in the eyes. He had discovered something shocking during the last few hours. By bottling up the seething fury within him—by becoming *cuendillar*—he had gained an understanding that had long eluded him.

People did not respond to anger. They did not respond to demands. Silence and questions, these were far more effective. Indeed, Merise—a fully trained Aes Sedai—wilted before that stare.

He put no emotion into it. His rage, his anger, his passion—it was all still there, buried within. But he had surrounded it with ice, cold and immobilizing. It was the ice of the place Semirhage had taught him to go, the place that was like the void, but far more dangerous.

Perhaps Merise could sense frozen rage within him. Or perhaps she could sense the other thing, the fact that he'd used that . . . power. Distantly, Lews Therin began to cry. The madman did that whenever Rand thought of what he had done to escape Semirhage's collar.

"What you did, it was a foolish move," Merise continued. "You should —"

"Do you think me a fool, then?" Rand asked softly.

Respond to demands with silence, respond to challenges with questions. It was amazing how it worked. Merise cut off, then shivered visibly. She glanced down, to the pouch on his saddle where he carried the small statue of a man holding aloft a sphere. Rand fingered it, holding his reins loosely.

He did not flaunt the statuette. He simply carried it, but Merise and most of the others knew the nearly unlimited power he could tap if he wished. It was a weapon greater than any other ever known. With it, he might be able to annihilate the world itself. And it sat innocently on his saddle. That had an effect on people.

"I . . . No, I don't," she admitted. "Not always."

"Do you think that failures should be unpunished?" Rand asked, voice still soft. Why had he lost his temper? These little annoyances were not worth his passion, his fury. If one bothered him too much, all he needed do was snuff it out, like a candle.

A dangerous thought. Had that been his? Had it been Lews Therin's? Or . . . had the thought come from . . . elsewhere?

"Surely you have been too harsh," Merise said.

"Too harsh?" he asked. "Do you realize her mistake, Merise? Have you considered what could have happened? What *should* have happened?"

"I—"

"The end of all things, Merise," he whispered. "The Dark One with control of the Dragon Reborn. The two of us, fighting on the same side."

She fell silent, then said, "Yes. But mistakes, you yourself have made them. They might have ended in similar disaster."

"I pay for my mistakes," he said, turning away. "I pay for them each day. Each hour. Each breath."

"I—"

"Enough." He did not yell the word. He spoke firmly, but quietly. He made her feel the full force of his displeasure, his gaze seizing her own. She suddenly slumped in her saddle, looking up at him with wide eyes.

There was a loud cracking noise from the side, followed by a sudden crash. Screams broke the air. Rand turned with alarm. A balcony filled with onlookers had broken free of its supports and fallen to the street, smashing like a barrel hit by a boulder. People groaned in pain, others called out for help. But the sounds had come from both sides of the street. Rand frowned and turned; a *second* balcony—directly across from the first—had fallen as well.

Merise paled, then turned her horse hastily, heading to help the wounded. Other Aes Sedai were already hurrying to Heal those who had fallen.

Rand kneed Tai'daishar forward. That had not been caused by the Power, but by his *ta'veren* nature changing probability. Wherever he visited, remarkable and random events occurred. Large numbers of births, deaths, weddings and accidents. He had learned to ignore them.

He had rarely seen an occurrence quite so . . . violent, however. Could he be sure it wasn't due to some interaction with the new force? That unseen yet tempting well of power Rand had tapped, used and enjoyed? Lews Therin thought what happened should have been impossible.

The original reason mankind had bored into the Dark One's prison had been power. A new source of energy for channeling, like the One Power, but different. Unknown and strange, and potentially vast. That source of power had turned out to be the Dark One himself.

Lews Therin whimpered.

Rand carried the access key with him for a reason. It linked him to one of the greatest *sa'angreal* ever created. With that power and the aid of Nynaeve, Rand had cleansed *saidin*. The access key had allowed him to tap an unimaginable river, a tempest as vast as the ocean. It had been the greatest thing he had ever experienced.

Until the moment when he had used the unnamed power.

That other force called to him, sang to him, tempted him. So much power, so much divine wonder. But it terrified him. He didn't dare touch it, not again.

And so he carried the key. He was not certain which of the two sources of energy was more dangerous, but as long as both called to him, he was able to resist both. Like two people, both yelling for his attention, they drowned one another out. For the moment.

Besides, he would *not* be collared again. The access key wouldn't have helped him against Semirhage—no amount of the One Power would aid a man if he were caught unaware—but perhaps it would in the future. Once, he hadn’t dared carry it for fear of what it offered. He no longer had room to indulge such weakness.

The destination was easy to pick out; about five hundred Cairhienin armsmen were camped on the grounds of a spacious, stately mansion. Aiel also had tents on the grounds—but they had also claimed nearby buildings, and several nearby roofs. For the Aiel, camping in a place was essentially the same thing as guarding it, as an Aiel resting was about twice as alert as a regular soldier on patrol. Rand had left the larger bulk of his force outside the city; he would leave it to Dobraine and his stewards to find quarters for Rand’s men within the walls.

Rand halted Tai’daishar, then surveyed his new home.

We have no home, Lews Therin whispered. *We destroyed it. Burned it away, melted to slag, like sand in a fire.*

The mansion was certainly a step up from the mostly log manor. Its large grounds were bordered by iron gates. The flower beds were empty—flowers were hesitant to bloom this spring—but the lawn was greener than most he had seen. Oh, it was mostly yellow and brown, but there were patches of green. The groundskeepers were trying very hard, their efforts also manifest in the rows of Aryth yews cut in the shapes of fanciful animals at the sides of the lawn.

The mansion itself was nearly a palace; there was one of those in the city, of course, belonging to the king. But it was said to be inferior to the homes of the Council of Merchants. The banner flapping tall atop the manor was of brilliant gold and black, and it proclaimed this to be the seat of House Chadmar. Perhaps this Milisair had seen the departure of the others as an opportunity. If so, the only real opportunity she’d gained was the chance to be taken by Rand.

The gates to the mansion grounds were open, and the Aiel in his entourage were already hurrying in, joining clusters of society or clan members. It was irksome that they rarely waited on Rand’s commands or orders, but Aiel were Aiel. Any suggestion that they should wait was simply met with laughter, as if he had made a grand joke. It would be easier to tame the wind itself than to get them to behave like wetlanders.

That made him think of Aviendha. Where *had* she gone, so suddenly? He could feel her through the bond, but it was faint—she was very far away. To the east. What business was there for her in the Waste?

He shook his head. All women were difficult to understand, and an Aiel woman was tenfold more incomprehensible. He had hoped that he would be able to spend some time with her, but she'd pointedly avoided him. Well, perhaps it was Min's presence that kept her away. Perhaps he would be able to keep himself from hurting her before death came. Better that Aviendha fled. His enemies didn't know of her yet.

He urged Tai'daishar through the gates, riding up the drive to the manor house itself. He dismounted, plucking the statuette from its strap and sliding it into the oversized pocket of his coat, which had been quickly tailored to hold it. He handed his mount off to a groom—one of the manor house's own servants, wearing a coat of green with a bright white shirt beneath, the collar and cuffs ruffled. The manor's servants had already been apprised that Rand would be using the place as his own, now that its former occupant had been . . . given his protection.

Dobraine joined him as he strode up the steps to the building. It was washed a crisp white, with wooden pillars lining the front landing. He stepped inside the front doors. After living in several palaces, he was still impressed. And disgusted. The opulence he found beyond the manor's front doors would never have indicated that the people of the city starved. A line of very nervous servants stood in a row along the back of the entryway. He could sense their fear. It was not every day that one's dwelling was annexed by the Dragon Reborn himself.

Rand pulled off his riding glove by tucking his hand between his arm and his side, then slipped the glove in his belt. "Where is she?" he asked, turning to the pair of Maidens—Beralna and Riallin—who were keeping an eye on the servants.

"Second floor," one of the Maidens said. "Sipping tea while her hand shakes so much it threatens to break the porcelain."

"We keep telling her she's not a prisoner," the other Maiden said. "She just can't leave."

Both of them found that amusing. Rand glanced to the side as Rhuarc joined him in the entryway. The tall, fire-haired clan chief inspected the room, with its twinkling chandelier and ornamented vases. Rand knew what he was thinking. "You may take the fifth," he said. "But only from the rich who live in this district."

That wasn't how it was done; the Aiel should have been allowed the fifth from everyone. But Rhuarc did not argue. What the Aiel had done in taking Bandar Eban hadn't really been a true conquest, though they had fought gangs and thugs. Perhaps he shouldn't have given them anything. But considering the mansions like this one, there was wealth to spare for the Aiel here, among the wealthy at least.

The Maidens nodded, as if they had expected it, then loped off, probably to begin selecting their share. Dobraine watched them with consternation. Cairhien had suffered the Aiel fifth on several occasions.

"I never can understand why you let them plunder like highwaymen who find the caravan guards asleep," Corele said, sweeping into the room with a smile. She raised an eyebrow at the impressive furnishings. "And such a pretty place as this. Like letting soldiers trample spring buds, isn't it?"

Had she been sent to deal with him now that he'd shaken Merise? She met Rand's gaze in her pleasant way, but he held it until she broke and turned away. He could remember a time when that had never worked with Aes Sedai.

He turned to Dobraine. "You have done well here," he said to the lord. "Even if you haven't brought order as widely as I wish. Gather your armsmen. Narishma has been instructed to provide a gateway for you to Tear."

"Tear, my Lord?" Dobraine asked, surprised.

"Yes," Rand said. "Tell Darlin to stop pestering me with messengers. He is to keep gathering his forces; I'll bring him to Arad Doman when I decide the time is right." That would be after he met with the Daughter of the Nine Moons, which meeting would determine much.

Dobraine looked faintly crestfallen. Or was that just Rand's interpretation? Dobraine's expression rarely changed. Was he imagining his hopes of this kingdom withering away? Was he plotting against Rand? "Yes, my Lord. I assume I'm to leave immediately?"

Dobraine has never given us reason to doubt him. He even gathered support for Elayne to take the Sun Throne!

Rand had been away from him too long. Too long to trust him. But best to get him out for now; he'd had too much time to get a foothold here, and Rand didn't trust any Cairhienin to avoid games with politics.

"Yes, you leave within the hour," Rand said, turning to walk up the graceful white stairs.

Dobraine saluted, stoic as always, and left out the front doorway. He obeyed immediately. No word of complaint. He *was* a good man. Rand knew he was.

Light, what is happening to me? Rand thought. *I need to trust some people. Don't I?*

Trust . . . ? Lews Therin whispered. *Yes, perhaps we can trust him. He cannot channel. Light, the one we can't trust at all is ourselves. . . .*

Rand clenched his jaw. He would reward Dobraine with the kingdom if Alsalam couldn't be found. Ituralde didn't want it.

The stairs rose straight and broad to a landing, then split and twisted up to the second floor, touching the landing there on two separate sides. "I need an audience chamber," Rand said to the servants below, "and a throne. Quickly."

Less than ten minutes later, Rand sat in a plushly decorated sitting room on the second floor, waiting for the merchant Milisair Chadmar to be brought to him. His ornately carved white wood chair wasn't quite a throne, but it would do. Perhaps Milisair had used it for audiences herself. The room did seem laid out like a throne room, with a shallowly raised dais for him to sit on. Both dais and floor below were covered in a textured green and red rug of fanciful design which matched the Sea Folk porcelain on pedestals at the corner. Four broad windows behind him—each large enough to walk through—ushered overcast sunlight into the room, and it fell on his back as he sat in the chair and leaned forward, one arm resting across his knees. The figurine sat on the floor just before him.

Shortly, Milisair Chadmar walked through the doorway past the Aiel guards. She wore one of those famous Domani dresses. It covered her body from neck to toe but was barely opaque and clung to every curve—of which she had more than her fair share. The dress was of deep green, and she wore pearls at her neck. Her dark hair, in tight curls, hung down past her shoulders, several locks framing her face. He hadn't expected her to be so young, barely into her thirties.

It would be a shame to execute her.

Just one day, he thought to himself, *and already I think of executing a woman for not agreeing to follow me. There was a time when I could barely stand to execute deserving criminals*. But he would do what must be done.

Milisair's deep curtsy seemed to imply that she accepted his authority. Or perhaps it was simply a means of allowing him a better view of what the dress accentuated. A very Domani thing to do. Unfortunately for her, he already had more problems with women than he knew how to handle.

“My Lord Dragon,” Milisair said, rising from her curtsy. “How may I serve you?”

“When was the last communication you had from King Alsalam?” Rand asked. He pointedly didn’t give her leave to sit in one of the room’s chairs.

“The King?” she asked, surprised. “It has been weeks now.”

“I will need to speak to the messenger who brought the latest message,” Rand said.

“I am not certain he can be found.” The woman sounded flustered. “I do not keep track of the coming and going of every messenger in the city, my Lord.”

Rand leaned forward. “Do you lie to me?” he asked softly.

Her mouth opened, perhaps in shock at his bluntness. The Domani were no Cairhienin—who had a seemingly inborn political craftiness—but they *were* a subtle people. Particularly the women.

Rand was neither subtle nor crafty. He was a sheepherder turned conqueror, and his heart was that of a Two Rivers man, even if his blood was Aiel. Whatever politicking she was used to playing, it wouldn’t work on him. He had no patience for games.

“I . . .” Milisair said, staring at him. “My Lord Dragon. . . .”

What was she hiding? “What did you do with him?” Rand asked, making a guess. “The messenger?”

“He knew nothing of the King’s location,” Milisair said quickly, the words seeming to spill from her. “My questioners were quite thorough.”

“He is dead?”

“I. . . . No, my Lord Dragon.”

“Then you will have him brought to me.”

She paled further, and glanced to one side, perhaps reflexively seeking escape. “My Lord Dragon,” she said hesitantly, bringing her eyes back to him. “Now that you are here, perhaps the King will remain . . . hidden. Perhaps there is no need to seek him out further.”

She thinks he’s dead too, Rand thought. *It has made her take risks.*

“There *is* need to find Alsalam,” Rand said, “or at least discover what happened to him. We need to know his fate so that you can choose a new king. That is how it happens, correct?”

“I’m certain you can be crowned quickly, my Lord Dragon,” she said smoothly.

“I will not be king here,” Rand said. “Bring me the messenger, Milisair, and perhaps you will live to see a new king crowned. You are dismissed.”

She hesitated, then curtsied again and withdrew. Rand caught a glimpse of Min standing outside with the Aiel, watching the merchant depart. He caught her eyes, and she looked troubled. Had she seen any viewings about Milisair? He almost called to her, but she vanished, walking away with a quick step. To the side, Alivia watched her go with curiosity. The former *damane* had stayed aloof recently, as if biding her time, waiting until she could fulfill her destiny in helping Rand die.

He found himself standing. That look in Min’s eyes. Was she angry with him? Was she remembering his hand at her neck, his knee pressing her against the floor?

He sat back down. Min could wait. “All right,” he said, addressing the Aiel. “Bring me my scribes and stewards, along with Rhuarc, Bael and whatever city worthies haven’t fled the city or been killed in riots. We need to go over the grain distribution plans.”

The Aiel sent runners and Rand settled back into his chair. He would see the people fed, restore order and gather the Council of Merchants. He would even see that a new king was chosen.

But he would *also* find out where Alsalam had gone. For there, his instincts said, was the best place to find Graendal. It was his best lead.

If he did find her, he would see that she died by balefire, just like Semirhage. He would do what must be done.

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Chapter 30

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Old Advice

Gawyn remembered very little of his father—the man had never been much of a father, to him at least—but he did have a strong memory of a day in the Caemlyn palace gardens. Gawyn had been standing beside a small pond, pitching pebbles into it. Taringail had walked past down the Rose March, young Galad at his side.

The scene was still vivid in Gawyn’s mind. The heavy scent of the roses in full bloom. The silver ripples on the pond, the minnows scattering away from the miniature boulder he’d just tossed at them. He could picture his father well. Tall, handsome, hair with a slight wave to it. Galad had been straight-backed and somber even then. A few months later, Galad would rescue Gawyn from drowning in that very pond.

Gawyn could hear his father speak words that he’d never forgotten. Whatever else one thought of Taringail Damodred, this bit of advice rang true. “There are two groups of people you should *never* trust,” the man had been saying to Galad as they passed. “The first are pretty women. The second are Aes Sedai. Light help you, son, if you ever have to face someone who is both.”

Light help you, son.

“I simply cannot see disobeying the Amyrlin’s express will in this matter,” Lelaine said primly, stirring ink in the small jar on her desk. No man trusted beautiful women, for all their fascination with them. But few realized what Taringail had said—that a pretty girl, like a coal that had cooled just enough to no longer look hot, could be far, far more dangerous.

Lelaine wasn’t beautiful, but she *was* pretty, particularly when she smiled. Slender and graceful, without a speck of gray in her dark hair, an almond face with full lips. She looked up at him with eyes that were far too comely to belong to a woman of her craftiness. And she seemed to know. She understood that she was just attractive enough to draw attention, but not stunning enough to make men wary.

She was a woman of the most dangerous type. One who felt real, who made men think they might be able to hold her attention. She wasn’t pretty like Egwene, who made you want to spend time with her. This woman’s smile made you want to count the knives on your belt and in your boot, just to make sure none of them had found their way into your back while you were distracted.

Gawyn stood beside her writing table, shaded by the straight-topped blue tent. He hadn't been invited to sit, and he had not asked for the privilege. Talking to an Aes Sedai, particularly an important one, required wits and sobriety. He'd rather stand. Perhaps it would keep him more alert.

"Egwene is trying to protect you," Gawyn said, controlling his frustration. "That's why she commanded you to forgo a rescue. She obviously doesn't want you to risk yourselves. She is self-sacrificing to a fault." *If she weren't,* he added in his mind, *she'd never have let you all bully her into pretending to be the Amyrlin Seat.*

"She seems very confident of her safety," Lelaine said, dipping her pen into the ink. She began to write on a piece of parchment; a note to someone. Gawyn politely didn't read over her shoulder, though he did notice the calculated move on her part. He was unimportant enough that he couldn't demand her full attention. He chose not to acknowledge the insult. Trying to bully Bryne hadn't worked; it would be even less effective with this woman.

"She's trying to put your worries at ease, Lelaine Sedai," he said instead.

"I am a fair judge of people, young Trakand. I do not think she feels she is in danger." She shook her head. Her perfume smelled of apple blossoms.

"I do not doubt you," he replied. "But perhaps if I knew *how* it is you communicate with her, I could judge better. If I could—"

"You have been warned not to ask about that, child," Lelaine said in her soft, melodious voice. "Leave things of the Aes Sedai to the Aes Sedai."

Virtually the same answer each sister gave when he asked how they communicated with Egwene. He clenched his jaw in frustration. What had he expected? It involved using the One Power. After all his time in the White Tower, he still had little idea of what the Power could and couldn't do.

"Regardless," Lelaine continued, "the Amyrlin thinks herself quite safe. What we've discovered in Shemerin's story only reinforces and corroborates what Egwene has told us. Elaida is so mad with power that she doesn't consider the rightful Amyrlin a threat."

There was more she wasn't saying. Gawyn could tell it. He could never get a straight answer from them regarding what Egwene's status was currently. He'd heard rumors that she'd been imprisoned, no longer allowed to roam free as a novice. But getting information from an Aes Sedai was about as easy as churning rocks into butter!

Gawyn took a breath. He couldn't lose his temper. If he did that, he'd *never* get Lelaine to listen. And he needed her. Bryne wouldn't move without Aes Sedai authorization, and as far as Gawyn had been able to tell, his best chances of gaining it came from Lelaine or Romanda. Everyone seemed to listen to one of the two or the other.

Fortunately, Gawyn had found that he could play them off one another. A visit to Romanda almost always prompted an invitation from Lelaine. Of course, the reason they were eager to see him in the first place had very little to do with Egwene. No doubt the conversation would move in that direction very soon.

"Perhaps you are right, Lelaine Sedai," he said, trying a different tack. "Perhaps Egwene *does* believe herself to be safe. But isn't there a possibility that she is wrong? You can't honestly believe that Elaida will let a woman who claimed to be *Amyrlin* wander around the White Tower free? This is obviously just a means of showing off a captured rival before executing her."

"Perhaps," Lelaine said, continuing to write. She had a flowing, ornate hand. "But must I not uphold the Amyrlin, even if she is misguided?"

Gawyn gave no response. Of course she could disobey the will of the Amyrlin. He knew enough of Aes Sedai politics to understand it was done all the time. But saying that would accomplish nothing.

"Still," Lelaine said absently. "Perhaps I can bring a motion before the Hall. We might be able to persuade the Amyrlin to listen to a new kind of plea. We shall see if I can formulate a new argument."

"We shall see" or "Perhaps we can" or "I will consider what to do." Never a firm commitment; every half-offer came smeared liberally with goose grease for easy escape. Light, but he was growing weary of Aes Sedai answers!

Lelaine looked up at him, favoring him with a smile. "Now, as I have agreed to do something for you, perhaps you will be willing to offer me something. Great deeds are rarely accomplished without the aid of many partners, you may know."

Gawyn sighed. "Speak your needs, Aes Sedai."

"Your sister has, by all reports, made a very admirable showing for herself in Andor," Lelaine said, as if she hadn't said nearly the exact same thing the last three times she'd met with Gawyn. "She *did* have to step on a few toes to secure her throne, however. What do you think her policy will be regarding House Traemane's fruit orchards? Under your mother, the tax assessments on the land were *very* favorable toward Traemane. Will Elayne revoke this special privilege, or will she try to use it as honey to soothe those who stood against her?"

Gawyn stifled another sigh. It always came back to Elayne. He was convinced that neither Lelaine nor Romanda had any real interest in rescuing Egwene—they were too pleased with their increased power in her absence. No, they met with Gawyn because of the new queen on the Lion Throne.

He had no idea why an Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah would care about apple orchard taxation rates. Lelaine wouldn't be looking for monetary gain; that wasn't the Aes Sedai way. But she would want leverage, a means of securing a favorable connection with the Andoran noble houses. Gawyn resisted answering. Why help this woman? What good was it doing?

But yet . . . could he be *certain* she wouldn't work for Egwene's release? If he stopped making these meetings useful to Lelaine, would she discontinue them? Would he find himself shut out of his one source of influence—no matter how small—in the camp?

"Well," he said, "I think that my sister will be more strict than my mother was. She always has thought that the favorable position of the orchard growers was no longer justified."

He could see that Lelaine subtly began taking notes on what he said at the bottom of her parchment. Was that the real reason for getting out the ink and quill?

He had no choice but to answer as honestly as he could, though he had to be careful not to let himself get pressed for *too* much information. His connection to Elayne was the only thing he had with which to bargain, and he had to ration his usefulness to stretch it long. It irked him. Elayne wasn't a bargaining chip, she was his sister!

But it was all he had.

"I see," Lelaine said, "and what of the northern cherry orchards? They haven't been particularly productive lately, and. . . ."

Shaking his head, Gawyn left the tent. Lelaine had prodded him about Andoran taxation rates for the better part of an hour. And, once again, Gawyn was uncertain if he'd achieved anything useful in his visit. He'd never get Egwene free at this rate!

As always, a novice in white waited outside the tent to escort him from the inner camp. This time the novice was a short, plump woman who looked more than a few years too old to have taken up the white.

Gawyn allowed the woman to lead him through the Aes Sedai camp, trying to pretend that she was just a guide, rather than a guard to see that he left as instructed. Bryne was right; the women did *not* like unnecessary bodies—soldiers in particular—wandering around their neat little imitation White Tower of a village. He passed bustling groups of white-clad women crossing walkways, watching him with the faint distrust the friendliest of people often gave an outsider. He passed Aes Sedai, universally self-assured whether they wore rich silk or stiff wool. He passed some groups of worker women, far more neat than those out in the soldier camp. They walked with an almost Aes Sedai air themselves, as if they gained a measure of authority by being allowed into the *real* camp.

All these groups crisscrossed through an open square of trampled weeds that formed the common area. The most confusing thing he had discovered in this camp had to do with Egwene. More and more, he was coming to realize that the people here really *did* see her as Amyrlin. She wasn't simply a decoy set up to draw ire, nor was she a calculated insult, meant to rile Elaida. Egwene *was* Amyrlin to them.

Obviously, she had been chosen because the rebels wanted someone easy to control. But they didn't treat her as a puppet—both Lelaine and Romanda spoke of her with respect. There was an advantage to Egwene's absence, since it created a void of power. Therefore, they accepted Egwene as a source of authority. Was he the only one who remembered that she'd been an Accepted just months ago?

She *was* in over her head. However, she'd also impressed the people in this camp. It was like his mother's own rise to power in Andor many years before.

But why did she refuse to allow a rescue? Traveling had been rediscovered—from what he'd heard, Egwene herself had rediscovered it! He needed to talk to her. Then he could judge if her unwillingness to escape came from a fear of putting others in danger, or if it was something else.

He unhobbled Challenge from the post at the border between Aes Sedai and army camps, nodded farewell to his novice handler, then swung into the saddle, checking the position of the sun. He turned his mount east along a pathway between army tents, and set out in a quick trot. He hadn't been lying when he'd told Lelaine he had another appointment; he'd promised to meet Bryne. Of course, Gawyn had set up the meeting because he'd known he might need a means of escaping Lelaine. Bryne had taught him that: It didn't show fear to prepare your retreat ahead of time. It was just plain good strategy.

Well over an hour's ride later, Gawyn found his old teacher where they'd planned to meet: one of the outlying guard posts. Bryne was conducting an inspection not unlike the one Gawyn had used to mask his escape from the Younglings. The general was just mounting his big-nosed bay gelding as Gawyn trotted up, crossing the scrub grass and wan spring weeds. The guard post sat in a hollow on the side of a gentle incline, with a good view of the approach from the north. The soldiers stood respectfully in their general's presence, and they veiled their hostility toward Gawyn. It had gotten around that he'd led the force which had raided them so successfully. A strategist like Bryne could respect Gawyn for his skill, no matter that they had been on opposite sides, but these men had seen colleagues killed by Gawyn's troops.

Bryne turned his horse to the side, nodding to Gawyn. "You're later than you said you'd be, son."

"But not later than you expected?" Gawyn said, pulling Challenge up.

"Not at all," the sturdy man said, smiling. "You were visiting Aes Sedai."

Gawyn grinned at that, and the two turned their mounts and began to cross the open hills toward the north. Bryne planned to inspect all of the guard posts on the western side of Tar Valon, a duty that would involve a lot of riding, so Gawyn had offered to accompany him. There was blessed little else to do with his time; few of the soldiers would spar with him, and those who would tried just a little too hard to cause an "accident." The Aes Sedai would only suffer so much of his prodding, and Gawyn didn't have a mind for the game of stones lately. He was too on edge, worried about Egwene and frustrated at his lack of progress. The truth was, he'd never been very good at the game in the first place—not like his mother. Bryne had insisted that Gawyn practice it anyway as a method of learning battlefield strategy.

The hillsides were scraggly with yellow weeds and larksbrush, with its tiny, faintly blue leaves and gnarled branches. There should have been wildflowers coating the hills in patches, but not a single one bloomed. The landscape felt sickly—yellow in patches, whitish blue in others, with generous helpings of dead brown scrub that hadn't regrown after the harsh winter.

"And are you going to tell me how the meeting went?" Bryne asked as they rode, a squad of soldiers following behind as an honor guard.

"I'll bet you have guessed that already as well."

"Oh, I don't know," Bryne said. "It is an unusual time, and strange events are common. Perhaps Lelaine decided to forgo scheming for a time and actually listen to your pleas."

Gawyn grimaced. "I think you'd sooner find a Trolloc who has taken up weaving than an Aes Sedai who has given up scheming."

"I do believe that you were warned," Bryne said.

There was no argument that Gawyn could make, so they simply rode in silence for a short time, passing the distant river to the right. Beyond that, the tower and roofs of Tar Valon. A prison.

"We'll eventually need to discuss that group of soldiers you left behind, Gawyn," Bryne said suddenly, eyes forward.

"I don't see what there is to discuss," Gawyn said, which wasn't completely truthful. He had suspicions of what Bryne would ask, and he didn't look forward to the conversation.

Bryne shook his head. "I'll need information, lad. Locations, troop counts, equipment lists. I know you were staging from one of the villages to the east, but which one? How many are in your force, and what kind of support are Elaida's Aes Sedai giving them?"

Gawyn kept his eyes forward. "I came to help Egwene. Not to betray those who trusted me."

"You already betrayed them."

"No," Gawyn said firmly. "I abandoned them, but I have not betrayed them. And I do not intend to."

"And you expect me to let a potential advantage die untaken?" Bryne asked, turning to him. "What you have in that brain of yours could save lives."

"Or *cost* lives," Gawyn said, "if you look at it from the other side."

"Don't make this difficult, Gawyn."

"Or what?" Gawyn asked. "You'll put me to the question?"

"You'd suffer for them?"

“They are my men,” Gawyn said simply. *Or, at least, they were.* Either way, he had had enough of being pushed around by circumstances and wars. He would give no loyalty to the White Tower, but neither would he offer it to these rebels. Egwene and Elayne held his heart and his honor. And if he couldn’t give it to them, he would give it to Andor—and the entire world—by hunting down Rand al’Thor and seeing him dead.

Rand al’Thor. Gawyn didn’t believe Bryne’s defense of the man. Oh, he believed that Bryne meant what he said—but he was mistaken. It could happen to the best of people, taken in by the charisma of a creature like al’Thor. He had fooled Elayne herself. The only way to help any of them would be to expose this Dragon and dispose of him.

He looked over at Bryne, who turned away. He was still thinking about the Younglings, likely. It was unlikely that Bryne would put Gawyn to the question. Gawyn knew the general, and his sense of honor, too well. It wouldn’t happen. But Bryne *might* decide to imprison Gawyn. Perhaps it would be wise to offer him something.

“They are youths, Bryne,” Gawyn said.

Bryne frowned.

“Youths,” Gawyn repeated. “Barely past their training. They belong on the sparring field, not on the battlefield. Their hearts are good, and their skills sound, but they are much less a threat to you now that I am gone. I was the one who knew your strategy. Without me, they will have a much harder time of their raids. I suspect that if they continue to strike, they shall have their day with the butcher soon enough. No need for me to hasten them along.”

“Very well,” Bryne replied. “I will wait. But if their raids continue to be effective, you will hear this question from me again.”

Gawyn nodded. The best thing he could do for the Younglings would be to help end this division between the rebels and the loyalists. But that seemed far beyond the scope of what he could accomplish. Perhaps after he freed Egwene he could think of some way to help. Light! They couldn’t really be intending to go to blows, could they? The skirmish following Siuan Sanche’s fall had been bad enough. What would happen if armies met here, just outside of Tar Valon? Aes Sedai against Aes Sedai, Warder fighting Warder on a battlefield? A disaster.

“It can’t come to that,” he found himself saying.

Bryne looked at Gawyn as their horses continued across the field.

“You can’t attack, Bryne,” Gawyn said. “A siege is one thing. But what will you do if they order you to mount an assault?”

“What I always do,” Bryne said. “Obey.”

“But—”

“I gave my word, Gawyn.”

“And how many deaths is that word worth? Assaulting the White Tower would be a disaster. No matter how slighted these rebel Aes Sedai may feel, there will be no reconciliation if it happens by the sword.”

“That’s not our decision,” Bryne said. He glanced at Gawyn, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“What?” Gawyn asked.

“I’m wondering why it matters to you. I thought you were just here for Egwene.”

“I. . . .” Gawyn floundered.

“Who are you, Gawyn Trakand?” Bryne asked, prodding further. “What are your allegiances, really?”

“You know me better than most, Gareth.”

“I know who you were *supposed* to be,” Bryne said. “First Prince of the Sword, trained by Warders but bonded to no woman.”

“And that’s not what I am?” Gawyn asked testily.

“Peace, son,” Bryne said. “This wasn’t meant to be an insult. Just an observation. I know you were never as single-minded as your brother. I suppose I should have seen this in you.”

Gawyn turned toward the aging general. What was the man talking about?

Bryne sighed. “It’s a thing most soldiers never face, Gawyn. Oh, they may consider it, but they don’t let it torment them. This question is for someone else, someone higher up.”

“What question?” Gawyn asked, perplexed.

“Choosing a side,” Bryne said. “And, once you’ve picked one, deciding if you made the right decision. The foot soldiers don’t have to make this choice, but those of us who lead . . . yes, I can see it in you. That skill of yours with the sword is no small gift. Where do you use it?”

“For Elayne,” Gawyn said quickly.

“As you do now?” Bryne asked with amusement.

“Well, once I save Egwene.”

“And if Egwene won’t go?” Bryne asked. “I know that look in your eyes, lad. I also know some small bit about Egwene al’Vere. She won’t leave this battlefield until a victor has been chosen.”

“I’ll take her away,” Gawyn said. “Back to Andor.”

“And will you *force* her to go?” Bryne asked. “As you forced your way into my camp? Will you become a bully and a footpad, remarkable only because of your ability to kill or punish those who disagree with you?”

Gawyn didn’t answer.

“Whom to serve?” Bryne said, thoughtful. “Our own skill frightens us, sometimes. What is the ability to kill if one has no outlet for it? A wasted talent? The pathway to becoming a murderer? The power to protect and preserve is daunting. So you look for someone to give the skill to, someone who will use it wisely. The need to make a decision chews at you, even after you’ve made it. I see the question more in younger men. We old hounds, we’re just happy to have a place by the hearth. If someone tells us to fight, we don’t want to shake things up too much. But the young men . . . they wonder.”

“Did you question, once?” Gawyn asked.

“Yes,” Bryne said. “More than once. I wasn’t Captain-General during the Aiel War, but I *was* a rank-captain. I wondered then, many times.”

“How could you question your side during the Aiel war, of all things?” Gawyn said, frowning. “They came to slaughter.”

“They didn’t come for us,” Bryne said. “They just wanted the Cairhienin. Of course, that wasn’t so easy to see at first, but truth be told, some of us wondered. Laman deserved his death. Why should we die to stand in the way of it? Maybe more of us should have asked the question.”

“Then what’s the answer?” Gawyn asked. “Where do you put your trust? Whom do I serve?”

“I don’t know,” Bryne said frankly.

“Then why ask in the first place?” Gawyn snapped, pulling his horse up short.

Bryne reined in his animal, turning back. “I don’t know the answer because there isn’t one. At least, each person’s answer is their own. When I was young, I fought for honor. Eventually, I realized that there was little honor to be found in killing, and I found that I had changed. Then I fought because I served your mother. I trusted her. When she failed me, I began to wonder again. What of all those years of service? What of the men I'd killed in her name? What did any of that mean?"

He turned and flicked his reins, moving again. Gawyn hasted Challenge to catch up.

"You wonder why I'm here, instead of in Andor?" Bryne asked. "It's because I can't let go. It's because the world is changing, and I need to be part of it. It's because once everything in Andor was taken from me, I needed a new place for my loyalty. The Pattern brought me this opportunity."

"And you chose it just because it was there?"

"No," Bryne said. "I picked it because I'm a fool." He met Gawyn's eyes. "But I *stayed* because it was right. That which has been broken must be made whole, and I've seen what a terrible leader can do to a kingdom. Elaida can't be allowed to pull this world down with her."

Gawyn started.

"Yes," Bryne said. "I've actually come to believe them. Fool women. But by the Light, Gawyn, they're right. What I'm doing is right. She's right."

"Who?"

Bryne shook his head, muttering. "Bloody woman."

Egwene? Gawyn wondered.

"My motives aren't important to you, son," Bryne said. "You're not one of my soldiers. But you need to make some decisions. In the days coming, you'll need to have a side and you'll need to know why you've chosen it. That's all I'll say on the matter."

He kicked his horse into a faster gait. In the distance, Gawyn could pick out another guard post. He hung back as Bryne and his soldiers approached it.

Pick a side. What if Egwene *wouldn't* go with him?

Bryne was right. Something *was* coming. You could smell it in the air, feel it in the weak sunlight that managed to shoulder its way through the clouds. You could sense it, distantly, in the north, crackling like unseen energy on that dark horizon.

War, battles, conflicts, changes. Gawyn felt as if he didn't know what the different sides were. Let alone which one to pick for himself.

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CHAPTER 31

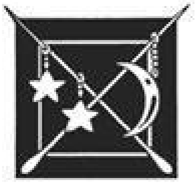

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A Promise to Lews Therin

Cadsuane kept her cloak on, hood up, despite the mugginess that strained her ability to "ignore" the heat. She dared not lower the hood or remove the cloak. Al'Thor's words had been specific; if he saw her face, she would be executed. She wouldn't risk her life to prevent a few hours of discomfort, even if she thought al'Thor was safely back in his newly appropriated mansion. The boy often appeared where he wasn't expected or wanted.

She wasn't about to let him exile her, of course. The more power a man held, the more likely he was to be an idiot with it. Give a man one cow, and he'd care for it with concern, using its milk to feed his family. Give a man ten cows, and he was likely to think himself rich—then let all ten starve for lack of attention.

She clomped down the boardwalk, passing bannered buildings like boxes stacked atop one another. She wasn't particularly pleased to be in Bandar Eban again. She had nothing against the Domani; she just preferred cities that weren't so crowded. And with the problems in the countryside, the place was more packed than normal. Refugees continued to trickle in despite the rumors regarding al'Thor's arrival in the city. She passed a cluster of them in the alley to her left, a family, faces darkened by dirt.

Al'Thor promised food. That brought hungry mouths, none eager to return to their farms, even after they were given food. The countryside was still too chaotic, and the food here too new. The refugees couldn't be certain the grain wouldn't just spoil, as so much did recently. No, they stayed, packing the city, crowding it.

Cadsuane shook her head, continuing down the boardwalk, those wretched clogs clattering against the wood. The city was famous for these long, sturdy walkways, which allowed foot traffic to avoid the mud of the streets. Cobbles would have fixed that, but the Domani often prided themselves on being *different* from the rest of the world. Indigestibly spicy food with dreadful eating utensils. A capital filled with frivolous banners, set on a huge port. Scandalous dresses on the women; long, thin mustaches on the men and an almost Sea Folk–like fondness for earrings.

Hundreds of those banners flapped in the wind as Cadsuane passed, and she gritted her teeth against the temptation to pull off her hood and feel the wind on her face. Light-cursed ocean air. Normally, Bandar Eban was chilly and rainy. Rarely had she felt it this warm. The humidity was dreadful either way. Rational people stayed inland!

She made her way down several streets, crossing through the mud at intersections. That was the irredeemable flaw of boardwalks, in her opinion. The locals knew which streets to cut across and which ones were deep in mud, but Cadsuane had to just tramp across wherever she could. That's why she'd hunted out these clogs, built after the Tairen style, to go over her shoes. It had been surprisingly hard to find a merchant selling them; the Domani obviously had little interest in them, and most people she passed either went barefoot in the mud or knew where to cross and keep from soiling their shoes.

Halfway down to the docks, she finally reached her destination. The fine banner flapping out front proclaimed the inn's name as The Wind's Favor, beating against an inlaid wood front. Cadsuane made her way inside and took off the clogs in the muddy entryway before stepping up into the inn proper. There, finally, she allowed herself to lower her hood. If al'Thor randomly happened to visit this particular inn, then he'd just have to hang her.

The inn's common room was decorated more like a king's dining hall than a tavern. White tablecloths coated the tables, and the varnished wooden floor was mopped to a shine. The walls were hung with tasteful still-life paintings—a bowl of fruit on the wall behind the bar, a vase of flowers on the wall opposite it. The bottles on the ledge behind the bar were almost all wine, very few bottles of brandy or other liquors.

The slender innkeeper, Quillin Tasil, was a tall, oval-faced Andoran man. Thinning on top with dark, short hair at the sides of his head, he wore a full beard, trimmed short, which was almost all gray. His fine lavender coat had white ruffled cuffs peeking out from the sleeves, but he wore an innkeeper's apron over the front. He generally had had good information, but was also willing to look into inquiries for her among his associates. A very useful man indeed.

He smiled at Cadsuane as she entered, wiping his hands on a towel. He gestured her toward a table, then went back to the bar to fetch some wine. Cadsuane settled herself as two men on the other side of the room began to argue loudly. The other patrons—only four, two women at a table on the far side, two more men at the bar—paid the argument no heed. One couldn't spend much time in Arad Doman without learning to ignore the frequent flares in temper. Domani men were as hotheaded as volcanoes, and most people agreed that Domani women were the reason. These two men did not turn to a duel, as would have been common in Ebou Dar. Instead, they shouted for a few moments, then began to agree with each other, then insisted on buying one another wine. Fights were common; bloodshed infrequent. Injuries were bad for business.

Quillin approached, bearing a cup of wine—it would be one of his finest vintages. She never requested such from him, but never complained either.

“Mistress Shore,” he said with his affable voice, “I wish I’d known earlier that you were back in town! The first I heard of it was your letter!”

Cadsuane took the offered cup. “I am not accustomed to giving reports on my whereabouts to every acquaintance, Master Tasil.”

“Of course not, of course not,” he said, and seemed completely unoffended at her sharp response. She’d never been able to get a rise out of him. That had always made her curious.

“The inn seems to be doing well,” she said politely, causing him to turn and look over his few patrons. They seemed uncomfortable to be sitting at immaculate tables atop a gleaming floor. Cadsuane wasn’t certain if it was the intimidating cleanliness that kept people away from The Wind’s Favor, or if it was Quillin’s insistence on never hiring gleemen or musicians to perform. He claimed they spoiled the atmosphere. As she watched, he noticed that a new patron entered, tracking in mud. She could see Quillin’s fingers itching to go scrub the floor.

“You there,” Quillin called to the man. “Scrape your shoes before coming in, if you please.”

The man froze, frowning, but went back to do as instructed. Quillin sighed and moved over to sit at her table. “Frankly, Mistress Shore, it gets a little too busy here lately for my tastes. Can’t keep track of all my patrons sometimes! People go without drink, waiting for me to get to them.”

“You could hire help,” she noted. “A serving girl or two.”

“What? And let them have all the fun?” He said it in all seriousness.

Cadsuane took a sip of her wine. An excellent vintage indeed, perhaps expensive enough that an inn—no matter how splendid—shouldn’t have had it readily available behind the bar. She sighed. Quillin’s Domani wife was one of the most accomplished silk merchants in the city; many Sea Folk vessels sought her out personally to trade with her. Quillin had kept accounts for his wife's business for some twenty years before he had retired, both of them wealthy.

And what did he do with it? Open an inn. It had apparently always been a dream of his. Cadsuane had learned long ago to stop questioning the odd penchants of people with too much free time.

"What news of the city, Quillin?" she asked, sliding a small bag of coins across the table toward him.

"Mistress, you offend," he said, raising his hands. "I couldn't take your coin!"

She raised an eyebrow. "I have little patience for games today, Master Tasil. If you don't want it yourself, then give it to the poor. Light knows there are enough of those in the city these days."

He sighed, but reluctantly pocketed the purse. Perhaps that was why his common room was often empty; an innkeeper who had no regard for money was a strange beast. Many of the common men would find Quillin as discomforting as the immaculate floor and tasteful decorations.

Quillin was, however, *very* good for information. His wife shared her gossip with him. With her face, he obviously knew she was Aes Sedai. Namine—his eldest daughter—had gone to the White Tower, eventually choosing the Brown and settling into the library there. A Domani librarian was nothing unusual—the Terhana library in Bandar Eban was one of the greatest in the world. However, Namine's casual, yet keen, understanding of current events had been enough of a curiosity that Cadsuane had followed the connection, hoping to discover well-placed parents. Ties such as a daughter in the White Tower often made people amiable toward other Aes Sedai. That had led her to Quillin. Cadsuane didn't trust him entirely, but she *was* fond of him.

"What news of the city?" Quillin asked. Honestly, what innkeeper wore a silk embroidered vest beneath his apron? No wonder people found the inn strange. "Where should I start? There has almost been too much to keep track of lately!"

"Start with Alsalam," Cadsuane said, sipping her wine. "When was he last seen?"

"By credible witnesses, or by hearsay?"

"Tell me both."

"There have been lesser windborn and merchants who claim to have received personal communication from the King as recently as a week ago, my Lady, but I regard such claims with skepticism. Very soon after the King's . . . hiatus began you could find forged letters claiming to dictate his wishes. I have seen some few sets of orders with my own eyes that I trust—or, at least, I trust the seal on them—but the King himself? I'd say it has been almost half a year since anyone I can vouch for has seen him."

"His whereabouts, then?"

The innkeeper shrugged, looking apologetic. "For a while, we were certain that the Council of Merchants was behind the disappearance. They rarely let the King out of their sight, and with the troubles to the south, we all assumed they'd taken His Majesty to safety."

"But?"

"But my sources," that meant his wife, "aren't convinced any longer. The Council of Merchants has been too disorganized lately, each member trying to keep their own chunk of Arad Doman from unraveling. If they'd had the King, they'd have revealed him by now."

Cadsuane tapped the side of her cup with a fingernail, annoyed. Could there be truth, then, to the al'Thor boy's belief that one of the Forsaken had Alsalam? "What else?"

"There are Aiel in the city, Lady," Quillin said, scrubbing at an invisible spot on the tabletop.

She gave him a flat stare. "I hadn't noticed."

He chuckled. "Yes, yes, obvious, I suppose. But the exact number in the area is twenty-four thousand. Some say the Dragon Reborn has them here just to prove his power and authority. After all, who ever heard of *Aiel* distributing food? Half the poor in the city are too frightened to go to the handouts, for fear the Aiel have used some of their poisons on the grain."

"Aiel *poisons*?" She'd never heard that particular rumor before.

Quillin nodded. "Some claim that as the reason for the food spoilages, my Lady."

"But food was spoiling in the country long before the Aiel arrived, wasn't it?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Quillin said. "But it can be hard to remember things like that in the face of so much bad grain. Besides, spoilage *has* grown much worse since the Lord Dragon arrived."

Cadsuane covered her frown by taking a sip of wine. It had grown worse with al'Thor's arrival? Was that just rumor, or was it the truth? She lowered her cup. “And the other strange occurrences in the city?” she asked carefully, to see what she could discover.

“You’ve heard of those, then?” Quillin said, leaning in. “People don’t like to speak of them, of course, but my sources hear things. Stillborn children, men dying from falls that should barely have caused a bruise, stones toppling from buildings and striking women dead as they trade. Dangerous times, my Lady. I hate to pass on mere hearsay, but I’ve seen the numbers myself!”

The events were not, in themselves, unexpected. “Of course, there are the balances.”

“Balances?”

“Marriages on the rise,” she said, waving a hand, “children who encounter wild beasts but escape unharmed, unexpected fortunes discovered beneath the floorboards of a pauper’s home. That sort of thing.”

“That certainly *would* be nice,” Quillin said, chuckling. “We can wish and hope, my Lady.”

“You’ve heard no such stories?” Cadsuane asked with surprise.

“No, my Lady. I can ask around, if you wish.”

“Do so.” Al’Thor was *ta’veren*, but the Pattern was a thing of balance. For every accidental death caused by Rand’s presence in a city, there was always a miraculous survival.

What did it mean if that was breaking down?

She went on to specific questions for Quillin, the whereabouts of the members of the merchant council at the top of the list. She knew that the al’Thor boy wanted to capture them all; if she could get information about their locations that he didn’t have, it could be very useful. She also asked Quillin to find out the economic situation of the other major Domani cities and supply any news of rebel factions or Taraboners striking across the border.

As she left the inn—reluctantly raising her hood and stepping back into the muggy afternoon—she found that Quillin’s words had left her with more questions than she’d had when she’d come.

It looked like rain. Of course, that was always the way it looked lately. Overcast and dreary, with a gray sky and clouds that bled together in a uniform haze. At least it had actually rained the previous night; for some reason, that made the overcast sky more bearable. As if it were more natural, allowing her to pretend that the perpetual gloom wasn’t another sign of the Dark One’s stirring. He had withered the people with a drought, he had frozen them with a sudden winter, and now he seemed determined to destroy them through sheer melancholy.

Cadsuane shook her head, tapping her clogs to make sure they were sturdily affixed, then walked onto the muddied boardwalk and made her way down toward the docks. She would see just how accurate these rumors about spoilage were. Had the strange events surrounding al’Thor really grown more destructive, or was she just allowing herself to find what she feared?

Al’Thor. She had to face the truth: she had bungled her handling of him. Of course, she hadn’t made any mistakes with the male *a’dam*, whatever al’Thor claimed. Whoever had stolen the collar had been exceedingly powerful and crafty. Anyone capable of such a feat could just as easily have fetched another male *a’dam* from the Seanchan. They were likely to have plenty of them.

No, the *a’dam* had been taken from her own room in an effort to sow distrust; of that she was certain. Perhaps, even, the theft had been intended to mask something else: the returning of the figurine to al’Thor. His temperament had become so dark, there was no telling what destruction he could cause with that.

The poor, foolish boy. He should never have had to suffer collaring at the hands of one of the Forsaken; that would only remind him of the times he had been beaten and caged by Aes Sedai. It would make her job more difficult. If not impossible.

That was the question she had to face now. Was he beyond saving? Was it too late to change him? And if it was, what—if anything—could she do? The Dragon Reborn *had* to meet the Dark One at Shayol Ghul. If he did not, all was lost. But what if allowing him to meet the Dark One would be equally disastrous?

No. She refused to believe that their battle had already been lost. There *had* to be something that could be done to change al’Thor’s direction. But what?

Al’Thor hadn’t reacted like most peasants suddenly granted power; he hadn’t grown selfish or petty. He hadn’t hoarded wealth, nor had he struck with childish vengeance against any who had slighted him in his youth. Indeed, there had actually been a wisdom to many of his decisions—the ones that didn’t involve gallivanting into danger.

Cadsuane continued down the boardwalk, passing Domani refugees in their incongruously bright clothing. She occasionally had to step around clusters of them sitting on the damp logs, an impromptu camp growing up around the mouth to an alleyway or the unused side door of a building. None made way for her. What good was an Aes Sedai face if you covered it up? This city was just too packed.

Cadsuane slowed near a row of pennants which spelled out the name of the dock registrar. The docks themselves were just ahead, lined by twice as many Sea Folk ships as before, many of them rakers, the largest of Sea Folk vessels. More than a few were converted Seanchan ships, likely stolen from Ebou Dar during the mass escape a short while back.

The docks were crowded with people eager for grain. The crowds jostled and yelled, not looking at all worried about the “poisons” Quillin had mentioned. Of course, starvation could overcome a great number of fears. Dock workers controlled the crowds; among them were Aiel in brown *cadin’sor*, holding their spears and glaring as only Aiel could. There also appeared to be a fair number of merchants on the docks, probably hoping to secure some of the handouts for storage and later sale.

The docks looked much as they had every day since al’Thor’s arrival. What had made her pause? There seemed to be a prickling sensation on her back, as if. . . .

She spun to find a procession riding down the muddy street. Al’Thor sat proudly on his dark gelding, his clothing colored to match, with only a little red embroidery. As usual, he led a score of soldiers, advisors and a growing number of Domani sycophants.

She seemed to encounter him very frequently traveling the streets. She forced herself to hold her ground, not shying away into an alley, though she did pull her hood down a little lower to shade her face. Al’Thor gave no sign that he recognized her as he rode just in front of her. He seemed troubled by his own thoughts, as he often was. She wanted to yell at him that he needed to move more quickly, secure the crown of Arad Doman and move on, but she held her tongue. She would *not* let her nearly three hundred years of life end with an execution at the hands of the Dragon Reborn!

His retinue passed. As before, when she turned away from him, she thought she saw . . . from the corner of her eye . . . darkness around him, like too much shade from the clouds above. Whenever she looked directly at him, it vanished—in fact, whenever she *tried* to see it, she couldn't make it out. It only appeared when she saw him indirectly, and by happenstance.

She had never read or heard of such a thing in all of her years. To see it around the Dragon Reborn terrified her. This had grown bigger than her pride, much larger than her failures. No. It had *always* been larger than she was. Guiding al'Thor wasn't like guiding a galloping horse, it was like trying to guide a deep sea tempest itself!

She would *never* be able to change his course. He didn't trust Aes Sedai, and with good reason. He didn't seem to trust anyone, save perhaps for Min—but Min had resisted every attempt that Cadsuane had made at involving her. The girl was almost as bad as al'Thor.

Visiting the docks was useless. Talking to her informants was useless. If she didn't do something *soon,* they were all doomed. But what? She leaned back against the building behind her, triangular banners blowing in front of her, pointing north. Toward the Blight and al'Thor's ultimate destiny.

An idea struck her. She seized it like a drowning woman in the churning waves. She didn't know what it was attached to, but it was her only hope.

She spun on her heels and hurried back the way she had come, her head bowed, barely daring to think about her plan. It could fail so easily. If al'Thor really was as dominated by his rage as she feared, then even this would not help him.

But if he really was that far gone, then there wasn't *anything* that would help him. That meant she had nothing to lose. Nothing but the world itself.

Pushing her way through crowds and occasionally taking to the muddy street to avoid them, she arrived at the mansion. Some Aiel had taken the camp where Dobraine's armsmen had staged until his withdrawal. They camped all about, some on the grounds, some in a wing of the mansion, others in nearby buildings.

Cadsuane made her way to the wing that belonged to the Aiel, and she was not stopped. She enjoyed privileges among the Aiel that none of the other sisters had been given. She found Sorilea and the other Wise Ones in conference in one of the libraries. They were sitting on the floor, of course. Sorilea nodded to Cadsuane as she entered. She was all bone, thin and leathery, yet never could a person think her frail. Not with those eyes, set into a face that, despite being worn by wind and sun, was too young for her age. How was it that the Wise Ones could live so long, yet not obtain the Aes Sedai agelessness? That was a question Cadsuane had not been able to answer.

She lowered her hood and joined the Wise Ones, seating herself on the floor, eschewing cushions. She looked Sorilea in the eyes. “I have failed,” she said.

The Wise One nodded, as if she had thought this same thing. Cadsuane forced herself not to show her annoyance.

“There is no shame in failure,” Bair said, “when that failure was the fault of another.”

Amys nodded. “The *Car’a’carn* is stubborn beyond all men, Cadsuane Sedai. You have no *toh* toward us.”

“Shame or *toh*,” Cadsuane said, “it will all be irrelevant soon. But I have a plan. Will you help me?”

The Wise Ones shared a look among them.

“What is this plan?” Sorilea asked.

Cadsuane smiled, then began to explain.

Rand glanced over his shoulder, watching Cadsuane scuttle away. She probably thought that he hadn’t noticed her hiding there at the side of the street. The cloak hid her face, but nothing could conceal that self-assured posture, not even the clumsy footgear. Even as she hurried, she seemed in control, and others moved out of her way reflexively.

She flirted with his prohibition, following him through the town like this. However, she had not shown him her face, and so he let her go. It had probably been a poor move to exile her in the first place, but there was no going back now. He would just have to control his temper in the future. Keep it wrapped in ice, steaming deep inside his chest, pulsing like a second heart.

He turned back to the docks. Perhaps there was no reason for him to check on the food distribution directly. However, he had found that the grain had a distinctly higher chance of getting to those who needed it if everyone knew they were being watched. This was a people who had been without a king for too long; they deserved to see that someone was in control.

Upon reaching the wharf, he turned Tai’daishar to angle along the back of the docks, moving at an unhurried pace. He glanced at the Asha’man riding beside him. Naeff had a strong, rectangular face and the lean build of a warrior; he'd been a soldier in the Queen's Guard of Andor before resigning in disgust during the reign of "Lord Gaebril." Naeff had found his way to the Black Tower, and now wore both the Sword and Dragon.

Eventually, Rand would probably have to either let Naeff return to his Aes Sedai—he had been among the first ones bonded—or bring her to him. He was loath to have another Aes Sedai nearby, although Nelavaire Demasiellin, a Green, was relatively pleasant as Aes Sedai went.

"Continue," Rand said to Naeff as they rode. The Asha'man had been running messages and meeting with the Seanchan with Bashere.

"Well, my Lord," Naeff said, "it's just my gut feeling, but I don't think they'll accept Katar for the meeting place. They always grow difficult when Lord Bashere or I mention it, claiming they will have to seek further instructions from the Daughter of the Nine Moons. Their tones imply that the 'instructions' will be that the location is unacceptable."

Rand spoke softly. "Katar is neutral ground, neither in Arad Doman nor deep within Seanchan lands."

"I know, my Lord. We've tried. I promise that we have."

"Very well," Rand said. "If they continue to be bullheaded about this, I will choose another location. Return to them and say we will meet at Falme."

From behind, Flinn whistled quietly.

"My Lord," Naeff said. "That's *well* within the Seanchan border."

"I know," Rand said, glancing at Flinn. "But it has a . . . certain historic significance. We will be safe; these Seanchan are bound rigidly by their honor. They will not attack if we arrive under a banner of truce."

"Are you certain?" Naeff asked quietly. "I don't like the way they look at me, my Lord. There's contempt in their eyes, every one of them. Contempt and pity, as if I'm some lost hound, searching for scraps behind the inn. Burn me, but it makes me sick."

"They've got those collars of theirs handy, my Lord," Flinn said. "Flag of truce or not, they'll be itching to bind us all."

Rand closed his eyes, keeping the rage inside, feeling the salty sea air blow across him. He opened his eyes to a sky bounded by dark clouds. He would not think of the collar at his neck, his hand strangling Min. That was the past.

He was harder than steel. He could not be broken.

“We *must* have peace with the Seanchan,” he said. “Differences notwithstanding.”

“Differences?” Flinn asked. “I don’t rightly think I’d call that a difference, my Lord. They want to enslave every one of us, maybe execute us. They think it’s a *favor* to do either!”

Rand held the man’s gaze. Flinn was not rebellious; he was as loyal as they came. But still Rand made him wilt and bow his head. Dissension could not be tolerated. Dissension and lies had brought him to the collar. No more.

“I’m sorry, my Lord,” Flinn finally said. “Burn me if Falme isn’t a fine choice! You’ll have them watching the skies with fear, you will.”

“Go with the message now, Naeff,” Rand said. “I want this settled.”

Naeff nodded, turning his horse and trotting away from the column, a small group of Aiel guards joining him. One could only Travel from a place one knew well, and so he couldn’t simply leave from dockside. Rand continued his ride, troubled by Lews Therin’s silence. The madman had been unusually distant lately. That should have pleased Rand, but it disturbed him instead. It had to do with the unnamed power that Rand had touched. He still often heard the madman weeping, whispering to himself, terrified.

“Rand?”

He turned, not having heard Nynaeve’s horse approach. She wore a bold green dress, modest by Domani standards, but still far more revealing than she’d ever have considered during her days in the Two Rivers. *She has a right to change,* Rand thought. *What is a loosening of dress compared to the fact that I have ordered exiles and executions?*

“What did you decide?” she asked.

“We will meet them at Falme,” he said.

She muttered quietly.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Oh, just something about you being a wool-headed fool,” she said, looking at him with defiant eyes.

“Falme will be agreeable to them,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “It puts you perfectly within their hands.”

“I cannot afford to wait, Nynaeve,” he said. “This is a risk we must take. But I doubt they will attack.”

“Did you doubt it last time too?” she asked. “The time when they took your hand?”

He glanced down at his stump. “They are unlikely to have one of the Forsaken with them this time.”

“You can be sure?”

He met her eyes, and she held them, something few people could seem to manage these days. Finally, he shook his head. “I cannot be sure.”

She sniffed in response, indicating that she’d won that argument. “Well, we’ll just have to be extra careful. Perhaps memories of the *last* time you visited Falme will make them uncomfortable.”

“I hope so,” he said.

She muttered something else to herself, but he didn’t catch it. Nynaeve would never make an ideal Aes Sedai; she was far too free with her emotions, particularly her temper. Rand did not find it a fault; at least he always knew where he stood with Nynaeve. She was terrible at games, and that made her valuable. He trusted her. She was one of the few.

We do trust her, don’t we? Lews Therin asked. *Can we?*

Rand didn’t answer. He completed his review of the docks. Nynaeve stayed at his side. She seemed to be in a dark mood, though Rand couldn’t see why. With Cadsuane’s banishment, Nynaeve could fill the role as his primary advisor. Didn’t that please her?

Perhaps she was worried about Lan. As Rand turned his procession back toward the center of town, he asked, “Have you heard from him?”

Nynaeve glanced at him, eyes narrowing. “Who?”

“You know who,” Rand said, riding past a row of bright red banners waving atop a line of homes, each holding scions of the same family.

“His actions are none of your concern,” Nynaeve said.

“The entire world is my concern, Nynaeve.” He looked at her. “Would you not agree?”

She opened her mouth, no doubt to snap at him, but faltered as she met his eyes. *Light*, he thought, seeing the apprehension in her face. *I can do it to Nynaeve, now. What is it that they see when they look at me?* That look in her eyes almost made him frightened of himself.

“Lan will be well,” Nynaeve said, looking away.

“He has ridden to Malkier, hasn’t he?”

She flushed.

“How long?” Rand asked. “He hasn’t gotten to the Blight already, has he?” Turned loose to follow what he saw as both his duty and destiny, Lan would ride straight to Malkier alone. The kingdom—his kingdom—had been consumed by the Blight decades ago, when he’d been a babe.

“Two or three more months,” she said. “Perhaps a little longer. He rides to Shienar to stand at the Gap, even if he has to do so alone.”

“He seeks vengeance,” Rand said softly. “ ‘To avenge what cannot be defended.’ ”

“He does his duty!” Nynaeve said. “But . . . I do worry at his brashness. He insisted that I take him to the Borderlands, so I did, but I left him in Saldaea. I wanted him as far from the Gap as possible. He’ll have to cross some difficult terrain to get where he’s going.”

Rand felt an icy coldness as he considered Lan riding to the Gap. To his death, essentially. But there was nothing to be done about that. “I am sorry, Nynaeve,” he said, though he did not feel it. He had trouble feeling anything lately.

“You think I’d send him alone?” she snapped. “Wool-headed, both of you! I’ve seen that he’ll have his own army, although he doesn’t want one.”

And she was perfectly capable of it. Perhaps she’d sent warning to the remnants of the Malkieri in Lan’s name. Lan was a strange mixture; he refused to raise the banner of Malkier or claim his place as its king, for he feared leading the last of his countrymen to their deaths. Yet he would be perfectly willing to ride to that same death himself in the name of honor.

Is that what I do? Rand thought. *Ride to my death in the name of honor? But no, it’s different. Lan has a choice.* There were no prophecies saying that Lan would die, whatever the man’s assumptions about his own fate.

“He could use some help regardless,” Nynaeve said uncomfortably. Asking for help always made her uncomfortable. “His army will be small. I doubt they’ll stand long against the Trollocs.”

“Will he attack?” Rand asked.

Nynaeve hesitated. “He didn’t say,” she said. “But yes, I think he will. He thinks you are wasting time here, Rand. If he arrives and gathers an army, and finds Trollocs gathered at Tarwin’s Gap . . . yes, I think he’ll attack.”

“Then he deserves what he will get, for riding without the rest of us,” Rand said.

Nynaeve scowled at him. “How can you say that?”

“I must,” Rand replied softly. “The Last Battle is imminent. Perhaps my own attack on the Blight will happen at the same time as Lan’s. Perhaps not.” He paused thoughtfully. If Lan and whatever army he brought engaged at the Gap . . . perhaps that would draw attention. If Rand *didn’t* attack there, it would throw off the Shadow. He could strike them where they didn’t expect it while their eyes were on Lan.

“Yes,” Rand said thoughtfully. “His death could serve me well indeed.”

Nynaeve’s eyes widened in fury, but Rand ignored her. A very quiet place, deep inside of him, was struck with worry over his friend. He had to ignore that worry, silence it. But that voice whispered to him.

He named you friend. Do not abandon him. . . .

Nynaeve controlled her anger, which impressed Rand. “We will speak of this again,” she said to him, voice curt. “Perhaps after you’ve had a chance to think on exactly what abandoning Lan would mean.”

He liked to think of Nynaeve as the same belligerent Wisdom who had bullied him back in the Two Rivers. She’d always seemed as if she tried *too* hard, as if she had worried that others would ignore her title because of her youth. But she had grown a lot since then.

They reached the mansion, where fifty of Bashere’s soldiers stood guard before the gates. They saluted in unison as Rand passed through them. He passed Aiel camped outside, dismounted at the stables and transferred the access key from its loop on his saddle to the oversized pocket of his coat—more of a pouch, buttoned into his coat—designed for the statuette. The hand holding its globe aloft reached out of its depths.

He went to his throne room. He couldn’t call it anything other than that, now that the King’s throne had been brought to him. It was oversized, with gilding and gemstones affixed to the wood at the arms and to the back, above the head. They protruded like budding eyes, giving the throne an ornate richness that Rand disliked. It hadn’t been in the palace. One of the local merchants had been “protecting” it from the riots. Perhaps he had considered seizing the seat in a more figurative sense as well.

Rand sat on the throne, despite its gaudiness, shifting so that the access key in his pocket didn’t jab him in the side. The powerful in the city weren’t certain what to think of him, and he preferred it that way. He didn’t name himself king, yet his armies secured the capital. He spoke of restoring

Alsalam's place to him, yet sat on the throne as if he had a right to it. He had not moved into the palace. He wanted them to wonder.

In truth, he hadn't made a decision. A lot would depend on this day's reports. He nodded to Rhuarc as he entered; the muscular Aielman returned the gesture. Then Rand stepped down from the throne and he and Rhuarc sat down on the circular rug of spiraling colors which lay on the floor in front of the green-carpeted dais. The first time they'd done this, it had caused a quiet stir among the Domani attendants and functionaries of Rand's growing court.

"We have located and taken another of them, Rand al'Thor," Rhuarc said. "Alamindra Cutren was hiding on her cousin's lands near the northern border; what we learned on her estate led us directly to her."

That made four members of the merchant council in his custody. "What of Meashan Dubaris? You said you might have her as well."

"Dead," Rhuarc said. "By the hands of a mob a week gone."

"You are certain of this? It could be a lie to set you off her track."

"I have not seen the body myself," Rhuarc said, "but men I trust have, and they say it matches her description. I am reasonably assured that the trail was genuine."

Four captured, and two dead, then. That left four more to locate before he had enough members to order a new vote for king. It would not be the most ethical council election in Domani history; why did he bother? He could *appoint* a king, or name himself to the throne. Why did he care what the Domani thought proper?

Rhuarc watched him; the Aiel chief's eyes were thoughtful. He likely wondered the same things.

"Keep searching," Rand said. "I do not intend to take Arad Doman for myself; we will find the rightful king or we will see the Council of Merchants assembled so that they can choose a new one. I will not care who it is, so long as he is not a Darkfriend."

"As you say, *Car'a'carn,*" Rhuarc said, moving to rise.

"Order is important, Rhuarc," Rand said. "I don't have time to secure this kingdom myself. We don't have long before the Last Battle." He glanced at Nynaeve, who had joined several Maidens at the back of the small room. "I want four more members of the merchant council in our possession by the end of the month."

"You set a demanding pace, Rand al'Thor," Rhuarc said.

Rand stood up. “Just find me those merchants. These people deserve leaders.”

“And the king?”

Rand glanced to the side, to where Milisair Chadmar stood, carefully watched by Aiel guards. She seemed . . . haggard. Her once-luxurious raven hair had been pulled up into a bun, obviously because it was easier to care for that way. Her dress was still rich, but now wrinkled, as if she’d been wearing it for too long. Her eyes were red. She was still beautiful, but much in the way that a painting would still be beautiful if it were crumpled up, then smoothed out on a table.

“May you find water and shade, Rhuarc,” Rand said in dismissal.

“May you find water and shade, Rand al’Thor.” The tall Aiel withdrew, some of his spears following him. Rand took a deep breath, then stepped up to the gaudy throne and sat. Rhuarc he treated with the respect he deserved. The others . . . well, *they* would get the respect they deserved as well.

He leaned forward, motioning Milisair to approach. One of the Maidens nudged her in the back, forcing her forward. The woman looked far more apprehensive than she had the last time she had come before Rand.

“Well?” he asked her.

“My Lord Dragon . . .” she began, glancing around, as if seeking aid from the Domani stewards and attendants who stood there. They ignored her; even the fop Lord Ramshalan looked the other way.

“Speak, woman,” Rand demanded.

“The messenger you asked after,” she said. “He is dead.”

Rand took in a deep breath. “And how did this happen?”

“The men I assigned to watch after him,” she said quickly, “I hadn’t realized how poorly they were treating the messenger! Why, they hadn’t given him water for days, and the fevers struck. . . .”

“In other words,” Rand said, “you failed to extract information from him, so you left him in a dungeon to rot, only remembering where he was when I demanded he be produced.”

“*Car’a’carn*,” one of the Maidens—a very young woman named Jalani—said, stepping forward. “We found this one packing her things, as if she were planning to escape the city.”

Milisair paled visibly. “Lord Dragon,” she said. “A moment of weakness! I—”

Rand waved for silence. “What am I to do with you now?”

“She should be executed, my Lord!” Ramshalan said, stepping forward eagerly.

Rand looked up with a frown. He hadn’t been asking for a response. Lanky, with one of the thin black Domani mustaches, Ramshalan had a prominent nose that might have indicated some Saldaean forebear. He wore an outrageous coat of blue, orange and yellow, with ruffled white cuffs peeking out underneath. Apparently, such things passed for fashionable among some segments of the Domani upper crust. His earrings bore the mark of his house, and he had a black beauty mark in the shape of a bird in flight affixed to his check.

Rand had known many like him, courtiers with too few brains but too many family connections. Noble life seemed to breed them, much as the Two Rivers bred sheep. Ramshalan was particularly annoying because of his nasal voice and eager willingness to betray others in his desire to curry favor with Rand.

Still, men like him had their uses. Occasionally. “What do you think, Milisair?” Rand said musingly. “Should I have you executed for treason, as this man suggests?”

She did not weep, but she was obviously terrified, her hands shaking as she held them out, her eyes wide, unblinking.

“No,” Rand said finally. “I need you to help choose a new king. What good would it do to search the countryside for your colleagues if I began to execute the Council members I’ve already found?”

She let out the breath she had been holding, and tension left her shoulders

“Lock her in the same dungeon where she imprisoned the King’s messenger,” Rand said to the Maidens. “Make sure she doesn’t suffer the same fate—at least, not until after I’m finished with her.”

Milisair cried out in despair. Aiel Maidens pulled her from the room screaming, but Rand had already put her from his head. Ramshalan watched her go with satisfaction; apparently, she’d insulted him several times in public. That was one point in her favor.

“The other members of the merchant council,” Rand said to the functionaries. “Have any of them had contact with the King?”

“None more recently than four or five months ago, my Lord,” said one of them, a stumpy, large-bellied Domani man named Noreladim. “Though we don’t know about Alamindra, as she was just recently . . . discovered.”

Perhaps she would have news, though he couldn't see her having a better lead than a messenger who claimed to have come from Alsalam himself. Burn that woman for letting him die!

If Graendal sent the messenger, Lews Therin said suddenly, *I'd have never been able to break him. She's too good with Compulsion. Crafty, so crafty.*

Rand hesitated. It was a good point. If the messenger *had* been subject to Graendal's Compulsion, there would have been little chance of him being able to betray her location. Not unless the web of Compulsion had been lifted, which would have required a Healing beyond Rand's skill. Graendal had always covered her tracks well.

But he wasn't sure she was in the country. If he could find a messenger and Compulsion was there, he'd have enough. "I need to speak with anyone else who claims to have a message from the King," he said. "Others in the city who might have had contact."

"They will be found, Lord Dragon," said the prim Ramshalan.

Rand nodded absently. If Naeff set up the meeting with the Seanchan as hoped, then Rand could leave Arad Doman soon after. He hoped to leave them with a king, hoped to find and kill Graendal. But he would settle for peace with the Seanchan and food for these people. He could not solve everyone's problems. He could just force them into abeyance long enough for him to die at Shayol Ghul.

And thereby leave the world to break again once he was gone. He gritted his teeth. He had already wasted too much time worrying about things he could not fix.

Is that why I resist naming a Domani king? he thought. *Once I die, that man would lose his authority, and Arad Doman would be back where it began. If I don't leave a king who has the support of the merchants, then I'm essentially offering the kingdom up to the Seanchan the moment I die.*

So many things to balance. So many problems. He couldn't fix them all. He *couldn't.*

"I don't approve of this, Rand," Nynaeve said, standing beside the door, arms folded. "And we're not done talking about Lan, either."

Rand waved a dismissive hand.

"He's your *friend,* Rand," Nynaeve said. "Light! And what of Perrin and Mat? Do you know where they are? What has happened to them?"

The colors swirled before his eyes, revealing an image of Perrin standing by a tent with Galad. Why was Perrin with *Galad* of all people? And when had Elayne's half-brother joined the Whitecloaks? The colors changed to Mat, riding through the streets of a familiar city. Caemlyn? Thom was there, with him.

Rand frowned to himself. He could feel a pull from Perrin and Mat, both distant. It was their *ta'veren* natures, trying to draw them together. They both needed to be with him for the Last Battle.

"Rand?" Nynaeve asked. "Aren't you going to respond?"

"About Perrin and Mat?" Rand asked. "They live."

"How do you know?"

"I simply do." He sighed, shaking his head. "And they had better remain alive. I'll have need of them both before this is over."

"Rand!" she said. "They're your friends!"

"They're threads in the Pattern, Nynaeve," he said, rising. "I barely know them anymore, and I suspect they would say the same thing of me."

"Don't you care about them?"

"Care?" Rand walked down the steps of the raised platform that held his throne. "What I care about is the Last Battle. What I care about is making peace with the Light-cursed Seanchan so that I can stop bothering with their squabble and get to the real battle. Beside those cares, a pair of boys from my little village are meaningless."

He looked at her, challenging. Ramshalan and the other attendants backed away quietly, not wanting to be caught between his gaze and Nynaeve.

She was silent, although her face took on a profound sadness. "Oh, Rand," she finally said. "You can't go on like this. This hardness within you, it will break you."

"I do what I must," he said, anger creeping into him. Would he never hear the end of complaints about his choices?

"This isn't what you must do, Rand," she said. "You're going to destroy yourself. You'll—"

Rand's anger surged. He spun, pointing at her. "Would you end up exiled like Cadsuane, Nynaeve?" he bellowed. "I will *not* be played with! I am done with that. Give advice when it is asked for, and the rest of the time *do not patronize me*!"

She recoiled, and Rand gritted his teeth, forcing the anger back down. He lowered his hand, but realized it had begun to reach reflexively for the access key in the pocket at his side. Nynaeve’s eyes fixed on it, opening wide, and he slowly forced his hand away from the statuette.

The explosion surprised him. He had thought his temper controlled. He forced it down, and had a surprisingly difficult time of it. He turned and stalked from the room, throwing open the door, his Maidens following him. “I will have no more audiences today,” he told the attendants who tried to follow him. “Go and do as I have told you! I need the other members of the merchant council. Go!”

They scattered. Only the Aiel remained, guarding him as he made his way to the rooms he had claimed in the mansion.

A short time longer. He only had to keep things balanced a short time longer. Then it could end. And he found that he was beginning to look forward to that end as much as Lews Therin did.

You promised we could die, Lews Therin said between distant sobs.

I did, Rand said. *And we will.*

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CHAPTER 32

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Rivers of Shadow

Nynaeve stood on the broad wall around Bandar Eban, looking down over the darkened city. The wall was on the inland side of the city, but Bandar Eban was built on a slope, so she could see out over it, past the city, toward the ocean beyond. The night fog rolled in across the waters, hanging above a crisp black mirror sea. It seemed like a reflection of the clouds high above. Those clouds glowed with a phantom pearl light, cast by a moon she could not see.

The fog did not reach the city; it rarely did. It hung over the ocean, churning. Like the ghost of a forest fire, stopped by some unseen barrier.

She could still feel the storm to the north. It called on her to ride through the streets, shouting warning. Flee to the cellars! Store up food, for a disaster will strike! Unfortunately, packing earth or reinforcing walls would not help against this tempest. It was of a different sort entirely.

The ocean fog was often herald to winds, and this night was no exception. She pulled her shawl close, smelling brine on the air. It mixed with the inevitable scents of an overcrowded city. Refuse, packed bodies, soot and smoke from fires and stoves. She missed the Two Rivers. The winds there were cold in the winters, but they were always fresh. Bandar Eban's winds always felt slightly *used*.

There would never again be a place for her in the Two Rivers. She knew this, though it hurt her. She was Aes Sedai now; it had become who she was, more important to her now than being Wisdom had once been. With the One Power, she could Heal people in a way that still seemed a marvel. And with the authority of the White Tower behind her, she was one of the most powerful individuals in the world, matched only by other sisters and the occasional monarch.

And in regard to monarchs, she herself was married to a king. He might not have a kingdom, but Lan *was* a king. To her, if nobody else. Life in the Two Rivers would not suit him. And, truthfully, it wouldn't suit her either. That simple life—once all she had been able to imagine—would now seem dull and unfulfilling.

Still, it was difficult not to feel wistful, particularly when watching the night fogs.

"There," Merise said, voice edged with tension. She, along with Cadsuane and Corele, stood looking in the other direction—not southwest over the city and ocean, but east. Nynaeve had almost decided against accompanying the group, as she had little doubt that Cadsuane partly blamed Nynaeve for her exile. However, the prospect of seeing the apparitions had been too enticing.

Nynaeve turned from the city and crossed the top of the wall, joining the others. Corele glanced at her, but Merise and Cadsuane ignored her. That suited Nynaeve. Though it did continue to irk her that Corele—of the Yellow Ajah—was so guarded in her acceptance of Nynaeve. Corele was pleasant, consoling, yet sternly unwilling to admit that Nynaeve was also a member of the Yellow. Well, the woman would have to change ruts eventually, once Egwene secured the White Tower.

Nynaeve peered through the crenellations atop the wall, scanning the dark landscape outside the city. She could faintly make out the remnants of the shanties that had crowded up against the walls until recently. The dangers—some real, others exaggerated—in the countryside had caused most of the refugees to crowd into the city's streets. Dealing with them, and the disease and hunger they brought with them, still demanded a lot of Rand's time.

Out beyond that trampled-down shantytown there were only shrubs, stunted trees, a shadowed bit of broken timber that might have been a wagon wheel. The nearby fields were barren. Plowed, seeded, yet still barren. Light! Why didn't crops grow anymore? Where would they find food this winter?

Anyway, that wasn't what she was looking for at the moment. What was it Merise had seen? Where—

Then Nynaeve saw it. Like a wisp of the ocean fog, a tiny patch of glowing light was blowing across the ground. It grew, bulging like a tiny storm cloud, glowing with a pearly light not unlike that of the clouds above. It resolved into the shape of a man, walking. Then that luminescent fog sprouted more figures. Within moments, an entire glowing procession strode across the dark ground, moving at a mournful pace.

Nynaeve shivered, then sternly reprimanded herself. Spirits from the dead they might be, but they were no danger so far away. But try as she might, she could not banish the goose bumps from her arms.

The procession was too distant for her to make out many details. There were both men and women in the line, clad in glowing clothing that flowed and shimmered like the city's banners. There was no color to the apparitions, just paleness, unlike most of the ghosts that had been appearing lately.

These were composed completely of a strange, otherworldly light. Several figures in the group—which was now about two hundred strong—were carrying a large object. Some kind of palanquin? Or . . . no. It was a coffin. Was this a funeral procession from long ago, then? What had happened to these people, and why had they been drawn back to the world of the living?

Rumors in the city said the procession had first appeared the night after Rand arrived in Bandar Eban. The wall's guards, who were likely the most reliable, had confirmed that to her in uneasy voices.

"I do not see the reason for so much fuss," Merise said with her Taraboner accent, folding her arms. "Ghosts, we are all accustomed to them by now, are we not? At least these aren't causing people to melt or burst into flames."

Reports in the city indicated that "incidents" were growing more and more frequent. Just in the last few days, Nynaeve had investigated three credible reports of people who had had insects burrow out of their skin, killing them. There had also been the man who had been found in his bed one morning, completely changed into burned charcoal. His linens hadn't been singed. She had seen that body herself.

These incidents weren't caused by the ghosts, but the people had begun to blame the apparitions. Better than them blaming Rand, she supposed.

"This waiting in the city, it is frustrating," Merise continued.

"Our time in this city *does* seem to lack fruit," Corele agreed. "We should be moving on. You've heard that he is proclaiming that the Last Battle will begin soon."

Nynaeve felt a stab of worry for Lan, then anger toward Rand. He still thought that if he could stage his assault at the same time as Lan's attack on Tarwin's Gap, he could confuse his enemies. Lan's attack could very well be the beginning of the Last Battle. Why, then, wouldn't Rand commit troops to help?

"Yes," Cadsuane said, musingly, "he is probably right." Why did she keep that hood up? Rand obviously wasn't around.

"Then we have all the greater reason to move on," Merise said sternly. "Rand al'Thor, he is a fool! And Arad Doman, it is irrelevant. A king or no king? What does it matter?”

“The Seanchan are not irrelevant,” Nynaeve said, sniffing. “What of them? You would have us march to the Blight and leave our kingdoms open to invasion?”

Merise didn’t react. Corele smiled and shrugged, then looked toward Damer Flinn, who leaned against the wall behind them, his arms folded. The leathery old man’s casual posture suggested that he saw the procession of ghosts as nothing special. And these days, he might be right.

Nynaeve looked back out at the ghost procession, who were walking in an arc, rounding the city wall. The other Aes Sedai resumed their conversation, Merise and Corele taking further opportunity to voice their displeasure with Rand in their separate ways—one dour, the other congenial.

It made Nynaeve want to defend him. Though he had been difficult and erratic lately, there *was* important work for him to do in Arad Doman. The meeting with the Seanchan in Falme was only a short time away. Beyond that, Rand was right to worry about filling the Domani throne. And what if Graendal really was here, as he seemed to think? The others thought he must be mistaken about the Forsaken, but Rand had discovered Forsaken in nearly every other kingdom. Why not Arad Doman? A missing king, a land seething with confusion, famine and strife? These things sounded exactly like the kinds of trouble one would discover near one of the Forsaken.

The others continued to talk. Nynaeve started to leave, and as she did so she noticed that Cadsuane was watching her. Nynaeve hesitated, turning toward the cloaked woman. Cadsuane’s face was barely visible by torchlight, but Nynaeve caught a grimace in the shadows, as if Cadsuane were displeased with Merise’s and Corele’s complaints. Nynaeve and Cadsuane stared at each other for a moment; then Cadsuane nodded curtly. The aged Aes Sedai turned and began to walk away, right in the middle of one of Merise’s tirades about Rand.

The other Aes Sedai bustled to catch up. What had that look been for? Cadsuane had a habit of treating other Aes Sedai as if they were less worthy of respect than a common mule. It was as if all the rest of them were mere children in her eyes.

But, well, considering the way many Aes Sedai had been acting lately. . . .

Frowning to herself, Nynaeve left in the other direction, nodding to the wall guards. That nod of Cadsuane's couldn't possibly have been given out of respect. Cadsuane was *far* too self-righteous and arrogant for that.

What to do about Rand, then? He didn't want Nynaeve's help—or anyone's help—but that was nothing new. He'd been just as stubborn as a sheepherder back in the Two Rivers, and his father had been nearly as bad. That had never stopped Nynaeve the Wisdom, so it certainly wouldn't stop Nynaeve the Aes Sedai. She'd wrangled Coplins and Congars; she could do the same for trumped-up Rand al'Thor. She had half a mind to stride to his new "palace" and give him an earful.

Except . . . Rand al'Thor wasn't just any Coplin or Congar. Stubborn folks back in the Two Rivers hadn't had Rand's strangely menacing aura.

She'd dealt with dangerous men before. Her own Lan was as dangerous as a wolf on the prowl, and could be as prickly, too, even if he was good at hiding it from most people. But as threatening and as intimidating as Lan could be, he'd sooner chop off his own hand than raise it to harm her.

Rand was different. Nynaeve reached the steps leading off the wall into the city and headed down them, waving away a guard's suggestion that she take one of them in escort. It was night and there were a lot of refugees about, but she was hardly helpless. She did accept a lantern from another guard, however. Using the One Power to craft light would make the passersby uncomfortable.

Rand. Once, she'd thought him as gentle as Lan. His devotion to protecting women had been almost laughable in its innocence. That Rand was gone. Nynaeve saw again the moment when he had exiled Cadsuane. She'd believed that he *would* kill Cadsuane if he saw her face again, and thinking of the moment still gave her shivers. Surely it had been her imagination, but the room had seemed to *darken* distinctly at that moment, as if a cloud had passed over the sun.

Rand al'Thor *had* grown unpredictable. His explosion of temper at Nynaeve herself a few days ago was just another example. Of course, he would never exile or threaten *her*, despite what he had said. He wasn't that hard. Was he?

She reached the bottom of the stone steps, walking out onto a boardwalk stained with the mud of evening traffic. She pulled her shawl close. Huddled people clustered on the other side of the street. The shop entrances and alleyways there offered protection from the wind.

She heard a child cough among a distant group. She froze, then heard the cough again. It was not an easy sound. Muttering, she crossed the street, then forced her way through the refugees, holding up her lantern to illuminate one group of drowsy people after another. Many had the coppery skin of the Domani, but there were a fair number of Taraboners as well. And . . . were those Saldaeans? That was unexpected.

Most of the refugees lay in ragged blankets next to their meager possessions. A pot here, a quilt there. One young girl had a small cloth doll that might have once been fine, but had now lost one of its arms. Rand certainly was effective at subduing countries, but his kingdoms needed more than just handouts of grain. They needed stability, and they needed something—someone—they could believe in. Rand was getting increasingly bad at offering either one.

Where was the source of that cough? Few of the refugees spoke to her, and they were hesitant to answer her questions. When she finally found the boy, she was more than a little annoyed. His parents had made their beds in a hollow between two wooden shops, and as Nynaeve approached, the father stood up to confront her. He was a scruffy Domani with a dark, ragged beard and a thick mustache that might have once been trimmed to Domani fashion. He wore no coat, and his shirt was nearly in tatters.

Nynaeve stared him down with a look she had learned long before her days as an Aes Sedai. Honestly, men could be so foolish! His son was likely dying, and yet he confronted one of the few people in the city who could help. The wife had more sense, which was usually the case. She laid a hand on her husband’s leg, causing him to glance down. He finally turned away with a quiet mutter.

The wife’s features were difficult to see through the grime on her face. The dirt was streaked with tear lines on her cheeks; she had obviously had a difficult couple of nights.

Nynaeve knelt—ignoring the looming father—then pulled back the blanket from the face of the child in the woman’s arms. Sure enough, he was gaunt and pale, and his eyes fluttered open in some delusion.

“How long has he been coughing?” Nynaeve said, pulling a few packets of herbs out of the pouch at her side. She didn’t have much, but they would have to do.

“A week now, Lady,” the woman replied.

Nynaeve tsked in annoyance, pointing toward a nearby tin cup. “Fill that,” she snapped at the father. “You are lucky the boy has survived this long with the white shakes; he likely wouldn’t live the night without intervention.”

Despite his earlier reluctance, the father hastened to obey, filling the cup from a nearby barrel. At least there wasn’t a lack of water here, with the frequent rains.

Nynaeve took the cup and mixed the acem and feverbane in it, then wove a thread of Fire and heated the water. It started steaming faintly, and the father muttered some more. Nynaeve shook her head; she’d always heard that the Domani were pragmatic people when it came to use of the One Power. The unrest in the city must really be getting to them.

“Drink,” she said to the boy, kneeling down and using all five Powers in a complex weave of Healing that she used instinctively. Her ability had awed some of the other Aes Sedai, but had earned her scorn from others. Either way, her method worked, even if she couldn’t explain how she did what she did. That was one of the blessings and the curses of being a wilder; she could do things by instinct that other Aes Sedai struggled to learn. However, it was difficult for Nynaeve to unlearn some of the bad habits she’d learned.

The boy, though dazed, responded to the cup pressed to his lips. Her Healing weave lay across him as he drank, and he stiffened, inhaling sharply. The herbs weren’t needed, but they would help give him strength following the rigorous Healing. She’d gotten over her habit of always using herbs when Healing, but she still felt they had their place and usefulness.

The father knelt down threateningly, but Nynaeve pressed the tips of her fingers to his chest and forced him back. “Give the child air.”

The boy blinked, and Nynaeve could see sense flood back into his eyes. He shivered weakly. Nynaeve Delved him to determine how well the Healing had worked. “The fever has broken,” she said with a nod, standing and releasing the One Power. “He will need to eat well over the next few days; I will give your descriptions to the dockmasters, and you will receive extra rations. Do *not* sell the food, or I will find out, and I will be angry. Do you understand?”

The woman looked down, ashamed. “We would never. . . .”

“I don’t take anything for granted anymore,” Nynaeve said. “Anyway, he should live, if you do as I say. Feed him the rest of that draught tonight, by sips if you have to. If the fever starts again, bring him to me at the Dragon’s palace.”

“Yes, my Lady,” the woman said as the husband knelt, taking the boy and smiling.

Nynaeve picked up her lantern and rose.

“Lady,” the woman said. “Thank you.”

Nynaeve turned back. “You should have brought him to me days ago. I don’t care what foolish superstitions people are spreading, the Aes Sedai are not your enemies. If you know any who are sick, encourage them to visit us.”

The woman nodded, and the husband seemed cowed. Nynaeve stalked out of the alleyway and back onto the dark street, passing folk who watched her with a mixture of awe and horror. Foolish people! Would they let their own children die rather than get them Healed?

Back on the street, Nynaeve calmed herself. The diversion really hadn’t taken much of her time, and—tonight at least—time was one of the things she had plenty of. She wasn’t having much luck dealing with Rand. Her only consolation was that Cadsuane had done worse as his advisor.

How did one handle a creature like the Dragon Reborn? Nynaeve knew that the old Rand was there, within him somewhere. He had simply been beaten and kicked so many times that he’d gone into hiding, letting this harsher version rule. As much as it galled her to admit it, bullying him was just not going to work. But how was she to get him to do what he should, since he was too bullheaded to respond to ordinary prodding?

Nynaeve halted, lantern light illuminating an empty street before her. There was one person who *had* managed to work with Rand while at the same time teaching and training him. It hadn’t been Cadsuane, nor had it been any of the Aes Sedai who tried to capture him, trick him or bully him.

It had been Moiraine.

Nynaeve continued on her way. During the last months of her life, the Blue had all but fawned over Rand. In order to get him to take her as his advisor, she’d agreed to obey his commands and offer advice only when it was wanted. What good was advice when it was given only when it was wanted? People needed most to hear the advice they didn’t want!

But Moiraine *had* been successful. Through her, Rand had begun to overcome his aversion to Aes Sedai. Without Rand's eventual acceptance for Moiraine, it was doubtful that Cadsuane would ever have made headway in becoming his counselor.

Well, Nynaeve wasn't about to act the same way for Rand al'Thor, no matter how many fancy titles he had. However, she did have something to learn from Moiraine's success. Perhaps Rand had listened to Moiraine because her subservience had flattered him, or maybe he had simply been tired of people pushing him around. Rand *did* have many people trying to control him. They must frustrate him, and they made Nynaeve's own job a lot more difficult, since she was the one that he *actually* needed to listen to.

Did he, perhaps, see her simply as another of those irrelevant manipulators? She wouldn't put it past him.

She needed to show him that they were working for the same goals. She didn't want to tell him what to do; she just wanted him to stop acting like a fool. And, beyond that, she just wanted him to be safe. She'd also like him to be a leader that people respected, not one that people feared. He seemed incapable of seeing that the path he was on was that of a tyrant.

Being a king really wasn't all that different from being mayor in the Two Rivers. The mayor needed to be respected and liked. The Wisdom and the Women's Circle could do the difficult tasks, such as punishing those who overstepped their bounds. The mayor, however, needed to be loved. That led to a civil and a safe town.

But how to show that to Rand? She couldn't force him; she needed to get him to listen to her in another way. A plan began to take root in her head. By the time she reached the mansion, she had an idea of what to do.

The gate to the mansion grounds was guarded by Saldaeans; the Aiel preferred to stay closer to Rand, watching the rooms and the hallways of the mansion itself. Haster Nalmat, the officer on duty, gave Nynaeve a bow as she approached; some people still knew how to treat Aes Sedai. The grounds beyond the gate were ornamental and cultivated. Nynaeve's lantern cast strange shadows on the grass as its light shone through the trees trained and trimmed in the shapes of fanciful animals. The shadows moved in concert with her lantern, the phantom shapes lengthening and merging with the greater blackness of the night around her. Like rivers of shadow.

A larger group of Saldaean soldiers stood guard at the front of the mansion; far more than were necessary. Whenever men stood on guard, their friends tended to gather, no doubt to gossip. Nynaeve strode up to the group, causing several of them to stop leaning lazily against the mansion's gallery of pillars.

"Who of you are not on duty right now?" she asked.

Sure enough, three of the nine soldiers raised their hands, looking somewhat sheepish.

"Excellent," Nynaeve said, handing her lantern to one of them. "You three, come with me." She strode into the mansion, the three soldiers scrambling in behind.

It was late—the ghost procession appeared only at midnight—and the mansion slumbered. The intricate chandelier in the entryway had been extinguished, and the hallways were dark. Testing her memory, she picked a direction and walked down it. The whitewashed walls were as immaculate here as they were in other sections of the mansion, but they were unornamented. Her instinct proved correct as she soon entered a small pantry, where servants would prepare platters of food before taking them to the dining room. The hallway she had chosen led out to the mansion sitting rooms; another hallway at the back led to the kitchens. The room was furnished with a big sturdy wooden table and some tall stools. Those were occupied by a group of men playing a game of dice, wearing green and white linen shirts—the livery of Milisair's house—with thick work trousers.

They looked up with shock as Nynaeve strode into the room; one of the men actually leaped to his feet, his stool toppling to the floor behind him. He pulled off his hat—a lopsided brown thing that even Mat would have been embarrassed to wear—looking like a child caught poking his finger into the pie before dinner.

Nynaeve didn't care what they were doing; she had found some servants of the mansion, and that was all that mattered. "I must see the dosun," she said, using the local term for the head housekeeper. "Fetch her for me."

Her soldiers entered the room behind her. All three were Saldaeans, and if they were somewhat oafish, they walked with the swaggers of men who intimately understood fighting. She doubted that these simple servants needed any more intimidation than an Aes Sedai, but the soldiers would likely prove useful later.

"The dosun?" the worker with the hat finally said. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather see the steward or—"

“The dosun,” Nynaeve said. “Bring her to me *now*. Give her time to throw on a robe, but no more.” She pointed at one of her soldiers. “You, go with him. Make sure he doesn’t speak to anyone else or give the woman a chance to escape.”

“Escape?” the worker yelped. “Why would Loral want to do that? What did she do, my Lady?”

“Nothing, I hope. Go!”

The two men—one worker, one soldier—hurried off, and the other three workers remained at the table, looking uncomfortable. Nynaeve folded her arms beneath her breasts, considering her plan. Rand had determined that his hunt for the Domani king had hit a wall with the death of the messenger. Nynaeve wasn’t so certain. There were others involved, and a few well-placed questions might be very illuminating.

It was unlikely the dosun had done anything wrong. But Nynaeve did *not* want the worker who fetched her letting his tongue wag to the people he might meet along the way; better to instill into him a sense of danger and use the soldier to keep him quiet. Not to mention punctual.

Her foresight proved effective. Within minutes, the worker hurried back into the room, towing a disheveled, elderly woman in a blue evening robe. Gray hair poked out from beneath her hastily wrapped red kerchief, and her aging Domani face was absolutely white with apprehension. Nynaeve felt guilty. How this woman must feel, awoken at night by a terrified servant claiming that one of the Aes Sedai wanted her immediately!

The Saldaean soldier followed, then stood guard beside the doorway. He was bowlegged and squat, and he wore one of those long Saldaean mustaches. The other two lounged beside the doorway Nynaeve had come through, their casual air only serving to make the room more tense. They had picked up on something of her intent, it seemed.

“Peace, goodwoman,” Nynaeve said, nodding to the table. “You may sit. You others, go to the main entryway and stay there. Don’t speak to anyone.”

The four workers needed no further prodding. Nynaeve told one of the soldiers to follow them and make certain they did as she said. The late hour was working to her advantage; with so many of the servants and Rand’s attendants asleep, she could investigate without alerting those who might be guilty.

The departure of the workers only made the dosun more nervous. Nynaeve sat at the table on one of the vacated stools. The men had left their dice behind in their haste, but had—of course—made sure to take their coins. The room was lit by a small lamp, burning with an open flame on the windowsill. The Saldaean had taken her lantern with him when following the workers.

“Your name is Loral, is it not?” Nynaeve asked.

The dosun nodded warily.

“You are aware that Aes Sedai do not lie?”

The housekeeper nodded again. Most Aes Sedai *couldn’t* lie, though Nynaeve technically could, since she hadn’t held the Oath Rod. That was part of what earned her a lesser status in the eyes of the others. Undeservedly so. The Oath Rod was only a formality; Two Rivers folk needed no *ter’angreal* to make them honest. “Then you will believe me when I tell you that I do not suspect you personally of having done anything wrong. I just need your help.”

The woman seemed to relax a bit. “What help do you need, Nynaeve Sedai?”

“It has been my experience that the head housekeeper knows more of a house’s workings than the stewards, or even the owners of the property. Have you been employed here for long?”

“I have served the Chadmar family through three generations,” the old woman said with no small measure of pride. “And had hoped to serve another, if Her Ladyship had—” The housekeeper cut off. Rand had imprisoned “Her Ladyship” in her own dungeons. That didn’t bode well for there being another generation to serve.

“Yes, well,” Nynaeve said, covering the uncomfortable silence. “The unfortunate circumstances involving your lady are part of my task this evening.”

“Nynaeve Sedai,” the aged woman said, growing eager, “do you suppose you can see her to freedom? Restore her to the Lord Dragon’s good graces?”

“Perhaps.” *Doubtful,* Nynaeve added in her mind, *but anything is possible.* “My activities tonight may help. Did you ever see this messenger, the one your mistress imprisoned?”

“The one sent by the King?” Loral asked. “I never spoke with him, Aes Sedai, but I *did* see him. Tall, handsome fellow, curiously clean-shaven for a Domani man. I passed him in the hallway. Had one of the most beautiful faces I rightly think I've ever seen on a man."

"And then?" Nynaeve asked.

"Well, he went directly to speak with Lady Chadmar, and then. . . ." Loral trailed off. "Nynaeve Sedai, I don't mean to be getting my lady into any more trouble, and—"

"He was sent for questioning," Nynaeve said shortly. "I have little time for foolishness, Loral. I am *not* here looking for evidence against your mistress, and I don't really care what your loyalties are. There are much larger issues at stake. Answer my question."

"Yes, Lady," Loral said, paling. "We all knew what had happened, of course. Didn't seem right, sending one of the King's men to a questioner like that. Particularly that man. Shame to mar a face so beautiful, and all."

"You know the location of the questioner and the dungeon?"

Loral hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. Good. She didn't intend to withhold information.

"Let us go, then," Nynaeve said, rising.

"My Lady?"

"To the dungeon," Nynaeve said. "I assume it isn't on the property anywhere, not if Milisair Chadmar was as careful as I think."

"It's a modest distance away, in the Gull's Feast," Loral said. "You wish to go *tonight*?"

"Yes," Nynaeve said, then hesitated. "Unless I decide to visit the questioner at his home instead."

"They are the same place, my Lady."

"Excellent. Come."

Loral didn't have much choice. Nynaeve allowed her—guarded by a soldier—to return to her rooms for a dress.

A short time later, Nynaeve and her soldiers marched the dosun—along with the four workers, to keep them from accidentally giving warning of what was happening—from the building. All five looked decidedly displeased. They probably believed the superstitious rumors that the night was not safe. Nynaeve knew better. The night might not be safe, but it wasn't any worse than other times. In fact, it might be safer. If there were fewer people about, there were fewer chances of someone nearby suddenly growing thorns out of their skin, bursting into flame or dying in some other horribly random way.

They left the mansion grounds, Nynaeve walking with a firm step, hoping to keep the others from feeling too nervous. She nodded to the soldiers at the gate, and went in the direction Loral indicated. Their feet thumped against the wood of the boardwalk, the clouded night sky glowing just faintly from moonlight above.

Nynaeve didn’t give herself the luxury of questioning her plan. She’d decided on a course, and so far it was going well. True, Rand might grow angry at her for appropriating soldiers and stirring up trouble. But sometimes, to see what was at the bottom of a cloudy rain barrel, you *needed* to stir the water to bring up what was at the bottom. It was just too coincidental. Milisair Chadmar had taken the messenger captive months ago, but he had died only a short time before Rand wanted him. He was the only person in the city with a clue to the King’s location.

Coincidences did happen. Sometimes, when two farmers were feuding and one of their cows died in the night, it was just an accident. And sometimes, a little searching uncovered the opposite.

Loral led the group toward the Gull’s Feast, also known as the Gull District, a part of town close to where the fishermen dumped waste from their hauls. Like most sensible people, Nynaeve avoided that section of town, and her nose reminded her just why as they approached. Fish guts might make excellent fertilizer, but Nynaeve could smell the composting heaps from several streets away. Even the refugees avoided this dark area.

The walk was a fairly long one—understandably, the rich sector of town was distant from the Gull’s Feast. Nynaeve stalked along, paying no heed to the shadowed alleyways and buildings, though her entourage—soldiers excepted—clustered around her apprehensively. The Saldaeans instead kept their hands on their serpentine swords, trying to look in all directions at once.

She wished she had news from the White Tower. How long had it been since she’d had news from Egwene or one of the others? She felt blind. It was her own fault for insisting that she go with Rand. *Someone* had needed to keep an eye on him, but that meant being unable to keep any eyes on everyone else. Was the Tower still divided? Was Egwene still Amyrlin? News on the streets was little help. As always, for every rumor she heard, there were two more contradicting it. The White Tower was fighting itself. No, it fought the Asha’man. No, the Aes Sedai had been destroyed by the

Seanchan. Or by the Dragon Reborn. No, those rumors were all lies spread by the Tower to bait its enemies into striking.

Very little was said about Elaida or Egwene specifically, though garbled news of two Amyrlins was spreading. That was problematic. Neither group of Aes Sedai would like spreading the news of a second Amyrlin. Tales of squabbles among the Aes Sedai would only end up hurting all of them.

Eventually, Loral stopped walking. The four workers stopped behind her, bundling together with worried expressions. Nynaeve glanced at Loral. “Well?”

“There, Lady.” The woman pointed a bony finger to the building across the street.

“The chandler’s shop?” Nynaeve asked.

Loral nodded.

Nynaeve summoned one of the bowlegged Saldaean soldiers. “You, watch these five and make sure they don’t get into trouble. You other two, come with me.”

She started across the street, but when she didn’t hear footsteps leave the boardwalk, she turned with a frown. The three guards stood together, looking at the single lantern, likely cursing themselves for not thinking to bring another.

“Oh, for the Light’s sake,” Nynaeve snapped, raising her hand and embracing the Source. She wove a globe of light above her fingers, casting a cool, even illumination across the ground around her. “Leave the lantern.”

The two Saldaeans complied, hurrying after her. She stepped up to the chandler’s door, then wove a ward against eavesdropping and placed it in the air around herself, the door and the two soldiers.

She looked at one of the soldiers. “What’s your name?”

“Triben, my Lady,” he said. He was a hawk-faced man with a short, trimmed mustache and a scar across his forehead. “That’s Lurts,” he said, pointing at the other soldier, a massive wall of a man who Nynaeve had been surprised to see was uniformed as a cavalryman.

“All right, Triben,” Nynaeve said. “Kick the door open.”

Triben didn’t question her; he just raised a booted foot and kicked. The frame cracked easily and the door slammed open, but if her ward had been placed correctly, nobody in the building would be able to hear. She peeked in. The room smelled of wax and perfumes, and the wooden floor was marked by numerous spots. Drip marks; wax that had been cleaned up often left a mark.

"Quickly," she said to the soldiers, releasing the ward but maintaining the globe of light. "Lurts, go to the back of the shop and watch the alley; make certain nobody escapes. Triben, with me."

Lurts moved with surprising speed for his bulk, taking his position in the back room of the shop. Her globe illuminated barrels for dipping candles and a pile of burned nubs in the corner, bought for pennies to be re-melted. A staircase mounted to the right. A small alcove in the front of the shop was the storefront, and it contained various sizes and shapes of candles, from the standard white rod to the perfumed and decorated brick. If Loral was wrong about this being the place. . . .

But any good secret operation would have a working front. Nynaeve hurried up the stairs, wood creaking beneath her weight. The building was narrow. On the upper floor, she and Triben found two rooms. One door was open a crack, so Nynaeve dimmed her globe of light and wove a ward against listeners into the room. Then she burst in, hawk-faced Triben following, his sword scraping against its scabbard as he pulled it free.

There was only one person in the room, an overweight man sleeping on a mattress on the floor, blankets in a heap around his feet. Nynaeve wove a few threads of Air, tying him up in one smooth motion. His eyes bulged open, and he opened his mouth to scream, but Nynaeve stuffed Air between his lips, gagging him.

She turned to Triben and nodded, tying off her weaves. They left the bound man there, struggling against his bonds, and crossed to the other door. She wove another weave against eavesdropping into the room before entering, and it was a good thing she did—for the two younger men in this room roused much more quickly. One sat bolt upright, letting out a yelp just as Triben headed across the floorboards. Triben punched him in the stomach, knocking the air out of his lungs.

Nynaeve bound him with a thread of Air, then did the same for the other young man, who was rousing drowsily in his bunk. She towed the two toward her, brightening her globe of light, hanging the men up in the air a few inches. They were both Domani, with dark hair and crude faces, thin mustaches above their lips. Both wore only their smallclothes. They seemed too old to be apprentices.

“I think we have the right place, Nynaeve Sedai,” Triben said, walking around the pair to stand beside her.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Those are no chandler’s apprentices,” Triben continued. He slid his sword back into its sheath. “Calluses on the palms, but no burns on their hands? Muscled arms? And they’re far too old. That fellow on the left has had his nose broken at least once.”

She looked closer; Triben was right. *I should have seen that.* Still, she had noticed the age. “Which one do you think I should ungag,” she asked casually, “and which one should I kill?”

Both men began to squirm, eyes wide. They should have known that an Aes Sedai would never do anything of the sort. In fact, she probably shouldn’t have implied it, but private jailers like these riled her anger.

“The one on the left seems most eager to talk, Lady,” Triben said. “Perhaps he will tell you what you wish to know.”

She nodded, releasing the man’s gag. He began to speak immediately. “I will do whatever you say! Please, don’t fill my stomach with insects! I haven’t done anything wrong, I promise you, I—”

She stuffed the Air gag back in.

“Too much complaining,” she said. “Perhaps the other will know to hush and speak when spoken to.” She released his gag.

This man remained dangling in the air, obviously terrified, but saying nothing. The One Power could unnerve the most hardened of killers.

“How do I get into the dungeon?” she asked this man.

He looked sick, but he had probably already guessed that she’d want the dungeon. It was unlikely that an Aes Sedai would burst into the shop after midnight because she’d been sold a bad candle.

“Trapdoor,” the man said, “under the rug in the shop front.”

“Excellent,” Nynaeve said. She tied off the weaves binding the men’s hands, then replaced the gag on the one who had spoken. She didn’t leave them hanging in the air—she didn’t want to have to pull them along behind her—and instead let them walk on their own feet.

She had Triben fetch the overweight man from the other room, then herded all three down the stairs. Below, they met the muscular Lurts keeping careful watch on the alley out back. A youth sat on the floor in front of him, and Nynaeve’s globe of light illuminated his face, a frightened

Domani one with uncharacteristically light hair and hands spotted with burns.

"Now, *that's* a chandler's apprentice," Triben said, scratching his forehead scar. "They probably have him doing all of the work for the front."

"He was asleep under those blankets over there." Lurts nodded to a shadowed pile in the corner as he joined Nynaeve. "Tried to scramble out the front door after you went up the stairs."

"Bring him," Nynaeve said. In the small storefront, Triben pulled back the rug, then used the edge of his sword to prod through the slats until he knocked against something underneath—hinges, Nynaeve assumed. After a little careful prying, he got the trapdoor open. A ladder reached down into the darkness below.

Nynaeve stepped forward, but Triben held up a hand. "Lord Bashere would hang me up by my own stirrups if I let you go first, Lady," he said. "No telling what might be down there." He leaped into the hole, sliding down the ladder with one hand, his sword in the other. He thumped to the ground below, and Nynaeve rolled her eyes. Men! She gestured for Lurts to watch the jailers, then released their bonds so they could climb down. She gave each of them a stern look; then she proceeded down the ladder without Triben's ridiculous flair, leaving Lurts to herd the jailers after.

She raised her globe of light and surveyed the cellar. The walls were stone, which made her feel much less nervous about the weight of the building above. The floor was packed dirt, and there was a wooden doorway built into the wall across from her. Triben was listening at it.

She nodded, and he pulled it open, darting inside eagerly. The Saldaeans seemed to be picking up some habits from the Aiel. Nynaeve followed, preparing weaves of Air, just in case. Behind her, the sullen jailers began to climb down the ladder, followed by Lurts.

There wasn't much to see in the other room. Two dungeon cells with thick wooden doors, a table with some stools beside it, and a large wooden trunk. Nynaeve sent her globe of light to the corner as hawk-faced Triben inspected the trunk. He lifted the lid, then raised an eyebrow, pulling out several glittering knives. Aids for questioning. Nynaeve shivered. She turned harsh eyes on the jailers behind her.

She untied the gag on the one who had spoken. "Keys?" she asked.

"Bottom of the trunk," said the thug. The overweight jailer—the leader of the group, no doubt, as he didn't share a room—shot him a furious glance. Nynaeve jerked the leader into the air. “Don’t provoke me,” she growled. “It’s already far too late at night for reasonable people to be awake.”

She nodded to Triben, and he dug out the keys and opened the cell doors. The first cell was empty; the second one held a disheveled woman, still wearing a fine Domani dress, though it was soiled. Lady Chadmar was dirty and ragged and she curled against the wall, drowsy, barely even noticing that the door was open. Nynaeve caught a whiff of a stench that, up until that moment, had been covered by the scent of rotting fish. Human excrement and an unwashed body. Likely, that was one reason for locating the dungeon here in the Gull’s Feast.

Nynaeve inhaled sharply at seeing how the woman was being treated. How could Rand allow this? The woman herself had done this very thing to others, but that didn’t make it right for him to stoop to her level.

She waved for Triben to close the door; then she sat down on one of the room’s stools, regarding the three jailers. Behind, Lurts guarded the way out, keeping an eye on the poor apprentice. The overweight jailer still hung in the air.

She needed information. She could have asked Rand for permission to visit the jail in the morning, but in doing so, she would have risked alerting these men that they were going to be visited. She was depending on surprise and intimidation to reveal what had been hidden.

“Now,” she said to the three, “I am going to ask some questions. You are going to answer. I’m not certain what I’m going to do with you yet, so realize it’s best to be *very* honest with me.”

The two on the ground looked up at the other man, floating in the invisible weaves of Air. They nodded.

“The man who was brought to you,” she said. “The messenger of the King. When did he first arrive?”

“Two months ago,” one of the toughs said—the one with the large chin and the broken nose. “Arrived in a sack with the candle nubs from Lady Chadmar’s mansion, just like all the prisoners.”

“Your instructions?”

“Hold him,” the other tough said. “Keep him alive. We didn’t know much, er, Lady Aes Sedai. Jorgin is the one who does all the questioning.”

She looked up at the fat man. “You’re Jorgin?”

He nodded reluctantly.

“And what were your instructions?”

Jorgin didn’t respond.

Nynaeve sighed. “Look,” she said to him. “I am Aes Sedai, and am bound by my word. If you tell me what I want to know, I will see that you are not suspected in the death. The Dragon doesn’t care about you three, otherwise you wouldn’t still be here in charge of this little . . . stopover of yours.”

“If we talk, we go free?” the fat man said, eyeing her. “Your word?”

Nynaeve glanced about the tiny room with a dissatisfied eye. They had left Lady Chadmar in the dark, and the door was packed with cloth to muffle screams. The cell would be dark, stuffy and cramped. Men who would work a place like this barely deserved life, let alone freedom.

But there was a much larger sickness to deal with. “Yes,” Nynaeve said, the word bitter in her mouth. “And you know that’s better than you deserve.”

Jorgin hesitated, then nodded. “Let me down, Aes Sedai, and I’ll answer your questions.”

She did so. The man might not know it, but she had very little authority to stand on; she wouldn’t resort to his methods of extracting answers, and she was acting without Rand’s knowledge. The Dragon probably wouldn’t react well when he discovered that she’d been prying—not unless she could present him with discoveries.

Jorgin said to the broken-nosed thug, “Mord, fetch me a stool.”

Mord glanced at Nynaeve for approval, which she gave with a curt nod. As Jorgin settled his bulk onto the stool, he leaned forward, hands clasped before him. He resembled a hulking beetle tipped up on its side.

“I don’t see what you need from me,” the man said. “You seem to know everything already. You know about my facility and about the people it has held. What more is there to know?”

Facility? Some word for it. “That is my own business,” Nynaeve said, giving him a stare which she hoped implied that the concerns of the Aes Sedai were not to be questioned. “Tell me, how did the messenger die?”

“Without dignity,” Jorgin replied. “Like all men, in my experience.”

“Give me specifics, or you’ll go back to hanging in the air.”

“I opened the cell door a few days back to feed him. He was dead.”

“How long had it been since you’d fed him, then?”

Jorgin snorted. “I don’t starve my guests, Lady Aes Sedai. I just . . . encourage them to be free with what they know.”

“And how much encouragement did you give the messenger?”

“Not enough to kill him,” the jailer said defensively.

“Oh, come now,” Nynaeve said. “The man remained for months in your possession, presumably healthy all that time. Then, the *day* before he is to be brought before the Dragon Reborn, he suddenly dies? You already have my promise of amnesty. Tell me who bribed you to kill him and I’ll see that you’re protected.”

The jailer shook his head. “It wasn’t like that. I’m telling you, he just died. It happens sometimes.”

“I tire of your games.”

“It’s not a game, burn you!” Jorgin snarled. “You think a man could get far in my profession if it were known that he’d accept a bribe to kill one of his guests? You couldn’t trust him any further than you could a lying Aiel!”

She let that last comment slide, though a man like this one could *never* be “trusted.”

“Look,” Jorgin said, “that wasn’t the type of prisoner you kill, anyway. *Everybody* wants to know where the King is. Who’d kill the only one with information about it? That man was worth good money.”

“So he’s not dead,” Nynaeve surmised. “Who did you sell him to?”

“Oh, he’s dead,” the jailer said with a chuckle. “If I *had* sold him, I wouldn’t have lived long afterward. You learn that sort of thing quickly, doing what I do.”

She turned to the other two thugs. “Is he lying?” she asked of them. “A hundred gold marks to the one of you who can give me proof that he is.”

Mord glanced at his boss, then grimaced. “For a hundred in gold, I’d sell you my own mother, Lady. Burn me, but I would. Jorgin’s telling the truth, though. That body was good and dead. The Dragon’s men checked when they brought the lady to us.”

So Rand had considered that possibility. But she still had no proof that these men were telling her the truth. If there *was* something to hide, they’d work hard to bury it deep. She decided to try a different path.

“What did you discover, then,” she said, “about the King’s location?”

Jorgin just sighed. “Like I told the Lord Dragon’s men, and like I told Lady Chadmar before she landed here in the dungeons herself. That man knew something, but he wouldn’t speak it.”

“Come now,” Nynaeve said, shooting a glance at the chest with its sharp equipment. She had to look away again before it angered her. “A man of your . . . skill? And you couldn’t pry one simple fact out of him?”

“Dark One take me if I’m lying!” The jailer’s face flushed as if this were a matter of pride for him. “I’ve never *seen* a man resist like that one did! A pretty feather of a man like him should have broken without much encouragement at all. But he didn’t. He would speak on anything other than the things we wanted!” Jorgin leaned forward. “I don’t know how he did it, Lady. Burn me, but I don’t! It’s like some . . . force had ahold of his tongue. It was like he *couldn’t* talk. Even if he’d wanted to!”

The two thugs muttered to themselves, looking apprehensive. It seemed that Nynaeve’s questioning had hit a nerve.

“So you pushed him too hard,” Nynaeve guessed. “And that’s how he died.”

“Take it all, woman!” the jailer growled. “Blood and bloody ashes! I *didn’t* kill him! Sometimes, people just die.”

Unfortunately, she was coming to believe him. Jorgin was a wretch of a man who could use a decade doing chores beneath the eyes of a Wisdom. But he wasn’t lying.

So much for her grand plans. She sighed, standing up, realizing just how tired she really was. Light! This scheme was more likely to make Rand explode at her than persuade him to listen to her counsel. She needed to return to the mansion for some sleep. Perhaps tomorrow she’d be able to think up a better way to show Rand that she was on his side.

She waved for the guards to take the jailer and his men back up above. After that, she wove Air to shut the cell door on Milisair Chadmar. Nynaeve *would* see that the woman’s conditions were improved. Despicable human being or not, she should not be treated this way. Rand would have to understand that when she explained it to him. Why, Milisair looked so pale she might be coming down with the shakes! Absently, Nynaeve walked to the viewing slit at the top of the cell door, then wove a Delving of Spirit to make certain the woman was not ill.

As soon as she began the Delving, Nynaeve froze. She had expected to find Milisair’s body taxed by exhaustion. She had expected to find disease, perhaps hunger.

She had not expected to find poison.

Cursing, suddenly alert, Nynaeve threw open the cell door and rushed inside. Yes, she could see it easily through the Delving. Tarchrot leaf. Nynaeve herself had given that to a hound who had needed to be put down. It was a common enough plant, and had a very bitter flavor. Not the best poison, as it had such an unpleasant taste, and yet had to be ingested.

Yes, it was a bad poison—unless the person you were poisoning was already captive and had no choice but to eat the food you gave her. Nynaeve began a Healing, weaving all five Powers, strangling the poison and strengthening Milisair's body. It was a relatively easy Healing, as tarchrot leaf wasn't particularly strong. You either had to use a lot of it—as she had with the hound—or you had to administer it several times for it to take effect. But if you did it slowly like that, the person you killed with it would seem to die naturally.

Once Milisair was safe, Nynaeve burst from the cell. "Stop!" she bellowed at the men. "Jorgin!"

Lurts, at the back, turned with surprise. He grabbed the jailer Jorgin by the arm and spun him around.

"Who prepares the prisoner's food?" Nynaeve demanded, stalking toward him.

"The food?" Jorgin asked, looking confused. "That's one of Kerb's jobs. Why?"

"Kerb?"

"The lad," Jorgin said. "Nobody important. An apprentice we found among the refugees a few months back. Quite a lucky find—our last apprentice ran off on us, and this one was already trained in—"

Nynaeve hushed him with a raised hand, suddenly anxious. "The boy! Where is he?"

"He was just here . . ." Lurts said, glancing up. "Went with—"

There was a sudden scrambling from above. Nynaeve cursed, calling for Triben to catch the boy. She shoved her way to the ladder and began climbing. She darted out into the shop above, her glowing light following. The two thugs stood cowering in the center room, looking confused, and a Saldaean guard stood with a sword pulled on them. He looked at her questioningly.

"The boy!" she said.

Triben glanced toward the shop door. It was open. Preparing weaves of Air, Nynaeve dashed out onto the street.

There, she found the boy, Kerb, in the muddy street, held down by the four dice-playing workers she'd brought from the mansion. Even as she stepped off the boardwalk onto the street, they pulled the struggling, frantic boy to his feet. The last Saldaean stood at the doorway, sword out, as if he'd been rushing in to see if she was in danger.

"He bolted out of the door, Aes Sedai," one of the workers said, "as if the Dark One himself was chasing him. Your soldier ran over to see if you were in danger, but we figured it'd be best to snatch this lad before he could get away. Just in case."

Nynaeve let out a breath to calm herself. "You did well," she said. The youth struggled, weakly. "You did well indeed."

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CHAPTER 33

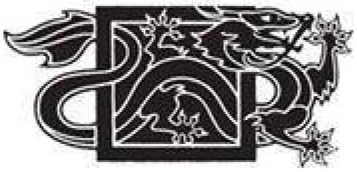

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A Conversation with the Dragon

“This,” Rand declared, “had better be important.”

Nynaeve turned to find the Dragon Reborn standing in the doorway to the sitting room. He wore a dark red robe with black dragons embroidered up the arms. His stump was hidden in the folds of the left sleeve. Though his hair was tousled from sleep, his eyes were alert.

He strode into the sitting room, ever the king—even now, long after midnight and just awakened, he walked as if he were absolutely certain of himself. Some servants had brought a pot of hot tea, and he filled a cup as Min followed him into the room. She also wore a sleeping robe; the robes were one of the fashions of the Domani, and hers was of yellow silk, the weave far thinner than Rand’s. Aiel maidens took up positions by the door, lounging in their strangely dangerous way.

Rand took a gulp from his cup. It was getting harder and harder to see in him the boy Nynaeve had known in the Two Rivers. Had his jaw always been set with those lines of determination? When had his step grown so sure, his posture so demanding? This man almost seemed an . . . interpretation of the Rand she’d once known. Like a statue, carved from rock to look like him, but exaggerated in heroic lines.

“Well?” Rand demanded. “Who is this?”

The young apprentice, Kerb, sat tied in Air upon one of the room’s cushioned benches. Nynaeve glanced at him, then Embraced the Source and wove a ward against eavesdropping. Rand looked at her sharply. “You channeled?” he asked. He could sense when she did so without taking precautions; he felt goose bumps on the flesh, according to Egwene and Elayne’s investigations.

“A ward,” she said, refusing to be cowed. “Last I checked, I didn’t need your *permission* to channel. You’ve grown high and mighty, Rand al’Thor, but don’t forget that I paddled your backside when you were barely as tall as a man’s shins.”

Once that would have gotten a reaction from him, if only a huff of annoyance. Now he just looked at her. Those eyes of his seemed, at times, the part of him that had changed the most.

He sighed. “Why have you wakened me, Nynaeve? Who is this spindly, terrified youth? If it had been anyone else who sent that message this time of night, I’d have sent them to Bashere for a flogging.”

Nynaeve nodded at Kerb. "I think this 'spindly, terrified youth' knows where the King is."

That got Rand's attention, and Min's as well. She'd poured herself a cup of tea and was leaning against a wall. Why weren't they *married*?

"The King?" Rand asked. "Graendal too, then. How do you know this, Nynaeve? Where did you find him?"

"At the dungeon where you sent Milisair Chadmar," Nynaeve said, eyeing him. "It is terrible, Rand al'Thor. You have no right to treat a person in such a manner."

He didn't rise to that comment either. Instead, he simply walked over to Kerb. "He heard something from the interrogation?"

"No," Nynaeve said. "But I think he killed the messenger. I know for a fact that he tried to poison Milisair. She'd have been dead by the end of the week if I hadn't Healed her."

Rand glanced at Nynaeve, and she could almost *feel* him connecting the comments to figure out what she had been doing. "You Aes Sedai," he finally said, "share much with rats, I have come to realize. You are always in places where you are not wanted."

Nynaeve snorted. "If I'd stayed away, then Milisair would be dying and Kerb would be free."

"I assume you've asked him who ordered him to kill the messenger."

"Not yet," Nynaeve said. "I did find the poison among his things, however, and confirmed that he had prepared food both for Milisair and for the messenger." She hesitated before continuing. "Rand, I'm not certain that he'll be *able* to answer our questions. I Delved him, and while he's not sick physically, there's . . . something there. In his mind."

"What do you mean?" Rand asked softly.

"A block of some sort," Nynaeve said. "The jailer seemed frustrated—even surprised—that the messenger had been able to resist his 'questioning.' I think there must have been some block on that man too, something to keep him from revealing too much."

"Compulsion," Rand said. He spoke offhandedly, raising his tea to his lips.

Compulsion was dark, evil. She'd felt it herself; she still shivered when she considered what Moghedien had done to her. And that had been only a small thing, removing some memories.

“Few are as skilled with Compulsion as Graendal,” Rand said musingly. “Perhaps this is the confirmation I’ve been looking for. Yes . . . this could be a great discovery indeed, Nynaeve. Great enough to make me forget how you obtained it.”

Rand rounded the bench and leaned down to meet the young man’s eyes.

“Release him,” Rand commanded her.

She complied.

“Tell me,” Rand said to Kerb, “who told you to poison those people?”

“I don’t know anything!” the boy squeaked. “I just—”

“Stop,” Rand said softly. “Do you believe that I can kill you?”

The boy fell silent and—though Nynaeve wouldn’t have thought it possible—his blue eyes opened wider.

“Do you believe that if I simply said the word,” Rand continued in his eerie, quiet voice, “your heart would stop beating? I am the Dragon Reborn. Do you believe that I can take your life, or your soul itself, if I so much as will it to happen?”

Nynaeve saw it again, the patina of darkness around Rand, that aura that she couldn’t *quite* be certain was there. She raised her tea to her lips—and found that it had suddenly grown bitter and stale, as if it had been left to sit too long.

Kerb slouched down and began to cry.

“Speak,” Rand commanded.

The youth opened his mouth, but only a groan came out. He was so transfixed by Rand that he didn’t—or couldn’t—blink the sweat from his eyes.

“Yes,” Rand said thoughtfully. “This is Compulsion, Nynaeve. She’s here! I was *right*.” He looked at Nynaeve. “You will have to unravel the web of Compulsion, wipe it from his mind, before he can tell us what he knows.”

“What?” she asked incredulously.

“I have little skill with this kind of weaving,” Rand said with a wave of his hand. “I suspect that you can remove Compulsion, if you try. It is similar to Healing, in a way. Use the same weave that creates Compulsion, but reverse it.”

She frowned. Healing the poor boy sounded like a fine idea—every wound *should* be Healed, after all. But trying something she’d never done before, and doing so in front of Rand, was not appealing. What if she did it wrong and somehow hurt the boy?

Rand sat down on the cushioned bench seat across from the youth, Min walking over to sit beside him. She was regarding her tea with a grimace; apparently, hers had spoiled as suddenly as Nynaeve's had.

Rand watched Nynaeve, waiting.

"Rand, I—"

"Just try it," Rand said. "I can't tell you how it is done specifically, not for a woman, but you are clever. I'm certain you can manage."

His unintentionally patronizing tone sent her back into a rage. Being as tired as she was didn't help. She gritted her teeth, turning toward Kerb, and wove all five Powers. His eyes darted back and forth, though he couldn't see the weaves.

Nynaeve laid a very light Healing across him, causing him to stiffen. She wove a separate line of Spirit, Delving into his head as delicately as she could, prodding at the weaves that clumped across his mind. Yes, she could see it now, a complex web made from lines of Spirit, Air and Water. It was horrible, looking at it with her mind's eye, crisscrossing the youth's brain. Bits of the weave touched here and there, like tiny hooks, jutting deep into the brain itself.

Reverse the weave, Rand had said. That was far from easy. She'd have to pull the web of Compulsion off layer by layer, and if she made a mistake, she could very easily kill him. She almost backed away.

But who else was there? Compulsion was a forbidden weave, and she doubted that Corele or the others had any experience with it. If Nynaeve stopped now, Rand would just send for the others and ask them to do it. They'd obey him, laughing behind their hands at Nynaeve, the Accepted who thought herself a full Aes Sedai.

Well, she had discovered new ways of Healing! She had helped cleanse the taint from the One Power itself! She had Healed stilling and gentling!

She could do this.

She worked quickly, weaving a mirror image of the first layer of Compulsion. Each use of the Power was exact, but reversed from the pattern already woven in the boy's mind. Nynaeve laid her weave down carefully, hesitantly, and as Rand had said, both puffed away and vanished.

How had he known? She shivered, thinking of what Semirhage had said about him. Memories from another life, memories he had no right to. There was a reason the Creator allowed them to forget their past lives. No man should have to remember the failures of Lews Therin Telamon.

She continued, layer after layer, stripping away the Compulsion's weaves like a hedge-doctor removing bandages from a wounded leg. It was exhausting work, but fulfilling. Each weave fixed a wrong, healed the youth a little more, made something just a hair more *right* in the world.

It took the better part of an hour, and was a grueling experience. But she did it. As the last layer of Compulsion vanished, she let out an exhausted sigh and released the One Power, convinced that she couldn't channel a single thread more if it were to save her life. She wobbled over to a chair and slumped down. Min, she noticed, had curled up on the bench seat beside Rand and had fallen asleep.

But he did not sleep. The Dragon Reborn watched, as if seeing things Nynaeve could not. He stood up and walked to Kerb. In her dizzied state, Nynaeve hadn't noticed the young chandler's face. It was oddly blank, like that of a person dazed from a strong blow to the head.

Rand lowered himself to one knee, cradling the youth's chin in his hand, staring into his eyes. "Where?" he asked softly. "Where is she?"

The youth opened his mouth, and a line of drool leaked out the side of it.

"*Where is she?*" Rand repeated.

Kerb moaned, eyes still blank, tongue parting his lips just slightly.

"Rand!" Nynaeve said. "Stop it! What are you doing to him?"

"I have done nothing," Rand said quietly, not looking toward her. "This is what you did, Nynaeve, in unraveling those weaves. Graendal's Compulsions are powerful—but crude, in some ways. She fills a mind with Compulsion to such an extent as to erase personality and intellect, leaving behind a puppet who works only according to her direct commands."

"But he was able to interact just moments ago!"

Rand shook his head. "If you ask the men at the jail, they'll tell you this one was slow of thought and rarely spoke to them. There was no real person in this head, only layered weaves of Compulsion. Instructions cleverly designed to wipe whatever personality this poor wretch had and replace it with a creature who would act exactly as Graendal wished. I've seen it dozens of times."

Dozens of times? Nynaeve thought with a shiver. *You've seen it, or Lews Therin saw it? Which memories rule you right now?*

She looked at Kerb, sick to her stomach. His eyes weren't blank from being dazed as she'd thought; they were more empty than that. When Nynaeve had been younger, new to her role as Wisdom, a woman had been brought to her who had fallen off of her wagon. The woman had slept for days, and when she'd finally awoken, she'd had a stare like this one. No hint that she recognized anyone, no clue that there was any soul left in the husk that was her body.

She'd died about a week later.

Rand spoke to Kerb again. "I need a location," Rand said. "Something. If there is any vestige within you that resisted, any scrap that fought her, I promise you revenge. A location. Where is she?"

Spittle dripped from the boy's lips. They seemed to quiver. Rand stood up, looming, still holding the youth's eyes with his own. Kerb shivered, then whispered two words.

"Natrin's Barrow."

Rand exhaled softly, then released Kerb with an almost reverent motion. The youth slipped from the bench to the floor, spittle drooling from his lips onto the rug. Nynaeve cursed, leaping from her seat, then wobbling slightly as the room spun. Light, she was exhausted! She steadied herself, closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. Then she knelt at the boy's side.

"You needn't bother," Rand said. "He is dead."

Nynaeve confirmed the death for herself. Then she snapped her head up, looking at Rand. What right did he have to look as exhausted as she felt? He had done barely anything! "What did you—"

"I did nothing, Nynaeve. I suspect that once you removed that Compulsion, the only thing keeping him alive was his anger at Graendal, buried deeply. Whatever bit of himself remained, it knew the only help it could give were those two words. After that, he just let go. There was nothing more we could do for him."

"I don't accept that," Nynaeve said, frustrated. "He could have been Healed!" She should have been able to help him! Undoing Graendal's Compulsion had felt so good, so *right*. It shouldn't have ended this way!

She shuddered, feeling dirtied. Used. How was she better than the jailer who had done such horrible things for information? She glared at

Rand. He could have told her what removing Compulsion would do!

"Don't look at me like that, Nynaeve." He walked to the door and gestured for the Maidens there to collect Kerb's body. They did so, carrying it away as Rand called softly for a new pot of tea.

He returned, sitting down on the bench beside the sleeping Min; she'd tucked one of the bench's pillows under her head. One of the two lamps in the room was burning low, and that left his face half in shadow. "This was the only way it could have happened," he continued. "The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. You are Aes Sedai. Is that not one of your creeds?"

"I don't know what it is," Nynaeve snapped, "but it's not an excuse for your actions."

"What actions?" he asked. "You brought this man to me. Graendal used Compulsion on him. Now I will kill her for it—that action will be my sole responsibility. Now, let me be. I shall try to go back to sleep."

"Don't you feel any guilt at all?" she demanded.

They locked eyes, Nynaeve frustrated and helpless, Rand. . . . Who could guess what Rand felt these days!

"Should I suffer for them all, Nynaeve?" he asked quietly, rising, face still half in the darkness. "Lay this death at my feet, if you wish. It will just be one of many. How many stones can you pile on a man's body before the weight stops mattering? How far can you burn a lump of flesh until further heat is irrelevant? If I let myself feel guilt for this boy, then I would need to feel guilt for the others. And it would crush me."

She regarded him in the half light. A king, certainly. A soldier, though he had only occasionally seen war. She forced down her anger. Hadn't this all been about proving to him that he could trust her?

"Oh, Rand," she said, turning away. "This thing you have become, the heart without any emotion but anger. It will destroy you."

"Yes," he said softly.

She looked back at him, shocked.

"I continue to wonder," he said, glancing down at Min, "why you all assume that I am too dense to see what you find so obvious. Yes, Nynaeve. Yes, this hardness will destroy me. I know."

"Then why?" she asked. "Why won't you let us help you?"

He looked up—not at her, but staring off at nothing. A servant knocked quietly, wearing the white and forest green of Milisair's house. She entered and deposited the new pot of tea, picked up the old one, then withdrew.

“When I was much younger,” he said, voice soft, “Tam told me of a story he’d heard while traveling the world. He spoke of Dragonmount. I didn’t know at the time that he’d actually seen it, nor that he had found me there. I was just a shepherd boy, and Dragonmount, Tar Valon and Caemlyn were almost mythical places to me.

“He told me of it, though, a mountain so high it made even Twinhorn’s Peak back home seem a dwarf. Tam’s stories claimed no man had ever climbed to Dragonmount’s peak. Not because it was impossible—but because reaching the top would take every last ounce of strength a man had. So tall was the mountain that besting it would be a struggle that drained a man completely.”

He fell silent.

“So?” Nynaeve finally asked.

He looked at her. “Don’t you see? The stories claimed no man had climbed the mountain because in doing so, he would be without strength to return. A mountaineer could best it, reach the top, see what no man had ever seen. But then he would die. The strongest and wisest explorers knew this. So they never climbed it. They always wanted to, but they waited, reserving that trip for another day. For they knew it would be their last.”

“But that’s just a story,” Nynaeve said. “A legend.”

“That’s what I am,” Rand said. “A story. A legend. To be told to children years from now, spoken of in whispers.” He shook his head. “Sometimes, you can’t turn back. You have to keep pressing on. And sometimes, you know this climb is your last.

“You all claim that I have grown too hard, that I will inevitably shatter and break if I continue on. But you assume that there needs to be something left of me to continue on. That I need to climb back down the mountain once I’ve reached the top.

“That’s the key, Nynaeve. I see it now. I will not live through this, and so I don’t need to worry about what might happen to me after the Last Battle. I don’t need to hold back, don’t need to salvage anything of this beaten up soul of mine. I know that I must die. Those who wish for me to be softer, willing to bend, are those who cannot accept what will happen to me.” He looked down at Min again. Many times before, Nynaeve had seen affection in his eyes when he regarded her, but this time they were blank. Set in that same, emotionless face.

“We can find a way, Rand,” Nynaeve said. “Surely there is a way to win but also let you live.”

“No,” he growled softly. “Do not tempt me down that path again. It only leads to pain, Nynaeve. I . . . I used to think about leaving something behind to help the world survive once I died, but that was a struggle to keep living. I can’t indulge myself. I’ll climb this bloody mountain and face the sun. You all will deal with what comes next. That is how it must be.”

She opened her mouth to object again, but he gave her a sharp glance. “That is how it *must* be, Nynaeve.”

She closed her mouth.

“You did well tonight,” Rand said. “You have saved us all a lot of trouble.”

“I did it because I want you to trust me,” Nynaeve said, then immediately cursed herself. Why had she said that? Was she really so tired that she blabbed the first thing that came to her mind?

Rand just nodded. “I do trust you, Nynaeve. As much as I trust anyone; more than I trust most. You think you know what is best for me, even against my wishes, but that is something I can accept. The difference between you and Cadsuane is that you actually care about me. She only cares about my place in her plans. She wants me to be part of the Last Battle. You want me to live. For that, you have my thanks. Dream on my behalf, Nynaeve. Dream for things I no longer can.”

He leaned down to pick up Min; he managed it despite his missing hand, snaking one arm underneath her and gripping with his hand as he lifted her up. She stirred, then snuggled in close to him, waking and murmuring a complaint that she could walk. He didn’t put her down; perhaps because of the exhaustion in her voice. Nynaeve knew she stayed up with her books most nights, pushing herself almost as hard as Rand did.

Carrying Min, he walked toward the door. “We will deal with the Seanchan first,” he said. “Be well prepared for that meeting. I will take care of Graendal soon after.”

He left her then. The flickering lamp finally gave out, leaving only the one on the table.

Rand had surprised her again. He was still a wool-headed fool, but he was a surprisingly self-aware one. How could a man understand so much, yet still be so ignorant?

And why couldn’t she come up with an argument against what he’d said? Why couldn’t she make herself yell at him that he was wrong? There was *always* hope. By surrendering that most important emotion, he might make himself strong—but risked losing all reason he might have to care about the outcome of his battles.

For some reason, she couldn’t find words for the argument.

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CHAPTER 34

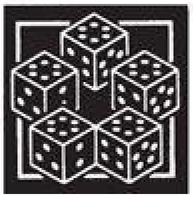

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Legends

"All right," Mat said, unrolling one of Roidelle's best maps on his table. Talmanes, Thom, Noal, Juilin and Mandevwin had arranged their chairs around the table. Beside the map of the area, Mat unrolled a sketch of the layout of a medium-sized town. It had taken some doing to find a merchant willing to sketch them a map of Trustair, but after Hinderstap, Mat didn't like to go into a town without knowing what they were up against.

Mat's pavilion was shaded by the pine forest outside, and the day was cool. Occasionally, the wind would blow, and a small sprinkle of dead pine needles would shake free from the boughs above and fall to the ground, some scratching the top of the tent as they fell. Outside, soldiers called to one another and pots clanged as the midday meal was distributed.

Mat studied the town map. It was time to stop being a fool. The whole world had decided to turn against him—even rural mountain towns were death traps, these days. Next he knew, the daisies on the sides of the road would be ganging up to try and eat him.

That thought gave him pause as he remembered the poor peddler, sinking into the phantom Shiotan town. When that ghostly place had vanished, it had left behind a meadow with butterflies and flowers. Including daisies. *Burn me,* he thought.

Well, Matrim Cauthon wasn't about to end up dead on some random backwater road. This time he would *plan* and he would be *ready*. He nodded to himself in satisfaction.

"The inn is here," Mat said, pointing at the town map. "The Shaken Fist. Two separate travelers agreed that it was a fine inn, the nicest of the three in the town. The woman looking for me hasn't made any effort to hide her whereabouts, so that means she thinks that she is well protected. We can expect guards."

Mat pulled out another of Roidelle's maps, one that better showed the geography around Trustair. The town sat in a small hollow, surrounded by gently rolling hills beside a small lake fed by highland springs. The lake reportedly produced some fine trout, the salting of which was the town's main trade.

"I want three squads of light cavalry here," Mat said, pointing at an upper slope. "They'll be hidden by the trees, but will have full view of the skies. If a red nightflower goes up, they're to come in directly along the main road here for a rescue. We'll have a hundred crossbowmen sequestered on either side of the town as a backup to the cavalry. If the nightflower is green instead, the cavalry is to march in and secure the main roads to the town, here, here and here."

Mat looked up, pointing at Thom. "Thom, you'll take Harnan, Fergin and Mandevwin as 'apprentices' and Noal can be your footman."

"Footman?" Noal asked. He was a gnarled man, missing teeth, with a hooked beak of a nose. But he was tough as an old, battle-scored sword passed down from father to son. "Why does a gleeman need a footman?"

"All right," Mat said. "You can be his brother then, who doubles as a manservant. Juilin, you—"

"Wait, Mat," Mandevwin said, scratching his face near his eye patch. "I'm to be an apprentice gleeman? I'm not certain my voice is suited to fine singing. You've heard me, I warrant. And with only one eye, I doubt I'll fare well at juggling."

"You're a new apprentice," Mat said. "Thom knows you don't have any talent, but he took pity on you because your great-aunt—with whom you've lived since your parents died in a tragic oxen stampede—took sick of the clover pox and went crazy. She started feeding you table scraps and treated you like the family hound, Marks, who'd run away when you were just seven."

Mandevwin scratched his head. His hair was streaked with gray. "Aren't I a little old to be an apprentice, though?"

"Nonsense," Mat said. "You're young at heart, and since you never married—the only woman you ever loved ran away with the tanner's son—Thom's arrival offered you an opportunity to start fresh."

"But I don't want to leave my great-aunt," Mandevwin protested. "She's cared for me since I was a child! It's not honest of a man to abandon an elderly woman just because she gets a little confused."

"There *is* no great-aunt," Mat said with exasperation. "This is just a legend, a story to go with your false name."

"Can't I have a story that makes me more honorable?" Mandevwin asked.

"Too late," Mat said, rifling through a stack on his desk, searching out a cluster of five pages covered in scrawled handwriting. "You can't change now. I spent half the night working on your story. It's the best out of the lot.

Here, memorize this." He handed it over to Mandevwin, then got out another stack of papers and began looking through them.

"Are you sure we're not taking this a little too far, lad?" Thom asked.

"I'm *not* going to be surprised again, Thom," Mat said. "Burn me, but I'm not going to let it happen. I'm tired of walking into traps unprepared. I plan to take command of my own destiny, stop running from problem to problem. It's time to be in charge."

"And you do that with . . ." Julin said.

"Elaborate aliases with backstories," Mat said, handing Thom and Noal their sheets. "Bloody right I do."

"What about me?" Talmanes asked. That twinkle to his eyes was back, though he spoke with a completely earnest voice. "Let me guess, Mat. I'm a traveling merchant who once trained with the Aiel and who has come to the village because he's heard there's a trout that lives in the lake who insulted his father."

"Nonsense," Mat said, handing him his sheets. "You're a Warder."

"That's rather suspicious," Talmanes noted.

"You're *supposed* to be suspicious," Mat said. "It's always easier to beat a man in cards when he's thinking about something else. Well, you'll be our 'something else.' A Warder passing through town on mysterious business won't be so grand an event that it will draw too much attention, but to those who know what to look for, it will be a good distraction. You can use Fen's cloak. He said he'd let me borrow it; he still feels guilty for letting those serving women get away."

"Of course, you didn't tell him that they simply *vanished*," Thom added. "And that there was no way for him to keep it from happening."

"Didn't see the point of telling him," Mat said. "No use dwelling on the past, I say."

"A Warder, is it?" Talmanes said, flipping through his stack of papers. "I'll have to practice scowling."

Mat regarded him with a flat expression. "You're not taking this seriously."

"What did you ask? Is there someone who *is* taking this seriously?" Burn that twinkle. Had Mat really ever thought this man was slow to laugh? He just did it on the inside. That was the most infuriating way.

"Light, Talmanes," Mat said. "A woman in that town is looking for Perrin and me. She knows what we look like so well that she can produce a drawing more accurate than my own mother could have made. That gives me a chill, like the Dark One himself standing over my shoulder. And I can't go into the flaming place myself, since every bloody man, woman and child has a picture with my face on it and a promise of gold for information!

"Now maybe I went a little far with the preparations, but I intend to find this person before they can order a flock of Darkfriends—or worse—to cut my throat in the night. Understood?"

Mat looked each of the five men in the eyes, nodded, and started toward the tent flap, but paused beside Talmanes's chair. Mat cleared his throat, then half mumbled, "You secretly harbor a love of painting, and you wish you could escape this life of death you've committed yourself to. You came through Trustair on your way south, rather than taking a more direct route, because you love the mountains. You're hoping to hear word of your younger brother, whom you haven't seen in years, and who disappeared on a hunting trip in southern Andor. You have a very tortured past. Read page four."

Mat hurried on, pushing his way out into the shaded noon, though he did catch a glimpse of Talmanes rolling his eyes. Burn the man! There was good drama in those pages!

Through the pine trees he could see that the sky was cloudy. Again. When *was* that going to end? Mat shook his head as he walked through camp, nodding to the groups of soldiers who offered him salutes or calls of greeting to "Lord Mat." The Band were staying here for the day—camped on a secluded, wooded hillside a half-day march from the town—while they made final preparations for the assault. The three-needle pines here were tall, and their limbs spread wide, the shade keeping underbrush to a minimum. Tents clustered in groups around the pines, and the air was cool and shaded, smelling of sap and loam.

He went about the camp, checking into the workings of his men and seeing that everything was being handled efficiently. Those old memories, the ones that the Eelfinn had given him, had begun to blend so evenly with his own that he could hardly tell which instincts came from them and which were his own.

It was good to be among the Band again; he hadn't realized how much he'd missed them. It would be nice to reunite with the rest of the men, the troops led by Estean and Daerid. Hopefully, they'd had an easier time of it than Mat's force had.

The cavalry banners came first in his rounds. They were separate from the rest of the camp—horsemen always considered themselves superior to foot. Today, as all too often, the men were worried about feed for their horses. To a good cavalryman, his horse always came first. Their trip from Hinderstap had been hard on the animals, particularly since there wasn't much to graze on. Little was growing this spring, and the winter's leavings were strangely sparse. Horses would refuse patches of thatch, almost as if it had gone bad, like other food stores. They didn't have much grain; they had hoped to live off the land, as they were moving too quickly for grain wagons.

Well, he'd just have to find something to do about that. Mat assured the cavalrymen he was working on the problem, and they took him at his word. Lord Mat hadn't let them down yet. Of course, the ones he *had* let down were rotting in their graves. He denied a request to fly the banner. Perhaps after the raid on Trustair.

He didn't have any true foot with him at the moment; they were all with Estean and Daerid. Talmanes had wisely understood that they'd need mobility, and had brought the three banners of horse and nearly four thousand mounted crossbowmen. Mat checked on the crossbowmen next, pausing to watch a couple of squads drilling in firing ranks at the back of the camp.

Mat stopped beside a tall pine, its lowest branches a good two feet above his head, leaning against the trunk. The line of crossbowmen weren't practicing their aim so much as their coordination. You didn't really aim in most battles, which was why the crossbows worked so well. They required a tenth the training of a longbow. Sure, the latter could fire faster and farther, but if you didn't have a lifetime to spare practicing, then these crossbows were a fine substitute.

Besides, the crossbow reloading process made it easier to train the ranks to fire together. The squad's captain stood on the far side, slapping a rod against the side of a tree once every two seconds to give a beat. Each crack of the wood was an order. Raise crossbows to the shoulder on the first. Fire on the second. Lower on the third. Crank on the fourth. Up to the shoulder again on the fifth. The men were getting good—firing in coordinated waves made for more consistent killing. Each fourth crack let loose a wave of bolts into the trees.

We'll need more of those, Mat thought, noticing how many of the bolts splintered during the training shots. You wasted more ammunition practicing than you did fighting, but each bolt now could be worth two or three in combat. The men were getting good indeed. If he'd had a few banners worth of *these* when he'd fought at Bloodwash Falls, perhaps Nashif would have learned his lesson a lot sooner.

Of course, they'd be *more* useful if they could fire faster. The cranking was the slow point. Not the turn of the crank itself, but the necessity of lowering the crossbow each time. It cost four seconds just to move the weapon about. These new cranks and boxes that Talmanes had learned to make from that mechanic in Murandy sped things up greatly. But the mechanic had been on his way to sell the cranks in Caemlyn, and who knew who else had bought them along the way? Before too long, everyone might have them. An advantage was negated if both you and your enemies had it.

Those boxes had given a lot to Mat's success in Altara against the Seanchan. He was loath to surrender the advantage. Could he find a way to make the bows fire even faster?

Thoughtful, he checked on a few more things in the camp—the Altarans they'd recruited into the Band were settling in well, and other than feed for the horses and perhaps crossbow bolts, supplies looked good. Satisfied, he went looking for Aludra.

She had established herself near the back of the camp, alongside a little cleft in the rocky hillside. Though this spot was much smaller than the glade of trees the Aes Sedai and their attendants used, it was noticeably more secluded. Mat had to weave around three separate cloth sheets hanging between trees—placed carefully to block any view into Aludra's workspace—before he reached her. And he had to stop when Bayle Domon held out a hand, holding Mat back until Aludra gave leave for him to enter.

The slender, dark-haired Illuminator sat on a stump in the center of her little camp, powders, rolls of paper, a writing board for notes and tools neatly arranged on strips of cloth on the ground around her. She no longer wore her braids, and her long hair fell loose around her shoulders. That made her look odd to Mat. Still pretty, though.

Burn it, Mat. You're married now, he told himself. Aludra *was* pretty, though.

Egeanin was there, holding a nightflower shell upright for Aludra to work on. Aludra's full-lipped face frowned in concentration as she tapped lightly on the shell. Egeanin's dark hair was growing out, making her look less and less like one of the Seanchan nobility. Mat still had trouble trying to decide what to call the woman. She wanted to be known as Leilwin, and sometimes he thought of her like that. It was foolish to go about changing your name just because someone said you had to, but he didn't really blame her for not wanting to rile Tuon. She was a bloody stubborn one, Tuon was. He found himself glancing to the south again, but caught himself. Blood and ashes! She'd be just fine.

Anyway, Tuon was gone now. So why did Egeanin continue the charade of calling herself Leilwin? Mat had actually called her by her old name once or twice after Tuon's departure, but had received a curt reprimand. Women! They made no sense, and Seanchan women least of all.

Mat glanced at Bayle Domon. The muscular, bearded Illianer leaned against a tree near the entrance to Aludra's camp, two flapping white sheets of cloth extending in either direction near him. He still held out a warning hand. As if this entire camp weren't Mat's in the first place!

Mat didn't push his way past, though. He couldn't afford to offend Aludra. She was flaming close to being done with those dragon designs of hers, and he meant to have those. But Light, if it didn't smart to have to pass a checkpoint in his own camp!

Aludra looked up from her work, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She noted Mat, then looked back to her nightflower and began tapping with the hammer again. Bloody ashes! Seeing that reminded him why he visited Aludra so infrequently. The checkpoint was bad enough, but did the woman have to pound on something explosive with a hammer? Had she no sense at all? The entire lot of Illuminators were that way, though. Short a few foals of a full herd, as Mat's father might say.

"He may enter," Aludra said. "Thank you, Master Domon."

"It do be a pleasure, Mistress Aludra," Bayle said, lowering his hand and nodding amiably to Mat. Mat straightened his coat and walked forward, intent on asking about crossbows. Something immediately caught his eye, however. Spread out on the ground behind Aludra were a series of neat pages with detailed drawings, along with a list of notations with numbers beside them.

"Are these the plans for the dragons?" Mat asked eagerly. He knelt down on one knee to inspect the sheets, without touching them. Aludra could be particular about that kind of thing.

“Yes.” She was still tapping with her hammer. She eyed him, looking just faintly uncomfortable. Because of Tuon, he suspected.

“And these figures?” Mat tried to ignore the awkwardness.

“Supply requirements,” she said. She put down her hammer and inspected the cylindrical nightflower from all sides. She nodded to Leilwin.

Bloody ashes, but the figures were large! A mountain of charcoal, sulphur and . . . bat guano? The notes claimed there was a city specializing in producing it over in the northern reaches of the Mountains of Mist. What city specialized in gathering *bat guano*, of all things? There were requirements for copper and tin as well, though for some reason there were no numbers beside those. Just a little star notation.

Mat shook his head. How would the common people react if they knew that the majestic nightflowers were just a paper, powder and—of all things—bat dung? No wonder Illuminators were so secretive with their craft. It wasn’t just about preventing competition. The more you knew about the process, the less wondrous and more ordinary it became.

“This is a lot of material,” Mat said.

“A miracle, that is what you asked me for, Matrim Cauthon,” she replied, handing her nightflower to Leilwin and picking up her writing board. She made some notations on the sheet strapped to the front. “That miracle, I have broken down into a list of ingredients. A feat which is in itself miraculous, yes? Do not complain of the heat when someone offers you the sun in the palm of her hands.”

“Doesn’t seem so manageable to me,” Mat muttered, mostly to himself. “Is this figure the costs?”

“I am not a scribe,” Aludra said. “Those are estimates only. The calculations, I have taken them as far as I can go, but the rest will have to be figured by those more proficient. The Dragon Reborn, he can afford such costs.” Leilwin watched Mat with a curious expression. Things had changed with her, too, because of Tuon. But not in the way he’d expected.

Mention of Rand brought the colors swirling into Mat’s vision, and he suppressed a sigh as he shook them away. Maybe Rand could manage costs like these, but *Mat* certainly couldn’t. Why, he’d have to dice with the queen of Andor herself to find this kind of coin!

But that was Rand’s problem. Burn him, he’d better appreciate what Mat was going through for him. “This doesn’t include a manpower estimate," Mat noticed, scanning the sheets again. "How many bellfounders are you going to need for this project?"

"Every one you can get," Aludra said curtly. "Is that not what you promised me? Every bellfounder from Andor to Tear."

"I suppose," Mat said. He hadn't actually expected her to take him literally on that. "What about copper and tin? You don't have an estimate of those."

"I need all of it."

"All of. . . . What do you mean, *all* of it?"

"All of it," she repeated, as simply and calmly as if she were asking for more cloudberry jam for her porridge. "Every scrap of copper and tin you can scrounge up this side of the Spine of the World." She paused. "Perhaps that does seem too ambitious."

"Bloody right it's ambitious," Mat muttered.

"Yes," Aludra said. "Let us assume the Dragon has control of Caemlyn, Cairhien, Illian and Tear. If he were to provide me with access to each and every mine and metal store of copper and tin in those four cities, I suppose it would be sufficient."

"Every metal store," Mat said flatly.

"Yes."

"In four of the world's largest cities."

"Yes."

"And you 'suppose' that would be sufficient."

"I believe that is what I said, Matrim Cauthon."

"Great. I'll see what I can do about that. Would you like the bloody Dark One to come polish your shoes while you're at it? Maybe we could dig up Artur Hawkwing and get him to do a dance for you."

Leilwin gave Mat a glare at the mention of Artur Hawkwing. After a moment, Aludra finished her annotations, then turned to regard Mat. She spoke flatly, just vaguely hostile. "My dragons, they will be a great power for a man of war. You claim what I have given you is extravagant. It is only needed." She eyed him. "I will not lie and say I didn't expect this *dismissiveness* from you, Master Cauthon. Pessimism, she is a fond friend of yours, yes?"

"That's uncalled for," Mat grumbled, glancing back down at the drawings. "I barely know her. Mere acquaintances, at best. You've got my oath on it."

That earned a snort from Bayle. Whether it was one of amusement or derision was impossible to tell without looking back to judge his face. Mat didn’t glance at him. Aludra was staring at him. Their eyes met for a moment, and Mat realized he’d probably been too curt with her. Maybe he was uncomfortable around her. A little. They’d been getting close before Tuon. And was that pain, hidden in Aludra’s eyes?

“I’m sorry, Aludra,” he said. “I shouldn’t have talked like that.”

She shrugged.

He took a deep breath. “Look, I know that . . . well, it’s odd how Tuon —”

She waved a hand, cutting him off. “It is nothing. I have my dragons. You have brought me the chance to create them. Other matters are no longer of concern. I wish you happiness.”

“Well,” he said. He rubbed his chin, then sighed. Best to just let it pass. “Anyway, I hope I can get this done. You ask for a *lot* of resources.”

“These bellfounders and materials,” she said, “they are what I need. No more and no less. I have done what I can here, without resources. I will still need to spend weeks testing—we will need to make a single dragon first, to check. So you have some time to gather all of this. But it will take much time, and yet you refuse to tell me when the dragons will be needed.”

“Can’t tell you things I don’t know myself, Aludra,” Mat said, glancing northward. He felt a strange tugging, as if someone had hooked a fisherman’s line about his insides and was softly—but insistently—pulling on it. *Rand, is that you, burn you?* Colors swirled. “Soon, Aludra,” he found himself saying. “Time is short. So short.”

She hesitated, as if sensing something in his voice. “Well,” she said. “If that be the case, then my requests are not so extravagant, yes? If the world goes to war, the forges will soon be needed for arrowheads and horseshoes. Better to put them to work now on my dragons. Let me assure you, each one we finish will be worth a thousand swords in battle.”

Mat sighed, stood up and tipped his hat to her. “All right, then,” he said. “Fair enough. Assuming Rand doesn’t bloody burn me to a crisp the moment I suggest this, I’ll see what I can do.”

“You would be wise to show Mistress Aludra respect,” Leilwin said, eyeing Mat, speaking with that slow Seanchan drawl. “Rather than being so flippant toward her.”

"That was sincere!" Mat said. "That last part was, at least. Burn me, woman. Can't you tell when a man's being sincere?"

She eyed him, as if trying to decide if that very pronouncement were some kind of mockery. Mat rolled his eyes. Women!

"Mistress Aludra is brilliant," Leilwin said sternly. "You don't understand the gift she is giving you in these plans. Why, if the Empire had these weapons. . . ."

"Well, see that you don't give them to it, Leilwin," Mat said. "I don't want to wake up one morning and find that you've run off with these plans in an attempt at retrieving your title!"

She looked insulted that he'd suggest such a thing, though it seemed like the logical thing to do. Seanchan had an odd sense of honor—Tuon hadn't tried once to flee from him, though she'd had ample opportunity.

Of course, Tuon had suspected from near the beginning that she'd marry him. She'd had that *damane*'s Foretelling. Burn him, he *wouldn't* look southward again. He wouldn't!

"My ship is being driven by different winds now, Master Cauthon," Leilwin said simply, turning from him and glancing at Bayle.

"But you wouldn't help us fight the Seanchan," Mat protested. "It seems that you'd—"

"You do be swimming in deep water right now, lad," Bayle interjected in a soft voice. "Aye, deep water, filled with lionfish. It may be time to stop splashing so loudly."

Mat closed his mouth. "All right then," he said. Shouldn't the two of them be treating him with more respect? Wasn't he some kind of high Seanchan prince or something? He should have known that wouldn't help him with Leilwin or the bearded sailor.

Anyway, he *had* been sincere. Aludra's words made sense, crazy though they sounded at first. They *would* need to dedicate a lot of foundries to the work. The weeks it was going to take him to reach Caemlyn seemed even more galling now. Those weeks spent on the road should be spent building dragons! A wise man learned that there was no use fretting over long marches—but Mat felt far from wise lately.

"All right," he said again. He looked back at Aludra. "Though—for completely different reasons—I'd like to take these plans with me and keep them safe."

“Completely different reasons?” Leilwin asked in a flat tone, as if searching for another insult.

“Yes,” Mat said. “Those reasons being that I don’t want them here when Aludra taps one of those nightflowers the wrong way and blows herself halfway to Tarwin’s Gap!”

Aludra chuckled at that, though Leilwin looked offended again. It was hard *not* to offend a Seanchan. Them and the bloody Aiel. Strange how opposite they could be in many ways, yet the same in so many others.

“You may take the plans, Mat,” Aludra said. “So long as you keep them in that trunk with your gold. That is one object in this camp that will receive the greatest attention from you.”

“Thank you kindly,” he said, stooping to gather up the pages, ignoring the veiled insult. Hadn’t they just made up? Bloody woman. “By the way, I nearly forgot. Do you know anything about crossbows, Aludra?”

“Crossbows?” she asked.

“Yes,” Mat said, stacking the papers. “I figure there should be a way to make them load faster. You know, like those new cranks, only maybe with some kind of spring or something. Maybe a crank you could twist without having to lower the weapon first.”

“This is hardly my area of expertise, Mat,” Aludra said.

“I know. But you’re smart about things like this, and maybe. . . .”

“You will have to find someone else,” Aludra said, turning to pick up another half-finished nightflower. “I am far too busy.”

Mat reached up under his hat, scratching his head. “That—”

“Mat!” a voice called. “Mat, you’ve got to come with me!” Mat turned as Olver ran into Aludra’s camp. Bayle held out a warning hand, but of course Olver just ran right beneath it.

Mat straightened up. “What?” he asked.

“Someone’s come to the camp,” Olver said, excitement painting his features. And those features were a sight. Ears that were too big for his head, nose that was squashed down, mouth that was too wide. On a child his age, the ugliness was endearing. He’d have no such luck when he grew older. Maybe the men in camp were right to be teaching him weapons. With a face like that, he’d better know how to defend himself.

“Wait, slow down,” Mat said, tucking Aludra’s plans into his belt. “Someone’s come? Who? Why do you need me?”

“Talmanes sent me to fetch you,” Olver said. “He thinks she’s someone important. Said to tell you she’s got some pages with your picture on them, and that she’s got a ‘distinctive face,’ whatever that means. That. . . .”

Olver continued, but Mat had stopped listening. He nodded to Aludra and the others, then trotted out of her camp, past the sheets and out into the woods proper. Olver tagged along behind as Mat hurried to the front of the camp.

There, sitting on a short-legged white mare, was a pudgy woman with a grandmotherly air, a brown dress, and streaks of gray in her hair, which was pulled back in a bun. She was surrounded by a group of soldiers, Talmanes and Mandevwin standing directly in front of her, like two stone pillars barring entrance to a harbor.

The woman had an Aes Sedai face, and an aging Warder stood beside her horse. Though he had graying hair, the stocky man exuded that sense of danger that all Warders had. He studied the Band’s soldiers with unyielding eyes, arms folded.

The Aes Sedai smiled at Mat as he trotted up. “Ah, very nice,” she said primly. “You’ve grown prompt since we last parted, Matrim Cauthon.”

“Verin,” Mat said, panting slightly from the run. He glanced at Talmanes who held up a sheet of paper, one of those imprinted with Mat’s face. “You’ve discovered that someone’s been distributing pictures of me in Trustair?”

She laughed. “You could say that.”

He looked at her, meeting those dark brown Aes Sedai eyes. “Blood and bloody ashes,” he muttered. “It was *you*, wasn’t it? You’re the one who’s been looking for me!”

“For some time, I might add,” Verin said lightly. “And rather against my will.”

Mat closed his eyes. So much for his intricate plan for the raid. Burn it! And it was a good plan, too. “How’d you find I was here?” he asked, opening his eyes.

“A kind merchant came to me in Trustair an hour ago and explained that he’d just had a nice meeting with you, and that you’d paid him handsomely for a sketch of Trustair. I figured that I’d spare the poor town an assault by your . . . associates and just come to you myself.”

"An hour ago?" Mat said, frowning. "But Trustair is still half a day's march away!"

"Indeed it is." Verin smiled.

"Burn me," he said. "You've got Traveling, don't you?"

Her smile deepened. "I surmise that you're trying to get to Andor with this army, Master Cauthon."

"That depends," Mat said. "Can you take us there?"

"In a very short time," Verin said. "I could have your men in Caemlyn by evening."

Light! Twenty days shaved off his march? Maybe he *could* get Aludra's dragons into production soon! He hesitated, eyeing Verin, forcing himself to contain his excitement. There was always a cost when Aes Sedai were involved.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Frankly," she replied, sighing slightly. "What I *want*, Matrim Cauthon, is to be cut free from your *ta'veren* web! Do you know how long you've forced me to wait in these mountains?"

"*Forced?*"

"Yes," she said. "Come, we have much to discuss." She flicked her reins, moving her horse into camp, and Talmanes and Mandevwin reluctantly stepped aside, letting her in. Mat joined the two of them, watching as she made straight for the cook fires.

"I guess there won't be a raid," Talmanes said. He didn't sound sad.

Mandevwin fingered his eye patch. "Does this mean I can go back to my poor aged aunt?"

"You *have* no poor aged aunt," Mat growled. "Come on, let's hear what the woman has to say."

"Fine," Mandevwin said. "But next time, I get to be the Warder, all right, Mat?"

Mat just sighed, hurrying after Verin.

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CHAPTER 35

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A Halo of Blackness

The cool sea breeze washed across Rand the moment he rode through the gateway. That soft, featherlike wind carried with it the scents of a thousand cook fires scattered through the city of Falme, heating morning stews.

Rand reined in Tai'daishar, unprepared for the memories those scents would carry with them. Memories of a time when he'd still been uncertain about his role in the world. Memories of a time when Mat had constantly ribbed him for wearing fine coats, despite the fact that Rand tried to avoid them. Memories of a time when he had been ashamed of the banners that now flapped behind him. He had once insisted on keeping them hidden, as if in doing so he could hide from his own fate.

The procession waited for him, buckles creaking, horses snorting. Rand had visited Falme once, briefly. Back in those days, he hadn't been able to stay anywhere for long. He'd spent those months either chasing or being chased. Fain had led him to Falme, bearing the Horn of Valere and the ruby dagger to which Mat had been bound. The colors flashed again, as he thought of Mat, but Rand ignored them. For these few moments, he wasn't in the present.

Falme marked a turning point in Rand's life as profound as the one that had later occurred in the barren lands of the Aiel, when he had proven himself to be the *Car'a'carn*. After Falme, there had been no more hiding, no more fighting what he was. This was the place where he'd first acknowledged himself as a killer, the place where he'd first realized what a danger he was to those around him. He'd tried to leave them all behind. They'd come after him.

At Falme, the shepherd boy had burned, his ashes scattered and blown away by those ocean winds. From those ashes, the Dragon Reborn had risen.

Rand kneed Tai'daishar forward, and the procession began again. He had ordered the gateway opened a short ride from the city, hopefully out of eyesight of *damane*. Of course he had Asha'man creating it—thereby hiding the weaves from women—but he didn't want to give them any clues about Traveling. The Seanchan inability to Travel was one of his greatest advantages.

Falme itself stood on a small spit of land—Toman Head—jutting out into the Aryth Ocean. High cliffs along both sides broke the waves, creating a soft, distant roar. The city's dark stone buildings covered the peninsula like rocks on the bed of a river. Most were squat, one-story buildings—built wide, as if the inhabitants expected the waves to wash up over the cliffs and crash against their homes. The grasslands here didn't show as much withering as the land did to the north, but the new spring grass was starting to look yellow and wan, as if the blades regretted poking their heads out of the soil.

The peninsula sloped down to a natural harbor, and numerous Seanchan ships lay at anchor there. Seanchan flags flew, proclaiming this city a part of their empire; the banner that fluttered highest above the city displayed a golden hawk in flight, clutching three bolts of lightning. It was fringed with blue.

The strange creatures the Seanchan had brought from their side of the ocean moved through distant streets, too far off for Rand to make out details. *Raken* flew in the sky; the Seanchan apparently had a large stable of them here. Toman Head was just south of Arad Doman, and this city was no doubt a major staging area for the Seanchan campaign to the north.

That conquest would end today. Rand *had* to make peace, had to convince the Daughter of the Nine Moons to call off her armies. That peace would be the calm before a storm. He wouldn't be protecting his people from war; just preserving them so that they could die for him elsewhere. But he would do what had to be done.

Nynaeve rode up beside him as they continued toward Falme. Her neat dress of blue and white was cut after the Domani fashion, but made of a much thicker—and far more modest—material. She seemed to be adopting fashions from around the world, wearing dresses from the cities she visited, but imposing her own sense of what was proper upon them. Once, perhaps, Rand would have found this amusing. That emotion no longer seemed possible for him. He could only feel the cold stillness inside, the stillness that capped a fountain of frozen rage.

He would keep the rage and stillness balanced long enough. He *had* to.

"And so we return," Nynaeve said. Her multicolor *ter'angreal* jewelry somewhat spoiled the look of her neatly tailored dress.

"Yes," Rand said.

“I remember the last time we were here,” she said idly. “Such chaos, such madness. And at the end of it all, we found you with that wound in your side.”

“Yes,” Rand whispered. He had earned that first of his unhealable wounds here, fighting Ishamael in the skies above the city. The wound grew warm as he thought of it. Warm, and painful. He had started regarding that pain as an old friend, a reminder that he was alive.

“I saw you up in the air,” Nynaeve said. “I didn’t believe it. I . . . tried to Heal that wound, but I was still blocked then, and couldn’t summon the anger. Min wouldn’t leave your side.”

Min hadn’t come with him this day. She remained close to him, but something had changed between them. Just as he had always feared that it would. When she looked at him, he knew she saw him killing her.

Just a few weeks before, he wouldn’t have been able to keep her from accompanying him, no matter what. Now she remained behind without a single protest.

Coldness. It would be over soon. No room for regret or sorrow.

The Aiel ran ahead to check for an ambush. Many of them wore the red headbands. Rand wasn’t worried about an ambush. The Seanchan would not betray him, not unless there was another Forsaken in their midst.

Rand reached down, touching the sword he wore at his waist. It was the curved one, with the scabbard of black, painted with the twisting dragon, red and gold. For more reasons than one, it made him think of the last time he had been in Falme.

“I killed a man with a sword for the first time in this city,” Rand said softly. “I’ve never spoken of it. He was a Seanchan lord, a blademaster. Verin had told me not to channel in the city, so I faced him with the sword only. I beat him. Killed him.”

Nynaeve raised an eyebrow. “So you *do* have a right to carry a heron-mark blade.”

Rand shook his head. “There were no witnesses. Mat and Hurin were fighting elsewhere. They saw me right after the fight, but did not witness the killing blow.”

“What do witnesses matter?” she scoffed. “You defeated a blademaster, so you are one. Whether or not it was seen by others is immaterial.”

He looked at her. “Why carry the heron mark if not to be seen by others, Nynaeve?”

She didn’t respond. Ahead, just outside of the city, the Seanchan had erected a striped pavilion of black and white. There appeared to be hundreds of *sul’dam* and *damane* pairs surrounding the open-sided tent, *damane* wearing the distinctive gray dress, *sul’dam* wearing their dresses of red and blue with the lightning bolt on the breast. Rand had brought only a few channelers: Nynaeve, three Wise Ones, Corele, Narishma, Flinn. A fraction of what he could access, even without turning to his forces stationed in the east.

But no, it was better to bring only a token guard, to look as though he came in peace. If this meeting turned into a battle, Rand’s only hope would be a quick escape via gateway. Either that . . . or do something to end the fight himself.

The figurine of the man holding aloft the sphere hung from the saddle before him. With it, he might be able to stand against a hundred *damane*. Two hundred. He could remember the Power he’d held when cleansing *saidin*. It had been the Power to level cities, to destroy any who stood against him.

No. It wouldn’t turn to that. He couldn’t *afford* to let it turn to that. Surely the Seanchan knew that attacking him would lead to disaster. Rand had come to meet with them again, aware that a traitor in their ranks had tried to capture or kill him. They would have to see his sincerity.

But if they didn’t. . . . He reached down and grasped the access key, just in case, and slipped it into his oversized outer coat pocket. Then, taking a deep breath, he steadied himself and sought the void. There, he seized the One Power.

Nausea and dizziness threatened to toss him to the ground. He wobbled, legs gripping Tai’daishar, hand clutching the access key in its pocket. He gritted his teeth. In the back of his mind, Lews Therin roused. The madman scrambled for the One Power. It was a desperate fight, and when Rand finally won, he found that he’d slumped in his saddle.

And he was muttering to himself again.

“Rand?” Nynaeve asked.

Rand straightened his back. He *was* Rand, wasn’t he? Sometimes, after a battle like this, he had trouble recalling who he was. Had he finally pushed Rand, the intruder, into seclusion and become Lews Therin? The previous day, he had woken at midday, huddled in the corner of his rooms, crying and whispering to himself about Ilyena. He could *feel* the soft texture of her long golden hair in his hands, and could remember holding her close. He could remember seeing her dead at his feet, slain by the One Power.

Who was he?

Did it really matter?

“Are you all right?” Nynaeve asked again.

“We are fine.” Rand did not realize he’d used the plural until the words were out of his mouth. His vision was recovering, though it still seemed just a little bit fuzzy. Everything was distorted a fraction, as it had been since the battle where Semirhage had taken his hand. He barely noticed it anymore.

He straightened, then drew a little extra power through the access key, filling himself with *saidin*. It was so sweet, despite the nausea that it caused. He longed to take in more, but held himself back. He already held more of the Power than any man could unaided. It would be enough.

Nynaeve glanced at the figurine at his side. The globe at the top glowed faintly. “Rand. . . .”

“I’m only holding a little extra, as a precaution.” The more of the One Power a person held, the more difficult it was to shield them. If the *damane* tried to capture him, they would be shocked by his resilience. He might be able to resist a full circle.

“I will *not* be captured again,” he whispered. “Never again. They will not take me by surprise.”

“Maybe we should turn back,” Nynaeve said. “Rand, we don’t have to meet them on their terms. It—”

“We stay,” Rand said softly. “We deal with them here and now.” Ahead, he could see a figure sitting in the pavilion at a table on a dais. There was a chair across from the figure, on an equal level. That surprised him; from what he knew of the Seanchan, he had expected to have to argue for equal footing with one of the Blood.

Was this the Daughter of the Nine Moons? This child? Rand frowned as they approached, but realized that she wasn’t actually a child, just a very small woman. Dressed in black clothing, she had dark skin, like one of the Sea Folk. There were gray-white ashes on the cheeks of her calm, round face. Upon close inspection, she appeared to be near his own age.

Rand took a deep breath and dismounted. It was time for the war to end.

The Dragon Reborn was a young man. Tuon had been told that, but something about it still surprised her.

Why should she be surprised by this youth? Conquering heroes were often young. Artur Hawkwing himself, the Empire's great progenitor, had been a young man when he'd begun his conquest.

Those who conquered, those who dominated the world, burned themselves out quickly, like lamps with untrimmed wicks. He wore gold and red on black, the buttons on his coat sparkling as he dismounted from his large black gelding and approached the pavilion. The black coat had red and gold embroidery on the cuffs—the missing hand was quite obvious, looking at those cuffs—but his clothing was otherwise unadorned. As if he saw no need to distract from his face with finery.

His hair was the color of a deep sunset, a dark red. He had a regal bearing to him—a stride that was firm, each step confident, eyes straight ahead. Tuon had been trained to walk that way, to give no quarter, in the way she stepped. Who had trained him, she wondered. Likely, he had the finest of teachers to prepare him in the ways of kings and leaders. Yet reports said he had grown up as a farmer in a rural village. A story, carefully spread to bring him credibility with the common people, perhaps?

He strode up to the pavilion, a *marath'damane* on his left. The woman wore a dress colored like the sky on a clear day, set with trim like clouds. She wore her hair in a single dark braid and adorned herself with a set of gaudy jewelry. She seemed displeased by something, her brow furrowed, her mouth a tight line. Her presence made Tuon shiver. One would think she'd have grown more accustomed to *marath'damane*, after traveling with Matrim. But not so. They were unnatural. Dangerous. Tuon could no more grow comfortable around an unleashed *damane* than she could tolerate having a grassfang twisted around her ankle, its tongue tickling her skin.

Of course, if the *marath'damane* was unsettling, then the two men who walked to the right of the Dragon were more so. One, little more than a youth, wore his hair in braids tied with bells. The other was an older man with white hair and a tanned face. Despite the difference in their ages, both walked with the casual swagger of men well acquainted with battle. And both wore black coats, sparkling pins on the high collars. Asha'man, they were called. Men who could channel. Abominations best killed quickly. In

Seanchan, there had been a very few who—in their lust for an unanticipated edge—had tried to train these *Tsorov'ande Doon*, these Black-Souled Tempests. The fools had fallen quickly, often destroyed by the very tools that they sought to control.

Tuon steeled herself. Karede and the Deathwatch Guards around her grew tense. It was subtle—fists tightening at their sides, breaths inhaled and released slowly. Tuon didn't turn toward them, though she made a covert gesture to Selucia.

"You are to maintain your calm," the Voice said softly to the men.

They would do so—they were Deathwatch Guard. Tuon hated to make the comment, as it would lower their eyes. But she would *not* have a mishap. Meeting with the Dragon Reborn would be dangerous. There was no avoiding that. Even with twenty *damane* and *sul'dam* on each side of the pavilion. Even with Karede at her back and Captain Musenge and a force of archers watching from a covered rooftop just within bowshot. Even with Selucia at her right, tense and ready to pounce, like a jagwin on the high rocks. Even with all of that, Tuon was exposed. The Dragon Reborn was a bonfire inexplicably lit inside a house. You could not prevent it from damaging the room. You just hoped to save the building.

He walked directly to the chair opposite Tuon and sat down, never once questioning that she had set him as her equal. She knew that the others wondered why she still wore the ashes of mourning, why she hadn't proclaimed herself Empress. The mourning period was over, but Tuon had not taken her throne.

It was because of this man. The Empress could not meet anyone, not even the Dragon Reborn, as an equal. The Daughter of the Nine Moons, however . . . this one man could be *her* equal. And so she had hesitated. The Dragon Reborn would not likely respond well to another setting herself above him, no matter if that other had a perfectly legitimate reason for doing so.

As he sat down, a distant flare of lightning arced between two clouds, though Malai—one of the *damane* who could tell fortunes of the weather—had insisted that no rain was near. Lightning on a day without rain. *Tread very lightly,* she thought, reading the omen, *and be careful what you speak.* Not the most illuminating of omens. If she trod any *more* carefully, she would have to take flight into the air!

“You are the Daughter of the Nine Moons,” the Dragon Reborn said. It was a statement, not a question.

“You are the Dragon Reborn,” she replied. Looking into those slatelike eyes, she realized that she had been wrong in her first impression. He was *not* a young man. Yes, his body might be that of a youth. But those eyes . . . those were old eyes.

He leaned forward slightly. Her Deathwatch Guards tensed, leather creaking. “We will make peace,” al’Thor said. “Today. Here.”

Selucia hissed softly. His words sounded a great deal like a demand. Tuon had shown him great respect by placing him at her level, but one did *not* give orders to the Imperial family.

Al’Thor glanced at Selucia. “You can tell your bodyguard that she can relax,” he said dryly. “This meeting will not turn to conflict. I will not allow it.”

“She is my Voice,” Tuon said carefully, “and my Truthspeaker. My bodyguard is the man behind my chair.”

Al’Thor snorted softly. So he was an observant man. Or a lucky one. Few had correctly guessed Selucia’s nature.

“You wish for peace,” Tuon said. “Have you terms for your . . . offer?”

“It is not an offer, but a necessity,” al’Thor said. He spoke with softness. All of these people spoke with such quick words, yet al’Thor’s had a *weight* to them. He reminded her of her mother. “The Last Battle comes. Surely your people remember the prophecies. By prosecuting this war of yours, you endanger us all. My forces—*everyone’s forces*—are needed in the struggle against the Shadow.”

The Last Battle would be between the Empire and the forces of the Dark One. Everybody knew that. The prophecies clearly showed that the Empress would defeat those who served the Shadow, and then she would send the Dragon Reborn in to duel with Lighteater.

How much had he fulfilled? He didn’t seem blinded yet, so that had yet to happen. The Essanik Cycle said that he would stand on his own grave and weep. Or did that prophecy refer to the dead walking, as they did already? Certainly, some of those spirits had walked across their own graves. The writings were unclear, sometimes.

This people seemed to have forgotten many of the prophecies, just as they forgot their oaths to watch for the Return. But she did not say this. *Watch your words carefully. . . .*

"You believe the Last Battle is close, then?" she asked.

"Close?" al'Thor asked. "It is as close as an assassin, breathing his foul breath upon your neck as he slides his knife across your skin. It is close like the last chime of midnight, after the other eleven have struck. Close? Yes, it is close. Horribly close."

Had the madness taken him already? If it had, that would make things much more difficult. She studied him, searching for signs of insanity. He seemed in control of himself.

A sea breeze blew through the canopy, ruffling the canvas and carrying with it the scent of rotten fish. Many things seemed to be rotting these days.

Those creatures, she thought. *The Trollocs.* What did their appearance foretell? Tylee had destroyed them, and the scouts had found no others. Looking at the intensity of this man, she hesitated. Yes, the Last Battle was close, perhaps as close as he said. That made it all the more important that she unify these lands beneath her banner.

"You *must* see why this is so important," the Dragon Reborn said. "Why do you fight me?"

"We are the Return," Tuon said. "The omens said it was time for us to come, and we expected to find a united kingdom, ready to praise us and lend us armies for the Last Battle. Instead, we found a fractured land that had forgotten its oaths and prepared for nothing. How can you not see that we must fight? It does not bring us pleasure to kill you, no more than it brings a parent joy to discipline a child who has gone astray."

Al'Thor seemed incredulous. "We are *children* to you?"

"It was a metaphor only," Tuon said.

He sat for a moment, then rubbed his chin with his hand. Did he blame her for the loss of the other one? Falendre had spoken of it.

"A metaphor," he said. "An apt one, perhaps. Yes, the land *did* lack unity. But I have forged it together. The solder is weak, perhaps, but it will hold long enough. If not for me, then your war of unification would be commendable. As it is, you are a distraction. We must have peace. Our alliance need last only until my life ends." He met her eyes. "I assure you that will not be overly long."

She sat at the wide table, arms folded before her. If al'Thor stretched out his arm, he would not be able to reach her. That was intentional, though the precaution was laughable, in hindsight. He would not need his hand should he decide to kill her. Best not to think of that.

“If you see the value of unification,” she said, “then perhaps you should unite your lands beneath the Seanchan banner, have your people take the oaths and—” The woman standing behind al’Thor, the *marath’damane*, opened eyes wide as Tuon spoke.

“No,” al’Thor said, interrupting Tuon.

“But surely you can see that one ruler, with—”

“No,” he said, softly, yet more firmly. More dangerous. “I will not see another person chained by your foul leashes.”

“Foul? They are the only way to deal with those who can channel!”

“We have survived without them for centuries.”

“And you have—”

“This is not a point I will concede,” al’Thor said.

Tuon’s guards—Selucia included—gritted their teeth, and the guards dropped hands to sword hilts. He had interrupted her twice in a row. The Daughter of the Nine Moons. How could he be so bold?

He was the Dragon Reborn, that was how. But his words were foolishness. He *would* bow before her, once she was Empress. The prophecies demanded it. Surely that meant that his kingdoms would join with the Empire.

She had let the conversation slip out of her control. The *marath’damane* were a touchy subject to many on this side of the ocean. They likely understood the logic in leashing the women, but their traditions were difficult to relinquish. That was no doubt why they were so disturbed by talking about these things.

She needed to nudge the conversation in other directions. Into a realm that would throw the Dragon Reborn off guard. She studied him. “Is this all our conversation is to be about?” she said. “We sit across from one another and speak only of our differences?”

“What else would we talk about?” al’Thor said.

“Perhaps something we have in common.”

“I doubt there is much in that area that is relevant.”

“Oh?” Tuon said. “And what of Matrim Cauthon?”

Yes, *that* shocked him. The Dragon Reborn blinked, mouth opening slightly. “Mat?” he said. “You know Mat? How . . .”

“He kidnapped me,” Tuon said. “And dragged me most of the way across Altara.”

The Dragon Reborn gaped, then shut his mouth. “I remember now,” he said softly. “I saw you. With him. I did not connect you to that face. Mat . . . what have you been doing?”

You saw *us?* Tuon thought skeptically. So the madness *had* manifested itself. Would that make him easier to manipulate, or more difficult? Probably the latter, unfortunately.

“Well,” al’Thor finally said, “I trust that Mat had his reasons. He always does. And they seem so *logical* to him at the time. . . .”

So, Matrim *did* know the Dragon Reborn; he would be an excellent resource to her. Perhaps that was why he had been brought to her, so she would have a means of learning about the Dragon Reborn. She would have to recover him before he could help her in that area.

Matrim would not like that, but he would have to see reason. He was First Prince of the Ravens. He needed to be raised to the High Blood, shave his head and learn the *proper* way of living. That all seemed a shame to her—for reasons she could not explain to herself.

She couldn’t help asking after him a little more. Partly because the topic appeared to unbalance al’Thor, and partly because she was curious. “What type of man is he, this Matrim Cauthon? I must admit, I found him to be something of an indolent scoundrel, too quick to find excuses to avoid oaths he’d taken.”

“Don’t speak of him that way!” Surprisingly, the words came from the *marath’damane* standing beside al’Thor’s chair.

“Nynaeve . . .” al’Thor began.

“Don’t hush me, Rand al’Thor,” the woman said, folding her arms. “He’s your friend too.” The woman looked back at Tuon, meeting her eyes. *Meeting* them. A *marath’damane*!

She continued, “Matrim Cauthon is one of the finest men you will ever know, Your Highness, and I won’t listen to ill speech of him. What’s right is right.”

“Nynaeve is right,” al’Thor said reluctantly. “He is a good man. Mat may seem a little rough at times, but he is as solid a friend as one could hope for. Though he *does* grumble about what his conscience makes him do.”

“He saved my life,” the *marath’damane* said. “Rescued me at great cost and personal danger when no other thought to come for me.” Her eyes were afire with anger. “Yes, he drinks and gambles far too much. But don’t speak of him as if you know him, because you don’t. His heart is golden, under it all. If you’ve hurt him. . . .”

“Hurt him?” Tuon said. “*He* kidnapped *me*!”

“If he did so, then there was cause,” Rand al’Thor said.

Such loyalty! Once again, she was forced to reassess her view of Matrim Cauthon.

“But this is irrelevant,” al’Thor said, standing up suddenly. One of the Deathwatch Guards drew his sword. Al’Thor glared at the guard, and Karede quickly motioned at the man, who replaced his sword, ashamed, his eyes lowered.

Al’Thor placed his hand on the table, palm down. He leaned forward, trapping Tuon’s eyes with his own. Who could look away from those intense gray eyes, like steel? “None of this matters. Mat doesn’t matter. Our similarities and our differences do not matter. All that matters is need. And I *need* you.”

He leaned forward further, looming. His form didn’t change, but he suddenly seemed a hundred feet tall. He spoke in that same calm, piercing voice, but there was a threat to it now. An edge.

“You *must* call off your attacks,” he said, nearly a whisper. “You must sign a treaty with me. These are not requests. They are my will.”

Tuon found herself longing, suddenly, to obey him. To please him. A treaty. A treaty would be excellent, it would give her a chance to stabilize her hold on the lands here. She could plan how to restore order back in Seanchan. She could recruit and train. So many possibilities opened to her, as if her mind were suddenly determined to see every advantage of the alliance and none of the flaws.

She reached for those flaws, scrambling to see the problems in uniting herself with this man. But they became liquid in her mind and slipped away. She couldn’t snatch them up and form objections. The pavilion grew silent, the breeze falling still.

What was happening to her? She felt short of breath, as though a weight constricted her chest. She felt as if she couldn’t help but bend before the will of this man!

His expression was grim. Despite the afternoon light, his face was shadowed, far more so than everything else beneath the pavilion. He held her eyes still, and her breaths came quick and short. In the corners of her vision, she thought she saw something around him. A dark haze, a halo of blackness, emanating from him. It warped the air like a great heat. Her throat constricted, and words were forming. Yes. Yes. I will do as you ask. Yes. I must. I must.

“No,” she said, the word barely a whisper.

His expression grew darker, and she saw fury in the way he pressed his hand down, fingers trembling with the force. The way he clenched his jaw. The way his eyes opened wider. Such intensity.

“I need—” he began.

“No,” she repeated, confidence growing. “You will bow before me, Rand al’Thor. It will *not* happen the other way around.” Such darkness! How could one man contain it? He seemed to throw a shadow the size of a mountain.

She could not ally with this creature. That seething hatred, it terrified her, and terror was an emotion with which she was unfamiliar. This man could *not* be allowed freedom to do as he wished. He had to be contained.

He watched her for a moment longer. “Very well,” he said. His voice was ice.

He spun, stalking away from the pavilion, not looking back. His entourage followed; they all, including the *marath’damane* with the braid, looked disturbed. As if they themselves weren’t certain what—or who—they followed in this man.

Tuon watched him go, panting. She could not let the others see how rattled she was. They couldn’t know that, in that last moment, she’d feared him. She watched until his mounted figure had passed beyond the hillsides. And still her hands shook. She did not trust herself to speak.

Nobody spoke in the time it took her to calm herself. Perhaps they were as shaken as she. Perhaps they sensed her worry. Finally, long after al’Thor had gone, Tuon stood. She turned and regarded the collected Blood, generals, soldiers and guards. “I am the Empress,” she said in a soft voice.

As one, they fell to their knees, even the High Blood prostrating themselves.

That was the only ceremony needed. Oh, there would be a formal crowning back in Ebou Dar, with processions and parades and audiences. She would accept the personal oaths of allegiance from each member of the Blood, and would have the chance—by tradition—to execute any of them by her own hand, without reason, who she felt had opposed her ascent to the throne.

There would be all of that and more. But her declaration was the *true* coronation. Spoken by the Daughter of the Nine Moons after the period of mourning.

Festivities began the moment she bade them all rise. There would be a week of jubilation. A necessary distraction. The world needed her. It needed an empress. From this moment on, everything would change.

As the *da'covale* rose and began to sing the praises of her coronation, Tuon stepped up to General Galgan. “Pass the word to General Yulan,” she said softly. “Tell him to prepare his attack against the *marath'damane* of Tar Valon. We must strike against the Dragon Reborn, and quickly. This man cannot be allowed to gain any more strength than he already has.”

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CHAPTER 36

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The Death of Tuon

“I began my journey in Tear,” Verin said, sitting down on Mat’s best chair, made of dark walnut with a nice tan pillow. Tomas took up position behind her, hand on the pommel of his sword. “My goal was to make my way to Tar Valon.”

“Then how did you end up *here*?” Mat asked, still suspicious as he seated himself on the pillowed bench. He hated the thing; it was completely impossible to sit on it in any way that was comfortable. Pillows didn’t help. Somehow, they made the seat *more* awkward. Bloody thing must have been designed by insane, cross-eyed Trollocs and built from the bones of the damned. That was the only reasonable explanation.

He shifted on the bench, and nearly called for another chair, but Verin was continuing. Mandevwin and Talmanes were just inside the tent, the former standing with folded arms, the latter settling himself on the floor. Thom sat on the floor on the other side of the room, watching Verin with calculating eyes. They were all in Mat’s smaller audience tent, which was intended only for short conferences between officers. Mat hadn’t wanted to bring Verin to his actual sitting tent, as it was still spread out with his plans for raiding Trustair.

“I ask myself the same question, Master Cauthon,” Verin said, smiling, her aging Warder standing behind her chair. “How did I end up here? It certainly wasn’t my intention. And yet here I am.”

“You say it almost as if it were an accident, Verin Sedai,” Mandevwin said. “But we’re speaking of a distance of several hundred leagues!”

“Plus,” Mat added, “you can Travel. So if you intended to go to the White Tower, then why not just bloody Travel there and be done with it?”

“Good questions,” Verin said. “Indeed. Might I have some tea?”

Mat sighed, shifting on the devil bench again, and waved for Talmanes to give the order. Talmanes rose and ducked outside for a moment to pass the word, then returned and sat down again.

“Thank you,” Verin said. “I find myself quite parched.” She projected that familiar distracted air that was so common to sisters from the Brown Ajah. Because of the holes in his memory, Mat’s first meeting with Verin was fuzzy to him. In fact, his memory of her at *all* was fuzzy. But he did seem to remember thinking she had the temperament of a scholar.

This time, studying her, her mannerisms seemed too exaggerated to him. As if she were leaning on the preconceptions about Browns, using them. Fooling people, like a street performer taking in country boys with a clever game of three-card shuffle.

She eyed him. That smile on the corner of her lips? That was the smile of a jackleg who didn't care that you were on to her con. Now that you understood, you could both enjoy the game, and perhaps together you could dupe someone else.

"Do you realize how strongly *ta'veren* you are, young man?" Verin asked.

Mat shrugged. "Rand's the one you want for that sort of thing. Honestly, I'm barely anything compared to him." Blasted colors!

"Oh, I wouldn't consider downplaying the Dragon's importance," Verin said, chuckling. "But you can't hide your light in his shadow, Matrim Cauthon. Not in the presence of any but the blind, at least. In any other time, you'd undoubtedly be the most powerfully *ta'veren* individual alive. Probably the most powerful to have lived in centuries."

Mat shifted on the bench. Bloody ashes, he hated the way that made him look as if he was squirming. Maybe he should just stand up. "What are you talking about, Verin?" he said instead. He folded his arms and tried to at least *pretend* that he was comfortable.

"I'm talking about how you yanked me halfway across the continent." Her smile widened as a soldier entered with a steaming cup of mint tea. She took it gratefully, and the soldier retreated.

"Yanked you?" Mat said. "*You* were looking for *me*."

"Only after I determined that the Pattern was tugging me somewhere." Verin blew on her tea. "That meant you or Perrin. It couldn't have been Rand's fault, since I'd been able to leave that one easily."

"Rand?" Mat asked, dismissing yet another flash of colors. "You were with him?"

Verin nodded.

"How . . . did he seem?" Mat said. "Is he . . . you know. . . ."

"Mad?" Verin asked.

Mat nodded.

"I'm afraid so," Verin said, lips downturning slightly. "I think he's still in control of himself, however."

"Bloody One Power," Mat said, reaching beneath his shirt to touch the comforting foxhead medallion.

Verin looked up. "Oh, I'm not convinced young al'Thor's problems are completely due to the Power, Matrim. Many would like to blame his temperament on *saidin*, but to do that is to ignore the incredible stresses that we've settled on that poor boy's shoulders."

Mat raised an eyebrow, glancing at Thom.

"Either way," Verin sipped her tea, "one cannot blame *too* much on the taint, as it will no longer affect him."

"It won't?" Mat asked. "He's decided to stop channeling?"

She laughed. "A fish would sooner stop swimming. No, the taint will no longer affect him because the taint is no more. Al'Thor cleansed *saidin*."

"What?" Mat asked sharply, sitting up.

Verin sipped her tea.

"Are you serious?" Mat asked.

"Quite," she replied.

Mat glanced at Thom again. Then he plucked at his coat and ran a hand through his hair.

"What are you doing?" Verin asked with amusement.

"I don't know," Mat said, feeling sheepish. "I guess I just think I should feel different, or something. The whole world up and changed on us, didn't it?"

"You could say that," Verin said, "though I would argue that the cleansing itself is more like a pebble thrown into a pond. The ripples will take some time to reach the shore."

"A pebble?" Mat asked. "A *pebble*?"

"Well, perhaps more of a boulder."

"A bloody mountain if you ask me," Mat muttered. He settled back on the awful bench.

Verin chuckled. Flaming Aes Sedai. Did they *have* to be like that? It was probably another oath they took and told nobody about, something to do with acting mysterious. He stared at her. "What was that chuckle for?" he finally demanded.

"Nothing," she said. "I merely suspect that you will soon feel a little of what *I* did this last month."

"Which was?"

“Well,” she said. “I believe I was talking about that before we got sidetracked on irrelevant topics.”

“On the flaming *cleansing of the True Source,*” Mat muttered. “Honestly.”

“I experienced the most curious of events,” Verin continued. Ignoring Mat, of course. “You may not be aware of this, but in order to Travel from a location, you need to spend time in it. Usually, stopping in a place for an evening is enough. Consequently, after parting from the Dragon, I made my way to a nearby village and took a room at the inn. I settled down, learning the room and preparing to open a Gateway in the morning.

“In the middle of the night, however, the innkeeper arrived. He explained with chagrin that I needed to be moved to another room. It appeared that a leak had been discovered in the roof above my room, and it would soon seep through my ceiling. I protested, but he was insistent.

“And so I moved across the hall and began learning *that* room. Just when I was feeling I knew it well enough to open a gateway, I was interrupted again. This time, the innkeeper—more embarrassed—explained that his wife had lost her ring in that room during early morning cleaning. The woman awoke in the night and was very upset. The innkeeper—looking quite tired—apologetically wanted to move me again.”

“And?” Mat asked. “Coincidence, Verin.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, then smiled as he shifted on the bench again. Burn it all, he wasn’t squirming!

“I refused to be moved, Matrim,” she said. “I told the innkeeper he was quite welcome to search the room *after* I left, and promised that I would *not* take any rings I discovered with me. Then I firmly shut the door on him.” She sipped her drink. “A few minutes later, the inn caught fire—a coal from the hearth rolled to the floor and ended up burning the entire place to the ground. Everyone escaped, fortunately, but the inn was a loss. Tired and bleary-eyed, Tomas and I had to move on to the next village and find rooms there instead.”

“So?” Mat said. “Still sounds like a coincidence.”

“This continued for three days,” Verin said. “I was interrupted even when I tried to learn a place outside a building. Random passersby asking to share the fire, a falling tree crashing down in camp, a flock of sheep wandering by, an isolated storm. Various random events always contrived to keep me from learning the area.”

Talmanes whistled softly. Verin nodded. “Each time I tried to learn an area, something went wrong. I was inevitably moved for some reason. However, when I decided I *wasn’t* going to do anything to learn a location and wasn’t planning to make a gateway, nothing happened. Another person might have simply moved on and given up on Traveling for the time, but my nature asserted itself, and I found myself studying the phenomenon. It was quite regular.”

Bloody ashes. That was the sort of thing Rand was supposed to do to people. Not Mat. “By your account, you should still be in Tear.”

“Yes,” she said, “but I soon started to feel a tugging on me. Something pulling me, yanking me. As if. . . .”

Mat shifted again. “As if someone’s got a bloody fishhook inside of you? And is standing far away, pulling gently—but insistently—on it?”

“Yes,” Verin said. She smiled. “What a clever description.”

Mat didn’t respond.

“I decided to use more mundane means to make my voyage. I thought that maybe my inability to Travel had something to do with al’Thor’s proximity, or perhaps the gradual unraveling of the Pattern due to the Dark One’s influence. I secured a place in a merchant caravan traveling northward toward Cairhien. They had an empty wagon they were willing to rent for a reasonable rate. I was quite fatigued from my days spent staying up all hours because of fires, crying babies and constant moves from one inn room to another. As such, I fear I slept much longer than I should have. Tomas napped as well.

“When we awoke, we were surprised to discover that the caravan had taken a turn to the northwest instead of heading toward Cairhien. I spoke with the caravan master, and he explained that he’d received a last-minute tip that his goods would fetch a much better price in Murandy than in Cairhien. As he considered it, he mentioned that he really should have told me about the change, but it had slipped his mind.”

She took another sip of tea. “It was then that I knew for certain that I was being directed. Most wouldn’t have noticed it, I suspect, but I have made a study of the nature of *ta’veren*. The caravan hadn’t moved far toward Murandy—only one day—but mixed with the tugging, it was enough. I spoke with Tomas, and we determined to avoid going where we were being pulled. Skimming is an inferior substitute for Traveling, but does not have the same limitation of knowing the area. I opened a gateway, but when we reached the end of our journey, we stepped not into Tar Valon, but a small village in northern Murandy!

“That shouldn’t have been possible. However, as we considered it, Tomas and I realized he had been speaking fondly of a hunting trip he’d gone on once in the village of Trustair, and I’d opened the gateway at that moment. I must have let myself focus on the wrong location.”

“And here we are,” Tomas said, arms folded, looking dissatisfied as he stood behind his Aes Sedai’s chair.

“Indeed,” Verin said. “Curious, wouldn’t you say, young Matrim? I accidentally end up here, in your path, right when you have great need of someone to create a gateway for your army?”

“Still could be coincidence.”

“And the tugging?”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

“Coincidence is how being *ta’veren* works,” Verin said. “You find a discarded object that is of great use to you, or happen to meet an individual at just the right time. Random chance randomly works in your favor. Or haven’t you noticed?” She smiled. “Care to throw some dice on it?”

“No,” he said reluctantly.

“One thing bothers me, however,” Verin said. “Was there no *other* person who could have happened into your path? Al’Thor has those Asha’man scouring the countryside looking for men who can channel, and I suspect rural areas like this are top on their list, as it is more likely that channelers could stay unnoticed in such places. One of them could have happened into your path and given you a gateway.”

“Not bloody likely,” Mat said, shivering. “I’m not trusting the Band to the likes of them.”

“Not to get to Andor in a heartbeat?” Verin asked.

Mat hesitated. Well, maybe.

“*I* had to be here for some reason,” she said thoughtfully.

“I still think you’re reading too much into this,” he replied, shifting yet again on the burning bench.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. First, we should negotiate my price for taking you to Andor. I assume you want to reach Caemlyn?”

“Price?” Mat said. “But you think the Pattern forced you here! Why demand a price of me?”

“Because,” she said, raising a finger, “while I waited to find you—I honestly didn’t know if it would be you or young Perrin—I realized that there were several things I could provide you that no other could.” She reached into a pocket of her dress, pulling out several pieces of paper. One was the picture of Mat. “You didn’t ask where I got this.”

“You’re Aes Sedai,” Mat said, shrugging. “I figured you . . . you know, *saidar*ed it.”

“*Saidar*ed it?” she asked flatly.

He shrugged.

“I received this paper, Matrim—”

“Call me Mat,” he said.

“I received this paper, *Matrim*, from a Darkfriend,” she said, “who told me—thinking me a servant of the Shadow—that one of the Forsaken had commanded that the men in these pictures be killed. You and Perrin are in grave danger.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said, hiding the chill her announcement made him feel. “Verin, Darkfriends have been trying to kill me since the day I left the Two Rivers.” He paused. “Burn me. Since the day *before* I left the Two Rivers. What does it change?”

“This is different,” Verin said, growing stern. “The level of danger you are in . . . I . . . Well, let us simply agree that you are in great, great danger. I suggest that you be *very* careful during the next few weeks.”

“I’m always careful,” Mat said.

“Well, be more so,” she said. “Go into hiding. Don’t take chances. You will be essential before this is through.”

He shrugged. Go into hiding? He could do that. With Thom’s help, he could probably do himself up so that even his sisters wouldn’t recognize him. “I can do that,” he said. “Bloody simple cost. How long will it take you to get us to Caemlyn?”

“That wasn’t my cost, Matrim,” she said, amused. “That was a suggestion. One I think you should listen to with great prejudice.” She slipped a small folded piece of paper out from under the picture. It was sealed with a drop of blood-red wax.

Mat took it hesitantly. “It is?”

“Instructions,” Verin said. “Which you will follow on the tenth day after I leave you in Caemlyn.”

He scratched his neck, frowning, then moved to break the seal.

“You aren’t to open them until that day,” Verin said.

“What?” Mat demanded. “But—”

“That is my cost,” Verin said simply.

“Bloody woman,” he said, looking back at the paper. “I’m not going to swear to something unless I know what it is.”

“I doubt you will find my instructions harsh, Matrim,” she noted.

Mat scowled at the seal for a moment, then stood up. “I pass on it.”

She pursed her lips. “Matrim, you—”

“Call me Mat,” he said, grabbing his hat off the top of a cushion. “And I said there’s no deal. I’ll be in Caemlyn in twenty days of marching, anyway.” He pushed open the tent flaps, gesturing out. “I’m not going to have you tying strings around me, woman.”

She didn’t move, though she did frown. “I had forgotten how difficult you can be.”

“And proud of it,” Mat said.

“And if we have a compromise?” Verin asked.

“You’ll tell me what is in that bloody paper?”

“No,” Verin said. “Because I might not need you to go through with the contents. I hope to be able to return to you and relieve you of the letter and send you on your way. But if I cannot. . . .”

“The compromise, then?” Mat said.

“You may choose not to open the letter,” Verin said. “Burn it. But if you do so, you wait fifty days in Caemlyn, just in case it takes me longer to return than I had expected.”

That gave him pause. Fifty days was a long time to wait. But if he could do it in Caemlyn, rather than traveling on his own. . . .

Was Elayne in the city? He’d worried about her, since her escape from Ebou Dar. If she was there, he might at least be able to get production started quickly on Aludra’s dragons.

But fifty days? Waiting? Either that, or open the bloody letter and do what it said? He didn’t like either option. “Twenty days,” he said.

“Thirty days,” she said, rising, then raised a finger to cut off his objection. “A *compromise*, Mat. Among Aes Sedai, I think you shall find me to be far more amenable to those than most.” She held out her hand.

Thirty days. He could wait thirty days. He looked at the letter in his hands. He could resist opening it, and thirty days of waiting didn’t really lose him any time. It was only a little longer than he’d take to reach

Caemlyn on his own. In fact, this was a bloody bargain! He needed a few weeks to get the dragons going, and he wanted time to find out more about the Tower of Ghenjei and the snakes and foxes. Thom couldn't complain—when it would take them two weeks to reach Caemlyn anyway.

Verin eyed him, a hint of worry on her face. He couldn't let her know how pleased he was. Let a woman know that, and she'd find some way to make you pay her back.

"Thirty days," Mat said reluctantly, taking her hand, "but at the end of them, I can go."

"Or you can open the letter after ten days," Verin said, "and do what it says. One of the two, Matrim. I have your word?"

"You do," he said. "But I'm not going to open the bloody letter. I'm going to wait thirty days, then be off on my business."

"We shall see," she said, smiling to herself and releasing his hand. She folded up the picture of him, then took a small leather-bound satchel from her pocket. She opened it, sliding the picture inside, and as she did, he noticed that she had a small stack of folded, sealed pieces of paper inside just like the one he was holding. What was the purpose of those?

Once the letters were safely tucked in her pocket, she took out a carved piece of translucent stone—a brooch, shaped like a lily. "Begin breaking down your camp, Matrim. I need to make your gateway as soon as possible. I myself need to Travel shortly."

"Fine." Mat looked down at the sealed, folded paper in his hands. Why was Verin being so cryptic?

Burn it! he thought. *I'm not going to open it. I'm not.* "Mandevwin," he said. "Get Verin Sedai her own tent to wait in as we break camp and assign a couple of soldiers to fetch for her anything she needs. Also, inform the other Aes Sedai that she's here. They'll probably be interested to hear of her arrival, Aes Sedai being Aes Sedai."

Mat tucked the folded paper into his belt, then started to leave. "And have somebody *burn* that bloody bench. I can't believe we carted the thing this far."

Tuon was dead. Gone, cast aside, forgotten. Tuon had been the Daughter of the Nine Moons. She was now just a notation in the histories.

Fortuona was empress.

Fortuona Athaem Devi Paendrag kissed the soldier lightly on the forehead as he knelt, head bowed, on the short grass. The muggy Altaran heat made it feel as if summer had already arrived, but the grass—which had seemed lush and full of life just weeks before—had grown stunted and was beginning to yellow. Where were the weeds and thistles? Recently seeds didn't sprout as they should. Like grain, they were going bad, dying before they truly came alive.

The soldier before Fortuona was one of five. Behind those five stood two hundred members of the Fists of Heaven—the most elite of her attack forces. They wore dark leather breastplates and helms of light wood and leather, shaped like insects. Both helms and breastplates were emblazoned with the sign of the clenched fist. Fifty *sul'dam* and *damane* pairs, including Dali and her *sul'dam* Malahavana, whom Fortuona had given to the cause. She had felt the need to sacrifice something personal to this most important of missions.

Hundreds of *to'raken* milled in the pens behind, walked by their handlers, who were preparing them for the flight to come. Already, a flock of *raken* circled above, graceful.

Fortuona looked down at the soldier before her, laying her fingers on his forehead, where she had kissed him. "May your death bring victory," she said softly, speaking the ritual words. "May your knife draw blood. May your children sing your praises until the final dawn."

He bowed his head further. Like the four others in the row, he wore black leather. Three knives hung from his belt, and he had no cloak or helm. He was a small man—all members of the Fists of Heaven were small and compact, and over half in this group were women. Weight was always an issue for those facing missions using *to'raken*. In a raid, two small, well-trained soldiers were preferable to one lumbering hulk in heavy armor.

It was early evening, the sun just setting. Lieutenant-General Yulan—who would lead the strike force personally—felt it best to take flight late in the day. Their assault would begin in darkness, shrouding it from those who might be watching the horizon in Ebou Dar. Once, the caution would have been unnecessary. What matter if people in Ebou Dar saw hundreds of *to'raken* take to the skies? News could never travel as quickly as *raken* wings.

But their enemies could travel far more quickly than they should be able to. Be it *ter'angreal*, weave or something else that gave the power, it was a distinct danger. Better to use all stealth. The flight to Tar Valon would take several days.

Fortuona moved to the next soldier in the line of five. The woman's black hair was braided. Fortuona kissed her on the forehead, saying the same ritual words. These five were Bloodknives. The pure black stone ring each one wore was a specialized *ter'angreal* that would grant them strength and speed, and would shroud them in darkness, allowing them to blend into shadows.

The incredible abilities came at a cost, however, for the rings leeched life from their hosts, killing them in a matter of days. Removing the ring would slow that process slightly, but once activated—done by touching a drop of one's own blood to the stone ring while wearing it—the process was irreversible.

These five would not return. They would stay behind, whatever the results of the raid, to kill as many *marath'damane* as they could. It was a terrible waste—those *damane* should be leashed—but better to kill them than leave them in the hands of the Dragon Reborn.

Fortuona moved to the next soldier in the short line, giving him the kiss and the blessing.

So much had changed in the days since her meeting with the Dragon Reborn. Her new name was only one of the manifestations. Now even the High Blood often prostrated themselves before her. Her *so'jhin*—Selucia included—had shaved the hair from their heads. From now on, they would leave the right side of their heads shaved and grow hair down the left side, braiding it as it grew. For now, they wore caps on the left.

The common people walked more confidently, more proudly. They had an empress again. With all that was wrong in the world, this one thing was right again.

Fortuona kissed the last of the five Bloodknives, speaking the words condemning them to death, but also to heroism. She stepped back, Selucia standing at her side. General Yulan came forward and bowed himself low. "Let it be known by the Empress, may she live forever, that we shall *not* fail her."

"It is known," Selucia said. "Light follow you. Know that Her Majesty, may she live forever, saw a new spring rose drop three petals in the garden today. The omen of your victory has been given. Fulfill it, General, and your reward shall be great."

Yulan stood, saluting, fist to breast, metal snapping against metal. He led the soldiers to the *to'raken* pens, the five Bloodknives first. Within moments, the first creature ran down a long pasture outside the back of the pen, marked with poles and streamers, then launched itself into the air. Others followed, a fleet, more than Fortuona had ever seen in the sky at once. As the final light of sunset died, they struck northward.

Raken and *to'raken* were not normally used in this manner. Most raids would be accomplished by dropping the soldiers off at a staging point, where the *to'raken* would wait while the soldiers attacked and returned. But this raid was too vital. Yulan's plan called for a more daring assault, the likes of which had rarely been contemplated. *To'raken* with *damane* and *sul'dam* on their backs, attacking from the air. It could be the beginning of a bold new tactic. Or it could lead to a disaster.

"We have changed everything," Fortuona said softly. "General Galgan is wrong; this will not give the Dragon Reborn a worse bargaining position. It will turn him against us."

"And was he not against us before?" Selucia asked.

"No," Fortuona said. "We were against him."

"And there is a difference?"

"Yes," Fortuona said, watching the cloud of *to'raken*, just barely visible in the sky. "There is. I fear we shall soon see just how big a difference that is."

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CHAPTER 37

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A Force of Light

Min sat quietly, watching Rand dress. His motions were tense and careful, like the steps of a performer walking the high rope at a menagerie. He did up the left cuff on his crisp white shirt with slow, deliberate fingers. The right cuff was already done up; his servants saw to that.

It was approaching evening outside. Not quite dark yet, though the shutters were closed in preparation. Rand reached for a gold and black coat, sliding on one sleeve, then the other. Then did the buttons one after another. He had no trouble with these; he was growing practiced at working with only one hand. Button after button. First, second, third, fourth. . . .

Min felt like screaming.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

Rand did not turn from the mirror. “About what?”

“The Seanchan.”

“There will be no peace,” he said, straightening his coat collar. “I have failed.” His tone was emotionless, yet somehow taut.

“It’s all right to be frustrated, Rand.”

“Frustration is pointless,” he said. “Anger is pointless. Neither emotion will change facts, and the fact is that I have no more time to waste on the Seanchan. We will have to risk an attack from behind by riding to the Last Battle without stability in Arad Doman. It is not ideal, but it is what must happen.”

The air shimmered above Rand, and a mountain appeared there. Viewings were so common around Rand that Min usually forced herself to ignore them unless they were new—though she did spend time some days trying to pick them all out and sort through them. This one was new, and it caught her attention. The towering mountain was blasted out on one side, making a jagged hole down the slope. Dragonmount? It was cloaked in dark shadows, as if shaded by clouds high above. That was odd; whenever she’d seen the mountain, it had reached higher than the clouds themselves.

Dragonmount in shadows. It would be important to Rand in the future. Was that a tiny prick of light shining from the heavens down onto the point of the mountain?

The viewing vanished. Though Min knew what some of them meant, this one baffled her. She sighed, leaning back in the red-cushioned chair. Her books lay scattered on the floor; she’d been dedicating more and more time to her studies, partly because she felt Rand's sense of urgency, and partly because she didn't know what else to do. She liked to think that she was capable of taking care of herself. And she'd begun to think of herself as a last defense for Rand.

Min had discovered just how useful she was as a "line of defense." She'd been about as useful as a child! In fact, she'd been a hindrance, a tool for Semirhage to use against him. She'd been indignant when Rand had suggested sending her away, giving him a tongue-lashing for even suggesting it. Send her away! To keep her safe? That was foolishness! She could take care of herself.

So she had thought. Now she saw that he'd been right.

That made her sick. So she studied and tried to stay out of his way. He'd changed on that day, as if something bright had turned off inside of him. A lamp flickering out, its oil gone, leaving only the casing. He looked at her differently, now. When those eyes of his studied her, did they see only a liability?

She shivered, trying to shove that thought from her mind.

Rand put on his boots, then did up their buckles.

He stood, reaching for the sword which leaned against his clothing chest. The black scabbard, with its lacquered red and gold dragon, sparkled in the light. Such a strange weapon those scholars had found beneath the submerged statue. The sword felt so *old*. Was Rand wearing it today as a symbol of something? A sign, perhaps, that he was riding to battle?

"You're going after *her*, aren't you?" Min found herself asking. "Graendal."

"I have to fix what problems I can," Rand said, pulling the ancient sword from the sheath and checking the blade. There was no heron mark, but the fine steel blade glistened in the lamplight, showing the undulating lines of its folded metal. It had been Power-forged, he claimed. He seemed to know things about it he did not share.

Rand snapped the blade into the black scabbard, looking at her. "Fix the problems you can, don't fret over the ones you cannot. It was something Tam once told me. Arad Doman will have to survive against the Seanchan on its own. The last thing I can do for the people here is remove one of the Forsaken from their soil."

"She might be waiting for you, Rand," Min said. "Did it occur to you that the boy Nynaeve found was a plant? Intended to be discovered, to lead you into a trap?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “He was genuine, Min. Moghedien might have considered a trick like that, but not Graendal. She’d be too worried about being traced. We have to move quickly, before word reaches her that she has been compromised. I must strike now.”

Min stood.

“Are you coming, then?” Rand asked, looking surprised.

She flushed. *What if things go as poorly with Graendal as they did with Semirhage? What if I become a tool against him again?*

“Yes,” she said, just to prove to herself that she wasn’t giving up. “Of course I’m coming. Don’t think you can leave me behind!”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said flatly. “Come.”

She’d expected more of an argument.

From the night stand he picked up the statuette of a man holding aloft a globe. He turned the *ter’angreal* in his hand, inspecting it, then looked up at Min, as if in challenge. She said nothing.

He tucked the statuette into the oversized pocket of his coat, then strode from the room, ancient, Power-forged sword belted to his waist.

Min hurried after Rand. He glanced at the pair of Maidens guarding the door. “I go to battle,” he said to them. “Bring no more than twenty.”

The Maidens exchanged a brief moment of handtalk; then one loped ahead and the other tailed Rand as he marched down the hallway. Min hurried up beside him, heart thumping, her boots loud on the floorboards. He had rushed off like this to fight Forsaken before, but usually he took more time to plan. He’d maneuvered Sammael for months before striking at Illian. He’d had barely a single day to decide what do with Graendal!

Min checked her knives, making certain they were secure in her sleeves, but it was just a nervous habit. Rand reached the end of the hallway, then strode down the stairs, his face still calm, his step quick but not hurried. Yet he seemed like a thunderstorm, contained and wrapped up, somehow bound and channeled toward a single goal. How she wished he’d just explode and lose his temper, the way he used to! He’d exasperated her then, but he’d never frightened her. Not as he did now, with those icy eyes she couldn’t read, that aura of danger. Since the incident with Semirhage, he spoke of doing “whatever he had to” regardless of cost, and she knew that he must seethe at having failed to convince the Seanchan to ally with him. What would that combination of failure and determination lead him to do?

At the bottom of the wide staircase, Rand spoke to a servant. “Fetch for me Nynaeve Sedai and Lord Ramshalan. Bring them to the sitting room.”

Lord Ramshalan? The overstuffed man from Lady Chadmar’s former circle? “Rand,” Min said quietly, reaching the bottom of the stairs, “what are you planning?”

He said nothing. He strode through the white marble entryway, entering the sitting room, which was decorated in deep reds to contrast with the white floor. He did not sit, but remained standing with his arms behind his back, studying the map of Arad Doman he’d ordered placed on the wall. The aged map hung where a fine oil painting once had, and seemed completely out of place in the room.

On the map, there was a black ink mark at the edge of a small lake to the southeast. Rand had placed it there the morning after Kerb died. It marked Natrin’s Barrow.

“It was a fort, once,” Rand said absently.

“The city where Graendal is hiding?” Min said, walking up beside him.

He shook his head. “It’s not a city. I’ve sent scouts. It’s just a solitary structure, built long ago to watch the Mountains of Mist and guard against incursion through the passes by Manetheren. It hasn’t been used for military purposes since the Trolloc Wars; there’s hardly need to worry about invasion from Two Rivers people who don’t even remember the name Manetheren.”

Min nodded. “Though, Arad Doman did get invaded by a shepherd from the Two Rivers.”

Once that would have made him smile. She kept forgetting that he didn’t do that anymore.

“A few centuries back,” Rand said, eyes narrowed in thought, “the king of Arad Doman seized Natrin’s Barrow back in the name of the throne. For some time before, it had been occupied by a minor noble family from Toman Head who had been trying to set up their own new kingdom. That happens on Almoth Plain occasionally. The Domani king liked the location, and used the fortress as a palace instead.

“He spent a great deal of time there, so much, in fact, that several of his merchant enemies gained too much power in Bandar Eban. The King fell, but his successors also used the fortress, and it became a popular retreat for the Crown when the King needed relaxation. The practice dwindled during the last hundred years or so, until it was granted to a distant cousin of the King about fifty years back. Their family has used it ever since. Among the general Domani populace, Natrin's Barrow has been largely forgotten."

"Except by Alsalam?" Min asked.

Rand shook his head. "No. I doubt he knew of it at all. I learned this history from the royal archivist, who had to search for hours to locate the name of the family using the place. There has been no contact with them for months, though they used to visit towns on occasion. The few farmsteaders in the area say that someone new seems to be living in the palace, though nobody knows where the former owner went. They seem surprised that they've never thought about how odd that is."

He eyed her. "This is exactly the sort of location Graendal would choose as her center of power. It's a jewel—a forgotten fortress of beauty and power, ancient and regal. Close enough to Bandar Eban for her to have a hand in ruling Arad Doman, but far enough away to be defensible and secluded. I made a mistake in my searches for her—I assumed she'd want a beautiful manor with gardens and grounds. I should have realized; it isn't just beauty that she collects, but prestige. A magnificent fortress for kings fits her just as much as an elegant manor house. Particularly since this one is more palace than fort now."

Footsteps in the entryway behind drew Min's attention, and a few seconds later a servant ushered in Nynaeve and the foppish Ramshalan, with his pointed beard and thin mustache. Today he had tiny bells at the end of the beard and wore a black velvet beauty mark on his cheek, also in the shape of a bell. He wore a loose silk costume of green and blue, the sleeves drooping, ruffled shirt poking out beneath. Min didn't care what fashion dictated, the man looked ridiculous. Like a disheveled peacock.

"My Lord called for me?" Ramshalan said, bowing extravagantly toward Rand.

Rand didn't turn away from the map. "I have a puzzle for you, Ramshalan," he said. "I want to know what you think."

"Please, don't hesitate, my Lord!"

"Then tell me this: How do I outthink an enemy I know is smarter than I am?"

“My Lord.” Ramshalan bowed a second time, as if worried that Rand hadn’t noticed the first one. “Surely you seek to trick me! There is nobody more intelligent than yourself.”

“I wish that were true,” Rand said softly. “I face some of the most crafty people who have ever lived. My current foe understands the minds of others in a way that I cannot hope to match. So how do I defeat her? She will vanish the moment I threaten her, running to one of a dozen other refuges she is sure to have set up. She won’t fight me head-on, yet if I destroy her fortress in a surprise attack, I risk letting her slip away and never knowing if I’ve finished her.”

“A problem indeed, my Lord,” Ramshalan said. He looked confused.

Rand nodded, as if to himself. “I have to peer into her eyes, see into her soul, and know that it’s *her* that I face and not some decoy. I have to do that without frightening her into running. How? *How* can I kill a foe who is more clever than myself, a foe who is impossible to surprise, yet who is also unwilling to confront me?”

Ramshalan looked overwhelmed by those demands. “I. . . . My Lord, if your foe is that clever, then perhaps your best course of action is to request the aid of someone *more* clever?”

Rand turned to him. “An excellent suggestion, Ramshalan. Perhaps I’ve already done just that.”

The man swelled. *He thinks that’s why Rand summoned him!* Min realized. She had to hide her smile with a turn of the head and a raised hand.

“If *you* had an enemy such as this, Ramshalan, what would you do?” Rand asked. “I grow impatient. Give me an answer.”

“I’d make an alliance, my Lord,” Ramshalan said without pausing for another second. “Anyone that powerful would make a better friend than foe, I say.”

Idiot, Min thought. *If your enemy is that crafty and ruthless, an alliance will only end with an assassin’s dagger in your back.*

“Another excellent suggestion,” Rand said softly. “But I am still intrigued by the first comment you made. You said I need allies who are smarter than I am, and that is true. It is time for you to be off, then.”

“My Lord?” Ramshalan said.

“You are to be my emissary,” Rand said, waving his hand. A gateway suddenly split the air on the far side of the room, shearing through the fine rug at the floor. “Too many of the Domani bloodborn are hiding, scattered through the country. I would have them as my allies, but it would be a drain on my time to seek each one in person. Fortunately, I have you to go on my behalf.”

Ramshalan looked excited about the prospect. Through the gateway, Min could see towering pines, and the air on the other side was cold and crisp. Min turned and glanced at Nynaeve—dressed in blue and white again. The Aes Sedai watched the exchange with calculating eyes, and Min could read her own emotions in Nynaeve’s expression. What was Rand’s game?

“Beyond that gateway,” Rand said, “you will find a hill leading down to an ancient palace which is inhabited by a minor Domani merchant family. It is the first of many places I shall send you. Go in my name and seek those who rule the keep. See if they are willing to support me, or if they even know about me. Offer them rewards for allegiance; since you have proven yourself clever, I will let you determine the terms. I haven’t the mind for those sorts of negotiations myself.”

“Yes, my Lord!” the man said, swelling further, though he did eye the gateway with concern, distrustful—like most people—of the One Power, particularly when wielded by a man. If it were opportune, this man would switch loyalties as quickly as he had when Lady Chadmar had fallen. What was Rand thinking, sending a popinjay like this to meet with Graendal?

“Go,” Rand said.

Ramshalan took a few hesitant steps toward the gateway. “Er, my Lord Dragon, could I perhaps have something in the way of an escort?”

“No need to frighten or alarm the people there,” Rand said without turning from the map. Cold air continued to blow through the gateway. “Go quickly and return, Ramshalan. I will leave the gateway open until you are back. My patience is not limitless, and there are many I could turn to for this mission.”

“I. . . .” The man seemed to calculate the risks. “Of course, Lord Dragon.” He took a deep breath and walked through the portal, his steps uncomfortable, like those of a house cat venturing out into a puddle of water. Min found herself feeling sorry for the man.

Fallen needles crackled as Ramshalan moved off into the forest. A breeze hissed through the trees; it was an odd sound to hear while standing in the comfort of the mansion. Rand left the gateway open, still staring at his map.

“All right, Rand,” Nynaeve demanded after a few minutes, her arms folded. “What game is this?”

“How would *you* beat her, Nynaeve?” Rand asked. “She won’t be goaded into fighting me, like Rahvin or Sammael were. She won’t be easily trapped either. Graendal understands people better than anyone. Twisted she may be, but she *is* crafty, and should not be underestimated. Torhs Margin made that mistake, I recall, and you know his fate.”

Min frowned. “Who?” she asked, looking at Nynaeve. The Aes Sedai shrugged.

Rand glanced at them. “I believe in history he was known as Tohrs the Broken.”

Again, Min shook her head. Nynaeve joined her. Neither was deeply versed in history, true, but Rand acted as if they should know this name. Rand’s face hardened, and he blushed just faintly, turning away from them. “The question remains,” he said, voice soft but tense. “How would you fight her, Nynaeve?”

“I don’t care to play your games, Rand al’Thor,” Nynaeve replied with a huff. “You’ve obviously already decided what you intend to do. Why ask me?”

“Because what I am about to do should frighten me,” he said. “It doesn’t.”

Min shivered. Rand nodded to the Maidens standing in the doorway. Moving lightly, they crossed the room, leaped through the gateway, and spread through the pine forest, quickly vanishing from sight. All twenty together made less noise than Ramshalan had.

Min waited. On the other side of the gateway, a distant sun was hidden from sight, giving a late-afternoon light to the shadowed forest floor. After a few moments, white-haired Nerilea stepped into view and nodded to Rand. All clear.

“Come,” Rand said, and walked to the gateway. Min followed, though Nynaeve—breaking into a trot—beat her to the gateway.

They stepped out onto a carpet of brown pine needles, dirtied from a long slumber beneath the vanished winter snows. Branches nudged one another in the breeze, and the mountain air was more chilly than the breeze had indicated. Min wished for a cloak, but there wasn’t time to go fetch one. Rand strode directly through the forest, Nynaeve trotting up to him and speaking in a low voice.

Nynaeve wouldn't get anything useful out of Rand, not when he was in this kind of mood. They would just have to see what he revealed. Min caught sight of some Aiel in the woods, but only brief glimpses when they obviously weren't taking care to hide. They certainly had taken well to life in the wetlands. How did a people raised in the Waste know so instinctively how to hide in a forest?

Up ahead, the trees broke. Min hastened to join Rand and Nynaeve, who had stopped at the top of a gently sloping ridge. Here, they could see over the forest, and the trees continued down below like a sea of green and brown. The pines parted at the shores of a small mountain lake, caught in a triangular depression of the land.

Atop a ridge of its own, high above the water, was an impressive white stone structure. Rectangular and tall, it was built in the form of several towers stacked atop one another, each one slightly thinner than the one beneath. That gave the palace an elegant shape—fortified, yet palatial. "It's beautiful," she said breathlessly.

"It was built during a different time," Rand said. "A time when people still thought that the majesty of a structure lent it strength."

The palace was distant, but not so distant that Min couldn't make out the figures of men walking the battlements on guard, halberds at their shoulders, breastplates reflecting the late sunlight. A late party of hunters rode in through the gates, a fine buck deer lashed to the packhorse, and a group of workers chopped at a fallen tree nearby, perhaps for firewood. A pair of serving women in white carried poles, bucket at each end, up from the lake, and lights were winking on in windows the length of the structure. It was a living, working estate bundled up in a single massive building.

"Do you think Ramshalan found his way?" Nynaeve said, arms folded, obviously trying not to look impressed.

"Even a fool like him could not miss that," Rand said, eyes narrowing. He still carried the statuette in his pocket. Min wished he had left the thing behind. It made her uncomfortable, the way he fingered it. Caressed it.

"So you sent Ramshalan to die," Nynaeve said. "What will that accomplish?"

"She won't kill him," Rand said.

"How can you be sure of that?"

“It isn’t her way,” Rand said. “Not when she can use him against me.”

“You don’t expect her to believe that story you told him,” Min said. “About sending him out to test the allegiance of the Domani lords?”

Rand slowly shook his head. “No. I hope for her to believe something of that tale, but I do not expect it. I meant what I said about her, Min—she’s more crafty than I am. And I fear that she knows me far better than I know her. She will compel Ramshalan and pull from him that entire conversation we had. From there, she will find a way to use that conversation against me.”

“How?” Min asked.

“I don’t know. I wish I did. She’ll think of something clever, then infect Ramshalan with a very subtle Compulsion that I won’t be able to anticipate. I’ll be left with the choice to keep him nearby and see what he does, or to send him away. But of course, she will think of that as well, and whatever I do will set in motion her other plans.”

“You make it sound as if you can’t win,” Nynaeve said, frowning. She didn’t seem to notice the chill at all. In fact, neither did Rand. Whatever that “trick” about ignoring cold and heat was, Min had never been able to figure it out. They claimed it had nothing to do with the power, but if that were so, why were Rand and the Aes Sedai the only ones who could manage it? The Aiel didn’t seem to be bothered by the cold either, but they didn’t count. They never seemed bothered by regular human concerns, though they could be very touchy about the most random and insignificant things.

“We can’t win, you say?” Rand asked. “Is that what we’re trying to do? Win?”

Nynaeve raised an eyebrow. “Do you not answer questions anymore?”

Rand turned, looking at Nynaeve. Standing on the other side of him, Min couldn’t see what was in his face, but she could see Nynaeve grow pale. It was her own fault. Couldn’t she sense how on edge Rand was? Perhaps Min’s chill didn’t just come from the cold. She moved up close to him, but he didn’t put his arm around her as he might once have. When he finally turned away from Nynaeve, the Aes Sedai slumped slightly, as if she had been dangling, held up by his gaze.

Rand did not speak for some time, and so they waited quietly on the mountain ridge as the distant sun made its way toward the horizon. Shadows lengthened, fingers stretching away from the sun. Down below, by the fortress walls, a group of grooms began walking some horses to give them exercise. More lights had been lit in the fortress windows. How many people did Graendal have in there? Scores, if not hundreds.

A crashing sound in the brush suddenly drew Min's attention; it was accompanied by curses. She jumped as the noise cut off quite abruptly.

A small group of Aiel approached a few moments later, leading a disheveled Ramshalan, his fine clothing stuck with needles and scratched from branches. He dusted himself off, then took a step toward Rand.

The Maidens held him back. He glanced at them, cocking his head. "My Lord Dragon?"

"Is he infected?" Rand asked of Nynaeve.

"By what?" she asked.

"Graendal's touch."

Nynaeve walked over to Ramshalan and looked at him for a moment. She hissed and said, "Yes. Rand, he's under a heavy Compulsion. There are a lot of weaves here. Not as bad as the chandler's apprentice, or maybe just more subtle."

"I say," Ramshalan said, "my Lord Dragon, what is going on? The lady of the castle down there was quite friendly—she is an ally, my Lord. You have nothing to fear from her! Very refined, I must say."

"Is that so?" Rand asked quietly. It was growing dark, sun setting behind the distant mountains. Besides the dim evening light, the only illumination came from the still-open gateway behind them. It shone with lamplight, an inviting portal back to warmth, away from this place of shadow and coldness.

Rand's voice sounded so hard. Worse than Min had ever heard it before.

"Rand," she said, touching his arm. "Let's go back."

"I have something I must do," he said, not looking at her.

"Think about it some more," Min said. "At least take some advice. We can ask Cadsuane, or—"

"Cadsuane held me in a box, Min," he said very softly. His face was clasped in shadow, but as he turned toward her, his eyes reflected the light from the open gateway. Orange and red. There was an edge of anger to his tone. *I shouldn't have mentioned Cadsuane*, she realized. The woman's name was one of the few things that could still get emotion out of him.

"A box, Min," Rand whispered. "Though Cadsuane's box had walls that were invisible, it was as binding as any that ever held me. Her tongue was far more painful a rod than any that was taken to my skin. I see that now."

Rand pulled away from Min's touch.

"What is the purpose of all this?" Nynaeve demanded. "You sent this man to suffer a Compulsion, *knowing* what it would do to him? I won't watch another man squirm and die because of this! Whatever she has compelled him to do, I won't remove it! It will be your own fault if it brings your death."

"My Lord?" Ramshalan asked. The growing terror in his voice put Min on edge.

The sun set; Rand was now just a silhouette. The fortress was only a black profile with lanterns lighting the holes in its walls. Rand stepped up to the lip of the ridge, removing the access key from his pocket. It started to glow just faintly, a red light coming from its very heart. Nynaeve inhaled sharply.

"Neither of you were there when *Callandor* failed me," he said into the night. "It happened twice. Once I tried to use it to raise the dead, but I got only a puppeted body. Once I tried to use it to destroy the Seanchan, but I caused as much death among my own armies as I caused among theirs.

"Cadsuane told me that the second failure came from a flaw in *Callandor* itself. It cannot be controlled by a lone man, you see. It only works if he's in a box. *Callandor* is a carefully enticing leash, intended to make me surrender willingly."

The access key's globe burst alight with a more brilliant color, seeming crystalline. The light within was scarlet, the core brilliant and bright. As if someone had dropped a glowing rock into a pool of blood.

"I see a different answer to my problems," Rand said, voice still almost a whisper. "Both times *Callandor* failed me, I was being reckless with my emotion. I allowed temper to drive me. I can't kill in anger, Min. I have to keep that anger inside; I must channel it as I channel the One Power. Each death must be deliberate. Intentional."

Min couldn't speak. Couldn't phrase her fears, couldn't find the words to make him stop. His eyes remained in the darkness, somehow, despite the liquid light he held before him. That light hurled shadows away from his figure, as if he was the point of a silent explosion. Min turned to Nynaeve; the Aes Sedai watched with wide eyes, mouth slightly open. She couldn't find words either.

Min turned back to Rand. When he'd been close to killing her with his own hand, she hadn't feared him. But then, she'd known that it wasn't Rand hurting her, but Semirhage.

But this Rand—hand aflame, eyes so intent yet so dispassionate—terrified her.

"I've done it before," he whispered. "I once said that I didn't kill women, but it was a lie. I murdered a woman long before I faced Semirhage. Her name was Liah. I killed her in Shadar Logoth. I struck her down, and I called it mercy."

He turned to the fortress palace below.

"Forgive me," he said, but it didn't seem directed at Min, "for calling this mercy as well."

Something impossibly bright formed in the air before him, and Min cried out, backing away. The air itself seemed to warp, as if pulling away from Rand in fear. Dust blew from the ground in a circle around him, and the trees groaned, lit by the brilliant white light, the pine needles rattling like a hundred thousand insects scrambling over one another. Min could no longer make out Rand, only a blazing, brilliant *force* of light. Pure power, gathered, making the hairs on her arms rise with the force of its nebulous energy. In that moment, she felt as if she could understand what the One Power was. It was there, before her, made incarnate in the man Rand al'Thor.

And then, with a sound like a sigh, he released it. A column of pure whiteness exploded from him and burned across the silent night sky, illuminating the trees below it in a wave. It moved as quick as a snap of the fingers, striking the wall of the distant fortress. The stones came alight, as if they were breathing in the force of the energy. The entire fortress glowed, transforming into living light, an amazing, spectacular palace of unadulterated energy. It was beautiful.

And then it was gone. Burned from the landscape—and the Pattern—as if it had never been there. The entire fortress, hundreds of feet of stone and everyone who had lived in it.

Something hit Min, something like a shocking wave in the air. It wasn't a physical blast, and it didn't make her stumble, but it twisted her insides about. The forest around them—still lit by the glowing access key in Rand's hands—seemed to warp and shake. It was as if the world itself were groaning in agony.

It snapped back, but Min could still feel that tension. In that instant, it seemed as if the very substance of world had been near to breaking.

"What have you done?" Nynaeve whispered.

Rand didn't reply. Min could see his face again, now that the enormous column of balefire had vanished, leaving behind only the glowing access key. He was in ecstasy, mouth agape, and he held the access key aloft before himself as if in victory. Or in reverence.

Then he gritted his teeth, eyes opening wide, lips parted as if he were under great pressure. The light flashed once, then immediately vanished. All became dark. Min blinked in the sudden darkness, trying to get her eyes to adjust. The powerful image of Rand seemed burned into her vision. Had he really done what she thought he had? Had he burned away an entire fortress with balefire?

All those people. Men returning from the hunt . . . women carrying water . . . soldiers on the walls . . . the grooms outside . . .

They were *gone*. Burned from the Pattern. Killed. Dead forever. The horror of it made Min stumble back, and she pressed her back against a tree to keep herself upright.

So many lives, ended in an instant. Dead. Destroyed. By Rand.

A light appeared from Nynaeve, and Min turned, seeing the Aes Sedai illuminated by the warm, soft glow of a globe above her hand. Her eyes seemed almost afire with a light of their own. "You are out of control, Rand al'Thor," she declared.

"I do what must be done," he said, speaking now from the shadows. He sounded exhausted. "Test him, Nynaeve."

"What?"

"The fool," Rand said. "Is her Compulsion still there? Is Graendal's touch gone?"

"I hate what you just did, Rand," Nynaeve snarled. "No. 'Hate' isn't strong enough. I *loathe* what you've done. What has happened to you?"

"Test him!" Rand whispered, voice dangerous. "Before condemning me, let us first determine if my sins have achieved anything beyond my own damnation."

Nynaeve breathed in deeply, then glanced at Ramshalan, who was still held in the grip of several Aiel Maidens. Nynaeve reached out and touched his forehead, concentrating. "It's gone," she said. "Erased."

"Then she is dead," Rand said from the darkness.

Light! Min thought, realizing what he'd done. *He didn't use Ramshalan as a courier, or as bait. He used the man as a way of proving to himself that Graendal was dead.* Balefire burned someone out of the Pattern completely, making it so that their most recent actions never occurred. Ramshalan would remember visiting Graendal, but her Compulsion no longer existed. In a way, she'd been killed *before* Ramshalan had visited her.

Min felt at her neck, where the bruises of Rand's hand on her neck hadn't yet faded.

"I don't understand," Ramshalan said, his voice nearly a squeak.

"How do you fight someone smarter than yourself?" Rand whispered. "The answer is simple. You make her think that you are sitting down across the table from her, ready to play her game. Then you punch her in the face as hard as you can. You have served me well, Ramshalan. I will forgive you for boasting to Lords Vivian and Callswell that you could manipulate me however you wished."

Ramshalan slumped in shock, and the Maidens let him fall to his knees. "My Lord!" he said. "I had too much wine that night, and—"

"Hush," Rand said. "As I said, you have served me well this day. I will not execute you. You will find a village two days' walk to the south."

With that, Rand turned; to Min's eyes, he was just a shadow rustling in the forest. He walked to the gateway and stepped through. Min hurried to follow him, and Nynaeve did likewise. The Maidens came last, leaving Ramshalan kneeling stupefied in the forest. When the last Maiden was through the gateway, the portal slid closed, cutting off the sounds of Ramshalan whimpering in the dark.

"What you have done is an abomination, Rand al'Thor," Nynaeve said as soon as the gateway was closed. "There looked to have been dozens, maybe hundreds, of people living in that palace!"

"Each one made into an idiot by Graendal's Compulsion," Rand replied. "She never lets anyone close to her without destroying their mind first. The boy she sent to work the jail barely knew a fraction of the torture most of her pets receive. She leaves them without ability to think or act—all they can do is kneel and adore her, perhaps run errands at her command. I did them a favor."

"A favor?" Nynaeve asked. "Rand, you used balefire! They were burned out of existence!"

“As I said,” Rand replied softly. “A favor. Sometimes, I wish the same blessing for myself. Good night, Nynaeve. Sleep as well you can, for our time in Arad Doman is at an end.”

Min watched him go, wishing to sprint after him, but holding herself back. Once he was gone from the room, Nynaeve slumped into one of the room’s maroon chairs, sighing and leaning her head against her hand.

Min felt like doing the same. Until that moment, she hadn’t realized just how drained she was. Being around Rand lately did that to her, even when he wasn’t engaged in activities as terrible as the ones this night.

“I wish Moiraine were here,” Nynaeve muttered softly, then froze, as if surprised to have heard herself say that.

“We have to do something, Nynaeve,” Min said, looking at the Aes Sedai.

Nynaeve nodded absently. “Maybe.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, what if he’s right?” Nynaeve asked. “Wool-headed fool though he is, what if he really *does* have to be like this to win? The old Rand could never have destroyed an entire fortress full of people to kill one of the Forsaken.”

“Of course he couldn’t have,” Min said. “He still *cared* about killing then! Nynaeve, all those lives . . .”

“And how many people would still be alive now if he’d been this ruthless from the start?” Nynaeve asked, looking away. “If he’d been capable of sending his followers into danger as he did Ramshalan? If he’d been able to strike without worrying about whom he would have to kill? If he’d ordered his troops into Graendal’s fortress, her followers would have resisted fanatically, and they would have ended up dead anyway. And she would have escaped.

“This might be what he has to be. The Last Battle is nearly upon us, Min. *The Last Battle!* Can we dare send a man to fight the Dark One who won’t sacrifice for what needs to be done?”

Min shook her head. “Dare we send him as he is, with that look in his eyes? Nynaeve, he’s stopped caring. Nothing matters to him anymore but defeating the Dark One.”

“Isn’t that what we want him to do?”

“I. . . .” She stopped. “Winning won’t be winning at all if Rand becomes something as bad as the Forsaken . . . We—”

"I understand," Nynaeve said suddenly. "Light burn me, but I do, and you're right. I just don't like the answers those conclusions are giving me."

"What conclusions?"

Nynaeve sighed. "That Cadsuane was right," she said. Nearly under her breath, she added, "Insufferable woman." She stood up. "Come on. We need to find her and discover what her plans are."

Min stood, joining Nynaeve. "You're certain she *has* plans? Rand was harsh with her. Maybe she's just staying with us to watch him flounder and fail without her."

"She has plans," Nynaeve said. "If there's one thing we can count on with that woman, it's that she's scheming. We just have to convince her to let us in on it."

"And if she won't?" Min asked.

"She will," Nynaeve said, looking at the place where Rand's gateway had split the rug. "Once we tell her about tonight, she will. I dislike the woman, and I suspect she returns the emotion, but neither of us can handle Rand alone." She pursed her lips. "I worry we won't be able to handle him together. Let's go."

Min followed. "Handle" Rand? That was another problem. Nynaeve and Cadsuane were both so concerned with *handling* that they failed to see that it might be best to *help* him instead. Nynaeve cared for Rand, but she saw him as a problem to be fixed, rather than a man in need.

And so Min accompanied the Aes Sedai out of the mansion. They walked into the dark courtyard—Nynaeve making a globe of light—and hurried around the back, past the stable and toward the gatekeeper's cottage. They passed Alivia on the way; the former *damane* looked disappointed. Likely, she'd been turned away by Cadsuane and the others again—Alivia spent a great deal of time trying to get the Aes Sedai to train her in new weaves.

They finally reached the gatekeeper's cottage—at least, the gatekeeper's cottage was what it *had* been until Cadsuane prevailed upon him to move out. It was a single-story, thatch-roofed structure of painted yellow wood. Light shone out between the shutters on the windows.

Nynaeve stepped up to the front and knocked on the sturdy oak door; it was answered shortly by Merise. "Yes, child?" the Green asked, as if intentionally trying to goad Nynaeve.

"I have to speak with Cadsuane," Nynaeve growled.

“Cadsuane *Sedai*, she has no business with you right now,” Merise said, moving to close the cottage door. “Return tomorrow, and perhaps she will see you.”

“Rand al’Thor just burned an entire palace full of people from existence with balefire,” Nynaeve said, loud enough to be heard by those inside the cottage. “I was with him.”

Merise froze.

“Let her in,” Cadsuane’s voice said from inside. Reluctantly, Merise pulled open the door. Inside, Min saw Cadsuane sitting on some cushions on the floor with Amys, Bair, Melaine and Sorilea. The front room—the main room—of the cottage was decorated with a simple brown rug on the floor, mostly obscured by the seated women. A gray stone fireplace burned with a calm flame at the back, the wood nearly consumed, the fire low. A stool sat in the corner, with a pot of tea on it.

Nynaeve barely gave the Wise Ones a glance. She pushed her way into the cottage, and Min followed more hesitantly.

“Tell us of this event, child,” Sorilea said. “We felt the world warping from here, but did not know what had caused it. We assumed it to be the Dark One’s work.”

“I’ll tell you,” Nynaeve said, then took a deep breath, “but I want to be a part of your plans.”

“We shall see,” Cadsuane said. “Relate your experience.”

Min took a seat on a wooden stool at the side of the room as Nynaeve gave her account of Natrin’s Barrow. The Wise Ones listened, tight-lipped. Cadsuane just nodded occasionally. Merise, face full of horror, refilled cups of tea from the pot on the stool—by the smell it was Tremalking black—then set it to hang by the fire. Nynaeve finished, still standing.

Oh, Rand, Min thought. *This must be tearing you apart inside.* But she could feel him through the bond; his emotions seemed very cold.

“You were wise to come to us with this, child,” Sorilea said to Nynaeve. “You may withdraw.”

Nynaeve’s eyes opened wide with anger. “But—”

“Sorilea,” Cadsuane said calmly, cutting Nynaeve off. “This child could be of use to our plans. She is still close to the al’Thor boy; he trusted her enough to take her with him this evening.”

Sorilea glanced toward the other Wise Ones. Aged Bair and sun-haired Melaine both nodded. Amys seemed thoughtful, but did not object.

"Perhaps," Sorilea said. "But can she be obedient?"

"Well?" Cadsuane asked of Nynaeve. They all seemed to be ignoring Min. "Can you?"

Nynaeve's eyes were still wide with anger. *Light,* Min thought. *Nynaeve?* Obey *Cadsuane and the others? She's going to explode at them!*

Nynaeve tugged on her braid with a white-knuckled grip. "Yes, Cadsuane Sedai," she said through clenched teeth. "I can."

The Wise Ones seemed surprised to hear her speak the words, but Cadsuane nodded again, as if she'd expected that response. Who could expect Nynaeve to be so . . . well, reasonable?

"Sit down, child," Cadsuane said with a wave of the hand. "Let's see if you *can* follow orders. You might be the only one of the current crop who is salvageable." That made Merise flush.

"No, Cadsuane," Amys said. "Not the only one. Egwene has much honor."

The other two Wise Ones nodded.

"What is the plan?" Nynaeve said.

"Your part in it is—" Cadsuane began.

"Wait," Nynaeve said. "My part? I want to hear the whole thing."

"You'll hear when we're ready to tell you," Cadsuane said curtly. "And don't make me regret my decision to speak in your behalf."

Nynaeve forced her mouth shut, eyes aflame. But she did not snap at them.

"Your part," Cadsuane continued, "is to find Perrin Aybara."

"What good will that do?" Nynaeve asked, then added, "Cadsuane Sedai."

"That is our business," Cadsuane said. "He has been traveling in the south recently, but we can't discover exactly where. The al'Thor boy might know where he is. Find out for us, and perhaps I'll explain the point."

Nynaeve nodded reluctantly, and the others turned to a discussion of how much strain from balefire the Pattern could take before unraveling completely. Nynaeve listened in silence, obviously trying to glean more about Cadsuane's plan, though there didn't seem to be many clues.

Min only half-listened. Whatever the plan, someone would need to watch out for Rand. His deed this day would be destroying him inside, no matter what he proclaimed. There were plenty of others worrying about what he would do at the Last Battle. It was her job to get him to that Last Battle alive and sane, with his soul in one piece.

Somehow.

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CHAPTER 38

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News in Tel’aran’rhiod

“Egwene, see reason,” Siuan said, faintly translucent because of the *ter’angreal* ring she had used to enter *Tel’aran’rhiod*. “What good can you do, rotting in that cell? Elaida will see that you’re never let free, not after what you said you did at that dinner.” Siuan shook her head. “Mother, sometimes you just have to face truth. You can only repair a net so many times before you need to toss the thing aside and weave a new one.”

Egwene sat on a three-legged stool in the corner of the room, the front part of a cobbler’s shop. She’d chosen the location at random, just in case, eschewing a location in the White Tower itself. The Forsaken knew that Egwene and the others walked the World of Dreams.

With Siuan, Egwene could be more relaxed, more her real self. The two of them both understood that Egwene was now the Amyrlin and Siuan her lesser, but at the same time, they shared a bond. A camaraderie due to the station they both had filled. That bond, strangely, had turned into something akin to friendship.

At the moment, Egwene was nearly ready to strangle her friend. “We’ve been over this,” she said firmly. “I *cannot* flee. Each day I spend imprisoned—but do not break—is another blow to Elaida’s rule. If I disappear before her trial, it will undermine everything we’ve worked for!”

“The trial will be a sham, Mother,” Siuan said. “And if it isn’t, the punishment will be light. From what you’ve told me, she didn’t break any bones when she beat you—why, she didn’t break the skin.”

That was true. Egwene’s bleeding had been from broken glass, not Elaida’s stripes.

“Even a formal censure from the Hall will undermine her,” Egwene said. “My resistance, my refusal to break my imprisonment, means something. The Sitters themselves come to visit me! If I were to flee, it would look as though I’d given in to Elaida.”

“Didn’t she declare you a Darkfriend?” Siuan asked pointedly.

Egwene hesitated. Yes, Elaida had done that. But she didn’t have proof for it.

Tower law was intricate, and sorting out the proper punishments and interpretations could be complicated. The Three Oaths would have prevented Elaida from using the One Power as a weapon, and so Elaida must have *thought* that what she was doing wasn’t a violation. Either she had gone farther than she'd planned, or she saw Egwene as a Darkfriend. She could argue for either position to defend herself; the latter would relieve her of the most guilt, but the former would be much easier to prove.

"She could succeed at having you convicted," Siuan said, apparently thinking along the same lines. "You would be slated for execution. What then?"

"She won't succeed. She hasn't any proof that I am a Darkfriend, and so the Hall will never allow it."

"And if you're wrong?"

Egwene hesitated. "Very well. If the Hall decides that I am to be executed, I will let you get me out. But not until then, Siuan. Not until then."

Siuan snorted. "You might not have an opportunity, Mother. If Elaida cows them, she will act quickly. The woman's punishments can be swift as a stormwind, take you unaware. I know *that* for certain."

"If that happens," Egwene said pointedly, "my death would be a victory. Elaida would be the one who gave up, not I."

Siuan shook her head, muttering, "Stubborn as a mooring post."

"We are finished with that discussion, Siuan," Egwene said sternly.

Siuan sighed, but said nothing further. She seemed to have too much nervous energy to sit, and ignored the stool on the other side of the room, instead going to stand by the shop window to Egwene's right.

The cobbler's salesroom showed signs of great traffic. A stout counter divided the room in half, the wall behind pocketed with dozens of shoe-sized nooks. At times, most of these were stuffed with sturdy work shoes of leather or canvas, laces hanging down the front or buckles gleaming in the phantom light of *Tel'aran'rhiod*. Yet each time Egwene glanced at the wall, the shoes had shifted, some vanishing, others appearing. They must not stay long in their cubbyholes in the real world, for they left only vague images behind in the world of dreams.

The front half of the shop was crowded with stools for customers to use. The shoes on the back wall were of different designs and patterns, along with test shoes for sizing. A person came into the shop, tried on the sizing shoes, then picked a style. The cobbler—or, likely, his assistants—would then craft a pair for later pickup. The wide glass windows at the front proclaimed the name of the cobbler in white painted letters to be Naorman Mashinta, and a smaller number "three" had been painted beside the name.

This was the third generation of Mashintas to run the shop. Not uncommon at all among townsfolk. In fact, the part of Egwene that was still influenced by the Two Rivers found it odd that anyone would consider leaving their parent's trade for another, unless they were a third or fourth child.

"Now that we've dealt with the obvious," Egwene said, "what news is there?"

"Well," Siuan said, leaning on the window and staring out at the eerily empty Tar Valon street. "An old acquaintance of yours recently arrived in camp."

"Really?" Egwene asked absently. "Who?"

"Gawyn Trakand."

Egwene started. That was impossible! Gawyn had sided with Elaida's faction during the rebellion. He wouldn't have come over to the rebel side. Had he been captured? But that wasn't how Siuan had phrased it.

For a moment, Egwene was a trembling girl, caught in the power of his whispered promises. She managed to keep her form locked into that of the Amyrlin, however, and forced her thoughts back to the moment, driving herself to be casual as she responded. "Gawyn?" she asked. "How odd. I wouldn't have thought to find him there."

Siuan smiled. "That was nicely handled," she said. "Though you paused too long, and when you did ask for him, you were overly uninterested. That made you easy to read."

"Light blind you," Egwene said. "Another test? Is he really there?"

"I hold to the oaths, thank you," Siuan said, affronted. Egwene was one of the few who knew that, as a result of her stilling and Healing, Siuan had been released from the Three Oaths. But, like Egwene, she chose not to lie anyway.

"Either way," Egwene said, "I should think that the time for testing me has passed."

"Everyone you meet will always be testing you, Mother," Siuan said. "You must be prepared for surprises; at any moment someone could throw one at you just to see how you respond."

"Thank you," Egwene said coldly. "But I really don't need the reminder."

"Don't you?" Siuan said. "Sounds a little like something Elaida would say."

"That's unfair!"

“Prove it,” Siuan said smugly.

Egwene forced herself to be calm. Siuan was right. Better to take the advice, particularly when it was good advice, than to complain. “You are right, of course,” Egwene said, smoothing out her dress across her knees as she also smoothed the frustration from her face. “Tell me more of Gawyn’s arrival.”

“I don’t know much more,” Siuan confessed. “I really should have mentioned it yesterday, but our meeting was cut short.” They were meeting more often now—each night of Egwene’s imprisonment—but yesterday something had awakened Siuan before they had finished talking. A bubble of evil in the rebel camp, she had reported, involving tents coming alive and trying to strangle people. Three had died, one of them Aes Sedai.

“Anyway,” Siuan continued, “Gawyn hasn’t said much that I could hear. I think he’s here because he heard that you were captured. He arrived with a spectacular flurry, but now he stays in Bryne’s command post, visiting the Aes Sedai regularly. He’s mulling over something; keeps going to speak to Romanda and Lelaine.”

“That’s troubling.”

“Well, they *are* the obvious power in camp,” Siuan said. “Save when Sheriam and the others can wrench some authority away. Things haven’t gone well without you; the camp needs leadership. Actually, we crave it, as a starving fisherman craves a catch. Aes Sedai are a people of order, I suppose. It—”

She stopped herself. Likely, she had been about to bully Egwene again to accept rescue. She glanced at Egwene, then continued. “Well, it will be good for us when you return, Mother. The longer you stay away, the stronger the factions become. You can almost see the lines down the middle of the camp now. Romanda on one side, Lelaine on the other, with a shrinking slice that doesn’t want to take sides.”

“We *cannot* afford another division,” Egwene said. “Not among ourselves; we have to prove stronger than Elaida.”

“At least our splits aren’t along the lines of Ajah,” Siuan said defensively.

“Factions and breaks,” Egwene said, getting up. “Infighting and squabbling. We are better than this, Siuan. Tell the Hall that I wish to meet with them. Perhaps in two days. Tomorrow, you and I should meet again.”

Siuan nodded hesitantly. “Very well.”

Egwene eyed her. “You think it unwise?”

“No,” Siuan said. “I worry about how hard you’re pushing yourself. The Amyrlin needs to learn to ration her strength; some in your place have failed not because they lacked the capacity for greatness, but because they stretched that capacity too thin, sprinting when they should have walked.”

Egwene refrained from pointing out that Siuan herself had spent much of her tenure as Amyrlin sprinting at a breakneck speed. But it could very well be argued that Siuan *had* stretched herself too thin, and had fallen as a result. Who better to speak on the dangers of such activities than one who had been burned by them so deeply?

“The advice is appreciated, daughter,” Egwene said. “But really, there is little to worry about. My days are spent in solitude, with the occasional beating to provide spice. These meetings at night help me survive.” She shivered, glancing away from Siuan, out the window toward the dirty, vacant street.

“Is it difficult to endure?” Siuan asked softly.

“The cell is narrow enough for me to touch opposite walls at once,” Egwene said. “And isn’t very long, either. When I lie down, I have to bend my knees to fit. I can’t stand, since the ceiling is so low it makes me stoop, and I can’t sit without pain, for they no longer Heal me between beatings. The straw is old and itches. The door is thick and the cracks don’t allow in much light. I wasn’t aware that the Tower *had* cells such as this one.” She glanced back at Siuan. “Once I am upheld fully as Amyrlin, this room and any like it will be removed, the doors ripped out and the cells themselves filled with bricks and mortar.”

Siuan nodded. “We’ll make certain of it.”

Egwene turned away again, and noticed with shame that she’d let her gown shift to the *cadin’sor* of an Aiel Maiden, complete with spears and bow at her back. She forced the clothing back, taking a deep breath. “No person should be kept in such a manner,” she said, “not even. . . .”

Siuan frowned as Egwene trailed off. “What was that?”

Egwene shook her head. “It just occurred to me. This is what it must have been like for Rand. No, worse. The stories say he was locked in a box smaller than my cell. At least I can spend part of the evenings chatting with you. He had nobody. He was without the belief that his beatings meant something.” Light send that she didn’t have to endure as long as he had. Her imprisonment had only been a few days so far.

Siuan fell silent.

“Regardless,” Egwene said, “I have *Tel’aran’rhiod*. During the days, my body is captive, but my soul is free at night. And each day I endure is another proof that Elaida’s will is *not* law. She cannot break me. Her support from the others is eroding. Trust me.”

Siuan nodded. “Very well,” she said, rising. “You *are* Amyrlin.”

“Of course I am,” Egwene said absently.

“No, Egwene,” Siuan said. “I meant that from the heart.”

Egwene turned, surprised. “But you’ve always believed in me!”

Siuan raised an eyebrow.

“At least,” Egwene said, “from fairly near the beginning.”

“I always believed you had potential,” Siuan corrected. “Well, you’ve fulfilled it. Some of it at least. Enough of it. However this storm blows through, you’ve proven one thing. You *deserved* the place you hold. Light, girl, you may end up being the best Amyrlin this world has known this side of Artur Hawkwing’s reign!” She hesitated. “And that’s not an easy thing for me to admit, mind you.”

Egwene took Siuan’s arms, smiling. Why, Siuan almost looked teary-eyed with pride! “All I did was get myself locked in a cell.”

“And you did it like an Amyrlin, Egwene,” Siuan said. “But I should be getting back. Some of us can’t spend our days relaxing the way you can. We need real sleep, otherwise we’re likely to fall unconscious in our washwater.” She grimaced, releasing herself from Egwene’s hands.

“You could just tell him to—”

“Now, I’ll have none of that,” Siuan said, wagging a finger at Egwene. Had she forgotten that she’d just been complimenting Egwene’s stature as an Amyrlin? “I gave my word, and I’ll be fish guts before I’ll break it.”

Egwene blinked. “I wouldn’t dream of making you,” she said, covering a smile as she noticed that Siuan’s shadowy form now had a bright red ribbon in its hair. “Off with you, then.”

Siuan nodded sharply, then sat down and closed her eyes. She faded slowly from *Tel’aran’rhiod*.

Egwene hesitated, watching the area where Siuan had been. It was probably time to return to normal dreaming, letting her mind restore itself. But returning to her normal dreams would be a step toward waking, and when she woke she would find only that cramped dungeon and its stuffy darkness. She longed to stay in the World of Dreams just a little longer. She thought of visiting Elayne’s dreams to ask for a meeting . . . but no, that would take too much time, assuming Elayne could make her dream *ter’angreal* work. She rarely could, these days.

She found herself stepping away from Tar Valon, the cobbler’s shop vanishing around her.

She appeared in the rebel Aes Sedai camp. A foolish place to visit, perhaps. If there were Darkfriends or Forsaken in the World of Dreams, they could very well be studying this camp and looking for information, much as Egwene sometimes visited the Amyrlin’s study in *Tel’aran’rhiod* to search for clues on Elaida’s plans. But Egwene needed to come here. She didn’t question why; she simply felt that it was true.

The streets of the camp were muddy, worn in ruts from passing wagons. Once just a field, the area had been appropriated by the Aes Sedai and turned into . . . something. Part a place of war, with Bryne’s soldiers camped in a ring about them. Part town, though no town had ever boasted such a complement of Aes Sedai, novices and Accepted. Part monument to the weakness of the White Tower.

Egwene walked the camp’s main thoroughfare, where weeds had been trampled to mud, then mud worn into a road. Walkways lined it, and tents covered the flat land beyond. There were no people, only the occasional fleeting glimpse of a sleeper who had stumbled into *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Here, a brief flash of a woman in a fine green gown. A dreaming Aes Sedai, perhaps, though it was just as likely to be a serving maid imagining herself to be a queen. There, a woman in white—a woman with stringy blond hair who was far too old to be a novice. That no longer mattered. The novice book should have long ago been opened to all. The White Tower was too weak to turn down any source of strength.

Both women were gone almost as quickly as they appeared. Few dreamers stayed long in *Tel’aran’rhiod*; to remain longer, one needed either a particular skill like Egwene’s or a *ter’angreal* like the ring Siuan used. There was a third way. Getting caught up in a living nightmare. There were none of the latter about, thank the Light.

The camp seemed strange to be so deserted. Egwene had long since stopped being unnerved by the eerie lack of people in *Tel’aran’rhiod*. But this camp was different somehow. It looked as a war camp might after all of the soldiers had been slaughtered on the battlefield. Deserted, yet still a banner to proclaim the lives of those who had occupied it. Egwene felt as if she could see the division that Siuan had talked about, tents clumped together like bunches of sprouting flowers.

With individuals removed, she could see the patterns and the troubles they bespoke. Egwene might denounce Elaida for the rifts among the Ajahs in the White Tower, but Egwene's own Aes Sedai were beginning to fracture as well. Well, three Aes Sedai could hardly gather without two of them making an alliance. It was healthy to have the women planning and preparing; the trouble was when they began to regard others of their kind as enemies, rather than just rivals.

Siuan was right, unfortunately. Egwene could not spend much more time setting her hopes on reconciliation. What if the White Tower *didn't* unseat Elaida? What if, despite Egwene's progress, the rifts between the Ajahs never healed? What then? Go to war?

There was another option, one that none of them had brought up: that of giving up on reconciliation permanently. Setting up a second White Tower. It would mean leaving the Aes Sedai broken, perhaps forever. Egwene shuddered at the prospect, and her skin itched, rebelling against the thought.

But what if she had no other choice? She had to consider the ramifications, and she found them daunting. How could they encourage the Kin or the Wise Ones to tie themselves to the Aes Sedai if the Aes Sedai themselves were not unified? The two White Towers would become opposed forces, confusing the leaders of men as rival Amyrlins tried to use nations for their own purposes. Allies and enemies alike would lose their awe of the Aes Sedai, and kings very well might start up their own centers for women talented in channeling.

Egwene steeled herself, walking on the muddy road, the tents along the way changing, their flaps open, then closed, then open again in the strange ephemeral way of the World of Dreams. Egwene felt the Amyrlin's stole appear around her neck, too heavy, as if woven with lead weights.

She *would* bring the White Tower Aes Sedai to her side. Elaida *would* fall. But if not . . . then Egwene would do what was necessary in order to preserve the people, and the world, in the face of Tarmon Gai'don.

She stepped away from the camp, the tents, ruts, and empty streets vanishing. Again, she wasn't certain where her mind would take her. Traveling in the World of Dreams this way—letting *need* direct her—could be dangerous, but it could also be very illuminating. In this case, she looked not for an object, but for knowledge. What did she need to know, what did she need to see?

Her surroundings blurred, then snapped back straight. She stood in the middle of a small camp, fire smoldering in a firepit before her, a tiny tongue of smoke curling toward the sky. That was odd. Fire was usually too fleeting to reflect in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. There were no actual flames, despite the smoke and the orange glow warming the smooth riverstones that ringed the pit. She glanced upward, toward the too-dark, stormy sky. That silent storm was another irregularity for the World of Dreams, though it had become so common lately that she hardly noticed it anymore. Could anything be called regular for this place?

With shock, she noticed colorful wagons around her, green, red, orange and yellow. Had they been there a moment before? She was in a large clearing set inside a forest of phantom white aspen. The underbrush was thick, where spindly wild grass poked fingers out in jagged patches. An overgrown road meandered through the trees to her right; the colorful wagons sat in a ring around the fire. Bright paints colored the sides of the boxy vehicles, which had roofs and walls like tiny buildings. Oxen did not reflect in the World of Dreams, but plates, cups and spoons appeared, then vanished from places beside the firepit or on the seats of the wagons.

It was a camp of the Traveling People, the Tuatha'an. Why this place? Egwene walked idly around the firepit, looking at the wagons, the coats of paint kept fresh and free of cracks or stains. This caravan was much smaller than the one she and Perrin had visited so long ago, but it had much the same feel. She could almost hear the flutes and drums, could almost imagine those flickers from the firepit to be the shadows of dancing men and women. Did the Tuatha'an still dance, with that sky so full of gloom, the winds so full of ill news? What place was there for them in a world preparing for war? Trollocs cared nothing for the Way of the Leaf. Did this group of Tuatha'an seek to hide from the Last Battle?

Egwene settled herself on the side steps of a wagon, which was turned to face the nearby firepit. For a moment, she let her gown change to that of a simple, woolen Two Rivers dress of green, much like the one she'd worn during her time visiting the Traveling People. She stared into those nonexistent flames, remembering and pondering. What had become of Aram, Raen and Ila? Likely they were safe somewhere in a camp just like this one, waiting to see what Tarmon Gai'don would do to the world.

Egwene smiled, thinking of those days when she'd flirted and danced with Aram beneath Perrin's scowling disapproval. That had been a simpler time; though the Tinkers always seemed able to make a simpler time for themselves.

Yes, this group would still dance. They would dance right up until the day when the Pattern burned away, whether or not they found their song, whether or not Trollocs ravaged the world or the Dragon Reborn destroyed it.

Had she let herself lose sight of those things which were most precious? *Why* did she fight so hard to secure the White Tower? For power? For pride? Or because she felt it really was best for the world?

Was she going to suck herself dry as she fought this battle? She had chosen—or, would have chosen—the Green and not the Blue. The difference wasn't just that she liked the way the Greens stood up and fought; she thought that the Blues were *too* focused. Life was more complicated than a single cause. Life was about living. About dreaming, laughing and dancing.

Gawyn was in the Aes Sedai camp. She said that she'd chosen the Green for its aggressive determination—it was the Battle Ajah. But a more secret, more honest, part of herself admitted that Gawyn was a motivation for her decision as well. Among the Green Ajah, marrying one's Warder was common. Egwene *would* have Gawyn for her Warder. And her husband.

She loved him. She would bond him. Those desires of her heart were less important than the fate of the world, true, but they *were* still important.

Egwene rose from the steps as her dress transformed back into the white and silver gown of the Amyrlin. She took a step forward and let the world shift.

She stood before the White Tower. She turned her eyes high, running them along the length of the delicate—yet still powerful—white spire. Though the sky bubbled in black turmoil, something cast a shadow from the Tower, and it fell directly on Egwene. Was this a vision of some sort? The Tower dwarfed her, and she felt its weight, as if she were holding it up herself. Pushing on those walls, keeping them from cracking and tumbling.

She stood for a long while there, sky boiling, the Tower's perfect spire throwing its shadow down on Egwene. She stared up at its peak, trying to decide if it was time to just let it fall.

No, she thought again. *No, not quite yet. A few more days.*

She closed her eyes, then opened them to blackness. Her body suddenly exploded with pain, her backside pounded raw from the strap, her arms and legs cramped from being forced to lie curled in the small room. It smelled of old straw and mold, and she knew that if her nose hadn't been used to it, she would have smelled the stench of her own unwashed body as well. She stifled a groan—there were women outside, guarding her and maintaining her shield. She wouldn't let them hear her offer complaint, not even in the form of a groan.

She sat up, wearing the same novice dress that she'd worn to Elaida's dinner party. The sleeves of the dress were stiff with dried blood, and this cracked as she moved, scraping against her skin. She was parched; they never gave her enough water. But she did not complain. No yells, no cries, no begging. She forced herself to sit up despite the pain, smiling to herself at how it felt. She crossed her legs, then leaned back and—one by one—stretched the muscles in her arms. Then she stood and stooped over, stretching her back and shoulders. Finally, she lay down on her back and stretched her legs up into the air, cringing as they complained. She needed to remain limber. Pain was nothing. Nothing at all compared with the danger the White Tower was in.

She sat back down, cross-legged, and took deep breaths, repeating to herself that she *wanted* to be locked in this room. She could escape if she wished, but she remained. By remaining she undermined Elaida. By remaining she proved that some would not bow and quietly accept the fall of the White Tower. This imprisonment meant something.

The words, repeated in her head, helped stave off the panic at considering yet another day within this cell. What would she have done without the nightly dreams to keep her sane? Again, she thought of poor Rand, locked away. She and he shared something now. A kinship beyond a common childhood in the Two Rivers. They had both suffered Elaida's punishments. And it hadn't broken either of them.

There was nothing to do but wait. Around noon, they would open the doors and drag her out to be beaten. It wouldn't be Silviana who did the punishing. Giving the beatings was seen as a reward, compensation to the Red sisters for having to spend all day sitting in the dungeons guarding her.

After the beating, Egwene would go back in the cell and be given a bowl of tasteless gruel. Day after day it was the same. But she would not break, particularly not while she could spend the nights in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. In fact, in many ways, those were her days—spent free and active—while these were her nights, in inactive darkness. She told herself that.

The morning passed slowly. Eventually, iron keys clanked as one turned in the ancient lock. The door opened, and a pair of slender Red sisters stood outside, barely silhouettes, the light so unfamiliar to Egwene that she couldn't make out their features. The Reds grabbed her roughly by the arms, though she never resisted. They pulled her out and threw her to the ground. She heard the strap as one slapped it against her hand in anticipation, and Egwene steeled herself for the blows. They would hear her laugh, just as they had every day before.

"Wait," a voice said.

The arms holding Egwene down grew stiff. Egwene frowned, cheek pressed against the cold tile floor. That voice . . . it had been Katerine's.

Slowly, the sisters holding Egwene relaxed their grips, pulling her to her feet. She blinked against the blazing light of the lamps to find Katerine standing in the hallway a short distance away, her arms folded. "She is to be released," the Red said, sounding strangely smug.

"*What?*" asked one of Egwene's captors. As her eyes adjusted, Egwene could see that it was lanky Barasine.

"The Amyrlin has realized that she is punishing the wrong person," Katerine said. "The failure lies not completely on the head of this . . . insect of a novice, but on the one who was to be manipulating her."

Egwene eyed Katerine. And then it clicked into place. "Silviana," she said.

"Indeed," Katerine said. "If the novices are out of control, then should not the blame fall on the one who was to train them?"

So Elaida *had* realized that she could not prove Egwene was a Darkfriend. Deflecting attention to Silviana was a clever move; if Elaida was punished for using the Power to beat Egwene, but Silviana was punished far more for letting Egwene get out of control, it would save face for the Amyrlin.

"I think the Amyrlin made a wise choice," Katerine said. "Egwene, you are to be . . . instructed from now on only by the Mistress of Novices."

"But Silviana is the one you said has failed," Egwene said, confused.

"Not Silviana," Katerine said; her smugness seemed to grow even further. "The new Mistress of Novices."

Egwene locked gazes with the woman. “Ah,” she said. “And you believe that you will succeed where Silviana failed?”

“You will see.” Katerine turned away and headed down the tiled hallway. “Take her to her quarters.”

Egwene shook her head. Elaida was more competent than Egwene had assumed. She’d seen that the imprisonment wasn’t working and had found a scapegoat to punish instead. But Silviana, removed from her position as Mistress of Novices? That would be a blow to the morale of the Tower itself, for many sisters considered Silviana an exemplary Mistress of Novices.

The Reds reluctantly began to walk Egwene toward the novices’ quarters, now in their new location on the twenty-second level. They seemed annoyed to have missed out on the opportunity to beat her.

She ignored them. After spending so long locked up, it felt wonderful simply to be able to walk. It wasn’t freedom, not with a pair of guards, but it certainly did feel like it! Light! She wasn’t certain how many more days in that dank hole of a cell she’d have been able to stand!

But she’d won. The realization was just beginning to dawn on her. She’d *won*! She’d resisted the worst punishment Elaida could contrive, and had come out victorious! The Amyrlin would be punished by the Hall, and Egwene would go free.

Each familiar hallway seemed to shine with a congratulatory light, and each step she took seemed like the victory march of a thousand men across the battlefield. She had won! The war was not over, but this battle went to Egwene. They climbed some stairs, then entered the more populated sections of the Tower. Soon, she saw a group of novices passing; they whispered to one another as they saw Egwene, then scattered away.

Within minutes, Egwene’s little procession of three began to pass more and more people in the hallways. Sisters of all Ajahs, looking busy—yet their steps slowed as they watched Egwene pass. Accepted in their banded dresses were far less covert; they stood at intersections, gawking as Egwene was led past. In all of their eyes there was surprise. Why was she free? They seemed tense. Had something happened that Egwene wasn’t aware of?

“Ah, Egwene,” a voice said as they passed a hallway. “Excellent, you are already free. I would speak with you.”

Egwene turned with shock to see Saerin, the purposeful Brown Sitter. The scar on the woman’s cheek always made her seem far more . . .

daunting than most other Aes Sedai, an air enhanced by the white locks of hair, indicating her great age. Few members of the Brown could be described as intimidating, but Saerin was certainly one of that select group.

“We are taking her to her rooms,” Barasine said.

“Well, I will speak to her as you do,” Saerin said calmly.

“She is not to—”

“You deny me, Red? A Sitter?” Saerin asked.

Barasine blushed. “The Amyrlin will not be pleased to hear of this.”

“Then run along and tell her,” Saerin said. “While I discuss some items of import with young al’Vere.” She eyed the Reds. “Give us some room, if you please.”

The two Reds failed to stare her down, then backed away. Egwene watched with curiosity. It appeared that the authority of the Amyrlin—indeed, that of her entire Ajah—was somewhat dimmed. Saerin turned to Egwene and gestured, and the two of them began to walk together through the hallway, the Red sisters following behind.

“You take a risk being seen speaking to me like this,” Egwene said.

Saerin sniffed. “Leaving one’s quarters is taking a risk, these days. I’m growing too frustrated with events to bother with niceties anymore.” She paused, then glanced at Egwene. “Besides. Being seen in your company can be rather worth that risk, these days. I wanted to determine something.”

“What?” Egwene asked, curious.

“Well, I actually wanted to see if *they* could be pushed around. Most of the members of the Red are not taking your release well. They see it as a major failing on Elaida’s part.”

“She should have killed me,” Egwene said with a nod. “Days ago.”

“That would have been seen as a failure.”

“As much a failure as being forced to remove Silviana?” Egwene asked. “Of suddenly deciding that your Mistress of Novices is to blame, a week after the fact?”

“Is that what they told you?” Saerin asked, smiling as they walked, her eyes forward. “That Elaida ‘suddenly’ came to this decision, all on her own?”

Egwene raised an eyebrow.

“Silviana demanded to be heard by the full Hall while it was sitting,” Saerin explained. “She stood before the lot of us, before Elaida herself, and insisted that your treatment was unlawful. Which, likely, it was. Even if you aren’t an Aes Sedai, you shouldn’t have been placed in such terrible conditions.” Saerin glanced at Egwene. “Silviana *demanded* your release. She seemed to respect you a great deal, I should say. She spoke with pride in her voice of how you’d received your punishments, as if you were a student who had learned her lesson well. She denounced Elaida, calling for her to be removed as Amyrlin. It was . . . quite extraordinary.”

“By the Light . . .” Egwene breathed. “What did Elaida do to her?”

“Ordered her to take up the dress of a novice,” Saerin said. “Just about caused an uproar in the Hall itself.” Saerin paused. “Silviana refused, of course. Elaida has declared that she is to be stilled and executed. The Hall doesn’t know *what* to do.”

Egwene felt a stab of panic. “Light! She mustn’t be punished! We must prevent this.”

“Prevent it?” Saerin asked. “Child, the Red Ajah is crumbling! Its members are turning against one another, wolves attacking their own pack. If Elaida is allowed to go through with *killing* one of her own Ajah, whatever support she had from within the ranks will evaporate. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised, when the dust settles, to see that the Ajah has undermined itself to the point that you could simply disband it and be done with them.”

“I don’t *want* to disband them,” Egwene said. “Saerin, that’s one of the problems with Elaida’s way of thinking in the first place! The White Tower needs all of the Ajahs, even the Red, to face what is coming. We certainly can’t afford to lose a woman like Silviana just to make a point. Rally what support you can. We have to move quickly to stop this travesty.”

Saerin blinked. “Do you really think you’re in control here, child?”

Egwene met her eyes. “Do *you* want to be?”

“Light, no!”

“Well, then stop standing in my way and get to work! Elaida must be removed, but we can’t let the entire Tower collapse around us while it happens. Go to the Hall and see what you can do to stop this!”

Saerin actually nodded in respect before withdrawing down a side corridor. Egwene glanced back at her two Red attendants. “Did you hear much of that?”

They glanced at each other. Of course they’d been listening. “You’ll want to go determine for yourselves what has happened,” Egwene said. “Why haven’t you?”

The two glanced at her with annoyance. “The shield,” Barasine said. “We’ve been instructed to always have at least two to maintain it.”

“Oh, for the. . . .” Egwene took a deep breath. “If I vow not to embrace the Power until I am properly back in the custody of another Red sister, will that be enough for you?”

The two regarded her with suspicion.

“I suspected as much,” Egwene said. She turned to a group of novices who were standing in a side corridor, pretending to scrub the tiles on the side wall while they gawked at Egwene.

“You,” Egwene said, pointing to one of them. “Marsial, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Mother,” the girl squeaked.

“Go and fetch us some forkroot tea. Katerine should have some at the study of the Mistress of Novices. It’s not far. Tell her that Barasine requested it for use on me; bring it to my quarters.”

The novice scrambled off to do as asked.

“I’ll dose myself with that, and then at least one of you can go,” Egwene said. “Your Ajah is collapsing. They’re going to need all of the clear minds they can get; maybe you can convince your sisters that it is unwise to let Elaida execute Silviana.”

The two Reds glanced at each other uncertainly. Then the spindly one whose name Egwene didn’t know cursed softly and hurried away with a flurry of rustling skirts. Barasine called after her, but the woman didn’t return.

Barasine glanced at Egwene, muttered something under her breath, but remained in place. “We’re waiting for that forkroot,” she said, staring Egwene in the eyes. “Keep moving on to your quarters.”

“Fine,” Egwene said. “But each minute you delay could cost you deeply.”

They climbed the stairs to the new novices’ quarters, which were scrunched up alongside the remainder of the Brown section of the Tower. They stopped by Egwene’s door to wait for the forkroot. As they stood there, novices began to crowd around. In the distant corridors, sisters and their Warders ran through hallways with a sense of urgency. Hopefully, the Hall would be able to do something to contain Elaida. If she really went so far as to execute sisters for simply disagreeing with her. . . .

The wide-eyed novice finally returned with a cup and a small packet of herbs. Barasine inspected the packet and apparently determined that it was satisfactory, for she dumped it into the cup and proffered it to Egwene expectantly. With a sigh, Egwene took it and downed the entire cup of warm water. It was enough of a dose that she wouldn't be able to channel a trickle, but hopefully wouldn't be strong enough to render her unconscious.

Barasine turned and hurried away, leaving Egwene alone in the hallway. Not just alone, but alone and able to do exactly as she wished. She didn't get many of these opportunities.

Well, she'd have to see what she could do with that. But first, she'd need to change out of this filthy, bloodstained dress, and wash herself, too. She pushed open the door to her quarters.

And found someone sitting inside.

"Hello, Egwene," Verin said, taking a sip from a steaming cup of tea. "My! I was beginning to wonder if I'd have to break into that cell of yours in order to speak with you."

Egwene shook off her shock. Verin? When had the woman returned to the White Tower? How long had it been since Egwene had seen her? "There isn't time right now, Verin," she said, quickly opening the small locker that contained her extra dress. "I have work to be about."

"Hmm, yes," Verin said, taking a calm sip of her tea. "I suspect that you do. By the way, that dress you are wearing is green."

Egwene frowned at the nonsense sentence, glancing down at her dress. Of course it wasn't green. What was Verin saying? Had the woman become—

She froze, glancing at Verin.

That had been a lie. *Verin could speak lies.*

"Yes, I thought that might get your attention," Verin said, smiling. "You should sit down. We have much to discuss and little time in which to do it."

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CHAPTER 39

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A Visit from Verin Sedai

“You never held the Oath Rod,” Egwene accused her, still standing by the closet. Verin remained on the side of the bed, sipping her tea. The stout woman wore a simple brown dress with a matronly cut through the bosom and a thick leather belt at the waist. The skirts were divided, and judging from the dirty boots peeking out from under the hem, she had only just arrived back in the White Tower.

“Don’t be silly.” Verin brushed back a lock of hair that had escaped from her bun; the brown was marked with a pronounced streak of gray. “Child, I held the Oath Rod and swore upon it before your *grandmother* was born.”

“Then you’ve had the Oaths removed,” Egwene said. It was possible with the Oath Rod—after all, Yukiri, Saerin and the others had removed their oaths and replaced them.

“Well, yes,” Verin said in a motherly way.

“I don’t trust you,” Egwene found herself blurting. “I don’t think I ever have.”

“Very wise,” Verin said, sipping her tea. It was not a scent Egwene recognized. “I am, after all, of the Black Ajah.”

Egwene felt a sudden chill, like an ice cold spike pounded directly through her back and down into her chest. Black Ajah. Verin was Black. Light!

Egwene immediately reached for the One Power. But of course the forkroot made that effort futile. And Egwene herself had been the one to suggest it be given to her! Light, had she taken leave of her senses? She’d been so confident and certain following her victory that she hadn’t anticipated what might happen if she ran into a Black sister. But who could *anticipate* running into a Black sister? Finding one sitting calmly on your bed, drinking tea and looking at you with those eyes that always *had* seemed to know too much. What better way to hide than as an unassuming Brown, constantly dismissed by the other sisters because of your distracted, scholarly ways?

“My, but this *is* good tea,” Verin said. “When you next see Laras, please thank her on my behalf for providing it. She promised that she had some that hadn’t spoiled, but I didn’t trust her. Can’t trust much these days, can you?”

“What, is Laras a Darkfriend?” Egwene asked.

“Heavens, no,” Verin said. “She’s many things, but not a Darkfriend. You’d sooner find a Whitecloak marrying an Aes Sedai than find Laras swearing to the Great Lord. Extraordinary woman. And quite good at judging the flavor of teas.”

“What are you going to do with me?” Egwene said, forcing herself to speak calmly. If Verin had wanted to kill her, the deed would have been done by now. Obviously Verin wanted to use Egwene, and use would give Egwene opportunity. Opportunity for escape, opportunity to turn the situation around. Light, this was bad timing!

“Well,” Verin said, “first I will ask you to sit. I would offer you some tea, but I sincerely doubt you want any of what I’m having.”

Think, Egwene! she told herself. Calling for help would be futile; only novices were likely to hear, as her Red keepers had both run off. Of all the times to be alone! She’d never have thought that she’d wish for jailers nearby.

Anyway, if she yelled, Verin would undoubtedly bind and gag her with weaves of Air. And if any novices *did* hear, they’d run to see what was the problem—and that would only pull them into Verin’s clutches as well. So Egwene pulled over the room’s single wooden stool and sat upon it, backside protesting the uncushioned wood.

The small room was still and quiet, cold and sterile, as it had been unoccupied for four days. Egwene sought furiously for an avenue of escape.

“I compliment you on what you’ve done here, Egwene,” Verin said. “I’ve followed some little of the foolishness going on between the Aes Sedai factions, though I decided not to get involved personally. It was more important to continue my research and keep an eye on young al’Thor. He’s a fiery one, I must say. I worry about the lad. I’m not certain he understands how the Great Lord works. Not all evil is as . . . obvious as the Chosen. The Forsaken, as you’d call them.”

“Obvious?” Egwene said. “The Forsaken?”

“Well, by comparison.” Verin smiled and warmed her hands on her cup of tea. “The Chosen are like a bunch of squabbling children, each trying to scream the loudest and attract their father’s attention. It’s easy to determine what *they* want: Power over the other children, proof that they are the most important. I’m convinced that it isn’t intelligence, craftiness, or skill that makes one Chosen—though of course, those things are important. No, I believe it is *selfishness* the Great Lord seeks in his greatest leaders.”

Egwene frowned. Were they really having a quiet chat about the *Forsaken?* “Why would he choose that quality?”

“It makes them predictable. A tool you can depend upon to act as expected is far more valuable than one you cannot understand. Or perhaps because when they struggle against one another, it makes only the strong ones survive. I don’t know, honestly. The Chosen are predictable, but the Great Lord is anything but. Even after decades of study, I can’t be certain exactly what *he* wants or why he wants it. I only know that this battle isn’t being fought the way that al’Thor assumes it will be.”

“And what does this have to do with me?” Egwene asked.

“Not much,” Verin said, *tsking* at herself. “I’m afraid I let myself get sidetracked. And with so little time, too. I really must pay attention.” She *still* seemed like the pleasant, scholarly Brown sister. Egwene had always expected that Black sisters would be . . . different.

“Anyway,” Verin continued. “We were talking about what you did here, in the Tower. I was afraid that I’d come and find you still dawdling with your friends outside. Imagine my amazement at finding that you’d not only infiltrated Elaida’s regime, but had apparently turned half of the Hall itself against her. You’ve certainly riled some of my associates, I can tell you that. They are none too pleased.” Verin shook her head, taking another sip of tea.

“Verin, I. . . .” Egwene paused. “What is—”

“No time, I’m afraid,” Verin said, leaning forward. Suddenly, something about her seemed to change. Though she was still the aged—and at times motherly—woman, her expression grew more determined. She caught Egwene’s eyes, and the intensity within that gaze shocked Egwene. *Was* this the same woman?

“Thank you for humoring a woman’s rambles,” Verin said, voice more soft. “It was so very nice to have a quiet chat over tea, at least once more. Now, there are some things you need to know. A number of years ago, I faced a decision. I found myself in a position where I could either take the oaths to the Dark One, or I could reveal that I had actually never wanted—or intended—to do so, whereupon I would have been executed.

“Perhaps another would have found a way around this situation. Many would have simply opted for death. I, however, saw this as an opportunity.

You see, one rarely has such a chance as this, to study a beast from inside its heart, to see really what makes the blood flow. To discover where all of the little veins and vessels lead. Quite an extraordinary experience."

"Wait," Egwene said. "You joined the Black Ajah to *study* them?"

"I *joined* them to keep my skin intact," Verin said, smiling. "I'm rather fond of it, though Tomas *did* go on about these white hairs. Anyway, after joining them, the chance to study them was my making the best of the situation."

"Tomas. Does he know what you've done?"

"He was a Darkfriend himself, child," Verin said. "Wanting a way out. Well, there really isn't a way out, not once the Great Lord has his claws in you. But there *was* a way to fight, to make up for a little of what you've done. I offered that chance to Tomas, and I believe he was quite grateful to me for it."

Egwene hesitated, trying to take all of this in. Verin was a Darkfriend . . . but not one at the same time. "You said he 'was' quite grateful to you?"

Verin didn't answer immediately. She simply took another sip of her tea. "The oaths one makes to the Great Lord are quite specific," she finally continued. "And, when they are placed upon one who can channel, they are quite binding. Impossible to break. You can double-cross other Darkfriends, you can turn against the Chosen if you can justify it. Selfishness must be preserved. But you can never betray *him*. You can never betray the order itself to outsiders. But the oaths are specific. Very specific." She looked up, meeting Egwene's eyes. " 'I swear not to betray the Great Lord, to keep my secrets until the hour of my death.' That was what I promised. Do you see?"

Egwene looked down at the steaming cup in Verin's hands. "Poison?"

"It takes a very special tea to make asping rot go down sweetly," Verin said, taking another sip. "As I said, please thank Laras for me."

Egwene closed her eyes. Nynaeve had mentioned asping rot to her; a drop could kill. It was a quick death, peaceful, and often came . . . within an hour of ingestion.

"A curious hole in the oaths," Verin said softly. "To allow one to effect a betrayal in the final hour of one's life. I cannot help wondering if the Great Lord knows of it. Why wouldn't he close that hole?"

"Perhaps he doesn't see it as threatening," Egwene said, opening her eyes. "After all, what kind of Darkfriend would *kill* themselves in order to advance the greater good? It doesn't seem the kind of thing his followers would consider."

"You may be right at that," Verin said, setting the cup of tea aside. "It would be wise to make certain that is disposed of with care, child."

"So that is it?" Egwene asked, chilled. "What of Tomas?"

"We made our farewells. He is spending his last hour with family."

Egwene shook her head. It seemed such a tragedy. "You come to me to confess, killing yourself in a final quest for redemption?"

Verin laughed. "Redemption? I should think that wouldn't be so easily earned. Light knows I've done enough to require a very *special* kind of redemption. But it was worth the cost. Worth it indeed. Or perhaps that is simply what I must tell myself." She reached to her side, pulling a leather scrip from beneath the folded blanket at the foot of Egwene's bed. Verin carefully undid the straps, then produced two items: two books, both bound in leather. One was larger, like a reference book, though it had no title on its red binding. The other was a thin blue book. The covers of both were a little worn from use.

Verin handed them to Egwene. Hesitantly she took them, the larger volume heavy in her right hand, the blue book light in her left hand. She ran a finger over the smooth leather, frowning. She looked up at Verin.

"Every woman in the Brown," Verin said, "seeks to produce something lasting. Research or study that will be *meaningful*. Others often accuse us of ignoring the world around us. They think we only look backward. Well, that is inaccurate. If we are distracted, it is because we look forward, toward those who will come. And the information, the knowledge we gather . . . we leave it for them. The other Ajahs worry about making today better; we yearn to make tomorrow better."

Egwene set the blue book aside, looking into the red one first. The words were written in a small, efficient, but cramped hand she recognized as Verin's. None of the sentences made sense. They were gibberish.

"The small book is a key, Egwene," Verin explained. "It contains the cipher I used to write this tome. That tome is the . . . work. My work. The work of my life."

"What is it?" Egwene asked softly, suspecting she might know the answer.

"Names, locations, explanations," Verin said. "Everything I learned about *them*. About the leaders among the Darkfriends, about the Black

Ajah. The prophecies they believe, the goals and motivations of the separate factions. Along with a list, at the back, of every Black Ajah sister I could identify."

Egwene started. "Every one?"

"I doubt I caught them all," Verin said, smiling. "But I think I got the large majority of them. I promise you, Egwene. I can be *quite* thorough."

Egwene looked down at the books with awe. Incredible! Light, but this was a treasure greater than any king's hoard. A treasure as great as the Horn of Valere itself. She looked up, tears in her eyes, imagining a life spent among the Black, always watching, recording, and working for the good of all.

"Oh, don't go doing that," Verin said. Her face was beginning to look pale. "They have many agents among us, like worms eating the fruit out from the core. Well, I thought it time that we had at least one of us among them. This is worth one woman's life. Few people have had a chance to create something as useful, and as wonderful, as that book you hold. We all seek to change the future, Egwene. I think I might just have a chance at doing so."

Verin took a deep breath, then raised a hand to her head. "My. That does work quickly. There is one more thing I must tell you. Open the red book, please."

Egwene did so, and found a thin leather strap with steel weights on the ends, the type used for marking one's place in a book, though it was longer than others she had seen.

"Wrap it around the book," Verin said, "place it marking any page, then twist the loose ends around the top."

Egwene did so, curious, tucking the strap into a random page and closing the book. She put the smaller book on top of the larger one, then took the long ends of the bookmark that dangled down and twisted them about one another. The weights, she noticed, fit together. She locked them into place.

And the books vanished.

Egwene stared. She could still feel them in her hands, but the books themselves were invisible.

"Only works on books, I'm afraid," Verin said, yawning. "Someone from the Age of Legends, it appears, was *very* worried about hiding his or her journal from others." She smiled slightly, but was growing very pale.

“Thank you, Verin,” Egwene said, unclasping and unwrapping the bookmark. The volumes appeared again. “I wish there were some other way . . .”

“I will admit that the poison was a backup plan,” Verin said. “I am not eager for death; there are still things I need to do. Fortunately, I have set several of them in motion to be . . . seen to, in case I do not return. Regardless, my first plan was to find the Oath Rod, then see if I could use it to remove the Great Lord’s oaths. The Oath Rod appears to have gone missing, unfortunately.”

Saerin, Egwene thought, *and the others. They must have taken it again.* “I’m sorry, Verin,” she said.

“It might not have worked anyway,” Verin said, settling back on the bed, arranging the pillow behind her streaked brown hair. “The process of making those oaths to the Great Lord was . . . distinctive. I do wish I’d been able to discover one more tidbit for you. One of the Chosen is in the Tower, child. It’s Mesaana, I’m certain of it. I had hoped to be able to bring you the name she was hiding under, but the two times I met with her, she was shrouded to the point that I couldn’t tell. What I did see is recorded in the red book.

“Be careful where you tread. Be careful how you strike. I will leave it to you to decide if you want to try to get all of them at once, or if you want to take the most important ones separately in secret. Perhaps you will decide to watch and see if you can counter their plots. A good interrogation might yield light upon some of the questions I was not able to answer. So many decisions you must make, for one so young.” She yawned, then grimaced as a pain stabbed her.

Egwene rose, walking to Verin’s side. “Thank you, Verin. Thank you for choosing me to carry this burden.”

Verin smiled faintly. “You did very well with the previous tidbits I gave you. That was quite the interesting situation. The Amyrlin commanded that I give you information to hunt the Black sisters who fled the Tower, so I had to comply, even though the leadership of the Black was frustrated by the order. I wasn’t supposed to give you the dreaming *ter’angreal*, you know. But I’ve always had a feeling about you.”

“I’m not certain I deserve such trust.” Egwene looked down at the book. “Trust such as you’ve shown.”

“Nonsense, child,” Verin said, yawning again, eyes closing. “You will be Amyrlin. I’m confident of it. And an Amyrlin should be well armed with knowledge. That, among all things, is the most sacred duty of the Brown—to arm the world with knowledge. I’m still one of them. Please see that they know, although the word Black may brand my name forever, my soul is Brown. Tell them. . . .”

“I will, Verin,” Egwene promised. “But your soul is not Brown. I can see it.”

Her eyes fluttered open, meeting Egwene’s, a frown creasing her forehead.

“Your soul is of a pure white, Verin,” Egwene said softly. “Like the Light itself.”

Verin smiled, and her eyes closed. The actual death was a few more minutes in coming, but unconsciousness came first and swiftly. Egwene sat, holding the woman’s hand. Elaida and the Hall could see to themselves; Egwene had prepared her seeds well. Showing up now and making demands would be to overextend her authority.

After Verin’s pulse faded, Egwene took the cup of poisoned tea and set it aside, then raised the saucer up in front of Verin’s nose. The shiny surface reflected no fog. It felt callous to double-check, but there were some poisons which could make one appear to be dead and breathe only very shallowly, and if Verin had wanted to trick Egwene and point a finger at the wrong sisters, this would have been a wonderful method. Callous indeed to double-check, and it made Egwene feel sick, but she was Amyrlin. She did that which was difficult and considered all possibilities.

Surely no truly Black sister would have been willing to die just to create such misdirection. Her heart trusted Verin, although her mind wanted to be certain. She glanced toward her simple desk, where she had set the books. At that moment, the door to her room opened without warning and a young Aes Sedai—new enough to the Shawl that her face didn’t show the ageless look yet—peeked in. Turese, one of the Red sisters. So someone had finally been assigned to watch over Egwene. Her period of freedom had come to an end. Well, there was no use crying over what could have been. The time had been well spent. She wished Verin had come to see her a week earlier, but what was done was done.

The Red sister frowned at seeing Verin, and Egwene quickly raised a finger to her lips and shot the young sister a harsh look.

Egwene hurried to the door. “She just got in, and wished to speak to me regarding a task she had set me upon long ago, back before the Tower split. They can be oddly single-minded at times, these Brown sisters.” True words, every one of them.

Turese nodded ruefully at the comment about Browns.

“I do wish she’d chosen her own bed to lie down in,” Egwene said. “I’m not sure what to do with her now.” All true again. Egwene really *did* need to get her hands on that Oath Rod. Lying started to seem far too convenient at times like this.

“She must be tired from her travels,” Turese said, voice soft but firm. “You let her do as she wishes; she is Aes Sedai, and you simply a novice. Do not disturb her.”

With that, the Red closed the door, and Egwene smiled to herself in satisfaction. Then she glanced at Verin’s corpse, and the smile faded. Eventually, she would have to reveal that Verin had died. How would she explain *that*? Well, she would think of something. If pressed, she might just tell the truth.

First, though, she needed to spend some time with that book. The chances of it being taken from her in the near future were great, even with the bookmark *ter’angreal*. She should probably store the cipher separate from the concealed book. Perhaps memorize and destroy the cipher. This would all be easier to plan for if she knew how events had gone in the Hall! Had Elaida been deposed? Was Silviana alive, or had she been executed?

There was little she could discover now, not while being guarded. She would simply have to wait. And read.

The code proved to be rather complex, requiring a good part of the smaller book to explain. That was both advantageous and frustrating. It would be very difficult to break the code without it, but the code would also be near impossible to memorize. She wouldn’t be able to manage it before morning, by which time she would have to reveal Verin’s true state.

She glanced over at the woman. Verin really did look as if she were sleeping peacefully. Egwene had pulled out the blanket and covered her up to the neck, then taken off her shoes and set them beside the bed to enhance the illusion. Feeling a little disrespectful, she decided to roll Verin onto her side. The Red sister had already peeked in a couple of times, and seeing Verin in another position would look less suspicious.

That finished, Egwene glanced at her candle to judge the passage of time. There were no windows in the room, not in a novice's quarters. She shoved aside the longing to embrace the Power and create a ball of light by which to read. She'd have to be satisfied with the single candle's flame.

She dug into her first task: deciphering the names of the Black sisters listed at the back of the tome. That was more important, even, than memorizing the cipher. She *had* to know whom she could trust.

The next few hours were among the most disturbing and discomforting in her life. Some of the names were unknown to her, many barely familiar. Others were women she had worked with, respected, and even trusted. She cursed when she found Katerine's name near the head of the list, then hissed in surprise when Alviarin's name came up. She'd heard of Elza Penfell and Galina Casban, though she didn't know some of the next few names.

She felt a sickening pit within her when she read Sheriam's name. Egwene had once suspected the woman, true, but that had been during her days as a novice and an Accepted. During those days—the days when she'd first begun hunting the Black Ajah—Liandrin's betrayal had still been fresh. Egwene had suspected everyone then.

During the exile in Salidar, Egwene had worked closely with Sheriam and had grown to like the woman. But she was Black. Egwene's own Keeper was Black. *Steel yourself, Egwene,* she thought, continuing to read down the list. She worked through the feelings of betrayal, the bitterness and the regret. She would not let emotions get in the way of her duty.

The Black sisters were spread across all Ajahs. Some were Sitters, others were the lowest and least powerful of Aes Sedai. And there were hundreds of them, a little over two hundred by Verin's own count. Twenty-one in the Blue, twenty-eight in the Brown, thirty in the Gray, thirty-eight in the Green, seventeen in the White, twenty-one in the Yellow, and a stunning forty-eight in the Red. There were names of Accepted and novices as well. The book noted that those had probably been Darkfriends before they joined the White Tower, as the Black Ajah did not recruit from any except Aes Sedai. It referred her to an earlier page for a longer explanation, but Egwene continued down the list of sisters. She needed to know the names of each woman. She *needed* to.

There were Black sisters among the rebel Aes Sedai and those of the White Tower, and even some among those unaligned who had been away from the Tower during the split. Other than Sheriam, the most disturbing discovery on the list were the sisters who were Sitters in either the Tower or among the rebels. Duhara Basaheen. Velina Behar. Sedore Dajenna. Delana Mosalaine, of course, and Talene Minly as well. Meidani had admitted to Egwene in confidence that Talene was the member of the Black Ajah that Saerin and the others had discovered, but she had fled the Tower.

Moria Karentanis. That last was a member of the Blue Ajah, a woman who had worn the shawl for over a hundred years, known for her wisdom and level-headedness. Egwene had conferred with her on numerous occasions, and had drawn on her experience, assuming that she—a Blue—would be one of the most reliable in her support. Moria had been one of those who had been eager to elect Egwene as Amyrlin, and had stood quickly in Egwene's favor at several crucial moments.

Each name was like a thorn through Egwene's skin. Dagdara Finchey, who had healed Egwene once when she'd stumbled and twisted her ankle. Zanica, who had taught Egwene lessons and had seemed so pleasant. Larissa Lyndel. Miyasi, for whom Egwene had cracked nuts. Nesita. Nacelle Kayama. Nalaene Forrell, who—like Elza—was bound to Rand. Birlen Pena. Melvara. Chai Rugan. . . .

The list went on. Neither Romanda or Lelaine were Black, which was somewhat irritating. Being able to throw one or both of those into chains would have been very convenient. Why Sheriam, but neither of those two?

Stop it, Egwene, she thought. *You aren't behaving rationally.* Wishing for certain sisters to be Black got her nowhere.

Cadsuane was not on the list. Neither were any of Egwene's dearest friends. She hadn't expected them to be, but it was still good to complete the list without seeing any of their names. The group hunting the Black Ajah in the White Tower really was true, as none of their names were on the list. The list also didn't contain the names of any of the spies sent from Salidar.

And Elaida's name wasn't on the list either. There was a notation at the end, explaining that Verin had looked very closely at Elaida, searching for proof that she was Black. But comments by Black sisters led her to believe strongly that Elaida was *not* herself Black. Just an unstable woman who was sometimes as frustrating to the Black as she was to the rest of the Tower.

It made sense, unfortunately. Knowing that Galina and Alviarin were Black had led Egwene to suspect that she wouldn't find Elaida's name on the list. The Blacks seemed more likely to choose someone they could manipulate to be Amyrlin, then install a Black Keeper to keep her in line.

They probably had used some kind of leverage against Elaida through Galina—whom Verin noted had probably managed to make herself Head of the Red Ajah—or Alviarin. They had bullied or bribed Elaida to do as they wished without her knowing that she was serving the Black. And that helped explain Alviarin's strange fall. Had she gone too far, perhaps? Overstepped herself, earning Elaida's ire? It seemed plausible, though they wouldn't know for certain until Elaida spoke or Egwene could have Alviarin interrogated. Which she meant to do as soon as possible.

She closed the fat red book, thoughtful, her candle burned nearly down to the base. It was growing late in the day. Perhaps it was time to insist on being given some information about the state of the Tower.

Before she could decide how to go about that, a knock came at the door. Egwene looked up, hurriedly twisting the straps of the bookmark around and making both books vanish. A knock meant someone other than a Red was there.

"Come," she called.

The door opened to reveal Nicola, with her large dark eyes and slender build, standing outside beneath the watchful eye of Turese. The Red did not seem pleased that Egwene had a visitor, but the steaming bowl carried on Nicola's tray indicated why she'd been given leave to knock.

Nicola curtsied to Egwene, her white novice dress fluttering. Turese's scowl deepened. Nicola didn't notice, however. "For Verin Sedai," she said softly, nodding toward the bed. "By orders of the Mistress of Kitchens, after hearing how exhausted Verin Sedai was from her travels."

Egwene nodded, gesturing toward the table, hiding her excitement. Nicola approached quickly, setting the tray on the table, whispering under her breath, "I'm to ask if you trust her." She glanced at the bed again.

"Yes," Egwene answered, covering the sound by scooting her stool back. So her allies didn't know that Verin was dead. That was good; the secret was still safe, for the moment.

Nicola nodded, then spoke in a louder voice. "It would be good for her to eat it when it's warm, though I'll leave it to you if you wish not to wake her. I'm instructed to warn you not to touch it yourself."

"I won't do so unless it turns out that she has no need of it," Egwene replied, turning away. A few moments later, the door closed behind Nicola.

Egwene waited a painful few minutes for Turese to open the door and check on her, passing the time by washing her face and hands, and putting on a clean dress. Finally, confident she wouldn't be interrupted, she grabbed the spoon and fished in the soup. Sure enough, she found a small glass vial with a rolled-up piece of paper in it.

Clever. Her allies had apparently heard of Verin's presence in Egwene's room and decided to use it as an excuse to get someone in. She unrolled the paper, which contained only one word. "Wait."

She sighed, but there was nothing to do. She didn't dare get out the book and continue reading, however. Soon, she heard voices outside, and what sounded like an argument. Another knock came at the door.

"Come," Egwene said, curious.

The door opened and Meidani stepped into the room. She pointedly closed the door on Turese. "Mother," she said, curtsying. The slender woman was wearing a tight gray dress which pulled a little too obviously across her ample chest. Had she been scheduled for a dinner with Elaida this evening? "I am sorry to keep you waiting."

Egwene waved dismissively. "How did you get past Turese?"

"It is known that Elaida . . . favors me with visits," she said. "And Tower law says that no prisoner can be forbidden visitors. She could not stop a sister from wishing to visit a simple novice, though she did try to make a point of arguing it."

Egwene nodded, and Meidani glanced at Verin, frowning. Then she paled. Verin's features had grown waxy and dull, and it was obvious that something was wrong. It was a good thing that Turese had never looked closely at the "sleeping" woman.

"Verin Sedai is dead," Egwene said, glancing at the door.

"Mother?" Meidani asked. "What happened? Were you attacked?"

"Verin Sedai was poisoned by a Darkfriend shortly before her conversation with me. She was aware of the poison, and came to pass on some important information to me during her last moments." It was incredible what a few true statements could conceal.

"Light!" Meidani said. "A murder *inside* the White Tower? We have to tell someone! Gather the guard and—"

"It will be dealt with," Egwene said firmly. "Keep your voice down and pull yourself together. I don't want the guard outside to hear what we are saying."

Meidani paled, then looked at Egwene, likely wondering how she could be so callous. Good. Let her see the collected, determined Amyrlin. As long as she didn't see a hint of the grief, confusion and anxiety inside.

"Yes, Mother." Meidani curtsied. "Of course. I apologize."

"Now, you bring news, I assume?"

"Yes, Mother," Meidani said, composing herself. "Saerin instructed me to come to you. She said you would need to know of the day's events."

"And I do," Egwene said, trying not to show her impatience. Light, but she'd already been able to figure out *that* part. Couldn't the woman get on with it? There were Black Ajah to deal with!

"Elaida is still Amyrlin," Meidani said, "but only by a hair. The Hall of the Tower met and censured her formally. They informed Elaida that the Amyrlin was *not* an absolute ruler, and that she couldn't continue to make decrees and demands without consulting them."

Egwene nodded. "Not an unexpected turn," she said. More than one Amyrlin had become only a figurehead because she'd overextended herself in a similar way. It was what Elaida had been heading for, and that would have been satisfactory, had these not been the end of days. "What of penance?"

"Three months," Meidani said. "One for what she did to you. Two for behavior unbecoming her station."

"Interesting," Egwene said, thoughtful.

"There were some who called for more, Mother. It seemed that for a moment she might be deposed right there."

"You were watching?" Egwene asked with surprise.

Meidani nodded. "Elaida asked for the proceedings to be Sealed to the Flame, but she gained no support in the move. I think that her own Ajah was behind that, Mother. All three of the Red's Sitters are out of the Tower. I still wonder where Duhara and the others went."

Duhara. A Black. What is she up to? And the other two? Were the three together, and if so, could the other two be Black as well?

She'd have to address that later. "How did Elaida take all of this?"

"She didn't say much, Mother," Meidani said. "She sat and watched, mostly. She didn't look very pleased; I was surprised she didn't start ranting."

"The Reds," Egwene said. "If she is really losing support in her own Ajah, they'd have warned her ahead of time not to make more waves."

“That was Saerin’s assessment as well,” Meidani replied. “She also noted that your own insistence that the Red Ajah not be allowed to fall—spread by a group of novices who overheard you—was part of what kept Elaida from being deposed.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind her deposed,” Egwene said. “I just didn’t want the entire Ajah disbanded. Still, this might be for the best. Elaida’s fall has to come in a way that doesn’t tear the Tower down with her.” Though, if Egwene could do it again, she might retract those words said earlier. She didn’t want anyone to think that Egwene had been *supporting* Elaida. “I assume that Silviana’s sentence has been dismissed?”

“Not completely, Mother,” Meidani said. “She is being held as the Hall decides what to do to her. She still defied the Amyrlin in a very public way, and there is talk of penance.”

Egwene frowned. It smelled of a compromise; Elaida had probably met in closed conference with the head of the Red Ajah—whoever that was, now that Galina had vanished—hashing out the details. Silviana would still be punished, although not as strongly, but Elaida would submit to the will of the Hall. It indicated that Elaida was on shaky ground, but that she could still make demands. Her support wasn’t as completely eroded within her own Ajah as Egwene had hoped.

Still, this was a fortunate turn of events. Silviana would live, and Egwene—it appeared—would be allowed to return to her life as a “novice.” The Sitters were displeased enough with Elaida to reprimand her. Given just a little more time, Egwene was confident she could get the woman overturned and the Tower reunited. But dare she spend that time?

She glanced at the table, where the precious books lay hidden from eyes. If she staged a mass assault on the Black Ajah, would that precipitate a battle? Would she destabilize the Tower even further? And could she realistically hope to strike at all of them like that? She needed time to consider the information. For now, that meant staying in the Tower and working against Elaida. And, unfortunately, that meant letting most of the Black sisters run free.

But not all of them. “Meidani,” Egwene said. “I want you to report to the others. They *must* take Alviarin into captivity and test her with the Oath Rod. Tell them to take any reasonable risk to achieve it.”

“Alviarin, Mother?” Meidani asked. “Why her?”

"She's Black," Egwene said, stomach turning. "And near the head of their organization in the Tower. This was the information Verin died to bring me."

Meidani paled. "Are you certain, Mother?"

"I'm confident in Verin's trustworthiness," Egwene said. "But it would still be advisable to have others remove, then replace, Alviarin's oaths and ask her if she's Black. Every woman should be given that chance to prove herself, no matter the evidence. You have the Oath Rod, I assume?"

"Yes," Meidani said. "We needed it to prove Nicola's trustworthiness; the others wanted to bring some Accepted and novices in, as they can run messages where sisters cannot go."

It was wise, considering the divisions among the Ajahs. "Why her?"

"Because of how often she speaks to the others about you, Mother," Meidani said. "It's well known that she's one of your greatest advocates among the novices."

It was odd to hear that of a woman who had effectively betrayed her, but the girl couldn't really be blamed for that, all things considered.

"They didn't let her swear all three oaths, of course," Meidani said. "She's not Aes Sedai. But she did take the oath about lying and proved herself not a Darkfriend. They removed the oath after."

"And you, Meidani?" Egwene asked. "Have they removed the fourth oath from you?"

The woman smiled. "Yes, Mother. Thank you."

Egwene nodded. "Go, then. Pass on my message. Alviarin *must* be taken." She glanced at Verin's body. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to take her with you as well. It will be better if she vanishes, as opposed to my having to explain her death in my room."

"But—"

"Use a gateway," Egwene said. "Skim if you don't know the area well enough."

Meidani nodded, then Embraced the Source.

"Weave something else, first," Egwene said thoughtfully. "It doesn't matter what; something that requires a lot of power. Perhaps one of the hundred weaves one takes in the test to become Aes Sedai."

Meidani frowned, but did as asked, weaving something very complicated and power-intensive. Soon after she began, Turese poked her head into the room suspiciously. The weave blocked her sight of Verin's face, fortunately, but Turese wasn't focused on the "sleeping" Brown. She focused on the weave, opening her mouth.

"She is showing me some of the weaves I will need to know if I take the test to become Aes Sedai," Egwene said curtly, cutting off Turese's words. "Is that forbidden?"

Turese glared at her, but pulled the door shut and withdrew.

"That was to prevent her from poking in and seeing the weaves for gateways," Egwene said. "Quickly now. Take the body. When Turese looks in again, I will tell her the truth—that you and Verin left through a gateway."

Meidani glanced at Verin's corpse. "But what should we do with the body?"

"Whatever seems appropriate," Egwene said, growing testy. "I'll leave that to you. I don't have the time to deal with it now. And take that cup with you; the tea is poisoned. Dispose of it carefully."

Egwene glanced at her flickering candle; it was burned nearly all the way down to the table itself. To the side, Meidani sighed softly, then created a gateway. Weaves of Air moved Verin's body in through the opening, and Egwene watched her go with a pang of regret. The woman had deserved better. Someday, it would be known what she had suffered and what she had accomplished. But not for a time yet.

Once Meidani was gone with the corpse and the tea, Egwene lit another candle, then lay down on her bed, trying not to think of the body that had occupied it previously. She relaxed herself, thinking of Siuan. The woman would be going to sleep soon. She needed to be warned about Sheriam and the others.

Egwene opened her eyes in *Tel'aran'rhiod*. She was in her room, or at least the dream version of it. The bed was made, the door closed. She changed her dress to that of a stately green gown fitting an Amyrlin, then moved herself to the Tower's Spring Garden. Siuan wasn't there yet, but it was probably still a little early for their meeting.

Here, at least, one could see none of the filth that piled up in the city or the corruption that worked at the roots of Ajah unity. The Tower gardeners moved like natural forces, planting, cultivating, and harvesting as Amyrlins rose and fell. The Spring Garden was smaller than most of the other Tower gardens; it was a triangular plot of land pressed between two walls. Perhaps in another city, this plot would have been used for storage or simply filled in with stone. But in the White Tower, both options would have been unsightly.

The solution was a small garden full of plants that thrived in the shade. Hydrangeas ran up the walls and surged around planters. Bleeding hearts sat in rows, with their tiny pink blossoms drooping from delicate three-pronged compound leaves. Flowering bristleboughs, with their thin, fingerlike leaves, and other small shade trees ran along the insides of the triangular walls, meeting in a single point.

Walking up and down the lines of trees as she waited, Egwene thought of Sheriam being Black. How many things had the woman had a hand in? She'd been Mistress of Novices for years during Siuan's tenure as Amyrlin. Had she used her position to bully, perhaps to turn, other sisters? Had she been behind the attack of the Gray Man so long ago?

Sheriam had been part of the group that Healed Mat. Surely she could have done nothing malicious while in a circle with so many other women—but anything involving the woman was suspect. That was so much! Sheriam had been one of those in charge of Salidar before Egwene's rise to power. What had Sheriam done, how much manipulation had she exerted then, how much had she betrayed to the Shadow?

Had she been aware ahead of time of Elaida's plans to depose Siuan? Galina and Alviarin were Black, and they had been two of the main instigators, so it seemed likely other Blacks had been warned. Were the exodus of half of the Tower, the gathering in Salidar, and the subsequent waiting and debating all part of the Dark One's plan? What of Egwene's own rise to power? How many of the Shadow's strings did she dance on without knowing it?

This is an exercise in futility, she told herself firmly. *Don't go down that path.* Even without Verin's books, Egwene had suspected that the breaking of the Tower was the Dark One's work. Of course he would be pleased that the Aes Sedai had split in two, rather than unifying behind one leader.

It was just more . . . personal now. Egwene felt dirtied, she felt duped. For a moment, she felt herself to be the country girl many thought her to be. If Elaida had been a pawn for the Blacks, then so had she. Light! How the Dark One must have laughed to see two rival Amyrlins, each with one of his loyal minions at her side, pitting them against one another.

I can't be certain exactly what he wants or why he wants it, Verin had said. *Even after years of study, I can't be certain. . . .* Who knew whether the Dark One laughed?

She shivered. Whatever his plan, she would fight him. Resist him. Spit in his eye, even if he won, just as the Aiel said.

"Well, that's a sight," Siuan's voice said.

Egwene spun, realizing with chagrin that she no longer wore the dress of the Amyrlin, but a full suit of armor like a soldier riding to battle. In her hand, she carried a pair of Aiel spears.

She banished armor and spears with a thought, resuming the dress. "Siuan," she said curtly. "You may want to summon yourself a chair. Something has happened."

Siuan frowned. "What?"

"First off, Sheriam and Moria are Black Ajah."

"What?" Siuan said, shocked. "What nonsense is this?" She froze. "Mother," she added belatedly.

"It is not nonsense," Egwene said. "The truth, I'm afraid. There are others, but I will have to give you their names later. We can't yet take them into custody. I need time to plan and think, an evening perhaps. We will strike soon. But until we do, I want Sheriam and Moria watched. Don't be alone around them."

Siuan shook her head in disbelief. "How certain are you about this, Egwene?"

"Certain enough," Egwene said. "Watch them, Siuan, and be thinking of what to do. I'll want to hear your suggestions. We'll need a way to take them quietly, then prove to the Hall that what we've done is justified."

"This could be dangerous." Siuan rubbed her chin. "I hope you know what you are doing, Mother." She emphasized the last word.

"If I err," Egwene said, "then it will be on my head. But I don't think that I do. As I said, much has changed."

Siuan bowed her head. "Are you still captive?"

"Not exactly. Elaida has—" Egwene hesitated, frowning to herself. Something was wrong.

"Egwene?" Siuan asked, anxious.

"I. . . ." Egwene began, then shuddered. Something was pulling on her mind, clouding it. Something was . . .

Pulling her back. *Tel'aran'rhiod* winked away and Egwene opened her eyes back in her room, an anxious Nicola shaking her arm. “Mother,” she was saying. “Mother!”

The girl had a bloody gash on her cheek. Egwene sat up sharply, and at that moment the entire *Tower* shook as if from an explosion. Nicola grabbed her arm, yelping in fright.

“What is going on?” Egwene demanded.

“Shadowspawn!” Nicola cried. “In the air, serpents that throw flame and weaves of the One Power! They're destroying us! Oh, Mother. It's Tarmon Gai'don!”

Egwene felt a moment of primal, nearly uncontrollable panic. Tarmon Gai'don! The Last Battle!

She heard screams in the distance, followed by the shouts of soldiers or Warders. No . . . no, she needed to focus! Serpents in the air. Serpents that wielded the One Power . . . or with *riders* that wielded the One Power. Egwene threw off the blanket and leaped to her feet.

It wasn't Tarmon Gai'don, but it was nearly as bad. The Seanchan had finally attacked the White Tower, just as Egwene had Dreamed.

And she couldn't channel enough Power to light a candle, let alone fight back.

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CHAPTER 40

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The Tower Shakes

Siuan awoke with a start. Something was wrong. Something was very, *very* wrong. She scrambled off of her pallet. As she did, a dark figure moved suddenly on the other side of the tent, metal rasping against metal. Siuan froze, embracing the Source reflexively and summoning a globe of light.

Gareth Bryne stood alert, heron-marked steel drawn and ready. He wore only his smallclothes, and she had to keep herself from staring at his muscled body, which was in far better shape than that of most men half his age. “What is it?” he asked tensely.

“Light!” Siuan said. “You sleep with your sword?”

“Always.”

“Egwene is in danger.”

“What kind of danger?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “We were meeting and she vanished suddenly. I think . . . I think Elaida may have decided to execute her. Or at least pull her from her cell and . . . do something to her.”

Bryne didn’t ask for details. He simply sheathed his sword, then proceeded to put on a pair of trousers and a shirt. Siuan still wore her now-wrinkled blue skirt and blouse—it was her habit to change after her meetings with Egwene, once Bryne was sound asleep.

She felt an anxiety she couldn’t quite define. Why was she so on edge? It wasn’t uncommon for something to wake a person while they were dreaming.

But most people weren’t Egwene. She was a master of the World of Dreams. If something had awakened her unexpectedly, she would have dealt with it, then returned to calm Siuan’s worries. But she hadn’t, despite Siuan’s waiting for what had seemed like an eternity.

Bryne stepped up to her, now wearing his stiff gray trousers and uniform coat. He’d buttoned up his high collar, marked with three stars on the left breast and golden epaulets on the shoulders.

A frenzied voice called from outside. “General Bryne! My Lord General!”

Bryne glanced at her, then turned toward the tent flaps. “Come!”

A youthful soldier with neat black hair pushed into the tent and gave a quick salute. He didn’t apologize for coming so late—Bryne’s men knew that their general trusted them to awake him if there was need. “My Lord,” the man said. “Scout’s report. Something is going on in the city.”

“ ‘Something,’ Tijds?” Bryne asked.

“The scouts aren’t certain, my Lord,” the man said with a grimace. “With the cloud cover, the night is dark, and the spyglasses aren’t much help. There have been bursts of light near the Tower, like an Illuminator’s show. Dark shadows in the air.”

“Shadowspawn?” Bryne asked, pushing out of the tent. With the globe of light, Siuan and the soldier followed. The moon would be barely a sliver, and with those perpetual clouds, it was difficult to see anything at all. The tents of the officers were slumbering banks of black on black around them, and the only really distinguishable lights were the watchfires of the guards at the palisade entrance.

“They could be Shadowspawn, my Lord,” the soldier said, trotting after Bryne. “Stories tell of creatures of Shadow that fly in such a way. But the scouts aren’t certain what they’re seeing. The flashes of light are there for sure, though.”

Bryne nodded, heading toward the watchfires. “Alert the night guard; I want them up and armored, just in case. Send runners to the city fortifications. And bring me more information!”

“Yes, my Lord.” The soldier saluted and ran off.

Bryne glanced at Siuan, his face illuminated by the globe of light hovering above her hand. “Shadowspawn wouldn’t dare attack the White Tower,” he said. “Not without a substantial ground assault waiting, and I sincerely doubt that there are a hundred thousand Trollocs hiding in what little cover these plains offer. So what in the blazes is going on?”

“Seanchan,” Siuan said, a pit of ice forming in her stomach. “Fish guts, Gareth! It *has* to be. Egwene predicted it.”

He nodded. “Yes. They ride Shadowspawn, some of the rumors say.”

“Flying beasts,” Siuan said, “not Shadowspawn. Egwene said that they’re called *raken*.”

He eyed her doubtfully, but said only, “What would make the Seanchan so foolhardy as to attack without a ground assault in tandem?”

Siuan shook her head. She’d always assumed that a Seanchan strike at the White Tower would mean a large-scale invasion, and Egwene had guessed that the attack was still months off. Light! It looked like Egwene could be wrong.

Bryne turned toward his watchfires, which were blazing higher in the night, tossing light across the front of the palisade. Inside the ring of wood, officers were rousing, calling to neighboring tents. Lamps and lanterns winked on.

"Well," Gareth said, "so long as they attack Tar Valon, they are no problem of ours. We just need to—"

"I'm getting her out," Siuan said suddenly, surprising herself.

Bryne spun toward Siuan, into the light of her globe. His chin was shadowed by evening stubble. "What?"

"Egwene," Siuan said. "We *need* to go in for her. This will provide a perfect distraction, Gareth! We can go in and grab her before anyone is the wiser."

He eyed her.

"What?"

"You gave your word not to rescue her, Siuan." Light, but it felt nice to hear him use her name!

Focus! she scolded herself. "That doesn't matter now. She's in danger and needs help."

"She doesn't *want* help," Bryne said sternly. "We need to make certain our own force is safe. The Amyrlin is confident that she can care for herself."

"I thought I could care for myself too," Siuan said. "And look where it got me." She shook her head, glancing toward the distant spire of Tar Valon. She could just faintly see a burst of light along the spire, illuminating it briefly. "When Egwene speaks of the Seanchan, she always shivers. Very little upsets her—not the Forsaken, not the Dragon Reborn. Gareth, you don't know what the Seanchan *do* to women who can channel." She met his eyes. "We need to go for her."

"I will not be a party to this," he said stubbornly.

"Fine," Siuan spat. Fool man! "Go take care of your men. I think I know someone who *will* help me." She stalked away, heading toward a tent just inside the palisade.

Egwene steadied herself against the wall of the hallway as the entire Tower shook again. The very stones quivered. Flakes of mortar crumbled down from the ceiling, and a loose tile fell from the wall and shattered into a dozen shards on the floor. Nicola screamed, and clutched at Egwene.

"The Dark One!" Nicola wailed. "The Last Battle! It's come!"

“Nicola!” Egwene snapped, straightening up. “Control yourself. This isn’t the Last Battle. It’s the Seanchan.”

“Seanchan?” Nicola said. “But I thought they were just a rumor!”

Fool girl, Egwene thought, hurrying down a side hallway. Nicola scuttled after her, carrying her lamp. Egwene’s memory served her correctly, and the next hallway was at the edge of the Tower, giving her a window to the outside. She waved Nicola to the side, then risked a glance out into the darkness.

Sure enough, dark, winged forms flapped in the sky. Those were too big to be *raken*. *To’raken*, then. They swooped, weaves spinning around many of them, glowing and vibrant to Egwene’s eyes. Blasts of fire sprang into existence, lighting pairs of women riding on the backs of the *to’raken*. *Damane* and *sul’dam*.

Portions of the Tower’s wings below were alight with flames, and to her horror, Egwene saw several gaping holes directly in the sides of the Tower. *To’raken* clutched the side of the Tower, climbing up like bats clinging to a wall, unloading soldiers and *damane* into the building. As Egwene watched, a *to’raken* leapt free of the side of the Tower, the height allowing it to forgo its normal running start. The creature wasn’t as graceful as one of the smaller *raken*, but its handler did a masterful job of directing it back into the air. The creature flew right by Egwene’s window, the wind of its passing blowing back her hair. Egwene faintly heard screaming as the *to’raken* swept past. Terrified screaming.

It wasn’t a full-scale attack—it was a raid! A raid to capture *marath’damane*! Egwene pulled to the side as a blast of fire shot by the window and hit the wall a short distance away. She could hear rock crumble, and the Tower shook violently. Dust and smoke exploded down a side passage off the hallway.

Soldiers would soon follow. Soldiers and *sul’dam*. With those leashes. Egwene shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself. The cool, seamless metal. The nausea, the degradation, the panic, despair, and—shamefully—guilt at not serving her mistress to the best of her abilities. She remembered the haunted look of an Aes Sedai as she was broken. Most of all, she remembered her own terror.

The terror of realizing that she would be like the others, eventually. Just another slave, happy to serve.

The Tower shook. Fire flashed in the distant hallways accompanied by shouts and wails of despair. She could smell smoke. Oh, Light! Could this really be? She wouldn't go back. She wouldn't let them leash her again. She had to run! She had to hide, flee, escape . . .

No!

She pushed herself upright.

No, she would *not* flee. She was Amyrlin.

Nicola huddled beside the wall, whimpering. "They're coming for us," the girl whispered. "Oh Light, they're coming!"

"Let them come!" Egwene roared, opening herself to the Source. Blessedly, enough time had passed to dull the forkroot slightly, and she was able to grab a faint trickle of the Power. It was tiny, perhaps the least amount of the Power she'd ever channeled. She wouldn't be able to weave a tongue of Air to shift a piece of paper. But it would be enough. It had to be. "We will fight!"

Nicola just sniffed, looking up at her. "You can barely channel, Mother!" she wailed. "I can see it. We *can't* fight them!"

"We can and will," Egwene said firmly. "Stand, Nicola! You're an initiate of the Tower, not a frightened milkmaid."

The girl looked up.

"I will protect you," Egwene said. "I promise."

The girl seemed to take heart, rising. Egwene glanced toward the distant hallway where the blast had hit. It was dark, the wall lamps unlit, but she thought she spotted shadows. They'd be coming, and they'd be leashing any women they found.

Egwene turned in the other direction. She could still faintly hear screams that way. They were the ones she'd heard just after she'd awakened. She didn't know where the guard at her door had gone, and didn't really care.

"Come," she said, striding forward, holding to her tiny bit of the Power like a drowning woman clinging to a rescue rope. Nicola followed, still sniffling, but she followed. Several moments later, Egwene discovered what she'd hoped to find. The hallway was filled with girls, some in their white dresses, others wearing their shifts. The novices clumped together, many of them screaming at each blast that shook the Tower. Likely, they wished that they were down below, where the novices' quarters had once been.

“The Amyrlin!” several exclaimed as Egwene entered the hallway. They were a sorry bunch, lit by candles in terrified hands. Their questions sprouted like rotwood mushrooms in the spring.

“What’s happening?”

“Are we under attack?”

“Is it the Dark One?”

Egwene raised her hands, and the girls fell mercifully silent. “The Tower is under attack from the Seanchan,” she said in a calm voice. “They have come to capture women who can channel; they have ways of forcing those women to serve them. It is *not* the Last Battle, but we are in grave danger. I don’t intend to let them take a single one of you. You are mine.”

The hallway grew still. Girls glanced at her, hopeful, nervous. There were a good fifty of them, perhaps more. They would have to do.

“Nicola, Jasmen, Yeteri, Inala,” Egwene said, naming off some of the more powerful of the novices. “Come forward. The rest of you pay close attention. I’m going to teach you something.”

“What, Mother?” one of the girls asked.

This had better work, Egwene thought. “I’m going to teach you how to link.”

There were gasps. This wasn’t a thing taught to novices, but Egwene would see that *sul’dam* did not find easy pickings in the novices’ quarters!

Teaching the method took a worrisome length of time, each moment torn by more blasts and more screams. The novices were frightened, and that made it difficult for some of them to embrace the Source, let alone learn a new technique. What had taken Egwene only a few tries to master took the novices a heart-pounding five minutes to begin.

Nicola was a help—she had been taught to link back in Salidar—and could help demonstrating. As they practiced, Egwene had Nicola join a circle with her. The young novice opened herself up to the Source, but stayed just on the cusp of surrender and let Egwene pull power through her. It worked, bless the Light! Egwene felt a rush of exhilaration as the One Power—too long denied her in meaningful quantities—flooded into her. How sweet it was! The world was more vibrant around her, sounds more sweet, colors more beautiful.

She smiled at the thrill of it. She could feel Nicola, sense her fear, her emotions bubbling over. Egwene had been part of enough circles to know how to separate herself from Nicola, but Egwene remembered that first time, how she had felt swept up into something far larger than herself.

There was a special skill to opening oneself to a circle. It wasn’t terribly difficult to learn, but they didn’t have much time. Fortunately, some of the girls soon picked it up. Yeteri, a petite blonde still in her nightgown, was first. Inala, a coppery and lanky Domani, followed soon after. Egwene eagerly formed a circle with Nicola, and the two other novices. Power flooded into her.

Next, she set about getting the others to practice. She had some inkling, from discussions with the novices during her stay in the Tower, which among them were the most skilled with weaves and the most level-headed. Those weren’t always the most powerful, but that wouldn’t matter if they had a circle backing them up. Egwene hurriedly set them into groups, explaining how to accept the Source through a link. Hopefully, at least some of them would figure it out.

What mattered was that Egwene now had the Power. A fair measure of it, almost as much as she was accustomed to without forkroot. She smiled in anticipation, then began a weave, the complexity of it awing several of the novices. “What you are seeing,” Egwene warned, “is something that you are *not* to try, even those of you leading circles. It is far too difficult and dangerous.”

A line of light split the air at the end of the hallway, rotating upon itself. She hoped that the gateway would open in the right location; she was going on Siuan’s instructions, which had been somewhat vague, though she also had Elayne’s original description of the place.

“Also,” Egwene said to the novices in a stern voice, “you are *not* to repeat this weave for anyone without my express permission, not even other Aes Sedai.” She doubted that would be an issue; the weave was complex and few novices would have the skill yet to repeat it.

“Mother?” a hawk-nosed girl named Tamala squeaked. “Are you escaping?” Her voice was edged with fear, and not a little hope, as if Egwene might take her, too.

“No,” Egwene said firmly. “I’ll return in just a moment. When I come back, I want at least five good circles formed!”

And with Nicola and her two other attendants in tow, Egwene stepped through the gateway into a dark room. She wove a globe of light, and the illumination revealed a storeroom with shelves lining the walls. She let out a relieved sigh. She'd gotten the location right.

Those shelves, along with two short rows of shelves out on the floor, were filled with items of curious design. Crystal globes, small exotic statues, here a glass pendant which reflected blue in the light, there a large set of metal gauntlets lined at the cuffs with firedrops. Egwene strode into the room, leaving the three novices to stare in wonder. They could likely sense what Egwene knew—these were objects of the One Power. *Ter'angreal*, *angreal*, *sa'angreal*. Relics of the Age of Legends.

Egwene scanned the shelves. Items of the Power were infamously dangerous to use if you didn't know exactly what they did. Any one of these items could kill her. If only. . . .

She smiled broadly, stepping up to a shelf and sliding a fluted white wand as long as her forearm off the top shelf. She'd found it! She held it reverently for a moment, then reached and pulled the One Power through it. An awesome, almost overpowering, torrent of power flooded through her.

Yeteri gasped audibly at sensing it. Few women had ever held such power. It surged into Egwene, like a deep breath drawn in. It made her long to roar. She looked at the three novices, smiling broadly. "*Now* we're ready," she announced.

Let the *sul'dam* try and shield her while she was wielding one of the most powerful *sa'angreal* that the Aes Sedai possessed. The White Tower would not fall while she was Amyrlin! Not without a fight to rival the Last Battle itself.

* * *

Siuan found Gawyn's tent illuminated, shadows playing on the walls as the man moved about inside. His tent was suspiciously close to the guard post; he was allowed to stay within the palisade, perhaps so that Bryne—and the watching guards—could keep an eye on him.

Bryne, being the stubborn devilfish he was, had *not* gone to his guard post as she'd instructed. He'd followed behind her, cursing and calling for his attendants to come find him, rather than meet him at the post. Even as she stopped at young Gawyn's tent, Bryne stepped up beside her, hand resting on the hilt of his sword. He eyed her with dissatisfaction. Well. She wouldn't let *him* be the judge of her honor! She would do what she pleased.

Although it was likely to make Egwene very, very annoyed with her. *She'll be thankful in the end,* Siuan thought. "Gawyn!" she barked.

The handsome youth burst out of his tent, hopping as he stomped on his left boot. He had his sheathed sword in hand, sword belt half on around his waist. "What?" he asked, scanning the camp. "I heard shouts. Are we being attacked?"

"No," Siuan said, glancing at Bryne. "But Tar Valon might be."

"Egwene!" Gawyn cried, hurriedly doing the last loops on his belt. Light, but the boy was single-minded.

"Boy," Siuan said, folding her arms. "I owe you a debt for getting me out of Tar Valon. Will you take my help getting you *in* to Tar Valon as repayment?"

"Gladly!" Gawyn said eagerly, sliding his sword in place. "Repayment and then some!"

She nodded. "Go get us some horses, then. It might just be the two of us."

"I'll risk it," Gawyn said. "Finally!"

"You won't be taking my horses for this fool's errand," Bryne said sternly.

"There are mounts in his stables owned by the Aes Sedai, Gawyn," Siuan said, ignoring Bryne. "Get one of them for me. A *mild* one, mind you. Very, very mild."

Gawyn nodded and ran away into the night. Siuan followed him at a more careful pace, plotting. This would all be so much easier if she could create a gateway, but she didn't have enough strength in the Power for that. She had before her stilling, but wishing for things to be different was about as useful as wishing the silverpike you'd caught was a fangfish instead. You sold what you had and were happy for any kind of catch at all.

"Siuan," Bryne said softly, walking beside her. Couldn't he just let her be! "Listen to me. This is insanity! How are you going to get in?"

Siuan glanced at him. "Shemerin got out."

"That was before there was a siege, Siuan." Bryne sounded exasperated. "The place is much tighter now."

Siuan shook her head. "Shemerin was being watched closely. She got out through a watergate; it's unwatched I'll bet, even now. I'd never heard of it, and I was Amyrlin. I have a map to its location."

Bryne hesitated. Then his face hardened. “It doesn’t matter. The two of you still have no chance on your own.”

“Then come with us,” Siuan said.

“I will *not* be party to you breaking your oath again.”

“Egwene said we could do something if it looked like she was in danger of execution,” Siuan said. “She told me she’d let us rescue her then! Well, the way she vanished from the meeting with me tonight, I’m inclined to think she’s in danger.”

“It isn’t Elaida who put her there, but the Seanchan!”

“We don’t *know* for certain.”

“Ignorance is not an excuse,” Bryne said sternly, stepping closer to her. “You have made oathbreaking far too convenient, Siuan, and I don’t want it to become a habit for you. Aes Sedai or not, former Amyrlin or not, people must have *rules* and *boundaries*. To say nothing of the fact that you’re likely to get yourself killed attempting this!”

“And will you stop me?” She was still holding the source. “Do you think you could manage it?”

He ground his teeth. But he said nothing. Siuan turned and walked away from him, straight toward the fires at the palisade gate.

“Blasted woman,” Bryne said from behind. “You’ll be the death of me.”

She turned, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ll come,” he said, hand gripping the hilt of his sheathed sword. He cut an imposing figure in the night, the straight lines of his coat matching the set cast of his face. “But there are two conditions.”

“Name them,” she said.

“The first is that you bond me as your Warder.”

Siuan started. He wanted. . . . Light! Bryne wanted to be her Warder? She felt a surge of excitement.

But she hadn’t considered taking a Warder, not since Alric’s death. Losing him had been a terrible experience. Did she want to risk that again?

Did she dare pass the opportunity to have this man bonded to her, to feel his emotions, have him by her side? After all that she had dreamed and all that she had wished?

Feeling reverent, she stepped back up to Bryne, then laid a hand against his chest and wove the required weaves of Spirit and laid them over him. He breathed in sharply as new awareness blossomed inside of both of them, a new connection. She could feel his emotions, could sense his concern for her, which was shockingly powerful. It was ahead of his worry for Egwene and concern for his soldiers! *Oh, Gareth,* she thought, feeling herself smile at the sweetness of his love for her.

"I always wondered what that would feel like," Bryne said, raising his hand and making a fist a few times in the torchlight. He sounded amazed. "Would that I could give this to each man in my army!"

Siuan sniffed. "I highly doubt that their wives and families would approve of that."

"They would if it kept the soldiers alive," Bryne said. "I could run a thousand leagues and never want for breath. I could stand against a hundred foes at once and laugh at them all."

She rolled her eyes. Men! She had given him a deeply personal and emotional connection to another person—the likes of which even husbands and wives would never know—and all he could think about was how much better he might have become at swordplay!

"Siuan!" a voice called. "Siuan Sanche!"

She turned. Gawyn, riding a black gelding, approached. Another horse trotted behind him—a shaggy brown mare. "Bela!" Siuan exclaimed.

"Is she suitable?" Gawyn said, sounding slightly out of breath. "Bela was once Egwene's horse, I recall, and the stablemaster said she was the most placid he had."

"She'll do just fine," Siuan said, turning back to Bryne. "You said you had two requirements?"

"I'll tell you the second at a later time." Bryne still sounded a little breathless.

"That's rather ambiguous." Siuan folded her arms. "I don't like giving an open promise."

"Well, you'll have to do it anyway," Bryne said, meeting her eyes.

"Fine, but it had better not be indecent, Gareth Bryne."

He frowned.

"What?"

"It's odd," he said, smiling. "I can sense your emotions now. For instance I could tell. . . ." He cut off, and she could sense him growing just faintly embarrassed.

He can tell that I half want *him to demand something indecent of me!* Siuan realized, aghast. *Bloody ashes!* She felt herself blushing. This was going to be very inconvenient. “Oh, for the Blessed Light. . . . I agree to your terms, you lout. Get moving! We have to go.”

He nodded. “Let me prepare my captains to take charge in case the fight spills out of the city. I’ll bring a guard of my best hundred with us. That should be small enough to get in, assuming this gate really is passable.”

“It will be,” she said. “Go!”

He actually saluted her, his face straight, but she could sense his inward grin—and he likely knew it. Insufferable man! She turned to Gawyn, who sat his gelding, looking confused.

“What’s happening?” Gawyn asked.

“We don’t have to go in alone.” Siuan took a deep breath, then steeled herself as she climbed up into Bela’s saddle. Horses couldn’t be trusted, not even Bela, though she was better than most. “That means our chances of surviving long enough to take Egwene just improved. Which is fortunate, since after what we’re about to do, she’ll undoubtedly want the privilege of killing us personally.”

* * *

Adelorna Bastine ran through the hallways of the White Tower. For once, she rued the enhanced senses that holding the Power offered. Scents seemed more crisp to her, but all she could smell were burning wood and dying flesh. Colors were more vibrant, and all she could see were the ashen scars of broken stone where lashes or balls of flame had fallen. Sounds were more crisp, but all she heard were screams, curses, and the raucous calls of those horrible beasts in the air.

She scrambled down a darkened hallway, her breath coming in gasps, until she reached an intersection. She pulled to a stop, putting a hand to her breast. She had to find resistance. Light, they couldn’t all have fallen, could they? A pocket of Greens had stood with her and fought. She had seen Josaine die as a weave of Earth had destroyed the wall beside her and had seen Marthera captured with some kind of metal leash around her neck. Adelorna didn’t know *where* her Warders were. One was wounded. Another lived. The last . . . the last she didn’t want to think about. Light send that she could at least reach the wounded Talric soon.

She pulled herself to her feet, wiping blood from her forehead where a chip of stone had grazed her. There were just so many of the invaders, with their strange helmets and women used as weapons. And they were so skilled with those deadly weaves! Adelorna felt ashamed. The Battle Ajah indeed! The Greens with her had stood only minutes before being defeated.

Breathing heavily, she continued down the hallway. She stayed away from the outer edge of the Tower, where the invaders were most likely to be found. Had she lost the ones who had been chasing her? Where was she? The twenty-second level? She'd lost count of the stairwells she'd fled through.

She froze; she sensed channeling coming from her right. That could mean invaders, or it could mean sisters. She hesitated, but gritted her teeth. She was the Captain-General of the Green Ajah! She couldn't just run and hide.

Torchlight sprang from the hallway in question, light accompanied by ominous shadows of men with strange armor. A squad of invaders burst around the corner, and they had a pair of women with them, the ones connected by a leash. Adelorna yelped despite herself, dashing away as fast as her feet could carry her. She felt a shield push at her, but she held to *saidar* too firmly, and it didn't get into place before she rounded a corner. She continued to flee, gasping, dazed.

She rounded another corner and nearly stumbled out of a rift in the side of the Tower. She teetered on the exposed ledge, looking out upon a sky filled with terrible monsters and lines of fire. She stumbled back with a cry, turning away from the hole. There was rubble to her right. She scrambled over the rocks. The hallway continued there! She had to—

A shield shoved between her and the Source, this time locking into place. She gasped, stumbling to the ground. She wouldn't be caught! She couldn't be caught! Not that!

She tried to continue forward, but a flow of Air tightened around her ankle and dragged her back across the broken-tiled floor. No! She was pulled directly up to the squad of soldiers, now accompanied by two sets of women connected by the leashes. In each pair there was a woman wearing a gray dress and another in red and blue, with the lightning-bolt pattern.

Another woman approached, wearing the red and blue. She held something silvery in her hands. Adelorna screamed in denial, pushing at the shield. The third woman calmly knelt and snapped a silver collar on Adelorna's neck.

This wasn't happening. It *couldn't* be happening.

"Ah, very nice," the third woman said in a slow drawl. "My name is Gregana, and you shall be Sivi. Sivi will be a good *damane*. I can see it. I have waited long for this moment, Sivi."

"No," Adelorna whispered.

"Yes." Gregana smiled deeply.

Then, shockingly, the collar unclipped from Adelorna's neck and fell to the floor. Gregana looked stunned for a moment before she was consumed in a blast of fire.

Adelorna's eyes opened wide, and she shied away from the sudden heat. A corpse in a blackened red and blue dress crumbled to the ground before her, smoking and reeking of burned flesh. It was then that Adelorna became aware of an extremely powerful source of channeling coming from behind.

The invaders screamed, the women in gray weaving shields. That proved to be the wrong choice, as both women's leashes unlocked, twisting lines of Air unclasping them with dexterous speed. Just a heartbeat after that, one of the women in red and blue disappeared in a flash of lightning while the other was set upon by tongues of flame, like striking serpents. She screamed as she died, and a soldier shouted. It must have been the command to fall back, for the soldiers fled, leaving two frightened women who had been unleashed by the tongues of Air.

Adelorna turned hesitantly. A woman in white stood atop the rubble a short distance away, a massive halo of power surrounding her, her arm outstretched toward the fleeing soldiers, her eyes intense. The woman stood like vengeance itself, the power of *saidar* like a storm around her. The very air seemed alight, and her brown hair blew from the wind of the open gap in the wall beside them. Egwene al'Vere.

"Quickly," Egwene said. A group of novices scrambled over the rubble and came to Adelorna's side, helping her to her feet. She stood, amazed. She was free! Several other novices hurried to grab the two unleashed women in gray—who, oddly, just kept kneeling in the hallway. They could channel; Adelorna could feel it. Why didn't they strike back? Instead, they seemed to be weeping.

"Put them with the others," Egwene said, striding over the rubble and glancing out the broken hallway gap. "I want—" Egwene froze, then raised her hands.

Suddenly, more weaves sprang up around Egwene. Light! Was that Vora's *sa'angreal* she carried in her hand, the white fluted wand? Where had Egwene gotten *that*? Blasts of lightning flew from Egwene's open hand, flashing through the opening in the wall, and something screeched and fell outside. Adelorna stepped up to Egwene, embracing the Source, feeling a fool for having been captured. Egwene struck again, and another of those flying monsters fell.

"What if they're carrying captives?" Adelorna asked, watching one of the beasts fall amid Egwene's flames.

"Then those captives are better dead," Egwene said, turning to her. "Trust me. I know this." She turned to the others. "Back from the hole, everyone. Those blasts may have drawn attention.

"Shanal and Clara, watch this hole from a safe distance. Run to us if any *to'raken* land here. Do *not* attack them."

Two girls nodded, taking up positions by the rubble. The other novices hurried away, chivvying the two strange invader women along with them. Egwene marched down the hallway behind them, like a general at the battle lines. And perhaps she was. Adelorna hastened to join her. "Well," she said. "You have done nicely to organize, Egwene, though it's good that an Aes —"

Egwene froze. Those eyes were so calm, so in control. "I am in command until this threat passes. You will call me Mother. Give me penance later if you must, but for now my authority must be unquestioned. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mother," Adelorna found herself saying, shocked.

"Good. Where are your Warders?"

"One wounded," Adelorna said. "One safe, with the other. One dead."

"Light, woman, and you're still standing?"

Adelorna straightened her back. "What other choice do I have?"

Egwene nodded. Why did her look of respect make Adelorna swell with pride?

"Well, I'm glad to have you," Egwene said, resuming her walk. "We've only rescued six other Aes Sedai, none of them Green, and we're having trouble keeping the Seanchan bottled at the eastern stairwells. I'll have one of the novices show you how to unlock the bracelets; but don't take any risks. Generally, it's easier—and much safer—to kill the *damane*. How familiar are you with the Tower's *angreal* storerooms?"

"Very," Adelorna said.

"Excellent," Egwene said, absently weaving as complex a weave as Adelorna had ever seen. A line of light broke the air, then rotated around itself, creating a hole into blackness. "Lucain, run and tell the others to hold. I'll be bringing more *angreal* soon."

A brunette novice bobbed her head and rushed away. Adelorna was still staring at that hole. "Traveling," she said flatly. "You really *have* rediscovered it. I thought the reports wishful rumors."

Egwene looked at her. "I'd have never shown you this, save that I just had a report that Elaida has been spreading knowledge of this weave. Knowledge of Traveling has been compromised. That means the Seanchan are likely to have it by now, assuming they've taken any women Elaida taught."

"Mother's milk in a cup!"

"Indeed," Egwene said, eyes like ice. "We need to stop them and destroy any *to'raken* we see, with captives or not. If there's any chance of stopping them from returning to Ebou Dar with someone who can Travel, we must take it."

Adelorna nodded.

"Come," Egwene said. "I need to know what items in this storeroom are *angreal*." She stepped through the hole.

Adelorna stood, stunned, still thinking over what she'd been told. "You could have run," she said. "You could have fled at any time."

Egwene turned back to her, looking through the portal. "Fled?" she asked. "If I left, it wouldn't have been *fleeing* you, Adelorna, it would have been *abandoning* you. I am the Amyrlin Seat. My place is here. I'm certain you've heard that I Dreamed this very attack."

Adelorna felt a chill. She had indeed.

"Come," Egwene repeated. "We must be quick. This is just a raid; they'll want to grab as many channelers as possible and be off with them. I intend to see that they lose more *damane* than they gain Aes Sedai."

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CHAPTER 41

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A Fount of Power

“Well, tie a kerchief on my face and call me Aiel,” said one of Bryne’s soldiers, kneeling beside the general at the prow of their narrow boat. “It really *is* there.”

Gawyn squatted at the prow of his own boat, the dark waters rippling and lapping at the sides of the vessel. They’d needed thirteen boats to carry them all, and had set into the river quietly and easily—at least, they had once Siuan Sanche had finished her inspection of the boats and decided they were riverworthy. Barely.

Each vessel carried a single, shielded lantern. Gawyn could barely make out the other boats sliding over the ebony water, the soldiers rowing them in near silence as they pulled up beside the stonework embankment on Tar Valon’s southwestern side. The flashes of light in the sky were distracting, and Gawyn kept finding himself glancing up, to see serpentine beasts illuminated briefly by cold white lightning or blazing crimson fire.

The White Tower itself seemed to burn. It lit a daunting profile in the sky, all white and red, outlined by flames. Smoke boiled toward the midnight clouds above, fires blazed inside many Tower windows, and a glare at the base indicated that outlying buildings and trees were also alight.

The soldiers shipped oars as Gawyn’s boat gracefully slid up beside that of Bryne, passing under the lip of ancient stonework where rock overhung the river. That blocked Gawyn’s view of the furious battle—though he could still hear the rumblings and pops, and an occasional spray of broken stone falling to the cobbles, sounding like distant rain.

Gawyn raised his lantern, risking just a sliver of light from the shield. With that illumination, he could make out what Bryne’s soldier had seen. Tar Valon’s island was rimmed by Ogier-made bulwarks, part of the original city design; they kept the island from eroding. Like most Ogier work, the bulwarks were beautiful. Here, the stone delicately arched outward from the island five or six feet above the water, forming a lip that looked like the white tip of a crashing wave. In the soft light of Gawyn’s lantern, the undersides of those stones were so realistic, so delicate, that it was difficult to tell where stone ended and river began.

One of those stone ripples hid a cleft, almost impossible to spot even from this close at hand. Bryne’s soldiers were steering his boat into the narrow rift, which was enclosed on both sides and top by stone. Siuan’s boat went next, and Gawyn waved for his rowers to go after her. The rift turned into a very narrow tunnel, and Gawyn unshielded his lantern further, as Bryne and Siuan had done ahead. The lichen-covered stones were ribboned on the sides by dark watermarks. In many years, this passage would have been completely under water.

"It was probably designed for workers," Bryne said from up ahead, his soft voice echoing in the damp tunnel. Even the movements of the oars in the water were amplified, as were distant drips and lappings of the river. "To go out and maintain the stonework."

"I don't care *why* they built it," Siuan said. "I'm just glad it's here. And mortified I didn't know about it earlier. One of the strengths of Tar Valon has always been that the bridges make it secure. You can keep track of who goes in and who goes out."

Bryne snorted softly, the sound echoing down the tunnel. "You can never control everything in a city this size, Siuan. Those bridges, in a way, they give you a false sense of control. Sure, for an invading army, this city is impenetrable—but a place like this, tighter than a tick, can still have a dozen holes big enough for fleas to slip through."

Siuan fell silent. Gawyn calmed himself, breathing steadily. At least he was *finally* doing something to help Egwene. It had taken far longer than he'd wanted. Light send that he was coming soon enough!

The tunnel trembled from a distant explosion. Gawyn glanced over his shoulder at the other ten boats, packed with apprehensive soldiers. They were gliding directly into a war zone where both sides were stronger than they were, both sides had little reason to like them, and both sides were wielding the One Power. It took a special kind of man to stare those odds in the eyes.

"Here," Bryne said, silhouetted against the light. He raised a hand and halted the line of boats. The tunnel had opened up to the right, where a ledge of stone—a landing with a set of stairs—waited. The watery tunnel itself continued on.

Bryne stood, bending over, and stepped out onto the ledge, mooring his boat to a cleat. The soldiers in his boat followed, each carrying a small brown package. What were they? Gawyn hadn't noticed them loading the packages on the boats. When the final soldier in that boat stepped out, he pushed the vessel forward and handed its tow rope to a soldier in Siuan's boat. As the line continued forward, they tied each boat to the one ahead of it. The last man would secure his boat to the docking pillar, and it would hold them all in place.

Gawyn stepped onto the stone ledge when his turn came and he trotted up the steps, which opened into the floor of a small alley. This entrance had probably long since been forgotten by all save the few beggars who used it for shelter. Several of the soldiers were tying up a small group of such men at the back of the alleyway. Gawyn grimaced, but said nothing. More often than not, beggars would sell secrets to any who cared to listen, and news of a hundred soldiers sneaking into the city would be worth good coin from the Tower Guard.

Bryne stood with Siuan at the mouth of the alleyway, checking the street outside. Gawyn joined them, hand on his sword. The streets were empty. The people no doubt hid in their homes, likely praying that the raid would soon pass.

The soldiers gathered in the alley. Bryne quietly ordered a squad of ten to guard the boats. Then the rest opened the soft-looking brown packages that Gawyn had noticed earlier and removed folded white tabards. They pulled these over their heads, tying them at the waist. Each was marked with the flame of Tar Valon.

Gawyn whistled softly, though Siuan stood with arms akimbo, looking indignant. “Where did you get *those*?”

“I had the women in the outer camp make them,” Bryne said. “It’s always a good idea to have a few copies of your enemy’s uniform.”

“It’s not proper,” Siuan said, folding her arms. “Serving on the Tower Guard is a sacred duty. They—”

“They’re your *enemy*, Siuan,” Bryne said sternly. “For now, at least. You’re not Amyrlin anymore.”

She eyed him, but held her tongue. Bryne looked over the soldiers, then nodded in approval. “This won’t fool anyone up close, but from a distance, it will serve. Out onto the streets and fall into ranks. Hustle toward the Tower, as if you’re rushing to help with the battle. Siuan, a globe of light or two would help with the disguise—if those who see us also see an Aes Sedai at our head, they’ll be more likely to assume what we want them to.”

She sniffed, but did as requested, creating two globes of light, then setting them to float in the air beside her head. Bryne gave the command, and the entire group spilled out of the alley and formed ranks. Gawyn, Siuan and Bryne took up positions at the front—Gawyn and the general walking just ahead of Siuan, as if they were Warders—and they double-timed forward down the street.

All in all, the illusion was very good. On first glance, Gawyn himself would have bought the disguise. What would be more natural to see than a squadron of Tower Guard marching to the scene of the attack, guided by an Aes Sedai and her Warders? It was certainly better than trying to sneak a hundred men through the city in alleyways, unseen.

As they approached the Tower grounds they entered the nightmare. The billowing smoke reflected red firelight, enveloping the Tower in a menacing crimson haze. Holes and gashes broke the walls of the once-majestic building; fires blazed within several of them. *Raken* commanded the air, swooping and spinning about the Tower like gulls circling a dead whale in the waves. Screams and shouts permeated the air, and the thick, acrid smoke made Gawyn's throat itch.

Bryne's soldiers slowed as they approached. There seemed to be two points of combat in the raid. The base of the Tower, with its two flanking wings, showed flashes of light. The grounds were littered with the dead and the wounded. And up above, near the middle of the Tower, several gashes were spewing fireballs and lightning back out at the invaders. The rest of the Tower seemed silent and dead, though surely fighting was going on in the corridors.

The group pulled to a halt outside the Tower grounds' iron gates. Those gates were open and completely unguarded. That seemed ominous. "Now what?" Gawyn whispered.

"We find Egwene," Siuan answered. "We start at the base, then head down to the basement floors. She was locked down there somewhere earlier today, and it's probably the first place we should look."

A spray of stone chips fell from the ceiling and rained down on the table as the White Tower shook from yet another blast. Saerin cursed to herself, wiping the chips away, then unrolled a wide piece of parchment, weighting the sides with some broken chunks of tile.

Around her, the room was in virtual chaos. They were on the ground floor, in the forward gathering room, a large square chamber situated where the eastern wing met the Tower proper. Members of the Tower Guard pulled tables out of the way to make room for the groups passing through. Aes Sedai warily glanced out the windows, watching the skies. Warders stalked like caged animals. What were they to do about flying beasts? Their best place was here, guarding the center of operations. Such as it was. Saerin had only just arrived.

A sister in green swept up to her. Moradri was a long-limbed Mayener with dark skin, and she was trailed by two handsome Warders, both also Mayener. Rumors said that they were her brothers, come to the White Tower to defend their sister, though Moradri didn't speak of the matter.

Saerin demanded, "How many?"

"The ground floor has at least forty-seven sisters," Moradri said. "Spread across the Ajahs. That's the best count I could gather, as they're fighting in small groups. I told them we were organizing a formal command center here. Most seemed to think that was a good idea, though many were too tired, too shocked or too dazed to respond with much else besides a nod."

"Mark their locations on the map here," Saerin said. "Did you find Elaida?"

Moradri shook her head.

"Blast," Saerin muttered as the Tower shook again. "What of any Green Sitters?"

"I didn't find any," Moradri said, glancing over her shoulder, obviously eager to get back to the fighting.

"A pity," Saerin said. "They like to call themselves the Battle Ajah, after all. Well, that leaves me to organize the fighting."

Moradri shrugged. "I suppose." She glanced over her shoulder again.

Saerin eyed the Green sister, then tapped the map. "Mark the locations, Moradri. You can be back to the fighting soon enough, but your knowledge is more important right now."

The Green sister sighed, but quickly began to make notations on the map. As she worked, Saerin was pleased to note Captain Chubain entering. The man looked youthful for his forty-some winters, without a speck of gray in his black hair. Some men were inclined to disparage his abilities because of his too-pretty face; Saerin had heard of the humiliation those men had received by his sword in return for the insults.

"Ah, good," she said. "Finally something is going well. Captain, over here if you will."

He limped over, favoring his left leg. His white tabard, hanging over mail, was scorched; his face was smudged with soot. "Saerin Sedai," he said, bowing.

“You are wounded.”

“An inconsequential wound, Aes Sedai, in the glory of a fight such as this.”

“See yourself Healed anyway,” she ordered. “It would be ridiculous for our captain of the guard to risk death because of an ‘inconsequential’ wound. If it makes you stumble for a moment we could lose you.”

The man stepped closer, speaking in a low voice. “Saerin Sedai, the Tower Guard is all but useless in this fight. With the Seanchan using those . . . monstrous women, we can barely reach them before being ripped to pieces or blasted to ashes.”

“You need to change your tactics, then, Captain,” Saerin said firmly. Light, what a mess! “Tell the men to switch to bows. Do *not* risk closing on the enemy’s channelers. Shoot from a distance. A single arrow could turn the battle to our side; we have their soldiers grossly outnumbered.”

“Yes, Aes Sedai.”

“As a White might say, it’s simple logic,” she said. “Captain, our most important task is to form a center of operations. Aes Sedai and soldiers alike are scrambling about independently, acting like rats faced by wolves. We need to stand together.”

What she didn’t mention was how embarrassed she was. The Aes Sedai had spent centuries guiding kings and influencing wars, but now—with their sanctuary assaulted—they had proven woefully inadequate in defending it. *Egwene was right,* she thought. *Not just in predicting this attack, but in berating us for being divided.* Saerin didn’t need reports from Moradri or scouts to know that the Ajahs were each fighting this battle independently.

“Captain,” she said. “Moradri Sedai is marking pockets of fighters on the map. Ask her which Ajah is represented in each group; she has an excellent memory, and will be able to tell you specifics. Send runners in my authority to any group of Yellow or Brown sisters. Tell them to report here, to this chamber.

“Next, send runners to the other groups and tell them that we are going to send one Brown or Yellow sister to them for Healing purposes. There will also be a group of sisters here providing Healing. Anyone wounded is to report here immediately.”

He saluted.

“Oh,” she added. “And send someone to the outer grounds to spot the main breaches above. We need to know where the invasion is deepest.”

“Aes Sedai, . . .” he said. “The outer grounds are dangerous. Those flying above fire on anyone they see moving.”

“Then send men who are good at concealing themselves,” she growled.

“Yes, Aes Sedai. We—”

“This is a disaster!” an angry voice shouted.

Saerin turned to find four Red sisters entering the room. Notasha was wearing a white dress bloodied up the left side, though if the blood was her own, she’d been Healed. Katerine’s mass of long black hair was frazzled and tangled with chips of stone. The other two women wore ripped dresses, faces soiled with ash.

“How *dare* they strike here!” Katerine continued, crossing the room. Soldiers ducked out of her way, and several less-influential sisters who had gathered at Saerin’s order suddenly found things to do at the corners of the room. Distant booms sounded, like the noises of an Illuminator’s display.

“They dare because they have the means and the desire, obviously,” Saerin replied, shoving down her annoyance and maintaining her calm. With difficulty. “So far, the strike has proven remarkably effective.”

“Well, I’m assuming command here,” Katerine growled. “We need to scour the Tower and eliminate each of them!”

“You will *not* take command,” Saerin said firmly. Insufferable woman! Calm, remain calm. “Nor will we go on the offensive.”

“And you will dare stop me?” Katerine snarled, the glow of *saidar* a burning light around her. “A *Brown*?”

Saerin raised an eyebrow. “Since when did the Mistress of Novices outrank a Sitter in the Hall, Katerine?”

“I—”

“Egwene al’Vere predicted this,” Saerin said, grimacing. “We can assume, therefore, that the other things she told us about the Seanchan are true. The Seanchan seize women who can channel and use them as weapons. They have brought no ground force; it would be near impossible to march them this far through hostile territory anyway. That means this is a *raid,* intended to seize as many sisters as possible.

“The battle has already stretched long for a raid, perhaps because we’ve done such a poor job of resisting that they feel they can take their time. Either way, we need to form a unified front and hold our ground. Once the battle goes more roughly for them, they will withdraw. We are in no position whatsoever to ‘scour the Tower’ and force them out.”

Katerine hesitated, considering that. Another boom sounded outside.

“Where *do* those keep coming from?” Saerin asked in annoyance. “Haven’t they made enough holes?”

“That wasn’t directed at the Tower, Saerin Sedai!” called one of the soldiers at the room’s doorway, standing just outside in the garden.

He’s right, Saerin realized. *The Tower didn’t shake. It didn’t the time before, either.* “What are they firing on? People down below?”

“No, Aes Sedai!” the guard said. “I think it was a blast thrown from within the Tower, launched from one of the upper floors out at the flying creatures.”

“Well, at least *someone* else is fighting back,” Saerin said. “Where was it launched from?”

“I didn’t see,” the soldier said, still watching the skies. “Light, there it goes again! And again!” Red and yellow reflected from the smoke above, bathing the garden in light barely visible through the door and windows. *Raken* screamed in pain.

“Saerin Sedai!” Captain Chubain said, turning from a group of wounded soldiers. Saerin hadn’t seen them enter; she’d been too caught up with Katerine. “These men are down from the upper levels. It appears that there’s a second rallying point for the defense, and it’s doing very well. The Seanchan are breaking off their attack below to focus there.”

“Where?” Saerin asked eagerly. “Specifically?”

“The twenty-second, Aes Sedai. Northeastern quarter.”

“What?” Katerine asked. “The Brown Ajah sections?”

No. That was what had been there *before*. Now, with the swapping of the Tower’s corridors, that area of the Tower was . . . “The *novices’ quarters*?” Saerin said. That seemed even more ridiculous. “How in the world. . . .” She trailed off, eyes widening slightly. “*Egwene.*”

Each faceless Seanchan that Egwene struck down seemed to be Renna in her mind’s eye. Egwene stood at an open hole in the side of the White Tower, wind pulling at her white dress, tugging at her hair, howling as if in accompaniment to her rage.

Her anger was not out of control. It was cold and distilled. The Tower was burning. She had Foretold this, she had Dreamed it, but the reality was far worse than she had feared. If Elaida had prepared for the event, the damage would have been much less. But there was no point in longing for what had not been.

Instead, she directed her anger—the anger of justice, the wrath of the Amyrlin. She blasted *to'raken* after *to'raken* from the air. They were much less maneuverable than their smaller cousins. She must have felled a dozen by now, and her actions had drawn the attention of those outside. The attack below was breaking off, the entire raid focusing on Egwene. The novices fought Seanchan raiding parties on the stairs, forcing them back. *To'raken* winged about in the air, swooping around the Tower, trying to take Egwene with shields or blasts of fire. Smaller *raken* darted through the air, crossbowmen on their backs launching bolts at her.

But she was a fount of Power, drawn from deep within the fluted rod in her hands, channeled through a group of novices and Accepted hiding in the room behind, bound to her in circle. Egwene was *part* of the fires that burned in the Tower, bloodying the sky with their flames, painting the air with their smoke. She almost seemed not a being of flesh, but one of pure Power, sending judgment to those who had dared bring war to the Tower itself. Blasts of lightning stormed from the sky, the clouds churning above. Fire sprouted from her hands.

Perhaps she should have feared breaking the Three Oaths. But she did not. This was a fight that needed to be fought, and she did not lust for death—though, perhaps, her rage against the *sul'dam* approached it. The soldiers and *damane* were unfortunate casualties.

The White Tower, the sacred dwelling of the Aes Sedai, was under attack. They were all in danger, a danger greater than death. Those silvery collars were far worse. Egwene defended herself and each woman in the Tower.

She would *make* the Seanchan withdraw.

Shield after shield came to sever her from the source, but they were like the hands of children trying to stem the roaring flow of a waterfall. With this much power, she could not be stopped save by a full circle, and the Seanchan didn't use circles; the *a'dam* prevented it.

The attackers prepared weaves to strike her down, but each time Egwene struck first, either deflecting the balls of fire with a blast of air or simply bringing down the *to'raken* who carried the women trying to kill her.

Some beasts had flown away into the night, bearing captives. Egwene had felled the ones she could, but there had been so many *to'raken* in this raid. Some would escape. Sisters would be captured.

She formed a ball of fire in each hand, blasting another beast from the sky as it swooped too close. Yes, some would escape. But they would pay dearly. That was another goal. She had to make certain they never attacked the Tower again.

This raid had to *cost* them.

"Bryne! Above you!"

Gareth dodged to the side, rolling with a grunt, breastplate digging into his sides and belly as he hit cobblestones. Something massive in the air passed just above him, and a thudding crash followed. He came up on one knee to see a burning *raken* tumbling across the ground where he had been standing, its rider—already dead from the fireblast that had killed his mount—tumbling free like a rag doll. The *raken* corpse, still smoldering, slumped to a rest beside the Tower wall. The rider lay where he had fallen, the helm bouncing away into the darkness. One of the corpse's boots was missing.

Bryne heaved himself to his feet and pulled his belt knife free—he'd dropped his sword in the roll. He spun, scanning for danger. There was plenty of it to be found. *Raken* swooped—big ones and small ones—though most were fixated on the Tower above. The inner green at the front of the Tower was studded with chunks of stone and bodies twisted into horrific positions. Bryne's men were fighting a squadron of Seanchan soldiers; the invaders in their insectile armor had piled out of the Tower moments ago. Were the Seanchan running away from something or just looking for a fight? There were a good thirty of them.

Had the soldiers come out to this courtyard to be lifted away? Well, either way, they had met an unexpected force in Bryne's soldiers. Light be blessed, there were no channelers in the group.

With over two-to-one odds, Bryne's men should have had an easy time of it. Unfortunately, there were some few of the bigger *raken* above dropping stones and fireballs on the courtyard's occupants. And these Seanchan fought well. Very well.

Bryne called for his men to stand fast, glancing about for his sword. Gawyn—the one who had warned him earlier—stood near it, dueling two Seanchan at once. Had the boy no sense? Gawyn's force had the upper hand. He should have a swordmate with him. He—

Gawyn dispatched both Seanchan with one fluid motion. Was that Lotus Closes Its Blossom? Bryne had never seen it used so effectively against two men at once. Gawyn wiped his weapon as part of the traditional finishing flourish, then sheathed it and kicked Bryne's fallen sword up into the air and snatched it. He fell into a guard position, holding the sword, wary. Bryne's line of men was holding, despite the attacks from above. Gawyn nodded to Bryne, waving him forward with the sword.

Metal on metal rang across the courtyard, shadows thrown across the scarred grass, lit by the fires above. Bryne took his sword back and Gawyn unsheathed his own blade, on edge. "Look up there," he said and pointed with his sword.

Bryne squinted. There was a great deal of activity near a hole in one of the upper floors. He pulled free his spyglass, focusing on the location, trusting in Gawyn to warn him if danger approached.

"By the Light . . ." Bryne whispered, focusing on the gap. A solitary figure wearing white stood in the Tower's rent. It was too distant to make out her face, even with the spyglass, but whoever she was, she was certainly doing some damage to the Seanchan. Her arms were upraised with fire glowing between her hands, the burning light throwing shadows across the outer Tower wall around her. Blasts of fire flew in a steady stream, flinging *raken* from the sky.

He raised his spyglass higher, scanning the length of the Tower, searching for other signs of resistance. There was activity on the flat, circular roof. It was so distant he could barely make it out. It looked like poles being raised, followed by *raken* swooping down and . . . What? Each time a *raken* swooped by, it left dragging something.

Captives, Bryne realized with a chill. *They're taking captive Aes Sedai to the roof, tying ropes to them, then the* raken *are snatching those ropes and towing the women into the air.* Light! He caught a glimpse of one of the captives being pulled away. It looked as if she had a sack tied over her head.

"We have to get into the Tower," Gawyn said. "This fight is just a distraction."

"Agreed," Bryne said, lowering the spyglass. He glanced to the side of the courtyard, where Siuan had said she'd wait while the men fought. Time to collect her and—

She was gone. Byrne felt a spike of shock, followed by one of terror. Where was she? If that woman had gotten herself killed. . . .

But no. He could sense her inside the Tower. She wasn't hurt. This bond was such a wondrous thing, but he was too unaccustomed to it. He should have noticed that she was gone! He scanned his line of soldiers. The Seanchan had fought well, but they were visibly routed now. Their line was breaking, scattering in all directions, and Bryne barked the order for his men not to follow.

"First and second squads, gather the wounded quickly," he called. "Carry them to the side of the courtyard. Those who can walk should head directly for the boats." He grimaced. "Those who can't walk will need to wait for Aes Sedai to Heal them." The soldiers nodded. The badly wounded would be abandoned into enemy hands, but they had been warned of that possibility before coming on this mission. Recovering the Amyrlin outweighed all other concerns.

Some men would die from their wounds while they waited. There was nothing he could do about that. Hopefully, most would be Healed by the White Tower Aes Sedai. That healing would be followed by imprisonment, but there was no other choice. The team of soldiers had to keep moving quickly, and there was no time for litters to carry the wounded.

"Third and fourth squads," he began, urgent. He stopped as a familiar form in a blue dress strode out of the Tower, towing a girl in white. Of course, Siuan herself looked only faintly older than the girl, now. At times, he had difficulty connecting her to the stern woman he had met years ago.

Feeling a surge of relief, he confronted Siuan as she approached. "Who is *that*?" he demanded. "Where did you go?"

She clicked her tongue, telling the novice to wait, then pulling Bryne away to speak to him in a low voice. "Your soldiers were busy, and I decided it would be a good time to gather some information. And, I might note, we're going to have to work on your attitude, Gareth Bryne. That's not the proper way for a Warder to speak to his Aes Sedai."

"I'll start worrying about that when *you* start acting like you have two bits of sense in your head, woman. What if you'd run into Seanchan?"

"Then I would have been in danger," she said, hands on hips. "It wouldn't be the first time. I couldn't risk being seen by other Aes Sedai with you or your soldiers. Such simple disguises won't fool a sister."

"And if you'd been recognized?" he demanded. "Siuan, these people tried to *execute* you!"

She sniffed. “Moiraine herself wouldn’t recognize me with this face. The women in the Tower will just see a young Aes Sedai who looks faintly familiar. Besides, I didn’t run into any of them. Just this child.” She glanced at the novice; the girl had a short bob of black hair and stared, terrified, at the battle in the sky above. “Hashala, come here,” Siuan called.

The novice scurried over.

“Tell this man what you told me,” Siuan commanded.

“Yes, Aes Sedai,” the novice said with an anxious curtsy. Bryne’s soldiers made an honor guard around Siuan, and Gawyn stepped up beside Bryne. The young man’s eyes kept flicking toward the deadly sky.

“The Amyrlin, Egwene al’Vere,” the novice said in a quivering voice. “She was released from the cells earlier today and allowed to return to the novices’ quarters. I was down in the lower kitchens when the attack came, so I don’t know what has happened to her. But she’s probably up on the twenty-first or twenty-second level somewhere. That’s where the novices’ quarters are now.” She grimaced. “The inside of the Tower is a mess, these days. Nothing is where it should be.”

Siuan met Bryne’s eyes. “Egwene’s been given forkroot in heavy doses. She’ll barely be able to channel.”

“We’ve got to reach her!” Gawyn said.

“Obviously,” Bryne said, rubbing his chin. “That’s why we’re here. I guess we go up instead of down, then.”

“You’re here to rescue her, aren’t you?” The novice sounded eager.

Bryne eyed the girl. *Child, I wish you hadn’t made that connection*. He hated the thought of leaving a mere novice tied up in the middle of this mess. But they couldn’t have her running to give warning to the White Tower Aes Sedai.

“I want to go with you,” the novice said fervently. “I’m loyal to the Amyrlin. The *real* Amyrlin. Most of us are.”

Bryne raised an eyebrow, glancing at Siuan.

“Let her come,” the Aes Sedai said. “It’s the easier option anyway.” She moved over to begin asking the girl a few more questions.

Bryne glanced to the side as one of his captains, a man named Vestas, approached. “My Lord,” Vestas said urgently, his voice a deep whisper. “The wounded are sorted. We lost twelve men. Another fifteen are wounded but can walk and are heading for the boats. Six are wounded too badly to go with them.” Vestas hesitated. “Three men won’t last the hour, my Lord.”

Bryne gritted his teeth. “We move on.”

“I feel that pain, Bryne,” Siuan said, turning around and eyeing him. “What is it?”

“We don’t have time. The Amyrlin—”

“Can wait another moment. What is it?”

“Three men,” he said. “I have to leave three of my men to die.”

“Not if I Heal them,” Siuan said. “Show me.”

Bryne made no further objection, though he did glance at the sky. Several of the *raken* had landed elsewhere in the Tower grounds, vague black shapes, lit by the fires in flickering orange. The fleeing Seanchan were congregating at them.

Those were the ground assault troops, he thought. *They really are pulling out. The raid is ending.*

Which meant they were running out of time. As soon as the Seanchan left, the White Tower would start to reorganize. They needed to reach Egwene! Light send that she hadn’t been captured.

Still, if Siuan wanted to Heal the soldiers, then it was her decision. He just hoped that these three lives did not end up costing the life of the Amyrlin.

Vestas had set the three soldiers by themselves at the side of the green, beneath the boughs of a large shade tree. Bryne brought a squad of soldiers, leaving Gawyn to organize the rest of the men, and followed Siuan over to the wounded. She knelt beside the first man. Her skill in Healing was not the best; she’d warned Bryne of this ahead of time. But perhaps she could make these three well enough that they would survive to be discovered and taken by the White Tower.

She worked quickly, and Bryne noticed that she’d done herself an injustice. She seemed to do a creditable job with the Healing. Still, it took time. He scanned the courtyard, feeling his anxiety rise. Though blasts were still being exchanged on the upper floors, the lower floors and grounds were silent. The only sounds nearby were those of the groaning wounded and the crackling of flames.

Light, he thought, surveying the rubble, running his eyes over the Tower’s base. The east wing’s roof and far wall had been leveled, and flames flickered inside the structure. The courtyard was a mess of rubble and gouges. Smoke hung in the air, pungent and thick. Would the Ogier be willing to return and rebuild this magnificent structure? Would it ever be the same again, or had a seemingly eternal monument fallen this evening? Was he proud or grieved to have witnessed it?

A shadow moved in the darkness beside the tree.

Bryne moved without thought. Three things in him mixed: years of training with the sword, a lifetime of practiced battlefield reflexes and a new bond-enhanced awareness. All came together in one motion. His sword was out in a heartbeat, and he performed Blacklance's Last Strike, slamming his sword straight into the neck of the dark figure.

All was still. Siuan, shocked, looked up from the man she was Healing. Bryne's sword extended directly over her shoulder and into the neck of a Seanchan soldier in pure black armor. The man silently dropped a wickedly barbed shortsword slathered with a viscous liquid. Twitching, he reached for Bryne's sword, as if to push it free. His fingers gripped Bryne's arm for a moment.

Then the man slid backward off of Bryne's blade and to the ground. He spasmed once, whispering something distinct despite the bubbling of his bleeding throat. "*Marath . . . damane . . .*"

"Light burn me!" Siuan breathed, raising a hand to her breast. "What was *that*?"

"He wasn't dressed like the others," Bryne said, shaking his head. "The armor is different. Assassin of some sort."

"Light," Siuan said. "I didn't even see him! He almost seemed part of the darkness itself!"

Assassins. They always seemed to look the same, regardless of the culture. Bryne sheathed his sword. That was the first time he'd ever used Blacklance's Last Strike in combat. It was a simple form, intended for only one thing: speed. Draw the sword and strike into the neck in one fluid motion. If you missed, you usually died.

"You saved my life," Siuan said, looking up at Bryne. Her face was mostly shadowed. "By the seas at midnight," she said, "the blasted girl was *right*."

"Who?" Bryne asked, warily scanning the darkness for more assassins. He waved curtly, and his men sheepishly opened their lanterns further. The assassin's attack had come so quickly that they had barely moved. If Bryne hadn't had the speed of a Warder bond. . . .

"Min," Siuan said, sounding tired. Those Healings seemed to have taken a lot out of her. "She said I had to stay near you." She paused. "If you hadn’t come tonight, I would have died.”

“Well,” Bryne said, “I *am* your Warder. I suspect it won’t be the only time I save you.” Why had it grown so warm all of a sudden?

“Yes,” Siuan said, standing up. “But this is different. Min said I’d die, and . . . No, wait. That’s *not* what Min said exactly. She said that if I didn’t stay close to you, we’d both die.”

“What are you—” Bryne said, turning toward her.

“Hush!” Siuan said, taking his head in her hands. He felt a strange prickling sensation. Was she using the Power on him? What was going on? He recognized that shock, like ice in the veins! She was Healing him! But why? He wasn’t wounded.

Siuan took her hands off his face, then teetered slightly with a sudden look of exhaustion. He grabbed her, to help steady her, but she shook her head and righted herself. “Here,” she said, grabbing his sword arm, twisting it so that the wrist was visible. There, pressed into his skin, was a tiny black pin. She yanked it free. Bryne felt a chill totally unrelated to the Healing.

“Poisoned?” he asked, glancing at the dead man. “When he reached for my arm, it wasn’t a simple death spasm.”

“Probably had a numbing agent on it,” Siuan muttered angrily, letting him help her sit down. She tossed the pin aside and it suddenly burst into flames, the poison evaporating beneath the heat of her channeling.

Bryne ran a hand through his hair. His brow was damp. “Did you . . . Heal it?”

Siuan nodded. “It was surprisingly easy; there was only a little in your system. It would have killed you anyway. You’ll have to thank Min next time you see her, Bryne. She just saved both of our lives.”

“But I wouldn’t have been poisoned if I hadn’t come!”

“Don’t try to apply logic to a viewing or Foretelling like this,” Siuan said, grimacing. “You’re alive. I’m alive. I suggest we leave it at that. You feel good enough to keep going?”

“Does it matter?” Bryne said. “I’m not about to let you go on without me.”

“Let’s move, then,” Siuan said, taking a deep breath and climbing to her feet. That rest hadn’t been nearly long enough, but he didn’t challenge her. “These three soldiers of yours will survive the night. I’ve done what I can for them.”

Egwene sat, exhausted, on a pile of rubble, staring out of the hole in the White Tower, watching fires burning below. Figures moved about them, and one by one, the fires winked out. Whoever had been running the resistance was quick-minded enough to realize that the fires could prove as dangerous as the Seanchan. But a few sisters weaving Air or Water could make short work of the flames, preserving the Tower. What was left of it.

Egwene closed her eyes and lay back, resting against the fragments of a wall, feeling the fresh breeze blow across her. The Seanchan were gone, the last *to'raken* vanishing into the night. That moment, watching it flee, was the moment when Egwene realized how hard she'd taxed herself and the poor novices she'd been drawing through. She'd released them with orders to go directly to sleep. The other women she'd gathered were caring for wounded or working on the fires on the upper levels.

Egwene wanted to help. A part of her did, at least. A sliver. But Light, she was tired! She couldn't channel another trickle, not even using the *sa'angreal*. She'd pushed the limits of what she could manage. But she was so worn out now that she wouldn't be able to embrace the Source if she tried.

She'd fought. She'd been glorious and destructive, the Amyrlin of judgment and fury, Green Ajah to the core. And still, the Tower had burned. And still, more *to'raken* had escaped than had fallen. The count of wounded among those she'd gathered was somewhat encouraging. Only three novices and one Aes Sedai dead, while they'd gathered ten *damane* and killed dozens of soldiers. But what of the other floors? The White Tower would not come out ahead in this battle.

The White Tower was broken, physically now as well as spiritually. They'd need a strong leader to rebuild. The next few days would be pivotal. It made her more than exhausted to consider the work she'd need to do.

She had protected many. She had resisted and fought. But this day would still mark one of the greatest disasters in the history of the Aes Sedai.

Can't think of that, she told herself. *Have to focus on what to do to fix things. . . .*

She would get up soon. She would lead the novices and Aes Sedai on these upper floors as they cleaned up and assessed the damage. She would be strong and capable. The others would be tempted to fall into despair, and she needed to be positive. For them.

But she *could* take a few minutes. She just needed to rest for a little while. . . .

She barely noticed when someone picked her up. She tiredly opened her eyes, and—though numb of mind—was astonished to find that she was being carried by Gawyn Trakand. His forehead was smeared with crusty dried blood, but his face was determined. “I’ve got you, Egwene,” he said, glancing down. “I’ll protect you.”

Oh, she thought, closing her eyes again. *Good. Such a pleasant dream.* She smiled.

Wait. No. That wasn’t right. She wasn’t supposed to be leaving the Tower. She tried to voice complaint, but she could barely mumble.

“Fish guts,” she heard Siuan Sanche say. “What did they do to her?”

“Is she wounded?” another voice. Gareth Bryne.

No, Egwene thought numbly. *No, you have to let me go. I can’t leave. Not now. . . .*

“They just left her there, Siuan,” Gawyn said. His voice was so nice to hear. “Defenseless in the hallway! Anyone could have come upon her like that. What if the Seanchan had discovered her?”

I destroyed them, she thought with a smile, thoughts slipping away from her. *I was a burning warrior, a hero called by the Horn. They won’t dare face me again.* She almost fell asleep, but being jostled by Gawyn’s steps kept her awake. Barely.

“Ho!” She distantly heard Siuan’s voice. “What’s this? Light, Egwene! Where did you get *this*? This is the most powerful one in the Tower!”

“What is it, Siuan?” Bryne’s voice asked.

“Our way out,” Siuan said distantly. Egwene sensed something. Channeling. Powerful channeling. “You asked about sneaking back out with all the activity in the courtyard? Well, with this, I’m strong enough for Traveling. Let’s go collect those soldiers with the boats and hop back to camp.”

No! Egwene thought, clawing through her drowsiness, forcing her eyes open. *I’m winning, don’t you see? If I offer leadership now, when the rubble is being cleared, they’ll see me as Amyrlin for certain! I have to stay! I have to—*

Gawyn carried her through the gateway, leaving the hallways of the White Tower behind.

Saerin finally let herself sit. The gathering room that was her center of operations had also become a room for separating and Healing the wounded. Yellow and Brown sisters moved down the lines of soldiers, servants, and other sisters, focusing on the worst cases first. There were a frightful number of dead, including over twenty Aes Sedai so far. But the Seanchan had withdrawn, as Saerin had predicted. Thank the light for that.

Saerin herself sat at the far northwestern corner of the room, beneath a fine painting of Tear in spring, perched on a short stool and accepting reports as they came. The wounded groaned and the room smelled of blood and of healall, which was used on those whose wounds didn't demand immediate Healing. The room also smelled of smoke. That was ever-present tonight. More and more soldiers approached her, handing in reports of damage and casualties. Saerin didn't want to read further, but it was better than listening to those groans. Where under the Light was Elaida?

Nobody had seen anything of the Amyrlin during the battle, but much of the upper Tower had been cut off from the lower portions. Hopefully, the Amyrlin and the Hall could be gathered soon to present a strong leadership in the crisis.

Saerin accepted another report, then raised her eyebrows at what it said. Only three novices in Egwene's group of over sixty had died? And only one sister out of some forty she had gathered? *Ten* Seanchan channelers captured, over thirty *raken* blown from the air? Light! That made Saerin's own efforts seem downright amateur by comparison. And this was the woman Elaida kept trying to insist was simply a *novice*?

"Saerin Sedai?" a man's voice asked.

"Hmm?" she asked, distracted.

"You should hear what this Accepted has to say."

Saerin looked up, realizing that the voice belonged to Captain Chubain. He had his hand on the shoulder of a young Arafellin Accepted with blue eyes and a plump round face. What was her name? Mair, that was it. The poor child looked ragged. Her face sported a number of cuts and some scrapes that would likely bruise. Her Accepted dress was ripped on the sleeve and shoulder.

"Child?" Saerin asked, glancing at Chubain's worried face. What was wrong?

"Saerin Sedai," the girl whispered, curtsying, then wincing at the action. "I. . . ."

“Spit it out, child,” Saerin demanded. “This isn’t a night for dawdling.”

Mair looked down. “It’s the Amyrlin, Saerin Sedai. Elaida Sedai. I was attending her tonight, taking transcriptions for her. And. . . .”

“And what?” Saerin said, feeling a growing chill.

The girl started crying. “The entire wall burst in, Saerin Sedai. The rubble covered me; I think they thought I was dead. I couldn’t do anything! I’m sorry!”

Light intercede! Saerin thought. *She can’t be saying what I think she is. Can she?*

Elaida awoke to a very odd sensation. Why was her bed moving? Rippling, undulating. So rhythmic. And that wind! Had Carlya left the window open? If so, the maid would be beaten. She’d been warned. She’d been—

This was not her bed. Elaida opened her eyes and found herself looking down at a dark landscape hundreds of feet below. She was tied to the back of some strange beast. She couldn’t move. Why couldn’t she move? She reached for the Source, then felt a sudden, sharp pain, as though she had suddenly been beaten on every inch of her body with a thousand rods.

She reached up, dazed, feeling the collar at her throat. There was a dark figure riding in the saddle next to her; no lanterns lit the woman’s face, but Elaida could *feel* her somehow. Elaida could just barely remember spending time dangling in the air, tied to a rope, as she fell in and out of consciousness. When had she been pulled up? What was happening?

A voice whispered from the night. “I shall forgive that little mistake. You have been *marath’damane* for very long, and bad habits are to be expected. But you will not reach for the Source again without permission. Do you understand?”

“Release me!” Elaida bellowed.

The pain returned tenfold, and Elaida retched at the intensity of it. Her bile and sick-up fell over the side of the beast and dropped far to the ground below.

“Now, now,” the voice said, patient, like a woman speaking to a very young child. “You must learn. Your name is Suffa. And Suffa will be a good *damane*. Yes she will. A very, very good *damane*.”

Elaida screamed again, and this time, she didn’t stop when the pain came. She just kept screaming out into the uncaring night.

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CHAPTER 42

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Before the Stone of Tear

We don't know the names of the women who were in Graendal's palace, Lews Therin said. *We can't add them to the list.*

Rand tried to ignore the madman. That proved impossible. Lews Therin continued.

How can we continue the list if we don't know the names! In war, we sought out the Maidens who had fallen. We found every one! The list is flawed! I can't continue!

It's not your list! Rand growled. *It's mine, Lews Therin. MINE!*

No! the madman sputtered. *Who are you? It's mine! I made it. I can't continue now that they're dead. Oh, Light! Balefire? Why did we use balefire! I promised that I would never do that again. . . .*

Rand squeezed his eyes shut, holding tightly to Tai'daishar's reins. The warhorse picked his way down the street; the hooves hit packed earth, one after another.

What have we become? Lews Therin whispered. *We're going to do it again, aren't we? Kill them all. Everyone we've loved. Again, again, again. . . .*

"Again and again," Rand whispered. "It doesn't matter, as long as the world survives. They cursed me before, swore at Dragonmount and by my name, but they lived. We're here, ready to fight. Again and again."

"Rand?" Min asked.

He opened his eyes. She rode her dun mare next to Tai'daishar. He couldn't let her, or any of them, see him slipping. They mustn't know how close he was to collapsing.

So many names we don't know, Lews Therin whispered. *So many dead by our hand.*

And it was just the beginning.

"I am well, Min," he said. "I was thinking."

"About the people?" Min asked. The wooden walks of Bandar Eban were filled with people. Rand no longer saw the colors of their clothing; he saw how worn that clothing was. He saw the rips in the magnificent fabric, the threadbare patches, the dirt and the stains. Virtually everyone in Bandar Eban was a refugee of one sort or another. They watched him with haunted eyes.

Each time he'd conquered a kingdom before, he'd left it better than when he'd arrived. Rand had removed Forsaken tyrants, brought an end to warfare and sieges. He'd cast out Shaido invaders, he'd delivered food, he'd created stability. Each land he'd destroyed had, essentially, been saved at the same time.

Arad Doman was different. He'd brought in food—but that food had drawn even more refugees, straining his supplies. Not only had he failed to give them peace with the Seanchan, he had appropriated their only troops and sent them up to watch the Borderlands. The seas were still unsafe. The tiny Seanchan empress hadn't trusted him. She would continue her attacks, perhaps double them.

The Domani would be trampled beneath the hooves of war, crushed between the invading Trollocs to the north and the Seanchan to the south. And Rand was leaving them.

Somehow, the people realized that, and it was very hard for Rand to look at them. Their hungry eyes accused him: Why bring hope, then let it dry up, like a newly dug well during a drought? Why force us to accept you as our ruler, only to abandon us?

Flinn and Naeff had ridden before him; he could see their black coats ahead as they sat their horses watching Rand's procession approach the city square. The pins sparkled on their high collars. The fountain in the square still flowed among gleaming copper horses leaping from copper waves. Which of those silent Domani continued to shine the fountain, when no king ruled and half the merchant council was lost?

Rand's Aiel hadn't been able to track down enough of the council to form a majority; he suspected that Graendal had killed or captured enough of them to keep a new king from ever being chosen. If any of the merchant council members had been pretty enough, they'd have joined the ranks of her pets—which meant that Rand had killed them.

Ah, Lews Therin said. *Names I can add to the list. Yes. . . .*

Bashere rode up beside Rand, knuckling his mustaches, looking thoughtful. "Your will is done," he said.

"Lady Chadmar?" Rand asked.

"Returned to her mansion," Bashere said. "We've done the same with the other four members of the merchant council the Aiel were holding near the city."

"They understand what they are to do?"

“Yes,” Bashere said, sighing. “But I don’t think they’ll do it. If you ask me, the moment we’re gone they’ll bolt from the city like thieves fleeing a prison once the guards leave.”

Rand gave no reaction. He’d ordered the merchant council to choose new members, then pick a king. But Bashere was probably right. Already, Rand had reports from the other cities along the coast, where he’d told his Aiel to withdraw. The city leaders were vanishing, running before the presumed Seanchan assault.

Arad Doman, as a kingdom, was finished. Like a table laden with too much weight, it would soon collapse. *It is not my problem,* Rand thought, not looking at the people. *I did everything I could.*

That wasn’t true. Though he’d wanted to help the Domani, his real reasons for coming had been to deal with the Seanchan, to find out what had happened to the king, and to track down Graendal. Not to mention to secure what he could of the Borderlands.

“What news from Ituralde?” Rand asked.

“Nothing good, I’m afraid,” Bashere said grimly. “He’s had skirmishes with Trollocs, but you knew that already. The Shadowspawn always withdraw quickly, but he warns that something is gathering. His scouts catch glimpses of forces large enough to overrun him. If the Trollocs are gathering there, then they’re likely gathering elsewhere as well. Particularly the Gap.”

Curse those Borderlanders! Rand thought. *I will have to do something about them. Soon*. Reaching the square, he reined in Tai’daishar and nodded to Flinn and Naeff.

At his signal, they each opened a large gateway in the city square. Rand had wanted to leave directly from Lady Chadmar’s mansion grounds, but that would have been to vanish like a thief, there one day and gone the next. He would at least let the people see that he was leaving and know that they had been left to themselves.

They lined the boardwalks, much as they had when Rand had first entered the city. If possible, they were more quiet now than they had been. Women in their sleek gowns, men in colorful coats and ruffled sleeves beneath. There were many without the coppery skin of the Domani. Rand had lured so many to the city with promises of food.

Time to go. He approached one of the gateways, but a voice called out. “Lord Dragon!”

The voice was easy to hear, since the crowds were so silent. Rand turned in his saddle, seeking out the source of the voice. A willowy man in a red Domani coat—buttoned at the waist, open in a “V” up the front, with a ruffled shirt beneath. His golden earrings sparkled as he elbowed his way through the crowd. The Aiel intercepted him, but Rand recognized him as one of the dockmasters. Rand nodded for the Aiel to let the man—Iralin was his name—approach.

Iralin hurried up to Tai’daishar. He was uncharacteristically clean shaven for a Domani man, and his eyes were shadowed from lack of sleep.

“My Lord Dragon,” the man said in a hushed voice, standing beside Rand’s horse, “The food! It has spoiled.”

“What food?” Rand asked.

“All of it,” the man said, voice taut. “Every barrel, every sack, every bit in our stores and in the Sea Folk ships. My Lord! It’s not just full of weevils. It’s grown black and bitter, and it makes men sick to eat it!”

“*All* of it?” he repeated, shocked.

“Everything,” Iralin said softly. “Hundreds upon hundreds of barrels. It happened suddenly, in the blink of an eye. One moment, it was good, the next moment. . . . My Lord, so many people have come to the city because they heard we had food! Now we have *nothing*. What will we do?”

Rand closed his eyes.

“My Lord?” Iralin asked.

Rand opened his eyes and kicked Tai’daishar into motion. He left the dockmaster behind, mouth open, and passed through the gateway. There was nothing more Rand could do. Nothing more he *would* do.

He put the coming starvation out of his mind. It was shocking how easy that was.

Bandar Eban vanished, those too-silent people vanished. The moment he passed through the gateway, cheers exploded from the waiting crowds. It was so shocking, such a contrast, that Rand pulled Tai’daishar up short, stunned.

Tear spread before him. This was one of the great cities, massive and sprawling, and the gateways opened directly into Feaster’s Run, one of the main city squares. A short rank of Asha’man saluted with fists to chests. Rand had sent them on earlier in the morning to prepare the city for his arrival and clear the square for gateways.

The people continued their cheers. Thousands had gathered, and Banners of Light flapped atop dozens of poles held aloft by the crowd. The adulation hit Rand like a wave of reproach. He didn't deserve such praise. Not after what he had done in Arad Doman.

Must keep moving, he thought, kicking Tai'daishar into motion again. The horse's hooves fell on flagstones here, rather than rain-dampened dirt. Bandar Eban was a large city, but Tear was something else entirely. Streets snaked across the landscape, lined with buildings that most country folk would have called cramped, but that were ordinary to the Tairens. Many of the peaked slate or tile roofs had men or boys perched on their edges, hoping for a better view of the Lord Dragon. The building stones were a lighter hue here than they had been in Bandar Eban, and they were the preferred building material. Perhaps that was because of the fortress that loomed above the city. The Stone of Tear, it was called. A relic of a previous age, still impressive.

Rand trotted forward, Min and Bashere still riding nearby. Those crowds roared. So loud. Nearby, two flapping pendants got caught in the wind, and inexplicably entangled. The men holding them aloft, near the front of the crowd, lowered them and tried to pull them apart, but they were knotted tight, somehow twisted that way by the wind. Rand passed them with barely any notice. He'd stopped feeling surprise at what his *ta'veren* nature could do.

Rand was surprised, however, to see so many foreigners in the crowd. That wasn't so unusual; Tear always saw a lot of outlanders—it welcomed those who would trade spices and silks from the east, porcelain from the seas, grains or tabac from the north, and stories from anywhere they could be gleaned. However, Rand had found that outlanders—no matter what the city—paid him less heed when he visited. This was true even when those outlanders were from another country he had conquered. When he was in Cairhien, the Cairhienin would fawn over him—but if he were in Illian, the Cairhienin would avoid him. Perhaps they didn't like being reminded that their lord and their enemy's lord were the same man.

Here, however, he had no trouble counting foreigners: Sea Folk with their dark skin and their loose, bright clothing; Murandians, in their long coats and waxed mustaches; bearded Illianers with upturned collars; pale-faced Cairhienin with stripes on their clothing. There were also men and women who wore simple Andoran wool. Fewer of the foreigners cheered than locals, but they were there, watchful.

Bashere scanned the crowd.

"The people seem surprised," Rand found himself saying.

"You've been away for a time." Bashere knuckled his mustaches in thought. "No doubt the rumors have flown swifter than arrows, and many an innkeeper has spun tales of your death or disappearance to encourage another round of drinks."

"Light! I seem to spend half of my life trampling down one rumor or another. When will it end?"

Bashere laughed. "When you can stop *rumor* itself, I'll get off my horse and ride a goat! Ha! And become one of the Sea Folk as well."

Rand fell silent. His followers continued to pile through the gateways. As the Saldaeans entered Tear, nearly to a man they held their lances up straighter, their horses prancing. The Aes Sedai wouldn't be caught preening, but they did look less wilted, their ageless faces regarding the crowd with a sagacious manner. And the Aiel—their prowling steps a little less wary, their expressions less guarded—seemed more comfortable with the cheering than they had with those quiet, accusing Domani eyes.

Bashere and Rand moved over to the side, Min following silently. She looked distracted. Nynaeve and Cadsuane had not been in the mansion when Rand had announced his departure. What could they be up to? He doubted they were together; those women barely tolerated being in the same room. Anyway, they would hear where he had gone, and they would find him. From this point on, Rand would be easy to locate. No more hiding in wooded manors. No more traveling alone. Not with Lan and his Malkieri riding to the Gap. There wasn't enough time left.

Bashere watched the open gateways, the Aiel passing through on silent feet. This method of voyaging was becoming familiar to them.

"Are you going to tell Ituralde?" Bashere finally asked. "About your withdrawal?"

"He will hear," Rand said. "His messengers were ordered to bring reports to Bandar Eban. They will soon discover I'm no longer there."

"And if he leaves the Borderlands to resume his war against the Seanchan?"

"Then he'll slow the Seanchan down," Rand said. "And keep them from nipping at my heels. That will be as good a use for him as any."

Bashere eyed him.

"What do you expect me to do, Bashere?" Rand asked quietly. That look was a challenge, if a subtle one, but Rand would not rise to it. His anger remained frozen.

Bashere sighed. "I don't know," he said. "This whole thing is a mess, and I don't see any way out of it, man. Going to war with the Seanchan at our backs, that's as bad a position as I can think of."

"I know," Rand said, looking over the city. "Tear will be theirs by the time this is through, probably Illian as well. Burn me, but we'll be lucky if they don't conquer all the way up to Andor while our backs are turned."

"But—"

"We have to assume that Ituralde will abandon his post once news of my failure reaches him. That means our next move *has* to be toward the Borderlander army. Whatever complaint your kinsmen have with me, it must be settled quickly. I have little patience for men who abandon their duties."

Have we done that? Lews Therin asked. *Who have we abandoned?*

Quiet! Rand growled. *Go back to your tears, madman, and leave me be!*

Bashere leaned back thoughtfully in his saddle. If he was thinking of Rand abandoning the Domani, he said nothing. Finally, he shook his head. "I don't know what Tenobia is about. Could be as simple as her anger at me for leaving to follow you; could be as difficult as a demand that you submit to the will of the Borderlander monarchs. I can't imagine what would draw her and the others away from the Blight at a time like this."

"We will soon find out," Rand said. "I want you to take a couple of the Asha'man and find out where Tenobia and the others are camped. Maybe we'll discover they've given up this fool's parade and turned back toward where they belong."

"All right, then," Bashere said. "Let me see my men settled and I'll be off."

Rand nodded sharply, then turned his mount and began to trot down the street. The people were lined up on either side, ushering him onward. The last time he had visited Tear, he had tried to come in disguise, for all the good it had done him. Anyone who knew the signs would have known he was in the city. Unusual events—banners tying themselves together, men falling from buildings and landing unharmed—were only the beginning.

His *ta'veren* effect seemed to be growing more powerful, causing increasingly greater distortions. And more dangerous ones.

During his last visit, Tear had been besieged by rebels, but the city hadn't suffered. Tear had too much trade to be bothered by something as simple as a siege. Most people had lived as usual, barely acknowledging the rebels. Nobles could play their games, as long as they didn't disrupt more honest folks.

Besides, everyone had known that the Stone would hold, as it almost always had. It might have been rendered obsolete by Traveling, but for invaders who didn't have access to the One Power, the Stone was virtually impossible to take. In and of itself, it was more massive than many cities—a gargantuan sprawl of walls, towers and sheer fortifications without a single seam in its rock. It included forges, warehouses, thousands of defenders, and its own fortified dock.

None of that would be much use against an army of Seanchan with *damane* and *raken*.

Crowds lined the street up to the Stone Verge, the large open space that surrounded the Stone on three sides. *It's a killing field*, Lews Therin said.

Here, another crowd cheered Rand. The gates to the Stone were open, and a welcoming delegation awaited him. Darlin—once a High Lord, now King of Tear—sat astride a brilliant white stallion. Shorter than Rand by at least a head, the Tairen had a short black beard and close-cropped hair. His prominent nose kept him from being handsome, but Rand had found him very keen of mind and of honor. After all, Darlin had opposed Rand from the start, rather than joining those who had hastened to worship him. A man whose allegiance was hard to win was often one whose allegiance would also be secure when he was out of your sight.

Darlin bowed to Rand. Pale-faced Dobraine, dressed in a blue coat and white trousers, sat astride a roan gelding beside the King. His expression was unreadable, though Rand suspected he was still disappointed in being sent from Arad Doman so soon.

Lines of Defenders of the Stone stood before the wall, swords held before them, breastplates and ridged helmets shined near to glowing. Their puffy sleeves were striped with black and gold, and above them waved the banner of Tear, a half-red, half-gold field marked with three silver crescents. Rand could see that the square inside the wall was bursting with soldiers, many in the colors of the Defenders, but many wearing no uniform beyond a strap of red and gold tied around their arms. Those would be the new recruits, the men Rand had ordered Darlin to gather.

It was a display to produce awe. Or perhaps to stroke a man’s pride. Rand stopped Tai’daishar before Darlin. Unfortunately, the rooster Weiramon accompanied the King, sitting his horse just behind Darlin. Weiramon was so lacking in wits that Rand would barely have trusted him to work a field unsupervised, let alone command a squad of troops. True, the short man was brave, but that was likely only because he was too slow of thought to consider most dangers. As always, Weiramon looked even more the fool for attempting to style himself as anything other than a buffoon; his beard was waxed, his hair was carefully arranged to hide just how much he was balding and his clothing was rich—a coat and breeches cut as if to be a field uniform, but no man would wear such fine cloth into battle. No man but Weiramon.

I like him, Lews Therin thought.

Rand started. *You don’t like anyone!*

He’s honest, Lews Therin replied, then laughed. *More than I am, for certain! A man doesn’t choose to be an idiot, but he* does *choose to be loyal. We could do much worse than have this man as a follower.*

Rand kept his tongue. Arguing with the madman was pointless. Lews Therin made decisions without reason. At least he wasn’t humming about a pretty woman again. That could be distracting.

Darlin and Dobraine bowed to Rand, Weiramon mimicking them. There were others behind the King, of course. Lady Caraline was a given; the slender Cairhienin was as beautiful as Rand remembered. A white opal hung on her forehead, the golden chain woven into her dark hair. Rand had to force himself to look away. She looked too much like her cousin, Moiraine. Sure enough, Lews Therin started naming off the names on the list, Moiraine at the forefront.

Rand steeled himself, listening to the dead man in the back of his mind as he studied the rest of the group. All of the remaining High Lords and Ladies of Tear were there—atop their own mounts. Simpering Anaiyella sat her bay horse beside Weiramon. And . . . was she wearing a handkerchief favor bearing his colors? Rand had thought her a little more discriminating than that. Torean had a smile on that lumpy face of his. A pity that he was still alive when far better men among the High Lords had died. Simaan, Estanda, Tedosian, Hearne—all four had opposed Rand, leading the siege against the Stone. Now they bowed to him.

Alanna was there, too. Rand didn't look at her. She was sorrowful, he could tell through their bond. As well she should be.

"My Lord Dragon," Darlin said, straightening in his saddle, "thank you for sending Dobraine with your wishes." His voice conveyed his displeasure. He'd rushed to gather an army at Rand's urgent command, and then Rand had forced him to do nothing for weeks. Well, the men would be glad for the extra weeks of training soon.

"The army is ready," Darlin continued, hesitant. "We are prepared to leave for Arad Doman."

Rand nodded. He'd originally intended to set Darlin in Arad Doman so he could pull Aiel and Asha'man out for placement elsewhere. He turned, glancing back at the crowds, absently realizing why there were so many foreigners among them. Most of the nationals had been recruited for the army, and now stood in ranks inside the Stone.

Perhaps the people in the square and on the streets hadn't been there to cheer Rand's arrival. Perhaps they thought they were cheering their departing armies off to victory.

"You have done well, King Darlin," Rand said. "It's about time someone in Tear learned to obey orders. I know your men are impatient, but they will have to wait a short time longer. Make rooms for me in the Stone and see to quartering Bashere's soldiers and the Aiel."

Darlin's confusion deepened. "Very well. Are we not needed in Arad Doman, then?"

"What Arad Doman needs, nobody can give," Rand said. "Your forces will be coming with me."

"Of course, my Lord. And . . . where will we be marching?"

"To Shayol Ghul."

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CHAPTER 43

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Sealed to the Flame

Egwene sat quietly in her tent, hands in her lap. She controlled her shock, her burning anger and her incredulity.

Plump, pretty Chesa sat silently on a cushion in the corner, sewing embroidery on the hem of one of Egwene's dresses, looking as content as a person could be, now that her mistress had returned. The tent was secluded, set in its own grove within the Aes Sedai camp. Egwene had allowed no attendants besides Chesa this morning. She had even turned away Siuan, who had undoubtedly come to offer some kind of apology. Egwene needed time to think, to prepare, to deal with her failure.

And it *was* a failure. Yes, it had been forced on her by others, but those others were her followers and friends. They would know her anger for their part in this fiasco. But first she needed to look inward, to judge what she should have done better.

She sat in her wooden chair, high-backed, with scrollwork patterns across the armrests. Her tent was as she had left it, desk orderly, blankets folded, pillows stacked in the corner, obviously kept dusted by Chesa. Like a museum used to instruct children of days past.

Egwene had been as forceful as possible with Siuan during their meetings in *Tel'aran'rhiod*, and yet they'd *still* come against her wishes. Perhaps she had been too secretive. It was a danger—secrecy. It was what had pulled down Siuan. The woman's time as head of the Blue Ajah's eyes-and-ears had taught her to be parsimonious with information, doling it out like a stingy employer on payday. If the others had known the importance of Siuan's work, perhaps they wouldn't have decided to work against her.

Egwene ran her fingers along the smooth, tightly woven pouch she wore tied to her belt. Inside was a long, thin item, retrieved secretly from the White Tower earlier in the morning.

Had she fallen into the same trap as Siuan? It was a danger. She had been trained by Siuan, after all. If Egwene had explained in more detail how well her work in the White Tower was going, would the others have stayed their hands?

It was a difficult line to walk. There *were* many secrets that an Amyrlin had to hold. To be transparent would be to lose her edge of authority. But with Siuan herself, Egwene should have been more forthcoming. The woman was too accustomed to taking action on her own. The way she had kept that dream *ter'angreal* against the Hall's knowledge and wishes was an indication of that. Yet Egwene had approved of that, unconsciously encouraging Siuan to defy authority.

Yes, Egwene had made mistakes. She could not lay all the blame on Siuan, Bryne and Gawyn. She had likely made other mistakes as well; she would need to look at her own actions in more detail later.

For now, she turned her attention to a greater problem. Disaster had struck. She'd been pulled from the White Tower on the brink of success. What was to be done? She did not get up and pace in thought. To pace was to show nervousness or frustration, and she had to learn to be reserved at all times, lest she unwittingly fall into bad habits. So she remained seated, arms on the hand rests, wearing a fine silken gown of green with yellow patterns on the bodice.

How odd it felt to be in that skirt. How *wrong*. Her white dresses, though forced upon her, had become something of a symbol of defiance. To change now meant an end to her strike. She was tired, emotionally and physically, from the night's battle. But she couldn't give in to that. This wouldn't be her first near-sleepless night before a very important day of decisions and problems.

She found herself tapping her armrest and forced herself to stop.

There was no way she could return to the White Tower as a novice now. Her defiance had worked only because she had been a captive Amyrlin. If she went back willingly, she would be seen as subservient, or as arrogant. Besides, Elaida would certainly have her executed this time.

And so she was stuck, just as she had been when she'd first been taken by the White Tower's agents. She gritted her teeth. She'd once thought, mistakenly, that the Amyrlin wouldn't be so easily tossed about by random twists in the Pattern. She was supposed to be in control. Everyone else spent their days reacting, but the Amyrlin was a woman of action!

She was realizing more and more that being the Amyrlin *wasn't* different. Life was a tempest, whether you were a milkmaid or a queen. The queens were simply better at projecting control in the middle of that storm. If Egwene looked like a statue unaffected by the winds, it was actually because she saw how to bend with those winds. That gave the illusion of control.

No. It was not just an illusion. The Amyrlin *did* have more control, if only because she controlled herself and kept the tempest outside her. She swayed before the needs of the moment, but her actions were well-considered. She had to be as logical as a White, as thoughtful as a Brown, as passionate as a Blue, as decisive as a Green, as merciful as a Yellow, as diplomatic as a Gray. And yes, as vengeful as a Red, when necessary.

There was no returning to the White Tower as a novice, and she couldn't wait for negotiations. Not with the Seanchan bold enough to strike the White Tower, not with Rand completely unwatched, not with the world in chaos and the Shadow gathering its forces for the Last Battle. That left her with a difficult decision. She had a fresh army of fifty thousand troops, and the White Tower had suffered an incredible blow. The Aes Sedai would be exhausted, the Tower Guard broken and wounded.

In a few days' time, the Healings would be finished and the women rested. She didn't know if Elaida had survived the attack or not, but Egwene had to assume she was still in control. That gave Egwene a very narrow window for action.

She *knew* what the only right decision was. She didn't have time to wait for the sisters in the White Tower to make the right decision, she would have to *force* them to accept her.

She hoped that history would eventually forgive her.

She rose, threw open the flaps of her tent, and stopped dead. A man was sitting on the ground directly in front of her.

Gawyn scrambled to his feet, every bit as handsome as she remembered. He wasn't beautiful, like his half-brother. Gawyn was more solid, more *real*. Strikingly, that now made him *more* attractive to Egwene than Galad. Galad was like a being from beyond reality, a figure of legends and stories. He was like a glass statue to be placed on a table for admiration, but never touched.

Gawyn was different. Handsome, with that brilliant reddish gold hair and those tender eyes. While Galad never worried about anything, Gawyn's concern made him genuine. As did his ability to make mistakes, unfortunately.

"Egwene," he said, righting his sword and dusting off his trouser legs. Light! Had he *slept* there in front of her tent? The sun was already halfway to its zenith. The man should have gone to take some rest!

Egwene squelched her concern and worry for him. It was not time to be a lovesick girl. It was time to be Amyrlin. "Gawyn," she said, raising a hand, stopping him as he stepped toward her. "I haven't *begun* to think about what to do with you. Other matters demand my attention. Has the Hall gathered, as I requested?”

“I think so,” he said, turning to glance toward the center of camp. She could just barely make out the large gathering tent of the Hall through the scrub trees.

“Then I must appear before them,” Egwene said, taking a deep breath. She began to walk forward.

“No,” Gawyn said, stepping in front of her. “Egwene, we need to talk.”

“Later.”

“No, not *later*, burn it! I’ve waited months. I need to know how we stand. I need to know if you—”

“Stop!” she said.

He froze. She would *not* be taken in by those eyes, burn him! Not right now. “I said that I hadn’t sorted through my feelings yet,” she said coolly, “and I meant it.”

He set his jaw. “I don’t believe that Aes Sedai calmness, Egwene,” he said. “Not when your eyes are so much more truthful. I’ve sacrificed—”

“*You’ve* sacrificed?” Egwene interrupted, letting a little anger show. “What about what I sacrificed to rebuild the White Tower? Sacrifices that *you* undermined by acting against my express wishes? Did Siuan not tell you that I had forbidden a rescue?”

“She did,” he said stiffly. “But we were worried about you!”

“Well, that *worry* was the sacrifice I demanded, Gawyn,” she said, exasperated. “Don’t you see what a distrust you have shown me? How can I trust *you* if you will disobey me in order to feel more comfortable?”

Gawyn didn’t look ashamed; he just looked perturbed. That was actually a good sign—as Amyrlin, she needed a man who would speak his mind. In private. But in public she’d need someone who supported her. Couldn’t he see that?

“You love me, Egwene,” he said stubbornly. “I can see it.”

“Egwene the woman loves you,” she said. “But Egwene the Amyrlin is *furious* with you. Gawyn, if you’d be with me, you have to be with both the woman and the Amyrlin. I would expect you—a man who was trained to be First Prince of the Sword—to understand that distinction.”

Gawyn looked away.

“You don’t believe it, do you?” she asked.

“What?”

“That I’m Amyrlin,” she said. “You don’t accept my title.”

“I’m trying to,” he said as he looked back at her. “But bloody ashes, Egwene. When we parted you were just an Accepted, and that wasn’t so long ago. Now they’ve named you Amyrlin? I don’t know what to think.”

“And you can’t see how your uncertainty undermines anything we could have together?”

“I can change. But you have to help me.”

“Which is why I wanted to talk *later,*” she said. “Are you going to let me pass?”

He stepped aside with obvious reluctance. “We’re not finished with this talk,” he warned. “I’ve finally made up my mind about something, and I don’t intend to stop chasing it until I have it.”

“Fine,” Egwene said, passing him. “I can’t think about that now. I have to go order people I care about to slaughter another group of people I care about.”

“You’ll do it, then?” Gawyn said from behind. “There’s speculation in camp; I heard it though I barely left this place all morning. Some think you’ll command Bryne to assault the city.”

She hesitated.

“It would be a shame if it happened,” he said. “I don’t care a whit about Tar Valon, but I think I know what it would do to you to attack it.”

She turned back to him. “I will do what must be done, Gawyn,” she said, meeting his eyes. “For the good of the Aes Sedai and the White Tower. Even if it is painful. Even if it tears me apart inside. I will do it if it needs to be done. Always.”

He nodded slowly. She headed for the pavilion at the center of camp.

“This was your fault, Jesse,” Adelorna said. Her eyes were still red; she’d lost a Warder the night before. She was one of many. But she was also tough as a feral hound, and was obviously determined not to let her pain show.

Jesse Bilal warmed her hands on her cup of gooseberry tea, refusing to let herself be goaded. Adelorna’s question had been inevitable. And perhaps Jesse deserved the reprimand. Of course, they *all* deserved it, in one way or another. Except perhaps for Tsutama, who hadn’t been an Ajah head at the time. That was part of why the woman hadn’t been invited to this particular meeting. That, and the fact that the Red Ajah wasn’t in good favor with the others at the moment.

The small, cramped room was barely large enough for five chairs and the small potbellied stove at the wall, radiating a calm warmth. There wasn’t room for a table, let alone a hearth. Just enough space for five women. The most powerful women in the world. And the five most foolish, it seemed.

They were a sorry sisterhood this morning, the morning following the greatest disaster in the history of the White Tower. Jesse glanced at the woman beside her. Ferane Neheran—First Reasoner of the White—was a small, stout woman who, oddly in a White, often seemed more temper than logic. Today was one of those times: she sat scowling, her arms folded. She’d refused a cup of tea.

Next to her was Suana Dragand, First Weaver of the Yellow Ajah. She was a beefy thing with a thrusting chin that matched her unyielding demeanor. Adelorna, the one to make the accusation against Jesse, was beside her. Who could blame the Captain-General for her spitefulness? She who had been birched by Elaida, and who had last night suffered near death at the hands of the Seanchan? The slim woman looked uncharacteristically disheveled. Her hair was pulled back in a serviceable bun, and her pale dress was wrinkled.

The last woman in the room was Serancha Colvine, Head Clerk of the Gray Ajah. She had light brown hair and a pinched face; she looked perpetually as if she’d tasted something very sour. The trait seemed more manifest today than usual.

“She has a point, Jesse,” Ferane said, her logical tone a contrast with her obvious pique. “You *were* the one to suggest this course of action.”

“ ‘Suggest’ is a strong word.” Jesse took a sip of her drink. “I simply mentioned that in some of the . . . more private Tower records, there are accounts of times when the Ajah heads ruled instead of the Amyrlin.” The Thirteenth Depository was known to the Ajah heads, though they could not visit it unless they were also Sitters. That didn’t stop most of them from sending Sitters to gather information from it for them. “I may have been the messenger, but that is often the role of the Brown. You all were not so hesitant as to be *forced* into this course of action.”

There were a few sideways glances at that, and the women found opportunity to study their tea. Yes, they were all implicated, and they understood it. Jesse would *not* take the blame for this disaster.

“There is little use in assigning blame.” Suana attempted to be soothing, though her voice was laced with bitterness.

“I won’t be deflected so easily,” Adelorna growled. Some reacted to the loss of a Warder with sadness, others with anger. There was little doubt which was Adelorna’s way. “A grave, grave error has been made. The White Tower burns, the Amyrlin has been captured by invaders, and the Dragon Reborn *still* walks the earth unfettered. The entire world will soon know of our disgrace!”

“And what good will it do to blame one another?” Suana replied. “Are we so childish that we will spend this meeting squabbling about which one of us will hang, in a useless attempt to evade our responsibility?”

Jesse gave quiet thanks for the sturdy Yellow’s words. Of course, Suana *had* been the first of the Ajah heads to agree to Jesse’s plan. So she’d be next in line for the metaphorical hanging.

“She has a point.” Serancha took a sip of her tea. “We must make peace among ourselves. The Tower needs leadership, and we’re not going to get it from the Hall.”

“That’s partly our fault as well,” Ferane admitted, looking sick.

It was. It had seemed like a brilliant plan. The division of the Tower, the departure of so many in rebellion and the raising of a new Amyrlin, had not been their fault. But it *had* presented several opportunities. The first had been the easiest to take hold of: send Sitters to the rebels to steer them and hasten a reconciliation. The most youthful of Sitters had been chosen, their replacements in the Tower intended to serve only a short time. The Ajah heads had been certain this ripple of a rebellion could be easily smoothed over.

They hadn’t taken it seriously enough. That had been their first mistake. The second was more dire. There were indeed times in the past where the Ajah heads—not the Amyrlin Seat or the Hall of the Tower—had led the Aes Sedai. It had been done secretly, of course, but it had been very successful. Why, the reign of Cemaile Sorenthaine would have been a complete disaster if the Ajah heads hadn’t stepped in.

This had seemed like a similar occasion. The days of the Last Battle’s approach were a special time, requiring special attention. Attention from women of sound, rational minds and great experience. Women who could speak together in confidence and decide on the best course, avoiding the arguments that the Hall got into.

“Where did we go wrong, do you think?” Serancha asked quietly.

The women fell silent. None of them wanted to admit outright that the plan had backfired. Adelorna settled back in her chair, arms folded, smoldering but no longer flinging out accusations.

“It was Elaida,” Ferane said. “She wasn’t ever . . . very logical.”

“She was a bloody disaster is what she was,” Adelorna muttered.

“It was more than that,” Jesse admitted. “Directly choosing Sitters we could control to replace those sent to the rebels was a good decision, but perhaps too obvious. The women of our own Ajahs became suspicious; I know of several comments made by women of the Brown. We are not so oblivious as others would like to think us.”

Serancha nodded. “It smelled of conspiracy,” she said. “That made the women less trusting. And then there were the rebels. Far more difficult to control than presumed.”

The women nodded. They, like Jesse, had assumed that with proper direction, the rebels would find their way back to the Tower and ask forgiveness. This division should have ended with no more damage than a few bruised egos.

But they hadn’t counted on how resilient, or effective, the rebels would be. A full army, appearing on the shores around Tar Valon in the middle of a snowstorm? Led by one of the greatest military minds of the Age? With a new Amyrlin and a frustratingly effective siege? Who could have expected it? And some of the Sitters they had sent had begun siding with the rebels more than the White Tower!

We never should have let Elaida disband the Blue Ajah, Jesse thought. *The Blues might have been willing to come back, had it not happened. But it was such a dishonor that they dug in.* Light only knew how dangerous that was; the histories were filled with accounts of how dogged the Blues could be at getting their way, particularly when they were forced into a corner.

“I think it is time to admit that there is no hope to save our plans,” Suana said. “Are we agreed?”

“Agreed,” Adelorna said.

One by one, the sisters nodded their heads, and so did Jesse herself. Even in this room, it was difficult to admit fault. But it was time to cut their losses and begin rebuilding.

“This has its own problems,” Serancha said, voice more calm now. The other women looked more assured as well. They didn’t trust one another, these five, but they were far closer to doing so than any other group with any authority in the Hall.

“Care must be taken,” Ferane added. “The division must be mended.”

“The rebellion was against Elaida,” Adelorna said. “If she is no longer Amyrlin, then what is there to rebel against?”

“So we abandon her?” Jesse asked.

“She deserves it,” Adelorna said. “She said time and time again that Seanchan were no threat. Well, now she is paying for her foolishness firsthand.”

“Elaida is beyond rescue,” Ferane added. “The Hall has already discussed this. The Amyrlin is buried somewhere in a mass of Seanchan captives, and we have neither the resources nor the information for a rescue.”

Not to mention our total lack of desire, Jesse added to herself. Many of the Sitters who had brought those points before the Hall were ones who had been sent to penance by Elaida. Jesse wasn’t one of those, but she *did* agree that Elaida had earned her reward, if only for the way she had driven the Ajahs to one another’s throats.

“Then we need a replacement,” Serancha said. “But who?”

“It has to be someone strong,” Suana said. “But someone cautious, unlike Elaida. Someone whom the sisters can rally around.”

“What about Saerin Asnobar?” Jesse asked. “She has shown uncanny wisdom of late, and she is well liked.”

“Of course you’d choose a Brown,” Adelorna said.

“And why not?” Jesse said, taken aback. “You all heard, I think, how well she did assuming command during the attack last night?”

“Seaine Herimon led her own pocket of resistance,” Ferane said. “I should think this would be a time for a woman to lead who is of an unemotional temperament. Someone who can provide *rational* guidance.”

“Nonsense,” Suana said. “Whites are too emotionless; we don’t want to alienate sisters, we want to bring them together. Heal them! Why, a Yellow—”

“You’re all forgetting something,” Serancha interjected. “What is needed now? A reconciliation. The Gray Ajah is the one that has spent centuries practicing the art of negotiation. Who better to deal with a divided Tower, and the Dragon Reborn himself?”

Adelorna gripped the armrests of her chair and straightened her back. The others were growing tense as well. As Adelorna opened her mouth to speak, Jesse cut her off.

"Enough!" she interjected. "Are we just going to squabble as the Hall has been doing all morning? Each Ajah offering its own members, and the others summarily rejecting them?"

The room fell silent again. It was true; the Hall had been in session for hours and had only just gone into a short recess. No one Ajah was *close* to getting enough support for one of its candidates. The Sitters would not stand for anyone not of their own Ajah; there was too much animosity between them. Light, but this was a mess!

"Ideally, it should be one of us five," Ferane said. "That makes sense."

The five looked at each other, and Jesse could read their answers to *that* in their eyes. They were the Ajah heads, the most powerful women in the world. Right now, they were balanced in power, and while they trusted each other more than most, there was no way any of them would allow the elevation of another Ajah head to the Amyrlin Seat. It would give the woman far too much power. After the failure of their plan, trust was wearing very thin.

"If we don't decide soon," Suana noted, "the Hall may take the decision from us."

"Bah." Adelorna waved a hand. "They're so divided they can't agree on what color the sky is. The Sitters have no idea what they're doing."

"At least some of us didn't choose Sitters who were *years* too young to be placed in the Hall," Ferane said.

"Oh?" Adelorna said. "And you got around that how, Ferane? By choosing *yourself* as a Sitter?"

Ferane's eyes widened with rage. It was *not* a good idea to rile that woman's temper.

"We all made mistakes," Jesse said quickly. "Many sisters we chose were odd. We wanted women who would do exactly as we said, but instead we got a group of squabbling brats with inflated opinions of themselves, too immature for more temperate minds to influence."

Adelorna and Ferane made a point of not looking at each other.

"This still leaves us with a problem," Suana said. "We need an Amyrlin. Healing must begin quickly, whatever the cost."

Serancha shook her head. “I honestly can’t think of a single woman that a sufficient number of Sitters would support.”

“I can,” Adelorna said softly. “She was mentioned in the Hall several times today. You know of whom I speak. She is young, and her circumstances are unusual, but everything is unusual at the moment.”

“I don’t know,” Suana said, frowning. “She was mentioned, yes, but by those whose motives I don’t trust.”

“Saerin seems quite taken with her,” Jesse admitted.

“She’s too young,” Serancha said. “Weren’t we just berating ourselves for choosing Sitters who lacked the necessary experience?”

“She is young, yes,” Ferane noted, “but you have to admit, there’s a certain . . . flair to her. I hardly think that anyone in the Tower stood up to Elaida as effectively as she. And while in such a position as she was, no less!”

“You’ve heard the reports of her actions during the attack,” Adelorna said. “I can confirm that they are true. I was there with her for most of it.”

Jesse started at this. She hadn’t realized that Adelorna had been on the twenty-second level during the fighting. “Surely some of what was said is exaggeration.”

Adelorna shook her head grimly. “No. It isn’t. It sounds incredible . . . but it . . . well, it happened. All of it.”

“The novices all but worship her,” Ferane said. “If the Sitters will not stand for someone of another Ajah, what of a woman who never picked an Ajah? A woman who has some experience—however unjustified—in holding the very position we are discussing?”

Jesse found herself nodding. But how had the young rebel gained such respect from Ferane and Adelorna?

“I am uncertain,” Suana said. “It seems like another rash decision.”

“Didn’t you yourself say that we had to heal the Tower, no matter what the cost?” Adelorna asked. “Can you honestly think of a better way to bring the rebels back to us?” She turned to Serancha. “What is the best method of appeasing an offended party? Would it not be to give some ground to them, acknowledge what they have done right?”

“She has a point,” Suana admitted. She grimaced, then downed the rest of her tea in one gulp. “Light, but she’s right, Serancha. We have to do it.”

The Gray looked at each of them in turn. “You aren’t foolish enough to assume this woman will be led by the nose, are you? I won’t stand for this if we're simply trying to create another puppet. That plan failed. It failed miserably."

"I doubt we'll find ourselves in that situation again," Ferane said, smiling faintly. "This one . . . is not the type to be bullied. Just look at how she dealt with Elaida's restrictions."

"Yes," Jesse found herself saying, to her own surprise. "Sisters, if we agree to this, it will end our dream of ruling from the shadows. For better or worse, we'll be setting up an Amyrlin of strength."

"I, for one," Adelorna said, "think that's a *splendid* idea. It's been too long."

One by one, the others agreed.

Siuan stood, unmoving, beneath the boughs of a small oak. The tree had been engulfed by the camp, and its shade had become a favored location for Accepted and novices taking lunches. There were none doing so at the moment; the sisters, showing remarkably good judgment this time, had set them tasks to keep them from congregating around the tent where the Hall was meeting.

And so Siuan stood alone, watching as Sheriam pulled the flaps to the large pavilion closed. She was able to attend now that Egwene was back. It was easy to sense when the ward against eavesdropping was woven, Sealing the meeting to the Flame and excluding prying ears.

A hand fell on Siuan's shoulder. She didn't jump; she'd sensed Bryne approaching. The general walked with stealth, although there was no need. He was going to make an excellent Warder.

He stepped up beside her, hand still comfortably on her shoulder, and she allowed herself the luxury of taking just a small step closer to him. His height and sturdiness felt good beside her. Like knowing that though the sky stormed and the sea raged, your hull was caulked and your sail crafted of the strongest cloth.

"What do you think she will tell them?" Bryne asked, his voice subdued.

"I honestly have no idea. She could call for my stilling, I suppose."

"I doubt that she will," Bryne asked. "She is not the vengeful type. Besides, she knows that you did what you felt you had to. For her own good."

Siuan grimaced. "Nobody likes being disobeyed, least of all the Amyrlin. I will pay for last night, Bryne. You're right that it probably won't be in a public way, but I worry that I've lost the girl's trust."

"And was it worth the cost?"

"Yes," Siuan said. "She didn't realize how close this band was to slipping away from her. And we couldn't know that she'd be safe within the Tower during the attack. If there's one thing my time in the White Tower taught me, it's that there is a time for gathering and planning, but one *also* has to act. You can't always wait for certainty."

She could feel Bryne's smile through the bond. Light, but it was good to have a Warder again. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed that comforting knot of emotions in the back of her mind. That stability. Men thought differently from women, and things she found complicated and baffling, Bryne saw as straightforward and simple. Make your decision and go. There was a helpful clarity to his way of reasoning. Not that he was simple—just less inclined to regret decisions he'd already made.

"And what of the other costs?" Bryne added.

She could feel his hesitation, his worry. She turned to him, smiling in amusement. "You're a fool, Gareth Bryne."

He frowned.

"Bonding you was never a cost," she said. "Whatever else happens because of this fiasco, *that* aspect of the night's events were pure profit on my part."

He chuckled. "Well, I'll have to make extra certain that my *second* demand is more unreasonable, then."

Fish guts, Siuan thought. She'd almost forgotten about that. Burning unlikely that Bryne would, though. "And when, precisely, are you going to make this unreasonable demand of me?"

He didn't respond immediately, instead looking down at her, rubbing his chin. "You know," he said, "I think I actually understand you now, Siuan Sanche. You *are* a woman of honor. It's just that nobody else's requirements of you can ever be more harsh or more demanding than your own requirements of yourself. You owe such a self-imposed debt to your own sense of duty that I doubt any mortal being could pay it back."

"You make me sound centered on myself," she said.

"At least I'm not comparing you to a boar again."

"So you *do* think I'm self-centered!" she said. Burn him! He could probably sense that she was actually bothered by his statement, rather than making argument for the sake of it. Burn him again!

“You’re a driven woman, Siuan Sanche,” he said. “Driven to save the world from itself. That’s how you can shrug off an oath or an order so easily.”

Siuan took a deep breath. “This conversation grew very tedious very quickly, Gareth Bryne. Are you going to tell me that other demand, or are you going to make me wait?”

He studied her stone face thoughtfully. “Well, frankly, I’m planning to demand that you marry me.”

She blinked in surprise. Light! The bond said that he was honest.

“But only after you feel the world can care for itself. I won’t agree to it before then, Siuan. You’ve given your life to something. I’ll see that you survive through it; I hope that once you’re done, you’ll be willing to give your life to something else instead.”

She reined in her shock. She wouldn’t let a fool man make *her* speechless. “Well,” she forced herself to say. “I see you have some sense after all. We shall see if I agree to this ‘demand’ of yours or not. I will think on it.”

Bryne chuckled as she turned around to regard the pavilion, waiting for Egwene’s reappearance. He could sense the truth from inside her, just as she could sense it from him. Light! Now she knew why Greens married their Warders so often. Feeling his affection for her while she felt the same for him made her giddy.

He was a fool of a man. And she no less a fool of a woman. She shook her head ruefully, but she did let herself lean back against him softly as they waited, and he replaced his hand on her shoulder. Soft, not forceful. Willing to wait. He *did* understand her.

Egwene stood before a group of smooth faces that were far too good at hiding their anxiety. By custom, she had ordered Kwamesa to weave the ward against eavesdropping, as the sharp-nosed Gray was the youngest among the Sitters in the large tent. It looked almost empty with so few places taken. A dozen women, two from each Ajah—there would have been three of each, but the Ajahs had all sent one Sitter with the envoy to the Black Tower. The Grays had already replaced Delana with Naorisa Cambral.

Twelve Sitters, along with Egwene and one other. Egwene did not look at Sheriam, who sat in her place to the side. Sheriam had seemed troubled as she entered. Did she realize what Egwene knew? She couldn't. If she had, she'd never have come to the meeting.

Still, knowing she was there—and knowing what she was—made Egwene nervous. In the chaos of the Seanchan attack, Siuan hadn't been able to watch Sheriam. Why *did* the Keeper wear a bandage on her left hand? Egwene didn't believe her excuse of an accident while riding, her little finger getting caught in her reins. Why had she refused Healing? Blast Siuan! Instead of watching Sheriam, she'd come to kidnap Egwene!

The Hall grew still, the women waiting to see what Egwene's response would be to her "freedom." Romanda, gray-streaked hair up in a bun, sat primly in a yellow dress. She oozed satisfaction, while Lelaine—on the opposite side of the room—sulked while trying to act pleased at Egwene's return. After what Egwene had been through in the White Tower, this squabbling felt ridiculously petty.

Egwene took a deep breath, then embraced the Source. It felt so good! No bitter forkroot to squeeze her power to a trickle, no need to reach through other women to lend her strength. No need for a *sa'angreal*. Sweet though the fluted wand's power had been, being strong in and of herself was even more satisfying.

Several of the women frowned at the action, and not a few of them embraced the Source themselves, as if by reflex, looking about as if for danger.

"There will be no need for that," Egwene said to the women. "Not yet. Please release the Source."

They were hesitant, but—ostensibly—they accepted her as Amyrlin. One by one their power winked away. Egwene did not release it herself.

"I am very glad to see that you returned safely, Mother," Lelaine said. She skirted the Three Oaths by adding the word "safely."

"Thank you," Egwene said calmly.

"You said that there were important revelations to make," Varilin added. "Is this regarding the Seanchan attack?"

Egwene reached to the pouch on her skirt and pulled its contents free. A smooth white rod with the numeral three inscribed on it in the script of the Age of Legends, near the base. There were several gasps.

Egwene wove Spirit into the Rod, then spoke in a clear voice. "I vow that I will speak no word that is not true." She felt the oath fall over her like a physical thing, her skin growing tighter, prickling. It was easy to ignore;

the pain was nothing compared with what she had been through. “I vow that I will make no weapon for one man to kill another. I vow that I will never use the One Power as a weapon except against Darkfriends and Shadowspawn, or in the last extreme of defending my life or that of my Warder or of another sister.”

The Hall was silent. Egwene released her weave. Her skin felt so odd! As if someone had pinched the excess up at the base of her neck and along her spine, yanking it and binding it in place.

“Let it no longer be thought that I can avoid keeping the Three Oaths,” Egwene announced. “Let it no longer be breathed that I am not fully Aes Sedai.” None of them said anything about her not having taken the test to gain the shawl. She would see to that another day. “And now that you’ve seen me use the Oath Rod and know that I cannot lie, I will tell you something. During my time in the White Tower, a sister came to me and confided that she was Black Ajah.”

The women’s eyes bulged, and several gasped quietly.

“Yes,” Egwene said. “I know we don’t like to speak of them, but can any of us honestly claim that the Black Ajah does not exist? Can you hold to the oaths while saying that you’ve never considered the possibility—even the *likelihood*—of there being Darkfriends among us?”

Nobody dared to. The tent felt hot despite the early hour. Stuffy. None of them sweated, of course—they knew the age-old trick of avoiding that.

“Yes,” Egwene said, “It is shameful, but it is a truth that we—as the leaders of our people—must admit. Not in public; but among ourselves there is no avoiding it. I have seen firsthand what distrust and quiet politicking can do to a people. I will *not* see the same disease infect us here. We are of different Ajahs, but we are single in purpose. We need to know that we can trust one another implicitly, because there is very little else in this world that can be trusted.”

Egwene looked down at the Oath Rod, which she’d fetched early in the morning from Saerin. She rubbed her thumb on it. *I wish you’d been able to find this when you visited, Verin,* she thought. *Perhaps it wouldn’t have saved you, but I would have liked to try. I could use your aid.*

Egwene looked up. “I am not a Darkfriend,” she announced to the room. “And you know it cannot be a lie.”

The Sitters looked perplexed. Well, they would soon see the point.

“It is time for us to prove ourselves,” Egwene said. “Some clever women in the White Tower hit upon this idea, and I intend to expand it. We will each in turn use the Oath Rod to release ourselves from the Three Oaths, then reswear them in turn. Once we are all bound, we will be able to promise that we are not servants of—”

Sheriam embraced the Source. Egwene had been anticipating that. She slammed a shield between Sheriam and the Source, causing the woman to gasp. Berana cried out in shock, and several other women embraced the Source, looking this way and that.

Egwene turned and met Sheriam’s eyes. The woman’s face was nearly as red as her hair, and she was breathing in and out quickly. Like a captured rabbit, its leg in a snare, eyes wide with fright. She clutched her bandaged hand.

Oh, Sheriam, Egwene thought. *I had hoped that Verin was wrong about you.*

“Egwene?” Sheriam asked uncomfortably. “I was just—”

Egwene stepped forward. “Are you Black Ajah, Sheriam?”

“What? Of course not!”

“Do you consort with the Forsaken?”

“No!” Sheriam said, glancing to the sides.

“Do you serve the Dark One?”

“No!”

“Have you been released from your oaths?”

“No!”

“Do you have red hair?”

“Of course not, I never—” She froze.

And thank you for that trick as well, Verin, Egwene thought with a mental sigh.

The tent grew very, very still.

“I misspoke, of course,” Sheriam said, sweating nervously. “I didn’t know what question I was answering. I can’t lie, of course. None of us can. . . .”

She trailed off as Egwene held out the Oath Rod. “Prove it, Sheriam. The woman who came to me in the Tower gave me your name as a leader among the Black Ajah.”

Sheriam met Egwene’s eyes. “Ah, then,” the woman said softly, eyes mournful. “Who was it, now, who came to you?”

“Verin Mathwin.”

“Well, well,” Sheriam said, settling back on her chair. “Never expected it of *her*, I’ll say. How did she get past the oaths to the Great Lord?”

“She drank poison,” Egwene said, heart twisting.

“Very clever.” The flame-haired woman nodded. “I could never bring myself to do such a thing. Never indeed. . . .”

Egwene wove bonds of Air and wrapped Sheriam in them, then tied off the weaves. She turned back to an incredulous group of women, white-faced. Some terrified. “The world marches to the Last Battle,” Egwene said sternly. “Did you expect that our enemies would leave us alone?”

“Who else?” Lelaine whispered. “Who else was mentioned?”

“Many others,” Egwene said. “Sitters among them.”

Moria leaped to her feet and ran for the exit. She barely made it two steps. A dozen different sisters enclosed the former Blue with shields and bound her in weaves of Air. In seconds, she was hanging, gagged, tears leaking down the sides of her oval face.

Romanda clicked her tongue, walking around the woman. “Both from the Blue,” she noted. “This was a dramatic way to make the revelations, Egwene.”

“You will address me as ‘Mother,’ Romanda,” Egwene said, walking down from the dais. “And it is not so odd that there would be a higher percentage of them among the Blue here, since that entire Ajah fled the White Tower.” She held up the Oath Rod. “The reason I had to make the revelation this way was simple. How would you have responded if I’d simply declared them to be Black without offering proof?”

Romanda nodded her head. “You are correct on both counts, Mother,” she admitted.

“Then you wouldn’t mind being the first to retake the oaths, I presume?”

Romanda hesitated only briefly, glancing at the two women bound in Air. Almost everyone in the room held to the Source, eyeing the others as if they might grow coppersnakes for hair at any moment.

Romanda took the Oath Rod, and did as instructed, releasing herself from the oaths. The process was obviously painful, but she held herself to a controlled, hissing intake of breath. The others watched carefully for a trick, but Romanda was straightforward in reswearing. She handed the rod back to Egwene. “I am not a Darkfriend,” she said. “And I never have been.”

Egwene accepted the Oath Rod back. “Thank you, Romanda,” she said. “Lelaine, do you wish to be next?”

“Gladly,” the woman said. She probably felt a need to vindicate the Blue. One by one, the other women forswore—gasping or hissing at the pain of it—then swore again and promised that they were not Darkfriends. Egwene let out a silent sigh of relief at each one. Verin had admitted that there would be sisters she didn’t get, and that Egwene might discover other members of the Black among the Sitters.

When Kwamesa, the last, handed the Rod back to Egwene and declared herself not a Darkfriend, there was a visible release of tension in the room.

“Very good,” Egwene said, returning to stand at the head of the room. “From now on, we continue as one. No more squabbling. No more fighting. We each have the best interests of the White Tower—and the world itself—at heart. The twelve of us, at least, are confident in one another.

“A cleansing is never easy. It is often painful. Today, we have cleansed ourselves, but what we have to do next will be nearly as painful.”

“You . . . know the names of many others?” Takima asked, for once looking not a bit distracted.

“Yes,” Egwene said. “Over two hundred total, some from each Ajah. Some seventy among us here in this camp. I have the names.” She had returned in the night to fetch Verin’s books from her room. They were now safely hidden in her tent, invisible. “I propose that we arrest them, though it will be difficult, as we will have to seize all of them as simultaneously as possible.” Their greatest advantage, beyond surprise, was going to be the inherently distrusting nature of the Black Ajah. Verin and other sources had indicated that few sisters in the Black knew more than a handful of other names. There was an entire write-up in the book about Black Ajah organization, and their system of groups known as “hearts” that had minimal interaction to keep them hidden. Hopefully, that very system would slow their realizing what was happening.

The Sitters looked daunted. “First,” Egwene said, “we will claim that we need to spread important news to every Sister, but can’t let it be overheard by the soldiers in camp. We’ll call the sisters into this pavilion by Ajah—it’s big enough to hold about two hundred people. I’ll distribute to each of you the names of all the Black sisters. When each Ajah enters, I’ll repeat to them what I told you and tell them they’re all going to have to reswear on the Oath Rod. We'll be ready to seize Black sisters who try to escape. We'll tie them up and deposit them in the audience tent." That smaller tent was connected to the side of the Hall, and could be closed off so that entering sisters wouldn't see the captives.

"We'll have to do something about Warders," Lelaine said grimly. "Let them come in with their sisters, I suppose, and be prepared to seize them."

"Some of them will be Darkfriends," Egwene said. "But not all. And I don't know which ones." Verin had had some notes about this, but not many, unfortunately.

"Light, what a mess," Romanda muttered.

"It must be done," haughty Berana said with a shake of her head.

"And it must be done quickly," Egwene said. "So that the Black sisters don't have time to escape. I'll warn Lord Bryne to create a perimeter of archers and sisters we trust to stop any trying to escape, just in case. But that will only work for those too weak to make gateways."

"We mustn't let it come to that," Lelaine said. "A war inside the camp itself . . ."

Egwene nodded.

"And what of the White Tower?" Lelaine said.

"Once we have cleansed ourselves," Egwene said, "then we can do what must be done to reunify the Aes Sedai."

"You mean—"

"Yes, Lelaine," Egwene said. "I mean to begin an assault on Tar Valon by this evening. Pass the word and tell Lord Bryne to prepare his men. The news will serve to distract the Black members among us, and will make them less likely to notice what we are doing."

Romanda glanced at Sheriam and Moria, hanging in the air at the side of the tent, both weeping openly, mouths bound with gags of Air. "It must be done. I put forth a motion before the Hall to take the action the Amyrlin has suggested."

The tent grew still. Then, slowly, each women rose to give consensus. It was unanimous.

"Light preserve us," Lelaine whispered. "And forgive us for what we are about to do."

My thoughts exactly, Egwene added.

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CHAPTER 44

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Scents Unknown

“Tarwin’s Gap is the place that makes the most sense!” Nynaeve argued.

She and Rand rode on an overgrown road in the open grassland of Maredo, accompanied by a crowd of Aiel. Nynaeve was the only Aes Sedai there; Narishma and Naeff rode near the back of the group, looking sullen. Rand had forced their Aes Sedai to stay behind. He seemed particularly determined to assert his independence from them, lately.

Nynaeve was astride a pure white mare named Moonlight, appropriated from Rand’s stable in Tear. It still seemed odd that he would have his own stable at all, let alone one in each of the major cities of the world.

“Tarwin’s Gap,” Rand said, shaking his head. “No. The more I think about it, the more I realize that we don’t want to fight there. Lan is doing me a favor. If I can coordinate an assault alongside his own, I can gain great advantage. But I don’t want to distract my armies with the Gap. It would be a waste of resources.”

A waste of resources? The Gap was where *Lan* was heading, like an arrow loosed from a Two Rivers longbow. Heading there to die! And Rand said helping was a waste? Wool-headed fool!

Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to calm down. If only he would *argue*, rather than speaking in that distant way he had recently adopted. He seemed so emotionless, but she had seen the beast get free and roar at her. It was coiled inside him, and if he didn’t let his emotions out soon, they would devour him from the inside.

But how to make him see reason? She had prepared argument after argument—each of them distinctly reasoned and calmly explained—during their time in Tear. Rand had ignored all of them, spending the last two days meeting with his generals and planning strategy for the Last Battle.

Each day brought Lan one step closer to a fight he couldn’t win. Each day made her more anxious; several times, she’d nearly abandoned Rand and ridden for the north. If Lan was going to fight an impossible battle, then she longed to be at his side. But she stayed. Light take Rand al’Thor, she stayed. What good would it do to help Lan, only to let the world fall into Shadow because of a stubborn sheepherder’s stubborn . . . *stubbornness*!

She gave her braid a solid yank. The jeweled bracelets and rings on her hands glittered in the faint sunlight—the sky was cloudy, of course, just as it had been for weeks. Everyone tried to ignore how unnatural that was, but Nynaeve could still feel that storm building to the north.

Such a short time left until Lan reached the Gap! Light send that he was slowed down by the Malkieri who had come to support him in his ride. Light send that he was not alone. Thinking of him, riding into the Blight, facing the army of Shadowspawn who infested his homeland. . . .

“We *have* to attack there,” Nynaeve said. “Ituralde says that the Blight is swarming with Trollocs. The Dark One is gathering his forces. You can bet that the bulk of them will be at the Gap, where it’s easiest to get through and strike at Andor and Cairhien!”

“That is exactly why we will not attack at the Gap, Nynaeve,” Rand said, voice cold and even. “We cannot let the enemy dictate our battlefield. The last thing we want to do is fight where *they* want us to, or where they expect us to.” He turned eyes northward. “Yes, let them gather. They seek me, and I shall not deliver myself. Why fight at Tarwin’s Gap? It makes the best sense to jump most of our armies right to Shayol Ghul.”

“Rand,” she said, trying to sound reasonable. Couldn’t he see that she was reasonable? “There is no way that Lan has been able to gather a large enough force to hold back a mass assault by the Trollocs, particularly not with most of the Borderlander armies doing Light only knows what down here. He’ll be overrun, and the Trollocs will invade!”

Mention of the Borderlanders made Rand’s face tighten; they rode to meet with their messengers. “The Trollocs will invade,” Rand repeated.

“Yes!”

“Good,” Rand said. “It will keep them occupied as I do what needs to be done.”

“And Lan?” Nynaeve asked.

“His attack will be well placed.” Rand nodded. “He will draw my enemies’ attention to Malkier and the Gap, and it will make them think that I am there. Shadowspawn can’t move through gateways, so they can’t move as quickly as I can. By the time they’ve engaged Lan, I’ll be past them and attacking directly at the Dark One’s heart.

“I don’t plan to abandon the southern lands, not at all. When the Trollocs punch through the Gap, they will break up into fists to invade. That’s when my forces will hit them, led by Bashere, Traveling by gateway to strike at each group of Trollocs from the sides or behind. That way, we can pick the best battlefields to suit our needs."

"Rand," Nynaeve said, her anger fading to horror. "Lan will die!"

"Then who am I to deny him that?" Rand said. "We all deserve the chance to find peace."

Nynaeve found her mouth hanging open. He actually believed that! Or he was convincing himself to believe it, at least.

"My duty is to kill the Dark One," Rand said, as if to himself. "I kill him, then I die. That is all."

"But—"

"That is enough, Nynaeve." Rand spoke softly in that dangerous voice of his. He would not be pressed further.

Nynaeve sat back, stewing, trying to decide how to press him on the topic. Light! He would leave the people of the Borderlands to suffer and die in the Trolloc invasions? The people there wouldn't care if the Dark One had been defeated—they would be cooking in stewpots. That would leave Lan and the Malkieri to fight alone, a tiny force to resist the might of every monster that the Blight could spit out.

The Seanchan would wage their war to the south and the west. The Trollocs would attack from the north and the east. The two would meet, eventually. Andor and the other kingdoms would be turned into a massive battleground, the people there—good people, like those in the Two Rivers—would have no chance against such warfare. They'd be crushed.

So what could she do to change it? She had to come up with a new strategy to influence Rand. Everything, in her heart, pointed at protecting Lan. She had to get him help!

The group rode through open grassland spotted occasionally with farms. They passed one on the right, a solitary farmstead not unlike many back in the Two Rivers. Yet, in the Two Rivers, she'd never seen a farmer watch travelers with such open hostility. The red-bearded man in dirtied trousers, with sleeves rolled nearly to his shoulders, leaned against a half-finished fence, his axe laid casually—but very visibly—on the logs beside him.

His field had seen better years; though the soil had been neatly plowed and harrowed, the furrows had spat forth only the smallest of sprouts. The field was spotted with empty patches where seeds had inexplicably refused to take root, and the plants that *were* growing had a yellowish cast to them.

A group of younger men were pulling a stump free from a neighboring field, yet to Nynaeve's practiced eye, they weren't actually trying to get any work done. They didn't have the harness hooked to their ox, and they hadn't loosened the stump in the earth by digging about it. Those lengths of wood lying in the grass were too stout and smoothly worked to be the shafts of tools. Quarterstaffs. It was almost an amusing display—considering the fact that Rand had two hundred Aiel with him—but it said something. These men expected trouble and were preparing for it. No doubt they could feel the storm themselves.

This area, close to trade routes and within reach of Tear, was relatively safe from bandits. It was also just far enough north to avoid being caught in squabbles between Illian and Tear. This should have been a place where farmers didn't need to turn good lumber into quarterstaffs, nor watch strangers with eyes that expected attack.

That wariness would serve them well when the Trollocs reached them—assuming the Seanchan hadn't conquered them and pressed them into their armies by that point. Nynaeve tugged her braid again.

Her mind turned back to Lan. She had to do something! But Rand wasn't seeing sense. That left only Cadsuane's mysterious plan. Fool woman, refusing to explain it. Nynaeve had made the first step, offering an alliance, and how had Cadsuane reacted? With presumptuous arrogance, of course. How dare she welcome Nynaeve into her little group of Aes Sedai like a child who had been wandering in the woods!

How would Nynaeve's task—discovering where Perrin was—help Lan? During the past week, Nynaeve had pressed Cadsuane for more information, but had failed. "Perform this task well, child," Cadsuane had said, "and perhaps we shall give you more responsibility in the future. You've proven yourself willful at times, and we can't have that."

Nynaeve sighed. Find out where Perrin was. How was she supposed to do that? The Two Rivers folk had been of little use. Many of their men were traveling with Perrin, but they hadn't been seen for some time. They were in the south somewhere, Altara or Ghealdan, likely. But that left a large area to search.

She should have known that the Two Rivers would not provide an easy answer. Cadsuane had obviously already tried reaching Perrin herself, and must have failed. That's why she'd given the task to Nynaeve. Had Rand sent Perrin on some secret mission?

“Rand?” she said.

He was muttering roughly to himself.

She shivered. “Rand,” she said more sharply.

He stopped muttering, then glanced at her. She thought she could see the anger hidden there, deep within him, a flash of annoyance at her interruption. Then it was gone, replaced by the frighteningly cool control. “Yes?” he asked.

“Do you . . . know where Perrin is?”

“He has tasks set before him and performs them,” Rand said, turning away. “Why do you wish to know?”

Best not to mention Cadsuane. “I’m still worried about him. And about Mat.”

“Ah,” Rand said. “You are particularly unaccustomed to lying, aren’t you, Nynaeve?”

She felt her face flush in embarrassment. When had he learned to read people so well! “I *am* worried about him, Rand al’Thor,” she said. “He has a peaceful, unassuming nature—and always did let his friends push him around too much.”

There. Let Rand think about *that*.

“Unassuming,” Rand said musingly. “Yes, I suppose he is still that. But peaceful? Perrin is no longer too . . . peaceful.”

So he had been in touch with Perrin recently. Light! How had Cadsuane known, and how had Nynaeve missed those communications? “Rand, if you have Perrin working on something for you, then why have you kept it secret? I deserve to—”

“I haven’t been meeting with him, Nynaeve,” Rand said. “Calm yourself. There are simply things that I know. We are connected, Perrin, myself and Mat.”

“How? What do you—”

“That is all I will say on it, Nynaeve,” Rand interrupted, slicing into her sentence with soft words.

Nynaeve settled back, gritting her teeth again. The other Aes Sedai spoke of being in control of their emotions, but obviously they didn’t have to deal with Rand al’Thor. Nynaeve could be calm too, if she weren’t expected to manage the most bullheaded fool of a man who had ever put on a pair of boots.

They rode in silence for a time, the overcast sky hanging above them like a distant field of graymoss peat. The meeting place with the Borderlanders was a nearby crossroads. They could have Traveled directly there, but the Maidens had prevailed upon Rand to arrive a short distance out and approach more carefully. Traveling was extremely convenient, but it also could be dangerous. If your enemies knew where you would appear, you could open a gateway and find yourself ambushed by a line of archers. Even sending scouts through the gateway first wasn't as safe as Traveling to a spot where nobody was expecting you.

The Aiel learned, and adapted, quickly. Surprising, really. The Waste was terribly unvaried; every part looked just about the same. Of course, she *had* overheard some Aiel guards saying something similar about the wetlands.

This particular crossroads hadn't been important in years. If Verin or one of the other Brown sisters had been there, they'd likely have been able to explain exactly why. All Nynaeve knew was that the kingdom which had once held this land had fallen long ago, and the only remnant was the independent city of Far Madding. The Wheel of Time turned. The most grand of kingdoms fell, rusted and eventually changed into lazy fields, ruled only by farmers determined to grow a particularly good crop of barley. It had happened to Manetheren, and it had happened here. Great highways that had once transported legions now dwindled to obscure country roads in need of maintenance.

As they continued, Nynaeve let Moonlight fall back from Rand's position. That placed her riding near Narishma, with his dark, braided hair, bells tinkling on the ends. He wore black, like most Asha'man, and the Sword and Dragon twinkled on his collar. He'd changed in the months since being bonded as a Warder. She could no longer look at him and see a boy. This was a man, with the grace of a soldier, the careful eyes of a Warder. A man who had seen death and fought Forsaken.

"You're a Borderlander, Narishma," Nynaeve said. "Do you have any idea why the others left their posts?"

He shook his head, scanning the landscape. "I was a cobbler's son, Nynaeve Sedai. I know not the ways of lords and ladies." He hesitated. "Besides, I'm not a Borderlander anymore." The implication was clear. He would protect Rand, no matter what other allegiances tugged at him. A very Warder-like way of thought.

Nynaeve nodded slowly. “Do you have any idea what we’re riding into?”

“They’ll keep their word,” Narishma said. “A Borderlander would sooner die than break his word. They promised to send a delegation to meet with the Lord Dragon. They’ll do just that. I wish we’d been allowed to bring our Aes Sedai, though.”

Reports held that the Borderlander army included thirteen Aes Sedai. A dangerous number: the number needed to still a woman or gentle a man. Thirteen women in a circle could shield the most powerful of channelers. Rand had insisted that the delegation that came to meet him include no more than four of those thirteen Aes Sedai; in return, he promised to bring no more than four channelers. Two Asha’man—Narishma and Naeff—Nynaeve and Rand himself.

Merise and the others had thrown the Aes Sedai equivalent of a fit—it involved a lot of downturned lips and questions like “Are you certain you want to do that?”—when Rand had forbidden them to come.

Nynaeve noted Narishma’s tense posture. “You don’t look as if you trust them.”

“A Borderlander’s place is guarding the Border,” Narishma said. “I was a cobbler’s son, and yet I was trained with the sword, spear, bow, axe and sling. Even before joining the Asha’man, I could best four out of five trained southern soldiers in a duel. We *live* to defend. And yet they left. Now, of all times. With thirteen Aes Sedai.” He glanced at her with those dark eyes of his. “I want to trust them. I know them for good people. But good people can do the wrong thing. Particularly when men who can channel are involved.”

Nynaeve fell silent. Narishma had a point, though what cause would the Borderlanders have to harm Rand? They’d fought the encroachment of the Blight and its Shadowspawn for centuries, and the struggle against the Dark One was imprinted on their very souls. They wouldn’t turn against the Dragon Reborn.

The Borderlanders had a special honor about them. It could be frustrating, true, but it was who they were. Lan’s reverence for his homeland—particularly when many other Malkieri had abandoned their identity—was part of what she loved about him. *Oh, Lan. I’ll find someone to help you. I won’t let you ride into the Shadow’s jaws alone.*

As they neared a small green hill, several Aiel returned from scouting. Rand pulled the group to a halt, waiting for the *cadin'sor*-clad scouts to pad up to him, several wearing the red headbands marked with the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai. The scouts weren't winded, despite the fact that they'd run all the way ahead to the meeting place and then back.

Rand leaned forward in his saddle. "Did they do as I asked? Did they bring no more than two hundred men, no more than four Aes Sedai?"

"Yes, Rand al'Thor," said one of the scouts. "Yes, they kept to your requirements admirably. They have great honor."

Nynaeve recognized the strange Aiel brand of humor in the tone of the man's response.

"What?" Rand asked.

"One man, Rand al'Thor," the Aiel scout said. "That is all that their 'delegation' consists of. He's a short little thing of a man, though he looks like he knows how to dance the spears. The crossroads is behind this hill."

Nynaeve looked ahead. Indeed, now that she knew to look, she could see another road running up from the south, presumably meeting with theirs just beyond the hill.

"What manner of trap is this?" Naeff asked, riding up beside Rand, his lean, warrior's face concerned. "An ambush?"

Rand held up a hand for silence. He kicked his gelding into motion, and the scouts kept up without a word of complaint. Nynaeve was nearly left behind; Moonlight was a far more placid animal than she would have chosen for herself. She'd have words with the stable master when she returned to Tear.

They rounded the hillside, finding a dusty square of ground, scarred by old firepits where caravans had stopped for the night. A roadway smaller than the one they'd been using twisted up to the north and down to the south. A solitary Shienaran man stood in the center, where roads met, watching the oncoming procession. His shoulder-length gray hair hung loose around a lean face which complemented his wiry build. His round face was lined with marks of age; his eyes were small, and he seemed to be squinting.

Hurin? she thought with surprise. Nynaeve hadn't seen the thief-taker since he'd accompanied her and a group of others back to the White Tower following the events at Falme.

Rand reined in his horse, allowing Nynaeve and the Asha'man to catch up. Aiel fanned out like leaves blown before a gust of wind, taking up watchful positions around the crossroads. She was fairly certain that both of the Asha'man had seized the Source, and likely Rand had as well.

Hurin shuffled uncomfortably. He looked much as Nynaeve remembered him. A tad more gray in the hair, but wearing the same simple brown clothing, with a sword-breaker and a shortsword at his waist. He had tied a horse to a fallen log nearby. The Aiel watched it suspiciously, as others might watch a pack of guard dogs.

"Why, Lord Rand!" Hurin called, voice uneven. "It *is* you! Well, you've certainly come up in the world, I must say. Good to—"

He cut off as he was raised from the ground. He made an "urk" of surprise, being turned on unseen weaves of Air. Nynaeve suppressed a shiver. Would seeing men channel ever stop bothering her?

"Who chased after you and me, Hurin," Rand called, "the time when we were trapped in that distant shadow land? What nationality of men did I fell with the bow?"

"Men?" Hurin asked, voice almost a squawk. "Lord Rand, there were no men in that place! None that we met, beyond Lady Selene, that is. All I remember are those frog beasts, the same ones folk say those Seanchan ride!"

Rand spun Hurin around in the Air, regarding him with cold eyes. Then he urged his mount closer. Nynaeve and the Asha'man did as well.

"You don't believe that I'm me, Lord Rand?" Hurin asked as he hung in the air.

"I take very little as it is presented to me, these days," Rand said. "I assume the Borderlanders sent you because of our familiarity?"

Hurin nodded, sweating. Nynaeve felt a stab of pity for the man. He was absolutely devoted to Rand. They had spent a lot of time together, chasing down Fain and the Horn of Valere. On the return trip to Tar Valon, she'd seldom been able to stop Hurin from gossiping about this or that grand feat that Rand had accomplished. Being treated this way by the man he idolized was probably very unsettling for the lean thief-taker.

"Why only you?" Rand asked quietly.

"Well," Hurin said, sighing. "They did tell you—" He hesitated, seeming distracted by something. He sniffed audibly. "Now that . . . that's strange. Never smelled that before."

“What?” Rand asked.

“I don’t know,” Hurin said. “The air . . . it smells like a lot of death, a lot of violence, only not. It’s darker. More terrible.” He shuddered visibly. Hurin’s ability to smell violence was one of those oddities that the Tower couldn’t explain. Not something related to the Power, yet obviously not quite natural either.

Rand didn’t seem to care what Hurin smelled. “Tell me why they sent only you, Hurin.”

“I was saying, Lord Rand. See, this here, we’re to discuss *terms*.”

“Terms regarding your armies moving back where they belong,” Rand said.

“No, Lord Rand,” Hurin said uncomfortably. “Terms for setting up a *real* meeting with them. That part in their letter was kind of vague, I guess. They said you might be angry to find only me here.”

“They were wrong,” Rand said, voice softer. Nynaeve found herself straining to hear him, leaning forward.

“I no longer feel anger, Hurin,” Rand said. “It serves me no useful function. Why would we need ‘terms’ to meet together? I presumed that my offer to bring only a small force would be acceptable.”

“Well, Lord Rand,” Hurin said, “you see, they really *want* to meet with you. I mean, we came all this way—marched through the bloody winter itself, my pardon, Aes Sedai. But it was the bloody *winter*! And a bad one, although it took a long time getting to us. Anyways, we did that coming for you, Lord Rand. So you see, they want to meet with you. Very badly.”

“But?”

“But, well, last time you were in Far Madding there was—”

Rand held up a finger. Hurin quieted, and all grew still. Even the horses seemed to hold their breaths.

“The Borderlanders are in Far Madding?” Rand asked.

“Yes, Lord Rand.”

“They want to meet with me there?”

“Yes, Lord Rand. You’ll have to come inside the protection of the Guardian, you see, and—”

Rand waved a curt hand, cutting off Hurin. A gateway opened immediately. It didn’t appear to lead to Far Madding, however; it just led back a short distance, to the road where Rand and the others had been riding a short time before.

Rand released Hurin, gesturing for the Aiel to let the man mount, then moved Tai'daishar through the gateway. What was going on? Everyone else followed. Once through, Rand created another gateway, this one opening into a small wooded hollow. Nynaeve thought she recognized it; this was where they had stopped following their visit to Far Madding with Cadsuane.

Why the first gateway? Nynaeve thought, confused. And then it occurred to her. One didn't need to learn an area to Travel a short distance from it—and Traveling *to* a place taught someone that location well enough to create gateways from it.

So by Traveling a short hop first, Rand memorized the location well enough to create gateways wherever he wanted—while skipping the time needed to learn the area! It was extremely clever, and Nynaeve felt herself blushing that she hadn't seen the possibility before. How long had Rand known of this trick? Had memory of it come from that . . . voice in his head?

Rand rode Tai'daishar out into the hollow, the horse's hooves stirring fallen leaves as he worked his way through the underbrush. Nynaeve followed, trying to urge her docile mare to keep up with Rand. That stablemaster was going to hear from her for certain. His ears would burn when she was through with him!

Hurin trotted his horse out as well, and the Aiel loped along, subtly keeping him surrounded. They had their faces veiled, spears or bows in hand. Past the trees and underbrush, Rand stopped Tai'daishar, looking across the open meadow toward the ancient city of Far Madding.

It wasn't large, not by the measure of the Great Cities. Nor was it beautiful, not when compared with the Ogier-built wonders Nynaeve had seen. But it was big enough, and it was certainly home to fine architecture and ancient relics. Set upon an island in a lake, it was actually faintly reminiscent of Tar Valon. Three broad bridges crossed the calm waters, and were the only means of entering the city.

A very large army was encamped around the lake, perhaps covering more ground than Far Madding itself. Nynaeve counted dozens of different pennons marking dozens of different houses. There were lines upon lines of horses, and tents like rows of summer crops, carefully planted and organized, awaiting harvest. The Borderlander army.

“I’ve heard of this place,” Naeff said, riding up, close-cropped, dark brown hair ruffling in the wind. He narrowed his eyes, rectangular face dissatisfied. “It’s like a *stedding*, only not as safe.”

Far Madding’s massive *ter’angreal*—known as the Guardian—created invisible protective bubbles that blocked people from touching the One Power. That could be worked around through the use of a very specialized *ter’angreal*, one of which Nynaeve happened to be wearing. But it would help only slightly.

The army looked close enough to be within the bubble that prevented men from channeling, which extended about a mile out around the city.

“They will know we’ve come,” Rand said softly, eyes narrowed. “They’ll have been waiting for it. They expect me to ride into their box.”

“Box?” Nynaeve asked hesitantly.

“The city is a box,” Rand said. “The whole city and the area round it. They want me where they can control me, but they don’t understand. Nobody controls me. Not anymore. I’ve had enough of boxes and prisons, of chains and ropes. Never again will I put myself into the power of another.”

Still staring at the city, he reached to its place on his saddle and removed the statuette of a man holding aloft a globe. Nynaeve felt a sharp chill. Did he have to bring *that* with him everywhere he went?

“Perhaps they need to be taught,” Rand said. “Given encouragement to do their duty and obey me.”

“Rand. . . .” Nynaeve tried to think. She couldn’t let this happen again!

The access key began to glow faintly. “They want to capture me,” he said softly. “Hold me. Beat me. They did it once in Far Madding already. They—”

“Rand!” Nynaeve said sharply.

He stopped, looking at her, seeing her as if for the first time.

“These are not slaves with their minds already burned away by Graendal. That is an entire city full of innocent people!”

“I wouldn’t harm the people of the city,” Rand said, voice emotionless. “That army deserves the demonstration, not the city. A rain of fire upon them, perhaps. Or lightning to strike and bite.”

“They have done nothing other than ask you to meet with them!” Nynaeve said, edging her horse closer to him. That *ter’angreal* sat like a viper in his hand. Once, it had cleansed the Source. If only it had melted away as the female one had!

She wasn't certain what would happen if he aimed a weave into the protective bubble of Far Madding, but she suspected it would still work. The Guardian didn't stop weaves from being made; Nynaeve had been able to craft weaves just fine, when she'd drawn upon her Well.

Either way, she knew that she had to stop Rand from turning his anger—or whatever it was he felt—upon his allies. "Rand," she said softly. "If you do this, there will be no turning back."

"There's already no turning back for me, Nynaeve," he said, his eyes intense. Those eyes shifted, sometimes seeming gray, sometimes blue. Today, they looked iron gray. He continued, voice flat. "My feet started on this path the moment Tam found me crying on that mountain."

"You don't have to kill anyone today. Please."

He turned to look back at the city. Slowly, mercifully, the access key stopped glowing. "Hurin!" he barked.

He must be close to fraying, Nynaeve thought. *His anger is slipping out in his voice.*

The thief-taker rode up to the front of the group. The Aiel kept their distance, however. "Yes, Lord Rand?"

"Return to your masters inside of their box," Rand said, voice under control again. "You are to give them a message for me."

"What message, Lord Rand?"

Rand hesitated, then slipped the access key back in its place. "Tell them that it will not be long before the Dragon Reborn rides to battle at Shayol Ghul. If they wish to return to their posts with honor, I will provide them with transport back to the Blight. Otherwise, they can remain here, hiding. Let them explain to their children and grandchildren why *they* were hundreds of leagues away from their posts when the Dark One was slain and the prophecies fulfilled."

Hurin looked shaken. "Yes, Lord Rand."

With that, Rand turned his horse about and rode back toward the clearing. Nynaeve followed, too slowly. Beautiful though Moonlight was, she'd have traded the beautiful mare in an instant for a biddable, dependable Two Rivers horse like Bela.

Hurin stayed behind. He still looked shaken. His reunion with "Lord Rand" had obviously been far from what he expected. Nynaeve gritted her teeth as the trees obscured her view of him. Inside the clearing, Rand had opened another gateway, a direct gateway to Tear.

They rode out into the Traveling ground prepared outside the Stone of Tear’s stableyards. The air was hot and muggy in Tear, despite the overcast sky, and thick with the sounds of men training and gulls shrieking. Rand rode out to where stablehands waited, then dismounted, his face unreadable.

As Nynaeve climbed off of Moonlight and handed the reins to a ruddy-faced stable worker, Rand walked past her. “Look for a statue,” he said.

“What?” she asked with surprise.

He glanced back at her, stopping. “You asked where Perrin was. He’s camped with an army beneath the shade of an enormous fallen statue shaped like a sword stabbing the earth. I’m certain scholars here can tell you where it is; it’s very distinctive.”

“How . . . how do you know that?”

Rand just shrugged. “I just do.”

“Why tell me?” she asked, walking alongside him across the yard of packed earth. She hadn’t expected him to give up the information—he had gotten into the habit of holding onto whatever he knew, even if that knowledge was meaningless.

“Because,” he said, striding toward the keep, voice growing almost too soft to hear, “I . . . have a debt to you for caring when I cannot. If you seek Perrin out, tell him that I will soon need him.”

With that, he left her.

Nynaeve stood in the horse yard, watching him go. There was a wet scent to the air, the smell of new rain, and she could feel that she’d missed a sprinkle. Not enough to clear the air or muddy the ground, but enough to leave wetted sections of stone in shaded corners. To her right, men galloped and exercised horses beneath the dun sky, riding across sandy earth between pickets. The Stone was the only fortress she knew of with exercise areas for cavalry—but, then, the Stone was far from ordinary.

The rumble of hoofbeats was like the sound of a distant storm, and she found herself glancing northward. The storm there felt *closer* than it had before. She’d assumed it was gathering in the Blight, but now she wasn’t so certain.

She took a deep breath, then hastened to the keep. She passed Defenders in their immaculate uniforms, the upper arm portions ribbed and puffy, breastplates smooth and curved. She passed stableboys, each probably dreaming of one day wearing that same uniform, but for now only leading horses back to the stables for hay and currying. She passed dozens of servants in linens, doubtless far more comfortable than Nynaeve's maroon wool.

The keep itself was a towering rock of a structure, sheer walls broken only by windows. Except that she could still spot the place where Mat had destroyed a section of stone with his Illuminator's fireworks when coming to rescue Nynaeve and the others from their imprisonment. Fool boy. Where was he? She hadn't seen him in . . . in quite a long time. Since Ebou Dar had fallen to the Seanchan. In a way, she felt as though she'd abandoned him, though she'd never admit that. Why, she'd embarrassed herself enough in front of the Daughter of the Nine Moons when she'd defended that scoundrel! She still didn't know what had come over her.

Mat could care for himself. He was probably carousing in some inn while the rest of them worked to save the world—drinking himself silly and playing at dice. Rand was another matter. He'd been so much easier to deal with when he'd continued to act like other men—stubborn and immature, but predictable. This new Rand with the cold emotions and the cold voice was truly unnerving.

The narrow corridors of the Stone were still unfamiliar to Nynaeve, and she often got lost. Her disorientation wasn't helped by the fact that hallways and walls sometimes changed places. She'd tried to discount such tales as superstitious nonsense, but the day before, she'd woken to discover that her room had indeed suddenly and mysteriously *moved*. Her door had opened to a smooth wall of the same seamless rock as the Stone itself. She'd been forced to escape through a gateway, and had been shocked to learn that her window looked out from a location two stories higher than it had the previous night!

Cadsuane said it was the Dark One's touch on the world, causing the Pattern to unravel. Cadsuane said a lot of things, and few of them were things that Nynaeve wished to hear.

Nynaeve got lost twice as she wove her way through the corridors, but she eventually arrived at Cadsuane's room. At least Rand hadn't forbidden his stewards to grant her rooms. Nynaeve knocked—she'd learned that she'd better—then entered.

The Aes Sedai from Cadsuane's group—Merise and Corele—sat in the room, knitting and sipping tea, trying to look like they were *not* waiting on the infernal woman's whims. Cadsuane herself was speaking quietly with Min, whom she had all but appropriated in recent days. Min herself didn't seem to mind, perhaps because it wasn't easy to spend time with Rand these days. Nynaeve felt a stab of sympathy for the girl. Nynaeve only had to deal with Rand as a friend; all of this would be much harsher on the one who shared his heart.

All eyes turned toward Nynaeve as she closed the door. "I think I've found him," she announced.

"Who is that, child?" Cadsuane said, leafing through one of Min's books.

"Perrin," Nynaeve said. "You were right; Rand did know where he was."

"Excellent!" Cadsuane said. "You did well; it appears that you *can* be of use."

Nynaeve wasn't certain which annoyed her more—the backhanded compliment, or the fact that her heart swelled with pride at hearing it. She was no girl, without her braid, to be stroked by this woman's words!

"Well?" Cadsuane looked up from the book. The others remained silent, though Min did shoot Nynaeve a congratulatory smile. "Where is he?"

Nynaeve's opened her mouth to reply before she caught herself. What was it about this woman that made her want to obey? It wasn't the One Power or anything to do with it. Cadsuane simply projected the air of a stern, but fair, grandmother. The type you never spoke back to, but who would give you some baked sweets in reward for sweeping the floor when told.

"First, I want to know why Perrin is important." Nynaeve stalked into the room and took the only remaining seat, a painted wooden stool. When she sat, she found herself sitting a few inches below eye level. Like a student before Cadsuane. She almost stood up, but realized that would draw more attention.

"Phaw!" Cadsuane said. "You'd hold this knowledge back, even if it means the lives of those you hold dear?"

"I want to know what I've gotten myself into," Nynaeve said stubbornly. "I want to know that this information isn't going to end up hurting Rand further."

Cadsuane snorted. "You presume to think that I'd *hurt* the fool boy?"

“I’m not going to presume otherwise,” Nynaeve snapped. “Not until you *tell* me what you are doing.”

Cadsuane closed the book—*Echoes of His Dynasty*—and looked perturbed. “Will you at least tell me how the meeting with the Borderlanders went?” she asked. “Or is that information held for ransom as well?”

Did she think she’d distract Nynaeve that easily? “It went poorly, as one might expect,” she said. “They’ve hunkered down outside Far Madding and refuse to meet with Rand unless he comes within range of the Guardian, cutting himself off from the Source.”

“Did he take it well?” Corele asked from her cushioned bench at the side of the room. She smiled faintly; she seemed to be the only one who thought the changes in Rand were amusing, rather than terrifying. But, then, she *was* one of the women who had bonded an Asha’man at practically the first opportunity.

“Did he take it well?” Nynaeve repeated flatly. “That depends. Does pulling out that blasted *ter’angreal* and threatening to rain down fire on the army strike you as ‘Taking it well’?”

Min paled. Cadsuane raised an eyebrow.

“I stopped him,” Nynaeve said. “But just barely. I don’t know. It . . . it might be getting too late to do anything to change him.”

“That boy *will* laugh again,” Cadsuane said quietly, but intensely. “I didn’t live this long to fail now.”

“What does it matter?” Corele said.

Nynaeve turned in shock.

“Well?” Corele set down her mending. “What *does* it matter? We’re obviously going to succeed.”

“Light!” Nynaeve said. “What gave you *that* idea?”

“We’ve just spent all afternoon drilling this girl about her visions.” Corele nodded to Min. “They always come true, and she’s seen things that obviously can’t happen until *after* the Last Battle. So we know that Rand is going to defeat the Dark One. The Pattern has already decided it. We can stop worrying.”

“No,” Min said. “You’re wrong.”

Corele frowned. “Child, are you saying that you lied about the things you’ve seen?”

“No,” Min said. “But if Rand loses, there *is* no Pattern.”

“The girl is correct.” Cadsuane sounded surprised. “What this child sees are weavings in the Pattern from a time still distant—but if the Dark One wins, he will *destroy* the Pattern entirely. This is the only way the visions could fail to occur. The same holds for other prophecies and Foretellings. Our victory is by no means sure.”

That stilled the room. They weren’t playing at village politics or national dominance. At stake was creation itself.

Light. Can I withhold this information if there’s any chance *of it helping Lan?* It wrenched her heart to think of him, and she had few options. In fact, Lan’s only hope seemed to rest in the armies Rand could marshal and the gateways his people could form.

Rand had to change. For Lan. For them all. And she had no idea what to do other than, unfortunately, to trust Cadsuane. Nynaeve swallowed her pride and spoke. “Do you know the location of a statue of an enormous sword, fallen to the earth as if stabbing it?”

Corele and Merise glanced at each other in confusion.

“The hand of the *amahn’rukane*.” Cadsuane turned from Min with a raised eyebrow. “The full statue was never finished, from what scholars can tell. It rests near the Jehannah Road.”

“Perrin is camping in its shadow.”

Cadsuane pursed her lips. “I assumed he would go eastward, toward lands al’Thor has captured.” She took a deep breath. “All right. We are going for him *right now*.” She hesitated, then glanced at Nynaeve. “In answer to your question earlier, child, Perrin actually isn’t important to our plans.”

“He isn’t?” Nynaeve asked. “But—”

Cadsuane raised a finger. “There are people with him who are *vital*. One in particular.”

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CHAPTER 45

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The Tower Stands

Egwene walked slowly through the rebel camp, wearing a crimson gown, its skirts divided for riding. The color raised not a few eyebrows. Considering what the Red Ajah had done, these Aes Sedai weren't likely to wear the hue. Even the camp's serving women had noticed, selling their red and maroon dresses or cutting them up for rags.

Egwene had asked for the crimson specifically. In the Tower, sisters had formed the habit of wearing only their own Ajah's color, and the practice had helped fuel the division. While it was good to be proud of your Ajah affiliation, it was dangerous to begin assuming that you couldn't trust anyone wearing other colors.

Egwene was all Ajahs. Today, the red symbolized many things to her. The impending reunification with the Red Ajah. A reminder of the division that needed to be righted. A sign of the blood that would be spilled, the blood of good men who fought to defend the White Tower.

The blood of the dead Aes Sedai, beheaded not an hour ago by Egwene's order.

Siuan had found her Great Serpent ring; it felt very good to have it on her finger again.

The sky was an iron gray, and the scent of dirt rose into the air, accompanying the bustling motion around the camp. Women hurriedly washed clothing, as if they were late in getting their patrons ready for a festival. Novices ran—literally ran—from lesson to lesson. Aes Sedai stood about with arms folded, eyes ready to burn any who didn't keep up the tempo.

They sense the tension of the day, Egwene thought. *And can't help but be made anxious by it.* The night before, with its attack by the Seanchan. Followed by the return of the Amyrlin, who had spent the morning cleansing the Aes Sedai. And now afternoon, and the beating drums of war.

She doubted that Bryne's own camp was in such a state. He'd have his men ready for attack; he probably could have assaulted the White Tower at a moment's notice on any given day of the siege. His soldiers would decide this war. Egwene would *not* have her Aes Sedai riding into battle, wriggling around their oaths not to use the Power to kill. They would wait here, to be called only for Healing.

Or called if the White Tower sisters joined the fight in earnest. Light send that Elaida saw wisdom in forbidding that. If the Aes Sedai turned the Power against one another, it would be a dark day indeed.

Can this day grow any darker? Egwene wondered. Many of the Aes Sedai she passed in the camp gave her looks of respect, awe, and a little horror. After a long absence, the Amyrlin had returned. And she had brought destruction and judgment in her wake.

Over fifty Black Sisters had been stilled, then executed. Egwene felt sick, thinking of their deaths. Sheriam had seemed almost relieved when her turn came, though she'd soon begun to struggle, sobbing and desperate. She'd confessed to several disturbing crimes, as if hoping that her willingness to speak would gain her amnesty.

They'd placed her head on the block and taken it off, just like the others. That scene would always be vivid in Egwene's mind—her former Keeper, lying with her head pressed against the stump, blue dress and fiery red hair suddenly bathed in warm golden light as a thinner section of clouds moved in front of the sun. Then the silvery axe, falling to claim her head. Perhaps the Pattern would be kinder to her next time she was allowed a thread in its great tapestry. But perhaps not. Death was not an escape from the Dark One. Sheriam's horror at the end indicated that she might have been thinking that very thing as the axe took her head.

Now Egwene understood fully how the Aiel could laugh at a simple beating. Would that she could go through a few days beneath the rod rather than have to order the execution of women she had liked and worked with!

Some of the Sitters had argued for interrogation instead of execution, but Egwene had been insistent. Fifty women were far too many to shield and guard, and now that they knew stilling could be Healed, that wasn't an option. No, history proved how slippery and dangerous members of the Black could be, and Egwene was tired of worrying about what *could* happen. She had learned with Moghedien that there was a price to be paid for greed, if just greed for information. She and the others had been too eager—too proud of the "discoveries" they'd made—to see the world rid of one of the Forsaken.

Well, she would not allow a similar mistake here. The law was known, the Hall had made its judgment, and it had not been done in secret. Verin had died to stop these women, and Egwene would see that her sacrifice meant something.

You did well, Verin. So very well. Every Aes Sedai in the camp had been made to swear the Three Oaths over again, and only three members of the Black had been discovered beyond the ones Verin had located. Her research had been thorough.

The Blacks' Warders were under guard. They would have to be sorted through at a later date, when attention could be given to separating those who were really Black from those who were just enraged by the loss of their Aes Sedai. Most of them would seek death, even the innocent ones. Perhaps the innocent could be convinced to remain alive long enough to throw themselves into the Last Battle.

Nearly twenty of the Black sisters on Verin's list had still escaped, despite all of Egwene's precautions. She wasn't certain how they had known. Bryne's guards had caught some weaker ones trying to flee, and soldiers had fallen to delay them. But many had still escaped.

No use crying over that. Fifty Black were dead; that was a victory. A frightening one. But a victory nonetheless.

And so she walked through the camp, in riding boots and a dress of red, brown hair free to stream in the wind and tied with crimson ribbons to mark the streams of blood she had shed not an hour before. She did not blame the sisters around her for their sly glances, their masked concern, their fear. And their respect. If there had been any doubt that Egwene was Amyrlin, it had been dispelled. They accepted her, they feared her. And she would never quite fit in with them again. She was separate, and always would be.

A determined figure in blue made her way through the tents and approached Egwene. The dignified woman curtsied appropriately, though since they were walking so quickly, Egwene didn't stop to let her kiss the Great Serpent ring. "Mother," Lelaine said, "Bryne sends word that all is at ready for the assault. He says that the western bridges would be the ideal point of attack, though he suggests that gateways be employed to send a flanking force of his men behind the White Tower lines. He asks if this would be possible."

It wasn't using the Power as a weapon, but it was close. A fine distinction. But being Aes Sedai was *about* fine distinctions. "Tell him I will make the gateway myself," she said.

"Excellent, Mother," Lelaine said, bowing her head, the perfect, loyal attendant. It was remarkable, how quickly the woman's bearing toward

Egwene had changed. She must have realized that her only choice was to attach herself to Egwene completely and give up on her attempts to secure power. This way, she didn't look like a hypocrite and would perhaps gain position through Egwene. Assuming Egwene was able to stabilize herself as a powerful Amyrlin.

It was a good assumption.

Lelaine must have been frustrated by Romanda's change of temperament. The Yellow waited beside the road ahead, as if on cue. She wore a dress after the color of her Ajah, hair back in a stately bun. She curtsied as Egwene reached her and barely spared a glance for Lelaine before falling into position on Egwene's right, away from Lelaine. "Mother," Romanda said, "I have made the inquires you requested. There has been no contact with those sent to the Black Tower. Not a whisper."

"Does this strike you as odd?" Egwene asked.

"Yes, Mother. With Traveling they should have been there and back by now. They should have at least sent word. This silence is disturbing."

Disturbing indeed. Even worse, that delegation contained Nisao, Myrelle, Faolain *and* Theodrin. Each of the women had sworn fealty to Egwene. An unsettling coincidence. The departure of Faolain and Theodrin was particularly suspicious. Supposedly, they had gone because they had no Warders, but the sisters in the camp didn't consider those two full Aes Sedai—though nobody would dare say such to Egwene directly.

Why had those four, out of the hundreds of Aes Sedai in the camp, been placed in the delegation? Was it mere coincidence? It stretched plausibility. But what did it mean, then? Had someone intentionally sent away those loyal to Egwene? If so, why not send Siuan? Was this perhaps Sheriam's work? The woman had confessed to several things before her execution, but this hadn't been one of them.

Either way, something was happening with those Asha'man. The Black Tower would need to be dealt with.

"Mother," Lelaine said, drawing her attention back. The Blue didn't glance at her rival. "I have other news."

Romanda sniffed quietly.

"Speak," Egwene said.

"Sheriam wasn't lying," Lelaine said. "The *ter'angreal* used for dreams are gone. All of them."

"How is this possible?" Egwene demanded, letting a hint of her anger slip out.

"Sheriam was Keeper, Mother," Lelaine said quickly. "We kept the *ter'angreal* together, as is custom in the White Tower, under guard. But . . . well, what reason would those guards have had to turn Sheriam away?"

"And what do you suppose she was planning to tell us?" Egwene asked. "This theft could not have been kept hidden for long."

"I don't know, Mother," Lelaine said, shaking her head. "The guards said that Sheriam seemed . . . flustered . . . when she took the *ter'angreal*. This was just last night."

Egwene clenched her teeth, thinking of Sheriam's final spilled confessions. The theft of the *ter'angreal* had been far from the most shocking tidbit she'd mentioned. Elayne would be livid; she had made all of the copies that were stolen. While none of her copies worked as well as the original, they worked well enough. She would not be happy that they were in the hands of a Forsaken.

"Mother," Lelaine said, more softly. "What of Sheriam's . . . other claim?"

"That one of the Forsaken is in the White Tower, impersonating an Aes Sedai?" Egwene said. Sheriam claimed she'd given the *ter'angreal* to this . . . person.

Lelaine and Romanda walked silently, both staring forward, as if speculation were too daunting.

"Yes, I suspect that she is right," Egwene said. "They infiltrated not only our camp, but the aristocracies of Andor, Illian and Tear. Why not the White Tower as well?" She didn't add that Verin's book confirmed the presence of one of the Forsaken. It seemed best to keep the extent of Verin's notes secret.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," Egwene said. "With the assault on the Tower, and our return, it seems likely that the Forsaken—whoever she is—will find it prudent to slip away and find an easier target for her scheming."

Lelaine and Romanda didn't seem comforted by that comment. The three of them reached the edge of the Aes Sedai camp, where mounts awaited them, as well as a large group of soldiers and one Sitter from each of the Ajahs, other than the Blue and Red. There wasn't a Blue because Lelaine was the only one remaining in camp; the reason there wasn't a Red was obvious. This was part of why Egwene had chosen to wear red, a subtle hint that all Ajahs should be represented in the action they were about to take. It was for the good of all.

As Egwene mounted, she noticed that Gawyn was following her, again, at a respectful distance. Where had he come from? They hadn't spoken since the early morning. As she mounted, so did he, and as she turned to ride out of camp with Lelaine, Romanda, the Sitters and the soldiers, Gawyn followed at a safe distance. Egwene wasn't certain what to do with him yet.

The army camp was mostly deserted. Tents sat empty, ground trampled by feet and hoofs, hardly any soldiers remaining behind. Egwene embraced the Source soon after leaving their camp, and she held to it, ready with weaves should someone attack her during the ride. She still didn't trust that Elaida wouldn't use a gateway to interfere with the assault. True, the false Amyrlin probably had her hands full with the aftermath of the Seanchan attack. But expectations like that one—assuming that she was safe—were what had gotten Egwene captured in the first place. She was Amyrlin. She couldn't risk herself. It was frustrating, but she knew that an end had come to her days of solitary action, striking out as she saw fit. She could have been killed, rather than captured, all those weeks ago. The Salidar rebellion would have floundered, and Elaida would have continued as Amyrlin.

So it was that her force rode up to the battle lines outside the village of Darein. The White Tower still smoldered, a wide field of smoke trailing up in a ring from the center of the island, shrouding the white spire. Even from a distance, the scars of the Seanchan attack were evident on the building. Blackened holes, like spots of corruption on an otherwise healthy apple. The Tower almost seemed to groan as she looked at it. It had stood for so long, had seen so much. Now it had been wounded so deeply that it still bled a day later.

And yet it stood. Light bless them, it *stood*. It rose high, wounded but sound, pointing toward a sun hidden by clouds above. It stood defiant of those who would break it, within and without.

Bryne and Siuan waited for Egwene at the back of the army. A disparate couple they were. The battle-hardened general, with temples of gray and a face like an unyielding piece of armor. Strong, made of lines. And beside him Siuan, the diminutive woman in pale blue, her face lovely, looking young enough to be Bryne's granddaughter, for all the fact that they were near the same age.

Siuan made a horseback curtsy as Egwene approached, and Bryne saluted. His eyes were still troubled. He seemed ashamed of his part in the rescue, though Egwene bore him no grievance. He was a man of honor. If he had been bullied into coming along to protect foolhardy Siuan and Gawyn, then Bryne was to be commended for keeping them alive.

As Egwene joined them, she noted that Siuan and Bryne were riding close together. Had Siuan finally admitted her attraction to the man? And . . . there was a certain familiar grace to Bryne now. It was slight enough that she could have just been seeing things, but coupled with the relationship between the two. . . .

"You've taken another Warder, at last?" Egwene asked Siuan.

The woman narrowed her eyes. "Aye," she said.

Bryne did seem surprised, and a tad ashamed.

"Do your best to keep her out of trouble, General," Egwene said, staring Siuan in the eyes. "She has been in quite a bit of it lately. I have half a mind to give her to you to use as a foot soldier. I believe that the military organization might be good for her, and remind her that sometimes, *obedience* overrides initiative."

Siuan wilted, glancing away.

"I haven't decided what to do with you yet, Siuan," Egwene said in a softer voice. "But my anger has been kindled. And my trust has been lost. You will need to soothe the first and stoke the second if you wish to enter my confidence again."

She turned from Siuan to the general, who looked sick. Probably from being forced to feel Siuan's shame.

"You are to be commended for your bravery, letting her bond you, General," Egwene said, turning to Bryne. "I realize that keeping *her* from trouble is a nearly impossible charge, but I have confidence in you."

The general relaxed. "I shall do my best, Mother," he said. Then he turned his horse, glancing along the rows of soldiers. "There is something you should see. If you will?"

She nodded, turning her horse and riding beside him down the roadway. The village was cobbled here, the population evacuated, the main thoroughfare lined with thousands of Bryne's soldiers. Siuan accompanied Egwene, and Gawyn followed. Lelaine and Romanda stayed with the other

Sitters at a wave of Egwene's hand. Their newfound obedience was proving useful, particularly since they had apparently decided that they would now be trying to outdo one another for Egwene's approval. Likely, they were both vying to be her new Keeper, now that Sheriam was gone.

The general led Egwene to the front lines, and Egwene prepared a weave of Air just in case an arrow was shot in her direction. Siuan eyed her, but said nothing at the precaution. It shouldn't have been needed—Tower Guards would never fire on an Aes Sedai, not even in a conflict like this one. However, the same couldn't be said of Warders, and accidents *did* happen. It would be very convenient for Elaida if a stray arrow took her rival in the throat.

They made their way through the village, finally coming to a stop near the Darein Bridge, a majestic white construction that spanned the river to Tar Valon. Here was the thing Bryne wanted her to see: Gathered just west of the high point of the bridge, bunkered down behind a blockade of stones and large logs, was a force of Tower Guard. They looked to be about three hundred strong. Across the river, more soldiers stood atop the walls. They brought the total to no more than a thousand.

Bryne's assault force here was ten thousand strong.

"Now, I know it was never numbers that were keeping us from attacking," Bryne said. "But the Tower Guard should be able to field more men than that, particularly with conscriptions out of the city proper. I doubt they've been spending these months carving pegs by the fire and reminiscing about old times. If Chubain has half a mind, he's been training a new set of recruits."

"So where is everyone?" Egwene asked.

"Light only knows, Mother," Bryne said, shaking his head. "We'll lose some men getting past that force, but not many. It will be a rout."

"Could the Seanchan have really hurt them *that* much?"

"I don't know, Mother," Bryne said. "It was bad last night. A lot of fire, a lot of men dead. But I'd have pegged the cost at hundreds, not thousands. Perhaps the Tower Guard is clearing out rubble and stopping the fires, but I still think they'd have gathered a larger force when they saw me forming up here. I've taken a spyglass to those lads over there, and I've noted more than one set of bleary red eyes."

Egwene sat thoughtfully, glad for the breeze blowing in along the river from downstream. "You haven't questioned the wisdom of this assault,

General.”

“It’s not my habit to question where I’m pointed, Mother.”

“And your thoughts on the matter, if asked?”

“If asked?” Byrne said. “Well, attacking makes tactical sense. We’ve lost Traveling as an edge, and if our enemy can resupply at will and send envoys in and out whenever they want, then what’s the purpose of a siege? It’s time to either attack or pack up and leave.”

Egwene nodded. And yet, she found herself hesitating. That ominous smoke in the sky, the maimed Tower, the frightened soldiers without reinforcements. It all seemed to whisper a warning.

“How long can we wait before you absolutely *must* begin this assault, General?” she asked.

He frowned, but didn’t question her. He glanced at the sky. “It’s getting late. An hour, perhaps? After that, it will be too dark. With numbers this favorable, I’d rather not add the randomness of a night battle to the mix.”

“We wait, then, for an hour,” Egwene said, settling back on her mount. The others seemed confused, but they said nothing. The Amyrlin Seat had spoken.

What was she waiting for? What were her instincts telling her? Egwene thought on it as the minutes extended, eventually realizing what had made her pause. Once this step had been taken, there was no turning back. The White Tower had suffered the previous night; it was the first time an enemy force had used the One Power against it. Egwene’s assault would be another first: the first time one group of Aes Sedai had led troops in battle against another group. There had been fights between factions in the Tower before; clashes between one Ajah and another, some turning to bloodshed, like what had happened after Siuan’s ousting. The Secret Histories mentioned such events.

But never had the dissension extended beyond the doors of the Tower itself. Never had Aes Sedai led troops across those bridges. To do so now would attach the event forever to Egwene’s tenure as Amyrlin. Whatever else she achieved, it would likely be overshadowed by this day.

She had hoped to liberate and unite. Instead, she would turn to war and subjugation. If it had to be so, then she would give the command. But she wanted to wait until the last possible moment. If that meant a grim hour beneath the overcast sky, horses snorting as they sensed their riders' tension, then so be it.

Bryne's hour came and passed. Egwene hesitated for a few minutes longer—as long as she dared. No relief came to the poor soldiers standing on the bridge. They just stared out behind their little barricade, resolute.

Reluctantly, Egwene turned to give the command.

"Here now." Bryne leaned forward in his saddle. "What is this?"

Egwene turned back to the bridge. Distantly, just barely visible, a procession was coming over the top. Had she waited too long? Had the White Tower sent reinforcements? Had she cost the lives of her men by her stubborn reluctance?

But no. That group wasn't soldiers, but women in skirts. Aes Sedai!

Egwene held up her hand, staying any attacks by her soldiers. The procession rode directly up to the Tower Guard fortification. A moment later, a woman in a gray dress stepped out in front of the blockade, accompanied by a single Warder. Egwene squinted, trying to make out the woman's features, and Bryne hastily handed her his spyglass. Egwene accepted it thankfully, but had already recognized the woman. Andaya Forae, one of the new Sitters to the Hall chosen after the split. Gray Ajah. That implied a willingness to negotiate.

The glow of power surrounded the woman, and Siuan hissed, causing several nearby soldiers to raise their bows. Again Egwene held up a hand. "Bryne," she said sternly, "I will *not* have the first shot fired until I give permission."

"Stand down, men!" Bryne bellowed. "I'll have your hides if you so much as nock an arrow!" The men snapped their bows back down from the ready.

The distant woman used a weave Egwene couldn't make out, and then spoke in a voice that was obviously amplified. "We would speak with Egwene al'Vere," Andaya said. "Is she in attendance?"

Egwene made her own weave to amplify her voice. "I am here, Andaya. Tell the others with you to come out so that I can see them."

Surprisingly, they obeyed the command. Nine more women filed out, and Egwene studied each one. "Ten Sitters," she said, handing Bryne back his spyglass and releasing her weave so that she could speak without her words being projected. "Two from each Ajah except the Blue and the Red."

"That's promising." Bryne rubbed his chin.

“Well, they could be here to demand my surrender,” Egwene noted. “All right,” she said, amplifying her voice with the Power again. “What do you wish of me?”

“We have come,” Andaya said. She hesitated. “We have come to inform you that the Hall of the White Tower has chosen to raise you to the Amyrlin Seat.”

Siuan gasped in shock, and Bryne cursed quietly to himself. Several of the soldiers muttered about it being a trap. But Egwene just closed her eyes. Dared she hope? She’d assumed that her unwanted rescue had come too soon. But if she’d laid enough groundwork before being taken by Siuan and Gawyn. . . .

“What of Elaida?” Egwene demanded, opening her eyes, her voice booming across the expanse. “Have you deposed yet another Amyrlin?”

The other side was silent for a moment. “They’re conferring.” Bryne had raised his spyglass.

Andaya spoke a moment later. “Elaida do Avriny a Roihan, Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the Amyrlin Seat . . . was taken in the raid last night. Her whereabouts are unknown. She is presumed dead or otherwise unable to fulfill her duties.”

“By the Light!” Bryne lowered the glass.

“No more than she deserved,” Siuan muttered.

“No woman deserves that,” Egwene said to Siuan and Bryne. Absently she raised fingers to her neck. “Better she had died.”

Bryne said, “This could be a trap.”

“I don’t see how,” Siuan said. “Andaya is bound by the oaths. She wasn’t on your list of Black, was she, Egwene?”

Egwene shook her head.

“I’m still hesitant, Mother,” Bryne said.

Egwene restored her weave. “You will let my army enter? You will accept the other Aes Sedai back in fellowship and will reinstate the Blue Ajah?”

“We anticipated these demands,” Andaya said. “They will be met.”

There was silence, the only sound that of the waters lapping against their banks below.

“Then I accept,” Egwene said.

“Mother,” Siuan said cautiously. “This might be rash. Perhaps you should speak with—”

“It is not rash,” Egwene released her weave and felt a surge of hope. “It is what we’ve wanted.” She eyed Siuan. “Besides. Who are you to lecture me on being rash?” Siuan looked down. “General, prepare your men to cross, and bring the Sitters at the back forward. Send runners back to the Aes Sedai camp with the news, and make certain your men at the other bridges know to stand down.”

“Yes, Mother.” Bryne wheeled his horse about and gave the necessary orders.

Taking a deep breath, Egwene kicked her horse into motion onto the bridge. Siuan muttered a fisher’s curse and followed. Egwene could hear Gawyn’s horse following as well, then a squad of soldiers obeying a curt command from Bryne.

Egwene rode across the waters, hair blowing out behind her, laced with red ribbons. She felt an odd sense of moment—a weight of realization—as she considered what they had all just avoided. It was soon replaced with growing satisfaction and joy.

Her white mare bucked her head slightly, brushing a silky mane across Egwene’s hands. On the bridge, the Sitters turned to make their way into the city. The Tower rose just ahead. Wounded. Bleeding.

But it still stood. Light, it *stood*!

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CHAPTER 46

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To Be Forged Again

After crossing the bridge to Tar Valon as a victor, the day nearly became a blur for Egwene. She hastened to the White Tower, Siuan and Gawyn barely managing to keep up with her. At the Tower, Egwene was met by a group of servants; the Sitters themselves were waiting in the Hall for Egwene.

The servants led her to an unadorned, wood-paneled chamber set with a pair of leather-padded chairs. Egwene had never been here before; it appeared to be a kind of waiting room near the Hall. It smelled of leather, and a small brazier burned coals in the corner.

Soon, a short, toadlike Brown sister named Lairain entered and instructed Egwene on the proper way to go about the ceremony. The little curly-haired woman seemed completely indifferent to the importance of the moment, and Egwene had never met her before. Likely, she was one of the Browns who spent her life roaming the back library stacks, and only surfaced once a century or so to recite instructions to prospective Amyrlins. Egwene listened carefully; she'd gone through the ceremony once, but it was very complex.

She could still remember her nervousness on that day, months ago, when she'd been raised in Salidar. Back then, she'd still been confused as to what was happening. Her? Amyrlin?

That hesitation was gone. She did not really worry about getting the ceremony wrong. It was only a ceremony, and the important decision had already been made. As Egwene listened to Lairain, she heard Siuan arguing outside the doors with one of the sisters, claiming that Egwene had already been raised, and that this ceremony wasn't needed. Egwene quieted Lairain with a raised hand and called out to Siuan.

Siuan peeked in the door.

"I was raised by the rebels, Siuan," Egwene said sternly. "These women deserve the chance to stand for me as well. Otherwise, I will never have a claim to their loyalty. The ceremony must be performed again."

Siuan scowled, but nodded. "Very well."

Lairain opened her mouth to continue instructions, but Egwene silenced her with another motion, earning a huff. "What news have you, Siuan?"

“Well,” Siuan said, cracking the door a little wider, “Bryne moved most of his troops across the bridges, and has relieved the Tower Guard from their positions at the fortifications, sending them in—along with a number of his own squads—to help put out flareups around the city. The Seanchan set some homes on fire to cover their retreat as they fled.”

That explained the lack of troops at the barricade—that, along with the knowledge that the Hall was busy debating whether or not to raise Egwene. They likely didn’t realize how close they’d come to war.

“What do you want to do with the sisters from your camp?” Siuan asked. “They’re starting to wonder.”

“Tell them to gather in front of the Sunset Gate,” Egwene said. “Have them stand in ranks by Ajah, with Sitters in a line at the front. Once I am finished with the ceremony, I will greet them and formally accept their apology for their rebellion and welcome them back into the Tower.”

“Accept their *apology*?” Siuan asked incredulously.

“They rebelled against the Tower, Siuan,” Egwene said, looking at her. “Whatever the need of what they did, there is reason for apology.”

“But you were with them!”

“I no longer represent just them, Siuan,” Egwene said firmly. “I represent the Tower. The entire Tower. And the Tower needs to know that the rebels regret the division. They needn’t lie and say that they wished they had stayed, but I think it *is* appropriate for them to express sorrow over the hardships the division caused. I will acquit them, and we can get on with healing.”

“Yes, Mother,” Siuan said in resignation. Egwene caught sight of Tesan standing behind, the woman nodding her Taraboner-braided head at Egwene’s words.

Egwene let Lairain continue her instructions, then repeated back to her the lines she would have to say and the actions she’d have to take. When the Brown was satisfied, Egwene rose, pulled open the door and found that Siuan had left to relay her orders. Tesan stood in the hallway outside, arms folded, regarding Gawyn. He leaned against the wall a short distance away, his hand resting on the pommel of his sheathed sword.

“Your Warder?” Tesan asked of Egwene.

She regarded Gawyn, and was forced to confront a whole mess of emotions. Anger, affection, passion and regret. What a strange mix. “No,” she said. She stared Gawyn in the eyes. “What I am going to do next you cannot be part of, Gawyn. Wait here.”

He opened his mouth to object, thought better of it, then stood up stiffly and bowed. That gesture felt even more insolent than an argument would have.

Egwene sniffed softly—yet loud enough for him to hear—then allowed Tesan to lead her to the Hall of the Tower. The Hall: both a place and a group of people. For they were one, just as the Amyrlin Seat was a person, yet was also the chair in which she sat.

She stopped before the doors to the Hall, the dark wood inlaid with the silver Flame of Tar Valon, and felt her heart flutter rebelliously. Siuan suddenly appeared, with a pair of slippers, gesturing at Egwene’s riding boots. Of course; the Hall floor was delicately painted. She changed into the slippers; Siuan took her boots away. There was no need to be nervous! *I’ve been here before,* she thought suddenly. *Not just in Salidar. In my testing. I’ve faced this door, confronted the women beyond. In my testing . . .*

A gong suddenly sounded; it seemed loud enough to shake the entire Tower, ringing to warn that an Amyrlin was about to be raised. The gong rang again, then again, and those ornate doors swung open. Yes, this was a different experience entirely from the one she’d had back in that humble wooden building where she’d been raised by the Salidar Aes Sedai. In many ways, her performance in Salidar had been but a rehearsal.

The doors finished opening, and Egwene stifled a gasp. The grand, domed room beyond now had a blasted hole—a gaping emptiness—directly across from the entrance. It looked out at Dragonmount. The chamber wasn’t as damaged as some had been in the Seanchan attack; the rubble was minimal, and the destruction had barely reached past that outer wall. The raised platform still ran around the outside of the room, and the chairs it held were undamaged. Eighteen of them, in clusters of three, each painted and cushioned to declare the Ajah of its inhabitant.

The Amyrlin Seat stood by the far wall, directly in front of the broken wall, its back to the sprawling landscape beyond and distant Dragonmount. If the Seanchan blast had gone a few feet farther inward, the Seat would have been destroyed. Thank the Light, it was unmarred.

Egwene could faintly smell paint in the air. Had they hurriedly had the Seat repainted to bear all seven colors again? If so, they’d worked quickly. They hadn’t had time to replace the seats of the Blue Sitters, however.

Egwene noted Saerin, Doesine and Yukiri sitting with their respective Ajahs. Seaine was there as well, regarding Egwene with those calculating blue eyes. How much power had these four women wielded in these events? Square-faced Suana, of the Yellow, was smiling openly in satisfaction as she regarded Egwene, and while most of the faces bore the serene, unemotional faces of Aes Sedai, Egwene sensed approval in their postures. Or, at least, a lack of hostility. More than just the Black Ajah hunters had been behind this decision.

Saerin stood up from her chair in the Brown section. “Who comes before the Hall of the Tower?” she asked in a ringing voice.

Egwene hesitated, still looking over the Sitters, their seats arranged around the outer platform, equally spaced. Too many of those chairs were empty. There were only two Green Sitters; Talene had fled weeks ago. The Gray were missing Evanellein, who had vanished earlier in the day. Velina and Sedore were gone as well. That didn’t bode well; those two were on Verin’s list of Black Ajah. Had they been warned? Did Evanellein’s disappearance mean Verin had missed her?

There were no Red sisters either. With a start, Egwene remembered that Duhara had left the Tower some weeks before—nobody knew why, but some said it had been on a mission for Elaida. Perhaps she was about Black Ajah business. The other two red Sitters, Javindhra and Pevara, had vanished mysteriously.

That left eleven Sitters. Not enough to raise an Amyrlin by the old laws of the Tower—but those had been revised with Elaida’s disbanding of the Blue. Fewer Sitters meant fewer women needed to raise an Amyrlin, and now only eleven were required. It would have to do. At least each and every Sitter currently in the Tower knew of this event; it wasn’t in secret, like Elaida’s raising. And Egwene could be reasonably certain no Black Sitters would stand for her.

Saerin cleared her throat, glancing at Egwene uncertainly, and called again, “Who comes before the Hall of the Tower?”

Tesan leaned in from the side, as if to hiss the proper response to Egwene. Egwene, however, cut her off by holding up a hand.

There was something Egwene had been considering, something audacious. Yet it was appropriate. She knew that it was. She could *feel* that it was. “The Red Ajah is in disgrace?” she asked quietly of Tesan.

The White nodded, braided hair brushing the sides of her face. “The Reds, you needn’t worry about them,” she said in her light Taraboner accent. “Following Elaida’s disappearance, they retreated back to their quarters. The Sitters here, they worried that the Red would choose new Sitters quickly and send them to this proceeding. I believe some . . . curt missives from the Hall of the Tower were enough to cow them.”

“And Silviana Brehon? Still imprisoned?”

“She is, as far as I know, Mother,” Tesan said, slipping for a moment and using the title, though Egwene hadn’t been formally raised by the Hall yet. “Don’t worry, Leane—she has been freed. We had her escorted out to stand with the other rebels, awaiting your forgiveness.”

Egwene nodded thoughtfully. “Have Silviana brought here, to the Hall of the Tower, immediately.”

Tesan’s brow wrinkled. “Mother, I don’t think this is the time—”

“Just do it,” Egwene hissed, then turned to face the Hall. “One who comes obediently, in the Light,” she pronounced in a firm voice.

Saerin relaxed. “Who comes before the Hall of the Tower?”

“One who comes humbly, in the Light,” Egwene responded. She stared at each of the Sitters. A firm hand. She would have to be firm. They needed leadership.

“Who comes before the Hall of the Tower?” Saerin finished.

“One who comes at the summons of the Hall,” Egwene said, “obedient and humble in the Light, asking only to accept the will of the Hall.”

The ceremony proceeded, each of the Sitters stripping to the waist to prove she was a woman. Egwene did the same, and barely gave a blush at the thought of Gawyn, who had clearly thought she should bring him along to the event.

“Who stands for this woman?” Saerin asked after the Sitters had redressed. Egwene had to remain stripped to the waist for now, and the cool breeze through the broken wall was chill on her skin. “And pledges for her, heart for heart, soul for soul, life for life?”

Yukiri, Seaine and Suana stood quickly. “I so pledge,” each of them announced.

The first time Egwene had experienced this ceremony, she had been in shock. At each step, she’d been terrified she’d make an error. Worse, she’d been terrified that it would all turn out to be a ruse or a mistake.

That fear was gone. As the ritual questions were asked—as Egwene stepped forward three steps and knelt on the smooth floor, repainted by Elaida's order with only six colors spiraling out of the mark of the Flame of Tar Valon—Egwene saw through the pomp and looked at the core of what was happening. These women were terrified. As had been the women in Salidar. The Amyrlin Seat was a force of stability, and they reached for it.

Why had she been chosen? Both times, it seemed the same answer. Because she was the only one they could all agree upon. There were smiling faces in this group. But they were the smiles of women who had succeeded in keeping rivals off of the Seat. Either that, or they were the smiles of women who were relieved that *someone* was stepping up to take leadership. And, perhaps, there were some who smiled because they weren't the ones who had to take the Seat. Its recent history had been fraught with danger, dissension, and two dramatic tragedies.

Originally, in Salidar, Egwene had thought the women were being idiots. She was more experienced now, and hopefully wiser as well. She could see that they hadn't been fools. They'd been Aes Sedai—covering their fear by being overly cautious, yet brazen at the same time. Choosing someone they wouldn't mind seeing fall. Taking a risk, but not putting themselves in direct danger.

These women were doing the same. They covered their fear with smooth faces and acts of control. When the time came for the Sitters to stand in her support, Egwene was not surprised that all eleven rose to their feet. Not a single dissent. There would be no foot washing during this ceremony.

No, she was not surprised. They knew that there was no other option, not with an army on their doorstep, not with Elaida as good as dead. The Aes Sedai thing to do was act as if there had never been any argument. The consensus must be reached.

Saerin looked surprised that nobody had chosen to remain seated, if only to prove that she would not be bullied. In fact, more than one of the Sitters seemed surprised, and Egwene suspected that they were regretting their decision to stand up so quickly. One could gain some measure of power by being the only person who remained seated, forcing Egwene to wash her feet and ask for permission to serve. Of course, that also could have singled the woman out, and earned her the dislike of the new Amyrlin.

The women slowly took their seats. Egwene needed no guidance, and none was offered. She rose and strode across the hall, her slippered feet silent on the painted stone of the Flame. A gust of wind blew through the room, ruffling shawls, blowing across Egwene's bare skin. It said something for the strength of the Hall that they had chosen to meet here, despite the dizzying view out of the far wall.

Saerin met Egwene at the Seat. The olive-skinned Altaran began to button Egwene's bodice with careful fingers, then reverently lifted the Amyrlin's stole from the Seat. It was the one with all seven colors, recovered from wherever Elaida had discarded it. Saerin regarded Egwene for a moment, hefting the stole, as if judging it.

"Are you certain you want to bear this weight, child?" Saerin asked in a very soft voice. This was not part of the ceremony.

"I bear it already, Saerin." Egwene's reply was almost a whisper. "Elaida cast it aside when she tried to slice it and divide it as she wished. I took it up and have carried it since. I would bear it to my death. And will."

Saerin nodded. "I think that might be why you deserve it," she said. "I doubt anything in the histories will compare to the days ahead. I suspect that, in the future, scholars will look back on our days and judge them to be more difficult—more trying of mind, body and soul—than the Time of Madness or the Breaking itself."

"Then it's a good thing the world has us, isn't it?" Egwene asked.

Saerin hesitated, then nodded. "I suppose it is at that." She raised the stole and set it upon Egwene's shoulders. "You are raised to the Amyrlin Seat!" she declared, the voices of the other Sitters joining in, "In the glory of the Light, that the White Tower may endure forever. Egwene al'Vere, the Watcher of the Seals, the Flame of Tar Valon, the *Amyrlin Seat*!"

Egwene turned to regard the group of women, then sat down in the chair. She felt as if she had returned home after a very long journey. The world bowed beneath the stress of the Dark One's touch, but it felt a little more right—a little more secure—the moment she took her place.

The women arranged themselves before her in order of age, with Saerin at the very end. One at a time they curtsied deeply before her, asked her permission to serve, then kissed her Great Serpent ring and stepped aside. As they did so, Egwene noticed that Tesan had finally returned. She peeked in to be certain everyone was dressed, then returned a moment later leading a group of four guards with the Flame of Tar Valon burning white on their chests. Egwene suppressed a sigh. They'd brought Silviana in chains, it appeared.

After kissing her ring, the Sitters returned to their chairs. There was some little more to the ceremony, but the important part was through with. Egwene was Amyrlin, really and truly, at long last. She had waited so long for this moment.

Now it was time for some surprises.

"Release the prisoner's chains," Egwene said.

Reluctantly, the soldiers outside the room did as demanded, the metal clinking. The Sitters turned with confused expressions.

"Silviana Brehon!" Egwene declared, standing up. "You may approach the Amyrlin Seat."

The soldiers stepped aside and allowed Silviana to enter. Her red dress had once been fine, but she had not been well treated by Elaida's confinement. Her black hair—normally kept in a bun—was instead coarsely braided. Her dress was rumpled, the knees dirty. And yet her square face was serene.

Surprisingly, she knelt before Egwene after walking across the room. Egwene lowered her hand and let the woman kiss her ring.

The Sitters watched, confused that Egwene had broken the ceremony. "Mother," Yukiri finally asked. "Is this the best time to be dispensing judgment?"

Egwene withdrew her hand from the kneeling Silviana and looked directly at Yukiri, then turned her gaze across the waiting Sitters. "You all bear a great deal of shame," she said.

Stiff-faced Aes Sedai raised eyebrows and opened eyes wider. They seemed angry. They had no right! Their anger was nothing beside hers.

"This," Egwene said, gesturing toward the broken wall. "You bear responsibility for this." She pointed at Silviana, still kneeling. "You bear responsibility for *this*. You bear responsibility for the way our sisters regard one another in the halls, and you bear responsibility for letting the Tower remain so long in division. Many of you bear responsibility for that division on the first place!

"You are a *disgrace*. The White Tower—the pride of the Light, the power for stability and truth since the Age of Legends—has nearly been shattered because of you."

Eyes bugged out, and a few women choked in shock. “Elaida—” one began.

“Elaida was a madwoman, and you all know it!” Egwene said sternly, standing tall, staring them down. “You knew it these last few months as she worked unwittingly to destroy us. Light, many of you probably knew it when you *raised* her in the first place!

“There have been foolish Amyrlins before, but none have come as close to tearing down the entire Tower! *You* are a check upon the Amyrlin. *You* are to keep her from doing things like this! *You* allowed her to disband an entire Ajah? What were you *thinking*? How is it that you allowed the Tower to fall so far? And when the *Dragon Reborn* himself walks the land, no less!

“You should have removed Elaida the moment you heard of her disastrous attempt to confine Rand al’Thor. You should have removed her when you saw how her bickering and pettiness was turning Ajahs against one another. And you should *certainly* have removed her when she refused to do what was needed to bring the Tower together again, whole as one!”

Egwene looked down the lines of sisters, staring at each one in turn, meeting each set of eyes until they looked away. None dared hold her gaze for long. Finally, she saw shame begin to peek through their masks. As well it should!

“None of you would stand up to her,” Egwene spat. “You *dare* call yourself the Hall of the Tower? You who were cowed? You who were too frightened to do what was needed? You who were too caught up in your own squabbles and politicking to *see* what was needed?”

Egwene looked down at Silviana. “Only one woman in this room was willing to stand up for what she knew to be right. Only one woman dared defy Elaida, and she accepted the price of doing so. And you think I brought this woman here to exact *vengeance* on her? Are you really so blinded that you think I’d punish the only person in the entire Tower who did anything of decency these last few months?”

They were all looking down, now. Even Saerin wouldn’t meet her eyes.

Silviana looked up at her.

“You did your duty, Silviana,” Egwene said. “And you did it well. Rise.”

The woman stood. She looked haggard, eyes puffy from lack of sleep, and Egwene suspected she was having trouble standing. Had anyone seen to bringing her food or water during the chaos of the last few days?

"Silviana," Egwene said, "a new Amyrlin has been raised. And, it shames me to say, it was done with subterfuge similar to Elaida's raising. Of the seven Ajahs, only five were represented. The Blue I know would support me, were they here. But the Red were not even given a chance to voice their dissent or approval."

"There are good reasons for that, Mother," Silviana said.

"That may be true," Egwene said, "but it all but ensures that my reign will be marked with tension between myself and the Red. They will perceive ill will where there is none, and I will lose the strength of hundreds of women. Women that will be sorely needed."

"I . . . don't see any way around that, Mother," Silviana said, honestly.

"I do," Egwene said. "Silviana Brehon, I would have you as my Keeper of the Chronicles. Let it not be said that I spurned the Red."

Silviana blinked in surprise. There were a few gasps from the Sitters, though Egwene did not mark whose they were.

She stared Silviana in the eyes. Just a short time ago, this woman had had Egwene over the side of the desk, paddling her at Elaida's command. But Silviana now knelt; she had done so without needing an order. She accepted the Hall's authority to raise Egwene. Did she accept Egwene herself?

Egwene's offer would place her on a difficult and dangerous road. The Reds might see it as a betrayal. What would Silviana's response be? Egwene blessed the trick that kept her from sweating, otherwise she knew that drops would have been trickling down the sides of her face.

"I would be honored, Mother," Silviana said, kneeling again. "Truly honored."

Egwene let out a breath. Her task of reuniting the fractured Ajahs would be difficult—but if the Reds saw her as an enemy, it would be nearly impossible. With Silviana on her side, she would have an envoy to the Reds who would not be rejected. Hopefully.

"This will be a difficult time for the Red Ajah, daughter," Egwene said. "Their nature has always been to capture men who can channel, but reports claim that *saidin* is cleansed."

“There will still be rogue channelers, Mother,” Silviana said. “And men are not to be trusted.”

Someday, we will have to move beyond that last sentiment, Egwene thought. *But for now, it is true enough to let stand.* “I didn’t say that your purpose would vanish, only that it would change. I see great things for the Red Ajah in the future—an expanding of vision, a renewal of duty. I am pleased to have you at my side to help guide them.”

Egwene looked up at the Sitters, who were watching in stunned silence. “I’d order you all to do penance,” Egwene said, “save for the fact that I know some of you, at least, were working behind the scenes to stop the crumbling of the White Tower. You didn’t do enough, but you did something. Beyond that, I think that the penance we often demand of ourselves is ridiculous. What is physical pain to Aes Sedai?”

Egwene took a deep breath. “And I am not guiltless either. I share some of your shame, for it was during my tenure that these disasters occurred. I sided with the rebels, allowed myself to be raised by them because it was the only choice. But that choice still gives me culpability.

“Bear your shame, Sitters, but bear it with determination. Do not let it break you. The time for healing has begun, and there is no longer any use in pointing fingers. You failed. But you are all that we have. *We* are all that the world has.”

The women began to look up.

“Come,” Egwene said, striding through the room, Silviana smoothly falling into step beside her. “Let us greet the rebels.”

They passed through the hallways of the Tower, which still smelled of smoke and were strewn with rubble in places. Egwene tried not to look at the bloodstains. The Sitters followed behind, clustering in Ajah groups, despite Egwene’s recent chastisement. There would still be a lot of work to heal them.

“Mother,” Silviana said quietly as they walked, “I can only assume that you had a Keeper already, among the rebels. Do you intend to maintain two of us?” Her tense voice revealed what she thought of such an unconventional arrangement.

“No,” Egwene said. “My previous Keeper was executed for being of the Black Ajah.”

Silviana paled. “I see.”

“We can’t dance around these things, Silviana,” Egwene said. “I received a very important visitor just before my . . . rescue. She was of the Black, and betrayed to me the names of other Black sisters. I have confirmed each of those who were among the rebel Aes Sedai through use of the Oath Rod.”

“The Oath Rod?” Silviana exclaimed.

“Yes,” Egwene said as they entered a stairwell. “I was given it last night by an ally in the Tower. Though, it occurs to me that we’ll have to move the room with the *ter’angreal*. And keep the location secret and constantly warded. It won’t be long before every sister with sufficient power knows the weave for Traveling, and I wouldn’t put it past many of them—including those I trust—to ‘borrow’ *angreal* now and again.”

“Yes, Mother,” Silviana said. Then, in a quieter voice. “I’m going to have to get used to a lot of things changing, I suspect.”

“I’m afraid so,” Egwene said. “Not the least of which will be the need to choose a proper Mistress of Novices, one who can deal with hundreds of new initiates—many of whom are not of the standard age. I’ve already begun the process of accepting for training any woman, no matter how old, who shows some measure of ability with channeling. I suspect that before long, the White Tower will be bursting at the seams with novices.”

“I shall consider suggestions for a replacement quickly then, Mother,” Silviana said.

Egwene nodded in approval. Romanda and Lelaine would undoubtedly be livid when they discovered what Egwene had done in choosing Silviana, but the more she considered it, the more satisfied Egwene was. Not just because Silviana was Red, but because she was so capable. Saerin would have been a fair choice, but many would have seen her as being Egwene’s guide, and perhaps the real power behind the Seat. Picking a Blue would have been too divisive for the current state of the Tower. And besides, with an Amyrlin who was one of the rebels—nobody would soon forget that, no matter what Egwene said or did—it would go a long way toward healing relations to have a Keeper who had been a loyalist.

Before long, they reached the Tower’s Great Square, on the east side of the building. The square was filled—as per her orders—by women in ranks by Ajah. Egwene had chosen this position because of the tall steps leading up to the Tower, topped by a spacious landing. She stood there, back to the majestically carved doors. It was a perfect location from which to address a crowd.

It was also situated between the wings, which had taken the worst damage during the attack the previous night. The east wing still smoldered; the dome had collapsed; one of the walls had fallen in. However, from this vantage, the Tower itself was relatively free of scars, and neither of the gaping holes was directly visible.

Egwene could see faces lining the lower windows. Aes Sedai and novices alike watched her. It seemed that in addition to the rebels, Egwene had an opportunity to address the majority of the remaining occupants of the Tower. She made a weave to enhance her voice. Not to booming levels, but enough to let her be heard both from behind and below.

“Sisters,” she said, “daughters. I have been raised properly to the Amyrlin Seat. Both sides of this conflict have chosen me. Both followed the prescribed methods, and both now accept me as their Amyrlin. It is time to join together again.

“I will not pretend that our division did not take place. We of the White Tower are sometimes too eager to forget those facts we don’t want to acknowledge. This one cannot be hidden, not from us who lived it. We were divided. We nearly came to war with one another. We have disgraced ourselves.

“You rebels before me have done something terrible. You have shattered the Tower and raised up a rival Amyrlin. For the first time, troops have been marshaled by Aes Sedai against Aes Sedai. I led those troops. I know of this shame.

“Necessary or not, it *is* a shame. And so it is that I require your admission of guilt. You must take responsibility for your crimes, even those performed in the name of the greater good.”

She looked down at the Aes Sedai below. If her action of forcing them into ranks—then making them wait upon her will—hadn’t made them aware of her attitude, then perhaps her words would.

“You did not come here in glory,” Egwene said to them. “You did not come here victorious. For there *is* no victory, and could have been no victory, when sister fought sister and Warder died to Warder.” She noted Siuan standing near the front of the ranks and met her eyes across the distance. Leane was there, too, looking disheveled from her long imprisonment, but standing erect.

“Mistakes have been made on both sides,” Egwene said. “And we will all have to work hard to repair what we have done. It is said by blacksmiths that a sword can never be whole again once it has been shattered. It must be completely reforged, the metal melted down to slag, then reworked and re-formed.

“These next few months will be our re-forming. We have been broken, then torn down nearly to roots. The Last Battle approaches, and before it arrives, I mean to see that we are once again a sword forged with strength, whole and unbroken! I will make demands of you. They will be harsh. They will stretch you to the limits of what you think you can bear. I will take these burned holes and fill them! Accommodations will have to be made, for between us there are far too many Sitters for the Hall, not to mention five too many Ajah heads. Some of you will have to step down and bow yourselves in humility before those you dislike.

“These days will test you! I will force you to work with those you saw as enemies just hours ago. You will march alongside those who spurned you, or hurt you, or hated you.

“But we are stronger than our weaknesses. The White Tower stands, and we shall stand with it! We *will* become one again. We will be an assembly that tales will tell of! When I am finished with you, it will not be written that the White Tower was weak. Our divisions will be forgotten in the face of our victories. We will be remembered not as the White Tower who turned against itself, but as the White Tower who stood strong in the face of the Shadow. These days will be *legendary*!”

Cheers burst out, mostly from novices and soldiers, as the Aes Sedai were too reserved for that sort of behavior. Generally. Some younger ones did call out, caught up in the moment. Thankfully, those cheers came from both sides. Egwene let them roar for a moment, then raised her arms, quieting them.

“Let it go forth across the land!” she shouted. “Let it be spoken of, let it be relied upon, and let it be remembered. The White Tower is whole and complete. And no one—man, woman or creation of the Shadow—will see us divided again!”

The cheers were nearly deafening this time, and surprisingly, more Aes Sedai joined in. Egwene lowered her hands.

She hoped they would still cheer her in the months to come. There was a great deal of work to be done.

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CHAPTER 47

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The One He Lost

Rand did not return to his rooms immediately. The failed meeting with the Borderlanders had left him feeling unhinged. Not because of their tricky attempt to pull him into Far Madding—that was frustrating, but it was not unexpected. People always tried to control and manipulate him. The Borderlanders were no different.

No, it was something else that had unsettled him, something he couldn't quite define. And so he stalked through the Stone of Tear, two Aiel Maidens trailing behind him, his presence startling servants and unnerving Defenders.

The corridors twisted and turned. The walls—where unadorned by tapestry—were the color of wet sand, but they were far stronger than any rock Rand knew, alien and strange; each smooth span a reminder that this place was not natural.

Rand felt the same way. He had the form of a human. Indeed, he had the mannerisms and history of one. But he was a thing that no human—not even he himself—could understand. A figure of legend, a creation of the One Power, as unnatural as a *ter'angreal* or a fragment of *cuendillar*. They dressed him up like a king, just as they dressed these corridors with tasseled gold and red rugs. Just as they hung the walls with those tapestries, each one depicting a famous Tairen general. Those decorations were intended for beauty, but they were also intended to obscure. The patches of naked wall highlighted how alien the place was. Rugs and tapestries made it all feel more . . . human. Just as giving Rand a crown and a fine coat allowed them to accept him. Kings were supposed to be a little different. Never mind his much more alien nature, hidden beneath the crown. Never mind his heart of a man long dead, his shoulders created to bear the weight of prophecy, his soul crushed by the needs, wants and hopes of a million people.

Two hands. One to destroy, the other to save. Which had he lost?

It was easy to go astray in the Stone. Long before the Pattern had begun to unravel, these twisting corridors of brown rock had been misleading. They were designed to befuddle attackers. Intersections came unexpectedly; there were few landmarks, and the inner corridors of the keep didn't have windows. The Aiel said they had been impressed with how difficult it had been to seize the Stone. It hadn't been the Defenders who had impressed them, but the sheer scope and layout of the monstrous building.

Fortunately, Rand had no particular goal. He simply wanted to walk.

He had *accepted* what he needed to be. Why was he so bothered by it, then? A voice deep down—one not in his head, but in his heart—had begun to disagree with what he did. It was not loud or violent like Lews Therin's; it just whispered, like a forgotten itch. Something is wrong. Something is wrong. . . .

No! he thought. *I must be strong. I have finally become what I must be!*

He stopped in the corridor, teeth gritted. In his deep coat pocket, he carried the access key. He fingered it, its contours cold and smooth. He didn't dare leave it to the care of a servant, no matter how trusted.

Hurin, he realized. *That's what is bothering me. Seeing Hurin.*

He resumed walking, straightening his back. He had to be strong—or at least appear strong—at all times.

Hurin was a relic from an earlier life. Days when Mat had still mocked Rand's coats, days when Rand had hoped that he'd marry Egwene and somehow return to the Two Rivers. He had traveled with Hurin and Loial, determined to stop Fain and get back Mat's dagger, to prove that he was a friend. That had been a much simpler time, although Rand hadn't known it. He'd have wondered if anything could grow more complicated than thinking his friends hated him.

The colors shifted in his vision. Perrin walking through a dark camp, that stone sword looming in the air above him. The vision changed to Mat, who was still in that city. It was Caemlyn? Why could he be near Elayne, when Rand had to remain so far away? He could barely feel her emotions through the bond. He missed her so. Once they had stolen kisses from one another in the halls of this very fortress.

No, he thought. *I am strong.* Longing was an emotion he mustn't feel. Nostalgia got him nowhere. He tried to banish both, ducking into a stairwell and moving down the steps, working his body, trying to make his breath come in gasps.

Do we run from the past, then? Lews Therin asked softly. *Yes. That is well. Better to run than to face it.*

Rand's time with Hurin had ended at Falme. Those days were indistinct in his mind. The changes that had come upon him then—realizing that he had to kill, that he could never return to the life he had loved—were things he could not dwell on. He'd headed out toward Tear, almost delirious, separated from his friends, seeing Ishamael in his dreams.

That last one was happening again.

Rand burst out onto one of the lower floors of the keep, breathing deeply. His Maidens followed him, not winded. He strode down the hallway and into a massive chamber with rows of pillars, stout and broad, wider than a man could wrap his arms around. The Heart of the Stone. Several Defenders came to attention and saluted as Rand passed them.

He walked to the center of the Heart. Once, *Callandor* had hung here, glistening with light. The crystal sword was now in Cadsuane's possession. Hopefully, she hadn't bungled that and lost *it* as she had the male *a'dam*. Rand didn't really care. *Callandor* was inferior; to use it, a man had to subject himself to the will of a woman. Besides, it was powerful, but not nearly as powerful as the Choedan Kal. The access key was a much better tool. Rand stroked it quietly, regarding the place where *Callandor* had once hung.

This had always bothered him. *Callandor* was the weapon spoken of in the prophecies. The Karaethon Cycle said that the Stone would not fall until *Callandor* was wielded by the Dragon Reborn. To some scholars, that passage had implied that the sword would *never* be wielded. But the prophecies did not work that way—they were made to be fulfilled.

Rand had studied the Karaethon Prophecy. Unfortunately, teasing out its meaning was like trying to untie a hundred yards of tangled rope. With one hand.

Taking the Sword That Cannot Be Touched was one of the first major prophecies that he had fulfilled. But was his taking of *Callandor* a meaningless sign, or was it a step? Everyone knew the prophecy, but few asked the question that should have been inevitable. Why? *Why* did Rand have to take up the sword? Was it to be used in the Last Battle?

The sword was inferior as a *sa'angreal*, and he doubted that it was intended to be used simply as a sword. Why did the prophecies not speak of the Choedan Kal? He had used *those* to cleanse the taint. The access key gave Rand power well beyond what *Callandor* could provide, and that power came with no strings. The statuette was freedom, but *Callandor* was just another box. Yet talk of the Choedan Kal and their keys was absent from the prophecies.

Rand found that frustrating, for the prophecies were—in a way—the grandest and most stifling box of them all. He was trapped inside of them. Eventually, they would suffocate him.

I told them . . . Lews Therin whispered.

Told them what? Rand demanded.

That the plan would not work, Lews Therin said, voice very soft. *That brute force would not contain him. They called my plan brash, but these weapons they created, they were too dangerous. Too frightening. No man should hold such Power . . .*

Rand struggled with the thoughts, the voice, the memories. He couldn't recall much at all of Lews Therin's plan to Seal the Dark One's prison. The Choedan Kal—had they been built for that purpose?

Was that the answer? Had Lews Therin made the wrong choice? Why, then, was there no mention of them in the prophecies?

Rand turned to leave the empty chamber. "Guard this place no more," he said to the Defenders. "There is nothing here of worth. I'm not sure if there ever was."

The men looked shocked, mortified, like children just chastised by a beloved father. But there was a war coming, and he wouldn't leave soldiers behind to defend an empty room.

Rand gritted his teeth and strode into a hallway. *Callandor*. Where had Cadsuane hidden it? He knew she'd taken rooms in the Stone, again pushing the limits of his exile. He would have to do something about that. Cast her from the Stone, perhaps. He hurried up the stone steps, then left the stairwell on a random floor, continuing to *move*. Sitting now would drive him mad.

He worked so hard to keep from being tied with strings, but at the end of the day, the prophecies would see that he did what he was supposed to. They were more manipulative, more devious, than any Aes Sedai.

His anger welled up inside him, raging against its constraints. The quiet voice deep within shivered at the tempest. Rand leaned his left arm against the wall, bowing his head, teeth gritted.

"I will be strong," he whispered. And yet, the anger would not go away. And why should it? The Borderlanders defied him. The Seanchan defied him. The Aes Sedai pretended to obey him, yet dined with Cadsuane behind his back and danced at her command.

Cadsuane defied him most of all. Staying right near him, flouting his words of command and twisting his intentions. He pulled out the access key, fingering it. The Last Battle loomed, and he spent what little time he had riding to meetings with people who insulted him. The Dark One was unraveling the Pattern more each day, and those sworn to protect the borders were hiding in Far Madding.

He glanced around, breathing deeply. Something about this particular hallway seemed familiar. He wasn't certain why; it looked like all of the others. Rugs of gold and red. An intersection of hallways ahead.

Maybe he shouldn't have let the Borderlanders survive their defiance. Perhaps he should go back and see that they learned to fear him. But no. He didn't need them. He could leave them for the Seanchan. That Borderlander army would serve to slow his enemies here in the south. Perhaps that would keep the Seanchan from his flanks while he dealt with the Dark One.

But . . . was there, perhaps, a way to stop the Seanchan for good? He looked down at the access key. Once he had tried to use *Callandor* to fight the foreign invaders. He hadn't yet understood why the sword was so difficult to control: only after his disastrous assault had Cadsuane explained what she knew about it. Rand needed to be in a circle with two women before he could safely wield the sword that was not a sword.

That had been his first major failure as a commander.

But he had a better tool now. The most powerful tool ever created; surely no human could hold more of the One Power than he had when cleansing *saidin*. Burning Graendal and Natrin's Barrow away had required only a fraction of what Rand could summon.

If he turned *that* against the Seanchan, then he could go to the Last Battle with confidence, no longer worried about what was creeping along behind him. He had given them their chance. Several chances. He had warned Cadsuane, told her that he'd bind the Daughter of the Nine Moons to him. One way . . . or another.

It would not take long.

There, Lews Therin said. *We stood there.*

Rand frowned. What was the madman babbling about? He glanced around. The wide hallway's floor was tiled in red and black patterns. A few tapestries fluttered on the walls. With shock, Rand realized that several of them depicted *him*, taking the Stone, holding *Callandor*, killing Trollocs.

Fighting the Seanchan wasn't our first failure, Lews Therin whispered. *No, our first failure happened here. In this hallway.*

Exhausted, following the battle with the Trollocs and Myrddraal. His side throbbing. The Stone still ringing with the cries of the wounded. Feeling he could do anything. *Anything.*

Standing above the corpse of a young girl. Just a child. *Callandor* glowing in his fingers. The body suddenly jerked.

Moiraine had stopped him. Bringing life to the dead was beyond him, she'd said.

How I wish she was still here, Rand thought. He had often been frustrated with her, but she—more than anyone else—had seemed to grasp just what it was he was expected to do. She'd made him more willing to do it, even when he'd been angry with her.

He turned away. Moiraine had been right. He could not bring life to those who were dead. But he was *very* good at bringing death to those who lived. "Gather your spear-sisters," Rand called over his shoulder to his Aiel guards. "We are going to battle."

"Now?" one of them asked. "It is nightfall!"

Have I been walking that long? Rand thought with surprise. "Yes," he said. "The darkness won't matter; I shall create light enough." He fingered the access key, feeling a thrill and a horror at the same time. He had driven the Seanchan back into the ocean once. He would do so again. Alone.

Yes, he would drive them back—at least, the ones he left alive.

"Go!" he shouted at the Maidens. They left him, loping down the hallway. What had happened to his control? The ice had grown thin lately.

He walked back to the stairway and climbed a few flights up toward his rooms. The Seanchan would know his fury. They dared to provoke the Dragon Reborn? He offered them peace, and they *laughed* at him?

He threw open the door to his rooms, silencing the eager Defenders on guard outside with a sharply upraised hand. He was not in the mood for their prattle.

He stormed inside, and was annoyed to find that the guards had allowed someone inside. An unfamiliar figure stood with his back to Rand, looking out the open balcony doors. "What—" Rand began.

The man turned. It was *not* a stranger. Not a stranger at all.

It was Tam. His father.

Rand stumbled back. Was this an apparition? Some twisted trick of the Dark One? But no, it was Tam. There was no mistaking the man's kindly eyes. Though he was a head shorter than Rand, Tam had always seemed more solid than the world around him. His broad chest and steady legs could not be moved, not because he was strong—Rand had met many men of greater strength during his travels. Strength was fleeting. Tam was *real*. Certain and stable. Just looking at him brought comfort.

But comfort clashed with who Rand had become. His worlds met—the person he had been, the person he had become—like a jet of water on a white-hot stone. One shattering, the other turning to steam.

Tam stood, hesitant, in the balcony doorway, lit by two flickering lamps on stands in the room. Rand understood Tam's hesitation. They were not blood father and son. Rand's blood father had been Janduin, clan chief of the Taardad Aiel. Tam was just the man who had found Rand on the slopes of Dragonmount.

Just the man who had raised him. Just the man who had taught him everything he knew. Just the man Rand loved and revered, and always would, no matter what their blood connection.

"Rand." Tam's voice was awkward.

"Please," Rand said through his shock. "Please sit."

Tam nodded. He closed the balcony doors, then walked forward and took one of the chairs. Rand sat, too. They stared across the room at one another. The stone walls were bare; Rand preferred them unornamented with tapestries or paintings. The rug was yellow and red, and so large it reached to all four walls.

The room felt too perfect. A vase of freshly cut dara lilies and calima blossoms sat there, right where it should. Chairs in the center, arranged too correctly. The room didn't look *lived* in. Like so many places he stayed, it wasn't home. He hadn't truly had a home since he'd left the Two Rivers.

Tam sat in one chair, Rand in another. Rand realized he still had the access key in his hand, so he set it on the sun-patterned rug before him. Tam glanced at Rand's stump, but said nothing. He clenched his hands together, probably wishing he had something to work on. Tam was always more comfortable talking about uncomfortable things when he had something to do with his hands, whether it be checking the straps on a harness or shearing a sheep.

Light, Rand thought, feeling a sudden urge to enfold Tam in a hug. Familiarity and memories flooded back into his mind. Tam delivering brandy to the Winespring Inn for Bel Tine. The pleasure Tam took in his pipe. His patience and his kindness. His unexpected heron-mark sword. *I know him so well. And yet I've rarely thought of him recently.*

"How . . ." Rand said. "Tam, how did you get here? How did you find me?"

Tam chuckled quietly. "You've been sending nonstop messengers to all the great cities these last few days, telling them to marshal their armies for war. I think a man would have to be blind, deaf *and* drunk not to know where to find you."

"But my messengers haven't gone to the Two Rivers!"

"I wasn't in the Two Rivers," Tam said. "Some of us have been fighting alongside Perrin."

Of course, Rand thought. Nynaeve must have contacted Perrin—the colors swirled—she was so worried about him and Mat. It would have been easy for Tam to come back with her.

Was Rand really having this conversation? He had given up on returning to the Two Rivers, on ever seeing his father again. It felt so good, despite the awkwardness. Tam's face held more lines than it had before, and the few determined streaks of black in his hair had finally given in and gone silver, but he was the same.

So many people had changed around Rand—Mat, Perrin, Egwene, Nynaeve—it was a wonder to meet someone from his old life who was the same. Tam, the man who had taught Rand to seek the void. Tam was a rock that seemed to him stronger than the Stone itself.

Rand's mood darkened slightly. "Wait. Perrin has been using Two Rivers folk?"

Tam nodded. "He needed us. That boy's put on a balancing act to impress any menagerie performer. What with the Seanchan and the Prophet's men, not to mention the Whitecloaks and the queen—"

"The queen?" Rand said.

"Aye," Tam said. "Though she says she's not queen anymore. Elayne's mother."

"She *lives,* then?" Rand asked.

"She does, little thanks to the Whitecloaks," Tam said with distaste.

"Has she seen Elayne?" Rand asked. "You mentioned Whitecloaks—how did he run into Whitecloaks?" Tam began to answer, but Rand held up his hand. "No. Wait. I can get a report from Perrin when I wish it. I will not have our time together spent with you acting the messenger."

Tam smiled faintly.

"What?" Rand asked.

"Ah, son," he said, shaking his head, broad hardworking hands clasped before him, "they've really done it. They've gone and made a king out of you. What happened to the gangly boy, so wide-eyed at Bel Tine? Where's the uncertain lad I raised all those years?"

"He's dead," Rand said immediately.

Tam nodded slowly. "I can see that. You . . . must know then. . . . About. . . ."

"That you're not my father?" Rand guessed.

Tam nodded, looking down.

"I've known since the day I left Emond's Field," Rand replied. "You spoke of it in your fever dreams. I refused to believe it for a time, but I was eventually persuaded."

"Yes," Tam said. "I can see how. I. . . ." He gripped his hands together tightly. "I never meant to lie to you, son. Or, well, I guess I shouldn't call you that, should I?"

You can call me son, Rand thought. *You are my father. No matter what some may say.* But he couldn't force the words out.

The Dragon Reborn couldn't have a father. A father would be a weakness to be exploited, even more than a woman like Min. Lovers were expected. But the Dragon Reborn had to be a figure of myth, a creature nearly as large as the Pattern itself. He had difficulty getting people to obey as it was. What would it do if it were known that he kept his father nearby? If it were known that the Dragon Reborn relied upon the strength of a shepherd?

The quiet voice in his heart was screaming.

"You did well, Tam," Rand found himself saying. "By keeping the truth from me, you likely saved my life. If people had known that I was a foundling, and discovered near Dragonmount no less—well, word would have spread. I might very well have been assassinated as a child."

"Oh," Tam said. "Well, then, I'm glad I did it."

Rand picked up the access key—it too brought him comfort—then stood. Tam hastily joined him, acting more and more like just another retainer or servant.

"You have done a great service, Tam al'Thor," Rand said. "By protecting and raising me, you have ushered in a new Age. The world owes you a debt. I will see that you are cared for the rest of your life."

"I appreciate that, my Lord," Tam said. "But it isn't necessary. I have what I need."

Was he hiding a grin? Perhaps it *had* been a pompous speech. The room felt stifling, and Rand turned, crossing the fine rug and throwing open the balcony doors again. The sun had indeed set, and darkness had fallen on the city. A crisp ocean breeze blew across him as he stepped out to the balcony railing, into the night.

Tam stepped up beside him.

"I'm afraid I lost your sword," Rand found himself saying. It felt foolish.

"That's all right," Tam said. "I don't know that I ever deserved the thing anyway."

"Were you really a blademaster?"

Tam nodded. "I suppose. I killed a man who was one, did it in front of witnesses, but I've never forgiven myself for it. Though it needed doing."

"The ones that need to be done often seem the ones that we least like to have to do."

"That's the truth if I've ever heard it," Tam said, sighing softly, leaning on the balcony railing. Lit windows were beginning to shine in the darkness below. "It's so strange. My boy, the Dragon Reborn. All of those stories I heard when traveling the world, I'm part of them."

"Think how it feels for me," Rand said.

Tam chuckled. "Yes. Yes, I suppose you understand exactly what I mean, don't you? Funny, isn't it?"

"Funny?" Rand shook his head. "No. Not, that. My life isn't my own. I'm a puppet for the Pattern and the prophecies, made to dance for the world before having my strings cut."

Tam frowned. "That's not true, son. Er, my Lord."

"I can't see it any other way."

Tam crossed his arms on the smooth stone railing. "I guess I can understand. I remember some of those emotions myself, during the days when I was a soldier. You know that I fought against Tear? You'd think I would have painful memories, coming here. But one enemy often comes to seem like another. I don't bear any grudges."

Rand rested the access key on the railing, but held it tightly. He did not lean down; he remained straight-backed.

"A soldier doesn't have a lot of choices for his own destiny either," Tam said, tapping softly on the railing with an idle finger. "More important men make all the decisions. Men, well, I guess men like you."

"But my choices are made for me by the Pattern itself," Rand said. "I have *less* freedom than the soldiers. You could have run, deserted. Or at least gotten out by legal means."

"And you can't run?" Tam asked.

"I don't think the Pattern would let me," Rand said. "What I do is too important. It would just force me back in line. It has done so a dozen times already."

"And would you really *want* to run?" Tam asked.

Rand didn't reply.

"I could have left those wars. But, at the same time, I couldn't have. Not without betraying who I was. I think it's the same for you. Does it matter if you *can* run, when you know that you're not going to?"

"I'm going to die at the end of this," Rand said. "And I have no choice."

Tam stood up straight, frowning. In an instant, Rand felt that he was twelve years old again. "I won't have talk like that," Tam said. "Even if you're the Dragon Reborn, I won't listen to it. You *always* have a choice. Maybe you can't pick where you are forced to go, but you still have a choice."

"But how?"

Tam laid a hand on Rand's shoulder. "The choice isn't always about *what* you do, son, but *why* you do it. When I was a soldier, there were some men who fought simply for the money. There were others who fought for loyalty—loyalty to their comrades, or to the crown, or to whatever. The soldier who dies for money and the soldier who dies for loyalty are both dead, but there's a *difference* between them. One death meant something. The other didn't.

"I don't know if it's true that you'll need to die for this all to play out. But we both know you aren't going to run from it. Changed though you are, I can see that some things are the same. So I won't stand any whining on the subject."

"I wasn't whining—" Rand began.

"I know," Tam said. "Kings don't whine, they deliberate." He seemed to be quoting someone, though Rand had no idea who. Oddly, Tam gave a brief chuckle. "It doesn't matter," Tam continued. "Rand, I think you can survive this. I can't imagine that the Pattern won't give you some peace, considering the service you're doing for us all. But you're a soldier going to war, and the first thing a soldier learns is that you might die. You may not be able to choose the duties you're given. But you *can* choose why you fulfill them. Why do you go to battle, Rand?"

"Because I must."

"That's not good enough," Tam said. "To the crows with that woman! I wish she'd come to me sooner. If I'd known—"

"What woman?"

"Cadsuane Sedai," Tam said. "She brought me here, said that I needed to talk to you. I'd stayed away, previously, because I thought the last thing you needed was your father stomping across your field!"

Tam continued, but Rand stopped listening.

Cadsuane. Tam had come because of *Cadsuane*. It wasn't because Tam had noticed Nynaeve and taken the opportunity. Not because he'd just wanted to check on his son. But because he'd been *manipulated* into coming.

Would the woman never leave Rand alone!

His emotions seeing Tam were so strong that they had worn away the ice. Too much affection was like too much hatred. Either one made him *feel*, which was something he could not risk.

But he had. And suddenly, *feeling* nearly overcame him. He shuddered, turning away from Tam. Had their conversation all been another one of Cadsuane's games? What was Tam's part in it?

"Rand?" Tam asked. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought up the Aes Sedai. She said you might be angry if I mentioned her."

"What else did she say?" Rand demanded, spinning back toward Tam. The stout man took a hesitant step backward. Night air blew around them, lights from the city dots below.

"Well," Tam said, "she told me that I should talk about your youth, remind you of better times. She thought—"

“She manipulates me!” Rand said softly, meeting Tam’s eyes. “And she manipulates you. Everyone ties their strings to me!”

The rage boiled inside. He tried to shove it back, but it was *so* difficult. Where was the ice, the quiet? Desperately, Rand sought the void. He tried pouring all of his emotions into the flame of a candle, as Tam had taught so long ago.

Saidin was waiting there. Without thought, Rand seized it, and in doing so was overwhelmed with those emotions he thought he’d abandoned. The void shattered, but somehow *saidin* remained, struggling against him. He screamed as the nausea hit him, and he threw his anger against it in defiance.

“Rand,” Tam said, frowning. “You should know better than—”

“*BE SILENT!*” Rand bellowed, throwing Tam to the floor with a flow of Air. Rand wrestled with his rage on one side and *saidin* on the other. They threatened to crush him between them.

This was why he needed to be strong. Couldn’t they see? How could a man laugh when confronted by forces like these?

“I am the Dragon Reborn!” Rand roared at *saidin*, at Tam, at Cadsuane, at the Creator himself. “I will not be your pawn!” He pointed at Tam with the access key. His father lay on the stone floor of the balcony. “You come from Cadsuane, pretending to show me affection. But you unwind another of her strings to tie about my throat! Can I not be free of you all?”

He had lost control. But he didn’t care. They wanted him to feel. He would *feel*, then! They wanted him to laugh? He would laugh as they burned!

Screaming at them all, he wove threads of Air and Fire. Lews Therin howled in his head, *saidin* tried to destroy both of them, and the quiet voice inside Rand’s heart vanished.

A prick of light grew in front of Rand, sprouting from the center of the access key. The weaves for balefire spun before him, and the access key grew brighter as he drew in more power.

By that light, Rand saw his father’s face, looking up at him.

Terrified.

What am I doing?

Rand began to shake, the balefire unraveling before he had time to loose it. He stumbled backward in horror.

What am I DOING? Rand thought again.

No more than I've done before, Lews Therin whispered.

Tam continued to stare at him, face shadowed by the night.

Oh, Light, Rand thought with terror, shock and rage. *I am doing it again. I am a monster.*

Still holding tenuously to *saidin*, Rand wove a gateway to Ebou Dar, then ducked through, fleeing from the horror in Tam's eyes.

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CHAPTER 48

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Reading the Commentary

Min sat in Cadsuane’s small room, waiting—with the others—to hear the result of Rand’s meeting with his father. A low fire burned in the fireplace and lamps at each corner of the room lent light to the women, who worked at various busying activities—embroidery, darning, and knitting—to keep their minds off of the wait.

Min was past regretting her decision to make an alliance with Cadsuane. Regret had come early, during the first few days when Cadsuane had kept Min close, asking after every viewing she had had about Rand. The woman was meticulous as a Brown, writing down each vision and answer. It was like being in the White Tower, again!

Min wasn’t certain why Nynaeve’s submission to Cadsuane had given the woman license to interrogate Min, but that was how Cadsuane seemed to interpret it. Mix that with Min’s discomfort around Rand lately and her own desire to figure out just what Cadsuane and the Wise Ones were planning, and she seemed to spend practically all of her time in the woman’s presence.

Yes, regret had come and gone. Min had moved on to resignation, tinged with a hint of frustration. Cadsuane knew quite a bit about the material Min was studying in her books, but the woman doled out her knowledge like cloudberry jam, a little reward for good behavior, always hinting that there was more to come. That kept Min from fleeing.

She *had* to find the answers. Rand needed them.

With that thought in mind, Min leaned back on her cushioned bench and reopened her current book, a work by Sajius that was simply titled *Commentary on the Dragon*. One line in it teased at her, a sentence mostly ignored by those who had written commentary. *He shall hold a blade of light in his hands, and the three shall be one.*

The commentators felt it was too vague compared with other passages, like Rand taking the Stone or Rand’s blood being spilled on the rocks of Shayol Ghul.

She tried not to think about that last one. The important thing was that many of the prophecies—with a little consideration and thought—generally made sense. Even the lines about Rand being marked by the Dragons and the Herons made sense, looking at it now.

But what of this line? A blade of light almost certainly meant *Callandor*. But what of the “three shall be one”? Some few scholars claimed that “the three” were three great cities—Tear, Illian and Caemlyn. Or, if one happened to be a scholar from Cairhien, then they were said to be Tear, Illian and Cairhien. The problem was that Rand had united far more than three cities. He’d conquered Bandar Eban as well, not to mention the fact that he would need to bring the Borderlanders to his banner.

But he was ruler—or near to it—in three kingdoms. He’d given up Andor, but Cairhien, Illian and Tear were directly beneath his control, even if he personally wore only one crown. Maybe this passage did mean what the scholars said, and Min was chasing nothing.

Were her studies as useless as the protection she’d thought to offer Rand? *Min,* she told herself, *self-pity will get you nowhere.* All she could do was study, think and hope.

“This is wrong,” she found herself saying out loud.

She heard Beldeine’s softly derisive snort from across the room. Min looked up, frowning.

The women who had sworn to Rand—Erian, Nesune, Sarene and Beldeine—had found themselves less welcome in his presence as he had grown less trusting of Aes Sedai. The only one he regularly allowed to see him was Nynaeve. It wasn’t odd, then, that the others had found their way to Cadsuane’s “camp.”

And what of Min’s own relationship with Rand? She was still welcome in his presence; that hadn’t changed. But there was something wrong, something *off*. He put up walls when she was near—not to keep her out, but to keep the real him in. As if he was afraid of what the real him would do, or could do, to those he loved. . . .

He’s in pain again, she thought, feeling him through the bond. *Such anger.* What was going on? She felt a spike of fear, but shoved it down. She had to trust in Cadsuane’s plan. It was a good one.

Corele and Merise—almost constant attendants of Cadsuane these days—continued their embroidery in matching chairs by the hearth. Cadsuane had suggested the work to them to keep their hands busy while they waited. It seemed the ancient Aes Sedai rarely did anything without intending to teach someone a lesson.

Of the Aes Sedai sworn to Rand, only Beldeine was there at the moment. Cadsuane sat near Min, perusing her own book. Nynaeve walked back and forth, up and down, occasionally tugging on her braid. Nobody spoke of the tension in the room.

What *were* Rand and Tam discussing? Would Rand's father be able to turn him?

The chamber was cramped. With three chairs on the rug beside the hearth, a bench along the wall, and Nynaeve crossing back and forth before the door like a spotted hound, there was barely room to move. The smooth stone walls made the place feel like a box, and there was only one window, open to the night air, behind Cadsuane. Light shone from the coals in the hearth and the lamps. The Warders were speaking in low tones in the adjoining room.

Yes, it was cramped, but considering her banishment, Cadsuane was lucky to have rooms in the Stone at all.

Min sighed and turned back to *Commentary on the Dragon*. That same phrase popped out at her again. *He shall hold a blade of light in his hands, and the three shall be one.* What did it mean?

"Cadsuane," Min said, holding up the book. "I think the interpretation of this phrase is wrong."

Again, Beldeine let out a small—almost imperceptible—sniff of disdain.

"You have something to say, Beldeine?" Cadsuane asked, not looking up from her own book, a history called *The Proper Taming of Power*.

"Not in so many words, Cadsuane Sedai," Beldeine replied lightly. The Green had a face that some might have called pretty, bearing traces of her Saldaean heritage. Young enough to not yet have the ageless face, she often seemed to try too hard to prove herself.

"You obviously thought *something* when Min spoke, Beldeine," Cadsuane replied, turning a page. "Out with it."

Beldeine flushed slightly—one noticed these things, if one spent a lot of time with Aes Sedai. They *did* have emotional reactions, they were just subtle. Unless, of course, the Aes Sedai in question was Nynaeve. Although she'd grown better at controlling her emotions, she . . . well, she was still Nynaeve.

Beldeine said, "I simply think that the child is amusing in the way she pokes through those tomes, as if she were a scholar."

Min would have taken that as a challenge from most people, but from Beldeine, the words were matter-of-fact.

Cadsuane turned another page. “I see. Min, what was it you were saying to me?”

“Nothing important, Cadsuane Sedai.”

“I didn’t ask if it was important, girl,” Cadsuane said briskly. “I asked you to repeat yourself. Out with it.”

Min sighed. Nobody could humiliate one more soundly than an Aes Sedai, for they did it without malice. Moiraine had explained it to Min once in simple terms: Most Aes Sedai felt it was important to establish control when there was no great conflict, so that if a crisis *did* happen, people would know where to look.

It was very frustrating.

“I said,” Min repeated, “that a passage is wrong. I’m reading commentary on the Karaethon Cycle. Sajius claims that this line about the three becoming one speaks of the unification of three kingdoms beneath the Dragon’s banner. But I think he’s wrong.”

“And why,” Cadsuane said, “is it that you think you know more than a respected scholar of the prophecies?”

“Because,” Min said, bristling, “the theory doesn’t make sense. Rand only really holds one crown. There *might* have been a good argument here if he hadn’t given away Tear to Darlin. But the theory doesn’t hold any longer. I think the passage refers to some way he has to use *Callandor*.”

“I see,” Cadsuane said, turning yet another page in her own book. “That is a very unconventional interpretation.” Beldeine smiled thinly, turning back to her embroidery. “Of course,” Cadsuane added, “you are quite right.”

Min looked up.

“It was that very passage that led me to investigate *Callandor*,” Cadsuane continued. “Through a great deal of searching I discovered that the sword could only be used properly in a circle of three. That is likely the ultimate meaning of the passage.”

“But that would imply that Rand had to use *Callandor* in a circle sometime,” Min said, looking at the passage again. He’d never done so, as far as she knew.

“It would,” Cadsuane said.

Min felt a sudden thrill. A hint, perhaps. Something that Rand didn’t know, that might help him! Except . . . Cadsuane had already known it. So Min hadn’t discovered anything of real import after all.

“I should think,” Cadsuane said, “that an acknowledgment is due. Bad manners are not to be tolerated, after all.”

Beldeine looked up from her needlework, face dark. Then, unexpectedly, she stood and left the room. Her Warder, the youthful Asha’man Karldin, followed quickly from the side chamber, crossing the room with the Aes Sedai and following Beldeine out into the hallway outside. Cadsuane gave a sniff, then turned back to her book.

The door closed, and Nynaeve eyed Min before returning to her pacing. Min could read a lot in that glance. Nynaeve was annoyed that nobody else seemed nervous. She was frustrated that they hadn’t found some way to listen in on Rand and Tam’s conversation. And she was obviously terrified for Lan. Min understood. She felt similarly about Rand.

And . . . what was that vision that was suddenly hovering above Nynaeve’s head? She was kneeling over someone’s corpse in a posture of grief. The viewing was gone a moment later.

Min shook her head. That hadn’t been a viewing she could interpret, so she let it pass. She couldn’t waste her time trying to unravel all of those. For instance, the black knife that spun around Beldeine’s head recently could mean anything.

She focused on the book. So . . . Rand was to use *Callandor* as part of a circle, then? The three becoming one? But for what reason and with whom? If he was to fight the Dark One, then it didn’t make sense for him to be in a circle with someone else in control, did it?

“Cadsuane,” she said. “This is still wrong. There’s more here. Something we haven’t discovered.”

“About *Callandor*?” the woman asked.

Min nodded.

“I suspect so as well,” Cadsuane replied. How odd to hear her being frank! “But I haven’t been able to determine *what*. If only that fool boy would revoke my exile, we could get on with more important—”

The door to Cadsuane’s room slammed open, causing Merise to jump in shock. Nynaeve hopped back from the door—it had nearly hit her.

Standing in the doorway was a very angry Tam al’Thor. He glared at Cadsuane. “What have you done to him?” he demanded.

Cadsuane lowered her book. “I have done *nothing* to the boy, other than to encourage him toward civility. Something, it seems, other members of the family could learn as well.”

“Watch your tongue, Aes Sedai,” Tam snarled. “Have you seen him? The entire *room* seemed to grow darker when he entered. And that face—I’ve seen more emotion in the eyes of a corpse! What has happened to my son?”

“I take it,” Cadsuane said, “that the reunion did not go as hoped?”

Tam took a deep breath, and the anger seemed to suddenly flow out of him. He was still firm, his eyes displeased, but the rage was gone. Min had seen Rand take control of himself that quickly, before things had started to go wrong in Bandar Eban.

“He tried to kill me,” Tam said in a level voice. “My own son. Once he was as gentle and faithful a lad as a father could hope for. Tonight, he channeled the One Power and turned it against me.”

Min raised her hand to her mouth, feeling a panicked terror. The words brought back memories of Rand looming over her, trying to kill her.

But that hadn’t been him! It had been Semirhage. Hadn’t it? *Oh, Rand,* she thought, understanding the pain she’d felt through the bond. *What have you done?*

“Interesting,” Cadsuane said, her voice cold. “And did you speak the words I prepared for you?”

“I began to,” Tam said, “but I realized that it wasn’t working. He wouldn’t open up to me, and well he shouldn’t. A man using an Aes Sedai script with his own son! I don’t know what you did to him, woman, but I recognize hatred when I see it. You have a lot to explain to—”

Tam cut off as he was suddenly lifted into the air by unseen hands. “You recall, perhaps, what I said about civility, boy?” Cadsuane asked.

“Cadsuane!” Nynaeve said. “You don’t need to—”

“It’s all right, Wisdom,” Tam said. He looked at Cadsuane. Min had seen her treat others like this, including Rand. He had always grown frustrated, and others she did it to were prone to bellowing.

Tam stared her in the eyes. “I’ve known men who, when challenged, always turn to their fists for answers. I’ve never liked Aes Sedai; I was happy to be rid of them when I returned to my farm. A bully is a bully, whether she uses the strength of her arm or other means.”

Cadsuane snorted, but the words had irked her, for she set Tam down.

“Now,” Nynaeve said, as if she’d been the one to defuse the exchange, “perhaps we can get back to what is important. Tam al’Thor, I’d have expected you of all people to handle this better. Didn't we warn you that Rand had grown unstable?"

"Unstable?" Tam asked. "Nynaeve, that boy is right near *insane*. What has happened to him? I understand what battle can do to a man, but. . . ."

"This is irrelevant," Cadsuane said. "You realize, child, that might have been our last opportunity to save your son?"

"If you'd explained to me how he regarded you," Tam said, "it might have gone differently. Burn me! This is what I get for listening to Aes Sedai."

"This is what you get for being wool-headed and ignoring what you are told!" Nynaeve interjected.

"This is what we all get," Min said, "for assuming we can *make* him do what we want."

The room fell still.

And suddenly Min realized that through their bond, she could feel Rand. Distant, to the west. "He's gone," she whispered.

"Yes," Tam said, sighing. "He opened one of those gateways right on the balcony. Left me alive, though I could have sworn—looking in his eyes—that he meant to kill me. I've seen that look in the eyes of men before, and one of the two of us always ended up bleeding on the floor."

"What happened, then?" Nynaeve asked.

"He . . . seemed to be distracted by something, suddenly," Tam said. "He took that little statue and dashed through the gateway."

Cadsuane raised an eyebrow. "And did you see, by chance, where that gateway took him?"

West, Min thought. *Far to the west.*

"I'm not certain," Tam admitted. "It was dark, though I thought. . . ."

"What?" Nynaeve prodded.

"Ebou Dar," Min said, surprising them all. "He's gone to destroy the Seanchan. Just as he told the Maidens he would."

"I don't know about that last part," Tam said. "But it *did* look like Ebou Dar."

"Light preserve us," Corele whispered.

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CHAPTER 49

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Just Another Man

Rand walked, stump shoved in the pocket of his coat, head down, carrying the access key securely wrapped in white linen and looped to his belt at his side. Nobody paid attention to him. He was just another man walking the streets of Ebou Dar. Nothing special, despite the fact that he was taller than most. He had reddish gold hair, maybe suggesting some Aiel blood. But a lot of strange people had fled to the city recently to seek Seanchan protection. What was one more?

As long as a person wasn't able to channel, he or she could find stability here. Safety.

That bothered him. They were his enemies. They were conquerors. He felt their lands shouldn't be peaceful. They should be terrible, full of suffering because of the tyrannical rule. But it wasn't like that at all.

Not unless you could channel. What the Seanchan did with this group of people was horrifying. Not all was well beneath this happy surface. And yet, it was shocking to realize how well they treated others.

Tinkers camped outside the city in large groups. Their wagons had not moved for weeks, and it seemed they were forming villages. As Rand had moved among them, he'd heard some of them speak of settling down. Others had objected to this, of course. They were the Tinkers, the Traveling People. How would they find the Song if they did not search for it? It was as much a part of them as the Way of the Leaf.

Last night, Rand had listened to them at one of the campfires. They'd welcomed him in, fed him, never asking who he was. He'd kept the dragon on his hand hidden and the access key carefully tucked in his coat pocket, looking at that fire burning down to coals.

He hadn't ever been to Ebou Dar itself; he'd only visited the hills to the north, where he'd fought the Seanchan while wielding *Callandor*. That had been a place of failure. Now he had returned to Altara. But for what?

In the morning, when the gates to the city had opened, he made his way inside with the others who had arrived at night. The Tinkers had taken them all in; apparently, they were receiving a ration of food from the Seanchan to house after-hour travelers. That was only one of their many occupations. They mended pots, sewed uniforms and did other odd jobs. For this, they received the protection of rulers for the first time in their long history.

He'd spent long enough with the Aiel to pick up some of their disdain for the Tinkers. Yet that disdain warred with his knowledge that the Tuatha'an—in many ways—followed more true, traditional Aiel ways. Rand could *remember* what it was like to live as they had. In the visions of Rhuidean, he had followed the Way of the Leaf. He'd also seen the Age of Legends. He'd lived those lives, the lives of others, for a few brief moments.

He walked along the packed streets of the muggy city, still in something of a daze. Last night, he had traded his fine black coat to a Tinker for a common brown cloak, ragged on the bottom and stitched in places. Not a Tinker cloak, just one that a Tinker had sewn up for a man who had never returned to claim it. It made him stand out less, even if it did require him to carry the access key looped to his belt, rather than his deep pocket. The Tinker also gave him a walking staff, which Rand used as he walked, slouching slightly. Height might make him memorable. He wanted to be invisible to these people.

He had nearly killed his father. He hadn't been forced to by Semirhage, or by Lews Therin's influence. No excuses. No argument. He, Rand al'Thor, had tried to kill his own father. He'd drawn in the Power, made the weaves and nearly released them.

Rand's rage was gone, replaced by loathing. He'd wanted to make himself hard. He'd *needed* to be hard. But this was where hardness had brought him. Lews Therin had been able to claim madness for his atrocities. Rand had nothing, no place to hide, no refuge from himself.

Ebou Dar. It was a busy, bulging city, split in half by its large river. Rand walked the west side, through squares edged with beautiful statues and streets lined with row upon row of white houses, many several stories high. He often passed men fighting with fists or knives, and nobody making any effort to break them apart. Even the women wore knives at their necks in jeweled scabbards, hanging above low-cut dresses worn over colorful petticoats.

He ignored them all. Instead, he thought on the Tinkers. Tinkers were safe here, but Rand's own father wasn't safe in his empire. Rand's friends feared him; he had seen it in Nynaeve's eyes.

The people here weren't afraid. Seanchan officers moved through the crowds, wearing those insectlike helms. The people made way for them, but out of respect. When Rand heard commoners speaking, they were glad for the stability. They actually praised the Seanchan for conquering them!

Rand crossed a short, canal-spanning bridge. Small boats idled down the waterway, boatmen calling greetings to one another. There didn't seem to be any sense of order to the city layout; where he expected houses, he found shops, and instead of similar shops clustering together— as was common in most cities—here they were scattered, haphazard. On the other side of the bridge, he passed a tall, white mansion, then a tavern right next to it.

A man in a colorful silk vest jostled Rand on the street, then offered a lengthy, overly polite apology. Rand hurried on, lest the man want to start a duel.

This did not seem like an oppressed people. There was no undercurrent of resentment. The Seanchan had a much better hold on Ebou Dar than Rand had on Bandar Eban, and the people here were happy—even prosperous! Of course, Altara—as a kingdom—had never been very strong. Rand knew from his tutors that the Crown's authority hadn't extended much beyond the borders of the city. It was much the same for the other places the Seanchan had conquered. Tarabon, Amadicia, Almoth Plain. Some were more stable than Altara, others less, but all would welcome security.

Rand stopped and leaned against another white building, this one a farrier's shop. He raised his stump to his head, trying to clear his mind.

He didn't want to confront what he had nearly done back in the Stone. He didn't want to confront what he *had* done: weaving Air and shoving Tam to the ground, threatening him; raving.

Rand couldn't focus on that. He had not come to Ebou Dar to gawk like a farmboy. He had come to destroy his enemies! They defied him; they needed to be eliminated. For the good of all nations.

But if he drew that much power through the access key, what damage would he cause? How many lives would he end? And would he not simply light a beacon for the Forsaken, as he had in cleansing *saidin*?

Let them come. He straightened up. He could defeat them.

It was time to attack. Time to burn the Seanchan off the land. He set aside his staff and took the key off its strap at his belt, but could not force himself to unwrap it from its linen shroud. He stared at it in his hand for a time, then continued to walk, idly leaving the staff behind. It felt so odd to be just another foreigner. The Dragon Reborn walked among this people, and they did not know him. To them, Rand al'Thor was far off. The Last Battle was secondary to whether or not they could get their chickens to market, or whether their son would recover from his cough, or whether they would be able to afford that new silk vest they had been wanting.

They would not know Rand until he destroyed them.

It will be a mercy, Lews Therin whispered. *Death is always a mercy.* The madman didn't sound as crazy as he once had. In fact, his voice had started to sound an awful lot like Rand's own voice.

Rand stopped atop another bridge, looking over at the city's massive white-walled palace, home to the Seanchan court. It rose four stories high, with rings of gold at the base of its four domes and more gold at the tips of its many spires. The Daughter of the Nine Moons would be found in there. He could give those walls a purity they had never known, a perfection. That would make the building complete, in a way, in the moment before it faded into nothingness.

He unwrapped the access key, just another foreigner, standing on the muddy bridge. After destroying the palace, he would have to be quick. He'd send off bursts of balefire to destroy the ships in the harbor, then use something more mundane to rain fire on the city itself, throw it into a panic. The chaos would delay his enemies' reaction. After that, he would Travel to the garrisons at the city gates and destroy them. He vaguely remembered scout reports of supply camps to the north, well stocked with both soldiers and foodstuffs. He would destroy them next.

From there, he'd need to move on to Amador, then to Tanchico and others. He'd Travel quickly, never remaining in one place long enough to be caught by the Forsaken. A flickering light of death, like a burning ember, flaring to life here, then there. Many would die, but most would be Seanchan. Invaders.

He stared down at the access key. Then he seized *saidin*.

The sickness washed across him more powerfully than it ever had before. The force of it knocked him to the ground like a physical blow. He cried out, barely noticing when he hit the stones. He groaned, gripping the access key, curling around it. His insides seemed to burn, and he turned his head, rolling onto his shoulder and vomiting onto the bridge.

But he held on to *saidin*. He needed the power. The succulent, beautiful power. Even the stench of his own vomit seemed more real to him, more sweet, for the power within him.

He opened his eyes. People were gathered around him, concerned. A Seanchan patrol was approaching. Now was the time. He had to strike.

But he could not. The people looked so concerned. So worried. They cared.

Screaming in frustration, Rand made a gateway, causing the people to jump back in shock. He stumbled to his feet and threw himself through, scrabbling on all fours, as the Seanchan soldiers drew swords and yelled unfamiliar words.

Rand landed on a large stone disc of black and white, the air around him a void of darkness. The portal closed behind, locking Ebou Dar away, and the disc began to move. It floated through the void, lit by some strange ambient light. Rand curled up on the disc, cradling the access key, breathing deeply.

Why can't I be strong enough? He didn't know if the thought was his or if it was Lews Therin's. The two were the same. *Why can't I do what I must?*

The disc traveled for a short time, the only sound in the void that of his breathing. The disc looked like one of the seals to the Dark One's prison, split with a sinuous line dividing the black from the white. Rand lay directly atop it. They called the black half the Dragon's Fang. To the people, it symbolized evil. Destruction.

But Rand was *necessary* destruction. Why had the Pattern pushed him so hard if he didn't need to destroy? Originally, he had tried to avoid killing—but there had been little chance of that working. Then he'd made himself avoid killing women. That had proven impossible.

He was destruction. He just had to accept that. *Someone* had to be hard enough to do what was necessary, didn't they?

A gateway opened, and he stumbled to his feet, clutching the access key. He stepped from the Skimming platform and out onto an empty meadow. The place where he'd fought the Seanchan once with *Callandor*. And failed.

He stared at this place for a long time, breathing in and out, then spun another gateway. This one opened onto a field of snow, and icy wind blasted at him. He stepped through, feet crunching into the snow, and let the gateway close.

Here, the world spread before him.

Why have we come here? Rand thought.

Because, Rand replied. *Because we made this. This is where we died.*

He stood on the very point of Dragonmount, the lone peak that had erupted where Lews Therin had killed himself three thousand years before. To one side, he could see down hundreds of feet to where the side of the mountain opened into a blasted-out chasm. The opening was enormous, larger than it looked from profile. A wide oval of red, blazing, churning rock. It was as if a chunk of the mountain were simply missing, torn away, leaving the peak to rise into the air but the entire side of the mountain gone.

Rand stared down into that seething chasm. It was like the maw of a beast. Heat burned from below and flakes of ash twisted into the sky.

The dun sky was clouded above him. The ground seemed equally distant, barely visible, like a quilt marked with patterns. Here a patch of green that was a forest. There a stitch that was a river. To the east, he saw a small speck in the river, like a floating leaf caught in the tiny current. Tar Valon.

Rand sat down, the snow crunching beneath his weight. He set the access key into the bank before him and wove Air and Fire to keep himself warm.

Then he rested his elbows on his knees and his head on his hand, staring at the diminutive statue of the man with the globe.

To think.

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CHAPTER 50

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Veins of Gold

Wind blew around Rand as he sat at the top of the world. His weaving of Air and Fire had melted away the snow around him, exposing a jagged gray-black tip of rock about three paces wide. The peak was like a broken fingernail jutting into the sky, and Rand sat atop it. As far as he could tell, it was the very tip of Dragonmount. Perhaps the highest point in the world.

He sat upon his small outcropping, the access key sitting on the rock in front of him. The air was thin here, and he'd had trouble breathing until he'd found a way to weave Air so that it compressed slightly around him. Like the weave that warmed him, he wasn't certain how he'd done it. He vaguely remembered Asmodean trying to teach him a similar weave, and Rand hadn't been able to get it right. Now it came naturally. Lews Therin's influence, or his own growing familiarity with the One Power?

Dragonmount's broken, open mouth lay several hundred feet beneath him, to the left. The scents of ash and sulphur were pungent, even at this distance. The maw was black with ash and red from molten rock and blazing fires.

He still held to the Source. He didn't dare let go. This last time he'd seized it had been the worst he could remember, and he feared that the sickness would overpower him if he tried again.

He had been here for hours. And yet he did not feel tired. He stared at the *ter'angreal*. Thinking.

What was he? What was the Dragon Reborn? A symbol? A sacrifice? A sword, meant to destroy? A sheltering hand, meant to protect?

A puppet, playing a part over and over again?

He was angry. Angry at the world, angry at the Pattern, angry at the Creator for leaving humans to fight against the Dark One with no direction. What right did any of them have to demand Rand's life of him?

Well, Rand had offered that life to them. It had taken him a great while to accept his death, but he *had* made his peace. Wasn't that enough? Did he have to be in pain until the end?

He had thought that if he made himself hard enough, it would take away the pain. If he couldn't feel, then he couldn't hurt.

The wounds in his side pulsed in agony. For a time, he'd been able to forget them. But the deaths he had caused rubbed his soul raw. That list starting with Moiraine. Everything had begun to go wrong at her death. Before that, he'd still had hope.

Before that, he'd never been put in a box.

He understood what would be required of him, and he'd changed in the ways he thought he needed. Those changes were to keep him from being overwhelmed. Die to protect people he didn't know? Chosen to save mankind? Chosen to force the kingdoms of the world to unite behind him, destroying those who refused to listen? Chosen to cause the deaths of thousands who fought in his name, to hold those souls upon his shoulders, a weight that must be borne? What man could do these things and remain sane? The only way he had seen had been to cut off his emotions, to make himself *cuendillar*.

But he had failed. He hadn't been able to stamp his feelings out. The voice inside had been so small, but it had pricked at him, like a needle making the smallest of holes in his heart. Even the smallest of holes would let the blood leak free.

Those holes would bleed him dry.

The quiet voice was gone now. It had vanished when he'd thrown Tam to the floor and nearly killed him. Without that voice, did Rand dare continue? If it was the last remnant of the old Rand—the Rand who had believed that he knew what was right and what was wrong—then what did its silence mean?

Rand picked up the access key and stood up, boots scraping stone. It was midday, though the sun still lay hidden behind the clouds. Below, he could see hills and forests, lakes and villages.

"And what if I don't *want* the Pattern to continue?" he bellowed. He stepped forward, right to the edge of the rock, clutching the access key to his chest.

"We live the same lives!" he yelled at them. "Over and over and over. We make the same mistakes. Kingdoms do the same *stupid* things. Rulers fail their people time and time again. Men continue to hurt and hate and die and kill!"

Winds buffeted him, whipping at his brown cloak and his fine Tairen trousers. But his words carried, echoing across the broken rocks of Dragonmount. It was cold and crisp, the air new. His weave kept him warm enough to survive, but it did not stop the chill. He hadn't wanted it to.

“What if I think it’s all meaningless?” he demanded with the loud voice of a king. “What if I don’t *want* it to keep turning? We live our lives by the blood of others! And those others become forgotten. What *good* is it if everything we know will fade? Great deeds or great tragedies, neither means anything! They will become legends, then those legends will be forgotten, then it will all start over again!”

The access key began to glow in his hands. The clouds above seemed to grow darker.

Rand’s anger beat in rhythm with his heart, demanding to be set free.

“What if *he* is right?” Rand bellowed. “What if it’s better for this all to end? What if the Light was a lie all along, and *this* is all just a punishment? We live again and again, growing feeble, dying, trapped forever. We are to be tortured for all time!”

Power flooded into Rand like surging waves filling a new ocean. He came to life, glorying in *saidin*, not caring that the display must be brilliantly visible to men everywhere who could channel. He felt himself alight with the Power, like a sun to the world below.

“NONE OF THIS MATTERS!”

He closed his eyes, drawing in more and more power, feeling as he had only twice before. Once when he had cleansed *saidin*. Once when he had created this mountain.

Then he drew in more.

He knew that much power would destroy him. He had stopped caring. Fury that had been building in him for two years finally boiled free, unleashed at long last. He spread his arms out wide, access key in his hand. Lews Therin had been right to kill himself and create Dragonmount. Only he hadn’t gone far enough.

Rand could remember that day. The smoke, the rumbling, the sharp pains of a Healing bringing him back to lucidity as he lay in a broken palace. But those pains had paled compared with the agony of realization. Agony from seeing the beautiful walls scarred and broken. From seeing the piles of familiar corpses, tossed to the floor like discarded rags.

From seeing Ilyena a short distance away, her golden hair spread out on the ground around her.

He could *feel* the palace around him shaking from the earth’s own sobs. Or was that Dragonmount, throbbing from the immense power he had drawn into himself?

He could smell the air thick with blood and soot and death and *pain*. Or was that just the scent of a dying world, spread before him?

The winds began to whip at him, spinning, enormous clouds above twisting upon themselves, like ancient leviathans passing in the profound black deep.

Lews Therin had made a mistake. He had died, but had left the world alive, wounded, limping forward. He'd let the Wheel of Time keep turning, rotating, *rotting* and bringing him back around again. He could not escape it. Not without ending everything.

"Why?" Rand whispered to the twisting winds around him. The Power coming to him through the access key was greater than he'd held when cleansing *saidin*. Perhaps greater than any man had ever held. Great enough to unravel the Pattern itself and bring final peace.

"Why do we have to do this again?" he whispered. "I have already failed. She is dead by my hand. Why must you make me live it *again*?"

Lightning cracked above, thunder buffeting him. Rand closed his eyes, perched above a drop that plummeted thousands of feet downward, in the middle of a tempest of icy wind. Through his eyelids, he could sense the blazing light of the access key. The Power he held inside dwarfed that light. He was the sun. He was fire. He was life and death.

Why? Why must they do this over and over? The world could give him no answers.

Rand raised his arms high, a conduit of power and energy. An incarnation of death and destruction. He would end it. End it all and let men rest, finally, from their suffering.

Stop them from having to live over and over again. Why? Why had the Creator done this to them? *Why?*

Why do we live again? Lews Therin asked, suddenly. His voice was crisp and distinct.

Yes, Rand said, pleading. *Tell me. Why?*

Maybe . . . Lews Therin said, shockingly lucid, not a hint of madness to him. He spoke softly, reverently. *Why? Could it be . . . Maybe it's so that we can have a second chance.*

Rand froze. The winds blew against him, but he could not be moved by them. The Power hesitated inside him, like the headsman's axe, held quivering above the criminal's neck. *You may not have a choice about* *which duties are given you,* Tam's voice, just a memory, said in his mind. *But you can choose* why *you fulfill them.*

Why, Rand? Why do you go to battle? What is *the point?*

Why?

All was still. Even with the tempest, the winds, the crashes of thunder. All was still.

Why? Rand thought with wonder. *Because each time we live, we get to love again.*

That was the answer. It all swept over him, lives lived, mistakes made, love changing everything. He saw the entire world in his mind's eye, lit by the glow in his hand. He remembered lives, hundreds of them, thousands of them, stretching to infinity. He remembered love, and peace, and joy, and hope.

Within that moment, suddenly something amazing occurred to him. *If I live again, then she might as well!*

That's why he fought. That's why he lived again, and that was the answer to Tam's question. *I fight because last time, I failed. I fight because I want to fix what I did wrong.*

I want to do it right this time.

The Power within him reached a crescendo, and he turned it upon itself, drove it through the access key. The *ter'angreal* was connected to a much greater force, a massive *sa'angreal* to the south, built to stop the Dark One. Too powerful, some had said. Too powerful ever to use. Too frightening.

Rand used its own power upon it, crushing the distant globe, shattering it as if in the grip of a giant's hands.

The Choedan Kal exploded.

The Power winked out.

The tempest ended.

And Rand opened his eyes for the first time in a very long while. He knew—somehow—that he would never again hear Lews Therin's voice in his head. For they were not two men, and never had been.

He regarded the world beneath him. The clouds above had finally broken, if only just above him. The gloom dispersed, allowing him to see the sun hanging just above.

Rand looked up at it. Then he smiled. Finally, he let out a deep-throated laugh, true and pure.

It had been far too long.

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EPILOGUE

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Bathed in Light

Egwene worked by the light of two bronze lamps. They were shaped like women holding their hands into the air, a burst of flame appearing in each set of palms. The calm yellow light reflected on the curves of their hands, arms and faces. Were they symbols of the White Tower and the Flame of Tar Valon? Or were they instead depictions of an Aes Sedai, weaving Fire? Perhaps they were simply relics of a previous Amyrlin's taste.

They sat on either side of her desk. A proper desk, finally, with a proper chair to sit upon. She was inside the Amyrlin's study, purged of any and all references to Elaida. That left it bare, the walls empty, the wood paneling unadorned by picture or tapestry, the end tables empty of works of art. Even the bookshelves had been emptied, lest something of Elaida's offend Egwene.

The moment Egwene had seen what the others had done, she had ordered all of Elaida's effects gathered and placed under secure lock, guarded by women Egwene trusted. Hidden among those effects would be clues to Elaida's plans. They might simply be hidden notes slipped between the pages of books, left for further review. Or they might be as obscure as connections between the types of books she'd been reading or the items she'd had in the desk drawers. But they didn't have Elaida herself to question, and there was no telling what schemes of hers would return to bite the White Tower at a later date. Egwene intended to look over those objects, then interview each and every Aes Sedai who had been in the Tower and determine what clues they hid.

For now, she had her hands full. She shook her head, turning over the pages of Silviana's report. The woman was proving to be an effective Keeper indeed, far more skilled than Sheriam had ever been. The loyalist women respected Silviana, and the Red Ajah seemed to have accepted—at least in part—Egwene's offer of peace in choosing one of their own as her Keeper.

Of course, Egwene also had two stiff letters of disapproval—one from Romanda and one from Lelaine—on the bottom of her stack. The two women had withdrawn their effusive support almost as quickly as they'd given it. Right now, they were arguing over what to do with the *damane* Egwene had captured during the White Tower raid, and neither one liked

Egwene's plan to train them as Aes Sedai. Romanda and Lelaine would trouble her for years yet, it appeared.

She set the report aside. It was late afternoon, and light peeked through the slits of the louvered shutters to her balcony. She didn't open them, preferring the quiet dimness. The solitude felt nice.

For now, she didn't mind the room's sparse decorations. True, it reminded her just a little too much of the study of the Mistress of Novices, but no number of wall hangings would banish her memory of those days, not when Silviana herself was Egwene's Keeper. That was fine. Why would Egwene want to banish those days? They contained some of her most satisfying victories.

Though she certainly didn't mind being able to sit without cringing.

She smiled faintly, scanning the next of Silviana's reports. Then she frowned. *Most* of the Black Ajah in the Tower had escaped. This report, written in Silviana's careful, flowing script, told that they had managed to seize some of the Blacks in the hours following Egwene's raising, but only the weakest of the lot. The majority of them—some sixty Black sisters—had escaped. Including one Sitter, as Egwene had noticed before, whose name had not been on Verin's list. Evanellein's disappearance indicated strongly that she was Black.

Egwene picked up another report, frowning to herself. It was a list of all the women in the White Tower, an extensive list several pages long, broken down by Ajah. Many names had a notation beside them. Black, escaped. Black, captured. Taken by the Seanchan.

That last group was galling. Saerin—acting with foresight—had taken a census following the attack to determine exactly who had been captured. Nearly forty initiates—over two dozen of them full Aes Sedai—snatched in the night and carried off. It was like a story told to children at bedtime, warning of Fades or Halfmen who stole wicked children. Those women would be beaten, confined and turned into nothing more than tools.

Egwene had to steel herself from reaching up to feel her neck, where the collar had held her. She wasn't focusing on that right now, burn it all!

Each of the Black Ajah members on Verin's list had been seen healthy and alive following the Seanchan attack. But most had escaped before Egwene arrived at the Tower to take her seat. Velina was gone. So were Chai and Birlen. And Alviarin; the Black hunters hadn't managed to get to her in time.

What had tipped them off? Unfortunately, it had probably something to do with Egwene seizing the Black Ajah in the rebel camp. She had worried about overplaying her hand. But what else should she have done? Her only hope had been to seize every Black in the camp and hope that word didn't spread to the White Tower.

But it had. She'd captured the ones who remained, and had them executed. Then she'd resworn every sister in the Tower on the Oath Rod. They hadn't liked it, of course. But the knowledge that all of the women in the rebel camp had done it had swayed them. If it hadn't, the news that Egwene had ordered the execution of her own Keeper probably did. It had certainly been a relief when Silviana had offered to swear first, in front of the entire Hall, to prove herself. Egwene had followed by reswearing herself, then told the Hall truthfully that she had watched each and every woman in the camp prove that she wasn't a Darkfriend. They'd captured three more Black sisters who hadn't been on Verin's list. Only three. What accuracy! Verin had proven herself once again.

Egwene set aside the report. Knowledge of those who had escaped still chewed at her. She had known the names of sixty Darkfriends, and they had escaped her grasp. That number reached to eighty if she included those who had escaped from the rebel camp.

I will find you, Alviarin, Egwene thought, tapping the sheet with her finger. *I will find you all. You were a rot within the Tower itself. The worst kind of rot. I will not let you spread it.*

She set the sheet aside and picked up another. This one bore only a few names. A list of all the women in the Tower who had *not* been on Verin's list and who had either been taken by the Seanchan, or had disappeared following the attack.

Verin had believed that one of the Forsaken, Mesaana, was hiding in the Tower. Sheriam's confession corroborated this. Egwene's task of reswearing every Aes Sedai on the Rod had revealed no Darkfriends of great power. Hopefully, the reswearing itself would ease the tension between the Ajahs. They could stop worrying if there were Blacks in their midst. Of course, it could very well weaken the Aes Sedai by giving proof that the Black Ajah *had* indeed existed in the first place.

Either way, Egwene had a problem. She looked over the sheet before her. Each woman in the White Tower had proven that she was not a Darkfriend. Each woman on Verin's list was accounted for. She'd been executed, she’d been captured, she’d fled the White Tower the day of Egwene’s ascension, she’d been taken by the Seanchan or she was out of the Tower at the moment—and had been for some time. The sisters had instructions to watch for those.

Perhaps they’d been lucky, and the Forsaken was one of those women who had been taken by the Seanchan. But Egwene didn’t believe in that kind of luck. One of the Forsaken would not be captured so easily. She’d probably known about the attack in the first place.

That left the three names on the list in front of Egwene. Nalasia Merhan, a Brown; Teramina, a Green; and Jamilila Norsish, a Red. All were very weak in the Power. And the women on this list had all been in the Tower for years. It seemed implausible that Mesaana had been impersonating one of them and doing it so well that her subterfuge hadn’t been noticed.

Egwene had a feeling. A premonition, perhaps. At the very least, a fear. These three names were the only ones who could have been the Forsaken. But none of them fit, not at all. That gave her a chill. Was Mesaana still hiding in the Tower?

If so, she somehow knew how to defeat the Oath Rod.

A soft knock came at her door. It cracked a moment later. “Mother?” Silviana asked.

Egwene looked up, raising her eyebrows.

“I thought you might want to see this,” Silviana said, entering, her hair back in its tidy black bun, the red Keeper’s stole around her shoulders.

“What is it?”

“You should come and see.”

Curious, Egwene rose. There was no tension to Silviana’s voice, so it couldn’t be anything too dire. The two of them left the study behind, walking around the outside of the building to the Hall of the Tower. When they reached it, Egwene raised an eyebrow. Silviana gestured for her to enter.

The Hall wasn’t in session, and the chairs sat empty. A scattering of mason’s tools lay on white sheets in the corner, and a group of workers in thick brown overalls and white shirts—sleeves rolled up—were collected in front of the gap in the wall that the Seanchan had left. Egwene had ordered a rose window fitted into the opening instead of having it sealed up completely, a remembrance for the time the White Tower had been attacked.

A warning to prevent its happening again. Before the window could be installed, however, stonemasons were busy shoring up the sides and creating the fitting.

Egwene and Silviana glided into the room, walking down the short ramp to the floor, which had again been properly painted with the colors of all seven Ajahs. The stonemasons saw them, then backed away respectfully, one man pulling off his cap and clutching it to his chest. Reaching the edge of the room, just before the opening, Egwene finally saw what Silviana had brought her to see.

After all this time, the clouds had finally broken. They had pulled back in a ring around Dragonmount. The sun shone down, radiant, lighting the distant, snowcapped crag. The broken maw and uppermost peak of the blasted mountainside were bathed in light. It was the first time Egwene could remember seeing direct sunlight in weeks. Perhaps longer.

"Some novices noticed it first, Mother," Silviana said, stepping up beside her. "And news spread quickly. Who would have thought that a little ring of sunlight would cause such a stir? It's such a simple thing, really. Nothing we haven't seen before. But. . . ."

There was something beautiful about it. The light streaming down in a column, strong and pure. Distant, yet striking. It was like something forgotten, but somehow still familiar, shining forth from a distant memory to bring warmth again.

"What does it mean?" Silviana asked.

"I don't know," Egwene said. "But I welcome the sight of it." She hesitated. "That opening in the clouds is too even to be natural. Mark this day on the calendars, Silviana. Something has happened. Perhaps, eventually, we shall know the truth of it."

"Yes, Mother," Silviana said, looking out through the gap again.

Egwene stood with her, rather than returning to her study immediately. It felt relaxing to stare out at that distant light, so welcoming and noble. "Storms will soon come," it seemed to say. "But for now, I am here."

I am here.

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At the end of time,
when the many become one,
the last storm shall gather its angry winds
to destroy a land already dying.
And at its center,
the blind man shall stand
upon his own grave.
There he shall see again,
and weep for what has been wrought.

—from *The Prophecies of the Dragon,*
Essanik Cycle. Malhavish’s
Official Translation, Imperial Record
House of Seandar,
Fourth Circle of Elevation.

The End
of the Twelfth Book of
The Wheel of Time

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GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World (AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Aelfinn: A race of beings, largely human in appearance but with snakelike characteristics, who will give true answers to three questions. Whatever the question, their answers are always correct, if frequently given in forms that are not clear, but questions concerning the Shadow can be extremely dangerous. Their true location is unknown, but they can be visited by passing through a *ter'angreal*, once a possession of Mayene but in recent years held in the Stone of Tear. There are reports that they can also be reached by entering the Tower of Ghenjei. They speak the Old Tongue, mention treaties and agreements and ask if those entering carry iron, instruments of music or devices that can make fire. *See also* Eelfinn.

Arad Doman: A nation on the Aryth Ocean, currently racked by civil war and by wars against those who have declared for the Dragon Reborn. Its capital is Bandar Eban, where many of its people have come for refuge.

Food is scarce. In Arad Doman, those who are descended from the nobility at the time of the founding of the nation, as opposed to those raised later, are known as the bloodborn. The ruler (king or queen) is elected by a council of the heads of merchant guilds (the Council of Merchants), who are almost always women. He or she must be from the noble class, not the merchant, and is elected for life. Legally the king or queen has absolute authority, except that he or she can be deposed by a three-quarter vote of the Council. The current ruler is King Alsalam Saeed Almadar, Lord of Almadar, High Seat of House Almadar. His present whereabouts are much shrouded in mystery.

Area, units of: (1) Land: 1 ribbon = 20 paces × 10 paces (200 square paces); 1 cord = 20 paces × 50 paces (1000 square paces); 1 hide = 100 paces × 100 paces (10,000 square paces); 1 rope = 100 paces × 1000 paces (100,000 square paces); 1 march = 1000 paces × 1000 paces (1/4 square mile). (2) Cloth: 1 pace = 1 pace plus 1 hand × 1 pace plus 1 hand.

Asha’man: (1) In the Old Tongue, “Guardian” or “Guardians,” but always a guardian of justice and truth. (2) The name given, both collectively and as a rank, to the men who have come to the Black Tower, near Caemlyn in Andor, in order to learn to channel. Their training largely concentrates on the ways in which the One Power can be used as a weapon, and in another departure from the usages of the White Tower, once they learn to seize *saidin*, the male half of the Power, they are required to perform all chores and labors with the Power. When newly enrolled, a man is termed a Soldier; he wears a plain black coat with a high collar, in the Andoran fashion. Being raised to Dedicated brings the right to wear a silver pin, called the Sword, on the collar of his coat. Promotion to Asha’man brings the right to wear a Dragon pin, in gold and red enamel, on the collar opposite the Sword. Although many women, including wives, flee when they learn that their men actually can channel, a fair number of men at the Black Tower are married, and they use a version of the Warder bond to create a link with their wives. This same bond, altered to compel obedience, has recently been used to bond captured Aes Sedai as well. Some Asha’man have been bonded by Aes Sedai, although the traditional Warder bond is used. The Asha’man are led by Mazrim Taim, who has styled himself the M’Hael, Old Tongue for “leader.”

Band of the Red Hand: *see Shen an Calhar.*

Blood, the: Term used by the Seanchan to designate the nobility. There are four degrees of nobility, two of the High Blood and two of the low, or lesser, Blood. The High Blood let their fingernails grow to a length of one inch and shave the sides of their heads, leaving a crest down the center, narrower for men than for women. The length of this crest varies according to fashion. The low Blood also grow their fingernails long, but they shave the sides and back of the head, leaving what appears to be a bowl of hair, with a wide tail at the back allowed to grow longer, often to the shoulder for men or to the waist for women. Those of the highest level of the High Blood are called High Lady or High Lord and lacquer the first two fingernails on each hand. Those of the next level of the High Blood are called simply Lord or Lady and lacquer only the nails of the forefingers. Those of the low Blood also are called simply Lady or Lord, but those of the higher rank lacquer the nails of the last two fingers on each hand, while those on the lowest level lacquer only the nails of the little fingers. The Empress and immediate members of the Imperial family shave their heads entirely and lacquer all of their fingernails One can be raised to the Blood as well as born to it, and this is frequently a reward for outstanding accomplishment or service to the Empire.

Brown Ajah Council: The Brown Ajah is headed by a council instead of an individual Aes Sedai. The current head of the council is Jesse Bilal in the White Tower; the other members in the White Tower and all of those in the rebel camp are unknown.

calendar: There are 10 days to the week, 28 days to the month and 13 months to the year. Several feast days are not part of any month; these include Sunday (the longest day of the year), the Feast of Thanksgiving (once every four years at the spring equinox) and the Feast of All Souls Salvation, also called All Souls Day (once every ten years at the autumn equinox). While the months have names (Taisham, Jumara, Saban, Aine, Adar, Saven, Amadaine, Tammaz, Maigdhal, Choren, Shaldine, Nesan and Danu), these are seldom used except in official documents and by officials. For most people, using the seasons is good enough.

Captain-General: The title given to the head of the Green Ajah. This position is currently held by Adelorna Bastine in the White Tower, and Myrelle Berengari among the rebel faction.

Children of the Light: Society of strict ascetic beliefs, owing allegiance to no nation and dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar to proselytize against an increase in Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military society. They are extremely rigid in their beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. They consider Aes Sedai and any who support them to be Darkfriends. Known disparagingly as Whitecloaks, a name they themselves despise, they were formerly headquartered in Amador, Amadicia, but were forced out when the Seanchan conquered the city. Galad Damodred became Lord Captain Commander after he killed Eamon Valda in a duel for assaulting his stepmother, Morgase. Valda's death produced a schism in the organization, with Galad leading one faction, and Rhadam Asunawa, High Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light, leading the other. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white. *See also* Questioners.

Commentary on the Dragon**:** A book by Sajius of which little is known.

Comprehensive Discussion of Pre-Breaking Relics, A**:** A book of which little is known (other than its title).

Corenne**:** In the Old Tongue, "the Return." The name given by the Seanchan both to the fleet of thousands of ships and to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers, craftsmen and others carried by those ships, who came behind the Forerunners to reclaim the lands stolen from Artur Hawkwing's descendants. The *Corenne* is led by Captain-General Lunal Galgan. *See also Hailene*, *Rhyagelle*.

cuendillar**:** A supposedly indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any known force used in an attempt to break it, including the One Power, is absorbed, making *cuendillar* stronger. Although the making of *cuendillar* was thought lost forever, new objects made from it have surfaced. It is also known as heartstone.

currency: After many centuries of trade, the standard terms for coins are the same in every land: crowns (the largest coin in size), marks and pennies. Crowns and marks can be minted of gold or silver, while pennies can be silver or copper, the last often called simply a copper. In different lands, however, these coins are of different sizes and weights. Even in one nation, coins of different sizes and weights have been minted by different rulers. Because of trade, the coins of many nations can be found almost anywhere, and for that reason, bankers, moneylenders and merchants all use scales to determine the value of any given coin. Even large numbers of coins are weighed.

The heaviest coins come from Andor and Tar Valon, and in those two places the relative values are: 10 copper pennies = 1 silver penny; 100 silver pennies = 1 silver mark; 10 silver marks = 1 silver crown; 10 silver crowns = 1 gold mark; 10 gold marks = 1 gold crown. By contrast, in Altara, where the larger coins contain less gold or silver, the relative values are: 10 copper pennies = 1 silver penny; 21 silver pennies = 1 silver mark; 20 silver marks = 1 silver crown; 20 silver crowns = 1 gold mark; 20 gold marks = 1 gold crown.

The only paper currency is "letters-of-rights," which are issued by bankers, guaranteeing to present a certain amount of gold or silver when the letter-of-rights is presented. Because of the long distances between cities, the length of time needed to travel from one to another and the difficulties of transactions at long distance, a letter-of-rights may be accepted at full value in a city near to the bank which issued it, but it may only be accepted at a lower value in a city farther away. Generally, someone intending to be traveling for a long time will carry one or more letters-of-rights to exchange for coin when needed. Letters-of-rights are usually accepted only by bankers or merchants, and would never be used in shops.

***da'covale*:** (1) In the Old Tongue, "one who is owned," or "person who is property." (2) Among the Seanchan, the term often used, along with "property," for slaves. Slavery has a long and unusual history among the Seanchan, with slaves having the ability to rise to positions of great power and open authority, including authority over those who are free. It is also possible for those in positions of great power to be reduced to *da'covale*. *See also so'jhin*.

Deathwatch Guards, the: The elite military formation of the Seanchan Empire, including both humans and Ogier. The human members of the Deathwatch Guard are all *da'covale*, born as property and chosen while young to serve the Empress, whose personal property they are. Fanatically loyal and fiercely proud, they often display the ravens tattooed on their shoulders, the mark of a *da'covale* of the Empress. The Ogier members are known as Gardeners, and they are not *da'covale*. The Gardeners are as fiercely loyal as the human Deathwatch Guards, though, and are even more feared. Human or Ogier, the Deathwatch Guards not only are ready to die for the Empress and the Imperial family, but believe that their lives are the property of the Empress, to be disposed of as she wishes. Their helmets and armor are lacquered in dark green (so dark that it is often mistakenly called black) and blood-red, their shields are lacquered black and their swords, spears, axes and halberds carry black tassels. *See also da'covale*.

Delving: (1) Using the One Power to diagnose physical condition and illness. (2) Finding deposits of metal ores with the One Power. That this has long been a lost ability among Aes Sedai may account for the name becoming attached to another ability.

Depository: A division of the Tower Library. There are twelve publicly known Depositories, each having books and records pertaining to a particular subject, or to related subjects. A Thirteenth Depository, known only to some Aes Sedai, contains secret documents, records and histories which may be accessed only by the Amyrlin Seat, the Keeper of the Chronicles, and the Sitters in the Hall of the Tower. And, of course, by that handful of librarians who maintain the depository.

der'morat-: (1) In the Old Tongue, "master handler." (2) Among the Seanchan, the prefix applied to indicate a senior and highly skilled handler of one of the exotics, one who trains others, as in *der'morat'raken*. *Der'morat* can have a fairly high social status, the highest of all held by *der'sul'dam,* the trainers of *sul'dam,* who rank with fairly high military officers. *See also morat-.*

Echoes of His Dynasty: A book of which little is known.

Eelfinn: A race of beings, largely human in appearance but with foxlike characteristics, who will grant three wishes, although they ask for a price in return. If the person asking does not negotiate a price, the Eelfinn choose it. The most common price in such circumstances is death, but they still fulfill their part of the bargain, although the manner in which they fulfill it is seldom the manner the one asking expects. Their true location is unknown, but it was possible to visit them by means of a *ter'angreal* that was located in Rhuidean. That *ter'angreal* was taken by Moiraine Damodred to Cairhien, where it was destroyed. It is also reported that they may be reached by entering the Tower of Ghenjei. They ask the same questions as the Aelfinn regarding fire, iron and musical instruments. *See also* Aelfinn.

***Falling Shale*:** A history of which little is known.

Fel, Herid: The author of *Reason and Unreason* and other books. Fel was a student (and teacher) of history and philosophy at the Academy of Cairhien. He was discovered in his study torn limb from limb.

First Reasoner: The title given to the head of the White Ajah. This position is currently held by Ferane Neheran, an Aes Sedai in the White Tower. Ferane Sedai is one of only two Ajah heads to sit in the Hall of the Tower at present.

First Selector: The title given to the head of the Blue Ajah. The First Selector is currently unknown, although it is suspected that Lelaine Akashi fills this position.

First Weaver: The title given to the head of the Yellow Ajah. This position is currently held by Suana Dragand in the White Tower. Suana Sedai is one of only two Ajah heads to sit in the Hall of the Tower at present. Among the rebel Aes Sedai, Romanda Cassin holds this position.

Forcing; forced: When someone with the ability to channel handles as much of the One Power as they can over long periods of time and channels continually, they learn faster and gain strength more rapidly. This is called forcing, or being forced, by Aes Sedai, who abjure the practice with novices and Accepted because of the danger of death or being burned out.

Forerunners, the: *See Hailene*.

Forsaken, the: The name given to thirteen powerful Aes Sedai, men and women both, who went over to the Shadow during the Age of Legends and were trapped in the sealing of the Bore into the Dark One’s prison. While it has long been believed that they alone abandoned the Light during the War of the Shadow, in fact others did as well; these thirteen were only the highest-ranking among them. The Forsaken (who call themselves the Chosen) are somewhat reduced in number since their awakening in the present day. Some of those killed have been reincarnated in new bodies.

***Hailene*:** In the Old Tongue, “Forerunners,” or “Those Who Come Before.” The term applied by the Seanchan to the massive expeditionary force sent across the Aryth Ocean to scout out the lands where Artur Hawkwing once ruled. Originally under the command of the High Lady Suroth, it has now been subsumed into the *Corenne*. *See Corenne, Rhyagelle*.

Hand: In Seanchan, Hand refers to a primary assistant or one of a hierarchy of Imperial functionaries. A Hand of the Empress is of the First Rank, and Lesser Hands will be found at lower ranks. Some Hands operate in secret, such as those who guide the Seekers and Listeners; others are known and display their rank by wearing the appropriate number of golden hands embroidered on their clothing.

Hanlon, Daved: A Darkfriend, also known as Doilin Mellar, who was captured with Lady Shiaine, Chesmal Emry, Eldrith Jhondar, Temaile Kinderode, Falion Bhoda and Marillin Gemalphin. They are currently being held prisoner in the Royal Palace of Andor.

Head Clerk: The title given to the head of the Gray Ajah. This position is currently held by Serancha Colvine in the White Tower.

Head of the Great Council of Thirteen: The title given to the head of the Black Ajah. This position is currently held by Alviarin Freidhen.

heart: The basic unit of organization in the Black Ajah. In effect, a cell. A heart consists of three sisters who know each other, with each member of the heart knowing one additional sister of the Black who is unknown to the other two of her heart.

Highest: The title given to the head of the Red Ajah. This position is currently held by Tsutama Rath.

Illuminators, Guild of: A society that held the secret of making fireworks. It guarded this secret very closely, even to the extent of doing murder to protect it. The Guild gained its name from the grand displays, called Illuminations, that it provided for rulers and sometimes for greater lords. Lesser fireworks were sold for use by others, but with dire warnings of the disaster that could result from attempting to learn what was inside them. The Guild once had chapter houses in Cairhien and Tanchico, but both are now destroyed. In addition, the members of the Guild in Tanchico resisted the invasion by the Seanchan and were made *da’covale,* and the Guild as such no longer exists. However, individual Illuminators still exist outside of Seanchan rule and work to make sure that the Guild will be remembered. *See also da’covale*.

Ishara: The first Queen of Andor (circa FY 994–1020). At the death of Artur Hawkwing, Ishara convinced her husband, one of Hawkwing’s foremost generals, to raise the siege of Tar Valon and accompany her to Caemlyn with as many soldiers as he could break away from the army. Where others tried to seize the whole of Hawkwing’s empire and failed, Ishara took a firm hold on a small part and succeeded. Today, nearly every noble House in Andor contains some of Ishara’s blood, and the right to claim the Lion Throne depends both on direct descent from her and on the number of lines of connection to her that can be established.

Kaensada: An area of Seanchan that is populated by less-than-civilized hill tribes. These tribes fight a great deal among themselves, as do individual families within the tribes. Each tribe has its own customs and taboos, the latter of which often make no sense to anyone outside that tribe. Most of the tribesmen avoid the more civilized residents of Seanchan.

Lance-Captain: In most lands, noblewomen do not personally lead their armsmen into battle under normal circumstances. Instead, they hire a professional soldier, almost always a commoner, who is responsible both for training and leading their armsmen. Depending on the land, this man can be called a Lance-Captain, Sword-Captain, Master of the Horse or Master of the Lances. Rumors of closer relationships than Lady and servant often spring up, perhaps inevitably. Sometimes they are true.

Legion of the Dragon, the: A large military formation, all infantry, giving allegiance to the Dragon Reborn, trained by Davram Bashere along lines worked out by himself and Mat Cauthon, lines which depart sharply from the usual employment of foot. While many men simply walk in to volunteer, large numbers of the Legion are scooped up by recruiting parties from the Black Tower, who first gather all of the men in an area who are willing to follow the Dragon Reborn, and only after taking them through gateways near Caemlyn winnow out those who can be taught to channel. The remainder, by far the greater number, are sent to Bashere's training camps.

Length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Listeners: A Seanchan spy organization. Almost anyone in the household of a Seanchan noble, merchant or banker may be a Listener, including *da'covale* occasionally, though seldom *so'jhin*. They take no active role, merely watching, listening and reporting. Their reports are sent to Lesser Hands who control both them and the Seekers and decide what should be passed on to the Seekers for further action. *See also* Seekers, Hand.

***marath'damane*:** In the Old Tongue, "those who must be leashed," and also "one who must be leashed." The term applied by the Seanchan to any woman capable of channeling who has not been collared as a *damane*.

march: *see* Area, units of.

Marks and Remarks**:** A history of which little is known.

Master of the Horse: *See* Lance-Captain.

Master of the Lances: *See* Lance-Captain.

Meditations on the Kindling Flame**:** A history dealing with the rise of various Amyrlins.

Mellar, Doilin: *See* Hanlon, Daved.

Mera'din: In the Old Tongue, "the Brotherless." The name adopted, as a society, by those Aiel who abandoned clan and sept and went to the Shaido because they could not accept Rand al'Thor, a wetlander, as the *Car'a'carn*, or because they refused to accept his revelations concerning the history and origins of the Aiel. Deserting clan and sept for any reason is anathema among the Aiel; therefore their own warrior societies among the Shaido were unwilling to take them in, and they formed this society, the Brotherless.

Moiraine Damodred: A Cairhienin Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. Long presumed dead. Thom Merrilin has, however, revealed the receipt of a letter purporting to be from her. It is reproduced here:

> My dearest Thom,
>
> There are many words I would like to write to you, words from my heart, but I have put this off because I knew that I must, and now there is little time. There are many things I cannot tell you lest I bring disaster, but what I can, I will. Heed carefully what I say. In a short while I will go down to the docks, and there I will confront Lanfear. How can I know that? That secret belongs to others. Suffice it that I know, and let that foreknowledge stand as proof for the rest of what I say.
>
> When you receive this, you will be told that I am dead. All will believe that. I am not dead, and it may be that I shall live to my appointed years. It also may be that you and Mat Cauthon and another, a man I do not know, will try to rescue me. May, I say because it may be that you will not or cannot, or because Mat may refuse. He does not hold me in the affection you seem to, and he has his reasons which he no doubt thinks are good. If you try, it must be only you and Mat and one other. More will mean death for all. Fewer will mean death for all.
>
> Even if you come only with Mat and one other, death also may come. I have seen you try and die, one or two or all three. I have seen myself die in the attempt. I have seen all of us live and die as captives.
>
> Should you decide to make the attempt anyway, young Mat knows the way to find me, yet you must not show him this letter until he asks about it. That is of the

> utmost importance. He must know nothing that is in this letter until he asks. Events must play out in certain ways, whatever the costs.
>
> If you see Lan again, tell him that all of this is for the best. His destiny follows a different path from mine. I wish him all happiness with Nynaeve.
>
> A final point. Remember what you know about the game of Snakes and Foxes. Remember, and heed.
>
> It is time, and I must do what must be done.
>
> May the Light illumine you and give you joy, my dearest Thom, whether or not we ever see one another again.
>
> Moiraine

Monuments Past**:** A history of which little is known.

morat-: In the Old Tongue, "handler." Among the Seanchan, it is used for those who handle exotics, such as *morat'raken,* a *raken* handler or rider, also informally called a flier. *See also der'morat-*.

Pelateos: Author of *Pelateos' Ponderings.*

Proper Taming of Power, The**:** A history of which little is known.

Prophet, the: More formally, the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. Once known as Masema Dagar, a Shienaran soldier, he underwent a revelation and decided that he had been called to spread the word of the Dragon's Rebirth. He believed that nothing—nothing!—was more important than acknowledging the Dragon Reborn as the Light made flesh and being ready when the Dragon Reborn called, and he and his followers would use any means to force others to sing the glories of the Dragon Reborn. Those who refused were marked for death, and those who were slow might find their homes and shops burned and themselves flogged. Forsaking any name but "the Prophet," he brought chaos to much of Ghealdan and Amadicia, large parts of which he controlled, although with him gone, the Seanchan are reestablishing order in Amadicia and the Crown High Council in Ghealdan. He joined with Perrin Aybara, who was sent to bring him to Rand, and, for reasons unknown, stayed with him even though this delayed his going to the Dragon Reborn. He was followed by men and women of the lowest sort; if they were not so when they were pulled in by his charisma, they became so under his influence. He died under mysterious circumstances.

Queen's Guard, the: The elite military formation in Andor. In peacetime the Guard is responsible for upholding the Queen's law and keeping the peace across Andor. The uniform of the Queen's Guard includes a red undercoat, gleaming mail and plate armor, a brilliant red cloak and a conical helmet with a barred visor. High-ranking officers wear knots of rank on their shoulder and golden lion-head spurs. A recent addition to the Queen's Guard is the Daughter-Heir's personal bodyguard, which is composed entirely of women since the arrest of its former captain, Doilin Mellar. These Guardswomen wear much more elaborate uniforms than their male counterparts, including broad-brimmed hats with white plumes, red-lacquered breastplates and helmets trimmed in white and lace-edged sashes bearing the White Lion of Andor.

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. They refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light—they intensely dislike being called Questioners—and their avowed purposes are to discover the truth in disputations and uncover Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is torture; their normal manner is that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. At times they act as if they are entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. The head of the Questioners is the High Inquisitor, at present Rhadam Asunawa, who sits on the Council of the Anointed. After Galad Damodred killed Lord Captain Commander Valda and assumed Valda's position, there was a schism in the organization, with Galad leading one faction, and Asunawa leading the other. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd's crook.

Redarms: Soldiers of the Band of the Red Hand, who have been chosen for temporary police duty to make sure that other soldiers of the Band cause no trouble or damage in a town or village where the Band has stopped. So named because, while on duty, they wear very broad red armbands that reach from cuff to elbow. Usually chosen from among the most experienced and reliable men. Since any damages must be paid for by the men serving as Redarms, they work hard to make sure all is quiet and peaceful. A number of former Redarms were chosen to accompany Mat Cauthon to Ebou Dar. *See also Shen an Calhar*.

Return, the: *See Corenne*.

***Rhyagell*e, the:** Old Tongue for "Those Who Come Home." Another name for the Seanchan who have returned to the lands once held by Artur Hawkwing. *See also Corenne, Hailene*.

Sajius: Author of *Commentary on the Dragon.*

Seandar: The Imperial capital of Seanchan, located in the northeast of the Seanchan continent. It is also the largest city in the Empire. After the death of Empress Radhanan, it descended into chaos.

Seekers: More formally, Seekers for Truth, they are a police/spy organization of the Seanchan Imperial Throne. Although most Seekers are *da'covale* and the property of the Imperial family, they have wide-ranging powers. Even one of the Blood can be arrested for failure to answer any question put by a Seeker, or for failure to cooperate fully with a Seeker, this last defined by the Seekers themselves, subject only to review by the Empress. Their reports are sent to Lesser Hands, who control both them and the Listeners. Most Seekers feel that the Hands do not pass on as much information as they should. Unlike the Listeners', the Seekers' role is active. Those Seekers who are *da'covale* are marked on either shoulder with a raven and a tower. Unlike the Deathwatch Guards, Seekers are seldom eager to show their ravens, in part because it necessitates revealing who and what they are. *See also* Hand, Listeners.

sei'mosiev**:** In the Old Tongue, "lowered eyes," or "downcast eyes." Among the Seanchan, to say that one has "become *sei'mosiev*" means that one has "lost face." *See also sei'taer.*

sei'taer**:** In the Old Tongue, "straight eyes," or "level eyes." Among the Seanchan, it refers to honor or face, to the ability to meet someone's eyes. It is possible to "be" or "have" *sei'taer*, meaning that one has honor and face, and also to "gain" or "lose" *sei'taer*. *See also sei'mosiev*.

Shara: A mysterious land to the east of the Aiel Waste which is the source of silk and ivory, among other trade goods. The land is protected both by inhospitable natural features and by man-made walls. Little is known about Shara, as the people of that land work to keep their culture secret. The Sharans deny that the Trolloc Wars touched them, despite Aiel statements to the contrary. They deny knowledge of Artur Hawkwing's attempted invasion, despite the accounts of eyewitnesses from the Sea Folk. The little information that has leaked out reveals that the Sharans are ruled by a single absolute monarch, a Sh'boan if a woman and a Sh'botay if a man. That monarch rules for exactly seven years, then dies. The rule then passes to the mate of that ruler, who rules for seven years and then dies. This pattern has repeated itself since the time of the Breaking of the World. The Sharans believe that the deaths are the "Will of the Pattern."

There are channelers in Shara, known as the Ayyad, who are tattooed on their faces at birth. The women of the Ayyad enforce the Ayyad laws stringently. A sexual relationship between Ayyad and non-Ayyad is punishable by death for the non-Ayyad, and the Ayyad is also executed if force on his or her part can be proven. If a child is born of the union, it is left exposed to the elements, and dies. Male Ayyad are used as breeding stock only. They are not educated in any fashion, not even how to read or write, and when they reach their twenty-first year or begin to channel, whichever comes first, they are killed and the body cremated. Supposedly, the Ayyad channel the One Power only at the command of the Sh'boan or Sh'botay, who is always surrounded by Ayyad women.

Even the name of the land is in doubt. The natives have been known to call it many different names, including Shamara, Co'dansin, Tomaka, Kigali and Shibouya.

Shen an Calhar**:** In the Old Tongue, "the Band of the Red Hand." (1) A legendary group of heroes who had many exploits, finally dying in the defense of Manetheren when that land was destroyed during the Trolloc Wars. (2) A military formation put together almost by accident by Mat Cauthon and organized along the lines of military forces during what is considered the height of the military arts, the days of Artur Hawkwing and the centuries immediately preceding.

Sisnera, Darlin: A High Lord in Tear, he was formerly in rebellion against the Dragon Reborn. After serving for a short period as Steward of the Dragon Reborn in Tear, he was chosen to be the first king of Tear.

Snakes and Foxes: A game that is much loved by children until they mature enough to realize that it can never be won without breaking the rules. It is played with a board that has a web of lines with arrows indicating direction. There are ten discs inked with triangles to represent the foxes, and ten discs inked with wavy lines to represent the snakes. The game is begun by saying, "Courage to strengthen, fire to blind, music to dazzle, iron to bind," while describing a triangle with a wavy line through it with one's hand. Dice are rolled to determine moves for the players and the snakes and foxes. If a snake or fox lands on a player's piece, he is out of the game, and as long as the rules are followed, this always happens.

so'jhin**:** The closest translation from the Old Tongue would be "a height among lowness," though some translate it as meaning "both sky and valley" among several other possibilities. *So'jhin* is the term applied by the Seanchan to hereditary upper servants. They are *da'covale*, property, yet occupy positions of considerable authority and often power. Even the Blood step carefully around *so'jhin* of the Imperial family, and speak to *so'jhin* of the Empress herself as to equals. *See also* Blood, the; *da'covale*.

Standardbearer: A Seanchan rank equivalent to Bannerman.

Succession: In general, when one House succeeds another on the throne. In Andor, the term is widely used for the struggle for the throne that arose upon Mordrellen's death. Tigraine's disappearance had left Mantear without a Daughter-Heir, and two years passed before Morgase, of House Trakand, took the throne. Outside of Andor, this conflict was known as the Third War of Andoran Succession.

Sword-Captain: *See* Lance-Captain.

Tarabon: A nation on the Aryth Ocean. Once a great trading nation, a source of rugs, dyes and the Guild of Illuminators' fireworks among other things, Tarabon has fallen on hard times. Racked by anarchy and civil war compounded by simultaneous wars against Arad Doman and the Dragonsworn, it was ripe for the picking when the Seanchan arrived. It is now firmly under Seanchan control, the chapter house of the Guild of Illuminators has been destroyed and the Illuminators themselves have been made *da'covale*. Most Taraboners appear grateful that the Seanchan have restored order, and since the Seanchan allow them to continue living their lives with minimal interference, they have no desire to bring on more warfare by trying to chase the Seanchan out. There are, however, some lords and soldiers who remain outside the Seanchan sphere of influence and are fighting to reclaim their land.

***Thoughts Among the Ruins*:** An ancient work of history.

***Wake of the Breaking, The*:** A book of which little is known.

weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Winged Guards, the: The personal bodyguards of the First of Mayene, and the elite military formation of Mayene. Members of the Winged Guards wear red-painted breastplates and helmets shaped like rimmed pots that come down to the nape of the necks in the back, and carry red-streamered lances. Officers have wings worked on the sides of their helmets, and rank is denoted by slender plumes.

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About the Authors

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

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Brandon Sanderson was born in 1975 in Lincoln, Nebraska. After a semester as a biochem major, Brandon came to his senses and recognized writing as his true vocation. He switched to English, graduating from Brigham Young University, then returning for a master’s in creative writing. During this time Brandon wrote thirteen novels, finally publishing his sixth, *Elantris*, in 2005. He has since released books for both adults and young readers, including the Mistborn trilogy, *Warbreaker*, and the Alcatraz series. He lives with his wife and children in Utah, where he often plays Magic: The Gathering, regularly eats mac-and-cheese, and occasionally teaches writing at BYU. Find more at www.brandonsanderson.com.

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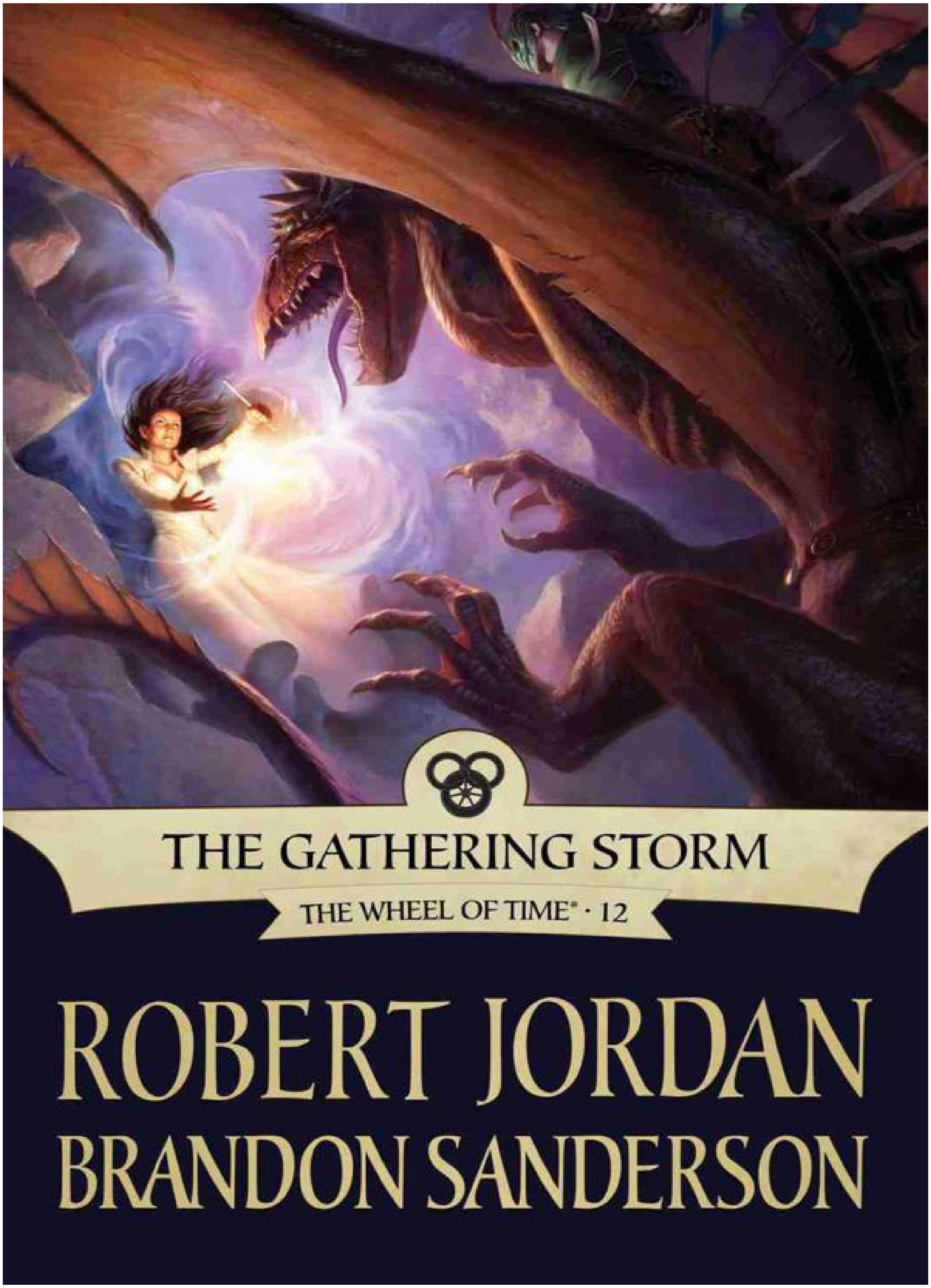
THE GATHERING STORM
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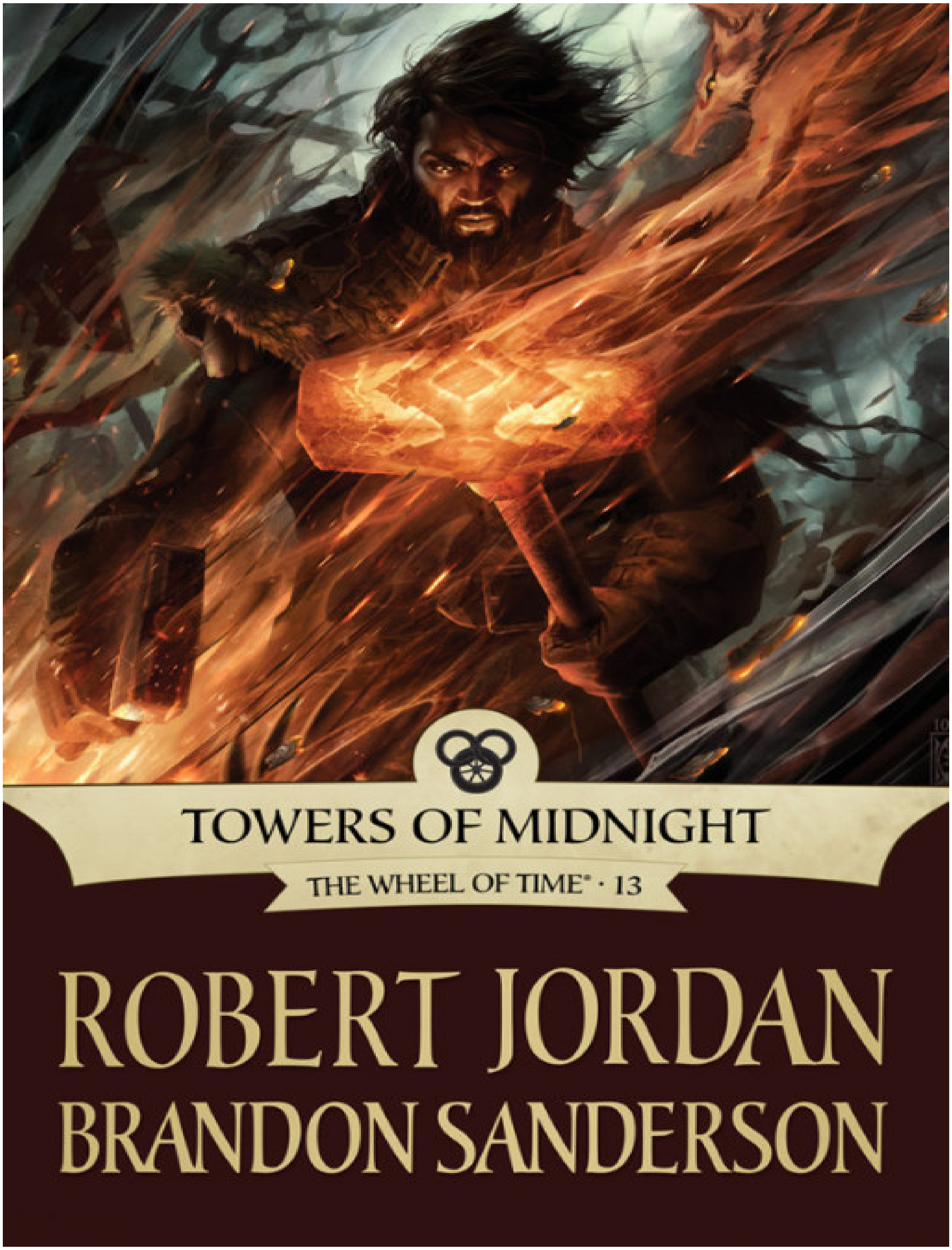
TOWERS OF MIDNIGHT
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For Jason Denzel, Melissa Craib, Bob Kluttz, Jennifer Liang,
Linda Taglieri, Matt Hatch, Leigh Butler, Mike Mackert,
and all those readers who over the years have made
The Wheel of Time part of their lives, and in doing so
have made the lives of others better.

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It soon became obvious, even within the stedding, that the Pattern was growing frail. The sky darkened. Our dead appeared, standing in rings outside the borders of the stedding, looking in. Most troublingly, trees fell ill, and no song would heal them.

It was in this time of sorrows that I stepped up to the Great Stump. At first, I was forbidden, but my mother, Covril, demanded I have my chance. I do not know what sparked her change of heart, as she herself had argued quite decisively for the opposing side. My hands shook. I would be the last speaker, and most seemed to have already made up their minds to open the Book of Translation. They considered me an afterthought.

And I knew that unless I spoke true, humanity would be left alone to face the Shadow. In that moment, my nervousness fled. I felt only a stillness, a calm sense of purpose. I opened my mouth, and I began to speak.

—from The Dragon Reborn, by Loial,
son of Arent son of Halan, of Stedding Shangtai

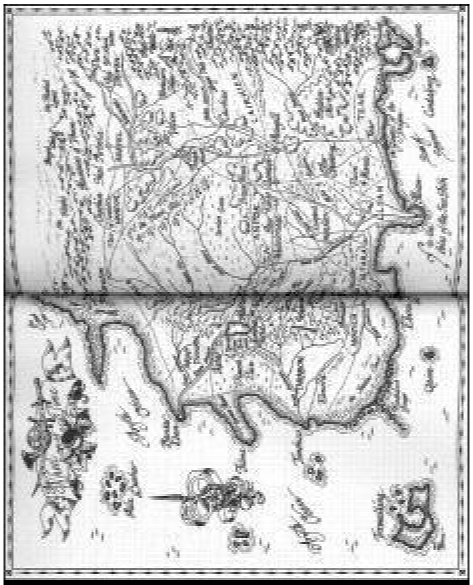

PROLOGUE

Distinctions

Mandarb's hooves beat a familiar rhythm on broken ground as Lan Mandragoran rode toward his death. The dry air made his throat rough and the earth was sprinkled white with crystals of salt that precipitated from below. Distant red rock formations loomed to the north, where sickness stained them. Blight marks, a creeping dark lichen.

He continued riding east, parallel to the Blight. This was still Saldaea, where his wife had deposited him, only narrowly keeping her promise to take him to the Borderlands. It had stretched before him for a long time, this road. He'd turned away from it twenty years ago, agreeing to follow Moiraine, but he'd always known he would return. This was what it meant to bear the name of his fathers, the sword on his hip, and the hadori on his head.

This rocky section of northern Saldaea was known as the Proska Flats. It was a grim place to ride; not a plant grew on it. The wind blew from the north, carrying with it a foul stench. Like that of a deep, sweltering mire bloated with corpses. The sky overhead stormed dark, brooding.

That woman, Lan thought, shaking his head. How quickly Nynaeve had learned to talk, and think, like an Aes Sedai. Riding to his death didn't pain him, but knowing she feared for him . . . that did hurt. Very badly.

He hadn't seen another person in days. The Saldaeans had fortifications to the south, but the land here was scarred with broken ravines that made it difficult for Trollocs to assault; they preferred attacking near Maradon.

That was no reason to relax, however. One should never relax, this close to the Blight. He noted a hilltop; that would be a good place for a scout's post. He made certain to watch it for any sign of movement. He rode around a depression in the ground, just in case it held waiting am-bushers. He kept his hand on his bow. Once he traveled a little farther eastward, he'd cut down into Saldaea and cross Kandor on its good roadways. Then—

Some gravel rolled down a hillside nearby.

Lan carefully slid an arrow from the quiver tied to Mandarb's saddle. Where had the sound come from? To the right, he decided. Southward. The hillside there; someone was approaching from behind it.

Lan did not stop Mandarb. If the hoofbeats changed, it would give warning. He quietly raised the bow, feeling the sweat of his fingers inside his fawn-hide gloves. He nocked the arrow and pulled carefully, raising it to his cheek, breathing in its scent. Goose feathers, resin.

A figure walked around the southern hillside. The man froze, an old, shaggy-maned packhorse walking around beside him and continuing on ahead. It stopped only when the rope at its neck grew taut.

The man wore a laced tan shirt and dusty breeches. He had a sword at his waist, and his arms were thick and strong, but he didn't look threatening. In fact, he seemed faintly familiar.

"Lord Mandragoran!" the man said, hastening forward, pulling his horse after. "I've found you at last. I assumed you'd be traveling the Kremer Road!"

Lan lowered his bow and stopped Mandarb. "Do I know you?"

"I brought supplies, my Lord!" The man had black hair and tanned skin. Borderlander stock, probably. He continued forward, overeager, yanking on the overloaded packhorse's rope with a thick-fingered hand. "I figured that you wouldn't have enough food. Tents—four of them, just in case—some water too. Feed for the horses. And—"

"Who are you?" Lan barked. "And how do you know who I am?"

The man drew up sharply. "I'm Bulen, my Lord. From Kandor?"

From Kandor . . . Lan remembered a gangly young messenger boy. With surprise, he saw the resemblance. "Bulen? That was twenty years ago, man!"

"I know, Lord Mandragoran. But when word spread in the palace that the Golden Crane was raised, I knew what I had to do. I've learned the sword well, my Lord. I've come to ride with you and—"

"The word of my travel has spread to Aesdaishar?"

"Yes, my Lord. El'Nynaeve, she came to us, you see. Told us what you'd done. Others are gathering, but I left first. Knew you'd need supplies."

Burn that woman, Lan thought. And she'd made him swear that he would accept those who wished to ride with him! Well, if she could play games with the truth, then so could he. Lan had said he'd take anyone who wished to ride with him. This man was not mounted. Therefore, Lan could refuse him. A petty distinction, but twenty years with Aes Sedai had taught him a few things about how to watch one's words.

"Go back to Aesdaishar," Lan said. "Tell them that my wife was wrong, and I have not raised the Golden Crane."

"But—"

"I don't need you, son. Away with you." Lan's heels nudged Mandarb into a walk, and he passed the man standing on the road. For a few moments, Lan thought that his order would be obeyed, though the evasion of his oath pricked at his conscience.

"My father was Malkieri," Bulen said from behind.

Lan continued on.

"He died when I was five," Bulen called. "He married a Kandori woman. They both fell to bandits. I don't remember much of them. Only something my father told me: that someday, we would fight for the Golden Crane. All I have of him is this."

Lan couldn't help but look back as Mandarb continued to walk away. Bulen held up a thin strap of leather, the hadori, worn on the head of a Malkieri sworn to fight the Shadow.

"I would wear the hadori of my father," Bulen called, voice growing louder. "But I have nobody to ask if I may. That is the tradition, is it not? Someone has to give me the right to don it. Well, I would fight the Shadow all my days." He looked down at the hadori, then back up again and yelled, "I would stand against the darkness, al'Lan Mandragoran! Will you tell me I cannot?"

"Go to the Dragon Reborn," Lan called to him. "Or to your queen's army. Either of them will take you."

"And you? You will ride all the way to the Seven Towers without supplies?"

"I'll forage."

"Pardon me, my Lord, but have you seen the land these days? The Blight creeps farther and farther south. Nothing grows, even in once-fertile lands. Game is scarce."

Lan hesitated. He reined Mandarb in.

"All those years ago," Bulen called, walking forward, his packhorse walking behind him. "I hardly knew who you were, though I know you lost someone dear to you among us. I've spent years cursing myself for not serving you better. I swore that I would stand with you someday." He walked up beside Lan. "I ask you because I have no father. May I wear the hadori and fight at your side, al'Lan Mandragoran? My King?"

Lan breathed out slowly, stilling his emotions. Nynaeve, when next I see you . . . But he would not see her again. He tried not to dwell upon that.

He had made an oath. Aes Sedai wiggled around their promises, but did that give him the same right? No. A man was his honor. He could not deny Bulen.

"We ride anonymously," Lan said. "We do not raise the Golden Crane. You tell nobody who I am."

"Yes, my Lord," Bulen said.

"Then wear that hadori with pride," Lan said. "Too few keep to the old ways. And yes, you may join me."

Lan nudged Mandarb into motion, Bulen following on foot. And the one became two.

Perrin slammed his hammer against the red-hot length of iron. Sparks sprayed into the air like incandescent insects. Sweat beaded on his face.

Some people found the clang of metal against metal grating. Not Perrin. That sound was soothing. He raised the hammer and slammed it down.

Sparks. Flying chips of light that bounced off his leather vest and his apron. With each strike, the walls of the room—sturdy leatherleaf wood—fuzzed, responding to the beats of metal on metal. He was dreaming, though he wasn't in the wolf dream. He knew this, though he didn't know how he knew.

The windows were dark; the only light was that of the deep red fire burning on his right. Two bars of iron simmered in the coals, waiting their turn at the forge. Perrin slammed the hammer down again.

This was peace. This was home.

He was making something important. So very important. It was a piece of something larger. The first step to creating something was to figure out its parts. Master Luhhan had taught Perrin that on his first day at the forge. You couldn't make a spade without understanding how the handle fit to the blade. You couldn't make a hinge without knowing how the two leaves moved with the pin. You couldn't even make a nail without knowing its parts: head, shaft, point.

Understand the pieces, Perrin.

A wolf lay in the corner of the room. It was large and grizzled, fur the color of a pale gray river stone, and scarred from a lifetime of battles and hunts. The wolf laid its head on its paws, watching Perrin. That was natural. Of course there was a wolf in the corner. Why wouldn't there be? It was Hopper.

Perrin worked, enjoying the deep, burning heat of the forge, the feel of the sweat trailing down his arms, the scent of the fire. He shaped the length of iron, one blow for every second beat of his heart. The metal never grew cool, but instead retained its malleable red-yellow.

What am I making? Perrin picked up the length of glowing iron with his tongs. The air warped around it.

Pound, pound, pound, Hopper sent, communicating in images and scents. Like a pup jumping at butterflies.

Hopper didn't see the point of reshaping metal, and found it amusing that men did such things. To a wolf, a thing was what it was. Why go through so much effort to change it into something else?

Perrin set the length of iron aside. It cooled immediately, fading from yellow, to orange, to crimson, to a dull black. Perrin had pounded it into a misshapen nugget, perhaps the size of two fists. Master Luhhan would be ashamed to see such shoddy work. Perrin needed to discover what he was making soon, before his master returned.

No. That was wrong. The dream shook, and the walls grew misty.

I'm not an apprentice. Perrin raised a thick-gloved hand to his head. I'm not in the Two Rivers any longer. I'm a man, a married man.

Perrin grabbed the lump of unshaped iron with his tongs, thrusting it down on the anvil. It flared to life with heat. Everything is still wrong. Perrin smashed his hammer down. It should all be better now! But it isn't. It seems worse somehow.

He continued pounding. He hated those rumors that the men in camp whispered about him. Perrin had been sick and Berelain had cared for him. That was the end of it. But still those whispers continued.

He slammed his hammer down over and over. Sparks flew in the air like splashes of water, far too many to come from one length of iron. He gave one final strike, then breathed in and out.

The lump hadn't changed. Perrin growled and grabbed the tongs, setting the lump aside and taking a fresh bar from the coals. He had to finish this piece. It was so important. But what was he making?

He started pounding. I need to spend time with Faile, to figure things out, remove the awkwardness between us. But there's no time! Those Light-blinded fools around him couldn't take care of themselves. Nobody in the Two Rivers ever needed a lord before.

He worked for a time, then held up the second chunk of iron. It cooled, turning into a misshapen, flattened length about as long as his forearm. Another shoddy piece. He set it aside.

If you are unhappy, Hopper sent, take your she and leave. If you do not wish to lead the pack, another will. The wolf's sending came as images of running across open fields, stalks of grain brushing along his snout. An open sky, a cool breeze, a thrill and lust for adventure. The scents of new rain, of wild pastures.

Perrin reached his tongs into the coals for the final bar of iron. It burned a distant, dangerous yellow. "I can't leave." He held the bar up toward the wolf. "It would mean giving in to being a wolf. It would mean losing myself. I won't do that."

He held the near-molten steel between them, and Hopper watched it, yellow pinpricks of light reflecting in the wolf's eyes. This dream was so odd. In the past, Perrin's ordinary dreams and the wolf dream had been separate. What did this blending mean?

Perrin was afraid. He'd come to a precarious truce with the wolf inside of him. Growing too close to the wolves was dangerous, but that hadn't prevented him turning to them when seeking Faile. Anything for Faile. In doing so, Perrin had nearly gone mad, and had even tried to kill Hopper.

Perrin wasn't nearly as in control as he'd assumed. The wolf within him could still reign.

Hopper yawned, letting his tongue loll. He smelled of sweet amusement.

"This is not funny." Perrin set the final bar aside without working on it. It cooled, taking on the shape of a thin rectangle, not unlike the beginnings of a hinge.

Problems are not amusing, Young Bull, Hopper agreed. But you are climbing back and forth over the same wall. Come. Let us run.

Wolves lived in the moment; though they remembered the past and seemed to have an odd sense for the future, they didn't worry about either. Not as men did. Wolves ran free, chasing the winds. To join them would be to ignore pain, sorrow and frustration. To be free . . .

That freedom would cost Perrin too much. He'd lose Faile, would lose his very self He didn't want to be a wolf. He wanted to be a man. "Is there a way to reverse what has happened to me?"

Reverse? Hopper cocked his head. To go backward was not a way of wolves.

"Can I . . ." Perrin struggled to explain. "Can I run so far that the wolves cannot hear me?"

Hopper seemed confused. No. "Confused" did not convey the pained sendings that came from Hopper. Nothingness, the scent of rotting meat, wolves howling in agony. Being cut off was not a thing Hopper could conceive.

Perrin's mind grew mzzy. Why had he stopped forging? He had to finish. Master Luhhan would be disappointed! Those lumps were terrible. He should hide them. Create something else, show he was capable. He could forge. Couldn't he?

A hissing came from beside him. Perrin turned, surprised to see that one of the quenching barrels beside the hearth was boiling. Of course, he thought. The first pieces I finished. I dropped them in there.

Suddenly anxious, Perrin grabbed his tongs and reached into the turbulent water, steam engulfing his face. He found something at the bottom and brought it out with his tongs: a chunk of white-hot metal.

The glow faded. The chunk was actually a small steel figurine in the shape of a tall, thin man with a sword tied to his back. Each line on the figure was detailed, the ruffles of the shirt, the leather bands on the hilt of the tiny sword. But the face was distorted, the mouth open in a twisted scream.

Aram, Perrin thought. His name was Aram.

Perrin couldn't show this to Master Luhhan! Why had he created such a thing?

The figurine's mouth opened farther, screaming soundlessly. Perrin cried out, dropping it from the tongs and jumping back. The figurine fell to the wood floor and shattered.

Why do you think so much about that one? Hopper yawned a wide-jawed wolf yawn, tongue curling. It is common that a young pup challenges the pack leader. He was foolish, and you defeated him.

"No," Perrin whispered. "It is not common for humans. Not for friends."

The wall of the forge suddenly melted away, becoming smoke. It felt natural for that to happen. Outside, Perrin saw an open, daylit street. A city with broken-windowed shops.

"Maiden," Perrin said.

A smoky, translucent image of himself stood outside. The image wore no coat; his bare arms bulged with muscles. He kept his beard short, but it made him look older, more intense. Did Perrin really look that imposing? A squat fortress of a man with golden eyes that seemed to glow, carrying a gleaming half-moon axe as large as a man's head.

There was something wrong about that axe. Perrin stepped out of the smithy, passing through the shadowy version of himself. When he did, he became that image, axe heavy in his hand, work clothes vanishing and battle gear replacing it.

He took off running. Yes, this was Maiden. There were Aiel in the streets. He'd lived this battle, though he was much calmer this time. Before, he'd been lost in the thrill of fighting and of seeking Faile. He stopped in the street. "This is wrong. I carried my hammer into Maiden. I threw the axe away."

A horn or a hoof, Young Bull, does it matter which one you use to hunt? Hopper was sitting in the sunlit street beside him.

"Yes. It matters. It does to me."

And yet you use them the same way.

A pair of Shaido Aiel appeared around a corner. They were watching something to the left, something Perrin couldn't see. He ran to attack them.

He sheared through the chin of one, then swung the spike on the axe into the chest of the other. It was a brutal, terrible attack, and all three of them ended on the ground. It took several stabs from the spike to kill the second Shaido.

Perrin stood up. He did remember killing those two Aiel, though he had done it with hammer and knife. He didn't regret their deaths. Sometimes a man needed to fight, and that was that. Death was terrible, but that didn't stop it from being necessary. In fact, it had been wonderful to clash with the Aiel. He'd felt like a wolf on the hunt.

When Perrin fought, he came close to becoming someone else. And that was dangerous.

He looked accusingly at Hopper, who lounged on a street corner. "Why are you making me dream this?"

Making you? Hopper asked. This is not my dream, Young Bull. Do you see my jaws on your neck, forcing you to think it?

Perrin's axe streamed with blood. He knew what was coming next. He turned. From behind, Aram approached, murder in his eyes. Half of the former Tinker's face was coated in blood, and it dripped from his chin, staining his red-striped coat.

Aram swung his sword for Perrin's neck, the steel hissing in the air. Perrin stepped back. He refused to fight the boy again.

The shadowy version of himself split off, leaving the real Perrin in his blacksmith's clothing. The shadow exchanged blows with Aram. The Prophet explained it to me . . . You're really Shadowspawn. . . . 1 have to rescue the Lady Faile from you. . . .

The shadowy Perrin changed, suddenly, into a wolf. It leaped, fur nearly as dark as that of a Shadowbrother, and ripped out Aram's throat.

"No! It didn't happen like that!"

It is a dream, Hopper sent.

"But I didn't kill him," Perrin protested. "Some Aiel shot him with arrows right before. . . ."

Right before Aram would have killed Perrin.

The horn, the hoof, or the tooth, Hopper sent, turning and ambling toward a building. Its wall vanished, revealing Master Luhhan's smithy inside. Does it matter? The dead are dead. Two-legs do not come here, not usually, once they die. I do not know where it is that they go.

Perrin looked down at Aram's body. "I should have taken that fool sword from him the moment he picked it up. I should have sent him back to his family."

Does not a cub deserve his fangs? Hopper asked, genuinely confused. Why would you pull them?

"It is a thing of men," Perrin said.

Things of two-legs, of men. Always, it is a thing of men to you. What of things of wolves?

"I am not a wolf."

Hopper entered the forge, and Perrin reluctantly followed. The barrel was still boiling. The wall returned, and Perrin was once again wearing his leather vest and apron, holding his tongs.

He stepped over and pulled out another figurine. This one was in the shape of Tod al'Caar. As it cooled, Perrin found that the face wasn't distorted like Aram's, though the lower half of the figurine was unformed, still a block of metal. The figurine continued to glow, faintly reddish, after Perrin set it down on the floor. He thrust his tongs back into the water and pulled free a figure of Jori Congar, then one of Azi al'Thone.

Perrin went to the bubbling barrel time and time again, pulling out figurine after figurine. After the way of dreams, fetching them all took both a brief second and what seemed like hours. When he finished, hundreds of figurines stood on the floor facing him. Watching. Each steel figure was lit with a tiny fire inside, as if waiting to feel the forger's hammer.

But figurines like this wouldn't be forged; they'd be cast. "What does it mean?" Perrin sat down on a stool.

Mean? Hopper opened his mouth in a wolf laugh. It means there are many little men on the floor, none of which you can eat. Your kind is too fond of rocks and what is inside of them.

The figurines seemed accusing. Around them lay the broken shards of

Aram. Those pieces seemed to be growing larger. The shattered hands began working, clawing on the ground. The shards all became little hands, climbing toward Perrin, reaching for him.

Perrin gasped, leaping to his feet. He heard laughter in the distance, ringing closer, shaking the building. Hopper jumped, slamming into him. And then . . .

Perrin started awake. He was back in his tent, in the field where they'd been camped for a few days now. They'd run across a bubble of evil the week before that had caused angry red, oily serpents to wiggle from the ground all through camp. Several hundred were sick from their bites; Aes Sedai Healing had been enough to keep most of them alive, but not restore them completely.

Faile slept beside Perrin, peaceful. Outside, one of his men tapped a post to count off the hour. Three taps. Still hours until dawn.

Perrin's heart pounded softly, and he raised a hand to his bare chest. He half-expected an army of tiny metal hands to crawl out from beneath his bedroll.

Eventually, he forced his eyes closed and tried to relax. This time, sleep was very elusive.

Graendal sipped at her wine, which glistened in a goblet trimmed with a web of silver around the sides. The goblet had been crafted with drops of blood caught in a ring pattern within the crystal. Frozen forever, tiny bubbles of brilliant red.

"We should be doing something," Aran'gar said, lounging on the chaise and eyeing one of Graendal's pets with a predatory hunger as he passed. "I don't know how you stand it, staying so far from important events, like some scholar holed up in a dusty corner."

Graendal arched an eyebrow. A scholar? In some dusty corner? Natrin's Barrow was modest compared to some palaces she had known, during the previous Age, but it was hardly a hovel. The furnishings were fine, the walls bearing an arching pattern of thick, dark hardwoods, the marble of the floor sparkling with inlaid chips of mother-of-pearl and gold.

Aran'gar was just trying to provoke her. Graendal put the irritation out of her mind. The fire burned low in the hearth, but the pair of doors—leading out onto a fortified walkway three stories in the air—were open, letting in a crisp mountain breeze. She rarely left a window or door open to the outside, but today she liked the contrast: warmth from one side, a cool breeze from the other.

Life was about feeling. Touches on your skin, both passionate and icy. Anything other than the normal, the average, the lukewarm.

"Are you listening to me?" Aran'gar asked.

"I always listen," Graendal said, setting aside her goblet as she sat on her own chaise. She wore a golden, enveloping dress, sheer but buttoned to the neck. What marvelous fashions these Domani had, ideal for teasing while revealing.

"I loathe being so removed from things," Aran'gar continued. "This Age is exciting. Primitive people can be so interesting." The voluptuous, ivory-skinned woman arched her back, stretching arms toward the wall. "We're missing all of the excitement."

"Excitement is best viewed from a distance," Graendal said. "I would think you'd understand that."

Aran'gar fell silent. The Great Lord had not been pleased with her for losing control of Egwene al'Vere.

"Well," Aran'gar said, standing. "If that is your thought on it, I will seek more interesting evening sport."

Her voice was cool; perhaps their alliance was wearing thin. In that case, it was time for reinforcement. Graendal opened herself and accepted the Great Lord's dominance of her, feeling the thrilling ecstasy of his power, his passion, his very substance. It was so much more intoxicating than the One Power, this raging torrent of fire.

It threatened to overwhelm and consume her, and despite being filled with the True Power, she could channel only a thin trickle of it. A gift to her from Moridin. No, from the Great Lord. Best not to begin associating those two in her mind. For now, Moridin was Nae'blis. For now only.

Graendal wove a ribbon of Air. Working with the True Power was similar, yet not identical, to working with the One Power. A weave of the True Power would often function in a slightly different way, or have an unanticipated side effect. And there were some weaves that could only be crafted by the True Power.

The Great Lord's essence forced the Pattern, straining it and leaving it scarred. Even something the Creator had designed to be eternal could be unraveled using the Dark One's energies. It bespoke an eternal truth—something as close to being sacred as Graendal was willing to accept. Whatever the Creator could build, the Dark One could destroy.

She snaked her ribbon of Air through the room toward Aran'gar. The other Chosen had stepped out onto the balcony; Graendal forbade the creation of gateways inside, lest they damage her pets or her furnishings. Graendal lifted the ribbon of Air up to Aran'gar's cheek and caressed it delicately.

Arangar froze. She turned, suspicious, but it took only a moment for her eyes to open wide. She wouldn't have felt the goose bumps on her arms to indicate Graendal was channeling. The True Power gave no hint, no sign. Male or female, no one could see or sense the weaves—not unless he or she had been granted the privilege of channeling the True Power.

"What?" the woman asked. "How? Moridin is—"

"Nae'blis," Graendal said. "Yes. But once the Great Lord's favor in this regard was not confined to the Nae'blis." She continued to caress Arangar's cheek, and the woman flushed.

Arangar, like the other Chosen, lusted for the True Power while fearing it at the same time—dangerous, pleasurable, seductive. When Graendal withdrew her line of Air, Arangar stepped back into the room and returned to her chaise, then sent one of Graendal's pets to fetch her toy Aes Sedai. Lust still burned Arangar's cheeks; likely she would use Delana to distract herself. Arangar seemed to find it amusing to force the homely Aes Sedai into subservience.

Delana arrived moments later; she always remained nearby. The Shienaran woman was pale-haired and stout, with thick limbs. Graendal's lips turned down. Such an unpretty thing. Not like Arangar herself. She'd have made an ideal pet. Maybe someday Graendal would have the chance to make her into one.

Arangar and Delana began to exchange affections on the chaise. Arangar was insatiable, a fact Graendal had exploited on numerous occasions, the lure of the True Power being only the latest. Of course, Graendal enjoyed pleasures herself, but she made certain that people thought she was far more self-indulgent than she was. If you knew what people expected you to be, you could use those expectations. It—

Graendal froze as an alarm went off in her ears, the sound of crashing waves beating against one another. Arangar continued her pleasures; she couldn't hear the sound. The weave was very specific, placed where her servants could trip it to give her warning.

Graendal climbed to her feet, strolling around the side of the room, giving no indication of urgency. At the door, she sent a few of her pets in to help distract Arangar. Best to discover the scope of the problem before involving her.

Graendal walked down a hallway hung with golden chandeliers and ornamented with mirrors. She was halfway down a stairwell when

Garumand—the captain of her palace guard—came bustling up. He was Saldaean, a distant cousin of the Queen, and wore a thick mustache on his lean, handsome face. Compulsion had made him utterly loyal, of course.

"Great Lady," he said, panting. "A man has been captured approaching the palace. My men recognize him as a minor lord from Bandar Eban, a member of House Ramshalan."

Graendal frowned, then waved for Garumand to follow as she made her way to one of her audience chambers—a small, windowless room decorated in crimson. She wove a ward against eavesdropping, then sent Garumand to bring the intruder.

Soon, he returned with some guards and a Domani man dressed in bright greens and blues, a beauty mark shaped like a bell on his cheek. His neat, short beard was tied with tiny bells, and they jingled as the guards shoved him forward. He brushed off his arms, glaring at the soldiers, and straightened his ruffled shirt. "Am I to understand that I have been delivered to—"

He cut off with a choking sound as Graendal wrapped him in weaves of Air and dug into his mind. He stuttered, eyes growing unfocused.

"I am Piqor Ramshalan," he said in a monotone. "I have been sent by the Dragon Reborn to seek an alliance with the merchant family residing in this fortification. As I am smarter and more clever than al'Thor, he needs me to build alliances for him. He is particularly afraid of those living in this palace, which I find ridiculous, since it is distant and unimportant.

"Obviously, the Dragon Reborn is a weak man. I believe that by gaining his confidence, I can be chosen as the next King of Arad Doman. I wish for you to make an alliance with me, not with him, and will promise you favors once I am king. I d—"

Graendal waved a hand and he cut off in midword. She folded her arms, hairs bristling as she shivered.

The Dragon Reborn had found her.

He had sent a distraction for her.

He thought he could manipulate her.

She instantly wove a gateway to one of her most secure hiding places. Cool air wafted in from an area of the world where it was morning, not early evening. Best to be careful. Best to flee. And yet . . .

She hesitated. He must know pain . . . he must know frustration . . . he must know anguish. Bring these to him. You will be rewarded.

Aran'gar had fled from her place among Aes Sedai, foolishly allowing herself to be sensed channeling saidin. She still bore punishment for her failure. If Graendal left now—discarding a chance to twist al'Thor about himself—would she be similarly punished?

"What is this?" Aran'gar's voice asked outside. "Let me through, you fools. Graendal? What are you doing?"

Graendal hissed softly, then closed the gateway and composed herself. She nodded for Aran'gar to be allowed into the room. The lithe woman stepped up to the doorway, eyeing—and assessing—Ramshalan. Graendal shouldn't have sent the pets to her; the move had likely made her suspicious.

"Al'Thor has found me," Graendal said curtly. "He sent this one to make an 'alliance' with me, but did not tell him who I was. Al'Thor likely wants me to think that this man stumbled upon me accidentally."

Aran'gar pursed her lips. "So you'll flee? Run from the center of excitement again?"

"This, from you?"

"I was surrounded by enemies. Flight was my only option." It sounded like a practiced line.

Words like those were a challenge. Aran'gar would serve her. Perhaps . . . "Does that Aes Sedai of yours know Compulsion?"

Aran'gar shrugged. "She's been trained in it. She's passably skilled."

"Fetch her."

Aran'gar raised an eyebrow, but nodded in deference, disappearing to run the errand herself—probably to gain time to think. Graendal sent a servant for one of her dove cages. They arrived with the bird before Aran'gar was back, and Graendal carefully wove the True Power—once again thrilling in the rush of holding it—and crafted a complex weave of Spirit. Could she remember how to do this? It had been so long.

She overlaid the weave on the bird's mind. Her vision seemed to snap. In a moment, she could see two images in front of her—the world as she saw it and a shadowed version of what the bird saw. If she focused, she could turn her attention to one or the other.

It made her mind hurt. The vision of a bird was entirely different from that of a human being: She could see a much larger field, and the colors were so vivid as to be nearly blinding, but the view was blurry, and she had trouble judging distance.

She tucked the bird's sight into the back of her head. A dove would be unobtrusive, but using one was more difficult than a raven or a rat, the Dark One's own favored eyes. The weave worked better on those than it did other animals. Though, most vermin that watched for the Dark One had to report back before he knew what they'd seen. Why that was, she was not certain—the intricacies of the True Power's special weaves never had made much sense to her. Not as much as they had to Aginor, at least.

Aran'gar returned with her Aes Sedai, who was looking increasingly

timid these days. She curtsied low to Graendal, then remained in a subservient posture. Graendal carefully removed her Compulsion from Ramsha-lan, leaving him dazed and disoriented.

"What is it you wish me to do, Great One?" Delana asked, glancing at Arangar and then back at Graendal.

"Compulsion," Graendal said. "As intricate and as complex as you can make it."

"What do you wish it to do, Great Lady?"

"Leave him able to act like himself," Graendal said. "But remove all memory of events here. Replace them with a memory of talking to a merchant family and securing their alliance. Add a few other random requirements on him, whatever occurs to you."

Delana frowned, but she had learned not to question the Chosen. Graendal folded her arms and tapped one finger as she watched the Aes Sedai work. She felt increasingly nervous. Al'Thor knew where she was. Would he attack? No, he wouldn't harm women. That particular failing was an important one. It meant she had time to respond. Didn't she?

How had he managed to trace her to this palace? She had covered herself perfectly. The only minions she'd let out of her sight were under Compulsion so heavy that it would kill them to remove it. Could it be that the Aes Sedai he kept with him—Nynaeve, the woman gifted in Healing—had been able to undermine and read Graendal's weaves?

Graendal needed time, and she needed to discover what al'Thor knew. If Nynaeve al'Meara had the skill needed to read Compulsions, that was dangerous. Graendal needed to lay him a false trail, delay him—hence her requirement that Delana create a thick Compulsion with strange provisions in it.

Bring him agony. Graendal could do that.

"You next," she said to Arangar once Delana had finished. "Something convoluted. I want al'Thor and his Aes Sedai to find the touch of a man on the mind." That would confuse them further.

Arangar shrugged, but did as asked, laying down a thick and complex Compulsion on the unfortunate Ramshalan's mind. He was somewhat pretty. Did al'Thor assume she'd want him for one of her pets? Did he even remember enough of being Lews Therin to know that about her? Her reports on how much of his old life he remembered were contradictory, but he seemed to be recalling more and more. That was what worried her. Lews Therin could have tracked her to this palace, perhaps. She'd never expected that al'Thor would be able to do the same.

Arangar finished.

"Now," Graendal said, releasing her weaves of Air and speaking to Ramshalan, "return and tell the Dragon Reborn of your success here."

Ramshalan blinked, shaking his head. "I . . . Yes, my Lady. Yes, I believe the ties we made today will be extremely beneficial to both of us." He smiled. Weak-minded fool. "Perhaps we should dine and drink to our success, Lady Basene? It has been a wearying trip to see you, and I—"

"Go," Graendal said coldly.

"Very well. You will be rewarded when I am king!"

Her guards led him away, and he began whistling with a self-satisfied air. Graendal sat down and closed her eyes; several of her soldiers stepped over to guard her, their boots soft on the thick rug.

She looked through the dove's eyes, accustoming herself to its strange way of seeing. At her order, a servant picked it up and carried it to a window in the hallway outside the room. The bird hopped onto the windowsill. Graendal gave it a soft nudge to go forward; she wasn't practiced enough to take control completely. Flying was far more difficult than it looked.

The dove flapped out of the window. The sun was lowering behind the mountains, outlining them in angry red and orange, and the lake below fell into a deep, shadowy blue-black. The view was thrilling but nauseating as the dove soared up into the air and landed on one of the towers.

Ramshalan eventually walked out of the gates below. Graendal nudged the dove and it leaped off the tower, plunging toward the ground. Graendal gritted her teeth at the stomach-churning descent, the palace stoneworks becoming a blur. The dove leveled out and flapped after Ramshalan. He seemed to be grumbling to himself, though she could make out only rudimentary sounds through the dove's unfamiliar earholes.

She followed him for some time through the darkening woods. An owl would have been better, but she didn't have one captive. She chided herself for that. The dove flew from branch to branch. The forest floor was a messy tangle of underbrush and fallen pine needles. She found that distinctly unpleasant.

There was light up ahead. It was faint, but the dove's eyes could easily pick out light and shadow, motion and stillness. She nudged it to investigate, leaving Ramshalan.

The light was coming from a gateway in the middle of a clear patch, spilling forth a warm glow. There were figures standing before it. One of them was al'Thor.

Graendal felt instant panic. He was here. Looking down over the ridge, toward her. Darkness within! She hadn't known for certain if he'd be here in person, or if Ramshalan would travel through a gateway to give his

report. What game was al'Thor playing? She landed her dove on a branch. Aran'gar was complaining and asking Graendal what she was seeing. She'd seen the dove, and would know what Graendal was up to.

Graendal concentrated harder. The Dragon Reborn, the man who had once been Lews Therin Telamon. He knew where she was. He had once hated her deeply; how much did he remember? Did he recall her murder of

Yanet?

Al'Thors tame Aiel brought Ramshalan forward, and Nynaeve inspected him. Yes, that Nynaeve did seem to be able to read Compulsion. She knew what to look for, at least. She would have to die; al'Thor relied upon her; her death would bring him pain. And after her, al'Thors dark-haired lover.

Graendal nudged the dove down onto a lower branch. What would al'Thor do? Graendal's instincts said he wouldn't dare move, not until he unraveled her plot. He acted the same now as he had during her Age; he liked to plan, to spend time building to a crescendo of an assault.

She frowned. What was he saying? She strained, trying to make sense of the sounds. Cursed bird's earholes—the voices sounded like croaks. Callandor? Why was he talking about Callandor? And a box . . .

Something burst alight in his hand. The access key. Graendal gasped. He'd brought that with him? It was nearly as bad as balefire.

Suddenly she understood. She'd been played.

Cold, terrified, she released the dove and snapped her eyes open. She was still sitting in the small, windowless room, Aran'gar leaning beside the doorway with arms folded.

Al'Thor had sent Ramshalan in, expecting him to be captured, expecting him to have Compulsion placed on him. Ramshalan's only purpose was to give al'Thor confirmation that Graendal was in the tower.

Light! How clever he's become.

She released the True Power and embraced less-wonderful saidar. Quickly! She was so unsettled that her embrace nearly failed. She was sweating.

Go. She had to go.

She opened a new gateway. Aran'gar turned, staring through the walls in the direction of al'Thor. "So much power! What is he doing?"

Aran'gar. She and Delana had made the weaves of Compulsion.

Al'Thor must think Graendal dead. If he destroyed the place and those Compulsions remained, al'Thor would know that he'd missed and that Graendal lived.

Graendal formed two shields and slammed them into place, one for

Aran'gar, one for Delana. The women gasped. Graendal tied off the weaves and bound the two in Air.

"Graendal?" Aran'gar said, voice panicked. "What are you—"

It was coming. Graendal leaped for the gateway, rolling through it, tumbling and ripping her dress on a branch. A blinding light rose behind her. She struggled to dismiss the gateway, and caught one glimpse of the horrified Aran'gar before everything behind was consumed in beautiful, pure whiteness.

The gateway vanished, leaving Graendal in darkness.

She lay, heart beating at a terrible speed, nearly blinded by the glare. She'd made the quickest gateway she could, one that led only a short distance away. She lay in the dirty underbrush atop a ridge behind the palace.

A wave of wrongness washed over her, a warping in the air, the Pattern itself rippling. A balescream, it was called—a moment when creation itself howled in pain.

She breathed in and out, trembling. But she had to see. She had to know. She rose to her feet, left ankle twisted. She hobbled to the treeline and looked down.

Natrin's Barrow—the entire palace—was gone. Burned out of the Pattern. She couldn't see al'Thor on his distant ridge, but she knew where he was.

"You," she growled. "You have become far more dangerous than I assumed."

Hundreds of beautiful men and women, the finest she'd gathered, gone. Her stronghold, dozens of items of Power, her greatest ally among the Chosen. Gone. This was a disaster.

No, she thought. / live. She'd anticipated him, if only by a few moments. Now he would think she was dead.

She was suddenly the safest she'd been since escaping the Dark One's prison. Except, of course, that she'd just caused the death of one of the Chosen. The Great Lord would not be pleased.

She limped away from the ridge, already planning her next move. This would have to be handled very, very carefully.

Galad Damodred, Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light, yanked his booted foot free of the ankle-deep mud with a slurping sound. Bitemes buzzed in the muggy air. The stench of mud and stagnant water threatened to gag him with each breath as he led his horse to drier ground on the path. Behind him trudged a long, twisting column four men wide, each one as muddied, sweaty and weary as he was.

They were on the border of Ghealdan and Altara, in a swampy wetland where the oaks and spicewoods had given way to laurels and spidery cypress, their gnarled roots spread like spindly fingers. The stinking air was hot—despite the shade and cloud cover—and thick. It was like breathing in a foul soup. Galad steamed beneath his breastplate and mail, his conical helmet hanging from his saddle, his skin itching from the grime and salty sweat.

Miserable though it was, this route was the best way. Asunawa would not anticipate it. Galad wiped his brow with the back of his hand and tried to walk with head high for the benefit of those who followed him. Seven thousand men, Children who had chosen him rather than the Seanchan invaders.

Dull green moss hung from the branches, drooping like shreds of flesh from rotting corpses. Here and there the sickly grays and greens were relieved by a bright burst of tiny pink or violet flowers clustering around trickling streams. Their sudden color was unexpected, as if someone had sprinkled drops of paint on the ground.

It was strange to find beauty in this place. Could he find the Light in his own situation as well? He feared it would not be so easy.

He tugged Stout forward. He could hear worried conversations from behind, punctuated by the occasional curse. This place, with its stench and biting insects, would try the best of men. Those who followed Galad were unnerved by the place the world was becoming. A world where the sky was constantly clouded black, where good men died to strange twistings of the Pattern, and where Valda—the Lord Captain Commander before Galad—had turned out to be a murderer and a rapist.

Galad shook his head. The Last Battle would soon come.

A clinking of chain mail announced someone moving up the line. Galad glanced over his shoulder as Dain Bornhald arrived, saluted, and fell into place beside him. "Damodred," Dain said softly, their boots squishing in mud, "perhaps we should turn back."

"Backward leads only to the past," Galad said, scanning the pathway ahead. "I have thought about this much, Child Bornhald. This sky, the wasting of the land, the way the dead walk . . . There is no longer time to find allies and fight against the Seanchan. We must march to the Last Battle."

"But this swamp," Bornhald said, glancing to the side as a large serpent slid through the underbrush. "Our maps say we should have been out of it by now."

"Then surely we are near the edge."

"Perhaps," Dain said, a trail of sweat running from his brow down the

side of his lean face, which twitched. Fortunately, he'd run out of brandy a few days back. "Unless the map is in error."

Galad didn't respond. Once-good maps were proving faulty these days. Open fields would turn to broken hills, villages would vanish, pastures would be arable one day, then suddenly overgrown with vines and fungus. The swamp could indeed have spread.

"The men are exhausted," Bornhald said. "They're good men—you know they are. But they are starting to complain." He winced, as if anticipating a reprimand from Galad.

Perhaps once he would have given one. The Children should bear their afflictions with pride. However, memories of lessons Morgase had taught—

lessons he hadn't understood in his youth—were nagging at him. Lead by example. Require strength, but first show it.

Galad nodded. They were nearing a dry clearing. "Gather the men. I will speak to those at the front. Have my words recorded, then passed to those behind."

Bornhald looked perplexed, but did as commanded. Galad stepped off to the side, climbing up a small hill. He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, inspecting his men as the companies at the front gathered around. They stood with slouched postures, legs muddied. Hands flailed at bitemes or scratched at collars.

"We are Children of the Light," Galad announced, once they were gathered. "These are the darkest days of men. Days when hope is weak, days when death reigns. But it is on the deepest nights when light is most glorious. During the day, a brilliant beacon can appear weak. But when all other lights fail, it will guide!

"We are that beacon. This mire is an affliction. But we are the Children of the Light, and our afflictions are our strength. We are hunted by those who should love us, and other pathways lead to our graves. And so we will go forward. For those we must protect, for the Last Battle, for the Light!

"Where is the victory of this swamp? I refuse to feel its bite, for I am proud. Proud to live in these days, proud to be part of what is to come. All the lives that came before us in this Age looked forward to our day, the day when men will be tested. Let others bemoan their fate. Let others cry and wail. We will not, for we will face this test with heads held high. And we will let it prove us strong!"

Not a long speech; he did not wish to extend their time in the swamp overly much. Still, it seemed to do its duty. The men's backs straightened, and they nodded. Men who had been chosen to do so wrote down the words, and moved back to read them to those who had not been able to hear.

When the troop continued forward, the men's footsteps no longer dragged, their postures were no longer slumped. Galad remained on his hillside, taking a few reports, letting the men see him as they passed.

When the last of the seven thousand had gone by, Galad noted a small group waiting at the base of the hill. Child Jaret Byar stood with them, looking up at Galad, sunken eyes alight with zeal. He was gaunt, with a narrow face.

"Child Byar," Galad said, walking down from the hillside.

"It was a good speech, my Lord Captain Commander," Byar said fervently. "The Last Battle. Yes, it is time to go to it."

"It is our burden," Galad said. "And our duty."

"We will ride northward," Byar said. "Men will come to us, and we will grow. An enormous force of the Children, tens of thousands. Hundreds of thousands. We will wash over the land. Maybe we will have enough men to cast down the White Tower and the witches, rather than needing to ally with them."

Galad shook his head. "We will need the Aes Sedai, Child Byar. The Shadow will have Dreadlords, Myrddraal, Forsaken"

"Yes, I suppose." Byar seemed reluctant. Well, he'd seemed reluctant about the idea before, but he had agreed to it.

"Our road is difficult, Child Byar, but the Children of the Light will be leaders at the Last Battle."

Valda's misdeeds had tarnished the entire order. More than that, Galad was increasingly convinced that Asunawa had played a large role in the mistreatment and death of his stepmother. That meant the High Inquisitor himself was corrupt.

Doing what was right was the most important thing in life. It required any sacrifice. At this time, the right thing to do was flee. Galad could not face Asunawa; the High Inquisitor was backed by the Seanchan. Besides, the Last Battle was more important.

Galad stepped swiftly, walking through the muck back toward the front of the line of Children. They traveled light, with few pack animals, and his men wore their armor—their mounts were laden with food and supplies.

At the front, Galad found Trom speaking with a few men who wore leathers and brown cloaks, not white tabards and steel caps. Their scouts. Trom nodded to him in respect; the Lord Captain was one of Galad's most trusted men. "Scouts say there's a small issue ahead, my Lord Captain Commander," Trom said.

"What issue?"

"It would be best to show it to you directly, sir," said Child Barlett, the leader of the scouts.

Galad nodded him forward. Ahead, the swampy forest seemed to be thinning. Thank the Light—did that mean they were nearly free?

No. As Galad arrived, he found several other scouts looking out at a dead forest. Most trees in the swamp bore leaves, though sickly ones, but those ahead were skeletal and ashen, as if burned. There was some kind of sickly white lichen or moss growing over everything. The tree trunks looked emaciated.

Water flooded this area, a wide but shallow river with a very slow current. It had swallowed the bases of many of the trees, and fallen tree limbs broke the dirty brown water like arms reaching toward the sky.

"There are corpses, my Lord Captain Commander," one of the scouts said, gesturing upriver. "Floating down. Looks like the remnants of a distant battle."

"Is this river on our maps?" Galad asked.

One by one, the scouts shook their heads.

Galad set his jaw. "Can this be forded?"

"It's shallow, my Lord Captain Commander," Child Barlett said. "But we'll have to watch for hidden depths."

Galad reached out to a tree beside him and broke free a long branch, the wood snapping loudly. "I will go first. Have the men remove their armor and cloaks."

The orders went down the line, and Galad took off his armor and wrapped it in his cloak, then tied it to his back. He hiked up his trousers as far as he could, then stepped down the gentle bank and plowed forward into the murky water. The sharply cold spring runoff made him tense. His boots sank inches into the sandy bottom, filling with water, stirring up swirls of mud. Stout made a louder splash as he stepped into the water behind.

It wasn't too difficult to walk in; the water only came up to his knees. He used his stick to find the best footing. Those skeletal, dying trees were unnerving. They didn't seem to be rotting, and now that he was closer, he could better see the ash-gray fuzz among the lichen that coated their trunks and branches.

The Children behind splashed loudly as more and more of them entered the wide stream. Nearby, bulbous forms floated down the river to catch upon rocks. Some were the corpses of men, but many were larger. Mules, he realized, catching a better look at a snout. Dozens of them. They'd been dead for some time, judging by the bloat.

Likely a village upstream had been attacked for its food. This wasn't the first group of dead they'd found.

He reached the other side of the river, then climbed out. As he unrolled his trouser legs and donned his armor and cloak, he felt his shoulder aching from the blows Valda had given him. His thigh still stung, too.

He turned and continued down the game trail northward, leading the way as other Children reached the bank. He longed to ride Stout, but he dared not. Though they were out of the river, the ground was still damp, uneven, and pocked with hidden sinkholes. If he rode, he could easily cost Stout a broken leg and himself a broken crown.

So he and his men walked, surrounded by those gray trees, sweating in the miserable heat. He longed for a good bath.

Eventually, Trom jogged up the line to him. "All men are across safely." He checked the sky. "Burn those clouds. I can never tell what time it is."

"Four hours past midday," Galad said.

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

"Weren't we to stop at midday to discuss our next step?" That meeting was to have taken place once they got through the swamp.

"For now, we have few choices," Galad said. "I will lead the men northward to Andor."

"The Children have met . . . hostility there."

"I have some secluded land up in the northwest. I will not be turned away there, regardless of who controls the throne."

Light send that Elayne held the Lion Throne. Light send that she had escaped the tangles of the Aes Sedai, though he feared the worst. There were many who would use her as a pawn, al'Thor not the least of them. She was headstrong, and that could make her easy to manipulate.

"We'll need supplies," Trom said. "Forage is difficult, and more and more villages are empty."

Galad nodded. A legitimate concern.

"It's a good plan, though," Trom said, then lowered his voice. "I'll admit, Damodred, I worried that you'd refuse leadership."

"I could not. To abandon the Children now, after killing their leader, would be wrong."

Trom smiled. "It's as simple as that to you, isn't it?"

"It should be as simple as that to anyone." Galad had to rise to the station he had been given. He had no other option. "The Last Battle comes and the Children of the Light will fight. Even if we have to make alliances with the Dragon Reborn himself, we will fight."

For some time, Galad hadn't been certain about al'Thor. Certainly the Dragon Reborn would have to fight at the Last Battle. But was that man al'Thor, or was he a puppet of the Tower, and not the true Dragon Reborn? That sky was too dark, the land too broken. Al'Thor must be the Dragon Reborn. That didn't mean, of course, that he wasn't also a puppet of the Aes Sedai.

Soon they passed beyond the skeletal gray trees, reaching ones that were more ordinary. These still had yellowed leaves, too many dead branches. But that was better than the fuzz.

About an hour later, Galad noted Child Barlett returning. The scout was a lean man, scarred on one cheek. Galad held up a hand as the man approached. "What word?"

Barlett saluted with arm to chest. "The swamp dries out and the trees thin in about one mile, my Lord Captain Commander. The field beyond is open and empty, the way clear to the north."

Light be thanked! Galad thought. He nodded to Barlett, and the man hurried back through the trees.

Galad glanced back at the line of men. They were muddied, sweaty, and fatigued. But still, they were a grand sight, their armor replaced, their faces determined. They had followed him through this pit of a swamp. They were good men.

"Pass the word to the other Lords Captain, Trom," Galad said. "Have them send word to their legions. We'll be out of this in under an hour."

The older man smiled, looking as relieved as Galad felt. Galad continued onward, jaw set against the pain of his leg. The cut was well bound, and there was little danger of further damage. It was painful, but pain could be dealt with.

Finally free of this bog! He would need to plot their next course carefully, staying away from any towns, major roads, or estates held by influential lords. He ran through the maps in his head—maps memorized before his tenth nameday.

He was thus engaged when the yellow canopy thinned, clouded sunlight peeking between branches. Soon he caught sight of Barlett waiting at the edge of the line of trees. The forest ended abruptly, almost as neat as a line on a map.

Galad sighed in relief, relishing the thought of being out in the open again. He stepped from the trees. Only then did an enormous force of troops begin to appear, climbing over a rise directly to his right.

Armor clanged, horses whinnying, as thousands of soldiers lined up atop the rise. Some were Children in their plate and mail, with conical

helms shined to perfection. Their pristine tabards and cloaks shone, sunbursts glittering at the breasts, lances raised in ranks. The larger number were foot soldiers, not wearing the white of the Children, but instead simple brown leathers. Amadicians, likely provided by the Seanchan. Many had bows.

Galad stumbled back, hand going to his sword. But he knew, immediately, that he had been trapped. Not a few of the Children wore clothing adorned with the crook of the Hand of the Light—the Questioners. If ordinary Children were a flame to burn away evil, the Questioners were a raging bonfire.

Galad did a quick count. Three to four thousand Children and at least another six to eight thousand foot, half of those with bows. Ten thousand fresh troops. His heart sank.

Trom, Bornhald and Byar hastened out of the forest behind Galad along with a group of other Children. Trom cursed softly.

"So," Galad said, turning to the scout, Barlett, "you are a traitor?"

"You are the traitor, Child Damodred," the scout replied, face hard.

"Yes," Galad said, "I suppose it could be perceived that way." This march through the swamp had been suggested by his scouts. Galad could see now; it had been a delaying tactic, a way for Asunawa to get ahead of Galad. The march had also left Galad's men tired while Asunawa's force was fresh and ready for battle.

A sword scraped in its sheath.

Galad immediately raised a hand without turning. "Peace, Child Byar." Byar would have been the one to reach for his weapon, probably to strike down Barlett.

Perhaps something of this could be salvaged. Galad made his decision swiftly. "Child Byar and Child Bornhald, you are with me. Trom, you and the other Lords Captain bring our men out in ranks onto the field."

A large cluster of men near the front of Asunawa's force was riding forward, down the hillside. Many wore the crook of the Questioners. They could have sprung their ambush and killed Galad's group quickly. Instead, they sent down a group to parley. That was a good sign.

Galad mounted, suppressing a wince for his wounded leg. Byar and Bornhald mounted as well, and they followed him onto the field, hoofbeats muffled by the thick, yellowed grass. Asunawa himself was among the group approaching. He had thick, graying eyebrows and was so thin as to appear a doll made of sticks, with fabric stretched across them to imitate skin.

Asunawa was not smiling. He rarely did.

Galad pulled his horse up before the High Inquisitor. Asunawa was surrounded by a small guard of his Questioners, but was also accompanied by five Lords Captain, each of whom Galad had met with—or served under—during his short time in the Children.

Asunawa leaned forward in his saddle, sunken eyes narrowing. "Your rebels form ranks. Tell them to stand down or my archers will loose."

"Surely you would not ignore the rules of formal engagement?" Galad said. "You would draw arrows upon men as they form ranks? Where is your honor?"

"Darkfriends deserve no honor," Asunawa snapped. "Nor do they deserve pity."

"You name us Darkfriends then?" Galad asked, turning his mount slightly. "AH seven thousand Children who were under Valda's command? Men your soldiers have served with, eaten with, known and fought beside? Men you yourself watched over not two months ago?"

Asunawa hesitated. Naming seven thousand of the Children as Darkfriends would be ridiculous—it would mean that two out of three remaining Children had gone to the Shadow.

"No," Asunawa said. "Perhaps they are simply . . . misguided. Even a good man can stray down shadowed paths if his leaders are Darkfriends."

"I am no Darkfriend." Galad met Asunawa's eyes.

"Submit to my questioning and prove it."

"The Lord Captain Commander submits himself to no one," Galad said. "Under the Light, I order you to stand down."

Asunawa laughed. "Child, we hold a knife to your throat! This is your chance to surrender!"

"Golever," Galad said, looking at the Lord Captain at Asunawa's left. Golever was a lanky, bearded man, as hard as they came—but he was also fair. "Tell me, do the Children of the Light surrender?"

Golever shook his head. "We do not. The Light will prove us victorious."

"And if we face superior odds?" Galad asked.

"We fight on."

"If we are tired and sore?"

"The Light will protect us," Golever said. "And if it is our time to die, then so be it. Let us take as many enemies with us as we may."

Galad turned back to Asunawa. "You see that I am in a predicament. To fight is to let you name us Darkfriends, but to surrender is to deny our oaths. By my honor as the Lord Captain Commander, I can accept neither option."

Asunawa's expression darkened. "You are not the Lord Captain Commander. He is dead."

"By my hand," Galad said, unsheathing his weapon, holding it forward so that the herons gleamed in the light. "And I hold his sword. Do you deny that you yourself watched me face Valda in fair combat, as prescribed

by law?"

"As by the law, perhaps," Asunawa said. "But I would not call that fight fair. You drew on the powers of Shadow; I saw you standing in darkness despite the daylight, and I saw the Dragon's Fang sprout on your forehead. Valda never had a chance."

"Harnesh," Galad said, turning to the Lord Captain to the right of Asunawa. He was a short man, bald, missing one ear from fighting Dragonsworn. "Tell me. Is the Shadow stronger than the Light?"

"Of course not," the man said, spitting to the side.

"If the Lord Captain Commander's cause had been honorable, would he have fallen to me in a battle under the Light? If I were a Darkfriend, could I have slain the Lord Captain Commander himself?"

Harnesh didn't answer, but Galad could almost see the thoughts in his head. The Shadow might display strength at times, but the Light always revealed and destroyed it. It was possible for the Lord Captain Commander to fall to a Darkfriend—it was possible for any man to fall. But in a duel before the other Children? A duel for honor, under the Light?

"Sometimes the Shadow displays cunning and strength," Asunawa cut in before Galad could continue to question. "At times, good men die."

"You all know what Valda did," Galad said. "My mother is dead. Is there an argument against my right to challenge him?"

"You have no rights as a Darkfriend! I will parley no more with you, murderer." Asunawa waved a hand, and several of his Questioners drew swords. Immediately, Galad's companions did the same. Behind, he could hear his weary forces hastily closing their ranks.

"What will happen to us, Asunawa, if Child fights Child?" Galad asked softly. "I will not surrender, and I would not attack you, but perhaps we can reunite. Not as enemies, but as brothers separated for a time."

"I will never associate with Darkfriends," Asunawa said, though he sounded hesitant. He watched Galad's men. Asunawa would win a battle, but if Galad's men stood their ground, it would be a costly victory. Both sides would lose thousands.

"I will submit to you," Galad said. "On certain terms."

"No!" Bornhald said from behind, but Galad raised a hand, silencing him.

"What terms would those be?" Asunawa asked.

"You swear—before the Light and the Lords Captain here with

you—that you will not harm, question, or otherwise condemn the men who followed me. They were only doing what they thought was right."

Asunawa's eyes narrowed, his lips forming a straight line.

"That includes my companions here," Galad said, nodding to Byar and Bornhald. "Every man, Asunawa. They must never know questioning."

"You cannot hinder the Hand of the Light in such a way! This would give them free rein to seek the Shadow!"

"And is it only fear of Questioning that keeps us in the Light, Asunawa?" Galad asked. "Are not the Children valiant and true?"

Asunawa fell silent. Galad closed his eyes, feeling the weight of leadership. Each moment he stalled increased the bargaining position for his men. He opened his eyes. "The Last Battle comes, Asunawa. We haven't time for squabbling. The Dragon Reborn walks the land."

"Heresy!" Asunawa said.

"Yes," Galad said. "And truth as well."

Asunawa ground his teeth, but seemed to be considering the offer.

"Galad," Bornhald said softly. "Don't do this. We can fight. The Light will protect us!"

"If we fight, we will kill good men, Child Bornhald," Galad said, without turning. "Each stroke of our swords will be a blow for the Dark One. The Children are the only true foundation that this world has left. We are needed. If my life is what is demanded to bring unity, then so be it. You would do the same, I believe." He met Asunawa's eyes.

"Take him," Asunawa snapped, looking dissatisfied. "And tell the legions to stand down. Inform them that I have taken the false Lord Captain Commander into custody, and will Question him to determine the extent of his crimes." He hesitated. "But also pass the word that those who followed him are not to be punished or Questioned." Asunawa spun his horse and rode away.

Galad turned his sword and handed it out to Bornhald. "Return to our men; tell them what happened here, and do not let them fight or try to rescue me. That is an order."

Bornhald met his eyes, then slowly took the sword. At last, he saluted. "Yes, my Lord Captain Commander."

As soon as they turned to ride away, rough hands grabbed Galad and pulled him from Stout's saddle. He hit the ground with a grunt, his bad shoulder throwing a spike of agony across his chest. He tried to climb to his feet, but several Questioners dismounted and knocked him down again.

One forced Galad to the ground, a boot on his back, and Galad heard the metallic rasp of a knife being unsheathed. They cut his armor and clothing free.

"You will not wear the uniform of a Child of the Light, Darkfriend," a Questioner said in his ear.

"I am not a Darkfriend," Galad said, face pressed to the grassy earth. "I will never speak that lie. I walk in the Light."

That earned him a kick to the side, then another, and another. He curled up, grunting. But the blows continued to fall.

Finally, the darkness took him.

The creature that had once been Padan Fain walked down the side of a hill. The brown weeds grew in broken patches, like the scrub on the chin of a beggar.

The sky was black. A tempest. He liked that, though he hated the one who caused it.

Hatred. It was the proof that he still lived, the one emotion left. The only emotion. It was all that there could be.

Consuming. Thrilling. Beautiful. Warming. Violent. Hatred. Wonderful. It was the storm that gave him strength, the purpose that drove him. Al'Thor would die. By his hand. And perhaps after that, the Dark One. Wonderful . . .

The creature that had been Padan Fain fingered his beautiful dagg'er, feeling the ridges of the designs in the fine golden wire that wrapped its hilt. A large ruby capped the end of its hilt, and he carried the weapon unsheathed in his right hand so that the blade extended between his first two fingers. The sides of those fingers had been cut a dozen times over.

Blood dripped from the tip of the dagger down onto the weeds. Crimson spots to cheer him. Red below, black above. Perfect. Did his hatred cause that storm? It must be so. Yes.

The drops of blood fell alongside spots of darkness that appeared on dead leaves and stems as he moved farther north into the Blight.

He was mad. That was good. When you accepted madness into yourself— embraced it and drank it in as if it were sunlight or water or the air itself—it became another part of you. Like a hand or an eye. You could see by madness. You could hold things with madness. It was wonderful. Liberating.

He was finally free.

The creature that had been Mordeth reached the bottom of the hill and did not look back at the large, purplish mass that he'd left atop it. Worms were very messy to kill the right way, but some things needed to be done the right way. It was the principle of the thing.

Mist had begun to trail him, creeping up from the ground. Was that mist his madness, or was it his hatred? It was so familiar. It twisted around his ankles and licked at his heels.

Something peeked around a hillside nearby, then ducked back. Worms died loudly. Worms did everything loudly. A pack of Worms could destroy an entire legion. When you heard them, you went the other way, quickly. But then, it could be advantageous to send scouts to go judge the direction of the pack, lest you continue on and run across it again elsewhere.

So the creature that had been Padan Fain was not surprised when he rounded the hillside and found a nervous group of Trollocs there, a Myrddraal guiding them.

He smiled. My friends. It had been too long.

It took a moment for their brutish brains to come to the obvious— but false—conclusion: If a man was wandering around, then Worms couldn't be near. Those would have smelled his blood and come for him. Worms preferred humans over Trollocs. That made sense. The creature that had been Mordeth had tasted both, and Trolloc flesh had little to recommend it.

The Trollocs tore forward in a mismatched pack, feathers, beaks, claws, teeth, tusks. The creature that had been Fain stood still, mist licking his unshod feet. How wonderful! At the very back of the group, the Myrddraal hesitated, its eyeless gaze fixed on him. Perhaps it sensed that something was terribly, terribly wrong. And right, of course. You couldn't be one without the other. That wouldn't make sense.

The creature that had been Mordeth—he would need a new name soon—smiled deeply.

The Myrddraal turned to run away.

The mist struck.

It rolled over the Trollocs, moving quickly, like the tentacles of a leviathan in the Aryth Ocean. Lengths of it snapped forward through Trolloc chests. One long rope whipped above their heads, then shot forward in a blur, taking the Fade in the neck.

The Trollocs screamed, dropping, spasming. Their hair fell out in patches, and their skin began to boil. Blisters and cysts. When those popped, they left craterlike pocks in the Shadowspawn skin, like bubbles on the surface of metal that cooled too quickly.

The creature that had been Padan Fain opened his mouth in glee, closing his eyes to the tumultuous black sky and raising his face, lips parted, enjoying his feast. After it passed, he sighed, holding his dagger tighter— cutting his flesh.

Red below, black above. Red and black, red and black, so much red and black. Wonderful.

He walked on through the Blight.

The corrupted Trollocs climbed to their feet behind him, lurching into motion, spittle dropping from their lips. Their eyes had grown sluggish and dull, but when he desired it, they would respond with a frenzied battle lust that would surpass what they had known in life.

He left the Myrddraal. It would not rise, as rumors said they did. His touch now brought instant death to one of its kind. Pity. He had a few nails he might have otherwise put to good use.

Perhaps he should get some gloves. But if he did, he couldn't cut his hand. What a problem.

No matter. Onward. The time had come to kill al'Thor.

It saddened him that the hunt must end. But there was no longer a reason for a hunt. You didn't hunt something when you knew exactly where it was going to be. You merely showed up to meet it.

Like an old friend. A dear, beloved old friend that you were going to stab through the eye, open up at the gut and consume by handfuls while drinking his blood. That was the proper way to treat friends.

It was an honor.

Malenarin Rai shuffled through supply reports. That blasted shutter on the window behind his desk snapped and blew open again, letting in the damp heat of the Blight.

Despite ten years serving as commander of Heeth Tower, he hadn't grown accustomed to the heat in the highlands. Damp. Muggy, the air often full of rotting scents.

The whistling wind rattled the wooden shutter. He rose, walking over to pull it shut, then twisted a bit of twine around its handle to keep it closed.

He walked back to his desk, looking over the roster of newly arrived soldiers. Each name had a specialty beside it—up here, every soldier had to fill two or more duties. Skill at binding wounds. Swift feet for running messages. A keen eye with a bow. The ability to make the same old mush taste like new mush. Malenarin always asked specifically for men in the last group. Any cook who could make soldiers eager to come to mess was worth his weight in gold.

Malenarin set aside his current report, weighing it down with the lead-filled Trolloc horn he kept for the purpose. The next sheet in his stack was a letter from a man named Barriga, a merchant who was bringing his caravan to the tower to trade. Malenarin smiled; he was a soldier first, but he wore the three silver chains across his chest that marked him as a master merchant. While his tower received many of its supplies directly from the Queen, no Kandori commander was denied the opportunity to barter with merchants.

If he was lucky, he'd be able to get this outlander merchant drunk at the bargaining table. Malenarin had forced more than one merchant into a year of military service as penance for entering bargains he could not keep. A year of training with the Queen's forces often did plump foreign merchants a great deal of good.

He set that sheet beneath the Trolloc horn, then hesitated as he saw the last item for his attention at the bottom of the stack. It was a reminder from his steward. Keemlin, his eldest son, was approaching his fourteenth nameday. As if Malenarin could forget about that! He needed no reminder.

He smiled, setting the Trolloc horn on the note, in case that shutter broke open again. He'd slain the Trolloc who had borne that horn himself. Then he walked over to the side of his office and opened his battered oak trunk. Among the other effects inside was a cloth-wrapped sword, the brown scabbard kept well oiled and maintained, but faded with time. His father's sword.

In three days, he would give it to Keemlin. A boy became a man on his fourteenth nameday, the day he was given his first sword and became responsible for himself. Keemlin had worked hard to learn his forms under the harshest trainers Malenarin could provide. Soon his son would become a man. How quickly the years passed.

Taking a proud breath, Malenarin closed the trunk, then rose and left his office for his daily rounds. The tower housed two hundred and fifty soldiers, a bastion of defense that watched the Blight.

To have a duty was to have pride—just as to bear a burden was to gain strength. Watching the Blight was his duty and his strength, and it was particularly important these days, with the strange storm to the north, and with the Queen and much of the Kandori army having marched to seek the Dragon Reborn. He pulled the door to his office closed, then threw the hidden latch that barred it on the other side. It was one of several such doors in the hallway; an enemy storming the tower wouldn't know which one opened onto the stairwell upward. In this way, a small office could function as part of the tower defense.

He walked to the stairwell. These top levels were not accessible from the ground level—the entire bottom forty feet of the tower was a trap. An enemy who entered at the ground floor and climbed up three flights of garrison quarters would discover no way up to the fourth floor. The only way to go to the fourth level was to climb a narrow, collapsible ramp on the outside of the tower that led from the second level up to the fourth. Running on it left attackers fully exposed to arrows from above. Then, once some of them were up but others not, the Kandori would collapse the ramp, dividing the enemy force and leaving those above to be killed as they tried to find the interior stairwells.

Malenarin climbed at a brisk pace. Periodic slits to the sides of the steps looked down on the stairs beneath, and would allow archers to fire on invaders. When he was about halfway to the top, he heard hasty footfalls coming down. A second later, Jargen—sergeant of the watch—rounded the bend. Like most Kandori, Jargen wore a forked beard; his black hair was dusted with gray.

Jargen had joined the Blightwatch the day after his fourteenth nameday. He wore a cord looped around the shoulder of his brown uniform; it bore a knot for each Trolloc he'd killed. There had to be approaching fifty knots in the thing by now.

Jargen saluted with arm to breast, then lowered his hand to rest on his sword, a sign of respect for his commander. In many countries, holding the weapon like that would be an insult, but Southerners were known to be peevish and ill-tempered. Couldn't they see that it was an honor to hold your sword and imply you found your commander a worthy threat?

"My Lord," Jargen said, voice gruff. "A flash from Rena Tower."

"What?" Malenarin asked. The two fell into step, trotting up the stairwell.

"It was distinct, sir," Jargen said. "Saw it myself, I did. Only a flash, but it was there."

"Did they send a correction?"

"They may have by now. I ran to fetch you first."

If there had been more news, Jargen would have shared it, so Malenarin did not waste breath pressing him. Shortly, they stepped up onto the top of the tower, which held an enormous mechanism of mirrors and lamps. With the apparatus, the tower could send messages to the east or west—where other towers lined the Blight—or southward, along a line of towers that ran to the Aesdaishar Palace in Chachin.

The vast, undulating Kandori highlands spread out from his tower. Some of the southern hills were still lightly laced with morning fog. That land to the south, free of this unnatural heat, would soon grow green, and Kandori herdsmen would climb to the high pastures to graze their sheep.

Northward lay the Blight. Malenarin had read of days when the Blight

had barely been visible from this tower. Now it ran nearly to the base of the stonework. Rena Tower was northwest as well. Its commander—Lord

Niach of House Okatomo—was a distant cousin and a good friend. He would not have sent a flash without reason, and would send a retraction if it had been an accident.

"Any further word?" Malenarin asked.

The soldiers on watch shook their heads. Jargen tapped his foot, and Malenarin folded his arms to wait for a correction.

Nothing came. Rena Tower stood within the Blight these days, as it was farther north than Heeth Tower. Its position within the Blight was normally not an issue. Even the most fearsome creatures of the Blight knew not to attack a Kandori tower.

No correction came. Not a glimmer. "Send a message to Rena," Malenarin said. 'Ask if their flash was a mistake. Then ask Farmay Tower if they have noticed anything strange."

Jargen set the men to work, but gave Malenarin a flat glance, as if to ask, "You think I haven't done that already?"

That meant messages had been sent, but there was no word back. Wind blew across the tower top, creaking the steel of the mirror apparatus as his men sent another series of flashes. That wind was humid. Far too hot. Malenarin glanced upward, toward where that same black storm boiled and rolled. It seemed to have settled down.

That struck him as very discomforting.

"Flash a message backward," Malenarin said, "toward the inland towers. Tell them what we saw; tell them to be ready in case of trouble."

The men set to work.

"Sergeant," Malenarin said, "who is next on the messenger roster?"

The tower force included a small group of boys who were excellent riders. Lightweight, they could go on fast horses should a commander decide to bypass the mirrors. Mirror light was fast, but it could be seen by one's enemies. Besides, if the line of towers was broken—or if the apparatus was damaged—they would need a means to get word to the capital.

"Next on the roster . . ." Jargen said, checking a list nailed to the inside of the door onto the rooftop. "It would be Keemlin, my Lord."

Keemlin. His Keemlin.

Malenarin glanced to the northwest, toward the silent tower that had flashed so ominously. "Bring me word if there is a hint of response from the other towers," Malenarin said to the soldiers. "Jargen, come with me."

The two of them hurried down the stairs. "We need to send a messenger southward," Malenarin said, then hesitated. "No. No, we need to send several messengers. Double up. Just in case the towers fall." He began moving again.

The two of them left the stairwell and entered Malenarin's office. He grabbed his best quill off the rack on his wall. That blasted shutter was blowing and rattling again; the papers on his desk rustled as he pulled out a fresh sheet of paper.

Rena and Farmay not responding to flash messages. Possibly overrun or severely hampered. Be advised. Heeth will stand.

He folded the paper, holding it up to Jargen. The man took it with a leathery hand, read it over, then grunted. "Two copies, then?"

"Three," Malenarin said. "Mobilize the archers and send them to the roof. Tell them danger may come from above."

If he wasn't merely jumping at shadows—if the towers to either side of Heeth had fallen so quickly—then so could those to the south. And if he'd been the one making an assault, he'd have done anything he could to sneak around and take out one of the southern towers first. That was the best way to make sure no messages got back to the capital.

Jargen saluted, fist to chest, then withdrew. The message would be sent immediately: three times on legs of horseflesh, once on legs of light. Malenarin let himself feel a hint of relief that his son was one of those riding to safety. There was no dishonor in that; the messages needed to be delivered, and Keemlin was next on the roster.

Malenarin glanced out his window. It faced north, toward the Blight. Every commander's office did that. The bubbling storm, with its silvery clouds. Sometimes they looked like straight geometric shapes. He had listened well to passing merchants. Troubled times were coming. The Queen would not have gone south to seek a false Dragon, no matter how cunning or influential he might be. She believed.

It was time for Tarmon Gai'don. And looking out into that storm, Malenarin thought he could see to the very edge of time itself. An edge that was not far distant. In fact, it seemed to be growing darker. And there was a darkness beneath it, on the ground northward.

That darkness was advancing.

Malenarin dashed out of the room, racing up the steps to the roof, where the wind swept against men pushing and moving mirrors.

"Was the message sent to the south?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Landalin said. He'd been roused to take command of the tower's top. "No reply yet."

Malenarin glanced down, and picked out three riders breaking away from the tower at full speed. The messengers were off. They would stop at Barklan if it wasn't being attacked. The captain there would send them on southward, just in case. And if Barklan didn't stand, the boys would continue on, all the way to the capital if needed.

Malenarin turned back to the storm. That advancing darkness had him on edge. It was coming.

"Raise the hoardings," he ordered Landalin. "Bring up the store hitchings and empty the cellars. Have the loaders gather all of the arrows and set up stations for resupplying the archers, and put archers at every choke point, kill slit and window. Start the firepots and have men ready to drop the outer ramps. Prepare for a siege."

As Landalin barked orders, men rushed away. Malenarin heard boots scrape stone behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder. Was that Jar-gen back again?

No. It was a youth of nearly fourteen summers, too young for a beard, his dark hair disheveled, his face streaming with sweat caused—presumably—by a run up seven levels of the tower.

Keemlin. Malenarin felt a stab of fear, instantly replaced with anger. "Soldier! You were to ride with a message!"

Keemlin bit his lip. "Well, sir," he said. "Tian, four places down from me. He is five, maybe ten pounds lighter than I. It makes a big difference, sir. He rides a lot faster, and I figured this would be an important message. So I asked for him to be sent in my place."

Malenarin frowned. Soldiers moved around them, rushing down the stairs or gathering with bows at the rim of the tower. The wind howled outside and thunder began to sound softly—yet insistently.

Keemlin met his eyes. "Tian's mother, Lady Yabeth, has lost four sons to the Blight," he said, softly enough that only Malenarin could hear. "Tian's the only one she has left. If one of us has a shot at getting out, sir, I figured it should be him."

Malenarin held his son's eyes. The boy understood what was coming. Light help him, but he understood. And he'd sent another away in his place.

"Kralle," Malenarin barked, glancing toward one of the soldiers passing by.

"Yes, my Lord Commander?"

"Run down to my office," Malenarin said. "There is a sword in my oaken trunk. Fetch it for me."

The man saluted, obeying.

"Father?" Keemlin said. "My nameday isn't for three days."

Malenarin waited with arms behind his back. His most important task at the moment was to be seen in command, to reassure his troops. Kralle returned with the sword; its worn scabbard bore the image of the oak set aflame. The symbol of House Rai.

"Father. . . ." Keemlin repeated. "I—"

"This weapon is offered to a boy when he becomes a man," Malenarin said. "It seems it is too late in coming, son. For I see a man standing before me." He held the weapon forward in his right hand. Around the tower top, soldiers turned toward him: the archers with bows ready, the soldiers who operated the mirrors, the duty watchmen. As Borderlanders, each and every one of them would have been given his sword on his fourteenth name-day. Each one had felt the catch in the chest, the wonderful feeling of coming of age. It had happened to each of them, but that did not make this occasion any less special.

Keemlin went down on one knee.

"Why do you draw your sword?" Malenarin asked, voice loud so that every man atop the tower would hear.

"In defense of my honor, my family, or my homeland," Keemlin replied.

"How long do you fight?"

"Until my last breath joins the northern winds."

"When do you stop watching?"

"Never," Keemlin whispered.

"Speak it louder!"

"Never!"

"Once this sword is drawn, you become a warrior, always with it near you in preparation to fight the Shadow. Will you draw this blade and join us, as a man?"

Keemlin looked up, then took the hilt in a firm grip and pulled the weapon free.

"Rise as a man, my son!" Malenarin declared.

Keemlin stood, holding the weapon aloft, the bright blade reflecting the diffuse sunlight. The men atop the tower cheered.

It was no shame to find tears in one's eyes at such a moment. Malenarin blinked them free, then knelt down, buckling the sword belt at his son's waist. The men continued to cheer and yell, and he knew it was not only for his son. They yelled in defiance of the Shadow. For a moment, their voices rang louder than the thunder.

Malenarin stood, laying a hand on his son's shoulder as the boy slid his sword into its sheath. Together they turned to face the oncoming Shadow. There!" one of the archers said, pointing upward. "There's something in the clouds!"

"Draghkar!" another one said.

The unnatural clouds were close now, and the shade they cast could no longer hide the undulating horde of Trollocs beneath. Something flew out from the sky, but a dozen of his archers let loose. The creature screamed and fell, dark wings flapping awkwardly.

Jargen pushed his way through to Malenarin. "My Lord," Jargen said, shooting a glance at Keemlin, "the boy should be below."

"Not a boy any longer," Malenarin said with pride. "A man. What is your report?"

"All is prepared." Jargen glanced over the wall, eyeing the oncoming Trollocs as evenly as if he were inspecting a stable of horses. "They will not find this tree an easy one to fell."

Malenarin nodded. Keemlin s shoulder was tense. That sea of Trollocs seemed endless. Against this foe, the tower would eventually fall. The Trollocs would keep coming, wave after wave.

But every man atop that tower knew his duty. They'd kill Shadow-spawn as long as they could, hoping to buy enough time for the messages to do some good.

Malenarin was a man of the Borderlands, same as his father, same as his son beside him. They knew their task. You held until you were relieved.

That's all there was to it.

CHAPTER
1

Apples First

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose above the misty peaks of Imfaral. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was a beginning.

Crisp and light, the wind danced across fields of new mountain grass stiff with frost. That frost lingered past first light, sheltered by the omnipresent clouds that hung like a death mask high above. It had been weeks since those clouds had budged, and the wan, yellowed grass showed it.

The wind churned morning mist, moving southward, chilling a small pride of torm. They reclined on a flat, lichen-stained granite shelf, waiting to bask in morning sunlight that would not arrive. The wind poured over the shelf, racing down a hillside of scraggly mura trees, with ropelike bark and green tufts of thick, needlelike leaves atop them.

At the base of the foothills, the wind turned eastward, passing an open plain kept free of trees and scrub by the soldier's axe. The killing field surrounded thirteen fortresses, tall and cut entirely from unpolished black marble, their blocks left rough-hewn to give them a primal feeling of unformed strength. These were towers meant for war. By tradition they were unoccupied. How long that would last—how long tradition itself would be remembered in a continent in chaos—remained to be seen.

The wind continued eastward, and soon it was playing with the masts of half-burned ships at the docks of Takisrom. Out into the Sleeping Bay, it passed the attackers: enormous greatships with sails painted blood red. They sailed southward, their grisly work done.

The wind blew onto land again, past smoldering towns and villages, open plains filled with troops and docks fat with warships. Smoke, war calls and banners flew above dying grass and beneath a dockmaster's gloomy sky.

Men did not whisper that this might be the end of times. They yelled it. The Fields of Peace were aflame, the Tower of Ravens was broken as prophesied and a murderer openly ruled in Seandar. This was a time to lift one's sword and choose a side, then spill blood to give a final color to the dying land.

The wind howled eastward over the famed Emerald Cliffs and coursed out over the ocean. Behind, smoke seemed to rise from the entire continent of Seanchan.

For hours, the wind blew—making what would have been called tradewinds in another Age—twisting between whitecaps and dark, mysterious waves. Eventually, the wind encountered another continent, this one quiet, like a man holding his breath before the headsman's axe fell.

By the time the wind reached the enormous, broken-peaked mountain known as Dragonmount, it had lost much of its strength. It passed around the base of the mountain, then through a large orchard of apple trees, lit by early-afternoon sunlight. The once-green leaves had faded to yellow.

The wind passed by a low wooden fence, tied at its joints with tan linen twine. Two figures stood there: a youth and a somber man in his later years. The older man wore a pair of worn brown trousers and a loose white shirt with wooden buttons. His face was so furrowed with wrinkles that it seemed kin to the bark of the trees.

Almen Bunt didn't know a lot about orchards. Oh, he had planted a few trees back on his farm in Andor. Who didn't have a tree or two to fill in space on the dinner table? He'd planted a pair of walnut trees on the day he'd married Adrinne. It had felt good to have her trees there, outside his window, after she'd died.

Running an orchard was something else entirely. There were nearly three hundred trees in this field. It was his sister's orchard; he was visiting while his sons managed his farm near Carysford.

In his shirt pocket, Almen carried a letter from his sons. A desperate letter, pleading for help, but he couldn't go to them. He was needed here.

Besides, it was a good time for him to be out of Andor. He was a Queen's man. There had been times, recently, when being a Queen's man could get someone into as much trouble as having one too many cows in his pasture.

"What do we do, Almen?" Adim asked. "Those trees, they . . . Well, it ain't supposed to happen like this." The boy of thirteen had golden hair from his father's side.

Almen rubbed his chin, scratching at a patch of whiskers he'd missed during shaving. Hahn, Adim's older brother, approached them. The lad had carved Almen a set of wooden teeth as an arrival gift earlier in the spring. Wondrous things, held together by wires, with gaps for the few remaining teeth he had. But if he chewed too hard, they'd go all out of shape.

The rows of trees were straight and perfectly spaced. Graeger—Almen s brother-in-law—always had been meticulous. But he was dead now, which was why Almen had come. The neat rows of trees continued on for spans and spans, carefully pruned, fertilized, and watered.

And during the night, every single one of them had shed their fruit. Tiny apples, barely as large as a man's thumb. Thousands of them. They'd shriveled during the night, then fallen. An entire crop, gone.

"I don't know what to say, lads," Almen finally admitted.

"You, at a loss for words?" Hahn said. Adim's brother had darker coloring, like his mother, and was tall for his fifteen years. "Uncle, you usually have as much to say as a gleeman who's been at the brandy for half the night!" Hahn liked to maintain a strong front for his brother, now that he was the man of the family. But sometimes it was good to be worried.

And Almen was worried. Very worried.

"We barely have a week's grain left," Adim said softly. "And what we've got, we got by promises on the crop. Nobody will give us anything, now. Nobody has anything."

The orchard was one of the largest producers in the region; half the men in the village worked it during one stage or another. They were depending on it. They needed it. With so much food going bad, with their stores used up during the unnatural winter . . .

And then there was the incident that had killed Graeger. The man had walked around a corner over in Negin Bridge and vanished. When people went looking, all they found was a twisted, leafless tree with a gray-white trunk that smelled of sulphur.

The Dragon's Fang had been scrawled on a few doors that night. People were more and more nervous. Once, Almen would have named them all fools, jumping at shadows and seeing bloody Trollocs under every cobblestone.

Now . . . well, now he wasn't so sure. He glanced eastward, toward Tar Valon. Could the witches be to blame for the failed crop? He hated being so close to their nest, but Alysa needed the help.

They'd chopped down that tree and burned it. You could still smell brimstone in the square.

"Uncle?" Hahn said, sounding uncomfortable. "What . . . what do we do?"

"I . . ." What did they do? "Burn me, but we should all go to Caemlyn. I'm sure the new Queen has everything cleared up there by now. We can get me settled right by the law. Who ever heard of such a thing, gaining a price on your head for speaking out in favor of the Queen?" He realized he was rambling. The boys kept looking at him.

"No," Almen continued. "Burn me, boys, but that's wrong. We can't go. We need to keep on working. This isn't any worse than when I lost my entire millet field to a late frost twenty years back. We'll get through this, right as Light we will."

The trees themselves looked fine. Not an insect bite on them, leaves a little yellowed, but still good. Sure, the spring buds had come late, and the apples had grown slowly. But they had been growing.

"Hahn," Almen found himself saying. "You know your father's felling axe has those chips on it? Why don't you go about getting it sharpened? Adim, go fetch Uso and Moor and their carts. We'll sort through those fallen apples and see if any aren't rotted too badly. Maybe the pigs will take them." At least they still had two. But there'd been no piglets this spring.

The youths hesitated.

"Go on now," Almen said. "No use dallying because we've had a setback."

The lads hastened off, obedient. Idle hands made idle minds. Some work would keep them from thinking about what was to come.

There was no helping that for him. He leaned down on the fence, feeling the rough grooves of the unsanded planks under his arms. That wind tugged at the tails of his shirt again; Adrinne had always forced him to tuck it in, but now that she was gone, he . . . well, he never had liked wearing it that way.

He tucked the shirt in anyway.

The air smelled wrong somehow. Stale, like the air inside a city. Flies were starting to buzz around the shriveled bits that had once been apples.

Almen had lived a long time. He'd never kept count; Adrinne had done that for him. It wasn't important. He knew he'd seen a lot of years, and that was that.

He'd seen insects attack a crop; he'd seen plants lost to flood, to drought, or to negligence. But in all his years, he'd never seen anything like this. This was something evil. The village was already starving. They didn't talk about it, not when the children or youths were around. The adults quietly gave what they had to the young and to women who were nursing. But the cows were going dry, the stores spoiling, the crops dying.

The letter in his pocket said his own farm had been set upon by passing mercenaries. They hadn't harmed anyone, but they'd taken every scrap of food. His sons survived only by digging half-grown potatoes from the crop and boiling them. They found nineteen out of every twenty rotting in the ground, inexplicably full of worms despite green growth above.

Dozens of nearby villages were suffering the same way. No food to be had. Tar Valon itself was having trouble feeding its people.

Staring down those neat, perfect rows of useless apple trees, Almen felt the crushing weight of it. Of trying to remain positive. Of seeing all his sister had worked for fail and rot. These apples . . . they were supposed to have saved the village, and his sons.

His stomach rumbled. It did that a lot lately.

This is it then, isn't it? he thought, eyes toward the too-yellow grass below. The fight just ended.

Almen slumped down, feeling a weight on his shoulders. Adrinne, he thought. There had been a time when he'd been quick to laugh, quick to talk. Now he felt worn, like a post that had been sanded and sanded and sanded until only a sliver was left. Maybe it was time to let go.

He felt something on his neck. Warmth.

He hesitated, then turned weary eyes toward the sky. Sunlight bathed his face. He gaped; it seemed so long since he'd seen pure sunlight. It shone down through a large break in the clouds, comforting, like the warmth of an oven baking a loaf of Adrinne's thick sourdough bread.

Almen stood, raising a hand to shade his eyes. He took a deep, long breath, and smelled . . . apple blossoms? He spun with a start.

The apple trees were flowering.

That was plain ridiculous. He rubbed his eyes, but that didn't dispel the image. They were blooming, all of them, white flowers breaking out between the leaves. The flies buzzed into the air and zipped away on the wind. The dark bits of apple on the ground melted away, like wax before a flame. In seconds, there was nothing left of them, not even juice. The ground had absorbed them.

What was happening? Apple trees didn't blossom twice. Was he going mad?

Footsteps sounded softly on the path that ran past the orchard. Almen spun to find a tall young man walking down out of the foothills. He had deep red hair and he wore ragged clothing: a brown cloak with loose

sleeves and a simple white linen shirt beneath. The trousers were finer, black with a delicate embroidery of gold at the cuff.

"Ho, stranger," Almen said, raising a hand, not knowing what else to say, not even sure if he'd seen what he thought he'd seen. "Did you . . . did you get lost up in the foothills?"

The man stopped, turning sharply. He seemed surprised to find Almen there. With a start, Almen realized the man's left arm ended in a stump.

The stranger looked about, then breathed in deeply. "No. I'm not lost. Finally. It feels like a great long time since I've understood the path before me."

Almen scratched the side of his face. Burn him, there was another patch he'd missed shaving. His hand had been shaking so much that he might as well have skipped the razor entirely. "Not lost? Son, that pathway only leads up the slopes of Dragonmount. The area's been hunted clean, if you were hoping to find some game. There's nothing back there of use."

"I wouldn't say that," the stranger said, glancing over his shoulder. "There are always things of use around, if you look closely enough. You can't stare at them too long. To learn but not be overwhelmed, that is the balance."

Almen folded his arms. The man's words ... it seemed they were having two different conversations. Perhaps the lad wasn't right in the head.

There was something about the man, though. The way he stood, the way those eyes of his stared with such calm intensity. Almen felt like standing up and dusting off his shirt to make himself more presentable.

"Do I know you?" Almen asked. Something about the young man was familiar.

"Yes," the lad said. Then he nodded toward the orchard. "Gather your people and collect those apples. They'll be needed in the days to come."

"The apples?" Almen said, turning. "But—" He froze. The trees were burgeoning with new, ripe red apples. The blossoms he'd seen earlier had fallen free, and blanketed the ground in white, like snow.

Those apples seemed to shine. Not just dozens of them on each tree, but hundreds. More than a tree should hold, each one perfectly ripe.

"I am going mad," Almen said, turning back to the man.

"It's not you who is mad, friend," the stranger said. "But the entire world. Gather those apples quickly. My presence will hold him off for a time, I think, and whatever you take now should be safe from his touch."

That voice . . . Those eyes, like gray gemstones cut and set in his face. "I do know you," Almen said, remembering an odd pair of youths he had given a lift in his cart years ago. "Light! You're him, aren't you? The one they're talking about?"

The man looked back at Almen. Meeting those eyes, Almen felt a strange sense of peace. "It is likely," the man said. "Men are often speaking of me." He smiled, then turned and continued on his way down the path.

"Wait," Almen said, raising a hand toward the man who could only be the Dragon Reborn. "Where are you going?"

The man looked back with a faint grimace. "To do something I've been putting off. I doubt she will be pleased by what I tell her."

Almen lowered his hand, watching as the stranger strode away, down a pathway between two fenced orchards, trees laden with blood-red apples. Almen thought—for a moment—he could see something around the man. A lightness to the air, warped and bent.

Almen watched the man until he vanished, then dashed toward Alysa's house. The old pain in his hip was gone, and he felt as if he could run a dozen leagues. Halfway to the house, he met Adim and the two workers coming to the orchard. They regarded him with concerned eyes as he pulled to a halt.

Unable to speak, Almen turned and pointed back at the orchards. The apples were red specks, dotting the green like freckles.

"What's that?" Uso asked, rubbing his long face. Moor squinted, then began running toward the orchard.

"Gather everyone," Almen said, winded. "Everyone from the village, from the villages nearby, people passing on Shyman's road. Everyone. Get them here to gather and pick."

"Pick what?" Adim asked with a frown.

"Apples," Almen said. "What else bloody grows on apple trees! Listen, we need every one of those apples picked before the day ends. You hear me? Go! Spread the word! There's a harvest after all!"

They ran off to look, of course. It was hard to blame them for that. Almen continued on, and as he did, he noticed for the first time that the grass around him seemed greener, healthier.

He looked eastward. Almen felt a pull inside of him. Something was tugging him softly in the direction the stranger had gone.

Apples first, he thought. Then . . . well, then he'd see.

CHAPTER
2

Questions of Leadership

Thunder rumbled above, soft and menacing like the growl of a distant beast. Perrin turned his eyes toward the sky. A few days ago, the pervasive cloud cover had turned black, darkening like the advent of a horrible storm. But rain had come only in spurts.

Another rumble shook the air. There was no lightning. Perrin patted Stayer on the neck; the horse smelled skittish—prickly, sweaty. The horse wasn't the only one. That scent hung above his enormous force of troops and refugees as they tramped across the muddy ground. That force created a thunder of its own, footsteps, hoofbeats, wagon wheels turning, men and women calling.

They had nearly reached the Jehannah Road. Originally, Perrin had planned to cross that and continue on northward, toward Andor. But he'd lost a great deal of time to the sickness that had struck his camp—both Asha'man had nearly died. Then this thick mud had slowed them even further. All told, it had been over a month since they'd left Maiden, and they'd traveled only as far as Perrin had originally hoped to go in a week.

Perrin put his hand into his coat pocket, feeling at the small blacksmith's puzzle there. They'd found it in Maiden, and he'd taken to riddling with it. So far, he hadn't figured out how to get the pieces apart. It was as complex a puzzle as he'd ever seen.

There was no sign of Master Gill or the people Perrin had sent on ahead with supplies. Grady had managed a few small gateways ahead to send scouts to find them, but they had returned without news. Perrin was beginning to worry about them.

"My Lord?" a man asked. He stood beside Perrin's horse. Turne was a lanky fellow with curly red hair and a beard he tied off with leather cords. He carried a warrior's axe in a loop at his belt, a wicked thing with a spike at the back.

"We can't pay you much," Perrin said. "Your men don't have horses?"

"No, my Lord," Turne said, glancing at his dozen companions. "Jarr had one. We ate it a few weeks back." Turne smelled unwashed and dirty, and above those scents was an odd staleness. Had the man's emotions gone numb? "If you don't mind, my Lord. Wages can wait. If you have food . . . well, that will be enough for now."

/ should turn them away, Perrin thought. We already have too many mouths to feed. Light, he was supposed to be getting rid of people. But these fellows looked handy with their weapons, and if he turned them away, they'd no doubt turn to pillaging.

"Go walk down the line," Perrin said. "Find a man named Tam al'Thor — he's a sturdy fellow, dressed like a farmer. Anyone should be able to point you in his direction. Tell him you spoke to Perrin, and I said to take you on for meals."

The dirty men relaxed, and their lanky leader actually smelled grateful. Grateful! Sell-swords—maybe bandits—grateful to be taken on only for meals. That was the state of the world.

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"Tell me, my Lord," Turne said as his group began to hike down the line of refugees. "Do you really have food?"

"We do," Perrin said. "I just said so."

"And it doesn't spoil after a night left alone?"

"Course it doesn't," Perrin said sternly. "Not if you keep it right." Some of their grain might have weevils in it, but it was edible. The man seemed to find that incredible, as if Perrin had said his wagons would soon sprout wings and fly off for the mountains.

"Go on now," Perrin said. "And make sure to tell your men that we run a tight camp. No fighting, no stealing. If I get a whiff of you making trouble, you'll be out on your ears."

"Yes, my Lord," Turne said, then hastened off to join his men. He smelled sincere. Tam wasn't going to be pleased to have another batch of mercenaries to watch over, but the Shaido were still out there somewhere. Most of them seemed to have turned eastward. But with how slowly Perrin's force had been traveling, he was worried the Aiel might change their minds and come back for him.

He nudged Stayer forward, flanked by a pair of Two Rivers men. Now that Aram was gone, the Two Rivers men had—unfortunately—taken it upon themselves to provide Perrin with bodyguards. Todays annoyances were Wil al'Seen and Reed Soalen. Perrin had tried chewing out the men about it. But they insisted, and he had bigger worries to bother him, not the least of which were his strange dreams. Haunting visions of working the forges and being unable to create anything of worth.

Put them out of your mind, he told himself, riding up the long column, al'Seen and Soalen keeping up. You have nightmares enough while awake. Deal with those first.

The meadow around him was open, though the grass was yellowing, and he noticed with displeasure several large swaths of dead wildflowers, rotting. The spring rains had turned most areas like this into mud traps. Moving so many refugees was slow, even discounting the bubble of evil and the mud. Everything took longer than he expected, including getting out of Maiden.

The force kicked up mud as it marched; most of the refugees' trousers and skirts were covered with it, and the air was thick with its sticky scent. Perrin neared the front of their line, passing riders in red breastplates, lances held high, their helms like rimmed pots. The Winged Guard of Mayene.

Lord Gallenne rode at their front, red-plumed helm held at his side. His bearing was formal enough that you might think he was riding in a parade, but his single eye was keen as he scanned the countryside. He was a good soldier. There were a lot of good soldiers in this force, though sometimes it was tough as bending a horseshoe to keep their hands from one another's throats.

"Lord Perrin!" a voice shouted. Arganda, First Captain of Ghealdan, pushed through the Mayener lines riding a tall roan gelding. His troops rode in a wide column beside the Mayeners—ever since Alliandre's return, Arganda had been set on equal treatment. He'd complained that the Winged Guard often rode in front. Rather than spur further arguments, Perrin had ordered their columns to ride side by side.

"Was that another batch of mercenaries?" Arganda demanded, pulling his horse up beside Perrin.

"A small band," Perrin said. "Probably once the guard of some local city's lord."

"Deserters." Arganda spat to the side. "You should have sent for me.

My queen would want them strung up! Don't forget that we're in Gheal-dan now."

"Your queen is my leigewoman," Perrin said as they reached the front of the column. "We're not stringing anyone up unless we have proof of their crimes. Once everyone is safely back where they belong, you can start sorting through the sell-swords and see if you can charge any of them. Until then, they're just hungry men looking for someone to follow."

Arganda smelled frustrated. Perrin had gained a few weeks of goodwill from him and Gallenne following the successful assault on Maiden, but old divisions were resurfacing in the endless mud, under a sky full of tumbling thunderheads.

"Don't worry yourself," Perrin said. "I have men watching over the newcomers." He also had them watching the refugees. Some were so docile that they would hardly go to the privy without being instructed to do so; others kept looking over their shoulders, as if expecting Shaido to spring from the distant line of oaks and sweetgum trees at any moment. People who smelled that terrified could be trouble, and the various factions of his camp already walked as if trudging through itchweed.

"You may send someone to talk to the newcomers, Arganda," Perrin said. "Talk only. Find out where they're from, learn whether they did serve a lord, see if they can add anything to the maps." They didn't have any good maps of the area, and had been forced to have the Ghealdanin men—Arganda included—draw some from memory.

Arganda rode off, and Perrin moved to the front of the column. Being in charge did have its nice moments; up here, the smells of unwashed bodies and pungent mud weren't nearly so strong. Ahead, he could finally see the Jehannah Road like a long strap of leather cutting through the highland plains, running in a northwestern direction.

Perrin rode, lost in thought for a time. Eventually, they reached the roadway. The mud didn't look as bad on the road as it had in the meadows — though if it were like any other road Perrin had traveled on, it would have its mires and washed-out sections. As he reached it, he noticed Gaul approaching. The Aiel had been off scouting ahead, and as Perrin's horse stepped up onto the road, he noticed that someone was riding behind Gaul up toward them.

It was Fennel, one of the farriers that Perrin had sent ahead with Master Gill and the others. Perrin felt a wash of relief to see him, but it was followed by worry. Where were the others?

"Lord Perrin!" the man said, riding up. Gaul stepped to the side. Fennel

was a wide-shouldered man, and carried a long-handled workman's axe strapped to his back. He smelled of relief. "Praise the Light. I thought you'd never get here. Your man says the rescue worked?"

"It did, Fennel," Perrin said, frowning. "Where are the others?"

"They went on ahead, my Lord," Fennel said, bowing from horseback. "I volunteered to stay behind, for when you caught up. We needed to explain, you see."

"Explain?"

"The rest turned toward Lugard," Fennel explained. "Along the road."

"What?" Perrin said, frustrated. "I gave them orders to continue northward!"

"My Lord," Fennel said, looking abashed. "We met travelers coming from that way; said that mud made the roads to the north almost completely impassable for wagons or carts. Master Gill decided that heading to Caemlyn through Lugard would be the best way to follow your orders. Sorry, my Lord. That's why one of us had to stay behind."

Light! No wonder the scouts hadn't found Gill and the others. They'd gone in the wrong direction. Well, after slogging through mud for weeks himself—sometimes having to stop and wait out storms—Perrin couldn't blame them for deciding to take the road. That didn't stop him from feeling frustrated.

"How far behind are we?" Perrin asked.

"I've been here five days, my Lord."

So Gill and the others had been slowed too. Well, that was something, at least.

"Go get yourself something to eat, Fennel," Perrin said. "And thank you for staying behind to let me know what happened. It was a brave thing you did, waiting alone for so long."

"Somebody had to do it, my Lord." He hesitated. "Most feared you hadn't . . . well, that things had gone wrong, my Lord. You see, we figured you'd be faster than us, since we had those carts. But from the look of things here, you decided to bring the entire town with you!"

It wasn't far from the truth, unfortunately. He waved Fennel on.

"I found him about an hour along the road," Gaul said softly. "Beside a hill that would make an excellent camp. Well watered, with a good view of the surrounding area."

Perrin nodded. They'd have to decide what to do—wait until Grady and Neald could make large gateways, follow along after Master Gill and the others on foot, or send most people northward and send only a few toward

Lugard. Regardless of the decision, it would be good to camp for the day and sort through things. "Pass the word to the others, if you will," Perrin said to Gaul. "We'll hike down the road to the place you found, then discuss what to do next. And ask some of the Maidens if they'd scout along the road in the other direction to make sure we're not going to be surprised by anyone moving up the road behind us."

Gaul nodded and moved off to pass the word. Perrin remained sitting atop Stayer, thinking. He had half a mind to send Arganda and AUiandre off to the northwest right now, setting on a path to Jehannah. But the Maidens had picked out some Shaido scouts watching his army. Those were probably there to make sure Perrin wasn't a threat, but they made him uneasy. These were dangerous times.

It was best to keep AUiandre and her people with him for now, both for her safety and his own, at least until Grady and Neald recovered. The snakebites from the bubble of evil had affected the two of them and Masuri—the only one of the Aes Sedai who had been bitten—worse than the others.

Still, Grady was starting to look hale again. Soon he'd be able to make a gateway large enough to move the army through. Then Perrin could send AUiandre and the Two Rivers men home. He himself could Travel back to Rand, pretend to make up—most people would still think that he and Rand had parted ways angrily—and then finally be rid of Berelain and her Winged Guard. Everything could go back to the way it should be.

Light send it all went that easily. He shook his head, dispelling the swirling colors and visions that appeared to his eyes whenever he thought of Rand.

Nearby, Berelain and her force were marching out onto the road, looking very pleased to reach some solid footing. The beautiful dark-haired woman wore a fine green dress and a belt of firedrops. Her neckline was discomfortingly low. He'd started relying on her during Faile's absence, once she'd stopped treating him like a prize boar to be hunted and skinned.

Faile was back now, and it appeared his truce with Berelain was over. As usual, Annoura rode near her, though she didn't spend the time chatting with Berelain as she once had. Perrin never had figured out why she'd been meeting with the Prophet. Probably never would, considering what had happened to Masema. A day out of Maiden, Perrin's scouts had run across a group of corpses that had been killed with arrows and robbed of their shoes, belts, and any valuables. Though ravens had gotten the eyes, Perrin had smelled Masema's scent through the rot.

The Prophet was dead, killed by bandits. Well, perhaps that was a fitting end for him, but Perrin still felt he'd failed. Rand had wanted Masema brought to him. The colors swirled again. Either way, it was time for Perrin to return to Rand. The colors swirled, showing Rand standing in front of a building with a burned front, staring westward. Perrin banished the image. His duty was done, the Prophet seen to, Alliandre's allegiance secure. Only, Perrin felt as if something were still very wrong. He fingered the blacksmith's puzzle in his pocket. To understand something. . . you have to figure out its parts . . .

He smelled Faile before she reached him, heard her horse on the soft earth. "So, Gill turned toward Lugard?" she asked, stopping beside him.

He nodded.

"That may have been wise. Perhaps we should turn that way too. Were those more sell-swords who joined us?"

"Yes."

"We must have picked up five thousand people these last few weeks," she said thoughtfully. "Perhaps more. Odd, in this desolate landscape."

She was beautiful, with her raven hair and strong features—a good Saldaean nose set between two tilted eyes. She was dressed for riding in deep wine red. He loved her dearly, and praised the Light that he'd gotten her back. Why did he feel so awkward around her now?

"You're troubled, my husband," she noted. She understood him so well, it was almost as if she could read scents. It seemed to be a thing of women, though. Berelain could do it too.

"We've gathered too many people," he said with a grunt. "I should start turning them away."

"I suspect they'd find their way back to our force anyway."

"Why should they? I could leave orders."

"You can't give orders to the Pattern itself, my husband." She glanced over at the column of people as they moved onto the road.

"What do—" He cut off, catching her meaning. "You think this is me? Being ta'veren?'

"Every stop along our trip, you've gained more followers," Faile said. "Despite our losses against the Aiel, we came out of Maiden with a stronger force than when we started. Haven't you found it odd that so many of the former gai'shain are taking to Tarn's training with weapons?"

"They were beaten down so long," Perrin said. "They want to stop that from happening again."

"And so coopers learn the sword," Faile said, "and find they have a talent for it. Masons who never thought of fighting back against the Shaido now train with the quarterstaff. Sell-swords and armsmen flock to us."

"It's coincidence."

"Coincidence?" She sounded amused. "With a ta'veren at the army's head?"

She was right, and as he fell silent, he could smell her satisfaction at winning the argument. He didn't think of it as an argument, but she'd see it as one. If anything, she'd be mad that he hadn't raised his voice.

"This is all going to end in a few days, Faile," he said. "Once we have gateways again, I'll send these people to their proper places. I'm not gathering an army. I'm helping some refugees to get home." The last thing he needed was more people calling him "my Lord" and bowing and scraping.

"We shall see," she said.

"Faile." He sighed and lowered his voice. "A man's got to see a thing for what it is. No sense in calling a buckle a hinge or calling a nail a horseshoe. I've told you; I'm not a good leader. I proved that."

"That's not how I see it."

He gripped the blacksmith's puzzle in his pocket. They'd discussed this during the weeks since Maiden, but she refused to see sense. "The camp was a mess while you were gone, Faile! I've told you how Arganda and the Maidens nearly killed one another. And Aram—Masema corrupted him right under my nose. The Aes Sedai played at games I can't guess, and the Two Rivers men . . . you see how they look at me with shame in their eyes."

Faile's scent spiked with anger when he said that, and she turned sharply toward Berelain.

"It's not her fault," Perrin said. "If I'd been able to think of it, I'd have stopped the rumors dead. But I didn't. Now I've got to sleep in the bed I made for myself. Light! What is a man if his own neighbors don't think well of him? I'm no lord, Faile, and that's that. I've proven it soundly."

"Odd," she said. "But I've been speaking to the others, and they tell a different story. They say that you kept Arganda contained and put out flare-ups in camp. Then there's the alliance with the Seanchan; the more I learn of that, the more impressed I am. You acted decisively in a time of great uncertainty, you focused everyone's efforts, and you accomplished the impossible in taking Maiden. Those are the actions of a leader."

"Faile . . ." he said, suppressing a growl. Why wouldn't she listen? When she'd been a captive, nothing had mattered to him but recovering her. Noth-ing. It didn't matter who had needed his help, or what orders he'd been given. Tarmon Gai'don itself could have started, and he'd have ignored it in order to find Faile.

He realized now how dangerous his actions had been. Trouble was, he'd take those same actions again. He didn't regret what he'd done, not for a moment. A leader couldn't be like that.

He never should have let them raise that wolfhead banner in the first place. Now that he'd completed his tasks, now that Faile was back, it was time to put all of that foolishness behind him. Perrin was a blacksmith. It didn't matter what Faile dressed him in, or what titles people gave him. You couldn't make a drawknife into a horseshoe by painting it, or by calling it something different.

He turned to the side, where Jori Congar rode before the column, that blasted red wolfhead banner flapping proudly from a pole taller than a cavalryman's lance. Perrin opened his mouth to shout for him to take it down, but Faile spoke suddenly.

"Yes, indeed," she said, musingly. "I've been thinking on this for the last few weeks, and—odd though it seems—I believe my captivity may have been precisely what we needed. Both of us."

What? Perrin turned to her, smelling her thoughtfulness. She believed what she'd said.

"Now," Faile said, "we need to speak of—"

"Scouts returning," he said, perhaps more abruptly than he intended. "Aiel up ahead."

Faile glanced as he pointed, but of course she couldn't see anything yet. She knew of his eyes, though. She was one of the few who did.

The call went up as others noticed the three figures in cadin'sor approaching alongside the road, the ones Perrin had sent to scout. Two Maidens hurried for the Wise Ones and one loped up to Perrin.

"There is something beside the road, Perrin Aybara," the woman said. She smelled concerned. That was a dangerous sign. "It is something that you will wish to see."

Galad woke to the sound of a tent flap rustling. Sharp pains burned at his side where he had been repeatedly kicked; they matched the duller aches on his shoulder, left arm, and thigh where he'd been wounded by Valda. His pounding headache was almost strong enough to drown out all else.

He groaned, rolling onto his back. All was dark around him, but pinprick lights shone in the sky. Stars? It had been overcast for so long.

No . . . something was wrong about them. His head pulsed with pain, and he blinked tears from the corner of his eyes. Those stars looked so faint, so distant. They made no familiar patterns. Where could Asunawa have taken him that the very stars were different?

As his mind cleared, he began to make out his surroundings. This was a heavy sleeping tent, constructed to be dark during the daylight hours. The lights above weren't stars at all, but sunlight through the occasional pinholes of wear in the canvas.

He was still naked, and with tentative fingers he determined that there was dried blood on his face. It had come from a long gash in his forehead. If he didn't wash it soon, infection was likely. He lay on his back, breathing in and out with care. If he took in too much air at once, his side screamed.

Galad did not fear death or pain. He had made the right choices. It was unfortunate that he'd needed to leave the Questioners in charge; they were controlled by the Seanchan. However, there had been no other option, not after he'd walked into Asunawa's hands.

Galad felt no anger at the scouts who had betrayed him. The Questioners were a valid source of authority in the Children, and their lies had no doubt been convincing. No, the one he was angry at was Asunawa, who took what was true and muddied it. There were many who did that in the world, but the Children should be different.

Soon the Questioners would come for him, and then the true price for saving his men would be exacted with their hooks and knives. He had been aware of that price when he'd made his decision. In a way, he had won, for he had manipulated the situation best.

The other way to ensure his victory was to hold to the truth under their questioning. To deny being a Darkfriend with his final breath. It would be difficult, but it would be right.

He forced himself to sit up, expecting—and weathering—the dizziness and nausea. He felt around. His legs were chained together, and that chain was locked to a spike that had been driven deep into the earth, piercing the rough canvas tent bottom.

He tried yanking it free, just in case. He pulled so hard that his muscles failed him and he nearly passed out. Once he had recovered, he crawled to the side of the tent. His chains gave him enough room to reach the flaps. He took one of the cloth ties—used to hold the flaps up when they were opened—and spat on it. Then, methodically, he wiped the grime and blood from his face.

The cleaning gave him a goal, kept him moving and stopped him from thinking about the pain. He carefully scrubbed the crusted blood from his cheek and nose. It was difficult; his mouth was dry. He bit down on his tongue to get saliva. The strips were not canvas, but a lighter material. They smelled of dust.

He spat on a fresh section, then worked the spittle into the cloth. The wound to his head, the dirt on his face . . . these things were marks of victory for the Questioners. He would not leave them. He would go into their tortures with a clean face.

He heard shouts outside. Men preparing to break down the camp. Would that delay their questioning? He doubted it. Striking camp could take hours. Galad continued cleaning, soiling the lengths of both straps, using the work as a kind of ritual, a rhythmic pattern to give him a focus for meditation. His headache withdrew, the pains of his body becoming less significant.

He would not run. Even if he could escape, fleeing would invalidate his bargain with Asunawa. But he would face his enemies with self-respect.

As he finished, he heard voices outside the tent. They were coming for him. He scrabbled quietly back to the stake in the ground. Taking a deep breath despite the pain, he rolled onto his knees. Then he took the top of the iron spike in his left hand and pushed, heaving himself to his feet.

He wobbled, then steadied himself, standing up all the way. His pains were nothing, now. He had felt insect bites that were worse. He put his feet wide in a warriors stance, his hands held before himself with his wrists crossed. He opened his eyes, back straight, staring at the tent flaps. It wasn't the cloak, the uniform, the heraldry, or the sword that made a man. It was the way he held himself.

The flaps rustled, then drew open. The outside light was brilliant to Galad s eyes, but he did not blink. He did not flinch.

Silhouettes moved against an overcast sky. They hesitated, backlit. He could tell they were surprised to see him standing there.

"Light!" one exclaimed. "Damodred, how is it that you're awake?" Unexpectedly, the voice was familiar.

"Trom?" Galad asked, his voice ragged.

Men spilled into the room. As his eyes adjusted, Galad made out stocky Trom, along with Bornhald and Byar. Trom fumbled with a set of keys.

"Stop!" Galad said. "I gave orders to you three. Bornhald, there is blood on your cloak! I commanded you not to try to free me!"

"Your men obeyed your orders, Damodred," a new voice said. Galad looked up to see three men entering the room: Berab Golever, tall and bearded; Alaabar Harnesh, his bald, shadowed head missing its left ear; Brandel Vordarian, a blond hulk of a man from Galad's native Andor. All three were Lords Captain, all three had stood with Asunawa.

"What is this?" Galad asked them.

Harnesh opened a sack and dumped something bulbous to the ground in front of Galad. A head.

Asunawa's.

All three men drew swords and knelt before him, the points of their weapons stabbing the canvas. Trom unlocked the manacles at Galad's feet.

"I see," Galad said. "You have turned your swords on fellow Children."

"What would you have had us do?" Brandel asked, looking up from his kneeling position.

Galad shook his head. "I do not know. Perhaps you are right; I should not chide you on this choice. It may have been the only one you could have made. But why did you change your minds?"

"We have lost two Lords Captain Commander in under half a year," Harnesh said in a gruff voice. "The Fortress of the Light has become a playground for the Seanchan. The world is in chaos."

"And yet," Golever said, "Asunawa marched us all the way out here to have us battle our fellow Children. It was not right, Damodred. We all saw how you presented yourself, we all saw how you stopped us from killing one another. Faced with that, and with the High Inquisitor naming as Darkfriend a man we all know to be honorable . . . Well, how could we not turn against him?"

Galad nodded. "You accept me as Lord Captain Commander?"

The three men bowed their heads. "All the Lords Captain are for you," Golever said. "We were forced to kill a third of those who wore the red shepherd's crook of the Hand of the Light. Some others united with us; some tried to flee. The Amadicians did not interfere, and many have said they'd rather join with us than return to the Seanchan. We have the other Amadicians—and the Questioners who tried to run—held at swordpoint."

"Let free those who wish to leave," Galad said. "They may return to their families and their masters. By the time they reach the Seanchan, we will be beyond their grasp."

The men nodded.

"I accept your allegiance," Galad said. "Gather the other Lords Captain and fetch me supply reports. Strike camp. We march for Andor."

None of them asked whether he needed rest, though Trom did look worried. Galad accepted the white robe a Child brought to him, and then

sat in a hastily supplied chair as another-Child Candeiar, a man expert in wounds entered to inspect his injuries. Galad didn't feel wise or strong enough to bear the title he did.

But the Children had made their decision. The light would protect them for it.

CHAPTER
3

The Arnyrlin's Anger

Egwene floated in blackness. She was without form, lacking shape or body. The thoughts, imaginings, worries, hopes, and ideas of all the world extended into eternity around her.

This was the place between dreams and the waking world, a blackness pinpricked with thousands upon thousands of distinct lights, each more focused and intense than the stars of the skies. They were dreams, and she could look in on them, but did not. The ones she wanted to see were warded, and most of the others were mysteries to her.

There was one dream she longed to slip into. She restrained herself. Though her feelings for Gawyn were still strong, her opinion of him was muddled recently. Getting lost in his dreams would not help.

She turned about, looking through the expanse. Recently, she'd started coming here to float and think. The dreams of all the people here—some from her world, some from shadows of it—reminded her why she fought.

She must never forget that there was an entire world outside the White Tower's walls. The purpose of Aes Sedai was to serve that world.

Time passed as she lay bathed in the light of dreams. Eventually, she willed herself to move, and located a dream she recognized—though she wasn't certain how she did it. The dream swept up toward her, filling her vision.

She pressed her will against the dream and sent a thought into it. Nynaeve. It is time to stop avoiding me. There is work to be done, and I have news for you. Meet me in two nights in the Hall of the Tower. If you do not come, I will be forced to take measures. Your dalliance threatens us all.

The dream seemed to shudder, and Egwene pulled back as it vanished. She'd already spoken to Elayne. Those two were loose threads; they needed to be truly raised to the shawl, with the oaths administered.

Beyond that, Egwene needed information from Nynaeve. Hopefully, the threat mixed with a promise of news would bring her. And that news was important. The White Tower finally unified, the Amyrlin Seat secure, Elaida captured by the Seanchan.

Pinprick dreams streaked around Egwene. She considered trying to contact the Wise Ones, but decided against it. How should she deal with them? The first thing was to keep them from thinking they were being "dealt with." Her plan for them was not yet firm.

She let herself slip back into her body, content to spend the rest of the night with her own dreams. Here, she couldn't keep thoughts of Gawyn from visiting her, nor did she want to. She stepped into her dream, and into his embrace. They stood in a small stone-walled room shaped like her study in the Tower, yet decorated like the common room of her fathers inn. Gawyn was dressed in sturdy Two Rivers woolens and did not wear his sword. A more simple life. It could not be hers, but she could dream . . .

Everything shook. The room of past and present seemed to shatter, shredding into swirling smoke. Egwene stepped back, gasping, as Gawyn ripped apart as if made of sand. All was dust around her, and thirteen black towers rose in the distance beneath a tarlike sky.

One fell, and then another, crashing to the ground. As they did, the ones that remained grew taller and taller. The ground shook as several more towers fell. Another tower shook and cracked, collapsing most of the way to the ground—but then, it recovered and grew tallest of all.

At the end of the quake, six towers remained, looming above her. Egwene had fallen to the ground, which had become soft earth covered in withered leaves. The vision changed. She was looking down at a nest. In it, a group of fledgling eagles screeched toward the sky for their mother. One of the eaglets uncoiled, and it wasn't an eagle at all, but a serpent. It began to strike at the fledglings one at a time, swallowing them whole. The eaglets simply continued to stare into the sky, pretending that the serpent was their sibling as it devoured them.

The vision changed. She saw an enormous sphere made of the finest crystal. It sparkled in the light of twenty-three enormous stars, shining down on it where it sat on a dark hilltop. There were cracks in it, and it was being held together by ropes.

There was Rand, walking up the hillside, holding a woodsman's axe. He reached the top and hefted the axe, then swung at the ropes one at a rime, chopping them free. The last one parted, and the sphere began to break apart, the beautiful globe falling in pieces. Rand shook his head.

Egwene gasped, came awake, and sat upright. She was in her rooms in the White Tower. The bedchamber was nearly empty—she'd had Elaida's things removed, but hadn't completely furnished it again. She had only a washstand, a rug of thick-woven brown fibers, and a bed with posts and drapes. The window shutters were closed; morning sunlight peeked through.

She breathed in and out. Rarely did dreams unsettle her as much as this one had.

Calming herself, she reached down to the side of her bed, picking up the leather-bound book she kept there to record her dreams. The middle of the three this night was the clearest to her. She felt the meaning of it, interpreting it as she sometimes could. The serpent was one of the Forsaken, hidden in the White Tower, pretending to be Aes Sedai. Egwene had suspected this was the case—Verin had said she believed it so.

Mesaana was still in the White Tower. But how did she imitate an Aes Sedai? Every sister had resworn the oaths. Apparently Mesaana could defeat the Oath Rod. As Egwene carefully recorded the dreams, she thought about the towers, looming, threatening to destroy her, and she knew some of the meaning there too.

If Egwene did not find Mesaana and stop her, something terrible would happen. It could mean the fall of the White Tower, perhaps the victory of the Dark One. Dreams were not Foretellings—they didn't show what would happen, but what could.

Light, she thought, finishing her record. As if I didn't have enough to worry about.

Egwene rose to call her maids, but a knock at the door interrupted her. Curious, she walked across the thick rug—wearing only her nightgown—and opened the door enough to see Silviana standing in the antechamber. Square-featured and dressed in red, she had her hair up in its typical bun, and her red Keeper's stole over her shoulders.

'Mother," the woman said, her voice tense. "I apologize for waking you."

"I wasn't asleep," Egwene said. "What is it? What has happened?"

"He's here, Mother. At the White Tower."

"Who?"

"The Dragon Reborn. He's asking to see you."

* * *

"Well, this is a pot of fisherman's stew made only with the heads," Siuan said as she stalked through a hallway of the White Tower. "How did he get through the city without anyone seeing him?"

High Captain Chubain winced.

As well he should, Siuan thought. The raven-haired man wore the uniform of the Tower Guard, a white tabard over his mail emblazoned with the flame of Tar Valon. He walked with a hand on his sword. There had been some talk that he might be replaced as High Captain now that Bryne was in Tar Valon, but Egwene had followed Siuan's advice not to do so. Bryne didn't want to be High Captain, and he would be needed as a field general for the Last Battle.

Bryne was out with his men; finding quarters and food for fifty thousand troops was proving to be near impossible. She'd sent him word, and could feel him getting closer. Stern block of wood though the man was, Siuan felt that his stability would have been nice to have near her right now. The Dragon Reborn? Inside Tar Valon?

"It's not really that surprising he got so far, Siuan," Saerin said. The olive-skinned Brown had been with Siuan when they'd seen the captain racing by, pale-faced. Saerin had white at her temples, some measure of age as an Aes Sedai, and had a scar on one cheek, the origin of which Siuan hadn't been able to pry out of her.

"There are hundreds of refugees pouring into the city each day," Saerin continued, "and any man with half an inclination to fight is being sent for recruitment into the Tower Guard. It's no wonder nobody stopped al'Thor."

Chubain nodded. "He was at the Sunset Gate before anyone questioned him. And then he just . . . well, he just said he was the Dragon Reborn, and that he wanted to see the Amyrlin. Didn't yell it out or anything, said it calm as spring rain."

The hallways of the Tower were busy, though most of the women didn't seem to know what they were to do, darting this way and that like fish in a net.

Stop that, Siuan thought. He's come into our seat of power. He's the one caught in the net.

"What is his game, do you think?" Saerin asked.

"Burn me if I know," Siuan replied. "He's bound to be mostly insane by now. Maybe he's frightened, and has come to turn himself in."

"I doubt that."

'As do I," Siuan said grudgingly. During these last few days, she'd found—to her amazement—that she liked Saerin. As Amyrlin, Siuan hadn't had time for friendships; it had been too important to play the Ajahs off one another. She'd thought Saerin obstinate and frustrating. Now that they weren't butting heads so often, she found those attributes appealing.

"Maybe he heard that Elaida was gone," Siuan said, "and thought that he would be safe here, with an old friend on the Amyrlin Seat."

"That doesn't match what I've read of the boy," Saerin replied. "Reports call him mistrustful and erratic, with a demanding temper and an insistence on avoiding Aes Sedai."

That was what Siuan had heard as well, though it had been two years since she'd seen the boy. In fact, the last time he'd stood before her, she'd been the Amyrlin and he'd been a simple sheepherder. Most of what she knew of him since then had come through the Blue Ajah's eyes-and-ears. It took a great deal of skill to separate speculation from truth, but most agreed about al'Thor. Temperamental, distrustful, arrogant. Light burn Elaida! Siuan thought. If not for her, we'd have had him safely in Aes Sedai care long ago.

They climbed down three spiraling ramps and entered another of the White Tower's white-walled hallways, moving toward the Hall of the Tower. If the Amyrlin was going to receive the Dragon Reborn, then she'd do it there. Two twisting turns later—past mirrored stand-lamps and stately tapestries—they entered one last hallway and froze.

The floor tiles here were the color of blood. That wasn't right. The ones here should have been white and yellow. These glistened, as if wet.

Chubain inhaled sharply, hand going to his sword hilt. Saerin raised an eyebrow. Siuan was tempted to barrel onward, but these places where the Dark One had touched the world could be dangerous. She might find herself sinking through the floor, or being attacked by the tapestries.

The two Aes Sedai turned and walked the other way. Chubain lingered for a moment, then hurried after. It was easy to read the tension in his face. First the Seanchan, and now the Dragon Reborn himself, come to assault the Tower on his watch.

As they passed through the hallways, they met other sisters flowing in the same direction. Most of them wore their shawls. One might have argued that was because of the news of the day, but the truth was that many still held to their distrust of other Ajahs. Another reason to curse Elaida. Egwene had been working hard to reforge the Tower, but one couldn't mend years' worth of broken nets in one month.

They finally arrived at the Hall of the Tower. Sisters clustered in the wide hallway outside, divided by Ajah. Chubain hurried to speak with his guards at the door, and Saerin entered the Hall proper, where she could wait with the other Sitters. Siuan remained standing with the dozens outside.

Things were changing. Egwene had a new Keeper to replace Sheriarn. The choice of Silviana made a great deal of sense—the woman was known to have a level head, for a Red, and choosing her had helped forge the two halves of the Tower back together. But Siuan had harbored a small hope that she herself would be chosen. Now Egwene had so many demands on her time—and was becoming so capable on her own—that she was relying on Siuan less and less.

That was a good thing. But it was also infuriating.

The familiar hallways, the scent of freshly washed stone, the echoing of footsteps . . . When last she'd been in this place, she'd commanded it. No longer.

She had no mind to climb her way into prominence again. The Last Battle was upon them; she didn't want to spend her time dealing with the squabbles of the Blue Ajah as they reintegrated into the Tower. She wanted to do what she'd set out to do, all those years before with Moiraine. Shepherd the Dragon Reborn to the Last Battle.

Through the bond, she felt Bryne arrive before he spoke. "Now, there's a concerned face," he said, piercing the hallways dozens of hushed conversations as he walked up behind her.

Siuan turned to him. He was stately and remarkably calm—particularly for a man who had been betrayed by Morgase Trakand, then sucked into Aes Sedai politics, then told he was going to be leading his troops on the front lines of the Last Battle. But that was Bryne. Serene to a fault. He soothed her worries just by being there.

"You came faster than I'd assumed you'd be able to," she said. "And I do not have a 'concerned face,' Gareth Bryne. I'm Aes Sedai. My very nature is to be in control of myself and my surroundings."

"Yes," he said. "And yet, the more time I spend around the Aes Sedai, the more I wonder about that. Are they in control of their emotions? Or do those emotions just never change? If one is always concerned, one will always look the same."

She eyed him. "Fool man."

He smiled, turning to look through the hallway full of Aes Sedai and Warders. "I was already returning to the Tower with a report when your messenger found me. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said gruffly.

"They're nervous," he said. "I don't think I've ever seen the Aes Sedai like this."

"Well, can you blame us?" she snapped.

He looked at her, then raised a hand to her shoulder. His strong, callused fingers brushed her neck. "What is wrong?"

She took a deep breath, glancing to the side as Egwene finally arrived, walking toward the Hall in conversation with Silviana. As usual, the somber Gawyn Trakand lurked behind like a distant shadow. Unacknowledged by Egwene, not bonded as her Warder, yet not cast from the Tower either. He'd spent the nights since the reunification guarding Egwene's doors, despite the fact that it angered her.

As Egwene neared the entrance to the Hall, sisters stepped back and made way, some reluctantly, others reverently. She'd brought the Tower to its knees from the inside, while being beaten every day and doused with so much forkroot she could barely light a candle with the Power. So young. Yet what was age to Aes Sedai?

"I always thought I would be the one in there," Siuan said softly, just for Bryne. "That I would receive him, guide him. I was the one who was to be sitting in that chair."

Bryne's grip tightened. "Siuan, I . . ."

"Oh, don't be like that," she growled, looking at him. "I don't regret a thing."

He frowned.

"It's for the best," Siuan said, though it twisted her insides in knots to admit it. "For all her tyranny and foolishness, it is good that Elaida removed me, because that is what led us to Egwene. She'll do better than I could have. It's hard to swallow—I did well as Amyrlin, but I couldn't do that. Lead by presence instead of force, uniting instead of dividing. And so, I'm glad that Egwene is receiving him."

Bryne smiled, and he squeezed her shoulder fondly.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm proud of you."

She rolled her eyes. "Bah. That sentimentality of yours is going to drown me one of these days."

"You can't hide your goodness from me, Siuan Sanche. I see your heart."

"You are such a buffoon."

"Regardless. You brought us here, Siuan. Whatever heights that girl climbs to, she'll do it because you carved the steps for her."

"Yes, then handed the chisel to Elaida." Siuan glanced toward Egwene, who stood inside the doorway into the Hall. The young Amyrlin glanced over the women gathered outside, and nodded in greeting to Siuan. Maybe even a little in respect.

"She's what we need now," Bryne said, "but you're what we needed then. You did well, Siuan. She knows it, and the Tower knows it."

That felt very good to hear. "Well. Did you see him when you came in?"

"Yes," Bryne said. "He's standing below, watched over by at least a hundred Warders and twenty-six sisters—two full circles. Undoubtedly he's shielded, but all twenty-six women seemed in a near panic. Nobody dares touch him or bind him."

"So long as he's shielded, it shouldn't matter. Did he look frightened? Haughty? Angry?"

"None of that."

"Well, what did he look like, then?"

"Honestly, Siuan? He looked like an Aes Sedai."

Siuan snapped her jaw closed. Was he taunting her again? No, the general seemed serious. But what did he mean?

Egwene entered the Hall, and then a white-dressed novice went scuttling away, tailed by two of Chubain's soldiers. Egwene had sent for the Dragon. Bryne remained with his hand on Siuan's shoulder, standing just behind her in the hallway. Siuan forced herself to be calm.

Eventually, she saw motion at the end of the hallway. Around her, sisters began to glow as they embraced the Source. Siuan resisted that mark of insecurity.

Soon a procession approached, Warders walking in a square around a tall figure in a worn brown cloak, twenty-six Aes Sedai following behind. The figure inside glowed to her eyes. She had the Talent of seeing ta'veren, and al'Thor was one of the most powerful of those to ever live.

She forced herself to ignore the glow, looking at al'Thor himself. It appeared that the boy had become a man. All hints of youthful softness were gone, replaced with hard lines. He'd lost the unconsciously slumped posture that many young men adapted, particularly the tall ones. Instead he embraced his height as a man should, walking with command. Siuan had seen false Dragons during her time as Amyrlin. Odd, how much this man should look like them. It was—

She froze as he met her eyes. There was something indefinable about them, a weight, an age. As though the man behind them was seeing through the light of a thousand lives compounded in one. His face did look like that of an Aes Sedai. Those eyes, at least, had agelessness.

The Dragon Reborn raised his right hand—his left arm was folded behind his back—and halted the procession. "If you please," he said to the Warders, stepping through them.

The Warders, shocked, let him pass; the Dragon's soft voice made them

step away. They should have known better. Al'Thor walked up to Siuan, and she steeled herself. He was unarmed and shielded. He couldn't harm her. Still, Bryne stepped up to her side and lowered his hand to his sword.

"Peace, Gareth Bryne," al'Thor said. "I will do no harm. You've let her bond you, I assume? Curious. Elayne will be interested to hear of that. And Siuan Sanche. You've changed since we last met."

"Change comes to all of us as the Wheel turns."

"An Aes Sedai answer for certain." Al'Thor smiled. A relaxed, soft smile. That surprised her. "I wonder if I will ever grow accustomed to those. You once took an arrow for me. Did I thank you for that?"

"I didn't do it intentionally, as I recall," she said dryly.

"You have my thanks nonetheless." He turned toward the door to the Hall of the Tower. "What kind of Amyrlin is she?"

Why ask me? He couldn't know of the closeness between Siuan and Egwene. "She's an incredible one," Siuan said. "One of the greatest we've had, for all the fact that she's only held the Seat a short time."

He smiled again. "I should have expected nothing less. Strange, but I feel that seeing her again will hurt, though that is one wound that has well and truly healed. I can still remember the pain of it, I suppose."

Light, but this man was making a muddle of her expectations! The White Tower was a place that should have unnerved any man who could channel, Dragon Reborn or not. Yet he didn't seem worried in the least.

She opened her mouth, but was cut off as an Aes Sedai pushed through the group. Tiana?

The woman pulled something out of her sleeve and proffered it to Rand. A small letter with a red seal. "This is for you," she said. Her voice sounded tense, and her fingers trembled, though the tremble was so faint that most would have missed it. Siuan had learned to look for signs of emotion in Aes Sedai, however.

Al'Thor raised an eyebrow, then reached over and took it. "What is it?"

"I promised to deliver it," Tiana said. "I would have said no, but I never thought you'd actually come to ... I mean . . ." She cut herself off, closing her mouth. Then she withdrew into the crowd.

Al'Thor slipped the note into his pocket without reading it. "Do your best to calm Egwene when I am done," he said to Siuan. Then he took a deep breath and strode forward, ignoring his guards. They hastened after him, the Warders looking sheepish, but nobody dared touch him as he strode between the doors and into the Hall of the Tower.

* * *

Hairs bristled on Egwene's arms as Rand came into the room, unaccompanied. Aes Sedai outside crowded around the doorway, trying to look as if they were not gawking. Silviana glanced at Egwene. Should this meeting be Sealed to the Hall?

No, Egwene thought.. They need to see me confront him. Light, but I don't feel ready for this.

There was no helping it. She steeled herself, repeating in her head the same words she'd been going over all morning. This was not Rand al'Thor, friend of her childhood, the man she'd assumed that she'd one day marry. Rand al'Thor she could be lenient with, but leniency here could bring about the end of the world.

No. This man was the Dragon Reborn. The most dangerous man ever to draw breath. Tall, much more confident than she ever remembered him being. He wore simple clothing.

He walked directly into the center of the Hall, his Warder guards remaining outside. He stopped in the center of the Flame on the floor, surrounded by Sitters in their seats.

"Egwene," Rand said, voice echoing in the chamber. He nodded to her, as if in respect. "You have done your part, I see. The Amyrlin's stole fits you well."

From what she had heard of Rand recently, she had not anticipated such calm in him. Perhaps it was the calm of the criminal who had finally given himself up.

Was that how she thought of him? As a criminal? He had done acts that certainly seemed criminal; he had destroyed, he had conquered. When she'd last spent any length of time with Rand, they had traveled through the Aiel Waste. He had become a hard man during those months, and she saw that hardness in him still. But there was something else, something deeper.

"What has happened to you?" she found herself asking as she leaned forward on the Amyrlin Seat.

"I was broken," Rand said, hands behind his back. 'And then, remarkably, I was reforged. I think he almost had me, Egwene. It was Cadsuane who set me to fixing it, though she did so by accident. Still, I shall have to lift her exile, I suspect."

He spoke differently. There was a formality to his words that she didn't recognize. In another man, she would have assumed a cultured, educated background. But Rand didn't have that. Could tutors have trained him so quickly?

"Why have you come before the Amyrlin Seat?" she asked. "Have you come to make a petition, or have you come to surrender yourself to the White Tower's guidance?"

He studied her, hands still behind his back. Just behind him, thirteen sisters quietly filed into the Hall, the glow of saidar around them as they maintained his shield.

Rand didn't seem to care about that. He studied the room, looking at the various Sitters. His eyes lingered on the seats of Reds, two of which were empty. Pevara and Javindhra hadn't yet returned from their unknown mission. Only Barasine—newly chosen to replace Duhara—was in attendance. To her credit, she met Rand's eyes evenly.

"I've hated you before," Rand said, turning back to Egwene. "I've felt a lot of emotions, in recent months. It seems that from the very moment Moiraine came to the Two Rivers, I've been struggling to avoid Aes Sedai strings of control. And yet, I allowed other strings—more dangerous strings—to wrap around me unseen.

"It occurs to me that I've been trying too hard. I worried that if I listened to you, you'd control me. It wasn't a desire for independence that drove me, but a fear of irrelevance. A fear that the acts I accomplished would be yours, and not my own." He hesitated. "I should have wished for such a convenient set of backs upon which to heap the blame for my crimes."

Egwene frowned. The Dragon Reborn had come to the White Tower to engage in idle philosophy? Perhaps he had gone mad. "Rand," Egwene said, softening her tone. "I'm going to have some sisters talk to you to decide if there is anything . . . wrong with you. Please try to understand."

Once they knew more about his state, they could decide what to do with him. The Dragon Reborn did need freedom to do as the prophecies said he would, but could they simply let him roam away, now that they had him?

Rand smiled. "Oh, I do understand, Egwene. And I am sorry to deny you, but I have too much to do. People starve because of me, others live in terror of what I have done. A friend rides to his death without allies. There is so little time to do what I must."

"Rand," Egwene said, "we have to make sure."

He nodded, as if in understanding. "This is the part I regret. I did not wish to come into your center of power, which you have achieved so well, and defy you. But it cannot be helped. You must know what my plans are so that you can prepare.

"The last time I tried to seal the Bore, I was forced to do it without the help of the women. That was part of what led to disaster, though they may have been wise to deny me their strength. Well, blame must be spread

evenly, but I will not make the same mistakes a second time. I believe that saidin and saidar must both be used. I don't have the answers yet."

Egwene leaned forward, studying him. There didn't seem to be madness in his eyes. She knew those eyes. She knew Rand.

Light, she thought. I'm wrong. I can't think of him only as the Dragon Reborn. I'm here for a reason. He's here for a reason. To me, he must be Rand. Because Rand can be trusted, while the Dragon Reborn must be feared.

"Which are you?" she whispered unconsciously.

He heard. "I am both, Egwene. I remember him. Lews Therin. I can see his entire life, every desperate moment. I see it like a dream, but a clear dream. My own dream. It's part of me."

The words were those of a madman, but they were spoken evenly. She looked at him, and remembered the youth that he had been. The earnest young man. Not solemn like Perrin, but not wild like Mat. Solid, straightforward. The type of man you could trust with anything.

Even the fate of the world.

"In one month's time," Rand said, "I'm going to travel to Shayol Ghul and break the last remaining seals on the Dark One's prison. I want your help."

Break the seals? She saw the image from her dream, Rand hacking at the ropes that bound the crystalline globe. "Rand, no," she said.

"I'm going to need you, all of you," he continued. "I hope to the Light that this time, you will give me your support. I want you to meet with me on the day before I go to Shayol Ghul. And then . . . well, then we will discuss my terms."

"Your terms?" Egwene demanded.

"You will see," he said, turning as if to leave.

"Rand al'Thor!" she said, rising. "You will not turn your back on the Amyrlin Seat!"

He froze, then turned back toward her.

"You can't break the seals," Egwene said. "That would risk letting the Dark One free."

"A risk we must take. Clear away the rubble. The Bore must be opened fully again before it can be sealed."

"We must talk about this," she said. "Plan."

"That is why I came to you. To let you plan."

He seemed amused. Light! She sat back down, angry. That bullheadedness of his was just like that of his father. "There are things we must speak of, Rand. Not just this, but other things—the sisters your men have bonded not the least among them."

"We can speak of that when we next meet."

She frowned at him.

"And so here we come to it," Rand said. He bowed to her—a shallow bow, almost more a tip of the head. "Egwene al'Vere, Watcher of the Seals, Flame of Tar Valon, may I have your permission to withdraw?"

He asked it so politely. She couldn't tell if he was mocking her or not. She met his eyes. Don't make me do anything I would regret, his expression seemed to say.

Could she really confine him here? After what she'd said to Elaida about him needing to be free?

"I will not let you break the seals," she said. "That is madness."

"Then meet with me at the place known as the Field of Merrilor, just to the north. We will talk before I go to Shayol Ghul. For now, I do not want to defy you, Egwene. But I must go."

Neither of them looked away. The others in the room seemed not to breathe. The chamber was still enough for Egwene to hear the faint breeze making the rose window groan in its lead.

"Very well," Egwene said. "But this is not ended, Rand."

"There are no endings, Egwene," he replied, then nodded to her and turned to walk from the Hall. Light! He was missing his left hand! How had that happened?

The sisters and Warders reluctantly parted for him. Egwene raised a hand to her head, feeling dizzy.

"Light!" Silviana said. "How could you think during that, Mother?"

"What?" Egwene looked about the Hall. Many of the Sitters were slumping visibly in their seats.

"Something gripped my heart," Barasine said, raising a hand to her breast, "squeezing it tight. I didn't dare speak."

"I tried to speak," Yukiri said. "My mouth wouldn't move."

"Ta'veren" Saerin said. "But an effect as strong as that ... I felt that it would crush me from the inside."

"How did you resist it, Mother?" Silviana asked.

Egwene frowned. She hadn't felt that way. Perhaps because she thought of him as Rand. "We need to discuss his words. The Hall of the Tower will reconvene in one hour's time for discussion." That conversation would be Sealed to the Hall. "And someone follow to make sure he really leaves."

"Gareth Bryne is doing so," Chubain said from outside.

The Sitters pulled themselves to their feet, shaken. Silviana leaned down. "You're right, Mother. He can't be allowed to break the seals. But what are we to do? If you won't hold him captive . . ."

"I doubt we could have held him," Egwene said. "There's something about him. I... I had the sense he could have broken that shield without a struggle."

"Then how? How do we stop him?"

"We need allies," Egwene said. She took a deep breath. "He might be persuaded by people that he trusts." Or he might be forced to change his mind if confronted by a large enough group united to stop him.

It was now more vital that she speak with Elayne and Nynaeve.

CHAPTER

4

The Pattern Groans

What is it?" Perrin asked, trying to ignore the sharp scent of rotting meat. He couldn't see any corpses, but by his nose, the ground should be littered with them.

He stood with an advance group at the side of the Jehannah Road, looking northward across a rolling plain with few trees. The grass was brown and yellow, as in other places, but it grew darker farther away from the road, as if infected with some disease.

"I've seen this before," Seonid said. The diminutive, pale-skinned Aes Sedai stooped at the edge of the road, turning the leaf of a small weed over in her fingers. She wore green wool, fine but unornamented, her only jewelry her Great Serpent ring.

Thunder rumbled softly above. Six Wise Ones stood behind Seonid, arms folded, faces unreadable. Perrin hadn't considered telling the Wise Ones—or their two Aes Sedai apprentices—to stay behind. He was probably lucky they let him accompany them.

"Yes," Nevarin said, bracelets clattering as she knelt and took the leaf from Seonid. "I visited the Blight once as a girl; my father felt it important for me to see. This looks like what I saw there."

Perrin had been to the Blight only once, but the look of those dark specks was indeed distinctive. A redjay fluttered down to one of the distant trees and began picking at branches and leaves, but found nothing of interest and took wing again.

The disturbing thing was, the plants here seemed better than many they'd passed along the way. Covered with spots, but alive, even thriving.

Light, Perrin thought, taking the leaf as Nevarin handed it to him. It smelled of decay. What kind of world is it where the Blight is the good alternative?

"Mori circled the entire patch," Nevarin said, nodding to a Maiden standing nearby. "It grows darker near the center. She could not see what was there."

Perrin nudged Stayer down off the road. Faile followed; she didn't smell the least bit afraid, though Perrin's Two Rivers armsmen hesitated.

"Lord Perrin?" Wil called.

"It's probably not dangerous," Perrin said. "Animals still move in and out of it." The Blight was dangerous because of what lived there. And if those beasts had somehow come southward, they needed to know. The Aiel strode after him without a comment. And since Faile had joined him, Berelain had to as well, Annoura and Gallenne trailing her. Blessedly, Alliandre had agreed to remain behind, in charge of the camp and refugees while Perrin was away.

The horses were already skittish, and the surroundings didn't help their moods any. Perrin breathed through his mouth to dampen the stench of rot and death. The ground was wet here too—if only those clouds would pass so they could get some good sunlight to dry the soil—and the horses' footing was treacherous, so they took their time. Most of the meadow was covered in grass, clover and small weeds, and the farther they rode, the more pervasive the dark spots became. Within minutes, many of the plants were more brown than they were green or yellow.

Eventually they came to a small dale nestled amid three hillsides. Perrin pulled Stayer to a halt; the others bunched up around him. There was a strange village here. The buildings were huts built from an odd type of wood, like large reeds, and the roofs were thatch—but thatch built from enormous leaves, as wide as two man's palms.

There were no plants here, only a very sandy soil. Perrin slid free of the saddle and stooped down to feel it, rubbing the gritty stuff between his fingers. He looked at the others. They smelled confused.

He cautiously led Stayer forward into the center of the village. The Blight was radiating from this point, but the village itself showed no touch of it. Maidens scattered forward, veils in place, Sulin at their head. They did a quick inspection of the huts, signing to one another with quick gestures, then returned.

"Nobody?" Faile asked.

"No," Sulin said, cautiously lowering her veil. "This place is deserted."

"Who would build a village like this," Perrin asked, "in Ghealdan of all places?"

"It wasn't built here," Masuri said.

Perrin turned toward the slender Aes Sedai.

"This village is not native to this area," Masuri said. "The wood is unlike anything I've seen before."

'The Pattern groans," Berelain said softly. "The dead walking, the odd deaths. In cities, rooms vanish and food spoils."

Perrin scratched his chin, remembering a day when his axe had tried to kill him. If entire villages were vanishing and appearing in other places, if the Blight was growing out of rifts where the Pattern was fraying . . . Light! How bad were things becoming?

"Burn the village," he said, turning. "Use the One Power. Scour as many of the tainted plants as you can. Maybe we can keep it from spreading. We'll move the army to that camp an hour away, and will stay there tomorrow if you need more time."

For once, neither the Wise Ones nor the Aes Sedai voiced so much as a sniff of complaint at the direct order.

Hunt with us, brother.

Perrin found himself in the wolf dream. He vaguely remembered sitting drowsily by the dwindling light of an open lamp, a single flame shivering on its tip, waiting to hear a report from those dealing with the strange village. He had been reading a copy of The Travels of Jain Farstrider that Gaul had found among the salvage from Maiden.

Now Perrin lay on his back in the middle of a large field with grass as tall as a man's waist. He gazed up, grass brushing his cheeks and arms as it shivered in the wind. In the sky, that same storm brewed, here as in the waking world. More violent here.

Staring up at it—his vision framed by the stalks of brown and green grass and stems of wild millet—he could almost feel the storm growing closer. As if it was crawling down out of the sky to engulf him.

Young Bull! Come! Come hunt!

The voice was that of a wolf. Perrin by instinct knew that she was called Oak Dancer, named for the way she had scampered between saplings as a whelp. There were others, too. Whisperer. Morninglight. Sparks, boundless. A good dozen wolves called to him, some living wolves who slept, others the spirits of wolves who had died.

They called to him with a mixture of scents and images and sounds. The smell of a spring buck, pocking the earth with its leaps. Fallen leaves crumbling beneath running wolves. The growls of victory, the thrill of a pack running together.

The invitations awakened something deep within him, the wolf he tried to keep locked away. But a wolf could not be locked up for long. It: either escaped or it died; it would not stand captivity. He longed to leap to his feet and send his joyous acceptance, losing himself in the pack. He was Young Bull, and he was welcome here.

"No!" Perrin said, sitting up, holding his head. "I will not lose myself in you."

Hopper sat in the grass to his right. The large gray wolf regarded Perrin, golden eyes unblinking, reflecting flashes of lighting from above. The grass came up to Hopper's neck.

Perrin lowered a hand from his head. The air was heavy, full of humidity, and it smelled of rain. Above the scent of the weather and that of the dry field, he could smell Hopper's patience.

You are invited, Young Bull, Hopper sent.

"I can't hunt with you," Perrin explained. "Hopper, we spoke of this. I'm losing myself. When I go into battle, I become enraged. Like a wolf."

Like a wolf? Hopper sent. Young Bull, you are a wolf. And a man. Come hunt.

"I told you I can't! I will not let this consume me." He thought of a young man with golden eyes, locked in a cage, all humanity gone from him. His name had been Noam—Perrin had seen him in a village called Jarra.

Light, Perrin thought. That's not far from here. Or at least not far from where his body slumbered in the real world. Jarra was in Ghealdan. An odd coincidence.

With a ta veren nearby, there are no coincidences.

He frowned, rising and scanning the landscape. Moiraine had told Perrin there was nothing human left inside of Noam. That was what awaited a wolfbrother if he let himself be completely consumed by the wolf.

"I must learn to control this, or I must banish the wolf from me," Perrin said. "There is no time left for compromise, Hopper."

Hopper smelled dissatisfied. He didn't like what he'd called a human tendency to wish to control things.

Come, Hopper sent, standing up in the grass. Hunt.

Come learn, Hopper sent, frustrated. The Last Hunt comes.

Hopper's sendings included the image of a young pup making his first

kill. That and a worry for the future—a normally unwolflike attribute, the Last Hunt brought change.

Perrin hesitated. In a previous visit to the wolf dream, Perrin had demanded that Hopper train him to master the place. Very inappropriate for a young wolf—a kind of challenge to the elder's seniority—but this was a response. Hopper had come to teach, but he would do it as a wolf taught.

"I'm sorry," Perrin said. "I will hunt with you—but I must not lose myself."

These things you think, Hopper sent, displeased. How can you think such images of nothing? The response was accompanied by images of blankness—an empty sky, a den with nobody in it, a barren field. You are Young Bull. You will always be Young Bull. How can you lose Young Bull? Look down, and you will see his paws beneath. Bite, and his teeth will kill. There is no losing this.

"It is a thing of humans."

The same empty words over and over, Hopper sent.

Perrin took a deep breath, sucking in and releasing the too-wet air. "Very well," he said, hammer and knife appearing in his hands. "Let's go."

You hunt game with your hooves? An image of a bull ignoring its horns and trying to leap onto the back of a deer and stomp it to the ground.

"You're right." Perrin was suddenly holding a good Two Rivers longbow. He wasn't as good a shot as Jondyn Barran or Rand, but he could hold his own.

Hopper sent a bull spitting at a deer. Perrin growled, sending back a wolf's claws shooting from its paws and striking a deer at a distance, but this only seemed to amuse Hopper further. Despite his annoyance, Perrin had to admit that it was a rather ridiculous image.

The wolf sent the image to the others, causing them to howl in amusement, though most of them seemed to prefer the bull jumping up and down on the deer. Perrin growled, chasing after Hopper toward the distant woods, where the other wolves waited.

As he ran, the grasses seemed to grow more dense. They held him back, like snarled forest undergrowth. Hopper soon outpaced him.

Run, Young Bull!

I'm trying, Perrin sent back.

Not as you have before!

Perrin continued to push his way through the grass. This strange Place, this wonderful world where wolves ran, could be intoxicating. And dangerous. Hopper had warned Perrin of that more than once.

Dangers for tomorrow. Ignore them for now, Hopper sent, growing more distant. Worry is for two-legs.

I can't ignore my problems! Perrin thought back.

Yet you often do, Hopper sent.

It struck true—more true, perhaps, than the wolf knew. Perrin burst into a clearing and pulled to a halt. There, lying on the ground, were the three chunks of metal he'd forged in his earlier dream. The large lump the size of two fists, the flattened rod, the thin rectangle. The rectangle glowed faintly yellow-red, singeing the short grass around it.

The lumps vanished immediately, though the simmering rectangle left a burned spot. Perrin looked up, searching for the wolves. Ahead of him, in the sky above the trees ahead, a large hole of blackness opened up. He could not tell how far it was away, and it seemed to dominate all he could see while being distant at the same time.

Mat stood there. He was fighting against himself, a dozen different men wearing his face, all dressed in different types of fine clothing. Mat spun his spear, and never saw the shadowy figure creeping behind him, bearing a bloody knife.

"Mat!" Perrin cried, but he knew it was meaningless. This thing he was seeing, it was some kind of dream or vision of the future. It had been some time since he'd seen one of these. He'd almost begun to think they would stop coming.

He turned away and another darkness opened in the sky. He saw sheep, suddenly, running in a flock toward the woods. Wolves chased them, and a terrible beast waited in the woods, unseen. He was there, in that dream, he sensed. But who was he chasing, and why? Something looked wrong with those wolves.

A third darkness, to the side. Faile, Grady, Elyas, Gaul ... all walked toward a cliff, followed by thousands of others.

The vision closed. Hopper suddenly shot back through the air, landing beside Perrin, skidding to a stop. The wolf wouldn't have seen the holes; they had never appeared to his eyes. Instead, he regarded the burned patch with disdain and sent the image of Perrin, unkempt and bleary-eyed, his beard and hair untrimmed and his clothing disheveled. Perrin remembered the time; it had been during the early days of Faile's captivity.

Had he really looked that bad? Light, but he seemed ragged. Almost like a beggar. Or . . . like Noam.

"Stop trying to confuse me!" Perrin said. "I became that way because I was dedicated to finding Faile, not because I was giving in to the wolves!"

The newest pups always blame the elders of the pack. Hopper bounded through the grasses again.

What did that mean? The scents and images confused him. Growling,

Perrin charged forward, leaving the clearing and reentering the grasses. Once again the stalks resisted him. It was like fighting against a current, Hopper shot on ahead.

"Burn you, wait for me!" Perrin yelled.

If we wait, we lose the prey. Run, Young Bull!

Perrin gritted his teeth. Hopper was a speck in the distance now, almost to the trees. Perrin wanted to think on those visions, but there wasn't time. If he lost Hopper, he knew that he would not see him again this night. Fine, he thought with resignation.

The land lurched around him, grasses speeding by in a flash. It was as if Perrin had leaped a hundred paces in one step. He stepped again, shooting forward. He left a faint blur behind him.

The grasses parted for him. The wind blew in his face with a comfortable roar. That primal wolf inside of him sparked to wakefulness. Perrin reached the woods and slowed. Each step now took him a jump of only about ten feet. The other wolves were there, and they formed up and ran with him, excited.

Two feet, Young Bull? Oak Dancer asked. She was a youthful female, her pelt so light as to be almost white, with a streak of black running along her right side.

He didn't answer, though he did allow himself to run with them through the trees. What had seemed like a small stand had become an expansive forest. Perrin moved past trunks and ferns, barely feeling the ground beneath his feet.

This was the way to run. Powerful. Energetic. He loped over fallen logs, his jumps taking him so high that his hair brushed the bottoms of the branches. He landed smoothly. The forest was his. It belonged to him, and he understood it.

His worries began to melt away. He allowed himself to accept things as they were, not as what he feared they might become. These wolves were his brothers and sisters. A running wolf in the real world was a masterwork of balance and control. Here—where the rules of nature bent to their will—they were far more. Wolves bounded to the sides and leaped off trees, nothing holding them to the ground. Some actually took to the branches, soaring from limb to limb.

It was exhilarating. Had he ever felt so alive? So much a part of the world around him, yet master of it at the same time? The rough, regal leatherleafs were interspersed with yew and the occasional ornamented spicewood in full bloom. He threw himself into the air as he passed one of these, the wind of his passing pulling a storm of crimson blossoms from

the branches. They surged around him in a swirling blur, caught in the currents, cradling him in their sweet scent.

The wolves began to howl. To men, one howl was like another. To Perrin, each was distinct. These were the howls of pleasure, the initiation of a hunt.

Wait. This is what I feared! I cannot let myself be trapped. I am a man, not a wolf

At that moment, however, he caught scent of a stag. A mighty animal, worthy prey. It had passed this way recently.

Perrin tried to restrain himself, but anticipation proved too strong. He tore off down the game trail after the scent. The wolves, including Hopper, did not race ahead of him. They ran with him, their scents pleased as they let him take the lead.

He was the herald, the point, the tip of the attack. The hunt roared behind him. It was as if he led the crashing waves of the ocean itself. But he was also holding them back.

I cannot make them slow for me, Perrin thought.

And then he was on all fours, his bow tossed aside and forgotten, his hands and legs becoming paws. Those behind him howled anew at the glory of it. Young Bull had truly joined them.

The stag was ahead. Young Bull picked it out through the trees; it was a brilliant white, with a rack of at least twenty-six points, the winter felt worn away. And it was enormous, larger than a horse. The stag turned, looking sharply at the pack. It met Perrins eyes, and he smelled its alarm. Then, with a powerful surge of its hind legs—flanks taut with muscles—the stag leaped off the trail.

Young Bull howled his challenge, racing through the underbrush in pursuit. The great white stag bounded on, each leap taking it twenty paces. It never hit a branch or lost its footing, despite the treacherous forest floor coated with slick moss.

Young Bull followed with precision, placing his paws where hooves had fallen just moments before, matching each stride exactly. He could hear the stag panting, could see the sweat foaming on its coat, could smell its fear.

But no. Young Bull would not accept the inferior victory of running his prey to exhaustion. He would taste the blood of the throat, pumping full force from a healthy heart. He would best his prey in its prime.

He began to vary his leaps, not following the stag's exact path. He needed to be ahead, not follow! The stag's scent grew more alarmed. That drove Young Bull to greater speed. The stag bolted to the right, and Young

Bull leaped, hitting an upright tree trunk with all four paws and pushing himself sideways to change directions. His turn gained him a fraction of a heartbeat.

Soon he was bounding a single breath behind the stag, each leap bringing him within inches of its hooves. He howled, and his brothers and sisters replied from just behind. This hunt was all of them. As one.

But Young Bull led.

His howl became a growl of triumph as the stag turned again. The chance had come! Young Bull leaped over a log and seized the stag's neck in his jaws. He could taste the sweat, the fur, the warm blood beneath pooling around his fangs. His weight threw the stag to the ground. As they rolled, Young Bull kept his grip, forcing the stag to the forest floor, its skin laced scarlet with blood.

The wolves howled in victory, and he let go for a moment, intending to bite at the front of the neck and kill. There was nothing else. The forest was gone. The howls faded. There was only the kill. The sweet kill.

A form crashed into him, throwing him back into the brush. Young Bull shook his head, dazed, snarling. Another wolf had stopped him. Hopper! Why?

The stag bounded to its feet, and then bounded off through the forest again. Young Bull howled in fury and rage, preparing to run after it. Again Hopper leaped, throwing his weight against Young Bull.

If it dies here, it dies the last death, Hopper sent. This hunt is done, Young Bull. We will hunt another time.

Young Bull nearly turned to attack Hopper. But no. He had tried that once, and it had been a mistake. He was not a wolf. He—

Perrin lay on the ground, tasting blood that was not his own, exhaling deeply, his face dripping with sweat. He pushed himself to his knees, then sat down, panting, shaking from that beautiful, terrifying hunt.

The other wolves sat down, but they did not speak. Hopper lay beside Perrin, setting his grizzled head on aged paws.

"That," Perrin finally said, "is what I fear."

No, you do not fear it, Hopper sent.

"You're telling me what I feel?"

You do not smell afraid, Hopper sent.

Perrin lay back, staring up at the branches above, twigs and leaves crumpling beneath him. His heart thumped from the chase. "I worry about it, then."

Worry is not the same as fear, Hopper sent. Why say one and feel the other? worry, worry, worry. It is all that you do.

"No. I also kill. If you're going to teach me to master the wolf dream, it's going to happen like this?"

Yes.

Perrin looked to the side. The stag's blood had spilled on a dry log, darkness seeping into the wood. Learning this way would push him to the very edge of becoming a wolf.

But he had been avoiding this issue for too long, making horseshoes in the forge while leaving the most difficult and demanding pieces alone, untouched. He relied on the powers of scent he'd been given, reaching out to wolves when he needed them—but otherwise he'd ignored them.

You couldn't make a thing until you understood its parts. He wouldn't know how to deal with—or reject—the wolf inside him until he understood the wolf dream.

"Very well," Perrin said. "So be it."

Galad cantered Stout through the camp. On all sides, Children erected tents and dug firepits, preparing for the night. His men marched almost until nightfall each day, then arose early in the morning. The sooner they reached Andor, the better.

Those Light-cursed swamps were behind them; now they traveled over open grasslands. Perhaps it would have been faster to cut east and catch one of the great highways to the north, but that wouldn't be safe. Best to stay away from the movements of the Dragon Reborn's armies and the Seanchan. The Light would shine upon the Children, but more than one valiant hero had died within that Light. If there was no danger of death, there could be no bravery, but Galad would rather have the Light shine on him while he continued to draw breath.

They had camped near the Jehannah Road and would cross it on the morrow to continue north. He had sent a patrol to watch the road. He wanted to know what kind of traffic the highway was drawing, and he was in particular need of supplies.

Galad continued on his rounds through camp, accompanied by a handful of mounted attendants, ignoring the aches of his various wounds. The camp was orderly and neat. The tents were grouped by legion, then set up forming concentric rings with no straight pathways. That was intended to confuse and slow attackers.

A section of the camp lay empty near the middle. A hole in the formation where the Questioners had once set up their tents. He had ordered the

Ouestioners spread out, two assigned to each company. If the Questioners were not set apart from the others, perhaps they would feel more kinship with the other Children. Galad made a note to himself to draw up a new camp layout, eliminating that hole.

Galad and his companions continued through the camp. He rode to be seen, and men saluted as he passed. He remembered well the words that Gareth Bryne had once said: Most of the time, a general's most important function was not to make decisions, but to remind men that someone would make decisions.

"My Lord Captain Commander," said one of his companions. Brandel Vordarian. He was an older man, eldest of the Lords Captain who served under Galad. "I wish you would reconsider sending this missive."

Vordarian rode directly beside Galad, with Trom on his other side. Lords Captain Golever and Harnesh rode behind, within earshot, and Bornhald followed, acting as Galad s bodyguard for the day.

"The letter must be sent," Galad said.

"It seems foolhardy, my Lord Captain Commander," Vordarian continued. Clean-shaven, with silver washing his golden hair, the Andoran was an enormous square of a man. Galad was vaguely familiar with Vordarian's family, minor nobles who had been involved in his mother's court.

Only a fool refused to listen to advice from those older and wiser than himself. But only a fool took all of the advice given him.

"Perhaps foolhardy," Galad replied. "But it is the right thing to do." The letter was addressed to the remaining Questioners and Children under the control of the Seanchan; there would be some who had not come with Asu-nawa. In the letter, Galad explained what had happened, and commanded them to report to him as soon as possible. It was unlikely any would come, but the others had a right to know what had happened.

Lord Vordarian sighed, then made way as Harnesh rode up beside Galad. The bald man scratched absently at the scar tissue where his left ear had been. "Enough about this letter, Vordarian. The way you go on about it tries my patience." From Galad's observation, there were many things that tried the Murandian's patience.

"You have other matters you wish to discuss, I assume?" Galad nodded to a pair of Children cutting logs, who stopped their work to salute him.

"You told Child Bornhald, Child Byar, and others that you plan to ally us with the witches of Tar Valon!"

Galad nodded. "I understand that the notion might be troubling, but if you consider, you will see that it is the only right decision."

"But the witches are evil!"

"Perhaps," Galad said. Once, he might have denied that. But listening to the other Children, and considering what those at Tar Valon had done to | his sister, was making him think he might be too soft on the Aes Sedai. "However, Lord Harnesh, if they are evil, they are insignificant when compared to the Dark One. The Last Battle comes. Do you deny this?"

Harnesh and the others looked up at the sky. That dreary overcast had stretched for weeks now. The day before, another man had fallen to a strange illness where beetles had come from his mouth as he coughed. Their food stores were diminishing as more and more was found spoiled.

"No, I do not deny it," Harnesh muttered.

"Then you should rejoice," Galad said, "for the way is clear. We must fight at the Last Battle. Our leadership there may show the way of Light to many who have spurned us. But if it does not, we will fight regardless, for it is our duty. Do you deny this, Lord Captain?"

"Again, no. But the witches, my Lord Captain Commander?"

Galad shook his head. "I can think of no way around it. We need allies. Look about you, Lord Harnesh. How many Children do we have? Even with recent recruits, we are under twenty thousand. Our fortress has been taken. We are without succor or allegiance, and the great nations of the world revile us. No, don't deny it! You know that it is true."

Galad met the eyes of those around him, and one by one they nodded.

"The Questioners are at fault," Harnesh muttered.

"Part of the blame is theirs," Galad agreed. "But it is also because those who would do evil look with disgust and resentment upon those who stand for what is right."

The others nodded.

"We must tread carefully," Galad said. "In the past, the boldness—and perhaps overeagerness—of the Children has alienated those who should have been our allies. My mother always said that a victory of diplomacy did not come when everyone got what they wanted—that made everyone assume they'd gotten the better of her, which encouraged more extravagant demands. The trick is not to satisfy everyone, but to leave everyone feeling they reached the best possible result. They must be satisfied enough to do as you wish, yet dissatisfied enough to know that you bested them."

"And what does this have to do with us?" Golever said from behind. "We follow no queen or king."

"Yes," Galad said, "and that frightens monarchs. I grew up in the court of Andor. I know how my mother regarded the Children. In every dealing with them, she either grew frustrated or decided that she had to suppress

them absolutely. We cannot afford either reaction! The monarchs of these lands must respect us, not hate us."

"Darkfriends," Harnesh muttered.

"My mother was no Darkfriend," Galad said quietly.

Harnesh flushed. "Excepting her, of course."

"You speak like a Questioner," Galad said. "Suspecting everyone who opposes us of being a Darkfriend. Many of them are influenced by the Shadow, but I doubt that it is conscious. That is where the Hand of the Light went wrong. The Questioners often could not tell the difference between a hardened Darkfriend, a person who was being influenced by Darkfriends, and a person who simply disagreed with the Children."

"So what do we do?" Vordarian asked. "We bow to the whims of monarchs?"

"I don't yet know what to do," Galad confessed. "I will think on it. The right course will come to me. We cannot become lapdogs to kings and queens. And yet, think of what we could achieve inside of a nations boundaries if we could act without needing an entire legion to intimidate that nation's ruler."

The others nodded at this, thoughtful.

"My Lord Captain Commander!" a voice called.

Galad turned to see Byar on his white stallion cantering toward them. The horse had belonged to Asunawa; Galad had refused it, preferring his own bay. Galad pulled his group to a halt as the gaunt-faced Byar neared, his white tabard pristine. Byar wasn't the most likable of men in the camp, but he had proven to be loyal.

Byar was not, however, supposed to be in the camp.

"I set you watching Jehannah Road, Child Byar," Galad said firmly. "That duty was not to end for a good four hours yet."

Byar saluted as he pulled up. "My Lord Captain Commander. We captured a suspicious group of travelers on the road. What would you have us do with them?"

"You captured them?" Galad asked. "I sent you to watch the road, not take prisoners."

"My Lord Captain Commander," Byar said. "How are we to know the character of those passing unless we speak with them? You wanted us to watch for Darkfriends."

Galad sighed. "I wanted you to watch for troop movements or merchants we could approach, Child Byar."

These Darkfriends have supplies," Byar said. "I think they might be merchants."

Galad sighed. Nobody could deny Byar's dedication—he'd ridden with Galad to face Valda when it could have meant the end of his career. And yet there was such a thing as being too zealous.

The thin officer looked troubled. Well, Galad s instructions hadn't been precise enough. He would have to remember that in the future, par-ticularly with Byar. "Peace," Galad said, "you did no wrong, Child Byar. How many of these prisoners are there?"

"Dozens, my Lord Captain Commander." Byar looked relieved. "Come."

He turned his mount to lead the way. Already, cook fires were springing up in the pits, the scent of burning tinder rising in the air. Galad caught slices of conversation as he rode past the soldiers. What would the Seanchan do with those Children who had remained behind? Was it really the Dragon Reborn who had conquered Illian and Tear, or some false Dragon? There was talk of a gigantic stone from the sky having struck the earth far to the north in Andor, destroying an entire city and leaving a crater.

The talk among the men revealed their worries. They should have understood that worry served no useful function. None could know the weaving of the Wheel.

Byar's captives turned out to be a group of people with a surprisingly large number of heavily laden carts, perhaps a hundred or more. The people clustered together around their carts, regarding the Children with hostility. Galad frowned, doing a quick inspection.

"That's quite a caravan," Bornhald said softly at his side. "Merchants?"

"No," Galad said softly. "That's travel furniture—notice the pegs on the sides, so they can be carried in pieces. Sacks of barley for horses. Those are farrier's tools wrapped in canvas at the back of that cart to the right. See the hammers peeking out?"

"Light!" Bornhald whispered. He saw it too. These were the camp followers of an army of substantial size. But where were the soldiers?

"Be ready to separate them," Galad told Bornhald, dismounting. He walked up to the lead cart. The man driving it had a thick figure and a ruddy face, with hair that had been arranged in a very poor attempt at hiding his increasing baldness. He nervously worked a brown felt hat in his hands, a pair of gloves tucked into the belt of his stout jacket. Galad could see no weapons on him.

Beside the cart stood two others, much younger. One was a bulky, muscular type with the look of a fighter—but not a soldier—who could be some trouble. A pretty woman clutched his arm, biting her lower lip.

The man in the cart gave a start upon seeing Galad. Ah, Galad thought, so he knows enough to recognize Morgase's stepson.

"So, travelers," Galad said carefully. "My man says you told him that you are merchants?"

"Yes, good Lord," said the driver.

"I know little of this area. Are you familiar with it?"

"Not much, sir," the driver said, wringing that hat in his hands. "We are actually far from home ourselves. I am Basel Gill, of Caemlyn. I have come south seeking business with a merchant in Ebou Dar. But these Sean-chan invaders have left me unable to do my trade."

He seemed very nervous. At least he hadn't lied about where he was from. "And what was this merchant's name?" Galad asked.

"Why, Falin Deborsha, my Lord," Gill said. "Are you familiar with Ebou Dar?"

"I have been there," Galad said calmly. "This is quite a caravan you have. Interesting collection of wares."

"We have heard that there are armies mobilizing here in the south, my Lord. I purchased many of these supplies from a mercenary troop who was disbanding, and thought I could sell them down here. Perhaps your own army has need of camp furniture? We have tents, mobile smithy equipment, everything that soldiers could use."

Clever, Galad thought. Galad might have accepted the lie, but the "merchant" had too many cooks, washwomen, and farriers with him, and not nearly enough guards for so valuable a caravan.

"I see," Galad said. "Well, it happens that I do have need of supplies. Particularly food."

"Alas, my Lord," the man said. "Our food cannot be spared. Anything else I will sell, but the food I have promised by messenger to someone in Lugard."

"I will pay more."

"I made a promise, my good Lord," the man said. "I could not break it, regardless of the price."

"I see." Galad waved to Bornhald. The soldier gave commands, and Children in white tabards moved forward, weapons out.

"What . . . what are you doing?" Gill asked.

"Separating your people," Galad said. "We'll talk to each of them alone and see if their stories match. I worry that you might have been . . . unforthcoming with us. After all, what it seems like to me is that you are the camp followers of a large army. If that is the case, then I would very much like to know whose army it is, not to mention where it is."

Gill's forehead started to sweat as Galad's soldiers efficiently separated the captives. Galad waited for a time watching Gill. Eventually Bornhald and Byar came jogging up to him, hands on their swords.

"My Lord Captain Commander," Bornhald said urgently.

Galad turned away from Gill. "Yes?"

"We may have a situation here," Bornhald said. His face was flushed with anger. Beside him, Byar's eyes were wide, almost frenzied. "Some of the prisoners have talked. It's as you feared. A large army is nearby. They've skirmished with Aiel—those fellows over there in the white robes are actually Aiel themselves."

"And?"

Byar spat to the side. "Have you ever heard of a man called Perrin Goldeneyes?"

"No. Should I have?"

"Yes," Bornhald said. "He killed my father."

CHAPTER 5

Writings

Gawyn hastened down the hallways of the White Tower, booted feet thumping on a deep blue rug atop crimson and white floor tiles. Mirrored stand-lamps reflected light, each like a sentry along the way.

Sleete walked quickly beside him. Despite the lamps' illumination, Sleete's face seemed half-shrouded in shadow. Perhaps it was the two-day stubble on his jaw—an oddity for a Warder—or the long hair, clean but unshorn. Or maybe it was his features. Uneven, like an unfinished drawing, with sharp lines, a cleft in his chin, a hook to his once-broken nose, cheekbones that jutted out.

He had the lithe motions of a Warder, but with a more primal feel than most. Rather than the huntsman moving through the woods, he was the silent, shadow-bound predator that prey never saw until the teeth were flashing.

They reached an intersection where several of Chubain's guards stood watch down one of the halls. They had swords at their sides and wore white tabards emblazoned with the Flame of Tar Valon. One held up a hand.

"I'm allowed in," Gawyn said. "The Amyrlin—"

"The sisters aren't done yet," the guard replied, hostile.

Gawyn ground his teeth, but there was nothing to be done about it. He and Sleete stepped back and waited until—finally—three Aes Sedai Walked out of a guarded room. They looked troubled. They strode away, followed by a pair of soldiers carrying something wrapped in a white cloth. The body.

Finally, the two guards reluctantly stepped aside and let Gawyn and Sleete pass. They hurried down the hallway and entered a small reading room. Gawyn hesitated beside the door, glancing back down the hallway. He could see some Accepted peeking around a corner, whispering.

This murder made four sisters killed. Egwene had her hands full trying to keep the Ajahs from turning back to their mistrust of one another. She'd warned everyone to be alert, and told sisters not to go about alone. The Black Ajah knew the White Tower well, their members having lived here for years. With gateways, they could slip into the hallways and commit murder.

At least, that was the official explanation for the deaths. Gawyn wasn't so certain. He ducked into the room, Sleete following.

Chubain himself was there. The handsome man glanced at Gawyn, lips turning down. "Lord Trakand."

"Captain," Gawyn replied, surveying the room. It was about three paces square, with a single desk set against the far wall and an unlit coal-burning brazier. A bronze stand-lamp burned in the corner, and a circular rug nearly filled nearly the entire floor. That rug was stained with a dark liquid beneath the desk.

"Do you really think you'll find anything the sisters did not, Trakand?" Chubain asked, folding his arms.

"I'm looking for different things," Gawyn said, going forward. He knelt down to inspect the rug.

Chubain sniffed, then walked into the hallway. The Tower Guard would watch over the area until servants had come to clean it. Gawyn had a few minutes.

Sleete stepped up to one of the guards just inside the doorway. They weren't as antagonistic toward him as they tended to be toward Gawyn. He still hadn't figured out why they were like that with him.

"She was alone?" Sleete asked the man in his gravelly voice.

"Yes," the guard said, shaking his head. "Shouldn't have ignored the Amyrlin's advice."

"Who was she?"

"Kateri Nepvue, of the White Ajah. A sister for twenty years."

Gawyn grunted as he continued to crawl across the floor, inspecting the rug. Four sisters from four different Ajahs. Two had supported Egwene, one had supported Elaida, and one had been neutral, only recently returned. All had been killed on different levels of the Tower during different times of day.

It certainly did seem like the work of the Black Ajah. They weren't looking for specific targets, just convenient ones. But it felt wrong to him. Why not Travel into the sisters' quarters at night and kill them in their sleep? Why did nobody sense channeling from the places where the women were killed?

Sleete inspected the door and lock with a careful eye. When Egwene had told Gawyn he could visit the scenes of the murders if he wished, he'd asked if he could bring Sleete with him. In Gawyn's previous interactions with the Warder, Sleete had proven himself to be not only meticulous, but discreet.

Gawyn continued looking. Egwene was nervous about something, he was certain. She wasn't being completely forthcoming about these murders. He found no slits in the carpet or tiles, no cuts in the furniture of the cramped room.

Egwene claimed the murderers were coming in by gateway, but he'd found no evidence of that. True, he didn't know much about gateways yet, and people could reportedly make them hang above the ground so they didn't cut anything. But why would the Black Ajah care about that? Besides, this room was so tiny, it seemed to him it would have been very hard to get in without leaving some trace.

"Gawyn, come here," Sleete said. The shorter man was still kneeling beside the doorway.

Gawyn joined him. Sleete threw the deadbolt a few times in its lock. "This door might have been forced," he said softly. "See the scrape here on the deadbolt? You can pop open this kind of lock by sliding a thin pick in and pushing it on the deadbolt, then putting pressure on the handle. It can be done very quietly."

"Why would the Black Ajah need to force a door?" Gawyn asked.

"Maybe they Traveled into the hallway, then walked until they saw light under a doorway," Sleete said.

"Why not then make a gateway to the other side?"

"Channeling could have alerted the woman inside," Sleete said.

"That's true," Gawyn said. He looked toward the bloody patch. The desk was set so that the occupant's back would be to the doorway. That arrangement made Gawyn's shoulder blades itch. Who would put a desk like that? An Aes Sedai who thought she was completely safe, and who Wanted to be sitting away from the distractions outside. Aes Sedai, for all of their cunning, sometimes seemed to have remarkably underdeveloped senses of self-preservation.

Or maybe they just didn't think like soldiers. Their Warders dealt with that sort of thought. "Did she have a Warder?"

"No," Sleete said. "I've met her before. She didn't have one." He hesitated. "None of the sisters murdered had Warders."

Gawyn gave Sleete a raised eyebrow.

"Makes sense," Sleete said. "Whoever is doing the killing didn't want to alert Warders."

"But why kill with a knife?" Gawyn said. All four had been killed that way. "The Black Ajah doesn't have to obey the Three Oaths. They could have used the Power to kill. Much more direct, much easier."

"But that would also risk alerting the victim or those around," Sleete noted.

Another good point. But still, something about these killings didn't seem to add up.

Or maybe he was just stretching at nothing, struggling to find something he could do to help. A part of him thought that if he could aid Egwene with this, maybe she would soften toward him. Perhaps forgive him for rescuing her from the Tower during the Seanchan attack.

Chubain entered a moment later. "I trust Your Lordship has had sufficient time," he said stiffly. "The staff is here to clean."

Insufferable man! Gawyn thought. Does he have to be so dismissive toward me? I should—

No. Gawyn forced himself to keep his temper. Once, that hadn't been nearly so hard.

Why was Chubain so hostile toward him? Gawyn found himself wondering how his mother would have handled such a man as this. Gawyn didn't often think of her, as doing so brought his mind back to al'Thor. That murderer had been allowed to walk away from the White Tower itself! Egwene had held him in her hand, and had released him.

True, al'Thor was the Dragon Reborn. But in his heart, Gawyn wanted to meet al'Thor with sword in hand and ram steel through him, Dragon Reborn or not.

Al'Thor would rip you apart with the One Power, he told himself. You're being foolish, Gawyn Trakand. His hatred of al'Thor continued to smolder anyway.

One of Chubain's guards came up, speaking, pointing at the door. Chubain looked annoyed they hadn't found the forced lock. The Tower Guard was not a policing force—the sisters had no need of that, and were more effective at this kind ot investigation anyway. But Gawyn could tell that Chubain wished he could stop the murders. Protecting the Tower, and its occupants, was part of his duty.

So he and Gawyn worked for the same cause. But Chubain acted as if this were a personal contest between them. Though his side did, essentially, meet defeat by Bryne's side in the Tower division, Gawyn thought. And as far as he knows, I'm one of Bryne's favored men.

Gawyn wasn't a Warder, yet he was a friend of the Amyrlin. He dined with Bryne. How would that look to Chubain, particularly now that Gawyn had been given power to look in on the murders?

Light! Gawyn thought as Chubain shot him a hostile glace. He thinks I'm trying to take his position. He thinks I want to be High Captain of the Tower Guard!

The concept was laughable. Gawyn could have been First Prince of the Sword—should have been First Prince of the Sword—leader of Andor's armies and protector of the Queen. He was son to Morgase Trakand, one of the most influential and powerful rulers Andor had ever known. He had no desire for this man's position.

That wouldn't be how it looked to Chubain. Disgraced by the destructive Seanchan attack, he must feel that his position was in danger.

"Captain," Gawyn said, "may I speak with you in private?"

Chubain looked at Gawyn suspiciously, then nodded toward the hallway. The two of them retreated. Nervous Tower servants waited outside, ready to clean the blood away.

Chubain folded his arms and inspected Gawyn. "What is it you wish of me, my Lord?"

He often emphasized the rank. Calm, Gawyn thought. He still felt the shame of how he'd bullied his way into Bryne's camp. He was better than that. Living with the Younglings, enduring the confusion and then the shame of the events surrounding the Tower's breaking, had changed him. He couldn't continue down that path.

"Captain," Gawyn said, "I appreciate you letting me inspect the room."

"I didn't have much choice."

"I realize that. But you have my thanks nonetheless. It's important to me that the Amyrlin see me helping. If I find something the sisters miss, it could mean a great deal for me."

"Yes," Chubain said, eyes narrowing. "I suspect it could."

"Maybe she'll finally have me as her Warder."

Chubain blinked. "Her . . . Warder?"

"Yes. Once, it seemed certain that she would take me, but now . . . well,

if I can help you with this investigation, perhaps it will cool her anger at me." He raised a hand, gripping Chubain's shoulder. "I will remember your aid. You call me Lord, but my title is all but meaningless to me now. All I want is to be Egwene's Warder, to protect her."

Chubain wrinkled his brow. Then he nodded and seemed to relax. "I heard you talking. You're looking for marks of gateways. Why?"

"I don't think this is the work of the Black Ajah," Gawyn said. "I think it might be a Gray Man, or some other kind of assassin. A Darkfriend among the palace staff, perhaps? I mean, look at how the women are killed. Knives."

Chubain nodded. "There were some signs of a struggle too. The sisters doing the investigation mentioned that. The books swept from the table. They thought it was done by the woman flailing as she died."

"Curious," Gawyn said. "If I were a Black sister, I'd use the One Power, regardless of the fact that others might sense it. Women channel all the time in the Tower; this wouldn't be suspicious. I'd immobilize my victim with weaves, kill her with the Power, then escape before anyone thought oddly of it. No struggle."

"Perhaps," Chubain said. "But the Amyrlin seems confident that this is the work of Black sisters."

"I'll talk to her and see why," Gawyn said. "For now, perhaps you should suggest to those doing the investigation that it would be wise to interview the palace servants? Give this reasoning?"

"Yes ... I think I might do that." The man nodded, seeming less threatened.

The two stepped aside, Chubain waving the servants to enter for their cleaning. Sleete came out, looking thoughtful. He held something up, pinched between his fingers. "Black silk," he said. "There's no way of knowing if it came from the attacker."

Chubain took the fibers. "Odd."

"A Black sister wouldn't seem likely to proclaim herself by wearing black," Gawyn said. "A more ordinary assassin, though, might need the dark colors to hide."

Chubain wrapped the fibers in a handkerchief and pocketed them. "I'll take these to Seaine Sedai." He looked impressed.

Gawyn nodded to Sleete, and the two of them retreated.

"The White Tower is abuzz these days with returning sisters and new Warders," Sleete said softly. "How would anyone—no matter how stealthy — travel the upper levels wearing black without drawing attention?"

"Gray Men are supposed to be able to avoid notice," Gawyn said. "I think this is more proof. I mean, it seems odd that nobody has actually seen rhese Black sisters. We're making a lot of assumptions."

Sleete nodded, eyeing a trio of novices who had gathered to gawk at the guards. They saw Sleete looking and chittered to one another before scampering away.

"Egwene knows more than she's saying," Gawyn said. "I'll talk to her."

"Assuming she'll see you," Sleete said.

Gawyn grunted irritably. They walked down a series of ramps to the level of the Amyrlin's study. Sleete remained with him—his Aes Sedai, a Green named Hattori, rarely had duties for him. She still had her eyes on Gawyn for a Warder; Egwene was being so infuriating, Gawyn had half a mind to let Hattori bond him.

No. No, not really. He loved Egwene, though he was frustrated with her. It had not been easy to decide to give up Andor—not to mention the Younglings—for her. Yet she still refused to bond him.

He reached her study, and approached Silviana. The woman sat at her neat, orderly Keeper's desk in the antechamber before Egwene's study. The woman inspected Gawyn, her eyes unreadable behind her Aes Sedai mask. He suspected that she didn't like him.

"The Amyrlin is composing a letter of some import," Silviana said. "You may wait."

Gawyn opened his mouth.

"She asked not to be interrupted," Silviana said, turning back to the paper she had been reading. "You may wait."

Gawyn sighed, but nodded. As he did so, Sleete caught his eye and gestured that he was going. Why had he accompanied Gawyn down here in the first place? He was an odd man. Gawyn waved farewell, and Sleete vanished into the hallway.

The antechamber was a grand room with a deep red rug and wood trim on the stone walls. He knew from experience that none of the chairs were comfortable, but there was a single window. Gawyn stepped up to it for some air and rested his arm on the recessed stone, staring out over the white Tower grounds. This high up, the air felt crisper, newer.

Below, he could see the new Warder practice grounds. The old ones were dug up where Elaida had begun building her palace. Nobody was sure what Egwene would end up doing with the construction.

The practice grounds were busy, a bustle of figures sparring, running, fencing. With the influx of refugees, soldiers and sell-swords, there were many who presumed themselves Warder material. Egwene had opened the grounds to any who wanted to train and try to prove themselves, as she intended to

push for as many women as were ready to be raised over the next few weeks.

Gawyn had spent a few days training, but the ghosts of men he had killed seemed more present down there. The grounds were a part of his past life, a time before everything had gone wrong. Other Younglings had easily—and happily—returned to that life. Already Jisao, Rajar, Durrent and most of his other officers had been chosen as Warders. Before long, nothing would remain of his band. Except for Gawyn himself.

The inner door clicked, followed by hushed voices. Gawyn turned to find Egwene, dressed in green and yellow, walking over to speak with Silviana. The Keeper glanced at him, and he thought he caught a trace of a frown on her face.

Egwene saw him. She kept her face Aes Sedai serene—she'd grown good at that so quickly—and he found himself feeling awkward.

"There was another death this morning," he said quietly, walking up to her.

"Technically," Egwene said, "it was last night."

"I need to talk to you," Gawyn blurted.

Egwene and Silviana shared a look. "Very well," Egwene said, gliding back into her study.

Gawyn followed, not looking at the Keeper. The Amyrlin's study was one of the grandest rooms in the Tower. The walls were paneled with a pale striped wood, carved to show fanciful scenes, marvelously detailed. The hearth was marble, the floor made of deep red stone cut into diamond blocks. Egwene's large, carved desk was set with two lamps. They were in the shape of two women raising their hands to the air, flames burning between each set of palms.

One wall had bookcases filled with books arranged—it seemed—by color and size rather than by subject. They were ornamental, brought in to trim the Amyrlin's study until Egwene could make her own selections.

"What is it you find so necessary to discuss?" Egwene said, sitting down at her desk.

"The murders," Gawyn said.

"What about them?"

Gawyn shut the door. "Burn me, Egwene. Do you have to show me the Amyrlin every time we speak? Once in a while, can't I see Egwene?"

"I show you the Amyrlin," Egwene said, "because you refuse to accept her. Once you do so, perhaps we can move beyond that."

"Light! You've learned to talk like one of them."

"That's because I am one of them," she said. "Your choice of words betrays you. The Amyrlin cannot be served by those who refuse to see her authority."

"I accept you," Gawyn said. "I do, Egwene. But isn't it important to have people who know you for yourself and not the title?"

"So long as they know that there is a place for obedience." Her face softened. "You aren't ready yet, Gawyn. I'm sorry."

He set his jaw. Don't overreact, he told himself. "Very well. Then, about the assassinations. We've realized that none of the women killed had Warders."

"Yes, I was given a report on that," Egwene said.

"Regardless," he said, "it brings my thoughts to a larger issue. We don't have enough Warders."

Egwene frowned.

"We're preparing for the Last Battle, Egwene," Gawyn said. "And yet there are sisters without Warders. A lot of sisters. Some had one, but never took another after he died. Others never wanted one in the first place. I don't think you can afford this."

"What would you have me do?" she said, folding her arms. "Command the women to take Warders?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "Gawyn, the Amyrlin doesn't have that kind of power."

"Then get the Hall to do it."

"You don't know what you're saying. The choosing and keeping of a Warder is a very personal and intimate decision. No woman should be forced to it."

"Well," Gawyn said, refusing to be intimidated, "the choice to go to war is very 'personal' and 'intimate' as well—yet all across the land, men are called into it. Sometimes, feelings aren't as important as survival.

"Warders keep sisters alive, and every Aes Sedai is going to be of vital importance soon. There will be legions upon legions of Trollocs. Every sister on the field will be more valuable than a hundred soldiers, and every sister Healing will be able to save dozens of lives. The Aes Sedai are assets that belong to humanity. You cannot afford to let them go about unprotected."

Egwene drew back, perhaps at the fervor of his words. Then, unexpectedly, she nodded. "Perhaps there is . . . wisdom in those words, Gawyn."

"Bring it before the Hall," Gawyn said. "At its core, Egwene, a sister not bonding a Warder is an act of selfishness. That bond makes a man a better soldier, and we'll need every edge we can find. This will also help prevent the murders."

"I will see what can be done," Egwene said.

"Could you let me see the reports the sisters are giving?" Gawyn said, "About the murders, I mean?"

"Gawyn," she said, "I've allowed you to be a part of the investigation because I thought it might be good to have a different set of eyes looking things over. Giving you their reports would just influence you to draw the same conclusions as they do."

"At least tell me this," he said. "Have the sisters raised the worry that this might not be the work of the Black Ajah? That the assassin might be a Gray Man or a Darkfriend?"

"No, they have not," Egwene said, "because we know that the assassin is not one of those two."

"But the door last night, it was forced. And the women are killed with knives, not the One Power. There are no signs of gateways or—"

"The killer has access to the One Power," Egwene said, speaking very carefully. "And perhaps they are not using gateways."

Gawyn narrowed his eyes. Those sounded like the words of a woman stepping around her oath not to lie. "You're keeping secrets," he said. "Not just from me. From the entire Tower."

"Secrets are needed sometimes, Gawyn."

"Can't you trust me with them?" He hesitated. "I'm worried that the assassin will come for you, Egwene. You don't have a Warder."

"Undoubtedly she will come for me, eventually." She toyed with something on her desk. It looked like a worn leather strap, the type used to punish a criminal. Odd.

She? "Please, Egwene," he said. "What's going on?"

She studied him, then she sighed. "Very well. I've told this to the women doing the investigation. Perhaps I should tell you too. One of the Forsaken is in the White Tower."

He lowered his hand to his sword. "What? Where! You have her captive?"

"No," Egwene said. "She's the assassin."

"You know this?"

"I know Mesaana is here; I've dreamed that it is true. She hides among us. Now, four Aes Sedai, dead? It's her, Gawyn. It's the only thing that makes sense."

He bit off questions. He knew very little of Dreaming, but knew she had the Talent. It was said to be like Foretelling.

"I haven't told the entire Tower," Egwene continued. "I worry that if they knew one of the sisters around them is secretly one of the Forsaken, it would divide us all again, as under Elaida. We'd all be suspicious of one another.

"It's bad enough now, with them thinking Black sisters are Traveling in to commit murders, but at least that doesn't make them suspicious of one another. And maybe Mesaana will think that I'm not aware it is her. But there, that's the secret you begged to know. It's not a Black sister we hunt, but one of the Forsaken."

It was daunting to consider—but no more so than the Dragon Reborn walking the land. Light, a Forsaken in the Tower seemed more plausible than Egwene being the Amyrlin Seat! "We'll deal with it," he said, sounding far more confident than he felt.

"I have sisters searching the histories of everyone in the Tower," Egwene said. "And others are watching for suspicious words or actions. We'll find her. But I don't see how we can make the women any more secure without inciting an even more dangerous panic."

"Warders," Gawyn said firmly.

"I will think on it, Gawyn. For now, there is something I need of you."

"If it is within my power, Egwene." He took a step toward her. "You know that."

"Is that so?" she asked dryly. "Very well. I want you to stop guarding my door at night."

"What? Egwene, no!"

She shook her head. "You see? Your first reaction is to challenge me."

"It is the duty of a Warder to offer challenge, in private, where his Aes Sedai is concerned!" Hammar had taught him that.

"You are not my Warder, Gawyn."

That brought him up short.

"Besides," Egwene said, "you could do little to stop one of the Forsaken. This battle will be fought by sisters, and I am being very careful with the wards I set. I want my quarters to look inviting. If she tries to attack me, perhaps I can surprise her with an ambush."

"Use yourself as bait?" Gawyn was barely able to get the words out. 'Egwene, this is madness!"

"No. It's desperation. Gawyn, women I am responsible for are dying. Murdered in the night, in a time when you yourself said we will need every woman."

For the first time, fatigue showed through her mask, a weariness of tone and a slight slump to her back. She folded her hands in front of her, suddenly seeming worn.

"I have sisters researching everything we can find about Mesaana," Egwene continued. "She's not a warrior, Gawyn. She's an administrator, a planner. If I can confront her, I can defeat her. But we must find her first. Exposing myself is only one of my plans—and you are right, it is dangerous. But my precautions have been extensive."

"I don't like it at all."

"Your approval is not required." She eyed him. "You will have to trust me."

"I do trust you," he said.

"All I ask is that you show it for once."

Gawyn gritted his teeth. Then he bowed to her and left the study, trying—and failing—to keep the door from shutting too hard when he pulled it closed. Silviana gave him a disapproving look as he passed her.

From there, he headed for the training grounds despite his discomfort with them. He needed a workout with the sword.

Egwene let out a long sigh, sitting back, closing her eyes. Why was it so hard to keep her feelings in check when dealing with Gawyn? She never felt as poor an Aes Sedai as she did when speaking with him.

So many emotions swirled within her, like different kinds of wine spilling and mixing together: rage at his stubbornness, burning desire for his arms, confusion at her own inability to place one of those before the other.

Gawyn had a way of boring through her skin and into her heart. That passion of his was entrancing. She worried that if she bonded him, it would infect her. Was that how it worked? What did it feel like to be bonded, to sense another's emotions?

She wanted that with him, the connection that others had. And it was important that she have people she could rely upon to contradict her, in private. People who knew her as Egwene, rather than the Amyrlin.

But Gawyn was too loose, too untrusting, yet.

She looked over her letter to the new King of Tear, explaining that Rand was threatening to break the seals. Her plan to stop him would depend on her gathering support from people he trusted. She had conflicting reports about Darlin Sisnera. Some said he was one of Rand's greatest supporters, while others claimed he was one of Rand's greatest detractors.

She set the letter aside for the moment, then wrote some thoughts on how to approach the Hall on the Warder issue. Gawyn made an excellent argument, though he went too far and assumed too much. Making a plea for women who had no Warders to choose one, explaining all of the advantages and pointing out how it could save lives and help defeat the Shadow that would be appropriate.

She poured herself some mint tea from the pot on the side of her desk. Oddly, it hadn't been spoiling as often lately, and this cup tasted quite good. She hadn't told Gawyn of the other reason she'd asked him to leave her door at nights. She had trouble sleeping, knowing he was out there, only a few feet away. She worried she'd slip and go to him.

Silviana's strap had never been able to break her will, but Gawyn Trakand ... he was coming dangerously close to doing so.

Graendal anticipated the messenger's arrival. Even here, in her most secret of hiding places, his arrival was not unexpected. The Chosen could not hide from the Great Lord.

The hiding place was not a palace, a fine lodge or an ancient fortress. It was a cavern on an island nobody cared about, in an area of the Aryth Ocean that nobody ever visited. So far as she knew, there was nothing of note or interest anywhere near.

The accommodations were downright dreadful. Six of her lesser pets cared for the place, which was merely three chambers. She'd covered over the entrance with stone, and the only way in or out was by gateway. Fresh water came from a natural spring, food from stores she'd brought in previously, and air through cracks. It was dank, and it was lowly.

In other words, it was precisely the sort of place where nobody would expect to find her. Everyone knew that Graendal could not stand a lack of luxury. That was true. But the best part about being predictable was that it allowed you to do the unexpected.

Unfortunately, none of that applied to the Great Lord. Graendal watched the open gateway before her as she relaxed on a chaise of yellow and blue silk. The messenger was a man with flat features and deep tanned skin, wearing black and red. He didn't need to speak—his presence was the message. One of her pets—a beautiful, black-haired woman with large brown eyes who had once been a Tairen high lady—stared at the gateway, She looked frightened. Graendal felt much the same way.

She closed the wood-bound copy of Alight in the Snow in her hands and stood up, wearing a dress of thin black silk with ribbons of streith running down it. She stepped through the gateway, careful to project an air of confidence.

Moridin stood inside his black stone palace. The room had no furniture;

only the hearth, with a fire burning. Great Lord! A fire, on such a warm day? She maintained her composure, and did not begin to sweat.

He turned toward her, the black flecks of saa swimming across his eyes. "You know why I have summoned you." Not a question.

"I do."

"Aran'gar is dead, lost to us—and after the Great Lord transmigrated her soul the last time. One might think you are making a habit of this sort of thing, Graendal."

"I live to serve, Nae'blis," she said. Confidence! She had to seem confident.

He hesitated just briefly. Good. "Surely you do not imply that Aran'gar had turned traitor."

"What?" Graendal said. "No, of course not."

"Then how is what you did a service?"

Graendal pasted a look of concerned confusion on her face. "Why, I was following the command I was given. Am I not here to receive an accolade?"

"Far from it," Moridin said dryly. "Your feigned confusion will not work on me, woman."

"It is not feigned," Graendal said, preparing her lie. "While I did not expect the Great Lord to be pleased to lose one of the Chosen, the gain was obviously worth the cost."

"What gain?" Moridin snarled. "You allowed yourself to be caught unaware, and foolishly lost the life of one of the Chosen! We should have been able to rely on you, of all people, to avoid stumbling over al'Thor."

He didn't know that she'd bound Aran'gar and left her to die; he thought this was a mistake. Good. "Caught unaware?" she said, sounding mortified. "I never . . . Moridin, how could you think that I'd let him find me by accident!"

"You did this intentionally?"

"Of course," Graendal said. "I practically had to lead him by the hand to Natrins Barrow. Lews Therin never was good at seeing facts directly in front of his nose. Moridin, don't you see? How will Lews Therin react to what he has done? Destroying an entire fortress, a miniature city of its own, with hundreds of occupants? Killing innocents to reach his goal? Will that sit easily within him?"

Moridin hesitated. No, he had not considered that. She smiled inwardly. To him, ai'Thor's actions would have made perfect sense. They were the most logical, and therefore most sensible, means of accomplishing a goal.

But al'Thor himself... his mind was full of daydreams about honor

and virtue. This event would not sit easily within him, and speaking of him as Lews Therin to Moridin would reinforce that. These actions would tear at al'Thor, rip at his soul, lash his heart raw and bleeding. He would have nightmares, wear his guilt on his shoulders like the yoke of a heavily laden cart.

She could vaguely remember what it had been like, taking those first few steps toward the Shadow. Had she ever felt that foolish pain? Yes, unfortunately. Not all of the Chosen had. Semirhage had been corrupt to the bone from the start. But others of them had taken different paths to the Shadow, including Ishamael.

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She could see the memories, so distant, in Moridin's eyes. Once, she'd not been sure who this man was, but now she was. The face was different, but the soul the same. Yes, he knew exactly what al'Thor was feeling.

"You told me to hurt him," Graendal said. "You told me to bring him anguish. This was the best way. Aran'gar helped me, though she did not flee when I suggested. That one always has confronted her problems too aggressively. But I'm certain the Great Lord can find other tools. We took a risk, and it was not without cost. But the gain . . . Beyond that, Lews Therin now thinks I am dead. That is a large advantage."

She smiled. Not too much pleasure. Merely a little satisfaction. Moridin scowled, then hesitated, glancing to the side. At nothing. "I am to leave you without punishment, for now," he finally said, though he didn't sound pleased about it.

Had that been a communication directly from the Great Lord? As far as she knew, all Chosen in this Age had to go to him in Shayol Ghul to receive their orders. Or at least suffer a visit from that horrid creature Shaidar Haran. Now the Great Lord appeared to be speaking to the Nae'blis directly. Interesting. And worrisome.

It meant the end was very near. There would not be much time left for posturing. She would see herself Nae'blis and rule this world as her own once the Last Battle was done.

"I think," Graendal said, "that I should—"

You are to stay away from al'Thor," Moridin said. "You are not to be punished, but I don't see reason to praise you either. Yes, al'Thor may be hurt, but you still bungled your plan, costing us a useful tool."

Of course," Graendal said smoothly, "I will serve as it pleases the Great Lord. I was not going to suggest that I move against al'Thor anyway. He thinks me dead, and so best to let him remain in his ignorance while I work elsewhere, for now."

"Elsewhere?"

Graendal needed a victory, a decisive one. She sifted through the different plans she'd devised, selecting the most likely to succeed. She couldn't move against al'Trior? Very well. She would bring to the Great Lord something he'd long desired.

"Perrin Aybara," Graendal said. She felt exposed, having to reveal her intentions to Moridin. She preferred to keep her plots to herself. However, she doubted she'd be able to escape this meeting without telling him. "I will bring you his head."

Moridin turned toward the fire, clasping his hands behind his back. He watched the flames.

With a shock, she felt sweat trickle down her brow. What? She was able to avoid heat and cold. What was wrong? She maintained her focus . . . it just didn't work. Not here. Not near him.

That unsettled her deeply.

"He's important," Graendal said. "The prophecies—"

"I know the prophecies," Moridin said softly. He did not turn. "How would you do it?"

"My spies have located his army," Graendal said. "I have already set some plans in motion regarding him, just in case. I retain the group of Shadowspawn given me to cause chaos, and I have a trap prepared. It will break al'Thor, ruin him, if he loses Aybara."

"It will do more than that," Moridin said softly. "But you will never manage it. His men have gateways. He will escape you."

"He will escape you," Moridin said softly.

The sweat trickled down her cheek, then to her chin. She wiped it casually, but her brow continued to bead.

"Come," Moridin said, striding from the hearth and toward the hallway outside.

Graendal followed, curious but afraid. Moridin led her to a nearby door, set in the same black stone walls. He pushed it open.

Graendal followed him inside. The narrow room was lined with shelves. And on them were dozens—perhaps hundreds—of objects of Power. Darkness within! she thought. Where did he get so many?

Moridin walked to the end of the room, where he picked through objects on a shelf. Graendal entered, awed. "Is that a shocklance?" she asked, pointing to a long thin bit of metal. "Three binding rods? A rema'kar? Those pieces of a sho—"

"It is unimportant," he said, selecting an item.

"If I could just—"

"You are close to losing favor, Graendal," he said, turning and holding long, spikelike piece of metal, silvery and topped with a large metal head set with golden inlay. "I have found only two of these. The other is being put to good use. You may use this one."

"A dreamspike?" she said, eyes opening wide. How badly she'd wanted to have one of these! "You found two?"

He tapped the top of the dreamspike and it vanished from his hand. "You will know where to find it?"

"Yes," she said, growing hungry. This was an object of great Power. Useful in so many different ways.

Moridin stepped forward, seizing her eyes with his own. "Graendal," he said softly, dangerously. "I know the key for this one. It will not be used against me, or others of the Chosen. The Great Lord will know if you do. I do not wish your apparent habit to be indulged further, not until Aybara is dead."

"I. . . yes, of course." She felt cold, suddenly. How could she feel cold here? And while still sweating?

"Aybara can walk the World of Dreams," Moridin said. "I will lend you another tool, the man with two souls. But he is mine, just as that spike is mine. Just as you are mine. Do you understand?"

She nodded. She couldn't help herself. The room seemed to be growing darker. That voice of his . . . it sounded, just faintly, like that of the Great Lord.

"Let me tell you this, however," Moridin said, reaching forward with his right hand, cupping her chin. "If you do succeed, the Great Lord will be pleased. Very pleased. That which has been granted you in sparseness will be heaped upon you in glory."

She licked her dry lips. In front of her, Moridin's expression grew distant.

"Moridin?" she asked hesitantly.

He ignored her, releasing her chin and walking to the end of the room. From a table, he picked up a thick tome wrapped in pale tan skin. He flipped to a certain page and studied it for a moment. Then he waved for her to approach.

She did so, careful. When she read what was on the page, she found herself stunned.

Darkness within! "What is this book?" she finally managed to force out. Where did these prophecies come from?"

"They have long been known to me," Moridin said softly, still studying the book. "But not to many others, not even the Chosen. The women and men who spoke these were isolated and held alone. The Light must never know of these words. We know of their prophecies, but they will never know all of ours."

"But this . . ." she said, rereading the passage. "This says Aybara will die!"

"There can be many interpretations of any prophecy," Moridin said. "But yes. This Foretelling promises that Aybara will die by our hand. You will bring me the head of this wolf, Graendal. And when you do, anything you ask shall be yours." He slapped the book closed. "But mark me. Fail, and you will lose what you have gained. And much more."

He opened a portal for her with a wave of the hand; her faint ability to touch the True Power—that hadn't been removed from her—allowed her to see twisted weaves stab the air and rend it, ripping a hole in the fabric of the Pattern. The air shimmered there. It would lead back to her hidden cavern, she knew.

She went through without a word. She didn't trust her voice to speak without shaking.

CHAPTER 6

Questioning Intentions

Morgase Trakand, once Queen of Andor, served tea. She moved from person to person in the large pavilion Perrin had taken from Maiden. It had sides that could be rolled up and no tent floor.

Large though the tent was, there was barely enough room for all who had wanted to attend the meeting. Perrin and Faile were there, of course, sitting on the ground. Next to them sat golden-eyed Elyas and Tam al'Thor, the simple farmer with the broad shoulders and the calm manners. Was this man really the father of the Dragon Reborn? Of course, Morgase had seen

Rand al'Thor once, and the boy hadn't looked much more than a farmer himself.

Beside Tam sat Perrin's dusty secretary, Sebban Balwer. How much did Perrin know of his past? Jur Grady was there also, wearing his black coat with a silver sword pin on the collar. His leathery farmer's face was hollow-eyed and still pale from the sickness he'd suffered recently. Neald—the other Asha'man—was not there. He hadn't yet recovered from his snakebites.

All three Aes Sedai were there. Seonid and Masuri sat with the Wise Ones, and Annoura sat beside Berelain, occasionally shooting glances at the six Wise Ones. Gallenne sat on Berelain's other side. Across from them sat Alliandre and Arganda.

The officers made Morgase think of Gareth Bryne. She hadn't seen him in a long while, not since she'd exiled him for reasons she still couldn't quite explain. Very little about that time in her life made sense to her now. Had she really been so infatuated with a man that she'd banished Aemlyn and Ellorien?

Anyway, those days were gone. Now Morgase picked her way carefully through the room and saw that people's cups were kept full.

"Your work took longer than I'd expected," Perrin said.

"You gave us a duty to attend to, Perrin Aybara," Nevarin replied. "We accomplished it. It took us as much time as needed to do it correctly. Surely you don't imply that we did otherwise." The sandy-haired Wise One sat directly in front of Seonid and Masuri.

"Give over, Nevarin," Perrin grunted as he unrolled a map before him on the ground; it had been drawn by Balwer using instructions from the Ghealdanin. "I wasn't questioning you. I was asking if there were any problems in the burning."

"The village is gone," Nevarin said. "And every plant we found with a hint of Blight has been burned to ash. As well we did. You wetlanders would have much trouble dealing with something as deadly as the Blight."

"I think," Faile said, "that you would be surprised."

Morgase glanced at Faile, who locked eyes with the Wise One. Faile sat like a queen, once again dressed to her station in a fine dress of green and violet, pleated down the sides and divided for riding. Oddly, Voiles sense of leadership seemed to have been enhanced by her time spent with the Shaido.

Morgase and Faile had quickly gone back to being mistress and servant. In fact, Morgase's life here was strikingly similar to what it had been in the Shaido camp. True, some things were different; Morgase wasn't likely to be strapped here, for instance. That didn't change the fact that—for a time—she and the other four women had been equals. No longer.

Morgase stopped beside Lord Gallenne and refilled his cup, using the same skills she'd cultivated in attending Sevanna. At times, being a servant seemed to require more stealth than being a scout. She wasn't to be seen, wasn't to distract. Had her own servants acted this way around her?

"Well," Arganda said, "if anyone is wondering where we've gone, the smoke from that fire is an easy indicator."

"We're far too many people to think of hiding," Seonid said. Recently, she and Masuri had begun being allowed to speak without reprimand from the Wise Ones, though the Green did still glance at the Aiel women before speaking. It galled Morgase to see that. Sisters of the Tower, made apprentices to a bunch of wilders? It was said to have been done at Rand al'Thor's order, but how would any man—even the Dragon Reborn—be capable of such a thing?

It discomforted her that the two Aes Sedai no longer seemed to resist their station. A person's situation in life could change her dramatically. Gaebril, then Valda, had taught Morgase that lesson. The Aiel captivity had been merely another step in the process.

Each of these experiences had moved her farther away from the Queen she had been. Now she didn't long for fine things or her throne. She just wanted some stability. That, it seemed, was a commodity more precious than gold.

"It doesn't matter," Perrin said, tapping the map. "So, we're decided? We chase after Gill and the others on foot for now, sending scouts by gateway to find them, if possible. Hopefully, we'll catch them before they reach Lugard. How long to the city would you say, Arganda?"

"Depends on the mud," the wiry soldier said. "There's a reason we call this time of year the swamping. Wise men don't travel during the spring melt."

"Wisdom is for those who have time for it," Perrin muttered, counting off distance on the map with his fingers.

Morgase moved to refill Annoura's cup. Pouring tea was more complicated than she'd ever assumed. She had to know whose cup to take aside and fill, and whose to fill while they were holding it. She had to know precisely how high to fill a cup so that it would not spill, and how to pour the tea without rattling the porcelain or splashing. She knew when to not be seen and when to make a slight production out of filling cups in case she'd missed people, forgotten them or misjudged their needs.

She carefully took Perrin's cup from beside him on the ground. He liked to gesture when he spoke, and could knock the cup from her hand if she was unwary. All in all, there was a remarkable art to serving tea—an entire world that Morgase the Queen had never bothered to notice. She refilled Perrin's cup and placed it back beside him. Perrin asked other questions about the map—nearby towns, potential sources of resup-ply. He had a lot of promise as a leader, even if he was rather inexperienced. A little advice from Morgase—

She cut that thought off. Perrin Aybara was a rebel. The Two Rivers was part of Andor, and he'd named himself lord of it, flying that wolfhead banner. At least the flag of Manetheren had been taken down. Flying that had been nothing short of an open declaration of war.

Morgase no longer bristled every time someone named him a lord, but

she also didn't intend to offer him any help. Not until she determined how to move him back beneath the cloak of the Andoran monarchy.

Besides, Morgase grudgingly admitted, Faile is sharp enough to give any advice I would have.

Faile was actually a perfect complement to Perrin. Where he was a blunt and leveled lance at charge, she was a subtle cavalry bow. The combination of the two—with Faile's connections to the Saldaean throne—was what really worried Morgase. Yes, he'd taken down the Manetheren banner, but he'd ordered that wolfhead banner taken down before. Often, forbidding something was the best way to ensure that it happened.

Alliandre s cup was half empty. Morgase moved over to refill it; like many highborn ladies, Alliandre always expected her cup to be full. Alliandre glanced at Morgase, and there was a faint glimmer of discomfort in those eyes. Alliandre felt uncertain what their relationship should be. That was curious, as Alliandre had been so haughty during their captivity. The person Morgase had once been, the Queen, wanted to sit Alliandre down and give a lengthy explanation of how to better maintain her grandeur.

She'd have to learn on her own. Morgase was no longer the person she had once been. She wasn't sure what she was, but she would learn how to do her duty as a lady's maid. This was becoming a passion for her. A way to prove to herself that she was still strong, still of value.

In a way, it was terrifying that she worried about that.

"Lord Perrin," Alliandre said as Morgase moved away. "Is it true that you're planning on sending my people back to Jehannah after you find Gill and his group?"

Morgase continued past Masuri—the Aes Sedai liked her cup refilled only when she tapped on it lightly with her fingernail.

"I do," Perrin replied. "We all know it wasn't completely your will to join us in the first place. If we hadn't brought you along, you'd never have been captured by the Shaido. Masema is dead. Time to let you return to governing your nation."

"With all due respect, my Lord," Alliandre said. "Why are you recruiting from among my countrymen if not to gather an army for future use?"

"I'm not trying to recruit," Perrin said. "Just because I don't turn them away doesn't mean I intend to enlarge this army any further."

"My Lord," Alliandre said. "But surely it is wise to keep what you have."

"She has a point, Perrin," Berelain added softly. "One need only look at the sky to know the Last Battle is imminent. Why send her force back? I'm certain that the Lord Dragon will have need of every soldier from every land sworn to him."

"He can send for them when he decides to," Perrin said stubbornly.

"My Lord," Alliandre said. "I did not swear to him. I swore to you. If Ghealdan will march for Tarmon Gai'don, it should do so beneath your banner."

Perrin stood up, startling several people in the tent. Was he leaving? He walked to the open side of the tent without a word, poking his head out. "Wil, come here," he called.

A weave of the One Power kept people outside from listening in. Morgase could see Masuri's weaves, tied off and warding the tent. Their intricacy seemed to mock her own minuscule talent.

Masuri tapped the side of her cup, and Morgase hastened to refill it. The woman liked to sip tea when nervous.

Perrin turned back into the tent, followed by a handsome youth carrying a cloth-wrapped bundle. "Unfurl it," Perrin said. The young man did so, looking apprehensive. It bore the wolfhead emblem that was Perrin's sigil.

"I didn't make this banner," Perrin said. "I never wanted it, but— upon advice—I let it fly. Well, the reasons for doing that are past. I'd order the thing taken down, but that never seems to work for long." He looked to Wil. "Wil, I want it passed through camp. I'm giving a direct order. I want each and every copy of this blasted banner burned. You understand?"

Wil paled. "But—"

"Do it," Perrin said. "Alliandre, you'll swear to Rand as soon as we find him. You won't ride beneath my banner, because I won't have a banner. I'm a blacksmith, and that's the end of it. I've stomached this foolishness for too long."

"Perrin?" Faile asked. She looked surprised. "Is this wise?"

Fool man. He should have at least talked to his wife about this. But men would be men. They liked their secrets and their plans.

"I don't know if it's wise. But it what I'm doing," he said, sitting down. Be off, Wil. I want those banners burned by tonight. No holdouts, you understand?"

Wil stiffened, then spun and strode from the tent without giving a reply. The lad looked as if he felt betrayed. Oddly, Morgase found herself feeling a little of the same. It was foolish. This was what she wanted—it was what Perrin should do. And yet, the people were frightened, with good reason. That sky, the things that were happening in the world . . . Well, in a time like this, perhaps a man could be excused for taking command.

"You are a fool, Perrin Aybara," Masuri said. She had a blunt way about her.

"Son," Tarn addressed Perrin, "the lads put a lot of stock in that banner."

"Too much," Perrin said.

"Perhaps. But it's good to have something to look to. When you took down the other banner, it was hard on them. This will be worse."

"It needs to be done," Perrin said. "The Two Rivers men have gotten too attached to it, started talking like they're going to stay with me instead of going back to their families where they belong. When we get gateways working again, Tarn, you'll be taking them and going." He looked at

Berelain. "I suppose I can't be rid of you and your men. You'll go back with me to Rand."

"I wasn't aware," Berelain said stiffly, "that you needed to 'be rid' of us. You seemed far less reluctant to accept my support when demanding the services of my Winged Guardsmen in rescuing your wife."

Perrin took a deep breath. "I appreciate your help, all of you. We did a good thing in Maiden, and not just for Faile and Alliandre. It was a thing that needed doing. But burn me, that's over now. If you want to go on to follow Rand, I'm sure he'll have you. But my Asha'man are exhausted, and the tasks I was given are complete. I've got these hooks inside of me, pulling me back to Rand. Before I can do that, I need to be done with all of you."

"Husband," Faile said, her words clipped. "Might I suggest that we begin with the ones who want to be sent away?"

"Yes," Aravine said. The former gai'shain sat near the back of the tent, easy to overlook, though she had become an important force in Perrin's camp administration. She acted as something of an unofficial steward for him. "Some of the refugees would be happy to return to their homes."

"I'd rather move everyone, if I can," Perrin said. "Grady?"

The Asha'man shrugged his shoulders. "The gateways I've made for scouts haven't taxed me too much, and I think I could make some larger ones. I'm still a little weak, but I am mostly over the sickness. Neald will need more time, though."

"My Lord." Balwer coughed softly. "I have some figures of curious note. Moving as many people as you now have through gateways will take hours, maybe days. It won't be a quick endeavor, as when we approached Maiden."

"That's going to be rough, my Lord," Grady said. "I don't think I could hold one open such a long time. Not if you want me strong enough to be in fighting shape, just in case."

Perrin settled back down, inspecting the map again. Berelain's cup was

empty; Morgase hurried over to fill it. "All right, then," Perrin said. "We'll start sending some smaller groups of refugees away, but those who want to leave first."

"Also," Faile said. "Perhaps it is time to send messengers to contact the Lord Dragon; he might be willing to send more Asha'man."

Perrin nodded. "Yes."

"Last we knew," Seonid said, "he was in Cairhien. The largest number of the refugees are from there, so we could begin by sending some of them home, along with scouts to meet with the Lord Dragon."

"He's not there," Perrin said.

"How do you know?" Edarra set down her cup. Morgase crept around the perimeter of the tent and snatched it for refilling. Eldest of the Wise Ones, and perhaps foremost among them—it was hard to tell with Wise Ones—Edarra looked strikingly young for her reported age. Morgase's own tiny ability in the One Power was enough to tell her that this woman was strong. Probably the strongest in the room.

"I . . ." Perrin seemed to flounder. Had he a source of information he wasn't sharing? "Rand has a habit of being where you don't expect him. I doubt he's remained in Cairhien. But Seonid is right—it's the best place to start looking."

"My Lord," Balwer said. "I worry about what we might, ahem, blunder into if we are not careful. Fleets of refugees, returning through gateways unexpectedly? We have been out of touch for some time. Perhaps, in addition to contacting the Dragon, we could send scouts to gather information?"

Perrin nodded. "I could approve that."

Balwer settled back, looking pleased, though that man was strikingly good at hiding his emotions. Why did he want so badly to send someone to Cairhien?

"I'll admit," Grady said, "I'm worried about moving all of these people. Even once Neald is well, it's going to be exhausting to hold gateways open long enough to get them all through."

"Perrin Aybara," Edarra said. "There may be a way to fix this problem."

"How?"

"These apprentices have been speaking of something. A circle, it is called? If we linked together, the Ashaman and some of us, then perhaps we could give them the strength to create larger gateways."

Perrin scratched at his beard. "Grady?"

"I've never linked in a circle before, my Lord. But if we could figure it out...well, bigger gateways would move more people through faster. That could help a lot."

"All right," Perrin said, turning back to the Wise One. "What would it cost me for you to try this?"

"You have worked too long with Aes Sedai, Perrin Aybara," Edarra said with a sniff. "Not everything must be done at a cost. This will benefit us all. I have been contemplating suggesting it for some time."

Perrin frowned. "How long have you known that this might work?"

"Long enough."

"Burn you, woman, why didn't you bring it to me earlier, then?"

"You seem hardly interested in your position as chief, most of the time," Edarra said coldly. "Respect is a thing earned and not demanded, Perrin Aybara."

Morgase held her breath at that insolent comment. Many a lord would snap at someone for that tone. Perrin froze, but then nodded, as if that were the expected answer.

"Your Asha'man were sick when I first thought of this," Edarra continued. "It would not have worked before. This is the appropriate time to raise the question. Therefore, I have done so."

She insults Aes Sedai with one breath, Morgase thought, then acts just like one with the next. Still, being a captive in Maiden had helped Morgase begin to understand Aiel ways. Everyone claimed the Aiel were incomprehensible, but she gave talk like that little credence. Aiel were people, like any other. They had odd traditions and cultural quirks, but so did everyone else. A queen had to be able to understand all of the people within her realm— and all of her realm's potential enemies.

"Very well," Perrin said. "Grady, don't fatigue yourself too much, but start working with them. See if you can manage forming a circle."

"Yes, my Lord," Grady said. The Asha'man always seemed somewhat distant. "Might be good to involve Neald in this. He gets dizzy when he stands, but he's been itching to do something with the Power. This might be a way for him to get back into practice."

"All right," Perrin said.

"We have not finished talking of the scouts we are sending to Cairhien," Seonid said. "I would like to be with the group."

Perrin scratched his bearded chin. "I suppose. Take your Warders, two Maidens and Pel Aydaer. Be unobtrusive, if you can."

"Also Camaille Nolaisen will go," Faile said. Of course she would add one Cha Faile to the group.

Balwer cleared his throat. "My Lord. We are in dire need of paper and new pen nibs, not to mention some other delicate materials."

"Surely that can wait." Perrin frowned.

"No," Faile said slowly. "'No, husband, I think this is a good suggestion. We should send one person to collect supplies. Balwer, would you go and fetch the things yourself?"

"If my Lady wishes it," the secretary said. "I have ached to visit this school the Dragon has opened in Cairhien. They would have the supplies

we need."

"I suppose you can go, then," Perrin said. "But nobody else. Light! Any more, and we might as well send the whole burning army through."

Balwer nodded, looking satisfied. That one was obviously spying for Perrin now. Would he tell Aybara who she really was? Had he done so already? Perrin didn't act as if he knew.

She gathered up more cups; the meeting was beginning to break up. Of course Balwer would offer to spy for Aybara; she should have approached the dusty man earlier, to see what the price would be to keep his silence. Mistakes like that could cost a queen her throne.

She froze, hand halfway to a cup. You're not a queen any longer. You have to stop thinking like one!

During the first weeks following her silent abdication, she'd hoped to find a way to return to Andor, so she could be a resource for Elayne. However, the more she'd considered it, the more she'd realized that she had to stay away. Everyone in Andor had to assume that Morgase was dead. Each queen had to make her own way, and Elayne might seem a puppet to her own mother if Morgase returned. Beyond that, Morgase had made many enemies before leaving. Why had she done such things? Her memory of those times was cloudy, but her return would only rip open old wounds.

She continued gathering up cups. Perhaps she should have done the noble thing and killed herself. If enemies of the throne discovered who she was, they could use her against Elayne, the same way that the Whitecloaks would have. But for now, she was not a threat. Besides, she was confident that Elayne would not risk Andor's safety, even to save her mother.

Perrin bade farewell to the attendees and gave some basic instructions for the evening camp. Morgase knelt down, using a rag to wipe dirt from the side of a teacup that had rolled over. Niall had told her that Gaebril was dead, and al'Thor held Caemlyn. That would have prompted Elayne to return, wouldn't it? Was she queen? Had the Houses supported her, or had they acted against her because of what Morgase had done?

The scouting party might bring news that Morgase hungered for. She would have to find a way into any meeting discussing their reports, perhaps by offering to serve the tea. The better she grew at her job as Faile's maid, the closer she'd be able to get to important events.

As the Wise Ones made their way from the tent, Morgase caught sight of someone outside. Tallanvor, dutiful as always. Tall, broad of shoulder, he wore his sword at his waist and a look of pointed concern in his eyes.

He'd followed her practically nonstop since Maiden, and while she'd complained of it out of principle, she didn't mind. After two months apart he wanted to take every opportunity to be together. Looking into those beautiful young eyes of his, she could not entertain the notion of suicide even for the good of Andor. She felt a fool for that. Hadn't she let her heart lead her into enough trouble already?

Maiden had changed her, though. She'd missed Tallanvor dearly. And then he'd come for her, when he shouldn't have risked himself so. He was more devoted to her than to Andor itself. And for some reason, that was exactly what she needed. She began to make her way toward him, balancing eight cups in the crook of her arm while carrying the saucers in her hand.

"Maighdin," Perrin said as she passed out of the tent. She hesitated, turning back. Everyone but Perrin and his wife had withdrawn.

"Come back here, please," Perrin said. "And Tallanvor, you might as well come in. I can see you lurking out there. Honestly. It's not as if anyone was going to swoop down and steal her away while she was inside a tent full of Wise Ones and Aes Sedai!"

Morgase raised an eyebrow. From what she'd seen, Perrin himself had followed Faile around lately nearly as much.

Tallanvor shot her a smile as he entered. He took some of the cups from her arm, then both of them presented themselves before Perrin. Tallanvor bowed formally, which gave Morgase a stab of annoyance. He was still a member of the Queen's Guard—the only loyal member, as far as she knew. He shouldn't be bowing to this rural upstart.

"I was given a suggestion back when you first joined us," Perrin said gruffly. "Well, I think it's about time I took it. Lately, you two are like youths from different villages, mooning over one another in the hour before

Sunday ends. It's high time you were married. We could have Alliandre do it, or maybe I could. Do you have some tradition you follow?"

Morgase blinked in surprise. Curse Lini for putting that idea in Perrin's head! Morgase felt a sudden panic, though Tallanvor glanced at her questioningly.

"Go change into something nicer if you want," Perrin said. "Gather any you want to witness and be back here in an hour. Then we'll get this silliness over with."

She felt her face grow hot with anger. Silliness? How dare he! And in

such a way! Sending her off like a child, as if her emotion—her love—was merely an inconvenience to him?

He was rolling up his map, but then Faile's hand placed on his arm

caused him to look up and notice that his orders had not been followed.

"Well?" Perrin asked.

"No," Morgase said. She kept her gaze on Perrin; she didn't want to see the inevitable disappointment and rejection in Tallanvor's face.

"What?" Perrin asked.

"No, Perrin Aybara," Morgase said. "I will not be back here in an hour to be married."

"But—"

"If you want tea served, or your tent cleaned, or something packed, then call for me. If you wish your clothing washed, I will oblige. But I am your servant, Perrin Aybara, not your subject. I am loyal to the Queen of Andor. You have no authority to give me this sort of command."

"I-"

"Why, the Queen herself wouldn't demand this! Forcing two people to marry because you're tired of the way they look at one another? Like two hounds you intend to breed, then sell the pups?"

"I didn't mean it that way."

"You said it nonetheless. Besides, how can you be sure of the young man's intentions? Have you spoken to him, asked him, interviewed him as a lord should in a matter like this?"

"But Maighdin," Perrin said. "He does care for you. You should have seen the way he acted when you were taken. Light, woman, but it's obvious!"

"Matters of the heart are never obvious." Pulling herself up to her full height, she almost felt a queen again. "If I choose to marry a man, I will make that decision on my own. For a man who claims he doesn't like being in charge, you certainly do like giving commands. How can you be sure that I want this young man's affections? Do you know my heart?"

To the side, Tallanvor stiffened. Then he bowed formally to Perrin and strode from the tent. He was an emotional one. Well, he needed to know that she would not be shoved around. Not anymore. First Gaebril, then valda, and now Perrin Aybara? Tallanvor would be ill-served if he were to receive a woman who married him because she was told to do so.

Morgase measured Perrin, who was blushing. She softened her tone.

"You're young at this yet, so I'll give you advice. There are some things a

lord should be involved in, but others he should always leave untouched.

You'll learn the difference as you practice, but kindly refrain from making

demands like this one until you've at least counseled with your wife."

With that, she curtsied—still carrying the teacups—and withdrew. She shouldn't have spoken to him so. Well, he shouldn't have made a command like that! It seemed she had some spark left in her after all. She hadn't felt that firm or certain of herself since . . . well, since before Gae-bril's arrival in Caemlyn! Though she would have to find Tallanvor and soothe his pride.

She returned the cups to the nearby washing station, then went through the camp, looking for Tallanvor. Around her, servants and workers were busy at their duties. Many of the former gai'shain still acted as if they were among the Shaido, bowing and scraping whenever someone so much as looked at them. Those from Cairhien were the worst; they'd been held longest, and Aiel were very good at teaching lessons.

There were, of course, a few real Aiel gai'shain. What an odd custom. From what Morgase had been able to determine, some of the gai'shain here had been taken by the Shaido, then had been liberated in Maiden. They retained the white, and so that meant they were now acting as slaves to their own relatives and friends.

Any people could be understood. But, she admitted, perhaps the Aiel would take longer than others. Take, for instance, that group of Maidens loping through camp. Why did they have to force everyone out of their way? There was no—

Morgase hesitated. Those Maidens were heading straight for Perrin's tent. They looked like they had news.

Her curiosity getting the better of her, Morgase followed. The Maidens left two guards by the front tent flaps, but the ward against eavesdropping had been removed. Morgase rounded the tent, trying to look as if she was doing anything other than eavesdropping, feeling a stab of shame for leaving Tallanvor to his pain.

"Whitecloaks, Perrin Aybara," Sulin's stout voice reported from inside. "There is a large force of them on the road directly in front of us."

CHAPTER 7

Lighter than a Feather

The air felt calmer at night, though the thunder still warned Lan that not all was well. In his weeks traveling with Bulen, that storm above seemed to have grown darker.

After riding southward, they continued on to the east; they were somewhere near the border between Kandor and Saldaea, on the Plain of Lances. Towering, weathered hills—steep-sided, like fortresses—rose around them.

Perhaps they'd missed the border. There often was no marker on these back roads, and the mountains cared not which nation tried to claim them.

"Master Andra," Bulen said from behind. Lan had purchased a horse for him to ride, a dusty white mare. He still led his packhorse, Scouter.

Bulen caught up to him. Lan insisted upon being called "Andra." One follower was bad enough. If nobody knew who he was, they couldn't ask to come with him. He had Bulen to thank—inadvertently—for the warning of what Nynaeve had done. For that, he owed the man a debt.

Bulen did like to talk, though.

'Master Andra," Bulen continued. "If I may suggest, we could turn south at the Berndt Crossroads, yes? I know a waypoint inn in that direction that serves the very best quail. We could turn eastward again on the road to South Mettler. A much easier path. My cousin has a farm along that road—-cousin on my mother's side, Master Andra—and we could—" "We continue this way," Lan said.

"But South Mettler is a much better roadway!"

"And therefore much better traveled too, Bulen."

Bulen sighed, but fell silent. The hadori looked good around his head and he had proven surprisingly capable with the sword. As talented a student as Lan had seen in a while.

It was dark—night came early here, because of those mountains. Compared to the areas near the Blight, it also felt chilly. Unfortunately, the land here was fairly well populated. Indeed, about an hour past the crossroads they arrived at an inn, windows still glowing with light.

Bulen looked toward it longingly, but Lan continued on. He had them traveling at night, mostly. The better to keep from being seen.

A trio of men sat in front of the inn, smoking their pipes in the darkness. The pungent smoke wound in the air, past the inns windows. Lan didn't give them much consideration until—as a group—they broke off their smoking. They unhooked horses from the fence at the side of the inn.

Wonderful, Lan thought. Highwaymen, watching the night road for weary travelers. Well, three men shouldn't prove too dangerous. They rode behind Lan at a trot. They wouldn't attack until they were farther from the inn. Lan reached to loosen his sword in its sheath.

"My Lord," Bulen said urgently, looking over his shoulder. "Two of those men are wearing the hadori'.'

Lan spun around, cloak whipping behind him. The three men approached and did not stop. They split around him and Bulen.

Lan watched them pass. "Andere?" he called. "What do you think you're doing?"

One of the three—a lean, dangerous-looking man—glanced over his shoulder, his long hair held back with the hadori. It had been years since

Lan had seen Andere. He looked as if he'd given up his Kandori uniform, finally; he was wearing a deep black cloak and hunting leathers underneath.

"Ah, Lan," Andere said, the three men pulling up to stop. "I didn't notice you there."

"I'm sure you didn't," Lan said flatly. 'And you, Nazar. You put your hadori away when you were a lad. Now you don one?"

"I may do as I wish," Nazar said. He was getting old—he must be past his seventieth year—but he carried a sword on his saddle. His hair had gone white.

The third man, Rakim, wasn't Malkieri. He had the tilted eyes of a Saldaean, and he shrugged at Lan, looking a little embarrassed.

Lan raised his fingers to his forehead, closing his eyes as the three rode ahead. What foolish game were they playing? No matter, Lan thought, opening his eyes.

Bulen started to say something, but Lan quieted him with a glare. He turned southward off the road, cutting down a small, worn trail.

Before long, he heard muffled hoofbeats from behind. Lan spun as he saw the three men riding behind him. Lan pulled Mandarb to a halt, teeth gritted. "I'm not raising the Golden Crane!"

"We didn't say you were," Nazar said. The three parted around him again, riding past.

Lan kicked Mandarb forward, riding up to them. "Then stop following me."

"Last I checked, we were ahead of you," Andere said.

"You turned this way after me," Lan accused.

"You don't own the roads, Lan Mandragoran," Andere said. He glanced at Lan, face shadowed in the night. "If you haven't noticed, I'm no longer the boy the Hero of Salmarna berated so long ago. I've become a soldier, and soldiers are needed. So I will ride this way if I please."

"I command you to turn and go back," Lan said. "Find a different path eastward."

Rakim laughed, his voice still hoarse after all these years. "You're not my captain any longer, Lan. Why would I obey your orders?" The others chuckled.

"We'd obey a king, of course," Nazar said.

"Yes," Andere said. "If he gave us commands, perhaps we would. But I don't see a king here. Unless I'm mistaken."

"There can be no king of a fallen people," Lan said. "No king without a kingdom."

"And yet you ride," Nazar said, flicking his reins. "Ride to your death in a land you claim is no kingdom."

"It is my destiny."

The three shrugged, then pulled ahead of him.

"Don't be fools," Lan said, voice soft as he pulled Mandarb to a halt. "This path leads to death."

"Death is lighter than a feather, Lan Mandragoran," Rakim called over "is shoulder. "If we ride only to death, then the trail will be easier than I'd thought!"

Lan gritted his teeth, but what was he to do? Beat all three of them senseless and leave them beside the road? He nudged Mandarb forward.

The two had become five.

* * *

Galad continued his morning meal, noting that Child Byar had come to speak with him. The meal was simple fare: porridge with a handful of raisins stirred in. A simple meal for every soldier kept them all from envy. Some Lords Captain Commander had dined far better than their men. That would not do for Galad. Not when so many in the world starved.

Child Byar waited inside the flaps of Galad's tent, awaiting recognition. The gaunt, sunken-cheeked man wore his white cloak, a tabard over mail underneath.

Galad eventually set aside his spoon and nodded to Byar. The soldier strode up to the table and waited, still at attention. There were no elaborate furnishings to Galad's tent. His sword—Valda's sword—lay on the plain table behind his wooden bowl, slightly drawn. The herons on the blade peeked out from beneath the scabbard, and the polished steel reflected Byar's form.

"Speak," Galad said.

"I have more news about the army, my Lord Captain Commander," Byar said. "They are near where the captives said they would be, a few days from us."

Galad nodded. "They fly the flag of Ghealdan?"

"Alongside the flag of Mayene." That flame of zeal glinted in Byar's eyes. "And the wolfhead, though reports say they took that down late yesterday. Goldeneyes is there. Our scouts are sure of it."

"Did he really kill Bornhald's father?"

"Yes, my Lord Captain Commander. I have a familiarity with this creature. He and his troops come from a place called the Two Rivers."

"The Two Rivers?" Galad said. "Curious, how often I seem to hear of that place, these days. Is that not where al'Thor is from?"

"So it is said," Byar replied.

Galad rubbed his chin. "They grow good tabac there, Child Byar, but I have not heard of them growing armies."

"It is a dark place, my Lord Captain Commander. Child Bornhald and I spent some time there last year; it is festering with Darkfriends."

Galad sighed. "You sound like a Questioner."

"My Lord Captain Commander," Byar earnestly continued, "my Lord, please believe me. I am not simply speculating. This is different."

Galad frowned. Then he gestured toward the other stool beside his table. Byar took it.

"Explain yourself," Galad said. "And tell me everything you know of this Perrin Goldeneyes."

perrin could remember a time when simple breakfasts of bread and cheese had satisfied him. That was no longer the case. Perhaps it was due to his relationship with the wolves, or maybe his tastes had changed over time. These days he craved meat, especially in the morning. He couldn't always have it, and that was fine. But generally he didn't have to ask.

That was the case this day. He'd risen, washed his face, and found a servant entering with a large chop of ham, steaming and succulent. No beans, no vegetables. No gravy. Just the ham, rubbed with salt and seared over the fire, with a pair of boiled eggs. The serving woman set them on his table, then withdrew.

Perrin wiped his hands, crossing the rug of his tent and taking in the ham's scent. Part of him felt he should turn it away, but he couldn't. Not when it was right there. He sat down, took up fork and knife and dug in.

"I still don't see how you can eat that for breakfast" Faile noted, leaving the washing chamber of their tent, wiping her hands on a cloth. Their large tent had several curtained divisions to it. She wore one of her unobtrusive gray dresses. Perfect, because it didn't distract from her beauty. It was accented by a sturdy black belt—she had sent away all of her golden belts, no matter how fine. He'd suggested finding her one that was more to her liking, and she'd looked sick.

"It's food," Perrin said.

"I can see," she said with a snort, looking herself over in the mirror. "What did you think I assumed it was? A rock?"

"I meant," Perrin said between bites, "that food is food. Why should I care what I eat for breakfast and what I eat for a different meal?"

"Because it's strange," she said, clasping on a cord holding a small blue stone. She regarded herself in the mirror, then turned, the loose sleeves of her Saldaean-cut dress swishing. She paused beside his plate, grimacing. "I'm having breakfast with AUiandre. Send for me if there is news."

He nodded, swallowing. Why should a person have meat at midday, but refuse it for breakfast? It didn't make sense.

He'd decided to remain camped beside the Jehannah Road. What else was he to do, with an army of Whitecloaks directly ahead, between him and Lugard? His scouts needed time to assess the danger. He'd spent much time thinking about the strange visions he'd seen, the wolves chasing

sheep toward a beast and Faile walking toward a cliff. He hadn't been able to make sense of them, but could they have something to do with the Whitecloaks? Their appearance bothered him more than he wanted to admit, but he harbored a tiny hope that they would prove insignificant and not slow him too much.

"Perrin Aybara," a voice called from outside his tent. "Do you give me leave to enter?"

"Come in, Gaul," he called. "My shade is yours."

The tall Aiel strode in. "Thank you, Perrin Aybara," he said, glancing at the ham. "Quite a feast. Do you celebrate?"

"Nothing besides breakfast."

"A mighty victory," Gaul said, laughing.

Perrin shook his head. Aiel humor. He'd stopped trying to make sense of it. Gaul settled himself on the ground and Perrin sighed inwardly before picking up his plate and moving to sit on the rug across from Gaul. Perrin placed the meal in his lap and continued to eat.

"You need not sit on the floor because of me," Gaul said.

"I'm not doing it because I need to, Gaul."

Gaul nodded.

Perrin cut off another bite. This would be so much easier if he grabbed the whole thing in his fingers and started ripping off chunks. Eating was simpler for wolves. Utensils. What was the point?

Thoughts like that gave him pause. He was not a wolf, and didn't want to think like one. Maybe he should start having fruit for a proper breakfast, as Faile said. He frowned, then turned back to his meat.

"We fought Trollocs in the Two Rivers," Byar said, lowering his voice. Galad's porridge cooled, forgotten on the table. "Several dozen men in our camp can confirm it. I killed several of the beasts with my own sword."

"Trollocs in the Two Rivers?" Galad said. "That's hundreds of leagues from the Borderlands!"

"They were there nonetheless," Byar said. "Lord Captain Commander Niall must have suspected it. We were sent to the place on his orders. You know that Pedron Niall would not have simply jumped at nothing."

"Yes. I agree. But the Two Rivers?"

"It is full of Darkfriends," Byar said. "Bornhald told you of Goldeneyes. In the Two Rivers, this Perrin Aybara was raising the flag of ancient Manetheren and gathering an army from among the farmers. Trained soldiers may scoff at farmers pressed into service, but get enough of them together, and they can be a danger. Some are skilled with the staff or the bow."

"I am aware," Galad said flatly, recalling a particularly embarrassing lesson he'd once been given.

"That man, this Perrin Aybara," Byar continued. "He's Shadowspawn, as plain as day. They call him Goldeneyes because his eyes are golden, no shade that any person has ever known. We were certain that Aybara was bringing the Trollocs in, using them to force the people of the Two Rivers to join his army. He eventually ran us out of the place. Now he's here, before us." A coincidence, or something more?

Byar was obviously thinking along the same lines. "My Lord Captain Commander, perhaps I should have mentioned this earlier, but the Two Rivers wasn't my first experience with this creature Aybara. He killed two of the Children on a forgotten road in Andor some two years ago. I was traveling with Bornhald's father. We met Aybara in a campsite off a main road. He was running with wolves like a wildman! He killed two men before we could subdue him, then escaped into the night after we had him captured. My Lord, he was to be hanged."

"There are others who can confirm this?" Galad asked.

"Child Oratar can. And Child Bornhald can confirm what we saw in the Two Rivers. Goldeneyes was at Falme, too. For what he did there alone he should be brought to justice. It is clear. The Light has delivered him to us."

"You're certain our people are among the Whitecloaks?" Perrin asked.

"I could not see faces," Gaul said, "but Elyas Machera's eyes are very keen. He says he's certain he saw Basel Gill."

Perrin nodded. Elyas' golden eyes would be as good as Perrin's own.

"Sulin and her scouts have similar reports," Gaul said, accepting a cup of ale poured from Perrin's pitcher. "The Whitecloak army has a large number of carts, much like the ones we sent ahead. She discovered this early in the morning, but asked me to pass these words to you once you awoke, as she knows that wetlanders are temperamental when disturbed in the morning."

Gaul obviously had no idea that he might be giving offense. Perrin was a wetlander. Wetlanders were temperamental, at least in the opinion of the Aiel. So Gaul was stating an accepted fact. Perrin shook his head, trying one of the eggs. Overcooked, but edible. "Did Sulin spot anyone she recognized?"

"No, though she saw some gai'shain" Gaul said. "However, Sulin is a Maiden, so perhaps we should send someone to confirm what she said—someone who won't demand the opportunity to wash our smallclothes."

"Trouble with Bain and Chiad?" Perrin asked.

Gaul grimaced. "I swear, those women will drive the mind from me. What man should be expected to suffer such things? Almost better to have Sightblinder himself as a gai'shain than those two."

Perrin chuckled.

"Regardless, the captives look unharmed and healthy. There is more to the report. One of the Maidens saw a flag flying over the camp that looked distinctive, so she copied it down for your secretary, Sebban Balwer. He says that it means the Lord Captain Commander himself rides with this army."

Perrin looked down at the last chunk of ham. That was not good news. He'd never met the Lord Captain Commander, but he bad met one of the Whitecloak Lords Captain once. That had been the night when Hopper had died, a night that had haunted Perrin for two years.

That had been the night when he had killed for the first time.

"What more do you need?" Byar leaned in close, sunken eyes alight with zeal. "We have witnesses who saw this man murder two of our own! Do we let him march by, as if innocent?"

"No," Galad said. "No, by the Light, if what you say is true then we cannot turn our backs on this man. Our duty is to bring justice to the wronged."

Byar smiled, looking eager. "The prisoners revealed that the Queen of Ghealdan has sworn fealty to him."

"That could present a problem."

"Or an opportunity. Perhaps Ghealdan is precisely what the Children need. A new home, a place to rebuild. You speak of Andor, my Lord Captain Commander, but how long will they suffer us? You speak of the Last Battle, but it could be months away. What if we were to free an entire nation from the grip of a terrible Darkfriend? Surely the Queen—or her successor—would feel indebted to us."

"Assuming we can defeat this Aybara."

"We can. Our forces are smaller than his, but many of his soldiers are farmers."

"Farmers you just pointed out can be dangerous," Galad said. "They should not be underestimated."

"Yes, but I know we can defeat them. They can be dangerous, yes, but they will break before the might of the Children. This time, finally, Goldeneyes won't be able to hide behind his little village fortifications or his ragtag allies. No more excuses."

Was this part of being ta'veren? Could Perrin not escape that night, years ago? He set his plate aside, feeling sick.

"Are you well, Perrin Aybara?" Gaul said.

"Just thinking." The Whitecloaks would not leave him alone, and the Pattern—burn it!—was going to keep looping them into his path until he dealt with them.

"How large is their army?" Perrin asked.

"There are twenty thousand soldiers among them," Gaul replied. "There are several thousand others who have likely never held a spear."

Servants and camp followers. Gaul kept the amusement from his voice, but Perrin could smell it on him. Among the Aiel, nearly every man—all but blacksmiths—would pick up a spear if they were attacked. The fact that many wetlanders were incapable of defending themselves either befuddled or infuriated the Aiel.

"Their force is large," Gaul continued, "but ours is larger. And they have no algai'd'siswai nor Asha'man, nor channelers of any type, if Sebban Balwer's word is not in error. He seems to know much of these Whitecloaks."

"He's right. Whitecloaks hate Aes Sedai and think anyone who can use the One Power is a Darkfriend."

"We move against him, then?" Byar asked.

Galad stood. "We have no choice. The Light has delivered him into our hands. But we need more information. Perhaps I should go to this Aybara and let him know that we hold his allies, and then ask his army to meet with us on the field of battle. I'd rather draw him out to make use of my cavalry."

"What do you want, Perrin Aybara?" Gaul asked.

What did he want? He wished he could answer that.

Send more scouts," Perrin said. "Find us a better place to camp. We'll want to offer parley, but there s no way under the Light I'm leaving. Gill and the others in the hands of the Whitecioaks. We'll give the Children chance to return our people. If they don't. . . well, then we'll see "

CHAPTER 8

The Seven-Striped Lass

Mat sat on a worn stool, his arms leaning against a dark wooden bar counter. The air smelled good—of ale, smoke, and of the washcloth that had recently wiped the counter. He liked that. There was something calming about a good, rowdy tavern that was also kept clean. Well, clean as was reasonable, anyway. Nobody liked a tavern that was too clean. That made a place feel new. Like a coat that had never been worn or a pipe that had never been smoked.

Mat flipped a folded letter between two fingers of his right hand. That letter, on thick paper, was sealed with a glob of blood-red wax. He had been carrying it only a short time, but it was already a source of as much aggravation to him as any woman. Well, maybe not an Aes Sedai, but most any other woman. That was saying a lot.

He stopped spinning the letter and tapped it on the counter. Burn Verin for doing this to him! She held him by his oath like a fish caught on a hook.

Well, Master Crimson?" asked the tavernkeeper. That was the name he was using these days. Best to be safe. "You want a refill or not?"

The tavernkeeper leaned down before him, crossing her arms. Melli Craeb was a pretty woman, with a round face and auburn hair that curled quite fetchingly. Mat would have given her his best smile—there was not a woman he had met who did not melt for his best smile—but he was a married man now. He could not go breaking hearts; it would not be right.

Though, leaning as she did showed some ample bosom. She was a short woman, but she kept the area behind the bar raised. Yes, a nice bosom indeed. He figured she would be good for a bit of kissing, perhaps tucked into one of the booths at the back of the tavern. Of course, Mat did not look at women anymore, not like that. He did not think about her for him to kiss. Maybe for Talmanes. He was so stiff, a good kiss and cuddle would do him good.

"Well?" Melli asked.

"What would you do if you were me, Melli?" His empty mug sat beside him, a few suds clinging to the rim.

"Order another round," she said immediately. "For the entire bar. It would be downright charitable of you. People like a charitable fellow."

"I meant about the letter."

"You promised not to open it?" she said.

"Well, not exactly. I promised that if I opened it, I'd do exactly what it said inside."

"Gave an oath, did you?"

He nodded.

She snatched it from his fingers, causing him to yelp. He reached to take it back but she pulled away, turning it over in her fingers. Mat suppressed an urge to reach for it again; he had played more than a few games of take-away, and had no urge to look the buffoon. A woman liked nothing more than to make a man squirm, and if you let her do it, she would only keep going.

Still, he began to sweat. "Now, Melli . . ."

"I could open it for you," she said, leaning back against the other side of the bar, looking over the letter. Nearby, a man called for another mug of ale, but she waved him down. The red-nosed man looked as if he had had enough anyway. Melli's tavern was popular enough that she had a half-dozen serving girls taking care of the patrons. One would get to him eventually. "I could open it," she continued to Mat, "and could tell you what's inside."

Bloody ashes! If she did that, he would have to do what it said. Whatever it bloody said! All he had to do was wait a few weeks, and he would be free. He could wait that long. Really, he could. "It wouldn't do," Mat said, sitting up with a jerk as she reached her thumb between two sides of the letter, as if to rip it. "I'd still have to do what it said, Melli. Don't you do that, now. Be careful!"

She smiled at him. Her tavern, The Seven-Striped Lass, was one of the best in western Caemlyn. Ale with a robust flavor, games of dice when you

wanted them, and not a rat to be seen. They probably did not want to risk running afoul of Melli. Light, but the woman could shame the whiskers off a man's cheeks without much trying. "You never did tell me who it was from," Melli said, turning the letter over. "She's a lover, isn't she? Got you tied up in her strings?"

She had the second part right enough, but a lover? Verin? It was ridiculous enough to make Mat laugh. Kissing Verin would have been about as much fun as kissing a lion. Of the two, he would have chosen the lion. It would have been much less likely to try to bite him.

"I gave my oath, Melli," Mat said, trying not to show his nervousness. "Don't you go opening that, now."

"I didn't give any oath," she said. "Maybe I'll read it, and then not tell you what it says. Just give you hints, now and then, as encouragement."

She eyed him, full lips smiling. Yes, she was a pretty one. Not as pretty as Tuon, though, with her beautiful skin and large eyes. But Melli was still pretty, particularly those lips of hers. Being married meant he could not stare at those lips, but he did give her his best smile. It was called for, this time, though it could break her heart. He could not let her open that letter.

"It's the same thing, Melli," Mat said winningly. "If you open that letter and I don't do what it says, my oath is as good as dishwater." He sighed, realizing there was one way to get the letter back. "The woman who gave it to me was Aes Sedai, Melli. You don't want to anger an Aes Sedai, do you?"

"Aes Sedai?" Melli suddenly looked eager. "I've always fancied going up to Tar Valon, to see if they'll let me join them." She looked at the letter, as if more curious about its contents.

Light! The woman was daft. Mat had taken her for the sensible type. He should have known better. He began to sweat more. Could he reach the letter? She was holding it close. . . .

She set it down on the bar before him. She left one finger on the letter, directly in the middle of the wax seal. "You'll introduce me to this Aes Sedai, when you next meet her."

"If I see her while I'm in Caemlyn," Mat said. "I promise it."

"Can I trust you to keep your word?"

He gave her an exasperated look. "What was this whole bloody conversation about, Melli?"

She laughed, turning and leaving the letter on the bar, going to help the gap-toothed man who was still calling for more ale. Mat snatched the letter, tucking it carefully into his coat pocket. Bloody woman. The only way for him to stay free of Aes Sedai plots was to never open this letter. Well, not exactly free. Mat had plenty of Aes Sedai plotting around him;

he had them coming out of his ears. But only a man with sawdust for brains would ask for another.

Mat sighed, turning on his stool. A varied crowd clogged The Seven-Striped Lass. Caemlyn was fuller than a lionfish at a shipwreck these days practically bursting at the seams. That kept the taverns busy. In the corner some farmers in workcoats fraying at the collars played at dice. Mat had played a few rounds with them earlier, and had paid for his drink with their coins, but he hated gambling for coppers.

The bluff-faced man in the corner was still drinking—must be fourteen mugs sitting empty beside him now—his companions cheering him onward. A group of nobles sat off from the rest, and he would have asked them for a nice game of dice, but the expressions on their faces could have frightened away bears. They had probably been on the wrong side of the Succession war.

Mat wore a black coat with lace at the cuffs. Only a little lace, and no embroidery. Reluctantly, he had left his wide-brimmed hat back in camp, and he had grown a few days' scrub on his chin. That itched like he had fleas, and he looked a bloody fool. But the scrub made him harder to recognize. With every footpad in the city having a picture of him, it was best to be safe. He wished being ta'veren would help him for once, but it was best not to count on that. Being ta'veren had not been good for anything he could tell.

He kept his scarf tucked low and his coat buttoned, the high collar up nearly to his chin. He had already died once, he was fairly certain, and was not eager to try again.

A pretty serving girl walked by, slender and wide-hipped, with long dark hair she let hang free. He moved to the side, allowing his empty mug to look lonely and obvious on the counter, and she walked over with a smile to refill it. He grinned at her and tipped a copper. He was a married man, and could not afford to charm her, but he could keep an eye out for his friends. Thorn might like her. A girl might make him stop moping about so much, at least. Mat watched the girl's face for a time to be certain he would recognize her again.

Mat sipped at his ale, one hand feeling at the letter in his pocket. He did not speculate at what was in it. Do that, and he would be only one step from ripping it open. He was a little like a mouse staring at a trap with moldy cheese in it. He did not want that cheese. It could rot, for all he cared.

The letter would probably instruct him to do something dangerous. And embarrassing. Aes Sedai had a fondness for making men look like fools. Light he hoped that she had not left instructions for him to help someone in trouble. If that were the case, surely she would have seen to it herself.

He sighed and took another pull on his ale. In the corner, the drinking man finally toppled over. Sixteen mugs. Not bad. Mat set aside his own drink, left a few coins as payment, then nodded farewell to Melli. He collected his winnings on the wager regarding the drinking man from a long-fingered fellow in the corner. Mat had bet on seventeen mugs, which was close enough to win some. Then he was on his way, taking his walking stick from the stand by the door.

The bouncer, Berg, eyed him. Berg had a face ugly enough to make his own mother wince. The shoulderthumper did not like Mat, and from the way Berg looked at Melli, that was probably because he figured Mat was trying to make eyes at his woman. Never mind that Mat had explained he was married, and did not do that sort of thing any longer. Some men would be jealous no matter what they were told.

The streets of Caemlyn were busy, even at this late hour. The paving stones were damp from a recent shower, though those clouds had passed by and—remarkably—left the sky open to the air. He moved northward along the street, heading for another tavern he knew, one where men diced for silver and gold. Mat was not about any specific task tonight, just listening for rumors, getting a feel for Caemlyn. A lot had changed since he had been here last.

As he walked, he could not help looking over his shoulder. Those bloody pictures had him unnerved. Many of the people on the street seemed suspicious. A few Murandians passed, looking so drunk that he could have lit their breath on fire. Mat kept his distance. After what had happened to him in Hinderstap, he figured he could not be too careful. Light, he had heard stories of paving stones attacking people. If a man could not trust the rocks under his feet, what could he trust?

He eventually reached the tavern he wanted, a cheery place called The Dead Man's Breath. It had two toughs out front, holding cudgels they patted against enormous palms. Lots of extra tavern toughs were being hired these days. Mat would have to watch himself, not win too much. Tavern-keepers did not like a man winning too much, as it could bring a fight. Unless the man spent his winnings on food and drink. Then he could win all he liked, thank you very much.

The inside of this tavern was darker than The Seven-Striped Lass had been. The men here hunched low over drinks or games, and there was not much food being served. Just strong drinks. The wooden bar had nails

whose heads jutted out a fingernail or so high and jabbed you in the arms. Mat figured they were working to pull themselves free and run for the door.

The tavernkeeper, Bernherd, was a greasy-haired Tairen with a mouth so small it looked like he had swallowed his lips by mistake. He smelled of radishes, and Mat had never seen him smile, not even when tipped. Most tavernkeepers would smile at the Dark One himself for a tip.

Mat hated gambling and drinking in a place where you had to keep one hand on your coin purse. But he had a mind to win some real money tonight, and there were dice games going and coins clinking, so he felt somewhat at home. The lace on his coat did get glances. Why had he taken to wearing that, anyway? Best have Lopin pull it off his cuffs when he got back to the camp. Well, not all of it. Some of it, maybe.

Mat found a game at the back being played by three men and a woman in breeches. She had short golden hair and nice eyes; Mat noticed those purely for Thorn's sake. She had a full bosom, anyway, and lately Mat had a mind for women who were more slender through the chest.

In minutes Mat was dicing with them, and that calmed him a measure. He kept his coin pouch in sight, though, laying it on the floor in front of him. Before long, the pile of coins beside it grew, mostly silvers.

"You hear about what happened over at Farrier's Green?" one of the men asked his fellows as Mat tossed. "It was a terrible thing." The speaker was a tall fellow, with a pinched-up face that looked like it had been closed in a door a few times. He called himself Chaser. Mat figured that was because the women ran away from him after they got a look at that face, and he had to run after them.

"What?" Clare asked. She was the golden-haired woman. Mat gave her a smile. He did not dice against women much, as most claimed to find dicing improper. Never mind that they never complained when a man bought them something nice with what he had won. Anyway, dicing with women was not fair, since one of his smiles could set their hearts fluttering and they would get all weak in the knees. But Mat did not smile at girls that way anymore. Besides, she had not responded to any of his smiles anyway.

"Jowdry," Chaser said as Mat shook his dice. "They found him dead this morning. Throat ripped clean out. Body was drained of blood, like a wineskin full of holes."

Mat was so startled that he threw the dice, but did not watch them roll. "What?" he demanded. "What did you say?"

"Here now," Chaser said, looking toward Mat. "It's just someone we knew. Owed me two crowns, he did."

"Drained of blood," Mat said, "Are you sure? Did you see the body?"

"What?" Chaser said, grimacing. "Bloody ashes, man! What's wrong with you?"

"Chaser," Clare said. "Will you look at that?"

The lean man glanced down, as did Mat. The dice he had tossed—all three of them—had landed still and were balanced on their corners. Light! He had tossed coins so they fell on their sides before, but he had never done anything like this.

Right there, all of a sudden, the dice started rattling inside his head. He almost jumped clear to the ceiling. Blood and bloody ashes! Those dice in his head never meant anything good. They only stopped when something changed, something that usually meant bad news for poor Matrim Cauthon.

"I ain't never . . ." Chaser said.

"We'll call that a loss," Mat said, tossing a few coins down and scooping up the rest of his winnings.

"What do you know about Jowdry?" Clare demanded. She was reaching for her waist. Mat would have bet gold against coppers on her having a knife there, the way she glared at him.

"Nothing," Mat said. Nothing and too much at the same time. "Excuse me."

He hastily crossed the tavern. As he did, he noticed one of the thick-armed toughs from the door standing and talking to Bernherd the tavern-keeper, pointing at a piece of paper in his hands. Mat could not see what was on it, but he could guess: his own face.

He cursed and ducked out onto the street. He took the first alley he saw, breaking into a run.

The Forsaken hunting him, a picture of his face in the pocket of every footpad in the city and a corpse killed and drained of its blood. That could only mean one thing. The gholam was in Caemlyn. It seemed impossible that it could have gotten here this quickly. Of course, Mat had seen it squeeze through a hole not two handspans wide. The thing did not seem to have a right sense of what was possible and what was not possible.

Blood and bloody ashes, he thought, ducking his head. He needed to collect Thorn and get back to the Band's camp outside of the city. He hastened down the dark, rain-slicked street. Paving stones reflected the lit oil lamps ahead. Elayne kept the Queen's Walk well illuminated at night.

He had sent word to her, but had not gotten a reply. How was that for gratitude? By his count, he had saved her life twice. Once should have been enough to reduce her to tears and kisses, but he had not seen even a peck

on the cheek. Not that he wanted one; not from royalty. Best to avoid ! them.

You're married to a bloody high lady of the Seamhan, he thought. Daughter of the Empress herself There was no avoiding royalty now! Not for him. At least Tuon was pretty. And good at playing stones. And very keen of wit, good for talking to, even if she was flaming frustrating most of the . . .

No. No thinking of Tuon right now.

Anyway, he had received no reply from Elayne. He would need to be more firm. It was not just Aludra and her dragons now. The bloody gholam was in the city.

He stepped out onto a large, busy street, hands pushed into the pockets of his coat. In his haste, he had left his walking staff back in The Dead Man's Breath. He grumbled to himself; he was supposed to be spending his days relaxing, his nights dicing in fine inns, and his mornings sleeping late while waiting for Verin's thirty-day requirement to run out. Now this.

He had a score to settle with that gholam. The innocents it had slaughtered while lurking around Ebou Dar were bad enough, and Mat had not forgotten Nalesean and the five Redarms who had been murdered either. Bloody ashes, it had had enough to answer for already. Then it had taken Tylin.

Mat removed a hand from his pocket, feeling at the foxhead medallion, resting—as always—against his chest. He was tired of running from that monster. A plan started to form in his mind, accompanied by the rattling of dice. He tried to banish the image of the Queen lying in bonds Mat himself had tied, her head ripped free. There would have been so much blood. The gholam lived on fresh blood.

Mat shivered, shoving his hand back into his pocket as he approached the city gate. Despite the darkness, he could pick out signs of the battle that had been fought here. An arrowhead embedded into the doorway of a building to his left, a dark patch on the wall of a guardhouse, staining the wood beneath the window. A man had died there, perhaps while firing a crossbow out, and had slumped down over the windows ledge, bleeding his lifeblood down the wood.

That siege was over now, and a new Queen—the right Queen—held the throne. For once, there had been a battle and he had missed it. Remembering that lightened his mood somewhat. An entire war had been fought over the Lion Throne, and not one arrow, blade or spear had entered the conflict seeking Matrim Cauthon's heart.

He turned right, along the inside of the city wall. There were a lot of inns here. There were always inns near city gates. Not the nicest ones, but almost always the most profitable ones.

Light spilled from doorways and windows, painting the road golden in atches. Dark forms crowded the alleyways except where the inns had hired men to keep the poor away. Caemlyn was strained. The flood of refugees, the recent fighting, the . . . other matters. Stories abounded of the dead walking, of food spoiling, of whitewashed walls suddenly going grimy.

The inn where Thorn had chosen to perform was a steep-roofed, brick-fronted structure with a sign that showed two apples, one eaten down to the core. That made it stark white, the other was stark red—colors .of the Andoran flag. The Two Apples was one of the nicer establishments in the area.

Mat could hear the music from outside. He entered and saw Thorn sitting atop a small dais on the far side of the common room, playing his flute and wearing his patchwork gleeman's cloak. His eyes were closed as he played, his mustache drooping long and white on either side of the instrument. It was a haunting tune, "The Marriage of Cinny Wade." Mat had learned it as "Always Choose the Right Horse," and still was not used to it being performed as slowly as Thom did.

A small collection of coins was scattered on the floor in front of Thom. The inn allowed him to play for tips. Mat stopped near the doorway and leaned back to listen. Nobody spoke in the common room, though it was stuffed so full Mat could have made half a company of soldiers just with the men inside. Every eye was on Thom.

Mat had been all around the world now, walking a great deal of it on his own two feet. He had nearly lost his skin in a dozen different cities, and had stayed in inns far and near. He had heard gleemen, performers and bards. Thom made the entire lot seem like children with sticks, banging on pots.

The flute was a simple instrument. A lot of nobles would rather hear the harp instead; one man in Ebou Dar had told Mat the harp was more elevated." Mat figured he would have gone slack-jawed and saucer-eyed if he had heard Thom play. The gleeman made the flute sound like an extension of his own soul. Soft trills, minor scales and powerfully bold long holds. Such a lamenting melody. Who was Thom sorrowing for?

The crowd watched. Caemlyn was one of the greatest cities in the world, but still the variety seemed incredible. Crusty Illianers sat beside smooth Domani, crafty Cairhienin, stout Tairens and a sprinkling of Borderlanders. Caemlyn was seen as one of the few places where one could be safe from both the Seanchan and the Dragon. There was a bit of food, too.

Thorn finished the piece and moved on to another without opening hjs eyes. Mat sighed, hating to break up Thorn's performance. Unfortunately it was time to be moving on back to camp. They had to talk about the I gholam, and Mat needed to find a way to get through to Elayne. Maybe Thorn would go talk to her for him.

Mat nodded to the innkeeper—a stately, dark-haired woman named Bromas. She nodded to Mat, hoop earrings catching the light. She was a little older than his normal taste—but then, Tylin had been her age. He would keep her in mind. For one of his men, of course. Maybe Vanin.

Mat reached the stage, then began to scoop up the coins. He would let Thorn finish and—

Mat's hand jerked. His arm was suddenly pinned by the cuff to the stage, a knife sticking through the cloth. The thin length of metal quivered. Mat glanced up to find Thorn still playing, though the gleeman had cracked an eye before throwing the knife.

Thorn raised his hand back up and continued playing, a smile showing on his puckered lips. Mat grumbled and yanked his cuff free, waiting as Thorn finished this tune, which was not as doleful as the other. When the lanky gleeman lowered the flute, the room burst into applause.

Mat favored the gleeman with a scowl. "Burn you, Thorn. This is one of my favorite coats!"

"Be glad I did not aim for the hand," Thorn noted, wiping down the flute, nodding to the cheering and applause of the inn's patrons. They called for him to continue, but he shook a regretful head and replaced his flute in its case.

"I almost wish you would have," Mat said, raising his cuff and sticking a finger through the holes. "Blood would not have shown that much on the black, but the stitching will be obvious. Just because you wear more patches than cloak doesn't mean I want to imitate you."

"And you complain that you're not a lord," Thorn said, leaning down to collect his earnings.

"I'm not!" Mat said. "And never mind what Tuon said, burn you. I'm no bloody nobleman."

"Ever heard of a farmer complaining that his coat stitches would show?"

"You don't have to be a lord to want to dress with some sense," Mat grumbled.

Thorn laughed, slapping him on the back and hopping down. "I'm sorry, Mat. I moved by instinct, didn't realize it was you until I saw the face attached to the arm. By then, the knife was already out of my fingers."

Mat sighed. "Thorn," he said grimly, "an old friend is in town. One who leaves folks dead with their throats ripped clean out."

Thorn nodded, looking troubled. "I heard about it from some Guardsmen during my break. And we're stuck here in the city unless you decide . . ."

"I'm not opening the letter," Mat said. "Verin could have left instructions for me to crawl all the way to Falme on my hands, and I'd bloody have to do it! I know you hate the delay, but that letter could make a much worse delay."

Thorn nodded reluctantly.

"Let's get back to camp," Mat said.

The Band's camp was a league outside of Caemlyn. Thorn and Mat had not ridden in—walkers were less conspicuous, and Mat would not bring horses into the city until he found a stable that he trusted. The price of good horses was getting ridiculous. He had hoped to leave that behind once he left Seanchan lands, but Elayne's armies were buying up every good horse they could find, and most of the not-so-good ones, too. Beyond that, he had heard that horses had a way of disappearing these days. Meat was meat, and people were close to starving, even in Caemlyn. It made Mat's skin crawl, but it was the truth.

He and Thorn spent the walk back talking about the gbolam, deciding very little other than to make everyone alert and have Mat start sleeping in a different tent every night.

Mat glanced over his shoulder as the two of them crested a hilltop. Caemlyn was ablaze with the light of torches and lamps. Illumination hung over the city like a fog, grand spires and towers lit by the glow. The old memories inside him remembered this city—remembered assaulting it before Andor was even a nation. Caemlyn had never made for an easy fight. He did not envy the Houses that had tried to seize it from Elayne.

Thorn stepped up beside him. "It seems like forever since we left here last, doesn't it, Mat?"

"Burn me, but it does," Mat said. "What ever convinced us to go hunting those fool girls? Next time, they can save themselves."

Thorn eyed him. "Aren't we about to do the same thing? When we go to the Tower of Ghenjei?" It's different. We can't leave her with them. Those snakes and foxes—"

"I'm not complaining, Mat," Thorn said. "I'm just thoughtful."

Thorn seemed thoughtful a lot, lately. Moping around, caressing that worn letter from Moiraine. It was only a letter. "Come on," Mat said, turning back along the road. "You were telling me about getting in to see the Queen?"

Thorn joined him on the dark roadway. "I'm not surprised she hasn't replied to you, Mat. She's probably got her hands full. Word is that Trol-locs have invaded the Borderlands in force, and Andor is still fractured from the Succession. Elayne—"

"Do you have any good news, Thorn?" Mat said. "Tell me some, if you do. I've a mind for it."

"I wish that The Queen's Blessing were still open. Gill always had tidbits to share."

"Good news," Mat prodded again.

"All right. Well, the Tower of Ghenjei is right where Domon said. I have word from three other ship's captains. It's past an open plain several hundred miles northwest of Whitebridge."

Mat nodded, rubbing his chin. He felt like he could remember something of the tower. A silvery structure, unnatural, in the distance. A trip on a boat, water lapping at the sides. Bayle Domon's thick Illianer accent. . .

Those images were vague to Mat; his memories of the time were full of more holes than one of Jori Congar's alibis. Bayle Domon had been able to tell them where to find the tower, but Mat wanted confirmation. The way Domon bowed and scraped for Leilwin made Mat itch. Neither showed Mat much affection, for all the fact that he had saved them. Not that he had wanted any affection from Leilwin. Kissing her would be about as fun as kissing a stoneoak's bark.

"You think Domon's description will be enough for someone to make us one of those gateways there?" Mat asked.

"I don't know," Thorn said. "Though that's a secondary problem, I should think. Where are we going to find someone to make a gateway? Verin has vanished."

"I'll find a way."

"If you don't, we'll end up spending weeks traveling to the place,' Thorn said. "I don't like—"

"I'll find us a gateway," Mat said firmly. "Maybe Verin will come back and release me from this bloody oath."

"Best that one stays away," Thorn said. "I don't trust her. There's something off about that one."

"She's Aes Sedai," Mat said. "There's something off about them all—like dice where the pips don't add up—but for an Aes Sedai, I kind of like Verin. And I'm a good judge of character, you know that."

Thorn raised an eyebrow. Mat scowled back.

"Either way," Thorn said, "we should probably start sending guards with you when you visit the city."

"Guards won't help against the gholam."

"No, but what of the thugs who jumped you on your way back to camp three nights back?"

Mat shivered. "At least those were just good, honest thieves. They only wanted my purse, nice and natural. Not a one had a picture of me in their pockets. And it's not like they were twisted by the Dark One's power to go crazy at sunset or anything."

"Still," Thorn said.

Mat made no argument. Burn him, but he probably should be bringing soldiers with him. A few Redarms, anyway. The camp was just ahead. One of Elayne's clerks, a man named Norry, had granted the Band permission to camp in Caemlyn's proximity. They had to agree to allow no more than a hundred men to go into the city on a given day, and had to camp at least a league from the walls, out of the way of any villages and not on anyone's farmland.

Talking to that clerk meant Elayne knew Mat was here. She had to. But she had sent no greetings, no acknowledgment that she owed Mat her skin.

At a bend in the road, Thorn's lantern showed a group of Redarms lounging by the side. Gufrin, sergeant of a squad, stood and saluted. He was a sturdy, broad-shouldered man. Not terribly bright, but keen eyed.

"Lord Mat!" he said.

"Any news, Gufrin?" Mat asked.

The sergeant frowned to himself. "Well," he said. "I think there's something you might want to know." Light! The man spoke more slowly than a drunk Seanchan. "The Aes Sedai came back to camp today. While you was away, my Lord."

"All three of them?" Mat asked.

"Yes, my Lord."

Mat sighed. If there had been any hope of this day turning out to be anything other than sour, that washed it away. He had hoped they would stay inside the city for a few more days.

He and Thorn continued, leaving the road and heading down a path through a field of blackwasp nettles and knifegrass. The weeds crunched as they walked, Thorn's lantern lighting the brown stalks. On one hand, it was good to be back in Andor again; it almost felt like home, with those nds of leatherleaf trees and sourgum. However, coming back to find it

looking so dead was disheartening. What to do about Elayne? Women were troublesome. Aes Sedai were worse. Queens were the worst of the lot. And she was all bloody three How was he going to get her to give him her foundries? He had taken Verin's offer in part because he thought it would get him to Andor quicker and therefore to start work on Aludra's dragons!

Ahead, the Band's camp sat on a small series of hills, entrenched around the largest of them at the center. Mat's force had met up with Es-tean and the others that had gone ahead to Andor, and the Band was well and truly whole again. Fires burned; there was no trouble finding dead wood for fires these days. Smoke lingered in the air, and Mat heard men chatting and calling. It was not too late yet, and Mat did not enforce a curfew. If he could not relax, at least his men could. It might be the last chance they got before the Last Battle.

Trollocs in the Borderlands, Mat thought. We need those dragons. Soon.

Mat returned salutes from a few guard posts and parted with Thorn, meaning to go find a bed and sleep on his problems for the night. As he did, he noted a few changes he could make to the camp. The way the hillsides were arranged, a light cavalry charge could come galloping through the corridor between them. Only someone very bold would try such a tactic, but he had done just that during the Battle of Marisin Valley back in old Coremanda. Well, not Mat himself, but someone in those old memories.

More and more, he simply accepted those memories as his own. He had not asked for them—no matter what those bloody foxes claimed—but he had paid for them with the scar around his neck. They had been useful on more than one occasion.

He finally reached his tent, intending to get fresh smallclothes before finding a different tent for the night, when he heard a woman's voice calling to him. "Matrim Cauthon!"

Bloody ashes. He had almost made it. He turned reluctantly.

Teslyn Baradon was not a pretty woman, though she might have made a passable paperbark tree, with those bony fingers, those narrow shoulders and that gaunt face. She wore a red dress, and over the weeks her eyes had lost most of the nervous skittishness she had shown since spending time as a damane. She had a glare so practiced she could have won a staring contest with a post.

"Matrim Cauthon," she said, stepping up to him. "I do be needing to speak with you."

"Well, seems that you're doing so already," Mat said, dropping his hand from his tent flap. He had a slight fondness for Teslyn, against his better judgment, but he was not about to invite her in. No more than he

would invite a fox into his henhouse, regardless of how kindly he thought of the fox in question.

"So I do be," she replied. "You've heard the news of the White Tower?"

"News?" Mat said. "No, I've heard no news. Rumors, though . . . I've a brainful of those. Some say the White Tower has been reunified, which is what you're probably talking about. But I've also heard just as many claiming that it is still at war. And that the Amyrlin fought the Last Battle in Rand's place, and that the Aes Sedai have decided to raise an army of soldiers by giving birth to them, and that flying monsters attacked the White Tower. That last one is probably just stories of raken drifting up from the south. But I think the one about Aes Sedai raising an army of babies holds some water."

Teslyn regarded him with a flat stare. He did not look away. Good thing Mat's father had always said he was more stubborn than a flaming tree stump.

Remarkably, Teslyn sighed, her face softening. "You be, of course, rightly skeptical. But we cannot ignore the news. Even Edesina, who foolishly sided with the rebels, does wish to return. We do plan to go in the morning. As it is your habit to sleep late, I wanted to come to you tonight in order to give you my thanks."

"Your what?"

"My thanks, Master Cauthon," Teslyn said dryly. "This trip did not be easy upon any of us. There have been moments of. . . tension. I do not say that I agree with each decision you made. That do not remove the fact that without you, I would still be in Seanchan hands." She shivered. "I pretend, during my more confident moments, that I would have resisted them and eventually escaped on my own. It do be important to maintain some illusions with yourself, would you not say?"

Mat rubbed his chin. "Maybe, Teslyn. Maybe indeed."

Remarkably, she held out her hand to him. "Remember, should you ever come to the White Tower, you do have women there who are in your debt, Matrim Cauthon. I do not forget."

He took the hand. It felt as bony as it looked, but it was warmer than he had expected. Some Aes Sedai had ice running in their veins, that was for certain. But others were not so bad.

She nodded to him. A respectful nod. Almost a bow. Mat released her and, feeling as unsettled as if someone had kicked his legs out from underneath him. She turned to walk back toward her own tent.

You'll be needing horses," he said. "If you wait to leave until I get up in the morning, I'll give you some. And some provisions. Wouldn't do for

you to starve before you get to Tar Valon, and from what we've seen lately the villages you'll pass won't have anything to spare."

"You told Joline—"

"I counted my horses again," Mat said. Those dice were still rattling in his head, burn them. "I did another count of the Band's horses. Turns out we have some to spare. You may take them."

"I did not come to you tonight to manipulate you into giving me horses," Teslyn said. "I do be sincere."

"So I figured," Mat said, turning lifting up the flap to his tent. "That's why I made the offer." He stepped into the tent.

There, he froze. That scent. . .

Blood.

CHAPTER 9

Blood in the Air

Mat ducked immediately. That instinct saved his life as something swung through the air above his head. Mat rolled to the side, his hand hitting something wet as it touched the floor. "Murder!" he bellowed. "Murder in the camp! Bloody murder!"

Something moved toward him. The tent was completely black, but he could hear it. Mat stumbled, but luck was with him as again something swished near him.

Mat hit the ground and rolled, flinging his hand to the side. He had left. . .

There! He came up beside his sleeping pallet, his hand grasping at the long wooden haft there. He threw himself backward to his feet, hauling the ashandarei up, then spun and slashed—not at the form moving through the tent toward him, but at the wall.

The fabric cut easily and Mat leaped out, clutching his long-bladed spear in one hand. With his other hand, he reached for the leather strap at his neck, his fingernails ripping at his skin in his haste. He pulled the fox-head medallion off and turned in the brush outside the tent.

A weak light came from a nearby lantern on a post at an intersection of camp pathways. By it, Mat made out the figure sliding out the rip in the tent. A figure he had feared to see. The gholam looked like a man, slender with sandy hair and unremarkable features. The only thing distinct about the thing was the scar on its cheek.

It was supposed to look harmless, supposed to be forgettable. If most people saw this thing in a crowd, they would ignore it. Right up to the point where it ripped their throat out.

Mat backed away. His tent was near a hillside, and he backed up to it, pulling the foxhead medallion up and wrapping it tightly by its leather strap to the side of his ashandarei s blade. It was far from a perfect fit, but he had practiced this. The medallion was the only thing he knew that could hurt the gholam. He worked swiftly, still yelling for help. Soldiers would be no use against this thing, but the gholam had said before that it had been ordered to avoid too much notice. Attention might frighten it away.

It did hesitate, glancing toward the camp. Then it turned back to Mat stepping forward. Its movements were as fluid as silk rippling in the wind. "You should be proud," it whispered. "The one who now controls me wants you more than anyone else. I am to ignore all others until I have tasted your blood."

In its left hand, the creature carried a long dagger. Its right hand dripped blood. Mat felt a freezing chill. Who had it killed? Who else had been murdered in Matrim Cauthon s stead? The image of Tylin flashed in his mind again. He had not seen her corpse; the scene was left to his imagination. Unfortunately, Mat had a pretty good imagination.

That image in his head, smelling the blood on the air, he did the most foolish thing he could have. He attacked.

Screaming in the open darkness, Mat spun forward, swinging the ashandarei. The creature was so fast. It seemed to flow out of the way of his weapon.

It rounded him, like a circling wolf, footsteps barely making a sound in the dried weeds. It struck, its form a blur, and only a backward jump by reflex saved Mat. He scrambled through the weeds, swinging the ashandarei. It seemed wary of the medallion. Light, without that, Mat would be dead and bleeding on the ground!

It came at him again, like liquid darkness. Mat swung wildly and clipped the gholam more by luck than anything else. The medallion made a searing hiss as it touched the beast's hand. The scent of burned flesh rose in the air, and the gholam scrambled back.

"You didn't have to kill her, burn you," Mat yelled at it. "You could have left her! You didn't want her; you wanted me!"

The thing merely grinned, its mouth an awful black, teeth twisted. "A bird must fly. A man must breathe. I must kill." It stalked forward, and

Mat knew he was in trouble. The cries of alarm were loud now. It had only been a few moments, but a few more, and help would arrive. Only a few more moments . . .

"I've been told to kill them all," the gholam said softly. "To bring you

out The man with the mustache, the aged one who interfered last time, the little dark-skinned woman who holds your affection. All of them, unless I take you now."

Burn that gholam; how did the thing know about Tuon? How? It was impossible!

He was so startled that he barely had time to raise the ashandarei as the gholam leaped for him. Mat cursed, twisting to the side, but too late. The creature's knife flashed in the air. Then the weapon jerked and ripped sideways from its fingers. Mat started, then felt something wrap around him and jerk him backward, out of the reach of the gholam's swipe.

Weaves of Air. Teslyn! She stood in front of his tent, her face a mask of concentration.

"You won't be able to touch it directly with weaves!" Mat screamed as her Air deposited him a short distance from the gholam. If she had been able to bloody raise him up high enough, he would have been fine with that! But he had never seen an Aes Sedai lift someone more than a pace or so in the air.

He scrambled to the side, the gholam charging after him. Then something large flew between them, causing the gholam to dodge fluidly. The object—a chair!—crashed into the hillside beside them. The gholam spun as a large bench smashed into it, throwing it backward.

Mat steadied himself, looking at Teslyn, who was reaching into his tent with invisible weaves of Air. Clever woman, he thought. Weaves could not touch the gholam, but something thrown by them could.

That would not stop it. Mat had seen the creature pluck out a knife that had been rammed into its chest; it had shown the indifference a man would show at plucking a burr from his clothing. But now soldiers were leaping over pathways, carrying pikes or swords and shields. The entire camp was being lit up.

The gholam gave Mat a glare, then dashed off toward the darkness outside of camp. Mat spun, then froze as he saw two Redarms set pikes against the oncoming gholam. Gorderan and Fergin. Both men who had survived the time in Ebou Dar.

"No!" Mat yelled. "Let it—"

Too late. The gholam indifferently slid between the pikes, grabbing each man's throat in a hand, then crushing its fingers together. With a

spin, it ripped free their flesh, dropping both men. Then it was off into the darkness.

Burn you! Mat thought, starting to dash after it. I'll gut you and—

He froze. Blood in the air. From inside his tent. He had nearly forgotten that.

Olver! Mat scrambled back to the tent. It was dark within, though the scent of blood once again assaulted him. "Light! Teslyn, can you—"

A globe of light appeared behind him.

The light of her globe was enough to illuminate a terrible scene inside. Lopin, Mats serving man, lay dead, his blood darkening the tent floor in a large black pool. Two other men—Riddem and Will Reeve, Redarms who had been guarding his door—were heaped onto his sleeping pallet. He should have noticed that they were missing from their post. Fool!

Mat felt a stab of sorrow for the dead. Lopin, who had only recently shown that he was recovered from Nalesean's death. Light burn him, he had been a good man! Not even a soldier, just a serving man, content to have someone to take care of. Mat now felt terrible for having complained about him. Without Lopin's help, Mat would not have been able to escape Ebou Dar.

And the four Redarms, two of whom had survived Ebou Dar and the gholam's previous attack.

I should have sent word, Mat thought. Should have put the entire camp on alert. Would that have done any good? The gholam had proven itself practically unstoppable. Mat had the suspicion that it could cut down the entire Band in getting to him, if it needed to. Only its master's command that it avoid attention prevented it from doing so.

He did not see any sign of Olver, though the boy should have been sleeping on his pallet in the corner. Lopin's blood had pooled nearby, and Olver's blanket was soaking it up from the bottom. Mat took a deep breath and began searching through the shambles, overturning blankets and looking behind travel furniture, worried at what he might find.

More soldiers arrived, cursing. The camp was coming alert: horns of warning blowing, lanterns being lit, armor clanking.

"Olver," Mat said to the soldiers gathering at his doorway. He had searched the entire bloody tent! "Has anyone seen him?"

"I think he was with Noal," said Slone Maddow, a wide-eared Redarm. "They—"

Mat shoved his way out of the tent, then ran through camp toward Noal's tent. He arrived just as the white-haired man was stepping out, looking about in alarm.

"Olver?" Mat asked, reaching the older man.

"He's safe, Mat," Noal said, grimacing. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to alarm you. We were playing Snakes and Foxes, and the boy fell asleep on v floor. I pulled a blanket over him; he's been staying up so late waiting for you these nights that I figured it was best not to wake him. I should have sent word."

"You're sorry?" Mat said, grabbing Noal in an embrace. "You bloody wonderful man. You saved his life!"

An hour later, Mat sat with Thorn and Noal inside Thorn's small tent. A dozen Redarms guarded the place, and Olver had been sent to sleep in Teslyn's tent. The boy did not know how close he had come to being killed. Hopefully he never would.

Mat wore his medallion again, though he needed to find a new leather strap. The ashandarei had cut the other one up pretty bad. He would need to find a better way to tie it on there.

"Thorn," Mat said softly, "the creature threatened you, and you too, Noal. It didn't mention Olver, but it did mention Tuon."

"How would the thing know about her?" Thom asked, scratching at his head.

"The guards found another corpse outside of the camp. Derry." Derry was a soldier who had gone missing a few days back, and Mat had presumed him to have deserted. It happened sometimes, though desertion was irregular in the Band. "He'd been dead a few days."

"It took him that long ago?" Noal said, frowning. Noal's shoulders were stooped and he had a nose the shape of a large, bent pepper growing right out the middle of his face. He had always looked . . . worn to Mat. His hands were so gnarled, they seemed to be all knuckles.

"It must have interrogated him," Mat said. "Found out people I spent time with, where my tent was."

"Is the thing capable of that?" Thom said. "It seemed more like a hound to me, hunting you out."

It knew where to find me in Tylin's palace," Mat said. "Even after I was gone, it went to her rooms. So either it asked someone, or it was observing. We'll never know if Derry was tortured, or if he just ran across the

gholam while it was sneaking about the camp and spying. But the thing is clever."

It wouldn't actually go after Tuon, would it? Threatening his friends was probably just a way to unhinge Mat. After all, the thing had shown

tonight that it still had orders to avoid too much attention. That didn't console Mat much. If that monster hurt Tuon . . .

There was only one way to make sure that didn't happen.

"So what do we do?" Noal asked.

"We're going to hunt it," Mat said softly, "and we're going to kill the bloody thing."

Noal and Thorn fell silent.

"I won't have this thing chasing us all the way to the Tower of Ghenjei," Mat said.

"But can it be killed, Mat?" Thom asked.

"Anything can be killed," Mat said. "Teslyn proved that she could still hurt it using the One Power, if she was clever. We'll have to do something similar."

"What?" Noal asked.

"I don't know yet," Mat said. "I want you two to continue your preparations; get us ready so that we can leave for the Tower of Ghenjei as soon as my oath to Verin will let us. Burn me, I still need to talk to Elayne. I want Aludra's dragons started. I'll have to write her another letter. Stronger, this time.

"For now, we're going to make some changes. I'm going to start sleeping in the city. A different inn each night. We'll let the Band know it, so if the gholam listens, it will find out. There will be no need for it to attack the men.

"You two will need to move to the city too. Until this is done, until it is dead or I am. The question is what to do about Olver. The thing didn't mention him, but . . ."

He saw understanding in Thorn's and Noal's eyes. Mat had left Tylin behind, and she was dead now. He was not going to do the same to Olver.

"We'll have to take the boy with us," Thom said. "Either that or send him away."

"I heard the Aes Sedai talking earlier," Noal said, rubbing his face with a bony finger. "They're planning to leave. Maybe send him with them?"

Mat grimaced. The way Olver leered at women, the Aes Sedai would have him strung up by his toes in a day flat. Mat was surprised it had not happened already. If he ever found out which of the Redarms was teaching the boy to act that way around women . . .

"I doubt we'd be able to get him to go," Mat said. "He'd be out of their sight and back here their first night away."

Thom nodded in agreement.

"We'll have to take him with us," Mat said. "Have him stay at the inns inside the city. Maybe that—"

"Matrim Cauthon!" The shrill call came from outside Thorn's tent.

Mat sighed, then nodded to the other two and stood up. He stepped out of the tent to find that Joline and her Warders had bullied their way hrough the Redarms and had nearly yanked open the tent flaps to come stalking in. His appearance drew her up short.

Several of the Redarms looked abashed at having let her through, but the men could not be blamed. Bloody Aes Sedai would bloody do what they bloody pleased.

The woman herself was everything that Teslyn was not. Slender and pretty, she wore a white dress with a deep neckline. She often smiled, though that smile became thin-lipped when she turned it on Mat, and she had large brown eyes. The type of eyes that could suck a man in and try to

drown him.

Pretty as she was, Mat did not think of her as a match for one of his friends. He would never wish Joline upon someone he liked. In fact, he was too gentlemanly to wish her on most of his enemies. Best she stayed with Fen and Blaeric, her Warders, who were madmen in Mat's opinion.

Both were Borderlanders—one Shienaran, the other Saldaean. Fen's tilted eyes were hard. He always seemed to be looking for someone to murder; each conversation with him was an interview to see if you fit the criteria. Blaerics topknot was growing in, and getting longer, but it was still too short. Mat would have mentioned that it looked remarkably like a badger's tail glued to his head, except that he did not feel like being murdered today. It had already been a bloody awful evening.

Joline folded her arms beneath her breasts. "It appears that your reports of this . . . creature that is chasing you were accurate." She sounded skeptical. He had lost five good men, and she sounded skeptical. Bloody Aes Sedai.

"And?" he asked. "You know something about gholam?"

"Not a thing," she said. "Regardless, I need to return to the White Tower. I will be leaving tomorrow." She looked hesitant. "I would like to ask if you would lend me some horses for the trip. Whatever you can spare. I will not be picky."

Nobody in town would sell you any, eh?" Mat said with a grunt.

Her face became even more serene.

Well, all right," Mat said. "At least you asked nicely this time, though I can see how hard it was for you. I've promised some to Teslyn already. You have some too. It will be worth it to have you bloody women out of my hair."

Thank you," she said, her voice controlled. "However, a word of advice.

Considering the company you often keep, you might want to learn to con-trol your language."

"Considering the company I keep all too often," Mat said, "it's bloodv amazing I don't swear more. Off with you, Joline. I need to write a lettei to Her Royal bloody Majesty Queen Elayne the prim."

Joline sniffed. "Are you going to swear at her too?"

"Of course I am," Mat muttered, turning to go back to Thorn's tent "How else is she going to trust that it's really from me?"

CHAPTER

10

After the Taint

I agree with those counts," Elyas said, walking at Perrin's side. Grady walked on the other side, thoughtful in his black coat. Montem al'San and Azi al'Thone—Perrin's two guards for the day—trailed behind.

It was still early in the morning. Perrin was ostensibly checking on guard posts, but he really just wanted to be walking. They'd moved the camp to an elevated meadow along the Jehannah Road. It had a good water supply and was near enough to the road to control it, but far enough back to be defensible.

On one side of the meadow, an ancient statue lay before a patch of trees. The statue had fallen on its side long ago, and most of it was now buried, but an arm rose from the earth, holding the hilt of a sword. The blade was thrust into the ground.

"I shouldn't have sent Gill and the others ahead," Perrin said. "That let them be snatched up by the first passing force."

"You couldn't have anticipated this," Elyas said. "Nor could you have anticipated being delayed. Where would you have left them? Shaido were coming up behind, and if our battle at Maiden hadn't gone well, Gill and the others would have been trapped between two groups of enemy Aiel."

Perrin growled to himself. His booted feet stuck a little in the sodden ground. He hated the scent of that trampled, stagnant mud mixed with rotting dead plants. It wasn't nearly as bad as the Blight disease, but it seemed to him the whole land was only a few steps away from that.

They approached a guard post. Two men—Hu Barran and Darl Coplin__.

stood watch here. There would be additional scouts, of course: Two Rivers men in trees, Maidens patrolling the ground. But Perrin had learned that a few men given posts around the camp lent everyone inside a sense of order.

The guards saluted him, though Darl's salute was sloppy. They gave off an odd mixture of scents—regret, frustration, disappointment. And embarrassment. That last one was faint, but still there. Perrin's supposed dalliance with Berelain was still recent in their minds, and Faile's return seemed to increase their discomfort. In the Two Rivers, one did not easily live down a reputation for infidelity.

Perrin nodded to them, then continued on. He didn't do much formal inspecting. If the men knew he would walk by sometime each day, they'd keep themselves in order. For the most part. Last night, he had needed to prod sleeping Berin Thane awake with his boot, and he was always careful to watch for the scent of strong drink among them. He wouldn't put it past Jori Congar to sneak a nip or two while on guard.

"All right," Perrin said. "The Whitecloaks have our people and our supplies." He grimaced, thinking of the grain purchased in So Habor going to fill Whitecloak bellies. "Could we sneak in and free them?"

"I don't see the need for sneaking," Grady said from behind. "Pardon, my Lord, but you seem to be making this a larger problem than it is."

Perrin looked back at the leathery man. "They're Whitecloaks, Grady. They're always a large problem."

"They won't have anyone who can channel the One Power." Grady shrugged, hands clasped behind his back as he walked. With the black coat, the pin and the increasingly soldierlike attitude, he was looking less and less like a farmer. "Neald is feeling better. He and I could pound those Children down until they give us what we want."

Perrin nodded. He hated the idea of letting the Asha'man loose with impunity. The scent of burned flesh in the air, the earth ripped apart and broken. The scents of Dumai's Wells. However, he couldn't afford another distraction like Maiden. If there were no other choice, he'd give the order.

Not yet, though. There are no coincidences with ta'veren. The wolves, the Whitecloaks. Things he had been outrunning for some time were returning to hunt him. He'd pushed the Children out of the Two Rivers. Many of the men who had been with him then now followed him here.

"Perhaps it will come to that," Perrin said to Grady, still walking. "But maybe not. We've got a larger force than they do, and with that blasted wolfhead banner finally taken down, they may not realize who we are. We fly the banner of the Queen of Ghealdan, and they're passing through Al-liandre's territory. Likely they saw the supplies in our people's carts and decided to 'protect them.' Some discussion, perhaps a little intimidation, may be enough to persuade them to return our people."

Elyas nodded, and Grady seemed to agree, though Perrin wasn't convinced by his own words. The Whitecloaks had haunted him since his early days out of the Two Rivers. Dealing with them had never been simple.

It felt like the time had come. Time to make an end to his troubles with them, one way or another.

He continued his rounds, arriving at the Aiel section of the camp. He nodded at a pair of Maidens lounging on guard with relaxed alertness. They didn't stand up or salute—which suited him fine—though they did nod. He'd apparently gained great ji in their eyes by the way he'd planned, then accomplished, the attack on the Shaido.

The Aiel maintained their own guard posts, and he had no reason to inspect them. But he included them in his rounds anyway. It seemed that if he was going to visit the other sections of camp, he should do it here, too.

Grady stopped suddenly and spun toward the Wise Ones' tents.

"What?" Perrin asked urgently, scanning the camp. He couldn't see anything unusual.

Grady smiled. "I think they've managed it." He started into the Aiel camp, ignoring the glares several Maidens gave him. They might very well have tossed him out, Asha'man or no, if Perrin hadn't been there.

Neald, Perrin thought. He's been working with the Aes Sedai to figure out circles. If Grady had seen something in the weaves . . .

Perrin followed, and soon they reached a ring of Wise One tents in the center of the Aiel camp, the area between them dried—perhaps by weaves—and the ground packed down. Neald, Edarra and Masuri sat there. Fager Neald was a young Murandian with a mustache that curled to points. He wore no pins on the collar of his black coat, though he'd likely be promoted as soon as the group returned from their excursion. He'd grown in Power since they'd begun.

He was still pale from the snakebites he'd taken, but looked much better than he had only a few days back. He was smiling, staring at the air in front of him, and he smelled exuberant.

A large gateway split the air. Perrin grunted. It appeared to lead back to a place where they'd camped several weeks ago—an open field of no real note.

'It's working?" Grady said, kneeling down beside Neald.

"It's beautiful, Jur," Neald said softly. His voice bore no hint of the bravado he often displayed. "I can feelsaidar. It's like I'm more complete now."

"You're channeling it?" Perrin asked.

"No. I don't need to. I can use it."

"Use it how?" Grady asked, eager.

"I . . . It's hard to explain. The weaves are saidin, but I seem to be able to strengthen them with saidar. So long as I can make a gateway on my own it appears that I can increase the Power—and size—with what the women lend me. Light! It's wonderful. We should have done this months ago."

Perrin glanced at the two women, Masuri and Edarra. Neither seemed as exultant as Neald. Masuri looked a little sick, and she smelled of fear. Edarra smelled curious and wary. Grady had mentioned that creating a circle this way seemed to require the men to gain control over the women.

"We'll send the scouting group through to Cairhien soon, then," Perrin said, fingering the blacksmith's puzzle in his pocket. "Grady, arrange with the Aiel about that mission, set up the gateways as they ask."

"Yes, my Lord," Grady said, rubbing his leathery face. "I should probably learn this technique rather than continuing on rounds. Though there's something I'll be wanting to talk to you about first. If you've the time."

"If you wish," Perrin said, stepping away from the group. To the side, several of the other Wise Ones came forward and told Neald it was their turn to try the circle with him. They didn't act at all as if Neald were in charge, and he was quick to obey. He'd been walking lightly around the Aiel since he'd said something a little too frisky to a Maiden and ended up playing Maiden's Kiss.

"What is this about, Grady?" Perrin asked once they were a little way off.

"Well, Neald and I are both well enough to make gateways, it seems," Grady said. "I was wondering if I might. . ." He seemed hesitant. "Well, if I might have leave to slip over to the Black Tower for an afternoon, to see my family."

That's right, Perrin thought. He's got a wife and a son. The Asha'man didn't often talk about them. Actually, he didn't often talk about much.

"I don't know, Grady," Perrin said, glancing up at the darkly clouded sky. "We have Whitecloaks ahead, and there's still no telling for sure if those Shaido will loop around and try to ambush us. I'm loath to be without you until I know we're someplace safe."

"It needn't be for long, my Lord," Grady said earnestly. Perrin sometimes forgot how young the man was, only six or seven years older than himself. Grady seemed so much older in that black coat, with his sun-darkened face.

"We'll find a time," Perrin said. "Soon. I don't want to upset anything until we have word of what's been happening since we left." Information could be potent. Balwer had taught him that.

Grady nodded, looking placated, though Perrin hadn't given him anything definite. Light! Even the Asha'man were starting to smell like people ho saw him as their lord. They'd been so aloof when this all began.

"You never worried about this before, Grady," Perrin said. "Has something changed?"

"Everything," Grady said softly. Perrin got a whiff of his scent. Hopeful "It changed a few weeks back. But of course you don't know. Nobody knows. Fager and I weren't certain at first, and we weren't sure if we should tell anyone for fear of sounding delusional."

"Know what?"

"My Lord, the taint. It's gone'.'

Perrin frowned. Was this madness speaking? But Grady didn't smell mad.

"It happened on that day," Grady said, "when we saw something to the north. My Lord, I know it sounds unbelievable, but it is true'.'

"Seems the sort of thing Rand might have been about," Perrin said, and the colors swirled in front of him. He banished them. "If you say it, I'll trust you, Grady. But what does this have to do with the Black Tower and your family? You want to go see if other Asha'man agree?"

"Oh, they'll agree," Grady said. "It's . . . well, my Lord, I'm a simple man. Sora, she's always been the thinker. I do what needs doing, and that's that. Well, joining the Black Tower, that was something that needed doing. I knew what was going to happen when I was tested. I knew it was in me. It was in my father, you see. We don't talk about it, but it was there. Reds found him young, right after I was born.

"When I joined the Lord Dragon, I knew what would happen to me. A few more years and I'd be gone. Might as well spend them fighting. The Lord Dragon told me I was a soldier, and a soldier can't leave his duty. So I haven't asked to go back before now. You needed me."

"That's changed?"

My Lord, the taint is gone. I'm not going to go mad. That means . . . well, I always had a reason to fight. But now I've got a reason to live, too."

Looking into the man's eyes, Perrin understood. What must it have been like? Knowing that you'd eventually go mad and need to be executed. Likely by your friends, who would call it a mercy.

That was what Perrin had sensed in the Asha'man all along, the reason they held themselves apart, often seeming so somber. Everyone else fought for life. The Asha'man . . . they'd fought to die.

That's how Rand feels, Perrin thought, watching the colors swirl again and his friend appear. He was riding his large black horse through a city with muddy streets, speaking with Nynaeve, who rode beside him.

Perrin shook his head and banished the image. "We'll get you home Grady," he promised. "You'll have some time with her before the end comes."

Grady nodded, glancing at the sky as a low rumble of thunder came from the north. "I just want to talk to her, you know? And I need to see little Gadren again. I won't recognize the lad."

"I'm sure he's a handsome child, Grady."

Grady laughed. It felt odd, but good, to hear that from the man. "Handsome? Gadren? No, my Lord, he might be big for his age, but he's about as pretty as a stump. Still, I love him something fierce." He shook his head, amused. "But I should be off learning this trick with Neald. Thank you, my Lord."

Perrin smiled, watching him go as a Maiden came hurrying into camp. She reported to the Wise Ones, but spoke loud enough to let Perrin hear. "There is a stranger riding along the road toward camp. He flies a flag of peace, but he wears the clothing of these Children of the Light."

Perrin nodded, gathering his guards. As he hastened toward the front of the camp, Tarn appeared and fell in beside him. They arrived just as the Whitecloak approached the first guard posts. The man rode a brilliant white gelding, and he carried a long pole with a white banner. His white clothing — mail with a tabard under the cloak—bore a yellow sunburst on the breast.

Perrin felt a sharp sinking feeling. He recognized this man. Dain Bornhald.

"I come to speak with the criminal Perrin Aybara," Bornhald announced in a loud voice, pulling to a stop.

"I'm here, Bornhald," Perrin called, stepping out.

Bornhald looked at him. "It is you. The Light has delivered you to us."

"Unless it has also delivered you an army three or four times the size of the one you have now," Perrin called, "then I doubt very much that it will matter."

"We have in our possession people who claim fealty to you, Aybara."

"Well, you can let them ride on back to our camp, and we'll be on our way."

The young Whitecloak turned his mount to the side, scowling. "We have unfinished business, Darkfriend."

"No need for this to turn nasty, Bornhald," Perrin said. "The way I see it, we can still each go our own way."

"The Children would rather die than leave justice undone," Dain said,

hen spat to the side. "But I will leave that for the Lord Captain Comander to explain. He wishes to see you for himself. I have been ordered to me and tell you that he is waiting beside the road a short ride ahead. He would like you to meet with him."

"You think I'm going to walk into such an obvious trap?" Perrin asked.

Bornhald shrugged. "Come or do not. My Lord Captain Commander is a man of honor, and swears by oath you will return safely—which is more than I'd have given a Darkfriend. You may bring your Aes Sedai^if you have them, for safety." With that, Bornhald turned his mount and galloped away.

Perrin stood thoughtfully, watching him retreat.

"You're not really thinking of going, are you, son?" Tarn asked.

"I'd rather know for certain who I'm facing," Perrin said. "And we did ask for parley. Maybe bargain for our people back. Burn me, Tarn. I have to at least try before attacking them."

Tarn sighed, but nodded.

"He mentioned Aes Sedai," Perrin said, "but not Asha'man. I'll bet he doesn't know much about them. Go have Grady dress like a Two Rivers man and tell him to report to me, along with Gaul and Sulin. Ask Edarra if she'll join us too. But don't tell my wife about this. We five will go on ahead and see if the Whitecloaks will really meet with us peacefully. If something goes wrong, we'll have Grady ready to get us out by gateway."

Tarn nodded and hurried away. Perrin waited nervously until Tam returned with Gaul, Sulin and Edarra. Grady came a few minutes later, wearing a brown wool cloak and brown and green clothing borrowed from one of the Two Rivers men. He carried a longbow, but walked like a soldier, with his back straight, his eyes keen as he looked about him. There was a particular air of danger to him that no common villager would bear. Hopefully, it wouldn't spoil the disguise.

The six of them broke away from camp, and blessedly, Faile didn't seem to have heard what was happening. Perrin would bring her if there was a longer parley or discussion, but he intended this trip to be quick, and he needed to be able to move without worrying about her.

They went on foot, and found the Whitecloaks a short distance ahead down the road. There looked to be only about a dozen of them, standing near a small tent that had been set up beside the road. They were upwind, which relaxed Perrin a little. He caught scents of anger and disgust, but it didn't feel like a trap to him.

As he and the others neared, someone stepped from the small tent,

wearing white. The tall man had fine features and short, dark hair. Most women would probably call him handsome. He smelled . . . better than the other Whitecloaks. They had a wild scent to them, like that of a rabid animal. This leader of theirs smelled calm, and not sickly at all.

Perrin glanced toward his companions.

"I do not like this, Perrin Aybara," Edarra said, looking from side to side. "These Children have a sense of wrongness about them."

"Archers could hit us from those trees," Tarn said with a grunt, nodding to a stand in the distance.

"Grady, you're holding the Power?" Perrin asked.

"Of course."

"Be ready, just in case," Perrin said, then stepped forward toward the small group of Whitecloaks. Their leader studied Perrin with hands clasped behind his back. "Golden eyes," the man said. "So it is true."

"You're the Lord Captain Commander?" Perrin asked.

"I am."

"What will it take for you to release the people of mine you're holding?"

"My men tell me they tried such an exchange once," the Whitecloak leader said. "And that you deceived them and betrayed them."

"They had kidnapped innocents," Perrin said. "And demanded my life in return. Well, I took my people back. Don't force me to do the same thing here."

The Whitecloak leader narrowed his eyes. He smelled thoughtful. "I will do what is right, Goldeneyes. The cost is irrelevant. My men tell me you murdered several Children a few years back, and have never known justice for it. That you lead Trollocs to attack villages."

"Your men are not very reliable," Perrin said with a growl. "I want a more formal parley, where we can sit down and discuss. Not something improvised like this."

"I doubt that will be needed," the Whitecloak leader said. "I am not here to bargain. I merely wanted to see you for myself. You wish your people freed? Meet my army on the field of battle. Do this, and I will release the captives, regardless of the outcome. They are obviously not soldiers. I will let them go."

"And if I refuse?" Perrin asked.

"Then it will not bode . . . well for their health."

Perrin ground his teeth.

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"Your force will face ours under the Light," the Whitecloak leader said. "Those are our terms."

Perrin glanced to the side. Grady met his eyes, and there was an obvious

question in them. He could take the Whitecloak leader captive right here, with barely a thought.

perrin was tempted. But they had come under the Whitecloak's oath f safety. He would not break the peace. Instead, he turned, and led his people back toward his camp.

Galad watched Aybara withdraw. Those golden eyes were unsettling. He had discounted Byar's insistence that this man was not merely a Darkfriend, but Shadowspawn. However, looking into those eyes, Galad was no longer certain he could dismiss those claims.

To the side, Bornhald let out a breath. "I can't believe you wanted to do this. What if he had brought Aes Sedai? We couldn't have stopped the One

Power."

"They would not have harmed me," Galad said. "And besides, if Aybara had the ability to assassinate me here with the One Power, he could have done the same to me in my camp. But if he is as you and Child Byar say, then he worries greatly about his image. He didn't lead Trollocs against the Two Rivers directly. He pretended to defend them." Such a man would act with subtlety. Galad had been safe.

He'd wanted to see Aybara himself, and he was glad he had. Those eyes . . . they were almost a condemnation by themselves. And Aybara had reacted to the mention of the murdered Whitecloaks, stiffening. Beyond that, there was the talk his people gave of him in alliance with the Seanchan and having with him men who could channel.

Yes, this Aybara was a dangerous man. Galad had been worried about committing his forces to fighting here, but the Light would see them through it. Better to defeat this Aybara now, than to wait and face him at the Last Battle. As quickly as that, he made his decision. The right decision. They would fight.

"Come," Galad said, waving to his men. "Let's get back to camp."

* * *

CHAPTER
11

An Unexpected Letter

They can't possibly think I'll sign this," Elayne said, tossing the sheaf of papers onto the floor beside her chair. "It's unlikely that they do," Dyelin said. Her golden hair was pristine, her firm face controlled, her slim body poised. The woman was perfect! It was unfair that she should look so pristine while Elayne felt like a sow, fattened up and ripe for the slaughter.

The hearth in Elayne's sitting room crackled warmly. Wine sat in a pitcher on one of the wall's sideboards, but of course she wasn't allowed any of that. If one more person tried to offer her bloody goat's milk . . .

Birgitte lounged near the far wall, golden braid hanging over her right shoulder, contrasting with her white-collared red coat and sky-blue trousers. She'd poured herself a cup of tea, and smiled over it, amused by Elayne's annoyance. Elayne could feel the emotion through the bond!

They were the only ones in the room. Elayne had retired to the sitting room after accepting the proposal from Ellorien's messenger, explaining that she would like to "consider" the offer in private. Well, she'd consider it! Consider it trash, for that was all it was!

"This is an insult," she said, sweeping her hand toward the pages.

"Do you intend to keep them imprisoned forever, Elayne?" Dyelin asked, raising an eyebrow. "They can't afford to pay a ransom, not after what they spent funding their Succession bid. That leaves you with a decision."

"They can rot," Elayne said, folding her arms. "They raised armies gainst me and besieged Caemlyn!"

"Yes," Dyelin said flatly. "I believe I was there."

Elayne cursed softly to herself, then stood up and began to pace. Birgitte eyed her; they both knew that Melfane had suggested that Elayne avoid taxing herself. Elayne met the Warder's eyes stubbornly, then continued her pacing. Burn her, and burn that bloody midwife! Walking wasn't taxing.

Ellorien was one of the last vocal holdouts to Elayne's rule, and was the most problematic—save, perhaps, for Jarid Sarand. These months marked the beginning of a long period of testing for Elayne. How would she stand on certain issues? How easily would she be pushed? How much did she take after her mother?

They should know that she wouldn't be easily intimidated. But the unfortunate truth was that she stood atop a precarious perch made of teacups, stacked high. Each of those cups was an Andoran House; some had supported her willingly, others grudgingly. Very few of them were as sturdy as she would have liked.

"The captive nobles are a resource," Elayne said. "They should be viewed as such."

Dyelin nodded. The noblewoman had a way of goading Elayne, forcing her to stretch for the answers they both knew she needed to find. "A resource is meaningless unless eventually expended," Dyelin noted. She held a cup of wine. Blasted woman.

"Yes," Elayne said, "but to sell a resource short would be to establish a reputation for carelessness."

"Unless you sell something just before its value plummets," Dyelin said. "Many a merchant has been called foolish for trading ice peppers at a discount, only to be called wise when prices fall even further."

"And these captives? You see their value falling soon?"

'Their Houses have been compromised," Dyelin said. "The stronger your position becomes, Elayne, the less valuable these political captives grow. You shouldn't squander the advantage, but neither should you lock it away until nobody cares anymore."

"You could execute them," Birgitte said.

They both stared at her.

What?" Birgitte said. "It's what they deserve, and it would establish a hard fisted reputation."

It's not right," Elayne said. "They should not be killed for supporting someone else for the throne. There can be no treason where there is no Queen."

"So our soldiers can die, but the nobles bloody walk away?" Birgitte asked. Then she raised a hand before Elayne could protest. "Spare the lecture, Elayne. I understand. I don't agree, but I understand. It's always been this way."

Elayne returned to her pacing. She did stop, however, to stomp on Ellorien's proposal as she passed it. That earned her an eye roll from Birgitte but it felt good. The "proposal" was a list of empty promises that concluded with a demand that Elayne release the captives for "the good of Andor." Ellorien claimed that since the captives had no funds, the crown should pardon them and release them to help rebuild.

Truth be told, Elayne had been considering doing so. But now if she released them, the three would see Ellorien as their savior! Any gratitude that Elayne could have gained would instead be given to her rival. Blood and bloody ashes!

"The Windfinders are beginning to ask after the land you promised them," Dyelin noted.

"Already?"

The older woman nodded. "The request still troubles me. Why do they want a sliver of land like that?"

"They earned it," Elayne said.

"Perhaps. Though this does mean that you're the first Queen in five generations to cede a portion of Andor—no matter how small—to a foreign entity."

Elayne took a deep breath, and oddly found herself calmer. Blasted mood swings! Hadn't Melfane promised those would grow less pronounced as the pregnancy progressed? Yet at times she still felt her emotions bouncing around like a ball in a children's game.

Elayne composed herself and sat. "I cannot allow this. The Houses are all looking for opportunities to shoulder their way into power."

"You would be doing the same in their place, I warrant," Dyelin said.

"Not if I knew that the Last Battle was approaching," Elayne snapped. "We need to do something to direct the nobles toward more important matters. Something to unify them behind me, or at least convince them that I'm not to be toyed with."

"And you have a means of achieving this?" Dyelin asked.

"Yes," Elayne said, glancing eastward. "It's time to seize Cairhien."

Birgitte choked quietly on her tea. Dyelin merely raised an eyebrow. "A bold move."

"Bold?" Birgitte asked, wiping her chin. "It's bloody insane. Elayne, you barely have your fingers on Andor."

"That makes the timing even better," Elayne said. "We have momen- Besides, if we move for Cairhien now, it will show that I mean to be more than a simpering puff of a queen."

"I doubt anyone expects that of you," Birgitte said. "If they do, they obably took one too many knocks to the head during the fighting."

"She's right, however uncouth the presentation," Dyelin agreed. She lanced at Birgitte, and Elayne could feel a stab of dislike through Birgitte's bond. Light! What would it take to make the two of them get along? "Nobody doubts your strength as a queen, Elayne. That won't stop the others from seizing what power they can; they know they're unlikely to be able to

get it later."

"I don't have fifteen years to stabilize my rule, like Mother," Elayne said. "Look, we all know what Rand kept saying about me taking the Sun Throne. A steward rules there now, waiting for me, and after what happened to Colavaere, nobody dares disobey Rand's edicts."

"By taking that throne," Dyelin said, "you risk looking as if you're letting al'Thor hand it to you."

"So?" Elayne said. "I had to take Andor on my own, but there is nothing wrong with me accepting his gift of Cairhien. His Aiel were the ones to liberate it. We'd be doing the Cairhienin a favor by preventing a messy Succession. My claim to the throne is strong, at least as strong as anyone else's, and those loyal to Rand will fall behind me."

"And do you not risk overextending yourself?"

"Possibly," Elayne said, "but I think it's worth the risk. In one step I could become one of the most powerful monarchs since Artur Hawkwing."

Further argument was cut off by a polite knock at the door. Elayne glanced at Dyelin, and the woman's thoughtful expression meant she was considering what Elayne had said. Well, Elayne would strike for the Sun Throne, with or without Dyelin's approval. The woman was becoming increasingly useful to Elayne as an advisor—Light be praised that Dyelin hadn't wanted the throne herself!—but a queen could not let herself fall into the trap of relying on any one person too much.

Birgitte answered the door, letting in the storklike Master Norry. He was dressed in red and white, his long face characteristically somber. He carried his leather folder under one arm, and Elayne suppressed a groan. "I thought we were finished for the day."

I thought so as well, Your Majesty," he said. "But several new matters have arisen. I thought that they might be . . . um . . . interesting to you."

'What do you mean?"

"Well, Your Majesty," Norry said, "you know that I am not . . . particularly fond of certain types of work. But in light of recent additions to my staff, I have seen reason to expand my attentions."

"You're taking about Hark, aren't you?" Birgitte said. "How's the worthless piece of grime doing?"

Norry glanced at her. "He is . . . er . . . grimy, I should say." He looked back at Elayne. "But he is rather adept, once given proper motivation. Please forgive me if I have taken liberties, but after the encounters recently-—and the guests to your dungeons they provided—I thought it wise."

"What are you talking about, Master Norry?" Elayne asked.

"Mistress Basaheen, Your Majesty," Norry said. "The first instruction I gave our good Master Hark was to watch the Aes Sedai s place of residence—a certain inn known as The Greeting Hall."

Elayne sat upright, feeling a burst of excitement. Duhara Basaheen had repeatedly attempted to gain audience with Elayne by bullying the various members of the palace staff. They all knew now, however, that she was not to be admitted. Aes Sedai or not, she was a representative of Elaida, and Elayne intended to have nothing to do with her.

"You had her watched," Elayne said eagerly. "Please tell me you discovered something I can use to banish that insufferable woman."

"Then I am under no condemnation?" Master Norry asked carefully, still as dry and unexcited as ever. He was yet inexperienced when it came to spying.

"Light no," Elayne said. "I should have ordered it done myself. You've saved me from that oversight, Master Norry. If what you've discovered is good enough news, I might just be likely to kiss you."

That prompted a reaction; his eyes widened in horror. It was enough to make Elayne laugh, and Birgitte chuckled as well. Dyelin didn't seem pleased. Well, she could go suck on a goat's foot, for all Elayne cared.

"Er . . . well," Norry said, "that wouldn't be necessary, Your Majesty. I had thought that, if there were Darkfriends pretending to be Aes Sedai in the city"—he, like the others, had learned not to refer to Falion and the others as "Aes Sedai" in Elayne's presence—"we might want to keep good watch on any who purported to be from the White Tower."

Elayne nodded eagerly. My, but Norry could ramble!

"I'm afraid I must disappoint Your Majesty," Norry said, obviously noting Elayne's excitement, "if you are hoping for proof that this woman is a Darkfriend."

"Oh."

"However," Norry said, raising a slender finger. "I have reason to believe that Duhara Sedai may have had a hand in the document you seem to be treating with . . . um . . . unusual reverence." He glanced at the pages p, ne had tossed to the floor. One bore the distinct outline of her shoe.

"Duhara has been meeting with Ellorien?" Elayne asked.

"Indeed she has," Master Norry said. "The visits are growing more freent. They are done with some measure of secrecy as well."

Elayne glanced at Dyelin. "Why does Duhara want my rivals freed?"

Dyelin looked troubled. "She couldn't be so foolish as to assume she can raise up a movement against you, particularly using a group of broken, bankrupt lords and ladies."

"Your Majesty?" Norry asked. "If I may offer a comment . . ."

"Of course, Master Norry."

"Perhaps the Aes Sedai is trying to curry favor with the Lady Ellorien. We don't know for certain they conspired on this proposal; it simply seemed likely, judging from the frequency and timing of the Aes Sedai's visits. But she may not have reason to support your enemies so much as she has reason to be in the good graces of some of the city's nobility."

It was possible. Duhara wasn't likely to return to the White Tower, no matter how often Elayne suggested that she do so. To go back would be to present Elaida with empty hands and a hostile Andor. No Aes Sedai would be so easily dissuaded. However, if she could return with the loyalty of some of the Andoran nobility, it would be something.

"When Duhara left her inn to visit Ellorien's home," Elayne said, "how did she dress?" Though Ellorien had briefly spoken of returning to her estates, she hadn't left, perhaps realizing that it wasn't politically useful as of yet. She resided in her mansion in Caemlyn at the moment.

"In a cloak, Your Majesty," Norry said. "With the hood drawn."

"Rich or poor?"

'I ... I don't know," Norry replied, sounding embarrassed. "I could fetch Master Hark___"

'That won't be needed," Elayne said. "But tell me. Did she go alone?"

No. I believe she always had a rather large contingent of attendants with her."

Elayne nodded. She was willing to bet that while Duhara wore a cloak and drawn hood, she left her Great Serpent ring on and chose a distinctively rich cloak for the subterfuge, along with taking attendants. Master Norry," Elayne said, "I fear that you've been played."

"Your Majesty?"

Dyelin was nodding. "She wanted to be seen visiting Ellorien. She didn't want the visits to be official—that would put her too formally against your throne. But she wanted you to know what she was doing."

"She's blatantly mingling with my enemies," Elayne said. "It's a warning. She threatened me earlier, saying that I would not appreciate being in opposition to her and Elaida."

"Ah," Norry said, deflated. "So my initiative wasn't so keen after all."

"Oh, it was still valuable," Elayne said. "If you hadn't had her watched we'd have missed this—which would have been embarrassing. If someone is going to go out of her way to insult me, then I at least want to be aware of it. If only so that I know whom to behead later on."

Norry paled.

"Figuratively, Master Norry," she said. As much as she'd like to do it. And Elaida too! She dared send a watchdog to "counsel" Elayne? Elayne shook her head. Hurry up, Egwene. We need you in the Tower, The world needs you there.

She sighed, turning back to Norry. "You said there were 'several new matters' that needed my attention?"

"Indeed, Your Majesty," he said, getting out his horrible leather folder. He removed a page from it—one he did not regard with nearly as much reverence as most he collected. Indeed, he pinched this one between two fingers and held it aloft, like a man picking up a dead animal found in the gutter. "You will recall your orders regarding mercenary bands?"

"Yes," she said, grimacing. She was getting thirsty. Gloomily, she eyed the cup of warm goat's milk on the table next to her chair. News of battle brought bands of sell-swords eager to offer their services.

Unfortunately for most of the mercenaries, the siege had been a short one. News traveled fast, but weary and hungry soldiers traveled slowly. Soldier bands continued to arrive at the city in a steady flow, the men in them disappointed to find no need for their weapons.

Elayne had begun by sending them away. Then she'd realized the foolishness in this. Every man would be needed at Tarmon Gai'don, and if Andor could provide an extra five or ten thousand soldiers to the conflict, she wanted to do so.

She didn't have the coin to pay them now, but neither did she want to lose them. So instead, she had ordered Master Norry and Captain Guybon to give all of the mercenary bands the same instructions. They were to allow no more than a certain number of soldiers into Caemlyn at a time, and they were to camp no closer than one league from the city.

This was to leave them with the idea that she'd meet with them evenally and offer them work. She just might do that, now that she had decided to take the Sun Throne. Of course, the last sell-swords she'd hired had gone rotten on her more often than not.

Against her better judgment, she picked up the cup of milk and took sip. Birgitte nodded in satisfaction, but Elayne grimaced. Better to g6

thirsty!

"Well," Master Norry said, looking over the page in his fingers, "one of

the mercenary captains has taken it upon himself to send you a very . . . familiar letter. I wouldn't have brought it to you, but upon second reading it seems that it is something you should see. The ruffian's claims are outlandish, but I would not like to have been the one to ignore them, should they prove . . . urn . . . accurate."

Curious, Elayne reached for the paper. Outlandish claims? She didn't know any mercenary captains. The scrawl on the page was uneven, there were numerous crossed out words, and some of the spelling was . . . creative. Whoever this man was, she—

She blinked in surprise as she reached the bottom of the letter. Then she read it again.

Your Royal Bloody Pain in My Back,

We're bloody waiting here to talk to you, and we're getting angry perturbed. (That means angry.) Thom says that you're a queen now, but I figure that changes nothing, sense you acted like a queen all the time *anyway. Don't forget that I carried hailed your pretty little backside out of a hole in Tear, but you acted like a queen then, so I guess I don't know why I'm suprised now that you act like one when you really are a queen.*

So I'm thinking I should treat you like a bloody Queen and send you a bloody letter and all, speaking with high talk and getting your attention. I even used my ring as a signet, like it was paper proper. So here is my formal salutation. So BLOODY STOP TURNING ME AWAY so we can talk. I need your bellfounders. It's bloody important.

—Mat

p.s. Salutation means greeting.

p.p.s. Don't mind the scratched out words and bad spellings. I was going to rewrite this letter, but Thom is laffing so hard at me that I want to be done.

p.p.s. Don't mind me calling your backside pretty. I hardly ever spent any time looking at it, as I've an awareness that you'd pull my eyes out if you saw me. Besides, I'm married now, so that all doesn't matter.

Elayne couldn't decide whether to be outraged or exuberant. Mat was in Andor, and Thorn was alive! They'd escaped Ebou Dar. Had they found Olver? How had they gotten away from the Seanchan?

So many emotions and questions welled up in her. Birgitte stood upright, frowning, feeling the emotions. "Elayne? What is it? Did the man insult you?"

Elayne found herself nodding, tears forming in her eyes.

Birgitte cursed, striding over. Master Norry looked taken aback, as if regretting that he'd brought the letter.

Elayne burst into laughter.

Birgitte froze. "Elayne?"

"I'm all right," Elayne said, wiping the tears from her eyes and forcing herself to take a deep breath. "Oh, Light. I needed that. Here, read it."

Birgitte snatched the letter, and as she read, her face lightened. She chuckled. "You have a nice backside? He should be talking. Mat's got as fine a rump as comes on a man."

"Birgitte!" Elayne said.

"Well it's true," the Warder said, handing back the letter. "I find his face far too pretty, but that doesn't mean I can't judge a good backside when I see one. Light, it will be good to have him back! Finally, someone I can go drinking with who doesn't look at me as their bloody military superior."

"Contain yourself, Birgitte," Elayne said, folding the letter up. Norry looked scandalized by the exchange. Dyelin said nothing. It took a lot to faze that woman, and she'd heard worse from Birgitte.

"You did well, Master Norry," Elayne said. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention."

"You do indeed know these mercenaries, then?" he asked, a hint of surprise sounding in his voice.

"They're not mercenaries. Actually, I'm not certain what they are. Friends. And allies, I should hope." Why had Mat brought the Band of the Red Hand to Andor? Were they loyal to Rand? Could she make use of them? Mat was a scoundrel, but he had a strangely good eye for tactics and warfare. A soldier under his command would be worth ten of the sell-sword riffraff she'd been forced to hire recently.

"My pardon, Your Majesty, for my mistake," Norry said. "I should have brought this to you sooner. My informants told me that this group was

ntly in the employ of the Crown of Murandy, so I discounted their 1 ader's insistence that he wasn't a mercenary."

"You did well, Master Norry," Elayne said, still feeling amused and

nsulted. It was odd how often one moved between those two emotions

when Matrim Cauthon was involved. "Light knows I've been busy enough.

But please, if someone claims to know me personally, at least bring it to

Birgitte's attention."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Arrange a meeting with Master Cauthon," she said, idly wishing she had time to write him back a letter as insulting as the one he'd written her. "Tell him he must bring Thorn with him. To . . . keep him in line."

"As you wish, Your Majesty," Norry said with a characteristically stiff bow. "If I may withdraw . . ."

She nodded in thanks and he left, pulling the door closed. Elayne held Mat's letter idly between two fingers. Could she use Mat, somehow, to help her with the troubles Ellorien was making? As she'd used the Borderlanders? Or was that too obvious?

"Why did he mention bellfounders, do you think?" Birgitte asked.

"It could be something as simple as needing a new bell to ring the hour for his camp."

"But you don't think it's simple."

"Mat's involved," Elayne said. "He has a way of complicating things, and the way he wrote that line makes it smell like one of his schemes."

"True. And if he merely wanted a bell, he could win himself enough to buy it after an hour dicing."

"Come now," Elayne said. "He's not that lucky."

Birgitte snorted into her tea. "You need to pay better attention, Elayne. That man could dice with the Dark One and win."

Elayne shook her head. Soldiers, Birgitte included, could be such a superstitious lot. "Make certain to have a few extra Guardswomen on duty when Mat comes. He can be exuberant, and I wouldn't want him to make a scene."

Who is this man?" Dyelin asked, sounding confused. One of the other two ta'veren who grew up with Rand al'Thor," Birgitte said, gulping down her tea. She'd given up drinking while Elayne was pregnant. At least someone else had to suffer too.

Mat is ... a particularly dynamic individual," Elayne said. "He can be very useful when properly harnessed. When he is not—which is most of the time—he can be an outright disaster. But whatever else can be said about the man, he and his Band know how to fight."

"You're going to use them, aren't you?" Birgitte said, eyeing her appreciatively.

"Of course," Elayne said. "And, from what I remember Mat saying, he has a lot of Cairhienin in the Band. They are native sons. If I arrive with that section of the Band as part of my army, perhaps the transition will be easier."

"So you really do intend to go through with this?" Dyelin asked. "Taking the Sun Throne? Now?"

"The world needs unity," Elayne said, standing. "With Cairhien, I begin knitting us all together. Rand already controls Illian and Tear, and has bonds to the Aiel. We're all connected."

She glanced to the west, where she could feel that knot of emotions that was Rand. The only thing she ever sensed from him these days was a cold anger, buried deeply. Was he in Arad Doman?

Elayne loved him. But she didn't intend to see Andor become merely another part of the Dragon's empire. Besides, if Rand were to die at Shayol Ghul, who would rule that empire? It could break up, but she worried that someone—Darlin, perhaps—would be strong enough to hold it together. If so, Andor would stand alone between an aggressive Seanchan empire to the southwest, Rand's successor to the northwest and the southeast and the Borderlanders united together in the north and northeast.

She could not let that happen. The woman in her cringed to think of planning for Rand's death, but the Queen could not be so squeamish. The world was changing.

"I realize it will be difficult to administer two nations," Elayne said. "But I must hold Cairhien. For the good of both thrones."

She turned and met Dyelin's eyes, and the older woman nodded slowly. "It seems you are committed."

"I am," Elayne said. "But I feel I'm going to need reliable use of Traveling if I'm going to manage it. Let's set up a meeting for me with Sumeko and Alise. We need to discuss the future of the Kin."

CHAPTER
12

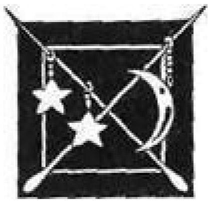

An Empty Ink Bottle

Min sat on a window ledge in the Stone of Tear, enjoying the warmth. The afternoon breeze was refreshing, laden though it was with humidity and the scents of the city below. The Tairens had been calling the weather "chilly," which made Min smile. How would these folk respond to a good Andoran winter, with snow piled up at the sides of buildings and icicles hanging from the eaves?

All that could be said of the weather lately was that it was less sweltering than usual. The warmth that Min was enjoying, however, had nothing to do with the heat in the air.

Sunlight shone upon the city. In the Stone's courtyards, Defenders in their striped sleeves and breeches kept stopping and looking up toward the open sky. The clouds still lurked on the horizon, but they were broken around the city in an unnatural ring. Perfectly circular.

The warmth that Min felt was not caused by the sunlight. How can you just sit there?" Nynaeve demanded. Min turned her head. The window was wide open, and the walls of the Stone were thick. Min sat on the windowsill with her knees bent, her bare oes touching the wall on the other side. Her boots and stockings lay on the floor beside a stack of books.

Nynaeve paced the room. The Stone of Tear had withstood sieges and storms, wars and desolation, but Min wondered if it had ever survived any. thing quite like Nynaeve al'Meara in a pique. The dark-haired Aes Sedai had spent the last three days stalking through the corridors like a crackling thunderhead, intimidating Defenders, terrifying servants.

"Three days," Nynaeve said. "Three days he's been gone! The Last Battle looms, and the Dragon Reborn is missing."

"He's not missing," Min said softly. "Rand knows where he is."

"You do as well," Nynaeve said, her voice curt.

"I'm not leading you to him, Nynaeve."

"And why not? Surely you can't—"

"He needs to be alone."

Nynaeve cut off. She walked over to the corner table and poured herself a cup of chilled Tremalking black. Chilled tea. That seemed so odd. Tea was meant to be warming during cold days.

Min turned her eyes northward again, into the distant, cloud-smothered haze. As far as she could determine through the bond, she was looking directly at him. Was he in Andor, perhaps? Or in the Borderlands? She'd been tempted to use the bond to seek him out at first, when he'd felt that awful anguish. Pain deeper than the wounds in his side. Agony, anger and despair. In those moments, Rand had seemed more dangerous than he ever had before. Not even that night—when he'd knelt above her, strangling her with one hand—had he been as frightening.

And then . . .

She smiled. And then had come the warmth. It radiated from the bond like the comfort of a winter hearth. Something wonderful was happening, something she'd been awaiting without knowing it.

"It will be all right, Nynaeve," she said.

"How can you say that?" The woman took a sip of her tea. "He didn't destroy Ebou Dar, but that doesn't mean he's not dangerous. You heard what he nearly did to Tarn. His own father, Min."

"A man should not be condemned for what he 'nearly' did, Nynaeve. He stopped himself."

"He didn't stop himself at Natrin's Barrow."

"That was necessary."

"You didn't believe that at the time."

Min took a deep breath. Nynaeve had been goading her into arguments lately; she certainly had good reason to be tense. Her husband was riding toward his death. The Dragon Reborn—a man she saw as her charge, still—was wandering alone, and there was nothing Nynaeve could do. And if there was one thing Nynaeve hated, it was being powerless.

"Nynaeve," Min said. "If this lasts much longer, I'll lead you to him. I promise."

The Aes Sedai narrowed her eyes. " 'Much longer?"

"A few days."

"In a few days he could level Cairhien."

"Do you really think he would do that, Nynaeve?" Min asked softly. "Truly?"

"Do I?" Nynaeve gripped her cup of tea, staring down at its contents. "Once I would have laughed at the idea. I knew Rand al'Thor, and the boy still inside him. The man he's become frightens me. I always told him he needed to grow up. And then . . . and then he did." She shivered visibly.

Min started to reply, but motion drew her attention. Two Maidens—Surial and Lerian—guarded the open doorway to the hallway; they'd turned to watch someone approach. There were always Maidens around Min, these days.

Sarene Nemdahl entered the small room a moment later. Min's quarters in the Stone were not expansive—she rarely used them, instead staying with Rand. Her sitting room had a thick blue-and-white rug and a small cherry desk, but nothing else.

Sarene wore her dark hair in its customary beaded braids framing her near-perfect face. "Cadsuane Sedai," Sarene said, "she has need of you."

"Is that so?" Nynaeve said. "Well, perhaps Cadsuane Sedai can—"

"Alanna is gone," Sarene continued, unruffled. "Vanished right from her chambers. The Defenders, they didn't see her go, and there was no sign of a gateway."

"Oh. Well, let's go then." Nynaeve bustled out of the chamber.

And I'm telling you that I felt nothing," Corele said. She smiled, tapping the side of her nose. "I don't know how she got out. Unless you think she somehow invented flying—which I daresay wouldn't be outside reason, considering some of what has occurred lately."

Fool woman, Cadsuane thought, leveling a flat stare at Corele. The woman's flippancy was preferable to the self-importance of some other Aes aedai, but today Cadsuane hadn't the patience for it.

The Yellow shrugged, still smiling, but said nothing further. Cadsuane

Placed hands on hips, surveying the small chamber. Room for a trunk to

hold clothing, a cot for sleeping and a desk. Cadsuane would have expected

Aes Sedai to demand more, even in Tear. Of course, Alanna didn't often

rveal her intimate connection to the Dragon. Most didn't know of it.

Two other Aes Sedai—Rafela Cindal and Bera Harkin—stood at the side of the room. Bera said she'd felt Alanna channeling, but nothing demanding Certainly not enough to create a gateway.

Burn that woman! Cadsuane had thought Alanna well in hand, despite recent stubbornness. She'd obviously slipped out intentionally. The clothing from the trunk was gone and the writing desk was mostly bare. Only an empty ink bottle remained.

"She said nothing to you?" Cadsuane said.

"No, Cadsuane Sedai," Bera replied. "We haven't spoken more than passing words in weeks. I. . . well, I did often hear weeping in her room."

"What is all the fuss about?" a new voice said. Cadsuane glanced at the doorway as Nynaeve arrived and met Cadsuane's stare. "She's only one person, and so far as I understand, she was free to leave when she wished."

"Phaw," Cadsuane said. "The girl isn't 'only one person.' She's a tool. An important one." She reached over to the desk, holding up a sheet of paper that they'd found in the room. It had been folded with a blood-red seal of wax on one side. "Do you recognize this?"

Nynaeve frowned. "No. Should I?"

Lying or truthful? Cadsuane hated not being able to trust the words of someone who called herself an Aes Sedai. But Nynaeve al'Meara had never held the Oath Rod.

Those eyes looked genuinely confused. Nynaeve should be trustworthy; she prided herself on her honesty. Unless that was a front. Unless she was Black.

Careful, she thought. You'll end up as distrustful as the boy is. Nynaeve hadn't given Alanna the note, which eliminated her last good theory on its origin.

"So, what is it, Cadsuane Sedai?" Nynaeve demanded. At least she used the honorific; Cadsuane nearly chided the girl for her tone. But, truth be told, she felt as frustrated as Nynaeve did. There were times when such emotions were justified. Facing the end of the world with the Dragon Reborn completely out of control was one of them.

"I'm not sure," Cadsuane said. "The letter was opened in haste—the paper was torn. It was dropped on the floor, and the note inside taken, along with clothing and emergency items."

"But why does it matter?" Nynaeve asked. Behind her, Min slipped into the room, two Maidens taking up positions by the door. Had Min yet figured out the real reason the Aiel trailed her?

"Because, Nynaeve," Min said. "She is a pathway to him."

Nynaeve sniffed. "She's been no more helpful than you, Min."

As persuasive as you can be, Nynaeve," Cadsuane said dryly, "the Shadow has means to make people more forthcoming."

Nynaeve blushed furiously, then began muttering under her breath.

Alanna could point the way to the Dragon Reborn. If agents of the Dark One had taken her, there would be no hiding Rand from them. Their traps had been deadly enough when they'd needed to coax and lure him into them.

"We've been fools," Nynaeve said. "There should have been a hundred Maidens guarding her."

"The Forsaken have known where to find him before," Cadsuane said, though inwardly she agreed. She should have seen Alanna better watched. "And he has survived. This is simply one more thing to be aware of." She sighed. "Can someone bring us some tea?"

Bera was actually the one who went to fetch it, though Cadsuane hadn't taken any care to cultivate influence with the woman. Well, a reputation was worth something, it appeared.

Bera returned shortly; Cadsuane had stepped out into the hall to think. She accepted the cup and braced herself for the tea's bitter taste— she'd asked for it partially because she needed a moment to think, and an empty-handed woman often looked nervous.

She raised the cup to her lips. What next? Ask the Defenders at the gate of the Stone? Last night, Alanna—after being prodded—had confirmed that al'Thor was still in the same place. Up north, Andor perhaps. For three days. What was the fool boy—

Cadsuane froze. The tea tasted good.

It was wonderful, as a matter of fact. Perfectly sweetened with honey. Faint bitterness and a relaxing flavor. It had been weeks, perhaps months, since Cadsuane had tasted tea that wasn't spoiled.

Min gasped, turning sharply toward the northern quarter of the city. The two Maidens in the doorway were gone in a heartbeat, dashing down the hallway. Cadsuane's suspicions were confirmed; their careful watch of Min had been less about protecting her and more about watching for signs of...

"He's here," Min said softly.

CHAPTER
13

For What Has Been Wrought

Min burst from the Dragonwall Gate on the eastern side of the Stone and dashed across the courtyard. What seemed like an entire clan's worth of Aiel flooded out behind her, breaking around Min like deer breaking around an oak. They weaved between startled Defenders and grooms, moving with grace and speed toward the wall.

It was galling how easily they outpaced her—years ago, she'd prided herself on being able to beat any boy she knew in an honest footrace. Now . . . well, too many months spent picking through books, perhaps.

She still outpaced the Aes Sedai, who were bridled by their need to maintain proper decorum. Min had long ago tossed aside all sense of decorum for her towering sheepherder. And so she ran, thankful for her breeches and boots, making for the gate.

And there he was. She pulled up sharply, looking through an open column of Aiel in cadin'sor toward the man himself, standing and speaking with two Defenders who were part of the wall guard. He glanced at her as she grew close; he could feel her coming, as she felt him.

Rand had found an old, long brown cloak somewhere. It had sleeves like a coat, though it fell loose from the shoulders. Underneath it, he had on a shirt and fine black trousers.

Now that he was close, the warmth through the bond seemed overwhelming. Couldn't the others see it? It made her want to raise her arm and shade her eyes, though there was nothing to actually see. It was just the bond. Except . . . the air did seem to distort around him. Was that a trick of the sunlight? New viewings spun around his head. She normally ignored those, but she couldn't do so now. An open cavern, gaping like a mouth. Bloodstained rocks. Two dead men on the ground, surrounded by ranks and ranks of Trollocs, a pipe with smoke curling from it.

Rand met her gaze, and—despite the bond—she was amazed at what she saw in him. Those gray gemstone eyes of his were deeper. There were faint wrinkles around them. Had those been there before? Surely he was too young for that.

Those eyes did not look young. Min felt a moment of panic as his eyes held hers. Was this the same man? Had the Rand she loved been stolen away, replaced with an ancient force of a man she could never know or understand? Had she lost him after all?

And then he smiled, and the eyes—deep though they had become—were his. That smile was something she'd been waiting a very long time to see again. It was now much more confident than the one he'd shown her during their early days together, yet it was still vulnerable. It let her see a part of him that others were never allowed.

That part was the youth, somehow innocent still. She ran up to him and seized him in an embrace. "You wool-headed fool! Three days? What have you been doing for three days}"

"Existing, Min," he said, wrapping his arms around her.

"I wasn't aware that was such a difficult task."

"It has been for me at times." He fell silent, and she was content to hold him. Yes, this was the same man. Changed—and for the better—but still Rand. She clung to him. She didn't care that people were gathering, more and more of them. Let them watch.

Finally she exhaled, reluctantly pulling back. "Rand, Alanna is gone. She vanished earlier today."

"Yes. I felt her go. Northward somewhere. The Borderlands, perhaps Arafel."

"She could be used against you, to find where you are." He smiled. Light, but it felt good to see that expression on his face again! "The Shadow does not need her to find me, Min, nor will it ever again. All its eyes are fixed directly upon me, and will be until I blind them."

"What? But Rand—"

'It's all right, Min. The time when it could silence me quietly—and therefore win—has passed. The confrontation is assured and the scream that begins the avalanche has been sounded."

He seemed afire with life. The thrill of it was intoxicating. He left an arm around her—the arm that ended in a stump—as he turned to regard the Aiel. "I have toh." Though the courtyard behind them was in chaos, the Aiel stood quietly.

They were ready for this, Min thought. The Aiel weren't hostile, exactly but they didn't share the excitement of the Defenders. The Tairens thought Rand had returned to lead them to the Last Battle.

"In the Waste," Rhuarc said, stepping forward, "there is an animal. The meegerling. It looks much like a rat, but it is far more stupid. If you place it near grain, it will go straight toward it, regardless of the danger. No matter how many times it falls in a trench between itself and the food it will repeat the same action if you move it back to the start. Aiel children amuse themselves with the game." He studied Rand. "I had not thought you would be a meegerling, Rand al'Thor."

"I promise I will never leave you again," Rand said. "Not of my own choice, and not without informing and—if they consent—bringing Maidens as a guard."

The Aiel did not budge. "This will prevent you from earning more toh" Rhuarc said. "It will not change what has gone before. And promises have been made before."

"This is true," Rand said, meeting Rhuarc's eyes. "I will meet my toh, then."

Something passed between them, something Min didn't understand, and the Aiel parted, looking more relaxed. Twenty Maidens came forward to act as a guard around Rand. Rhuarc retreated with the others, joining a small group of Wise Ones who watched from the periphery.

"Rand?" Min said.

"It will be all right," he said, though there was a grim cast to his emotions. "This was one of the things I needed to fix. One of many." He took his arm from around her and scanned the courtyard, feeling hesitant, as if he were looking for something. Whatever it was, he didn't see it, so he began to stride toward King Darlin, who had just arrived in a hurry.

King Darlin bowed, hand on the pommel of his narrow side-sword. "My Lord Dragon. Are we to march, finally?"

"Walk with me, Darlin," Rand said in reply as he moved through the courtyard. "There is much to do. Who else is here? Narishma, Flinn. Excellent." He nodded to the two black-coated Asha'man who arrived at a run. "Your Aes Sedai? Ah, there they come. Well, that will be next. Kai-nea, would you be so kind as to gather me some messengers?"

One of the Maidens—a woman with oddly dark hair for an Aiel—ran as off to do as requested. Min frowned, keeping pace with Rand and Darlin the two Asha'man fell into step behind. Nynaeve and Merise led the group of Aes Sedai. They stopped when they saw Rand approaching, as if to let him be the one who came to meet them. They pulled together in a clump, fiddling with their clothing, look-ne more unsettled than Aes Sedai normally did.

Rand crossed the bustling, open courtyard, walking into the shadow of the Stone's towering fortifications, then stepped up to them.

"Rand al'Thor," Nynaeve said, folding her arms as he walked up to them. "You are—"

'An idiot?" Rand finished, sounding amused. "An arrogant fool? An impulsive, wool-headed boy in need of a sound ear-boxing?" "Er. Yes."

"All true, Nynaeve," he said. "I see it, now. Perhaps I've finally gained a portion of wisdom. I do think you need some new insults, however. The ones you use are wearing out like last year's lace. Someone send for Cadsuane. I promise not to execute her."

The Aes Sedai seemed shocked by his brusque tone, but Min smiled. His confidence had surged again following the confrontation with the Aiel. It was supremely satisfying to see him disarm Aes Sedai, objections and condemnations dying on their lips. Merise sent a servant to fetch Cadsuane. "Narishma," Rand said, turning. "I need you to visit that Borderlander army that came looking for me. I'm assuming it's still in Far Madding. Tell the leaders there that I accept their terms and will come in a few days to meet with them."

"My Lord Dragon?" Narishma said. "Is that prudent, considering the nature of that place?"

"Prudent? Prudence is for those who intend to live long lives, Narishma. Darlin, I need the High Lords and Ladies lined up to receive me. One of these arriving messengers should be sufficient for the task. Also, post word that the White Tower has been reunified, and that Egwene al'Vere is the Amyrlin Seat."

"What?" Merise said. Several of the other Aes Sedai gasped. Rand," Min said. "I doubt the Amyrlin will be pleased to have you publicizing the division."

A valid point," Rand said. "Darlin, write a proclamation that Egwene al'Vere has succeeded Elaida a'Roihan as the Amyrlin. That should be enough to inform without revealing too much. Light knows I don't need to do anything else to make Egwene angry with me. . . ." Else?" Corele asked, paling.

"Yes," Rand said offhandedly. "I've already been to the White Tower to see her."

"And they let you go?" Corele asked.

"I didn't allow them other options. Darlin, kindly marshal our forces here. I want them gathered by the evening. Flinn, we'll need gateways Large ones. A circle might be needed."

"Tarwin's Gap?" Nynaeve said, eager.

Rand glanced at her and hesitated. Min could feel his pain—sharp spiking, real—as he spoke. "Not yet, Nynaeve. I've poured hot oil into the White Tower, and it will be boiling soon. Time. We don't have time! I will get help to Lan, I vow it to you, but right now I must prepare to face Egwene."

"Face her?" Nynaeve said, stepping forward. "Rand, what have you done?"

"What needed to be done. Where is Bashere?"

"He was out of the city with his men, my Lord Dragon," Flinn said, "running their horses. Should be back soon."

"Good. He's going with me to Arad Doman. You too, Nynaeve. Min." He looked at her, and those unfathomable eyes seemed to draw her in. "I need you, Min."

"You have me. Stupid looby."

"Callandor" he said. "It plays a part in this. You have to find out how. I cannot seal the Bore the way I tried last time. I'm missing something, something vital. Find it for me."

"I will, Rand." A cold shiver ran through her. "I promise."

"I trust you." He looked up as a figure in a deep hooded cloak walked out of one of the Stone's many guard posts.

"Cadsuane Melaidhrin," Rand said, "I pardon you for past mistakes and I revoke your exile. Not that it was ever anything more than a minor inconvenience to you."

She sniffed, lowering the hood. "If you believe that wearing a cloak in this heat is a 'minor' inconvenience, boy, then you need a lesson in contrast. I trust you see the error in your deed. It strikes me as unsuitable that I should need 'forgiveness' or a 'pardon' in the first place."

"Well, then," Rand said. "Please accept my pardon alongside my apology. You may say I have been under unusual stress as of late."

"Of all people," Cadsuane said sternly, "you cannot afford to let the pressure of life drive you."

"On the contrary. I am who I have become because of that pressure, Cadsuane. Metal cannot be shaped without the blows of the hammer. But that is beside the point. You tried to manipulate me, and you failed horribly. But in that failure, you have shown me something."

"Which is?"

"I thought I was being forged into a sword," Rand said, eyes growing distant. "But I was wrong. I'm not a weapon. I never have been."

"Then what are you?" Min asked, genuinely curious.

He merely smiled. "Cadsuane Sedai, I have a task for you, if you will accept it."

"I expect that will depend on the task," she said, folding her arms.

"I need you to locate someone. Someone who is missing, someone I now suspect may be in the hands of well-meaning allies. You see, I've been informed that the White Tower is holding Mattin Stepaneos."

Cadsuane frowned. "And you want him?"

"Not at all. I haven't decided what to do about him yet, so he can stay Egwene's problem for the time. No, the person I want is probably somewhere in the Caralain Grass. I'll explain more when we are not in the open."

The High Lords and Ladies were gathering. Rand looked toward them, though once again he scanned the courtyard, as if looking for something. Something that made him feel anxious.

He turned back to the High Lords and Ladies. Min watched them skeptically. Aside from Darlin, she'd never been impressed with them. Rand rested his hand on her shoulder. The gathered nobles looked disheveled, apparently summoned from naps or meals, although they wore an assortment of fine silks and ruffles. They looked oddly out of place in the Stone's courtyard, where everyone else had a purpose.

/ shouldn't be so harsh on them, Min thought, folding her arms. But then, she had watched their plotting and pandering frustrate Rand. Besides, she'd never been fond of those who thought themselves more important than everyone else.

"Form a line," Rand said, walking up to them.

The High Lords and Ladies looked at him, confused.

A line" Rand said, voice loud and firm. "Now."

They did so, arranging themselves with haste. Rand began to walk down the row, starting with Darlin, looking each man or woman in the eye. Rand's emotions were . . . curious. Perhaps a touch angry. What was he doing?

The courtyard grew still. Rand continued down the line, looking at each of the nobles in turn, not speaking. Min glanced to the side. Near the

end of the line, Weiramon kept glancing at Rand, then looking away. The tall man had thinning gray hair, his beard oiled to a point.

Rand eventually reached him. "Meet my eyes, Weiramon," Rand said softly.

"My Lord Dragon, surely I am not worthy to—"

"Do it."

Weiramon did so with an odd difficulty. He looked as if he was gritting his teeth, his eyes watering.

"So it is you," Rand said. Min could feel his disappointment. Rand looked to the side, to where Anaiyella stood last in line. The pretty woman had pulled away from Rand, her head turned. "Both of you."

"My Lord—" Weiramon began.

"I want you to deliver a message for me," Rand said. "To the others of your . . . association. Tell them that they cannot hide among my allies any longer."

Weiramon tried to bluster, but Rand took a step closer. Weiramon's eyes opened wide, and Anaiyella cried out, shading her face.

"Tell them," Rand continued, voice soft but demanding, "that I am no longer blind."

"Why . . ." Anaiyella said. "Why are you letting us go?"

"Because today is a day of reunion," Rand said. "Not a day of death. Go."

The two stumbled away, looking drained. The others in the courtyard watched with surprise and confusion. The Aiel, however, began to beat their spears against their shields. Anaiyella and Weiramon seemed to keep to the shadows of the courtyard as they ducked into the Stone.

"Leeh," Rand said. "Take two others. Watch them."

Three Maidens split from those watching over Rand, darting after the two former nobles. Min stepped up to Rand, taking his arm. "Rand? What was that? What did you see in them?"

"The time for hiding is past, Min. The Shadow made its play for me and lost. It is war, not subterfuge, that turns the day now."

"So they're Darkfriends?" Min asked, frowning.

Rand turned to her, smiling. "They are no longer a threat. I—" He cut off suddenly, looking to the side. Min turned, and grew chill.

Tarn al'Thor stood nearby. He had just walked out of a nearby entrance into the Stone, pausing on a low set of steps leading down to the courtyard. Rand's emotions grew apprehensive again, and Min realized what he'd been searching for earlier.

Tarn looked at his son, falling still. His hair was gray and his face lined, yet he was solid in a way that few people were.

Rand lifted his hand, and the crowd—Aes Sedai included—parted. Rand passed through them, Min following behind, crossing to the steps up the Stone. Rand climbed a few of those steps, hesitant. The courtyard fell silent; even the gulls stopped calling.

Rand stopped on the steps, and Min could feel his reluctance, his hame, his terror. It seemed so strange. Rand—who had faced Forsaken without a tremor—was afraid of his father.

Rand took the last few steps in two sudden strides and grabbed Tarn in an embrace. He stood one step down, which brought them near an equal height. In fact, in that posture, Tarn almost seemed a giant, and Rand but a child who was clinging to him.

There, holding to his father, the Dragon Reborn began to weep.

The gathered Aes Sedai, Tairens and Aiel watched solemnly. None shuffled or turned away. Rand squeezed his eyes shut. "I'm sorry, Father," he whispered. Min could barely hear. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right, son. It's all right."

"I've done so much that is terrible."

"Nobody walks a difficult path without stumbling now and again. It didn't break you when you fell. That's the important part."

Rand nodded. They held each other for a time. Eventually, Rand pulled back, then gestured to Min, standing at the base of the steps.

"Come, Father," Rand said. "There is someone I want to introduce to you."

Tarn chuckled. "It's been three days, Rand. I've already met her."

"Yes, but / didn't introduce you. I need to." He waved to Min, and she raised an eyebrow, folding her arms. He looked at her pleadingly, so she sighed and climbed up the steps.

"Father," Rand said, resting his hand on Min's back. "This is Min Farshaw. And she's very special to me."

CHAPTER 14

A Vow

Egwene walked up the side of a gentle slope, the grass green at her feet, the air cool and pleasant. Lazy butterflies floated from blossom to blossom, like curious children peeking into cupboards. Egwene made her shoes vanish so she could feel the blades beneath her feet.

She took a deep breath, smiling, then looked up at the boiling black clouds. Angry, violent, silent despite flashes of amethyst lightning. Terrible storm above, quiet, placid meadow beneath. A dichotomy of the World of Dreams.

Oddly, Tel'aran'rbiod felt more unnatural to her now than it had during her first few visits using Verin's ter'angreal. She'd treated this place like a playground, changing her clothes on a whim, assuming that she was safe. She hadn't understood. Tel'aran'rbiod was about as safe as a bear trap painted a pretty color. If the Wise Ones hadn't straightened her out, she might not have lived to become Amyrlin.

Yes, I think this is it. The rolling green hills, the stands of trees. It was the first place she'd come, well over a year ago. There was something meaningful about standing here, having come so far. And yet it seemed she would have to cover an equal distance before this was done, and in far shorter a time.

When she'd been captive in the Tower, she had reminded herself—-repeatedly—that she could focus on only one problem at a time. The reunification of the White Tower had to come first. Now, however, both problems and possible solutions seemed uncountable. They overwhelmed her drowning her in all of the things she should he doing.

Fortunately, during the last few days, several unexpected stores of grain had been discovered in the city. In one case a forgotten warehouse, owned by a man who had died over the winter. The others were smaller, a few sacks here and there. Remarkably, none of them had borne any kind of rot.

She had two meetings this evening, dealing with other problems. Her biggest difficulty was going to be the perceptions of the people she met with. Neither group would see her as what she had become.

She closed her eyes, willing herself away. When she opened her eyes, she was standing in a large room, deeply shadowed in the corners, its columns rising like thick towers. The Heart of the Stone of Tear.

Two Wise Ones sat on the floor at the center of the room, amid a forest of columns. Above their light brown skirts and white blouses, their faces were distinctly different. Bair's was wrinkled with age, like leather left to cure in the sun. For all her occasional sternness, smile lines wove from her eyes and mouth.

Amys' face was silky smooth, an effect of being able to channel. Her face was not ageless, but she could have been Aes Sedai for the emotion she showed.

The two had their shawls at their waists, their blouses unlaced. Egwene sat before them but left herself wearing wetlander clothing. Amys raised an eyebrow; was she thinking that Egwene should have changed? Or did she appreciate that Egwene did not imitate something she was not? It was difficult to tell.

"The battle within the White Tower is over," Egwene said.

"The woman Elaida a'Roihan?" Amys asked.

"Taken by the Seanchan," Egwene said. "I have been accepted as Amyr-lin by those who followed her. My position is far from secure—at times, I feel balanced atop a stone that sits balanced atop another stone. But the White Tower is again whole."

Amys clicked her tongue softly. She raised her hand and a striped stole—an Amyrlin's stole—appeared in it. "I suppose you should be wearing this, then."

Egwene let out a soft, slow breath. It was remarkable to her, sometimes, how much stock she put in the opinions of these women. She took the stole, putting it around her shoulders.

Sorilea will dislike this news," Bair said, shaking her head. "She still had a hope that you would leave those fools in the White Tower and return

to us."

"Please take care," Egwene said, summoning herself a cup of tea. "I am not only one of those fools, my friend, but I am their leader. Queen of the fools, you might say."

Bair hesitated. "I have toh."

"Not for speaking the truth," Egwene assured her. "Many of them are fools, but are we not all fools at some point? You did not abandon me to my failures when you found me walking Tel'aran'rbiod. In like manner \ cannot abandon those of the White Tower."

Amys' eyes narrowed. "You have grown much since we last met, Egwene al'Vere."

That sent a thrill through Egwene. "I had much need to grow. My life has been difficult of late."

"When confronted by a collapsed roof," Bair said, "some will begin to haul away the refuse, becoming stronger for the process. Others will go to visit their brother's hold and drink his water."

"Have you seen Rand recently?" Egwene asked.

"The Car'a'carn has embraced death," Amys said. "He has given up trying to be as strong as the stones, and has instead achieved the strength of the wind."

Bair nodded. "Almost, we will have to stop calling him a child." She smiled. "Almost."

Egwene gave no hint of her shock. She'd expected them to be displeased with Rand. "I wish you to know the respect I have for you. You have much honor for taking me in as you did. I think that the only reason I see farther than my sisters is because you taught me to walk with my back straight and head high."

"It was a simple thing," Amys said, obviously pleased. "One that any woman would have done."

"There are few pleasures more satisfying than taking a cord someone else has knotted," Bair said, "then teasing it straight again. However, if the cord is not of good material, then no untangling will save it. You gave us fine material, Egwene al'Vere."

"I wish that there were a way," Egwene said, "to train more sisters in the ways of the Wise Ones."

"You could send them to us," Amys said. "Particularly if they need punishing. We wouldn't coddle them like the White Tower."

Egwene bristled. The beatings she'd taken had been "coddling"? That was a fight she didn't want to join, however. The Aiel would always assume wetlander ways to be soft, and there was no changing that assumption.

"I doubt the sisters would agree to that," Egwene said carefully. "But
hat might work would be to send young women—those still train-
.__to study with you. That was part of why my training was so effec-

tive; I wasn't yet set in the ways of the Aes Sedai." "Would they agree to this?" Bair asked.

"They might," Egwene said. "If we sent Accepted. Novices would be onsidered too inexperienced, sisters too dignified. But Accepted . . . perhaps. There would need to be a good reason that seems to benefit the White

Tower."

"You should tell them to go," Bair said, "and expect them to obey.

Have you not the most honor among them? Should they not listen to your

counsel when it is wise?"

"Does the clan always do as a chief demands?" Egwene said.

"Of course not," Amys said. "But wetlanders are always fawning over kings and lords. They seem to like being told what to do. It makes them feel safe."

"Aes Sedai are different," Egwene said.

"The Aes Sedai keep implying that we should all be training in the White Tower," Amys said. Her tone indicated what she thought of that idea. "They drone on, as noisy as a blind chippabird that cannot tell if it's day or night. They need to see that we will never do such a thing. Tell them that you're sending women to us to study our ways so we can understand one another. It is only the truth; they needn't know that you also expect them to be strengthened by the experience."

"That might work." Egwene was pleased; the plan was only a few hairs off from what she eventually wanted to accomplish.

"This is a topic to consider in easier days," Bair said. "I sense greater trouble in you than this, Egwene al'Vere."

"There is a greater trouble," she said. "Rand al'Thor. Has he told you what he declared when he visited the White Tower?"

"He said he angered you," Amys said. "I find his actions odd. He visits you after all his talk of the Aes Sedai locking him up and putting him in a box?"

"He was . . . different when he came here," Egwene said. "He has embraced death," Bair said again, nodding. "He becomes the Car'a'carn truly."

He spoke powerfully," Egwene said, "but his words were those of madness. He said he is going to break the seals on the Dark One's prison."

Amys and Bair both froze. You are certain of this?" Bair asked. "Yes."

"This is disturbing news," Amys said. "We will consult with him on this. Thank you for bringing this to us."

"I will be gathering those who resist him." Egwene relaxed. Until that moment, she hadn't been certain which way the Wise Ones would go. "Perhaps Rand will listen to reason if enough voices are present."

"He is not known for his willingness to listen to reason," Amys said with a sigh, rising. Egwene and Bair did so as well. The Wise Ones' blouses were laced in an instant.

"The time is long past for the White Tower to ignore the Wise Ones" Egwene said, "or for the Wise Ones to avoid the Aes Sedai. We must work together. Hand in hand as sisters."

"So long as it isn't some sun-blinded ridiculous thought about the Wise Ones training in the Tower," Bair said. She smiled to show it was a joke, but succeeded only in baring her teeth.

Egwene smiled. She did want the Wise Ones to train in the Tower. There were many methods of channeling that the Aes Sedai did better than the Wise Ones. On the other hand, the Wise Ones were better about working together and—Egwene admitted reluctantly—with leadership.

The two groups could learn much from one another. She would find a way to tie them together. Somehow.

She fondly bade farewell to the two Wise Ones, watching as they faded from Tel'aran'rhiod. Would that their counsel alone proved enough to turn Rand from his insane plan. But it was unlikely.

Egwene took a breath. In an instant she stood in the Hall of the Tower, her feet planted directly on the Flame of Tar Valon painted on the floor. Seven spirals of color wound out from her, spinning toward the perimeter of the domed chamber.

Nynaeve was not there. Egwene drew her lips to a line. That woman! Egwene could bring the White Tower to its knees, turn a staunch member of the Red Ajah to her side, earn the respect of the toughest Wise Ones. But Light help her if she needed the loyalty of her friends! Rand, Gawyn, Nynaeve—all infuriating in their own ways.

She folded her arms to wait. Perhaps Nynaeve would still come. If not, this wouldn't be the first time she had disappointed Egwene. A massive rose window dominated the far wall behind the Amyrlin Seat itself. The Flame at the center sparkled, as if there were sunlight beyond, though Egwene knew those boiling black clouds covered all the sky of the World of Dreams.

She turned from the window, then froze.

There, set into the glass below the Flame of Tar Valon, was a large segment in the shape of the Dragon's Fang. That wasn't part of the original window. Egwene stepped forward, inspecting the glass.

There is a third constant besides the Creator and the Dark One, Verin's me-ticulous voice said, a memory from another time. There is a world that lies ithin each of these others, inside all of them at the same time. Or perhaps sur~ rounding them. Writers in the Age of Legends called it Tel'aran'rhiod.

Did this window represent one of those, another world where Dragon and Amyrlin ruled Tar Valon side by side?

"That's an interesting window," a voice said from behind her.

Egwene started, spinning. Nynaeve stood there, wearing a dress of bright yellow trimmed with green across the high bodice and along the skirt. She wore a red dot at the center of her forehead, and had her hair woven into its characteristic braid.

Egwene felt a surge of relief. Finally! It had been months since she'd seen Nynaeve. Cursing inside for letting herself be surprised, she smoothed her face and embraced the Source, weaving Spirit. A few inverted wards might help keep her from being startled again. Elayne was supposed to arrive a little later.

"I didn't choose this pattern," Egwene said, looking back at the Rose Window. "This is Tel'aran'rhiod's interpretation."

"But the window itself is real?" Nynaeve asked.

"Unfortunately," Egwene said. "One of the holes the Seanchan left when they attacked."

"They attacked}" Nynaeve asked.

"Yes," Egwene said. Something you would have known if you'd ever responded to my summons!

Nynaeve folded her arms, and the two of them regarded one another across the room, Flame of Tar Valon centering the floor beneath them. This would have to be handled very carefully; Nynaeve could be as prickly as the worst of thornbushes.

'Well," Nynaeve said, sounding distinctly uncomfortable, "I know you're busy, and Light knows I have enough things to be doing. Tell me the news you think I need to know, and I'll be off."

"Nynaeve," Egwene said, "I didn't bring you here only to give you news."

Nynaeve grasped her braid. She knew she should be rebuked for the way she'd avoided Egwene.

Actually," Egwene continued, "I wanted to ask your advice."

Nynaeve blinked. "Advice on what?"

Well," Egwene said, strolling across the Flame, "you're one of the few people I can think of who has been in a situation similar to mine."

"Amyrlin?" Nynaeve asked flatly.

"A leader," Egwene said, passing Nynaeve and nodding for her to walk beside her, "that everyone thinks is too young. Who rose to her position abruptly. Who knows she is the right woman for the job, yet has only grudging acceptance from most of those near her."

"Yes," Nynaeve said, walking with Egwene, eyes growing distant. "You I could say I know something of being in that situation."

"How did you deal with it?" Egwene asked. "It seems that everything I do, I need to do myself—because if I don't, they ignore me once I'm out of sight. Many assume that I give orders just to be seen making noise, or they resent my position above them."

"How did I deal with it when I was Wisdom?" Nynaeve asked. "Egwene, I don't know if I did. I could barely keep myself from boxing Jon Thane's ears half the days, and don't get me talking about Cenn!"

"But eventually they respected you."

"It was a matter of not letting them forget my station. They couldn't be allowed to continue to think of me as a young girl. Establish your authority quickly. Be firm with the women in the Tower, Egwene, because they'll begin by seeing how far they can push you. And once you've let them push you a handspan, it's harder than winter molasses to get back what you've lost."

"All right," Egwene said.

"And don't come up with idle work for them to do," Nynaeve said. They passed out of the Hall of the Tower, strolling through the hallways. "Get them used to you giving orders, but make those orders good ones. Make sure they don't bypass you. I'd guess that it might be easy for them to start looking to the Sitters or the Ajah heads instead of you; women in Emond's Field started going to the Women's Circle instead of me.

"If you discover that the Sitters are making decisions that should have come before the entire Hall, you have to make a big fuss about it. Trust me. They'll grouse that you're making too much noise over small things, but they'll think twice about doing something important without your attention."

Egwene nodded. It was good advice, though—of course—it came colored by Nynaeve's view of the world. "I think the biggest problem," Egwene said, "is that I have so few true supporters."

"You have me. And Elayne."

"Do I?" Egwene said, stopping in the hallway and looking at Nynaeve. "Do I really have you, Nynaeve?"

The former Wisdom stopped beside her. "Of course you do. Don't be silly"

"And how will it seem," Egwene asked, "if those who know me best fuse my authority? Might it seem to the others that there is something hev do not know? Some weakness that only my friends have seen?"

Nynaeve froze. Suddenly, her honesty melted into suspicion, her eyes narrowing. "This wasn't about asking me for advice at all, was it?"

"Of course it was," Egwene said. "Only a fool would ignore the advice of those who support her. But how did it feel for you, those first weeks when you became Wisdom? When all the women you were supposed to be leading looked at you only as the girl they had known?"

"Terrible," Nynaeve said softly.

"And were they wrong to do so?"

"Yes. Because I'd become something more. It wasn't me any longer, it was my station."

Egwene met the older woman's eyes, holding them, and an understanding passed between them.

"Light," Nynaeve said. "You caught me quite soundly, didn't you?"

"I need you, Nynaeve," Egwene said. "Not just because you're so strong in the Power, not just because you're a clever, determined woman. Not just because you're refreshingly untainted by Tower politics, and not just because you're one of the few who knew Rand before this all began. But because I need people I can trust implicitly. If you can be one of those."

"You'll have me kneeling on the ground," Nynaeve said. "Kissing your ring."

"And? Would you have done it for another Amyrlin?"

"Not happily."

"But you'd have done it."

"Yes."

"And do you honestly think there is another who would do a better job than I?"

Nynaeve hesitated, then shook her head.

Then why is it so bitter for you to serve the Amyrlin? Not me, Nynaeve, but the station."

Nynaeve's face looked as if she'd drunk something very bitter. "This will • . . not be easy for me."

I ve never known you to avoid a task because it was difficult, Nynaeve." "The station. All right. I'll try." Then you might begin by calling me Mother." Egwene held up a finger

to cut off Nynaeve's objection. "To remind yourself, Nynaeve. It needn't be permanent, at least not in private. But you must begin thinking of me as I Amyrlin."

"All right, all right. You've pricked me with enough thorns. I already feel as if I've been drinking windsatter's draught all day." She hesitated, then added, "Mother." She almost seemed to choke on the word.

Egwene smiled encouragingly.

"I won't treat you the way women did me after I was first named Wisdom," Nynaeve promised. "Light! Odd to be able to feel as they did Well, they were still fools. I'll do better; you'll see it. Mother."

It sounded a little less forced that time. Egwene broadened her smile. There were few ways to motivate Nynaeve better than a competition.

Suddenly, a tinkling bell rang in Egwene's mind. She'd almost forgotten her wards. "I think Elayne has arrived."

"Good," Nynaeve said, sounding relieved. "Let's go to her, then." She began striding back toward the Hall, then froze. She glanced back. "If it pleases you, Mother."

I wonder if she'll ever be able to say that without sounding awkward, Egwene thought. Well, so long as she's trying. "An excellent suggestion." She joined Nynaeve. Upon arriving in the Hall, however, they found it empty. Egwene folded her arms, looking around.

"Maybe she went looking for us," Nynaeve said.

"We'd have seen her in the hallway," Egwene said. "Besides . . ."

Elayne popped into the room. She wore a regal white gown, sparkling with diamonds. As soon as she saw Egwene, she smiled broadly, rushing over and taking her hands. "You did it, Egwene! We're whole again!"

Egwene smiled. "Yes, though the Tower is still injured. There is much to do."

"You sound like Nynaeve." Elayne glanced at Nynaeve, smiling.

"Thank you," Nynaeve said dryly.

"Oh, don't be so silly." Elayne walked over and gave Nynaeve a friendly hug. "I'm glad you're here. I'd worried that you wouldn't come, and Egwene would have to hunt you down and pull your toes off one at a time."

"The Amyrlin," Nynaeve said, "has much better things to do. Isn't that right, Mother?"

Elayne started, looking amazed. She got a glimmer in her eye, and hid a smile. She assumed that Nynaeve had been given a tongue-lashing. But, of course, Egwene knew that wouldn't have worked with Nynaeve; it would be like trying to yank a burr out of your skin when its spines had gone in the wrong way.

"Elayne," Egwene said. "Where did you go, before we returned?"

"What do you mean?" she said.

"When you first came here, we were gone. Did you go somewhere looking for us?"

Elayne seemed perplexed. "I channeled into my terangreal, went to sleep, and you were here when I appeared."

"Then who set off the wards?" Nynaeve asked.

Troubled, Egwene reset the wards and then—thinking carefully—she wove an inverted ward against eavesdropping but altered it to allow a little bit of sound through. With another weave, she projected that little bit far out around them.

Someone who grew near would hear them as if whispering. They'd edge closer, but the sound would remain a whisper. Perhaps that would draw them closer, inch by inch, as they strained to hear.

Nynaeve and Elayne watched her make the weaves, Elayne looking awed, though Nynaeve nodded thoughtfully to herself.

"Sit, please," Egwene said, making herself a chair and sitting in it. "We have much to discuss." Elayne made herself a throne, probably unconsciously, and Nynaeve made a seat copying the chairs of the Sitters in the room. Egwene, of course, had moved the Amyrlin Seat.

Nynaeve looked from one throne to another, obviously dissatisfied. Maybe that was why she'd resisted these meetings for so long; Egwene and

Elayne had risen so far.

It was time for some honey to take away the bitterness. "Nynaeve," Egwene said. "I'd like it very much if you could return to the Tower and teach more of the sisters in your new method of Healing. Many are learning it, but they could use more instruction. And there are others who are reluctant to abandon the old ways."

"Stubborn goats," Nynaeve said. "Show them cherries and they'll still eat the rotten apples, if they've been doing it long enough. I'm not sure it would be prudent for me to come, though. Er, Mother."

"Why is that?"

Rand," Nynaeve said. "Someone has to keep an eye on him. Someone other than Cadsuane, at least." Her lips turned down at that woman's name. "He's changed recently."

Changed?" Elayne said, sounding concerned. "What do you mean?"

Have you seen him recently?" Egwene asked.

No," Elayne said immediately. Too quickly. It was undoubtedly the

truth-—Elayne wouldn't lie to her—but there were things she was hiding

about Rand. Egwene had suspected it for a time. Could she have bonded him?

"He has changed," Nynaeve said. "And it's a very good thing. Mother . . . you don't know how bad he grew. There were times when T was terrified of him. Now ... that's gone. He's the same person—he even talks the same way as before. Quietly, without anger. Before it was like the quiet of a knife being drawn, and now it's like the quiet of a breeze."

"He's awakened," Elayne said suddenly. "He's warm now."

Egwene frowned. "What does that mean?"

"I . . . Actually, I don't know." Elayne blushed. "It came out. Sorry."

Yes, she'd bonded him. Well, that could be useful. Why didn't she wish to speak of it? Egwene would have to talk to her alone sometime.

Nynaeve was studying Elayne with narrowed eyes. Had she noticed as well? Her eyes flickered toward Elayne's chest, then down at her belly.

"You're pregnant!" Nynaeve accused suddenly, pointing at Elayne.

The Andoran queen blushed. That was right, Nynaeve wouldn't know of the pregnancy, though Egwene had heard from Aviendha.

"Light!" Nynaeve said. "I didn't think I'd let Rand out of my sight long enough for that. When did it happen?"

Elayne blushed. "Nobody said that he—"

Nynaeve gave Elayne a flat stare, and the Queen blushed further. Both knew Nynaeve's feelings about propriety in these matters—and, in truth, Egwene agreed. But Elayne's private life was none of her business.

"I'm happy for you, Elayne," Egwene said. "And for Rand. I'm not certain what I think of the timing. You should know that Rand is planning to break the remaining seals upon the Dark One's prison, and in so doing, risk releasing him upon the world."

Elayne pursed her lips. "Well, there are only three seals left, and they're crumbling."

"So what if he is running that risk?" Nynaeve said. "The Dark One will be freed when the final seal crumbles; best if it happens when Rand is there to battle him."

"Yes, but the seals? That's foolhardy. Surely Rand can face the Dark One, and defeat him, and seal him away without taking that risk."

"Maybe you're right," Nynaeve said.

Elayne looked troubled.

This was a more lukewarm reception than Egwene had expected. She'd thought that the Wise Ones would resist her, while Nynaeve and Elayne would immediately see the danger.

Nynaeve has been around him too much, Egwene thought. She was likely caught up by his ta'veren nature. The Pattern bent around him. Those near

him would begin to see things his way, would work—unconsciously—to

see his will done.

That had to be the explanation. Normally, Nynaeve was so levelheaded about these sorts of things. Or . . . well, Nynaeve wasn't exactly levelheaded, really. But generally did see the right way things needed to be done, so long as that right way didn't involve her being wrong.

"I need both of you to return to the Tower," Egwene said. "Elayne, I know what you're going to say—and yes, I realize that you are Queen, and that Andor's needs must be met. But so long as you haven't taken the oaths, other Aes Sedai will think you undeserving."

"She's right, Elayne," Nynaeve said. "You needn't visit for long—enough time to be raised formally to an Aes Sedai and be accepted into the Green Ajah. The nobles of Andor won't know the difference, but other Aes

Sedai will."

"True," Elayne said. "But the timing is . . . awkward. I don't know if I want to risk swearing the oaths while pregnant. It might harm the children."

That gave Nynaeve pause.

"You may have a point," Egwene said. "I will have someone look into whether or not the oaths are dangerous in pregnancy. But Nynaeve, I want you back here for certain."

"It will leave Rand completely unattended, Mother."

"I'm afraid it is impossible to avoid." Egwene met Nynaeve's eyes. "I won't have you as an Aes Sedai free of the oaths. No, close your mouth—I know you try to hold to the oaths. But so long as you are free of the Oath Rod itself, others will wonder if they could be free as well."

"Yes," Nynaeve said. "I suppose."

"So you will return?"

Nynaeve clenched her jaw, and seemed to be fighting an internal battle. Yes, Mother," she said. Elayne opened her eyes wider in shock.

"This is important, Nynaeve," Egwene said. "I doubt there is anything you alone could do to stop Rand now. We need to gather allies for a unified front."

"All right," Nynaeve said.

"What worries me is the testing," Egwene said. "The Sitters have begun to argue that—while it was all right to raise you and the others in exile-you should still have to go through the testing, now that the White Tower is reunified. They make very good arguments. Perhaps I can argue that your difficult challenges recently should earn you an exemption. We don't have time to teach you two all of the weaves you'd need."

Elayne nodded. Nynaeve shrugged. "I'll do the testing. If I'm going to come back, then I might as well do this properly."

Egwene blinked in surprise. "Nynaeve, these are very complex weaves I haven't had time to memorize all of them; I swear that many are needlessly ornate simply to be difficult." Egwene had no intention of going through the testing herself, and didn't need to. The law was specific. Bv being made Amyrlin, she had become Aes Sedai. Things weren't as clear in regards to Nynaeve and the others that Egwene had raised.

Nynaeve shrugged again. "The hundred testing weaves aren't so bad I could show them to you right here, if you wanted me to."

"When have you had time to learn those?" Elayne exclaimed.

"I haven't spent the last few months mooning about and dreaming of Rand al'Thor."

"Securing the throne of Andor is not 'mooning about'!"

"Nynaeve," Egwene cut in, "if you truly have the weaves memorized, then being raised properly would help me a great deal. It would look less like I'm favoring my friends."

"The testing is supposed to be dangerous," Elayne said. "Are you sure you have the weaves in hand?"

"I'll be fine," Nynaeve said.

"Excellent," Egwene said. "I'll expect you here in the morning."

"So soon!" Nynaeve said, aghast.

"The sooner you can hold that Oath Rod, the sooner I'll be able to stop worrying about you. Elayne, we'll still have to do something about you."

"The pregnancy," Elayne said. "It's interfering with my ability to channel. That's getting better—I could get here, thankfully—but it's still a problem. Explain to the Hall it would be too dangerous for me—and for the babes—to undergo the testing while unable to channel consistently."

"They might suggest you wait," Nynaeve said.

"And lef me run around without the oaths?" Elayne said. "Though I would like to know if anyone's taken the oaths while pregnant before, just to be sure."

"I'll find what I can," Egwene said. "Until then, I have another task for you."

"I am rather busy with ruling Andor, Mother."

"I know," Egwene said. "Unfortunately, there's nobody else I can ask. I need more dream ter'angreal.'

"I might be able to manage," Elayne said. "Assuming I can start channeling reliably."

"What happened to the dream ter'angreal you had?" Nynaeve asked Egwene.

"Stolen," Egwene said. "By Sheriam—who, by the way, was Black Ajah"

The two gasped, and Egwene realized that the revelation of the hundreds of Black sisters was unknown to them. She took a deep breath. "Steel yourselves," she said. "I've got a painful story for you. Before the Seanchan attack, Verin came to—"

At that moment, the bell went off in her head again. Egwene willed herself to move. The room blinked around her, and she was suddenly standing outside in the hallway, where her wards were set. She came face-to-face with Talva, a thin woman with a bun of golden hair. She had once been of the Yellow Ajah, but was one of the Black sisters who had fled the Tower. Weaves of Fire sprang up around Talva, but Egwene had already begun working on a shield. She slammed it between the other woman and the Source, immediately weaving Air to snare her. A sound came from behind. Egwene didn't think; she moved herself, relying on practiced familiarity with Tel'aran'rhiod. She appeared behind a woman who was letting loose a jet of Fire. Alviarin. Egwene snarled, beginning another shield as Alviarin's wave of Fire hit the unfortunate Talva, causing her to scream as her flesh burned. Alviarin spun, then yelped, vanishing. Burn her! Egwene thought. Alviarin was at the very top of the list of people she wanted captured. The hallway fell still, Talva's corpse— blackened and smoking—slumping to the ground. She'd never awaken; die here, and one died in the real world.

Egwene shivered; that murderous weave had been meant for her. I relied too much on channeling, she thought. Thought happens more quickly than weaves can be made. I should have imagined ropes around Alviarin.

No, Alviarin would still have been able to jump away from ropes. Egwene hadn't been thinking like a Dreamer. Lately, her mind had been on the Aes Sedai and their problems, and weaves had come naturally to her. But she couldn't let herself forget that in this place, thought was more powerful than the One Power. Egwene looked up as Nynaeve barreled out of the Hall, Elayne follow-ing more cautiously. "I sensed channeling," Nynaeve said. She looked at the burned corpse. "Light!" Black sisters," Egwene said, folding her arms. "It seems they're mak-ing good use of those dream ter'angreal. I'd guess they're under orders to

prowl the White Tower at night. Perhaps looking for us, perhaps looking for information to use against us." Egwene and the others had done that very thing during Elaida's reign.

"We shouldn't have met here," Nynaeve said. "Next time, we'll use a different place." She hesitated. "If it suits you, Mother."

"It might," Egwene said. "It might not. We'll never defeat them unless we can find them."

"Walking into traps is hardly the best way to defeat them, Mother" Nynaeve said flatly.

"Depends on your preparation," Egwene said. She frowned. Had she just seen a flutter of black cloth, ducking around a corner? Egwene was there in a moment; Elayne's startled curse sounded down the hallway behind her. My, but the woman had a tongue on her.

The place was empty. Eerie, almost too silent. That was normal in Tel'aran'rhiod.

Egwene remained full of the One Power, but moved back to the other two. She had cleansed the White Tower, but an infestation remained, hiding at its heart.

I will find you, Mesaana, Egwene thought, then waved for the others to join her. They moved to the hillside where she'd been earlier, a place where she could give a more detailed explanation of events they'd missed.

CHAPTER
15

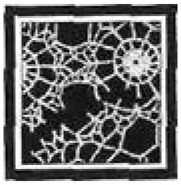

Use a Pebble

Nynaeve hastened through the paved streets of Tear, the Asha'man Naeff at her side. She could still feel that storm to the north, distant but terrible. Unnatural. And it was moving southward. Lan was up there. "Light protect him," she whispered. "What was that, Nynaeve Sedai?" Naeff asked.

"Nothing." Nynaeve was getting used to having the black-coated men around. She did not feel an uncomfortable chill when she looked at Naeff. That would be silly. Saidin had been cleansed, with her own help. No need to be uncomfortable. Even if the Asha'man did sometimes stare off into nothing, muttering to themselves. Like Naeff, who was looking into the shadow of a nearby building, hand on his sword.

'Careful, Nynaeve Sedai," he said. "There's another Myrddraal following us."

"You're . . . certain, Naeff?"

The tall , rectangular-faced man nodded. He was talented with weaves — particularly Air, which was unusual for a man—and he was very polite to Aes Sedai, unlike some of the other Asha'man. "Yes, I'm certain," he said. "I don't know why I can see them and others cannot. I must have a Talent for it. They hide in shadows, scouts of some sort, I think. They haven't struck yet; I think they're wary because they know I can see them."

tie d taken to night walks through the Stone of Tear, watching the Mydraal that only he could see. His madness wasn't getting worse, but old injuries wouldn't go away. He'd always bear this scar. Poor man. At least his madness wasn't as bad as some of the others'.

Nynaeve looked forward, marching down the wide, paved street I Buildings passed on either side, designed in Tear's haphazard way. A large mansion, with two small towers and a bronze, gatelike door sat beside an inn of only modest size. Across from them was a row of homes with wrought iron worked into the doors and windows, but a butcher's shop had been built right in the middle of the line.

Nynaeve and Naeff were heading for the All Summers neighborhood which was just inside the western wall. It wasn't the richest section of Tear but it was definitely prosperous. Of course, in Tear, there was really only one division: commoner or noble. Many of the nobles still considered commoners completely different—and wholly inferior—creatures.

They passed some of those commoners. Men in loose breeches tied at the ankles, colorful sashes at the waist. Women in high-necked dresses, pale aprons hanging at the front. Wide straw hats with flat tops were common, or cloth caps that hung to one side. Many people carried clogs on a string over their shoulders to use once they returned to the Maule.

The people passing Nynaeve now wore worried faces, some glancing over their shoulders in fear. A bubble of evil had hit the city in that direction. Light send that not too many were hurt, for she didn't have much time to spare. She had to return to the White Tower. It galled her to have to obey Egwene. But obey she would, and leave as soon as Rand returned. He'd gone somewhere this morning. Insufferable man. At least he'd taken Maidens with him. He'd reportedly said he needed to fetch something.

Nynaeve quickened her step, Naeff at her side, until they were nearly running. A gateway would have been faster, but it wouldn't be safe; she couldn't be certain they wouldn't slice into someone. We're growing too dependent on those gateways, she thought. Our own feet hardly seem good enough anymore.

They turned a corner into a street where a group of nervous Defenders—-wearing black coats and silvery breastplates, black and gold sleeves puffing out at the sides—stood in a line. They parted for her and Naeff, and while they looked relieved that she'd arrived, they still clutched their polearms nervously.

The city beyond them looked faintly . . . blander than it should. Washed out. The paving stones were a lighter shade of gray, the walls of the buildings a fainter brown or gray than they should have been.

"You have men inside searching for wounded?" Nynaeve asked.

One of the Defenders shook his head. "We've been keeping people out, er, Lady Aes Sedai. It's not safe."

Most Tairens still weren't accustomed to showing Aes Sedai respect. Until recently, channeling had been outlawed in the city.

"Send your men ro search," Nynaeve said firmly. "The Lord Dragon ill be upset if your timidity costs lives. Start at the perimeter. Send for me if you find anyone I can help."

The guardsmen moved off. Nynaeve turned to Naeff, and he nodded, She turned and took a step into the affected section of town. When her foot hit the paving stone, the stone turned to dust. Her food sank through the shattered paving stone and hit packed earth.

She looked down, feeling a chill. She continued forward, and the stones fell to powder as she touched them. She and Naeff made their way to a nearby building, leaving a trail of powdered rock behind. The building was an inn with nice balconies on the second floor, delicate ironwork patterns on the glass windows, and a darkly stained porch. The door was open, and as she lifted her foot up to step onto the low porch, the boards also turned to powder. She froze, looking down. Naeff stepped up beside her, then knelt down, pinching the dust between his fingers.

"It's soft," he said quietly, "as fine a powder as I've ever touched."

The air smelled unnaturally fresh, contrasting strangely with the silent street. Nynaeve took a deep breath, then went into the inn. She had to push forward, walking with the wooden floor at her knees, the boards disintegrating as she touched them.

The inside was dim. The stand-lamps no longer burned. People sat about the room, frozen in midmotion. Most were nobles with fine clothing, the men wearing beards oiled to a point. One sat at a nearby tall table with long-legged chairs. He had a mug of morning ale halfway to his lips. He was motionless, his mouth open to accept the drink.

Naeff's face was grim, although little seemed to surprise or unsettle Asha'man. As he took another step forward, Nynaeve lunged and grabbed his arm. He frowned at her, and she pointed down. Right in front of him—barely visible beneath the still-whole floorboards right ahead of them-—the ground fell away. He'd been about to step into the inn's cellar.

Light," Naeff said, stepping back. He knelt down, then tapped the board in front of him. It fell to dust, showering down into the dark cellar below.

Nynaeve wove Spirit, Air and Water to Delve the man sitting at the chair her. Normally she would touch someone to Delve them, but she hesitated this time. It would work without touch, but would not be as effective for Healing.

Her Delving found nothing. No life, no sense that he had ever alive. His body wasn't even flesh. With a sinking feeling, she Delved other people in the darkened room. A serving maid carrying breakfast towari three Andoran merchants. A corpulent innkeeper, who must have had trouble navigating between the close-set tables. A woman in a rich dre$ sitting in the very back of the room, primly reading a small book.

There was no life in any of them. These weren't corpses; they were husks. Fingers trembling, Nynaeve reached out and brushed the shoulder of the man at the high table. He immediately fell to powder, dust showering downward in a puff. The chair and floorboards underneath did not dissolve.

"There is nobody here to save," Nynaeve said.

"Poor people," Naeff said. "Light shelter their souls."

Nynaeve often had trouble feeling pity for the Tairen nobles—-of all the people she had met, they seemed among the most arrogant. But nobody deserved this. Besides, a large number of commoners had been caught in this bubble as well.

She and Naeff made their way out of the building, Nynaeve's frustration mounting as she tugged on her braid. She hated feeling helpless.

Like with the poor guard who had started the fire back at the manor house in Arad Doman, or the people who were struck down by strange diseases. The dusty husks this day. What was the good of learning to Heal if she couldn't help people?

And now she had to leave. Go back to the White Tower. It felt like running away. She turned to Naeff. "Wind," she said.

"Nynaeve Sedai?"

"Give the building a gust of wind, Naeff," she said. "I want to see what happens."

The Asha'man did as she asked, his invisible weaves blowing a jet of air. The entire building burst, shattering into dust that blew away, like the white seeds of a dandelion. Naeff turned to her.

"How wide did they say this bubble was?" she asked.

"About two streets wide in all directions."

"We need more wind," she said, beginning a weave. "Create a gust as large as you can. If there is anyone wounded in here, we'll find them this way."

Naeff nodded. The two of them strode forward, creating wind. They shattered buildings, causing them to burst and fall. Naeff was far more skilled at the process than she, but Nynaeve was stronger in the One Power. Together, they swept the crumbling buildings, stones and husks before them in a dust storm.

It was exhausting work, but they kept at it. She hoped—against

reason -__that she might find someone to help. Buildings fell before her and

Naeff, the dust caught in swirling air. They pushed the dust in a circle moving inward. Like a woman sweeping the floor.

They passed people frozen on the streets in midstride. Oxen pulling a cart. Heart-wrenchingly, some children playing in an alley. All fell to dust.

They found nobody alive. Eventually, she and Naeff had dissolved all

f the broken part of the city and blown the dust into the center. Nynaeve

looked at it, kept swirling in place by a small cyclone Naeff had woven.

Curious, Nynaeve channeled a tongue of Fire into the cyclone, and the dust

caught alight.

Nynaeve gasped; that dust went up like dried paper thrown into a fire, creating a roaring tempest of flames. She and Naeff backed away, but it was over in a flash. It didn't leave any ash behind.

If we hadn't gathered it, she thought, watching the fire fade away, someone might have dropped a candle on it. A fire like that. . .

Naeff stilled his winds. The two of them stood in the center of an open circle of bare earth with periodic holes for cellars. On the edges, buildings had been sliced into, rooms open to the air, some structures having collapsed. It was eerie, to see this hollow area. Like a gouged-out eye socket in an otherwise healthy face.

Several groups of Defenders stood at the perimeter. She nodded to Naeff, and they walked to the largest group. "You didn't find anyone?" she demanded.

"No, Lady Aes Sedai," a man said. "Er . . . well, we did find a few, but they were dead already."

Another man nodded, a barrel-like fellow whose uniform was very tight. "Seems anyone who had even a toe inside of that ring fell dead. Found a few of them missing only a foot or part of their arm. But they were dead anyway." The man shuddered visibly.

Nynaeve closed her eyes. The entire world was falling apart, and she was powerless to Heal it. She felt sick and angry.

Maybe they caused it," Naeff said softly. She opened her eyes to see him nodding toward the shadows of a building nearby. "The Fades. There are three of them there, Nynaeve Sedai, watching us."

Naeff. . ." she said, frustrated. Telling him the Fades weren't real didn't help. I have to do something, she thought. Help someone. "Naeff, stand still. She took hold of his arm and Delved him. He looked at her, surprised, but didn't object.

She could see the madness, like a dark network of veins digging into his mind. It seemed to pulse, like a small beating heart. She'd found similar corruption recently in other Asha'man. Her skill with Delving was improving, her weaves more refined, and she could find things once hidden to her She had no idea how to fix what was wrong, though.

Anything should be Healable, she told herself. Anything but death itself. She concentrated, weaving all Five Powers, and carefully prodded at the mad-ness, remembering what had happened when she'd removed the

Compulsion from Graendal's unfortunate servant. Naeff was better off with this madness than he would be if she damaged his mind further.

Oddly, the darkness did seem similar to Compulsion. Was that what the taint had done? Bent the men who used the One Power with the Dark One's own Compulsion?

She carefully wove a counterweave opposite the madness, then laid it over Naeff's mind. The weave just faded away, doing nothing.

She gritted her teeth. That should have worked. But, as seemed so common lately, it had failed.

No, she thought. No, I can't just sit back. She Delved deeper. The darkness had tiny, thornlike projections stuck into Naeff's mind. She ignored the people gathering around her, and inspected those thorns. She carefully used weaves of Spirit to pry one free.

It came out with some resistance, and she quickly Healed the spot where it had punctured Naeff's flesh. The brain seemed to pulse, looking more healthy. One by one, she pried the others free. She was forced to maintain her weaves, holding the barbs back, lest they plunge down again. She began to sweat. She was already tired from sweeping the area clean, and no longer could spare concentration to keep the heat off her. Tear was so muggy.

She continued working, preparing another counterweave. Once she had pried up each and every thorn, she released her new weave. The dark patch undulated and shook, like something alive.

Then it vanished.

Nynaeve stumbled back, drained near to exhaustion. Naeff blinked, then looked around. He raised a hand to his head.

Light! she thought. Did I hurt him? I shouldn't have barreled into that. I could have—

"They're gone," Naeff said. "The Fades ... I can't see them anymore. He blinked. "Why would Fades be hiding in the shadows anyway? If I could see them, they'd have killed me, and—" He looked at her, focusing- "What did you do?"

"I... I think I just Healed your madness." Well, she'd done something to it. What she'd done hadn't been any standard Healing, and hadn't even used Healing weaves. But it had worked, it seemed.

Naeff smiled deeply, seeming bewildered. He took her hand with both of his then knelt before her, growing teary-eyed. "For months, I have felt as if I were always being watched. As if I would be murdered the moment I turned back on the shadows. Now I. . . Thank you. I need to go find Nelavaire."

"Off with you, then," Nynaeve said. Naeff left her in a dash, running back toward the Stone to search out his Aes Sedai.

I can't let myself begin to think that nothing I do matters. That's what the Dark One wants. As she watched Naeff hasten away, she noticed that the clouds above were breaking. Rand had returned.

Workers began clearing away the rubble of buildings that had half turned to dust, and Nynaeve ended up speaking soothingly to the worried Tairens who began to cluster around the perimeter. She didn't want there to be a panic; she assured everyone that the danger was past, and then she asked to meet with any families who had lost someone.

She was still doing this—talking softly with a thin, worried woman—when Rand found her. The woman was a commoner, wearing a high-necked dress with three aprons and a straw hat. Her husband had worked in the inn Nynaeve had entered. The woman kept glancing at the hole in the ground that had been the cellar.

After a moment, Nynaeve noticed Rand, watching her and standing with his arms behind his back, hand clasping his stump. Two Maidens guarded him, a pair of women named Somma and Kanara. Nynaeve finished speaking with the Tairen, but the woman's tearful eyes wrenched her heart. How would she react, if she lost Lan?

Light protect him. Please, please protect him, she prayed. She unhooked her coin pouch and sent the woman off with it. Perhaps that would help. Rand stepped up to Nynaeve. "You care for my people. Thank you." I care for any who need it," Nynaeve said.

As you've always done," Rand said. "Along with caring for some who don't need it."

Like you?" she said, raising an eyebrow. No, I've always needed it. That and more."

Nynaeve hesitated. That wasn't something she'd ever expected him to admit. Why hadn't he gotten rid of that old cloak? It was faded and dull. This is my fault," Rand said, nodding toward the hole in the city. Rand, don't be a fool."

"I don't know if anyone can avoid being a fool at times," he said "\ blame myself because of my delays. We've been putting off the confront tion with him for too long. What happened here today? The buildin» turned to dust?"

"Yes," Nynaeve said. "Their substance was removed. Everything crumbled the moment we touched it."

"He would do this to the entire world," Rand said, his voice growing soft. "He stirs. The longer we wait—holding on by our fingernails__the more he destroys what remains. We can delay no longer."

Nynaeve frowned. "But Rand, if you let him free, won't that make it even worse?"

"Perhaps for a short burst," Rand said. "Opening the Bore will not free him immediately, though it will give him more strength. It must be done regardless. Think of our task as climbing a tall stone wall. Unfortunately, we are delaying, running laps before attempting the climb. Each step tires us for the fight to come. We must face him while still strong. That is why I must break the seals."

"I . . ." Nynaeve said. "I think I actually believe you." She was surprised to realize it.

"Do you, Nynaeve?" he asked, sounding oddly relieved. "Do you really?"

"I do."

"Then try to convince Egwene. She will stop me, if she can."

"Rand . . . she has called me back to the Tower. I'll need to go today."

Rand looked saddened. "Well, I suspected that she might do that eventually." He took Nynaeve by the shoulder in an odd gesture. "Don't let them ruin you, Nynaeve. They'll try."

"Ruin me?"

"Your passion is part of you," Rand said. "I tried to be like them, though I wouldn't have admitted it. Cold. Always in control. It nearly destroyed me. That is strength to some, but it is not the only type of strength. Perhaps you could learn to control yourself a little more, but I like you as you are. It makes you genuine. I would not see you become another 'perfect' Aes Sedai with a painted mask of a face and no care for the feelings and emotions of others."

"To be Aes Sedai is to be calm," Nynaeve replied.

"To be Aes Sedai is to be what you decide it is," Rand said, his stump still held behind his back. "Moiraine cared. You could see it in her, even when she was calm. The best Aes Sedai I've known are the ones who other complain aren't what an Aes Sedai should be."

Nynaeve found herself nodding, then was annoyed at herself. She was taking advice from Rand alThor?

There was something different about Rand now. Quiet intensity and careful words. He was a man you could take advice from without feeling he

speaking down to you. Like his father, actually. Not that she'd ever admit that to either one of them.

"Go to Egwene," Rand said, releasing her shoulder. "But when you can, I would like it very much if you returned to me. I will need your counsel gain. At the very least, I would like you by my side as I go to Shayol Ghul. I cannot defeat him with saidin alone, and if we are going to use Cal-landor, I will need two women I trust in the circle with me. I have not decided upon the other. Aviendha or Elayne, perhaps. But you for certain."

"I will be there, Rand." She felt oddly proud. "Hold still for a moment. I won't hurt you. I promise."

He raised an eyebrow, but did nothing as she Delved him. She was so tired, but if she was going to leave him, she needed to take this opportunity to Heal his madness. It seemed, suddenly, the most important thing she could do for him. And for the world.

She Delved, staying away from the wounds at his side, which were pits of darkness that seemed to try to suck in her energy. She kept her attention on his mind. Where was the—

She stiffened. The darkness was enormous, covering the entirety of his mind. Thousands upon thousands of the tiny black thorns pricked into his brain, but beneath them was a brilliant white lacing of something. A white radiance, like liquid Power. Light given form and life. She gasped. It coated each of the dark tines, driving into his mind alongside them. What did it mean?

She didn't have any idea how to begin working on this. There were so many barbs. How could he even think with that much darkness pressing against his brain? And what had created the whiteness? She'd Healed Rand before, and hadn't noticed it then. Of course, she'd never seen the darkness until recently. Her practice with Delving was likely the reason. She reluctantly withdrew. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't Heal you." Many have tried on those wounds—you yourself included. They are simply unhealable. I don't think on them much, these days."

"Not the wounds in your side," Nynaeve said. "The madness. I . . ." You can Heal madness?" "I think I did so in Naeff."

Rand grinned widely. "You never cease to . . . Nynaeve, do you realize

that the most Talented of Healers during the Age of Legends had difficulty with diseases of the mind? Many believed it was not possible to Heal mad-ness with the One Power."

"I'll Heal the others," she said. "Narishma, Flinn at the least, befor go. All of the Asha'man probably have at least a hint of this taint upon their minds. I don't know if I'll be able to get to the Black Tower." Or if I want to go there.

"Thank you," Rand said, looking northward. "But no, you shouldn't go to the Black Tower. I will need to send someone there, but it will be handled carefully. Something's happening with them. But I have so much to do

He shook his head, then looked to her. "That is one pit I cannot cross at the moment. Speak well of me to Egwene. I need her to be an ally."

Nynaeve nodded, then—feeling foolish—gave him a hug before hurrying off to seek out Narishma and Flinn. A hug. For the Dragon Reborn. She was turning as silly as Elayne. She shook her head, thinking that perhaps some time in the White Tower would help her regain her levelheadedness.

The clouds had returned.

Egwene stood at the very apex of the White Tower, on the flat, circular roof, holding to the waist-high wall. Like a creeping fungus—like insects in a swarm—the clouds had closed up above Tar Valon. The sunlights visit had been Welcome, but brief.

The tea was back to tasting stale again. The grain stores they'd discovered were running out, and the next sacks to come in had been filled with weevils. The Land is One with the Dragon.

She breathed in, smelling the new air, looking out over Tar Valon. Her Tar Valon.

Saerin, Yukiri and Seaine—three of the sisters who had been the original hunters for the Black Ajah in the Tower—waited patiently behind her. They were among her most ardent supporters now, and her most useful. Everyone expected Egwene to favor the women who had been among those who split from Elaida, so being seen spending time with Aes Sedai who had stayed in the White Tower was helpful.

"What have you discovered?" Egwene asked.

Saerin shook her head, joining Egwene at the wall. The scar on her cheek and the white at her temples made the olive-skinned and blunt-faced Brown look like an aging general. "Some of the information you requeste was uncertain even three thousand years ago, Mother."

"Whatever you can give me will help, daughter," Egwene said. "So long as we do not depend on the facts entirely, incomplete knowledge is better than complete ignorance."

Saerin snorted softly, but obviously recognized the quote from Yasicca Cellaech, an ancient Brown scholar.

"And you two?" Egwene asked Yukiri and Seaine.

"We're looking," Yukiri said. "Seaine has a list of possibilities. Some are actually reasonable."

Egwene raised an eyebrow. Asking a White for theories was always nteresting, but not always useful. They had a tendency to ignore what was plausible, focusing on remote possibilities.

"Let us begin there, then," Egwene said. "Seaine?"

"Well," Seaine said, "I will begin by saying that one of the Forsaken undoubtedly has knowledge that we can't guess at. So there may be no way to ascertain how she defeated the Oath Rod. For instance, there might be a way to disable it for a short time, or perhaps there are special words that can be used to evade its effects. The rod is a thing of the Age of Legends, and though we've used it for millennia, we don't really understand it. No more than we do most ter'angreal."

"Very well," Egwene said.

"But," Seaine said, getting out a sheet of paper, "that taken into account, I have three theories on how one might defeat swearing on the rod. First, it is possible that the woman has another Oath Rod. Others were once said to exist, and it's plausible that one rod could release you from the oaths of another. Mesaana could have been holding one secretly. She could have taken the Three Oaths while holding our rod, then somehow used the other to negate those oaths before swearing that she was not a Darkfriend."

Tenuous," Egwene said. "How would she have released herself without us knowing? It requires channeling Spirit."

"I considered that," Seaine said.

"Not surprising," Yukiri said.

Seaine eyed her, then continued. "This is the reason Mesaana would have needed a second Oath Rod. She could have channeled Spirit into it, then inverted the weave, leaving her linked to it."

It seems improbable," Egwene said.

"Improbable?" Saerin replied. "It seems ridiculous. I thought you said some of these were plausible, Yukiri."

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"This one is the least likely of the three," Seaine said. "The second method would be easier. Mesaana could have sent a look-alike wearing the Mirror of Mists. Some unfortunate sister—or novice, or even some untrained woman who could channel—under heavy Compulsion. This woman could have been forced to take the oaths in Mesaana's place. Then, since this person wouldn't be a Darkfriend, she could speak truthfully that she wasn't."

Egwene nodded thoughtfully. "That would have taken a lot of preparation."

"From what I've been able to learn about her," Saerin said, "Mesaan was good at preparation. She excelled at it."

Saerin's task had been to discover whatever she could about Mesaana's true nature. They had all heard the stories—who didn't know the names of each of the Forsaken, and their most terrible deeds, by heart? But Egwene put little faith in stories; she wanted something more hardfast, if she could get it.

"You said there was a third possibility?" Egwene asked.

"Yes," Seaine said. "We know that some weaves play with sound. Variations on vocal weaves are used to enhance a voice to project to a crowd, and in the ward against eavesdropping—indeed, they're used in the various tricks used to listen in on what is being said nearby. Complex uses of the Mirror of Mists can change a person's voice. With some practice, Doesine and I were able to fabricate a variation on a weave that would alter the words we spoke. In effect, we said one thing, but the other person heard another thing entirely."

"Dangerous ground to walk, Seaine," Saerin said, her voice gruff. "That is the kind of weave that could be used for ill purposes."

"I couldn't use it to lie," Seaine said. "I tried. The oaths hold—so long as the weave was there, I couldn't speak words that I knew another would hear as lies, even if they were truth when they left my lips. Regardless, it was an easy weave to develop. Tied off and inverted, it hung in front of me and altered my words in a way I'd indicated.

"Theoretically, if Mesaana had this weave in force, she could have taken up the Oath Rod and sworn whatever she wished. 'I vow that I will lie whenever I feel like it' for instance. The Oath Rod would have bound her with that vow, but the weaves would have changed the sounds in the air as they passed her lips. We'd have heard her saying the proper oaths.

Egwene gritted her teeth. She'd assumed that defeating the Oath Rod would be difficult. And yet here was a simple weave capable of the feat. She should have known—never use a boulder when a pebble will do, as her mother had often said.

"With this," Egwene said, "they could have been slipping Darkfriends . into ranks of the Aes Sedai for years."

"Unlikely," Saerin said. "None of the Black sisters we captured knew of this wave. If they had, then they'd have tried to use it when we made hem reswear the oaths. I suspect that if Mesaana does know this trick, she h kept it to herself. The usefulness of it would vanish once too many people became aware of it."

"Still," Egwene said. "What do we do? Knowing of the weave, we could probably find a way to check for it—but I doubt that the sisters would be willing to go through the reswearing process again."

"And if it were to catch one of the Forsaken?" Yukiri asked. "It might be worth ruffling a few feathers to catch the fox hiding in the henhouse."

"She wouldn't be caught," Egwene said. "Besides, we don't know if she's using one of these methods. Seaine's logic suggests that it might be possible—without too much trouble—to defeat the Oath Rod. The actual method Mesaana used is less important than the possibility of the act."

Seaine glanced at Yukiri. None of the three had questioned Egwene's knowledge that one of the Forsaken was in the White Tower, but she knew they'd been skeptical. Well, at least they now understood that it might be possible to defeat the Oath Rod.

"I want you to continue your work," Egwene said. "You and the others were effective at capturing several Black sisters and unearthing the ferrets. This is much the same thing." Merely far, far more dangerous.

"We'll try, Mother," Yukiri said. "But one sister among hundreds? One of the most crafty and evil creatures ever to have lived? I doubt she will leave many clues. Our investigations into the murders have, so far, yielded very little in the way of results."

"Keep at it anyway," Egwene said. "Saerin, what have you to report?"

"Tales, rumors and whispers, Mother," Saerin said with a grimace. "You likely know the most famous stories regarding Mesaana—how she ran the schools in lands conquered by the Shadow during the War of Power. So far as I can tell, those legends are quite true. Marsim of Manetheren speaks of that in detail in her Annals of the Final Nights, and she's often a reliable source. Alrom gathered quite a full report of living through one of those schools, and fragments of it have survived.

Mesaana wished to be a researcher, but was rejected. The details are

not clear. She also governed the Aes Sedai who went to the Shadow, lead-ing them in battle at times, if Alrom's report is to be believed. I'm not convinced it is; I think it likely Mesaana's leadership was more figurative."

Egwene nodded slowly. "But what of her personality? Who is she?"

Saerin shook her head. "The Forsaken are more monsters in the night than real 'personalities' to most, Mother, and much has been lost or misquoted. From what I can tell, among the Forsaken you could think of her as the realist—the one who, rather than sitting high on a throne, steps in and gets her hands dirty. Elandria Borndat's Seeing Through the Breaking insists that, unlike Moghedien and Graendal, Mesaana was willing to take the reins directly.

"She was never known as the most skilled or powerful of the Forsaken but she was extremely capable. Elandria explains that she did what needed to be done. When others would be scheming, she would be carefully building up defenses and training new recruits." Saerin hesitated. "She . . . well, she sounds much like an Amyrlin, Mother. The Shadow's Amyrlin."

"Light," Yukiri said. "Little wonder she set up here." The Gray seemed very unsettled by that.

"The only other thing I could find of relevance, Mother," Saerin said, "was a curious reference from the Blue scholar Lannis, who indicated that Mesaana was second only to Demandred in sheer anger."

Egwene frowned. "I'd assume that all of the Forsaken are full of hate."

"Not hate," Saerin said. "Anger. Lannis thought Mesaana was angry—at herself, at the world, at the other Forsaken—because she wasn't one of those at/ the forefront. That could make her very dangerous."

Egwene nodded slowly. She's an organizer, she thought. An administrator who hates being relegated to that position.

Was that why she'd stayed in the Tower after the Black sisters had been found? Did she desire to bring some great accomplishment to the Dark

One? Verin had said that the Forsaken shared one unifying trait: their selfishness.

She tried to deliver a broken White Tower, Egwene thought. But that has failed. She was probably part of the attempt to kidnap Rand as well. Another fiasco. And the women sent to destroy the Black Tower?

Mesaana would need something grand to offset so many failures. Killing Egwene would work. That might send the White Tower back into division.

Gawyn had been mortified when she'd said she might use herself as bait. Dared she do so? She gripped the railing, standing above the Tower, above the city that depended on her, looking out on a world that needed her.

Something had to be done; Mesaana had to be drawn out. If what Saerin said was true, then the woman would be willing to fight directly—she

wouldn't hide and poke from the shadows. Egwene's task, then, was to tempt her with an opportunity, one that didn't seem obvious, one she couldn't resist.

"Come " Egwene said, walking toward the ramp back down into the "I have some preparations to make."

CHAPTER
16

Shanna'har

Faile walked the camp in the waning evening light, making her way toward the quartermaster's tent. Perrin had sent their group of scouts through the gateway to Cairhien; they'd return the next morning.

Perrin was still brooding about the Whitecloaks. Over the last several days, the two armies had exchanged several letters, Perrin trying to maneuver for a second, more formal parley while the Whitecloaks insisted on a battle. Faile had given Perrin choice words about sneaking off to meet with the Whitecloaks without her.

Perrin was stalling as he let Elyas and the Aiel scout the Whitecloaks to try to find a way to sneak their people out, but it was unlikely to be an option. He'd succeeded back in the Two Rivers, but there had been only a handful of captives then. Now there were hundreds.

Perrin was not dealing well with his guilt. Well, Faile would talk with him shortly. She continued through the camp, passing the Mayener section to her left, with banners flying high.

I will have to deal with that one soon as well, Faile thought, looking up at Berelain's banner. The rumors about her and Perrin were problematic. She'd suspected that Berelain might try something in Faile's absence, but taking him into her tent at night seemed particularly forward.

Faile's next steps would have to be taken with extreme care. Her husband, his people, and his allies were all balanced precariously. Faile found herself wishing she could ask her mother for advice.

That shocked her, and she hesitated, stopping on the worn pathway of trampled yellow grass and mud. Light, Faile thought. Look what has happened to me.

Two years ago, Faile—then called Zarine—had run from her home in Saldaea to become a Hunter for the Horn. She'd rebelled against her duties as the eldest, and the training her mother had insisted she undergo.

She hadn't run because she'd hated the work; indeed, she'd proven adept at everything required of her. So why had she gone? In part for adventure. But in part—she admitted to herself only now—because of all the assumptions. In Saldaea, you always did what was expected of you. Nobody wondered if you would do your duty, particularly if you were a relative of the Queen herself.

And so . . . she'd left. Not because she'd hated what she would become, but because she had hated the fact that it had seemed so inevitable. Now here she was, using all of the things her mother had insisted she learn.

It was nearly enough to make Faile laugh. She could tell a host of things about the camp from a mere glance. They'd need to find some good leather for the cobblers soon. Water wasn't a problem, as it had been raining light sprinkles often over the last few days, but dry wood for campfires was an issue. One group of refugees—a collection of former wetlander gai'shain who watched Perrin's Aiel with outright hostility—would need attention. As she walked, she watched to make certain the camp had proper sanitation, and that the soldiers were caring for themselves. Some men would show utmost concern for their horses, then forget to eat anything proper—or at least healthy. Not to mention their habit of spending half the night gossiping by the campfires.

She shook her head and continued walking, entering the supply ring, where food wagons had been unloaded for the horde of cooks and serving maids. The supply ring was almost a village itself, with hundreds of people quickly wearing pathways in the muddy grass. She passed a group of dirty-raced youths digging pits in the ground, then a patch of women chattering and humming as they peeled potatoes, children gathering the rinds and throwing them into the pits. There weren't many of those children, but errins force had gathered a number of families from around the countrySide who—starving—had begged to join.

Serving men ran baskets of peeled potatoes to cooking pots, which were slowly being filled with water by young women making trips to the stream. Journeyman cooks prepared coals for roasting and older cooks were mixing spices into sauces that could be poured over other foods, which was really the only way to give flavor to such mass quantities.

Elderly women—the few in the camp—shuffled past with bent backs and light wicker baskets bearing herbs clutched on thin arms, their shawls rippling as they chatted with crackling voices. Soldiers hurried in and out, carrying game. Boys between childhood and manhood gathered sticks for tinder; she passed a small gaggle of these who had grown distracted capturing spiders.

It was a tempest of confusion and order coexisting, like two sides of a coin. Strange how well Faile fit in here. Looking back at herself only a few years before, she was amazed to realize that she saw a spoiled, self-centered child. Leaving the Borderlands to become a Hunter for the Horn? She'd abandoned duties, home and family. What had she been thinking?

She passed some women milling grain, then walked around a fresh batch of wild scallions lying on a blanket beside them, waiting to be made into soup. She was glad she'd left and met Perrin, but that didn't excuse her actions. With a grimace, she remembered forcing Perrin to travel the Ways in the darkness, alone. She didn't even recall what he'd done to set her off, though she'd never admit that to him.

Her mother had once called her spoiled, and she'd been right. Her mother had also insisted that Faile learn to run the estates, and all the while Faile had dreamed of marrying a Hunter for the Horn and spending her life far away from armies and the boring duties of lords.

Light bless you, Mother, Faile thought. What would she, or Perrin, have done without that training? Without her mother's teachings, Faile would have been useless. Administration of the entire camp would have rested on Aravine's shoulders. Capable though the woman was as Perrin's camp steward, she couldn't have managed this all on her own. Nor should she have been expected to.

Faile reached the quartermaster's station, a small pavilion at the very heart of the cooking pits. The breeze brought an amalgamation of scents: fat seared by flames, potatoes boiling, peppered sauces spiced with garlic, the wet, sticky scent of potato peelings being carried to the small herd or hogs they'd managed to bring out of Maiden.

The quartermaster, Bavin Rockshaw, was a pale-faced Cairhienin with blond speckled through his graying brown hair, like the fur on a mixed-breed dog. He was spindly through the arms, legs and chest, yet had an almost perfectly round paunch. He had apparently worked at j quartermastering as far back as the Aiel War, and was an expert—a master as practiced in overseeing supply operations as a master carpenter was at woodworking.

That, of course, meant that he was an expert at taking bribes. When saw Faile, he smiled and bowed stiffly enough to be formal, but without mentation. "I'm a simple soldier, doing his duty," that bow said.

"Lady Faile!" he exclaimed, waving over some of his serving men. "Here to inspect the ledgers, I assume?"

"Yes, Bavin," she said, though she knew there would be nothing suspicious in them. He was far too careful. Still, she made a cursory motion of going through the records. One of the men brought her a stool, another a table upon which to place the ledgers, and yet another a cup of tea. She was impressed at how neatly the col-umns added up. Her mother had explained that often, a quartermaster would make many messy notations, referencing other pages or other ledgers, separating different types of supplies into different books, all to make it more difficult to track what was going on. A leader who was befuddled by the notations would assume that the quartermaster must be doing his job.

There was none of that here. Whatever tricks of numbering Bavin was using to obscure his thievery, they were nothing short of magical. And he was stealing, or at least being creative in how he doled out his foodstuffs. That was inevitable. Most quartermasters didn't really consider it thievery; he was in charge of his supplies, and that was that.

"How odd it is," Faile said as she leafed through the ledger. "The strange twists of fate."

"My Lady?" Bavin asked.

"Hmm? Oh, it is nothing. Only that Torven Rikshan's camp has received their meals each evening a good hour ahead of the other camps. I'm certain that's just by chance."

Bavin hesitated. "Undoubtedly, my Lady."

She continued to leaf through the ledgers. Torven Rikshan was a Cairhienin lord, and had been placed in charge of one of the twenty camps within the larger mass of refugees. He had an usually large number of nobles in his particular camp. Aravine had brought this to Faile's attention; she wasn't certain what Torven had given to receive supplies for meals more quickly, but it wouldn't do. The other camps might feel that Perrin was favoring one over another.

Yes," Faile said, laughing lightly. "Merely coincidence. These things happen in a camp so large. Why, just the other day Varkel Tius was complaining to me that he had put in a requisition for canvas to repair torn tents, but hasn't had his canvas for nearly a week now. Yet I know for a fact that Soffi Moraton ripped her tent during the stream crossing but had it repaired by that evening."

Bavin was silent.

Faile made no accusations. Her mother had cautioned that a good quartermaster was too valuable to toss into prison, particularly when the next man was likely to be half as capable and equally corrupt. Faile's duty was not to expose or embarrass Bavin. It was to make him worried enough that he kept himself in check. "Perhaps you can do something about these irregularities, Bavin," she said, closing the ledger. "I loathe to burden you with silly matters, but the problems must not reach my husband's ears. You know how he is when enraged."

Actually, Perrin was about as likely to hurt a man like Bavin as Faile was to flap her arms and fly away. But the camp didn't see it that way. They heard reports of Perrin's fury in battle, along with her occasional arguments

with him—provoked by Faile so that they could have a proper discussion-

and assumed he had a terrible temper. That was good, so long as they also thought of him as honorable and kind. Protective of his people, yet filled with rage at those who crossed him.

She rose from the stool, handing the ledgers to one of the men, curly-haired and with ink stains on his fingers and jerkin. She smiled at Bavin, then made het way out of the supply ring. She noted with displeasure that the bunch oPwild scallions beside the pathway had spoiled in the moments since she'd seen them last, their stalks melted and runny, as if they'd been rotting in the sun for weeks. These spoilings had begun only recently inside of camp, but by reports, it happened far more frequently out in the countryside.

It was hard to tell the hour with the sky so full of clouds, but it seemed from the darkening horizon that her time to meet with Perrin had come. Faile smiled. Her mother had warned her what would happen to her, had told her what was expected of her, and Faile had worried that she would feel trapped by life.

But what Deira hadn't mentioned was how fulfilling it would be. Perrin made the difference. It was no trap at all to be caught with him.

Perrin stood with one foot up on the stump of a felled tree, facing north. The hilltop let him look out over the plains toward the cliffs of Garens Wall rising like the knuckles of a slumbering giant.

He opened his mind, questing out for wolves. There were some in the distance, almost too faint to feel. Wolves stayed away from large gatherings of men.

The camp spread out behind him, watchfires fluttering at its boundaries.

This hillside was far enough away to be secluded, but not so distant as to be solitary He wasn't certain why Faile had asked him to meet her here at dusk, she'd smelled excited, so he hadn't pried. Women liked their secrets.

He heard Faile coming up the side of the hill, stepping softly on the wet grass. She was good at being quiet—not nearly as good as Elyas or one of the Aiel, but better than one might think of her. But he could smell her cent, soap with lavender. She used that particular soap only on days she deemed special.

She stepped atop the hillside, beautiful, impressive. She wore a violet vest over a long silk blouse of a lighter shade. Where had she gotten the clothing? He hadn't seen her in this fine outfit before.

"My husband," she said, stepping up to him. He could faintly hear others near the foot of the hill—probably Cha Faile. She'd left them behind. "You look concerned."

"It's my fault that Gill and the others were captured, Faile," he said. "My failures continue to mount. It's a wonder anyone follows me."

"Perrin," she said, laying a hand on his arm. "We've spoken of this. You mustn't say such things."

"Why?"

"Because I've never known you to be a liar," she said with a softly chiding tone.

He looked at her. It was growing dark, though he could still make out details. She'd have a harder time seeing them.

"Why do you continue to fight this?" she asked. "You are a good leader, Perrin."

"I wouldn't have given myself up for them," he said.

She frowned. "What does that have to—"

"Back in the Two Rivers," Perrin said, turning away from her, looking north again, "I was ready to do it. When the Whitecloaks had Mat's family and the Luhhans, I'd have given myself up. This time, I wouldn't have. Even when I spoke to their leader, asking his price, I knew I wouldn't give myself up."

You're becoming a better leader."

How can you say that? I'm growing callous, Faile. If you knew the things I did to get you back, the things I would have done . . ." He fingered the hammer at his side. The tooth or the claw, Young Bull, it matters not.

He'd thrown away the axe, but could he blame it for his brutality? It was only a tool. He could use the hammer to do the same terrible things.

Its not callous," Faile said, "or selfish. You're a lord now, and you can't let it be known that capturing your subjects will undermine your rule. Do

you think Queen Morgase would abdicate to tyrants who kidnapped her subjects? No leader could rule that way. Your inability to stop evil men does not make you evil yourself."

"I don't want this mantle, Faile. I never have."

"I know."

"Sometimes I wish I'd never left the Two Rivers. I wish I'd let Ran run off to his destiny, leaving regular folk behind to live their lives."

He caught a scent of annoyance from her.

"But if I'd stayed," he added hastily, "I'd never have met you. So I'm glad I left. I'm just saying I'll be glad when this is all through and finished and I can go back to someplace simple."

"You think the Two Rivers will ever go back to being the way you remember it?"

He hesitated. She was right—when they'd gone, it had already been showing signs of change. Refugees from across the mountains moving in, the villages swelling. Now, with so many men joining him in war, getting ideas into their heads about having a lord . . .

"I could find someplace else," he said, feeling stubborn. "There are other villages. They won't all change."

"And you'd drag me off to one of these villages, Perrin Aybara?" she said.

"I . . ." What would happen if Faile, his beautiful Faile, were confined to a sleepy village? He always insisted that he was only a blacksmith. But was Faile a blacksmith's wife? "I would never force you to do anything, Faile," he said, cupping her face in his hand. He always felt awkward when touching her satin cheeks with his thick, callused fingers.

"I'd go, if you really wanted me to," she replied. That was odd. He'd normally expect a snap from her at his awkward tongue. "But is it what you want? Is it really?"

"I don't know what I want," he said frankly. No, he didn't want to drag Faile off to a village. "Maybe . . . life as a blacksmith in a city, somewhere?

"If you wish it," she repeated. "Of course, that would leave the Two Rivers without a lord. They'd have to find someone else."

"No. They don't need a lord. That's why I have to stop them treating me like one."

"And you think they'd give up on the idea that quickly?" Faile asked, smelling amused. "After they've seen how everyone else does it? After the way they fawned over that fool Luc? After welcoming in all of those people from Almoth Plain, who are used to lords?"

What would the Two Rivers folk do if he stepped down as their lord.

In a sinking moment of realization, he knew that Faile was right. Surely they'd pick someone who'd do a better job of it than me, he thought. Maybe Master

al'Vere.

But could Perrin trust that? Men like Master al'Vere or Tarn might

down the position. Might they end up picking someone like old Cenn Buie? Would they have a choice? If Perrin stepped aside, might some person who figured himself highborn seize power?

pon't be a fool, Perrin Aybara, he thought. Almost anyone would be better

than you.

Still, the thought of someone else taking control—someone else being lord-filled him with intense anxiety. And a surprising amount of sadness.

"Now," Faile said, "stop your brooding. I have grand intentions for this evening." She clapped her hands loudly three times, and movements began below. Soon, servants crested the hillside. Perrin recognized them as people she'd appropriated from among the refugees, a group as loyal to her as Cha Faile.

They carried canvas, which they spread on the ground. Then they covered that with a blanket. And what was that he smelled coming up from below? Ham?

"What is this, Faile?" he asked.

"At first," she said, "I assumed that you had something special planned for our shanna'har. I grew nervous when you didn't mention it, however, and so I asked. It appears that you do not celebrate it in the Two Rivers, odd though that is."

"Shanna'har?" Perrin asked, scratching his head.

"In the coming weeks," Faile said, "we will have been married one year. This is our first shanna'har, our marriage celebration." She folded her arms, watching as her servants arranged a meal on the blanket. "In Saldaea, we celebrate the shanna'har each year in the early summer. It is a festival to mark another year together, another year with neither husband nor wife fallen to the Trollocs. Young couples are told to savor their first shanna'har, much as one savors the first taste of a succulent meal. Our marriage will only be new to us once." The servants laid out a meal, including several glass bowls with candles in them. Faile dismissed the servants with a smile and a wave, and they retreated down the side of the hill. Faile had obviously taken care to make the meal look lavish. The blanket was embroidered, perhaps taken from Shaido spoils. The meal was served on silver plates and platters, ham a bed of boiled barley and capers across the top. There was even wine. Faile stepped closer to him. "I realize that there has been much, this year, that is not worth savoring. Maiden, the Prophet, that harsh winter. But if these things are the cost for being with you, Perrin, then I would pay them freely a dozen times over.

"If all were well, we would spend this next month giving gifts to on another, affirming our love, celebrating our first summer as husband and wife. I doubt we will have the month of ease that is our right, but at least we should spend and enjoy this evening together."

"I don't know if I can, Faile," he said. "The Whitecloaks, the sky Light! The Last Battle itself is almost here. The Last Battle, Faile! How can I feast while my people are being held under threat of execution and while the world itself may die?"

"If the world itself is going to die," Faile said, "is this not the time when a man must take time to appreciate what he has? Before it is all taken?"

Perrin hesitated. She laid a hand on his arm, her touch so soft. She hadn't raised her voice. Did she want him to yell? It was so hard to tell when she wanted an argument and when she didn't. Maybe Elyas would have advice for him.

"Please," she said softly. "Try to relax for one evening. For me."

"All right," he said, laying his hand on hers.

She led him to the blanket and they settled down, side by side before the array of silver dishes. Faile lit more candles off of the lit ones the servants had left. The night was chilly—the clouds seemed to draw summer warmth away. "Why do this outside?" Perrin said. "And not in our tent?"

"I asked Tarn what you do in the Two Rivers for shannahar" she said. "And as I feared, I learned that you don't celebrate it. That is really quite backward, you realize—we'll need to change the custom, once things settle down. Regardless, Tam said that the closest they had was something he and his wife did. Once a year, they would pack up a full meal—as extravagant as they could afford—and hike to a new place in the woods. They would dine there and spend the day with one another." She snuggled up against him. "Our wedding was done in the Two Rivers fashion, so I wished this day to be after that fashion as well."

He smiled. Despite his earlier objections his tension was easing. The food smelled good, and his stomach growled, prompting Faile to sit up and take his plate and hand it to him.

He dug in. He tried to keep his manners, but the food was excellent, and it had been a long day. He found himself ripping into the ham with ferocity, though he tried to take care not to drip on the fancy blanket.

Faile ate more slowly, the scent of amusement mixing with that of her soap.

"What?" Perrin asked, wiping his mouth. She was lit only by the candles that the sun was fully down. "There's much of the wolf in you, my husband."

He froze, noticing that he'd been licking his fingers. He growled at self wiping them instead on a napkin. As much as he liked wolves, he woudn't invite them to the dinner table with him. "Too much of the wolf

in me," he said.

"You are what you are, my husband. And I happen to love what you

are, so that is well."

He continued to chew on his cut of the ham. The night was quiet, the servants having retreated far enough away that he couldn't smell or hear them. Likely Faile had left orders that they weren't to be disturbed, and with the trees at the base of the hillside, they wouldn't have to worry about being observed.

"Faile," he said softy, "you need to know what I did while you were captive. I did things I worried would turn me into someone you would no longer want. It wasn't only the deal with the Seanchan. There were people in a city, So Habor, that I can't stop thinking of. People that maybe I should have helped. And there was a Shaido, with his hand—"

"I heard about that. It seems that you did what you had to."

"I'd have gone much farther," Perrin admitted. "Hating myself all the way. You spoke of a lord being strong enough to resist letting himself be manipulated. Well, I'll never be that strong. Not if you're taken."

"We shall have to make certain I don't get taken."

"It could ruin me, Faile," he said softly. "Anything else, I think I could handle. But if you are used against me, nothing will matter. I'd do anything to protect you, Faile. Anything."

"Perhaps you should wrap me up in soft cloth, then," she said dryly, and tuck me away in a locked room." Oddly, her scent was not offended.

"I wouldn't do that," Perrin said. "You know I wouldn't. But this means I have a weakness, a terrible one. The type a leader can't have."

She snorted. "You think other leaders don't have weaknesses, Perrin? every King or Queen of Saldaea has had their own. Nikiol Dianatkhah was a drunkard, despite being known as one of our greatest kings, and Belairah married and put her husband away four times. Her heart always did lead her to trouble. Jonasim had a son whose gambling ways nearly brought her House to ruin, and Lyonford couldn't keep his temper if challenged. Each and every one was a great monarch. And all had their share of Weaknesses."

Perrin continued to chew on his food, thoughtful.

"In the Borderlands," Faile said, "we have a saying. 'A polished sword reflects the truth.' A man can claim to be diligent in his duties, but if his sword isn't polished, you know that he's been idle.

"Well, your sword is bright, my husband. These last few weeks, you keep saying that you led poorly during my captivity. You'd have me believe that you led the entire camp to ruin and dust! But that's not true at all You kept them focused; you inspired them, maintained a strong presence and kept the air of a lord."

"Berelain's behind some of that," he said. "I half think the woman would have bathed me herself if I'd gone another day without."

"I'm certain that wouldn't have been good for the rumors," Faile noted dryly.

"Faile, I—"

"I'll deal with Berelain," Faile said. Her voice sounded dangerous. "That's one duty you needn't distract yourself with."

"But—"

"I'll deal with her," Faile said, her voice more firm. It was not wise to challenge her when she smelled that way, not unless he wanted to start a full argument. She softened, taking another bite of barley. "When I said you were like a wolf, my husband, I wasn't talking about the way you eat. I was talking about the way you give your attention. You are driven. Given a problem to solve, no matter how grand, and you will see it done.

"Can't you understand? That's a wonderful trait in a leader- It is exactly what the Two Rivers will need. Assuming, of course, that you have a wife to care for some of the smaller issues." She frowned. "I wish you'd spoken to me about the banner before burning it. It will be difficult to raise it again without looking foolish."

"I don't want to raise it again," Perrin said. "That's why I had them burn it."

"But why?"

He took another bite of his ham, pointedly not watching her. She smelled curious, almost desperately so.

I can't lead them, he thought. Not until I know if I can master the wolf How could he explain? Explain that he feared the way it took control when he fought, when he wanted something too badly?

He would not rid himself of the wolves; they had become too much a part of him. But where would he leave his people, where would he leave Faile, if he lost himself to what was inside of him?

He again remembered a dirty creature, once a man, locked in a cage- There is nothing left in this one that remembers being a man . . .

"My husband," Faile said, resting a hand on his arm. "Please." She smelled of pain. That twisted his heart about. "It has to do with those Whitecloaks," Perrin said. "What? Perrin, I thought I said—"

"It has to do," Perrin said firmly, "with what happened to me the first time I met with them. And what I'd begun to discover in the days before." Faile frowned. "I've told you that I killed two Whitecloaks," he said. "Before I met you."

"Yes."

"Settle back," he said. "You need to know the whole story." And so he told her. Hesitantly at first, but the words soon grew easier. He spoke of Shadar Logoth, and of their group being scattered. Of Egwene letting him take the lead, perhaps the first time he'd been forced to do

that.

He'd already told her of his meeting with Elyas. She knew much about Perrin, things that he'd never told anyone else, things he'd never even spoken of with Elyas. She knew about the wolf. She knew that he feared he'd lose himself.

But she didn't know what he felt in battle. She didn't know what it had felt like to kill those Whitecloaks, to taste their blood—either in his own mouth, or through his link with the wolves. She didn't know what it had been like to be consumed by anger, fear and desperation when she'd been taken. These were the things he haltingly explained.

He told her of the frenzy he'd gone into when searching for her in the wolf dream. He spoke of Noam and what he feared would happen to him. And of how it related to how he acted when he fought.

Faile listened, sitting quietly atop the hilltop, arms wrapped around her legs, lit by candlelight. Her scents were subdued. Perhaps he should have held some things back. No woman wanted to know what a beast her husband became when he killed, did she? But now that he was speaking, he wanted to be rid of his secrets. He was tired of them.

Each word spoken made him relax more. It did what the meal—touching though it had been—hadn't been able to. In telling her of his struggles, he felt some of his burden lift.

He finished by speaking of Hopper. He wasn't certain why he'd saved the wolf for last; Hopper was part of much Perrin had told before—the Whitecloaks, the wolf dream. But it felt right to reserve Hopper until the end, so he did.

As he finished, he stared at the flame of one of the candles. Two of them had gone out, leaving others still to flicker. That wasn't dim light to

his eyes. He had trouble remembering what the days had been like when his senses had been as weak as an ordinary man's.

Faile leaned against him, wrapping his arm around her. "Thank you" she said.

He let out a deep sigh, leaning back against the stump behind him, feeling her warmth.

"I want to tell you about Maiden," she said.

"You don't have to," he said. "Just because I—"

"Hush. I was quiet while you spoke. It's my turn."

"All right."

It should have been worrying for him to hear about Maiden. He lay with his back to the stump, sky crackling with energy above, the Pattern itself in danger of unraveling, while his wife spoke of being captured and beaten. Yet it was one of the most oddly relaxing things he'd ever experienced.

The events in that city had been important to her, maybe even good for her. Though he was angered at hearing how Sevanna had trussed Faile up naked and left her overnight. Someday he'd hunt that woman down.

Not today, however. Today he had his wife in his arms, and her strong voice was a comfort. He should have realized she would have planned her own escape. In fact, listening to her careful preparation, he began to feel a fool. She'd been worried that he'd get himself killed trying to rescue her—she didn't say it, but he could infer it. How well she knew him.

Faile left some things out. He didn't mind. Faile would be like a penned and caged animal without her secrets. He got a good hint of what she was hiding, though. It was something to do with that Brotherless who had captured her, something about Faile's plans to trick the man and his friends into helping her escape. Perhaps she'd felt a fondness for him, and didn't wish Perrin to regret killing him. That wasn't necessary. Those Brotherless had been with the Shaido, and they had attacked and killed men under Perrin's protection. No act of kindness would redeem that. They deserved their deaths.

That gave him pause. The Whitecloaks probably said very similar things about him. But the Whitecloaks had attacked first.

She finished. It was very late, now, and Perrin reached over to a bundle that Faile's servants had brought up, pulling out a blanket.

"Well?" Faile asked as he settled back, putting his arm around her again.

"I'm surprised that you didn't give me an earful for barreling in like a wild bull and stomping all over your plans."

That made her smell satisfied. It wasn't the emotion he'd expected, but he'd long ago stopped trying to decipher the ways of women's thought.

"I almost brought the matter up tonight," Faile said, "so that we could have a proper argument and a proper reconciliation."

"Why didn't you?"

"I decided that this night should be done in the Two Rivers way."

"And you think husbands and wives don't argue in the Two Rivers?" he asked, amused.

"Well, perhaps they do. But you, husband, always seem uncomfortable when we yell. I'm very glad you've begun to stand up for yourself, as is proper. But I have asked much from you to adapt to my ways. I thought, tonight, I would try to adapt to yours."

Those were words that he had never expected to hear from Faile. It seemed the most personal thing she could ever have given him. Embarrassingly, he felt tears in his eyes, and he pulled her tight.

"Now," she said, "I'm not a docile sheep, mind you."

"I would never think that," he said. "Never."

She smelled satisfied.

"I'm sorry I didn't give much thought to you escaping on your own," Perrin said.

"I forgive you."

He looked down at her, those beautiful dark eyes reflecting the candlelight. "Does this mean we can have the reconciliation without the argument?"

She smiled. "I will allow it, this once. And, of course, the servants have strict orders to ensure our solitude."

He kissed her. It felt so very right, and he knew that the worries he'd had—and the awkwardness that had been between them since Maiden—were gone. Whether it had been something real or something he imagined, it had passed.

He had Faile back, truly and completely.

CHAPTER

Partings, and a Meeting

The morning after the gholam attack, Mat woke from dreams rotten as last month's eggs, feeling stiff and aching. He had spent the night sleeping in a hollow he'd found beneath Aludra's supply wagon. He had chosen the location by random chance, using his dice.

He climbed out from under the wagon, standing and rolling his shoulder, feeling it pop. Bloody ashes. One of the best things about having money was not having to sleep in ditches. There were beggars who spent nights better than this.

The wagon smelled of sulphur and powders. He was tempted to peek under the oiled tarp that stretched over the back of, but there would be no point. Aludra and her powders were incomprehensible. So long as the dragons performed, Mat did not mind not knowing how they worked. Well, he did not mind it much. Not enough to risk irritating her.

She was not there at the wagon, fortunately for Mat. She would complain at him again for not having gotten her a bellfounder. She seemed to think him her own personal messenger boy. An unruly one, who refused to do his job properly. Most women had moments like that.

He walked through camp, brushing bits of straw from his hair. He almost went searching for Lopin to have him draw a bath, until he remembered that Lopin was dead. Bloody ashes! Poor man.

Thinking about poor Lopin put Mat in an even more dour mood as he

Iked toward where he'd find some breakfast. Juilin found him first. The

short Tairen thief-catcher wore his flat-topped conical hat and dark blue "Mat," he said. "Is it true? You've given permission for the Aes Sedai to go back to the Tower?"

"They didn't need my permission," Mat said, wincing. If the women heard it said that way, they would tan his hide and make saddle leather from it. "I'm planning to give them horses, though."

"They have them already," Juilin said, looking in the direction of the picket lines. "Said you gave them permission."

Mat sighed. His stomach growled, but food would have to wait. He walked toward the picket lines; he would need to make sure the Aes Sedai did not make off with his best stock.

"I've been thinking I might go with them," Juilin said, joining Mat. "Take Thera to Tar Valon."

"You're welcome to leave any time," Mat said. "I won't hold you here." Juilin was a good enough fellow. A little stiff at times. Well, very stiff. Juilin could make a Whitecloak look relaxed. He was not the type you wanted to take with you dicing; he would spend the night scowling at everyone in the tavern and muttering about the crimes they had certainly committed. But he was reliable, and a good hand to have in a pinch.

"I want to get back to Tear," Juilin said. "But the Seanchan would be so close, and Thera ... It worries her. She doesn't much like the idea of Tar Valon either, but we don't have many choices, and the Aes Sedai promised that if I came with them, they'd get me work in Tar Valon."

"So, this is parting, then?" Mat said, stopping and turning to him.

"For now," Juilin said. He hesitated, then held out his hand. Mat took it and shook, and then the thief-catcher was off to gather his things and his woman.

Mat thought for a moment, then changed his mind and headed for the cook tent. Juilin would slow the Aes Sedai, probably, and he wanted to fetch something.

A short time later, he arrived at the picket lines fed and carrying a cloth-wrapped bundle under his arm. The Aes Sedai had, of course, created an inordinately large caravan out of some of his best horses. Teslyn and Joline also seemed to have decided they could commandeer some pack animals and some soldiers to do the loading. Mat sighed and walked into the mess, checking over the horses.

Joline sat on Moonglow, a mare of Tairen stock that had belonged to one of the men Mat had lost in the fighting to escape the Seanchan. The

more reserved Edesina had mounted Firewisp, and was glancing occasion-ally at two women who stood to the side. Dark-skinned Bethamin and pale, yellow-haired Seta were former sul'dam.

The Seanchan women tried very hard to look aloof as the group gathered. Mat sauntered up to them.

"Highness," Seta said, "it is true? You're going to allow these to roam free of you?"

"Best to be rid of them," Mat said, wincing at her choice of titles for him. Did they have to throw around such words that like they were wooden pennies? Anyway, the two Seanchan women had changed a great deal since beginning with the group, but they still seemed to find it odd that Mat did not wish to use the Aes Sedai as weapons. "Do you want to go, or do you want to stay?"

"We will go," Bethamin said firmly. She was determined to learn, it seemed,

"Yes,' Seta said, "though I sometimes think it might be better to simply let us die, as opposed to . . . Well, what we are, what we represent, means that we are a danger to the Empire."

Mat nodded. "Tuon is a sul'dam" he said.

The two women looked down.

"Go with the Aes Sedai," Mat said. "I'll give you your own horses, so you don't have to rely on them. Learn to channel. That'll be more use than dying. Maybe someday you two can convince Tuon of the truth. Help me find a way to fix this without causing the Empire to collapse."

The two women looked to him, more firm and confident, suddenly. "Yes, Highness," Bethamin said. "It is a good purpose for us to have. Thank you, Highness."

Seta actually got tears in her eyes! Light, what did they think he had just promised them? Mat retreated before they could get any more odd ideas in their heads. Flaming women. Still, he could not help feeling sorry for them. Learning that they could channel, worrying they might be a danger to everyone around them.

That's bow Rand felt, Mat thought. Poor fool. As always, the colors swirled when he thought of Rand. He tried not to do it too often, and before he could banish those colors, he caught a glimpse of Rand shaving in a fine, gilded mirror hanging in a beautiful bathing chamber.

Mat gave some orders to get the sul'dam horses, then he walked over toward the Aes Sedai. Thom had arrived and he strolled over. "Light, Mat," he said. "You look like you tangled with a briarstitch patch and came out sore.

Mat raised a hand to his hair, which was probably a real sight. "I lived the night, and the Aes Sedai are leaving. I've half a mind to dance

a jig at that." 'Thorn snorted. "Did you know those two were going to be here?"

"The sul'dam? I figured."

"No, those two." He pointed.

Mat turned, frowning as he found Leilwin and Bayle Domon riding

Their possessions were rolled up on the backs of their horses. Leilwin —then known as Egeanin—had once been a Seanchan noblewoman, but

Tuon had stripped her name away. She wore a dress with divided skirts of

muted gray. Her short dark hair had grown out, and hung over her ears.

She climbed from her saddle and stalked in Mat's direction.

"Burn me," Mat said to Thorn, "if I can be rid of her, too, I'll almost start thinking that life has turned fair on me."

Domon followed her as they approached. He was her so'jhin. Or . . . could he still be so'jhin, now that she had no title? Well, either way, he was her husband. The Illianer was thick of girth, and strong. He was not too bad a fellow, except when he was around Leilwin. Which was always.

"Cauthon," she said, stepping up to him.

"Leilwin," he replied. "You're leaving?"

"Yes."

Mat smiled. He really was going to do that dance!

"I always intended to make my way to the White Tower," she continued. "I set my mind there on the day I left Ebou Dar. If the Aes Sedai are leaving, I will go with them. A ship is always wise to join a convoy, when the right opportunity is presented."

"Too bad to see you go," Mat lied, tipping his hat to her. Leilwin was as tough as a hundred-year oak stuck with bits of axe left over from the men foolish enough to try to chop it down. If her horse threw a shoe on the road to Tar Valon, she would likely sling the animal over her shoulder and carry it the rest of the way.

But she did not like Mat, for all he had done to save her skin. Maybe it was because he had not let her take charge, or maybe because she had been forced act like his lover. Well, he had not enjoyed that part either. It had been like holding a sword by the blade and pretending that it did not sting.

Though it had been fun to watch her squirm.

"Be well, Matrim Cauthon," Leilwin said. "I don't envy the place you've put yourself in. In some ways, I think the winds that carry you may actu-ally be rougher than the ones which have buffeted me, recently." She nodded to him, then turned to go.

Domon reached over, laying a hand on Mat's arm. "You did do as you said. By my aged grandmother! You gave a bumpy ride of it, but you did do as you said. My thanks."

The two of them moved off. Mat shook his head, waving to Thom and strolling over to the Aes Sedai. "Teslyn," Mat said. "Edesina. Joline. All ' well?"

"It is," Joline said.

"Good, good," Mat said. "You have sufficient pack animals?"

"They will do, Master Cauthon," Joline said. Then, covering a wince she added, "Thank you for giving them to us."

Mat smiled broadly. My, but it was amusing to hear her trying to acr respectful! She had obviously expected Elayne to welcome her and the others with open arms, not turn them away from the palace without an audience.

Joline eyed Mat, lush lips pressed together. "I would liked to have tamed you, Cauthon," she said. "I've still half a mind to return someday and see the job done properly."

"I'll wait breathlessly for that, then," he said, taking the cloth-wrapped package from under his arm. He handed it up to her.

"What is this?" she asked, not reaching for it.

Mat shook the bundle. "Parting gift," he said. "Where I come from, you never let a traveler depart without giving her something for the road. It would be rude."

Reluctantly, she accepted it and peeked inside. She was obviously surprised to find that it contained a collection of about a dozen powdered sweetbuns. "Thank you," she said, frowning.

"I'm sending soldiers with you," Mat said. "They'll bring my horses back once you arrive in Tar Valon."

Joline opened her mouth as if to complain, but then closed it. What argument could she make?

"That will be acceptable, Cauthon," Teslyn said, moving her black gelding closer.

"I'll give them orders to do as you say," Mat said, turning to her. "So you'll have people to command about and make set up your tents. But there's a condition attached."

Teslyn raised an eyebrow.

"I want you to tell the Amyrlin something," he said. "If it's Egwene, this should be easy. But even if it isn't, you tell her. The White Tower has something of mine, and it's nearly time that I reclaimed it. I don't want to, but what I want never seems to matter a whisker, these days. So I'll be coming, and I don't mean to be bloody turned away. " He smiled. "Use that exact language."

Testlyn, to her credit, chuckled softly. "I'll see it done, though I doubt rumors are true. Elaida would not have given up the Amyrlin Seat."

"You might be surprised." Mat surely had been, when he had discovered women calling Egwene Amyrlin. He did not know what had hapned up at the White Tower, but he had a sinking feeling that the Aes Sedai had wrapped poor Egwene up in their schemes so soundly that she would never escape. He had half a mind to ride up there himself and see if

he could get her out. But he had other tasks. Egwene would have to see to herself for now. She was a capable girl; she could probably handle it without him for a while.

Thorn stood to his side, looking thoughtful. He did not know for sure that Mat had blown the Horn—at least, Mat had never told him. He tried to forget about the bloody thing. But Thorn had probably guessed.

"Well, I suppose you should be going," Mat said. "Where's Setalle?"

"She'll be staying here," Teslyn said. "She said that she wanted to keep you from making too many missteps." She raised an eyebrow, and Joline and Edesina nodded sagaciously. They all assumed that Setalle was a former runaway servant from the White Tower, perhaps having fled as a girl because of a misdeed.

Well, that meant he wouldn't be rid of the entire group. Still, if he had to pick one to stay, it would be Mistress Anan. She would probably be wanting to find a way to meet up with her husband and family, who had fled Ebou Dar by ship.

Juilin walked up, leading Thera. Had that frightened wisp of a woman really been the Panarch of Tarabon? Mat had seen mice that were less timid. Mat's soldiers brought out horses for the two of them. All in all, this expedition was costing him some forty animals and a file of soldiers. But it would be worth it. Besides, he intended to retrieve both men and horses—along with information about what was really happening in Tar Valon.

He nodded to Vanin. The thick-waisted horse thief had not been too pleased when Mat had ordered him to go along to Tar Valon and gather information. Mat had figured he would be ecstatic, considering how he doted on the Aes Sedai. Well, he would be even less happy when he found Juilin was along; Vanin tended to step lightly around the thief-catcher.

Vanin mounted a bay gelding. As far as the Aes Sedai knew, he was a

senior Redarm and one of Mat's field scouts, but nobody to be suspicious

of. We did not look very threatening, except maybe as a danger to a bowl of boiled potatoes. That might be why he was so good at what he did. Mat did not need any horses stolen, but Vanin's talents could be applied to other tasks.

"Well," Mat said, turning back to the Aes Sedai, "I won't keep you further, then." He stepped back, avoiding looking at Joline—who had a predatory cast to her eyes that reminded him all too much of Tylin. Teslyn waved and, curiously, Edesina nodded to him in respect. Juilin had a wave for him and Thorn, and Mat got a nod from Leilwin. The woman chewed rocks for breakfast and nails for supper, but she was fair. Maybe he could talk to Tuon, get her reinstated or something.

Don't be a fool, he thought, giving a wave to Bayle Domon. First you'll need to convince Tuon not to make you da'covale. He was half convinced she intended to see him as her servant, husband or not. Thinking about that made him sweat around the collar.

Before long, they were making dust along the road. Thorn stepped up beside Mat, watching the riders. "Sweetbuns?"

"Tradition among us Two Rivers folk."

"Never heard of that tradition."

"It's very obscure."

"Ah, I see. And what did you do to those buns?"

"Sprinklewort," Mat said. "It'll turn her mouth blue for a week, maybe two. And she won't share the sweetbuns with anyone, except maybe her Warders. Joline is addicted to the things. She must have eaten seven or eight bags' worth since we got to Caemlyn."

"Nice," Thorn said, knuckling his mustache. "Childish, though."

"I'm trying to get back to my basic roots," Mat said. "You know, recapture some of my lost youth."

"You're barely twenty winters old!"

"Sure, but I did a lot of living when I was younger. Come on. Mistress Anan is staying, and that gives me an idea."

"You need a shave, Matrim Cauthon." Mistress Anan folded her arms as she regarded him.

He reached up, touching his face. Lopin had always done that, each morning. The man got as sulky as a dog in the rain when Mat did not let him do such things, though lately Mat had been growing out his beard to avoid notice. It still itched like a week-old scab.

He had found Setalle at the supply tents, overseeing the midday meal- Soldiers from the Band hunkered down, chopping vegetables and stewing beans with the furtive expression of men who had been given firm instructions. Setalle was not needed here; the Band's cooks had always been able to prepare meals without her. But there was nothing a woman liked better

than finding men who were relaxing, then giving them orders. Besides, Setalle was a former innkeeper and—remarkably—a former Aes Sedai. Mat often found her supervising things that did not need supervising.

Not for the first time, he wished Tuon were still traveling with him. Setalle had usually taken Tuon's side, but staying with the Daughter of the Nine Moons had often kept her busy. Nothing was more dangerous for the sanity of men than a woman with too much time on her hands.

Setalle still wore clothing of the Ebou Dari style, which Mat found pleasant, considering the plunging neckline. That kind of outfit worked particularly well on a woman as buxom as Setalle. Not that he noticed. She had golden hoops in her ears, a stately demeanor and gray in her hair. The jeweled wedding knife worn around her neck seemed something of a warning, the way it nestled in her cleavage. Not that Mat noticed that, either.

"I've been growing the beard intentionally," Mat said to her statement. "I want to—"

"Your coat is dirty," she said, nodding to a soldier who brought her some onions he had peeled. He sheepishly poured them into a pot, not looking at Mat. "And your hair a mess. You look like you've been in a brawl, and it's not yet noon."

"I'm fine," Mat said. "I'll clean up later. You didn't go with the Aes Sedai."

"Each step toward Tar Valon would take me farther from where I need to be. I need to send word to my husband. When we parted, I didn't suspect that I'd end up in Andor of all places."

"I'm thinking I might be getting access to someone who can make gateways here soon," Mat said. "And I . . ." He frowned as another group of soldiers approached, carrying a few undersized quail they'd hunted. The soldiers looked ashamed of the terrible catch.

Setalle ordered them to pluck the birds without so much as a glance toward Mat. Light, he needed to get her out of his camp. Things would not be normal here until they were all gone.

"Don't look at me like that, Lord Mat," Setalle said. "Noram went into the city to see what kind of provisions he could find. I've noted that without the cook himself here to prod the men, meals don't get done at any reasonable speed. Not all of us like to take lunch when the sun is setting." I didn't say a thing," Mat said, keeping his voice even. He nodded to the side. "Can we talk for a moment?"

Setalle hesitated, then nodded and stepped away from the others with him. "What's going on really?" she said softly. "You look like you slept under a hay pile."

"I slept under a wagon, actually. And my tent's stained with blood Not really looking forward to going there to change clothing right now"

Her gaze softened. "I understand your loss. But that's no excuse to go around looking like you've been living in an alleyway. You'll need to hire another serving man."

Mat scowled. "I never needed one in the first place. I can take care of myself. Look, I have a favor to ask of you. I want you to watch after Olver for a little while."

"For what purpose?"

"That thing might come back," Mat said. "And it could try to hurt him. Besides, I'm going to be leaving with Thorn shortly. I might be back I should be back. But if I don't, I . . . Well, I would rather he not be left alone."

She studied him. "He would not be alone. The men in camp seem to have a great deal of fondness for the child."

"Sure, but I don't like the things they're teaching him. The boy needs better examples than that lot."

She seemed amused by that for some reason. "I've already begun instructing the child in letters. I suppose I can watch after him for a time, if need be."

"Great. Wonderful." Mat let out a relieved sigh. Women were always happy for a chance to educate a boy when he was young; Mat thought they assumed they could educate him out of becoming a man if they tried hard enough. "I'll give you some money. You can go into the city and find an inn."

"I've been into the city," Setalle said. "Every inn in the place seems packed to the walls already."

"I'll find a place for you," Mat promised. "Just keep Olver safe. When the time comes, and I have someone to make gateways, I'll have them send you to Illian so you can find your husband."

"A deal," Setalle said. She hesitated, glancing northward. "The . . . others are gone, then?"

"Yes." Good riddance.

She nodded, looking regretful. Maybe she had not been ordering his men about for lunch because she had been offended at seeing them relax. Maybe she had been looking for something to busy herself at.

"I'm sorry," Mat said. "About whatever happened to you."

"The past is gone," she replied. "And I need to leave it be. I shoal" never have even asked to see the item you wear. These last few weeks have made me forget myself."

Mat nodded, parting with her, then went searching for Olver. And after

that, he really should get around to changing his coat. And burn him, he was going to shave, too. The men looking for him could bloody kill him if they wanted. A slit throat would be better than this itching.

Elayne strolled through the palace's Sunrise Garden. This smaller garden had always been a favored location of her mother's, set atop the roof of the lace's eastern wing. It was rimmed by an oval of white stonework, with a larger, curved wall at the back.

Elayne had a full view of the city below. In earlier years, she had liked the lower gardens precisely because they were a retreat. It was in those gardens that she had first met Rand. She pressed a hand to her belly. Though she felt enormous, the pregnancy was only just beginning to show. Unfortunately, she'd had to commission an entirely new set of gowns. She would probably have to do so again in the coming months. What a bother.

Elayne continued to walk the roof garden. Pink jumpups and white morningstars bloomed in planters. The blossoms weren't nearly as large as they should have been, and already they were wilting. The gardeners complained that nothing helped. Outside the city, grass and weeds were dying in swaths, and the patchwork quilt of fields and crops looked depressingly brown. It is coming, Elayne thought. She continued on her way, walking a path made of springy grass, manicured and kept short. The gardeners' efforts weren't without some results. The grass here was mostly green, and the air smelled of the roses that wove their way up the sides of the wall. Those had brown spots on them, but they had bloomed.

A tinkling stream ran through the middle of the garden, lined in carefully placed river stones. That stream ran only when she visited; water had to be carried up to the cistern.

Elayne paused at another vantage point. A Queen couldn't choose seclusion the way a Daughter-Heir could. Birgitte walked up beside her. She raided her arms across her red-coated chest, eyeing Elayne. "What?" Elayne asked.

You're in full view," Birgitte said. "Anyone down there with a bow and a good eye could throw the nation right back into a Succession war."

Elayne rolled her eyes. "I'm safe, Birgitte. Nothing will happen to me." Oh, well, I apologize," Birgitte said flatly. "The Forsaken are loose and angry with you, the Black Ajah are undoubtedly furious that you've captured their agents, and you've humiliated various nobles who tried to seize the throne from you. Obviously you're in no danger whatsoever. I'll run along and take lunch, then."

"You might as well," Elayne snapped. "Because I am safe. Min had a viewing. My babes will be born healthy. Min is never wrong, Birgitte."

"Min said your babies would be strong and healthy," Birgitte said. "Not that you would be healthy when they arrived."

"How else would they come?"

"I've seen people knocked in the head so hard that they're never the same, girl," Birgitte said. "Some live for years, but never speak another word and have to be fed broth and live with a bedpan. You could lose an arm or two and still bear healthy children. And what about the people around you? Give you no thought to the danger you could cause them?"

"I feel bad for Vandene and Sareitha," Elayne said. "And for those men who died to rescue me. Don't dare imply that I feel no responsibility for them! But a queen must be willing to accept the burden of letting others die in her name. We discussed this, Birgitte. We decided that there was no way I could have known that Chesmal and the others would arrive as they did."

"We decided" Birgitte said through clenched teeth, "that there was no use arguing any further. But I want you to keep in mind that any number of things could still go wrong."

"They won't," Elayne said, looking out over the city. "My children will be safe, and that means I will be, too. We have until their birth."

Birgitte let out an exasperated sigh. "Foolish, stubborn . . . ." She trailed off as one of the nearby Guardswomen waved to get her attention.

Two of the Kin stepped onto the roof. Elayne had asked them to come meet with her.

Birgitte took up a position beside one of the short cherry trees, her arms folded. The two Kinswomen wore unadorned dresses, Sumeko in yellow, Alise in blue. Alise was the shorter of the two, with gray streaking her brown hair, and she was weaker in the Power, so she hadn't slowed in aging as much as Sumeko.

Both women had grown more firm of step lately. No further Kinswomen had disappeared or been murdered; Careane had been behind the killings all along. A member of the Black, hiding among them. Light, but thinking of it made Elayne s skin crawl\

"Your Majesty," Alise said, curtsying. She spoke with a calm, smooth voice and a faint Taraboner accent.

"Your Majesty," Sumeko said as well, mimicking her companions curtsy. The two were deferential—more so to Elayne than they were to other Aes Sedai these days. Nynaeve had given the Kin in general a backbone in regards to the Aes Sedai and the White Tower, though Alise hadn't ever struck Elayne as needing it.

During the siege, Elayne had started to regard the Kinswomen's attitudes with annoyance. Recently, however, she'd been wondering. They had extremely useful to her. How high would their newfound boldness lead Elayne nodded to each of the Kin in turn, then gestured toward a trio of chairs that had been placed in the shade of the drooping cherry trees.

The three seated themselves, the stream winding its contrived way past them to the left. There was mint tea. The other two took a cup each, but were careful to add generous amounts of honey. Tea tasted terrible these days without it.

"How are the Kin?" Elayne asked.

The two women glanced at each other. Blast. Elayne was being too formal with them. They knew something was up.

"We are well, Your Majesty," Alise said. "The fear seems to be leaving most of the women. At least, those who had enough sense to feel it in the first place. I suppose those who didn't were the ones who went off on their own and found themselves dead."

"It is good not to have to spend so much time Healing, either," Sumeko noted. "It was becoming very fatiguing. So many wounded, day after day." She grimaced.

Alise was made of stouter material. She sipped her tea, face mild. Not calm and frozen, like an Aes Sedai. Thoughtful and warm, yet reserved. That was an advantage these women had that the Aes Sedai did not—they could be regarded without as much suspicion, as they were not tied directly to the White Tower. But they didn't have its authority, either.

"You can sense that I have something to ask of you," Elayne said, meeting Alise's eyes.

"We can?" Sumeko asked, sounding surprised. Perhaps Elayne had given her too much credit.

Alise nodded in a matronly way. "You've asked much of us while we've been here, Your Majesty. No more than I felt you had a right to ask. So far." I have tried to welcome you in Caemlyn," Elayne said. "As I realize you can never return home, not while the Seanchan rule Ebou Dar."

That is true," Alise agreed. "But one can hardly call Ebou Dar our home. It was merely a place where we found ourselves. Less a home, more a necessity. Many of us rotated in and out of the city anyway, to avoid notice."

"Have you considered where you will stay now?"

"Were going to Tar Valon," Sumeko said quickly. "Nynaeve Sedai said—"

"I'm certain there will be a place for some of you there," Elayne interjected. "Those who wish to become Aes Sedai. Egwene will be eager to give a second chance to any Kin who wish to try again for the shawl. But what of the rest of you?"

"We spoke of this," Alise said carefully, eyes narrowing. "We will b come associated with the Tower, a place for Aes Sedai to retire."

"Surely you will not move to Tar Valon, though. What good would th Kin be as a place to retire from Aes Sedai politics if they are so near th White Tower?"

"We had assumed we would remain here," Alise said.

"That was my assumption as well," Elayne said carefully. "But assump-. tions are weak. I wish to give you promises instead. After all, if you were to remain in Caemlyn, I see no reason to not offer you support directly from the Crown."

"At what cost?" Alise asked. Sumeko was watching with a confused frown.

"Not much of one," Elayne said. "Really, not a cost at all. An occasional favor, as you have done the Crown in the past."

The garden fell still. Faint calls from the city below rose up into the air, and the branches shivered in the wind, dropping a few brown leaves between Elayne and the Kin.

"That sounds dangerous," Alise said, taking a sip of her tea. "Surely you're not suggesting that we set up a rival White Tower here, in Caemlyn."

"Nothing of the sort," Elayne said quickly. "I am Aes Sedai myself, after all. And Egwene has spoken of letting the Kin continue as they have before, so long as they accept her authority."

"I'm not certain we want to 'continue as we have before,'" Alise said. "The White Tower left us to live our lives in terror that we would be discovered. But all the while, they were using us. The more we consider that, the less . . . amused that makes us."

"Speak for yourself, Alise," Sumeko said. "I intend to be tested and return to the Tower. I will join the Yellow, mark my words."

"Perhaps, but they won't have me," Alise said. "I'm too weak in the Power. I won't accept some halfway measure, forced to scrape and bow every time a sister comes along and wants me to wash her clothing. But I won't stop channeling, either. I won't give it up. Egwene Sedai has spoken of letting the Kin continue, but if we do, would be we be able to work the One Power openly?"

"I assume you would be able to," Elayne said. "Much of this was Egwene's idea. She certainly wouldn't send Aes Sedai to you to retire if they were to be forbidden to channel. No, the days of women outside the Tower channeling in secret have passed. The Windfinders, the Aiel Wise Ones, have proven that times must change."

"perhaps," Alise said. "But giving our services to the Crown of Andor is a very different matter."

"We would make certain not to compete with the Tower's interests," Flavne said. "And you would accept the Aymrlin's authority. So what is the roblem? Aes Sedai provide service to monarchs across the land."

Alise sipped her tea. "Your offer has merit. But it depends on the nature of the favors required by the Crown of Andor."

"I would only ask two things of you," Elayne said. "Traveling and Healing. You need not enter our conflicts, you need not be part of our politics. Simply agree to Heal my people who are sick, and to assign a group of women each day to create gateways when the crown wishes."

"That still sounds an awful lot like your own White Tower," Alise said. Sumeko was frowning.

"No, no," Elayne said. "The White Tower means authority, politics. You would be something else entirely. Imagine a place in Caemlyn where any person can come to receive Healing, free of charge. Imagine a city free of disease. Imagine a world where food can travel instantly to those who need it."

"And a queen who can send troops wherever she needs," Alise said. "Whose soldiers can fight one day, then be free of wounds the next. A queen who can earn a tidy profit by charging merchants for access to her gateways." She took a sip of her tea.

"Yes," Elayne admitted. Though she wasn't certain how she was going to convince Egwene to let her do that part of it.

"We will want half," Alise said. "Half of anything you charge for Traveling or Healing."

Healing is free," Elayne said firmly. "For anyone who comes, regardless or station. People are treated in order of the severity of their ailment, not in order of their rank."

"I could agree to this," Alise said.

Sumeko turned to her, eyes wide. "You cannot speak for us. You yourself threw in my face the Knitting Circle having dissolved, now that we have left Ebou Dar. Besides, by the Rule—"I speak only for myself, Sumeko," Alise said. "And those who would

me. The Kin as we knew them are no more. We were dominated by our need to remain secret, and that is gone now."

Sumeko grew silent.

"You mean to join the Aes Sedai, my friend," Alise said, laying a hand

on her arm. "But they will not have me, nor will I have them. I need sorn thing else, and others will as well."

"But to tie yourselves to the Crown of Andor. . . ."

"We tie ourselves to the White Tower," Alise said. "But live in Caemlyn. Both have their benefits. We aren't strong enough to stand on our own

Andor is as good a place as any. It has the favor of the White Tower, and the favor of the Dragon Reborn. Mostly, it is here, and so are we."

"You can reorganize," Elayne said, growing excited. "The Rule can be crafted anew. You can decide to let Kin marry now, if you wish. I think that would be for the best."

"Why?" Alise asked.

"Because it will tie them down," Elayne explained. "That will make them less of a threat to the White Tower. It will help differentiate you. It is something that few women in the White Tower do, and it gives you something to make the Kin more attractive as an option."

Alise nodded, thoughtful; Sumeko seemed to be coming around. Elayne was sorry to admit that she wouldn't miss the woman when she left. Elayne intended to push them to restructure how they chose leaders. It would be much more convenient if she could work with one like Alise, as opposed to whomever happened to be the oldest among them.

"I still worry about the Amyrlin," Alise said. "Aes Sedai do not charge for services. What will she say if we start doing so?"

"I will speak with Egwene," Elayne repeated. "I'm certain I can convince her that the Kin, and Andor, are no threat to her."

Hopefully. There was a chance for something incredible in the Kin, a chance for Andor to have constant and inexpensive access to gateways. That would put her on nearly equal ground with the Seanchan.

She spoke with the women for a time longer, making certain they felt she was giving them due attention. Eventually, she dismissed them, but found herself lingering in the garden, standing between two planters holding bluebells, their clusters of tiny, vaselike blossoms drooping and wiggling in the breeze. She tried not to look at the planter beside them, which was empty. The bluebells there had flowered in the color of blood, and had actually bled something red when cut. The gardeners had pulled them out.

The Seanchan would come for Andor eventually. By then, Rands armies would likely be weakened and broken from the fighting, their leader possibly dead. Again, it made her heart twist to consider that, but she couldn't shy away from the truth.

Andor would be a prize to the Seanchan. The mines and rich lands ot her realm would tempt them, as would the proximity to Tar Valon. Beyond that, she suspected that those who claimed to be Artur Hawkwing's successors would never be satisfied until they held all that had once belonged to their ancestor.

Elayne looked out over her nation. Her nation. Full of those who trusted in her to protect and defend them. Many who had supported her claim to the throne had had little faith in her. But she was their best op-tion their only option. She would show them the wisdom of their choice.

Securing the Kin would be one step. Sooner or later, the Seanchan would be able to Travel. All they needed to do was capture one woman who knew the weaves, and soon each and every damane with the requisite strength would be able to create the portals. Elayne needed access to them as well.

What she didn't have, however, were channelers to use in battle. She knew she couldn't ask this of the Kin. They'd never agree to it, nor would Egwene. Nor would Elayne herself. Forcing a woman to use the Power as a weapon would make her no better than the Seanchan themselves.

Unfortunately, Elayne knew full well the destruction women using the One Power could cause. She'd been bound in a wagon while Birgitte led the attack on the Black Ajah who had kidnapped her here in Caemlyn, but she'd seen its aftermath. Hundreds dead, hundreds more wounded, dozens burned away. Smoking, twisted corpses.

She needed something. An edge against the Seanchan. Something to balance their channelers in combat. The only thing she could think of was the Black Tower. It was on Andor's soil. She'd told them that she considered them part of her nation, but so far she'd gone no further than sending inspection parties.

What would happen to them if Rand died? Dared she try to claim them? Dared she wait for someone else to?

CHAPTER
18

The Strength of This Place

Perrin ran through the darkness. Trails of watery mist brushed his face and condensed in his beard. His mind was foggy, distant. Where was he going? What was he doing? Why was he running?

He roared and charged, ripping through the veiled darkness and bursting into open air. He took a deep breath and landed on the top of a steep hill covered with short, patchy grass, with a ring of trees at its base. The sky rumbled and churned with clouds, like a boiling pot of tar.

He was in the wolf dream. His body slumbered in the real world, on this hilltop, with Faile. He smiled, breathing deeply. His problems had not diminished. In fact, with the Whitecloak ultimatum, they seemed magnified. But all was well with Faile. That simple fact changed so much. With her at his side, he could do anything.

He leaped down from the hillside and crossed the open area where his army camped. They had been here long enough that signs had appeared in the wolf dream. Tents reflected the waking world, though their flaps were in a different position each time he looked at them. Cook-fire pits in the ground, ruts in the pathways, occasional bits of refuse or discarded tools. These would pop into existence, then vanish.

He moved quickly through the camp, each step taking him ten paces. Once he might have found the lack of people in the camp eerie, but he was accustomed to the wolf dream now. This was natural.

Perrin approached the statue at the side of the camp, then looked up at the age-pocked stone, overgrown with lichen of black, orange and green. The statue must have been posed oddly, if it had fallen in such a way. It almost looked as if it had been created this way—an enormous arm bursting from the loam.

Perrin turned to the southeast, toward where the Whitecloak camp

would be found. He had to deal with them. He was increasingly certain — nfident, even—that he could not continue until he had confronted these shadows from the past.

There was one way to deal with them for certain. A careful trap using the Asha'man and Wise Ones, and Perrin could hit the Children so hard that they shattered. He could maybe even destroy them permanently as a group.

He had the means, the opportunity, and the motivation. No more fear in the land, no more Whitecloak mock trials. He leaped forward, soaring thirty feet and falling lightly to the ground. Then he took off, running southeast along the road.

He found the Whitecloak camp in a forested hollow, thousands of white tents set up in tight rings. The tents of some ten thousand Children, along with another ten thousand mercenaries and other soldiers. Balwer estimated that this was the bulk of the remaining Children, though he had been unclear on how he'd gotten that knowledge. Hopefully the dusty man's hatred of the Whitecloaks wasn't clouding his judgment.

Perrin moved among the tents, looking to see if he could discover anything that Elyas and the Aiel had not. It was unlikely, but he figured it was worth an attempt, while he was here. Besides, he wanted to see the place with his own eyes. He lifted flaps, moved between groupings of tents, inspecting the place and getting a feel for it and its occupants. The camp was arranged in a very orderly manner. The insides were less stable than the tents themselves, but what he saw was also kept orderly.

The Whitecloaks liked things neat, tidy and carefully folded. And they liked to pretend the entire world could be polished up and cleaned the same way, people defined and explained in one or two words.

Perrin shook his head, making his way to the Lord Captain Commander's tent. The organization of the tents led him to it easily, at the center ring, It wasn't much larger than the other tents, and Perrin ducked inside, trying to see if he could find anything of use. It was furnished simply, with a bed-that was in a different position each time Perrin looked at it, along with a table holding objects that vanished and appeared at random.

Perrin stepped up to it, picking up something that appeared there. A signet ring. He didn't recognize the signet, a winged dagger, but memorised it just before the ring vanished from his fingers, too transient to stay long in the wolf dream. Though he'd met with the Whitecloak leader, and corresponded with the man, he didn't know much about the man's past Perhaps this would help.

He searched through the tent a while longer, finding nothing of use, then went to the large tent where Gaul had explained that many of the captives were being kept. Here, he saw Master Gill's hat appear for a moment, then vanish.

Satisfied, Perrin walked back out of the tent. As he did so, he found something bothering him. Shouldn't he have tried something like this when Faile was kidnapped? He'd sent numerous scouts to Maiden. Light he'd had to restrain himself from marching off to find Faile on his own.' But he'd never tried visiting the place in the wolf dream.

Perhaps it would have been useless. But he hadn't considered the possibility, and that troubled him.

He froze, passing a cart parked beside one of the Whitecloak tents. The back was open, and a grizzled silver wolf lay there, watching him.

"I do let my attention grow too narrow, Hopper," Perrin said. "When I get consumed by a goal, it can make me careless. That can be dangerous. As in battle, when concentrating on the adversary in front of you can expose you to the archer on the side."

Hopper cracked his mouth open, smiling after the way of wolves. He hopped from the cart. Perrin could sense other wolves nearby—the others of the pack he had run with before. Oak Dancer, Sparks and Boundless.

"All right," he said to Hopper. "I'm ready to learn."

Hopper sat down on his haunches, regarding Perrin. Follow, the wolf sent.

Then vanished.

Perrin cursed, looking about. Where had the wolf gone? He moved through the camp, searching, but couldn't sense Hopper anywhere. He reached out with his mind. Nothing.

Young Bull. Suddenly Hopper was behind him. Follow. He vanished again.

Perrin growled, then moved about the camp in a flash. When he didn'r find the wolf, he shifted to the field of grain where he'd met Hopper last time. The wolf wasn't there. Perrin stood among the blowing grain, frustrated.

Hopper found him a few minutes later. The wolf smelled dissatisfied. Follow! he sent.

"I don't know how," Perrin said. "Hopper, I don't know where you're going."

The wolf sat down. He sent an image of a wolf pup, joining others of the pack. The pup watched his elders and did what they did.

"I'm not a wolf, Hopper," Perrin said. "I don't learn the way you do. You must explain to me what you want me to do."

Follow here. The wolf sent an image of, oddly, Emond's Field. Then he perrin followed, appearing on a familiar green. A group of buildings lined it, which felt wrong. Emond's Field should have been a little vil- not a town with a stone wall and a road running past the mayor's inn, paved with stones. Much had changed in the short time he had been away.

"Why have we come here?" Perrin asked. Disturbingly, the wolfhead banner still flew on the pole above the green. It could have been a trick of the wolf dream, but he doubted it. He knew all too well how eagerly the people of the Two Rivers flew the standard of "Perrin Goldeneyes."

Men are strange, Hopper sent.

Perrin turned to the old wolf.

Men think strange thoughts, Hopper said. We do not try to understand them. Why does the stag flee, the sparrow fly, the tree grow? They do. That is all.

"Very well," Perrin said.

I cannot teach a sparrow to hunt, Hopper continued. And a sparrow does not teach a wolf to fly.

"But here, you can fly," Perrin said.

Yes. And I was not taught. I know. Hopper's scent was full of emotion and confusion. Wolves all remembered everything that one of their kind knew. Hopper was frustrated because he wanted to teach Perrin, but wasn't accustomed to doing things in the way of people.

"Please," Perrin said. "Try to explain to me what you mean. You always tell me I'm here 'too strongly.' It's dangerous, you say. Why?"

You slumber, Hopper said. The other you. You cannot stay here too long. You must always remember that you are unnatural here. This is not your den.

Hopper turned toward the houses around them. This is your den, the den of your sire. This place. Remember it. It will keep you from being lost. This was how your kind once did it. You understand.

It wasn't a question, though it was something of a plea. Hopper wasn't certain how to explain further.

I can try," Perrin thought, interpreting the sending as best he could. But Hopper was wrong. This place wasn't his home. Perrin's home was with Faile. He needed to remember that, somehow, to keep himself from getting drawn into the wolf dream too strongly.

I have seen your she in your mind, Young Bull, Hopper sent, cocking his head. She is like a hive of bees, with sweet honey and sharp stings. Hopper's image of Faile was that of a very confusing female wolf. One who would playfully nip at his nose one moment, then growl at him the next, refusing to share her meat.

Perrin smiled.

The memory is part, Hopper sent. But the other part is you. You must stay as Young Bull. A wolfs reflection in the water, shimmering and growing in-distinct as ripples crossed it.

"I don't understand."

The strength of this place, Hopper sent an image of a wolf carved of stone is the strength of you. The wolf thought for a moment. Stand. Remain. Be you

With that, the wolf stood and backed up, as if preparing to run at Perrin.

Confused, Perrin imagined himself as he was, holding that image in his head as strongly as he could.

Hopper ran and jumped at him, slamming his body into Perrin. He'd done this before, somehow forcing Perrin out of the wolf dream.

This time, however, Perrin was set and waiting. Instinctively, Perrin pushed back. The wolf dream wavered around him, but then grew firm again. Hopper rebounded off him, though the heavy wolf should have knocked Perrin to the ground.

Hopper shook his head, as if dazed. Good, he sent, pleased. Good. You learn. Again.

Perrin steadied himself just in time to get slammed by Hopper a second time. Perrin growled, but held steady.

Here, Hopper sent, giving an image of the field of grain. Hopper vanished, and Perrin followed. As soon as he appeared, the wolf slammed into him, mind and body.

Perrin fell to the ground this time, everything wavering and shimmering. He felt himself being pushed away, forced out of the wolf dream and into his ordinary dreams.

No/ he thought, holding to an image of himself kneeling among those fields of grain. He was there. He imagined it, solid and real. He smelled the oats, the humid air, alive with the scents of dirt and fallen leaves.

The landscape coalesced. He panted, kneeling on the ground, but he was still in the wolf dream.

Good, Hopper sent. You learn quickly.

"There's no other option," Perrin said, climbing to his feet.

The Last Hunt comes, Hopper agreed, sending an image of the Whitecloak camp.

Perrin followed, bracing himself. No attack came. He looked around for the wolf.

Something slammed into his mind. There was no motion, only the

mental attack. It wasn't as strong as before, but it was unexpected. Perrin barly managed to fight it off.

Hopper fell from the air, landing gracefully on the ground. Always be

ready, the wolf sent. Always, but especially when you move. An image of a care-ful wolf, testing the air before moving out into an open pasture.

"I understand."

But do not come too strongly, Hopper chided.

Immediately, Perrin forced himself to remember Faile and the place where he slept. His home. He . . . faded slightly. His skin didn't grow translucent, and the wolf dream stayed the same, but he felt more exposed.

Good, Hopper sent. Always ready, but never holding on too strong. Like carrying a pup in your jaws.

"That's not going to be an easy balance," Perrin said.

Hopper gave a slightly confused scent. Of course it was difficult.

Perrin smiled. "What now?"

Running, Hopper sent. Then more practice.

The wolf dashed away, zipping in a blur of gray and silver off toward the road. Perrin followed. He sensed determination from Hopper—a scent that was oddly similar to the way Tarn smelled when training the refugees to fight. That made Perrin smile.

They ran down the road, and Perrin practiced the balance of not being in the dream too strongly, yet being ready to solidify his sense of self at any moment. Occasionally Hopper would attack him, trying to throw him from the wolf dream. They continued until Hopper—suddenly—stopped running.

Perrin took a few extra steps, surging ahead of the wolf, before stopping. There was something in front of him. A translucent violet wall that cut directly through the roadway. It extended up into the sky and distantly to both the right and the left.

"Hopper?" Perrin asked. "What is this?"

Wrongness, Hopper sent. It should not be here. The wolf smelled angry.

Perrin stepped forward and raised a hand toward the surface, but hesitated. It looked like glass. He'd never seen anything like this in the

wolf dream. Might it be like the bubbles of evil? He looked up at the sky.

The wall flashed suddenly and was gone. Perrin blinked, stumbling back. He glanced at Hopper. The wolf sat on his haunches, staring at the Place where the wall had been. Come, Young Bull, the wolf finally sent, standing. We will practice in another place.

He loped away. Perrin looked back down the road. Whatever the wall had been, it had left no visible sign of its existence. Troubled, Perrin followed after Hopper.

"Burn me, where are those archers!" Rodel Ituralde climbed up to the ton of the hillside. "I wanted them formed up on the forward towers an hour ago to relieve the crossbowmen!"

Before him, the battle clanged and screamed and grunted and thumped and roared. A band of Trollocs had surged across the river, crossing on ford rafts or a crude floating bridge fashioned from log rafts. Trollocs hated crossing water. It took a lot to get them over.

Which was why this fortification was so useful. The hillside sloped directly down to the only ford of reasonable size in leagues. To the north Trollocs boiled through a pass out of the Blight and ran right into the River Arinelle. When they could be forced across, they faced the hillside, which had been dug with trenches, piled with bulwarks and set with archer towers at the top. There was no way to reach the city of Maradon from the Blight except by passing over this hill.

It was an ideal position for holding back a much larger force, but even the best fortifications could be overrun, particularly when your men were tired from weeks of fighting. The Trollocs had crossed and fought their way up the slope under a hail of arrows, falling into the trenches, having difficulty surmounting the high bulwarks.

The hillside had a flat area at the top, where Ituralde had his command position, in the upper camp. He called orders as he looked down on the woven mass of trenches, bulwarks and towers. The Trollocs were dying to pikemen behind one of the bulwarks. Ituralde watched until the last Trolloc—an enormous, ram-faced beast—roared and died with three pikes in its gut.

It looked as if another surge was coming, the Myrddraal driving another mass of Trollocs through the pass. Enough bodies had fallen in the river that it was clogged for the moment, running red, the carcasses providing a footing for those running up behind.

"Archers!" Ituralde bellowed. "Where are those bloody—"

A company of archers finally ran past, some of the reserves he'd held back. Most of them had the coppery skin of Domani, though there were a few stray Taraboners mixed in. They carried a wide variety of bows: narrow Domani longbows, serpentine Saldaean shortbows scavenged from guard posts or villages, even a few tall Two Rivers longbows.

"Lidrin," Ituralde called. The young, hard-eyed officer hurried across

the hillside to him. Lidrin's brown uniform was wrinkled and dirty at the knees, not because he was undisciplined, but because there were tims when his men needed him more than his laundry did.

"Go with those archers to the towers," Ituralde said. "Those Trollocs are going to try another push. I do not want another fist breaking through to the top, hear me? If they seize our position and use it against us, I'm going to have a rotten morning."

Lidrin didn't smile at the comment, as he once might have. He didn't smile much at all anymore; usually only when he got to kill a Trolloc. He saluted, turning to jog after the archers.

Ituralde turned looked down the backside of the hill. The lower camp was set up there, in the shadow of the steep hillside. This hill had been a natural formation, once, but the Saldaeans had built it up over the years with one long slope extending toward the river and a steeper one on the opposite side. In the lower camp, his troops could sleep and eat, and their supplies could be protected, all sheltered from enemy arrows by the steep hillside upon which Ituralde now stood.

Both of his camps, upper and lower, were patchwork things. Some of the tents had been purchased from Saldaean villages, some were of Domani make, and dozens had been brought in by gateway from all over the land. A large number of them were enormous Cairhienin things with striped patterns. They kept the rain off his men, and that was enough.

The Saldaeans certainly knew how to build fortifications. If only Ituralde had been able to persuade them to leave their hiding place in the city of Maradon and come help.

"Now," Ituralde said, "where in—"

He cut off as something darkened the sky. He barely had time to curse and duck away as a group of large objects rained down, arcing high to fall on the upper camp, eliciting howls of pain and confusion. Those weren't boulders: they were corpses. The hulking bodies of dead Trollocs. The Shad-owspawn army had finally set up their trebuchets.

A part of Ituralde was impressed that he'd driven them to it. The siege equipment had undoubtedly been brought to assault Maradon, which was a little to the south. Setting up the trebuchets across the ford to assault Ituralde's lines instead not only would slow the Shadowspawn, but would expose their trebuchets to his counterfire.

He hadn't expected them to hurl carcasses. He cursed as the sky darkened again, more bodies falling, knocking down tents, crushing soldiers.

"Healers!" Ituralde bellowed. "Where are those Asha'man?" He'd pushed the Asha'man hard, since this siege had begun. To the brink of exhaustion. Now he held them back, using them only when Trolloc assaults got too close to the upper camp.

"Sir!" A young messenger with dirt under his fingernails scrambled up from front lines. His Domani face was ashen, and he was still too young to grow a proper mustache. "Captain Finsas reports the Shadowspawn army moving trebuchets into range. There are sixteen by his count."

"Let Captain Finsas know that his bloody timing could be better," Ituralde growled.

"I'm sorry, my Lord. They rolled them down through the pass before we figured out what was going on. The initial volley hit our watchpost. Lord Finsas himself was wounded."

Ituralde nodded; Rajabi was arriving to take command of the upper camp and organize the wounded. Below, a lot of bodies had hit the lower camp, too. The trebuchets could get the height and range to launch over the hill and fall down on his men in their previously sheltered area. He'd have to pull the lower camp back, farther across the plain toward Maradon, which would delay response times. Bloody ashes.

/ never used to swear this much, Ituralde thought. It was that boy, the Dragon Reborn. Rand al'Thor had given Ituralde promises, some spoken, some implied. Promises to protect Arad Doman from the Seanchan. Promises that Ituralde could live, rather than die trapped by the Seanchan. Promises to give him something to do, something important, something vital. Something impossible.

Hold back the Shadow. Fight until help arrived.

The sky darkened again, and Ituralde ducked into the command pavilion, which had a wooden roof as a precaution against siege weapons. He'd feared sprayshot of smaller rocks, not carcasses. The men scattered to help pull the wounded down to the relative safety of the lower camp, and from there across the plain toward Maradon. Rajabi led the effort. The lumbering man had a neck as thick as a ten-year-grown ash and arms nearly as wide. He now hobbled as he walked, his left leg hurt in the fighting and amputated beneath the knee. Aes Sedai had Healed him as best he could, and he walked on a peg. He'd refused to retire through gateways with the badly injured, and Ituralde hadn't forced him. You didn't throw away a good officer because of one wound.

A young officer winced as a bloated carcass thumped against the top of the pavilion. The officer—Zhell—didn't have the coppery skin of a Domani, though he wore a very Domani mustache and a beauty mark on his cheek in the shape of an arrow.

They could not hold against Trollocs here for much longer, not with

the numbers they were fielding. Ituralde would have to fall back, point k point, farther into Saldaea, farther toward Arad Doman. Odd, how he was always retreating toward his homeland. First from the south, now from the northeast.

Arad Doman would be crushed between the Seanchan and the Trollocs. You'd better keep your word, boy.

He couldn't retreat into Maradon, unfortunately. The Saldaeans there had made it quite clear they considered Ituralde—and the Dragon Reborn—

to be invaders. Bloody fools. At least he had a chance to destroy those siege engines.

Another body hit the top of the command pavilion, but the roof held From the stink—and, in some cases, splash—of those deceased Trollocs they'd not chosen the newly dead for this assault. Confident that his officers were seeing to their duties—now was not the time to interfere-Ituralde clasped his hands behind him. Seeing him, soldiers both inside and out of the pavilion stood a little straighter. The best of plans lasted only until the first arrow hit, but a determined, unyielding commander could bring order to chaos by the way he held himself.

Overhead, the storm boiled, clouds of silver and black like a blackened pot hanging above a cook fire, bits of steel shining through at the edges of the crusted soot. It was unnatural. Let his men see that he did not fear it, even when it hailed corpses upon them.

Wounded were carried away, and men in the lower camp began to break it down, preparing to move it farther back. He kept his archers and crossbowmen firing, pikemen ready along the bulwarks. He had a sizable cavalry, but couldn't use them here.

Those trebuchets, if left alone, would wear his men down with boulders and sprayshot—but Ituralde intended to see them burned first, using an Asha'man or a strike force with flaming arrows through a gateway.

If only I could retreat into Maradon. But the Saldaean lord there wouldn't let him in; if Ituralde fell back to the city, he'd get smashed against those walls by the Trollocs.

Bloody, bloody fools. What kind of idiots denied men refuge when an army of Shadowspawn was knocking on their gates?

"I want damage assessments," Ituralde said to Lieutenant Nils. "Prepare the archers for an attack on those siege engines, and bring two of the Asha'man who are on duty. Tell Captain Creedin to watch that Trolloc assault across the ford. They'll redouble their efforts following this barrage, as they'll presume us disordered."

The young man nodded and hastened off as Rajabi limped into the pavilion, rubbing his broad chin. "You guessed right again about those trebuchets. They did set them up to attack us."

"I try to always guess right," Ituralde said. "When I don't, we lose."

Rajabi grunted. Overhead, that storm boiled. In the distance, Ituralde could hear Trollocs calling. War drums beating. Men shouting.

"Something's wrong," Ituralde said.

"This whole bloody war is wrong," Rajabi said. "We shouldn't be here; it should be the Saldaeans. Their whole army, not only the few horsemen the Lord Dragon gave us."

"More than that," Ituralde said, scanning the sky. "Why carcasses, Rajabi?"

"To demoralize us."

It was a not-unheard-of tactic. But the first volleys? Why not use stones when they'd do the most damage, and then move to bodies once surprise had been expended? The Trollocs hadn't a mind for tactics, but the Fades . . . they could be crafty. He'd learned that firsthand.

As Ituralde stared at the sky, another massive volley fell, as if spawned by the dark clouds. Light, where had they gotten that many trebuchets? Enough to throw hundreds of dead bodies.

There are sixteen by his count, the boy had said. Not nearly enough. Were some of those carcasses falling too evenly?

It hit him like a burst of frozen rain. Those clever bloody monsters!

"Archers!" Ituralde screamed. "Archers, watch the skies! Those aren't bodies!"

It was too late. As he yelled, the Draghkar unfurled their wings; well over half of the "carcasses" in this volley were living Shadowspawn, hiding among the falling bodies. After the first Draghkar attack on his army a few days back, he'd left archers on permanent rotation watching the skies day and night.

But the archers didn't have orders to fire on falling bodies. Ituralde continued to bellow as he leaped out of the pavilion and whipped his sword from its scabbard. The upper camp became chaos as Draghkar dropped amid the soldiers. A large number of them fell around the command pavilion, their too-large black eyes shining, drawing men toward them with their sweet songs.

Ituralde screamed as loud as he could, filling his ears with the sound of his own voice. One of the beasts came for him, but his yell prevented him from hearing its croon. It looked surprised—as surprised as something so inhuman could look—as he stumbled toward it, pretending to be drawn, then struck an expert thrust through its neck. Dark blood dribbled down across milky white skin as Ituralde yanked his blade free, still screaming.

He saw Rajabi stumble and fall to the ground as one of the Shadowspawn leaped on him. Ituralde couldn't go to him—he was confronted by another of the monsters himself. In a blessed moment, he noticed balls of fire striking down Draghkar in the air—the Asha'man.

But at the same time, in the distance, he heard the war drums grow louder. As he'd predicted, the churning force of Trollocs would be striking across the ford with as much strength as they ever had. Light, but sometimes he hated being right.

You'd better keep your promise to send me help, boy, Ituralde thought as he fought the second Draghkar, his screaming growing hoarse. Light, but you'd better!

Faile strode through Perrin's camp, the air ringing with chattering voices, grunts of exertion and calls of men giving orders. Perrin had sent one last request to the Whitecloaks for parley, and there had been no reply yet.

Faile felt refreshed. She'd spent the entire night nuzzled against Perrin atop their hill. She'd brought plenty of bedding and blankets. In some ways, the grassy hilltop had been more comfortable than their tent.

The scouts had returned from Cairhien this morning; their report would come soon. For now, Faile had bathed and eaten.

It was time to do something about Berelain.

She crossed the trampled grass toward the Mayener section of camp, feeling her anger rise. Berelain had gone too far. Perrin claimed that the rumors came from Berelain's maids, not the woman herself, but Faile saw the truth. The First was a master of manipulating and controlling rumor. That was one of the best ways to rule from a position of relative weakness. The First did so in Mayene, and she did the same here in camp, where Faile was the stronger party as Perrin's wife.

A pair of Winged Guards stood at the entrance to the Mayener section, their breastplates painted crimson, winged helmets shaped like pots and extending down the backs of their necks. They stood up taller as Faile neared, holding lances that were mostly ornamental, pennons flapping with the golden hawk in flight stenciled on their blue lengths.

Faile had to crane to meet their eyes. "Escort me to your lady," she ordered.

The guards nodded, one holding up a gauntleted hand and waving for two other men from inside the camp to take up the watch. "We were told to expect you," the guard told Faile in a deep voice.

Faile raised an eyebrow. "Today?"

"No. The First simply said that should you come, you were to be obeyed."

"Of course I'm to be obeyed. This is my husband's camp."

The guards did not argue with her, though they probably disagreed.

Berelain had been sent to accompany Perrin, but he had not been given express command over her or her troops.

Faile followed the men. The ground was, by a miracle, actually starting to dry out. Faile had told Perrin that she wasn't bothered by the ru-mors but she was frustrated by Berelain's boldness. That woman, Faile thought. How dare she—

No. No, Faile couldn't continue down that path. A good shouting match would make her feel better, but it would reinforce the rumors. What else would people surmise if they saw her stalk to the First's tent, then scream at her? Faile had to be calm. That would be difficult.

The Mayener camp was arranged with lines of men radiating from a central tent like spokes on a wheel. The Winged Guard didn't have tents—those were with Master Gill—but there was a very orderly arrangement to the groupings. They almost seemed too level, the folded blankets, the piles of lances, the horse poles and the periodic firepits. Berelain's central pavilion was lavender and maroon—salvage from Maiden. Faile maintained her composure as the two towering guards led her up to the tent. One knocked on the post outside for permission to enter.

Berelain's tranquil voice responded, and the guard pushed back the entrance flap for Faile. As she moved to enter, rustling inside made her step back, and Annoura came out. The Aes Sedai nodded to Faile, the overlapping braids around her face swinging. She seemed displeased; she hadn't regained her mistress's favor yet.

Faile took a deep breath, then stepped into the pavilion. It was cool inside. The floor was covered with a maroon and green rug of a twisting ivy pattern. Though the pavilion looked empty without Berelain's usual travel furniture, she did have a pair of sturdy oak chairs and a light table from Maiden.

The First rose. "Lady Faile," she said calmly. Today, she wore the diadem of Mayene. The thin crown had a simple grandeur about it, unornamented save for the golden hawk taking flight as if leaping toward the sunlight streaming in patches through the tent ceiling. Flaps had been removed there to let in the light. The First's dress was gold and green, a very simple belt at her waist, the neckline plunging.

Faile sat in one of the chairs. This conversation was dangerous; it could lead to disaster. But it had to be done.

"I trust you are well?" Berelain said. "The rains of the last few days have not been overly taxing?"

"The rains have been dreadful, Berelain," Faile said. "But I'm not here to talk about them."

Berelain pursed perfect lips. Light, but the woman was beautiful! Faile felt downright dingy by comparison, her nose too large, her bosom too small. Her voice wasn't nearly as melodic as Berelain's. Why had the Creator made people as perfect as Berelain? Was it mockery of the rest of them?

But Perrin didn't love Berelain. He loved Faile. Remember that.

"Very well," Berelain said. "I assumed this discussion would come. Let me promise you that the rumors are absolutely false; nothing inappropriate happened between myself and your husband."

"He has told me that already," Faile said, "and I trust his word over yours."

This made Berelain frown. She was a master of political interactions, possessing a skill and subtlety that Faile envied. Despite her youth, Berelain had kept her tiny city-state free from the much larger and powerful Tear. Faile could only guess how much juggling, political double-dealing and sheer cleverness that must have required.

"So why have you come to me?" Berelain asked, sitting down. "If your heart is at ease, then there is no problem."

"We both know that whether or not you slept with my husband is not an issue here," Faile said, and Berelain's eyes widened. "It isn't what happened, but what is presumed, that angers me."

"Rumors can be found in any place where people are gathered," Berelain said. "Particularly where men gossip."

"Such strong, persistent rumors are unlikely to have happened without encouragement," Faile said. "Now everyone in the camp—including the refugees sworn to me—assumes that you bedded my husband while I was away. This not only makes me look like a fool, but casts a shadow upon Perrin's honor. He cannot lead if people take him for the type of man who will run to the arms of another woman the moment his wife is away."

"Other rulers have overcome such rumors," Berelain said, "and for many of them, the rumors weren't unfounded. Monarchies survive infidelity."

"Perhaps in Illian or Tear," Faile said, "but Saldaea expects better of its monarchs. As do the people of the Two Rivers. Perrin is not like other rulers. The way his men look at him rips him apart inside."

"I think you underestimate him," Berelain said. "He will overcome and he will learn to use rumor for his gain. That will make him stronger as a man and a ruler."

Faile studied the woman. "You don't understand him at all, do you?

Berelain reacted as if she'd been slapped, pulling back. She obviously didn't like the bluntness of this conversation. That might give Faile some slight advantage.

"I understand men, Lady Faile," Berelain said coldly. "And your husband is no exception. Since you have decided to be candid, I will return in kind. You were clever to take Aybara when you did, welding Saldaea to the Dragon Reborn, but do not think that he will remain yours without contest."

Faile took a deep breath. It was time to make her play. "Perrin's reputation has been severely damaged by what you have done, my Lady First. For my own dishonor, I might have been able to forgive you. But not for his."

"I don't see what can be done."

"I do," Faile said. "And I'm pretty certain one of us is going to have to die."

Berelain remained impassive. "Excuse me?"

"In the Borderlands, if a woman finds that another has been bedding her husband, she is given the option of knife combat." That was true, though the tradition was an old one, rarely observed any longer. "The only way to clear my name is for you and me to fight."

"What would that prove?"

"If nothing else, if you were dead, it would stop anyone from thinking that you are still sleeping with my husband behind my back."

"Are you actually threatening me in my own tent?"

"This is not a threat," Faile said, remaining firm. Light, she hoped this went the right way. "This is a challenge."

Berelain studied her, eyes calculating. "I will make a public statement. I will publicly chastise my maids for their rumors, and will tell the camp that nothing happened."

"Do you really think that would stop the rumors? You didn't object to them before my return; that is seen as proof. And, of course, now you would be expected to act as if nothing happened."

'You can't be serious about this . . . challenge."

In regards to my husband's honor, Berelain, I am always serious." She met the woman's eyes, and saw concern there. Berelain didn't want to fight her. And, of course, Faile didn't want to fight Berelain, and not just because she wasn't certain if she could win or not. Though she had always wanted to get revenge on the First for that time when Berelain had taken her knife from her.

"I will make the challenge formally this evening, before the entire camp," Faile said, keeping her voice even. "You will have one day to respond or leave."

"I will not be a party to this foolishness."

"You already are," Faile said, rising. "This is what you set in motion the moment you let those rumors begin."

Faile turned to walk from the tent. She had to work hard to hide her nervousness. Had Berelain seen how her brow prickled with sweat? Faile felt as if she walked on the very edge of a sword. Should word of this challenge get to Perrin, he would be furious. She had to hope that—

"Lady Faile," Berelain said from behind. The First's voice was edged with concern. "Surely we can come to another accommodation. Do not force this."

Faile stopped, heart thumping. She turned back. The First looked genuinely worried. Yes, she believed that Faile was bloodthirsty enough to make this challenge.

"I want you out of Perrin's life, Berelain," Faile said. "I will have that, one way or another."

"You wish me to leave?" Berelain asked. "The tasks the Lord Dragon gave me are finished. I suppose I could take my men and march another direction."

No, Faile didn't want her to go. The disappearance of her troops would be a blow, in the face of that looming Whitecloak army. And Perrin would have need of the Winged Guard again, Faile suspected.

"No," Faile said. "Leaving will do nothing for the rumors, Berelain."

"It will do as much as killing me would," the woman said dryly. "If we fight, and you somehow managed to kill me, all that would be said is that you discovered your husband's infidelity and became enraged. I fail to see how that would help your position. It would only encourage the rumors."

"You see my problem, then," Faile said, letting her exasperation show through. "There seems to be no way to be rid of these rumors."

Berelain studied her. The woman had once promised she would take Perrin. Had all but vowed it. She seemed to have backed off on that, in part, recently. And her eyes showed hints of worry.

She realizes that she let this go too far, Faile thought, understanding. Or course. Berelain hadn't expected Faile to return from Maiden. That was why she'd made such a bold move.

Now she realized she'd overextended herself. And she legitimately thought Faile unhinged enough to duel her in public.

"I never wanted this, Berelain," Faile said, walking back into the tent. "And neither did Perrin. Your attentions are an annoyance to us both."

"Your husband did little to dissuade me," Berelain said, arms folded. "During your absence, there were points where he directly encouraged me."

"You understand him so little, Berelain." It was amazing how the man could be so blind while being so clever in other ways.

"So you claim," Berelain said.

"You have two choices right now, Berelain," Faile said, stepping up to her. "You can fight me, and one of us will die. You're right, that wouldn't nd the rumors. But it would end your chances at Perrin. Either you'd be dead or you'd be the woman who killed his wife.

"Your other choice," Faile said, meeting Berelain's eyes, "is to come up with a way to destroy these rumors once and for all. You caused this mess.

You will fix it."

And there was her gamble. Faile couldn't think of a way out of the situation, but Berelain was much more accomplished in this regard than she was. So Faile came, prepared to manipulate Berelain into thinking she was ready to do something unreasonable. Then let the woman's impressive political acumen attack the situation.

Would it work?

Faile met Berelain's eyes, and allowed herself to feel her anger. Her outrage at what had happened. She was being beaten, frozen and humiliated by their common enemy. And during that, Berelain had the gall to do something like this?

She held the First's eyes. No, Faile did not have as much political experience as Berelain. But she had something the woman didn't. She loved Perrin. Deeply, truly. She would do anything to keep him from being hurt.

The First studied her. "Very well," she said. "So be it. Be proud of yourself, Faile. It is . . . rare that I take myself off a prize I have long desired."

"You haven't said how we could get rid of the rumors." "There may be a method," Berelain said. "But it will be distasteful." Faile raised an eyebrow.

We will need to be seen as friends," Berelain explained. "Fighting, being at odds, this will fuel the rumors. But if we are seen spending time with one another, it will disarm them. That, mixed with a formal renunciation on my part of the rumors, will likely be enough."

Faile sat down in the chair she had been using earlier. Friends? She detested this woman.

It would have to be a believable act," Berelain said, rising and walking over to the serving stand at the corner of the tent. She poured herself some chilled wine. "Only that would work."

"You'll find another man, as well," Faile said. "Someone you can give
your attentions to, for a time at least. To prove that you are not intere
in Perrin."

Berelain raised the cup. "Yes," she said. "I suspect that would help too.

Can you put on such an act, Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara?"

You believed I was ready to kill you over this, didn't you, Faile thought, "I
promise it."

Berelain paused, winecup halfway to her lips. Then she smiled, and drank. "We shall see, then," she said, lowering the cup, "what comes of this"

CHAPTER 19

Talk of Dragons

Mat tugged on a sturdy brown coat. The buttons were brass, but other than that, it was free of ornamentation. Made of a thick wool, it had a few holes from arrows that really should have killed him. One of the holes had a bloodstain around it, but that had mostly been washed out. It was a nice coat. He would have paid good coin for a coat like this one, when he lived back in the Two Rivers.

He rubbed his face, looking in the mirror of his new tent. He had shaved off that bloody beard, finally. How did Perrin manage that bloody itching? The man must have sandpaper for skin. Well, Mat would find another way to disguise himself, when needed.

He had nicked himself a few times while shaving. But it was not as if he had forgotten how to take care of himself. He did not need a manservant to do what he could manage on his own. Nodding to himself, he pulled on his hat and grabbed his ashandarei from the corner of the tent; the ravens on the blade seemed to perch excitedly in anticipation of battles to come. "Bloody right you do," Mat said, resting the ashandarei on his shoulder as he walked out or the tent. He grabbed his pack and slung it over his other shoulder, Starting tonight, he would be spending nights in the city.

He strode through camp, nodding to a group of passing Redarms. He had doubled the watch. He was worried about the gholam, but also about the many military camps in the area. Half were mercenaries, half were the retainers of this minor lord or that, coming to pay respects to the Queen suspiciously arriving after the righting was done.

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No doubt each and every one was professing his heartfelt allegiance to Elayne, explaining that his men supported her all along. Their words probably fell a little flat, since Mat had it on good authority from three separate drunks in taverns that Elayne had used Traveling extensively in recruiting her defense. It was easier to feign a delayed arrival when you were responding to a written message.

"Mat! Mat!"

Mat stopped on the pathway outside his tent as Olver came racing up The boy had taken to wearing a red band around his arm, much as the Redarms did, but he still wore his brown trousers and coat. He was carrying his rolled-up cloth for Snakes and Foxes under one arm and a pack slung over the other.

Setalle stood in the near distance, along with Lussin and Edder, two Redarms that Mat had assigned to watch over her and the boy. They'd be departing for the city soon.

"Mat," Olver said, panting. "You're leaving?"

"I don't have time to play with you now, Olver," Mat said, lowering his ashandarei to the crook of his arm. "I have to go meet with a Queen."

"I know," Olver said. "I figured that since we're both going to town, we could ride together and plan. I have some ideas about how to defeat the snakes and the foxes! We're going to show them, Mat. Burn me, but we bloody will!"

"Who taught you that language?"

"Mat," he said. "This is important! We have to plan! We haven't talked about what we're going to do."

Silently, Mat cursed himself for discussing the quest to rescue Moiraine where Olver could hear. The boy was not going to take it well when he was left behind.

"I need to think about what I'm going to say to the Queen," Mat said, rubbing his chin. "But I guess you're right, planning is important. Why don't you go tell Noal about your ideas?"

"I already did," Olver said. "And Thorn too. And Talmanes."

Talmanes? He was not going with them into the Tower! Light, how much had Olver been spreading the news around?

"Olver," Mat said, squatting down to be on eye level with the boy, "you need to keep quieter. We don't want too many people knowing what we're doing."

"I didn't tell nobody we don't trust, Mat," Olver said. "Don't worry, Most were Redarms."

Great, Mat thought. What would the soldiers think of their commander planning to go off and fight a bunch of creatures from children's stories? Hopefully they would see Olver's comments as the fancies of a young boy.

"Just be careful," Mat said. "I'll come stop by your inn tomorrow, and

can play a game then and talk about it. All right?"

Olver nodded. "All right, Mat. But . . . blood and bloody ashes!" He turned and walked away.

"And stop swearing!" Mat called after him, then shook his head. Bloody soldiers would have Olver corrupted by the time he was twelve.

Mat continued on his way, leaning his spear on his shoulder again. He found Thorn and Talmanes mounted at the front of the camp along with a force of fifty Redarms. Thorn wore an extravagant wine-red coat and trousers, gold work at the arms, with a shirt bearing white lace at the cuffs and a silken cravat tied at the neck. The buttons were of gleaming gold. His mustaches had been trimmed and neatly combed. The entire outfit was new, including the black cloak, its inner lining of gold.

Mat froze in place. How had the man so perfectly transformed from an old scamp of a gleeman into a royal courtier? Light!

"I see from your reaction that the presentation is effective," Thorn said.

"Blood and bloody ashes!" Mat exclaimed. "What happened? Did you take ill from a bad sausage at breakfast?"

Thorn whipped his cloak back, revealing that he had his harp out and at his side. He looked like a court-bard! "I figured that if—after all of these years—I was going to make an appearance in Caemlyn, I should look the part."

"No wonder you've been singing for coin every day," Mat said. "The people in those taverns have way too much money."

Talmanes raised an eyebrow—as good as a grin, from that man. At times, he seemed so dour as to make thunderclouds feel cheerful. He also wore a fine outfit, his of deep cobalt and silver. Mat felt at his cuffs. He could have used some lace. If Lopin had been here, he would have set out the proper outfit without Mat even asking. A little lace was good for a man. Made him look presentable.

Is that what you're wearing to visit the Queen, Mat?" Talmanes asked. "Of course it is." The words left his mouth before he had a chance to think about them. "It's a good coat." He walked over to take Pips' reins, "Good for sparring in, maybe," Talmanes said.

"Elayne is the Queen of Andor now, Mat," Thorn said. "And queens are a particular lot. You should show her respect."

"I am showing her bloody respect," Mat said, handing his spear to one of the soldiers, then climbing into the saddle. He took the spear back, then turned Pips so he could regard Thorn. "This is a good enough coat for a farmer."

"You're not a farmer anymore, Mat," Talmanes said.

"I am too," Mat said stubbornly.

"But Musenge called you—" Thorn began.

"He was mistaken," Mat said. "Just because a man marries someone doesn't mean he suddenly becomes bloody nobility."

Thorn and Talmanes exchanged a look.

"Mat," Thorn said. "That's actually exactly how it works. It's pretty much one of the only ways to become nobility."

"That's the way we do it here, maybe," Mat said. "But Tuon is from Seanchan. Who knows what they do there? We all know how strange they can be. We can't know anything until we talk to her."

Thorn frowned. "I'm certain, from things she said, that—"

"We can't know anything until we talk to Tuon," Mat repeated, louder this time. "Until then, I'm Mat. None of this Prince of Whatever nonsense."

Thorn looked confused, but Talmanes' lips turned ever so slightly up at the side. Burn that man. Mat was inclined to think his solemn nature was all an act. Was he secretly laughing inside?

"Well, Mat," Talmanes said, "you never have made any sense, so why should we expect you to now? Onward, then, to meet the Queen of Andor. Certain you don't want to roll in the mud first?"

"I'll be fine," Mat said dryly, pulling his hat down as a soldier tied his pack to the back of his saddle.

He kicked Pips into motion, and the procession began the now-familiar ride to Caemlyn. Mat spent most of the time going over his plan in his head. He had Aludra's papers tucked into a leather folder, and they included her demands. Every bellfounder in Caemlyn, large quantities or bronze and iron, and powders worth thousands of crowns. And she claimed that was the minimum of what she needed.

How under the Light was Mat going to get bloody Elayne Trakand to give him all that? He would have to do a lot of smiling. But Elayne had proven resistant to his smiles before, and Queens were not like ordinary folk. Most women, they would smile back or they would scowl at you, so you knew where you stood. Elayne seemed the type to smile at you, then toss you in prison all the same.

For once, it would be nice if his luck could see him off somewhere enjoy-pipe and a game of dice, with a pretty serving girl on his knee and no beyond his next throw. Instead, he was married to a Seanchan High Blood and was off to beg the Queen of Andor for her help. How did he get these situations? Sometimes he thought that the Creator must be like Talmanes. Straight of face, but secretly having a grand time laughing at Mat.

His procession passed numerous camps on the open plains around Caemlyn. All mercenaries were required to stay at least a league away, but the forces of the lords could camp closer. That put Mat in a rough place. There was always tension between sell-swords and loyal armsmen, and with the mercenaries so far from Caemlyn, fights were common. The Band was right in the middle of it.

He did some quick figuring based on the trails of campfire smoke he saw twisting into the air. There were at least ten thousand mercenaries in the area. Did Elayne know what a bubbling kettle she was brewing here? Too much heat, and the whole bloody thing would boil over!

Mat's procession drew attention. He had one of the men flying the banner of the Band of the Red Hand, and his men were developing a reputation. By Mat's count, they were the largest single group—mercenary or lord's force—outside Caemlyn's walls. They were as organized and disciplined as a regular army, and were under the leadership of a personal friend of the Dragon Reborn. His men could not help bragging about that, though Mat would much rather that they had kept quiet.

They passed groups of men waiting by the side of the road, curious to catch a glimpse of "Lord Mat." He kept his eyes forward. If they had expected some fop in a rich coat, then they would be disappointed! Though perhaps he could have chosen a better coat. This one was stiff, and the collar itched.

Of course, more than a few seemed to think Talmanes was "Lord Mat" from the way they pointed, probably because of how he was dressed. Bloody ashes!

This conversation with Elayne was going to be tough. But Mat had a hidden card, one he hoped would be enough to get her to look past the expense of Aludra's proposal. Though he was more afraid she would see what he was doing and want to take part in it. And when a woman wanted to be part" of something, that meant she wanted to be in charge.

They approached the gate in Caemlyn's white-gray walls, passing the growing outer city. The soldiers waved him on. Mat gave them a tip of the hat, and Thom gave a flourishing wave to the small crowd gathered here. They cheered. Great. Just bloody great.

The march through the New City was uneventful save for more crowds watching. Would someone recognize his face from those drawings? Mat wanted to get off the main thoroughfares, but Caemlyn's narrow streets were a twisting mess. A force of fifty horsemen was too large to move through those streets.

They eventually passed through the brilliant white walls of the Inner City, where the roads were wider, the Ogier-built buildings less cramped, and the population thinner. Here, they passed more groups of armed men,' including Guardsmen in white and red. Mat could make their camp out ahead, covering the gray paving stones of the courtyard with their tents and horselines.

The Caemlyn palace was like another little city within the city inside the city. It had a low fortified wall, and while its peaks and spires rose into the air, it had more of the look of a war bunker than the Sun Palace did. Odd, how he had never noticed that when he was younger. If Caemlyn fell this palace could hold on its own. They needed more barracks, though, within that wall. This camping out in the courtyard was ridiculous.

Mat took Talmanes, Thorn and a force of ten Redarms as an escort. A tall man in a burnished breastplate, three golden knots on the shoulder of his cloak, waited at the palace entrance. He was a young man, but the way he stood—relaxed, yet poised, hand on the pommel of his sword—indicated he was a practiced soldier. Too bad he had such a pretty face. A life in the military would probably end up wrecking that.

The man nodded to Mat, Thorn and Talmanes. "Lord Cauthon?" he asked Mat.

"Just Mat."

The man raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. "My name is Charlz Guybon. I'll lead you to Her Majesty."

She had sent Guybon himself to escort Mat. He was high-ranking, second-in-command of the armies. That was unexpected. Was Elayne afraid of him, or was she was honoring him? Maybe Guybon had wanted to see Mat for himself. She would not honor Mat, not after making him wait so long to get an audience! A fine greeting for an old friend. His suspicions were confirmed when Guybon did not lead them to the Grand Hall, but down to a quiet area of the Palace.

"I've heard much about you, Master Cauthon," Guybon said. He seemed like one of those stiff soldiers. Solid, but maybe a little too solid-Like a bow without enough spring to it.

"From who?" Mat asked. "Elayne?"

"Mostly rumors around the city. People like to talk about you."

They do? Mat thought. "I didn't do half of what they say," he grumbled, and the other half wasn't my bloody fault." Guybon laughed. "What of the story of you hanging from a tree for nine days?"

"Didn't happen," Mat said, resisting the urge to tug at the scarf around his neck. Nine days? Where did that come from? He had not even hung for nine bloody minutes! Nine seconds had been too long.

"They also say," Guybon continued, "that you never lose at dice or at love, and that your spear never misses its target."

"Wish those second two were true. Burn me, but I wish they were."

"But you do always win at dice?"

"Near enough," Mat said, tugging down the brim of his hat. "But don't spread that one, or I'll never find a game."

"They say you slew one of the Forsaken," Guybon noted.

"Not true," Mat said. Where had that one come from?

"And the stories of you dueling the King of the Aiel invaders in a battle of honor? Did you really win the Dragon Reborn the loyalty of the Aiel?"

"Bloody ashes," Mat said. "I killed Couladin, but it didn't happen in any kind of duel! I ran into him on the battlefield, and one of us had to die. It wasn't bloody well going to be me."

"Interesting," Guybon said. "I thought that one might be true. At least, it's one of the few that could have happened. Unlike. . . ." He trailed off.

"What?" Mat said. They passed an intersection of halls where servants grouped, watching him and the other pass and whispering among themselves.

Guybon looked hesitant. "I'm sure you've heard."

"Doubtful." Burn him! What was next? Had the members of the Band been spreading these rumors? Even they did not know about some of those things!

Well, there's this rumor that says you stepped into death's domain to challenge him and demand answers to your questions," Guybon said, looking more embarrassed. "And that he gave you that spear you hold and foretold to you your own death."

Mat felt a chill. That one was close enough to the truth to be frightening. Silly, I know," Guybon said.

Sure," Mat said. "Silly." He tried to laugh, but it came out as a cough. Guybon regarded him curiously.

Light, Mat realized, he thinks I'm dodging the question! "Only rumors, of course, Mat said quickly. Too quickly, maybe. Blood and bloody ashes!

Guybon nodded, looking thoughtful.

Mat wanted to change the topic, but he did not trust himself to open his bloody mouth. He could see that more and more palace servants had stopped to watch the procession. He felt like cursing some more at thar but then noticed that many of them seemed focused on Thorn.

Thorn had been court-bard right here in Caemlyn. He did not talk about it, but Mat knew he had suffered a falling-out with the Queen Thorn had been in virtual exile ever since, coming to Caemlyn only when pressed.

Morgase was dead now, so this was Thorn returning from his exile it seemed. That was probably why he had dressed so finely. Mat looked down at his coat again. Burn me, I should have worn something nicer.

Guybon led them to a carved wooden door, bearing the roaring Lion of Andor. He knocked softly, received the call to enter, then gestured Mat toward the door. "The Queen will receive you in her sitting room."

"Thorn, you're with me," Mat said. "Talmanes, you watch the soldiers." The nobleman looked crestfallen, but Elayne was undoubtedly going to embarrass Mat, and he did not want Talmanes there to see. "I'll introduce you later," Mat promised. Bloody noblemen. They thought every second thing was an affront to their honor. Mat would have been happy to wait outside!

Mat stepped up to the door, taking a deep breath. He had fought in dozens of skirmishes and battles without growing nervous. Now his hands were shaking. Why did he feel as if he were walking directly into an ambush without a scrap of armor on?

Elayne. As Queen. Burn him, but this was going to hurt. He opened the door and strode in.

His eyes found Elayne immediately. She sat beside a hearth, holding a cup of what appeared to be milk. She looked radiant in a gown of deep red and gold. Beautiful, full red lips that Mat would not have minded kissing, if he had not been a married man. Her red-gold hair seemed to shimmer in the hearthlight, and her cheeks were full of color. She seemed to have gained a little weight. Best not to mention that. Or should he? Sometimes women got angry when you mentioned that they looked different, and sometimes they got angry if you did not notice.

She was a pretty thing. Not as pretty as Tuon, of course. Elayne was far too pale, and too tall, and had too much hair. It was distracting. Still, she was pretty. Seemed a waste as a queen. She would have made an excellent serving girl. Ah well. Somebody had to be Queen.

Mat glanced at Birgitte, who was the only other one in the room. She looked the same. Always did, with that golden braid and high boots, like

the hero from the bloody stories. Which was exactly what she was. It was good to see her again; she was one woman he knew who would not snap at him for speaking the truth.

Thorn stepped in beside him, and Mat cleared his throat. She would expected him to be formal. Well, he was not going to bow or scrape, and

Elayne leaped out of her chair. She ran across the room as Birgitte closed the door. "Thorn, I'm so glad that you're all right!" Elayne grabbed him in an embrace.

"Hello, dear one," Thorn said fondly. "I hear you've done well for yourself and for Andor."

Elayne was crying! Mat pulled off his hat, befuddled. Sure, Thorn and Elayne had been close, but Elayne was Queen now. Elayne turned toward Mat. "It's good to see you, Mat. Do not think that the Crown has forgotten your service to me. Bringing Thorn back to Andor is another debt we owe

you."

"Well, um," Mat said. "It really wasn't anything, you know, Elayne. Burn me. You're Queen! How's that feel?"

Elayne laughed, finally releasing Thom. "Such a way with words you have, Mat."

"I'm not going to bow to you or anything," he warned. "Or bother with that 'Your Majesty' nonsense."

"I wouldn't expect it," Elayne said. "Unless we're in public, of course. I mean, I have to keep up appearances for the people."

"I suppose that's true," Mat agreed. It did make sense. He held out a hand to Birgitte, but she chuckled and gave him a hug, slapping him on the back like an old pal meeting for a mug of ale. And, well, perhaps that was what they were. Without the ale.

He could have used some ale.

"Come, sit," Elayne said, gesturing toward the chairs by the fire. "I'm sorry to make you wait so long, Mat."

"It's nothing," he said. "You're busy."

It's embarrassing," she said. "One of my stewards lumped you with the mercenary groups. It's so hard to keep track of them all! If you wish, I'll give you leave to camp closer to the city. There's not room inside the walls for the Band, I'm afraid."

That won't be needed," Mat said, taking one of the seats. "Letting us move closer is kind enough. Thank you." Thom sat, and Birgitte preferred to stand, though she did join them by the hearth, leaning back against the stones.

"You look well, Elayne," Thorn said. "Is everything going well with the child?"

"Children," Elayne corrected. "There will be twins. And yes, everything is well. Save for me having to be poked and prodded at nearly every opportunity."

"Wait," Mat said. "What?" He glanced again at Elayne's stomach.

Thom rolled his eyes. "Don't you ever listen when you're in the city gambling?"

"I listen," Mat muttered. "Usually." He looked accusingly at Elayne. "Does Rand know about this?"

She laughed. "I should hope he isn't too surprised."

"Burn me!" Mat said. "He's the father!"

"The father of my children is a matter of some speculation in the city," Elayne said solemnly. "And the Crown prefers there to be speculation, for the time. But enough about me! Thom, you have to tell me everything. How did you escape Ebou Dar?"

"Forget Ebou Dar," Birgitte snapped. "How's Olver? Did you find him?"

"We did," Thom said. "And he is well, though I fear the lad is destined for life as a professional soldier."

"Not a bad life," Birgitte said. "Eh, Mat?"

"There are worse," he said, still trying to get his legs underneath him. How had becoming Queen made Elayne less high-and-mighty? Had he missed something? She actually seemed agreeable now!

Well, that was unfair. There were times when she had been agreeable before. They had merely been mixed between times when she had been ordering Mat around. He found himself smiling as Thom related the details of their escape and the capture of Tuon, followed by their travels with Master Luca's menagerie. Drawn from the quiver of a storyteller, the tale sounded a whole lot more impressive than it had been to live. Mat almost thought himself a hero, listening to Thom.

Right before Thom got to the part about Tuon's marriage words, however, Mat coughed and cut in. "And we beat the Seanchan, fled into Mu-randy, and eventually found an Aes Sedai to get us here through a gateway. By the way, have you seen Verin lately?"

"No," Elayne said. Thom eyed Mat with amusement.

"Blast," Mat said. Well, there went his chance to use her for a gateway to the Tower of Ghenjei. He would worry about that later. He took the leather envelope from his belt, then opened it, taking out Aludra's papers. "Elayne," he said, "I need to talk to you."

"Yes, you mentioned 'bellfounders' in your letter. What trouble have you gotten yourself into, Matrim Cauthon?"

"That's not fair at all," he said, spreading out the sheets. "I'm not the one who gets into trouble. If I—"

"You're not going to mention my getting captured in the Stone of Tear again are you?" she asked with a roll of her eyes. He stopped. "Of course not. That happened ages ago. I barely remember

She laughed, the pretty sound ringing in the room. He felt himself blushing. "Anyway, I'm not in trouble. I just need some resources."

"What kind of resources?" Elayne asked, growing curious as he spread out the papers on the table next to her chair. Birgitte leaned down.

"Well," Mat said, rubbing his chin. "There are three bellfounders in the city; I'll need those. And we're going to need some powders. They're listed on this page. And . . . we'll need a little bit of metal." He winced and handed her one of Aludra's lists.

Elayne read the page, then blinked. "Are you mad?"

"Sometimes I think I might be," he said. "But burn me, I think this will be worth the cost."

"What is it?" Elayne asked as Birgitte looked over one of the sheets, then handed it to Elayne.

"Aludra calls them dragons," Mat said. "Thorn says you knew her?"

"Yes, I did," Elayne said.

"Well, these are launching tubes, like the ones for her fireworks. Only they're made of metal, and they're big. And instead of launching nightflowers, they launch these head-sized chunks of iron."

"Why would you want to launch chunks of iron up into the air?" Elayne said, frown deepening.

You don't" Birgitte said, eyes opening wide. "You launch them at someone else's army."

Mat nodded. "Aludra claims that one of these dragons could launch an iron ball as far as a mile."

Mother's milk in a cup!" Birgitte said. "You can't be serious."

She is," Mat said. "And I believe her. You should see what she's created

already, and she claims these will be her masterpiece. Look, she shows here

the dragons firing on a city wall from a mile away. With fifty dragons and

two hundred and fifty solders she could knock down a wall like the one

around Caemlyn in a few hours."

Elayne looked pale. Did she believe him? Would she be angry at him for wasting her time?

"I know that won't be of much use in the Last Battle," Mat said quicly. "Trollocs don't have walls. But look here. I had her design a spreading shot. Fire it on a line of Trollocs from four hundred paces, and one of these dragons will do the work of fifty bowmen. Burn me, Elayne, but we're going to be at a disadvantage. The Shadow can always toss more Trollocs at us than we have soldiers, and the bloody things are twice as hard to kill as a man. We need an advantage. I remember—"

He cut himself off. He had been about to say he remembered the Trolloc Wars, which would not have been a good idea. A man could start some embarrassing rumors that way. "Look," he said. "I know this sounds outrageous, but you have to give it a chance."

She looked up at him, and . . . was she crying again? What had he done?

"Mat, I could kiss you," she declared. "This is exactly what I needed!"

Mat blinked. What?

Birgitte chuckled. "First Norry, now Mat. You'll have to watch yourself, Elayne. Rand will be jealous."

Elayne snorted, looking down at the plans. "The bellfounders aren't going to like this. Most of the craftsmen were looking forward to getting back to daily work, following the siege."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Elayne," Birgitte said. "I've known a craftsman or two in my time. To a person, they complain about royal privilege during war, but as long as the Crown compensates them, they're secretly happy. Steady work is always appreciated. Besides, something like this will make them curious."

"We'll have to keep it secret," Elayne said.

"So you'll do it?" Mat asked, surprised. He had not needed his secret bribe to distract her!

"We'll need proof of one working first, of course," Elayne said. "But if these devices, these dragons, work half as well as Aludra claims . . • well, I'd be a fool not to put every man on them we can!"

"That's right generous of you," Mat said, scratching his head.

Elayne hesitated. "Generous?"

"Building these for the Band."

"For the Band . . . Mat, these will be for Andor!"

"Here now," Mat said. "These are my plans."

"And my resources!" Elayne said. She sat up straight, suddenly becoming more poised. "Surely you see that the Crown could offer a more stable and useful control for the deployment of these weapons."

To the side, Thorn was grinning.

"What are you so happy about?" Mat demanded.

"Nothing," Thorn said. "You do your mother proud, Elayne."

"Thank you, Thorn," she said, favoring him with a smile.

"Whose side are you on?" Mat said.

"Everyone's," Thorn said.

"That's not a bloody side," Mat said, then looked back to Elayne. "I put a lot of effort and thought into getting these plans out of Aludra. I've nothing inst Andor, but I don't trust anyone with these weapons who isn't me."

"And if the Band were part of Andor?" Elayne asked. She really did sound like a queen all of a sudden.

"The Band is beholden to nobody," Mat said.

"That is admirable, Mat," Elayne said, "but it makes you mercenaries. I think that the Band deserves something more, something better. With official backing, you would have access to resources and authority. We could give you a commission in Andor, with your own command structure."

It was actually tempting. Just a little. But it did not matter. He did not think Elayne would be happy to have him in her realm once she knew of his relationship with the Seanchan. He meant to return to Tuon eventually, somehow. If only to work out what she really felt about him.

He had no intention of giving the Seanchan access to these dragons, but he did not fancy giving them to Andor, either. Unfortunately, he had to admit that there was no way he was going to have Andor build them without giving the weapons to the nation, too.

"I don't want a commission for the Band," Mat said. "We're free men, and that's how we like it."

Elayne looked troubled.

"But I'd be willing to split the dragons with you," Mat said. "Some for us, some for you."

"What if" Elayne said, "I built all of the dragons and owned all of

them—but promised that only the Band could use them? No other forces

would have access to them."

"That would be kind of you," Mat said. "Suspicious, though. No offense."

It would be better for me if the noble Houses didn't have these, at

least not at first. They will spread eventually. Weapons always do. I build them and promise to give them to the Band. No commission, just a contract, hiring you for a long term. You can go at any time. But if you do, you leave the dragons behind."

Mat frowned. "Feels like you're wrapping a chain around my neck, Elayne."

"I'm only suggesting reasonable solutions."

"The day you become reasonable is the day I eat my hat," Mat said. "No offense."

Elayne raised an eyebrow at him. Yes, she had become a queen. Just like that.

"I want the right to keep a few of these dragons," Mat said, "if we leave. One-quarter to us, three-quarters to you. But we'll take your contract, and while we're in your employ, only we use them. As you said."

Her frown deepened. Burn him, but she; had grasped the power of those dragons quickly. He could not let her hesitate now. They needed the dragons to go into production immediately. And he was not about to let the chance of having them pass the Band by.

Sighing to himself, Mat reached up and undid the strap at the back of his neck, then pulled the familiar foxhead medallion out of his shirt. The second he removed it, he felt more naked than if he had stripped bare. He set it on the table.

Elayne glanced at it, and he could see a flash of desire in her eyes. "What is that for?"

"It's a sweetener," Mat said, leaning forward, elbows on knees. "You get it for one day if you agree to start production on a prototype dragon this evening. I don't care what you do with the medallion—study it, write a bloody book about it, wear it about. But you return it tomorrow. Your word on it."

Birgitte whistled slowly. Elayne had wanted to get her hands on that medallion the moment she discovered he had it. Of course, so had every other bloody Aes Sedai that Mat had met.

"I get the Band in at least a one-year contract," Elayne said, "renewable. We'll pay you whatever you were earning in Murandy."

How did she know about that?

"You can cancel," she continued, "as long as you provide a month's warning—but I keep four dragons out of five. And any men who wish to join the Andoran military must be given the chance."

"I want one out of four," Mat said. "And a new serving man."

"A what?" Elayne said.

"A serving man," Mat said. "You know, to take care of my clothing. You'd do a better job of picking than I would."

Elayne looked at his coat, then up at his hair. "That," she said, "I'll give you regardless of how the other negotiations go."

"One out of four?" Mat said.

"I get the medallion for three days."

He shivered. Three days, with the ghola?n in town. She would have him dead. It was already a gamble to give it to her for a day. But he could not think of anything else he could offer. "What do you even think you can do with the thing?" he asked.

"Copy it," Elayne said absently, "if I'm lucky."

"Really?"

"I won't know until I study it."

Mat suddenly had the horrifying image of every Aes Sedai in the world earing one of those medallions. He shared a look with Thorn, who seemed equally surprised to hear this.

But what did that matter? Mat could not channel. Before, he had worried that—if she studied it—Elayne might figure a way to touch him with the One Power when he was wearing it. But if she just wanted to copy it well, he found himself relieved. And intrigued.

"There's been something I've been meaning to mention, Elayne," he said. "The gholam is here. In town. It's been killing people."

Elayne remained calm, but he could tell from the way she was even more formal when she spoke that the news worried her. "Then I will be certain to return the medallion to you on time."

He grimaced. "All right," he said. "Three days."

"Very well," she said. "I want the Band to start immediately. I'll be Traveling to Cairhien soon, and I have a feeling they would be a better support force there than the Queen's Guard."

So that was what this was about! Elayne was moving on the Sun Throne. Well, that seemed a good use for the men, at least until Mat needed them. Better than letting them sit around getting lazy and picking fights with sell-swords.

"I agree to that," Mat said, "but Elayne, the Band has to be free to fight in the Last Battle, however Rand wants. And Aludra has to supervise the dragons. I have a feeling that she'll insist that she remain with you if the Band breaks off from Andor."

"I have no issues with that," Elayne said, smiling.

I figured you wouldn't. But, just so we're clear, the Band has control of the dragons until we leave. You can't sell the technology to others."

"Someone will replicate it, Mat," she said.

Copies won't be as good as Aludra's," Mat said. "I promise you that."

Elayne studied him, blue eyes weighing him, judging him. "I'd still rather have the Band as a fully commissioned Andoran force."

"Well, I wish I had a hat made all of gold, a tent that could fly and a norse that leaves droppings of diamonds. But we'll both have to settle with what's reasonable, won't we?"

"It wouldn't be unreasonable to—"

"We'd have to do what you said, Elayne," Mat replied. "I won't have it Some battles aren't worth fighting, and I'm going to decide when my men put themselves at risk. That's that."

"I don't like having men who could leave me at any time."

"You know I won't hold them back merely to spite you," Mat said. "I'll do what's right."

"What you see as being right," she corrected.

"Every man should have that option," he replied,

"Few men use it wisely."

"We want it anyway," Mat said. "We demand it."

She glanced—almost imperceptibly—toward the plans and the medallion on the table. "You have it," she said.

"Deal," he said, standing up, spitting in his hand, and holding it out.

She hesitated, stood and spat in her hand, then held it out to him. He smiled and shook it.

"Did you know that I might ask you to take arms against the Two Rivers?" she asked. "Is that why you demanded the right to leave if you want?"

Against the Two Rivers? Why under the Light would she want to do that? "You don't need to fight them, Elayne."

"We shall see what Perrin forces me to do," she replied. "But let's not discuss that right now." She glanced at Thorn, then reached under her table and pulled out a rolled piece of paper with a ribbon about it. "Please. I want to hear more of what happened during your trip out of Ebou Dar. Will you take dinner with me this evening?"

"We'd be delighted," Thorn said, standing. "Wouldn't we, Mat?"

"I suppose," Mat said. "If Talmanes can come. He'll tear my throat out if I don't at least let him meet you, Elayne. Taking dinner with you will have him dancing all the way back to the camp."

Elayne chuckled. "As you wish. I'll have servants show you to some rooms where you can rest until the time arrives." She handed Thorn the rolled-up paper. "This will be proclaimed tomorrow, if you will it."

"What is it?" Thom asked, frowning.

"The court of Andor lacks a proper court-bard," she said. "I thought you might be interested."

Thom hesitated. "You honor me, but I can't accept that. There are things I need to do in the next little while, and I can't be tied to the court."

"You needn't be tied to the court," Elayne said. "You'll have freedom to leave and go where you wish. But when you are in Caemlyn, I'd have you be known for who you are."

"I..." He took the roll of paper. "I'll consider it, Elayne."

"Excellent." She grimaced. "I'm afraid I have an appointment with my midwife now, but I will see you at dinner. I haven't yet asked what Matrim

meant by calling himself a married man in his letter. I expect a full report! No expurgations!" She eyed Mat, smiling slyly. "Expurgation means 'parts cut out,' Mat. In case you weren't bloody aware."

He put his hat on. "I knew that." What had that word been again? Expirations? Light, why had he mentioned his marriage in that letter? He had hoped it would make Elayne curious enough to see him.

Elayne laughed, gesturing them toward the exit. Thom spared a paternal kiss for her cheek before parting—good that it was paternal! Mat had heard some things about those two that he did not want to believe. With Thom old enough to be her grandfather, no less.

Mat pulled open the door, moving to leave.

"And Mat," Elayne added. "If you need to borrow money to buy a new coat, the Crown can lend you some. Considering your station, you really should dress more nicely."

"I'm no bloody nobleman!" he said, turning.

"Not yet," she said. "You don't have Perrin's audacity in naming yourself to a title. I'll see that you get one."

"You wouldn't dare," he said.

"But—"

"See here," he said as Thom joined him in the hallway. "I'm proud of who I am. And I like this coat. It's comfortable." He clenched his hands into fists, refusing to scratch at his collar.

"If you say so," Elayne said. "I will see you at dinner. I'll have to bring Dyelin. She's very curious to meet you."

With that, she had Birgitte close the door. Mat stared at it vengefully for a moment, then turned toward Thom. Talmanes and the soldiers waited a short distance down the hallway, out of hearing range. They were being given warm tea by some palace servants.

That went well," Mat decided, hands on hips. "I worried she wouldn't bite, but I think I reeled her in pretty well." Though the bloody dice were still rolling in his head.

Thom laughed, clapping him on the shoulder.

"What?" Mat demanded.

Tom just chuckled, then glanced down at the scroll in his other hand. "And this was unexpected as well."

"Well, Andor doesn't have a court-bard," Mat said.

"Yes," Thorn said, looking over the scroll. "But there's a pardon written in here too, for any and all crimes—known and unknown—I may have committed in Andor or Cairhien. I wonder who told her. . . ."

"Told her what?"

"Nothing, Mat. Nothing at all. We have a few hours until dinner with Elayne. What do you say we go buy you a new coat?"

"All right," Mat said. "You think I could get one of those pardons, too if I asked for it?"

"Do you need one?"

Mat shrugged, walking down the hallway with him. "Can't hurt to be safe. What kind of coat are you going to buy me, anyway?"

"I didn't say I'd pay."

"Don't be so stingy," Mat said. "I'll pay for dinner." And bloody ashes, somehow, Mat knew, he would.

CHAPTER
20

A Choice

"You must not speak," Rosil said to Nynaeve. The slender, longnecked woman wore an orange dress slashed with yellow. "At least, speak only when spoken to. You know the ceremony?"

Nynaeve nodded, her heart beating treacherously as they walked into the dungeonlike depths of the White Tower. Rosil was the new Mistress of Novices, and a member of the Yellow Ajah by coincidence.

"Excellent, excellent," Rosil said. "Might I suggest you move the ring to the third finger of your left hand?"

"You may suggest it," Nynaeve said, but did not move the ring. She had been named Aes Sedai. She would not give in on that point.

Rosil pursed her lips, but said nothing further. The woman had shown Nynaeve remarkable kindness during her short time in the White Tower—which had been a relief. Nynaeve had grown to expect that every Yellow sister would regard her with disdain, or at least indifference. Oh, they thought she was talented, and many insisted on being trained by her. But they did not think of her as one of them. Not yet.

This woman was different, and being a burr in her sandal was not a good repayment. "It is important to me, Rosil," Nynaeve explained, "that 1 not give any indication of disrespect for the Amyrlin. She named me Aes Sedai. To act as if I were merely Accepted would be to undermine her words. This test is important—when the Amyrlin raised me, she never said that I need not be tested. But I am Aes Sedai."

Rosil cocked her head, then nodded. "Yes. I see. You are correct."

Nynaeve stopped in the dim corridor. "I want to thank you, and the others who have welcomed me these last days—Niere and Meramor. I had not assumed I would find acceptance here among you."

"There are some who resist change, dear," Rosil said. "It will ever be so But your new weaves are impressive. More importantly, they're effective That earns you a warm welcome from me."

Nynaeve smiled.

"Now," Rosil said, raising a finger. "You might be Aes Sedai in the eyes of the Amyrlin and the Tower, but tradition still holds. No speaking for the rest of the ceremony, please."

The lanky woman continued leading the way. Nynaeve followed, biting off a retort. She wouldn't let her nerves rule her.

Deeper into the Tower they wound, and despite her determination to be calm, she found herself increasingly nervous. She was Aes Sedai, and she would pass this test. She'd mastered the hundred weaves. She didn't need to worry.

Except, some women never returned from the test.

These cellars had a grand beauty to them. The smooth stone floor was leveled carefully. Lamps burned high on the walls; likely, those had required a sister or Accepted to light them with the One Power. Few people came down here, and most of the rooms were used for storage. It seemed a waste to her to put such care in a place rarely visited.

Eventually, they arrived at a pair of doors so large that Rosil had to use the One Power to open them. It's an indication, Nynaeve thought, folding her arms. The vaulted hallways, the enormous door. This is here to show Accepted the importance of what they are about to do.

The enormous, gatelike doors swung open, and Nynaeve forced herself to master her jitters. The Last Battle was looming. She would pass this test. She had important work to be about.

Head raised high, she entered the chamber. It was domed, with stand-lamps around the perimeter. A large ter'angreal dominated the center. It was an oval, narrowed at the top and bottom, that sat unsupported.

Many ter'angreal looked ordinary. That was not the case here: this oval was obviously something worked by the One Power. It was made of metal, but the light changed colors as it reflected off the silvery sides, making the thing seem to glow and shift.

"Attend," Rosil said formally.

There were other Aes Sedai in the room. One from each Ajah, including— unfortunately—the Red. They were all Sitters, an oddity, perhaps because of

Nyaeve's notoriety in the Tower. Saerin from the Brown, Yukiri of the

Gray, Barasine from the Red. Notably, Romanda from the Yellow was there; she had insisted on taking part. She had been hard with Nynaeve so far. Egwene herself had come. One more than normal, and the Amyrlin as well. Nynaeve met the Amyrlin's eyes, and Egwene nodded. Unlike the test tobe raised to Accepted—which was made entirely by the ter'angreal—his test involved the sisters actively working to make Nynaeve prove herself And Egwene would be among the most harsh. To show that she had been right in raising Nynaeve.

"You come in ignorance, Nynaeve al'Meara," Rosil said. "How will you depart?"

"In knowledge of myself," Nynaeve said.

"For what reason have you been summoned here?"

"To be tried."

"For what reason should you be tried?"

"To show that I am worthy," Nynaeve said.

Several of the women frowned, including Egwene. Those weren't the right words—Nynaeve was supposed to say that she wanted to learn whether or not she was worthy. But she was already Aes Sedai, so by definition she was worthy. She just had to prove it to the others.

Rosil stumbled, but continued. "And ... for what would you be found worthy?"

"To wear the shawl I have been given," Nynaeve said. She didn't say it to be arrogant. Once again, she simply stated the truth, as she saw it. Egwene had raised her. She wore the shawl already. Why pretend that she didn't?

This test was administered clad in the Light. She began taking off her dress.

"I will instruct you," Rosil said. "You will see this sign upon the ground." She raised her fingers, forming weaves that made a glowing symbol in the air. A six-pointed star, two overlapping triangles.

Saerin embraced the source and wove a weave of Spirit. Nynaeve suppressed the urge to embrace the Source herself.

Only a little longer, she thought. And then nobody will be able to doubt me.

Saerin touched her with the weave of Spirit. "Remember what must be remembered," she murmured.

That weave had something to do with memory. What was its purpose? The six-pointed star hovered in Nynaeve's vision.

"When you see that sign, you will go to it immediately," Rosil said, "Go at a steady pace, neither hurrying nor hanging back. Only when you

reach it may you embrace the Source. The weaving required must begin immediately, and you may not leave that sign until it is completed."

"Remember what must be remembered," Saerin said again.

"When the weave is complete," Rosil said, "you will see that sign again, marking the way you must go, again at a steady pace, without hesitation."

"Remember what must be remembered."

"One hundred times you will weave, in the order that you have been given and in perfect composure."

"Remember what must be remembered," Saerin said one final time.

Nynaeve felt the weaving of Spirit settle into her. It was rather like Healing. She removed her dress and shift as the other sisters knelt beside the ter'angreal, performing complex weaves of all Five Powers. They caused it to glow brightly, the colors on its surface shifting and changing. Rosil cleared her throat, and Nynaeve blushed, handing her the pile of garments, then took off her Great Serpent ring and placed it on top, followed by Lan's ring—which she normally wore around her neck.

Rosil took the clothing. The other sisters were completely absorbed in their work. The ter'angreal began glowing a pure white in the center, then started to revolve slowly, grinding against the stone.

Nynaeve took a deep breath, striding forward. She paused before the ter'angreal, stepped through and . . .

. . . and where was she? Nynaeve frowned. This didn't look like the Two Rivers. She stood in a village made of huts. Waves lapped against a sandy beach to her left, and the village ran up a slope toward a rocky shelf to her right. A distant mountain towered above.

An island of some sort. The air was humid, the breeze calm. People walked between huts, calling good-naturedly to one another. A few stopped to stare at her. She looked down at herself, realizing for the first time that she was naked. She blushed furiously. Who had taken her clothing? When she found the person responsible she'd switch them so soundly, they wouldn't be able to sit for weeks!

A robe was hanging from a nearby clothesline. She forced herself to remain calm as she walked over and pulled it free. She would find its owner and pay them. She couldn't very well walk about without a stitch. She threw the robe on over her head.

The ground shook, suddenly. The gentle waves grew louder, crashing against the beach. Nynaeve gasped, steadying herself against the clothesline pole. Above, the mountain began spurting smoke and ashes.

Nynaeve clutched the pole as the rocky shelf nearby began to break apart, boulders tumbling down the incline. People yelled. She had to do something! As she looked about, she saw a six-pointed star carved into the ground. She wanted to run for it, but she knew she needed to walk carefully.

Keeping calm was difficult. As she walked, her heart fluttered with rror. She was going to be crushed! She reached the star pattern just as a large shower of stones rumbled toward her, smashing huts. Despite her fear Nynaeve quickly formed the correct weave—a weave of Air that formed a wall. She set it in front of herself, and the stones thudded against the air, forced back.

There were hurt people in the village. She turned from the star pattern to help, but as she did, she saw the same six-pointed star woven in reeds and hanging from the door of a nearby hut. She hesitated.

She could not fail. She walked to the hut and passed through the doorway.

Then she froze. What was she doing in this dark, cold cavern? And why was she wearing this robe of thick, scratchy fibers?

She had completed the first of the hundred weaves. She knew this, but nothing else. Frowning to herself, she walked through the cavern. Light shone through cracks in the ceiling, and she saw a greater pool of it ahead. The way out.

She walked from the cavern to find that she was in the Waste. She raised a hand to shade her eyes from the bright sunlight. There wasn't a soul in sight. She walked forward, feet crunching on weeds and scalded by hot stones.

The heat was overwhelming. Soon each step was exhausting. Fortunately, some ruins lay ahead. Shade! She wanted to run for it, but she had to remain calm. She walked up to the stones, and her feet fell on rock shaded by a broken wall. It was so cool, she sighed in relief.

A pattern of bricks lay nearby in the ground, and they made a six-pointed star. Unfortunately, that star was back out in the sunlight. She reluctantly left the shade and walked toward the pattern.

Drums thumped in the distance. Nynaeve spun. Disgusting brown-furred creatures began to climb over a nearby hill, carrying axes that dripped with red blood. The Trollocs looked wrong to her. She'd seen Trollocs before, though she didn't remember where. These were different. A new breed, perhaps? With thicker fur, eyes hidden in the recesses of their faces.

Nynaeve walked faster, but did not break into a run. It was important to keep her calm. That was completely stupid. Why would she need to—or want to—keep herself from running when there were Trollocs nearby? If she died because she wasn't willing to hasten her step, it would be her own fault.

Keep composure. Don't move too quickly.

She maintained her steady pace, reaching the six-pointed star as the Trollocs drew close. She began the weave she was required to make and split off a thread of Fire. She sent an enormous spray of heat away from her, burning the nearest of the beasts to cinders.

Jaw set against her fear, she crafted the rest of the required weave. She split her weaves a half-dozen times and finished the complicated thing in mere moments.

She set it in place, then nodded. There. Other Trollocs were coming and she burned them away with a wave of her hand.

The six-pointed star was carved into the side of an archway of stone. She walked toward it, trying to keep from looking nervously over her shoulder. More Trollocs were coming. More than she could possibly kill.

She reached the archway and stepped through.

Nynaeve finished the forty-seventh weave, which caused the sounds of bells in the air. She was exhausted. She'd had to make this weave while standing on top of an impossibly narrow tower hundreds of feet in the air. Wind buffeted her, threatening to blow her free.

An archway appeared below, in the dark night air. It seemed to grow right out of the pillar's side a dozen feet below her, parallel to the ground, its opening toward the sky. It held the six-pointed star.

Gritting her teeth, she leaped off the spire and fell through the archway.

She landed in a puddle. Her clothing was gone. What had happened to it? She stood up, growling to herself. She was angry. She didn't know why, but someone had done . . . something to her.

She was so tired. That was their fault, whoever they were. As she focused on that thought, it became more clear to her. She couldn't remember what they'd done, but they were definitely to blame. She had cuts across both of her arms. Had she been whipped? The cuts hurt something fierce.

Dripping wet, she looked around. She'd completed forty-seven of the hundred weaves. She knew that, but nothing else. Other than the fact that somebody very badly wanted her to fail.

She wasn't going to let them win. She rose out of the puddle, determined to be calm, and found some clothing nearby. It was garishly colored, bright pink and yellow with a generous helping of red. It seemed an insult. She put it on anyway.

She walked down a path in the bog, stepping around sinkholes and pools of stagnant water, until she found a six-pointed star drawn in the mud. She began the next weave, which would make a burning blue star shoot into the air.

Something bit at her neck. She slapped her hand at it, killing a blackfly. Well, no surprise that she'd find those in this dank swamp. She would be glad to—

Another bite on her arm. She slapped at it. The very air started to buzz, flies zipping around her. Nynaeve gritted her teeth, continuing the weave. More and more bites prickled on her arms. She couldn't kill them all. Could she get rid of the flies with a weave? She began a weave of Air to create a breeze around her, but was interrupted as she heard screams.

It was faint over the buzzing of the flies, but it sounded like a child trapped in the bog! Nynaeve took a step toward the sounds and opened her mouth to call, but blackflies swarmed into her mouth, choking her. They got at her eyes, and she had to squeeze them shut.

That buzzing. The screams. The biting. Light, they were in her throat! In her lungs!

Finish the weave. You must finish the weave.

She continued, somehow, despite the pain. The sound of the insects was so loud that she could barely hear the whoosh of the fiery star as it blasted into the air. She quickly wove a weave to blow the flies away, and once she did, she looked about. She coughed and trembled. She could feel the flies sticking to the inside of her throat. She didn't see any child in danger. Had it been a trick of her ears?

She did see another six-pointed star, above a door carved into a tree. She walked toward it as the flies buzzed around her again. Calm. She had to be calm! Why? It made no sense! She did it anyway, walking with eyes closed as the flies swarmed her. She reached out, feeling for the door and pulling it open. She stepped through.

She pulled to a stop inside the building, wondering why she was coughing so much. Was she ill? She leaned against the wall, exhausted, angry. Her iegs were covered in scrapes, and her arms itched with some kind of insect bites. She groaned, looking down at her garish clothing. What could possibly have possessed her to wear red, yellow and pink together?

She stood up with a sigh and continued down the rickety hallway. The planks that made up the floor rattled as she walked, and the plaster on the walls was broken and crumbling.

She reached a doorway and peeked in. The small chamber contained four small brass beds; the mattresses had straw peeking from the seams.

Each bed bore a young child clutching a ratty blanket. Two of them were coughing, and all four looked pale and sickly.

Nynaeve gasped, hurrying into the room. She knelt beside the first child, a boy of perhaps four years. She checked his eyes, then told him to cough as she listened at his chest. He had the creeping sickness.

"Who is caring for you?" Nynaeve demanded.

"Mistress Mala runs the orphanage," the child said in a weak voice. "We haven't seen her in a long time."

"Please," a young girl said from the next bed. She had bloodshot eyes, her skin so pale it was practically white. "Some water? Could I have some water?" She trembled.

The other two were crying. Pitiful, weak sounds. Light! There wasn't a single window in the room, and Nynaeve saw roaches scuttling under the beds. Who would leave children in such conditions?

"Hush," she said. "I'm here now. I'll care for you."

She'd need to channel to Heal them. Then . . .

No, she thought. / can't do that. I can't channel until I reach the star.

She would brew draughts, then. Where was her herb pouch? She looked around the room, searching for a source of water.

She froze; there was another room across the hallway. Had that been there before? A rug on its floor bore the symbol of the six-pointed star. She rose. The children whimpered.

"I'll return," Nynaeve said, stepping toward that room. Each step twisted her heart. She was abandoning them. But no, she was only walking into the next room. Wasn't she?

She reached the rug and began to weave. Just this one quick weaving, then she could help. She found herself crying as she worked.

I've been here before, she thought. Or a place like it. A situation such as this.

She found herself more and more angry. How could she channel with those children calling for her? They were dying.

She completed the weave, then watched it blow out jets of air, ruffling her dress. She reached for her braid and held it as a door appeared on the side of the room. A small glass window was set into the top, and it bore the six-pointed star.

She had to continue. She heard the weeping children. Tears in her eyes, heart breaking, she walked to the door.

It grew worse. She left people to be drowned, beheaded and buried alive-One of the worst was when she had to form a weave while villagers were consumed by enormous spiders with bright red fur and crystalline eyes. She hated spiders.

Sometimes she would appear naked. That stopped bothering her. Though she couldn't remember anything specific but the number of the weave she was on, she understood—somehow—that nudity was nothing comparedd to the terrors she'd seen.

She stumbled through a stone archway, memories of a house on fire fading from her mind. This was the eighty-first weave. She remembered that. That and her fury.

She wore a singed dress of sackcloth. How had she burned it? She stood up straight, holding her head, arms throbbing, back feeling whipped, legs and toes bearing cuts and scratches. She was in the Two Rivers. Except, it wasn't the Two Rivers. Not as she remembered it. Some of the buildings smoldered, still burning.

"They're coming again!" a voice yelled. Master al'Vere. Why was he holding a sword? People she knew, people dear to her—Perrin, Master al'Vere, Mistress al'Donel, Aerie Botteger—stood beside a low wall, all holding weapons. Some waved to her.

"Nynaeve!" Perrin called. "Shadowspawn! We need your help!"

Enormous shadows moved on the other side of the wall. Shadowspawn of terrible size—not Trollocs, but something far worse. She could hear roars.

She had to help! She moved toward Perrin, but froze as she saw—across the Green in the other direction—a six-pointed star painted on a hillside.

"Nynaeve!" Perrin sounded desperate. He began striking at something that reached over the wall, tentacles of midnight black. Perrin chopped at them with an axe as one snatched up Aerie and pulled him—screaming—into the darkness.

Nynaeve began to walk toward the star. Calm. Measured.

That was stupid. An Aes Sedai had to be calm. She knew that. But an Aes Sedai also needed to be able to act, to do what was needed to help those who needed it. It didn't matter what it cost her personally. These people needed her.

So she started to run.

Even that didn't feel like enough. She ran to get to the star, but still she left people she loved to fight alone. She knew she couldn't channel until she reached the six-pointed star. That made absolutely no sense. Shadowspawn were attacking. She had to channel!

She embraced the Source, and something seemed to try to stop her. Something like a shield. She pushed it aside with difficulty and Power

flooded her. She began flinging fire at the monster, burning off a tentacle as it grabbed for Perrin.

Nynaeve continued throwing fire until she reached the six-pointed star. There, she wove the eighty-first weave, which created three rings of Fire in the air.

She worked furiously, attacking at the same time. She didn't know the point of creating this weave, but she knew she had to finish it. So she increased the strength of the weave, making the burning rings extremely large. Then she began hurling them at the creatures. Massive halos of) flame crashed into the dark things, killing them.

There was a six-pointed star on the roof of Master al 'Veres inn. Had it been burned there? Nynaeve ignored it, venting her anger at the things with tentacles.

No. This is important. More important than the Two Rivers. I must go on.

Feeling like an utter coward—but knowing it was the right thing to do—she ran to the inn, passing through the doorway.

Nynaeve lay weeping on the ground beside a broken archway. She was on the last of the hundred weaves.

She could barely move. Her face was streaked with tears. She had hollow memories of fleeing battles, of leaving children to die. Of never being able to do enough.

Her shoulder bled. A wolf's bite. Her legs were flayed, as if she'd walked through a long patch of thorns. All across her body were burns and blisters. She was naked.

She rose to her knees, which were scraped and bleeding. Her braid ended in a smoldering stump about a handspan below her shoulders. She retched to the side, shivering.

So sick, so weak. How could she continue?

No. They will not beat me.

She slowly raised herself to her feet. She was in a small room, harsh sunlight leaking through cracks between the wallboards. A bundle of white cloth lay on the ground. She picked it up, unfolding it. It was a white dress with the colors of the Ajahs banded at the bottom. The clothing of an Accepted in the White Tower.

She dropped it. "I am Aes Sedai," she said, stepping over the robe and pushing open the door. Better to go naked than to give in to that lie.

Outside the door, she found another dress, this time yellow. That was more proper. She allowed herself the time to put it on, though she couldn't

stop trembling, and her fingers were so tired she could barely make them

work. Her blood stained the cloth.

Dress on, she inspected her surroundings. She was on a hillside in the Blight, the ground covered in weeds that bore the distinctive dark marks.

Why was there a shack in the Blight, and why had she been inside of it?

She felt so tired. She wanted to go back into the shack and sleep.

No. She would continue. She trudged up the hill. At its top, she looked down on a land covered in broken rubble and pockets of darkness. Lakes, if they could be called that. The liquid looked thick and oily. Dark shapes moved within them. Malkier, she thought, stunned that she recognized the place. The Seven Towers, only rubble now. The Thousand Lakes corrupted. The place of Lan's heritage.

She stepped forward, but her toe hit something. A stone beneath her feet had been carved with a small symbol. The six-pointed star.

She sighed in relief. It was almost through. She began the final weave.

Below, a man stumbled out from behind a mound of rubble, swinging expertly with his sword. She knew him even at a distance. That strong figure, square face, color-shifting cloak and dangerous way of walking.

"Lan!" she screamed.

He was surrounded by beasts that looked like wolves, but too large. They had dark fur, and their teeth flashed as they lunged toward Lan. Darkhounds, an entire pack.

Nynaeve finished the hundredth weave with a start; she hadn't realized she'd continued it. A shower of colorful specks burst into the air around her. She watched them fall, feeling used. She heard a sound over her shoulder, but when she glanced, there was nothing there. Just the shack.

The six-pointed star hung over a door there, the symbol made of bits of gemstones. That door hadn't been there before. She took a step toward the shack, then looked back.

Lan swung about him with his sword, forcing the Darkhounds away. One bit of saliva from those beasts would kill him.

"Lan," she screamed. "Run!"

He didn't hear her. The six-pointed star. She needed to walk to it!

She blinked, then looked down at her hands. In the direct center of each palm was a tiny scar. Almost unnoticeable. Seeing them sparked a memory in her.

Nynaeve . . . I love you . . .

This was a test. She could remember that now. It was a test to force her to choose between him and the White Tower. She'd made that choice once, but she'd known it wasn't real.

This wasn't real either, was it? She raised a hand to her head, mind cloudy. That is my husband down there, she thought. No. I will not play this game!

She screamed, weaving Fire and throwing it toward one of the Darkhounds. The creature burst into flames, but the fire didn't seem to hurt it. Nynaeve stepped forward, throwing more fire. Useless! The hounds just kept attacking.

She refused to give in to her exhaustion. She banished it, growing calm controlled. Ice. They wanted to push her, see what she could do? Well, let it be. She reached out, drawing in an immense amount of the One Power.

Then she wove balefire.

The line of pure light sprang from her fingers, warping the air around it. She hit one of the Darkhounds and seemed to puncture it, the light continuing on into the ground. The entire landscape rumbled, and Nynaeve stumbled. Lan fell to the ground. The Darkhounds leaped at him.

NO! Nynaeve thought, righting herself, weaving balefire again. She blasted another hound, then another. More of the monsters leaped from behind rock formations. Where were they all coming from? Nynaeve strode forward, blasting with the forbidden weave.

Each strike made the ground tremble, as if in pain. The balefire shouldn't puncture the ground like that. Something was wrong.

She reached Lan's side. He had broken his leg. "Nynaeve!" he said. "You must go!"

She ignored his words, kneeling down and weaving balefire as another hound rounded the rubble. Their number was increasing, and she was so tired. Each time she channeled, she felt it would surely be her last.

But it could not be. Not with Lan in danger. She wove a complex Healing, putting every bit of strength she had left into it, mending his leg. He scrambled up and grabbed his sword, turning to fend off a Darkhound.

They fought together, her with balefire, him with steel. But his swings were lethargic, and it took her a few heartbeats longer each time she made the balefire. The ground was shaking and rumbling, ruins crashing to the ground.

"Lan!" she said. "Be ready to run!"

"What?"

With her last ounce of strength, she wove balefire and aimed it directly downward in front of them. The ground undulated in agony, almost like a living thing. The earth split nearby, Darkhounds tumbling in. Nynaeve collapsed, the One Power slipping from her. She was too tired to channel.

Lan grabbed her arm. "We must go!"

She hauled herself to her feet, taking his hand. Together, they ran up the rumbling hillside. Darkhounds howled behind, some of the pack leaping the rift.

Nynaeve ran for all she was worth, clinging to Lan's hand. They crested

the hill. The ground was shaking so terribly, she couldn't believe the shack

still standing. She stumbled down the hill toward it, Lan with her.

He tripped, crying out in pain. His hand slipped from her fingers.

She spun. Behind them, a flood of Darkhounds crested the hilltop, snarling, teeth flashing and spittle flying from their mouths. Lan waved for her to go, his eyes wide.

"No." She grabbed him by the arm and, heaving, hauled him down the slope. Together, they tumbled through the doorway, and . . .

and gasping, Nynaeve fell from the ter'angreal. She collapsed alone on the cold floor, naked, shaking. In a flood, she remembered it all. Each and every horrible moment of the test. Each betrayal, each frustrating weave. The impotence, the screams of the children, the deaths of people she knew and loved. She wept against the floor, curling up.

Her entire body was afire with pain. Her shoulder, legs, arms and back still bled. She was burned to blisters in swaths across her body, and the greater part of her braid was gone. Her unraveled hair fell across her face as she tried to banish the memories of what she had done.

She heard groans from nearby, and through bleary eyes she saw the Aes Sedai in the circle break off their weaves and slump. She hated them. She hated each and every one of them.

"Light!" Saerin's voice. "Someone Heal her!"

Everything was growing blurry. Voices grew muddled. Like sounds under water. Peaceful sounds . . .

Something cold washed over her. She gasped, her eyes opening wide at the icy shock of the Healing. Rosil knelt beside her. The woman looked worried.

The pain left Nynaeve's body, but her exhaustion increased tenfold. And the pain inside ... it remained. Oh, Light. She could hear the children screaming.

"Well," Saerin said from nearby, "seems that she'll live. Now, would someone please tell me what in the name of creation itself that was?" She sounded furious. "I've been a part of many a raising, even one where the woman didn't survive. But I have never, in all of my days, seen a woman put through what this one just suffered."

She had to be tested properly," Rubinde said.

Properly?" Saerin demanded, livid.

Nynaeve didn't have the strength to look at them. She lay, breathing in and out.

"Properly?" Saerin repeated. "That wasn't proper. That was downright, vengeful, Rubinde! Almost any one of those tests was beyond what I've seen demanded of other women. You should be ashamed. All of you. Light, look what you've done to the girl!"

"It is unimportant," Barasine the Red said in a cold voice. "She failed the test."

"What?" Nynaeve croaked, finally looking up. The ter'angreal had fallen dim, and Rosil had fetched a blanket and Nynaeve's clothing. Egwene stood to the side, arms clasped before her. Her face was serene as she listened to the others. She would not have a vote, but the others would, regarding whether Nynaeve had passed the test or not.

"You failed, child" Barasine said, regarding Nynaeve with an emotionless stare. "You did not show proper decorum."

Lelaine of the Blue nodded, looking annoyed to be agreeing with a Red. "This was to test your ability to be calm as an Aes Sedai. You did not show that."

The others looked uncomfortable. You weren't supposed to speak of the specifics of a testing. Nynaeve knew that much. She also knew that most of the time, failing and dying were the same thing. Though she wasn't terribly surprised to hear claims that she'd failed, now that she thought about it.

She had broken the rules of the test. She'd run in order to save Perrin and others. She'd channeled before she should have. She had trouble summoning regret. Every other emotion was, for the moment, consumed by the hollow loss she felt.

"Barasine does have a point," Seaine said, reluctant. "By the end, you were openly furious, and you ran to reach many of the markers. And then there is the matter of the forbidden weave. Most troubling. I do not say you should fail, but there are irregularities."

Nynaeve tried to climb to her feet. Rosil placed a hand on her shoulder to forbid her, but Nynaeve took the arm and used it as support, pulling herself up on unsteady legs. She took the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders, holding it closed at the front.

She felt so drained. "I did what I had to. Who among you would not run if you saw people in danger? Who among you would forbid herself to channel if she saw Shadowspawn attacking? I acted as an Aes Sedai should.

"This test," Barasine said, "is meant to ensure that a woman is capable of dedicating herself to a greater task. To see that she can ignore the distractions of the moment and seek a higher good."

Nynaeve sniffed. "I completed the weaves I needed to. I maintained my focus. Yes, I broke my calm—but I kept a cool enough head to complete my tasks. One should not demand calmness for the mere sake of calmness, and a prohibition on running when there are people you need to save is foolish.

"My goal in this test was to prove that I deserve to be Aes Sedai. Well, then I could argue that the lives of the people I saw were more important than gaining that title. If losing my title is what would be required to save someone's life—and if there were no other consequences—I'd do it. Every time. Not saving them wouldn't be serving a higher good; it would just be selfish."

Barasine's eyes opened wide with anger. Nynaeve turned to walk—with some difficulty—to the side of the room, where she could sit on a bench and rest. The women gathered together to speak softly, and Egwene walked—still serene—over to Nynaeve. The Amyrlin sat down beside her. Though she had been allowed to participate in the test, and create some of the experiences that tested Nynaeve, the choice of the raising would be up to the others.

"You've angered them," Egwene said. "And confused them."

"I spoke the truth," Nynaeve grumbled.

"Perhaps," Egwene said. "But I wasn't speaking of your outburst. During the test, you flouted the orders you were given."

"I couldn't flout them. I didn't remember that I'd been given them. I. . . well, actually I could remember what I was supposed to do, but not the reasons." Nynaeve grimaced. "That's why I broke the rules. I thought they were just arbitrary. I couldn't remember why I wasn't supposed to run, so in the face of seeing people die, it seemed silly to walk."

"The rules are supposed to hold strongly, even though you don't remember them," Egwene said. "And you should not have been able to channel before reaching the marker. That is in the very nature of the test."

Nynaeve frowned. "Then how—"

You've spent too much time in Tel'aran'rhiod. This test ... it seems to function much in the same way as the World of Dreams. What we create in our minds became your surroundings." Egwene clicked her tongue, shaking her head. "I warned them that this might be a danger. Your practice in the World of Dreams made you innately able to break the test."

Nynaeve didn't reply to that, feeling sick. What if she did fail? Being cast out of the Tower now, after getting so close?

"I think your infractions might help you, however," Egwene said softly.

"What?"

"You're too experienced to have been given this test," Egwene explained. "In a way, what happened is proof that you deserved the shawl when I granted it to you. You performed each of the weaves expertly, with speed and skill. I particularly liked the way you used 'useless' weaves, on occasion, to attack the things you saw."

"The fight in the Two Rivers," Nynaeve said. "That one was you, wasn't it? The others don't know the place well enough to create it."

"You can sometimes create visions and situations based on the mind of the woman being tested," Egwene said. "It is an odd experience, using this ter'angreal. One that I am not certain I understand."

"But the Two Rivers was you."

"Yes," Egwene admitted.

"And the last one. With Lan?"

Egwene nodded. "I'm sorry. I thought that if I didn't do it, nobody would—"

"I am glad that you did," Nynaeve said. "It showed me something."

"It did?"

Nynaeve nodded, back against the wall, holding the blanket in place and closing her eyes. "I realized that if I had to choose between becoming an Aes Sedai and going with Lan, I'd choose Lan. What people call me doesn't change anything inside of me. Lan, however ... he is more than a title. I can still channel—I can still be me—if I never become Aes Sedai. But I would never be myself again if I abandoned him. The world changed when I married him."

She felt. . . freed, somehow, realizing it and saying it.

"Pray the others don't realize that," Egwene said. "It would not be good for them to determine that you would place anything before the White Tower."

"I wonder if," Nynaeve said, "we sometimes put the White Tower—as an institution—before the people we serve. I wonder if we let it become a goal in itself, instead of a means to help us achieve greater goals."

"Devotion is important, Nynaeve. The White Tower protects and guides the world."

"And yet, so many of us do it without families," Nynaeve said. "Without love, without passion beyond our own particular interests. So even while we try to guide the world, we separate ourselves from it. We risk arrogance, Egwene. We always assume we know best, but risk making ourselves unable to fathom the people we claim to serve."

Egwene seemed troubled. "Don't voice those ideas too much, at least not today. They're already frustrated enough with you. But this testing was brutal, Nynaeve. I'm sorry. I couldn't be seen favoring you, but perhaps I should have put a stop to it. You did what you weren't supposed to, and that drove the others to be increasingly severe. They saw that sick children hurt you, so they put more and more of them into the test. Many seemed to consider your victories a personal affront, a contest of wills. That drove them to be harsh. Cruel, even."

"I survived," Nynaeve said, eyes closed. "And I learned a great deal. About me. And about us."

She wanted to be Aes Sedai, fully and truly embraced. She wanted it badly. But in the end, if these people chose to refuse her their approval, she knew she could continue on and do what she needed to do anyway.

Eventually, the Sitters—trailed by Rosil—walked up. Nynaeve hauled herself to her feet to be respectful.

"We must discuss the forbidden weave you used," Saerin said, stern.

"It is the only way I know to destroy Darkhounds," Nynaeve said. "It was needed."

"You do not have the right to decide that," Saerin said. "What you did destabilized the ter'angreal. You could have destroyed it, killing yourself and perhaps us. We want you to swear that you will never use that weave again."

"I won't do that," Nynaeve said tiredly.

"And if it means the difference between gaining the shawl or losing it forever?"

"Giving an oath like that would be foolish," Nynaeve said. "I could find myself in a situation where people would die if I didn't use it. Light! I'll be fighting in the Last Battle alongside Rand. What if I were to get to Shayol Ghul and discover that, without balefire, I could not help the Dragon stop the Dark One? Would you have me choose between a foolish oath and the fate of the world?"

"You think you're going to Shayol Ghul?" Rubinde asked, incredulous.

I'm going to be there," Nynaeve said softly. "It is not a question. Rand has asked it of me, though I would have gone if he hadn't."

They shared a look, seeming troubled.

If you're going to raise me," Nynaeve said, "then you'll just have to trust my judgment on balefire. If you don't trust me to know when to use a very dangerous weave and when not to, then I'd rather you not raise me."

I would be careful," Egwene said to the women. "Refusing the shawl to the woman who helped cleanse the taint from saidin—the woman who defeated Moghedien herself in battle, the woman married to the King of Malkier—would set a very dangerous precedent."

Saerin looked at the others. Three nods. Yukiri, Seaine and-surprisingly—Romanda. Three shakes of the head. Rubinde, Barasine, Lelaine. That left only Saerin. The deciding vote.

The Brown turned back to her. "Nynaeve al'Meara, I declare that you have passed this test. Narrowly."

To the side, Egwene let out a soft—almost inaudible—sigh of relief Nynaeve realized she'd been holding her own breath.7

"It is done!" Rosil said, clapping her hands together. "Let no one ever speak of what has passed here. It is for us to share in silence with she who experienced it. It is done."

The women nodded in agreement, even those who had voted against Nynaeve. Nobody would know that Nynaeve had nearly failed. They had probably confronted her about the balefire directly—rather than seeking formal punishment—because of the tradition of not speaking of what happened in the ter'angreal.

Rosil clapped again. "Nynaeve al'Meara, you will spend the night in prayer and contemplation of the burdens you will take up on the morrow, when you don the shawl of an Aes Sedai. It is done." She clapped a third and final time.

"Thank you," Nynaeve said. "But I already have my shawl and—"

She cut off as Egwene gave her a glare. A serene glare, but a glare nonetheless. Perhaps Nynaeve had pushed things far enough tonight already.

"—I will be happy to follow tradition," Nynaeve continued, discarding her objection. "So long as I am allowed to do one very important thing first. Then I will return and fulfill tradition."

Nynaeve needed a gateway to get where she was going. She hadn't specifically told the others she'd be leaving the Tower to see to her task. But she hadn't said she wouldn't, either.

She hustled through the dark camp of tents which sat just outside a partially built wall. The night sky was dim, with those clouds covering it, and fires burned at the perimeter of the camp. Perhaps too many fires. Those here were being extremely cautious. Fortunately, the guards had allowed her into the camp without comment; the Great Serpent ring worked wonders, when applied in the right locations. They'd even told her where to find the woman she sought.

In truth, Nynaeve had been surprised to find these tents outside, rather than inside, the walls of the Black Tower. These women had been sent to bond Asha'man, as Rand had offered. But according to the guards, Egwene s envoy had been made to wait. The Asha'man had said that "others had the first choice," whatever that meant. Egwene probably knew more; she'd sent

messengers back and forth with the women here, particularly to warn them about Black sisters who might be among them. Those they'd known of had vanished before the first messengers arrived.

Nvnaeve hadn't the mind to ask more details at the moment. She had another task. She stepped up to the proper tent, feeling so tired from the testing that she felt she would soon tumble to the ground in a flurry of yellow cloth. A few Warders passed through the camp nearby, watching her with calm expressions.

The tent before her was a simple gray thing. It was lit with a faint glow, and shadows moved inside. "Myrelle," Nynaeve said loudly. "I would speak with you." She was surprised at how strong her voice sounded. She didn't feel that she had much strength remaining.

The shadows paused, and then moved again. The tent flaps rustled, and a confused face peered out. Myrelle wore a blue nightgown that was almost translucent, and one of her Warders—a bear of a man with a thick black beard after the Illianer fashion—sat shirtless on the tent floor inside.

"Child?" Myrelle said, sounding surprised. "What are you doing here?" She was an olive-skinned beauty, with long black hair and rounded curves. Nynaeve had to stop herself from reaching for her braid. It was too short now to tug. That was going to take a lot of getting used to.

"You have something that belongs to me," Nynaeve said.

"Hmm . . . That depends on opinion, child." Myrelle frowned.

"I was raised today," Nynaeve said. "Formally. I passed the testing. We are equals now, Myrelle." She left the second part unsaid—that Nynaeve was the stronger of the two. Not truly equals, then.

"Return tomorrow," Myrelle said. "I am occupied." She moved to turn back into the tent.

Nynaeve caught the woman's arm. "I have never thanked you," she said, though she had to grit her teeth to get the words out. "I do so now. He lives because of you. I realize that. However, Myrelle, this is not a time to push me. Today, I have seen people I love slaughtered, I have been forced to consign children to living torment. I have been burned, scourged and harrowed.

1 swear to you, woman, if you do not pass me Lan's bond this very mo-ment, I will step into that tent and teach you the meaning of obedience. Do not press me. In the morning, I swear the Three Oaths. I'm free of them for one more night."

Myrelle froze. Then she sighed and stepped back out of the tent. "So be it. She closed her eyes, weaving Spirit and sending the weaves into Nynaeve.

It felt like an object being shoved physically into her mind. Nynaeve gasped, her surroundings spinning.e

Myrelle turned and slipped back into her tent. Nynaeve slid down until she was sitting on the ground. Something was blossoming inside her mind An awareness. Beautiful, wonderful.

It was him. And he was still alive.

Blessed Light, she thought, eyes closed. Thank you.

CHAPTER

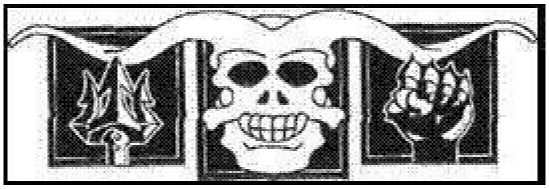

21

An Open Gate

We thought it best," Seonid said, "to let one of us give the full report. I have gathered information from the others for presentation."

Perrin nodded absently. He sat on cushions in the meeting pavilion, Faile at his side. It was crammed full of people again.

"Cairhien is still in a mess, of course," Seonid began. The businesslike Green was a curt woman. Not mean or disagreeable, but even her interactions with her Warders seemed like those of a prosperous farmer with his workers. "The Sun Throne has remained unoccupied for far too long. All know that the Lord Dragon has promised the throne to Elayne Trakand, but she has been struggling to secure her own throne. She has finally done so, by reports."

She looked to Perrin for comment, smelling satisfied. He scratched at his beard. This was important, and he needed to pay attention. But thoughts of his training in the wolf dream kept drawing his mind. "So Elayne is Queen. That must make Rand happy."

The Lord Dragon's reaction is unknown," Seonid continued, as if checking off another item on a list. The Wise Ones made no comments and asked no questions; they sat on their cushions in a little cluster, like rivets on a hinge. Likely, the Maidens had already told them all of this.

"I am reasonably certain that the Lord Dragon is in Arad Doman," Seonid continued. "Several rumors speak of this—though, of course, there are rumors placing him in many places. But Arad Doman makes sense f0 I him as a tactical conquest, and the unrest there threatens to destabili2 the Borderlands. I'm not certain if it's true that he sent the Aiel there o not."

"He did," Edarra said simply. She offered no further explanation.

"Yes," Seonid said. "Well, many of the rumors say that he is planning to meet the Seanchan in Arad Doman. I suspect he would want the clans there to aid him."

That brought up thoughts of Maiden. Perrin imagined damane and Wise Ones at war, the One Power ripping through ranks of soldiers, blood earth and fire spinning in the air. It would be like Dumai's Wells, only worse. He shivered. Anyway, from the visions—and they appeared as Seonid spoke—he knew that Rand was where she said.

Seonid continued, speaking of trade and food resources in Cairhien. Perrin found himself thinking about that strange violet wall he'd seen in the wolf dream. Idiot, he told himself sternly. Keep listening. Light! He really was a bad ruler. He'd had no trouble running at the front of the wolves when they'd let him hunt. Why couldn't he do the same for his own people?

"Tear is rallying troops," Seonid said. "Rumors say the Lord Dragon commanded King Darlin to gather men for war. There is apparently a king in Tear now, by the way. A curious event. Some say that Darlin will march for Arad Doman, though others say it must be for the Last Battle. Still others insist that al'Thor intends to defeat the Seanchan first. All three options seem plausible, and I can't give more without a trip to Tear myself." She eyed Perrin, smelling hopeful.

"No," Perrin said. "Not yet. Rand isn't in Cairhien, but Andor seems stable. It makes the most sense for me to head there and talk to Elayne. She'll have information for us."

Faile smelled worried.

"Lord Aybara," Seonid said, "do you think the Queen will welcome you? With the flag of Manetheren, and your self-endowed title of Lord . . •

Perrin scowled. "Both of those fool banners are down now, and Elayne will see things right, once I explain them to her."

"And my soldiers?" Alliandre said. "You will probably want to ask before moving foreign troops onto Andoran soil."

"You won't be coming," Perrin said. "I've said it before, Alliandre. You'll be in Jehannah. We'll get you there as soon as we deal with the Whitecloaks."

"Has a decision been made about them, then?" Arganda asked, leaning forward, eager and excited.

"They've demanded a battle," Perrin said. "And they ignore my requests for further parley. I've a mind to give them a fight." They began talking of that, though it soon became a discussion of

what it meant to have a king in Tear. Eventually, Seonid cleared her throat

and stered the conversation back to her report.

"The Seanchan are a matter of great discussion in Cairhien," Seonid said "The invaders seem to be focusing on securing their lands, including Altara. They are still expanding in the west, however, and there are pitched battles on Almoth Plain."

"Expanding toward Arad Doman," Arganda said. "There is a battle

brewing there."

"Most likely," Seonid said.

"If the Last Battle comes," Annoura said, "then it would be advantageous to have an alliance with the Seanchan." She seemed thoughtful, legs crossed as she sat on her embroidered blue and yellow silk pillow.

"They have chained Wise Ones," Edarra said, her too-young face growing dark. She smelled dangerous. Angry but cold, like the smell before a person planned to kill. "Not just Shaido, who deserve their fate. If there is an alliance with the Seanchan, it will end as soon as the Car'a'carn's work is finished. Already, many of my people speak of a blood feud with these invaders."

"I doubt Rand wants a war between you," Perrin said.

"A year and a day," Edarra said simply. "Wise Ones cannot be taken gai'shain, but perhaps the Seanchan ways are different. Regardless, we will give them a year and a day. If they do not release their captives when we demand them after that time, they will know our spears. The Car'a'carn cannot demand any more from us."

The pavilion grew still.

"Anyway," Seonid said, clearing her throat. "Once finished with Cairhien, we met up with those who had gone to Andor to check on rumors there."

"Wait," Perrin said. "Andor?"

"The Wise Ones decided to send Maidens there."

"That wasn't the plan," Perrin growled, looking at the Wise Ones. You don't control us, Perrin Aybara," Edarra said calmly. "We needed to know if there were still Aiel in the city or not, and if the Car'a'carn was there. Your Asha'man complied when we asked them for the gateway."

The Maidens could have been seen," he grumbled. Well, he had told Grady to do the gateways as the Aiel asked him, though he'd been refer-ring to the timing of the departure and the return. He should have been more precise.

"Well, they weren't seen," Seonid sounded exasperated, like one talk ing with a foolish child. "At least not by anyone they didn't intend to sperak with." Light! Was it him, or was she beginning to seem a lot like a Wise One? Was that what Seonid and the others were doing in the Aiel camp? Learning to become more stubborn? Light help them all.

"Regardless," Seonid continued, "it was wise of us to visit Caemlyri Rumor cannot be trusted, particularly not when one of the Forsaken was said to be operating in the area."

"One of the Forsaken?" Gallenne asked. "In Andor?"

Perrin nodded, waving for another cup of warmed tea. "Rand said it was Rahvin, though I was in the Two Rivers when the battle happened." The colors swirled in Perrin's head. "Rahvin was impersonating one of the local

noblemen, a man named Gabral or Gabil or some such. He used the Queen__-

made her fall in love with him, or something—and then killed her."

A serving tray hit the ground with a muted peal.

Porcelain cups shattered, tea spraying into the air. Perrin spun, cursing, and several of the Maidens leaped to their feet, clutching belt knives.

Maighdin stood, looking stunned, arms at her sides. The fallen tray lay on the ground before her.

"Maighdin!" Faile said. "Are you all right?"

The sun-haired serving woman turned to Perrin, looking dazed. "If you please, my Lord, will you repeat what you said?"

"What?" Perrin asked. "Woman, what's wrong?"

"You said one of the Forsaken had taken up residence in Andor," Maighdin said, voice calm. She gave him as sharp a look as he'd gotten from any Aes Sedai. "Are you certain of what you heard?"

Perrin settled back on his cushion, scratching his chin. "Sure as I can be. It's been some time, now, but I know Rand was convinced. He fought someone with the One Power in the Andoran palace."

"His name was Gaebril," Sulin said. "I was there. Lightning struck from an open sky, and there was no doubt it was the One Power. It was one of the Forsaken."

"There were some in Andor who claimed the Car'a'carn spoke of this, Edarra added. "He said that this Gaebril had been using forbidden weaves on wetlanders in the palace, twisting their minds, making them think and do as he wished."

"Maighdin, what's wrong?" Perrin asked. "Light, woman, he's dead now! You needn't fear."

"I must be excused," Maighdin said. She walked from the pavilion, leaving the tray and broken porcelain, bone white, scattered on the ground.

"I will see to her later," Faile said, embarrassed. "She is distraught to find that she'd lived so close to one of the Forsaken. She's from Caemlyn,

you know."

The others nodded, and other servants moved forward to clean up the mess. Perrin realized he wasn't going to be getting any more tea. Fool man, he thought. You lived most your life without being able to order tea on command. You won't die now that you can't get a refill by waving your hand.

"Let's move on," he said, settling on his cushions. He could never quite get comfortable on the blasted things.

"My report is finished," Seonid said, pointedly ignoring the servant who was cleaning up porcelain shards in front of her.

"I stand by my earlier decision," Perrin said. "Dealing with the Whitecloaks is important. After that we'll go to Andor, and I'll talk to Elayne. Grady, how are you managing?"

The weathered Asha'man looked up from where he sat in his black coat. "I'm fully recovered from my sickness, my Lord, and Neald almost is as well."

"You still look tired," Perrin said.

"I am," Grady said, "but burn me, I'm better than I was many a day in the field before I went to the Black Tower."

"It's time to start sending some of these refugees where they belong," Perrin said. "With those circles, you can keep a gateway open longer?"

"I'm not right sure. Being in a circle is still tiring. Maybe more so. But I can make much larger gateways with the help of the women, wide enough to drive two wagons through."

"Good. We'll start by sending the ordinary folk home. Each person we see back where they belong will be a stone off my back."

"And if they don't want to go?" Tarn asked. "A lot of them have started the training, Perrin. They know what's coming, and they'd rather face it here—with you—than cower in their homes."

Light! Were there no people in this camp who wanted to go back to their families? "Surely there are some of them who want to go back."

"Some," Tarn said.

Remember," Faile said, "the weak and the aged were sent away by the Aiel."

Arganda nodded. "I've looked in on these troops. More and more of the gat'shain are coming out of their stupor, and when they do, they're hard. Hard as many soldiers I've known."

Some will want to check on family," Tarn said, "but only if you'll let them back. They can see that sky. They know what's coming."

"For now, we'll send back the ones that want to go and remain in their homes," Perrin said. "I can't deal with the others until after I'm done with the Whitecloaks."

"Excellent," Gallenne said eagerly. "You have a plan of attack?"

"Well," Perrin said, "I figure that if they're going to be companionable enough to line up, we'll have at them with my archers and channelers and destroy them."

"I approve of this plan," Gallenne said, "so long as my men can charge to deal with the rabble left at the end."

"Balwer," Perrin said. "Write the Whitecloaks. Tell them we'll fight and that they should pick a place."

As he said the words, he felt a strange reluctance. It seemed such a waste to kill so many who could fight against the Shadow. But he didn't see a way around it.

Balwer nodded, smelling fierce. What had the Whitecloaks done to Balwer? The dusty secretary was fascinated with them.

The meeting began to break up. Perrin stepped to the tent's open side and watched the separate groups leave, Alliandre and Arganda moving toward their section of the camp. Faile walked beside Berelain; oddly, the two were chatting together. Their scents said they were angry, but their words sounded companionable. What were those two up to?

Only a few wet stains on the ground inside the tent remained of the dropped tray. What was wrong with Maighdin? Erratic behavior like that was disturbing; all too often, it was followed by some manifestation of the Dark One's power.

"My Lord?" a voice asked, preceded by a quiet cough. Perrin turned, realizing that Balwer was waiting behind him. The secretary stood with hands clasped before him, looking like a pile of sticks that children had dressed up in an old shirt and coat.

"Yes?" Perrin asked.

"I happened to overhear several items of, ah, some interest while visiting the scholars of Cairhien."

"You found the supplies, right?"

"Yes, yes. I am quite well stocked. Please, a moment. I do believe you'll be interested in what I overheard."

"Go ahead, then," Perrin said, walking back into the pavilion. The last of the others had left.

Balwer spoke in a soft voice. "First off, my Lord, it appears that the Children of the Light are in league with the Seanchan. It is common knowledge now, and I worry that the force ahead of us was planted to—-'

"Balwer," Perrin interrupted, "I know you hate the Whitecloaks, but you've already told me that news a half-dozen times over." "Yes, but—"

"Nothing more about the Whitecloaks," Perrin said, holding up a hand. "Unless it's specific news about this force ahead of us. Do you have any

of that?"

"No, my Lord."

"All right, then. Was there anything else you wanted to tell me?"

Balwer showed no signs of annoyance, but Perrin could smell dissatisfaction. Light knew that the Whitecloaks had plenty to answer for, and perrin didn't blame Balwer for his hatred, but it did grow wearying.

"Well, my Lord," Balwer continued, "I would hazard that the tales of the Dragon Reborn wanting a truce with the Seanchan are more than idle hearsay. Several sources indicate that he has sued their leader for peace."

"But what did he do to his hand?" Perrin asked, dispelling yet another image of Rand from his vision.

"What was that, my Lord?"

"Nothing," Perrin said.

"In addition," Balwer said, reaching into his sleeve, "there are an alarming number of these traveling among cutpurses, slipfingers and footpads in Cairhien." He pulled out a sheet of paper with a sketch of Perrin's face on it. The likeness was alarmingly good. Perrin took the paper, frowning. There were no words on it. Balwer handed him a second one, identical to the first. A third paper followed, this one with a picture of Mat.

"Where did you get these?" Perrin asked.

"As I said, my Lord," Balwer continued, "they are being passed around in certain circles. Apparently there are very large sums of money promised to anyone who can produce your corpse, though I could not determine who would be doing the paying."

"And you discovered these while visiting the scholars at Rand's school?" Perrin asked.

The pinch-faced scribe displayed no emotion.

"Who are you really, Balwer?"

A secretary. With some measure of skill in finding secrets." Some measure? Balwer, I haven't asked after your past. I figure a man deserves to be able to start fresh. But now the Whitecloaks are here, and you have some connection to them. I need to know what it is."

Balwer stood silently for a time. The raised walls of the pavilion rustled.

"My previous employer was a man I respected, my Lord," Balwer said.

"He was killed by the Children of the Light. Some among them may rec-ognize me."

"You were a spy for this person?" Perrin asked.

Balwer's lips turned down distinctly. He spoke more softly. "I merely have a mind for remembering facts, my Lord."

"Yes, you've got a very good mind for it. Your service is useful to me, Balwer. I'm only trying to tell you that. I'm glad you're here."

The man smelled pleased. "If I may say, my Lord, it is refreshing to work for someone who doesn't see my information as simply a means of betraying or compromising those around him."

"Well, be that as it may, I should probably start paying you better" Perrin said.

That gave Balwer a panicked scent. "That won't be necessary."

"You could demand high wages from any number of lords or merchants!"

"Petty men of no consequence," Balwer said with a twitch of his fingers.

"Yes, but I still think you should be paid more. It's simple sense. If you hire an apprentice blacksmith for your forge and don't pay him well enough, he'll impress your regular customers, then open a new forge across the street the moment he can afford to."

"Ah, but you do not see, my Lord," Balwer said. "Money means nothing to me. The information—that is what is important. Facts and discoveries . . . they are like nuggets of gold. I could give that gold to a common banker to make coins, but I prefer to give it to the master craftsman to make something of beauty.

"Please, my Lord, let me remain a simple secretary. You see, one of the easiest ways to tell if someone is not what he seems is to check his wages." He chuckled. "I've uncovered more than one assassin or spy that way, yes I have. No pay is needed. The opportunity to work with you is its own payment."

Perrin shrugged, but nodded, and Balwer withdrew. Perrin stepped out of the pavilion, stowing the pictures in his pocket. They disturbed him. He'd bet these pictures were in Andor, too, placed by the Forsaken.

For the first time, he found himself wondering if he was going to need an army to keep himself safe. It was a disturbing thought.

The wave of bestial Trollocs surged over the top of the hill, overrunning the last of the fortifications. They grunted and howled, thick-fingered hands tearing at the dark Saldaean soil and clutching swords, hooked spears, hammers, clubs and other wicked weapons. Spittle dripped from tusked lips on some, while on others wide, too-human eyes stared out from be-.hind wicked beaks. Their black armor was decorated with spikes.

Ituralde's men stood strong with him at the bottom of the back slope of the hillside. He had ordered the lower camp to disband and retreat as far as they could to the south along the riverbank. Meanwhile, the army had retreated from the fortifications. He hated to surrender the high ground, but getting pushed down that steep hill during an assault would have been deadly. He had room to fall back, so he'd use it, now that the fortifications were lost. He positioned his forces just at the base of the hill, near where the lower camp had once been. The Domani soldiers wore steel caps and had set their fourteen-foot pikes with butts in the dirt, holding them for more stability, steel points toward the towering wave of Trollocs. A classic defensive position: three ranks of pikemen and shieldmen, pikes slanted toward the top of the slope. When the first rank of pikes killed a Trolioc, they'd fall back and pull their weapons free, letting the second rank step forward to kill. A slow, careful retreat, rank by rank. A double row of archers behind began loosing arrows, slamming wave after wave up into the Shadowspawn, dropping bodies down the slope. Those rolled, some still screaming, spraying dark blood. A larger number continued down, over their brothers, trying to get at the pikemen.

An eagle-headed Trolioc died on a pike in front of Ituralde. There were chips along the edges of the thing's beak, and its head—set with predatory eyes—sat atop a bull-like neck, the edge of the feathers coated with some kind of dark, oily substance. The monster screeched as it died, voice low and only faintly avian, somehow forming guttural sounds in the Trolioc language.

"Hold!" Ituralde called, turning and trotting his horse down the line of pikemen. "Keep the formation, burn you!"

The Trollocs surged down the hillside, dying on those pikes. It would be a temporary reprieve. There were too many Trollocs, and even a rotating triple pike line would be overwhelmed. This was a delaying tactic. Behind them, the rest of his troops began their retreat. Once the lines had weakened, the Asha'man would assume the burden of defense, buying time for the pikemen to retreat.

If the Asha'man could manage the strength. He'd pushed them hard. Maybe too hard. He didn't know their limits the way he did for ordinary troops. If they were able to break the Trolioc advance, his army would fall back southward. That retreat would take them past the safety of Maradon, but they would not be allowed in. Those inside had rebuffed all Ituralde's attempts at communication. "We do not abet invaders" had been the reply each time. Bloody fools.

Well, the Trollocs would likely form up around Maradon for a sustained siege, giving Ituralde and his men time to fall back to a more defensible position.

"Hold!" Ituralde called again, riding past an area where the Trolloc press was beginning to show results. Atop one of the hilltop fortifications a pack of wolf-headed Trollocs lurked, wary, while their companions charged down before them. "Archers!" Ituralde said, pointing.

A volley of arrows followed, spraying the wolf-headed Trollocs, or "Minds" as the Dragonsworn in Ituralde's army had started calling them. Trollocs had their own bands and organization, but his men often referred to individuals by the features they displayed. "Horns" for goats, "Beaks" for hawks, "Arms" for bears. Those with the heads of wolves were often among the more intelligent; some Saldaeans claimed to have heard them speaking the human language to bargain with or trick their opponents.

Ituralde knew much about Trollocs now. You needed to know your enemy. Unfortunately, there was huge variety in Trolloc intelligence and personality. And there were many Trollocs who shared physical attributes from various groups. Ituralde swore he'd seen one twisted abomination with the feathers of a hawk but the horns of a goat.

The Trollocs atop the fortification tried to get out of the way of the arrows. A large pack of hulking beasts behind shoved them down the hill with a roar. Trollocs were cowardly things, normally, unless hungry, but if they were whipped into a frenzy, they fought well.

The Fades would follow this initial wave. Once the archers were out of arrows, and Trollocs had softened the men below. Ituralde didn't look forward to that.

Light, Ituralde thought. I hope ive can outrun them. The Asha'man waited in the distance for his order. He wished he had them closer. But he couldn t risk it. They were too important an asset to lose to a stray arrow.

Hopefully, the front ranks of Trollocs would be severely battered by the pikemen, their carcasses twisted and banked against the pikes—-and the Trollocs behind stumbling and falling against their own bloody remnants. Ituralde's remaining Saldaeans would ride as a harrying force at any who got through the Asha'man blasts. Then the pikemen should be able to draw back and follow the rest of the army in retreat. Once past Maradon, they could use gateways to fall back to his next chosen position, a forested pass some ten leagues south.

His men should be able to escape. Should. Light, but he hated being forced to command a too-fast retreat like this.

Stay firm, he told himself, continuing to ride and call out the order to hold. It was important that they hear his voice. That boy is the Dragon Reborn, He'll keep bis promises.

"My Lord!" a voice called. Ituralde's guard split to let a young boy ride up, panting. "My Lord, it's Lieutenant Lidrin!"

"He's fallen?" Ituralde demanded.

"No, my Lord. He's . . ." The boy looked over his shoulder. In the pike line nearby, the soldiers were bulging forward toward the Trolloc wave, rather than falling back.

"What in the Light?" Ituralde said, heeling Dawnweave into motion. The white gelding galloped forward, Ituralde's guard and the young messenger joining him in a thunder of hooves.

He could hear Lidrin's yells despite the roar of the battlefield. The young Domani officer was out in front of the pike lines, attacking the Trollocs with sword and shield, bellowing. Lidrin's men had pushed through to defend him, leaving the pikemen confused and disoriented.

"Lidrin, you fool." Ituralde reined his horse to a halt.

"Come!" Lidrin bellowed, raising his sword up before the Trollocs. He laughed loudly, voice half-mad, face splattered with blood. "Come! I will face you all! My sword thirsts!"

"Lidrin!" Ituralde screamed. "Lidrin!"

The man glanced over his shoulder. His eyes were wide with a crazed kind of glee. Ituralde had seen it before, in the eyes of soldiers who fought too long, too hard. "We're going to die, Rodel," Lidrin called. "This way, I get to take them with me! One or two at least! Join me!"

"Lidrin, get back here and—"

The man ignored him, turning back and pressing forward.

'Get his men back here," Ituralde yelled, gesturing. "Close the pike ranks! Quickly. We can't . . ."

The Trollocs surged forward. Lidrin fell in a spray of blood, laughing. His men were too strongly pressed, and they split down the middle. The pikemen reset themselves, but a fist of Trollocs crashed into them. Some Trollocs fell.

Most didn't.

The nearby creatures screeched and howled at seeing the hole in the defenses. They came, scrambling over bodies at the base of the hill, throwing themselves at the pikemen.

Ituralde cursed, then pushed Dawnweave forward. In war, as in farming, you sometimes had to step in and get knee-deep in the muck. He bellowed as he crashed into the Trollocs. His guard rode in around him, closing the gap. The air became a crashing tempest of metal on metal and grunts of pain.

Dawnweave snorted and danced as Ituralde lashed out with his sword. The warhorse disliked being so close to the Shadowspawn, but he was well trained, a gift from one of Bashere's men. He had claimed that a general on the Borderlands needed an animal who had fought Trollocs before. Ituralde blessed that soldier now.

The fighting was brutal. The leading rank of pikemen, and those behind, began buckling. Ituralde briefly heard Ankaer's voice taking command, screaming at the men to get back into line. He sounded frantic. That was bad.

Ituralde swung, doing Heron on the Stump—a horseback sword form—and taking a bull-headed Trolloc across the throat. A spray of fetid brownish blood spurted forth, and the creature fell back against a boar-headed monster. A large red standard—depicting a goat's skull with a fire burning behind it—rose atop the hill. The symbol of the Ghob'hlin Band.

Ituralde turned his horse, dancing out of the way of a wicked axe blow, then urged his mount forward, driving his sword into the Trollocs side. Around him, Whelborn and Lehynen—two of his best—died as they defended his flank. Light burn the Trollocs!

The entire line was breaking apart. He and his men were too few, but most of his forces had already pulled back. No, no, no! Ituralde thought, trying to extricate himself from the battle and take over the command. But if he pulled back, the Trollocs would break through.

He'd have to risk it. He was ready for problems like this.

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A trumpet sounded retreat.

Ituralde froze, listening with horror to the haunted sound rolling across the battlefield. The horns weren't supposed to blow unless he, or a member of his guard, gave the order personally! It was too soon, far too soon.

Some of the other trumpeters heard the call and took it up, though others did not. They could see that it was far too soon. Unfortunately, that was worse. It meant that half of the pikemen began to pull back while the other half held their position.

The lines around Ituralde burst, men scattering as the Trollocs swarmed over them. It was a disaster, as bad a disaster as Ituralde had ever been part of. His fingers felt limp.

If we fall, Shadowspawn destroy Arad Doman. Ituralde roared, yanking on the reins of his horse and galloping back away from the surging Trollocs. The remaining members of his guard followed.

"Helmke and Cutaris," Ituralde yelled to two of his men, sturdy, longlimbed Domani. "Get to Durhem's cavalry and tell them to attack the center as soon as an opening appears! Kappre, head to Alin's cavalry. Order him to assault the Trollocs on the eastern flank. Sorrentin, go to those Asha'man! I want the Trollocs to go up in flame!"

The horsemen galloped off. Ituralde rode westward, to the place where the pikemen were still holding. He started to rally one of the back ranks and bring it to the bulging section. He almost had it working. But then the Myrddraal came, sliding through the Trolloc ranks like snakes, striking with oily speed, and a flight of Draghkar descended.

Ituralde found himself fighring for his life.

Around him, the battlefield was a terrible mess: ranks destroyed, Trollocs roaming freely for easy kills, Myrddraal trying to whip them into attacking the few remaining pike formations instead.

Fires flew in the air as the Asha'man aimed for the Trollocs, but their fires were smaller, weaker than they had been days ago. Men screamed, weapons clanged, and beasts roared in the smoke beneath a sky of too-black clouds.

Ituralde was breathing hard. His guards had fallen. At least he had seen Staven and Rett die. What of the others? He didn't see them. So many dying. So many. There was sweat in his eyes.

Light, he thought. At least we gave them a fight. Held out longer than I thought possible.

There were columns of smoke to the north. Well, one thing had gone well—that Asha'man Tymoth had done his job. The second set of siege equipment was burning. Some of his officers had called it madness to send away one of his Asha'man, but one more channeler wouldn't have mattered in this disaster. And when the Trollocs attacked Maradon, the lack of those catapults would make a big difference.

Dawnweave fell. A Trolloc javelin that had been meant for Ituralde had fallen low. The horse screamed with the weapon lodged in its neck, blood pulsing down its sweat-frothed skin. Ituralde had lost mounts be-fore, and he knew to roll to the side, but was too off-balance this time. He heard his leg snap as he hit.

He gritted his teeth, determined not to die on his back, and forced himself up into a sitting position. He dropped his sword—heron-mark though it was—and lifted up a broken, discarded pike in a fluid motion and rammed it through the chest of an approaching Trolloc. Dark, stinking blood coated the shaft, spurting down onto Ituralde's hands as the Trolloc screamed and died.

There was thunder in the air. That wasn't odd—there was often thunder from those clouds, often eerily disjointed from the bursts of lightning.

Ituralde heaved, pushing the Trolloc to the side by levering the pike. Then a Myrddraal saw him.

Ituralde reached for his sword, gritting his teeth, but knew he had just seen his killer. One of those things could fell a dozen men. Facing it with a broken leg . . .

He tried to stumble to his feet anyway. He failed, falling backward cursing. He raised his sword, prepared to die as the thing slunk forward, movements like liquid.

A dozen arrows slammed into the Fade.

Ituralde blinked as the creature stumbled. The thunder was getting louder. Ituralde propped himself up, and was amazed to see thousands of unfamiliar horsemen charging in formation through the Trolloc ranks, sweeping the creatures before them.

The Dragon Reborn! He came!

But no. These men flew the Saldaean flag. He looked back. The gates of Maradon were open, and Ituralde's tired survivors were being allowed to limp inside. Fire was flying from the battlements—his Asha'man had been allowed up top to get a vantage on the battlefield.

A force of twenty horsemen broke off and ran down the Myrddraal, trampling it. The last man in the group leaped free of his saddle and hacked at the creature with a hand axe. All across the battlefield, the Trol-locs were run down, shot or lanced.

It wouldn't last. More and more Trollocs were rolling through Ituralde's former fortifications and loping down the slope. But the Saldaean relief would be enough, with those gates open, and with the Asha'man blasting wreaking destruction. The remnants of Ituralde's force were fleeing to safety. He was proud to see Barettal and Connel—the last of his guard—stumbling across the field toward him on foot, their mounts no doubt dead, their uniforms bloodied.

He slid his sword into its scabbard and pulled the javelin from Dawnweave's neck. Supporting himself on it, he managed to stand. A rider from the Saldaean force trotted up to him, a man with a lean face, a hooked nose, and a set of bushy black eyebrows. He wore a short, trimmed beard, and he raised a bloodied sword to Ituralde. "You live."

"I do," Ituralde said as his two guards arrived. "You command this force?"

"For now," the man said. "I am Yoeli. Can you ride?"

"Better that than staying here."

Yoeli reached out a hand and pulled Ituralde into his saddle behind him Ituralde's leg protested with a flare of pain, but there wasn't time to wait for a stretcher.

Two other horsemen took Ituralde's guards onto their horses, and soon they three were riding for the city at a gallop.

"Bless you," Ituralde said. "It took you long enough, though."

"I know." Yoeli's voice sounded oddly grim. "I hope you are worth this, invader, for my actions this day will likely cost my life."

"What?"

The man didn't reply. He simply bore Ituralde on thundering hooves into the safety of the city—such as that safety was, considering the city was now besieged by a force of several hundred thousand Shadowspawn.

Morgase walked out of the camp. Nobody stopped her, though some did give her odd looks. She passed the wooded northern rim. The trees were burloak, spaced apart to allow for their great, spreading arms. She moved beneath the boughs, breathing deeply of the humid air.

Gaebril had been one of the Forsaken.

She eventually found a place where a tiny highland stream filled a cleft between two rocks and created a still, clear pool. The tall rocks around it clustered like an ancient, broken throne built for a giant fifteen spans tall.

The trees bore leaves above, though many looked sickly. A thinner patch of clouds blew past, allowing fingers of sunlight to reach down from the overcast sky. That splintered light shone in rays through the clear water, making patches of light on the pool's bottom. Minnows darted between the patches, as if investigating the light.

Morgase rounded the pool, then settled atop a flat boulder. The sounds of the camp could be heard in the distance. Calling, posts being driven into the ground, carts rattling on pathways.

She stared into the pool. Was there anything more hateful than being

made the pawn of another? Of being forced to dance upon their strings like

a wooden puppet? In her youth, she'd grown well acquainted with bowing

berore the whims of others. That had been the only way for her to stabilize

her rule.

Taringail had tried to manipulate her. In truth, he'd been successful much of the time. There had been others, too. So many who had pushed her this way or that. She'd spent ten years pandering to whichever faction was the strongest. Ten years slowly building alliances. It had worked. She'd eventually been able to maneuver on her own. When Taringail had died hunting, many had whispered that his passing released her, but those close to her had known that she had already gone a long way toward unseating his authority.

She could remember the very day when she'd cast off the last of those who had presumed to be the real power behind the throne. That was the day that, in her heart, she'd truly become Queen. She'd sworn that she'd never let another manipulate her again.

And then, years later, Gaebril had arrived. After that, Valda, who had been worse. At least with Gaebril, she hadn't realized what was happening. That had numbed the wounds.

Footsteps on fallen twigs announced a visitor. The light from above dimmed, the thinner clouds moving on. The shafts of light faded, and the minnows scattered.

The footsteps stopped beside her stone. "I'm leaving," Tallanvor's voice said. "Aybara has given leave for his Asha'man to make gateways, starting with some of the distant cities. I'm going to Tear. Rumors say there's a king there again. He's gathering an army to fight in the Last Battle. I want to be with it."

Morgase looked up, staring ahead through the trees. It wasn't really a forest. "They say you were as single-minded as Goldeneyes," she said softly. "That you would not rest, that you barely took time to eat, that you spent every moment searching for a way to free me."

Tallanvor said nothing.

"I've never had a man do that for me," she continued. "Taringail saw me as a pawn, Thorn as a beauty to be hunted and romanced, and Gareth as a queen to be served. But none of them made me their entire life, their heart. I think Thorn and Gareth loved me, but as something to be held and cared for, then released. I didn't think you'd ever let go."

"I won't," Tallanvor said softly.

"You go to Tear. Yet you said you'd never leave."

"My heart stays here," he said. "I know well what it is to love from afar, Morgase. I'd done it for years before this fool's trip began, and I will do it for years yet. My heart is a traitor. Perhaps some Trolloc will do me a favor and rip it free of my chest."

"So bitter," she whispered.

"You have made it amply clear that my attentions are not wanted. A een and a simple guardsman. Pure foolishness."

"A queen no longer," she said.

"Not in name, Morgase. Just in mind."

A leaf fell from above and struck the pool. With a lobed margin and verdant richness, it should have had a long life yet.

"Do you know the worst part of this?" Tallanvor asked. "It's the hope. The hope I let myself feel. Traveling with you, protecting you, I thought maybe you would see. Maybe you would care. And forget about him"

"Him?"

"Gaebril," Tallanvor snapped. "I can see that you still think of him. Even after what he did to you. I leave my heart here, but you left yours in Caemlyn." From the corner of her eye, she could see him turn away. "Whatever it is you saw in him, I don't have it. I'm only a simple, common, idiot of a Guardsman who can't say the right words. You fawned over

Gaebril, and he all but ignored you. That's how love is. Bloody ashes, I've all but done the same thing with you."

She said nothing.

"Well," he said, "that's why I have to go. You're safe now, and that's all that matters. Light help me, but that's still all that I care about!"

He began to walk away, feet crunching twigs.

"Gaebril was one of the Forsaken," she said.

The crunching twigs stopped.

"He was really Rahvin," she continued. "He took over Andor through use of the One Power, forcing people to do as he said."

Tallanvor hissed, twigs crunching as he hastened back to her. "Are you certain?"

"Certain? No. But it does make sense. We can't ignore what is happening in the world, Tallanvor. The weather, the way food spoils in a heartbeat, the movements of this Rand al'Thor. He is no false Dragon. The Forsaken must be loose again.

What would you do, if you were one of them? Raise up an army and conquer? Or simply stroll into a palace and take the Queen as your consort? Twist her mind so that she lets you do as you wish. You'd gain the resources of an entire nation, all with minimal effort. Barely a finger raised . . ."

She raised her head and stared off into the distance. Northward. Toward Andor. "They call it Compulsion. A dark, foul weave that removes the will from your subject. I'm not supposed to know that it exists.

"You say that I think of him. That is true. I think about him and hate him. Hate myself for what I let him do. And a part of my heart knows that if he were to appear here and demand something from me, I'd give it. I couldn't help myself. But this thing I feel for him—this thing that blends my desire and my hatred like two locks in a braid—it is not love."

She turned and looked down at Tallanvor. "I know love, Tallanvor, and Gaebril never had it from me. I doubt that a creature like him could comprehend love."

Tallanvor met her eyes. His were dark gray, soft and pure. "Woman you give me that monster hope again. Be wary of what lies at your feet."

"I need time to think. Would you refrain, for now, from going to Tear?"

He bowed. "Morgase, if you want anything from me—anything—all you ever need to do is ask. I thought I made that clear. I'll remove my name from the list."

He withdrew. Morgase watched him, her mind a tempest despite the stillness of the trees and pond before her.

CHAPTER
22

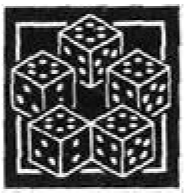

The End of a Legend

At night, Gawyn couldn't see the White Tower's wounds. In darkness, one couldn't tell the difference between a beautifully intricate mural and a wall full of mismatched tiles. At night, the most beautiful of Tar Valon's buildings became another dark lump.

And at night, the holes and scars on the White Tower were patched with a bandage of darkness. Of course, on a night as dark as these clouds caused, one also couldn't tell the Tower's color. White or black; at night, it didn't really matter.

Gawyn walked the White Tower grounds, wearing stiff trousers and coat of red and gold. Like a uniform, but of no specific allegiance. He didn't seem to have a specific allegiance these days. Almost unconsciously, he found himself walking toward the eastern tower entrance as if to climb up to Egwene's sleeping chambers. He set his jaw, turning the other way.

He should have been sleeping. But after nearly a week of guarding Egwene's door at night, he was—as soldiers liked to say—on a midnight lunch. Perhaps he could have stayed in his rooms to relax, but his quarters in the White Tower's barracks felt confining.

Nearby, two small feral cats stalked through tufts of grass, eyes reflecting the torchlight of a guard post. The cats hunkered low, watching him as if considering—for a brief moment—whether or not he'd be worth attack-ing. An unseen owl cruised in the air above, the only evidence of its pass-ing a solitary feather that floated down. It was easier to pretend at night.

Some men lived their entire lives that way, preferring the curtains of dark-ness to the open windows of daylight, because they let them see the world all in shadow.

It was summer now, but though the day had been hot, the night was strangely cold. He shivered at a passing breeze. There hadn't been any murders since the death of that unfortunate White. When would the killer strike again? He—or she—could be moving through the hallways at this moment, searching for a solitary Aes Sedai as those cats searched for mice Egwene had sent him away from her door, but that didn't mean he couldn't be on the watch. What good was it to walk the grounds? He should be indoors, where he had a chance of doing some good. Gawyn made his way to one of the servant entrances.

The low-ceilinged hallway inside was clean and well lit, like the rest of the Tower, though the floor was set with dull gray slate instead of glazed tiles. An open room to his right resounded with laughter and chatting, off-duty guardsmen enjoying time with their comrades. Gawyn gave them barely a glance, but then froze.

He looked back in, recognizing some of the men. "Mazone? Celark? Zang? What are you men about?"

The three looked up with alarm, then chagrin. They were among about a dozen Younglings who were dicing and smoking pipes with the off-duty Tower guardsmen. The Younglings stumbled to their feet and gave salutes, though he was no longer their commander. They didn't seem to realize that.

Celark, foremost among them, hastened over to Gawyn. He was a lean fellow with light brown hair and thick fingers. "My Lord," he said. "Nothing important, my Lord. Just a little harmless fun."

"The Warders don't like this kind of behavior," Gawyn said. "You know that, Celark. If it gets around that you're staying up this late dicing, you'll never convince an Aes Sedai to take you."

Celark grimaced. "Yes, my Lord."

There was something reluctant in that grimace. "What?" Gawyn said. "Out with it, man."

"Well, my Lord," Celark said. "It's that some of us, we aren't so sure that we want to be Warders. Not all of us came here for that, you know.

Some were like you, wanting to train with the best. And the rest of us . . • well, things have changed now."

"What things?" Gawyn asked.

"Foolish things, my Lord," the man said, looking down. "You're right, of course. There's early sparring tomorrow. But, well, we've seen war. We're soldiers now. Being a Warder, it's all a man should aspire to. But some of us, we'd rather not see what we have now end. You know?" Gawyn nodded slowly. "When I first came to the Tower," Celark said, "I wanted nothing more than to be a Warder. Now I don't know that I want to spend my life protect-ing one woman, solitary, roving about the countryside."

"You could be Warder to a Brown or White," Gawyn said. "And stay in the Tower."

Celark frowned. "With all respect, my Lord, I think that might be just as bad. Warders . . . they don't live like other men."

"That's for certain," Gawyn said, eyes lifting upward, toward Egwene's distant quarters. He would not go seeking that door. He forced his gaze back down to Celark. "There's no shame in choosing a different path."

"The others make it sound like there is."

"The others are wrong," Gawyn said. "Gather those of you who want to remain with the Younglings and report to Captain Chubain tomorrow. I'll speak with him. I'll wager he could use you as a division in the Tower Guard. He lost a lot of men in the Seanchan attack."

Celark relaxed visibly. "You'd do that, my Lord?"

"Of course. It was an honor to lead you men."

"Do you think . . . maybe you could join with us?" The youth's voice was hopeful.

Gawyn shook his head. "I've another path to take. But, the Light willing, I'll end up close enough to keep an eye on you." He nodded toward the room. "Go back to your games. I'll speak to Makzim for you as well." Makzim was the stern, thick-armed Warder currently leading the training sessions.

Celark nodded gratefully, hurrying back to the others. Gawyn continued down the corridor, wishing his choices were as easy as those of his men.

Lost in thought, he'd climbed halfway to Egwene's rooms before he stopped to realize what he was doing. / need something to distract me. The hour wasn't too late. Perhaps he could find Bryne and chat.

Gawyn made his way to Bryne's rooms. If Gawyn had a strange position among the Aes Sedai, Bryne's was nearly as odd: Warder to the former Amyrlin, general of Egwene's conquering army, and renowned great captain. Bryne's door was open a crack, emitting a line of light across the blue-tiled corridor. That was his habit when he was in and awake, should one of his officers need him. Many nights Bryne was away, staying at one of his command centers around the island or in a nearby village.

Gawyn knocked softly.

"Come." Bryne's voice was firm and familiar. Gawyn slipped in, then returned the door to its cracked position. Bryne sat at a rickety-looking desk, working on a letter. He glanced at Gawyn. "Just a moment."

Gawyn waited. The walls were papered with maps of Tar Valon, Andor, Cairhien and surrounding regions. Many bore recent notations in red chalk. Bryne was preparing for war. The notations made it clear he felt he'd eventually have to defend Tar Valon itself against Trollocs. Several maps showed villages across the northern part of the countryside, listing their fortifications—if any—and their loyalty to Tar Valon. They'd be used for supply dumps and forward positions. Another map had circles pointing out ancient watchtowers, fortifications and ruins.

There was a methodical inevitability to Bryne's calculations, and a sense of urgency. He wasn't looking to build fortifications, but to use those already in place. He was moving troops into the villages he felt most useful; another map showed progress in active recruitment.

It wasn't until Gawyn stood there—smelling the musty scent of old paper and burning candles—that he felt the reality of the impending war. It was coming soon. The Dragon would break the seals of the Dark One's prison. The place he had told Egwene to meet him, the Field of Merrilor, was marked in bright red on the maps. It was north, on the border of Shienar.

The Dark One. Loose upon the world. Light! It made Gawyn's own problems insignificant.

Bryne finished his letter, sanding the paper, folding it, and reaching for his wax and seal. "It's a little late for calling on people, son."

"I know, but I thought you might be up."

"And so I am." Bryne dribbled wax onto the letter. "What is it you need?"

"Advice," Gawyn said, sitting on a stool.

"Unless it's about the best way to quarter a group of men or how to fortify a hilltop, you'll find my advice lacking. But what is it you want to talk about?"

"Egwene forbade me to protect her."

"I'm certain the Amyrlin had her reasons," Bryne said, calmly sealing the letter.

"Foolish ones," Gawyn said. "She has no Warder, and there is a killer in the Tower." One of the Forsaken, he thought.

"Both true," Bryne said. "But what does that have to do with you?"

"She needs my protection."

"Did she ask for your protection?"

"No"

"Indeed. As I recall, she didn't ask you to come with her into the Tower either nor did she ask for you to begin following her about like a hound that has lost his master."

"But she needs me!" Gawyn said.

"Interesting. The last time you thought that, you—with my help— upset weeks' worth of her work to reunite the White Tower. Sometimes, son, our help is not needed. No matter how freely offered, or how urgent that help may seem."

Gawyn folded his arms, unable to lean against the wall, lest he disturb a map showing orchards across the surrounding countryside. One village near Dragonmount was circled four times, for some reason. "So your advice is to let her remain exposed, perhaps to take a knife in the back."

"I haven't given any advice," Bryne said, leafing through some reports on his desk, his firm face lit by flickering candlelight. "I have only made observations, though I think it curious that you conclude that you should leave her alone."

"I . . . Bryne, she doesn't make sensel"

The corner of Bryne's mouth raised in a wry smile. He lowered his papers, turning to Gawyn. "I warned you that my advice would be of little use. I'm not sure if there are answers that will suit you. But let me ask this: What is it you want, Gawyn Trakand?"

"Egwene," he said immediately. "I want to be her Warder."

"Well, which is it?"

Gawyn frowned.

"Do you want Egwene, or do you want to be her Warder?"

"To be her Warder, of course. And . . . and, well, to marry her. I love her, Bryne."

"It seems to me that those are two different things. Similar, but separate. But, other than things to do with Egwene, what is it that you want?"

Nothing," Gawyn said. "She's everything."

"Well, there's your problem."

"How is that a problem? I love her."

So you said." Bryne regarded Gawyn, one arm on the table, the other resting on his leg. Gawyn resisted the urge to squirm beneath that gaze. "You always were the passionate one, Gawyn. Like your mother and your sister. Impulsive, never calculating like your brother."

Galad doesn't calculate," Gawyn said. "He just acts."

No," Bryne said. "Perhaps I spoke wrong—Galad may not be calculating, but he isn't impulsive. To be impulsive is to act without careful

thought; Galad has given everything a great deal of thought. He's worked out his code of morality that way. He can act quickly and decisively be-cause he's already determined what to do.

"You act with passion. You don't act because of the way you think, but because of the way you feel. In a rush, with a snap of emotion. That gives you strength. You can act when you need to, then sort through the ramifications later. Your instincts are usually good, just like your mother's were. But because of that, you've never had to face what to do when your instincts lead you in the wrong direction."

Gawyn found himself nodding.

"But son," Bryne said, leaning forward. "A man is more than one drive one goal. No woman wants that in a man. It seems to me that men who spend time making something of themselves—rather than professing their devotion—are the ones who get somewhere. Both with women, and with life itself." Bryne rubbed his chin. "So, if I have advice for you, it's this: Find out who you would be without Egwene, and then figure out how to fit her into that. I think that's what a woman—"

"You're an expert on women now?" a new voice asked.

Gawyn turned, surprised, to find Siuan Sanche pushing open the door.

Bryne didn't miss a beat. "You've been there listening long enough, Siuan, to know that's not what the conversation was about."

Siuan snorted, bustling into the room with a pot of tea. "You should be in bed," she said, ignoring Gawyn after a cursory glance.

"Very true," Bryne said casually. "Oddly, the needs of the land don't submit to my whims."

"Maps can be studied in the morning."

"And they can be studied at night. And during the afternoon. Every hour I spend could mean leagues of ground defended if Trollocs break through."

Siuan sighed loudly, handing him a cup, then pouring the tea, which smelled of cloudberry. It was decidedly odd to see Siuan—who, because of her stilling, looked like a woman Gawyn's age—mothering the grizzled General Bryne.

Siuan turned to Gawyn as Bryne accepted his drink. "And you, Gawyn Trakand," she said. "I've been meaning to speak to you. Giving orders to the Amyrlin, telling her what she should do? Honestly. Men seem to think that women are nothing more than their personal messengers, sometimes. You dream up all sorts of ridiculous schemes, then expect us to somehow carry them out."

She eyed him, not looking like she expected any response other than an ashamed lowering of the eyes. Gawyn gave that and then made a hasty exit to avoid further bullying.

He wasn't surprised by anything Bryne had said. The man was nothing if not consistent, and he had repeated the same themes to Gawyn before. Think instead of being impulsive; be deliberate. But he'd spent weeks thinking, his ideas chasing one another in circles like flies trapped in a jar.

He'd gotten nowhere.

Gawyn walked the hallways, noting Chubain's guards posted at regular intervals. He told himself he wasn't climbing to Egwene; he was merely checking on the guards. And yet, he soon found himself in a hallway near the Amyrlin's quarters. Just one hallway over. He'd check on her quickly and . . .

Gawyn froze. What am I doing? he thought.

A lot of his nervousness tonight came from not knowing if Egwene was properly guarded or not. He wouldn't be able to sleep until—

No, he told himself forcefully. This time, I'll do as she asks. He turned to go.

A sound made him hesitate, glancing over his shoulder. Footfalls and clothing rustling. It was too late for novices, but servants might well be delivering late meals. Bryne and Gawyn weren't the only ones who kept unusual hours in the White Tower.

It came again. So soft, barely audible. Frowning, Gawyn slipped off his boots, then sneaked forward to glance around the corner.

There was nothing. Egwene's door—inlaid with gold in the shape of Avendesora—sat closed, the hallway empty. Sighing, Gawyn shook his head, leaning back against the wall to slip his boots back on. He wished Egwene would at least let Chubain set guards at her room. Leaving it unwatched was—

Something moved in the shadow just down from Egwene's doorway. Gawyn froze. There wasn't much of a dark patch there, only a shadow a few inches wide made by an alcove, But as he studied that patch, he had trouble keeping his eyes on it. His gaze slid free, like a dollop of butter on a hot turnip.

It seemed ... it seemed that the darkness was larger than he had originally thought. Why couldn't he look straight at it?

There was a flash of movement, and something spun in the air. Gawyn threw himself to the side, and steel struck stone. One boot on, he dropped the other as he pulled his sword free. The knife that had been thrown for his heart skidded across the tiled floor.

Gawyn peered round the corner, tense. Someone was fleeing down the hallway. Someone wearing all black, a hood over the head.

Gawyn took off after the person, sword held before him, arms pumping, gait awkward as his unbooted foot hit opposite his booted one. The assassin was extremely fast. Gawyn bellowed the alarm, his voice echoing through the silent halls of the Tower; then he cut left. The assassin would have to turn and come up the hallway here to the right.

Gawyn burst into another hallway, charging on a heading that would cut off the assassin. He skidded around the corner.

The hallway was empty. Had the assassin doubled back? Gawyn cursed as he ran forward and reached the original hallway at the other end. It was empty. A doorway, perhaps? All would be dead ends. If Gawyn waited until help came . . .

No, Gawyn thought, spinning. Darkness. Look for darkness. There was a deep patch of it by a doorframe to his left. Far too small to hold anyone, but he had that same sense of disorientation as he looked at it.

A person leaped out, swinging a sword for Gawyn's head. He whipped his blade into Cutting the Reeds, knocking aside the attack. The assassin was much shorter than Gawyn, so he should have had a strong advantage in reach. Yet the assassin moved with a blurring speed, sword darting at Gawyn in a series of thrusts, not using any sword forms Gawyn recognized.

Gawyn fell into Twisting the Wind, as he was forced to act as if he were surrounded. He barely kept the attacker at bay. He could hear yells in the distance—guards responding to his call. He shouted again.

He could sense frustration in the attacker's moves; the assassin had expected to defeat Gawyn quickly. Well, Gawyn had expected the same, but focusing on this opponent was very difficult. Gawyn's blows—when he could make them—hit air when they should have landed on flesh. Gawyn twisted to the side, raising his blade for Boar Rushes Down the Mountain. But that gave the assassin an opening; he flung another knife at Gawyn, forcing him to the side.

The knife clanged against the wall, and the assassin fled down the hallway. Gawyn rushed after, but he couldn't keep up. Soon the assassin was far away, darting to the left. That direction led to a series of intersections.

Such speed, Gawyn thought, stopping, breathing in and out in gasps, hands on knees. It isn't natural. Two of Chubain's guards arrived a moment later, swords at the ready. Gawyn pointed. "Assassin. Listening at Egwene's door. Went that way."

One ran where he pointed. The other went to raise the general alarm.

Light! Gawyn thought. What if I didn't interrupt him listening? What if I interrupted him on his way out?

Gawyn dashed to Egwene's door, fatigue evaporating. Sword out, he tested the door. It was unlocked!

"Egwene!" he cried, throwing the door open and leaping into the room.

There was a sudden explosion of light and a crashing sound. Gawyn found himself wrapped up in something strong: invisible cords, towing him into the air. His sword fell to the ground, and his mouth filled with an unseen force.

And so it was that he found himself hanging from the ceiling, disarmed, struggling, as the Amyrlin herself walked from her bedroom. She was alert and fully dressed in a crimson dress trimmed with gold. She did not look pleased.

Mat sat beside the inn's hearth, wishing the fire were a little less warm. He could feel its heat through the layers of his ragged jacket and white shirt, matched by a pair of workman's thick trousers. The boots on his feet had good soles, but the sides were worn. He did not wear his hat, and his scarf was pulled up around the bottom half of his face as he leaned back in the mountain oak chair.

Elayne still had his medallion. He felt naked without it. He had a shortsword sitting by his chair, but that was mostly for show. A walking staff leaned innocently beside it; he would rather use that, or the knives hidden in his coat. But a sword was more visible, and would make the footpads who sauntered through the streets of Low Caemlyn think twice.

"I know why you're asking after him," Chet said. There was a man like Chet in nearly every tavern. Old enough to have seen men like Mat be born, grow up, and die, and willing to talk of all those years if you got enough drink in them. Or often if you didn't.

The stubble on Chet's long face was dappled silver, and he wore a lopsided cap. His patched coat had once been black, and the red-and-white insignia on his pocket was too faded to read. It was vaguely military, and one did not usually get scars like the thick, angry one on his cheek and neck from a bar fight.

"Aye," Chet continued, "many are askin' after the leader of that Band.

Well, this mug of ale is appreciated, so let me give you some advice. You

walk like you know which end of that sword means business, but you'd be

a fool to challenge that one. Prince of Ravens, Lord of Luck. He faced old death himself and diced for his future, he did. Ain't never lost a fight."

Mat said nothing. He leaned back in his chair. This was his fourth tavern this night, and in three of them he had been able to find rumors about Matrim Cauthon. Barely a lick of truth to them. Blood and bloody ashes'

Oh, sure, there were tales of other people, too. Most about Rand, each one making the colors swirl when he heard them. Tear had fallen to the Seanchan, no Illian, no Rand had defeated them all and was fighting the

Last Battle right now. No! He visited women in their sleep, getting them with child. No, that was the Dark One. No, Mat was the Dark One!

Bloody stories. They were supposed leave Mat alone. Some he could trace back to the Band—like the story of a city full of the dead awakening But many of the people claimed that the stories had come from their uncle or cousin, or nephew.

Mat flicked Chet a copper. The man tipped his hat politely and went to get himself another drink. Mat did not feel like drinking. He had a suspicion that those pictures of him were part of why the stories were spreading so quickly. In the last tavern he had visited, someone had actually pulled out a copy of the sketch—folded and wrinkled—and shown it to him. Nobody had recognized him so far, though.

The hearthfire continued to crackle. Low Caemlyn was growing, and enterprising men had realized that providing rooms and drinks for the transients could make a healthy profit. So shanties had started to become taverns, and those had begun to grow into full inns.

Wood was in high demand, and many of the mercenary bands had taken to woodcutting. Some worked honestly, paying the Queen's levy for claims. Others worked less legally. There had already been hangings for it. Who would have thought? Men hanging for poaching trees? What next? Men hanging for stealing dirt?

Low Caemlyn had changed drastically, roads springing up, buildings being enlarged. A few years, and Low Caemlyn would be a city itself! They'd have to build another wall to close it in.

The room smelled of dirt and sweat, but no more so than other taverns. Spills were quickly cleaned up and the serving girls looked eager to have work. One in particular gave him a quiet smile, refilling his mug and showing some ankle. Mat made sure to remember her; she would be good for Talmanes.

Mat lifted up his scarf enough to drink. He felt like a fool wearing the scarf this way. But it was too hot for a hooded cloak, and the beard had been torture. Even with the scarf on his face, he did not stand out too much in

Low Caemlyn; he was not the only tough walking around with his face ob-scured. He explained that he had a bad scar he wanted to cover; others as-sumed he had a bounty on his head. Both were actually true, unfortunately.

He sat for a time, staring into the dancing flames of the hearth. Chet's warning caused an uncomfortable pit to open in Mat's stomach. The greater his reputation grew, the more likely he would be challenged. There would be great notoriety in killing the Prince of the Ravens. Where had they gotten that name? Blood and bloody ashes!

A figure joined him at the fire. Lanky and bony, Noal looked like a scarecrow who had dusted himself off and decided to go to town. Despite his white hair and leathery face, Noal was as spry as men half his age. When he was handling a weapon, anyway. Other times he seemed as clumsy as a mule in a dining parlor.

"You're quite the notable man," Noal said to Mat, holding out his palms to the fire. "When you stumbled across me in Ebou Dar, I had no idea what illustrious company I'd find myself in. Give this a few more months and you'll be more famous than Jain Farstrider."

Mat hunkered down farther into his chair.

"Men always think it would be a grand to be known in every tavern and every city," Noal said softly. "But burn me if it isn't just a headache."

"What do you know of it?"

"Jain complained about it," Noal said softly.

Mat grunted. Thorn arrived next. He was dressed as a merchant's servant, wearing a blue outfit that was not too fine, but also not in disrepair. He was claiming to have come to Low Caemlyn to determine whether his master would be well advised to put a shopfront here.

Thorn pulled off the disguise with aplomb, waxing his mustaches to points and speaking with a faint Murandian accent. Mat had offered to come up with a backstory for his act, but Thorn had coughed and said that he already had one worked out. Flaming liar of a gleeman.

Thorn pulled up a chair, seating himself delicately, as if he were a servant who thought highly of himself. "Ah, what a waste of my time this was! My master insists that I associate with such rabble as this! And here I find the worst of the lot."

Noal chuckled softly.

"If only," Thorn said dramatically, "I had been instead sent to the camp of the majestic, amazing, indestructible, famous Matrim Cauthon! Then I would certainly have—"

Burn me, Thorn," Mat said. "Let a man suffer in peace."

Thorn laughed, waving over the serving girl and buying drinks for the three of them. He gave her an extra coin and quietly asked her to keep casual ears from getting too close to the hearth.

'Are you sure you want to meet here?" Noal asked.

"It'll do," Mat said. He did not want to be seen back in camp, lest the gholam look there for him.

"All right, then," Noal said. "We know where the tower is, and can get there, assuming Mat procures us a gateway."

"I will," Mat said.

"I haven't been able to find anyone who has gone inside," Noal continued

"Some say it's haunted," Thorn said, taking a slurp from his mug. "Others say it's a relic from the Age of Legends. The sides are said to be of smooth steel, without an opening. I did find a captain's widow's younger son who once heard a story of someone who found great treasures in the tower. He didn't say how the lad had gotten in, though."

"We know how to get in," Mat said.

"Olver's story?" Noal asked skeptically.

"It's the best we have," Mat said. "Look, the game and the rhyme are about the Aelfinn and Eelfinn. People knew about them once. Those bloody archways are proof of that. So they left the game and the rhyme as warning."

"That game can't be won, Mat," Noal said, rubbing his leathery chin.

"And that's the point of it. You need to cheat."

"But maybe we should try a deal," Thorn said, playing with the waxed tip of a mustache. "They did give you answers to your questions."

"Bloody frustrating ones," Mat said. He had not wanted to tell Thorn and Noal about his questions—he still had not told them what he had asked.

"But they did answer," Thorn said. "It sounds like they had some kind of deal with the Aes Sedai. If we knew what it was the Aes Sedai had that the snakes and foxes wanted—the reason they were willing to bargain-—then maybe we could trade it to them for Moiraine."

"If she's still alive," Noal said grimly.

"She is," Thorn said, staring straight ahead. "Light send it. She has to be alive."

"We know what they want." Mat glanced at those flames.

"What?" Noal asked.

"Us," Mat replied. "Look, they can see what's going to happen. They did it to me, they did it to Moiraine, if that letter is any clue. They knew she would leave a letter for you, Thorn. They knew it. And they still answered her questions."

"Maybe they had to," Thorn said.

"Yes, but they don't have to answer straightforwardly," Mat said. "They didn't with me. They answered knowing she would come back to them, And they gave me what they did knowing I'd get pulled back, too. They want me. They want us."

"You don't know that for certain, Mat." Thom set his mug of ale on the floor between his feet and got out his pipe. To Mat's right, men cheered a dice game. "They can answer questions, but that doesn't mean they know everything. Could be like Aes Sedai foretellings."

Mat shook his head. The creatures put memories into his head. He figured they were the memories of people who had touched the tower or been into it. The Aelfinn and the Eelfinn had those memories, and burn him they probably had his, too. Could they watch him, see through his eyes?

He wished again for his medallion, though it would do no good against them. They were not Aes Sedai; they would not use channeling. "They do know things, Thom," Mat said. "They're watching. We won't surprise them."

"Makes them hard to defeat, then," Thom said, lighting a tinder twig with the fire, then using it to light his pipe. "We can't win."

"Unless we break the rules," Mat repeated.

"But they'll know what we're doing," Thom said, "if what you say is true. So we should trade with them."

"And what did Moiraine say, Thom?" Mat said. "In that letter you read every night."

Thom puffed on his pipe, raising an absent hand to his breast pocket, where he kept the letter. "She said to remember what we knew of the game."

"She knows there's no way to win when dealing with them," Mat said. No trades, Thom, no bargains. We go in fighting and we don't leave until we have her."

Thom hesitated for a moment, then nodded, his pipe beginning to puff.

Courage to strengthen," Noal said. "Well, we have enough of that, with Mat's luck."

You don't have to be part of this, you know, Noal," Mat said. "You have no reason to risk yourself on this."

"I'm going," Noal said. "I've seen a lot of places. Most places, actually. But never this one." He hesitated. "It's something I need to do. And that's the end of it."

"Very well," Mat said.

"Fire to blind," Noal said. "What do we have?"

"Lanterns and torches," Mat said, knocking his foot against the sack beside his chair. "And some of those firesticks from Aludra, so we can light them. A few surprises from her, too."

"Fireworks?" Noal asked.

"And a few of those exploding cylinders we used against the Seanchan. She calls them roarsticks."

Thorn whistled. "She let you have some?"

"Two. When I presented her with Elayne's agreement, she was ready to let me have almost anything I asked for." Mat grimaced. "She wanted to come along to light them. Herself! Burn me, but that was a tough argument to end. But we've got a whole lot of nightflowers." He tapped the sack beside his chair with the edge of his foot.

"You brought them?" Thorn asked.

"I wanted to keep them close," Mat said. "And she only gave them to me today. They're not going to explode by accident, Thorn. That doesn't happen very often."

"Well at least move them back from the hearth!" Thorn said. He glanced at his pipe and cursed, then scooted his chair a few inches from Mat.

"Next," Noal said, "music to dazzle."

"I got us a variety," Thorn said. "I'll bring my harp and flute, but I found us some hand drums and hand cymbals. They can be strapped to the side of your leg and hit with one hand. I also bought an extra flute." He eyed Mat. "A simple one, designed for those with thick, slow fingers."

Mat snorted.

"And finally, iron to bind," Noal said, sliding forward a pack of his own. It clinked faintly as he untied the top, the contents reflecting the deep orange hearthlight. "A set of throwing knives for each of us and two shortswords. Each of pure iron, no steel. I got us some chains, too, and a band of iron to clip around the butt of Mat's spear. It might throw the weight off, though."

"I'll take it," Mat said.

Noal did up his pack again, and the three of them sat before the hearth for a time. In a way, these things they'd gathered were an illusion. A way to reassure themselves that they were doing something to prepare.

But Mat remembered those twisted places beyond the gateways, the angles that were not right, the unnatural landscape. The creatures called snakes and foxes because they defied standard description.

That place was another world. The preparations he did with Thorn and Noal might help' but they might also be useless. There was no telling until they stepped into that tower. It felt like not knowing if you had the right antidote until after the snake's teeth were already clamped down on your Eventually, he bade the other two a good night. Noal wanted to head back to the Band's camp, which was now only a ten-minute ride from the city. Thorn agreed to go with him, and they took Mat's pack full of nightflowers—though both men looked as if they would rather be carrying a sack full of spiders.

Mat belted his sword on over his coat, took up his staff, then headed back toward his inn. He did not go directly there, though, and instead found himself trailing through the alleys and streets. Shanties and tents had sprung up beside solid buildings as the city-outside-the-city spread along the walls, like mold growing on a loaf of bread.

The sky was dark, but the night was still busy, touts calling from within the lit doorways of inns. Mat made sure the shortsword was visible. There were many who would think to exploit a lone wanderer at night, particularly outside the city walls, where the arm of the law was a little on the flabby side.

The air smelled of impending rain, but it often did these days. He wished it would go on and storm or bloody clear up. It felt as if the air were holding its breath, waiting for something. A blow that never fell, a bell that never rang, a set of dice that never stopped spinning. Just like the ones that thundered in his head.

He felt at the letter from Verin in his pocket. Would the dice stop if he opened it? Maybe it was about the gbolam. If he did not retrieve his medallion from Elayne soon, the thing was likely to find him and rip his insides out.

Bloody ashes. He felt like going drinking, forgetting who he was—and who people thought he was—for a while. But if he got drunk, he was likely to let his face show by accident. Perhaps begin to talk about who he really was. You never could tell what a man would do when he was drunk, even if that man was your own self.

He made his way through the city gates and into the New City. The air began to mist with something that was not quite rain, as if the sky had listened to his rant and had decided to allow a little sneeze to spray down on him.

Wonderful, he thought, bloody wonderful.

The paving stones soon grew wet from the not-rain, and the streetlamps glowed with balls of vaporous haze. Mat hunkered down, scarf still covering

his face as if he were a bloody Aielman. Had he not been too hot only a little bit ago?

He was as eager as Thom to move on and find Moiraine. She had made a mess of his life, but Mat supposed he owed her for that. Better to live in this mess than to be trapped back in the Two Rivers, living a boring life without realizing how boring it was. Mat was not like Perrin, who had mooned over leaving the Two Rivers before they had even gotten to Baer-Ion. An image of Perrin flashed in his head, and Mat banished it.

And what of Rand? Mat saw him sitting on a fine chair, staring down at the floor in front of himself in a dark room, a single lamp flickering. He looked worn and exhausted, his eyes wide, his expression grim. Mat shook his head to dispel that image as well. Poor Rand. The man probably thought he was a bloody blackferret or something by now, gnawing on pinecones. But it was likely a blackferret that wanted to live back in the Two Rivers.

No, Mat did not want to go back. There was no Tuon back in the Two Rivers. Light, well, he would have to figure out what to do with Tuon. But he did not want to be rid of her. If she were still with him, he would let her call him Toy without complaining. Well, not much anyway.

Moiraine first. He wished he knew more about the Aelfinn and Eelfinn and their bloody tower. Nobody knew about it, nobody spoke more than legends, nobody had anything useful to say. . . .

. . . nobody but Birgitte. Mat stopped in the street. Birgitte. She had been the one to tell Olver how to get into the Tower. How had she known?

Cursing himself for a fool, he turned toward the Inner City. The streets were emptying of the traffic that had burdened them before the almost-rain began. Soon Mat felt he had the whole city to himself; even the cut-purses and beggars withdrew.

For some reason, that put him on edge more than being stared at. It was not natural. Someone should have tried at least to bloody shadow him to see if he was worth picking off. Once again, he longed for his medallion. He had been an idiot to give that away. Better to have cut off his own bloody hand and offered that to Elayne as payment! Was the gholam there, in that darkness, somewhere?

There should have been toughs on the street. Cities were full of them. That was practically one of the bloody requirements for a city. A town hall, a few inns and a tavern, and several blunt-faced fellows whose only desire was to pound you into the mud and spend your coin on drink and women- He passed a courtyard and headed through the Mason's Gate into the Inner City, the white archway almost seeming to glow, rain-slick in the phantom light of the clouded moon. Mat's quarterstaff knocked against the paving stones. The gate guards were huddled and quiet in their cloaks, Like statues, not men at all. The entire place felt like a tomb. A ways past the gate, he passed an alleyway, and hesitated. He thought he could see a group of shadowy forms inside. Tall buildings rose on either side, grand Ogier masonry. A grunt sounded from inside the alleyway. "A robbery?" Mat said with relief.

A hulking figure looked back out of the alleyway. Moonlight revealed fellow with dark eyes and a long cloak. He seemed stunned to find Mat nding there. He pointed with a thick-fingered hand, and three of his companions made for Mat.

Mat relaxed, wiping his brow free of rainwater. So there were footpads out this night. What a relief. He had been jumping at nothing!

A thug swung his cudgel at Mat. Mat had worn the shortsword on the right side intentionally; the thug took the bait, assuming that Mat would move to draw the weapon.

Instead, Mat brought up the quarterstaff swiftly, snapping the butt against the man's leg. The footpad stumbled, and Mat swung into the man's head. The drizzle, which was nearly a proper rain by now, sprayed off the cutpurse as he fell, tripping one of his companions.

Mat stepped back and slammed the top of the quarterstaff down on the head of the tripping thug. He went down on top of his companion. The third man looked back toward his leader, who held to the collar of a gangly man Mat could barely make out in the shadows. Mat took the opportunity to leap over the small pile of unconscious thugs, swinging at the third man. The footpad brought his cudgel up to protect his head, so Mat slammed his quarterstaff into the man's foot. He then swung the quarterstaff, knocking aside the third man's weak parry, and dropped him with a blow to the face.

Mat casually flipped a knife toward the leader of the gang, who was charging forward. The leader gurgled, stumbled in the drizzle, clawing at the knife in his neck. The others Mat would leave unconscious—poor fools, maybe they would take this warning and reform.

Mat stepped to the side as the leader stumbled past, then finally collapsed on top of his three companions. Mat kicked him over, pulled out the knife, then cleaned it. Finally, he glanced at the victim of the robbery. "Sure am glad to see you," Mat said. "You . . . you are?" the man asked.

"Sure am," Mat said, standing up straight. "I thought the thieves were not out tonight. A city without cutpurses, well, that's like a field without weeds. And if there were no weeds, what would you need a farmer for? Bloody inhospitable, I tell you."

The rescued man stumbled forward on shaky feet. He seemed confused by what Mat had said, but he scrambled up, taking Mat's hand "Thank you!" The man had a nasal voice. "Thank you so, so much." In the faint moonlight, Mat could barely make out a wide face with buck teeth atop an awkwardly thin body.

Mat shrugged, setting aside his staff and unwinding his scarf__-which

was getting sodden—and beginning to wring it free. "I'd stay away from traveling by yourself at night, if I were you, friend."

The man squinted in the darkness. "You!" he said, voice nearly a squeak.

Mat groaned. "Blood and bloody ashes! Can't I go anywhere without__"

He cut off as the man lunged, a dagger flashing in the faint moonlight. Mat cursed, and snapped his scarf in front of him. The dagger hit the cloth instead of Mat's gut, and Mat quickly twisted his hands, tying the assassin's dagger in lengths of cloth.

The man yelped, and Mat released the scarf and pulled out a pair of knives, one in each hand, releasing them by reflex. They took the assassin in the eyes. One in each eye. Light! Mat had not been aiming for the eyes.

The man collapsed to the wet paving stones.

Mat stood breathing in and out. "Mother's milk in a cup! Mother's bloody milk!" He grabbed his quarterstaff, glancing about him, but the gloomy street was empty. "I rescued you. I rescued you, and you try to stab me?"

Mat knelt down beside the corpse. Then, grimly certain what he would find, he fished in the man's pouch. He came out with a couple of coins—gold coins—and a folded-up piece of paper. Moonlight revealed Mat's face on it. He crinkled the paper and shoved it in his pocket.

One in each bloody eye. Better than the man deserved. Mat retied his scarf, grabbed his knives, then walked out onto the street, wishing he had left the assassin to his fate.

Birgitte folded her arms, leaning against a marble pillar and watching as Elayne sat enjoying an evening presentation of "players." Groups like this— acting out stories—had become very popular in Cairhien, and were now trying to achieve the same success in Andor. One of the palace halls, where bards performed, had been adapted to allow the players to act out their stories.

Birgitte shook her head. What was the good of acting out fake stories.

Why not go live a few stories of your own? Besides, she'd prefer a bard any day. Helpfully this fashion of seeing "players" would die quickly. This particular story was a retelling of the tragic marriage and death of the Princess Walishen, slain by beasts of the Shadow. Birgitte was familiar with the ballad that the players had adapted to form their story. In fact, they sang parts of it during the performance. It was remarkable how little that song had changed over the years. Some different names, a few different notes, but the same overall. Much like her own lives. Repeated over and over, but with little variations. Sometimes she was a soldier. Sometimes she was a forest woman, with no formal military training. She'd been a general once or twice, unfortunately. She'd rather leave that particular job for someone else.

She'd been a guard, a noble thief, a lady, a peasant, a killer and a savior. But she had never before been a Warder. The unfamiliarity didn't bother her; in most of her lives, she had no knowledge of what had come before. What she could draw from her previous lives now was a boon, yes, but she had no right to those memories.

That didn't stop her heart from twisting each time one of those memories faded. Light! If she couldn't be with Gaidal this time around, couldn't she at least remember him? It was as if the Pattern didn't know what to do with her. She'd been forced into this life, shoving other threads aside, taking an unexpected place. The Pattern was trying to weave her in. What would happen when all of the memories faded? Would she remember waking up as an adult with no history? The thought terrified her as no battlefield ever had.

She nodded to one of her Guardswomen, Kaila Bent, who passed by the back row of the makeshift theater and saluted.

"Well?" Birgitte asked, stepping around the corner to speak with Kaila. "Nothing to report," Kaila said. "All is well." She was a lanky fire-haired woman, and had taken very easily to wearing the trousers and coat of a Guardswoman. "Or, all is as well as it could be while having to suffer through The Death of Princess Walishen'.'

Stop complaining," Birgitte said, suppressing a wince as the diva—so the players called her—began a particularly shrill aria—so they called a song by yourself. Why did the players need so many new names for things? "You could be out patrolling in the rain."

"I could?" Kaila asked, sounding eager. "Why didn't you say so sooner? Maybe I'll get struck by lightning. That might be preferable." Birgitte snorted. "Get back to your rounds." Kaila saluted and left. Birgitte tuned back into the theater, leaning

against the pillar. Perhaps she should have brought some wax to stuff in her ears. She glanced over at Elayne. The Queen sat with a calm demeanor, watching the play. At times, Birgitte felt more like a nursemaid than a bodyguard. How did you protect a woman who seemed, at times, so deter-mined to see herself dead?

And yet, Elayne was also so very capable. Like tonight; she'd somehow convinced her most bitter rival to attend this play. That was Ellorien sit-ting over in the eastern row; the woman's last parting from the palace had been so bitter that Birgitte hadn't expected her to return unless she was in chains. Yet here she was. It whispered of a political maneuver by Elayne that was thirteen steps more subtle than Birgitte had a mind for.

She shook her head. Elayne was a queen. Volatility and all. She'd be good for Andor. Assuming Birgitte could keep that golden-haired head from being lopped off its neck.

After some time suffering through the singing, Kaila approached again. Birgitte stood up straight, curious at the woman's quick pace. "What?" she asked quietly.

"You looked bored," Kaila whispered, "so I thought I'd bring this to you. Disturbance at the Plum Gate." That was the southeastern entrance to the palace grounds. "Someone tried to sneak through."

"Another beggar looking for scraps? Or a spy for one of the lordlings, hoping to listen in?"

"I don't know," Kaila said. "I heard the news thirdhand from Calison as we passed on patrol. He said the Guardsmen have the intruder in custody at the gate."

Birgitte glanced to the side. It looked like another solo was about to begin. "You have command here; hold this post and take reports. I'll go stretch my legs and check on this disturbance."

"Bring me some wax for my ears when you come back, would you?"

Birgitte chuckled, leaving the theater and stepping into a white-and-red palace hallway. Though she had Guardswomen and men with extra bows at the hallways, Birgitte herself carried a sword, for an assassination attempt would most likely turn to close-quarters fighting.

Birgitte trotted down the hallway, glancing out a window when she passed. The sky leaked a strengthening drizzle. Utterly dreary. Gaidal would have liked this weather. He loved the rain. On occasion, she'd joked that drizzle suited his face better, making him less likely to frighten children. Light, but she missed that man.

The most direct route to the Plum Gate took her through the servants quarters. In many palaces, this would have meant entering a section of the building that was more drab, meant for less important people. But this building had been Ogier built, and they had particular views about such things. The marble stonework here was as grand as it was elsewhere, with tiled mosaics of red and white. The rooms, while small by royal standards, were each large enough to hold an entire family. Birgitte generally preferred to take her meals in the servants' large, open dining hall. Four separate hearths crackled here in defiance of the dreary night, and off-duty servants and Guards laughed and chatted. Some said you could judge a monarch by the way he treated those who served him. If that were the case, then the Andoran palace had been designed in a way to encourage the best in its queens.

Birgitte reluctantly passed by the inviting scents of food and instead pushing her way out into the cold summer storm. The chill wasn't biting. Just uncomfortable. She pulled up the hood of her cloak and crossed the slick paving down to the Plum Gate. The gatehouse was alight with an orange glow, and the Guardsmen on watch stood outside in wet cloaks, halberds held to the side.

Birgitte marched up to the gatehouse, water dripping from the lip of her hood, then pounded on the thick oak door. It opened, revealing the bald-headed, mustached face of Renald Macer, sergeant on duty. A stout man, he had wide hands and a calm temperament. She always thought he should be in a shop somewhere making shoes, but the Guard took all types, and dependability was often more important than skill with the sword.

"Captain-General!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Getting rained on," she snapped.

"Oh, my!" He stepped back, making way for her to enter the gatehouse. It had a single crowded room. The soldiers were on storm shift — meaning twice as many men would work the gate as usual, but they would only have to stand outside an hour before rotating with the men warming inside the gatehouse.

Three Guardsmen sat at a table, throwing dice into a dicing box while an open-fronted iron stove consumed logs and warmed tea. Dicing with the tour soldiers was a wiry man with a black scarf wrapped around the bottom of his face. His clothing was scruffy, his head topped by a mop of wet brown hair kicking out in all directions. Brown eyes glanced at Birgitte over the top of the scarf, and the man sank down a little in his seat.

Birgitte took off her cloak and shook it free of rainwater. "This is your intruder, I assume?"

"Why, yes," the sergeant said. "How did you hear about that?"

She eyed the intruder. "He tried to sneak onto the palace grounds, and now you re dicing with him?"

The sergeant and the other men looked sheepish. "Well, my Lady-"

"I'm no lady." Not this time at least. "I work for a living."

"Er, yes," Macer continued. "Well, he gave up his sword readily, and he doesn't seem that dangerous. Just another beggar wanting scraps from the kitchens. Right nice fellow. Thought we'd get him warm before sending him out into that weather again."

"A beggar," she said. "With a sword?"

Sergeant Macer scratched his head. "I guess that is kind of odd."

"You could charm the helmet off a general on a battlefield, couldn't you, Mat?" she said.

"Mat?" the man asked in a familiar voice. "I don't know what you mean, my good woman. My name is Garard, a simple beggar who has a quite interesting past, if you care to listen to it—"

She eyed him with a firm gaze.

"Oh, bloody ashes, Birgitte," he complained, taking off the scarf "I only wanted to get warm for a spell."

"And win the coin off my men."

"A friendly game never hurt a man," Mat said.

"Unless it was against you. Look, why are you sneaking into the palace?"

"It took too much bloody work to get in last time," Mat said, sitting back in his chair. "Thought I might pass that up this time."

Sergeant Macer glanced at Birgitte. "You know this man?"

"Unfortunately," she said. "You can release him to my custody, Sergeant. I'll see that Master Cauthon is properly taken care of."

"Master Cauthon?" one of the men said. "You mean the Raven Prince?"

"Oh, for bloody . . ." Mat said, as he stood and picked up his walking staff. "Thanks," he said dryly to Birgitte, throwing on his coat.

She put her cloak back on, then pushed open the door as one of the Guards handed Mat his sword, belt still attached. Since when had Mat carried a shorts word? Probably a decoy away from the quarterstaff.

The two stepped out into the rain as Mat tied on the belt. "Raven Prince?" she asked.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm getting too bloody famous for my own good, that's why.

"Wait until it tracks you across generations," she said, glancing up at the sky, blinking as a raindrop hit her square in the eye.

"Come on, let's go grab a drink," Mat said, walking toward the gate.

"Wait," she said. "Don't you want to go see Elayne?"

"Elayne?" Mat said. "Blood and ashes, Birgitte, I'm here to talk to you. Why do you think I let those Guards catch me? You want a drink or not?"

She hesitated, then shrugged. By putting Kaila on duty in her place, Birgitte had officially gone on break. She knew a fairly decent tavern only two streets from the Palace.

"All right," she said, waving to the Guards and leading Mat onto the rainy street. "But I'll need to have milk or tea instead of ale. We aren't sure if her Warder drinking would be bad for the babies or not." She smiled, thinking of a drunk Elayne trying to talk to her allies after the play. "Though if I make her tipsy, it might be good revenge for some of the things she's done to me."

"I don't know why you let her bond you in the first place," Mat said. The street was nearly empty around them, though the tavern up ahead looked inviting, its yellow light spilling into the street.

"I didn't have a say in the matter," she said. "But I don't regret it. Did you really sneak into the palace to meet with me?"

Mat shrugged. "I have some questions."

"About what?"

He replaced that ridiculous scarf, which she noticed had a rip in the middle. "You know," he said. "Things."

Mat was one of the few who knew who she really was. He couldn't mean. . . . "No," she said, turning, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Bloody ashes, Birgitte! I need your information. Come on, for an old friend."

"We agreed to keep each other's secrets."

"And I'm not out blabbing yours," Mat said quickly. "But, see, there's this issue."

"What issue?" "The Tower of Ghenjei."

That's not an issue," she said. "You stay away from it." "I can't."

Of course you can. It's a flaming building, Mat. It can't exactly chase you down."

Very amusing. Look, will you at least hear me out, over a mug? Of, er, milk. I'll buy."

She stopped for a moment. Then she sighed. "Bloody right, you'll buy," she muttered, waving him onward. They entered the inn, known as The Grand Hike, which was crowded beyond usual because of the rain. The innkeeper was a friend of Birgitte's, however, and he had the bouncer toss out a drunkard sleeping in one of the booths to make room for her.

She tossed him a coin in thanks, and he nodded his ugly head to her—he was missing several teeth, one eye, and most of his hair. Best-looking man in the place. Birgitte held up two fingers to order drinks - he knew that she took milk these days—and she waved Mat to the booth.

"1 don't rightly think I've ever seen an uglier man than that innkeeper," Mat said as they sat.

"You haven't been alive long enough," she said, leaning back against the wall and putting her booted feet up on the table. There was just room enough for her to do so, sitting on the bench of the booth lengthwise. "If Old Snert were a few years younger, and if someone thought to break his nose in a few places, I might consider him. He's got a fine chest, nice and full of curly hair to get your fingers in."

Mat grinned. "Have I ever mentioned how odd it is to go drinking with a woman who talks about men like that?"

She shrugged. "Ghenjei. Why in the name of Normad s Ears are you wanting to go there?"

"Whose ears?" Mat asked.

"Answer me."

Mat sighed, then absently accepted his mug as the serving girl delivered it. Uncharacteristically, he didn't slap her backside, though he did give her a good leer as she walked away. "The bloody snakes and foxes have a friend of mine," he said, lowering his scarf and taking a pull on his drink.

"Leave him. You can't save him, Mat. If he was foolish enough to go into their realm, he deserves what he got."

"It's a woman," Mat said.

Ah. Birgitte thought. Bloody fool. Heroic, but still a fool.

"I can't leave her," Mat continued. "I owe her. Besides, a good friend of mine is going in whether I want him to or not. I have to help."

"Then they'll have all three of you," Birgitte said. "Look, if you go in through the portals, then you're locked into the treaties. They protect you to an extent, but they also restrict you. You'll never get anywhere useful after entering by one of the archways."

"And if you go in the other way?" Mat asked. "You told Olver how to open the Tower."

"Because I was telling him a bedtime story! Light, I never thought one of you sap-for-brains would actually try to get in!"

"But if we go in that way, can we find her?"

"Mayaybe," Birgitte said, "but you won't. The treaties won't be in effect, so the Aelnnn and Eelfinn can draw blood. Normally, you only have to worry about tricks with pits or ropes, since they can't. . . ." She trailed off, glancing at him. "How did you get hanged, anyway?"

He flushed, looking down into his drink. "They should post a flaming explanation on those archways. 'Step through here and they can bloody hang you-.And they will. Idiot.'"

Birgitte snorted. They'd talked about the memories he had. She should have put it together. "If you go in the other way, they'll probably try that as well. Shedding blood in their kingdom can have strange effects. They'll try to break your bones with a fall or drug you to sleep. And they will win, Mat. It's their world."

"And if we cheat?" Mat asked. "Iron, music, fire."

"That's not cheating. That's being smart. Everyone with half a wit who enters through the tower carries those things. But only one out of a thousand makes it back out, Mat."

He hesitated, then fished a small handful of coins out of his pocket. "What do you think the odds are that if I toss these into the air, they will all come up heads? One in a thousand?"

"Mat . . ."

He tossed them above the table. They came down in a spray, hitting the tabletop. Not a single one of them bounced or rolled from the table onto the floor.

Mat didn't look down at the coins. He met her eyes as they all rolled and vibrated to a stop. She glanced at them. Two dozen coins. Each had landed face up.

"One in a thousand is good odds," he said. "For me."

"Bloody ashes. You're as bad as Elayne! Don't you see? All it takes is one wrong throw. Even you miss once in a while."

"I'll take the chance. Burn me, Birgitte, I know it's stupid, but I'm doing it. How do you know so much about the Tower anyway? You've been into it, haven't you?"

"I have," she admitted.

Mat looked smug. "Well you got back out! How'd you manage it?"

She hesitated, then finally took up her mug of milk. "That legend didn't survive, I'm assuming?" "I don't know it," Mat said. "I went in to ask them to save the life of my love," she said. "It came after the battle of Lahpoint Hills, where we led the Buchaner rebellion.

Gaidal was wounded horribly; a blow to the head that made him unable to think straight. He forgot who I was, some of the time. It tore my heart, so I took him to the Tower to be Healed."

"And how'd you get out?" Mat asked. "How'd you fool them?"

"I didn't," Birgitte said softly. Mat froze. "The Eelfinn never Healed him," she continued. "They killed us both I didn't survive, Mat. That is the end of that particular legend."

He fell silent. "Oh," he finally said. "Well, that's kind of a sad story, then."

"They can't all end in victory. Gaidal and I don't deal well with happy endings anyway. Better for us to burn out in glory." She grimaced, remembering one incarnation when she and he had been forced to grow old together, peacefully. Most boring life she'd ever known, though at the time—ignorant of her grander part in the Pattern—she'd been happy with it.

"Well I'm still going," Mat said. She sighed. "I can't go with you, Mat. Not and leave Elayne. She has a death wish the size of your pride, and I mean to see she survives."

"I don't expect you to go," Mat said quickly. "Burn me, that's not what I'm asking. And . . ." He frowned. "A death what the size of my what!"

"Never mind," she said, drinking her milk. She had a soft spot for milk, though she didn't tell people of it. Of course, she'd be happy when she could drink again; she missed Old Snert's yeasty drinks. She liked ugly beer as much as she liked ugly men. "I came to you because I need help," Mat said. "What more is there to say? You're taking iron, fire, and music. Iron will hurt them, ward them, and hold them. Fire will scare them and kill them. Music will entrance them. But you'll find that both fire and music grow less and less effective the longer you use them.

"The tower isn't a place, it's a portal. A kind of gate to the crossroads between their realms. You'll find both of them there, Aelfinn snakes and Eelfinn foxes. Assuming they're working together currently. They have a strange relationship."

"But what do they want?" Mat asked. "From us, I mean. Why do they care?"

"Emotion," Birgitte said. "That's why they built portals into our world, that's why they entice us in. They feed off what we feel. They like Aes Sedai in particular, for some reason. Perhaps those with the One Power taste like a strong ale."

Mat shivered visibly.

"The inside will be confusing," Birgitte said. "Getting anywhere specific in there is difficult. Going in through the tower instead of the archways put me in danger, but I knew that if I could reach that grand hall, I'd be able to make a deal. You don't get anything free if you go in the tower, by the way. They'll ask for something, something dear to you.

"Anyway, I figured out a method to find the grand hall. Iron dust, left behind me in the intersections where I'd passed so that I knew which ways I'd gone before. They couldn't touch it, you see, and ... are you sure you've never heard this story?"

Mat shook his head. "It used to be popular around these parts," she said, frowning. "A hundred years ago or so."

"You sound offended."

"It was a good story," she said.

"If I survive, I'll have Thorn compose a bloody ballad about it, Birgitte. Tell me about the dust. Did your plan work?" She shook her head. "I still got lost. I don't know if they blew away the dust somehow, or if the place is so huge that I never repeated myself. I ended up cornered, my fire going out, my lyre broken, my bowstring snapped, Gaidal unconscious behind me. He could walk some of the days in there, but was too dizzy on others, so I pulled him on the litter I'd brought."

"Some of the days?" Mat said. "How long were you in there?"

"I had provisions for two months," Birgitte said, grimacing. "Don't know how long we lasted after those ran out."

"Bloody ashes!" Mat said, then took a long swig of his ale.

"I told you not to go in," Birgitte said. "Assuming you do reach your friend, you'll never get back out. You can wander for weeks in that place and never turn right or left, keep going straight, passing hallway after hallway. All the same. The grand hall could be minutes away, if you knew which direction to take. But you'll keep missing it."

Mat stared into his mug, perhaps wishing he'd ordered something more potent.

"You reconsidering?" she asked. "No," he said. "But when we get out, Moiraine better bloody appreciate this! Two months?" He frowned. "Wait. If you both died in there, how did the story get out?"

She shrugged. "Never did find out. Perhaps one of the Aes Sedai used their questions to ask. Everyone knew I'd gone in. I was called Jethari Moondancer then. You're sure you've never heard the story?" He shook his head again. She sighed, settling back. Well, not every one of the tales about her could live on forever, but she'd thought that one would stand for a few more generations. She raised her mug to drink the last of her milk. The mug never got there. She froze when she felt a jolt of emotion from Elayne. Anger, fury, pain.

Birgitte slammed the mug down on the table, then threw coins down and stood up, cursing.

"What?" Mat said, on his feet in an eyeblink. "Elayne. In trouble. Again. She's hurt."

"Bloody ashes," Mat snapped, grabbing his coat and staff as they ran for the exit.

CHAPTER 23

Foxheads

Elayne turned the strange medallion around in her fingers, tracing the fox's head worked into the front. As with many ter'angreal, it was difficult to tell exactly what kind of metal had been used to create it originally. She suspected silver, with the senses of her Talent. However, the medallion was no longer silver. It was something else, something new.

The songmistress of the Lucky Man's Theater Troop continued her song. It was beautiful, pure and high. Elayne sat on a cushioned chair on the right side of the hall, which had been repurposed with a raised area at the front for the players. A pair of Birgitte's Guards stood behind her.

The room was dim, lit only by a line of small flickering lamps set behind blue glass in alcoves on the walls. The blue light was overwhelmed by the burning yellow lanterns set around the front of the platform.

Elayne was barely paying attention. She had often listened to "The Death of Princess Walishen" as a ballad, and didn't really see the point of adding words to it and different players, instead of just having one bard do the entire thing. But it was Ellorien's favorite ballad, and the favorable news out of Cairhien about these players—which nobles there had recently discovered—had many of the nobles in Andor buzzing. Hence this evening. Ellorien had come at Elayne's invitation; likely she was intrigued. Why had Elayne been so audacious as to invite her? Soon, Eayne would take advantage of having Ellorien here. But not quite yet. Let the wornan enjoy the production first. She'd be expecting a political ambush.

She'd wait for Elayne to walk over and sit in one the seats near her, or per-haps send a servant with an offer.Elayne did neither, instead sitting and regarding the foxhead ter'angreal, It was a complex work of art, despite being only a single, solid piece of metal. She could feel the weaves that had been used to create it. Its intri-cacy was far beyond the simplicity of the twisted dream rings. She was doing something wrong in trying to reproduce the medallion. She carried in her pouch one of her failed attempts. She'd had copies cast for her, as precise in detail as her silversmiths could create, though she sus-pected the form was not important. The amount of silver seemed to be, for some reason, but not the shape that silver took.

She'd gotten close. The copy in her pouch didn't work perfectly. Less powerful weaves slid off anyone holding it, but very powerful ones could not be deflected for some reason. And, more problematic, it was impossible to channel while touching the copy.

She could channel while holding the original. Indeed, she'd been giddy when she'd discovered that holding the medallion didn't interfere with her weaves at all. Being pregnant did—that was still a source of frustration to her—but it was possible to hold the foxhead and channel.

But not the copy. She hadn't gotten it quite right. And, unfortunately, her time was slim. Mat would need his medallion back soon.

She took out the fake and set it on the seat beside her, then embraced the Source and wove Spirit. Several of the Kin, a group of whom were watching the production some seats to the side, glanced up at her as she did so. Most were too distracted by the song.

Elayne reached over and touched the medallion. Immediately, her weaves unraveled and the source winked away from her. Much as if a shield had been placed over her.

She sighed as the song reached its heights. The copy was so close, yet so frustrating at the same time. She'd never wear something that prevented her from touching the Source, not even for the protection it offered.

Still, it was not completely useless. She could give a copy to Birgitte, perhaps, and a few of the Guardsmen captains. It wouldn't do for her to create too many of these. Not when they could be used so effectively against Aes Sedai.

Could she, perhaps, give one of the copies to Mat? He'd never know, since he couldn't channel himself. . . .

No, she thought, squashing that temptation before it could fly too high.

She had promised to return Mat's medallion, and she would. Not some copy that didn't work as well. She tucked both medallions into her dress pocked. Now that she knew she could get Mat to part with his medallion, perhaps she could bully him into giving her more time. Though the presence of the gholarn did worry her. How to deal with the thing? Perhaps copies of the medallion for all her guards wouldn't be a bad idea after all.

The song finished, the final, high-pitched note dwindling like a candle running out of wick. The end of the play came shortly afterward, men in white masks jumping out of the darkness. A brilliant light flashed, something thrown into one of the lanterns, and when it faded again, Walishen lay dead on the stage, the bell of her red dress splayed around her like spilled blood.

The audience stood to clap. Most of them were Kin, though not a few were attendants of the other High Seats who had been invited. All of those were supporters of hers. Dyelin, of course, and young Conail Northan and the equally young—but twice as proud—Catalyn Haevin.

The final noble here was Syivase Caeren. What to make of her? Elayne shook her head, slipping the fake foxhead into her pouch and lending a demure clap to the other accolades. The players would be focused only on her. If she didn't give some sign of approval, they'd fret the entire night.

That done, Elayne made her way out to a nearby sitting room, which was furnished with padded, thick-armed chairs for relaxed conversation. There was a bar at the side, manned by a serving man in a crisp red and white uniform. He stood with hands behind his back, waiting respectfully as people ambled in. Ellorien wasn't there, of course—it was basic courtesy for a guest to wait for the host to withdraw first. Though Ellorien and Elayne weren't on the best of terms, it wouldn't do to show poor manners.

Soon after Elayne arrived, Ellorien trailed in. The plump woman was chatting with one of the Kinswomen, pointedly ignoring the High Seats who walked near her. Her conversation sounded forced. She probably could have been expected to avoid the sitting room entirely, but Elayne knew that the woman would want to make certain to express that she had not changed her mind about House Trakand.

Elayne smiled, but did not approach the woman, instead turning toward Syivase as she entered. Of medium build, the blue-eyed girl might have been pretty, save for that expressionless look on her face. Not emotionless, like an Aes Sedai. Completely expressionless. It sometimes seemed like Syivase was a dressing dummy set up for display. But then, on other occasions, she'd show a hidden depth, a cunning deep down.

Thank you for the invitation, Your Majesty," Syivase said evenly, her voice a faintly eerie monotone. "It was most enlightening."

Enlightening?" Elayne said. "I should hope that it was enjoyable."

Syivase said nothing. She glanced at Ellorien, and here she finally showed some emotion. An icy kind of dislike, the kind that gave you a shiver. "Why invite her, Your Majesty?"

"House Caeren was at odds with Trakand once, too," Elayne said, "Often, those whose loyalty is most difficult to win are the most valuable once it is yours."

"She will not support you, Your Majesty," Sylvase said, her voice still too calm. "Not after what your mother did."

"When my mother took the throne years ago," Elayne said, glancing over at Ellorien, "there were some Houses it was said she'd never win over And yet she did."

"So? You already have enough support, Your Majesty. You've had your victory."

"One of them."

She left the rest unsaid. There was a debt of honor owed to House Traemane. Courting Ellorien's approval wasn't merely about strengthening the Lion Throne. It was about repairing rifts caused by Elayne's mother while under the influence of Gaebril. It was about recovering her House's reputation, about undoing the wrongs that could be undone.

Sylvase would not understand that. Elayne had learned about the poor girl's childhood; this one would not put much stock in the honor of a High Seat. Sylvase seemed to believe in only two things: power and vengeance. So long as she supported Elayne and could be guided, she would not be a liability. But she would never be the strength to House Trakand that someone like Dyelin was.

"How is my secretary serving your needs, Your Majesty?" Sylvase asked.

"Well enough, I suppose," Elayne said. So far, he hadn't produced anything of value, though Elayne hadn't given him leave to do anything too drastic during his questioning. She was trapped in a conundrum. She'd been hunting this group of Black Ajah for what seemed like forever. She finally had them . . . but what did she do with them?

Birgitte had taken the captives alive ostensibly so that they could be questioned, then tried by the White Tower. But that meant they had no reason to speak; they knew their ultimate end would be execution. So Elayne either had to be willing to bargain with them, or she had to let the questioner take extreme measures.

A queen had to be hard enough to allow these things. Or that was what her teachers and tutors had explained. There was no question as to the guilt of these women, and they had already done enough to earn themselves death a dozen times over. Elayne wasn't certain how far she herself was willing to descend, however, to pry their secrets free.

Besides, would that actually do any good? Ispan had had some kind of Compulsion or oaths binding her; these were likely to have the same. Would they be able to reveal anything useful? If only there were a way to...

She hesitated, missing Sylvase's next comment as a thought occurred to her. Birgitte wouldn't like it, of course. Birgitte didn't like anything. But Elayne had felt Birgitte move off out of the Palace somewhere, perhaps doing rounds of the guard posts outside.

"Excuse me, Sylvase," Elayne said. "I just recalled something that I absolutely must do."

"Of course, Your Majesty," the girl said in a flat, almost inhuman voice.

Elayne moved from her, then quickly greeted—and bade good evening. - to the others. Conail looked bored. He'd come because it had been expected of him. Dyelin was her usual pleasant, yet careful, self. Elayne avoided Ellorien. She greeted everyone else in the room of note. Once finished, she began to walk toward the exit.

"Elayne Trakand," Ellorien called out.

Elayne paused, smiling to herself. She turned, wiping her face of anything other than calculated curiosity. "Yes, Lady Ellorien?"

"Have you invited me here only to ignore me?" the woman demanded from across the room. Other conversations grew quiet.

"Not at all," Elayne said. "I was merely under the impression that you would have a more pleasant time if I did not force you to interact with me. This evening was not intended for political purposes."

Ellorien frowned. "Well what was it for, then?"

"To enjoy a good ballad, Lady Ellorien," Elayne said. "And, perhaps, to remind you of days when you often enjoyed entertainment in the company of House Trakand." She smiled and nodded slightly, then left.

Let her think about that, Elayne thought with satisfaction. Ellorien had no doubt heard that Gaebril had been one of the Forsaken. The woman might not believe it, but perhaps she would recall the years of respect she and Morgase had shown one another. Should a few short months be cause to forget years of friendship?

At the bottom of the steps out of the lounge, Elayne found Kaila Bent, one of Birgitte's Guardswoman captains. The lanky fire-haired woman was chatting amiably with a pair of Guardsmen, both of whom seemed quite eager to gain her favor. All three snapped to attention when they noticed Elayne.

"Where did Birgitte go?" Elayne asked.

"She went to investigate a disturbance at the gates, Your Majesty," Kaila said. "I've had word that it was nothing. That mercenary captain who came to visit you earlier tried to sneak onto the palace grounds. Cap-tain Birgitte is questioning him."

Elayne raised an eyebrow. "You mean Matrim Cauthon?"

The woman nodded.

"She's 'questioning' him?" "That's what I heard, Your Majesty," Kaila replied.

"That means the two of them have gone out for drinks," Elayne said with a sigh. Light, this was a bad time for it.

Or was it a good time? Birgitte couldn't object to Elayne's plan for the Black Ajah if she was out with Mat. Elayne found herself smiling. "Captain Bent, you are with me." She left the theater rooms and entered the Palace proper. The woman followed, waving for the squad of Guardswomen standing in the hallway to follow.

Smiling to herself, Elayne began giving orders. One of the Guardswomen ran off to deliver them, though she looked confused at the strange list of commands. Elayne made her way to her rooms, then sat down, thinking. She would have to move quickly. Birgitte was in a surly mood; Elayne could tell that through the bond.

A servant soon arrived, carrying an enveloping black cloak. Elayne jumped up and slipped it on, then embraced the Source. It took her three tries! Bloody ashes, but being pregnant was frustrating sometimes.

She spun weaves of Fire and Air around her, using the Mirror of Mists to make herself look taller, more imposing. She fetched her jewelry chest and fished out a small ivory carving of a seated woman shrouded in her own hair. She used the angreal to pull as much of the One Power into her as she dared. To anyone watching who could channel, she'd look imposing indeed.

She glanced back at the Guardswomen. They were confused, obviously, and stood with their hands unconsciously on their swords. "Your Majesty?' Kaila asked.

"How do I look?" Elayne said, tweaking her weaves to make her voice deeper.

Kaila's eyes opened wider. "Like a thunderhead given life, Your Majesty."

"Imposing, then?" Elayne asked, jumping slightly at the dangerous, almost inhuman sound of her voice. Perfect!

"I'd say so," the lanky Guardswoman said, rubbing her chin with one hand. "Though the slippers do spoil the effect."

Elayne glanced down, cursing at the pink silk. She wove some more, making her slippered feet vanish. The weave would make it appear as if she were floating in the air, wrapped in a pulsing shroud of darkness, cloak and straps of black cloth fluttering round her. Her face was hidden completely in blackness. As an added touch, she created two faintly glowing picks of red where the eyes should be. Like coals radiating with a deep
crimson light.

"Light preserve us," one of the Guards whispered. Elayne nodded to herself, her heart quickening in excitement. She wasn't worried. She'd be safe. Min's viewing promised that. She ran through her plans again. They were solid. But there would be only one way to test
them for certain.

Elayne inverted her weaves and tied them off. Then she turned to the Guards. "Turn out the lights," she said to them, "and remain perfectly still. I will return shortly."

"But—" Kaila said.

"That is an order, Guardswoman," Elayne said firmly. "You had best
obey it."

The woman hesitated. She likely knew that Birgitte would never let this happen. But Kaila was not Birgitte, thankfully. She reluctantly gave the order and the lights in the room were doused.

Elayne reached into her pocket and took out the foxhead medallion, the real one, and held it hidden and tucked in her hand. She took a deep breath, then created a gateway. The ribbon of light was bright in the blackened room, glowing and bathing them in a pale glow, like moonlight. It opened into a room that was similarly dark.

Elayne stepped through and found herself in the Palace dungeons, in one of the cells. A woman knelt on the far side of the cell, beside the sturdy door with a small window at the top, slotted with bars, that let in the only light in the dank cell. There was a small cot to Elayne's right and a bucket for a chamber pot to her left. The tiny room smelled of mold and human waste, and she could clearly hear the scratching of rats nearby. It still seemed too lavish quarters for the woman in front of her.

Elayne had chosen Chesmal with calculation. The woman had seemed to have some authority among the Black, and she was powerful enough that most of the others would bow to her. But she also had seemed more passionate than logical, when Elayne had last encountered her. That would be important.

The tall, handsome woman spun as soon as Elayne entered the cell. Elayne held her breath. Blessedly, the act worked. Chesmal threw herself to the straw-covered floor of the cell.

'Great One," the woman hissed. "I had—" "Silence!" Elayne shouted, her voice booming.

Chesmal cringed, then glanced to the side, as if waiting for the Guards outside to peek in. There would be Kinswomen there to hold Chesmal's shield; Elayne could feel them. Nobody came, despite the sound. The Kin were following Elayne's orders, odd though those orders were.

"You are less than a rat," Elayne said with her disguised voice. "You were sent to see to the Great Lord's glory, but what have you done? Allowed yourself to be captured by these fools, these children?"

Chesmal wailed, bowing herself further. "I am dust, Great One. I am nothing! We have failed you. Please, do not destroy me!"

"And why shouldn't I?" Elayne barked. "The work of your particular group has been marked with failure after failure! What have you done that would possibly persuade me to allow you to live?"

"We have killed many of these fools who work against the Great Lord!" Chesmal wailed.

Elayne winced, then, steeling herself, created a whip of Air and lashed it across the woman's back. It was no more than Chesmal deserved. "You?" Elayne said. "You had nothing to do with their deaths! Do you think me stupid? Do you think me ignorant!"

"No, Great One," Chesmal wailed, curling up further. "Please!"

"Then give me reason to let you live."

"I have information, Great One," Chesmal said quickly. "One of those we were told to seek, the two men that must be killed at all costs . . . one is here in Caemlyn!"

What's this? Elayne hesitated. "Tell me more."

"He rides with a mercenary group," Chesmal said, sounding relieved to have information that was wanted. "He is the man with the keen eyes who wears the hat and carries the spear marked by ravens!"

Mat? The Darkfriends were hunting Mat? He was friends with Rand, true, and ta'veren. But what had Mat done to gain the ire of the Forsaken themselves? More disturbing was that Chesmal knew of Mat's presence in the city. He hadn't arrived until after the Black sisters had been captured! That meant. . . .

That meant Chesmal and the others were in contact with other Darkfriends. But who? "And how did you discover this? Why was this not reported earlier?"

"I got news this very day, Great One," Chesmal said, sounding more self-assured now. "We are planning an assassination."

"And how can you do that while imprisoned?" Elayne demanded.

Chesmal looked up briefly, her square face showing confusion. She said nothing.

I've tipped her off that I don't know as much as I should. Elayne gritted her teeth behind her mask of shadows.

"Great One," Chesmal said. "I have been following my orders carefully. We are almost in a position to begin the invasion, as commanded. Soon,

Andor will be awash with the blood of our enemies and the Great Lord shall reign in fire and ash. We will see it done."

What was this? An invasion, of Andor? Impossible! How would it happen? How could it happen? And yet, dared she ask the questions? Chesmal seemed to suspect that something was wrong.

"You are not the Chosen who visited me before, are you, Great One?" Chesmal asked.

"Our ways are not to be questioned by one such as you," Elayne growled, punctuating the remark with another switch of Air across the woman's back. "I need to know how much you have been told. So that I can judge the gaps in your understanding. If you are ignorant of. . . . Well, that is to be seen. First, explain to me how much you know of the invasion."

"I know that the deadline nears, Great One," Chesmal said. "If we had longer, perhaps we could plan more extensively. If you could see me freed from these confines, then I could . . ."

She trailed off, glancing to the side.

Deadline. Elayne opened her mouth to demand more, but hesitated. What? She could no longer feel the Kin outside. Had they retreated? And what of Chesmal's shield?

The door rattled, the lock spun, then the door flew open, revealing a group of people on the other side. And they were not the group of Guards Elayne had been expecting. At their head was a man with short black hair, thinning at the sides, and huge mustaches. He wore brown trousers and a black shirt, his coat long, almost an open-fronted robe.

Sylvase's secretary! Behind him were two women. Temaile and Eldrith. Both of the Black Ajah. Both holding to the Source. Light!

Elayne stifled her surprise, meeting their gaze and not giving ground. If she could convince one Black sister that she was of the Forsaken, then perhaps she could convince three. Temaile's eyes opened wide, and she threw herself to her knees, as did the secretary. Eldrith, however, hesitated. Elayne couldn't be certain if it was her stance, her disguise, or her reaction to seeing the three newcomers. Perhaps it was something else entirely. Either way, Eldirith wasn't taken in. The round-faced woman began to channel.

Elayne cursed to herself, forming weaves of her own. She slammed a shield at Eldrith right as she felt one come for her. Fortunately, she was holding Mat's ter'angreal. The weave unraveled, and the medallion grew cold in Elayne's hand. Elayne's own weave slid evenly between Eldrith and the Source, cutting her off. The glow of the Power winked out around her.

"What are you doing, you idiot!" Chesmal screeched. "You try to overthrow one of the Chosen? You'll see us all dead!"

"That's not one of the Chosen," Eldrith yelled back. Elayne belatedly thought to weave a gag of Air. "You've been duped! It—"

Elayne got the gag in her mouth, but it was too late. Temaile - who had always looked too delicate to be a Black sister—embraced the Source and looked up. Chesmal s expression turned from horror to anger.

Elayne quickly tied off Eldrith's shield and began weaving another one A weave of Air hit her. The foxhead medallion grew cold, and—blessing Mat for his timely loan—Elayne placed a shield between Chesmal and the Source.

Temaile gaped at Elayne, obviously stunned to see her weaves fail. Syl-vase s secretary wasn't so slow, however. He threw himself forward unexpectedly, ramming Elayne back against the wall with a great deal of force.

Pain laced out from her shoulder, and she felt something crack. Her shoulder bone? The babes! she thought immediately. It was a primal flash of horror and instant terror that defied all thoughts about Min and viewings. In her surprise, she let go of the gateway leading back to her room above. It winked out.

"She has a ter'angreai oŁsome kind," Temaile cried. "Weaves fall off her."

Elayne scrambled, pushing against the secretary and beginning a weave of Air to thrust him back. As she did, however, he clawed at her hand, perhaps having noticed a flash of silvery metal there. The secretary got his long fingers around the medallion just as Elayne's burst of Air hit him.

The secretary flew backward, clinging to the medallion. Elayne growled, still furious. Temaile grinned maliciously, and weaves of Air sprang up around her. She threw them forward, but Elayne met them with her own.

The two weaves of Air slammed against one another, causing the air to churn in the small room. Bits of straw blew up in a flurry. Elayne's ears protested the sudden pressure. The dark-haired secretary scrambled back from the battle, clutching the ter'angreai. Elayne reached a weave toward him—but it unraveled.

Elayne yelled in anger, pain throbbing in her shoulder where she'd hit the wall. The small room was cramped with so many people in it, and Temaile stood in the doorway, unintentionally blocking the secretary from getting away. Or maybe it was intentional; she probably wanted that medallion. The other two Black sisters hunkered down, air blasting around them, still shielded.

Elayne drew as much through the angreal as she dared, forcing her weave of Air forward, shoving aside the one Temaile was using to push. The two held for a moment; then Elayne's burst through, crashing into Temaile and tossing her out of the cell and against the stone wall outside. Elayne followed with a shield, though it appeared that Temaile had been knocked unconscious by the blast. The secretary bolted for the nearby doorway. Elayne felt a stab of panic, She did the only thing she could think of. She picked up Chesmal in a weave of Air and threw her at the secretary.

Both went down in a heap. A metallic ping sounded in the air as the foxhead medallion slipped free and hit the ground, rolling through the door.

Elayne took a deep breath, pain flaring across her chest, her arm falling slack. She could no longer hold it up properly. She cradled it in her other arm, angry, clinging to the Source. The sweetness of saidar was a comfort.

She wove Air and tied up Chesmal, the secretary and Eldrith, who had been trying to crawl toward Elayne unobtrusively.

Calming herself, Elayne pushed past them out of the small cell to check on Temaile in the hallway outside. The woman was still breathing, but was indeed unconscious. Elayne tied her in Air, too, to be certain, then carefully picked up the foxhead medallion. She winced at the pain of her other arm. Yes, she'd broken a bone for certain.

The dark hallway was empty, set with four doorways for cells, lit by only a single stand-lamp. Where were the Guards and Kin? She reluctantly released the weaves that formed her disguise—she wouldn't want any soldiers arriving and mistaking her for one of the Darkfriends. Certainly someone had heard some of that racket! In the back of her mind, she could sense concern from Birgitte, who was getting closer. The Warder had undoubtedly felt Elayne's injury.

Almost, Elayne preferred the pain of her shoulder to the lecture she'd get from Birgitte. She winced again, considering that, as she turned and inspected her captives. She'd need to check the other cells.

Of course her babes would be all right. She would be all right. She'd overreacted to the pain; she hadn't really been afraid. Still, best to—

Hello, my Queen," a man's voice whispered in her ear right before a second pain blossomed in her side. She gasped, stumbling forward. A hand reached out and yanked the medallion from her fingers.

Elayne spun, and the room seemed blurry. Something warm ran down her side. She was bleeding! She was so stunned, she felt the Source slip away from her.

Doilin Mellar stood behind her in the hallway, holding a bloodied

knife in his right hand, hefting the medallion in his left. His hatchetlike face was broken by a deep smile, almost a leer. Though he wore only rags, he looked as self-assured as a king on his throne.

Elayne hissed and reached for the Source. But nothing happened. She heard chuckling behind her. She'd hadn't tied off Chesmal's shield! As soon as Elayne released the Source, rhe weaves would have vanished. Sure enough, Elayne glanced and found weaves cutting her off from the Source.

Chesmal, handsome face flushed, smiled at her. Light! There was blood pooling at Elayne's feet. So much of it.

She stumbled back against the wall of the hallway, Mellar to one side, Chesmal the other.

She couldn't die. Min had said . . . We could be misinterpreting. Birgirte's voice returned to her. Any number of things could still go wrong.

"Heal her," Mellar said.

"What?" Chesmal demanded. Behind her, Eldrith was dusting herself off inside the cell doorway. She'd fallen to the ground when Elayne's weavings of Air dissipated, but her shield was still there. That one Elayne had tied in place.

Think, Elayne told herself, blood dribbling between her fingers. There has to be a way out. There has to be! Oh, Light! Birgitte, hurry!

"Heal her," Mellar said again. "The knife wound was to make her drop you."

"Fool," Chesmal said. "If the weaves had been tied off, a wound wouldn't have released us!"

"Then she would have died," Mellar said, shrugging. He eyed Elayne; those handsome eyes of his shone with lust. "And that would have been a pity. For she was promised to me, Aes Sedai. I won't have her die here in this dungeon. She doesn't die until I have had time to . . . enjoy her." He looked at the Black sister. "Besides, you think those whom we serve would be pleased if they knew you'd let the Queen of Andor die without yielding her secrets?"

Chesmal looked dissatisfied, but she apparently saw the wisdom in his words. Behind them, the secretary slipped out of the cell and—after glancing both ways—slunk down the hallway toward the steps and hurried up them. Chesmal crossed the hallway toward Elayne. Blessedly. Elayne was getting fuzzy-headed. She rested her back against the wall, barely feeling the pain of her broken shoulder, and slid down until she was sitting.

"Idiot girl," Chesmal said. "I saw through your ploy, of course. I was leading you on, knowing that help was coming."

The words were hollow; she was lying for the benefit of the others. The Healing. Elayne needed . . . that . . . Healing. Her mind was growing dull,

her vision darkening. She held her hand to her side, terrified for herself, for her children.

Her hand slipped. She felt something through the fabric in the pocket of her dress. The foxhead medallion copy.

Chesmal put her hands on Elayne's head, crafting Healing weaves. Elayne's veins became ice water, her body overwhelmed by a wave of Power. She drew in a deep breath, the agony in her side and shoulder vanishing.

"There," Chesmal said. "Now, quickly, we need to—"

Elayne whipped free the other medallion and held it up. By reflex, Chesmal grabbed it. That made the woman unable to channel. Her weaves vanished, including Elayne's shield.

Chesmal cursed, dropping the medallion. It hit and rolled as Chesmal wove a shield.

Elayne didn't bother with a shield. This time, she wove Fire. Simple, direct, dangerous. The Dark sister's clothing burst into flame before she could finish weaving, and she cried out.

Elayne hauled herself to her feet. The hallway shook and spun—the Healing had taken a lot out of her—but before things stopped spinning, she wove another thread of Fire, lashing it at Mellar. He had risked the life of her children! He had stabbed her! He . . .

The weaves unraveled the moment they touched him. He smiled up at her, stopping something with his foot. The second medallion. "Here now," he said, scooping it up. "Another one? If I shake you, will a third fall free?"

Elayne hissed. Chesmal was still screaming, afire. She fell to the ground, kicking, the hallway growing pungent with the scent of burned flesh. Light! Elayne hadn't meant to kill her. But there wasn't time to spare. She wove Air, snatching up Eldrith again before the woman could escape. Elayne pushed her forward, between herself and Mellar, just in case. He watched with keen eyes, edging forward, holding the two medallions in one hand and his dagger in the other. It still glistened with Elayne's blood. "We aren't finished, my Queen," he said in a soft voice. "These others were promised power. But my reward was always to be you. I always collect what I am owed." He watched Elayne with care, expecting some trick.

If only she had one! She could barely stand upright. Holding the Source was difficult. She backed away, keeping Eldrith between herself and Mellar. His eyes flicked to the statuesque woman; she stood with arms tied to her sides by Air, floating an inch above the ground. With a jerking motion, he jumped forward and slit Eldrith's throat. Elayne started, scrambling backward.

"Sorry," Mellar said, and it took Elayne a moment to realize he was addressing Eldrith. "But orders are orders." With that, he ducked, plunging his dagger into Temaile's unconscious body.

He couldn't escape with the medallions! With a surge of strength, Elayne drew in the One Power and wove Earth. She pulled at the ceiling above Mellar as he stood up. Stones shattered, blocks falling downward, causing him to yell and cover his head as he ducked away. Something rang in the air. Metal on stone.

The hallway shook, and dust sprayed in the air. The rain of rocks drove Mellar away, but kept her from chasing. He vanished up the stairwell to the right. Elayne sank down to her knees, feeling drained. But then she saw something glittering among the rubble of the ceiling blocks she'd pulled down. A bit of silvery metal. One of the medallions.

Holding her breath, she grabbed it. Blessedly, the Source didn't leave her. Mellar had escaped with the copy, it seemed, but she still had the original.

She sighed, allowing herself to sit back against the cold stone wall. She wanted to lapse into unconsciousness, but forced herself to tuck away the medallion, then remain awake until Birgitte appeared in the hallway. The Warder panted heavily from having run, her red coat and golden braid wet with rainwater.

Mat stepped down into the hallway after her, wearing a scarf up around his face, his wet brown hair plastered to his head. His eyes darted from side to side, a quarterstaff held at guard.

Birgitte knelt by Elayne's side. "Are you all right?" she asked urgently.

Elayne nodded in exhaustion. "I got myself out of this one." In a way. "Did you happen to do the world a favor and kill Mellar on your way in?"

"Mellar?" Birgitte asked, alarmed. "No. Elayne, there's blood on your dress!"

"I'm fine," she said. "Really, I've been Healed."

So Mellar was free. "Quickly," she said. "Search the hallways. The Guards and the Kin who were guarding this place—"

"We found them," Birgitte said. "Stuffed into the bottom of the stairwell. Dead. Elayne, what happened?" To the side, Mat poked at Temailes corpse, noting the dagger wound in her chest.

Elayne pressed her hands to her abdomen. Her babes would be all right, wouldn't they? "I did something very rash, Birgitte, and I know that you are going to scream at me for it. But would you first please take me to my rooms? I think we should have Melfane look at me. Just in case."

* * *

An hour after the failed assassination attempt on Egwene, Gawyn stood alone in a small room that was part of the Amyrlin's chambers. He'd been released from the weaves that had held him, then told to stay put. Egwene finally strode into the room. "Sit," she said.

He hesitated, but her fierce eyes could have set candles aflame. He sat down on the stool. This small room held several dressers and trunks for clothing. The doorway led out to the larger sitting room where he'd been captured in weaves; a doorway off of that room led to Egwene's bedchamber. Egwene shut the door, sequestering the two of them from the many guards, Warders and Aes Sedai milling about in the rooms outside. Their conversations made a low hum through the door. Egwene still wore red and gold and she had golden threads woven into her dark hair. Her cheeks were flushed with anger at him. That made her even more beautiful than usual.

"Egwene, I—"

"Do you realize what you have done?"

"I checked to see if the woman I love was safe, following the discovery of an assassin outside her door."

She folded her arms beneath her breasts. He could almost feel the heat of her anger. "Your yelling has drawn half of the White Tower. They saw you captured. The assassin probably knows, now, about my weaves."

"Light, Egwene! You talk as if I did it on purpose. I was only trying to protect you."

"I didn't ask for your protection! I asked for your obedience! Gawyn, don't you see the opportunity we've missed? If you hadn't scared Mesaana away, she'd have walked into my traps!"

"It wasn't one of the Forsaken," Gawyn said. "It was a man."

"You said you couldn't see the face or make out the figure because it was blurred."

"Well, yes," Gawyn said. "But he fought with the sword."

And a woman couldn't use a sword? The size of the person you saw indicated a woman."

Maybe, but one of the Forsaken? Light, Egwene, if it had been Mesaana, then she'd have used the Power to burn me to dust!"

Another reason," Egwene said, "that you should not have disobeyed me. Perhaps you're right—perhaps this was one of Mesaana's minions. A Darkfriend or Gray Man. If that were the case, I'd have them captive and be able to learn about Mesaana's plots. And Gawyn, what if you had found Mesaana? What could you have done?"

He looked down at the floor.

"I told you that I had taken precautions," she continued. 'And still you disobeyed! And now, because of what you've done, the murderer knows that I was anticipating her. She'll be more careful next time. How many lives do you think you just cost us?"

Gawyn kept his hands in his lap, trying to hide the fists that they had formed. He should have felt ashamed, but all he could feel was anger. A rage he couldn't explain—frustration at himself, but mostly at Egwene for turning an honest mistake into a personal affront.

"It seems to me," he said, "that you don't want a Warder at all. Because I'll tell you, Egwene, if you can't stand being looked after, then no man will do."

"Perhaps you are right," she said curtly. Her skirts rustled as she pulled open the door to the hall, went out and then pulled it closed behind her. Not quite a slam.

Gawyn stood up and wanted to kick the door. Light, what a mess this had become!

He could hear Egwene through the door, sending the gawkers back to their beds, ordering the Tower Guard to be extra vigilant tonight. That was likely for show. She knew that the assassin wouldn't try again so soon.

Gawyn slipped out of the room and left. She noted his departure, but said nothing to him, instead turning to speak softly with Silviana. The Red had a glare for Gawyn that would have made a boulder wince.

Gawyn passed several guards who—for their parts—seemed respectful of Gawyn. As far as they knew, he'd foiled an attempt on the Amyrlin's life. Gawyn nodded to their salures. Chubain stood nearby, inspecting the knife that had nearly taken Gawyn in the chest.

Chubain held up the knife to him. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

Gawyn took the narrow, sleek knife. It was balanced for throwing, with a fine steel blade that looked something like an elongated candle's flame. Set into the center were three bits of blood-colored rock,

"What kind of stone is that?" Gawyn asked, holding the knife up to the light.

"I've never seen it before."

Gawyn turned the knife over a few times. There weren't any inscriptions or carvings. "This came within half a breath of claiming my life."

"You can take it, if you wish," Chubain said. "Maybe you can ask Bryne's men if they've ever seen one like it. We have a second one we found down the hallway."

"It was also intended for my heart," Gawyn said, tucking the knife into his belt. "Thank you. I have a gift for you in return."

Chubain raised an eyebrow.

"You've been complaining of the men you lost," Gawyn said. "Well, I've a group of soldiers I can recommend strongly."

"From Bryne's army?" Chubain asked, lips downturned. Like many of the Tower Guard, he still regarded Bryne's army as a rival force.

"No," Gawyn said. "Men loyal to the Tower. Some of those who trained to be Warders and who fought with me on Elaida's side. They're feeling displaced now, and they would rather be soldiers than Warders. I'd appreciate it if you'd give them a home. They're solid men and excellent warriors."

Chubain nodded. "Send them to me."

"They'll come to you tomorrow," Gawyn said. "I only ask one thing. Try not to break the group apart. They've been through much together. Their bond gives them strength."

"Shouldn't be difficult," Chubain said. "The Tenth Tower Company was destroyed nearly to a man by those flaming Seanchan. I'll set some veteran officers over your lads and form the new company out of them."

"Thank you," Gawyn said. He nodded toward Egwene's quarters. "Watch over her for me, Chubain. I think she's determined to see herself dead."

"It is ever my duty to defend and uphold the Amyrlin. But where will you be?"

"She made it clear that she wants no Warder," Gawyn said, his mind drifting back to the things Bryne had said to him earlier. What did he want, aside from Egwene? Perhaps it was time to find out. "I think it's past time I went to visit my sister."

Chubain nodded, and Gawyn took his leave. He visited the barracks and gathered his possessions—little more than a change of clothing and a winter cloak—then made his way to the stables and saddled Challenge.

Then he led the horse to the Traveling ground. Egwene maintained a sister on duty there at all times. Tonight's Aes Sedai—a petite, drowsy-eyed Green named Nimri—didn't question him. She made him a gateway to a hillside about an hour's travel from Caemlyn.

And so he left Tar Valon—and Egwene al'Vere—behind.

What is that?" Lan demanded.

The aged Nazar looked up from his saddlebags, leather hadori holding down his powdery white hair. A small stream gurgled near their camp in the middle of a forest of highland pines. Those pines shouldn't have borne half so many brown needles.

Nazar had been tucking something into his saddlebags, and Lan had happened to spot a bit of gold peeking out. "This?" Nazar asked. He pulled the cloth out: a brilliant white flag with a golden crane embroidered in the center. It was a fine work, with beautiful stitching. Lan nearly grabbed it out of Nazar's fingers and ripped it in half.

"Now, I see that expression on your face, Lan Mandragoran," Nazar said. "Weil, don't you be getting all self-centered about this. A man has a right to carry his kingdom's flag with him."

"You're a baker, Nazar."

"I'm a Borderlander first, son," the man said, tucking the banner away "This is my heritage."

"Bah!" Lan said, turning away. The others were breaking up camp. He'd grudgingly allowed the three newcomers to join him—they were stubborn as boars, and in the end, he had had to succumb to his oath. He'd promised that he'd accept followers. These men, technically, hadn't asked to ride with him—they'd simply started doing it. That was enough. Besides, if they were going to travel in the same direction, then there was little sense in making two camps.

Lan continued to wipe his face dry from the morning's washing. Bulen was getting bread ready for breakfast. This grove of pines was in eastern Kandor; they were getting close to the border into Arafel. Perhaps he could—

He froze. There were several new tents in their camp. A group of eight men were chatting with Andere. Three of them looked plump around the waist—not warriors, judging by their soft clothing, though they did appear to be Malkieri. The other five were all Shienarans, topknots on their heads, leather bracers on their arms, and horsebows stored in cases on their backs beside long, two-handed swords.

"What is this?" Lan demanded.

"Weilin, Managan and Gorenellin," Andere said, gesturing to the Malkieri. "These others are Qi, Joao, Merekel, Ianor, Kuehn—"

"I didn't ask who," Lan said, voice cold. "I asked what. What have you done?"

Andere shrugged. "We met them before running into you. We told them to wait along the southern roadway for us. Rakim fetched them last night, while you were sleeping."

"Rakim was supposed to be on watch!" Lan said.

"I watched in his stead," Andere said. "I figured we'd want these fellows."

All three of the plump merchants looked to Lan, then went down on their knees. One was weeping openly. "Tai'shar Malkier." The five Shienarans saluted Lan. "Dai Shan," one said. "We have brought what we could to the cause of the Golden Crane," another of the merchants added. "All that we could gather in a little time." "It is not much," said the third. "But we lend you our swords as well. We may look to have grown soft, but we can fight. We will fight." "I don't need what you brought," Lan said, exasperated. "I—" "Before you say too much more, old friend," Andere said, laying a hand on Lan's shoulder, "perhaps you should have a look at that." He nodded to

the side.

Lan frowned, hearing a rattling sound. He stepped past a patch of trees to look upon the path to the camp. Two dozen wagons were approaching, each piled high with supplies—weapons, sacks of grain, tents. Lan opened his eyes wide. A good dozen warhorses were hitched in a line, and strong oxen pulled the wagons. Teamsters and servants walked alongside them.

"When they said they sold what they could and brought supplies," Andere said, "they meant it."

"We will never be able to move quietly with all of this!" Lan said.

Andere shrugged.

Lan took a deep breath. Very well. He would work with it. "Moving quietly appears to be failing anyway. From now on, we will pose as a caravan delivering supplies to Shienar."

"But—"

"You will swear to me," he said, turning toward the men. "Each of you will swear not to reveal who I am or send word to anyone else who might be looking for me. You will swear it"

Nazar looked like he would object, but Lan silenced him with a stern look. One by one, they swore.

The five had become dozens, but it would stop there.

CHAPTER
24

To Make a Stand

Bed rest," Melfane announced, taking her ear from the wooden tube she'd placed against Elayne's chest. The midwife was a short, ample-cheeked woman who today wore her hair tied back by a translucent blue scarf. Her neat dress was of white and matching sky-blue, as if worn in defiance of the perpetually overcast sky.

"What?" Elayne asked.

"One week," Melfane said, wagging a thick finger at Elayne. "You aren't to be on your feet for one week."

Elayne blinked, stunned, her exhaustion fleeing for the moment. Melfane smiled cheerfully as she consigned Elayne to this impossible punishment. Bed rest? For a week?

Birgitte stood in the doorway, Mat in the room beyond. He'd stepped out for Melfane's inspection, but otherwise he'd hovered near her almost as protectively as Birgitte. You'd never know they cared for her by the way they spoke, however—the two of them had been sharing curses, each trying to top the other. Elayne had learned a few new ones. Who knew that hundred-legs did those things?

Her babes were safe, so far as Melfane could tell. That was the important part. "Bed rest is, of course, impossible," Elayne said. "I have far too much to do."

"Well, it will have to be done from bed," Melfane replied, her voice pleasant but completely unyielding. "Your body and your child have undergone a great stress. They need time to recover. I will be attending you and making certain you maintain a strict diet."

"But—"

"I won't hear any excuses," Melfane interrupted.

"I'm the Queenl" Elayne said, exasperated.

"And I'm the Queen's midwife," Melfane replied, still calm. "There isn't a soldier or attendant in this palace who won't help me, if I determine that your health-—and that of your child—is at risk." She met Elayne's eyes. "Would you like to put my words to the test, Your Majesty?"

Elayne cringed, imagining her own Guards forbidding her exit to her chambers. Or, worse, tying her down. She glanced at Birgitte, but received only a satisfied nod. "It's no more than you deserve," that nod seemed to say.

Elayne sat back in her bed, frustrated. It was a massive four-poster, decorated in red and white. The room was ornate, sparkling with various creations of crystal and ruby. It would make a beautifully gilded prison indeed. Light! This wasn't fair! She did up the front of her gown.

"I see that you're not going to try my word," Melfane said, standing up from the side of the bed. "You show wisdom." She glanced at Birgitte. "I will allow you a meeting with the Captain-General to assess the evening's events. But no more than a half-hour, mind you. I won't have you exerting yourself!"

"But—"

Melfane wagged that finger at her again. "A half-hour, Your Majesty. You are a woman, not a plow beast. You need rest and care." She turned to Birgitte. "Do not upset her unduly."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Birgitte said. Her anger was finally beginning to abate, replaced by amusement. Insufferable woman.

Melfane withdrew to the outer chamber. Birgitte remained where she was, regarding Elayne through narrow eyes. Some displeasure still boiled and churned from the bond. The two regarded one another for a long moment.

What are we do to with you, Elayne Trakand?" Birgitte finally asked. Lock me in my bedroom, it appears," Elayne snapped. "Not a bad solution."

And would you keep me here forever?" Elayne asked. "Like Gelfina, from the stories, locked away for a thousand years in the forgotten tower?" Birgitte sighed. "No. But six months or so would help keep my anxiety levels down."

"We don't have time for that," Elayne replied. "We don't have time for much, these days. Risks must be taken."

"Risks involving the Queen of Andor going alone to face a mob of the Black Ajah? You're like some blood-besotted idiot on the battlefield, charging ahead of his comrades, seeking death without a shield-mate to guard your back!

Elayne blinked at the anger in the woman.

"Don't you trust me, Elayne?" Birgitte asked. "Would you be rid of me, if you could?"

"What? No! Of course I trust you."

"Then why won't you let me help you? I'm not supposed to be here, now. I have no purpose other than what circumstance has given me. You made me your Warder, but you won't let me protect you! How can I be your bodyguard if you won't tell me when you're putting yourself in danger?"

Elayne felt like pulling the covers up to shield herself from those eyes. How could Birgitte be the one who felt so hurt? Elayne had been the one who'd been wounded! "If it means anything," she said, "I don't intend to do this again."

"No. You'll do something else reckless."

"I mean, I intend to be more careful. Maybe you're right, and the viewing isn't a perfect guarantee. It certainly didn't stop me from panicking when I felt a real danger."

"You didn't feel a real danger when the Black Ajah locked you up and tried to cart you away?"

Elayne hesitated. She should have been frightened that time, but she hadn't been. Not only because of Min's viewing. The Black Ajah would never have killed her, not under those circumstances. She was too valuable.

Feeling that knife enter her side, pierce her skin, dig toward her womb . . . that had been different. The terror. She could remember the world blackening around her, her heartbeat thudding, growing louder, like the drumbeats at the end of a performance. The ones that came before the silence.

Birgitte regarded Elayne appraisingly. She could feel Elayne's emotions. She was Queen. She could not avoid risks. But. . . perhaps she could rein herself in.

"Well," Birgitte said, "did you at least discover anything?"

"I did," Elayne said. "I—"

At that moment, a scarf-wrapped head appeared in the doorway. Mat had his eyes closed. "You covered up?"

"Yes," Elayne said. "And in a far more fashionable way than you, Matrim Cauthon. That scarf looks ridiculous."

He scowled, opening his eyes and pulling off the scarf, revealing the angular face beneath. "You try moving through the city without being rec-ognized," he said. "Every butcher, innkeeper and bloody backroom slipfin-ger seems to know what I look like these days."

"The Black sisters were planning to have you assassinated," Elayne said.

"What?" Mat asked.

Elayne nodded. "One mentioned you. It sounded like Darkfriends had been searching for you for some time, with the intent of killing you."

Birgitte shrugged. "They're Darkfriends. No doubt they want us all dead."

"This was different," Elayne said. "It seemed more . . . intense. I suggest keeping your wits about you the next while."

"That'll be a trick," Birgitte noted. "Seeing as to how he doesn't have any wits in the first place."

Mat rolled his eyes. "Did I miss you explaining what you were doing in the flaming dungeons, sitting in a pool of your own blood, looking for all the world like you'd seen the losing end of a battlefield skirmish?"

"I was interrogating the Black Ajah," Elayne said. "The details are none of your concern. Birgitte, have you a report from the grounds?"

"Nobody saw Mellar leave," the Warder said. "Though we found the secretary's body on the ground floor, still warm. Died from a knife to the back."

Elayne sighed. "Shiaine?"

"Gone," Birgitte said, "along with Marillin Gemalphin and Falion Bhoda."

"The Shadow couldn't leave them in our possession," Elayne said with a sigh. "They know too much. They had to end up either rescued or executed."

'Well," Mat said, shrugging, "you're alive, and three of them are dead. Seems like a reasonably good outcome."

But the ones who escaped have a copy of your medallion, Elayne thought. She didn't speak it, however. She also didn't mention the invasion that Chesmal had spoken of. She would talk of it with Birgitte soon, of course, but first she wanted to consider it herself.

Mat had said the night's events had a "reasonably good outcome." But the more Elayne thought about it, the more dissatisfied she was. An invasion of Andor was coming, but she didn't know when. The Shadow wanted Mat dead, but as Birgitte had pointed out, that was no surprise. In fact, the only certain result of the evening's adventures was the sense of fatigue Elayne felt. That and a week confined to her rooms.

"Mat," she said, taking off his medallion. "Here, it's time I gave this back. You should know that it probably saved my life tonight."

He walked over and took it back eagerly, then hesitated. "Were you able to . . ."

"Copy it? Not perfectly. But to an extent."

He put it back on, looking concerned. "Well, that feels good to have back. I've been wanting to ask you something. Now might not be the time"

"Speak of it," Elayne said, tired. "Might as well."

"Well, it's about the gholam . . ."

"The city has been emptied of most civilians," Yoeli said as he and Ituralde walked through Maradon's gate. "We're close to the Blight; this is not the first time we've evacuated. My own sister, Sigril, leads the Lastriders, who will watch from the ridge to the southeast and send word if we should we fall. She will have sent word to our watchposts around Saldaea, requesting aid. She will light a watchfire to alert us if they come."

The lean-faced man looked at Ituralde, his expression grim. "There will be few troops who could come to our aid. Queen Tenobia took many with her when she rode to find the Dragon Reborn."

Ituralde nodded. He walked without a limp—Antail, one of the Ashaman, was quite skilled with Healing. His men made a hasty camp in the courtyard just inside the city gates. The Trollocs had taken the tents they'd left behind, then lit them on fire at night to illuminate them feasting on the wounded. Ituralde had moved some of his troops into the empty buildings, but he wanted others close to the gate in case of an assault.

The Ashaman and Aes Sedai had worked to Heal Ituralde's men, but only the worst cases could get attention. Ituralde nodded to Antail, who was working with the wounded in a roped-off section of the square. Antail didn't see the nod. He concentrated, sweating, working with a Power Ituralde didn't want to think about.

"Are you certain you want to see them?" Yoeli asked. He held a horsemans long spear on his shoulder, the tip tied with a triangular black and yellow pendant. It was called the Traitor's Banner by the Saldaeans here.

The city bristled with hostility, different groups of Saldaeans regarding one another with grim expressions. Many wore strips of black cloth and yellow cloth twisted about one another and tied to their sword sheaths. They nodded to Yoeli.

Desya gavane cierto cuendar isain carentin, Ituralde thought. A phrase in the Old Tongue. It meant "A resolute heart is worth ten arguments." He could guess what that banner meant. Sometimes a man knew what he must do, though it sounded wrong. The two of them walked for a time through the streets. Maradon was like most Borderland cities: straight walls, square buildings, narrow streets. The houses looked like fortressed keeps, with small windows and sturdy doors The streets wound in odd ways, and there were no thatched roofs—only slate shingles, fireproof. The dried blood at several key intersections was difficult to make out against the dark stone, but Ituralde knew what to look for. Yoeli's rescue of his troops had come after fighting among the Saldaeans.

They reached a nondescript building. There would be no way for an outsider to know that this particular dwelling belonged to Vram Torku-men, distant cousin to the Queen, appointed lord of the city in her absence. The soldiers at the door wore yellow and black. They saluted Yoeli.

Inside, Ituralde and Yoeli entered a narrow staircase and climbed three flights of stairs. There were soldiers in nearly every room. On the top floor, four men wearing the Traitor's Banner guarded a large, gold-inlaid door. The hallway was dark: narrow windows, a rug of black, green and red.

"Anything to report, Tarran?" Yoeli asked.

"Not a thing, sir," the man said with a salute. He wore long mustaches and had the bowed legs of a man very comfortable in the saddle.

Yoeli nodded. "Thank you, Tarran. For all you do."

"I stand with you, sir. And will at the end."

"May you keep your eyes northward, but your heart southward, my friend," Yoeli said, taking a deep breath and pushing open the door. Ituralde followed.

Inside the room, a Saldaean man in a rich red robe sat beside a hearth, sipping a cup of wine. A woman in a fine dress did needlework in the chair across from him. Neither looked up.

"Lord Torkumen," Yoeli said. "This is Rodel Ituralde, leader of the Domani army."

The man at the hearth sighed over his cup of wine. "You do not knock, you do not wait for me to address you first, you come during an hour when have spoken of my need for quiet contemplation."

Really, Vram," the woman said, "you expect manners from this man?

Now?"

Yoeli quietly rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. The room held a jumble of furniture: a bed on the side of the room that obviously didn't belong there, a few trunks and standing wardrobes.

"So," Vram said, "Rodel Ituralde. You're one of the great captains. I realize it might be insulting to ask, but I must observe formalities. You realize that by bringing troops onto our soil, you have risked a war?"

"I serve the Dragon Reborn," Ituralde said. "Tarmon Gai'don comes and all previous allegiances, boundaries, and laws are subject to the Dragon's will."

Vram clicked his tongue. "Dragonsworn. I had reports, of course - and those men you employ seemed an obvious hint. But it is still so strange to hear. Do you not realize how utterly foolish you sound?"

Ituralde met the man's eyes. He hadn't considered himself Dragonsworn, but there was no use calling a horse a rock and expecting everyone else to agree. "Don't you care about the invading Trollocs?"

"There have been Trollocs before," Vram said. "There have always been Trollocs."

"The Queen—" Yoeli said.

"The Queen," Vram interrupted, "will soon return from her expedition to unmask and capture this false Dragon. Once that happens, she will see you executed, traitor. You, Rodel Ituralde, will likely be spared because of your station, but I should not like to be your family when they receive the ransom demand. I hope that you have wealth to accompany your reputation. Otherwise, you shall likely spend many of the next years as a general to nothing more than the rats of your cell."

"I see," Ituralde said. "When did you turn to the Shadow?"

Vram's eyes opened wide, and he stood. "You dare name me Darkfriend?"

"I've known some Saldaeans in my time," Ituralde said. "I've called some friends; I've fought against others. But never have I known one who would watch men fight Shadowspawn and not offer to help."

"If I had a sword . . ." Vram said.

"May you burn, Vram Torkumen," Ituralde said. "I came here to tell you that that, on behalf of the men I lost."

The man seemed shocked as Ituralde turned to go. Yoeli joined him, pulling the door closed.

"You disagree with my accusation?" Ituralde asked, joining the traitor as they returned to the stairs.

"I honestly can't decide if he's a fool or a Darkfriend," Yoeli said. "He'd have to be one or the other to not put together the truth from the winter, those clouds and the rumors that al'Thor has conquered half the world."

"Then you have nothing to fear," Ituralde said. "You won't be executed.

"I killed my countrymen," Yoeli said, "staged a revolt against my

Queen's appointed leader, and seized command of the city, though I've not a drop of noble blood."

"That'll change the moment Tenobia returns, I warrant," Ituralde said. "You've earned yourself a title for certain."

Yoeli stopped in the dark stairwell, lit only from above and below. "I

see that you do not understand. I have betrayed my oaths and killed friends. I will demand execution, as is my right."

Ituralde felt a chill. Bloody Borderlanders, he thought. "Swear yourself to the Dragon. He supersedes all oaths. Do not waste your life. Fight beside me at the Last Battle."

"I will not hide behind excuses, Lord Ituralde," the man said, continuing down the steps. "No more than I could watch your men die. Come. Let us see to the housing of those Asha'man. I would like very much to see these gateways' you speak of. If we could use them to send messages out and bring supplies in, this could be a very interesting siege indeed."

Ituralde sighed, but followed. They didn't speak of fleeing by way of the gateways. Yoeli wouldn't abandon his city. And, he realized, Ituralde wouldn't abandon Yoeli and his men. Not after what they'd gone through to rescue him.

This was as good a place as any to make a stand. Better than many a situation he'd been in lately, that was for certain.

Perrin entered their tent to find Faile brushing her hair. She was beautiful. Each day, he still felt a sense of wonder that she was really back.

She turned to him and smiled in satisfaction. She was using the new silver comb he'd left on her pillow—something he'd traded for from Gaul, who had found it in Maiden. If this shanna'har was important to her, then Perrin intended to treat it the same way.

"The messengers have returned," Perrin said, closing the flaps to the tent. "The Whitecloaks have chosen a battlefield. Light, Faile. They're going to force me to wipe them out."

"I don't see the trouble with that," she said. "We'll win."

Probably," Perrin said, sitting down on the pillows beside their sleeping pallet. "But despite the Asha'man doing most of the work at first, we'll have to move in to fight. That means we'll lose people. Good men we need at the Last Battle." He forced himself to relax the fists that he'd clenched.

"The Light burn those Whitecloaks for what they've done, and for what they're doing."

"Then it's a welcome opportunity to defeat them."

Perrin grunted a reply, and didn't explain the depth of frustration he felt. He would lose that fight against the Whitecloaks, no matter what happened. Men would die on both sides. Men they needed.

The lightning flashed outside, casting shadows on the canvas ceil-ing. Faile went over to their trunk, getting out a sleeping shift for herself and setting aside a robe for him. Faile thought a lord should have a robe handy in case he was needed at night. She'd been correct a couple of times so far.

She moved past him, smelling worried, though her expression was pleasant. He had expended all options for a peaceful resolution with the Whitecloaks. It looked like, want it or not, killing would be his lot again very soon.

He stripped to his smallclothes and lay down, then started drifting off before Faile had finished changing.

He entered the wolf dream beneath the great sword impaling the ground. In the distance, he could make out the hill that Gaul had named a "fine watchpoint." The campsite was supplied from behind by a stream.

Perrin turned and sped toward the Whitecloak camp. They sat like a dam in a river, stopping him from continuing onward.

"Hopper?" he called, looking around the Whitecloak camp, still tents standing on an open field. There was no response, so Perrin searched the camp a while longer. Balwer had not recognized the seal Perrin had described. Who led these Whitecloaks?

An hour or so later, Perrin had come to no conclusion about that. However, he was fairly certain which tents they kept their supplies in; those might not be as well guarded as the prisoners, and—with gateways—he might be able to burn their supplies.

Maybe. Their Lord Captain Commander's letters were filled with phrases like: "I am giving your people the benefit of believing they knew not of your nature" and "My patience for your delays wears thin" and "There are only two options. Surrender yourself for proper trial, or bring your army to suffer the Light's judgment."

There was a strange sense of honor to this man, one Perrin had seen hinted at when he'd met the man, but could sense even more through the letters. But who was he? He signed each letter only "Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light."

Perrin moved out onto the roadway. Where was Hopper? Perrin took off at a brisk run. After a few moments, he moved off onto the grass. The earth was so soft, each step seemed to spring his foot back up into the air. He reached out and thought he sensed something to the south. He ran toward it; he wished to go faster, so he did. Trees and hills zipped past. The wolves were aware of him. It was Oak Dancer's pack, with Boundless, Sparks, Morninglight, and others. Perrin could feel them sending to one another, distant whispers of images and scent. Perrin moved faster, feeling the wind become a roar around him. The wolves began to move away farther south. Wait! he sent. / must meet with you!

They returned only amusement. Suddenly, they were heading east, and he pulled to a stop, then turned. He ran as quickly as he knew how, but when he got near, they were suddenly elsewhere. They'd shifted, vanishing from the south and appearing north of him.

Perrin growled, and suddenly he was on all fours. His fur blew, his mouth open as he dashed to the north, drinking in the hissing wind. But the wolves stayed ahead, distant.

He howled. They sent back taunts.

He pushed himself faster, leaping from hilltop to hilltop, bounding over trees, the ground a blur. In moments, the Mountains of Mist sprang up to his left, and he passed along them in a rush.

The wolves turned east. Why couldn't he catch them? He could smell them ahead. Young Bull howled at them, but got no response.

Do not come too strongly, Young Bull.

Young Bull pulled to a halt and the world lurched around him. The main pack continued on to the east, but Hopper sat on his haunches beside a large curving stream. Young Bull had been here before; it was near the den of his sires. He had traveled along the river itself on the back of one of the humans' floating trees. He—

No. . . no . . . remember Faile!

His fur became clothing and he found himself on hands and knees. He glared at Hopper. "Why did you run away?" Perrin demanded.

You wish to learn, Hopper sent. You grow more skilled. Faster. You stretch your legs and run. This is good.

Perrin looked back the way he had come, thinking of his speed. He'd bounded from hilltop to hilltop. It had been wonderful. "But I had to become the wolf to do that," Perrin said. "And that threatened to make me here 'too strongly. What use is training if it makes me do things you've forbidden?"

You are quick to blame, Young Bull. A young wolf howling and yapping outside the den, making a racket. This is not a thing of wolves.

Hopper was gone in an eyeblink.

Perrin growled, looking eastward, where he sensed the wolves. He took off after them, going more cautiously. He couldn't afford to let the wolf consume him. He'd end up like Noam, trapped in a cage, his humanity gone. Why would Hopper encourage him to that?

This is not a thing of wolves. Had he meant the accusations, or had he meant what was happening to Perrin?

The others all knew to end the hunt, Young Bull, Hopper sent from a dis-tance. Only you had to be stopped.

Perrin froze, pulling to a halt on the bank of the river. The hunt for the white stag. Hopper was there, suddenly, beside the river with him.

"This started when I began to sense the wolves," Perrin sent. "The first time I lost control of myself was with those Whitecloaks."

Hopper lay down, resting his head on his paws. You often are here too strongly, the wolf sent. // is what you do.

Hopper had told him that, off and on, since he'd known the wolf and the wolf dream. But suddenly, Perrin saw a new meaning to it. It was about coming to the wolf dream, but it was also about Perrin himself.

He'd begun to blame the wolves for what he did, the way he was when fighting, the way he'd become when searching for Faile. But were the wolves the cause of that? Or was it some part of him? Was it possible that that was what caused him to become a wolfbrother in the first place?

"Is it possible," Perrin said, "to run on four legs, but not come here too strongly?"

Of course it is, Hopper sent, laughing after the way of wolves—as if what Perrin had discovered was the most obvious thing in the world. Maybe it was.

Perhaps he wasn't like the wolves because he was a wolfbrother. Perhaps he was a wolfbrother because he was like the wolves. He didn't need to control them. He needed to control himself.

"The pack," Perrin said. "How do I catch them? Move more quickly?

That is one way. Another is to be where you want.

Perrin frowned. Then he closed his eyes and used the direction the wolves were running to guess where they would be. Something shifted.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing on a sandy hillside, tufts of long-bladed grass peeking out of the soil. An enormous mountain with a broken tip—shattered as if it had been slapped by the hand of a giant-—rose to his right.

A pack of wolves burst out of the forest. Many of them were laughing-Young Bull, hunting when he should seek the end! Young Bull, seeking the end when he should enjoy the hunt! He smiled, trying to feel good captured about the laughter, though in truth he felt much as he had on the day that his cousin Wil had planted a bucket of wet feathers to drop on Perrin.

Something fluttered in the air. A chicken feather. Wet around the edges.

Perrin started, realizing that they were spread around him on the ground. As he blinked, they vanished. The wolves smelled greatly amused, sending images of Young Bull dusted with feathers.

Get lost in dreams here, Young Bull, Hopper sent, and those dreams become this dream.

Perrin scratched his beard, fighting down his embarrassment. He'd experienced before the unpredictable nature of the wolf dream. "Hopper," he said, turning to the wolf. "How much could I change about my surroundings, if I wanted?"

If you wanted? Hopper said. It's not about what you want, Young Bull. It's about what you need. What you know.

Perrin frowned. Sometimes the wolf's meanings still confused him.

Suddenly, the other wolves in the group turned—as if one—and looked to the southwest. They vanished.

They went here. Hopper sent an image of a distant wooded hollow. The wolf prepared to follow.

"Hopper!" Perrin said, stepping forward. "How did you know? Where they went? Did they tell you?"

No. But I can follow.

"How?" Perrin said.

It is a thing I've always known, Hopper sent. Like walking. Or jumping.

"Yes, but how?"

The wolf smelled confused. It is a scent, he finally replied, though scent" was much more complex than that. It was a feeling, an impression, and a smell all in one.

"Go somewhere," Perrin said. "Let me try to follow."

Hopper vanished. Perrin walked up to where the wolf had been.

Smell it, Hopper sent distantly. He was near enough to give a sending, By reflex, Perrin reached out. He found dozens of wolves. In fact, he was amazed by how many of them were here, on the slopes of Dragonmount. Perrin had never felt so many gathered in one place before. Why were they here? And did the sky look more stormy in this place than it had in other areas of the wolf dream?

He couldn't sense Hopper; the wolf had closed himself off, somehow, making Perrin unable to place where he was. Perrin settled down. Smell it,

Hopper had sent. Smell it how? Perrin closed his eyes and let his nose catry the scents of the area to him. Pine cones and sap, quills and leaves, leather-leaf and hemlock.

And . . . something else. Yes, he could smell something. A distant, lingering scent that seemed out of place. Many of the scents were the same-the same fecund sense of nature, the same wealth of trees. But those were mixed with the scents of moss and of wet stone. The air was different. Pollen and flowers.

Perrin squeezed his eyes tight, breathing in deeply. Somehow, he built a picture in his mind from those scents. The process was not unlike the way a wolf sending translated into words.

There, he thought. Something shifted.

He opened his eyes. He was sitting on a stone outcropping amid pines; he was on the side of Dragonmount, several hours' hike up from where he had been. The stone outcropping was covered in lichen, and it jutted out over the trees spreading below. A patch of violet springbreath grew here, where sunlight could reach the blossoms. It was good to see flowers that weren't wilted or dying, if only in the wolf dream.

Come, Hopper sent. Follow.

And he was gone.

Perrin closed his eyes, breathing in. The process was easier this time. Oak and grass, mud and humidity. It seemed each place had its own specific scent.

Perrin shifted, then opened his eyes. He crouched in a field near the Jehannah Road. This was where Oak Dancer's pack had gone earlier, and Hopper moved about the meadow, smelling curious. The pack had moved on, but they were still close.

"Can I always do that?" Perrin asked Hopper. "Smell where a wolf went in the dream?"

Anyone can, Hopper said. If they can smell as a wolf does. He grinned.

Perrin nodded thoughtfully.

Hopper loped back across the meadow toward him. We must practice, Young Bull You are still a cub with short legs and soft fur. We—

Hopper froze suddenly.

"What?" Perrin asked.

A wolf suddenly howled in pain. Perrin spun. It was Morninglight. The howl cut off, and the wolf's mind winked out, vanishing.

Hopper growled, his scents panicked, angry, and sorrowful.

"What was that?" Perrin demanded.

We are hunted. Go, Young Bull! We must go.

The minds of the other members of the pack leaped away. Perrin

growled. When a wolf died in the wolf dream, it was forever. No rebirth,

no running with nose to the wind. Only one thing hunted the spirits of the

wolves. Slayer.

Young Bull! Hopper sent. We must go!

Perrin continued to growl. Morninglight had sent one last burst of

suprise and pain, her last vision of the world. Perrin formed an image from that jumble. Then closed his eyes.

Young Bull! No! He—

Shift. Perrin snapped his eyes open to find himself in a small glade near

where - in the real world—his people made camp. A muscular, tanned

man with dark hair and blue eyes squatted in the center of the glade, a wolf's corpse at his feet. Slayer was a thick-armed man, and his scent was faintly inhuman, like a man mixed with stone. He wore dark clothing; leather and black wool. As Perrin watched, Slayer began to skin the corpse.

Perrin charged forward. Slayer looked up in surprise. He resembled Lan in an almost eerie fashion, his hard face all angles and sharp lines. Perrin roared, hammer suddenly in his hands.

Slayer vanished in a blink of an eye, and Perrin's hammer passed through empty air. Perrin breathed deeply. The scents were there! Brine, and wood, wet with water. Seagulls and their droppings. Perrin used his newfound skill to hurl himself at that distant location.

Shift.

Perrin appeared on an empty dock in a city he didn't recognize. Slayer stood nearby, inspecting his bow.

Perrin attacked. Slayer brought his head up, eyes widening, his scent growing amazed. He raised the bow to block, but Perrin's swing shattered it.

With a roar, Perrin pulled his weapon back and swung again, this time for Slayer's head. Oddly, Slayer smiled, dark eyes glittering with amusement. He smelled eager, suddenly. Eager to kill. A sword appeared in his raised hand, and he twisted it to block Perrin's blow.

The hammer bounced off too hard, as if it had hit stone. Perrin stumbled, and Slayer reached out, placing a hand against Perrin's shoulder. He shoved.

His strength was immense. The shove tossed Perrin backward to the dock, but the wood disappeared as he hit. Perrin passed through empty air and splashed into the water beneath. His bellow became a gurgle; dark liquid surrounded him.

He struggled to swim upward, dropping his hammer, but found that the surface inexplicably became ice. Ropes snaked up from the depths, whipping up around Perrin's arms, yanking him downward. Through the frozen surface above, he could see a shadow moving. Slayer, raising his re-formed bow.

The ice vanished and the water parted. Water streamed off Perrin, and he found himself staring up at arrow pointed directly at his heart.

Slayer released.

Perrin willed himself away.

Shift. He gasped, hitting the stone outcropping where he had been with Hopper. Perrin fell to his knees, seawater streaming from his body He sputtered, wiping his face, heart pounding.

Hopper appeared beside him, panting, his scent angry. Foolish cub! Stupid cub! Chase down a lion when you're barely weaned?

Perrin shivered and sat up. Would Slayer follow? Could he? As minutes stretched and nobody appeared, Perrin began to relax. The exchange with Slayer had happened so quickly that it felt like a blur. That strength ... it was more than any man could have. And the ice, the ropes . . .

"He changed things," Perrin said. "Made the dock vanish beneath me, created ropes to bind me, pushed the water back so that he could get a clear shot at me."

He is a lion. He kills. Dangerous.

"I need to learn. I must face him, Hopper."

You are too young. These things are beyond you.

"Too young?" Perrin said, standing. "Hopper, the Last Hunt is nearly upon us!"

Hopper lay down, head on paws.

"You always tell me that I'm too young," Perrin said. "Or that I don't know what I'm doing. Well, what is the point of teaching me, if not to show me how to fight men like Slayer?"

We will see, Hopper sent. For tonight, you will go. We are done.

Perrin sensed a mournful cast to the sending, and also a finality. Tonight, Oak Dancer's pack and Hopper would grieve for Morninglight.

Sighing, Perrin sat with his legs crossed. He concentrated, and managed to imitate the things that Hopper had done in tossing him from the dream.

It faded around him.

He woke on the pallet in his darkened tent, Faile snuggled up beside him-Perrin lay for a time, staring up at the canvas. The darkness reminded him of the tempestuous sky in the wolf dream. Sleep seemed as far off as

Caemlyn- Eventually he rose—carefully extricating himself from Faile — and pulled on his trousers and shirt.

The camp was dark outside, but there was enough light for his eyes. He nodded to Kenly Maerin and Jaim Dawtry, the Two Rivers men who guarded his tent tonight.

"What's the time?" he asked one of them.

"After midnight, Lord Perrin," Jaim said.

Perrin grunted. Distant lightning lit the landscape. He walked off, and the men started to follow. "I'll be fine without guards," he told them. "Watch over my tent—Lady Faile still sleeps."

His tent was near the edge of camp. He liked that; it gave him a little more sense of seclusion, nestled near the hillside at the western side of the camp. Though it was late, he passed Gaul sharpening his spear near a fallen log. The tall Stone Dog stood up and began to follow, and Perrin didn't dismiss him. Gaul felt he hadn't been fulfilling his self-appointed duty of watching after Perrin lately, and had stepped up his efforts. Perrin thought he really just wanted an excuse to stay away from his own tent and the pair of gai'shain women who had taken up residence there.

Gaul kept his distance, and Perrin was glad. Was this how all leaders felt? No wonder so many nations ended up at war with one another—their leaders never had any time to think by themselves, and probably attacked to get people to stop pestering them!

A short distance away, he entered a stand of trees with a small pile of logs. Denton—his serving man until they got Lamgwin back—had frowned when Perrin had asked for them. Once a minor lord of Cairhien, Denton had refused to return to his station. He thought of himself as a servant now, and would not let anyone convince him otherwise.

There was an axe. Not the deadly half-moon blade he had once carried to battle, but a sturdy woodsman's axe with a fine steel head and a haft smoothed by the sweaty hands of workers. Perrin rolled up his sleeves, then spat on his hands and picked up the axe. It felt good to hold the worked wood in his hands. He raised it to his shoulder, stood the first log in front of him, then stepped back and swung.

He hit the log straight on, splinters flipping into the dark night air, the log railing into two pieces. He split one of the halves next. Gaul took a seat beside a tree, getting out a spear and continuing to sharpen its head. The rasping of metal against metal accompanied Perrin's thunk of axe against wood.

It felt good. Why was it that his mind worked so much better when he was doing something? Loial spoke much of sitting and thinking. Perrin didn't think he himself could figure anything out that way.

He split another log, the axe cutting clear. Was it really true? Could his own nature be to blame for the way he acted, not the wolves? He'd never acted like that back in the Two Rivers.

He split another log. / always ivas good at concentrating my attention. That was part of what had impressed Master Luhhan. Give Perrin a project and he'd keep working on it until he was done.

He split the halves of that log.

Maybe the changes in him were a result of encountering the outside world. He'd blamed the wolves for many things, and he had placed unnatural demands on Hopper. Wolves weren't stupid or simple, but they did not care about things that humans did. It must have been very hard for Hopper to teach in a way that Perrin would understand.

What did the wolf owe him? Hopper had died during that fateful night, so long ago. The night when Perrin had first killed a man, the night Perrin had first lost control of himself in a battle. Hopper didn't owe Perrin anything, but he had saved Perrin on several occasions—in fact, Perrin realized that Hopper's intervention had helped to keep him from losing himself as a wolf.

He swung at a log, a glancing blow that knocked it to the side. He repositioned and continued, Gaul's quiet sharpening soothing him. He split it.

Perrin grew caught up in what he was doing, maybe too much. That was true.

But at the same time, if a man wanted to get anything done, he had to work on one project until it was complete. Perrin had known men who never seemed to finish anything, and their farms were a mess. He couldn't live like that.

There had to be a balance. Perrin had claimed he had been pulled into a world filled with problems much larger than he was. He had claimed he was a simple man.

What if he was wrong? What if he was a complex man who had once happened to live a simple life? After all, if he was so simple, why had he fallen in love with such a complicated woman?

The split logs were piling up. Perrin bent down, gathering up quarters, their grain rough against his fingers. Callused fingers; he would never be a lord like those milk-fed creatures from Cairhien. But there were other kinds of lords, men like Faile's own father. Or men like Lan, who seemed more weapon than man.

Perrin stacked the wood. He enjoyed leading the wolves in his dream, but wolves didn't expect you to protect them, or to provide for them, or to make laws for them. They didn't cry to you when their loved ones died beneath your command.

It wasn't the leadership that worried him. It was all the things that

came with it.

He could smell Elyas approaching. With his loamy, natural earthen scent he smelled like a wolf. Almost.

"You're up late," Elyas said, stepping up. Perrin heard Gaul rustling, slipping his spear back into its place on his bowcase, then withdrawing with the silence of a sparrow streaking off into the sky. He would stay close, but would not listen in.

Perrin looked up at the dark sky, resting the axe on his shoulder. "Sometimes I feel more awake at night than during the day."

Elyas smiled. Perrin didn't see it, but he could smell the amusement.

"Did you ever try to avoid it, Elyas?" Perrin asked. "Ignore their voices, pretend that nothing about you had changed?"

"I did," Elyas said. He had a soft low voice, one that somehow suggested the earth in motion. Distant rumbles. "I wanted to, but then the Aes Sedai wanted to gentle me. I had to flee."

"Do you miss your old life?"

Elyas shrugged—Perrin could hear the motion, the clothing scraping against itself. "No Warder wants to abandon his duty. Sometimes, other things are more important. Or . . . well, maybe they are just more demanding. I don't regret my choices."

"I can't leave, Elyas. I won't"

"I left my life for the wolves. That doesn't mean you have to."

"Noam had to," Perrin said.

"Did he have to?" Elyas said.

"It consumed him. He stopped being human."

He caught a scent of worry. Elyas had no answers.

"Do you ever visit wolves in your dreams, Elyas?" Perrin asked. "A place where dead wolves run and live again?"

Elyas turned, eyeing him. "That place is dangerous, Perrin. It's another world, although tied to this one somehow. Legends say the Aes Sedai of old could go there."

And other people, too," Perrin said, thinking of Slayer.

Be careful in the dream. I stay away from it." His scent was wary.

Do you ever have trouble?" Perrin asked. "Separating yourself from the wolf?"

"I used to."

"But not any longer?"

"I found a balance," Elyas said.

"How?"

The older man fell still for a moment. "I wish I knew. It was just something I learned, Perrin. Something you'll have to learn."

Or end up like Noam. Perrin met Elyas' golden eyes, then nodded "Thank you."

"For the advice?"

"No," Perrin said. "For coming back. For showing me that one of us at least, can live with the wolves and not lose himself."

"It's nothing," Elyas said. "I had forgotten that it could be nice to be around people for a change. I don't know how long I can stay, though. The Last Hunt is almost here."

Perrin looked up at the sky again. "That it is. Pass the word on to Tam and the others for me. I've made my decision. The Whitecloaks have picked a place to fight. I've decided to go ahead and meet them tomorrow."

"All right," Elyas said. "You don't smell like you want to do it, though."

"It needs to be done," Perrin said. "And that's that." Everyone wanted him to be a lord. Well, this was the sort of thing lords did. Made decisions that nobody wanted to make.

It would still sicken him to give the order. He'd seen a vision of those wolves running sheep toward a beast. It seemed to him that maybe that was what he was doing, running the Whitecloaks toward destruction. They certainly wore the color of sheep's wool.

But what to make of the vision of Faile and the others, approaching a cliff? Elyas moved off, leaving Perrin with the axe still on his shoulder. He felt as if he hadn't been chopping logs, but bodies.

CHAPTER
25

Return to Bandar Eban

Rand and Min did not announce themselves as they came to Bandar Eban. They stepped through the gateway into a small alley, guarded by two Maidens—Lerian and Heidia—along with Naeff, the tall, square-chinned Asha'man.

The Maidens scouted to the end of the alleyway, peering suspiciously at the city. Rand stepped forward and laid a hand on Heidias shoulder, calming the slender woman, who seemed anxious at Rand's guard being so few. He wore his brown cloak.

Overhead, the clouds broke, melting away above the city in response to Rand's arrival. Min looked upward, feeling the warmth shine on her face. The alley smelled terrible—of refuse and waste—but a warm breeze blew through, carrying the stenches away.

"My Lord Dragon," Naeff said. "I don't like this. You should have gteater protection. Let us return and gather—"

"It will be fine, Naeff," Rand said. He turned to Min and held out his hand.

She took it, joining him. Naeff and the Maidens had orders to follow behind at a distance; they would draw attention.

As Min and Rand stepped out onto one of the Domani capital's many boardwalks, she raised a hand to her mouth. It had only been a short time since Rand's departure. How had the city changed so quickly?

The street was full of sickly, dirty people, crowded alongside walls, huddled in blankets. There wasn't room to move on the boardwalks; Min and Rand had to step down into the mud to continue. People coughed and moaned, and she realized the stenches weren't confined to the alley. The entire city seemed to stink. Once, banners had hung from many of these buildings, but they'd been pulled down and ripped apart for blankets or fuel.

Most of the buildings had broken windows, with refugees clogging the doorways and floors inside. As Min and Rand walked, the people around them turned to watch. Some looked delirious. Others looked hungry. And dangerous. Many were Domani, but there seemed to be as many paler-skinned people. Refugees from Almoth Plain or Saldaea, perhaps. Min loosened a knife in her sleeve as they passed a group of young toughs lounging at an alley way s mouth. Perhaps Naeff had been right. This didn't feel safe.

"I walked through Ebou Dar like this," Rand said softly. Suddenly, she was aware of his pain. A crushing guilt, more hurtful than the wounds in his side. "That was part of what made me change. The people in Ebou Dar were happy and well-fed. They didn't look like these. The Seanchan rule better than I."

"Rand, you aren't responsible for this," Min said. "You weren't here to . . ."

His pain increased, and she realized she'd said the wrong thing. "Yes," he replied softly, "I wasn't here. I abandoned this city when I saw that I could not use it as the tool I wished it to be. I forgot, Min. I forgot what this was all about. Tarn was so very right. A man must know why he is fighting."

Rand had sent his father—along with one of the Ashaman—to the Two Rivers to prepare and gather them for the Last Battle.

Rand stumbled as he walked, suddenly looking very tired. He sat down on a nearby box. A copper-skinned urchin watched him keenly from a nearby doorway. Across the street, a roadway branched off the main thoroughfare. That one wasn't clogged with people; brutish-looking men with cudgels stood at its mouth.

"They break into gangs," Rand said softly, shoulders bowing. "The rich hire the strong to protect them, to fight away those who come seeking their wealth. But it's not a wealth of gold or jewelry. It's about food, now."

"Rand," she said, going to one knee beside him. "You can't—"

"I know I must go on," Rand said, "but it hurts to know the things that I've done, Min. By turning myself to steel, I pushed out all of these emotions. By allowing myself to care again, to laugh again, I've had to open myself to my failures, too."

"Rand, I see sunlight around you."

He looked up at her, then glanced at the sky.

"Not that sunlight," Min whispered. "A viewing. I see dark clouds, pushed away by the sunlight's warmth. I see you, a brilliant white sword held in your hand, wielded against one of black, held by a faceless darkness. I see trees, growing green again, bearing fruit. I see a field, the crops healthy and full." She hesitated. "I see the Two Rivers, Rand. I see an inn there with the mark of the Dragon's Fang inlaid on its door. No longer be a symbol of darkness or hate. A sign of victory and hope."

He looked to her.

Min caught something from the corner of her eye. She turned toward the people sitting on the street, and gaped. Every single one had an image above them. It was remarkable to see so many viewings, all at once, flaring to light above the heads of the sickly, the weak, and the abandoned.

"I see a silver axe above that man's head," she said, pointing to a bearded beggar, who lay against a wall, his chin down against his chest. "He will be a leader in the Last Battle. That woman there—the one sulking in the shadows—she will be trained by the White Tower and become Aes Sedai. I can see the Flame of Tar Valon beside her, and I know what it means. That man over there who looks like a simple street tough? He will save her life. I know he doesn't look like it, but he will fight. All of them will. I can see it!"

She looked at Rand and took his hand. "You will be strong, Rand. You'll do this. You'll lead them. I know it."

"You saw that?" he asked. "In a viewing?"

She shook her head. "I don't need to. I believe in you." I almost killed you," he whispered. "When you look at me, you see a murderer. You feel my hand at your throat."

"What? Of course I don't! Rand, meet my eyes. You can sense me through the bond. Do you feel a sliver of hesitation or fear from me?"

He searched her eyes with his own, so deep. She didn't back down. She could meet the eyes of this sheepherder.

He sat up straighter. "Oh, Min. What would I do without you?"

She snorted. "You have kings and Aiel chiefs following you. Aes Sedai, Asha'man, and ta'veren. I'm certain you'd get along."

"No," Rand said. "You're more vital than them all. You remind me

who I am. Besides, you think more clearly than most of those who call themselves my counselors. You could be a queen, if you wished it."

"All I wish for is you, stupid looby."

"Thank you." He hesitated. "Though I could manage without quite so much name calling."

"Life's tough, isn't it?"

He smiled. Then he stood, taking a deep breath. His guilt was still there, but he managed it now, as he managed the pain. Nearby, the refugees perked up. Rand turned toward the bearded wretch Min had indicated earlier; the man sat with his feet in the mud.

"You," the man said to Rand, "you're him. The Dragon Reborn."

"Yes," Rand said. "You were a soldier?"

"I. . ." The man's eyes grew distant. "Another life. I was in the King's Guard, before he was taken, before we were seized by Lady Chadmar, then disbanded." The fatigue seemed to bleed from his eyes as he thought of earlier days.

"Excellent," Rand said. "We need to restore this city, Captain."

"Captain?" the man said. "But I. . ." He cocked his head. Then he stood up and brushed himself off. He suddenly had a faintly military air about him, despite the ripped clothing and the snarled beard. "Well, I suppose you're right. But I don't think it'll be easy. The people are starving."

"I will see to that," Rand said. "I need you to gather your soldiers."

"I don't see many of the other lads here. . . . No, wait. There's Votabek and Redbord." He waved to a pair of the toughs Min had noticed earlier. They hesitated, then walked over.

"Durnham?" one of them asked. "What's this?"

"It's time for the lawlessness in the city to end," Durnham said. "We're going to organize things, clean it up. The Lord Dragon has returned."

One of them spat to the side. He was a burly man with curly black hair, Domani skin, and a thin mustache. "Burn him. He left us. I—" He cut off as saw Rand.

"I'm sorry," Rand said, meeting the man's eyes. "I failed you. I will not do so again."

The man glanced at his companion, who shrugged. "Lain's never going to pay us. Might as well see what we can do here."

"Naeff," Rand called, waving the Asha'man forward. He and the Maidens stepped up from where they had been watching. "Make a gateway back to the Stone. I want weapons, armor and uniforms."

"I'll do it immediately," Naeff said. "We'll have soldiers bring them—

"No," Rand said. "Pass the supplies through, into this building here.

I'll clear a place for the gateway inside it. But no soldiers are to come."

Rand raised his eyes, looking at the street. "Bandar Eban has suffered enough beneath the hands of outsiders. Today, she will not know the hand of a conqueror."

Min stepped back, and watched with wonder. The three soldiers hastened into the building and cleared out the urchins. When Rand saw them he asked them to be messengers to run errands. They responded. Everyone responded to Rand, when they took time to look at him.

Perhaps another might have thought it some form of Compulsion, but Min saw their faces change, saw hope return as a glimmer in their eyes. They saw something about Rand they could trust. Something, at least, they hoped they could trust.

The three soldiers sent a few of the messenger boys and girls to fetch other former soldiers. Naeff made his gateway. In minutes, the original three soldiers stepped out of the building, wearing silvery breastplates and simple, clean clothing of green. The men had combed their beards and hair and found some water to wash their faces As quickly as that, they stopped looking like beggars and became soldiers. A bit smelly, but soldiers nonetheless.

The woman Min had noted earlier—the one she was certain could learn to channel—came over to speak with Rand. After a bit, she nodded, and soon had gathered women and men to fill buckets from the well. Min frowned at that until they started wiping clean the faces and hands of those who approached.

People began to gather around. Some curious, others hostile, still others merely caught in the flow. The woman and her team began sorting through them and setting them to work. Some to seek out the wounded or sickly, others to take up swords and uniforms. Another woman began interrogating the urchins, discovering where their parents were, if they had any.

Min sat down on the box that Rand had been sitting on. Within the hour, he had a group of soldiers five hundred strong, led by Captain Durnham and his two lieutenants. Many of those five hundred kept glancing down at their clean clothing and silvery breastplates as if amazed.

Rand spoke with many of them, apologizing directly. As he was speaking to one woman, the crowd behind began to shuffle and move. Rand turned to see an aged man approaching, his skin broken by terrible lesions. The crowd kept its distance.

"Naeff," Rand called.

"My Lord?"

"Bring the Aes Sedai through," Rand said. "There are people who require Healing." The woman who had gotten people to fill water buckets led the old man to one side.

"My Lord," Captain Durnham said, marching up. Min blinked. The man had found a razor somewhere and shaved off his beard, revealing a strong chin. He'd left a Domani mustache. Four men followed him as a guard.

"We're going to need more room, my Lord," Durnham said. "That building you chose is overflowing, and more and more are coming, filling the street."

"What do you suggest?" Rand asked.

"The docks," Durnham replied. "They are held by one of the city merchants. I'll wager we can find some near-empty warehouses to use. Those once held food but . . . well, there isn't any left."

"And the merchant who holds the place?" Rand asked.

"My Lord," Captain Durnham said, "nothing you can't deal with."

Rand smiled, then waved for Durnham to lead the way. Rand held his hand out to Min.

"Rand," she said, joining him, "they'll need food."

"Yes," he agreed. He looked southward, toward the nearby docks. "We'll find it there."

"Won't it already have been eaten?"

Rand didn't reply. They joined the newly formed city guard, walking at the head of a force in green and silver. Behind them trailed a growing throng of hopeful refugees.

The enormous docks of Bandar Eban were some of the most impressive in the world. They lay in a half-moon at the base of the city. Min was surprised to see how many ships were there, most of them Sea Folk vessels.

That's right, Min thought. Rand had them bring food to the city. But it had spoiled. As Rand had left the city, he'd gotten word that all of the food on those ships had fallen to the Dark One's touch.

Someone had set up blockades at the base of the roadway. Other roads to the docks looked similarly inhibited. Uniformed soldiers peeked out nervously from behind the barricade as Rand's force walked up.

"Stop right there!" a voice called. "We don't—"

Rand lifted his hand, then waved it casually. The barricade—formed of furniture and planks—rumbled, then slid to the side with a grinding of wood. Men cried out from behind, scrambling away.

Rand left the barricade slumped at the side of the road. He stepped forward, and Min could sense peace inside of him. A ragged-looking group of men with cudgels stood in the road, eyes wide. Rand picked one at the front. "Who is it that blocks my people from these docks and seeks to hoard food for himself? I would . . . speak with this person."

"My Lord Dragon?" a surprised voice asked.

Min glanced to the side. A tall, lean man in a red Domani coat hustled toward them from the docks. His shirt had once been fine and ruffled, but was now wrinkled and unkempt. He looked exhausted.

What was his name? Min thought. Iralin. That's it. Master of the docks.

"Iralin?" Rand asked. "What is going on here? What have you done?"

"What have / done?" the man demanded. "I've been trying to keep everyone from rushing those ships for the spoiled food! Anyone who eats it gets sick and dies. The people won't listen. Several groups tried to storm the docks for the food, so I decided not to let them kill themselves eating it."

The man's voice had never been that angry before. Min remembered him as peaceable.

"Lady Chadmar fled an hour after you left," Iralin continued. "The other members of the Council of Merchants ran within the day. Those burning Sea Folk claim they won't sail away until they've unloaded their wares—or until I give them payment to do something else. So I've been waiting for the city to starve itself, eat that food and die, or go up in another riot of flame and death. That's what I've been doing here. What have you been doing, Lord Dragon?"

Rand closed his eyes and sighed. He did not apologize to Iralin as he had the others; perhaps he saw that it would not have meant anything.

Min glared at Iralin. "He has weights upon his shoulders, merchant. He cannot watch over each and every—"

"It is all right, Min," Rand said, laying his hand on her arm and opening his eyes. "It is no more than I deserve. Iralin. Before I left the city, you told me that the food on those ships had spoiled. Did you check every barrel and sack?"

"I checked enough," Iralin said, still hostile. "If you open a hundred sacks and you find the same thing in every one, you figure out the pattern. My wife has been trying to figure out a safe method of sifting the rotted grain from the safe grain. If there's any safe grain to be had."

Rand began walking toward the ships. Iralin followed, looking confused, perhaps because Rand hadn't yelled at him. Min joined them. Rand approached a Sea Folk vessel sitting low in the water, moored by ropes. A group of Sea Folk lounged atop it.

"1 would speak with your Sailmistress," Rand called.

"I am she," said one of the Sea Folk, a woman with white in her straight black hair and a pattern of tattoos across her right hand. "milis din Shalada Three Stars."

"I made a deal," Rand called up, "for food to be delivered here."

"That one doesn't want it delivered," Milis said, nodding to Iralin. "He won't let us unload; says that if we do, he'll have his archers loose on us."

"I wouldn't be able to hold the people back," Iralin said. "I've had to spread rumors in town that the Sea Folk are holding the food hostage."

"You see what we suffer for you?" Milis said to Rand. "I begin to wonder about our Bargain with you, Rand al'Thor."

"Do you deny that I am the Coramoor?" Rand asked, meeting her eyes. She seemed to have trouble looking away from him.

"No," Milis said. "No, guess that I do not. You will want to board the Whitecap, I suppose."

"If I may."

"Up with you, then," she said.

Once the gangplank was in place, Rand strode up it, followed by Min with Naeff and the two Maidens. After a moment, Iralin came, too, followed by the captain and some of his soldiers.

Milis led them to the center of the deck, where a hatch and ladder led down to the ship's hold. Rand climbed down first, moving awkwardly, being one-handed. Min followed.

Beneath, light peeked through slots in the deck, illuminating sack upon sack of grain. The air smelled dusty and thick.

"We'll be glad to have this cargo gone," Milis said softly, coming down next. "It's been killing the rats."

"I would think you'd appreciate that," Min said.

"A ship without rats is like an ocean without storms," Milis said. "We complain about both, but my crew mutters every time they find one of the vermin dead."

There were several open sacks of grain nearby, turned on their sides, spilling dark contents across the floor. Iralin had spoken of trying to sift the bad from the good, but Min didn't see any good. Just shriveled, discolored grains.

Rand stared at the open sacks as Iralin came down into the hold. Captain Durnham shuffled down the ladder last with his men.

"Nothing stays good any longer," Iralin said. "It's not just this grain-People brought winter stores from the farms with them. They're all gone.

We're going to die, and that's that. We won't reach the bloody Last Battle. We-"

"Peace, Iralin," Rand said softly. "It is not so bad as you think." He stepped forward and yanked free the tie on the top of a sack. It fell to the side, and golden barley spilled from it across the floor of the hold, not a single speck of darkness on it. The barley looked as if it had just been haryested, each grain plump and full.

Mills gasped. "What did you do to it?"

"Nothing," Rand said. "You merely opened the wrong sacks. The rest are all good."

"Merely . . ." Iralin said. "We happened to open the exact number of bad sacks without reaching one of the good ones? That's ridiculous."

"Not ridiculous," Rand said, laying his hand Iralin's shoulder. "Simply implausible. You did well here, Iralin. I'm sorry to have left you in such a predicament. I'm naming you to the Merchant Council."

Irilin gaped.

To the side, Captain Durnham pulled open another sack. "This one's good."

"So's this one," said one of his men.

"Potatoes here," another soldier said from beside a barrel. "Look as good as any I've had. Better than most, actually. Not dried up, like you'd expect from winter leftovers."

"Spread the word," Rand said to the soldiers. "Gather your men to set up distribution in one of the warehouses. I want this grain well guarded; Iralin was wise to worry that the people would rush the docks. Don't give out uncooked grain—that will turn people to hoarding and bartering with it. We'll need cauldrons and fires to cook some of it. Move the rest to stores. Hurry, now."

"Yes, sir!" Captain Durnham said.

"The people I've gathered so far will help," Rand said. "They won't steal the grain; we can trust them. Have them unload the ships and burn the bad grain. There should be thousands of sacks that are still good."

Rand looked to Min. "Come. I need to organize the Aes Sedai for Wealing." He hesitated, looking at the stunned Iralin. "Lord Iralin, you are steward of the city for now, and Durnham is your commander. You will soon have sufficient troops to restore order."

Steward of the city . . ." Iralin said. "Can you do that?"

Rand smiled. "Somebody must. Hurry about your work; there is much to do. I can only remain here long enough for you to make things stable. A day or so."

Rand turned to climb up the ladder.

'A day?" Iralin said, still standing in the hold with Min "To get things stable? We can't possibly do it in that time. Can we?"

"I think you'll be surprised by him, Lord Iralin," Min said, gripping the ladder and starting to climb. "I am, each day."

CHAPTER
26

Parley

Perrin rode Stepper out of camp, leading a large army. They didn't fly the wolfhead banner. So far as he knew, his order to burn the things had been followed. He was less certain of that decision now.

There was an odd scent in the air. A staleness. Like the inside of a room that had been left locked up for years. Stepper trotted onto the Jehannah Road. Grady and Neald flanked Perrin directly, and they smelled eager.

"Neald, you sure you're ready?" Perrin asked as he turned the army to the southeast.

"I feel as strong as I ever have, my Lord," Neald answered. "Strong enough to kill some Whitecloaks. I've always wanted a chance to do that."

"Only a fool looks for a chance to kill," Perrin said.

"Br, yes, my Lord," Neald said. "Though, maybe I should mention—"

"No need to speak of that," Grady interrupted.

"What?" Perrin asked.

Grady looked embarrassed. "It's nothing, I'm sure." Say it, Grady," Perrin said.

The older man took a deep breath. "We tried to make a gateway this morning to send refugees back, and it didn't work. One time earlier, it happened, too. Weaves fell apart and unraveled on us."

Perrin frowned. "Other weaves work fine?"

"They do," Neald said quickly.

"Like I said, my Lord," Grady said. "I'm sure it will work when we try again. Just not enough practice."

It wasn't likely that they'd need Traveling to retreat from this battle-not with only two Asha'man and so large a force. But it was still discon-certing to lose the chance. It had better not happen with other weaves He was depending on Grady and Neald to confuse and disrupt the initial Whitecloak charge.

Maybe we should turn back, Perrin thought, but squelched the thought immediately. He didn't like having to make this decision. It made him sick to think of fighting, man against man, when their real enemy was the Dark One. But his hand had been forced.

They continued on, his hammer in its strap at his side. Hopper had implied it was no different from the axe. To the wolf, one weapon was like another.

Mayener Winged Guards rode beside him, red-painted breastplates gleaming, looking like graceful hawks ready to swoop. Alliandre's soldiers, straightforward and determined, rode behind, like boulders poised to crush. Two Rivers longbowmen, like sapling oaks, were nimble yet sturdy. Aiel, like adders with razor teeth. Wise Ones, reluctantly drawn along, uncertain thunderheads boiling with unpredictable energy. He didn't know if they would fight for him.

The rest of his army was less impressive. Thousands of men with a range of experience and age—some mercenaries, some refugees from Maiden, some women who had seen the Maidens and Cha Faile and insisted on being trained alongside the men. Perrin hadn't stopped them. The Last Battle was coming. Who was he to forbid those who wanted to fight?

He had considered forbidding Faile to come today, but he'd known how that would turn out. Instead, he placed her at the back, surrounded by Wise Ones and Cha Faile, accompanied by Aes Sedai.

Perrin gripped his reins tighter, listening to the marching feet. Few of the refugees had armor. Arganda had called them light infantry. Perrin had another term for them: "innocents with blades." Why did they follow him? Couldn't they see that they would fall first?

They trusted him. Light burn them, they all trusted him! He rested his hand on his hammer, smelling the damp air mixed with fear and excitement. The thunder of hooves and footsteps, reminding him of the dark sky. Thunder with no lightning. Lightning with no thunder.

The battlefield was ahead, a broad green grassland lined on the far end by troops in white. That Whitecloak army wore silver breastplates shined to perfection, their tabards and cloaks a pure white. This grassy

plain was a good place to have a battle. It would also be a good place to plant crops.

To understand a thing, you must understand its parts and its purpose.

What had been the purpose of his war axe? To kill. That was why it had been made. That was all it had been good for.

But the hammer was different.

Perrin pulled Stepper up sharply. Beside him, the Asha'man stopped, and the entire column of troops started to pull to a halt. Groups bunched up as they slowed; yelled orders replaced the sounds of marching.

The air was still, the sky overhead dreary. He couldn't smell the grass or the distant trees for the dust in the air and the men sweating in their armor. Horses snorted, a number of them nibbling at the grass. Others shuffled, catching the tension of their riders.

"My Lord?" Grady asked. "What is it?"

The Whitecloak army was already in position with a V formation of riders at the front. They waited, lances upright, ready to be lowered to spill blood.

"The axe only kills," Perrin said. "But the hammer can either create or kill. That is the difference."

It made sense to him, suddenly. That was why he'd needed to throw the axe away. He could choose not to kill. He would not be pushed into this.

He turned to Gaul, who stood with several Maidens a short distance away. "I want the Aes Sedai and Wise Ones up here now." Perrin hesitated. "Order the Aes Sedai, but ask the Wise Ones. Order the Two Rivers men up as well."

Gaul nodded and ran to do as asked. Perrin turned back to the Whitecloaks. For all their faults, the Whitecloaks considered themselves honorable. They wouldn't attack until Perrin was in position.

The cluster of Wise Ones and Aes Sedai joined him at the front. Faile, he noticed, rode with them. Well, he had told her to stay with them. He held out a hand to her, inviting her next to him. The Two Rivers men came up on the flank of his force.

"Gaul said you were very polite," Edarra noted to Perrin. "That means you want something from us that we will not want to do."

Perrin smiled. "I want you to help me prevent this battle."

You do not wish to dance the spears?" Edarra asked. "I have heard some of what these men in white have done in the wetlands. I think they wearr white to hide what is dark inside of them."

"They're confused," Perrin said. "Well, they're more than confused. They're Light-cursed frustrating. But we shouldn't be fighting them, not

with the Last Battle coming. If we squabble among ourselves, we will lose to the Dark One."

Edarra laughed. "I would like to see someone tell that to the Shaido, Perrin Aybara. Or, rather, I would like to have seen someone suggest that to you when they still held your wife!"

"Well, the Shaido needed killing," he said. "But I don't know if these Whitecloaks do. Maybe they only need a good fright. I want you and the Aes Sedai to blast the ground in front of their army."

"You ask something you should not, Aybara," Seonid said sternly. "We will not take part in your battle. The diminutive Green met his eyes, voice crisp and curt.

"You're not taking part in battle," Perrin said. "You're preventing one."

Seonid frowned. "I'm afraid it would be the same, in this case. If we attack the earth, it would be using the One Power as a weapon. We could hurt those men. I'm sorry."

Perrin ground his teeth, but did not force them. The Wise Ones and Asha'man would probably be enough. He turned to the Two Rivers men. "Tarn, tell the men to nock arrows and be ready to launch a volley."

Tarn nodded, sending a runner with the order. The Two Rivers men lined up. This was beyond the range of most bows, but a good pull on a Two Rivers longbow could manage it.

Perrin nodded to the Wise Ones, then motioned toward the Asha'man. Before anything else could be said, the ground in front of the Whitecloaks erupted. A rumble shook the meadow, dirt exploding into the air. Grady and Neald moved their horses forward.

The Whitecloaks' horses reared and men shouted in terror. A small group of men at the very front didn't seem disturbed by the explosions, and they kept their horses under control. Those would be the leaders. Indeed, Perrin's eyes could make out the Lord Captain Commander himself sitting there.

Dirt sprayed into the air again, falling to pelt the trench beneath. The Wise Ones wore that look of concentration that came with channeling.

"Can one of you enhance my voice?" Perrin asked.

"I can do it," Grady said. "I saw the M'Hael do it once."

"Good," Perrin said, turning to Tarn. "Once the channelers stop, tell the men to give me a couple of long volleys. Try and hit that trench."

A few moments later, the explosions ended. The Two Rivers men drew a volley and loosed it. Thick shafts rose in an arc, and soon the rift bristled with arrows. Perrin watched the Whitecloak army. They had broken ranks, standing in disorder.

A clank of armor matched by hoofbeats announced Arganda's arrival.

The First Captain of Ghealdan wore his plumed helm, his eyes hard beneath

it. "What was the point of that, if I may ask, Lord Aybara?" He smelled

f;ie "You just gave away our advantage! An ambush could have killed thousands and broken their initial charge."

"Yes " Perrin said. Faile still rode at his other side. "And they know it. Look at their lines, Arganda. They're worried. The Whitecloaks are realizing what they'd have to go through to charge us. If I was willing to give them this as a warning burst, what was I holding back?"

"But that was the extent of what we can do," Faile said.

"They don't know that." Perrin grinned. "It would be stupid of us to commit everything we have in a warning blast like that."

Arganda held his tongue, though he obviously was thinking that very thing. He was a soldier to the bone. An axe. There was nothing wrong with that, but Perrin had to be the hammer. When he pointed, men like Arganda killed.

"Grady," Perrin said. "My voice, please? I wouldn't mind if our army could hear what I say, too."

"I can manage that," Grady said.

Perrin took a deep breath, then spoke. "I am Perrin Aybara!" his voice boomed across the plain. "I am friend to the Dragon Reborn, and I serve here at his command. I am marching to the Last Battle. Lord Captain Commander, you demanded I meet with you on your terms before, and I came. I ask you to return the honor here, and meet as I request. If you are determined to kill me before I ride against the Shadow, at least do me the service of giving me one last chance to prevent spilling blood this day!"

He nodded to Grady, and the man released his weave. "Do we have a pavilion we could set up for parley?"

"Back at the camp," Faile said.

"I can try a gateway," Neald said, knuckling his mustache—or, at least, the thin bit of fur on his face that he called a mustache, waxed to points.

"Try it."

He concentrated. Nothing happened. The young man blushed furiously. "Doesn't work. Not Traveling or Skimming."

I see," Perrin said. "Well, let's send a rider back. We should be able to have the tent set up here in minutes. I don't know if they'll agree to meet, but I want to get ready, in case they do. Bring Berelain and Alliandre back as well, and perhaps someone with drinks and the chairs and table from my tent."

The proper orders were given, and a Two Rivers man—Robb Solter-rode off, Maidens trailing after him. The Whitecloaks seemed to be considering his proposition. Good.

Arganda and most of the others spread out to pass the word about what was happening, though they couldn't possibly have missed Perrin's announcement. Everyone seemed to be doing what they should, so Perrin sat back in his saddle to wait.

Faile sidled her horse up to him. She smelled intrigued.

"What?" Perrin asked.

"Something's changed about you. I'm trying to figure out what."

"I'm stalling," Perrin said. "I haven't made any decisions yet. But I don't want to kill these men. Not yet. Not unless I have to."

"They're not going to give any ground, husband," Faile said. "They've already judged you."

"We'll see," he said. He looked up at the sky, thinking of the strange scent and the fact that the Asha'man gateways weren't working. Slayer was prowling this area in the wolf dream and there was that wall of glass. Something felt very wrong on the wind, and his senses itched at him. Be wary. Be prepared.

The hammer could kill or create. He didn't know which situation this was yet. He didn't intend to strike until he did.

Galad sat on the grassy plain that should have been a field of battle, looking at the trench torn in the ground, bristling with hundreds of arrows.

He was prepared for Aes Sedai. An Aes Sedai could not hurt someone unless she or her Warder was in danger, and Galad had given very specific orders to his people not to engage—or even go near—Aes Sedai. If the Children saw Aes Sedai, they were to stop and nod their heads, turning their weapons away. If his men showed plainly that they would not harm Aes Sedai, then the sisters should be useless in battle.

Many of the Children did not believe this. They called the stories of the Three Oaths deliberate fabrications. They hadn't lived in the White Tower. Galad didn't like most Aes Sedai, and he certainly didn't trust them, but he knew that the oaths did hold.

Galad s men moved back into line, muttering. He raised his looking glass, inspecting Aybara's front line. Men in black coats. Several Aiel women, including one of those who had come with Aybara to their first meetings. A channeler, no doubt. He imagined the ground exploding beneath his charging forces, knocking the cavalry into the air, others falling into the trench while the later lines stalled in confusion, prey to those impressive longbows.

Bornhald rode up to Galad, his face angry. "We aren't really going to parley, are we?"

Galad lowered his looking glass. "Yes. I think we are."

"But we already met with him!" Bornhald said. "You said you wanted to see those eyes, as proof he was Shadowspawn, and you saw them. What more do you need?"

Byar said, nudging his mount closer. He often acted as a guard to Galad these days. "He can't be trusted, my Lord Captain Commander."

Galad nodded at the trench. "He could have destroyed us with that attack."

"I agree with Byar," Bornhald said. "He wants to draw you out, then kill you to demoralize us."

Galad nodded slowly. "That's possible." He turned to Lord Captain Harnesh, who rode nearby. "If I die, I want you to take command and charge. Attack without mercy; I repeal my order to avoid Aes Sedai. Kill anyone who seems to be channeling. Make it a priority. It's possible that we do not understand what is happening here."

"But you're still going?" Bornhald asked.

"Yes," Galad said. He had let Bornhald and Byar goad him into battle, but now he wondered if he'd been too hasty. He had seen those eyes, and had heard the testimonies of both his Children and some of those who had ridden with Aybara. It had seemed clear that attacking was the thing to do.

But Aybara was right. He had come to meet with Galad when asked. Perhaps there was a way to prevent bloodshed. Galad did not believe it, but if there was even a chance, then delaying was the right thing. It was as simple as that.

Bornhald did not seem pleased. His anger at the man who had killed his father was understandable, but it could not be allowed to guide the Children. "You may come with me," Galad said, nudging his horse forward. "That goes for you as well, Child Byar. The Lords Captain should remain behind, scattered through the men, lest Aybara leave us without leaders."

Harnesh saluted. Bornhald reluctantly fell into place beside Galad, as

did Byar, whose eyes burned with a wild zeal that matched Bornhald s anger.

Both had experienced defeat and indignity at the hands of this Perrin

Aybara. Galad also took fifty Children as guards, riding in formation behind him.

A pavilion was set up by the time they arrived. Flat topped and simple, it had four poles stretching the brownish gray canvas. There was a small square table under it, accompanied by two chairs.

Aybara sat on one side of the table. He stood up as Galad approached; today, the large man wore a green coat and brown trousers—both well crafted but plain—and had that hammer slung at his waist. The clothes had an earthy sensibility to them. No, this was not a man of palaces but a man of fields and forests. A woodsman who had risen to be a lord.

A pair of Two Rivers men stood at the back of the pavilion, holding powerful Two Rivers longbows. They were said to be independent farmers and herdsmen of old, sturdy stock. And they had chosen this Perrin Aybara to lead them.

Galad walked toward the pavilion. Byar and Bornhald joined him though the other fifty remained mounted outside.

Unlike their last meeting, there were Aes Sedai here, three whom he could spot. A short Cairhienin woman; a slim, pleasant-looking woman in a simple dress; a stocky woman whose numerous braids meant she was likely from Tarabon. They stood with the group of Aiel women in shawls, guarded by a handful of Maidens of the Spear. Well, those Aiel did give credence to the claim that Aybara had been sent by the Dragon Reborn.

Galad rested his hand casually on the pommel of his sword, looking over the pavilion's other occupants.

And then he froze. A strikingly beautiful woman stood behind Aybara's chair. No, not beautiful, gorgeous. Lustrous black hair streamed down past her neck; it seemed to shine. She wore a red gown, thin enough to accentuate her form and deeply cut enough to expose swelling bosom.

And those eyes. So dark, with long beautiful lashes. He seemed . .. pulled toward them. Why hadn't this woman come last time?

"You appear surprised," Aybara said as he sat back down. He had a gruff voice. "The Lady First is here at the Lord Dragon's command, as 1 am. Didn't you notice the flag of Mayene above my forces?"

"I. . ." Galad snapped his mouth closed, executing a bow to the woman. Berelain sur Paendrag Paeron? She was said to be a marvelous beauty, but those tales did her little justice. Galad tore his eyes from her and forced himself to take the seat opposite Aybara. He had to concentrate on his foe.

Those golden eyes were as unsettling as he remembered. So strange to look into. Yes, this man couldn't be anything other than Shadowspawn.

Why would so many follow such a creature? Why would she follow such a creature?

"Thank you for coming," Aybara said. "Our last meeting was hasty. We'll do it proper, this time. You should be made aware that this woman beside me is Alliandre Maritha Kigarin, Queen of Ghealdan, Blessed of the Light, Defender of Garen's Wall." So, that stately, dark-haired woman was the current Queen of Ghealdan. Of course, with the unrest here lately, there were probably a half-dozen people trying to claim the throne. She was pretty, but completely overshadowed by Berelain.

Perrin nodded toward a third woman. "This is Faile ni Bashere t'Avbara, my wife and cousin to the Queen of Saldaea." Aybara's wife regarded Galad with suspicion. Yes, she was obviously Saldaean, by that nose. Bornhald and Byar hadn't known of her royal connections.

Two monarchs in the tent, and both behind Aybara. Galad rose from his seat and gave a bow to Alliandre to match the one he'd given Berelain. "Your Majesty."

"You're very polite, Lord Captain Commander," Berelain said. "And those were elegant bows. Tell me, where did you receive such training?"

Her voice was like music. "In the court of Andor, my Lady. I am Galad Damodred, stepson of the departed Queen Morgase and half-brother of Elayne Trakand, the rightful Queen."

"Ah," Perrin said. "About time I put a name to you. Wish you'd said that last time."

Berelain stared into his eyes, and she smiled, looking as if she wanted to step forward. She caught herself, however. "Galad Damodred. Yes, I thought I recognized something in your face. How is your sister?"

"I hope she is well," Galad said. "I have not seen her in some time."

"Elayne's fine," Perrin said gruffly. "Last I heard—which was only a few days back—she'd secured her claim to the throne. I wouldn't be surprised if she's looking to marry Rand by now. If she can pull him away from whatever realm he's conquering."

Behind Galad, Byar hissed softly. Had Aybara intended insult by indicating a relationship between Elayne and the Dragon Reborn? Unfortunately, Galad knew his sister all too well. She was impulsive, and she had shown an unseemly fascination with young al'Thor.

My sister may do as she wishes," Galad said, surprised at how easily he contained his annoyance at both her and the Dragon Reborn. "We are here to discuss you, Perrin Aybara, and your army."

Aybara leaned forward, laying two hands on the table. "We both know this isn't about my army."

"What is it about, then?" Galad asked.

Aybara met his gaze with those unnatural eyes of his. "It's about a pair of Children of the Light I killed two years back. Now every time I turn around, it seems that there is a group of you snapping at my heels."

It wasn't often that a murderer was so open about what he had done. Galad heard the rasp of a sword being drawn behind him, and raised a hand. "Child Bornhald! You will control yourself!"

"Two Children of the Light, Shadowspawn?" Bornhald spat. "And what of my father?"

"I had nothing to do with his death, Bornhald," Aybara said. "Geofram was killed by the Seanchan, unfortunately. For a Whitecloak, he seemed like a reasonable man, though he was planning to hang me."

"He was to hang you for the murders you just confessed to," Galad said calmly, shooting a glance at Bornhald. The man snapped his sword back in its sheath, but his face was red.

"They weren't murders," Aybara said. "They attacked me. I fought back."

"That is not what I have heard," Galad said. What game was this man playing? "I have sworn testimony that you were hiding underneath a cleft in the rock. When the men asked you to come out, you jumped out screaming and attacked them without provocation."

"Oh, there was provocation," Aybara said. "Your Whitecloaks killed a friend of mine."

"The woman who was with you?" Galad asked. "From what I hear, she escaped safely." He'd been shocked when Bornhald had mentioned that name. Egwene al'Vere. Another woman who seemed to prefer dangerous company.

"Not her," Perrin said. "A friend named Hopper. And after him, a companion of his. They were wolves."

The man was condemning himself further! "You make friends of wolves, known to be creatures of the Shadow?"

"Wolves aren't of the Shadow," Aybara said. "They hate Shadowspawn as much as any man I've known."

"And how do you know this?"

Aybara said nothing further. There was more there. Byar said this man seemed able to command wolves, run with them, like a wolf himself. That testimony was part of what had persuaded Galad that battle was the only recourse. It seemed that Byar's words had not been exaggeration.

But there was no need, yet, to dwell on that. Aybara had admitted to murder. "I don't accept the killing of wolves as something to exonerate you," Galad said. "Many hunters slay wolves who attack their flocks or threaten their lives. The Children did nothing wrong. Your attack on

them, therefore, was unprovoked murder."

"There was far more to it than that," Aybara said. "But I doubt I'll convince you of that."

"I cannot be convinced of something that isn't true," Galad said.

"And you won't leave me alone, either," Aybara said.

"We are at an impasse, then," Galad said. "You have confessed to crimes that I, as a servant of justice, must see righted. I cannot walk away. You see why I felt further parley was useless?"

"What if I were willing to stand trial?" Perrin asked.

Aybara's bold-nosed wife rested a hand on his shoulder. He reached up and laid his hand on it, but did not turn away from Galad.

"If you will come and accept punishment from us for what you've done . . " Galad said. It would mean execution. Surely the creature wouldn't give himself up.

At the back of the pavilion, a group of servants had arrived and were preparing tea. Tea. At a war parley. Obviously Aybara had little experience with this kind of thing.

"Not punishment," Aybara said sharply. "A trial. If I am proven innocent, I go free and you—the Lord Captain Commander—instruct your men to stop hounding me. Especially Bornhald and that one behind you who growls like a pup seeing his first leopard."

"And if you are proven guilty?"

"That depends."

"Don't listen to him, my Lord Captain Commander!" Byar said. "He promised to give himself to us once before, then betrayed his word!"

"I did not!" Aybara said. "You did not fulfill your part of the bargain!"

Galad slapped the table. "This is useless. There will be no trial." "Why not?" Aybara demanded. "You talk of justice, but won't offer me a trial?"

"And who would judge it?" Galad asked. "Would you trust me to do so?" Of course not," Perrin said. "But Alliandre can. She's a queen."

"And your companion," Galad said. "I mean her no insult, but I fear she would acquit you without hearing evidence. Even the Lady First would not be adequate—though I would, of course, trust her word, I fear that my men would not."

Light, but that woman was beautiful! He glanced at her for a moment, and found her blushing as she regarded him. It was faint, but he was sure he saw it. He found himself blushing as well.

"The Aes Sedai, then," Aybara said.

Galad tore his eyes away from Berelain and looked at Aybara, giving him a flat stare. "If you think that a judgment by one from the White Tower would satisfy my men, you know little of the Children of the Ligh Perrin Aybara."

Aybara's eyes grew hard. Yes, he knew that. It was too bad. A trial would have been a tidy end to this. A serving woman approached the table with two cups of tea, but there was no need. This second parley was over.

"You're right, then," Aybara said, looking frustrated. "This meeting was pointless."

"No," Galad said, stealing another glance at Berelain. "Not pointless for me." He knew more of Aybara's strength; that would help him in battle. Beyond that, it had been right to delay fighting for a short time to make certain it was needed. There was still plenty of light in the day for the fighting to proceed.

But . . . what of that woman . . . the Lady First? He forced himself to look away. It was difficult.

Galad stood, and bowed to Alliandre, then to Berelain. He moved to leave.

Then he heard a gasp. Oddly, it came from the serving woman who had brought the tea. Galad glanced at her.

It was Morgase.

Galad froze, completely still. He'd been trained by swordmaster after swordmaster never to let his surprise overwhelm him, but at that moment, their careful training was for naught. That was his stepmother. That red-gold hair he had tugged as a child. That face, so beautiful and strong. Those eyes. Those were her eyes.

A ghost? He had heard the stories. Manifestations of the Dark One's evil returning the dead to life. But nobody else in the pavilion seemed uneasy, and this woman was too real. Hesitantly, Galad reached out and touched the apparition on the cheek. The skin was warm.

"Galad?" she said. "What are you doing here? How—"

She cut off as he seized her in an embrace, causing those around him on both sides to jump in surprise. She jumped, too. She lived! How?

I killed Valda, Galad thought immediately. Killed him for the death of my mother. Who is not dead. I have done evil.

No. Valda had deserved to die for the assault on Morgase. Or was that part true? He had spoken to Children sure that it was, but they'd also been sure she was dead.

He would sort that out later. Right now, he needed to stop embarrassing himself in front of his men. He released his stepmother, but she kept hold of his arm. She looked dazed. He had rarely seen her that way.

Perrin Aybara had stood up and was watching them with a frown. "You know Maighdin?"

"Maighdin?" Galad asked. She wore a simple dress and no jewelry. Was she trying to hide as a servant? "Aybara, this is Morgase Trakand, Defender of the Realm, Protector of the People, High Seat of House Trakand. She is your queenl"

That brought a stillness to the pavilion. Aybara scratched at his beard thoughtfully. His wife watched Morgase with eyes wide, either shocked or

angry.

"Maighdin," Aybara said, "is this true?"

She lifted her chin, staring Aybara in the eyes. How could they not see the Queen in her?

"I am Morgase Trakand," she said. "But I have renounced my throne in favor of Elayne. Before the Light, I will never again claim the crown."

Galad nodded. Yes. She must have feared that Aybara would use her against Andor. "I'm taking you back to my camp, Mother," Galad said, still watching Aybara. "Then we can discuss the way you were treated by this man."

She turned level eyes on Galad. "An order, Galad? Have I no say in the matter?"

He frowned, leaning in and speaking in a whisper. "Does he have others captive? What leverage does he have over you?"

She shook her head and replied softly, "This man is not what you think he is, Galad. He's rough-cut, and I certainly don't like what he's doing to Andor, but he is no friend of the Shadow. I have more to fear from your . . . associates than from Perrin Aybara."

Yes, she did have reason to distrust the Children. Good reason. "Will you come with me, my Lady? I promise you that you may leave and return to Aybara's camp at any time. Whatever you suffered from the Children in the past, you will be safe now. I vow this."

Morgase gave him a nod. "Damodred," Aybara said, "wait a moment."

Galad turned, laying his hand on his sword pommel again. Not as a threat, but a reminder. Many of those in the pavilion had begun to whisper. "Yes?" Galad asked.

"You wanted a judge," Aybara said. "Would you accept your mother in that position?"

Galad didn't hesitate. Of course; she'd been a queen since her eighteenth nameday, and he had seen her sit in judgment. She was fair. Harsh, but fair.

But would the other Children accept her? She'd been trained by the Aes Sedai. They'd see her as one of them. A problem. But if it gave a way out of this, perhaps he could make them see the truth.

"I would," Galad said. "And if I vouched for her, my men would as well."

"Well," Aybara said, "I'd accept her, too."

Both men turned to Morgase. She stood in her simple yellow dress, looking more a queen by the moment. "Perrin," she said, "if I sit in judgment, I will not temper my decisions. You took me in when we needed shelter, and for that I am appreciative. But if I decide that you have committed murder, I will not hold back my decision."

"That will do," Aybara said. He seemed sincere.

"My Lord Captain Commander," Byar said softly in Galad s ear, sounding fervent. "I fear this would be a farce! He's not said he would submit to punishment."

"No, I have not," Aybara said. How had he heard those whispers? "It would be meaningless. You think me a Darkfriend and a murderer. You wouldn't accept my word on taking punishment, not unless I was in your custody. Which I won't allow."

"See?" Byar said, more loudly. "What is the point?"

Galad met Aybara's golden eyes again. "It will give us a trial," he said, growing more certain. "And legal justification. I'm beginning to see, Child Byar. We must prove our claims, otherwise we are no better than Asunawa."

"But the trial will not be fair!"

Galad turned to the tall soldier. "Are you questioning my mother's impartiality?"

The gaunt man froze, then shook his head. "No, my Lord Captain Commander."

Galad turned back to Aybara. "I ask Queen Alliandre to grant that this trial be legally binding in her realm."

"If Lord Aybara requests it, I will." She sounded uncomfortable.

"I do request it, Alliandre," Perrin said. "But only if Damodred agrees to release all of my people that he's holding. Keep the supplies, but let the people go, as you promised me you would before."

"Very well," Galad said. "It will happen once the trial begins. I promise it. When will we meet?"

"Give me a few days to prepare."

"In three days, then," Galad said. "We hold the trial here, in this pavilion, in this place."

"Bring your witnesses," Aybara said. "I'll be here.

CHAPTER
27

A Call to Stand

I am not opposed to questioning the Lord Dragon, Egwene read from the letter as she sat in her study. Indeed, the more absolute a man's power becomes, the more necessary questioning becomes. However, know that I am not a man who gives his loyalty easily, and I have given my loyalty to him. Not because of the throne he provided me, but because of what he has done for Tear. Yes, he grows more erratic by the day. What else are we to expect from the Dragon Reborn? He will break the world. We knew this when we gave him our allegiance, much as a sailor must sometimes give his loyalty to the captain who steers his ship straight for the strand. When an unnavigable tempest rises behind, the strand is the only option. Still, your words bring me concern. The destruction of the seals is not something we should undertake without careful discussion. The Lord Dragon charged me with raising him an army, and I have done so. If you provide the gateways you have promised, I will bring some troops to this meeting place, along with the loyal High Lords and Ladies. Be warned, however, that the Seanchan presence to my west continues to weigh heavily upon my mind. The bulk of my armies must remain behind.

High Lord Darlin Sisnera,
King of Tear
beneath the rule
of the Dragon Reborn
Rand al'Thor

Egawene tapped the sheet with one finger. She was impressed—Darlin had committed his words to paper, rather than sending a messenger with them memorized. If a messenger fell into the wrong hands, his words could always be denied. Convicting a man of treason based on the testimony of one messenger was difficult. Words on paper, however . . . Bold. By writing them, Darlin said, "I do not care if the Lord Dragon discovers what I have written. I stand by it."

But leaving behind the bulk of his army? That would not do. Egwene

inked her pen. King Darlin. Your concern for your kingdom is well measured, as is your loyalty to the man you follow.

I know that the Seanchan are a danger to Tear, but let us not forget that the Dark One, not the Seanchan, is our primary concern during these worst of days. Perhaps it is easy to think yourself safe from the Trollocs when so distant from the battle lines, but how will you feel once the cushions ofAndor and Cairhien have fallen? You are separated from the Seanchan by hundreds of miles.

Egwene paused. Tar Valon had been separated from the Seanchan by hundreds of miles, and had nearly been destroyed. He was right to be afraid, and he was a good king for considering it. But she needed his army at the Field of Merrilor. Perhaps she could offer a way for him to both be safe and help with Rand.

Illian holds for now, she wrote. And gives you a buffer between the Seanchan and yourself I will provide you with gateways and a promise. If the Seanchan move against Tear, 1 will give you gateways so you can return immediately and defend your nation.

She hesitated. Chances were good that the Seanchan had Traveling now. Nobody was safe from them, no matter how far or close they might be. If they decided to strike for Tear, even giving Darlin gateways back might not be enough to help.

She felt a shiver, remembering her own time with the Seanchan, captive as a damane. She loathed them with a hatred that sometimes worried her. But Dariin's support was essential to her plans. She gritted her teeth and continued writing.

The Dragon Reborn must see our full forces marshaled to oppose his brash intentions. If he sees this as halfhearted, we will never dissuade him from his course. Please come with all of your troops.

She sanded the letter, then folded and sealed it. Darlin and Elayne were monarchs of two of the most powerful kingdoms. Both were very important to her plans.

Next she would respond to a letter from Gregorin den Lushenos of Illian.

She hadn't yet told him directly that she had Mattin Stepaneos at the White Tower, but had hinted at it. She'd also spoken to Mattin himself, letting him know he was free to leave, if he wished. She would not be in the habit of holding monarchs against their will.

Unfortunately, Mattin was now afraid for his life, should he return. He'd been gone too long, and he viewed Illian as being in the Dragon Reborn's pocket. Which it probably was. What a mess.

One problem at a time. Gregorin, the steward in Illian, was very hesitant to support her cause—he seemed more intimidated by Rand than Darlin was, and the Seanchan were not a distant concern for him. They were practically pounding on his city gates.

She wrote Gregorin a firm letter, giving a promise like the one she'd given Darlin. Perhaps she could arrange to keep Mattin away—something both men might want, though she wouldn't let Gregorin know that—in exchange for him bringing his armies northward.

Obliquely, she realized what she was doing. She was using Rand's proclamation as a beacon by which to gather and tie the monarchs to the White Tower. They would come to support her arguments against breaking the seals. But in the end, they would serve humankind in the Last Battle.

A knock came at her door. She looked up as Silviana peeked in. The woman held up a letter. It was curled tightly from having been carried in by pigeon.

"Your expression is grim," Egwene noted.

"The invasion has begun," she said. "Watchtowers across the Blight-border go silent, one at a time. Waves of Trollocs advance beneath clouds that boil black. Kandor, Arafel and Saldaea are at war."

"Do they hold?" Egwene asked with a spike of fear.

"Yes," Silviana said. "But news is uncertain and piecemeal. This letter—which is from an eyes-and-ears I trust—claims that an assault this massive has not been seen since the Trolloc Wars."

Egwene took a deep breath. "What of Tarwin's Gap?"

"I don't know."

"Find out. Call Siuan in here. She might have more. The Blue network is the most extensive." Siuan wouldn't know everything, of course, but she would have her fingers in it.

Silviana nodded curtly. She didn't say the obvious—that the Blue network was the Blue Ajah's, not to be preempted by the Amyrlin. Well, the Last Battle was at hand. Some concessions had to be made.

Silviana closed the door softly, and Egwene picked up her pen to finish her screed to Gregorin. She was interrupted by another knock, this one much more hasty. Silviana threw open the door a second later.

"Mother," she said. "They're meeting. As you said they would!"

Egwene felt a stab of annoyance. She calmly put down her pen and stood. "Let us be to it, then."

She walked from her study, pace hurried. In the Keeper's antechamber, she passed a pair of Accepted—Nicola, who had just been raised, and Nissa. She'd like them both raised to the shawl before the Last Battle. They were young, but powerful, and every sister would be needed—even one who, like Nicola, had proved to have terrible judgment in the past.

These two had brought the news about the Hall; the novices and Accepted were among the most loyal to Egwene, but were often ignored by the sisters. For now, they remained behind as Egwene and Silviana hurried toward the Hall.

"I can't believe they would try this," Silviana said softly as they walked.

"It's not what you think," Egwene guessed. "They won't try to depose me. The division is too fresh in their minds."

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"Then why meet without you?"

"There are ways to move against an Amyrlin without deposing her."

She'd been expecting this for some time, but that didn't make it any less frustrating. Aes Sedai would, unfortunately, be Aes Sedai. It had only been a matter of time before someone decided to try wrenching power from her.

They reached the Hall. Egwene pushed open the doors and stepped in. Her appearance was met with cool Aes Sedai gazes. The seats weren't all filled, but two-thirds of them were. She was surprised to see three Red Sitters. What of Pevara and Javindhra? It appeared that their extended absence during this time had prompted the Red to action. They had been replaced by Raechin and Viria Connoral. The sisters were the only siblings in the White Tower, now that Vandene and Adeleas were dead; an odd choice, but not unexpected.

Both Romanda and Lelaine were in attendance. They met Egwene's gaze evenly. How strange to see them here with so many sisters who they had been at odds with. A common foe—Egwene—could heal any number of rifts. She should have been pleased at that, perhaps.

Lelaine was the only Blue, and there was also only one Brown: Takima, who looked sick. The ivory-skinned Brown wouldn't meet Egwene's gaze. There were two Whites, two Yellows—including Romanda—two Grays, and all three Greens. Egwene gritted her teeth when she saw that. That was the Ajah she would have joined, but it gave her the most grief!

Egwene did not chastise them for meeting without her; she simply strode down between them, Silviana announcing her. Egwene turned and sat down on the Amyrlin Seat, her back to the huge rose window.

There, she sat quietly.

"Well?" Romanda finally asked. Her gray hair up in a bun, she looked like a mother wolf sitting atop the ledge out front of her den. "Are you going to say anything, Mother?"

"You did not inform me of this meeting," Egwene said, "so I assume you do not want my words. I have come merely to watch."

That seemed to make them more uncomfortable. Silviana walked to her side, brandishing one of her best expressions of displeasure.

"All right, then," Rubinde said. "I believe we were going to hear from Saroiya next."

The blocky White was one of the Sitters who had left the Tower when Elaida was raised, but she had made her share of trouble in Salidar. Egwene was not surprised to see her here. The woman stood, pointedly not looking at Egwene. "I will add my testimony. During the days of. . . uncertainty within the Tower"—that would mean the division; few sisters liked to speak of it outright—"the Amyrlin did exactly as Romanda indicated. We were taken by surprise when she called for a declaration of war.

"Within the law, there are provisions that give the Amyrlin almost total power when official war is declared. By being goaded into making war with Elaida, we gave the Amyrlin the means to subject the Hall to her will." She looked around the room, but did not turn to Egwene. "It is my opinion that she will try something similar again. That must be prevented. The Hall is meant to be a balance upon the Amyrlin's power."

She sat down.

Hearing the words actually relieved Egwene. One could never be certain what kinds of scheming were happening in the White Tower. This meeting meant her plans were proceeding as hoped, and that her enemies—or, well, her reluctant allies—hadn't seen what she was really doing. They were busy reacting to things she'd done months ago.

That didn't mean they weren't dangerous. But when a person anticipated danger, it could be handled.

"What can we do?" Magla asked. She glanced at Egwene. "To be prudent, I mean. To make certain the Hall of the Tower is in no way limited."

"We cannot declare war," Lelaine said firmly.

"And yet, to avoid it?" Varilin said. "War is declared between halves of the White Tower, but not against the Shadow?"

"War," Takima said hesitantly, "is already declared against the Shadow.

Need there be an official proclamation? Is not our existence enough? In-deed, do not the oaths make our position clear?"

"But we must make some kind of declaration," Romanda said. She was eldest among them, and would be the one running the meeting. "Some-thing to make the position of the Hall known, to dissuade the Amyrlin from an imprudent call for war."

Romanda didn't seem embarrassed at all by what they had done here. She looked directly at Egwene. No, she and Lelaine would not quickly forgive Egwene for choosing a Red as her Keeper.

"But how would we send such a message?" Andaya asked. "I mean, what are we to do? Make a pronouncement from the Hall that there won't be a declaration of war? Would that not sound ridiculous?"

The women fell silent. Egwene found herself nodding, though not specifically to what was being said. She had been raised through unconventional circumstances. Left alone, the Hall would try to establish its power as greater than hers. This day could easily have meant a step toward that. The Amyrlin Seat's strength had not been constant through the centuries— one could rule almost totally while another was controlled by the Sitters.

"I believe the Hall acts in wisdom," Egwene said, speaking very carefully.

The Sitters turned to her. Some looked relieved. Those who were more familiar with her, however, looked suspicious. Well, that was good. Better they regard her as a threat than as a child to be bullied. She hoped they would eventually respect her as their leader, but there was only so much she could do with the time given.

"The war between factions within the Tower was a different type of battle," Egwene continued. "It was deeply and individually my battle, as Amyrlin, for that division was initially about the Amyrlin Seat.

"But the war against the Shadow is more vast than any one person. It is greater than you or I, greater than the White Tower. It is the war of all life and creation, from the most destitute of beggars to the most powerful of queens."

The Sitters considered that in silence.

Romanda spoke first. "And so you would not oppose the Hall taking over prosecution of the war, managing General Bryne's armies and the Tower Guard?"

That depends," Egwene said, "upon how the provision was worded." There was movement in the hallway outside, and Saerin bustled into the Hall, accompanied by Janya Frende. They shot Takima withering glances, and she shrank down like a threatened bird. Saerin and Egwene's other supporters would have been informed of this meeting just after Egwene herself was.

Romanda cleared her throat. "Perhaps we should see if there is anything in the Law of War that can help."

"I'm certain you have studied it quite thoroughly now, Romanda" Egwene said. "What is it you propose?"

"There is a provision for the Hall taking up prosecution of a war" Romanda said.

"That requires the Amyrlin's assent," Egwene said idly. If that was Romandas game, then how had she intended to get Egwene s approval after meeting without her? Perhaps she'd had a different plan.

"Yes, it would require the Amyrlin's agreement," said Raechin. She was a tall, dark-haired woman, and liked to wear her hair in a coil of braids atop her head. "But you said that you thought us wise to take this measure."

"Well," Egwene said, trying to sound as if she were being pressed into a corner, "agreeing with the Hall is quite different from allowing a provision to ban me from the day-to-day workings of the army. What is the Amyrlin Seat to do, if not see to the war?"

"By reports, you've been dedicating yourself to wrangling kings and queens," Lelaine said. "That seems a fine task for the Amyrlin."

"Then you'll stand for such a provision?" Egwene said. "The Hall sees to the army, while I am given authority for dealing with the monarchs of the world?"

"I. . ." Lelaine said. "Yes, I'd stand for that."

"I suppose I could agree," Egwene said.

"Shall we put it to a vote?" Romanda said quickly, as if pouncing on the moment.

"Very well," Egwene said. "Who will stand for this motion?"

Rubinde rose to her feet, and was joined by Faiselle and Farnah, the other Greens. Raechin and her sister stood quickly, though Barasine was watching Egwene with eyes narrowed. Magla stood next, and Romanda reluctantly joined her. Ferane rose slowly. Lelaine was next. She and Romanda shot daggered glances at one another.

That was nine. Egwene's heart beat quickly as she glanced at Takima. The woman seemed very disturbed, as if trying to sort through Egwene's plan. The same went for Saroiya. The calculating White studied Egwene, tugging her ear. Suddenly, her eyes went wide, and she opened her mouth to speak.

At that moment, Doesine and Yukiri arrived, striding into the room.

Saerin stood immediately. Slim Doesine glanced at the women around her. "What motion are we standing for?"

"An important one," Saerin said.

""Well, I suppose I'll stand for it, then."

"As will I," Yukiri said.

"The lesser consensus is given, it seems," Saerin said. "The Hall is given authority over the White Tower's army, while the Amyrlin is given authority and responsibility for dealing with the world's monarchs."

"No!" Saroiya said, climbing to her feet. "Don't you see? He is a king! He holds the Laurel Crown. You've just given the Amyrlin sole responsibility for dealing with the Dragon Reborn!"

There was silence in the Hall.

"Well," Romanda said, "surely she . . ." She trailed off as she turned, seeing Egwene's serene face.

"I suppose someone should ask for the greater consensus," Saerin said dryly. "But you've managed to hang yourselves quite efficiently with the lesser rope already."

Egwene stood. "I meant what I said about the Hall's choices being wise, and nobody has hanged herself. It is wise of the Hall to put me in charge of dealing with the Dragon Reborn—he will need a firm, familiar hand. You are also wise to see that the details of managing the army were demanding too much of my attention. You will want to choose someone among you to go through and approve all of General Bryne's supply requests and recruitment schemes. I assure you, there are a multitude of them.

"I am pleased that you have seen the need to aid the Amyrlin, though I am deeply displeased at the secretive nature of this meeting. Do not try to deny that it was done in secret, Romanda. I see you preparing to object. If you wish to speak, know that I will pin you by the Three Oaths into answering directly."

The Yellow bit off her comment.

"How can you not have learned the foolishness of acts like this?" Egwene said. "Is your memory so short?" She looked at the women in turn, and was satisfied by the number who winced.

It is time," Egwene said, "for a change to be made. I propose that there be no further meetings of this nature. I propose that it be written into Tower law that if any Sitter leaves the White Tower, her Ajah must appoint a surrogate to vote for her while absent. I propose that it be written into Tower law that no meeting of the Hall can be convened unless every Sitter or her surrogate either is present, or has sent word directly that she cannot attend. I propose that the Amyrlin must be informed—and given a reasonable amount of time to attend if she wishes—of every meeting of the Hall, save when she cannot be found or is indisposed in some way."

"Bold changes, Mother," Saerin said. "You propose altering traditions that have been established for centuries."

"Traditions that hitherto have been used only for treachery, backbiting and division," Egwene said. "It is time for this hole to be closed, Saerin. The last time it was used effectively, the Black Ajah manipulated us into casting down an Amyrlin, raising a fool in her place, and dividing the Tower. Are you aware that Kandor, Saldaea and Arafel are swarming with Shadowspawn?"

Several of the sisters gasped. Others nodded, including Lelaine. So the Blue network was still reliable. Good.

"The Last Battle is here," Egwene said. "I will not withdraw my proposal. Either you will stand now, or you will be known—through all time—as one of those who refused. At the dusk of an Age, can you not stand for openness and Light? Will you not—for all of our sakes—make it impossible for a meeting of the Hall to be called without your presence? To leave any out means the possibility that you will be left out."

The women were silent. One by one, those who were standing sat back down to prepare for the new vote.

"Who will stand for this motion?" Egwene asked.

They stood. Blessedly, they stood—one at a time, slowly, reluctantly. But they did it. Every one of them.

Egwene let out a deep breath. They might squabble and scheme, but they knew right when they saw it. They shared the same goals. If they disagreed, it was because they had different views on how to reach those goals. Sometimes it was hard to remember that.

Looking shaken by what they'd done, the Sitters allowed the meeting to break up. Outside, sisters had begun to gather, surprised to find the Hall meeting. Egwene nodded to Saerin and the others of her supporters and walked from the room, Silviana at her side.

"That was a victory," the Keeper said once they were alone. She sounded satisfied. "But you did still give up control of our armies."

"I had to," Egwene said. "They could have pulled command away from me at any time; this way, I got something in return."

"Authority over the Dragon Reborn?"

"Yes," Egwene said, "but I was referring more to closing that loophole in Tower law. So long as it was possible for the Hall to meet in relative secret, my authority—the authority of any Amyrlin—could be circumvented. Now, if they want to maneuver, they'll have to do it in front of my Silviana gave a rare smile. "I suspect that since something like today is the result of such maneuvering, Mother, they will be more hesitant in the

future"

"That's the idea," Egwene said. "Though I doubt Aes Sedai will ever stop trying to maneuver. They simply cannot be allowed to dice with the Last Battle or the Dragon Reborn."

Back at Egwene's study, Nicola and Nissa still waited. "You did well," Egwene told them. "Very well. In fact, I'm of a mind to give you more responsibility. Go to the Traveling ground, and go to Caemlyn—the Queen there will be expecting you. Return with the items she gives you."

"Yes, Mother," Nicola said, grinning. "What will she give us?"

"Ter'angreal" Egwene said. "Used for visiting the World of Dreams. I'm going to begin training you, and some others, in their use. Do not use them without my express permission, however. I will send some soldiers with you." That should be enough to keep the two in line.

The two Accepted curtsied and trotted away, excited. Silviana looked at Egwene. "You didn't swear them to silence. They are Accepted, and they will brag about being trained with the ter'angreal."

"I'm depending on it," Egwene said, walking to the study door.

Silviana raised an eyebrow.

"I don't intend to let the girls come to harm," Egwene said. "In fact, they'll be doing a lot less in Tel'aran'rhiod than they probably suspect from what I just said. Rosil has been lenient with me so far, but she'll never let me put Accepted in danger. This is just to start the proper rumors."

"What rumors?"

"Gawyn scared off the assassin," Egwene said. "There hasn't been a murder in days, and I suppose we should bless him for that. But the killer is still hiding, and I've glimpsed Black sisters watching me in Tel'aran'rhiod. If I can't catch them here, then I will catch them there. But first I need a way to trick them into thinking they know where to find us."

"So long as you intend them to find you, and not those girls," Silviana said, voice calm—but iron. She had been the Mistress of Novices.

Egwene found herself grimacing, thinking of the things that had been expected of her as an Accepted. Yes, Silviana was right. She would have to take care not to subject Nicola and Nissa to similar dangers. She had survived, and was stronger for it, but Accepted should not be put through such trials unless there was no other choice.

"I will take care," Egwene said. "I simply need them to spread the rumor that I have a very important meeting coming up. If I lay the groundwork properly, our phantom won't be able to resist coming to listen in."

"Bold."

"Essential," Egwene said. She hesitated, hand on her door. "Speaking of Gawyn, have you found out where in the city he's run off to?"

"Actually, Mother, I had a note on this earlier today. It appears that well, he isn't in the city. One of the sisters delivering your messages to the Queen of Andor returned with news of seeing him there."

Egwene groaned, closing her eyes. That man will be the death of me. "Tell him to return. Infuriating though he is, I'm going to need him in the coming days."

"Yes, Mother," Silviana said, taking out a sheet of paper.

Egwene entered her study to continue her letters. Time was short. Time was so very, very short.

CHAPTER 28

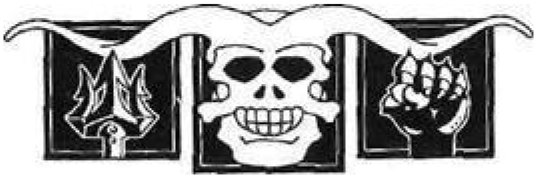

Oddities

"What are you planning, husband?" Faile asked. They were back in their tent, following the parley with the Whitecloaks. Perrin's actions had surprised her—which was invigorating, yet also disturbing. He took off his coat. "I smell a strangeness on the wind, Faile. Something I've never smelled before." He hesitated, glancing at her. "There are no wolves."

"No wolves?"

"I can't sense any nearby," Perrin said, eyes distant. "There were some before. Now they're gone."

"You said that they don't like being close to people."

He pulled off his shirt, exposing a muscled chest covered in curling brown hair. "There were too few birds today, too few creatures in the underbrush. Light burn that sky. Is that causing this, or is it something else?" He sighed, sitting down on their sleeping pallet.

"You're going to go . . . there?" Faile asked.

"Something's wrong," he repeated. "I need to learn what I can before the trial. There might be answers in the wolf dream."

The trial. "Perrin, I don't like this idea." "You're angry about Maighdin."

"Of course I'm angry about Maighdin," she said. They'd been through Malden together, and she hadn't told Faile that she was the Queen of bloody

Andor? It made Faile look like a fool—like a small-town braggart, extol-ling her skill with the sword in front of a passing blademaster.

"She didn't know if she could trust us," Perrin said. "She was fleeing one of the Forsaken, it seems. I'd have hidden myself, too."

Faile glared at him.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "She didn't do it to make you look bad, Faile. She had her reasons. Let it go."

That made her feel a little better; it was so nice that he would stand up for himself now. "Well, it makes me wonder who Lini will turn out to be. Some Seanchan queen? Master Gill, the King of Arad Doman in hiding?"

Perrin smiled. "I suspect they're her attendants. Gill is who he says he is, at least. Balwer is probably having a fit for not having figured this out."

"I bet he did figure it out," Faile said, kneeling beside him. "Perrin, I meant what I said about this trial. I'm worried."

"I won't let myself be taken," he said. "I only said I'd sit through a trial and give them a chance to present evidence."

"Then what's the point?" Faile said.

"It gives me more time to think," he said, "and it might stop me from having to kill them. Their captain, Damodred—something about him smells better than many of the rest. Not rabid with anger or hate. This will get our people back and let me plead my side. It feels good for a man to be able to have his say. Maybe that's what I've needed, all this time."

"Well, all right," Faile said. "But in the future, please consider warning me of your plans."

"I will," he said, yawning and lying back. "In truth, it didn't occur to me until the last moment."

Faile kept her tongue with some difficulty. At least something good had come from that parley. She'd watched Berelain when she'd met Damodred, and she'd rarely seen a woman's eyes light up so brightly. Faile might be able to make use of that.

She looked down. Perrin was already snoring softly.

Perrin found himself sitting with his back against something hard and smooth. The too-dark, almost evil sky of the wolf dream boiled above the forest, which was a mixture of fir, oak and leatherleaf.

He stood up, then turned and looked at what he had been leaning against. A massive steel tower stretched toward the turbulent sky. Too straight, with walls that looked like a single piece of seamless metal, the tower exuded a completely unnatural feel.

I told you this place was evil, Hopper sent, suddenly sitting next to Per-rin. Foolish cub.

"I didn't come here by choice," Perrin protested. "I woke here."

Your mind is focused on it, Hopper said. Or the mind of one to whom you are

connected.

"Mat" Perrin said, without understanding how he knew. The colors didn't appear. They never did in the wolf dream.

As foolish a cub as yourself?

"Maybe more foolish."

Hopper smelled incredulous, as if unwilling to believe that was possible. Come, the wolf sent. It has returned.

"What has—"

Hopper vanished. Perrin followed with a frown. He now could easily catch the scent of where Hopper had gone. They appeared on the Jehannah Road, and that strange violet glass wall was there again, slicing the roadway in half, extending high in the air and into the distance in either direction. Perrin walked up to a tree. Its bare branches seemed trapped in the glass, immobile.

Hopper paced nearby. We have seen this thing before, he sent. Long, long ago. So many lives ago.

"What is it?"

A thing of men.

Hopper's sending included confused images. Flying, glowing discs. Impossibly tall structures of steel. Things from the Age of Legends? Hopper didn't understand their use any more than he understood the use of a horse cart or a candle.

Perrin looked down the roadway. He didn't recognize this section of Ghealdan; it must be farther toward Lugard. The wall had appeared in a different place than it had last time.

A thought occurring to him, Perrin moved down the roadway in a few jumping bursts. A hundred of paces away, he looked back and confirmed his suspicions. That glass didn't make a wall, but an enormous dome. Translucent, with a violet tint, it seemed to extend for leagues.

Hopper moved at a blur, coming to stand beside him. We must go.

"He's in there, isn't he?" Perrin asked. He reached out. Oak Dancer, Sparks and Boundless were near. Ahead, inside the dome. They responded with quick, frantic sendings, at hunt and being hunted.

"Why don't they flee?" Perrin asked.

Hopper sent confusion.

"I'm going to them," Perrin said, willing himself forward.

Nothing happened.

Perrin felt a stab of panic in his gut. What was wrong? He tried again, this time trying to send himself to the base of the dome.

It worked. He arrived in an eyeblink, that glasslike surface rising in a cliff face before him. It's this dome, he thought. It's blocking me. Suddenly, he understood the trapped feeling the wolves had sent. They couldn't get away.

Was that the purpose of this dome, then? To trap wolves so that Slayer could kill them? Perrin growled, stepping up to the surface of the dome. He couldn't pass in by imagining himself there, but perhaps he could he get through by more mundane means. He raised a hand, then hesitated. He didn't know what touching the surface would do.

The wolves sent images of a man in black and leather, with a harsh lined face and a smile curling on his lips as he launched arrows. He smelled wrong, so wrong. He also smelled of dead wolves.

Perrin couldn't leave them in there. No more than he could leave Master Gill and the others to the Whitecloaks. Furious at Slayer, he touched the surface of the dome.

His muscles suddenly lost strength. They felt like water, his legs unable to hold him up. He fell to the ground, hard. His foot was still touching the dome—passing through it. The dome appeared to have no substance.

His lungs no longer worked; inflating his chest was too difficult. Panicked, he imagined himself elsewhere, but it didn't work. He was trapped, as surely as the wolves!

A gray-silver blur appeared next to him. Jaws grabbed his shoulder. As Hopper pulled him free of the violet dome, Perrin immediately felt his strength return. He gasped for breath.

Foolish cub, Hopper sent.

"You'd leave them?" Perrin said, voice ragged.

Not foolish to dig in the hole. Foolish for not waiting for me in case hornets came out. Hopper turned toward the dome. Help me if I fall. He padded forward, then touched his nose to the dome. Hopper stumbled, but righted himself and continued on slowly. On the other side, he collapsed, but his chest continued to move.

"How did you do it?" Perrin asked, rising.

I am me. Hopper as he saw himself—which was identical to who he was. Also scents of strength and stability.

The trick, it seemed, was to be in complete control of who you were. Like many things in the wolf dream, the strength of one's mental image was more powerful than the substance of the world itself.

Come, Hopper sent. Be strong, pass through.

"I have a better idea," Perrin said, standing up. He charged forward at full speed. He hit the violet dome and immediately went limp, but his momentum carried him to the other side, where he rolled to a stop. He groaned, shoulder hurt, arm scraped. Foolish cub, Hopper sent. You must learn. "Now isn't the time," Perrin said, climbing to his feet. "We have to

help the others."

Arrows in the wind, thick, black, deadly. The hunter's laughter. The scent of a man who was stale. The killer was here. Hopper and Perrin ran down the road, and Perrin found that he could increase his speed within the dome. Tentatively, he tried jumping forward with a thought, and it worked. But when he tried to send himself outside, nothing happened.

So the dome was a barrier. Within it, he could move freely, but he could not move to a place outside it by imagining himself elsewhere. He had to pass the dome's wall physically if he wanted out.

Oak Dancer, Boundless and Sparks were ahead. And Slayer, too. Perrin growled—frantic sendings flooded him. Dark woods. Slayer. He seemed so tall to the wolves, a dark monster with a face chiseled as if from rock.

Blood on the grass. Pain, anger, terror, confusion. Sparks was wounded. The other two jumped back and forth, taunting and distracting Slayer while Sparks crawled toward the border of the dome.

Care, Young Bull, Hopper sent. This man hunts well. He moves almost like a wolf, though he is something wrong.

"I'll distract him. You get Sparks."

You have arms. You carry. There was more to the sending than that, of course: Hopper's age and experience, Perrin still a pup.

Perrin gritted his teeth, but didn't argue. Hopper was more experienced than he was. They parted, Perrin reaching out for Sparks, finding where he was—hidden within a patch of trees—and taking himself directly there.

The dark brown wolf had an arrow in his thigh, and he was whimpering softly, trailing blood as he crawled. Perrin knelt quickly and pulled the arrow out. The wolf continued to whimper, smelling frightened. Perrin held the arrow up. It smelled evil. Disgusted, he tossed it aside and picked up the wolf.

Something crackled nearby, and Perrin spun. Boundless leaped between two trees, smelling anxious. The other two wolves were leading Slayer away.

Perrin turned and ran toward the dome's nearest edge, carrying Sparks. He couldn't leap directly to the edge of the dome because he didn't know where it was.

He burst from the trees, heart thumping. The wolf in his arms seemed to grow stronger as they left the arrow behind. Perrin ran more quicly, using a speed that felt reckless, moving hundreds of paces with blurring speed. The dome wall approached, and he pulled to a stop.

Slayer was suddenly there, standing before him, bow drawn. He wore a black cloak that billowed around him; he was no longer smiling, and his eyes were thunderous.

He released. Perrin shifted and never saw where the arrow landed. He appeared in the place where he'd first entered the dome; he should have gone there first. He hurled himself through the violet dome, collapsing on the other side, sending Sparks tumbling.

The wolf yelped. Perrin hit hard.

Young Bull! Sparks sent an image of Slayer, dark like a thunderhead, standing right inside the barrier with bow drawn.

Perrin didn't look. He shifted, sending himself to the slopes of Dragonmount. Once there, he leaped to his feet, anxious, hammer appearing in his hand. Groups of nearby wolves sent greeting. Perrin ignored them for the moment.

Slayer did not follow. After a few tense moments, Hopper appeared. "Did the others get away?" Perrin asked.

They are free, he sent. Whisperer is dead. The sending showed the wolf— from the viewpoint of the others in the pack—being killed moments after the dome appeared. Sparks had taken an arrow as he nuzzled at her side in panic.

Perrin growled. He nearly jumped away to confront Slayer again, but a caution from Hopper stopped him. Too soon! You must learn!

"It's not only him," Perrin said. "I need to look at the area around my camp and that of the Whitecloaks. Something smells wrong there in the waking world. I need to see if something is odd there."

Odd? Hopper sent the image of the dome.

"It is probably related." The two oddities seemed likely to be more than mere coincidence.

Search another time. Slayer is too strong for you.

Perrin took a deep breath. "I have to face him eventually, Hopper."

Not now.

"No," Perrin agreed. "Not now. Now we practice." He turned to the wolf. "As we will do every night until I am ready."

Rodel Ituralde rolled over in his cot, neck slick with sweat. Had Saldaea always been this hot and muggy? He wished for home, the cool ocean breezes of Bandar Eban.

Things felt wrong. Why hadn't the Shadowspawn attacked? A hundred

possibilities rattled in his mind. Were they waiting for new siege engines?

Were they scouting out forests in order to build them? Or were their commanders content with a siege? The entire city was surrounded, but there had to be enough Trollocs out there to overwhelm it now.

They had taken to beating drums. All hours. Thump, thump, thump. Steady, like the heartbeat of an enormous animal, the Great Serpent itself, coiling around the city.

Dawn was beginning to shine outside. He hadn't turned in until well after midnight. Durhem—who commanded the morning watch—had ordered that Ituralde not be disturbed until noon. His tent was in a shadowed alcove of the courtyard. He had wanted to be close to the wall, and had refused a bed. That had been foolish. Though a cot had been fine for him in previous years, he wasn't as young as he'd once been. Tomorrow, he'd move.

Now, he told himself, sleep.

It wasn't that easy. The accusation that he was Dragonsworn left him unsettled. In Arad Doman, he'd been fighting for his king, someone he'd believed in. Now he was fighting in a foreign land for a man he'd met only once. All because of a gut feeling.

Light, but it was hot. Sweat ran down his cheeks, making his neck itch. It shouldn't be this hot so early in the morning. It wasn't natural. Those burning drums, still pounding.

He sighed, climbing off his sweat-dampened cot. His leg ached. It had for days now.

You're an old man, Rodel, he thought, stripping off his sweaty smallclothes and getting out some freshly washed ones. He stuffed his trousers into knee-high riding boots. A simple white shirt with black buttons went on next, and then his gray coat, buttoning straight up to the collar.

He was strapping on his sword when he heard hurried footsteps outside, followed by whispers. That conversation grew heated, and he stepped outside just as someone said, "Lord Ituralde will wish to know!"

Know what?" Ituralde asked. A messenger boy was arguing with his guards. All three turned toward him sheepishly.

"I'm sorry, my Lord," Connel said. "We were instructed to let you sleep."

A man who can sleep in this heat must be half-lizard, Connel," Ituralde said. "Lad, what's the word?"

Captain Yoeli is on the wall, sir," the youth said. Ituralde recognized the young man—he'd been with him from near the beginning of this campaign. "He said you should come."

Ituralde nodded. He laid a hand on Connel's arm. "Thank you for watching me, old friend, but these bones aren't so frail as you think."

Connel nodded, blushing. The guard fell into place behind as Ituralde crossed the courtyard. The sun had risen. Many of his troops were up. Too many. He wasn't the only one having difficulty sleeping.

Atop the wall, he was greeted by a disheartening sight. On the dying land, thousand upon thousands of Trollocs camped, burning fires. Ituralde didn't like to think about where the wood for those fires came from. Hopefully all of the nearby homesteaders and villagers had heeded the call to evacuate.

Yoeli stood gripping the crenelated stone of the wall, next to a man in a black coat. Deepe Bhadar was senior among the Asha'man whom al'Thor had given him, one of only three who wore both the Dragon and the sword pins on his collar. The Andoran man had a flat face and black hair that he wore long. Ituralde had sometimes heard some of the black-coated men mumbling to themselves, but not Deepe. He seemed fully in control.

Yoeli kept glancing at the Asha'man; Ituralde didn't feel comfortable. with men who could channel either. But they were an excellent tool, and they hadn't failed him. He preferred to let experience, instead of rumor, rule him.

"Lord Ituralde," Deepe said. The Asha'man never saluted Ituralde, just al'Thor.

"What is it?" Ituralde asked, scanning the hordes of Trollocs. They didn't seem to have changed since he'd bedded down.

"Your man claims to be able toyW something," Yoeli said. "Out there."

"They have channelers, Lord Ituralde," Deepe said. "I suspect at least six, perhaps more. Men, since I can feel the Power they're wielding, doing something powerful. If I squint at the far camps, I think I can sometimes see weaves, but it may be my imagination."

Ituralde cursed. "That's what they've been waiting for."

"What?" Yoeli asked.

"With Asha'man of their own—"

"They are not Asha'man," Deepe said fervently.

"All right, then. With channelers of their own, they can tear this wall down easily as knocking over a pile of blocks, Yoeli. That sea of Trollocs will surge in and fill your streets."

"Not so long as I stand," Deepe said.

"I like determination in a soldier, Deepe," Ituralde said, "but you look as exhausted as I feel."

Deepe shot him a glare. His eyes were red from lack of sleep, and he clenched his teeth, the muscles in his neck and face tense. He met Ituralde-s eyes, then took a long, forced breath.

"You are correct," Deepe said. "But neither of us can do anything about that." He raised his hand, doing something that Ituralde couldn't see. A flash of red light appeared over his hand—the signal he used to draw the others to him. "Prepare your men, General, Captain. It will not be long. They cannot continue to hold that kind of Power without . . . consequences."

Yoeli nodded, then hurried away. Ituralde took Deepe's arm, drawing his attention.

"You Asha'man are too important a resource to lose," Ituralde said. "The Dragon sent us here to help, not to die. If this city falls, I want you to take the others and whatever wounded you can and get out. Do you understand, soldier?"

"Many of my men will not like this."

"But you know it is for the best," Ituralde said. "Don't you?"

Deepe hesitated. "Yes. You are correct, as you so often are. I will get them out." He spoke in a lower voice. "This is a hopeless resistance, my Lord. Whatever is happening out there, it will be deadly. It galls me to suggest it . . . but what you have said about my Asha'man applies to your soldiers as well. Let us flee." He said the word "flee" with bitterness.

"The Saldaeans wouldn't leave with us."

"I know."

Ituralde considered it. Finally, he shook his head. "Every day we delay up here keeps these monsters away from my homeland a day longer. No, I cannot go, Deepe. This is still the best place to fight. You've seen how fortified those buildings are; we can hold inside for a few days, split apart, keep the army busy."

"Then my Asha'man could stay and help."

"You have your orders, son. You follow them. Understand?"

Deep snapped his jaw shut, then nodded curtly. "I will take—"

Ituralde didn't hear the rest. An explosion hit.

He didn't feel it arrive. He was standing with Deepe one moment, then round himself on the floor of the wall walk, the world strangely silent around him. His head screamed with pain and he coughed, raising a trembling hand to find his face bleeding. There was something in his right eye; it seared with pain when he blinked. Why was everything so quiet?

He rolled over, coughing again, right eye squeezed shut, the other watering. The wall ended a few inches away from him.

He gasped. An enormous chunk of the northern wall was simply gone.

He groaned, looking back in the other direction. Deepe had been standing beside him . . .

He found the Ashaman lying on the wall walk nearby, head bleeding. His right leg ended in a ragged rip of flesh and broken bone above where the knee should have been. Ituralde cursed and stumbled forward, drorpping to his knees beside the man. Blood was pooling beneath Deepe but he was still twitching. Alive.

I need to sound the alarm . . .

Alarm? That explosion would have been alarm enough. Inside the wall, buildings were demolished, crushed by stones flying in a spray away from the hole. Outside, Trollocs were loping forward, carrying rafts to cross the moat.

Ituralde pulled the Asha'man's belt off and used it to bind his thigh. It was all he could think to do. His head was still throbbing from the explosion.

The city is lost. . . Light! It's lost, just like that.

Hands were helping him up. Dazedly he glanced about. Connel; he'd survived the blast, though his coat was torn to shreds. He pulled Ituralde away while a pair of soldiers took Deepe.

The next minutes were a blur. Ituralde stumbled down the stairs from the wall, nearly pitching headfirst fifteen feet onto the cobbles. Only Connel's hands kept him from falling. And then ... a tent? A large open-sided tent? Ituralde blinked. A battlefield should not be so quiet.

Icy coldness washed over him. He screamed. Sounds assaulted his ears and mind. Screams, rock breaking, trumpets sounding, drums throbbing. Men dying. It all hit him at once, as if plugs had been yanked from his ears.

He shook himself, gasping. He was in the sick tent. Antail—the quiet, thin-haired Ashaman—stood above him. Light, but Ituralde felt exhausted! Too little sleep mixed with the strain of being Healed. As the sounds of battle consumed him, he found his eyelids treacherously heavy.

"Lord Ituralde," Antail said, "I have a weave that will not make you well, but it will make you think you are well. It could be harmful to you. Do you want me to proceed?"

"I . . ." Ituralde said. The word came out as a mumble. "It . . ."

"Blood and bloody ashes," Antail muttered. He reached forward. Another wave of Power washed through Ituralde. It was like a broom sweeping through him, pushing away all of the fatigue and confusion, restoring his senses and making him feel as if he'd had a perfect night's rest. His right eye didn't hurt anymore.

There was something lingering, deep down, an exhaustion in his bones.

He could ignore that. He sat up, breathed in and out, then looked to Antail. "Nowthat is a useful weave, son. You should have told me you could do this!"

"It's dangerous," Antail repeated. "More dangerous than the women s version I'm told. In some ways more effective. You're trading alertness now for more profound exhaustion later on."

"Later on, we won't be in the middle of a city that is falling to the Trollocs. Light willing, at least. Deepe?"

"I saw to him first," Antail said, gesturing to the Asha'man lying on a nearby cot, his clothing singed and his face bloodied. His right leg ended in a healed stump, and he appeared to be breathing, though unconscious.

"Connel!" Ituralde said.

"My Lord," the soldier said, stepping up. He'd found a squad of soldiers to act as a personal guard.

"Let's investigate this mess," Ituralde said. He ran out of the sick tent, toward Cordamora Palace. The city was in chaos, groups of Saldaeans and Domani rushing this way and that. Connel, showing foresight, sent a messenger to find Yoeli.

The palace stood nearby, just before the front gate. Its wall had been damaged in the blast, but the building still looked hale. Ituralde had been using it as a command post. Men would expect to find him here. They ran inside, Connel carrying Ituralde's sword—the belt had been cut free at some point. They climbed to the third floor, then ran out onto a balcony that surveyed the area broken by the blast.

As he'd originally feared, the city was lost. The swath of broken wall was being defended by a hastily assembled jumble of defenders. A mounting tide of Trollocs were throwing down rafts on the moat, some beginning to surge forward, followed by Fades. Men ran through the streets, disoriented.

If he'd had more time to prepare, he could have held, as he'd told Deepe. Not now. Light, but this defense has been one disaster after another.

Gather the Asha'man," Ituralde ordered. "And any of my officers you can find. We will organize the men into a retreat through gateways."

Yes, my Lord," Connel said.

"Ituralde, no!" Yoeli burst out onto the balcony, uniform dirtied and ripped.

"You survived," Ituralde said, relieved. "Excellent. Man, your city is lost. I'm sorry. Bring your men with us and we can—"

"Look!" Yoeli said, pulling Ituralde to the side of the balcony, pointing

to the east. A thick column of smoke rose in the distance. A village the Trollocs had burned?

"The watchfire," Yoeli continued. "My sister has seen aid coming! We must stand until they arrive."

Ituralde hesitated. "Yoeli," he said softly, "if a force has come, it can't be large enough to stop this horde of Trollocs. And that's assuming it's not a ruse. The Shadowspawn have proven clever in the past."

"Give us a few hours," Yoeli said. "Hold the city with me and send scouts through those gateways of yours to see if a force really is coming."

"A few hours?" Ituralde said. "With a hole in your wall? We're overwhelmed, Yoeli."

"Please," Yoeli pled. "Are you not one of those they name Great Captain? Show me what that title means, Lord Rodel Ituralde."

Ituralde turned, back at the broken wall. Behind him, in the palace's top room, he could hear his officers gathering. The line at the wall was fragmenting. It wouldn't be long now.

Show me what that means.

Perhaps . . .

"Tymoth, are you here?" Ituralde bellowed.

A red-haired man in a black coat stepped onto the balcony. He'd be in command of the Asha'man now that Deepe had fallen. "Here, Lord Ituralde."

"Gather your men," Ituralde said urgently. "Take command of that gap and have the soldiers there retreat. I want the Asha'man to hold the breach. I need a half-hour. I want all of your energy—everything you've got—to hit those Trollocs. You hear me? Everything you've got. If you can channel enough to light a candle when this is done, I'll have your hides."

"Sir," the Asha'man said. "Our retreat?"

"Leave Antail in the Healing tent," Ituralde said. "He can make a large enough gateway for the Asha'man to run. But everyone else, hold that breach!"

Tymoth dashed away. "Yoeli," Ituralde said, "your job is to gather your forces and stop them from running through the city like . . ." He paused. He'd been about to say, "like it's Tarmon bloody Gai'don." Burn me. ". . . like there is nobody in command. If we are going to hold, we will need to be organized and disciplined. I need four cavalry companies formed up in the courtyard in ten minutes. Give the orders."

"Yes, my Lord," Yoeli said, snapping to it.

"Oh," Ituralde said, turning. "I'm going to need a couple of cartloads or firewood, as many barrels of oil as you can come up with, and all of the

wounded in either army who can still run but who have face or arm wounds. Also, get me anyone in the city who's ever held a bow. Go!"

Nearly an hour later, Ituralde stood, hands clasped behind his back, wait-ing. He'd moved in from the balcony to look out a window, as to not ex-pose himself. But he still had a good view of the fighting.

Outside the palace, the Asha'man line was finally weakening. They'd given him the better part of an hour, blasting back wave after wave of Trollocs in an awesome display of Power. Blessedly, the enemy channelers had not appeared. After that show of power, hopefully they were drained and exhausted.

It felt like dusk, with those oppressive clouds overhead and the masses of figures darkening the hillsides beyond the city. The Trollocs, fortunately, didn't bring ladders or siege towers. Only wave after wave at that breach, whipped into attack by the Myrddraal.

Already, some of the black-coated men were limping away from the breach, looking exhausted. The last few threw a final blast of Fire and erupting Earth, then followed their companions. They left the gap completely open and undefended, as ordered.

Come on, Ituralde thought as the smoke cleared.

The Trollocs peered through the smoke, climbing over the carcasses of those the Asha'man had killed. The Shadowspawn loped on hooves or thick paws. Some sniffed the air.

The streets inside the gap were filled with carefully placed men who were bloodied and wounded. They began to scream as the Trollocs entered, running as commanded. Likely none of their fear was feigned. The scene looked more terrible now that many of the nearby buildings were smoldering, as if from the blast, roofs on fire, smoke pouring from windows. The Trollocs wouldn't know that the slate roofs had been designed not to burn, and laws kept buildings from containing too much wood.

Ituralde held his breath. The Trollocs broke, running into the city, howling and roaring, groups breaking apart as they saw the opportunity to pillage and slaughter.

The door behind Ituralde slammed open, and Yoeli hastened in. "The last ranks are placed. Is it working?"

Ituralde didn't answer; the proof was below. The Trollocs assumed their battle won—the blasting Power of the Asha'man had the air of one final stand, and the city appeared to be in chaos. The Trollocs all ran down the streets with obvious glee. Even the Myrddraal who entered appeared at ease.

The Trollocs avoided the burning buildings and the palace, which was walled. They moved deeper into the city, pursuing the fleeing soldiers down a wide avenue on the eastern side of the city. Carefully piled rubble encouraged the bulk of them down this avenue.

"Do you have aspirations of being a general, Captain Yoeli?" Ituralde asked softly.

"My aspirations are not important," Yoeli said. "But a man would be a fool not to hope to learn."

"Then pay attention to this lesson, son." Below, shutters on windows were flung open on buildings along the avenue the Trollocs had taken Bowmen surged out onto balconies. "If you ever have so much as an impression that you're doing what your enemy expects you to do, then do something else."

The arrows fell, and Trollocs died. Large crossbows that shot quarrels almost the size of spears targeted the Fades, and many could be seen lurching across the pavement, not knowing that they were already dead, as scores of Trollocs linked to them fell. Confused, enraged, the still-living creatures began to bellow and pound in the doors of the buildings filled with archers. But as they did so, the thunder began. Hoofbeats. Yoeli s best cavalry charged down the streets, lances forward. They trampled the Trollocs, slaughtering them.

The city became an enormous ambush. A man couldn't ask for better vantages than those buildings, and the streets were wide enough to allow a charge by those who knew the layout. The Trollocs went from bellowing in joy to screaming in pain, and scrambled over one another in their haste to get away. They entered the courtyard by the broken wall.

The Saldaean horsemen followed, their hooves and flanks wet with the noxious blood of the fallen. Men appeared at windows of "burning" buildings—the fires carefully created in sectioned-off rooms—and began loosing arrows down into the large courtyard. Others tossed new lances to the horsemen, who, reequipped, lined up and rode into the Trollocs. The arrows stopped falling, and the cavalry made a sweeping charge crossed the courtyard.

Hundreds of Trollocs died. Perhaps thousands. Those that didn't die scrambled out of the gap. Most of the Myrddraal fled. Those that did not were targets for the archers. Killing one of them could kill dozens of Trollocs linked to them. The Fades went down—many sprouting dozens of arrows.

"I'll give the order to unite and hold the breach again," Yoeli said eagerly.

"No.." Ituralde said.

"But—"

"Fighting at the breach will gain us nothing," Ituralde said. "Give the orders for the men to move to different buildings, and have the archers take different positions. Are there warehouses or other large buildings that can hide the horsemen? Move them there, quickly. And then we wait."

"They won't be caught again."

"No," Ituralde said. "But they'll be slow and cautious. If we fight them head on, we lose. If we hold, buy time, we win. That's the only way out of this Yoeli. To survive until help comes. If it's coming."

Yoeli nodded.

"Our next trap won't kill as many," Ituralde said, "but Trollocs are cowards at heart. The knowledge that any roadway could suddenly turn into a death trap will make them hesitate, and will earn us more time than would losing half of our men holding that wall."

"All right," Yoeli said. He hesitated. "But . . . doesn't this mean that they're anticipating us? This phase of the plan will work only because they expect our ambushes."

"I suppose that's true."

"So shouldn't we do something different? You said that if we've got a hint that the enemy knows what we're going to do, we should change plans."

"You're thinking about it too much, son. Go do as I commanded."

"Er, yes, my Lord." He hurried away.

This, Ituralde thought, is why I should never teach tactics. It was hard to explain to students that there was a rule that trumped all of the others: Always trust your instincts. The Trollocs would be afraid. He could use that. He'd use anything they gave him.

He didn't like to think too long about that rule, lest he dwell on the fact that he'd violated it already. Because his every instinct screamed that he should have abandoned this city hours ago.

* * *

CHAPTER
29

A Terrible Feeling

What is Perrin plotting, do you think?" Berelain asked as she strolled beside Faile and Alliandre. Faile didn't answer. The late afternoon was softly lit by a distant sun shrouded in clouds. Soon it would make the horizon burn as it sank down for the night. In two days, Perrin would go on trial. He'd delayed specifically, she knew, to gain more time for the Ashaman to work out the strange problem with gateways.

Their army was growing, still more people flooding to them. Scout reports indicated that the Whitecloak force was growing as well. More slowly, but still growing. In days like these, an army was a symbol of strength and—at the very least—food.

A stand of fingeroot trees glutted themselves on the water of the stream near Perrin's war camp. Such strange plants they were, with those roots that dipped into the water. Trunks like flowing glass that had pooled while hardening. There was nothing like them up in Saldaea. It seemed that two wrong steps here could lead you into a swamp.

"No answer for me?" Berelain asked. She seemed distracted these days. "I've been thinking. Perhaps it would be good to send an envoy to the Whitecloak army. Do you think Perrin would allow me to go and speak with them? Perhaps I could make a personal appeal on his behalf."

She kept bringing up that topic. "No," Faile said. "You know his mind is made up on this trial, Berelain."

The First pursed her lips, but did not press further. The three continued heir walk, accompanied by ten Maidens. Once, Faile might have combined about the attention. That was before she'd been taken so unexpectedly, and so easily.

In the distance, she saw a small group of refugees leaving the camp, walking away to the southeast, cross-country. Before things had gone wrong with the gateways, about ten thousand had been sent to rural areas in

Cairhien. All had instructions to remain quiet. Perrin didn't want his location known yet. Women would be still, but of course the men would gossip; they always did.

Few knew that gateways failed; Perrin had told the people that he needed the Asha'man strong, in case there was righting with the Whitecloaks. It was true enough. Still, some refugees had asked to leave, going on foot. To these, Faile gave bits of gold or a jewel from Sevanna's store and wished them the best. She was surprised at how many wanted to return to homes that were in Seanchan-controlled lands.

Despite the departures, the size of Perrin's force was swelling day by day. Faile and the others passed a large group practicing with swords. The refugees who had decided to train were now some twenty-five thousand strong. They practiced late into the day, and Faile could still hear barked orders from Tarn.

"Well." Berelain continued her musings. "What will Perrin do? Why set up this trial? He wants something from those Whitecloaks." She stepped around a gnarled fingeroot. The First, like so many others, read much more into Perrin's actions than there was to find. He'd be amused if he knew the plots they ascribed to him.

And she claims to understand men, Faile thought. Perrin was by no means stupid, nor was he the simple man he sometimes claimed to be. He planned, he thought, and he was careful. But he was also direct. Deliberate. When he said something, he meant it.

"I agree with Berelain," Alliandre said. "We should just leave, march away. Or attack those Whitecloaks."

Faile shook her head. "It bothers Perrin when people think he did something wrong. As long as the Whitecloaks continue to insist he is a murderer, his name will not be clear." He was being bullheaded and foolish, but there was a nobility about it.

So long as it didn't get him killed. However, she loved him for that very sense of honor. Changing him would be ill advised, so she had to make certain others didn't take advantage of him.

As she always did when they discussed the Whitecloaks, Berelain got

a strange look in her eyes, and she glanced—perhaps unconsciously - in

the direction their army camped. Light. She wasn't going to ask again if she could go speak to them? She had come up with a dozen different reasons why she wanted to.

Faile noticed a large group of soldiers trying to look inconspicuous as they rounded the inside of the camp, keeping pace with Faile and their guards on their promenade. Perrin wanted her well protected.

"This young Lord Captain Commander," Alliandre said idly. "He looks quite striking in that white uniform, wouldn't you say? If you can get past that sunburst on his cloak. Such a beautiful man."

"Oh?" Bereiain said. Surprisingly, warm color rose in her cheeks.

"I'd always heard that Morgase's stepson was a handsome man," Alliandre continued. "But I hadn't anticipated him being so . . . pristine."

"Like a statue carved from marble," Bereiain whispered, "a relic from the Age of Legends. A perfect thing left behind. For us to worship."

"He's passable," Faile said with a sniff. "I prefer a bearded face, myself."

It wasn't a lie—she loved a bearded face, and Perrin was handsome. He had a burly power to him that was quite appealing. But this Galad Damodred was . . . well, it wasn't fair to compare him to Perrin. That would be like comparing a stained glass window to a cabinet made by a master carpenter. Both were excellent examples of their craft, and it was hard to weigh them against one another. But the window certainly did shine.

Berelain's expression seemed distant. She was definitely taken with Damodred. Such a short time for it to have happened. Faile told Bereiain that finding another man for her attentions would help with the rumors, but the Whitecloak commander? Had the woman lost all sense?

"So what do we do?" Alliandre asked as they rounded the south side of the camp, halfway to the point from which they'd started.

"About the Whitecloaks?" Faile asked.

"About Maighdin," Alliandre said. "Morgase."

"I can't help feeling that she took advantage of my kindness," Faile said. "After all we went through together, she didn't tell me who she was?

"You seem to be determined to give her very little credit," Bereiain said.

Faile didn't reply. She'd been thinking about what Perrin said, and he was probably right. Faile should not be so angry with her. If Morgase really had been fleeing one of the Forsaken, it was a miracle that she was still alive. Besides, she herself had lied about who she was, when first meeting Perrin.

In truth, her anger was because Morgase was going to judge Perrin. She presumed to judge Perrin. Maighdin the lady's maid might be grateful, but Morgase the Queen would see Perrin as a rival. Would Morgase really treat this judgment fairly, or would she take the chance to discredit a man who had raised himself up as a lord?

"I feel as you do, my Lady," Alliandre said softly.

"And how is that?"

"Deceived," Alliandre said. "Maighdin was our friend. I thought I knew her."

"You would have acted exactly as she did in that situation," Berelain said. "Why give away information if you don't have to?"

"Because we were friends," Alliandre said. "After what we went through together, it turns out that she's Morgase Trakand. Not just a queen—the Queen. The woman's a legend. And she was here, with us, serving us tea. Poorly."

"You have to admit," Faile said thoughtfully, "she did get better with the tea."

Faile reached to her throat, touching the cord that bore Rolan's stone. She didn't wear it every day, but she did so often enough. Had Morgase been false that entire time they'd been with the Shaido? Or had she, in a way, been more true? With no titles to live up to, she hadn't been forced to be the "legendary" Morgase Trakand. Under circumstances like that, wouldn't a person's true nature be more likely to show through?

Faile gripped the cord. Morgase would not turn this trial against Perrin out of spite. But she would offer judgment in honesty. Which meant Faile needed to be prepared, and have ready—

Screams sounded nearby.

Faile reacted immediately, spinning toward the woods. She instinctively anticipated Aiel leaping from the bushes to kill and capture, and she felt a moment of sheer panic.

But the screams were coming from inside camp. She cursed, turning about, but felt something tug at her belt. She looked down with a start to see her belt knife pull itself from its sheath and flip into the air.

"A bubble of evil!" Berelain said, stumbling to the side.

Faile ducked, throwing herself to the ground as her knife nipped through the air toward her head. It narrowly missed. As Faile came up in a crouch, she saw with a start that Berelain was facing down a dagger, one that looked—from the damage to Berelain's shirt—to have ripped its way free of a hidden sheath inside her sleeve.

Beyond Berelain, the camp was in a tumult. The nearby practicing refugeess were scattering, swords and spears nipping through the air of their own volition. It looked as if every weapon in the camp had suddenly sprung to life, rising up to attack its master.

Motion. Faile dodged to the side as her knife came back for her, but a

white-haired figure in brown snatched the weapon from the air, holding it in a tight grip. Sulin rolled, clinging to it, her teeth gritted as she wrenched it from the air and slammed it down onto a stone, breaking the blade from the hilt.

It stopped moving. Sulin's spears, however, pulled from their place on her back and spun in the sky, tips pointing toward her.

"Run!" the Maiden said, turning and trying to face all three spears at once.

"Where?" Faile demanded, picking up a stone from the ground. "The weapons are everywhere." Berelain was struggling with her dagger. She'd grabbed it, but it was fighting her, wrenching her arms from side to side. Alliandre was surrounded by three knives. Light! Faile suddenly felt lucky for having worn only one today.

Several of the Maidens charged in to help Alliandre, throwing stones at the knives, dodging spears that lunged for them. Berelain was alone.

Gritting her teeth—feeling half a fool for helping the woman she hated—Faile jumped in and placed her hands over Berelain's, lending her strength to that of the First. Together, they wrenched the dagger to the side, toward the ground, where they could drive its point into the earth. When they did, remarkably, it stopped moving.

Faile released it hesitantly, then looked up at the disheveled Berelain. The woman pressed her right hand to her other palm, stanching the blood from a cut she'd taken. She nodded at Faile. "Thank you."

"What stopped it?" Faile asked, heart thumping. Shouts sounded from around the camp. Cursing. Clangs from weapons.

"The dirt?" Berelain asked, kneeling.

Faile dug her fingers into the loam. She turned, noticing with alarm that one of the Maidens was down, though others had felled several of the flying spears. Faile tossed her handful of soil at one that was still whipping about.

When the dirt touched the spear, the weapon dropped. Sulin saw it, eyes widening behind her veiled face. She dropped the stones she'd been wielding and took up a handful of soil, spraying it over her head as a spear drove for her heart.

The dirt stopped it, and it fell to the ground. Nearby, the soldiers who had been following along to guard Faile and the others were having a worse time of things. They had backed into a circle, using their shields to block incoming weapons, hunkered down with worried expressions.

"Quickly!" Faile said to the Maidens, digging both hands into the soil. "Spread the word! Let the others know how to stop the weapons!" She threw soil at the daggers beside Alliandre, dropping two with one throw, then began running for the nearby soldiers.

"There is no need for you to apologize, Galad," Morgase said softly. "You couldn't have known what was happening in the Fortress of the Light. You were leagues and leagues away."

They sat in his tent, chairs facing each other, late-afternoon light shining on the walls. Galad sat with hands clasped before him as he leaned forward. So thoughtful. She remembered her first impressions of him, long ago when she'd married his father. The young child had simply been part of the deal, and while Morgase had adopted him, she had always worried that he felt less loved than his siblings.

Galad had always been so solemn. Quick to point out when someone did something wrong. But unlike other children—Elayne especially—he had not used his knowledge as a weapon. She should have seen. She should have realized he'd be attracted to the Whitecloaks for their vision of a world that was black and white. Could she have prepared him better? Shown him that the world was not black and white—it wasn't even gray. It was full of colors that sometimes didn't fit into any spectrum of morality.

He looked up, hands still clasped, eyes troubled. "I accused Valda wrongly. When I went to him, I said I was demanding Trial Beneath the Light because he had abused you and killed you. Half was wrong. I have done something where I was in error, at least in part. Regardless of that fact, I'm pleased that I killed him."

Her breath caught in her throat. Valda had reputedly been one of the greatest swordsmen alive. And Galad had bested him in a duel? This youth? But he was a youth no longer. Galad had made his choices, and she had a difficult time judging him for them. In some ways, they seemed more admirable than her own choices.

"You did well," she said. "Valda was a snake. I am certain he was behind Niall's death. Galad, you did the world a service."

He nodded. "For what he did to you, he deserved death. But I shall need to release a statement anyway." He rose, clasping his hands behind his back as he walked, his white clothing seeming to glow in the light. "I will explain that my accusation of murder was false, but that Valda still deserved death for his other offenses. Dire offenses." He stopped for a moment. "I wish I had known."

"There was nothing you could have done, son," she said. "My captivity was my own fault. For trusting my enemies."

Galad waved a hand. "There was no resisting Gaebril, if what you have heard is true. As for your captivity, you did not trust your enemies. You were betrayed, like all of us, by Valda. The Children are never the enemies of a person who walks in the Light."

"And Perrin Aybara?" she asked.

"Shadowspawn."

"No, son. I don't like some of the things he is doing, but I promise you, he is a good man."

"Then the trial will prove that," Galad said.

"Good men can make mistakes. If you proceed with this, it could end in a way that none of us wish."

Galad froze, frowning. "Mother, are you implying that he should be allowed to escape his crime?"

"Come," she said, gesturing. "Sit back down. You're dizzying me with that pacing about."

Perhaps he'd risen to the position of Lord Captain Commander only recently, but he already seemed to bristle at taking an order. He did sit, however.

Oddly, she felt like a queen again. Galad hadn't seen her during the hard months. He thought of her as the old Morgase, so around him, she actually felt like the old Morgase. Almost.

Niall had held her as a prisoner, but had respected her, and she had begun to think that she might be able to respect him as well. What had happened to the board where she and Niall had played stones so often? She hated to think of it broken in the Seanchan assault.

Would Galad become a Lord Captain Commander like Niall, or perhaps someone better? The Queen in her, the Queen reawakened, wanted to find a way to bring his light out and stifle the shadow.

"Galad," she said. "What are you going to do?"

"About the trial?"

"No. With this army of yours."

"We will fight at the Last Battle."

"Admirable," she said. "But do you know what that means?"

"It means fighting alongside the Dragon Reborn."

"And the Aes Sedai."

"We can serve alongside the witches for a time, if it is in the name of the greater good."

She closed her eyes, breathing out. "Galad, listen to yourself. You name them witches? You went to train with them, perhaps to become a Warder!"

"Yes."

She opened her eyes. He seemed so earnest. But even the most deadly and violent of hounds could be earnest. "Do you know what they did to Elayne, Mother?" he asked.

"You mean losing her?" Morgase still harbored anger over that.

"They sent her out on missions," he said, voice laced with disgust. '"They refused to let me see her, probably because she was out being put into danger. I met her later, outside the Tower."

"Where was she?" Morgase asked, eager.

"Here in the south. My men name the Aes Sedai witches. Sometimes, I wonder how far off from the truth that is."

"Galad . . ."

"Not all women who wield the One Power are evil inherently," he said. "That is a mistaken tradition of the Children. The Way of the Light doesn't make that claim; it just says that the temptation to use the One Power can corrupt. I believe that the women who now run the White Tower have let their schemes and selfish plots blind them."

She nodded, not wishing to argue the point. Thank the Light Elaida wasn't here to hear that logic!

"Either way," he said. "We will fight alongside them, and the Dragon Reborn, and this Perrin Aybara if need be. The struggle against the Shadow outweighs all other concerns."

"Then let us join that struggle," she said. "Galad, forget this trial! Aybara intends to disband some of his army and give the rest to al'Thor."

He met her eyes, then nodded. "Yes. I can see now that the Pattern has led you to me. We will travel with you. After the trial has finished."

She sighed.

"I don't do this by choice," Galad said, rising again. "Aybara himself suggested that he be tried. The man's conscience weighs against him, and to deny him this opportunity would be wrong. Let him prove his innocence to us, and to himself. Then we can continue." He hesitated, reaching out and touching the white-scabbarded sword on his dressing table. "And if we continue without him, then he will rest in the Light, having paid for his crimes." Galad," she said, "you know Lini was among the people you took from Perrin's camp."

She should have spoken up, revealed herself to me. I would have set her free."

And yet she did not. I have heard you all but threatened to execute the prisoners if Perrin didn't come to battle. Would you have actually done this?" Their blood would have been on his head." "Lini's blood, Galad?"

"I... I would have seen her among them and removed her from danger.".

"So you would have killed the others," Morgase said. "People who did no wrong, who were innocent of nothing more than being beguiled by Aybara?"

"The executions would never have occurred. It was merely a threat"

"A lie."

"Bah! What is the point of this, Mother?"

"To make you think, son," Morgase said. "In ways that I should have encouraged before, rather than leaving you to your simple illusions. Life is not so easy as the toss of a coin, one side or the other. Have I ever told you of the trial of Tham Felmley?"

Galad shook his head, looking irritated.

"Listen to me. He was a brickmason in Caemlyn, a reputable one. He was accused of murdering his brother in the early days of my reign. He had enough repute, and the case was important enough, that I judged it myself. He hanged at the end of it."

"A fitting end for a murderer."

"Yes," Morgase said. "Unfortunately, the murderer went free. One of his workers had actually done the deed. It didn't come out until two years later, when the man was taken for another murder. He laughed at us then, as we hanged him. Felmley had been innocent all along. The real man, the murderer, was one of those to condemn him during the original trial."

Galad fell silent.

"It's the only time," Morgase said, "where I know for certain that I hanged someone by mistake. So you tell me, Galad. Should I hang for my mistake in condemning an innocent man?"

"You did your best, Mother."

"And a man is still dead who did not deserve it."

Galad looked troubled.

"The Children like to speak of the Light protecting them," Morgase said, "of guiding their judgment and leading people to justice. That isn't how it works, Galad. Valda, claiming the blessing of the Light, could do terrible things. And I, hoping for the Light's aid, have killed unjustly.

"I'm not saying that Aybara is innocent. I haven't heard enough either way. But I want you to understand. Sometimes a good man can do wrong. At times, it is appropriate to punish him. At other times, punishment serves nobody, and the best thing to do is to let him continue and learn. As I continued and learned, after making such a poor judgment."

Galad frowned. That was good. Finally, he shook his head, his face clearing. "We shall see what the trial brings. It—"

There was a knock on the post outside. Galad turned, his frown deepening. "Yes?"

"My Lord Captain Commander," a Whitecloak said, lifting the nap andstepping into the tent. He was a lean man with sunken eyes that had dark patches beneath them. "We've just had word from the creature Ay-bara's camp. They're asking to push back the day of the trial."

Galad stood. "For what purpose?" he demanded.

"A disturbance in their camp, they claim," the Whitecloak said. "Something about wounded needing tending. My Lord Captain Commander ... it is obviously a ploy. A trick of some sort. We should attack them, or at the very least, deny this pointless extension."

Galad hesitated. He looked at Morgase.

"It is no ploy, son," she said. "I can promise you that. If Aybara says he needs more time, he's being honest with you."

"Bah," Galad said, waving the messenger away. "I shall consider it. Alongside the things you have said, Mother. Perhaps some extra time to consider would be . . . welcomed."

"The channelers say they are working as hard as they can," Gaul explained, walking beside Perrin though camp as they checked the various sections. "But they say it could take days to see to everyone."

The sun was sinking toward the horizon, but it would probably be a long night for many of them, tending the wounded. Thousands had been wounded, though most wounds—fortunately—were not bad. They'd lost some people. Too many, maybe as many as had fallen to the snake bites.

Perrin grunted. Gaul himself had his arm in a sling; he'd fended off his spears, only to have one of his arrows nearly kill him. He'd blocked it with his forearm. When Perrin had asked, he'd laughed and said that it had been years since he'd shot himself with his own arrow. Aiel humor.

"Have we heard back from the Whitecloaks?" Perrin asked, turning to Aravine, who walked on his other side.

Yes," she said. "But nothing specific. Their commander said he'd think' about giving us more time."

Well, he's not the one who will decide," Perrin said, going into the Mayener section of camp to check on Berelain's people. "I'm not going to risk a battle with a quarter of my men wounded and my Asha'man dead tired from Healing. We go to this trial when I say so, and if Damodred disagrees, he can just go ahead and attack us."

Gaul grunted his agreement. He wore his spears, but Perrin noticed

they were strapped more tightly in place than usual. Aravine carried a lan-tern, though they hadn't needed to light it yet. She was anticipating a late night as well.

"Let me know when Tarn and Elyas get back," Perrin said to Gaul. Perrin had sent each one separately to visit nearby villages and make certain the people there—the ones who hadn't joined a passing army—hadn't suffered from the bubble of evil.

Berelain had composed herself, her hand bandaged. She gave the report to him herself, from her tent, saying how many of her soldiers had been wounded, giving the names of the men they'd lost. Only six from her camp.

Perrin yawned as he left the tent, sending Aravine to check on the Aes Sedai. Gaul had run off to help with carrying some of the wounded, and

Perrin found himself alone as he walked down the path toward Alliandre's section of camp.

His hammer hadn't tried to kill him. So far as he knew, it was the only weapon on anyone's person that hadn't responded to the bubble of evil. What did it mean?

He shook his head, then hesitated, pausing in thought as he heard someone jogging along the path toward him. He caught Tarn's scent, and turned to meet the sturdy man as he arrived.

"Perrin, son," Tam said, out of breath from running. "Something unusual just happened."

"The bubble of evil hit the village?" Perrin asked, alarmed. "Were people hurt?"

"Oh, no," Tam said. "Not that. The village was fine. They didn't even notice anything was wrong. This is something else." Tam smelled odd. Thoughtful, worried.

Perrin frowned. "What? What's happening?"

"I . . . well, I have to go, son," Tam said. "Leave the camp. I don't know when I'll be back."

"Is this—"

"It has nothing to do with the Whitecloaks," Tam said. "I've been told I can't say much. But it's about Rand."

The colors swirled. Rand walked the hallways of the Stone of Tear. His expression was dark. Dangerous.

"Perrin," Tam said, "I think this is something I need to do. It involves Aes Sedai, and I have to leave you now. I can't say anything else. They made me swear it."

Perrin looked into Tarn's eyes and saw the sincerity there. He nodded.

"All right, then. You need any help? Someone to go with you, wherever you're going?"

"I'll be all right," Tarn said. He smelled embarrassed. What was going on? "I'll try to get you some help, son." He laid a hand on Perrin's shoulder. "You've done well here. I'm proud of you, and your father would be too. Keep it up. I'll see you at the Last Battle, if not before."

Perrin nodded. Tarn hurried off toward his tent, perhaps to pack.

It was hard to look regal while being carried atop the Caemlyn city wall on a litter, but Elayne did her best. Sometimes getting what you wanted was more important than looking regal.

Bed rest! For a queen! Well, in order to keep Melfane from hovering over her, she'd given an oath that she would stay off her feet. But she'd said nothing about staying in her bedroom.

Four Guardsmen carried the litter high on their shoulders. Elayne sat safely between armrests, wearing a crimson gown, hair carefully brushed, the Rose Crown of Andor atop her head.

The day was muggy, the weather turning warm, the sky still dark with clouds. She spared a moment to feel guilty for making the poor men, in dress uniform, carry her through this early-summer heat. But these men would ride to battle in her name; they could stand a little warm weather. How often did Guardsmen get the honor of carrying their queen, anyway?

Birgitte strode alongside the bed, and the bond indicated that she was amused. Elayne had feared she'd try to stop this excursion, but instead she had laughed! Birgitte must have determined that this day's activities—though bound to upset Melfane—were no real risk to Elayne or her babes. To the Warder, that meant this was an opportunity to see Elayne get paraded through town looking foolish.

Elayne winced. What would the people say? The Queen, riding a litter, being marched to the outer wall? Well, Elayne wasn't about to let rumors keep her from seeing the test firsthand, and she wasn't about to be bullied by a tyrannical midwife.

She had quite a view from the wall. The fields leading to Aringill lay open to her left; the city bustled to her right. Those fields were too brown. Reports from around the realm were dire. Nine fields in ten had failed.

Elayne's porters carried her up to one of the wall's tower turrets, then hit a snag as they realized the poles on the litter were too long to make the turns on the stairs inside the tower; the demonstration was supposed to happen atop it. Luckily, there were alternative short handholds for just such situations. They removed the poles, switched to the handholds, and proceeded.

While they carried her up, she distracted herself by thinking about Cairhien. The noble Houses there all claimed to be eagerly awaiting her arrival to take the throne, and yet none offered more than the most flaccid support. Daes Dae'mar was fully in effect, and the posturing for Elayne's ascent—or her failure to ascend—had begun the moment Rand had mentioned that he intended the nation to be hers.

In Cairhien, a hundred different political winds always blew in a hundred different directions. She didn't have time to learn all of the different factions before she took the throne. Besides, if she was seen as playing the game, she could be seen as someone to defeat. She had to find a way to seize the Sun Throne without mixing too much in the local House politics.

Elayne's litter creaked up and crested the lip of the tower's turret. Atop the tower, Aludra stood with one of her prototype dragons. The bronze tube was quite long and set in a framework of wood. It was just a dummy, for display. A second, working dragon had been set up atop the next tower down the wall. It was far enough away that Elayne wouldn't be in danger if something went wrong.

The slender Taraboner woman seemed to take no thought for the fact that she was delivering a potentially world-changing weapon to the queen of a foreign country; all Aludra seemed to want was a way to get back at the Seanchan, or so Mat had explained. Elayne had spent some time with the woman while traveling with Luca's menagerie, but still wasn't certain how trustworthy she was. She'd have Master Norry keep an eye on her.

Assuming, of course, the dragons worked. Elayne spared another glance for the people down below. Only then did she realize how high up she really was. Light!

I'm safe, she reminded herself. Min's viewing. Not that she said anything like that to Birgitte, not any longer. And she did intend to stop taking so many risks. This wasn't a risk. Not really.

She turned away before she grew dizzy and inspected the dragon more closely. It was shaped like a large bronze bell, though longer and narrower. Like an enormous vase turned on its side. Elayne had received more than one missive from the city's irate bellfounders. Aludra insisted that her orders be carried out exactly and had forced the men to recast the tube three times.

Late the previous night, a loud crack had sounded across the city. As n

stone wall had fallen somewhere or a bolt of lightning had struck. This morning Elayne had received a note from Aludra.

First test a success, it had read. Meet me today on city wall for demonstration.

"Your Majesty," Aludra said. "You are . . . well, yes?"

"I will be fine, Aludra," Elayne said, trying to maintain her dignity. "The dragon is ready?"

"It is," Aludra said. She wore a long brown dress, her black wavy hair loose, coming down to her waist. Why no braids today? Aludra didn't seem to care for jewelry, and Elayne had never seen her wear any. A group of five men from Mat's Band of the Red Hand stood with her, one carrying what appeared to be a chimney brush of some sort. Another had a metal sphere in his hands, and another carried a small wooden cask.

Elayne could see a similar group on the next tower over. Someone there raised a hat into the air and waved at her. Mat wanted to watch from the tower with the working dragon, it seemed. Foolhardy man. What if the thing exploded like a nightflower?

"The demonstration, then," Aludra said, "we shall begin. These men here will show you what is being done on the other tower." She hesitated as she regarded Elayne. "Her Majesty, I think we should prop her up, so that she can see the display."

A few minutes later, they'd located some small boxes to place beneath the litter and elevate Elayne so that she could see over the tower's crenelations. It appeared that something had been constructed on a distant hillside, though it was too far for Elayne to make out. Aludra pulled out several looking glasses and handed one each to Elayne and Birgitte.

Elayne raised her glass to her eye. Dressing dummies. Aludra had set up some fifty of them in ranks on the far hill. Light! Where had she gotten so many? Likely, Elayne would be getting some wordy missives from gownmakers across the city.

Mat had promised this would be worth practically any cost. Of course, that was Mat. He wasn't exactly the most reliable person around.

He 's not the one who lost an invaluable ter'angreal to the Shadow, she reminded herself. She grimaced. In her pouch, she carried another replica of the foxhead. It was one of three she'd created so far. If she was going to be confined to her bed, then she might as well make use of her time. It would be a lot less frustrating if she could channel consistently.

All three of the replica foxhead medallions worked as the first replica had. She couldn't channel while wearing one, and a powerful weave could overwhelm them. She really needed that original back for further study.

"You can see, Your Majesty," Aludra said in a stiff voice, as if unaccustomed to giving a demonstration, "that we've tried to re-create the conditions under which you might make use of the dragons, yes?"

Except instead of fifty dressing dummies, we'll have a hundred thousand Trollocs, Elayne thought.

"The next tower, you should look at it," Aludra said, gesturing.

Elayne turned the glass to look at the next tower down the wall. She could see five members of the Band there, dressed in uniforms, waiting with another dragon. Mat was looking in the thing, right down the tube

"These have trained somewhat on the dragons," Aludra continued "But they do not have the efficiency I would like. They will do for now yes?"

Elayne lowered her glass as the men pulled the dummy tube back__it

was on a set of wheels—and rotated it up a bit toward the sky. One poured some black powder in from his cask, then another stuffed in a wad of something. This was followed by the man with the long pole ramming it down the tube. That wasn't a chimney brush he held, but some kind of tool used for packing.

"That looks like the powder inside a nightflower," Birgitte said. She felt wary.

Aludra shot the Warder a glance. "And how do you know what is inside a nightflower, Maerion? You do realize how dangerous it is to open one of those, yes?"

Birgitte shrugged.

Aludra frowned, but got no response, so took a deep breath and calmed herself. "The device, it is perfectly safe. We set up the other dragon to do the firing, so there would be no danger, yes? But there would not be danger anyway. The casting is good and my calculations, they are perfect."

"Elayne," Birgitte said, "I still think we'd be better off watching from the wall down below. Even if this one beside us isn't going to be lit."

"After all I went through to get up here?" Elayne asked. "No thank you. Aludra, you may proceed."

She ignored Birgitte's annoyance. Did Aludra really think she could hit one of those dressing dummies with her iron sphere? That was a long way to go, and the sphere was so small, barely wider than a man's outstretched palm. Had Elayne invested all of this effort to get something that would work more poorly than a catapult? This dragon sounded as if it could throw its sphere farther, but the boulders tossed by a catapult were many times larger.

The men finished. The remaining man touched a small torch to a fuse sticking out of the sphere and rolled it into the tube; then they turned the tube to face directly outward.

"You see?" Aludra said, patting the dragon. "Three men is best. Four for safety, in case one falls. One could do the work if he had to, but it

would be slow."

The men stepped back as Aludra got out a red flag. She held it up in the air, signaling the other team on the next tower down the wall. Elayne focused on them with the glass. One carried a small torch. Mat watched with a curious expression.

Aludra lowered her flag. The soldier touched his burning torch to the side of the dragon.

The explosive sound that followed was so powerful that it made Elayne jump- The boom was as sharp as a thunderclap, and she heard in the distance what sounded like an echo of the explosion. She raised a hand to her breast, and remembered to draw breath.

A pocket on the mountainside exploded in a massive spray of dust and earth. The ground seemed to tremble! It was as if an Aes Sedai had torn up the earth with a weave, but the One Power hadn't been used at all.

Aludra seemed disappointed. Elayne raised her looking glass to her eye. The blast had missed the dressing dummies by a good twenty paces, but had ripped a hole in the ground five paces wide. Did the ball explode like a nightflower to cause that? This device wasn't merely an improved catapult or trebuchet; it was something else. Something capable of smashing an iron sphere into the ground with such force that it blew open a hole, then perhaps exploded on its own.

Why, she could line an entire wall with these dragons! With all of them firing together. . . .

Aludra raised her flag again; Elayne watched with her glass as the men on the next tower over cleaned, then reloaded, the tube. Mat was holding his ears and scowling, which gave Elayne a smile. He really should have watched from her tower. The reloading process took a very short time, perhaps three minutes. And Aludra said she intended to see it happen more quickly?

Aludra wrote a set of orders and sent it by messenger to the men. They changed the dragon's position slightly. She waved her flag; Elayne steeled herself for another explosion, but still jumped when it came.

This time, the blast was dead-on, hitting in the very center of the rank of dressing dummies. Their tattered remnants spun through the air. The blow destroyed five or six, and knocked down a good dozen of them.

With the ability to fire every two minutes, hit so far away, and deal such destruction, these weapons would be deadly. As deadly as damame, perhaps. Birgitte was still looking through her looking glass, and while her face was impassive, Elayne could feel the woman's amazement.

"The weapon, you find it pleasing?" Aludra asked.

"I find it pleasing, Aludra," Elayne said, smiling. "I find it pleasing indeed. The resources of the entire city are yours, the resources of all Andor. There are several more bellfounders in Andor." She glanced at the Illuminator. "But you must keep the plans and designs a secret. I will send Guards with you. We can't afford to let any of the bellfbunders consider the value of leaving home and selling information to our enemies."

"So long as they don't reach the Seanchan," Aludra said, "I care not."

"Well, I do," Elayne said. "And I'm the one who will see these things used properly. I'll need an oath out of you, Aludra."

The woman sighed, but gave it. Elayne had no intention of turning them against anyone other than Trollocs and Seanchan. But she would feel much more secure about her nation knowing that she had these at her disposal.

She smiled as she considered it, and found it difficult to contain her excitement. Birgitte finally lowered her glass. She felt. . . solemn.

"What?" Elayne asked as the Guards took turns with her glass, inspecting the devastation. She felt some odd indigestion. Had she eaten something bad for lunch?

"The world just changed, Elayne," Birgitte said, shaking her head, long braid swinging slightly. "It just changed in a very large way. I have a terrible feeling that it's only the beginning."

CHAPTER

30

Men Dream Here

These Whitecloaks are a tight-lipped group, my Lady," Lacile said with a smug smile, "but they're still men. Men who haven't seen a woman in a while, I think. That always makes them lose what few brains they have."

Faile walked the horselines, the sky dark, lantern held before her. Perrin was asleep; he'd retired early these last few days, seeking the wolf dream. The Whitecloaks had reluctantly agreed to delay the trial, but Perrin still should have been preparing his words to speak there. He grumbled that he already knew what he was going to say. Knowing him, he'd just tell Morgase what had happened, straightforward as usual.

Lacile and Selande walked on either side of Faile. Other members of Cha Faile walked behind, keeping careful watch for anyone close enough to be within earshot.

"I think the Whitecloaks knew we were there to spy," Selande said. The short, pale woman walked with hand on her sword. The stance didn't seem as awkward as it once had; Selande had taken her sword training seriously.

"No, I doubt they guessed," Lacile replied. She still wore a simple tan blouse and darker brown skirt. Selande had changed back to breeches and sword immediately upon returning—she still bore a cut on her arm from where that sword had tried to kill her—but Lacile seemed to be savoring her time in the skirt.

'They barely said anything of use," Selande said.

"Yes," Lacile replied, "but I think they're merely in that habit. Our excuse of checking on Maighdin and the others was a reasonable one, my Lady. We were able to deliver your note, then do a little chatting with the men. I teased out enough to be of some use."

Faile raised an eyebrow, though Lacile fell quiet as they passed a groom working late, brushing down one of the horses.

"The Whitecloaks respect Galad," Lacile said once out of the groom's earshot. "Though some grumble about the things he's been telling them"

"What things?" Faile asked.

"He wants them to ally with the Aes Sedai for the Last Battle," Lacile explained.

"Anyone could have told you they would dislike that idea," Selande said. "They're Whitecloaks!"

"Yes," Faile said, "but it means that this Galad is more reasonable than his men. A useful tip, Lacile."

The young woman swelled, brushing her short hair back in a modest gesture, throwing back the red ribbons she had tied there. She'd taken to wearing twice as many now, since her Shaido captivity.

Up ahead, a lanky figure stepped between two of the horses. He had a thick mustache, Taraboner style, and though he was young, he had the air of one who had seen much in his life. Dannil Lewin, the man in charge of the Two Rivers men now that Tam had mysteriously decided to depart. Light send that Tam was safe, wherever he'd gone.

"Why, Dannil," Faile said, "what an odd coincidence to see you here."

"Coincidence?" he asked, scratching at his head. He held his bow in one hand, staff-like, though he kept glancing at it, wary. A lot of people did that with their weapons now. "You asked me to come here."

"It must be a coincidence nonetheless," Faile said, "in case anyone asks. Particularly if that somebody is my husband."

"I don't like keeping things from Lord Perrin," Dannil said, falling into step with her.

"And you'd prefer to risk letting him be beheaded by a group of rabid Whitecloaks?"

"No. None of the men do."

"You've done what I asked, then?"

Dannil nodded. "I spoke to Grady and Neald. Lord Perrin has already ordered them to stay nearby, but we talked. Grady said he'd have weaves or Air ready, and will grab Lord Perrin and get out if things get ugly, Neald covering the retreat. I've talked to the men from the Two Rivers. A group of archers in the trees will be ready to provide a distraction."

Faile nodded. Neither Asha'man had been wounded in this bubble of evil fortunately. Each had been carrying a knife, but reports said they'd looked at the floating weapons, then nonchalantly waved hands and blasted them from the air. When messengers with news of Faile's earth-throwing trick had reached the section of camp the Asha'man had been in, they'd found this area in much less chaos, Grady and Neald striding through camp and felling weapons wherever they saw them.

Part of the reason for the delay before the trial was to take care of Healing. But another large reason was because Perrin wanted to give time to the camp's smiths and craftsmen to make replacement weapons for those who had lost theirs, just in case the trial turned to a battle. And Faile was increasingly certain that it would.

"Lord Perrin won't like being pulled away from fighting," Dannil said. "Not one bit."

"That tent could turn into a death trap," Faile said. "Perrin can lead the battle if he wants, but from a safer position. You will get him out."

Dannil sighed, but nodded. "Yes, my Lady."

Perrin was learning not to fear Young Bull.

Step by step, he learned balance. The wolf when the wolf was needed; the man when the man was needed. He let himself be drawn into the hunt, but kept Faile—his home—in his mind. He walked the edge of the sword, but each step made him more confident.

Today, he hunted Hopper, wily and experienced prey. But Young Bull was quick to learn, and having the mind of a man gave him advantages. He could think like something, or someone, that he was not.

Was this how Noam had begun? Where would this path of understanding lead? There was a secret to this, a secret Young Bull had to find for himself.

He could not fail. He had to learn. It seemed that—somehow—the more confident he became in the wolf dream, the more comfortable he became with himself in the waking world.

Young Bull charged through an unfamiliar forest. No, a jungle, with hanging vines and wide-fronded ferns. The underbrush was so thick that a rat would have trouble squeezing through. But Young Bull demanded that the world open before him. Vines pulled back. Shrubs bent. Ferns retracted, like mothers pulling their children out of the way of a galloping horse.

He caught glimpses of Hopper bounding ahead. His prey vanished. Young Bull didn't break pace, charging through that spot and catching the scent of Hoppers destination. Young Bull shifted onto an open plain with no trees and an unfamiliar scrub patching the ground. His prey was a series of streaking blurs in the distance. Young Bull followed, each bound carrying him hundreds of paces.

Within seconds, they approached an enormous plateau. His prey ran directly up the side of the stone shelf. Young Bull followed, ignoring what was "right." He ran with the ground far below at his back, nose toward that boiling sea of black clouds. He leaped over clefts in the rock, ricocheting between two sides of a rift, cresting the top of the plateau.

Hopper attacked. Young Bull was ready. He rolled, coming up on all fours as his prey leaped over his head, passed over the cliff's edge, but then vanished in a flash and was back standing on the lip of the cliff.

Young Bull became Perrin holding a hammer made of soft wood. Such things were possible in the wolf dream; if the hammer hit, it would not harm.

Perrin swung, the air cracking with the sudden speed of his motion. But Hopper was equally fast, dodging out of the way. He rolled, then leaped at Perrin's back, fangs glistening. Perrin growled and shifted so that he was standing a few feet from where he had been. Hopper's jaws snapped open air, and Perrin swung his hammer again.

Hopper was suddenly shrouded in a deep mist. Perrin's hammer slammed down through it, hitting the ground. It bounced off. He cursed, spinning. In the fog, he couldn't see, couldn't catch Hopper's scent.

A shadow moved in the mist and Perrin lunged, but it was only a pattern in the air. He spun and found shadows moving all around him. The shapes of wolves, men, and other creatures he couldn't see.

Make the world yours, Young Bull, Hopper sent.

Perrin focused, thinking of dry air. Of the musty scent of dust. That was what the air should be like, in an arid landscape like this.

No. It wasn't what the air should be like. It was how the air was\ His mind, his will, his feelings slammed against something else. He pushed through.

The mists vanished, evaporating in the heat. Hopper sat on his haunches a short distance away. Good, the wolf sent. You learn. He glanced sideways, looking toward the north, seeming distracted by something. Then he was gone.

Perrin caught his scent and followed to the Jehannah Road. Hopper dashed along outside the strange violet dome. They jumped back to this place frequently to see if the dome ever vanished. So far, it had not.

Perrin continued the chase. Was the dome meant to trap wolves inside?

But if that was the case, why had Slayer not sprung his trap at Dragonmount, where so many wolves had for some reason gathered?

Perhaps the dome had another purpose. Perrin memorized a few notable rock formations along the perimeter of the dome, then followed Hopper to a low shelf of rock. The wolf leaped from it, vanishing in midair, and Perrin

followed.

He caught the scent of Hopper's destination in midjump, then took himself there, still in motion. He appeared about two feet above a shimmering blue expanse. Stunned, he fell and splashed into the water.

He swam frantically, dropping his hammer. Hopper stood on top of the water, bearing a wolfish expression of disapproval. Not good, the wolf added. You still need to learn.

Perrin sputtered.

The sea grew tempestuous, but Hopper sat placidly upon the rolling waves. Again he glanced northward, but then turned back to Perrin. Water troubles you, Young Bull.

"I was just surprised," Perrin said, swimming hard.

Why?

"Because I didn't expect this!"

Why expect? Hopper sent. When you follow another, you could end up anywhere.

"I know." Perrin spat out a mouthful of water. He gritted his teeth, then imagined himself standing on the water like Hopper. Blessedly, he rose out of the sea to stand atop its surface. It was a strange sensation, the sea undulating beneath him.

You will not defeat Slayer like this, Hopper sent.

"Then I will keep learning," Perrin said.

There is little time.

"I will learn more quickly."

Can you?

"We have no other choice."

You could choose not to fight him.

Perrin shook his head. "Do we run from our prey? If we do, they'll hunt us instead. I will face him, and I need to be prepared."

There is a way. The wolf smelled of worry.

"I'll do what I have to."

Follow. Hopper vanished, and Perrin caught an unexpected scent: refuse and mud, burning wood and coal. People.

Perrin shifted and found himself atop a building in Caemlyn. He had visited this city only once, and briefly, and seeing the beautiful Inner City before him—ancient buildings, domes and spires rising atop the hill like majestic pines atop a crowned mountain—gave him pause. He was near the old wall, beyond which spread the New City.

Hopper sat at his side, looking over the beautiful city. Much of the city itself was said to be Ogier-built, and Perrin could believe it, with that marvelous beauty. Tar Valon was said to be more grand than Caemlyn. Perrin had trouble believing that was possible.

"Why are we here?" Perrin asked.

Men dream here, Hopper replied.

In the real world, they did. Here, the place was empty. It was light enough to be day, despite that storm overhead, and Perrin felt there should be people crowding the streets. Women, going to and from market. Nobles atop horses. Wagons bearing barrels of ale and sacks of grain. Children scampering, slipfingers searching for marks, workers replacing paving stones, enterprising hawkers offering meat pies to them all.

Instead, there were hints. Shadows. A fallen handkerchief on the street. Doors that were open one moment, then closed the next. A thrown horseshoe sticking from the mud of an alleyway. It was as if all of the people had been whisked away, snatched by Fades or some monster from a gleemans dark tale.

A woman appeared momentarily below. She wore a beautiful green and gold dress. She stared at the street, eyes glazed over, then was gone. People did occasionally appear in the wolf dream. Perrin figured it must happen to them when they were asleep, part of their natural dreams.

This place, Hopper said, is not only a place of wolves. It is a place of all.

"Of all?" Perrin asked, sitting down on the rooftiles.

All souls know this place, Hopper said. They come here when they reach for it.

"When they're dreaming."

Yes, Hopper said, lying down beside him. The fear-dreams of men are strong. So very strong. Sometimes, those terrible dreams come here. That sending was an enormous wolf, the size of a building, knocking aside much smaller wolves who tried to snap at him. There was a scent of terror and death about the wolf. Like ... a nightmare.

Perrin nodded slowly.

Many wolves have been caught in the pains of these fear-dreams. They appear more commonly where men might walk, though the dream lives without those who created it.

Hopper looked at Perrin. Hunting in the fear-dreams will teach you strength. But you might die. It is very dangerous.

"I don't have time to be safe anymore," Perrin said. "Let's do it."

Hopper didn't ask if he was certain. He jumped down to the street, and Perrin followed, landing softly. Hopper began to lope forward, so Per-rin broke into a jog.

"How do we find them?" Perrin asked.

Smell fear, Hopper sent. Terror.

Perrin closed his eyes, breathing in deeply. Just as doors flashed open and closed, in the wolf dream he could sometimes smell things there for a moment, then gone. Musty winter potatoes. The dung of a passing horse.

A pie, baking.

When he opened his eyes, he saw none of these things. They weren't really there, but they almost were. They could have been.

There, Hopper said, vanishing. Perrin followed, appearing beside the wolf outside of a narrow alleyway. Inside, it looked too dark to be natural.

Go in, Hopper said. You will not last long your first time. I will come for you. Remember it is not. Remember it is false.

Feeling worried, but determined, Perrin stepped into the alleyway. The walls to either side were black, as if they'd been painted. Only . . . these walls were too dark to be painted. Was that a tuft of grass beneath his foot? The sky above had stopped boiling, and he thought he could see stars peeking down. A pale moon, far too large, appeared in the sky, shrouded in clouds. It gave a cold glow, like ice.

He wasn't in the city anymore. He turned about, alarmed, to find himself in a forest. The trees had thick trunks and were of no species he could recognize. Their branches were naked. The bark was a faint gray, lit by the phantom light above, and looked like bone.

He needed to get back to the city! Out of this terrible place. He turned around.

Something flashed in the night, and he spun. "Who's there!" he shouted.

A woman burst from the darkness, running in a mad scramble. She wore a loose white robe, little more than a shift, and she had long dark hair streaming behind her. She saw him and froze, then turned and made as if to run in a different direction.

Perrin cut her off, snatching her hand, pulling her back. She struggled, feet marring the loamy dark ground beneath as she tried to pull away. She was gasping. In and out. In and out. She smelled frantic.

I need to know the way out!" Perrin said. "We have to return to the city."

She met his eyes. "He's coming," she hissed. Her hand slipped from his and she ran, vanishing into the night, the darkness enfolding her like a shroud. Perrin took a step forward, hand outstretched.

He heard something behind him. He turned slowly to find something enormous. A looming shadow that sucked in the moonlight. The thing seemed to draw breath away, absorbing his very life and will.

The thing reared up taller. It was taller than the trees, a hulking monster with arms as thick as barrels, its face and body lost in shadow. It opened deep red eyes, like two huge coals flaring to life.

/ need to fight it! Perrin thought, hammer appearing in his hand. He took a step forward, then thought better of it. Light! That thing was enormous. He couldn't fight it, not out in the open like this. He needed cover

He turned and ran through the hostile woods. The thing followed. He could hear it snapping branches, its footsteps making the earth shake Ahead of him, he saw the woman, her thin white gown slowing her as it caught on a branch. She pulled free and continued to run.

The creature loomed. It would catch him, consume him, destroy him! He yelled for the woman, reaching out toward her. She glanced over her shoulder at him, and tripped.

Perrin cursed. He scrambled to her side, to help her up. But the thing was so close!

It was a fight, then. His heart was thumping as quickly as a woodlark pecking a tree. Hands sweaty, he turned, gripping his hammer to face the terrible thing behind. He placed himself between it and the woman.

It reared up, growing larger, those red eyes blazing with fire. Light! He couldn't fight that, could he? He needed an edge of some kind. "What is that thing?" he desperately asked of the woman. "Why does it chase us?"

"It's him" she hissed. "The Dragon Reborn."

Perrin froze. The Dragon Reborn. But. . . but that was Rand. It's a nightmare, he reminded himself. None of this is real. I can't let myself be caught up in it!

The ground trembled, as if moaning. He could feel the heat of the monster's eyes. A scrambling sound came from behind as the woman ran, leaving him.

Perrin stood up, legs shaking, every instinct crying for him to run. But no. He couldn't fight it, either. He could not accept this as real.

A wolf howled, then leaped into the clearing. Hopper seemed to push back the darkness. The creature bent down toward Perrin, reaching a massive hand as if to crush him.

This was an alley.

Inside of Caemlyn.

It wasn't real.

It was not.

The darkness around them faded. The enormous dark shadow creature

warped in the air, like a piece of cloth being stretched. The moon vanished.

A small pocket of ground—the dirty, trampled earth of an alley—appeared

at their feet.

Then, with a snap, the dream was gone. Perrin stood in the alley again, Hopper at his side, no sign of the forest or the terrible creature that someone had viewed as the Dragon Reborn.

Perrin exhaled slowly. Sweat dripped from his brow. He reached up to wipe it away, then willed the sweat away instead.

Hopper vanished, and Perrin followed, finding himself on the same rooftop as before. He sat down. Merely thinking of that shadow made him shiver. "It felt so real," he said. "A piece of me knew it was a nightmare. I couldn't help but try to fight, or try to run. When I did either, it grew stronger, didn't it? Because I accepted it was real?"

Yes. You must not believe what you see.

Perrin nodded. "There was a woman in there. Part of the dream? She wasn't real either?"

Yes.

"Maybe she was the one who dreamed it," Perrin said. "The one having the original nightmare, caught up in it and trapped here in the World of Dreams."

Men who dream do not stay here long, Hopper sent. To him, that was the end of the discussion. You were strong, Young Bull. You did well. He smelled proud.

"It helped when she called the thing the Dragon Reborn. That showed it wasn't real. Helped me believe it wasn't."

You did well, foolish cub, Hopper repeated. Perhaps you can learn.

"Only if I keep practicing. We need to do that again. Can you find another?"

Yes, Hopper sent. There are always nightmares when your kind is near. Always. The wolf turned northward again, however. Perrin had thought that the thing that had been distracting him earlier was the dreams, but it didn't seem to have been the case.

What is up there?" Perrin asked. "What is it you keep looking toward?"

It comes, Hopper sent.

"What?"

The Last Hunt. It begins. Or it does not.

Perrin frowned, standing. "You mean . . . right now?"

The decision will be made. Soon. What decision?" Hopper's sendings were confusing, and he couldn't

decipher them. Light and darkness, a void and fire, a coldness and a terri-ble, terrible heat. Mixed with wolves howling, calling, lending strength.

Come. Hopper stood, looking to the northeast.

Hopper vanished. Perrin shifted after him, appearing low down on the slopes of the Dragonmount, beside an outcropping of stone.

"Light," Perrin said softly, looking up in awe. The storm that had been brewing for months had come to a head. A massive black thunderhead dominated the sky, covering the top of the mountain. It spun slowly in the air, an enormous vortex of blackness, emitting bolts of lightning that connected to the clouds above. In other parts of the wolf dream the clouds were tempestuous, yet distant. This felt immediate.

This was ... the focus of something. Perrin could feel it. Often, the wolf dream reflected things in the real world in strange or unexpected ways.

Hopper stood on the outcropping. Perrin could feel wolves all across the slopes of Dragonmount. In even greater numbers than he'd felt here recently.

They wait, Hopper said. The Last Hunt comes.

As Perrin reached out, he found that other packs were coming, still distant but moving toward Dragonmount. Perrin looked upward at the monstrous peak. The tomb of the Dragon, Lews Therin. It was a monument to his madness, to both his failure and his success. His pride and his self-sacrifice.

"The wolves," Perrin said. "They gather for the Last Hunt?"

Yes. If it occurs.

Perrin turned back to Hopper. "You said that it would. 'The Last Hunt comes,' you said."

A choice must be made, Young Bull. One path leads to the Last Hunt.

"And the other?" Perrin asked.

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Hopper didn't respond immediately. He turned toward Dragonmount. The other path does not lead to the Last Hunt.

"Yes, but what does it lead to?"

To nothing.

Perrin opened his mouth to press further, but then the weight of Hopper's sending hit him. "Nothing" to the wolf meant a vacant den, all of the pups taken by trappers. A night sky empty of stars. The moon fading. The smell of old blood, dry, stale and flaked away.

Perrin closed his mouth. The sky continued to churn with that black storm. He smelled it on the wind, the smell of broken trees and dirt, or flooded fields and lightning fires. As so often, particularly recently, those scents seemed to contrast with the world around him. One of his senses told him he was in the very center of a catastrophe while the others saw

nothing amiss.

"This choice. Why don't we just make it?"

It is not our choke, Young Bull.

Perrin felt drawn to the clouds above. Despite himself, he began to walk up the slope. Hopper loped up beside him. It is dangerous above, Young Bull.

"I know," Perrin said. But he couldn't stop. Instead, he increased his speed, each step launching him just a little farther. Hopper ran beside him passing trees, rocks, groups of watching wolves. Upward Perrin and Hopper went, climbing until the trees dwindled and the ground grew cold with frost and ice.

Eventually, they approached the cloud itself. It seemed a dark fog, shaking with currents as it spun. Perrin hesitated at the perimeter, then stepped inside. It was like stepping into the nightmare. The wind was suddenly violent, the air buzzing with energy. Leaves and dirt and grit blew in the tempest, and he had to raise a hand against it.

No, he thought.

A small bubble of calm air opened around him. The tempest continued to blow just inches from his face, and he had to strain to keep from being claimed by it again. This storm wasn't a nightmare or a dream; it was something more vast, something more real. This time, Perrin was the one creating something abnormal with the bubble of safety.

He pressed forward, soon leaving tracks in snow. Hopper strode against the wind, lessening its effect on him as well. He was stronger at it than Perrin was—Perrin barely managed to keep his own bubble up. He feared that without it, he would be sucked into the storm and tossed into the air. He saw large branches rip past in the air, and even some smaller trees.

Hopper slowed, then sat down in the snow. He looked upward, toward the peak. I cannot stay, the wolf sent. This is not my place.

"I understand," Perrin said.

The wolf vanished, but Perrin continued. He couldn't explain what drew him, but he knew that he needed to witness. Someone did. He walked for what seemed like hours, focused completely on only two things: keeping the winds off him and putting one foot in front of the other.

The storm grew increasingly violent. It was so bad here that he couldn't keep all of the storm off, just the worst of it. He passed the ridged lip where the mountaintop was broken, picking his way alongside it, hunkered against the gusts, a steep fall on either side. Wind began to whip at his clothing, and he had to squint his eyes against the dust and snow in the air.

But he continued on. Striving for the peak, which rose ahead, rising above the blasted out side of the mountain. He knew that atop that point he would find what he searched for. This horrible maelstrom was the wolf dream's reaction to something great, something terrible. In this place, sometimes things were more real than in the waking world. The dream reflected a tempest because something very important was happening He worried that it was something terrible.

Perrin pressed forward, shoving his way through the snows, crawling up rock faces, his fingers leaving skin sticking to the frigid stones. But he had trained well these last few weeks. He leapt chasms he shouldn't have been able to leap and climbed rocks that should have been too high for him.

A figure stood at the very top of the jagged, broken tip of the mountain. Perrin kept pressing onward. Someone needed to watch. Someone needed to be there when it happened.

Finally, Perrin heaved atop one last stone and found himself within a dozen feet of the top. He could make out the figure now. The man stood at the very heart of the vortex of winds, staring eastward, motionless. He was faint and translucent, a reflection of the real world. Like a shadow. Perrin had never seen anything like it.

It was Rand, of course. Perrin had known that it would be. Perrin held to the stone with one ragged hand and pulled his cloak close with the other—he'd created the cloak several cliff faces ago. He blinked through reddened eyes, gazing upward. He had to focus most of his concentration on pushing back some of the winds to keep himself from being flung out into the tempest.

Lightning flashed suddenly, thunder sounding for the first time since he'd begun climbing. That lightning began to arc in a dome around the top of the mountain. It threw light across Rand's face. That hard, impassive face, like stone itself. Where had its curves gone? When had Rand gained so many lines and angles? And those eyes, they seemed made of marble!

Rand wore a coat of black and red. Fine and ornamented, with a sword at his waist. The winds didn't affect Rand's clothes. Those fell unnaturally still, as if he really were just a statue. Carved from stone. The only thing that moved was his dark red hair, blowing in the wind, thrown and spun.

Perrin clung to the rocks for his life, cold wind biting into his cheeks, his fingers and feet so numb he could barely feel them. His beard bristled with dusty ice and snow. Something black began to spin around Rand. It wasn't part of the storm; it seemed like night itself leaking from him. Tendrils of it grew from Rand's own skin, like tiny hands curling back and wrapping around him. It seemed evil itself given life.

"Rand!" Perrin bellowed. "Fight it! Rand!"

His voice was lost in the wind, and he doubted that Rand could have heard him anyway. The darkness continued to seep out, like a liquid tar coming through Rand's pores, creating a miasma of pitch around the Dragon Reborn. Within moments, Perrin could barely see Rand through the blackness. It enclosed him, cutting him off, banishing him. The Dragon Reborn was gone. Only evil remained.

"Rand, please . . ." Perrin whispered.

And then—from the midst of the blackness, from the center of the uproar and the tempest—a tiny sliver of light split through the evil. Like a candle's glow on a very dark night. The light shone upward, toward the distant sky, like a beacon. So frail.

The tempest buffeted it. The winds stormed, howled, and screamed. The lightning beat against the top of the rocky peak, blasting free chunks of rock, scoring the ground. The blackness undulated and pulsed.

But still the light shone.

A web of cracks appeared down the side of the shell of evil blackness, light shining from within. Another fracture joined it, and another. Something strong was inside, something glowing, something brilliant.

The shell exploded outward, vaporizing and releasing a column of light so bright, so incredible that it seemed to sear the eyes from Perrin's head. But he looked on anyway, not raising arm to shade or block the resplendent image before him. Rand stood within that light, mouth open as if bellowing toward the skies above. The sun-yellowed column shot into the air, and the storm seemed to shudder, the entire sky itself undulating.

The tempest vanished.

That column of fiery light became a column of sunlight streaming down, illuminating the peak of Dragonmount. Perrin pulled his fingers free from the rock, gazing on with wonder at Rand standing within the light. It seemed so long, so very long, since Perrin had seen a ray of pure sunlight.

The wolves began to howl. It was a howl of triumph, of glory and of victory. Perrin raised his head and howled as well, becoming Young Bull for a moment. He could feel the pool of sunlight growing, and it washed over him, its warmth banishing the frozen chill. He barely noticed when Rand's image vanished, for he left that sunlight behind.

Wolves appeared around Perrin, flashing into existence midleap. They continued to bay, jumping at one another, exulting and dancing in the Wight as it washed over them. They yipped and barked, tossing up patches of snow as they bounded. Hopper was among them, and he leaped into the air, soaring over to Perrin. The Last Hunt begins, Young Bull! Hopper screamed. We live. We live! Perrin turned back to the place where Rand had stood. If that darkn had taken Rand ... But it hadn't. He smiled broadly. "The Last Hunt has come'" he screamed to the wolves. "Let it begin!"

They howled their agreement, as loud as the storm had been just moments before.

CHAPTER 31

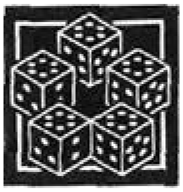

Into the Void

Mat dumped the rest of the wine into his mouth, savoring the sweet, cool taste. He brought the cup down and tossed a handful of five dice. They tumbled to the wooden floor of the tavern, clacking against one another.

The air was thick. Thick with sounds, thick with curses, thick with scents. Smoke, pungent liquors, a steak that had been peppered so much that you could hardly taste the meat. That was probably for the best. Even in Caemlyn, meat spoiled unpredictably.

The pungent men around Mat watched his dice fall: one of the men stank of garlic, another of sweat, a third of a tannery. Their hair was stringy, their fingers were grimy, but their coin was good. The game was called Koronko's Spit, and hailed from Shienar.

Mat did not know the rules.

'Five ones," said the man who stank of garlic. His name was Rittle. He seemed unsettled. "That's a loss."

"No it's not," Mat said softly. Never mind that he did not know the rules. He knew he had won; he could feel it. His luck was with him.

Good thing, too. He needed it tonight.

The man that smelled of a tannery reached for his belt, where he carried a wicked knife. His name was Saddler, and he had a chin that could have been used to sharpen swords. "I thought you said you didn't know this game, friend."

"I don't," Mat said. "Friend. But that's a win. Do we need to ask around the room to see if anyone else can confirm it?"

The three men looked at each other, expressions dark. Mat stood up. The inn had walls dark from years of men smoking pipes inside it, and the windows—though of fine glass—had grown opaque with dirt and smoke. It was a tradition that they never be cleaned. The weathered sign out front had a wagon wheel painted on it, and the official name was The Dusty Wheel. Everyone called it The Rumor Wheel instead; it was the best place in Caemlyn to listen to rumors. Most of them were untrue, but that was half the fun.

Most everyone in the place was drinking ale, but Mat had taken a fancy to good red wine lately. "Want some more, Master Crimson?" Kati, the serving woman, asked. She was a raven-haired beauty with a smile so wide it reached halfway to Cairhien. She had been flirting with him all night. Never mind that he had told her he was married. He had not even smiled at her. Well, not much. And hardly his best smile. Some women could not see the truth of things, even if it was written on their own foreheads, that was a fact.

He waved her away. Only one cup tonight, for courage. Burn him, but he needed a little of that. With resignation, he took the scarf off his neck and dropped it to the side. He untucked the foxhead medallion—Light, but it felt good to be wearing that again!—and hung it out front of his clothing. He wore the new red and silver coat that Thorn had bought him.

Mat took his asbandarei from beside the wall and pulled off the cloth cover, revealing the blade. He set it over his shoulder. "Hey," he said in a loud voice. "Anyone in the bloody place know the rules for Koronko's Spit?"

The three men he had been dicing regarded the weapon; the third of them, Snelle, stood up, hooking his thumbs into the top of his trousers, pushing back his coat and showing the shortsword buckled at his waist.

Most people ignored Mat at first. Conversations rang, stories about the Borderlander army that had passed, about the Queen's pregnancy, about the Dragon Reborn, about mysterious deaths or not so mysterious ones. Everyone had a rumor to share. Some of the inn's occupants wore little better than rags, but some wore the finest of clothing. Nobles, commoners and everything in between came to The Rumor Wheel.

A few men by the bar glanced at Mat because of the outburst. One hesitated, blinking. Mat reached down and took his wide-brimmed black hat off the table beside him, holding it by the crown, then set it on his head. The man nudged his companions. The sweaty, balding man Mat had been dicing with raised fingers to his chin, rubbing it in thought, as if try-ing to remember something.

Snelle smiled at Mat. "Looks like nobody answered you, friend. Guess you'll have to trust us. You shouldn't have thrown if you didn't ask the rules. Now, are you going to pay, or—"

Rittle's eyes opened wide, and he stood hastily and took his friend's arm. He leaned in, whispering something. Snelle looked down at Mat's medallion. He looked up and met Mat's eyes.

Mat nodded.

"Excuse us," Rittle said, stumbling away. The other two joined him. They left their dice and coins on the ground.

Mat casually knelt down, scooping up the coins and dumping them in his pouch. He left the dice. They were loaded, meant to almost always throw threes. He had been able to judge that from a few quick throws before laying down coins.

Whispers moved through the inn's common room like a swarm of ants covering a corpse. Chairs scooted back. Conversations changed tempo, some silencing, others becoming urgent. Mat stood up to go. People hastened out of his way.

Mat left a golden crown on the edge of the bar, then tipped his hat to Hatch, the innkeeper. The man stood behind the bar wiping a glass, his wife next to him. She was a pretty one, but Hatch kept a special cudgel for thumping men who looked too long. Mat gave her only a short look, then.

Mat pulled off his black scarf, leaving it on the floor. It had a hole in it now anyway. He stepped out into the night, and the moment he did, the dice stopped thundering in his head.

It was time to get to work.

He walked out onto the street. He had spent all evening with his face uncovered. He was certain he had been recognized a few times, mostly by men who had slipped out into the night without saying anything. As he walked down off the inn's front porch, people gathered at the windows and doorway.

Mat tried not to feel like all of those eyes were knives sticking into his back. Light, he felt like he was dangling from another noose. He reached up and felt at the scar on his neck. It had been a long while since he had gone about with his neck uncovered. Even with Tylin, he had normally left the scarf on.

Tonight, though, he danced with Jak o' the Shadows. He tied his medallion to the ashandarei. He affixed it so that the medallion rested against

the flat of the blade, and one edge hung out over the tip. It would be hard to use—he would have to hit with the flat of the blade in most cases to touch the medallion to flesh;—but it gave him much better reach than swinging the medallion by hand.

Medallion in place, he picked a direction and began walking. He was in the New City, a place heaped with man-made buildings, a contrast to the fine Ogier work elsewhere in Caemlyn. These buildings were well built, but were narrow and thin, up close next to one another.

The first group tried to kill him before he was one street away from The Rumor Wheel. There were four of them. As they charged him, a group of shadows leaped from a nearby alleyway, Talmanes at their head. Mat spun on the killers, who pulled up short as his soldiers joined him. The street toughs fled in a scramble and Mat nodded to Talmanes.

The men of the Band faded back into the darkness, and Mat continued on his way. He walked slowly, carrying his asbandarei on his shoulder. His men had been told to keep their distance unless he was attacked.

He ended up needing them three more times through the hour, each time scaring away a larger group of thugs. The last time, the Band and he actually clashed with the assassins. The thugs were no match for trained soldiers, even on the darkened streets that were their home. The exchange left five of the thugs dead, but only one of his men wounded. Mat sent Harvell away with a guard of two.

It grew later and later. Mat began to worry that he would have to repeat this act the next night, but then he noticed someone standing in the street ahead. The paving stones were wet from a misting earlier in the night, and they reflected the slivered moon.

Mat stopped, lowering his weapon to his side. He could not make out details about the figure, but the way it stood . . .

"You think to ambush me?" the gholam asked, sounding amused. "With your men who squish and rip, who die so easily, almost at a touch?"

"I'm tired of being chased," Mat said loudly.

"So you deliver yourself to me? What a kind gift."

"Sure," Mat said, lowering his asbandarei, foxhead on the back catching the moonlight. "Just mind the sharp edges."

The thing slid forward, and Mat's men lit lanterns. The men of the Band set the lanterns on the ground, then backed away, a few of them dashing off to deliver messages. They had strict orders not to interfere. Tonight would probably strain their oaths to him on that.

Mat planted himself and waited for the gholam. Only a hero charged a beast like that, and he was no bloody hero. Though his men would be trying to clear away anyone on the streets, trying to keep the area empty so nobody would scare the gholam away. That was not heroism. It might have been stupidity, though.

The gholam's, fluid movements threw lanternlight shadows across the road. Mat met it with a sweep of his ashandarei, but the beast danced to the side, easily evading him. Bloody ashes, but the thing was fast! It reached out, swiping at the front of the ashandarei with the knife it held.

Mat yanked the ashandarei back, not letting the monster cut the medallion free. It danced around Mat, and he spun, staying inside the ring of lanterns. He had chosen a relatively wide street, remembering with a shiver that day in the alleyway of Ebou Dar where the gholam had nearly taken him in close quarters.

The beast slid forward again, and Mat feinted, drawing it in. He almost miscalculated, but twisted the ashandarei in time to slap the gholam with the flat of the weapon. The medallion let out a hiss as it touched the gholam's arm.

The gholam cursed and backed away. Wavering lanternlight illuminated its features, leaving pockets of darkness and pockets of light. It was smiling again, despite the wisp of smoke rising from its arm. Before, Mat had thought this creature's face unremarkable, but in the uneven light—and with that smile—it took on a terrifying cast. More angular, reflected lanternlight making its eyes glow like tiny yellow flames consumed by the darkness of its sockets.

Nondescript by day, a horror by night. This thing had slaughtered Tylin while she lay helpless. Mat gritted his teeth. Then he attacked.

It was a bloody stupid thing to do. The gholam was faster than he was, and Mat had no idea if the foxhead could kill it or not. He attacked anyway. He attacked for Tylin, for the men he'd lost to this horror. He attacked because he had no other option. When you really wanted to see what a man was worth, you backed him into a corner and made him fight for his life.

Mat was in the corner now. Bloodied and harried. He knew this thing would eventually find him—or, worse, find Tuon or Olver. It was the kind or situation where a sensible man would have run. But he was a bloody fool instead. Staying in the city because of an oath to an Aes Sedai? Well, if he died, he would go out with weapon in hand.

Mat became a swirling cyclone of steel and wood, yelling as he attacked. The gholam, seeming shocked, actually backed away. Mat slammed his ashandarei into its hand, burning the flesh, then spun and knocked the dagger from its fingers. The creature leaped away, but Mat lunged forward, ramming the butt of his spear between the thing's legs.

It went down. Its motions were fluid, and it caught itself, but it did go down. As it threw itself to its feet, Mat slashed the ashandarei % blade at its heel. He neatly severed the gholam s tendon, and if the thing had been human, it would have collapsed. Instead, it landed without even a wince of pain, and no blood seeped free of the cut.

It spun and lunged at Mat with clawed fingers. He was forced to stumble back, swinging the ashandarei to ward it away. The creature grinned at him.

Then, oddly, it turned and ran.

Mat cursed. Had something scared it away? But no, it was not fleeing It was going for his men!

"Retreat!" Mat called at them. "Back! Burn you, you bloody monster. I'm here! Fight me!"

The members of the Band scattered at his orders, though Talmanes hung back, wearing a grim expression. The gholam laughed, but did not chase down the soldiers. Instead, the thing kicked over the first lantern, causing it to wink out. It ran around the circle, kicking at each one, plunging the street into darkness.

Bloody ashes! Mat chased after the creature. If it managed to get all of those lights out, with that cloud cover, Mat would be left fighting it unable to see!

Talmanes—blatantly ignoring his own safety—leaped forward and snatched his lantern up to protect it. He fled down the street, and Mat cursed as the gholam chased after.

Mat dashed behind them. Talmanes had a good lead, but the gholam was so quick. It nearly got to him, and Talmanes jerked to the side, backing up the steps of a nearby building. The monster lunged for him, and Talmanes stumbled backward as Mat ran toward them for all he was worth.

The lantern fell from Talmanes' fingers and splashed oil across the front of the building. The dry wood came alight, tongues of flame rippling across the lamp oil, illuminating the gholam. It leaped for Talmanes.

Mat threw his ashandarei.

The broad-bladed spear was not meant for throwing, but he did not have a knife handy. He aimed for the gholairis head. One would have never known that, for he missed pitifully. Fortunately, the weapon dipped down and passed between the gholam's legs.

The monster tripped, thudding heavily to the paving stones. Talmanes scrambled back up the steps of the now-blazing building.

Bless this luck of mine, Mat thought.

The gholam stood up and made a motion to follow Talmanes, but then looked down at what had tripped it. The creature looked at Mat with a wicked grin, half its face cast in the light of the burning building. The creature picked up Mat's ashandarei—foxhead medallion still tied to the front—then whipped its hand to the side, tossing the weapon away. The ashandarei

crashed through a window and passed into the burning building. Lamps sparked on inside, as if those living there were only now notic-ing the fight happening in their proximity. Talmanes gave Mat a look, and they met eyes. The Cairhienin man threw himself against the door into the burning building and broke in. The gholam spun on Mat, backlit by the growing flames. They blazed quickly, and Mat's heart thumped with alarm as the creature came for him, unnaturally fast. Mat reached into his coat pockets with sweaty fingers. Right before the gholam reached him—hands going for Mat's neck—Mat pulled something out with each hand, slamming them forward into the gholam's palms. Hissing rang in the air, like meat being placed on a grill, and the gholam screeched in pain. It stumbled, wide-eyed, as it looked at Mat.

Who held a foxhead medallion in each hand.

He whipped them out, each held on a long, thick chain, spinning them. The medallions caught firelight, seeming to glow as Mat whipped them at the gholam, striking it on the arm.

The creature howled, backing up another step. "How?" it demanded. "How!"

"Don't rightly know myself." Elayne had said her copies weren't perfect, but it seemed they did the job well enough. So long as they hurt the gholam, he didn't care about their other abilities. Mat grinned, spinning the second medallion forward. "Guess I just got lucky."

The gholam glared at him, then stumbled up the steps toward the burning building. It dashed inside, perhaps deciding to flee. Mat was not about to let it escape, not this time. He charged it up the steps and ducked through the flaming doorway, reaching out a hand as Talmanes tossed his ashandarei to him from a side hallway.

Mat caught the weapon, leaving the medallions wrapped around his forearms. The gholam spun on him; the hallway was already burning, the heat from the sides and above oppressive. Smoke lined the ceiling. Talmanes coughed, a kerchief held to his face.

The gholam turned on Mat, snarling and attacking. Mat met the beast in the middle of the wide hallway, bringing up his ashandarei to block the gholam'?, clawlike hands. The butt of Mat's ashandarei had been singed from sitting in the fire, and the wood smoldered at the end. It left a trail of smoke in the air.

He attacked for all he was worth, spinning the ashandarei, the back end leaving a whirl of smoke around him. The gholam tried to strike at him, but Mat dropped the ashandarei with one hand and flung one of the medallions like a knife, hitting the creature in the face. It howled and stumbled back, face burned and smoking. Mat stepped forward, slamming the end of the ashandarei against the medallion as it hit the floor, flipping it back up and hitting the creature again.

He pushed forward, slashing with the ashandarei, and several of the creature's fingers flew free. Sure, it did not bleed and did not seem to feel pain from ordinary wounds, but that would slow it a bit. The gholam recovered, hissing, eyes wide with anger. Its smile was gone now. It leaped forward in a blur, but Mat spun and sliced down the creature's tan shirt, exposing its chest. Then he whipped the second medallion to the side, hitting the gholam as it clawed at his arm, slicing the skin and spraying blood across the wall.

Mat grunted. The gholam howled and stumbled back, farther down the burning hallway. Mat was sweating from the heat, from the exertion. Mat could not fight this creature. Not for long. That did not matter. He pushed forward, letting his ashandarei become a blur. He slapped the flat of it—with the medallion—against the gholam. When the beast recovered, he flung the second medallion at its face, making it duck. But then he kicked the third one up to hit it on the neck. He left lines of smoke in the air as he spun the ashandarei, grabbing it in two hands again. The end of his weapon glowed and smoldered. He found himself yelling in the Old Tongue.

"Al dival, al kiserai, al mashi!" For light, glory, and love!

The gholam stepped back, snarling at the barrage. It looked over its shoulder, seeming to notice something behind, but Mat's attack drew its attention back.

"Tai'daishar!" True Blood of Battle!

Mat forced the creature toward an open doorway at the back of the hallway. The room beyond was entirely dark. No light of the fires reflected off walls there.

"Carai manshimaya Tylin. Carai an manshimaya Nalesean. Carai an man-shimaya ayend'an!" Honor of my blade for Tylin. Honor of my blade for Nalesean. Honor of my blade for the fallen.

The call of vengeance.

The gholam backed into the darkened room, stepping onto a bone white floor, eyes flickering down.

Taking a deep breath, Mat leaped through the doorway with a final

burst of strength and slammed the smoldering butt of his ashandarei into the side of the creature's head. A spray of sparks and ash exploded around its face. The creature cursed and stumbled to the right.

And there, it nearly stepped off the edge of a platform hanging above an expansive void. The gholam hissed in anger, hanging with one leg over the void, flailing to keep its balance.

From this side, the doorway into the room was ringed by a glowing white light—the edges of a gateway made for Skimming. "I don't know if vou can die," Mat said softly. "I hope to the Light that you can't." He raised a boot and slammed it into the thing's back, throwing it off the platform into the darkness. It fell, twisting in the air, looking up at him with a horror.

"I hope you can't die," Mat said, "because I'm going to enjoy the thought of you falling through that blackness forever, you misbegotten son of a goat's droppings." Mat spit over the side, sending a bit of bloody spittle down, plummeting after the gholam. Both disappeared into the blackness below.

Sumeko walked up beside him. The stout Kinswoman had long dark hair and the air of a woman who did not like being ordered about. Nearly every woman had that same air. She'd been standing just inside the gateway, to the side where she would be unseen from the hallway. She had to be there to maintain the white platform, which was in the shape of a large book. She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Thanks for the gateway," Mat said, shouldering his ashandarei, the butt still trailing a thin line of smoke. She'd made the gateway from inside the palace, using it to travel to this point and open the gateway in the hallway. They'd hoped that would keep the gholam from feeling her channel, as she'd made the weaves in the palace.

Sumeko sniffed. Together, the two walked out through the gateway and into the building. Several of the Band were hurriedly putting out the fire. Talmanes rushed up to Mat as the gateway vanished, accompanied by another of the Kinswomen, Julanya.

"You sure that darkness goes on forever?" Mat asked. Julanya was a plump, pretty woman who would have fit nicely on Mat's knee. The white in her hair did not detract from her prettiness at all.

"Near as we can tell, it does," Sumeko said. "This was quite nearly bungled, Matrim Cauthon. The thing didn't seem surprised by the gateway. I think it sensed it anyway."

'Still managed to fight it off the platform," Mat said.

"Barely. You should have let us deal with the beast." Wouldn't have worked," Mat said, taking a wetted kerchief from Talmanes. Sumeko glanced at his arm, but Mat didn't ask for Healing. That

cut would heal right nicely. Might even have a good scar. Scars impressed most women, so long as they were not on the face. What did Tuon think of them?

Sumeko sniffed. "The pride of men. Do not forget that we lost some of our own to that thing."

"And I'm glad I could help you get revenge," Mat Said. He smiled at her, though she was right, it had nearly been bungled. He was certain the gholam had felt the Kinswoman beyond that doorway as they approached Fortunately, though, the thing hadn't seemed to consider woman who could channel to be a threat.

Talmanes handed Mat back the two fallen medallions. He tucked them away and untied the one on his ashandarei, slipping it back onto his neck. The Kin watched those medallions with a predatory hunger. Well they could do that all they wanted. He intended one for Olver and the other for Tuon, once he could find her.

Captain Guybon, Birgitte's second-in-command, walked into the building. "The beast is dead?"

"No," Mat said, "but close enough for a Crown contract."

"Crown contract?" Guybon asked, frowning. "You asked the Queen's aid on this endeavor. This wasn't done on her contract."

"Actually," Talmanes said, clearing his throat, "we just rid the city of a murderer who has taken, at last count, nearly a dozen of her citizens. We're entitled to combat pay, I surmise." He said it with a completely straight face. Bless the man.

"Bloody right," Mat said. Stopping the gholam and getting paid for it. That sounded like a sunny day for a change. He tossed his kerchief to Guybon and walked away, leaving behind the Kinswomen who folded their arms and watched with displeasure. Why was it a woman could look angry with a man even when he had done exactly what he had said he would, risking his neck even?

"Sorry about the fire, Mat," Talmanes said. "Didn't mean to drop the lantern like that. I know I was just supposed to lead him into the building."

"Worked out fine," Mat said, inspecting the butt of his ashandarei. The damage was minor.

They had not known where—or if—the gholam would attack him, but Guybon had done his job well, getting everyone out of the nearby buildings, then picking a hallway that the Kinswoman would make the gateway into. He'd sent a member of the Band to tell Talmanes where to go.

Well, Elayne and Birgitte's idea with the gateway had worked out, even if it hadn't been the way they'd planned. It was still better than what Mat

had been able to come with; his only idea bad been to try to stuff one of those medallions down the gholam's throat.

"Let's collect Setalle and Olver from their inn," Mat said, "and get back to camp. Excitement's over for now. About bloody time."

CHAPTER 32

A Storm of Light

The city of Maradon burned. Violent, twisting columns of smoke rose from dozens of buildings. The careful city planning kept the fires from spreading too quickly, but did not stop them entirely. Human beings and tinder. They went together.

Ituralde crouched inside a broken building, rubble to his left, a small band of Saldaeans to his right. He'd abandoned the palace early on; it had been swarmed with Shadowspawn. He'd left it packed with all the oil they'd been able to find, then had the Asha'man set it aflame, killing hundreds of Trollocs and Fades trapped inside.

He glanced out the window of his current hiding place. He could have sworn he'd seen a patch of bare sky out the window, but the ash and smoky haze in the air made it difficult to tell. A building nearby burned so intensely that he could feel the heat through the stone.

He used the smoke and the fire. Almost everything on a battlefield could be an advantage. In this case, once Yoeli had accepted that the city was lost, they'd stopped defending it. Now they used the city as a killing ground.

The streets created a maze that Ituralde—with the help of the Saldaeans—knew and his enemies did not. Every rooftop was a ridge to give high ground, every alley a secret escape route, every open square a potential trap.

The Trollocs and their commanders had made a mistake. They assumed that Ituralde cared about protecting the city. They mistook him. All he cared about now was doing as much damage to them as possible. So, he used their assumptions against him. Yes, their army was large. But any man who had ever tried to kill rats knew that the size of his hammer didn't matter so long as the rats knew how to hide.

A hesitant group of the creatures shuffled down the blackened street outside Ituralde's building. The Trollocs snapped and hooted warily at one another. Some sniffed at the air, but the smoke ruined their sense of smell.

They completely missed Ituralde and his small band, just inside the building.

Hoofbeats rang on the other end of the street. The Trollocs began to shout, arid a group hurried to the front, setting wickedly barbed spears down with the butts against the cobbles. Charging that would be death for cavalry. The Trollocs were learning to be more careful.

But they weren't learning well enough. The cavalry came into view, revealing one man leading a group of wounded and exhausted horses. A distraction.

"Now," Ituralde said. The archers around him sprang up and began shooting out the windows at the Trollocs. Many died; others spun and charged.

And from a side street a cavalry charge—the horses' hooves covered with rags to dampen sound—galloped out, their approach covered by the louder hooves of the diversionary horses. The Saldaeans ripped through the Trollocs, trampling and killing.

The archers whooped and took out swords and axes to finish off the wounded Trollocs. No Fade with this group, bless the Light. Ituralde stood up, a wet handkerchief to his face against the smoke. His weariness—once buried deep—was slowly resurfacing. He was worried that when it hit him, he'd drop unconscious. Bad for morale, that.

No, he thought, hiding in the smoke while your home burns, knowing that the Trollocs are slowly penning you in . . . that's bad for morale.

His men finished off the fist of Trollocs, then hastened to another pre-decided building that they could hide in. Ituralde had about thirty archers and a company of cavalry, which he moved among five independent bands of irregular fighters similar to this one. He waved his men back into hiding while his scouts brought him information. Even with the scouts, it was difficult to get a good read on the large city. He had vague ideas of where the strongest resistance was, and sent what orders he could, but the battle was spread over too large an area for him to be able to coordinate the fighting effectively. He hoped Yoeli was well.

The Ashaman were gone, escaping at his order through the tiny gateway-only large enough to crawl through—that Antail had made. Since they'd gone—it was hours ago now—there had been no sign of whatever "rescuers" were supposedly coming. Before the Ashaman left, he'd sent a scout through a gateway to that ridge where the Lastriders had been said to watch. All that the scout found was an empty camp, the fire burning unattended.

Ituralde joined his men inside the new hiding place, leaving his handkerchief—now stained with soot—on the doorknob to give the scouts a clue to his location. Once inside, he froze, hearing something outside.

"Hush," he said to the men. They stilled their clinking armor.

Footfalls. Many of them. That was a Trolloc band for certain; his men had orders to move silently. He nodded to his soldiers, holding up six fingers. Plan number six. They'd hide, waiting, hoping the creatures would pass them by. If they didn't—if they delayed, or started searching the nearby buildings—his team would burst out and broadside them.

It was the riskiest of the plans. His men were exhausted and the cavalry had been sent to another of his group of defenders. But better to attack than be discovered or surrounded.

Ituralde sidled up to the window, waiting, listening, breathing shallowly. Light, but he was tired. The group marched around the corner outside, footfalls in unison. That was odd. Trollocs didn't march so regularly.

"My Lord," one of his men whispered. "There aren't any hooves."

Ituralde froze. The man was right. His tiredness was making him stupid. That's an army of hundreds, he thought. He got to his feet, coughing despite himself, and pushed open the door. He stepped outside.

A gust of wind blew down the street as Ituralde s men piled out behind him. The wind cleared the smoke for a moment, revealing a large troop of infantry kitted out in silvery armor and carrying pikes. They seemed ghosts for a moment—glowing in a phantom golden light from above, a sun he had not seen in months.

The newcomers began to call as they saw him and his men, and two of their officers charged up to him. They were Saldaean. "Where is your commander?" one asked. "The man Rodel Ituralde?"

"I. . ." Ituralde found himself coughing. "I am he. Who are you?"

"Bless the Light," one of the men said, turning back to the others. "Pass the word to Lord Bashere! We've found him!"

Ituralde blinked. He looked back at his filthy men, faces blackened with soot. More than a few had an arm in a sling. He'd started with two

hundred. Now there were fifty. They should be celebrating, but most of them sat down on the ground, closing their eyes.

Ituralde found himself laughing. "Now? The Dragon sends help now?" He stumbled, then sat down, staring up at the burning sky. He was laughing, and he could not stop. Soon tears began streaking down his cheeks.

Yes, there was sunlight up there.

Ituralde had regained some composure by the time the troops led him into a well-defended sector of the city. The smoke here was much less thick. Supposedly, alThor's troops—led by Davram Bashere—had reclaimed most of Maradon. What was left of it. They'd been putting out the fires.

It was so odd to see troops with shiny armor, neat uniforms, clean faces. They'd swept in with large numbers of Asha'man and Aes Sedai, and an army that—for now—had been enough to drive the Shadowspawn back to the hillside fortifications above the river. Al'Thor's men led him to a tall building inside the city. With the palace burned out, mostly destroyed, it looked like they'd picked this building as a command center.

Ituralde had been fighting a draining war for weeks now. Al'Thor's troops seemed almost too clean. His men had been dying while these men washed and slept and dined on hot food?

Stop it, he told himself, entering the building. It was far too easy to blame others when a battle went wrong. It wasn't the fault of these men that their lives had been easier than his recently.

He labored up the stairs, wishing they'd let him be. A good night's sleep, a wash, and then he could meet with Bashere. But no, that wouldn't do. The battle wasn't over, and al'Thor's men would need information. It was just that his mind was failing him, working very slowly.

He reached the top floor and followed Bashere's soldiers into a room to the right. Bashere stood there, wearing a burnished breastplate without the matching helmet, hands clasped behind his back as he looked out the window. He wore one of those overly large Saldaean mustaches and a pair of olive trousers stuffed into knee-high boots.

Bashere turned and started. "Light! You look like death itself, man!" He turned to the soldiers. "He should be in the Healer's tent! Someone fetch an Asha'man!"

'I'm all right," Ituralde said, forcing sternness into his voice. "I look worse than I feel, I'd warrant."

The soldiers hesitated, looking to Bashere. "Well," the man said, "at least get him a chair and something to wipe his face with. You poor fellow; we should have been here days ago."

Outside, Ituralde could hear the sounds of distant battle. Bashere had chosen a tall building, one from which he could survey the fighting. The soldiers brought a chair, and—for all his wish to show a strong face to a fellow general—Ituralde sat with a sigh.

He looked down, and was amazed to see how dirty his hands were as though he'd been cleaning a hearth. No doubt his face was soot-covered, streaked with sweat, and there was likely still dried blood on it. His clothing was ragged from the blast that had destroyed the wall, not to mention a hastily bandaged cut on his arm.

"Your defense of this city was nothing short of stunning, Lord Ituralde," Bashere said. There was a formality to his tone—Saldaea and Arad Doman were not enemies, but two strong nations could not share a border without periods of animosity. "The number of Trollocs dead compared to the number of men you had . . . and with a gap that large in the wall . . . Let me say that I'm impressed." Bashere's tone implied that such praise was not easily given.

"What of Yoeli?" Ituralde asked.

Bashere's expression grew grim. "My men found a small band defending his corpse. He died bravely, though I was surprised to find him in command and Torkumen—a distant cousin of mine, the presumed leader of the city—locked in his rooms, and abandoned, where the Trollocs could have gotten him."

"Yoeli was a good man," Ituralde said stiffly. "Among the bravest I've had the honor of knowing. He saved my life, brought my men into the city against Torkumen's orders. It's a burning shame to lose him. A burning shame. Without Yoeli, Maradon wouldn't stand right now."

"It hardly stands anyway," Bashere said somberly.

Ituralde hesitated. He's uncle to the Queen—this city is probably his home.

The two looked at one another, like old wolves, leaders of rival packs. Stepping softly. "I'm sorry for your loss," Ituralde said.

"The city stands as well as it does," Bashere said, "because of you. I'm not angry, man. I'm saddened, but not angry. And I'll take your word on Yoeli. To be frank, I've never liked Torkumen. For now, I've left him in the room where we found him—still alive, thankfully—though I'll hear thunder from the Queen for what's been done to him. She's always been fond of him. Bah! She normally has better judgment."

Bashere nodded to the side when he spoke of Torkumen, and—with a start—Ituralde realized that he recognized this building. This was Torkumen's home, where Yoeli had brought Ituralde on his first day in the city. It made sense to choose this building as a command post—it was close enough to the northern wall to have a good view of the outside, but far enough away from the blast to have survived, unlike the Council Hall.

Well, it would have served Torkumen right if the Trollocs had gotten him. Ituralde sat back, closing his eyes, as Bashere consulted with his officers. Bashere was capable, that much was obvious. Very quickly he'd swept the city clean; once the Trollocs had realized that there was a larger force to fight, they'd abandoned the city. Ituralde could feel pride that, in part, his tenacity was what had made them so quick to run.

Ituralde continued to listen. Most of Bashere's troops had come into the city through gateways, after sending in one scout to find safe places to make them. Fighting in the streets wouldn't work for him as it had Ituralde; the hit-and-hide tactic had been devoted to doing as much damage as possible before getting killed. It was a losing tactic.

The Trollocs had pulled back into the fortifications, but they wouldn't stay there for long. As he sat with closed eyes, struggling to stay awake, Ituralde heard Bashere and his captains come to the same dire conclusion Ituralde had. Maradon was lost. The Shadowspawn would wait for night, then swarm in again.

After all this, they'd just flee? After Yoeli had died holding the city? After Rajabi had been killed by a Draghkar? After Ankaer and Rossin had fallen during the skirmishes inside the walls? After all the bloodshed, they finally saw help arrive, only to have it prove insufficient?

"Perhaps we could push them off that hilltop," one of Bashere's men said. "Clean out the fortifications."

He didn't sound very optimistic.

"Son," Ituralde said, forcing his eyes open, "I held that hill for weeks against a superior force. Your people built it up well, and the problem with well-built fortifications is that your enemy can turn them against you. You'll lose men attacking there. A lot of them."

The room fell silent. We leave, then," Bashere said. "Naeff, we'll need gateways."

'Yes, Lord Bashere." Square-faced and lean of build, the man wore the black coat and the Dragon pin of an Asha'man.

Malain, gather the cavalry and organize them outside; make it look as if we're going to try an assault against their fortifications. That'll keep them eager and waiting. We'll evacuate the wounded, then we'll have the cavalry charge in the other direction into—"

"By the Light and my hope for rebirth!" a voice suddenly exclaimed.

Everyone in the room turned in shock; that wasn't the sort of oath you heard every day.

A young soldier stood by the window, looking out with a looking glass. Bashere cursed, and hurried to the window, the others crowding around, several taking out looking glasses.

What now? Ituralde thought, standing despite his fatigue and hurrying over. What could they possibly have come up with? More Draghkar? Darkhounds?

He peered out the window, and someone handed him a looking glass. He raised it, and as he'd guessed, the building was on enough of a rise to ' look out over the city wall and onto the killing field outside and the beyond. The tower positions on the crest of the hill were clustered with ra-' vens. Through the glass, he could see Trollocs clogging the heights, holding the upper camp, the towers, and the bulwarks there.

Beyond the hill, surging down through the pass, was an awesome force of Trollocs, many times the number that had assaulted Maradon. The wave of monsters seemed to continue on forever,

"We need to go," Bashere said, lowering his looking glass. "Immediately."

"Light!" Ituralde whispered. "If that force gets past us, there won't be anything in Saldaea, Andor, or Arad Doman that can stop it. Please tell me the Lord Dragon made peace with the Seanchan, as he promised?"

"In that," a quiet voice said from behind, "as in so many other things, I have failed."

Ituralde spun, lowering his looking glass. A tall man with reddish hair stepped into the room—a man whom Ituralde felt he had never met before, despite the familiar features.

Rand al'Thor had changed.

The Dragon Reborn had that same self-confidence, that same straight back, that same attitude expecting obedience. And yet, at the same time, everything seemed different. The way he stood, no longer faintly suspicious. The way he studied Ituralde with concern.

Those eyes, cold and emotionless, had once convinced Ituralde to follow this man. Those eyes had changed, too. Ituralde had not noted wisdom in them before.

Don't be a thickheaded fool, Ituralde thought, you can't tell if a man is wise by looking at his eyes.

And yet he could.

"Rodel Ituralde," al'Thor said, stepping forward and laying a hand on Ituralde s arm. "I left you and your men stranded and overwhelmed. Please forgive me."

"I made this choice myself," Ituralde said. Oddly, he felt less tired than he had just moments ago.

"I have inspected your men," al'Thor said. "There are so few left, and they are broken and battered. How did you hold this city? What you have done is a miracle."

"I do what needs to be done."

"You must have lost many friends."

"I. . . Yes." What other answer was there? To dismiss it as nothing would be to dishonor them. "Wakeda fell today. Rajabi . . . well, a Draghkar got him. Ankaer. He lasted until this afternoon. Never did find out why that trumpeter sounded early. Rossin was looking into it. He's dead,

too."

"We need to get out of the city," Bashere said, his voice urgent. "I'm

sorry, man. Maradon is lost."

"No," al'Thor said softly. "The Shadow will not have this city. Not after what these men did to hold it. I will not allow it."

"An honorable sentiment," Bashere said, "but we don't . . ." He trailed off as al'Thor looked at him.

Those eyes. So intense. They seemed almost alight. "They will not take this city, Bashere," al'Thor said, an edge of anger entering his quiet voice. He waved to the side, and a gateway split the air. The sounds of drums and Trollocs yelling grew closer, suddenly. "I'm tired of letting him hurt my people. Pull your soldiers back."

With that, al'Thor stepped through the gateway. A pair of Aiel Maidens hurried into the room, and he left the gateway open long enough for them to leap through behind him. Then he let it vanish.

Bashere looked stunned, mouth half-open. "Curse that man!" he finally said, turning to the window again. "I thought he wasn't going to do this sort of thing any longer!"

Ituralde joined Bashere, raising his looking glass, looking out through the enormous gap in the wall. Outside, al'Thor was crossing the trampled ground, wearing his brown cloak and followed by the two Maidens.

Ituralde thought he could hear the sounds of the howling Trollocs. Their drums beat. They saw three people alone.

The Trollocs surged forward, charging across the ground. Hundreds, Thousands. Ituralde gasped. Bashere uttered a quiet prayer.

Al'Thor raised one hand, then thrust it—palm forward—toward the tide of Shadowspawn.

And they started to die.

It began with waves of fire, much like the ones Asha'man used. Only these were far larger. The flames burned terrible swaths of death through the Trollocs. They followed the course of the land, seeping up the hill and down into the trenches, filling them with white-hot fire, searing and destroying.

Clouds of Draghkar spun in the sky, diving for al'Thor. The air above him turned blue, and shards of ice exploded outward, spraying the air like arrows from the bows of an entire banner of archers. The beasts shrieked their inhuman agony, carcasses tumbling to the ground.

Light and Power exploded from the Dragon Reborn. He was like an entire army of channelers. Thousands of Shadowspawn died. Deathgates sprang up, striking across the ground, killing hundreds.

The Asha'man Naeff—standing beside Bashere—gasped. "I've never seen so many weaves at once," he whispered. "I can't track them all. He's a storm. A storm of Light and streams of Power!"

Clouds began to form and swirl above the city. The wind picked up, howling, and lightning struck from above. Blasts of thunder overpowered the sounds of drums as Trollocs tried in vain to get to al'Thor, climbing over the burning carcasses of their brethren. The swirling white clouds crashed into the black, boiling tempest, intermingling. Wind spun around al'Thor, whipping at his cloak.

The man himself seemed to be glowing. Was it the reflection of the swaths of fire, or perhaps the lightning blasts? Al'Thor seemed brighter than them all, his hand upraised against the Shadowspawn. His Maidens hunched near the ground on either side of him, eyes forward, shoulders set against the great wind.

Clouds spinning about one another made funnels into the masses of Trollocs, sweeping across the top of the hill, taking up the creatures into the air. Great waterspouts rose behind, made of flesh and fire. The beasts rained down, falling upon the others. Ituralde watched with awe, the hair on his arms and head rising. There was an energy to the very air itself.

A scream came from nearby. Within the building, in one of the nearby rooms. Ituralde did not turn away from the window. He had to watch this beautiful, terrible moment of destruction and Power.

Waves of Trollocs broke, the drums faltering. Entire legions of them turned and fled, stumbling up the hillside and over one another, fleeing back toward the Blight. Some remained firm—too angry, too intimidated by those driving them, or too stupid to flee. The tempest of destruction seemed to come to a peak, flashes of light blasting down in time with howling wind, thrumming waves of burning flame, tinkling shards of ice.

It was a masterwork. A terrible, destructive, wonderful masterwork. Al'Thor lifted his hand toward the sky. The winds grew faster, the lightning

strikes larger, the fires hotter. Trollocs screamed, moaned, howled. Ituralde found himself trembling.

Al'Thor closed his hand into a fist, and it all ended.

The last of the wind-seized Trollocs dropped from the sky like leaves abandoned by a passing breeze. Everything fell silent. The flames died, the black and white clouds cleared and opened to a blue sky.

Al'Thor lowered his hand. The field before him was piled with carcasses atop carcasses. Tens of thousands of dead Trollocs smoldering. Directly before al'Thor, a pile a hundred paces wide formed a ridge five feet tall a mound of dead that had nearly reached him.

How long had it taken? Ituralde found that he could not gauge the time, though looking at the sun, at least an hour had passed. Perhaps more. It had seemed like seconds.

Al'Thor turned to walk away. The Maidens rose on shaky feet, stumbling after him.

"What was that scream?" Naeff asked. "The one nearby, in the building. Did you hear it?"

Ituralde frowned. What had that been? He crossed the room, the others—including several of Bashere's officers—following. Many others stayed in the room, however, staring out at the field that had been cleansed by ice and by fire. It was odd, but Ituralde hadn't been able to spot a single fallen tower atop the hill. It was as if al'Thor's attacks had somehow affected only the Shadowspawn. Could a man really be that precise?

The hallway outside was empty, but Ituralde had a suspicion now of where the scream had come from. He walked to Lord Torkumen's door; Bashere unlocked it, and they went inside.

It seemed empty. Ituralde felt a spike of fear. Had the man escaped? He pulled out his sword.

No. A figure was huddled in the corner beside the bed, fine clothing wrinkled, doublet stained with blood. Ituralde lowered his sword. Lord Torkumen's eyes were gone. He appeared to have put them out with a writing quill; the bloodied implement lay on the ground beside him.

The window was broken. Bashere glanced out it. "Lady Torkumen is down there."

"She jumped," Torkumen whispered, clawing at his eye sockets, fingers covered with blood. He sounded dazed. "That light . . . That terrible light: Ituralde glanced at Bashere. "I cannot watch it," Torkumen muttered. "I cannot! Great Lord, where

is your protection? Where are your armies to rend, your swords to strike? That Light eats at my mind, like rats feasting on a corpse. It burns at my thoughts. It killed me. That light killed me."

"He's gone mad," Bashere said grimly, kneeling down beside the man. "Better than he deserved, judging by those ramblings. Light! My own cousin a Darkfriend. And in control of the city!"

"What is he talking about?" one of Bashere's men said. "A light? Surely he couldn't have seen the battle. None of these windows face the right way."

"I'm not sure he was talking about the battle, Vogeler," Bashere said. "Come on. I suspect the Lord Dragon is going to be tired. I want to see that he's cared for."

This is it, Min thought, tapping the page. She sat on her windowsill in the Stone of Tear, enjoying the breeze. Trying not to think of Rand. He wasn't hurt, but his emotions were so strong. Anger. She'd hoped he wouldn't be so angry ever again.

She shook off the worrying; she had work to do. Was she following the wrong thread? Was she interpreting in the wrong way? She read the line again. Light is held before the maw of the infinite void, and all that he is can be seized.

Her speculation cut off as she saw a light appear from the room across the hall. She dropped her book and leaped down to the floor. Rand was suddenly close. She could feel it through the bond.

Two Maidens guarded the room across the hall, mostly to prevent people from wandering in and getting hurt by gateways. The one that had opened now led to a place that smelled of smoke. Rand stumbled through. Min ran to him. He looked exhausted, eyes red, face wan. He leaned against her with a sigh, letting her help him to a chair.

"What happened?" Min demanded of Evasni, the Maiden who came through next. She was a lanky woman with dark red hair, cut short with a tail in the back like that of most Maidens.

"The Car'a'carn is well," the woman said. "Though he is like a youth who ran one more lap around the camp than everyone else, only to prove that he could."

"He gained much ji today," Ifeyina—the other Maiden—said, almost in argument. Her voice was solemn.

Rand sighed, settling back in the chair. Bashere followed out of the gateway, boots hitting stone. Min heard calls from down below—a group of wounded soldiers being brought through a larger gateway. The Stone's courtyards were alive with activity, Aes Sedai Healers running to care for the bloodied, sooty men.

After Bashere came a lean Domani man in his middle years. Rodel Iturralde. He looked much the worse for wear, with dried blood on his filthy face his clothing ripped, and bearing a clumsy bandage on his arm. Rand had no visible wounds. His clothing was clean, though he insisted on still wearing that aged brown cloak. But Light, he looked tired.

"Rand," Min said, kneeling down. "Rand, are you all right?"

"I grew angry," Rand said softly. "I had thought myself beyond that."

She felt a chill.

"It was not a terrible anger, like before," Rand said. "It was not the anger of destruction, though I did destroy. In Maradon, I saw what had been done to men who followed me. I saw Light in them, Min. Defying the Dark One no matter the length of his shadow. We will live, that defiance said. We will love and we will hope.

"And I saw him trying so hard to destroy that. He knows that if he could break them, it would mean something. Something much more than Maradon. Breaking the spirit of men ... he thirsts for that. He struck far harder than he otherwise would have because he wanted to break my spirit." His voice grew softer and he opened his eyes, looking down at her. "And so I stood against him."

"What you did was amazing," Bashere said, standing beside Min with his arms folded. "But did you let him drive you to it?"

Rand shook his head. "I have a right to my anger, Bashere. Don't you see? Before, I tried to hold it all hidden within. That was wrong. I must feel. I must hurt for the pains, the deaths, the losses of these people. I have to cling to these things so I know why I am fighting. There are times when I need the void, but that does not make my anger any less a part of me."

He seemed to be growing more confident with each word, and Min nodded.

"Well, you saved the city," Bashere said.

"Not soon enough," Rand said. Min could feel his sorrow. "And my actions today may still have been a mistake."

Min frowned. "Why?"

It came too close to a confrontation between us," Rand said. "That must happen at Shayol Ghul, and at the right time. I cannot afford to let him provoke me. Bashere is right. Nor can I afford to let the men assume that I will always be able to step in and save them."

Perhaps," Bashere said. "But what you did today . . ."

Rand shook his head. "I am not to fight this war, Bashere. Today's

battle exhausted me beyond what I should have allowed. If my enemies were to come upon me now, I'd be finished. Besides, I can only fight in one place at a time. What is coming will be grander than that, grander and more terrible than any one man could hope to hold back. I will organize you, but I must leave you. The war will be yours."

He fell silent, and Flinn stepped through the gateway, letting it slid closed.

"I must rest now," Rand said softly. "Tomorrow I meet with your niece and the other Borderlanders, Bashere. I know not what they will require of me, but they must return to their posts. If Saldaea was in such a state with one of the great captains leading the defense, I can only guess what the other Borderland nations are suffering."

Min helped him to his feet. "Rand," she said softly. "Cadsuane returned, and she had someone with her."

He hesitated. "Take me to her."

Min winced. "I shouldn't have mentioned it. You should rest."

"I will," he said. "Don't worry."

She could still sense his exhaustion. But she didn't argue. They walked from the room. "Rodel Ituralde," Rand said, pausing by the doorway. "You will wish to accompany me. I cannot repay you for the honor you have shown, but I do have something I can give."

The grizzled Domani nodded, following. Min helped Rand down the corridor, worrying about him. Did he have to push himself this hard?

Unfortunately, he does. Rand al'Thor was the Dragon Reborn. He'd be bled dry, ground down, used up before this was through. It was almost enough to make a woman stop trying.

"Rand . . ." she said, Ituralde and several Maidens trailing them. Fortunately, Cadsuane s room wasn't far.

"I will be all right," he said. "I promise. Have you news of your studies?" He was trying to distract her.

Unfortunately, that question just sent her to another worry. "Have you ever wondered why Cailandor is so often called a 'fearful blade' or 'the blade of ruin' in the prophecies?"

"It's such a powerful sa'angreal," he said. "Maybe it's because of the destruction it can cause?"

"Maybe," she said.

"You think it's something else."

"There's a phrase," Min said, "in the Jendai Prophecy. I wish we knew more of them. Anyway, it says 'and the Blade will bind him by twain."

"Two women," Rand said. "I need to be in a circle with two women to control it."

She grimaced.

"What?" Rand said. "You might as well be out with it, Min. I need to know.

"There's another phrase, from The Karaethon Cycle. Anyway, I think

hat Callandor might be flawed beyond that. I think it might . . . Rand, I think it might make you weak, open you to attack, if you use it."

"Perhaps that's how I'll be killed, then."

"You aren't going to be killed," Min said.

"I—"

"You'll live through this, sheepherder," she insisted. "I'm going to see that you do."

He smiled at her. He looked so tired. "I almost believe that you'll do it, Min. Perhaps I'm not the one the Pattern bends around, but you." He turned, then knocked on a door in the hallway.

It cracked, Merise peeking out. She looked Rand up and down. "You seem as if you can barely stand on your own feet, al'Thor."

"True indeed," he replied. "Is Cadsuane Sedai here?"

"She has done as you asked," Merise replied. "And, I might say, she's been very accommodating, considering how you—"

"Let him in, Merise," Cadsuane's voice said from inside.

Merise hesitated, then gave Rand a glare as she pulled the door open all the way. Cadsuane sat in a chair, speaking with an older man whose long, gray hair fell loose to his shoulders. He had a large beak of a nose and regal clothing.

Rand stepped to the side. Behind them, someone gasped. Rodel Ituralde stepped up to the doorway, seeming stunned, and the man in the room turned. He had kindly eyes and coppery skin.

My liege," Ituralde cried, hastening forward, then going down on one knee. "You live!"

Min felt an overwhelming sense of happiness from Rand. Ituralde, it appeared, was weeping. Rand stepped back. "Come, let's go to my rooms and rest."

"The King of Arad Doman. Where did she find him?" Min said. "How did you know?"

A friend left me a secret," Rand said. "The White Tower collected Mattin Stepaneos to 'protect' him. Well, it wasn't too much of a leap to wonder if they might have done that with other monarchs. And if they sent sisters to Arad Doman to seize him months ago, before any of them knew of gateways, they could have gotten trapped in the snows on their return trip.
He seemed so relieved. "Graendal never had him. I didn't kill him Mm. One innocent I assumed that I'd killed still lives. That's something. A small something. But it helps."

She helped him walk the rest of the way to their rooms, contents-for moment—to share in his warm sense of joy and relief.

CHAPTER

33

A Good Soup

Siuan's soup was surprisingly good. She took another sip, raising an eyebrow. It was simple—broth and vegetables, bits of chicken—but when most food tasted stale at best, this seemed a wonder. She tried the biscuit. No weevils? Delightful! Nynaeve had just fallen silent, her own bowl steaming in front of her. Newly raised, she'd taken the oaths earlier in the day. They were in the Amyrlin's study, shutters open and spilling in golden light, new rugs of green and gold on the floor.

Silently, Siuan chided herself for getting distracted by the soup. Nynaeve's report demanded consideration. She'd spoken of her time with Rand al'Thor, and specifically of events such as the cleansing. Of course, Siuan had heard the reports that saidin had been cleansed; an Asha'man had visited the camp during the division. She had remained skeptical, but there was little denying it now.

Well," the Amyrlin said, "I am very glad for this longer explanation, Nynaeve. Though saidin being cleansed does make it less unsettling to consider Asha'man and Aes Sedai bonding one another. I wish Rand had been willing to speak to me of that during our meeting." She said it evenly, though Siuan knew she looked on men bonding women with as much pleasure as a captain looked on a fire in his hold.

"I suppose," Nynaeve said, lips turning down. "If it matters, Rand didn't approve the men bonding women."

"It doesn't matter if he did or not," Egwene said. "The Asha'rnan are his responsibility."

"As the Aes Sedai who chained him and beat him are yours, Mother?" Nynaeve asked.

"Inherited from Elaida, perhaps," Egwene said, eyes narrowing just slightly.

She was right to bring Nynaeve back, Siuan thought, taking a sip of soup. She takes his side far too often for comfort.

Nynaeve sighed, taking her spoon to begin her soup. "I didn't mean that as a challenge, Mother. I just want to show how he thinks. Light' I didn't approve of much of what he did, particularly lately. But I can see how he got there."

"He has changed, though," Siuan said thoughtfully. "You said so yourself."

"Yes," Nynaeve said. "The Aiel say he's embraced death."

"I've heard that from them, too," Egwene said. "But I looked into his eyes, and something else has changed, something inexplicable. The man I saw . . ."

"He didn't seem like one to destroy Natrin's Barrow?" Siuan shivered as she thought of that.

"The man I saw wouldn't need to destroy such a place," Egwene said. "Those inside would just follow him. Bend to his wishes. Because he was"

The three fell silent.

Egwene shook her head and took a sip of her soup. She paused, then smiled. "Well, I see the soup is good. Perhaps things aren't as bad as I thought."

"The ingredients came from Caemlyn," Nynaeve noted. "I overheard the serving girls talking."

"Oh."

More silence.

"Mother," Siuan said, speaking carefully. "The women are still worried about the deaths in the Tower."

"I agree. Mother," Nynaeve said. "Sisters stare at one another with distrust. It worries me."

"You both should have seen it before," Egwene said. "During Elaidas reign."

"If it was worse than this," Nynaeve said, "I'm glad that I didn't." She glanced down at her Great Serpent ring. She did that a lot, recently. As a fisher with a new boat often glanced toward the docks and smiled. For all her complaints that she was Aes Sedai, and for all the fact that she'd been wearing that ring for a long time now' she was obviously satisfied to have

passsed the testing and taken the oaths. "It was terrible," Egwene said. "And I don't intend to let it go back to that. Siuan, the plan must be put into motion."

Siuan grimaced. "I've been teaching the others. But I don't think this is a good idea, Mother. They're barely trained."

"What's this?" Nynaeve asked.

"Aes Sedai," Egwene said. "Carefully chosen and given dream ter'angreal. Siuan is showing them how Tel'ararirhiod works."

"Mother, that place is dangerous."

Egwene took another sip of soup. "I believe I know that better than most. But it is necessary; we must lure the killers into a confrontation. I'll arrange for a 'secret' meeting among my most loyal Aes Sedai, in the World of Dreams, and perhaps lay clues that other people of importance will be attending. Siuan, you've contacted the Windfinders?"

"Yes," Siuan said. "Though they want to know what you'll give them to agree to meet with you."

"The loan of the dream ter'angreal will be enough," Egwene said dryly. "Not everything has to be a bargain."

"To them, it often does," Nynaeve said. "But that's beside the point. You're bringing Windfinden to this meeting to lure Mesaana?"

"Not exactly," Egwene said. "I'll see the Windfinders at the same time, in a different place. And some Wise Ones as well. Enough to hint to Mesaana—assuming she's got spies watching the other groups of women who can channel—that she really wants to spy on us in Tel'aran'rhiod that day.

"You and Siuan will hold a meeting in the Hall of the Tower, but it will be a decoy to draw Mesaana or her minions out of hiding. With wards—and some sisters watching from hidden places—we'll be able to trap them. Siuan will send for me as soon as the trap is sprung."

Nynaeve frowned. "It's a good plan, save for one thing. I don't like you being in danger, Mother. Let me lead this fight. I can manage it."

Egwene studied Nynaeve, and Siuan saw some of the real Egwene. Thoughtful. Bold, but calculating. She also saw Egwene's fatigue, the weight of responsibility. Siuan knew that feeling well.

I a admit you have a valid concern," Egwene said. "Ever since I let myself get captured by Elaid a's cronies outside of Tar Valon, I've wondered if I become too directly involved, too directly in danger."

"Exactly," Nynaeve said.

"However," Egwene said, "the simple fact remains that I am the one among us who is most expert at Tel'aran'rhiod. You two are skilled, true,

but I have more experience. In this case, I am not just the leader of the Aes Sedai, I am a tool that the White Tower must use." She hesitated "I dreamed this, Nynaeve. If we do not defeat Mesaana here, all could be lost. All will be lost. It is not a time to hold back any of our tools, no matter how valuable."

Nynaeve reached for her braid, but it now came only to her shoulders She gritted her teeth at that. "You might have a point. But I don't like it."

"The Aiel dreamwalkers," Siuan said. "Mother, you said you'll be meet-ing with them. Might they be willing to help? I'd feel much better about having you fight if I knew they were around to keep an eye on you."

"Yes," Egwene said. "A good suggestion. I will contact them before we meet and make the request, just in case."

"Mother," Nynaeve said. "Perhaps Rand—"

"This is a matter of the Tower, Nynaeve," Egwene said. "We will manage it."

"Very well."

"Now," Egwene continued, "we need to figure out how to spread the right rumors so that Mesaana won't be able to resist coming to listen . . ."

Perrin hit the nightmare running. The air bent around him, and the city houses—this time of the Cairhienin flat-topped variety—disappeared. The road became soft beneath his feet, like mud, then turned to liquid.

He splashed in the ocean. Water again? he thought with annoyance.

Deep red lightning crashed in the sky, throwing waves of bloody light across the sea. Each burst revealed shadowed creatures lurking beneath the waves. Massive things, evil and sinuous in the spasming red lightning.

People clung to the wreckage of what had once been a ship, screaming in terror and crying out for loved ones. Men on broken boards, women trying to hold their babies above the water as towering waves broke over them, dead bodies bobbing like sacks of grain.

The things beneath the waves struck, snatching people from the surface and dragging them into the depths with splashes of fins and sparking, razor-sharp teeth. The water was soon bubbling red that didn't come from the lightning.

Whoever had dreamed this particular nightmare had a singularly twisted imagination.

Perrin refused to let himself be drawn in. He squelched his fear, and did not swim for one of those planks. It isn't real. It isn't real. It isn't real.

Despite his understanding, part of him knew that he was going to die

in these waters. These terrible, bloody waters. The moans of the others assaulted him, and he yearned to try to help them. They weren't real, he knew. Just figments. But it was hard.

Perrin began to rise from the water, the waves turning back into ground. But then he cried out as something brushed his leg. Lightning crashed breaking the air. A woman beside him slipped beneath the waves,

tugged by unseen jaws. Panicked, Perrin was suddenly back in the water, there in a heartbeat, floating in a completely different place, one arm slung over a piece of wreckage.

This happened sometimes. If he wavered for a moment—if he let himself see the nightmare as real—it would pull him in and actually move him, fitting him into its terrible mosaic. Something moved in the water nearby, and he splashed away with a start. One of the surging waves raised him into the air.

It isn't real. It isn't real. It isn't real.

The waters were so cold. Something touched his leg again, and he screamed, then choked off as he gulped in a mouthful of salty water.

IT ISN'T REAL/

He was in Cairhien, leagues from the ocean. This was a street. Hard stones beneath. The smell of baked bread coming from a nearby bakery. The street lined with small, thin-trunked ash trees.

With a bellowing scream, he clung to this knowledge as the people around him held to their flotsam. Perrin knotted his hands into fists, focusing on reality.

There were cobblestones under his feet. Not waves. Not water. Not teeth and fins. Slowly, he rose from the ocean again. He stepped out of it and set his foot on the surface, feeling solid stone beneath his boot. The other foot followed. He found himself on a small, floating circle of stones.

Something enormous surged from the waters to his left, a massive beast part fish and part monster, with a maw so wide that a man could walk into it standing upright. The'teeth were as large as Perrin's hand, and they glittered, dripping blood.

It was not real.

The creature exploded into mist. The spray hit Perrin, then dried immediately. Around him, the nightmare bent, a bubble of reality pressing out from him. Dark air, cold waves, screaming people ran together like wet paint.

Tnere was no lightning—he did not see it light his eyelids. There was no thunder. He could not hear it crashing. There were no waves, not in the middle of landlocked Cairhien.

Perrin snapped his eyes open, and the entire nightmare broke apart, vanishing like a film of frost exposed to the spring sunlight. The buildings reappeared, the street returned, the waves retreated. The sky returned to the boiling black tempest. Lightning that was bright and white flashed in its depths, but there was no thunder.

Hopper sat on the street a short distance away. Perrin walked over to the wolf. He could have jumped there immediately, of course, but he didn't like the idea of doing everything easily. That would bite at him when he returned to the real world.

You grow strong, Young Bull, Hopper sent approvingly.

"I still take too long," Perrin said, glancing over his shoulder. "Every time I enter, it takes me a few minutes to regain control. I need to be faster. In a battle with Slayer, a few minutes might as well be an eternity."

He will not be so strong as these.

"He'll still be strong enough," Perrin said. "He's had years to learn to control the wolf dream. I only just started."

Hopper laughed. Young Bull, you started the first time you came here.

"Yes, but I just started training a few weeks back."

Hopper continued laughing. He was right, in a way. Perrin had spent two years preparing, visiting the wolf dream at night. But he still needed to learn as much as he could. In a way, he was glad for the delay before the trial.

But he could not delay too long. The Last Hunt was upon them. Many of the wolves were running to the north; Perrin could feel them passing. Running for the Blight, for the Borderlands. They were moving both in the real world and in the wolf dream, but those here did not shift there directly. They ran, as packs.

He could tell that Hopper longed to join them. However, he remained behind, as did some others.

"Come on," Perrin said. "Let's find another nightmare."

The Rose March was in bloom.

That was incredible. Few other plants had bloomed in this terrible summer, and those that did had wilted. But the Rose March was blooming, and fiercely, hundreds of red explosions twisting around the garden framework. Voracious insects buzzed from flower to flower, as if every bee in the city had come here to feed.

Gawyn kept his distance from the insects, but the scent of roses was so pervasive that he felt bathed in it. Once he finished his walk, his clothing would probably smell of the perfume for hours.

Elayne was speaking with several advisors near one of the benches beside a small, lily-covered pond. She was showing her pregnancy, and seemed radiant. Her golden hair reflected the sunlight like the surface of a mirror; atop that hair, the Rose Crown of Andor looked almost plain by comparison.

She often had much to do these days. He'd heard hushed reports of the weapons she was building, the ones she thought might be as powerful as captive damane. The bellfounders in Caemlyn had been working for straight through the nights, from what he'd heard. Caemlyn was preparing for war, the city abuzz with activity. She didn't often have time for him, though he was glad for what she could spare.

She smiled at him as he approached, then waved off her attendants for the moment. She walked to him and gave him a fond kiss on the cheek. "You look thoughtful."

"A common malady of mine lately," he said. "You look distracted."

"A common malady of mine lately," she said. "There is always too much to do and never enough of me to do it.

"If you need to—"

"No," she said, taking his arm. "I need to speak to you. And I've been told that a walk around the gardens once a day will be good for my constitution."

Gawyn smiled, breathing in the scents of roses and mud around the pond. The scents of life. He glanced up at the sky as they walked. "I can't believe how much sunlight we've been seeing here. I'd nearly convinced myself that the perpetual gloom was something unnatural."

"Oh, it probably is," she said nonchalantly. "A week back the cloud cover in Andor broke around Caemlyn, but nowhere else."

"But. . . how?"

She smiled. "Rand. Something he did. He was atop Dragonmount, I think. And then . . ."

Suddenly, the day seemed darker. "Al'Thor again," Gawyn spat. "He follows me even here."

"Even here?" she said with amusement. "I believe these gardens are where we first met him."

Gawyn didn't reply to that. He glanced northward, checking the sky in that direction. Ominous dark clouds hung out there. "He's the father, isn't he?"

"If he were," Elayne said without missing a beat, "then it would be

prudent to hide that fact, wouldn't it? The children of the Dragon Reborn will be targets."

Gawyn felt sick. He'd suspected it the moment he'd discovered the pregnancy. "Burn me," he said. "Elayne, how could you? After what he did to our mother!"

"He did nothing to her," Elayne said. "I can produce witness after witness that will confirm it, Gawyn. Mother vanished before Rand liberated Caemlyn." There was a fond look in her eyes as she spoke of him. "Something is happening to him. I can feel it, feel him changing. Cleansing. He drives back the clouds and makes the roses bloom."

Gawyn raised an eyebrow. She thought the roses bloomed because of a/'Thor? Well, love could make a person think strange things, and when the man she spoke of was the Dragon Reborn, perhaps some irrationality was to be expected.

They approached the pond's small dock. He could remember swimming there as a child, then getting an earful for it. Not from his mother, from Galad, though Gawyn's mother had given him a stern, disappointed look. He'd never told anyone that he'd been swimming only because Elayne had pushed him in.

"You're never going to forget that, are you?" Elayne asked.

"What?" he asked.

"You were thinking of the time you slipped into the pond during Mother's meeting with House Farah."

"Slipped? You pushed me!"

"I did nothing of the sort," Elayne said primly. "You were showing off, balancing on the posts."

"And you shook the dock."

"I stepped onto it," Elayne said. "Forcefully. I'm a vigorous person. I have a forceful stride."

"A forceful— That's a downright lie!"

"No, I'm merely stating the truth creatively. I'm Aes Sedai now. Its a talent of ours. Now, are you going to row me on the pond, or nor?"

"I . . . Row you? When did that come up?"

"Just now. Weren't you listening?"

Gawyn shook a bemused head. "Fine." Behind them, several Guardswomen took up posts. They were always near, often led by the tall woman who fancied herself an image of Birgitte from the stories. And maybe she did look like Birgitte at that—she went by the name, anyway, and was serving as Captain-General.

The Guards were joined by a growing group of attendants and messengers. The Last Battle approached, and Andor prepared—and, unfortunately, many of those preparations required Elayne's direct attention.

Though Gawyn had heard a curious story of Elayne having been carried up on the city wall in her bed a week or so back. So far, he hadn't been able to pin her down on whether that was true or not.

He waved to Birgitte, who gave him a scowl as he led Elayne to the pond's small rowboat. "I promise not to dump her in," Gawyn called. Then, under his breath, "Though I might row 'forcefully' and upend us."

"Oh, hush," Elayne said, settling down. "Pondwater wouldn't be good for the babies."

"Speaking of which," Gawyn said, pushing the boat off with his toe, then stepping into it. The vessel shook precariously until he sat down. "Aren't you supposed to be walking for your 'constitution'?"

"I'll tell Melfane I needed to take the opportunity to reform my miscreant brother. You can get away with all kinds of things if you're giving someone a proper scolding."

"And is that what I'm getting? A scolding?"

"Not necessarily." Her voice was somber. Gawyn shipped the oars and slipped them into the water. The pond wasn't large, barely big enough to justify a boat, but there was a serenity about being upon the water, amid the pond-runners and the butterflies.

"Gawyn," Elayne said, "why have you come to Caemlyn?"

"It's my home," he said. "Why shouldn't I come here?"

"I worried about you during the siege. I could have used you in the fighting. But you stayed away."

"I explained that, Elayne! I was embroiled in White Tower politics, not to mention the winter snows. It burns me that I couldn't help, but those women had their fingers on me."

"I'm one of 'those women' myself, you know." She held up her hand, Great Serpent ring encircling her finger.

"You're different," Gawyn said. 'Anyway, you're right. I should have been here. I don't know what other apologies you expect me to make, though."

I don't expect any apologies," Elayne said. "Oh, Gawyn, I wasn't chastising you. While I certainly could have used you, we managed. I also worried about you getting caught between defending the Tower and protecting Egwene. It seems that worked out as well. So, I ask. Why have you come here now? Doesn't Egwene need you?"

"Apparently not," Gawyn said, backing the boat. A massive draping willow grew from the side of the pond here, hanging down branches like

braids to dangle above the water. He raised his oars outside those branches and the boat stilled.

"Well," Elayne said. "I won't presume to pry into that—at least, not at the moment. You are always welcome here, Gawyn. I'd make you Captain.. General if you asked, but I don't think you want it."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, you've spent the majority of your time here moping around these gardens."

"I have not been moping. I've been pondering."

"Ah, yes. I see you've learned to speak the truth creatively, too."

He snorted softly.

"Gawyn, you haven't been spending time with any of your friends or acquaintances from the palace. You haven't been stepping into the role of a prince or Captain-General. Instead you merely . . . ponder."

Gawyn looked out across the pond. "I don't spend time with the others because they all want to know why I wasn't here for the siege. They keep asking when I'm going to take my station here and lead your armies."

"It's all right, Gawyn. You don't have to be Captain-General, and I can survive with my First Prince of the Sword absent, if I must. Though I'll admit, Birgitte is rather upset with you for not becoming Captain-General."

"Is that the reason for the glares?"

"Yes. But she will manage; she's actually good at the job. And if there's anyone I'd want you protecting, it would be Egwene. She deserves you."

"And what if I've decided I don't want her?"

Elayne reached forward, resting her hand on his arm. Her face—framed in golden hair, topped by that matching crown—looked concerned. "Oh, Gawyn. What has happened to you?"

He shook his head. "Bryne thinks I was too accustomed to succeeding, and didn't know how to react when things started to upend on me."

"And what do you think?"

"I think it's been good for me to be here," Gawyn said, taking a deep breath. Some women were walking along the path around the pond, led by a woman with bright red hair that was streaked with white. Dimana was some kind of failed student of the White Tower. Gawyn wasn't quite certain about the nature of the Kin and their relationship with Elayne.

"Being here," he said, "reminded me of my life before. It's been particularly liberating to be free of Aes Sedai. For a time, I was sure that I needed to be with Egwene. When I left the Younglings to ride to her, it felt like the best choice I'd ever made. And yet, she seems to have moved beyond needing me. She's so concerned with being strong, with being the

Amyrlin, that she doesn't have room for anyone who won't bow to her every whim."

"I doubt that it's as bad as you say, Gawyn. Egwene . . . well, she has to

put forward a strong front. Because of her youth, and the way she was

raised But she's not arrogant. No more so than is necessary."

Elayne dipped her fingers in the water, startling a goldenback fish. "I've felt the way she must be feeling. You say she wants someone to bow and scrape for her, but what I'd bet she really wants—what she really needs—is someone she can trust completely. Someone she can give tasks, then not worry about how they will be handled. She has enormous resources. Wealth, troops, fortifications, servants. But there's only one of her, and so if everything requires her attention directly, she might as well have no resources at all."

"I . . ."

"You say you love her," Elayne said. "You've told me you're devoted to her, that you'd die for her. Well, Egwene has armies full of those kinds of people, as do I. What is truly unique is someone who does what I tell them. Better, someone who does what they know I'd tell them, if I had the chance."

"I'm not sure I can be th?t man," Gawyn said.

"Why not? Of all the men ready to support a woman of Power, I'd have thought it would be you."

"It's different with Egwene. I can't explain why."

"Well, if you wish to marry an Amyrlin, then you must make this choice."

She was right. It frustrated him, but she was right. "Enough about that," he said. "I notice the topic moved away from al'Thor."

"Because there was no more to say about him."

"You have to stay away from him, Elayne. He's dangerous."

Elayne waved her hand. "Saidin is cleansed."

"Of course he would say that."

"You hate him," Elayne said. "I can hear it in your voice. This isn't about Mother, is it?"

He hesitated. She'd grown so good at twisting a conversation. Was that the queen in her, or the Aes Sedai? He nearly turned the boat back toward the dock. But this was Elayne. Light, but it felt good to talk to someone who really understood him.

"Why do I hate al'Thor?" Gawyn said. "Well, there's Mother. But it's not just her. I hate what he's become."

"The Dragon Reborn?"

"A tyrant."

"You don't know that, Gawyn."

"He's a sheepherder. What right does he have to cast down thrones, to change the world as he does?"

"Particularly while you huddled in a village?" He'd told her most of what had happened to him in the last few months. "While he conquered nations, you were being forced to kill your friends, then were sent to your death by your Amyrlin."

"Exactly."

"So it's jealousy," Elayne said softly.

"No. Nonsense. I. . ."

"What would you do, Gawyn?" Elayne asked. "Would you duel him?"

"Maybe."

"And what would happen if you won and ran him through as you've said you wanted to do? Would you doom us all to satisfy your momentary passion?"

He had no reply to that.

"That's not just jealousy, Gawyn," Elayne said, taking the oars from him. "It's selfishness. We can't afford to be shortsighted right now." She began to row them back despite his protest.

"This," he said, "coming from the woman who personally raided the Black Ajah?"

Elayne blushed. He could tell that she wished he'd never found out about that event. "It was needed. And besides, I did say 'we.' You and I, we have this trouble. Birgitte keeps telling me I need to learn to be more temperate. Well, you'll need to learn the same thing, for Egwene's sake. And she does need you, Gawyn. She may not realize it; she may be convinced she needs to hold up the world herself. She's wrong."

The boat thumped against the dock. Elayne unshipped the oars and held out a hand. Gawyn climbed out, then helped her up onto the dock. She gripped his hand fondly. "You'll sort it out," she said. "I'm releasing you from any responsibility to be my Captain-General. For now, I wont appoint another First Prince of the Sword, but you can hold that title with duties in abeyance. So long as you show up for the occasional state function, you needn't worry about anything else that might be required of you. I will publish it immediately, citing a need for you to be doing other work at the advent of the Last Battle."

"I. . . Thank you," he said, though he wasn't certain he felt it. It sounded too much like Egwene's insistence that he didn't need to guard her door.

Elayne squeezed his hand again, then turned and walked up to the attendants. Gawyn watched her speak to them in a calm tone. She seemed to grow more regal by the day; it was like watching a flower blossom. He wished he'd been in Caemlyn to view the process from the start.

He found himself smiling as he turned to continue his way along the Rose March. His regrets had trouble taking hold before a healthy dose of Elayne's characteristic optimism. Only she could call a man jealous and make him feel good about it.

He passed through waves of perfume, feeling the sun on his neck. He walked where he and Galad had played as children, and he thought of his mother walking these gardens with Bryne. He remembered her careful instruction when he misstepped, then her smiles when he acted as a prince should. Those smiles had seemed like the sun rising.

This place was her. She lived on, in Caemlyn, in Elayne—who looked more and more like her by the hour—in the safety and strength of Andor's people. He stopped beside the pond, the very spot where Galad had saved him from drowning as a child.

Perhaps Elayne was right. Perhaps al'Thor hadn't had anything to do with Morgase's death. If he had, Gawyn would never prove it. But that didn't matter. Rand al'Thor was already condemned to die at the Last Battle. So why keep hating the man?

"She is right," Gawyn whispered, watching the hawkflies dance over the surface of the water. "We're done, al'Thor. From now on, I care nothing for you."

It felt like an enormous weight lifting from his shoulders. Gawyn let out a long, relaxed sigh. Only now that Elayne had released him did he realize how much guilt he'd felt over his absence from Andor. That was gone now, too.

Time to focus on Egwene. He reached into his pocket, slipping out the assassin's knife, and held it up in the sunlight, inspecting those red stones.

He did have a duty to protect Egwene. Supposing she railed against him, hated him, and exiled him; wouldn't it be worth the punishments if he managed to preserve her life?

By my mother's grave," a voice said sharply from behind. "Where did you get that?"

Gawyn spun. The women he'd noticed earlier were standing behind him on the path. Dimana led them, her hair streaked with white, her face wrinkled around the eyes. Wasn't working with the Power supposed to stop those signs of aging?

There were two people with her. One was a plump young woman with black hair, the other a stout woman in her middle years. The second was

the one who had spoken; she had wide, innocent-looking eyes. And she seemed horrified.

"What is that, Marille?" Dimana asked.

"That knife," Marille said, pointing at Gawyn's hand. "Marille has seen one like it before!"

"I have seen it before," Dimana corrected. "You are a person and not a thing."

"Yes, Dimana. Much apologies, Dimana. Marille . . . / will not make the mistake again, Dimana."

Gawyn raised an eyebrow. What was wrong with this person?

"Forgive her, my Lord," Dimana said. "Marille spent a long time as a damane, and is having difficulty adjusting."

"You're Seanchan?" Gawyn said. Of course. I should have noticed the accent.

Marille nodded vigorously. A former damane. Gawyn felt a chill. This woman had been trained to kill with the Power. The third woman remained silent, watching with curious eyes. She didn't look nearly as subservient.

"We should be moving on," Dimana said. "It isn't good for her to see things that remind her of Seanchan. Come, Marille. That is merely a token Lord Trakand won in battle, I suspect."

"No, wait," Gawyn said, holding up a hand. "You recognize this blade?"

Marille looked to Dimana, as if requesting permission to answer. The Kinswoman nodded sufferingly.

"It is a Bloodknife, my Lord," Marille said. "You did not win it in battle, because men do not defeat Bloodknives. They are unstoppable. They only fall when their own blood turns against them."

Gawyn frowned. What nonsense was this? "So this is a Seanchan weapon?"

"Yes, my Lord," Marille said. "Carried by the Bloodknives."

"I thought you said this was a Bloodknife."

"It is, but that is also who carries them. Shrouded in the night, sent by the Empress's will—may she live forever—to strike down her foes and die in her name and glory." Marille lowered her eyes farther. "Marille speaks too much. She is sorry."

"I am sorry," Dimana said, a hint of exasperation in her tone.

"I am sorry," Marille repeated.

"So these . . . Bloodknives," Gawyn said. "They're Seanchan assassins? He felt a deep chill. Could they have left behind suicide troops to kill Aes Sedai? Yes. It made sense. The murderer wasn't one of the Forsaken.

"Yes, my Lord," Marille said. "I saw one of the knives hanging in the

room of my mistress's quarters; it had belonged to her brother, who had

borne it with honor until his blood turned against him."

"His family?"

"No, his blood." Marille shrank down farther.

"Tell me of them," Gawyn said urgently.

"Shrouded in the night," Marille said, "sent by the Empress's will—may she live forever—to strike down her foes and die in—"

"Yes, yes," Gawyn said. "You said that already. What methods do they use? How do they hide so well? What do you know of how this assassin will strike?"

Marille shrank down farther at each question, and began to whimper.

"Lord Trakand!" Dimana said. "Contain yourself."

"Marille doesn't know very much," the damane said. "Marille is sorry. Please, punish her for not listening better."

Gawyn pulled back. The Seanchan treated their damane worse than animals. Marille wouldn't have been told anything specific of what these Bloodknives could do. "Where did you get these damane?" Gawyn asked. "Were any Seanchan soldiers captured? I need to speak with one; an officer, preferably."

Dimana pursed her lips. "These were taken in Altara, and only the damane were sent to us."

"Dimana," the other woman said. She didn't have a Seanchan accent. "What of the sul'dam? Kaisea was of the low Blood."

Dimana frowned. "Kaisea is . . . unreliable."

"Please," Gawyn said. "This could save lives."

"Very well," Dimana said. "Wait here. I will return with her." She took her two charges toward the palace, leaving Gawyn to wait anxiously. A few minutes later, Dimana returned, followed by a tall woman wearing a pale gray dress without belt or embroidery. Her long black hair was woven into a braid, and she seemed determined to remain precisely one step behind Dimana—an action that bothered the Kinswoman, who seemed to be trying to keep an eye on the woman.

They reached Gawyn, and the sul'dam—incredibly—got down on her knees and prostrated herself on the ground, head touching the dirt. There was a smooth elegance to the bowing; for some reason, it made Gawyn feel as if he were being mocked.

Lord Trakand," Dimana said, "this is Kaisea. Or, at least, that's what she insists that we call her now."

Kaisea is a good servant," the woman said evenly.

"Stand up," Gawyn said. "What are you doing?"

"Kaisea has been told you are the Queen's brother; you are of the Blood of this realm, and I am a lowly damane"

"Damane? You're a sul'dam."

"No longer," the woman said. "I must be collared, great Lord. Will you see it done? Kaisea is dangerous."

Dimana nodded to the side, indicating they should speak privately. Gawyn withdrew with her farther down the Rose March, leaving Kaisea prostrate on the ground.

"She's a sul'dam?" Gawyn asked. "Or is she a damane?"

"All sul'dam can be trained to channel," Dimana explained. "Elayne thinks that fact will undermine their entire culture once revealed, so she's had us focus on teaching the sul'dam to access their powers. Many refuse to admit that they can see the weaves, but a few have been honest with us. To a woman, they've insisted that they should be made damane"

She nodded back toward Kaisea. "This one is most troubling. We think she's intentionally working to learn the weaves so that she can create an 'accident,' and use our own reasoning against us—if she does something violent with the One Power, she can claim that we were wrong to leave her free."

A woman who could be trained to kill with the One Power, who was not bound by the Three Oaths, and who had a determination to prove that she was dangerous? Gawyn shivered.

"We keep some forkroot in her most days," Dimana said. "I don't tell you this to worry you, but to warn you that what she says and does may not be reliable."

Gawyn nodded. "Thank you."

Dimana led him back, and the sul'dam remained on the ground. "How may Kaisea serve you, great Lord?" Her actions seemed a parody of Marille's subservience. What Gawyn had originally taken for mockery wasn't that at all—instead, it was the imperfect efforts of one who was highborn to imitate the lowly.

"Have you ever seen one of these before?" Gawyn asked casually, taking out the Bloodknife.

Kaisea gasped. "Where did you find that? Who gave it to you?" She cringed almost immediately, as if realizing that she'd stepped out of her assumed role.

"An assassin tried to kill me with it," Gawyn said. "We fought, and he got away."

"That is impossible, great Lord," the Seanchan woman said, her voice more controlled.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if you had fought one of the Bloodknives, great Lord, you would be dead. They are the most expert killers in all of the Empire. They fight the most ruthlessly, because they are already dead."

"Suicide troops." Gawyn nodded. "Do you have any information about them?"

Kaisea's face grew conflicted.

"If I see you leashed?" Gawyn asked. "Will you answer me then?"

"My Lord!" Dimana said. "The Queen would never allow it!"

"I'll ask her," Gawyn said. "I can't promise that you'll be leashed, Kaisea but I can promise I'll intercede with the Queen for you."

"You are powerful and strong, great Lord," Kaisea said. "And wise indeed. If you will do this thing, Kaisea will answer you."

Dimana glared at Gawyn.

"Speak," Gawyn said to the sul'dam.

"Bloodknives do not live long," Kaisea said. "Once they are given a duty, they do not rest from it. They are granted abilities from the Empress, may she live forever, ter'angreal rings that make them into great warriors."

"Those blur their forms," Gawyn said. "When they are near shadow."

"Yes," Kaisea said, sounding surprised that he knew this. "They cannot be defeated. But eventually, their own blood will kill them."

"Their own blood?"

"They are poisoned by their service. Once they are given a charge, they often will not last more than a few weeks. At most, they survive a month."

Gawyn held up the knife, disturbed. "So we only need to wait them out."

Kaisea laughed. "That will not happen. Before they die, they will see their duty fulfilled."

"This one is killing people slowly," Gawyn said. "One every few days. A handful so far."

"Tests," Kaisea said. "Prodding for weaknesses and strengths, learning where they can strike without being seen. If only a few are dead, then you have not yet seen the full power of the Bloodknife. They do not leave a 'handful' of dead, but dozens."

"Unless I stop him," Gawyn said. "What are his weaknesses?"

Kaisea laughed again. "Weaknesses? Great Lord, did I not say that they are the finest warriors in Seanchan, enhanced and aided by the Empress's favor, may she live forever?"

Fine. What about the ter'angreal, then? It helps the assassin when he is in shadow? How can I stop it from working? Perhaps light a large number of torches?"

"You cannot have light without shadow, great Lord, the woman said. "Create more light, and you will create more shadows."

"There has to be a way."

"Kaisea is certain that if there is one, great Lord, you will find it." The woman's response had a smug rone to it. "If Kaisea may suggest, great Lord? Count yourself fortunate to have survived fighting a Bloodknife. You must not have been his or her true target. It would be prudent to hide yourself until a month has passed. Allow the Empress—may she live forever-__to

accomplish her will, and bless the omens that you were given warning enough to escape and live."

"That's enough of that," Dimana said. "I trust you have what you wish, Lord Trakand?"

"Yes, thank you," Gawyn said, disturbed. He barely noticed as Kaisea rose and the Kinswoman led her charge away.

Count yourself fortunate to have survived. . . you must not truly have been his target. . .

Gawyn tested the throwing knife in his hands. The target was Egwene, obviously. "Why else would the Seanchan expend such a powerful weapon? Perhaps they thought her death would bring down the White Tower.

Egwene had to be warned. If it made her angry at him, if it flew in the face of what she wanted, he had to bring her this information. It could save her life.

He was still standing there—considering how to approach Egwene—when a servant in red and white found him. She carried a plate with a sealed envelope on it. "My Lord Gawyn?"

"What's this?" Gawyn asked, taking the letter and using the Bloodknife to cut it open along the top.

"From Tar Valon," the servant said, bowing. "It came through a gateway."

Gawyn unfolded the thick sheet of paper inside. He recognized Silviana's script.

Gawyn Trakand. it read. The Amyrlin was thoroughly displeased to discover your departure. You were never instructed to leave the city. She has asked me to send this missive, explaining that you have been given ample time to idle in Caemlyn. Your presence is required in Tar Valon, and you are to return with all haste.

Gawyn read the letter, then read it again. Egwene screamed at him for disturbing her plans, all but threw him out of the Tower, and she was displeased to discover he'd left the city? What did she expect him to do? He almost laughed.

"My Lord?" the servant asked. "Would you like to send a reply?" There was paper and pen on the tray. "They implied that one would be expected.'

"Send her this,' Gawyn said, tossing the Bloodknife onto the tray. He felt so angry, suddenly, and all thoughts of returning fled his mind. Flaming woman!

"And tell her," he added after a moment's thought, "that the assassin is Seanchan, and carries a special ter'angreal that makes him difficult to see in shadows. Best to keep extra lights burning. The other murders were tests gauge our defenses. She is the true target. Emphasize that the assassin is very, very dangerous—but not the person she thought it was. If she needs proof, she can come talk to some of the Seanchan here in Caemlyn."

The servant looked perplexed, but when he said nothing further, the woman retreated.

He tried to cool his rage. He wouldn't go back, not now. Not when it would look as if he'd come crawling back at her command. She had her "careful plans and traps." She had said she didn't need him. She would have to do without him for a while, then.

CHAPTER 34

Judgment

I want the scouts out watching," Perrin said forcefully. "Even during the trial." "The Maidens won't like this, Perrin Aybara," Sulin said. "Not if it makes them miss the chance to dance the spears."

"They'll do it anyway," Perrin said, walking through camp, Dannil and Gaul at his side. Behind followed Azi and Wil al'Seen, his two guards for the day.

Sulin inspected Perrin, then nodded. "It will be done." She moved off.

"Lord Perrin," Dannil asked, smelling nervous. "What's this about?"

"I don't know yet," Perrin said. "Something's wrong on the wind."

Dannil frowned, looking confused. Well, Perrin was confused, too. Confused and increasingly certain. It seemed a contradiction, but it was true.

The camp was busy, his armies gathering to meet the Whitecloaks. Not his army, his armies. There was so much division among them. Ar-ganda and Gallenne jostling one another for position, the Two Rivers men resenting the newer bands of mercenaries, the former refugees mashed between them all. And, of course, the Aiel, aloof and doing as they wished.

I'm going to disband them, Perrin told himself. What does it ?natter? It bothered him nonetheless. It was a disorderly way to run a camp.

Anyway, Perrin's people had mostly recovered from this latest bubble of evil. None of the would probably look at their weapons again the same way, but the wounded had been Healed and the channelers were rested.

The Whitecloaks had not been pleased at the delay, which had extended longer than they had probably expected. But Perrin had needed the time, for a number of reasons.

"Dannil," he said. "My wife has you mixed up in her plots to protect me, I assume."

Dannil started. "How—"

"She needs her secrets," Perrin said. "I miss half of them, but this one was as plain as day. She's not happy about this trial. What's she got you doing? Some plan with the Asha'man to get me out of danger?"

"Something like that, my Lord," Dannil admitted.

"I'll go, if it turns bad," Perrin said. "But don't jump to it too early. I won't have this turn into a bloodbath because one of the Whitecloaks lets out a curse at the wrong time. Wait for my signal. Understood?"

"Yes, my Lord," Dannil said, smelling sheepish.

Perrin needed to be done with this all. Free of it. Now. Because, over these last few days, it had begun to feel natural to him. I'm just a ... He trailed off. Just a what? A blacksmith? Could he say that anymore? What was he?

Up ahead, Neald sat on a stump near the Traveling ground. During the last few days, the youthful Asha'man soldier and Gaul had scouted out in several directions at Perrin's orders, to see if gateways worked if one got far enough away from camp. Sure enough, it turned out they did, though one had go for hours to escape the effect.

Neither Neald nor Gaul had noted any sort of change other than the weave for gateways working again. There was no barrier or visible indication on this side, but if Perrin guessed right, the area where gateways didn't work matched exactly the area covered by the dome in the wolf dream.

That was the dome's purpose, and that was why Slayer guarded it. It wasn't about hunting the wolves, though he surely did that with pleasure. Something was causing both the dome and the problems with the Asha'man.

"Neald," Perrin said, walking up to the Asha'man. "Latest scouting mission went well?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"When Grady and you were first telling me about the failing weaves, you said it had happened to you before. When was that?"

"When we tried to open the gateway to retrieve the scouting group from Cairhien," Neald said. "We tried at first and the weaves fell apart. But we waited a little while and tried again. That time it worked."

That was just after the first night I saw the dome, Perrin thought. It came up for a short time, then vanished. Slayer must have been testing it.

"My Lord," Neald said, stepping close. He was a fop of a man, but he'd been reliable when Perrin needed him. "What's going on?"

"I think someone's setting a trap for us," Perrin said softly. "Boxing us in. I've sent some others out to look for the thing causing this; it's probably some kind of object of the One Power." He worried that it might be hidden in the wolf dream. Could something there produce an effect in the real world? "Now, you're sure you can't create gateways at all? Not even to other points nearby, inside the effected area?"

Neald shook his head.

The rules are different on this side, then, Perrin thought. Or, at least it works differently on Traveling than it does on shifting in the wolf dream. "Neald, you said with the larger gateways—using a circle—you could move the entire army through in a few hours?"

Neald nodded. "We've been practicing."

"We need to be ready for that," Perrin said, looking at the sky. He could still smell that oddity in the air. A faint staleness.

"My Lord," Neald said. "We'll be ready, but if we can't create gateways, then it doesn't matter. We could march the army out to that point beyond the effect, though, and escape from there."

Unfortunately, Perrin suspected that wouldn't do. Hopper had called this a thing of the deep past. That meant there was a good chance Slayer was working with the Forsaken. Or he was one of the Forsaken himself. Perrin had never considered that. Either way, the ones planning this trap would be watching. If his army tried to escape, the enemy would spring its trap or they'd move the dome.

The Forsaken had been fooling the Shaido with those boxes and had placed them here. And there was his picture, being distributed. Was it all part of this trap, whatever it was? Dangers. So many dangers hunting him.

Well, what did you expect, he thought. It's Tarmon Gai'don.

"I wish Elyas would return," he said. He'd sent the man on a special scouting mission of his own. "Just be ready, Neald. Dannil, it'd be best if you'd go pass my cautions on to your men. I don't want any accidents."

Dannil and Neald went their separate ways, and Perrin walked to the horse pickets to find Stepper. Gaul, quiet as the wind, fell in beside him.

Someone's pulling a snare tight, Perrin thought, slowly, inch by inch, around ?ny leg. Probably waiting for him to fight the Whitecloaks. Afterward, his army would be weakened and wounded. Easy pickings. It gave him a chill to realize that if he'd gone to battle with Damodred earlier, the trap might have been sprung right then. The trial suddenly took on enormous import.

Perrin had to find a way to forestall a battle until he could get to the

wolf dream one more time. In it, perhaps he could find a way to destroy the dome and free his people.

"You change, Perrin Aybara," Gaul said.

"What's that?" Perrin said, taking Stepper from a groom.

"This is a good thing," Gaul replied. "It is good to see you stop protesting about being chief. It is better to see you enjoy command."

"I've stopped protesting because I have better things to do," Perrin said. "And I don't enjoy being in command. I do it because I have to."

Gaul nodded, as if he thought Perrin were agreeing with him.

Aiel. Perrin swung into the saddle. "Let's go on, then. The column is starting to march."

"Off with you," Faile said to Aravine. "The army is moving out."

Aravine curtsied and moved to pass the orders to the refugees. Faile wasn't certain what this day would bring, but she wanted those who stayed behind to break camp and be ready to march, just in case.

As Aravine left, Faile noticed Aldin the bookkeeper joining her. He did seem to be visiting Aravine quite often lately. Perhaps he'd finally given up on Arrela.

She hastened toward the tent. On her way, she passed Flann Barstere, Jon Gaelin and Marek Cormer checking over their bowstrings and arrow fletchings. All three looked up at her and waved. There seemed to be a sense of relief in their eyes, which was a good sign. Once, these men had looked ashamed when they'd seen her, as if they felt bad for the way Perrin had seemingly dallied with Berelain during Faile's absence.

Faile spending time with Berelain, mixed with the formal denunciation of the rumors, was working to convince the camp that nothing inappropriate had happened. Interesting, it seemed that Faile saving Berelain's life during the bubble of evil had had the strongest effect in changing people's minds. They assumed because of that event that there was no grudge between the two women.

Of course, Faile hadn't saved the woman's life, just helped her. But that wasn't what the rumors said, and Faile was pleased to see them working in her and Perrin's favor for once.

She reached the tent and hurriedly washed up with a damp cloth and their basin. She put on some perfume, then dressed in her nicest gown— a depp gray-green with embroidered vine patterns across the bodice and around the hem. Finally, she checked herself in the mirror. Good. She was hiding her anxiety. Perrin would be all right. He would be.

She slipped a few knives into her belt and up her sleeves anyway. Out side, a groom had brought Daylight for her. She climbed up—missing Swallow, who had been killed by the Shaido. Even her finest dress had skirts divided for riding; she wouldn't carry anything else on the road. Her mother had taught her that nothing destroyed a woman's credibility with soldiers more quickly than riding sidesaddle. And, should the unthinkable happen and Perrin fall, Faile might need to take command of their forces.

She trotted up to the front of the gathering army. Perrin sat in his saddle there. How dare he look so patient!

Faile didn't let her annoyance show. There was a time to be a tempest and a time to be a tender breeze. She had already let Perrin know, in no uncertain terms, what she thought of this trial. For the moment, she needed to be seen supporting him.

She rode up beside Perrin as the Aes Sedai gathered behind, walking like the Wise Ones. No Maidens. Where were they? It must be important to keep them from the trial. To Sulin and the others, protecting Perrin was a duty given them by their Car'a'carn, and it would be a grave matter of toh to them if he fell.

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Scanning the camp, she noted two gai'shain in hooded white robes hurrying to the front of the line. Gaul, who stood beside Perrin's horse, scowled. One of the figures bowed to him, holding forth a collection of spears. "Freshly sharpened," Chiad said.

"And newly fletched arrows," Bain added.

"I have arrows and spears already," Gaul said.

"Yes," the women said, kneeling before him, still holding their offerings.

"What?" he asked.

"We were simply worried for your safety," Bain said. "You prepared those weapons yourself, after all." She said it earnestly, no hint of mockery or insincerity. Yet the words themselves were close to patronizing.

Gaul started laughing. He took the weapons offered and gave the women his own. Despite the troubles of the day, Faile found herself smiling. There was a devious complexity to Aiel interactions. What should have pleased Gaul regarding his gai'shain often seemed to frustrate him, and yet that which should have been insulting was met with amusement.

As Bain and Chiad retreated, Faile looked over the gathering army. Everyone was coming, not just captains or token forces. Most wouldn't be able to watch the trial, but they needed to be there. In case.

Faile pulled up beside her husband. "Something worries you," she said to him.

"The world holds its breath, Faile," he said. "What do you mean?"

He shook his head. "The Last Hunt is here. Rand is in danger. More than any of us, he is in danger. And I can't go to him, not yet."

"Perrin, you're not making any sense. How can you know Rand is in danger?"

"I can see him. Any time I mention his name or think on him, a vision of him opens to my eyes."

She blinked.

He turned toward her, his yellow eyes thoughtful. "I'm connected to him. He . . • pulls at me, you see. Anyway, I told myself I was going to be open with you about things like this." He hesitated. "My armies here, they're being herded, Faile. Like sheep being driven to the butcher."

He suddenly remembered his vision from the wolf dream. Sheep running in front of wolves. He'd thought himself one of the wolves. But could he have been wrong?

Light! He had been wrong about that. He knew what it meant, now. "I can feel it on the wind," he said. "The problem with gateways, it's related to something happening in the wolf dream. Somebody wants us to be unable to escape this place."

A cold breeze, odd in the noonday heat, washed over them. "Are you certain?" Faile asked.

"Yes," Perrin said. "Oddly, I am."

"That's where the Maidens are? Scouting?"

"Someone wants to trap us and attack. Makes most sense to let us clash with the Whitecloaks, then kill whoever survives. But that would require an army, of which there is no sign. Just us and the Whitecloaks. I have Elyas hunting out signs of a Waygate in the area, but he hasn't found anything yet. So maybe there's nothing, and I'm just jumping at shadows."

"Lately, husband, it's become likely that those shadows can bite. I trust your instincts."

He looked to her, then smiled deeply. "Thank you."

"So what do we do?"

"We ride to this trial," Perrin said. "And do whatever we can to keep from going to battle with the Whitecloaks. Then tonight, I see if I can stop the thing that is preventing the gateways. We can't just ride far enough away to escape it; the thing can be moved. I saw it in two places. I'll have to destroy it, somehow. After that, we escape."

She nodded, and Perrin gave the call to march. Though the force behind

still seemed chaotic—like a rope chat had been tangled—the army began to move. The various groups sorted themselves out, unraveling.

They made the short trip down the Jehannah Road, approaching the field with the pavilion. The Whitecloaks had already arrived; they were in formation. It looked as if they'd brought their entire army as well.

This was going to be a tense afternoon.

Gaul ran beside Perrin's horse, and he didn't seem worried, nor did he have his face veiled. Faile knew he thought it honorable for Perrin to go to trial. Perrin either had to defend himself or admit toh and accept judgment. Aiel had walked freely to their own executions to meet toh.

They rode down to the pavilion. A chair had been set on a low platform at the northern end, its back to the distant forest of leatherleaf. Mor-gase sat in the elevated chair, looking every inch a monarch, wearing a gown of red and gold that Galad must have found for her. How had Faile ever mistaken this woman for a simple lady's maid?

Chairs had been placed in front of Morgase, and Whitecloaks filled half of them. Galad stood beside her makeshift throne of judgment. His every lock of hair was in place, his uniform without blemish, his cloak falling behind him. Faile glanced to the side and caught Berelain staring at Galad and blushing, looking almost hungry. She had not given up on her attempts to persuade Perrin to let her go make peace with the Whitecloaks.

"Galad Damodred," Perrin called, dismounting before the pavilion. Faile dismounted and walked beside him. "I want you to promise me something before this begins."

"And what would that be?" the young commander called from the open-sided tent.

"Vow not to let this turn to battle," Perrin said.

"I could promise that," Galad said. "But, of course, you'd have to promise me that you're not going to run if the judgment falls against you.

Perrin fell silent. Then he rested his hand upon his hammer.

"Not willing to promise it, I see," Galad said. "I give you this chance because my mother has persuaded me that you should be allowed to speak in your defense. But I would sooner die than allow a man who has murdered Children to walk away unchallenged. If you do not wish this to turn to battle, Perrin Aybara, then present your defense well. Either that, or accept punishment."

Faile glanced at her husband; he was frowning. He looked as if he wanted to speak the requested promise. She laid a hand on his arm.

"I should do it," he said quietly. "How can any man be above the law, Faile? I killed those men in Andor when Morgase was Queen. I should abide by her judgment."

"And your duty to the people of your army?" she asked. "Your duty to Rand and to the Last Battle?" And to me?

Perrin hesitated, then nodded. "You're right." Then, louder, he continued, "Let's be on with this."

Perrin strode into the pavilion, joined immediately by Neald, Dannil and Grady. Their presence made Perrin feel like a coward; the way the four stood made it obvious that they had no intention of letting Perrin be taken.

What was a trial, if Perrin would not abide by its determination? Nothing more than a sham.

The Whitecloaks watched tensely, their officers standing in the shade of the pavilion, their army at parade rest. They looked as if they had no intention of standing down during the proceedings. Perrin's own forces—larger, but less orderly—responded by standing at the ready opposite the Whitecloaks.

Perrin nodded, and Rowan Hum moved off to make certain Galad had released the captives. Perrin walked to the front of the pavilion, stopping just before Morgase's elevated seat. Faile stayed by his side. There were chairs for him here, and he sat. Several steps to his left was Morgase's stand. To his right, the people sat to watch the trial. His back was toward his army.

Faile—smelling wary—sat next to him. Others filed in. Berelain and Alliandre sat with their guards near him; the Aes Sedai and Wise Ones stood at the back, refusing seats. The last few seats were taken by a few of the Two Rivers men and some of the senior former refugees.

The Whitecloak officers sat down opposite them, facing Faile and Perrin. Bornhald and Byar at the front. There were about thirty chairs, likely taken from Perrin's supplies that the Whitecloaks had appropriated.

Perrin," Morgase said from her seat. "Are you certain you want to go through with this?"

"I am," he said.

Very well," she said, her face impassive, though she smelled hesitant. A formally begin this trial. The accused is Perrin Aybara, known as Perrin Goldeneyes." She hesitated. "Lord of the Two Rivers," she added. "Galad, you will present the charges."

"There are three," Galad said, standing. "The first two are the unlawful

murder of Child Lathin and the unlawful murder of Child Yamwick. Ay-bara is also accused of being a Darkfriend and of bringing Trollocs into the Two Rivers."

There were angry murmurs from the Two Rivers men at that last charge. Those Trollocs had killed Perrin's own family.

Galad continued, "The last charge cannot be substantiated yet, as my men were forced out of the Two Rivers before they could gather proof, As to the first two charges, Aybara has already admitted his guilt."

"Is this so, Lord Aybara?" Morgase asked.

"I killed those men, sure enough," Perrin said. "But it wasn't murder"

"Then this is what the court will determine," Morgase said formally. "And this is the dispute."

Morgase seemed a completely different person from Maighdin. Was this how people expected Perrin to act when they came to him for judgment? He had to admit, she did lend the proceedings a measure of needed formality. After all, the trial was happening in a tent on a field with the judge's chair elevated by what appeared to be a small stack of boxes with a rug thrown over them.

"Galad," Morgase said. "Your men may tell their side of the story."

Galad nodded to Byar. He stood, and another Whitecloak—a young man with a completely bald head—stepped forward to join him. Bornhald remained seated.

"Your Grace," Byar said, "it happened about two years ago. During the spring. An unnaturally cold spring, I remember. We were on our way back from important business at the command of the Lord Captain Commander, and we were passing through the wilderness of central Andor. We were going to camp for the night at an abandoned Ogier stedding, at the base of what was once an enormous statue. The kind of place you assume will be safe."

Perrin remembered that night. A chill east wind blowing across him, ruffling his cloak as he stood by a pool of fresh water. He remembered the sun dying silently in the west. He remembered staring at the pool in the waning light, watching the wind ruffle its surface, holding the axe in his hands.

That blasted axe. He should have thrown it away right then. Elyas had persuaded him to keep it.

"When we arrived," Byar continued, "we found that the campsite had been used recently. That concerned us; few people knew of the stedding- We determined, from the single firepit, that there were not many of these mysterious wayfarers."

His voice was precise, his description methodical. That wasn't how Perrin remembered the night. No, he remembered the hiss of the flames, sparks fluttering angrily into the air as Elyas dumped the teapots contents int to firepit. He remembered a hasty sending from the wolves flooding his mind, confusing him. The wolves' wariness had made it hard to separate himself from them. He remembered the smell of fear on Egwene, the way he fumbled with Bela's saddle as he cinched it. And he remembered hundreds of men who

smelled wrong. Like the Whitecloaks in the pavilion. They smelled like sick wolves who snapped at anything that got too close. "The Lord Captain was worried," Byar continued. He was obviously not mentioning the captain's name, perhaps to spare Bornhald. The young Whitecloak captain sat perfectly still, staring at Byar as if he didn't trust himself to look at Perrin. "He thought that maybe the camp had been used by brigands. Who else would douse their fire and vanish the moment someone else approached? That's when we saw the first wolf."

Hiding, breath coming in quick short gasps, Egwene huddled beside him in the dark. The scent of campfire smoke rising from her clothing and from his. Bela breathing in the darkness. The sheltering confines of an enormous stone hand, the hand of Artur Hawkwing's statue, which had broken free long before.

Dapple, angry and worried. Images of men in white with flaming torches. Wind, darting between the trees.

"The Lord Captain thought the wolves were a bad sign. Everyone knows they serve the Dark One. He sent us to scout. My team searched to the east, looking through the rock formations and shards of the enormous broken statue."

Pain. Men shouting. Perrin? Will you dance with me at Sunday? If we're home by then. . . .

"The wolves started to attack us," Byar said, voice growing hard. "It was obvious that they were no ordinary creatures. There was too much coordination to their assaults. There seemed to be dozens of them, moving through the shadows. There were men among them, striking and killing our mounts."

Perrin had watched it with two sets of eyes. His own, from the vantage of the hand. And the eyes of the wolves, who only wanted to be left alone. They had been wounded earlier by an enormous flock of ravens. They'd tried to drive the men away. Scare them.

So much fear. Both the fear of the men and the fear of the wolves. It had ruled that night, controlling both sides. He could remember fighting to remain himself, bewildered by the sendings.

"That night stretched long," Byar said, voice growing softer, yet full of anger. "We passed a hillside with a massive flat rock at the top, and Chid Lathin said he thought he saw something in the shadows there. We stopped, holding forward our lights, and saw the legs of a horse beneath the overhang. I gave Lathin a nod, and he stepped forward to order whoever was in there down to identify themselves.

"Well, that man—Aybara—came out of the darkness with a young woman. He was carrying a wicked axe, and he walked calmly right up to Lathin, ignoring the lance pointed at his chest. And then. . . ."

And then the wolves took over. It was the first time it had happened to Perrin. Their sendings had been so strong that Perrin had lost himself. He could remember crushing Lathin's neck with his teeth, the warm blood bursting into his mouth as if he'd bitten into a fruit. That memory had been Hoppers, but Perrin couldn't separate himself from the wolf for the moments of that fight.

"And then?" Morgase prompted.

"And then there was a fight," Byar said. "Wolves leaped from the shadow and Aybara attacked us. He didn't move like a man, but like a beast, growling. We subdued him and killed one of the wolves, but not before Aybara had managed to kill two of the Children."

Byar sat down. Morgase asked no questions. She turned to the other Whitecloak who had stood with Byar.

"I have little to lend," the man said. "I was there, and I remember it exactly the same way. I want to point out that when we took Aybara into custody, he was already judged guilty. We were going to—"

"That judgment is of no concern to this trial," Morgase said coldly."

"Well, then, allow my voice to be the testimony of a second witness. I saw it all, too." The bald Whitecloak sat down.

Morgase turned to Perrin. "You may speak."

Perrin stood up slowly. "Those two spoke truly, Morgase. That's about how it happened."

"About?" Morgase asked.

"He's nearly right."

"Your guilt or innocence hangs on his 'nearly,' Lord Aybara. It is the measure by which you will be judged."

Perrin nodded. "That it does. Tell me something, Your Grace. When you judge someone like this, do you try to understand their different pieces?"

She frowned. "What?"

"My master, the man who trained me as a blacksmith, taught me an important lesson. To create something, you have to understand it. And to understand something, you have to know what it is made of." A cool breeze

blew through the pavilion, ruffling cloaks. That matched the quiet sounds from the plains outside—men shifting in armor and horses stamping, coughs and ocasional whispers as his words were passed through the ranks.

"I've come to see something lately," Perrin said. "Men are made up of a lot of different pieces. Who they are depends on what situation you put them in. I had a hand in killing those two men. But to understand, you have to see the pieces of me."

He met Galad's eyes. The young Whitecloak captain stood with a straight back, hands clasped behind his back. Perrin wished he could catch the man's scent.

Perrin turned back to Morgase. "I can speak with wolves. I hear their voices in my mind. I know that sounds like the admission of a madman, but I suspect that many in my camp who hear it won't be surprised. Given time, I could prove it to you, with the cooperation of some local wolves."

"That won't be necessary," Morgase said. She smelled of fear. The whispers from the armies grew louder. He caught Faile's scent. Worry.

"This thing I can do," Perrin said. "It's a piece of me, just as forging iron is. Just as leading men is. If you're going to pass judgment on me because of it, you should understand it."

"You dig your own grave, Aybara," Bornhald said, rising and pointing. "Our Lord Captain Commander said he could not prove you were a Darkfriend, and yet here you make the case for us!"

"This doesn't make me a Darkfriend," Perrin said.

"The purpose of this court," Morgase said firmly, "is not to judge that allegation. We will determine Aybara's culpability for the deaths of those two men, and nothing else. You may sit, Child Bornhald."

Bornhald sat angrily.

"I have yet to hear your defense, Lord Aybara," Morgase said.

"The reason I told you what I am—what I do—is to show you that the wolves were my friends." He took a deep breath. "That night in Andor . . . it was terrible, as Byar said. We were scared, all of us. The Whitecloaks were scared of the wolves, the wolves were scared of the fire and the threatening motions the men made, and I was plain scared of the world around me. I'd never been out of the Two Rivers before, and didn't understand why I heard wolves in my head.

Well, none of that is an excuse, and I don't mean it to be one. I killed those men, but they attacked my friends. When the men went hunting for wolf pelts, the wolves fought back." He stopped. They needed the whole truth. "To be honest, Your Grace, I wasn't in control of myself. I was ready to surrender. But with the wolves in my head. ... I felt their pain. Then the Whitecloaks killed a dear friend of mine, and I had to fight. I'd do the same thing to protect a farmer being harassed by soldiers."

"You're a creature of the Shadow!" Bornhald said, rising again. "Your lies insult the dead!"

Perrin turned toward the man, holding his eyes. The tent fell silent, and Perrin could smell the tension hanging in the air. "Have you never re-alized that some men are different from you, Bornhald?" Perrin asked. "Have you ever tried to think what it must be like to be someone else? If you could see through these golden eyes of mine, you'd find the world a different place."

Bornhald opened his mouth as if to spit out another insult, but licked his lips, as if they had grown dry. "You murdered my father," he finally said.

"The Horn of Valere had been blown," Perrin said, "the Dragon Reborn fought Ishamael in the sky. Artur Hawkwing's armies had returned to these shores to dominate. Yes, I was in Falme. I rode to battle alongside the heroes of the Horn, alongside Hawkwing himself, fighting against the Seanchan. I fought on the same side as your father, Bornhald. I've said that he was a good man, and he was. He charged bravely. He died bravely."

The audience was so still they seemed statues. Not a one moved. Bornhald opened his mouth to object again, but then closed it.

"I swear to you," Perrin said, "under the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth, that I did not kill your father. Nor had I anything to do with his death."

Bornhald searched Perrin's eyes, and looked troubled.

"Don't listen to him, Dain," Byar said. The scent of him was strong, stronger than any other in the pavilion. Frenzied, like rotten meat. "He did kill your father."

Galad still stood, watching the exchange. "I've never understood how you know this, Child Byar. What did you see? Perhaps this should be the trial we hold."

"It is not what I saw, Lord Captain," Byar said. "But what I know. How else can you explain how he survived, yet the legion did not! Your father was a valiant warrior, Bornhald. He would never have fallen to the Seanchan!"

"That's foolishness," Galad said. "The Seanchan have beaten us over and over again. Even a good man can fall in battle."

"I saw Goldeneyes there," Byar said, gesturing toward Perrin. "Fighting alongside ghostly apparitions! Creatures of evil!"

"The Heroes of the Horn, Byar," Perrin said. "Couldn't you see that we where fighting alongside the Whitecloaks?"

"You seemed to be," Byar said wildly. "Just as you seemed to be defending the people in the Two Rivers. But I saw through you, Shadowspawn! I saw through you the moment I met you!"

"Is that why you told me to escape?" Perrin said softly. "When I was confined in the elder Lord Bornhald's tent, following my capture. You gave me a sharp rock to cut my bonds and told me that if I ran, nobody would chase me."

Byar froze. He seemed to have forgotten that until this moment.

"You wanted me to try to get away," Perrin said, "so that you could kill me. You wanted Egwene and me dead very badly."

"Is this true, Child Byar?" Galad asked.

Byar stumbled. "Of course ... of course not. I. . . ." Suddenly, he spun and turned to Morgase atop her simple throne of judgment. "This trial is not about me, but him! You have heard both sides. What is your answer? Judge, woman!"

"You should not speak to my mother so," Galad said quietly. His face was impassive, but Perrin smelled danger on him. Bornhald, looking very troubled, had sat back down and was holding his head with his hand.

"No, it is all right," Morgase said. "He is right. This trial is about Perrin Aybara." She turned from Byar to regard Perrin. He looked back calmly. She smelled ... as if she were curious about something. "Lord Aybara. Do you feel you have spoken adequately for yourself?"

"I was protecting myself and my friends," Perrin said. "The Whitecloaks had no authority to do as they did, ordering us out, threatening us. You know their reputation as well as any, I suspect. We had good reason to be wary of them and disobey their orders. It wasn't murder. I was just defending myself."

Morgase nodded. "I will make my decision, then."

"What of having others speak for Perrin?" Faile demanded, standing.

"That won't be needed, Lady Faile," Morgase said. "So far as I can tell, the only other person we could interview would be Egwene al'Vere, which doesn't seem within the reasonable bounds of this trial."

"But—"

It is enough," Morgase interrupted, voice growing cold. "We could have a dozen Children name him Darkfriend and two dozen of his followers laud his virtues. Neither would serve this trial. We are speaking of specific events, on a specific day."

Faile fell silent, though she smelled furious. She took Perrin's arm, not sitting back down. Perrin felt . . . regretful. He had presented the truth. But he wasn't satisfied.

He hadn't wanted to kill those Whitecioaks, but he had. And he'd done it in a frenzy, without control. He could blame the wolves, he could blame the Whitecioaks, but the honest truth was that he had lost control When he'd awoken, he'd barely remembered what he had done.

"You know my answer, Perrin," Morgase said. "I can see it in your eyes "

"Do what you must," Perrin said.

"Perrin Aybara, I pronounce you guilty."

"No!" Faile screamed. "How dare you! He took you in!"

Perrin put a hand on her shoulder. She'd been reaching for her sleeve by reflex, aiming for the knives there.

"This has nothing to do with how I personally feel about Perrin," Morgase said. "This is a trial by Andoran law. Well, the law is very clear. Perrin may feel that the wolves were his friends, but the law states that a man's hound or livestock is worth a certain price. Slaying them is unlawful, but killing a man in retribution is even more so. I can quote the very statutes to you if you wish."

The pavilion was silent. Neald had risen halfway from his chair, but Perrin met his eyes and shook his head. The Aes Sedai and Wise Ones wore faces that betrayed nothing. Berelain looked resigned, and sun-haired Alliandre had one hand to her mouth.

Dannil and Azi al'Thone moved up to Perrin and Faile, and Perrin did not force them to back down.

"What does this matter?" Byar demanded. "He's not going to abide by the judgment!"

Other Whitecioaks stood, and this time Perrin couldn't stare down all those on his side who did likewise.

"I have not passed sentence yet," Morgase said, voice crisp.

"What other sentence could there be?" Byar asked. "You said he's guilty.

"Yes," Morgase said. "Though I believe there are further circumstances relevant to the sentencing." Her face was still hard, and she smelled determined. What was she doing?

"The Whitecioaks were an unauthorized military group within the confines of my realm," Morgase said. "By this light, while I do rule Per-rin guilty of killing your men, I rule the incident subject to the Kainec protocol."

"Is that the law that governs mercenaries?" Galad asked.

"Indeed."

"What is this?" Perrin asked.

Galad turned to him. "She has ruled that our altercation was a brawl between unemployed mercenary groups. Essentially, the ruling states there were no innocents in the clash—you are not, therefore, charged with murder. Instead, you have killed illegally."

"There's a difference?" Dannil asked, frowning.

"One of semantics," Galad said, hands still clasped behind his back, Perrin caught his scent; it was curious. "Yes, this is a good ruling, Mother. But the punishment is still death, I believe."

"It can be," Morgase said. "The code is much more lenient, depending on the circumstances."

"Then what do you rule?" Perrin asked.

"I do not," Morgase said. "Galad, you are the one responsible for the men killed, or the closest we have. I will pass sentencing on to you. I have given the ruling and the legal definitions. You decide the punishment."

Galad and Perrin locked eyes across the pavilion. "I see," Galad said. "A strange choice, Your Grace. Aybara, it must be asked again. Will you abide by the decisions of this trial that you yourself suggested? Or must this be settled with conflict?"

Faile tensed at his side. Perrin could hear his army moving behind him, men loosening swords in their sheaths, muttering. The word passed through them as a low hum. Lord Perrin, named guilty. They're going to try to take him. We won't let it happen, will we?

The bitter scents of fear and anger mixed in the pavilion, both sides glowering at one another. Above it all, Perrin could smell that wrongness to the air.

Can 1 continue to run? he thought. Hounded by that day? There were no coincidences with ta'veren. Why had the Pattern brought him here to confront these nightmares from his past?

"I will abide by it, Damodred," Perrin said.

"What?" Faile gasped.

But," Perrin said, raising a finger, "only so long as you promise to delay execution of this punishment until after I have done my duty at the Last Battle."

You'll accept judgment after the Last Battle?" Bornhald asked, sounding befuddled. "After what may be the end of the world itself? After you've had time to escape, perhaps betray us? What kind of promise is that?" "The only kind I can make," Perrin said. "I don't know what the future

will bring, or if we'll reach it. But we're fighting for survival. Maybe the world itself. Before that, all other concerns are secondary. This is the only

way I could submot.

way 1 can submit.

"How do we know you'll keep your word?" Galad asked. "My men name you Shadowspawn."

"I came here, didn't I?" Perrin asked.

"Because we had your people captive."

"And would Shadowspawn give one hair's worry about that?" Perrin asked.

Galad hesitated.

"I swear it," Perrin said. "By the Light and by my hope of salvation and rebirth. By my love of Faile and on the name of my father. You'll have your chance, Galad Damodred. If you and I both survive until the end of this, I'll submit to your authority."

Galad studied him, then nodded. "Very well."

"No!" Byar cried. "This is foolishness!"

"We leave, Child Byar," Galad said, walking to the side of the pavilion. "My decision has been made. Mother, will you attend me?"

"I'm sorry, Galad," Morgase said. "But no. Aybara is making his way-back to Andor, and I must go with him."

"Very well." Galad continued on.

"Wait," Perrin called. "You didn't tell me what my punishment will be, once I submit."

"No," Galad said, still walking. "I didn't."

CHAPTER

35

The Right Thing

You understand what you are to do?" Egwene asked, walking toward her rooms in the White Tower. Siuan nodded.

"If they do appear," Egwene said, "you will not let yourself be drawn into a fight."

"We're not children, Mother," Siuan said dryly.

"No, you're Aes Sedai—nearly as bad at following directions."

Siuan gave her a flat look, and Egwene regretted her words. They had been uncalled-for; she was on edge. She calmed herself.

She had tried several forms of bait to lure Mesaana out, but so far, there hadn't been any nibbles. Egwene swore she could almost feel the woman watching her in Tel'aran'rhiod. Yukiri and her group were at a standstill.

Her best hope was the meeting tonight. It had to draw her. Egwene didn't have any time left—the monarchs she'd persuaded were already beginning to move, and Rand's forces were gathering.

Tonight. It must happen tonight.

"Go," Egwene said. "Speak with the others. I don't want there to be any foolish mistakes."

"Yes, Mother," Siuan grumbled, turning away.

And Siuan," Egwene called after her.

The former Amyrlin hesitated. "See to your safety tonight," Egwene said. "I would not lose you."

Siuan often gave such concern a crusty reply, but tonight she smiled Egwene shook her head and hurried on to her rooms, where she found Silviana waiting.

"Gawyn?" Egwene asked.

"There has been no news of him," Silviana replied. "I sent a messenger for him this afternoon, but the messenger hasn't returned. I suspect that Gawyn is delaying his reply to be difficult."

"He's nothing if not stubborn," Egwene said. She felt exposed without him. That was surprising, since she'd pointedly ordered him to stay away from her door. Now she worried about him not being there?

"Double my guard, and make certain to have soldiers posted nearby If my wards go off, they will raise a clatter."

"Yes, Mother," Silviana said.

"And send Gawyn another messenger," she said. "One with a more politely worded letter. Ask him to return; don't order him." Knowing Silviana's opinion of Gawyn, Egwene was sure the original letter had been brusque.

With that, Egwene took a deep breath, then went into her rooms, checked on her wards, and prepared to go to sleep.

7 shouldn't feel so exhausted, Perrin thought as he climbed down from Stepper. I didn't do anything but talk.

The trial weighed on him. It seemed to weigh upon the entire army. Perrin looked at them as they rode back into camp. Morgase was there, off on her own. Faile had watched her the whole way back, smelling of anger, but not speaking a word. Alliandre and Berelain had kept their distance.

Morgase had condemned him, but in truth, he didn't much care. He had deflected the Whitecloaks; now he needed to lead his people to safety.

Morgase rode through camp, seeking out Lini and Master Gill. They'd arrived safely, together with all the other captives, as Galad Damodred had promised. Surprisingly, he'd sent the supplies and carts with them.

The trial was a victory, then. Perrin's men didn't seem to see it that way. The soldiers split into groups as they slunk back into camp. There was little talking.

Beside Perrin, Gaul shook his head. "Two silver points."

"What's that?" Perrin asked, handing Stepper to a groom.

"A saying," Gaul said, glancing up at the sky. "Two silver points. Twice we have ridden to battle and found no foe. Once more, and we lose honor.

"Better to find no foe, Gaul," Perrin said. "Better no blood be shed.'

Gaul laughed. "I do not say I wish to end the dream, Perrin Aybara. But look at your men. They can feel what I say. You should not dance the spears without purpose, but neither should you too often demand that men prepare themselves to kill, then give them nobody to fight." "I'll do it as often as I like," Perrin said gruffly, "if it means avoiding

a battle. I—"

A horse's hooves thumped the ground, and the wind brought him

Faile's scent as he turned to face her.

"A battle avoided indeed, Perrin Aybara," Gaul said, "and another invited. May you find water and shade." He trotted away as Faile dismounted.

Perrin took a deep breath.

"All right, husband," she said, striding up to him. "You will explain to me just what you thought you were doing. You let him pass judgment on you? You promised to deliver yourself to him? I wasn't under the impression that I'd married a fool!"

"I'm no fool, woman," he roared back. "You keep telling me I need to lead. Well, today I took your advice!"

"You took it and made the wrong decision."

"There was no right decision!"

"You could have let us fight them."

"They intend to fight at the Last Battle," Perrin said. "Every Whitecloak we killed would be one less man to face the Dark One. Me, my men, the Whitecloaks—none of us matter compared to what is coming! They had to live, and so did we. And this was the only way!"

Light, but it felt wrong to yell at her. Yet it actually softened her temper. Remarkably, the soldiers nearby him started to nod, as if they hadn't been able to see the truth until he'd bellowed it out.

"I want you to take command of the retreat," Perrin said to Faile. "The trap hasn't sprung yet, but I find myself itching more each minute. Something's watching us; they have taken away our gateways, and they intend to see us dead. They now know we won't fight the Whitecloaks, which means they'll attack soon. Maybe this evening; if we're lucky, they'll delay until tomorrow morning."

We aren't done with this argument," she warned.

What's done is done, Faile. Look forward."

Very well." She still smelled angry, those beautiful dark eyes of hers fierce, but she contained it.

"I'm going to the wolf dream," Perrin said, glancing toward the edge of camp, where their tent lay. "Ill either destroy that dome, or I'll find a way

to force Slayer to tell me how to make Traveling work again. Get the people ready to march, and have the Asha'man try to make a gateway on every count of a hundred. The moment it works, get our people out of here."

"Where?" Faile asked. "Jehannah?"

Perrin shook his head. "Too close. The enemy might be watching ther Andor. Take them to Caemlyn. Actually, no. Whitebridge. Let's stay away from anywhere they might expect. Besides, I don't want to show up with an army on Elayne's doorstep until I've warned her."

"A good plan," Faile said. "If you fear attack, we should move the carnp followers first, rather than moving the armies through and leaving us undefended."

Perrin nodded. "But get them moving as soon as the gateways work again."

"And if you don't succeed?" Faile had begun to sound determined. Frightened, but determined.

"If I haven't restored gateways in one hour, start them marching toward the perimeter where Neald discovered that he can make gateways. I don't think that will work; I think Slayer will just move the dome, always keeping us underneath it. But it's something."

Faile nodded, but her scent became hesitant. "That will also put us marching, rather than in camp. Much easier to ambush that way."

"I know," Perrin said. "That is why I must not fail."

She took him into her arms, head against his chest. She smelled so wonderful. Like Faile. That was the definition of wonderful to him. "You've said he's stronger than you are," she whispered.

"He is."

"Can I do anything to help you face him?" she asked softly.

"If you watch over them while I'm gone, that will help."

"What happens if he kills you while you're there?"

Perrin didn't reply.

"There's no other way?" she asked.

He pulled back from her. "Faile, I'm fairly certain that he's Lord Luc. They smell different, but there's something similar about them, too. And when I wounded Slayer in the wolf dream before, Luc bore the wound."

"Is that supposed to help me feel better?" she asked, grimacing.

"It's all coming back around. We finish with Maiden and find ourselves within a stone's toss of the remnants of the Whitecloaks, Byar and Bornhald with them. Slayer appears in the wolf dream again. That man I told you of, Noam, the one who was in the cage. Do you remember where I found him?

"You said you were chasing Rand. Through . . ."

"Ghealdan," Perrin said. "It happened not one week's ride from here."

"An odd coincidence, but—"

"No coincidences, Faile. Not with me. I'm here for a reason. He's here for a reason. I must face this."

She nodded. He turned to walk toward their tent, her hand slipping free of his. The Wise Ones had given him a tea that would let him sleep so he could enter the wolf dream.

It was time.

"How could you let him go?" Byar said, knuckles clenched on the pommel of his sword, white cloak flapping behind him. He, Bornhald and Galad walked through the middle of their camp.

"I did what was right," Galad said.

"Letting him go free was not right!" Byar said. "You can't believe—"

"Child Byar," Galad said softly, "I find your attitude increasingly insubordinate. That troubles me. It should trouble you as well."

Byar closed his mouth and said no more, though Galad could see that it was difficult for him to hold his tongue. Behind Byar, Bornhald walked silently, looking very upset.

"I believe that Aybara will keep his oath," Galad said. "And if he does not, I now have the legal grounds to hunt him and exact punishment. It is not ideal, but there was wisdom to his words. I do believe the Last Battle is coming, and if so, it is time to unite against the Shadow."

"My Lord Captain Commander," Byar said, managing his tone, "with all respect, that man is of the Shadow. He will not be fighting beside us, but against us."

"If that is true," Galad said, "we will still have a chance to face him on the field of battle. I have made my decision, Child Byar." Harnesh strode up to join them and saluted. Galad nodded. "Child Harnesh, strike camp."

"My Lord Captain Commander? This late in the day?"

'Yes," Galad said. "We will march into the night and put some distance between us and Aybara, just in case. Leave scouts, make certain he doesn't try to follow us. We'll make for Lugard. We can recruit and resup-ply, then continue on toward Andor."

Yes, my Lord Captain Commander," Harnesh said.

Galad turned to Byar as Harnesh left. The skeletal man gave a salute, sunken eyes dangerously resentful, then stalked off. Galad stopped on the field, between white tents, hands behind his back as he watched messengers relay his orders through camp.

"You are quiet, Child Bornhald," Galad said after a few moments. Ate you as displeased with my actions as Child Byar is?"

"I don't know," Bornhald said. "I've believed for so long that Aybara killed my father. And yet, seeing how Jaret acts, remembering his description... There is no evidence. It frustrates me to admit it, Galad, but I have no proof He did kill Lathin and Yamwick, however. He killed Children, so he is a Darkfriend."

"I killed one of the Children, too," Galad said. "And was named Darkfriend for it."

"That was different." Something seemed to be troubling Bornhald, something he wasn't saying.

"Well, that is true," Galad said. "I do not disagree that Aybara should be punished, but the day's events leave me strangely troubled."

He shook his head. Finding answers should be easy. The right thing always came to him. However, whenever he thought he'd seized upon the right course of action regarding Aybara, he found distasteful worries cropping up inside of him.

Life is not so easy as the toss of a coin, his mother had said. One side or the other. . . your simple illusions . . .

He did not like the feeling. Not at all.

Perrin inhaled deeply. Flowers bloomed in the wolf dream, even as the sky raged silver, black and gold. The scents were so incongruous. Baking cherry pie. Horse dung. Oil and grease. Soap. A wood fire. Arrath. Thyme. Catfern. A hundred other herbs he couldn't name.

Very few of them fit the meadow where he had appeared. He'd made certain not to appear where his camp was in the wolf dream; that would have put him too near Slayer.

The scents were fleeting. Vanishing too quickly, as if they'd never really been there.

Hopper, he sent.

/ am here, Young Bull. The wolf appeared beside him.

"It smells strange."

Scents blend, Hopper sent. Like the waters of a thousand streams. It is not natural. It is not good. This place begins to break.

Perrin nodded. He shifted, appearing knee deep in brown cockleburrs just outside of the violet dome. Hopper appeared to his right, weeds crackling as he moved among them.

The dome rose, ominous and unnatural. A wind blew, shuffling the weeds and shaking tree limbs. Lightning flashed silently in the sky.

He is there, Hopper sent. Always.

Perrin nodded. Did Slayer come to the wolf dream the way Perrin did? And did spending time in it leave him still tired, as it did Perrin? The man never seemed to leave this area.

He was guarding something. There had to be a way in the wolf dream to disable the dome.

Young Bull, we come. The sending was from Oak Dancer. Her pack was approaching, now only three strong. Sparks, Boundless, Oak Dancer herself. They had chosen to come here, rather than join the wolves running northward.

The three appeared behind Hopper. Perrin looked to them, and sent concern. This will be dangerous. Wolves may die.

Their sending back was insistent. Slayer must fall for what he has done. Together we are strong. Young Bull should not hunt such dangerous prey alone.

He nodded in agreement, letting his hammer appear in his hand. Together, they approached the dome. Perrin walked into it with a slow, determined stride. He refused to feel weakness. He was strong. The dome was nothing but air. He believed the world to be as he wished it.

He stumbled, but pulled through into the inside of the dome. The landscape felt faintly darker here. Elder trees more dim of bark, the dying dogfen-nel a deeper green or brown. Hopper and the pack moved through the dome around him.

We make for the center, Perrin sent. If there is a secret to discover, it will probably be there.

They moved slowly through the brush and stands of trees. Perrin imposed his will upon the area around him, and the leaves stopped crackling, weeds remaining silent when he brushed against them. That was natural. It was the way things should be. So it was.

It would be a long distance to the center, so Perrin began hopping forward. Not jumps or steps; he simply stopped being in one place, appearing in a different location. He masked his scent, though Slayer was not a wolf.

That has to become my advantage, Perrin thought as they grew closer and closer to the center. He is more experienced than I. But I have the wolf within me. This place is our dream. He is the invader. However skilled he may be, he is not one of us.

And that is why I will win.

Perrin smelled something; an increasing wrongness in the air. He and the wolves crept up to a large hillside, then peered around a cleft in the land there. A small stand of elder trees stood just ahead, perhaps fifty paces away. Looking up, he judged this to be very near the center of the dome. Using the shifting way of wolves, they'd traveled several hours' worth of walking in a few minutes.

That is it, Perrin sent. He looked at Hopper. The wolf's scent was masked, but he was coming to know wolves well enough to read concern in Hoppers stare and the way he stood with forelegs bent just a fraction.

Something changed.

Perrin heard nothing. He smelled nothing. But he felt something, a small tremble in the ground.

Go! he sent, vanishing. He appeared ten paces away to see an arrow hit the hillside where he'd been standing. The shaft split a large stone, embedding itself in the rock and earth up to its black fletching.

Slayer stood from a crouch, turning to look at Perrin across the short expanse of ground. His eyes seemed black, his square face shadowed, his tall body muscular and dangerous. As he often did, he wore a smile. Really a sneer. He wore leather breeches and a shirt of deep green, forearms exposed, hand holding his wicked bow of dark wood. He wore no quiver; he created arrows as he needed them.

Perrin held his eyes, stepping forward as if in challenge. That was enough of a distraction for the wolves to attack from behind.

Slayer yelled, spinning as Boundless slammed into him. Perrin was there in an eyeblink, bringing his hammer down. Slayer vanished, and Perrin struck only earth, but he caught a whiff of where Slayer had gone.

Here? That scent was of the same place that Perrin was. Alarmed, he looked up to see Slayer hovering in the air just above, drawing an arrow.

The wind, Perrin thought. It is so strong!

The arrow loosed, but a sudden gust blew it sideways. It sank into the earth just beside Perrin. He did not flinch, raising his hands, his own bow appearing in them. Already drawn, arrow in place.

Slayer's eyes opened wider as Perrin loosed. Slayer vanished, appearing on the ground a short distance away—and Hopper leaped on him from above, pulling him to the ground. Slayer cursed with a guttural sound, then vanished.

Here, Hopper sent, showing a hillside.

Perrin was there in an instant, hammer in his hands, the pack with him. Slayer raised a sword in one hand and a knife in the other as Perrin and the four wolves attacked.

Perrin hit first, swinging his hammer with a roar. Slayer actually sank into the ground, as if it were liquid, dropping beneath the axe blow. He rammed his knife forward—piercing Oak Dancer's breast with a splash of scarlet blood as he swung to the side, slashing across Sparks' face. Oak Dancer didn't get time to howl; she collapsed to the ground, and Slayer vanished as Perrin brought his hammer back around. Whimpering, Sparks sent agony and panic and vanished. He would live. But Oak Dancer was dead.

Slayer's scent had been this place again. Perrin turned to smash his hammer into Slayer's sword as it sought to pierce him from behind. Again a look of surprise from Slayer. The man bared his teeth, pulling back, keeping a wary eye on the two remaining wolves, Hopper and Boundless. Slayer's forearm was bleeding where Hopper had bitten him.

"How is the dome created, Luc?" Perrin said. "Show me and leave. I will let you depart."

"Bold words, cub," Slayer snarled back. "For one who just watched me kill one of your pack."

Boundless howled in anger, leaping forward. Perrin attacked at the same time, but the ground beneath them trembled, shaking.

No, Perrin thought. His own footing became firm as Boundless was knocked to the ground.

Slayer lunged, and Penin raised his hammer to block—but Slayer's weapon turned into smoke and passed right through it, solidifying on the other side. With a yelp, Perrin tried to pull back, but the blade scored him across the chest, cutting through his shirt and leaving a gash from one arm to the other. It flared with pain.

Perrin gasped, stumbling backward. Slayer drove forward, but something crashed into him from above. Hopper. Once again the grizzled wolf bore Slayer to the ground, growling, fangs flashing.

Slayer cursed and kicked the wolf free. Hopper went flying with a whimper of pain, tossed some twenty feet. To the side, Boundless had caused the earth to stop rumbling, but had hurt his paw.

Perrin shook himself free of his pain. Slayer was strong in control over this world. Perrin's hammer felt sluggish whenever he swung, as if the air itself were thicker.

Slayer had smiled when he'd killed Oak Dancer. Perrin moved forward, enraged. Slayer was on his het and retreating back down the hillside, toward the trees. Perrin chased after him, ignoring his wound. It wasn't bad enough to stop him, though he did imagine a bandage in place on it, his clothing mended and tight against his chest to stanch the blood.

He entered the trees just behind Slayer. The branches closed overhead,

and vines whipped from the darkened shadows. Perrin didn't bother fighting them off. Vines didn't move like that. They couldn't touch him. Sure enough, as soon as they grew close, they withered and fell still.

Slayer cursed, then began to move in bursting steps, leaving a blur behind him. Perrin followed, enhancing his own speed.

Perrin didn't consciously make the decision to drop to four legs, but in a heartbeat he had done so, chasing after Slayer as he'd hunted the white stag.

Slayer was fast, but he was merely a man. Young Bull was part of the land itself, the trees, the brush, the stones, the rivers. He moved through the forest like a breeze blowing through a hollow, keeping pace with Slayer gaining on him. Each log in Slayer's way was an obstruction, but to Young Bull each was just a part of the pathway.

Young Bull leaped to the side, paws against the tree trunks pushing him when he turned. He soared, over stones and rocks, leaping from one to the next, leaving a blur in the air behind him.

Slayer smelled afraid for the first time. He vanished, but Young Bull followed, appearing in the field where the army camped, beneath the shadow of the large stone sword. Slayer looked over his shoulder and cursed, vanishing again.

Young Bull followed. The place where the Whitecloaks had made camp.

The top of a small plateau.

A cavern burrowed into a hillside.

The middle of a small lake. Young Bull ran upon the surface with ease.

Each place Slayer went, he followed, each moment growing closer. There was no time for swords, hammers, or bows. This was a chase, and Young Bull was the hunter this time. He—

He leaped into the middle of a field, and Slayer wasn't there. He smelled where the man had gone, however. He followed him, and appeared in another place on the same field. There were scents of places all around. What?

Perrin came to a stop, booted feet grinding into the ground. He spun, bewildered. Slayer must have hopped quickly through several different places in the same field, confusing his trail. Perrin tried to determine which one to follow, but they all faded and intermixed.

"Burn him!" he said.

Young Bull, a sending came. Sparks. The wolf had been wounded, but he hadn't fled as Perrin had assumed. He sent an image of a thin silver rod, two handspans high, sprouting from the ground in the middle of a stand of dogfennel.

Perrin smiled and sent himself there. The wounded wolf, still trailing blood, lay beside the object. It was obviously some sort of ter'angreal. it ppeared to be made of dozens upon dozens of fine, wirelike bits of metal woven together like a braid. It was about two handspans long, and was driven point first into the soft earth.

Perrin pulled it from the ground. The dome didn't vanish. He turned the spike over in his hand, but had no idea how to make the dome stop. He willed the spike to change into something else, a stick, and was shocked when he was rebuffed. The object actually seemed to push his mind away.

It is here in its reality, Sparks sent. The sending tried to convey something, that the item was somehow more real than most things in the dream world.

Perrin didn't have time to wonder about it. First priority was to move the dome, if he could, away from where his people camped. He sent himself to the edge where he'd entered the dome.

As he'd hoped, the center of the dome moved with him. He was at the place where he'd entered, but the edge of the dome had changed positions, the center falling wherever Perrin was standing. The dome still dominated the sky, extending far in every direction.

Young Bull, Sparks sent. I am free. The wrongness is gone.

Go, Perrin sent. I'll take this and get rid of it. Each of you, go a different direction and howl. Confuse Slayer.

The wolves responded. A part of Perrin, the hunter inside of him, was frustrated at not having been able to defeat Slayer directly. But this was more important.

He tried to shift to someplace distant, but it didn't work. It appeared that even though he was holding the ter'angreal, he was still bound by the dome's rules.

So, instead, he shifted as far as he could. Neald had said it was about four leagues from their camp to the perimeter, so Perrin shifted that far to the north, then did so again, and again. The enormous dome moved with him, its center always appearing directly over his head.

He would take the spike someplace safe, someplace where Slayer couldn't find it.

CHAPTER

36

An Invitation

Egwene appeared in Tel'aran'rhiod wearing a pure white gown sewn with golden thread at the seams and in the embroidery, tiny bits of obsidian—polished but unshaped—sewn in gold along the trim of the bodice. A terribly impractical dress to own, but that didn't matter here.

She was in her chambers, where she'd wanted to appear. She sent herself to the hallway outside the Yellow Ajah's quarters. Nynaeve was there, arms folded, her dress a far more sensible tan and brown.

"I want you to be very careful," Egwene said. "You're the only one here who has faced one of the Forsaken directly, and you also have more experience with Tel'aran'rhiod than the others. If Mesaana arrives, you are to lead the attack."

"I think I can manage that," Nynaeve said, the corners of her mouth rising. Yes, she could manage it. Holding Nynaeve back from attacking, that would have been the difficult task.

Egwene nodded, and Nynaeve vanished. She'd remain hidden near the Hall of the Tower, watching for Mesaana or Black sisters coming to spy on the decoy meeting happening there. Egwene sent herself to another place in the city, a hall where the true meeting would take place between herself, the Wise Ones and the Windfinders.

Tar Valon had several meeting halls used for musical performances or for gatherings. This one, known as the Musician's Way, was perfect for her

needs. It was precisely decorated with leatherleaf wood paneling carved to look like a forest of trees lining the walls. The chairs were of a matching wood, sung by Ogier, each one a thing of beauty. They were arranged in the round, facing a central podium. The domed ceiling was inset with marble carved to look like stars in the sky. The ornamentation was remarkable; beautiful without being gaudy.

The Wise Ones had already arrived—Amys, Bair and Melaine, whose belly was great with the later stages of pregnancy. This amphitheater had a raised platform along one side where the Wise Ones could sit comfortably on the floor, yet those seated in the chairs would not look down at them.

Leane, Yukiri and Seaine sat in chairs facing the Wise Ones, each wearing one of Elayne's copied dream ter'angreal, looking shadowy and insubstantial. Elayne was supposed to be there, too, but she had warned she might have trouble channeling enough to enter Tel'aran'rhiod.

The Aes Sedai and Wise Ones inspected one another with a nearly palpable air of hostility. The Aes Sedai considered the Wise Ones to be poorly trained wilders; the Wise Ones, in turn, thought the Aes Sedai full of themselves.

As Egwene arrived, a group of women with dark skin and black hair appeared in the very center of the room. The Windhnders glanced about suspiciously. Siuan had said, from her time teaching them, that the Sea Folk had legends about Tel'aran'rhiod and its dangers. That hadn't stopped the Windhnders from learning everything they could about the World of Dreams the moment they discovered that it was real.

At the head of the Windhnders was a tall, slender woman with narrow eyes and a long neck, numerous medallions on the fine chain connecting her nose to her left ear. That would be Shielyn, one of those Nynaeve had told Egwene about. The three other Windfinders included a dignified woman with white locks of hair woven among her black. That would be Renaile, according to the letters they'd sent and Nynaeve's instruction. Egwene had been led to believe she'd be foremost among them, but she seemed subservient to the others. Had she lost her place as Windfinder to the Mistress of the Ships?

"Welcome," Egwene said to them. "Please, sit." We will stand," Shielyn said. Her voice was tense.

'Who are these ones, Egwene al'Vere?" Amys asked. "Children should not be visiting Tel'aran'rhiod. It is not an abandoned sand-badger's den to be explored."

"Children?" Shielyn asked.

"You are children here, wetlander."

"Amys, please," Egwene cut in. "I lent them ter'angreal to come here. It was necessary."

"We could have met outside the World of Dreams," Bair said. "Choosing the middle of a battlefield might have been safer."

Indeed, the Windfinders were very unfamiliar with the workings of Tel'aran'rhiod. Their bright clothing periodically changed colors—in fact, as Egwene watched, Renaile's blouse vanished entirely. Egwene found herself blushing, though Elayne had mentioned that when on the waves, Sea Folk men and women both worked wearing not a stitch above the waist The blouse was back a moment later. Their jewelry also seemed in almost constant flux.

"There are reasons I have done what I have done, Amys," Egwene said striding forward and seating herself. "Shielyn din Sabura Night Waters and her sisters have been told of the dangers of this place, and have accepted responsibility for their own safety."

"A little like giving a firebrand and a cask of oil to a child," Melaine muttered, "and claiming you've given him responsibility for his own safety."

"Must we endure this squabbling, Mother?" Yukiri asked.

Egwene took a calming breath. "Please, you are leaders of your separate peoples, women with reputations for great wisdom and acuity. Can we not at least be civil with one another?" Egwene turned to the Sea Folk. "Wind-finder Shielyn, you have accepted my invitation. Surely you will now not reject my hospitality by standing through the entire meeting?"

The woman hesitated. She had a proud air to her; recent interaction between the Aes Sedai and the Sea Folk had made her bold. Egwene shoved down a stab of anger; she did not like the details of the bargain regarding the Bowl of Winds. Nynaeve and Elayne should have known better. They—

No. Elayne and Nynaeve had done their best, and had been under unusual strain. Besides, bargaining with the Sea Folk was said to be only one step safer than bargaining with the Dark One himself.

Shielyn finally gave a curt nod, though her blouse changed colors several times while she considered, settling on crimson, and her jewelry kept vanishing and reappearing. "Very well. We are indebted to you for the gift of this place, and will agree to your hospitality." She sat down in a chair apart from Egwene and the other Aes Sedai, and those with her did as well.

Egwene released a soft breath of relief and summoned several small tables with cups of warm, fragrant tea. The Windfinders jumped, though the Wise Ones didn't bat an eye. Amys did, however, reach for her cup and change the rose-blossom tea to something with a much darker cast.

"Perhaps you will tell us the purpose of this meeting," Bair said, sipping her tea. The Sea Folk did not pick up theirs, though the Aes Sedai did began to drink.

"We have guessed it already," Shielyn said. "This confrontation is inevitable, though I wish to the winds that it were not so."

"Well, speak up, then," Yukiri said. "What is it about?"

Shielyn focused on Egwene. "For many seasons and tides we hid the nature of our Windfinding from the Aes Sedai. The White Tower inhales, but does not exhale—that which is brought in is never allowed to leave. Now that you know of us, you want us, for you cannot stand the thought of women channeling outside of your grasp."

The Aes Sedai frowned. Egwene caught Melaine nodding in agreement. The words were true enough, though only one side of the issue. If they'd known how useful White Tower training would be, and how important it was for the people to know that channelers were being cared for and trained . . .

However, that thinking felt hollow to her. The Sea Folk had their own traditions, and made fine use of their channelers without regulation from the White Tower. Egwene hadn't spent as much time with the Sea Folk as Nynaeve or Elayne, but she'd had detailed reports. The Windfinders were unskilled with many weaves, but their abilities with specific weaves—particularly those focusing on Air—were far more advanced than those practiced by Aes Sedai.

These women deserved the truth. Was that not what the White Tower, and the Three Oaths, stood for? "You are correct, Shielyn din Sabura Night Waters " Egwene said. "And your people may have been wise to keep their abilities hidden from the Aes Sedai."

Yukiri gasped, a quite un-Aes Sedai reaction. Shielyn froze, chain from her ear to nose tinkling softly as the medallions on it hit together. Her blouse changed to blue. "What?"

"You may have been wise," Egwene said. "I would not presume to second-guess the Amyrlins who came before me, but there is an argument to be made. Perhaps we have been overly zealous to control women who can wield the One Power. It is obvious that the Windfinders have done well in training themselves. I should think that the White Tower could learn much from you."

Shielyn settled back, scanning Egwene's face. Egwene met the woman's eyes and kept her expression calm. See that I am resolute, she thought. See that I mean what I say. That is not flattery. I am Aes Sedai. 1 speak the truth.

"Well," Shielyn said. "Perhaps we could make a bargain that would allow us to train your women."

Egwene smiled. "I was hoping that you would see the advantage ' that." To the side, the three other Aes Sedai regarded Egwene with measured hostility. Well, they would see. The best way to gain the upper hand was to shake expectations like rindwater beetles in a jar.

"And yet," Egwene said, "you acknowledge that there are things the White Tower knows that you do not. Otherwise you would not have striven to bargain for our women to train your Windflnders."

"We will not rescind that agreement," Shielyn said quickly. Her blouse turned pale yellow.

"Oh, I expect nothing of the sort," Egwene said. "It is well that you now have Aes Sedai teachers. Those who bargained with you achieved something unexpected."

True words, every one. However, the way she said them implied something more—that Egwene had wanted the Aes Sedai to be sent to the Sea Folk ships. Shielyn's frown deepened, and she sat back in her chair. Egwene hoped she was considering whether her people's grand victory over the Bowl of the Winds had been a setup from the start.

"If anything," Egwene continued, "I feel that the previous agreement was not ambitious enough." She turned to the Wise Ones. "Amys, would you agree that the Aes Sedai have knowledge of weaves that the Wise Ones do not?"

"It would be foolish not to admit Aes Sedai expertise in these areas," Amys said carefully. "They spend much time practicing their weaves. But there are things we know that they do not."

"Yes," Egwene said. "During my time training beneath the Wise Ones, I learned more about leadership than I did during my time in the White Tower. You also gave me very helpful training in Tel'aran'rhiod and Dreaming."

"All right," Bair said, "out with it. We've been chasing a three-legged lizard this entire conversation, poking it with a stick to see if it will move any further."

"We need to share what we know with one another," Egwene said. "We three groups—women who can channel—need to form an alliance."

"With the White Tower in control, I assume," Shielyn said.

"All I am saying," Egwene replied, "is that there is wisdom in sharing and learning from others. Wise Ones, I would have Accepted from the White Tower be sent to train with you. It would be particularly useful to have you train them to master Tel'aran'rhiod"

It was unlikely that another Dreamer, such as Egwene, would be discovered among the Aes Sedai, though she could hope. The Talent was very rare. Still, it would be advantageous to have some sisters trained in Tel'aran'rhiod, even if they did have to enter with ter'angreal.

"Windfinders," Egwene continued. "I would send women to you as well, particularly those skilled in Air, to learn to call the winds as you do."

"Life for an apprentice Windfinder is not easy," Shielyn said. "I think your women would find it very different from the soft life in the White Tower."

Egwene's backside still remembered the pain of her "soft" life in the White Tower. "I do not doubt that it will be challenging," she said, "but I do not doubt that it would be very helpful for that very reason."

"Well, I suspect this could be arranged," Shielyn said, leaning forward, sounding eager. "There would have to be payment, of course."

"An equal one," Egwene said. "In allowing you to send some of your apprentices to the White Tower to train with us."

"We already send women to you."

Egwene sniffed. "Token sacrifices sent so we will not become suspicious of your Windfinders. Your women often seclude themselves, or come reluctantly. I would have that practice stop—there is no reason to deny potential Windfinders to your people."

"Well, what would be the difference?" Shielyn asked.

"The women you send would be allowed to return to you after their training," Egwene said. "Wise Ones, I would have Aiel apprentices sent to us as well. Not reluctantly, and not to become Aes Sedai, but to train and learn our ways. They, too, would be allowed to return, should they desire it, once they are finished."

"It would have to be more than that," Amys said. "I worry what would happen to women who become too accustomed to soft wetlander ways."

"Surely you wouldn't want to compel them—" Egwene began.

Bair cut in. "They'd still be apprentice Wise Ones, Egwene al'Vere. Children who need to complete their training. And that is assuming we agree to this plan; something about it unsettles my stomach, like too much food after a day of fasting."

"If we let the Aes Sedai set hooks into our apprentices," Melaine said, they will not soon be pulled free."

"Do you want them to be?" Egwene said. "Do you see what you have in me, Melaine? An Amyrlin Seat who was trained by the Aiel? What sacrifice would it be worth to your people to have more like me? Aes Sedai who understand ji'e'toh and the Three-fold Land, who respect Wise Ones rather than seeing them as rivals or wilders?"

The three Aiel settled back at that, looking at one another, troubled.

"And what of you, Shielyn?" Egwene said. "What would it be worth to your people to have an Amyrlin Seat who, having trained with you, regards you as friends and who respects your ways?"

"That could be valuable," Shielyn admitted. "Assuming the women you send to us have a better temperament than those whom we have seen so far. I have yet to meet an Aes Sedai who could not benefit from a few days hanging from the high mast."

"That is because you insisted on getting Aes Sedai," Egwene said "who are set in their ways. If we were to send you Accepted instead, they would be much more pliable."

"Instead?" Shielyn said immediately. "This is not the bargain we were discussing."

"It could be," Egwene replied. "If we allow Sea Folk channelers to return to you instead of requiring that they stay in the Tower, you will no longer have such a strong need of the Aes Sedai teachers."

"This must be a different agreement." Shielyn shook her head. "And it will not be a bargain to make lightly. Aes Sedai are serpents, like those rings you wear."

"What if I offer to include the dream ter'angreal you were loaned?" Egwene asked.

Shielyn glanced at her hand where, in the real world, she would be holding the small plate that—with a channeled bit of Spirit—let a woman enter Tel'aran'rhiod. Egwene hadn't given them the ter'angreal that let one enter without needing to channel, of course. Those were more versatile, and therefore more powerful. Best to keep those a secret.

"In Tel'aran'rhiod" Egwene said, leaning forward, "you can go anywhere. You can meet those who are distant without needing to Travel there, can learn what is hidden, and can confer in secret."

"This is a dangerous thing you suggest, Egwene al'Vere," Amys said sternly. "To let them loose would be like letting a group of wetlander children run wild in the Three-fold Land."

"You cannot keep this place for yourself, Amys," Egwene said.

"We are not so selfish," the Wise One said. "It is their safety I speak of."

"Then perhaps," Egwene said, "it would be best if the Sea Folk sent some of their apprentices to train with you Wise Ones—and perhaps you could send some back."

"To live on ships?" Melaine said, aghast.

"What better way to conquer your fears of the water?"

"We aren't afraid of it" Amys snapped. "We respect it. You wetlalanders . . ." She always spoke of ships as one spoke of a caged lion.

"Regardless." Egwene turned back to the Sea Folk. "The ter'angreal could be yours, should we have a bargain."

"You already gave these to us," Shielyn said.

"They were lent to you, Shielyn, as was made very clear by the women who delivered them."

"And you would give them to us permanently?" Shielyn asked. "With none of this nonsense about all ter'angreal belonging to the White Tower?"

"It is important that there be a rule to prevent ter'angreal from being kept by those who discover them," Egwene said. "That way, we can remove a potentially dangerous item from a foolish merchant or farmer. But I would be willing to make a formal exception for the Windnnders and Wise Ones."

"So the glass pillars . . ." Amys said. "I have wondered if the Aes Sedai would ever try to lay claim to them."

"I doubt that would happen," Egwene said. "But I also suspect that it would ease Aiel minds if we were to proclaim it officially, that those ter'angreal—and others you possess—belong to you, and that sisters cannot claim them."

That gave the Wise Ones serious thought.

"1 still find this agreement odd," Bair said. "Aiel, training in the White Tower, but not becoming Aes Sedai? It is not the way things have been."

"The world is changing, Bair," Egwene said softly. "Back in Emond's Field, there was a patch of fine, cultivated Emond's Glory flowers near a brook. My father liked to walk there, and loved their beauty. But then when the new bridge was built, people began traipsing across the patch to get to it.

"My father tried for years to keep them off the patch. Small fences, signs. Nothing worked. And then he thought to build a neat path of river stones through the patch, cultivating the flowers to the sides. After that, people stopped walking on them.

"When change comes, you can scream and try to force things to stay the same. But you'll usually end up getting trampled. However, if you can direct the changes, they can serve you. Just as the Power serves us, but only after we surrender to it."

Egwene looked at each woman in turn. "Our three groups should have begun working together long ago. The Last Battle is upon us, and the Dragon Reborn threatens to free the Dark One. If that weren't enough, we have another common foe—one who would see Aes Sedai, Windnnders and Wise Ones alike destroyed."

"The Seanchan," Melaine said.

Renaile, sitting at the back of the Windnnders, let out a soft hiss at the word. Her clothing changed, and she was wearing armor, holding a sword. It was gone in a moment.

"Yes," Egwene said. "Together, we can be strong enough to fight them Apart. . ."

"We must consider this bargain," Shielyn said. Egwene noticed a wind blowing through the room, likely created by one of the Sea Folk by accident. "We will meet again and perhaps make a promise. If we make it, the terms will be this: We will send you two apprentices a year, and you will send two to us."

"Not your weakest," Egwene said. "I want your most promising."

"And you will send the same?" Shielyn said.

"Yes," Egwene said. Two was a start. They would probably wish to move to larger numbers once the plan was proven effective. But she would not push for that at the start.

"And us?" Amys said. "We are part of this 'bargain' as you put it?"

"Two Accepted," Egwene said, "in return for two apprentices. They train for a period of no less than six months, but no more than two years. Once our women are among you, they are to be considered your apprentices, and must follow your rules." She hesitated. "At the end of their training, all apprentices and Accepted must return to their people for at least one year. After that, if yours decide they want to be Aes Sedai, they can return to be considered. The same goes for women among us, should they decide to join with you instead."

Bair nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps there will be women like yourself who, seeing our ways, will know them superior. It is still a shame we lost you."

"My place was elsewhere," Egwene said.

"Will you accept this between us as well?" Shielyn said to the Wise Ones. "Should we agree to this bargain, two for two, in a similar manner?

"If the bargain is agreed to," Bair said, looking to the other Wise Ones, "we will make it with you as well. But we must speak with the other Wise Ones about it."

"And what of the ter'angrealT Shielyn said, turning back to Egwene.

"Yours," Egwene said. "In exchange, you will release us from out promise to send sisters to train you, and we will let any Sea Folk currently among us return to their people. All of this is subject to the approval of your people, and I will have to bring this before the Hall of the Tower."

Of course, as Amyrlin, her decrees were law. If the Hall balked, however, those laws could end up being ignored. In this, she would need to get

their support—and she wanted to, particularly considering her stance that the Hall should work together with her more and meet in secret less.

She was reasonably certain she could get approval for this proposal, however. The Aes Sedai wouldn't like giving up ter'angreal, but they also did not like the bargain that had been made with the Sea Folk over the Bowl of the Winds. To be rid of that, they would give almost anything.

"I knew you would try to end the sisters training us," Shielyn said, sounding self-satisfied.

"Which would you rather have?" Egwene asked. "Women who are among our weakest members, and who see their service as a punishment? Or instead, your own Sea Folk, who have learned the best we can offer and return happily to share?" Egwene had been half-tempted to simply send Sea

Folk Aes Sedai to them to fulfill the bargain anyway; it seemed a proper twisting of the situation.

Hopefully, however, this new bargain would supplant the old one. She had a feeling she'd lose the Sea Folk sisters anyway, at least the ones who longed to be back with their people. The world was changing, and now that the Windfinders were no longer a secret, the old ways need not be maintained.

"We will discuss," Shielyn said. She nodded to the others, and they vanished from the room. They certainly did learn quickly.

"This dance is a dangerous one, Egwene al'Vere," Amys said, standing and adjusting her shawl. "There was a time when the Aiel would have taken pride to have served the Aes Sedai. That time has passed."

"The women you thought you would find are nothing more than a dream, Amys," Egwene said. "Real life is often more disappointing than dreams, but at least when you find honor in the real world, you know it to be more than a fancy."

The Wise One nodded. "We will likely agree to this bargain. We have need to learn what the Aes Sedai can teach."

We will pick our strongest women," Bair added. "Those who will not be corrupted by wetlander softness." There was no condemnation in those words. Calling wetlanders soft was not an insult, in Bair's mind.

Amys nodded. "This work you do is a good one so long as you do not presume to tie us in steel bands."

No, Amys, Egwene thought. I will not tie you in bands of steel. I'll use lace instead.

Now," Bair said. "You still have need of us this day? You indicated a battle ...? "

"Yes," Egwene said. "Or so I hope." No word had come. That meant Nynaeve and Siuan hadn't discovered anyone listening. Had her ploy failed?

The Wise Ones nodded to her, then walked to the side, conferring quietly. Egwene trailed over to the Aes Sedai.

Yukiri stood. "I don't like this, Mother," Yukiri said, speaking softly and eyeing the Wise Ones. "I don't think the Hall will agree to this. Many are adamant that all objects of the One Power should belong to us."

"The Hall will see reason," Egwene said. "We've already returned the Bowl of Winds to the Sea Folk, and now that Elayne has rediscovered the method of crafting ter'angreal, it is only a matter of time before there are so many we cannot keep track of them all."

"But Elayne is an Aes Sedai, Mother," Seaine said, rising, face troubled. "Surely you can keep her in line."

"Perhaps," Egwene said, speaking softly. "But doesn't it strike you odd that—after all of these years—so many Talents are returning, so many discoveries being made? My Dreaming, Elayne's ter'angreal, Foretelling. Rare Talents seem in abundance. An Age is ending, and the world is changing. I doubt that Elayne's Talent will remain unique. What if one of the Wise Ones or Sea Folk manifest it?"

The other three sat quietly, troubled.

"It still isn't right to give up, Mother," Yukiri finally said. "With effort, we could bring the Wise Ones and Windfinders under control."

"And the Asha'man?" Egwene said softly, unable to keep a hint of discomfort out of her voice. "Will we insist that all angreal and sa'angreal created for men belong to us, though we cannot use them? What if there are Asha'man who learn to create objects of Power? Will we force them to give up everything they create to us? Could we enforce that?"

"I . . ." Yukiri said.

Leane shook her head. "She's right, Yukiri. Light, but she is."

"The world as it was cannot be ours any longer," Egwene said softly, not wanting the Wise Ones to overhear. "Was it ever? The Black Tower bonds Aes Sedai, the Aiel no longer revere us, the Windfinders have hidden their best channelers from us for centuries and are becoming increasingly belligerent. If we try to hold too tightly to all of this, we will either become tyrants or fools, depending upon how successful we are. I accept neither title.

"We will lead them, Yukiri. We must become a source that women look to, all women. We achieve that by not holding too tightly, by bringing their channelers to train with us and by sending our most talented Accepted to become experts in the things they are best at."

"And if they are saying the same thing right now?" Leane asked softly, looking over at the Wise Ones, who were speaking in hushed tones on the far side of the room. "If they try to play us as we play them?"

"Then we have to play the best," Egwene said. "All of this is secondary, for now. We need unity against the Shadow and the Seanchan. We have to-—

A frazzled-looking Siuan appeared in the room, her dress singed on one

side. "Mother! We need you!"

"The battle has begun?" Egwene said, urgent. To the side, the Wise Ones perked up.

"It has," Siuan said, panting. "It happened right off. Mother, they didn't come to eavesdrop! They attacked"

Perrin streaked across the land, covering leagues with each step. He needed to take the spike someplace away from Slayer. Perhaps the ocean? He could—

An arrow hissed through the air, slicing his shoulder. Perrin cursed and spun. They were on a high rocky hillside. Slayer stood downhill from him, bow raised to his angular face, dark eyes alight with anger. He released another arrow.

A wall, Perrin thought, summoning a wall of bricks in front of him. The arrow punched several inches into the bricks, but stopped. Perrin immediately sent himself away. He couldn't go far, though, not while carrying the dome.

Perrin changed so that he wasn't going straight north any longer, but moving toward the east. He doubted that would throw off Slayer—he could probably see the dome moving and judge its direction.

What to do? He'd planned to toss the spike into the ocean, but if Slayer was following, he'd just recover it. Perrin concentrated on moving as quickly as he could, covering leagues with each heartbeat. Could he outrun his foe? The landscape passed him in a blur. Mountains, forests, lakes, meadows.

Just as he thought he might have gotten ahead, a figure appeared just beside him, swinging a sword at his neck. Perrin ducked, barely dodging the attack. He growled, raising his hammer, but Slayer vanished.

Perrin stopped in place, frustrated. Slayer could move faster than Perrin, and could get under the dome by jumping ahead of it, then waiting for Perrin to move it on top of him. From there, he could jump directly to Perrin and attack.

I can't outrun him, Perrin realized. The only way to be certain, the only way to protect Faile and the others, was to kill Slayer. Otherwise the man would recover the spike from wherever Perrin put it, then return it to trap his people.

Perrin glanced around, getting his bearings. He was on a lightly forested slope, and could see Dragonmount to the north of him. He glanced eastward, and saw the tip of a large structure peeking out over the tree-tops. The White Tower. The city might give Perrin an advantage, make it easier to hide in one of the many buildings or alleys.

Perrin leaped off in that direction, carrying the spike with him, the dome it created traveling with him as he moved. It would come down to a fight after all.

CHAPTER
37

Darkness in the Tower

Gawyn sat on a bench in the Caemlyn Palace gardens. It had been several hours since he'd sent Egwene's messenger away. A gibbous moon hung fat in the sky. Servants occasionally passed by to see if he needed anything. They seemed worried about him.

He just wanted to watch the sky. It had been weeks since he'd been able to do that. The air was cooling, but he left his coat off, hung over the back of the bench. The open air felt good—different, somehow, from the same air beneath a cloudy sky.

With the last light of dusk fading, the stars shone like hesitant children, peeking out now that the uproar of day had died down. It felt so good to finally see them again. Gawyn breathed in deeply.

Elayne was right. Much of Gawyn's hatred of al'Thor came from frustration. Maybe jealousy. Al'Thor was playing a role closer to what Gawyn would have chosen for himself. Ruling nations, leading armies.

Looking at their lives, who had taken on the role of a prince, and who the role of a lost sheepherder?

Perhaps Gawyn resisted Egwene's demands because he wanted to lead, to be the one who accomplished the heroic acts. If he became her Warder, he would have to step aside and help her change the world. There was honor in keeping someone great alive. A deep honor. What was the point of great acts? The recognition they brought, or the better lives they created?

To step aside. He'd admired men like Sleete for their willingness to do this, but had never understood them. Not truly. / can't leave her to do it alone, he thought. 7 have to help her. From within her shadow.

Because he loved her. But also because it was for the best. If two bards tried to play different songs at the same time, they both made noise. But if one stepped back to give harmony to the other's melody, then the beauty could be greater than either made alone.

And in that moment, finally, he understood. He stood up. He couldn't go to Egwene as a prince. He had to go to her as a Warder. He had to watch over her, to serve her. See her wishes done.

It was time to return.

Slinging his coat on, he strode down the path toward the Palace. The opening serenades of various pond frogs cut short—followed by splashes—as he passed them and entered the building. It wasn't a long walk to his sister's rooms. She would be up; she had trouble sleeping lately. During the past few days, they had often enjoyed conversation and a cup of warm tea before bed. At her doors, however, he was stopped by Birgitte.

She gave him another glare. Yes, she did not like being forced to act as Captain-General in his stead. He could see that now. He felt a little awkward stepping up to her. The woman held up a hand. "Not tonight, princeling."

"I'm leaving for the White Tower," he said. "I'd like to say farewell."

He moved to step forward, but Birgitte held a hand against his chest, gently pushing him back. "You can leave in the morning."

He almost reached for his sword, but stopped himself. Light! There had been a time when he hadn't reacted that way to everything. He had become a fool. "Ask if she'll see me," he said politely. "Please."

"I have my orders," Birgitte said. "Besides, she couldn't talk to you. She's asleep."

"I'm sure she'd like to be awakened."

"It's not that kind of sleep," Birgitte said. She sighed. "It has to do with Aes Sedai matters. Go to bed. In the morning, your sister will probably have word from Egwene for you."

Gawyn frowned. How would . . .

The dreams, he realized. This is what the Aes Sedai meant, about Egwene training them to walk in their dreams. "So Egwene's sleeping as well?"

Birgitte eyed him. "Bloody ashes, I've probably said too much already. Off to your rooms."

Gawyn stepped away, but not to go to his rooms. He'll wait for a time of

weakness, he thought, remembering the sul'dam's words. And when he strikes, he'll leave such desolation as you wouldn't believe a single man could create . . .

A time of weakness.

He dashed away from Elayne's rooms, sprinting through the palace hallways to the Traveling room that Elayne had set up. Blessedly, a Kinswoman was on duty here—bleary-eyed, but waiting in case emergency messages needed to be sent. Gawyn didn't recognize the dark-haired woman, but she seemed to recognize him.

She yawned and opened a gateway at his request. He ran through and onto the Traveling ground of the White Tower. The gateway vanished right behind him. Gawyn started, spinning with a curse. That had nearly closed right on him! Why had the Kinswoman let it vanish so abruptly, and so dangerously? A split second sooner, and it would have taken his foot off or worse.

There was no time. He turned and continued running.

Egwene, Leane and the Wise Ones appeared in a room at the base of the Tower, where a group of anxious women waited. This was a guard post that Egwene had stipulated as a fallback position.

"Report!" Egwene demanded.

"Shevan and Carlinya are dead, Mother," Saerin said grimly. The brusque Brown was panting.

Egwene cursed. "What happened?"

"We were in the middle of our ploy, having a discussion about a fake plot to bring peace to Arad Doman, as you'd ordered. And then . . ."

"Fire," Morvrin said, shivering. "Blasting through the walls. Women channeling, several with incredible Power. I saw Alviarin there. Others, too."

"Nynaeve is still up there," Brendas added.

"Stubborn woman," Egwene said, looking at the three Wise Ones. They nodded. "Send Brendas out," she said, pointing at the cool-eyed White. "When you wake, go and wake the others here so they will be out of danger. Leave Nynaeve, Siuan, Leane and myself."

"Yes, Mother," Brendas said.

Amys did something that made her form fade away. The rest of you," Egwene said, "go someplace safe. Away from the city." Very well, Mother," Saerin said. She stayed in place, however. What?" Egwene said.

"I .. ." Saerin frowned. "I can't go. Something is odd."

"Nonsense," Bair snapped. "It—"

"Bair," Amys said. "I can't leave. Something is very wrong."

"The sky is violet," Yukiri said, looking out a small window. "Light It looks like a dome, covering the Tower and the city. When did that happen?"

"Something is very wrong here," Bair said. "We should awaken."

Amys suddenly vanished, causing Egwene to start; She was back in a moment. "I was able to go to the place where we were before, but I cannot leave the city. I do not like this, Egwene al'Vere."

Egwene tried sending herself to Cairhien. It didn't work. She looked out the window, feeling worried, but resolute. Yes, there was violet above.

"Wake if you must," she said to the Wise Ones. "I will fight. One of the Shadowsouled is here."

The Wise Ones fell silent. "We will go with you," Melaine finally said.

"Good. You others, be away from this place. Go to the Musician's Way and stay there until awakened. Melaine, Amys, Bair, Leane, we are going to a place higher in the Tower, a room with wood paneling and a four-poster bed, gauze drapings around it. It is my bedroom."

The Wise Ones nodded, and Egwene sent herself there. A lamp sat on her nightstand; it didn't burn here in Tel'aran'rhiod, though she'd left it burning in the real world. The Wise Ones and Leane appeared around her. The gauze draping Egwene s bed ruffled in the breeze of their appearance.

The Tower shook. The fighting continued.

"Be careful," Egwene said. "We hunt dangerous foes, and they know this terrain better than you."

"We will be careful," Bair replied. "I have heard that the Shadowsouled think themselves masters of this place. Well, we shall see."

"Leane," Egwene said, "can you handle yourself?" Egwene had been tempted to send her away, but she and Siuan had spent some measure of time in Tel'aran'rhiod. Certainly, she was more experienced than most.

"I'll keep my head low, Mother," she promised. "But there are bound to be more of them than us. You need me."

"Agreed," Egwene said.

The four women winked away. Why couldn't they leave the Tower? It was troubling, but also useful. It would mean she was trapped here.

But hopefully so was Mesaana.

Five doves rose into the air, scattering from the ledge of the rooftop. Perrin spun. Slayer stood behind him, smelling like stone.

The hard-eyed man glanced up at the fleeing birds. "Yours?"

"For warning," Perrin replied. "I figured you'd see through walnut shellls on the ground."

"Clever," Slayer said.

Behind him spread a magnificent city. Perrin hadn't believed that any city could be as magnificent as Caemlyn. But if there was such a thing, Tar Valon was it. The entire city was a work of art, almost every building decked with archways, spires, engravings and ornamentation. Even the cobblestones seemed to be arranged artistically.

Slayer's eyes flickered down to Perrin's belt. There, affixed in a pouch Perrin had created to hold it, was the ter'angreal. The tip stuck out the top, silvery bits wrapping around one another in a complex knotted braid. Perrin had tried again to destroy the thing by thinking of it, but had been rebuffed. Attacking it with his hammer hadn't so much as bent it. Whatever this thing was, it had been built to resist such attacks.

"You've grown skilled,1' Slayer said. "I should have killed you months ago."

"I believe you tried," Perrin said, raising his hammer, resting it on his shoulder. "Who are you really?"

"A man of two worlds, Perrin Aybara. And one owned by both. I'll need the dreamspike back."

"Step closer, and I'll destroy it," Perrin said.

Slayer snorted, walking forward. "You don't have the strength for that, boy. I don't even have the strength to manage that." His eyes flickered unconsciously over Perrin's shoulder. Toward what?

Dragonmount, Perrin thought. He must have worried I was coming this way to toss it in. Was that, then, an indication of a way Perrin could destroy the ter'angreal? Or was Slayer trying to mislead him?

"Don't press me, boy," Slayer said, sword and knife appearing in his hands as he walked forward. "I've already killed four wolves today. Give me the spike."

Four? But he'd killed only one that Perrin had seen. He's trying to goad me.

You think I'll believe that you won't kill me if I give it to you?" Per-

rin said. "If I gave this to you, you'd have to go put it back in Ghealdan.

You know I'd just follow you there." Perrin shook his head. "One of us has

to die, and that's that."

Slayer hesitated, then smiled. "Luc hates you, you know. Hates you

deeply."

And you don't?" Perrin asked, frowning. No more than the wolf hates the stag."

"You are not a wolf," Perrin said, growling softly.

Slayer shrugged. "Let us be done with this, then." He dashed forward

Gawyn charged into the White Tower; the men on guard barely had time to salute. He dashed past mirrored stand-lamps. Only one in every two was lit, to conserve oil. As he reached a ramp upward, he heard feet be-hind him.

His sword hissed as he pulled it free, spinning. Mazone and Celark pulled to a halt. The former Younglings wore Tower Guard uniforms now Would they try to stop him? Who knew what kind of orders Egwene had left?

They saluted.

"Men?" Gawyn said. "What are you doing?"

"Sir," Celark said, lean face shadowed in the patchy lamplight. "When an officer runs by with a look like that on his face, you don't ask if he needs help. You just follow!"

Gawyn smiled. "Come on." He dashed up the ramps, the two men following, swords at the ready.

Egwene s quarters were some way up, and Gawyn's pulse was racing — his breathing forced—by the time they reached her level. They hurried down three hallways; then Gawyn held up his hand. He glanced at the nearby shadowed recesses. Were any of them deep enough to hide a Bloodknife?

You cannot have light without shadow . . .

He peeked around the corner toward Egwene's door; he stood in virtually the same position he been when he had ruined her plans before. Was he doing the same thing now? His two guardsmen stood up close behind him, waiting on his command.

Yes. He was doing the same thing as before. And yet, something had changed. He would see her protected so that she could do great things. He would stand in her shadow and be proud. He would do as she asked—-but would see her safe no matter what.

Because that was what a Warder did.

He slipped forward, waving his men to follow. The darkness in that shadowy alcove from before didn't seem to repel his attention as it had last time. A good sign. He stopped at the door and tried it carefully. It was unlocked. He took a deep breath, then slipped inside.

No alarms went off; no traps caught him and flung him about. A few lamps shone on the walls. At a faint noise, he looked upward. A Tower maid hung there, struggling, with wide eyes, mouth gagged by an invisible flow of Air.

Gawyn cursed, dashing across the room, and threw open the door to Egwene's sleeping chamber. Her bed, one side against the far wall, was draped with white gauze curtains, and a lamp burned on the stand beside it. Gawyn crossed the room to her, pushing the gauze aside. Was she sleeping? Or was she...

He reached a hand toward her neck, but at a faint thump behind, Gawyn whipped his sword around and blocked the strike coming at his back. Not one, but two blurs of darkness leaped from the shadows. He spared a glance for Egwene; there was no blood, but he couldn't tell if she was breathing or not. Had his entrance interrupted the assassins in time?

There was no time to check. He fell into Apple Blossoms in the Wind and began to shout. His men stepped up to the doorway, then froze there, stunned.

"Get more help!" Gawyn said. "Go!"

Dark-skinned Mazone turned to obey while Celark, looking determined, leaped into the fight.

The Bloodknives shifted and undulated. Gawyn managed to slip into Cat on Hot Sand to test them, but each strike hit only air. His eyes were already hurting from trying to follow the figures.

Celark attacked from behind, but was as ineffective as Gawyn. Gawyn gritted his teeth, fighting with his back against the bed. He had to keep them away from Egwene, long enough for help to come. If he could—

Both figures twisted suddenly, striking in tandem at Celark. The man barely had time to curse before a sword took him in the neck, and bright blood spurted out. Gawyn yelled again, falling into Lizard in the Thornbush, striking at the backs of the assassins.

Again, his attacks missed. It seemed he was off by only a few hairs. Celark stumbled to the floor with a gurgle, his blood reflecting lanternlight, and Gawyn couldn't step forward to defend him. Not without exposing Egwene.

One of the assassins turned back to Gawyn while the other beheaded Celark, with a slash that—despite the shadows—looked a lot like The River Undercuts the Bank, Gawyn stepped back, trying to keep his eyes off the fallen man. Defend. He only had to defend until help came! He edged to the side.

The Seanchan were wary; they knew he'd fought one of them off before.

But they had such a strong advantage. Gawyn wasn't certain he could stand against two of them.

Yes you will, he told himself sternly. If you fall, Egivene dies.

Was that a flicker of movement from the other room? Could help have come? Gawyn felt a surge of hope, and edged to the side. From there, he could see Mazone's body on rhe floor, bleeding.

A third shadowed figure glided into the room and shut the door behind locking it. That was why the other two had been hesitating. They'd wanted to wait until their ally arrived.

The three of them attacked together.

Perrin let the wolf free.

For once, he didn't worry about what it would do to him. He let himself be, and as he fought, the world seemed to become right around him.

Perhaps that was because it bent to his will.

Young Bull leaped from a rooftop in Tar Valon, powerful hind legs springing him into the air, ter'angreal pouch fastened to his back. He soared over a street and landed on a white marble roof with groups of statues on its edges. He rolled, coming up as a man—ter'angreal tied at his waist—with hammer swinging.

Slayer vanished right before the hammer hit, then appeared beside Perrin. Perrin vanished as Slayer swung, then appeared just to the left. Back and forth they went, spinning around one another, each disappearing then appearing again, struggling to land a blow.

Perrin threw himself out of the cycle, sending himself to a place beside one of the roof's large statues, a pompous-looking general. He swung, smashing his hammer into it, magnifying the power of the blow. Chunks of statue exploded toward Slayer. The wolf-killer appeared, expecting to find Perrin beside him. Instead, a storm of stone and dust crashed into him.

Slayer bellowed, stone chips slicing his skin. His cloak immediately became as strong as steel, reflecting chunks of stone. He whipped it back and the entire building started to shake. Perrin cursed and leaped free as the roof fell in.

Perrin soared, becoming a wolf before landing on a nearby rooftop-Slayer appeared in front of him, bow drawn. Young Bull growled, imagining the wind blowing, but Slayer didn't fire. He just stood there, as if—

As if he were just a statue.

Perrin cursed, spinning as an arrow shot past him, narrowly missing

him at the waist. The real Slayer stood a short distance off; he vanished, leaving the remarkably detailed statue he'd created to distract Perrin.

Perrin took a deep breath and made the sweat leave his brow. Slayer could come at him from any direction. He put a wall at his back and stood refully, scanning the rooftop. The dome shook overhead. He'd grown used to that—it moved with him.

But he wasn't moving.

He looked down with a panic. The pouch was gone—the arrow Slayer had fired at his waist had sliced it free. Perrin dashed forward to the edge of the roof. Below, Slayer ran through the street, the pouch in his hand.

A wolf leaped from an alley, crashing into Slayer, tossing him to the ground. Hopper.

Perrin was there in a moment, attacking. Slayer cursed, vanishing from underneath Hopper and appearing at the end of the street. He began to flee, leaving a blur behind him.

Perrin followed, Hopper joining him. How did you find me? Perrin sent.

You are two foolish cubs, Hopper sent. Very loud. Like snarling cats. Easy to find.

He'd deliberately not shown Hopper where he was. After seeing Oak Dancer die . . . well, this was Perrin's fight. Now that the ter'angreal was away from Ghealdan and his people were escaping, he didn't want to risk the lives of other wolves.

Not that Hopper would go if he told him to. Growling again, Perrin barreled after Slayer, wolf at his side.

Egwene crouched beside the wall of the hallway, panting, sweat dripping from her brow. Across from her, molten drops of rock cooled from a blast of fire.

The Tower hallway fell still. A few lamps flickered on the wall. Through a window, she could see the purple sky above, between the Tower and the dark clouds. She'd been fighting for what seemed like hours, though it had probably been only fifteen minutes. She'd lost track of the Wise Ones.

She began to creep forward, using the anti-eavesdropping weave to make her footfalls silent until she reached a corner and peered around it.

Darkness in both directions. Egwene crept forward, moving carefully, resolutely. The Tower was her domain. She felt invaded, as surely as when the Seanchan had come. However, this fight was proving very different from fighting off the Seanchan. There, the enemy had been bold, easy to spot.

Faint light appeared under a doorway ahead. She shifted herself into the room, preparing weaves. Two women were there, speaking in whispers, one holding a globe of light. Evanellein and Mestra, two of the Black sister who had fled the White Tower.

Egwene let loose with a ball of fire that destroyed Mestra in an inferno

Evanellein yelped, and Egwene used a trick Nynaeve had taught her__she

imagined Evanellein being stupid, unable to think, unable to react.

The woman's eyes glazed over, and her mouth opened. Thought was faster than weaves. Egwene hesitated. Now what? Kill her, while defenseless? Her stomach turned at that thought. / could take her captive. Go and -

Someone appeared in the room with her. The newcomer wore black a magnificent gown with silver trim. Darkness swirled about her, made of spinning ribbons of cloth, her skirt rippling. The effect was unnatural and impressive; possible only here in Tel'ararirhiod.

Egwene looked into the woman's eyes. Large and blue, set in an angular face with chin-length black hair. There was a power to those eyes, and Egwene immediately knew what she was facing. Why fight? She couldn't—

Egwene felt her mind change, become accepting. She fought it with a burst of panic, and in a moment of clarity, she sent herself away.

Egwene appeared in her rooms, then raised her hand to her head, sitting down on the bed. Light, but that woman had been strong.

Something sounded behind her; someone appearing in the room. Egwene leaped to her feet, preparing weaves. Nynaeve stood there, eyes wide with fury. The woman thrust her hands forward, weaves forming, but she froze.

"To the gardens," Egwene said, not trusting her quarters. She shouldn't have come here; Mesaana would know this place.

Nynaeve nodded, and Egwene vanished, appearing in the lower Tower garden. The strange violet dome extended above. What was that, and how had Mesaana brought it here? Nynaeve appeared a moment later.

"They're still up there," Nynaeve whispered. "I just saw Alviarin."

"I saw Mesaana," Egwene said. "She nearly took me."

"Light! Are you all right?"

Egwene nodded. "Mestra is dead. I saw Evanellein, too."

"It's black as a tomb up there," Nynaeve whispered. "I think they made it that way. Siuan and Leane are all right; I saw them a little bit ago, sticking together. Just before that, I managed to hit Notofi with a blast fire. She's dead."

"Good. The Black Ajah stole nineteen ter'angreal. That might give us an estimate of how many Black Ajah we have to contend with." She, Siuan, Nynaeve, Leane and the three Wise Ones were outnumbered—but the Rlack Ajah didn't seem to have much experience with Tel'aran'rhiod.

"Have you seen the Wise Ones?"

"They're up there." Nynaeve grimaced. "They seem to be enjoying this."

"They would," Egwene said. "I want you and me to go together. We will appear in intersections, back to back, and quickly scan for light or people. If you see a Black, strike. If someone sees you, say 'Go' and we'll jump back here."

Nynaeve nodded.

"First intersection is the one outside my room," Egwene said. "Hallway on the south side. I'll flood it with light; you be ready. From there, we'll jump down one hallway, by the door into the servants' ramp. Then on down the

line."

Nynaeve nodded sharply.

The world winked around Egwene. She appeared in the hallway, and immediately thought of the place lit, imposing her will upon it. Light flooded the entire space. A round-faced woman crouched near the side of the wall, wearing white. Sedore, one of the Black sisters.

Sedore spun, looking angry, weaves springing up around her. Egwene worked faster, creating a column of fire right before Sedore would have released her own. No weaves on Egwene's part. Just the fire.

Egwene saw the Black's eyes open wider as the fire roared around her. Sedore screeched, but that cut off as the heat consumed her. Her burned corpse collapsed to the floor, smoldering.

Egwene let out a relieved breath. "Anyone on your side?"

"No," Nynaeve said. "Who was that you hit?"

"Sedore."

"Really?" Nynaeve said, turning. She had been a Sitter for the Yellow.

Egwene smiled. "Next hallway."

They jumped, and repeated their strategy, flooding the hallway with light. There was nobody there, so they moved on. The next two hallways were empty. Egwene was about to leave when a voice hissed, "Foolish child! Your pattern is obvious."

Egwene spun. "Where . . ."

She cut off as she saw Bair. The aged Wise One had changed her clothing and even her skin itself to match the white walls and floor tiles. She was practically invisible, crouching in an alcove.

"You shouldn't—" Bair began.

A wall beside them exploded outward, throwing up chunks of rock Six women stood beyond, and they released weaves of Fire. It appeared that the time for sneaking had ended.

Perrin crested the wall surrounding the White Tower grounds, coming down with a thump. The strangeness of the wolf dream continued; he now not only smelled odd scents, but heard odd sounds as well. Rumblings from inside the Tower.

He leaped after Slayer, who crossed the grounds, then ran up the outside of the Tower itself. Perrin followed, running up into the air. Slayer stayed just ahead, ter'angreal pouch tied at his waist.

Perrin created a longbow. He pulled it back, freezing in place, standing on the side of the Tower. He loosed, but the wolf-killer leaped up, then fell into the Tower through a window. The arrow passed overhead.

Perrin leaped to the window, then ducked inside, Hopper leaping in after him, leaving a blur behind. They entered a bedroom hung with brocades of blue. The door slammed, and Perrin charged after Slayer. He didn't bother to open the door; he smashed it with his hammer.

Slayer charged down a hallway.

Follow, Perrin sent to Hopper. I'll cut him off.

The wolf raced forward, after Slayer. Perrin ran to the right, then cut down a hallway. He moved quickly, the walls speeding past.

He passed a hallway that appeared to be full of people. He was so surprised that he froze, the hall lurching around him.

They were Aes Sedai, and they were fighting. The hallway was alight, trails of fire flying from one end to the other. The sounds he'd heard before hadn't been phantoms. And, he thought, yes . . .

"Egwene?" Perrin asked.

She stood pressed against the wall nearby, intently looking down the hallway. When he spoke, she spun on him, hands going up. He felt something grab him. His mind instantly reacted, however, pushing the air away

Egwene started as she failed to snatch him.

He stepped forward. "Egwene, you shouldn't be here. This place is dangerous."

"Perrin?"

"I don't know how you got here," Perrin said. "But you need to go. Please. "How did you stop me?" she demanded. "What are you doing here. Have you been with Rand? Tell me where he is."

She spoke with such authority now. She almost seemed a different person, decades older than the girl he'd known. Perrin opened his mouth to reply, but Egwene cut him off.

"I don't have time for this," she said. "I'm sorry, Perrin. I'll be back for you." She raised a hand, and he felt things change around him. Ropes appeared, binding him.

He looked down, amused. The ropes slipped free the moment he thought of them being too loose.

Egwene blinked, watching them drop to the ground. "How—"

Someone burst out of a room nearby, a tall, slender-necked woman with raven hair, wearing a sleek white dress. She smiled, raising her hands, and a light appeared before her.

Perrin didn't need to know what she was doing. He was a wolf; he was the ruler of this place. Weaves were meaningless. He imagined the woman's attack missing him; he knew it would be so.

A bar of white-hot light shot from the woman. Perrin raised a hand before himself and Egwene. The light vanished, as if stopped by his palm.

Egwene turned, and the wall above the woman burst, rock showering down. A chunk smashed the woman on the head brutally, knocking her to the ground. Light, she was probably dead, after a blow like that.

Egwene smelled amazed. She spun on him. "Balefire? You stopped balefire? Nothing should be able to do that."

"It's just a weave," Perrin said, reaching out for Hopper. Where was Slayer?

"It's not just a weave, Perrin, it's—"

"I'm sorry, Egwene," he said. "I will speak to you later. Be careful in this place. You probably already know that you need to be, but still. It's more dangerous than you know."

He turned and ran, leaving Egwene sputtering. It seemed she'd managed to become an Aes Sedai. That was good; she deserved it.

Hopper? he sent. Where are you?

His only reply was a sudden, terrifying, sending of pain.

Gawyn fought for his life against three living shadows of darkness and steel

They pressed him to the utmost of his ability, leaving him bloodied half a dozen times over on arms and legs. He used The Cyclone Rages, and it defended his vitals. Barely.

Drops of his blood stained the gauze draping Egwene's bed. If his

opponents had already killed Egwene, then they made a good show of con-tinuing to threaten her.

He was growing weak and tired. His boots left bloody prints when he stepped. He couldn't feel the pain. His parries were becoming sluggish. They'd have him in another moment or two.

No help came, although his voice was hoarse from yelling. Fool! he thought. You need to spend more time thinking and less time running straight into danger! He should have alerted the entire Tower.

The only reason he was alive was because the three were being careful wearing him down. Once he fell, that sul'dam had indicated they would go on a rampage through the White Tower. It would take the Aes Sedai completely by surprise. This night could be a disaster greater than the original Seanchan strike had been.

The three moved forward.

No! Gawyn thought as one of them tried The River Undercuts the Bank. He leaped forward, dodging between two blades, swinging his weapon. Amazingly, he actually struck, and a voice cried out in the room. Blood sprayed across the ground, one shadowy form falling.

The two others muttered curses, and all pretense of wearing him down vanished. They struck at him, weapons flashing amid dark mist. Exhausted, Gawyn took another hit on the shoulder, blood trickling down his arm beneath his coat.

Shadows. How could a man be expected to fight against shadows? It was impossible!

Where there is light, there must be shadow . . .

A last, desperate thought occurred to him. With a cry, he leaped to the side and yanked a pillow from Egwene's bed. Blades cut the air around him as he spun and slammed the pillow on the lantern, smothering it.

Plunging the room into darkness. No light. No shadows.

Equality.

The darkness evened out everything, and in the night, you couldn't see color. He couldn't see the blood on his arms, couldn't see the black shadows of his enemies or the whiteness of Egwene's bed. But he could hear the men move.

He raised his blade for a desperate strike, using Hummingbird Kisses the Honeyrose, predicting where the Bloodknives would move. He was no longer distracted by their misted figures, and his strike hit true, sinking into flesh.

He twisted, yanking his blade free. The room fell silent save for the fall

of the man he'd hit. Gawyn held his breath, heartbeat thumping in his ears. Where was the last assassin?

No light came in from the room next door; Celark had fallen beside the doorway, blocking the light underneath.

Gawyn was feeling shaky now. He'd lost too much blood. If he had something to throw to create a distraction . . . but no. Moving would rustle clothing, would give him away.

So, gritting his teeth, he tapped his foot and raised his blade to protect his neck, praying to the Light that the attack came low.

It did, cutting deeply into his side. He took it with a grunt, but immediately lashed out with all he had. His sword hissed, and with a brief tug it sliced true. A thump followed; a decapitated head bouncing off the wall, followed by the noise of a corpse hitting the ground.

Gawyn slumped against the bed, blood gushing from his side. He was blacking out, although it was hard to tell in the unlit room.

He reached for where he remembered Egwene's hand being, but was too weak to find it.

He hit the floor a moment later. His last thought was that he still didn't know whether or not she was dead.

"Great Mistress," Katerine said, kneeling before Mesaana, "we cannot find the thing you describe. Half of our women search for it while the other half fight the worms who resist. But it is nowhere!"

Mesaana folded her arms beneath her breasts as she considered the situation. With an offhanded thought, she strapped Katerine's back with lines of Air. Failure needed always be punished. Consistency was the key in all forms of training. The White Tower rumbled above her, though she was safe here. She'd imposed her will on this area, creating a new room beneath the basements, carved as a pocket in the stone. The children who fought above obviously nought themselves practiced in this place, but children they were. She had been coming to Tel'aran'rbiod for a century before her imprisonment. The Tower rumbled again. Carefully, she considered her situation. somehow, the Aes Sedai had found a dreamspike. How had they located such a treasure? Mesaana was nearly as interested in gaining control of it as she was in dominating the child Amyrlin, Egwene al'Vere. The ability to forbid gateways into your places of refuge . . . Well, it was a vital tool, particulary when she decided to move against the other Chosen. It was more effective than wards, protecting one's dreams from any intrusion, and it stopped all forms of Traveling in or out of the area except for those allowed.

However, with the dreamspike in place, she also could not move this battle with the children above to a more suitable, carefully selected location. Aggravating. But no, she would not allow herself to become ernotional about the situation.

"Return above and concentrate everything on capturing the woman Egwene al'Vere," Mesaana said. "She will know where the device is." Yes that was clear to her now. She would achieve two victories with a single act

"Yes . . . Mistress . . ." Katerine was still cowering, straps of Air beating against her back. Ah, yes. Mesaana waved curtly, dispelling the weave. As she did so, a thought occurred to her.

"Wait here, a moment," she said to Katerine. "I'm going to place a weave upon you. . . ."

Perrin appeared on the very top of the White Tower.

Slayer held Hopper by the scruff of his neck. The wolf had an arrow through his side; blood ran down his paw. Wind blew across the rock, catching the blood and spraying it across the stones.

"Hopper!" Perrin took a step forward. He could still sense Hopper's mind, though it was weak.

Slayer held the wolf up, lifting him easily. He raised a knife.

"No," Perrin said. "You have what you want. Just go."

"And what was it you said earlier?" Slayer asked. "That you know where I would go, and you'd follow? The dreamspike is too easy to locate on this side."

He casually tossed the wolf off the side of the Tower.

"NO!" Perrin screamed. He leaped for the side, but Slayer appeared beside him, grabbing him, raising his dagger. The leap knocked them both off the side of the Tower, Perrin's stomach lurching as they fell.

He tried to send himself away, but Slayer had hold of him, and he tried very hard to keep them in place. They shook for a moment, but kept falling.

Slayer was so strong. He smelled wrong, like staleness and wolf's blood. His knife sought Perrin's throat, and the best Perrin could do was raise his arm to block, thinking of his shirt being as hard as steel.

Slayer pressed harder. Perrin felt a moment of weakness, the wound

across his chest throbbing as he and Slayer tumbled. The knife split Per-rin's sleeve and rammed into his forearm.

Perrin screamed. The wind was so loud. It had been mere seconds. Slayer pulled the knife free.

Hopper!

Perrin roared and kicked at Slayer, pushing him away, breaking his grip. Arm aflame, Perrin twisted in the air. The ground rushed at them. He willed himself to another place, and he appeared just below Hopper, catching the wolf and crashing into the ground. His knees buckled; the ground around him shattered. But he lowered Hopper safely.

A black-fletched arrow zipped from the sky and pierced Hopper's back, passing all the way through the wolf and hitting Perrin in his thigh, which was bent at the knee just beneath the wolf.

Perrin yelled, feeling his own pain mix with a sudden wash of agony from Hopper. The wolf's mind was fading.

"No!" Perrin sent, eyes wet with tears.

Young Bull. . . Hopper sent.

Perrin tried to send himself away, but his mind was fuzzy. Another arrow would soon fall. He knew it. He managed to roll out of the way as it struck the ground, but his leg no longer worked, and Hopper was so heavy. Perrin pitched to the ground, dropping the wolf, rolling.

Slayer landed a short distance away, long, wicked black bow in hand. "Goodbye, Aybara." Slayer raised his bow. "Looks like I kill five wolves today."

Perrin stared up at the arrow. Everything was blurry.

I can't leave Faile. I can't leave Hopper.

I won't!

As Slayer released, Perrin desperately imagined himself strong, not faint. He felt his heart become hale again, his veins filling with energy. He yelled, head clearing enough to make himself vanish and appear standing behind Slayer.

He swung with his hammer.

Mayer turned casually and blocked it with his arm, which was enormously strong. Perrin fell to one knee, the pain in his leg still there. He gasped.

"You can't heal yourself," Slayer said. "There are ways, but simply imaging yourself well does not work. You do seem to have figured out how to replenish your blood, however, which is useful." Perrin smelled something. Terror. Was it his own?

No. No, there. Behind Slayer was a doorway open into the White Tower Inside was blackness. Not just shadow, blackness. Perrin had done enough practice with Hopper to recognize what it was.

A nightmare.

As Slayer opened his mouth to say something, Perrin growled and threw all of his weight forward, ramming into Slayer, His leg scream in pain.

They tumbled directly into the blackness of the nightmare.

CHAPTER 38

Wounds

Spurts of fire flashed through the dark hallways of the White Tower, leaving trails of smoke that curled in the air, thick and pungent. People screamed and yelled and cursed. The walls shook as blasts took them; chips and chunks of rock sprayed off weaves of Air crafted for protection.

There. Egwene noted a place where several Black sisters were lobbing fire down the hallway. Evanellein was there.

Egwene sent herself into the room next to the one where they were standing; she could hear them on the other side of the wall. She opened her hands and released a powerful blast of Earth and Fire directly at the wall, blowing it outward.

The women beyond stumbled and fell, Evanellein collapsing, bloodied. The other woman was quick enough to send herself away.

Egwene checked to see that Evanellein was dead. She was. Egwene nodded with satisfaction; Evanellein was one of those that she'd been most eager to find. Now if she could only track down Katerine or Alviarin.

Channeling. Behind her. Egwene threw herself to the ground as a blast of Fire sprayed over her head. Mesaana, black cloth swirling about her. Egwene gritted her teeth and sent herself away. She didn't dare face the woman directly.

Egwene appeared in a storage room not far away, then stumbled as a blast shook the area. She waved a hand, making a window in the door, and

saw Amys charging past. The Wise One wore cadin'sor and carried spears. Her shoulder was bleeding and blackened. Another blast hit near her but she vanished. That blast made the air outside swelter, melting Egwene's window and forcing her to step back.

Saerin's research had been correct. Despite the open battle, Mesaa had not fled or hid, as Moghedien might have. Perhaps she was confident Perhaps she was frightened; likely, she needed Egwene's death to prove a victory before the Dark One.

Egwene took a deep breath and prepared to return to the fighting. She hesitated, however, thinking of Perrin's appearance. He'd acted as if she were a novice. How had he grown so confident, so strong? She hadn't been surprised by the things he'd done so much as by the fact that he had been the one doing them.

His appearance was a lesson. Egwene had to be very careful not to rely on her weaves. Bair couldn't channel, but she was as effective as the others. However, it did seem that for some things, weaves were better. Blowing the wall outward, for instance, had seemed easier with a weave than by imagining it, where imposing her will against so large and thick surface might have been difficult.

She was Aes Sedai and she was a Dreamer. She had to use both. Egwene cautiously sent herself back to the room where she'd seen Mesaana. It was empty, though the wall was still rubble. Blasts sounded from the right, and Egwene peeked around. Balls of fire shot back and forth in that direction, weaves flying in the air.

Egwene sent herself behind one of the fighting groups and created a thick cylinder of glass around her for protection. The Tower was broken and scarred here, the walls smoldering. Egwene caught sight of one figure stooping beside a section of rubble, wearing a blue dress.

Nicola? Egwene thought with anger. How did she get here? I thought I could trust her now! The fool girl must have gotten a dream ter'angreal from one of the others who had awakened.

Egwene prepared to jump over and send the girl away, but the ground suddenly ripped up beneath Nicola, fire blazing. Nicola screamed as she was tossed into the air, bits of molten rock spraying around her.

Egwene yelled, sending herself there, imagining a strong wall of stone beneath Nicola. The girl fell and landed on it, bloodied, eyes unseeing-Egwene cursed, kneeling. The girl wasn't breathing.

"No!" Egwene said.

"Egwene al'Vere! Beware!" Melaine's voice.

Egwene turned with alarm as a wall appeared beside her, made or hick granite, blocking several blasts of fire that had come from behind, Melaine appeared next to Egwene, dressed in all black, her very skin col-ored dark. She'd been hiding in the shadows beside the hallway.

"This place grows too dangerous for you," Melaine said. "Leave it to us." Egwene looked down. Nicola's corpse faded away. Foolish child! She seeked around the wall to see two Black sisters—Alviarin and Ramola—standing back-to-back and sending destructive weaves in different directions. There was a room behind them. Egwene could do as she had several times before, jumping into the room, destroying the wall and hitting the two of them . ..

Foolish child, Bair had said, your pattern is obvious.

That was what Mesaana wanted her to do. The two Black sisters were bait.

Egwene jumped into the room, but put her back to the wall. She emptied her mind, waiting, tense.

Mesaana appeared as she had before. That swirling black cloth was impressive, but it was also foolish. It took thought to maintain. Egwene stared into the woman's surprised eyes and saw the weaves the woman had prepared.

Those will not hit me, Egwene thought, confident. The White Tower was hers. Mesaana and her minions had invaded, killing Nicola, Shevan and Carlinya.

Weaves shot forward, but they bent around Egwene. In a moment Egwene was wearing the clothing of a Wise One. White blouse, brown skirt, shawl on her shoulders. She imagined a spear in her hand, an Aiel spear, and she threw it with a precise motion.

The spear pierced the weaves of Fire and Air, blasting them away, then hit something thick. A wall of Air before Mesaana. Egwene refused to allow it. That wall didn't belong here. It did not exist.

The spear stopped slowing and shot forward, taking Mesaana in the neck. The woman's eyes opened wide and she slumped backward, blood spurting from the wound. The black strips swirling around her vanished completely, as did the dress. So it had been a weave. Mesaana's darkened face turned into that of . . .

Katerine? Egwene frowned. Mesaana had been Katerine all along? But she'd been Black, and fled the Tower. She hadn't remained, and that meant —

No, Egwene thought, I've been had. She's a—

At that moment, Egwene felt something snap around her neck. Something cold and metallic, something familiar and terrifying. The Source fled her in a moment, for she was no longer authorized to hold it.

She spun in terror. A woman with chin-length dark hair and deep blue eyes stood beside her. She did not look very imposing, but she was very strong in the Power. And her wrist held a bracelet, connected by a leash to the band around Egwene's neck.

An a'dam.

"Excellent," Mesaana said. "Such unruly children you are." She clicked her tongue in disapproval. In a moment, she shifted somewhere else, taking Egwene with her. A chamber with no windows, looking as if it were cut directly from stone. There wasn't even a doorway.

Alviarin waited here, wearing a dress of white and red. The woman immediately knelt before Mesaana, though she spared a satisfied glance for

Egwene.

Egwene barely noticed. She stood, stiff, a tide of panicked thoughts flooding her mind. She was trapped again! She could not stand it. She would die before she allowed this to happen. Images flashed in her head. Trapped in a room, unable to move more than a few feet without being overcome by the a'dam. Treated like an animal, a creeping sense that she would eventually break, would eventually become exactly what they wanted her to be.

Oh, Light. She could not suffer this again. Not this.

"Tell those above to withdraw," Mesaana was saying to Alviarin, her voice calm. Egwene barely registered the words. "Fools they are, and their showing here was pathetic. Punishments will be administered."

This was how Moghedien had been captured by Nynaeve and Elayne. She was kept captive, forced to do as they demanded. Egwene would suffer the same! Indeed, Mesaana would probably use Compulsion on her. The White Tower would be fully in the hands of the Forsaken.

The emotions welled up. Egwene found herself clawing at the collar, which got a look of amusement from Mesaana as Alviarin vanished to relay her order.

This could not be happening. It was a nightmare. A—

You are Aes Sedai. A quiet piece of her whispered the words, yet for all their softness, they were strong. And they were deep within her. The voice was deeper than the terror and fear.

"Now," Mesaana said. "We will speak of the dreamspike. Where might I find it?"

An Aes Sedai is calmness, an Aes Sedai is control, regardless of the situation. Egwene lowered her hands from the collar. She had not gone through the testing, and she had not planned to. But if she had, what if she had been

forced to face a situation like this? Would she have broken? Proven herself unworthy of the mantle she claimed to carry?

"Not speaking, I see," Mesaana said. "Well, that can be changed. These a'dam. Such lovely devices. Semirhage was so delightfully wonderful in bringing them to my attention, even if she did so accidentally. Pity she died before I could place one on her neck."

Pain shot through Egwene's body, like fire beneath her skin. Her eyes watered from it.

But she had suffered pain before, and laughed while being beaten. She had been captive before, in the White Tower itself, and captivity had not stopped her.

But this is different! The larger part of her was terrified. This is the a'dam! I cannot withstand it!

An Aes Sedai must, the quiet piece of her replied. An Aes Sedai can suffer all things, for only then can she be truly a servant of all.

"Now," Mesaana said. "Tell me where you have hidden the device."

Egwene controlled her fear. It was not easy. Light, but it was hard! But she did it. Her face became calm. She defied the a'dam by not giving it power over her.

Mesaana hesitated, frowning. She shook the leash, and more pain flooded Egwene.

She made it vanish. "It occurs to me, Mesaana," Egwene said calmly, "that Moghedien made a mistake. She accepted the a'dam!'

"What are you—"

"In this place, an a'dam is as meaningless as the weaves it prevents," Egwene said. "It is only a piece of metal. And it only will stop you if you accept that it will." The a'dam unlocked and fell free of her neck.

Mesaana glanced at it as it dropped to the ground with a metallic ring. Her face grew still, then cold as she looked up at Egwene. Impressively, she did not panic. She folded her arms, eyes impassive. "So, you have practiced here."

Egwene met her gaze.

You are still a child," Mesaana said. "You think that you can best me? have walked in Tel'aran'rhiod longer than you can imagine. You are what, twenty years old?"

I am the Amyrlin," Egwene said. "An Amyrlin to children."

An Amyrlin to a Tower that has stood for thousands of years," Egwene said.   Thousands of years of trouble and chaos. Yet most of your life, you

lived in a time of peace, not strife. Curious, that you should think yourself so strong when much of your life was so easy."

"Easy?" Mesaana said. "You know nothing."

Neither broke her gaze. Egwene felt something press against her as it had before. Mesaana's will, demanding her subservience, her supplication. An attempt to use Tel'aran'rhiod to change the very way that Egwene thought.

Mesaana was strong. But strength in this place was a matter of per-. spective. Mesaana's will pressed against her. But Egwene had defeated the a'dam. She could resist this.

"You will bend," Mesaana said quietly.

"You are mistaken," Egwene replied, voice tense. "This is not about me Egwene al'Vere is a child. But the Amyrlin is not. I may be young, but the Seat is ancient."

Neither woman looked away. Egwene began to push back, to demand that Mesaana bow before her, before the Amyrlin. The air began to feel heavy around them, and when Egwene breathed it in, it seemed thick somehow.

"Age is irrelevant," Egwene said. "To an extent, even experience is irrelevant. This place is about what a person is. The Amyrlin is the White Tower, and the White Tower will not bend. It defies you, Mesaana, and your lies."

Two women. Gazes matched. Egwene stopped breathing. She did not need to breathe. All was focused on Mesaana. Sweat trickled down Egwenes temples, every muscle in her body tense as she pushed back against Mesaana's will.

And Egwene knew that this woman, this creature, was an insignificant insect shoving against an enormous mountain. That mountain would not move. Indeed, shove against it too hard, and . . .

Something snapped, softly, in the room.

Egwene breathed in with a gasp as the air returned to normal. Mesaana dropped like a doll made of strips of cloth. She hit the ground with her eyes still open, and a little bit of spittle dribbled from the corner of her mouth.

Egwene sat down, dazed, breathing in and out in gasps. She looked to the side, where the a'dam lay discarded. It vanished. Then she looked back at Mesaana, who lay in a heap. Her chest was still rising and lowering, but she stared with sightless eyes.

Egwene lay for a long moment recovering before standing and embracing the Source. She wove lines of Air to lift the unresponsive Forsaken,

then shifted both herself and the woman back to the upper floors of the Tower.

Women turned toward her with a start. The hallway here was strewn with rubble, but everyone Egwene saw was one of hers. The Wise Ones, spinning on her. Nynaeve picking through some rubble. Siuan and Leane, the latter bearing several blackened cuts on her face, but looking strong. "Mother," Siuan said with relief. "We had feared . . ." "Who is that?" Melaine asked, walking up to Mesaana, hanging limply in the weaves of Air and staring at the ground. The woman cooed suddenly, like a child, eyes watching a bit of burning fire on the remnants of a tapestry.

"It is her," Egwene said, tired. "Mesaana."

Melaine turned to Egwene, eyes wide with surprise.

"Light!" Leane exclaimed. "What have you done?"

"I have seen this before," Bair said, inspecting the woman. "Sammana, a Wise One Dreamer from my youth. She encountered something in the dream that broke her mind." She hesitated. "She spent the rest of her days in the waking world drooling, and needing her linen changed. She never spoke again, at least nothing more than the words of a babe who can barely walk."

"Perhaps it is time to stop thinking of you as an apprentice, Egwene al'Vere," Amys said.

Nynaeve stood with hands on hips, looking impressed but still clinging to the Source. Her braid was full length again in the dream. "The others have gone," she said.

"Mesaana ordered them to flee," Egwene said.

"They couldn't have gone far," Siuan said. "That dome is still there."

"Yes," Bair said. "But it is time for this battle to end. The enemy has been defeated. We will speak again, Egwene al'Vere."

Egwene nodded. "I agree on both points. Bair, Amys, Melaine, thank you for your much-needed aid. You have gained much ji in this, and I am in your debt."

Melaine eyed the Forsaken as Egwene sent herself out of the dream. "I believe it is us, and the world itself, who are in your debt, Egwene al'Vere."

The others nodded, and as Egwene faded from Tel'aran'rhiod, she heard Bair muttering, "Such a shame she didn't return to us."

'Perrin ran through crowds of terrified people, in a burning city. Tar Valon. Aflame! The very stones burned, the sky a deep red. The ground trembled,

like a wounded buck kicking as a leopard bled its neck. Perrin stumbled as a chasm opened before him, flames blazing upward, singeing the hairs on his arms.

People screamed as some fell into the terrible rift, burning away into nothing. Bodies suddenly littered the ground. To his right, a beautiful building with arched windows began to melt, the rock turning liquid, lava bleeding from between stones and out of openings.

Perrin climbed to his feet. It's not real.

"Tarmon Gai'don!" people yelled. "The Last Battle has come! It ends! Light, it ends!"

Perrin stumbled, pulling himself up against a chunk of rock, trying to stand. His arm hurt, and his fingers wouldn't grip, but the worst wound was in his leg, where the arrow had hit. His trousers and coat were wet with blood, and the scent of his own terror was powerful in his nose.

He knew this nightmare was not real. And yet, how could one not feel the horror of it? To the west, Dragonmount was erupting, plumes of angry smoke billowing into the sky. The entire mountain seemed aflame, rivers of red surging down its sides. Perrin could feel it shaking, dying. Buildings cracked, trembled, melted, shattered. People died, crushed by stones or burned to death.

No. He would not be drawn in. The ground around him changed from broken cobbles to neat tiles; the servants' entrance to the White Tower. Perrin forced himself to his feet, creating a staff to use in limping.

He didn't destroy the nightmare; he had to find Slayer. In this terrible place, Perrin might be able to gain an advantage. Slayer was very practiced in Tel'aran'rhiod, but perhaps—if Perrin had luck on his side—the man was skilled enough to have avoided nightmares in the past. Perhaps he would be startled by this one, taken in.

Reluctantly, Perrin weakened his resolve, letting himself be drawn into the nightmare. Slayer would be close. Perrin stumbled across the street, staying far from the building with the lava boiling from its windows. If was hard to keep himself from giving in to the screams of horror and pain. The calls for help.

There, Perrin thought, reaching an alley. Slayer stood inside, head bowed, a hand up against one wall. The ground beside the man ended in a rift, boiling magma at the bottom. People clung to the edge of the gap,, screaming. Slayer ignored them. Where his hand touched the wall, it started to change from whitewashed brick to the gray stone of the White Tower's interior.

The ter'angreal still hung at Slayer's waist. Perrin had to move quickly-

The wall is melting from the heat, Perrin thought, focusing on the wall beside Slayer. It was easier, here, to change things like that—it was playing into the world the nightmare created.

Slayer cursed, pulling his hand back as the wall grew red-hot. The ground beneath him rumbled, and his eyes opened wide in alarm. He spun as a rift opened beside him, projected there by Perrin. In that moment, Perrin saw that Slayer believed—for just a fraction of a section—that the nightmare was real. Slayer stepped away from the rift, raising a hand against its heat, believing it real.

Slayer vanished in the blink of an eye, appearing beside those hanging above the rift. The nightmare incorporated him, sucking him into its whims, making him play a role in its terrors. It nearly took Perrin, too. He felt himself waver, nearly responding to the heat. But no. Hopper was dying. He would not fail!

Perrin imagined himself as someone else. Azi al'Thone, one of the Two Rivers men. Perrin put himself in clothing like that he'd seen on the street, a vest and a white shirt, finer trousers than any man would wear while working in Emond's Field. This step was almost too much for him. His heart beat faster, and he stumbled as the ground rumbled. If he let himself be caught up completely in the nightmare, he'd end up like Slayer.

No, Perrin thought, forcing himself to hold to his memory of Faile in his heart. His home. His face might change, the world might shake, but that was still home.

He ran to the edge of the rift, above the heat, acting as if he were just another part of the nightmare. He screamed in terror, reaching down to help those who were falling. Though he reached for someone else, Slayer cursed and grabbed his arm, using it to heave himself upward.

And as he passed, Perrin grabbed the ter'angreal. Slayer crawled over him, reaching the relative safety of the alley. Covertly, Perrin made a knife in his other hand.

'Burn me," Slayer growled. "I hate these things." The area around them suddenly changed to tiles.

Perrin stood up, holding a staff to steady himself and trying to appear terrified—it wasn't hard. He began to stumble past Slayer. In that mo-ment, the hard-faced man looked down and saw the ter'angreal in Perrin's Angers.

His eyes opened wide. Perrin rammed his hand forward, plunging the knife into Slayer's stomach. The man screamed, lurching backward, hand to his belly. Blood soaked his fingers.

Slayer clenched his teeth. The nightmare bent around him. It would

burst soon. Slayer righted himself, lowering his bloodied hand, eyes alight with anger.

Perrin felt unsteady on his feet, even with the staff. He'd been wounded so badly. The ground trembled. A rift opened in the ground next to him, steaming with heat and lava, like . . .

Perrin started. Like Dragonmount. He looked down at the ter'angreal in his fingers. The fear-dreams of people are strong. Hopper's voice whispered in Perrin's mind. So very strong. . . .

As Slayer advanced on him, Perrin gritted his teeth and hurled the ter'angreal into the river of lava.

"No!" Slayer screamed, reality returning around him. The nightmare burst, its last vestiges vanishing. Perrin was left kneeling on the cold tiled floor of a small hallway.

A short distance to his right, a melted lump of metal lay on the ground. Perrin smiled.

Like Slayer, the ter'angreal was here from the real world. And like a person, it could be broken and destroyed here. Above them, the violet dome had vanished.

Slayer growled, then stepped forward and kicked Perrin in the stomach. His chest wound flared. Another kick followed. Perrin was growing dizzy.

Go, Young Bull, Hopper sent, his voice so weak. Flee.

I can't leave you!

And yet. . . I must leave you.

No!

You have found your answer. Seek Boundless. He will. . . explain . . . that answer.

Perrin blinked through tears as another kick landed. He screamed, raggedly, as Hopper's sending—so comforting, so familiar—faded from his mind.

Gone.

Perrin screamed in anguish. Voice ragged, eyes stained with tears, Perrin willed himself out of the wolf dream and away. Fleeing like an utter coward.

Egwene awoke with a sigh. Eyes still closed, she breathed in. The battle with Mesaana had left her mind feeling strained—indeed, she had a splitting headache. She had quite nearly been defeated there. Her plans had worked, but the weight of what had happened left her feeling contemplative, even a little overwhelmed.

Still, it had been a great victory. She would have to do a search of the White Tower and find the woman who, when awakened, now had the mind of a child. She knew, somehow, that this was not something Mesaana would recover from. She'd known it even before Bair had spoken her words.

Egwene opened her eyes to a comfortably dark room, making plans to
gather the Hall and explain why Shevan and Carlinya would never awaken.

She spared a moment to mourn for them as she sat up. She'd explained to
them the dangers, but still she felt as if she'd failed them. And Nicola, always
trying to go faster than she should. She shouldn't have been there. It—

Egwene hesitated. What was that smell? Hadn't she left a lamp burning? It must have gone out. Egwene embraced the Source and wove a ball of light to hang above her hand. She was stunned by the scene it revealed.

The translucent curtains of her bed had been sprayed red with blood, and five bodies littered the floor. Three were in black. One was an unfamiliar young man in the tabard of the Tower Guard. The last wore a fine white and red coat and trousers.

Gawyn!

Egwene threw herself from the bed and knelt beside him, ignoring the pain of her headache. He was breathing shallowly, and had a gaping wound in his side. She wove Earth, Spirit and Air into a Healing, but she was far from talented in this area. She worked on, in a panic. Some of his color returned and the wounds began to close, but she couldn't do nearly enough.

"Help!" she yelled. "The Amyrlin needs help!"

Gawyn stirred. "Egwene," he whispered, his eyes fluttering open.

"Hush, Gawyn. You're going to be fine. Aid! To the Amyrlin!"

"You . . . didn't leave enough lights on," he whispered.

"What?"

"The message I sent ..."

"We never got a message," she said. "Be still. Help!"

"Nobody is near. I yelled. The lamps ... it is good . . . you didn't. . ." He smiled dazedly. "I love you."

"Lie still," she said. Light! She was crying.

The assassins weren't your Forsaken, though," he said, words slurring. "I was right."

And he had been; what were those unfamiliar black uniforms? Seanchan?

I should be dead, she realized. If Gawyn hadn't stopped these assassins, she'd have been murdered in her sleep and would have vanished from Tel'aran'rhiod. She'd never have killed Mesaana.

Suddenly, she felt a fool, any sense of victory completely evaporating.

"I'm sorry," Gawyn said closing his eyes, "for disobeying you." He was slipping.

"It's all right, Gawyn," she said, blinking away tears. "I'm going to bond you now. It's the only way."

His grip on her arm became slightly more firm. "No. Not unless... you want. . ."

"Fool," she said, preparing the weaves. "Of course I want you as my Warder. I always have."

"Swear it."

"I swear it. I swear that I want you as my Warder, and as my husband" She rested her hand on his forehead and laid the weave on him. "I love you."

He gasped. Suddenly, she could feel his emotions, and his pain, as if they were her own. And, in return, she knew that he could feel the truth of her words.

Perrin opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He was crying. Did people cry in their sleep when they dreamed normal dreams?

"Light be praised," Faile said. He opened his eyes and found that she knelt next to him, as did someone else. Masuri?

The Aes Sedai grabbed Perrin's head in her hands, and Perrin felt the icy cold of a Healing wash across him. The wounds in his leg and across his chest closed.

"We tried to Heal you while you slept," Faile said, cradling Perrin's head in her lap. "But Edarra stopped us."

"It is not to be done. Wouldn't work anyway." That was the Wise One's voice. Perrin could hear her in the tent somewhere. He blinked his eyes. He lay on his pallet. It was dim outside.

"It's been longer than an hour," he said. "You should have left by now.'

"Hush," Faile said. "Gateways are working again, and almost everyone is through. Only a few thousand soldiers remain—Aiel and Two Rivers men, mostly. You think they'd leave, you think I'd leave, without you?

He sat up, wiping his brow. It was damp with sweat. He tried to make it vanish, as he had in the wolf dream. He failed, of course. Edarra stood by the far wall, behind him. She watched him with a measuring gaze.

He turned to Faile. "We have to get away," he said, voice ragged. "Slayer will not be working alone. There will be a trap, probably an army. Someone with an army. They might try to strike at any moment."

"Can you stand?" Faile asked.

"Yes." He felt weak, but he managed, with Faile's help. The flap rustled and Chiad entered with a waterskin. Perrin took it gratefully, drinking. It slaked his thirst, but pain still burned inside of him.

Hoopper. . . He lowered the waterskin. In the wolf dream, death was final. Where would Hopper's soul go?

I must keep going, Perrin thought. See my people to safety. He walked to the tent flaps. His legs were already more steady.

"I see your sorrow, my husband," Faile said, walking beside him, hand on his arm. "What happened?"

"I lost a friend," Perrin said softly. "For the second time."

"Hopper?" She smelled fearful.

"Yes."

"Oh, Perrin, I'm sorry." Her voice was tender as they stepped out of the tent. It stood, alone, on the meadow that had once held his forces. The brown and yellow grass still bore the impressions of tents, paths worn down to the mud in a large crisscross pattern. It looked like a layout for a town, sections stamped down for buildings, lines cut to become roadways. But it was nearly empty of people now.

The rumbling sky was dark. Chiad held a lantern up to illuminate the grass in front of them. Several groups of soldiers waited. Maidens raised their spears high when they saw him, then banged them on their shields. A sign of approval.

The Two Rivers men were there as well, gathering around as word spread. How much could they guess of what he'd done tonight? Two Rivers men cheered, and Perrin nodded to them, though he felt on edge. The wrongness was still there, in the air. He'd assumed that the dreamspike was causing it, but he had apparently been wrong. The air smelled like the Blight.

The Asha'man stood where the center of the camp had once stood. They turned when Perrin approached, saluting, hands to chests. They looked to be in good shape, despite just having moved almost the entire camp.

Get us out of here, men," Perrin said to them. "I don't want to spend another minute in this place."

"Yes, my Lord," Grady said, sounding eager. He got a look of concentration on his face, and a small gateway opened beside him.

Ihrough," Perrin said, waving to the Two Rivers men. They crossed with a quick step. The Maidens and Gaul waited with Perrin, as did Elyas.

Light, Perrin thought, scanning the field where they'd camped. I feel like a mouse being eyed by a hawk.

"I don't suppose you could give us some light," Perrin said to Neald, standing beside the gateway.

The Asha'man cocked his head, and a group of glowing globes appeared around him. They zipped up into the air around the meadow.

They illuminated nothing. Just the abandoned campsite. The last of the troops finally filed through. Perrin and Faile crossed, Gaul, Elyas and the Maidens going after him. Finally, the channelers passed through, walking in a cluster.

The air on the other side of the gateway was cool, and smelled refreshingly clean. Perrin hadn't realized how much the evil smell had been bothering him. He inhaled deeply. They were on a rise, some distance from a splash of lights beside the river that was probably Whitebridge.

His troops cheered as he stepped through. The great camp was already mostly set up, guard posts in place. The gateway had been opened into a large area, marked off with posts, near the back.

They'd escaped. The cost had been great, but they'd escaped.

Graendal sat back in her chair. The leather cushions were stuffed with the down of the fledgling kallir, which during this Age lived only in Shara. She barely noticed the luxury.

The servant—one Moridin had loaned her—was on one knee before her. His eyes were tempestuous, and only half-lowered. This one was under control, but barely. He knew he was unique.

He also seemed to know that his failure would fall upon her shoulders. Graendal did not sweat. She was too controlled for that. The shutters on the window in the wide, red-tiled room burst open suddenly, a cold sea wind blowing through the chamber and putting out several of the lamps. Tendrils of smoke wove up from their wicks.

She would not fail.

"Prepare to spring the trap anyway," she commanded.

"But—" the servant said.

"Do it, and do not speak back to one of the Chosen, dog."

The servant lowered his eyes, though there was still a rebellious spark to them.

Never mind. She still had one tool left to her, one she had positioned so very carefully. One she had prepared for a moment such as this.

It had to be done carefully. Aybara was ta'veren, and so strongly one as to be frightening. Arrows fired from afar would miss, and in a time of peacful contemplation, he would be alerted and escape.

She needed a tempest with him at the center of it. And then, the blade would fall. This is not done yet, Fallen Blacksmith. Not by an inch or by a league.

CHAPTER
39

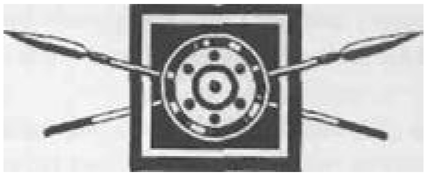

In the Three-fold Land

Aviendha felt right again. There was a calming perfection to the Three-fold Land. Wet-landers thought the landscape's uniform colors drab, but

Aviendha found them beautiful. Simple browns and tans. They were familiar and dependable, not like the wetlands, where both the landscape and the weather were different every time you turned around.

Aviendha ran forward in the darkening night, each foot falling on dusty ground. For the first time in many months, she felt alone. In the wetlands, she always felt as if she was being watched by some enemy she could not see or attack.

Not that the Three-fold Land was safer. Far from it. That shadowed patch beneath the nadra-scruh was the den of a lethal snake. If one brushed the spindly branches, the snake would strike; she had seen five men die from those bites. The den was merely one of the many hazards she passed during her run to Rhuidean. But those dangers were understandable. She could see them, measure them and avoid them. If she died from the snakes bite or fell to the land's heat, the fault would be her own.

It was always preferable to face the enemy or the danger you could see than to fear the one that hid behind the faces of lying wetlanders.

She continued running, despite the dimming light. It was good to sweat again. People didn't sweat enough in the wetlands; perhaps that was what made them so unusual. Instead of letting the sun warm them, they sought refreshment. Instead of going to a proper sweat tent to get clean, they submersed themselves in water. That couldn't be healthy.

She would not lie to herself. Aviendha herself had partaken of those luxuries, and she had come to enjoy those baths and the fine dresses Elayne forced upon her. One had to acknowledge one's weaknesses before one could defeat them. Now, as she ran across the gently sloping earth of the Three-fold Land, Aviendha's perspective was restored.

Finally, she slowed. As tempting as it was to travel in the dark and sleep through the day's heat, it was not wise. A misstep in the dark could end your life. She quickly collected some dead taŁ-brush and some ina'ta bark, then made herself a camp at the side of a tremendous stone.

Soon she had a fire burning, the orange light reflecting off the rock that towered over her. She'd slain a small shellback earlier, and she unwrapped it, skinned it, then set it up on a spit. Not the most delicate of meals, but satisfactory.

Aviendha settled down, watching the fire crackle, smelling the meat. Yes, she was glad she hadn't Traveled directly to Rhuidean, instead taking the time—precious though that time was—to run in the Three-fold Land. It helped her see what she had been, and what she had become. Aviendha the Maiden was gone. She had embraced her path as a Wise One, and that brought her honor back. She had purpose again. As a Wise One, she could help lead her people through their most trying time.

Once this was through, her people would need to return to the Threefold Land. Each day in the wetlands made them weaker; she herself was an excellent example. She had grown soft there. How could one not grow soft in that place? It would have to be abandoned. Soon.

She smiled, settling back and closing her eyes for a moment, letting the day's fatigue melt away. Her future seemed so much more clear. She was to visit Rhuidean, pass through the crystal columns, then return and claim her share of Rand's heart. She would fight at the Last Battle. She would help preserve the remnant of the Aiel who survived, then bring them home where they belonged.

A sound came from outside her camp.

Aviendha opened her eyes and jumped up, embracing the Source. A piece of her was pleased that she now instinctively looked to the One Power, rather than spears that were not there. She wove a globe of light.

A woman stood in the darkness nearby, wearing Aiel garb. Not cadin'sor

or the garb of a Wise One, but normal clothing: a dark skirt and a tan blouse and shawl, a kerchief on her graying hair. She was middle-aged, and

carried no weapons. She was still.

Aviendha glanced to the sides. Was this an ambush? Or was this woman a specter? One of the dead walking? Why hadn't Aviendha heard her approach?

"Greetings, Wise One," the woman said, bowing her head. "Might I share water with you? I am traveling far, and saw your fire." The woman had furrowed skin, and she could not channel—Aviendha could sense that easily.

"I am not yet a Wise One," Aviendha said, wary. "I currently take my second path into Rhuidean."

"Then you will soon find much honor," the woman said. "I am Nakomi. I promise that I mean you no harm, child."

Suddenly, Aviendha felt foolish. The woman had approached without weapons drawn. Aviendha had been distracted by her thoughts; that was why she hadn't heard Nakomi approach. "Of course, please."

"Thank you," Nakomi said, stepping into the light and setting down her pack beside the small fire. She clicked her tongue, then drew some small branches out of her pack to build up the flames. She removed a pot for tea. "Might I have some of that water?"

Aviendha got out a waterskin. She could hardly spare a drop—she was still several days from Rhuidean—but it would give offense not to respond to the request after offering to share shade.

Nakomi took the waterskin and filled her teapot, which she then set beside the fire to warm. "It is an unexpected pleasure," Nakomi said, rifling through her pack, "to cross the path of one on her way to Rhuidean. Tell me, was your apprenticeship long?"

"Too long," Aviendha said. "Though primarily because of my own stubbornness."

"Ah," Nakomi said. "You have the air of a warrior about you, child. Tell me, are you from among those who went west? The ones who joined the one named the Car'a'carn?"

"He is the Car'a'carn" Aviendha said.

"I did not say that he was not," Nakomi said, sounding amused. She got out some tea leaves and herbs.

No. She hadn't said so. Aviendha turned her shellback, and her stomach rumbled. She'd need to share her meal with Nakomi as well.

"May I ask," Nakomi said. "What do you think of the Car'a'carn?"

I love him, Aviendha thought immediately. But she couldn't say that, "I think he has much honor. And though he is ignorant of the proper ways, he is learning."

"You have spent time with him, then?"

'Some," Aviendha said. Then, to be more honest, she added, "More than most-'

"He is a wetlander," Nakomi said, thoughtful. "And Car'a'carn. Tell me,

are the wetlands as glorious as so many say? Rivers so wide you cannot see the other side, plants so full of water they burst when squeezed?"

"The wetlands are not glorious," Aviendha said. "They are dangerous. They make us weak."

Nakomi frowned.

Who is this woman? It was not unusual to find Aiel traveling the Waste; even children learned to protect themselves. But should Nakomi not be traveling with friends, family? She did not wear the clothing of a Wise One, but there was something about her . . .

Nakomi stirred the tea, then repositioned Aviendha's shellback, placing it over the coals to cook it more evenly. From inside her pack, she drew forth several deepearth roots. Aviendha's mother had always cooked those. Nakomi placed them in a small ceramic baking box, then slid this into the coals. Aviendha hadn't realized the fire had grown so warm. Where had all those coals come from?

"You seem troubled," Nakomi said. "Far be it for me to question an apprentice Wise One. But I do see worry in your eyes."

Aviendha stifled a grimace. She would have preferred to be left alone. And yet, she had invited this woman to share her water and shade. "I am worried about our people. Dangerous times come."

"The Last Battle," Nakomi said softly. "The thing the wetlanders speak of."

"Yes. I worry about something beyond that. The wetlands, corrupting our people. Making them soft."

"But the wetlands are part of our destiny, are they not? The things the Car'a'carn is said to have revealed . . . they link us to the wetlands in curious ways. Assuming what he said was true."

"He would not lie about this," Aviendha said.

A small wake of buzzards cawed and flapped past in the dark night air. Aviendha's people's history—the things Rand al'Thor had revealed—still caused many of the Aiel grief. In Rhuidean, Aviendha would soon see this history for herself: that the Aiel had broken their vows. Aviendha's people had once followed, then abandoned, the Way of the Leaf.

Interesting thoughts you raise, apprentice," Nakomi said, pouring the tea. "Our land here is called the Three-fold Land. Three-fold, for the three things it did to us. It punished us for sin. It tested our courage. It formed an anvil to shape us."

"The Three-fold Land makes us strong. So, by leaving it, we become weak."

"But if we had to come here to be forged into something of strength"

Nakomi said, "does that not suggest that the tests we were to face-in the

wetlands—were as dangerous as the Three-fold-land itself? So dangero and difficult that we had to come here to prepare for them?" She shook her head. "Ah, but I should not argue with a Wise One, not even an apprentice. I have toh"

"There is never toh for speaking wise words," Aviendha said. "Tell me Nakomi, where is it you travel? Which sept is your own?"

"I am far from my roof," the woman said, wistful, "yet not far at all Perhaps // is far from me. I cannot answer your question, apprentice, for it is not my place to give this truth."

Aviendha frowned. What kind of answer was that?

"It seems to me," Nakomi said, "that by breaking our ancient oaths to do no violence, our people have gained great toh"

"Yes," Aviendha said. What did you do when your entire people had done something so awful? This realization was what had caused so many of the Aiel to be taken by the bleakness. They had thrown down their spears, or refused to remove the white of gai'shain, implying that their people had such great toh, it could never be met.

But they were wrong. The Aiel toh could be met—it had to be met. That was the purpose of serving the Car'a'carn, the representative of the ones to whom the Aiel had originally sworn their oaths.

"We will meet our toh" Aviendha said. "By fighting in the Last Battle."

The Aiel would therefore regain their honor. Once you paid toh, you forgot it. To remember a fault that had been repaid-was arrogant. They would be finished. They could return and no longer feel shame for what had happened in the past. Aviendha nodded to herself.

"And so," Nakomi said, handing over a cup of tea, "the Three-fold Land was our punishment. We came here to grow so that we could meet our toh"

"Yes," Aviendha said. It felt clear to her.

"So, once we have fought for the Car'a'carn, we will have met that toh. And therefore will have no reason to be punished further. If that is the case, why would we return to this land? Would that not be like seeking more punishment, once toh is met?"

Aviendha froze. But no, that was silly. She did not want to argue with Nakomi on the point, but the Aiel belonged in the Three-fold Land.

"People of the Dragon," Nakomi said, sipping her tea. "That is what we

are, Serving the Dragon was the point behind everything we did. Our cus-toms, our raids on each other, our harsh training . . . our very way of life"

"Yes," Aviendha said.

'And so," Nakomi said softly, "once Sightblinder is defeated, what is left for us? Perhaps this is why so many refused to follow the Car'a'carn. Because they worried at what it meant. Why continue the old ways? How do we find honor in raiding, in killing one another, if we are no longer prenaring for such an important task? Why grow harder? For the sake of being hard itself?"

"I . . ."

"I'm sorry," Nakomi said. "I've let myself ramble again. I am prone to it, I fear. Here, let us eat."

Aviendha started. Surely the roots weren't done yet. However, Nakomi pulled them out, and they smelled wonderful. She cut the shellback, fishing a pair of tin plates from her pack. She seasoned the meat and roots, then passed a plate to Aviendha.

She tasted hesitantly. The food was delicious. Wonderful, even. Better than many a feast she'd had in fine palaces back in the wetlands. She stared at the plate, amazed.

"If you'll excuse me," Nakomi said. "I need to see to nature." She smiled, rising, then shuffled off into the darkness.

Aviendha ate quietly, disturbed by what had been said. Was not a wonderful meal like this, cooked over a fire and made from humble ingredients, proof that the luxury of the wetlands wasn't needed?

But what was the purpose of the Aiel now? If they did not wait for the Car'a'carn, what did they do? Fight, yes. And then? Continue to kill one another on raids? To what end?

She finished her meal, then thought for a long time. Too long. Nakomi did not return. Worried, Aviendha went to search for her, but found no trace of the woman.

Upon returning to the fire, Aviendha saw that Nakomi's pack and plate were gone. She waited up for a time, but the woman did not return.

Eventually, Aviendha went to sleep, feeling troubled.

CHAPTER
40

A Making

Perrin sat alone on a tree stump, eyes closed and face to the dark sky. The camp was situated, the gateway closed, and reports taken. Perrin finally had time to rest.

That was dangerous. Resting let him think. Thinking brought him memories. Memories brought pain.

He could smell the world on the wind. Layers of scents, swirling together. The camp around him: sweaty people, spices for cooking, soaps for cleaning, horse dung, emotions. The hills around them: dried pine needles, mud from a stream, the carcass of a dead animal. The world beyond: hints of dust from the distant road, a stand of lavender that somehow survived in the dying world.

There was no pollen. There were no wolves. Both seemed terrible signs to him.

He felt sick. Physically ill, as if his stomach were filled with muddy swamp water, rotting moss and bits of dead beetles. He wanted to scream. He wanted to find Slayer and kill him, pound fists on the man's face until the blood engulfed it.

Footsteps approached. Faile. "Perrin? Do you want to talk?"

He opened his eyes. He should be crying, screaming. But he felt so cold. Cold and furious. Those two didn't go together for him.

His tent had been set up nearby; its flaps fluttered in the wind. Nearby, Gaul reclined against a leatherleaf sapling. In the distance, one of the farriers worked late. Soft peals in the night. "I failed, Faile," Perrin whispered.

"You got the ter'angreal" she said, kneeling beside him. "You saved the people."

"And still Slayer beat us," he said bitterly. "A pack of five of us together weren't enough to fight him."

Perrin had felt this way when he'd found his family dead, killed by Trollocs. How many was the Shadow going to take from him by the time this was done? Hopper should have been safe in the wolf dream.

Foolish cub, foolish cub.

Had there even really been a trap for Perrin's army? Slayer's dreamspike could have been meant for another purpose entirely. Just a coincidence.

There are no coincidences for ta'veren . . .

He needed to find something to do with his anger and his pain. He stood, turning, and was surprised to see how many lights still shone in camp. A group of people waited nearby, far enough away from him that he hadn't made out their scents specifically. Alliandre in a golden gown. Berelain in blue. Both sat on chairs beside a small wooden travel table, set with a lantern. Elyas sat on a rock beside them, sharpening his knife. A dozen of the Two Rivers men—Wil al'Seen, Jon Ayellin and Grayor Frenn among them—huddled around a firepit, glancing at him. Even Arganda and Gallenne were there, speaking softly.

"They should be sleeping," Perrin said.

"They're worried about you," Faile said. She smelled worried as well. "And they're worried you will send them away, now that gateways work again."

"Fools," Perrin whispered. "Fools to follow me. Fools not to hide."

"You'd really have them do that?" Faile said, angry. "Cower someplace while the Last Battle happens? Didn't you say every man would be needed?"

She was right. Every man would be needed. He realized that part of his frustration was that he didn't know what he'd escaped. He'd gotten away, but from what? For what had Hopper died? Not knowing the enemy's plan made Perrin feel blind.

He walked away from the stump, over to where Arganda and Gallenne were talking. "Bring me our map," he said. "Of the Jehannah Road."

Arganda called over Hirshanin and told him where to find one. Hirshanin ran off, and Perrin began to walk through camp. Toward the sound of metal hitting metal, the farrier working. Perrin seemed drawn to it. The scents of camp swirled around him, the sky rumbling above him.

The others trailed after him. Faile, Berelain and Alliandre, the Two Rivers men, Elyas, Gaul. The group grew, other Two Rivers men joining it Nobody spoke, and Perrin ignored them, until he came to Aemin working at an anvil, one of the camp's horse-pulled forges set up beside him and burning with a red light.

Hirshanin caught up to Perrin as he arrived, carrying the map. Perrin unrolled it, holding it before him as Aemin stopped his work, smellin curious. "Arganda, Gallenne," Perrin said. "Tell me. If you were going to set up the best ambush for a large group moving along this road toward Lugard, where would you place it?"

"Here," Arganda said without hesitation, pointing to a location several hours from where they'd been camping. "See here? The road turns to follow an old, dried-out streambed. An army passing through there would be totally exposed to an ambush; you'd be able to attack them from the heights here and here."

Gallenne nodded. "Yes. This is marked as an excellent place for a large group to camp. At the base of that hill where the road bends. But if someone's on the heights above with a mind to do you harm, you might not wake up in the morning."

Arganda nodded.

The heights rose flat-topped to the north of the road; the old riverbed had cut a wide, level pathway that was washed out to the south and west. You could fit an army on those heights.

"What are these?" Perrin asked, pointing to some marks south of the road.

"Old ruins," Arganda said. "Nothing of relevance; they've degraded too far to provide cover. They're really just a few moss-covered boulders."

Perrin nodded. Something was coming together for him. "Are Grady and Neald asleep?" he asked.

"No," Berelain said. "They said they wanted to stay awake, just in case. I think your mood gave them a fright."

"Send for them," Perrin said to nobody in particular. "One of them needs to check on the Whitecloak army. I remember someone telling me they had broken camp." He didn't wait to see if the order was followed. He stepped up to the forge, laying a hand on Aemin's shoulder. "Get some sleep, Aemin. I need something to work on. Horseshoes, is it?"

The man nodded, looking perplexed. Perrin took the man's apron and gloves, and Aemin departed. Perrin got out his own hammer. The hammer he'd been given in Tear, a hammer that had been used to kill, but hadn't been used to create in such a long time.

The hammer could be either a weapon or a tool. Perrin had a choice, just as everyone who followed him had a choice. Hopper had a choice. The wolf had made that choice, risking more in defense of the Light than any human—-save Perrin—would ever understand.

Perrin used the tongs to pull a small length of metal from the coals, then placed it on the anvil. He raised his arm and began to pound.

It had been a long time since he'd found his way to a forge. In fact, the last he could remember doing any substantial work at one was back in Tear, on that peaceful day when he'd left his responsibilities for a short time and worked at that smithy.

You are like a wolf, husband. Faile had told him that, referring to how focused he became. That was a thing of wolves; they could know the past and the future, yet keep their attention on the hunt. Could he do the same? Allow himself to be consumed when needed, yet keep balance in other parts of his life?

The work began to absorb him. The rhythmic beating of hammer on metal. He flattened the length of iron, occasionally returning it to the coals and getting out another one, working on several shoes at once. He had the measurements nearby for the sizes of what was needed. He slowly bent the metal against the side of the anvil, shaping it. His arms began to sweat, his face warmed by the fire and the work.

Neald and Grady arrived, along with the Wise Ones and Masuri. As Perrin worked, he noticed them sending Sulin through a gateway to check on the Whitecloaks. She returned a short time later, but delayed her report, since Perrin was busy with his work.

Perrin held up a horseshoe, then frowned. This wasn't difficult enough work. It was soothing, yes, but today he wanted something more challenging. He felt a need to create, as if to balance the destruction he'd seen in the world, the destruction he'd helped create. There were several lengths of unworked steel stacked beside the forge, finer material than what was used for shoes. They were probably waiting to be turned into swords for the former refugees.

Perrin took several of those lengths of steel and set them into coals. This Forge wasnt as nice as what he was accustomed to; though he had a bellows and three barrels for quenching, the wind cooled the metal, and the coals didn't get as hot as he'd like. He watched with dissatisfaction.

"I can help you with that, Lord Perrin," Neald said from the side.

"Heat the metal up, if you want."

Perrin eyed him, then nodded. He plucked out a length of steel, holding it up with his tongs. "I want it a nice yellow-red. Not so hot it goes white, mind you."

Neald nodded. Perrin set the bar on the anvil, took out his hammer and began to pound again. Neald stood at the side, concentrating.

Perrin lost himself in the work. Foige the steel. All else faded. The rhythmic pounding of hammer on metal, like the beating of his heart, That shimmering metal, warm and dangerous. In that focus, he found clarity. The world was cracking, breaking further each day. It needed help, right now. Once a thing shattered, you couldn't put it back together.

"Neald," Grady's voice said. It was urgent, but distant to Perrin. "Neald, what are you doing?"

"I don't know," Neald replied. "It feels right."

Perrin continued to pound, harder and harder. He folded the metal, flattening pieces against one another. It was wonderful the way the Asha'man kept it at exactly the right temperature. That freed Perrin from needing to rely on only a few moments of perfect temperature between heatings.

The metal seemed to flow, almost as if shaped by his will alone. What was he making? He took the other two lengths out of the flames, then began to switch between the three. The first—and largest—he folded upon itself, molding it, using a process known as shrinking where he increased its girth. He made it into a large ball, then added more steel to it until it was nearly as large as a man's head. The second he drew, making it long and thin, then folded it into a narrow rod. The final, smallest piece he flattened.

He breathed in and out, his lungs working like bellows. His sweat was like the quenching waters. His arms were like the anvil. He was the forge.

"Wise Ones, I need a circle," Neald said urgently. "Now. Don't argue! I need it!"

Sparks began to fly as Perrin pounded. Larger showers with each blow. He felt something leaking from him, as if each blow infused the metal with his own strength, and also his own feelings. Both worries and hopes. These flowed from him into the three unwrought pieces.

The world was dying. He couldn't save it. That was Rand's job. Perrin just wanted to go back to his simple life, didn't he?

No. No, he wanted Faile, he wanted complexity. He wanted life. He couldn't hide, any more than the people who followed him could hide.

He didn't want their allegiance. But he had it. How would he feel ii someone else took command, and then got them killed?

Blow after blow. Sprays of sparks. Too many, as if he were pounding against a bucket of molten liquid. Sparks splashed in the air, exploding from his hammer, flying as high as treetops and spreading tens of paces. The people watching withdrew, all save the Asha'man and Wise Ones, who stood gathered around Neald.

I don't want to lead them, Perrin thought. But if I don't, who will? If I abandon them, and they fall, then it will be my fault.

Perrin saw now what he was making, what he'd been trying to make all along. He worked the largest lump into a brick shape. The long piece beame a rod, thick as three fingers. The flat piece became a capping bracket, a piece of metal to wrap around the head and join it to the shaft.

A hammer. He was making a hammer. These were the parts.

He understood now.

He grew to his task. Blow after blow. Those beats were so loud. Each blow seemed to shake the ground around him, rattling tents. Perrin exulted. He knew what he was making. He finally knew what he was making.

He hadn't asked to become a leader, but did that absolve him of responsibility? People needed him. The world needed him. And, with an understanding that cooled in him like molten rock forming into a shape, he realized that he wanted to lead.

If someone had to be lord of these people, he wanted to do it himself. Because doing it yourself was the only way to see that it was done right.

He used his chisel and rod, shaping a hole through the center of the hammer's head, then grabbed the haft and—raising it far over his head—slammed it down into place. He took the bracket and laid the hammer on it, then shaped it. Mere moments ago, this process had fed off his anger. But now it seemed to draw forth his resolution, his determination.

Metal was something alive. Every blacksmith knew this. Once you heated it, while you worked it, it lived. He took his hammer and chisel and began to shape patterns, ridges, modifications. Waves of sparks flew from him, the ringing of his hammer ever stronger, ever louder, pealing like bells. He used his chisel on a small chunk of steel to form a shape, then placed it down on top of the hammer.

With a roar, he raised his old hammer one last time over his head and beat it down on the new one, imprinting the ornamentation upon the side of the hammer. A leaping wolf.

Perrin lowered his tools. On the anvil—still glowing with an inner heat—-was a beautiful hammer. A work beyond anything he'd ever created, or thought that he might create. It had a thick, powerful head, like a maul or sledge, but the back was formed cross-face and flattened. Like a blacksmith's tool. It was four feet from bottom to top, maybe longer, an enormous size for a hammer of this type.

The haft was all of steel, something he'd never seen on a hammer before. Perrin picked it up; he was able to lift it with one hand, but barely. It was heavy. Solid.

The ornamentation was of a Crosshatch pattern with the leaping wolf stamped on one side. It looked like Hopper. Perrin touched it with a callused thumb, and the metal quieted. It still felt warm to the touch, but did not burn him.

He turned to look, and was amazed at the size of the crowd watching him. The Two Rivers men stood at the front, Jori Congar, Azi al'Thone, Wil al'Seen and hundreds more. Ghealdanin, Cairhienin, Andorans, May-eners. Watching, quiet. The ground around Perrin was blackened from the falling sparks; drops of silvery metal spread out from him like a sunburst.

Neald fell to his knees, panting, his face coated with sweat. Grady and the women of the circle sat down, looking exhausted. All six Wise Ones had joined in. What had they done?

Perrin felt exhausted, as if all of his strength and emotion had been forged into the metal. But he could not rest. "Wil. Weeks ago, I gave you an order. Burn the banners that bore the wolfhead. Did you obey? Did you burn every one?"

Wil al'Seen met his eyes, then looked down, ashamed. "Lord Perrin, I tried. But. . . Light, I couldn't do it. I kept one. The one I'd helped sew."

"Fetch it, Wil," Perrin said. His own voice sounded like steel.

Wil ran, smelling frightened. He returned shortly, bearing a folded cloth, white with a red border. Perrin took it, then held it in a reverent hand, hammer in the other. He looked at the crowd. Faile was there, hands clasped before her. She smelled hopeful. She could see into him. She knew.

"I have tried to send you away," Perrin announced to the crowd. "You would not go. I have failings. You must know this. If we march to war, I will not be able to protect you all. I will make mistakes."

He looked across the crowd, meeting the eyes of those who stood there. Each man or woman he looked at nodded silently. No regrets, no hesitations. They nodded.

Perrin took a deep breath. "If you wish this, I will accept your oaths. I will lead you."

They cheered him. An enormous roar of excitement. "Goldeneyes. Goldeneyes the wolf! To the Last Battle! Tai'shar Manetheren!"

"Wil!" Perrin bellowed, holding up the banner. "Raise this banner high. Don't take it down again until the Last Battle has been won. i march beneath the sign of the wolf. The rest of you, rouse the camp. Get every soldier ready to fight. We have another task tonight!"

The young man took the banner and unfurled it, Jori and Azi joining him and holding it so it didn't touch the ground. They raised it high, running to get a pole. The group broke up, men running this way and that, shouting the summons.

Perrin took Faile by the hand as she walked up to him. She smelled satisfied. "That's it, then?"

"No more complaining," he promised. "I don't like it. But I don't like killing, either. I'll do what must be done." He looked down at the anvil, blackened from his work. His old hammer, now worn and dented, lay across it. He felt sad to leave it, but he had made his decision.

"What did you do, Neald?" he asked as the Asha'man—still looking pale__- stumbled up to his feet. Perrin raised the new hammer, showing the magnificent work.

"I don't know, my Lord," Neald said. "It just . . . well, it was like I said. It felt right. I saw what to do, how to put the weaves into the metal itself. It seemed to draw them in, like an ocean drinking in the water of a stream." He blushed, as if he thought it a foolish figure of speech.

"That sounds right," Perrin said. "It needs a name, this hammer. Do you know much of the Old Tongue?"

"No, my Lord."

Perrin looked at the wolf imprinted on the side. "Does anyone know how you say 'He who soars'?"

"I ... I don't . . ."

"Mah'alleinir" Berelain said, stepping up from where she'd been watching.

"Mah'alleinir" Perrin repeated. "It feels right. Sulin? What of the White-cloaks?"

"They have made camp, Perrin Aybara," the Maiden replied.

"Show me," he said, gesturing to Arganda's map.

She pointed out the location: a piece of land on the side of a hill, heights running to the north of it, roadway coming in from the northeast, wrapping around the south of the heights—following the ancient riverbed—and then bending southward when it hit the campsite by the hill. From there, the road headed toward Lugard, but the campsite was protected from wind on two sides. It was a perfect campsite, but also a perfect place for an ambush. The one Arganda and Gallenne had pointed out.

He looked at that passageway and campsite, thinking of what had happened the last few weeks. We met travelers. . . . said that the muds to the north were almost completely impassable with wagons or carts . . .

A flock of sheep, running before the pack into the jaws of a beast. Faile and the others, walking toward a cliff. Light!

"Grady, Neald," Perrin said. "I'm going to need another gateway, Can you manage?"

"I think so," Neald said. "Just give us a few minutes to catch our breath."

"Very well. Position it here." Perrin pointed to the heights above the Whitecloaks' camp. "Gaul!" As usual, the Aiel man waited nearby He loped up. "I want you to go speak with Dannil, Arganda, Gallenne. I want the entire army to cross through as quickly as possible, but they are to keep quiet. We move with as much stealth as an army this size can manage."

Gaul nodded, running off. Gallenne was still nearby; Gaul started by speaking with him.

Faile watched Perrin, smelling curious and a little anxious. "What are you planning, husband?"

"It's time for me to lead," Perrin said. He looked one last time at his old hammer, and laid fingers on its haft. Then he hefted Mah'alleinir to his shoulder and strode away, feet crackling on drops of hardened steel.

The tool he left behind was the hammer of a simple blacksmith. That person would always be part of Perrin, but he could no longer afford to let him lead.

From now on, he would carry the hammer of a king.

Faile ran her fingers across the anvil as Perrin strode away, calling further orders to prepare the army.

Did he realize how he'd looked, standing amid those showers of sparks, each blow of his hammer causing the steel before him to pulse and flare to life? His golden eyes had blazed as brightly as the steel; each peal of the hammer had been nearly deafening.

"It has been many centuries since this land has seen the creation of a Power-wrought weapon," Berelain said. Most others had left to follow Perrin's orders, and the two were alone, save for Gallenne standing nearby and studying the map while rubbing his chin. "It is a strong Talent the young man just displayed. This will be of use. Perrin's army will have Power-wrought blades to strengthen them."

"The process seemed very draining," Faile said. "Even if Neald can repeat what he did, I doubt we will have time to make many weapons."

"Every small advantage helps," Berelain said. "This army your husband has forged, it will be something incredible. Ta'veren is at work here. He gathers men, and they learn with amazing speed and skill."

"Perhaps," Faile said, walking around the anvil slowly, keeping her eyes

on Berelain, who strolled around it opposite her. What was Berelain's game, here?

"Then we must speak with him," Berelain said. "Turn him from this course of action."

"This course of action?" Faile asked, genuinely confused.

Berelain stopped, her eyes alight with something. She seemed tense. She's worried, Faile thought. Worried deeply about something.

"Lord Perrin must not attack the Whitecloaks," Berelain said. "Please, you must help me persuade him."

"He's not going to attack them," Faile said. She was reasonably certain of that.

"He's setting up a perfect ambush," Berelain said. "Asha'man to use the One Power, Two Rivers bowmen to shoot from the heights down on the camp of the Children. Cavalry to ride down and sweep up after." She hesitated, seeming pained. "He's set them up perfectly. He told them that if he and Damodred both survived the Last Battle, he'd submit to punishment. But Perrin is going to make certain the Whitecloaks don't reach the Last Battle. He can keep his oath that way, but also avoid turning himself in."

Faile shook her head. "He'd never do that, Berelain."

"Can you be certain?" Berelain asked. "Absolutely certain?"

Faile hesitated. Perrin had been changing lately. Most of the changes were good ones, such as his decision to finally accept leadership. And the ambush Berelain spoke of would make a kind of perfect, ruthless sense.

But it was also wrong. Terribly wrong. Perrin wouldn't do that, no matter how much he'd changed. Of that, Faile could be certain.

"Yes," she said. "Giving a promise to Galad, then slaughtering the Whitecloaks in this way, it would rip Perrin apart. He doesn't think that way. It won't happen."

I hope that you are right," Berelain said. "I had hoped some sort of accommodation could be reached with their commander before we left . . ."

A Whitecloak. Light! Couldn't she have picked one of the noblemen in camp to give her attentions to? One who wasn't married? "You aren't very good at picking men, are you, Berelain?" The words just slipped out.

Berelain turned back to Faile, eyes widening in either shock or anger. "And what of Perrin?"

A terrible match for you," Faile said with a sniff. "You've shown that tonight, by what you think he is capable of."

How good a match he was is irrelevant. I was promised him."

"By whom?"

The Lord Dragon," Berelain said.

"What?"

"I came to the Dragon Reborn in the Stone of Tear," she said. "But he would not have me—he even grew angry with my advances. I realized that he, the Dragon Reborn, intended to marry a much higher lady, probably Elayne Trakand. It makes sense—he cannot take every realm by the sword; some will have to come to him through alliances. Andor is very powerful is ruled by a woman, and would be advantageous to hold through marriage."

"Perrin says Rand doesn't think like that, Berelain," Faile said. "Not so calculating. It's my inclination, too, from what I know of him."

"And you say the same thing about Perrin. You'd have me believe they're all so simple. Without a wit in their heads."

"I didn't say that."

"And yet you use the same old protests. Tiring. Well, I realized what the Lord Dragon was implying, so I turned my attentions toward one of his close attendants. Perhaps he did not 'promise' them to me. That was a poor choice of words. But I knew he would be pleased if I made a union with one of his close allies and friends. Indeed, I suspect that he wished me to do it—after all, the Lord Dragon did place me and Perrin together for this mission. He could not be frank about what he desired, however, so as to not offend Perrin."

Faile hesitated. On one hand, what Berelain said was purely foolish . . . but on the other, she could see what the woman might have seen. Or, perhaps, what she wished to see. To her, breaking apart a husband and wife was nothing immoral. This was politics. And, logically, Rand probably should have wanted to tie nations to him through bonds of marriage to those closest to him.

That didn't change the fact that neither he, nor Perrin, regarded matters of the heart in such a way.

"I have given up on Perrin," Berelain said. "I hold to my promise there. But it leaves me in a difficult situation. I have long thought that a connection to the Dragon Reborn is Mayene's only hope in maintaining independence in the coming years."

"Marriage isn't only about claiming political advantages," Faile said.

"And yet the advantages are so obvious that they cannot be ignored."

"And this Whitecloak?" Faile asked.

"Half-brother of the Queen of Andor," Berelain said, blushing slightly. "If the Lord Dragon does intend to marry Elayne Trakand, this will give me a link to him."

It was much more than that; Faile could see it in the way Berelain

acted, in the way she looked when she spoke of Galad Damodred. But if she wanted to rationalize a political motivation for it, Faile had no reason to dissuade her, so long as it helped distract her from Perrin. "I have done as you asked," Berelain said. "And so now, I ask your aid. If it appears that he is going to attack them, please join me in trying to dissuade him. Together, perhaps we can manage it." "Very well," Faile said.

Perrin rode at the head of an army that felt unified for the first time. The flag of Mayene, the flag of Ghealdan, the banners of noble Houses from among the refugees. Even a few banners the lads had made up representing the parts of the Two Rivers. Above them all flapped the wolfhead.

Lord Perrin. He would never get used to that, but maybe that was a good thing.

He trotted Stepper over to the side of the open gateway as the troops marched past, saluting. They were lit by torches for now. Hopefully the channelers would be able to light the battlefield later.

A man came up beside Stepper, and Perrin smelled animal pelts, loam and rabbits blood. Elyas had gone hunting while he waited for the army to gather. It took quite a keen hunter to catch rabbits at night. Elyas said it was a better challenge.

"You said something to me once, Elyas," Perrin said. "You told me that if I ever grew to like the axe, I should throw it away."

"That I did."

"I think it applies to leadership, too. The men who don't want titles should be the ones who get them, it seems. So long as I keep that in mind, I think I might do all right."

Elyas chuckled. "The banner looks good, hanging up there."

"It fits me. Always has. I just haven't always fit it."

"Deep thoughts, for a blacksmith."

"Perhaps." Perrin pulled the blacksmith's puzzle from his pocket, the

one he'd found in Maiden. He still hadn't managed to get the thing apart.

"Has it ever struck you as odd that blacksmiths seem like such simple folk,

yet they're the ones who make all of these blasted puzzles that are so hard

to figure out?"

"Never thought of it like that. So you're one of us, finally?" "No," Perrin said, putting the puzzle away. "I am who I am. Finally." He wasn't certain what had changed within him. But perhaps trying to think it through too much had been the problem in the first place.

He knew that he'd found his balance. He would never become like Noam, the man who had lost himself to the wolf. And that was enough

Perrin and Elyas waited for a time, watching the army pass. These larger gateways made it much easier to Travel; they'd have all of the fighting men and women through in under an hour. Men raised hands to Per-rin, smelling proud. His connection to the wolves did not frighten them; in fact, they actually seemed less worried now that they knew the specifics of it. Before, there had been speculation. Questions. Now, they could begin to grow comfortable with the truth. And proud of it. Their lord was no ordinary man. He was something special.

"I need to leave, Perrin," Elyas said. "Tonight, if I can."

"I know. The Last Hunt has begun. Go with them, Elyas. We will meet in the north."

The aging Warder laid a hand on Perrin's shoulder. "If we don't see one another there, perhaps we'll meet in the dream, my friend."

"This is the dream," Perrin said, smiling. "And we will meet again. I will find you, if you are with the wolves. Hunt well, Long Tooth."

"Hunt well, Young Bull."

Elyas vanished into the darkness with barely a rustle.

Perrin reached down to the warm hammer at his side. He had thought that responsibility would be another weight upon him. And yet, now that he had accepted it, he actually felt lighter.

Perrin Aybara was just a man, but Perrin Goldeneyes was a symbol created by the people who followed him. Perrin didn't have a choice about that; all he could do was lead the best he could. If he didn't, the symbol wouldn't vanish. The people would just lose faith in it. As poor Aram had.

I'm sorry, my friend, he thought. You I failed most of all. There was no point in looking backward at that. He would simply have to continue forward and do better. "I'm Perrin Goldeneyes," he said, "the man who can speak to wolves. And I guess that's a good person to be."

He kicked Stepper through the gateway. Unfortunately, Perrin Goldeneyes had some killing to do tonight.

Galad awoke as soon as his tent flap rustled. He drove away the vestiges of his dream—a silly thing, of him dining with a dark-haired beauty with perfect lips and cunning eyes—and reached for his sword.

"Galad!" a voice hissed. It was Trom.

"What's wrong?" Galad asked, hand still on his sword.

"You were right," Trom said.

"About what?"

"Aybara's army is back. Galad, they're on the heights just above us! We only caught sight of them by accident; our men were watching along the road, as you told us."

Galad cursed, sat up and reached for his smallclothes. "How did they get up there without us seeing?"

"Dark powers, Galad. Byar was right. You saw how fast their camp emptied."

Their scouts had returned an hour before. They'd found Aybara's campsite eerily empty, as if it had been populated by ghosts. Nobody had seen them leave along the road.

Now this. Galad dressed quickly. "Rouse the men. See if you can do it quietly. You were wise to bring no light; that might have alerted the enemy. Have the men put on their armor inside their tents."

"Yes, my Lord Captain Commander," Trom said. A rustling accompanied his departure.

Galad hurried to dress. What have I done? Every step of the way, he'd been confident in his choices, yet this was where they had led him. Aybara, positioned to attack, Galad's men asleep. Ever since Morgase had returned, Galad had felt his world crumbling. What was right was no longer clear to him, not as it had once been. The way ahead seemed clouded.

We should surrender, he thought, affixing his cloak in place over his mail. But no. Children of the Light never give in to Darkfriends. How could I think that?

They had to die fighting. But what would that accomplish? The end of the Children, dead before the Last Battle began?

His tent flaps rustled again, and he had his sword out, ready to strike.

"Galad," Byar said. "You've killed us." All respect was gone from his voice.

The accusation set Galad on edge. "Those who walk in the Light must take no responsibility for the actions of those who follow the Shadow." A quote from Lothair Mantelar. "I have acted with honor."

'You should have attacked instead of going through that ridiculous 'trial'"

We would have been slaughtered. He had Aes Sedai, Aiel, men who can channel, more soldiers than us, and powers we don't understand." "The Light would have protected us!"

And if that is true, it will protect us now," Galad said, confidence strengthening.

No," Byar said, voice an angry whisper. "We have led ourselves to this. If we fall, it will be deserved." He left with a rustle of the flaps.

Galad stood for a moment, then buckled on his sword. Recrimination and repentance would wait. He had to find a way to survive this day. if there was a way.

Counter their ambush, with one of their own, he thought. Have the men stay ' their tents until the attack starts, then surprise Aybara by rushing out in force, and. . .

No. Aybara would start with arrows, raining death on the tents It would be the best way to take advantage of his high ground and his long. bowmen.

The best thing to do was get the men armored, then have them break from their tents together on a signal and run for their horses. The Arnadicians could form a pikewall at the base of the heights. Aybara might risk running cavalry down the steep slope leading up to the rise, but pikemen could upset that maneuver.

Archers would still be a problem. Shields would help. A little. He took a deep breath, then strode into the night to give the orders.

"Once the battle begins," Perrin said, "I want you three to retreat to safety. I won't try to send you back to Andor; I know you wouldn't go. But you're not to participate in the battle. Stay behind the battle lines and with the rear guard."

Faile glanced at him. He sat his mount, eyes forward. They stood atop the heights, the last of his army emerging from the gateways positioned behind. Jori Congar held a shielded lantern for Perrin. It gave the area a very faint light.

"Of course, my Lord," Berelain said smoothly.

"I'll have your oaths on it, then," Perrin said, eyes still forward. "You and Alliandre, Berelain. Faile, I'll simply ask and hope."

"You have my oath, my Lord," Alliandre said.

Perrin's voice was so firm, and that worried Faile. Could Berelain be right? Was he going to attack the Whitecloaks? They were an unpredictable element, for all their professions of wanting to fight in the Last Battle. They could cause more harm than help. Beyond that, Alliandre was Perrin's liege woman, and the Whitecloaks were in her realm. Who knew what damage they would cause before they left? Beyond that, there was the future sword of Galad's judgment.

"My Lord," Berelain said, sounding worried. "Please don't do this."

"I'm only doing what I must," Perrin said, looking along the roadway

that ran toward Jehannah. That wasn't the direction of the Whitecloaks. They were just south of Perrin's position.

"Perrin," Faile said, glancing at Berelain. "What are you—" A man suddenly emerged from the shadows, making no sound, despite the dried underbrush. "Perrin Aybara," Gaul said. "The Whitecloaks know

we're here."

"Are you certain?" Perrin asked. He didn't seem alarmed.

"They are trying not to let us know," Gaul said, "but I can see it. The Maidens agree. They are preparing for battle, the grooms unhobbling the horses, guards moving from tent to tent."

Perrin nodded. He nudged Stepper forward through the brush, riding right up to the edge of the heights. Faile moved Daylight up behind him, Berelain staying close to her.

The land sloped steeply down to the ancient riverbed that flanked the roadway below. The road ran from the direction of Jehannah, until it passed the base of these heights and took a turn in the direction of Lugard. Right at the bend was the hollow, sheltered against the hill, where the Whitecloaks had arranged their circles of tents.

The clouds were thin, allowing pale moonlight to coat the land in silvery white. A low fog was rolling in, staying mainly in the riverbed, deep and thick. Perrin scanned the scene; he had a clear view of the road in both directions. Suddenly, shouts rang out below, men bursting from the Whitecloak tents and sprinting toward horselines. Torches flared to life.

"Archers forward!" Perrin bellowed.

The Two Rivers men scrambled to the edge of their elevated position.

"Infantry, ready behind the archers!" Perrin yelled. 'Arganda, on the left flank. Gallenne, on the right! I'll call if I need you to sweep for us." He turned to the foot soldiers—mainly former refugees. "Keep in a tight formation, boys. Keep your shields up and your spear arms flexed. Archers, arrows to bow!"

Faile felt herself start to sweat. This was wrong. Surely Perrin wasn't going to . . .

He still wasn't looking at the Whitecloaks below them. He was staring at the riverbed on the other side, perhaps a hundred yards or so beyond the heights, which ended in a steep drop-off because of the ancient river's washing. Perrin looked as if seeing something the rest of them weren't. And with those golden eyes of his, perhaps he was doing just that.

"My Lord," Berelain said, moving her horse up beside him, sounding

desperate. "If you must attack, could you spare the commander of the Whitecloaks? He might be useful for political reasons."

"What are you talking about?" Perrin said. "The whole reason I'm here is to keep Damodred alive."

"You . . . what?" Berelain asked.

"My Lord!" Grady suddenly exclaimed, riding nearby. "I sense channeling!"

"What's that, there!" Jori Congar yelled, pointing. "Something in the fog. It's . . ."

Faile squinted. There, just below the army in the former riverbed, figures began to rise as if from the ground. Misshapen creatures with animal heads and bodies, half again as tall as Perrin, bearing brutish weapons Moving among them were sleek, eyeless figures in black.

Fog streamed around them as they strode forward, trailing wisps. The creatures continued to appear. Dozens of them. Hundreds. Thousands.

An entire army of Trollocs and Myrddraal.

"Grady, Neald!" Perrin bellowed. "Light!"

Brilliant white globes appeared in the air and hung there. More and more Trollocs were rising from the fog, as if it were spawning them, but they seemed bewildered by the lights. They looked up, squinting and shielding their eyes.

Perrin grunted. "How about that? They weren't ready for us; they thought they'd have an easy shot at the Whitecloaks." He turned, looking down the lines of surprised soldiers. "Well, men, you wanted to follow me to the Last Battle? We're going to get a taste of it right here! Archers, loose! Let's send those Shadowspawn back to the pit that birthed them!"

He raised his newly forged hammer, and the battle began.

CHAPTER 41

An Unexpected Ally

Galad ran with his shield raised high. Bornhald joined him, also holding a shield and tossing aside his lantern as those unnatural lights flared in the air. Neither spoke. The hail of arrows would begin momentarily.

They reached the horse pickets, where a pair of nervous grooms handed over their horses. Galad lowered his shield, feeling terribly exposed as he swung onto Stout's back. He turned the horse and got the shield back up. He could hear the familiar twang of bows, distant, arrows snapping as they rained down.

None fell near him.

He hesitated. The lights hanging in the air made it bright as a night with a full moon, maybe brighter.

"What's going on?" Bornhald said, horse dancing nervously beneath him. "They missed? Those arrows are falling well outside of camp."

"Trollocs!" A shout from camp. "There are thousands of them coming down the roadway!"

"Monsters!" a terrified Amadician yelled. "Monsters of the Shadow! Light, they're real?"

Galad glanced at Bornhald. They galloped their horses to the of camp, white cloaks streaming behind them, and looked up the road.

At a slaughter.

Waves of arrows fell from the heights, crashing into the mob of Shadowspawn. The creatures howled and screeched, some trying to run for Galad's camp, others to climb toward the archers. Troilocs exploded suddenly into the air, the ground heaving beneath them, and fire fell from above. Aybara's channelers had joined the fight.

Galad took it in. "Foot, form a shieldwall on this side of the camp," he bellowed. "Crossbowmen, to those ruins there. Split the legions into eight cavalry companies, and prepare to sally! Bowmen, get ready!" The Children were primarily a cavalry force. His men would ride out, hit the Troilocs in waves, one company at a time, then retreat back behind the foot's defensive shieldwall. Crossbowmen to weaken the Trolloc lines before the heavy cavalry hit them with lances, archers to cover them as they returned behind their defenses.

The orders were passed quickly, the Children moving more efficiently than the Amadicians. Bornhald nodded. This was a mostly defensive posture, but that made the most sense, at least until Galad could sort through what was happening.

Hoofbeats announced Byar galloping up. He reared his horse, then turned, eyes wide. "Troilocs? How . . . It's Aybara. He's brought an army of Shadowspawn!"

"If he did," Galad said, "he's treating them to a slaughter."

Byar edged closer. "It's exactly like the Two Rivers. Dain, you remember what he did? Troilocs attack. Aybara rallies a defense, and therefore earns support."

"What would be the point?" Bornhald said.

"To trick us."

"By killing as many Troilocs as it gains him in followers?" Bornhald frowned. "It ... it makes no sense. If Aybara can command thousands of Troilocs, why would he need us?"

"His mind is sick, twisted," Byar said. "If he didn't have something to do with the appearance of the Troilocs, then how did both show up right now, at the same time?"

Well, there was a grain a truth in that, Galad had to admit. "For now, he said, "it gains us the time we need to form up. Bornhald, Byar, help pass my orders. I want the riders ready to sally as soon as the crossbowmen finish. He hesitated. "But let the men know that we are not to expose our flanks to Aybara. Keep some foot with pikes at the base of those heights. Just in case.

Troilocs fell screaming under the arrows. Still more continued to appear, and many of the beasts didn't fall until they had multiple arrows in them.

The Shadowspawn were preparing for a rush up the incline toward Perrin's forces. If they did, he'd have his foot hold for a time—then pull them back and run the cavalry sweep along in front of them.

"How did you know?" Faile asked softly.

He glanced at her. "It's time for you three to retreat behind to the rear guard." He glanced at Berelain, white-faced on her horse, as if seeing the Trollocs had unhinged her. He knew her to be of stronger steel than that, however. Why did she smell so worried?

"I will go," Faile said. "But I have to know."

"It made sense," Perrin said. "That dome was meant to keep us from fleeing by gateway. But it was also to encourage us along the road, to keep us from Traveling directly to Andor. It seemed odd to us that Master Gill would turn along the road, disobeying orders—but it happened because he was convinced by people coming from the north that the way was impassible. Plants by our enemies, I suspect, to lure us this direction.

"We were being herded all along. They weren't waiting for us to engage the Whitecloaks, they were waiting for us to make for Lugard as fast as we could. If we'd tried to go cross-country, I'll bet something would have happened to turn us back. They desperately wanted us walk into their ambush. Galad's force probably wasn't part of it—he was a burr that got under their saddle."

"But the Trollocs. Where—"

"I think it must be a Portal Stone," Perrin said. "I knew some kind of attack was going to come here. Didn't know how. I half thought it would be Draghkar from the sky or a Waygate we'd missed. But those ruins Ar-ganda pointed out seem like they might be a good place for a Portal Stone. It must be buried, having fallen under the river when it changed its course. The Trollocs aren't coming out of the ground; I think they're appearing from the stone.

"This was the trap. They probably would have attacked us much earlier, but the Whitecloaks were in the way. They had to wait for us to deal with them. And then we left. So . . ."

So they attacked Damodred and his men," Faile said. "After setting uP the trap, they at least wanted to do some damage to those who might fight later on."

I suspect one of the Forsaken is behind this," Perrin said, turning toward Grady.

"One of the Forsaken?" Alliandre said, voice rising. "We can't fight one of the Forsaken?

Perrin glanced at her. "What did you think you were signing up to do,

Alliandre, when you joined me? You fight for the Dragon Reborn in Tar-mon Gai'don itself. We'll have to face the Forsaken sooner or later."

She paled, but to her credit, she nodded.

"Grady.'" Perrin called to the Asha'man, who was firing blasts down at the Trollocs. "You still sense channeling?"

"Only off and on, my Lord," Grady called back. "Whoever it is, they're not terribly strong. And they're not joining the battle. I think they must be doing something to bring the Trollocs, jumping in with fists of them, then jumping away immediately to fetch more."

"Watch for him," Perrin said. "See if you can take him down."

"Yes, my Lord," Grady said, saluting.

So it wasn't one of the Forsaken bringing the Trollocs directly. That didn't mean this wasn't the work of one of them, just that they hadn't decided to commit themselves directly. "Back with you three," Perrin said to Faile, Berelain and Alliandre, hefting his hammer. The Trollocs had begun charging up the rise, many dropping to arrows, but there were enough that some would reach the top soon. It was time to fight.

"You don't know how many of them there are, my husband," Faile said softly. "They keep coming. What if they overwhelm us?"

"We'll retreat through a gateway if things turn poor for us. But I'm not letting them have the Whitecloaks without a fight—I won't leave any man to the Trollocs, not even their lot. They ignored the Two Rivers when we were attacked. Well, I won't do the same. And that's that."

Faile, suddenly, leaned over to kiss him. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being the man that you are," she said, turning her mount and leading the other two away.

Perrin shook his head. He had been worrying that he'd need to have Grady wrap her up in Air and tow her away. He turned back to the approaching Trollocs. The Two Rivers men weren't making it easy for them to get up the incline. The men were running out of arrows, though.

Perrin hefted Mah'alleinir. A part of him felt sorry to bathe the weapon in blood so soon after its birth, but the greater part of him was pleased. These Trollocs, and those who led them, had caused Hopper's death.

A fist of Trollocs crested the hilltop, a Fade moving in behind them, led by another Fade with a black sword. Perrin let out a roar and charged forward, hammer held high.

* * *

Galad cursed, turning Stout and chopping his sword down into the neck of Trolloc with the head of a bear, Dark, thick blood spurted out in a noisome gush, but the beasts were terribly difficult to kill. Galad had heard the stories, had trained with men who had fought Shadowspawn. Still, their resilience surprised him. He had to hack at the creature three more times before it dropped. Already, Galad s arm was aching. There was no finesse to fighting monsters like this. He used horseback sword forms, but often the most direct and brutal of them. Woodsman Strips the Branch. Arc of the Moon. Striking the Spark.

His men weren't faring well. They were boxed in, and there was no longer room for lances. The sallying attacks had worked for a time, but the heavy cavalry had been forced to retreat back to the foot lines, and his whole force was being pushed east. The Amadicians were being overwhelmed, and the force of the attack was too great to allow further cavalry charges. All the Children on horseback could do was swing their weapons wildly in an attempt to stay alive.

Galad turned Stout, but two snarling Trollocs leaped for him. He quickly took one across the neck with Heron Snatches the Silvernsh, but the creature fell forward onto Stout, causing the horse to lurch away. Another brute slashed a catchpole at the horse's neck. The horse fell.

Galad barely managed to throw himself free, hitting the ground in a heap as Stout collapsed, legs jerking, neck spurting blood across his white shoulder. Galad rolled, sword twisted to the side, but he had landed wrong. His ankle wrenched in pain.

Ignoring the pain, he brought his sword up in time to deflect the hook of a brown-furred monster, nine feet tall, that stank of death. Galad's parry sent him off balance again.

"Galad!"

Figures in white crashed into the Trollocs. Reeking blood sprayed in the air. White figures tumbled to the ground, but the Trollocs were driven back. Bornhald stood panting, sword out, shield dented and sprayed with dark blood. He had four men with him. Two others had fallen.

Thank you," Galad said. "Your mounts?"

Cut down," Bornhald said. "They must have orders to go after the horses."

"Don't want us escaping," Galad said. "Or rallying a charge." He glanced down the line of beleaguered soldiers. Twenty thousand had seemed a grand army, but the battle lines were a mess. And the Trollocs continued to come, wave after wave. The northern section of the Children's line was breaking, and the Trollocs were pushing forward there with a pincer movement surround Galad's force. They'd cut them off on the north and south to ram them against the hill. Light!

"Rally to the northern foot line!" Galad yelled. He ran in that direc-tion as quickly as he could, his ankle protesting, but still functioning. Men joined with him. Their clothing was no longer white.

Galad knew that most generals, like Gareth Bryne, didn't fight on the front lines. They were too important for that, and their minds were needed for organizing the fight. Perhaps that was what Galad should have done It was falling apart.

His men were good. Solid. But they were inexperienced with Trollocs Only now—charging across muddy ground on a dark night, lit by globes hanging in the air—did he see how inexperienced many of them were. He had some veterans, but the larger group had fought mostly against unruly bandits or city militias.

The Trollocs were different. The howling, grunting, snarling monsters were in a frenzy. What they lacked in military discipline they made up for in strength and ferocity. And hunger. The Myrddraal amid them were terrible enough to break a formation all on their own. Galad's soldiers were buckling.

"Hold!" Galad bellowed, reaching the breaking section of the line. He had Bornhafd and about fifty men. Not nearly enough. "We are the Children of the Light! We do not give before the Shadow!"

It didn't work. Watching the disaster play out, his entire framework of understanding started to crack. The Children of the Light were not protected by their goodness; they were falling in swaths, like grain before the scythe. Worse than that, some did not fight valiantly or hold with resolve. Too many yelled in terror, running. The Amadicians he could understand, but a lot of the Children themselves were little better.

They weren't cowards. They weren't poor fighters. They were just men. Average. That wasn't how it was supposed to be.

Thunder sounded as Gallenne brought his horsemen around in another charge. They hammered into the Trolloc line and forced many of them off the edge, tumbling them back down the incline.

Perrin slammed Mab'alleinir into a Trollocs head. The force of the blow tossed the creature to the side, and—oddly—its skin sizzled and smoked where the hammer had hit. This happened with each blow, as if the touch of Mah'alleinir burned them, though Perrin felt only a comfort-able warmth from the hammer.

Gallenne's charge punched through the Trolloc ranks, separating them into two cohorts, but there were so many carcasses it was getting difficult for his lancers to charge. Gallenne withdrew and a contingent of Two Rivers men moved in and shot arrows at the Trollocs, cutting them down in a wave of screaming, howling, reeking death.

Perrin pulled Stepper back, foot soldiers forming around him. Very few of his men had fallen among the Trollocs. Of course, even one was too many.

Arganda trotted up on his horse. He'd lost his helmet's plumes somewhere, but was smiling broadly. "I've rarely had such a pleasing battle, Ay-bara," he said. "Enemies to fell that you need not feel a sting of pity for, a perfect staging area and defensible position. Archers to dream of and Asha'man to stop the gaps! I've laid down over two dozen of the beasts myself. For this day alone, I'm glad we followed you!"

Perrin nodded. He didn't point out that one of the reasons they were having an easy time of it was that most of the Trollocs were focused on the Whitecloaks. Trollocs were nasty, monstrous things, and they had a fiercely selfish streak. Charge up the hillside at balls of fire and longbowmen, only to try and seize ground from two full contingents of cavalry? Better to seek the easier foe, and it made tactical sense, too. Focus on the easier battle first, when you had two fronts to fight on.

They were trying to crush the Whitecloaks back against the hillside as quickly as possible, and had swarmed them, not leaving them room to ride their cavalry in charges, separating groups of them. The person leading this understood tactics; this wasn't the work of Trolloc minds.

"Lord Perrin!" Jori Congar's voice rose above the din of howling Trollocs. He scrambled up to Stepper's side. "You asked me to watch and tell you how they were doing. Well, you'll want to look, maybe."

Perrin nodded, raising his fist, then making a chopping motion. Grady and Neald stood behind him, on a rock formation that could look down toward the roadway. Their main orders were to take down any Myrddraal they spotted. Perrin wanted to keep as many of those things as possible off the heights; it could cost dozens of lives to kill a single Myrddraal with the sword or axe. Best to kill with Fire, from a distance. Besides, sometimes killing one of the Fades would mean killing a complement of Trollocs linked to it.

The Asha'man, Aes Sedai and Wise Ones saw Perrin's signal. They began a full assault on the Trollocs, fire flying from hands, lightning blasting

from the sky, pushing the Trollocs back down the incline. Perrin's for soldiers pulled back for a few moments' rest.

Perrin nudged Stepper to the edge, looking down the slope to the south, holding Mah'alleinir down by his leg. Below, Damodred's force was doing even worse than Perrin had worried. The Trollocs had drilled forward, nearly dividing the Whitecloaks into two sections. The monsters were surging around the sides, entrapping Galad, making the Whitecloaks fight on three fronts. Their backs were to the hillside, and many groups of cavalry had been cut off from the main body of fighting.

Gallenne trotted up beside Perrin. "The Trollocs are still appearing. I'd guess fifty thousand of the beasts so far. The Asha'man say they've only sensed the one channeler, and he isn't engaging."

"The one leading the Shadowspawn won't want to commit their channelers," Perrin guessed. "Not with us having the high ground. They'll leave the Trollocs to do what damage they can, and see if they gain the upper hand. If they do, we will see channelers come out."

Gallenne nodded.

"Damodred's force is in trouble."

"Yes," Gallenne said. "You positioned us well to help them, but it appears we weren't enough."

"I'm going down for them," Perrin decided. He pointed. "The Trollocs are surrounding him, boxing him in against the hillside. We could sweep down and surprise the beasts with a broadside, breaking through and freeing Damodred's men to get themselves up on the plateau here."

Gallenne frowned. "Pardon, Lord Perrin, but I must ask. What is it that you feel you owe them? I would have sorrowed if, indeed, we'd come here to attack them—though I would have seen its logic. But I see no reason to help them."

Perrin grunted. "It's just the right thing to do."

"That is a subject of debate," Gallenne said, shaking his helmeted head. "Fighting the Trollocs and Fades is excellent, for every one that falls is one fewer to face at the Last Battle. Our men get practice fighting them, and can learn to control their fears. But that slope is steep and treacherous; if you try to ride down to Damodred, you could destroy our advantage.

"I'm going anyway," Perrin said. "Jori, go get the Two Rivers men and the Asha'man. I'll need them to soften the Trollocs for my charge." He looked down again. Memories of the Two Rivers flooded his mind. Blood. Death. Mah'alleinir grew warmer in his fist. "I won't leave them to it, Gallenne. Not even them. Will you join me?"

"You are a strange man, Aybara." Gallenne hesitated. "And one of true honor. Yes, I will."

"Good. Jori, get moving. We must reach Damodred before his lines break."

a shock rippled through the mass of Trollocs. Galad hesitated, sword ripped in sweaty fingers. His entire body ached. Moans came from all round him, some guttural and snarling—Trollocs dying—some piteous from fallen men. The Children near him were holding. Barely.

The night was dim, even with those lights. It felt like fighting nightmares. But if the Children of the Light could not stand against darkness, who could?

The Trollocs began howling more loudly. Those in front of him turned, speaking to one another in a crude, snarling tongue that caused him to pull back in revulsion. Trollocs could speak? He hadn't known that. What had drawn their attention?

And then he saw it. A hail of arrows, falling from above, ripped into ranks of the nearby Trollocs. The Two Rivers bowmen lived up to their reputation. Galad wouldn't have trusted most archers to shoot like that, not without stray arrows falling on the Whitecloaks. These archers were precise, however.

The Trollocs screamed and howled. Then, from the top of the rise, a thousand horsemen charged. Lights flashed around them; fires fell from above, arcing down like red-golden lances. They illuminated the horsemen in silver.

It was an incredible maneuver. The incline was steep enough that horses could have tripped, fallen, tumbled the entire force into a useless mass of bodies. But they didn't fall. They galloped sure-footed, lances gleaming. And at their front rode a bearded monster of a man with a large hammer held high. Perrin Aybara himself, above his head a banner flapping, carried by a man riding just behind. The crimson wolfhead.

Despite himself, Galad lowered his shield at the sight. Aybara almost seemed aflame from the tongues of fire that surrounded him. Galad could see those wide, golden eyes. Like fires themselves.

The horsemen crashed into the Trollocs that had surrounded Galad's force. Aybara let out a roar over the din, then began to lay about him with the hammer. The attack forced the Trollocs back.

Assault!" Galad yelled. "Press the attack! Force them into the cavalry!" He charged northward, toward the face of the heights, Bornhald at his side.

Nearby, Trom rallied what was left of his legion and brought it around to attack the Trollocs opposite Aybara.

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The fray grew increasingly chaotic. Galad fought furiously. Above, incredibly, Aybara's entire army poured down the incline, giving up the high ground. They fell upon the Trollocs, tens of thousands of men yelling. "Goldeneyes! Goldeneyes!"

The attack put Galad and Bornhald into the Trollocs' ranks. The creatures tried to pull back from Aybara, surging in all directions. The men near Galad and Bornhald were soon fighting desperately to stay alive. Galad finished off a Trolloc with Ribbon in the Air, but spun and imme-diately found himself facing a ram-faced behemoth ten feet tall. Horns curled around the sides of its enormous square face, but the eyes were human, and the lower jaw as well.

Galad ducked when it swung its catchpole, then rammed his sword up into its gut. The creature screamed, and Bornhald hamstrung it from the side.

Galad yelled and leaped backward, but his twisted ankle finally failed him. It got caught in a cleft in the ground, and Galad heard a terrible snap as he fell.

The dying monster crashed down on him, pinning him to the ground. Pain shot up his leg, but he ignored it. He dropped his sword, trying to shove the carcass free. Bornhald, swearing, fended off a Trolloc that had the snout of a boar. It made a horrid grunting sound.

Galad heaved off the stinking carcass. To the side, he could see men in white—Trom, with Byar at his side, fighting desperately to reach Galad. There were so many Trollocs, and those Children immediately nearby had mostly fallen.

Galad reached for his sword just as a mounted figure burst through the shadows and Trollocs just to the north. Aybara. He rode up and pounded that massive hammer of his into a boar Trolloc, sending it crashing to the ground. Aybara leaped off his horse as Bornhald scrambled over to help Galad to his feet.

"You are wounded?" Aybara asked.

"My ankle," Galad said.

"On my horse," Aybara said.

Galad didn't protest; it made sense. He did, however, feel embarrassed as Bornhald helped him up. Aybara's men filled in around them, pushing the Trollocs back. Now that Aybara's army had joined the fray, Galad's men were rallying.

Rushing down the slope had been a dangerous gamble, but as soon as Galad was astride Aybara's horse, he could see that the gamble had worked, The massive charge had broken the Trollocs apart, and some groups started fleeting. Tongues of flame fell from above, burning Myrddraal and dropping entire fists of Trollocs linked to them.

There was still a great deal of fighting to do, but the tide was turning. Aybara's forces carved out a section around their leader, giving him—and by extension Galad—some breathing room to consider the next stage of the attack.

Galad turned to Aybara, who was studying the Trollocs with keen eves. "I assume you think that saving me will influence my decision about your judgment," Galad said.

"It had better," Aybara muttered.

Galad raised an eyebrow. It wasn't the response he'd been expecting. "My men find it suspicious that you appeared so soon before the Trollocs."

"Well, they can think that if they want," Aybara said. "I doubt anything I say will change their minds. In a way, this is my fault. The Trollocs were here to kill me; I just got away before they could spring their trap. Be glad I didn't leave you to them. You Whitecloaks have caused me nearly as much grief as they have."

Oddly, Galad found himself smiling. There was a straightforward air about this Perrin Aybara. A man could ask for little more in an ally.

Are we allies, then? Galad thought, nodding to Trom and Byar as they approached. Perhaps for now. He did trust Aybara. Yes, perhaps there were men in the world who would put together an intricate plot like this one, all to trick his way into Galad's favor. Valda had been like that.

Aybara wasn't. He really was straightforward. If he'd wanted the Children out of his way, he'd have killed them and moved on.

"Then so be it, Perrin Aybara," Galad said. "I name your punishment here, this night, at this moment."

Perrin frowned, turning away from his contemplation of the battle lines. "What? Now?"

I deem, as punishment, that you pay blood price to the families of the dead Children in the amount of five hundred crowns. I also order you to frght in the Last Battle with all the strength you can muster. Do these things, and I pronounce you cleansed of guilt."

It was an odd time for him to give this proclamation, but he had made his decision. They would still fight, and perhaps one would fall. Galad wanted Aybara to know the judgment, in case.

Aybara studied him, then nodded. "I name that fair, Galad Damodred." He held up his hand.

"Creature of darkness!" Someone moved behind Aybara. A figure, pulling free his sword. A hiss, a flash of metal. Byar's eyes, alight with anger. He'd positioned himself right where he could strike Aybara in the back.

Aybara spun; Galad raised his sword. Both were too slow.

But Jaret Byar's blow did not fall. He stood with his weapon upraised, frozen, blood dribbling from his lips. He fell to his knees, then flopped onto the ground right at Aybara's feet.

Bornhald stood behind him, eyes wide with horror. He looked down at his sword. "I . . . It wasn't right, to strike a man in the back after he saved us. It. . ." He dropped his sword, stumbling back from Byar's corpse..

"You did the right thing, Child Bornhald," Galad said with regret He shook his head. "He was a fine officer. Unpleasant at times, perhaps, but also brave. I am sorry to lose him."

Aybara glanced to the sides, as if looking for other Children who might strike him. "From the beginning, that one was looking for an excuse to see me dead."

Bornhald looked at Aybara, eyes still hateful, then cleaned his sword and rammed it into its sheath. He walked away, toward the area where the wounded had been taken. The area around Galad and Aybara was increasingly safe, the Trollocs pushed back, more solid battle lines forming, made of Aybara's men and the remaining Children.

"That one still thinks I killed his father," Aybara said.

"No," Galad replied. "I think he believes that you did not. But he has hated you for very long, Lord Aybara, and has loved Byar longer." He shook his head. "Killing a friend. It is sometimes painful to do what is right."

Aybara grunted. "You should get to the wounded," he said, hefting his hammer and looking toward where the fighting was still thick.

"I am well enough to fight if I have your mount."

"Well then, let's be on with it." Aybara eyed him. "I'll stay by you, though, just in case it looks like you might fall."

"Thank you."

"I'm fond of the horse."

Smiling, Galad joined him, and they waded back into the melee.

CHAPTER

42

Stronger than Blood

Once again, Gawyn sat in the small, unadorned room of Egwene's quarters. He was exhausted, which wasn't surprising, considering what he'd been through, Healings included.

His attention was consumed by the new awareness inside of him. That wonderful blossoming in the back of his mind, that link to Egwene and her emotions. The connection was a wonder, and a comfort. Sensing her let him know she was alive.

Able to anticipate her approach, he stood up as the door opened. "Gawyn," she said as she stepped in, "you shouldn't be standing up in your condition. Please, sit."

"I'm fine," he said, but did as commanded.

She pulled over the other stool, sitting down in front of him. She was calm and serene, but he could sense that she was overwhelmed by events during the night. Servants were still dealing with the bloodstains and the bodies while Chubain was holding the entire Tower at alert, checking on each and every sister. One other assassin had turned up. They'd lost two soldiers and a Warder killing her.

Yes, he could feel her emotional tempest behind that calm face. During the past few months, Gawyn had begun to think that maybe Aes Sedai lerned not to feel anything at all. The bond gave him proof otherwise, Egwene did feel; she merely didn't let her emotions touch her features.

Looking at her face and feeling the storm inside, Gawyn was given-for the first time—another perspective on the Warder and Aes Sedai relationship. Warders weren't just bodyguards; they were the ones—the only ones-who saw the truth of what happened within the Aes Sedai. No matter how proficient the Aes Sedai became at hiding emotions, her Warder knew there was more than the mask.

"You found Mesaana?" he asked.

"Yes, though it took some time. She was impersonating an Aes Sedai named Danelle, of the Brown Ajah. We found her in her room, babbling like a child. She had already soiled herself. I'm not sure what we will do with her."

"Danelle. I didn't know her."

"She kept to herself," Egwene said. "Which is probably why Mesaana picked her."

They sat in silence for a few moments longer. "So," Egwene finally said, "how do you feel?"

"You know how I feel," Gawyn said honestly.

"It was simply a means of beginning the conversation."

He smiled. "I feel wonderful. Amazing. At peace. And concerned, and worried, anxious. Like you."

"Something must be done about the Seanchan."

"I agree. But that's not what is worrying you. You're bothered by how I disobeyed you, and yet you know it was the right thing to do."

"You didn't disobey," Egwene said. "I did tell you to return."

"The moratorium on guarding your room had not been lifted. I could have unhinged plans, caused a disturbance, and scared off the assassins."

"Yes," she said. Her emotions grew more troubled. "But instead, you saved my life."

"How did they get in?" Gawyn asked. "Shouldn't you have awakened when the maid tripped your alarms?"

She shook her head. "I was deep within the dream, fighting Mesaana. Tower Guards were within range to hear the alarms," Egwene said. "They have all been found dead. It sounds like the assassins were expecting me to come running. They had one of their members hiding in the entry room to kill me after I captured the other two." She grimaced. "It might have worked. I was anticipating the Black Ajah, or maybe a Gray Man."

"I sent warning."

"The messenger has been found dead as well." She eyed him. "You did the right thing tonight, but it still has me worried."

"We'll work it out," Galad said. "You let me protect you, Egwene, and I'll obey you in anything else. I promise it." Egwene hesitated, then nodded. "Well, I'll need to go speak with the Hall. They'll be ready to break down my door and demand answers, by now." How could tell that on the inside, she was grimacing. "It may help," he said, "if you imply that my return was always part of

the plan."

"It was," Egwene said. "Though the timing wasn't anticipated." She

hesitated. "When I realized how Silviana had phrased my request that you

return, I was worried that you wouldn't come back at all."

"I nearly didn't."

"What made the difference?"

"I had to learn how to surrender. It's something I've never been good at."

Egwene nodded, as if understanding. "I'll leave orders for a bed to be brought into this room. I was always planning this to be my Warder's station."

Gawyn smiled. Sleep in another room? Underneath it all, there was still some of the conservative innkeeper's daughter remaining. Egwene blushed as she sensed his thoughts.

"Why don't we get married?" Gawyn said. "Right here, today. Light, Egwene, you're Amyrlin—your word is as good as law in Tar Valon. Speak the words, and we'd be wedded."

She paled; odd, how that would unsettle her this night. Gawyn felt a stab of anxiety. She'd said she loved him. Didn't she want to—

But no, he could feel her emotions. She did love him. Then why?

Egwene sounded aghast when she spoke. "You think I could face my parents if I got married without them knowing about it? Light, Gawyn, we'll at least have to send for them! And what about Elayne? You'd marry without telling her?"

He smiled. "You're right, of course. I'll contact them."

"I can—"

"Egwene, you're the Amyrlin Seat. The weight of the world itself is on your shoulders. Let me make arrangements."

Very well," she said. She stepped outside, where Silviana waited—she had one of her glowers for Gawyn. Egwene sent some servants for a bed for him, then she and her Keeper moved off, a pair of Chubain's soldiers following.

Gawyn would have liked to go with her. There might still be assassins about. Unfortunately, she was right to send him to sleep. He was having trouble remaining upright. He stood on unsteady legs, then noticed a line of sheet-covered bodies outside. They wouldn't be removed until sisters had a chance to look them over. Right now, rinding Mesaana—and looking for other assassins—had been more pressing.

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to walk over and pull back the sheet, revealing Celark's and Mazone's lifeless faces—Celark's, unfortunately, sitting beside his body, separated from it at the heck.

"You did well, men," he said. "I'll see that your families know that you saved the life of the Amyrlin." It made him angry to lose such good men.

Burn those Seanchan, he thought. Egwene is right about them. Something needs to be done.

He glanced to the side, to where the three assassins lay beneath sheets of their own, black-slippered feet sticking out the bottom. Two women and a man.

/ wonder... he thought, then crossed to where they lay. Guards glanced at him as he pulled back the sheet, but nobody forbade him.

The ter'angreal were easy to pick out, though only because he'd been told what to look for. Identical black stone rings, worn on the middle fingers of their right hands. The rings were carved in the shape of a vine with thorns. Apparently none of the Aes Sedai had recognized them for what they were, at least not yet.

Gawyn slipped all three rings off, then tucked them into his pocket.

Lan could feel something, a distinct difference to the emotions in the back of his mind. He'd grown accustomed to ignoring those, and the woman they represented.

Lately, those emotions had changed. More and more, he was certain that Nynaeve had taken his bond. He could identify her by the way she felt. How could one not know her, that sense of passion and kindness? It felt . . . remarkable.

He stared down the roadway. It twisted around the side of a hill before turning straight toward a distinctive fortress ahead. The border between

Kandor and Arafel was marked by the Silverwall Keeps, a large fortification built on two sides of Firchon Pass. It was an extremely impressive fortress-really two of them, each one built up the straight wall of the narrow canyonlike pass. Like two sides of an enormous doorway.

Getting through the pass required traveling a considerable distance between large stone walls pocked with arrowslits, and it would be effective at stopping armies moving in either direction.

They were all allies, the Borderlanders were. But that didn't stop the

Arafellin from wanting a nice fortress blocking the way up to Shol Arbela. Camped in front of that fortress was a gathering of thousands of people,

clustered in smaller groups. The flag of Malkier—the Golden Crane—flew over some of the groups. Others flew flags of Kandor or Arafel.

""Which of you broke your oath?" Lan asked, looking back at the caravan.

The men there shook their heads.

"Nobody needed to break his oath," Andere said. "What else would you do? Cut through the Broken Lands? The Uncapped Hills? It is here or nowhere. They know this. And so they wait for you."

Lan growled. It was probably true. "We are a caravan," he said loudly. "Remember, if any ask, you may admit that we are Malkieri. You may say you wait for your king. That is truth. You may not mention that you have found him."

The others seemed troubled, but they made no objection. Lan led the way down the slope, their caravan of twenty wagons, warhorses and attendants following.

This was what he'd always worried would happen. Reclaiming Malkier was impossible. They would die, no matter how large their force. An assault? On the Blight? Ridiculous.

He could not ask that of them. He could not allow that of them. As he continued down the road, he became more resolute. Those brave men, flying those flags . . . they should join with the Shienaran forces and fight in a battle that meant something. He would not take their lives.

Death is lighter than a feather . . . Rakim had thrown that at him several times during their ride. He had followed Lan decades ago, during the Aiel War. Duty is heavier than a mountain.

Lan was not running from duty. He was running toward it. Still, sight of the camps stirred his heart as he reached the bottom of the slope, then rode forward. The waiting men wore simple warrior's garb, hadori in place, women marked with a ki'sain on their foreheads. Some of the men wore coats with the Golden Crown on the shoulders—the mark of the royal guard of Malkier. They would have donned those only if their fathers or grandfathers had served in that guard.

It was a sight that would have made Bukama cry. He had thought the Malkieri gone as a people, broken, shattered, absorbed by other nations. Yet here they were, gathering at the faintest whisper of a call to arms. Many were older—Lan had been but a babe when his kingdom fell, and those who remembered that day as men would now be in their seventh or eighth decade. They had gray hair, but they were still warriors, and they'd brought their sons and grandsons.

"Tai'shar Malkier!" a man cried as Lan's group passed. The call went up a dozen, two dozen times as they saw his hadori. None seemed to recognize him for who he was. They assumed that he had come for the reason they had come.

The Last Battle comes, Lan thought. Must I deny them the right to fight alongside me?

Yes, he must. Best he passed unnoticed and unrecognized. He kept his eyes forward, his hand on his sword, his mouth closed. But each call of Tai'shar Malkier made him want to sit up straighter. Each seemed to strengthen him, push him forward.

The gates between the two fortress keeps were open, though soldiers checked every man who went through. Lan halted Mandarb, and his people stopped behind him. Could the Arafellin have orders to watch for him? What other choice did he have but to go forward? Going around would take weeks. His caravan waited its turn, then stepped up to the guard post.

"Purpose?" asked the uniformed Arafellin, hair in braids.

"Traveling to Fal Moran," Lan said. "Because of the Last Battle."

"You're not going to wait here like the rest?" the guard said, waving a gauntleted hand at the gathered Malkieri. "For your king?"

"I have no king," Lan said softly.

The soldier nodded slowly, rubbing his chin. Then he waved for some soldiers to inspect the goods in the wagons. "There will be a tariff on that."

"I plan to give it to Shienarans to fight in the Last Battle," Lan said. "No price asked."

The guard raised an eyebrow.

"You have my oath on it," Lan said softly, meeting the man's eyes.

"No tariff, then. Tai'shar Malkier, friend."

"Tai'shar Arafel." Lan kicked his horse forward. He hated riding through the Silverwalls; they made him feel as though a thousand archers were drawing on him. The Trollocs would not easily get through here, if the Arafellin were forced to retreat back this far. There were times that had happened, and they had held here each time, as in the days of Yakobin the Undaunted.

Lan practically held his breath the entire way. He reached the other side gratefully, and urged Mandarb out onto the roadway to the northeast.

"Al'Lan Mandragoran?" a voice yelled, sounding distant.

Lan froze. That call had come from above. He turned, looking back at the leftmost keep. A head was sticking from a window there.

"Light be praised, it is you!" the voice called. The head ducked back inside.

Lan felt like bolting. But if he did, this person would surely call back to the others. He waited. The figure came running out one of the fortress doorways. Lan recognized him: a boy not yet grown into a man wearing red, with a rich blue cloak. Kaisei Noramaga, grandson of the Queen of Kandor.

"Lord Mandragoran," the youth said, trotting up. "You came! When I heard that the Golden Crane was raised—"

"I have not raised it, Prince Kaisei. My plan was to ride alone."

"Of course. I would like to ride alone with you. May I?"

"This is not a wise choice, Your Highness," Lan said. "Your grandmother is in the South; I assume your father rules in Kandor. You should be with him. What are you doing here?"

"Prince Kendral invited me," Kaisei said. "And my father bade me come. We both plan to ride with you!"

"Kendral, too?" Lan asked, aghast. The grandson of the Arafellin king? "Your places are with your people!"

"Our ancestors swore an oath," the young man said. "An oath to protect, to defend. That oath is stronger than blood, Lord Mandragoran. It is stronger than will or choice. Your wife told us to wait here for you; she said that you might try to pass without greeting us."

"How did you notice me?" Lan asked, containing his anger.

"The horse," Kaisei said, nodding to Mandarb. "She said you might disguise yourself. But you would never leave the horse."

Burn that woman, Lan thought as he heard a call being raised through the fortress. He'd been outmaneuvered. Curse Nynaeve. And bless her, too. He tried to send a sense of love and frustration through the bond to her.

And then, with a deep sigh, he gave in. "The Golden Crane flies for Tarmon Gai'don," Lan said softly. "Let any man or woman who wishes to follow join it and fight."

He closed his eyes as the call went up. It soon became a cheer. Then a roar.

CHAPTER

43

Some Tea

And these Ashaman claim they are free of the taint?" Galad asked, as he and Perrin Aybara picked their way through the aftermath of the battle.

"They do," Perrin said. "And I've a mind to trust them. Why would they lie?"

Galad raised an eyebrow. "Insanity?"

Perrin nodded at that. This Perrin Aybara was an interesting man. Others often responded with anger when Galad said what he thought, but he was coming to realize that he didn't need to hold himself back with Perrin. This man responded well to honesty. If he was a Darkfriend or Shadowspawn, he was a very odd sort.

The horizon was starting to grow brighter. Light, had night already passed? Bodies littered the ground, most of them Trollocs. The stench was of burned flesh and fur, nauseating as it mixed with that of blood and mud. Galad felt exhausted.

He'd allowed an Aes Sedai to Heal him. "Once you've committed your reserves, there's no use holding back your scouts," Gareth Bryne was fond of saying. If he was going to let Aes Sedai save his men, then he might as well accept their Healing. Once, accepting Aes Sedai Healing hadn't bothered him nearly so much.

"Perhaps," Perrin said. "Perhaps the Ashaman are mad, and the taint isn't cleansed. But they've served me well, and I figure they've earned the right to be trusted until they show me otherwise. You and your men might well owe your lives to Grady and Neald."

"And they have my thanks," Galad said, stepping over the hulking body of a Trolloc with a bear's snout. "Though few of my men will express that emotion. They aren't certain what to think of your intervention here, Aybara."

"Still think I set them up somehow?"

"Perhaps," Galad said. "Either you are a Darkfriend of unsurpassed cunning, or you really did as you said—coming to save my men despite your treatment at our hands. In that case, you are a man of honor. Letting die would have made your life much easier, I believe."

"No," Perrin said. "Every sword is needed at the Last Battle, Galad. Every one."

Galad grunted, kneeling beside a soldier with a red cloak and turning him over. It wasn't a red cloak; it was a white one soaked in blood. Ranun Sinah would not see the Last Battle. Galad closed the young man's eyes, breathing a prayer to the Light in his name.

"So what now for you and yours?" Perrin asked.

"We continue on," Galad said, rising. "North, to my estates in Andor to prepare."

"You could—" Perrin froze. Then he turned, trotting across the battlefield.

Galad hurried after him. Perrin reached a heap of Trollocs, then began pushing bodies aside. Galad heard a very faint sound. Moaning. He helped move a dead hawk-headed beast, its too-human eyes staring lifelessly.

Beneath it, a young man looked up, blinking. It was Jerum Nus, one of the Children.

"Oh, Light," the young man croaked. "It hurts. I thought I was dead. Dead . . ."

His side was cut open. Perrin knelt hastily, lifting the boy's head, giving him a drink of water as Galad took a bandage from the bag he carried and used it to wrap the wound. That cut was bad. The unfortunate youth would die for certain. He—

No, Galad realized. We have Aes Sedai. It was hard to get used to thinking that way.

Jerum was crying with joy, holding to Perrin's arm. The boy looked delusional. He didn't seem to care one bit about those golden eyes.

"Drink, son," Perrin said, voice soothing. Kindly. "It's all right. We found you. You're going to be fine."

It seemed like I yelled for hours," the youth said. "But I was so weak, and they were on top of me. How . . . how did you find me?"

"I have good ears," Perrin said. He nodded to Galad, and together they lifted the youth, Perrin beneath the arms, Galad taking the legs. They carefully carried him across the battlefield. The youth continued mumbling, consciousness slipping.

At the side of the battlefield, the Aes Sedai and Aiel Wise Ones were Healing the wounded. As Galad and Perrin arrived, alight-haired Wise One—a woman who looked not a day older than Galad, but spoke with the authority of an aged matron—hustled over. She began chastising them for moving the lad as she reached out to touch his head.

"Do you give permission, Galad Damodred? she asked. "This one is too far gone to speak for himself."

Galad had insisted that each Child be given the choice to refuse Healing, regardless of the nature of their wound. The Aes Sedai and Wise Ones hadn't liked it, but Perrin had repeated the order. They seemed to listen to him. Odd. Galad had rarely met Aes Sedai who would listen to the orders, or even opinions, of a man.

"Yes," Galad said. "Heal him."

The Wise One turned to her work. Most Children had refused Healing, though some had changed their minds once Galad himself accepted it. The youth's breathing steadied, his wound closing. The Wise One didn't Heal him completely—only far enough that he'd survive the day. When she opened her eyes, she looked haggard, even more tired than Galad felt.

The channelers had fought all night, followed by performing Healings. Galad and Perrin moved back onto the field. They weren't the only ones searching for wounded, of course. Perrin himself could have gone back to camp to rest. But he hadn't.

"I can offer you another option," Perrin said as they walked. "As opposed to staying here, in Ghealdan, weeks from your destination. I could have you in Andor tonight."

"My men would not trust this Traveling."

"They'd go if you ordered them," Perrin said. "You've said that you'll fight alongside Aes Sedai. Well, I don't see anything different between that and this. Come with me."

"You'd let us join you, then?"

Perrin nodded. "I'd need an oath from you, though."

"What manner of oath?"

"I'll be frank with you, Galad. I don't think we have much time left. A few weeks, maybe. Well, I fancy we'll need you, but Rand won't like the idea of Whitecloaks in the battle lines unsupervised. So, I want you to swear you'll accept me as your commander until the battle is through."

Galad hesitated. Dawn was close now; in fact, it might have arrived, behind those clouds. "Do you realize what an audacious suggestion you make? The Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light obeying the orders of any man would be remarkable. But to you, a man I just recently saw judged a killer? A man most of the Children are convinced is a

Darkfriend?"

Perrin turned to him. "You come with me now, and I'll get you to the Last Battle. Without me, who knows what will happen?"

"You said every sword was needed," Galad replied. "You'd leave us?"

"Yes. If I don't have that oath, I will. Rand may come back for you himself, though. In me, you know what you're getting. I'll be fair to you. All I'll ask is that your men stay in line, then fight where they're told when the battle comes. Rand . . . well, you can say no to me. You'll find it much harder to say it to him. And I doubt you'll like the result half as much, either, once you end up saying yes."

Galad frowned. "You're an oddly compelling man, Perrin Aybara."

"We have a bargain?" Perrin held out a hand.

Galad took it. It wasn't the threat that did it; it was remembering Perrin's voice when he'd found Jerum wounded. That compassion. No Darkfriend could feign that.

"You have my oath," Galad said. "To accept you as my military commander until the end of the Last Battle," He suddenly felt weaker than he had before, and he released a breath, then sat on a nearby rock.

"And you have my oath," Perrin said. "I'll see your men cared for like the others. Sit here and rest a spell; I'll search that patch over there. The weakness will pass soon."

"Weakness?"

Perrin nodded. "I know what it's like to be caught up in the needs of a ta'veren. Light, but I do." He eyed Galad. "You ever wonder why we ended up here, in this same place?"

"My men and I assumed it was because the Light had placed you before us," Galad said. "So we could punish you."

Perrin shook his head. "That's not it at all. Truth is, Galad, I apparently needed you. And that's why you ended up here." With that, he headed off.

Alliandre carefully folded the bandage, then passed it to a waiting gai'shain. His fingers were thick and callused, his face hidden beneath the hood of his robe. She thought it might be Niagen, the Brotherless that Lacile had

been taking after. That still irked Faile, but Ailiandre couldn't fathom why. An Aiel man would probably match Lacile well.

Ailiandre began rolling another bandage. She sat with other women in a small clearing near the battlefield, surrounded by scraggly scatterhead and stands of leatherleaf. The cool air was quiet save for the nearby groan of the wounded.

She cut another length of cloth in the morning light. The cloth had been a shirt. Now it was bandages. Not a great loss; it hadn't been a very good shirt, by the looks of it.

"The battle is through?" Berelain said softly. She and Faile worked nearby, sitting on stools across from one another as they cut.

"Yes, it appears that it is," Faile replied.

Both fell silent. Ailiandre raised an eyebrow, but did not say anything. Something was going on between those two. Why suddenly start pretending they were the greatest of friends? The act seemed to fool many of the men in camp, but Ailiandre could see the truth in the way their lips tightened when they saw one another. It had lessened after Faile had saved Bere-lain's life, but not vanished entirely.

"You were right about him," Berelain said.

"You sound surprised."

"I am not often wrong when it comes to men."

"My husband is not like other men. It—" Faile cut off. She looked toward Ailiandre, eyes narrowing.

Bloody ashes, Ailiandre thought. She'd sat too far away, which made her strain, turning to eavesdrop. That was suspicious.

The two of them fell silent again, and Ailiandre held up a hand, as if inspecting her nails. Yes, she thought. Ignore me. I don't matter, I'm just a woman in over her head and struggling to keep up. Faile and Berelain didn't think that, of course, any more than the Two Rivers men had ever thought Perrin had been unfaithful. If you sat them down and asked them—really made them think about it—they'd come to the conclusion that something else must have happened.

But things like superstition and bias ran deeper than mere thoughts. What the other two thought about Ailiandre and what they instinctively felt were different. Besides, Ailiandre really was a woman who was in over her head and struggling to keep up.

Best to know what your strengths were.

Ailiandre turned back to cutting bandages. Faile and Berelain had insisted on staying to help; Ailiandre couldn't go. Not with the two of them acting so bloody fascinating lately. Besides, she didn't mind the work. Compared to their captivity by the Aiel, this was really quite pleasant. Unfor-tunstely, the two didn't go back to their conversation. In fact, Berelain rose, looking frustrated, and walked toward the other side of the clearing.

Alliandre could practically feel the frost coming off the woman. Berelain stopped over where others were rolling the strips of cloth. Alliandre stood up, carrying her stool, scissors and cloths over to Faile. "I don't believe I've ever seen her this unsettled," Alliandre said.

"She's not fond of being wrong," Faile noted. She took a deep breath, then shook her head. "She sees the world as a network of half-truths and inferences, ascribing complex motivations to the simplest of men. I suspect it makes her very good at court politics. But I wouldn't want to live that way."

"She's very wise," Alliandre said. "She does see things, Faile. She understands the world, she merely has a few blind spots, like most of us."

Faile nodded absently. "The thing I pity most is the fact that, despite all of this, I don't believe she was ever in love with Perrin. She chased him for sport, for political advantage, and for Mayene. In the end, it was more the challenge than anything else. She may be fond of him, but nothing more. I could, perhaps, understand her if it had been for love."

Alliandre kept her tongue after that, cutting bandages. She ran across a fine blue silk shirt in the pile. Surely there could be something better done with that! She stuffed it between two others and set those beside her, as if in a pile she intended to cut.

Perrin eventually tramped into the clearing, followed by some workers in bloodied clothing. He made instantly for Faile, sitting down on Berelain's stool, setting his marvelous hammer down in the weeds beside him. He looked exhausted. Faile got him something to drink and then rubbed his shoulder.

Alliandre excused herself, leaving Perrin and his wife. She made her way over to where Berelain stood at the edge of the clearing, sipping a cup of tea taken from the pot on the fire. Berelain eyed her.

Alliandre poured herself a cup of tea, then blew on it for a moment. They are good for one another, Berelain," she said. "I cannot say I'm sorry to see this result."

"Every relationship deserves to be challenged," Berelain replied. "And if she had fallen in Maiden—an outcome all too possible—he would have needed someone. It is not a great loss to me, however, to take my eyes off Perrin Aybara. I would have liked to make a connection to the Dragon Reborn through him, but there will be other opportunities." She seemed far less frustrated now than she had moments ago. In fact, she seemed to have returned to her calculating self.

Alliandre smiled. Clever woman. Faile needed to see her rival completely beaten down, so that she would consider rhe threat passed. This was why Berelain let some of her frustration show, more than she normally would have.

Alliandre sipped her tea. "Marriage seems nothing to you other than a calculation, then? The advantages gained?"

"There's also the joy of the hunt, the thrill of the game."

"And what of love?"

"Love is for those who do not rule," Berelain said. "A woman is worth far more than her ability to make a match, but I must care for Mayene. If we enter the Last Battle without my having secured a husband, that puts the succession in danger. And when Mayene has a succession crisis, Tear is all too quick to assert itself. Romance is an unaffordable distraction I. . ."

She trailed off suddenly, her expression changing. What was going on? Alliandre turned to the side, frowning until she saw the cause.

Galad Damodred had entered the clearing.

He had blood on his white uniform, and he looked exhausted. Yet he stood upright, straight-backed, and his face was clean. He almost seemed too beautiful to be human, with that perfectly masculine face and graceful, lean figure. And those eyes! Like deep, dark pools. He practically seemed to glow.

"I. . . What was I saying?" Berelain asked, eyes on Damodred.

"That there is no place for romance in a leaders life?"

"Yes," Berelain said, sounding distracted. "It's just not reasonable at all."

"Not at all."

"I—" Berelain began, but Damodred turned toward them. She cut off as their eyes met.

Alliandre suppressed a smile as Damodred crossed the clearing. He executed another set of perfect bows, one for each of them, though he barely seemed to notice Alliandre.

"My . . . Lady First," he said. "Lord Aybara says that, when he first approached this battle, you pled to him on my behalf."

"Foolishly," Berelain said. "I feared he would attack you."

"If fearing that makes one a fool," Damodred said, "then we two are fools together in it. I was certain that my men would soon fall to Aybara.

She smiled at him. That quickly, she seemed to have forgotten everything she'd been saying previously.

"Would you like some tea?" Damodred said, speaking a little abruptly as he reached for the teacups, which sat on a cloth away from the fire.

"I'm drinking some," she noted.

"Some more then?" he asked, hastily kneeling and pouring a cup.

"Er."

He stood up, holding the cup, then seeing that she already had one in her hands.

"There are still bandages to cut," Berelain said. "Perhaps you could help."

"Perhaps," he said. He handed the cup he'd poured over to Alliandre. Berelain—her eyes still holding his—handed hers over as well, seeming oblivious to what she was doing.

Alliandre smiled deeply—now holding three teacups—as the two of them walked over to the stack of cloths to be cut. This might turn out well indeed. At the very least, it would get those blasted Whitecloaks out of her kingdom.

She walked back toward Faile and Perrin. As she did so, she slipped the blue silk shirt from the pile of cloth she'd set aside to cut.

It really would make a nice sash.

CHAPTER

44

A Backhanded Request

Morgase stepped out of her hillside tent and looked out at Andor. Whitebridge lay below, blessedly familiar, although she could see that it had grown. The farms were failing, the last of the winter stores spoiling, so people made for the cities.

The landscape should have been green. Instead, even the yellowed grass was dying off, leaving scars of brown. It wouldn't be long before the entire land was like the Waste. She longed to take action. This was her nation. Or it had once been.

She left her tent, looking for Master Gill. On the way, she passed Faile, who was speaking with the quartermaster again. Morgase nodded, showing deference. Faile nodded back. There was a rift between the two of them now. Morgase wished it could be otherwise. She and the others had shared a sliver of their lives when hope had been weaker than a candle's flame. It had been Faile who had encouraged Morgase to use the One Power— squeezing every last drop from her pathetic ability—to signal for help while they were trapped.

The camp was already well set up, and amazingly the Whitecloaks had joined them, but Perrin hadn't yet decided what to do. Or at least if he had decided, he wasn't sharing that decision with Morgase.

She walked to the wagon lines, past farriers and grooms looking for the best pasture, people arguing in the supply dump, soldiers grudgingly digging trenches for waste. Everyone had their place except Morgase. Servants backed away, half-bowing, uncertain how to treat her. She wasn't a queen, but neither was she simply another noblewoman. She certainly wasn't a servant anymore.

Though her time with Galad had reminded her what it was to be a queen, she was thankful for what she had learned as Maighdin. That hadn't been as bad as she had feared; there had been advantages to being a lady's maid. The camaraderie of the other servants, the freedom from the burdens of leadership, the time spent with Tallanvor. . . . That life was not hers. It was time to be done with pretending. She eventually found Basel Gill packing the cart, Lini supervising, Lamgwin and Breane helping. Faile had released Breane and Lamgwin from her service so they could serve Morgase. Morgase had kept silent about Faile so graciously granting her back her servants.

Tallanvor wasn't there. Well, she couldn't moon over him like a girl any longer. She had to get back to Caemlyn and help Elayne.

"Your Majes—" Master Gill said, bowing. He hesitated. "I mean, my Lady. Pardon me."

"Don't mind it, Master Gill. I have trouble remembering myself."

"You sure you want to go forward with this?" Lini folded her thin arms.

"Yes," Morgase said. "It is our duty to return to Caemlyn and offer Elayne what assistance we can."

"If you say so," Lini said. "Me, I think that anyone who allows two roosters in the same barnyard deserves the ruckus they get."

Morgase raised an eyebrow. "Noted. But I think you'll find that I am quite capable of helping without usurping authority from Elayne."

Lini shrugged.

She had a point; Morgase had to be careful. Staying in the capital for too long could throw a shadow across Elayne. But if there was one thing Morgase had learned from her months as Maighdin it was that people needed to be doing something productive, even if it was something as simple as learning to serve tea. Morgase had skills that Elayne could use for the dangerous times ahead. If she began to overshadow her daughter, however, she would move out of Caemlyn to her holdings in the west.

The others worked quickly loading up, and Morgase had to fold her arms to keep from helping. There was a certain fulfillment to caring for oneself. As she waited, she noticed someone riding up the path from Whitebridge. Tallanvor. What had he been doing in the city? He saw her and approached, then bowed, his lean, square face a model of deference. "My Lady."

"You visited the city? Did you get Lord Aybara's permission?" Perrin

hadn't wanted a sudden flood of soldiers and refugees going into the city, causing trouble.

"My Lady, I have family there," Tallanvor said, climbing from the saddle. His voice was stiff and formal. "I felt it wise to investigate the information discovered by Lord Aybara's scouts."

"Is that so, Guardsman-Lieutenant Tallanvor?" Morgase said. If he could act in such a formal way, then so could she. Lini, passing with an armload of linens to pack, gave a quiet snort at Morgase s tone.

"Yes, my Lady," Tallanvor replied. "My Lady ... if I may make a suggestion?"

"Speak."

"By reports, your daughter still assumes you dead. I'm certain if we speak to Lord Aybara, he will command his Asha'man to make a gateway for us to return to Caemlyn."

"An interesting suggestion," Morgase said carefully, ignoring the smirk on Lini's face as she walked back by in the other direction.

"My Lady," Tallanvor said, eyeing Lini, "might we speak in private?"

Morgase nodded, stepping off to the side of the camp. Tallanvor followed. A short distance away, she turned to look at him. "Well?"

"My Lady," he continued in a softer voice. "The Andoran court is certain to hear that you still live, now that Aybara's entire camp knows. If you don't present yourself and explain that you've renounced the throne, the rumors of your survival could erode Elayne's authority."

Morgase didn't reply.

"If the Last Battle truly is coming," Tallanvor said, "we can't afford—"

"Oh, hush," she said curtly. "I've already given Lini and the others the order to pack up. Didn't you notice what they were doing?"

Tallanvor flushed as he noticed Gill hauling a chest over and setting it on the cart.

"I apologize for my forwardness. With your leave, my Lady." Tallanvor nodded to her and turned to go.

"Must we be so formal with one another, Tallanvor?"

"The illusion has ended, my Lady." He walked away.

Morgase watched him go, and felt her heart twist. Curse her stubbornness! Curse Galad! His arrival had reminded her of her pride, of her royal duty.

It was bad for her to have a husband. She'd learned that from Taringail. For all of the stability her marriage to him had brought, each and every advantage had come with a threat to her throne. That was why she'd never made Bryne or Thorn her official consort, and Gaebril only proved that she had been right to worry.

Any man who married her could, potentially, be a threat to Elayne as well as Andor. Her children, if she had any more, would be rivals to Elayne's. Morgase couldn't afford to love.

Tallanvor stopped a short distance away, and her breath caught. He turned, then walked back to her. He drew his sword and bent down, plac-ing it reverently at her feet as she stood in weeds and scrub.

"I was wrong to threaten to leave, before," he said softly. "I was hurt, and pain makes a man stupid. You know that I will always be here, Morgase. I've promised it to you before, and I mean it. These days, I feel like a biteme in a world of eagles. But I have my sword and my heart, and both are yours. Forever."

He stood to go.

"Tallanvor," she said, almost in a whisper. "You've never asked me, you know. If I would have you."

"I can't put you into that position. It wouldn't be right to force you to do what we both know you must, now that you have been exposed."

"And what must I do?"

"Turn me down," he spat, obviously growing angry. "For the good of Andor."

"Must I?" she asked. "I keep telling myself that, Tallanvor, but still I question it."

"What good am I to you?" he asked. "At the very least, you should marry to help Elayne secure the loyalty of one of the factions you offended."

"And so I go to marriage without love," she said. "Again. How many times must I sacrifice my heart for Andor?"

"As many times as required, I suppose." He sounded so bitter, clenching his fists. Not angry at her, but at the situation. He always had been a man of such passion.

She hesitated, then shook her head. "No," she said. "Not again. Tallanvor, look at that sky above. You've seen the things that walk the world, felt the Dark One's curses strike us. This is not a time to be without hope. Without love."

"But what of duty?"

"Duty can bloody gtt in line. It's had its share of me. Everyone's had their share of me, Tallanvor. Everyone but the man I want." She stepped over his sword, still lying in the cockleburrs, then couldn't stop herself. In a blink, she was kissing him.

"All right, you two," a stern voice said from behind. "We're going to see Lord Aybara right now."

Morgase pulled away. It was Lini.

"What?" Morgase tried to regain some composure.

"You're getting married," Lini declared. "If I have to pull you to it by the ears."

"I will make my own choice," Morgase said. "Perrin tried to get me to—"

"I'm not him," Lini said. "This is best done before we return to Elayne. Once you're in Caemlyn there will be complications." She turned her eyes on Gill, who had the trunk stowed. "And you! Unpack my Lady's things."

"But Lini," Morgase protested, "we're going to Caemlyn."

"Tomorrow will be soon enough, child. Tonight, you celebrate." She eyed them. "And until the marriage is done, I don't think it's safe to trust you two alone."

Morgase flushed. "Lini," she hissed. "I'm not eighteen anymore!"

"No, when you were eighteen, you were married proper. Do I need to seize your ears?"

"I—" Morgase said.

"We're coming, Lini," Tallanvor said.

Morgase glared at him.

He frowned. "What?"

"You haven't asked."

He smiled, then held her close. "Morgase Trakand, will you be my wife?"

"Yes," she replied. "Now let's find Perrin."

Perrin tugged on the oak branch. It broke off, powdery wood dust puffing out. As he held the branch up, sawdust streamed out of the end onto the brown grass.

"Happened last night, my Lord," Kevlyn Torr said, holding his gloves. "The entire stand of hardwood over there, dead and dried in one night. Nearly a hundred trees, I'd guess."

Perrin dropped the branch, then dusted off his hands. "It's no worse than what we've seen before."

"But—"

"Don't worry about this," Perrin said. "Send some men to harvest this wood for fires; looks as if it will burn really well."

Kevlyn nodded, then hurried off. Other woodsmen were poking through the trees, looking disturbed. Oak, ash, elm and hickory trees dying overnight was bad enough. But dying, then drying out as though dead for years? That was downright unsettling. Best to take it in stride, though, not let the men grow afraid.

Perrin walked back toward camp. In the distance, anvils rang. They'd bought up raw materials, every bit of iron or steel they could get from Whitebridge. The people had been eager to trade for food, and Perrin had obtained five forges, with men to move them and set them up, along with hammers, tools and coal.

He might just have saved some in the city from starving. For a little while at least.

Smiths continued to pound. Hopefully he wasn't working Neald and the others too hard. Power-wrought weapons would give his people a critical advantage. Neald hadn't been able to figure out exactly what he'd done in helping forge Mah'alleinir, but Perrin hadn't been surprised. That night had been unique. He rested a hand on the weapon, feeling its faint warmth, thinking of Hopper.

Now, Neald had figured out how to make blades that wouldn't dull or break. The more he practiced, the sharper edges he was able to create. The Aiel had already begun to demand those edges for their spears, and Perrin had given Neald the order to see to them first. It was the least he owed them.

On the Traveling ground at the edge of the large, increasingly entrenched camp, Grady stood in a circle with Annoura and Masuri, holding open a gateway. This was the last group of noncombatants who wanted to leave him, the group traveling to Caemlyn. Among them, he'd sent a messenger to Elayne. He'd need to meet with her soon; he wasn't certain if he should be worried or not. Time would tell.

Some others were coming back through the gateway, bringing a few carts of food purchased in Caemlyn, where supplies were still available. Eventually he caught sight of Faile picking her way through the camp toward him. He raised a hand, drawing her over.

"Everything all right with Bavin?" Perrin asked. She'd been at the quartermaster's tent.

"All is well."

Perrin rubbed his chin. "I've been meaning to tell you for some time—I don't think he's particularly honest."

"I'll keep special watch on him," she said, smelling amused.

"Berelain's been spending more time with the Whitecloaks," Perrin said. "Seems she has eyes for Damodred. She's been leaving me alone entirely."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. And she published that proclamation, condemning the rumors about me and her. Light, but people actually seem to believe it. I was worried they'd see it is a sign of desperation!"

Faile smelled satisfied.

He laid a hand on her shoulder. "I don't know what you did, but thank you."

"Do you know the difference between a hawk and a falcon, Perrin?"

"Size, mostly," he said. "Wing shape, too. The falcon has a more arrowlike look to it."

"The falcon," Faile said, "is a better flyer. It kills with the beak, and can fly fast and quick. The hawk is slower and stronger; it excels at getting prey that is moving along the ground. It likes to kill with the claw, attacking from above."

"All right," Perrin said. "But doesn't that mean that if both see a rabbit below, the hawk will be better at snatching it?"

"That's exactly what it means." She smiled. "The hawk is better at hunting the rabbit. But, you see, the falcon is better at hunting the hawk. You sent the messenger to Elayne?"

Women. He'd never make sense of them. For once, though, that seemed a good thing. "I did. Hopefully we'll be able to meet with her soon."

"There is already talk in camp of whom you might bring with you."

"Why would there be talk?" Perrin said. "It'll be you. You'll be best at knowing how to deal with Elayne, though having Alliandre along probably won't hurt."

"And Berelain?"

"She can stay in camp," Perrin said. "Watch over things here. She got to go last time."

Faile smelled even more satisfied. "We should—" She cut off, frowning. "Well, it looks like the last leaf finally fell."

"What?" Perrin said, turning. She was looking toward a group coming at them. Aged Lini, and trailing behind her Morgase and Tallanvor, gazing at one another like a couple just back from their first Bel Tine together. "I thought she didn't like him," he said. "Or, if she did, she wasn't going to marry him anyway."

"Minds change," Faile said, "much more quickly than hearts." Her scent was faintly angry, though she smothered it. She hadn't completely forgiven Morgase, but she was no longer outright hostile.

"Perrin Aybara," Morgase said. "You are the closest thing to a lord this camp has, other than my stepson. But it wouldn't be right for a son to

smelled angry as well. Perrin sighed. Fight among themselves though they might they were always eager to pounce on a man who said the wrong thing, even if it was the truth.

However, Morgase calmed down. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to insult your authority."

"It's all right," he said. "I suppose you have reason to question."

"No," Morgase said, standing up taller. Light, but she could look like a queen when she wanted. How had they missed it before? "You are a lord, Perrin Aybara. Your actions show it. The Two Rivers is blessed because of you, and perhaps Andor as well. So long as you remain part of her."

"I intend to," Perrin promised.

"Well, if you would do this thing for me," she said, looking to Tallanvor, "then I would be willing to speak on your behalf with Elayne. Arrangements can be made, and titles—proper titles—can be bestowed."

"We will take your offer of speaking for us," Faile said, speaking quickly before Perrin could. "But we will decide, with Her Majesty, whether bestowing titles is the . . . proper course at this point."

Perrin eyed her. She wasn't still considering splitting the Two Rivers off into its own kingdom, was she? They'd never discussed it in such frank terms, but she'd encouraged him to use the flag of Manetheren. Well, they'd have to see about that.

Nearby, he could see Galad Damodred walking toward them, Bere-lain—as always lately—at his side. It appeared that Morgase had sent a messenger for him. Galad was tucking something into his pocket. A small letter, it appeared, with a red seal. Where had he gotten that? He looked troubled, though his expression lightened as he arrived. He didn't seem surprised by the news of the marriage; he had a nod for Perrin and a hug for his mother, then a stern-eyed—but cordial—greeting for Tallanvor.

"What kind of ceremony would you like?" Perrin asked Morgase. "I only know the Two Rivers way."

"I believe simple oaths before you will suffice," Morgase said. "I'm old enough to be tired of ceremony."

"Sounds appropriate to me," Perrin said.

Galad stepped to the side and Morgase and Tallanvor clasped hands. "Martyn Tallanvor," she said. "I've had more from you than I deserve, for longer than I've known that I've had it. You've claimed that the love of a simple soldier is nothing before the mantle of a queen, but I say the measure of a man is not in his title, but in his soul.

"I've seen from you bravery, dedication, loyalty, and love. I've seen the heart of a prince inside of you, the heart of a man who would remain true when hundreds around him failed. I swear that I love you. And before the Light, I swear not to leave you. I swear to cherish you forever and have you as my husband."

Berelain took out a kerchief and dabbed the corners of her eyes. Well, women always wept at things like weddings. Though Perrin . . . well he felt a little water in his eyes, too. Might have been the sunlight.

"Morgase Trakand," Tallanvor said, "I fell in love with you for the way you treated those around you as Queen. I saw a woman who took duty with not just a sense of responsibility, but with a passion. Even when you didn't know me from any other guard, you treated me with kindness and respect. You treated all of your subjects that way.

"I love you for your goodness, your cleverness, your strength of mind and will. One of the Forsaken couldn't break you; you escaped him when he thought you completely under control. The most terrible of tyrants couldn't break you, even when he held you in his palm. The Shaido couldn't break you. Another would be hateful in your place, if they had been through what you had. But you . . . you have grown, increasingly, into someone to admire, cherish, and respect.

"I swear that I love you. And before the Light, I swear that I will never, never leave you. I swear to cherish you forever and have you as my wife. I swear it, Morgase, though part of me fails to believe that this could really be happening."

And then they stood like that, staring into one another's eyes, as if Perrin weren't even there.

He coughed. "Well, so be it, then. You're married." Should he give advice? How did one give advice to Morgase Trakand, a queen with children his own age? He just shrugged. "Off with you, then."

Beside him, Faile smelled amused and faintly dissatisfied. Lini snorted at Perrin's performance, but ushered Morgase and Tallanvor away. Galad nodded to him, and Berelain curtsied. They walked away, Berelain remarking on the suddenness of it.

Faile smiled at him. "You'll have to get better at that."

"They wanted it simple."

"Everyone says that," Faile replied. "But you can have an air of authority while keeping things brief. We'll talk about it. Next time you'll do a much better job."

Next time? He shook his head as Faile turned and walked toward the camp.

"Where are you going?" Perrin asked.

"To Bavin. I need to requisition some casks of ale."

"For what?"

"The festivities," Faile said, looking over her shoulder. "Ceremony can be skimped if needed. But the celebration should not be skimped." She glanced upward. "Particularly at times like this."

Perrin watched her go, disappearing into the enormous camp. Soldiers, farmers, craftsmen, Aiel, Whitecloaks, refugees. Almost seventy thousand strong, despite those who had left or fallen in battle. How had he ended up with such a force? Before leaving the Two Rivers, he'd never seen more than a thousand people gathered in one place.

The largest portion was the group of former mercenaries and refugees who had been training under Tarn and Dannil. The Wolf Guard, they were calling themselves, whatever that was supposed to mean. Perrin began walking to check on the supply carts, but something small struck him softly on the back of the head.

He froze, turning, scanning the forest behind him. To the right, it stood brown and dead; to his left, the tree cover dwindled. He couldn't seen anyone.

Have I been pushing myself too hard? he wondered, rubbing his head as he turned to continue walking. Imagining things that—

Another little strike on the back of his head. He spun and caught sight of something dropping to the grass. Frowning, he knelt down and picked it up. An acorn. Another one smacked him in the forehead. It had come from the forest.

Perrin growled and strode into the trees. One of the camp's few children, perhaps? Ahead was a large oak tree; the trunk thick and wide enough to hide someone. Once he grew close, he hesitated. Was this some kind of trap? He laid his hand on his hammer and inched forward. The tree was downwind, and he couldn't catch the scent of—

A hand suddenly jutted out from behind the trunk, holding a brown sack. "I caught a badger," a familiar voice said. "Want to let it go on the village green?"

Perrin froze, then let out a bellowing laugh. He rounded the tree's trunk and found a figure in a high-collared red coat—trimmed with gold—and fine brown trousers sitting on the tree's exposed roots, the sack squirming near his ankles. Mat was chewing idly on a long length of jerk. and wore a broad-brimmed black hat. A black polearm with a broad blade at the top leaned against the tree beside him. Where had he gotten such fine clothing? Hadn't he once complained about Rand wearing outfits like that?

"Mat?" Perrin asked, nearly too stunned to speak. "What are you doing here?"

"Catching badgers," Mat said, shaking the sack. "Bloody hard to do, you know, particularly on short notice."

The sack rustled and Perrin heard a faint growl from inside. He could smell that there was, indeed, something alive in that sack. "You actually caught one?"

"Call me nostalgic."

Perrin didn't know whether to chastise Mat or laugh at him—that particular mix of emotions was common when Mat was around. No colors, fortunately, spun in Perrin's eyes now that they were near one another. Light, that would have been confusing. Perrin did feel a . . . Tightness, however.

The long-limbed man smiled, setting the sack down and standing, offering a hand. Perrin took it, but pulled Mat into a hearty hug.

"Light, Mat," Perrin said. "It seems like its been forever!"

"A lifetime," Mat said. "Maybe two. I lose count. Anyway, Caemlyn is already is buzzing with news of your arrival. Figured the only way to get in a word of welcome was to slip through that gateway and find you before everyone else." Mat picked up his spear and rested it on his shoulder, blade to the back.

"What have you been doing? Where have you been? Is Thom with you? What about Nynaeve?"

"So many questions," Mat said. "How safe is this camp of yours?"

"Safe as any place."

"Not safe enough," Mat grew solemn. "Look, Perrin, we've got some mighty dangerous folks after us. I came because I wanted to warn you to take extra care. Assassins will find you soon enough, and you'd best be ready for them. We need to catch up. But I don't want to do it here."

"Where, then?"

"Meet me in an inn called The Happy Throng, in Caemlyn. Oh, and if you don't mind, I'll be wanting to borrow one of those black-coated fellows of yours for a few shakes. Need a gateway."

"For what purpose?"

"I'll explain. But later." Mat tipped his hat, turning to jog back toward the still-open gateway to Caemlyn. "Really," he said, turning and jogging backward for a moment. "Be careful, Perrin." With that he ducked past a few refugees and through the gateway.

How had he gotten past Grady? Light! Perrin shook his head to himself, then bent to untie the sack and ease the poor badger Mat had captured.

CHAPTER
45

A Reunion

Elayne woke in her bed, bleary-eyed. "Egwene?" she said, disoriented. "What?" The last memories of the dream were dissolving like honey consumed by warm tea, but Egwene s words remained firm in Elayne's mind. The serpent has fallen, Egwene had sent. Your brother's return was timely.

Elayne sat up, feeling a surge of relief. She had spent the entire night trying to channel enough to make her dream ter'angreal work, to no avail. When she'd found out that Birgitte had turned away Gawyn—while Elayne sat inside, furious but unable to attend the meeting with Egwene— she'd been livid.

Well, Mesaana had been defeated, it seemed. And what was that about her brother? She smiled. Perhaps he and Egwene had worked out their problems.

Morning light peeked through the drapes. Elayne sat back, feeling the powerful warmth through the bond with Rand that had appeared there. Light, but that was a wonderful sensation. The moment she'd begun feeling it, the cloud cover around Andor had broken.

It had been about a week since the testing of the dragons, and she'd put all of the bellfounders in her nation to work on creating them. These days, one could hear a steady sound in Caemlyn, repeating booms as members or the Band trained with the weapons in the hills outside of the city. So far, she had let only a few of the weapons be used for training; the different teams rotated practicing on them. She'd gathered the larger number in a secret warehouse inside Caemlyn for safekeeping.

She thought about the dream sending again. She hungered for specifics. Well, Egwene would probably send a messenger by gateway eventually.

The door cracked, and Melfane looked in. "Your Majesty?" the short, round-faced woman asked. "Is everything all right? I thought I heard a cry of pain." Ever since lifting her ban on Elayne remaining in bed, the midwife had decided to sleep in the antechamber outside Elayne's bedroom to keep a careful watch on her.

"That was an exclamation of joy, Melfane," Elayne said. "A greeting for the wonderful morning that has come to us."

Melfane frowned. Elayne tried to act cheerful around the woman, to persuade her that more bed rest wasn't needed, but perhaps that last part had been a little much. Elayne couldn't afford to appear as if she were forcing herself to be happy. Even if she was. Insufferable woman.

Melfane walked in and pulled open the drapes—sunlight was good for a woman with child, she'd explained. Part of Elayne's treatment lately had been to sit in her bed with the covers drawn back, letting the spring sunlight bake her skin. As Melfane moved, Elayne felt a little tremble from inside. "Oh! There was another. They're kicking, Melfane! Come feel!"

"I won't be able to feel it yet, Your Majesty. Not until they're stronger." She began the normal daily routine. Listen to Elayne's heartbeat, then listen for the babe's. Melfane still wouldn't believe there were twins. After that, she inspected and prodded Elayne, performing all of the tests in her secretive list of annoying and embarrassing things to do to women.

Finally, Melfane placed hands on hips, regarding Elayne, who was doing up her nightgown. "I think you've been straining yourself too much lately. I want you to be certain to take proper rest. My cousin Tess's daughter had a child not two years ago who was birthed barely breathing. Light be thanked that the child survived, but she had been working the fields late through the day before and not taking proper meals. Imagine! Take care of yourself, my Queen. Your babies will be thankful for it."

Elayne nodded, relaxing. "Wait!" she said, sitting up. "Babies?"

"Yes," Melfane said, walking to the door. "There are two heartbeats in your womb, sure as I have two arms. Don't know how you knew it."

"You heard the heartbeats!" Elayne exclaimed, elated. Yes, they're there, sure as the sun." Melfane shook her head and left, sending in Naris and Sephanie to dress her and brush her hair.

Elayne endured the process in a state of amazement. Melfane believed! She couldn't stop herself from smiling.

An hour later, she settled into her small sitting room, windows all thrown open to let in the sunlight, sipping warm goat's milk. Master Norry entered on long spindly legs, tufts of hair sticking up behind the backs of his ears, face long and peaked, leather folder under his arm He was accompanied by Dyelin, who didn't usually attend the morning meet-ing. Elayne raised an eyebrow at the woman.

"I have the information you requested, Elayne," Dyelin said, pouring herself some morning tea. Today it was cloudberry. "I hear Melfane heard heartbeats?"

"She did indeed."

"My congratulations, Your Majesty," Master Norry said. He opened his folder and began arranging his papers on the tall, narrow table beside her chair. He rarely sat down in Elayne s company. Dyelin took one of the other comfortable chairs beside the hearth.

What information had Elayne requested of the woman? She didn't recall asking for anything specific. The question distracted her as Norry went over the daily reports on the various armies in the area. There was a list of altercations between sell-sword groups.

He also talked of food problems. Despite the Kinswomen making gateways to Rand's lands to the south for supply—and despite the caches of unexpected food stores that had been discovered in the city—Caemlyn was running low.

"Finally, as for our, um, guests," Norry said. "Messengers have arrived with the anticipated responses."

None of the three Houses whose nobility had been captured could afford to pay ransom. Once the Arawn, Sarand and Marne estates had been among the most productive and extensive in Andor—and now they were destitute, their coffers dry, their fields barren. And Elayne had left two of them without leadership. Light, what a mess!

Norry moved on. She had a letter from Talmanes, agreeing to move several companies of soldiers from the Band of the Red Hand to Cairhien. She ordered Norry to send him a writ with her seal, authorizing the soldiers to "lend aid restoring order." That was, of course, nonsense. No order needed to be restored. But if Elayne was ever going to move for the Sun Throne, she'd need to make some preliminary moves in that direction.

"This is what I wanted to discuss, Elayne," Dyelin said as Norry began to pack up his papers, arranging each one with meticulous care. Light help them if one of those precious pages tore or got a stain on it.

"The situation in Cairhien is . . . complex," Dyelin said.

"'When is it not?" Elayne asked with a sigh. "You've information on the political climate there?"

"It's a mess," Dyelin said simply. "We need to talk about how you're going manage the maintenance of two nations, one in absence."

"We have gateways," Elayne said.

"True. But you must to find a way to take the Sun Throne without letting it look as if Andor is subsuming Cairhien. The nobility there might accept you as their queen, but only if they see themselves as equals to the Andorans. Otherwise, the moment they're out of your sight, the schemes will grow like yeast in a warm bowl of water."

"They will be the equals of the Andorans," Elayne said.

"They won't see it that way if you go in with your armies," Dyelin said. "The Cairhienin are a proud people. To think of themselves living conquered beneath Andor's Crown. . . ."

"They lived beneath Rand's power."

"With all due respect, Elayne," Dyelin said. "He is the Dragon Reborn. You are not."

Elayne frowned, but how did one argue with that?

Master Norry cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, Lady Dyelin's advice is not born of idle speculation. I, um, have heard things. Knowing of your interests in Cairhien. . . ."

He'd been growing better at gathering informants. She'd turn him into a regular spymaster yet!

"Your Majesty," Norry continued, voice lower. "Rumors are claiming that you'll soon come to seize the Sun Throne. There is already talk of rebellion against you. Idle speculation, I'm certain, but . . ."

"The Cairhienin could see Rand al'Thor as an emperor," Dyelin said. "Not a foreign king. That is a different thing."

"Well, we don't need to move armies to take the Sun Throne," Elayne said thoughtfully.

I. . . am not certain of that, Your Majesty," Norry said. "The rumors are quite pervasive. It seems that as soon as the Lord Dragon announced the throne was to be yours, some elements in the nation began working— very subtly—to prevent it from happening. Because of these rumors, many people worry that you will seize the titles of the Cairhienin nobility and give them to Andorans instead. Others claim you will relegate any Cairhienin to a secondary state of citizenship."

"Nonsense," Elayne said. "That's plain ridiculous!"

'Obviously," Norry said. "But there are many rumors. They do tend to, um, grow like chokevines. The sentiment is strong."

Elayne gritted her teeth. The world was fast coming to be a place for those with strong alliances, knit together with bonds of both blood and paper. She had the best chance of uniting Cairhien and Andor that any queen had had in generations. "Do we know who has been starting the rumors?

"That has been very difficult to ascertain, my Ladyf Norry said.

"Who stands to benefit most?" Elayne asked. "That's the first place we should look for the source."

Norry glanced at Dyelin.

"Any number of people could benefit," Dyelin said, stirring her tea "I would guess that those with the greatest chance of taking the throne themselves would benefit the most."

"Those who resisted Rand," Elayne guessed.

"Perhaps," Dyelin said. "Or perhaps not. The strongest of the rebellious elements received great attention from the Dragon, and many of them were either converted or broken. So his allies—those he trusted most, or who professed greatest allegiance to him—are the ones we should probably suspect. This is Cairhien, after all."

Daes Dae mar. Yes, it would make sense for Rand's allies to resist her ascent to the throne. Those who had been favored by Rand would be favored for the throne, should Elayne prove incapable. However, those people would also have undermined their chances by professing allegiance to a foreign leader.

"I should think," Elayne said thoughtfully, "that those in the best position for the throne would be those in the middle. Anyone who didn't oppose Rand, and so didn't earn his ire. But also someone who didn't support him too wholeheartedly—someone who can be viewed as a patriot who can reluctantly step in and take power once I've failed." She eyed the other two. "Get me the names of anyone who has risen sharply in influence recently, a nobleman or woman who fits those criteria."

Dyelin and Master Norry nodded. Eventually, she would probably have to build a stronger network of eyes-and-ears, as neither of these two was perfectly suited to leading them. Norry was too obvious, and he already had enough to do with his other duties. Dyelin was . . . well, Elayne wasnt certain what Dyelin was.

She owed much to Dyelin, who seemed to have taken it upon herself to act as a surrogate mother to Elayne. A voice of experience and wisdom. But eventually, Dyelin would have to take a few steps back. Neither of them could afford to encourage the notion that Dyelin was the real power behind the throne.

But Light! What would she have done without the woman? Elayne had to steel herself against the sudden surge of feeling. Blood and bloody ashes, when was she going to get over these mood swings? A queen couldn't afford to be seen crying on a whim!

Elayne dabbed her eyes. Dyelin wisely said nothing.

"This will be for the best," Elayne said firmly, to distract attention f rom her treacherous eyes. "I'm still worried about the invasion."

Dyelin said nothing to that. She didn't believe that Chesmal had been talking of a specific invasion of Andor; she thought that the Black sister had been speaking of the Trolloc invasion of the Borderlands. Birgitte took the news more seriously, beefing up soldiers on the Andoran borders. Still, Egwene would very much like to have control of Cairhien; if Trollocs were to march on Andor, through her sister realm would be one of the avenues they might use.

Before the conversation could go further, the door to the hallway opened, and Elayne would have jumped in alarm had she not felt that it was Birgitte. The Warder never knocked. She strode in, wearing a sword—reluctantly—and her knee-high black boots over trousers. Oddly, she was followed by two cloaked figures, their faces hidden by hoods. Norry stepped back, raising a hand to his breast at the irregularity of it. Everyone knew that Elayne didn't like to see visitors in the small sitting room. If Birgitte was bringing people here. . . .

"Mat?" Elayne guessed.

"Hardly," a familiar voice said, firm and clear. The larger of the figures lowered his hood, revealing a perfectly beautiful masculine face. He had a square jaw and a set of focused eyes that Elayne remembered well from her childhood—mostly when he had noticed her doing something wrong.

"Galad," Elayne said, surprised at the warmth she felt for her half-brother. She rose, holding out her hands toward him. She'd spent most of their childhood frustrated with him for one reason or another, but it was good to see him alive and well. "Where have you been?"

"I have been seeking truth," Galad said bowing with an expert bow, but he did not approach to take her hands. He rose and glanced to the side. "I found that which I did not expect. Steel yourself, sister."

Elayne frowned as the second, shorter figure lowered her hood. Elayne's mother.

Elayne gasped. It was her! That face, that golden hair. Those eyes that had so often looked at Elayne as a child, judging her, measuring her—not merely as a parent measured her daughter, but as a queen measured her successor. Elayne felt her heart beating in her chest. Her mother. Her mother was alive.

Morgase was alive. The Queen still lived.

Morgase locked eyes with Elayne, then—oddly—Morgase looked down. "Your Majesty," she said with a curtsy, still remaining beside the door.

Elayne controlled her thoughts, controlled her panic. She was Queen, or she would have been Queen, or . . . Light! She'd taken the throne, and she was at least the Daughter-Heir. But now her own7 mother came back from the bloody dead?

"Please, sit," Elayne found herself saying, gesturing Morgase toward the seat beside Dyelin. It did Elayne good to see that Dyelin wasn't dealing with the shock any better than Elayne. She sat with her hand gripping her cup of tea, knuckles white, eyes bulging.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Morgase said, walking forward, Galad joining her and resting a hand on Elayne's shoulder in a comforting way. He then fetched himself a seat from the other side of the room.

Morgase's tone was more reserved than Elayne remembered. And why did she continue to call Elayne that title? The Queen had come in secret, with hood drawn. Elayne regarded her mother, putting the pieces together as she sat. "You renounced the throne, didn't you?"

Morgase gave a stately nod.

"Oh, thank the Light," Dyelin said, letting out a loud breath, hand raised to her breast. "No offense, Morgase. But for a moment there, I imagined a war between Trakand and Trakand!"

"It wouldn't have come to that," Elayne said, virtually at the same time that her mother said something similar. Their eyes met, and Elayne allowed herself to smile. "We would have found a . . . reasonable accommodation. This will do, though I certainly wonder at the circumstances of the event."

"I was being held by the Children of the Light, Elayne," Morgase said. "Old Pedron Niall was a gentleman in most respects, but his successor was not. I would not let myself be used against Andor."

"Bloody Whitecloaks," Elayne muttered under her breath. Light, they'd actually been telling the truth when they'd written, claiming to have Morgase in their possession?

Galad eyed her, raising an eyebrow. He placed the chair he'd brought over, then undid his cloak, revealing the brilliant white uniform underneath, with the sunburst on the breast.

"Oh, that's right" Elayne said, exasperated. "I almost forgot that. Intentionally."

"The Children had answers, Elayne," he said, sitting. Light, but he was frustrating. It was good to see him, but he was frustrating!

"I don't wish to discuss it," Elayne said. "How many Whitecloaks have come with you?"

"The entire force of Children accompanied me to Andor," Galad said. I

am their Lord Captain Commander."

Elayne blinked, then glanced at Morgase. The elder Trakand nodded. ."Well," Elayne said, "I see we have much to catch up on."

Galad took that as a request—he could be very literal—and began explaining how he'd come by his station. He was quite detailed about it, and Elayne occasionally glanced at her mother. Morgase's expression was unreadable.

Once Galad was done, he asked after the Succession war. Conversing with Galad was often like this: an exchange, more formal than familiar. Once, it had frustrated her, but this time she found that—against her better wishes—she'd actually been missing him. So she listened with fondness.

Eventually, the conversation wound down. There was more to talk about with him, but Elayne was dying for a chance to speak just with her mother. "Galad," Elayne said, "I'd like to talk further. Would you be amenable to an early dinner this evening? You may take refreshment in your old quarters until then."

He nodded, standing. "That would be well."

"Dyelin, Master Norry," Elayne said. "My mother's survival will lead to some . . . delicate issues of state. We will need to publish her abdication officially, and quickly. Master Norry, I'll leave the formal document to you. Dyelin, please inform my closest allies of this news so that they will not be taken by surprise."

Dyelin nodded. She glanced at Morgase—Dyelin wasn't one of those whom the former Queen had embarrassed during the days of Rahvin s influence, but she had undoubtedly heard the stories. Then Dyelin withdrew with Galad and Master Norry. Morgase glanced at Birgitte as soon as the door closed; the Warder was the only other one in the room.

"I trust her like a sister, Mother," Elayne said. "An insufferable older sister, sometimes, but a sister nonetheless."

Morgase smiled, then rose and took Elayne by the hands, pulling her up into an embrace. "Ah, my daughter," she said, tears in her eyes. "Look at what you've done! Queen in your own right!"

You trained me well, Mother," Elayne said. She pulled back. "And you re a grandmother! Or soon will be!"

Morgase frowned, looking down at her. "Yes, I thought as much from looking at you. Who . . . ?"

"Rand," Elayne said, blushing, "though it's not widely known, and I'd rather it stay that way."

"Rand al'Thor . . ." Morgase said, her mood darkening. "That-__"

"Mother," Elayne said, raising a hand to grasp hers. "He's a good man and I love him. What you have heard is exaggeration or bitter rumor"

"But he's . . . Elayne, a man who can channel, the Dragon Reborn'"

"And still a man," Elayne said, feeling his knot of emotions in the back of her mind, so warm. "Just a man, for all that is demanded of him."

Morgase drew her lips into a thin line. "I shall withhold judgment. Though in a way I still feel that I should have thrown that boy in the Pal-ace dungeons the moment we found him skulking in the gardens. I didn't like how he looked at you even then, mind you."

Elayne smiled, then gestured back to the seats. Morgase sat, and this time Elayne took the seat directly beside her, still clutching her mother's hands. She sensed amusement from Birgitte, who stood with her back against the far wall, one knee bent so that the sole of her boot rested against the wood paneling.

"What?" Elayne asked.

"Nothing," Birgitte said. "It's good to see you two acting like mother and child, or at least woman and woman, rather than staring at each other like two posts."

"Elayne is Queen," Morgase said stiffly. "Her life belongs to her people, and my arrival threatened to upset her Succession."

"It still might muddy things, Mother," Elayne said. "Your appearance could open old wounds."

"I will have to apologize," Morgase said. "Perhaps offer reparations." She hesitated. "I had intended to stay away, daughter. It would be best if those who hated me still thought me dead. But—"

"No," Elayne said quickly, squeezing her hands. "This is for the best. We simply will have to approach it with skill and care."

Morgase smiled. "You make me proud. You will be a wonderful queen.

Elayne had to force herself to stop beaming. Her mother had never been free with compliments.

"But tell me, before we go further," Morgase said, voice growing more hesitant. "I have heard reports that Gaebril was . . ."

"Rahvin," Elayne said, nodding. "It's true, Mother."

"I hate him for what he did. I can see him, using me, driving spikes through the hearts and loyalty of my dearest friends. And yet there is a part of me that longs to see him, irrationally."

"He used Compulsion on you," Elayne said softly. "There is no other explanation. We will have to see if any from the White Tower can Heal it."

Morgase shook her head. "Whatever it was, it is faint now, and maneable I have found another to give my affection."

Elayne frowned.

"I will explain that at another point," Morgase said. "I'm not certain I understand it yet. First we must decide what to do about my return."

"That is easy," Elayne said. "We celebrate!"

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing, Mother," Elayne said. "You have returned to us! The city, the entire nation, will celebrate." She hesitated. "And after that, we will find an important function for you."

"Something that takes me away from the capital, so I cast no unfortunate shadows."

"But a duty that is important, so that you are not thought of as having been put out to pasture." Elayne grimaced. "Perhaps we can give you charge of the western quarter of the realm. I have little pleasure in the reports of what is happening there."

"The Two Rivers?" Morgase asked. "And Lord Perrin Aybara?"

Elayne nodded.

"He is an interesting one, Perrin is," Morgase said thoughtfully. "Yes, perhaps I could be of some use there. We have something of an understanding already."

Elayne raised an eyebrow.

"He was behind my safe return to you," Morgase said. "He is an honest man, and honorable as well. But also a rebel, despite his good intentions. You will not have an easy time of it if you come to blows with that one."

"I'd rather avoid it." She grimaced. The easiest way to deal with it would be to find him and execute him, but of course she wasn't going to do that. Even if reports had her fuming enough to almost wish that she could.

'Well, we shall begin working on a way." Morgase smiled. "It will help you to hear of what happened to me. Oh, and Lini is safe. I don't know if you've worried over her or not."

To be honest, I didn't," Elayne said, grimacing, feeling a spike of

shame. "It seems that the collapse of Dragonmount itself couldn't harm Lini."

Morgase smiled, then began her story. Elayne listened with awe, and not a little excitement. Her mother lived. Light be blessed, so many things had gone wrong recently, but at least one had gone right.

* * *

The Three-fold Land at night was peaceful and quiet. Most animals were active near dusk and dawn, when it was neither sweltering nor freezing.

Aviendha sat on a small rock outcropping, legs folded beneath her, looking down upon Rhuidean, in the lands of the Jenn Aiel, the clan that was not. Once Rhuidean had been shrouded in protective mists. That was before Rand had come. He'd broken the city in three very important very discomforting ways.

The first was the simplest. Rand had taken away the mist. The city had shed its dome like an algai'd'siswai unveiling his face. She didn't know how Rand had caused the transformation; she doubted that he knew himself. But in exposing the city, he had changed it forever.

The second way Rand had broken Rhuidean was by bringing it water A grand lake lay beside the city, and phantom moonlight, filtered through clouds above, made the waters shine. The people were calling the lake Tsodrelle'Aman. Tears of the Dragon, though the lake should be called Tears of the Aiel. Rand al'Thor had not known how much pain he would cause in what he revealed. Such was the way with him. His actions were often so innocent.

The third way Rand had broken the city was the most profound. Aviendha was slowly coming to understand this one. Nakomi's words worried her, unnerved her. They had awakened in her shadows of memories, things from potential futures chat Aviendha had seen in the rings during her first visit to Rhuidean, but that her mind could not quite recall, at least not directly.

She worried that Rhuidean would stop mattering very soon. Once, the city's ultimate purpose had been to show Wise Ones and clan chiefs their people's secret past. To prepare them for the day when they'd serve the Dragon. That day had come. So who should come to Rhuidean now? Sending the Aiel leaders through the glass columns would be reminding them of toh they had begun to meet.

This bothered Aviendha in ways that itched beneath her skin. She didn't want to acknowledge these questions. She wanted to continue with tradition. But she could not get them out of her head.

Rand caused so many problems. Still, she loved him. She loved him for his ignorance, in a way. It allowed him to learn. And she loved him for the foolish way he tried to protect those who did not want to be protected.

Most of all, she loved him for his desire to be strong. Aviendha had

always wanted to be strong. Learn the spear. Fight and earn ji.. Be the best.

She could feel him now, distant from her. They were so alike in this way.

Her feet ached from running. She'd rubbed them with the sap of a segade plant, but she could still feel them throbbing. Her boots sat on the stone beside her, along with the fine woolen stockings that Elayne had given her.

She was tired and thirsty—she would fast this night, contemplating, then refill her waterskin at the lake before going into Rhuidean tomorrow. Tonight, she sat and thought, preparing.

The lives of the Aiel were changing. It was strength to accept change when it could not be avoided. If a hold was damaged during a raid and you rebuilt it, you never made it exactly the same way. You took the chance to fix the problems—the door that creaked in the wind, the uneven section of floor. To make it exactly as it had been would be foolishness.

Perhaps traditions—such as coming to Rhuidean, and even living in the Three-fold Land itself—would need to be reexamined eventually. But for now, the Aiel couldn't leave the wetlands. There was the Last Battle. And then the Seanchan had captured many Aiel and made Wise Ones into damane; that could not be allowed. And the White Tower still assumed that all Aiel Wise Ones who could channel were wilders. Something would have to be done about that.

And herself? The more she thought of it, she realized that she couldn't go back to her old life. She had to be with Rand. If he survived the Last Battle—and she intended to fight hard to make certain he did—he would still be a wetlander king. And then there was Elayne. Aviendha and she were going to be sister-wives, but Elayne would never leave Andor. Would she expect Rand to stay with her? Would that mean Aviendha would need to as well?

So troubling, both for herself and her people. Traditions should not be maintained just because they were traditions. Strength was not strength if it had no purpose or direction.

She studied Rhuidean, such a grand place of stone and majesty. Most cities disgusted her with their corrupt filth, but Rhuidean was different. Domed roofs, half-finished monoliths and towers, carefully planned sections with dwellings. The fountains flowed now, and though a large section still bore the scars of when Rand had fought there. Much of that had been cleaned up by the families who lived here, Aiel who had not gone to war.

There would be no shops. No arguments in streets, no murderers in alleys. Rhuidean might have been deprived of meaning, but it would remain a place of peace.

I will go on, she decided. Pass through the glass columns. Perhans her wor-ries were true, and the passage was now far less meaningful, but she was genuinely curious to see what the others had seen. Besides knowing ones past was important in order to understand the future.

Wise Ones and clan chiefs had been visiting this location for centuries They returned with knowledge. Maybe the city would show her what to do about her people, and about her own heart.

CHAPTER 46

Working Leather

Androl carefully took the oval piece of leather from the steaming water; it had darkened and curled. He moved quickly, picking it up in his callused fingers. The leather was springy and flexible now.

He quickly sat down at his bench, a square of sunlight coming in through the window on his right side. He wrapped the leather around a thick wooden rod about two inches across, then poked holes around the edges.

From there, he began stitching the leather to another piece he'd prepared earlier. A good stitching around the outside would keep it from fraying. A lot of leatherworkers were casual about stitching. Not Androl. The stitching was what people saw first; it stood out, like paint on a wall.

As he worked, the leather dried and lost some of its springiness, but it was still flexible enough. He made the stitches neat and even. He pulled the last few tight and used them to tie the leather around the wooden rod; he'd cut those last once the leather dried.

Stitching done, he added some ornaments. A name across the top, pounded into place using his small mallet and letter-topped pins. The symbols of the Sword and Dragon came next; he'd made those plates himself, based on the pins the Asha'man wore.

At the bottom, using his smaller letter pins, he stamped the words, Defend. Guard. Protect." As the leather continued to dry, he got out his stain and gauze to carefully color the letters and the designs for contrast.

There was a tranquility to this kind of work; so much of his life was about destruction these days. He knew that had to be. He'd come to the Black Tower in the first place because he understood what was to come. Still, it was nice to create something.

He left his current piece, letting it dry while working on some saddle straps. He measured the straps with the marks on the side of his table then reached for his shears in the tool pouch that hung from the side of his table—he'd made that himself. He was annoyed to discover that they weren't in their place.

Burn the day word got out that I had good shears in here, he thought. Despite Taim's supposedly strict rules for the Black Tower, there was a distressing amount of chaos. Large infractions were punished with harsh measures, but the little things—like wandering into a man's workshop and "borrowing" his shears—were ignored. Particularly if the borrower was one of the M'Hael's favorites.

Androl sighed. His belt knife was waiting at Cuellar's place for sharpening. Well, he thought, Taim does keep telling us to look for excuses to channel . . . Androl emptied himself of emotion, then seized the Source. It had been months since he'd had trouble doing that—at first, he'd been able to channel only when he was holding a strap of leather. The M'Hael had beaten that out of him. It had not been a pleasant process.

Saidin flooded into him, sweet, powerful, beautiful. He sat for a long moment, enjoying it. The taint was gone. What a wonder that was. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply.

What would it be like to draw in as much of the One Power as the others could? At times, he thirsted for that. He knew he was weak—weakest of the Dedicated in the Black Tower. Perhaps so weak he should never have been promoted from soldier. Logain had gone to the Lord Dragon about it, and made the promotion happen, against Taim's express wishes.

Androl opened his eyes, then held up the strap and wove a tiny gateway, only an inch across. It burst alive in front of him, slicing the strap in two. He smiled, then let it vanish and repeated the process.

Some said that Logain had forced Androl's promotion only as a dig against Taim's authority. But Logain had said that it was Androl s incredible Talent with gateways that had earned him the title of Dedicated. Logain was a hard man, broken around the edges, like an old scabbard that hadnt been properly lacquered. But that scabbard still held a deadly sword. Logain was honest. A good man, beneath the scuff marks.

Androl eventually finished with the straps. He walked over and snipped the string holding the oval piece of leather in place. It retained its shape, and he held it up to the sunlight, inspecting the stitching. The leather was stiff without being brittle. He fit it onto his forearm. Yes, the molding was good.

He nodded to himself. One of the tricks to life was paying attention to the small details. Focus, make the small things right. If each stitch was secure on an armguard, then it wouldn't fray or snap. That could mean the difference between an archer lasting through a barrage or having to put away his bow.

One archer wouldn't make a battle. But the small things piled up, one atop another, until they became large things. He finished the armguard by affixing a few permanent ties to its back, so one could bind it in place on the arm.

He took his black coat off the back of his chair. The silver sword pin on the high collar glimmered in the window's sunlight as he did up the buttons. He glanced at himself in the glass's reflection, making certain the coat was straight. Small things were important. Seconds were small things, and if you heaped enough of those on top of one another, they became a man's life.

He put the armguard on his arm, then pushed open the door to his small workshop and entered the outskirts of the Black Tower's village. Here, clusters of two-storied buildings were arranged much like any small town in Andor. Peaked roofs, thatched, with straight wooden walls, some stone and brick as well. A double line of them ran down the center of the village. Looking only at those, one might have thought he was strolling through New Braem or Grafendale.

Of course, that required ignoring the men in black coats. They were everywhere, running errands for the M'Hael, going to practice, working on the foundations of the Black Tower structure itself. This place was still a work in progress. A group of soldiers—bearing neither the sword pin nor the red-and-gold Dragon—used the Power to blast a long trough in the ground beside the road. It had been decided that the village needed a canal.

Androl could see the weaves—mostly Earth—spinning around the soldiers. In the Black Tower, you did as much with the Power as you could. Always training, like men lifting stones to build their strength. Light, how Logain and Taim pushed those lads.

Androl moved out onto the newly graveled roadway. Much of that gravel bore melted edges from where it had been blasted. They had brought in boulders—through gateways, on weaves of Air—then shattered them

with explosive weaves. It had been like a war zone, rocks shattering, spray-ing chips. With Power—and training—like that, the Asha'man would be able to reduce city walls to rubble.

Androl continued on his way. The Black Tower was a place of strange sights, and melted gravel wasn't nearly the strangest of them. Neither were the soldiers tearing up ground, following Androl s own careful surveying. Lately, the strangest sight to him was the children. They ran and played, jumping into the trough left behind by the working soldiers, sliding down its earthen sides, then scrambling back up.

Children. Playing in the holes created by saidin blasts. The world was changing. Androl's own gramma—so ancient she'd lost every tooth in her mouth—had used stories of men channeling to frighten him into bed on nights when he tried to slip outside and count the stars. The darkness outside hadn't frightened him, nor had stories of Trollocs and Fades. But men who could channel . . . that had terrified him.

Now he found himself here, grown into his middle years, suddenly afraid of the dark but completely at peace with men who could channel. He walked down the road, gravel crunching beneath his boots. The children came scrambling up out of the ditch and flocked around him. He idly brought out a handful of candies, purchased on the last scouting mission.

"Two each," he said sternly as dirty hands reached for the candies. "And no shoving, mind you." Hands went to mouths, and the children gave him bobbed heads in thanks, calling him "Master Genhald," before racing away. They didn't go back to the trench, but invented a new game, running off toward the fields to the east.

Androl brushed off his hands, smiling. Children were so adaptable. Before them, centuries of tradition, terror and superstition could melt away like butter left too long in the sun. But it was good that they'd chosen to leave the trench. The One Power could be unpredictable.

No. That wasn't right. Saidin was very predictable. The men who wielded it, however . . . well, they were a different story.

The soldiers halted their work and turned to meet him. He wasn't a full Asha'man, and didn't merit a salute, but they showed him respect. Too much. He wasn't sure why they deferred to him. He was no great man, particularly not here, in the Black Tower.

Still, they nodded to him as he passed. Most of these were among the men who had been recruited from the Two Rivers. Sturdy lads and men, eager, though many were on the young side. Half of them didn't need to shave but once a week. Androl walked up to them, then inspected their work, eyeing the line of string he'd tied to small stakes. He nodded in approval. "Angle is good, lads," he said. "But keep the sides steeper, if you can."

"Yes, Master Genhald," said the one leading the team. Jaim Torfinn was his name, a spindly young man with dusty brown hair. He still held he Power. That raging river of strength was so enticing. Rare was the man who could release it without a sense of loss.

The M'Hael encouraged them to keep hold of it, said that holding it taught them to control it. But Androl had known seductive sensations somewhat like saidin before—the exhilaration of battle, the intoxication of rare drinks from the Isles of the Sea Folk, the heady feeling of victory. A man could be swept up in those feelings and lose control of himself, forgetting who he was. And saidin was more seductive than anything else he'd experienced.

He said nothing to Taim about his reservations. He had no business lecturing the M'Hael.

"Here," Androl said, "let me show you what I mean by straight." He took a deep breath, then emptied himself of feeling. He used the old soldier's trick to do that—he'd been taught it by his first instructor in the sword, old one-armed Garfin, whose heavy rural Illianer accent had been virtually incomprehensible. Of course, Androl himself had a faint Taraboner accent, he was told. It had faded over the years since he'd last been home.

Within the nothing—the void—Androl could feel the raging force that was saidin. He grabbed it as a man grabbed the neck of a horse running wild, hoping to steer in some small way but mostly just trying to hold on.

Saidin was wonderful. Yes, it was more powerful than any intoxicant. It made the world more beautiful, more lush. Holding that terrible Power, Androl felt as if he'd come to life, leaving the dry husk of his former self behind. It threatened to carry him away in its swift currents.

He worked quickly, weaving a tiny trickle of Earth—the best he could manage, for Earth was where he was weakest—and carefully shaved the sides of the canal. "If you leave too much jutting out," he explained as he worked, "then the canal flow will stay muddy as it washes away the earth on the sides. The straighter and more firm the sides, the better. You see?"

The soldiers nodded. Sweat had beaded on their brows, flakes of dirt sticking to their foreheads and cheeks. But their black coats were clean, particularly the sleeves. You could judge a man's respect for his uniform by whether or not he used the sleeve to wipe his brow on a day like this. The Two Rivers lads used handkerchiefs.

The more senior Asha'man, of course, rarely sweated at all. It would take these lads more practice to get that down while concentrating so much

"Good men," Androl said, standing up and glancing over them Androl laid a hand on Jaim's shoulder. "You lads are doing a fine job here The Two Rivers, it grows men right."

The lads beamed. It was good to have them, particularly compared to the quality of men Taim had been recruiting lately. The M'Hael's scouts claimed they took whoever they could find, yet why was it that most they brought back had such angry, unsettling dispositions?

"Master Genhald?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Yes, Trost?" Androl asked.

"Have you . . . Have you heard anything of Master Logain?"

The others looked hopeful.

Androl shook his head. "He hasn't returned from his scouting mission. I'm sure he'll be back soon."

The lads nodded, though he could see that they were beginning to worry. They had a right to. Androl had been worrying for weeks now. Ever since Logain had left in the night. Where had he gone? Why had he taken Donalo, Mezar and Welyn—three of the most powerful Dedicated loyal to him—along?

And now there were those Aes Sedai camped outside, supposedly sent with authority from the Dragon to bond Asha'man. Taim had given one of his half-smiles at that, the kind that never reached his eyes, and told them the group from the White Tower had first pick, since they'd come first. The others waited, impatiently.

"The M'Hael," one of the Two Rivers men said, expression growing dark. "He—"

"Keep your heads on your shoulders," Androl interrupted, "and don't make waves. Not yet. We wait for Logain."

The men sighed, but nodded. Distracted by the conversation, Androl almost didn't notice when the shadows nearby began creeping toward him. Shadows of men, lengthening in the sunlight. Shadows within the trough. Shadows of rocks and clefts in the earth. Slowly, deviously, they turned toward Androl. Androl steeled himself, but couldn't dispel the panic. This one terror he could feel despite the void.

They came whenever he held saidin for too long. He released it immediately, and the shadows reluctantly crept back to their places.

The Two Rivers lads watched him, discomfort in their faces. Could they see the wild cast to Androl's eyes? Nobody spoke of the . . . irregulateries that afflicted men of the Black Tower. It just wasn't done. Like whispering dirty family secrets.

The taint was cleansed. These lads would never have to feel the things that Androl did. Eventually, he and the others who had been in the Tower before the cleansing would become rarities. Light, but he couldn't understand why anyone would listen to him. Weak in the Power and insane to boot?

And the worst part was, he knew—deeply, down to his very center—that those shadows were real. Not just some madness concocted by his mind. They were real, and they would destroy him if they reached him.

They were real. They had to be.

Oh, Light, he thought, gritting his teeth. Either option is terrifying. Either I'm insane or the darkness itself wants to destroy me.

That was why he could no longer sleep at nights without huddling in fear. Sometimes he could go hours holding the Source without seeing the shadows. Sometimes only minutes. He took a deep breath.

"All right," he said, satisfied that his voice—at least—sounded in control. "You best get back to work. Keep that slope moving the right direction, mind you. We'll have a mess and a half to deal with if the water overflows and floods this area."

As they obeyed, Androl left them, cutting back through the village. Near the center stood the barracks, five large, thick-stoned buildings for the soldiers, a dozen smaller buildings for the Dedicated. Right now, this little village was the Black Tower. That would change. A tower proper was being built nearby, the foundation already dug.

He could visualize what the place might someday look like. He'd once worked with a master architect—one of a dozen different apprenticeships he'd held in a life that sometimes seemed to have lasted too long. Yes, he could see it in his mind's eye. A domineering black stone tower, Power-built. Strong, sturdy. At its base would be blockish square structures with crenelated tops.

This village would grow to become a town, then a large city, as vast as Tar Valon. The streets had been built to allow the passing of several wagons at a time. New sections were surveyed and laid. It bespoke vision and planning. The streets themselves whispered of the Black Tower's destiny.

Androl followed a worn pathway through the scrub grass. Distant booms and snaps echoed across the plains like the sounds of a whip being cracked. Each man had his own reasons for coming. Revenge, curiosity, desperation, lust for power. Which was Androl's reason? All four, perhaps?

He left the village, and eventually rounded a line of trees and came to the practice range—a small canyon between two hills. A line of men stood channeling Fire and Earth. The hills needed to be leveled to make land for farming. An opportunity to practice.

These men were mostly Dedicated. Weaves spun in the air, much more skillful and powerful than those the Two Rivers lads had used. These were streamlined, like hissing vipers or striking arrows. Rocks exploded and bursts of dirt sprayed into the air. The blasting was done in an unpredictable pattern to confuse and disorient foes. Androl could imagine a group of cavalry thundering down that slope, only to be surprised by exploding Earth. A single Dedicated could wipe out dozens of riders in moments.

Androl noted with dissatisfaction that the working men stood in two groups. The Tower was beginning to split and divide, those loyal to Logain shunned and ostracized. On the right, Canler, Emarin and Nalaam worked with focus and dedication, joined by Jonneth Dowtry—the most skilled soldier among the Two Rivers lads. On the left, a group of Taim's cronies were laughing among themselves. Their weaves were more wild, but also much more destructive. Coteren lounged at the back, leaning against a leafy hardgum tree and overseeing the work.

The workers took a break and called for a village boy to bring water. Androl walked up, and Arlen Nalaam saw him first, waving with a broad smile. The Domani man wore a thin mustache. He was just shy of his thirtieth year, though he sometimes acted much younger. Androl was still smarting from the time Nalaam had put tree sap in his boots.

"Androl!" Nalaam called. "Come tell these uncultured louts what a Retashen Dazer is!"

"A Retashen Dazer?" Androl said. "It's a drink. Mix of mead and ewe's milk. Foul stuff"

Nalaam looked at the others proudly. He had no pins on his coat. He was only a soldier, but he should have been advanced by now.

"You bragging about your travels again, Nalaam?" Androl asked, unlacing the leather armguard.

"We Domani get around," Nalaam said. "You know, the kind of work my father does, spying for the Crown. . . ."

"Last week you said your father was a merchant," Canler said. The sturdy man was the oldest of the group, his hair graying, his square face worn from many years in the sun.

"He is," Nalaam said. "That's his front for being a spy!"

"Aren't women the merchants in Arad Doman?" Jonneth asked, rubbing his chin. He was a large, quiet man with a round face. His entire

family-his siblings, his parents, and his grandfather Buel—had relocated to the village rather than letting him come alone.

"Well, they're the best," Nalaam said, "and my mother is no exception. We men know a thing or two, though. Besides, since my mother was busy infiltrating the Tuatha'an, my father had to take over the business."

"Oh, now that's just ridiculous," Canler said with a scowl. "Who would ever want to infiltrate a bunch of Tinkers?"

"To learn their secret recipes," Nalaam said. "It's said that a Tinker can cook a pot of stew so fine that it will make you leave house and home to travel with them. It's true, I've tasted it myself, and I had to be tied in a shed for three days before the effect wore off."

Canler sniffed. However, after a moment, the farmer added, "So . . . did she find the recipe or not?"

Nalaam launched into another story, Canler and Jonneth listening intently. Emarin stood to the side, looking on with amusement—he was the other soldier in the group, bearing no pins. He was an older man, with thin hair and wrinkles at his eyes. His short white beard was trimmed to a point.

The distinguished man was something of an enigma; he'd arrived with Logain one day, and had said nothing of his past. He had a poised bearing and a delicate way of speaking. He was a nobleman, that was certain. But unlike most other noblemen in the Black Tower, Emarin made no attempt at asserting his presumed authority. Many noblemen took weeks to learn that once you joined the Black Tower, your outside rank was meaningless. That made them sullen and snappish, but Emarin had taken to life in the Tower immediately.

It took a nobleman with true dignity to follow the orders of a commoner half his age without complaint. Emarin took a sip of water from the serving boy, thanking the lad, then stepped up to Androl. He nodded toward Nalaam, who was still talking to the others. "That one has the heart of a gleeman."

Androl grunted. "Maybe he can use it to earn some extra coin. He still owes me a new pair of socks."

"And you, my friend, have the soul of a scribe!" Emarin laughed. "You never forget a thing, do you?"

Androl shrugged.

"How did you know what a Retashen Dazer was? I consider myself quite educated in these matters, yet I'd heard not a word of it."

"I had one once," Androl said. "Drank it on a bet."

"Yes, but where?"

"Retash, of course."

"But that's leagues off shore, in a cluster of islands not even the Sea Folk often visit!"

Androl shrugged again. He glanced over at Taim's lackeys. A village boy had brought them a basket of food from Taim, though the M'HaeI claimed not to play favorites. If Androl asked, he'd find that a boy was supposed to have been sent with food for the others, too. But that lad would have become lost, or had forgotten, or made some other innocent mistake. Taim would have someone whipped, and nothing would change.

"This division is troubling, my friend," Emarin said softly. "How can we fight for the Lord Dragon if we cannot make peace among ourselves?"

Androl shook his head.

Emarin continued. "They say that no man favored of Logain has had the Dragon pin in weeks. There are many, like Nalaam there, who should have had the sword pin long ago—but are denied repeatedly by the M'Hael. A House whose members squabble for authority will never present a threat to other Houses."

"Wise words," Androl said. "But what should we do? What can we do? Taim is M'Hael, and Logain hasn't returned yet."

"Perhaps we could send someone for him," Emarin said. "Or maybe you could calm the others. I fear that some of them are near to snapping, and if a fight breaks out, I have little doubt who would see the rough side of Taim's punishments."

Androl frowned. "True. But why me? You're far better with words than I am, Emarin."

Emarin chuckled. "Yes, but Logain trusts you, Androl. The other men look to you."

They shouldn't, Androl thought. "I'll see what I can think of." Nalaam was winding up for another story, but before he could begin, Androl gestured to Jonneth, holding up the armguard. "I saw your old one had cracked. Try this."

Jonneth s face brightened as he took the armguard. "You're amazing, Androl! I didn't think anyone had noticed. It's a silly thing, I know, but. . ." His smile broadened and he hurried to a nearby tree, beside which sat some of the men's equipment, including Jonneth's bow. These Two Rivers men liked to have them handy.

Jonneth returned, stringing the bow. He put on the armguard. "Fits like a dream!" he said, and Androl felt himself smiling. Small things. They could mean so much.

Jonneth took aim and launched an arrow, the shaft streaking into the air, bowstring snapping against the armguard. The arrow soared far, striking a tree on a hill better than two hundred paces away.

Canler whistled. "Ain't ever seen anything like those bows of yours, Jonneth. Never in my life." They were fellow Andorans, though Canler had come from a town much closer to Caemlyn.

Jonneth looked at his shot critically, then drew again—fletching to cheek—and loosed. The shaft fell true and hit the very same tree. Androl would guess that the shafts were less than two handspans apart.

Canler whistled again.

"My father trained on one of those," Nalaam noted. "Learned the art from a Two Rivers man whom he rescued from drowning in Illian. Has the bowstring as a memento."

Canler raised an eyebrow, but he seemed taken with the tale at the same time. Androl just chuckled, shaking his head. "Mind if I have a go, Jonneth? I'm a pretty dead shot with a Tairen bow, and they're a little longer than most."

"Surely," the lanky man said, unstrapping the armguard and handing over the bow.

Androl donned the armguard and lifted the bow. It was of black yew, and there wasn't as much spring to the string as he was used to. Jonneth handed him an arrow and Androl mimicked the man's pull, drawing to his cheek.

"Light!" he said at the weight of the pull. "Those arms of yours are deceptively small, Jonneth. How do you manage to aim? I can barely keep it steady!"

Jonneth laughed as Androl's arms trembled, and he finally loosed, unable to keep the bow drawn for a breath longer. The arrow hit the ground far off target. He handed the bow to Jonneth.

"That was fairly good, Androl," Jonneth said. "A lot of men can't even get the string back. Give me ten years, and I could have you shooting like one born in the Two Rivers!"

"I'll stick to shortbows for now," Androl said. "You'd never be able to shoot a monster like that from horseback."

"I wouldn't need to!" Jonneth said.

"What if you were being chased?"

"If there were fewer than five of them," Jonneth said, "I'd take them all down with this before they got to me. If there were more than five, then what am I doing shooting at them? I should be running like the Dark One himself was after me."

The other men chuckled, though Androl caught Emarin eyeing him.

Probably wondering how Androl knew to shoot a bow from horseback He was a keen one, that nobleman. Androl would have to watch himself.

"And what is this?" a voice asked. "You do be trying to learn to shoot a bow, pageboy? Is this so you can actually defend yourself?"

Androl gritted his teeth, turning as Coteren sauntered up. He was a bulky man, his black, oily hair kept long and loose. It hung around a blunt face with pudgy cheeks. His eyes were focused, dangerous. He smiled. The smile of a cat that had found a rodent to play with.

Androl quietly undid the armguard, handing it to Jonneth. Coteren was full Asha'man, a personal friend of the M'Hael. He outranked everyone here by a long stride.

"The M'Hael will hear of this," Coteren said. "You do be ignoring your lessons. You have no need for arrows or bows—not when you can kill with the Power!"

"We aren't ignoring anything," Nalaam said stubbornly.

"Quiet, lad," Androl said. "Mind your tongue."

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Coteren laughed. "Listen to the pageboy, you lot. The M'Hael will hear of your impudence also." He focused on Androl. "Seize the Source."

Androl obliged reluctantly. The sweetness of saidin flowed into him, and he glanced nervously to the side. There was no sign of the shadows.

"So pathetic," Coteren said. "Destroy that stone over there."

It was far too large for him. But he'd dealt with bullies before, and Coteren was a bully of the most dangerous type—one with power and authority. The best thing to do was to mind. Embarrassment was a small punishment. That was something few bullies seemed to understand.

Androl wove the requisite weave of Fire and Earth, striking at the large stone. The thin weave held almost all of the Power he could manage, but it only flaked a few chips off the large stone.

Coteren laughed heartily, as did the group of Dedicated eating beneath the nearby tree. "Bloody ashes, but you're useless!" Coteren said. "Forget what I said earlier, pageboy! You need that bow!"

Androl released the One Power. Coteren had had his laugh; he would be satisfied. Unfortunately, Androl felt men seize the Source behind him. Jonneth, Canler and Nalaam stepped up beside Androl, each of them filled with the One Power and bristling with anger.

The men who had been eating stood up, each holding the Source as well. There were twice as many of them as there were of Androl s friends. Coteren smirked.

Androl eyed Canler and the others. "Now lads," he said, raising a hand,

"Asha'man Coteren was just doing what the M'Hael ordered him. He s try-ing to make me mad so I'll push myself."

The two groups hesitated. The intensity of their locked gazes rivaled that

of the Power within them. Then Jonneth released the Source. This caused Nalaam to do likewise, and finally gruff Canler turned away. Coteren laughed.

"I don't like this," Canler muttered as the group of them walked off. He shot a glance over his shoulder. "Don't like it at all. Why'd you stop us, Androl?"

"Because they'd have made rubble of us faster than you can curse, Canler" Androl snapped. "Light, man! I can barely channel worth a bean, and Emarin hasn't been here a month yet. Jonneth's learning fast, but we all know he's never actually fought with the Power before, and half of Coteren's men saw battle beneath the Lord Dragon! You really think you and Nalaam could handle ten men, virtually on your own?"

Canler continued to bristle, muttering, but let the argument drop.

"Makashak Na famalashten morkase," Nalaam mumbled, "delf takaksaki mere!" He laughed to himself, eyes wild. It wasn't a language Androl knew-—it wasn't the Old Tongue, that was for certain. It probably wasn't even a language at all.

None of the others said anything. Nalaam occasionally cackled to himself in gibberish. If asked about it, he'd claim he'd spoken in plain ordinary words. The outburst seemed to discomfit Emarin and Jonneth a great deal. They hadn't ever seen friends go mad and kill those around them. Light send that they'd never have to see it, now. Whatever else Androl thought of the Lord Dragon for leaving them alone, the cleansing earned al'Thor redemption. Channeling was safe now.

Or, at least, it was safer. Channeling would never be safe, particularly now with Taim pushing them.

"More and more people are taking those burning personal lessons from Taim," Nalaam muttered as they walked to the shade of the trees. "Nensen's success has the men eager. We've lost a good dozen to Taim's side in the last tew weeks. Soon there won't be anyone left besides us here. I'm afraid to talk to half the men I used to trust."

"Norley is trustworthy," Canler said. "Evin Hardlin, too."

"That's a small list," Nalaam said. "Too small."

"The Two Rivers men are with us," Jonneth said. "To a man."

"Still a small list," Nalaam said. "And not a full Asha'man among us."

They all looked to Androl. He glanced back at Taim's lackeys, laughing among themselves again.

"What, Androl?" Nalaam asked. "Not going to chastise us for talking like that?"

"Like what?" Androl asked, looking back at them.

"Like it's us against them."

"I didn't want you lads to get yourselves killed or imprisoned, but that doesn't mean I don't see a problem." He glanced back at them. "Aye, there's trouble here, brewing like a storm."

"The men who take Taim's private lessons learn too quickly," Nalaam said. "Nensen was barely powerful enough to be considered for Dedicated just a short time ago. Now he's full Asha'man. Something very strange is going on. And those Aes Sedai. Why did Taim agree to let them bond us? You know he's protected all of his favorites by stopping the Aes Sedai from choosing any man with the Dragon pin. Burn me, but I don't know what I'll do if one chooses me. I'm not going to be put on some Aes Sedai s string."

There were several mutters about that.

"Taim's men spread rumors among the newcomers," Jonneth said softly. "They talk about the Lord Dragon, and how he drove good men to turn traitor. They say he's abandoned us, and that he's gone mad. The M'Hael doesn't want those rumors pointing back to him, but burn me if he isn't the source of them all."

"Maybe he's right," Canler said. The others looked at him sharply, and the leathery man scowled. "I'm not saying that I'm going to go jump into Taim's camp. But the Lord Dragon? What has he done for us? Seems like he's forgotten about this place. Maybe he is mad."

"He's not," Emarin said, shaking his head. "I met him just before I came here."

The others looked at him, surprised.

"He impressed me," Emarin said. "Young, but with a powerful will. I trust him. Light! I barely spoke with him a half-dozen times, but I trust him."

The others slowly nodded.

"Burn me," Canler said, "I suppose that's good enough for me. But I wish he'd listen! I heard Logain cursing that the Lord Dragon won't hear him when he gives warnings about Taim."

"And if we gave him evidence?" Jonneth asked. "What if we could find something that proves that Taim is up to no good?"

"Something is strange about Nensen," Nalaam repeated. "And that Kash. Where did he even come from, and how did he grow so powerful so quickly? What if, when Logain returned, we had information for him. Or if we could take it to the Lord Dragon directly . . ."

The group turned to Androl. Why did they look to him, the weakest of them? All he could do was create gateways. That was where Coteren's nickname for Androl had come from. Pageboy. The only thing he was good for was delivering messages, taking people places.

But the others looked to him. For one reason or another, they looked to him.

"All right," Androl said. "Let's see what we can find. Bring Evin, Hard-lin and Norley into this but don't tell anyone else, not even the other Two Rivers lads. Don't rile Taim or his men . . . but if you do find something, bring it to me. And I'll see if I can find a way to contact Logain, or at least find where he went."

Each man nodded, somber. Light help us if we're wrong, Androl thought, looking back at Taim's favorites. And Light help us more if we're right.

CHAPTER 47

A Teaching Chamber

Faile sat impatiently atop Daylight, trying to keep herself from twitching as the gateway split the air. A browning meadow lay on the other side; Gaul and the Maidens immediately slipped through to scout.

"Are you certain you don't want to come?" Perrin asked Galad, who stood nearby, watching the procession with arms clasped behind his back.

"No," Galad said. "My meal with Elayne was sufficient for us to catch up."

"Suit yourself," Perrin said. He turned to Faile and gestured to the gateway.

She kicked Daylight into motion. It was time, at long last, to face the Queen of Andor, and she had to work to contain her nervousness. Perrin passed through the gateway with her; on the other side, Caemlyn was close, the grand city topped by peaked towers and banners of red and white, palace rising in the center. Low Caemlyn, which sprawled outside the city walls, was a growing city of its own.

Perrin s procession followed them out of the gateway; it had been carefully planned to look impressive, but not hostile. Alliandre with a hundred guardsmen. A hundred Two Rivers archers with unstrung longbows carried like staves. A hundred representatives of the Wolf Guard, including a large contingent of minor Cairhien nobility, the colored slashes on their

uniforms created from cloth purchased in Whitebridge. And, of course, Gaul and the Maidens.

Grady came last. The man wore a neatly pressed black coat, his Dedicated pin polished and gleaming on the high collar. He immediately looked westward, toward the Black Tower. He'd tried to make a gateway there earlier in the day, when Perrin had given him permission. It hadn't worked. Perrin was disturbed by that. He intended to investigate soon, tonight or tomorrow night at the latest.

Gaul and the Maidens formed up around Perrin and Faile, and the procession moved down onto the road, Arganda and a squad of Perrin's Wolf Guards riding ahead to announce them. The rest of them moved along the road at a regal pace. Caemlyn's sprawling growth was even worse than that of Whitebridge. Several armies camped near Low Caemlyn. Probably supported by the various lords who had supported Elayne's ascent to the throne.

There was a distinct irregularity here. The clouds broke around Caemlyn. The cloud cover had been so universal elsewhere that Faile started upon seeing this. The clouds formed an open circle above the city, eerily even. Arganda and the Wolf Guards returned. "They will receive us, my Lord, my Lady," he announced.

Faile and Perrin rode in silence as the group made its way down the road. They had discussed the coming meeting dozens of times over; there wasn't anything more to say. Perrin had wisely given her the lead in the diplomatic negotiations. The world could not afford war between Andor and the Two Rivers. Not now.

As they passed through the city gates, Perrin and the Aiel grew more alert. She suffered their overprotectiveness in silence. How long would her capture by the Shaido loom over her life? At times, it seemed Perrin was loath to let her use the privy without four dozen guards.

Inside the walls, the streets teemed with people, the buildings and markets packed. Refuse was beginning to pile up, and a frightening number of urchins moved through the crowds. Criers yelled about the dangerous times, some perhaps in the employ of the merchants, encouraging people to hoard. Perrin's people had bought food here, but it was expensive; soon, Elayne would need to subsidize it, if she hadn't already. How good were the royal stores?

They passed through the New City, then entered the Inner City, climbing the hill to the Palace itself. The Queen's Guard stood at attention in their red-and-white tabards and burnished plate-and-mail outside the Palace gates in the pristine white Palace walls.

Once past the gates, they dismounted. A force of one hundred continued on with Perrin and Faile into the Palace. All of the Aiel, and a smaller honor guard from each contingent. The Palace hallways were wide but that many people still made Faile feel crowded. The path she and Perrin were led along was a different way to the throne room than she'd taken before. Why not use the direct way?

It seemed that little had changed about the Palace since Rand's time rul-ing it. There were no Aiel now—save for the ones Perrin had brought. The same narrow red rug ran down the middle of the hallway, the same urns at the corners, the same mirrors on the walls to give an illusion of greater size.

A structure like this could stand unaltered over the centuries, paying little attention to whose feet trod the rugs and whose backside warmed the throne. In one year's time, this palace had known Morgase, one of the Forsaken, the Dragon Reborn and finally Elayne.

In fact, Faile half-expected—as they rounded the corner to the throne room—to find Rand lounging on his Dragon Throne, that strange half-spear held in the crook of his arm, a glimmer of madness in his eyes. However, the Dragon Throne had been removed, and the Lion Throne again held its queen. Rand had set that throne aside and protected it, like a flower he intended to present to a future love.

The Queen was a younger version of her mother. True, Elayne's face had angles that were more delicate than Morgase's. But she had that same red-gold hair and that same stunning beauty. She was tall, and was showing her pregnancy at the belly and through the chest.

The throne room was suitably ornate, with gilded wood trim and narrow pillars in the corners, probably ornamental. Elayne kept the room better lit than Rand had, stand-lamps burning brightly. Morgase herself stood at the base of the throne on the right side, and eight members of the

Queen's Guard stood on the left. Some lesser nobles lined the sides of the room, watching with keen attention.

Elayne leaned forward on her throne as Perrin, Faile and the others entered. Faile curtsied, of course, and Perrin bowed. Not a low bow, but a bow nonetheless. By arrangement, Alliandre curtsied deeper than Faile had. That would immediately set Elayne thinking.

The official purpose of this visit was a commendation by the Crown, a thanks to Perrin and Faile for bringing back Morgase. That was just an affectation, of course. Their real reason for meeting was to discuss the future of the Two Rivers. But that was the sort of delicate goal that neither could speak of outright, at least not at first. Merely stating the objective would reveal too much to the other side.

"Let it be known," Elayne said with a musical voice, "that the throne welcomes you, Lady Zarine ni Bashere t'Aybara. Queen Alliandre Maritha Kigaarin. Perrin Aybara." No use of title for him. "Let it be proclaimed in person our gratitude to you for returning our mother. Your diligence in this matter earns you the Crown's deepest appreciation."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Perrin said with his usual gruffness. Faile had spoken to him at length about not trying to dispense with the formality or ceremony.

"We will declare a day of celebration for my mother's safe return," Elayne continued. "And for her . . . restoration to proper status."

Well, that pause meant Elayne was displeased to know that her mother had been treated as a servant. She had to realize that Perrin and Faile hadn't known what they were doing, but a queen could still claim indignation for such an event. It was an edge that, perhaps, she planned to use.

Perhaps Faile was reading too much into the comments, but she couldn't help it. In many ways, being a lady was much like being a merchant, and she had been trained well for both roles.

"Finally," Elayne said, "we come to the purpose of our meeting. Lady Bashere, Master Aybara. Is there a boon you would ask in return for the gift you have given to Andor?"

Perrin rested his hand on his hammer, then looked to Faile questioningly. Obviously, Elayne expected them to ask for him to be named formally a lord. Or, perhaps, to ask forbearance for impersonating one, along with a formal pardon. Either direction could be a result of this conversation.

Faile was tempted to demand the first. It would be a simple answer. But perhaps too simple; there were things Faile had to know before they could proceed. "Your Majesty," Faile said, carefully, "might we discuss this boon in a more intimate setting?"

Elayne gave that some thought—at least thirty seconds' worth, which seemed an infinity. "Very well. My sitting room is prepared."

Faile nodded, and a servant opened a small door on the left-hand wall of the throne room. Perrin walked toward it, then held up a hand to Gaul, Su-lin and Arganda. "Wait here." He hesitated, glancing at Grady. "You, too."

None of them seemed to like that, but they obeyed. They'd been warned this might happen.

Faile contained her nervousness—she didn't like leaving the Asha'man, their best means of escape. Particularly since Elayne undoubtedly had spies and Guards hidden inside the sitting room, ready to spring out should matters turn dangerous. Faile would have liked a similar protection, but bringing a male channeler in to speak with the Queen . . . well, this was how it would have to be. They were in Elayne's domain.

Faile took a deep breath, joining Perrin, Alliandre and Morgase in the small side room. Chairs had been arranged; Elayne had foreseen this possibility. They waited for Elayne to enter before sitting. Faile couldn't see any place for Guards to be hiding.

Elayne entered and waved a hand. The Great Serpent ring on her finger glittered in the lamplight. Faile had nearly forgotten that she was Aes Sedai. Perhaps there weren't any Guardsmen lurking around to help a woman who could channel was as dangerous as a dozen soldiers.

Which of the rumors regarding the father of Elayne's child were to be believed? Surely not the ones about that fool of a man in her Guard—that was most likely obfuscation. Could it possibly be Rand himself?

Morgase entered after Elayne. She wore a subdued gown of deep red. She sat down beside her daughter, watching carefully, remaining silent.

"So," Elayne said, "explain to me why I shouldn't just execute you both as traitors."

Faile blinked in surprise. Perrin, however, snorted. "I don't think Rand would think very highly of that move."

"I'm not beholden to him," Elayne said. "You expect me to believe that he was behind you seducing my citizens and naming yourself a king?"

"You have a few of your facts backward, Your Majesty," Faile said testily. "Perrin never named himself king."

"Oh, and did he raise the flag of Manetheren, as my informants tell me he did?" Elayne asked.

"I did that," Perrin said. "But I put it away of my own choice."

"Well, that's something," Elayne replied. "You may not have called yourself a king, but holding up that banner was essentially the same thing. Oh, sit down, all of you." She waved a hand. A tray lifted off the far table and floated over to her. It bore goblets and a pitcher of wine, as well as a teapot and cups.

Fetching it with the One Power, Faile thought. It's a reminder of her strength. A rather unsubtle one.

"Still," Elayne said, "I will do the best for my realm, regardless of the cost."

"I doubt that upsetting the Two Rivers," Alliandre said hesitantly, "would be best for your realm. Executing their leader would undoubtedly throw the region into rebellion."

"So far as I'm concerned," Elayne said, pouring several cups of tea, "they're already in rebellion."

"We came to you peacefully," Faile said. "Hardly the action of rebels."

Elayne took a sip of the tea first, as was the custom, to prove it wasn't poisoned. "My envoys to the Two Rivers have been refused, and your people here gave me a message—and I quote—'The lands of Lord Perrin Golden-ves refuse your Andoran taxes. Tai'shar Mamtberen!'"

Alliandre paled. Perrin groaned softly, a sound that came out faintly like a growl. Faile took her cup and sipped her tea—mint, with cloudberries' it was good. The Two Rivers folk had pluck, that was certain.

"These are passionate times, Your Majesty," Faile said. "Surely you can see that the people might be concerned; the Two Rivers has not often been a priority for your throne."

"That's putting it mildly," Perrin added with a snort. "Most of us grew up not knowing we were part of Andor. You ignored us."

"That was because the area wasn't rising in rebellion." Elayne sipped her tea.

"Rebellion isn't the only reason men might need the attention of the queen who claims them," Perrin said. "I don't know if you've heard, but last year we faced Trollocs on our own, and without a whisker of help from the

Crown. You'd have helped if you'd known, but the fact that there were no troops nearby—none capable of knowing our danger—says something."

Elayne hesitated.

"The Two Rivers has rediscovered its history," Faile said carefully. "It couldn't rest forever, not with Tarmon Gai'don looming. Not after sheltering the Dragon Reborn during his childhood. Part of me wonders if Manetheren had to fall, if the Two Rivers had to rise, to provide a place for Rand al'Thor to be raised. Among farmers with the blood—and obstinacy—of kings."

"Which makes it all the more important that I quiet things now" Elayne said. "I offered you a boon so that you could ask for forgiveness. I'd pardon you, and I'll be certain to send troops so that your people are protected. Accept this, and we can all go back to life the way it should be."

"That isn't going to happen," Perrin said softly. "The Two Rivers will have lords, now. I fought it for a time. You may, too, but it won't change anything."

'Perhaps," Elayne said. "But recognizing you would be to agree that a man can just claim a title within my nation, then keep it by stubbornly gathering an army. It makes for a terrible precedent, Perrin. I don't think you realize the predicament you've put me in."

"We'll muddle through," Perrin said in that stubborn tone he used when he wasn't going to budge. "I'm not stepping down."

"You're doing a poor job of persuading me you will accept my authority," Elayne snapped.

Not good, Faile thought, opening her mouth to jump in. A clash here would not serve them well.

Before she could speak, however, another voice cut in. "Daughte " Morgase said softly, drinking her tea. "If you plan to dance with ta'veren, be sure that you know the proper steps. I've traveled with this man. I've seen the world bend around him; I've seen bitter enemies become his allies To fight the Pattern itself is to try to move a mountain with a spoon."

Elayne hesitated, looking at her mother.

"Please forgive me if I overstep myself," Morgase continued. "But Elayne, I promised these two that I would speak for them. I told you I would. Andor is strong, but I fear it could break itself against this man. He does not want your throne, I promise it, and the Two Rivers does need supervision. Would it be such a terrible thing to let them have the man they themselves have chosen?"

The small room fell silent. Elayne eyed Perrin, sizing him up. Faile held her breath.

"All right," Elayne said. "I assume you've come with demands. Let's hear them so we can discover if there's anything that can be done."

"No demands," Faile said. "An offer."

Elayne raised an eyebrow.

"Your mother is right," Faile said. "Perrin does not want your throne."

"What you two want may be irrelevant once your people get an idea in their minds."

Faile shook her head. "They love him, Your Majesty. They respect him. They'll do what he says. We can and will put down ideas of Manetheren rising again."

"And why would you do that?" Elayne asked. "I know how fast the Two Rivers is growing with those refugees coming in over the mountains. Nations could rise and fall with the coming of the Last Battle. You have no reason to give up the chance to form your own kingdom."

"Actually," Faile said, "we have good reason. Andor is a strong nation, and prosperous. The towns in the Two Rivers may be growing rapidly, but the people have barely begun to want a lord. They're still farmers at heart. They don't want glory; they want their crops to survive." Faile paused. "Perhaps you're right, perhaps there will be another Breaking, but that's only more reason to have allies. Nobody wants civil war in Andor, least of all the Two Rivers folk."

"What do you propose, then?" Elayne said.

"Nothing, really, that doesn't exist already," Faile said. "Give Perrin an oficial title and make him High Lord over the Two Rivers." "And what do you mean by 'High Lord?" Elayne asked. "He'd rank higher than other noble Houses in Andor, but beneath the

Queen."

"I doubt the others would like that," Elayne said. "What of taxes?"

"The Two Rivers is exempt," Faile said. As Elayne's expression soured, she continued quickly. "Your Majesty, the throne ignored the Two Rivers for generations, not protecting them from bandits or sending workers to improve their roads, not giving them anything in the way of magistrates or justices."

"They didn't need it," Elayne said. "They governed themselves fine." She left unsaid that the Two Rivers folk would probably have tossed out tax collectors, magistrates or justices sent by the Queen—but she seemed to know it.

"Well," Faile said, "nothing needs change, then. The Two Rivers governs itself."

"You could have tariff-free trade with them," Alliandre said.

"Something I already have," Elayne said.

"So nothing changes," Faile said again. "Except that you gain a powerful province to the west. Perrin, as your ally and subject lord, will agree to marshal troops in your defense. He will also call up his sworn monarchs to your allegiance."

Elayne glanced at Alliandre. She'd probably heard of Alliandre's swearing from Morgase, but also would want to hear it for herself.

"I swore fealty to Lord Perrin," Alliandre said. "Ghealdan had long lacked strong allies. I meant to change that."

"Your Majesty," Faile said, leaning forward, tea cupped in her hands before her. "Perrin spent several weeks with some Seanchan officers. They have created a great pact of nations allied beneath one banner. Rand al'Thor, though you may trust him as a friend, has done the same. Tear, Illian, and maybe now Arad Doman are beneath his rule. Nations join rather than split, these days. Andor looks smaller by the hour."

"That's why I did what I did," Alliandre said.

Well, in Faile's view, Alliandre had been caught up by Perrin as a taveren. There hadn't been much planning. But Alliandre might see it otherwise.

'Your Majesty," Faile continued, "there is much to gain here. Through my marriage to Perrin, you gain a tie to Saldaea. Through Alliandre's oaths, y°u gain Ghealdan. Berelain also follows Perrin and has often mentioned

her desire to find strong allies for Mayene. If we were to speak with her, I suspect she might be willing to make an alliance with us. We could create our own pact. Five nations, if you count the Two Rivers as one—six, if you do take the Sun Throne, as rumor claims you will. We are not the most powerful nations, but the many are stronger than the one. And you would be at our head."

Elayne's face had lost almost all of its hostility. "Saldaea. What are you in its line of succession?"

"I'm second," Faile admitted, which Elayne probably already knew. Perrin shifted in his chair. She knew he was still uncomfortable with that fact; well, he would simply have to get used to it.

"Second is too close," Elayne replied. "What if you end up with the throne of Saldaea? I could lose the Two Rivers to another country that way."

"This is easy to fix," Alliandre said. "If Faile were to ascend, one of her and Perrin's children could continue as Lord of the Two Rivers. Another could take the throne of Saldaea. Put it in writing, and you will be protected."

"I could accept such an arrangement," Elayne said.

"I don't have problems with it," Faile replied, looking at Perrin.

"I suppose."

"I should like one of them myself," Elayne said thoughtfully. "One of your children, I mean, to marry into the Andoran royal line. If the Two Rivers is to be ruled by a lord with as much power as this treaty would give him, then I would love to have blood connections to the throne."

"I won't promise that," Perrin said. "My children will make their own choices."

"It is sometimes the way of nobility," Elayne said. "It would be unusual, but not unheard of, for children like ours to be engaged from birth.

"We won't do it that way in the Two Rivers," Perrin said stubbornly. "Ever."

Faile shrugged. "We could offer encouragement, Your Majesty."

Elayne hesitated, then nodded. "That will be fine. But the other Houses won't like this 'High Lord' business. There'd need to be a way around it...

"Give the Two Rivers to the Dragon Reborn," Morgase said.

Elayne's eyes lit up. "Yes. That would work. If I gave the area to him to be his seat in Andor . . ."

Faile opened her mouth, but Elayne cut her off with a wave of the hand. "This isn't negotiable. I'll need some way to convince the other lords and ladies that I'm right to give the Two Rivers so much autonomy. If the lands are granted to the Dragon Reborn, giving him a title in Andor and making the Two Rivers his seat, then it will make sense for your home to be treated differently.

"The noble Houses of Andor will accept this, since the Two Rivers is where Rand came from, and Andor does owe him a debt. We'll have him ppoint Perrin's line as his stewards. Instead of capitulating to rebels within my borders, I'll be seen allowing the Dragon Reborn, the man I love, to elevate his good friend. It might also give us some ground against the Illian-

Tear pact you mentioned, who are bound to claim that their ties to Rand give them the right of conquest." She grew thoughtful, tapping the side of her cup.

"That seems reasonable," Perrin said, nodding. "Steward of the Two Rivers. I like the sound of that."

"Yes, well," Faile said. "I guess it's settled, then."

"The taxes," Elayne said, as if she hadn't heard. "You put them into a trust to be administered by Perrin and his line, with the understanding that if the Dragon ever returns, he can call upon them. Yes. That gives us a legal excuse for your exemption. Of course, Perrin will have authority to dip into those funds to improve the Two Rivers. Roads, food stores, defenses."

Elayne looked at Faile, then smiled, taking a long drink of tea. "I'm beginning to think it was a good idea not to execute you."

"That's certainly a relief," Alliandre said, smiling. As the least powerful one in the union, she stood to gain a lot from the alliances.

"Your Majesty—" Faile said.

"Call me Elayne," she said, pouring a goblet of wine for Faile.

"Very well, Elayne," Faile said, smiling and putting aside her tea, then accepting the wine. "I need to ask. Do you know what is happening with the Dragon Reborn?"

"Ox-brained lummox," Elayne said, shaking her head. "The bloody man's got Egwene all riled up."

"Egwene?" Perrin asked.

She's Amyrlin, finally," Elayne said, as if the fact had been inevitable. Perrin nodded, though Faile found herself amazed. How had that happened, and why wasn't Perrin surprised by it?

'What's he gone and done?" Perrin asked.

"He says he's going to break the remaining seals of the Dark One's prison," Elayne said, frowning. "We'll need to stop him, of course. Foolish plan. You could help with that. Egwene's gathering a force to persuade him."

"I think I could be of help," Perrin said.

"Do you know where he is currently?" Faile asked. Perrin had a good idea, from his visions, but she wanted to know what Elayne knew. "I don't know," Elayne said. "But I do know where he will be . . ."

Fortuona Athaem Devi Paendrag, ruler of the Glorious Seanchan Empire marched into her Teaching Chamber. She wore a magnificent gown of golden cloth, cut after the highest Imperial fashion. The skirt split at the front to just above the knees, and was so long that it took five da'covale to carry the sides and train.

She wore an ornate headdress, of gold and crimson silk with beautiful silken wings shaped like those of an owl taking flight, and her arms glittered with thirteen bracelets, each of a different gemstone combination. She wore crystal at her throat in a long strand. She had heard an owl above her window the last night, and it had not flown away when she looked out. An omen indicating great care should be taken, that the next days would be ones of important decisions. The proper response was to wear jewelry with powerful symbolism.

When she entered the chamber, those inside prostrated themselves. Only the Deathwatch Guard—men in armor of blood red and deep green--was exempt; they bowed, but kept their eyes up, watching for danger.

The large chamber was windowless. Lines of stacked pottery stood at one end, a place for damane to practice weaves of destruction. The floor was covered in woven mats where stubborn damane were sent to the ground, writhing in pain. It would not do for them to be harmed physically. Damane were among the most important tools the Empire had, more valuable than horses or raken. You did not destroy a beast because it was slow to learn; you punished it until it learned.

Fortuona crossed the chamber to where a proper Imperial Throne had been set up. She commonly came here, to watch the damane being worked or broken. It soothed her. The throne was atop a small dais; she climbed the steps, train rustling as her da'covale carried it. She turned to face the room, allowing the servants to arrange her dress. They took her by her arms and lifted her back into the throne, draping her long golden skirts down the front of the dais like a tapestry.

Those skirts were sewn with the writings of Imperial power. The Empress IS Seanchan. The Empress WILL live forever. The Empress MUST be obeyed. She sat as a living banner to the might of the Empire.

Selucia took her position on the lower steps of the dais. This done, the

courtiers raised themselves. The damane, of course, remained kneeling. There were ten of them, with heads bowed, their sul'dam holding their leashes and—in a few cases—patting them affectionately on the heads.

King Beslan entered. He'd shaved most of his head, leaving only a dark strip on the top, and seven of his fingernails had been lacquered. One more fingernail than anyone on this side of the ocean, excepting Fortuona herself. He still wore Altaran clothing—a uniform of green and white—rather than Seanchan robes. She had not pressed him on this.

So far as she knew, since his raising, Beslan hadn't made any plans to have her assassinated. Remarkable. Any Seanchan would have immediately begun scheming. Some would have tried an assassination; others would have decided to make only plans, but remain supportive. But all would have considered killing her.

Many on this side of the ocean thought differently. She'd never have believed it, if not for her time with Matrim. That was obviously one reason why Fortuona had been required to go with him. She just wished she'd interpreted the omens earlier.

Beslan was joined by Captain-General Lunal Galgan and a few members of the low Blood. Galgan was a wide-shouldered fellow with a crest of white hair atop his head. The other members of the Blood deferred to him; they knew he had her favor. If things went well here and with the reclamation of Seanchan, there was a good chance she'd raise him to the Imperial family. The ranks of the family would need to be refilled, after all, once Fortuona returned and restored order. Undoubtedly, many had been assassinated or executed. Galgan was a valuable ally. He'd not only worked openly against Suroth, but had suggested the assault on the White Tower, which had gone well. Extremely well.

Melitene, Fortuona's der'sul'dam, stepped forward and bowed again. The stout, graying woman led a damane with dark brown hair and bloodshot eyes. Apparently this one wept often.

Melitene had the presence to look embarrassed at the weeping, and bowed extra low. Fortuona chose not to notice that the damane was acting so displeasingly. This one was a fine catch, despite her petulance.

Fortuona made a series of gestures to Selucia, instructing her in what to say. The woman watched with keen eyes, half of her head covered in cloth while she waited for the hair to grow there, the other half shaved, Fortuona would eventually have to choose another Voice, as Selucia was now her Truthspeaker.

Show us what this woman can do," Selucia said, Voicing the words Fortuona had signed to her.

Melitene patted the damane on the head. "Suffa will show I Empress—may she live forever—the Power of slicing the air."

"Please," Suffa said, looking pleadingly toward Fortuona. "Please, listen to me. I am the Amyrlin Seat'.'

Melitene hissed, and Suffa's eyes opened wide, obviously feeling a blast of pain through the a'dam. The damane continued anyway. "I can offer great bounty, powerful Empress! If I am returned, I will give you ten women to

take my place. Twenty! The most powerful the White Tower has. I__" She broke off, moaning, and collapsed to the ground.

Melitene was sweating. She looked to Selucia, speaking quickly, nervously. "Please explain to the Empress of us all—may she live forever—that my eyes are lowered for not having trained this one properly. Suffa is amazingly stubborn, despite how quick she is to weep and offer others in her place."

Fortuona sat for a moment, letting Melitene sweat. Eventually, she signed for Selucia to speak.

"The Empress is not displeased with you," Selucia Voiced. "These marattidamane who call themselves Aes Sedai have all proven stubborn."

"Please express my gratitude to the Greatest One," Melitene said, relaxing. "If it pleases She Whose Eyes Look Upward, I can make Suffa perform. But there may be further outbursts."

"You may continue," Selucia Voiced.

Melitene knelt beside Suffa, speaking sharply at first, then consolingly. She was very skilled at working with former marathdamane. Of course, Fortuona considered herself good with damane as well. She enjoyed breaking marath'damane as much as her brother Halvate had enjoyed training wild grolm. She'd always found it a pity that he had been assassinated. He was the only one of her brothers who she'd ever been fond of.

Suffa finally got back onto her knees. Fortuona leaned forward, curious. Suffa bowed her head, and a line of light—brilliant and pure—cut the air in front of her. That line turned sideways along a central axis, opening a hole directly in front of Fortuona's throne. Trees rustled beyond, and Fortuonas breath caught as she saw a hawk with a white head streak away from the portal. An omen of great power. The normally unflappable Selucia gasped, though whether it was at the portal or the omen, Fortuona did not know.

Fortuona covered her own surprise. So it was true. Traveling wasn't a myth or a rumor. It was real. This changed everything about the war.

Beslan walked forward, bowing to her, looking hesitant. She waved fot him and Galgan to come to where they could see the forest glade through the opening. Beslan stared, mouth hanging open.

Galgan clasped his hands behind his back. He was a curious one. He'd met with assassins in the city, and had inquired about the cost for having Fortuona killed. Then, he'd had each of the men who quoted him a price executed. A very subtle maneuver—it was meant to show that she should consider him a threat, as he was not afraid of meeting with assassins. However it was also a visible sign of loyalty. / follow you for now, the move said, but I am watching, and I am ambitious.

In many ways, his careful maneuvering was more comforting to her than Beslan's apparently unwavering loyalty. The first, she could anticipate. The second . . . well, she wasn't certain what to make of it yet. Would Matrim be equally loyal? What would it be like, to have a Prince of the Ravens whom she did not have to plot against? It seemed almost a fantasy, the type of tale told to common children to make them dream of an impossible marriage.

"This is incredible!" Beslan said. "Greatest One, with this ability . . ." His station made him one of the only people able to speak directly to her.

"The Empress wishes to know," Selucia Voiced, reading Fortuona's fingers, "if any of the captured marath'damane spoke of the weapon."

"Tell the highest Empress—may she live forever—that they did not," Melitene said, sounding worried. "And, if I may be so bold, I believe that they are not lying. It seems that the explosion outside the city was an isolated accident—the result of some unknown ter'angreal, used imprudently. Perhaps there is no weapon."

It was possible. Fortuona had already begun to doubt the validity of those rumors. The explosion had happened before Fortuona had arrived in Ebou Dar, and the details were confusing. Perhaps this had all been a ploy by Suroth or her enemies.

"Captain-General," Selucia Voiced. "The Greatest One wishes to know what you would do with a Power such as this Traveling ability."

"That depends," Galgan said, rubbing his chin. "What is its range? How large can she make it? Can all damane do this? Are there limitations on where a hole can be opened? If it pleases the Greatest One, I will speak with the damane and get these answers."

'It does please the Empress," Selucia Voiced.

"This is troubling," Beslan said. "They could attack behind our battle lines. They could open a portal like this into the Empress's own chambers, may she live forever. With this . . . everything we know about war will change."

The members of the Deathwatch Guard shuffled—a sign of great discomfort. Only Furyk Karede did not move. If anything, his expression

grew harder. Fortuona knew that he would soon be suggesting a new, ro-tating location of her sleeping quarters.

Fortuona thought for a moment, staring at that rent in the air. That rent in reality itself. Then, contrary to tradition, she stood up on her dais. Fortunately, Beslan was there, one she could address directly—and let the others hear her commands.

"Reports say," Fortuona announced, "that there are still hundreds of marath'damane in the place called the White Tower. They are the key to recapturing Seanchan, the key to holding this land, and the key to preparing for the Last Battle. The Dragon Reborn will serve the Crystal Throne.

"We have been provided with a way to strike. Let it be said to the Captain-General that he should gather his finest soldiers. I want each and every damane we control to be brought back to the city. We will train them in this method of Traveling. And then we will go, in force, to the White Tower. Before, we struck them with a pinprick. Now, we will let them know the full weight of our sword. All of the marath'damane must be leashed."

She sat back down, letting the room fall still. It was rare that the Empress made such announcements personally. But this was a time for boldness.

"You should not allow word of this to spread," Selucia said to her, voice firm. She was now speaking in her role as Truthspeaker. Yes, another would have to be chosen to be Fortuona's voice. "You would be a fool to let the enemy know for certain we have this Traveling."

Fortuona took a deep breath. Yes, that was true. She would make certain each in this room was held to secrecy. But once the White Tower was captured, they would talk of her proclamation, and would read the omens of her victory upon the skies and world around them.

We will need to strike soon, Selucia signed.

Yes, Fortuona signed back. Our previous attack will have them gathering arms.

Our next move will have to be decisive, then, Selucia signed. But think. Delivering thousands of soldiers into the White Tower through a hidden basement, room. Striking with the force of a thousand hammers against a thousand anvils!

Fortuona nodded.

The White Tower was doomed.

"Don't know that there's much more to say, Perrin," Thorn said, leaning back in his chair, tabac smoke curling out of his long-stemmed pipe. It was a warm night, and they didn't have a fire in the hearth. Just a few candles on the table, with some bread, cheeses and a pitcher of ale.

Perrin puffed on his own pipe. Only he, Thorn and Mat were in the room. Gaul and Grady waited out in the common room. Mat had cursed Perrin for bringing those two—an Aiel and an Asha'man were rather conspicuous. But Perrin felt safer with those two than with an entire company of soldiers.

He'd shared his story with Mat and Thorn first, speaking of Maiden, the Prophet, Alliandre, and Galad. Then they had filled him in on their experiences. It stunned Perrin, how much had happened to the three of them since their parting.

"Empress of the Seanchan, eh?" Perrin said, watching the smoke twist above him in the dim room.

"Daughter of the Nine Moons," Mat said. "It's different."

"And you're married." Perrin grinned. "Matrim Cauthon. Married."

"You didn't have to share that part, you know," Mat said to Thom.

"Oh, I assure you, I did indeed."

"For a gleeman, you seem to leave out most of the heroic parts of the things I do," Mat said. "At least you mentioned the hat."

Perrin smiled, contented. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed sitting with friends to spend the evening chatting. A carved wooden sign hung outside the window, dripping with rainwater. It depicted faces wearing strange hats and exaggerated smiles. The Happy Throng. There was probably a story behind the name.

The three of them were in a private dining chamber, paid for by Mat. They'd brought in three of the inn's large hearth chairs. They didn't fit the table, but they were comfortable. Mat leaned back, putting his feet up on the table. He took up a hunk of ewe's milk cheese and bit off a piece, then balanced the rest on his chair arm.

"You know, Mat," Perrin said, "your wife is probably going to expect you to be taught table manners."

"Oh, I've been taught," Mat said. "I just never learned."

"I'd like to meet her," Perrin said.

"She's something interesting," Thom replied.

"Interesting," Mat said. "Yeah." He looked wistful. "Anyway, you've heard the lot of it now, Perrin. That bloody Brown brought us here. Haven't seen her in over two weeks, now."

"Can I see the note?" Perrin asked.

Mat patted a few pockets, then fished out a small white piece of paper, folded closed and sealed with red wax. He tossed it onto the table. The corners

were bent, the paper smudged, but it hadn't been opened. Matrim Cauthon was a man of his word, at least when you could pry an oath out of him.

Perrin lifted the note. It smelled faintly of perfume. He turned it over, then held it up to a candle.

"Doesn't work," Mat said.

Perrin grunted. "So what do you think it says?"

"Don't know," Mat said. "Bloody insane Aes Sedai. I mean, they're all odd. But Verin's fallen completely off her stone. Don't suppose you've heard from her?"

"I haven't."

"Hope she's all right," Mat said. "She sounded worried something might happen to her." He took the note back, then tapped it on the table.

"You going to open it?"

Mat shook his head. "I'll open it when I get back. I—"

A knock came at the door, then it creaked open, revealing the innkeeper, a younger man named Denezel. He was tall, with a lean face and a head he kept shaved. The man was all but Dragonsworn, from what Perrin had seen, even going so far as to have a portrait of Rand commissioned and hung in the common room. It wasn't a bad likeness.

"I apologize, Master Crimson," Denezel said, "but Master Goldens man insisted on speaking with him."

"It's all right," Perrin said.

Grady poked his weathered face into the room and Denezel retreated.

"Ho, Grady," Mat said, waving. "Blown up anyone interesting lately?"

The tanned Asha'man frowned, looking to Perrin. "My Lord. Lady Faile asked me to remind you when midnight arrived."

Mat whistled. "See, this is why I left my wife in another kingdom."

Grady's frown deepened.

"Thank you, Grady," Perrin said with a sigh. "I hadn't realized the time. We'll be going soon."

The Asha'man nodded, then withdrew.

"Burn him," Mat said. "Can't the man at least smile? Flaming sky is depressing enough without people like him trying to imitate it."

"Well, son," Thorn said, pouring some ale, "some just don't find the world particularly humorous lately."

"Nonsense," Mat said. "The world's plenty humorous. The whole bloody place has been laughing at me, lately. I'm telling you, Perrin. With those drawings of us about, you need to keep your head low."

"I don't see how I can," Perrin said. "I've got an army to lead, people to care for."

"I don't think you're taking Verin's warning seriously enough, lad," Thom said, shaking his head. "You ever heard of the Banath people?"

"No," Perrin said, looking at Mat.

"They were a group of savages who roamed what is now Almoth Plain," Thorn said. "I know a couple fine songs about them. See, their various tribes always painted the skin of their leader red to make him stand out."

Mat took another bite of his cheese. "Bloody fools. Painted their leader red? That would make him a target for every soldier on the field!"

"That was the point," Thorn said. "It was a challenge, you see. How else would their enemies be able find him and test their skill against him?"

Mat snorted. "I'd have painted a few decoy soldiers red to distract them from me, then had my archers feather their leader with arrows while everyone was trying to hunt down the fellows they thought were leading my army."

"Actually," Thom said, taking a sip of his ale, "that's exactly what Villiam Bloodletter did during his first, and last, battle with them. 'The Song of a Hundred Days' talks about it. Brilliant maneuver. I'm surprised you've heard of that song—it's very obscure, and the battle happened so long ago, most history books don't even remember it."

For some reason, the comment made Mat smell nervous.

"You're saying that we're making ourselves targets," Perrin said.

"I'm saying," Thom replied, "that you boys are getting harder and harder to hide. Everywhere you go, banners proclaim your arrival. People talk about you. I'm half-convinced you have only survived this long because the Forsaken didn't know where to find you."

Perrin nodded, thinking of the trap his army had nearly fallen into. Assassins in the night would come. "So what should I do?"

"Mat's been sleeping in a different tent each night," Thom said. "And sometimes in the city. You should try something like that. Grady can make gateways, right? Why not have him make one for you into the middle of your tent each night? Sneak out and sleep someplace else, then Travel back in the morning. Everyone will assume you're in your tent. If assassins strike, you won't be there."

Perrin nodded thoughtfully. "Even better, I could leave five or six Aiel inside, on alert, waiting."

"Perrin," Mat said, "that's downright devious." He smiled. "You've changed for the better, my friend."

'From you, I'll try to accept that as a compliment," Perrin said. He Paused, then added, "It will be difficult."

Thom chuckled. "He's right, though. You've changed. What happened to the soft-spoken, unsure boy I helped escape the Two Rivers?"

"He passed through the blacksmith's fire," Perrin said softly.

Thorn nodded, seeming to understand.

"And you, Mat?" Perrin said. "Can I do something to help you? Maybe let you Travel between tents?"

"No. I'll be fine."

"How are you going to protect yourself?"

"With my wits."

"Planning to find some of those, then?" Perrin said. "About time."

Mat snorted. "What is it with everyone and my wits lately? I'll be fine trust me. Remind me to tell you about the night when I first figured out I could win whatever dice game I wanted to. It's a good story. Involves falling off bridges. One bridge, at least."

"Well . . . you could tell us now," Perrin said.

"Not the right time. Anyway, it doesn't matter. See, I'm leaving soon."

Thorn smelled excited.

"Perrin, you will lend us a gateway, won't you?" Mat asked. "Hate to leave the Band. They'll be inconsolable without me. At least they have those dragons to blow things up."

"But where are you going?" Perrin asked.

"Suppose I should explain it," Mat said. "That was the reason for meeting with you, aside from the amiable discourse and all." He leaned in. "Perrin, Moiraine is alive."

"What?"

"Its true," Mat said. "Or, well, we think it is. She sent Thorn a letter, claiming she'd foreseen the battle with Lanfear, and knew that she would . . . Well, anyway, there's this tower west of here on the River Ari-nelle. It's made all of metal. It—"

"The Tower of Ghenjei," Perrin said softly. "Yes, I know of it."

Mat blinked. "You do? Burn me. When did you get to be a scholar?"

"I've merely heard some things. Mat, that place is evil."

"Well, Moiraine is inside," Mat said. "Captured. I mean to get her back. I have to beat the snakes and the foxes. Bloody cheats."

"Snakes and foxes?" Perrin said.

Thorn nodded. "The children's game is named after the things that live in the tower. So we think."

"I've seen them," Mat said. "And . . . well, there's really not time for that now."

"If you're going to rescue her," Perrin said, "perhaps I could come. Or at least send one of the Asha'man."

"I'll take a gateway gladly," Mat said. "But you can't come, Perrin.

Moraine explained it in her letter. Only three can come, and I know already who they have to be." He hesitated. "Olver is going to bloody kill me for not taking him, you know."

"Mat," Perrin said, shakmg his head. "You're not makmg any sense. Mat s.ghed. "Let me tell you the whole story, then. He eyed the pitcher of ale. "Were going to need more of that, and you'd better tell Grady you'll be some time yet . . ."

CHAPTER

48

Near Avendesora

Aviendha took one final step and was out of the forest of glass pillars. She took a deep breath, then glanced back at the path she had taken.

The central plaza of Rhuidean was an awe-inspiring sight. Smooth white flagstones carpeted the entire square save for the absolute center. There stood an enormous tree, branches spread wide like arms reaching to embrace the sun. The massive tree had a perfection she could not explain. It had a natural symmetry—no missing branches, no gaping holes in its leafy upper reaches. It was particularly impressive since, when she'd last seen it, it had been blackened and burned.

In a world where other plants were dying without explanation, this one healed and flourished faster than ever should have been possible. Its leaves rustled soothingly in the wind, and its gnarled roots poked through the ground like the aged fingers of a wise elder. The tree made her want to sit and bask in the simple peace of the moment.

It was as if this tree were the ideal, the one after which all other trees were patterned. In legend it was called Avendesora. The Tree of Life.

To the side sat the glass columns. There were dozens of them, perhaps hundreds, forming concentric rings. Spindly and thin, they reached high into the sky. As purely—even superlatively—natural as Avendesora was, these columns were equally natural. They were so thin and tall, logic said that the first gust of wind should have toppled them. It wasn't that they were aberrant, merely artificial.

"When she had first entered days before, there had been gai'shain in white carefully picking up fallen leaves and twigs. They had retreated as soon as they had seen her. Was she the first to go through the glass pillars since Rhuidean's transformation? Her own clan had sent no one, and she was certain she would have heard of it if the others had.

That left only the Shaido, but they had rejected Rand's claims about the Aiel oast. Aviendha suspected that if any Shaido had come, they would not have been able to bear what was shown here. They would have passed into the center of the glass columns and never returned.

That had not been the case for Aviendha. She had survived. Indeed, everything she'd seen had been expected. Almost disappointingly so.

She sighed, walking over to Avendesords trunk, then looking up through its web of branches.

Once, this plaza had been cluttered with other ter'angreal; this was where Rand had first discovered the access keys he had used to cleanse saidin. That wealth of ter'angreal was gone now; Moiraine had claimed many pieces for the White Tower, and the Aiel who lived here must have taken the others away. That left only the tree, the columns and the three rings that women went through on their first trip here, the trip that made them apprentice Wise Ones.

She remembered some of her trip through those rings, which had showed her life—her many possible lives—to her. Really, only bits and pieces remained in her memory. Her knowledge that she would love Rand, that she would have sister-wives. Included in that knowledge was the impression that she'd return here, to Rhuidean. She had known, though only stepping into this courtyard again had sparked some of those memories to life in her mind.

She sat down cross-legged between two of the great tree's roots. The soft wind was soothing, the air dry and familiar, the dusty scent of the Three-fold Land reminding her of her childhood.

Her trip through the columns had certainly been immersive. She had expected to see the origins of the Aiel, perhaps witness the day when they had—-as a people—decided to take up the spears and fight. She'd anticipated a noble decision, where honor overcame the inferior lifestyle dictated by the Way of the Leaf.

She had been surprised to see how mundane—almost accidental—the true event had been. No grand decision; only a man who had been unwilling to let his family be murdered. There was honor in wanting to defend others, but he had not approached his decision with honor.

She rested her head back against the trunk of the tree. The Aiel did. deserve their punishment in the Three-fold Land, and they did have toh—as a people—to the Aes Sedai. She had seen everything she had expected. But many of the things she had been hoping to learn had been absent. Aiel would continue to visit this place for centuries, as they had for centuries. And each of them would learn something that was now common knowledge.

That bothered her deeply.

She looked upward, watching branches quiver in the breeze, several leaves falling and drifting down toward her. One passed her face, brushing her cheek before alighting on her shawl.

Passing through the glass columns was no longer a challenge. Originally, this ter'angreal had provided a test. Could the potential leader face and accept the Aiel's darkest secret? As a Maiden, Aviendha had been tested in body and strength. Becoming a Wise One tested a person emotionally and mentally. Rhuidean was to be the capstone of that process, the final test of mental endurance. But that test was gone now.

More and more, she was coming to believe that tradition for the sake of tradition was foolishness. Good traditions—strong, Aiel traditions—taught the ways of ji'e'toh, methods of survival.

Aviendha sighed, standing. The forest of columns looked like the strange lines of frozen water she had seen during winter in the wetlands. Icicles, Elayne had called them. These grew up from the ground, pointing toward the sky, things of beauty and Power. It was sad to witness their lapse into irrelevance.

Something occurred to her. Before she had left Caemlyn, she and Elayne had made a remarkable discovery. Aviendha had manifested a Talent in the One Power: the ability to identify ter'angreal. Could she determine, exactly, what the glass pillars did? They couldn't have been created specifically for the Aiel, could they? Most things of great Power like this hailed from very ancient days. The pillars would have been created during the Age of Legends, then adapted to the purpose of showing the Aiel their true past.

There was so much they didn't know about ter'angreal. Had the ancient Aes Sedai really understood them, the same way Aviendha understood exactly how a bow or spear worked? Or had they themselves been mystified by the things they created? The One Power was so wondrous, so mysterious, that even working practiced weaves often made Aviendha feel like a child.

She stepped up to the nearest glass pillar, careful not to pass inside the ring. If she touched one of the rods, perhaps her Talent would let her read something about them. It was dangerous to experiment with ter'angreal, but she had already passed their challenge and was unscathed.

Hesitantly, she reached out and laid fingers on the slick, glassy surface. It was about a foot thick. She closed her eyes, trying to read the pillar's function.

She sensed the powerful aura of the pillar. It was far more potent than any of the ter'angreal she had handled with Elayne. Indeed, the pillars seemed . . alive, somehow. It was almost as if she could sense an awareness from them.

That gave her a chill. Was she touching the pillar, or was it touching her?

She tried to read ter'angreal as she had done before, but this one was vast. Incomprehensible, like the One Power itself. She inhaled sharply, disoriented by the weight of what she felt. It was as if she had suddenly fallen into a deep, dark pit.

She snapped her eyes open, pulling her hand away, palm quivering. This was beyond her. She was an insect, trying to grasp the size and mass of a mountain. She took a breath to steady herself, then shook her head. There was nothing more to be done here.

She turned from the glass pillars and took a step.

She was Malidra, eighteen but scrawny enough to appear much younger. She crawled in the darkness. Careful. Quiet. It was dangerous to get this close to the Lightmakers. Hunger drove her forward. It always did.

The night was cold, the landscape barren. Malidra had heard stories of a place beyond the distant mountains, where the land was green and food grew everywhere. She didn't believe those lies. The mountains were just lines in the sky, jagged teeth. Who could climb something so tall?

Maybe the Lightmakers could. They did come from that direction, usually. Their camp was ahead of her, glowing in the darkness. That glow was too steady to be fire. It came from the balls they carried with them. She inched closer, crouching, bare ket and hands dusty. There were a few men and women of the Folk with her. Grimy faces, stringy hair. Ragged beards on the men.

A mishmash of clothing. Tattered trousers, garments that might once have been shirts. Anything to keep the sun off during the day, because the sun could kill. And did. Malidra was the last of four sisters, two dead by the sun and hunger, one dead from the bite of a snake.

But Malidra survived. Anxiously, she survived. The best way was to follow the Lightmakers. It was dangerous, but her mind barely noticed danger anymore. That was what happened when virtually anything could kill you.

Malidra passed a bush, watching the Lightmaker guards. Two sentries, carrying their long, rodlike weapons. Malidra had found one on a dead man once, but she hadn't been able to make it do anything. The Lightmak-ers had magics, the same magics that created their food and their lights Magics that kept them warm in the bitter cold at night.

The two men wore strange clothing. Trousers that fit too well, coats covered with pockets and glistening bits of metal. Both had hats, though one wore his back, held around his neck by a thin leather strap The men chatted. They didn't have beards like the Folk did. Their hair was darker.

One of the other Folk got too close, and Malidra hissed at her. The woman shot back a glare, but moved away. Malidra stayed at the edge of the light. The Lightmakers wouldn't see her. Their strange glowing orbs ruined their night vision.

She rounded their massive wagon. There were no horses. Only the wagon, large enough to house a dozen people. It moved magically during the daylight, rolling on wheels nearly as wide as Malidra was tall. She had heard—in the hushed, broken communication of Folk—that in the east, the Lightmakers were creating a massive roadway. It would pass directly through the Waste. It was made by laying down strange pieces of metal. They were too big to pry up, though Jorshem had shown her a large nail he had found. He used it to scrape meat off bones.

It had been quite a while since she had eaten well—not since they'd managed to kill that merchant in his sleep two years ago. She could still remember that feast, digging into his stores, eating until her stomach ached. Such an odd feeling. Wondrous and painful.

Most Lightmakers were too careful for her to kill them in their sleep. She didn't dare face them when they were awake. They could make one such as her vanish with a stare.

Nervously, trailed by a couple of other Folk, she rounded the wagon and approached it from the back. Sure enough, here the Lightmakers had tossed some of the leavings from their earlier meal. She scuttled forward and began to dig through the trash. There were some cuttings of meat, strips of fat. She snatched these up eagerly—holding them close before the others could see—and stuffed them into her mouth. She felt dirt grind against her teeth, but meat was food. She hurriedly picked through the waste some more.

A bright light shone on her. She froze, hand halfway to her mouth. The other two Folk screamed, scrambling away. She tried to do likewise but tripped. There was a hiss of sound—one of the Lightmaker weapons—and something popped against her back. It felt like she'd been hit with a small rock.

She collapsed, the pain sudden and sharp. The light faded slightly. She blinked, eyes adjusting even as she felt her life seeping out and around her hands.

"I told you," a voice said. Two shadows moved in front of the light. She had to run! She tried to rise, but only managed to thrash weakly.

"Blood and char, Flern," a second voice said. A silhouette knelt beside her. "Poor thing. Almost a child. She wasn't doing any harm."

Flern snorted. "No harm? I've seen these creatures try to slit a sleeping man's throat. All for his trash. Bloody pests."

The other shadow looked at her, and she caught sight of a grim face. Twinkling eyes. Like stars. The man sighed, rising. "Next time we bury the trash." He retreated back toward the light.

The second man, Flern, stood watching her. Was that her blood? All over her hands, warm, like water that had been sitting in the sun for too long?

Death did not surprise her. In a way, she'd been expecting it for most of her eighteen years.

"Bloody Aiel," Flern said as her sight faded.

Aviendha's foot hit the flagstone in Rhuidean's square, and she blinked in shock. The sun had changed in the sky above. Hours had passed.

What had happened? The vision had been so real, like her viewings of the early days of her people. But she could make no sense of it. Had she gone even farther back into history? That seemed like the Age of Legends. The strange machines, clothing, and weapons. But that bad been the Waste.

She could remember distinctly being Malidra. She could remember years of hunger, of scavenging, of hatred—and fear—of the Lightmakers. She remembered her death. The terror, trapped and bleeding. That warm blood on her hands. . . .

She raised a hand to her head, sick and unsettled. Not by the death. Everyone woke from the dream, and while she did not welcome it, she would not fear it. No, the horrible thing about the vision had been the complete lack of honor she'd seen. Killing men in the night for their food?

Scavenging for half-chewed meat in the dirt? Wearing scraps? She'd been more an animal than a person!

Better to die. Surely the Aiel couldn't have come from roots like those, long ago. The Aiel in the Age of Legends had been peaceful servants respected. How could they have started as scavengers?

Perhaps this was merely one tiny group of Aiel. Or maybe the man had been mistaken. There was little way to tell from this single vision. Why had she been shown it?

She took a hesitant step away from the glass columns, and nothing happened. No further visions. Disturbed, she began to walk from the plaza.

Then she slowed.

Hesitantly she turned back. The columns stood in the dimming light, quiet and alone, seeming to buzz with an unseen energy.

Was there more?

That one vision seemed so disconnected from the others she'd seen. If she passed into the columns' midst again, would she repeat what she'd been given before? Or . . . had she, perhaps, changed something with her Talent?

In the centuries since Rhuidean's founding, those columns had shown the Aiel what they needed to know about themselves. The Aes Sedai had set that up, hadn't they? Or had they simply placed the ter'angreal and allowed it to do what it pleased, knowing it would grant wisdom?

Aviendha listened to the tree's leaves rustle. Those pillars were a challenge, as sure as an enemy warrior with his spear in hand. If she passed into their midst again, she might never come out; nobody visited this ter'angreal a second time. It was forbidden. One trip through the rings, one through the columns.

But she had come seeking knowledge. She would not leave without it. She turned and—taking a deep breath—walked up to the pillars.

Then took a step.

She was Norlesh. She held her youngest child close to her bosom. A dry wind tugged at her shawl. Her baby, Garlvan, started to whimper, but she quieted him as her husband spoke with the outlanders.

An outlander village stood in the near distance, built of shacks against the foothills of the mountains. They wore dyed clothing and strangely cut trousers with buttoning shirts. They had come for the ore. How could rocks be so valuable that they would live on this side of the mountains,

away from their fabled land of water and food? Away from their buildings where light shone without candles and their carts that moved without

horses?

Her shawl slipped and she pulled it up. She needed a new one; this one was ragged, and she didn't have any more thread left for patching. Garlvan whimpered in her arms, and her only other living child—Meise—held to her skirts. Meise hadn't spoken for monrhs, now. Not since her older brother had died from exposure.

"Please," said her husband—Metalan—to the outlanders. There were three of them, two men and a woman, all wearing trousers. Rugged folk, not like the other foreigners, with their delicate features and too-fine silks. Illuminated Ones, those others sometimes called themselves. These three were more ordinary.

"Please," Metalan repeated. "My family . . ."

He was a good man. Or he had been once, back when he'd been strong and fit. Now he seemed a shell of that man, his cheeks sunken. His once-vibrant blue eyes stared absently much of the time. Haunted. That look came from watching three of his children die in eighteen months' time. Though Metalan was a head taller than any of the outlanders, he seemed to grovel before them.

The lead outlander—a man with a bushy beard and wide, honest eyes—shook his head. He returned to Metalan the sack full of stones. "The Raven Empress, may she always draw breath, forbids it. No trading with Aiel. We could be stripped of our charter for talking to you."

"We have no food," Metalan said. "My children are starving. These stones contain ore. I know that it is the type for which you search. I spent weeks gathering it. Give us a bit of food. Something. Please."

"Sorry, friend," the lead outlander said. "It isn't worth trouble with the Ravens. Go on your way. We don't want an incident." Several outlanders approached from behind, one carrying an axe, two others with hiss-staves.

Her husband slumped. Days of travel, weeks of searching for the stones. For nothing. He turned and walked back to her. In the distance, the sun was setting. Once he reached her, she and Meise joined him, walking away from the outlander camp.

Meise began to sniffle, but neither of them had the will or strength to carry her. About an hour away from the outlander camp, her husband found a hollow in a rock shelf. They settled in, not making a fire. There was nothing to burn.

Norlesh wanted to cry. But . . . feeling anything seemed difficult. "I'm so hungry," she whispered.

"I will trap something in the morning," her husband said, staring up at the stars.

"We haven't caught anything in days," she said.

He didn't reply.

"What are we going to do?" she whispered. "We haven't been able t keep a home for our people since my greatmother Tava's day. If we gather they attack us. If we wander the Waste, we die off. They won't trade with us. They won't let us cross the mountains. What are we going to do?"

His response was to lie down, turning away from her.

Her tears did come then, quiet, weak. They rolled down her cheeks as she undid her shirt to nurse Garlvan, though she had no suck for him.

He didn't move. He didn't latch on. She lifted his small form and realized that he was no longer breathing. Somewhere along the walk to the hollow, he had died without her realizing it.

The most frightening part was how difficult she found it to summon any sorrow at the death.

Aviendha's foot hit the flagstones. Around her, the forest of glass columns shimmered with prismatic color. It was like standing in the middle of an Illuminator's firework. The sun was high in the sky, cloud cover remarkably gone.

She wanted to leave the square forever. She had been prepared for the knowledge that the Aiel had once followed the Way of the Leaf. That knowledge wasn't very disturbing. They would soon fulfill their toh.

But this? These scattered and broken wretches? People who didn't stand up for themselves, who begged, who didn't know how to survive off the land? To know that these were her ancestors was a shame she nearly could not bear. It was good that Rand al'Thor had not revealed this past to the Aiel.

Could she flee? Run from the plaza and see no more? If it grew any worse, the shame would overwhelm her. Unfortunately, she knew that there was only one way out, now that she'd begun.

Gritting her teeth, she took a step forward.

She was Tava, fourteen years old and screaming in the night as she ran from her burning house. The entire valley—really a canyon, with steep sides—was in flames. Every building in the fledgling hold had been set afire. Nightmarish creatures, with sinuous necks and wide wings, flapped in the night above, bearing riders with bows, spears, and strange new weapons that made a hissing sound when they fired.

Tava cried, searching for her family, but the hold was a mass of chaos and confusion. Some few Aiel warriors resisted, but anyone who raised a spear fell moments later, killed by arrow or by one of the invisible shots from the new weapons.

An Aiel man fell before her, corpse rolling on the ground. Tadvishm had been his name, a Stone Dog. It was one of the few societies which still maintained an identity. Most warriors no longer held to a society; they made brothers and sisters of those with whom they camped. All too often, those camps were scattered anyway.

This hold was to have been different, secret, deep within the Waste. How had their enemies found them?

A child of only two years was crying. She dashed to him, snatching him from where he lay near the flames. Their homes burned. The wood had been scavenged with difficulty from the mountains on the eastern edge of the Waste.

She held the child close and ran toward the deeper recesses of the canyon. Where was her father? With a sudden whoosh of sound, one of the nightmarish creatures landed before her, the burst of wind making her skirt flap. A fearsome warrior sat upon the creature's back, helmet like that of an insect, mandibles sharp and jagged. He lowered his hissing staff toward her. She cried out in terror, huddling around the crying child and closing her eyes.

The hissing sound never came. At a grunt and a sudden screech from the serpentine beast, she looked up and saw a figure struggling with the outlander. The firelight showed the face of her father, clean-shaven as the old traditions dictated. The beast beneath the two men lurched, throwing both to the ground.

A few moments later, her father rose, holding the invader's sword in his hands, its length stained dark. The invader did not move, and behind them the beast leaped into the air, howling. Tava looked up, and saw that it was following the rest of the pack. The invaders were withdrawing, leaving a broken people with burning homes.

She looked down again. The scene horrified her; so many bodies, dozens, lay bleeding on the ground. The invader that her father had killed appeared to be the only enemy that had fallen.

"Gather sand!" her father—Rowahn—roared. "Quench the flames!"

Tall—even for an Aiel—with striking red hair, he wore the old clothing of brown and tan, boots tied high to his knees. That clothing marked

one as Aiel, therefore many had abandoned it. Being known as Aiel meant death.

Her father had inherited his clothing from his grandfather, along with a charge. Follow the old ways. Remember ji'e'toh. Fight and maintain honor. Though he had been in the hold for only a few days, the others listened when he yelled for them to put out the fires. Tava returned the child to a grateful mother and then helped gather sand and dirt.

A few hours later, a tired and bloodied people gathered in the center of the canyon, regarding with dull eyes what they had worked for months to build. It had been wiped out in a single night. Her father still carried the sword. He used it to direct the people. Some of the old ones said that a sword was bad luck, but why would they say that? It was only a weapon.

"We must rebuild," her father said, surveying the wreckage.

"Rebuild?" said a soot-stained man. "The granary was the first to burn! There is no food!"

"We will survive," her father said. "We can move deeper into the Waste."

"There is nowhere else to go!" another man said. "The Raven Empire has sent word to the Far Ones, and they hunt us at the eastern border!"

"They find us whenever we gather!" another cried.

"It is a punishment!" her father said. "But we must endure!"

The people looked at him. Then, in pairs or small groups, they began to walk away.

"Wait," her father said, raising his hand. "We must stay together, keep fighting! The clan—"

"We are not a clan," an ashen man said. "I can survive better on my own. No more fighting. They beat us when we fight."

Her father lowered the sword, its tip hitting the ground. Tava moved up beside him, worried as she watched the others walk their ways into the night. The air was still thick with smoke. The departing Aiel were shadows, melting into darkness, like swirls of dust blown on the wind. They didn't pause to bury their dead.

Her father bowed his head and dropped the sword to the ash-covered ground.

There were tears in Aviendha's eyes. There was no shame at crying over this tragedy. She had feared the truth, and she could no longer deny it.

Those had been Seanchan raiders, riding atop raken. The Raven Empire, the Lightmakers from her first vision, were the Seanchan—and they hadn't existed until the middle of the current Age, when Artur Hawkwings armies had crossed the oceans.

She was not seeing the deep past of her people. She was seeing their future.

Her first time through the pillars, each step had taken her backward, moving her through time toward the Age of Legends. It appeared that this time, the visions had started at a distant point in the future, and were working back toward her day, each vision jumping back a generation or two. Tears streaking her face, she took the next step.

CHAPTER
49

Court of the Sun

She was Ladalin, Wise One of the Taardad Aiel. How she wished that she had been able to learn to channel. That was a shameful thought, wishing for a talent one did not have, but she could not deny it.

She sat in the tent, feeling regretful. If she'd been able to work with the One Power, perhaps she could have done more to help the wounded. She could have remained young to lead her clan, and perhaps her bones would not ache so. Old age was a frustration when there was so much to do.

The tent walls rustled as the remaining clan chiefs settled down. There was only one other Wise One in the room, Mora of the Goshien Aiel. She could not channel either. The Seanchan were particularly determined when it came to killing or capturing all Aiel—male or female—who showed any talent with the One Power.

It was a sorry group gathered in the tent. A one-armed young soldier entered with a warm brazier and set it in the middle of them, then retreated. Ladalin's mother had spoken of the days when there had still been gai'shain to do such work. Had there really been Aiel, man or Maiden, who had not been needed for the war against the Seanchan?

Ladalin reached forward to warm her hands at the brazier, fingers knotted with age. She'd held a spear as a young woman; most women did, before they married. How could a woman remain behind when the Seanchan used female soldiers and their damane with such effectiveness?

She'd heard stories about her mother and greatmother's days, but they seemed incredible. The war was all Ladalin had ever known. Her first memories as a little girl were of the Almoth strikes. Her youth had been spent training. She had fought in the battles focused around the land that had been known as Tear.

Ladalin had married and raised children, but had focused every breath on the conflict. Aiel or Seanchan. Both knew that, eventually, only one of the two would remain.

It was looking more and more like the Aiel would be the ones forced out. That was another difference between her day and her mother's day. Her mother had not spoken of failure; Ladalin's lifetime was filled with milestones of withdrawal and retreat.

The others seemed absorbed in their thoughts. Three clan chiefs and two Wise Ones. They were all that remained of the Council of Twenty-Two. Highland winds seeped through the tent flaps, chilling her back. Tamaav was the last to arrive. He looked as old as she felt, his face scarred and his left eye lost in battle. He sat down on the rock. The Aiel no longer carried rugs or cushions. Only the essentials could be transported.

"The White Tower has fallen," he said. "My scouts informed me not an hour ago. I trust their information." He had always been a blunt man, and a good friend to her husband, who had fallen last year.

"Then with it goes our last hope," said Takai, the youngest of the clan chiefs. He was the third chief of the Miagoma in as many years.

"Speak not so," Ladalin said. "There is always hope."

"They have pushed us all the way to these cursed mountains," Takai said. "The Shiande and the Daryne are no more. That leaves only five clans, and one of those is broken and scattered. We are beaten, Ladalin."

Tamaav sighed. She'd have lain a bridal wreath at his feet, had the years been earlier and the times different. Her clan needed a chief. Her son still thought to become the one, but with the recent Seanchan capture of Rhuidean, the clans were uncertain how to choose new leaders.

"We must retreat into the Three-fold Land," Mora said in her soft, matronly voice. "And seek penance for our sins."

"What sins?" Takai snapped.

"The Dragon wanted peace," she replied.

"The Dragon left us!" Takai said. "I refuse to follow the memory of a man my greatfathers barely knew. We made no oaths to follow his foolish pact. We—"

"Peace, Takai," Jorshem said. The last of the three clan chiefs was a

small, hawk-faced man with some Andoran blood in him from his greatfa-ther. "Only the Three-fold Land holds any hope for us, now. The war against the Ravens has been lost."

The tent fell still.

"They said they'd hunt us," Takai said. "When they demanded surrender, they warned us against retreat. You know that. They Said they would destroy any place where three Aiel gathered."

"We will not surrender," Ladalin said firmly. More firmly than she felt to be honest.

"Surrender would make us gai'shain" Tamaav said. They used the word to mean one without honor, though that was not the way Ladalins mother had used it. "Ladalin. What is your advice?"

The other four looked at her. She was of the lineage of the Dragon, one of the last living. The other three lines had been killed off.

"If we become slaves to the Seanchan, the Aiel as a people will be no more," she said. "We cannot win, so we must retreat. We will return to the Three-fold Land and build up our strength. Perhaps our children can fight where we cannot."

Silence again. They all knew her words to be optimistic at best. After decades of war, the Aiel were a bare fraction of the number they had once been.

Seanchan channelers were brutal in their effectiveness. Though the Wise Ones and Dragon Blooded used the One Power in battle, it was not enough. Those cursed a'dam\ Each channeler the Aiel lost to capture was eventually turned against them.

The real turning point in the war had been the entry of the other nations. After that, the Seanchan had been able to seize wetlander peoples and cull more channelers from their ranks. The Ravens were unstoppable; now that Tar Valon had fallen, every realm in the wetlands was subject to the Seanchan. Only the Black Tower still fought, though the Asha'man did so in secret, as their fortress had fallen years before.

Aiel could not fight in secret. There was no honor to that. Of course, what did honor matter now? After deaths numbering in the hundreds of thousands? After the burning of Cairhien and the scouring of Illian? It had been twenty years since the Seanchan had gained the Andoran war machines. The Aiel had been tumbling toward defeat for decades; it was a testament to their tenacious nature that they had lasted so long.

"This is his fault," Takai said, still looking sullen. "The Car'a'carn could have led us to glory, but he abandoned us."

"His fault?" Ladalin said, understanding—perhaps for the first time-why that statement was wrong. "No. Aiel take responsibility for themselves. This is our fault, and not that of my distant greatfather. We have forgotten who we are. We are without honor."

"Our honor was taken from us," Takai said, sighing as he stood. "People of the Dragon indeed. What is the good of being his people? We were drafted to be a spear, the legends say, forged in the Three-fold Land. He used us, then cast us away. What is a discarded spear to do, but go to war?"

What indeed, Ladalin thought. The Dragon had demanded peace, thinking that it would bring happiness to the Aiel. But how could they be happy, when the Light-cursed Seanchan were in the land? Her hatred of the invaders ran deep.

Perhaps that hatred had destroyed the Aiel. She listened to the wind howl as Takai stalked from the tent. On the morrow the Aiel would return to the Three-fold Land. If they would not accept peace themselves, it seemed they would have to have it forced upon them.

Aviendha took another step forward. She'd nearly reached the very center of the columns, and shards of light sparkled around her.

Her tears flowed freely now. She felt like a child. Being Ladalin had been worse than the others, for in her, Aviendha had seen hints of true Aiel ways, but corrupted, as if to make mockery. The woman had thought of war and associated it with honor, but hadn't understood what honor was. No gai'shain? Retreat? There had been no mention of toh. This was battle stripped completely of point or reason.

Why fight? For Ladalin, it had been about hatred of the Seanchan. There was war because there had always been war.

How? How had this happened to the Aiel?

Aviendha took a step forward.

She was Oncala, Maiden of the Spear. She would eventually give the spear up and marry, just as her mother had and her mother's mother before her. But now was the time to fight.

She strode through the streets of Caemlyn, her near-sister carrying the banner of the Dragon to announce her lineage. Next to Oncala was the man for whom she would likely give up her spears. Hehyal, Dawn Runner, had killed more Seanchan than any of his society, gaining much ji. He had been granted permission to travel to Rhuidean last year to become clan chief.

Rhuidean. The city was besieged by Seanchan. Oncala sneered. Seanchan had no honor. They had been told that Rhuidean was a place for peace. The Aiel did not assault the palace in Ebou Dar. The Seancha should not attack Rhuidean.

They were lizards. It was a source of constant frustration that, after decades of war, the battle lines remained nearly the same as they had been after her greatfather went to Shayol Ghul.

She and Hehyal were accompanied by two thousand spears as a guard of honor. Queen Talana knew to expect them, and so the white Andoran palace gates were open. Hehyal waved for fifty spears, preselected, to walk with them through the fine halls. Lushness abounded here in the palace. Each tapestry, each vase, each golden frame seemed an insult to Oncala. Forty years of war, and Andor had not been touched. It lay safe, basking in the protection the Aiel defense gave them.

Well, Andor would see. The Aiel had grown stronger through their fighting. Once, their prowess had been legendary. Now it was greater! When the Aiel had destroyed the Seanchan, the world would see what the Aiel had learned. The wetland rulers would wish they had been more generous.

The throne room doors were open; Oncala and Hehyal entered, leaving their escort. The banner of the Dragon flew here, too, a reminder that the Andoran royal line also carried the lineage of the Car'a'carn. One more reason for Oncala to hate them. The Andoran nobility thought themselves her equals.

Queen Talana was a middle-aged woman with deep, lustrous red hair. Not very pretty, but very regal. She was speaking quietly with one of her advisors, and she waved for the Aiel to wait. An insult, deliberate. Oncala fumed.

Finally, they were summoned to approach the Lion Throne. Talana's brother, her protector, stood behind her in court clothing—a vest and coat—hand on his sword. Oncala could have killed him while barely breaking a sweat.

"Ah," Queen Talana said. "The Taardad Aiel again. You still carry the spear, Oncala?"

Oncala folded her arms, but said nothing. She knew she was not good with people. When she spoke, insults were too common. Better to let the clan chief take the lead.

"I assume you're here to beg for aid again," Talana said.

Hehyal flushed, and Oncala wished—for a moment—she hadn't left her spear outside.

"We have something for you," Hehyal said, taking out a leather pouch and handing it to one of the Queen's Guards. The man opened it, inspecting the papers inside. Another insult. Must they be treated like assassins? Oncala did not like the Queen, true, but her family and Talana's were sworn to allegiance because of their greatmothers, who had been first-sisters.

The soldier handed the Queen the papers. Talana perused them, face growing concerned and thoughtful.

Talana, like most of the rulers beneath the Dragon's Peace, worried about the Seanchan. The Raven Empire's techniques and skill with shaping the One Power were growing. The Aiel had them held at a stalemate, for now. What would happen if the Seanchan won? Would they hold to their oaths?

How much could the Seanchan be trusted? Hehyal's agents had spent a great deal of time over the last decade seeding that very question among the great courts of the world. He was a wise man. Even before he had become chief, he had realized that this war could not be won by the Aiel alone. They needed these soft wetlanders.

And that was the final reason Oncala hated them.

"Where did you get these?" Talana asked.

"From the Seanchan palace," Hehyal said. "They should not have struck at Rhuidean. By honor, that allowed us to reciprocate—though our attack was done quietly to recover these. I had long suspected where they were located, and only my honor in not breaching the Seanchan sacred palace held me back."

Talana's face grew hard. "You're certain these are authentic?"

"You question me?" Hehyal asked.

Queen Talana shook her head, looking troubled. She knew that the Aiel did not lie.

"We have been patient with you," Hehyal said. "We have come to you and explained what will happen if we cannot hold off the Seanchan."

"The Dragon's Peace—"

"What care do they have for the Dragon?" Hehyal asked. "They are invaders who forced him to bow to their Empress. She is considered above him. They will not keep promises they made to an inferior."

Queen Talana looked down again. The documents were Seanchan plans for attacking Andor, along with a detailed plot for the assassination of the Queen. Underneath that were similar plans for dealing with the rulers of Tear, the Two Rivers, and Illian.

"I must have time to consult with my advisors," Talana said.

We have her, Oncala thought, smiling. Oncala already knew what the Queen's answer would be. The trick had been to get her to consider action.

Hehyal nodded, and the two of them withdrew. Oncala had to keep herself from yelling in victory. If Andor entered the war, the other nations would as well, particularly those in the Pact of the Griffin and those in the Court of the Sun. They looked to the Andoran Queen much as the other Aiel clans looked to Oncala. The blood of Rand al'Thor held much weight.

"Is this right?" Hehyal asked as they walked, their spears surrounding them to keep away prying ears.

Oncala started. "It was your plan."

He nodded, frowning.

Nothing he had said to the Queen had been untrue. Their honor was unsoiled. However, Hehyal had left out one of the sheets they'd discovered. That one had explained that the other sheets were contingency plans.

The descriptions of Andor's military forces, suggestions on how to use gateways and dragons to attack Caemlyn, the very plot to assassinate Queen Talana—these had been drawn up only in case Andor entered the war. They were meant as a preemptive study on a potential enemy, not an actual plan to attack.

It was virtually the same thing. The Seanchan were snakes. They would seize Andor eventually, and by then the Aiel might be unable to help. If this war went badly, her people would go to the Three-fold Land and leave the foolish wetlanders to be conquered. The Seanchan would find it impossible to fight the Aiel in their homeland.

Much better for Queen Talana to enter the war now. For her own good, it was best she never saw that other sheet.

"It is done," Hehyal said. "There is no room for question now."

Oncala nodded. The Seanchan would fall, and the Aiel would take their rightful place. The blood of the Dragon Reborn was in her veins. She deserved to rule.

It would not be the Raven Empire that rose at the end of this all, but the Dragon Empire.

"I don't want to go on," Aviendha said to the empty forest of glass.

The breeze had fallen still. Her comment was met with silence. Her tears had marked the dust by her feet, like fallen drops of rain.

"That . . . creature had no honor," she said. "She has ruined us."

The worst part was, the woman—Oncala—had thought of her mother's mother. Her greatmother. Inside Ocala's head, there had been a face attached to that title. Aviendha had recognized it.

As her own.

Cringing, closing her eyes, she stepped forward into the very center of the radiant columns.

She was Padra, daughter of the Dragon Reborn, proud Maiden of the Spear. She yanked her weapon from the neck of a dying Seanchan, then watched the rest flee through their gateway.

Light curse the one who taught the Seanchan Traveling, Padra thought. Even if their weaves aren't very elegant.

She was convir? ced that no living person understood the One Power as she and her siblings did. She'd been able to weave since she'd been a child, and her brothers and sister were the same. To them, it was natural, and all others who channeled seemed awkward by comparison.

She was careful not to speak that way. Aes Sedai and Wise Ones didn't like being reminded of their shortcomings. It was true nonetheless.

Padra joined her spear-sisters. They left one of their number dead on the grass, and Padra mourned for her. Tarra, of the Taardad Aiel. She would be remembered. But honor was theirs, for they had slain eight Seanchan soldiers.

She wove a gateway—for her, it happened as fast as she could think. She held the One Power perpetually, even while she slept. She'd never known what it was like not to have that comforting, surging Power in the back of her mind. Others said they feared being consumed by it, but how was that possible? Saidar was a piece of her, like her arm or her leg. How could one be consumed by one's own flesh, bone and blood?

The gateway led to the Aiel camp in the land called Arad Doman. The camp wasn't a city; Aiel didn't have cities. But it was a very large camp, and it had not moved in almost a decade. Padra strode across the grass, and Aiel in cadin'sor showed her deference. Padra and her siblings, as children of the Dragon, had become . . . something to the Aiel.

Not lords—that concept made her sick. But she was more than an ordinary algai'd'siswai. The clan chiefs looked to her and her siblings for ad-vice, and the Wise Ones took special interest in them. They allowed her to channel, though she was not one of them. She could no sooner stop channeling than she could stop breathing.

She dismissed her spear-sisters, then made her way directly to Ronam's tent. The clan chief—son of Rhuarc—would need to hear her report. She entered and was surprised to see that Ronam was not alone. A group of men sat on the rug, clan chiefs every one. Her siblings were sitting there as well.

"Ah, Padra," Ronam said. "You have returned."

"I can come back another time, Ronam," she said.

"No, you were wanted for this meeting. Sit and share my shade."

Padra bowed her head at the honor he showed her. She sat between Alarch and Janduin, her brothers. Though the four siblings were quadruplets, they looked very dissimilar. Alarch took more after their wetlander side, and had dark hair. Janduin was blond and tall. Beside him Marinna, their sister, small of build with a round face.

"I should report," Padra said to Ronam, "that the Seanchan patrol was where we thought. We engaged them."

There were uncomfortable mumbles about that.

"It is not against the Dragon's Peace for them to enter Arad Doman" said Tavalad, clan chief of the Goshien Aiel.

"Nor is it wrong for us to kill them for getting too close, clan chief" Padra replied. "The Aiel are not bound by the Dragon's Peace. If the Seanchan wish to risk inspecting our camp, then they need to know that it is a risk."

Several of the others—more than she would have expected—nodded at that comment. She glanced at Janduin, and he raised an eyebrow. She covertly raised two fingers. Two Seanchan, dead by her spear. She would have liked to take them captive, but the Seanchan did not deserve to become gai'shain. They also made terrible prisoners. Better to spare them the shame and let them die.

"We should speak what we came to say," said Alalved, chief of the Tomanelle Aiel. Padra did a quick count. All eleven chiefs were accounted for, including those who had blood oaths against one another. A meeting like this hadn't been seen in years, not since her father had been preparing for the Last Battle.

"And what did we come to say?" asked one of the others.

Alalved shook his head. "The spears grow restless. The Aiel are not meant to grow fat in lush lands, tending crops. We are warriors."

"The Dragon asked for peace," Tavalad said.

"The Dragon asked others for peace," Alalved replied. "He excluded the Aiel."

"That is true," said Darvin, chief of the Reyn.

"Do we return to raiding one another after all of these years of holding our blood feuds in abeyance?" Ronam asked softly. He was an excellent clan chief, much as Rhuarc had been. Wise, yet not afraid of battle.

"What would be the point?" asked Shedren, chief of the Daryne Aiel. Others nodded. But that raised a larger problem, one her mother had often spoken of. What was it to be Aiel, now that their duty to the past had been fulfilled, their toh as a people cleansed?

"How long can we wait," Alalved said, "knowing that they have Aiel women captive with those bracelets of theirs? It has been years, and they still continue to refuse all offers of payment and barter! They return our civility with rudeness and insults."

"We are not meant to beg," said aged Bruan. "The Aiel will soon become milk-fed wetlanders."

All nodded at his words. Wise Bruan had lived through the Last Battle.

"If only the Seanchan Empress . . ." Ronam shook his head, and she knew what he was thinking. The old empress, the one who had ruled during the days of the Last Battle, had been considered a woman of honor by Ronam's father. An understanding had nearly been reached with her, so it was said. But many years had passed since her rule.

"Regardless," Ronam continued, "the spears clash; our people fight when they meet. It is our nature. If the Seanchan won't listen to reason, then what cause do we have to leave them be?"

"This peace of the Dragon's will not last long, anyway," Alalved said. "Skirmishes between the nations are common, though none speak of them. The Car'a'carn required promises of the monarchs, but there is no enforcement. Many wetlanders cannot be held at their word, and I worry that the Seanchan will devour them while they squabble."

There were many nods. Only Darvin and Tavalad did not seem convinced.

Padra held her breath. They had known this was coming. The skirmishes with the Seanchan, the restlessness of the clans. She had dreamed of this day, but feared it as well. Her mother had gained great ji in battle. Padra had had few chances to prove herself.

A war with the Seanchan . . . the prospect invigorated her. But it would also mean much death.

"What say the Dragon's children?" Ronam asked, looking at the four of them.

It still seemed strange that these elders looked to her. She checked on saidar, comfortable in the back of her mind, and drew strength from it. What would she do without it?

I say that we must reclaim our own who are held by the Seanchan," said Marinna. She was training to become a Wise One.

Alarch seemed uncertain, and he glanced at Janduin. Alarch often deferred to his brother.

"The Aiel must have a purpose," Janduin said, nodding. "We are useless as we are, and we made no promise not to attack. It is a testament to our patience and respect for my father that we have waited this long."

Eyes turned to Padra. "They are our enemies," she said.

One by one, the men in the room nodded. It seemed such a simple event to end years of waiting.

"Go to your clans." Ronam stood up. "Prepare them."

Padra remained seated as the others said their farewells, some somber, others excited. Seventeen years was too long for the Aiel to be without battle.

Soon, the tent was empty save for Padra. She waited, staring at the rug before her. War. She was excited, but another part of her was somber.. She felt as if she had set the clans on a path that would change them forever.

"Padra?" a voice asked.

She turned to see Ronam standing in the entryway to the tent. She blushed and stood. Though he was ten years her senior, he was quite handsome. She'd never give up the spear, of course, but if she did. . . .

"You seem worried," he said.

"I was simply thinking."

"About the Seanchan?"

"About my father," she replied.

"Ah." Ronam nodded. "I remember when he first came to Cold Rocks Hold. I was very young."

"What was your impression of him?"

"He was an impressive man," Ronam said.

"Nothing else?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Padra, but I did not spend much time with him. My path led me elsewhere. I. . . heard things, from my father, though."

She cocked her head.

Ronam turned and looked out the open tent flaps, toward the green grass beyond. "My father called Rand al'Thor a clever man and great leader, but one who did not know what to do with the Aiel. I remember him saying that when the Car'a'carn was among us, he did not feel like one of us. As if we made him uncomfortable." Ronam shook his head. "Everyone else was planned for, but the Aiel were left adrift."

"Some say we should have returned to the Three-fold Land," she said-

"No," Ronam said. "No, that would have destroyed us. Our fathers knew nothing of steamhorses or dragon tubes. Were the Aiel to return to

the Waste, we would have become irrelevant. The world would pass us by, and we would vanish as a people." "But war?" Padra said. "Is it right?" "I do not know," Ronam said softly. "We are Aiel. It is what we know

how to do."

Padra nodded, feeling more certain.

The Aiel would ride to war again. And there would be much honor in it.

Aviendha blinked. The sky was dark.

She was exhausted. Her mind was drained, her heart opened—as if bleeding out strength with every beat. She sat down in the midst of the dimming columns. Her . . . children. She remembered their faces from her first visit to Rhuidean. She had not seen this. Not that she remembered, at least.

"Is it destined?" she asked. "Can we change it?"

There was no answer, of course.

Her tears were dry. How did one react to seeing the utter destruction—no, the utter decay—of one's people? Each step had seemed logical to the people who took it. But each had taken the Aiel toward their end.

Should anyone have to see such terrible visions? She wished she'd never stepped back into the forest of pillars. Was she to blame for what was to happen? It was her line that would doom her people.

This was not like the events she had seen when passing into the rings during her first visit to Rhuidean. Those had been possibilities. This day's visions seemed more real. She felt almost certain that what she had experienced was not simply one of many possibilities. What she had seen would occur. Step by step, honor drained from her people. Step by step, the Aiel turned from proud to wretched.

There had to be more. Angry, she stood up and took another step. Nothing happened. She walked all the way to the edge of the pillars, then turned, furious.

"Show me more," she demanded. "Show me what I did to cause this! It lis my lineage that brought us ruin! What is my part in it?"

She walked into the pillars again.

Nothing. They seemed dead. She reached out and touched one, but there was no life. No hum, no sense of Power. She closed her eyes, squeezing one more tear from the corner of each eye. The tears trailed down her face, leaving a line of cold wetness on her cheeks.

'Can I change it?" she asked.

If I can't, she thought, will that stop me from trying?

The answer was simple. No. She could not live without doing something to avert that fate. She had come to Rhuidean seeking knowledge. Well, she had received it. In more abundance than she had wanted.

She opened her eyes and gritted her teeth. Aiel took responsibility. Aiel fought. Aiel stood for honor. If she was the only one wh6 knew the terrors of their future, then it was her duty—as a Wise One—to act. She would save her people.

She walked from the pillars, then broke into a run. She needed to return, to consult with the other Wise Ones. But first she needed quiet, out in the Three-fold Land. Time to think.

CHAPTER

50

Choosing Enemies

Elayne sat anxiously, hands in her lap, listening to the distant booms. She'd intentionally chosen the throne room, rather than a less formal audience chamber. Today, she needed to be seen as a queen.

The throne room was imposing, with its majestic pillars and lavish ornamentation. Golden stand-lamps burned in a long double row on either side of the room, breaking only for the pillars. Guardsmen in white and red stood in front of them, burnished breastplates gleaming. The marble columns were matched by the thick crimson rug, woven with the Lion of Andor in gold at its center. It led toward Elayne, wearing the Rose Crown. Her gown was after a traditional fashion rather than those favored in court right now; the sleeves were wide, with the cuffs designed to droop down to a gold-embroidered point beneath her hand.

That pattern was echoed by the bodice, which was high enough to be modest, but low enough to remind all that Elayne was a woman. One still unmarried. Her mother had married a man from Cairhien early in her reign. Others might wonder if Elayne would do the same to cement her hold there.

Another distant boom sounded. The noise of the dragons firing was growing familiar. Not quite a clap of thunder—lower, more regular.

Elayne had been taught to conceal her nervousness. First by her tutors, and then by the Aes Sedai. Whatever some people thought, Elayne Trakand could control her temper when she needed to. She kept her hands in her lap and forced her tongue to be still. Showing nervousness would be far worse than anger.

Dyelin sat in a chair near the throne. The stately woman wore he golden hair unbound around her shoulders, and she was working quietly at a hoop of embroidery. Dyelin said it relaxed her, providing something for the hands to do while the mind was busy. Elayne's mother was not in attendance. Today, she might be too much of a distraction.

Elayne couldn't afford herself Dyelin's same luxury. She needed to be seen leading. Unfortunately, "leading" often took the form of sitting on her throne, eyes forward, projecting determination and control while she waited. Surely the demonstration was done by now?

Another boom. Perhaps not.

She could hear soft chat in the sitting chamber to the side of the throne room. Those High Seats still in Caemlyn had received a royal invitation to meet with the Queen in a discussion of sanitation requirements for those staying outside the city. That meeting would happen at the strike of five, but the invitations had hinted the High Seats were to arrive two hours early.

The wording of the message should have been obvious. Elayne was going to do something important today, and she was inviting the High Seats early so that they could enjoy some sanctioned eavesdropping. They were kept well supplied with drinks and small dishes of meats and fruits in the sitting room. Likely, the chat she overheard was speculation about what she was going to reveal.

If they only knew. Elayne kept her hands in her lap. Dyelin continued her needlework, clicking her tongue to herself as pulled out a wrong stitch.

After a nearly insufferable wait, the dragons stopped sounding and Elayne felt Birgitte returning to the palace. Sending her with the group was the best way to know when it was returning. The timing today needed to be handled with absolute care. Elayne breathed in and out to still her nerves. There. Birgitte was surely in the palace now.

Elayne nodded to Captain Guybon. It was time to bring in the prisoners.

A group of Guards entered a moment later, leading three individuals. Sniffling Arymilla was still plump, despite her captivity. The older woman was pretty, or might have been, had she been wearing more than rags. Her large brown eyes were wide with fright. As if she thought Elayne might still execute her.

Elenia was far more in control. She, like the others, had been stripped or her fine dress and wore a tattered gown instead, but she had cleaned her face and dressed her gold hair in a neat bun. Elayne didn't starve or abuse her prisoners. Her enemies though they were, they weren't traitors to Andor.

Elenia regarded Elayne. That vulpine face of hers was thoughtful, calculating. Did she know where her husband's army had vanished to? That face felt like a hidden knife, pressed to Elayne's back. None of her scouts had been able to discover its location. Light! Problems atop problems.

The third woman was Naean Arawn, a slim, pale woman whose black hair had lost much of its luster during her captivity. This one had seemed broken before Elayne had taken her captive, and she kept back from the other two women.

The three were prodded to the foot of the throne's dais, then forced down on their knees. In the hallway, the Cairhienin nobles were returning noisily from the demonstration of the dragons. They would assume that they'd happened upon Elayne's display by accident.

"The Crown acknowledges Naean Arawn, Elenia Sarand and Arymilla Marne," Elayne said in a loud voice. That stilled the outside conversations — both those of the Andoran nobles in the sitting room and the Cairhienin outside in the hallway.

Of the three, only Elenia dared glance up. Elayne met the gaze with one as hard as stone, and the woman blushed before looking down again. Dyelin had put away her needlework and was watching closely.

"The Crown has given much thought to you three," Elayne pronounced. "Your misguided war against Trakand has left you destitute, and requests for ransom have been turned away by your heirs and scions. Your own Houses have abandoned you."

Her words rang in the grand throne room. The women before her bowed down further.

"This leaves the Crown with a conundrum," Elayne said. "You vex us with your troubling existences. Perhaps some queens would have left you to prison, but I find that reeks of indecision. You would drain my resources and make men whisper of ways to free you."

The hall fell silent save for the husky breathing of the prisoners.

"This Crown is not prone to indecisiveness," Elayne pronounced. "On this day, Houses Sarand, Marne and Arawn are stripped of title and estate, their lands forfeit to the Crown in retribution for their crimes."

Elenia gasped, looking up. Arymilla groaned, slouching down on the lion-centered rug. Naean did not respond. She seemed numb.

Murmuring rose immediately from the sitting room. This was worse than an execution. When nobles were executed, they were at least executed with their titles—in a way, an execution was an acknowledgment of a worthy foe. The title and lands passed on to the heir, and the House survived.

But this . . . this was something few queens would ever attempt. If

Elayne were seen as seizing land and money for the throne, the other noble would unite against her. She could guess the conversations in the othe room. Her power base was shaky. Her allies, who had stood with her befor the siege and faced the possibility of execution themselves, might very well now begin to question.

Best to move on quickly. Elayne gestured, and the Guards pulled the three prisoners to their feet and then led them to the side of the room Even defiant Elenia seemed stunned. In essence, this proclamation was a proclamation of death. As soon as possible, they would commit suicide rather than face their Houses.

Birgitte knew her cue. She entered, leading the group of Cairhienin nobles. They had been invited to a display of Andor's new weapon for "defending against the Shadow," and were a mixed band. The most important in the group was probably either Bertome Saighan or Lorstrum Aesnan.

Bertome was a short man with a kind of handsomeness, though Elayne was not fond of the way the Cairhienin shaved and powdered their foreheads. He wore a large knife at his belt—swords had been forbidden in the Queen's presence—and seemed disturbed by Elayne's treatment of the prisoners. As well he should have been. His cousin, Colavaere, had received a similar punishment from Rand, though that had not affected her entire House. She'd hanged herself rather than face the shame.

Her death had elevated Bertome, and while he'd been very careful not to make public waves against Rand's rule, Elayne's sources picked him out as one of the major private critics of Rand in Cairhien.

Lorstrum Aesnan was a quiet, thin man who walked with his hands behind his back, and tended to look down his nose. Like the others in the group, he wore dark clothing after the Cairhienin fashion, his coat striped with the colors of his House. He had risen to prominence following Rand's disappearance from Cairhien. Desperate times made for quick advances, and this man had not moved against Rand too quickly, yet also hadn't allied with him. That middle ground gave him power, and some whispered that he was considering seizing the throne.

Other than those two, the Cairhienin here were a smattering of other nobility. Ailil Riatin was not the head of her House, but since the disappearance of her brother—a disappearance that was looking more and more like death—she had assumed power. Riatin was a powerful House.

The slim, middle-aged woman was tall for a Cairhienin, and wore a dark blue dress slashed with colors, her dress shaped by hoops through the skirts. Her family had held the Sun Throne recently, if only for a relatively short time, and she was known to be a vocal supporter of Elayne.

Lord and Lady Osiellin, Lord and Lady Chuliandred, Lord and Lady Hamarashle, and Lord Mavabwin had gathered behind those of more importance. All were of middling power, and all—for one reason or another — were likely roadblocks to Elayne. They were a cluster of carefully done hair and powdered foreheads, wide dresses on the women, coats and trousers on the men, lace at the cuffs.

"My Lords and Ladies," Elayne said, naming each House in turn. "You have enjoyed Andor's demonstration?"

"Indeed we have, Your Majesty," lanky Lorstrum said, bowing his head graciously. "Those weapons are quite . . . intriguing."

He was obviously digging for information. Elayne blessed her tutors for their insistence that she understand the Game of Houses. "We all know that the Last Battle quickly approaches," Elayne said. "I thought that Cairhien should best be apprised of the strength of its greatest and closest ally. There will be times in the near future when we will need to rely upon one another."

"Indeed, Your Majesty," Lorstrum said.

"Your Majesty," Bertome said, stepping forward. The short man folded his arms. "I assure you, Cairhien exults in Andor's strength and stability."

Elayne eyed him. Was he offering her support? No, it seemed he was also digging, wondering if Elayne would declare herself a candidate for the Sun Throne. Her intentions should have been obvious by now—sending some of the Band to the city had been an obvious move, nearly too obvious for the subtle Cairhienin.

"Would that Cairhien had similar stability," Elayne said carefully.

Several of them nodded, no doubt hoping she intended to offer one of them the throne. If she threw Andor's support behind one of these, it would guarantee him or her victory. And it would give her a sympathizer as King or Queen.

Another might have made that ploy. Not her. That throne would be hers.

"The taking of a throne is a very delicate business," Lorstrum said. "It has proven . . . dangerous in the past. And so many are hesitant."

"Indeed," Elayne said. "I do not envy Cairhien the uncertainty that it has known these last months." And now the moment. Elayne took a deep breath. "Faced with the strength in Andor, one might think this would be an obvious time to have strong alliances. In fact, the throne recently acquired several estates of no small means. It occurs to me that these estates have no stewards."

All grew quiet. The whispers in the other room stopped. Had they heard correctly? Had Elayne offered estates in Andor to foreign nobility?

She hid her smile. Slowly, some of them got it. Lorstrum gave a sly smile, and he nodded to her ever so slightly.

"Cairhien and Andor have long shared fellowship," Elayne continued, as if the idea were only now occurring to her. "Our lords have married your ladies, our ladies your lords, and we share many common bonds of blood and affection. I should think the wisdom of a few Cairhiehin lords would be a great addition to my court, and perhaps educate me upon my heritage on my father's side."

She locked eyes with Lorstrum. Would he bite? His lands in Cairhien were small, and his influence great for a time—but that could tip. The estates she'd seized from the three prisoners were among the most enviable in her country.

He had to see it. If she took the throne of Cairhien by force, the people and the nobility would rebel against her. That was partially Lorstrum's fault, if her suspicions were true.

But what if she gave lands within Andor to some of the Cairhienin nobility? What if she created multiple bonds between their countries? What if she proved that she would not steal their titles—but would instead be willing to give some of them greater holdings? Would that be enough to prove that she didn't intend to steal the lands of the Cairhien nobility and give them to her own people? Would that ease their worries?

Lorstrum met her eyes. "I see great potential for alliances."

Bertome was nodding in appreciation. "I too, think this could be arranged." Neither would give up their lands, of course. They simply planne to gain estates in Andor. Wealthy ones.

The others shared glances. Lady Osiellin and Lord Mavabwin were the first two to figure it out. They spoke at the same time, offering alliances.

Elayne stilled her anxious heart, sitting back in the throne. "I have but one more estate to give," she said. "But I believe it could be divided.' She would give some to Ailil also, to curry favor and reward her support. Now for the second part of the ploy. "Lady Sarand," Elayne called toward the back of the room.

Elenia stepped forward, wearing her rags.

"The Crown is not without mercy," Elayne said. "Andor cannot forgive you for the pain and suffering you caused. But other countries have no such memories. Tell me, if the Crown were to provide you with an opportunity for new lands, would that opportunity be taken?"

"New lands, Your Majesty?" Elenia asked. "Of which lands do you speak?"

"A unification between Andor and Cairhien would offer many oppotunities," Elayne said. "Perhaps you have heard of the Crown's alliance with Ghealdan. Perhaps you have heard of the newly revitalized lands in the west of realm. This is a time of great opportunity. If I were to find you and your husband a place to form a new seat in Cairhien, would you take what is given?"

"I . . . would certainly consider it, Your Majesty," Elenia said, showing a glimmer of hope.

Elayne turned to the Cairhienin lords. "For any of this to take effect," she said, "I would need authority to speak for both Andor and Cairhien. How long, do you suspect, might it take for such a situation to be arranged?"

"Return me to my homeland through one of those strange portals," Lorstrum said, "and give me one hour."

"I need only a half an hour, Your Majesty," Bertome put in, glancing at Lorstrum.

"One hour," Elayne said, holding up her hands. "Prepare well."

"All right," Birgitte said as the door to the smaller chamber closed. "What in the name of the Dark One's bloody left hand just happened?"

Elayne sat down. It had worked! Or it seemed as if it would. The plush chair was a comfort after the stiffness of the Lion Throne. Dyelin took a seat to her right; Morgase sat to her left.

"What happened," Morgase said, "is that my daughter is brilliant."

Elayne smiled in gratitude. Birgitte, however, frowned. Elayne could feel the woman's confusion. She was the only one in the room with them; they had to wait one hour to see the true results of Elayne's plotting.

"All right," Birgitte said. "So you gave up a bunch of Andor's land to Cairhienin nobility."

"As a bribe," Dyelin said. She didn't seem as convinced as Morgase. "A clever maneuver, Your Majesty, but dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Birgitte said. "Blood and ashes, will someone please explain to the idiot over here why bribery is brilliant or clever? It's hardly Elayne who discovered it."

"This was more than a gift," Morgase said. Incongruously, she took to pouring tea for those in the room. Elayne couldn't ever recall seeing her Mother pour tea before. "The major obstacle blocking Elayne from Cairhien was that she would be viewed as a conqueror."

"Yes, so?" Birgitte asked.

"So she made bonds between the two nations," Dyelin said, accepting

a cup of Tremalking black from Morgase. "By giving that group some land in Andor, she shows that she's not going to ignore or impoverish the Cairhienin nobility."

"Beyond that," Morgase said, "she makes herself less of an oddity. If she'd taken the throne, she'd have gained its lands—and become the only person to have holdings in both countries. Now she'll be one of many."

"But it's dangerous," Dyelin repeated. "Lorstrum didn't give in because of the bribe."

"He didn't?" Birgitte said, frowning. "But—"

"She's right," Elayne said, sipping her tea. "He gave in because he saw that I was handing him the chance for both thrones."

The room fell silent.

"Bloody ashes," Birgitte finally swore.

Dyelin nodded. "You have created enemies who could overthrow you, Elayne. If something were to happen to you, there is a good chance that either Lorstrum or Bertome could make a play for both countries."

"I'm counting on it," Elayne said. "They're the two most powerful noblemen in Cairhien right now, particularly since Dobraine hasn't returned from wherever Rand took him. With them actively supporting the idea of a common monarch, we actually have a chance at this."

"They'll only be supporting you because they see a chance of taking both thrones for themselves!" Dyelin said.

"Better to choose your enemies than remain in ignorance," Elayne said. "I've essentially limited my competition. They saw the dragons, and those made them envious. Then I offered them the chance not only to gain access to those weapons, but to double their wealth. And on top of that, I gave them the seed of possibility that one day, they might be named king."

"So they'll try to kill you," Birgitte said flatly.

"Perhaps," Elayne said. "Or, perhaps they'll try to undermine me. But not for many years—a decade, I'd guess. To strike now would be to risk the nations dividing again. No, first they'll establish themselves and enjoy their wealth. Only once they're certain that things are secure—and that I've grown lax—will they move. Fortunately, there are two of them, and that will let me play them against one another. And for now, we have gained two staunch allies—men who keenly want my bid for the Sun Throne to succeed. They will hand the crown right to me."

"And the prisoners?" Dyelin said. "Elenia and the other two? Do you really intend to find them lands?"

"Yes," Elayne said. "What I've done for them is actually very kind. The Crown will assume their debts, then give them a fresh start in Cairhien, 11

this works. It will be good to have Andoran nobility taking lands there though I will ptobably have to give them land out of my own Cairhenin

"You'll leave youtself surrounded by enemies," Birgitte said, shaking her head.

"As usual," Elayne said. "Fortunately, I have you to watch over me,

She smiled at the Warder, bur knew that Birgitte could sense her nervousness. This was going to be a long hour's wait.

CHAPTER

51

A Testing

The hair on Min's neck rose as she held the crystal sword. Callandor. She'd heard stories of this weapon since she was a child, wild tales of distant Tear and the strange Sword That Is Not a Sword. Now she held it in her own fingers.

It was lighter than she'd expected. Its crystalline length caught and played with the lamplight. It seemed to shimmer too much, the light inside changing even when she didn't move. The crystal was smooth, but warm. It almost felt alive.

Rand stood in front of her, looking down at the weapon. They were in their rooms inside the Stone of Tear, accompanied by Cadsuane, Narishma, Merise, Naeff and two Maidens.

Rand reached out, touching the weapon. She glanced at him, and a viewing sprang to life above him. A glowing sword, Callandor; being gripped in a black hand. She gasped.

"What did you see?" Rand asked softly.

"Callandor, held in a fist. The hand looks to be made of onyx."

"Any idea what it means?"

She shook her head.

"We should hide it away again," Cadsuane said. She wore brown and green today, earthy colors lightened by her golden hair ornaments. She stood with arms folded, back straight. "Phaw! Getting the object out now is foolhardy, boy."

"Your objection is noted," Rand said. He took the sa'angreal from Min, then slid it over his shoulder into a sheath on his back. At his side, he once again wore the ancient sword with the red-and-gold dragons painted on the sheath. He'd said before that he considered that to be a kind of symbol. It represented the past to him, and Callandor—somehow—represented the future.

"Rand," Min said, taking his arm. "My research . . . remember, Callandor seems to have a deeper flaw than we've discovered. This viewing only reinforces what I said before. I worry it may be used against you."

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"I suspect that it will," Rand said. "Everything else in this world has been used against me. Narishma, a gateway, please. We've kept the Borderlanders waiting long enough."

The Asha'man nodded, bells in his hair tinkling.

Rand turned to Naeff "Naeff, there has still been no word from the Black Tower?"

"No, my Lord," the tall Asha'man said.

"I have been unable to Travel there," Rand said. "That implies great trouble, worse than I had feared. Use this weave. It can disguise you. Travel to a place a day's ride outside, and ride in, hiding yourself. See what you can discover. Help if you can, and when you find Logain and those loyal to him, deliver him a message for me."

"What message, my Lord?"

Rand looked distant. "Tell them that I was wrong. Tell them that we're not weapons. We're men. Perhaps it will help. Take care. This could be dangerous. Bring me word. I will need to fix things there, but I could easily stumble into a trap more dangerous than any I've avoided so far. Problems ... so many problems that need fixing. And only one of me. Go in my place, Naeff, for now. I need information."

"I. . . Yes, my Lord." He seemed confused, but he ducked out of the room to obey.

Rand took a deep breath, then rubbed the stump of his left arm. "Let's go."

"Are you certain you don't want to bring more people?" Min asked.

"Yes," Rand said. "Cadsuane, be ready to open a gateway and get us out if needed."

"We're going into Far Madding, boy," Cadsuane said. "Surely you haven't forgotten that we are prevented from touching the Source while there."

Rand smiled. "And you're wearing a full paralis-net in your hair, which includes a Well. I'm certain you keep it full, and that should be enough to create a single gateway."

Cadsuane's face grew expressionless. "I've never heard of a paralis-net"

"Cadsuane Sedai," Rand said softly. "Your net has a few ornaments I don't recognize—I suspect it is a Breaking-era creation. But I was there when the first ones were designed, and I wore the original male version."

The room fell still.

"Well, boy," Cadsuane finally said. "You—"

"Are you ever going to give up that affectation, Cadsuane Sedai?" Rand asked. "Calling me boy? I no longer mind, though it does feel odd. I was four hundred years old on the day I died during the Age of Legends. I suspect that would make you my junior by several decades at the least. I show you respect. Perhaps it would be appropriate for you to return it. If you wish, you may call me Rand Sedai. I am, so far as I know, the only male Aes Sedai still alive who was properly raised but who never turned to the Shadow."

Cadsuane paled visibly.

Rand's smile turned kindly. "You wished to come in and dance with the Dragon Reborn, Cadsuane. I am what I need to be. Be comforted— you face the Forsaken, but have one as ancient as they at your side." He turned away from her, eyes growing distant. "Now, if only great age really were an indication of great wisdom. As easy to wish that the Dark One would simply let us be."

He took Min by the arm, and together they walked through Narishma's gateway. Beyond, a small cluster of Maidens waited inside a wooded clearing, guarding a group of horses. Min climbed into her saddle, noting how reserved Cadsuane looked. As well she should. When Rand spoke like that, it troubled Min more than she wanted to admit.

They rode out of the small thicket, down toward Far Madding, an impressive city set on an island in the middle of a lake. A large army—flying hundreds of banners—spread out around the lake.

"It's always been a city of importance, you know," Rand said from beside Min, his eyes distant. "The Guardians are newer, but the city was here long ago. Aren Deshar, Aren Mador, Far Madding. Always a thorn in our side, Aren Deshar was. The enclave of the Incastar—those afraid of progress, afraid of wonder. Turns out they had a right to be afraid. How I wish I had listened to Gilgame . . ."

"Rand?" Min said softly.

It drew him out of his reverie. "Yes?"

"Is it really as you said. Are you four centuries old?"

"I'm nearly four and a half, I suppose. Do my years in this Age add to those I had before?" He looked at her. "You're worried, aren't you? That I'm no longer me, the man you knew, the foolish sheepherder?"

"You've got all of this in your mind, so much past!'

"Memories, only," Rand said.

"But you're him, too. You talk like you were the one who tried to seal the Bore. Like you knew the Forsaken personally."

Rand rode in silence for a time. "I suppose I am him. But Min, what you're missing is this: I may be him now, but he was always me as well. I was always him. I'm not going to change just because I remember—I was the same. I'm me. And I always have been me."

"Lews Therin was mad."

"At the end," Rand said. "And yes, he made mistakes. / made mistakes. I grew arrogant, desperate. But there's a difference this time. A great one."

"What difference?"

He smiled. "This time, I was raised better."

Min found herself smiling as well.

"You know me, Min. Well, I promise you, I feel more like myself now than I have in months. I feel more like myself than I ever did as Lews Therin, if that makes any kind of sense. It's because of Tam, because of the people around me. You, Perrin, Nynaeve, Mat, Aviendha, Elayne, Moiraine. He tried very hard to break me. I think if I'd been the same as I was so long ago, he would have succeeded."

They rode across the meadow surrounding Far Madding. As everywhere else, the green here had departed, leaving yellow and brown. It was getting worse and worse.

Pretend that it slumbers, Min told herself. The land isn't dead. It's waiting through the winter. A winter of storms and war.

Narishma hissed softly, riding behind. Min glanced at him. The Asha'man's face had gone hard. Apparently, they'd passed inside the bubble of the Guardian's influence. Rand gave no indication he'd noticed. He didn't seem to be having the trouble with sickness when he channeled any longer, which relieved her. Or was he just covering it?

She turned her mind to the task at hand. The Borderlander armies had never explained why they'd defied custom and logic by marching south to find Rand. They were needed desperately. Rand's intervention at Maradon had saved what was left of the city, but if that sort of thing was happening all across the border with the Blight. . . .

Twenty soldiers—lances upheld with narrow, blood-red banners flapping from them like streamers—intercepted Rand's group long before it reached the army. Rand stopped and let them approach.

"Rand al'Thor," one of the men announced. "We are representatives of the Unity of the Border. We will provide escort."

Rand nodded, and the procession started forward again, this time with guards.

"They didn't call you Lord Dragon," Min whispered to Rand. He nod ded thoughtfully. Perhaps the Borderlanders did not believe he was th Dragon Reborn.

"Do not be arrogant here, Rand al'Thor," Cadsuane said, trotting up to ride beside him. "But do not back down. Most Borderlanders will respond to strength when they see it."

So. Cadsuane called Rand by name, instead of naming him "boy." It seemed a victory, and it made Min smile.

"I will have that gateway ready," Cadsuane continued more softly. "But it will be very small. The Well will only give me enough to make one we'd have to crawl through. We shouldn't need it. These people will fight for you. They will want to fight for you. Only bumbling foolishness could keep them from it."

"There is more to it than that, Cadsuane Sedai," Rand replied, his voice hushed. "Something drove them southward. This is a challenge, one I am uncertain how to meet. But your advice is appreciated."

Cadsuane nodded. Eventually, Min picked out a line of people waiting at the forefront of the army. There were thousands of soldiers behind, standing in rows. Saldaeans, with their bowed legs. Shienarans in topknots. Arafellin, each soldier with two swords strapped to his back. Kandori, with forked beards.

The group at the head stood on the ground, without mounts. They wore fine clothing. Two women and two men, all with what were obviously Aes Sedai at their sides, some with an attendant or two behind.

"The one at the front is Queen Ethenielle," Cadsuane whispered. "She is a stern woman, but fair. She is known for meddling in the affairs of the southern nations, and I suspect the others will let her take the lead today. The handsome man beside her is Paitar Nachiman, King of Arafel."

"Handsome?" Min asked, inspecting the balding older Arafellin. ".Him?"

"It depends on one's perspective, child," Cadsuane said without missing a beat. "He was once known widely for his face, and he is still known for his sword. Beside him is King Easar Togita of Shienar."

"So sad," Rand said softly. "Who did he lose?"

Min frowned. Easar didn't look particularly sad to her. Solemn, perhaps.

"He's a Borderlander," Cadsuane said. "He's fought the Trollocs all his life; I'd suspect he's lost many a person dear to him. His wife did die some

years back. He's said to have the soul of a poet, but he is an austere man. If you could earn his respect, it would mean much."

"The last one is Tenobia, then," Rand said, rubbing his chin. "Still wish I had Bashere with us." Bashere had said that his face might fuel Tenobia's anger, and Rand had listened to reason on that count.

"Tenobia," Cadsuane said, "is a wildfire. Young, impertinent and reckless. Don't let her draw you into an argument."

Rand nodded. "Min?"

"Tenobia has a spear hovering over her head," Min said. "Bloody, but shining in the light. Ethenielle will soon be wed—I see that by white doves. She plans to do something dangerous today, so be careful. The other two have various swords, shields and arrows hovering about them. Both will fight soon."

"In the Last Battle?" Rand asked.

"I don't know," she admitted. "It could be here, today."

Their escort led them up to the four monarchs. Rand slid out of the saddle, patting Tai'daishar on the neck as the horse snorted. Min moved to dismount, as did Narishma, but Rand held up a hand to stop them.

"Blasted fool," Cadsuane muttered from beside Min, low enough that nobody else could hear. "He asks me to be ready to get him out, then leaves us?"

"He likely meant that you should get me away," Min said softly. "Knowing him, he's more worried about me than himself." She paused. "Blasted fool."

Cadsuane shot her a glance, then smiled slightly before turning back to watch Rand.

He stepped up to the four monarchs and stopped, raising his arms to the sides, as if to ask, "What is it you wish of me?"

Ethenielle took the lead, as Cadsuane had guessed. She was a plump woman, her dark hair pulled away from her face and tied at the back. She strode up to Rand, a man walking beside her and carrying a sheathed sword in his arm, hilt pointed toward her.

Nearby, the Maidens rustled. They stepped up beside Rand. As usual, they assumed that commands to stay back didn't include them.

Ethenielle raised a hand and slapped Rand across the face.

Narishma cursed. The Maidens raised their veils and drew spears. Min nudged her horse forward, breaking through the line of guards.

"Stop!" Rand said, raising his hand. He turned, looking at the Maidens.

Min stilled her mare, patting her on the neck. She was skittish, as might be expected. The Maidens reluctantly backed down, though Cadsuane did take the opportunity to move her horse up beside Min's.

Rand turned back to Ethenielle and rubbed his face. "I hope that's some traditional Kandori greeting, Your Majesty."

She raised an eyebrow, then gestured to the side, and King Easar of Shienar stepped up to Rand. The man backhanded Rand across the mouth the force of it causing Rand to stumble.

Rand righted himself, again waving the Maidens down. He met Easar's eyes. A trickle of blood ran down Rand's chin. The Shienaran studied him for a moment, then nodded and stepped back.

Tenobia came next. She slapped Rand with her left hand, a strong blow that cracked in the air. Min felt a flash of pain from Rand. Tenobia shook her hand afterward.

King Paitar came last. The aging Arafellin with only a fringe of hair walked with his hands behind his back, contemplative. He stepped up to Rand and reached over and dabbed at the blood on Rand's cheek. Then he backhanded Rand with a blow that sent him to his knees, a spray of blood flying from his mouth.

Min couldn't sit by any longer. "Rand!" she said, jumping down from her saddle and running to him. She reached his side, steadying him while glaring at the monarchs. "How dare you! He came to you peacefully."

"Peacefully?" Paitar said. "No, young woman, he did not come to this world in peace. He has consumed the land with terror, chaos and destruction."

"As the prophecies said that he would," Cadsuane said, walking up as Min helped Rand back to his feet. "You lay before him the burdens of an entire Age. You cannot hire a man to rebuild your house, then reproach him when he must knock down a wall to do the job."

"That presumes that he is the Dragon Reborn," Tenobia said, folding her arms. "We—"

She cut off as Rand stood, then carefully slid Callandor from its sheath, glittering blade rasping. He held it forth. "Do you deny this, Queen Tenobia, Shield of the North and Sword of the Blightborder, High Seat of House Kazadi? Will you look upon this weapon and call me a false Dragon?"

That quieted her. To the side, Easar nodded. Behind them, ranks of silent troops watched with lances, pikes and shields held high. As if in salute. Or as if in preparation to attack. Min looked up, and could faintly make out people lining the walls of Far Madding to watch.

"Let us proceed," Easar said. "Ethenielle?"

"Very well," the woman said. "I will say this, Rand al'Thor. Even if you do prove to be the Dragon Reborn, you have much to answer for."

"You may take your price from my skin, Ethenielle," Rand said softly, sliding Callandor back into its sheath. "But only once the Dark One has had his day with me."

"Rand al'Thor," Paitar said. "I have a question for you. How you answer will determine the outcome of this day."

"What kind of question?" Cadsuane demanded.

"Cadsuane, please," Rand said, holding up his hand. "Lord Paitar, I see it in your eyes. You know that I am the Dragon Reborn. Is this question necessary?"

"It is vital, Lord al'Thor," Paitar replied. "It drove us here, though my allies did not know it from the start. I have always believed you to be the Dragon Reborn. That made my quest here even more vital."

Min frowned. The aging soldier reached down to his sword hilt, as if ready to draw. The Maidens grew more alert. With a start, Min realized Paitar was still standing close to Rand. Too close.

He could have that sword out and swinging for Rand's neck in an eyeblink, she realized. Paitar placed himself there to be ready to strike.

Rand didn't break his gaze from the monarch. "Ask your question."

"How did Tellindal Tirraso die?"

"Who?" Min asked, looking at Cadsuane. The Aes Sedai shook her head, confused.

"How do you know that name?" Rand demanded.

"Answer the question," Easar said, hand on his hilt, body tense. Around them, ranks of men prepared themselves.

"She was a clerk," Rand said. "During the Age of Legends. Demandred, when he came for me after founding the Eighty and One . . . She fell in the fighting, lightning from the sky . . . Her blood on my hands . . . How do you know that name!"

Ethenielle looked to Easar, then to Tenobia, then finally to Paitar. He nodded, then closed his eyes, letting out a sigh that sounded relieved. He took his hand from his sword.

"Rand al'Thor," Ethenielle said, "Dragon Reborn. Would you kindly sit down and speak with us? We will answer your questions."

Why have I never heard of this so-called prophecy?" Cadsuane asked. "Its nature required secrecy," King Paitar said. They all sat on cushions

in a large tent in the middle of the Borderlander army. It made Cadsuane' shoulders itch, being surrounded like this, but the fool boy—he would al-ways be a fool boy, no matter how old he was—looked perfectly at peace

Thirteen Aes Sedai waited outside the tent, which wasn't large enough for them all. Thirteen. That hadn't made al'Thor blink. What man who could channel would sit amid thirteen Aes Sedai and not sweat?

He's changed, Cadsuane told herself. You're just going to have to accept that Not that he didn't need her anymore. Men like him grew overly confident A few little successes, and he'd trip over his own feet and land in some predicament.

But. . . well, she was proud of him. Grudgingly proud. A little.

"It was given by an Aes Sedai of my own family line," Paitar continued. The square-faced man sipped a small cup of tea. "My ancestor, Reo Myer-shi, was the only one who heard it. He ordered the words preserved, passed from monarch to monarch, for this day."

"Speak them to me," Rand said. "Please."

"I see him before you!" Paitar quoted. "Him, the one who lives many lives, the one who gives deaths, the one who raises mountains. He will break what he must break, but first he stands here, before our king. You will bloody him! Measure his restraint. He speaks! How was the fallen slain? Tellindal Tirraso, murdered by his hand, the darkness that came the day after the light. You must ask, and you must know your fate. If he cannot answer . . ."

He trailed off, falling silent.

"What?" Min asked.

"If he cannot answer," Paitar said, "then you will be lost. You will bring his end swiftly, so that the final days may have their storm. So that Light may not be consumed by he who was to have preserved it. I see him. And I weep."

"You came to murder him, then," Cadsuane said.

"To test him," Tenobia said. "Or so we decided, once Paitar told us of the prophecy."

"You don't know how close you came to doom," Rand said softly. "If I had come to you but a short time earlier, I'd have returned those slaps with balefire."

"Inside the Guardian?" Tenobia sniffed disdainfully.

"The Guardian blocks the One Power," Rand whispered. "The One Power only."

What does he mean by that? Cadsuane thought, frowning.

"We knew well the risk," Ethenielle said proudly. "I demanded the right to slap you first. Our armies had orders to attack if we fell."

"My family has analyzed the words of the prophecy a hundred times over," Paitar said. "The meaning seemed clear. It was our task to test the Dragon Reborn. To see if he could be trusted to go to the Last Battle."

"Only a month earlier," Rand said. "I wouldn't have had the memories to answer you. This was a foolish gambit. If you had killed me, then all would have been lost."

"A gamble," Paitar said evenly. "Perhaps another would have risen in your stead."

"No," Rand said. "This prophecy was like the others. A declaration of what might happen, not advice."

"I see it differently, Rand al'Thor," Paitar said. "And the others agreed with me."

"It should be noted," Ethenielle said, "that I didn't come south because of this prophecy. My goal was to see if I could bring some sense to the world. And then . . ." She grimaced.

"What?" Cadsuane asked, finally sipping her tea. It tasted good, as it usually did near al'Thor these days.

"The storms," Tenobia said. "The snow stopped us. And then, finding you proved more difficult than we'd assumed. These gateways. Can you teach them to our Aes Sedai?"

"I will have your Aes Sedai taught in return for a promise," Rand said. "You will swear to me. I have need of you."

"We are sovereigns," Tenobia snapped. "I'm not going to bow to you as quickly as my uncle did. We have to speak about that, by the way."

"Our oaths are to the lands we protect," Easar said.

"As you wish," Rand said, rising. "I once gave you an ultimatum. I phrased it poorly, and I regret that, but I remain your only path to the Last Battle. Without me, you will remain here, hundreds of leagues from those lands you swore to protect." He nodded to each of them, then helped Min to her feet. "Tomorrow, I meet with the monarchs of the world. After that, I am going to go to Shayol Ghul and break the remaining seals on the Dark One's prison. Good day."

Cadsuane didn't rise. She sat, sipping her tea. The four seemed astounded. Well, the boy certainly had picked up an understanding of the dramatic.

"Wait!" Paitar finally sputtered, rising. "You're going to do what?"

Rand turned. "I'm going to shatter the seals, Lord Paitar. I'm going to 'break what he must break' as your own prophecy says I must. You cannot stop me, not when those words prove what I will do. Earlier, I stepped in to prevent Maradon from falling. It was near to it, Tenobia. The walls are

shattered, your troops bloodied. With help, I was able to save it. Barely Your countries need you. And so, you have two choices. Swear to me, or sit here and let everyone else fight in your place."

Cadsuane sipped her tea. That was going a little too far.

"I'll leave you to discuss my offer," Rand said. "I can spare one hour-though, before you start your deliberation, could you send for someone on my behalf? There is a man in your army named Hurin. I would like to apologize to him."

They still looked stunned. Cadsuane rose to go speak with the sisters waiting outside; she knew a few of them, and needed to feel out the others She didn't worry about what the Borderlanders would decide. Al'Thor had them. Another army beneath his banner. I didn't think he'd manage this one.

One more day and it all began. Light, but she hoped that they were ready.

CHAPTER
52

Boots

Elayne settled herself in Glimmer's saddle. The mare was one of the prizes of the royal stable; she was of fine Saldaean stock with a brilliant white mane and coat. The saddle itself was rich, the leather trimmed with wine-red and gold. It was the sort of saddle you used when parading.

Birgitte rode Rising, a tall dun gelding, also one of the fastest in the royal stables. The Warder had chosen both horses. She expected to have to run.

Birgitte wore one of Elayne's foxhead copies, though it had a different shape, a thin silver disc with a rose on the front. Elayne carried another wrapped in cloth inside her pocket.

She'd tried making another this morning, but it had melted, nearly setting her dresser on fire. She was having a great deal of difficulty without the original to study. Her dreams of arming all of her personal Guards with medallions was looking less and less possible, unless she somehow managed to persuade Mat to give her the original again.

Her honor guard fell into mounted ranks around her and Birgitte in the Queen's Plaza. She was bringing only a hundred soldiers—seventy-five Guardsmen and an inner ring of twenty-five Guardswomen. It was a tiny force, but she'd have gone without those hundred if she'd been able to get away with it. She couldn't afford to be seen as a conqueror.

"I don't like this," Birgitte said.

"You don't like anything, lately," Elayne said. "I swear, you're becoming more irritable by the day."

"It's because you're becoming more foolhardy by the day."

"Oh, come now. This is hardly the most foolhardy thing I've done."

"Only because you've set a very high benchmark for yourself, Elayne "

"It will be fine," Elayne said, glancing southward.

"Why do you keep looking in that direction?"

"Rand," Elayne said, feeling that warmth again, pulsing from the knot of emotions in her mind. "He's getting ready for something. He feels troubled. And peaceful at the same time." Light, but that man could be confusing.

The meeting would happen in one day, if his original deadline still held. Egwene was right; breaking the seals would be foolish. But Rand would see reason.

Alise rode up to her, accompanied by three Kinswomen. Sarasia was a plump woman with a grandmotherly air; dark-skinned Kema kept her black hair in three long braids, and prim Nashia with a youthful face wore a baggy dress.

The four took up positions beside Elayne. Only two of them were strong enough for a gateway—many of the Kin were weaker than most Aes Sedai. But that would be enough, assuming Elayne had trouble embracing the Source.

"Can you do something to prevent archers from hitting her?" Birgitte asked Alise. "Some kind of weave?"

Alise cocked her head thoughtfully. "I know of one that might help," she said, "but I've never tried it."

Another Kinswoman wove a gateway up ahead. It opened to a span of rough, brown-grassed land outside of Cairhien. A much larger army waited there, wearing the cuirasses and bell-shaped helmets of Cairhienin troops. The officers were easy to spot with their dark clothing, in the colors of the Houses they served. They wore con rising over their backs.

Tall, narrow-faced Lorstrum sat his mount at the front of his army, which wore dark green with crimson slashes; Bertome was on the other side. Their forces looked to be about the same size. Five thousand each. The other four Houses had fielded smaller armies.

"If they wanted to take you captive," Birgitte said grimly, "you're handing them the chance."

"There's no way to do this and remain safe, not unless I want to hide in my palace and send my troops in. That would only lead to rebellion in Cairhien and potential collapse in Andor." She glanced at the Warder. "I'm

Queen now, Birgitte. You're not going to be able to keep me from danger, no more than you could keep a lone soldier safe on the battlefield."

Birgitte nodded. "Stay close to me and Guybon."

Guybon approached, on a large dappled gelding. With Birgitte on one side of her and Guybon on the other—and with both of their horses taller than Elayne's—a would-be assassin would have great difficulty picking her off without first hitting her friends.

So it would be for the rest of her life. She nudged Glimmer into motion, and her troop made its way through the gateway and onto Cairhienin soil. The noblemen and noblewomen ahead bowed or curtsied from horseback, and those oblations were deeper this time than they had been when meeting Elayne in her throne room. The show had begun.

The city was just ahead, walls still blackened from fires during the fight with the Shaido. Elayne could sense Birgitte's tension as the gateway vanished behind. The Kin around Elayne embraced the source, and Alise wove an unfamiliar weave, placing it in the air around the inner ring of troops. It made a small—but swift—wind spinning in the air.

Birgitte's anxiety was contagious, and Elayne found herself holding her reins in a tight grip as Glimmer moved forward. The air was drier here in Cairhien, with a faint dusty scent to it. The sky was overcast.

The Cairhienin troops formed around her small group of Andorans in white and red. Most of the Cairhienin forces were foot, though there was some heavy cavalry, horses in shiny barding and men carrying lances pointed high into the air. All marched in perfect lines, protecting Elayne. Or keeping her captive.

Lorstrum moved his bay stallion closer to Elayne's outer ranks. Guybon glanced at her, and she nodded, so the captain allowed him to approach.

"The city is nervous, Your Majesty," Lorstrum said. Birgitte was still careful to keep her mount between his and Elayne's. "There are . . . unfortunate rumors surrounding your ascension."

Rumors you probably initiated, Elayne thought, before you decided to support me instead. "Surely they won't rise against your troops?"

"I hope they will not." He eyed her from under his flat cap of forest green. He wore a black coat that went down to his knees and slashes of color across it all the way down, to denote his House. It was the type of clothing he'd wear if going to a ball. That projected a sense of confidence.

His force wasn't seizing the city, it was escorting the new queen with an honorary parade. "It is unlikely that there will be armed resistance. But I wanted to warn you."

Lorstrum nodded to her with respect. He knew she was manipulating him, but he also accepted that manipulation. She would have to keep a careful watch on him in the years to come.

Cairhien was such a boxish city, all straight lines and fortified towers. Though some of its architecture was beautiful, there was no comparing the place to Caemlyn or Tar Valon. They rode directly in through the northern gates, the River Alguenya to their right.

Crowds waited inside. Lorstrum and the others had done their work well. There were cheers, probably started by carefully placed courtiers. As Elayne entered the city, the cheers grew louder. That surprised her. She had expected hostility. And yes, there was some of that—the occasional thrown piece of refuse, hurled from the back of the crowd. She caught a jeer here and there. But most seemed pleased.

As she rode down that broad passageway, lined with the rectangular buildings Cairhienin favored, she realized that perhaps these people had been waiting for an event like this. Talking of it, spreading tales. Some of those tales had been hostile, and those were what Norry had reported. But they now seemed to her more a sign of worry than hostility. Cairhien had been too long without a monarch, their king dead by unknown hands, the Lord Dragon seemingly abandoning them.

Her confidence grew. Cairhien was a wounded city. The burned and broken remnants of the Foregate outside. Cobbles had been torn up to be thrown from the walls. The city had never fully recovered from the Aiel War, and the unfinished Topless Towers—symmetrical in design, but woefully forlorn in appearance—were a lofty declaration of that fact.

That bloody Game of Houses was nearly as bad a scourge. Could she change that? The people around her sounded hopeful, as if they knew what a twisted mess their nation had become. One could sooner take away an Aiel's spears than cut the craftiness out of the Cairhienin, but perhaps she could teach them a greater loyalty to country and throne. So long as they had a throne worth that loyalty.

The Sun Palace stood at the exact center of the city. Like the rest of the city, it was square and angular, but here the architecture gave a sense or imposing strength. It was a grand building, despite the broken wing where the attempt on Rand's life had taken place.

More nobles waited here, standing on covered steps or in front of ornate carriages. Women in formal gowns with wide hoops, the men in neat coats of dark colors, caps on the heads. Many looked skeptical, and some amazed.

Elayne shot Birgitte a satisfied smile. "It's working. Nobody expected me to ride to the palace escorted by a Cairhienin army."

Birgitte said nothing. She was still tense—and probably would be until Elayne returned to Caemlyn.

Two women stood at the foot of the steps, one a pretty woman with bells in her hair, the other with curly hair and a face that did not seem Aes Sedai, for all the fact that she had been one for years. That was Sashalle Anderly, and the other woman—who did have an ageless face—was Samitsu Tamagowa. From what Elayne's sources had been able to determine, these two were as close to "rulers" as the city had in Rand's absence. She'd corresponded with both, and found Sashalle remarkably keen at understanding the Cairhienin way of thinking. She'd offered Elayne the city, but had implied that she understood that being offered it and taking it were two different things.

Sashalle stepped forward. "Your Majesty," she said formally, "let it be known that the Lord Dragon gives you all rights and claim to this land. All formal control he had over the land is ceded to you, and the position of steward over the nation is dissolved. May you rule in wisdom and peace."

Elayne nodded to her regally from horseback, but inside she seethed. She'd said she didn't mind Rand's help taking this throne, but it wasn't like she wanted her nose rubbed in it. Still, Sashalle seemed to take her position seriously, though from what Elayne had discovered, that position was in large measure self-created.

Elayne and her procession dismounted. Had Rand thought that it would be as easy as that to give her the throne? He'd stayed in Cairhien long enough to know how they schemed. One Aes Sedai making a proclamation would never have been enough. But having powerful nobles support her directly should be enough to do it.

Their procession made its way up the steps. They entered, and each of those supporting her brought a smaller honor guard of fifty. Elayne brought her entire force; it was crowded, but she didn't intend to leave any behind.

The inner hallways were straight, with peaked ceilings and golden trim. The symbol of the Rising Sun emblazoned each door. There were alcoves for riches to be displayed, but many were empty. The Aiel had taken their fifth from this palace.

Upon reaching the entrance to the Grand Hall of the Sun, Elayne's Andoran Guardsmen and Guardswomen arranged themselves lining the outer hallway. Elayne took a deep breath, then strode into the throne room with a group of ten. Blue-streaked marble columns rose to the ceiling at the sides of the room, and the Sun Throne sat on its blue marble dais at the back of the large hall.

The seat was of gilded wood, but was surprisingly unassuming. Perhaps

that was why Laman had decided to build himself a new throne, using Avendoraldera itself as a material. Elayne walked up to the dais, then turned as the Cairhienin nobility entered, her supporters first, then the others, ranked according to the complicated dictates of Does Dae'mar. Those rankings could change by the day, if not the hour.

Birgitte eyed each one who entered, but the Cairhienin were models of propriety. None would show anything like Ellorien's audacity in Andor. She was a patriot, if one who frustratingly continued to disagree with Elayne. In Cairhien, one did not do such things.

Once the crowd had stilled, Elayne took a deep breath. She'd considered a speech, but her mother had taught her that sometimes, decisive action made for the best speech. Elayne moved to sit down in the throne.

Birgitte caught her arm.

Elayne glanced at her questioningly, but the Warder was eyeing the throne. "Wait a moment," she said, bending down.

The nobles began murmuring one to another, and Lorstrum stepped up to Elayne. "Your Majesty?"

"Birgitte," Elayne said, blushing, "is this really necessary?"

Birgitte ignored her, prodding at the seat's cushion. Light! Was the Warder determined to embarrass her in every possible situation? Surely the—

"Aha!" Birgitte said, yanking something from the pillowed cushion.

Elayne started, the stepped closer, Lorstrum and Bertome at her side. Birgitte was holding up a small needle, tipped black. "Hidden in the cushion."

Elayne paled.

"It was the only place they knew you'd be, Elayne," Birgitte said softly. She knelt down and began prodding for more traps.

Lorstrum had grown flushed. "I will find who did this, Your Majesty," he said in a low voice. A dangerous voice. "They will know my wrath."

"Not if they know mine first," stocky Bertome said, looking over the needle.

"Obviously an assassination attempt intended for the Lord Dragon, Your Majesty," Lorstrum said in a louder voice, for the benefit of the audience. "None would dare try to kill you, our beloved sister from Andor."

"That is good to hear," Elayne said, eyeing him. That expression of hers said to everyone in the room that she would put up with this ruse, intended to save his face. As her strongest supporter, the shame of an assassination attempt fell on him.

Agreeing to let him save face would cost him. He lowered his eyes briefly in understanding. Light, she hated this game. But she would play it. And she would play it well.

"Is it safe?" she asked Birgitte.

The Warder rubbed her chin. "One way to find out," she said, then plopped herself down in the throne with an unceremonious amount of force.

Not a few of the nobles in the hall gasped, and Lorstrum grew more pale.

"Not very comfortable," Birgitte said, leaning to the side, then pushing her back up against the wood. "I would have expected a monarch's throne to be more cushioned, what with your delicate backside and all."

"Birgitte!" Elayne hissed, feeling her face grow red again. "You can't sit in the Sun Throne!"

"I'm your bodyguard," Birgitte said. "I can taste your food if I want, I can walk through doorways before you, and I can bloody sit in your chair if I think it will protect you." She grinned. "Besides," she added in a lower voice, "I always wondered what one of these felt like." The Warder stood up, still wary, but also satisfied.

Elayne turned and faced the nobility of Cairhien. "You have waited long for this," she said. "Some of you are dissatisfied, but remember that half of my blood is Cairhienin. This alliance will make both of our nations great. I do not demand your trust, but I do demand your obedience." She hesitated, then added, "Remember again, this is as the Dragon Reborn wishes it to be."

She saw that they understood. Rand had conquered this city once, though it had been to liberate it from the Shaido. They would be wise not to tempt him to come back and conquer it again. A queen used the tools that she had at hand. She had taken Andor on her own; she would let Rand help her with Cairhien.

She sat down. Such a simple thing, but the implications would be far-reaching indeed. "Gather your individual forces and House guards," she commanded to the collected nobles. "You will be marching, with the forces of Andor, through gateways to a place known as the Field of Merrilor. We will be meeting the Dragon Reborn."

The nobles seemed surprised. She would come in, take the throne, then command their armies from the city the same day? She smiled. Best to act quickly and decisively; it would build precedent for obeying her. And would begin to ready them for the Last Battle.

"Also," she announced as they began to whisper, "I want you to gather every man in this realm who can hold a sword and conscript them into the

Queen's army. There won't be much time for training, but every man will be needed in the Last Battle—and those women who wish to fight may report as well. Also, send word to the bellfounders in your city. I will need to meet with them within the hour."

"But," Bertome said, "the coronation feast, Your Majesty. . . ." "We will feast when the Last Battle has been wori and Cairhien's children are safe," Elayne said. She needed to distract them from their plots, give them work to keep them busy, if possible. "Move! Pretend the Last Battle is on your doorstep, and will arrive on the morrow!" For, indeed it might.

Mat leaned against a dead tree, looking over his camp. He breathed in and out, smiling, feeling the beautiful comfort of knowing that he was no longer being chased. He had forgotten how good that felt. Better than a pretty serving girl on each knee, that feeling was. Well, better than one serving girl, anyway.

A military camp at evening was one of the most comfortable places in all the world, even if half the camp was empty, the men there having gone to Cairhien. The sun had set, and some of those who remained had turned in. But for those who had pulled afternoon duty the next day, there was no reason to sleep just yet.

A dozen firepits smoldered through the camp, men sitting to share tales of exploits, of women left behind, or of rumors from far off. Tongues of flames flickered as men laughed, sitting on logs or rocks, someone occasionally digging into the coals with a twisted branch and stirring tiny sparks into the air as his friends sang "Come Ye Maids" or "Fallen Willows at Noon."

The men of the Band were from a dozen different nations, but this camp was their true home. Mat strode through them, hat on his head, ashandarei over his shoulder. He had gotten a new scarf for his neck. People knew about his scar, but there was no reason to show it off like one or Luca's bloody wagons.

The scarf he had chosen this time was red. In memory of Tylin and the others who had fallen to the gholam. For a short time, he had been tempted to choose pink. A very short time.

Mat smiled. Though songs rang from several of the campfires, none were loud, and there was a healthy stillness about the camp. Not a silence. Silence was never good. He hated silence. Made him wonder who was trying so hard to sneak up on him. No, this was a stillness. Men snoring softly,

fires crackling, other men singing, weeds crunching as those on watch passed by. The peaceful noises of men enjoying their lives.

Mat found his way back to his table outside his darkened tent. He sat down, looking over the papers he had stacked here. The inside of the tent had been too stuffy. Besides, he had not wanted to wake Olver.

Mat's tent rippled in the wind. His seat did look odd, the fine oak table sitting in a patch of hensfoot, Mat's chair beside it, a pitcher of mulled cider on the ground beside him. The papers on his table were weighed down with various rocks he had picked up, lit by a single flickering lamp.

He should not have to have stacks of paper. He should be able to sit at one of those fires and sing "Dance with Jak o' the Shadows." He could faintly make out the words of the song from a nearby campfire.

Papers. Well, he had agreed to Elayne's employment, and there were papers for that sort of thing. And papers about setting up the dragon crews. Papers about supplies, discipline reports, and all kinds of nonsense. And a few papers he had been able to wiggle out of her royal majesty, spy reports he had wanted to look over. Reports on the Seanchan.

Much of the news was not new to him; by courtesy of Verin's gateway, Mat had traveled to Caemlyn more quickly than most rumors. But Elayne had gateways of her own, and some of the news from Tear and Illian was fresh. There was talk of the new Seanchan Empress. So Tuon really had crowned herself, or whatever it was the Seanchan did to name a new leader.

That made him smile. Light, but they did not know what they were in for! They probably thought they did. But she would surprise them, sure as the sky was blue. Or, well, it had been gray lately.

There was also talk of Sea Folk in alliance with the Seanchan. Mat dismissed that. The Seanchan had captured enough Sea Folk vessels to give that impression, but it was not the truth. He found some pages with news about Rand, too, most of it unspecific or untrustworthy.

Blasted colors. Rand was sitting around and talking with some people in a tent. Perhaps he was in Arad Doman, but he could not be both there and fighting in the Borderlands, now could he? One rumor said that Rand had killed Queen Tylin. Which bloody idiots thought that?

He turned over the reports on Rand quickly. He hated having to banish those flaming colors over and over again. At least Rand was wearing clothes this time.

The last page was curious. Wolves running in enormous packs, congregating in clearings and howling in chorus? The skies shining red at night? Livestock lining up in the fields, all facing toward the north, watching silently? The footprints of Shadowspawn armies in the middle of fields?

These things smelled of simple hearsay, passed on from farmwife to farm-wife until they reached the ears of Elayne's spies.

Mat looked over the sheet, then—without even thinking of it-realized he had pulled Verin's envelope out of his pocket. The still-sealed letter was looking worn and dirty, but he had not opened it. It seemed lke the most difficult thing he had ever done, resisting that;/urge.

"Now that is a sight of some irregularity," a woman's voice said. Mat looked up to see Setalle strolling toward him. She wore a brown dress that laced over her ample bosom. Not that Mat spent any time looking at it.

"You like my den?" Mat asked. He set the envelope aside, then put the last of the spy reports on a stack, just beside a series of sketches he'd been doing on some new crossbows, based on the ones Talmanes had bought The papers threatened to blow away. As he had no rock for this stack, he pulled off one of his boots and set it on the top.

"Your den?" Setalle asked, sounding amused.

"Sure," Mat said, scratching the bottom of his stockinged foot. "You'll have to make an appointment with my steward if you want to come in."

"Your steward?"

"The stump right over there," Mat said, nodding. "Not the little one, the big one with moss growing on the top."

She raised an eyebrow.

"He's quite good," Mat said. "Hardly ever lets anyone in I don't want to see."

"You are an interesting creature, Matrim Cauthon," Setalle said, seating herself on the larger stump. Her dress was after the Ebou Dar style, with the side pinned up to reveal petticoats colorful enough to scare away a Tinker.

"Did you want anything specific?" Mat asked. "Or did you just drop by so that you could sit on my steward's head?"

"I heard that you visited the palace again today. Is it true that you know the Queen?"

Mat shrugged. "Elayne's a nice enough girl. Pretty thing, that's for certain."

"You don't shock me anymore, Matrim Cauthon," Setalle noted. "I've realized that the things you say are often intended to do that."

They were? "I say what I'm thinking, Mistress Anan. Why does it matter to you if I know the Queen?"

"Merely another piece of the puzzle that you represent," Setalle said. "I received a letter from Joline today."

"What did she want from you?"

"She didn't ask for anything. She merely wanted to send word that they had arrived safely in Tar Valon."

"You must have read it wrong."

Setalle gave him a chiding stare. "Joline Sedai respects you, Master Cauthon. She often spoke highly of you, and the way that you rescued not only her, but the other two. She asked after you in the letter."

Mat blinked. "Really? She said things like that?"

Setalle nodded.

"Burn me," he said. "Almost makes me feel bad for painting her mouth blue. But you wouldn't have known she thought that way, considering how she treated me."

"Speaking such things to a man inflates his opinion of himself. One would think that the way she treated you would have been enough."

"She's Aes Sedai," Mat muttered. "She treats everyone like they're mud to be scraped off her boots."

Setalle glared at him. She had a stately way about her, part grandmother, part court lady, part no-nonsense innkeeper.

"Sorry," he said. "Some Aes Sedai aren't as bad as others. I didn't mean to insult you."

"I'll take that for a compliment," Setalle said. "Though I'm not Aes Sedai."

Mat shrugged, finding a nice small rock at his feet. He used it to replace his boot atop the stack of paper. The rains of the last few days had passed, leaving a crisp freshness to the air. "I know you said it didn't hurt," Mat said. "But . . . what does it feel like? The thing you lost?"

She pursed her lips. "What is the most delightful food you enjoy, Master Cauthon? The one thing that you would eat above all others?"

"Ma's sweet pies," Mat said immediately.

"Well, it is like that," Setalle said. "Knowing that you used to be able to enjoy those pies every day, but now they have been denied you. Your friends, they can have as many of those pies as they want. You envy them, and you hurt, but at the same time you're happy. At least someone can enjoy what you cannot."

Mat nodded slowly.

"Why is it that you hate Aes Sedai so, Master Cauthon?" Setalle asked.

"I don't hate them," Mat said. "Burn me, but I don't. But sometimes, a man can't seem to do two things without women wanting him to do one of those things a different way and ignore the other one completely."

"You aren't forced to take their advice, and I warrant that much of the time, you eventually admit it is good advice."

Mat shrugged. "Sometimes, a man just likes to do what he wants without someone telling him what's wrong with it and what's wrong with him. That's all."

"And it has nothing to do with your . . . peculiar views of nobles? Most Aes Sedai act as if they were noblewomen, after all."

"I have nothing against nobles," Mat said, straightening his coat. "I just don't fancy being one myself."

"Why is that, then?"

Mat sat for a moment. Why was it? Finally, he looked down at his foot then replaced his boot. "It's boots."

"Boots?" Setalle looked confused.

"Boots," Mat said with a nod, tying his laces. "It's all about the boots."

"But—"

"You see," Mat said, pulling the laces tight, "a lot of men don't have to worry much about what boots to wear. They're the poorest of folks. If you ask one of them 'What boots are you going to wear today, Mop?' their answer is easy. 'Well, Mat. I only have one pair, so I guess I'm gonna wear that pair.'"

Mat hesitated. "Or, I guess they wouldn't say that to you, Setalle, since you're not me and all. They wouldn't call you Mat, you understand."

"I understand," she said, sounding amused.

"Anyway, for people that have a little coin, the question of which boots to wear is harder. You see, average men, men like me. . . ." He eyed her. "And I'm an average man, mind you."

"Of course you are."

"Bloody right I am," Mat said, finishing with his laces and sitting up. "An average man might have three pairs of boots. Your third best pair of boots, those are the boots you wear when you're working at something unpleasant. They might rub after a few paces, and they might have a few holes, but they're good enough to keep your footing. You don't mind mucking them up in the fields or the barn."

"All right," Setalle said.

"Then you have your second best pair of boots," Mat said. "Those are your day-to-day boots. You wear those if you are going over to dinner at the neighbors. Or, in my case, you wear those if you're going to battle. They're nice boots, give you good footing, and you don't mind being seen in them or anything."

"And your best pair of boots?" Setalle asked. "You wear those to social events, like a ball or dining with a local dignitary?"

"Balls? Dignitaries? Bloody ashes, woman. I thought you were an innkeeper."

Setalle blushed faintly.

"We're not going to any balls," Mat said. "But if we had to, I suspect we'd wear our second best pair of boots. If they're good enough for visiting old lady Hembrew next door, then they're bloody well good enough for stepping on the toes of any woman fool enough to dance with us."

"Then what are the best boots for?"

"Walking," Mat said. "Any farmer knows the value of good boots when you go walking a distance."

Setalle looked thoughtful. "All right. But what does this have to do with being a nobleman?"

"Everything," Mat said. "Don't you see? If you're an average fellow, you know exactly when to use your boots. A man can keep track of three pairs of boots. Life is simple when you have three pairs of boots. But noblemen . . . Talmanes claims he has forty different pairs of boots at home. Forty pairs, can you imagine that?"

She smiled in amusement.

"Forty pairs," Mat repeated, shaking his head. "Forty bloody pairs. And, they aren't all the same kind of boots either. There is a pair for each outfit, and a dozen pairs in different styles that will match any number of half your outfits. You have boots for kings, boots for high lords, and boots for normal people. You have boots for winter and boots for summer, boots for rainy days and boots for dry days. You have bloody shoes that you wear only when you're walking to the bathing chamber. Lopin used to complain that I didn't have a pair to wear to the privy at night!"

"I see. ... So you're using boots as a metaphor for the onus of responsibility and decision placed upon the aristocracy as they assume leadership of complex political and social positions."

"Metaphor for. . . ." Mat scowled. "Bloody ashes, woman. This isn't a metaphor for anything! It's just boots"

Setalle shook her head. "You're an unconventionally wise man, Matrim Cauthon."

"I try my best," he noted, reaching for the pitcher of mulled cider. "To be unconventional, I mean." He poured a cup and lifted it in her direction. She accepted graciously and drank, then stood. "I will leave you to your own amusements, then, Master Cauthon. But if you have made any progress on that gateway for me. . . ."

"Elayne said she would have one for you soon. In a day or two. Once I'm back from the errand I have to run with Thorn and Noal, I'll see it done."

She nodded in understanding. If he did not return from that "errand," she would see to Olver. She turned to leave. Mat waited until she was gone

before taking a slurp of the cider straight from the pitcher. He had been doing that all evening, but he figured she would probably rather not know. It was the sort of thing women were better off not thinking about.

He turned back to his reports, but soon found his mind wandering to the Tower of Ghenjei, and those bloody snakes and foxes. Birgitte's comments had been enlightening, but not particularly encouraging. Two months? Two bloody months spent wandering those hallways? That was a mighty, steaming bowl of worry, served up like afternoon slop. Beyond that, she had taken fire, music, and iron. Breaking the rules was not so original an idea.

He was not surprised. Likely, the day the Light made the very first man, and that man had made the first rule, someone else had thought to break it. People like Elayne made up rules to suit them. People like Mat found ways to get around the stupid rules.

Unfortunately, Birgitte—one of the legendary Heroes of the Horn—had not been able to defeat the Aelfinn and Eelfinn. That was disconcerting.

Well, Mat had something she had not had. His luck. He sat thoughtfully, leaning back in his chair. One of his soldiers passed by. Clintock saluted; the Redarm checked on Mat every half-hour. They still had not gotten over the shame of letting the gbolam sneak into camp.

He picked up Verin's letter again, feeling it over in his fingers. The worn corners, the smudges of dirt on the once-white paper. He tapped it against the wood.

Then he tossed it onto the desk. No. No, he was not going to open it, even when he got back. That was that. He would never know what was in it, and he bloody did not care.

He stood up and went looking for Thorn and Noal. Tomorrow, they would leave for the Tower of Ghenjei.

CHAPTER

53

Gateways

Pevara kept her tongue as she walked through the village of the Black Tower with Javindhra and Mazrim Taim. There was activity all through the place. There was always activity in the Black Tower. Soldiers felling trees nearby; Dedicated stripping the bark away, then slicing the logs into lumber with focused jets of Air. Sawdust coated the path; with a chill, Pevara realized that the stack of boards nearby had probably been cut by Asha'man.

Light! She'd known what she'd find here. It was much harder to face than she'd assumed it would be.

"And you see," Taim said, walking with one hand folded—fingers making a fist—behind his back. With his other hand, he pointed toward a distant, part-finished wall of black stone. "Guard posts spaced at fifty-foot intervals. Each with two Asha'man atop them." He smiled in satisfaction. "This place will be impregnable."

"Yes indeed," Javindhra said. "Impressive." Her tone was flat and uninterested. "But the item I wished to speak with you about. If we could choose men with the Dragon pin to—"

"This again?" Taim said. He had fire in his eyes, this Mazrim Taim. A tall, black-haired man with high, Saldaean cheekbones. He smiled. Or the closest he came to such an expression—a half-smile that did not reach his eyes. It looked . . . predatory. "I have made my will known. And yet you continue to push. No. Soldiers and Dedicated only."

"As you demand," Javindhra said. "We will continue our consideration."

"Weeks pass," Taim replied, "and still you consider? Well, far be it from me to question Aes Sedai. I care not what you do. But the women outside my gates claim to be from the White Tower as well. Do you not wish me to invite them in to meet with you?"

Pevara felt a chill. He always seemed to know too much, and hint that he knew too much, about internal White Tower politics.

"That won't be needed," Javindhra said coldly.

"As you wish," he said. "You should make your choices soon. They grow impatient, and al'Thor has given them permission to bond my men. They will not suffer my stalling forever."

"They are rebels. You need pay them no heed at all."

"Rebels," Taim said, "with a much larger force than you. What do you have? Six women? From the way you talk, you seem to intend to bond the entirety of the Black Tower!"

"Perhaps we might." Pevara spoke calmly. "No limit was placed upon us."

Taim glanced at her, and she had the distinct feeling she was being inspected by a wolf considering whether she'd make a good meal. She shoved that feeling aside. She was Aes Sedai, no easy meat. Still, she couldn't help remembering that they were only six. Inside a camp filled with hundreds of men who could channel.

"I once saw a skyfisher dying on the city docks of Illian," Taim said. "The bird was choking, having tried to swallow two fish at once."

"Did you help the sorry thing?" Javindhra asked.

"Fools will always choke themselves when they grasp for too much, Aes Sedai," Taim said. "What matters that to me? I had a fine meal of it that night. The flesh of the bird, and of the fish. I must go. But be warned, now that I have a defensible perimeter, you must give me warning if you wish to pass outside."

"You mean to keep comings and goings that tight?" Pevara asked.

"The world becomes a dangerous place," Taim said smoothly. "I must think of the needs of my men."

Pevara had noticed how he saw to the "needs" of his men. A group of young soldiers passed by, saluting Taim. Two bore bruised features, one with an eye swollen shut. Asha'man were beaten brutally for making mistakes in their training, then forbidden Healing.

The Aes Sedai were never touched. In fact, the deference they were shown bordered on mockery.

Taim nodded, then stalked off, meeting up with two of his Asha'man

who waited nearby, beside the smithy. They immediately began speaking in hushed tones.

"I don't like this," Pevara said as soon as the men were away. Perhaps she said it too quickly, betraying her worries, but this place had her on edge. "This could easily turn to disaster. I'm beginning to think that we should do as I originally stated—bond a few Dedicated each and return to the White Tower. Our task was never to lock down the entire Black Tower, but to gain access to Asha'man and learn about them."

"That's what we're doing," Javindhra said. "I've been learning much these last few weeks. What have you been doing?"

Pevara did not rise to the other woman's tone. Must she be so contrary? Pevara had leadership of this team, and the others would defer to her. But it didn't mean that they would always be pleasant about it.

"This has been an interesting opportunity," Javindhra continued, scanning the Tower grounds. "And I do think he will yield eventually on the subject of full Asha'man."

Pevara frowned. Javindhra couldn't honestly think that, could she? After how stubborn Taim had been? Yes, Pevara had yielded to suggestions that they remain in the Black Tower a little longer, to learn of its workings and ask Taim to allow them access to the more powerful Asha'man. But it was obvious now he would not give in. Surely Javindhra saw that.

Unfortunately, Pevara was having great difficulty reading Javindhra lately. Originally, the woman had seemed against coming to the Black Tower, only agreeing to the mission because the Highest had ordered it. Yet now she offered reasons to remain here.

"Javindhra," Pevara said, stepping closer. "You heard what he said. We now need permission to leave. This place is turning into a cage."

"I think, we're safe," Javindhra said, waving a hand. "He doesn't know we have gateways."

"So far as we know," Pevara said.

"If you order it, I'm sure the others will go," Javindhra said. "But I intended to continue to use the opportunity to learn."

Pevara took a deep breath. Insufferable woman! Surely she wasn't going so far as to ignore Pevara's leadership of the group? After the Highest herself had placed Pevara in charge? Light, but Javindhra was growing erratic.

They parted without another word, Pevara spinning and walking back down the path. She kept her temper with difficulty. That last statement had been close to outright defiance! Well, if she wanted to disobey and remain, so be it. It was time to be returning to the White Tower.

Men in black coats walked all around her. Many nodded with those too-obsequious grins of feigned respect. Her weeks here had not done anything to make her more comfortable around these men. She would make a few of them Warders. Three. She could handle three, couldn't she?

Those dark expressions, like the eyes of executioners while waiting for the next neck to line up before them. The way some of them muttered to themselves, or jumped at shadows, or held their heads and looked dazed. She stood in the very pit of madness itself, and it made her skin creep as if covered in caterpillars. She couldn't help quickening her pace. No, she thought. / can't leave Javindhra here, not without trying one more time. Pevara would explain to the others, give them the order to leave. Then she'd ask them, Tarna first, to approach Javindhra. Surely their united arguments would convince her.

Pevara reached the huts they had been given. She purposely did not look to the side, toward the line of small buildings where the bonded Aes Sedai made their homes. She'd heard what some of them were doing, trying to control their Asha'man using . . . various methods. That made her skin crawl, too. While she thought most Reds had too harsh an opinion of men, what those women did crossed the line with a heedless leap.

She stepped inside her hut, and there found Tarna at the desk writing a letter. The Aes Sedai had to share their huts, and Pevara had picked Tarna specifically. Pevara might have been made leader of this group, but Tarna was Keeper of the Chronicles. The politics of this particular expedition were very delicate, with so many influential members and so many opinions.

Last night, Tarna had agreed that it was time to leave. She'd work with Pevara on going to Javindhra.

"Taim has locked down the Black Tower," Pevara said calmly, sitting on her bed in the small, circular chamber. "We now need his permission to leave. He said it offhandedly, as if it weren't really meant to stop us. Just a rule he'd forgotten to give us a blanket exception to."

"Likely, that's just what it was," Tarna said. "I'm sure it's nothing."

Pevara fell still. What? She tried again. "Javindhra still irrationally thinks he will change his mind on letting us bond full Asha'man. It's time to bond Dedicated and leave, but she's hinted that she'll remain regardless of my intentions. I want you to speak to her."

"Actually," Tarna said, continuing to write, "I've been thinking on what we discussed last night. Perhaps I was hasty. There is much to learn here, and there is the matter of the rebels outside. If we leave, they will bond Asha'man, which should not be allowed."

The woman looked up, and Pevara froze. There was something different in Tarna's eyes, something cold. She'd always been a distant one, but this was worse.

Tarna smiled, a grimace that looked completely unnatural on her face. Like the smile on the lips of a corpse. She turned back to her writing.

Something is very, very wrong here, Pevara thought. "Well, you may be right," she found herself saying. Her mouth worked, though her mind reeled. "This expedition was your suggestion, after all. I will think on it further. If you'll excuse me."

Tarna waved ambivalently. Pevara stood, years as an Aes Sedai keeping her profound worry from showing in her posture. She stepped outside, then walked eastward, along the unfinished wall. Yes, guard stations had been set up regularly. Earlier this morning, those hadn't been manned. Now they were, with men who could channel. One of those men could strike her dead before she could respond. She couldn't see their weaves, and she couldn't strike first, because of her oaths.

She turned and walked to a small stand of trees, a place that was to become a garden. Inside, she sat down on a stump, breathing deeply. The coldness—almost lifelessness—she'd seen in Tarna's eyes still chilled her.

Pevara had been ordered by the Highest not to risk gateways unless the situation were dire. This seemed like a dire situation to her. She embraced the Source and wove the proper weave.

The weave fell apart the moment she completed it. No gateway formed. Eyes wide, she tried again, but got the same result. She tried other weaves, and they worked, but gateways failed every time.

Her chill became frost within her. She was trapped.

They all were.

Perrin clasped hands with Mat. "Good luck, my friend."

Mat grinned, tugging down the broad brim of his dark hat. "Luck? I hope this all comes down to luck. I'm good with luck."

Mat carried a bulging pack over one shoulder, as did the bony, gnarled man that Mat had introduced as Noal. Thorn had his harp on his back and a similar pack. Perrin still wasn't clear on what they were bringing. Mat only planned to be at the tower for a few days, so there was no need for a lot of supplies.

The small group stood on the Traveling ground outside Perrin's camp. Behind them, Perrin's people shouted back and forth, breaking down the camp. None had any inkling of how important this day could prove. Moiraine. Moiraine was alive. Light, let it be so.

"Are you certain I can't convince you to take more help?" Perrin asked.

Mat nodded. "Sorry. These things . . . well, they tend to be particular. The note was clear. Only three of us can enter, otherwise we'll fail. If we fail anyway . . . well, I guess it will be her own bloody fault then, won't it?"

Perrin frowned. "Just be careful. I'm expecting another helping from your pouch of tabac at Master Denezel's place when you return."

"You'll have it," Thorn said, taking Perrin's offered hand. He hesitated, smiling, a faint twinkle in his eyes.

"What?" Perrin asked.

Thorn repositioned his pack. "Is every last farmboy I know going to transform into a nobleman by the time this is through?"

"I'm no nobleman," Mat said.

"Oh?" Thom asked. "Prince of the Ravens?"

Mat pulled his hat down. "People can call me what they want. That doesn't mean I'm one of them."

"Actually," Thom said, "it—"

"Open the gateway so we can get going," Mat said. "No more nonsense."

Perrin nodded to Grady. The air rent, a twisting beam of light opening a portal that overlooked a broad, slow-moving river. "This is as close as he can get," Perrin said. "At least, not without a better description of the place."

"It'll do," Mat said, poking his head through the gateway. "You'll open one for us to get back?"

"Each day at noon," Grady said, repeating Perrin's orders to him. "Into that exact spot." He smiled. "Take care you don't get your toes cut off when it appears, Master Cauthon."

"I'll do my best," Mat said. "I'm attached to those toes." He took a breath and stepped through the gateway. Quiet Noal followed, smelling of determination. That one was a lot tougher than he looked. Thom nodded to Perrin, mustaches wagging, then hopped through. He was spry, though he still bore the stiff leg from fighting that Fade two years ago.

Light guide you, Perrin prayed, raising a hand to the three as they trudged along the river's bank.

Moiraine. Perrin should send word to Rand. The colors appeared, showing Rand speaking with a group of Borderlanders. But ... no. Perrin couldn't tell Rand until he was certain she lived. To do otherwise would be too cruel, and would be an invitation for Rand to meddle in Mat's mission.

Perrin turned as the portal closed. As he stepped, he felt a faint throbbing from his leg, where Slayer's arrow had hit him. He had been Healed or that wound, and from what he'd been able to tell, the Healing had been complete. There was no injury. But his leg . . . it felt like it could remember the wound anyway. It was like a shadow, very faint, almost unnoticeable.

Faile walked up to him, her face curious. Gaul was with her, and Perrin smiled at the way he kept glancing over his shoulder at Bain and Chiad. One carried his spears, the other his bow. So that he didn't have to, apparently.

"I missed the sendoff?" Faile asked.

"As you intended," Perrin replied.

She sniffed. "Matrim Cauthon is a bad influence. I'm surprised he didn't drag you off to another tavern before leaving."

Amusingly, the colors appeared, showing him Mat—who had just left—walking along the river. "He's not as bad as all that," Perrin said. "Are we ready?"

"Aravine has everyone organized and moving," Faile said. "We should be ready to march within the hour."

That proved a good estimate. In about a half-hour, Perrin stood to the side as an enormous gateway split the air, created by Grady and Neald linked together with the Aes Sedai and Edarra. Nobody had questioned Perrin's decision to move. If Rand was traveling to this place known as the Field of Merrilor, then that was where Perrin wanted to be. It was where he needed to be.

The land beyond this gateway more rugged than southern Andor. Fewer trees, more prairie grass. Some ruins lay in the distance. The open area before them was filled with tents, banners, and camps. It looked as if Egwene's coalition was gathered.

Grady peered through, then whistled softly. "How many people is that?"

"Those are the Crescent Moons of Tear," Perrin noted, pointing toward a banner. "And that's Illian. Camped on opposite sides of the field." A green banner set with nine golden bees marked that army.

"A large number of Cairhienin Houses," Faile said, looking out off the rise. "Not a few Aiel. . . No Borderlander flags."

"I've never seen so many troops in one place," Grady said.

It's really happening, Perrin thought, heart thumping. The Last Battle.

"Do you think they'll be enough to stop Rand?" Faile asked. "To help us keep him from breaking the seals?"

"Help us?" Perrin asked.

"You told Elayne that you'd go to the Field of Merrilor," Faile said. "Because of what Egwene had asked."

"Oh, I told her I needed to be there," Perrin said. "But I never said I was going to take Egwene's side. I trust Rand, Faile, and it seems right to me that he'd need to break the seals. It's like making a sword. You usually don't want to forge one out of the pieces of a broken and ruined weapon You get new good steel to make it. Rather than patch the old seals, he'll need to make new ones."

"Perhaps," Faile said. "But this is going to be a fine line to walk. So many armies in one place. If some side with Rand and others with the White Tower . . ."

Nobody would win if they turned against one another. Well, Perrin would have to make sure that didn't happen.

The soldiers were already gathered in lines, preparing to march. Perrin turned to them. "Rand sent us away to search for an enemy," he bellowed. "We return to him having found allies. Onward, to the Last Battle!"

Only the ones at the front could hear him, but they cheered and passed the word back. Rand or Elayne would have given a far more inspiring speech. But Perrin wasn't them. He'd have to do things his way.

"Aravine," Perrin called to the plump Amadician. "Go through and make sure that nobody fights over where to set up their camps."

"Yes, Lord Goldeneyes."

"Keep us away from the other armies for now," Perrin said, pointing. "Have Sulin and Gaul pick a good site. Pass the word to each of the armies as we set up. We're not to interact with, or look the wrong way at, any of those other forces. And don't let people go wandering off southward either!

We're not in the wilderness anymore, and I don't want the local farmers complaining of mischief."

"Yes, my Lord," she said.

He'd never asked Aravine why she didn't join one of the groups that had been sent back to Amadicia. It was probably because of the Seanchan, though. She was obviously noble, but didn't say much of her past. He was glad to have her. As his camp steward, she was his liaison between the various factions that made up his army.

The Wolf Guard had drawn first lot, so they led the way through the gateway. The large column began to move. Perrin went down the line, giving orders, mostly reinforcing that he didn't want trouble with the locals or the other armies. He stopped as he met Whitecloaks waiting their turn. Berelain was riding next to Galad again; they seemed very amenably lost in conversation. Light, but the woman had spent pretty much every waking hour with Galad these last few days.

Perrin hadn't put the Whitecloaks and Mayeners together, yet they

seemed to have somehow ended up that way. As they started moving, Galad's Whitecloaks rode in a perfect line, four across, their white tabards set with sunbursts. Perrin still had a gut reaction akin to panic whenever he saw them, but they'd made surprisingly little trouble since the trial.

Mayene's Winged Guard rode along the other side, Gallenne just behind Berelain, their lances held high. Red streamers came from the lances, and breastplates and helms were shined to perfection. It seemed they were ready to parade. And maybe they were. If you were going to ride to the Last Battle, you did it with lance held high and armor polished.

Perrin continued on. Alliandre's army came next, riding in a tight formation of heavy cavalry, eight men across, Arganda at their head. He called orders when he saw Perrin, and the serpentine column of soldiers turned and saluted.

Perrin returned their salute. He'd asked Alliandre, and she'd indicated that was the appropriate response. She rode with Arganda, sidesaddle, in a slim maroon gown with gold trim. An impractical outfit for riding, but they wouldn't be in the saddle very long. Three hundred paces and as many leagues.

He could see her satisfaction as he saluted her soldiers. She was pleased to see him stepping into his role as leader of the coalition. In fact, many in camp reacted the same way. Perhaps before, they'd been able to sense how much he resented leadership. How did people do that, without being able to smell emotions?

"Lord Perrin," Alliandre said, riding past him. She gave a bowing sort of sway that was the equivalent of a horseback curtsy. "Should you not be riding?"

"I like my feet," Perrin said.

"It looks more authoritative when a commander rides."

"I've decided to lead this bunch, Alliandre," Perrin said gruffly, "but I'll do it my way. That means walking when I want to." They were only going a few feet through the gateway. His feet would serve him well enough.

"Of course, my Lord."

"Once we're settled, I want you to send some men back to Jehannah. See if you can recruit anyone else, pick up whatever city guard you have. Bring them here. We're going to need everyone we can get, and I want to train them as much as possible before this war hits."

"Very well, my Lord."

"I've sent to Mayene already," Perrin said. "And Tarn's been gathering what extras he can from the Two Rivers." Light, but he wished he could let them stay behind, on their farms, to live in peace while the storm raged

elsewhere. But this really was the end. He could feel it. Lose this fight and they lost everything. The world. The Pattern itself. Facing that, he'd field boys who could barely swing a sword and grandfathers who had trouble walking. It twisted his stomach to admit it, but it was the truth.

He continued down the line and gave some orders to several other groups. As he was finishing up with the last, he noticed a handful of Two Rivers men passing by. One, Azi, held the wolfhead banner. Jori Congar hung back. He stopped, then waved the other three on before trotting up to Perrin. Was something wrong?

"Lord Perrin." Jori drew himself up, long and lanky, like a bird standing on one leg. "I. . . ."

"Well?" Perrin said. "Out with it."

"I wanted to apologize," Jori said, words coming in a rush.

"For what?"

"For some things I said," Jori said, looking away. "I mean, some foolish words. It was after you were ill, you see, and you were taken to the First's tent and . . . well, I—"

"Jt's all right, Jori," Perrin said. "I understand."

Jori looked up, smiling. "It's a pleasure to be here with you, Lord Perrin. A real pleasure. We'll follow you anywhere, the others and I."

With that, Jori saluted, then ran off. Perrin scratched at his beard, watching the man go. Jori was one of a good dozen Two Rivers men who had approached Perrin over the last few days to apologize. It seemed all of them felt guilty for spreading rumors about Perrin and Berelain, though none would say it straight out.

Bless Faile for what she had done there.

Everyone seen to, Perrin took a deep breath, then walked up the column and stepped through the gateway.

Come quickly, Rand, he thought, colors blossoming in his vision. I can feel it starting.

Mat stood with Thorn at his left and Noal at his right, looking up through the trees at the spire ahead. A trickling, musical stream gurgled behind them, a tributary of the nearby Arinelle. A grassy plain spread behind them, and beyond that, the grand river itself.

Had he passed this way before? So much of his memory from that time was fragmented. And yet, this tower remained clear in his mind, viewed from a distance. Even the darkness of Shadar Logoth had not been able to excise it from his mind.

The tower looked to be of pure metal, its solid steel gleaming in the overcast sunlight. Mat felt an iciness between his shoulder blades. Many travelers along the river thought it some relic from the Age of Legends. What else did you make of a column of steel rising out of the forest, seemingly uninhabited? It was as unnatural and out of place as the twisted red doorways were. Those warped the eyes to look at them.

The forest felt too still here, quiet save for the footsteps of the three. Noal walked with a long staff, taller than he was. Where had he gotten it? It had that smooth, oiled look of wood that had spent more years as a walking staff than it originally had as a tree. Noal had also put on a dark blue—nearly black—pair of trousers and a shirt that was of an odd, unknown style. The shoulders were stiffer than the cuts Mat was familiar with, and the coat longer, going almost all the way down to Noal's knees. It buttoned to the waist, then split at the legs. Strange indeed. The old man never would answer questions about his past.

Thom had opted for his gleeman's clothing. It was good to see him in that again, rather than the frilly court bard apparel. The patchwork cloak, the simple shirt that tied up the front, the tight breeches tucked into boots. When Mat had asked about the choice, Thom had shrugged, saying, "It feels like what I should wear if I'm going to see her."

"Her" meant Moiraine. But what had the snakes and foxes done to her? It had been so long, but burn him if he was going to let another hour pass. He had chosen clothing of forest greens and earthy browns, along with a deep brown cloak. He carried his pack slung over one arm and his ashandarei in his hand. He had practiced with the new iron counterweight on the butt, and was pleased.

The Eelfinn had given him the weapon. Well, if they dared stand between him and Moiraine, then they would see what he could do with their gift. Burn him, but they would.

The three men stepped up to the tower. It did not appear to have a single opening anywhere on its two-hundred-foot-tall height. Not a window, not a seam, not a scratch. Mat looked up, feeling disoriented as he stared along its gleaming length toward the distant gray sky. Did the tower reflect too much light?

He shuddered and turned to Thom. Mat gave a single nod.

Hesitating only briefly, Thom slid a bronze knife from its sheath on his belt and stepped over to set the tip against the tower. He grimly slid the knife in the shape of a triangle, about a palm wide, point down. Metal scraped against metal, but left no trail. Thom finished by making a wavy line through the center, as one did at the start of any game of Snakes and Foxes.

All stood silently. Mat glanced at Thorn. "Did you do it right?"

"I think so," Thorn said. "But how do we know what 'right' is? That game has been passed down for—"

He cut off as a line of light appeared on the tower front. Mat jumped back, leveling his spear. The glowing lines formed a triangle matching the one that Thorn had drawn, and then—quick as a single beat of a moth's wings—the steel in the center of the triangle vanished.

Noal eyed the palm-sized hole. "That's a tad small to get through." He stepped up to it and looked through. "Nothing but darkness on the other side."

Thorn looked down at the knife. "Guess that triangle is actually a doorway. That's what you're drawing when you start the game. Should I try a bigger one?"

"Guess so," Mat said. "Unless the gholam taught you how to squeeze through holes the size of a fist."

"No need to be unpleasant," Thorn said, using the knife to draw another triangle around the first, this one large enough to walk through. He finished with the wavy line.

Mat counted. It took seven heartbeats for the lines of white to appear. The steel between them faded away, opening a triangular corridor leading into the tower. The inside looked to be solid steel.

"Light burn me," Noal whispered. The corridor disappeared into darkness; the sunlight seemed hesitant to enter the opening, though it was probably just a trick of the light.

"And so we begin the game that cannot be won," Thorn said, sliding the knife back into its sheath.

"Courage to strengthen," Noal whispered, stepping forward, holding up a lantern with a flickering flame. "Fire to blind. Music to dazzle. Iron to bind."

"And Matrim Cauthon," Mat added. "To bloody even the odds." He stepped through the doorway.

Light flashed, brilliant white, blinding. He cursed, squeezing, his eyes shut and lowering his asbandarei in what he hoped was a threatening posture. He blinked and the whiteness faded. He was in the center of a wide room with a triangular opening behind him, freestanding, with the point down at the floor. It was pure black, made of twisting cords that in some places seemed metal and in other places seemed wood.

The room was black as well, shaped like an off-kilter square. Rippling white steam poured up from holes at all four corners; that mist glowed with a white light. There were four hallways extending from the room, one in each direction.

The chamber was not exactly square. Each side was a slightly different length than the others, making for an odd meeting of angles at the corners. And that steam! It gave off a sulphurous stench that made him want to breathe through his mouth. The onyx-colored walls were not stone, but were of some reflective material, like the scales of enormous fish. The steam collected at the ceiling, glowing faintly with a soft light.

Burn him! This was not like the first place he had visited, with its twisting coils and circular doorways, but nor was it like the second one, with the star-shaped rooms and lines of yellow light! Where was he? What had he gotten himself into? He turned about, nervous.

Thorn stumbled through the doorway, blinking, dazed. Mat dropped his pack and caught the gleeman by one arm. Noal came next. The bony man kept his footing, but was obviously blinded, his lantern held forward defensively.

The two others blinked, tears streaming from Noal's eyes, but they eventually got their bearings and glanced about. The room, like the hallways extending in all four directions, was empty.

"This doesn't look like what you described, Mat," Thorn said. His voice echoed faintly, though the sounds seemed eerily warped. Almost like whispers thrown back at them. It made the hair on Mat's neck rise.

"I know," Mat said, pulling a torch from his pack. "This place doesn't makes sense. The stories agree about that, at least. Here, light this, Noal."

Thorn got out a torch of his own and both lit from Noal's lantern. They had strikers from Aludra, but Mat wanted to save those. He had been half-afraid that in the tower, flames would go out once lit. But the lights burned steady and true. That heartened him somewhat.

"So where are they?" Thorn asked, walking around the perimeter of the black room.

"They're never here when you come through," Mat said, holding up his own torch and inspecting a wall. Was that writing, carved into the not-stone? The unfamiliar script was so fine and delicate he could barely see it. "But watch yourself. They can appear behind you, faster than an innkeeper who heard coins clink in your pouch."

Noal inspected the triangular opening they had come through. "Do you suppose we can use this to get back?" It resembled the stone ter'angreal Mat had stepped through before. Just a different shape.

"I hope so," Mat said."

"Maybe we should try," Noal said.

Mat nodded to him. He did not like being separated, but they did

need to know if this was a way back or not. Noal looked determined and stepped through. He vanished.

Mat held his breath for a long moment, but the aged man did not return. Was it a trick? Had this doorway been placed here to—

Noal stumbled back into the room through the opening. Thorn set his torch on the floor and dashed over to help. Noal recovered more quickly this time, blinking away the blindness. "It sealed me out," he explained. "I had to draw another triangle to get back in."

"At least we know we've got a means of escape," Thorn said.

Assuming those bloody Aelfinn or Eelfinn don't move it, Mat thought, remembering his previous visit, the one that had ended with him being hanged. That time, the rooms and corridors had shifted mysteriously, in total defiance of what was right.

"Will you look at that?" Thorn said.

Mat lowered his spear and Noal had an iron shortsword in his hand in a moment. Thorn was pointing at his torch, which burned fitfully where he had set it on the floor beside one of the glowing steam vents.

The white steam pushed away from the flames, like it was being blown by a breeze. Only, no breeze ever made steam move so unnaturally. It curved around the fire in a loop. Thorn stepped over and picked up the torch. He moved it toward the column of steam, and it bowed out of the way. Thorn rammed the torch directly into the steam's path, and the steam split, going around the flame and melding together into a single stream again above.

Thorn glanced at the others.

"Don't ask me," Mat said, scowling. "I said this place doesn't make sense. If that's the oddest thing we see here, I'll be a Murandian's mustache. Come on."

Mat picked one of the hallways and began to walk down it. The other two hurried to catch up. The steam glowed on the ceiling, bathing the black hallway with its milky light. The floor was made of interlocking triangular tiles that, once again, looked discomfortingly like scales. The corridor was wide and long, the other end distant and dark.

"To think," Noal said, holding up his lantern, "all of this hidden in that single tower."

"I doubt we're in the tower anymore," Mat said. Up ahead, he could see a slice out of the side of the wall, a kind of window. It was set up a little too high up to feel natural.

"Then where. . . ." Noal trailed off as they reached the window, which was an off-center square. Through it, they could look out at an unnatural

landscape. They were up several floors in some kind of spire, but that certainly was not Andor outside.

The window looked out over a canopy of dense vegetation that was too yellow. Mat recognized the wispy trees with a drooping umbrella of branches at the top, though before he had seen them from below. The fernlike trees with their spreading fans of leaves were familiar as well, though those had deep black fruits hanging from them now. The large fruits caused the leaves to droop.

"Mercy of the Winnower," Noal whispered, a phrase Mat had never heard before.

Noal had reason to be astonished; Mat remembered looking out at that forest for the first time, realizing that the twisted doorway had not brought him to another place, but another world entirely.

Mat looked to the side. Could he see the three spires he had noted on his first visit? They did not seem to be about, though in this place, the very next window they passed could show a different scene. They could. . . .

He paused, then glanced sharply through the window. He could make out a spire to the left. And then he knew. He was in one of the spires he had seen in the distance during his first visit.

He stifled a shiver and turned away. At least he knew for certain he was in the same place. Did that mean that the worlds of the Aelfinn and the Eelfinn were the same? He hoped so. Moiraine had fallen through the second of the twisted red doorways, which meant she had most likely been taken by the Eelfinn, the foxes.

They were the ones who had hanged Mat; the snakes, at least, had only tossed him out of their realm without any useful answers. He bore them a grudge, but the foxes . . . they had refused to answer his questions, and had given him these bloody memories instead!

Mat and the others continued down the hallway, their footsteps echoing against the flooring. Soon, Mat began to get the sense that he was being watched. He had felt it before, on his other visits. He turned to the side, and caught a glimpse of faint motion far behind.

He spun, preparing to toss his torch aside and fight with his ashandarei, but saw nothing. The other two froze, looking about, anxious. Mat continued on sheepishly, though he felt less so after Thorn did the same thing a short time later. Thorn went so far as to throw a knife at a darkened patch of the wall.

The iron weapon clanked against the surface. The dull ring echoed for far too long in the hallway.

"Sorry," Thorn said.

"It's all right," Mat said.

"They're watching us, aren't they?" Noal asked. His voice was soft faintly nervous. Light! Mat felt as if he was going to jump out of his skin and run away, leaving it behind. Compared to that, Noal seemed steady.

"I suspect they are, at that," Mat said.

Within a few moments, they reached the end of the too-long hallway Here, they entered a chamber that was identical to the first, save it had no doorway in the center. It split off in four directions, each corridor disappearing into the distant darkness.

They picked another direction, memorizing the path they were taking, unseen eyes scratching at their backs. His footsteps grew more hurried as they traversed the length of the hallway and entered another chamber. It was exactly like the previous one.

"Easy to be disoriented in a place like this," Noal said. He opened his pack and got out a sheet of paper and a charcoal pencil. He made three dots on his paper, then connected them by lines, representing the corridors and rooms they'd gone through. "It's all a matter of keeping a good map. A good map can mean life or death; you can trust me on that."

Mat turned around, looking back the way they had come. Part of him wanted to keep going, not look backward, but he had to know. "Come on," he said, going back the way they had come.

Thorn and Noal shared looks, but once again hurried to catch up. It took them a good half-hour to retrace their steps back to the first chamber, the one that should contain the doorway. They found it empty. Those columns of steam rose from the corners. They had in the other two rooms, too.

"Impossible!" Noal said. "We retraced our steps perfectly! The way out should be here."

In the distance—faint and almost inaudible—Mat heard laughter. A hissing, dangerous laughter. Malicious.

Mat's skin grew icy. "Thorn," he said, "you ever hear a story about Birgitte Silverbow and her visit to the Tower of Ghenjei?"

"Birgitte?" Thom asked, looking up from his inspection—with Noal—of the floor. They seemed convinced that the doorway must have been pulled down into some hidden trapdoor. "No, can't say that I have.

"What about a story of a woman trapped for two months in a maze of corridors inside a fortress?"

"Two months?" Thom said. "Well, no. But there's the tale of Elmiara and the Shadoweyes. She spent a hundred days wandering in a maze, looking for the infamous healing spring of Sund to save her lover's life."

That was probably it. The story had survived; it had changed forms, the way so many of them did. "She didn't get out, did she?"

"No. She died at the end, only two steps away from the fountain, but separated from it by a wall. She could hear it bubbling; it was the last sound she heard before dying from thirst." He glanced about uncomfortably, as if uncertain he wanted to be sharing such a story in this place.

Mat shook his head, worried. Burn him, but he hated these foxes. There had to be a way to—

"You have broken the bargain," a soft voice said.

Mat spun and the other two cursed, standing up, hands on weapons. A figure stood in the hallway behind them. It was one of the creatures Mat remembered, perhaps the exact same one who had met him last time. Short, bright red hair sprouted from the creature's pale scalp. A pair of ears clung to the head, slightly pointed at the tips. The figure was willowy and tall, the shoulders disproportionately wide for the waist, and it wore pale leather straps crossed the chest—Mat still did not want to think about what those might have been made of—and a long black kilt below.

It was the face that was most distinctive. Large, unnatural eyes, pale with a shade of iris in the center. A narrow jaw and angular features. Like a fox. One of the Eelfinn, masters of this realm.

It had come to play with the mice.

"There is no bargain this way," Mat said, trying to keep the nervousness from his voice. "We can bloody bring what we want."

"Having no bargain is dangerous," the Eelfinn said in a smooth voice. "For you. Fortunately, I can take you where you desire."

"Well, then," Mat said. "Do it."

"Leave your iron," the Eelfinn said. "Your implements of music. Your fire."

"Never," Mat said.

The Eelfinn blinked large eyes. Slowly, deliberately. It stepped forward, footsteps soft. Mat raised his ashandarei, but the Eelfinn made no directly threatening moves. It glided around the three of them, speaking softly.

"Come now," it said. "Can we not speak with civility? You have come to our realm seeking. We have power to grant what you wish, what you need. Why not show good faith? Leave behind your implements of fire. Those only, and I promise to lead you for a time."

Its voice was hypnotic, soothing. It did make sense. What need had they of fire? It was light enough with that mist. It . . .

"Thorn," Mat said. "Music."

"What?" Thorn said, shaking a little bit.

"Play anything. It doesn't matter what."

Thorn took out his flute, and the Eelfinn narrowed its eyes. Thorn began playing. It was a familiar song, "The Wind That Shakes the Willows" Mat had intended to soothe the Eelfinn, maybe put it off guard. But the familiar tune seemed to help dispel the cloud on Mat's mind.

"This isn't needed," the Eelfinn said, glaring at Thorn.

"Yes it is," Mat said. "And we're not bloody leaving our fire. Not unless you promise to take us all the way to the central chamber and give us back Moiraine."

"I cannot make that bargain," the creature said, continuing to walk around them. Mat turned to follow it, never letting his back to the thing. "I have not the authority."

"Bring someone who can."

"Impossible," the Eelfinn said. "Listen to me. Fire isn't needed. I will lead you half of the way to the central chamber, the Chamber of Bonds, should you leave behind that terrible fire. It offends us. We wish only to meet your desires."

The creature was obviously trying to lull them again, but its cadence was off, at odds with Thorn's playing. Mat watched it, then began to sing along with the flute playing. He did not have the best voice among those he knew, but he was not terrible either. The Eelfinn yawned, then settled down beside the wall and closed its eyes. In moments, it was sleeping.

Thorn lowered the flute form his lips, looking impressed.

"Nicely done," Noal whispered. "I had no idea you were so fluent in the Old Tongue."

Mat hesitated. He had not even realized they had been speaking in it.

"My Old Tongue is rusty," Noal said, rubbing his chin, "but I caught a lot of that. Problem is, we still don't know the way through this place. How will we make our way without one of them to guide us?"

He was right. Birgitte had wandered for months, never knowing if her goal was merely a few steps away. The chamber where Mat had met the Eelfinn leaders . . . she had said that once you were there, they had to bargain with you. That must be the Chamber of Bonds the Eelfinn had mentioned.

Poor Moiraine. She had come through one of the red doorways; she should have been protected by whatever treaty the Eelfinn had with the ancient Aes Sedai. But that doorway had been destroyed. No way back.

When Mat had come originally, they had praised him as wise for thinking to ask for a leave-taking. Though he grumbled, still, about the Eelfinn not answering his questions, he could see that was not what they

did. The Aelfinn were for questions; the Eelfinn granted requests. But they twisted those requests, and took whatever price they wanted. Mat had unwittingly asked for his memory filled, for a way to be free of the Aes Sedai, and a way out of the Tower.

If Moiraine had not known this, and had not asked for passage out as he had done ... or if she had asked for passage back to the doorway, not knowing it had been destroyed. . . .

Mat had asked for a way out. They had given it to him, but he could not remember what it was. Everything had gone black, and he had awakened hanging from the ashandarei.

Mat pulled something from his pocket, holding it tightly in his fist. "The Aelfinn and the Eelfinn get around in here somehow," his whispered. "There has to be a correct pathway."

"One way," Noal said. "Four choices, followed by four choices, followed by four choices . . . The odds against us are incredible!"

"Odds," Mat said, holding out his hand. He opened it, revealing a pair of dice. "What do / care for odds?"

The two looked at his ivory dice, then looked back up at his face. Mat could feel his luck surge. "Twelve pips. Three for each doorway. If I roll a one, a two, or a three, we go straight. Four, five, or six, we take the right path, and so on."

"But Mat," Noal whispered, glancing at the sleeping Eelfinn. "The rolls won't be equal. You can't roll a one, for example, and a seven is far more likely to—"

"You don't understand, Noal," Mat said, tossing the dice to the floor. They rattled against the scale-like tiles, clacking like teeth. "It doesn't matter what is likely. Not when I'm around."

The dice came to a rest. One of them caught in a rut between two tiles and froze precariously, one of the corners to the air. The other came to rest with a single pip showing.

"How about that, Noal," Thorn said. "Looks like he can roll a one after all."

"Now that's something," Noal said, rubbing his chin.

Mat fetched his ashandarei, then picked up the dice and walked straight ahead. The others followed, leaving the sleeping Eelfinn behind.

At the next intersection, Mat rolled again, and got a nine. "Back the way we came?" Thorn asked, frowning. "That's—"

"Just what we're going to do," Mat said, turning and going back. In the other room, the sleeping Eelfinn was gone.

"They could have wakened him," Noal pointed out.

"Or it could be a different room," Mat said, tossing the dice again. Another nine. He was facing the way he had come, so a nine meant going back again. "The Aelfinn and the Eelfinn have rules," Mat said, turning and running down the corridor, the other two chasing after him. "And this place has rules."

"Rules have to make sense, Mat," Noal said.

"They have to be consistent," Mat said. "But they don't have to follow our logic. Why should they?"

It made sense to him. They ran for a time—this hallway seemed much longer than the others. He was starting to feel winded when he reached the next room. He tossed the dice again, but suspected what he would see Nine. Back to the first room again.

"Look, this is foolish!" Noal said as they turned and ran back the other way. "We're never going to get anywhere this way!"

Mat ignored him, continuing to run. Soon they approached the first room again.

"Mat," Noal said, pleadingly. "Can we at least. . . ."

Noal trailed off as they burst into the first chamber. Only it was not the first chamber. This room had a white floor, and was enormous, with thick, black columns rising toward an unseen ceiling far above.

The glowing white steam that pooled atop their corridor poured into the room and fell upward into that blackness, like a waterfall going in the wrong direction. Though the floor and the columns looked like glass, Mat knew they would feel porous, like stone. The room was lit by a series of glowing yellow stripes that ran up each column, marking places where the carved glass-stone was fluted to a point.

Thorn clapped him on the shoulder. "Mat, lad, that was insane. And effective. Somehow."

"About what you should expect from me," Mat said, pulling down the brim of his hat. "I've been in this room before. We're on track. If Moiraine still lives, then she'll be somewhere past here."

CHAPTER

54

The Light of the World

Thom held up his torch, inspecting the enormous star-shaped black columns and their glowing yellow lines. Those lines gave the entire room a sickly light, making Thorn look wan and jaundiced.

Mat remembered the stink of this place, that musty staleness. Now that he knew what to look for, he could smell something else, too. The musky stink of an animal's den. A predator's lair.

There were five corridors leading out of the room, one at each inner point of the star shape. He remembered passing through one of those passageways, but had there not been only one way out before?

"Wonder how high up the pillars go," Thorn said, raising his torch higher and squinting.

Mat held his ashandarei in a firmer grip, palms sweaty. They had entered the foxes' den. He felt at his medallion. The Eelnnn had not used the

Power on him before, but they had to have some understanding of it, did they not? Of course, Ogier could not channel. Perhaps that meant Eelfinn could not either.

Rustling sounds came from the edges of the room. Shadows shifted and moved. The Eelnnn were in there, in that darkness. "Thorn," Mat said. "We should play some more music."

Thorn watched that darkness. He did not object; he raised his flute and began playing. The sound seemed lonely in the vast room.

"Mat," Noal said, kneeling near the center of the room. "Look at this."

"I know," Mat said. "It looks like glass but feels like stone."

"No, not that," Noal said. "There's something here."

Mat edged over to Noal. Thorn joined them, watching and playing as Noal used his lantern to illuminate a melted lump of slag on the floor, perhaps the size of a small chest. It was black, but a deeper, less reflective black than the floor and the columns.

"What do you make of it?" Noal asked. "Maybe one of the trapdoors?"

"No," Mat said. "It's not that."

The other two looked at him.

"It's the doorframe," Mat said, feeling sick. "The red stone doorframe. When I came through it before, it was in the center of a room like this. When it melted on the other side . . ."

"It melted here too," Noal said.

The three stared at it. Thorn's music sounded haunting.

"Well," Mat said. "We knew it wasn't a way out in the first place. We'll have to bargain our way free." And I'll make bloody sure not to get hanged this time.

"Will the dice lead us?" Noal asked, rising.

Mat felt them in his coat pocket. "I don't see why not." But he did not take them out. He turned to regard the depths of the room. Thorn's music seemed to have stilled some of the shadows. But others still moved. There was a restless energy to the air.

"Mat?" Thorn asked.

"You knew I'd come back," Mat said loudly. His voice did not echo. Light! How large was the thing? "You knew I'd come marching back to your bloody realm, didn't you? You knew you'd have me eventually."

Hesitant, Thorn lowered his flute.

"Show yourselves!" Mat said. "I can hear you scrambling, hear you breathing."

"Mat," Thom said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "They couldn't have known that you'd come back. Moiraine didn't know that you'd come for certain."

Mat watched the darkness. "You ever see men lead cattle to slaughter, Thom?"

The gleeman hesitated, then shook his head.

"Well, every man has his own ways," Mat said. "But cattle, see, they'll know something is wrong. They'll smell the blood. They'll get frenzied, refuse to enter the slaughterhouse. And you know how you fix that?"

"Do we have to talk about this now, Mat?"

"You fix it," Mat said, "by taking them through the slaughterhouse a

few times when it is clean, when the scents aren't so strong. You let them go through and escape, see, and they'll think the place is safe." He looked at Thom. "They knew I'd be back. They knew I'd survive that hanging. They know things, Thom. Burn me, but they do."

"We'll get out, Mat," Thom promised. "We can. Moiraine saw it."

Mat nodded firmly. "Bloody right we will. They're playing a game, Thom. I win games." He pulled a handful of dice from his pocket. 1 win them most of the time, anyway.

A voice whispered suddenly from behind them. "Welcome, son of battles."

Mat spun, cursing, glancing about the chamber.

"There," Noal said, pointing with his staff. There was a figure beside one of the pillars, half lit by the yellow light. Another Eelfinn. Taller, his face more angular. His eyes reflected torchlight. Orange.

"I can take you where you wish to go," the Eelfinn said, voice rough and gravelly. He raised an arm against the glow of the torches. "For a price."

"Thom, music."

Thom began playing again.

"One of you already tried to get us to leave our tools behind," Mat said. He pulled a torch from the pack over his arm, then thrust it to the side, lighting it on Noal's lantern. "It won't work."

The Eelfinn shied away from the new light, snarling softly. "You come looking to bargain, yet you purposely antagonize? We have done nothing to earn this."

Mat pulled the scarf free from his neck. "Nothing?"

The creature made no response, though it did back away, stepping into the darker area between pillars. Its too-angular face was now only barely lit by the yellow lights.

"Why do you wish to speak with us, son of battles," the whisperer said from the shadows, "if you are not willing to bargain?"

"No," Mat said. "No bargaining until we reach the great hall, the Chamber of Bonds." That was the only place where they would be bound to the agreement. Is that not what Birgitte had said? Of course, she had seemed to be relying on stories and hearsay herself.

Thom continued playing, eyes darting from side to side, trying to watch the shadows. Noal began to play the little cymbals he had tied to the legs of his trousers, tapping them in time with Thom's music. The shadows continued to move out there, however.

"Your . . . comforts will not slow us, son of battles," a voice said from behind. Mat spun, lowering his weapon. Another Eelfinn stood there, just

inside the shadows. A female, with a crest of red running down her back, the leather straps crossing her breasts in an 'X' pattern. Her red lips smiled. "We are the near ancient, the warriors of final regret, the knowers of secrets."

"Be proud, son of battles," another voice hissed. Mat spun again, sweat dampening his brow. The female vanished back into the shadows, but another Eelfinn strolled through the light. He carried a long, wicked bronze knife, with a crosswork pattern of roses along its length and thorns sticking out near the top of the crossguard. "You draw out our most skilled You are to be . . . savored."

"What—" Mat began, but the lean, dangerous-looking Eelfinn stepped back into the shadows and vanished. Too quickly. As if the darkness had absorbed him.

Other whispers began in the shadows, speaking in low voices, overlapping each other. Faces appeared from the darkness, inhuman eyes wide, lips curled in smiles. The creatures had pointed teeth.

Light! There were dozens of Eelfinn in the room. Shifting, moving about, dancing into the light, then jumping back into the dark. Some were casual, others energetic. All looked dangerous.

"Will you bargain?" one asked.

"You come without treaty. Dangerous," said another.

"Son of battles."

"The savor!"

"Feel his fear."

"Come with us. Leave your terrible light."

"A bargain must be made. We will wait."

"Patient we are. Ever patient."

"The savor!"

"Stop it!" Mat bellowed. "No bargains! Not until we reach the center."

At his side, Thorn lowered the flute. "Mat. I don't think the music is working anymore."

Mat nodded curtly. He needed Thom ready with weapons. The gleeman tucked away his flute, getting out knives. Mat ignored the whispering voices and tossed the dice onto the ground.

As they rolled, a figure scuttled from the darkness beside the nearest pillar. Mat cursed, lowering his spear and striking at the Eelfinn, which moved across the ground on all fours. But his blade passed right through it, as if it were smoke.

Was it an illusion? A trick of the eyes? Mat hesitated long enough for another creature to snatch the dice and leap back toward the shadows.

Something sparkled in the air. Thorn's dagger found its mark, striking the creature in the shoulder. This time the blade pierced and stayed, releasing a spray of dark blood.

Iron, Mat thought, cursing his stupidity. He spun the ashandarei around, using the side banded with iron. He shivered as he saw the Eelfinn's blood on the ground begin to steam. White steam, as in the other chambers, but this had shapes in it. They looked like twisted faces, appearing briefly and yelling before vanishing.

Burn them! He couldn't get distracted. He had other dice. He reached for his pocket, but an Eelfinn ducked from the shadows, as if to grab at his coat.

Mat spun his weapon, striking the side of the fox male's face with the banded iron. He crushed bone, tossing the creature to the side like a bundle of sticks.

Hisses and growls surrounded them. Eyes shifted in the darkness, reflecting torchlight. The Eelfinn moved, cloaked in blackness, surrounding

Mat and the others. Mat cursed, taking a step in the direction of the Eelfinn he had struck.

"Mat!" Thorn said, grabbing the cuff of his coat. "We can't wade into that."

Mat hesitated. It seemed that the stink from before was stronger, the scent of beasts. Shadows moved all about, more frantic now, their whispers angry and mixed with yipping calls.

"They control the darkness," Noal said. He stood with his back to Mat and Thorn, wary. "Those yellow lights are to distract us; there are breaks in them and sheltered alcoves. It's all a trick."

Mat felt his heart beating rapidly. A trick? No, not just a trick. There was something unnatural about the way those creatures moved in the shadow. "Burn them," Mat said, shaking Thorn's hand free but not chasing into the darkness.

"Gentlemen," Noal said. "Gather arms. . . ."

Mat glanced over his shoulder. There were Eelfinn stalking from the shadows behind them, a double wave, one group sliding on all fours before a second group. The second group carried those wicked-looking bronze knives.

The shadows from the depths of the room seemed to be extending with the Eelfinn, closing on Mat and his group. His heart beat even faster.

The Eelfinn eyes shone, and those on all fours began to lope forward. Mat swung as the Eelfinn reached his group, but they split, ducking to the sides. Distracting him.

Behind! Mat thought with alarm. Another group of Eelfinn jumped out of the darkness there.

Mat turned on them, swinging. They ducked back before he hit. Light' They were all around, seething out of the darkness, coming close enough to be dangerous, then backing away.

Thorn whipped out a pair of daggers, throwing, and Noal kept his shortsword at the ready, waving his torch with his other hand, his banded staff on the floor at his feet. One of Thorn's knives flashed, seeking flesh but missed and passed into the darkness.

"Don't waste knives!" Mat said. "Bloody sons of goats, they're trying to make you waste them, Thorn!"

"They're harrying us," Noal growled. "They'll overwhelm us eventually. We have to move!"

"Which way?" Thorn asked, urgent. He cursed as a pair of Eelfinn appeared from the shadows carrying bronze-ended lances. They thrust forward, forcing Mat, Thorn, and Noal to back away.

No time for dice. They would just snatch those anyway. Mat yanked open his pack and pulled out a nightflower. "Once this goes off, I'm going to close my eyes and spin about."

"What?" Thorn said.

"It's worked before!" Mat said, lighting the nightflower and throwing it as hard as he could into the darkness. There was a count of five, and the boom that followed rattled the room. All three of them averted their eyes, but the colorful flash was bright enough to see through eyelids.

Eelfinn screamed in pain, and Mat distinctly heard pings as weapons were dropped. No doubt hands were raised to eyes.

"Here we go!" Mat said, spinning.

"This is flaming insane," Thorn said.

Mat kept going, trying to feel for it. Where was that luck? "That way!" he said, pointing in a random direction.

He opened his eyes in time to leap over the dark form of an Eelfinn huddling on the ground. Mat and Thorn followed, and Mat led them straight into the darkness. He charged ahead until his friends were barely visible. All he could see were those lines of yellow.

Oh, bloody ashes, he thought. If my luck fails me now. . . .

They burst into a five-sided corridor, the darkness vanishing around them. They had not been able to see this corridor from the other room, but here it was.

Thorn let out a whoop. "Mat, you wood-headed shepherd! For this, I'll let you play my harp!"

"I don't want to play your bloody harp," Mat said, glancing over his shoulder. "But you can buy me a mug or two when we're out."

He heard screams and screeches from the dark room. That was one trick used up; they would be expecting nightflowers now. Birgitte, you were right, he thought. You probably walked past the corridor you needed several times, never knowing it was only a few feet away.

Never choose the card a man wants you to. Mat should have realized that. It was one of the oldest cons in creation. They hastened forward, passing five-sided doorways leading into large star-shaped caverns. Thorn and Noal glanced into them, but Mat kept on. Straight forward. This was the way his luck had sent them.

Something was different from when he had visited before. There was no dust on the floor to make footprints. Had they known he was coming, and used the dust to confuse him? Or had they cleaned the place this time, knowing that visitors might arrive? Who knew in a realm such as this?

It had been a long walk before. Or had it been a short one? Time blended here. It seemed that they ran for many hours, yet it also felt like moments.

And then the doorway was in front of them, appearing like a striking adder. It had not been there a moment before. The rim of the opening was intricately carved wood, with an impossible pattern of weaving vines that seemed to double back on one another and make no sense.

All three pulled to a halt. "Mirrors," Noal said. "I've seen it before. That's how they do it, obscuring things with mirrors." He sounded unnerved. Where did one hide mirrors in a bloody straight tunnel?

They were in the right place; Mat could smell it. The stink of the Eelfinn was strongest here. He set his jaw and stepped through the doorway.

The room beyond was as he remembered it. No columns here, though the room was distinctly star-shaped. Eight tips and only the one doorway. Those glowing yellow strips ran up the sharp ends of the room, and eight empty pedestals stood, black and ominous, one at each point.

It was exactly the same. Except for the woman floating at its center.

She was clothed only in a fine white mist that shifted and shone around her, the details of her figure obfuscated but not hidden. Her eyes were closed, and her dark hair—curly but no longer in perfect ringlets— fluttered as if in a wind blowing up from beneath. Her hands rested atop her stomach, and there was a strange bracelet of something that looked like aged ivory on her left wrist.

Moiraine.

Mat felt a surge of emotions. Worry, frustration, concern, awe. She was the one who had started this all. He had hated her at times. He also owed her his life. She was the first one who had meddled, yanking him this way and that. Yet—looking back—he figured that she had been the most honest about it of anyone who had used him. Unapologetic, unyielding. And selfless.

She had dedicated everything to protecting three foolish boys, all ignorant of what the world would demand of them. She had determined to take them to safety. Maybe train them a little, whether they wanted it or not.

Because they needed it.

Light, her motives seemed clear to him now. That did not make him any less angry with her, but it did make him grateful. Burn her, but this was a confusing set of emotions! Those bloody foxes—how dare they keep her like this! Was she alive?

Thorn and Noal were staring—Noal solemn, Thorn disbelieving. So Mat stepped forward to pull Moiraine free. As soon as his hands touched the mist, however, he felt a blazing pain. He screamed, pulling back, shaking his hand.

"It's bloody hot" Mat said. "It—"

He cut off as Thorn stepped forward.

"Thom . . ." Mat said warningly.

"I don't care," the gleeman said. He stepped up to the mist, reaching in, his clothing beginning to steam, his eyes watering from the pain. He did not flinch. He dug into that mist and took hold of her, then pulled her free. Her weight sank into his arms, but his aging limbs were strong, and she looked frail enough that she must not have weighed much.

Light! Mat had forgotten how small she was. A good head shorter than he was. Thom knelt, pulling off his gleeman's cloak and wrapping her in it. Her eyes were still closed.

"Is she . . ." Noal asked.

"She lives," Thom said quietly. "I felt her heartbeat." He took the bracelet off her arm. It was in the shape of a man bent backward with his wrists bound to his ankles, clothed in a strange suit of clothing. "It looks like a ter'angreal of some sort," Thom said, tucking it into his cloak pocket. "I—"

"It is an angreal" a voice proclaimed. "Strong enough to be nearly sa'angreal. It can be part of her price, should you wish to pay it."

Mat spun. The pedestals were now occupied by Eelfinn, four males, four females. All eight wore white instead of black—white skirts with straps across the chests for the males and blouses for the females, made from that disturbing pale substance that looked like skin.

"Mark your tongues," Mat said to Thorn and Noal, trying to contain his worry. "Speak amiss, and they'll have you strung up, claiming it was your own desire. Ask nothing of them."

The other two fell silent, Thorn holding Moiraine close, Noal carrying his torch and staff warily, pack over his shoulder.

"This is the great hall," Mat said to the Eelfinn. "The place called the Chamber of Bonds. You must abide by the pacts you make here."

"The bargain has been arranged," one of the Eelfinn males said, smiling, showing pointed teeth.

The other Eelfinn leaned in, breathing deeply, as if smelling something. Or ... as if drawing something from Mat and the others. Birgitte had said that they fed off emotion.

"What bargain?" Mat snapped, glancing around at the pedestals. "Burn you, what bargain?"

"A price must be paid," one said.

"The demands must be met," said another.

"A sacrifice must be given." This from one of the females. She smiled more broadly than the others. Her teeth were pointed, too.

"I want the way out restored as part of the bargain," Mat said. "I want it back where it was and open again. And I'm not bloody done negotiating, so don't assume that this is my only request, burn you."

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"It will be restored," an Eelfinn said. The others leaned forward. They could sense his desperation. Several of them seemed dissatisfied. They didn't expect us to make it here, Mat thought. They don't like to risk losing us.

"I want you to leave that way out open until we get through," Mat continued. "No blocking it up or making it bloody vanish when we arrive. And I want the way to be direct, no changing rooms about. A straight pathway. And you bloody foxes can't knock us unconscious or try to kill us or anything like that."

They did not like that. Mat caught several of them frowning. Good. They would see they were not negotiating with a child.

"We take her," Mat said. "We get out."

"These demands are expensive," one of the Eelfinn said. "What will you pay for these boons?"

"The price has been set," another whispered from behind.

And it had been. Somehow, Mat knew. A part of him had known from the first time he had read that note. If he had never spoken to the Aelfinn that first time, would any of this have happened? Likely, he would have died. They had to tell the truth.

They had warned him of a payment to come. For life. For Moiraine.

And he would have to pay it. In that moment, he knew that he would. For he knew that if he did not, the cost would be too great. Not just to Thom, not just to Moiraine, and not just to Mat himself. By what he'd been told, the fate of the world itself depended on this moment.

Well burn me for a fool, Mat thought. Maybe I am a hero after all. Didn't that beat all?

"I'll pay it," Mat announced. "Half the light of the world." To save the world.

"Done!" one of the male Eelfinn announced.

The eight creatures leaped—as if one—from their pedestals. They enclosed him in a tightening circle, like a noose. Quick, supple and predatory.

"Mat!" Thom cried, struggling to hold the unconscious Moiraine while reaching for one of his knives.

Mat held up a hand toward Thom and Noal. "This must be done," he said, taking a few steps away from his friends. The Eelfinn passed them without sparing a glance. The gold studs on the straps crossing the male

Eelfinn's chests glittered in the yellow light. All eight creatures were smiling wide.

Noal raised his sword.

"No!" Mat yelled. "Don't break this agreement. If you do, we all will die here!"

The Eelfinn stepped up in a tight circle around Mat. He tried to look at them all at once, heart thudding louder and louder in his chest. They were sniffing at him again, drawing in deep breaths, enjoying whatever it was they drew from him.

"Do it, burn you," Mat growled. "But know this is the last you'll get of me. I'll escape your tower, and I'll find a way to free my mind from you forever. You won't have me. Matrim Cauthon is not your bloody puppet."

"We shall see," an Eelfinn male growled, eyes lustful. The creature's hand snapped forward, too-sharp nails glittering in the dim light. He drove them directly into the socket around Mat's left eye, then ripped the eye out with a snap.

Mat screamed. Light, but it hurt! More than any wound taken in battle, more than any insult or barb. It was as if the creature had pressed its deceitful claws into his mind and soul.

Mat fell to his knees, spear clattering to the ground as he raised hands to his face. He felt slickness on his cheek, and he screamed again as his fingers felt the empty hole where his eye had been.

He threw his head back and yelled into the room, bellowing in agony.

Eelfinn watched with their horrid, almost-human faces, eyes narrowed in ecstasy as they fed on something rising from Mat, An almost invisible vapor of red and white.

"The savor!" one Eelfinn exclaimed.

"So long!" cried another.

"How it twists around him!" said the one who had taken his eye. "How it spins! Scents of blood in the air! And the gambler becomes the center of all! I can taste fate itself!"

Mat howled, his hat falling back as he looked through a single, tear-muddled eye toward the darkness above. His eye socket seemed to be on fire! Blazing! He felt the blood and sera dry on his face, then flake away as he screamed. The Eelfinn drew in deeper breaths, looking drunk.

Mat let out one final scream. Then he clenched his fists and shut his jaw, though he could not stop a low groan—a growl of anger and pain—

from sounding deep within his throat. One of the Eelfinn males collapsed, as if overwhelmed. He was the one who had taken Mat's eye. He clutched it in his hands, curling around it. The others stumbled away, finding their way to pillars or the sides of the room, resting against them for support.

Noal dashed to Mat's side, Thorn following more carefully, still cradling Moiraine.

"Mat?" Noal asked.

Teeth still clenched against the pain, Mat forced himself to reach back and snatch his hat off the white floor. He was not leaving his hat, burn him. It was a bloody good hat.

He stumbled to his feet.

"Your eye, Mat . . ." Thorn said.

"Doesn't matter," Mat said. Burn me for a fool. A bloody, goat-headed fool. He could barely think through the agony.

His other eye blinked tears of pain. It really did seem he had lost half of the light of the world. It was like looking through a window with one half blackened. Despite the blazing pain in his left socket, he felt as he should be able to open his eye.

But he could not. It was gone. And no Aes Sedai channeling could replace that.

He pulled on his hat, defiantly ignoring the pain. He pulled the brim down on the left, shading the empty socket, then bent down and picked up his ashandarei, stumbling but managing it.

"I should have been the one to pay," Thorn said, voice bitter. "Not you, Mat. You didn't even want to come."

"It was my choice," Mat said. "And I had to do it, anyway. It's one of

the answers I was told by the Aelfinn when I first came. I'd have to give up half the light of the world to save the world. Bloody snakes."

"To save the world?" Thorn asked, looking down at Moiraine's peaceful face, her body wrapped in the patchwork cloak. He had left his pack on the floor.

"She has something yet to do," Mat said. The pain was retreating somewhat. "We need her, Thorn. Burn me, but it's probably something to do with Rand. Anyway, this had to happen."

"And if it hadn't?" Thorn asked. "She said she saw . . ."

"It doesn't matter," Mat said, turning toward the doorway. The Eelfinn were still overwhelmed. One would think they had been the ones to lose an eye, looking at those expressions! Mat set his pack on his shoulder, leaving Thorn's where it sat. He could not carry two, not and be able to fight.

"Now I've seen something," Noal said, looking over the room and its occupants. "Something no man has ever seen, I warrant. Should we kill them?"

Mat shook his head. "Might break our bargain."

"Will they keep it?" Thom asked.

"Not if they can wiggle out of it," Mat said, then winced again. Light, but his head hurt! Well, he could not sit around and cry like he had lost his favorite foal. "Let's go."

They made their way out of the grand hall. Noal carried a torch, though he had reluctantly left his staff behind, favoring his shortsword.

There were no openings in the hallway this time, and Mat heard Noal muttering at that. It felt right. He had demanded a straight pathway back. The Eelfinn were liars and cheats, but they seemed to be liars and cheats like the Aes Sedai. Mat had made his demands carefully this time, rather than spouting out whatever occurred to him.

The hallway went on for a long while. Noal was growing more and more nervous; Mat kept on forward, footsteps in time with his throbbing skull. How would missing an eye change how he fought? He would have to be more careful of that left side. And he would have trouble judging distance now. In fact, he had that trouble now—walls and floor were disturbingly hard to judge.

Thom clutched Moiraine close to his chest, like a miser holding his gold. What was she to him, anyway? Mat had assumed that Thom was along for the same reason that Mat was—because it felt as if it needed to be done. That tenderness in Thorn's face was not what Mat had expected to see.

The hallway ended abruptly in a five-sided arch. The room beyond appeared to be the one with the melted slag on the floor. No signs of the fight before were visible, no blood on the floor.

Mat took a deep breath and led the way through. He tensed as he saw Eelfinn here, crouching or standing in the shadows, hissing and growling. They did not move, did not strike, though some yipped quietly. Shadows made them seem even more like foxes. If Mat looked right at one, he could almost mistake them for ordinary men and women, but the way they moved in darkness, sometimes on all fours . . . No man walked like that, with the anxious tension of a chained predator. Like an angry hound, separated from you by a fence and fiercely eager to get to your throat.

But they held to their bargain. None attacked, and Mat began to feel right good about himself once they reached the other side of the room. He had beaten them. Last time, they had gotten the better end, but that was only because they had fought like cowards, punching a man who did not know the fight had started.

This time he had been ready. He had shown them that Matrim Cauthon was no fool.

They entered a corridor with the faintly glowing white steam at the top. The floor was of those black, interlocking triangles, curved on the sides like scales. Mat began to breathe easier as they entered one of the rooms with the twisting steam rising from the corners, though his eye socket still hurt like the nethers of a freshly gelded stallion.

He stopped in the center of the room, but then continued forward. He had demanded a straight pathway. That was what he would get. No doubling back and forth this time. "Blood and bloody ashes!" Mat said, realizing something as he walked.

"What?" Thorn asked, looking up from Moiraine with alarm.

"My dice," Mat said. "I should have included getting my dice back in the bargain."

"But we discovered you don't need them to guide us."

"It's not about that," Mat grumbled. "I like those dice." He pulled his hat down again, looking down the hallway ahead. Was that motion he saw? All the way in the distance, a good dozen rooms away? No, it must be a trick of the shadows and the shifting steam.

"Mat," Noal said. "I've mentioned that my Old Tongue isn't what it once was. But I think I understood what you said. The bargain you made."

"Yes?" Mat said, only half-listening. Had he been speaking in the Old Tongue again? Burn him. And what was that down the hallway?

"Well," Noal said, "you said—as part of the bargain—something like 'you foxes can't knock us down or try to kill us or anything.' "

"Sure did," Mat said.

"You said foxes, Mat," Noal said. "The foxes can't hurt us."

"And they let us pass."

"But what about the others?" Noal asked. "The Aelfinn? If the Eelfinn can't hurt us, are the Aelfinn required to leave us be as well?"

The shadows in the far-distant corridor resolved into figures carrying long, sinuous bronze swords with curving blades. Tall figures, wearing layers of yellow cloth, the hair on their heads straight and black. Dozens of them, who moved with an unnatural grace, eyes staring forward. Eyes with pupils that were vertical slits.

Bloody and bloody ashes!

"Run!" Mat yelled.

"Which direction?" Noal asked, alarmed.

"Any direction!" Mat yelled. "So long as it's away from them!"

CHAPTER 55

The One Left Behind

Aloud boom shook the hallways, making the entire structure rumble. Mat stumbled, leaning against the wall for support as smoke and chips of rock sprayed out of the opening behind them.

He ducked his head around and looked down the hallway as Thorn and Noal ran onward, Thorn clutching Moiraine. Noal had tossed his torch aside and gotten out a drum to try to soothe the Aelfinn. That had not worked, and so Mat had turned to the exploding cylinders and nightflowers.

Light, but the cylinders were deadly! He saw corpses of Aelfinn lying scattered through the hallway, their glistening skin ripped and torn, evil-looking smoke steaming from their blood. Others slid out of doorways and alcoves, pushing through the smoke. They walked on two legs, but they seemed to slither as they walked, waving back and forth through the hallway, their hissing growing angrier and angrier.

Heart pounding, Mat charged after Mat and Noal. "They still following?" Noal called.

"What do you think?" Mat said, catching up to the other two. "Light, but those snakes are fasti"

Mat and the other two burst into another room, identical to all of the others. Vaguely off-scale square walls, steam rising from the corners, black triangle-pattern floor tiles. There was no triangular opening at the center to get them out. Blood and bloody ashes.

Mat glanced at the three ways out, holding his ashandarei in sweaty hands. They could not do the same trick as before, bouncing back and forth between the same two rooms. Not with the Aelfinn behind them. He needed to invoke his luck. He prepared to spin, and—

"We have to keep moving!" Noal yelled. He had stopped by the doorway, dancing from one toe to the next in anxiety. "Mat! If those snakes catch us . . ."

Mat could hear them behind, hissing. Like the rush of a river. He picked a direction and ran.

"Throw another cylinder!" Thorn said.

"That was the last one!" Mat said. "And we've only got three night-flowers." His pack was feeling light.

"Music doesn't work on them," Noal said, throwing aside his drum. "They're too angry."

Mat cursed and lit a nightflower with a striker, then tossed it over his shoulder. The three of them barreled into another room, then continued on directly through the doorway on the other side.

"I don't know what way to go, lad," Thorn said. He sounded so winded! "We're lost."

"I've been picking directions at random!" Mat said.

"Only you can't go backward," Thorn said. "That's probably the direction the luck wants us to go!"

The nightflower boomed, the explosion echoing through the corridors. It was not nearly as great as that of the cylinders. Mat risked a glance over his shoulder, seeing smoke and sparks fly through the tunnel. The fire slowed the Aelfinn, but soon the more daring members of the band slithered through the smoke.

"Maybe we can negotiate!" Thorn panted.

"They look too angry!" Noal said.

"Mat," Thorn said, "you mentioned that they knew about your eye. They answered a question about it."

"They told me I'd bloody give up half the light of the world," Mat said, skull still throbbing. "I didn't want to know, but they told me anyway."

"What else did they say?" Thorn asked. "Anything that can be a clue? How did you get out last time?"

"They threw me out," Mat said.

He and the others burst into another room—no doorway—then dashed out the left-hand exit. What Thorn had said before was correct. They probably needed to double back. But they could not, not with that nest of vipers following so closely!

"They threw me out of the doorframe in the Aelfinn realm," Mat said, feeling winded. "It leads to the basement of the Stone of Tear."

"Then maybe we can find that!" Thom said. "Your luck, Mat. Have it take us to the Aelfinn realm."

It might work. "All right," he said, closing his eye and spinning about.

Mat pointed in a direction and opened his eye. He was pointing directly toward the gang of Aelfinn, weaving up the corridor toward them.

"Bloody ashes!" Mat cursed, turning and running away from them, picking another corridor at random.

Thom joined him, but was looking very wearied. Mat could take Moiraine from him for a while, but Thom would be so tired he would not be able to fight. The Aelfinn were going to run them ragged, as they had Birgitte centuries ago.

In the next room, Thom stumbled to a halt, drooping, though he still held Moiraine. Like all of the chambers, this one had four ways out. But the only way that mattered was one directly toward the Aelfinn. The one they couldn't take.

"There's no winning this game," Thom said, panting. "Even if we cheat, there's no winning."

"Thom . . ." Mat said urgently. He handed Thom his asbandarei, then picked up Moiraine. She was so light. A good thing, too, otherwise Thom would never have lasted as long as he had.

Noal glanced at them, then down the corridor. The Aelfinn would be on them in moments. Noal met Mat's eye. "Give me your pack. I need those nightflowers."

"But—"

"No arguing!" Noal said. He dashed over and snagged one of the nightflowers. It had a very short fuse. He lit it and tossed it into the corridor. The Aelfinn were close enough that Mat could hear them scream and hiss as they saw the firework.

The boom came, sparks spurting out of the corridor and lighting the dark room. Where sparks came close to one of the rising columns of steam, that steam shied back, dancing away from the flames. The air smelled strongly of smoke and sulphur. Light, his socket was throbbing again.

"Now, Mat," Noal said, Mat's ears still ringing from the blast, "give me the pack."

"What are you doing?" Mat said warily as Noal took the pack, then fished out the last nightflower.

"You can see it, Mat," Noal said. "We need more time. You have to get

far enough ahead of those vipers that you can double back a few times, let your luck work you out of this."

Noal nodded to one of the corridors "These corridors are narrow. Good choke points. A man could stand there and only have to fight one or two at a time. He'd last maybe a few minutes."

"Noal!" Thom said, wheezing, standing with his hands on his knees near Mat's asbandarei leaning against the wall. "You can't do this."

"Yes I can," Noal said. He stepped up to the corridor, beyond which the Aelfinn gathered. "Thom, you're in no shape to fight. Mat, you're the one whose luck can find the way out. Neither of you can stay. But I can."

"There will be no coming back for you," Mat said grimly. "As soon as we double back, this flaming place will take us somewhere else."

Noal met his eye, that weathered face determined. "I know. A price, Mat. We knew this place would demand a price. Well, I've seen a lot of things, done a lot of things. I've been used, Mat, one too many times. This is as good a place as any to meet the end."

Mat stood up, lifting Moiraine, then nodded in respect to Noal. "Come on, Thom."

"But—"

"Come on!" Mat barked, dashing to one of the other doorways. Thom hesitated, then cursed and joined him, carrying Mat's torch in one hand and his asbandarei in the other. Noal stepped into the corridor behind, hefting his shorts word. Shapes moved in the smoke beyond him.

"Mat," Noal called, glancing over his shoulder.

Mat waved Thom on, but hesitated, looking back.

"If you ever meet a Malkieri," Noal said, "you tell him Jain Farstrider died clean."

"I will, Jain," Mat said. "May the light hold you."

Noal turned back to face the Aelfinn and Mat left him. There was another boom as a nightflower went off. Then Mat heard Noal's voice echo down the corridor as he screamed a battlecry. It was not in any tongue Mat had ever heard.

He and Thom entered another chamber. Thom was weeping, but Mat held his tears. Noal would die with honor. Once, Mat would have thought that kind of thinking foolish—what good was honor if you were dead? But he had too many memories of soldiers, had spent too much time with men who fought and bled for that honor, to discredit such notions now.

He closed his eye and spun, Moiraine's weight almost unbalancing him. He picked a direction and found himself pointing back the way they had come. He charged down the corridor, Thom following.

When they reached the end of the corridor, it did not open into the room where they had left Noal. This room was round and was filled with yellow columns, made in the shape of enormous vines twisting around one another with an open cylinder of space at the center. Coiled lamp stands held globes of white that gave the room a soft light, and the floor was tiled in the pattern of white and yellow strips, spiraling out from the center. It smelled pungently of dry snakeskin.

Matrim Cauthon, you're no hero, he thought, glancing over his shoulder. That man you left behind, he's the hero. Light illumine you, Noal.

"Now what?" Thorn asked. He seemed to have recovered some of his strength, so Mat handed back Moiraine and took his spear. There were only two doorways in this room, the one behind and one directly across the chamber. But Mat spun with his eye closed anyway. The luck pointed them to the doorway opposite the one they had entered.

They took it. The windows in this hallway looked out at the jungle, and they were now down in the thick of it. Mat occasionally spotted those three spires. The place where they had been moments ago, the place where Noal bled.

"This is where you got your answers, isn't it?" Thorn asked.

Mat nodded.

"You think I could get some of those myself?" Thom asked. "Three questions. Any answers you like. . . ."

"You don't want them," Mat said, tugging down the brim of his hat. "Trust me, you don't. They aren't answers. They're threats. Promises. We—"

Thom stopped beside him. In Thorn's arms, Moiraine was beginning to stir. She let out a soft groan, eyes still closed. But that was not what made Mat freeze.

He could see another circular yellow room up ahead. Sitting in the middle of that room was a redstone doorway. Or what was left of it.

Mat cursed, running forward. The floor was strewn with chunks of red rock rubble. Mat groaned, dropping his spear and taking a few of the chunks, holding them up. The doorway had been shattered by something, a blow of awesome force.

Near the entrance to the room, Thom sank down, holding the stirring Moiraine. He looked exhausted. Neither of them had a pack anymore; Mat had given his to Noal, and Thom had left his behind. And this room was a dead end, with no other doorways.

"Burn this place!" Mat shouted, ripping off his hat, staring up into the expansive, endless darkness above. "Burn you all, snakes and foxes! Dark

One take the lot of you. You have my eye, you have Noal. That's enough of a price for you! That's too much of a price! Isn't the life of Jain bloody Far-strider enough to appease you, you monsters!"

His words rang and vanished, with no reply. The old gleeman squeezed his eyes shut, holding Moiraine. He looked beaten, ground down to nothing. His hands were red and blistered from pulling her free, his coat sleeves burned.

Mat looked about, desperate. He tried spinning about with eye closed pointing. When he opened his eye, he was pointing at the center of the room. The broken doorway.

It was then that he felt hope start to die inside of him.

"It was a good try, lad," Thorn said. "We did well. Better than we should have expected."

"I won't give up," Mat said, trying to defy the crushing sense inside of him. "We'll . . . we'll retrace our steps, find a way back to the place between the Aelfinn and Eelfinn. The bargain said they had to leave that portal open. We'll take it and get out of here, Thorn. I'll be burned if I'm going to die in here. You still owe me a couple of mugs."

Thorn opened his eyes and smiled, but did not stand up. He shook his head, those drooping mustaches wagging, and looked down at Moiraine.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Thorn," she whispered, smiling. "I thought I heard your voice."

Light, but her voice took Mat back. To other times. Ages ago.

She glanced at him. "And Mat. Dear Matrim. I knew you would come for me. Both of you. I wish you hadn't, but I knew you would. . . ."

"Rest, Moiraine," Thorn said softly. "We'll be out of here in two strums of a harp."

Mat looked at her, lying there, helpless. "Burn me. I'm not going to let it end like this!"

"They're coming, lad," Thorn said. "I can hear them."

Mat turned to look through the opening. He could see what Thorn had heard. The Aelfinn crept through the corridor, sinuous and deadly. They smiled, and he could see fanglike incisors at the forefront of those smiles. They could have been human, save for those fangs. And those eyes. Those unnatural, slitted eyes. They moved sleekly. Terrible, eager.

"No," Mat whispered. "There has to be a way." Think, he told himself. Mat, you fool. There has to be a way out. How did you escape the last time? Noal had asked. That was no help.

Thorn, looking desperate, unhooked his harp from his back. He began to play it. Mat recognized the tune, "Sweet Whispers of Tomorrow." A mournful sound, played for the fallen dead. It was beautiful.

Remarkably, the music did seem to soothe the Aelfinn. They slowed, the ones at the front beginning to sway to the beat of the melody as they walked. They knew. Thorn played for his own funeral.

"I don't know how I got out last time," Mat whispered. "I was unconscious. I woke up being hanged. Rand cut me down."

He raised a hand to his scar. His original Aelfinn answers revealed nothing. He knew about the Daughter of the Nine Moons, he knew about giving up half the light of the world. He knew about Rhuidean. It all made sense. No holes. No questions.

Except. . . .

What did the Eelfinn give you?

"If I had my way," Mat whispered, staring at the oncoming Aelfinn, "I would want those holes filled."

The Aelfinn slithered forward, wearing those cloths of yellow wrapping their bodies. Thorn's music spun in the air, echoing. The creatures approached with steady, slow steps. They knew they had their prey now.

The two Aelfinn at the front carried swords of gleaming bronze, dripping red. Poor Noal.

Thom began to sing. "Oh, how long were the days of a man. When he strode upon a broken land."

Mat listened, memories blossoming in his mind. Thorn's voice carried him to days long ago. Days in his own memories, days of the memories of others. Days when he had died, days when he had lived, days when he had fought and when he had won.

"I want those holes filled . . ." Mat whispered to himself. "That's what I said. The Eelfinn obliged, giving me memories that were not my own."

Moiraine's eyes had closed again, but she smiled as she listened to Thorn's music. Mat had thought Thom was playing for the Aelfinn, but now he wondered if he was playing for Moiraine. A last, melancholy song for a failed rescue.

"He sailed as far as a man could steer," Thom sang, voice sonorous, beautiful. "And he never wished to lose his fear."

"I want those holes filled," Mat repeated, "so they gave me memories. That was my first boon."

"For the fear of man is a thing untold. It keeps him safe, and it proves him bold!"

"I asked something else, not knowing it," Mat said. "I said I wanted to

be free of Aes Sedai and the Power. They gave me the medallion for that. Another gift."

"Don't let fear make you cease to strive, for that fear it proves you remain alive!"

"And . . . and I asked for one more thing. I said I wanted to be away from them and back to Rhuidean. The Eelfinn gave me everything I asked for. The memories to fill my holes. The medallion to keep me free from the Power. . . ."

And what? They sent him back to Rhuidean to hang. But hanging was a price, not an answer to his demands.

"I will walk this broken road," Thorn sang, voice growing louder, "and I will carry a heavy load!"

"They did give me something else," Mat whispered, looking down at the ashandarei in his hands as the Aelfinn began to hiss more loudly.

Thus is our treaty written; thus is agreement made.

It was carved on the weapon. The blade had two ravens, the shaft inscribed with words in the Old Tongue.

Thought is the arrow of time; memory never fades.

Why had they given to him? He had never questioned it. But he had not asked for a weapon.

What was asked is given. The price is paid.

No, I didn't ask for a weapon. I asked for a way out.

And they gave me this.

"So come at me with your awful lies," Thorn bellowed the final line of the song. "I'm a man of truth, and I'll meet your eyes!"

Mat spun the ashandarei and thrust it into the wall. The point sank into the not-stone. Light sprayed out around it, spilling free like blood gushing from a split vein. Mat screamed, ramming it in farther. Powerful waves of light erupted from the wall.

He drew the ashandarei down at an angle, making a slit. He pulled the weapon up the other side, cutting out a large inverse triangle of light. The light seemed to thrum as it washed across him. The Aelfinn had reached the doorway by Thorn, but they hissed, shying back from the powerful radiance.

Mat finished by drawing a wavy line down the middle of the triangle. He could barely see, the light was so bright. The section of the wall in front of him fell away, revealing a glowing white passage that seemed to be cut out of steel.

"Well I'll . . ." Thorn whispered, standing up.

The Aelfinn screamed with high-pitched anger. They entered the room, arms raised to shield their eyes, wicked swords gripped in opposing hands.

"Get her out!" Mat bellowed, spinning to face the creatures. He lifted the ashandarei, using the butt end to smash the face of the first Aelfinn. "Go!"

Thorn grabbed Moiraine, then spared a glance at Mat.

"Go!" Mat repeated, smashing the arm of another Aelfinn.

Thom leaped into the doorway and vanished. Mat smiled, spinning among the Aelfinn with his ashandarei, laying into legs, arms, heads. There were a lot of them, but they seemed dazed by the light, frenzied to get to him. As he tripped the first few, the others stumbled. The creatures became a squirming mass of sinuous arms and legs, hissing and spitting in anger, several of those in back trying to crawl over the pile to reach him.

Mat stepped back and tipped his hat to the creatures. "Looks like the game can be won after all," he said. "Tell the foxes I'm mighty pleased with this key they gave me. Also, you can all go rot in a flaming pit of fire and ashes, you unwashed lumps on a pig's backside. Have a grand bloody day."

He held his hat and leaped through the opening.

All flashed white.

CHAPTER

56

Something Wrong

A soft knock came at the post outside Egwene's tent. "Come," she said, shuffling through the papers on her desk. Gawyn slipped in. He'd given up his fine clothing, choosing trousers of brown and a slightly lighter shirt. A Warders color-shifting cloak hung around his shoulders, making him blend into his surroundings. Egwene herself was wearing a regal dress of green and blue.

His cloak rustled as he took a seat beside her desk. "Elayne's army is crossing. She sent word that she's on her way to come visit our camp."

"Excellent," Egwene said. Gawyn nodded, but he was troubled. Such a useful thing, that ball of emotions caused by the bond. If she'd known earlier the depth of his devotion to her, she'd have bonded him weeks ago. "What?" Egwene asked, setting aside her papers.

"Aybara," he said. "He hasn't agreed to meet with you."

"Elayne said he might be difficult."

"I think he's going to take al'Thor's side," Gawyn said. "You can see it in the way he set up camp, apart from everyone else. He sent messengers immediately to the Aiel and to the Tairens. He's got a good army, Egwene. A huge one. With Whitecloaks in it."

"That doesn't sound likely to make him side with Rand," Egwene said.

"Doesn't seem like it makes him likely to side with us either," Gawyn said. "Egwene . . . Galad leads the Whitecloaks."

"Your brother?"

"Yes." Gawyn shook his head. "This many armies, this many loyalties, all rubbing against one another. Aybara and his force could be a spark that sends us all up like a firework."

"It will be better when Elayne settles in," Egwene said.

"Egwene, what if al'Thor isn't coming? What if he did this to distract everyone from whatever else he's doing?"

"Why would he do that?" Egwene said. "He's already proven that he can avoid being found, if he wants to." She shook her head. "Gawyn, he knows he shouldn't break those seals. A part of him does, at least. Perhaps that's why he told me—so I could gather resistance, so I could talk him out of it."

Gawyn nodded. No further complaint or argument. It was a wonder how he'd changed. He was as intense as ever, yet less abrasive. Ever since that night with the assassins, he had started doing as she asked. Not as a servant. As a partner dedicated to seeing her will done.

It was a wonderful thing. It was also important, since the Hall of the Tower seemed determined to overturn their agreement to let her take charge of dealings with Rand. She looked down at her stack of papers, not a few of which were letters of "advice" from Sitters.

But they came to her, rather than circumventing her. That was good, and she couldn't ignore them. She had to make them continue to believe that working with her was for the best. At the same time, she couldn't let them assume that she'd be blown over by a few good shouts.

Such a delicate balance. "Well, let's go meet your sister, then."

Gawyn rose, moving smoothly. The three rings he wore on a chain around his neck rattled as he moved; she'd have to ask him again where he'd gotten those. He had been oddly closemouthed about them. He held open the tent flaps for her, and she stepped out.

Outside, the late-afternoon sun was hidden by gray clouds. Bryne's soldiers worked busily on a palisade. His army had swelled during the last few weeks, and they dominated the eastern side of the wide, forest-rimmed grassland that had once been known as Merrilor. The ruins of the tower fortress that had stood here were strewn across the northern side of the field, moss-covered, nearly hidden by chokevine.

Egwene's tent was on a rise, and she could overlook the many armies encamped here. "Is that one new?" she asked, gesturing toward a smaller force that had taken up a position just below the ruins.

"They came on their own," Gawyn said. "Farmers, mostly. Not really a true army; most don't have swords. Pitchforks, wood axes, quarterstaffs. I assume al'Thor sent them. They started wandering in yesterday."

"Curious," Egwene said. They seemed a varied bunch, with mismatched tents and little understanding of how to set up an army camp. But there did seem to be some five or ten thousand of them. "Have some scouts keep an eye on them."

Gawyn nodded.

Egwene turned and noted a procession moving through several gateways nearby, setting up camp. The Lion of Andor flew high above them and the soldiers marched in orderly rows. A procession in red and white had left them and was marching toward Egwene's camp, the banner of the Queen flying above them.

Gawyn accompanied Egwene across the yellowed grass to meet Elayne. The Andoran Queen had certainly taken her time. Only one day until the time specified by Rand. Still, she had come, as had others. Aiel had accompanied Darlin from Tear, and her persuasion had been enough to bring a large contingent of Illianers, who camped on the western side of the grass.

The Cairhienin were Elayne's now, by reports, and were coming through with the Andorans and a large number of men from the Band of the Red Hand. Egwene had sent an offer, and a woman to offer Traveling, to King Roedran of Murandy, but she was uncertain if he would come. Even without him, however, a considerable number of the world's nations were represented here, particularly since the flags of Ghealdan and Mayene could be seen among Perrin's armies. She would have to contact their two rulers and see if she could sway them to her way of thinking. But even if not, surely what she had gathered would be enough to convince Rand to change his plans. Light send it was enough. She didn't want to think of what would happen if he forced her hand.

She walked down the pathway, nodding back to sisters who nodded and Accepted who curtsied, soldiers who saluted and servants who bowed. Rand would—

"It can't be," Gawyn said suddenly, freezing in place.

"Gawyn?" she said, frowning. "Are you—"

He took off at a run across the weed-strewn hill. Egwene looked after him with dissatisfaction. He still had an impulsive streak. Why was he so upset, suddenly? It wasn't worry; she could feel that. It was confusion. She hastened after him with as much speed as decorum would allow. Elayne's envoy had stopped in the dead grass.

Gawyn was on his knees there, before someone. An older woman with red-gold hair, standing beside a smiling Elayne, who still sat her horse.

Ah, Egwene thought. Her spies had delivered word of this rumor just last night, but she'd wanted to confirm it before speaking to Gawyn.

Morgase Trakand lived.

Egwene stood back, for now. Once she stepped forward, Elayne would have to kiss her ring and the entire procession would bow; that would spoil Gawyn's moment. As she waited, the clouds above grew thinner.

Suddenly they split, the dark thunderheads pulling back. The sky became an open field of blue, a deep, pure expanse. Elayne's eyes opened wide, and she turned on her horse, looking at Perrin's section of camp.

He's come, then, Egwene thought. And the calm is here. The brief moment of peace before the storm that destroys.

"You give it a try, Emarin," Androl said, standing with a small group inside a stand of trees near the border of the Black Tower grounds.

The stately nobleman concentrated, holding the One Power. Weaves sprang up around him. He was remarkably skillful, considering his short time practicing, and expertly crafted the weave for a gateway.

Instead of opening a hole in the air, the weave unraveled and vanished. Emarin turned to the rest of them, sweat streaming down his face. "Forming those weaves seemed harder than before," he said.

"Why won't they work?" Evin said. The young man's youthful face flushed with anger—as if the problem with gateways was an insult.

Androl shook his head, arms folded. The trees rustled, leaves shivering, many falling to the ground. Brown, as if it were autumn. That unnerved him. He'd spent some time working the ground during his journeys in life, and had acquired a farmer's sense for right and wrong regarding the land.

"You try it again, Androl," Evin said. "You're always so good with gateways."

He glanced at the other three. Canler was the other one there; the aging Andoran farmer wore a deep frown. Of course, Canler often scowled at one thing or another.

Androl closed his eyes, emptying himself of all passions, embracing the void. Saidin shone in there, life and Power. He seized it, drinking it in. He opened his eyes to a world that was more vibrant. Could dead plants look both sickly and vibrant at the same time? A strange juxtaposition made possible by saidin.

He focused. Making gateways came so much easier to him than other weaves did; he'd never understood why. Though he couldn't break even a small rock apart by channeling, he could make a gateway large enough for a wagon to drive through. Logain had called it impressive; Taim had called it impossible.

This time, Androl pushed all of the Power he had into his weave. He understood gateways. They made sense. Maybe it was the innate fondness he had for traveling, for discovering new places and new arts.

The weaves came together. He didn't notice any of the difficulty that Emarin had mentioned. However, when the familiar slash of light should have come, the weave began to unravel instead. Androl tried to hold to it pulling it together. For a moment, it looked like that would work. Then the threads slid from his grip, evaporating. The gateway never formed.

"The other weaves I've tried all work," Evin said, making a globe of light. "Every one of them."

"Only gateways," Canler said with a grunt.

"It's like . . ." Emarin said. "It's as if something wants to keep us here. In the Black Tower."

"Try them in other places inside the perimeter," Androl said. "But try not to let any of Taim's loyalists see what you're doing. Pretend to be surveying, as Taim ordered."

The men nodded, the three of them hiking toward the east. Androl left the glade. Norley was standing beside the road, looking about for him. The short, thick-waisted Cairhienin man waved and approached. Androl met him halfway. Norley had an open, inviting smile. Nobody ever suspected him of spying on them, something Androl had put to good use.

"You spoke with Mezar?" Androl asked.

"Sure did," Norley replied. "Shared a lunch with him." Norley waved at Mishraile as they passed him supervising a group of soldiers practicing their weaves. The golden-haired man turned away dismissively.

"And?" Androl asked, tense.

"It's not really Mezar," Norley said. "Oh, it has Mezar's face, right enough. But it's not him. I can see it in his eyes. Trouble is, whatever the thing is, it has Mezar's memories. Talks right like him. But the smile is wrong. All wrong."

Androl shivered. "It has to be him, Norley."

"It ain't. I promise you that."

"But—"

"It just ain't" the stout man said.

Androl took a deep breath. When Mezar had returned a few days back—explaining that Logain was well and that all would soon be resolved with Taim—Androl had begun to hope that there was a way out of this mess. But something had seemed off about the man. Beyond that, the M'Hael had made a great show of accepting Mezar as a full Ashaman; the

Dragon had raised him. And now Mezar—once fiercely loyal to Logain— was spending his time with Coteren and Taim's other lackeys.

"This is getting bad, Androl," Norley said softly, smiling and waving toward another group of practicing men. "I'd say it's time for us to leave here, whether or not it's against orders."

"We'd never get past those guard posts," Androl said. "Taim won't even let those Aes Sedai leave; you heard the fit that plump one threw at the gates the other day. Taim doubles the guard at night, and gateways don't work."

"Well, we have to do something, don't we? I mean . . . what if they've got Logain? What then?"

"I . . ." Z don't know. "Go talk to the others who are loyal to Logain. I'm going to move us to a shared barrack. Them and their families. We'll tell the M'Hael that we want to give more space for his new recruits. Then we'll post a guard at nights."

"That's going to be a little obvious."

"The division is already obvious," Androl said. "Go do it."

"Sure thing. But what are you going to do?"

Androl took a deep breath. "I'm going to find us some allies."

Norley moved off to the left, but Androl continued down the path, through the village. It seemed that fewer and fewer people were showing him respect these days. Either they were afraid to do so, or they'd thrown their lot in with Taim.

Packs of black-coated man stood, with arms folded, watching him. Androl tried not to feel a chill. As he walked, he noted Mezar—hair graying at the sides, skin a Domani copper—standing with a group of lackeys. The man smiled at him. Mezar hadn't ever been one who smiled easily. Androl nodded to him, meeting his eyes.

And he saw what Norley had seen. Something was deeply wrong, something not-quite-alive inside those eyes. This didn't seem to be a man, but a parody of one. A shadow stuffed inside human skin.

Light help us all, Androl thought, hurrying by. He made his way to the southern side of the village, to a group of small huts with bleached white wood walls and thatched roofs that needed to be replaced.

Androl hesitated outside. What was he doing? This was where the women of the Red Ajah were staying. They said they'd come to bond the Ashaman, but they hadn't done it so far. That was obviously some kind of ruse. Perhaps they'd come here to try to find a way to gentle the entire lot.

But if that were the case, then at least he could count on them not siding with Taim. When you stared down the gullet of a lionfish, a pirate's

brig didn't seem so bad. Androl had heard the saying once while working a fisher's boat in the south.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked. The plump Red answered the door. She had the ageless face of an Aes Sedai—not young, really, but also not old. She eyed him.

"I hear you want to leave the Black Tower," Androl said, hoping he was doing the right thing.

"Has your M'Hael changed his mind?" she asked, sounding hopeful. She actually smiled. A rare action for an Aes Sedai.

"No," Androl said, "so far as I know, he still forbids you to leave."

She frowned. "Then—"

Androl lowered his voice. "You're not the only one who would like to leave this place, Aes Sedai."

She looked at him, her face becoming perfectly calm. She doesn't trust me, he thought. Odd, how the mere lack of emotion could itself convey meaning.

Desperate, he took a step forward, laying a hand on the frame of the door. "Something's wrong in this place. Something worse than you understand. Once, long ago, men and women who worked the Power strove together. They were stronger for it. Please. Hear me out."

She stood for a moment longer, then pulled the door open. "Come in, quickly. Tarna—the woman I share this hut with—is away. We must be done before she returns."

Androl stepped up into the building. He didn't know whether he was stepping into the pirate's brig or the lionfish's mouth. But it would have to do.

CHAPTER

57

A Rabbit for Supper

A Rabbit for Supper

Mat hit uneven ground, blinded by the flash of light. Cursing, he used the ashandarei to steady himself on the springy earth. He smelled foliage, dirt and rotting wood. Insects buzzed in the shade.

The whiteness faded, and he found himself standing outside the Tower of Ghenjei. He had half-expected to reappear in Rhuidean. It seemed that the spear returned him to his world in the place where he had entered. Thom sat on the ground, propping up Moiraine, who was blinking and looking about her.

Mat spun on the tower and pointed upward. "I know you're watching!" he said, thrilled. He had made it. He had bloody made it out alive! "I beat you, you crusty boot-leavings! I, Matrim Cauthon, survived your traps! Ha!" He raised the ashandarei over his head. "And you gave me the way out! Chew on that bitterness for lunch, you flaming, burning, misbegotten liars!"

Mat beamed, slamming the spear down butt first onto the ground beside him. He nodded. Nobody got the better of Matrim Cauthon. They had lied to him, told him vague prophecies and threatened him, and then they had hanged him. But Mat came out ahead in the end.

"Who was the other?" Moiraine's soft voice asked from behind. "The one I saw, but did not know?"

"He didn't make it out," Thom said somberly.

That dampened Mat's spirits. Their victory had come at a price, a terrible one. Mat been traveling with a legend all this time?

"He was a friend," Thorn said softly.

"He was a great man," Mat said, turning and pulling his ashandarei from where he had planted it in the dirt. "When you write the ballad of all this, Thom, make sure you point out that he was the hero."

Thorn glanced at Mat, then nodded knowingly. "The world will want to know what happened to that man." Light. As Mat thought about it Thom had not been at all surprised to hear Noal was Jain Farstrider. He had known. When had he figured it out? Why had he said nothing to Mat? Some friend Thom was.

Mat just shook his head. "Well, we're out, one way or another. But Thom, next time I want to do the bloody negotiating, sneak up behind and hit me on the head with something large, heavy and blunt. Then take over."

"Your request is noted."

"Let's move on a little way. I don't like that bloody tower looming over me."

"Yes," Moiraine said, "you could say that they feed off emotion. Though I wouldn't call it 'feeding off so much as 'delighting in' emotion. They don't need it to survive, but it pleases them greatly."

They sat in a wooded hollow a short walk from the tower, next to the meadow beside the Arinelle. The thick tree canopy cooled the air and obscured their view of the tower.

Mat sat on a small, mossy boulder as Thom made a fire. He had a few of Aludra's strikers in his pocket as well as some packets of tea, though there was nothing to warm the water in.

Moiraine sat on the ground, still wrapped in Thorn's cloak, leaning back against a fallen log. She held the cloak closed from the inside, letting it envelop her completely, save for her face and those dark curls. She looked more a woman than Mat remembered—in his memories, she was like a statue. Always expressionless, face like polished stone, eyes like dark brown topaz.

Now she sat with pale skin, flushed cheeks, hair curled and falling naturally around her face. She was fetching, save for that ageless Aes Sedai face. Yet that face showed far more emotion than Mat remembered, a look of fondness when she glanced at Thom, a faint shiver when she spoke of her time in the tower.

She glanced at Mat, and her eyes were still appraising. Yes, this was the same Moiraine. Humbled, cast down. That made her seem stronger to him for some reason.

Thorn blew at a hesitant flame that curled a lock of smoke into the air before flickering out. The wood was probably too wet. Thorn cursed.

"It's all right, Thom," Moiraine said softly. "I will be well."

"I won't have you catching cold the moment we free you from that place" Thom said. He got out a striker, but suddenly the wood sparked, and then fire sputtered to life as it consumed the too-wet tinder.

Mat glanced at Moiraine, who had a look of concentration on her face.

"Oh," Thom said, then chuckled. "I'd forgotten about that, nearly. . . ."

"It's all I can manage now on my own," Moiraine said, grimacing. Light, had Moiraine grimaced before? She been too high-and-mighty for that, had she not? Or was Mat remembering her wrong?

Moiraine. He was talking to flaming Aloirainel Though he had gone into the tower with the distinct purpose of rescuing her, it seemed incredible that he was speaking with her. It was like talking to . . .

Well, like talking to Birgitte Silverbow or Jain Farstrider. Mat smiled, shaking his head. What a world this was, and what a strange place he had in it.

"What did you mean by that, Moiraine?" Thom asked, nurturing the fire with some sticks. "It's all you can manage?"

"The Aelfinn and Eelfinn," she explained, voice calm. "They savor and relish powerful emotions. For some reason the effects of a ta'veren are even more intoxicating to them. There are other things that they enjoy."

Thom glanced at her, frowning.

"My Power, Thom," she explained. "I could hear them barking and hissing to one another as they fed on me, both Aelfinn and Eelfinn in turn. They have not often had an Aes Sedai to themselves, it seems. While draining my ability to channel, they were fed twofold—my sorrow at what I was losing and the Power itself. My capacity has been greatly reduced.

"They claimed to have killed Lanfear by draining her too quickly, though I think they may have been trying to make me afraid. A man was there once, when they woke me. He said I was not the one he wanted." She hesitated, then shivered. "Sometimes I wished that they would drain me quickly and end my life."

The small camp grew silent save for the popping of the fire. Thom looked toward Moiraine, seeming helpless.

"Do not show me such sorrow, Thom Merrilin," Moiraine said, smiling. "I have felt terrible things, but all people know such moments of despair. I believed that you would come." She removed her hand from the cloak—revealing a slender, pale shoulder and collarbone—and reached toward him. He hesitated, then took the hand and squeezed it.

Moiraine looked to Mat. "And you, Matrim Cauthon. Not a simple farm lad any longer. Does your eye pain you much?"

Mat shrugged.

"I would Heal the wound if I could," Moiraine said. "But even were I still as strong as I once was, I couldn't restore your eye." She looked down releasing Thorn's hand and holding up her arm. "Do you have the angreal?"

"Oh, yes," Thorn said, fishing the strange bracelet out of his pocket. He put it on her arm.

"With this," Moiraine said. "I will be strong enough to at least take the pain away. They placed it on me to let me draw more of the Power, to make their feeding more succulent. I asked for it, actually, as one of my three demands. I did not realize they would end up using it against me."

"They gave you your three demands?" Mat asked, frowning.

"I passed through the ter'angreal" she said. "The ancient treaty held for both of us, though with the doorway destroyed, there was no simple return. I knew from . . . previous events that I would not escape unless you came for me, no matter what my demands were or how carefully I worded them. So I used them for the best."

"What did you ask for?" Mat asked. "Beyond the angreal?"

She smiled. "I shall keep that to myself, for now. You do have my thanks, young Matrim. For my life."

"Then I guess we're equal," he said. "You saved me from life in the Two Rivers. Burn me if I haven't had a nice gallop of it since then."

"And your wound?"

"Doesn't hurt so much." Actually, it throbbed. Really, really badly. "No need for you to waste strength on it."

"Still afraid of the One Power, I see."

He bristled. "Afraid?"

"I should think you have good reason for that wariness." She looked away from him. "But take care. The most displeasing of events in our lives are sometimes for our good."

Yes, she was still Moiraine. Quick with a moral and advice. But perhaps she had a right—after what she had been through—to lecture on suffering. Light! She had known what she would have to go through, and yet she had still pulled Lanfear into that ter'angreal? Maybe Mat was not the hero here, and maybe Noal was not either.

"So what now?" Thorn said, settling back on a stump. The warmth of the fire did feel good.

"I must find Rand," Moiraine said. "He will need my help. I trust he has done well in my absence?"

"I don't know about that," Mat said. "He's half mad and the whole bloody world is at one another's throats." Colors swirled. Rand eating a meal with Min. Mat dispelled the image.

She raised an eyebrow.

"But," Mat acknowledged, "he's got most everybody pointed toward the Last Battle. And Verin says he managed to clean the taint from saidin."

"Blessed Light," Moiraine whispered. "How?"

"I don't know."

"This changes everything," she said, smile deepening. "He has fixed what he once set wrong. 'By the Dragon came our pain, and by the Dragon was the wound repaired.'"

"Mat keeps saying we should be having a festival or something to celebrate," Thorn noted. "Though maybe he only wants a good excuse to get drunk."

"I'd say that's a certainty," Mat added. "Anyway, Rand's been busy. Elayne says he's got some kind of meeting arranged with the monarchs under him coming up soon."

"Elayne is Queen, then?"

"Sure is. Her mother was killed by Rahvin," Mat said.

"So you told me."

"I did? When?"

"A lifetime ago, Matrim," she replied, smiling.

"Oh. Well, Rand finished him off. So that's good."

"And the other Forsaken?" Moiraine asked.

"Don't know," Mat said.

"Mat's been too busy to keep track," Thom added. "He's been spending his time marrying the Empress of the Seanchan."

Moiraine blinked in surprise. "You did what?"

"It was an accident," Mat said lamely, hunching down.

"You accidentally married the Seanchan Empress?"

"They've got some odd customs," Mat said, pulling his hat down. "Strange folk." He forced out a chuckle.

"Ta'veren" Moiraine said.

Somehow, he had known she would say that. Light. Well, it was good to have her back. Mat was surprised at how strongly he felt that. Who would have thought it? Affection for an Aes Sedai, from him?

"Well," she said, "I can see there are many tales I need to be told. But for now, we will need to seek out Rand."

He had also known that she would try to take charge. "You find him Moiraine, but I've got things to do in Caemlyn. Don't mean to argue and all, but that's the fact of it. You should come there, too. Elayne's more likely than anyone else to be able to help you with Rand."

Bloody colors. As if having one eye were not bad enough, he had those flaming visions bunching up his sight every time he so much as thought of Ran—

Burn those visions!

Moiraine raised an eyebrow as he shook his head, then blushed. He probably looked like he was having a fit.

"We shall see, Matrim," she said, then glanced at Thorn, who stood holding the packets of tea. Mat half thought he would try to boil water in his own hands, if only to get some warm tea for Moiraine. Thorn looked at her, and she held out her hand again.

"Dearest Thorn," she said. "I would have you for a husband, if you'll have me for a wife."

"What?" Mat said, standing up. He raised a hand to his forehead, nearly knocking his hat free. "What did you say?"

"Hush, Mat," Thorn said. He did not take Moiraine's offered hand. "You know I've never much liked women who can channel the One Power, Moiraine. You know it held me back in the past."

"I don't have much of the Power now, dearest Thorn. Without this angreal, I wouldn't be strong enough to be raised Accepted in the White Tower. I will throw it away, if you wish it of me." She lifted out her other hand, barely staying modest. She pulled off the angreal.

"I don't think so, Moiraine," Thorn said, kneeling down, taking her hands. "No, I won't rob you of anything."

"But with it I'll be very strong, stronger in the Power than before I was taken."

"So be it, then," he said. He put the bracelet back on her wrist. "I'll marry you now, if you wish it."

She smiled deeply.

Mat stood, stunned. "And who's going to bloody marry you?" he blurted out. "It sure as thunder isn't going to be me, I'll tell you that."

The two glanced at him, Thorn with a flat stare, Moiraine with a hint of a smile. "I can see why the Seanchan woman had to have you, Mat," she noted. "You certainly have a mind for romance."

"I just . . ." He pulled off his hat, holding it awkwardly, looking back and forth between them. "I just—burn me! How did I miss this? I was

with the two of you most the time you were together! When did you become affectionate?"

"You weren't watching very closely," Thorn said. He turned back to Moiraine. "I assume you'll want me as a Warder, too."

She smiled. "My previous Gaidin has been appropriated by another by now, I hope."

"I'll take the job," Thorn said, "though you'll have to explain to Elayne why her court-bard is someone's Warder." He hesitated. "You think they can make one of those color-changing cloaks with some patches on it?"

"Well, you two have gone bloody insane, I see," Mat said. "Thorn, didn't you once tell me once that the two most painful places for you to be were Tar Valon and Caemlyn? Now you're running headlong down the hillside that will end with you living in one or the other!"

Thorn shrugged. "Times change."

"I never have spent much of my time in Tar Valon," Moiraine said. "I think we shall enjoy traveling together, Thom Merrilin. Should we survive the months to come." She looked at Mat. "You should not spurn the Warder bond so easily, Mat. The blessings it provides will be of great use to men in these days."

Mat pulled his hat back on. "That may be true, but you'll never see me bloody trapped by one. No offense, Moiraine. I like you well enough. But to be bonded to a woman? Isn't going to happen to Matrim Cauthon."

"Is that so?" Thom asked, amused. "Didn't we determine that your Tuon would be capable of channeling, should she decide to learn?"

Mat froze. Bloody ashes. Thom was right. But channeling would make her marath'damane. She would not do such a thing. He did not have to worry.

Did he?

He must have made a face at the thought, for Thom chuckled and Moiraine smiled again. The two of them soon lost interest in sporting with Mat, however, and turned to a soft discussion. That affection in their eyes was true. They did love each other. Light! How had Mat missed it? He felt like a man who had brought a hog to a horse race.

He decided to make himself scarce, leaving the two of them alone. He went to scout the area where their gateway was supposed to appear. It had better. They had no supplies, and Mat did not fancy flagging down a ship and riding the long way back to Caemlyn.

It was a short hike across the meadow to the banks of the Arinelle. Once there, he made a small cairn for Noal, then tipped his hat to it and sat down to wait and think.

Moiraine was safe. Mat had survived, though that bloody socket throbbed like nothing else. He still was not certain if the Aeifinn and Eelfinn had strings around him or not, but he had gone into their den and come out unscathed. Mostly, anyway.

One eye lost. What would that do to his ability to fight? That worried him more than anything. He had put on a brave front, but inside he trembled. What would Tuon think of a husband missing an eye? A husband who might not be able to defend himself?

He pulled out a knife, flipping it. Then, on a whim, he tossed it behind him without looking. He heard a soft screech, then turned to see a rabbit slump to the ground, speared by the idly thrown knife.

He smiled, then turned back to the river. There, he noticed something caught between two large river stones along the shore. It was an overturned cooking pot, with a copper bottom, barely used, only dinged on the sides a couple of times. It must have been dropped by a traveler walking up the river.

Yes, he might not be able to judge distance, and he might not be able to see as well. But luck worked better when you were not looking anyway.

He smiled wider, then fetched the rabbit—he would skin that for supper—and plucked the pot out of the river.

Moiraine would get her tea after all.

EPILOGUE

And After

Graendal hurriedly gathered what she needed from her new palace. From her desk, she took a small angreal Mesaana had traded her in exchange for information. It was in the shape of a small, carved ivory knife; she'd lost her gold ring in al'Thor's attack.

Graendal tossed it in her pack, then snatched a sheaf of papers from her bed. Names of contacts, eyes-and-ears—everything she'd managed to remember from what had been destroyed at Natrin's Barrow.

Waves surged against the rocks outside. It was still dark. Only moments had passed since her last tool had failed her, Aybara surviving the battlefield. That was supposed to have worked!

She was in her elegant manor house a few leagues from Ebou Dar. Now that Semirhage was gone, Graendal had begun placing some strings around their new, childlike Empress. She'd have to abandon those schemes now.

Perrin Aybara had escaped. She felt stunned. Plan after perfect plan had fallen in place. And then . . . he'd escaped. How? The prophecy ... it had said . . .

That fool ham, Graendal thought, stuffing the papers in her pack. And that idiot Whitecloak! She was sweating. She shouldn't be sweating.

She tossed a few ter'angreal from her desk into the pack, then rifled her closet for changes of clothing. He could find her anywhere in the world.

But perhaps one of the mirror realms of the Portal Stones. Yes. There, his connections were not—

She turned, arms full of silk, and froze. A figure stood in the room Tall, like a pillar dressed in black robes. Eyeless. Smiling lips the color of death.

Graendal dropped to her knees, throwing aside the clothing. Sweat ran down her temple onto her cheek.

"Graendal," said the tall Myrddraal. His voice was terrible, like the last whispers of a dying man. "You have failed, Graendal."

Shaidar Haran. Very bad. "I . . ." she said, licking her dry lips. How to twist this to a victory? "It is according to plan. It is merely a—"

"I know your heart, Graendal. I can taste your terror"

She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Mesaana has fallen," Shaidar Haran whispered. "Three Chosen, destroyed by your actions. The design builds, a lattice of failure, a framework of incompetence."

"I had nothing to do with Mesaana's fall!"

"Nothing? Graendal, the dreamspike was there. Those who fought with Mesaana said that they tried to move, to draw the Aes Sedai to a location where their trap could be sprung. They were not meant to fight in the White Tower. They could not leave. Because of you."

"Isam—"

"A tool given you. The failure is yours, Graendal."

She licked her lips again. Her entire mouth had gone dry. There had to be a way out. "I have a better plan, more bold. You will be impressed. Al'Thor thinks I am dead, and so I can—"

"No." Such a quiet voice, but so horrible. Graendal found she could not speak. Something had taken her voice. "No," Shaidar Haran continued. "This opportunity has been given to another. But Graendal, you shall not be forgotten."

She looked up, feeling a surge of hope. Those dead lips were smiling widely, that eyeless gaze fixed on her. She felt a horrible sinking feeling.

"No," Shaidar Haran said, "I shall not forget you, and you shall not forget that which comes next."

She opened her eyes wide, then howled as he reached for her.

The sky rumbled; the grass around Perrin shivered. That grass was spotted black, just as in the real world. Even the wolf dream was dying.

The air was full of scents that did not belong. A fire burning. Blood drying. The dead flesh of a beast he didn't recognize. Eggs rotting.

No, he thought. No it will not be.

He gathered his will. Those scents would vanish. They did, replaced with the scents of summer. Grass, hedgehogs, beetles, moss, mice, blue-winged doves, purple finches. They appeared, bursting to life in a circle around him.

He gritted his teeth. The reality spread from him like a wave, blackness fading from the plants. Above him, the clouds undulated, then parted. Sunlight streamed down. The thunder calmed.

And Hopper lives, Perrin thought. He does! I can smell his coat, hear him loping in the grass.

A wolf appeared before him, forming as if from mist. Silvery gray, grizzled from years of life. Perrin thrilled in his power. It was real.

And then he saw the wolf's eyes. Lifeless.

The scent turned stale and wrong.

Perrin was sweating from the strain of concentrating so hard. Something within him became disjointed. He was coming into the wolf dream too strongly; to try to control this place absolutely was like trying to contain a wolf in a box.

He cried out, falling to his knees. The misty not-Hopper vanished in a puff and the clouds crashed back into place. Lightning exploded above him and the black spots flooded the grass. The wrong scents returned.

Perrin knelt, sweat dripping from his brow, one hand on the prickly brown and black grass. Too stiff.

Perrin thought of Faile in their tent back in the Field of Merrilor. She was his home. There was much to do. Rand had come, as promised. Tomorrow, he would face Egwene. Thought of the real world grounded Perrin, keeping him from entering the wolf dream too strongly.

Perrin stood. He could do many things in this place, but there were limits. There were always limits.

Seek Boundless. He will explain.

Hopper's last sending to him. What did it mean? Hopper had said that Perrin had found the answer. And yet, Boundless would explain that answer? The sending had been awash with pain, loss, satisfaction at seeing Perrin accept the wolf within him. One final image of a wolf leaping proudly into the darkness, coat shining, scent determined.

Perrin sent himself to the Jehannah Road. Boundless was often there, with the remnants of the pack. Perrin reached out and found him: a

youthful male with brown fur and a lean build. Boundless teased him sending the image of Perrin as a bull trampling a stag. The others had left that image alone, but Boundless continued to remember.

Boundless, Perrin sent. Hopper told me I needed you.

The wolf vanished.

Perrin started, then jumped to the place the wolf had 'been—a cliff top several leagues from the road. He caught the faintest scent of the wolf's destination, and then went there. An open field with a distant barn, looking rotted.

Boundless? Perrin sent. The wolf crouched in a pile of brush nearby.

No. No. Boundless sent fright and anger.

What did I do?

The wolf streaked away, leaving a blur. Perrin growled, and went down on all fours, becoming a wolf. Young Bull followed, wind roaring in his ears. He forced it to part before him, increasing his speed further.

Boundless tried to vanish, but Young Bull followed, appearing in the middle of the ocean. He hit the waves, water firm beneath his paws, and continued after Boundless without breaking stride.

Boundless's sendings flashed with images. Forests. Cities. Fields. An image of Perrin, looking down at him, standing outside a cage.

Perrin froze, becoming human again. He stood upon the surging waves, rising slowly into the air. What? That sending had been of a younger Perrin. And Moiraine had been with him. How could Boundless have . . .

And suddenly, Perrin knew. Boundless was always found in Ghealdan in the wolf dream.

Noam, he sent to the wolf, now distant.

There was a start of surprise, and then the mind vanished. Perrin moved to where Boundless had been, and there smelled a small village. A barn. A cage.

Perrin appeared there. Boundless lay on the ground between two houses, looking up at Perrin. Boundless was indistinguishable from the other wolves, for all that Perrin now suspected the truth. This was not a wolf. He was a man.

"Boundless," Perrin said, kneeling down on one knee to look the wolf in the eyes. "Noam. Do you remember me?"

Of course. You are Young Bull.

"I mean, do you remember me from before, when we met in the waking world? You sent an image of it."

Noam opened his jaws, and a bone appeared in them. A large femur

with some meat still on it. He lay on his side, chewing the bone. You are Young hull, he sent, stubborn.

"Do you remember the cage, Noam?" Perrin asked softly, sending the image. The image of a man, his filthy clothing half ripped off, locked in a makeshift wooden cell by his family.

Noam froze, and his image wavered momentarily, becoming that of a man. The wolf image retuned immediately, and he growled a low, dangerous growl.

"I do not bring up bad times to make you angry, Noam," Perrin said. "I... Well, I'm like you."

I am a wolf.

"Yes," Perrin said. "But not always."

Always.

"No," Perrin said firmly. "Once you were like me. Thinking it differently doesn't make it so."

Here it does, Young Bull, Noam sent. Here it does.

That was true. Why was Perrin pressing this issue? Hopper had sent him here, though. Why should Boundless have the answer? Seeing him, knowing who he was, brought back all of Perrin's fears. He'd made peace with himself, yet here was a man who had lost himself completely to the wolf.

This was what Perrin had been terrified of. This was what had driven the wedge between him and the wolves. Now that he'd overcome that, why would Hopper send him here? Boundless scented his confusion. The bone vanished and Boundless set his head on his paws, looking up at Perrin.

Noam—his mind almost gone—had thought only of breaking free and of killing; he'd been a danger to everyone around him. There was none of that now. Boundless seemed at peace. When they'd freed Noam, Perrin had worried that the man would die quickly, but he seemed alive and well. Alive, at least—Perrin couldn't judge much about his wellness from how the man looked in the wolf dream.

Still, Boundless's mind was far better now. Perrin frowned to himself. Moiraine had said there was nothing left of the man Noam in the mind of the creature.

"Boundless," Perrin said. "What do you think of the world of men?"

Perrin was immediately hit with a rapid succession of images. Pain. Sadness. Dying crops. Pain. A large, stout man, half-drunk, beating a pretty woman. Pain. A fire. Fear, sorrow. Vain.

Perrin stumbled back. Boundless kept sending the images. One after

another. A grave. A smaller grave beside it, as if for a child. The fire getting larger. A man—Noam's brother, Perrin recognized him, though the man had not seemed dangerous at the time—enraged.

It was a flood, too much. Perrin howled. A lament for the life that Noam had led, a dirge of sorrow and pain. No wonder this man preferred the life of a wolf.

The images stopped, and Boundless turned his head away. Perrin found himself gasping for breath.

A gift, Boundless sent.

"By the Light," Perrin whispered. "This was a choice, wasn't it? You picked the wolf intentionally."

Boundless closed his eyes.

"I always thought it would take me, if I weren't careful," Perrin said.

The wolf is peace, Boundless sent.

"Yes," Perrin said, laying a hand on the wolf's head. "I understand."

This was the balance for Boundless. Different from the balance for Elyas. And different from what Perrin had found. He understood. This did not mean that the way he let himself lose control was not a danger. But it was the final piece he needed to understand. The final piece of himself.

Thank you, Perrin sent. The image of Young Bull the wolf and Perrin the man standing beside one another, atop a hill, their scents the same. He sent that image outward, as powerfully as he could. To Boundless, to the wolves nearby. To any who would listen.

Thank you.

"Dovie'andi se tovya sagain," Olver said, throwing the dice. They rolled across the canvas floor of the tent. Olver smiled as they came up. All black dots, no wavy lines or triangles. A lucky roll indeed.

Olver moved his piece along the cloth board of the Snakes an.d Foxes game his father had made for him. Seeing that board made Olver hurt every time. It reminded him of his father. But he kept his lip stiff and did not let anyone know. Warriors did not cry. And besides, someday he would find that Shaido who had killed his father. Then Olver would get his vengeance.

That was the sort of thing a man did, when he was a warrior. He figured Mat would help, once he was done with all of this business at the Last Battle. He would owe Olver by then, and not just for all the time Olver

had spent being Mat's personal messenger. For the information he had given him about the snakes and the foxes.

Talmanes sat in a chair beside Olver. The stoic man was reading a book, only paying mild attention to the game. He was not nearly as good to play with as Noal or Thorn. But then, Talmanes had not been sent to play with Olver so much as watch over him.

Mat did not want Olver to know that he had gone to the Tower of Ghenjei, leaving Olver behind. Well, Olver was not a fool, and he knew what was going on. He was not mad, not really. Noal was a good one to take, and if Mat could only take three, well . . . Noal could fight better than Olver. So it made sense for him to go.

But next time, Olver would do the choosing. And then Mat had better be nice, or he would be left behind.

"Your roll, Talmanes," Olver said.

Talmanes mumbled something, reaching over and tossing the handful of dice without losing his place in the book. He was an all-right fellow, though a little stiff. Olver would not choose to have a man like him on a good night of drinking and hunting serving girls. As soon as Olver was old enough to go drinking and hunting serving girls. He figured he would be ready in another year or so.

Olver moved the snakes and foxes, then picked up the dice for his next throw. He had figured it all out. There were a lot of Shaido out there, and he had no idea how to find the one who had killed his parents. But the Aelfinn, they could answer questions. He had heard Mat talking about it. So Olver would go get his answers, then track the man down. Easy as riding a horse. He just had to train with the Band beforehand, so he could fight well enough to see done what needed to be done.

He threw his dice. Another full run. Olver smiled, moving his piece back toward the center of the board, half lost in thought and dreaming of the day when he would finally get his revenge, like was proper.

He moved his piece across one more line, then froze.

His piece was on the center spot.

"I won!" he exclaimed.

Talmanes looked up, pipe lowering in his lips. He cocked his head, staring at the board. "Burn me," he muttered. "We must have counted wrong, or . . ."

"Counted wrong?"

"I mean . . ." Talmanes looked stunned. "You can't win. The game can't be won. It just can't."

That was nonsense. Why would Olver piay if it could not be won? He smiled, looking over the board. The snakes and the foxes were within one toss of getting to his piece and making him lose. But this time, he'd gotten all the way to the outside ring and back. He had won.

Good thing, too. He had started to think he would never manage it!

Olver stood up, stretching his legs. Talmanes climbed off his chair, squatting down beside the game board and scratching his head, smoke idly curling from the end of his pipe.

"I hope Mat will be back soon," Olver said.

"I'm sure he will be," Talmanes said. "His task for Her Majesty shouldn't take much longer." That was the lie they had told Olver—that Mat, Thorn and Noal had gone off on some secret errand for the Queen. Well, that was just another reason that Mat would owe him. Honestly, Mat could be so prim sometimes, acting as if Olver could not take care of himself.

Olver shook his head, strolling over to the side of the tent, where a stack of Mat's papers sat waiting his return. There, peeking from between two of them, Olver noticed something interesting. A bit of red, like blood. He reached up, sliding a worn letter from between two of the sheets. It was sealed closed with a dollop of wax.

Olver frowned, turning the small letter over. He had seen Mat carrying it about. Why had he not opened it? That was downright rude. Setalle had worked hard to explain propriety to Olver, and while most of what she said made no sense—he just nodded his head so she would let him snuggle up to her—he was sure you were supposed to open letters people sent you, then respond kindly.

He turned the letter over again, then shrugged and broke the seal. Olver was Mat's personal messenger, all official and everything. It was no wonder Mat sometimes forgot things, but it was Olver's job to take care of him. Now that Lopin was gone, Mat would need extra taking care of. It was one of the reasons Olver stayed with the Band. He was not sure what Mat would do without him.

He unfolded the letter and removed a small, stiff piece of paper inside. He frowned, trying to make out the words. He was getting pretty good with reading, mostly because of Setalle, but some words gave him trouble. He scratched his head. "Talmanes," he said. "You should probably read this."

"What's that?" the man looked up from the game. "Here, now! Olver, what are you doing? That wasn't to be opened!" The man rose, striding over to snatch the paper from Olver's fingers.

"But—" Olver began.

"Lord Mat didn't open it," Talmanes said. "He knew that it would get

us tied up in White Tower politics. He waited all those weeks! Now look what you've done. I wonder if we can stuff it back inside . . ."

"Talmanes," Olver said insistently. "I think it's important"

Talmanes hesitated. He seemed torn for a moment, then held the letter so that the light shone better on it. He read it quickly, with the air of a boy stealing food from a street vendor's cart and stuffing into his mouth before he could be discovered.

Talmanes whispered a curse under his breath. He read the letter again, then cursed more loudly. He grabbed his sword from the side of the room and dashed out of the tent. He left the letter on the floor.

Olver looked it over again, sounding out the words he had not understood the first time.

Matrim,

If you are opening this, then I am dead. I had planned to return and release you of your oath in a single day. There are many potential complications to my next task, however, and a large chance that I will not survive. I needed to know that I'd left someone behind who could see this work done.

Fortunately, if there's one thing I believe I can rely upon, it is your curiosity. I suspect you lasted a few days before opening this letter, which is long enough for me to have returned if I were going to. Therefore, this task falls upon you.

There is a Waygate in Caemlyn. It is guarded, barricaded, and thought secure. It is not.

An enormous force of Shadowspawn moves through the Ways toward Caemlyn. I do not know when they left exactly, but there should be time to stop them. You must reach the Queen and persuade her to destroy the Waygate. It can be done; walling it up will not suffice. If you cannot destroy it, the Queen must bring all of her forces to bear upon guarding the location.

If you fail in this, I fear Caemlyn will be lost before the month is out.

Sincerely, Verin Mathwin

Olver rubbed his chin. What was a Waygate? He thought he had heard Mat and Thorn talking about them. He took the letter and walked out of the tent.

Talmanes stood just outside the tent, looking eastward. Toward Caemlyn.

A reddish haze hung on the horizon, a glow over the city. One larger than had been there on other nights.

"Light preserve us," Talmanes whispered. "It's burning. The city is burning." He shook his head, as if clearing it, then raised a call. "To arms! Trollocs in Caemlyn! The city is at war! To arms, men! Burn me, we have to get into the city and salvage those dragons! If those fall irito the Shadow's hands, we're all dead men!"

Olver lowered the letter in his fingers, eyes wide. Trollocs in Caemlyn? It would be like the Shaido in Cairhien, only worse.

He hurried into Mat's tent, stumbling over the rug, and threw himself to his knees beside his sleeping pallet. He hurriedly pulled at the stitch-ings on the side. The wool stuffed inside bulged out through the opening. He reached in, fishing about, and pulled free the large knife he had hidden there. It was wrapped in a leather sheath. He had taken it from one of the Band's quartermasters, Bergevin, when he had not been looking.

After Cairhien, Olver had sworn to himself that he would never prove himself a coward again. He gripped the large knife in two hands, knuckles white, then dashed out of the tent.

It was time to fight.

Barriga stumbled as he crawled past the stump of a fallen tree. Blood from his brow dripped onto the ground, and the dark-speckled nettles seemed to soak it in, feeding upon his life. He raised a trembling hand to his brow. The bandage was soaked through.

No time to stop. No time! He forced himself to his feet and hastily scrambled through the brown sawleaf. He tried not to look at the black spots on the plants. The Blight, he'd entered the Blight. But what else was he to do? The Trollocs rampaged to the south; the towers had all fallen. Kandor itself had fallen.

Barriga tripped and fell to the earth. He groaned, rolling over, gasping. He was in a trough between two hills north of Heeth Tower. His once fine clothing—coat and vest of rich velvet—was ragged and stained with blood. He stank of smoke, and when he closed his eyes, he saw the Trollocs. Washing over his caravan, slaughtering his servants and soldiers.

They'd all fallen. Thum, Yang . . . both dead. Light, they were all dead.

Barriga shuddered. How had he come to this? He was just a merchant. I should have listened to Rebek, he thought. Smoke rose from Heeth Tower behind. That was where his caravan had been going. How could this be happening?

He needed to keep moving. East. He'd make for Arafel. The other Borderlands would couldn't have fallen, could they?

He climbed up a hillside, hands pulling against short, coiling choke-vine. Like worms between his fingers. He was growing woozy. He reached the hilltop; the world was spinning. He fell there, blood seeping from his bandage.

Something moved in front of him. He blinked. Those clouds above were a tempest. In front of him, three figures wearing black and brown approached with a sleek grace. Myrddraal!

No. He blinked the tears and blood from his eyes. No, those weren't Myrddraal. They were men, wearing red veils over their faces. They walked at a crouch, scanning the terrain, short spears worn on their backs.

"Light be praised," he whispered. "Aiel." He'd been in Andor when Rand al'Thor had come. Everyone knew the Aiel followed the Dragon Reborn. He had tamed them.

I'm safe!

One of the Aiel stepped up to Barriga. Why was the man's veil red? That was unusual. The Aiel's dark eyes were glassy and hard. The Aiel man undid his veil, and revealed a smiling face.

The man's teeth had been filed to points. His smile broadened, and he slipped a knife from his belt.

Barriga stuttered, looking at that horrific maw and the glee in this man's eyes as he reached in for the kill. These weren't Aiel. They were something else.

Something terrible.

Rand al'Thor, the Dragon Reborn, sat quietly in his dream. He breathed in the cool, chill air. White clouds floated gently around him, kissing his skin with their condensation.

His throne for the night was a flat boulder on a mountain slope; he looked down through the clouds at a narrow valley. This wasn't the real location. It wasn't even the World of Dreams, that place where he'd fought Forsaken, the place he'd been told was so dangerous.

No, this was one of his own ordinary dreams. He controlled them now. They were a place he could find peace to think, protected by wards while his body slept beside Min in their new camp, surrounded by Borderlanders, set up on the Field of Merrilor. Egwene was there, with armies marshaled. He was ready for that. He'd counted on it.

On the morrow, they'd hear his demands. Not what he would demand

to keep him from breaking the seals—he was going to do that, regardless of what Egwene said. No, these would be the demands he made on the monarchs of the world in exchange for going to Shayol Ghul to face the Dark One.

He wasn't certain what he'd do if they refused him. They'd find it very difficult to do so. Sometimes, it could be useful to have a reputation for being irrational.

He breathed in deeply, peaceful. Here, in his dreams, the hills grew green. As he remembered them. In that nameless valley below, sheltered in the Mountains of Mist, he'd begun a journey. Not his first, and not his last, but perhaps the most important. One of the most painful, for certain.

"And now I come back," he whispered. "I've changed again. A man is always changing."

He felt a unity in returning here, to the place where he'd first confronted the killer inside him. The place where he'd first tried to flee from those whom he should have kept near. He closed his eyes, enjoying tranquility. Calmness. Harmony.

In the distance, he heard screams of pain.

Rand opened his eyes. What had that been? He stood up, spinning. This place was created of his own mind, protected and safe. It couldn't—

The scream came again. Distant. He frowned and raised a hand. The scene around him vanished, puffing away into mist. He stood in blackness.

There, he thought. He was in a long corridor of dark wood paneling. He walked down it, boots thumping. That screaming. It shook his peace. Someone was in pain. They needed him.

Rand began to run. He reached a doorway at the end of the hall. The door's russet wood was knobbed and ridged, like the thick roots of an ancient tree. Rand seized the handle—just another root—and wrenched the door open.

The vast room beyond was pure black, lightless, like a cavern deep beneath the ground. The room seemed to suck in the light and extinguish it. The screaming voice was inside. It was weak, as if it were being smothered by the darkness.

Rand entered. The darkness swallowed him. It seemed to pull the life out of him, like a hundred leeches sucking blood from his veins. He pressed onward. He couldn't distinguish the direction of the cries, so he moved along the walls; they felt like bone, smooth but occasionally cracked.

The room was round. As if he stood inside the bowl of an enormous skull.

There! A faint light ahead, a single candle on the ground, illuminating

a floor of black marble. Rand hurried toward it. Yes, there was a figure there. Huddled against the bone-white wall. It was a woman with silvery hair, wearing a thin white shift.

She was weeping now, her figure shaking and trembling. Rand knelt beside her, the candle flickering from his motion. How had this woman gotten into his dream? Was she someone real, or was this a creation of his mind? He laid a hand on her shoulder.

She glanced toward him, eyes red, face a mask of pain, tears dripping from her chin. "Please," she pled. "Please. He has me."

"Who are you?"

"You know me," she whispered, taking his hand, clinging to it. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. He has me. He flays my soul anew each eve. Oh, please! Let it stop." The tears flowed more freely.

"I don't know you," Rand said. "I . . ."

Those eyes. Those beautiful, terrible eyes. Rand gasped, releasing her hand. The face was different. But he did know that soul. "Mierin? You're dead. I saw you die!"

She shook her head. "I wish I were dead. I wish it. Please! He grinds my bones and snaps them like twigs, then leaves me to die before Healing me just enough to keep me alive. He—" She cut off, jerking.

"What?"

Her eyes opened wide and she spun toward the wall. "No!" she screamed. "He comes! The Shadow in every man's mind, the murderer of truth. No!" She spun, reaching for Rand, but something towed her backward. The wall broke away, and she tumbled into the darkness.

Rand jumped forward, reaching for her, but he was too late. He caught a glimpse of her before she vanished into the blackness below.

Rand froze, staring into that pit. He sought calmness, but he could not find it. Instead, he felt hatred, concern, and—like a seething viper within him—desire. That had been Mierin Eronaile, a woman he had once called the Lady Selene.

A woman most people knew by the name she'd taken upon herself. Lanfear.

A cruel, dry wind blew across Lan's face as he looked down at a corrupt landscape. Tarwin's Gap was a wide pass, rocky, speckled with Blighted knifegrass. This had once been part of Malkier. He was home again. For the last time.

Masses of Trollocs clustered on the other side of the Gap. Thousands.

Tens of thousands. Probably hundreds of thousands. Easily ten times the number of men Lan had gathered during his march across the

Borderlands. Normally, men held at their side of the Gap, but Lan could not do that.

He had come to attack, to ride for Malkier. Andere rode up beside him on his left, young Kaisel of Kandor on his right. He could feel something, distant, that had given him strength recently. The bond had changed. The emotions had changed.

He could still feel Nynaeve, so wonderful, caring, and passionate in the back of his mind. He should have been pained to know that now she would suffer when he died, instead of another. However, that closeness to her—a final closeness—brought him strength.

The hot wind seemed too dry; it smelled of dust and dirt, and drew the moisture from his eyes, forcing him to blink.

"It is fitting," Kaisel said.

"What?" Lan asked.

"That we should strike here."

"Yes," Lan said.

"Perhaps," Kaisel said. "But it is bold. It shows the Shadow that we will not be beaten down, that we will not cower. This is your land, Lord Mandragoran."

My land, he thought. Yes, it was. He nudged Mandarb forward.

"I am al'Lan Mandragoran," Lan bellowed. "Lord of the Seven Towers, Defender of the Wall of First Fires, Bearer of the Sword of the Thousand Lakes! I was once named Aan'allein, but I reject that title, for I am alone no more. Fear me, Shadow! Fear me and know. I have returned for what is mine. I may be a king without a land. But I am still a kingl"

He roared, raising his sword. A cheer rose from behind him. He sent a final, powerful sensation of love to Nynaeve as he kicked Mandarb into a gallop.

His army charged behind him, each man mounted—a charge of Kandori, Arafellin, Shienarans, and Saldaeans. But most of all Malkieri. Lan wouldn't be surprised if he'd drawn every living man from his former kingdom who could still hold a weapon.

They rode, cheering, brandishing swords and leveling lances. Their hooves were thunder, their voices a crash of waves, their pride stronger than the blazing sun. They were twelve thousand strong. And they charged a force of at least one hundred and fifty thousand.

This day will be remembered in honor, Lan thought, galloping forward. The Last Charge of the Golden Crane. The fall of the Malkieri.

The end had come. They would meet it with swords raised.

Lo, it shall come upon the world that the prison of the Greatest One shall grow weak, like the limbs of those who crafted it. Once again, His glorious cloak shall smother the Pattern of all things, and the Great Lord shall stretch forth His hand to claim what is His. The rebellious nations shall be laid barren, their children caused to weep. There shall be none but Him, and those who have turned their eyes to His majesty.

In that day, when the One-Eyed Fool travels the halls of mourning, and the First Among Vermin lifts his hand to bring freedom to Him who will Destroy, the last days of the Fallen Blacksmith's pride shall come. Yea, and the Broken Wolf, the one whom Death has known, shall fall and be consumed by the Midnight Towers. And his destruction shall bring fear and sorrow to the hearts of men, and shall shake their very will itself.

And then, shall the Lord of the Evening come. And He shall take our eyes, for our souls shall bow before Him, and He shall take our skin, for our flesh shall serve Him, and He shall take our lips, for only Him will we praise. And the Lord of the Evening shall face the Broken Champion, and shall spill his blood and bring us the Darkness so beautiful. Let the screams begin, O followers of the Shadow. Beg for your destruction!

—from The Prophecies of the Shadow

The End of the Thirteenth Book of
The Wheel of Time

GLOSSARY

A Note on Dates in This Glossary. The Toman Calendar (devised by Toma dur Ahmid) was adopted approximately two centuries after the death of the last male Aes Sedai, recording years After the Breaking of the World

(AB). So many records were destroyed in the Trolloc Wars that at their end there was argument about the exact year under the old system. A new calendar, proposed by Tiam of Gazar, celebrated freedom from the Trolloc threat and recorded each year as a Free Year (FY). The Gazaran Calendar gained wide acceptance within twenty years after the Wars' end. Artur Hawkwing attempted to establish a new calendar based on the founding of his empire (FF, From the Founding), but only historians now refer to it. After the death and destruction of the War of the Hundred Years, a third calendar was devised by Uren din Jubai Soaring Gull, a scholar of the Sea Folk, and promulgated by the Panarch Farede of Tarabon. The Farede Calendar, dating from the arbitrarily decided end of the War of the Hundred Years and recording years of the New Era (NE), is currently in use.

Aelfinn: A race of beings, largely human in appearance but with snakelike characteristics, who will give true answers to three questions. Whatever the question, their answers are always correct, if frequently given in forms that are not clear, but questions concerning the Shadow can be extremely dangerous. Their true location is unknown, but they

can be visited by passing through a ter'angreal, once a possession of Mayene but in recent years held in the Stone of Tear. They can also be reached by entering the Tower of Ghenjei. They speak the Old Tongue, mention treaties and agreements, and ask if those entering carry iron, instruments of music, or devices that can make fire. See also Eelfinn, Snakes and Foxes.

Arad Doman: A nation on the Aryth Ocean, currently racked by civil war and by wars against those who have declared for the Dragon Reborn. Its capital is Bandar Eban, where many of its people have come for refuge. Food is scarce. In Arad Doman, those who are descended from the nobility at the time of the founding of the nation, as opposed to those raised later, are known as the bloodborn. The ruler (king or queen) is elected by a council of the heads of merchant guilds (the Council of Merchants), who are almost always women. He or she must be from the noble class, not the merchant, and is elected for life. Legally the king or queen has absolute authority, except that he or she can be deposed by a three-quarter vote of the Council. The current ruler is King Alsalam Saeed Almadar, Lord of Almadar, High Seat of House Almadar.

area, units of: (1) Land: 1 ribbon = 20 paces X 10 paces (200 square paces); 1 cord = 20 paces X 50 paces (1000 square paces); 1 hide = 100 paces X 100 paces (10,000 square paces); 1 rope = 100 paces X 1000 paces (100,000 square paces); 1 march = 1000 paces X 1000 paces (1/4 square mile). (2) Cloth: 1 pace = 1 pace plus 1 hand X 1 pace plus 1 hand.

Asha'man: (1) In the Old Tongue, "Guardian" or "Guardians," but always a guardian of justice and truth. (2) The name given, both collectively and as a rank, to the men who have come to the Black Tower, near Caemlyn in Andor, in order to learn to channel. Their training largely concentrates on the ways in which the One Power can be used as a weapon, and in another departure from the usages of the White Tower, once they learn to seize saidin, the male half of the Power, they are required to perform all chores and labors with the Power. When newly enrolled, a man is termed a soldier; he wears a plain black coat with a high collar, in the Andoran fashion. Being raised to Dedicated brings the right to wear a silver pin, called the Sword, on the collar of his coat. Promotion to Asha'man brings the right to wear a Dragon pin, in gold and red enamel, on the collar opposite the Sword. Although many women,

including wives, flee when they learn that their men actually can channel, a fair number of men at the Black Tower are married, and they use a version of the Warder bond to create a link with their wives. This same bond, altered to compel obedience, has been used to bond captured Aes Sedai as well. Some Asha'man have been bonded by Aes Sedai, although the traditional Warder bond is used. The Asha'man are led by Mazrim Taim, who has styled himself the M'Hael, Old Tongue for "leader."

Avendesora: In the Old Tongue, "the Tree of Life." It is located in Rhuidean.

Balwer, Sebban: Formerly Pedron Niall's secretary, in public, and secretly Niall's spy master. He aided Morgase's escape from the Seanchan in Amador for his own reasons, and now is employed as secretary to Perrin t'Bashere Aybara and Faile ni Bashere t'Aybara. His duties expanded, however, and he now directs Cha Faile in their activities, acting as a spymaster for Perrin, though Perrin doesn't think of him so. See also Cha Faile.

Band of the Red Hand: See Shen an Calhar.

Bloodknives: An elite division of Seanchan soldiers. Each is equipped with a ter'angreal that increases their strength and speeds and shrouds him in darkness. The ter'angreal is activated by touching a drop of the

Bloodknife's blood to the ring, and once activated, it slowly leaches the life from its host. Death occurs within a matter of days.

Brown Ajah Council: The Brown Ajah is headed by a council instead of an individual Aes Sedai. The current head of the council is Jesse Bilal; the other members are unknown.

Captain-General: (1) The military rank of the leader of the Queen's Guard of Andor. This position is currently held by Lady Birgitte Tra-helion. (2) The title given to the head of the Green Ajah. This position is currently held by Adelorna Bastine.

calendar: There are 10 days to the week, 28 days to the month and 13 months to the year. Several feast days are not part of any month; these include Sunday (the longest day of the year), the Feast of Thanksgiving (once every four years at the spring equinox) and the Feast of All Souls

Salvation, also called All Souls Day (once every ten years at the autumn equinox). While the months have names (Taisham, Jumara, Saban, Aine, Adar, Saven, Amadaine, Tammaz, Maigdhal, Choren, Shaldine, Nesan and Danu), these are seldom used except in official documents and by

officials. For most people, using the seasons is good enough.

Callandor: The Sword That Is Not a Sword, the Sword That Cannot Be Touched. A crystal sword once held in the Stone of Tear, it is a powerful sa'angreal for use by male channelers. It has known flaws: It lacks the buffer that makes sa'angreal safe to use, and magnified the taint. Other flaws are suspected.

Cha Faile: (1) In the Old Tongue, "the Falcon's Talon." (2) Name taken by the young Cairhienin and Tairens, attempted followers of ji'e'toh, who have sworn fealty to Faile ni Bashere tAybara. In secret, they act as her personal scouts and spies. During her captivity with the Shaido, they continued their activities under the guidance of Sebban Balwer. See also Balwer, Sebban.

Charin, Jain: See Farstrider, Jain.

Children of the Light: Society of strict ascetic beliefs, owing allegiance to no nation and dedicated to the defeat of the Dark One and the destruction of all Darkfriends. Founded during the War of the Hundred Years by Lothair Mantelar to proselytize against an increase in Darkfriends, they evolved during the war into a completely military society. They are extremely rigid in their beliefs, and certain that only they know the truth and the right. They consider Aes Sedai and any who support them to be Darkfriends. Known disparagingly as Whitecloaks, a name they themselves despise, they were formerly headquartered in Amador, Amadicia, but were forced out when the Seanchan conquered the city. Galad Damodred became Lord Captain Commander after he killed Eamon Valda in a duel for assaulting his stepmother, Morgase. Valda's death produced a schism in the organization, with Galad leading one faction, and Rhadam Asunawa, High Inquisitor of the Hand of the Light, leading the other. Their sign is a golden sunburst on a field of white. See also Questioners.

Consolidation, the: When the armies sent by Artur Hawkwing under his son Luthair landed in Seanchan, they discovered a shifting quilt of

nations often at war with one another, where Aes Sedai often reigned. Without any equivalent of the White Tower, Aes Sedai worked for their own individual interest, using the Power. Forming small groups, they schemed against one another constantly. In large part it was this constant scheming for personal advantage and the resulting wars among the myriad nations that allowed the armies from east of the Aryth Ocean to begin the conquest of an entire continent, and for their descendants to complete it. This conquest, during which the descendants of the original armies became Seanchan as much as they conquered Seanchan, took centuries and is called the Consolidation. See also Towers of Midnight.

cuendillar: A supposedly indestructible substance created during the Age of Legends. Any known force used in an attempt to break it, including the One Power, is absorbed, making cuendillar stronger. Although the making of cuendillar was thought lost forever, new objects made from it have surfaced. It is also known as heartstone.

currency: After many centuries of trade, the standard terms for coins are the same in every land: crowns (the largest coin in size), marks and pennies. Crowns and marks can be minted of gold or silver, while pennies can be silver or copper, the last often called simply a copper. In different lands, however, these coins are of different sizes and weights. Even in one nation, coins of different sizes and weights have been minted by different rulers. Because of trade, the coins of many nations can be found almost anywhere, and for that reason, bankers, moneylenders and merchants all use scales to determine the value of any given coin. Even large numbers of coins are weighed.

The heaviest coins come from Andor and Tar Valon, and in those two places the relative values are: 10 copper pennies = 1 silver penny; 100 silver pennies = lsilver mark; 10 silver marks = 1 silver crown; 10 silver crowns = 1 gold mark; 10 gold marks = 1 gold crown. By contrast, in Altara, where the larger coins contain less gold or silver, the relative values are: 10 copper pennies =1 silver penny; 21 silver pennies = 1 silver mark; 20 silver marks = 1 silver crown; 20 silver crowns = 1 gold mark; 20 gold marks = 1 gold crown.

The only paper currency is "letters-of-rights," which are issued by bankers, guaranteeing to present a certain amount of gold or silver when the letter-of-rights is presented. Because of the long distances between cities, the length of time needed to travel from one to another, and the difficulties of transactions at long distance, a letter-of-rights

may be accepted at full value in a city near to the bank which issued it, but it may only be accepted at a lower value in a city farther away. Generally, someone intending to be traveling for a long time will carry one or more letters-of-rights to exchange for coin when needed. Letters-of-rights are usually accepted only by bankers or merchants, and would never be used in shops.

da'covale: (1) In the Old Tongue, "one who is owned," or "person who is property." (2) Among the Seanchan, the term often used, along with "property," for slaves. Slavery has a long and unusual history among the Seanchan, with slaves having the ability to rise to positions of great power and open authority, including authority over those who are free. It is also possible for those in positions of great power to be reduced to da'covale. See also so'jhin.

Deathwatch Guards, the: The elite military formation of the Seanchan Empire, including both humans and Ogier. The human members of the Deathwatch Guard are all da'covale, born as property and chosen while young to serve the Empress, whose personal property they are. Fanatically loyal and fiercely proud, they often display the ravens tattooed on their shoulders, the mark of a da'covale of the Empress. The Ogier members are known as Gardeners, and they are not da'covale. The Gardeners are as fiercely loyal as the human Deathwatch Guards, though, and are even more feared. Human or Ogier, the Deathwatch Guards not only are ready to die for the Empress and the Imperial family, but believe that their lives are the property of the Empress, to be disposed of as she wishes. Their helmets and armor are lacquered in dark green (so dark that it is often mistakenly called black) and blood red, their shields are lacquered black, and their swords, spears, axes and halberds carry black tassels. See also da'covale.

Delving: (1) Using the One Power to diagnose physical condition and illness. (2) Finding deposits of metal ores with the One Power. That this has long been a lost ability among Aes Sedai may account for the name becoming attached to another ability.

der'morat-: (1) In the Old Tongue, "master handler." (2) Among the Seanchan, the prefix applied to indicate a senior and highly skilled handler of one of the exotics, one who trains others, as in der'morat'raken.

Der'morat can have a fairly high social status, the highest of all held by der'sul'dam, the trainers of sul'dam, who rank with fairly high military officers. See also morat-.

dragon: A powerful new weapon capable of firing explosive charges over large distances, causing extensive damage to the enemy.

dragons' eggs: The name given to the explosive charges fired by dragons.

Eelfinn: A race of beings, largely human in appearance but with fox-like characteristics, who will grant three wishes, although they ask for a price in return. If the person asking does not negotiate a price, the Eelfinn choose it. The most common price in such circumstances is death, but they still fulfill their part of the bargain, although the manner in which they fulfill it is seldom the manner the one asking expects. Their true location is unknown, but it was possible to visit them by means of a ter'angreal that was located in Rhuidean. That ter'angreal was taken by Moiraine Damodred to Cairhien, where it was destroyed. They may also be reached by entering the Tower of Ghenjei. They ask the same questions as the Aelfinn regarding fire, iron, and musical instruments. See also Aelfinn, Snakes and Foxes.

Farstrider, Jain: A hero of the northern lands who journeyed to many lands and had many adventures; he captured Cowin Fairheart and brought him to the king's justice. He was the author of several books, as well as the subject of books and stories. He vanished in 981 NE, after returning from a trip into the Great Blight which some said had taken him all the way to Shayol Ghul.

Fel, Herid: The author of Reason and Unreason and other books. Fel was a student (and teacher) of history and philosophy at the Academy of Cairhien. He was discovered in his study torn limb from limb.

First Reasoner: The title given to the head of the White Ajah. This position is currently held by Ferane Neheran.

First Selector: The title given to the head of the Blue Ajah. The First Selector is currently unknown, although it is suspected that Lelaine Akashi fills this position.

First Weaver: The title given to the head of the Yellow Ajah. This position is currently held by Suana Dragand in the White Tower.

Forsaken, the: The name given to thirteen powerful Aes Sedai, men and women both, who went over to the Shadow during the Age of Legends and were trapped in the sealing of the Bore into the Dark One's prison. While it has long been believed that they alone abandoned the Light during the War of the Shadow, in fact others did as well; these thirteen were only the highest-ranking among them. The Forsaken (who call themselves the Chosen) are somewhat reduced in number since their awakening in the present day. Some of those killed were reincarnated in new bodies.

Golden Crane, the: The banner of the lost Borderland nation of Malkier.

Graendal: One of the Forsaken. Once known as Kamarile Maradim Nin-dar, a noted ascetic, she was the second of the Forsaken to decide to serve the Dark One. A ruthless killer, she was responsible for the deaths of Aran'gar and Asmodean and for the destruction of Mesaana. Her present circumstances are uncertain.

badori: The braided leather cord that a Malkieri man tied around his temples to hold his hair back. Until after Malkier fell to the Blight, every adult Malkieri male wore his hair to the shoulders and tied back with a hadori. Like the presentation of his sword, being allowed to wear the badori marked the move from childhood to adulthood for Malkieri males. The badori symbolized the duties and obligations that bound him as an adult, and also his connection to Malkier. See also ki'sain.

Hanlon, Daved: A Darkfriend, also known as Doilin Mellar, who was captured with Lady Shiaine, Chesmal Emry, Eldrith Jhondar, Temaile Kinderode, Falion Bhoda and Marillin Gemalphin.

Head Clerk: The title given to the head of the Gray Ajah. This position is currently held by Serancha Colvine.

Head of the Great Council of Thirteen: The title given to the head of the Black Ajah. This position is currently held by Alviarin Freidhen.

heart: The basic unit of organization in the Black Ajah. In effect, a cell. A heart consists of three sisters who know each other, with each member of the heart knowing one additional sister of the Black who is unknown to the other two of her heart.

Highest: The title given to the head of the Red Ajah. This position is currently held by Tsutama Rath.

Illuminators, Guild of: A society that held the secret of making fireworks. It guarded this secret very closely, even to the extent of doing murder to protect it. The Guild gained its name from the grand displays, called Illuminations, that it provided for rulers and sometimes for greater lords. Lesser fireworks were sold for use by others, but with dire warnings of the disaster that could result from attempting to learn what was inside them. The Guild once had chapter houses in Cairhien and Tanchico, but both are now destroyed. In addition, the members of the Guild in Tanchico resisted the invasion by the Seanchan and were made da'covale, and the Guild as such no longer exists. However, individual Illuminators still exist outside of Seanchan rule and work to make sure that the Guild will be remembered. See also da'covale.

Imfaral: The sixth-largest city of Seanchan. It is located northwest of Seandar, and is home to the Towers of Midnight. See also Towers of Midnight.

ki'sain: A small mark, a dot, which an adult Malkieri woman painted on her forehead each morning in pledge that she would swear (or had sworn) her sons to fight the Shadow. This pledge was not necessarily that they would be warriors, but that they would oppose the Shadow every day in every way that they could. Like the hadori, the ki'sain was also considered a symbol of connection to Malkier, and of the bonds that united her with other Malkieri. Also like the ha-dori, the ki'sain was a sign of adulthood. The ki'sain also gave information about the woman who wore it. A blue mark was worn by a woman who had not married, a red mark by a married woman and a white mark by a widow. In death, she would be marked with all three, one of each color, whether she had ever married or not. See also hadori.

Legion of the Dragon, the: A large military formation, all infantry, giving allegiance to the Dragon Reborn, trained by Davram Bashere along lines worked out by himself and Mat Cauthon, lines which depart sharply from the usual employment of foot. While many men simply walk in to volunteer, large numbers of the Legion are scooped up by recruiting parties from the Black Tower, who first gather all of the men in an area who were willing to follow the Dragon Reborn, and only after taking them through gateways near Caemlyn winnow out those who can be taught to channel. The remainder, by far the greater number, are sent to Bashere's training camps. The Legion of the Dragon is at present training for the Last Battle.

length, units of: 10 inches = 1 foot; 3 feet = 1 pace; 2 paces = 1 span; 1000 spans = 1 mile; 4 miles = 1 league.

Listeners: A Seanchan spy organization. Almost anyone in the household of a Seanchan noble, merchant or banker may be a Listener, including da'covale occasionally, though seldom so'jhtn. They take no active role, merely watching, listening and reporting. Their reports are sent to Lesser Hands who control both them and the Seekers and decide what should be passed on to the Seekers for further action. See also Seekers.

marath'datnane: In the Old Tongue, "those who must be leashed," and also "one who must be leashed." The term applied by the Seanchan to any woman capable of channeling who has not been collared as a

damane.

march: See area, units of.

Mellar, Doilin: See Hanlon, Daved.

Mera'din: In the Old Tongue, "the Brotherless." The name adopted, as a society, by those Aiel who abandoned clan and sept and went to the Shaido because they could not accept Rand al'Thor, a wetlander, as the Car'a'carn, or because they refused to accept his revelations concerning the history and origins of the Aiel. Deserting clan and sept for any reason is anathema among the Aiel, therefore their own warrior societies among the Shaido were unwilling to take them in, and they formed this society, the Brotherless.

Moiraine Damodred: A Cairhienin Aes Sedai of the Blue Ajah. Long presumed dead. Thorn Merrilin has, however, revealed the receipt of a letter purporting to be from her. It is reproduced here:

My dearest Thorn,

There are many words I would like to write to you, words from my heart, but I have put this off because I knew that I must, and now there is little time. There are many things I cannot tell you lest I bring disaster, but what I can, I will. Heed carefully what I say. In a short while I will go down to the docks, and there I will confront Lanfear. How can I know that? That secret belongs to others. Suffice it that I know, and let that foreknowledge stand as proof for the rest of what I say.

When you receive this, you will be told that I am dead. All will believe that. I am not dead, and it may be that I shall live to my appointed years. It also may be that you and Mat Cauthon and another, a man I do not know, will try to rescue me. May, I say because it may be that you will not or cannot, or because Mat may refuse. He does not hold me in the affection you seem to, and he has his reasons which he no doubt thinks are good. If you try, it must be only you and Mat and one other. More will mean death for all. Fewer will mean death for all.

Even if you come only with Mat and one other, death also may come. I have seen you try and die, one or two or all three. I have seen myself die in the attempt. I have seen all of us live and die as captives. Should you decide to make the attempt anyway, young Mat knows the way to find me, yet you must not show him this letter until he asks about it. That is of the utmost importance. He must know nothing that is in this letter until he asks. Events must play out in certain ways, whatever the costs.

If you see Lan again, tell him that all of this is for the best. His destiny follows a different path from mine. I wish him all happiness with Nynaeve.

A final point. Remember what you know about the game of Snakes and Foxes. Remember, and heed.

It is time, and I must do what must be done.

May the Light illumine you and give you joy, my dearest Thorn, whether or not we ever see one another again.

Moiraine

morat-: In the Old Tongue, "handler." Among the Seanchan, it is used for those who handle exotics, such as morat'raken, a. raken handler or rider, also informally called a flier. See also der'morat-.

Prophet, the: More formally, the Prophet of the Lord Dragon. Once known as Masema Dagar, a Shienaran soldier, he underwent a revelation and decided that he had been called to spread the word of the Dragon's Rebirth. He believed that nothing—nothing!—was more important than acknowledging the Dragon Reborn as the Light made flesh and being ready when the Dragon Reborn called, and he and his followers would use any means to force others to sing the glories of the Dragon Reborn. Those who refused were marked for death, and those who were slow might find their homes and shops burned and themselves flogged. Forsaking any name but "the Prophet," he brought chaos to much of Ghealdan and Amadicia, large parts of which he controlled, although with him gone, the Seanchan are reestablishing order in Amadicia and the Crown High Council in Ghealdan. He joined with Perrin Aybara, who was sent to bring him to Rand, and, for reasons unknown, stayed with him even though this delayed his going to the Dragon Reborn. He was followed by men and women of the lowest sort; if they were not so when they were pulled in by his charisma, they became so under his influence. He died under mysterious circumstances.

Queen's Guards, the: The elite military formation in Andor. In peacetime the Guard is responsible for upholding the Queen's law and keeping the peace across Andor. The uniform of the Queen's Guard include a red undercoat, gleaming mail and plate armor, a brilliant red cloak, and a conical helmet with a barred visor. High-ranking officers wear knots of rank on their shoulder and golden lion-head spurs. A recent addition to the Queen's Guards is the Queen's personal bodyguard, which is composed entirely of women since the arrest of its former captain, Doilin Mellar. These Guardswomen wear much more elaborate uniforms than their male counterparts, including broad-brimmed hats with white plumes, red-lacquered breastplates and helmets trimmed in white, and lace-edged sashes bearing the White Lion of Andor.

Questioners, the: An order within the Children of the Light. They refer to themselves as the Hand of the Light—they intensely dislike being called Questioners—and their avowed purposes are to discover the

truth in disputations and uncover Darkfriends. In the search for truth and the Light, their normal method of inquiry is torture; their normal manner is that they know the truth already and must only make their victim confess to it. At times they act as if they are entirely separate from the Children and the Council of the Anointed, which commands the Children. Their sign is a blood-red shepherd's crook.

Redarms: Soldiers of the Band of the Red Hand, who have been chosen out for temporary police duty to make sure that other soldiers of the Band cause no trouble or damage in a town or village where the Band has stopped. So named because, while on duty, they wear very broad red armbands that reach from cuff to elbow. Usually chosen from among the most experienced and reliable men. Since any damages must be paid for by the men serving as Redarms, they work hard to make sure all is quiet and peaceful. See also Shen an Calhar.

Saldaea: A nation in the Borderlands. Its capital is Maradon, and its royal palace is known as the Cordamora (from the Old Tongue for "Heart of the People"). It is ruled by a king or queen, and is a hereditary monarchy. The Crown High Council, also known as the Council of Lords, advises and assists the monarch in administering the nation. The husband or wife of a Saldaean ruler is not simply a consort, but an almost co-equal ruler. Saldaea is currently ruled by Her Most Illumined Majesty, Tenobia si Bashere Kazadi, Queen of Saldaea, Defender of the Light, Sword of the Blightborder, High Seat of House Kazadi and Lady of Shahanyi, Asnelle, Kunwar and Ganai; her Marshal-General and the leader of her army is her uncle and heir, Davram Bashere, although he has been missing from his post for some time.

Seandar: The Imperial capital of Seanchan, located in the northeast of the Seanchan continent. It is also the largest city in the Empire. After the death of Empress Radhanan, it descended into chaos.

Seekers: More formally, Seekers for Truth, they are a police/spy organization of the Seanchan Imperial Throne. Although most Seekers are da'covale and the property of the Imperial family, they have wide-ranging powers. Even one of the Blood can be arrested for failure to answer any question put by a Seeker, or for failure to cooperate fully with a Seeker, this last denned by the Seekers themselves, subject

only to review by the Empress. Their reports are sent to Lesse Hands, who control both them and the Listeners. Most Seekers fee that the Hands do not pass on as much information as they shoul Unlike the Listeners', the Seekers' role is active. Those Seekers wh are da'covale are marked on either shoulder with a raven and a towe Unlike the Deathwatch Guards, Seekers are seldom eager to sho~ their ravens, in part because it necessitates revealing who and what they are. See also Listeners.

Shara: A mysterious land to the east of the Aiel Waste which is the source of silk and ivory, among other trade goods. The land is protected both by inhospitable natural features and by man-made walls. Little is known about Shara, as the people of that land work to keep their culture secret. The Sharans deny that the Trolloc Wars touched them, despite Aiel statements to the contrary. They deny knowledge of Artur Hawkwing's attempted invasion, despite the accounts of eyewitnesses from the Sea Folk. The little information that has leaked out reveals that the Sharans are ruled by a single absolute monarch, a Sh'boan if a woman and a Sh'botay if a man. That monarch rules for exactly seven years, then dies. The rule then passes to the mate of that ruler, who rules for seven years and then dies. This pattern has repeated itself since the time of the Breaking of the World. The Sharans believe that the deaths are the "Will of the Pattern."

There are channelers in Shara, known as the Ayyad, who are tattooed on their faces at birth. The women of the Ayyad enforce the Ayyad laws stringently. A sexual relationship between Ayyad and non-Ayyad is punishable by death for the non-Ayyad, and the Ayyad is also executed if force on his or her part can be proven. If a child is born of the union, it is left exposed to the elements, and dies. Male Ayyad are used as breeding stock only. They are not educated in any fashion, not even how to read or write, and when they reach their twenty-first year or begin to channel, whichever comes first, they are killed and the body cremated. Supposedly, the Ayyad channel the One Power only at the command of the Sh'boan or Sh'botay, who is always surrounded by Ayyad women.

Even the name of the land is in doubt. The natives have been known to call it many different names, including Shamara, Co'dansin, Tomaka, Kigali and Shibouya.

Shen an Calhar: In the Old Tongue, "the Band of the Red Hand." (1) A legendary group of heroes who had many exploits, finally dying in the defense of Manetheren when that land was destroyed during the Trol-loc Wars. (2) A military formation put together almost by accident by Mat Cauthon and organized along the lines of military forces during what is considered the height of the military arts, the days of Artur Hawkwing and the centuries immediately preceding.

Sisnera, Darlin: A High Lord in Tear, he was formerly in rebellion against the Dragon Reborn. After serving for a short period as Steward of the Dragon Reborn in Tear, he was chosen to be the first king of Tear.

Snakes and Foxes: A game that is much loved by children until they mature enough to realize that it can never be won without breaking the rules. It is played with a board that has a web of lines with arrows indicating direction. There are ten discs inked with triangles to represent the foxes, and ten discs inked with wavy lines to represent the snakes. The game is begun by saying "Courage to strengthen, fire to blind, music to dazzle, iron to bind," while describing a triangle with a wavy line through it with one's hand. Dice are rolled to determine moves for the players and the snakes and foxes. If a snake or fox lands on a player's piece, he is out of the game, and as long as the rules are followed, this always happens. See also Aelfinn, Eelfinn.

so'jhin: The closest translation from the Old Tongue would be "a height among lowness," though some translate it as meaning "both sky and valley" among several other possibilities. So'jhin is the term applied by the Seanchan to hereditary upper servants. They are da'covale, property, yet occupy positions of considerable authority and often power. Even the Blood step carefully around so'jhin of the Imperial family, and speak to so'jhin of the Empress herself as to equals. See also da'covale.

Stump: A public meeting among the Ogier. It is presided over by the Council of Elders of a stedding, but any adult Ogier may speak, or may choose an advocate to speak for him. A Stump is often held at the largest tree stump in a stedding, and may last for several years. When a question arises that affects all Ogier, a Great Stump is held, and Ogier from all stedding meet to address the question. The various stedding take turns hosting the Great Stump.

Succession: In general, when one House succeeds another on the throne. In Andor, the term is widely used for the struggle for the throne that arose upon Mordrellen's death. Tigraine's disappearance had left Man-tear without a Daughter-Heir, and two years passed before Morgase, of House Trakand, took the throne. Outside of Andor, this conflict was known as the Third War of Andoran Succession.

Tarabon: A nation on the Aryth Ocean. Once a great trading nation, a source of rugs, dyes and the Guild of Illuminators' fireworks among other things, Tarabon has fallen on hard times. Racked by anarchy and civil war compounded by simultaneous wars against Arad Doman and the Dragonsworn, it was ripe for the picking when the Seanchan arrived. It is now firmly under Seanchan control, the chapter house of the Guild of Illuminators has been destroyed and the Illuminators themselves have been made da'covale. Most Taraboners appear grateful that the Seanchan have restored order, and since the Seanchan allow them to continue living their lives with minimal interference, they have no desire to bring on more warfare by trying to chase the Seanchan out. There are, however, some lords and soldiers who remain outside the Seanchan sphere of influence and are fighting to reclaim their land.

Tower of Ravens, the: The central Imperial prison of Seanchan. It is located in the capital of Seandar and serves as the headquarters for the

Seekers for Truth. Members of the Blood are imprisoned, questioned and executed within it. The questioning and execution must be accomplished without spilling a drop of blood. See also Seekers.

Towers of Midnight, the: Thirteen fortresses of unpolished black marble located in Imfaral, Seanchan. At the time of the Consolidation of Seanchan, it was the center of military might. The final battle of the Consolidation took place there, leaving Hawkwing's descendants in power. Since that time, it has been unoccupied. Legend has it that in time of dire need, the Imperial family will return to the Towers of Midnight and "right that which is wrong." See also Consolidation.

weight, units of: 10 ounces = 1 pound; 10 pounds = 1 stone; 10 stone = 1 hundredweight; 10 hundredweight = 1 ton.

Winged Guards, the: The personal bodyguards of the First of Mayene, and the elite military formation of Mayene. Members of the Winged

Guards wear red-painted breastplates and helmets shaped like rimmed pots that come down to the nape of the necks in the back, and carry red-streamered lances. Officers have wings worked on the sides of their helmets, and rank is denoted by slender plumes.

About the Authors

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of the Citadel, the Military college of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with "V" and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

Brandon Sanderson was born in 1975 in Lincoln, Nebraska. After a semester as a biochem major, Brandon came to his senses and recognized writing as his true vocation. He switched to English, graduating from Brigham Young University, then returning for a master's in creative writing. During this time Brandon wrote thirteen novels, finally publishing his sixth, Elantris, in 2005. He has since released books for both adults and young readers, including the Mistborn trilogy, Warbreaker, and the Alcatraz series. He lives with his wife and children in Utah, where he often plays Magic: The Gathering, regularly eats mac-and-cheese, and occasionally teaches writing at BYU. Find more at www.brandonsanderson.com.

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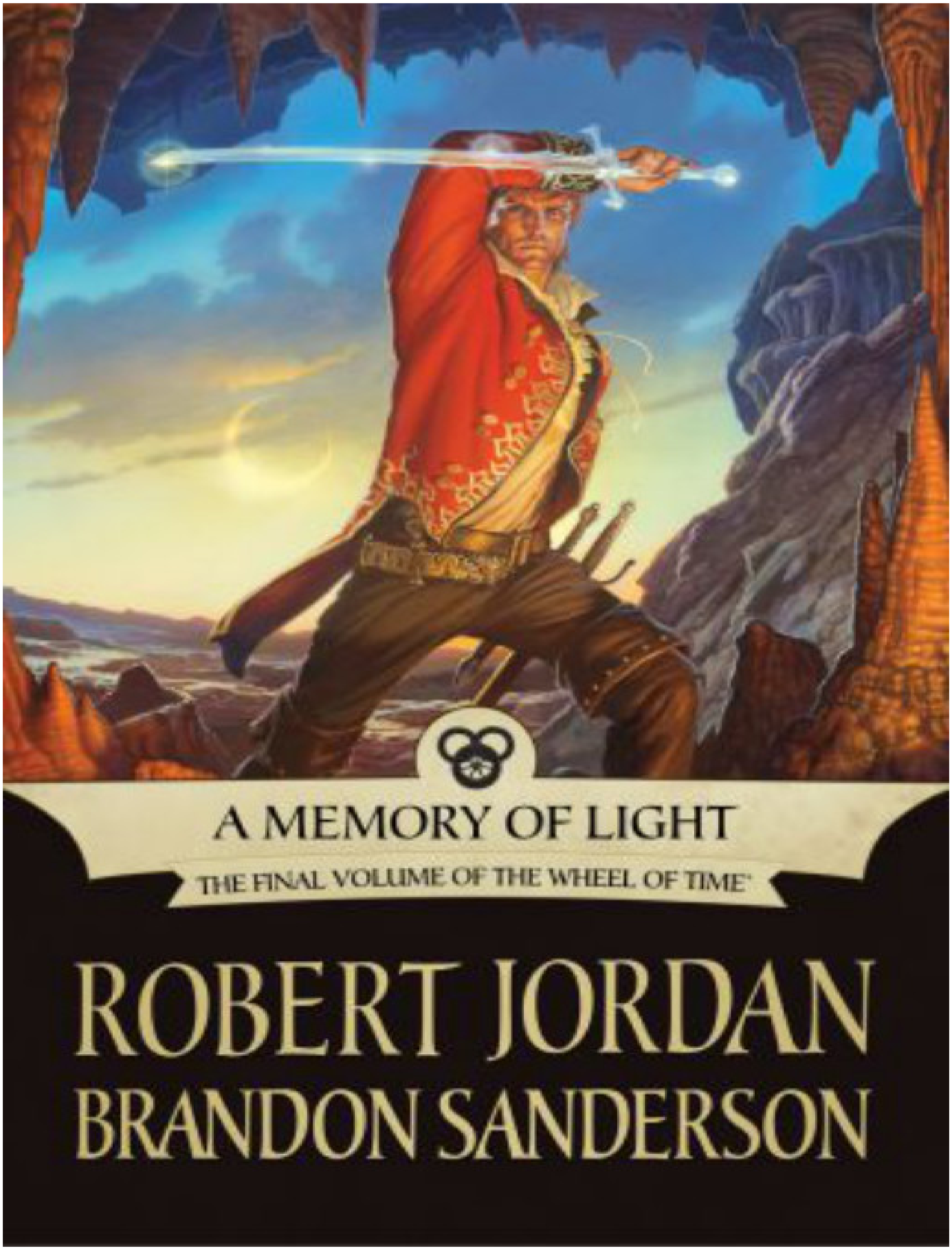
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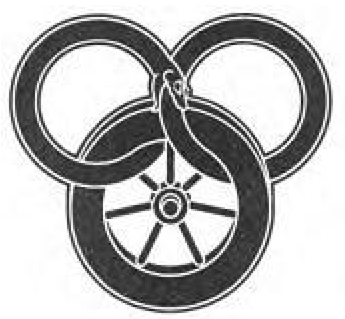

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For Harriet,
the light of Mr. Jordan's life,
and for Emily,
the light of mine.

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EPILOGUE: To See the Answer

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And the Shadow fell upon the Land, and the World was riven stone from stone. The oceans fled, and the mountains were swallowed up, and the nations were scattered to the eight corners of the World. The moon was as blood, and the sun was as ashes. The seas boiled, and the living envied the dead. All was shattered, and all but memory lost, and one memory above all others, of him who brought the Shadow and the Breaking of the World. And him they named Dragon.

—from *Aleth nin Taerin alt a Camora,*
The Breaking of the World.
Author unknown, the Fourth Age.

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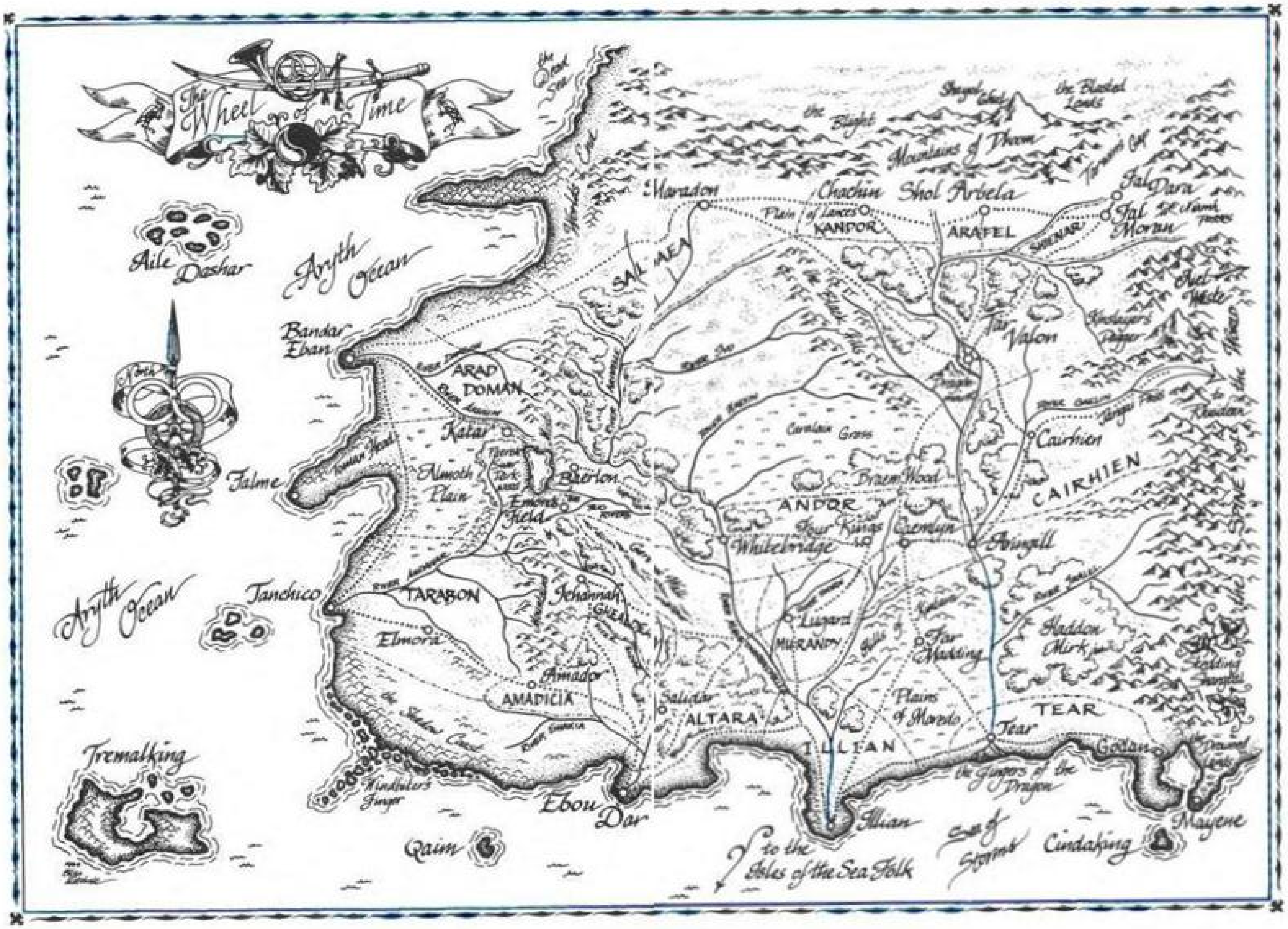
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PROLOGUE

By Grace and Banners Fallen

Bayrd pressed the coin between his thumb and forefinger. It was thoroughly unnerving to feel the metal *squish.*

He removed his thumb. The hard copper now clearly bore its print, reflecting the uncertain torchlight. He felt chilled, as if he'd spent an entire night in a cellar.

His stomach growled. Again.

The north wind picked up, making torches sputter. Bayrd sat with his back to a large rock near the center of the war camp. Hungry men muttered as they warmed their hands around firepits; the rations had spoiled long ago. Other soldiers nearby began laying all of their metal—swords, armor clasps, mail—on the ground, like linen to be dried. Perhaps they hoped that when the sun rose, it would change the material back to normal.

Bayrd rolled the once-coin into a ball between his fingers. *Light preserve us,* he thought. *Light*... He dropped the ball to the grass, then reached over and picked up the stones he'd been working with.

"I want to know what happened here, Karam," Lord Jarid snapped. Jarid and his advisors stood nearby in front of a table draped with maps. "I want to know how they drew so close, and I want that bloody Darkfriend Aes Sedai queen's head!" Jarid pounded his fist down on the table. Once, his eyes hadn't displayed such a crazed fervor. The pressure of it all—the lost rations, the strange things in the nights—was changing him.

Behind Jarid, the command tent lay in a heap. Jarid's hair—grown long during their exile—blew free, face bathed in ragged torchlight. Bits of dead grass still clung to his coat from when he'd crawled out of the tent.

Baffled servants picked at the iron tent spikes, which—like all metal in the camp—had become soft to the touch. The tent's mounting rings had stretched and snapped like warm wax.

The night smelled wrong. Of staleness, of rooms that hadn't been entered in years. The air of a forest clearing should not smell like ancient dust.

Bayrd's stomach growled again. Light, but he would've liked to have something to eat. He set his attention on his work, slapping one of his stones down against the other.

He held the stones as his old pappil had taught him as a boy. The feeling of stone striking stone helped push away the hunger and coldness. At least something was still solid in this world.

Lord Jarid glanced at him, scowling. Bayrd was one of ten men Jarid had insisted guard him this night. "I *will* have Elayne's head, Karam," Jarid said, turning back to his captains. "This unnatural night is the work of her witches."

"Her head?" Eri's skeptical voice came from the side. "And how, precisely, is someone going to bring you her head?"

Lord Jarid turned, as did the others around the torchlit table. Eri stared at the sky; on his shoulder, he wore the mark of the golden boar charging before a red spear. It was the mark of Lord Jarid's personal guard, but Eri's voice bore little respect. "What's he going to use to cut that head free, Jarid? His teeth?"

The camp stilled at the horribly insubordinate line. Bayrd stopped his stones, hesitating. Yes, there had been talk about how unhinged Lord Jarid had become. But this?

Jarid sputtered, face growing red with rage. "You dare use such a tone with me? One of my own *guards*?"

Eri continued inspecting the cloud-filled sky.

"You're docked two months' pay," Jarid snapped, but his voice trembled. "Stripped of rank and put on latrine duty until further notice. If you speak back to me again, I'll cut out your tongue."

Bayrd shivered in the cold wind. Eri was the best they had in what was left of their rebel army. The other guards shuffled, looking down.

Eri looked toward the lord and smiled. He didn't say a word, but somehow, he didn't have to. Cut out his tongue? Every scrap of metal in the camp had gone soft as lard. Jarid's own knife lay on the table, twisted and warped—it had stretched thin as he pulled it from his sheath. Jarid's coat flapped, open; it had had silver buttons.

"Jarid . . " Karam said. A young lord of a minor house loyal to Sarand, he had a lean face and large lips. "Do you really think… really think this was the work of Aes Sedai? All of the metal in the camp?"

“Of course,” Jarid barked. “What else would it be? Don’t tell me you believe those campfire tales. The Last Battle? Phaw.” He looked back at the table. Unrolled there, with pebbles weighting the corners, was a map of Andor.

Bayrd turned back to his stones. *Snap, snap, snap.* Slate and granite. It had taken work to find suitable sections of each, but Pappil had taught Bayrd to recognize all kinds of stone. The old man had felt betrayed when Bayrd’s father had gone off and become a butcher in the city, instead of keeping to the family trade.

Soft, smooth slate. Bumpy, ridged granite. Yes, some things in the world were still solid. Some few things. These days, you couldn’t rely on much. Once immovable lords were now soft as… well, soft as metal. The sky churned with blackness, and brave men—men Bayrd had long looked up to—trembled and whimpered in the night.

“I’m worried, Jarid,” Davies said. An older man, Lord Davies was as close as anyone was to being Jarid’s confidant. “We haven’t seen anyone in days. Not farmer, not queen’s soldier. Something is happening. Something wrong.”

“She cleared the people out,” Jarid snarled. “She’s preparing to pounce.”

“I think she’s ignoring us, Jarid,” Karam said, looking at the sky. Clouds still churned there. It seemed like months since Bayrd had seen a clear sky. “Why would she bother? Our men are starving. The food continues to spoil. The signs—”

“She’s trying to squeeze us,” Jarid said, eyes wide with fervor. “This is the work of the Aes Sedai.”

Stillness came suddenly to the camp. Silence, save for Bayrd’s stones. He’d never felt right as a butcher, but he’d found a home in his lord’s guard. Cutting up cows or cutting up men, the two were strikingly similar. It bothered him how easily he’d shifted from one to the other.

Snap, snap, snap.

Eri turned. Jarid eyed the guard suspiciously, as if ready to scream out harsher punishment.

He wasn't always this bad, was he? Bayrd thought. *He wanted the throne for his wife, but what lord wouldn’t?* It was hard to look past the name. Bayrd’s family had followed the Sarand family with reverence for generations.

Eri strode away from the command post.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jarid howled.

Eri reached to his shoulder and ripped free the badge of the Sarand house guard. He tossed it aside and left the torchlight, heading into the night toward the winds from the north.

Most men in the camp hadn’t gone to sleep. They sat around firepits, wanting to be near warmth and light. A few with clay pots tried boiling cuts of grass, leaves, or strips of leather as something, anything, to eat.

They stood up to watch Eri go.

“Deserter,” Jarid spat. “After all we’ve been through, now he leaves. Just because things are difficult.”

“The men are *starving*, Jarid,” Davies repeated.

“I’m aware. Thank you so much for telling me about the problems with every *bloody breath you have”* Jarid wiped his brow with his trembling palm, then slammed it on his map. “We’ll have to strike one of the cities; there’s no running from her, not now that she knows where we are. Whitebridge. We’ll take it and resupply. Her Aes Sedai must be weakened after the stunt they pulled tonight, otherwise she’d have attacked.”

Bayrd squinted into the darkness. Other men were standing, lifting quarterstaffs or cudgels. Some went without weapons. They gathered sleeping rolls, hoisted packs of clothing to their shoulders. Then they began to trail out of the camp, their passage silent, like the movement of ghosts. No rattling of chain mail or buckles on armor. The metal was all gone. As if the soul had been stripped from it.

“Elayne doesn’t dare move against us in strength,” Jarid said, perhaps convincing himself. “There must be strife in Caemlyn. All of those mercenaries you reported, Shiv. Riots, maybe. Elenia will be working against Elayne, of course. Whitebridge. Yes, Whitebridge will be perfect.

“We hold it, you see, and cut the nation in half. We recruit there, press the men in western Andor to our banner. Go to… what’s the place called? The Two Rivers. We should find able hands there.” Jarid sniffed. “I hear they haven’t seen a lord for decades. Give me four months, and I’ll have an army to be reckoned with. Enough that she won’t dare strike at us with her witches . . ”

Bayrd held his stone up to the torchlight. The trick to creating a good spearhead was to start outward and work your way in. He’d drawn the proper shape with chalk on the slate, then had worked toward the center to finish the shape. From there, you turned from hitting to tapping, shaving off smaller bits.

He'd finished one side earlier; this second half was almost done. He could almost hear his pappil whispering to him. *We're of the stone, Bayrd. No matter what your father says. Deep down, we're of the stone.*

More soldiers left the camp. Strange, how few of them spoke. Jarid finally noticed. He stood up straight and grabbed one of the torches, holding it high. "What are they doing? Hunting? WeVe seen no game in weeks. Setting snares, perhaps?"

Nobody replied.

"Maybe they've seen something," Jarid muttered. "Or maybe they think they have. I'll stand no more talk of spirits or other foolery; the witches are creating apparitions to unnerve us. That's… that's what it has to be."

Rustling came from nearby. Karam was digging in his fallen tent. He came up with a small bundle.

"Karam?" Jarid said.

Karam glanced at Lord Jarid, then lowered his eyes and began to tie a coin pouch at his waist. He stopped and laughed, then emptied it. The gold coins inside had melted into a single lump, like pigs' ears in a jar. Karam pocketed this lump. He fished in the pouch and brought out a ring. The blood-red gemstone at the center was still good. "Probably won't be enough to buy an apple, these days," he muttered.

"I *demand* to know what you are doing," Jarid snarled. "Is this your doing?" He waved toward the departing soldiers. "You're staging a mutiny, is that it?"

"This isn't my doing," Karam said, looking ashamed. "And it's not really yours, either. I'm… I'm sorry."

Karam walked away from the torchlight. Bayrd found himself surprised. Lord Karam and Lord Jarid had been friends from childhood.

Lord Davies went next, running after Karam. Was he going to try to hold the younger man back? No, he fell into step beside Karam. They vanished into the darkness.

"I'll have you hunted down for this!" Jarid yelled after them, voice shrill. Frantic. "I will be consort to the Queen! No man will give you, or any member of your Houses, shelter or succor for ten generations!"

Bayrd looked back at the stone in his hand. Only one step left, the smoothing. A good spearhead needed some smoothing to be dangerous. He brought out another piece of granite he’d picked up for the purpose and carefully began scraping it along the side of the slate.

Seems I remember this better than I'd expected, he thought as Lord Jarid continued to rant.

There was something powerful about crafting the spearhead. The simple act seemed to push back the gloom. There had been a *shadow* on Bayrd, and the rest of the camp, lately. As if... as if he couldn’t stand in the light no matter how he tried. He woke each morning feeling as if someone he’d loved had died the day before.

It could crush you, that despair. But the act of creating something—anything—fought back. That was one way to challenge… *him.* The one none of them spoke of. The one that they all knew was behind it, no matter what Lord Jarid said.

Bayrd stood up. He’d want to do more smoothing later, but the spearhead actually looked good. He raised his wooden spear haft—the metal blade had fallen free when evil had struck the camp—and lashed the new spearhead in place, just as his pappil had taught him all those years ago.

The other guards were looking at him. “We’ll need more of those,” Morear said. “If you’re willing.”

Bayrd nodded. “On our way out, we can stop by the hillside where I found the slate.”

Jarid finally stopped yelling, his eyes wide in the torchlight. “No. You are my personal guard. You will not defy me!”

Jarid jumped for Bayrd, murder in his eyes, but Morear and Rosse caught the lord from behind. Rosse looked aghast at his own mutinous act. He didn’t let go, though.

Bayrd fished a few things out from beside his bedroll. After that, he nodded to the others, and they joined him—eight men of Lord Jarid’s personal guard, dragging the sputtering lord himself through the remnants of camp. They passed smoldering fires and fallen tents, abandoned by men who were trailing out into the darkness in greater numbers now, heading north. Into the wind.

At the edge of camp, Bayrd selected a nice, stout tree. He waved to the others, and they took the rope he’d fetched and tied Lord Jarid to the tree. The man sputtered until Morear gagged him with a handkerchief.

Bayrd stepped in close. He tucked a waterskin into the crook of Jarid's arm. “Don’t struggle too much or you’ll drop that, my Lord. You should be able to push the gag off—it doesn't look too tight—and angle the waterskin up to drink. Here, I'll take out the cork."

Jarid stared thunder at Bayrd.

"It's not about you, my Lord," Bayrd said. "You always treated my family well. But, here, we can't have you following along and making life difficult. There's just something that we need to do, and you're stopping everyone from doing it. Maybe someone should have said something earlier. Well, that's done. Sometimes, you let the meat hang too long, and the entire haunch has to go."

He nodded to the others, who ran off to gather bedrolls. He pointed Rosse toward the slate outcropping nearby and told him what to look for in good spearhead stone.

Bayrd turned back to the struggling Lord Jarid. "This isn't witches, my Lord. This isn't Elayne ... I suppose I should call her the Queen. Funny, thinking of a pretty young thing like that as queen. I'd rather have bounced her on my knee at an inn than bow to her, but Andor will need a ruler to follow to the Last Battle, and it isn't your wife. I'm sorry."

Jarid sagged in his bonds, the anger seeming to bleed from him. He was weeping now. Odd thing to see, that.

"I'll tell people we pass—if we pass any—where you are," Bayrd promised, "and that you probably have some jewels on you. They might come for you. They might." He hesitated. "You shouldn't have stood in the way. Everyone seems to know what is coming but you. The Dragon is reborn, old bonds are broken, old oaths done away with… and I'll be *hanged* before I let Andor march to the Last Battle without me."

Bayrd left, walking into the night, raising his new spear onto his shoulder. *I have an oath older than the one to your family, anyway. An oath the Dragon himself couldn't undo.* It was an oath to the land. The stones were in his blood, and his blood in the stones of this Andor.

Bayrd gathered the others and they left for the north. Behind them in the night, their lord whimpered, alone, as the ghosts began to move through camp.

Talmanes tugged on Selfar's reins, making the horse dance and shake his head. The roan seemed eager. Perhaps Selfar sensed his master's anxious mood.

The night air was thick with smoke. Smoke and screams. Talmanes marched the Band alongside a road clogged with refugees smudged with soot. They moved like flotsam in a muddy river.

The men of the Band eyed the refugees with worry. “Steady!” Talmanes shouted to them. “We can’t sprint all the way to Caemlyn. Steady!” He marched the men as quickly as he dared, nearly at a jog. Their armor clanked. Elayne had taken half of the Band with her to the Field of Merrilor, including Estean and most of the cavalry. Perhaps she had anticipated needing to withdraw quickly.

Well, Talmanes wouldn’t have much use for cavalry in the streets, which were no doubt as clogged as this roadway. Selfar snorted and shook his head. They were close now; the city walls just ahead—black in the night—held in an angry light. It was as if the city were a firepit.

By grace and banners fallen, Talmanes thought with a shiver. Enormous clouds of smoke billowed over the city. This was bad. Far worse than when the Aiel had come for Cairhien.

Talmanes finally gave Selfar his head. The roan galloped along the side of the road for a time; then Talmanes reluctantly forced his way across, ignoring pleas for help. Time he’d spent with Mat made him wish there were more he could offer these people. It was downright strange, the effect Mat-rim Cauthon had on a person. Talmanes looked at common folk in a very different light now. Perhaps it was because he still didn’t rightly know whether to think of Mat as a lord or not.

On the other side of the road, he surveyed the burning city, waiting for his men to catch up. He could have mounted all of them—though they weren’t trained cavalry, every man in the Band had a horse for long-distance travel. Tonight, he didn’t dare. With Trollocs and Myrddraal lurking in the streets, Talmanes needed his men in immediate fighting shape. Crossbowmen marched with loaded weapons at the flanks of deep columns of pike-men. He would not leave his soldiers open to a Trolloc charge, no matter how urgent their mission.

But if they lost those dragons…

Light illumine us, Talmanes thought. The city seemed to be boiling, with all that smoke churning above. Yet some parts of the Inner City— rising high on the hill and visible over the walls—were not yet aflame. The Palace wasn’t on fire yet. Could the soldiers there be holding?

No word had come from the Queen, and from what Talmanes could see, no help had arrived for the city. The Queen must still be unaware, and that was bad.

Very, *very* bad.

Ahead, Talmanes spotted Sandip with some of the Band's scouts. The slender man was trying to extricate himself from a group of refugees.

"Please, good master," one young woman was crying. "My child, my daughter, in the heights of the northern march . ."

"I must reach my shop!" a stout man bellowed. "My glasswares—"

"My good people," Talmanes said, forcing his horse among them, "I should think that if you want us to help, you might wish to back away and allow us to reach the bloody city."

The refugees reluctantly pulled back, and Sandip nodded to Talmanes in thanks. Tan-skinned and dark-haired, Sandip was one of the Band's commanders and an accomplished hedge-doctor. The affable man wore a grim expression today, however.

"Sandip," Talmanes said, pointing, "there."

In the near distance, a large group of fighting men clustered, looking at the city.

"Mercenaries," Sandip said with a grunt. "We've passed several batches of them. Not a one seemed inclined to lift a finger."

"We shall see about that," Talmanes said. People still flooded out through the city gates, coughing, clutching meager possessions, leading crying children. That flow would not soon slacken. Caemlyn was as full as an inn on market day; the ones lucky enough to be escaping would be only a small fraction compared to those still inside.

"Talmanes," Sandip said quietly, "that city's going to become a death trap soon. There aren't enough ways out. If we let the Band become pinned inside…"

"I know. But—"

At the gates a wave of feeling surged through the refugees. It was almost a physical thing, a shudder. The screams grew more intense. Talmanes spun; hulking figures moved in the shadows inside the gate.

"Light!" Sandip said. "What is it?"

"Trollocs," Talmanes said, turning Selfar. "Light! They're going to try to seize the gate, stop the refugees." There were five gates out of the city; if the Trollocs held all of them…

This was already a slaughter. If the Trollocs could stop the frightened people from fleeing, it would grow far worse.

"Hurry the ranks!" Talmanes yelled. "All men to the city gates!" He spurred Selfar into a gallop.

The building would have been called an inn elsewhere, though Isam had never seen anyone inside except for the dull-eyed women who tended the few drab rooms and prepared tasteless meals. Visits here were never for comfort. He sat on a hard stool at a pine table so worn with age, it had likely grayed long before Isam's birth. He refrained from touching the surface overly much, lest he come away with more splinters than an Aiel had spears.

Isam's dented tin cup was filled with a dark liquid, though he wasn't drinking. He sat beside the wall, near enough the inn's single window to watch the dirt street outside, dimly lit in the evening by a few rusty lanterns hung outside buildings. Isam took care not to let his profile show through the smeared glass. He never looked directly out. It was always best not to attract attention in the Town.

That was the only name the place had, if it could be said to have a name at all. The sprawling ramshackle buildings had been put up and replaced countless times over two thousand years. It actually resembled a good-sized town, if you squinted. Most of the buildings had been constructed by prisoners, often with little or no knowledge of the craft. They'd been supervised by men equally ignorant. A fair number of the houses seemed held up by those to either side of them.

Sweat dribbled down the side of Isam's face, as he covertly watched that street. Which one would come for him?

In the distance, he could barely make out the profile of a mountain splitting the night sky. Metal rasped against metal somewhere out in the Town like steel heartbeats. Figures moved on the street. Men, heavily cloaked and hooded, with faces hidden up to the eyes behind blood-red veils.

Isam was careful not to let his eyes linger on them.

Thunder rumbled. The slopes of that mountain were filled with odd lightning bolts that struck upward toward the ever-present gray clouds. Few humans knew of this Town not so far from the valley of Thakan'dar, with

Shayol Ghul itself looming above. Few knew *rumors* of its existence. Isam would not have minded being among the ignorant.

Another of the men passed. Red veils. They kept them up always. Well, almost always. If you saw one lower his veil, it was time to kill him. Because if you didn't, he'd kill you. Most of the red-veiled men seemed to have no reason to be out, beyond scowling at each other and perhaps kicking at the numerous stray dogs--slat-ribbed and feral—whenever one crossed their path. The few women who had left shelter scuttled along the edges of the street, eyes lowered. There were no children to be seen, and likely few to be found. The Town was no place for children. Isam knew. He had grown from infancy here.

One of the men passing on the street looked up at Isam's window and stopped. Isam went very still. The *Samma N'Sei*, the Eye Blinders, had always been touchy and full of pride. No, touchy was too mild a term. They required no more than whim to take a knife to one of the Talentless. Usually it was one of the servants who paid. Usually.

The red-veiled man continued to regard him. Isam stilled his nerves and did not make a show of staring back. His summons here had been urgent, and one did not ignore such things if one wished to live. But still ... if the man took one step toward the building, Isam would slip into *Tel'ararirhiod*, secure in the knowledge that not even one of the Chosen could follow him from here.

Abruptly the *Samma N'Sei* turned from the window. In a flash he was moving away from the building, striding quickly. Isam felt some of his tension melt away, though it would never truly leave him, not in this place. This place was not home, despite his childhood here. This place was death.

Motion. Isam glanced toward the end of the street. Another tall man, in a black coat and cloak, was walking toward him, his face exposed. Incredibly, the street was emptying as *Samma N'Sei* darted off down other streets and alleys.

So it was Moridin. Isam had not been there to witness the Chosen's first visit to the Town, but he had heard. The *Samma N'Sei* had thought Moridin one of the Talentless until he demonstrated differently. The constraints that held them did not hold him.

The numbers of dead *Samma N'Sei* varied with the telling, but the claim never dipped below a dozen. By the evidence of his eyes, Isam could believe it.

When Moridin reached the inn, the street was empty save for the dogs. And Moridin walked right on past. Isam watched as closely as he dared. Moridin seemed uninterested in him or the inn, which was where Isam had been instructed to wait. Perhaps the Chosen had other business, and Isam would be an afterthought.

After Moridin passed, Isam finally took a sip of his dark drink. The locals just called it “fire.” It lived up to its name. It was supposedly related to some drink from the Waste. Like everything else in the Town, it was a corrupt version of the original.

How long was Moridin going to make him wait? Isam didn’t like being here. It reminded him too much of his childhood. A servant passed—a woman with a dress so frayed that it was practically rags—and dropped a plate onto the table. The two didn’t exchange a word.

Isam looked at his meal. Vegetables—peppers and onions, mostly—sliced thin and boiled. He picked at one and took a taste, then sighed and pushed the meal aside. The vegetables were as bland as unseasoned millet porridge. There wasn’t any meat. That was actually good; he didn’t like to eat meat unless he’d seen it killed and slaughtered himself. That was a remnant of his childhood. If you hadn’t seen it slaughtered yourself, you couldn’t know. Not for certain. Up here, if you found meat, it *could* have been something that had been caught in the south, or maybe an animal that had been raised up here, a cow or a goat.

Or it could be something else. People lost games up here and couldn’t pay, then disappeared. And often, the *Samma N’Sei* who didn’t breed true washed out of their training. Bodies vanished. Corpses rarely lasted long enough for burial.

Burn this place, Isam thought, stomach unsettled. *Burn it with*—

Someone entered the inn. He couldn’t watch both approaches to the door from this direction, unfortunately. She was a pretty woman, dressed in black trimmed with red. Isam didn’t recognize her slim figure and delicate face. He was increasingly certain he could recognize all of the Chosen; he’d seen them often enough in the dream. They didn’t know that, of course. They thought themselves masters of the place, and some of them *were* very skilled.

He was equally skilled, and also exceptionally good at not being seen.

Whoever this was, she was in disguise, then. Why bother hiding herself here? Either way, she had to be the one who had summoned him. No woman walked the Town with such an imperious expression, such self assurance, as if she expected the rocks themselves to obey if told to jump. Isam went quietly down on one knee.

That motion woke the ache inside his stomach from where he'd been wounded. He still hadn't recovered from the fight with the wolf. He felt a stirring inside of him; Luc hated Aybara. Unusual. Luc tended to be the more accommodating one, Isam the hard one. Well, that was how he saw himself.

Either way, on this particular wolf, they agreed. On one hand, Isam was thrilled; as a hunter, he'd rarely been presented with such a challenge as Aybara. However, his hatred was deeper. He *would* kill Aybara.

Isam covered a grimace at the pain and bowed his head. The woman left him kneeling and took a seat at his table. She tapped a finger on the side of the tin cup for a few moments, staring at its contents, and did not speak.

Isam remained still. Many of those fools who named themselves Darkfriends would squirm and writhe when another asserted power over them. Indeed, he admitted with reluctance, Luc would probably squirm just as much.

Isam was a hunter. That was all he cared to be. When you were secure with what you were, there was no cause to resent being shown your place.

Burn it, but the side of his belly *did* ache.

"I want him dead," the woman said. Her voice was soft, yet intense.

Isam said nothing.

"I want him gutted like an animal, his bowels spilled onto the ground, his blood a milkpan for ravens, his bones left to bleach, then gray, then *crack* in the heat of the sun. I want him *dead*, hunter."

"Al'Thor."

"Yes. You have failed in the past." Her voice was ice. He felt a chill. This one was hard. Hard as Moridin.

In his years of service, he had learned contempt for most of the Chosen. They bickered like children, for all their power and supposed wisdom. This woman made him pause, and he wondered if he actually *had* spied on all of them. She seemed different.

"Well?" she asked. "Do you speak for your failures?"

"Each time one of the others has tasked me with this hunt," he said, "another has come to pull me away and set me on some other task."

In truth, he'd rather have continued his hunt for the wolf. He would not disobey orders, not direct ones from the Chosen. Other than Aybara, one hunt was much the same to him as another. He would kill this Dragon, if he had to.

"Such won't happen this time," the Chosen said, still staring at his cup. She hadn't looked at him, and she did not give him leave to stand, so he remained kneeling. "All others have renounced claim on you. Unless the Great Lord tells you otherwise—unless he *summons you himself-*—you are to keep to this task. Kill al'Thor."

Motion outside the window caused Isam to glance to the side. The Chosen didn't look as a group of black-hooded figures passed. The winds didn't cause the cloaks of these figures to stir.

They were accompanied by carriages; an unusual sight in the Town. The carriages moved slowly, but still rocked and thumped on the uneven street. Isam didn't need to see into the carriages' curtained windows to know that thirteen women rode inside, matching the number of Myrddraal. None of the *Samma N'Sei* returned to the street. They tended to avoid processions like this. For obvious reasons, they had… strong feelings about such things.

The carriages passed. So. Another had been caught. Isam would have assumed that the practice had ended, once the taint was cleansed.

Before he turned back to look at the floor, he caught sight of something more incongruous. A small, dirty face watching from the shadows of an alleyway across the street. Wide eyes but a furtive posture. Moridin's passing, and the coming of the thirteens, had driven the *Samma N'Sei* off the street. Where they were not, the urchins could go in some safety. Maybe.

Isam wanted to scream at the child to go. Tell it to run, to risk crossing the Blight. To die in the stomach of a Worm was better than to live in this Town, and suffer what it did to you. Go! Flee! *Die!*

The moment passed quickly, the urchin retreating to the shadows.

Isam could remember being that child. He'd learned so many things then. How to find food that you could mostly trust, and wouldn't vomit back up once you found out what was in it. How to fight with knives. How to avoid being seen or noticed.

And how to kill a man, of course. Everyone who survived long enough in the Town learned that particular lesson.

The Chosen was still looking at his cup. It was her reflection she was looking at, Isam realized. What did she see there?

"I will need help," Isam finally said. "The Dragon Reborn has guards, and he is rarely in the dream."

"Help has been arranged," she said softly. "But you are to *find* him, hunter. None of this playing as you did before, trying to draw him to you. Lews Therin will sense such a trap. Besides, he will not deviate from his cause now. Time is short."

She spoke of the disastrous operation in the Two Rivers. Luc had been in charge then. What knew Isam of real towns, real people? Almost, he felt a longing for those things, though he suspected that was really Luc's emotion. Isam was just a hunter. People held little interest for him beyond the best places for an arrow to enter so as to hit the heart.

That Two Rivers operation, though ... it stank like a carcass left to rot. He still didn't know. Had the point really been to lure al'Thor, or had it been to keep Isam away from important events? He knew his abilities fascinated the Chosen; he could do something that they could not. Oh, they could imitate the way he stepped into the dream, but they needed channeling, gateways, time.

He was tired of being a pawn in their games. Just let him hunt; stop changing the prey with each passing week.

One did not say such things to the Chosen. He kept his objections to himself.

Shadows darkened the doorway to the inn, and the serving woman disappeared into the back. That left the place completely empty save for Isam and the Chosen.

"You may stand," she said.

Isam did, hastily, as two men stepped into the room. Tall, muscular and red-veiled. They wore brown clothing like Aiel, but didn't carry spears or bows. These creatures killed with weapons far deadlier.

Though he kept his face impassive, Isam felt a surge of emotion. A childhood of pain, hunger and death. A lifetime of avoiding the gaze of men like these. He fought hard to keep himself from trembling as they strode to the table, moving with the grace of natural predators.

The men dropped their veils and bared their teeth. *Burn me.* Their teeth were filed.

These had been Turned. You could see it in their eyes—eyes that weren’t quite right, weren’t quite *human.*

Isam nearly fled right then, stepping into the dream. He couldn’t kill both of these men. He’d have been reduced to ash before he managed to take down one of them. He’d seen *Samma N’Sei* kill; they often did it just to explore new ways of using their powers.

They didn’t attack. Did they know this woman was Chosen? Why, then, lower their veils? *Samma N’Sei* never lowered their veils except to kill—and only for the kills they were most eagerly anticipating.

“They will accompany you,” the Chosen said. “You shall have a handful of the Talentless as well to help deal with al’Thor’s guards.” She turned to him and, for the first time, she met his eyes. She seemed… revolted. As if she were disgusted to need his aid.

"They will accompany you,” she had said. Not *“They will serve you.”*

Bloody son of a dog. This was going to be a hateful job.

Talmanes threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding the Trolloc’s axe. The ground trembled as the axe broke cobblestones; he ducked and rammed his blade through the creature’s thigh. The thing had a bull’s snout, and it threw back its head to bellow.

“Burn me, but you have horrid breath,” Talmanes growled, whipping his sword free and stepping back. The thing went down on one leg, and Talmanes hacked off its weapon hand.

Panting, Talmanes danced back as his two companions struck the Trolloc through the back with spears. You always wanted to fight Trollocs in a group. Well, you always wanted to fight *anyone* with a team on your side, but it was more important with Trollocs, considering their size and strength.

Corpses lay like heaps of trash in the night. Talmanes had been forced to fire the city gate’s guardhouses to give light; the half-dozen or so guards who had remained were now recruits in the Band, for the time being.

Like a black tide, the Trollocs began to retreat from the gate. They’d overextended themselves in pushing for it. Or, rather, *being* pushed for it. There had been a Halfman with this crew. Talmanes lowered his hand to the wound in his side. It was wet.

The guardhouse fires were burning low. He’d have to order a few of the shops set on fire. That risked letting the blaze spread, but the city was already lost. No sense in holding back now. “Brynt!” he yelled. “Set that stable aflame!”

Sandip came up as Brynt went running past with a torch. “They’ll be back. Soon, probably.”

Talmanes nodded. Now that the fighting was done, townspeople began to flood out of alleys and recesses, timidly making for the gate and—presumably—safety.

“We *can’t* stay here and hold this gate,” Sandip said. “The dragons…”

“I know. How many men did we lose?”

“I don’t have a count yet. A hundred, at least.”

Light, Mat’s going to have my hide when he hears about that. Mat hated losing troops. There was a softness to the man equal to his genius—an odd, but inspiring, combination. “Send some scouts to watch the city roadways nearby for approaching Shadowspawn. Heap some of these Trolloc carcasses to make barriers; they’ll work as well as anything else. You, soldier!”

One of the wearied soldiers walking past froze. He wore the Queen’s colors. “My Lord?”

“We need to let people know this gate out of the city is safe. Is there a horn call that Andoran peasants would recognize? Something that would bring them here?”

“ ‘Peasants,’ ” the man said thoughtfully. He didn’t seem to like the word. They didn’t use it often, here in Andor. “Yes, the Queen’s March.”

“Sandip?”

“I’ll set the sounders to it, Talmanes,” Sandip said.

“Good.” Talmanes knelt to clean his sword on a fallen Trolloc’s shirt, his side aching. The wound wasn’t bad. Not by normal terms. Just a nick, really.

The shirt was so grimy he almost hesitated to wipe his weapon, but Trolloc blood was bad for a blade, so he swabbed down the sword. He stood up, ignoring the pain in his side, then walked toward the gate, where he’d tied Selfar. He hadn’t dared trust the horse against Shadowspawn. He was a good gelding, but not Borderland-trained.

None of the men questioned him as he climbed into the saddle and turned Selfar westward, out of the city gate, toward those mercenaries he’d seen watching earlier. Talmanes wasn't surprised to find that they'd moved closer to the city. Fighting drew warriors like fire drawing cold travelers on a winter night.

They hadn’t joined in the battle. As Talmanes rode up, he was greeted by a small group of the sell-swords: six men with thick arms, and— likely— thick wits. They recognized him and the Band. Mat was downright famous these days, and so was the Band, by association. They undoubtedly also noticed the Trolloc bloodstains on Talmanes’ clothing and the bandage at his side.

That wound had really begun to burn fiercely now. Talmanes reined in Selfar, then patiently patted at his saddlebags. *I stowed some tabac here somewhere…*

“Well?” one of the mercenaries asked. The leader was easy to pick out; he had the finest armor. A man often became leader of a band like this by staying alive.

Talmanes fished his second-best pipe out of his saddlebag. Where was that tabac? He never took the best pipe into battle. His father had called that bad luck.

Ah, he thought, pulling out the tabac pouch. He placed some in the bowl, then removed a lighting twig and leaned over to stick it into a torch held by a wary mercenary.

“We aren’t going to fight unless paid,” the leader said. He was a stout man, surprisingly clean, though he could have done with a beard trim.

Talmanes lit his pipe, puffing smoke out. Behind him, the horns started blowing. The Queen’s March turned out to be a catchy tune. The horns were accompanied by shouts, and Talmanes looked back. Trollocs on the main thoroughfare, a larger batch this time.

Crossbowmen fell into ranks and began loosing at an order Talmanes couldn’t hear.

“We’re not—” the head man began again.

“Do you know what this is?” Talmanes asked softly around his pipe. “This is the beginning of the end. This is the fall of nations and the unification of humankind. This is the *Last Battle*, you bloody fool.”

The men shuffled uncomfortably.

“Do you ... do you speak for the Queen?” the leader said, trying to salvage something. “I just want to see my men taken care of.”

“If you fight,” Talmanes said, “I’ll promise you a great reward.”

The man waited.

“I promise you that you’ll continue to draw breath,” Talmanes said, taking another puff.

“Is that a threat, Cairhienin?”

Talmanes blew out smoke, then leaned down from his saddle, putting his face closer to the leader. “I killed a Myrddraal tonight, Andoran,” he said softly. “It nicked me with a Thakan’dar blade, and the wound has gone black. That means I have a few hours at best before the blade’s poison burns me from the inside out and I die in the most agonizing way a man can.

“Therefore, friend, I suggest that you trust me when I tell you that I really have nothing to lose.”

The man blinked.

“You have two choices,” Talmanes said, turning his horse and speaking loudly to the troop. “You can fight like the rest of us and help this world see new days, and maybe you’ll earn some coin in the end. I can’t promise that. Your other option is to sit here, watch people be slaughtered and tell yourselves that you don’t work for free. If you’re lucky, and the rest of us salvage this world without you, you’ll draw breath long enough to be strung up by your cowardly necks.”

Silence. Horns blew from the darkness behind.

The chief sell-sword looked toward his companions. They nodded in agreement.

“Go help hold that gate,” Talmanes said. “I’ll recruit the other mercenary bands to help.”

Leilwin surveyed the multitude of camps dotting the place known as the Field of Merrilor. In the darkness, with the moon not due to rise for some time, she could almost imagine that the cook fires were shipborne lanterns in a busy port at night.

That was probably a sight she would never see again. Leilwin Shipless was not a captain; she would never be one again. To wish otherwise was to defy the very nature of who she had become.

Bayle put a hand on her shoulder. Thick fingers, rough from many days of work. She reached up and rested her hand on his. It had been simple to slip through one of those gateways being made at Tar Valon. Bayle knew his way around the city, though he had grumbled about being there. “This place do set the hairs on my arms to points,” he’d said, and, “I did wish to never walk these streets again. I did wish it.”

He’d come with her anyway. A good man, Bayle Domon. As good as she’d found in these unfamiliar lands, despite moments of unsavory trading in his past. That was behind him. If he didn’t understand the right way of things, he did try.

“This do be a sight,” he said, scanning the quiet sea of lights. “What want you to do now?”

“We find Nynaeve al’Meara or Elayne Trakand.”

Bayle scratched at his bearded chin; he wore it after the Illianer style, with the upper lip shaved. The hair on his head was of varying lengths; he’d stopped shaving a portion of his head, now that she had freed him. She’d done that so they could marry, of course.

It was well; the shaven head would have drawn attention here. He’d done quite well as *so’jhin* once certain… issues had been resolved. In the end, however, she had to admit that Bayle Domon was not meant to be *so’jhin*. He was too rough-cut, and no tide would ever soften those sharp edges. That was how she wanted him, though she’d never say so out loud.

“It do be late, Leilwin,” he said. “Perhaps we should wait until morning.”

No. There was a quiet to the camps, true, but it was not the quiet of slumber. It was the quiet of ships waiting for the right winds.

She knew little of what was happening here—she hadn’t dared open her mouth in Tar Valon to ask questions, lest her accent reveal her as Seanchan. A gathering of this size did not occur without dedicated planning. She was surprised at the immensity of it; she’d heard of the meeting here, one that most of the Aes Sedai had come to attend. This exceeded anything she’d anticipated.

She started across the field, and Bayle followed, both of them joining the group of Tar Valon servants they had been allowed to accompany, thanks to Bayle’s bribe. His methods did not please her, but she had been able to think of no other way. She tried not to think too much about his original contacts in Tar Valon. Well, if she was never to be on a ship again, then Bayle would find no more opportunities for smuggling. That was a small comfort.

You’re a ship’s captain. That’s all you know, all you want. And now, Shipless. She shivered, and clenched her hands into fists to keep from wrapping her arms around herself. To spend the rest of her days on these unchanging lands, never able to move at a pace brisker than what a horse could provide, never to smell the deep-sea air, never to point her prow toward a horizon, hoist anchor, set sail and simply…

She shook herself. Find Nynaeve and Elayne. She might be Shipless, but she would not let herself slip into the depths and drown. She set her course and started walking. Bayle hunched down slightly, suspicious, and tried to watch all around them at once. He also glanced at her a few times, lips drawn to a line. She knew what that meant, by now.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Leilwin, what do we be doing here?”

“I’ve told you. We need to find—”

“Yes, but why? What do you think you will do? They do be Aes Sedai.”

“They showed me respect before.”

“And so you do think they’ll take us in?”

“Perhaps.” She eyed him. “Speak it, Bayle. You have something on your mind?”

He sighed. “Why do we need be taken in, Leilwin. We could find ourselves a ship somewhere, in Arad Doman. Where there do be no Aes Sedai *or* Seanchan.”

“I wouldn’t run the kind of ship you prefer.”

He regarded her flatly. “I do know how to run an honest business, Leilwin. It would no be—”

She raised a hand, quieting him, then rested it on his shoulder. They stopped on the pathway. “I know, my love. I know. I’m speaking words to distract, to set us spinning in a current that goes nowhere.”

“Why?”

That single word scratched at her like a splinter under a fingernail. Why... Why *had* she come all this way, traveling with Matrim Cauthon, putting herself dangerously near the Daughter of the Nine Moons? My people live with a grave misconception of the world, Bayle. In doing so, they create injustice.”

“They did reject you, Leilwin,” he said softly. You do no longer exist.”

"I'll *always* be one of them. My name was revoked, but not my blood.”

“I do be sorry for the insult.”

She nodded curtly. “I am still loyal to the Empress, may she live forever. But the *damane*. . . they are the very *foundation* for her rule. They are the means by which she creates order, by which she holds the Empire together. And the *damane* are a lie."

Suldam could channel. The talent could be learned. Now, months after she had discovered the truth, her mind could not encompass all of the implications. Another might have been more interested in the political advantage; another might have returned to Seanchan and used this to gain power.

Almost, Leilwin wished she had done that. Almost.

But the pleas of the *suldam*… growing to know those Aes Sedai, who were nothing like what she'd been taught ...

Something had to be done. And yet, in doing it, did she risk causing the entire Empire to collapse? Her movements must be considered very, very carefully, like the last rounds of a game of *shal*.

The two continued to follow the line of servants in the dark; one Aes Sedai or another often sent servants for something they had left in the White Tower, so traveling back and forth was common—a good thing for Leilwin. They passed the perimeter of the Aes Sedai camp without being challenged.

She was surprised at the ease of it until she spotted several men alongside the path. They were very easy to miss; something about them blended into the surroundings, particularly in the darkness. She noticed them only when one moved, breaking off from the others to fall into step a short distance behind her and Bayle.

In seconds, it was obvious that he'd picked the two of them out. Perhaps it was the way they walked, the way they held themselves. They'd been careful to dress plainly, though Bayle's beard would mark him as Illianer.

Leilwin stopped—laying a hand on Bayle's arm—and turned to confront the one following them. A Warder, she assumed from descriptions.

The Warder stalked up to them. They were still near the perimeter of the camp, the tents organized in rings. She had noticed with discomfort that some of the tents glowed with a light too steady to come from candle or lamp.

"Ho," Bayle said, raising a friendly hand to the Warder. "We do be seeking an Aes Sedai named Nynaeve al'Meara. If she is not here, perhaps one named Elayne Trakand?"

"Neither makes their camp here," the Warder said. He was a long-armed man, and he moved with grace. His features, framed by long, dark hair, looked… unfinished. Chiseled from rock by a sculptor who had lost interest in the project partway through.

“Ah,” Bayle said. “That do be our mistake, then. Could you point us to where they do be making camp? It do be a matter of some urgency, you see.” He spoke smoothly, easily. Bayle could be quite charming, when necessary. Much more so than Leilwin could.

“That depends,” the Warder said. “Your companion, she wishes to find these Aes Sedai, too?”

“She do—” Bayle began, but the Warder held up a hand.

“I would hear it from her,” he said, inspecting Leilwin.

“It do be what I wish,” Leilwin said. “My aged grandmother! These women, they did promise us payment, and I *do* mean to have it. Aes Sedai do not lie. Everyone do know this fact. If you will not take us to them, then provide someone who will!”

The Warder hesitated, eyes widening at the barrage of words. Then, blessedly, he nodded. “This way.” He led them away from the center of the camp, but he no longer seemed suspicious.

Leilwin let out a quiet breath and fell into step with Bayle behind the Warder. Bayle looked at her proudly, grinning so widely he’d certainly have given the two of them away if the Warder had looked back. She couldn’t help a hint of a smile herself.

The Illianer accent had not come naturally to her, but both had agreed that her Seanchan tongue was dangerous, particularly when traveling among Aes Sedai. Bayle claimed that no true Illianer would accept her as one of them, but she was clearly good enough to fool an outsider.

She felt relieved when they moved away from the Aes Sedai camp into the dark. Having two friends—they were friends, despite their troubles with one another—who were Aes Sedai did not mean she wanted to be inside a camp full of them. The Warder led them to an open area near the middle of the Field of Merrilor. There was a very large camp here, with a great number of small tents.

“Aiel,” Bayle said softly to her. “There do be tens of thousands of them.”

Interesting. Fearsome stories were told of Aiel, legends that could not all possibly be true. Still, the tales—if exaggerated—suggested that these were the finest warriors this side of the ocean. She would have welcomed sparring with one or two of them, had the situation been different. She rested a hand on the side of her pack; she'd stowed her cudgel in a long pocket on the side, easily within reach.

They certainly were a *tall* folk, these Aiel. She passed some of them lounging by campfires, seemingly relaxed. Those eyes, however, watched more keenly than the Warders' had. A dangerous people, ready for killing while relaxing beside fires. She could not make out the banners that flapped above this camp in the night sky.

"Which king or queen do rule this camp, Warder?" she called.

The man turned to her, his features lost in the night shadow. "Your king, Illianer."

At her side, Bayle stiffened.

My…

The Dragon Reborn. She was proud that she didn't miss a step as they walked, but it was a near thing. A man who could channel. That was worse, far worse, than the Aes Sedai.

The Warder led them to a tent near the center of the camp. "You are fortunate; her light is on." There were no guards at the tent entrance, so he called in and received permission to enter. He pulled back the flap with one arm and nodded to them, yet his other hand was on his sword, and he stood in fighting posture.

She hated putting that sword to her back, but she entered as ordered. The tent was lit by one of those unnatural globes of light, and a familiar woman in a green dress sat at a writing desk, working on a letter. Nynaeve al'Meara was what, back in Seanchan, one would call a *telarti*—a woman with fire in her soul. Leilwin had come to understand that Aes Sedai were supposed to be calm as placid waters. Well, this woman might be that on occasion-but she was the kind of placid water found one bend away from a furious waterfall.

Nynaeve continued to write as they entered. She no longer wore braids; her hair was loose around the top of her shoulders. It was a sight as strange as a ship with no mast.

"I'll be with you in a moment, Sleete," Nynaeve said. "Honestly, the way you lot have been hovering over me lately makes me think of a mother bird who has lost an egg. Don't your Aes Sedai have work for you to do?"

"Lan is important to many of us, Nynaeve Sedai," the Warder-Sleete—said in a calm, gravelly voice.

“Oh, and he’s not important to me? Honestly, I wonder if we should send you out to chop wood or something. If one more Warder comes to see if I need—”

She glanced up, finally seeing Leilwin. Nynaeve’s face immediately grew impassive. Cold. Burningly cold. Leilwin found herself sweating. This woman held her life in her hands. Why couldn’t it have been Elayne that Sleete had brought them to? Perhaps they shouldn’t have mentioned Nynaeve.

“These two demanded to see you,” Sleete said. His sword was out of its sheath. Leilwin hadn’t seen that. Domon muttered softly to himself. “They claim that you promised to pay them money, and they have come for it. They did not identify themselves in the Tower, however, and found a way to slip through one of the gateways. The man is from Illian. The woman, somewhere else. She’s disguising her accent.”

Well, perhaps she wasn’t as good with the accent as she’d assumed. Leilwin glanced at his sword. If she rolled to the side, he’d probably miss a strike, assuming he went for the chest or neck. She could pull the cudgel and—

She was facing an Aes Sedai. She’d never stand up from that roll. She’d be caught in a weave of the One Power, or worse.

“I know them, Sleete,” Nynaeve said, voice cool. “You did well in bringing them to me. Thank you.”

His sword was sheathed at once, and Leilwin felt cool air on her neck as he slipped out of the tent, quiet as a whisper.

“If you’ve come to beg forgiveness,” Nynaeve said, “you’ve come to the wrong person. I’ve half a mind to give you over to the Warders to question. Maybe they can bleed something useful about your people from that treacherous mind of yours.”

“It is good to see you again too, Nynaeve,” Leilwin said coolly.

“So what happened?” Nynaeve demanded.

What happened? What was the woman talking about?

“I did try,” Bayle suddenly said, regretfully. “I did fight them, but I was taken easily. They could have fired my ship, sunk us all, killed my men.”

“Better that you and all aboard should have died, Illianer,” Nynaeve said. “The *ter’angreal* ended up in the hands of one of the Forsaken; Semirhage was hiding among the Seanchan, pretending to be some kind of judge. A Truthspeaker? Is that the word?”

"Yes," Leilwin said softly. She understood now. "I regret breaking my oath, but—"

"You *regret* it, Egeanin?" Nynaeve said, standing, knocking her chair back. " 'Regret' is not a word I would use for endangering the world itself, bringing us to the brink of darkness and all but shoving us over the edge! She had copies of that device made, woman. One ended up around the neck of the Dragon Reborn. The *Dragon Reborn himself,* controlled by one of the Forsaken!"

Nynaeve flung her hands into the air. "Light! We were *heartbeats* from the end, because of you. The end of everything. No more Pattern, no more world, nothing. Millions of lives could have winked out because of your carelessness."

"I . . Leilwin's failures seemed monumental, suddenly. Her life, lost. Her very name, lost. Her ship, stripped from her by the Daughter of the Nine Moons herself. All were immaterial in light of this.

"I did fight," Bayle said more firmly. "I did fight with what I could give."

"I should have joined you, it appears," Leilwin said.

"I did try to explain that," Bayle said grimly. "Many times now, burn me, but I did."

"Bah," Nynaeve said, raising a hand to her forehead. "What are you doing here, Egeanin? I had hoped you were dead. If you had died trying to keep your oath, then I could not have blamed you."

I handed it to Suroth myself Leilwin thought. *A price paid for my life, the only way out.*

"Well?" Nynaeve glared at her. "Out with it, Egeanin."

"I no longer bear that name." Leilwin went down on her knees. "I have had all stripped from me, including my honor, it now appears. I give myself to you as payment."

Nynaeve snorted. "We don't keep people as if they were animals, unlike you Seanchan."

Leilwin continued kneeling. Bayle rested a hand on her shoulder, but did not try to pull her to her feet. He understood well enough now why she had to do as she had. He was quite nearly civilized.

"On your feet," Nynaeve snapped. "Light, Egeanin. I remember you being so strong you could chew rocks and spit out sand."

"It is my strength that compels me," she said, lowering her eyes. Did Nynaeve not understand how difficult this was? It would be easier to slit her own throat, only she had not the honor left to demand such an easy end.

“Stand!”

Leilwin did as told.

Nynaeve grabbed her cloak off the bed and threw it on. “Come. We’ll take you to the Amyrlin. Maybe she’ll know what to do with you.”

Nynaeve barged out into the night, and Leilwin followed. Her decision had been made. There was only one path that made sense, one way to preserve a shred of honor, and perhaps to help her people survive the lies they had been telling themselves for so long.

Leilwin Shipless now belonged to the White Tower. Whatever they said, whatever they tried to do with her, that fact would not change. They owned her. She would be a *da covale* to this Amyrlin, and would ride this storm like a ship whose sail had been shredded by the wind.

Perhaps, with what remained of her honor, she could earn this woman’s trust.

“It’s part of an old Borderlander relief for the pain,” Melten said, removing the bandage at Talmanes’ side. “The blisterleaf slows the taint left by the cursed metal.”

Melten was a lean, mop-haired man. He dressed like an Andoran woodsman, with a simple shirt and cloak, but spoke like a Borderlander. In his pouch he carried a set of colored balls that he’d sometimes juggle for the other members of the Band. In another life, he must have been a gleeman.

He was an unlikely man to be in the Band, but they all were, in one way or another.

“I don’t know how it dampens the poison,” Melten said. “But it does. It’s no natural poison, mind you. You can’t suck it free.”

Talmanes pressed his hand to the side. The burning pain felt like thorny vines crawling in under his skin, creeping forward and tearing at his flesh with every movement. He could *feel* the poison moving through his body. Light, but it hurt.

Nearby, the men of the Band fought through Caemlyn up toward the Palace. They’d come in through the southern gate, leaving the mercenary bands—under Sandip’s command—holding the western gate.

If there was human resistance anywhere in the city, it would be at the Palace. Unfortunately, fists of Trollocs roved the area between Talmanes' position and the Palace. They kept running across the monsters and getting drawn into fights.

Talmanes couldn't find out if, indeed, there was resistance above without getting there. That meant leading his men up toward the Palace, fighting all the way, and leaving himself open to being cut off from behind if one of those roving groups worked around behind him. There was nothing for it, though. He needed to find out what—if anything—remained of the Palace defenses. From there, he could strike further into the city and try to get the dragons.

The air smelled of smoke and blood; during a brief pause in the fighting, they'd piled dead Trollocs against the right side of the street to make room for passage.

There were refugees in this quarter of the city, too, though not a flood of them. A stream, maybe, seeping in from the darkness as Talmanes and the Band seized sections of the thoroughfare leading up toward the Palace. These refugees never demanded that the Band protect their goods or rescue their homes; they sobbed with joy at finding human resistance. Madwin was in charge of sending them toward freedom along the corridor of safety the Band had carved free.

Talmanes started up toward the Palace, atop the hill but only barely visible in the night. Though most of the city burned, the Palace was not aflame; its white walls hung in the smoky night like phantoms. No fire. That *had* to indicate resistance, didn't it? Wouldn't the Trollocs have attacked it as one of their first actions in the city?

He'd sent scouts along the street up ahead as he gave his men—and himself—a short breather.

Melten finished tying Talmanes' poultice tight.

"Thank you, Melten," Talmanes said, nodding to the man. "I can feel the poultice working already. You said this is part of the cure for the pain. What is the other part?"

Melten unhooked a metal flask from his belt and handed it over. "Shienaran brandy, full strength."

"It's not a good idea to drink in combat, man."

"Take it," Melten said softly. "Keep the flask and drink it deep, my Lord. Or come the next bell, you won't be standing."

Talmanes hesitated, then took the flask and took a long swallow. It burned like the wound. He coughed, then tucked the brandy away. “I believe you mistook your bottles, Melten. That was something you found in a tanning vat.”

Melten snorted. “And it’s said you have no sense of humor, Lord Talmanes.”

“I haven’t one,” Talmanes said. “Stay close with that sword of yours.”

Melten nodded, eyes solemn. “Dreadbane,” he whispered.

“What’s that?”

“Borderlander title. You slew a Fade. Dreadbane.”

“It had about seventeen bolts in it at the time.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Melten clasped him on the shoulder. “Dreadbane. When you can’t take the pain any longer, make two fists and raise them toward me. I will see the deed done.”

Talmanes stood up, unable to suppress a groan. They both understood. The several Borderlanders in the Band agreed; wounds made by a Thakan’dar blade were unpredictable. Some festered quickly, others made men sick. When one went black like Talmanes’, though… that was the worst. Nothing short of finding an Aes Sedai in the next few hours could save him.

“See,” Talmanes muttered, “it is a good thing I have no sense of humor, otherwise I should think the Pattern was playing a joke on me. Dennel! You have a map handy?” Light, but he missed Vanin.

“My Lord,” Dennel said, hurrying across the dark street carrying a torch and a hastily drawn map. He was one of the Band’s dragon captains. “I think I’ve found a faster way through the streets to where Aludra had the dragons stored.”

“We’re fighting to the Palace first,” Talmanes said.

“My Lord.” Dennel’s words came more softly from his wide lips. He was picking at his uniform, as if it didn’t fit right. “If the Shadow reaches those dragons…”

“I’m well aware of the dangers, Dennel, thank you. How fast could you move the things, assuming we reach them? I’m worried about extending ourselves too far, and this city is going up faster than oil-soaked love letters to a High Lords mistress. I want to get the weapons and leave the city as quickly as possible.”

“I can level an enemy bulwark in a shot or two, my Lord, but the dragons do *not* move quickly. They are attached to carts, so that will help, but they aren’t going to be any faster than… say, a line of supply wagons. And they would take time to set up properly and fire.”

“Then we continue to the Palace,” Talmanes said.

“But—”

“At the Palace,” he said sternly, “we might find women who can channel us a gateway straight to Aludra’s warehouse. Besides, if we find the Palace Guard still fighting, we know we have a friend at our backs. We *will* retrieve those dragons, but we’ll do it smartly.”

He noticed Ladwin and Mar hurrying down from above. “There are Trollocs up there!” Mar said, hastening up to Talmanes. “A hundred strong at least, hunkered down in the street.”

“Form ranks, men!” Talmanes shouted. “We push for the Palace!”

The sweat tent fell completely still.

Aviendha had anticipated incredulity, perhaps, at her tale. Questions, certainly. Not this painful silence.

Though she had not expected it, she did understand it. She had felt it herself after seeing her vision of the Aiel slowly losing *ji’e’toh* in the future. She had witnessed the death, dishonor and ruination of her people. At least now she had someone with whom to share that burden.

The heated stones in the kettle hissed softly. Someone should pour more water, but none of the room’s six occupants moved to tend it. The other five were all Wise Ones, naked—as was Aviendha—after the manner of sweat tents. Sorilea, Amys, Bair, Melaine and Kymer of the To-manelle Aiel. All stared straight ahead, each alone for the moment with her thoughts.

One by one, they straightened their backs and sat up, as if accepting a new burden. That comforted Aviendha; not that she’d expected the news to break them. It was still good to see them set their faces toward the danger instead of away from it.

“Sightblinder is too close to the world now,” said Melaine. “The Pattern has been twisted somehow. In the dream we still see many things that may or may not happen, but there are too many possibilities; we cannot tell one from another. The fate of our people is unclear to the dreamwalkers, as is the fate of the *Car'a'carn* once he spits in Sightblinder's eye on the Last Day. We do not know the truth of what Aviendha saw."

"We must test this," Sorilea said, eyes like stone. "We must know. Is each woman now shown this vision instead of the other, or was the experience unique?"

"Elenar of the Daryne," Amys said. "Her training is nearly complete; she will be the next to visit Rhuidean. We could ask Hayde and Shanni to encourage her."

Aviendha suppressed a shudder. She understood too well how "encouraging" the Wise Ones could be.

"That would be well," Bair said, leaning forward. "Perhaps this is what happens whenever someone goes through the glass columns a second time? Maybe that is why it is forbidden."

None of them looked at Aviendha, but she could feel them considering her. What she had done *was* forbidden. Speaking of what happened in Rhuidean was also taboo.

There would be no reprimand. Rhuidean had not killed her; this was what the Wheel had spun. Bair continued to stare into the distance. Sweat trickled down the sides of Aviendha's face and her breasts.

I do not miss taking baths, she told herself. She was no soft wetlander. Still, a sweat tent wasn't truly necessary on this side of the mountains. There was no bitter cold at night, so the heat of the tent felt stifling, not comforting. And if water *was* plentiful enough for bathing…

No. She set her jaw. "May I speak?"

"Don't be foolish, girl," Melaine said. The woman was round in the belly, nearly to term. "You're one of us now. No need to ask permission." Girl? It would take time for them to see her truly as one of them, but they did make an effort. Nobody ordered her to make tea or to throw water on the kettle. With no apprentice around and no *gai'shain* handy, they took turns doing these tasks.

"I am less concerned with whether the vision repeats," Aviendha said, "than with what I was shown. Will it happen? Can we stop it?"

"Rhuidean shows two types of vision," Kymer said. She was a younger woman, perhaps less than a decade Aviendha's senior, with deep red hair and a long, tanned face. "The first visit is what could be, the second, to the columns, what has happened."

"This third vision could be either," Amys said. "The columns always show the past accurately; why would they not show the future with equal accuracy?"

Aviendha's heart lurched.

"But why," Bair said softly, "would the columns show a despair that cannot change? No. I refuse to believe it. Rhuidean has always shown us what we needed to see. To help us, not destroy us. This vision must have a purpose as well. To encourage us toward greater honor?"

"Its unimportant," Sorilea said curtly.

"But—" Aviendha began.

"It's unimportant," Sorilea repeated. "If this vision were unchangeable, if our destiny is to… fall ... as you have spoken, would any of us stop fighting to change it?"

The room grew still. Aviendha shook her head.

"We must treat it as if it can be changed," Sorilea said. "Best not to dwell on your question, Aviendha. We must decide what course to take." Aviendha found herself nodding. "I… Yes, yes, you are correct, Wise One."

"But what do we do?" Kymer asked. "What do we change? For now, the Last Battle *must* be won."

"Almost," Amys said, "I wish for the vision to be unchangeable, for at least it proves we win this fight."

"It proves nothing," Sorilea said. "Sightblinder's victory would break the Pattern, and so no vision of the future can be sure or trusted. Even with prophecies of what might happen in Ages to come, if Sightblinder wins this battle, all will become nothing."

"This vision I saw has to do with whatever Rand is planning," Aviendha said.

They turned to her.

"Tomorrow," she said. "From what you've told me, he's preparing for an important revelation."

"The *Car'a'carn* has a… fondness for dramatic presentations," Bair said, her tone itself fond. "He's like a crockobur who has toiled all night making a nest so that he can sing of it in the morning to all who will listen."

Aviendha had been surprised to discover the gathering at Merrilor; she had found it only by using her bond to Rand al'Thor to determine where he was. Arriving here to find so many together, the wet lander forces collected, she wondered if this was part of what she'd seen. Was this gathering the start of what would become her vision?

"I feel as if I know more than I should." She spoke almost to herself. "You have had a deep glimpse of what the future may hold," Kymer said. "It will change you, Aviendha."

"Tomorrow is key," Aviendha said. "His plan."

"From what you said," Kymer replied, "it sounds as if he intends to ignore the Aiel, his own people. Why would he give boons to everyone else, but not to those who are most deserving? Does he seek to insult us?"

"I don't think that is the reason," Aviendha said. "I think he intends to make demands of those who attend, not grant them gifts."

"He did mention a price," Bair said. "A price he intends to make the others pay. No one has been able to pry the secret of this price from him.

He went through a gateway to Tear earlier this evening and returned with something," Melaine said. "The Maidens report it—he keeps his oath to bring them with him, now. When we have inquired after his price, he has said that it is something that the Aiel need not worry about."

Aviendha scowled. "He is making men pay him in order to do what we all know he must? Perhaps he has been spending too much time with that minder the Sea Folk sent him."

"No, this is well," Amys said. "These people demand much of the *Car'a'carn*. He has a right to demand something of them in return. They are soft; perhaps he intends to make them hard."

"And so he leaves us out," Bair said softly, "because he knows that we are already hard."

The tent fell silent. Amys, looking troubled, ladled some water onto the kettle's heated stones. It hissed as the steam rose.

"That is it," Sorilea said. "He does not intend to insult us. He intends to do us honor, in his own eyes." She shook her head. "He should know better.

"Often," Kymer agreed, "the *Car'a'carn* gives insult by accident, as if he were a child. We are strong, so his demand—whatever it is—matters not. If it is a price the others can pay, so can we."

"He would not make these mistakes if he had been trained properly in our ways," Sorilea murmured.

Aviendha met their eyes evenly. No, she had not trained him as well as he could have been trained—but they knew that Rand al'Thor was obstinate.

Besides, she was their equal now. Although she had trouble feeling that way while facing Sorilea's tight-lipped disapproval.

Perhaps it was spending so much time with wetlanders like Elayne, but suddenly, she did see things as Rand must. To give the Aiel an exemption from his price—if, indeed, that was what he intended—was an act of honor. If he *had* made a demand of them with the others, these very Wise Ones might have taken offense at being lumped with the wetlanders.

What was he planning? She saw hints of it in the visions, but increasingly, she was certain that the next day would start the Aiel on the road to their doom.

She *must* see that did not happen. This was her first task as a Wise One, and would likely be the most important she was ever given. She *would not* fail.

"Her task was not just to teach him," Amys said. "What I wouldn't give to know that he was safely under the watchful eyes of a good woman." She looked at Aviendha, face laden with meaning.

"He will be mine," Aviendha said, firmly. *But not for you, Amys, or for our people.* She was shocked at the strength of that sentiment within her. She was Aiel. Her people meant everything to her.

But this choice was not their choice. This choice was hers.

"Be warned, Aviendha," Bair said, laying a hand on her wrist. "He has changed since you left. He has grown strong."

Aviendha frowned. "In what way?"

"He has embraced death," Amys said, sounding proud. "He may still carry a sword and wear the clothing of a wetlander, but he is ours now, finally and truly."

"I must see this," Aviendha said, standing. "I will discover what I can regarding his plans."

"There is not much time remaining," Kymer warned.

"One night remains," Aviendha said. "It will be enough."

The others nodded, and Aviendha started to dress. Unexpectedly, the others joined her, dressing as well. It appeared that they considered her news important enough that they would be going to share it with the other Wise Ones, rather than continuing to sit in conference.

Aviendha was the first to step out into the night; the cool air, away from the sweltering heat of the sweat tent, felt good on her skin. She took a deep breath. Her mind was heavy with fatigue, but sleep would need to wait.

The tent flaps rustled behind the other Wise Ones, Melaine and Amys speaking softly to one another as they hastened into the night. Kymer walked purposefully toward the Tomanelle section of the camp. Perhaps she would speak with her sister-father, Han, the Tomanelle chief.

Aviendha started to move off herself, but a bony hand took her arm. She glanced over her shoulder to see Bair standing behind her, dressed again in blouse and skirt.

“Wise One,” Aviendha said by reflex.

“Wise One,” Bair replied with a smile.

“Is there something…”

“I would go to Rhuidean,” Bair said, glancing at the sky. “Would you kindly make a gateway for me?”

“You’re going through the glass columns.”

“One of us needs to. Despite what Amys said, Elenar is not ready, particularly not to see… something of this nature. That girl spends half of her days squawking like a buzzard over the last scrap of a rotting carcass.”

“But—”

“Oh, don’t you start, too. You’re one of us now, Aviendha, but I’m still old enough to have tended your *greatmother* when she was a child.” Bair shook her head; her white hair almost seemed to glow in the filtered moonlight. “I am the best one to go,” she continued. “Channelers must be preserved for the battle to come. I would not have some child walk into those columns now. I will do it. Now, that gateway? Will you grant my request, or do I need to bully Amys into doing so?”

Aviendha would have liked to see anyone bully Amys into anything. Maybe Sorilea could do it. She said nothing, however, and created the proper weave to open a gateway.

The thought of another seeing what she’d seen made her stomach twist. What would it mean if Bair returned with the exact same vision? Would that indicate the future was more likely?

“It was that terrible, was it?” Bair asked softly.

“Horrible. It would have made spears weep and stones crumble, Bair. I would rather have danced with Sightblinder himself.”

“Then it is much better that I go than another. It should be the strongest of us who does this.”

Aviendha stopped herself from raising an eyebrow. Bair was as tough as good leather, but the other Wise Ones weren’t exactly flower petals. “Bair,” Aviendha said, a thought occurring to her. “Have you ever met a woman named Nakomi?”

“Nakomi.” Bair tried the word in her mouth. “An ancient name. I have never known anyone who uses it. Why?”

“I met an Aiel woman while traveling to Rhuidean,” Aviendha said. “She claimed not to be a Wise One, but she had a way about her…” She shook her head. “The question was merely idle curiosity.”

“Well, we shall know some of the truth of these visions,” Bair said, stepping toward the gateway.

“What if they *are* true, Bair?” Aviendha found herself asking. “What if there isn’t anything we can do?”

Bair turned. “You saw your children, you said?”

Aviendha nodded. She hadn’t spoken in detail of that segment of the vision. It had seemed more personal to her.

“Change one of their names,” Bair said. “Never speak of the name that child was called in the vision, not even to us. Then you shall know. If one thing is different, then others may be different as well. *Will* be different. This is not our fate, Aviendha. It is a path we will avoid. Together.”

Aviendha found herself nodding. Yes. A simple change, a small change, but full of meaning. “Thank you, Bair.”

The aging Wise One nodded to her, then stepped through the gateway, running in the night toward the city ahead.

Talmanes threw his shoulder against a hulking, boar-faced Trolloc in crude chain armor. The beast smelled horrid, like smoke, wet fur and unwashed flesh. It grunted at the force of Talmanes’ assault; the things always seemed surprised when he attacked them.

Talmanes pulled back, ripping his sword out of the beast’s side as it collapsed. He then lunged forward and rammed his sword into its throat, heedless of its ragged fingernails scratching at his legs. Life faded from the beady, too-human eyes.

Men fought, called, grunted, killed. The street ran up a steep incline toward the Palace. Trolloc hordes had entrenched here, holding position and keeping the Band from reaching the top.

Talmanes sagged against the side of a building—the one next to it was on fire, lighting the street with violent colors and bathing him in heat. Those fires seemed chilly compared to the flaring, horrible pain of his wound. The flare ran down his leg to his foot and was beginning to work its way across his shoulder.

Blood and bloody ashes, he thought. *What I'd give for another few hours with my pipe and book, alone and peaceful.* The people who spoke of glorious death in battle were complete flaming fools. There was nothing glorious about dying in this mess of fire and blood. Give him a quiet death any day.

Talmanes pushed himself back up to his feet, drops of sweat falling from his face. Below, Trollocs amassed themselves behind his rear position. They had closed the road behind Talmanes' force, but Talmanes was able to proceed, cutting through the Trollocs ahead.

Retreat would be difficult to pull off. As well as this roadway being full of Trollocs, fighting in the city meant that Trollocs could wind through the streets in small groups and attack his flanks, as they advanced and later when they retreated.

"Throw everything you've got at them, men!" he bellowed, hurling himself up the street and into the Trollocs blocking the way up. The Palace was quite close now. He caught a goat-faced Trollocs sword on his shield right before it would have taken off Dennel's head. Talmanes tried to shove the beast's weapon back, but *Light,* Trollocs were strong. Talmanes barely kept this one from throwing him to the ground as Dennel recovered and attacked its thighs, bringing it down.

Melten fell in beside Talmanes. The Borderlander was true to his word to stay close, in case Talmanes needed a sword to end his life. The two led the push up the hill. The Trollocs began to give, then rallied, a snarling, roaring heap of dark fur, eyes and weapons in the firelight.

There were so many of them.

"Steady!" Talmanes yelled. "For Lord Mat and the Band of the Red Hand!"

If Mat were here, he would probably curse a lot, complain as much, then proceed to save them all with some battlefield miracle. Talmanes couldn't reproduce Mat's blend of insanity and inspiration, but his yell did seem to encourage the men. The ranks tightened. Gavid arrayed his two dozen crossbowmen—the last Talmanes had with him—atop a building that hadn't burned away. They started driving flight after flight of bolts into the Trollocs.

That might have broken human enemies, but not Trollocs. The bolts dropped a few, but not as many as Talmanes would have hoped.

There's another Fade back there, Talmanes thought. *Pushing them forward. Light, I can't fight another. I shouldn't have fought the one I did!*

He shouldn't be on his feet. Melten's flask of brandy was gone, long since drained to deaden what it could. His mind was already as fuzzy as he dared allow. He fell in with Dennel and Londraed at the front, fighting, concentrating. Letting Trolloc blood out onto the cobbles to stream down the hillside.

The Band gave a good fight of it, but they were outnumbered and exhausted. Down below, another Trolloc fist joined the ones on the street behind him.

That was it. He would have to either hit that force behind—turning his back on the one in front—or break his men into smaller units and send them retreating through side streets to regroup at the gate below.

Talmanes prepared to give the orders.

"Forward the White Lion!" voices yelled. "For Andor and the Queen!" Talmanes spun as men in white and red broke through the Trolloc lines atop the hill. A second force of Andoran pikemen poured out of a side alleyway, coming in behind the Trolloc horde that had just surrounded him. The Trollocs broke before the oncoming pikemen, and in moments the entire mass—like a pus-filled blister—burst, Trollocs scattering in all directions.

Talmanes stumbled back. Momentarily he had to prop himself up with his sword as Madwin took command of the counterstrike and his men killed many of the fleeing Trollocs.

A group of officers in bloodied Queens Guard uniforms rushed down the hillside; they didn't look any better than the Band. Guybon led them. "Mercenary," he said to Talmanes, "I thank you for showing up."

Talmanes frowned. "You act as if we saved you. From my perspective, it happened the other way around."

Guybon grimaced in the firelight. "You gave us some respite; those Trollocs were attacking the Palace gates. I apologize for taking so long to reach you—we didn't realize, at first, what had drawn them in this direction."

"Light. The Palace still stands?"

"Yes," Guybon said. "We're full of refugees, though."

“What of channelers?” Talmanes asked, hopeful. “Why haven’t the Andoran armies returned with the Queen?”

“Darkfriends.” Guybon frowned. “Her Majesty took most of the Kinswomen with her, the strongest ones at least. She left four with enough power to make a gateway together, but—the attack—an assassin killed two of them before the other two could stop him. Alone, the two aren’t strong enough to send for help. They’re using their strength to Heal.”

“Blood and bloody ashes,” Talmanes said, though he felt a stab of hope as he said it. Perhaps these women could not make a gateway, but they *might* be able to Heal his wound. “You should lead the refugees out of the city, Guybon. My men hold the southern gate.”

“Excellent,” Guybon said, straightening. “But you will have to lead the refugees. I must defend the Palace.”

Talmanes raised an eyebrow at him; he didn’t take orders from Guybon. The Band had its own command structure, and reported only to the Queen. Mat had made that clear when accepting the contract.

Unfortunately, Guybon didn’t take orders from Talmanes, either. Talmanes took a deep breath, but then wavered, dizzy. Melten grabbed his arm to keep him from toppling over.

Light, but it hurt. Couldn’t his side just do the decent thing and grow numb? Blood and bloody ashes. He needed to get to those Kinswomen. Talmanes said hopefully, “Those two women who can Heal?”

“I have sent for them already,” Guybon said. “As soon as we saw this force here.”

Well, that was something.

“I do mean to stay here,” Guybon warned. “I wont abandon this post.”

“Why? The city is lost, man!”

“The Queen ordered us to send regular reports through gateways,” Guybon said. “Eventually, she’s going to wonder why we haven’t sent a messenger. She will send a channeler to see why we haven’t reported, and that messenger will arrive at the Palace’s Traveling ground. It—”

“My Lord!” a voice called. “My Lord Talmanes!”

Guybon cut off, and Talmanes turned to find Filger—one of the scouts—scrambling up the bloodied cobbles of the hillside toward him. Filger was a lean man with thinning hair and a couple of days’ worth of scruff, and the sight of him filled Talmanes with dread. Filger was one of those they’d left guarding the city gate below.

“My Lord,” Filger said, panting, “the Trollocs have taken the city walls. They’re packing the ramparts, loosing arrows or spears at anyone who draws too close. Lieutenant Sandip sent me to bring you word.”

“Blood and ashes! What of the gate?”

“We’re holding,” Filger said. “For now.”

“Guybon,” Talmanes said, turning back. “Show some mercy, man; someone needs to defend that gate. Please, take the refugees out and reinforce my men. That gate will be our only method of retreat from the city.”

“But the Queen’s messenger—”

“The Queen will figure out what bloody happened once she thinks to look here. Look about you! Trying to defend the Palace is madness. You don’t have a city any longer, but a pyre.”

Guybon’s face was conflicted, his lips a tight line.

“You know I’m right,” Talmanes said, his face twisted in pain. “The best thing you can do is reinforce my men at the southern gate to hold it open for as many refugees as can reach it.”

“Perhaps,” Guybon said. “But to let the Palace burn?”

“You can make it worth something,” Talmanes said. “What if you left some soldiers to fight at the Palace? Have them hold off the Trollocs as long as they can. That will draw the Trollocs away from the people escaping out this way. When they can hold no longer, your soldiers can escape the Palace grounds on the far side, and make their way around to the southern gate.”

“A good plan,” Guybon said, grudgingly. “I will do as you suggest, but what of you?”

“I have to get to the dragons,” Talmanes said. “We cant let them fall to the Shadow. They’re in a warehouse near the edge of the Inner City. The Queen wanted them kept out of sight, away from the mercenary bands outside. I have to find them. If possible, retrieve them. If not, destroy them.”

“Very well,” Guybon said, turning away, looking frustrated as he accepted the inevitable. “My men will do as you suggest; half will lead the refugees out, then help your soldiers hold the southern gate. The other half will hold the Palace a little longer, then withdraw. But *I’m* coming with you.

“Do we really need so many lamps in here?” the Aes Sedai demanded from her stool at the back of the room. It might as well have been a throne. “Think of the oil you’re wasting.”

“We need the lamps.” Androl grunted. Night rain pelted the window, but he ignored it, trying to focus on the leather he was sewing. It would be a saddle. At the moment, he was working on the girth that would go around the horse’s belly.

He poked holes into the leather in a double row, letting the work calm him. The stitching chisel he used made diamond-shaped holes—he could use the mallet on them for speed, if he wanted, but right now he liked the feel of pressing the holes without it.

He picked up his stitch-mark wheel, measuring off the locations for the next stitches, then worked another of the holes. You had to line the flat sides of the diamonds toward one another for holes like this, so that when the leather pulled, it didn’t pull on the flats. The neat stiches would help keep the saddle in good shape over the years. The rows needed to be close enough together to reinforce one another, but not so close that there was danger of them ripping into one another. Staggering the holes helped.

Little things. You just had to make sure the little things were done right, and—

His fingers slipped, and he punched a hole with the diamond pointing the wrong way. Two of the holes ripped into one another at the motion.

He nearly tossed the entire thing across the room in frustration. That was the fifth time tonight!

Light, he thought, pressing his hands on the table. *What’s happened to my self-control?*

He could answer that question with ease, unfortunately. *The Black Tower is what happened.* He felt like a multilegged *nachi* trapped in a dried-up tidal pool, waiting desperately for the water to return while watching a group of children work their way down the beach with buckets, gathering up anything that looked tasty…

He breathed in and out, then picked up the leather. This would be the shoddiest piece he’d done in years, but he *would* finish it. Leaving something unfinished was nearly as bad as messing up the details.

“Curious,” said the Aes Sedai—her name was Pevara, of the Red Ajah. He could feel her eyes on his back.

A *Red*. Well, common destinations made for unusual shipmates, as the old Tairen saying went. Perhaps he should use the Saldaean proverb instead. *If his sword is at your enemy's throat, don't waste time remembering when it was at yours*.

"So," Pevara said, "you were telling me about your life prior to coming to the Black Tower?"

"I don't believe that I was," Androl said, beginning to sew. "Why? What did you want to know?"

"I'm simply curious. Were you one of those who came here on his own, to be tested, or were you one of those they found while out hunting?"

He pulled a thread tight. "I came on my own, as I believe Evin told you yesterday, when you asked him about me."

"Hmm," she said. "I'm being monitored, I see."

He looked toward her, lowering the leather. "Is that something they teach you?"

"What?" Pevara asked innocently.

"To twist a conversation about. There you sit, all but accusing me of spying on you—when you were the one interrogating my friends about me."

"I want to know what my resources are."

"You want to know why a man would *choose* to come to the Black Tower. To learn to channel the One Power."

She didn't answer. He could see her deciding upon a response that would not run afoul of the Three Oaths. Speaking with an Aes Sedai was like trying to follow a green snake as it slipped through damp grass.

"Yes," she said.

He blinked in surprise.

"Yes, I want to know," she continued. "We are allies, whether either of us desires it or not. I want to know what kind of person I've slipped into bed with." She eyed him. "Figuratively speaking, of course."

He took a deep breath, *forcing* himself to become calm. He hated talking with Aes Sedai, with them twisting everything about. That, mixed with the tension of the night and the inability to get this saddle right…

He would be calm, Light burn him!

"We should practice making a circle," Pevara said. "It will be an advantage to us—albeit a small one—against Taim's men, should they come for us."

Androl put his dislike of the woman from his mind—he had other things to worry about—and forced himself to think objectively. “A circle?”

“Do you not know what one is?”

“Afraid not.”

She pursed her lips. “Sometimes I forget how ignorant all of you are…” She paused, as if realizing she’d said too much.

“All men are ignorant, Aes Sedai,” Androl said. “The topics of our ignorance may change, but the nature of the world is that no man may know everything.”

That didn’t seem to be the answer she’d been expecting, either. Those hard eyes studied him. She didn’t like men who could channel—most people didn’t—but with her it was more. She had spent her life hunting down men like Androl.

“A circle,” Pevara said, “is created when women and men join their strength in the One Power together. It must be done in a specific way.”

“The M’Hael will know about it, then.”

“Men require women to form a circle,” Pevara said. “In fact, a circle must contain more women than men except in very limited cases. One woman and man can link, as can one woman and two men, as can two women and two men. So the largest we could create is a circle of three, with me and two of you. Still, it *could* be of use to us.”

“I’ll find you two of the others to practice with,” Androl said. “Among those I trust, I’d say that Nalaam is the strongest. Emarin is very powerful too, and I don’t think he’s yet reached the height of his strength. Same for Jonneth.”

“They are the strongest?” Pevara asked. “Not yourself?”

“No,” he said, returning to his work. That rain picked up again outside, and chill air slipped under the door. One of the room’s lamps was burning low nearby, letting shadows into the room. He watched the darkness uncomfortably.

“I find that hard to believe, Master Androl,” she said. “They all look to you.”

“Believe what you wish, Aes Sedai. I’m weakest among them. Perhaps the weakest man in the Black Tower.”

This quieted her, and Androl rose to refill that dwindling lamp. As he sat back down, a rap on the door announced the entrance of Emarin and Canler. Although both were wet from the rain, they were nearly as opposite as men could be. One was tall, refined and careful, the other crotchety and prone to gossip. They had found common ground, somewhere, and seemed to enjoy one another's company.

"Well?" Androl asked.

"It *might* work," Emarin said, taking off his rain-soaked coat and hanging it on a hook beside the door. He wore clothing underneath embroidered after the Tairen style. "It would need to be a powerful rainstorm. The guards watch carefully."

"I feel like the prize bull at a fair," Canler grumbled, stomping some of the mud off his boots after hanging up his coat. "Everywhere we go, Taim's favored watch us from the corners of their eyes. Blood and ashes, Androl. They *know*. They know we're going to try running."

"Did you find any weak points?" Pevara asked, leaning forward. "Someplace where the walls are less guarded?"

"It appears to depend upon the guards chosen, Pevara Sedai," Emarin said, nodding to her.

"Hmm ... I suppose that it would. Have I mentioned how intriguing I find it that the one of you who treats me with the most respect is a Tairen?"

"Being polite to a person is not a sign of respect for them, Pevara Sedai," Emarin said. "It is merely a sign of a good upbringing and a balanced nature."

Androl smiled. Emarin was an absolute *wonder* with insults. Half the time, the person didn't figure out that he'd been mocked until they'd parted ways.

Pevara's mouth pursed. "Well, then. We watch the rotation of guards. When the next storm arrives, we will use it as cover and escape over the wall near the guards we think are less observant."

The two men turned to Androl, who caught himself watching the corner of the room where the shadow fell from a table. Was it growing larger? Reaching toward him…

"I don't like leaving men behind," he said, forcing himself to look away from the corner. "There are dozens upon dozens of men and boys here who aren't yet under Taim's control. We can't possibly lead all of them out without drawing attention. If we leave them, we risk…"

He couldn't say it. They didn't know what was happening, not really. People were *changing*. Once-trustworthy allies became enemies overnight.

They looked like the same people, yet different at the same time. Different behind the eyes. Androl shivered.

"The women sent by the rebel Aes Sedai are still outside the gates," Pevara said. They had been camped out there for a time, claiming the Dragon Reborn had promised them Warders. Taim had yet to let any of them in. "If we can reach them, we can storm the Tower and rescue those left behind."

"Will it really be that easy?" Emarin asked. "Taim will have an entire village of hostages. A lot of the men brought their families."

Canler nodded. His family was one of those. He wouldn't willingly leave them.

"Beyond that," Androl said softly, turning on his stool to face Pevara, "do you honestly think the Aes Sedai can win here?"

"Many of them have decades—some centuries—of experience."

"How much of that was spent fighting?"

Pevara did not answer.

"There are hundreds of men who can channel in here, Aes Sedai," Androl continued. "Each one has been trained—at length—to be a *weapon.* We don't learn about politics or history. We don't study how to influence nations. We learn to kill. Every man and boy here is pushed to the edges of his capacity, forced to stretch and grow. Gain more power. Destroy. And a lot of them are insane. Can your Aes Sedai fight that? Particularly when many of the men we trust—the very men we're trying to save—will likely fight alongside Taim's men if they see the Aes Sedai trying to invade?"

"Your arguments are not without merit," Pevara said.

Just like a queen, he thought, unwillingly impressed at her poise.

"But surely we need to send information out," Pevara continued. "An all-out assault may be unwise, but sitting here until we are all taken, one at a time . . "

"I do believe it would be wise to send someone," Emarin said. "We need to warn the Lord Dragon."

"The Lord Dragon," Canler said with a snort, taking a seat by the wall. "He's abandoned us, Emarin. We're nothing to him. It—"

"The Dragon Reborn carries the world on his shoulders, Canler," Androl said softly, catching Canler up short. "I don't know why he's left us here, but I'd prefer to assume it's because he thinks we can handle ourselves." Androl fingered the straps of leather, then stood up. "This is our time of proving, the test of the Black Tower. If we have to run to the Aes Sedai to protect us from our own, we subject ourselves to their authority. If we have to run to the Lord Dragon, then we will be nothing once he is gone.”

“There can be no reconciliation with Taim, now,” Emarin said. “We all know what he is doing.”

Androl didn’t look at Pevara. She had explained what she suspected was happening, and she—despite years of training at keeping her emotions in check—had not been able to quiet the fear in her voice as she spoke of it. Thirteen Myrddraal and thirteen channelers, together in a horrifying rite, could turn any channeler to the Shadow. Against his will. “What he does is pure, undiluted evil,” Pevara said. “This is no longer a division between the men who follow one leader and those who follow another. This is the Dark One’s work, Androl. The Black Tower has fallen under the Shadow. You must accept that.”

“The Black Tower is a dream,” he said, meeting her eyes. “A shelter for men who can channel, a place of our own, where men need not fear, or run, or be hated. I will not surrender that to Taim. I *will not*.”

The room fell silent save for the sounds of rain on the windows. Emarin began to nod, and Canler stood up, taking Androl by the arm.

“You’re right,” Canler said. “Burn me if you ain’t right, Androl. But what can we *do*? We’re weak, outnumbered.”

“Emarin,” Androl said, “did you ever hear about the Knoks Rebellion?”

“Indeed. It caused quite a stir, even outside of Murandy.”

“Bloody Murandians,” Canler spat. “They’ll steal your coat off your back and beat you bloody if you don’t offer your shoes, too.”

Emarin raised an eyebrow.

“Knoks was well outside Lugard, Canler,” Androl said. “I think you'd find the people there not dissimilar to Andorans. The rebellion happened about ... oh, ten years back, now.”

“A group of farmers overthrew their lord,” Emarin said. “He deserved it, by all accounts—Desartin was a horrid person, particularly to those beneath him. He had a force of soldiers, one of the largest outside of Lugard, and was looking as if he’d set up his own little kingdom. There wasn’t a thing the King could do about it.”

“And Desartin was overthrown?” Canler asked.

“By simple men and women who had had too much of his brutality, Androl said. “In the end, many of the mercenaries who had been his cronies stood with us. Though he'd seemed so strong, his rotten core led to his downfall. It seems bad here, but most of Taim's men are not loyal to him. Men like him don't inspire loyalty. They collect cronies, others who hope to share in the power or wealth. We *can* and *will* find a way to overthrow him."

The others nodded, though Pevara simply watched him with pursed lips. Androl couldn't help feeling a bit of the fool; he didn't think the others should be looking to him, instead of someone distinguished like Emarin or someone powerful like Nalaam.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the shadows underneath the table lengthen, reaching for him. He set his jaw. They wouldn't dare take him with so many people around, would they? If the shadows were going to consume him, they'd wait until he was alone, trying to sleep.

Nights terrified him.

They're coming when I don't hold to saidin *now,* he thought. *Burn me, the Source was cleansed! I'm not supposed to be losing more of my wits!*

He gripped the seat of his stool until the terror retreated, the darkness withdrawing. Canler—looking uncharacteristically cheerful—said he was going to fetch them something to drink. He wandered toward the kitchen, but nobody was to go about alone, so he hesitated.

"I suppose I could use a drink as well," Pevara said with a sigh, joining him.

Androl sat down to continue his work. As he did, Emarin pulled over a stool, settling down beside him. He did so nonchalantly, as if merely looking for a good place to relax and wanting a view out the window.

Emarin, however, wasn't the type to do things without several motivations. "You fought in the Knoks Rebellion," Emarin said softly.

"Did I say that?" Androl resumed his work on the leather.

"You said that when the mercenaries switched sides, they fought with you. You used the word 'us' to refer to the rebels."

Androl hesitated. *Burn me. I* really *need to watch myself.* If Emarin had noticed, Pevara would have as well.

"I was just passing through," Androl said, "and was caught up in something unanticipated."

"You have a strange and varied past, my friend," Emarin said. "The more I learn of it, the more curious I become."

"I wouldn't say that I'm the only one with an interesting past," Androl said softly. "Lord Algarin of House Pendaloan."

Emarin pulled back, eyes widening. "How did you know?"

"Fanshir had a book of Tairen noble lines," Androl said, mentioning one of the Asha'man soldiers who had been a scholar before coming to the Tower. "It included a curious notation. A house troubled by a history of men with an unmentionable problem, the most recent one having shamed the house not a few dozen years ago."

"I see. Well, I suppose that it is not too much of a surprise that I am a nobleman."

"One who has experience with Aes Sedai," Androl continued, "and who treats them with respect, despite—or because of—what they did for his family. A *Tairen* nobleman who does this, mind you. One who does not mind serving beneath what you would term farmboys, and who sympathizes with citizen rebels. If I might say, my friend, that is *not* a prevalent attitude among your countrymen. I wouldn't hesitate to guess you've had an interesting past of your own."

Emarin smiled. "Point conceded. You would be wonderful at the Game of Houses, Androl."

"I wouldn't say that," Androl said with a grimace. "Last time I tried my hand at it, I almost…" He stopped.

"What?"

"I'd rather not say," Androl said, face flushing. He was *not* going to explain that period of his life. *Light, people will think I'm as much a tale-spinner as Nalaam if I continue on like this.*

Emarin turned to watch the rain hitting the window. "The Knoks Rebellion succeeded for only a short time, if I remember correctly. Within two years the noble line had reestablished itself and the dissenters were driven out or executed."

"Yes," Androl said softly.

"So we do a better job of it here," Emarin said. "I'm your man, Androl. We all are."

"No," Androl said. "We are the *Black Tower's* men. I'll lead you, if I must, but this isn't about me, or about you, or any of us individually. I am only in charge until Logain returns."

If he ever returns, Androl thought. *Gateways into the Black Tower don't work any longer. Is he trying to return, but finds himself locked out?*

“Very well,” Emarin said. “What do we do?”

Thunder crashed outside. “Let me think,” Androl said, picking up his piece of leather and his tools. “Give me one hour.”

“I’m sorry,” Jesamyn said softly, kneeling beside Talmanes. “There is nothing I can do. This wound is too far along for my skill.”

Talmanes nodded, replacing the bandage. The skin all along his side had turned black as if from terrible frostbite.

The Kinswoman frowned at him. She was a youthful-looking woman with golden hair, though with channelers, ages could be very deceptive. “I’m amazed you can still walk.”

“I’m not certain it could be defined as walking,” Talmanes said, limping back toward the soldiers. He could still gimp along on his own, mostly, but the dizzy moments came more frequently now.

Guybon was arguing with Dennel, who kept pointing at his map and gesturing. There was such a haze of smoke in the air that many of the men had tied kerchiefs to their faces. They looked like a band of bloody Aiel.

“. . . even the Trollocs are pulling out of that quarter,” Guybon insisted. “There’s too much fire.”

“The Trollocs are pulling back to the walls all through the city,” Dennel replied. “They’re going to let the city burn all night. The only sector not burning is the one where the Waygate is. They knocked down all of the buildings there to create a firewall.”

“They used the One Power,” Jesamyn said from behind Talmanes. “I felt it. Black sisters. I would not suggest going in that direction.”

Jesamyn was the only Kinswoman remaining; the other had fallen. Jesamyn wasn’t powerful enough to create a gateway, but neither was she useless. Talmanes had watched her burn six Trollocs that had broken through his line.

He’d spent that skirmish sitting back, overcome by the pain. Fortunately, Jesamyn had given him some herbs to chew. They made his head feel fuzzier, but made the pain manageable. It felt as if his body were in a vise, being smashed slowly, but at least he could stay on his feet.

“We take the quickest route,” Talmanes said. “The quarter that isn't burning is too close to the dragons; I wont risk the Shadowspawn discovering Aludra and her weapons.” *Assuming they haven't already.*

Guybon glared at him, but this was the Band's operation. Guybon was welcome, but he wasn't part of their command structure.

Talmanes' force continued through the dark city, wary of ambushes. Though they knew the approximate location of the warehouse, getting there was problematic. Many large streets were blocked by wreckage, fire or the enemy. His force had to crawl through alleyways and lanes so twisted that even Guybon and the others from Caemlyn had difficulty following their intended direction.

Their path skirted portions of the city that burned with a heat so strong, it was probably melting cobblestones. Talmanes stared at these flames until his eyes felt dry, then led his men in further detours.

Inch by inch, they approached Aludra's warehouse. Twice they encountered Trollocs prowling for refugees to kill. They finished these off, the remaining crossbowmen felling over half of each group before they had time to respond.

Talmanes stood to watch, but did not trust himself to fight any longer. That wound had left him too weak. Light, why had he left his horse behind? Fool move, that. Well, the Trollocs would have chased it off anyway.

My thoughts are starting to go in circles. He pointed with his sword down a crossing alley. The scouts scurried on ahead and looked in both directions before giving the all clear. *I can barely think. Not much longer now before the darkness takes me.*

He would see the dragons protected first. He had to.

Talmanes stumbled out of the alley onto a familiar street. They were close. On one side of the street, structures burned. The statues there looked like poor souls trapped in the flames. The fires raged around them, and their white marble was slowly being overcome with black.

The other side of the street was silent, nothing there burning. Shadows thrown by the statues danced and played, like revelers watching their enemies burn. The air smelled oppressively of smoke. Those shadows—and the burning statues—seemed to move, to Talmanes' fuzzy mind. Dancing creatures of shadow. Dying beauties, consumed by a sickness upon the skin, darkening it, feasting upon it, killing the soul…

"We're close now!" Talmanes said. He pushed himself forward into a shambling run. He couldn't afford to slow them down. *If that fire reaches the warehouse. . .*

They arrived at a burned-out patch of ground; the fire had been here, and gone, apparently. A large wooden warehouse had stood here once, but it had fallen in. Now the timbers only smoldered, and were heaped with rubble and half-burned Trolloc corpses.

The men gathered around him, silent. The only sound was that of crackling flames. Cold sweat dripped down Talmanes' face.

"We were too late," Melten whispered. "They took them, didn't they? The dragons would have made explosions if they'd burned. The Shadowspawn arrived, took the dragons and burned the place down.

Around Talmanes, exhausted members of the Band sank down to their knees. *I'm sorry, Mat,* Talmanes thought. *We tried. We*—

A sudden sound like thunder cracked through the city. It shook Talmanes to his bones, and the men looked up.

"Light," Guybon said. "The Shadowspawn are using the dragons?"

"Maybe not," Talmanes said. Strength surged through him, and he broke into a run again. His men filled in around him.

Each footfall sent a jolt of agony up his side. He passed down the street with the statues, flames to his right, cold stillness to his left.

BOOM.

Those explosions didn't sound loud enough to be dragons. Dared he hope for an Aes Sedai? Jesamyn seemed to have perked up at the sounds, and was running in her skirts alongside the men. The group barreled around a corner two streets from the warehouse and came up on the back ranks of a snarling force of Shadowspawn.

Talmanes bellowed with a startling ferocity and raised his sword in two hands. The fire of his wound had spread through his entire body; even his fingers burned with it. He felt as if he'd become one of those statues, consigned to burn with the city.

He beheaded a Trolloc before it knew he was there, then threw himself at the next creature in line. It drew back with an almost liquid grace, turning a face on him that had no eyes, a cloak that did not stir in the wind. Pale lips drew back in a snarl.

Talmanes found himself laughing. *Why not?* And men said he didn't have a sense of humor. Talmanes moved into Apple Blossoms in the Wind, striking forward wildly with a strength and fury to match the fire that was killing him.

The Myrddraal obviously had him at a disadvantage. At his best, Talmanes would have needed help fighting one. The thing moved like a shadow, flowing from one form to the next, its terrible blade darting toward Talmanes. It obviously felt it only needed to nick him.

It scored a hit on his cheek, the tip of its sword catching on his skin there and slicing a neat ribbon through the flesh. Talmanes laughed and struck at the weapon with his sword, causing the Fade's mouth to open wide in surprise. That wasn't how men were supposed to react. They were supposed to stumble at the burning flare of pain, cry out as they knew their life had ended.

"I've already had one of your flaming swords in me, you son of a goat," Talmanes screamed, attacking time and time again. Blacksmith Strikes the Blade. Such an inelegant form. It fit his mood perfectly.

The Myrddraal stumbled. Talmanes swept back in a smooth motion, bringing his sword to the side and slicing the thing's pale white arm free at the elbow. The limb twisted in the air, the Fade's blade dropping from spasming fingers. Talmanes spun for momentum and brought his sword across with two hands, severing the Fade's head from its neck.

Dark blood sprayed free and the thing fell, its remaining hand clawing at the bloodied stump as it collapsed. Talmanes stood over it, his sword suddenly feeling too heavy to hold. It slipped from his fingers, clanging to the paving stones. He tipped and lost his balance, falling face-first, but a hand caught him from behind.

"Light!" Melten exclaimed, looking at the body. "*Another* one?"

"I've found the secret to defeating them," Talmanes whispered. "You just have to be dead already." He chuckled to himself, though Melten just looked at him, seeming baffled.

Around them, dozens of Trollocs collapsed to the ground, writhing. They'd been linked to the Fade. The Band gathered around Talmanes, some bearing wounds; a few were down for good. They were exhausted and worn down; this batch of Trollocs could have ended them.

Melten retrieved Talmanes' sword and swabbed it clean, but Talmanes found he was having trouble standing, so he sheathed it and had a man fetch a Trolloc spear for him to lean on.

"Ho, the back of the street!" a distant voice called. "Whoever you are, thank you!"

Talmanes limped forward, Filger and Mar scouting on ahead without needing orders. The street here was dark and cluttered with Trollocs that had fallen moments ago, so it was a moment before Talmanes could climb over the corpses and see who had called to him.

Someone had built a barricade at the end of the street. People stood atop it, including one who held aloft a torch. She had hair in braids, and wore a plain brown dress with a white apron. It was Aludra.

“Cauthon’s soldiers,” Aludra said, sounding unimpressed. “Your time, you certainly did take it coming for me.” In one hand, she held a stubby leather cylinder larger than a man’s fist, with a short length of dark fuse attached. Talmanes knew they exploded after she lit and threw them. The Band had used them before, hurling them from slings. They weren’t as devastating as dragons, but still powerful.

“Aludra,” Talmanes called, “you have the dragons? Please, tell me you saved them.”

She sniffed, waving for some people to pull apart a side of the barricade to admit his men. She appeared to have several hundred—maybe several thousand—townspeople back there, filling the street. As they opened the way for him, he saw a beautiful sight. Surrounded by townspeople, a hundred dragons rested there.

The bronze tubes had been fitted to wooden dragon carts to comprise a single unit, pulled by two horses. They were really quite maneuverable, all things considered. Those carts could be anchored in the ground to manage recoil, Talmanes knew, and the dragons fired once the horses were detached. There were more than enough people here to do the work horses should have been available to do.

“You think I would *leave* them?” Aludra asked. “This lot, they do not have the training to fire them. But they can pull a cart as well as anyone else.”

“We have to get them out,” Talmanes said.

“This, it is a new revelation to you?” Aludra asked. “As if I haven’t been trying to do that very thing. Your face, what is wrong with it?”

“I once ate a rather sharp cheese, and it has never quite sat right with me.”

Aludra cocked her head at him. *Maybe if I smiled more when I made jokes,* he thought idly, leaning against the side of the barricade. *Then they’d understand what I meant.* That, of course, raised the question: Did he want people to understand? It was often more amusing the other way. Besides, smiling was so *garish*. Where was the subtlety? And…

And he was *really* having trouble focusing. He blinked at Aludra, whose face had grown concerned in the torchlight.

“What about my face?” Talmanes raised a hand to his cheek. Blood. The Myrddraal. Right. “Just a cut.”

“And the veins?”

“Veins?” he asked, then noticed his hand. Tendrils of blackness, like ivy growing beneath the skin, had wound down his wrist and across the back of his hand toward the fingers. They seemed to be growing darker as he watched. “Oh, that. I’m dying, unfortunately. Terribly tragic. You wouldn’t happen to have any brandy, would you?”

“I—”

“My Lord!” a voice called.

Talmanes blinked, then forced himself to turn about, leaning on the spear. “Yes, Filger?”

“More Trollocs, my Lord. Lots of them! They’re filling in behind us.”

“Lovely. Set the table. I hope we have enough dinnerware. I *knew* we should have sent the maid for that five thousand seven hundred and thirty-first set.”

“Are you… feeling all right?” Aludra asked.

“Blood and bloody ashes, woman, do I *look* like I’m feeling well? Guybon! Retreat is cut off. How far from the east gates are we?”

“East gates?” Guybon called. “Maybe a half-hour march. We need to head further down the hill.”

“Onward we go, then,” Talmanes said. “Take the scouts and go on point. Dennel, make sure those local folk are organized to haul those dragons! Be ready to set up the weapons.”

“Talmanes,” Aludra said, stepping in. “Dragons’ eggs and powder, we have few of them left. We will need the supplies from Baerlon. Today, if you set up the dragons ... A few shots for each dragon, this is all I can give you.”

Dennel nodded. “Dragons aren’t meant to make up frontline units all by themselves, my Lord. They need support to keep the enemy from coming too close and destroying the weapons. We can man those dragons, but we won’t last long without infantry.”

“That’s why we’re running,” Talmanes said. He turned, took a step, and was so woozy he almost fell. “And I believe ... I believe I’ll need a horse…”

Moghedien stepped onto a platform of stone floating in the middle of an open sea. Glassy and blue, the water rippled in the occasional breeze, but there were no waves. Neither was there land in sight.

Moridin stood at the side of the platform, hands clasped behind his back. In front of him, the sea burned. The fire gave off no smoke, but it was hot, and the water near it hissed and boiled. Stone flooring in the middle of an endless sea. Water that burned. Moridin always *had* enjoyed creating impossibilities within his dreamshards.

“Sit,” Moridin said to her, not turning.

She obeyed, choosing one of the four chairs suddenly arranged near the center of the platform. The sky was deep blue, cloudless, and the sun hung at about three-quarters of the way to its zenith. How long had it been since she’d seen the sun in *Tel’aran’rhiod*? Lately, that omnipresent black storm had blanketed the sky. But, then, this wasn’t completely *Tel’aran’rhiod*. Nor was it Moridin’s dream, but a… melding of the two. Like a temporary lean-to built off the side of the dream world. A bubble of merged realities.

Moghedien wore a gown of black and gold, lacework on the sleeves faintly reminiscent of a spider’s web. Only faintly. One did well not to overuse a theme.

As she sat, Moghedien tried to exude control and self-confidence. Once, both had come easily for her. Today, trying to capture either was like trying to snatch dandelion seeds from the air, only to have them dance away from her hand. Moghedien gritted her teeth, angry at herself. She was one of the *Chosen*. She had made kings weep, armies tremble. Her name had been used by generations of mothers to frighten their children. And now…

She felt at her neck, found the pendant hanging there. It was still safe. She knew it was, but touching it brought her calmness.

“Do not grow too comfortable wearing that,” Moridin said. A wind blew across him, rippling the pristine ocean surface. On that wind she heard faint screams. “You are not completely forgiven, Moghedien. This is a probation. Perhaps when you fail next, I will give the mindtrap to Demandred.”

She sniffed. “He would toss it aside in boredom. Demandred wants only one thing. Al’Thor. Anyone who does not lead him toward his goal is unimportant to him.”

“You underestimate him,” Moridin said softly. “The Great Lord is pleased with Demandred. Very pleased. You, however . . ”

Moghedien sank down in her chair, feeling her tortures anew. Pain such as few in this world had ever known. Pain beyond what a body should be able to endure. She held to the *cour’souvra* and embraced *saidar.* That brought some relief.

Before, channeling in the same room as the *cour’souvra* had been agonizing. Now that she, rather than Moridin, wore the pendant, it was not so. *Not just a pendant,* she thought, clutching it. *My soul itself.* Darkness within! She had never thought that she, of all people, would find herself subject to one of these. Was she not the spider, careful in all that she did?

She reached her other hand up, clasping it over the one that held the pendant. What if it fell, what if someone took it? She wouldn’t lose it. She *couldn’t* lose it.

This is what I have become? She felt sick. *I have to recover. Somehow.* She forced herself to let go of the mindtrap.

The Last Battle was upon them; already, Trollocs poured into the southern lands. It was a new War of the Shadow, but only she and the other Chosen knew the deeper secrets of the One Power. The ones she hadn’t been forced to give up to those horrible women…

No, don’t think about that. The pain, the suffering, the *failure.*

In this war, they faced no Hundred Companions, no Aes Sedai with centuries of skill and practice. She would prove herself, and past errors would be forgotten.

Moridin continued to stare at those impossible flames. The only sounds were that of the fire and of the water that boiled near it. He would eventually explain his purpose in summoning her, wouldn’t he? He had been acting increasingly strange, lately. Perhaps his madness was returning. Once, the man named Moridin—or Ishamael, or Elan Morin Tedronai—would have delighted in holding a *cour’souvra* for one of his rivals. He would have invented punishments, thrilled in her agony.

There had been some of that at the start; then ... he had lost interest. He spent more and more time alone, staring into flames, brooding. The punishments he had administered to her and Cyndane had seemed almost routine.

She found him more dangerous this way.

A gateway split the air just to the side of the platform. “Do we really need to do this every other day, Moridin?” Demandred asked, stepping through and into the World of Dreams. Handsome and tall, he had jet hair and a prominent nose. He gave Moghedien a glance, noting the mindtrap on her neck before continuing. “I have important things to do, and you interrupt them.”

“There are people you need to meet, Demandred,” Moridin said softly. “Unless the Great Lord has named you Nae’blis without informing me, you *will* do as you are told. Your playthings can wait.”

Demandred’s expression darkened, but he did not object further. He let the gateway close, then moved to the side, looking down into the sea. He frowned. What was in the waters? She hadn’t looked. She felt foolish for not having done so. What had happened to her caution?

Demandred walked to one of the chairs near her, but did not sit. He stood, contemplating Moridin from behind. What *had* Demandred been doing? During her period bound to the mindtrap, she had done Moridin’s bidding, but had never found an answer to Demandred.

She shivered again, thinking of those months under Moridin’s control. *I will have vengeance.*

“You’ve let Moghedien free,” Demandred said. “What of this… Cyndane?”

“She is not your concern,” Moridin said.

Moghedien had not failed to notice that Moridin still wore Cyndane’s mindtrap. Cyndane. It meant “last chance” in the Old Tongue, but the woman’s true nature was one secret that Moghedien *had* discovered. Moridin himself had rescued Lanfear from *Sindhol*, freeing her from the creatures that feasted upon her ability to channel.

In order to rescue her, and of course to punish her, Moridin had slain her. That had allowed the Great Lord to recapture her soul and place it in a new body. Brutal, but very effective. Precisely the kind of solution the Great Lord preferred.

Moridin was focused on his flames, and Demandred on him, so Moghedien used the chance to slip out of her seat and walk to the edge of the floating stone platform. The water below was completely clear. Through it she could see people very distinctly. They floated with their legs chained to something deep below, arms bound behind them. They swayed like kelp.

There were thousands of them. Each of them looked up at the sky with wide, horrified eyes. They were locked in a perpetual state of drowning. Not dead, not allowed to die, but constantly gasping for air and finding only water. As she watched, something dark reached up from below and pulled one of them down into the depths. Blood rose like a blooming flower; it caused the others to struggle all the more urgently.

Moghedien smiled. It did her good to see someone other than herself suffering. These might simply be figments, but it was possible that they were ones who had failed the Great Lord.

Another gateway opened at the side of the platform, and an unfamiliar woman stepped through. The creature had alarmingly unpleasant features, with a hooked yet bulbous nose and pale eyes that were off center with one another. She wore a dress that tried to be fine, of yellow silk, but it only served to highlight the woman's ugliness.

Moghedien sneered and returned to her seat. Why was Moridin admitting a stranger to one of their meetings? This woman could channel; she must be one of those useless women who called themselves Aes Sedai in this Age.

Granted, Moghedien thought, sitting, *she* is *powerful* How had Moghedien missed noticing one with this talent among the Aes Sedai? Her sources had picked out that wretched lightskirt Nynaeve almost immediately, yet they'd missed this hag?

"This is who you wish us to meet?" Demandred said, lips turning down.

"No," Moridin said absently. "You've met Hessalam before."

Hessalam? It meant… "without forgiveness" in the Old Tongue. The woman met Moghedien's eyes proudly, and there was something familiar about her stance.

"I have things to be about, Moridin," the newcomer said. "This had better be—"

Moghedien gasped. The tone in that voice…

"Do not take that tone with me," Moridin cut in, speaking softly, not turning. "Do not take it with any of us. Currently, even Moghedien is favored more than you."

"*Graendal?*" Moghedien asked, horrified.

"Do not use that name!" Moridin said, spinning on her, the burning water flaring up. "It has been stripped from her."

Graendal—Hessalam—sat down without looking again at Moghedien. Yes, the way the woman carried herself was right. It *was* her.

Moghedien almost chortled with glee. Graendal had always used her looks as a bludgeon. Well, now they were a bludgeon of a different type. How perfect! The woman must be positively *writhing* inside. What had she done to earn such a punishment? Graendal's stature—her authority, the myths told about her—were all linked to her beauty. What now? Would she have to start searching for the most horrid people alive to keep as pets, the only ones who could compete with her ugliness?

This time, Moghedien did laugh. A quiet laugh, but Graendal heard. The woman shot her a glare that could have set a section of the ocean aflame all on its own.

Moghedien returned a calm gaze, feeling more confident now. She resisted the urge to stroke the *cour'souvra. Bring what you will, Graendal,* she thought. *We are on level footing now. We shall see who ends this race ahead.*

A stronger wind blew past, and ripples started to rise around them, though the platform itself remained secure. Moridin let his fire die out, and nearby, waves rose. Moghedien could make out bodies, little more than dark shadows, inside those waves. Some were dead. Others struggled for the surface, their chains removed, but as they neared the open air, something always towed them back down again.

"We are few, now," Moridin said. "We four, and the one who is punished most, are all that remain. By definition, that makes us the strongest."

Some of us are, Moghedien thought. *One of us was slain by al'Thor, Moridin, and required the Great Lord's hand to return him.* Why had Moridin never been punished for his failure? Well, it was best not to look too long for fairness in the Great Lord's hand.

"Still, we are too few." Moridin waved a hand, and a stone doorway appeared on the side of the platform. Not a gateway, just a door. This was Moridin's dreamshard; he could control it. The door opened, and a man strode through it and out onto the platform.

Dark-haired, the man had the features of a Saldaean—a nose that was faintly hooked, eyes that tilted. He was handsome and tall, and Moghedien recognized him. "The leader of those fledgling male Aes Sedai? I know this man, Mazri—"

“That name has been discarded,” Moridin said. “Just as each of us, upon being Chosen, discarded what we were and the names men called us. From this moment on, this man shall be known only as M’Hael. One of the Chosen.”

“Chosen?” Hessalam seemed to choke on the word. “This *child*? He—” She cut off.

It was not their place to debate if one was Chosen. They could argue among themselves, even plot, if they did so with care. But questioning the Great Lord… that was not allowed. Ever.

Hessalam said no more. Moridin would not dare call this man Chosen if the Great Lord had not decided it. There was no argument to be made. Still, Moghedien shivered. Taim… M’Hael… was said to be strong, perhaps as strong as the rest of them, but elevating one from this Age, with all of their ignorance. ... It galled her to consider that this M’Hael would be regarded as her equal.

“I see the challenge in your eyes,” Moridin said, looking at the three of them, “though only one of you was foolish enough to start voicing it. M’Hael has earned his reward. Too many of our number threw themselves into contests with al’Thor when he was presumed to be weak. M’Hael instead earned Lews Therin’s trust, then took charge of the training of his weapons. *He* has been raising a new generation of Dreadlords to the Shadow’s cause. What do the three of you have to show for your work since being released?”

“You will know the fruits I have harvested, Moridin,” Demandred said, voice low. “You will know them in bushels and droves. Just remember my requirement: I face al’Thor on the field of battle. His blood is mine, and no one else’s.” He met each of their eyes in turn, then finally those of M’Hael. There seemed to be a familiarity to them. The two had met before.

You will have competition with that one, Demandred, Moghedien thought. *He wants al’Thor nearly as much as you do.*

Demandred had been changing lately. Once, he wouldn’t have cared who killed Lews Therin—so long as the man died. What made Demandred insist on doing the deed himself?

“Moghedien,” Moridin said. “Demandred has plans for the war to come. You are to assist him.”

‘*Assist* him?” she said. “I—”

“Do you forget yourself so quickly, Moghedien?” Moridin’s voice was silky. “You will do as you are told. Demandred wants you watching over one of the armies that now lacks proper monitoring. Speak a single word of complaint, and you will realize that the pain you have known up to now is but a shadow of true agony.”

Her hand went to the *cour’souvra* at her neck. Looking into his eyes, she felt her authority evaporate. *I hate you,* she thought. *I hate you more for doing this to me in front of the others.*

“The last days are upon us,” Moridin said, turning his back on them. “In these hours, you will earn your final rewards. If you have grudges, put them behind you. If you have plots, bring them to completion. Make your final plays, for this… this is the end.”

Talmanes lay on his back, staring up at a dark sky. The clouds above seemed to be reflecting light from below, the light of a dying city. That was wrong. Light came from above, didn’t it?

He’d fallen from the horse not long after starting for the city gate. He could remember that, most of the time. Pain made it hard to think. People yelled at one another.

I should have ... I should have taunted Mat more, he thought, a hint of a smile cracking his lips. *Stupid time to be thinking of such things. I have to… have to find the dragons. Or did we find them already… ?*

“I’m telling you, the bloody things don’t work like that!” Dennel’s voice. “They’re not bloody Aes Sedai on wheels. We can’t make a wall of fire. We can send these balls of metal hurtling through the Trollocs.”

“They explode.” Guybon’s voice. “We could use the extras like I say.”

Talmanes’ eyes drifted closed.

“The balls explode, yes,” Dennel said. “But we have to launch them first. Setting them all in a row and letting the Trollocs run over them wont do much.”

A hand shook Talmanes’ shoulder. “Lord Talmanes,” Melten said. “There is no dishonor in letting it end now. I know the pain is great. May the last embrace of the mother shelter you.”

A sword being drawn. Talmanes steeled himself.

Then he found that he really, *really* didn’t want to die.

He forced his eyes open and held up a hand to Melten, who stood over him. Jesamyn hovered nearby with arms folded, looking worried.

“Help me to my feet,” Talmanes said.

Melten hesitated, then did so.

“You shouldn’t be standing,” Jesamyn said.

“Better than being beheaded in honor,” Talmanes grumbled, gritting his teeth against the pain. Light, was that his hand? It was so dark, it looked as if it had been charred in a fire. “What… what is going on?”

“We're cornered, my Lord,” Melten said grimly, eyes solemn. He thought them all as good as dead. “Dennel and Guybon are arguing over placement of the dragons for a last stand. Aludra is measuring the charges.”

Talmanes, finally standing, sagged against Melten. Before him, two thousand people clustered in the large city square. They huddled like men in the wilderness seeking one another’s warmth on a cold night. Dennel and Guybon had set up the dragons in a half-circle bowed outward, pointing toward the center of the city, refugees behind. The Band was now committed to manning the dragons; three pairs of hands were needed to operate each weapon. Almost all of the Band had had at least some training.

The buildings nearby had caught fire, but the light was doing strange things. Why didn’t it reach the streets? Those were all too dark. As if they’d been painted. Like…

He blinked, clearing the tears of pain from his eyes, realization dawning. Trollocs filled the streets like ink flowing toward the half-circle of dragons that were pointed at them.

Something held the Trollocs back for the moment. *They’re waiting until they are all together for a rush,* Talmanes thought.

Calls and snarls came from behind. Talmanes pivoted, then clutched Melten’s arm as the world lurched. He waited for it to steady. The pain… the pain was actually dulling. Like glowing flames running out of fresh coal. It had feasted upon him, but there wasn’t much left of him for it to eat.

As things steadied, Talmanes saw what was creating the snarls. The square they were in adjoined the city wall, but the townspeople and soldiers had kept their distance from the wall, for it was coated with Trollocs, like a thick grime. They raised weapons in the air and roared down at the people.

“They throw down spears at anyone who comes too close, Melten said. “We’d been hoping to reach the wall, then follow it along to the gate, but we can't—not with those things up there raining death upon us. All other routes are cut off."

Aludra approached Guybon and Dennel. "Charges, I can set under the dragons," she said to them; softly, but not as softly as she should have. "These charges, they will destroy the weapons. They may hurt the people in an unpleasant way."

"Do it," Guybon said very softly. "What the Trollocs would do is worse, and we cannot allow the dragons to fall into the Shadow's hands. That's why they're waiting. Their leaders are hoping that a sudden rush will give them time to overwhelm us and seize the weapons."

"They're moving!" a soldier called from beside the dragons. "Light, they're coming!"

That dark slime of Shadowspawn bubbled down the streets. Teeth, nails, claws, too-human eyes. The Trollocs came from all sides, eager for the kill. Talmanes struggled to draw breath.

On the walls, the calls grew excited. *We're surrounded*, Talmanes thought.

Pressed back against the wall, caught in a net. We…

Pressed back against the wall.

"Dennel!" Talmanes shouted over the din. The captain of dragons turned from his line, where men waited with burning punks for the call to launch the one volley they'd have.

Talmanes took a deep breath that made his lungs burn. "You told me that you could level an enemy bulwark in only a few shots."

"Of course," Dennel called. "But we're not trying to enter . . " He trailed off.

Light, Talmanes thought. *We're all so exhausted. We should have seen this*. "You in the middle, Ryden's dragon squad, about-face!" Talmanes screamed. "The rest of you, stay in position and fire at the oncoming Trollocs! Move, move, *mover*

The dragoners sprang into motion, Ryden and his men hastily turning their weapons about, wheels creaking. The other dragons began to fire a pattern of shot that sprayed through the streets entering the square. The booms were deafening, causing refugees to scream and cover their ears. It sounded like the end of the world. Hundreds, thousands of Trollocs went down in pools of blood as dragons' eggs exploded in their midst. The square filled with white smoke that poured from the mouths of the dragons.

The refugees behind, already terrified by what they had just witnessed, shrieked as Ryden’s dragons turned on them, and most of them fell to the ground in fright, clearing a path. A path that exposed the Trolloc-infested city wall. Ryden’s line of dragons bowed inward like a cup, the reverse formation of those firing into the Trollocs behind, so that the tubes were pointed at the same section of city wall.

“Give me one of those bloody punks!” Talmanes shouted, holding out a hand. One of the dragoners obeyed, passing him a flaming brand with a glowing red tip. He pushed away from Melten, determined to stand on his own for the moment.

Guybon stepped up. The man’s voice sounded soft to Talmanes’ strained ears. “Those walls have stood for hundreds of years. My poor city. My poor, poor city.”

“It’s not your city any longer,” Talmanes said, raising his flaming brand high in the air, defiant before a wall thick with Trollocs, a burning city to his back. “It’s theirs.”

Talmanes swiped the brand down in the air, leaving a trail of red. His signal ignited a roar of dragonfire that echoed throughout the square.

Trollocs—pieces of them, at least—blew into the air. The wall under them exploded like a stack of children’s blocks kicked at a full run. As Talmanes wavered, his vision blackening, he saw the wall crumble outward. When he toppled, slipping into unconsciousness, the ground seemed to tremble from the force of his fall.

* * *

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CHAPTER 1

Eastward the Wind Blew

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth, and even myth is long forgotten when the Age that gave it birth comes again. In one Age, called the Third Age by some, an Age yet to come, an Age long past, a wind rose in the Mountains of Mist. The wind was not the beginning. There are neither beginnings nor endings to the turning of the Wheel of Time. But it was *a* beginning.

Eastward the wind blew, descending from lofty mountains and coursing over desolate hills. It passed into the place known as the Westwood, an area that had once flourished with pine and leatherleaf. Here, the wind found little more than tangled underbrush, thick save around an occasional towering oak. Those looked stricken by disease, bark peeling free, branches drooping. Elsewhere needles had fallen from pines, draping the ground in a brown blanket. None of the skeletal branches of the Westwood put forth buds.

North and eastward the wind blew, across underbrush that crunched and cracked as it shook. It was night, and scrawny foxes picked over the rotting ground, searching in vain for prey or carrion. No spring birds had come to call, and—most telling—the howls of wolves had gone silent across the land.

The wind blew out of the forest and across Taren Ferry. What was left of it. The town had been a fine one, by local standards. Dark buildings, tall above their redstone foundations, a cobbled street, built at the mouth of the land known as the Two Rivers.

The smoke had long since stopped rising from burned buildings, but there was little left of the town to rebuild. Feral dogs hunted through the rubble for meat. They looked up as the wind passed, their eyes hungry.

The wind crossed the river eastward. Here, clusters of refugees carrying torches walked the long road from Baerlon to Whitebridge despite the late hour. They were sorry groups, with heads bowed, shoulders huddled. Some bore the coppery skin of Domani, their worn clothing displaying the hardships of crossing the mountains with little in the way of supplies. Others came from farther off. Taraboners with haunted eyes above dirty veils. Farmers and their wives from northern Ghealdan. All had heard rumors that in Andor, there was food. In Andor, there was hope.

So far, they had yet to find either.

Eastward the wind blew, along the river that wove between farms without crops. Grasslands without grass. Orchards without fruit.

Abandoned villages. Trees like bones with the flesh picked free. Ravens often clustered in their branches; starveling rabbits and sometimes larger game picked through the dead grass underneath. Above it all, the omnipresent clouds pressed down upon the land. Sometimes, that cloud cover made it impossible to tell if it was day or night.

As the wind approached the grand city of Caemlyn, it turned northward, away from the burning city—orange, red and violent, spewing black smoke toward the hungry clouds above. War had come to Andor in the still of night. The approaching refugees would soon discover that they'd been marching toward danger. It was not surprising. Danger was in all directions. The only way to avoid walking toward it would be to stand still.

As the wind blew northward, it passed people sitting beside roads, alone or in small groups, staring with the eyes of the hopeless. Some lay as they hungered, looking up at those rumbling, boiling clouds. Other people trudged onward, though toward what, they knew not. The Last Battle, to the north, whatever that meant. The Last Battle was not hope. The Last Battle was death. But it was a place to *be,* a place to *go.*

In the evening dimness, the wind reached a large gathering far to the north of Caemlyn. This wide field broke the forest-patched landscape, but it was overgrown with tents like fungi on a decaying log. Tens of thousands of soldiers waited beside campfires that were quickly denuding the area of timber.

The wind blew among them, whipping smoke from fires into the faces of soldiers. The people here didn't display the same sense of hopelessness as the refugees, but there was a dread to them. They could see the sickened land. They could feel the clouds above. They knew.

The world was dying. The soldiers stared at the flames, watching the wood be consumed. Ember by ember, what had once been alive turned to dust.

A company of men inspected armor that had begun to rust despite being well oiled. A group of white-robed Aiel collected water—former warriors who refused to take up weapons again, despite their *toh* having been served. A cluster of frightened servants, sure that tomorrow would bring war between the White Tower and the Dragon Reborn, organized stores inside tents shaken by the wind.

Men and women whispered the truth into the night. *The end has come. The end has come. All will fall. The end has come.*

Laughter broke the air.

Warm light spilled from a large tent at the center of the camp, bursting around the tent flap and from beneath the sides.

Inside that tent, Rand al'Thor—the Dragon Reborn—laughed, head thrown back.

"So what did she do?" Rand asked when his laughter subsided. He poured himself a cup of red wine, then one for Perrin, who blushed at the question.

He's become harder, Rand thought, *but somehow he hasn't lost that innocence of his. Not completely.* To Rand, that seemed a marvelous thing. A wonder, like a pearl discovered in a trout. Perrin was strong, but his strength hadn't broken him.

"Well," Perrin said, "you know how Marin is. She somehow manages to look at even *Cenn* as if he were a child in need of mothering. Finding Faile and me lying there on the floor like two fool youths… well, I think she was torn between laughing at us and sending us into the kitchen to scrub dishes. Separately, to keep us out of trouble."

Rand smiled, trying to picture it. Perrin—burly, solid Perrin—so weak he could barely walk. It was an incongruous image. Rand wanted to assume his friend was exaggerating, but Perrin didn't have a dishonest hair on his head. Strange, how much about a man could change while his core remained exactly the same.

"Anyway," Perrin said after taking a drink of wine, "Faile picked me up off the floor and set me on my horse, and the two of us pranced about looking important. I didn't do much. The fighting was accomplished by the others—I'd have had trouble lifting a cup to my lips." He stopped, his golden eyes growing distant. "You should be proud of them, Rand. Without

Dannil, your father and Mat's father, without all of them, I wouldn't have managed half what I did. No, not a tenth."

"I believe it." Rand regarded his wine. Lews Therin had loved wine. A part of Rand—that distant part, the memories of a man he had been—was displeased by the vintage. Few wines in the current world could match the favored vintages of the Age of Legends. Not the ones he had sampled, at least.

He took a small drink, then set the wine aside. Min still slumbered in another part of the tent, sectioned off with a curtain. Events in Rand's dreams had awakened him. He had been glad for Perrin's arrival to take his mind off what he had seen.

Mierin… No. He would not let that woman distract him. That was probably the point of what he had seen.

"Walk with me," Rand said. "I need to check on some things for tomorrow."

They went out into the night. Several Maidens fell into step behind them as Rand walked toward Sebban Balwer, whose services Perrin had loaned to Rand. Which was fine with Balwer, who was prone to gravitate toward those holding the greatest power.

"Rand?" Perrin asked, walking beside him with a hand on *Mah'alleinir.* "I've told you about all of this before, the siege of the Two Rivers, the fighting… Why ask after it again?"

"I asked about the events before, Perrin. I asked after what happened, but I did not ask after the people it happened to." He looked at Perrin, making a globe of light for them to see by as they walked in the night. "I need to remember the *people.* Not doing so is a mistake I have made too often in the past."

The stirring wind carried the scent of campfires from Perrin's nearby camp and the sounds of smiths working on weapons. Rand had heard the stories: Power-wrought weapons discovered again. Perrin's men were working overtime, running his two Asha'man ragged, to make as many as possible.

Rand had lent him as many more Asha'man as he could spare, if only because—as soon as they'd heard—he'd had dozens of Maidens presenting themselves and demanding Power-wrought spearheads. *It only makes sense, Rand al'Thor,* Beralna had explained. *His smiths can make four spearheads* *for every sword.* She’d grimaced saying the word “sword,” as if it tasted like seawater.

Rand had never tasted seawater. Lews Therin had. Knowing facts like that had greatly discomforted him once. Now he had learned to accept that part of him.

“Can you believe what has happened to us?” Perrin asked. “Light, sometimes I wonder when the man who owns all these fancy clothes is going to walk in on me and start yelling, then send me out to muck the stables for being too bigheaded for my collar.”

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, Perrin. We've become what we needed to become.”

Perrin nodded as they walked on the path between tents, lit by the glow of the light above Rand’s hand.

“How does it… feel?” Perrin asked. “Those memories you’ve gained?”

“Have you ever had a dream that, upon waking, you remembered in stark clarity? Not one that faded quickly, but one that stayed with you through the day?”

“Yes,” Perrin said, sounding oddly reserved. “Yes, I can say that I have.”

“It’s like that,” Rand said. “I can remember being Lews Therin, can remember doing what he did, as one remembers actions in a dream. It *was* me doing them, but I don’t necessarily like them—or think I’d take those actions if I were in my waking mind. That doesn’t change the fact that, in the dream, they seemed like the right actions.”

Perrin nodded.

“He’s me,” Rand said. “And I’m him. But at the same time, I’m not.”

“Well, you still seem like yourself,” Perrin said, though Rand caught a slight hesitation on the word “seem.” Had Perrin been about to say “smell” instead? “You haven’t changed *that* much.”

Rand doubted he could explain it to Perrin without sounding mad. The person he became when he wore the mantle of the Dragon Reborn… that wasn’t simply an act, wasn’t simply a mask.

It was who he was. He had not changed, he had not transformed. He had merely *accepted.*

That didn’t mean he had all of the answers. Despite four hundred years of memories nestled in his brain, he still worried about what he had to do. Lews Therin hadn’t known how to seal the Bore. His attempt had led to disaster. The taint, the Breaking, all for an imperfect prison with seals that were now brittle.

One answer kept coming to Rand. A dangerous answer. One that Lews Therin hadn't considered.

What if the answer *wasn't* to seal the Dark One away again? What if the answer, the final answer, was something else? Something more permanent. *Yes,* Rand thought to himself for the hundredth time. *But is it possible?* They arrived at the tent where the clerks worked, the Maidens fanning out behind them, Rand and Perrin entering. The clerks were up late, of course, and they didn't look surprised to see Rand enter.

"My Lord Dragon," Balwer said, bowing stiffly from where he stood beside a table of maps and stacks of paper. The dried-up little man sorted his papers nervously, one knobby elbow protruding from a hole in his oversized brown coat.

"Report," Rand said.

"Roedran will come," Balwer said, his voice thin and precise. "The Queen of Andor has sent for him, promising him gateways made by those Kinswomen of hers. Our eyes in his court say he is angry that he needs her help to attend, but is insistent that he needs to be at this meeting—if only so he doesn't look left out."

"Excellent," Rand said. "Elayne knows nothing of your spies?"

"My Lord!" Balwer said, sounding indignant.

"Have you determined who is spying for her among our clerks?" Rand asked.

Balwer sputtered. "Nobody—"

"She'll have someone, Balwer," Rand said with a smile. "She all but taught me how to do this, after all. No matter. After tomorrow, my intentions will be manifest for all. Secrets won't be needed."

None save the ones I keep closest to my own heart.

"That means everyone will be here for the meeting, right?" Perrin asked. "Every major ruler? Tear and Illian?"

"The Amyrlin persuaded them to attend," Balwer said. "I have copies of their exchanges here, if you wish to see them, my Lords."

"I would," Rand said. "Send them to my tent. I will look them over tonight."

The shaking of the ground came suddenly. Clerks grabbed stacks of papers, holding them down and crying out as furniture crashed to the ground around them. Outside, men shouted, barely audible over the sound of trees breaking, metal clanging. The land groaned, a distant rumble.

Rand felt it like a painful muscle spasm.

Thunder shook the sky, distant, like a promise of things to come. The shaking subsided. The clerks remained holding their stacks of paper, as if afraid to let go and risk them toppling.

It's really here, Rand thought. *I'm not ready—we're not ready—but it's here anyway.*

He had spent many months fearing this day. Ever since Trollocs had come in the night, ever since Lan and Moiraine had dragged him from the Two Rivers, he had feared what was to come.

The Last Battle. The end. He found himself unafraid now that it had come. Worried, but not afraid.

I'm coming for you, Rand thought.

"Tell the people," Rand said to his clerks. "Post warnings. Earthquakes will continue. Storms. Real ones, terrible ones. There will be a Breaking, and we cannot avoid it. The Dark One will try to grind this world to dust."

The clerks nodded, shooting concerned glances at one another by lamplight. Perrin looked contemplative, but nodded faintly, as if to himself.

"Any other news?" Rand asked.

"The Queen of Andor may be up to something tonight, my Lord," Balwer said.

" 'Something' is not a very descriptive word, Balwer," Rand said.

Balwer grimaced. "I'm sorry, my Lord. I don't have more for you yet; I only just received this note. Queen Elayne was awakened by some of her advisors a short time ago. I don't have anyone close enough to know why."

Rand frowned, resting his hand on Laman's sword at his waist.

"It could just be plans for tomorrow," Perrin said.

"True," Rand said. "Let me know if you discover anything, Balwer. Thank you. You do well here."

The man stood taller. In these last days—days so dark—every man looked for something useful to do. Balwer was the best at what he did, and was confident in his own abilities. Still, it did no harm to be reminded of the fact by one who employed him, particularly if his employer was none other than the Dragon Reborn.

Rand left the tent, Perrin following.

“You’re worried about it,” Perrin said. “Whatever it was that awoke Elayne.”

“They would not awaken her without good cause,” Rand said softly. “Considering her state.”

Pregnant. Pregnant with *his* children. Light! He had only just learned of it. Why hadn’t she been the one to tell him?

The answer was simple. Elayne could feel Rand’s emotions as he felt hers. She would have been able to feel how he had been, recently. Before Dragonmount. Back when…

Well, she wouldn’t have wanted to confront him with a pregnancy when he’d been in such a state. Beyond that, he hadn’t exactly made himself easy to find.

Still, it was a shock.

I’m going to be a father, he thought, not for the first time. Yes, Lews Therin had had children, could remember them and his love for them. It wasn’t the same.

He, Rand al’Thor, would be a father. Assuming he won the Last Battle.

“They wouldn’t have awakened Elayne without good reason,” he continued, returning to task. “I’m worried, not because of what might have happened, but because of the potential distraction. Tomorrow will be an important day. If the Shadow has any inkling of tomorrow’s importance, it will try whatever it can to keep us from meeting, from unifying.”

Perrin scratched at his beard. “I have people close to Elayne. People who keep watch on things for me.”

Rand raised his hand. “Let’s go talk to them. I have a great deal to do tonight, but… Yes, I can’t let this slip.”

The two turned toward Perrin’s camp nearby, picking up their pace, Rand’s bodyguards following like shadows with veils and spears.

The night felt too quiet. Egwene, in her tent, worked on a letter to Rand. She was not certain if she would send it. Sending it was not important. Writing it was about organizing her thoughts, determining what she wished to say to him.

Gawyn pushed his way into the tent again, hand on his sword, Warder cloak rustling.

“Are you going to stay in this time?” Egwene asked, dipping her pen, “or are you going to go right back out?”

“I don’t like this night, Egwene.” He looked over his shoulder. “Something feels wrong about it.”

“The world holds its breath, Gawyn, waiting upon the events of the morrow. Did you send to Elayne, as I requested?”

“Yes. She won’t be awake. It’s too late for her.”

“We shall see.”

It wasn’t long before a messenger arrived from Elayne’s camp, bearing a small folded letter. Egwene read it, then smiled. “Come,” she said to Gawyn, rising and gathering a few things. She waved a hand, and a gateway split the air.

“We’re Traveling there?” Gawyn asked. “It’s only a short walk.”

“A short walk would require the Amyrlin to call upon the Queen of Andor,” Egwene said as Gawyn stepped through the gateway first and checked the other side. “Sometimes, I don’t want to take an action that starts people asking questions.”

Siuan would have killed for this ability, Egwene thought as she stepped through the gateway. How many more plots could that woman have spun if she’d been able to visit others as quickly, quietly and easily as this?

On the other side, Elayne stood beside a warm brazier. The Queen wore a pale green dress, her belly swollen from the babes within. She hastened over to Egwene and kissed her ring. Birgitte stood to one side of the tent flaps, arms folded, wearing her short red jacket and wide, sky-blue trousers, her golden braid down over her shoulder.

Gawyn cocked an eyebrow at his sister. “I'm surprised you are awake.

I’m waiting for a report,” Elayne said, gesturing for Egwene to join her in a pair of cushioned chairs beside the brazier.

“Something important?” Egwene asked.

Elayne fawned. “Jesamyn forgot to check in again from Caemlyn. I left the woman *strict* orders to send to me every two hours, and yet she dallies. Light, its probably nothing. Still, I asked Serinia to go to the Traveling grounds to check on things for me. I hope you don’t mind.”

“You need rest,” Gawyn said, folding his arms.

“Thank you very much for the advice,” Elayne said, “which I will ignore, as I ignored Birgitte when she said the same thing. Mother, what is it you wished to discuss?”

Egwene handed over the letter she had been working on.

“To Rand?” Elayne asked.

“You have a different perspective on him than I. Tell me what you think of this letter. I might not send it to him. I haven’t decided yet.”

“The tone is… forceful,” Elayne noted.

“He doesn’t seem to respond to anything else.”

After a moment of reading Elayne lowered the letter. “Perhaps we should simply let him do as he wishes.”

“Break the seals?” Egwene asked. “Release the Dark One?”

“Why not?”

“Light, Elayne!”

“It has to happen, doesn’t it?” Elayne asked. “I mean, the Dark One’s going to escape. He’s practically free already.”

Egwene rubbed her temples. “There is a difference between touching the world and being free. During the War of Power, the Dark One was never truly released into the world. The Bore let him touch it, but that was resealed before he could escape. If the Dark One had entered the world, the Wheel itself would have been broken. Here, I brought this to show you.”

Egwene retrieved a stack of notes from her satchel. The sheets had been hastily gathered by the librarians of the Thirteenth Depository. “I’m not saying that we shouldn’t break the seals,” Egwene said. “I’m saying that we can’t afford to risk one of Rand’s crackbrained schemes with this.”

Elayne smiled fondly. Light, but she was smitten. I *can rely on her, can’t*

I? It was hard to tell with Elayne these days. The woman’s ploy with the Kinswomen.…

“We have unfortunately found nothing pertinent in your library *ter’angreal.”* The statue of the smiling bearded man had nearly caused a riot in the Tower; every sister had wanted to read the thousands of books that it held. “All of the books seem to have been written before the Bore was opened. They will keep searching, but these notes contain everything we could gather on the seals, the prison and the Dark One. If we break the seals at the wrong time, I fear it would mean an end to all things. Here, read this.” She handed a page to Elayne.

“The Karaethon Cycle” Elayne asked, curious. “ And light shall fail, and dawn shall not come, and still the captive rails.’ The captive is the Dark One?

I think so," Egwene said. "The Prophecies are never clear. Rand intends to enter the Last Battle and break the seals immediately, but that is a dreadful idea. We have an extended war ahead of us. Freeing the Dark One now will strengthen the forces of the Shadow and weaken us.

"If it is to be done—and I still don't know that it has to be—we should wait until the last possible moment. At the very least, we need to discuss it. Rand has been right about many things, but he has been *wrong*, too. This is not a decision he should be allowed to make alone."

Elayne shuffled through the sheets of paper, then stopped on one of them. " 'His blood shall give us the Light…' " She rubbed the page with her thumb, as if lost in thought. " 'Wait upon the Light.' Who added this note?"

"That is Doniella Alievin's copy of the Termendal translation of *The Karaethon Cycle"* Egwene said. "Doniella made her own notes, and they have been the subject of nearly as much discussion among scholars as the Prophecies themselves. She was a Dreamer, you know. The only Amyrlin that we know of to have been one. Before me, anyway."

"Yes," Elayne said.

"The sisters who gathered these for me came to the same conclusion that I have," Egwene said. "There may be a time to break the seals, but that time is not at the start of the Last Battle, whatever Rand thinks. We must wait for the right moment, and as the Watcher of the Seals, it is my duty to choose that moment. I won't risk the world on one of Rand's overly dramatic stratagems."

"He has a fair bit of gleeman in him," Elayne said, again fondly. "Your argument is a good one, Egwene. Make it to him. He will listen to you. He does have a good mind, and can be persuaded."

"We shall see. For now, I—"

Egwene suddenly sensed a spike of alarm from Gawyn. She glanced over to see him turning. Hoofbeats outside. His ears weren't any better than Egwene's, but it was his job to listen for things like this.

Egwene embraced the True Source, causing Elayne to do likewise. Birgitte already had the tent flaps open, hand on her sword.

A frazzled messenger leaped from horseback outside, eyes wide. She scrambled into the tent, Birgitte and Gawyn falling in beside her immediately, watching in case she came too close.

She didn't. "Caemlyn is under attack, Your Majesty," the woman said, gasping for breath.

“What!” Elayne leaped to her feet. “How? Did Jarid Sarand finally—”

“Trollocs,” the messenger said. “It started near dusk.”

“Impossible!” Elayne said, grabbing the messenger by the arm and hauling her out of the tent. Egwene followed hastily. “It’s been over six hours since dusk,” Elayne said to the messenger. “Why haven’t we heard anything until now? What happened to the Kinswomen?”

“I was not told, my Queen,” the messenger said. “Captain Guybon sent me to fetch you at speed. He just arrived through the gateway.”

The Traveling ground was not far from Elayne’s tent. A crowd had gathered, but men and women made way for the Amyrlin and Queen. In moments the two of them reached the front.

A group of men in bloodied clothing trudged through the open gateway, pulling carts laden with Elayne’s new weapons, the dragons. Many of the men seemed near collapse. They smelled of smoke, and their skin was blackened by soot. Not a few of them slumped unconscious as Elayne’s soldiers grabbed the carts, which were obviously meant for horses to pull, to help them.

Other gateways opened nearby as Serinia Sedai and some of the stronger of the Kinswomen—Egwene wouldn’t think of them as *Elayne’s* Kinswomen— created them. Refugees poured through like the waters of a suddenly unstopped river.

“Go,” Egwene said to Gawyn, weaving her own gateway—one to the Traveling grounds in the White Tower camp nearby. “Send for as many Aes Sedai as we can rouse. Tell Bryne to ready his soldiers, tell them to do as Elayne orders and send them through gateways to the outskirts of Caemlyn. We will show solidarity with Andor.”

Gawyn nodded, ducking through the gateway. Egwene let it vanish, then joined Elayne near the gathering of wounded, confused soldiers. Sumeko, of the Kinswomen, had taken charge of seeing that Healing was given to those in immediate danger.

The air was thick with the smell of smoke. As Egwene hurried to Elayne, she caught sight of something through one of the gateways. Caemlyn afire.

Light! She stood stunned for a moment, then hurried on. Elayne was speaking with Guybon, commander of the Queens Guard. The handsome man seemed barely able to remain on his feet, his clothing and arms alarmingly bloodied.

“Darkfriends killed two of the women you left to send messages, Your Majesty,” he was saying in a tired voice. “Another fell in the fighting. But we retrieved the dragons. Once we ... we escaped . . ” He seemed pained by something. “Once we escaped through the hole in the city wall, we found that several mercenary bands were making their way around the city toward the gate that Lord Talmanes had left defended. By coincidence they were near enough to aid in our escape.”

“You did well,” Elayne said.

“But the city—”

“You did *well*” Elayne repeated, voice firm. “You retrieved the dragons and rescued all of these people? I will see you rewarded for this, Captain.”

“Give your reward to the men of the Band, Your Majesty. It was their work. And please, if you can do anything for Lord Talmanes…” He gestured to the fallen man whom several members of the Band had just carried through the gateway.

Elayne knelt beside him, and Egwene joined her. At first, Egwene assumed that Talmanes was dead, with his skin blackened. Then he drew a ragged breath.

“Light,” Elayne said, Delving his prostrate form. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Thakan’dar blades,” Guybon said.

“This is beyond either of us,” Egwene said to Elayne, standing. “I…” She trailed off, hearing something over the groans of soldiers and carts creaking.

“Egwene?” Elayne asked softly.

“Do what you can for him,” Egwene said, standing and rushing away. She pushed through the confused crowd, following the voice. Was that… yes, *there.* She found an open gateway at the edge of the Traveling grounds, Aes Sedai in a variety of clothing hurrying through to see to the wounded. Gawyn had done his work well.

Nynaeve was asking, quite loudly, who was in charge of this mess. Egwene approached her from the side and grabbed her by the shoulder, surprising her.

“Mother?” Nynaeve asked. “What is this about Caemlyn burning? I—”

She cut off as she saw the wounded. She stiffened, then tried to go to them.

“There is one you need to see first,” Egwene said, leading her to where Talmanes lay.

Nynaeve drew in a sharp breath, then went to her knees and pushed Elayne gently aside. Nynaeve Delved Talmanes, then froze, eyes wide.

"Nynaeve?" Egwene said. "Can you—"

An *explosion* of weaves burst from Nynaeve like the sudden light of a sun coming out from behind clouds. Nynaeve wove the Five Powers together in a column of radiance, then sent it driving into Talmanes' body.

Egwene left her to her work. Perhaps it would be enough, though he looked far gone. The Light willing, the man would live. She had been impressed with him in the past. He seemed precisely the type of man that the Band—and Mat—needed.

Elayne was near the dragons and was questioning a woman with her hair in braids. That must be Aludra, who had created the dragons. Egwene walked up to the weapons, resting her fingers on one of the long bronze tubes. She had been given reports on them, of course. Some men said they were like Aes Sedai, cast in metal and fueled by the powders from fireworks.

More and more refugees poured though the gateway, many of them townspeople. "Light," Egwene said to herself. "There are too many of them. We cant house all of Caemlyn here at Merrilor."

Elayne finished her conversation, leaving Aludra to inspect the wagons. It appeared that the woman wasn't willing to rest for the night and see to them in the morning. Elayne walked toward the gateways.

"The soldiers say the area outside the city is secure," Elayne said, passing Egwene. "I'm going through to have a look."

"Elayne…" Birgitte said, coming up behind her.

"We're going! Come on."

Egwene left the Queen to it, stepping back to supervise the work. Romanda had taken charge of the Aes Sedai and was organizing the injured, separating them into groups depending on the urgency of their wounds.

As Egwene surveyed the chaotic mix, she noticed a pair of people standing nearby. A woman and man, Illianers by the looks of them. "What do you two want?"

The woman knelt before her. The fair-skinned, dark-haired woman had a firmness to her features, despite her tall, slender build. "I am Leilwin," she said in an unmistakable accent. "I was accompanying Nynaeve Sedai when the call for Healing was raised. We followed her here."

"You're Seanchan," Egwene said, startled.

“I have come to serve you, Amyrlin Seat.”

Seanchan. Egwene still held the One Power. Light, not *every* Seanchan she met was dangerous to her; still, she would not take chances. As some members of the Tower Guard came through one of the gateways, Egwene pointed to the Seanchan pair. “Take these somewhere safe and keep watch on them. I’ll deal with them later.”

The soldiers nodded. The man went reluctantly, the woman more easily. She couldn’t channel, so she wasn’t a freed *damane.* That didn’t mean she wasn’t a *sul’dam,* though.

Egwene returned to Nynaeve, who still knelt beside Talmanes. The sickness had retreated from the man’s skin, leaving it pale. “Take him somewhere to rest,” Nynaeve said tiredly to several watching members of the Band. “I’ve done what I can.”

She looked up at Egwene as the men carried him away. “Light,” Nynaeve whispered, “that took a lot out of me. Even with my *angreal.* I’m impressed that Moiraine managed it with Tam, all that time ago…” There seemed to be a note of pride in Nynaeve’s voice.

She had wanted to heal Tam, but could not—though, of course, Nynaeve had not known what she had been doing at the time. She had come a long, long way since then.

“Is it true, Mother?” Nynaeve asked, rising. “About Caemlyn?”

Egwene nodded.

“This is going to be a long night,” Nynaeve said, looking at the wounded still pouring through the gateways.

“And a longer tomorrow,” Egwene said. “Here, let us link. I’ll lend you my strength.”

Nynaeve looked shocked. “Mother?”

“You are better at Healing than I.” Egwene smiled. “I may be Amyrlin, Nynaeve, but I am still Aes Sedai. Servant of all. My strength will be of use to you.”

Nynaeve nodded and they linked. The two of them joined the group of Aes Sedai that Romanda had set Healing the refugees with the worst wounds.

“Faile has been organizing my network of eyes-and-ears,” Perrin said to Rand as the two of them hurried toward Perrin’s camp. “She might be there with them tonight. I'll warn you, I'm not certain she likes you."

She would be a fool to like me, Rand thought. *She probably knows what I'm going to require of you before this is over.*

"Well," Perrin said, "I guess that she does like that I know you. She's cousin to a queen, after all. I think she still worries you'll go mad and hurt me."

"The madness has already come," Rand said, "and I have it in my grip. As for hurting you, she's probably right. I don't think I can avoid hurting those around me. It was a hard lesson to learn."

"You implied that you're mad," Perrin said, hand resting on his hammer again as he walked. He wore it at his side, large though it was; he'd obviously needed to construct a special sheath for it. An amazing piece of work. Rand kept intending to ask whether it was one of the Power-wrought weapons his Asha'man had been making— "But Rand, you're not. You don't seem at all crazy to me."

Rand smiled, and a thought fluttered at the edge of his mind. "I *am* mad, Perrin. My madness is these memories, these impulses. Lews Therin tried to take over. I was two people, fighting over control of myself. And one of them was completely insane."

"Light," Perrin whispered, "that sounds horrible."

"It wasn't pleasant. But… here's the thing, Perrin. I'm increasingly certain that I needed these memories. Lews Therin was a good man. I was a good man, but things went wrong—I grew too arrogant, I assumed I could do everything myself. I needed to remember that; without the madness… without these memories, I might have gone charging in alone again."

"So you are going to work with the others?" Perrin asked, looking up toward where Egwene and the other members of the White Tower were camped. "This looks an *awful* lot like armies gathering to fight one another.

I'll make Egwene see sense," Rand said. "I'm right, Perrin. We need to break the seals. I don't know why she denies this."

"She's the Amyrlin now." Perrin rubbed his chin. "She's Watcher of the Seals, Rand. It's up to her to make sure they're cared for."

"It is. Which is why I will persuade her that my intentions for them are correct."

"Are you *sure* about breaking them, Rand?" Perrin asked. "Absolutely sure?"

"Tell me, Perrin. If a metal tool or weapon shatters, can you stick it back together and make it work properly?"

"Well, you *can?* Perrin said. "It's better not to. The grain of the steel… well, you're almost always better off reforging it. Melting it down, starting from scratch."

"It is the same here. The seals are broken, like a sword. We can't just patch the pieces. It won't work. We need to remove the shards and make something new to go in their place. Something better."

"Rand," Perrin said, "that's the most reasonable thing anyone has said on this topic. Have you explained it that way to Egwene?"

"She's not a blacksmith, my friend." Rand smiled.

"She's smart, Rand. Smarter than either of us. She'll understand if you explain it the right way."

"We shall see," Rand said. "Tomorrow."

Perrin stopped walking, his face lit by the glow of Rand's Power-summoned orb. His camp, beside Rand's, contained a force as large as any on the field. Rand still found it incredible that Perrin had gathered so many, including—of all things—the Whitecloaks. Rand's eyes-and-ears indicated that everyone in Perrin's camp seemed loyal to him. Even the Wise Ones and Aes Sedai with him were more inclined to do what Perrin said than not.

Sure as the wind and the sky, Perrin had become a king. A different kind of king than Rand—a king of his people, who lived among them. Rand couldn't take that same path. Perrin could be a man. Rand had to be something more, for a little time yet. He had to be a symbol, a force that everyone could rely upon.

That was terribly tiring. Not all of it was physical fatigue, but instead something deeper. Being what people needed was wearing on him, grinding as surely as a river cut at a mountain. In the end, the river would always win.

"I'll support you in this, Rand," Perrin said. "But I want you to promise me that you won't let it come to blows. I won't fight Elayne. Going up against the Aes Sedai would be worse. We can't afford to squabble."

"There won't be fighting."

"Promise me." Perrin's face grew so hard, one could have broken rocks against it. "Promise me, Rand."

"I promise it, my friend. I'll bring us to the Last Battle united."

“That’ll do, then.” Perrin walked into his camp, nodding to the sentries. Two Rivers men, both of them—Reed Soalen and Kert Wagoner. They saluted Perrin, then eyed Rand and bowed somewhat awkwardly.

Reed and Kert. He’d known them both—Light, he’d looked up to them, as a child—but Rand had grown accustomed to people he’d known treating him as a stranger. He felt the mantle of the Dragon Reborn harden upon him.

“My Lord Dragon,” Kert said. “Are we ... I mean…” He gulped and looked at the sky, and the clouds that seemed to be—despite Rand’s presence—creeping in on them. “Things look bad, don’t they?”

“The storms are often bad, Kert,” Rand said. “But the Two Rivers survives them. Such it will do again.”

“But . . ” Kert said again. “It looks bad. Light burn me, but it does.”

“It will be as the Wheel wills,” Rand said, glancing northward. “Peace, Kert, Reed,” Rand said softly. “The Prophecies have nearly all been fulfilled. This day was seen, and our tests are known. We do not walk into them unaware.”

He hadn’t promised them they would win or that they would survive, but both men stood up straighter and nodded, smiling. People liked to know that there was a plan. The knowledge that someone was in control might be the strongest comfort that Rand could offer them.

“That’s enough bothering the Lord Dragon with your questions,” Perrin said. “Make sure you guard this post well—no dozing, Kert, and no dicing.”

Both men saluted again as Perrin and Rand passed into the camp. There was more cheer here than there was in other camps on the Field. The campfires seemed faintly brighter, the laughter faintly louder. It was as if the Two Rivers folk had managed, somehow, to bring *home* with them.

“You lead them well,” Rand said softly, moving quickly beside Perrin, who nodded toward those out at night.

“They shouldn’t need me to tell them what to do, and that’s that.” However, when a messenger came running into camp, Perrin was immediately in charge. He called the spindly youth by name and, seeing the boy’s flushed face and trembling legs—he was frightened of Rand—Perrin pulled him aside and spoke softly, but firmly, with him.

Perrin sent the boy off to find Lady Faile, then stepped over. “I need to talk to Rand again.”

“You’re talking to—”

"I need the real Rand, not the man who's learned to talk like an Aes Sedai."

Rand sighed. "It really *is* me, Perrin," he protested. "I'm more me than I've been for ages."

"Yes, well, I don't like talking to you when your emotions are all masked."

A group of Two Rivers men passed and saluted. He felt a sudden spike of cold solitude at seeing those men and knowing he could never be one of them again. It was hardest with the Two Rivers men. But he did let himself be more… relaxed, for Perrin's sake.

"So, what was it?" he asked. "What did the messenger say?"

"You were right to be worried," Perrin said. "Rand, Caemlyn has fallen. It's overrun with Trollocs."

Rand felt his face grow hard.

"You're not surprised," Perrin said. "You're worried, but not surprised.

No, I'm not," Rand admitted. "I thought it would be the south where they struck—I've heard word of Trolloc sightings there, and I'm half-certain that Demandred is involved. He has never been comfortable without an army. But Caemlyn… yes, it's a clever strike. I told you they would try to distract us. If they can undercut Andor and draw her away, my alliance grows much shakier."

Perrin glanced at where Elayne's camp was set up right beside that of Egwene. "But wouldn't it be good for you if Elayne ran off? She's on the other side of this confrontation."

"There is no other side, Perrin. There is *one* side, with a disagreement on how that side should proceed. If Elayne isn't here to be part of the meeting, it will undermine everything I'm trying to accomplish. She's probably the most powerful of all the rulers."

Rand could feel her, of course, through the bond. Her spike of alarm let him know that she'd received this information. Should he go to her? Perhaps he could send Min. She had gotten up, and was moving away from the tent where he'd left her. And—

He blinked. Aviendha. She was here, at Merrilor. She hadn't been here moments ago, had she? Perrin glanced at him, and he didn't bother to wipe the shock from his face.

"We can't let Elayne leave," Rand said.

"Not even to protect her homeland?" Perrin asked, incredulous.

"If the Trollocs have already taken Caemlyn, then it's too late for Elayne to do anything meaningful. Elayne's forces will focus on evacuation. She doesn't need to be there for that, but she *does* need to be here. Tomorrow morning."

How could he make certain she stayed? Elayne reacted poorly to being told what to do—all women did—but if he implied…

"Rand," Perrin said, "what if we sent in the Asha'man? All of them? We could make a fight of it at Caemlyn."

"No," Rand said, though the word hurt. "Perrin, if the city really is overrun—I'll send men through gateways to be certain—then it's lost. Taking back those walls would take far too much effort, at least right now. We *cannot* let this coalition break apart before I have a chance to forge it together. Unity will preserve us. If each of us goes running off to put out fires in our homelands, then we will lose. That's what this attack is about."

"I suppose that's possible . . Perrin said, fingering his hammer.

"The attack might unnerve Elayne, make her more eager to act," Rand said, considering a dozen different lines of action. "Perhaps this will make her more vulnerable to agreeing with my plan. This could be a good thing." Perrin frowned.

How quickly I've learned to use others. He had learned to laugh again. He had learned to accept his fate, and to charge toward it smiling. He had learned to be at peace with who he had been, what he had done.

That understanding would not stop him from using the tools given him. He needed them, needed them all. The difference now was that he would see the people they were, not just the tools he would use. So he told himself.

"I still think we should do something to help Andor," Perrin said, scratching his beard. "How did they sneak in, do you think?"

"By Waygate," Rand said absently.

Perrin grunted. "Well, you said that Trollocs can't Travel through gateways; could they have learned how to fix that?"

"Pray to the Light they haven't," Rand said. "The only Shadowspawn they managed to make that could go through gateways were *gholam*, and Aginor wasn't foolish enough to make more than a few of *those*. No, I'd bet against Mat himself that this was the Caemlyn Waygate. I thought she had that thing guarded!"

"If it *was* the Waygate, we can do something," Perrin said. "We can't have Trollocs rampaging in Andor; if they leave Caemlyn, they'll be at our backs, and that will be a disaster. But if they're coming in at a single point, we might be able to disrupt their invasion with an attack on that point." Rand grinned.

"What's so funny?"

"At least I have an excuse for knowing and understanding things no youth from the Two Rivers should."

Perrin snorted. "Go jump in the Winespring Water. You really think this is Demandred?"

"It's exactly the sort of thing he'd try. Separate your foes, then crush them one at a time. It's one of the oldest strategies in warfare."

Demandred himself had discovered it in the old writings. They'd known nothing of war when the Bore had first opened. Oh, they'd *thought* they understood it, but it had been the understanding of the scholar looking back on something ancient, dusty.

Of all those to turn to the Shadow, Demandred's betrayal seemed the most tragic. The man could have been a hero. *Should* have been a hero.

I'm to blame for that, too, Rand thought. *If I'd offered a hand instead of a smirk, if I'd congratulated instead of competed. If I'd been the man then that I am now. . .*

Never mind that. He had to send to Elayne. The proper course was to send help for evacuating the city, Asha'man and loyal Aes Sedai to make gateways and free as many people as possible—and to make certain that for now, the Trollocs remained in Caemlyn.

"Well, I guess those memories of yours are good for something, then," Perrin said.

"Do you want to know the thing that twists my brain in knots, Perrin?" Rand said softly. "The thing that gives me shivers, like the cold breath of the Shadow itself? The taint is what made me mad *and* what gave me memories from my past life. They came as Lews Therin whispering to me. But that very insanity is the thing giving me the clues I need to win. Don't you see? If I win this, it will be the *taint itself* that led to the Dark One's fall."

Perrin whistled softly.

Redemption, Rand thought. *When I tried this last time, my madness destroyed us. This time, it will save us.*

“Go to your wife, Perrin,” Rand said, glancing at the sky. “This is the last night of anything resembling peace you shall know before the end. I’ll investigate and see how bad things are in Andor.” He looked back at his friend. “I will not forget my promise. *Unity* must come before all else. I lost last time precisely because I threw unity aside.”

Perrin nodded, then rested a hand on Rand’s shoulder. “The Light illumine you.”

“And you, my friend.”

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CHAPTER 2

The Choice of an Ajah

Pevara did her very best to pretend that she was not terrified.

If these Asha'man had known her, they'd have realized that sitting still and quiet was not her natural state. She retreated to basic Aes Sedai training: *appearing* in control when she felt anything but.

She forced herself to rise. Canler and Emarin had withdrawn to visit the Two Rivers lads and make sure they were going about in pairs. That left only her and Androl again. He quietly tinkered with his leather straps as the rain continued outside. He used two needles at once to stitch, crossing the holes on either side. The man had the concentration of a master craftsman.

Pevara strolled over, causing him to look up sharply when she drew close. She smothered a smile. She might not look it, but she could move silently, when necessary.

She stared out of the windows. The rain had grown worse, splashing curtains of water against the glass. "After so many weeks of *looking* as if it would storm at any moment, it finally comes."

"Those clouds had to break open eventually," Androl said.

"The rain doesn't feel natural," she said, hands clasped behind her. She could feel the coldness through the glass. "It doesn't ebb and flow. Just the same steady torrent. A great deal of lightning, but very little thunder.

"You think it's one of those?" Androl asked. He didn't need to say what "those" meant. Earlier in the week, common people in the Tower—none of the Asha'man—had begun bursting into flame. Just… flame, inexplicably. They'd lost some forty people. Many still blamed a rogue Asha'man, though the men had sworn nobody had been channeling nearby.

She shook her head, watching a group of people trudge past on the muddy street outside. She had been one of those, at first, who had called the deaths the work of an Asha'man gone mad. Now she accepted these events, and other oddities, as something far worse.

The world was unraveling.

She needed to be strong. Pevara herself had devised the plan of bringing women here to bond these men, though Tarna had suggested it. She couldn't let them discover how disturbing she found it to be trapped in here, facing down enemies who could force a person to the Shadow. Her only allies men who, only months ago, she would have pursued with diligence and gentled without remorse.

She sat down on the stool Emarin had used earlier. "I would like to discuss this 'plan' you are developing."

"I'm not sure I've actually developed one yet, Aes Sedai."

"I might be able to offer some suggestions."

"I wouldn't say no to hearing them," Androl said, though he narrowed his eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Those people outside. I don't recognize them. And…"

She looked back out the window. The only light came from buildings, shining an occasional red-orange glow into the drenched night. The passersby still moved very slowly down the street, in and out of the light of windows.

"Their clothing isn't wet," Androl whispered.

With a chill, Pevara realized he was right. The man at the front walked with a wide-brimmed, drooping hat on his head, but it didn't break the rain or stream water. His rustic clothing was untouched by the downpour. And the dress of the woman beside him wasn't blowing at all in the wind. Now Pevara saw that one of the younger men was holding his hand behind him, as if pulling the reins of a pack animal—but there was no animal there.

Pevara and Androl watched in silence until the figures passed too far into the night to be seen. Visions of the dead were growing increasingly common.

"You said you had a suggestion?" Androl's voice trembled.

"I… Yes." Pevara tore her eyes away from the window. "So far, Taim's focus has been on the Aes Sedai. My sisters have all been taken. I am the last."

"You're offering yourself as bait."

"They *will* come for me," she said. "It is only a matter of time."

Androl fingered the leather strap and looked pleased with it. "We should sneak you out."

“Is that so?” she said, eyebrow raised. “I have been elevated to the position of maiden in need of rescue, have I? Very valiant of you.”

He blushed. “Sarcasm? From an Aes Sedai? I wouldn’t have thought I’d hear that.”

Pevara laughed. “Oh my, Androl. You really don’t know *anything* about us, do you?”

“Honestly? No. I’ve avoided your kind for most of my life.”

“Well, considering your… innate tendencies, perhaps that was wise.”

“I couldn’t channel before.”

“But you suspected. You came here to learn.”

“I was curious,” he said. “It’s something I hadn’t tried before.”

Interesting, Pevara thought. *Is that what drives you then, leatherworker? What has set you drifting on the winds, from place to place?*

“I suspect,” she said, “you have never tried jumping off a cliff before. The fact that you haven’t done something shouldn’t *always* be a reason to try it.”

“Actually, I have jumped off a cliff. Several of them.”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“The Sea Folk do it,” he explained. “Off into the ocean. The braver you are, the higher the cliff you choose. And you have changed the topic of the conversation again, Pevara Sedai. You are quite skilled at that.”

“Thank you.”

“The reason,” he said, holding up a finger, “that I suggested we sneak you out is because this isn’t your battle. You shouldn’t have to fall here.”

“It isn’t because you want to hurry an Aes Sedai away, out of meddling in your business?”

“I came to you for help,” Androl said. “I don’t want to be rid of you; I’ll happily use you. However, if you fall here, you do so in a fight that is not your own. That isn’t fair.”

“Let me explain something to you, Asha’man,” Pevara said, leaning in. “This *is* my fight. If the Shadow takes this tower, it will mean terrible things for the Last Battle. I have accepted responsibility for you and yours; I will not turn away from it so easily.”

“You’ve accepted responsibility’ for us? What does that mean?”

Ah, perhaps I shouldn’t have shared that. Still, if they were going to be allies, perhaps he needed to know.

“The Black Tower needs guidance,” she explained.

“So that’s the point of bonding us?” Androl asked. “So we can be… corralled, like stallions to be broken?”

“Don’t be a fool. Surely you admit the value of the White Tower’s experience.”

“I’m not sure I’d say that,” Androl said. “With experience comes a determination to be set in your ways, to avoid new experiences. You Aes Sedai all assume that the way things have been done is the only way to do them. Well, the Black Tower will not be subject to you. We can look after ourselves.”

“And you’ve done a *wonderful* job of that so far, haven’t you?”

“That was unfair,” he said softly.

“Perhaps it was,” she admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“Your motivations don’t surprise me,” he said. “What you were doing here was obvious to the weakest of soldiers. The question I’ve had is this: Why, of all women, did the White Tower send *Red* sisters to bond us?”

“Who better? Our entire lives have been dedicated to dealing with men who can channel.”

“Your Ajah is doomed.”

“Is that so?”

“You exist to hunt down men who can channel,” he said. “To gentle them. See them… disposed of. Well, the Source is cleansed—”

“So you all say.”

“It *is* cleansed, Pevara. All things come and pass, and the Wheel turns. It was once pure, so it must someday be pure again. It has happened.”

And the way you look at shadows, Androl? Is that a sign of purity? The way that Nalaam mutters in unknown languages? Do you think we don't notice such things?

“You have two choices, as an Ajah,” Androl continued. “You can either continue to hunt us—ignoring the proof that we offer, that the Source is cleansed—or you can give up on being Red Ajah.”

“Nonsense. Of all Ajahs, the Reds should be your greatest ally.”

“You exist to destroy us!”

“We exist to make certain that men who can channel do not accidentally hurt themselves or those around them. Would you not agree that is a purpose of the Black Tower as well?”

“I suppose that might be part of it. The only purpose I have been told was that we are to be a weapon for the Dragon Reborn, but keeping good men from hurting themselves without proper training is important as well.”

“Then we can unite on that idea, can we not?”

“I would like to believe that, Pevara, but I’ve seen the way you and yours look at us. You see us as ... as some stain that needs to be cleansed, or poison to be bottled.”

Pevara shook her head. “If what you say is true, and the Source is cleansed, then changes *will* come, Androl. The Red Ajah and the Asha’man will grow together in common purpose, over time. I’m willing to work with you now, here.”

“Contain us.”

“Guide you. Please. Trust me.”

He studied her by the light of the room’s many lamps. He did have a sincere face. She could see why the others followed him, though he was weakest among them. He had a strange mixture of passion and humility. If only he hadn’t been one of. . . well… what he was.

“I wish I could believe you,” Androl said, looking away. “You’re different from the others, I’ll admit. Not like a Red at all.”

“I think you’ll find we’re more varied than you suppose,” Pevara said. “There isn’t one single motive that makes a woman choose the Red.”

“Other than hatred of men.”

“If we hated you, would we have come here looking to bond you?” That was a sidestep, in truth. Though Pevara herself did not hate men, many Reds did—at the very least, many regarded men with suspicion. She hoped to change that.

“Aes Sedai motivations are odd sometimes,” Androl said. “Everyone knows that. Anyway, different though you are from many of your sisters, I’ve seen that look in your eyes.” He shook his head. “I won’t believe you’re here to help us. No more than I believed that the Aes Sedai who hunted down male channelers really thought they were helping the men. No more than I believe a headsman thinks he’s doing a criminal a favor by killing him. Just because a thing needs to be done doesn’t make the one doing it a friend, Pevara Sedai. I’m sorry.”

He turned back to his leather, working by the close light of a lantern on the table.

Pevara found her annoyance rising. She’d almost had him. She *liked* men; she had often thought Warders would be useful. Couldn’t the fool recognize a hand extended across the chasm when he saw it?

Calm yourself, Pevara, she thought. *You won't get anywhere if anger rules you.* She needed this man on her side.

"That will be a saddle, won't it?" she said.

"Yes."

"You're staggering the stitches."

"It's my own method," he said. "Helps prevent rips from spreading. I think it looks nice, too."

"Good linen thread, I assume? Waxed? And do you use a single lacing chisel for those holes, or a double? I didn't get a good look."

He glanced at her, wary. "You know leatherworking?"

"From my uncle," she said. "He taught me a few things. Let me work in the shop, when I was little."

"Maybe I've met him."

She fell still. For all Androl's comments that she was good at steering a conversation, she had blundered this one directly into places she didn't like to go.

"Well?" he asked. "Where does he live?"

"Back in Kandor."

"You're *Kandori*" he asked, surprised.

"Of course I am. Don't I look it?"

"I just thought I could pick out any accent," he said, pulling a pair of stitches tight. "I've been there. Maybe I do know your uncle."

"He's dead," she said. "Murdered by Darkfriends."

Androl fell silent. "I'm sorry."

"It's been over a hundred years now. I miss my family, but they'd be dead by now even if the Darkfriends hadn't killed them. Everyone I knew back home is dead."

"My sorrow is deeper, then. Truly."

"It is long past," Pevara said. "I can remember them with fondness without having the pain intrude. But what of your family? Siblings? Nieces, nephews?"

"A smattering of each group," Androl said.

"Do you ever see them?"

He eyed her. "You're trying to engage me in friendly conversation to prove that you don't feel awkward around me. But I've seen how you Aes Sedai look at people like me."

"I—"

“Say you don’t find us repulsive.”

“I hardly think what you do should be—”

“Straight answer, Pevara.”

“Very well, fine. Men who can channel *do* discomfort me. You make me itch all over, and it has only grown worse the longer I’ve been here, surrounded by you.”

Androl nodded in satisfaction at having pulled it from her.

“However,” Pevara continued, “I feel this way because it has been ingrained in me over decades of life. What you do is terribly unnatural, but you yourself do *not* disgust me. You are just a man trying to do your best, and I hardly think that is worthy of disgust. Either way, I am willing to look beyond my inhibitions in the name of common good.”

“That’s better than I could have expected, I suppose.” He looked back toward the rain-splattered windows. “The taint is cleansed. This isn’t unnatural any longer. I wish ... I wish I could just *show* you, woman.” He looked toward her sharply. “How does one form one of those circles you mentioned?”

“Well,” Pevara said, “I’ve never actually done it with a male channeler, of course. I did some reading before coming down here, but much of what we have is hearsay. So much has been lost. To start with, you must put yourself on the edge of embracing the Source, then open yourself to me. That is how we establish the link.”

“All right,” he said. “You’re not holding the Source, however.”

It was downright unfair, that a man could tell when a woman was holding the One Power and when she wasn’t. Pevara embraced the Source, flooding herself with the sweet nectar that was *saidar.*

She reached out to link with Androl as she would with a woman. That was how one was supposed to begin, according to the records. But it was not the same. *Saidin* was a torrent, and what she had read was true; she could do nothing with the flows.

“It’s working; my power is flowing into you.”

“Yes,” Pevara said. “But when a man and woman link, the man must be in control. You must take the lead.”

“How?” Androl asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll try to pass it. You *must* control the flows.”

He eyed her, and she prepared herself to pass control to him. Instead, he somehow *seized* it. She was caught in the tempestuous link, yanked—as if by her hair—right in.

The force of it nearly made her teeth rattle, and it felt as if her skin was being pulled off. Pevara closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and did not let herself fight back. She had wanted to try this; it could be useful. But she couldn't help a moment of sheer panic.

She was linked with a *male channeler,*; one of the most feared things the land had ever known. Now he had control of her, completely. Her Power flowed through her, washing over him, and Androl gasped.

"So much…" he said. "Light, you're strong."

She allowed herself a smile. The link brought with it a storm of awareness. She could feel Androl's emotions. He was as fearful as she was. He was also *solid.* She'd imagined that being linked to him would be terrible, because of his madness, but she sensed none of it.

But *saidin…* that liquid fire that he wrestled with, like a serpent that was trying to consume him. She pulled back. Was it tainted? She wasn't certain she could tell. *Saidin* was so different, so alien. Reports from the early days fragmented, spoke of the taint like an oil slick upon a river. Well, she could see a river—more a stream, really. It appeared that Androl had been honest with her, and wasn't very powerful. She could not sense any taint— but then again, she did not know what to look for.

"I wonder . ." Androl said. "I wonder if I can make a gateway with this power."

"Gateways don't work in the Black Tower anymore."

"I know," he said. "But I keep feeling that they're just beyond my fingertips."

Pevara opened her eyes, looking at him. She could feel his honesty within the circle, but creating a gateway required a *lot* of the One Power, at least for a woman. Androl would have to be orders of magnitude too weak for that weave. Could it require a different level of strength for a man?

He reached out a hand, using her Power somehow, mixed with his own. She could feel him pulling the One Power through her. Pevara tried to maintain her composure, but she did not like him having control. She could do nothing!

"Androl," she said. "Release me."

"It's wonderful…" he whispered, eyes unfocused as he stood up. "Is this what it feels like, to be one of the others? Those with strength in the Power?"

He drew more of her power and used it. Objects in the room began to rise into the air.

“Androl!” Panic. It was the panic she’d felt after hearing that her parents were dead. She hadn’t known this sense of horror in over a hundred years, not since taking the test for her shawl.

He had control of her channeling. Absolute control. She began to gasp, trying to reach for him. She could not use *saidar* without him releasing it back to her—but he could use it against her. Images of him using her own strength to tie her in Air ran through her mind. She could not end the link. Only he could.

He noticed, suddenly, and his eyes widened. The circle vanished like a wink of the eye, and her power was her own again. Without thinking, she lashed out. This would not happen again. *She* would have the control. The weaves sprang from her before she knew what she was doing.

Androl fell to his knees, hand sweeping across his table as he threw his head back, brushing tools and scraps of leather to the floor. He gasped. “What have you done?”

“Taim said we could pick any of you,” Pevara muttered as she realized what she *had* done. She’d bonded him. The reverse, after a fashion, of what he’d done to her. She tried to calm her thundering heart. An awareness of him blossomed in the back of her mind, like what they’d known in the circle, but somehow more personal. Intimate.

“Taim is a monster!” Androl growled. “You know that. You take his word on what you can do, and you do it without my permission?”

“I… I…”

Androl clenched his jaw, and Pevara immediately felt *something*. Something alien, something strange. It felt like looking at herself. Feeling her emotions circled back on her endlessly.

Her *self* melded with *his* for a seeming eternity. She knew what it was like to be him, think his thoughts. She saw his life in the blink of an eye, was absorbed by his memories. She gasped and fell to her knees in front of him.

It faded. Not completely, but it faded. It felt like swimming a hundred leagues through boiling water, and only now emerging, having forgotten what it was like to have normal sensations.

“Light . .” she whispered. “What was that?”

He lay on his back. When had he fallen? He blinked, looking up at the ceiling. "I saw one of the others do it. Some of the Asha'man bond their wives."

"You *bonded* me?" she said, horrified.

He groaned, rolling over. "You did it to me first."

She realized, with horror, that she could still feel his emotions. His self. She could even understand some of what he was thinking. Not the actual thoughts, but some impressions of them.

He was confused, worried and… curious. He was curious about the new experience. *Foolish man!*

She'd hoped that the two bonds would have somehow canceled one another out. They did not. "We have to stop this," she said. "I'll release you. I vow it. Just… just release me."

"I don't know how," he said, standing up and breathing in deeply. "I'm sorry."

He was telling the truth. "That circle was a bad idea," she said. He offered a hand to help her to her feet. She stood on her own without accepting it.

"I believe it was *your* bad idea before it was mine."

"So it was," she admitted. "It isn't my first one, but it might be one of my worst." She sat down. "We need to think through this. Find a way to—"

The door to his shop slammed open.

Androl spun, and Pevara embraced the Source. Androl had grabbed his stitching groover in one hand like a weapon. He'd also seized the One Power. She could sense that molten force within him—weak because of his lack of talent, like a single small jet of magma, but still burning and hot. She could feel his awe. So it was the same for him as it was for her. Holding the One Power felt like opening your eyes for the first time, the world coming to life.

Fortunately, neither weapon nor the One Power was needed. Young Evin stood in the doorway, raindrops dribbling down the sides of his face. He shut the door and hurried to Androl's workbench.

"Androl, it—" He froze, seeing Pevara.

"Evin," Androl said. "You're alone."

"I left Nalaam to watch," he said, breathing in and out. "It was important, Androl."

“We are *never* to be alone, Evin,” Androl said. “Never. Always in pairs. No matter the emergency.”

“I know, I know,” Evin said. “I’m sorry. It’s just—the news, Androl.” He glanced at Pevara.

“Speak,” Androl said.

“Welyn and his Aes Sedai are back,” Ewan said.

Pevara could feel Androl’s sudden tension. “Is he… one of us, still?”

Evin shook his head, sick. “He’s one of them. Probably Jenare Sedai is, too. I don’t know her well enough to tell for sure. Welyn, though… his eyes aren’t his own any longer, and he now serves Taim.”

Androl groaned. Welyn had been with Logain. Androl and the others had been holding to the hope that although Mezar had been taken, Logain and Welyn were still free.

“Logain?” Androl whispered.

“He isn’t here,” Evin said, “but Androl, Welyn says Logain will come back soon—and that he’s met with Taim, and they have reconciled their differences. Welyn is promising that Logain will come tomorrow to prove it. Androl… that’s it. We have to admit it now. They have him.”

Pevara could feel Androl’s agreement, and his horror. It mirrored her own.

Aviendha moved through the darkened camps silently.

So many groups. There had to be at least a hundred thousand people gathered here at the Field of Merrilor. All waiting. Like a breath taken in and held before a great leap.

The Aiel saw her, but she did not approach them. The wetlanders didn’t notice her, save for a Warder who spotted her as she skirted the Aes Sedai camp. That camp was a place of motion and activity. Something had happened, though she caught only fragments. A Trolloc attack somewhere?

She listened enough to determine that the attack was in Andor, in the city of Caemlyn. There was worry the Trollocs would leave the city and rampage across the land.

She needed to know more; would the spears be danced tonight? Perhaps Elayne would share news with her. Aviendha moved silently out of the Aes Sedai camp. Stepping softly in these wet lands, with their lush plants, presented different challenges than the Three-fold Land did. There, the dry ground was often dusty, which could muffle footsteps. Here, a dry twig could inexplicably be buried beneath wet grass.

She tried not to think about how dead that grass seemed. Once, she'd have considered those browns lush. Now, she knew these wetland plants should *not* look so wan and… and hollow.

Hollow plants. What was she thinking? She shook her head and crept through the shadows out of the Aes Sedai camp. She briefly contemplated sneaking back to surprise that Warder—he'd been hiding in a moss-worn cleft in the rubble of an old, fallen building and watching the Aes Sedai perimeter—but discarded the idea. She wanted to get to Elayne and ask her for details on the attack.

Aviendha approached another busy camp, ducked beneath the leafless branches of a tree—she didn't know what type, but its limbs spread wide and high—and slipped inside the guard perimeter. A pair of wetlanders in white and red stood on "watch" near a fire. They didn't come close to spotting her, though they did jump up and level polearms toward a thicket a good thirty feet away when an animal rustled in it.

Aviendha shook her head and passed them.

Forward. She needed to keep moving forward. What to do about Rand al'Thor? What were his plans for tomorrow? These were other questions she wanted to ask Elayne.

The Aiel needed a purpose once Rand al'Thor finished with them. That was clear from the visions. She had to find a way to give this to them. Perhaps they should return to the Three-fold Land. But… no. No. It tore her heart, but she had to admit that if the Aiel did so, they would be going to their graves. Their death, as a people, might not be immediate, but it would come. The changing world, with new devices and new ways of fighting, would overtake the Aiel, and the Seanchan would never leave them alone. Not with women who could channel. Not with armies full of spears that could, at any time, invade.

A patrol approached. Aviendha drew some fallen brown undergrowth over herself for camouflage, then lay down flat beside a dead shrub and remained perfectly still. The guards walked two handspans from her.

We could attack the Seanchan now, she thought. *In my vision, the Aiel waited nearly a generation to attack—and that let the Seanchan strengthen their position.*

The Aiel already spoke of the Seanchan and the confrontation that must inevitably come. The Seanchan would force it, everyone whispered. Except, in her vision, years had passed with the Seanchan failing to attack. Why? What could possibly have held them back?

Aviendha rose and crept across to the pathway the guards had taken. She took out her knife and rammed it down into the ground. She left it there, right beside a lantern on a pole, clearly visible even to wetlander eyes. Then she slipped back into the night, hiding near the back of the large tent that was her goal.

She crouched low and practiced her silent breathing, using the rhythm to calm herself. There were hushed, anxious voices inside the tent. Aviendha did her best not to pay attention to what they were saying. It wouldn't be proper to eavesdrop.

As the patrol passed again, she stood up. When they cried out, having found her dagger, she slipped around to the front of the tent. There, avoiding the attention of guards distracted by the commotion, she lifted the flap and stepped inside the tent behind them.

Some people sat at a table on the far side of the very large tent, huddled around a lamp. They were so busy with their conversation that they did not see her, so she settled down near some cushions to wait.

It was very hard not to listen in, now that she was so close.

". . . *must* send our forces back!" one man barked. "The fall of the capital is a symbol, Your Majesty. A *symbol!* We cannot let Caemlyn go or the entire nation will collapse into chaos."

"You underestimate the strength of the Andoran people," said Elayne. She looked very much in control, very strong, her red-gold hair practically glowing in the lamplight. Several of her battle commanders stood behind her, lending authority and a sense of stability to the meeting. Aviendha was pleased to see the fire in her first-sister's eyes.

"I have been to Caemlyn, Lord Lir," Elayne continued. "And I have left a small force of soldiers there to watch and give warning if the Trollocs leave the city. Our spies will use gateways to sneak through the city and find where the remaining Trollocs are herding captives, and then we can mount rescue operations if the Trollocs continue to hold the city."

"But the city itself!" Lord Lir said.

"Caemlyn is lost, Lir," Lady Dyelin snapped. "We'd be fools to try to mount any kind of assault now."

Elayne nodded. “I have held conference with the other High Seats, and they agree with my assessment. For now, the refugees who escaped are safe—I sent them on along toward Whitebridge with guards. If there are people alive within, we will try to rescue them with gateways, but I will *not* commit my forces to an all-out attack on Caemlyn’s walls.”

“But—”

“Taking the city again would be fruitless,” Elayne said, voice hard. “I know full well the damage that can be done to an army assaulting those walls! Andor will not collapse because of the loss of one city, no matter how important a city.” Her face was a mask, her voice as cold as good steel.

“The Trollocs will eventually leave the city,” Elayne continued. “They gain nothing by holding it—they will starve themselves out, if nothing else. Once they leave, we can fight them—and on far fairer ground. If you wish, Lord Lir, you may visit the city yourself and see that what I say is true. The soldiers there could use the inspiration of a High Seat.”

Lir frowned, but nodded. “I think I will.”

“Then go knowing my plan. We will begin sending in scouts before the night is through, trying to find pens of civilians to save, and *Aviendha, what in the name of a bloody goat's left stone are you doing!”*

Aviendha looked up from trimming her fingernails with her second knife. *Bloody goat’s left stone*? That was a new one. Elayne always knew the most interesting curses.

The three High Seats at the table jumped up, scrambling, throwing down chairs and reaching for swords. Elayne sat in her place, eyes and mouth wide.

“It is a bad habit,” Aviendha admitted, slipping her knife back into her boot. “My nails were growing long, but I should not have done it in your tent, Elayne. I am sorry. I hope I did not offend.”

“I’m not talking about your flaming nails, Aviendha,” Elayne said. “How… when did you arrive? Why didn’t the guards announce you?”

“They didn’t see me,” Aviendha said. “I didn’t wish to make a fuss, and wetlanders can be touchy. I thought they might turn me away, now that you are Queen.” She smiled as she said the last part. Elayne had much honor; the way of becoming a leader among the wetlanders was different from proper ways—things could be so backward over here—but Elayne had handled herself well and obtained her throne. Aviendha couldn’t have been more proud of a spear-sister who had taken a clan chief *gai’shain.*

“They didn’t . .” Elayne said. Suddenly, she was smiling. “You crept through the *entire camp*, to my tent at the center, and then slipped inside and sat down not five feet from me. And nobody saw.”

“I didn’t wish to make a fuss.”

“You have a strange way of not making a fuss.”

Elayne’s companions did not react with such calm. One of the three, young Lord Perival, gazed around him with worried eyes, as if searching for other intruders.

“My Queen,” Lir said. “We must punish this breach in security! I will find the men who were lax in their duty and see that they—”

“Peace,” Elayne said. “I will speak to my guards and suggest they keep their eyes a little more open. Still, guarding the front of a tent is a silly precaution—and always has been—as someone can just cut their way into the back.”

“And ruin a good tent?” Aviendha said, lips turning down. “Only if we had blood feud, Elayne.”

“Lord Lir, you may go inspect the city—from a good distance—if you wish,” Elayne said, standing. “If any of the rest of you wish to accompany him, you may. Dyelin, I will see you in the morning.”

“Very well,” the lords said in turn, then walked from the tent. Both kept distrustful eyes on Aviendha as they left. Dyelin just shook her head before following them, and Elayne sent her battle commanders out to coordinate scouting of the city. That left Elayne and Aviendha alone in the tent.

“Light, Aviendha,” Elayne said, embracing her, “if the people who want me dead had half of your skill . . ”

“Did I do something wrong?” Aviendha said.

“Other than sneaking into my tent like an assassin?”

“But you are my first-sister…” Aviendha said. “Should I have asked? But we are not under a roof. Or… among wetlanders, is a tent considered a roof, as in a hold? I’m sorry, Elayne. Do I have *toh!* You are such an unpredictable people, it’s hard to know what will offend you and what will not.” Elayne just laughed. “Aviendha, you’re a gem. A complete and total *gem.* Light, but it’s good to see your face. I needed a friendly one tonight.”

“Caemlyn has fallen?” Aviendha asked.

“Near enough,” Elayne said, face growing colder. “It was that bloody Waygate. I thought it was safe—I had that thing all but bricked up, with fifty guards at the door and the *Avendesora* leaves taken and both put on the outside.”

“Someone inside Caemlyn let them in, then.”

“Darkfriends,” Elayne said. “A dozen members of the Guard—we were lucky enough that one man survived their betrayal and found his way out. Light, I don’t know why I should be surprised. If they’re in the White Tower, they’re in Andor. But these were men who had rejected Gaebril, and who seemed loyal. They waited all this time only to betray us now.”

Aviendha grimaced, but took one of the chairs to join Elayne at the table, rather than staying on the floor. Her first-sister preferred sitting that way. Her stomach had swelled with the children she bore.

“I sent Birgitte with the soldiers to the city to see what can be done,” Elayne said. “But we’ve done what we can for the night, the city watched, the refugees seen to. Light, I wish I could do more. The worst thing about being Queen is not the things you must do, but the things that you cannot.”

“We will bring the battle to them soon enough,” Aviendha said.

“We will,” Elayne said, eyes smoldering. “I will bring them fire and fury, repayment in kind for the flames they brought to my people.”

“I heard you speak to those men of not attacking the city.”

“No,” Elayne said. “I will not give them the satisfaction of holding my own walls against me. I have given Birgitte an order—the Trollocs will eventually abandon Caemlyn, of this we are sure. Birgitte will find a way to hasten that, so we can fight them outside of the city.”

“Do not let the enemy choose your battleground,” Aviendha said with a nod. “A good strategy. And… Rand’s meeting?”

“I will attend,” Elayne said. “I must, so it will be done. He had better not give us theatrics and stalling. My people die, my city burns, the world is two steps from the edge of a cliff. I will stay through the afternoon only; after that, I go back to Andor.” She hesitated. “Will you come with me?”

“Elayne…” Aviendha said. “I cannot leave my people. I am a Wise One now.”

“You went to Rhuidean?” Elayne asked.

“Yes,” Aviendha said. Though it pained her to keep secrets, she said nothing of her visions there.

“Excellent. I—” Elayne began, but was cut off.

“My Queen?” the tent guard called from outside. “Messenger for you.”

“Let them in.”

The guard opened the flaps for a young Guardswoman with a messenger’s ribbon on her coat. She performed an ornate bow, one hand removing her hat as the other held out a letter.

Elayne took the letter but didn’t open it. The messenger retreated. “Perhaps we can still fight together, Aviendha,” Elayne said. “If I have my way, I will have Aiel at my side as I reclaim Andor. The Trollocs in Caemlyn present a serious threat to all of us; even if I draw their main force out, the Shadow can continue to pour Shadowspawn through that Waygate.

“I’m thinking that while my armies fight the main body of Trollocs outside of Caemlyn—I will have to make the city inhospitable to the Shadowspawn somehow—I will send a smaller force through a gateway to seize the Waygate. If I could gain the aid of Aiel for that ... ”

As she spoke, she embraced the Source—Aviendha could see the glow—and absently sliced the letter open, breaking the seal with a ribbon of Air. Aviendha raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry,” Elayne said, “I've reached the point in my pregnancy where I can channel again reliably, and I keep finding excuses…”

“Do not endanger the babes,” Aviendha said.

“I’m not going to endanger them,” Elayne said. “You’re as bad as Birgitte. At least no one has any goat’s milk here. Min says…” She trailed off, eyes flickering back and forth as she read the letter. Elayne’s expression darkened, and Aviendha prepared herself for a shock.

“Oh, that man…” Elayne said.

“Rand?”

“I think I may strangle him one of these days.”

Aviendha set her jaw. “If he’s offended—”

Elayne turned the letter around. “He *insists* that I return to Caemlyn to see to my people. He gives a dozen reasons why, going so far as to release me from my obligation’ to meet with him tomorrow.”

“He should not be insisting on anything with you.”

“Particularly not so forcefully,” Elayne said. “Light, this is clever. He’s obviously trying to bully me into *staying.* There’s a touch of *Daes Dae’mar* in this.”

Aviendha hesitated. “You seem proud. Yet I gather this letter is only one step away from being insulting!”

“I am proud,” Elayne said. “And angry at him. But proud because he knew to make me angry like that. Light! We’ll make a king out of you yet, Rand. Why does he want me at the meeting so badly? Does he think I'll support his side just because of my affection for him?"

"You don't know what his plan is, then?"

"No. It obviously involves all of the rulers. But I will attend, even though I'm likely to do so without having had any sleep tonight. I am meeting with Birgitte and my other commanders in an hour to go over plans for drawing out, then destroying, the Trollocs." A fire still burned behind those eyes of hers. Elayne was a warrior, as true a one as Aviendha had ever known.

"I must go to him," Aviendha said.

"Tonight?"

"Tonight. The Last Battle will soon begin."

"As far as I'm concerned, it started the moment those bloody Trollocs set foot in Caemlyn," Elayne said. "May the Light favor us. It is here."

"Then the day of dying will come," Aviendha said. "Many of us will soon wake from this dream. There may not be another night for Rand and myself. I came to you, in part, to ask you about this."

"You have my blessing," Elayne said softly. "You are my first-sister. Have you spent time with Min?"

"Not enough, and under other circumstances I would remedy that lack immediately. There is no time."

Elayne nodded.

"I do think she feels better about me," Aviendha said. "She did me a great honor in helping me understand the last step to becoming a Wise One. It may be appropriate to bend some of the customs. We have done well, under the circumstances. I would speak to her together with you, if there is time."

Elayne nodded. "I can spare a moment or two between meetings. I'll send for her."

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CHAPTER 3

A Dangerous Place

"Lord Logain and Taim have indeed patched up their differences," Welyn said, sitting inside the common room of The Great Gathering. He wore bells in his dark braids, and he smiled widely. He always had smiled too much. "Both were worried about the division we've been suffering and agree it isn't good for morale. We need to be focused on the Last Battle. This isn't a time for squabbling."

Androl stood just inside the door, Pevara beside him. It was surprising, how quickly this building—a former warehouse—had been transformed into a tavern. Lind had done her work well. There were a respectable bar and stools, and though the tables and chairs spread through the room didn't match yet, the place could seat dozens. She also had a library with a considerable number of books, although she was very particular about who she allowed to use it. On the second floor, she planned private dining chambers and sleeping rooms for visitors to the Black Tower. Assuming Taim started letting visitors in again.

The room was quite packed, and the crowd included a large number of newer recruits, men who didn't yet fall on either side of the growing dispute — either with Taim and his men, or with those loyal to Logain.

Androl listened to Welyn, feeling chilled. Welyn's Aes Sedai, Jenare, sat beside him, hand resting fondly on his arm. Androl didn't know her well, but he *did* know Welyn. And this thing with Welyn's face and voice was *not* the same man.

We met with the Lord Dragon," Welyn continued. "Surveying the Borderlands, preparing for humankind's assault against the Shadow. He has rallied the armies of all nations to his banner. There are none who do not support him, other than the Seanchan, of course—but they have been driven back.

This is the time, and we will soon be called upon to strike. We need to focus one last time on our skills. The Sword and Dragon will be awarded liberally in the next two weeks. Work hard, and we will be the weapons that break the Dark One’s hold upon this land.”

“You say Logain is coming,” a voice demanded. “Why isn’t he back yet?” Androl turned. Jonneth Dowtry stood near Welyn's table. With his arms folded, glowering at Welyn, Jonneth was an intimidating sight. The Two Rivers man often had a friendly way about him, and it was easy to forget that he stood a head taller than you and had arms like those of a bear. He wore his black Asha’man coat, though it had no pins on the high collar — despite the fact that he was as strong in the One Power as any Dedicated.

‘Why isn’t he here?” Jonneth demanded. “You said that you returned with him, that he and Taim have spoken. Well, where is he?”

Don’t push, lad, Androl thought. *Let him think we believe his lies!*

“He took the M’Hael to visit the Lord Dragon,” Welyn said. “Both should be back on the morrow, the day after at the latest.”

“Why did Taim need Logain to show him the way?” Jonneth said stubbornly. “He could have gone on his own.”

“That boy is a fool,” Pevara hissed.

“He’s honest,” Androl replied quietly, “and he wants honest answers.” These Two Rivers lads were a good lot—straightforward and loyal. They weren’t particularly practiced in subterfuge, however.

Pevara fell silent, but Androl could *feel* her as she considered channeling and hushing Jonneth with some bindings of Air. They weren’t serious thoughts, just idle fancies, but Androl could sense them. Light! What had they done to one another?

She’s in my head, he thought. *There’s an Aes Sedai, inside my head.*

Pevara froze, then glanced at him.

Androl sought the void, that old soldier’s trick to help him seek clarity before a battle. *Saidin* was there, too, of course. He didn’t reach for it.

“What did you do?” Pevara whispered. “I can feel you there, but sensing your thoughts is harder.”

Well, that was something at least.

“Jonneth,” Lind called across the common room, interrupting the lad’s next question to Welyn. “Didn’t you hear the man saying how much traveling he’s been doing? He’s exhausted. Let him drink his ale and rest a spell before you pry stories out of him.”

Jonneth glanced at her, looking hurt. Welyn smiled deeply as the lad withdrew, pushing his way out of the common room. Welyn continued talking about how well the Lord Dragon was doing, and about how much each of them would be needed.

Androl released the void, feeling more relaxed. He looked around the room, trying to judge who in here he could rely upon. He liked many of these men, and many weren't completely for Taim, yet he still couldn't trust them. Taim had complete control of the Tower now, and private lessons with him and his chosen were coveted by the newcomers. Only the Two Rivers lads could be counted on to give any sort of support to Androl's cause— and most of them other than Jonneth were too unpracticed to be of use.

Evin had joined Nalaam on the other side of the room, and Androl nodded his head to him, sending him out to follow Jonneth into the storm. Nobody was to be alone. That done, Androl listened to Welyn's boasting, and noticed Lind picking her way through the crowd toward him.

Lind Taglien was a short, dark-haired woman; her dress was covered in lovely embroidery. She had always seemed to him a model of what the Black Tower *could* be. Civilized. Educated. Important.

Men made way for her; they knew not to spill their drinks or start fights in her inn. Lind's anger was not something a wise man ever wanted to know. It was a good thing she ran the place so tightly. In a city full of male channelers, a simple tavern brawl could potentially go very, very wrong.

"Does this bother you as much as it does me?" Lind asked softly as she stepped up beside him. "Wasn't he the one who, just a few weeks back, was talking about how Taim should be tried and executed for some of the things he'd done?"

Androl didn't reply. What could he say? That he suspected that the man they'd known as Welyn was dead? That the entire Black Tower would soon be nothing but these monsters with the wrong eyes, the false smiles, the dead souls?

"I don't believe him about Logain," Lind said. "Something's going on here, Androl. I'm going to have Frask follow him tonight, see where he—"

"No," Androl said. "No. Don't." Frask was her husband, a man who had been hired to help Henre Haslin teach swordsmanship in the Black Tower. Taim thought that swordfighting was useless for Asha'man, but the Lord Dragon had insisted that the men be taught.

She eyed him. "You're not saying you believe—"

"I'm saying that were in great danger right now, Lind, and I don't want Frask making it worse. Do me a favor. Take note of what else Welyn says tonight. Maybe some of it will be useful for me to know."

"All right," she said, sounding skeptical.

Androl nodded toward Nalaam and Canler, who rose and headed over. Rain beat against the rooftop and the porch outside. Welyn kept right on talking, and the men were listening. Yes, it was incredible that he'd swapped sides so quickly, and that would make some suspicious. But many people respected him, and the way he was *off* just slightly wasn't noticeable unless you knew him.

"Lind," Androl said as she started to walk away.

She glanced back at him.

"You… lock this place up tightly tonight. Then maybe you and Frask should find your way into the cellar with some supplies, all right? You have a sturdy cellar door?"

"Yes," she said. "For all the good it will do." It wouldn't matter how thick a door was if someone with the One Power came looking.

Nalaam and Canler reached them, and Androl turned to go, only to run directly into a man standing in the doorway behind him, someone he hadn't heard approach. Rain dripped from his Asha'man coat, with the Sword and the Dragon on the high collar. Atal Mishraile had been one of Taim's from the start. Fie didn't have the hollow eyes; his evil was all his own. Tall, with long golden hair, he had a smile that never seemed to reach his eyes.

Pevara jumped when she saw him, and Nalaam cursed, seizing the One Power.

"Now, now," a voice said. "No need for strife." Mezar stepped in from the rain beside Mishraile. The short Domani man had graying hair and an air of wisdom to him, despite his transformation.

Androl met Mezar's eyes, and it was like looking into a deep cavern. A place where light had never shone.

"Hello, Androl," Mezar said, putting a hand on Mishraile's shoulder, as if the two had been friends for a long time. "Why is it that Goodwoman Lind would need to fear, and shut herself in her cellar? Surely the Black Tower is as safe a place as there is?"

"I don't trust a dark night full of storms," Androl said.

"Perhaps that is wise," Mezar replied. "Yet you go out into it. Why not stay where it is warm? Nalaam, I should like to hear one of your stories.

Perhaps you could tell me of the time your father and you visited Shara?"

"It's not that good a story," Nalaam said. "I don't know if I remember it that well."

Mezar laughed, and Androl heard Welyn stand up behind him. "Ah, there you are! I was telling them you'd talk about defenses in Arafel."

"Come listen," Mezar said. "This will be important for the Last Battle."

"Maybe I will return," Androl said, voice cool. "Once my other work is done."

The two stared at one another. To the side, Nalaam still held the One Power. He was as strong as Mezar, but would never be able to face both him and Mishraile—particularly not in a room crammed with people who would probably take the side of the two full Asha'man.

"Don't waste your time with the pageboy, Welyn," Coteren said from behind. Mishraile stepped aside to make room for this third newcomer. The bulky, beady-eyed man pressed a hand against Androl's chest and shoved him aside as he passed. "Oh, wait. You can't play pageboy anymore, can you?"

Androl entered the void and seized the Source.

Shadows immediately started moving in the room. Lengthening.

There weren't enough lights! Why didn't they light more lamps? The darkness invited those shadows in, and he could *see* them. These were real, each one a tendril of blackness, reaching for him. To pull him into them, to destroy him.

Oh, Light. I'm mad. I'm mad. . .

The void shattered, and the shadows—thankfully—retreated. He found himself shaking, pulling back against the wall, panting. Pevara watched him with an expressionless face, but he could feel her concern.

"Oh, by the way," Coteren said. He was one of Taim's most influential toadies. "Have you heard?"

"Heard what?" Androl managed to force out.

"You've been demoted, pageboy," Coteren said, pointing toward the sword pin. "Taim's orders. As of today. Back to soldier you go, Androl."

"Oh, yes," Welyn called from the center of the room. "I'm sorry I forgot to mention it. It *has* been cleared with the Lord Dragon, I'm afraid. You never should have been promoted, Androl. Sorry."

Androl reached to his neck, to the pin there. It shouldn't matter to him; what did it really mean?

But it *did* matter. He'd spent his entire life searching. He'd apprenticed to a dozen different professions. He'd fought in revolts, sailed two seas. All the while searching, searching for something he hadn't been able to define.

He'd found it when he'd come to the Black Tower.

He pushed through the fear. Shadows be *burned}.* He seized *saidin* again, the Power flooding him. He straightened up, going eye-to-eye with Coteren.

The larger man smiled and seized the One Power as well. Mezar joined him, and in the middle of the room, Welyn stood. Nalaam was whispering to himself in worry, eyes darting back and forth. Canler seized *saidin* and looked resigned.

Everything Androl could hold—all of the One Power he could muster—flooded into him. It was minuscule compared to the others. He was the weakest man in the room; the newest of recruits could manage more than he could.

"Are you going to make a go of it, then?" Coteren asked softly. "I asked them to leave you, because I knew you'd try it eventually. I wanted the satisfaction, pageboy. Come on. Strike. Let's see it."

Androl reached out, trying to do the one thing he could do, form a gateway. To him, this was something beyond weaves. It was just him and the Power, something intimate, something *instinctive.*

Trying to make a gateway now felt like trying to scramble up a hundred-foot glass wall with only his fingernails to give him purchase. He leaped, scrambled, *tried.* Nothing happened. He felt so close: if he could just push a little harder, he could…

The shadows lengthened. The panic rose in him again. Teeth gritted, Androl reached to his collar and ripped the pin free. He dropped it on the floorboards before Coteren with a clink. Nobody in the room spoke.

Then, burying his shame under a mountain of determination, he released the One Power and pushed past Mezar into the night. Nalaam, Canler and Pevara followed with anxious steps.

The rain washed over Androl. He felt the loss of that pin as he might have felt the loss of a hand.

"Androl…" Nalaam said. "I'm sorry."

Thunder rumbled. They splashed through muddy puddles on the unpaved street. "It doesn't matter," Androl said.

"Maybe we should have fought," Nalaam said. "Some of the lads in there would have supported us; they're not all in his pocket. Once, Father and I, we fought down six Darkhounds—Light upon my grave, we did. If we survived that, we can deal with a few Asha'man dogs."

"We'd have been slaughtered," Androl said.

"But—"

"We'd have been *slaughtered*!" Androl said. "We don't let them pick the battlefield, Nalaam."

"But there will be a battle?" Canler asked, catching up to Androl on the other side.

"They have Logain," Androl said. "They wouldn't make the promises they're making unless they did. Everything dies—our rebellion, our chances at a unified Black Tower—if we lose him."

"So . . "

"So we're going to rescue him," Androl said, continuing forward. "Tonight."

Rand worked by the soft, steady light of a *saidin* globe. Before Dragonmount, he'd begun avoiding this kind of common use of the One Power. Seizing it had made him sick, and using it had revolted him more and more.

That had changed. *Saidin* was part of him, and he needed to fear it no longer, now that the taint was gone. More importantly, he had to stop thinking of it—and of himself—as merely a weapon.

He would work by globes of light whenever he could. He intended to go to Flinn to learn Healing. He had little skill in it, but a little skill could save the life of someone wounded. All too often, Rand had used this wonder—this gift—only to destroy or kill. Was it any wonder that people looked upon him with fear? What would Tam say?

I guess I could ask him, Rand thought idly as he made a notation to himself on a piece of paper. It was still hard to get used to the idea of Tam being there, just one camp over. Rand had dined with him earlier. It had been awkward, but no more so than expected for a king inviting his father from a rural village to "dine." They had laughed about it, which had made him feel much better.

Rand had let Tam return to Perrin's camp rather than seeing him given honors and wealth. Tam didn't want to be hailed as the Dragon Reborn's father. He wanted to be what he'd always been—Tam al'Thor, a solid, dependable man by anyone's measure, but not a lord.

Rand went back to the document in front of him. Clerks in Tear had advised him on the proper language, but he had done the actual writing; he hadn't trusted any other hand—or any other eyes—with this document.

Was he being too careful? What his enemies could not anticipate, they could not work against. He had grown too distrustful after Semirhage had nearly captured him. He recognized this. However, he'd been holding secrets close to him for so long, it was difficult to let them out.

He started at the top of the document, rereading. Once, Tam had sent Rand to examine a fence for weak spots. Rand had done so, but when he'd returned, Tam had sent him on the same duty again.

It hadn't been until the third pass that Rand had found the loose post that needed replacing. He still didn't know if Tam had known about the post, or if his father had just been being his careful self.

This document was far more important than a fence. Rand would look it over a dozen more times this night, searching for problems he had not foreseen.

Unfortunately, it was hard to concentrate. The women were up to something. He could feel them through the balls of emotion in the back of his mind. There were four of those—Alanna was still there, somewhere to the north. The other three had been near to one another all night; now they'd made their way almost to his tent. What *were* they up to? It—

Wait. One of them had split off from the others. She was nearly here. Aviendha?

Rand stood up, walking to the front of his tent and throwing back the flaps.

She froze in place just outside, as if she'd been intending to sneak into his tent. She raised her chin, meeting his eyes.

Suddenly, shouts rose in the night. For the first time, he noticed that his guards were not in attendance. However, the Maidens made camp near his tent, and they appeared to be shouting at him. Not with joy, as he'd expected. Insults. Terrible ones. Several were screaming about what they'd do to certain parts of his body when they caught him.

"What is this?" he murmured.

"They don't mean it," Aviendha said. "It is a symbol to them of you taking me away from their ranks—but I have already left their ranks to join the Wise Ones. It is a… thing of the Maidens. It is actually a sign of respect. If they did not like you, they would not act this way.”

Aiel. “Wait,” he said. “How have I taken you from them?”

Aviendha looked him in the eyes, but color rose in her cheeks. Aviendha? Blushing? That was unexpected.

“You should understand already,” she said. “If you’d paid attention to what I told you about us…”

“Unfortunately, you had a complete woolhead of a student.”

“It is fortunate for him that I have decided to extend my training.” She took a step closer. “There are many things I still need to teach.” Her blush deepened.

Light. She was beautiful. But so was Elayne… and so was Min… and…

He was a fool. A Light-blinded fool.

‘Aviendha,” he said. “I love you, I truly do. But that’s a problem, burn it! I love all *three* of you. I don’t think I could accept this and choose—” Suddenly, she was laughing. “You *are* a fool, aren’t you, Rand al’Thor?

Often. But what—”

“We are first-sisters, Rand al’Thor, Elayne and I. When we get to know her better, Min will join us. We three will share in all things.”

First-sisters? He should have suspected, following that odd bonding. He raised a hand to his head. *We* will *share you*, they had said to him.

Leaving four bonded women to their pains was bad enough, but three bonded women who loved him? Light, he did not want to bring them pain!

“They say you have changed,” Aviendha said. “So many have spoken of it in the short time since my return that almost, I grow weary of hearing about you. Well, your face may be calm, but your emotions are not. Is this so terrible a thing to consider, being with the three of us?”

“I want it, Aviendha. I should hide myself because I do. But the pain…

You have embraced it, have you not?”

“It is not my pain I fear. It is yours.”

“Are we so weak, then, that we cannot bear what you can?”

That look in her eyes was unnerving.

“Of course not,” Rand said. “But how can I hope for pain in those I love?

The pain is ours to accept,” she said, raising her chin. “Rand al’Thor, your decision is simple, though you strive to make it difficult. Choose yes or no. Be warned; it is all three of us, or none of us. We will not let you come between us.”

He hesitated, then—feeling a complete lecher—he kissed her. Behind him, Maidens he hadn't realized were watching began to yell louder insults, though he could now hear an incongruous joy to them. He pulled back from the kiss, then reached out, cupping the side of Aviendha's face with his hand. "You're bloody fools. All three of you."

"Then it is well. We are your equals. You should know that I am a Wise One now."

"Then perhaps we are not equals," Rand said, "for I've only just begun to understand how little wisdom I possess."

Aviendha sniffed. "Enough talk. You will bed me now."

"Light!" he said. "A little forward, aren't you? Is that the Aiel way of doing things?"

"No," she said, blushing again. "I just ... I am not very skilled with this."

"You three decided this, didn't you? Which of you came to me?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

"I'm never going to get to choose, am I?"

She shook her head.

He laughed and pulled her close. She was stiff, initially, but then melted against him. "So, do I go fight them first?" He nodded toward the Maidens.

"That is only for the wedding, if we decide you are worth marriage, fool man. And it would be our families, not members of our society. You really did ignore your lessons, didn't you?"

He looked down at her. "Well, I'm glad there's no fighting to do. I'm not sure how much time we have, and I was hoping to get some sleep tonight. Still…" He trailed off at the look in her eyes. "I'm… not getting any sleep, am I?"

She shook her head.

"Ah, well. At least I don't have to worry about you freezing to death this time."

"Yes. But it may happen that I die of boredom, Rand al'Thor, if you do not stop rambling."

She took him by the arm and gently, but firmly, pulled him back into his tent—the calls of the Maidens growing louder, more insulting and more exuberant all at the same time.

“I suspect the reason is some kind of *ter’angreal,*” Pevara said. She crouched with Androl in the back room of one of the Black Tower’s general storehouses, and she did not find the position terribly comfortable. The room smelled of dust, grain and wood. Most buildings in the Black Tower were new, and this was no exception, the cedar boards still fresh.

“You know of a *ter’angreal* that could prevent gateways?” Androl asked.

“Not specifically, no,” Pevara replied, shifting to a better position. “But it is generally accepted that what we know of *ter’angreal* comprises only the smallest portion of what was once known. There must be thousands of different types of *ter’angreal,* and if Taim is a Darkfriend, he has access to the Forsaken—who could likely explain to him the use and construction of things we can only dream about.”

“So we need to find this *ter’angreal,*” Androl said. “Block it, or at least figure out how it functions.”

“And escape?” Pevara asked. “Haven’t you already determined that leaving would be a poor choice?”

“Well… yes,” Androl admitted.

She concentrated, and could catch glimmers of what he was thinking. She’d heard that the Warder bond allowed an empathic connection. This seemed deeper. He was… yes, he *really* wished he could make gateways. He felt disarmed without them.

“It’s my Talent,” he said begrudgingly. He knew she’d sift out the reason eventually. “I can make gateways. At least, I could.”

“Really? With your level of strength in the One Power?”

“Or lack of it?” he asked. She could sense a little of what he was thinking. Though he accepted his weakness, he worried that it made him unfit to lead. A curious mix of self-confidence and self-consciousness.

“Yes,” he continued. “Traveling requires great strength in the One Power, but I can make large gateways. Before this all went wrong, the largest I ever made was a gateway thirty feet across.”

Pevara blinked. “Surely you’re exaggerating.”

“I’d show you, if I could ” He seemed completely honest. Either he was telling the truth, or his belief was due to his madness. She remained quiet, uncertain how to approach that.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I know that there are… things wrong with me. With most of us. You can ask the others about my gateways. There’s a reason Coteren calls me pageboy. It's because the only thing I'm good at is delivering people from one place to another."

"That's a remarkable Talent, Androl. I'm certain the Tower would *love* to study it. I wonder how many people were born with it, but never knew, because the weaves for Traveling were unknown?"

"I'm not going to the White Tower, Pevara," he said, putting an emphasis on the *White.*

She changed the topic. "You long for Traveling, yet you don't want to leave the Black Tower. So what does this *ter'angreal* matter?"

"Gateways would be… useful," Androl said.

He thought something, but she couldn't catch hold of it. A quick flash of images and impressions.

"But if were not going anywhere…" she protested.

"You'd be surprised," he said, raising his head to peer out over the windowsill at the alleyway. It was drizzling outside; the rain had finally let up. The sky was still dark, though. Dawn wouldn't come for a few hours yet. "I've been… experimenting. Trying a few things I don't think anyone else has ever tried."

"I doubt they are things that haven't *ever* been tried," she said. "The Forsaken had access to the knowledge of Ages."

"You really think one might be involved here?"

"Why not?" she asked. "If you were preparing for the Last Battle and wanted to make certain your enemies couldn't resist you, would you let a crop of channelers train together, teach one another and become strong?

Yes," he said softly. "I would, and then I'd steal them."

Pevara closed her mouth. That was probably right. Talking of the Forsaken troubled Androl; she could feel his thoughts, clearer than before.

This bond was unnatural. She needed to be rid of it. After that, she wouldn't mind having him properly bonded to her.

"I will *not* take responsibility for this situation, Pevara," Androl said, again looking out. "You bonded me first."

"After you betrayed the trust I gave you by offering a circle."

"I didn't hurt you. What did you *expect* to happen? Wasn't the purpose of a circle to allow us to join our powers?"

"This argument is pointless."

"You only say that because you're losing." He said it calmly, and he felt calm as well. She was coming to realize that Androl was a difficult man to rile.

"I say it because it's true," she said. "Do you disagree?"

She felt his amusement. He saw how she took control of the conversation. And… beside his amusement, he actually seemed impressed. He was thinking that he needed to learn to do what she did.

The inner door to the room creaked open, and Leish peered in. She was a white-haired woman, round and pleasant, an odd match for the surly Asha'man Canler, to whom she was married. She nodded to Pevara, indicating that half an hour had passed, then shut the door. Canler had reportedly bonded the woman, making her some kind of. . . what? Female Warder?

Everything was backward with these men. Pevara supposed she could see the reason for bonding one's spouse, if only so that each could have the comfort of knowing where the other was, but it felt wrong to use the bond in such a mundane way. This was a thing for Aes Sedai and Warders, not wives and husbands.

Androl regarded her, obviously trying to figure out what she was thinking—though these thoughts were complex enough to give him trouble. Such an odd man, this Androl Genhald. How did he so fully mix determination and diffidence, like two threads woven together? He did what needed to be done, all the while worrying that he shouldn't be the one doing it.

"I don't understand myself either," he said.

He was also *infuriating*. How had he grown so good at understanding what she was thinking? She still had to fish to figure out his thoughts.

"Can you think that again?" he asked. "I didn't catch it."

"Idiot," Pevara muttered.

Androl smiled, then peeked over the windowsill again.

"It's not time," Pevara said.

"You're sure?"

"Yes," she said. "And if you keep peeking, you might scare him off when he actually comes."

Androl reluctantly crouched down again.

"Now," Pevara said. "When he comes, you have to let me take the lead."

"We should link."

"No." She would *not* put herself in his hands again. Not after what had happened last time. She shivered, and Androl glanced at her.

“There are very good reasons,” she said, “for not linking. I don’t mean to insult you, Androl, but your ability isn’t great enough to make the trade worthwhile. Better that there be two of us. You must accept this. On a battlefield, which would you rather have? One soldier? Or two—with one being only slightly less skilled—that you can send on different tasks and duties?”

He thought about it, then sighed. “All right, fine. You talk sense, this time.”

“I always talk sense,” she said, rising. “It’s time. Be ready.”

The two of them moved to either side of the doorway that led out into the alley. It stood open a crack by intention, the sturdy lock on the outside left hanging as if someone had forgotten to close it.

They waited silently, and Pevara began to worry that her calculations had been off. Androl would have a good laugh about that, and—

The door pushed open the rest of the way. Dobser poked his head in, lured by Evin’s offhanded comment that he’d nicked a bottle of wine from the back room after finding that Leish had forgotten to lock the door. According to Androl, Dobser was a known drunkard, and Taim had beaten him senseless more than once for getting into the wine.

She could feel Androl’s reaction to the man. Sadness. Deep, crushing sadness. Dobser had the darkness behind his eyes.

Pevara struck quickly, tying Dobser in Air and slamming a shield into place between the unsuspecting man and the Source. Androl hefted a cudgel, but it wasn’t needed. Dobser grew wide-eyed as he was hoisted into the air; Pevara put her hands behind her back, regarding him critically.

“Are you certain about this?” Androl asked softly.

“Too late now, regardless,” Pevara replied, tying off the weaves of Air.

The accounts *seem* to agree. The more dedicated a person was to the Light before being taken, the more dedicated they 11 be to the Shadow after falling. And so . . ”

And so this man, who had always been rather lukewarm, *should* be easier to break, bribe or convert than others. That was important, as Taim’s lackeys would likely realize what had happened as soon as—

“Dobser?” a voice asked. Two figures darkened the doorway. “Do you have the wine? No need to watch the front; the woman isn’t—”

Welyn and another of Taim’s favored, Leems, stood in the doorway.

Pevara reacted immediately, throwing weaves at the two men while forming a thread of Spirit. They rebuffed her attempts at shielding them—it was tough to get a shield between the Source and a person holding the One Power—but her gags snapped into place, stopping their yells.

She felt Air wrapping around her, a shield trying to come between her and the Source. She lashed out with Spirit, slicing down the weaves by guessing where they would be.

Leems stumbled back, looking surprised as his weaves vanished. Pevara threw herself forward, weaving another shield and smashing it between him and the Source as she slammed her body into him, throwing him back against the wall. The distraction worked, and her shield cut him off from the One Power.

She flung a second shield at Welyn, but he hit her with his own threads of Air. They hurled her backward across the room. She wove Air as she crashed into the wall, grunting. Her vision swam, but she kept hold of that single thread of Air and by instinct, sweeping it forward, grabbed Welyn's foot as he tried to run out of the building.

She felt the ground tremble from someone falling. He'd tripped, hadn't he? Dizzy, she couldn't see straight.

She sat up, aching all over, but clung to the threads of Air she'd woven as gags. Let those go, and Taim's men would be able to scream. If they did that, she died. They all died. Or worse.

She blinked the tears of pain from her eyes to find Androl standing over the two Asha'man, cudgel in his hand. He'd knocked them both out, it appeared, not trusting in shields he couldn't see. Good thing, too, as her second shield hadn't gotten into place. She set it now.

Dobser still hung where she'd put him, his eyes wider now. Androl looked at Pevara. "Light!" he said. "Pevara, that was incredible. You brought down two Asha'man, practically by yourself!"

She smiled in satisfaction and woozily took Androl's hand, letting him help her to her feet. "What did you think the Red Ajah does with its time, Androl? Sit around and complain about men? We train to fight other channeled."

She felt Androl's respect as he busied himself, pulling Welyn into the building and shutting the door, then checking at the windows to make certain they hadn't been seen. He drew the shades quickly, then channeled to make a light.

Pevara took a breath, then raised a hand and steadied herself against the wall.

Androl looked up sharply. “We need to take you to one of the others for Healing.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Just took a thump to the head and it has the room shaking. It will wear off.”

“Let me see,” Androl said, walking over—his light hovering beside him. Pevara allowed him to putter about for a moment, checking her eyes, feeling her head for lumps. He moved his light closer to her eyes. “Does it hurt to look at this?”

“Yes,” she admitted, glancing away.

“Nausea?”

“Slight.”

He grunted, then took a handkerchief out of his pocket and poured some water on it from his flask. He adopted a look of concentration, and his light winked out. The handkerchief crackled softly, and when he handed it to her, it was frozen. “Hold this to the wound,” he said. “Tell me if you start to feel drowsy. It could grow worse if you fall asleep.”

“Are you worried for me?” she asked, amused, doing as he said.

“Just… what was it you told me earlier? Keeping watch over our assets?

I’m sure,” she said, pressing the iced bandanna to her head. “So you know field medicine as well?”

“I apprenticed with a town’s Wise Woman once,” he said absently as he knelt to bind the fallen men. Pevara was glad to release the weaves of Air on them, though she did keep the shields up.

“A Wise Woman took on a *male* apprentice?”

“Not at first,” Androl said. “It’s ... a long story.”

“Excellent; a long story will keep me from falling asleep until the others come for us.” Emarin and the others had been instructed to go and be seen, establishing an alibi for the group, in case Dobser’s disappearance was noted.

Androl eyed her, replacing his light. Then he shrugged, continuing his work. “It started when I lost a friend to the fevers during a silverpike run out of Mayene. When I came back to the mainland, I started thinking that we could have saved Sayer if any of us had known what to do. So I went looking for someone who could teach me . . ”

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CHAPTER 4

Advantages to a Bond

“And that was the end of it,” Pevara said, sitting against the wall.

Androl could feel her emotions. They sat in the storeroom where they’d fought Taim’s men, waiting for Emarin—who claimed he could make Dobser talk. Androl himself had little skill in interrogation. The scent of grain had changed to a rancid stench. It spoiled suddenly, sometimes.

Pevara had grown quiet, both outside and in, as she’d spoken of the murder of her family by longtime friends.

“I still hate them,” she said. “I can think about my family without pain, but the Darkfriends ... I *hate* them. At least I have some vengeance, as the Dark One certainly didn’t defend them. They spent all their lives following him, hoping for a place in his new world, only to have the Last Battle come long after their deaths. I suppose the ones living now won’t be any better off. Once we win the Last Battle, he will have their souls. I hope their punishment is lengthy.”

“You’re so certain we will win?” Androl asked.

“Of course we will win. It’s not a question, Androl. We can’t afford to make it one.”

He nodded. “You’re right. Continue.”

“There’s no more to say. Odd, to tell the story after all these years. For a long while, I couldn’t speak of it.”

The room fell silent. Dobser hung in his bonds, facing the wall, his ears plugged by Pevara's weaves. The other two were still unconscious. Androl had hit them hard, and he intended to see that they didn’t awaken anytime soon.

Pevara had shielded them, but she couldn’t possibly maintain three shields at once if the men tried to break free. Aes Sedai usually used more than one sister to hold one man. Three would be impossible for any single channeler, strong or not. She could tie off those shields, but Taim had set the Asha’man at practicing how to escape a tied-off shield.

Yes, best to make certain the other two didn't wake. Useful though it would be just to cut their throats, he didn't have the stomach for it. Instead he sent a tiny thread of Spirit and Air to touch each of their eyelids. He had to use a single weave, and a weak one, but he managed to touch all of their eyes. If the lids cracked a tiny bit, he'd know. That would have to be enough.

Pevara was still thinking about her family. She had been telling the truth; she did hate the Darkfriends. All of them. It was a measured hate, not out of control, but it was still strong after all of these years.

He would not have suspected that in this woman who seemed so often to smile. He could sense that she hurt. And, oddly, that she felt… lonely.

"My father killed himself," Androl said, without really intending to.

She looked at him.

"My mother pretended it was an accident for years," Androl continued. "He did it out in the woods, leaped from a cliff. He'd sat down with her the night before and explained what he was going to do."

"She didn't try to stop him?" Pevara asked, aghast.

"No," Androl said. "Only a few years before she found the mother's last embrace, I was able to pry some answers out of her. She was frightened of him. That was shocking to me; he'd always been so gentle. What had changed, in those last few years, to make her fear him?" Androl turned to Pevara. "She said that he saw things in the shadows. That he'd started to go mad."

"Ah…"

"You asked me why I came to the Black Tower. You wanted to know why I *asked* to be tested. Well this thing that I am, it answers a question for me. It tells me who my father was, and why he did what he felt he needed to do.

"I can see the signs now. Our business did too well. Father could find quarries of stone and veins of metal when nobody else could. Men hired him to find valuable deposits for them. He was the best. Uncannily good. I could… see it in him at the end, Pevara. I was only ten, but I remember.

"The fear in his eyes. I *know* that fear now." He hesitated. "My father jumped off that cliff to save his family's lives."

"I'm sorry," Pevara said.

"Knowing what I am, what *he* was, helps."

It had started raining again, fat drops hitting the window like pebbles. The door into the shop opened, and Emarin, finally, peered in. He saw

Dobser, hanging there, and looked relieved. Then he saw the other two and started. “What have you two done?”

“What needed to be done,” Androl said, standing. “What took you so long?”

“I nearly started another confrontation with Coteren,” Emarin said, still staring at the two captive Asha’man. “I think our time is short, Androl. We didn’t let them goad us, but Coteren seemed annoyed—more so than normal. I don’t think they’re going to tolerate us much longer.”

“Well, these captives put us on a countdown anyway,” Pevara said, moving Dobser over to make room for Emarin. “You really think you can make this man talk? I’ve tried interrogating Darkfriends before. They can be tough to crack.”

“Ah,” Emarin said, “but this is *not* a Darkfriend. This is Dobser.”

“I don’t think it’s really him,” Androl said, studying the man floating in his bonds. “I can’t accept that someone can be *made* to serve the Dark One.” He could sense Pevara’s disagreement; she really did think that was how it happened. Anyone who could channel could be Turned, she’d explained. The old texts spoke of it.

The idea made Androl want to sick up. Forcing someone to be evil? That shouldn’t be possible. Fate moved people about, put them in terrible positions, cost them their lives, sometimes their sanity. But the choice to serve the Dark One or the Light… surely that one choice could not be taken from a person.

The shadow he saw behind Dobser’s eyes was enough proof for Androl. The man he’d known was gone, killed, and something else—something evil—had been put into his body. A new soul. It had to be that.

“Whatever he is,” Pevara said, “I’m still skeptical that you can force him to speak.”

“The best persuasions,” Emarin said, hands clasped behind his back, “are those that aren’t forced. Pevara Sedai, if you would be so kind as to remove the weaves blocking his ears so that he can start to hear—but only remove them in the most minor way, as if the weave has been tied off and is failing. I want him to overhear what I’m about to say.”

She complied. At least, Androl assumed she did. Being double-bonded didn’t mean they could see one another’s weaves. He could feel her anxiety, however. She was thinking of Darkfriends she’d interrogated, was wishing for… something. A tool she’d used against them?

“I do think we can hide at my estates,” Emarin said in a haughty voice.

Androl blinked. The man held himself taller, more proudly, more… authoritatively. His voice became powerful, dismissive. Just like that, he had become a nobleman.

“No one will think to look for us there,” Emarin continued. “I will accept you as my associates, and the lesser among us—young Evin, for instance—can enter my employ as servants. If we play our hand correctly, we can build up a rival Black Tower.”

“I… don’t know how wise that would be,” Androl said, playing along.

“Silence,” Emarin said. “I will ask your opinion when it is required. Aes Sedai, the *only* way we will rival the White and Black Towers is if we create a place where male and female channelers work together. A… Gray Tower, if you will.”

“It is an interesting proposal.”

“It is the only thing that makes sense,” Emarin said, then turned to their captive. “He cannot hear what we say?”

“No,” Pevara said.

“Release him, then. I would speak to him.”

Pevara hesitantly did as instructed. Dobser dropped to the floor, barely catching himself. He stumbled for a moment, unsteady on his feet, then immediately glanced toward the exit.

Emarin reached behind his back, pulled something from his belt and tossed it to the floor. A small sack. It clinked as it hit. “Master Dobser,” Emarin said.

“What’s this?” Dobser asked, tentatively crouching down, taking the sack. He peeked into it, and his eyes widened noticeably.

“Payment,” Emarin said.

Dobser narrowed his eyes. “To do what?”

“You mistake me, Master Dobser,” Emarin said. “I’m not asking you to do anything, I’m paying you in apology. I sent Androl here to request your aid, and he seems to have… overstepped the bounds of his instructions.

“I merely wished to speak with you. I did not intend to see you wrapped up in Air and tormented.”

Dobser glanced about himself, suspicious. “Where’d you find money like this, Emarin? What makes you think you can start giving orders? You’re just a soldier…” He looked at the pouch’s contents again.

“I see that we understand each other,” Emarin said, smiling. “You’ll maintain my front for me, then?”

“I…“ Dobser frowned. He looked at Welyn and Leems, lying unconscious on the floor.

“Yes,” Emarin said. “That *is* going to be a problem, isn’t it? You don’t suppose we could just give Androl to Taim and blame him for this?”

“Androl?“ Dobser said, snorting. “The pageboy? Taking down two Ashaman? Nobody would believe it. Nobody.”

“A valid point, Master Dobser,” Emarin said.

“Just give em the Aes Sedai,” Dobser said, jerking a finger toward her.

“Alas, I have need of her. A mess, this is. A pure mess.”

“Well,” Dobser said, “maybe I could talk to the M’Hael for you. You know, straighten it out.”

“That would be much appreciated,” Emarin said, taking a chair from beside the wall and setting it down, then placing another before it. He sat, waving for Dobser to sit down. “Androl, make yourself useful. Find something for Master Dobser and me to drink. Tea. You like sugar?”

“No,” Dobser said. “Actually, I heard there was wine round here somewhere…”

“Wine, Androl,” Emarin said, snapping his fingers.

Well, Androl thought, *best to play the part.* He bowed, shooting Dobser a calculated glare, then fetched some cups and wine from the storeroom. When he returned, Dobser and Emarin were chatting amicably.

“I understand,” Emarin said. “I have had *such* trouble finding proper help inside the Black Tower. You see, the need to preserve my identity is *imperative*.”

“I can see that, m’Lord,” Dobser said. “Why, if anyone else knew a High Lord of Tear was among our ranks, there’d be no end to the boot licking. That I can tell you! And the M’Hael, well, he wouldn’t like someone with so much authority being here. No, not at all!”

“You see why I had to maintain my distance,” Emarin explained, holding out a hand and accepting a cup of wine as Androl poured it.

A High Lord of Tear? Androl thought, amused. Dobser seemed to be drinking it in as he did strong liquor.

“And we all thought you were fawning over Logain because you was stupid!” Dobser said.

"Alas, the lot I've been given. Taim would see through me in a moment if I were to spend too much time around him. So I was forced to go with Logain. He and that Dragon fellow, both are obviously farmers and wouldn't recognize a highborn man."

"I'll say, m'Lord," Dobser said, "I was suspicious."

"As I thought," Emarin said, taking a sip of the wine. "To prove it's not poisoned," he explained, before passing the cup to Dobser.

" 'S all right, m'Lord," Dobser said. "I trust you." He gulped down the wine. "If you can't trust a High Lord himself, who can you trust, right?"

"Quite right," Emarin said.

"I can tell you this," Dobser said, holding out his cup and wagging it for Androl to refill, "you'll need to find a better way of keeping away from Taim. Following Logain won't work anymore."

Emarin took a long, contemplative sip from his cup of wine. "Taim has him. I see. I did guess it would be so. Welyn and the others showing up tells the tale."

"Yeah," Dobser said, letting Androl refill his cup again. "Logain is a strong one, though. Takes a lot of work to Turn a man like him. Willpower, you know? It will be a day or two to Turn him. Anyway, you might as well come out to Taim, explain what you're up to. He'll understand, and he keeps saying men are more useful to him if he doesn't have to Turn them. Don't know why. No choice but to Turn Logain, though. Awful process." Dobser shivered.

"I'll go and speak with him then, Master Dobser. Would you vouch for me, by chance? I'll ... see you paid for the effort."

"Sure, sure," Dobser said. "Why not?" He downed his wine, then lurched to his feet. "He'll be checking on Logain. Always does, this time of night."

"And that would be where?" Emarin said.

"The hidden rooms," Dobser said. "In the foundations we're building. You know the eastern section, where the collapse made all of that extra digging? That was no collapse, just an excuse for covering up extra work being done. And…" Dobser hesitated.

"And that's enough," Pevara said, tying the man up in air again and stopping his ears. She folded her arms, looking at Emarin. "I'm impressed." Emarin spread his hands apart in a gesture of humility. "I have always had a talent for making men feel at ease. In truth, I didn't suggest picking Dobser because I thought he’d be easy to bribe. I picked him because of his… well, understated powers of cognitive expression.”

“Turning someone to the Shadow doesn’t make him any less stupid,” Androl said. “But if you could do this, why did we have to jump him in the first place?”

“It’s a matter of controlling the situation, Androl,” Emarin said. “A man like Dobser mustn’t be confronted in his element, surrounded by friends with more wits than he. We had to scare him, make him writhe, then offer him a way to wiggle out.” Emarin hesitated, glancing at Dobser. “Besides, I don’t think we wanted to risk him going to Taim, which he very well might have done if I’d approached him in private without the threat of violence.”

“And now?” Pevara asked.

“Now,” Androl said, “we douse these three with something that will keep them sleeping until Bel Tine. We gather Nalaam, Canler, Evin and Jonneth. We wait for Taim to finish his inspection of Logain; we break in, rescue him and seize the Tower back from the Shadow.”

They stood in silence for a moment, the room lit only by the single, flickering lamp. Rain sprayed the window.

“Well,” Pevara said, “so long as it’s not a *difficult* task you’re proposing, Androl…”

Rand opened his eyes to the dream, somewhat surprised to find that he had fallen asleep. Aviendha had finally let him doze. In truth, she was probably letting herself doze as well. She’d seemed as tired as he had. More, perhaps.

He climbed to his feet in the meadow of dead grass. He had been able to sense her concern not only through the bond but in the way she had held him. Aviendha was a fighter, a warrior, but even a warrior needed something to hold on to once in a while. Light knew that he did.

He looked about. This didn't feel like *Tel’aran’rhiod*', not completely. The dead field extended into the distance on all sides, presumably into infinity. This wasn't the true World of Dreams; it was a dreamshard, a world created by a powerful Dreamer or dreamwalker.

Rand began walking, feet crunching on dead leaves, though there were no trees. He could probably have sent himself back to his own dreams; though he had never been as good as many of the Forsaken at walking dreams, he could manage that much. Curiosity drove him forward.

I shouldn't be here, he thought. *I set wards.* How had he come to this place and who had created it? He had a suspicion. There was one person who had often made use of dreamshards.

Rand felt a presence nearby. He continued walking, not turning, but knew that someone was now walking beside him.

"Elan," Rand said.

"Lews Therin." Elan still wore his newest body, the tall, handsome man who wore red and black. "It dies, and the dust soon will rule. The dust… then nothing."

"How did you pass my wards?"

"I don't know," Moridin said. "I knew that if I created this place, you would join me in it. You cant keep away from me. The Pattern won't allow it. We are drawn together, you and I. Time after time after time. Two ships moored on the same beach, beating against one another with each new tide."

"Poetic," Rand said. "You've finally let Mierin off her leash, I've seen." Moridin stopped, and Rand paused, looking at him. The man's rage seemed to come off him in waves of heat.

"She came to you?" Moridin demanded.

Rand said nothing.

"Do not *pretend* that you knew she still lived. You didn't know, you couldn't have known."

Rand kept still. His emotions regarding Lanfear—or whatever she called herself now—were complicated. Lews Therin had despised her, but Rand had known her primarily as Selene, and had been fond of her—until, at least, she tried to kill Egwene and Aviendha.

Thinking of her made him think of Moiraine, made him *hope* for things he shouldn't hope for.

If Lanfear still lives… might Moiraine as well?

He faced Moridin with calm confidence. "Loosing her is pointless, now," Rand said. "She no longer holds any power over me."

"Yes," Moridin said. "I believe you. She does not, but I do think she still harbors something of a… grievance with the woman you chose. What is her name again? The one who calls herself Aiel but carries weapons?"

Rand did not rise to the attempt to rile him.

"Mierin hates you now, anyway," Moridin continued. "I think she blames you for what happened to her. You should call her Cyndane. She has been forbidden to use the name she took upon herself.”

“Cyndane…” Rand said, trying out the word. “ ‘Last Chance’? Your master has gained humor, I see.”

“It was not meant to be humorous,” Moridin said.

“No, I suppose that it was not.” Rand looked at the endless landscape of dead grass and leaves. “It is hard to think that I was so afraid of you during those early days. Did you invade my dreams then, or bring me into one of these dreamshards? I was never able to figure it out.”

Moridin said nothing.

“I remember one time…” Rand said. “Sitting up by the fire, surrounded by nightmares that felt like *Tel’aran’rhiod*. You would not have been able to pull someone fully into the World of Dreams, yet I’m no dream-walker, able to enter on my own.”

Moridin, like many of the Forsaken, had usually entered *Tel’aran’rhiod* in the flesh, which was dangerous. Some said that entering in the flesh was an evil thing, that it lost you a part of your humanity. It also made you more powerful.

Moridin gave no clue as to what had happened on that night. Rand remembered those days faintly, traveling toward Tear. He remembered visions in the night, visions of his friends or family that would try to kill him. Moridin… Ishamael… had been pulling him against his will into dreams intersecting *Tel’aran’rhiod.*

“You were mad, during those days,” Rand said softly, looking into Moridin’s eyes. He could almost see the fires burning there. “You’re still mad, aren't you? You just have it contained. No one could serve him without being at least a little mad.”

Moridin stepped forward. “Taunt as you wish, Lews Therin. The ending dawns. All will be given to the great suffocation of the Shadow, to be stretched, ripped, *strangled*.”

Rand took a step forward as well, right up to Moridin. They were the same height. “You hate yourself,” Rand whispered. “I can *feel* it in you, Elan. Once you served him for power; now you do it because his victory—and an end to all things—is the only release you’ll ever know. You’d rather not exist than continue to be you. You must know that he will not release you. Not ever. Not you.”

Moridin sneered. “He’ll let me kill you before this ends, Lews Therin. You, and the golden-haired one, and the Aiel woman, and the little darkhaired—”

“You act as if this is a contest between you and me, Elan,” Rand interrupted.

Moridin laughed, throwing his head back. “Of course it is! Haven’t you seen that *yet?* By the blood falls, Lews Therin! It is about us two. Just as in Ages past, over and over, we fight one another. You and I.”

“No,” Rand said. “Not this time. I’m done with you. I have a greater battle to fight.”

“Don’t try to—”

Sunlight exploded through the clouds above. There was often no sunlight in the World of Dreams, but now it bathed the area around Rand.

Moridin stumbled back. He looked up at the light, then gazed at Rand and narrowed his eyes. “Don’t think… don’t think I will believe your simple tricks, Lews Therin. Weiramon was shaken by what you did to him, but it’s not such a difficult thing, holding *saidin* and listening for people’s heartbeats to speed up.”

Rand exerted his will. The crackling dead leaves began to transform at his feet, turning green again, and shoots of grass broke through the leaves.

The green spread from him like spilled paint, and clouds above boiled away.

Moridin’s eyes opened wider. He stumbled, staring at the sky as the clouds retreated… Rand could feel his shock. This was *Moridin’s* dreamshard.

However, to draw another in, he had had to place it close to *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Those rules applied. There was something else, too, something about the connection between the two of them…

Rand strode forward, lifting his arms out to the sides. Grass sprouted in waves, red blossoms burst from the ground like a blush upon the land. The storm stilled, the dark clouds burned away by light.

“Tell your master!” Rand commanded. “Tell him this fight is not like the others. Tell him I’ve tired of minions, that I’m finished with his petty movement of pawns. Tell him that *I’m coming for HIM!”*

“This is wrong,” Moridin said, visibly shaken. “This isn’t . . ” He looked at Rand for a moment, standing beneath the blazing sun, then vanished.

Rand let out a deep breath. The grass died around him, the clouds sprang back, the sunlight faded. Though Moridin was gone, holding on to that transformation of the landscape had been difficult. Rand sagged, panting, recovering from the exertion.

Here, willing something to be true could make it so. If only things were that simple in the real world.

He closed his eyes and sent himself away, to sleep for the short time before he had to rise. Rise, and save the world. If he could.

Pevara crouched beside Androl in the rainy night. Her cloak was soaked completely through. She knew a couple of weaves that would have been useful for that, but she didn't dare channel. She and the others would be facing Turned Aes Sedai and women of the Black Ajah. They could sense it if she channeled.

"They're definitely guarding the area," Androl whispered. Ahead of them, the ground broke away into a large sequence of mazelike brickworks and trenches. These were the foundation rooms of what would eventually become the Black Tower proper. If Dobser was right, other rooms had been created within the foundation—hidden chambers, already complete, that would continue to be secret as the Tower itself was constructed.

A pair of Taim's Asha'man stood chatting nearby. Though they tried to appear nonchalant, the effect was spoiled by the weather. Who would *choose* to stand outside on a night like this one? Despite a warm brazier lighting them and a weave of Air to send the rain streaming away, their presence was suspicious.

Guards. Pevara tried sending the thought to Androl directly.

It worked. She could feel his surprise as the thought intruded onto his own.

Something returned, fuzzy. *We should take advantage.*

Yes, she sent back. The next thought was too complex, though, so she whispered it. "How have you never before noticed that he left the foundation guarded at night? If there really are secret rooms, then the work on them would be done at night as well."

"Taim set a curfew," Androl whispered. "He lets us ignore it only when convenient to him—such as for Welyn's return tonight. Besides, this area is dangerous, with those pits and trenches. It would be a good enough reason to set guards, except . . ."

“Except,” Pevara said, “Taim isn’t exactly the type to care if a child or two break their necks poking around.”

Androl nodded.

Pevara and Androl waited in the rain, counting their breaths, until three ribbons of fire flew from the night and struck the guards directly in their heads. The two Asha’man dropped like sacks of grain. Nalaam, Emarin and Jonneth had done their work perfectly. Quick channeling; with luck, it either wouldn’t be noticed or would be thought the work of Taim’s men on guard.

Light, Pevara thought. *Androl and the others really are weapons.* She hadn’t stopped to consider that Emarin and the others would lead with lethal attacks. It was completely outside her experience as an Aes Sedai. Aes Sedai didn’t even kill false Dragons if they could help it.

“Gentling kills,” Androl said, eyes forward. “Albeit slowly.”

Light. Yes, there might be advantages to their bond—but it was also blasted inconvenient. She would have to practice shielding her thoughts.

Emarin and the others came in from the darkness, joining Pevara and Androl at the brazier. Canler remained behind, with the other Two Rivers lads, ready to lead them from the Black Tower in an escape attempt if something went wrong tonight. It made sense to leave him, despite his protests. He had a family.

They dragged the corpses into the shadows, but left the brazier burning. Someone looking for the guards would see that the light was still there, but the night was so misty and rainy one would have to draw close to realize that its attendants had vanished.

Though he often complained that he didn’t know why the others followed him, Androl immediately took charge of this group, sending Nalaam and Jonneth to watch at the edge of the foundation. Jonneth carried his bow, unstrung in the wet night. They were hoping the rain would let up, and that he’d be able to use it when they couldn’t risk channeling.

Androl, Pevara and Emarin slid down one of the muddy slopes into the foundation pits that had been dug. Mud splashed over her as she landed, but she was already soaked, and the rain washed away the grime.

The foundation was made of stones built up to form walls between rooms and hallways; down here, this became a labyrinth, with a steady stream of rain falling from above. In the morning, the Asha’man soldiers would be set to drying out the foundation.

How do we find the entrance? Pevara sent.

Androl knelt, a very small globe of light hovering above his hand. Drops of rain passed through the light, looking like tiny meteorites for a moment as they flashed and vanished. He rested fingers in the pooling water on the ground.

He looked up, then pointed. “It runs this way,” he whispered. “It’s going somewhere. That is where we’ll find Taim.”

Emarin grunted appreciatively. Androl raised a hand, summoning Jonneth and Nalaam down into the foundation with them, then led the way, stepping softly.

You. Quietly. Move. Well, she sent.

Trained as scout, he sent back. *In woods. Mountains of Mist.*

How many jobs had he done in his life? She had worried about him. A life such as he had led could indicate a dissatisfaction with the world, an impatience. The way he spoke of the Black Tower, though… the passion with which he was willing to fight… that said something different. This wasn’t just about a loyalty to Logain. Yes, Androl and the others respected Logain, but to them, he represented something far greater. A place where men like them were accepted.

A life like Androl’s *could* indicate a man who would not commit or be satisfied, but it could also indicate something else: a man who searched. A man who knew that the life he wanted existed out there. He just had to find it.

“They teach you to analyze people like that in the White Tower?” Androl whispered to her as he stopped beside a doorway and moved his globe of light in, then waved the others to follow.

No, she sent back, trying to practice this method of communicating, to make her thoughts smoother. *Is something a woman picks up after her first century of life.*

He sent back tense amusement. They passed into a series of unfinished rooms, none of them roofed, before reaching a section of unworked earth. Some barrels here held pitch, but they had been shifted to the side and the boards they normally sat upon had been pulled away. A pit opened in the ground here. The water trailed over the lip of the pit and down into darkness. Androl knelt and listened, then nodded to the others before slipping down into it. His splash came a second later.

Pevara followed him, dropping only a few feet. The water was cold on her feet, but she was already soaked. Androl hunched, leading the way under an earthen overhang, then stood up on the other side. His little globe of light revealed a tunnel. A trench had been dug here to hold the rainwater. Pevara judged they'd been standing directly above this when they'd taken down the guards.

Dobser right, she sent as the others splashed down behind. *Taim building secret tunnels and chambers.*

They crossed the trench and continued on. A short distance down the tunnel, they reached an intersection where the earthen walls were shored up, like the shafts of a mine. The five of them gathered there, looking in one direction, then another. Two paths.

"That way slopes upward," Emarin whispered, pointing left. "Perhaps to another entrance into these tunnels?"

"We should probably move deeper," Nalaam said. "Don't you think?"

"Yes," Androl said, licking his finger and testing the air. "The wind is blowing right. We'll go that way first. Be careful. There will be other guards."

The group slipped further down into the tunnels. How long had Taim been working on this complex? It didn't seem terribly extensive—they didn't pass other branchings—but still, it was impressive.

Suddenly Androl stopped, and the others pulled to a halt. A grumbling voice echoed up the tunnel, too soft for them to make out the words, accompanied by a flickering light on the walls. Pevara embraced the Source and prepared weaves. If she channeled, would someone in the foundation notice? Androl was obviously hesitant as well; channeling above, to kill the guards, had been suspicious enough. If Taim's men down here sensed the One Power being used…

The figure was approaching, the light illuminating him.

A creak came from beside her, as Jonneth drew his restrung Two Rivers bow. There was barely room in the tunnel for it. He loosed with a snap, the air whistling. The grumbling cut off, and the light fell.

The group scrambled forward to find Coteren down on the ground, eyes staring up glassily, the arrow through his chest. His lantern burned fitfully on the ground beside him. Jonneth retrieved his arrow, then wiped it on the dead mans clothing. "*That's* why I still carry a bow, you bloody son of a goat."

“Here,” Emarin said, pointing at a thick door. “Coteren was guarding it.”

“Prepare yourselves,” Androl whispered, then shoved open the thick wooden door. Beyond, they found a line of crude cells built into the earthen wall—each one little more than a roofed cubbyhole burrowed into the earth with a door set in the opening. Pevara peeked in one, which was empty. The cubby didn’t have enough room for a man to stand up inside, and the room was unlit. Being locked in those cells would mean being trapped in blackness, squeezed into a space like a grave.

“Light!” Nalaam said. “Androl! He’s in here. It’s Logain!”

The others hurried to join him, and Androl picked the door’s lock with a surprisingly adept hand. They pulled open the cell door, and Logain rolled out with a groan. He looked horrible, covered in grime. Once, that curling dark hair and strong face might have made him handsome. He looked as weak as a beggar.

He coughed, then rose to his knees with Nalaam’s help. Androl knelt immediately, but not in reverence. He looked Logain in the eyes as Emarin gave the Asha’man leader his flask for a drink.

Well? Pevara asked.

It’s him, Androl thought, a wave of relief coming through the bond. *It’s still him.*

They’d have let him go if they’d Turned him, Pevara sent back, growing increasingly comfortable with this method of communicating.

Maybe. Unless this is a trap. “My Lord Logain.”

“Androl.” Logain’s voice was raspy. “Jonneth. Nalaam. And an Aes Sedai?” He inspected Pevara. For a man who had apparently suffered days, perhaps weeks, of incarceration, he looked remarkably lucid. “I remember you. What Ajah are you, woman?”

“Does it matter?” she replied.

“Greatly,” Logain said, trying to stand. He was too weak, and Nalaam had to support him. “How did you find me?”

“That is a story for once we are safe, my Lord,” Androl said. He peeked out the doorway. “Let’s move. We still have a difficult night ahead of us. I—”

Androl froze, then slammed the door.

“What is it?” Pevara asked.

“Channeling,” Jonneth said. “Powerful.”

Yells, muffled by the door and the dirt walls, sounded outside in the hallway.

"Someone found the guards," Emarin said. "My Lord Logain, can you fight?"

Logain tried to stand on his own, then sagged again. His face grew determined, but Pevara felt Androl's disappointment. Logain had been given forkroot; either that, or he was simply too tired to channel. Not surprising. Pevara had seen women in better shape than this who were too worn out to embrace the Source.

"Back!" Androl shouted, stepping to the side of the door—against the earthen wall. The door exploded in a weave of fire and destruction.

Pevara didn't wait for the debris to settle; she wove Fire and released a column of destruction down the corridor beyond. She knew she was facing Darkfriends, or worse. The Three Oaths did not hinder her here.

She heard shouts, but something deflected the fire. Immediately, a shield tried to slam between her and the Source. She fought it off, barely, and ducked to the side, breathing deeply.

"Whoever it is, they're strong," Pevara said.

A voice called orders distantly, echoing in the tunnels.

Jonneth knelt down beside her, bow out. "Light, that's Taim's voice!"

"We cannot stand here," Logain said. "Androl. A gateway."

"I'm trying," Androl said. "Light, I'm trying!"

"Bah," Nalaam set Logain down beside the wall. "I've been in tighter spots before!" He joined the others at the doorway, flinging weaves down the corridor. Blasts shook the side walls, and dirt rained down from the roof above.

Pevara jumped in front of the doorway, releasing a weave, then knelt down beside Androl. He stared ahead, not seeing, face a mask of concentration. She could feel determination and frustration pulsing through the bond. She took his hand.

"You can do it," she whispered.

The doorway erupted, and Jonneth fell back, arm burned. The ground trembled; the walls started to break apart.

Sweat dripped down the sides of Androl's face. He gritted his teeth, his face going red, eyes opening wide. Smoke poured through the doorway, making Emarin cough as Nalaam Healed Jonneth.

Androl yelled, and he neared the top of that wall in his mind. He was almost there! He could—

A weave *thumped* against the room, a ripple in the earth, and the strained roof finally gave out. Earth poured down atop them, and all went black.

* * *

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CHAPTER 5

To Require a Boon

Rand al'Thor awoke and drew in a deep breath. He slipped from the blankets in his tent, leaving Aviendha slumbering there, and threw on a robe. The air smelled wet.

He was reminded, in passing, of mornings during his youth, rising before dawn to milk the cow, which would need milking twice a day. Eyes closed, he remembered the sounds of Tam—already up—cutting new fence posts in the barn. Remembering the chilly air, stomping his feet into his boots, washing his face with water left to warm beside the stove.

On any morning, a farmer could open his door and look out on a world that was still new. Crisp frost. The first, tentative calls of birds. Sunlight breaking the horizon, like the morning yawn of the world.

Rand stepped up to the flaps of his tent and drew them back, nodding to Katerin, a short, golden-haired Maiden who was on guard. He looked out on a world that was far from new. This world was old and tired, like a peddler who had been to the Spine of the World and back on foot. Tents crowded the Field of Merrilor, cook fires trailing pillars of smoke toward the still-dark morning sky.

Everywhere, men worked. Soldiers oiled armor. Smiths sharpened spearheads. Women prepared feathers for fletching arrows. Breakfasts were served from meal wagons to men who should have slept better than they had. Everyone knew these were their last moments before the storm arrived.

Rand closed his eyes. He could *feel* it, the land itself, like a faint Warder bond. Beneath his feet, grubs crawled through the soil. The roots of the grasses continued to spread, ever so slowly, seeking nutrients. The skeletal trees were not dead, for water seeped through them. They slumbered. Bluebirds clustered in a nearby tree. They did not call out with the arrival of dawn. They huddled together, as if for warmth.

The land still lived. It lived like a man clinging to the edge of a cliff by his fingertips.

Rand opened his eyes. "Have my clerks returned from Tear?"

“Yes, Rand al’Thor,” said Katerin.

“Send word to the other rulers,” Rand said. “I will meet with them in one hour at the center of the field where I commanded no tents be placed.”

Katerin went off to relay his command, leaving three other Maidens nearby to guard. Rand let the tent flaps close in front of him and turned around, then jumped as he found Aviendha—as bare as the day she’d been born—standing in the tent.

“It is very difficult to sneak up on you, Rand al’Thor,” she announced with a smile. “The bond gives you too much of an advantage. I have to move very slowly, like a lizard at midnight, so that your sense of where I am does not change too quickly.”

“Light, Aviendha! Why do you need to sneak up on me in the first place?”

“For this,” she said, then jumped forward, snatching his head and kissing him, her body pressed against his.

He relaxed, letting the kiss linger. “Unsurprisingly,” he mumbled around her lips, “this is much more fun now that I don’t have to worry about freezing my bits off while doing it.”

Aviendha pulled back. “You should not speak of that event, Rand al’Thor.”

“But—”

“My *toh* is paid, and I am now first-sister to Elayne. Do not remind me of a shame that is forgotten.”

Shame? Why would she be ashamed of that when just now… He shook his head. He could hear the land breathing, could sense a beetle on a leaf half a league away, but sometimes he could not fathom Aiel. Or maybe it was just women.

In this case, it was probably both.

Aviendha hesitated beside the tent’s barrel of fresh water. “I suppose that we will not have time for a bath.”

“Oh, you like baths now?”

“I have accepted them as a part of life,” she said. “If I am going to live in the wetlands, then I will adopt some wetlander customs. When they are not foolish.” Her tone indicated that most of them were.

“What’s wrong?” Rand asked, stepping up to her.

“Wrong?”

“Something bothers you, Aviendha. I can see it in you, feel it in you.” She looked him over with a critical eye. Light, but she was beautiful. “You were much easier to manage before you received the ancient wisdom of your former self, Rand al’Thor.”

“I was?” he asked, smiling. “You didn’t act that way at the time.”

“That was when I was as a new child, inexperienced in Rand al’Thor’s boundless capacity to be frustrating.” She dipped her hands into the water and washed her face. “It is well; if I had known some of what was to come with you, I might have put on the white and never removed it.”

He smiled, then channeled, weaving Water and drawing the liquid from the barrel in a stream. Aviendha stepped back, watching with curiosity.

“You no longer seem bothered by the idea of a man channeling,” he noted as he fanned the water out into the air and heated it with a thread of Fire.

“There is no longer a reason to be bothered. If I were to be uncomfortable with you channeling, I would be behaving like a man refusing to forget a woman’s shame after her *toh* has been met.” She eyed him.

“I can’t imagine anyone being that crass,” he said, tossing aside his robe and stepping up to her. “Here. This is a relic from that ancient wisdom’ you apparently find so frustrating.”

He brought the water in, warmed perfectly, and shattered it into a thick misting spray that wove about them in a rush. Aviendha gasped, clutching his arm. She might be growing more comfortable with wetlander ways, but water still made her both uncomfortable and reverent.

Rand snatched some soap with Air and shaved it into part of the mix of water, sending a spinning whirl of bubbles around them, swirling up their bodies and pulling their hair into the air, twisting Aviendha’s about like a column before dropping it back lightly to her shoulders.

He used another wave of warm water to remove the soap, then pulled most of the wetness away, leaving them damp but not soaked. He dumped the water back into the barrel and, with a hint of reluctance, released *saidin.*

Aviendha was panting. “That… That was completely crackbrained and irresponsible.”

“Thank you,” he said, fetching a towel and tossing it to her. “You would consider most of what we did during the Age of Legends to be crackbrained and irresponsible. That was a different time, Aviendha. There were many more channelers, and we were trained from a young age. We didn’t need to know things like warfare, or how to kill. We had eliminated pain, hunger, suffering, war. Instead, we used the One Power for things that might seem common.”

“You’d only assumed that you’d eliminated war,” Aviendha said with a sniff. “You were wrong. Your ignorance left you weak.”

“It did. I can’t decide if I would have changed things, though. There were many good years. Good decades, good centuries. We believed we were living in paradise. Perhaps that was our downfall. We wanted our lives to be perfect, so we ignored imperfections. Problems were magnified through inattention, and war might have become inevitable if the Bore hadn’t ever been made.” He toweled himself dry.

“Rand,” Aviendha said, stepping up to him. “Today, I will require a boon.” She laid her hand on his arm. The skin of her hand was rough, callused from her days as a Maiden. Aviendha would never be a milk-softened lady like those from the courts of Cairhien and Tear. Rand liked that just fine. Hers were hands that had known work.

“What boon?” he asked. “I’m not certain I could deny you anything today, Aviendha.”

“I’m not yet certain what it will be.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You needn’t understand,” she said. “And you needn’t promise me you will agree. I felt I needed to give you warning, as one does not ambush a lover. My boon will require you to change your plans, perhaps in a drastic way, and it will be important.”

“All right…”

She nodded, as mystifying as ever, and began gathering up her clothing to dress for the day.

Egwene strode around a frozen pillar of glass in her dream. It almost looked like a column of light. What did it mean? She could not interpret it.

The vision changed, and she found a sphere. The world, she knew somehow. Cracking. Frantic, she tied it with cords, striving to hold it together. She could keep it from breaking, but it took so much effort…

She faded from the dream and started awake. She embraced the Source immediately and wove a light. Where was she?

She was wearing a nightgown and lying in bed back in the White Tower. Not her own rooms, which were still in disrepair following the assassins' attack. Her study had a small sleeping chamber, and she'd bedded down in that.

Her head pounded. She could vaguely remember growing bleary-eyed the night before, listening in her tent at the Field of Merrilor to reports of Caemlyn's fall. At some point during the late hours of the night, Gawyn had insisted that Nynaeve make a gateway back to the White Tower so Egwene could sleep in a bed, rather than on a pallet on the ground.

She grumbled to herself, rising. He'd probably been right, though she could remember feeling *distinctly* annoyed at his tone. Nobody had corrected him on it, not even Nynaeve. She rubbed at her temples. The headache wasn't as bad as those she'd had when Halima had been "caring" for her, but it did hurt mightily. Undoubtedly, her body was expressing displeasure at the lack of sleep she'd given it in recent weeks.

A short time later—dressed, washed and feeling a *little* better—she left her rooms to find Gawyn sitting at Silviana's desk, looking over a report, ignoring a novice who was lingering near the doorway.

"She'd hang you out the window by your toes if she saw you doing that," Egwene said dryly.

Gawyn jumped. "It's not a report from her stack," he protested. "It's the latest news from my sister about Caemlyn. It came by gateway for you just a few minutes ago."

"And you're reading it?"

He blushed. "Burn me, Egwene. It's my *home.* It wasn't sealed. I thought.. "

"It's all right, Gawyn," she said with a sigh. "Let's see what it says."

"There's not much," he said with a grimace, handing it to her. At a nod from him the novice scurried away. A short time later, the girl came back with a tray of wizened bellfruit, bread and a pitcher of milk.

Egwene sat down at her desk in the study to eat, feeling guilty as the novice left. The bulk of the Tower's Aes Sedai and soldiers camped in tents on the Field of Merrilor while she dined on fruit, no matter how old, and slept in a comfortable bed?

Still, Gawyn's arguments had made sense. If everyone thought she was in her tent on the Field, then potential killers would strike there. After her near-death at the hands of the Seanchan assassins, she was willing to accept a few extra precautions. Particularly those that helped her get a good night's sleep.

"That Seanchan woman," Egwene said, staring into her cup. "The one with the Illianer. Did you speak with her?"

He nodded. "I have some Tower guards watching the pair. Nynaeve vouched for them, in a way."

"In a way?"

"She called the woman several variations of wool-headed, but said she probably wouldn't do you any *intentional* harm."

"Wonderful." Well, Egwene could make use of a Seanchan who was willing to talk. Light. What if she had to fight them and the Trollocs at the same time?

"You didn't take your own advice," she said, noting Gawyn's red eyes as he sat down in the chair in front of her desk.

"Someone had to watch the door," he said. "Calling for guards would have let everyone know that you were not at the Field."

She took a bite of her bread—what *had* it been made of?—and looked over the report. He was right, but she didn't like the idea of him going without sleep on a day like this. The Warder bond would only help him so far.

"So the city is truly gone," she said. "Walls breached, palace seized. The Trollocs didn't burn all of the city, I see. Much of it, but not all."

"Yes," Gawyn said. "But it is obvious that Caemlyn is lost." She felt his tension through the bond.

"I'm sorry."

"Many people escaped, but it's hard to say what the city population was before the attack, with so many refugees. Hundreds of thousands are likely dead."

Egwene breathed out. A large army's worth of people, wiped out in one night. That was probably only the start of the brutality to come. How many had died in Kandor so far? They could only guess.

Caemlyn had held much of the Andoran army's food supply. She felt sick, thinking of so many people—hundreds of thousands of them—stumbling across the landscape away from the burning city. Yet that thought was less terrifying than the risk of starvation to Elayne's troops.

She drew up a note to Silviana, requiring her to send all sisters strong enough to provide Healing for the refugees, and gateways to carry them to

Whitebridge. Perhaps she could deliver supplies there, though the White Tower was strained as it was.

"Did you see the note at the bottom?" Gawyn asked.

She had not. She frowned, then scanned a sentence added at the bottom in Silviana's hand. Rand al'Thor had demanded that everyone meet with him by…

She looked up at the room's old, freestanding wooden clock. The meeting was in a half-hour. She groaned, then began shoveling the rest of her breakfast into her mouth. It wasn't dignified, but Light *burn* her if she was going to meet with Rand on an empty stomach.

"I'm going to throttle that boy," she said, wiping her face. "Come on, let's move."

"We could always be last," Gawyn said, rising. "Show him he doesn't order us about."

"And allow him the chance to meet with everyone else while I'm not there to counter what he has to say? I don't like it, but Rand holds the reins right now. Everyone's too curious to see what he's going to do."

She made a gateway back to her tent, into the corner that she'd set aside for Traveling. She and Gawyn stepped through and left the tent, into the clamor of the Field of Merrilor. People shouted outside; with a distant thunder of hooves, troops cantered and galloped as they took positions for the meeting. Did Rand realize what he'd done here? Putting soldiers together like this, leaving them edgy and uncertain, was like tossing a handful of fireworks into a stewpot and setting it onto the stove. Eventually, things were going to start exploding.

Egwene needed to manage the chaos. She strode out of her tent, Gawyn a step behind and to her left, and smoothed her face. The world needed an Amyrlin.

Silviana waited outside, dressed formally with stole and staff, as if she were going to a meeting of the Hall of the Tower.

"See to this, once the meeting starts," Egwene said, handing her the note.

"Yes, Mother," the woman said, then fell into step just behind Egwene and to her right. Egwene didn't need to look to know that Silviana and Gawyn were pointedly ignoring each other.

At the west side of her camp, Egwene found a cluster of Aes Sedai arguing with one another. She passed through them and pulled silence in her wake. A groom brought her horse Sifter, a testy dapple gelding, and as she mounted, she looked at the Aes Sedai. “Sitters only.”

That produced a sea of calm, orderly complaints, each made with an Aes Sedai sense of authority. Each woman thought she had a right to be at the meeting. Egwene stared at them, and the women slowly came into line. They were Aes Sedai; they knew that squabbling was beneath them.

The Sitters gathered, and Egwene looked out over the Field of Merrilor as she waited. It was a large triangular area of Shienaran grassland, bounded on two sides by converging rivers—the Mora and the Erinin—and on the other by woods. The grass was broken by Dashar Knob, a rocky outcrop about a hundred feet high, with cliff walls, and on the Arafellin side of the Mora by Polov Heights, a flat-topped hill about forty feet high, with gradual slopes on three sides and a steeper slope on the river side. Southwest of Polov Heights lay an area of bogs, and nearby, the River Mora’s shallows, known as Hawval Ford, a convenient crossing place between Arafel and Shienar.

There was an Ogier *stedding* nearby, opposite some old stone ruins to the north. Egwene had paid her respects soon after arriving, but Rand had not invited the Ogier to his meeting.

Armies were converging. Borderlander flags came in from the west, where Rand had made his camp. Perrin’s own flag flew among those. Odd, that Perrin should have a flag.

From the south, Elayne’s procession wound its way toward the meeting place, smack in the middle of the Field. The Queen rode at the front. Her palace had burned, but she kept her eyes forward. Between Perrin and Elayne, the Tairens and Illianers—Light, who had let those armies camp so near one another?—marched in separate columns, both bringing almost their entire forces.

Best to be quick. Her presence would calm the rulers, perhaps prevent problems. They wouldn’t like being near so many Aiel. Each clan but the Shaido was represented. She *still* didn’t know if they’d support Rand or her. Some of the Wise Ones seemed to have listened to Egwene’s pleas, but she had received no commitments.

“Look there,” Saerin said, pulling up beside Egwene. “Did you invite the Sea Folk?”

Egwene shook her head. “No. I thought there was little chance they’d side against Rand.” In truth, after her meeting with the Windfinders in

Tel’aran’rhiod, she hadn’t wanted to swim in negotiations with them again. She was afraid she’d wake up and find that she’d traded away not only her firstborn, but the White Tower itself.

They put up quite a show, appearing through gateways near Rand’s camp, wearing their colorful clothing, Wavemistresses and Swordmasters as proud as monarchs.

Light, Egwene thought. *I wonder how long it’s been since a meeting of this scale occurred.* Nearly every nation was represented, and then some, considering the Sea Folk and the Aiel. Only Murandy, Arad Doman and the Seanchan-held lands were missing.

The last of the Sitters finally mounted and pulled up beside her. Eager to move forward, but not daring to show it, Egwene started a slow ride toward the meeting place. Bryne’s soldiers fell in and formed an escort of tromping boots and pikes held high. Their white tabards were emblazoned with the Flame of Tar Valon, but they did not outshine the Aes Sedai. The way they marched accented the women at their center. Other armies relied on the strength of arms. The White Tower had something better.

Each army converged on the meeting place, the center of the field, where Rand had ordered no tents erected. So many armies together on ground perfect for a charge. This had better not go wrong.

Elayne set precedent by leaving the vast bulk of her force halfway there, continuing on with a smaller guard of about a hundred men. Egwene did the same. Other leaders began to trickle forward, their retinues coming to rest in a large ring around the central field.

Sunlight shone down upon Egwene as she approached the center. She couldn’t help but notice the large, perfectly broken circle of clouds above the field. Rand did affect things in strange ways. He needed no announcement to say that he was in attendance, no banner. The clouds pulled back and sunlight shone down when he was near.

It did not seem that he’d arrived at the center yet, however. She met up with Elayne. “Elayne, I’m sorry,” she said, not for the first time.

The golden-haired woman kept her eyes forward. “The city is lost, but the city is not the nation. We must have this meeting, but do so quickly, so that I can return to Andor. Where is Rand?”

“Taking his time,” Egwene said. “He’s always been like that.”

“I have spoken to Aviendha,” Elayne said, her bay horse shifting and snorting. “She spent last night with him, but he wouldn’t tell her what he intends this day.”

“He has mentioned demands,” Egwene said, watching the rulers gather with their retinues. Darlin Sisnera, King of Tear, was first. He would support her, for all the fact that he owed Rand his crown. The Seanchan threat still bothered him deeply. The middle-aged man with a dark, pointed beard was not particularly handsome, but self-composed and sure of himself. He bowed from horseback to Egwene, and she held out her ring.

He hesitated, then dismounted and came forward, bowing his head and kissing the ring. “The Light illumine you, Mother.”

“I am glad to see you here, Darlin.”

“So long as your promise holds. Gateways to my homeland should the moment require it.”

“It will be done.”

He bowed again, eyeing a man riding up toward Egwene from the other side. Gregorin, Steward of Illian, was Darlin’s equal in many ways-- but not all. Rand had named Darlin Steward of Tear, but the High Lords had asked for him to be crowned king. Gregorin remained merely a Steward. The tall man had lost weight recently, his round face—with its customary Illianer beard—starting to look sunken. He didn’t wait for Egwene to prod him; he swung from his horse and seized her hand, executing a flourishing bow and a kiss to the ring.

“I’m pleased the two of you could put aside differences to join me in this endeavor,” Egwene said, drawing their attention away from glares at one another.

“The Lord Dragon’s intentions are… troubling,” Darlin said. “He chose me to lead Tear because I opposed him when I felt it necessary. I believe he will listen to reason if I present it to him.”

Gregorin snorted. “The Lord Dragon do be perfectly reasonable. We do need to offer a good argument, and I do think he will listen.”

“My Keeper has some words for each of you,” Egwene said. “Please listen to what she has to say. Your cooperation will be remembered.”

Silviana rode forward and drew Gregorin aside to speak to him. There wasn’t much of importance to say, but Egwene had feared these two would end up chipping at one another. Silviana’s instruction was to keep them apart.

Darlin regarded her with a discerning gaze. He seemed to understand what she was doing, but didn’t complain as he mounted his horse.

“You seem troubled, King Darlin,” she said.

“Some old rivalries run deeper than the ocean’s depths, Mother. I can almost wonder if this meeting was the work of the Dark One, hoping that we would end up destroying one another and doing his work for him.”

“I understand,” Egwene said. “Perhaps it would be best if you advised your men—again, if you’ve already done so—that there are to be *no* accidents’ this day.”

“A wise suggestion.” He bowed, pulling back.

They were both with her, as was Elayne. Ghealdan would stand for Rand, if what Elayne said about Queen Alliandre was true. Ghealdan wasn’t so powerful that Alliandre worried her—the Borderlanders were another matter. Rand seemed to have won them over.

Each of their flags flew over their respective armies, and each ruler was in attendance save Queen Ethenielle, who was in Kandor trying to organize the refugees fleeing her homeland. She had left a sizable contingent for this meeting—including Antol, her eldest son—as if to state that what happened here was as important to Kandor’s survival as fighting on the border.

Kandor. The first casualty of the Last Battle. The entire country was said to be aflame. Would Andor be next? The Two Rivers? *Steady,* Egwene thought.

It felt awful to have to consider who was “for” whom, but it was her duty to do so. Rand could not direct the Last Battle personally, as he would undoubtedly wish to do. His mission would be to fight the Dark One; he would have neither the presence of mind nor the time to act as a commanding general as well. She intended to come from this meeting with the White Tower acknowledged as leading the collected forces against the Shadow, and she would *not* give up responsibility for the seals.

How much could she trust this man Rand had become? He wasn’t the Rand she’d grown up with. He was more akin to the Rand she’d come to know out in the Aiel Waste, only more confident. And, perhaps, more cunning. He had grown quite proficient at the Game of Houses.

None of these changes in him were terrible things, assuming he could still be reasoned with.

Is that the flag of Arad Doman? she thought, surprised. It wasn’t just the flag, it was the *King’s* flag, indicating he was riding with those forces that had just arrived on the field. Had Rodel Ituralde finally ascended to the throne, or had Rand picked someone else? The Domani king’s flag flew next to that of Davram Bashere, uncle to the Queen of Saldaea.

“Light.” Gawyn nudged his horse up beside hers. “That flag…”

“I see it,” Egwene said. “I’ll have to pin down Siuan: have her sources mentioned who took the throne? I was afraid the Domani would ride into battle without a leader.”

“The Domani? I was talking about *that.*”

She followed his eyes. A new force was approaching, moving with apparent haste, under the banner of the red bull. “Murandy,” Egwene said. “Curious. Roedran has finally decided to join the rest of the world.”

The newly arrived Murandians made more show than they probably deserved. Their apparel, at least, was pretty: yellow and red tunics over mail; brass helmets with wide brims. The wide red belts bore the symbol of the charging bull. They kept their distance from the Andorans, wrapping around behind the Aiel forces and coming in from the northwest.

Egwene looked toward Rand’s camp. Still no sign of the Dragon himself.

“Come,” she said, nudging Sifter into motion toward the Murandian force. Gawyn fell in beside her, and Chubain brought a force of twenty soldiers as a guard.

Roedran was a corpulent man swathed in red and gold; she could practically hear the man’s horse groaning with each step. His thinning hair was more white than black, and he watched her with an unexpectedly keen expression. The King of Murandy was little more than ruler of one city, Lugard, but her reports indicated that this man wasn’t doing a bad job of expanding his rule. Given a few years, he might actually have a full kingdom to call his own.

Roedran held up a meaty hand, stopping his procession. She reined in her horse and waited for him to approach her, as would be customary. He didn’t.

Gawyn muttered a curse. Egwene let a smile tug at the edges of her lips. Warders could be useful, if only to express what she should not. Finally, she nudged her horse forward.

“So.” Roedran looked her over. “You’re the new Amyrlin. An Andoran.”

“The Amyrlin has no nationality,” Egwene said coolly. “I am curious to find you here, Roedran. When did the Dragon extend an invitation to you?”

“He didn’t.” Roedran waved for a cupbearer to bring him some wine. I thought it was high time Murandy stopped being left out of events.”

“And through whose gateways did you arrive? Surely you didn't cross Andor to reach here.”

Roedran hesitated.

“You came from the south,” Egwene said, studying him. “Andor. Elayne sent for you?”

“She did not *send* for me,” Roedran snapped. “The bloody Queen promised me if I supported her cause, she’d release a proclamation of intention, promising not to invade Murandy.” He hesitated. “Besides, I’ve been curious to see this false Dragon. Everybody in the world seems to have taken leave of their senses regarding him.”

“You *do* know what this meeting is about, don’t you?” Egwene said.

He waved a hand. “Talking this man out of his conquering ways, or something like that.”

“Good enough.” Egwene leaned forward. “I hear your rule is consolidating nicely, and that Lugard may actually have some real authority in Murandy for once.”

“Yes,” Roedran said, sitting up a bit straighten “That is true.”

Egwene leaned forward further. You're welcome, she said softly, then smiled. She turned Sifter and led her retinue away.

“Egwene,” Gawyn said softly, trotting his horse beside hers, “did you really just do that?”

“Does he look troubled?”

Gawyn glanced over his shoulder. “Very.”

“Excellent.”

Gawyn continued riding for a moment, then broke into a deep grin.

“That was positively evil.”

“He’s as boorishly rude as reports have made him out to be,” Egwene said. “He can suffer a few nights spent wondering how the White Tower has been pulling strings in his realm. If I’m feeling particularly vengeful, I’ll set up some good secrets for him to unearth. Now, where *is* that sheepherder? He has the audacity to demand that we . . ”

She trailed off as she saw him coming. Rand strode across the browning grass of the field, wearing red and gold. A tremendous bundle hovered in the air beside him, held up by weaves she could not see.

The grass greened at his feet.

It wasn’t a large change. Where he trod, the turf recovered, spreading from him like a soft wave of light through opening shutters. Men stepped back; horses stamped their hooves. Within minutes, the entire ring of troops stood on grass that lived again.

How long had it been since she'd seen a simple field of green? Egwene breathed out. Some of the gloom to the day had been lightened. "I'd give good coin to know how he does that," she murmured under her breath.

"A weave?" Gawyn asked. "I've seen Aes Sedai make flowers bloom in winter."

"I know of no weave that would be so extensive," Egwene said. "It feels so *natural.* Go see if you can find out how he's doing it. Maybe one of the Aes Sedai with Asha'man Warders will let the truth out."

Gawyn nodded, slipping away.

Rand continued his walk, trailed by that large floating bundle, Asha'man in black and an honor guard of Aiel. The Aiel spurned regular ranks, sweeping the land like a swarm, fanning out. Even soldiers who followed Rand shied back from the Aiel. For many of the older soldiers, a wave of browns and tans like that meant death.

Rand walked calmly, purposefully. The cloth bundle he carried with Air began to unravel in front of him. Large swaths of canvas rippled in the wind before Rand, braiding with one another, leaving long trails behind themselves. Wooden poles and metal stakes fell from inside them, and Rand caught those in unseen threads of Air, spinning them.

He never broke stride. He didn't look at the maelstrom of cloth, wood and iron, as canvas rippled in front of him like fish from the depths. Small clods of soil erupted from the ground. Some soldiers jumped.

He's grown into quite the showman, Egwene thought as the poles spun and came down in the holes. Sweeping bands of cloth wrapped around them, tying themselves. In seconds, a massive pavilion settled into place, the Dragon banner flapping from one end, the banner with the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai on the other.

Rand didn't break stride as he reached the pavilion, cloth sides parting for him. "You may each bring five," he announced as he stepped inside.

"Silviana," Egwene said, "Saerin, Romanda, Lelaine. Gawyn will be our fifth when he returns."

Sitters behind suffered the decision in silence. They couldn't complain about her taking her Warder for protection or her Keeper for support. The other three she'd chosen were widely considered among the most influential in the Tower, and together the four she brought included two Aes Sedai each from Salidar and the White Tower loyalists.

The other rulers allowed Egwene to enter before them. All understood that this confrontation was, at its core, between Rand and Egwene. Or, rather, the Dragon and the Amyrlin Seat.

There were no chairs inside the pavilion, though Rand hung *saidin* globes of light at the corners, and one of the Asha'man deposited a small table at the center. She did a quick count. Thirteen glowing globes.

Rand stood facing her, arms behind his back, hand clasping his other forearm as had become his habit. Min stood at his side, one hand on his arm.

"Mother," he said, nodding his head.

So he would pretend respect, would he? Egwene nodded back. "Lord Dragon."

The other rulers and their small retinues filed in, many doing so with timidity until Elayne swept in, the sorrow on her face lightening as Rand smiled warmly at her. The wool-headed woman was still impressed with Rand, pleased with how he'd managed to bully everyone into coming here. Elayne considered it a matter of pride when he did well.

And you don't feel a small measure of pride? Egwene asked herself. *Rand al'Thor, once simple village boy and your near-betrothed, now the most powerful man in the world? You don't feel proud of what he's done?*

Perhaps a little.

The Borderlanders entered, led by King Easar of Shienar, and there was nothing timid about them. The Domani were led by an older man that Egwene did not know.

"Alsalam," Silviana whispered, sounding surprised. "He has returned."

Egwene frowned. Why hadn't any of her informants told her he had shown up? Light. Did Rand know that the White Tower had tried to take him into custody? Egwene herself had discovered that fact only a few days before, buried in a pile of Elaida's papers.

Cadsuane entered, and Rand nodded to her, as if giving permission. She didn't bring five, but neither did he seem to require her to be counted among Egwene's five. That struck her as a bothersome precedent. Perrin stepped in with his wife, and they stayed to the side. Perrin folded his tree-trunk arms, wearing his new hammer at his belt. He was far easier to read than Rand was. He was worried, but he trusted Rand. Nynaeve did, too, burn her. She took her position near Perrin and Faile.

The Aiel clan chiefs and Wise Ones entered in a large mass—Rand's "Bring only five" probably meant that each clan chief could bring five. Some Wise Ones, including Sorilea and Amys, made their way to Egwene's side of the tent.

Light bless them, Egwene thought, releasing a held breath. Rand's eyes flickered toward the women, and Egwene caught a tightening of his lips. He was surprised that all the Aiel didn't back him, each and every one.

King Roedran of Murandy was one of the last to enter the tent, and Egwene noticed something curious as he did. Several of Rand's Asha'man — Narishma, Flinn, Naeff—moved in behind Roedran. Others, near Rand, looked as alert as cats who had seen a wolf wander by.

Rand stepped over to the shorter, wider man and looked down into his eyes. Roedran stuttered for a moment, then started wiping his brow with a handkerchief. Rand continued to stare at him.

"What is it?" Roedran demanded. "You're the Dragon Reborn, so they say. I do not know that *I'd* have let you—"

"Stop," Rand said, raising a finger.

Roedran quieted immediately.

"Light burn me," Rand said. "You're not him, are you?"

"Who?" Roedran asked.

Rand turned away from him, waving his hand to make Narishma and the others stand down. They did so reluctantly. "I thought for certain…" Rand said, shaking his head. "Where *are* you?"

"Who?" Roedran asked loudly, almost squeaking.

Rand ignored him. The flaps to the pavilion had finally stilled, everyone inside. "So," Rand said. "We are all here. Thank you for coming."

"It's not like we did have much of a bloody choice," Gregorin grumbled. He'd brought a handful of Illianer nobility with him as his five, all members of the Council of Nine. "We did be caught between you and the White Tower itself. Light burn us."

"You know by now," Rand continued, "that Kandor has fallen and Caemlyn has been taken by the Shadow. The last remnants of Malkier are under assault at Tarwin's Gap. The end is upon us."

"Then why are we standing here, Rand al'Thor?" demanded King Paitar of Arafel. The aging man had only a thin ribbon of gray hair remaining on his head, but he was still broad-shouldered and intimidating. “Let us put an end to this posturing and be to it, man! There is fighting to be done.”

“I promise you fighting, Paitar,” Rand said softly. “All that you can stomach, and then some. Three thousand years ago, I met the Dark Ones forces in battle. We had the wonders of the Age of Legends, Aes Sedai who could do things that would make your mind reel, *ter’angreal* that could enable people to fly and make them immune to blows. We still *barely won*. Have you considered that? We face the Shadow in much the same state as it was then, with Forsaken who have not aged. But we are not the same people, not by far.”

The tent fell silent. Flaps blew in the breeze.

“What are you saying, Rand al’Thor?” Egwene said, folding her arms. “That we are doomed?”

“I’m saying we need to plan,” Rand said, “and present a unified attack. That we did poorly last time, and it nearly cost us the war. We each thought we knew the best way to go.” He met Egwene’s eyes. “In those days, every man and woman considered themselves to be the leader on the field. An army of generals. *That* is why we nearly lost. *That* is what left us with the taint, the Breaking, the madness. I was as guilty of it as anyone. Perhaps the most guilty.

“I will not have that happen again. I will not save this world only to have it broken a second time! I will not die for the nations of humanity, only to have them turn upon one another the moment the last Trolloc falls. You’re planning it. Light burn me, I *know* that you are!”

It would have been easy to miss the glances that Gregorin and Darlin shot at one another, or the covetous way Roedran watched Elayne. Which nations would be broken by this conflict, and which would step in—out of altruism—to help its neighbors? How quickly would altruism become greed, the chance to hold another throne?

Many of the rulers here were decent people. It took more than a decent person to hold that much power and not look afield. Even Elayne had gobbled up another country when the opportunity presented itself. She would do so again. It was the nature of rulers, the nature of nations. In Elayne’s case, it even seemed appropriate, as Cairhien would be better off beneath her rule than it had been.

How many would assume the same? That they, of course, could rule better—or restore order—in another land?

"Nobody wants war," Egwene said, drawing the crowd's attention. "However, I think what you are trying to do here is beyond your calling, Rand al'Thor. You cannot change human nature and you cannot bend the world to your whims. Let people live their lives and choose their own paths."

"I *will not,* Egwene," Rand said. There was a fire in his eyes, like the one she'd seen when he first sought to bring the Aiel to his cause. Yes, that emotion seemed very like Rand—frustration that people didn't see the world as clearly as he thought he did.

"I don't see what else you can do," Egwene said. "Would you appoint an emperor, someone to rule over us all? Would you become a true tyrant, Rand al'Thor?"

He didn't snap back a retort. He held out his hand to the side, and one of his Asha'man slipped a rolled paper into it. Rand took it and placed it on the table. He used the Power to unroll it and to keep it flat.

The oversized document was filled with tight, cramped letters. "I call it the Dragon's Peace," Rand said softly. "And it is one of the three things which I will require of you. Your payment, to me, in exchange for my life."

"Let me see that." Elayne reached for it, and Rand obviously let it go, because she was able to snatch it off the table before any of the other surprised rulers.

"It locks the borders of your nations to their current positions," Rand said, arms behind his back again. "It forbids country from attacking country, and it requires the opening of a great school in each capital—fully funded and with doors open to those who wish to learn."

"It does more than that," Elayne said, one finger to the document as she read. "Attack another land, or enter into a minor armed border dispute, and the other nations of the world have an obligation to defend the country attacked. Light! Tariff restrictions to prevent the strangling of economies, barriers on marriage between rulers of nations unless the two lines of rule are clearly divided, provisions for stripping the land from a lord who starts a conflict… Rand, you *really* expect us to sign this?"

"Yes."

The outrage from the rulers was immediate, though Egwene stood calmly, and shot a few glances at the other Aes Sedai. They seemed troubled. As well they should be—and this was only part of Rand's "price."

The rulers muttered, each wanting a chance at the document, but not wanting to shoulder in and look over Elayne's shoulder. Fortunately, Rand had thought ahead, and smaller versions of the document were distributed.

"But there are very good reasons for conflict, sometimes!" Darlin said, looking over his document. "Such as creating a buffer between you and an aggressive neighbor."

"Or what if some people from our country do be living across the border?" Gregorin added. "Do we not have the mandate to step in and protect them, if they do be oppressed? Or what if someone like the Seanchan do claim land that is ours? Forbidding war do seem ridiculous!"

"I agree," Darlin said. "Lord Dragon, we should have the *mandate* to defend land that is rightfully ours!"

"I," Egwene said, cutting through the arguments, "am more interested to hear his other two requirements."

"You know one of them," Rand said.

"The seals," Egwene said.

"Signing this document would mean nothing to the White Tower," Rand said, apparently ignoring the comment. "I cant very well forbid all of you to influence the others; that would be foolishness."

"Its *already* foolishness," Elayne said.

Elayne was not feeling so proud of him any longer, Egwene thought. "And as long as there are political games to be played," Rand continued to Egwene, "the Aes Sedai will master them. In fact, this document benefits you. The White Tower always *has* believed war to be, as they say, shortsighted. Instead, I demand something else of you. The seals."

"I am their Watcher."

"In name only. They were only just discovered, and I possess them. It is out of respect for your traditional title that I approached you about them first."

"Approached me? You didn't make a request," she said. "You didn't make a *demand*. You came, told me what you were going to do and walked away."

"I have the seals," he repeated. "And I will break them. I won't allow anything, not even you, to come between me and protecting this world."

All around them arguments over the document continued, rulers muttering with their confidants and neighbors. Egwene stepped forward, facing Rand across the small table, the two of them ignored for the moment. “You won’t break them if I stop you, Rand.”

“Why would you want to stop me, Egwene? Give me a single reason why it would be a bad idea.”

“A single reason other than that it will let the Dark One loose on the world?”

“He was not loose during the War of Power,” Rand said. “He could touch the world, but the Bore being opened will not loose him. Not immediately.”

“And what was the cost of letting him touch the world? What are they now? Horrors, terrors, destruction. You know what is happening to the land. The dead walking, the strange twisting of the Pattern. This is what happens with the seals only weakened! What happens if we actually break them? The Light only knows.”

“It is a risk that must be taken.”

“I don’t agree. Rand, you don’t know what releasing his seals will do—you don t know if it might let him escape. You don’t know how close he was to getting out when the Bore was last secured. Shattering those seals could destroy the world itself! What if our only hope lies in the fact that he’s hindered this time, not completely free?”

“It won’t work, Egwene.”

“You don’t know that. How can you?”

He hesitated. “Many things in life are uncertain.”

“So you *don’t* know,” she said. “Well, I have been looking, reading, listening. Have you read the works of those who have studied this, thought about it?”

“Aes Sedai speculation.”

“The only information we have, Rand! Open the Dark One’s prison and all could be lost. We have to be more careful. This is what the Amyrlin Seat is for, this is part of why the White Tower was founded in the first place!”

He actually hesitated. Light, he was *thinking*. Could she be getting through to him?

“I don’t like it, Egwene,” Rand said softly. “If I go up against him and the seals are not broken, my only choice will be to create another imperfect solution. A patch, even worse than the one last time—because with the old, weakened seals there, I’ll just be spreading new plaster over deep cracks. Who knows how long the seals would last this time? In a few centuries, we could have this same fight all over again.”

“Is that so bad?” Egwene said. “At least it’s sure. You sealed the Bore last time. You know how to do it.”

“We could end up with the taint again.”

“We’re ready for it, this time. No, it wouldn’t be ideal. But Rand ... do we really want to risk this? Risk the fate of every living being? Why not take the simple path, the known path? Mend the seals again. Shore up the prison.”

“No, Egwene.” Rand backed away. “Light! Is this what it’s about? You want *saidin* to be tainted again. You Aes Sedai… you’re threatened by the idea of men who can channel, undermining your authority!”

“Rand al’Thor, don’t you *dare* be that level of a fool.”

He met her eyes. The rulers seemed to be paying little attention to this conversation, despite the fact that the world depended on it. They pored over Rand’s document, muttering in outrage. Perhaps that was what he had intended, to distract them with the document, then pounce for the real fight.

Slowly, the rage melted from his face, and he raised his hand to the side of his head. “Light, Egwene. You can still do it, like the sister I never had—tie my mind in knots and have me raving at you and loving you at the same time.”

“At least I’m consistent,” she said. They were now speaking very softly, leaning across the table toward one another. To the side, Perrin and Nynaeve were probably close enough to hear, and Min had joined them. Gawyn had returned, but he kept his distance. Cadsuane rounded the room, looking in the other direction—too pointedly. She was listening in.

“I am not making this argument in some fool hope to restore the taint,” Egwene said. “You know I’m better than that. This is about protecting humankind. I can’t believe you are willing to risk everything on a slender chance.”

“A slender chance?” Rand said. “We’re talking about entering darkness instead of founding another Age of Legends. We could have peace, an end to suffering. Or we could have another Breaking. Light, Egwene. I don’t know for certain if I *could* mend the seals, or make new ones, in the same way. The Dark One has to be ready for that plan.”

“And you have another one?”

“I’ve been telling it to you. I break the seals to get rid of the old, imperfect plug, and try again in a new way.”

“The world itself is the cost of failure, Rand.” She thought a moment. “There’s more here. What aren’t you telling me?”

Rand looked hesitant, and for a moment, he seemed the child she’d once caught sneaking bites of Mistress Cauthon’s pies with Mat. “I’m going to kill him, Egwene.”

“Who? Moridin?”

“The Dark One.”

She drew back in shock. “I’m sorry. What did you—”

“I’m going to *kill* him,” Rand said passionately, leaning in. “I’m going to end the Dark One. We will never have true peace so long as he is there, lurking. I’ll rip open the prison, I’ll enter it and I’ll face him. I’ll build a new prison if I have to, but first, I’m going to try to end all of this. Protect the Pattern, the Wheel, for good.”

“Light, Rand, you’re *insane!*”

“Yes. That is part of the price I have paid. Fortunately. Only a man with shaken wits would be daring enough to try this.”

“I’ll fight you, Rand,” she whispered. “I won’t let you pull all of us into this. Listen to reason. The White Tower should be guiding you here.”

“I’ve known the White Tower’s guidance, Egwene,” he replied. “In a box, beaten each day.”

The two locked eyes across the table. Nearby, other arguments continued.

“I don’t mind signing this,” Tenobia said. “It looks fine to me.”

“Bah!” Gregorin snarled. “You Borderlanders never care anything for southern politics. You’ll sign it? Well, good for you. I, however, won’t chain my country to the wall.”

“Curious,” Easar said. The calm man shook his head, pure white topknot bobbing. “As I understand, it’s not your country, Gregorin. Unless you’re assuming that the Lord Dragon will die, and that Mattin Stepaneos will not demand his throne back. He may be willing for the Lord Dragon to wear the Laurel Crown, but not you, I’m sure.”

“Isn’t all of this meaningless?” Alliandre asked. “The *Seanchan* are our worry now, aren’t they? Peace can never exist so long as they are there.

“Yes,” Gregorin said. “The Seanchan and those cursed Whitecloaks.”

“We will sign it,” Galad said. Somehow the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light had ended up holding the official copy of the document. Egwene didn’t look at him. It was hard not to stare. She loved Gawyn, and not Galad, but… well ... it was hard not to stare.

“Mayene will sign it as well,” Berelain said. “I find the Lord Dragon’s will to be perfectly just.”

“Of course *you’d* sign it.” Darlin sniffed. “My Lord Dragon, this document seems designed to protect the interests of some nations more than others.”

“I want to hear what his third requirement is,” Roedran said. “I don’t care anything for talk of the seals; that is Aes Sedai business. He claimed there were three requirements, and we have heard only two.”

Rand raised an eyebrow. “The third and final price—the last thing you will pay me in exchange for my life on the slopes of Shayol Ghul—is this: I command your armies for the Last Battle. Utterly and completely. You do as I say, go where I say, fight where I say.”

This caused a larger eruption of arguments. It was obviously the least outrageous of the three demands, though it *was* impossible for reasons Egwene had already determined.

The rulers treated it as an attack on their sovereignty. Gregorin glowered at Rand through the din, only maintaining the most threadbare respect. Amusing, since he had the least authority of them all. Darlin shook his head, and Elayne’s face was *livid.*

Those on Rand’s side argued back, primarily the Borderlanders. *They’re desperate,* Egwene thought. *They’re being overrun.* They probably thought that if command were given to the Dragon, he would immediately march to the defense of the Borderlands. Darlin and Gregorin would never agree to that. Not with the Seanchan breathing down their necks.

Light, what a mess.

Egwene listened to the arguments, hoping they would set Rand on edge. Once, they might have. Now, he stood and watched, arms folded behind his back. His face became serene, though she was increasingly certain that was a mask. She’d seen flashes of his temper inside. Rand certainly was more in control of himself now, but he was by no means emotionless.

Egwene actually found herself smiling. For all of his complaints about Aes Sedai, for all of his insistence that he wouldn’t be controlled by them, he was acting more and more like one of them himself. She prepared to speak and take control, but something in the tent changed. A… feeling to the air. Her eyes seemed drawn to Rand. Sounds came from outside, sounds she couldn’t place. A faint cracking sound? What was he doing?

The arguments trailed off. One by one the rulers turned toward him. The sunlight outside dimmed, and she was glad for those spheres of light he had made.

"I need you," Rand said softly to them. "The land itself needs you. You argue; I knew that you would, but we no longer have time for arguments. Know this. You cannot talk me out of my designs. You cannot make me obey you. No force of arms, nor weave of the One Power, can *make* me face the Dark One for you. I must do it of my own choice."

"You would really toss the world for this, Lord Dragon?" Berelain asked.

Egwene smiled. The lightskirt suddenly didn't seem so certain of the side she had chosen.

"I won't have to," Rand said. "You'll sign it. To fail to do so means death."

"So it's extortion," Darlin snapped.

"No," Rand said, smiling toward the Sea Folk, who had said little as they stood near Perrin. They had simply read the document and nodded among themselves, as if impressed. "No, Darlin. It's not extortion… it's an arrangement. I have something you want, something you need. Me. My blood. I will die. We've all known this from the start; the Prophecies demand it. As you wish this of me, I will sell it to you in exchange for a legacy of peace to balance out the legacy of destruction I gave the world last time."

He scanned the meeting, looking at each ruler in turn. Egwene felt his determination almost like a physical thing. Perhaps it was his *ta'veren* nature, or perhaps it was just the weight of the moment. A pressure rose inside the pavilion, making it difficult to breathe.

He's going do it, she thought. *They'll complain, but they'll bend.*

"No," Egwene said loudly, her voice breaking the air. "No, Rand al'Thor, we will not be bullied into signing your document, into giving you sole control of this battle. And you're an utter fool if you think I believe you'd let the world—your father, your friends, all those you love, all of humanity — be slaughtered by Trollocs if we defy you."

He met her eyes, and suddenly she wasn't certain. Light, he wouldn't *really* refuse, would he? Would he really sacrifice the world?

"You dare call the Lord Dragon foolish?" demanded Narishma.

"The Amyrlin is *not* to be spoken to that way," Silviana said, stepping up beside Egwene.

The arguments began again, this time louder. Rand kept Egwene's eyes, and she saw the flush of anger rise in his face. The shouting rose, tension mounting. Unrest. Anger. Old hatreds, flaring anew, fueled by terror.

Rand rested his hand on the sword he wore these days—the one with the dragons on the scabbard—his other arm folded behind his back.

"I *will* have my price, Egwene," he growled.

"Require if you wish, Rand. You are *not* the Creator. If you go to the Last Battle with this foolishness, we're all dead anyway. If I fight you, then there is a chance I can change your mind."

"Ever the White Tower has been a spear at my throat," Rand snapped. "Ever, Egwene. And now you really have become one of them."

She met his stare. Inside, however, she was beginning to lose certainty. What if these negotiations did break down? Would she really drive her soldiers to fight Rand's?

She felt as if she had tripped over a rock at the top of a cliff and was tipping toward the fall. There had to be a way to stop this, to salvage it!

Rand started to turn away. If he left the pavilion, that would be the end of it.

"Rand!" she said.

He froze. "I will not budge, Egwene."

"Don't do this," she said. "Don't throw it all away."

"It cannot be helped."

"Yes it can! All you have to do is stop being such a Light-burned, woolheaded, stubborn fool for once!"

Egwene drew herself back. How could she have spoken to him as if they were back in Emond's Field, at their beginning?

Rand stared at her for a moment. "Well, you could certainly stop being a spoiled, self-certain, unmitigated *brat* for once, Egwene." He threw up his arms. "Blood and ashes! This was a waste of time."

He was very nearly right. Egwene didn't notice someone new entering the tent. Rand did, however, and he spun as the flaps parted and let in light. He frowned at the interloper.

His frown died as soon as he saw the person who entered.

Moiraine.

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CHAPTER 6

A Knack

The pavilion grew quiet again. Perrin hated a racket, and the people’s scents weren’t any better. Frustration, anger, fear. Terror.

Much of it was directed at the woman standing just inside the entrance to the pavilion.

Mat, you blessed fool, Perrin thought, breaking into a grin. *You did it. You actually did it.*

For the first time in a while, thinking of Mat made the colors swirl in his vision. He saw Mat on a horse, riding along a dusty road, tinkering with something he held. Perrin dismissed the image. Where had Mat gotten to now? Why hadn’t he come back with Moiraine?

It didn’t matter. Moiraine was back. Light, Moiraine! Perrin started toward her to give her an embrace, but Faile caught him by the sleeve. He followed her eyes.

Rand. His face had grown pale. He stumbled away from the table, as if all else had been forgotten, and pushed his way to Moiraine. He hesitantly reached out and touched her face. “By my mother’s grave,” Rand whispered, then fell to his knees before her. “How?”

Moiraine smiled, resting a hand on his shoulder. “The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills, Rand. Have you forgotten that?”

“I…”

“Not as you will, Dragon Reborn,” she said gently. “Not as any of us will. Perhaps one day it will weave itself out of existence. I do not believe that day is today, nor a day soon.”

“Who is this woman?” Roedran said. “And what is she blathering about? I—” He cut off as something unseen flicked him on the side of the head, causing him to jump. Perrin glanced at Rand, then noticed the smile on Egwene's lips. He caught the scent of her satisfaction despite all of the people in the pavilion.

Nynaeve and Min, standing nearby, smelled utterly shocked. The Light willing, Nynaeve would stay that way for a little while. Shouting at Moiraine wouldn't help right now.

"You haven't answered my question," Rand said.

"But I have," Moiraine replied fondly. "It just was not the answer you wanted."

Rand knelt, then threw his head back and laughed. "Light, Moiraine! You haven't changed, have you?"

"We all change day by day," she replied, then smiled. "Me more than some, lately. Stand up. It is I who should be kneeling before you, Lord Dragon. We all should."

Rand rose and stepped back to allow Moiraine farther into the pavilion. Perrin caught another scent, and smiled as Thom Merrilin slipped into the tent behind her. The old gleeman winked at Perrin.

"Moiraine," Egwene said, stepping forward. "The White Tower welcomes you back with open arms. Your service has not been forgotten."

"Hmm," Moiraine said. "Yes, I should think that having discovered a future Amyrlin would reflect well upon me. That is a relief, as I believe I was on a path to stilling, if not execution, before."

"Things have changed."

"Obviously." Moiraine nodded. "Mother." She passed Perrin, and gave him a squeeze on the arm, eyes twinkling.

One by one, the Borderlander rulers took swords in hands and bowed or curtsied toward her. Each one seemed to know her personally. Many of the others in the tent still looked baffled, though Darlin obviously knew who she was. He was more… thoughtful than confused.

Moiraine hesitated beside Nynaeve. Perrin couldn't catch Nynaeve's scent right then. That seemed ominous to him. *Oh, Light. Here it comes…*

Nynaeve enfolded Moiraine in a powerful embrace.

Moiraine stood for a moment, smelling distinctly shocked, hands out to the sides. Finally, she returned the embrace in a somewhat maternal way, patting Nynaeve on the back.

Nynaeve released her, pulling back, then wiped a tear from her eye. "Don't you *dare* tell Lan about this," she growled.

"I would not dream of it," Moiraine said, moving on to stand in the center of the pavilion.

“Insufferable woman,” Nynaeve grumbled as she wiped a tear from the other eye.

“Moiraine,” Egwene said. “You’ve come at just the right time.”

“I have a knack for that.”

“Well,” Egwene continued as Rand stepped back up to the table, “Rand… the Dragon Reborn… has decided to hold this land for ransom to his demands, refusing to do his duty unless we agree to his whims.”

Moiraine pursed her lips, taking up the contract for the Dragon’s Peace as Galad set it on the table for her. She scanned it.

“Who *is* this woman?” Roedran said. “And why do we— Would you stop that!” He raised a hand as if he’d been smacked by a thread of Air, then glared at Egwene—however, this time one of the nearby Asha’man was the one who smelled satisfied.

“Nice shot, Grady,” Perrin whispered.

“Thank you, Lord Perrin.”

Grady would know her only by legend, of course, but tales of Moiraine had spread among those who followed Rand.

“Well?” Egwene said.

“ ‘And it shall come to pass that what men made shall be shattered,’ ” Moiraine whispered. “ ‘The Shadow shall lie across the Pattern of the Age, and the Dark One shall once more lay his hand upon the world of man. Women shall weep and men quail as the nations of the earth are rent like rotting cloth. Neither shall anything stand nor abide.’ ”

The people shuffled their feet. Perrin looked questioningly at Rand.

“ ‘Yet one shall be born to face the Shadow,’ ” Moiraine said more loudly. “ ‘Born once more as he was born before and shall be born again, time without end! The Dragon shall be Reborn, and there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth at his rebirth. In sackcloth and ashes shall he clothe the people, and he shall break the world again by his coming, tearing apart all ties that bind!

“ ‘Like the unfettered dawn shall he blind us, and burn us, yet shall the Dragon Reborn confront the Shadow at the Last Battle, and his blood shall give us the Light. Let tears flow, O ye people of the world. Weep for your salvation!’ ”

“Aes Sedai,” Darlin said, “pardon, but that is very ominous.”

“At least it shall be a salvation,” Moiraine said. “Tell me, Your Majesty. That prophecy commands you to shed tears. Are you to weep because your salvation comes with such pain and worry? Or, instead, are you to weep *for* your salvation? For the man who will suffer for you? The only one we know for certain will not walk away from this fight?"

She turned to Rand.

"These demands are unfair," Gregorin said. "He requires us to keep our borders as they are!"

" 'He shall slay his people with the sword of peace,' " Moiraine said, " 'and destroy them with the leaf.' "

It's The Karaethon Cycle. *I've heard these words before.*

"The seals, Moiraine," Egwene said. "He's planning to break them. He defies the authority of the Amyrlin Seat."

Moiraine did not look surprised. Perrin suspected she'd been listening outside before entering. It was very like her.

"Oh, Egwene," Moiraine said. "Have you forgotten? 'The unstained tower breaks and bends knee to the forgotten sign…' "

Egwene blushed.

" 'There can be no health in us, nor any good thing grow,' " Moiraine quoted, " 'for the land is one with the Dragon Reborn, and he one with the land. Soul of fire, heart of stone.' "

She looked to Gregorin. " 'In pride he conquers, forcing the proud to yield.' "

To the Borderlanders. " 'He calls upon the mountains to kneel…' "

To the Sea Folk. " '… and the seas to give way.' "

To Perrin, then Berelain. " '… and the very skies to bow.' "

To Darlin. " 'Pray that the heart of stone remembers tears…' "

Then, finally, to Elayne. " '… and the soul of fire, love.' You cannot fight this. None of you can. I am sorry. You think he came to this on his own?" She held up the document. "The Pattern is balance. It is not good nor evil, not wisdom nor foolishness. To the Pattern, these things matter not, yet it *will* find balance. The last Age ended with a Breaking, and so the next one will begin with peace—even if it must be shoved down your throats like medicine given to a screaming babe."

"If I may speak?" An Aes Sedai wearing a brown shawl stepped forward.

"You may," Rand said.

"This is a wise document, Lord Dragon," the Brown said. She was a stout woman, more direct of tone than Perrin expected from a Brown. "But I see an enormous flaw to it, one that was raised earlier. So long as the Seanchan are exempt from it, it will be meaningless. There will be no peace so long as they conquer."

"That's an issue," Elayne said, arms folded. "But not the only one. Rand, I see what you're trying to do, and I love you for it. That does not remove the fact that this document is fundamentally untenable. For a peace treaty to work, both sides must continue to wish for peace because of the benefits presented.

"This grants no way to settle disputes. They *will* arise, they always do. Any document like this must give a way to settle such things; you must set up a way to punish an infraction save for the other countries to enter all-out war. Without that change, little grievances will mount and build pressure over years until they explode.

"As this is, it all but requires the nations to fall upon the first that breaks the peace. It doesn't stop them from setting up a puppet regime in the fallen kingdom, or even in another kingdom. Over time, I fear this treaty will be viewed as null; what good is it if it protects only on paper? The end result of this will be war. Massive, overpowering war. You will have peace for a time, particularly while those who revere you live. But for every year of peace you gain, you will earn one of greater destruction once the thing falls apart."

Rand rested his fingers on the document. "I will make peace with the Seanchan. We will add a provision. If their ruler does not sign, then the document is voided. Will you all agree to it then?"

"That fixes the lesser problem," Elayne said softly, "but not the larger one, Rand."

"There is yet a greater issue here," a new voice said.

Perrin turned, surprised. Aviendha? She and the other Aiel had not participated in the arguments. They'd only watched. Perrin had almost forgotten they were there.

"You, too?" Rand said. "Come to walk on the shards of my dreams, Aviendha?"

"Don't be a child, Rand al'Thor," the woman said, striding up to place her finger on the document. "You have *toh*."

"I left you out of it," Rand protested. "I trust you, and all of the Aiel."

"The Aiel aren't in it?" Easar said. "Light, how did we miss that!"

"It is an insult," Aviendha said.

Perrin frowned. She smelled very serious. From any other Aiel, he'd expect that sharp scent to be followed by a pulled-up veil and a raised spear.

"Aviendha," Rand said, smiling. "The others are about to hang me for putting them in it, and you are angry for being left out?"

"I demand my boon of you," she said. "This is it. Place the Aiel in your document, your 'Dragon's Peace.' We will leave you otherwise."

"You don't speak for all of them, Aviendha," Rand said. "You can't—" All of the tent's Wise Ones stepped up behind Aviendha, as if in rhythm together. Rand blinked.

"Aviendha carries our honor," Sorilea said.

"Do not be foolish, Rand al'Thor," Melaine added.

"This is a thing of the women," Sarinde added. "We will not be satisfied until we are treated equally with the wetlanders."

"Is this thing too difficult for us?" Amys asked. "Do you insult us by implying we are weaker than the others?"

"You're all insane!" Rand said. "Do you realize that this would *forbid* you from fighting one another?"

"Not from fighting," Aviendha said. "From fighting without cause."

"War is your purpose," Rand said.

"If you believe that, Rand al'Thor," she said, voice cold, "I have trained you poorly indeed."

"She speaks wisdom," Rhuarc said, stepping up to the front of the crowd. "Our purpose was to prepare for your need of us at this Last Battle—our purpose was to be strong enough to be preserved. We will need another purpose. I have buried blood feuds for you, Rand al'Thor. I would not take them up again. I have friends now that I would rather not kill."

"Madness," Rand said, shaking his head. "All right, I'll put you in." Aviendha seemed satisfied, but something bothered Perrin. He didn't understand the Aiel—Light, he didn't understand Gaul, who had been with him for so long. Still, he'd noticed that the Aiel liked to be doing something. Even when they lounged, they were alert. When other men gamed or diced, the Aiel were often quietly doing something of use.

"Rand," Perrin said, stepping up, taking him by the arm. "A moment, please?"

Rand hesitated, then nodded to him and waved his hand. "We're sealed off; they can't hear us now. What is this about?"

"Well, I just noticed something. The Aiel are like tools."

"All right . . "

"And tools that aren't used grow rusty," Perrin said.

"Which is why they raid one another," Rand said, rubbing his temple. "To keep up their skills. That is why I exempted them. Light, Perrin! I think this is going to be a disaster. If we include them in this document…"

"I don't think you have a choice, now," Perrin said. "The others will never sign it if the Aiel are left out."

"I don't know if they'll sign it anyway," Rand said. He looked longingly at the sheet on the table. "It was such a beautiful dream, Perrin. A dream of good for humanity. I thought I had them. Right up until Egwene called my bluff, I thought I had them."

It was a good thing others couldn't smell Rand's emotions, or everyone there would have known that he'd never refuse to go against the Dark One. Rand showed not a hint of it on his face, but inside, Perrin knew he had been as nervous as a boy at his first shearing.

"Rand, don't you see?" Perrin said. "The solution."

Rand frowned at him.

"The *Aiel*," Perrin said. "The tool that needs to be used. A treaty that needs to be enforced…"

Rand hesitated, then grinned widely. "You're a genius, Perrin."

"So long as it's about blacksmithing, I suppose I know a thing or two."

"But this… this isn't about blacksmithing, Perrin…"

"Of course it is," Perrin said. How could Rand not see that?

Rand turned, no doubt ending his weave. He strode up to the document, then held it up toward one of his clerks in the back of the pavilion. "I want two provisions added. First, this document is void if not signed by either the Seanchan Daughter of the Nine Moons or the Empress. Second… the Aiel—all but the Shaido—are to be written into the document as enforcers of the peace and mediators of disputes between nations. Any nation may call upon them if they feel abused, and the Aiel—not enemy armies—will provide redress. They can hunt criminals across national borders. They are to be *subject* to the laws of the nations in which they reside at the time, but they are not *subjects* of that nation."

He turned to Elayne. "There is your enforcement, Elayne, the way to keep your small pressures from building."

"The Aiel?" she asked skeptically.

“Will you agree to this, Rhuarc?” Rand asked. “Bael, Jheran, the rest of you? You claim to be left without purpose, and Perrin sees you as a tool that needs to be worked. Will you take this charge? To prevent war, to punish those who do wrong, to work with the rulers of nations to see justice served?”

“Justice as we see it, Rand al’Thor,” Rhuarc said, “or as they see it?”

“It will have to be according to the conscience of the Aiel,” Rand said. “If they call for you, they will have to know that they’ll receive your justice. This will not work if the Aiel simply become pawns. Your autonomy will be what makes this effective.”

Gregorin and Darlin began to complain, but Rand silenced them with a look. Perrin nodded to himself, arms folded. Their complaints were weaker now than they had been before. He smelled ... thoughtfulness from many of them.

They see this as an opportunity, he realized. *They view the Aiel as savages, and think they’ll be easy to manipulate once Rand is gone.* Perrin grinned, imagining their defeat should they attempt that course.

“This is very sudden,” Rhuarc said.

“Welcome to the dinner party,” Elayne added, still staring daggers at Rand “Try the soup.” Oddly, she smelled *proud.* Strange woman.

“I warn you, Rhuarc,” Rand said. “You will need to change your ways. The Aiel will have to act together on these matters; the chiefs and Wise Ones will need to hold council to make decisions together. One clan cannot fight a battle while other clans disagree and fight for the other side.

“We will speak of it,” Rhuarc said, nodding to the other Aiel chiefs.

“This will mean an end to the Aiel.”

“A beginning as well,” Rand said.

The Aiel clan chiefs and the Wise Ones gathered separately to one side, and spoke in soft voices. Aviendha lingered, with Rand staring away, troubled. Perrin heard him whisper something, so soft Perrin’s ears barely made it out.

“… your dream now… when you wake from this life, we will be no more…”

Rand’s clerks, smelling frantic, came forward to begin working on the document’s additions. The woman Cadsuane watched all events with a stern expression.

She smelled extremely proud.

“Add a provision,” Rand said. “The Aiel can call upon other nations to aid them in their enforcement if they decide that their own numbers will not be enough. Give formal methods by which nations can petition the Aiel for redress or for permission to attack a foe.”

The clerks nodded, working harder.

“You act as if this were settled,” Egwene said, eyes on Rand.

“Oh, it is far from that,” Moiraine said. “Rand, I have some words for you.”

“Are they words I will like? he asked.

“I suspect not. Tell me, why do you need to command the armies yourself? You will be traveling to Shayol Ghul where you will no doubt be unable to contact anyone.”

“Somebody needs to be in command, Moiraine.”

“On this point, I believe all would agree.”

Rand folded his arms behind his back, smelling troubled. “I have taken responsibility for this people, Moiraine. I want to see that they’re cared for, that the brutalities of this battle are minimized.”

“I fear that is a poor reason to lead a battle,” Moiraine said softly. “You do not fight to preserve your troops; you fight to win. This leader need not be you, Rand. It should not be you.”

“I won’t have this battle turn into a tangle, Moiraine,” he said. “If you could see the mistakes we made last time, the confusion that can result when everyone thinks *they* are in control. Battle is turmoil, but we still need an ultimate commander to make decisions, to hold everything together.”

“What of the White Tower?” Romanda asked, stepping—half shoving—her way up beside Egwene. “We have the resources for efficient travel between battlefronts, we are coolheaded in times that would crush others, and we are trusted by all nations.”

That last bit prompted a raised eyebrow from Darlin.

“The White Tower *does* seem the optimal choice, Lord Dragon,” Tenobia added.

“No,” Rand said. “The Amyrlin is many things, but a leader of war… I do not think it a wise choice.”

Egwene, oddly, said nothing. Perrin studied her. He’d have thought that she’d jump at the chance to lead the war herself.

“It should be one of us,” Darlin said. “Chosen from those who would go to battle here.”

“I suppose,” Rand said. “So long as you all know who is in command, I will cede this point. You must meet my other demands, however.”

“You still insist that you must break the seals?” Egwene said.

“Do not worry, Egwene,” Moiraine said, smiling. “He is not going to break the seals.”

Rand’s face darkened.

Egwene smiled.

“You are going to break them,” Moiraine said to Egwene.

“What? Of course I’m not!”

“You are the Watcher of the Seals, Mother,” Moiraine said. “Did you not hear what I said earlier? ‘It shall come to pass that what men made shall be *shattered*, and the Shadow shall lie across the Pattern of the Age, and the Dark One shall once more lay his hand upon the world of man…’ It must happen.”

Egwene seemed troubled.

“You have seen this, have you not?” Moiraine whispered. “What have you dreamed, Mother?”

Egwene didn’t respond at first.

“What did you see?” Moiraine pressed, stepping closer to her.

“His feet crunching,” Egwene said, staring Moiraine in the eyes. “As he strode forward, Rand’s feet stepped on the shards of the Dark One’s prison. I saw him, in another dream, hacking away at it to open it. But I never actually saw him *opening* it, Moiraine.”

“The shards were there, Mother,” Moiraine said. “The seals had been broken ”

“Dreams are subject to interpretation.”

“You know the truth of this one. It does need to be done, and the seals are yours. You will break them, when the time is right. Rand, Lord Dragon Reborn, it is time to give them to her.”

“I don’t like this, Moiraine,” he said.

“Then not much has changed, has it?” she asked lightly. “I believe you have often resisted doing what you are supposed to. Particularly when *I* am the one to point it out to you.”

He paused for a moment, then laughed, reaching into the pocket of his coat. He slipped out three discs of *cuendillar*; each split by a sinuous line down the center. He set them on the table.

“How will she know the time?” he asked.

“She will,” Moiraine said.

Egwene smelled skeptical, and Perrin didn’t blame her. Moiraine always had believed in following the weave of the Pattern and bowing to the Wheel's turnings. Perrin didn’t see it that way. He figured you made your own path, and trusted in your own arms to do what needed to be done. The Pattern wasn’t a thing to depend on.

Egwene was Aes Sedai. It seemed that she felt she should see it as Moiraine did. Either that, or she was willing to agree and just take those seals into her hands. “I’ll break them, when I feel it must be done,” she said, taking the seals.

“You'll sign, then.” Rand took the document as the clerks protested the hastiness with which they’d had to work. It now had several additions on the back. One of the clerks cried out, reaching for the sand, but Rand did something with the One Power, drying the ink instantly as he placed the document before Egwene.

“I will,” she said, holding out a hand for a pen. She read the provisions carefully, the other sisters looking over her shoulders. They nodded one at a time.

Egwene put pen to paper.

“And now the rest,” Rand said, turning to measure reactions.

“Light, he’s grown clever,” Faile whispered beside Perrin. “Do you realize what he did?”

“What?” Perrin said, scratching his beard.

“He brought with him all he knew would support him,” Faile whispered. “The Borderlanders, who would sign practically anything to garner help for their homelands. Arad Doman, which he helped most recently. The Aiel… well, all right, who knows what the Aiel will do at a given time? But the idea stands.

“Then he let Egwene gather the others. It’s genius, Perrin. That way, with her bringing this coalition against him, all he *really* had to do was convince her. Once he swayed her to his side, the others would look foolish to stand apart.”

Indeed, as the rulers began to sign—Berelain going first and most eagerly—those who had supported Egwene started to fidget. Darlin stepped up and took the pen. He hesitated for a moment, then signed.

Gregorin followed. Then the Borderlanders, each in turn, followed by the King of Arad Doman. Even Roedran, who still seemed to find this entire thing a fiasco, signed. Perrin found that curious.

“He blusters a lot,” Perrin said to Faile, “but he knows this is good for his kingdom.”

“Yes,” she said. “He’s been acting a buffoon partially to throw everyone off, make them dismiss him. The document outlines current borders of nations to remain as they are,” Faile said. “That’s a huge boon to someone trying to stabilize his rule. But . . ”

“But?”

“The Seanchan?” Faile said softly. “If Rand persuades them, does that allow them to keep the countries they have now? The women who are *damane,* are they allowed to slap one of those collars on any woman who passes their border?”

The tent stilled; perhaps Faile had spoken more loudly than she’d intended. Perrin sometimes had trouble remembering what ordinary people could and couldn’t hear.

“I will deal with the Seanchan,” Rand said. He stood over the table, watching as each ruler looked over the document, spoke with the counselors they’d brought, then signed.

“How?” Darlin asked. “They do *not* wish to make peace with you, Lord Dragon. I do think they’ll make this document meaningless.”

“Once we are done here,” Rand said softly, “I will go to them. They will sign.”

“And if they do not?” Gregorin demanded.

Rand rested his hand on the table, fingers spread. “I may have to destroy them. Or at least their ability to make war in the near future.”

The pavilion grew still.

“Could you *do* that?” Darlin asked.

“I'm not certain,” Rand admitted. “If I can, it may leave me weakened in a time when I need all of my strength. Light, it may be my only choice. A terrible choice, when I left them last time… We *cannot* have them striking at our backs while we fight the Shadow.” He shook his head, and Min stepped up to take his arm. “I will find a way to deal with them. Somehow, I'll find a way.”

The signing progressed. Some did it with great flourish, others in more casual fashion. Rand had Perrin, Gawyn, Faile and Gareth Bryne sign as well. He seemed to want anyone here who might rise to a position of leadership to have their names on the document.

Finally, only Elayne remained. Rand held out the quill to her.

"This is a difficult thing you ask of me, Rand," Elayne said, arms folded, golden hair gleaming in the light of his globes. Why *had* the sky gone dim outside? Rand didn't seem worried, but Perrin feared that the clouds had consumed the sky. A dangerous sign, if they now held sway where Rand had once kept them back.

"I know it is difficult," Rand said. "Perhaps if I gave you something in return…"

"What?"

"The war," Rand said. He turned to the rulers. "You wanted one of you to lead the Last Battle. Will you accept Andor, and its queen, in this role?"

"Too young," Darlin said. "Too new. No offense, Your Majesty."

Alsalam snorted. "You're one to talk, Darlin. Half the monarchs present have held their thrones for a year or less!"

"What of the Borderlanders?" Alliandre asked. "They've fought against the Blight all of their lives."

"We are overrun," Paitar said. He shook his head. "One of us cannot coordinate this. Andor is as good a choice as any."

"Andor is suffering an invasion of its own," Darlin noted.

"You all are, or soon will be," Rand said. "Elayne Trakand is a leader to her core; she taught me much of what I know about leadership. She has learned tactics from a great captain, and I'm certain she will rely upon all the great captains for advice. Someone *must* lead. Will you all accept her in this position?"

The others reluctantly nodded agreement. Rand turned to Elayne.

"All right, Rand," she said. "I'll do this, and I will sign, but you had *better* find a way to deal with the Seanchan. I want to see their ruler's name on this document. None of us will be safe until it's there."

"What of the women held by the Seanchan?" Rhuarc asked. "I will admit, Rand al'Thor, our intention was to declare a blood feud with these invaders the moment more pressing battles were won."

"If their ruler signs it," Rand said, "I will ask about trading for goods to retrieve those channelers they have stolen. I will try to persuade them to release the lands they hold and return to their own country."

"What if they refuse?" Egwene asked, shaking her head. "Will you let them sign it without giving on those points? Thousands are enslaved, Rand."

“We cannot defeat them,” Aviendha said, speaking softly. Perrin eyed her. She smelled frustrated, but determined. “If we go to war with them, we will fall ”

“Aviendha is right,” Amys said. “The Aiel will *not* fight the Seanchan.” Rhuarc, startled, looked back and forth between the two.

“They have done horrible things,” Rand said, “but so far, the lands they have taken have benefited from strong leadership. If forced to it, I am content to allow them the lands they have, so long as they do not spread further. As for the women… what is done is done. Let us worry about the world itself first, then do what we can for those held captive.”

Elayne held the document for a moment, perhaps for the drama of it, then bent down and added her name to the bottom with a flourish.

“It is done,” Moiraine said as Rand picked up the document. “You *will* have peace this time, Lord Dragon.”

“We must survive first,” he said, holding the document with reverence. “I will leave you to make your battle preparations. I need to complete some tasks, Seanchan included, before I travel to Shayol Ghul. I do have a request for you, however. There is a dear friend who needs us…”

Angry lightning blistered the clouded sky. Despite the shade, sweat lined Lan’s neck, matting his hair underneath his helmet. He’d not worn one in years; much of his time with Moiraine had required them to be nondescript, and helmets were anything but.

“How… how bad is it?” Andere grimaced, holding his side, and leaning back against a rock.

Lan looked to the battle. The Shadowspawn were amassing again. The monsters almost seemed to blend and shift together, one enormous dark force of howling, *miasmic* hatred as thick as the air—which seemed to hold in the heat and the humidity, like a merchant hoarding fine rugs.

“It’s bad,” Lan said.

“Knew it would be,” Andere said, breathing in and out quickly, blood seeping between his fingers. “Nazar?”

“Gone,” Lan said. The white-haired man had gone down in the same set-to that had nearly taken Andere. Lan’s rescue had not been quick enough. “I saw him gut a Trolloc as it killed him.”

“May the last embrace of the mother—” Andere spasmed in pain. “May the—”

“May the last embrace of the mother welcome you home,” Lan said softly.

“Don’t look at me that way, Lan,” Andere said. “We all knew what this was going to be when we… when we joined you.”

“That is why I tried to stop you.”

Andere scowled. “I—”

“Peace, Andere,” Lan said, rising. “What I wished was selfish. I came to die for Malkier. I have no right to deny that privilege to others.”

“Lord Mandragoran!” Prince Kaisel rode up, his once-fine armor bloodstained and dented. The Kandori prince still looked too young for this battle, but he’d proven himself to be as coolheaded as any grizzled veteran. “They’re forming up again.”

Lan walked across the rocky ground to where a groom held Mandarb. The black stallion bore cuts on his flanks from Trolloc weapons. Thank the Light, they were superficial. Lan rested a hand on the horse’s neck as Mandarb snorted. Nearby, his standard-bearer, a bald man named Jophil, raised the flag of Malkier, the Golden Crane. This was his fifth standard-bearer since yesterday.

Lan’s forces had seized the Gap with their initial charge, shoving the Shadowspawn back before they were able to emerge into the valley. That was more than Lan had expected. The Gap was a long, narrow piece of rocky ground nestled between craggy rises and peaks.

Holding this position required nothing clever. You stood, you died and you killed—as long as you could.

Lan commanded a cavalry. It wasn’t ideal for this kind of work—cavalries did best where they could spread out and had room to charge—but the passage through Tarwin’s Gap was narrow enough that only a small number of Trollocs could come through at once. That gave Lan a chance. At least it was more difficult for the Trollocs to take advantage of their superior numbers. They would have to pay a butcher’s bill for every yard they gained.

Trolloc carcasses had formed an almost furlike blanket leading through the canyon. Each time the creatures tried to push through the gorge, Lan’s men had resisted them with lances and polearms, swords and arrows, eventually slaughtering thousands and leaving them heaped for their fellows to climb over. But each clash similarly reduced Lan’s numbers.

Each assault forced his men to withdraw a little farther. Toward the mouth of the Gap. They were less than a hundred feet from it now.

Lan felt the fatigue pressing deep into his bones.

“Our forces?” Lan asked Prince Kaisel.

“Maybe six thousand still able to ride, Dai Shan.”

Less than half of what they’d started with a day before. “Tell them to mount up.”

Kaisel looked shocked. “We’re going to retreat?”

Lan turned to the lad.

Kaisel paled. Lan had been told that his gaze could unnerve any man; Moiraine had liked to joke that he could outstare rocks and had the patience of an oak. Well, he didn’t feel as sure of himself as people thought, but this boy should have known better than to ask if they were retreating.

“Of course,” Lan said, “and then we're going to attack.”

“Attack?” Kaisel said. “We are on the defensive!”

“They’ll sweep us out,” Lan said, pulling himself into Mandarb’s saddle. “We’re exhausted, worn out and nearly broken. If we stand here and let them come at us again, we’ll fall without a whimper.”

Lan knew an ending when he saw one.

“Pass these orders,” Lan said to Prince Kaisel. “We will slowly pull out of the pass. You have the rest of the troops assemble on the plain, mounted and ready to attack the Shadowspawn as they come out of the Gap. A charge will do great damage; they won’t know what hit them.”

“Wont we be surrounded and overrun if we leave the pass?” Kaisel asked.

“This is the best we can do with the resources we have.”

“And then?”

“And then they eventually break through, slice our force into pieces and overrun us.”

Kaisel sat for a moment, then nodded. Again, Lan was impressed. He’d assumed this boy had come with him to find the glory of battle, to fight at the side of Dai Shan and sweep their enemies away. But no. Kaisel was a Borderlander to the core. He hadn’t come for glory. He’d come because he’d had to. *Good lad.*

“Give the order now. The men will be glad to get back on their horses again.” Too many of them had been forced to fight on foot because of the lack of maneuverability in the narrow confines.

Kaisel gave the orders, and those orders burned through Lan’s men like an autumn fire. Lan saw Andere being helped into his saddle by Bulen.

“Andere?” Lan said, heeling Mandarb toward him. “You are in no condition to ride. Go join the wounded at the back camp.”

“So I lie back there and let the Trollocs butcher me after finishing you lot?” Andere leaned forward in the saddle, teetering slightly, and Bulen looked up with concern. Andere waved him off and forced himself upright. “We’ve already moved the mountain, Lan. Let’s budge this feather and be through with it.”

Lan could offer no argument. He called the retreat to the men ahead of him in the pass. His remaining men bunched around him, slowly backing out toward the plain.

The Trollocs hooted and yelled in excitement. They knew that once they were free of the walls that restricted their movement, they would win this fight easily.

Lan and his small force left the narrow confines of the Gap, those on foot running toward their horses tethered near the mouth of the canyon.

The Trollocs—for once—needed no push from the Myrddraal to charge. Their footfalls were a low rumble on the stony ground.

Several hundred yards out of the Gap, Lan slowed Mandarb and turned. Andere brought his horse up beside Lan’s with difficulty, and they were joined by the other riders, who formed long lines of cavalry. Bulen cantered up to the other side of Lan.

The storm of Shadowspawn neared the mouth of the Gap, a charging force of thousands of Trollocs that would soon burst out into the open—and try to consume them.

Lan’s forces were silently lined up around him. Many were old men, the last remnants of their fallen kingdom. This force that had managed to plug the narrow gap now seemed tiny on the much larger plain.

“Bulen,” Lan said.

“Yes, Lord Mandragoran?”

“You claim to have failed me, years ago.”

“Yes, my Lord. It—”

“Any failing on your part is forgotten,” Lan said, eyes forward. “I am proud to have given you your *hadori*.”

Kaisel rode up, nodding to Lan. “We are ready, Dai Shan.”

“This is for the best,” Andere said, grimacing, still holding to his wound, barely able to remain in the saddle.

“It is what must be,” Lan said. Not an argument. Not exactly.

“No,” Andere said. “It is more than that, Lan. Malkier is like a tree that lost its roots to whiteworms, the branches withering slowly. I’d rather be burned away in a flash.”

“I’d rather charge,” Bulen said, voice growing firm. “I’d rather charge now than let them overrun us. Let us die on the attack, with swords pointed home.”

Lan nodded, turning and raising his sword high above his head. He gave no speeches. He had given those already. The men knew what this was. One more charge, while they still had some strength, would mean something. Fewer Shadowspawn to flood into civilized lands. Fewer Trollocs to kill those who could not fight back.

The enemy seemed endless. A slavering, rampaging horde without battle line or discipline. Anger, destruction incarnate. Thousands upon thousands of them. They came forward like floodwaters suddenly released, surging out of the canyon.

Lan’s little force was but a pebble before them.

The men silently raised their swords to him, a final salute.

“Now!” Lan yelled. *Now as they begin to spread out. It will do the most damage.* Lan kicked Mandarb forward, leading the way.

Andere galloped beside Lan, clinging to his pommel with both hands. He didn’t try to raise a weapon; he’d have fallen from his saddle if he had.

Nynaeve was too far away for Lan to feel much of her through the bond, but sometimes very powerful emotions could stand out despite the distance. He tried to project confidence in case it reached her. Pride in his men. Love for her. He wished deeply for those to be the last things she remembered of him.

My arm will be the sword…

Hooves clattered on the ground. The Trollocs ahead hooted in delight, realizing that their prey had transformed a retreat into a charge of men rushing right into their grasp.

My breast itself a shield…

Lan could hear a voice, his father’s voice, speaking these words. That was foolish, of course. Lan had been a baby when Malkier had fallen.

To defend the Seven Towers…

He had never seen the Seven Towers stand against the Blight. He’d only heard stories.

To hold back the darkness…

The horses’ hooves were becoming a thunder. So loud, louder than he’d have thought possible. He held himself straight, sword out.

I will stand when all others fall.

The oncoming Trollocs leveled spears as the distance between the two opposing forces narrowed.

Al Chalidholara Malkier. For my sweet land Malkier.

It was the oath a Malkieri soldier took during their first posting to the Border. Lan had never spoken it.

He did so now in his heart.

“*Al Chalidholara Malkier!*” Lan screamed. “Lances, set!” Light, but those hoofbeats were loud! Could six thousand make so much noise? He turned to look at those behind him.

At least ten thousand rode there.

What?

He pressed Mandarb forward through his surprise.

“Forward the Golden Crane!”

Voices, shouts, screams of power and joy.

The air ahead to the left *split* with a sudden vertical slash. A gateway three dozen paces wide—as large as Lan had ever seen—opened as if into the sun itself. From the other side, the brightness spilled out, *exploded* out. Charging men in full armor burst from the gateway, falling into place at Lan’s flank. They flew the flag of Arafel.

More gateways. Three, then four, then a dozen. Each broke the field in coordination, charging horsemen bursting forth with lances leveled, flying the flags of Saldaea, Shienar, Kandor. In seconds, his charge of six thousand had become a hundred thousand.

Trollocs in the front lines screamed, and some of them stopped running. Some held steady, spears angled to impale oncoming horses. Bunching up behind them—not being able to see clearly what was happening in front—other enraged hordes pushed eagerly forward, waving large swords with scythe-like blades and double-bitted battle-axes.

Those Trollocs at the front, holding spears, exploded.

From somewhere behind Lan, Asha'man began to send weaves to rip the earth, completely destroying the front ranks of Trollocs. As the carcasses collapsed to the ground, the middle ranks found themselves completely exposed, facing a storm of hooves, swords and lances.

Lan hit, swinging, crashing Mandarb through the snarling Trollocs. Andere was laughing.

"Back, you fool!" Lan yelled to him as he lashed out at the nearby Trollocs. "Direct the Asha'man to our wounded; have them protect the camp!"

"I want to see you smile, Lan!" Andere shouted, clinging to his horse's saddle. "Show more emotion than a stone, for once! Surely this deserves it!"

Lan looked at the battle he'd never thought to win, seeing a last stand instead become a promising fight, and couldn't help himself. He didn't just smile, he laughed.

Andere obeyed his order, riding off to seek Healing and organize the back lines.

"Jophil," Lan called. "Raise my banner high! Malkier lives on this day!"

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CHAPTER 7

Into the Thick of It

Elayne stepped out of the pavilion after the meeting—and entered a grove of a dozen or so trees. And not just any trees: they were towering, healthy, huge-limbed, beautiful trees, hundreds of feet tall with massive trunks. The way she froze and gaped would have been embarrassing if everyone else hadn't been doing the same. She looked to the side, where Egwene stood, mouth open, as she stared up into the huge trees. The sun still shone above, but the green leaves shaded the area, explaining why the light had dimmed inside the tent.

"These trees," Perrin said, stepping forward and resting his hand on the thick, ribbed bark. "I've seen Great Trees like this before. Inside a *stedding!*"

Elayne embraced the Source. The glow of *saidar* was there, a warmth alongside that of the sun. She breathed in the Power, and was amused to notice that most of the women who could channel had done as she had the moment a *stedding* was mentioned.

"Well, whatever Rand is now," Egwene said, folding her arms, "he can't just make *stedding* appear." She seemed to find the thought comforting.

"Where did he go?" Elayne asked.

"He strolled out there," Perrin said, waving toward the trees. "And vanished."

People were walking among the massive trunks: soldiers from the various camps, staring upward. She heard a Shienaran talking to Lord Agelmar close by. "We watched them grow, my Lord. They burst from the ground; it took less than five minutes for them to become so tall. I swear it, my Lord, or may I never draw blade again."

"All right," Elayne said, releasing the Source. "Lets begin. Nations are burning. Maps! We need maps!"

The other rulers turned toward her. In the meeting, with Rand standing there, few of them had objected to her being chosen to lead them. That was how it could be around him; a person was swept up in the tides of Rand's will. Things seemed so logical when he spoke of them.

Many now looked displeased to have her put above them. Best to give them no time to dwell on it. "Where is Master Norry?" she said to Dyelin. "Could he have—"

"I have maps, Your Majesty," Gareth Bryne said as he left the pavilion, Siuan at his side.

He seemed grayer than she remembered him; he wore a stiff white coat and trousers, the breast marked with the Flame of Tar Valon. He bowed in respect, but did not step too close. His uniform made his allegiance plain, as did Siuan's protective hand on his arm.

Elayne remembered him standing with that same quiet expression behind her mother. Never presuming, always protecting the Queen. That queen had put him out to pasture. That event hadn't been Elayne's fault, but she could read the breached trust in Bryne's face.

Elayne could not change what had come and gone. She could look only to the future. "If you have maps of this area and the potential battlefields presented to us, Lord Bryne, we would love to see them. I would like maps for the area between here and Caemlyn, a detailed map of Kandor and your best maps of the other Borderland areas." To the rulers, she continued, "Gather your commanders and advisors! We must meet immediately with the other great captains to discuss our next course of action."

It didn't take long, though the confusion was pervasive as two dozen different factions set to work. Servants pulled open the sides of the pavilion, and Elayne ordered Sumeko to gather Kinswomen and guards to fetch tables and some chairs through a gateway from her camp. Elayne also sent for specific reports of what was happening at the Gap, where Rand had asked the bulk of the Borderlander armies to go and rescue Lan. The rulers and great captains had remained behind for the planning.

Shortly, Elayne and Egwene stood surveying Bryne's detailed maps, which had been spread out across four tables. The rulers stood back and allowed the commanders to deliberate.

"This is good work, Bryne," Lord Agelmar said. The Shienaran was one of the four remaining great captains. Bryne was another. The final two great captains—Davram Bashere and Rodel Ituralde—stood side by side at the end of another table, making corrections to a map of the western Borderlands. Ituralde had bags under his eyes, and his hands sometimes shook. From what Elayne had heard, he had suffered quite an ordeal in Maradon, having been rescued only very recently. She was surprised he was here, actually.

"All right," Elayne said to the assembly. "We must fight. But how? Where?"

"Large forces of Shadowspawn have invaded three locations," Bryne said. "Caemlyn, Kandor and Tarwin's Gap. The Gap should not be abandoned, assuming our armies are enough to help Lord Mandragoran stabilize there. The likely result of our push there today will be the Shadowspawn pulling back into the pass. Keeping the enemy plugged up there is an unsuitable task for the Malkieri heavy cavalry alone. Perhaps we would best send him some pike companies? If he continues to plug that breach, we can devote the majority of our forces to combat in Andor and Kandor."

Agelmar nodded. "Yes. That should be viable if we give Dai Shan the proper support. But we cannot risk letting Shienar become overrun as Kandor was. If they push out of the Gap…"

"We are prepared for an extended battle," Lord Easar said. "Kandor's resistance and Lan's fight at the Gap have given us the time we need. Our people are pulling into our fortresses. We can hold, even if we lose the Gap."

"Brave words, Your Majesty," Gareth Bryne said, "but it would be best if we did not have to test the Shienarans in that way. Let us plan to hold the Gap with whatever force it takes to do so."

"And Caemlyn?" Elayne asked.

Ituralde nodded. "An enemy force that deep behind our lines, with a Waygate to use for reinforcements… that is trouble."

"Early reports from this morning," Elayne said, "indicate they're staying put for the time being. They burned large quarters of the city, but left other sections alone—and now that they have the city, the Trollocs have been set to work smothering the flames."

"They will have to leave eventually," Bryne said. "But it will be better if we can flush them out sooner, rather than later."

"Why not consider a siege?" Agelmar asked. "I think the bulk of our armies should go to Kandor. I would not let the Throne of Clouds and the Three Halls of Trade fall as did the Seven Towers."

"Kandor already has fallen," Prince Antol said softly.

The great captains looked at the eldest son of the Kandori queen. A tall man, he had a silent way about him. Now he spoke boldly. “My mother fights for our country,” he said, “but it is a fight of vengeance and redemption. Kandor burns, and it rips my heart to know it, but we cannot stop that. Give Andor your greatest attention; it is too tactically important to ignore, and I would not see another land fall as mine has.”

The others nodded. “Wise advice, Highness,” Bashere said. “Thank you.”

Also, do not forget Shayol Ghul,” Rhuarc said from the periphery, where he stood alongside Perrin, some Aes Sedai and several other Aiel chiefs. The great captains turned toward Rhuarc, as if having forgotten he was there.

“The *Car’a’carn* soon will assault Shayol Ghul,” Rhuarc said. “He will need spears at his back when he does so.”

“He will have them,” Elayne said. “Though that means four battle-fronts. Shayol Ghul, Tarwin’s Gap, Kandor and Caemlyn.”

“Let us focus on Caemlyn first,” Ituralde said. “I don’t like the idea of a siege there. We *need* to flush the Trollocs out. If we simply besiege them, it gives them more time to reinforce their numbers through that Waygate. We have to take them out now, on our terms.”

Agelmar nodded with a grunt, looking at the map of Caemlyn an aide had put on the table. “Can we stanch that flow? Retake the Waygate?”

“I’ve tried,” Elayne said. “This morning, we sent three separate forces through a gateway into the basement with the Waygate, but the Shadow is prepared and entrenched. None of the forces returned. I don’t know if we *can* take the Waygate back, or even destroy it.”

“What if we tried from the other side?” Agelmar asked.

“The other side?” Elayne asked. “You mean from *inside* the Ways?” Agelmar nodded.

“Nobody travels the Ways,” Ituralde said, aghast.

“The Trollocs do,” Agelmar said.

“I’ve been through them,” Perrin said, approaching the table. “And I’m sorry, my Lords, but I don’t think that taking the Waygate from the other side would work. From what I understand, we couldn’t destroy it—even with the One Power. And we couldn’t hold it inside, not with the Black Wind in there. Our best choice is to somehow get those Trollocs out of Caemlyn and then hold this side of the Waygate. If it is properly guarded, the Shadow would never be able to use it against us.”

“Very well,” Elayne said. “We will consider other options. Though, it occurs to me that we should send to the Black Tower for their Asha’man also. How many are there?”

Perrin cleared his throat. “I think you might want to be careful about that place, Your Majesty. Something’s going on there.”

Elayne frowned. “ ‘Something’?”

“I don’t know,” Perrin said. “I spoke to Rand about it, and he was worried, and said he was going to investigate. Anyway… just be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” Elayne said absently. “So how do we get those Trollocs out of Caemlyn?”

“Perhaps we can hide a large assault force in Braem Wood; it’s here, almost fifty leagues north of Caemlyn.” Bryne pointed at the map. “If a smaller company of soldiers were to go up to the city gates and get the Trollocs to chase them back to the Wood as bait in the trap ... I always worried that an invading army would use the Wood for cover as a base for attacking the city. I never thought I’d be considering the same option myself.”

“Interesting,” Agelmar said, studying a map of the terrain around Caemlyn. “That seems like a solid prospect.”

“But what of Kandor?” Bashere asked. “The Prince is right that the country is beyond rescue, but we cannot simply let the Trollocs pour out into other lands.”

Ituralde scratched at his chin. “This entire matter is going to be difficult. Three Trolloc armies, with us forced to divide our attention between them. Yes, more and more, I realize that the right move is to focus on one of them and set delaying forces against the other two.”

“The Shadow’s army at Caemlyn is likely the smallest,” Agelmar said, “as the size of the Waygate has restricted their entry into the city.”

“Yes,” Bashere agreed. “Our chance for a quick victory on one of the battlefronts is best at Caemlyn. We should strike hard there with the largest of our assault forces. If we can win in Andor, it will reduce the number of fronts we have to fight on—and that will be extremely advantageous.”

“Yes,” Elayne said. “We reinforce Lan, but tell him that his job will be to hold there as long as he can. We place a second force at the border of Kandor, with the purpose of delaying there as well—perhaps a slow withdrawal, as conditions dictate. While those two fronts are held, we can focus our true attention—and our largest army—at breaking the Trollocs in Caemlyn.”

“Good,” Agelmar said. “I like it. But what force do we place in Kandor? What army can slow the Trollocs, but won’t require a large commitment of troops?”

“The White Tower?” Elayne asked. “If we send the Aes Sedai to Kandor, they can slow the Trollocs’ advance across the border. That will let the rest of us concentrate on Caemlyn.”

“Yes,” Bryne said. “I like it.”

“And what of the fourth battlefront?” Ituralde asked. “Shayol Ghul? Does anyone know what the Lord Dragon plans there?”

Nobody spoke.

“The Aiel will see to his needs,” Amys said from beside the clan chiefs. “You needn’t worry about us. Make your battle plans, and we will make ours.”

“No,” Elayne said.

“Elayne?” Aviendha said. “We—”

“This is precisely what Rand wished to avoid,” Elayne said forcefully. “The Aiel will work with the rest of us. The battle at Shayol Ghul could be the most important of all. I won’t have one group presuming to keep to themselves and fight alone. You’ll accept our help.”

And, she added to herself, *our direction.* The Aiel were excellent warriors, but there were some things they just wouldn’t admit. The usefulness of cavalry, for one.

The Aiel obviously did *not* like the prospect of wetlander command. They bristled, eyes narrowing.

“The Aiel are excellent irregulars,” Bryne said, looking to them. “I faced you on the Blood Snow, and I know how deadly you can be. However, if the Lord Dragon attacks Shayol Ghul, we will likely need to seize the valley and then hold it for as long as it takes him to battle with the Dark One. I don’t know how long that will take, but it could take hours. Days. Tell me, have you ever had to entrench and fight a protracted, defensive war?”

“We will do what needs to be done,” Rhuarc said.

“Rhuarc,” Elayne said. “You yourselves insisted on signing the Dragon’s Peace. You yourselves insisted that you be part of our coalition. I expect you to live up to your word. You *will* do as you are told.”

Bryne’s and Ituralde’s questions had set them off, but being told directly what to do made them back down. Rhuarc nodded. “Of course,” he said. “I have *toh.”*

“Meet it by listening,” Elayne said, “and offering your opinion. If we’re going to fight on four different fronts at once, we’ll need a lot of coordination.” She looked at the gathered generals. “It occurs to me. We have four battlefronts, and four great captains…”

Bashere nodded. “No coincidence, that.”

“Well, it might be one.”

“There are no coincidences, Highness,” Bashere said. “If I’ve learned one thing traveling with the Lord Dragon, that is it. Four of us, four battlefronts.

“We each take one, with Queen Elayne coordinating among us and overseeing the war effort as a whole.”

“I will go to the Malkieri,” Agelmar said. “Most of the Borderlanders fight there now.”

“What of Kandor?” Elayne said.

“If the Aes Sedai are to fight there,” Bryne said, “so will I. My place is with the White Tower.”

He doesn’t want to fight in Andor, Elayne thought. *He doesn't want to fight alongside me. He wishes the break to be clean.* “Who comes to Andor with me, then?”

“I’ll go,” Bashere said.

“And I to Shayol Ghul, then,” Ituralde said, nodding. “To fight alongside Aiel. A day I never thought I’d see, in truth.”

“Good,” Elayne said, pulling over a chair. “Then let’s dig into the thick of it and get to details. We need a central location for me to work from, and Caemlyn is lost. For now, I will use Merrilor. It is central, and has plenty of room to move troops and supplies around in. Perrin, do you think you could take charge of the logistics of this camp? Set up a Traveling ground, and organize the channelers to help with communications and supply operations?”

Perrin nodded.

“The rest of you,” she said, “let’s get to dividing the forces in detail and fleshing out the plans. We need a firm idea of how we are going to push those Trollocs out of Caemlyn so we can fight them on even ground.”

Hours later, Elayne stepped from the pavilion, her mind spinning with details of tactics, supply needs and troop placements. When she blinked, she could see maps in her mind's eye, covered with Gareth Bryne's cramped notations.

The others from the meeting began trailing away to their separate camps to begin executing their battle plans. The dimming sky had required lanterns to be set up around the pavilion. She vaguely remembered both lunch and dinner being brought to the meeting. She'd eaten, hadn't she? There had simply been so much to *do.*

She nodded to those rulers who passed her, giving farewells. Most of the initial planning details had been worked out. On the morrow, Elayne would take her troops to Andor and begin the first leg of the counterattack against the Shadow.

The ground here was now soft and springy with deep green grass. Rand's influence lingered, though he had departed. As Elayne inspected those towering trees, Gareth Bryne stepped up beside her.

She turned, surprised he hadn't left the pavilion already. The only ones still here now were the servants and Elayne's guards. "Lord Bryne?" she asked.

"I just wanted to say that I'm proud," Bryne told her softly. "You did well in there."

"I had hardly anything to add."

"You added leadership," Bryne said. "You aren't a general, Elayne, and nobody expects you to be one. But when Tenobia complained about Saldaea being left exposed, you were the one who diverted her back to what matters. Tensions are high, but you kept us together, smoothed over bad feelings, prevented us from snapping at one another. Good work, Your Majesty. *Very* good work."

She grinned. Light, but it was hard not to positively beam at his words. He wasn't her father, but in many ways, he was as close to one as she had. "Thank you. And Bryne, the crown apologizes for—"

"Not a word of that," he said. "The Wheel weaves as it wills. I don't blame Andor for what happened to me." He hesitated. "I'm still going to fight together with the White Tower, Elayne."

"I understand."

He bowed to her and strode off toward Egwene's section of camp.

Birgitte stepped up to Elayne. “Back to our camp, then?” the woman asked.

“I…” Elayne hesitated, hearing something. A faint sound, yet somehow deep and powerful. She frowned, walking toward it, holding up a hand to still Birgitte as she started to ask what was happening.

The two of them rounded the pavilion, crossing green grass and blossoming morning’s breath, walking toward the sound, which grew stronger and stronger. A song. A beautiful song, unlike any she had ever heard, that made her tremble with its striking sonority.

It washed over her, enveloped her, vibrated *through* her. A joyful song, a song of awe and wonder, though she could not understand the words. She approached a group of towering creatures, like trees themselves, standing with their hands on the gnarled trunks of the trees Rand had grown, their eyes closed.

Three dozen Ogier of various ages, from those with eyebrows as white as new snow to those as young as Loial. He stood there with them, a smile raising the sides of his mouth as he sang.

Perrin, arms folded, stood nearby with his wife. “Your talk of going to the Asha’man had me thinking—if we need allies, what about the Ogier? I was going to see if I could find Loial, but before I could set out, I found them already here among these trees.”

Elayne nodded, listening to the Ogier song reach its climax, then fade, the Ogier bowing their heads. For a moment, all was peaceful.

Finally, an ancient Ogier opened his eyes and turned toward Elayne. His white beard reached low on his chest, below the white mustaches that drooped on either side of his mouth. He stepped forward, other ancients both male and female joining him. With them came Loial.

“You are the Queen,” the ancient Ogier said, bowing to her. “The one who leads this journey. I am Haman, son of Dal son of Morel. We have come to lend our axes to your fight.”

“I am pleased,” Elayne said, nodding to him. “Three dozen Ogier will add strength to our battle.”

“Three dozen, young one?” Haman laughed a rumbling laugh. “The Great Stump did not meet, did not debate this long time, to send you three *dozen* of our numbers. The Ogier will fight alongside humans. All of us. Every one of us who can hold an axe or long knife.”

“Wonderful!” Elayne said. “I will put you to good use.”

An older Ogier woman shook her head. “So hasty. So quick. Know this, young one. There were some who would have abandoned you, and the world, to the Shadow.”

Elayne blinked in shock. “You would have actually done it? Just… left us alone? To fight?”

“Some argued for it,” Haman said.

“I myself took that position,” the woman said. “I made the argument, though I did not truly believe it was right.”

“What?” Loial asked, stumbling forward. This seemed news to him. “You didn’t?”

The woman looked to him. “Trees will not grow if the Dark One claims this world.”

Loial looked surprised. “But why did you—”

“An argument must have opposition if it is to prove itself, my son,” she said. “One who argues truly learns the depth of his commitment through adversity. Did you not learn that trees grow roots most strongly when winds blow through them?” She shook her head, though she did seem fond. “That is not to say you should have left the *stedding* when you did. Not alone. Fortunately, that has been taken care of.”

“Taken care of?” Perrin asked.

Loial blushed. “Well, you see, Perrin, I am married now.”

“You didn’t mention this earlier!”

“Everything has come so quickly. I am married to Erith, though, you see. She’s just over there. Did you hear her singing? Isn’t her song beautiful? Being married is not so bad, Perrin. Why didn’t you tell me it was not so bad? I think I am rather fond of it.”

“I am pleased for you, Loial,” Elayne cut in. Ogier could talk quite long on tangents if one was not careful. “And thankful, to all of you, for joining us.”

“It is worth the price, perhaps,” Haman said, “just to see these trees. In all my life, men have only *cut* Great Trees. To see someone growing them instead… We made the correct decision. Yes, yes, we did. The others will need to see this…”

Loial waved to Perrin, apparently wanting to catch up. “Allow me to borrow him for a moment, Loial,” Elayne said, steering Perrin toward the center of the grove.

Faile and Birgitte joined her, and Loial waited behind. He seemed distracted by the mighty trees.

“I have a duty I want to assign you,” Elayne said softly to Perrin. “Losing Caemlyn threatens to send our armies into a supply crisis. Despite complaints of food prices, we had been keeping everyone fed, as well as accumulating stores for the battle ahead. Those stores are now gone.”

“What of Cairhien?” Perrin asked.

“It still has some food,” Elayne said. “As do the White Tower and Tear. Baerlon has good supplies of metals and powder—I need to find what we can draw from the other nations, and discover their food situation. It will be a massive task to coordinate stores and rations for all the armies. I’d like one person in charge of it all.”

“You were thinking of me?” Perrin said.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” Perrin said. “Elayne, Rand needs me.”

“Rand needs us all.”

“He needs me more,” Perrin said. “Min saw it, he said. Without me at the Last Battle, he’ll die. Besides, I have a few fights to finish.”

“I’ll do it,” Faile said.

Elayne turned toward her, frowning.

“It is my duty to manage the affairs of my husband’s army,” Faile said. “You are his liege lady, Your Majesty, so your needs are his needs. If Andor is to command the Last Battle, then the Two Rivers will see it fed. Give me access to gateways large enough for wagons to drive through, give me troops to protect my movements, and give me access to the quartermaster records of anyone I want. I will see it done.”

It was logical and rational, but not what Elayne needed. How far did she trust this woman? Faile had proven herself deft at politics. That was useful, but did she really consider herself part of Andor? Elayne studied the woman.

“There is nobody better you can trust with this task, Elayne,” Perrin said. “Faile *will* see it done.”

“Perrin,” Elayne said. “There is a different matter involved in this. May we speak privately for a moment?”

“I’ll just tell her what it is when we're done, Your Majesty,” Perrin said. “I don’t keep secrets from my wife.”

Faile smiled.

Elayne eyed the two of them, then sighed softly. “Egwene came to me during our battle preparations. There is a certain… item of importance to the Last Battle that she needs to be delivered.”

“The Horn of Valere,” Perrin said. “You still have it, I hope.”

“We do. In the Tower, hidden. We moved it from the strongroom none too quickly. Last night, that room was broken into. I know only because of certain wards we set. The Shadow knows we have the Horn, Perrin, and the Dark One’s minions are looking for it. They can’t use it; it’s tied to Mat until he dies. But if the Shadow’s minions can capture it, he can keep Mat from using it. Or, worse—kill him, then blow it themselves.”

“You want to mask moving it,” Faile said, “using the supply runs to hide where you’re taking it.”

“We’d *rather* just give it to Mat straight out,” Elayne said. “But he can be… difficult, sometimes. I had hoped he would be here at this meeting.”

“He’s in Ebou Dar,” Perrin said. “Doing something with the Seanchan.

“He told you?” Elayne asked.

“Not exactly,” Perrin said, looking uncomfortable. “We… have some kind of connection. I sometimes see where he is and what he’s doing.”

“That man,” Elayne said, “is *never* where he needs to be.”

“And yet,” Perrin said, “he always arrives there eventually.”

“The Seanchan are the enemy,” Elayne said. “Mat doesn’t seem to understand that, considering what he’s done. Light, I hope that man isn’t putting himself in trouble somehow…”

“I will do this,” Faile said. “I’ll care for the Horn of Valere. I’ll see it gets to Mat, guard it.”

“No offense to either of you,” Elayne said, “but I am hesitant to trust this to someone I don’t know well. That is why I came to you, Perrin.”

“That’s going to be a problem, Elayne,” Perrin said. “If they really are watching for the Horn, then they’ll *expect* you and Egwene to give it to someone you know well. Choose Faile. There is nobody I trust more than her, but she won’t be suspected, as she has no direct relationship with the White Tower.”

Elayne nodded slowly. “Very well. I’ll send word to you on how it will be delivered. For now, begin running supplies to establish precedent. Too many people know about the Horn. After we give it to you, I will send five suspect envoys from the White Tower and seed the right rumors. We hope that the Shadow will assume the Horn is being carried by one of those envoys. I want it to be where nobody expects, at least until we can put it into Matrim's hands."

"Four battlefronts, Lord Mandragoran," Bulen repeated. "That's what the messengers are saying. Caemlyn, Shayol Ghul, Kandor, and here. They want to try to bottle up the Trollocs here and in Kandor while trying hard to defeat those in Andor first."

Lan grunted, guiding Mandarb around the reeking heap of dead Trollocs. The carcasses served as a bulwark now that his five Asha'man had pushed them up into mounds like dark, bloody hills before the Blight, where the Shadowspawn gathered.

The stench was horrible, of course. Many of the guards he passed in his rounds had thrown sprigleaf onto their fires to cover up the smell.

Evening approached, bringing its most dangerous hours. Fortunately, those black clouds above made nights so dark that Trollocs had trouble seeing anything. Dusk, however, was a time of strength to them—a time when the eyes of humans were hampered but the eyes of Shadowspawn were not.

The power of the united Borderlander attack had pushed the Trollocs back toward the mouth of the Gap. Lan was getting reinforced by the hour with pikemen and other foot to help him hold position. All in all, it looked far better here now than it had just a day before.

Still grim, though. If what Bulen said was right, his army would be stationed here as a stalling force. That meant fewer troops for him than he would have liked. He could not fault the tactics presented, however.

Lan passed into the area where the Shienaran lancers cared for their horses. A figure emerged from them and rode up beside Lan. King Easar was a compact man with a white topknot, recently arrived from the Field of Merrilor following a long day making battle plans. Lan began a horseback bow, but stopped as King Easar bowed to *him.*

"Your Majesty?" Lan asked.

"Agelmar has brought his plans for this battlefront, Dai Shan," King Easar said, falling in beside him. "He would like to go over them with us. It is important that you are there; we fight beneath the banner of Malkier. We all agreed to it."

"Tenobia?" Lan asked, genuinely surprised.

“In her case, a little encouragement was required. She came around. I also have word that Queen Ethenielle will leave Kandor and come here. The Borderlands fight together in this battle, and we do it with you at our head.”

They rode on in the fading light, row upon row of lancers saluting Easar. The Shienarans were the finest heavy cavalry in the world, and they had fought—and died—upon these rocks countless times, defending the lush lands to the south.

“I will come,” Lan agreed. “The weight of what you have given me feels like three mountains.”

“I know,” Easar said. “But we shall follow you, Dai Shan. Until the sky is rent asunder, until the rocks split underfoot, and until the Wheel itself stops turning. Or, Light send its blessing, until every sword is favored with peace.”

“What of Kandor? If the Queen comes here, who will lead that battle?”

“The White Tower rides to fight the Shadowspawn there,” Easar said. “You raised the Golden Crane. We were sworn to come to your aid, so we have.” He hesitated, and then his voice grew grim. “Kandor is beyond recovery now, Dai Shan. The Queen admits it. The White Towers job is not to recover it, but to stop the Shadowspawn from taking more territory.”

They turned and rode through the ranks of lancers. The men were required to spend dusk within a few paces of their mounts, and they made themselves busy, caring for armor, weapons and horses. Each man wore a longsword, sometimes two, strapped to his back, and all had maces and daggers at their belts. The Shienarans did not rely solely upon their lances; an enemy who thought to pin them without room to charge soon discovered that they could be very dangerous in close quarters.

Most of the men wore yellow surcoats over their plate-and-mail, bearing the black hawk. They gave their salutes with stiff backs and serious faces. Indeed, the Shienarans were a serious people. Living in the Borderlands did that.

Lan hesitated, then spoke in a loud voice. “Why do we mourn?”

The soldiers nearby turned toward him.

“Is this not what we have trained for?” Lan shouted. “Is this not our purpose, our very *lives?* This war is not a thing to mourn. Other men may have been lax, but we have not been. We are prepared, and so this is a time of glory.

“Let there be laughter! Let there be joy! Let us cheer the fallen and drink to our forefathers, who taught us well. If you die on the morrow, awaiting your rebirth, be proud. The Last Battle is upon us, and *we are ready!*”

Lan wasn’t sure, exactly, what had made him say it. His words inspired a round of “Dai Shan! Dai Shan! Forward the Golden Crane!” He saw that some of the men were writing the speech down, to pass among the other men.

“You do have the soul of a leader, Dai Shan,” Easar said as they rode on.

“It is not that,” Lan said, eyes forward. “I cannot stand self-pity. Too many of the men looked as if they were preparing their own shrouds.”

“A drum with no head,” Easar said softly, flicking his horse’s reins. “A pump with no grip. A song with no voice. Still it is mine. Still it is mine.”

Lan turned, frowning, but the King gave no explanation for the poem. If his people were a serious people, their king was more so. Easar had wounds deep within that he chose not to share. Lan did not fault him in this; Lan himself had done the same.

Tonight, however, he caught Easar smiling as he considered whatever it was that had brought the poem to his lips.

“Was that Anasai of Ryddingwood?” Lan asked.

Easar looked surprised. “You have read Anasai’s work?”

“She was a favorite of Moiraine Sedai. It sounded as though it might be hers.”

“Each of her poems was written as an elegy,” Easar said. “This was for her father. She left instructions; it can be read, but should not be spoken out loud, except when it was right to do so. She did not explain when it would be right to do so.”

They reached the war tents and dismounted. No sooner had they done so, however, than the horns of alarm began to sound. Both men reacted, and Lan unconsciously touched the sword on his hip.

“Let us go to Lord Agelmar,” Lan shouted as men began to yell and equipment to rattle. “If you fight beneath my banner, then I will accept the role of leader gladly.”

“No hesitation at all?” Easar said.

“What am I?” Lan asked, swinging into the saddle. “Some sheepherder from a forgotten village? I will do my duty. If men are foolish enough to put me in charge of them, I’ll send them about theirs as well.”

Easar nodded, then saluted, the corners of his mouth rising in another smile. Lan returned the salute, then galloped Mandarb through the center of the camp. The men at the outskirts were lighting bonfires; Ashaman had created gateways to one of the many dying forests in the south for soldiers to gather wood. If Lan had his way, those five channelers would never waste their strength killing Trollocs. They were far too useful otherwise.

Narishma saluted Lan as he passed. Lan could not be certain that the great captains had chosen Borderlander Ashaman for him on purpose, but it seemed not to be a coincidence. He had at least one from each Borderlander nation—even one born to Malkieri parents.

We fight together.

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CHAPTER 8

That Smoldering City

Atop Moonshadow, her deep brown mare from the royal stables, Elayne Trakand rode through a gateway of her own making.

Those stables were now in the hands of Trollocs, and Moonshadow’s stablemates had undoubtedly found their way into cookpots by now. Elayne did not think too hard about what else—*who* else—might have ended up in those same pots. She set her face in determination. Her troops would not see their queen look uncertain.

She had chosen to come to a hill about a thousand paces to the northwest of Caemlyn, well out of bow range but close enough to see the city. Several mercenary bands had made their camp in these hills during the weeks following the Succession War. Those had all either joined the armies of Light or had disbanded, becoming roving thieves and brigands.

The foreguard had already secured the area, and Captain Guybon saluted as members of the Queens Guard—both male and female—surrounded Elayne’s horse. The air still smelled of smoke, and seeing Caemlyn smoldering like Dragonmount itself tossed a handful of bitter powder into the stew of emotions churning inside of her.

The once-proud city was dead, a pyre that pitched a hundred different columns of smoke toward the storm clouds above. The smoke reminded her of the spring burnings, when farmers would occasionally fire their fields to help clear them for planting. She hadn’t ruled Caemlyn for a hundred days, and already it was lost.

If dragons can do that to a city, she thought, surveying the hole that Talmanes had made in the nearest wall, *the world will need to change. Everything we know about warfare will change.*

“How many, would you say?” she asked the man who rode up beside her. Talmanes was only one day of rest away from the ordeal that should have cost him his life. He probably should have remained at Merrilor; he certainly wouldn't be doing any frontline fighting in the near future.

"It is impossible to count their numbers, hidden as they are in the city, Your Majesty," he said, bowing respectfully. "Tens of thousands, but probably not hundreds of thousands."

The fellow was nervous around her, and he manifested it in a very Cairhienin way—by speaking with flowery respect. He was said to be one of Mat's most trusted officers; she would have assumed that, by now, Mat would have corrupted the fellow far more. He didn't curse once. Pity.

Other gateways opened nearby onto the yellow grass, and her forces came through, filling the fields and topping the hills. She had taken charge of a large army of warriors, which included many of the *siswai'aman*, to bolster her Queen's Guard and the Andoran regulars under the command of Birgitte and Captain Guybon. A second contingent of Aiel—Maidens, Wise Ones and the remaining warriors—had been chosen to travel north to Shayol Ghul with Rand.

Only a handful of Wise Ones had come with Elayne, the ones who followed Perrin. Elayne would have liked more channelers than that. Still, she did have the Band and their dragons, which should make up for the fact that her only other channelers were the Kinswomen, many of whom were on the weaker side of strength in the Power.

Perrin and his force had come with her. That included Mayene's Winged Guards, the Ghealdanin cavalry, the Whitecloaks—she still wasn't sure what she thought of *that*—and a company of Two Rivers archers with Tam. Filling out her army was the group who called themselves the Wolf Guard, mostly refugees turned soldiers, some of whom had received combat training. And, of course, she had Captain Bashere and his Legion of the Dragon.

She had approved Bashere's plan for the battle at Caemlyn. *We will need to draw the fighting into the woods,* he had explained. *The archers will be deadly, loosing at the Trollocs upon their approach. If these lads can move as well as I am told they can in the forest, they'll be just as dangerous once they've pulled back.*

The Aiel, too, would be deadly in a forest, where the Trollocs wouldn't be able to use their masses to overrun their opponents. Bashere himself rode nearby. Apparently, Rand had specifically told him to watch over her. As if she didn't have Birgitte jumping every time she moved.

Rand had better stay safe so I can tell him what I think of him, she thought as Bashere approached in quiet conversation with Birgitte. Bashere was a bowlegged man with a thick mustache. He didn’t talk to Elayne the way a man should a queen… but then, the Queen of Saldaea was his niece, so perhaps he was just very comfortable around royalty.

He is first in line for the throne, Elayne reminded herself. Working with him would offer opportunities to further secure her ties to Saldaea. She still liked the idea of seeing one of her children on that throne. She lowered a hand to her stomach. The babes kicked and elbowed frequently now. Nobody had told her it would feel so much like… well, indigestion. Unfortunately, Melfane had, against all expectation, found some goat’s milk.

“What word?” Elayne asked as Birgitte and Bashere arrived, Talmanes moving his horse aside to make room.

“Scout reports of the city are in,” Bashere said.

“Bashere was right,” Birgitte said. “The Trollocs have been reined in, and the burning has mostly died out. A good half of the city still stands. Much of that smoke you see is from cook fires, not buildings.”

“Trollocs are stupid,” Bashere said, “but Halfmen are *not.* The Trollocs would have gleefully ransacked the city and lit fires all across it, but that would have threatened to let the fires get away from them. Either way, the truth is we don’t know what the Shadow is planning here, but they at least have the option of trying to hold the city for a time, should they desire.”

“Will they try that?” Elayne asked.

“I can’t say, honestly,” Bashere replied. “We don’t know their goals. Was this attack on Caemlyn intended to sow chaos and bring fear to our armies, or is it intended to take a stronghold and hold it long-term as a base from which to harry our forces? Back during the Trolloc Wars, the Fades did hold cities for that purpose.”

Elayne nodded.

“Pardon, Your Majesty?” a voice said. She turned to see one of the Two Rivers men stepping up. One of their leaders, Tam’s second-in-command. *Dannil,* she thought, *that's his name.*

“Your Majesty,” Dannil repeated. He fumbled a little, but actually spoke with some polish. “Lord Goldeneyes has his men set up in the forest.”

“Lord Talmanes, do you have your dragons in position?”

"Almost," Talmanes said. "Pardon, Your Majesty, but I'm not certain the bows will be needed once those weapons fire. Are you certain you don't want to lead with the dragons?"

"We need to goad the Trollocs into battle," Elayne said. "The placement I outlined will work best. Bashere, what of my plan for the city itself?"

"I think everything is almost ready, but I'll want to check," Bashere said, knuckling his mustache in thought. "Those women of yours made gateways well enough, and Mayene gave us the oil. You're sure you want to go through with something so drastic?"

"Yes."

Bashere waited for more of a response, perhaps an explanation. When she didn't give one, he moved off, issuing the last orders. Elayne turned Moonshadow to ride down the ranks of soldiers here at the front lines, where they'd set up near the forests. There wasn't much she could do now, in these last moments as her commanders gave orders, but she *could* be seen riding with confidence. Where she passed, the men raised their pikes higher, lifted their chins.

Elayne kept her own eyes on that smoldering city. She would not look away, and she would not let anger control her. She would use the anger.

Bashere returned to her a short time later. "It's done. The basements of many buildings that are still standing have been filled with oil. Talmanes and the others are in place. Once your Warder returns with word that the Kinswomen are prepared to open another round of gateways, we can proceed."

Elayne nodded, and then removed her hand from her belly as Bashere glanced at it. She hadn't realized she'd been holding it again. "What do you think of me going to battle while pregnant? Is it a mistake?"

He shook his head. "No. It proves just how desperate our situation is. It will make the soldiers think. Make them more serious. Besides…

"What?"

Bashere shrugged. "Perhaps it will remind them that not *everything* in this world is dying."

Elayne turned back, looking at the distant city. Farmers burned their fields in the spring to prepare them for new life. Maybe that was what Andor was suffering now.

"Tell me," Bashere said. "Are you going to tell the men that you're carrying the Lord Dragon's child?"

Children, Elayne corrected in her head. “You presume to know something that may or may not be true, Lord Bashere.”

“I have a wife, and a daughter. I recognize the look in your eyes when you see the Lord Dragon. No woman with child touches her hand to her womb so reverently when looking on a man who is not the father.”

Elayne drew her lips into a line.

“Why do you hide it?” Bashere asked. “I’ve heard what some of the men think. They talk of some other man, a Darkfriend named Mellar, once Captain of your Guardswomen. I can see that the rumors are false, but others are not so wise. You could kill those rumors if you wished.”

“Rand’s children will be targets,” she said.

“Ah…” he replied. He knuckled his mustache for a moment.

“If you disagree with the reasoning, Bashere, speak your mind. I will not suffer a toady.”

“I’m no toady, woman,” he said with a huff. “But regardless, I hardly doubt your child could be a greater target than he or she already is. You’re high commander of the armies of the Light! I think your men deserve to know what exactly they’re fighting for.”

“It is not your business to know,” Elayne said, “nor is it theirs.”

Bashere raised an eyebrow at her. “The heir to the realm,” he said flatly, “is not the business of its subjects?”

“I believe you are overstepping your bounds, *General*.”

“Perhaps I am,” he said. “Maybe spending so much time with the Lord Dragon has warped the way I do things. That man… you could never tell what he was thinking. Half of the time, he wanted to hear my mind, as raw as I could lay it out. The other half of the time, it seemed like he’d break me in two just for commenting that the sky looked a little dark.” Bashere shook his head. “Just give it some thought, Your Majesty. You remind me of my daughter. She might have done something similar, and this is the advice I’d give her. Your men will fight more bravely if they know that you carry the Dragon Reborns heir.”

Men, Elayne thought. *The young ones try to impress me with every stunt that comes into their fool heads. The old ones assume every young woman is in need of a lecture.*

She turned her eyes toward the city again as Birgitte rode up and gave her a nod. The basements were filled with oil and pitch.

“Burn it,” Elayne said loudly.

Birgitte waved a hand. The Kinswomen opened their round of gateways, and men hurled lit torches through into the basements of Caemlyn. It didn’t take long for the smoke rising above the city to grow darker, more ominous.

“They won’t soon put *that* out,” Birgitte said softly. “Not with the dry weather we’ve been having. The entire city will go up like a haystack.”

The army gathered to stare at the city, particularly the members of the Queen’s Guard and the Andoran military. A few of them saluted, as one might salute the pyre of a fallen hero.

Elayne ground her teeth, then said, “Birgitte, make it known among the Guards. The children I carry were fathered by the Dragon Reborn.”

Bashere’s smile deepened. *Insufferable man!* Birgitte was smiling as she went to spread the word. She was insufferable, too.

The men of Andor seemed to stand taller, prouder, as they watched their capital burn. Trollocs started pouring from the gates, driven by the fires. Elayne made sure the Trollocs saw her army, then announced, “Northward!” She turned Moonshadow. “Caemlyn is dead. We take to the forests; let the Shadowspawn follow!”

Androl awoke with dirt in his mouth. He groaned, trying to roll over, but found himself bound in some way. He spat, licked his lips and blinked crusty eyes.

He lay with Jonneth and Emarin against an earthen wall, tied by ropes. He remembered… Light! The roof had fallen in.

Pevara? he sent. Incredible how natural that method of communication was beginning to feel.

He was rewarded with a groggy sensation from her. The bond let him know that she was nearby, probably tied up as well. The One Power was also lost to him; he clawed at it, but ran up against a shield. His bonds were tied to some kind of hook in the ground behind him, hindering his movement.

Androl shoved panic down with some effort. He couldn’t see Nalaam. Was he here? The group of them lay tied in a large chamber, and the air smelled of damp earth. They were still underground in a part of Taim’s secret complex.

If the roof fell in, Androl thought, *the cells were probably destroyed.* That explained why he and the others were tied up, but not locked away.

Someone was sobbing.

He strained around and found Evin tied nearby. The younger man wept, shaking.

“It’s all right, Evin,” Androl whispered. “We’ll find a way out of this.”

Evin glanced at him, shocked. The youth was tied in a different way, in a seated position, hands behind his back. “Androl? Androl, I’m *sorry.*”

Androl felt a twisting emotion. “For what, Evin?”

“They came right after the rest of you left. They wanted Emarin, I think. To Turn him. When he wasn’t there, they began asking questions, demands. They broke me, Androl. I broke so easily. I’m sorry…”

So Taim hadn’t discovered the fallen guards. “It’s not your fault, Evin.”

Footsteps sounded on the ground nearby. Androl feigned unconsciousness, but someone kicked him. “I saw you talking, pageboy,” Mishraile said, leaning down his golden-haired head. “I’m going to enjoy killing you for what you did to Coteren.”

Androl opened his eyes and saw Logain sagging in the grip of Mezar and Welyn. They dragged him near and dropped him roughly to the ground. Logain stirred and groaned as they tied him up. They stood, and one spat on Androl before moving over to Emarin.

“No,” Taim said from somewhere near. “The youth is next. The Great Lord demands results. Logain is taking too long.”

Evin’s sobs grew louder as Mezar and Welyn moved over to seize him under the arms.

“No!” Androl said, twisting. “No! Taim, burn you! Leave him alone! Take me!”

Taim stood nearby, hands clasped behind his back, in a sharp black uniform that resembled those of the Asha’man, but trimmed with silver. He wore no pins at his neck. He turned toward Androl, then sneered. “Take you? I am to present to the Great Lord a man who couldn’t channel enough to break a pebble? I should have culled you long ago.”

Taim followed the other two, who were dragging away the frantic Evin. Androl screamed at them, yelling until he was hoarse. They took Evin somewhere on the other side of the chamber—it was very large—and Androl could not see them because of the angle at which he was tied. Androl dropped his head back against the floor, closing his eyes. That didn’t prevent him from hearing poor Evin’s screams of terror.

“Androl?” Pevara whispered.

"Quiet." Mishraile's voice was followed by a thump and a grunt from Pevara.

I am really starting to hate that one, Pevara sent to him.

Androl didn't reply.

They took the effort to dig us out of the collapsed room, Pevara continued. *I remember some of it, before they shielded me and knocked me unconscious. It seems to have been less than a day since then. I guess Taim hasn't yet hit his quota of Dread-lords Turned to the Shadow.*

She sent it, almost, with levity.

Behind them, Evin's screams stopped.

Oh, Light! Pevara sent. *Was that Evin?* All wryness vanished from her tone. *What's happening?*

They're Turning him, Androl sent back. *Strength of will has something to do with resisting. That is why Logain hasn't been Turned yet.*

Pevara's concern was a warmth through the bond. Were all Aes Sedai like her? He'd assumed they had no emotions, but Pevara felt the full range—although she accompanied it with an almost inhuman control over how those emotions affected her. Another result of decades of practice?

How do we escape? she sent.

I'm trying to untie my bonds. My fingers are stiff.

I can see the knot. It's a hefty one, but I might be able to guide you.

He nodded, and they began, Pevara describing the turns of the knot as Androl tried to twist his fingers around them. He failed to get enough purchase on the bonds; he tried pulling his hands free and wiggling them out, but the ropes were too tight.

By the time he accepted defeat, his fingers were numb from the lack of circulation. *It's not going to work,* he sent.

I've been trying to push out of this shield, Pevara replied. *It's possible, and I think our shields might be tied off. Tied-off shields fail.*

Androl sent back agreement, though he couldn't keep from feeling frustrated. How long could Evin hold out?

The silence taunted him. Why couldn't he hear any sounds? Then he sensed something. Channeling. Could that be thirteen men? Light. If there were thirteen Myrddraal as well, the situation was dire. What would they do *if* they escaped? They couldn't fight so many.

Which cliff did you choose? Pevara sent him.

What?

You said that when you were among the Sea Folk, they jumped off cliffs to prove their bravery. The higher the cliff, the braver the jumper. Which cliff did you choose?

The highest, he admitted.

Why?

I figured that once you've decided to jump off a cliff, you might as well pick the highest one. Why accept the risk, if not for the greatest prize?

Pevara sent back approval. *We will escape, Androl. Somehow.*

He nodded, mostly for himself, and set back at his knot.

A few moments later, Taim's cronies returned. Evin squatted down beside Androl. Behind his eyes lurked something different, something awful. He smiled. "Well, that was certainly not as bad as I had assumed it would be, Androl."

"Oh, Evin…"

"Don't worry about me," Evin said, resting a hand on Androl's shoulder. "I feel great. No more fear, no more worry. We shouldn't have been fighting all of this time. We are the Black Tower. We need to work together."

You are not my friend, Androl thought. *You might have his face, but Evin… Oh, Light. Evin is dead.*

"Where is Nalaam?" Androl asked.

"Died in the cave-in, I'm afraid." Evin shook his head. He leaned in. "They're planning to kill you, Androl, but I think I can convince them that you're worth Turning instead. You'll thank me, eventually."

The terrible thing inside of Evin's eyes smiled, patted Androl on the shoulder, then rose and began chatting with Mezar and Welyn.

Behind them, Androl could barely see thirteen shadows trailing over to grab Emarin and drag him away to be Turned next. Fades, with cloaks that did not move.

Androl thought how lucky Nalaam was to be crushed in the collapse.

* * *

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CHAPTER 9

To Die Well

Lan split the head of the Myrddraal in half down to the neck. He danced Mandarb back, letting the Fade thrash as it died, its convulsions twisting the pieces of its skull from the neck. Putrid black blood poured onto the rock, which had already been bloodied a dozen times.

“Lord Mandragoran!”

Lan wheeled toward the call. One of his men pointed back toward their camp, where a spout of bright red light was shooting into the air.

Noon already? Lan thought, raising his sword and signaling for his Malkieri to retreat. The Kandori and Arafellin troops were swinging in, light cavalry with bows, sending wave after wave of arrows into the mass of Trollocs.

The stench was tremendous. Lan and his men rode away from the front lines, passing two Asha’man and an Aes Sedai—Coladara, who had insisted on staying on as King Paitar’s advisor—channeling to set the Trolloc corpses aflame. That would make it more difficult for the next wave of Shadowspawn.

Lan’s armies had continued their brutal work, holding the Trollocs at the Gap like pitch holding back the spray of water in a leaking boat. The army fought in short rotations, an hour at a time. Bonfires and Asha’man lit the way at night, never giving the Shadowspawn the opportunity to advance.

After two days of grueling battle, Lan knew that this tactic would eventually favor the Trollocs. Humans were killing them by the wagonload, but the Shadow had been building its forces for years. Each night, the Trollocs fed upon the dead; they didn’t have to worry about mess supplies.

Lan kept his shoulders from sagging as he rode away from the front lines, making way for the next group of his troops, but he wanted to collapse and sleep for days. Despite the greater numbers given him by the Dragon

Reborn, every man was required to take several shifts on the front lines each day. Lan always joined a few extra.

Finding sleep was not easy for his troops while also caring for their equipment, gathering wood for the bonfires and bringing supplies through gateways. As he surveyed those leaving the front lines with him, Lan sought for what he could do to strengthen them. Nearby, faithful Bulen was sagging. Lan would need to make sure the man slept more, or—

Bulen slid from the saddle.

Lan cursed, stopping Mandarb, and leaped down. He dashed to Bulen's side and found the man staring blankly into the sky. Bulen had a massive wound in his side, the mail there ripped like a sail that had seen too much wind. Bulen had covered the wound by putting his coat on over his armor. Lan hadn't seen him hit, nor had he seen the man covering up the wound.

Fool! Lan thought, feeling at Bulen's neck.

No pulse. He was gone.

Fool! Lan thought again, bowing his head. *You wouldn't leave my side, would you? That's why you hid it. You were afraid I'd die out there while you came back for Healing.*

Either that, or you didn't want to demand strength from the channelers. You knew they were pushed to their limits.

With teeth clenched, Lan picked up Bulen's corpse and slung it over his shoulder. He hefted the body onto Bulen's horse and tied it across the saddle. Andere and Prince Kaisel—the Kandori youth and his squad of a hundred usually rode with Lan—sat nearby, watching solemnly. Conscious of their eyes, Lan put his hand on the corpse's shoulder.

"You did well, my friend," he said. "Your praises will be sung for generations. May you shelter in the palm of the Creator's hand, and may the last embrace of the mother welcome you home." He turned to the others. "I will not mourn! Mourning is for those who regret, and I do *not* regret what we do here! Bulen could not have died a better death. I do not cry for him, I *cheer!*"

He swung up into Mandarb's saddle, holding the reins of Bulen's horse, and sat tall. He would not let them see his fatigue. Or his sorrow. "Did any of you see Bakh fall?" he asked those riding near him. "He had a crossbow tied to the back of his horse. He always carried that thing with him. I swore that if it ever went off by accident, I'd have the Asha'man hang him by his toes from the top of a cliff.

"He died yesterday when his sword caught in a Trollocs armor. He left it and reached for his spare, but two more Trollocs pulled his horse out from underneath him. I thought he was dead then, and was trying to reach him, only to see him come up with that Light-burned crossbow of his and shoot a Trolloc right in the eye from two feet away. The bolt went clear through its head. The second Trolloc gutted him, but not before he put his boot knife in its neck." Lan nodded. "I remember you, Bakh. You died well." They rode for a few moments, and then Prince Kaisel added, "Ragon. He died well, too. Charged his horse straight at a group of thirty Trollocs that were coming in at us from the side. Probably saved a dozen men with that move, buying us time. He kicked one in the face as they pulled him down."

"Yes, Ragon was a right insane man," Andere said. "I'm one of the men he saved." He smiled. "He did die well. Light, but he did. Of course, the *craziest* thing I've seen these last few days is what Kragil did when fighting that Fade. Did any of you see it…"

By the time they reached the camp, the men were laughing and toasting the fallen with words. Lan split off from them, and took Bulen to the Asha'man. Narishma was holding open a gateway for a supply cart. He nodded to Lan. "Lord Mandragoran?"

"I need to put him someplace cold," Lan said, dismounting. "When this is done, and Malkier is reclaimed, we will want a proper resting place for the noble fallen. Until then, I will not have him burned or left to rot. He was the first Malkieri to return to Malkier's king."

Narishma nodded, Arafellin bells tinkling on the ends of his braids. He ushered a cart through the gateway, then held up a hand for the others to stop. He closed that gateway, then opened one to the top of a mountain.

Icy air blew through. Lan took Bulen off his horse. Narishma moved to help, but Lan waved him away, grunting as he heaved the corpse up onto his shoulder. He stepped through into the snows, the biting wind sharp on his cheeks, as if someone had taken a knife to them.

He laid Bulen down, then knelt and gently took the *hadori* from Bulen's head. Lan would carry it into battle—so that Bulen could continue to fight—then return it to the body when the battle was through. An old Malkieri tradition. "You did well, Bulen," Lan said softly. "Thank you for not giving up on me."

He stood up, boots crunching the snow, and strode out through the gateway, *hadori* in hand. Narishma let the gateway close, and Lan asked for the location of the mountain—in case Narishma died in the fighting—so he could locate Bulen again.

They wouldn't be able to preserve all of the Malkieri corpses this way, but one was better than none. Lan wrapped the leather *hadori* about the hilt of his sword, just below the crossguard, and tied it tight. He handed Mandarb off to a groom, holding up a finger to the horse and meeting his dark, liquid eyes. "No more biting grooms," he growled at the stallion.

After that, Lan went looking for Lord Agelmar. He found the commander speaking with Tenobia outside the Saldaean section of camp. Men stood with bows nearby in lines of two hundred, watching the skies. There had already been a number of Draghkar attacks. As Lan stepped up, the ground started to shake and rumble.

The soldiers didn't cry out. They were growing used to this. The land groaned.

The bare rock ground near Lan split. He jumped back in alarm as the shaking continued, watching tiny rents appear in the rock—hairline cracks. There was something profoundly *wrong* about the cracks. They were too dark, too deep. Though the area was still shaking, he stepped up, looking at the tiny cracks, trying to make them out in detail through the rumbling earthquake.

They seemed to be cracks into nothingness. They drew the light in, sucked it away. It was as if he was looking at fractures in the nature of reality itself.

The quakes subsided. The darkness within the cracks lingered for a few breaths, then faded away, the hairline fractures becoming just ordinary breaks in stone. Wary, Lan knelt down, inspecting them closely. Had he seen what he'd thought? What did it mean?

Chilled, he rose to his feet and continued on his way. *It is not men alone who grow tired,* he thought. *The mother is weakening*

He hastened through the Saldaean camp. Of those fighting at the Gap the Saldaeans had the most well-kept camp, run by the stern hands of the officers' wives. Lan had left most of the Malkieri noncombatants in Fal Dara, and the other forces had come with few others except the warriors.

That wasn't the Saldaean way. Though they normally didn't go into the Blight, the women otherwise marched with their husbands. Each one could fight with knives, and would hold their camp to the death if the need arose.

They had been extremely useful here in gathering and distributing supplies and tending the wounded.

Tenobia was arguing tactics with Agelmar again. Lan listened as the Shienaran great captain nodded to her demands. She didn't have a bad grasp of things, but she was too bold. She wanted them to push into the Blight, and take the fight to the Trolloc spawning grounds.

Eventually, she noticed Lan. "Lord Mandragoran," she said, eyeing him. She was a pretty enough woman, with fire in her eyes and long black hair. "Your latest sortie was a success?"

"More Trollocs are dead," Lan said.

"We fight a glorious battle," she said with pride.

"I lost a good friend."

Tenobia paused, then looked at his eyes, perhaps searching for emotion in them. Lan didn't give any. Bulen had died well. "The men who fight have glory," Lan said to her, "but the battle itself is not glory. It simply is. Lord Agelmar, a word."

Tenobia stepped aside and Lan drew Agelmar away. The aged general gave Lan a grateful look. Tenobia watched for a moment, then stalked off with two guards following hastily at her heels.

Shell be off into battle herself at some point if we don't watch her, Lan thought. *Her head is full of songs and stories.*

Hadn't he just encouraged his men to tell those same stories? No. There was a difference, he could *feel* a difference. Teaching the men to accept that they might die and to revere the honor of the fallen… that was different from singing songs about how wonderful it was to fight on the front lines.

Unfortunately, it took actual fighting to teach the difference. The Light send Tenobia wouldn't do anything too rash. Lan had seen many a young man with that look in his eyes. The solution then was to work them to exhaustion for a few weeks, drilling them to the point that they thought only of their bed, not of the "glories" they would someday find. He doubted that would be appropriate for the Queen herself.

"She has been growing more rash ever since Kalyan married Ethenielle," Lord Agelmar said quietly, joining Lan as they walked the back lines, nodding to passing soldiers. "I think that he was able to dampen her a featherweight or two, but now—without him *or* Bashere watching her…" He sighed. "Well, regardless. What is it you wished of me, Dai Shan?"

“We fight well here,” Lan said. “But I’m worried about how tired the men are. Will we be able to keep holding back the Trollocs?”

“You are right; the enemy will force its way through eventually,” Agelmar said.

“What do we do, then?” Lan asked.

“We will fight here,” Agelmar said. “And then, once we cannot hold, we will retreat to buy time.”

Lan stiffened. “Retreat?”

Agelmar nodded. “We are here to slow the Trollocs down. We will accomplish that by holding here for a time, then slowly pulling back across Shienar.”

“I did not come to Tarwin’s Gap to retreat, Agelmar.”

“Dai Shan, I’m led to believe you came here to die.”

That was nothing but the truth. “I will not abandon Malkier to the Shadow a second time, Agelmar. I came to the Gap—the Malkieri followed me here—to show the Dark One that we had not been beaten. To leave after we’ve actually been able to gain a footing…”

“Dai Shan,” Lord Agelmar said in a softer voice as they walked, “I respect your decision to fight. We all do; your march here alone inspired thousands. That may not have been your purpose, but it is the purpose the Wheel wove for you. The determination of a man set upon justice is a thing not lightly ignored. However, there is a time to put yourself aside and see the greater importance.”

Lan stopped, eyeing the aged general. “Take care, Lord Agelmar. It almost sounds as if you are calling me selfish.”

“I am, Lan,” Agelmar said. “And you are.”

Lan did not flinch.

“You came to throw your life away for Malkier. That, in itself, is noble. However, with the Last Battle upon us, it’s also stupid. We need you. Men will die because of your stubbornness.”

“I did not ask for them to follow me. Light! I did all that I could to stop them.”

“Duty is heavier than a mountain, Dai Shan.”

That time, Lan did flinch. How long had it been since someone had been able to do that to him with mere words? He remembered teaching that same concept to a youth out of the Two Rivers. A sheepherder, innocent of the world, fearful of the fate laid out before him by the Pattern.

“Some men,” Agelmar said, “are destined to die, and they fear it. Others are destined to live, and to lead, and they find it a burden. If you wished to keep fighting here until the last man fell, you could do it, and they’d die singing the glory of the fight. Or, you could do what we both need to do. Retreat when we’re forced to it, adapt, continuing delaying and stalling the Shadow as long as we can. Until the other armies can send us aid.

“We have an exceptionally mobile force. Each army sent you their finest cavalry. I’ve seen nine thousand Saldaean light horse perform complex maneuvers with precision. We can hurt the Shadow here, but their numbers are proving too great. Greater than I thought they would be. We will hurt more of them as we withdraw. We will find ways to punish them with every step we take backward. Yes, Lan. You made me commanding general of the field. That is my advice to you. It won’t be today, or perhaps for another week, but we *will* need to fall back.”

Lan walked on in silence. Before he could formulate a reply, he saw a blue light exploding in the air. The emergency signal from the Gap. The units that had just rotated onto the field needed help.

I will consider it, Lan thought. Pushing aside his fatigue, he dashed for the horselines where the groom would have delivered Mandarb.

He didn’t need to ride on this sortie. He had just gotten off one. He decided to go anyway, and caught himself yelling for Bulen to prepare a horse, and felt a fool. Light, but Lan had grown accustomed to the man’s help.

Agelmar is right, Lan thought as the grooms fell over themselves, saddling Mandarb. The stallion was skittish, sensing his mood. *They will follow me. Like Bulen did. Leading them to death in the name of a fallen kingdom… leading myself to the same death… how is that any different from Tenobia’s attitude?*

Before long, he was galloping back toward the defensive lines to find the Trollocs almost breaking through. He joined the rally, and this night, they held. Eventually, they would fail to do so. What then?

Then… then he would abandon Malkier again, and do what had to be done.

Egwene’s force had gathered at the southern portion of the Field of Merrilor. They had been slated to Travel to Kandor once Elayne’s force had been dispatched to Caemlyn. Rand's armies had not yet entered Thakan'dar, but had instead moved to staging areas on the northern part of the Field, where supplies could be assembled more easily. He claimed the time wasn't quite right for his assault; the Light send he was making progress with the Seanchan.

Moving so many people was a tremendous headache. Aes Sedai created gateways in a huge line, like the doorways along one side of a grand feast hall. Soldiers bunched up, waiting their turn to pass through. Many of the strongest channelers were not involved in this task; they would be channeling in combat soon enough, and creating gateways would only consume needed strength before the important work had begun.

The soldiers made way for the Amyrlin, of course. With the foreguard in place and a camp established on the other side, it was time for her to cross. She had spent the morning meeting with the Hall as they went over the supply reports and terrain assessments. She was glad she had allowed the Hall to take a larger role in the war; there was a great deal of wisdom to the Sitters, many of whom had lived well over a century.

"I don't like being forced to wait this long," Gawyn said, riding beside her.

She eyed him.

"I trust General Bryne's battlefield assessment, as does the Hall," Egwene said as they rode past the Illianer Companions, each man's brilliant breastplate worked with the Nine Bees of Illian on the front. They saluted her, faces hidden behind their conical helmets, barred at the front.

She wasn't certain she liked having them in her army—they would be more loyal to Rand than to her—but Bryne had insisted on it. He said that her force, though enormous, lacked an elite group like the Companions.

"I still say we should have left sooner," Gawyn said as the two of them passed through the gateway to the border of Kandor.

"It has only been a few days."

"A few days while Kandor burns." She could sense his frustration. She could also feel that he loved her, fiercely. He was her husband, now. The marriage had been performed by Silviana in a simple ceremony the night before. It still felt odd to know that Egwene had authorized her own wedding. When you were the highest authority, what else could you do?

As they moved into the camp on the Kandori border, Bryne rode by, giving terse orders to scouting patrols. When he reached Egwene, he climbed out of the saddle and bowed low, kissing her ring. He then remounted and continued. He was very respectful, considering that he'd essentially been bullied into leading this army. Of course, he'd made his demands and they had been met, so perhaps he'd bullied them as well. Leading the White Tower's armies had been an opportunity for him; no man liked being put out to pasture. The great captain shouldn't have found himself there in the first place.

Egwene noted Siuan riding at Bryne's side and smiled in satisfaction. *He is bound tightly to us now.*

Egwene surveyed the hills on the southeastern border of Kandor. Though they lacked greenery—like most places in the world now—their peaceful serenity gave no hint that the country beyond them burned. The capital, Chachin, was now little more than rubble. Before withdrawing to join the fight with the other Borderlanders, Queen Ethenielle had turned over rescue operations to Egwene and the Hall. They had done what they could, sending scouts through gateways along major roadways looking for refugees, then bringing them away to safety—if anywhere could be called safe now.

The main Trolloc army had left the burning cities and was now moving southeast toward the hills and the river that made up Kandor's border with Arafel.

Silviana rode up beside Egwene, opposite Gawyn. She spared him only a glare—those two really would have to stop snapping at one another; it was growing tiresome—before kissing Egwene's ring. "Mother."

"Silviana."

"We have received an update from Elayne Sedai."

Egwene allowed herself a smile. Both of them, independently, had taken to calling Elayne by her White Tower title as opposed to her civil title. "And?"

"She suggests that we set up a location where the wounded can be sent for Healing."

"We'd talked about having the Yellows move from battlefield to battlefield," Egwene said.

"Elayne Sedai is worried about exposing the Yellows to attack," Silviana said. "She wants a stationary hospital."

"That *would* be more efficient, Mother," Gawyn said, rubbing his chin. "Finding the wounded after a battle is a brutal affair. I don't know what I'd think of sending sisters to comb through the dead. This war could stretch weeks, even months, if the great captains are right. Eventually, the Shadow is going to start picking off Aes Sedai on the field."

"Elayne Sedai was quite… insistent," Silviana said. Her face was a mask, her tone steady, yet she also managed to convey severe displeasure. Silviana was proficient at that.

I helped put Elayne in charge, Egwene reminded herself. *Refusing her would set a bad precedent.* As would obeying her. Perhaps they could remain friends through it.

"Elayne Sedai shows wisdom," Egwene said. "Tell Romanda that it must be done this way. Have the entire Yellow Ajah gather for Healing, but not at the White Tower."

"Mother?" Silviana asked.

"The Seanchan," Egwene said. She had to smother the serpent deep inside of her that writhed whenever she thought of them. "I will not risk the Yellows being attacked while alone and exhausted from Healing. The White Tower is exposed, and is a focus for the enemy—if not the Seanchan, then the Shadow."

"A valid point." Silviana sounded reluctant. "But where else? Caemlyn has fallen, and the Borderlands are too exposed. Tear?"

"Hardly," Egwene said. That was Rand's territory, and it seemed too obvious. "Send back to Elayne with a suggestion. Perhaps the First of Mayene will be willing to provide a suitable building, a very large one." Egwene tapped the side of her saddle. "Send the Accepted and the novices with the Yellows. I don't want those women on the battlefield, but their strength can be put to use in Healing."

Linked to a Yellow, the weakest of novices could lend a trickle of strength and save lives. Many would be disappointed; they imagined slaying Trollocs. Well, this would be a way for them to fight without getting underfoot, untrained in combat as they were.

Egwene glanced over her shoulder. Movement through the gateways would not be finished any time soon. "Silviana, relay my words to Elayne Sedai," Egwene said. "Gawyn, I have something I want to do."

They found Chubain supervising the setup of a command camp in a valley west of the river that formed the boundary between Kandor and Arafel. They'd press forward into this hilly country to meet the oncoming Trollocs, deploying harrying forces in the adjoining valleys, with archers atop the hills alongside defensive units. The plan would be to strike hard at

Trollocs as they tried to take the hills, doing as much damage as possible. The harrying units could swipe at enemy flanks while the defenders held the hills as long as they could.

The odds were good that they would eventually be pushed out of those hills and across the border into Arafel, but on the wide plains of Arafel their cavalries could be used to better advantage. Egwene's force, like Lan's, was meant to delay and slow the Trollocs until Elayne could defeat those in the south. Ideally they would hold until reinforcements could arrive.

Chubain saluted and led them to a tent that had already been erected nearby. Egwene dismounted and started to enter, but Gawyn laid a hand on her arm. She sighed, nodded and let him enter first.

Inside, on the floor with legs folded, sat the Seanchan woman that Nynaeve had called Egeanin, although the woman insisted on being called Leilwin. Three members of the Tower Guard watched over her and her Illianer husband.

Leilwin looked up as Egwene entered, then immediately rose to her knees and performed a graceful bow, forehead touching the tent floor. Her husband did as she did, though his motions seemed more reluctant. Perhaps he was merely a worse actor than she was.

"Out," Egwene said to the three guards.

They did not argue, though their withdrawal was slow. As if she couldn't handle herself with her Warder against two people who could not channel. Men.

Gawyn took up position at the side of the tent, leaving her to address the two prisoners.

"Nynaeve tells me you are marginally trustworthy," Egwene said to Leilwin. "Oh, sit up. Nobody bows that low in the White Tower, not even the lowest of servants."

Leilwin sat up, but kept her eyes lowered. "I have failed greatly in the duty assigned me, and in so doing have endangered the Pattern itself."

"Yes," Egwene said. "The bracelets. I'm aware. Would you like a chance to repay that debt?"

The woman bowed herself, forehead to the ground again. Egwene sighed, but before she could order the woman to rise, Leilwin spoke. "By the Light and my hope for salvation and rebirth," Leilwin said, "I vow to serve you and protect you, Amyrlin, ruler of the White Tower. By the Crystal Throne and the blood of the Empress, I bind myself to you, to do as commanded in all things, and to put your life before my own. Under the Light, may it be so.” She kissed the floor.

Egwene looked at her, stunned. Only a Darkfriend would betray an oath such as that one. Of course, every Seanchan was close to being a Darkfriend.

“You think I m not well protected?” Egwene asked. “You think that I need another servant?”

“I think only of repaying my debt,” Leilwin said.

In her tone, Egwene sensed a stiffness, a bitterness. That rang of authenticity. This woman did not like humbling herself in this manner.

Egwene folded her arms, troubled. “What can you tell me of the Seanchan military, its arms and strength, and of the plans of the Empress?”

“I know some things, Amyrlin,” Leilwin said. “But I was a ship’s captain. What I do know is of the Seanchan navy, and that will be of little use to you.”

Of course, Egwene thought. She glanced at Gawyn, who shrugged.

“Please,” Leilwin said softly. “Allow me to prove myself to you somehow. I have little left to me. My name itself is no longer my own.”

First, Egwene said, “you will talk of the Seanchan. I don’t care if you think it’s irrelevant. Anything you tell me might be helpful.” Or, it might reveal Leilwin as a liar, which would be equally useful. “Gawyn, fetch me a chair. I’m going to listen to what she says. After that, we’ll see…”

Rand rifled through the pile of maps, notes and reports. He stood with his arm folded behind his back, a single lamp burning on the desk. Sheathed in glass, the flame danced as breezes eddied through the tent where he stood alone.

Was the flame alive? It ate, it moved on its own. You could smother it, so in a way, it breathed. What was it to be alive?

Could an idea live?

A world without the Dark One. A world without evil.

Rand turned back to the maps. What he saw impressed him. Elayne was preparing well. He had not attended the meetings planning each battle. His attention was directed toward the north. Toward Shayol Ghul. His destiny. His grave.

He hated the way these battle maps, with notes for formations and groups, reduced men's lives to scribbles on a page. Numbers and statistics. Oh, he admitted that the clarity—the distance—was essential for a battlefield commander. He hated it nonetheless.

Here before him was a flame that lived, yet here were also men who were dead. Now that he could not lead the war himself, he hoped to stay away from maps such as this one. He knew seeing these preparations would make him grieve for the soldiers he could not save.

A sudden chill ran across him, the hairs on his arms standing on end—a distinct shiver halfway between excitement and terror. A woman was channeling.

Rand raised his head and found Elayne frozen in the tent doorway. "Light!" she said. "Rand! What are you doing here? Are you trying to kill me with fright?"

He turned, settling his fingers on the battle maps, taking her in. Now *here* was life. Flushed cheeks, golden hair with a hint of honey and rose, eyes that burned like a bonfire. Her dress of crimson showed the swell of the children she bore. Light, she was beautiful.

"Rand al'Thor?" Elayne asked. "Are you going to talk to me, or do you wish to ogle me further?"

"If I can't ogle you, whom can I ogle?" Rand asked.

"Don't grin at me like that, farmboy," she said. "Sneaking into my tent? Really. What would people say?"

"They'd say that I wanted to see you. Besides, I didn't sneak in. The guards let me in."

She folded her arms. "They didn't tell me."

"I asked them not to."

"Then, for all intents and purposes, you *were* sneaking." Elayne brushed by him. She smelled wonderful. "Honestly, as if Aviendha weren't enough…"

"I didn't want the regular soldiers to see me," Rand said. "I worried it would disturb your camp. I asked the guards not to mention that I was here." He stepped up to her, resting his hand on her shoulder. "I had to see you again, before…"

"You saw me at Merrilor."

"Elayne . . "

“I’m sorry,” she said, turning back to him. “I *am* happy to see you, and I *am* glad you came. I’m just trying to get into my head how you fit into all of this. How *we* fit into all of this.”

“I don’t know,” Rand said. “I’ve never figured it out. I’m sorry.”

She sighed, sitting down in the chair beside her desk. “I suppose it is good to find there are some things you can’t fix with a wave of your hand.

“There is much I can’t fix, Elayne.” He glanced at the desk, and the maps. “So much.”

Don't think about that.

He knelt before her, getting a cocked eyebrow until he placed his hand on her belly—hesitantly, at first. “I didn’t know,” he said. “Not until just recently, the night before the meeting. Twins, it is said?”

“Yes.”

“So Tam will be a grandfather,” Rand said. “And I will be…”

How was a man supposed to react to this news? Was it supposed to shake him, upend him? Rand had been given his share of surprises in life. It seemed he could no longer take two steps without the world changing on him.

But this… this wasn’t a surprise. He found that deep down, he’d hoped that someday he would be a father. It had happened. That gave him warmth. One thing was going right in the world, even if so many had gone wrong.

Children. *His* children. He closed his eyes, breathing in, enjoying the thought.

He would never know them. He would leave them fatherless before they were even born. But, then, Janduin had left Rand fatherless—and he had turned out all right. Just a few rough edges, here and there.

“What will you name them?” Rand asked.

“If there is a boy, I’ve been thinking of naming him Rand.”

Rand let himself go still as he felt her womb. Was that motion? A kick? “No,” Rand said softly. “Please do not name either child after me, Elayne. Let them live their own lives. My shadow will be long enough as it is.”

“Very well.”

He looked up to meet her eyes, and he found her smiling with fondness. She rested a smooth hand on his cheek. “You will be a fine father.”

“Elayne—”

“Not a word of it,” she said, raising a finger. “No talk of death, of duty.”

“We cannot ignore what will happen.”

“We needn’t dwell on it either,” she said. “I taught you so much about being a monarch, Rand. I seem to have forgotten one lesson. It is all right to plan for the worst possibilities, but you must not bask in them. You must not fixate on them. A queen must have hope before all else.”

“I do hope,” Rand said. “I hope for the world, for you, for everyone who must fight. That does not change the fact that I have accepted my own death.”

“Enough,” she said. “No more talk of this. Tonight, I will have a quiet dinner with the man I love.”

Rand sighed, but rose, seating himself in the chair beside hers as she called to the guards at the tent flap for their meal.

“Can we at least discuss tactics?” Rand asked. “I am truly impressed by what you’ve done here. I don’t think I could have done a better job.”

“The great captains did most of it.”

“I saw your annotations,” Rand said. “Bashere and the others are wonderful generals, geniuses even, but they think only of their specific battles. Someone needs to coordinate them, and you are doing that marvelously. You have a head for this.”

“No, I don’t,” Elayne said. “What I *do* have is a lifetime spent as the Daughter-Heir of Andor, being trained for wars that might come. Thank General Bryne and my mother for what you see in me. Did you find anything in my notes that you would change?”

“There is more than a hundred and fifty miles between Caemlyn and Braem Wood, where you plan to ambush the Shadow,” Rand noted. “That’s risky. What if your forces get overrun before they reach the Wood?”

“Everything depends on them beating the Trollocs to the Wood. Our harrying forces will be using the strongest, fastest mounts available. It will be a grueling race, there’s no question, and the horses will be near death by the time they reach the Wood. But we are hoping that the Trollocs will be the worse for wear by then as well, which should make our job easier.”

They talked tactics, and evening became night. Servants arrived with dinner, broth and wild boar. Rand had wished to keep his presence in the camp quiet, but there was nothing for that now that the servants knew.

He settled himself to dine, and let himself flow into the conversation with Elayne. Which battlefield was in the most danger? Which of the great captains should she champion when they disagreed, which they often did?

How would this all work with Rand's army, which still waited for the right time to attack Shayol Ghul?

The conversation reminded him of their time in Tear, stealing hidden kisses in the Stone between sessions of political training. Rand had fallen in love with her during those days. Real love. Not the admiration of a boy falling off a wall, looking at a princess—back then, he hadn't understood love any more than a farmboy swinging a sword understood war.

Their love was born of the things they shared. With Elayne, he could speak of politics and the burden of rule. She understood. She truly did, better than anyone he knew. She knew what it was to make decisions that changed the lives of thousands. She understood what it was to be owned by the people of a nation. Rand found it remarkable that, though they had often been apart, their connection held. In fact, it felt even stronger. Now that Elayne was queen, now that they shared the children growing within her. "You wince," Elayne said.

Rand looked up from his broth. Elayne's dinner was half-finished—he had been making her speak a great deal. She seemed through anyway, and held a warm cup of tea.

"I what?" Rand asked.

"You wince. When I mentioned the contingents fighting for Andor, you flinched, just a little."

It was not surprising she had noticed—Elayne had been the one to teach him to watch for minor tells in the expressions of those with whom he spoke.

"All of these people fight under my name," Rand said. "So many people I do not even know will die for me."

"That has ever been the burden of a ruler at war."

"I should be able to protect them," Rand said.

"If you think you can protect everyone, Rand al'Thor, you are far less wise than you pretend."

He looked at her, meeting her eyes. "I don't believe I can, but their deaths weigh on me. I feel as if I should be able to do more, now that I remember. He tried to break me, and he failed."

"Is that what happened that day atop Dragonmount?"

He hadn't spoken of it to anyone. He pulled his seat closer to hers. "Up there, I realized that I had been thinking too much on strength. I wanted to be *hard,* so hard. In driving myself so, I risked losing the ability to care.

That was wrong. For me to win, I *must* care. That, unfortunately, means I must allow myself pain at their deaths."

"And you remember Lews Therin now?" she whispered. "Everything he knew? That is not just an air you put on?"

"I am him. I always was. I remember it now."

Elayne breathed out, eyes widening. "What an *advantage.*" Of all the people he had told that to, only she had responded in such a way. What a wonderful woman.

"I have all of this knowledge, yet it doesn't tell me what to do." He stood up, pacing. "I should be able to *fix* it, Elayne. No more should need to die for me. This is my fight. Why must everyone else go through such suffering?"

"You deny us the right to fight?" she said, sitting up straight.

"No, of course not," Rand said. "I could deny you nothing. I just wish that somehow… somehow I could make this all stop. Shouldn't my sacrifice be enough?"

She stood, taking his arm. He turned to her.

Then she kissed him.

"I love you," she said. "You *are* a king. But if you would try to deny the good people of Andor the right to defend themselves, the right to stand in the Last Battle…" Her eyes flared, her cheeks flushed. Light! His comments had truly made her angry.

He never quite knew what she was going to say or do, and that excited him. Like the excitement of watching nightflowers, knowing that what was to come would be beautiful, but never knowing the exact form that beauty would take.

"I said I wouldn't deny you the right to fight," Rand said.

"It's about more than just me, Rand. It's about everyone. Can you understand *that?"*

"I suppose that I can."

"Good." Elayne settled back down and took a sip of her tea, then grimaced.

"It's gone bad?" Rand asked.

"Yes, but I'm used to it. Still, it's almost worse than drinking nothing at all, with how spoiled everything is."

Rand walked to her and took the cup from her fingers. He held it for a moment, but did not channel. "I brought you something. I forgot to mention it.”

“Tea?”

“No, this is just an aside.” He handed the cup back to her and she took a sip.

Her eyes widened. “It’s *wonderful*. How do you do it?”

“I don’t,” Rand said, sitting. “The Pattern does.”

“But—”

“I am *taveren,*” Rand said. “Things happen around me, unpredictable things. For the longest time, there was a balance. In one town, someone would discover a great treasure unexpectedly under the stairs. In the next I visited, people would discover that their coins were fakes, passed to them by a clever counterfeiter.

“People died in terrible ways; others were saved by a miracle of chance. Deaths and births. Marriages and divisions. I once saw a feather drift down from the sky and fall point-first into the mud so it stuck there. The next ten that fell did the same thing. It was all random. Two sides to a flipping coin.”

“This tea is not random.”

“Yes, it is,” Rand said. “But, you see, I get only one side of the coin these days. Someone else is doing the bad. The Dark One injects horrors into the world, causing death, evil, madness. But the Pattern ... the Pattern is balance. So it works, through me, to provide the other side. The harder the Dark One works, the more powerful the effect around me becomes.”

“The growing grass,” Elayne said. “The splitting clouds. The food unspoiled…”

“Yes.” Well, some other tricks helped on occasion, but he didn’t mention them. He fished in his pocket for a small pouch.

“If what you say is true,” Elayne replied, “then there can never be good in the world.”

“Of course there can.”

“Will the Pattern not balance it out?”

He hesitated. That line of reasoning cut too close to the way he had begun thinking before Dragonmount—that he had no options, that his life was planned for him. “So long as we care,” Rand said, “there can be good. The Pattern is not about emotions—it is not even about good or evil. The Dark One is a force from outside of it, influencing it by force.”

And Rand would end that. If he could.

“Here,” Rand said. “The gift I mentioned.” He pushed the pouch toward her.

She looked at him, curious. She untied the strings, and took from it a small statue of a woman. She stood upright, with a shawl about her shoulders, though she did not look like an Aes Sedai. She had a mature face, aged and wise, with a wise look about her and a smile on her face.

“An *angreal*?” Elayne asked.

“No, a Seed.”

“A… seed?”

“You have the Talent of creating *ter’angreal*,” Rand said. “Creating *angreal* requires a different process. It begins with one of these, an object created to draw your Power and instill it into something else. It takes time, and will weaken you for several months, so you should not attempt it while we are at war. But when I found it, forgotten, I thought of you. I had wondered what I could give you.”

“Oh, Rand, I have something for you as well.” She hurried over to an ivory jewelry chest that rested on a camp table and took a small object from it. It was a dagger with a short, dull blade and a handle made of deerhorn wrapped in gold wire.

Rand glanced at the dagger quizzically. “No offense, but that looks like a poor weapon, Elayne.”

“It’s a *ter’angreal*, something that may be of use when you go to Shayol Ghul. With it, the Shadow cannot see you.” She reached up to touch his face. He placed his hand on hers.

They stayed together long into the night.

* * *

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CHAPTER 10

The Use of Dragons

Perrin rode Stayer, light cavalry from Elayne’s forces following behind him: Whitecloaks, Mayeners, Ghealdanin, joined by some of the Band of the Red Hand. Only a fraction of their armies. That was the point.

They swept along diagonally toward the Trollocs camped outside of Caemlyn. The city still smoldered; Elayne’s plan with the oil had driven the creatures out, for the most part, but some still held the walls above.

“Archers,” Arganda yelled, “loose!” His voice would be lost to most in the roar of the charge, the snorting of horses, the gallop of hooves. Enough would hear to start shooting, and the rest knew what to do anyway.

Perrin leaned low, hoping his hammer would not be needed on this sortie. They charged past the Trollocs, sweeping in front of them, launching arrows; then they turned away from the city.

Perrin glanced over his shoulder as he rode, and he was rewarded with the sight of Trollocs falling. The Band followed after Perrin's cavalry, getting close enough to launch arrows.

Trolloc arrows followed—thick and black, almost like spears, loosed from enormous bows. Some of Perrin's riders fell, but his attack had been swift.

The Trollocs didn’t break from their position outside the city walls. The riders slowed, Arganda coming up beside Perrin, watching over his shoulder.

“They still aren’t charging,” Arganda said.

“Then we’ll hit them again and again,” Perrin said. “Until they break.”

“Our attacks are continuing, Your Majesty,” the messenger said, riding through a gateway made by a pair of Kinswomen to where Elayne had her camp in the Wood. “Lord Goldeneyes sends word; they’ll continue through the day, if need be.”

She nodded, and the messenger rode back the way he had come. Braem Wood slumbered, trees bare, as if in winter. “It takes too much work to relay information back and forth to me,” Elayne said with dissatisfaction. “I wish we could have made those *ter’angreal* work; Aviendha said that one let you see over distance, and another talk that way. But wish and want trip the feet, as Lini says. Still, if I could see the fighting with my own eyes—” Birgitte said nothing. Eyes forward, the golden-haired Warder gave no sign at all that she’d heard the comment.

“After all,” Elayne said, “I *can* defend myself, as I have proven on a number of occasions.”

No response. The two horses walked softly beside one another, hooves on soft earth. The camp around them had been designed to be broken down and moved on the run. The soldiers’ “tents” were canvas tarps set over ropes pulled tight between trees. The only travel furniture was that of her own pavilion and the battle pavilion. The Kinswomen had one group ready with gateways to move Elayne and her commanders further into the woods.

Most of her forces waited at the ready, like a taut bow with the arrow nocked. She would *not* engage the Trollocs on their terms, however. By report, some of their fists still topped the city walls, and attacking directly would be a disaster, with them raining death on her from above.

She would draw them out. If that required patience, so be it. “I’ve decided,” Elayne continued to Birgitte. “I’ll just hop through a gateway to take a look at the Trolloc army myself. From a safe distance. I could—”

Birgitte reached beneath her shirt and removed the foxhead medallion she wore, one of the three imperfect copies Elayne had made. Mat had the original and a copy. Mellar had escaped with the other copy.

“You try anything like that,” Birgitte said, eyes still forward, “and I’ll *throw* you over my bloody shoulder like a drunken man with a barmaid on a rowdy night and carry you back to camp. Light help me, I’ll *do* it, Elayne.” Elayne frowned. “Remind me why, exactly, I gave you one of those medallions?”

“I’m not sure,” Birgitte said. “It showed remarkable foresight and an actual sense of self-preservation. Completely unlike you.”

“I hardly think that is fair, Birgitte.”

“I know! It *is* extremely unfair for me to have to deal with you. I wasn’t certain you’d noticed. Are all young Aes Sedai as reckless as you are, or did I just end up with the pick of this particular litter?”

“Stop whining,” Elayne muttered, maintaining a smile and a nod for the men who saluted as she passed. “I’m beginning to wish I had a Tower-trained Warder. Then, at least, I wouldn’t hear so much sauce.”

Birgitte laughed. “I don’t think you understand Warders half as well as you think you do, Elayne.”

Elayne let the matter die as they passed the Traveling ground, where Sumeko and the other Kinswomen were shuttling messengers back and forth from the battlefields. For now, Elayne’s agreement with them held.

In her dress pocket, Elayne carried Egwene’s—the Amyrlin Seat’s—official reply regarding the Kin and what Elayne had done. Elayne could almost sense heat radiating from the letter, but it was hidden behind official language and an agreement that now wasn’t the time to worry about such things.

Elayne would have to do more work there. Egwene would eventually see the logic of letting the Kinswomen work in Andor, beneath Elayne’s supervision. Just beyond the Traveling ground she noticed a tired-looking Shienaran accepting a waterskin from one of the Two Rivers men. The top-knotted man had an eyepatch and familiar features.

“Uno?” Elayne asked with shock, pulling Moonshadow to a halt.

He started, nearly spilling water over himself as he drank. “Elayne?” he asked, wiping his brow with his sleeve. “I’d heard that you’re the flaming—the Queen now. I guess that’s what should have happened, with you being the bloody Daughter-Heir. Sorry. The Daughter-Heir. Not bloody at all.” The Shienaran man grimaced.

“You can swear all you want, Uno,” Elayne said dryly. “Nynaeve isn’t around. What are you doing here?”

“The Amyrlin,” he said. “She flaming wanted a messenger, and I was bloody chosen. Already gave Egwene’s bloody report to your commanders, for all the bloody good it will do. We’ve set up our flaming battle positions and started scouting out Kandor, and the place is a bloody mess. You want details?”

Elayne smiled. “I’ll hear the report from my commanders, Uno,” she said. “Have a rest, and go have a flaming bath, you son of a shepherd’s boil.”

Uno blew a mouthful of water out at the comment. Elayne smiled. She’d heard that last curse from a soldier just the day before, and still didn’t know why it was considered to be so vile. It had the proper effect.

“I… No flaming bath for me,” Uno said. “Er, Your Majesty. I’ve had my five minutes of rest. The Trollocs could attack soon up in bloody Kandor, and I won’t have the others fighting without me.” He saluted her, hand across chest, and bowed before hurrying back toward the Traveling ground.

“Pity,” Birgitte said, “he was a good drinking companion. I’d have liked him to stay a little while.” Through the bond, Elayne felt a different reaction from her, as she watched Uno’s backside.

Elayne blushed. “There’s no time for that right now. *Either* of those things.”

“Just looking,” Birgitte said innocently. “I suppose we should go listen to the reports from the other battlefields.”

“We should,” Elayne said firmly.

Birgitte didn’t voice her annoyance, but Elayne could feel it. Birgitte hated battle planning, something Elayne found odd in a woman who had fought in thousands of battles, a hero who had saved countless lives during some of the great moments in history.

They came to the battle pavilion, one of the few full-sized tents the army carried. Inside, she found Bashere conferring with several of the commanders: Abell Cauthon, Gallenne and Trom, second-in-command of the Whitecloaks. Galad himself, like Perrin, was with the harrying forces at Caemlyn. Elayne found Trom surprisingly agreeable—much more so than Galad himself.

“Well?” she asked.

“Your Majesty,” Trom said, bowing. He didn’t like the fact that she was Aes Sedai, but he hid it well. The others in the room saluted, though Bashere gave merely a friendly wave, then pointed at their battle maps.

“Reports from all fronts are in,” Bashere said. “Refugees from Kandor are flocking to the Amyrlin and her soldiers, and that includes a fair number of fighting men. House soldiers or merchant guards, for the most part. Lord Ituralde’s forces still await the Lord Dragon before moving on Shayol Ghul.” Bashere knuckled his mustache. “Once they move into that valley, there won’t be any retreat available.”

“And the Borderlander army?” Elayne asked.

“Holding,” Bashere said, pointing to another map, showing Shienar. Elayne wondered, idly, if Uno wished he were fighting with the rest of his people at the Gap. “Last messenger said they feared being overwhelmed, and were considering a controlled retreat.”

Elayne frowned. “Are things so bad there? They were supposed to hold until I could finish the Trollocs in Andor and join them. That was the plan.”

“It was,” Bashere agreed.

“You’re going to tell me that a plan, in warfare, lasts only until the first sword is drawn,” Elayne said. “Or maybe until the first arrow falls?”

“First lance is raised,” Bashere said under his breath.

“I realize that,” Elayne said, stabbing a finger at the map. “But I also know that Lord Agelmar is a good enough general to hold a pack of Trollocs, especially with the Borderlander armies there to back him up.”

“They are holding for now,” Bashere said. “But they’re still being mightily pressed.” He held up a hand to her objection. “I know you’re worried about a retreat, but I counsel that you shouldn’t try to overrule Agelmar. He deserves his reputation as a great captain, and he’s there, while we are far away. He will know what to do.”

She took a deep breath. “Yes. You are right. Do see if Egwene can send him any troops. Meanwhile, *we* need to win our battle here quickly.” Fighting on four fronts was going to drain resources quickly.

Elayne had not only familiar terrain to fight on, but also the best odds. If the other armies could hold steady while she obliterated the Trollocs in Andor, she could join Lan and Agelmar and turn the Gap from a stalemate into a victory. From there, she could reinforce Egwene and reclaim Kandor.

Elayne’s army was the linchpin of the entire operation. If she didn’t win in Andor, the other armies would have no eventual reinforcement. Lan and Ituralde would waste away, losing wars of attrition. Egwene might have a chance, depending on what the Shadow hurled her direction. Elayne didn’t want to find out.

“We need the Trollocs to charge us,” she said. “Now.”

Bashere nodded.

“Step up the harrying,” Elayne said. “Hit them with constant waves of arrows. Make it clear that if they don’t charge, we’re going to wear them down to nothing.”

“And if they just retreat back into the city?” Trom asked. “The fires are dying down.”

“Then, like it or not, we’ll bring those dragons in to start leveling Caemlyn. We cannot wait any longer.”

Androl struggled to stay awake. The drink they had given him ... it made him drowsy. What was the purpose of that?

Something to do with channeling, Androl thought in a daze. The One Power was lost to him, though there was no shield. What kind of drink could do that to a man?

Poor Emarin lay weeping in his bonds. They had not managed to Turn him yet, but as the hours wore on, he seemed closer and closer to breaking. Androl stretched, twisting his head. He could barely make out the thirteen men Taim had been using for the process. They slumped as they sat around a table in the dim room. They were exhausted.

Androl remembered… Taim yelling the day before. He railed against the men, claiming their work went too slowly. They had expended much strength on the first men and women they'd Turned, and now they were apparently having a more difficult time.

Pevara slept. The tea had knocked her out. They'd given it to Androl after her, but almost as an afterthought. They seemed to forget about him much of the time. Taim had actually been angry when he'd found his minions had given the tea to Pevara. He'd wanted to Turn her next, apparently, and the process required the victim to be able to channel.

"Release me!"

Androl twisted at the new voice. Abors and Mishraile pulled someone in through the door, a short woman with coppery skin. Toveine, one of the Aes Sedai that Logain had bonded.

Nearby, Logain—eyes closed, looking as if he'd been beaten by a mob of angry men—stirred.

"What are you doing!" Toveine demanded. "Light! I—" She cut off as Abors gagged her. The thick-browed man was one of those who had gone to Taim willingly, during the days before Turning had begun.

Androl tried, thoughts still cloudy, to pull his hands free from the bonds. The ropes were bound more tightly. That was right. Evin had noticed the bonds and retied them.

He felt so helpless. Useless. He hated that feeling. If there was one thing Androl had dedicated his life to, it was to never being useless. Always knowing something about the situation.

"Turn her next," Taim's voice said.

Androl twisted, craning his neck. Taim sat at the table. He liked to be there for the Turnings, but he wasn't watching Toveine. He fondled something in his hands. Some kind of disc…

He stood up suddenly, tucking the object into a pouch at his waist. “The others complain about exhaustion from so much Turning. Well, if they Turn this one, she can join their ranks and lend her strength. Mishraile, you come with me. It’s time.”

Mishraile and several others joined Taim; they’d been standing where Androl couldn’t see them.

Taim stalked toward the door. “I want that woman Turned by the time I get back,” he said.

Lan galloped across the rocky ground, riding toward the Gap for what seemed like the hundredth time, though he had been fighting here less than a week.

Prince Kaisel and King Easar fell in beside him, riding hard. “What is it, Dai Shan?” Kaisel yelled. “Another attack? I did not see the emergency signal!”

Lan leaned down grimly in the dusk, bonfires made of carcasses and wood blazing to either side of him as he led the charge of several hundred Malkieri. Burning carcasses was difficult, but not only did they need the light; they wanted to deny the Trollocs some meals.

Lan heard something ahead, something that horrified him. Something he had been dreading.

Explosions.

The distant eruptions sounded like boulders crashing against one another. Each one made the air shake.

“Light!” Queen Ethenielle of Kandor joined them, galloping on her white gelding. She yelled to him. “Is that what I think it is?”

Lan nodded. Enemy channelers.

Ethenielle called back to her retinue, yelling something he did not catch. She was a plump woman, somewhat matronly for a Borderlander. Her retinue included Lord Baldhere—her Swordbearer—and the grizzled Kalyan Ramsin, her new husband.

They approached the Gap, where warriors fought to keep the beasts contained. A group of Kandori riders near the bonfires at the front were suddenly thrown into the air.

“Lord Mandragoran!” A figure in a black coat waved to them. Narishma hurried up, his Aes Sedai accompanying him. Lan always had one channeler at the front lines, but had given them orders not to fight. He needed them fresh for emergencies.

Like this one.

“Channeling?” Lan asked, slowing Mandarb.

“Dreadlords, Dai Shan,” Narishma said, panting. “Maybe as many as two dozen.”

“Twenty or more channelers,” Agelmar said. “They’ll cut through us like a sword through a spring lamb.”

Lan looked across the bitter landscape, once his homeland. A homeland he’d never known.

He would have to abandon Malkier. Admitting it felt like a knife twisting inside him, but he would do it. “You have your retreat, Lord Agelmar,” Lan said. “Narishma, can you channelers do anything?”

“We can try to cut their weaves from the air if we ride up close enough,” Narishma said. “But that will be hard, perhaps impossible, with them using just ribbons of Fire and Earth. Besides, with so many on their side… well, they’ll target us. I fear we would be cut down—”

A nearby blast rocked the earth, and Mandarb reared, nearly throwing Lan to the ground. Lan fought the horse, nearly blind from the flash of light. “Dai Shan!” Narishma’s voice.

Lan blinked tears from his eyes.

“Go to Queen Elayne!” Lan bellowed. “Bring back channelers to cover our retreat. We’ll be cut to ribbons without them. Go, man!”

Agelmar was yelling the retreat, bringing forward archers to target the channelers and drive them beneath cover. Lan unsheathed his sword, galloping to bring the horsemen back.

Light protect us, Lan thought, yelling himself ragged and salvaging what he could of his cavalry. The Gap was lost.

Elayne waited nervously just inside Braem Wood.

It was an old forest, the type that seemed to have a soul of its own. The ancient trees were its gnarled fingers, reaching out of the earth to feel the wind.

It was difficult not to feel tiny in a wood like Braem. Though many of the trees were bare, Elayne could feel a thousand eyes watching her from the depths of the forest. She found herself thinking of the stories told to her as a child, stories of the Wood being full of brigands—some goodly, others with hearts as twisted as those of Darkfriends.

In fact. . . Elayne thought, remembering one of the stories. She turned to Birgitte. “Didn’t you once lead a band of thieves out of this forest?” Birgitte grimaced. “I was hoping you hadn’t heard that one.”

“You robbed the Queen of Aldeshar!” Elayne said.

“I was very polite about it,” Birgitte said. “She *wasn’t* a good queen. Many claimed she wasn’t the rightful one.”

“It’s the principle!”

“That’s exactly why I did it.” Birgitte frowned. “At least ... I think it was…”

Elayne didn’t push the topic any farther. Birgitte always grew anxious when reminded that her memories of past lives were fading. At times, she had no recollection of her past lives at all; at other times, certain incidents would come flooding back to her, only to disappear the next moment.

Elayne led the rear guard, which would—in theory—do the bulk of the damage to the enemy.

Dry leaves crunched as a winded messenger arrived from the Traveling ground. “I’ve come from Caemlyn, Your Majesty,” the woman said with a bobbing bow from her mount. “Lord Aybara has successfully engaged the Trollocs. They are on their way.”

“Light, they took the bait,” Elayne said. “Now we make our preparations. Go get some rest; you’ll be needing all your strength soon enough.” The messenger nodded, galloping away. Elayne relayed the latest news to Talmanes, the Aiel and Tam al’Thor.

As Elayne heard something in the forest she raised a hand, stopping a Guards-woman’s report. Moonshadow danced forward, anxious, past the men who crouched in the underbrush around Elayne. No one spoke. The soldiers barely seemed to be drawing breath.

Elayne embraced the Source. Power flooded her, and with it the sweetness of a world expanded. The dying wood seemed more colorful within the embrace of *saidar* Yes. There was something climbing over the hills in the near distance. Her soldiers, thousands of them, whipping at horses past the point of exhaustion, were fast approaching the Wood. Elayne raised her spyglass to make out the twisting mass of Trollocs chasing behind like black waves flooding onto an already shadowed land.

"Finally!" Elayne exclaimed. "Archers, to the front!"

The Two Rivers men scrambled out of the woods before her, forming up just inside the tree line. They were one of the smallest forces in her army, but if reports on their prowess weren't exaggerations, they'd be as useful as an ordinary force of archers three times their size.

A few of the younger men began nocking arrows to bows.

"Hold!" Elayne yelled. "Those are *our* men coming toward you."

Tam and his leaders repeated the order. The men lowered their bows nervously.

"Your Majesty," Tam said, stepping up to her horse. "The lads can hit them at this range."

"Our soldiers are still too close," Elayne said. "We need to wait for them to break to the sides."

"Pardon, my Lady," Tam said. "But no Two Rivers man would miss a shot like this. Those riders are safe, and the Trollocs have bows of their own." He was right on that last count. Some of the Trollocs were pausing in their pursuit long enough to draw their massive blackwood bows. Perrin's men were riding with their backs exposed, and more than a few had dark-fletched arrows protruding from their limbs or their horses.

"Loose," Elayne said. "Archers, loose!" Birgitte relayed the orders as she rode down the line. Tam barked orders to those nearby.

Elayne lowered the spyglass as a breeze blew through the forest, crackling dried leaves, rattling skeletal branches. The Two Rivers men drew. Light! Could they *really* shoot that far and still be accurate? The Trollocs were hundreds of paces away.

Arrows flew high, like hawks breaking from their roosts. She'd heard Rand brag about his bow, and she'd seen a Two Rivers longbow used on occasion. But this ... so many arrows climbing into the air with incredible precision…

The arrows arced and dropped, not a one falling too short. They rained onto the Trolloc ranks, especially on the Trolloc archers. A few straggling Trolloc arrows returned, but the Two Rivers men had handily broken up their lines.

“That’s some fine archery,” Birgitte said, riding back up. “Fine indeed…” The Two Rivers men loosed more volleys in quick succession as Perrin’s riders entered the forest.

“Crossbowmen!” Elayne ordered, drawing her sword and raising it high. “Forward the Legion of the Dragon!”

The Two Rivers men fell back into the trees and the crossbowmen came out. She had two full banners of them from the Legion of the Dragon, and Bashere had drilled them well. They formed three ranks, one standing at a time to loose while the others reloaded while kneeling. The death they sent at the Trollocs hit like a crashing wave, driving a tremble through the advancing army, thousands falling dead.

Elayne leveled her sword at the Trollocs. The Two Rivers men had climbed the branches of the first line of trees and were loosing arrows from them. The men weren’t nearly as accurate from the precarious perches, but they didn’t need to be. The Trollocs faced death from the front and from above, and the creatures began to stumble over their dead.

Come on… Elayne thought.

The Trollocs advanced, forcing their way toward the archers. A large contingent of Trollocs broke off from the advance and headed to the east. The roadway that bordered Braem Wood was that way, and it would make sense for the Trollocs to seize it, then push along it to surround Elayne’s forces. Or so the Fades would think.

“Fall back into the Wood!” Elayne said, waving the sword. “Hurry!”

The crossbowmen each loosed one more bolt, then melted into the forest, pushing through the underbrush. The Two Rivers men dropped to the ground, then moved carefully through the trees. Elayne turned and rode in at a cautious trot. A short distance into the forest, she reached a banner of Alliandre’s Ghealdanin standing in ranks with pikes and halberds.

“Be sure to fall back as soon as they hit,” Elayne yelled to them. “We want to draw them deeper!” Deeper into the forest, where the *siswat’aman* awaited their arrival.

The soldiers nodded. Elayne passed Alliandre herself, sitting her horse with a small guard surrounding her. The dark-haired queen did a horseback curtsy to Elayne. Her men had wanted their queen to join Berelain at Mayene’s hospital, but Alliandre had refused. Perhaps seeing Elayne lead her troops directly had spurred the woman’s decision.

Elayne left them behind as the first Trollocs hit the Wood, grunting and yelling. They'd have a difficult time fighting in the forest. The humans could use the forest cover far more effectively, ambushing the huge Trollocs barreling through the woods, skewering and hamstringing them from behind. Mobile forces of bowmen and crossbowmen could shoot from cover—if they did it right, the Trollocs wouldn't even know which direction the arrows were coming from.

As Elayne led her Queen's Guard toward the roadway, she heard distant explosions and screams from Trollocs. The slingmen were tossing Aludra's explosive roarsticks at the Trollocs through the trees. Flashes of light reflected off dim tree trunks.

Elayne reached the roadway just in time to see the Trollocs, led by several Myrddraal in deep black cloaks, come pouring onto it. They could quickly flank Elayne's force—but the Band of the Red Hand had already set up the dragons on the road. Talmanes stood with hands clasped behind his back atop a pile of boxes, overlooking his force. The banner of the Red Hand flapped behind him, a bloody palm stamped on a field of red-fringed white, with Aludra yelling out measurements, aiming instructions and the occasional curse at dragoners making mistakes or moving too slowly.

Arrayed in front of Talmanes were the dragons, nearly a hundred of them, strung across the broad roadway in four ranks, spilling out into the fields around the roadway here. Elayne was too far away to hear him give the order to fire. That was perhaps a good thing, for the thunder that followed shook her as if Dragonmount itself had decided to erupt. Moon-shadow bucked, neighing, and Elayne had to fight to keep the animal from tossing her on her backside. In the end, she plugged the horse's ears with a weave of Air as the dragoners rolled their weapons to the side and let the second rank open fire.

Elayne plugged her own ears as she calmed Moonshadow. Birgitte continued fighting her own terrified mount, eventually leaping free, but Elayne paid little attention. She peered through the smoke that choked the roadway. The third line of dragons was rolling up to fire.

Despite having her ears plugged, she could *feel* the blast jolt the ground, shake the trees. The fourth round followed, rattling her to the bones. Elayne breathed in and out, stilling her heart, waiting for the smoke to clear.

First, she made out Talmanes, standing tall. The first line of dragons had rolled back into place, reloaded. The other three ranks were hastily doing their own reloads, slipping powder and the large metal spheres into place.

A strong breeze from the west cleared the smoke enough for her to see… Elayne gasped softly.

Thousands of Trollocs lay in smoldering pieces, many blown off the road completely. Arms, legs, strands of coarse hair, *pieces* lay scattered amid holes in the ground fully two paces wide. Where there had once been many thousands of Trollocs, only blood, broken bones and smoke remained. Many of the trees had been shattered into splintered trunks. Of the Myrddraal that had been at the front, there was no sign at all.

The dragoners lowered their flame-sticks, not firing their reloaded rounds. A few surviving Trollocs near the back scrambled away into the forest.

Elayne looked at Birgitte and grinned. The Warder looked on, solemn, while several Guardswomen ran to chase down her horse.

“Well?” Elayne asked, unstopping her ears.

“I think…” Birgitte said. “Those things are messy. And imprecise. And bloody *effective*.”

“Yes,” Elayne said proudly.

Birgitte shook her head. Her horse was returned to her, and she remounted. “I used to think that a man and his bow were the most dangerous combination this land would ever know, Elayne. Now—as if it weren’t bad enough that men channel openly and the Seanchan use channelers in combat—we have those things. I don’t like the way this is going. If any boy with a tube of metal can destroy an entire army . . ”

“Don’t you see?” Elayne said. “There won’t be war any more. We win this, and there *will* be peace, as Rand intends. Nobody but Trollocs would go into battle, knowing they face weapons like these!”

“Perhaps,” Birgitte said. She shook her head. “Maybe I have less faith in the wisdom of people than you do.”

Elayne sniffed, raising her sword to Talmanes, who drew his and raised it back. The first step in destroying this Trolloc army had been taken.

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CHAPTER 11

Just Another Sell-sword

“I realize there have been… disagreements between us in the past” Adelorna Bastine said, riding beside Egwene as they passed through camp. Adelorna was a slim, regal woman; her tilted eyes and dark hair bespoke her Saldaean heritage. “I would not have you consider us enemies.”

“I have not,” Egwene said carefully, “and do not.” She did not ask what Adelorna meant by using the word “us.” She was Green, and Egwene had suspected for a time that she was the Captain-General, the name the Greens gave to the head of their Ajah.

“That is well,” Adelorna said. “Some within the Ajah have acted in foolishness. They have been… informed of their mistakes. You will find no further resistance from those who should have loved you best, Mother. Whatever has passed, let it be buried.”

“Let it be buried,” Egwene agreed, amused. *Now*, she thought. *After all of this, the Greens try to claim me?*

Well, she would use them. She had been worried that her relationship with them was beyond repair. Choosing Silviana as her Keeper had made many determine to treat her as an enemy. Egwene had heard whispers that many thought she would have chosen the Red as her Ajah, despite the fact that she not only had a Warder, but had married him.

“If I may ask,” Egwene said. “Is there a particular incident which has brought about this… bridge across our difficulties?”

“Some are willfully ignorant of what you did during the Seanchan invasion, Mother,” Adelorna said. “You proved to have the spirit of a warrior. Of a general. This is something the Green Ajah must not ignore. Indeed, we must embrace it as an example. So it has been decided, and so those who lead the Ajah have spoken.” Adelorna met Egwene’s eyes, then bowed her head.

The implication was obvious. Adelorna *was* the head of the Green Ajah. To speak it outright would not be appropriate, but to give Egwene this knowledge was to give a measure of trust and respect.

If you had truly been raised from us, the action said, *you would have known who led us. You would have known our secrets. I give them to you.* There was also gratitude to the motion. Egwene had saved Adelorna's life during the Seanchan assault of the White Tower.

The Amyrlin was of no Ajah—and Egwene actually expressed this virtue more than any before her, for she never *had* belonged to an Ajah. Still, this gesture was moving. She rested her hand on Adelorna's arm in thanks, then gave her leave to depart.

Gawyn, Silviana and Leilwin rode off to the side, where Egwene had sent them after Adelorna asked for a private word. That Seanchan… Egwene vacillated between keeping her close to watch her, and sending her far, far away.

Leilwin’s information about the Seanchan *had* been useful. So far as she could determine, Leilwin had told her the exact truth. For now, Egwene kept her close—if only because she frequently thought of more questions about the Seanchan. Leilwin acted more like a bodyguard than a prisoner. As if Egwene would trust her safety to one of the Seanchan. She shook her head, riding among the gathered tents and campfires of the army. Most were empty, as Bryne had the men forming battle lines. He expected the Trolloc approach within the hour.

Egwene found Bryne calmly organizing his maps and papers in a tent near the center of the camp. Yukiri was there, arms folded. Egwene dismounted and went in.

Bryne looked up sharply. “Mother!” he exclaimed, causing her to freeze.

She looked down. There was a hole in the floor of the tent, and she had nearly stepped into it.

It was a *gateway.* The other side appeared to open into the air itself, looking down on the Trolloc army, which was crossing the hills. The recent week had involved many skirmishes, with Egwene’s archers and riders slaughtering Trollocs who marched, in force, toward the hills and the border into Arafel.

Egwene peered through this gateway in the floor. It was high up, well outside of bow range, but looking down through it at the Trollocs made her dizzy.

“I’m not sure if this is brilliant,” she said to Bryne, “or incredibly foolhardy.”

Bryne smiled, turning back to his maps. “Winning wars is about information, Mother. If I can see exactly what they are doing—where they are trying to envelop us and how they are bringing in reserves—I can prepare. This is better than a battle tower. I should have thought of it ages ago.”

“The Shadow has Dreadlords who can channel, General,” Egwene said. “Peeking through this gateway could get you burned to a crisp. That’s not to mention Draghkar. If a flock of them tried to fly through this—”

“Draghkar are Shadowspawn,” Bryne said. “I’ve been told that they’d die passing through the gateway.”

“I guess that’s true,” Egwene said, “but you’d have a flock of dead Draghkar in here. Regardless, channelers can still attack through it.”

“I will take that chance. The advantage offered is incredible.”

“I’d still rather you use scouts to look through the gateway,” Egwene said, “not your own eyes. You are a resource. One of our most valuable. Risks are unavoidable, but please take care to minimize them.”

“Yes, Mother,” he said.

She inspected the weaves, then eyed Yukiri.

“I volunteered, Mother,” Yukiri said before Egwene could ask how a Sitter ended up doing simple gateway duty. “He sent to us, asking if forming a gateway like this—horizontal, instead of vertical—was possible. I thought it an interesting puzzle.”

She was not surprised he had sent to the Grays. There was a growing sentiment among them that, just as the Yellows specialized in Healing weaves and the Greens specialized in Battle weaves, the Grays should take particular interest in weaves for Traveling. They seemed to consider travel part of their calling as mediators and ambassadors.

“Can you show me our own lines?” Egwene asked.

“Certainly, Mother,” Yukiri said, closing the gateway. She opened another, letting Egwene look down on the battle lines of her army as they formed up in defensive positions on the hills.

This *was* more efficient than maps. No map could completely convey the lay of a land, the way that troops moved. Egwene felt as if she were looking at an exact replica of the landscape in miniature.

Vertigo hit her suddenly. She was standing at the edge of a drop of hundreds of feet. Her mind reeled, and she stepped back, taking a deep breath.

“You need to put a rope up around this thing,” Egwene said. “Someone could step right off.” *Or pitch headfirst while staring down…*

Bryne grunted. “I sent Siuan for something like that.” He hesitated. “She didn’t much like being sent, though, so she might come back with something completely useless.”

“I keep wondering,” Yukiri said. “Shouldn’t there be a way to create a gateway like this, but make it so it can only let light through? Like a window. You could stand on it and look down, without fearing that you could slip through. With the right weaves, you might be able to make it invisible from the other side…”

Stand on *it? Light. You’d have to be mad.*

“Lord Bryne,” Egwene said, “your battle lines seem very solid.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

“They are also lacking.”

Bryne raised his head. Other men might have risen to the challenge, but he did not. Perhaps it was all of that practice in dealing with Morgase. “How so?”

“You form up the troops as usual,” Egwene said. “Archers at the front and on the hills to slow the enemy advance, heavy cavalry to charge and hit, then withdraw. Pikes to hold the line, light cavalry to protect our flanks and keep us from being surrounded.”

“The soundest battle strategies are often those that are time-tested,” Bryne said. “We may have a large force, with all of those Dragonsworn, but we’re still outnumbered. We can’t be more aggressive than I’ve been here.”

“Yes, you can be,” Egwene said calmly. She met his eyes. “This is unlike any battle you’ve ever fought, and your army is not like any you’ve ever led, General. You have a major advantage that you are not taking into account.”

“You mean the Aes Sedai?”

Bloody right I do, she thought. Light, she’d been spending too much time around Elayne.

“I did account for you, Mother,” Bryne said. “I had planned for the Aes Sedai to be a reserve force to aid companies in disengaging so we can rotate in fresh troops.”

“Pardon, Lord Bryne,” Egwene said. “Your plans are wise, and certainly some of the Aes Sedai should be used that way. However, the White Tower did not prepare and train for thousands of years to sit out the Last Battle as a *reserve* force."

Bryne nodded, slipping a new set of documents out from underneath his pile. "I did consider other more… dynamic possibilities, but I did not want to overstep my authority." He handed her the documents.

Egwene scanned them, raising an eyebrow. Then she smiled.

Mat had not remembered so many Tinkers around Ebou Dar. Brilliantly colored wagons grew like vibrant mushrooms on an otherwise dun field. There were enough of them to make a bloody city. A city of Tinkers? That would be like… like a city of Aiel. It was just wrong.

Mat trotted Pips along the roadway. Of course, there *was* an Aiel city. Maybe there would be a Tinker city someday, too. They would buy up all of the colored dye, and everyone else in the world would have to wear brown. There would be no fighting in the city, so it would be downright boring, but there also would not be a single bloody pot with a hole in the bottom for thirty leagues!

Mat smiled, patting Pips. He had covered over his *ashandarei* as best he could to make it look like a walking pole strapped to the side of the horse. His hat lay inside the pack he had hung from the saddlebags, along with all of his nice coats. He had ripped the lace off the one he wore. It was a shame, but he did not want to be recognized.

He wore a crude bandage wrapped around the side of his head, covering his missing eye. As he approached the Dal Eira gate, he fell into line behind the others awaiting permission to enter. He should look just like another wounded sell-sword riding into the city, seeking refuge or perhaps work.

He made certain to slump in the saddle. Keep your head down: good advice on the battlefield *and* when entering a city where people knew you. He could not be Matrim Cauthon here. Matrim Cauthon had left the queen of this city tied up to be murdered. Many would suspect him of the murder. Light, he would have suspected *himself.* Beslan would hate him now, and there was no telling how Tuon would feel about him, now that they had had some time apart.

Yes, best to keep his head down and stay quiet. He would feel the place out. If, that was, he ever reached the front of this bloody line. Who ever heard of a line to enter a city?

Eventually, he reached the gate. The bored soldier there had a face like an old shovel—it was half-covered in dirt and would be better off locked in a shed somewhere. He looked Mat up and down.

“You have sworn the oaths, traveler?” the guard asked in a lazy Seanchan drawl. On the other side of the gate, a different soldier waved over the next person in line.

“Yes, I have indeed,” Mat said. “The oaths to the great Seanchan Empire, and the Empress herself, may she live forever. I’m just a poor, traveling sell-sword, once attendant to House Haak, a noble family in Murandy. I lost my eye to some bandits in the Tween Forest two years back while protecting a young child I discovered in the woods. I raised her as my own, but—”

The soldier waved him on. The fellow did not look as if he had been listening. Mat considered staying put out of principle. Why would the soldiers force people to wait in such a long line and give them time to think of a cover story, only to not hear it out? That could offend a man. Not Matrim Cauthon, who was always lighthearted and never offended. But someone else, surely.

He rode on, containing his annoyance. Now, he just needed to make his way to the right tavern. Pity Setalle’s place was not an option any longer. That had—

Mat stiffened in the saddle, though Pips continued his leisurely pace forward. Mat had just taken a moment to look at the other guard at the gate. It was *Petra*, the strongman from Valan Luca’s menagerie!

Mat looked the other way and slumped again in his saddle, then shot another glance over his shoulder. That was Petra, all right. There was no mistaking those log arms and that tree-stump neck. Petra was not a tall man, but he was so wide, an entire army could have taken shade in his shadow. What was he doing back in Ebou Dar? Why was he wearing a Seanchan uniform? Mat almost went over to talk to him, as they had always been amiable, but that Seanchan uniform made him reconsider.

Well, at least his luck was with him. If he had been sent to Petra instead of the guard he had ended up talking to, he would have been recognized for sure. Mat breathed out, then climbed down to lead Pips. The city was crowded, and he did not want the horse pushing someone over. Besides, Pips was laden down enough to look like a packhorse—if the looker knew nothing of horses—and walking might make Mat less memorable.

Perhaps he should have started his search for a tavern in the Rahad. Rumors were always easy to find in the Rahad, as was a game of dice. It was also the easiest place to find a knife in your gut, and that was saying something in Ebou Dar. In the Rahad people were as likely to take out their knives and begin killing as they were to say hello in the morning.

He did not go into the Rahad. The place looked different, now. There were soldiers camped outside it. Generations of successive rulers in Ebou Dar had allowed the Rahad to fester unchecked, but the Seanchan were not so inclined.

Mat wished them luck. The Rahad had fought off every invasion so far. Light. Rand should have just hidden there, instead of going up to fight the Last Battle. The Trollocs and Darkfriends would have come for him, and the Rahad would have left them all unconscious in an alley, their pockets turned inside out and their shoes sold for soup money. Mat caught a glimpse of Rand shaving, but he squashed the image.

Mat shouldered his way over a crowded canal bridge, keeping a close eye on his saddlebags, but so far, not a single cutpurse had tried for them. With a Seanchan patrol on every other corner, he could see why. As he passed a man yelling out the days news, with hints that he had good gossip for a little coin, Mat found himself smiling. He was surprised at how familiar, even comfortable, this city felt. He had liked it here. Though he could vaguely remember grumbling about wanting to be away—probably just after the wall fell on him, as Matrim Cauthon was not often one for grumbling—he now realized that his time in Ebou Dar had been among the best of his life. Plenty of cards and dice in the city.

Tylin. Bloody ashes, but that had been a fun game. She had had the better of him time and again. Light send him plenty of women who could do that, though not in rapid succession, and always when he knew how to find the back door. Tuon was one. Come to think of it, he would probably never need another. She was enough of a handful for any man. Mat smiled, patting Pips on the neck. The horse blew down Mat’s neck in return.

Strangely, this place felt more like home to him than the Two Rivers did. Yes, the Ebou Dari were prickly, but all peoples had their quirks. In fact, as Mat thought about it, he had never met a people who were not prickly about one thing or another. The Borderlanders were baffling, and so were the Aiel—that went without saying. The Cairhienin and their strange games, the

Tairens and their ridiculous hierarchies, the Seanchan and their… Seanchan-ness.

That was the truth of it. Everyone outside the Two Rivers, and to a lesser extent Andor, was *bloody* insane. A man just had to be ready for that.

He strolled along, careful to be polite, lest he find a knife in his gut. The air smelled of a hundred sweetmeats, the chattering crowd a low roar in his ears. The Ebou Dari still wore their colorful outfits—maybe that was why the Tinkers had come here, drawn to the bright colors like soldiers drawn to dinner—anyway, the Ebou Dari women wore dresses with tight laced tops that showed plenty of bosom, not that Mat looked. Their skirts had colorful petticoats underneath and they pinned up the side or front to show them off. That never had made sense to him. Why put the colorful parts underneath? And if you did, why take such pains to cover them over, then go around with the outside pinned up?

The men wore long vests that were equally colorful, perhaps to hide the bloodstains when they were stabbed. No point in throwing away a good vest just because the fellow wearing it was murdered for inquiring after the weather. Though ... as Mat walked along, he found fewer duels than he had expected. They never had been as common in this part of the city as in the Rahad, but some days, he had hardly been able to take two steps without passing a pair of men with knives out. This day, he saw not a single one.

Some of the Ebou Dari—you could often tell them by their olive skin—were parading around in Seanchan dress. Everyone was very polite. As polite as a six-year-old boy who had just heard that you had a fresh apple pie back in the kitchen.

The city was the same, but different. The feel was off a shade or two. And it was not just that there were no Sea Folk ships in the harbor any longer. It was the Seanchan, obviously. They’d made rules since he’d left. What kind?

Mat took Pips to a stable that seemed reputable enough. A quick glance at their stock told him that; they were caring well for the animals, and many were very fine. It was best to trust a stable with fine horses, though it cost you a little more.

He left Pips, took his bundle, and used the still-wrapped *ashandarei* as a walking staff. Choosing the right tavern was as tough as choosing a good wine. You wanted one that was old, but not broken down. Clean, but not too clean—a spotless tavern was one that never saw any real use. Mat could not stand the types of places where people sat around quietly and drank tea, coming there primarily to be seen.

No, a good tavern was worn and used, like good boots. It was also sturdy, again like good boots. So long as the ale did not *taste* like good boots, you would have a winner. The best places for information were over in the Rahad, but his clothing was too nice to visit, and he did not want to run into whatever the Seanchan were doing there.

He stuck his head into an inn named The Winter Blossom, and immediately turned around and stalked away. Deathwatch Guards in uniform. He did not want to take any slight chance of running into Furyk Karede. The next inn was too well lit, and the next too dark. After about an hour of hunting—and not a duel to be seen—he began to despair of ever finding the right place. Then he heard dice tumbling in a cup.

At first, he jumped, thinking that it was those blasted dice in his head. Fortunately, it was just ordinary dice. Blessed, wonderful dice. The sound was gone in a moment, carried on the wind through the throng of people in the streets. Hand on his coin purse, pack over his shoulder, he pushed through the crowd, muttering a few apologies. In a nearby alleyway, he saw a sign hanging from a wall.

He stepped up to it, reading the words “The Yearly Brawl” in copper on its face. It had a picture of clapping people, and the sounds of dice mixed with the smells of wine and ale. Mat stepped inside. A round-faced Seanchan stood just inside the door, leaning casually against the wall, a sword on his belt. He gave Mat a distrustful stare. Well, Mat had never met a shoulderthumper who did not give that look to every man who entered. Mat reached up to tip his hat to the man, but of course he was not wearing it. Bloody ashes. He felt naked without it, sometimes.

“Jame!” a woman called from beside the bar. “You aren’t glaring at customers again, are you?”

“Only the ones that deserve it, Kathana,” the man called back with a Seanchan slur. “I’m sure this one does.”

“I’m just a humble traveler,” Mat said, “looking for some dicing and some wine. Nothing more. Certainly not trouble.”

“And that’s why you’re carrying a polearm?” Jame asked. “Wrapped up like that?”

“Oh, stop it,” the woman, Kathana, said. She had crossed the common room and took Mat by the sleeve of his coat, dragging him toward the bar.

She was a short thing, dark-haired and fair-skinned. She was not that much older than he was, but she had an unmistakable motherly air. “Don’t mind him. Just don’t make trouble, and he won’t be forced to stab you, kill you, or anything in between.”

She plunked Mat down on a bar stool and started busying herself behind the bar. The common room was dim, but in a friendly way. People diced at one side, the good kind of dicing. The kind that had people laughing or clapping their friends on the back at a good-natured loss. No haunted eyes of men gambling their last coin, here.

“You need food,” Kathana declared. “You have the look of a man who hasn’t eaten anything hearty in a week. How’d you lose that eye?”

“I was a lord’s guard in Murandy,” Mat said. “Lost it in an ambush.”

“That’s a great lie,” Kathana said, slapping a plate down in front of him, full of slices of pork and gravy. “Better than most. You said it really straight, too. I almost believe you. Jame, you want food?”

“I have to guard the door!” he called back.

“Light, man. You expect someone to walk off with it? Get over here.” Jame grumbled but made his way over to the bar beside Mat, settling down on a stool. Kathana put a mug of ale down, and he took it up to his lips, staring straight ahead. “I'm watching you,” he muttered to Mat.

Mat was not certain this was the right inn for him, but he also was not certain he would be able to escape with his head unless he ate the woman’s food as instructed. He took a taste; it was pretty good. She had moved over and was wagging a finger while lecturing a man at one of the tables. She seemed the type who would lecture a tree for growing in the wrong spot.

This woman, Mat thought, *must never be allowed to enter the same room as Nynaeve. At least not when I’m within shouting distance.*

Kathana came bustling back. She wore a marriage knife at her neck, though Mat did not stare for more than a few seconds on account of him being a married man. She had her skirt pinned up on the side after the fashion of Ebou Dari commoners. As she came back to the bar and readied a plate of food for Jame, Mat noticed him watching her fondly, and made a guess. “You two been married long?” Mat asked.

Jame eyed him. “No,” he finally said. “Haven’t been on this side of the ocean for long.”

“I suppose that would make sense,” Mat said, taking a drink of the ale she set before him. It was not bad, considering how awful most things tasted these days. This was only a little awful.

Kathana walked over to the dicing men and demanded they eat more food, as they were looking pale. It was a wonder this Jame fellow did not weigh as much as two horses. She did talk some, though, so perhaps he could wiggle the information he needed out of her.

“There don’t seem to be as many duels as there used to be,” Mat said to her as she passed.

“That's because of a Seanchan rule,” Kathana said, “from the new Empress, may she live forever. She didn’t forbid duels entirely, and a bloody good thing she didn’t. The Ebou Dari won’t riot at something as unimportant as being conquered, but take away our duels… *then* you’ll see something. Anyway, duels now have to be witnessed by an official of the government. You can’t duel without answering a hundred different questions and paying a fee. It’s drained the whole life out of it all.”

“It has saved lives,” Jame said. “Men can still die by each other’s knives if they are determined. They simply have to give themselves time to cool down and think.”

“Duels aren’t about thinking,” Kathana said. “But I suppose it *does* mean that I don’t have to worry about your pretty face being cut up on the street.”

Jame snorted, resting his hand on his sword. The hilt, Mat noticed for the first time, was marked with herons—though he could not see if the blade was or not. Before Mat could ask another question, Kathana marched away and began squawking at some men who had spilled ale on their table. She did not seem the type to stand in one place for very long.

“Hows the weather, to the north?” Jame asked, eyes still straight ahead.

“Dreary,” Mat replied, honestly. “As everywhere.”

“Men say it’s the Last Battle,” Jame said.

“It is.”

Jame grunted. “If it is, it would be a bad time for interfering with politics, wouldn’t you think?”

“Bloody right it would be,” Mat said. “People need to stop playing games and have a look at the sky.”

Jame eyed him. “That’s the truth. You should listen to what you are saying.”

Light, Mat thought. *He must think I'm a spy of some sort.* “It’s not my choice,” Mat said. “Sometimes, people will only listen to what they want to hear.” He took another bite of his meat, which tasted as good as could be expected. Eating a meal these days was like going to a dance where there were only ugly girls. This, however, was among the better of the bad that he had had the misfortune of eating, lately.

“A wise man might just learn the truth,” Jame said.

“You have to find the truth first,” Mat said. “It’s harder than most men think.”

From behind, Kathana snorted, bustling past. “The ‘truth’ is something men debate in bars when they’re too drunk to remember their names. That means it’s not in good company. I wouldn’t put too much stock in it, traveler.”

“The name’s Mandevwin,” Mat said.

“I’m sure it is,” Kathana said. She looked him over then. “Has anyone ever told you that you should wear a hat? It would fit the missing eye quite well.”

“Is that so,” Mat said dryly. “You give fashion advice as well as force-feeding men?”

She swatted him on the back of the head with her cleaning rag. “Eat your food.”

“Look, friend,” Jame said, turning toward him. “I know what you are and why you are here. The fake eye bandage is not fooling me. You have throwing knives tucked into your sleeves and six more on your belt that I can count. I’ve never met a man with one eye who could throw worth a dried bean. She’s not as easy a target as you foreigners think. You’ll never make it into the palace, let alone through her bodyguards. Go find some honest work instead.”

Mat gaped at the man. He thought Mat was an *assassin?* Mat reached up and took off the bandage, exposing the hole where his eye had been. Jame started at that.

“There are assassins,” Mat said calmly, “after Tuon?”

“Don’t use her name like that,” Kathana said, beginning to snap her cleaning rag at him again.

Mat reached up beside his head without looking, catching the tip of the rag. He held Jame's eyes with his single one, not flinching.

“There are assassins,” Mat repeated calmly, “after Tuon?”

Jame nodded. “Mostly foreigners who don’t know the right way of things. Several have moved through the inn. Only one admitted the reason he was here. I saw that his blood fed the dusty earth of the dueling grounds.”

“Then I count you a friend,” Mat said, standing. He reached into his bundle and took out his hat and put it upon his head. “Who is behind it? Who has brought them in, put the bounty on her head?”

Nearby, Kathana inspected his hat and nodded in satisfaction. Then she hesitated and squinted at his face.

“This isn’t what you think,” Jame said. “He isn’t hiring the best assassins. They’re foreigners, so they aren’t meant to succeed.”

“I don’t care how bloody likely their chances are,” Mat said. “Who is hiring them?”

“He’s too important for you to—”

“*Who?*” Mat said softly.

“General Lunal Galgan,” Jame said. “Head of the Seanchan armies. I can’t make you out, friend. Are you an assassin, or are you here hunting assassins?”

“I’m no bloody assassin,” Mat said, pulling the brim of his hat down and picking up his bundle. “I never kill a man unless he demands it— demands it with screams and thunder so loudly, I figure it would be impolite not to agree to the request. If I stab you, friend, you’ll know that it is coming, and you will know why. I promise you that.”

“Jame,” Kathana hissed. “It’s *him*”

“What now?” Jame asked as Mat brushed past, raising his covered *ashandarei* to his shoulder.

“The one the guards have been looking for!” Kathana said. She looked to Mat. “Light! Every soldier in Ebou Dar has been told to watch for your face. How did you make it through the city gates?”

“By luck,” Mat said, then stepped out into the alleyway.

“What are you waiting for?” Moiraine asked.

Rand turned toward her. They stood in Lan’s command tent in Shienar. He could smell the smoke of burning fields, set aflame by Lan and Lord Agelmar's troops as they withdrew from the Gap.

They were burning the lands they would rather defend. A desperate tactic, but a good one. It was the sort of all-in tactic that Lews Therin and his people in the Age of Legends had been hesitant to try, at least at first. It had cost them dearly then.

The Borderlanders showed no such timidity.

"Why are we here?" Moiraine pressed, stepping up to him. His Maidens guarded the tent from the inside; better to not let the enemy know Rand was here. "You should be at Shayol Ghul right now. That is your destiny, Rand al'Thor. Not these lesser fights."

"My friends die here."

"I thought you were beyond such weaknesses."

"Compassion is not a weakness."

"Is it not?" she said. "And if, in sparing your enemy because of compassion, you allow them to kill you? What then, Rand al'Thor?"

He had no answer.

"You cannot risk yourself," Moiraine said. "And regardless of whether or not you agree that compassion itself can be a weakness, acting foolishly because of it certainly is."

He had often thought about the moment when he had lost Moiraine. He had agonized over her death, and he still reveled in her return. At times, however, he had forgotten how… insistent she could be.

"I will move against the Dark One when the time is right," Rand said, "but not before. He must think I am with the armies, that I am waiting to seize more ground before striking at him. We must coax his commanders to commit their forces southward, lest we be overwhelmed at Shayol Ghul once I enter."

"It will not matter," Moiraine said. "You will face him, and that will be the time of determination. All spins on that moment, Dragon Reborn. All threads in the Pattern are woven around your meeting, and the turning of the Wheel pulls you toward it. Do not deny that you feel it."

"I feel it."

"Then go."

"Not yet."

She took a deep breath. "Stubborn as ever."

"And a good thing," Rand said. "Stubbornness is what brought me this far. Rand hesitated, then fished in his pocket. He came out with something bright and silvery—a Tar Valon mark. "Here," he said, holding it out to her. "I've been saving this."

She pursed her lips. "It cannot be…"

“The same one? No. That is long lost, I fear. I’ve been carrying this one around as a token, almost without realizing what I’d been doing.”

She took the coin, turning it over in her fingers. She was still inspecting it when the Maidens looked with alertness toward the tent flap. A second later, Lan lifted the flap and strode in, flanked by two Malkieri men. The three could have been brothers, with those grim expressions and hard faces.

Rand stepped up, resting his hand on Lan’s shoulder. The man did not look tired—a stone could not look tired—but he did look *worn.* Rand understood that feeling.

Lan nodded to him, then looked at Moiraine. “Have you two been arguing?”

Moiraine tucked the mark away, face becoming impassive. Rand didn’t know what to make of the interaction between the two of them since Moiraine’s return. They were civil, but there was a distance between them that he had not expected.

“You should listen to Moiraine,” Lan said, turning back to Rand. “She has prepared for these days longer than you have been alive. Let her guide you.”

“She wants me to leave this battlefield,” Rand said, “and strike immediately for Shayol Ghul instead of trying to fight those channelers for you so you can retake the Gap.”

Lan hesitated. “Then perhaps you should do as she—”

“No,” Rand said. “Your position here is dire, old friend. I can do something, and so I will. If we can’t stop those Dreadlords, they’ll have you retreating all the way back to Tar Valon.”

“I have heard what you did at Maradon,” Lan said. “I will not turn away a miracle here if one is determined to find us.”

“Maradon was a mistake,” Moiraine said tersely. “You cannot afford to expose yourself, Rand.”

“I cannot afford not to, either. I won’t just sit back and let people die! Not when I can protect them.”

“The Borderlanders do not need to be sheltered,” Lan said.

“No,” Rand replied, “but I’ve never known one who would refuse a sword when one was offered in a time of need.”

Lan met his eyes, then nodded. “Do what you can.”

Rand nodded to the two Maidens, who nodded back.

“Sheepherder,” Lan said.

Rand raised an eyebrow.

Lan saluted him, arm across his chest, bowing his head.

Rand nodded back. “There is something for you on the floor over there, Dai Shan.”

Lan frowned, then walked to a pile of blankets. There were no tables in this tent. Lan knelt, then raised a bright, silvery crown—thin, yet strong. “The crown of Malkier,” he whispered. “This was lost!”

“My smiths did what they could with old drawings,” Rand said. “The other is for Nynaeve; I think it will suit her. You have ever been a king, my friend. Elayne taught me to rule, but you… you taught me how to stand. Thank you.” He turned to Moiraine. “Keep a space clear for my return.”

Rand seized the One Power and opened a gateway. He left Lan kneeling, holding the crown, and followed his Maidens out onto a black field. Burned stalks crunched beneath his boots and smoke wreathed the air.

The Maidens immediately sought shelter in a small depression in the field, huddling against the blackened earth, prepared to weather the storm.

Because one was *certainly* brewing. Trollocs milled in a large mass before Rand, prodding at the soil and at the remains of farmhouses. The River Mora rushed nearby; this was the first cultivated land south of Tarwin’s Gap. Lan’s forces had burned it before preparing to retreat downriver ahead of the Trolloc advance.

There were tens of thousands of the beasts here. Perhaps more. Rand raised his arms, forming a fist, drawing in a deep breath. In the pouch at his belt, he carried a familiar object. The small fat man with the sword, the *angreal* he had recently found at Dumai’s Wells. He had returned there for one last look and found it buried in the mud. It had been useful at Maradon. Nobody knew he had it. That was important.

But there was more to what he would do here than tricks. Trollocs shouted as the winds whipped up around Rand. This was not the result of channeling, not yet.

It was Rand. Being here. Confronting *him*.

Seas grew choppy when different streams of water crashed into one another. Winds grew powerful when hot air and cool mixed. And where Light confronted Shadow… storms grew. Rand shouted, letting his nature stir the tempest. The Dark One pressed upon the land, seeking to smother it. The Pattern needed equalization. It needed balance.

It needed the Dragon.

The winds grew more powerful, lightning breaking the air, black dust and burned stalks flipping up, twisting about in the maelstrom. Rand finally channeled as Myrddraal forced the Trollocs to attack him; the beasts charged against the wind, and Rand directed the lightning.

It was so much easier to *direct* than *control.* With a storm already in place, he didn't need to force the lightning—he needed only to cajole it.

Strikes destroyed the front groups of Trollocs, a hundred bolts of lightning in succession. The pungent scent of burned flesh soon swirled in the storm, joining the charred stalks of grain. Rand roared as the Trollocs kept coming. Deathgates sprang up around him, gateways that zipped across the ground like water striders, sweeping Trollocs into death. Shadowspawn could not survive Traveling.

The stormwinds rose around Rand as he struck down those Trollocs who tried to reach him. The Dark One thought to rule here? He would see that this land already had a king! He would see that the fight would not—

A shield tried to sever Rand from the Source. He laughed, spinning, trying to pinpoint the shield's origin. "Taim!" he yelled, though the storm captured his voice and overwhelmed it. "I had hoped you would come!"

This was the fight that Lews Therin had constantly demanded of him, a fight Rand hadn't dared begin. Not until now, not until he had control. He summoned his strength, but then another shield struck at him, and another.

Rand drew in more of the One Power, tapping nearly all that he could through the fat man *angreal.* Shields continued to snap at him like biting flies. None were strong enough to sever him from the Source, but there were *dozens* of them.

Rand calmed himself. He sought peace, the peace of destruction. He was life, but he was also death. He was the manifestation of the land itself.

He struck, destroying an unseen Dreadlord hiding in the rubble of a burned building nearby. He summoned fire and directed it at a second, burning him to nothingness.

He could not see the weaves of the women out there—he could only feel their shields.

Too weak. Each shield was too weak, and yet their attacks had him worried. They had come quickly, at least three dozen Dreadlords, each trying to cut him off from the Source. This was dangerous—that they had anticipated him. That was why they had hit Lan so hard with channelers. To draw Rand out.

Rand fought off the attacks, but none of them were in danger of truly shielding him. A single person could not cut off someone holding as much *saidin* as he was. They should have…

He saw it right before it happened. The other attacks were cover, feints. One that was coming would be created by a circle of men and women. A man would be leading.

There! A shield slammed against him, but Rand had had just enough time to prepare. He channeled Spirit in the tempest, weaving by instinct from Lews Therin's memories, and rebuffed the shield. He shoved it away, but could not destroy it.

Light! That had to be a full circle. Rand grunted as the shield slipped closer to him; it made a vibrant pattern in the sky, motionless despite the tempest. Rand resisted it with his own surge of Spirit and Air, holding it back as if it were a knife hanging above his throat.

He lost control of the tempest.

Lightning crashed around him. The other channelers wove to enhance the storm—they didn't try to control it, for they didn't need to. It being out of control served them, as at any moment, it could strike Rand.

He roared again, louder this time, more determined. *I will beat you, Taim! I will finally do what I should have months ago!*

But he did not let the anger, the wildness, force him into conflict. He couldn't afford to. He had learned better than that.

This was not the place. He could not fight here. If he did, he would lose.

Rand pushed with a surge of strength, throwing back Taim's shield, then used the moment of respite to weave a gateway. His Maidens went through immediately, and Rand, ducking his head against the wind, reluctantly followed.

He leaped into Lan's tent, where Moiraine had done as he requested and kept space open for him. He closed his gateway, and the winds stilled, the noise dampened.

Rand formed a fist, panting, sweat running down the sides of his face. Here, back with Lan's army, the tempest was distant, although Rand could hear it rumbling, and faint winds stirred the tent.

Rand had to fight to keep from sinking to his knees. He sucked in large breaths. With difficulty, he slowed his racing heart and brought calmness to his face. He wanted to *fight*, not run! He could have beaten Taim!

And in so doing, would have weakened himself so far that the Dark One would have taken him with ease. He forced his fist to open and wrestled control of his emotions.

He looked up at Moiraine’s calm, knowing face.

“It was a trap?” she asked.

“Not so much a trap,” Rand said, “as a battlefield well-prepared with sentinels. They know what I did at Maradon. They must have teams of Dreadlords waiting to Travel to wherever I’m spotted and attack me.”

“You have seen the error in this line of attack?” she asked.

“Error ... no. Inevitability, yes.”

He couldn’t fight this war personally. Not this time.

He would have to find another way to protect his people.

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CHAPTER 12

A Shard of a Moment

Birgitte dashed through the forest, accompanied by a group of thirty Aiel, all with bows out. They made sound—they couldn't help but make sound—but the Aiel made less than they should. They would leap up onto fallen logs and run deftly along them or would find stones to step upon. They would writhe out of the way of hanging branches, ducking, twisting, moving.

"Here," she said in a hushed tone, rounding the side of a broken hill. Fortunately, the cave was still there, overgrown with vines, a small creek running past it. The Aiel ducked in, the water removing any scent of their passage.

Two of the men continued down the game trail, now moving much more loudly, scraping against every branch they passed. Birgitte joined the ones hiding in the cavern. It was dark inside and smelled of mold and earth.

Had she hidden in this cave, centuries ago when she'd lived in these woods as a bandit? She didn't know. She rarely remembered any of her past lives, sometimes only fleeting memories of the in-between years during her life in the World of Dreams before being brought into this world unnaturally by Moghedien.

She considered that with sickness. It was all right to be reborn, fresh and new. But to have her memories—her very sense of self—ripped away? If she lost her memories of her time in the World of Dreams, would she forget Gaidai completely? Would she forget herself?

She clenched her teeth. *It's the Last Battle, fool woman,* she thought. *Who cares about that?*

But she did. A question had begun to haunt her. What if, in being cast out of the World of Dreams, Birgitte had been broken from the Horn? She didn't know if it was possible. She no longer remembered enough to tell.

But if she had, she'd lose Gaidai forever.

Outside, leaves crunched, twigs cracking. The clatter was so loud, she would have sworn that a thousand soldiers were marching past—though she knew the fist of Trollocs was only fifty strong. Still, fifty had her band outnumbered. She didn't worry. Though she complained to Elayne that she didn't know much about warfare, this hiding in a forest with a team of well-trained companions… this she'd done before. Dozens of times. Perhaps hundreds, though her memories were so fuzzy, she couldn't say for certain.

When the Trollocs were nearly all the way past, she and her Aiel burst from cover. The brutes had started down the false trail made by the two Aielmen earlier, and Birgitte attacked them from behind, downing a number of Trollocs with arrows before the rest were able to react.

Trollocs did not die easily. They could often take two or three arrows before slowing. Well, that only happened when you missed the eyes or the throat. She never did. Monster after monster dropped to her bow. The Trollocs had begun downslope of the cave, which meant every one she or the Aiel killed was another corpse the others had to try to climb over to reach her.

Fifty became thirty in mere seconds. As that thirty rushed upward, half of the Aiel pulled out spears and engaged them while Birgitte and the others took a few steps downslope and flanked the Trollocs.

Twenty became ten, who tried to flee. Despite the wooded landscape, they were easy to pick off—though it meant hitting them in the legs or back of the neck, taking them down so that spears could finish them off.

Ten of the Aiel saw to the Trollocs, sticking a spear in each one to make certain it was dead. Others gathered arrows. Birgitte pointed to Nichil and Ludin, two of the Aiel, and they joined her to scout the area.

Her steps felt familiar, these woods felt familiar. Not just because of past lives she could no longer remember. During her centuries spent living in the World of Dreams, she and Gaidai had spent many a year in these forests. She remembered his caress upon her cheek. Her neck.

I can't lose this, she thought, fighting down panic. *Light, I can't. Please*… She didn't know what was happening to her. She could remember something, a faint discussion about… about what? She had lost it. People couldn't be unbound from the Horn, could they? Hawkwing might know. She'd have to ask him. Unless she had already?

Burn me!

Movement in the forest stopped her cold. She crouched down next to a rock, bow out in front of her. Underbrush crackled close at hand. Nichil and Ludin had vanished at the first sound. Light, but they were good. It took her a moment to pick them out hiding nearby.

She raised a finger, pointed at herself, then pointed before her. She would scout; they would cover her.

Birgitte moved silently. She'd show these Aiel that they weren't the only ones who knew how to avoid detection. Besides, these were *her* woods. She wouldn't be shown up by a bunch of desert folk.

She moved stealthily, avoiding thickets of withered thorn bushes. Were there more of those around of late? They seemed to be one of the only plants that hadn't died off completely. The ground smelled stale in a way that no forest should, though that was overpowered by the stench of death and rot. She passed another group of fallen Trollocs. The blood on them was dry. They were several days dead.

Elayne ordered her forces to bring back their dead. Thousands upon thousands of Trollocs moved through these woods like crawling beetles. Elayne wanted them to find only their own dead, hoping it would give them reason to fear.

Birgitte moved toward the sounds. She saw large shadows approaching in the dim light. Trollocs, sniffing at the air.

The creatures continued to press through the woods. They were forced to avoid the roads where an ambush of dragons could prove deadly. Elayne's plan called for teams like the one Birgitte led to hack away at the Trollocs, leading groups of them off into the woods, whittling down their numbers.

This group was far too big for her team to take, unfortunately. Birgitte withdrew, waving for the Aiel to follow, and slipped quietly back toward camp.

That night, following his failure with Lan's army, Rand fled to his dreams.

He sought out his valley of peace, appearing amid a grove of wild cherry trees in full bloom, their perfume lacing the air. With those beautiful pink-throated white blossoms, the trees almost looked aflame.

Rand wore simple Two Rivers clothing. After months in a king's garments of brilliant colors and soft textures, the loose wool trousers and linen felt very comfortable. He placed sturdy boots on his feet, like those he’d worn growing up. They fit him in a way that no new boot, no matter how well made, ever could.

He wasn’t allowed old boots any longer. If his boots showed a hint of wear, one servant or another made them vanish.

Rand stood up in the dream hills and made himself a walking staff. He then began to walk upward through the mountains. This wasn’t a real place, not any longer. He’d crafted it from memory and desire, somehow mixing both familiarity and a sense of exploration. It smelled fresh, of overturned leaves and sap. Animals moved in the underbrush. A hawk cried somewhere distant.

Lews Therin had known how to create dreamshards like this. Though he had not been a Dreamer, most Aes Sedai of that era had made use of *Tel’aran’rhiod* in one way or another. One thing they learned was how to slice out a dream for themselves, a haven within their own mind, more controlled than regular dreams. They learned how to enter a fragment like this while meditating, somehow giving the body rest as real as sleep.

Lews Therin had known these things, and more. How to reach into someone’s mind if they entered his dreamshard. How to tell if someone else had invaded his dreams. How to expose his dreams to others. Lews Therin had liked to *know* things, like a traveler who wanted to have one of everything useful in his rucksack.

Lews Therin had rarely used these tools. He’d left them stored on a back shelf in his mind, gathering dust. Would things have gone differently if he’d taken time, each night, to wander a peaceful valley such as this? Rand didn’t know. And, truth be told, this valley was no longer safe. He passed a deep cavern to his left. He had not put it there. Another attempt by Moridin to draw him? Rand passed it by without looking.

The forest didn’t seem as alive as it had moments ago. Rand kept walking, trying to enforce his will upon the land. He had not practiced that enough, however—so as he walked, the forest grayed, looking washed out.

The cavern came again. Rand stopped at its mouth. Cold, humid air blew out over him, chilling his skin, smelling of fungus. Rand cast aside his walking staff, then strode into the cavern. As he passed into darkness, he wove a globe of white-blue light and hung it beside his head. The glow reflected from the wet stone, shining on smooth knobs and clefts.

Panting echoed from deep within the cavern. It was followed by gasps. And… splashes. Rand walked forward, though by now he had guessed what this was. He had begun to wonder if she would try again.

He came to a small chamber, perhaps ten paces wide, at the end of the tunnel, where the stone sank down into a clear pool of water, perfectly circular. The blue depths seemed to extend downward forever.

A woman in a white dress struggled to stay afloat in the center of it.

The fabric of her dress rippled in the water, forming a circle. Her face and hair were wet. As Rand watched, she gasped and sank, flailing in the crystalline water.

She came up a moment later, gasping.

"Hello, Mierin," Rand said softly. His hand formed into a fist. He would *not* jump into that water to rescue her. This was a dreamshard. That pool could actually be water, but more likely it represented something else.

His arrival seemed to buoy her, and her vigorous thrashings became more effective. "Lews Therin," she said, wiping her face with one hand, panting.

Light! Where was his peace? He felt like a child again, a boy who thought Baerlon the grandest city ever built. Yes, her face was different, but faces were no longer of much matter to him. She was still the same person.

Of all the Forsaken, only Lanfear had chosen her new name. She had always wanted one of those.

He remembered. He *remembered.* Walking into grand parties with her on his arm. Her laughter over the music. Their nights alone. He had not wanted to remember making love to another woman, particularly not to one of the Forsaken, but he could not pick and choose what was in his mind.

Those memories mixed with his own, when he had desired her as the Lady Selene. A foolish, youthful lust. He no longer felt these things, but the memories of them remained.

"You can free me, Lews Therin," Lanfear said. "He has claimed me. Must I beg? He has claimed me!"

"You pledged yourself to the Shadow, Mierin," Rand said. "This is your reward. You expect pity from me?"

A dark something reached up and wrapped around her legs, yanking her down into the abyss again. Despite his words, Rand found himself stepping forward, as if to leap into the pool.

He held himself back. He finally felt like a whole person again, after a long fight. That gave him strength, but in his peace was a weakness—the weakness he had always feared. The weakness that Moiraine had rightfully spotted in him. The weakness of compassion.

He needed it. Like a helmet needed a hole through which to see. Both could be exploited. He admitted to himself that it was true.

Lanfear surfaced, sputtering, looking helpless. “Must I beg?” she said again.

“I don’t think you are capable of it.”

She lowered her eyes. “… Please?” she whispered.

Rand’s insides twisted. He had fought through darkness himself in seeking the Light. He had given himself a second chance; should he not give one to another?

Light! He wavered, remembering what it had felt like in that moment seizing the True Power. That agony and that thrill, that power and that horror. Lanfear had given herself to the Dark One. But in a way, Rand had as well.

He looked into her eyes, searching them, *knowing* them. Finally, Rand shook his head. “You’ve grown better at this kind of deception, Mierin. But not good enough.”

Her expression darkened. In a moment, the pool was gone, replaced by a stone floor. Lanfear sat there, cross-legged, in her silver-white dress. Wearing her new face, but still the same.

“So you *are* back,” she said, sounding not entirely pleased. “Well, I am no longer forced to deal with a simple farmboy. That is some small blessing.”

Rand snorted, entering the chamber. She *was* still imprisoned—he could sense a darkening around her, like a dome of shadow, and he stayed outside of it. The pool, however—the act of drowning—had been mere theatrics. She was prideful, but was not above maintaining a weak front when the situation required it. If he’d been able to embrace Lews Therin’s memories earlier, Rand would never have been fooled so easily by her in the Waste.

“Then I shall address you not as a damsel in need of a hero,” Lanfear said, eyeing him as he walked around her prison, “but as an equal, seeking asylum.”

“An equal?” Rand said, laughing. “Since when have you ever considered *anyone* your equal, Mierin?”

“You care nothing for my captivity?”

“It pains me,” Rand said, “but no more than it pained me when you swore yourself to the Shadow. Did you know I was there, when you revealed it? You did not see me, as I did not want to be seen, but I was watching. Light, Mierin, you swore to *kill* me."

"Did I mean it?" she asked, turning to look him in the eyes.

Had she?… No, she had not meant it. Not then. Lanfear did not kill people that she thought would be useful, and she had always considered him useful.

"We shared something special, once," she said. "You were my—"

"I was an ornament to you!" Rand snapped. He breathed deeply, trying to calm himself. Light, but it was hard around her. "The past is done. I care nothing for it, and would gladly give you a second chance at the Light.

"Unfortunately, I *know* you. You're just doing it again. Playing us all, including the Dark One himself. You care nothing for the Light. You care only for power, Mierin. You honestly want me to believe that you've changed?"

"You do not know me so well as you think that you do," she said, watching him as he rounded the perimeter of her prison. "You never did."

"Then prove it to me," Rand said, stopping. "Show me your mind, Mierin. Open it to me completely. Give me control over you here, in this place of mastered dreams. If your intentions are pure, I will free you."

"What you ask is forbidden."

Rand laughed. "When has *that* ever stopped you?"

She seemed to consider it; she must actually have been worried about her imprisonment. Once, she would have laughed at a suggestion such as this. Since this was, ostensibly, a place where he had complete control, if she gave him leave, he could strip her down, delve within her mind.

"I…" Lanfear said.

He stepped forward, right to the lip of the prison. That tremble in her voice… that felt real. The first genuine emotion from her.

Light, he thought, searching her eyes. *Is she actually going to do it?*

"I cannot," she said. "I cannot." She said it the second time more softly. Rand exhaled. He found his hand shaking. So close. So close to the Light, like a feral cat in the night, stalking back and forth before the fire-lit barn! He found himself angry, angrier than before. Always, she did this! Flirting with what was right, but always choosing her own path.

"I am done with you, Mierin," Rand said, turning away and walking from the chamber. "Forever."

“You mistake me!” she called out. “You have *always* mistaken me! Would *you* show yourself to someone in that way? I cannot do it. I have been slapped too many times by those I should have trusted. Betrayed by those who should have loved me.”

“You blame this on me?” Rand asked, spinning on his heel.

She did not look away. She sat, imperious, as if her prison were a throne. “You really remember it that way, don’t you?” Rand said. “You think I betrayed you for her?”

“You said that you loved me.”

“I never said that. *Never.* I could not. I did not know what love was. Centuries of life, and I never discovered it until I met her.” He hesitated, then continued, speaking so softly his voice did not echo in the small cavern. “You have never really felt it, have you? But of course. Who could you love? Your heart is claimed already, by the power you so strongly desire. There is no room left.”

Rand let go.

He let go as Lews Therin never had been able to. Even after discovering Ilyena, even after realizing how Lanfear had used him, he had held on to hatred and scorn. *You expect me to pity you?* Rand had asked her.

He now felt just that. Pity for a woman who had never known love, a woman who would not let herself know it. Pity for a woman who could not choose a side other than her own.

“I…” she said softly.

Rand raised his hand, and then he opened himself to her. His intentions, his mind, his self appeared as a swirl of color, emotions and power around him.

Her eyes opened wide as the swirl played before her, like pictures on a wall. He could hold nothing back. She saw his motives, his desires, his wishes for mankind. She saw his intentions. To go to Shayol Ghul, to kill the Dark One. To leave a better world than he had the last time.

He did not fear revealing these things. He had touched the True Power, and so the Dark One knew his heart. There were no surprises here, at least nothing that *should* have been a surprise.

Lanfear was surprised anyway. Her jaw dropped as she saw the truth—the truth that, down deep, it was not Lews Therin who made up Rand's core. It was the sheepherder, raised by Tam. His lives played out in moments, his memories and feelings exposed.

Last, he showed her his love for Ilyena—like a glowing crystal, set upon a shelf and admired. Then his love for Min, Aviendha, Elayne. Like a burning bonfire, warming, comforting, passionate.

There was no love for Lanfear in what he exposed. Not a sliver. He had squelched Lews Therin's loathing of her as well. And so, to him, she really was nothing.

She gasped.

The glow around Rand faded. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I really did mean it. I am finished with you, Mierin. Keep your head down during the storm to come. If I win this fight, you will no longer have reason to fear for your soul. There will be no one left to torment you.”

He turned from her again, and walked from the cave, leaving her silent.

Evening in the Braem Wood was accompanied by the scent of fires smoldering in their pits and the sounds of men groaning softly as they settled into uneasy sleep, swords ready at hand. An unnatural chill to the summer air.

Perrin walked through the camp, among the men under his command.

The fighting had been hard in these woods. His people were hurting the Trollocs, but Light, there always seemed to be more Shadowspawn to replace those that fell.

After seeing that his people were properly fed, that the watch had been set and the men knew what to do if awakened in the night by an assault of Shadowspawn, he went seeking the Aiel. The Wise Ones in particular. Nearly all of them had gathered to go with Rand when he marched on Shayol Ghul—for now, they waited his order—but a few had remained with Perrin, including Edarra.

She and the other Wise Ones did not march at his command. And yet, like Gaul, they stayed with him when their fellows went elsewhere. Perrin had not asked them why. He didn’t really care why. Having them with him was useful, and he was grateful.

The Aiel let him pass their perimeter. He found Edarra sitting beside a fire, well rimmed with stones to prevent the chance of a stray spark escaping. These woods, dry as they were, could go up easier than a barn full of last harvests hay.

She glanced at Perrin as he settled down near her. The Aiel looked young but smelled of patience, inquisitiveness and control. Wisdom. She did not ask why Perrin had come to her. She waited for him to speak.

"Are you a dreamwalker?" Perrin asked.

She studied him in the night; he had the distinct impression this was not a question a man—or an outsider—was supposed to ask.

He was surprised, then, when she answered.

"No"

"Do you know much of it?" Perrin asked.

"Some."

"I need to know of a way to enter the World of Dreams physically. Not just in my dreams, but in my real body. Have you heard of such a thing?"

She inhaled sharply. "Do not think of that, Perrin Aybara. It is evil."

Perrin frowned. Strength in the wolf dream—in *Tel'aran'rhiod*—was a delicate thing. The more strongly Perrin put himself into the dream—the more solidly *there* he was—the easier he found it to change things there, manipulate that world.

That came at a risk, however. Going into the dream too strongly, he risked cutting himself off from his sleeping body in the real world.

That apparently didn't bother Slayer. Slayer was strong there, so *very* strong; the man was in the dream physically. Perrin was increasingly sure of it.

Our contest will not end, Perrin thought, *until you are the prey, Slayer. Hunter of wolves. I* will *end you.*

"In many ways," Edarra muttered, looking at him, "you are still a child, for all the honor you have found." Perrin had grown accustomed to—though not fond of—women who looked not a year or two older than he addressing him so. "None of the dreamwalkers will teach you this thing. It is evil."

"Why is it evil?" Perrin said.

"To enter into the world of dreams in the flesh costs you part of what makes you human. What's more, if you die while in that place—and you are in the flesh—it can make you die forever. No more rebirth, Perrin Aybara. Your thread in the Pattern could end forever, you yourself destroyed. This is not a thing you should contemplate."

"The servants of the Shadow do this, Edarra," Perrin said. "They take these risks to dominate. We need to take the same risks in order to stop them.”

Edarra hissed softly, shaking her head. “Do not cut off your foot for fear that a snake will bite it, Perrin Aybara. Do not make a terrible mistake because you fear something that seems worse. This is all I will say on the topic.”

She stood and left him sitting by the fire.

* * *

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CHAPTER 13

What Must Be Done

The army split before Egwene as she rode forward toward the hills in southeastern Kandor where they would shortly engage the advancing enemy. She led over a hundred Aes Sedai, many of them from the Green Ajah. Bryne's tactical revisions had been quick and efficient. He had something better than archers for breaking a charge, something more destructive than heavy cavalry for causing sheer damage.

It was time to use it.

Two other smaller forces of Aes Sedai made their way to the flanks of the army. These hills might once have been lush and green. Now they were yellow and brown, as if burned by sunlight. She tried to see the advantages. At least they would have sure footing, and though the sky broke with periodic lightning, rain seemed unlikely.

The approaching Trollocs seemed to extend forever in either direction. Though Egwene's army was enormous, it suddenly felt tiny. Fortunately, Egwene had a single advantage: The Trolloc army was driven by a need to continue moving forward. Trolloc armies fell apart if they were not constantly advancing. They'd start bickering. They'd run out of food.

Egwene's army was a barrier in their way. And bait. The Shadowspawn couldn't afford to leave such a force as theirs at large, and so Egwene would draw them along a course she determined.

Her Aes Sedai reached the battlefront. Bryne had split his army into large, highly mobile strike units to hit the Trollocs wherever and whenever they showed vulnerability.

The offensive structure of Bryne's forces seemed to confuse the Trollocs. At least, that was how Egwene read the shuffling in their ranks, the churning movement, the increase of noise. Trollocs rarely had to worry about being on the defensive. Trollocs attacked, humans defended. Humans worried. Humans were food.

Egwene reached the top of a low hill, looking out at the plain in Kandor where the Trollocs amassed, her Aes Sedai arraying in a long line to either side of her. Behind them, the men of the army seemed uncertain. They knew Egwene and the others were Aes Sedai, and no man was comfortable around Aes Sedai.

Egwene reached to her side, and slipped something long, white and slender from the leather case tied to her belt. A fluted rod, Vora's *sa'angreal.* It felt comfortable in her hand, familiar. Though she had only used this *sa'angreal* once, she felt as if it had claimed her and she it. During the fight against the Seanchan, this had been her weapon. For the first time, she understood why a soldier might feel a bond with his sword.

The glow of the Power winked on around the women in the line, like a row of lanterns being lit. Egwene embraced the Source and felt the One Power flow into her like a waterfall, filling her and opening her eyes. The world became sweeter, the scents of oil from armor and of beaten grass growing stronger.

Within the embrace of *saidar* she could see the signs of color that the Shadow wanted them to ignore. The grass wasn't all dead; there were tiny hints of green, slivers where the grass clung to life. There were voles beneath it; she could now easily make out the ripples in the earth. They ate at the dying roots and clung to life.

Smiling widely, she pulled the One Power through the fluted rod. Within that torrent she was atop a sea of strength and energy, riding a lone vessel and embracing the wind. The Trollocs finally surged into motion. They roared, a huge rush of weapons, teeth, stink and eyes that were too human. Perhaps the Myrddraal had seen Aes Sedai up front, and thought to attack and destroy the human channelers.

The other women waited for Egwene's sign. They were not in a circle—a circle was best for one focused, precise stream of the One Power. That wasn't the goal today. The goal today was simply to destroy.

Once the Trollocs were halfway to the hills, Egwene began her offensive. She had always been unusually strong in Earth, so she led with the most simple and destructive of weaves. She sent threads of Earth into the ground beneath the Trollocs in a long line, then heaved it up. With the aid of Vora's *sa'angreal*, it felt as easy as tossing a handful of pebbles into the air.

At this sign, the entire line of women formed weaves. The air rippled with glowing threads. Pure streams of fire, of earth to heave, of gusts of wind to blow the Trollocs into one another and make them trip and tumble.

The Trollocs that Egwene had thrown into the air toppled back to the ground, many of them missing legs or feet. Bones broke and Trollocs screamed in agony as their fellows fell upon them. Egwene let the second rank stumble across the fallen, then struck again. This time, she didn’t focus on the earth, but on *metal*.

Metal in armor, in weapons and on wrists. She shattered axes and swords, mail and the occasional breastplate. This released fragments of metal with deadly speed. The air grew red with spraying blood. The next ranks tried to stop to avoid the shrapnel, but the Trollocs behind them had too much momentum. They shoved their fellows forward into the zone of death and trampled them.

Egwene also killed the next wave with exploding metal. It was harder than casting up the earth, but it also didn’t give as much sign to the back ranks, so she was able to continue killing without them realizing what they were doing by shoving their fellows forward.

Then Egwene returned to rupturing the earth. There was something energizing about using raw power, sending weaves in their most basic forms. In that moment—maiming, destroying, bringing death upon the enemy—she felt as if she were one with the land itself That she was doing the work it had longed for someone to do for so long. The Blight, and the Shadowspawn it grew, were a disease. An infection. Egwene—afire with the One Power, a blazing beacon of death and judgment—was the cauterizing flame that would bring healing to the land.

The Trollocs tried hard to push through the Aes Sedai weaves, but that only put more and more of them into the White Tower’s reach. The Greens lived up to their Ajah’s reputation—releasing wave after wave of destruction at the Trollocs—but the other Ajahs did well, also.

The ground trembled, and the air clogged with the howls of the dying. Bodies ripped. Flesh burned. Not a few of the soldiers in the front lines emptied their stomachs at the sight. And still, the Aes Sedai pounded the Trolloc lines. Specific sisters sought out Myrddraal, as they had been ordered. Egwene struck one herself, ripping its eyeless head from its neck with a weave of Fire and Air. Each Fade they killed dropped fists of Trollocs linked to them.

Egwene doubled her attack. She hit a rank with a wave of exploding earth, then slammed a wave of air into the bodies as they fell, pushing them back so they dropped onto the ranks behind. She ripped holes in the earth and made the stones in the ground explode. She butchered Trollocs for what seemed like hours. Finally, the Shadowspawn broke, the Trollocs pulling back despite the whips of the Myrddraal. Egwene took a deep breath—she was starting to feel limp—and struck down more Fades. Finally, they too broke and fled back away from the hills.

Egwene sagged in her saddle, lowering her *sa'angreal*. She wasn't sure exactly how much time had passed. The soldiers nearby stared, wide eyed. Their blood had not been required this day.

"That was *impressive*," Gawyn said, pulling his horse up beside hers. "It was as if they were assaulting city walls, trying to run ladders to a siege… only without the walls or the ladders."

"They'll return," Egwene said tiredly. "We killed just a small percentage of them."

On the morrow, or the day after at the latest, they would try again. New tactics, perhaps—they might spread out waves of attackers to make it more difficult for the Aes Sedai to kill large batches of them at once.

"We surprised them," Egwene said. "They will come stronger next time. For now, for this night, we've held."

"You didn't just hold, Egwene," Gawyn said with a smile. "You sent them running. I don't know that I've ever seen an army so thoroughly trounced."

The rest of the army seemed to agree with Gawyn's assessment, for they began to cheer, raising weapons. Egwene forced back her fatigue and tucked away the fluted rod. Nearby, other Aes Sedai lowered small statues, bracelets, brooches, rings and rods. They had emptied the White Tower's storehouse of every *angreal* and *sa'angreal*—the few of those they had—and distributed them among the sisters on the battlefront. At the end of each day, they would be collected and delivered to the women providing Healing.

The Aes Sedai turned and rode back through the cheering army. The time for sorrows would, unfortunately, come. The Aes Sedai could not fight each battle. For now, however, Egwene was content to let the soldiers enjoy their victory, for it was the very best kind. The kind that left no holes in their ranks.

"The Lord Dragon and his scouts have begun to reconnoiter Shayol Ghul." Bashere pointed to one of the shaded maps. "Our resistance in Kandor and Shienar is forcing the Shadow to commit more and more troops to those fights. Soon, the Blasted Lands will be mostly empty, save for a skeleton force of defenders. He will be able to strike more easily then."

Elayne nodded. She could feel Rand somewhere in the back of her mind. He was worried about something, though he was too distant for her to feel more than that. He occasionally visited her, at her camp in the Braem Wood, but for now he was on one of the other battlefronts.

Bashere continued. "The Amyrlin should be able to hold in Kandor, considering the number of channelers she has. I'm not worried about her."

"But you are about the Borderlanders," Elayne said.

"Yes. They've been pushed out of Tarwin's Gap."

"I wish they had been able to hold where they were, but they've been overwhelmed. There is nothing to be done for it save siphon to them what aid we can."

Bashere nodded. "Perhaps Lord Mandragoran could reverse his retreat if he had more Aes Sedai or Asha'man."

Of which there were none to spare. She had sent him some Aes Sedai from Egwene's army to help him with his initial retreat, and that had helped. But if Rand himself couldn't fight off the Dreadlords there…

"Lord Agelmar will know what to do," Elayne said. "The Light willing, he'll be able to pull the Trollocs away from more populated areas."

Bashere grunted. "A retreat like this—almost a rout—usually affords no chance for directing the course of battle." Bashere pointed toward the map of Shienar.

Elayne studied it. The path of the Trollocs would *not* avoid inhabited land. Fal Dara, Mos Shirare, Fal Moran… And with Dreadlords, city walls would be useless.

"Send word to Lan and the lords of Shienar," she said quietly. "Order Fal Dara and Ankor Dail burned, along with Fal Moran and villages like Medo. They're already burning what farmland they can—emptying the cities as well. Evacuate the civilians to Tar Valon."

"I'm sorry," Bashere said softly.

"It is what must be done, isn't it?"

"Yes," Bashere said.

Light, what a mess. *Well, what did you expect? Neatness and simplicity?*

Footsteps on the leaves announced Talmanes approaching with one of his commanders. The Cairhienin looked tired. Everyone did. A week of battle was only the beginning, but the thrill of the fight was dying. Now came the real work of the war. Days fighting or waiting to fight, nights spent sleeping with sword in hand.

Elayne's current location in the Wood—she'd begun the morning a thousand paces further south, but their constant retreat through the forest kept her moving—was ideal. Three small streams with easy access, room for plenty of troops to camp, trees atop the hill that worked as well as watchtowers. A pity they'd have to leave this site behind in the morning.

"The Trollocs control the entire southern section of the forest," Bashere said, knuckling his mustaches. "They are avoiding the clearings. That means our cavalry won't be able to operate effectively."

"The dragons are practically useless in here, Your Majesty," Talmanes said, entering the tent. "Now that the Trollocs are keeping off the roadways, we have trouble doing any damage. It's nearly impossible to maneuver the dragon carts in the forest, and when we do get a shot, we kill more trees than we do Shadowspawn."

"What of that… whatever it was that Aludra was talking about?"

"Her dragon teeth?" Talmanes said. "It's better—the dragon shoots out a bunch of bits of metal, rather than one ball. It has a big spread to it, and works reasonably well inside the forest, but I maintain that the dragons are doing less damage than it is worth risking them to achieve."

"I think that the forest has done us the good it can," Bashere said, moving some Trolloc tokens on their maps. "We have whittled down their numbers, but they're getting smart, keeping to the thick woods and trying to surround us."

"Suggestions?"

"Pull back," Bashere said. "Head out to the east of here."

"Make for the Erinin? There's no bridge this far north," Talmanes said. Bashere nodded. "So you know what I'm going to ask. You have a company of men who can build bridges. Send them with some of your dragons for protection and have them build raft bridges directly east of us. The rest of us won't be far behind. The open terrain there will give our cavalry and the dragons the chance to do more damage. We can rely on the Erinin to slow the Trollocs, especially once we torch the bridges. A few dragons placed there should slow their progress. We'll continue east to the Alguenya, and repeat the process. Then we’ll be on the road to Cairhien. We’ll head north and when we find a suitable place to make a stand—I think I know just the spot—we’ll turn and face the Shadow with Cairhien at our backs.”

“Surely you don’t think we’ll need to go all that way,” Elayne said.

Bashere stared at the map, squinting, as if seeing through the parchment itself to the land it depicted. “We're stirring this battle,” he said softly, “but we don’t control it. We’re riding it, as a man might ride a stampeding horse. I can’t say where the gallop will stop. I’ll divert it, I’ll send it through patches of thorns. But I can’t stop it, not so long as the Trollocs keep coming.”

Elayne frowned. She couldn’t afford an endless retreat; she needed to defeat these Shadowspawn as soon and as thoroughly as possible so she could join the remainder of her forces to Lan’s and Egwene’s armies to beat back the invasions from the north.

That was the only way they’d win. Otherwise, it wouldn’t matter what Rand was able to do against the Dark One.

Light, what a *mess.*

“Do it.”

Perrin rested his hammer on his shoulder, listening as the sweating young messenger relayed Elayne’s orders. A gentle breeze blew through the branches of the forest behind. The Ogier fought in there. He’d worried they would refuse to endanger the trees, but their fighting… Light, Perrin had never seen savagery to rival it.

“These tactics aren’t bad,” Tam said reading the orders. “The Queen has a good head for warfare.”

Perrin waved away the messenger boy. He passed Galad and several of his Whitecloak commanders, conferring nearby. “She listens well to those who know their tactics,” Perrin said, “and she doesn’t interfere.”

“That’s what I meant, lad,” Tam said with a smile. “Being in charge isn’t always about telling people what to do. Sometimes, it’s about knowing when to step out of the way of people who know what they’re doing.”

“Wise words, Tam,” Perrin said, turning northward. “I suggest you adopt them, as you have command now.”

Perrin could see Rand. The colors swam. Rand, speaking with Moiraine on a bleak rocky ridge he did not recognize. They were almost ready for the invasion of Shayol Ghul. Perrin felt a tug from Rand, growing stronger. Soon, Rand would need him.

“Perrin?” Tam asked. “What’s this nonsense about command?”

“You have our forces, Tam,” Perrin said. “The men are working together now; let Arganda, Gallenne and Galad assist you.” Nearby, Grady held open a gateway through which the wounded from the most recent skirmish were being sent for Healing. Berelain ran the hospital on the other side, which the Yellow Ajah had placed in Mayene. The air coming from the other side was warm.

“I don’t know if they’ll listen to me, Perrin,” Tam said. “I’m just a common farmer.”

“They listened to you well enough before.”

“That was when we were traveling the wilderness,” Tam said. “You were always nearby. They answered to me on your authority.” He rubbed his chin. “I have a feeling, from the way you keep looking north, that you don’t intend to be here much longer.”

“Rand needs me,” Perrin said softly. “Burn me, Tam, I hate it—but I cant fight along with you here in Andor. Someone needs to watch Rand’s back, and it… well, it’s going to be me. I know it, somehow.”

Tam nodded. “We’ll just go to Arganda or Gallenne, and tell them they’re in charge of our men. Queen Elayne is giving most of the orders anyway, and—”

“Men!” Perrin yelled, looking toward the assembled soldiers. Arganda was consulting with Gallenne. They turned to Perrin, as did the nearby members of the Wolf Guard, along with Galad and his Whitecloaks. Young Bornhald regarded Perrin through dark eyes. That one grew more and more unpredictable lately. The Light send Galad had been able to keep him from the brandy.

“You all accept my authority, as granted by the crown of Andor?” Perrin asked.

“Of course, Lord Goldeneyes,” Arganda called. “I thought that was established.”

“I’m hereby making Tam al’Thor a lord,” Perrin called. “I am making him steward over the Two Rivers in the name of his son, the Dragon Reborn. He carries all of my authority, which is the Dragon’s own authority. If I do not survive this battle, Tam succeeds me.”

The camp grew still, then the men nodded, several saluting Tam. Tam groaned so softly, Perrin doubted anyone else could hear.

“Is it too late to turn you over to the Women’s Circle for a good talking-to?” Tam asked. “Maybe a sound swat on the behind and a week spent carrying water for Widow al’Thone?”

“Sorry, Tam,” Perrin said. “Neald, try making a gateway to the Black Tower.”

The young Asha’man adopted a look of concentration. “It still doesn’t work, Lord Goldeneyes.”

Perrin shook his head. He’d heard the reports from Lan’s battlefront, that members of the Black Tower were fighting for the Shadow. Something had happened there, something terrible. “All right, back to Merrilor, then,” Perrin said.

Neald nodded, concentrating.

As he worked, Perrin turned to the men. “I hate to leave you, but I have these hooks in me, pulling me north. I *have* to go to Rand, and there’s just no arguing with it. I’ll try to come back. If I can’t… well, I want you all to know that I’m proud of you. All of you. You’re welcome in my home when this is over. We’ll open a cask or two of Master al’Vere’s best brandy. We’ll remember those who fell, and we’ll tell our children how we stood when the clouds turned black and the world started to die. We’ll tell them we stood shoulder to shoulder, and there was just no space for the Shadow to squeeze through.”

He raised *Mah’alleinir* toward them, and he bore their cheering. Not because he deserved it, but because they certainly did.

Neald opened the gateway. Perrin started toward it, then hesitated as his name was called. He frowned, looking at Dain Bornhald as the man hurried over.

Perrin rested his hand on his hammer, wary. This man had saved his life against the Trollocs, and against a fellow Whitecloak, but Perrin saw the dislike the man had for him. He might not blame Perrin for the death of his father, but that didn’t mean he liked—or even accepted—Perrin.

“A word, Aybara,” Bornhald said, looking toward Gaul standing nearby. “In private.”

Perrin waved Gaul away, and the Aiel reluctantly retreated. He stepped with Bornhald away from the open gateway. “What is this about? If it’s because of your father—”

“Light, just be quiet,” Bornhald said, glancing away. “I don’t want to say this. I hate saying this. But you need to know. Light burn me, you need to know.”

“Know what?”

“Aybara,” Bornhald said, taking a deep breath. “It wasn’t Trollocs who killed your family.”

A shock went through Perrin’s body.

“I’m sorry,” Bornhald said, looking away. “It was Ordeith. Your father insulted him. He tore apart the family, and we blamed the Trollocs. I didn’t kill them, but I didn’t say anything. So much blood…”

“What?” Perrin grabbed the Whitecloak by the shoulder. “But they said ... I mean…” Light, he’d *dealt* with this already!

The look in Bornhald’s eyes when his met Perrin’s dredged it all up again. The pain, the horror, the loss, the fury. Bornhald reached up and took Perrin’s wrist, then yanked it free of his shoulder.

“This is an awful time to tell you this, I know,” Bornhald said. “But I couldn’t keep it in. I just… We may fall. Light, it might all fall. I had to speak, say it.”

He pulled away, moving back toward the other Whitecloaks with eyes downcast. Perrin stood alone, his entire world shaking.

Then he pulled it back together. He *had* dealt with this; he had mourned his family. It was over, through.

He could and would go on. Light, the old hurts returned, but he shoved them down and turned his eyes toward the gateway. Toward Rand, and his duty.

He had work to do. But Ordeith… Padan Fain… This only added to that man’s terrible crimes. Perrin would see that he paid, one way or another.

He approached the gateway to Travel to find Rand, where he was joined by Gaul.

“I’m going to a place you cannot, my friend,” Perrin said softly, his pain subsiding. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ll go to the dream within a dream,” Gaul said, then yawned. “Turns out I’m tired.”

“But—”

“I’m coming, Perrin Aybara. Kill me if you wish me to remain behind.” Perrin didn’t dare push him on it. He nodded.

Perrin glanced behind him, raising his hammer once more. As he did so, he caught a glimpse through the other gateway, the one to Mayene that Grady still held open. Inside, two white-robed forms watched Gaul. He raised a spear to them. How must it feel, for a pair of warriors to wait out this, the Last Battle? Perhaps Rand should have tried to have the *gai'shain* released from their vows for a few weeks.

Well, that would probably have turned every single Aiel against him. Light protect the wetlander who dared tamper with *ji'e'toh.*

Perrin ducked through the gateway, stepping onto the ground of Merrilor. From there, he and Gaul packed as if for a long trip—foodstuffs and water aplenty, as much as they dared carry.

It took Perrin the better part of a half hour to convince Rand's Asha'man to tell him where their leader had gone. Finally, a grudging Naeff opened a gateway for Perrin. He left Merrilor, and stepped out into what seemed to be the Blight. Only the rocks were cold.

The air smelled of death, of desolation. The fetor took Perrin aback, and it was minutes before he could sort out normal scents from the stench. Rand stood just ahead, at the edge of a ridge, arms folded behind his back. A group of his advisors, commanders and guards stood behind, including Moiraine, Aviendha and Cadsuane. At this moment, though, Rand stood alone at the end of the ridge.

Distant, in front of them, rose the peak of Shayol Ghul. Perrin felt a shiver. It was distant, but Perrin could not mistake the intense determination in Rand's expression as he regarded the peak.

“Light,” Perrin said. “Is it time?”

“No,” Rand said softly. “This is a test, to see if he senses me.”

“Perrin?” Nynaeve asked from the hillside behind. She had been speaking with Moiraine and for once, she didn't smell a twinge hateful. Something had happened between those two women.

“I only need him for a moment,” Perrin said, walking up to join Rand at the end of the outcropping of rock. There were some Aiel back there, and Perrin didn't want them—particularly any Wise Ones—to hear what he was going to ask Rand.

“You have this moment and many, Perrin,” Rand said. “I owe you dearly. What is it you want?”

“Well…” Perrin looked over his shoulder. Would Moiraine or Nynaeve know enough to try to stop him? Probably. Women were always trying to keep a man from doing what he must, as if worried he'd break his neck. Never mind that it was the Last Battle.

"Perrin?" Rand asked.

"Rand, I need to enter the wolf dream."

"*Tel'aran'rhiod*?" Rand said. "Perrin, I don't know what you do there; you've told me little. I figured that you would know how to—"

"I know how to enter it one way," Perrin said, whispering so that the Wise Ones and the others behind couldn't hear. "The easy way. I need something else. You know things, you remember things. Is there anything in that ancient brain of yours that remembers how to enter into the World of Dreams in the flesh?"

Rand grew solemn. "Its a dangerous thing you ask."

"As dangerous as going to do what you're about to do?"

"Perhaps." Rand frowned. "If I'd known back when I… Well, let's just say that some would call your request very, very evil."

"It's not evil, Rand," Perrin said. "I know something evil when I smell it. This isn't evil, it's just incredibly stupid."

Rand smiled. "And still you ask?"

"The good options are gone, Rand. Better to do something desperate than to do nothing at all."

Rand didn't reply.

"Look," Perrin said. "We've spoken of the Black Tower. I know you're worried about it."

"I will need to go there," Rand said, expression darkening. "And yet, it's obviously a trap."

"I think I know part of what is to blame," Perrin said. "There's someone I need to face, and I can't beat him without being able to face him on equal terms. There, in the dream."

Rand nodded slowly. "The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills. We will have to leave the Blasted Lands; you cannot enter the dream from…"

He trailed off, then did something, crafting a weave. A gateway opened beside him. Something about it was different from ordinary ones.

"I see," Rand said. "The worlds are drawing together, compressing. What was once separate is no longer so. This gateway will take you into the dream. Take care, Perrin. If you die in that place while in the flesh, it can have… ramifications. What you face could be worse than death itself, particularly now. At this time."

“I know,” Perrin said. “I will need a way out. Can you have one of your Asha’man make one of these gateways once a day, at dawn? Say, at the Traveling grounds of Merrilor?”

“Dangerous,” Rand whispered. “But I will do it.”

Perrin nodded in thanks.

“The Light willing, we will see one another again,” Rand said. He held out his hand to Perrin. “Watch out for Mat. I’m honestly not sure what he’s going to do, but I have a feeling it will be highly dangerous for all involved.”

“Not like us,” Perrin said, clasping Rand’s forearm. “You and I, we’re *much* better at keeping to the safe paths.”

Rand smiled. “May the Light shelter you, Perrin Aybara.”

“And you, Rand al’Thor.” Perrin hesitated, and realized what was happening. They were saying goodbye. He took Rand in an embrace.

“You take care of him, you two,” Perrin said, looking toward Nynaeve and Moiraine as he pulled back from the embrace. “You hear me?”

“Oh, *now* you want me to watch after Rand?” Nynaeve said, hands on hips. “I don’t believe I ever stopped, Perrin Aybara. Don’t think I didn’t hear you two whispering over there. You’re doing something foolish, aren’t you?”

“Always,” Perrin said, raising a hand in farewell to Thom. “Gaul, you certain you want to do this?”

“I am,” the Aielman said, loosening his spears and looking through Rand’s gateway.

Without another word, the two hefted their heavy packs and stepped into the World of Dreams.

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CHAPTER 14

Doses of Forkroot

“Light… ” Perrin whispered to Gaul, looking across the landscape.

“It’s dying.”

The boiling, thrashing, churning black sky of the wolf dream was nothing new, but the storm that the sky had been foreshadowing for months had finally arrived. Wind blew in enormous gusts, moving this way, then that, in unnatural patterns. Perrin closed his cloak, then strengthened it with a thought, imagining the ties holding it to be fixed strongly in place.

A little bubble of calmness extended out from him, deflecting the worst of the winds. It was easier than he anticipated, as if he’d reached for a heavy piece of oak and found it as light as pine.

The landscape seemed less real than it usually did. The raging winds actually *smoothed* out hills, like erosion at high speed. In other places, the land swelled up, forming ripples of rock and new hillsides. Chunks of earth sprayed into the air, shattering. The land itself was coming apart.

He grabbed Gaul’s shoulder and *shifted* the two of them away from the place. It was too close to Rand, Perrin suspected. Indeed, as they appeared on the familiar plain to the south—the place where he’d hunted with Hopper—they found the storm less powerful.

They stowed their heavy packs, laden with food and water, in a thicket of bushes. Perrin didn’t know if they could survive on food or water found in the dream, but he didn’t want to have to find out. They should have enough here for a week or so, and as long as they had a gateway waiting for them, he felt comfortable—or, at least, satisfied—with the risks he was taking here.

The landscape here wasn’t coming apart in the same way as it had been near Shayol Ghul. However, if he watched a section long enough, he could catch bits of… well, everything being pulled up in the winds. Stalks of dead grain, fragments of tree trunks, gobs of mud and slivers of rock—all were slowly being pulled toward those gluttonous black clouds. After the way of the wolf dream, when he looked back, things that had been broken apart would often be whole again. He understood. This place was being consumed, slowly, as was the waking world. Here, it was simply easier to see.

The winds whipped at them, but weren’t so strong that he had to keep them at bay. They felt like the winds at the beginning of a storm, right before the rain and lightning. The heralds of oncoming destruction.

Gaul had pulled the *shoufa* over his face, and looked about suspiciously. His clothing had changed in shade to match the grasses.

“You have to be very careful here, Gaul,” Perrin said. “Your idle thoughts can become reality.”

Gaul nodded, then hesitantly unveiled his face. “I will listen and do as instructed.”

It was encouraging that Gaul’s clothing didn’t change too much as they walked through the field. “Just try to keep your mind clear,” Perrin said. “Free of thought. Act by instinct and follow my lead.”

“I will hunt like the *gara,”* Gaul said, nodding. “My spear is yours, Perrin Aybara.”

Perrin walked through the field, worried that Gaul would accidentally send himself somewhere by thinking of it. The man barely suffered any effects of the wolf dream, however. His clothing would change a little if he was startled, his veil snapping into place without him reaching for it, but that seemed to be the extent of it.

“All right,” Perrin said. “I’m going to take us to the Black Tower. We hunt a dangerous prey, a man named Slayer. You remember Lord Luc?”

“The *lopinginny*?” Gaul said.

Perrin frowned.

“It is a type of bird,” Gaul said. “From the Three-fold Land. I did not see this man often, but he seemed to be the type who talked big, but was inwardly a coward.”

“Well, that was a front,” Perrin said. “And either way, he is a very different person in the dream—here, he is a predator named Slayer who hunts wolves and men. He’s powerful. If he decides to kill you, he can appear behind you in an eyeblink and imagine you captured by vines and unable to move. You’ll be trapped as he slits your throat.”

Gaul laughed.

“That’s funny?” Perrin asked.

“You act as if it is something new,” Gaul explained. “Yet in the first dream, wherever I go, I am surrounded by women and men who could tie me in air with a thought and kill me at any time. I am accustomed to being powerless around some, Perrin Aybara. It is the way of the world in all things.”

“Still,” Perrin said sternly, “if we find Slayer—he’s a square-faced fellow, with eyes that don’t seem totally alive, and he dresses in dark leather—I want you to stay away from him. Let me fight him.”

“But—”

“You said you’d obey, Gaul,” Perrin said. “This is *important*. He took Hopper; I won’t have him taking you as well. You don’t fight Slayer.”

“Very well,” Gaul said. “I give my oath on it. I will not dance the spears with this man unless you order it.”

Perrin sighed, imagining Gaul standing with his spears put away, letting Slayer kill him because of this oath. Light, but Aiel could be prickly. “You can fight him if he attacks you,” Perrin said, “but only as a means of escape. Don’t hunt him, and if I’m fighting him, stay out of the way. Understand?” Gaul nodded. Perrin put a hand on the Aiel’s shoulder, then *shifted* them in the direction of the Black Tower. Perrin had never been there before, so he had to guess and try to find it. The first *shift* was off, taking them to a section of Andor where grass-covered hills seemed to dance in the churning winds. Perrin would have preferred to just leap from hilltop to hilltop, but he didn’t think Gaul was ready for that. He used *shifting* instead.

After four or five tries, Perrin took them to a place where he spotted a translucent, faintly purple dome rising in the distance.

“What is it?” Gaul asked.

“Our goal,” Perrin said. “That is the thing keeping Grady and Neald from creating gateways to the Black Tower.”

“Just as we were afflicted in Ghealdan.”

“Yes.” Seeing that dome brought back memories, vivid ones, of wolves dying. Perrin suppressed them. Memories like that could lead to idle thoughts, here. He allowed himself a burning anger deep within, like the warmth of his hammer, but that was all.

“Let’s go,” Perrin said, *shifting* them down in front of the dome. It looked like glass. “Pull me free if I collapse,” he said to Gaul, then stepped into the barrier.

It felt as if he'd hit something incredibly cold. It sucked away his strength.

He stumbled, but kept his mind on his goal. Slayer. Killer of wolves. Hopper's murderer.

Perrin straightened as his strength returned. This was easier than it had been last time; being in the wolf dream in the flesh *did* make him stronger. He didn't have to worry about pulling himself into the dream too strongly, and leaving his body to die in the real world.

He moved slowly through the barrier, as if through water, and stepped out onto the other side. Behind, Gaul reached out with a curious expression on his face, then tapped the dome wall with his index finger.

Gaul immediately dropped to the ground, going limp like a doll. His spears and arrows tumbled away from his body, and he lay perfectly still, his chest not rising. Perrin reached through—his arm slow—and seized Gaul by the leg to pull him through.

Once on the other side, Gaul gasped, then rolled over, groaning. He sat up, holding his head. Perrin quietly fetched the man's arrows and spears for him.

"This is going to be a good experience for building our *ji*," Gaul said. He stood up and rubbed his arm where he'd hit the ground. "The Wise Ones call coming to this place as we do evil? It seems to me they would enjoy bringing men here to teach them."

Perrin eyed Gaul. He hadn't realized that the man had heard him speaking to Edarra of the wolf dream. "What did I do to deserve your loyalty, Gaul?" Perrin said, mostly to himself.

Gaul laughed. "It is not anything you did."

"What do you mean? I cut you down from that cage. That's why you follow me."

"That's why I began following you," Gaul said. "It is not why I remained. Come, is there not a danger that we hunt?"

Perrin nodded, and Gaul veiled his face. Together, they walked beneath the dome, approaching the structure within. It was a goodly distance from the edge of one of these domes to the center, but Perrin didn't want to jump and be surprised, so they continued on foot, crossing a landscape of open grasslands patched with groves of trees.

They walked for about an hour before they spotted the walls. Tall and imposing, they looked like those around a large city. Perrin and Gaul walked up to them, Gaul scouting with great care, as if he expected to be fired upon at any moment. However, in the wolf dream, these walls wouldn't be guarded. If Slayer were in here, he would lurk at the heart of the dome, at the center. And he'd probably have laid a trap.

Perrin rested his hand on Gaul's shoulder and brought them to the top of the wall in an instant. Gaul prowled to one side, crouching low and peeking into one of the covered guard posts.

Perrin went to the inner edge of the wall, looking in. The Black Tower wasn't as imposing as the outside implied: a distant village of huts and small houses, and beyond that a large building project.

"They're arrogant, wouldn't you say?" a feminine voice asked.

Perrin jumped, spinning, summoning his hammer to his hands and readying a brick wall around himself for protection. A short young woman with silver hair stood next to him, standing straight as if to try to appear taller than she was. She wore white clothing, tied at the waist with a silver belt. He didn't recognize the face, but he did know her scent.

"Moonhunter," Perrin said, almost a growl. "Lanfear."

"I'm not allowed to use that name any longer," she said, tapping one finger on the wall. "He's so strict with names."

Perrin backed away, glancing from side to side. Was she working with Slayer? Gaul appeared out of the guard post and froze, seeing her. Perrin held out a hand to stop him. Could he jump to Gaul and be away before she attacked?

"Moonhunter?" Lanfear asked. "Is that what the wolves call me? That's not right, not at all. I don't *hunt* the moon. The moon is mine already." She leaned down, resting her arms on the chest-high battlement.

"What do you want?" Perrin demanded.

"Vengeance," she whispered. Then she looked at him. "The same as you, Perrin."

"I'm to believe *you* want Slayer dead too?"

"Slayer? That orphan errand boy of Moridin's? He doesn't interest me. My vengeance will be against another."

"Who?"

"The one who caused my imprisonment," she said softly, passionately. Suddenly, she looked toward the skies. Her eyes widened in alarm, and she vanished.

Perrin passed his hammer from one hand to the other as Gaul crept forward, trying to watch all directions at once. “What was that?” he whispered. “Aes Sedai?”

“Worse,” Perrin said with a grimace. “Do the Aiel have a name for Lanfear?”

Gaul drew in a sharp breath.

“I don’t know what she wants,” Perrin said. “She’s never made any sense to me. With any luck, we merely crossed paths, and she will go on with what she was about.”

He didn’t believe that, not after what the wolves had told him earlier. Moonhunter wanted him. *Light, as if I didn’t have enough trouble.*

He *shifted* them down to the bottom of the wall, and they continued.

Toveine knelt beside Logain. Androl was forced to watch as she caressed his chin, his wearied eyes open and watching her with horror.

“It’s all right,” she said sweetly. “You can stop resisting. Relax, Logain. Give in.”

She had been Turned easily. Apparently, linked with thirteen Halfmen, it was easier for male channelers to Turn female channelers, and vice versa. That was why they were having so much trouble with Logain.

“Take him,” Toveine said, pointing at Logain. “Let’s see this done, once and for all. He deserves the peace of the Great Lord’s bounty.”

Taim’s minions dragged Logain away. Androl watched with despair. Taim obviously considered Logain a prize. Turn him, and the rest of the Black Tower would go easily. Many of the boys up above would come willingly to their fate if Logain ordered them to it.

How can he keep fighting? Androl thought. Stately Emarin had been reduced to a whimpering wreck after only two sessions, though he hadn’t yet been Turned. Logain had suffered nearly a dozen, and still he resisted.

That would change, for Taim now had women. Soon after Toveine’s Turning, others had arrived, sisters of the Black Ajah led by a horridly ugly woman who spoke with authority. The other Reds who had come with Pevara had joined them.

Drowsy concern flowed through Pevara’s bond to Androl. She was awake, but full of that drink that stopped her from channeling. Androl's own mind felt relatively clear. How long had it been since they'd forced him to drink the dregs out of the cup they'd first given to Emarin?

Logain… will not last much longer. Pevara's sending was laced with fatigue and growing resignation. *What are…* She cut off, thoughts growing muddled. *Burn me! What are we going to do?*

Logain screamed in pain. He hadn't done that before. It seemed a very bad sign. By the doorway, Evin stood and watched. He looked over his shoulder suddenly, jumping at something.

Light, Androl thought. *Could it be… his madness, caused by the taint? Is it still there?*

Androl noticed for the first time that he was shielded, which they never did to captives unless letting their dose of forkroot wane so they could be Turned.

That sent a spike of panic through him. Were they coming for him next?

Androl? Pevara sent. *I have an idea.*

What?

Androl started coughing through his gag. Evin jumped, then came over, bringing out his water flask and pouring water on the gag. Abors—one of Taim's flunkies—lounged against the wall. He was holding the shield. He glanced at Androl, but something at the other side of the room drew his attention.

Androl coughed worse, so Evin untied the gag and rolled him to the side, letting him spit out the water.

"Quiet now," Evin said, glancing back at Abors, who was too far away to hear. "Don't make them angry at you, Androl."

The Turning of a man to the Shadow was not perfect. While it changed their allegiance, it did not change everything about them. The thing in Evin's head had his memories, his personality, and—the Light send—his failings.

"Have you convinced them?" Androl whispered. "Not to kill me?"

"I have!" Evin said, leaning low, eyes frenzied. "They keep saying you're useless, since you can't channel very well, but none of them like making gateways to shuffle people about. I told them you'd do it for them. You will, won't you?"

"Of course," Androl said. "It's better than dying."

Evin nodded. "They stopped your dose of forkroot. They'll take you next, after Logain. M'Hael was finally sent new women from the Great Lord, women who aren't tired from channeling all the time. Them and Toveine and the Reds mean it should go quickly now. M'Hael should have Logain by the end of the day."

"I'll serve them," Androl said. "I'll swear to the Great Lord."

"That's good, Androl," Evin said. "But we can't let you go until you've been Turned. M'Hael won't accept just an oath. It will be all right. I told them that you'd Turn easily. You will, won't you? Not resisting?"

"I won't resist."

"Thank the Great Lord," Evin said, relaxing.

Oh, Evin. You never were terribly bright.

"Evin," Androl said softly, "you need to watch out for Abors. You know that, right?"

"I'm one of them now, Androl," Evin said. "I don't have to worry about them."

"That's good," Androl whispered. "What I heard him say about you must have been nothing."

Evin fidgeted. That look in his eyes ... it was fright. The taint had been cleansed. Jonneth, Emarin and the other new Asha'man would never have to suffer the madness.

It manifested differently in different Asha'man, and at different rates. However, the fear was the most common. It came in waves; it had been consuming Evin when the cleansing happened. Androl had seen Asha'man need to be put down as the taint overwhelmed them. He knew that look in Evin's eyes well. Though the lad had been Turned, he still carried the madness with him. He would do so forever.

"What did he say?" Evin said.

"He didn't like it that you had been Turned," Androl said. "He thinks you'll take his place."

"Oh."

"Evin ... he might be planning to kill you. Take care."

Evin stood up. "Thank you, Androl."

He walked away, leaving Androl ungagged.

That. . . can't possibly work, Pevara sent drowsily.

She hadn't lived among them long enough. She hadn't seen what the madness could do, and didn't know to recognize it in the eyes of the Asha'man. Normally, when one of them became like this, they would take him and confine him until he rode it out. If that didn’t work, Taim added something to their wine, and they didn’t wake up.

If they weren’t stopped, they would descend to destruction. They would kill those closest to them, lashing out first at people they should have loved.

Androl knew that madness. He knew it was inside of him, too. *That is a mistake, Taim,* he thought. *You use our own friends against us, but we know them better than you do.*

Evin struck at Abors. It came in a burst of the One Power. A second later, Androl’s shield dropped.

Androl embraced the Source. He was not very strong, but he had enough Power to burn away a few ropes. He rolled free of his bindings, hands bloodied, and took stock of the room. He hadn’t been able to see it before, not entirely.

The room was bigger than he’d assumed, the size of a small throne room. A wide circular dais dominated the far end, topped by a double ring of Myrddraal and women. He shivered as he saw the Fades. Light, but that eyeless gaze was awful.

Taim’s exhausted men stood by the far wall, the Asha’man who had failed to Turn Logain. He sat on the dais, slouching and tied to a chair in the center of the double ring. Like a throne. Logain’s head rolled to the side, his eyes closed. He appeared to be whispering something.

Taim had spun, furious, toward Evin, who fought with Mishraile beside Abors’ smoking corpse. Evin and Mishraile each held the One Power, wrestling on the floor, a knife in Evin’s hands.

Androl scrambled toward Emarin, then nearly fell on his face as his legs gave out. Light! He was weak, but he did manage to burn away Emarin’s bonds, then Pevara’s. She shook her head, trying to clear it. Emarin nodded in gratitude.

“Can you weave?” Androl whispered. Taim’s attention was on Evin’s fight.

Emarin shook his head. “The drink they gave us…”

Androl clung to the One Power. Shadows began to lengthen around him.

No! he thought. *No, not now!*

A gateway. He needed a gateway! Androl sucked in the One Power, forming the weave for Traveling. And yet, as before, he hit some kind of barrier—like a wall, preventing him from opening the gateway. Frustrated, he tried to make one to a closer destination. Perhaps distance mattered. Could he make a gateway to Canler's store above them?

He struggled against that wall, fighting with everything he had. He strained, inching closer; he could almost do it… He felt as if something was happening.

"Please," he whispered. "Please, open. We need to get out of here…"

Evin fell to Taim's weave.

"What was that?" Taim bellowed.

"I don't know," Mishraile said. "Evin attacked us! He had been talking to the pageboy, and—"

Both spun toward Androl. Androl stopped trying to make the gateway, instead flinging a weave of fire in desperation toward Taim.

Taim smiled. By the time Androl's tongue of fire reached him, it vanished into a weave of Air and Water that dissipated it.

"You *are* a persistent one," Taim said, slamming Androl against the wall with a weave of Air.

Androl gasped in pain. Emarin stumbled dizzily to his feet, but a second weave of Air knocked him down. Dazed, Androl felt himself hoisted up and pulled across the room.

The ugly woman wearing black stepped out of the circle of Aes Sedai and walked up beside Taim. "So, M'Hael," she said. "You are not nearly as in control of this place as you indicated."

"I have inferior tools," Taim said. "I should have been given more women earlier!"

"You ran your Asha'man to exhaustion," the woman replied. "You squandered their strength. I will take charge here."

Taim stood on the dais, beside Logain's slumped form, the women and the Fades. He seemed to consider this woman, perhaps one of the Forsaken, a greater threat than anyone else in the room.

"You think that will work, do you?" Taim asked.

"When the Nae'blis hears of how you are bungling—"

"The Nae'blis? I care not for Moridin. I have already provided a gift to the Great Lord himself. Beware, I am in his favor. I hold the keys in my hands, Hessalam."

"You mean… you actually did it? You stole them?"

Taim smiled. He turned back to Androl, who hung in the air, struggling without success. He wasn't shielded. He flung another weave at Taim, but the man blocked it indifferently.

Androl wasn't even worth shielding. Taim dropped him from the weaves of Air. Androl hit the ground hard. He grunted.

"How long have you trained here, Androl?" Taim asked. "You shame me. That is the *best* you can do when trying to kill?"

Androl struggled to his knees. He felt pain and worry from Pevara behind, her mind clouded with forkroot. In front of him, Logain sat on his throne, locked in place, surrounded by the enemy. The man's eyes were closed; he was barely conscious.

"We are done here," Taim said. "Mishraile, kill these captives. We will take those above and carry them to Shayol Ghul. The Great Lord has promised me more resources for my work there."

Taim's lackeys approached. Androl looked up from his knees. The darkness grew all around, shapes moving in the shadows. The darkness… it terrified him. He had to let go of *saidin*, he *had* to. And yet, he could not.

He had to begin weaving.

Taim glanced at him, then smiled and wove balefire.

Shadows, all around!

Androl clung to the Power.

The dead, they come for me!

He wove by instinct, the best weave he knew. A gateway. He hit that wall, that blasted wall.

So tired. Shadows… Shadows will take me.

A white-hot bar of light sprang from Taim's fingers, pointed right at Androl. Androl shouted, straining, thrusting his hands forward and snapping his weave into place. He hit that wall and *heaved.*

A gateway the width of a coin opened in front of him. He caught the stream of balefire in it.

Taim frowned, and the room grew still, stunned Asha'man pausing their weaves. At that moment, the door to the room exploded inward.

Canler, holding the One Power, roared in. He was followed by the twenty or so Two Rivers boys who had come to train in the Black Tower.

Taim yelled, embracing the Source. "We are attacked!"

The dome seemed to be centered on the building project he'd noted. That was bad; with those foundations and pits, Slayer would have plenty of places to hide and ambush him.

Once they reached the village, Perrin pointed to a particularly large building. Two stories, built like an inn, with a solid wooden roof. “I’m going to take you up there,” Perrin whispered. “Ready your bow. Yell if you spot anyone trying to sneak up on me, all right?”

Gaul nodded. Perrin *shifted* them up onto the top of the building, and Gaul took position by the chimney. His clothing blended to match the color of the clay bricks, and he stayed low, bow out. It wouldn’t have the range of a longbow, but from here, he’d be deadly.

Perrin dropped to the ground, floating softly the last inch or so in order to keep from making noise. He crouched and *shifted* to the side of a building just ahead. He *shifted* again, to the edge of the last building in the row before the excavation, then looked over his shoulder. Gaul, hidden quite well up above, raised his fingers. He had tracked Perrin.

From here, Perrin crept forward on his belly, not wanting to *shift* to a place he couldn’t see directly. He reached the lip of the first cavernous foundation hole and looked down on a dirt floor. The wind still blew, and dust swirled down below, obscuring any tracks that might have been left.

Perrin rose to a crouch and began to make his way around the perimeter of the large foundation. Where would the exact center of the dome be? He couldn’t tell; it was too large. He kept his eyes open.

His attention was so focused on the foundation holes that he nearly walked right into the guards. A quiet chuckle from one of them alerted him, and he *shifted* immediately, jumping to the other side of the foundation and dropping to his knees, Two Rivers longbow appearing in his hands. He scanned the area he’d left, now distant.

Fool, he thought, finally spotting them. The two men lounged in a shack built beside the foundations. The shack was the type of structure you’d expect workers to take meals in. Perrin looked about anxiously, but Slayer did not rise out of hiding to attack him, and the two guards failed to spot him.

He couldn’t make out many details, so he cautiously *shifted* back to near where he’d been. He dropped down into the foundation and created an earthen ledge on its side to stand on while peering over the lip of the hole into the shack.

Yes, there were two of them. Men in black coats. Asha’man. He thought he recognized them from the aftermath of Dumai’s Wells, where they had rescued Rand. They were loyal to him, weren’t they? Had Rand sent help for Perrin?

Light burn that man, Perrin thought. *Couldn’t he just be upfront with everyone for once?*

Of course, even Asha’man could be Darkfriends. Perrin debated climbing out of the pit and confronting them.

“Broken tools,” Lanfear said idly.

Perrin jumped, cursing to find her standing on the ledge beside him, peeking up at the two men.

“They’ve been Turned,” she said. “I’ve always found that to be a wasteful business. You lose something in the transformation—they will never serve as well as if they’d come willingly. Oh, they’ll be loyal, but the light is gone. The self-motivation, the spark of ingenuity that makes people into people.”

“Be quiet,” Perrin said. “Turned? What do you mean? Is that…”

“Thirteen Myrddraal and thirteen Dreadlords.” Lanfear sneered. “Such crudeness. Such a waste.”

“I don’t understand.”

Lanfear sighed, speaking as if she were explaining to a child. “Those who can channel can be Turned to the Shadow by force in the right circumstances. M’Hael has been having trouble here making the process work as easily as he should. He needs women if he’s going to Turn men easily.

Light, Perrin thought. Did Rand know this could happen to people? Were they planning to do the same thing to him?

“I’d be careful around those two,” Lanfear said. “They’re powerful.”

“Then you should be speaking more softly,” Perrin whispered.

“Bah. It’s easy to bend sound in this place. I could shout for all I'm worth, and they wouldn’t hear. They’re drinking, you see? They brought the wine through with them. They’re here in the flesh, of course. I doubt their leader warned them of the dangers of that.”

Perrin looked up at the guards. The two men sipped at their wine, chuckling to one another. As Perrin watched, the first slumped to the side, then the other did as well. They slipped out of their seats and hit the ground.

“What did you do?”

“Forkroot in the wine,” Lanfear said.

“Why are you helping me?” Perrin demanded.

“I'm fond of you, Perrin.”

“You’re one of the Forsaken!”

“I was,” Lanfear said. “That… privilege has been removed from me. The Dark One discovered I was planning to help Lews Therin win. Now, I—” She froze, looking toward the sky again. What did she see in those clouds? Something that made her grow pale. She vanished a moment later.

Perrin tried to decide what to do. He couldn’t trust her, of course. However, she was *good* with the wolf dream. She managed to appear next to him without making any sound at all. That was tougher than it seemed; she had to still the air as it was moved out of the way when she arrived. She had to land just precisely so that she didn’t make noise, and had to mute her clothing’s rustle.

With a start, Perrin realized that this time she’d also been masking her scent. He’d only been able to smell her—her scent was that of soft night lily—after she’d begun speaking to him.

Uncertainly, he crawled out of the pit and approached the shack. Both men were asleep. What happened to men who slept in the dream? Normally, this would have sent them back to the waking world—but they were here in the flesh.

He shivered, thinking of what had been done to them. “Turned”? Was that the word she’d used? Light. It seemed unfair. *Not that the Pattern is ever fair,* Perrin acknowledged, quickly searching through the hut.

He found the dreamspike driven into the ground under the table. The silvery piece of metal looked like a long tent spike, carved with designs down its length. It was similar to the other one he’d seen, but not exactly the same. He pulled it free, then waited, hand on his hammer, expecting Slayer to come for him.

“He’s not here,” Lanfear said.

“Light!” Perrin jumped, hammer raised. He turned. “Why do you keep appearing like that, woman?”

“He searches for me,” she said, glancing skyward. “I’m not supposed to be able to do this, and he’s grown suspicious. If he finds me, he’ll know for certain, and I will be destroyed, captured and burned for an eternity.”

“You expect me to feel sorry for you, one of the Forsaken?” Perrin snapped.

“I chose my master,” she said, studying him. “This is my price—unless I can find a way free of it.”

“What?”

“I think you have the best chance,” she said. “I need you to win, Perrin, and I need to be at your side when you do.”

He snorted. “You haven’t learned any new tricks, have you? Take your offers elsewhere. I’m not interested.” He turned the dreamspike over in his fingers. He had never been able to figure out how the other one worked.

“You have to twist it at the top.” Lanfear held out a hand.

Perrin eyed her.

“You don’t think I could have taken it on my own if I’d wanted?” she asked, amused. “Who was it who put M’Hael’s little pets down for you?”

He hesitated, then handed it over. She ran her thumb from tip to midlength, and something clicked inside it. She reached up and twisted the head about. Outside, the faint wall of violet shrank and vanished.

She handed it back. “Twist it again to set up the field—the longer you twist, the larger it will grow—then slide your finger in the reverse of what I did to lock it. Be careful. Wherever you set it will have ramifications in the waking world as well as this world, and it will stop even your allies from moving in or out. You can get through with a key, but I do not know it for this spike.”

“Thank you,” Perrin said grudgingly. At his feet, one of the slumbering men grunted, then rolled to his side. “Is there ... Is there really no way to resist being Turned? Nothing they can do?”

“A person can resist for a short time,” she said. “A short time only. The strongest will fail eventually. If you are a man facing women, they will beat you quickly.”

“It shouldn’t be possible,” Perrin said, kneeling. “Nobody should be able to *force* a man to turn to the Shadow. When all else is taken from us, this choice should remain.”

“Oh, they have the choice,” Lanfear said, idly nudging one with her foot. “They could have chosen to be gentled. That would have removed the weakness from them, and they could never have been Turned.”

“That’s not much of a choice.”

“This is the weave of the Pattern, Perrin Aybara. Not all options will be good ones. Sometimes you have to make the best of a bad lot and ride the storm.”

He looked at her sharply. “And you imply that’s what you did? You joined the Shadow because it was the ‘best’ option? I don’t buy it for a moment. You joined for power. Everyone knows it.”

“Think what you will, wolf pup,” she said, eyes growing hard. “I’ve suffered for my decisions. I’ve borne pain, agony, *excruciating* sorrow because of what I’ve done in my life. My suffering goes beyond what you could conceive.”

“And of all of the Forsaken,” Perrin said, “you chose your place and accepted it most readily.”

She sniffed. “You think you can believe stories three thousand years old?”

“Better to trust them than the words of one such as yourself.”

“As you wish,” she said, then looked down again at the sleeping men. “If it helps you to understand, wolf pup, you should know that many think men like these are killed when the Turning happens. And then something else invades the body. Some think that, at least.” She vanished.

Perrin sighed, then tucked the dreamspike away and *shifted* back to the rooftop. As soon as he appeared, Gaul spun about, drawing an arrow. “Is it you, Perrin Aybara?”

“It’s me.”

“I wonder if I should ask for proof,” Gaul said, arrow still drawn. “It seems to me that in this place, one could easily change one’s appearance.”

Perrin smiled. “Appearance isn’t all. I know that you have two *gai’shain*, one you want, one you do not. Neither seems content to act as proper *gai’shain*. If we live through this, one might marry you.”

“One might,” Gaul agreed, lowering his bow. “It’s looking like I’ll have to take both or neither. Perhaps it is punishment for making them put away their spears, though it is not my choice that makes them do so, but their own.” He shook his head. “The dome is gone.”

Perrin held up the dreamspike. “It is.”

“What is our next task?”

“To wait,” Perrin said, settling down on the rooftop, “and see if removing the dome draws Slayer’s attention.”

“What if it does not?”

“Then we go to the next likely place to find him,” Perrin said, rubbing his chin. “And that is wherever there are wolves to kill.”

“We heard you!” Canler yelled to Androl amid the firefight. “Burn me if it isn’t true! We were in my shop above and we heard you speak, begging! We decided we had to attack. Now or never.”

Weaves exploded through the room. Earth erupted, and Fire shot from Taim’s people at the dais toward the Two Rivers men. Fades slunk across the room with cloaks that did not move, unsheathing swords.

Androl scrambled away from Canler, head low, making for Pevara, Jonneth and Emarin at the side of the room. Canler had heard him? The gateway he’d made, just before Taim heaved him in air. It must have opened, so small he hadn’t been able to see it.

He could make gateways again. But only very small ones. What good was that? *Enough to stop Taim’s balefire*, he thought, reaching Pevara and the others. None of the three were in a state to fight. He wove a gateway, hitting the wall, pushing to—

Something changed.

The wall vanished.

Androl sat, stunned for a moment. Blasts and explosions in the room assaulted his ears. Canler and the others fought well, but the Two Rivers lads faced fully trained Aes Sedai and maybe one of the Forsaken. They were dropping one by one.

The wall was gone.

Androl stood up slowly, then walked back toward the center of the room. Taim and his people fought on the dais; the weaves coming from Canler and his lads were flagging.

Androl looked to Taim and felt a powerful, overwhelming surge of anger. The Black Tower belonged to the Asha’man, not this man.

It was time for the Asha’man to reclaim it.

Androl roared, raising his hands beside him, and wove a gateway. The power rushed through him. As always, his gateways snapped into place faster than any others, growing larger than a man of his strength should be able to make.

He built this one the size of a large wagon. He opened it facing Taim’s channelers, snapping it in place right as they released their next round of deadly weaves.

The gateway only covered the distance of a few paces, and opened behind them.

Weaves crafted by Taim's women and men hit the open gateway—which hung before Androl like a haze in the air—then exploded out behind them.

Weaves killed their own masters, burning away Aes Sedai, killing Asha'man and the few remaining Myrddraal. Straining at the exertion, Androl bellowed louder and opened small gateways on Logain's bonds, snapping them. He opened another one directly in the floor beneath Logain's chair, dropping it from the room to a place far away from the Black Tower— one that was, the Light send, safe.

The woman called Hessalam fled. As she darted through a gateway of her own, Taim followed with a couple of others. The rest were not so wise—for a moment later, Androl opened a gateway as wide as the floor, dropping the other women and Asha'man through it to plummet hundreds of feet.

* * *

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CHAPTER 15

Your Neck in a Cord

The Tarasin Palace of Ebou Dar was *far* from the most difficult place that Mat had broken into. He told himself that over and over again as he dangled outside a balcony three stories above the gardens.

He clung to a marble ledge with one hand while holding his hat on his head with the other, his *ashandarei* strapped to his back. He'd stowed his bundle in the gardens below. The night air was cool against the sweat running down the sides of his face.

Above, a pair of Deathwatch Guards clanked as they moved on the balcony. Blood and bloody ashes. Did those fellows never take off their armor? They looked like beetles. He could barely make them out. The balcony was surrounded by an ironwork screen to keep people from looking in at the occupants from below, but Mat was close enough to see the guards moving inside through it.

Light, they were spending a long time in there. Mat's arm started to ache. The two men murmured to one another. Perhaps they were going to sit down and have some tea. Pull out a book, start reading into the night. Tuon really needed to dismiss these two. Why were they having a leisurely conversation on a balcony? There could be assassins out here!

Eventually, thank the Light, the two moved on. Mat tried to count to ten before swinging up, but only lasted to seven. He pushed open one of the unlatched screens, and scrambled over the balcony railing.

Mat exhaled softly, arms aching. This palace—those two guards notwithstanding—was nowhere near as impregnable as the Stone had been, and Mat had gotten in there. He had another advantage here, of course: He had lived in this palace, free to come and go. For the most part. He scratched at his neck, and the scarf he wore there. For a moment it felt like a ribbon that felt like a chain.

Mat's father had an adage: Always know which way you are going to ride. There never was a man as honest as Abell Cauthon, and everyone knew it, but some folk—like those up in Taren Ferry—could not be trusted farther than they could spit. In trading horses, Abell had always said, you needed to be ready to ride, and you always had to know which way you were going to go.

In his two months living in this palace, Mat had learned every way out—every crack and passage, every loose window. Which balcony screens were easy to open, which were usually locked tight. If you could sneak out, you could sneak in. He rested a moment on the balcony, but did not enter the room it was attached to. He was on the third floor, where guests stayed. He might have been able to sneak in this way, but the guts of a building were always better guarded than the skin. Best to go up the outside.

Doing so involved a lot of *not* looking down. Fortunately, the side of the building was not difficult to scale. Stonework and wood with plenty of handholds. He remembered chastising Tylin about that once.

Sweat crept down Mat's brow like ants down a hill as he crawled out onto the screen, pulled himself upward and started toward the fourth level. The *ashandarei* occasionally banged his legs from behind. He could smell the sea on the breeze. Things always smelled better when one was up high. Perhaps that was because heads smelled better than feet did.

Stupid thought, that, Mat told himself. Anything to keep from thinking about the height. He pulled himself up onto a piece of stonework, slipping with one foot below and lurching. He breathed in and out, panting, then continued on.

There. Above, he could see Tylin's balcony. Her quarters had several, of course; he went for the one at her bedroom, not the one attached to her sitting room. That one was on the Mol Hara Square, and climbing there, he would be as obvious as a fly in a white pudding.

He looked up again at the arabesque-covered iron balcony. He had always wondered if he could climb to it. He had certainly considered climbing *out* of it.

Well, he would not be a fool and try this sort of thing again, that was for certain. Just this once, and grudgingly. Matrim Cauthon knew to look out for his own neck. He had not survived this long by taking fool chances, luck or no luck. If Tuon wanted to live in a city where the head of her armies was trying to have her assassinated, that was her choice.

He nodded to himself. He would climb up, explain to her in very rational tones that she needed to leave the city and that this General Galgan was betraying her. Then he could saunter on his way and find himself some games of dice. That was why he had come to the city, after all. If Rand was up north, where all the Trollocs were, then Mat wanted to be as far from the man as possible. He felt bad for Rand, but any sane person would see that Mats choice was the only one. The swirl of colors started to form, but Mat suppressed it.

Rational. He would be very rational.

Sweating, cursing, his hands aching, Mat pulled himself up to the balcony on the fourth floor. One of the screen latches was loose here, as it had been when he lived in the palace. Quick work with a small wire hook was all he needed to get in. He entered the enclosed balcony, took off the *ashandarei*, then lay down on his back, panting as if he had just run all the way from Andor to Tear.

After a few minutes of that, he hauled himself to his feet, then looked out the unlatched screen down four stories. Mat felt pretty good about that climb.

He picked up the *ashandarei* and went to the balcony doors. Tuon would undoubtedly have moved in here, to Tylin's rooms. They were the finest in the palace. Mat cracked the doors open. He would just peek and—

Something shot from the shadows before him and slammed into the door just above his head.

Mat dropped, rolling, pulling out a knife with one hand and holding the *ashandarei* with the other. The door creaked open from the force of the crossbow bolt lodged in its wood.

Selucia looked out a moment later. She had the right side of her head shaven clean, the other side covered in cloth. Her skin was the color of cream, but any man who thought her soft would soon learn otherwise. Selucia could teach sandpaper a thing or two about being tough.

She leveled a small crossbow at him, and Mat found himself smiling. "I knew it!" he exclaimed. "You're a bodyguard. You always were."

Selucia scowled. "What are you doing here, you fool?"

"Oh, just going for a stroll," Mat said, picking himself up and sheathing his knife. "The night air is said to be good for a fellow. The sea breeze. That sort of thing."

“Did you *climb* up here?” Selucia asked, glancing over the side of the balcony, as if looking for a rope or ladder.

“What? You don’t climb up normally? Its very good for the arms. Improves grip.”

She gave him a suffering look, and Mat found himself grinning. If Selucia was on the lookout for assassins, then Tuon was probably all right. He nodded toward the crossbow, which was still leveled toward him. “Are you going to . . ”

She paused, then sighed and lowered it.

“Many thanks,” Mat said. “You could put a mans eye out with that thing, and normally I wouldn’t mind, but I’m running short on eyes these days.”

“What did you do?” Selucia asked dryly. “Go dicing with a bear?”

“Selucia!” Mat said, walking past her to enter the rooms. “That was quite near to a joke. I should think that, with a little effort, we might be able to grow you a sense of humor. That would be so unexpected, we could put you in a menagerie and charge money to see you. ‘Come see the marvelous laughing *so’jhin.* Two coppers only, tonight…’ ”

“You bet the eye on something, didn’t you?”

Mat stumbled, pushing open the door. He chuckled. Light! That was strangely close to the truth. “Very cute.”

It’s a bet I won, he thought, *no matter how it may seem.* Matrim Cauthon was the only man to have diced with the fate of the world itself in the prize pouch. Of course, next time, they could find some fool hero to take his place. Like Rand or Perrin. Those two were so full of heroism, it was practically dripping out their mouths and down their chins. He suppressed the images that tried to form. Light! He had to stop thinking of those two.

“Where is she?” Mat asked, looking about the bedchamber. The sheets of the bed were disturbed—he earnestly did not imagine pink ribbons tied to that headboard—but Tuon was nowhere to be seen.

“Out,” Selucia said.

“Out? It’s the middle of the night!”

“Yes. A time when only assassins would visit. You are lucky that my aim was off, Matrim Cauthon.”

“Never you bloody mind that,” Mat said. “You’re her bodyguard.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Selucia said, making the little crossbow vanish into her robes. “I am *so’jhin* to the Empress, may she live forever. I am her Voice and her Truthspeaker.”

“Lovely,” Mat said, glancing at the bed. “You’re decoying for her, aren’t you? Lying in her bed? With a crossbow ready, should assassins try to sneak in?”

Selucia said nothing.

“Well, where is she?” Mat demanded. “Bloody ashes, woman! This is serious. General Galgan himself has hired men to kill her!”

“That?” Selucia asked. “You’re worried about *that!*”

“Bloody right, I am.”

“Galgan is nothing to worry about,” Selucia said. “He’s too good a soldier to jeopardize our current stabilization efforts. Krisa is the one you should be worried about. She has brought in three assassins from Seanchan.” Selucia glanced at the balcony doorway. Mat noticed for the first time a stain on the floor that might have been blood. “I have caught two so far. Pity. I assumed you were the third.” She eyed him, as if considering that he might— against all logic—somehow be that assassin.

“You’re bloody insane,” Mat said, tugging on his hat and fetching his *ashandarei.* “I’m going to Tuon.”

“That is no longer her name, may she live forever. She is known as Fortuona; you should not address her by either name, but instead as ‘Highest One’ or ‘Greatest One.’ ”

“I’ll call her what I bloody well please,” Mat said. “Where is she?” Selucia studied him.

“I’m *not* an assassin,” he said.

“I don’t believe that you are. I am trying to decide if she would like me to tell you her location.”

“I’m her husband, am I not?”

“Hush,” Selucia said. “You just tried to convince me you weren’t an assassin, now you bring up that? Fool man. She is in the palace gardens.”

“It’s the—”

“—middle of the night,” Selucia said. “Yes, I know. She does not always… listen to logic.” He caught a hint of exasperation in her tone. “She has an entire squad of the Deathwatch Guard with her.”

“I don’t care if she has the Creator himself with her,” Mat snapped, walking back toward the balcony. “I’m going to go sit her down and explain some things to her.”

Selucia followed and leaned against the doorway, raising a skeptical gaze to him.

“Well, maybe I won’t sit her down, really,” Mat said, looking through the open screen at the gardens below. “But I will explain to her—logically—why she can’t just go wandering in the night like this. At least, I’ll mention it to her. Blood and bloody ashes. We really are high up, aren’t we?”

“Normal people use stairs.”

“Every soldier in the city is looking for me,” Mat said. “I think Galgan is trying to make me vanish.”

Selucia pursed her lips.

“You didn’t know about this?” Mat asked.

She hesitated, then shook her head. “It’s not impossible that Galgan would be on the watch for you. The Prince of the Ravens would be competition, under normal circumstances. He is general of our armies, but that is a task often assigned to the Prince of the Ravens.”

Prince of the Ravens. “Don’t bloody remind me,” Mat said. “I thought that was my title when I was married to the Daughter of the Nine Moons. It hasn’t changed at her elevation?”

“No,” Selucia said. “Not yet.”

Mat nodded, then sighed as he looked at the climb ahead of him. He lifted one leg up onto the railing.

“There is another way,” Selucia said. “Come before you break your fool neck. I do not know yet what she wants with you, but I doubt it involves you falling to your death.”

Mat gratefully hopped off the balcony railing, following Selucia into the room. She opened a wardrobe, and then opened the back into a dark passageway enclosed in the wood and stone of the palace.

“Blood and bloody ashes,” Mat said, sticking his head in. “This was here all along?”

“Yes.”

“This might be how it got in,” Mat murmured. “You need to board this thing up, Selucia.”

“I’ve done better. When the Empress sleeps—may she live forever—she sleeps in the attic. She never slumbers in this room. We have not forgotten how easily Tylin was taken.”

“That’s good,” Mat said. He shuddered. “I found the thing that did that. He won’t be ripping out any more throats. Tylin and Nalesean can have a little dance together about that. Farewell, Selucia. Thank you.”

“For the passageway?” she asked. “Or for failing to kill you with the crossbow?”

“For not bloody calling me Highness like Musenge and the others,” Mat muttered, entering the passage. He found a lantern hung on the wall, and lit it with his flint and tinder.

Behind him, Selucia laughed. “If that bothers you, Cauthon, you have a very irritating life ahead of you. There is only one way to stop being the Prince of the Ravens, and that is to find your neck in a cord.” She closed the door to the wardrobe.

What a pleasant woman she is, Mat thought. He almost preferred the days when she would not talk to him. Shaking his head, he started down the passage, realizing she had never told him exactly where it led.

Rand strode through Elayne’s camp at the eastern edge of Braem Wood, accompanied by a pair of Maidens. The camp was dark, evening upon them, but few slept. They were making preparations to break camp and move the army east toward Cairhien the next morning.

Only two guards for Rand tonight. He felt almost *exposed* with two guards, though once he had thought any number of guards at all to be excessive. The inevitable turning of the Wheel had changed his perception as surely as it changed the seasons.

He walked a lantern-lit pathway that had obviously once been a game trail. This camp hadn’t been here long enough to have pathways otherwise. Soft noises broke the nights calm: supplies being loaded on to carts, sword blades being ground on whetstones, meals being distributed to hungry soldiers.

The men did not call to one another. Not only was it night, but the Shadow’s forces were near in the forest, and Trollocs had good ears. Best to be in the habit of speaking softly, not shouting from one side of the camp to another. The lanterns had shields to give only a soft light, and cook fires were kept to a minimum.

Rand left the trail, carrying his long bundle, passing through rustling high grass in the clearing on his way to Tam’s tent. This would be a quick trip. He nodded to those soldiers who saluted as he passed on the path. They were shocked to see him, but not surprised that he walked the camp. Elayne had made her armies aware of his earlier visit.

I lead these armies, she had said as they parted last time, *but you are their heart. You gathered them, Rand. They fight for you. Please let them see you when you come.*

And so he did. He wished he could protect them better, but he would simply have to carry that burden. The secret, it turned out, had not been to harden himself to the point of breaking. It had not been to become numb. It had been to walk in pain, like the pain of the wounds at his side, and accept that pain as part of him.

Two men from Emond's Field guarded Tams tent. Rand nodded to them as they straightened up, saluting. Ban al'Seen and Dav al'Thone— once, he would never have thought to see them salute. They did it well, too.

"You have a solemn task, men," Rand said to them. "As important as any on this battlefield."

"Defending Andor, my Lord?" Dav asked, confused.

"No," Rand said. "Watching over my father. Take care you do it well." He pushed into the tent, leaving the Maidens outside.

Tam stood over a travel table, inspecting maps. Rand smiled. It was the same look Tam had worn when inspecting a sheep that had gotten caught in the thicket.

"You seem to think I'll need watching," Tam said.

Responding to that comment, Rand decided, would be like walking up to an archer's nest and daring anyone inside to hit him. Instead, he set his bundle down on the table. Tam regarded the long, cloth-wrapped bundle, then tugged at its covering. The cloth came off, revealing a majestic sword with a black-lacquered sheath painted with entwined dragons of red and gold. Tam looked up with a question in his eyes.

"You gave me your sword," Rand said. "And I wasn't able to return it. This is a replacement."

Tam slid the sword from its sheath, and his eyes widened. "This is too fine a gift, son."

"Nothing is too fine for you," Rand whispered. "Nothing."

Tam shook his head, slipping the blade back into the sheath. "It will just end up in a trunk, forgotten like the last one. I should never have brought that thing home. You put too much care into that blade." He moved to hand the sword back.

Rand put his hand over Tam's. "Please. A blademaster deserves a fitting weapon. Take it—that will ease my conscience. Light knows, any burden I can lighten now will help in the days to come.”

Tam grimaced. “That’s a dirty trick, Rand.”

“I know. I’ve been spending my time with all kinds of unsavory types lately. Kings, clerks, lords and ladies.”

Tam reluctantly took the sword back.

“Think of it as a thank-you,” Rand said, “from all the world to you. If you had not taught me of the flame and the void all those years ago… Light, Tam. I wouldn’t be here right now. I’d be dead, I’m sure of that.” Rand looked down at the sword. “To think. If you hadn’t wanted me to be a good archer, I’d have never learned the thing that kept me sane through the rough times.”

Tam sniffed. “The flame and the void aren’t about archery.”

“Yes, I know. They are a swordsman’s technique.”

“They’re not about swords either,” Tam said, strapping the sword onto his belt.

“But—”

“The flame and the void are about center,” Tam said. “And about peace. I would teach it to each and every person in this land, soldier or not, if I could.” His expression softened. “But, Light, what am I doing? Lecturing you? Tell me, where did you get this weapon?”

“I found it.”

“It’s as fine a blade as I’ve ever seen.” Tam pulled it out again, looking at the folds of the metal. “It’s ancient. And used. Well-used. Cared for, certainly, but this didn’t just sit in some warlord’s trophy case. Men have swung this blade. Killed with it.”

“It belonged ... to a kindred soul.”

Tam looked at him, searching his eyes. “Well, I suppose I should try it out, then. Come on.”

“In the night?”

“It’s early evening still,” Tam said. “This is a good time. The practice grounds won’t be clogged.”

Rand raised an eyebrow, but stepped aside as Tam rounded the table and left the tent. Rand followed, the Maidens falling in behind them, and trailed his father to the nearby practice grounds, where a few Warders sparred, lit by glowing lanterns on poles.

Near the rack of wooden practice weapons, Tam took the new sword out and moved into a few forms. Though his hair was gray, his face creased around the eyes, Tam al'Thor moved like a ribbon of silk in the wind. Rand had never seen his father fight, not even spar. In truth, a piece of him had had trouble imagining gentle Tam al'Thor killing anything other than a grouse for the firepit.

Now he saw. Lit by flickering lantern light, Tam al'Thor slipped into the sword forms like a comfortable pair of boots. Oddly, Rand found himself jealous. Not of his father specifically, but of any who could know the peace of sword practice. Rand held up his hand, then the stump of the other. Many of the forms required two hands. To fight as Tam did was not the same as fighting with shortsword and shield, as many men in the infantry did. This was something else. Rand might still be able to fight, but he could never do *this.* No more than a man missing one foot could dance.

Tam completed Hare Finds Its Hole, sliding the weapon into its sheath in one smooth motion. Orange lantern light reflected off of the blade as it slipped into its cover. "Beautiful," Tam said. "Light, the weight, the construction ... Is it Power-forged?"

"I don't know," Rand said.

He'd never had a chance to fight with it.

Tam took a cup of water from a serving boy. A few newer recruits ran through pike formations in the distance, working late into the night. Every moment of training was precious, particularly for those who were not often on the front lines.

New recruits, Rand thought, watching them. *These, too, are my burden. Every man who fights.*

He would find a way to defeat the Dark One. If he did not, these men fought in vain.

"You're worried, son," Tam said, handing the cup back to the serving boy.

Rand calmed himself, finding peace, turning to Tam. He remembered, from his old memories, something from a book. *The key to leadership is in the rippling waves.* You could not find stillness on a body of water if there was turmoil underneath. Likewise, you could not find peace and focus in a group unless the leader himself had peace within.

Tam eyed him, but did not challenge Rand on the sudden mask of control that he had adopted. Instead, Tam reached to the side and took one of the balanced wooden practice swords from the rack. He tossed it to Rand, who caught it, standing with his other arm folded behind his back.

“Father,” Rand said warningly as his father picked up another sparring sword. “This is not a good idea.”

“I’ve heard you became quite the swordsman,” Tam said, taking a few swipes with the practice sword to test its balance. “I’d like to see what you can do. Call it a father’s pride.”

Rand sighed, holding up his other arm, displaying the stump. People’s eyes tended to slide off it, as if they were seeing a Gray Man. They didn’t like the idea that their Dragon Reborn was flawed.

He never let them know how tired he felt, inside. His body was worn, like a millstone that had worked for generations. He was still tough enough to do his job, and he *would*, but Light, he felt tired sometimes. Carrying the hopes of millions was heavier than lifting any mountain.

Tam didn’t pay any heed to the stump. He took out a handkerchief and wrapped it around one of his hands, then tied it tight using his teeth. “I won’t be able to grip a thing with my offhand,” he said, swinging the sword again. “It will be a fair fight. Come on, son.”

Tam’s voice carried authority—the authority of a father. It was the same tone he had once used to get Rand out of bed to go muck the milking shed.

Rand couldn’t disobey that voice, not Tam’s. It was just built into him. He sighed, stepping forward. “I don’t need the sword to fight any longer. I have the One Power.”

“That would be important,” Tam said, “if sparring right now had anything to do with fighting.”

Rand frowned. “What—”

Tam came at him.

Rand parried with a halfhearted swing. Tam moved into Feathers in the Wind, spinning his sword and delivering a second blow. Rand stepped back, parrying again. Something stirred inside of him, an eagerness. As Tam attacked a second time, Rand lifted the sword and—by instinct— brought his hands together.

Only, he didn’t have his other hand to grip the bottom of the sword. That left his grip weak, and when Tam hit again, it nearly twisted the sword out of Rand’s grip.

Rand set his teeth, stepping back. What would Lan say, if he’d seen this shoddy performance by one of his students? *What would he say? He’d say, “Rand, don’t get into swordfights. You can’t win them. Not any longer.”*

Tam's next attack feinted right, then came around and hit Rand on the thigh with a solid thump. Rand danced backward, smarting. Tam had actually *hit* him, and hard. The man certainly wasn't holding back.

How long had it been since Rand had sparred with someone who was actually willing to hurt him? Too many treated him like glass. Lan had never done that.

Rand threw himself into the fight, trying Boar Rushes Down the Mountain. He beat at Tam for a few moments, but then a slap from Tam's weapon almost twisted the sword from Rand's hand again. The long swords, designed for swordmasters, were difficult to stabilize correctly without a second hand.

Rand growled, again trying to fall into a two-handed stance, again failing. He'd learned, by now, to deal with what he had lost—in normal life, at least. He hadn't spent time sparring since the physical loss, although he'd intended to.

He felt like a chair that was missing one of its legs. He could balance, with effort, but not very well. He fought, he tried form after form, but he barely held on against Tam's attacks.

He couldn't do it. Not well, so why was he bothering? In this activity, he was defective. Sparring made no sense. He turned, sweat streaming from his brow, and threw his coat aside. He tried again, stepping carefully on the trampled grass, but again Tam got the better of him, nearly knocking his feet out from under him.

This is pointless! Why fight one-handed? Why not find another way? Why…

Tam was doing it.

Rand continued to fight, defensive, but he directed his attention to Tam. His father must have practiced fighting one-handed; Rand could read it in his movements, the way he didn't try—by instinct—to keep grabbing the hilt with his bound hand. Upon consideration, Rand probably should have practiced sparring one-handed. Many wounds could hurt the hand, and some forms focused on arm attacks. Lan had told him to practice reversing his grips. Perhaps fighting with one hand would have come next.

"Let go, son," Tam said.

"Let go of what?"

"Everything." Tam came rushing in, throwing shadows in the lantern light, and Rand sought the void. All emotion went into the flame, leaving him empty and whole at once.

The next attack nearly cracked his head. Rand cursed, coming into Heron in the Reeds as Lan had taught him, sword up to block the next blow. Again, that missing hand of his tried to grip the hilt. One could not unlearn years of training in an evening!

Let go.

Wind blew through across the field, carrying with it the scents of a dying land. Moss, mold, rot.

Moss lived. Mold was a living thing. For a tree to rot, life had to progress.

A man with one hand was still a man, and if that hand held a sword, he was still dangerous.

Tam fell into Hawk Spots the Hare, a very aggressive form. He charged Rand, swinging. Rand saw the next few moments before they happened. He saw himself raising his sword in the proper form to block—a form that required him to expose his sword to bad balance, now that he had no second hand. He saw Tam slicing down on the sword to twist it in Rand’s grip. He saw the next attack coming back and taking Rand at the neck.

Tam would freeze before hitting. Rand would lose the spar.

Let go.

Rand shifted his grip on the sword. He didn’t think about why; he did what felt right. When Tam came near, Rand flung his left arm up to stabilize his hand while pivoting his sword to the side. Tam connected, weapon sliding off Rand’s sword, but not unhanding it.

Tam’s backswing came as expected, but hit Rand’s elbow, the elbow of the useless arm. Not so useless after all. It blocked the sword effectively, though the *crack* of it hitting sent a shiver of pain down Rand’s arm.

Tam froze, eyes widening—first in surprise that he’d been blocked, then in apparent worry over connecting with a solid blow on Rand’s arm. He had probably fractured the bone.

“Rand,” Tam said, “I…”

Rand stepped back, folded his wounded arm behind his back, and lifted his sword. He breathed in the deep scents of a world wounded, but not dead.

He attacked. Kingfisher Strikes in the Nettles. Rand didn’t choose it; it happened. Perhaps it was his posture, sword out, other arm folded behind his back. That led him easily into the offensive form.

Tam blocked, wary, stepping to the side in the brown grass. Rand swung to the side, flowing into his next form. He stopped trying to turn off his instincts, and his body adapted to the challenge. Safe within the void, he didn’t need to wonder how.

The contest continued in earnest, now. Swords clacking with sharp blows, Rand keeping his hand behind his back and *feeling* what his next strike should be. He did not fight as well as he once had. He could not; some forms were impossible for him, and he could not strike with as much force as he once could.

He did match Tam. To an extent. Any swordsman could tell who was the better as they fought. Or, at least, they could tell who had the advantage. Tam had it here. Rand was younger and stronger, but Tam was just so *solid*. He *had* practiced fighting with one hand. Rand was certain of it.

He did not care. This focus ... he had missed this focus. With so much to worry about, so much to carry, he had not been able to dedicate himself to something as simple as a duel. He found it now, and poured himself into it.

For a time, he wasn’t the Dragon Reborn. He wasn’t even a son with his father. He was a student with his master.

In this, he remembered that no matter how good he had become, no matter how much he now remembered, there was still much he could learn.

They continued to spar. Rand did not count who had won which exchange; he just fought and enjoyed the peace of it. Eventually, he found himself exhausted in the good way—not in the worn-down way he had begun to feel lately. It was the exhaustion of good work done.

Sweating, Rand raised his practice sword to Tam, indicating that he was through. Tam stepped back, raising his own sword. The older man wore a grin.

Nearby, standing near the lanterns, a handful of Warders began clapping. Not a large audience—only six men—but Rand had not noticed them. The Maidens lifted their spears in salute.

“It has been quite a weight, hasn’t it?” Tam asked.

“What weight?” Rand replied.

“That lost hand you’ve been carrying.”

Rand looked down at his stump. “Yes. I believe it has been at that.”

Tylin's secret passage led to the gardens, opening up in a very narrow hole not far from where Mat had begun his climb. He crawled out, brushing the dust off of his shoulders and knees, then craned his neck back and looked up to the balcony far above. He had ascended to the building's heights, then crawled out through its bowels. Maybe there was a lesson in that somewhere. Maybe it was that Matrim Cauthon should look for secret passages before deciding to scale a bloody four-story building.

He stepped softly into the gardens. The plants were not doing well. These ferns should have far more fronds, and the trees were as bare as a Maiden in the sweat tent. Not surprising. The entire land wilted faster than a boy at Bel Tine with no dancing partners. Mat was pretty sure Rand was to blame. Rand or the Dark One. Mat could trace every bloody problem in his life to one or the other. Those flaming colors. . .

Moss still lived. Mat had not ever heard of moss being used in a garden, but he could have sworn that here it had been made to grow on rocks in patterns. Perhaps, when everything died off, the gardeners used what they could find.

It took him some searching, poking through dried shrubs and past dead flower beds, to find Tuon. He had expected to find her sitting peacefully in thought, but he should have known better.

Mat crouched beside a fern, unseen by the dozen or so Deathwatch Guards who stood in a ring around Tuon as she went through a series of fighting stances. She was lit by a pair of lanterns that gave off a strange, steady blue glow. Something burned within them, but it was not a regular flame.

The light shone on her soft, smooth skin, which was the shade of good earth. She wore a pale *a'solma*, a gown that was split at the sides, showing blue leggings underneath. Tuon had a slight frame; he had once made the mistake of assuming that meant she was frail. Not so.

She had shaved her head again properly, now that she was no longer hiding. Baldness looked good on her, strange though it was. She moved in the blue glow, running through a sequence of hand combat forms, her eyes closed. She seemed to be sparring with her own shadow.

Mat preferred a good knife—or, better, his *ashandarei*—to fighting with his hands. The more space he had between himself and a fellow trying to kill him, the better. Tuon did not seem to need either. Watching her, he realized how fortunate he had been the night he had taken her. Unarmed, she was deadly.

She slowed, waving her hands in front of her in a gentle pattern, then thrusting them quickly to the side. She breathed in and brought her arms to the other side, her entire body twisting.

Did he love her?

The question made Mat uncomfortable. It had been scratching at the edges of his mind for weeks now, like a rat trying to have at the grain. It was not the sort of question Matrim Cauthon was supposed to have to ask. Matrim Cauthon worried only about the girl on his knee and the next toss of the dice. Questions about matters like love were best left to Ogier who had time to sit and watch trees grow.

He had married her. That was an accident, was it not? The bloody foxes had told him he would. She had married him back. He still did not know why. Something to do with those omens she talked about? Their courtship had been more of a game than a romance. Mat liked games, and he always played to win. Tuon's hand had been the prize. Now that he had it, what did he do with it?

She continued her forms, moving like a reed in the wind. A tilt this way, then a wave of motion that way. The Aiel called fighting a dance. What would they think of this? Tuon moved as gracefully as any Aiel. If battle were a dance, most of it was done to the music of a rowdy barroom. This was done to the swaying melody of a master singer.

Something moved over Tuon's shoulder. Mat tensed, peering into that darkness. Ah, it was just a gardener. An ordinary-looking fellow with a cap on his head and freckled cheeks. Barely worth noticing. Mat put him out of his mind and leaned forward to take a better look at Tuon. He smiled at her beauty.

Why would a gardener be out at this time? he thought. *Must be a strange type of fellow.*

Mat glanced at the man again, but had trouble picking him out. The gardener stepped between two members of the Deathwatch Guard. They did not seem to care. Mat should not either. They must trust the man…

Mat reached into his sleeve and freed a knife. He raised it without letting himself think about why. In doing so, his hand brushed one of the branches ever so softly.

Tuon's eyes snapped open, and despite the dim light, she focused directly on Mat. She saw the knife in his hand, ready to throw.

Then she looked over her shoulder.

Mat threw, the knife reflecting blue light as it spun. It passed less than a finger’s width from Tuon’s chin, hitting the gardener in the shoulder as he raised a knife of his own. The man gasped, stumbling back. Mat would have preferred to take him in the throat, but he had not wanted to risk hitting Tuon.

Rather than doing the sensible thing and moving away, Tuon leaped for the man, hands shooting toward his throat. That made Mat smile. Unfortunately, the man had just enough time—and she was just enough off-balance—that he managed to push backward and scramble between the baffled Deathwatch Guards. Mat’s second dagger hit the ground behind the assassin’s heel as he vanished into the night.

A second later, three men—each weighing roughly the same as a small building—crashed down on top of Mat, slamming his face against the dry ground. One stepped on his wrist, and another ripped his *ashandarei* away from him.

“Stop!” Tuon barked. “Release him! Go after the other one, you fools!”

“Other one, Majesty?” one of the guards asked. “There was no other one.”

“Then to whom does that blood belong?” Tuon asked, pointing at the dark stain on the ground that the assassin had left behind. “The Prince of the Ravens saw what you did not. Search the area!”

The Deathwatch Guards slowly climbed off Mat. He let out a groan. What did they feed these men? Bricks? He did not like being called “Highness,” but a little respect would have been nice here. If it had prevented him from being sat upon, that was.

He climbed to his feet, then held out his hand to a sheepish Death-watch Guard. The fellow’s face had more scars than skin. He handed Mat the *ashandarei*, then went off to help search the garden.

Tuon folded her arms, obviously unshaken. “You have chosen to delay your return to me, Matrim.”

“Delay my ... I came to bloody warn you, not return to you. I’m my own man.”

“You may pretend whatever you wish,” Tuon said, looking over her shoulder as the Deathwatch Guards beat at the shrubbery. “But you must not stay away. You are important to the Empire, and I have use for you."

"Sounds delightful," Mat grumbled.

"What was it?" Tuon asked softly. "I did not see the man until you drew attention. These guards are the best of the Empire. I have seen Daruo there catch an arrow in flight with his bare hand, and Barrin once stopped a man from breathing on me because he suspected an assassin whose mouth was filled with poisons. He was right."

"It's called a Gray Man," Mat said, shivering. "There's something freakishly ordinary about them—they're hard to notice, hard to fixate upon."

"Gray Man," Tuon said idly. "More myths come to life. Like your Trollocs."

"Trollocs are real, Tuon. Bloody—"

"Of course Trollocs are real," she said. "Why wouldn't I believe that they are?" She looked at him defiantly, as if daring him to mention the times she had called them myths. "This Gray Man appears to be real as well. There is no other explanation for why my guards let him pass."

"I trust the Deathwatch Guards well enough," Mat said, rubbing his shoulder where one of them had placed his knee. "But I don't know, Tuon. General Galgan is trying to have you killed; he could be working with the enemy."

"He's not serious about having me killed," Tuon said indifferently.

"Are you bloody insane?" Mat asked.

"Are you bloody stupid?" she asked. "He hired assassins from this land only, not true killers."

"That Gray Man is from this land," Mat pointed out.

That quieted her. "With whom did you gamble away that eye?"

Light! Was everyone going to ask him about it that way? "I went through a rough patch," he said. "I made it through alive, which is all that matters."

"Hmm. And did you save her? The one you went to rescue?"

"How did you know about that?"

She did not reply. "I have decided not to be jealous. You are fortunate. The missing eye suits you. Before, you were too pretty."

Too pretty? Light. What did that mean?

"Good to see you, by the way," Mat said. He waited a few moments. "Usually, when a fellow says something like that, it's customary to tell them that you're happy to see them as well."

"I am the Empress now," Tuon said. "I do not wait upon others, and do not find it good that someone has returned. Their return is expected, as they serve me."

"You know how to make a fellow feel loved. Well, I know how you feel about me."

"And how is that?"

"You looked over your shoulder."

She shook her head. "I had forgotten that you are supremely good at saying that which has no meaning, Matrim."

"When you saw me," Mat explained, "with a dagger in hand—as if to throw at you—you didn't call for your guards. You didn't fear I was here to kill you. You looked over your shoulder to see what I was aiming at. That's the most loving gesture I think a man could receive from a woman. Unless you'd like to sit on my knee for a little while…"

She did not reply. Light, but she seemed cold. Was it all going to be different, now that she was the Empress? He could not have lost her already, could he?

Furyk Karede, the captain of the Deathwatch Guard, soon arrived with Musenge walking behind him. Karede looked like he had just found his house on fire. The other Deathwatch Guards saluted him and seemed to wither before him.

"Empress, my eyes are lowered," Karede said, going down on his belly before her. "I will join those who failed you in spilling our lives before you as soon as a new squad has arrived to see to your protection."

"Your lives are mine," Tuon said, "and you do not end them unless I give you leave. This assassin was not of natural birth, but a creation of the Shadow. Your eyes are not lowered. The Prince of the Ravens will teach you how to spot this kind of creature, so you will not be so surprised again." Mat was fairly certain that Gray Men *were* of natural birth, but then, so were Trollocs and Fades. It did not seem appropriate to point this out to Tuon. Besides, something else in her orders drew his attention.

"I'm going to do what, now?" Mat asked.

"Teach them," Tuon said softly. "You are Prince of the Ravens. This will be part of your duties."

"We need to talk about that," Mat said. "Everyone calling me 'Highness' is not going to do, Tuon. It just won't."

She did not reply. She waited as the search proceeded, and made no move to retreat to the palace.

Finally, Karede approached again. “Highest One, there is no sign of the thing in the gardens, but one of my men has found blood on the wall. I suspect the assassin fled into the city.”

“He is unlikely to try again tonight,” Tuon said, “while we are alerted. Do not spread news of this to the common soldiers or guards. Inform my Voice that our ruse has stopped being effective, and that we will need to consider a new one.”

“Yes, Empress,” Karede said, bowing low again.

“For now,” Tuon said, “clear out and secure the perimeter. I will be spending time with my consort, who has requested that I ‘make him feel loved.’ ”

“That’s not exactly—” Mat said as the members of the Deathwatch Guard faded into the darkness.

Tuon studied Mat for a moment, then began to disrobe.

“Light!” Mat said. “You *meant* it?”

“I’m not going to sit on your knee,” Tuon said, pulling one arm out of her robe, exposing her breasts, “though I may allow you to sit on mine. Tonight, you have saved my life. That will earn you special privilege. It—”

She cut off as Mat grabbed her and kissed her. She was tense with surprise. *In the bloody garden*, he thought. *With soldiers standing all about, well within earshot.* Well, if she expected Matrim Cauthon to be shy, she had a surprise coming.

He released her lips from the kiss. Her body was pressed against his, and he was pleased to find her breathless.

“I won’t be your toy,” Mat said sternly. “I won’t have it, Tuon. If you intend it to be that way, I will leave. Mark me. Sometimes, I do play the fool. With Tylin, I did for sure. I won’t have that with you.”

She reached up and touched his face, surprisingly tender. “I would not have said the words I did if I had found in you only a toy. A man missing an eye is no toy anyway. You have known battle; everyone who sees you now will know that. They will not mistake you for a fool, and I have no use for a toy. I shall have a prince instead.”

“And do you love me?” he asked, forcing the words out.

“An empress does not love,” she said. “I am sorry. I am with you because the omens state it so, and so with you I will bring the Seanchan an heir.”

Mat had a sinking feeling.

“However,” Tuon said. “Perhaps I can admit that it is… good to see you.”

Well, Mat thought, *guess I can take that. For now.*

He kissed her again.

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CHAPTER 16

A Silence Like Screaming

Loial, son of Arent son of Halan, had secretly always wanted to be hasty.

Humans fascinated him, of *that* he made no secret. He was sure most of his friends knew, though he could not be certain. It amazed him what humans didn't hear. Loial could speak to them all day, then find that they had heard only part. Did they think that someone would speak without intending for others to listen?

Loial listened when they spoke. Every word out of their mouths revealed more about them. Humans were like the lightning. A flash, an explosion, power and *energy.* Then gone. What would it be like?

Hastiness. There were things to learn from hastiness. He was starting to wonder if he had learned that particular lesson too well.

Loial strode through a forest of too-silent trees, Erith at his side, other Ogier surrounding them. All held axes on shoulders or carried long knives as they marched toward the battlefront. Erith's ears twitched; she was not a Treesinger, but she could sense that the trees did not feel right.

It was horrible, horrible indeed. He could not explain the sense of a healthy stand of trees any more than he could explain the sensation of wind on his skin. There was a rightness, like the scent of morning rain, to healthy trees. It was not a sound, but it felt like a melody. When he sang to them, he found himself swimming in that rightness.

These trees had no such rightness. If he drew close to them, he felt he could hear something. A silence like screaming. It was not a sound, but a feeling.

Fighting raged ahead of them in the forest. Queen Elayne's forces carefully withdrew eastward, out of the trees. They were nearly to the edge of Braem Wood now; once out, they would march for the bridges, cross them and burn them behind. Then the soldiers would launch volleys of destruction at the Trollocs trying to cross the river after them on their own bridges. Bashere hoped to reduce the enemy's numbers considerably at the Erinin before they continued east.

Loial was certain this would all make fascinating information for his book, once he wrote it. If he was able to write it. He laid his ears flat as the Ogier began their war song. He lent his voice to theirs, glad for the terrible song—the call to blood, to death—as it filled the silence left by the trees.

He started running with the others, Erith at his side. Loial drew out in front, axe raised above his head. Thoughts left him as he found himself angry, *furious,* at the Trollocs. They didn't just kill trees. They took the peace from the trees.

The call to blood, to death.

Bellowing his song, Loial laid into the Trollocs with his axe, Erith and the other Ogier joining him and stopping the brunt of this Trolloc flanking force. He had not intended to lead the Ogier charge. He did anyway.

He hacked at the shoulder of a ram-faced Trolloc, shearing its arm free. The thing yelled and fell to its knees, and Erith kicked it in the face, throwing it back into the legs of a Trolloc behind.

Loial did not stop his song, the call to blood, to death. Let them hear! Let them *hear!* Swing after swing. Chopping dead wood, that was all this was. Dead, rotting, horrible wood. He and Erith fell into place with Elder Haman, who—with ears laid back—looked utterly fierce. Placid Elder Haman. He felt the rage too.

A beleaguered line of Whitecloaks—whom the Ogier had relieved—stumbled back, making way for the Ogier.

He sang and fought and roared and killed, hacking at Trollocs with an axe meant for cutting wood, and never flesh. Working with wood was a reverent business. This… this was killing weeds. Poisonous weeds. Strangling weeds.

He continued to chop the Trollocs, losing himself in the call to blood, to death. The Trollocs began to fear. He saw terror in their beady eyes, and he loved it. They were used to fighting men, who were smaller than themselves.

Well, let the Trollocs fight someone their own size. They snarled as the Ogier line forced them back. Loial landed blow after blow, shearing through arms, hacking through torsos. He shoved his way between two bear Trollocs, laying about him with his axe, yelling in fury—fury now for what the Trollocs had done to the Ogier. They should be enjoying the peace of the *stedding*. They should be able to build, sing, and grow.

They could not. Because of these… these *weeds*, they could not! The Ogier were forced to kill. The Trollocs made builders into destroyers. They forced Ogier and humans to be like themselves. The call to blood, to death.

Well, the Shadow would see just how dangerous the Ogier could be. They *would* fight, and they *would* kill. And they would do it better than any human, Trolloc or Myrddraal could imagine.

By the fear Loial saw in the Trollocs—by their terrified eyes—they were beginning to understand.

“Light!” Galad exclaimed, falling back from the thick of the fight. *“Light!”*

The Ogier attack was terrible and glorious. The creatures fought with ears drawn back, eyes wide, broad faces flat as anvils. They seemed to transform, all placidity gone. They cut through ranks of Trollocs, hacking the beasts to the ground. The second row of Ogier, made up mostly of females, sliced up Trollocs with long knives, bringing down any who made it through the first line.

Galad had thought Trollocs fearsome with their twisted mix of human and animal features, but the Ogier disturbed him more. Trollocs were simply horrible… but Ogier were gentle, soft-spoken, kindly. Seeing them enraged, bellowing their terrible song and attacking with axes nearly as long as men were tall… Light!

Galad waved the Children back, then ducked as a Trolloc slammed into a tree nearby. Some of the Ogier were seizing wounded Trollocs by their arms and hurling them out of the way. Many of the other Ogier were blood-soaked to their waists, hacking and chopping like butchers preparing meat. Now and then, one of them fell, but unarmored though they were, their skin seemed tough.

“Light!” Trom said, moving up to Galad. “Have you ever seen anything like that?”

Galad shook his head. It was the most honest answer he could think of.

“If we had an army of those…” Trom said.

“They’re Darkfriends,” Golever said, joining them. “Shadowspawn for certain.”

“Ogier are no more Shadowspawn than I am,” Galad said dryly. “Look, they’re *slaughtering* the Trollocs.”

“Any moment now, they’ll all turn on us,” Golever said. “Watch…” He trailed off, listening to the Ogier chant their war song. One large group of Trollocs broke, fleeing back around cursing Myrddraal. The Ogier didn’t let them go. Enraged, the giant Builders chased after the Trollocs, long-handled axes chopping their legs, dropping them in sprays of blood and cries of agony.

“Well?” Trom asked.

“Maybe…” Golever said. “Maybe it’s a scheme of some kind. To gain our trust.”

“Don’t be a fool, Golever,” Trom said.

“I’m not—”

Galad held up a hand. “Gather our wounded. Let’s head toward the bridge.”

Rand let the swirling colors fade from his vision. “It is nearly time for me to go,” he said.

“To battle?” Moiraine asked.

“No, to Mat. He is in Ebou Dar.”

He had returned from Elayne’s camp to Merrilor. The conversation with Tam still bounced around in his head. *Let go.* It wasn’t nearly so easy. And yet, something had lifted from him in speaking with his father. *Let go.* There seemed a depth to Tam’s words, one far beyond the obvious.

Rand shook his head. He couldn’t afford to waste time on such thoughts. The Last Battle ... it had to claim his attention.

I have been able to draw close without drawing attention, he thought, fingering the deerhorn-hilted dagger at his belt. *It seems to be true. The Dark One can’t sense me when I carry this.*

Before he could move against the Dark One, he had to do something about the Seanchan. If what Thom said was true, Mat might be the key. The Seanchan *had* to join the Dragon’s Peace. If they did not…

“That is an expression I remember,” a soft voice said. “Consternation. You do it so well, Rand al’Thor.”

He turned toward Moiraine. Beyond her, on the table in his tent, maps that Aviendha had sent by messenger showed positions where his army could gather in the Blight.

Moiraine stepped up beside Rand. "Did you know that I used to spend hours in thought, trying to discover what that mind of yours was conjuring? It is a wonder I did not pull every hair from my head in frustration."

"I was a fool for not trusting you," Rand said.

She laughed. A soft laugh, the laugh of an Aes Sedai who was in control. "You trusted me enough. That was what made it all the more frustrating that you would not share."

Rand breathed in deeply. The air here at Merrilor was sweeter than in other places. He had coaxed the land here back to life. Grass grew. Flowers budded. "Tree stumps and men," he said to Moiraine. "The Two Rivers has both, and one is about as likely to budge as the other."

"Perhaps that is too harsh," Moiraine said. "It was not merely stubbornness that drove you; it was a will to prove to yourself, and to everyone else, that you could do this on your own." She touched his arm. "But you cannot do this on your own, can you?"

Rand shook his head. He reached up to *Callandor*; strapped on his back, touching it. The sword's final secret lay bare to him now. It was a trap, and a clever one, for this weapon was a *sa'angreal* not for just the One Power, but for the True Power as well.

He had thrown away the access key, but on his back he carried something so very tempting. The True Power, the Dark One's essence, was the sweetest thing he had ever touched. With *Callandor*; he could draw it forth in strength such as no man had ever before felt. Because *Callandor* lacked the safety measures of most other *angreal* and *sa'angreal*, there was no telling how much of the Powers it could draw.

"There it is again," Moiraine murmured. "What are you planning, Rand al'Thor, Dragon Reborn? Can you finally let go enough to tell me?" He eyed her. "Did you set this entire conversation up to pull that secret from me?"

"You think very highly of my conversational abilities."

"An answer that says nothing," Rand said.

"Yes," Moiraine said. "But might I point out that you did it first in deflecting my question?"

Rand thought back a few steps in the conversation, and realized he'd done just that. "I'm going to kill the Dark One," Rand said. "I'm not just going to seal up the Dark One, I'm going to end him."

“I thought you had grown up while I was away,” Moiraine said.

“Only Perrin grew up,” Rand said. “Mat and I have simply learned to pretend to be grown up.” He hesitated. “Mat did not learn it so well.”

“The Dark One is beyond killing,” Moiraine said.

“I think I can do it,” Rand said. “I remember what Lews Therin did, and there was a moment ... a brief moment ... It can happen, Moiraine. I’m more confident that I can do *that* than I am that I could seal the Dark One away.” That was true, though he had no real confidence that he could manage either.

Questions. So many questions. Shouldn’t he have some answers by now? “The Dark One is part of the Wheel,” Moiraine said.

“No. The Dark One is outside the Pattern,” Rand countered. “Not part of the Wheel at all.”

“Of course the Dark One is part of the Wheel, Rand,” Moiraine said. “*We* are the threads that make up the Pattern’s substance, and the Dark One affects us. You cannot kill him. That is a fool’s task.”

“I have been a fool before,” Rand said. “And I shall be one again. At times, Moiraine, my entire life—all that I’ve done—feels like a fool’s task. What is one more impossible challenge? I’ve met all the others. Perhaps I can accomplish this one too.”

She tightened her grip on his arm. “You have grown so much, but you are still just a youth, are you not?”

Rand immediately seized control of his emotions, and did not lash back at her. The surest way to be thought of as a youth was to act like one. He stood straight-backed, and spoke softly. “I have lived for four centuries,” he said. “Perhaps I am still a youth, in that all of us are, compared to the timeless age of the Wheel itself. That said, I am one of the oldest people in existence.”

Moiraine smiled. “Very nice. Does that work on the others?”

He hesitated. Then, oddly, he found himself grinning. “It worked pretty well on Cadsuane.”

Moiraine sniffed. “That one… Well, knowing her, I doubt you fooled her as well as you assume. You may have the memories of a man four centuries old, Rand al’Thor, but that does not make you ancient. Otherwise, Matrim Cauthon would be the patriarch of us all.”

“Mat? Why Mat?”

“It is nothing,” Moiraine said. “Something I am not supposed to know. You are still a wide-eyed sheepherder at heart. I would not have it any other way. Lews Therin, for all of his wisdom and power, could not do what you must. Now, if you would be kind, fetch me some tea.”

“Yes, Moiraine Sedai,” he said, immediately starting toward the teapot over the fire. He froze, then looked back at her.

She glanced at him slyly. “Merely seeing if that still worked.”

“I *never* fetched you tea,” Rand protested, walking back to her. “As I remember, I spent our last few weeks together ordering *you* around.”

“So you did,” Moiraine said. “Think about what I said regarding the Dark One. But now I ask you a different question. What will you do *now*? Why go to Ebou Dar?”

“The Seanchan,” Rand said. “I must try to bring them to our side, as I promised.”

“If I remember,” Moiraine said, “you did not promise that you would try, you promised that you would make it happen.”

“Promises to 'try’ don’t achieve much in political negotiations,” Rand said, “no matter how sincere.” He held up his hand before him, arm outstretched, fingers up, and looked out of his open tent flaps. As if he were preparing to grab the lands to the south. Scoop them up, claim them as his, protect them.

The Dragon on his arm shone, gold and crimson. “Once the Dragon, for remembrance lost.” He held up his other arm, ending at the stump near the wrist. “Twice the Dragon ... for the price he must pay.”

“What will you do if the Seanchan leader refuses again?” Moiraine asked.

He hadn’t told her that the Empress had refused him the first time. Moiraine didn’t need to be told things. She simply discovered them.

“I don’t know,” Rand said softly. “If they don’t fight, Moiraine, we will lose. If they don’t join the Dragon’s Peace, then we have nothing.”

“You spent too much time on that pact,” Moiraine said. “It distracted you from your goal. The Dragon does not bring peace, but destruction. You cannot change that with a piece of paper.”

“We shall see,” Rand said. “Thank you for your advice. Now, and always. I don’t believe I have said that enough. I owe you a debt, Moiraine.”

“Well,” she said. “I *am* still in need of a cup of tea.”

Rand looked at her, incredulous. Then he laughed and walked away to bring her some.

Moiraine held her warm cup of tea, which Rand had fetched for her before leaving. He had become ruler of so much since they had parted, and he was as humble now as when she had first found him in the Two Rivers. Maybe more so.

Humble toward me, perhaps, she thought. *He believes he can slay the Dark One. That is not the sign of a humble man.* Rand al’Thor, such an odd mixture of self-effacement and pride. Did he finally have the balance right? Despite what she had said, his action toward her today proved he was no youth, but a man.

A man could still make mistakes. Often, they were of a more dangerous sort.

“The Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills,” she murmured to herself, sipping the tea. Prepared by Rand’s hand, and not someone else’s, it was as flavorful and vibrant as it had been during better days. Not touched in the least bit by the Dark One’s shadow.

Yes, the Wheel wove as it willed. Sometimes, she wished that weaving were easier to understand.

“Everyone knows what to do?” Lan asked, turning in Mandarb’s saddle.

Andere nodded. He’d carried the word himself to the rulers, and from them it had gone to their generals and commanders. Only at the last moments had it been passed to the soldiers themselves.

There would be Darkfriends among them. There always were. It was impossible to exterminate rats from a city, no matter how many cats you brought in. The Light willing, this news would come too late for those rats to give warning to the Shadow.

“We ride,” Lan said, setting heels into Mandarb’s ribs. Andere raised his banner high, the flag of Malkier, and galloped at his side. He was joined by his ranks of Malkieri. Many of those had only a little Malkieri blood in them, and were truly Borderlanders of other nations. They still chose to ride beneath his banner, and had taken up the *hadori*.

Thousands upon thousands of horsemen rode with him, hooves shaking the soft earth. It had been a long, hard retreat for their army. The Trollocs had superior numbers and presented a serious threat of surrounding Lan’s men. Lan’s mounted army was highly mobile, but there was only so much speed you could force upon soldiers, and Trollocs could march quickly. Faster than people could, particularly with those Fades whipping them. Fortunately, the fires in the countryside were slowing the Shadow’s army. Without that, Lan’s men might not have been able to escape.

Lan crouched in the saddle as the explosions from the Dreadlords began. To his left, the Asha’man Deepe rode, tied to his saddle because of his missing leg. As a ball of fire crackled through the air and arced down toward Lan, Deepe adopted a look of concentration and thrust his hands forward. The fire exploded in the air above them.

Burning embers fell like crimson rain, trailing smoke. One hit Mandarb's neck, and Lan brushed it aside with a gauntleted hand. The horse didn’t seem to notice.

The ground here was of deep clay. The terrain consisted of rolling hills, covered with sere grass, rocky outcrops and groves of defoliated trees. The retreat followed the banks of the Mora; the river would prevent the Trollocs flanking them from the west.

Smoke bled from two distinct points on the horizon. Fal Dara and Fal Moran. The two grandest cities in Shienar, torched by their own people, along with the lands of their farms and orchards, everything that could provide even a handful of sustenance to the invading Trollocs.

Holding the cities had not been an option. That meant they had to be destroyed.

It was time to start hitting back. Lan led a charge at the center of the mass, and the Trollocs set spears against the oncoming rush of Malkieri and Shienaran heavy cavalry. Lan brought his lance down, setting it in position along Mandarb’s neck. He leaned forward in his stirrups, holding tightly with his knees, and hoped that the channelers—Lan now had fourteen, after a small reinforcement from Egwene—could do their part.

The ground ripped up before the Trollocs. The front line of Trollocs broke.

Lan chose his target, a massive boar Trolloc that was yelling at its companions as they shied away from the explosions. Lan took the creature in the neck; the lance pierced it, and Mandarb threw the Trolloc to the side while trampling one of the cowering beasts nearby. The roar of the cavalry became a crash as the riders hit hard, letting momentum and weight carry them into the thick of the Trollocs.

Once they slowed, Lan tossed the lance to Andere, who caught it deftly. Lan's guards moved in and he slipped his sword from its sheath. Woodsman Tops the Sapling. Apple Blossom on the Wind. The Trollocs made for easy targets when he was in the saddle—the Trollocs' height presented their necks, shoulders and faces at just the right level.

It was quick, brutal work. Deepe watched for attacks from the enemy Dreadlords, countering them. Andere moved up to Lan's side.

Lan's banner was a lodestone for the Shadowspawn. They began to roar and rage, and he heard two Trolloc words spoken over and over in their language. *Murdru Kar. Murdru Kar. Murdru Kar.* He laid about himself with his sword, spilling their blood, coldly, within the void.

They had taken Malkier from him twice now. They would never be able to taste his sense of defeat, his sense of loss, at leaving his homeland again, this time by choice. But by the Light, he *could* bring them close to it. His sword through their chests would do that best.

The battle descended into chaos, as so many did. The Trollocs fell into frenzy; his army had spent the last four days not engaging the beasts at all. They had only retreated, finally having gained some control over their withdrawal, enough to avoid clashes, at least, which their fires had made possible.

Four days without a conflict, now this all-out attack. That was the first piece of the plan.

"Dai Shan!" someone called. Prince Kaisel. He pointed to where the Trollocs had managed to divide Lan's guard. His banner was tipping.

Andere. The man's horse fell, pulled down as Lan urged Mandarb between two Trollocs. Prince Kaisel and a handful of other soldiers joined him.

Lan couldn't continue on horseback, lest he accidentally trample his friend. He threw himself from the saddle, hit the ground and crouched beneath a Trolloc swing. Kaisel took that beast's leg off at the knee.

Lan dashed past the falling Trolloc. He saw his banner and a body beside it. Alive or dead, Lan did not know, but there *was* a Myrddraal raising a dark blade.

Lan arrived in a rush of wind and spinning steel. He blocked the Thakan'dar blade with a swing of his own, trampling his own banner as he fought. Within the void, there was no time for thought. There was only instinct and action. There was—

There was a second Myrddraal, rising up from behind Andere's fallen horse. So, a trap. Take down the banner, draw Lan's attention.

The two Fades attacked, one from each side. The void did not shake. A sword could not feel fear, and for that moment, Lan *was* the sword. The Heron Spreads Its Wings. Slashing all around him, blocking their blades with his own, back and forth. The Myrddraal were like water, flowing, but Lan was the wind itself. He spun between their blades, knocking back the attack to the right, then the one to the left.

The Fades began cursing in fury. The one to his left rushed Lan, a sneer on its pale lips. Lan stepped to the side, then parried the creature's thrust and lopped its arm off at the elbow. He continued in a fluid stroke, his swing continuing to where he knew the other Fade would be attacking, and took its hand off at the wrist.

Both Thakan'dar blades clanged to the ground. The Fades froze, stupefied for a second. Lan cut the head of one from its neck, then twisted and drove his sword through the neck of the other. Black Pebbles on Snow. He stepped back and swiped his sword to the side to spray some of the deadly blood free of the blade. Both Fades fell, thrashing, flailing at one another, mindless, dark blood staining the ground.

A good hundred and fifty Trollocs nearby fell writhing to the ground. They'd been linked to the Fades. Lan stepped over to haul Andere out of the mud. The man looked dazed, blinking, and his arm hung at a strange angle. Lan tossed Andere over his shoulder, and kicked his banner by its staff up into his free hand.

He ran back toward Mandarb—the area around him now clear of Trollocs—and handed the banner to one of Prince Kaisel's men. "See that cleaned, then raise it." He slung Andere across the front of his saddle, mounted, and wiped his sword on his saddle blanket. The man didn't look mortally wounded.

He faintly heard Prince Kaisel behind. "By my fathers!" the man said. "I'd heard he was good, but… but *Light!*"

"This will do," Lan said, surveying the battlefield, releasing the void. "Send the signal, Deepe."

The Asha'man complied, sending a red streak of light into the air. Lan turned Mandarb and pointed his sword back toward the camp. His forces rallied around him. Their attack had always been meant to be a hit and retreat. They hadn't maintained a solid battle line. That was difficult with a cavalry charge.

His troops pulled back, and the Saldaeans and Arafellin arrived, riding in quick waves to break up the Trolloc lines and protect the retreat. Mandarb was wet with sweat; carrying two armored men was a difficult order for the horse, following a charge. Lan slowed the pace, now that they were out of direct harm.

"Deepe," Lan asked as they reached the back lines. "How is Andere?"

"He has a few broken ribs, a broken arm, and a head injury," Deepe said. "I'd be surprised if he could count to ten on his own right now, but I've seen worse. I'll Heal the head wound; the rest can wait."

Lan nodded, reining in. One of his guards—a surly man named Benish who wore a Taraboner veil, though he wore a *hadori* above it—helped take Andere off Mandarb; they held him up beside Deepe's horse. The one-legged Asha'man leaned down from the arrangement of straps that supported him in the saddle, placing his hand on Andere's head and concentrating.

The dazed look left Andere's eyes, and awareness took over. Then he started swearing.

He'll be fine, Lan thought, looking at the battlefield. The Shadowspawn were now falling back. It was near dusk.

Prince Kaisel cantered up beside Lan. "That Saldaean flag bears the red stripe of the Queen," he said. "She's riding with them again, Lan."

"She is their queen. She can do as she wishes."

"You should talk to her," Kaisel said, shaking his head. "Its not right, Lan. Other women from the Saldaean army are starting to ride with them as well."

"I've seen Saldaean women spar," Lan said, still watching the battlefield. "If I were to place a bet on a contest between one of them and a man from any army in the South, I'd bet on the Saldaean any day."

"But…"

"This war is everything or nothing. If I could round up each woman in the Borderlands and put a sword in her hands, I would. For now, I'll settle for not doing something stupid—like forbidding some trained and passionate soldiers from fighting. If you, however, decide not to exercise that prudence, you are free to tell them what you think. I promise to give you a good burial once they let me take your head down off the pole."

"I… Yes, Lord Mandragoran," Kaisel said.

Lan took out his spyglass and surveyed the field.

"Lord Mandragoran?" Kaisel said. "Do you really think this plan will work?"

"There are too many Trollocs," Lan said. "The leaders of the Dark One's armies have been breeding them for years, growing them like weeds. Trollocs eat a lot; each one requires more food than a man to keep it going.

"By now, they must have eaten the Blight out of anything that could sustain them. The Shadow expended every bit of food they could to create this army, counting on the Trollocs being able to eat the corpses of the fallen."

Sure enough, now that the battle had broken off, the Trollocs swarmed the field in their gruesome scavenging. They preferred human meat, but would eat their own fallen. Lan had spent four days running before their army, not giving them any bodies to feast upon.

They'd managed it only because of the burning of Fal Dara and Fal Moran and other cities in western Shienar. Scouring those cities for food had slowed the Trollocs, allowing Lan's army to get its feet underneath it and organize its retreat.

The Shienarans had left nothing edible in any of the nearby cities. Four days without food. The Trollocs didn't use supply lines; they ate what they came across. They'd be starving. Ravenous. Lan studied them with his spyglass. Many did not wait for the cookpots. They were far more animal than they were human.

They're far more Shadow than they are either one, Lan thought, lowering his spyglass. His plan was morbid, but the Light send it would be effective. His men would fight, and there would be casualties. Those casualties would become the bait for the real battle.

"Now," Lan whispered.

Lord Agelmar saw it, too. The horns blew, and a yellow streak of light rose into the air. Lan turned Mandarb, the horse snorting at the command. He was tired, but so was Lan. Both could stand another battle. They had to.

"Tai'shar Malkier!" Lan roared, lowering his sword and leading his force back onto the field. All five Borderlander armies converged on the fractured

Shadowspawn horde. The Trollocs had broken lines completely to fight over the corpses.

As Lan thundered toward them, he heard the Myrddraal yelling, trying to force the Trollocs back into order. It was far too late. Many of the famished beasts didn't look up until the armies were nearly upon them.

When Lan's forces hit this time, the effect was very different from before. Earlier, their attack had been slowed by the Trollocs' close ranks, and they had managed to penetrate only a dozen paces before being forced to take up swords and axes. This time, the Trollocs were spread out. Lan signaled the Shienarans to hit first; their line was so tight, one would have been hard-pressed to find an opening of more than two paces between the horses.

That left no room for the Trollocs to run or dodge. The riders trampled them in a thunder of hooves and clanking barding, skewering Trollocs on their lances, firing horsebows, laying about themselves with two-handed swords. There seemed to be a special viciousness to the Shienarans as they attacked, wearing their open-fronted helmets and armor made up of flat plates.

Lan brought his Malkieri cavalry in behind, riding crossfield behind the Shienarans to kill any Trollocs that survived the initial onslaught. Once they'd passed, the Shienarans broke to the right to gather for another pass, but the Arafellin slammed in behind them, slaying more Shadowspawn that were attempting to form up. After them came a wave of Saldaeans crossing as the Malkieri had, then the Kandori sweeping from the other direction.

Sweating—sword-arm tired—Lan prepared again. Only then did he realize that Prince Kaisel himself was carrying the banner of Malkier. The lad was young, but his heart was right. Though he was somewhat stupid about women.

Light, but we all are, in one way or another, Lan thought. Nynaeve's distant emotions in the bond comforted him. He could not sense much over the distance, but she seemed determined.

As Lan began his second sweep, the ground started exploding beneath his men. The Dreadlords had finally realized what was happening and had made their way back to the front lines. Lan directed Mandarb around a crater that erupted in the ground just before him, soil spraying across his chest. The Dreadlords' appearance was his signal to stop the sweeps; he wanted to ride in, hit hard, and ride out. To fight the Dreadlords, he'd have to commit all of his channelers, which was something he didn't want to do.

"Blood and bloody ashes!" Deepe swore as Lan rounded another explosion. "Lord Mandragoran!"

Lan looked back. Deepe was slowing his horse.

"Keep moving, man," Lan said, reining in Mandarb. He signaled for his forces to keep riding, though Prince Kaisel and Lan's battlefield guard stopped with him.

"Oh, *Light"* Deepe said, concentrating.

Lan surveyed the scene. Around them, Trollocs lay dead or dying, howling or simply whimpering. To his left, the mass of Shadowspawn was belatedly forming up. They'd have a unified line soon, and if Lan and the others didn't move, they'd find themselves alone on the field.

Deepe had his eyes on a figure standing atop what appeared to be a large siege engine; it had a flat bed, and was perhaps twenty feet tall. A group of Trollocs were heaving it forward, and it rolled on large wooden wheels.

Yes, there was a figure up there. There were several of them. Balls of fire began to fall toward the Borderlanders as they rode away, and lighting flashed from the sky. Lan suddenly felt like a target on an archery practice field.

"Deepe!"

"It's the M'Hael!" Deepe explained.

Taim had not been with the enemy army for the last week or so—but now the man had returned, it seemed. It was impossible to tell for sure because of the distance, but the way the man flung weaves in rapid succession, he seemed angry about something.

"Let's ride!" Lan yelled.

"I could take him," Deepe said. "I could—"

Lan saw a flash of light, and suddenly Mandarb reared. Lan cursed, trying to blink the afterimage from his eyes. There was something wrong with his ears, too.

Mandarb bucked and curvetted, quivering. It took a lot to shake the stallion, but a lightning bolt that close would unnerve any horse. A second flash of lightning threw Lan to the ground. He tumbled, grunting, but something—deep within—knew what to do. When he came to himself, he was already on his feet, dizzy, sword in hand. He groaned, staggering.

Hands grabbed him, hauling him up into a saddle. Prince Kaisel, face bloodied from fighting, held the reins. Lan’s guard made sure he was steady on his mount as they rode away.

He caught sight of Deepe’s corpse, mangled and lying in pieces, as they fled.

* * *

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CHAPTER 17

Older, More Weathered

“Was not fruitful, Majesty,” the voice said through Mat’s doze. Something was pricking Mat’s face. This mattress was the absolute worst he had ever slept on. He was going to thrash the innkeeper until he got his money back.

“The assassin is very difficult to follow,” that annoying voice continued. “People he passes do not remember him. If the Prince of the Ravens has information on how the creature may be tracked, I would very much like to hear it.”

Why would the innkeeper let these people into Mat’s room? He drifted toward consciousness, leaving behind a lovely dream involving Tuon and no cares in the world. He opened a bleary eye, looking up at a cloudy sky. Not an inn’s ceiling at all.

Bloody ashes, Mat thought, groaning. They had fallen asleep in the gardens. He sat up, finding himself totally bare except for the scarf around his neck. His and Tuon’s clothing was spread out beneath them. His face had been in a patch of weeds.

Tuon sat beside him, ignoring the fact that she was completely naked, speaking with a member of the Deathwatch Guard. Musenge was on one knee, head bowed, face toward the ground. But still!

“Light!” Mat said, reaching for his clothing. Tuon was sitting on his shirt, and gave him an annoyed look as he tried to yank it free.

“Honored One,” the guard said to Mat, face still down. “Greetings upon your waking.”

“Tuon, why are you just sitting there?” Mat demanded, finally retrieving his shirt from under that luscious rump.

“As my consort,” Tuon said sternly, “you may call me Fortuona or Majesty. I would hate to have you executed before you give me a child, as I am growing fond of you. Regarding this guard, he is of the Deathwatch. They are needed to watch me at all times. I have often had them with me when bathing. This is their duty, and his face is averted.”

Mat hurriedly began dressing.

She started to dress, though not quickly enough for his taste. He did not think much of a guard ogling his wife. The place where they had slept was rimmed by small blue fir trees—an oddity here in the South, perhaps cultivated because they were exotic. Though the needles were browning, they offered some measure of privacy. Beyond the firs was a ring of other trees—peaches, Mat thought, but it was hard to tell without the leaves.

He could barely hear the city waking up outside the garden, and the air smelled faintly of the fir needles. The air was warm enough that sleeping outside had not been uncomfortable, though he was glad to be back in his clothing.

A Deathwatch Guard officer approached just as Tuon finished dressing. He crunched dried fir needles, bowing low before her. "Empress, we may have caught another assassin. It is not the creature from last night, as he bears no wounds, but he was trying to sneak into the palace. We thought you might wish to see him before we begin our interrogation."

"Bring him forward," Tuon said, straightening her gown. "And send for General Karede."

The officer withdrew, passing Selucia, who stood near the pathway that led to the clearing. She walked in to stand beside Tuon. Mat put his hat on his head and went up to her other side, setting the *ashandarei* butt down in the dead grass.

Mat felt sorry for this poor fool caught sneaking into the palace. Maybe the man was an assassin, but he could just be a beggar or other fool looking for excitement. Or he could be…

…the Dragon Reborn.

Mat groaned. Yes, that was Rand they led along the path. Rand looked older, more weathered, than the last time Mat had seen him in person. Of course, he had seen the man recently in those blasted visions. Although Mat had trained himself to stop thinking of Rand to avoid those colors, he still slipped on occasion.

Anyway, seeing Rand in person was different. It had been… Light, how long *had* it been? *The last time I saw him with my own eyes was when he sent me to Salidar after Elayne.* That felt like an eternity ago. It had been before he had come to Ebou Dar, before he had seen the *gholam* for the first time. Before Tylin, before Tuon.

Mat frowned as Rand was led up to Tuon, his arms bound behind his back. She spoke with Selucia, wiggling her fingers in their handtalk. Rand did not seem the least bit worried; his face was calm. He wore a nice coat of red and black, a white shirt underneath, black trousers. No gold or jewelry, no weapon at all.

“Tuon,” Mat began. “That’s—”

Tuon turned from Selucia to see Rand. “*Damane!*” Tuon said, cutting Mat off. “Bring my *damane!* Run, Musicar! *RUN*!”

The Deathwatch Guard stumbled backward, then ran, yelling for the *damane* and for Banner-General Karede.

Rand watched the man go, nonchalant though he was bound. *You know,* Mat thought idly, *he kind of does look like a king.* Of course, Rand was mad, most likely. That would explain why he had strolled up to Tuon like this.

Either that, or Rand was just planning on killing her. Bonds did not matter one bit to a man who could channel. *Blood and ashes,* Mat thought. *How did I end up in this situation?* He had done whatever he could to avoid Rand!

Rand met Tuon’s stare. Mat took a big breath, then jumped in front of her. “Rand. Rand, here now. Let’s be calm.”

“Hello, Mat,” Rand said, voice pleasant. Light, he *was* mad! “Thank you for leading me to her.”

“Leading you…”

“What is this?” Tuon demanded.

Mat spun. “I… Really, it’s just…”

Her stare could have drilled holes in steel. “You did this,” she said to Mat. “You came, you lured me to be affectionate, then you brought him in. Is this true?”

“Don’t blame him,” Rand said. “The two of us needed to meet again. You know it is true.”

Mat stumbled out between them, raising one hand either direction. “Here now! Both of you, stop. You hear me!”

Something seized Mat, hauling him into the air. “Stop that, Rand!” he said.

“It isn’t me,” Rand said, adopting a look of concentration. “Ah. I am shielded.”

As Mat hung in the air he felt at his chest. The medallion. *Where was his medallion?*

Mat stared at Tuon. She looked ashamed for a brief moment, reaching into the pocket of her gown. She brought out something silver in her hand, perhaps intending to use the medallion as protection against Rand.

Brilliant, Mat thought, groaning. She had taken it off him while he slept, and he had not noticed. *Bloody brilliant.*

The weaves of Air set him down beside Rand; Karede had returned with a *suldam* and *damane*. All three were flushed, as if having run quickly. The *damane* had been doing the channeling.

Tuon looked over Rand and Mat, then began gesturing with handtalk at Selucia with sharp motions.

"Thanks a bundle for this," Mat muttered to Rand. "You're such a bloody good friend."

"Its good to see you too," Rand said, a hint of a smile on his lips.

"Here we go," Mat said with a sigh. "You've pulled me into trouble again. You always do this."

"I do?"

"Yes. In Rhuidean and the Waste, in the Stone of Tear… back in the Two Rivers. You do realize that I went south, instead of coming to your little party with Egwene in Merrilor, to *escape*?"

"You think you could stay away from me?" Rand asked, smiling. "You really think *it* would let you?"

"I could bloody try. No offense, Rand, but you're going to go mad and all. I figured I'd give you one less friend nearby to kill. You know, save you some trouble. What did you do to your hand, by the way?"

"What did you do to your eye?"

"A little accident with a corkscrew and thirteen angry innkeepers. The hand?"

"Lost it capturing one of the Forsaken."

"Capturing?" Mat said. "You're growing soft."

Rand snorted. "Tell me you've done better."

"I killed a *gholam,*" Mat said.

"I freed Illian from Sammael."

"I married the Empress of the Seanchan."

"Mat," Rand said, "are you *really* trying to get into a bragging contest with the Dragon Reborn?" He paused for a moment. "Besides, I cleansed *saidin.* I win."

"Ah, that's not really worth much," Mat said.

"Not worth much? It's the single most important event to happen since the Breaking."

"Bah. You and your Asha'man are already crazy," Mat said, "so what does it matter?" He glanced to the side. "You look nice, by the way. You've been taking better care of yourself lately."

"So you *do* care," Rand said.

"Of course I do," Mat grumbled, looking back at Tuon. "I mean, you have to keep yourself alive, right? Go have your little duel with the Dark One and keep us all safe? It's good to know you're looking up to it."

"That's nice to hear," Rand said, smiling. "No wisecracks about my nice coat?"

"What? Wisecracks? You aren't still sore because I teased you a little a couple of years ago?"

"Teased?" Rand said. "You spent weeks refusing to talk to me."

"Here now," Mat said. "It wasn't all that bad. I remember that part easily."

Rand shook his head, as if bemused. Bloody ungrateful was what he was. Mat had gone off to fetch Elayne, as Rand had asked, and this was the thanks he was given. Sure, Mat had been a little sidetracked after that. He had still done it, had he not?

"All right," Mat said very softly, tugging at the bonds of Air holding him. "I'll get us out of this, Rand. I'm married to her. Let me do the talking, and—"

"Daughter of Artur Hawkwing," Rand said to Tuon. "Time spins toward the end of all things. The Last Battle has begun, and the threads are being woven. Soon, my final trial will begin."

Tuon stepped forward, Selucia waving a few last finger-talk words toward her. "You will be taken to Seanchan, Dragon Reborn," Tuon said. Her voice was collected, firm.

Mat smiled. Light, but she made a good Empress. *There was no need to filch my medallion, though,* he thought. They were going to have words about that. Assuming he survived this. She would not *really* execute him, would she?

Again, he tried the invisible bonds tying him.

"Is that so?" Rand asked.

"You have delivered yourself to me," Tuon said. "It is an omen." She seemed almost regretful. "You did not truly think that I would allow you to stroll away, did you? I must take you in chains as a ruler who resisted me—as I have done to the others I found here. You pay the price of your ancestors' forgetfulness. You should have remembered your oaths."

"I see," Rand said.

You know, Mat thought, *he does a fair job of sounding like a king, too.* Light, what kind of people had Mat surrounded himself with? What had happened to the fair barmaids and carousing soldiers?

"Tell me something, Empress," Rand said. "What would you all have done if you'd returned to these shores and found Artur Hawkwing's armies still ruling? What if we hadn't forgotten our oaths, what if we had stayed true? What then?"

"We would have welcomed you as brothers," Tuon said.

"Oh?" Rand said. "And you would have bowed to the throne here? Hawkwing's throne? If his empire still stood, it would have been ruled over by his heir. Would you have tried to dominate them? Would you instead have accepted their rule over you?"

"That is not the case," Tuon said, but she seemed to find his words intriguing.

"No, it is not," Rand said.

"By your argument, you must submit to us." She smiled.

"I did not make that argument," Rand said, "but let us do so. How do you claim the right to these lands?"

"By being the only legitimate heir of Artur Hawkwing."

"And why should that matter?"

"This is his empire. He is the only one to have unified it, he is the only leader to have ruled it in glory and greatness."

"And there you are wrong," Rand said, voice growing soft. "You accept me as the Dragon Reborn?"

"You must be," Tuon said slowly, as if wary of a trap.

"Then you accept me for who I am," Rand said, voice growing loud, crisp. Like a battle horn. "*I* am Lews Therin Telamon, the Dragon. *I* ruled these lands, unified, during the Age of Legends. *I* was leader of all the armies of the Light, *I* wore the Ring of Tamyrlin. *I* stood first among the Servants, highest of the Aes Sedai, and I could summon the Nine Rods of Dominion."

Rand stepped forward. "*I* held the loyalty and fealty of all seventeen Generals of Dawn's Gate. Fortuona Athaem Devi Paendrag, my authority supersedes your own!”

“Artur Hawkwing—”

“My authority supersedes that of Hawkwing! If you claim rule by the name of he who conquered, then you must bow before my prior claim. I conquered before Hawkwing, though I needed no sword to do so. You are here on *my* land, Empress, at my sufferance!”

Thunder broke in the distance. Mat found himself shaking. Light, it was just Rand. Just Rand… was it not?

Tuon backed away, eyes wide, her lips parted. Her face was full of horror, as if she had just seen her own parents executed.

Green grass spread around Rand’s feet. The guards nearby jumped back, hands to swords, as a swath of life extended from Rand. The brown and yellow blades colored, as if paint had been poured on them, then came upright—stretching as if after long slumber.

The greenness filled the entire garden clearing. “He’s still shielded!” the *sul’dam* cried. “Honored One, he is *still shielded*!”

Mat shivered, and then noticed something. Very soft, so easy to miss.

“Are you singing?” Mat whispered to Rand.

Yes ... it was unmistakable. Rand *was* singing, under his breath, very softly. Mat tapped his foot. “I swear I’ve heard that tune somewhere, once ... Is it ‘Two Maids at the Water’s Edge’?”

“You’re not helping,” Rand whispered. “Quiet.”

Rand continued his song. The green spread to the trees, the firs strengthening their limbs. The other trees began to shoot out leaves—they were indeed peach trees—growing at great speed, life flooding into them.

The guards looked about themselves, spinning, trying to watch all of the trees at once. Selucia had cringed. Tuon remained upright, her eyes focused on Rand. Nearby, the frightened *sul’dam* and *damane* must have stopped concentrating, for the bonds holding Mat vanished.

“Do you deny my right?” Rand demanded. “Do you deny that my claim to this land precedes your own by thousands of years?”

“I…” Tuon took a deep breath and stared at him defiantly. “You broke the land, abandoned it. I can deny your right.”

Behind her, blossoms *exploded* onto the trees like fireworks, white and deep pink. The bursts of color surrounded them. Petals sprayed outward with their growth, breaking from the trees, catching in the wind and swirling through the clearing.

"I allowed you to live," Rand said to Tuon, "when I could have destroyed you in an instant. This is because you have made life better for those under your rule, though you are not without guilt for the way you have treated some. Your rule is as flimsy as paper. You hold this land together only through the strength of steel and *damane*, but your homeland burns.

"I have not come here to destroy you. I come to you now to offer you peace, Empress. I have come without armies, I have come without force. I have come because I believe that you need me, as I need you." Rand stepped forward and, remarkably, went down on one knee, bowing his head, his hand extended. "I extend my hand to you in alliance. The Last Battle is upon us. Join me, and fight."

The clearing fell still. The wind stopped blowing, the thunder stopped rumbling. Peach blossoms wafted to the now-green grass. Rand remained where he was, hand extended. Tuon stared at that hand as if at a viper.

Mat hurried forward. "Nice trick," he said under his breath to Rand. "Very nice trick." He approached Tuon, taking her by the shoulders and turning her to the side. Nearby, Selucia looked stunned. Karede was not in much better shape. They would not be any help.

"Hey, look," Mat said to her softly. "He's a good fellow. Hes rough at the corners sometimes, but you can trust his word. If he's offering you a treaty, he'll make good on it."

"That was a very impressive display," Tuon said softly. She was trembling faintly. "What *is* he?"

"Burn me if I know," Mat said. "Listen, Tuon. I grew up with Rand. I vouch for him."

"There is a darkness in that man, Matrim. I saw it when last he and I last met."

"Look at me, Tuon. Look at me."

She looked up, meeting his gaze.

"You can trust Rand al'Thor with the world itself," Mat said. "And if you can't trust him, trust me. Hes our only choice. We don't have time to take him back to Seanchan.

"I've been in the city long enough to have a little peek at your forces. If you're going to fight the Last Battle *and* recapture your homeland, you're going to need a stable base here in Altara. Take his offer. He just claimed this land. Well, make him secure your borders as they are and announce it to the others. They might listen. Take a little pressure off you. Unless, that is, you want to fight the Trollocs, the nations of this land, *and* the rebels in Seanchan at the same time."

Tuon blinked. "Our forces."

"What?"

"You called them my forces," she said. "They are *our* forces. You are one of us now, Matrim."

"Well, I guess I am at that. Listen, Tuon. You have to do this. Please." She turned, looking at Rand, kneeling in the middle of a pattern of peach blossoms that seemed to have circled out from him. Not a one had fallen on him.

"What is your offer?" Tuon asked.

"Peace," Rand said, standing, hand still out. "Peace for a hundred years. Longer, if I can make it so. I have persuaded the other rulers to sign a treaty and work together to fight the armies of the Shadow."

"I would have my borders secured," Tuon said.

"Altara and Amadicia shall be yours."

"Tarabon and Almoth Plain as well," Tuon said. "I hold them now. I will not be forced from them by your treaty. You wish peace? You will give me this."

"Tarabon and half of Almoth Plain," Rand said. "The half you already control."

"I would have the all of the women this side of the Aryth Ocean who can channel as *damane*," Tuon said.

"Do not strain your luck, Empress," Rand said dryly. "I ... I will allow you to do what you will in Seanchan, but I *will* require you to relinquish any *damane* you have taken while in this land."

"Then we have no agreement," Tuon said.

Mat held his breath.

Rand hesitated, hand lowering. "The fate of the world itself could hang on this, Fortuona. Please."

"If it is that important," she said firmly, "you can agree to my demand. Our property is our own. You wish a treaty? Then you will get it with this clause: We keep the *damane* we already have. In exchange, I will allow you to leave in freedom."

Rand grimaced. "You're as bad as one of the Sea Folk."

"I should hope I'm worse," Tuon said, no emotion in her voice. "The world is your charge, Dragon, not mine. I care for my empire. I will greatly need those *damane*. Choose now. As I believe you said, your time is short."

Rand's expression darkened; then he thrust his hand outward. "Let it be done. Light be merciful, let it be done. I will carry this weight too. You may keep the *damane* you already have, but you shall not take any from among my allies while we fight the Last Battle. Taking any afterward who are not in your own land will be seen as breaking the treaty and attacking the other nations."

Tuon stepped forward, then took Rand's hand in her own. Mat let out his breath.

"I have documents for you to review and sign," Rand said.

"Selucia will take them," Tuon said. "Matrim, with me. We must prepare the Empire for war." Tuon walked away down the path, her step controlled, though Mat suspected that she wanted to be away from Rand as quickly as possible. He understood the sentiment.

He followed, but stopped beside Rand. "Seems you have a bit of the Dark One's luck yourself," he muttered to Rand. "I can't believe that worked."

"Honestly?" Rand said softly. "I can't either. Thank you for the good word."

"Sure," Mat said. "By the way, *I* saved Moiraine. Chew on that as you try to decide which of the two of us is winning."

Mat followed Tuon, and behind him rose the laughter of the Dragon Reborn.

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CHAPTER 18

To Feel Wasted

Gawyn stood on a field near the area where the Aes Sedai had first fought the Trollocs. They'd come off the hills, and had moved deeper onto the Kandor plain. They continued to stem the Trolloc advances, and they even managed to push back the enemy's main forces a few hundred paces. All in all, this battle was going better than could have been expected.

They'd fought here for a week on this open, unnamed Kandori field. This place had been churned and torn as if in preparation for planting. There were so many bodies here—almost all Shadowspawn—that even Trolloc appetites couldn't consume them all.

Gawyn carried a sword in one hand, shield in the other, stationed in front of Egwene's horse. His job was to bring down the Trollocs that came through the Aes Sedai attacks. He preferred to fight two-handed, but against Trollocs, he needed that shield. Some of the others thought him a fool for using the sword. They preferred pikes or halberds, anything to keep the Trollocs at a distance.

You couldn't really *duel* with a pike, though; as a pikeman, you were like a brick in a larger wall. You weren't so much a soldier as a barrier. A halberd was better—at least it had a blade that required some skill to use—but nothing gave the same feel as a sword. When Gawyn fought with the sword, he controlled the fight.

A Trolloc came for him, snorting, face bearing the melded features of a ram and a man. This one was more human than most, including a sickeningly human mouth with bloodied teeth. The thing brandished a mace that bore the Flame of Tar Valon on its haft, stolen from a fallen member of the Tower Guard. Though it was a two-handed weapon, the creature wielded it easily in one.

Gawyn dodged to the side, then brought his shield up and to the right under the expected blow. The shield shook with repeated impacts. One, two, three. Standard Trolloc berserking—hit hard, hit fast and assume that the opponent would break.

Many did. They would trip, or their arms would go numb from the pounding. That was the value of pikewalls or halberd lines. Bryne used both, and a newly improvised half-spear, half-halberd line. Gawyn had read of its like in history books. Bryne's army used them for hamstringing Trollocs. The pike lines would keep them back, and then the halberds would reach through and slice their legs.

Gawyn ducked to the side, and the Trolloc wasn't ready for his burst of speed. The thing turned, too slow, as Gawyn separated its hand from its wrist, using Whirlwind on the Mountain. As it screamed, Gawyn spun about, ramming his sword into the stomach of another Trolloc that had plowed through the Aes Sedai defense.

He whipped his sword out of that body and sheathed it in the first Trollocs neck. The dead beast slid off his blade. That was four that Gawyn had killed today. He carefully wiped his sword on the bloody cloth he wore tied at his waist.

He checked on Egwene. Mounted, she used the One Power to rip apart Trollocs in droves. The Aes Sedai used a rotation, with only a small portion of them on the field at a time. Using so few Aes Sedai at a time required the soldiers to take the brunt of the fighting, but the Aes Sedai always came to the battle rested. Their job was to blast apart the groups of Trollocs, shattering lines and letting the soldiers work on the scattered remnants.

With the Aes Sedai keeping the Trollocs from solid battle formations, the fight—though grueling—was proceeding well. They hadn't had to fall back since leaving the hills behind, and had effectively stalled the Trolloc advance for a week here.

Silviana sat atop a roan gelding beside Egwene, and did her best to keep the Trollocs from coming too close. The ground was ripped and furrowed just in front of them, Silviana's attacks having torn it asunder, leaving trenchlike depressions all over the field. Despite that, the occasional Trolloc would crawl through the mire and come for Gawyn.

Gawyn saw movement in the nearest trench and strode forward. A wolf-featured Trolloc crouched inside. It snarled at him, scrambling up.

Water Flows Downhill.

The Trolloc fell back into the trench, and Gawyn wiped his blade on the bloody rag. Five. Not bad for one of his two-hour shifts. Often the Aes

Sedai were able to repel the Trollocs, and he just ended up standing beside Egwene. Of course, today she was accompanied by Silviana—they always came to the battlefront in pairs—and Gawyn was half-convinced the Keeper let a few through now and then just to keep him working.

A sudden series of explosions nearby drove him backward, and he glanced over his shoulder. Their relief had arrived. Gawyn raised his sword to Sleete as the man took up position with Piava Sedai's Warder to guard the area.

Gawyn joined Egwene and Silviana as they left the battlefield. He could feel Egwene’s growing exhaustion. She was pushing herself too hard, insisting on joining too many shifts.

They made their way across the trampled grass, passing a group of Illianer Companions charging into the fray. Gawyn didn’t have a good enough view of the battle as a whole to know where specifically they were needed. He watched them go with a hint of envy.

He knew Egwene needed him. Now more than ever. Fades slipped into camp at night, bringing Thakan’dar-forged blades to take the lives of Aes Sedai. Gawyn kept watch personally when Egwene slept, relying on her to wash his fatigue away when it overwhelmed him. He slept when she was in conference with the Hall of the Tower.

He insisted that she sleep in a different tent each night. Once in a while, he convinced her to Travel to Mayene and the beds in the palace. She hadn’t done that in a few days. His arguments that she should check on the Yellows, and inspect the Healing work, were growing thin. Rosil Sedai had things in hand there.

Gawyn and the two women continued on into the camp. Some soldiers bowed, the ones who were not currently on duty, while others hastened toward the battlefield. Gawyn eyed some of these. Too young, too new.

Others were Dragonsworn, and who knew what to make of them? There were Aiel among the Dragonsworn, which made sense to him, since all Aiel seemed basically Dragonsworn to him. But there were also Aes Sedai among the Dragonsworn ranks. He didn’t think much of their choice.

Gawyn shook his head and continued on. Their camp was enormous, though it contained virtually no camp followers. Food was brought in daily through gateways in wagons—some pulled by those unreliable metal machines from Cairhien. When those wagons left, they carried away clothing for washing, weapons to be repaired and boots to be mended.

It made for a very efficient camp; one not heavily populated, however, as almost everyone spent long hours on the battlefield fighting. Everyone but Gawyn.

He knew he was needed, and that what he did was important, but he couldn't help feeling wasted. He was one of the finest swordsmen in the army, and he stood on the battlefield for a few hours a day, killing only the occasional Trolloc stupid enough to charge two Aes Sedai. What Gawyn did was more like putting them out of their misery than fighting them.

Egwene nodded farewell to Silviana, then turned her horse toward the command tent.

"Egwene . . " Gawyn said.

"I only want to check on things," she said calmly. "Elayne was supposed to have sent new orders."

"You need sleep."

"It seems that all I do these days is sleep."

"When you fight on the battlefield, you are easily worth a thousand soldiers," Gawyn said. "If sleeping twenty-two hours a day were required to keep you in good enough shape to protect the men for two, I'd suggest you do it. Fortunately, that isn't required—and neither is it required that you run yourself as hard as you do."

He could feel her annoyance through the bond, but she snuffed it out. "You are right, of course." She eyed him. "And you needn't feel surprised to hear me admit it."

"I wasn't surprised," Gawyn said.

"I can feel your emotions, Gawyn."

"That was from something else entirely," he said. "I remembered something Sleete said a few days back, a joke I didn't understand until now." He looked at her innocently.

That, finally, earned a smile. A hint of one, but that was enough. She didn't smile much these days. Few of them did.

"In addition," he said, taking her reins and helping her dismount as they reached the command tent, "I'd never given much thought to the fact that a Warder can, of course, ignore the Three Oaths. I wonder how often sisters have found that convenient?"

"I hope not too often," Egwene said. A very diplomatic answer. Inside the command tent, they found Gareth Bryne looking down through his now customary gateway; it was being maintained by a mousy Gray whom

Gawyn didn’t know. Bryne stepped to his map-littered desk, where Siuan was attempting to bring order. He made a few notes on a map, nodding to himself, then looked to see who had entered.

“Mother,” Bryne said, and took her hand to kiss her ring.

“The battle seems to be going well,” Egwene said, nodding to Siuan. “We have held here well. You have plans to push forward, it seems?”

“We can’t loiter here forever, Mother,” Bryne said. “Queen Elayne has asked me to consider an advance farther into Kandor, and I think she is wise to do so. I worry that the Trollocs will pull back into the hills and brace themselves. You notice how they’ve been pulling more of the bodies off the field each night?”

“Yes.”

Gawyn could sense her displeasure; she wished the Aes Sedai had the strength to burn the Trolloc carcasses with the One Power each day.

“They’re gathering food,” Bryne said. “They might decide to move eastward and try to get around us. We need to keep them engaged here, which might mean pushing into those hills. It would be costly, normally, but now…” He shook his head, walking over and looking down through his gateway onto the front lines. “Your Aes Sedai dominate this battlefield, Mother. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“There is a reason,” she replied, “that the Shadow did everything in its power to bring down the White Tower. It knew. The White Tower has the ability to rule this war.”

“We’ll need to watch for Dreadlords,” Siuan said, shuffling through papers. Scouting reports, Gawyn suspected. He knew little of Siuan Sanche, despite having spared her life, but Egwene commonly spoke of the woman’s greed for information.

“Yes,” Egwene said. “They will come.”

“The Black Tower,” Bryne said, frowning. “Do you trust the word from Lord Mandragoran?”

“With my life,” Egwene said.

“Asha’man fighting for the enemy. Why wouldn’t the Dragon Reborn have done something? Light, if all of the remaining Asha’man side with the Shadow…”

Egwene shook her head. “Bryne, I want you to saddle up riders and send them to the area outside the Black Tower where gateways can still be made. Send them, riding hard, to the sisters still camped outside the Black Tower.”

“You want them to attack?” Gawyn asked, perking up.

“No. They are to retreat back as far as it takes to make gateways, and then they are to join us here. We can’t afford any further delays. I want them here.”

She tapped the table with one finger. “Taim and his Dreadlords *will* come. They have stayed away from this battlefield, instead focusing on Lord Mandragoran. That lets them dominate their battlefield as we have this one. I will choose more sisters to send to the Borderlander army. We will have to confront them eventually.”

Gawyn said nothing, but drew his lips tight. Fewer sisters here meant more work for Egwene and the others.

And now, Egwene said, “I need to…” She trailed off, seeing Gawyn’s expression. “I suppose I need to sleep. If I am needed, send to… Light, I don’t know where I’m sleeping today. Gawyn?”

“I have you in Maerin Sedai’s tent. She’s on duty in the rotation after this, so that should give you some hours of uninterrupted sleep.”

“Unless I’m needed,” Egwene reminded him. She walked toward the tent flaps.

“Of course,” Gawyn said, following her out, but shaking his head toward Bryne and Siuan. Bryne smiled back, nodding. On a battlefield, there was little that would absolutely require the Amyrlin’s attention. The Hall of the Tower had been given direct oversight of their armies.

Outside, Egwene sighed, closing her eyes. He put his arm around her, and let her slump against him. The moment lasted but a few seconds before she pulled back, standing up straight and putting on the face of the Amyrlin. *So young,* he thought, *to have so much required of her.*

Of course, she wasn’t much younger than al’Thor himself. Gawyn was pleased, and a little surprised, that thinking of the man did not provoke any anger. Al’Thor would fight his fight. Really, what the man did was none of Gawyn’s business.

Gawyn led Egwene to the Green Ajah section of camp, the several Warders at the perimeter greeting them with nods of respect. Maerin Sedai had a large tent. Most of the Aes Sedai had been allowed to bring what housing and furniture they wished, so long as they could make their own gateway for it and use their own Warders to carry it. If the army had to move quickly, such things would be abandoned. Many Aes Sedai had chosen to bring very little, but others… well, they were not accustomed to austerity. Maerin was one of those. Few had brought as much as she.

Leilwin and Bayle Domon waited outside the tent. They had been the ones to inform Maerin Sedai that her tent was being borrowed, and that she wasn't to tell anyone that Egwene was the one using it. The secret could be discovered if anyone asked around—they hadn't hidden themselves while walking here—but at the same time, someone asking where the Amyrlin was sleeping would draw attention. It was the best protection Gawyn could arrange, since Egwene was unwilling to Travel each day to sleep.

Egwene's emotions immediately turned sour when she saw Leilwin.

"You did say you wanted to keep her close," Gawyn said softly.

"I don't like her knowing where I sleep. If their assassins *do* come looking for me in camp, she might be the one to lead them to me."

Gawyn fought down the instinct to argue. Egwene was a cunning, insightful woman—but she had a blind spot regarding anything Seanchan. He, on the other hand, found himself trusting Leilwin. She seemed to be the type who dealt straight with people.

"I'll keep an eye on her," he said.

Egwene composed herself with a breath, then walked to the tent and passed Leilwin without saying a word. Gawyn didn't follow her inside.

"The Amyrlin seems intent on not letting me provide service," Leilwin said to Gawyn in that telltale Seanchan drawl.

"She doesn't trust you," Gawyn said frankly.

"Is one's oath worth so little on this side of the ocean?" Leilwin said. "I swore an oath to her that none would break, not even a Muyami!"

"A Darkfriend will break any oath."

The woman eyed him coolly. "I begin to think she assumes all Seanchan to be Darkfriends."

Gawyn shrugged. "You beat her and imprisoned her, making her into an animal to be led by a collar."

"*I* did not," Leilwin said. "If one baker made you foul bread, would you assume all of them seek to poison you? Bah. Do not argue. There is no point. If I cannot serve her, then I will serve you. Have you eaten today, Warder?"

Gawyn hesitated. When *had* he last had something to eat? This morning… no, he'd been too eager for the fight. His stomach grumbled loudly.

“I know you will not leave her,” Leilwin said, “particularly under the watch of a *Seanchan*. Come, Bayle. Let us fetch this fool some food so that he does not faint if assassins do come.” She stalked off, her large Illianer husband following. The fellow shot a glare over his shoulder that could have cured leather.

Gawyn sighed and settled down on the ground. From his pocket, he pulled three black rings; he selected one, then shoved the others back into his pocket.

Talk of assassins always made him think of the rings, which he’d taken off the Seanchan who *had* come to kill Egwene. The rings were *ter’angreal*. They were the means by which those Bloodknives had moved quickly and blended into shadows.

He held up the ring toward the light. It didn’t look like any *ter’angreal* he had seen, but an object of the Power could look like anything. The rings were of some heavy black stone he did not recognize. The outside was carved like thorns, though the inside surface—the side that touched the skin—was smooth.

He turned the ring over in his fingers. He knew that he should go to Egwene with it. He also knew how the White Tower treated *ter’angreal*. They locked the objects away, afraid to experiment with them. But this was the Last Battle. If there was ever a time to take risks…

You decided to stand in Egwene’s shadow, Gawyn, he thought. *You decided you would protect her, do what she needed of you.* She was winning this war, she and the Aes Sedai. Would he let himself grow as jealous of her as he had been of al’Thor?

“Is that what I believe it to be?”

Gawyn snapped his head up, fist closing around the ring. Leilwin and Bayle Domon had been to the mess tent and returned with a bowl for him. From the smell of it, the meal was barley stew again. The cooks used so much pepper it was almost sickening. Gawyn suspected they did so because the black flakes hid the bits of weevil.

I can’t act like I’m doing something suspicious, he thought immediately. *I can’t let her go to Egwene.*

“This?” he asked, holding up the ring. “It’s one of the rings we recovered from the Seanchan assassins who tried to kill Egwene. We assume it’s a *ter’angreal* of some sort, though it’s not one the White Tower has ever heard of.”

Leilwin hissed softly. “Those are to be bestowed only by the Empress, may she—” She cut herself off and took a deep breath. “Only one appointed as a Bloodknife, one who has given their life to the Empress, is allowed to wear such a ring. For you to put one on would be very, very wrong.”

“Fortunately,” Gawyn said, “I’m not wearing it.”

“The rings are dangerous,” Leilwin said. “I do not know much of them, but they are said to kill those who use them. Do not let your blood touch the ring, or you will activate it, and that could be deadly, Warder.” She handed him the bowl of stew, then strode away.

Domon didn’t follow her. The Illianer scratched at his short beard. “She do not always be the most accommodating of women, my wife,” he said to Gawyn. “But she do be strong and wise. You would do well to listen to her.”

Gawyn pocketed the ring. “Egwene would never allow me to wear it in the first place.” That was true. If she knew about it. “Tell your wife that I appreciate the warning. I should warn you that the subject of the assassins is still a very sore subject for the Amyrlin. I’d suggest avoiding the topic of the Bloodknives, or their *ter’angreal*.”

Domon nodded and then went after Leilwin. Gawyn felt only a small prick of shame at the deception. He hadn’t said anything untrue. He just didn’t want Egwene asking any awkward questions.

That ring, and its brothers, represented something. They weren’t the way of the Warder. Standing beside Egwene, watching for danger to her… that was the way of the Warder. He would make a difference on the battlefield by serving her, not by riding out like some hero.

He told himself that time and time again as he ate his stew. By the time he was done, he was nearly certain he believed it.

He still didn’t tell Egwene about the rings.

Rand remembered the first time he’d seen a Trolloc. Not when they had attacked his farm in the Two Rivers. The *true* first time he’d seen them. During the last Age.

There will come a time when they no longer exist, he thought, weaving Fire and Air, creating an explosive wall of flames that roared to life in the middle of a pack of Trollocs. Nearby, men of Perrin’s Wolf Guard raised weapons in thanks. Rand nodded back. He wore the face of Jur Grady in this fight, for now.

Once Trollocs had not scourged the land. They could return to that state. If Rand killed the Dark One, would it happen immediately?

The flames of his fire wall brought sweat on his forehead. He drew carefully on the fat-man *angreal*—he couldn't afford to seem *too* powerful—and struck down another group of Trollocs here on the battlefield just west of the River Alguenya. Elayne's forces had crossed the Erinin and the countryside to the east, and were waiting for their bridges across the Alguenya to be constructed. These were almost completed, but meanwhile a vanguard of Trollocs had caught up with them, and Elayne's army had formed up in defensive positions to hold them off until they could cross the river.

Rand was happy to help. The real Jur Grady rested back in his camp in Kandor, worn out from Healing. A convenient face that Rand could wear and not draw the attention of the Forsaken.

The Trolloc screams were satisfying as they burned. He had loved that sound, near the end of the War of Power. It had always made him feel as if he were *doing* something.

He hadn't known what Trollocs were the first time he'd seen them. Oh, he'd known of Aginor's experiments. Lews Therin had named him a madman on more than one occasion. He hadn't understood; so many of them hadn't. Aginor had loved his projects far too much. Lews Therin had made the mistake of assuming that Aginor, like Semirhage, enjoyed the torture for its own sake.

And then the Shadowspawn had come.

The monsters continued burning, limbs twitching.

Still, Rand worried that these *things* might be humans reborn. Aginor had used people to create the Trollocs and Myrddraal. Was this the fate of some? To be reborn as twisted creations such as this? The idea sickened him.

He checked the sky. The clouds had begun to withdraw, as they did near him. He could force them to not do so, but... no. Men needed the Light, and he could not fight here too long, lest it become obvious that one of the Asha'man was too strong for the face he wore.

Rand let the light come.

All across the battlefield near the river, people glanced toward the sky as sunlight fell on them, the dark clouds pulling back.

No more hiding, Rand thought, removing his Mask of Mirrors and raising his hand in a fist above his head. He wove Air, Fire and Water, creating a column of light extending from himself high into the sky. Soldiers across the battlefield cheered.

He would not bring down the traps the Dark One had waiting for him. He moved through a gateway back to Merrilor. He never stayed long at a battlefront, but he always revealed himself before he left. He let the clouds break above, proving he had been there, then withdrew.

Min waited for him at the Merrilor Traveling ground. He looked behind himself as his gateway closed, leaving the people to fight without him. Min placed a hand on his arm. His Maiden guards waited here; they reluctantly allowed him to fight alone as they knew that their presence would give him away.

“You look sad,” Min said softly.

A hot breeze blew from somewhere north. Nearby soldiers saluted him. Most of what he had here were Domani, Tairens and Aiel. The assault force, led by Rodel Ituralde and King Darlin, that would try to hold the valley of Thakan’dar while Rand wrestled with the Dark One.

The time had almost arrived for that. The Shadow had seen him fighting on all fronts. He had joined Lan’s fighting, Egwene’s fighting and Elayne’s in turn. By now the Shadow had committed most of its armies to the fighting in the south. The time for Rand to strike Shayol Ghul was at hand.

He looked to Min. “Moiraine calls me a fool for these attacks. She says that even a small risk to me is not worth what I accomplish.”

“Moiraine is probably right,” Min said. “She often is. But I prefer you as the person who would do this. *That* is the person who can defeat the Dark One: the man who cannot sit and plan while others die.”

Rand put his arm around her waist. Light, what would he have done without her? *I'd have fallen,* he thought. *During the dark months ... I'd have fallen for certain.*

Over Min’s shoulder, Rand saw a gray-haired woman approaching. And behind her, a smaller figure in blue stopped and pointedly turned the other way. Cadsuane and Moiraine gave one another wide berth in the camp. He thought he caught a hint of a glare in Moiraine’s eyes when she saw that Cadsuane had spotted Rand first.

Cadsuane came up to him, then walked around him, looking him up and down. She nodded to herself several times.

“Trying to decide if I’m up to the task?” Rand said to Cadsuane, keeping emotions—in this case, annoyance—from his voice.

“I never wondered,” Cadsuane said. “Even before I found you were reborn, I never wondered if I would be able to make you into the man you needed to be. Wondering, in that manner at least, is for fools. Are you a fool, Rand al’Thor?”

“An impossible question,” Min replied. “If he says that he is, then a fool he becomes. If he says that he is not, then he implies he does not seek further wisdom.”

“Phaw. You’ve been reading too much, child.” Cadsuane seemed fond as she said it. She turned to Rand. “I hope you give her something nice.”

“What do you mean?” Rand asked.

“You’ve been giving things to people,” Cadsuane said, “in preparation for death. It’s common for the elderly or for men riding into a battle they don’t think they can win. A sword for your father, a *ter’angreal* for the Queen of Andor, a crown for Lan Mandragoran, jewelry for the Aiel girl, and for this one.” She nodded at Min.

Rand stiffened. He’d known what he was doing, on some level, but to hear it explained was disconcerting.

Min’s expression darkened. Her grip on him tightened.

“Walk with me,” Cadsuane said. “Just you and me, Lord Dragon.” She glanced at him. “If you will.”

Min looked to Rand, but he patted her on the shoulder and nodded. “I’ll meet you at the tent.”

She sighed, but retreated. Cadsuane had already started on the path. Rand had to jog a few steps to catch up. She probably enjoyed seeing that.

“Moiraine Sedai grows restless with your delays,” Cadsuane said.

“And what are your thoughts?”

“I think she has a portion of wisdom to her. However, I do not find your plan to be complete idiocy. You must not delay much longer, however.”

He purposely did not say when he would give the order to attack Shayol Ghul. He wanted everyone guessing. If nobody around him knew when he would strike, then chances were good the Dark One wouldn’t know either.

“Regardless,” Cadsuane said, “I am not here to speak about your delays. I feel that Moiraine Sedai has your… education in that matter well in hand. Something else worries me far more.”

“And that is?”

“That you expect to die. That you are giving so much away. That you do not even seek to live.”

Rand took a deep breath. Behind, a group of Maidens trailed him. He passed the Windfinders in their small camp, huddled and speaking over the Bowl of Winds. They looked toward him and Cadsuane with placid faces.

“Leave me go to my fate, Cadsuane,” Rand said. “I have embraced death. I will take it when it comes.”

“I am pleased at that,” she said, “and do not think—for a moment— that I would not trade your life for the world.”

“You’ve made that obvious from the start,” Rand said. “So why worry now? This fight will claim me. So it must be.”

“You must not assume that you will die,” Cadsuane said. “Even if it is nearly inevitable, you must not take it as *completely* inevitable.”

“Elayne said much the same thing.”

“Then she has spoken wisdom at least once in her life. A better average than I had assumed of that one.”

Rand refused to rise to that comment, and Cadsuane let slip a smile. She was pleased at how he controlled himself now. That was why she tested him. Would the tests never end?

No, he thought. *Not until the final one. The one that matters most.*

Cadsuane stopped in the path, causing him to stop as well. “Do you have a gift for me as well?”

“I am giving them to those I care about.”

That actually made her smile more deeply. “Our interactions have not always been smooth, Rand al’Thor.”

“That would be one way to say it.”

“However,” she continued, eyeing him, “I will have you know that I am pleased. You have turned out well.”

“So I have your permission to save the world?”

“Yes!” She looked upward, where the dark clouds boiled. They began to split at his presence, as he did not try to mask it or keep them back.

“Yes,” Cadsuane repeated, “you have my permission. So long as you do it soon. That darkness grows.”

As if in concert with her words, the ground rumbled. It did that more and more lately. The camp shook, and men stumbled, wary.

“There will be Forsaken,” Rand said. “Once I enter. Someone will need to face them. I intend to ask Aviendha to lead the resistance against them.

She could use your aid."

Cadsuane nodded. "I will do my part."

"Bring Alivia," Rand said. "She is strong, but I worry about putting her with others. She does not understand limits in the way that she should." Cadsuane nodded again, and from the look in her eyes, he wondered if she'd already planned to do just that. "And the Black Tower?"

Rand set his jaw. The Black Tower was a trap. He *knew* it was a trap. Taim wanted to lure Rand into a place where he couldn't escape through a gateway.

"I sent Perrin to help."

"And your determination to go yourself?"

I have to help them. Somehow. I let Taim gather them. I can't just leave them to him…

"You still aren't certain," Cadsuane said, dissatisfied. "You'd risk yourself, you'd risk us all, stepping into a trap."

"I . . "

"They're free." Cadsuane turned to walk away. "Taim and his men have been cast out of the Black Tower."

"What?" Rand demanded, taking her by the arm.

"Your men there freed themselves," Cadsuane said. "Though, from what I've been told, they took a beating doing it. Few know it. Queen Elayne might not be able to use them in battle for some time. I don't know the details."

"They freed themselves?" Rand said.

"Yes."

They did it. Or Perrin did.

Rand exulted, but a wave of guilt slammed against him. How many had been lost? Could he have saved them, if he'd gone? He'd known for days now of their predicament, and yet he'd left them, obeying Moiraine's insistent counsel that this was a trap he could not afford to spring.

And now they'd escaped it.

"I wish that I'd been able to draw an answer out of you," Cadsuane said, "about what you intended to do there." She sighed, then shook her head. "You have cracks in you, Rand al'Thor, but you'll have to do."

She left him.

"Deepe was a good man," Antail said. "He survived the fall of Maradon. He was on the wall when it blew, but he lived and kept fighting. The Dreadlords came for him eventually, sending an explosion to finish the job. Deepe spent the last moments throwing weaves at them. He died well."

The Malkieri soldiers raised cups toward Antail, saluting the fallen. Lan raised his own cup, though he stood just outside the ring of men around the fire. He wished Deepe had followed orders. He shook his head, downing his wine. Though it was night, Lan's men were on rotation to be awake in case of an attack.

Lan turned his cup between two fingers, thinking of Deepe again. He found he couldn't drum up anger at the man. Deepe had wanted to kill one of the Shadow's most dangerous channelers. Lan couldn't say he would turn down a similar opportunity, if it were given him.

The men continued their toasts to the fallen. It had become a tradition every evening, and had spread among all of the Borderlander camps. Lan found it encouraging that the men here were starting to treat Antail and Narishma as fellows. The Asha'man were aloof, but Deepe's death had forged a link between the Asha'man and the ordinary soldiers. Now they'd all paid the butcher's bill. The men had seen Antail grieving, and had invited him to make a toast.

Lan stepped away from the fire and walked through the camp, stopping by the horselines to check on Mandarb. The stallion was holding up well, though he bore a large wound on his left flank where his coat would never grow back; it seemed to be healing well. The grooms still spoke in hushed tones about how the wounded horse had appeared out of the night following the fight where Deepe had died. Many riders had been killed or unhorsed in the fighting that day. Very few horses had escaped the Trollocs and made their way back to camp.

Lan patted Mandarb's neck. "We'll rest soon, my friend," he said softly. "I promise."

Mandarb snorted in the darkness, and nearby, several of the other horses nickered.

"We'll make a home," Lan said. "The Shadow defeated, Nynaeve and I will reclaim Malkier. We'll make the fields bloom again, cleanse the lakes. Green pastures. No more Trollocs to fight. Children to ride on your back, old friend. You can spend your days in peace, eating apples and having your pick of mares."

It had been a very long time since Lan had thought of the future with anything resembling hope. Strange to find it now, in this place, in this war. He was a hard man. At times, he felt he had more in common with the rocks and the sand than he did with the men who laughed together beside the fire.

That was what he'd made of himself. It was the person he'd needed to be, a person who could someday journey toward Malkier and uphold the honor of his family. Rand al'Thor had begun to crack that shell, and then Nynaeve's love had ripped it apart completely.

I wonder if Rand ever knew, Lan thought, taking out the currycomb and working on Mandarb's coat. Lan knew what it was like to be chosen, from childhood, to die. He knew what it was like to be pointed toward the Blight and told he would sacrifice his life there. Light, but he did. Rand al'Thor would probably never know how similar the two of them were.

Lan brushed Mandarb for a time, though he was bone tired. Perhaps he should have slept. Nynaeve would have told him to sleep. He played out the conversation in his head, allowing himself a smile. She'd have won, explaining that a general needed sleep and that there were plenty of grooms to care for the horses.

But Nynaeve wasn't there. He kept brushing.

Someone approached the horselines. Lan heard the footsteps long before the person arrived, of course. Lord Baldhere retrieved a brush from the groom station, nodding to one of the guards there, and walked toward his own horse. Only then did he notice Lan.

"Lord Mandragoran?" he said.

"Lord Baldhere," Lan said, nodding toward the Kandori. Queen Ethenielle's Swordbearer was slender, with streaks of white in his otherwise black hair. Though Baldhere was not one of the great captains, he was a fine commander, and had served Kandor well since his king's death. Many had assumed that the Queen would marry Baldhere. That, of course, was foolish; Ethenielle looked at him as she would a brother. Besides, anyone who paid attention would know that Baldhere clearly preferred men to women.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Dai Shan," Baldhere said. "I had not realized that anyone else would be here." He moved to withdraw.

"I was nearly done," Lan said. "Do not let me stop you."

"The grooms do well enough," Baldhere said. "I wasn't here to check on their work. I have found, at times, that doing something simple and familiar helps me think.”

“You’re not the only one to have noticed that,” Lan said, continuing to brush Mandarb.

Baldhere chuckled, then fell silent for a moment. Finally, he spoke. “Dai Shan,” he said, “are you worried about Lord Agelmar?”

“In what regard?”

“I worry that he’s pushing himself too hard,” Baldhere said. “Some of the choices he is making… they confuse me. It’s not that his battle decisions are *bad*. They simply strike me as too aggressive.”

“It is war. I don’t know that one can be too aggressive in defeating one’s enemy.”

Baldhere fell quiet for a time. “Of course. But did you notice the loss of Lord Yokata’s two cavalry squadrons?”

“That was unfortunate, but mistakes do happen.”

“This isn’t one that Lord Agelmar should have made. He’s been in situations like this before, Dai Shan. He should have seen.”

It had happened during a recent raid against the Trollocs. The Asha’man had been setting fire to Fal Eisen and the surrounding countryside. At Agelmar’s orders, Yokata had taken his cavalry in a swing around a large hill to attack the right flank of the Trolloc army advancing on the Asha’man. Using a classic pincer movement, Agelmar was to send in more cavalry against the enemy’s left flank, and the Asha’man would turn to meet the Trollocs head-on.

But the Shadow’s leaders had seen through the maneuver. Before Agelmar and the Asha’man could act, a large contingent of Trollocs had come over the hill to hit Yokata’s own right flank, while the remainder hit Yokata head-on, enveloping his cavalry.

The cavalry had been killed to the last man. Immediately after, the Trollocs went after the Asha’man, who had barely been able to save themselves.

“He is tired, Dai Shan,” Baldhere said. “I *know* Agelmar. He would never have made a mistake like that if he were awake and alert.”

“Baldhere, anyone could have made a mistake like that.”

“Lord Agelmar is one of the great captains. He should see the battle differently than ordinary men do.”

“Are you certain you aren’t expecting too much of him?” Lan asked. “Agelmar is just a man. We all are, at the end of the day.”

“I… Perhaps you are right,” Baldhere said, hand on his sword, as if worried. He wasn’t carrying the Queen’s weapon, of course—he did that only when she was acting in her station. “I guess it comes down to an instinct, Lan. An itch. Agelmar seems tired a lot, and I worry it’s affecting his ability to plan. Please, just watch him.”

“I’ll watch,” Lan said.

“Thank you,” Baldhere said. He seemed less troubled now than when he’d approached.

Lan gave Mandarb a final pat, left Baldhere to tend his horse and walked through camp to the command tent. He went in; the tent was lit and well guarded, though the soldiers on guard weren’t allowed clear views of the battle maps.

Lan moved around the hung cloths that obscured the entry and nodded to the two Shienaran commanders, subordinates to Agelmar, who attended this inner sanctum. One was studying the maps spread out on the floor. Agelmar himself wasn’t there. A leader needed to sleep sometime.

Lan squatted, looking at the map. After tomorrow’s retreat, it appeared that they would reach a place called Blood Springs, named for the way the rocks beneath the water made the river seem to run red. At Blood Springs, they would have a slight advantage of height because of the adjacent hills, and Agelmar wanted to stage an offensive against the Trollocs with bowmen and cavalry lines working together. And, of course, there would be more burning of the land.

Lan knelt on one knee, looking over Agelmar’s notes about which army would fight where and how he’d divide the attacks. It was ambitious, but nothing looked particularly troublesome to Lan.

As he was studying, the tent flaps rustled, and Agelmar himself entered, speaking softly with Lady Ells of Saldaea. He stopped when he saw Lan, excusing himself quietly from his conversation. He approached Lan.

Agelmar did not slump with exhaustion, but Lan had learned to read beyond a man’s posture for signs of tiredness. Redness to the eyes. Breath that smelled faintly of flatwort, an herb chewed to keep the mind alert when one had been up too long. Agelmar was tired—but so was everyone else in camp.

“Do you approve of what you see, Dai Shan?” Agelmar asked, kneeling.

“It is very aggressive for a retreat.”

“Can we afford any other action?” Agelmar asked. “We leave a swath of burned land behind us, destroying Shienar almost as surely as if the Shadow had taken her. I will bring Trolloc blood to quench those ashes.”

Lan nodded.

“Baldhere came to you?” Agelmar asked.

Lan looked up sharply.

Agelmar smiled wanly. “I assume it was regarding the loss of Yokata and his men?”

“Yes”

“It was a mistake, to be certain,” Agelmar said. “I wondered if anyone would confront me on it; Baldhere is one to believe I should never have made such an error.”

“He thinks you’re pushing yourself too hard.”

“He is clever in tactics,” Agelmar said, “but he does not know so much as he thinks. His head is full of the stories of great captains. I am not without flaw, Dai Shan. This will not be my only error. I will see them, as I saw this one, and learn from them.”

“Still, perhaps we should see that you get more sleep.”

“I am perfectly hale, Lord Mandragoran. I know my limits; I have spent my entire life learning them. This battle will push me to my utmost, and I must let it.”

“But—”

“Relieve me or let me be,” Agelmar said, cutting in. “I will listen to advice—I am not a fool—but I will not be second-guessed.”

“Very well,” Lan said, rising. “I trust your wisdom.”

Agelmar nodded, lowering his eyes to his maps. He was still working on his plans when Lan finally left to turn in.

* * *

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CHAPTER 19

The Choice of a Patch

Elayne found Bashere pacing on the east bank of the river.

Riverbanks were among the few places that still felt alive to her. So much was lifeless these days, trees that did not put forth leaves, grass that did not grow, animals that huddled in their dens and refused to move.

The rivers kept flowing. There was a sense of life to that, though the plants were dreary.

The Alguenya was one of those deceptively mighty rivers that looked placid from a distance, but could pull a woman under its surface until she drowned. She remembered Bryne making a lesson of that to Gawyn once during a hunting trip they'd taken along it. He'd been speaking to her, too. Maybe to her primarily, though he'd always been careful not to overstep himself with the Daughter-Heir.

Be careful of currents, he'd said. *River currents are one of the most dangerous things under the Light, but only because men underestimate them. The surface looks still because nothing is fighting it. Nothing wants to. The fish go along with it and men stay out of it, all except the fools who think to prove themselves.*

Elayne stepped down the rocky bank, toward Bashere. Her guards stayed behind—Birgitte wasn't with them just now. She was seeing to the archer companies miles downriver, where they were busy pounding the Trollocs building rafts to get them across the river. Birgitte's archers and Talmanes' dragons were doing an outstanding job of reducing the Trolloc numbers there, but it was still only a matter of time before their vast army would pour across the Alguenya.

Elayne had pulled her forces out of Andor a week before, and she and Bashere had been pleased with their progress. Until they had discovered the trap.

“Amazing, isn't it?” she asked, stepping up beside Bashere, who stood at the river’s bank.

Bashere glanced at her, then nodded. “We don’t have anything like it, back home.”

“What of the Arinelle?”

“It doesn't grow this big until it’s outside of Saldaea,” he said absently. “This is almost like an ocean, settled right here, dividing bank from bank. It makes me smile, thinking of how the Aiel must have regarded it after first crossing the Spine.”

The two of them were silent for a time.

“How bad is it?” Elayne finally asked.

“Bad,” Bashere said. “I should have realized, burn me. I should have seen.”

“You can’t plan for everything, Bashere.”

“Pardon,” he said, “but that is *exactly* what I’m supposed to be doing.” Their march eastward from Braem Wood had gone according to plan. Burning the bridges across the Erinin and the Alguenya, they had taken out large numbers of Trollocs trying to cross after them. Elayne was now on the road that went upriver to the city of Cairhien. Bashere had planned to set up their final confrontation with the Trollocs in hills along the road that lay twenty leagues south of Cairhien.

The Shadow had out-thought them. Scouts had spotted a second army of Trollocs just to the north of their current position, marching east, heading toward the city of Cairhien itself. Elayne had stripped that city of defenders to fill out her army. Now it was filled only with refugees—and was as crowded as Caemlyn had been.

“How did they do it?” she asked. “Those Trollocs couldn’t have come down from Tarwin’s Gap.”

“There hasn't been enough time for that,” Bashere agreed.

“Another Waygate?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” Bashere said. “Perhaps not.”

“How, then?” she asked. “Where did that army come from?” That army of Trollocs was almost close enough to knock on the city gates. Light!

“I made the mistake of thinking like a human,” Bashere said. “I accounted for Trolloc marching speed, but not for how the Myrddraal might push them. A foolish mistake. The army in the woods must have split in two, with half taking a northeastern route through the woods toward Cairhien. It's the only thing I can think of."

"We've been moving as quickly as we can," Elayne said. "How could they have overtaken us?" Her army had gateways. She couldn't move everyone through them, as she didn't have enough channelers to hold gateways for long periods. However, she *could* move the supply carts, the wounded, and the camp followers through. That let them march at the speed of trained soldiers.

"We've moved as quickly as we could *safely,*" Bashere said. "A human commander would never have pushed his forces into such a terrible march. The terrain they went through had to have been awful—the rivers they had to cross, the forests, the wetlands, Light! They must have lost thousands of Trollocs to fatigue during such a march. The Fades risked it, and now they have us in a pincer. The city could be destroyed as well."

Elayne fell silent. "I *won't* let that happen," she finally said. "Not again. Not if we can prevent it."

"Do we have a choice?"

"Yes," Elayne said. "Bashere, you're one of the greatest military minds the land has known. You have resources that no man has ever had before. The dragons, the Kinswomen, Ogier willing to fight in battle… You can make this work. I know you can."

"You show surprising faith in me for someone you have known a very short time."

"Rand trusts you," Elayne said. "Even during the dark times, Bashere—when he would look at every second person around him with darkness in his eyes—he trusted you."

Bashere seemed troubled. "There is a way."

"What is it?"

"We march and hit the Trollocs near Cairhien as quickly as we can. They're tired; they have to be. If we could beat them quickly, before the horde to the south reaches us, we may have a chance. It will be difficult. The northern force probably wants to seize the city, then use it against us as the southern Trollocs arrive."

"Could we open gateways into the city and hold it?"

"I doubt it," Bashere said. "Not with channelers as tired as these. Beyond that, we need to *destroy* the northern Trollocs, not just hold against them. If we give them time to rest, they will recover from their march, be joined by the Trollocs from the south, then use Dreadlords to rip open Cairhien like an overripe apple. No, Elayne. We have to attack and *crush* that northern army while it is weak; only then could we possibly hold against the southern one. If we fail, the two will smash us between them."

"It is the risk we must take," Elayne said. "Make your plans, Bashere. We'll make them work."

Egwene stepped into *Tel'aran'rhiod.*

The World of Dreams had always been dangerous, unpredictable. Lately, it was even more so. The grand city of Tear reflected strangely in the dream, the buildings weathered as if by a hundred years of storms. The city walls were now little more than ten feet high, their tops rounded and smooth, blown by the wind. Buildings inside had worn away, leaving foundations and lumps of weathered stone.

Chilled by the sight, Egwene turned toward the Stone. It, at least, stood as it had. Tall, strong, unchanged by the weathering of the winds. That comforted her.

She sent herself into its heart. The Wise Ones waited for her. That, too, was comforting. Even in this time of change and tempest, they were solid like the Stone itself. Amys, Bair and Melaine waited for her. She overheard part of their conversation before they noticed her.

"I saw it just as she did," Bair was saying. "Though it was my own descendants who lent me their eyes. I think we will all see it now, if we return the third time. It should be required."

"Three visits?" Melaine said. "That brings change indeed. We still do not know if the second visit will show this, or the previous vision."

Conscious of her eavesdropping, Egwene cleared her throat. They turned toward her, immediately falling silent.

"I did not mean to intrude," Egwene said, walking among the columns and joining them.

"It is nothing," Bair said. "We should have guarded our tongues. We were the ones to invite you here to meet us, after all."

"It is good to see you, Egwene al'Vere," Melaine said, smiling with affection. The woman looked so far along in her pregnancy, she must be close to delivering. "From reports, your army gains much *ji.*"

“We do well,” Egwene said, settling herself on the floor with them. “You shall have your own chance, Melaine.”

“The *Car’a’carn* delays,” Amys said, frowning. “The spears grow impatient. We should be moving against Sightblinder.”

“He likes to prepare and plan,” Egwene said. She hesitated. “I cannot remain with you long. I have a meeting with him later today.”

“About what?” Bair asked, leaning forward, curious.

“I don’t know,” Egwene said. “I found a letter from him on the floor of my tent. He said he wanted to see me, but not as Dragon and Amyrlin. As old friends.”

“Tell him that he must not dally,” Bair said. “But here, there is something we need to speak of with you.”

“What is it?” Egwene asked, curious.

“Have you seen anything like this?” Melaine said, concentrating. On the floor between them, the rock split with cracks. She was imposing her will upon the World of Dreams, creating something specific for Egwene to see.

At first, she was confused. Cracks in the rock? Of course she had seen cracks in rock before. And with the earthquakes striking the land so often recently, they were probably becoming even more common.

There *was* something distinctive about these. Egwene leaned forward, and found that the cracks seemed to empty into *nothing*. A deep blackness. Unnaturally so.

“What is it?” Egwene asked.

“Our people report seeing these,” Amys said softly. “Those fighting in Andor and those in the Blasted Lands with Rand al’Thor. They appear like fractures in the pattern itself. They remain dark like that for a few moments, then fade, leaving behind ordinary cracks.”

“It is a very dangerous sign,” Bair said. “We sent one of ours to ask at the Borderlands, where Lan Mandragoran fights. It appears that the cracks are most common there.”

“They appear more frequently when the Dreadlords fight,” Amys said. “When they use the weave known as balefire.”

Egwene stared at that darkness, shivering. “Balefire weakens the Pattern. During the War of Power, even the Forsaken grew to fear using it, lest they unravel the world itself.”

“We must spread the word to all of our allies,” Amys said. “We *must* not use this weave.”

“It is forbidden of Aes Sedai already,” Egwene said. “But I will make it known that nobody is to consider breaking that rule.”

“That is wise,” Melaine said. “For a people with so many rules for themselves, I have found that the Aes Sedai are very proficient at ignoring guidelines if their situation allows it.”

“We trust our women,” Egwene said. “The Oaths hold them; otherwise, their own wisdom must guide them. If Moiraine had not been willing to bend this rule, Perrin would be dead—as would Mat, had Rand ignored the rule. But I *will* speak to the women.”

Balefire bothered her. Not that it existed or did what it did. It was uniquely dangerous. And yet, what was it Perrin had said to her in the dream? *It’s only another weave…*

It seemed unfair that the Shadow should have access to such a weapon as this, one that unraveled the Pattern as it was used. How would they fight it, how could they counter it?

“This is not the only reason we sent to you, Egwene al’Vere,” Melaine said. “You have seen the changes to the World of Dreams?”

Egwene nodded. “The storm grows worse here.”

“We will not be visiting here often in the future,” Amys said. “We have made the decision. And, despite our complaints about him, the *Car’a’carn* does prepare his armies to move. It will not be long before we march with him to the Shadow’s own hold.”

Egwene nodded slowly. “So this is it.”

“I am proud of you, girl,” Amys said. Amys, tough-as-rocks Amys, looked teary-eyed. They rose, and Egwene embraced them one at a time.

“Light shelter you, Amys, Melaine, Bair,” Egwene said. “Give my love to the others.”

“It will be done, Egwene al’Vere,” Bair said. “May you find water and shade, now and always.”

One by one, they faded from Tear. Egwene took a deep breath, looking upward. The building groaned, like a ship in a tempest. The rock itself seemed to shift around her.

She had loved this place—not the Stone, but *Tel’aranrhiod*. It had taught her so much. But she knew, as she prepared to leave, that it was like a river in dangerous flood. Familiar and loved it might be, but she could not risk herself here. Not while the White Tower needed her.

“And farewell to you, old friend,” she said to the air. “Until I dream again.”

She let herself wake.

Gawyn waited beside the bed, as usual. They were back in the Tower, Egwene fully dressed, in the chamber near her study. It was not yet evening, but the request from the Wise One was not something she had wished to ignore.

“He's here,” Gawyn said quietly, glancing at the door to her study.

“Then let us meet him,” Egwene said. She prepared herself, rising, smoothing her skirt. She nodded to Gawyn, and they stepped out and went to meet the Dragon Reborn.

Rand smiled when he saw her. He waited inside with two Maidens she did not know.

“What is this about?” Egwene asked tiredly. “Convincing me to break the seals?”

“You’ve grown cynical,” Rand noted.

“The last two times we met,” Egwene said, “you pointedly tried to infuriate me. Am I not to expect it again?”

“I am not trying to infuriate you,” Rand said. “Look, here.” He pulled something from his pocket. A hair ribbon. He held it out to her. “You always looked forward so to being able to braid your hair.”

“So now you imply I’m a child?” Egwene asked, exasperated. Gawyn rested a hand on her shoulder, comforting.

“What? No!” Rand sighed. “Light, Egwene. I want to make amends. You’re like a sister to me; I never had siblings. Or, at least, the one I have doesn’t know me. I only have you. Please. I’m not trying to rile you.”

For a moment, he seemed just as he had long ago. An innocent boy, earnest. Egwene let her frustration melt away. “Rand, I’m busy. *We* are busy. There isn’t time for things like this. Your armies are impatient.”

“Their time will soon come,” Rand said, growing harder. “Before this is through, they will wonder why they were so eager, and will look with longing at these restful days waiting.” He still held the ribbon in his hand, forming a fist. “I just ... I didn’t want to go to my fight with our last meeting having been an argument, even if it was an important one.”

“Oh, Rand,” Egwene said. She stepped forward, taking the ribbon. She embraced him. Light, but he’d been difficult to deal with lately—but she’d thought the same thing about her parents on occasion. “I support you. It doesn’t mean I’m going to do as you say with the seals, but I *do* support you.” Egwene released Rand. She would *not* be teary-eyed. Even if it did seem like a last parting for them.

“Wait,” Gawyn said. “Sibling? You have a sibling?”

“I am the son of Tigraine,” Rand said, shrugging, “born after she went to the Waste and became a Maiden.”

Gawyn looked stunned, though Egwene had figured this out ages ago. “You are Galad’s *brother*?” Gawyn asked.

“Half-brother,” Rand said. “Not that it would probably mean much to a Whitecloak. We had the same mother. His father, like yours, was Taringail, but mine was an Aiel.”

“I think Galad would surprise you,” Gawyn said softly. “But Elayne…”

“Not to tell you your own family history, but Elayne is not related to me.” Rand turned to Egwene. “May I see them? The seals. Before I go to Shayol Ghul, I would look upon them one last time. I promise not to do anything with them.”

Reluctantly, she fished them from the pouch at her waist where she often kept them. Gawyn, still looking stunned, walked to the window and pushed it open, letting light into the room. The White Tower felt still… silent. Its armies were gone, its masters at war.

She unwrapped the first seal and handed it to Rand. She would not give him all of them at once. Just in case. She did trust his word; it was Rand after all, but… just in case.

Rand held up the seal, staring at it, as if seeking wisdom in that sinuous line. “I crafted these,” he whispered. “I made them to never break. But I knew, as I did it, that they would eventually fail. Everything eventually fails when he touches it . . ”

Egwene hefted another of the seals, holding it gingerly. It would not do to break the thing by accident. She kept them wrapped and the pouch stuffed with cloth; she worried about breaking them while carrying them, but Moiraine had indicated that Egwene would break them.

She felt that was foolish, but the words she had read, the things Moiraine had said… Well, if the moment did come to break them, Egwene would need to have them at hand. And so she carried them—carried with her the potential death of the world itself.

Rand suddenly went as white as a sheet. “Egwene,” he said. “This does not fool me.”

“What doesn’t?”

He looked at her. “This is a fake. Please, it is all right. Tell me the truth. You made a copy and gave it to me.”

“I did nothing of the sort,” she said.

“Oh… Oh, *Light”* Rand raised the seal again. “Its a fake.”

“What!” Egwene snatched it from his hand, feeling it. She sensed nothing wrong. “How can you be sure?”

“I made them,” Rand said. “I know my handiwork. That is *not* one of the seals. It is… Light, someone took them.”

“I’ve had these with me each moment since you gave them to me!” Egwene said.

“Then it happened before,” Rand whispered. “I didn’t look them over carefully after I fetched them. He knew, somehow, where I’d put them.” Taking the other one from her, he shook his head. “It’s not real either.” He took the third. “Nor this one.”

He looked at her. “He has them, Egwene. He’s stolen them back, somehow. The Dark One holds the keys to his own prison.”

For much of Mat’s life, he had wished that people would not look at him so much. They gave him frowns at the trouble he had ostensibly caused—trouble that really was not his fault—and glances of disapproval when he walked about completely innocent, trying his best to be pleasant. Every boy filched a pie now and then. No harm in it. It was practically expected.

Normal life had been harder for Mat than for other boys. For no good reason, everyone watched him extra carefully. Perrin could have stolen pies all day, and people would have just smiled at him and maybe mussed his hair. Mat they came at with the broom.

When he entered a place to dice, he drew looks. People watched him as they would watch a cheater—though he never was—or with envy in their eyes. Yes, he had always figured that *not* being watched would be a grand situation. A cause for real celebration.

Now he had it, and it made him sick.

“You can look at me,” Mat protested. “Really. Burn you, it’s all right!”

“My eyes would be lowered,” the serving woman said as she piled fabric on the low table against the wall.

“Your eyes are *already* lowered! They’re staring at the bloody floor, aren’t they? I want you to raise them.”

The Seanchan continued her work. She was of fair skin with freckles under her eyes, not too bad to look at, though he was more in favor of darker shades these days. He still would not have minded if this girl showed him a smile. How could he talk to a woman if he could not try to make her smile?

A few other servants entered, eyes downcast, carrying other folds of fabric. Mat stood in what were apparently “his” chambers in the palace. They were more numerous than he would ever need. Perhaps Talmanes and some of the Band could move in with him and keep the place from feeling so empty.

Mat sauntered over to the window. Below, in the Mol Hara, an army organized. It was going to take longer than he wanted. Galgan—Mat had only met the man briefly, and he did not trust the fellow, no matter what Tuon said about his assassins not being intended to succeed—was gathering the Seanchan forces from the borders, but too slowly. He worried about losing Almoth Plain with the withdrawal.

Well, he had better listen to reason. Mat had little reason to like the man already, but if he delayed in this…

“Honored One?” the serving girl asked.

Mat turned, raising an eyebrow. Several *da’covale* had entered with the last of the fabric, and Mat found himself blushing. They hardly wore any clothing at all, and what they did wear was transparent. He could look, though, could he not? They would not wear clothing like that if a man was not supposed to look. What would Tuon think?

She doesn’t own me, Mat thought, determined. *I will* not *be husbandly.*

The freckled servant—she was *so’jhin*, half of her head shaved—gestured toward a person who had entered behind the *da’covale*, a middle-aged woman with her dark hair in a bun, none of her head shaved. She was squat, shaped kind of like a bell, with a grandmotherly air.

The newcomer inspected him. Finally someone who would look at him! If only her face did not have the expression of one studying horses at the market.

“Black for his new station,” the woman said, clapping her hands once. “Green for his heritage. A deep forest, in moderation. Someone bring me a variety of eyepatches, and someone else burn that hat.”

“What?” Mat exclaimed. Servants swarmed around him, picking at his clothing. “Wait, now. What is this?”

“Your new regalia, Honored One,” the woman said. “I am Nata, and I will be your personal tailor.”

“You aren’t burning my hat,” Mat said. “Try, and we’ll bloody well see if you can fly from four stories up. Do you understand me?”

The woman hesitated. “Yes, Honored One. Do not burn his clothing. Keep it safe, should it be needed.” She seemed doubtful it ever would be.

Mat opened his mouth to complain further, and then one of the *da’covale* opened a box. Jewelry shone inside it. Rubies, emeralds, firedrops. Mat’s breath caught in his throat. There was a *fortune* in there!

He was so stunned that he almost did not notice that the servants were undressing him. They pulled at his shirt, and Mat let them. Although he held on to his scarf, he was not bashful. That blush on his cheeks had nothing to do with his trousers being taken off. He was just surprised at the jewelry.

Then one of the young *da’covale* reached for Mat’s smallclothes.

“You’d be real funny without any fingers,” Mat growled.

The *da’covale* looked up—his eyes widening, face paling. He immediately looked down again, bowing, backing away. Mat was not bashful, but the smallclothes were far enough.

Nata clicked her tongue. Her servants began draping Mat in fine cloth, black and deep green—so dark it was nearly black itself. “We shall tailor you outfits for military expression, court attendance, private functions, and civic appearances. It—”

“No,” Mat said. “Military only.”

“But—”

“We're at the bloody Last Battle, woman,” Mat said. “If we survive this, you can make me a bloody feastday cap. Until then, we're at war, and I don’t need anything else.”

She nodded.

Mat reluctantly stood with arms out to the sides, letting them drape him in the fabric, taking measurements. If he had to put up with this business of being called “Honored One” and “Highness,” then he could at least make certain he was dressed in a reasonable way.

In truth, he *had* been growing tired of the same old clothing. There did not seem to be much lace used by the Seanchan tailor, which was a shame, but Mat did not want to correct her in doing her job. He could not complain about every little thing. Nobody liked a complainer, least of all Mat.

As they dealt with the measurements, a servant approached with a small, velvet-lined case displaying a variety of eyepatches. He hesitated, considering; some were marked with gemstones, others painted with designs.

“That one,” he said, pointing at the least ornamented patch. Simple black with only two small rubies, cut thin and long, set at the right and left edges of the patch opposite one another. They fitted it on him as the other servants finished measuring.

That done, the tailor had her servants dress him in a costume she had brought. Apparently, he was not going to be allowed back to his old clothing while he waited for his new outfits to be tailored.

The clothing started off simple enough. A silk robe of fine weave. Mat would have preferred trousers, but the robe was comfortable. However, they overlaid it with a larger, stiffer robe. It was also silk, of dark green, every inch of it embroidered with scrollwork patterns. The sleeves were large enough to trot a horse through, and they felt heavy and bulky.

“I thought I said to give me warrior’s clothing!” he said.

“This is a ceremonial warrior’s uniform for a member of the Imperial family, Highness,” Nata said. “Many will see you as an outsider, and though nobody would question your loyalty, it would be well for our soldiers to see you as Prince of the Ravens first and an outlander second. Would you agree?”

“I suppose,” Mat said.

The servants continued, buckling on an ornate girdle and placing forearm bands of the same design on his arms inside the large sleeves. That was all right, Mat supposed, as the girdle pulled in the waist of the clothing and kept it from feeling quite so bulky.

Unfortunately, the next piece of clothing was the most ridiculous of all. The stiff, pale piece of cloth fitted onto his shoulders. It draped down his front and back like a tabard, the sides open, but they flared out to the sides a good foot each, making him seem inhumanly wide. They were like shoulder plates from heavy armor, only made of cloth.

“Here now,” Mat said. “This isn’t a kind of trick you play on a fellow, just because he’s new, is it?”

“Trick, Honored One?” Nata asked.

“You can’t really . . ” Mat trailed off as someone passed outside his door. Another commander. The man was wearing a costume not unlike Mat’s, though not as ornate, and with shoulders not quite as wide. Not Imperial family armor, but ceremonial armor for one of the Blood. Still, it was almost as lavish.

The man stopped and bowed to Mat, then continued on his way.

“Burn me,” Mat said.

Nata clapped and the servants began draping Mat in gemstones. They chose mostly rubies, which made Mat uncomfortable. That had to be a coincidence, did it not? He did not know what he thought of being covered in all of these gemstones. Perhaps he could sell them. Actually, if he could put these on a gambling table, he could probably end up owning all of Ebou Dar…

Tuon already owns it, he realized. *And I married her.* It sank in that he was rich. *Really* rich.

He sat there, letting them lacquer his fingernails, as he considered what this all meant. Oh, he had not needed to worry about money for some time, as he could always gamble for more. This was different. If he already had everything, what point was there to gambling? This did not sound like much fun. People were not supposed to give you things like this. You were supposed to find a way to come to them yourself, by wits, luck or skill.

“Burn me,” Mat said, lowering his arms to his side as the lacquering finished. “I’m a *bloody* nobleman.” He sighed, plucking his hat from the hands of a startled servant—who was walking past with his old clothing—and set it on his head.

“Honored One,” Nata said. “Please forgive my forwardness, but it is my place to advise on fashion, if you please. That hat looks… particularly out of place with that uniform.”

“Who cares?” Mat said, marching out of the room. He almost had to go out the door sideways! “If I’m going to look ridiculous, I might as well do it with style. Someone point me toward where our flaming generals are meeting. I need to figure out how many troops we have.”

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CHAPTER 20

Into Thakan'dar

Later in the day after her meeting with Rand, Egwene thrust Vora’s *sa’angreal* out in front of her and wove Fire. Threads came together, tiny glowing ribbons forming a complex weave in the air before her. She could almost feel their heat shining upon her, turning her skin a violent orange.

She finished the weave, and a fiery ball as large as a boulder arced in the air, crackling and roaring. It fell upon the distant hilltop like a meteor. The blast flung bow-wielding Trollocs aside, scattering their carcasses.

Romanda opened a gateway beside Egwene. Romanda was among the Yellows who had insisted on staying at the battlefront to provide emergency Healing. She and her small crew had been invaluable in saving lives.

Today, however, there would be no opportunity for Healing. The Trollocs had pulled back into the hills, as Bryne had indicated they would. After a day and a half of rest, many of the Aes Sedai were recovered. Not to full strength—not after over a week of grueling combat—but enough.

Gawyn jumped through the gateway right after it opened, his sword out. Egwene followed, along with Romanda, Lelaine, Leane, Silviana, Raemassa and a handful of Warders and soldiers. They stepped out onto the very hilltop Egwene had just cleared. The charred earth was still warm under her feet, blackened; the scent of burned flesh hung in the air.

This hill was in the very middle of the Trolloc army. All around, Shadowspawn scrambled for safety this way and that. Romanda held the gateway and Silviana began weaving Air to create a dome of wind against arrows. The rest of them began to send weaves outward.

The Trollocs reacted slowly—they’d been waiting here, in these hills, ready to surge down into the valleys as Egwene’s army entered. Normally, this would have been a disaster. The Trollocs could rain projectiles down on Egwene’s troops, and her cavalry would have been at a disadvantage trying to get up those hills. The hilltops would have given the Trollocs and Fades a better perspective to spot weak points in Egwene’s forces, and attack accordingly.

Egwene and her commanders had been disinclined to give the enemy that advantage. The beasts scattered as the battle reversed on them, Aes Sedai seizing the hilltops. Some of the beasts tried to charge up and retake them, but others scrambled away for their lives. Egwene's heavy cavalry came next, thundering through the valleys. What had once been a very efficient position for the Trollocs became a killing field; with the Trolloc archers removed by Aes Sedai, the heavy cavalry could kill practically unmolested.

That opened the way for the foot, who marched in formation to sweep the Trollocs back, smashing them against hillsides so that the Aes Sedai could kill them in groups. Unfortunately, the Trollocs had grown more accustomed to facing the One Power. Either that, or the Myrddraal had grown more thorough at encouraging them.

Soon, more coordinated groups of Trollocs charged the hilltops, while others managed to form resistance to the foot assault. *Bryne is right*, Egwene thought, leveling a contingent of Trollocs that had almost clawed their way to her. *The Fades are linked to the Trollocs again.* The Shadowspawn had been hesitant to use that tactic recently, as killing the Fade would drop all linked Trollocs. However, she suspected that it was the only way they could make the Trollocs climb toward almost-certain death on these hills.

If she could find the Myrddraal linked to the Trollocs nearby, she could stop them all with one well-placed weave of Fire. Unfortunately, the Fades were crafty, and had begun hiding among the Trollocs.

"They're closing in," Lelaine said, panting.

"Fall back," Egwene said.

They ducked through Romanda's gateway, followed by their Warders. Romanda came last, leaping through as a group of Trollocs claimed their hilltop. One of the beasts, a shaggy-furred bearlike monstrosity, stumbled through the gateway after her.

The thing dropped dead immediately, a faint wisp of smoke rising from its carcass. Its fellows hooted and growled on the other side. Egwene glanced at the other women, then shrugged and released flame straight through the gateway. A few fell dead, twitching, while the others scrambled away, howling, dropping their weapons.

"That is effective," Leane noted, folding her arms and raising an immaculate eyebrow at the gateway. It was the middle of the Last Battle, and the woman *still* took time each morning to do her face.

Their gateway had taken them back to camp, which was now mostly empty. With the reserves formed up and ready to move when required, the only soldiers who remained in the camp were a force of five hundred guarding Bryne’s command tent.

She still carried the pouch with the false seals at her side. Rand's words had shaken her hard. How would they get the seals back? If the minions of the Shadow broke them at the wrong time, it would be a catastrophe.

Had they broken them already? Would the world know? Egwene felt a dread she could not abandon. And yet, the war continued, and she had no recourse but to keep fighting. They would think of a way to recover the seals, if they could. Rand swore to try. She wasn’t certain what he could do.

“They’re fighting so hard,” Gawyn said.

Egwene turned to find him standing a short distance away, inspecting the battlefield with his looking glass. She felt a longing from him. Without some men to lead as he had the Younglings, she knew, he felt useless in these battles.

“The Trollocs are driven by Myrddraal,” Egwene said, “linked to give the Fades greater control over them.”

“Yes, but *why* resist so strongly?” Gawyn said, still looking through the glass. “They don’t care about this land. It’s obvious that these hills are lost to them, and yet they fight savagely. Trollocs are base—they fight and win or they scatter and retreat. They don’t hold land. They’re trying to do so here. It’s like… like the Fades think that even after a rout like this one, they’re in a good position.”

“Who knows why Fades do what they do?” Lelaine remarked, arms folded, looking through the still-open gateway.

Egwene turned, looking through it, too. The hilltop was now empty, strangely isolated amid the battle. Her soldiers had crashed up against the Trollocs in the small valley between the hills, and the fighting was brutal down there. She heard grunts, yells, clangs. Bloodied pikes were raised in the air as a group of men were forced back, and halberdiers moved in to try to slow the Trollocs.

The Shadowspawn were taking terrible casualties. It *was* an oddity; Bryne had expected them to retreat.

“Something’s wrong,” Egwene said, the hairs of her arms standing on end. Her worry about the seals vanished, for now. Her army was in danger. “Gather the Aes Sedai and have the army pull back.”

The other women looked at her as if she were mad. Gawyn took off at a dash toward the command tent to give her orders. He didn't question.

"Mother," Romanda said, letting her gateway die. "What is—"

Something split the air on the other side of Egwene's war camp, opposite the battlefield. A line of light, longer than any gateway Egwene had seen. It was nearly as wide as her *camp itself*.

The line of light turned upon itself, opening a view that was *not* of southern Kandor. Instead, it was a place of ferns and drooping trees—though they were brown, like everything else, they were still alien and unfamiliar.

An enormous army stood silently upon this unfamiliar landscape. Thousands of banners flew above it, emblazoned with symbols Egwene didn't recognize. The foot soldiers wore knee-length garments that appeared to be some kind of padded armor, reinforced with chain in a large-squared pattern. Others wore metal shirts that seemed sewn from coins tied together.

Many carried hand axes, though of a very strange design. They had long, thin handles that bulged like bulbs at the end and the axe heads were narrow and thin, almost like picks. The hafts of all of their weapons—from polearms to swords—had a flowing, organic design. Smooth and not of a uniform width, made of some dark red wood that had been painted with colorful dots down the sides.

Egwene took in all of this in moments, her mind searching for any kind of origin for this strange force. She found nothing to latch on to until she sensed the channeling. The glow of *saidar* surrounded *hundreds* of women, all of them riding, wearing strange dresses made entirely of stiff black silk. The dresses were not tied at the waists, but instead pulled relatively tight around the shoulders, and flared wide toward the bottoms. Long, rectangular tassels of a multitude of colors hung from ties at the front, just below the neck. The faces of the women were all tattooed.

"Release the Power," Egwene said, letting go of *saidar*. "Don't let them sense you!" She dashed to the side, Lelaine following, the glow winking out from around her.

Romanda ignored Egwene, letting out a curse. She began weaving a gateway to escape.

A dozen different weaves of fire suddenly thrashed the area where Romanda stood. The woman didn't have a chance to scream. Egwene and the other women scrambled through the camp as weaves of the One Power destroyed tents, consumed supplies and set the entire place aflame.

Egwene reached the command tent just as Gawyn stumbled out. She grabbed him and pulled him to the ground as a ball of fire passed just overhead, then crashed into a collection of tents nearby.

“Light!” Gawyn said. “What is it?”

“Sharans.” Lelaine, breathless, huddled down beside them.

“Are you certain?” Egwene whispered.

Lelaine nodded. “Accounts from the Cairienin before the Aiel War are plentiful, if not very informative. They weren't allowed to see much, but what they did see looked a lot like an army.”

“Army?” Gawyn said, stretching to the side and looking between the tents toward the force marching through the unnaturally wide gateway. “Blood and bloody ashes!” he swore, ducking back. “There are thousands of them!”

“Far too many to fight,” Egwene agreed, mind working furiously. “Not pinned between them and the Trollocs as we are. We have to fall back.”

“I just passed the order to Byrne to disengage the troops,” Gawyn said. “But ... Egwene. Where are we going to go? Trollocs in front, that army behind! Light. We'll be crushed between them!”

Byrne would react quickly. He'd send a messenger to the line captains. *Oh no ...*

Egwene grabbed Gawyn and pulled him away from the command tent just as she felt channeling within. Lelaine cried out, ducking in the other direction.

The Sharan women reacted immediately to the channeling. The ground ripped up underneath the tent, destroying it in a burst of overwhelming power. Tattered shreds of cloth flew into the air amid stones and clods of earth.

Egwene fell backward, and Gawyn pulled her toward a toppled cart that had been hit, one wheel shattered, its burden of firewood tumbling out. Gawyn pulled Egwene to the sheltered place just under the edge of the cart, beside the tumble of wood. They huddled there, though the wood flickered with flames and the ground was afire. The heat was distressing, but not unbearable.

Egwene huddled against the ground, blinking through eyes that burned with smoke, searching for signs of Lelaine. Or ... Light! Siuan and Byrne had been inside that tent, along with Yukiri and many of their command staff.

Egwene and Gawyn hid as flames rained on the camp, tearing up the earth. The Sharans struck at any sign of movement; several women who ran were instantly immolated.

“Be ready to run,” Gawyn said, “once the fire stops falling.”

The flames *did* wane, but just as they did, riders in Sharan armor charged through the camp. They hooted and yelled, leveling bows at anyone they saw, dropping dozens with arrows to the back. After that, the Sharan troops moved through the camp in tight formations. Egwene waited tensely, trying to think of how to slip away.

She saw no opportunity. Gawyn pulled Egwene back farther, rubbed soot on her cheeks and motioned for her to stay low, then draped his Warder cloak over them both. With the smoke from the wood burning nearby, perhaps they wouldn’t be seen.

Her heart thumped urgently in her chest. Gawyn pressed something to her face, a kerchief he had soaked with his waterskin. He held another one to his face and breathed through it. She took the one he was holding to her, but barely breathed. Those soldiers were so *close.*

One of the soldiers turned toward the cart, peering at the woodpile, but when he glanced through the smoke toward them he didn’t seem to see anything. Egwene silently contemplated the Warder cloak. Its color-shifting nature made them nearly invisible, if they were careful not to move.

Why don’t I have one of these cloaks? she thought with annoyance. *Why should they only be for Warders?*

The soldiers were busy flushing out servants. Those who ran, they killed with arrows from bows that stretched extremely far. Servants who moved more slowly, they rounded up and forced to the ground.

Egwene longed to embrace the Source, to do something. To bring down fire and lightning upon these invaders. She still had Vora’s *sa’angreal.* She could—

She quashed that line of thinking. She was surrounded by the enemy, and the swift reaction of the channelers indicated that they were watching for Aes Sedai. If she wove for a single moment, she’d be killed before she could escape. She huddled beside Gawyn, under his cloak, hoping none of the Sharan channelers walked close enough to sense her ability. She could use a weave to hide that ability, but would have to channel first to use it. Dared she try that?

They hid for a good hour or more. If the cloud cover hadn’t been so complete, casting the land into perpetual twilight, they’d certainly have been spotted, cloak or no cloak. She almost cried out at one point when a few of the Sharan soldiers tossed some buckets of water onto the woodpile, stifling the fire and soaking both of them.

She couldn’t make out anything of her own army, though she feared the worst. The Sharan channelers and a large portion of their army moved through the camp quickly, toward the battlefield. With Bryne and the Amyrlin gone, and with a surprise force coming in from behind…

Egwene felt sick. How many were dying, dead? Gawyn caught her arm as he felt her stir, then shook his head, mouthing a few words. *Wait until night.*

They’re dying! she mouthed.

You can’t help.

It was true. She let him hold her, letting his familiar scent calm her. But how could she simply *wait* as soldiers and Aes Sedai who depended on her were slaughtered? Light, a huge portion of the White Tower was out there! If this army fell, and those women with it…

I am the Amyrlin Seat, she told herself firmly. *I will be strong. I will survive. So long as I live, the White Tower stands.*

She still let Gawyn hold her.

Aviendha crawled across the rock like a winter lizard seeking warmth. Her fingertips, though callused, were beginning to burn from the bitter cold. Shayol Ghul was cold, with air that smelled as if it came from a tomb.

Rhuarc crawled to her left, a Stone Dog named Shaen to her right. Both wore the red headband of the *siswai’aman.* She didn’t know what to make of Rhuarc, a clan chief, donning that headband. He had never spoken of it; it was as if the headband did not exist. So it was with all of the *siswai’aman.* Amys crawled on Shaen’s right. For once, no one had objected to Wise Ones joining the advance scouts. In a place such as this, at a time such as this, the eyes of one who could channel might see what ordinary eyes would not.

Aviendha pulled herself forward, making no noise, despite the necklaces she wore. No plants sprouted on these rocks, not even mold or lichen. They were deep within the Blasted Lands, now. Almost as deep as one could go.

Rhuarc reached the ridge first, and she saw him tense. Aviendha arrived next, peering over the side of the rock, keeping low so as not to be seen. Her breath stopped dead in her throat.

She'd heard stories of this place. Of the massive forge near the base of the slope, a single black stream running past it. That water had been poisoned to the point that it would kill any who touched it. Hearths dotted the valley like open wounds, reddening the fog around them. As a young Maiden, she'd listened with wide eyes as an ancient roofmistress told of the creatures who worked the Shadow's forges, creatures that were not dead and not alive. Silent and horrible, the brutish things moved with steps that held no life—like the ticking hands of a clock.

The forgers paid little heed to the cages full of humans whose blood would be spilled to temper newly forged blades. The captives might as well have been chunks of iron. Though Aviendha was too far to hear the humans’ whimpers, she felt them. Her fingers grew taut upon the rocks.

Shayol Ghul itself dominated the valley, its black slopes rising like a serrated knife into the sky. The sides were rent with cuts, like the skin of a man who had been whipped a hundred times, each score leaving a gash that spat steam. Perhaps that steam created the fog that lay over the valley. The fog churned and surged, as if the valley were a cup holding liquid.

“Such a terrible place,” Amys whispered.

Aviendha had never heard such dread in the woman’s voice. That chilled Aviendha nearly as much as the bitter wind that ruffled their clothing. Distant *pings* broke the air, the workers forging. A black column of smoke rose from the nearest forge, and did not dissipate. It rose like an umbilical cord to the clouds above, which rained down lightning with dreadful frequency.

Yes, Aviendha had heard stories of this place. Those stories had failed to convey the full truth. One could not *describe* this place. One had to experience it.

A scraping from behind, and in a few moments, Rodel Ituralde crawled up next to Rhuarc. He moved quietly, for a wetlander.

“You were so impatient that you could not await our report?” Rhuarc asked softly.

“No report can convey what a man’s own eyes can,” Ituralde said. “I didn’t promise I’d stay behind. I told you to go ahead. And you did.” He raised his looking glass, shading the front with his hand, though that probably wasn’t necessary with those clouds.

Rhuarc frowned. He and the other Aiel who had come north had agreed to follow a wetlander general, but it did not sit well with them. Nor should it. They would do this thing without growing comfortable. Comfort was the great killer of men.

Let it be enough, Aviendha thought, turning back to look at the valley. *Enough for my people. Enough for Rand and the task he ynust accomplish.*

Seeing the end of her people had nauseated and horrified her, but also awakened her. If the end of the Aiel was the sacrifice required for Rand to win, she would make it. She would scream and curse the Creator’s own name, but she would pay that price. Any warrior would. Better that one people should end than the world fall completely under Shadow.

The Light willing, it would not come to that. The Light willing, her actions with the Dragons Peace would serve to protect and shelter the Aiel. She would not let the possibility of failure stop her. They would fight. Waking from the dream was always a possibility when the spears were danced.

“Interesting,” Ituralde said softly, still looking through his glass. “Your thoughts, Aiel?”

“We need to create a distraction,” Rhuarc said. “We can come down the slope just to the east of the forge and set those captives free and break the place apart. This stops the Myrddraal from receiving new weapons and will keep the Dark Ones eyes on us and not the *Car’a’carn*”

“How long will it take the Dragon?” Ituralde asked. “What do you think, Aiel? How much time do we give him to save the world?”

“He will fight,” Amys said. “Enter the mountain, duel with Sight-blinder. It will take as long as a fight needs to take. A few hours, perhaps? I have not seen a duel last much longer than that, even between two men of great skill.”

“Let us assume,” Ituralde said with a smile, “that there is going to be more to it than a duel.”

“I am not a fool, Rodel Ituralde,” Amys said coolly. “I doubt that the *Car’a’carris* fight will be one of spears and shields. However, when he cleansed the Source, did that not happen in the space of a single day? Perhaps this will be similar."

"Perhaps," Ituralde said. "Perhaps not." He lowered the glass and looked to the Aiel. "Which possibility would you rather plan for?"

"The worst one," Aviendha said.

"So we plan to hold out as long as the Dragon needs," Ituralde said. "Days, weeks, months… years? As long as it takes."

Rhuarc nodded slowly. "What do you suggest?"

"The pass into the valley is narrow," Ituralde said. "Scout reports put most of the Shadowspawn left in the Blight out beyond the pass there. Even they spend as little time as they can in this forsaken place. If we can close off the pass and seize this valley—destroy those forgeworkers and the few Fades down there—we could hold this place for ages. You Aiel are good at slash-and-run tactics. Burn me, but I know *that* from personal experience. You lot attack that forge, and we'll set about closing up the pass."

Rhuarc nodded. "It is a good plan."

The four of them walked down the ridge to where Rand waited, dressed in red and gold, arms behind his back, accompanied by a force of twenty Maidens and six Asha'man, plus Nynaeve and Moiraine. He seemed very troubled by something—she could feel his anxiety—though he should have been pleased. He had convinced the Seanchan to fight. What was it that, in his meeting with Egwene al'Vere, had disturbed him so?

Rand turned and looked upward, toward the peak of Shayol Ghul. Staring at it, his emotions changed. He seemed a man looking at a fountain in the Three-fold Land, savoring the idea of cool water. Aviendha could feel his anticipation. There was also fear in him, of course. No warrior ever rid himself completely of the fear. He controlled it, overwhelmed it with the thirst to be on with the fight, to test himself.

Men or women could not know themselves, not truly, until they were strained to their absolute limit. Until they danced the spears with death, felt their blood seeping out to stain the ground, and drove the weapon home into the beating heart of an enemy. Rand al'Thor wanted this, and she understood him because of it. Strange to realize, after all of this time, just how alike they were.

She stepped up to him, and he moved so that he stood just beside her, his shoulder touching hers. He did not drape an arm around her, and she did not take his hand. He did not own her, and she did not own him. The act of his movement so that they faced the same direction meant far more to her than any other gesture could.

“Shade of my heart,” he said softly, watching his Asha’man open a gateway, “what did you see?”

“A tomb,” she replied.

“Mine?”

“No. That of your enemy. The place where he was buried once, and the place he will slumber again.”

Something hardened inside Rand. She could feel it, his resolve.

“You mean to kill him,” Aviendha whispered. “Sightblinder himself.”

“Yes.”

She waited.

“Others tell me I am a fool for thinking this,” Rand said. His guards moved through the gateway to return to Merrilor.

“No warrior should enter a battle without intending to see that battle finished,” Aviendha said. She hesitated after saying it, something else occurring to her.

“What is it?” Rand asked.

“Well, the *greatest* victory would be to take your enemy *gai’shain*.”

“I doubt he would submit to that,” Rand said.

“Don’t make jest,” she said, elbowing him in the side, earning a grunt. “This must be considered, Rand al’Thor. Which is the better way of *ji’e’toh*?”

“Is imprisoning the Dark One like taking him *gai’shain?* If so, that would be the proper path.”

“I’m not certain I care what is proper’ this time, Aviendha.”

“A warrior must *always* consider *ji’e’toh*,” she said sternly. “Have I taught you nothing? Do not speak like that, or you will shame me again before the other Wise Ones.”

“I had hoped that—considering how our relationship has progressed—we would be through with the lectures, Aviendha.”

“You thought that growing closer to me would *end* the lectures?” she asked, baffled. Rand al’Thor, I have been among wetlander wives, and I’ve seen that they—”

He shook his head, leading the way through the gateway, Aviendha following. He seemed amused, and that was good. Some of his anxiety had faded. But truly, this was not a jest. Wetlanders did not have good senses of humor. Sometimes, they did not understand at all when to laugh.

On the other side of the gateway, they entered a camp made up of many groups. Rand had command of the Maidens and the *siswai'aman*, along with most of the Wise Ones.

Just outside of the Aiel camp were the Aes Sedai. Rand had command of some three dozen—all of the Aes Sedai who had sworn to him personally, and most who were bonded to his Asha'man. That meant another two dozen Asha'man, of various ranks.

He also had Rodel Ituralde and his force, composed primarily of Domani. Their king, with his wispy beard and the beauty mark on his cheek, rode with them as well, but left the command to the great captain. The monarch gestured, and Ituralde walked over to give a report. Alsalam seemed uncomfortable around Rand, and did not go on any excursions when the Dragon did. Aviendha liked that arrangement. She wasn't certain she trusted this Alsalam.

Outside the Aiel tents camped another large military force, the Tairen army, including the elite force known as the Defenders of the Stone, led by a man named Rodrivar Tihera. Their king was with them as well, and was generally considered the highest authority in their gathered armies, aside from Rand.

The Tairens would form a key part of Rodel Ituralde's plans. As much as it galled Aviendha to admit it, Ituralde was right. The Aiel were not a defensive force, and though they could hold a pass if needed, they would be better used for offensive maneuvers.

The Tairens would be perfect for holding ground. They had well-trained companies of pikemen, and a full banner of crossbowmen with a new kind of crossbow crank, knowledge of which the smiths had only just received. They had spent the last week converting the equipment to the new style.

There was one other group in Rand's force, and it was the most baffling to Aviendha. Dragonsworn in large numbers. They camped together, and flew a flag that placed the image of the dragon over the ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai. The group was made up of common men, soldiers, lords, ladies and some Aes Sedai and Warders. They came from all nations, including the Aiel, and shared only one common bond: They had put aside all loyalties, broken all bonds, to fight in the Last Battle. Aviendha had heard discomforting rumors that many of the Aiel among them were *gai'shain* who had put aside the white, claiming they would take it up again when the Last Battle was won.

Rand's coming was said to remove all bonds from men. Oaths shattered when he drew near, and any loyalty or alliance was secondary to the need to serve him in this last fight for humankind. Part of her wanted to name that wetlander foolishness, but perhaps she used that term too easily. A Wise One had to see with better eyes than that.

Now that they were on the other side of the gateway, Aviendha finally allowed herself to release *saidar.* The world dulled around her, the added sense of life and wonder evaporating. Every time she released the One Power, she felt slightly hollow, the joy and thrill now passed, over.

Ituralde and Rhuarc went to join King Darlin, speaking together about their battle plans. Aviendha joined Rand as he walked toward his tent.

“The dagger worked,” Rand said. He reached down and fingered the black sheath that held the dull dagger. “Artham. I had heard them spoken of, back in the Age of Legends, but nobody created one. I wonder who finally managed it…”

“Are you certain it worked?” Aviendha said. “He could have been watching you, but not exposed his hand.”

“No, I would have felt the attention,” Rand said. “It *did* work. With this, he won’t sense me until I step right up to the Bore. Once he does know I’m there, he will have trouble envisioning me, striking at me directly. Aviendha, that you should find this and identify it when you did, that Elayne should give it to me… The Pattern weaves us all where we need to be.” Rand smiled, then added, “Elayne sounded sad when she gave me the dagger. I think a part of her wanted to keep it because it would let her curse by the Dark One’s name without drawing his attention.”

“Is this really a time for levity?” Aviendha asked, scowling at him.

“If ever there was a need for laughter, this is it,” Rand said, though the laughter seemed to have left his voice. That anxiety of his returned as they reached his tent.

“What is troubling you?” Aviendha asked him.

“They have the seals,” Rand said.

“What!”

“Only Egwene knows, but it is true. They were stolen, perhaps from my hiding place, perhaps after I delivered them to Egwene.”

“Then they are broken.”

“No,” Rand said. “I would feel that. I think they must be waiting. Perhaps they know that in breaking the seals, they clear the way for me to reforge his prison. They’ll break them at just the wrong moment, to let the Dark One touch the world, perhaps to give him the strength to overwhelm me as I face him…”

“We will find a way to stop this,” Aviendha said, voice firm.

He looked to her and smiled. “Always the warrior.”

“Of course.” What else would she be?

“I have another concern. The Forsaken will try to strike at me when I enter to face him. The Dark One cannot see me, does not know where I am, and so is committing some of his forces to each of the different battlefronts. The Shadow pushes hard at Lan, trying to destroy him—the Dark One presses Elayne almost as badly in Cairhien. Only Egwene seems to be having some success.

“He searches for me at each of these battlefields, committing his creatures in large numbers. When we attack Shayol Ghul, we should be able to hold the valley against armies. The Forsaken, however, will come through gateways. Holding a pass will not stop them, or the Dreadlords, male or female. My confrontation with the Dark One will draw them as the cleansing did—only a thousand times more urgently. They will come, with fire and thunder, and they will kill.”

“So will we.”

“I'm counting on it,” Rand said. “But I cannot afford to take you into the cavern with me, Aviendha.”

She felt a sinking feeling, though she attacked it, stabbed it, left it to die. “I suspected. Do not think to send me away to safety, Rand al’Thor. You would—”

“I wouldn’t dare,” he said. “I’d fear for my life if I were to try—there isn’t any place that is safe, now. I cannot take you into the cavern because you will be needed out in the valley, watching for the Forsaken and the seals. I *need* you, Aviendha. I need all three of you to watch, to be my hands—my heart—during this fight. I am going to send Min to Egwene. Something is going to happen there, I’m certain. Elayne will fight in the south, and you ... I need you in the valley of Thakan’dar, watching my back.

“I will leave orders for the Aes Sedai and Asha’man, Aviendha. Ituralde leads our troops, but *you* command our channelers at Shayol Ghul. You must keep the enemy from entering the cavern after me. You are my spear in this battle. If they reach me while I am in the cavern, I will be helpless. What I must do will take all of me—all of my concentration, every scrap of power I have. I'll be like a babe lying in the wilderness, defenseless against the beasts."

"And how is this different from how you usually are, Rand al'Thor?" she asked.

He laughed. It felt good to be able to both see and feel that smile. "I thought you said this wasn't a time for levity."

"Someone must keep you humble," Aviendha said. "It would not do for you to think yourself something grand, simply because you save the world." He laughed again, leading her up to the tent where Min was. Nynaeve and Moiraine waited there, too, one with annoyance on her face, the other serenity. Nynaeve looked very odd with her hair not long enough to braid. Today, she'd pulled it up and pinned it back.

Moiraine sat quietly on a large stone, *Callandor*—the Sword That Is Not a Sword—lying across her lap, one hand resting protectively on its hilt. Thom sat beside her, whittling a stick and whistling softly to himself.

"You should have taken me, Rand," Nynaeve said, folding her arms. "You had work to do," Rand said. "You have tried as I instructed?"

"Time and time again," Nynaeve said. "There's no way around the flaw, Rand. You *cannot* use *Callandor.* It will be too dangerous."

Rand came up to Moiraine, reaching out his hand, and she lifted *Callandor* for him to take. He raised it up before him, looking through its crystalline substance. It started to glow softly. "Min, I have a task for you," he whispered. "Egwene is progressing well, and I feel her battlefront will be key. I wish you to go and watch her and the Seanchan Empress, whom I have asked to join that battlefront once their forces are ready."

"You would have the Seanchan join *Egwene's* battlefront?" Moiraine asked, aghast. "Is that wise?"

"I cannot tell wisdom from brashness these days," Rand said. "But I would feel better if someone were keeping an eye on those two factions. Min, will you do it?"

"I was hoping…" Min looked away.

Hoping he'd take her into the cavern, Aviendha thought. But of course he could not.

"I'm sorry, Min," Rand said. "But I need you."

"I will do it."

“Rand,” Nynaeve said. “You are taking *Callandor* when you attack him? Its weakness ... so long as you are channeling into that… *thing*, anyone can seize control of you. They can use you, and can draw the One Power through *Callandor* into you until it burns you out—leaving you powerless, and leaving them with the strength to level mountains, destroy cities.

“I will take it,” Rand said.

“But it’s a trap!” Nynaeve said.

“Yes,” Rand said, sounding tired. “A trap I must stride into and allow to spring shut upon me.” He laughed, suddenly, throwing his head back. “As always! Why should I be surprised? Spread the word, Nynaeve. Tell Ituralde, Rhuarc, King Darlin. Tomorrow, we invade Shayol Ghul and claim it as our own! If we must put our head into the lion’s mouth, let us make certain that he chokes upon our flesh!”

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CHAPTER 21

Not a Mistake to Ignore

Siuan rolled her shoulder. She grimaced at the sharp pain. “Yukiri,” she grumbled, “that weave of yours still needs work.”

The tiny Gray cursed softly, standing up from beside a soldier who had lost his hand. She hadn’t Healed him, instead leaving him to more mundane healers with bandages. To spend energy Healing this man would be a waste, as he would never fight again. They needed to save their strength for soldiers who could rejoin the battle.

It was brutal reasoning. Well, these were brutal times. Siuan and Yukiri moved on to the next soldier in the line of wounded. The man with the missing hand would survive without Healing. Probably. They had the Yellows in Mayene, but their energy was consumed in Healing Aes Sedai who had survived the escape and soldiers who could still fight.

All through the makeshift camp, set up on Arafellin soil east of the river’s ford, soldiers wept and groaned. So many wounded, and Siuan and Yukiri were among the few Aes Sedai left with any strength to Heal. Most of the others had drained themselves making gateways to bring their army out from between the two attacking forces.

The Sharans had attacked aggressively, but securing the White Tower’s camp had occupied them for a while, giving time for the army to flee. Pieces of it, at least.

Yukiri Delved the next man, then nodded. Siuan knelt down and began a Healing weave. She’d never been very good at this, and even with an *angreal*, it took a lot out of her. She brought the soldier back from the edge of death, Healing the wound in his side. He gasped, much of the energy for the Healing coming from his own body.

Siuan wavered, then fell to her knees in exhaustion. Light, she was as unsteady as a noblewoman her first day on the deck of a ship!

Yukiri looked her over, then reached out for the *angreal*, a small stone flower. “Go rest, Siuan.”

Siuan clenched her teeth, but handed over the *angreal*. The One Power slipped from her, and she let out a deep sigh, half-relieved and half-saddened at losing the beauty of *saidar.*

Yukiri moved to the next soldier. Siuan lay back where she was, her body complaining of its numerous bruises and aches. The events of the battle were a blur to her. She remembered young Gawyn Trakand bursting into the command tent, yelling that Egwene wanted the army to retreat.

Bryne had moved quickly, dropping a written order through the gateway in the floor. That was his newest method of passing commands—an arrow shaft with a note and a long ribbon tied to it, dropped through a gateway high above. There were no heads on the shafts, just a small stone to weight them.

Bryne had been restless before Gawyn appeared. He hadn't liked the way the battle had been playing out. The way the Trollocs moved had warned him that the Shadow had been planning something. Siuan was certain he'd already prepared the orders.

Then there had been the explosions in camp. And Yukiri yelling for them to jump *through* the hole in the floor. Light, she'd assumed the woman was mad! Mad enough to save all of their lives, apparently.

Burn me if I'm going to lie here like a piece of yesterday's catch on the deck, Siuan thought, staring up at the sky. She hauled herself to her feet and started stalking through the new camp.

Yukiri claimed her weave wasn't all *that* obscure, though Siuan had never heard of it. A massive cushion of Air, meant to cradle someone who had fallen a great distance. Crafting it had drawn the attention of the Sharans—*Sharans*, of all things!—but they'd escaped. She, Bryne, Yukiri and a few aides. Burn her, they'd gotten out, though that fall still made her wince to remember. And Yukiri kept saying she thought the weave might be the secret behind discovering how to fly! Fool woman. There was a good reason the Creator hadn't given people wings.

She found Bryne at the edge of the new camp, sitting exhausted on a stump. Two battle maps spread out by stones lay on the ground in front of him. The maps were wrinkled; he'd grabbed them as the tent started to explode around him.

Fool man, she thought. *Risking his life for a couple of pieces of paper.*

"…from reports," said General Haerm, the new commander of the Illianer Companions. "I'm sorry, my Lord. The scouts don't dare sneak too close to the old camp.”

“No sign of the Amyrlin?” Siuan asked.

Bryne and Haerm both shook their heads.

“Keep looking, young man.” Siuan wagged a finger at Haerm. He raised an eyebrow at her use of the word “young.” Burn this youthful face she’d been given. “I mean it. The Amyrlin is alive. You *find* her, you hear me?”

“I… Yes, Aes Sedai.” He showed some measure of respect, but not enough. These Illianers didn’t know how to treat Aes Sedai.

Bryne waved the man off, and for once, it didn’t look as if anyone was waiting to meet with him. Everyone was probably too exhausted. Their “camp” looked more like a collection of refugees from a terrible fire than it did an army. Most of the men had rolled themselves in cloaks and gone to sleep. Soldiers were better than sailors at sleeping whenever, and wherever, they could.

She couldn’t blame them. She’d been exhausted *before* the Sharans arrived. Now she was tired as death itself. She sat down on the ground beside Bryne’s stump.

“Arm still hurting you?” Bryne asked, reaching down to rub her shoulder.

“You can feel that it is,” Siuan grumbled.

“Merely trying to be pleasant, Siuan.”

“Don’t think I have forgotten that you’re to blame for this bruise.”

“Me?” Bryne said, sounding amused.

“You pushed me through the hole.”

“You didn’t seem ready to move.”

“I was just about to jump. I was almost there.”

“I’m certain,” Bryne said.

“It’s your fault,” Siuan insisted. “I tumbled. I hadn’t intended to tumble. And Yukiri’s weave… horrible thing.”

“It worked,” Bryne said. “I doubt many people can claim to have fallen three hundred paces and survived.”

“She was too eager,” Siuan said. “She was probably longing to make us jump, you know. All that talk about Traveling and weaves of movement…” She trailed off, partly because she was annoyed at herself. This day had gone poorly enough without her griping at Bryne. “How many did we lose?” Not a much better topic, but she needed to know. “Do we have reports yet?”

“Nearly one in two of the soldiers,” Bryne said softly.

Worse than she'd suspected. "And the Aes Sedai?"

"We have somewhere around two hundred and fifty left," Bryne said. "Though a number of those are in shock at having lost Warders."

That was more of a disaster. A hundred and twenty Aes Sedai dead in a matter of hours? The White Tower would require a very long time to recover from that.

"I'm sorry, Siuan," Bryne said.

"Bah," Siuan said, "most of them treated me like fish guts anyway. They resented me as Amyrlin, laughed when I was cast down, and then made a servant of me when I returned."

Bryne nodded, still rubbing her shoulder. He could feel that she was hurt, despite her words. There were good women among the dead. Many good sisters.

"She's out there," Siuan said stubbornly. "Egwene will surprise us, Bryne. You watch."

"If I'm watching, it won't be much of a surprise, will it?"

Siuan grunted. "Fool man."

"You're right," he said solemnly. "On both counts. I think Egwene *will* surprise us. I'm also a fool."

"Bryne…"

"I *am,* Siuan. How could I miss that they were stalling? They wanted to occupy us until this other force could gather. The Trollocs pulled back into those hills. A defensive move. Trollocs aren't defensive. I assumed they were trying to set up an ambush only, and that was why they were pulling back corpses and preparing to wait. If I'd attacked them earlier, this could have been avoided. I was too careful."

"A man who thinks all day about the catch he missed because of stormy weather ends up wasting time when the sky is clear."

"A clever proverb, Siuan," he said. "But there's a saying among generals, written by Fogh the Tireless. 'If you do not learn from your losses, you will be ruled by them.' I can't see how I let this happen. I've trained better than this, prepared better than this! It's *not* just a mistake I can ignore, Siuan. The Pattern itself is at stake."

He rubbed his forehead. In the dim light of the setting sun, he looked older, his face wrinkled, his hands frail. It was as if this battle had stolen decades from him. He sighed, hunching forward.

Siuan found herself at a loss for words.

They sat in silence.

* * *

Lyrelle waited outside the gates to the so-called Black Tower. It took every ounce of her training not to let her frustration show.

This entire expedition had been a disaster from the start. First, the Black Tower had refused them entry until the Reds had done their business, and that had been followed by the trouble with gateways. *That* had been followed by three bubbles of evil, two attempts by Darkfriends to murder the lot of them and the warning from the Amyrlin that the Black Tower had joined the Shadow to fight.

Lyrelle had sent most of her women to fight alongside Lan Mandragoran at the Amyrlin's insistence. She'd remained behind with a few sisters to watch the Black Tower. And now… now this. What to make of it?

"I can assure you," the young Asha'man said, "the danger has passed. We drove off the M'Hael and the others who turned to the Shadow. The rest of us walk in the Light."

Lyrelle turned to her companions. A representative from each Ajah, along with backup—sent for desperately this morning when the Asha'man had first approached her—in the form of thirty other sisters. They accepted Lyrelle's leadership here, if only reluctantly.

"We will discuss it," she said, dismissing the young Asha'man with a nod.

"What do we do?" Myrelle asked. The Green had been with Lyrelle from the start, one of the few that she'd not sent away, partially because she wanted the woman's Warders near. "If some of their members are fighting for the Shadow…"

"Gateways can be made again," Seaine said. "Something has changed about this place in the days since we felt that channeling inside."

"I don't trust it," Myrelle said.

"We must know for certain," Seaine said. "We cannot leave the Black Tower unattended during the Last Battle itself. We *must* see these men taken care of, one way or another." The Black Tower men claimed that only a few of their number had joined the Shadow, and that the channeling had been the result of an attack by the Black Ajah.

It galled her to hear them use those words. Black Ajah. For centuries, the White Tower had denied the existence of Darkfriends among Aes Sedai.

The truth had, unfortunately, been revealed. That didn't mean Lyrelle wanted to hear men tossing around the term so casually. Particularly men like these.

"If they'd wanted to attack us," Lyrelle said speculatively, "they'd have done it when we couldn't escape with gateways. For now, I will assume they have cleansed the… problems among their ranks. As was required of the White Tower itself."

"So we go in?" Myrelle asked.

"Yes. We bond the men we were promised, and from them draw out the truth, if it is obscured." It troubled Lyrelle that the Dragon Reborn had refused them the highest-ranking among the Asha'man, but Lyrelle had devised a plan when she first came here. It should still work. She would first ask for a display of channeling among the men, and would bond the one she felt was strongest. She would then have that one tell her which among the trainees were the most talented so her sisters could bond those.

From there… well, she hoped that would contain the majority of these men. Light, what a mess. Men who could *channel*, walking about unashamed! She did not accept this fable of the taint having been cleansed. Of course these… men… would claim such a thing.

"Sometimes," Lyrelle muttered, "I wish I could go back and slap myself for accepting this commission."

Myrelle laughed. She never *did* take events as seriously as she should. Lyrelle felt annoyed at having missed the chances to be had at the White Tower during her long absence. Reunification, fighting the Seanchan… These were the times when leadership could be proven, and a woman could gain a reputation for strength.

Opportunities appeared during times of upheaval. Opportunities now lost to her. Light, but she hated that thought.

"We will enter," she called up to the walls framing the gate before her. Then, more softly, she continued to her women: "Hold the One Power and be careful. We do not know what could happen here." Her women would be a match for a larger number of untrained Asha'man, if it came to that. It shouldn't, logically. Of course, the men *were* likely mad. So perhaps assuming logic from them was imprudent.

The large gates opened to allow her people in. It said something about these Black Tower men that they chose to finish the walls around their grounds before actually building their tower.

She kneed her horse forward, and Myrelle and the others followed in a clopping of hooves. Lyrelle embraced the Source and used the new weave, which would tell her if a man channeled nearby. It was not the young man from a short time ago who met them at the gates, however.

“What is this?” Lyrelle asked as she was joined by Pevara Tazanovni. Lyrelle knew the Red Sitter, though not well.

“I’ve been asked to accompany you,” Pevara said cheerfully. “Logain thought that a familiar face might make you more comfortable.”

Lyrelle held in a sneer. Aes Sedai should not be cheerful. Aes Sedai should be calm, collected, and—if anything else—stern. A man should look at an Aes Sedai and immediately wonder what he had done wrong and how he could fix it.

Pevara fell in beside her as they rode onto the grounds of the Black Tower. “Logain, who is in charge now, sends his regards,” Pevara continued. “He was gravely wounded in the attacks and has not yet fully recovered.”

“Will he be well?”

“Oh, certainly. He should be up and about in another day or two. He will be needed to lead the Asha’man as they join the Last Battle, I suspect.” *Pity*, Lyrelle thought. The Black Tower would have been more easily controlled without a false Dragon at their head. Better that he had died.

“I am certain his aid will be useful,” Lyrelle said. “His leadership, however… Well, we shall see. Tell me, Pevara. I have been told that bonding a man who can channel is different from bonding a normal man. Have you been through the process?”

“Yes,” Pevara said.

“Is it true, then?” Lyrelle asked. “Ordinary men can be compelled with the bond to obey, but not these Asha’man?”

Pevara smiled, seeming wistful. “Ah, what would that be like? No, the bond cannot force Asha’man. You will have to use more inventive means.” That was not good. “How obedient are they?” Aledrin asked from the other side.

“It depends on the man, I suspect,” Pevara said.

“If they cannot be forced,” Lyrelle said, “will they obey their Aes Sedai in battle?”

“Probably,” Pevara said, though there was something ambiguous about the way she said it. “I must tell you something, all of you. The mission I was sent on, and the one you also pursue, is a fool's errand."

"Is that so?" Lyrelle asked evenly. She was hardly going to trust a Red after what they had done to Siuan. "Why is that?"

"I was once where you are," Pevara said. "Ready to bond all of the Asha'man in an attempt to control them. But would you ride into another city and select fifty men there, at a whim, and bond them as Warders? Bonding the Asha'man just to bond them is foolish. It will not control them. I do think some Asha'man will make excellent Warders, but—like many men— others will not. I suggest that you abandon your plan to bond exactly forty-seven and take those who are most willing. You will gain better Warders."

"Interesting advice," Lyrelle said. "But, as you mentioned, the Asha'man will be needed at the battlefront. There is not time. We will take the forty-seven most powerful."

Pevara sighed, but said nothing further as they passed several men in black coats with two pins on the high collars. Lyrelle felt her skin crawling, as if insects burrowed beneath it. Men who could channel.

Lelaine felt that the Black Tower was vital to the White Tower's plans. Well, Lyrelle did not belong to Lelaine. She was her own person, and a Sitter in her own right. If she could find a way to bring the Black Tower under her direct authority, then perhaps she could finally wiggle out from under Lelaine's thumb.

For that prize, bonding Asha'man was worthwhile. Light, but she wasn't going to enjoy it. They needed all of these men controlled, somehow. The Dragon would be growing mad, unreliable by this point, tainted by the Dark One's touch on *saidin*. Could he be manipulated into letting the rest of the men be bonded?

Not having control through the bond. . . that will be dangerous. She imagined going into battle with ranks of two or three dozen Asha'man, bonded and forced to her will. How could she make it happen?

They reached a line of men in black coats waiting at the edge of the village. Lyrelle and the others approached them, and Lyrelle did a quick count. Forty-seven men, including the one standing at the front. What trick were they trying to pull?

The one at the front came forward. He was a sturdy man in his middle years, and he looked as if he'd recently suffered some kind of ordeal. He had bags under his eyes and wan skin. His step was firm, however, and his gaze steady as he met Lyrelle's eyes, then bowed to her.

"Welcome, Aes Sedai," he said.

"And you are?"

"Androl Genhald," he said. "I've been put in charge of your forty-seven until they have been bonded."

"My forty-seven? I see that you have forgotten the terms already. We are to be given any soldier or Dedicated we wish, and they cannot refuse us."

"Yes, indeed," Androl said. "That is true. Unfortunately, all of the men in the Black Tower other than these are either full Asha'man, or have been called away on urgent business. The others would, of course, follow the Dragon's commands if they were here. We made certain to keep forty-seven for you. Actually, forty-six. I've already been bonded by Pevara Sedai, you see."

"We will wait until the others return," Lyrelle said coldly.

"Alas," Androl said, "I do not think they will return any time soon. If you intend to join the Last Battle, you will have to make your selections quickly."

Lyrelle narrowed her eyes at him, then looked at Pevara, who shrugged.

"This is a trick," Lyrelle said to Androl. "And a childish one."

"I thought it clever myself," Androl returned, voice cool. "Worthy of an Aes Sedai, one might say. You were promised that any member of the Black Tower, save full Asha'man, would respond to your request. They will. Any of them to whom you can *make* the request."

"Undoubtedly, you chose for me the weakest among your numbers."

"Actually," Androl said, "we took those who volunteered. They are good men, every one of them. They are the ones who wanted to be Warders."

"The Dragon Reborn will hear of this."

"From what I've heard," Androl said, "he's heading to Shayol Ghul any time now. Are you going to join him there just to make your complaint?"

Lyrelle drew her lips into a line.

"Here's the thing, Aes Sedai," Androl said. "The Dragon Reborn sent a message to us, just earlier today. He instructed us to learn one last lesson: that we're not to think of ourselves as weapons, but as men. Well, men have a choice in their fate, and weapons do not. Here are your *men*, Aes Sedai. Respect them."

Androl bowed again and walked away. Pevara hesitated, then turned her horse, following him. Lyrelle saw something in the woman’s face as she looked at the man.

So that is it, Lyrelle thought. *No better than a Green, that one is. I would have expected more of one her age.*

Lyrelle was tempted to refuse this manipulation, to go to the Amyrlin and protest what had happened. Only… news from the Amyrlin’s battle-front was jumbled. Something about an unexpected army appearing; details were not available.

Certainly the Amyrlin would not be happy to hear complaints at this point. And certainly, Lyrelle admitted to herself, she also wanted to be done with the Black Tower.

“Each of you pick two,” Lyrelle said to her companions. “A few of us will take only one. Faolain and Theodrin, you are among those. Be quick about it, all of you. I want away from this place as soon as possible.”

Pevara caught up to Androl as he slipped into one of the huts.

“Light,” she said. “I’d forgotten how *cold* some of us can be.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Androl replied. “I’ve heard that some of you aren’t quite so bad.”

“Be careful of them, Androl,” she said, looking back out. “Many will see you as only a threat or a tool to be used.”

“We won you over,” Androl said, walking into a room where Canler, Jonneth and Emarin waited with cups of warm tea. All three were beginning to recover from the fighting, Jonneth most quickly. Emarin bore the worst scars, most of them emotional. He, like Logain, had been subjected to the Turning process. Pevara noticed him staring blankly, sometimes, face etched by fear as if remembering something horrible.

“You three shouldn’t be here,” Pevara said, hands on hips, facing Emarin and the other two. “I know Logain promised you advancement, but you still wear only the sword on your collars. If any of those women saw you, they could take you as Warders.”

“They won’t see us,” Jonneth said with a laugh. “Androl would have us through a gateway before we had time to curse!”

“So what do we do now?” Canler asked.

“Whatever Logain wishes of us,” Androl said.

Logain had… changed since the ordeal. Androl whispered to her that he was darker now. He spoke less. He did still seem determined to get to the Last Battle, but for now, he gathered the men in and pored over things they'd found in Taim's rooms. Pevara worried that the Turning had broken him inside.

"He thinks there might be something in those battle maps he found in Taim's chambers," Emarin said.

"We'll go where Logain decides we can be of most use," Androl replied. A straightforward answer, but one that didn't actually say much.

"And what of the Lord Dragon?" Pevara asked carefully.

She felt Androl's uncertainty. The Asha'man Naeff had come to them, bearing news and instructions—and with them, some implications. The Dragon Reborn had known all was not well at the Black Tower.

"He left us alone on purpose," Androl said.

"He would have come if he could have!" Jonneth said. "I promise you."

"He left us to escape on our own," Emarin said, "or to fall on our own. He has become a harsh man. Perhaps callous."

"It doesn't matter," Androl said. "The Black Tower has learned to survive without him. Light! It always survived without him. He barely had anything to do with us. It was Logain who gave us hope. It is Logain who will have my allegiance."

The others nodded. Pevara felt something important happening here. *They couldn't have leaned upon him forever anyway,* she thought. *The Dragon Reborn will die at the Last Battle*. By intention or not, he had given them the chance to become their own men.

"I will take his last order to heart, however," Androl said. "I will not be merely a weapon. The taint is cleansed. We fight not to die, but to live. We have a *reason* to live. Spread the word among the other men, and let us take oaths to uphold Logain as our leader. And then, to the Last Battle. Not as minions of the Dragon Reborn, not as pawns of the Amyrlin Seat, but as the Black Tower. Our own men."

"Our own men," the other three whispered, nodding.

* * *

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CHAPTER 22

The Wyld

Egwene was shocked awake as Gawyn clamped his hand over her mouth. She tensed, memories returning like the light of a sunrise. They were still hiding beneath the broken cart; the air still smelled of burned wood. The land nearby was dark as coal. Night had fallen.

She looked to Gawyn and nodded. Had she really drifted off? She wouldn’t have thought it possible, under the circumstances.

“I’m going to try to slip away,” Gawyn whispered, “and make a distraction.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“I can go more quietly.”

“Obviously you’ve never tried to sneak up on someone from the Two Rivers, Gawyn Trakand,” she said. “I’d bet you a hundred Tar Valon marks that I’m the quieter of us two.”

“Yes,” Gawyn whispered, “but if you draw within a dozen steps of one of their channelers, you’ll be spotted, no matter how quiet. They’ve been patrolling through camp, particularly at the perimeters.”

She frowned. How did he know that? “You went out scouting.”

“A little,” he whispered. “I wasn’t seen. They’re scavenging through the tents, taking captive anyone they find. We won’t be able to hide here much longer.”

He should not have gone out without asking her. “We—”

Gawyn stiffened, and Egwene cut off, listening. Feet, shuffling. The two of them pulled back, watching as ten or twelve captives were led into an open space near where the command tent had stood. Sharans placed torches on poles around the ragged prisoners. A few of these were soldiers, beaten to the point where they could barely walk. There were cooks and laborers as well. They had been lashed, their trousers frayed. All of their shirts had been removed.

On their backs, someone had tattooed a symbol that Egwene did not recognize. At least, she thought they were tattoos. The symbols might have been burned into them.

As the captives were gathered, someone yelled nearby. In a few minutes, a dark-skinned Sharan guard walked up, dragging a young messenger boy he'd apparently found hiding in camp. He ripped off the boys shirt and shoved him, crying, to the ground. The Sharans, oddly, wore clothing that had a large diamond shape cut out of the back. Egwene could see that the guard bore a mark on his own back, a tattoo she could barely make out against his dark skin. His clothing was very formal, with a large, stiff robe that came almost to his knees. It didn’t have sleeves, but underneath he wore a shirt, with a diamond cut-out, that had long sleeves.

Another Sharan came out of the darkness, and this man was almost completely naked. He wore ripped trousers, but no shirt. Instead of a tattoo on his back, he had tattoos all across his shoulders. They crept up his neck, like twisted vines, before reaching up to cup his jaw and cheeks. They looked like a hundred twisted hands, long fingers with claws holding his head from below.

This man went over to the kneeling messenger boy. The other guards shuffled; they weren’t comfortable with this fellow, whoever he was. He held out a hand, sneering.

The boy’s back burned, suddenly, with a tattoo mark like that of the other captives. Smoke rose, and the boy cried out in pain. Gawyn exhaled softly in shock. That man with the tattoos running up onto his face… that man could channel.

Several of the guards muttered. She could *almost* understand the words, but they had a thick accent. The channeler snapped like a feral dog. The guards stepped back, and the channeler prowled off, disappearing into the shadows.

Light! Egwene thought.

Rustling in the darkness resolved into two women in the wide silk dresses. One had lighter skin, and as Egwene searched, she found that some of the soldiers did, too. Not all Sharans were dark as the fellows she’d seen so far.

The women’s faces were very beautiful. Delicate. Egwene shrank back. From what she had seen earlier, these two would probably be channelers. If they stepped too close to Egwene, they might sense her.

The two women inspected the captives. By the light of their lanterns, Egwene made out tattoos on their faces as well, though theirs were not as disturbing as those upon the men. These were like leaves, tattooed from the back of the neck forward, going under the ears and spreading like blossoms on the cheeks. The two women whispered to one another, and again Egwene felt as if she could almost understand them. If she could weave a thread to listen—

Idiot, she thought. Channeling would get her killed here.

Others gathered around the captives. Egwene held her breath. A hundred, two hundred, more people approached. They did not talk much; they seemed a quiet, solemn people, these Sharans. Most of those who came had open backs to their garments, revealing their tattoos. Were those symbols of status?

She had assumed that the more important one was, the more intricate the tattoos. However, officers—she had to assume that was what they were, with their feathered helmets and fine silken coats and golden armor made as if of coins that had been sewn together through the holes at their centers—they had only small openings, revealing tiny tattoos at the base of shoulders.

They've removed pieces of armor to display the tattoos, she thought. Surely they did not do battle with the skin exposed. This was something done during more formal times.

The last people who joined the crowd—ushered to the front—were the strangest of all. Two men and a woman atop small donkeys, all three wearing beautiful silk skirts, their animals draped with gold and silver chains. Plumes of vibrant colors fanned out from intricate headdresses upon these three. They were nude from the waist up, including the woman, save for the jewelry and necklaces that covered much of their chests. Their backs were exposed, their heads shaven just on the back to show their necks. There were no tattoos.

So… lords of some sort? Except all three had hollow, haunted expressions. They slumped forward, eyes down, faces wan. Their arms seemed thin, almost skeletal. So frail. What had been done to these people?

It made no sense to her. The Sharans were undoubtedly a people as baffling as the Aiel, probably more so. *But why come now?* Egwene thought. *Why, after centuries upon centuries of isolation, have they finally decided to invade?*

There were no coincidences, not of this magnitude. These had come to ambush Egwene's people, and had worked with the Trollocs. She let herself seize upon that. Whatever she learned here would be of vital importance. She could not help her army right now—Light send that some of its members, at least, had managed to flee—so she should learn what she could.

Gawyn prodded her softly. She looked to him, and felt his worry for her.

Now? he mouthed, gesturing behind them. Perhaps, with everyone's attention drawn by… whatever was happening, the two of them could sneak away. They started to back up, shuffling quietly.

One of the Sharan channelers called out. Egwene froze. She'd been spotted!

No. No. Egwene breathed deeply, trying to calm her heart, which seemed to be trying to beat its way out through her chest. The woman was speaking to the others. Egwene thought she'd heard the words "It is done" through the thick accent.

The group of people knelt down. The bejeweled trio bowed their heads further. And then, near the captives, the air *bent.*

Egwene couldn't describe it any other way. It warped and… and seemed to rip apart, twisting like it did above the road on a hot day. Something formed from this disruption: a tall man in glistening armor.

He wore no helmet and had dark hair and light skin. His nose was slightly hooked, and he was very handsome, particularly in that armor. It looked to be constructed all of *coins,* silvery and overlapping. The coins were polished to such a shine, they reflected the faces around him like a mirror.

"You have done well," the man announced to those bowing before him. "You may stand." His voice bore hints of the Sharan accent, but it was not nearly as thick.

The man placed his hand on the pommel of the sword at his waist as the others rose. From the darkness behind, a group of the channelers crawled forward. They bobbed for this newcomer in a kind of bow. He removed one of his gauntlets, reached out with an offhanded gesture and scratched the head of one of the men, as a lord might favor a hound.

"So these are the new *inacal,*" the man said speculatively. "Do any of you know who I am?"

The captives cringed before him. Though the Sharans had risen, the captives were smart enough to remain on the ground. None of them spoke.

"I suspected not," the man said. "Though one can never tell if one's fame has spread unexpectedly. Tell me, if you know who I am. Speak it, and I will let you free."

No replies.

"Well, you will listen and remember," the man said. "I am Bao, the Wyld. I am your savior. I have crawled through the depths of sorrow and have risen up to accept my glory. I have come seeking what was taken from me. Remember that."

The captives cowered further, obviously uncertain what to do. Gawyn tugged on Egwene's sleeve, motioning backward, but she did not move. There was something about that man…

He looked up suddenly. He focused on the women channelers, then gazed about, peering into the darkness. "Do any of you *inacal* know the Dragon?" he asked, though he sounded distracted. "Speak up. Tell me."

"I did see him," said one of the captive soldiers. "Several times."

"Did you speak with him?" Bao asked, strolling away from the captives.

"No, great Lord," the soldier said. "The Aes Sedai, they did speak with him. Not I."

"Yes. I worried you would be of no use," Bao said. "Servants, we are being watched. You have not searched this camp as well as you claimed. I sense a woman nearby who can channel."

Egwene felt a spike of alarm. Gawyn pulled on her arm, meaning to go, but if they ran, they'd be captured for certain. Light! She—

The crowd turned at a sudden noise near one of the fallen tents. Bao raised a hand, and Egwene heard a furious yell in the darkness. Moments later, Leane floated through the crowd of Sharans, tied in Air, her eyes wide. Bao brought her up close to him, holding her wrapped in weaves that Egwene could not see.

Her heart continued to pound. Leane was alive. How had she remained hidden? Light! What could Egwene do?

"Ah," Bao said. "One of these… Aes Sedai. You, you have spoken with the Dragon?"

Leane didn't respond. To her credit, she kept her face blank.

"Impressive," Bao said, reaching up fingers and touching her chin. He held up another hand, and the collected captives suddenly started to writhe and scream. They burst into flames, yelling in agony. Egwene had to forcibly stop herself from reaching for the True Source as she watched. She was crying by the time it ended, though she did not remember starting.

The Sharans shuffled.

“Do not be displeased,” Bao said to them. “I know you went to great trouble to take some alive for me, but they would have made poor *inacal*. They are not raised to it, and during this war, we do not have time to train them. Killing them now is a mercy compared to what they would have had to endure. Besides, this one, this… Aes Sedai will serve our purpose.”

Leane’s mask had cracked, and despite the distance, Egwene could see her hatred.

Bao still had her chin cupped in his hand. “You are a beautiful thing,” he said. “Unfortunately, beauty is meaningless. You are to deliver a message for me, Aes Sedai, to Lews Therin. The one who calls himself the Dragon Reborn. Tell him that I have come to slay him, and in so doing, I will claim this world. I will take what originally should have been mine. Tell him that. Tell him you have seen me, and describe me to him. He will know me.

“Just as the people here awaited him with prophecy, just as they showered him with glory, the people of *my* land awaited me. I have fulfilled their prophecies. He is false, and I am true. Tell him I will finally have satisfaction. He is to come to me, so that we may face one another. If he does not, I will slaughter and destroy. I will seize his people. I will enslave his children, I will take his women for my own. One by one, I will break, destroy, or dominate everything he has loved. The only way for him to avoid this is for him to come and face me.

“Tell him this, little Aes Sedai. Tell him that an old friend awaits. I am Bao, the Wyld. He Who Is Owned Only by the Land. The dragonslayer. He knew me once by a name I have scorned, the name Barid Bel.”

Barid Bel? Egwene thought, memories from her lessons in the White Tower returning to her. *Barid Bel Medar… Demandred.*

The storm in the wolf dream was a changeable thing. Perrin spent hours prowling the Borderlands, visiting packs of wolves as he ran down dry riverbeds and across broken hills.

Gaul had learned quickly. He wouldn’t stand for a moment against Slayer, of course, but at least he had learned to keep his clothing from changing— though his veil did still snap up to cover his face when he was startled.

The two of them bounded through Kandor, leaving blurs in the air as they moved from hilltop to hilltop. The storm was sometimes strong, sometimes weak. At the moment, Kandor was hauntingly still. The grassy highland landscape was strewn with all kinds of debris. Tents, roofing tiles, the sail of a large ship, even a blacksmith’s anvil, deposited point-first into a muddy hillside.

The dangerously powerful storm could arise anywhere in the wolf dream and rip apart cities or forests. He’d found Tairen hats blown all the way to Shienar.

Perrin came to rest on a hilltop, Gaul streaking into place beside him. How long had they been searching for Slayer? A few hours, it seemed on one hand. On the other… how much ground had they crossed? They had returned to their food stores now three times to eat. Did that mean a day had passed?

“Gaul,” Perrin said. “How long have we been at this?”

“I cannot say, Perrin Aybara,” Gaul replied. He checked for the sun, though there was none. “A long while. Will we need to stop and sleep?”

That was a good question. Perrin's stomach suddenly growled, and he made them a meal of dried meat and a hunk of bread. He gave some to Gaul. Would summoned bread sustain them in the wolf dream, or would it merely vanish once they consumed it?

The latter. The food vanished even as Perrin ate it. They would need to rely upon their supplies, perhaps getting more from Rand’s Asha’man during the daily opening of that portal. For now, he *shifted* back to their packs and dug out some dried meat, then rejoined Gaul in the north.

As they settled down on the hillside to eat again, he found himself dwelling on the dreamspike. He carried it with him, turned to its slumbering position, as Lanfear had taught him. It made no dome now, but he could make one when he wished.

Lanfear had all but given it to him. What did that mean? Why did she taunt him?

He ripped at a hunk of dried meat. Was Faile safe? If the Shadow discovered what she was doing… Well, he wished he could at least check on her.

He took a long drink from his waterskin, then searched outward for the wolves. There were hundreds of them up here, in the Borderlands. Perhaps thousands. He gave those nearby a greeting, sending his scent mixed with his image. The dozen replies that came were not words, but his mind understood them as such.

Young Bull! This from a wolf named White Eyes. *The Last Hunt is here. Will you lead us?*

Many asked this, lately, and Perrin couldn't figure out how to interpret it. *Why do you need me to lead you?*

It will be by your call' White Eyes replied. *By your howl.*

I don't understand what you mean, Perrin sent. *Can you not hunt on your own?*

Not this prey, Young Bull.

Perrin shook his head. A response like others he'd received. *White Eyes,* he sent. *Have you seen Slayer? The killer of wolves? Has he stalked you here?*

Perrin sent it out broadly, and some of the other wolves replied. They knew of Slayer. His image and scent had been passed among many wolves, much as had Perrin's own. None had seen him recently, but time was an odd thing to wolves; Perrin wasn't certain how recent their "recently" really was.

Perrin took a bite of dried meat, and caught himself growling softly. He stifled that. He had come to a peace with the wolf inside of him, but that didn't mean he intended to let it start tracking mud into the house.

Young Bull, another wolf sent. Turn Bow, an aged female pack leader. *Moonhunter walks the dreams again. She seeks you.*

Thank you, he sent back. *I know this. I will avoid her.*

Avoid the moon? Turn Bow sent back. *A difficult thing, Young Bull. Difficult.*

She had the right of that.

I saw Heartseeker just now, sent Steps, a black-furred youth. *She wears a new scent, but it is her.*

Other wolves sent agreement. Heartseeker was in the wolf dream. Some had seen her to the east, but others said that she had been seen to the south.

But what of Slayer? Where was the man, if not hunting wolves? Perrin caught himself growling again.

Heartseeker. That must be one of the Forsaken, though he didn't recognize the images they sent of her. She was ancient, and so were the memories of wolves, but often the things they remembered were fragments of fragments that their ancestors had seen.

"Any news?" Gaul said.

"Another one of the Forsaken is here," Perrin said with a grunt. "Doing something to the east."

"Does it involve us?"

"The Forsaken always involve us," Perrin said, standing. He reached down, touched Gaul on the shoulder and *shifted* them in the direction Steps had indicated. The position wasn't exact, but once Perrin arrived, he found some wolves who had seen Heartseeker on their way to the Borderlands the day before. They sent Perrin eager greetings, asking if he was going to lead them.

He rebuffed their questions, pinpointing where Heartseeker had been spotted. It was Merrilor.

Perrin *shifted* there. A strange mist hung over the landscape here. Tall trees, the ones Rand had grown, reflected here, and their lofty tops poked out of the mist above.

Tents dotted the landscape, like the tops of mushrooms. Aiel tents were plentiful, and between them cook fires glowed in the mist. This camp had been here long enough to manifest in the wolf dream, though tent flaps changed places and bedrolls vanished, flickering in the insubstantial way of this place.

Perrin led Gaul between the neat rows of tents and horseless horse pickets. They both froze as they heard a sound. Someone muttering. Perrin used the trick he'd seen Lanfear use, creating a pocket of. . . something around himself that was invisible, but which stopped sound. It was strange, but he did it by creating a barrier with no air in it. Why would that make the sound stop?

He and Gaul crept forward to the canvas of a tent. That of the man Rodel Ituralde, one of the great captains, judging by the banner. Inside, a woman in trousers picked through documents on a table. They kept vanishing in her fingers.

Perrin didn't recognize her, though she was painfully homely. That certainly wasn't what he'd have expected from one of the Forsaken; not that large forehead, bulbous nose, uneven eyes or thinning hair. He didn't recognize her curses, though he grasped the meaning from her tone.

Gaul looked at him, and Perrin reached for his hammer, but hesitated. Attacking Slayer was one thing, but one of the Forsaken? He was confident of his ability to resist weaves here in the wolf dream. But still…

The woman cursed again as the paper she was reading vanished. Then she looked up.

Perrin's reaction was immediate. He created a paper-thin wall between her and him, her side painted with an exact replica of the landscape behind him, his side transparent. She looked right at him, but didn't see him, and turned away.

Beside him, Gaul let out a very soft breath of relief. *How did I do that?* Perrin thought. It wasn't something he had practiced; it had merely seemed *right.*

Heartseeker—this had to be she—waved her fingers, and the tent split in half above her, the canvas flaps hanging down. She rose through the air, moving toward the black tempest above.

Perrin whispered to Gaul, "Wait here and watch for danger."

Gaul nodded. Perrin cautiously followed Heartseeker, lifting himself into the air with a thought. He tried to form another wall between himself and her, but it was too difficult to keep the right image displayed while moving. Instead, he kept his distance and put a blank brownish-green wall between him and the Forsaken, hoping that if she happened to glance down, she'd pass over the small oddity.

She began to move more quickly, and Perrin forced himself to keep up.

He glanced down, and was rewarded with the stomach-churning sight of Merrilor's landscape dwindling below. Then it grew dark and vanished into blackness.

They didn't pass through the clouds. As the ground faded away, so did the clouds, and they entered someplace black. Pinpricks of light appeared all around Perrin. The woman above stopped and hung in the air for a few moments before streaking away to the right.

Perrin followed again, coloring himself—his skin, his clothing, everything—black to hide. The woman approached one of the pinpricks of light until it expanded and dominated the sky in front of her.

Heartseeker reached her hands forward and pressed them against the light. She was muttering to herself. Feeling he *needed* to hear what she was saying, Perrin dared move closer, though he suspected that the pounding of his heart was so loud it would give him away.

"…take it from me?" she said. "You think I care? Give me a face of broken stone. What do I care? That's not *me*. I will have your place, Moridin. It *will be mine.* This face will just make them underestimate me. Burn you." Perrin frowned. He couldn't make much sense of what she was saying. "Go ahead and throw your armies at them, you fools," she continued to herself. "I'll have the greater victory. An insect can have a thousand legs, but only one head. Destroy the head, and the day is yours. All you're doing is cutting off the legs, stupid fool. Stupid, arrogant, *insufferable* fool. I'll have what is due me, I'll…"

She hesitated, then pivoted. Perrin, spooked, immediately sent himself back to the ground. It worked, thankfully—he hadn't known if it would, up in that place of lights. Gaul jumped, and Perrin took a deep breath. "Let's —"

A ball of blazing fire crashed into the ground beside him. Perrin cursed and rolled, cooling himself with a gust of wind, imagining his hammer up into his hand.

Heartseeker dropped to the ground in a wave of energy, power rippling around her. "Who are you?" she demanded. "Where are you? I—"

She focused suddenly on Perrin, seeing him completely for the first time, the blackness having faded from his clothing. "You!" she screeched. "You are to blame for this!"

She raised her hands; her eyes almost seemed to *glow* with hatred. Perrin could smell the emotion in spite of the blowing wind. She released a white-hot bar of light, but Perrin bent it around himself.

The woman started. They always did that. Didn't they realize that nothing was real here except what you thought to be real? Perrin vanished, appearing behind her, raising his hammer. Then he hesitated. A woman?

She spun about, screaming and ripping the earth beneath him. He jumped up into the sky, and the air around him tried to seize him—but he did what he'd done before, creating a wall of nothingness. There was no air to grab him. Holding his breath, he vanished and appeared back on the ground, summoning banks of earth in front of him to block the balls of fire that hurtled his way.

"I want you dead!" the woman screamed. "You *should be* dead. My plans were perfect!"

Perrin vanished, leaving behind a statue of himself. He appeared beside the tent, where Gaul watched carefully, spear raised. Perrin put a wall between them and the woman, coloring it to hide them, and made a barrier to block the sound.

"She can't hear us now," Perrin said.

"You are strong here," Gaul said thoughtfully. "Very strong. Do the Wise Ones know of this?"

"I'm still a pup compared to them," Perrin said.

"Perhaps," Gaul said. "I have not seen them, and they do not speak of this place to men." He shook his head. "Much honor, Perrin Aybara. You have much honor."

"I should have just struck her down," Perrin said as Heartseeker destroyed the statue of him, then stepped up to it, looking confused. She turned about, searching frantically.

"Yes," Gaul agreed. "A warrior who will not strike a Maiden is a warrior who refuses her honor. Of course, the greater honor for you . . "

Would be to take her captive. Could he do it? Perrin took a breath, then sent himself behind her, imagining vines reaching around her to hold her in place. The woman howled curses at him, slicing the vines with unseen blades. She reached her hand toward Perrin, and he *shifted* to the side.

His feet crunched on bits of frost on the ground that he hadn't noticed, and she immediately spun on him and released another weave of balefire. *Clever,* Perrin thought, barely managing to bend the light away. It struck the hillside behind, drilling a hole straight through it.

Heartseeker continued the weave, snarling, hideous face distorted. The weave bent back toward Perrin, and he gritted his teeth, keeping it at bay. She *was* strong. She pushed hard, but finally, she released it, panting. "How… how can you possibly…"

Perrin filled her mouth with forkroot. It was difficult to do; changing anything directly about a person was always harder. However, this was much easier than trying to transform her into an animal or the like. She raised a hand to her mouth, eyes adopting a look of panic. She began to spit and hack, then desperately opened a gateway beside her.

Perrin growled, imagining ropes reaching for her, but she destroyed them with a weave of Fire—she must have gotten the forkroot out. She hurled herself through the gateway, and he *shifted* himself to be right in front of it, preparing to leap through. He froze when he saw her entering the middle of an enormous army of Trollocs and Fades at night. Many faced the gateway, eager.

Perrin stepped back as Heartseeker raised a hand to her mouth, looking aghast and coughing out more forkroot. The gateway closed.

“You should have killed her,” Lanfear said.

Perrin turned to find the woman standing nearby, her arms folded. Her hair had changed from silver to dark brown. In fact, her face had changed, too, becoming slightly more like it had been before, when he’d first seen her nearly two years ago.

Perrin said nothing, returning his hammer to its straps.

“This is a weakness, Perrin,” Lanfear said. “I found it charming in Lews Therin at one point, but that doesn’t make it any less a weakness. You need to overcome it.”

“I will,” he snapped. “What was she doing, up there with the balls of light?”

“Invading dreams,” Lanfear said. “She was here in the flesh. That affords one certain advantages, particularly when playing with dreams. That hussy. She thinks she knows this place, but it has always been mine. It would have been best if you’d killed her.”

“That was Graendal, wasn’t it?” Perrin asked. “Or was it Moghedien?”

“Graendal,” Lanfear said. “Though, again, we are not to use that name for her. She’s been renamed Hessalam.”

“Hessalam,” Perrin said, trying the word out in his mouth. “I don’t know it.”

“It means ‘without forgiveness.’ ”

“And what is your new name, the one we’re supposed to call you, now?”

That actually pulled a blush out of her. “Never mind,” she said. “You are skilled here in *Tel’aran’rhiod.* Much better than Lews Therin ever was. I always thought I would rule at his side, that only a man who could channel would be worthy of me. But the power you display here ... I think I may accept it as a substitute.”

Perrin grunted. Gaul had moved across the small clearing between the camp tents, spear raised, *shoufa* covering his face. Perrin waved him off. Not only was Lanfear likely to be *much* better with the wolf dream than Gaul, but she hadn’t done anything specifically threatening yet.

“If you've been watching me,” Perrin said, “you’ll know that I’m married, quite happily.”

“So I have seen.”

“Then stop looking at me like a flank of beef hung up for display in the market,” Perrin growled. “What was Graendal doing here? What does she want?”

“I’m not certain,” Lanfear said lightly. “She always has three or four plots going at the same time. Don’t underestimate her, Perrin. She’s not as skilled here as some others, but she *is* dangerous. She’s a fighter, unlike Moghedien, who will run from you whenever she can.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Perrin said, walking up to the place where she’d vanished by gateway. He prodded at the earth where the gateway had cut the ground.

“You could do that, you know,” Lanfear said.

He spun on her. “What?”

“Go back and forth into the waking world,” she said. “Without requiring the help of one like Lews Therin.”

Perrin didn’t like the way she sneered when she said his name. She tried to cover it up, but he smelled hatred on her whenever she mentioned him.

“I can’t channel,” Perrin said. “I suppose I could imagine being able to…”

“It wouldn’t work,” she said. “There are limits to what one can accomplish here, regardless of how strong the mind. The ability to channel is not a thing of the body, but a thing of the soul. There *are* still ways for one such as you to move back and forth between worlds in the flesh. The one you call Slayer does it.”

“He’s not a wolfbrother.”

“No,” she said. “But he is something similar. I’m honestly not certain another has had his skills before. The Dark One did… something to this Slayer when capturing his soul, or his souls. I suspect Semirhage might have been able to tell us more. It’s a pity she’s dead.”

Lanfear didn’t smell of pity at all. She glanced at the sky, but was calm, not worried.

“You don’t seem as worried about being spotted as you once were,” Perrin noted.

“My former master is… occupied. This last week watching you, I’ve rarely felt his eyes on me.”

“Week?” Perrin asked, shocked. “But—”

“Time passes oddly here,” she said, “and the barriers of time itself are fraying. The closer you are to the Bore, the more time will distort. For those who approach Shayol Ghul in the real world, it will be just as bad. For every day that passes to them, three or four might pass to those more distant.”

A week? Light! How much had happened on the outside? Who lived, and who had died, while Perrin hunted? He should wait at the Traveling ground for his portal to open. But, judging by the darkness he’d seen through Graendal’s gateway, it was night. Perrin’s escape portal could be hours away.

“You could make a gateway for me,” Perrin said. “A pathway out, then back in. Will you?”

Lanfear considered it, strolling past one of the flickering tents and letting her fingers trail on the canvas as it vanished. “No,” she finally said.

“But—”

“You must learn to do this thing for yourself if we are to be together.”

“We’re *not* going to be together,” he said flatly.

“You need this power of and for yourself,” she said, ignoring what he had said. “You are weak so long as you are trapped only in one of the worlds; being able to come here when you want will give you great power.”

“I don’t care about power, Lanfear,” he said, watching her as she continued to stroll. She *was* pretty. Not as pretty as Faile, of course. Beautiful nonetheless.

“Don’t you?” She faced him. “Have you never thought of what you could do with more strength, more power, more authority?”

“That won’t tempt me to—”

“Save lives?” she said. “Prevent children from starving? Stop the weak from being bullied, end wickedness, reward honor? Power to encourage men to be straightforward and honest with one another?”

He shook his head.

“You could do so much good, Perrin Aybara,” she said, walking up to him, then touching the side of his face, running her fingers down his beard.

“Tell me how to do what Slayer does,” Perrin said, pushing her hand away. “How does he move between worlds?”

“I cannot explain it to you,” she said, turning away, “as it is a skill I have never had to learn. I use other methods. Perhaps you can beat it out of him. I would be quick, assuming you wish to stop Graendal.”

“Stop her?” Perrin said.

“Didn't you realize?” Lanfear turned back to him. “The dream she was invading was not one of the people from this camp—space and distance matter not to dreams. That dream you saw her invading ... it belongs to Davram Bashere. Father of your wife.”

With that, Lanfear vanished.

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CHAPTER 23

At the Edge of Time

Gawyn tugged urgently on Egwene’s shoulder. Why wouldn’t she move? Whoever that man was in the armor made of silver discs, he could sense female channelers. He d picked Leane out of the darkness; he could do the same for Egwene. Light, he probably would, as soon as he took a moment to notice.

I’m going to haul her up onto my shoulder, if she doesn’t move, he thought. *Light help me, I’ll do it, no matter how much noise it makes. We’re going to be caught anyway, if we*—

The one who called himself Bao moved off, towing Leane—still wrapped in Air—with him. The others followed in a mass, leaving the awful, charred remnants of the other captives behind.

“Egwene?” Gawyn whispered.

She looked at him, a cold strength in her eyes, and nodded. Light! How could she be so calm when he had to clench his teeth for fear they would start rattling together?

They wriggled out from under the cart backward, moving on their stomachs until they emerged. Egwene glanced in the direction of the Sharans. Her cold sense of control radiated into his mind from the bond. Hearing that man’s name had done that to her, given her a sudden spike of shock followed by grim determination. What was that name? Barid something? Gawyn thought he'd heard it before.

He wanted Egwene *out* of this death trap. He put the Warder cloak around her shoulders. “The best way out is directly east,” he whispered. “Around the mess tent—what’s left of it—then on to the camp perimeter. They have a guard post set up next to what was our Traveling ground. We’ll go around that to the north side.”

She nodded.

“I’ll scout ahead, you follow,” Gawyn said. “If I see anything, I’ll toss a stone back toward you. Listen for it hitting, all right? Count to twenty, then follow me at a slow pace."

"But—"

"You can't go first, lest we run across some of those channelers. I need to take the lead."

"At least wear the cloak," she hissed.

"I'll be fine," he whispered, then slipped away before she could argue further. He did feel her spike of annoyance, and suspected he'd get an earful once they were out of this. Well, if they lived long enough for that to happen, he'd accept the reprimand happily.

Once he was a short distance from her, he slipped on one of the rings of the Bloodknives. He had activated it with his blood, as Leilwin had said was needed.

She'd also said it might kill him.

You're a fool, Gawyn Trakand, he thought as a tingling sensation ran across his body. Though he'd used the *ter'angreal* only once before, he knew that his figure had been blurred and darkened. If people glanced in his direction, their eyes would slide away from him. It worked particularly well in shadows. For once, he was pleased that those clouds blocked out any moonlight or starlight.

He moved on, stepping carefully. Earlier in the night, when he'd first tested the ring as Egwene slept, he'd been able to pass within a few steps of sentries holding lanterns. One had looked right at Gawyn, but hadn't seen him. In this much darkness, he might as well have been invisible.

The *ter'angreal* allowed him to move more quickly as well. The change was slight, but noticeable. He itched to try out the ability in a duel. How many of these Sharans could he take on his own while wearing one of these rings? A dozen? Two?

That would last right up until one of those channelers cooked you, Gawyn told himself. He collected a few pebbles off the ground to toss back toward Egwene if he spotted one of the female channelers.

He looped around the mess tent, following the path he'd scouted earlier. It was important to keep reminding himself to be careful; earlier, the *ter'angreal*'s power had made him too bold. It was a heady thing, knowing how easily he could move.

He had told himself he wouldn't use the rings, but that had been during battle—when he'd been tempted to try to make a name for himself. This was different. This was protecting Egwene. He could allow an exception for this.

The moment she hit the count of twenty, Egwene moved into the darkness. She wasn't as good at sneaking as Nynaeve and Perrin were, but she was from the Two Rivers. Every child in Emond's Field learned how to move in the woods without startling game.

She turned her attention to the path before her, testing with her toes—she'd removed her shoes—to avoid dried leaves or weeds. Moving this way was second nature to her; that left her mind free, unfortunately.

One of the Forsaken led the Sharans. She could only guess from his words that their entire nation followed him. This was as bad as the Seanchan. Worse. The Seanchan captured and used Aes Sedai, but they didn't slaughter the common people with such recklessness.

Egwene *had* to survive to escape. She needed to bring this information to the White Tower. The Aes Sedai would have to face Demandred. Light send that enough of their number had escaped the battle earlier to do so.

Why had Demandred sent for Rand? Everyone knew where to find the Dragon Reborn.

Egwene reached the mess tent, then crept around it. Guards chatted in the near distance. That Sharan accent was oddly monotone, as if the people had no emotions at all. It was as if. . . the music was gone from their speech. Music that Egwene hadn't realized was normally there.

The ones speaking were men, so she probably didn't need to worry that they would sense her ability to channel. Still, Demandred had done it with Leane; perhaps he had a *ter'angreal* for the purpose. Such things existed.

She gave the men a wide berth anyway and continued on into the darkness of what had once been her camp. She moved past fallen tents, the scent of smoldering fires still lingering in the air, and crossed a path that she had taken most evenings while collecting troop reports. It was disturbing, how quickly one could go from being in a position of power to slinking through camp like a rat. Being suddenly unable to channel changed so many things.

My authority is not drawn from my power to channel, she told herself. *My strength is in control, understanding, and care. I* will *escape this camp, and I* will *continue the fight.*

She repeated those words, fighting off a creeping sense of powerlessness — the feeling of despair at so many dead, the tingling between her shoulder blades, as if someone were watching her in the darkness. Light, poor Leane.

Something hit the bare earth near her. It was followed by two more pebbles dropping to the ground. Gawyn apparently didn't trust in just one. She moved quickly to the remnants of a nearby tent, half-burned, the other half of the canvas hanging from the poles.

She crouched down. At that moment she realized a half-burned body was lying on the ground mere inches from her. He was Shienaran, she saw in a flash of lightning from the rumbling clouds above, though he wore the symbol of the White Tower on his shirt. He lay with one eye up toward the sky, silent, the other side of his head burned down to the skull.

A light appeared from the direction she'd been heading. She waited, tense, as two Sharan guards approached, bearing a lantern. They didn't speak. As they turned to walk southward along their route, she could see that their armor had symbols etched across the back that mimicked the tattoos she'd seen on men earlier. These marks were quite extravagant, and so—by her best guess—the men were actually of low rank.

The system disturbed her. You could always add to a person's tattoo, but she knew of no way to remove one. Having the tattoos grow more intricate the lower one was in society implied something: people could fall from grace, but they could not rise once fallen—or born—to a lowly position.

She sensed the channeler behind her mere moments before a shield slammed between Egwene and the Source.

Egwene reacted immediately. She didn't give terror time to gain purchase; she grabbed her belt knife and spun toward the woman she could sense approaching from behind. Egwene lunged, but a weave of Air snatched her arm and held it tightly; another one filled her mouth, gagging her.

Egwene thrashed, but other weaves grabbed her and hauled her into the air. The knife dropped from her twitching fingers.

A globe of light appeared nearby, a soft blue aura, much dimmer than that of a lantern. It had been created by a woman with dark skin and very refined features. Delicate. A small nose, a slender frame. She stood up from her crouch, and Egwene found her to be quite tall, nearly as tall as a man.

"You are a dangerous little rabbit," the woman said, her thick, toneless accent making her difficult to understand. She emphasized words in the wrong places, and pronounced many sounds in a just-off way. She had the tattoos on her face, like delicate branches, reaching from the back of her neck forward onto her cheeks. She also wore one of those dresses shaped like a cow's bell, black, with strands of white tied a handspan below the neck.

The woman touched her arm, where Egwene's knife had nearly taken her. "Yes," the woman said, "very dangerous. Few of the Ayyad would reach for a dagger so quickly, rather than for the Source. You have been trained well."

Egwene struggled in her bonds. It was no use. They were tight. Her heart began racing, but she was better than that. Panic would not save her. She forced herself to be calm.

No, she thought. *No, panic won't save me… but it* may *alert Gawyn.* She could sense that he was worried, out there somewhere in the darkness. With effort, she allowed her terror to rise. She let go of all of her careful Aes Sedai training. It was not nearly as easy as she had expected.

"You move quietly, little rabbit," the Sharan woman said, inspecting Egwene. "I would never have been able to follow you if I hadn't already known you were moving in this direction." She walked around Egwene, looking curious. "You watched the Wyld's little show all the way through, did you? Brave. Or stupid."

Egwene shut her eyes and focused on her terror. Her sheer panic. She had to bring Gawyn to her. She reached within, and opened the tight little nugget of emotion she'd packed there. Her fear at being captured again by the Seanchan.

She could feel it. The *a'dam* on her neck. The name. Tuli. A name for a pet.

Egwene had been younger then, but no more powerless than she was now. It would happen again. She would be nothing. She would have her very self stripped away. She would rather be dead. Oh, *Light!* Why couldn't she have died?

She'd sworn she'd never be captured like this again. She began to breathe quickly, now unable to control her terror.

"Now, now," the Sharan said. She seemed amused, though her tone was so flat, Egwene couldn't completely tell. "It won't be that bad now, will it? I have to decide. Which will gain me more? Turning you over to him, or keeping you for myself? Hmm…"

Strong channeling came suddenly from the far side of the camp, where Demandred had gone. The Sharan glanced that way, but didn't seem alarmed.

Egwene could feel Gawyn approaching. He was very worried. Her message had served its purpose, but he wasn't coming quickly enough, and he was farther away than she'd expected. What was wrong? Now that she'd let her worry out of its hidden place, it overwhelmed her, beating against her, a series of blows.

"Your man…" the Sharan said. "You have one of them. What are they called, again? Odd, that you should rely on the protection of a *man*, but you never reach your potential in this land, I am told. He will be taken. I've sent for him."

As Egwene had feared. Light! She'd led Gawyn to this. She'd led the army to disaster. Egwene squeezed her eyes shut. She'd led the White Tower to its destruction.

Her parents would be slaughtered. The Two Rivers would burn.

She should have been stronger.

She should have been smarter.

No.

She had not been broken by the Seanchan. She would not be broken by this. Egwene opened her eyes and met the gaze of the Sharan in the soft blue light. Egwene wrestled her emotions to stillness, and felt the Aes Sedai calm envelop her.

"You… are an odd one," the Sharan whispered, still held by Egwene's eyes. So transfixed was she that the woman didn't notice when the shadow moved up behind her. A shadow that could not have been Gawyn, for he was still distant.

Something smashed into the woman's head from behind. She crumpled, slumping to the ground. The globe winked out instantly, and Egwene was free. She dropped to a crouch, fingers finding her knife.

A figure moved up to her. Egwene raised her knife and prepared herself to embrace the Source. She would draw attention if she had to. She would *not* be taken again.

But who was this?

"Hush," the figure said.

Egwene recognized the voice. "*Leilwin?*"

“Others noticed this woman channeling,” Leilwin said. “They will come to see what she was doing. We must move!”

“You saved me,” Egwene whispered. “You *rescued* me.”

“I take my oaths seriously,” Leilwin said. Then, so softly that Egwene could barely hear it, she added, “Maybe too seriously. Such horrible omens this night…”

They moved quickly through the camp for a few moments, until Egwene sensed Gawyn approaching. She couldn’t make him out in the darkness. Finally, she whispered softly, “Gawyn?”

Suddenly, he was there, right next to her. “Egwene? Who did you find?”

Leilwin stiffened, then hissed softly through her teeth. Something seemed to have upset her greatly. Perhaps she was angry at having someone sneak up on her. If that was the case, Egwene shared the emotion. She’d been taking pride in her abilities, and then she’d been blindsided not only by a channeler, but now by Gawyn! Why should a boy raised in the city be able to move so well without her spotting him?

“I didn’t find anyone,” Egwene whispered. “Leilwin found me… and she pulled me out of a fire.”

“Leilwin?” Gawyn said, peering through the darkness. Egwene could feel his surprise, and his suspicion.

“We must keep moving,” Leilwin said.

“I will not argue with that,” Gawyn replied. “We’re almost out. We’ll want to go a little to the north, though. I left some bodies just to the right.”

“Bodies?” Leilwin asked.

“Half a dozen or so Sharans jumped me,” Gawyn said.

Half a dozen? Egwene thought. He made it sound as if it were nothing. This was not the place for discussion. She joined the other two, heading out of the camp, Leilwin leading them in a specific direction. Each noise or shout from the camp made Egwene wince, worried that one of the bodies had been found. In fact, she nearly jumped all the way to the storm clouds above when someone spoke from the darkness.

“Do that be you?”

“It is us, Bayle,” Leilwin said softly.

“My aged grandmother!” Bayle Domon exclaimed softly, joining them. “You *found* her? Woman, you do amaze me again.” He hesitated. “I do wish you’d have let me come with you.”

"My husband," Leilwin whispered, "you are as brave and stout a man as any woman could wish on her crew. But you move with all of the stillness of a bear charging through a river."

He grunted, but joined them as they left the edge of the camp, quietly and carefully. About ten minutes away, Egwene finally trusted herself to embrace the Source. Glorying in it, she made a gateway for them and Skimmed to the White Tower.

Aviendha ran with the rest of the Aiel through gateways. They surged, like floodwaters, into the valley of Thakan'dar. Two waves, rushing down from opposite sides of the valley.

Aviendha did not carry a spear; that was not her place. Instead, she *was* a spear.

She was joined by two men in black coats, five Wise Ones, the woman Alivia and ten of Rand's sworn Aes Sedai with Warders. None of them save Alivia had responded well to having Aviendha placed above them. The Asha'man did not like having to answer to any woman, the Wise Ones didn't like being ordered by Rand at all, and the Aes Sedai still thought of Aiel channelers as inferior. They all obeyed the order anyway.

Rand had whispered to her in a quiet moment to watch them all for Darkfriends. Fear did not make him speak those words, but his sense of realism. Shadows could creep anywhere.

There were Trollocs here in the valley and some Myrddraal, but they had not anticipated this attack. The Aiel took advantage of their disarray and commenced a slaughter. Aviendha led her group of channelers toward the forge, that massive gray-roofed building. The Shadow-forgers turned from their inexorable movement, showing just a hint of confusion.

Aviendha wove Fire at one, removing its head from its shoulders. The body turned to stone, then started to crumble.

That seemed a signal to the other channelers, and Shadow-forgers through the valley began to explode. They were said to be terrible warriors when provoked, with skin that turned aside swords. That might just be rumor, as few Aiel had ever actually danced the spears with a Shadow-forger.

Aviendha didn't particularly want to discover the truth. She let her team end the first group of Shadow-forgers, and tried not to think too hard about the death and destruction these things had caused during their unnatural lives.

The Shadowspawn tried to mount a defense, some of the Myrddraal screaming and whipping at their Trollocs to charge and break the Aiel attack that came at them across a broad front. It would have been easier to stop a river with a handful of twigs. The Aiel didn’t slow, and those Shadowspawn who tried to resist were slain in their tracks, often falling to multiple spears or arrows.

Most of the Trollocs broke and ran, fleeing before the thunder of Aiel yells. Aviendha and her channelers reached the forges and the nearby pens of dirty, lifeless-eyed captives who had been awaiting death.

“Quickly!” Aviendha said to the Warders who accompanied her. The men broke open pens as Aviendha and the others attacked the last of the Shadow-forgers. As they died—falling to stone and dust—they dropped half-finished Thakan’dar blades to the rocks.

Aviendha looked upward to the right. A long serpentine path led up toward the cavern maw in the side of the mountain that loomed above. The hole there was *dark.* It seemed a trap that tempted light to enter, then never released it.

Aviendha wove Fire and Spirit, then released the weave into the air. A moment later, a gateway opened at the head of the path up to Shayol Ghul. Four figures stepped through. A woman in blue, small of stature but not of will. An aging man, white-haired and shrouded in a multihued cloak. A woman in yellow, her dark hair cut short, adorned with an assortment of gemstones set in gold.

And a tall man, hair the color of living coals. He wore his coat of red and gold, but under it a simple Two Rivers shirt. What he had become and what he had been, wrapped together in one. He carried two swords, like a Shienaran. One looked as if it were glass; he wore it upon his back. The other was the sword of the Treekiller, King Laman, tied at his waist. He carried that because of her. Fool man.

Aviendha raised her hand to him, and he raised his in return. That would be their only farewell if he failed in his task or she died during hers. With a last look, she turned away from him and toward her duty.

Two of her Aes Sedai had linked and created a gateway so that the Warders could usher the captives to safety. Many needed to be prodded into motion. They stumbled forward, eyes nearly as dead as those of the Shadow-forgers.

“Check inside the forge, too,” Aviendha said, motioning to a few of the Warders. They charged in, Aes Sedai following. Weaves of the One Power shook the building as they found more Shadow-forgers, and the two Asha’man quickly went in as well.

Aviendha scanned the valley. The battle had become uglier; there were more Shadowspawn at the corridor leading out of the valley. These had been given more time to prepare and form up. Ituralde led his forces in behind the Aiel, securing the sections of the valley already taken.

Patience, Aviendha thought to herself. Her job would not be to join that battle ahead, but to guard Rand’s back as he ascended and entered the Pit of Doom.

She worried about one thing. Couldn’t the Forsaken just Travel directly into the cavern itself? Rand didn’t seem worried about that, but he was also very distracted by what he had to do. Perhaps she should join him and…

She frowned, looking up. What was that shadow?

High above, the sun shone in a turbulent sky. Some storm clouds, in patches, some deep black, others brilliant white. It wasn’t a cloud that had suddenly obscured the sun, however, but something solid and black sliding into place.

Aviendha felt a chill and found herself trembling as the light slipped away. Darkness, true darkness, fell.

Soldiers across the field looked up in awe, and even fear. The light went out. The end of the world had come.

Channeling came suddenly from the other end of the wide valley. Aviendha spun, shaking off her awe. The ground nearby was littered with torn garments, dropped weapons and corpses. All of the fighting was at the mouth of the valley, distant from her, where the Aiel were trying to push the Shadowspawn back into the pass.

Though Aviendha couldn’t see much through the darkness, she could tell soldiers were staring at the sky. Even the Trollocs looked awestruck. But then the solid blackness began to move in the sky, revealing first the edge of the sun, and then the sun itself. Light! The end was not upon them.

The battle at the mouth of the valley resumed, but it was obviously difficult. Making the Trollocs retreat through such narrow confines was like trying to shove a horse through a small crack in a wall. Impossible, unless you started doing some carving.

“There!” Aviendha said, pointing toward the side of the valley, behind the Aiel lines. “I sense channeling by a woman.”

“Light, but she’s powerful,” Nesune breathed.

“Circle!” Aviendha yelled. “Now!”

The others linked, feeding Aviendha control of the circle. Power filled her, unimaginable power. It was as if she drew in a breath, but just kept being able to take in more air, filling, expanding, crackling with energy. She was a thunderstorm, a vast sea of the One Power.

She thrust her hands forward, letting loose a raw weave, only half-formed. This was almost too much power for her to shape. Air and Fire spurted from her hands, a column of it as wide as a man with arms outstretched. The fire flared as a thick, hot near-liquid. Not balefire—she was smarter than that but dangerous nonetheless. The air contained the fire in a concentrated mass of destruction.

The column streaked across the battlefield, melting the stone beneath and starting corpses aflame. A huge swath of fog vanished with a hiss, and the ground shook as the column plowed into the side of the valley wall where the enemy channeler—Aviendha could only assume it was one of the Forsaken, from her strength—had been attacking the back ranks of Aiel.

Aviendha released the weave, her skin slick with sweat. A smoldering black column of smoke rose from the valley wall. Molten rock trickled down the slope. She grew still, waiting, alert. The One Power inside of her actually started to *strain*, as if trying to escape her. Was that because some of the energy she used came from men? Never before had the One Power seemed to want to destroy her.

She had only a brief warning: a frantic moment of channeling from the other side of the valley, followed by an enormous rush of wind.

Aviendha sliced that wind down the center with an invisible weave the size of a great forest tree. She followed it with another blast of fire, this time more controlled. No, she didn’t dare use balefire. Rand had warned her. That could widen the Bore, break the framework of reality in a place where that membrane was already thin.

Her enemy didn’t have the same restriction. The woman’s next attack came as a white-hot bar, narrowly missing Aviendha—drilling through the air a finger’s width from her head—before hitting the wall of the forge behind. The balefire sliced a wide swath of stone and brick from the wall, and the building collapsed with a crash.

Good riddance, Aviendha thought, throwing herself to the ground. “Spread out!” she ordered the others. “Don’t give her good targets!” She channeled, stirring up air to create a tempest of dust and debris in front of them. Then she used a weave to mask the fact that she was holding to the One Power and hide her from her enemy. She scuttled in a low crouch behind some nearby cover: a heap of slag and broken bits of iron, waiting to be smelted.

Balefire struck again, hitting the stony ground where she’d been before. It punctured stone as easily as a spear went through a melon. Aviendha’s companions had all taken cover, and they continued to feed her their strength. Such *power.* It was distracting.

She judged the source of the attacks. “Be ready to follow,” she said to the others, then made a gateway to the point where the weave had begun. “Come through after me, but take cover immediately!”

She leaped through, skirts swishing, the One Power held like thunder somehow contained. She landed on a slope overlooking the battlefield. Below, Maidens and men fought Trollocs; it looked as if the Aiel were holding back a vast black flood.

Aviendha didn’t spare time for more than a quick glance. She dug into the ground with a primal weave of Earth and ripped up a horse-sized chunk of rock, popping it into the air. The beam that came for her a second later struck the chunk of rock.

Balefire was a dangerous spear to wield. Sometimes it cut, but if it hit a distinct object—a person, for example—it caused the entire thing to flash and vanish. The balefire burned Aviendha’s chunk from existence in a flash, dropping motes of glowing dust that soon vanished. Behind her, the men and women in her circle dashed through her gateway and took cover.

Aviendha barely had time to notice that nearby, cracks had appeared in the rock. Cracks that seemed to look down into darkness. As the bar of light faded in Aviendha’s vision, she released a burning column of fire. This time, she met flesh, burning away a coppery-skinned, slender woman in a red dress. Two other women nearby cursed, scrambling away. Aviendha launched a second attack at the others.

One of the two—the strongest—made a weave with such skill and speed that Aviendha barely caught sight of it. The weave went up in front of her column of fire, and the result was an explosion of blistering steam. Aviendha's fire was extinguished, and she gasped, temporarily blinded.

Battle instincts took over. Obscured by the cloud of steam, she dropped to her knees, then rolled to the side while grabbing a handful of rocks and tossing them away from her to create a distraction.

It worked. As she blinked tears from her eyes, a white-hot bar struck toward the sound of the rocks. Those dark cracks spread further.

Aviendha blew the steam away with a weave of Air while still blinking tears. She could see well enough to distinguish two black shapes crouching nearby on the rocks. One turned toward her, gasped—seeing the attack weaves that Aviendha was making—then *vanished.*

There was no gateway. The person just seemed to fold up on herself, and Aviendha sensed no channeling. She did feel something else, a faint… *something.* A tremble to the air that wasn't entirely physical.

"No!" the second woman said. Just a blur to Aviendhas tear-streaked eyes. "Don't—"

Aviendha's vision cleared just enough to make out the woman's features—a long face and dark hair—as her weave struck the woman. The woman's limbs ripped from her body. A smoldering arm spun in the air, creating a swirl of black smoke before hitting nearby.

Aviendha coughed, then released the circle. "Healing!" she said, struggling to her feet.

Bera Harkin reached her first, and a Healing weave set Aviendha trembling. She panted, and her reddened skin—her singed eyes—were repaired. She nodded in thanks to Bera, whom she could now see clearly.

Ahead of her, Sarene an Aes Sedai with a teardrop face and numerous dark braids—stepped up to the corpses Aviendha had made, her Warder Vitalien close by her side. She shook her head. "Duhara and Falion. Dreadlords now."

"There's a difference between Dreadlords and Black Ajah?" Amys asked.

"Of course," Sarene said with a calm tone.

Nearby, the others still held the One Power, expecting another attack.

Aviendha didn't think there would be one. She had heard that gasp of surprise, sensed the panic in the way the final woman—the strongest of the three had fled. Perhaps she hadn't anticipated facing such powerful resistance so quickly.

Sarene kicked at an arm that had been Falion’s. “Better to have taken them alive for questioning. I am certain we could have learned the identity of that third woman. Did anyone recognize her?”

Members of the group shook their heads. “She was not anyone on the list of Black Ajah who escaped,” Sarene said, taking the arm of her Warder. She has a distinctive face so bulbous, and lacking any qualities of charm. I am certain I would remember her.”

“She was powerful, Aviendha said. Very powerful.” Aviendha would have guessed her as one of the Forsaken. But that certainly hadn’t been Moghedien, and it didn’t match the description of Graendal.

“We’ll split into three circles,” Aviendha said. “Bera will lead one of them, Amys and I the others. Yes, we *can* make circles larger than thirteen now, but it seems a waste. I don’t need that much power to kill. One of our groups will attack the Trollocs below. The other two will avoid channeling, and hide nearby watching. That way, we can goad the enemy channeler into assuming were still in one large circle, and the other two can strike at her from the sides when she comes to attack.”

Amys smiled. She recognized this as a basic Maiden raiding tactic. She didn’t seem particularly put out to be following Aviendha’s orders, now that annoyance at Rand's presumption had faded. In fact, if anything, she and the other four Wise Ones looked proud.

As Aviendha's team obeyed, she sensed more channeling on the battlefield. Cadsuane and those who followed her liked to consider themselves outside Rand’s orders. They fought while another group of Aes Sedai and Asha’man held open gateways to usher through the Domani and Tairen armies.

Too many people channeling all about. It was going to grow difficult to pinpoint an attack by one of the Forsaken.

“We need to set up Traveling grounds,” Aviendha said. “And keep strict control over who is going to channel and where. That way, we’ll be able to tell in an instant when we sense channeling if something is wrong.’’ She raised her hand to her head. “This is going to be very difficult to organize.” Nearby, Amys smile widened. *You are in command now*, *Aviendha,* that smile seemed to say. *And leadership’s headaches are yours to endure.*

Rand al'Thor, the Dragon Reborn, turned away from Aviendha and left her and Ituralde to their battle. He had a different one to join.

At last, the time had come.

He approached the base of the mountain of Shayol Ghul. Above, a black hole burrowed into the mountain face, the only way to reach the Pit of Doom. Moiraine joined him, pulling close her rippling shawl, its blue fringe catching in the wind. "Remember. This is not the Bore, this is not the Dark Ones prison. This is merely the place where his touch is strongest upon the world. He has control here."

"He touches the entire world now, to one extent or another," Rand said.

"And so his touch here will be stronger."

Rand nodded, setting his hand upon the dagger he wore at his belt. "No channeling until we strike at the Dark One directly. If possible, I would avoid a fight like the one we had at the cleansing. What comes will require all of my strength."

Nynaeve nodded. She wore her *angreal* and *ter'angreal* jewelry over a gown of yellow, one far more beautiful than she would ever have allowed herself during their days in the Two Rivers. She looked strange to him without her braid, her hair now barely to her shoulders. She seemed somehow older. That shouldn't be. The braid was a symbol of age and maturity in the Two Rivers. Why should Nynaeve look older without it?

Thom stepped up beside Rand, squinting up at the hole in the rock. "I suspect I'm not going in with you."

Moiraine looked at him, pursing her lips.

"Someone will need to guard the entry into the cave, my wife," Thom said. "That ledge up there right beside the opening has an excellent view of the battlefield. I can watch the battle below, maybe compose a good ballad or two."

Rand smiled at the spark of humor in Thom's eyes. They stood at the edge of time itself, and still Thom Merrilin found a smile.

Above them, dark clouds spun, the peak of Shayol Ghul their axis. Darkness assaulted the sun until it was nearly gone, entirely covered, in total oblivion.

Rand's forces stopped, staring in terror at the sky, and even the Trollocs paused, growling and hooting. But as the sun slowly emerged from its captivity, the fierce battle resumed in the valley below. It announced his intentions, but the dagger would shield him from the Dark One's eyes. The

Light willing, the Shadow’s leaders would focus on the battle and assume Rand would wait for its outcome before striking.

“Now?” Nynaeve asked, looking up the narrow, stony pathway to the cavern.

Rand nodded and led the way forward. A wind rose, whipping at the four as they climbed the pathway. He had chosen his clothing deliberately. His red coat, embroidered with long-thorned briars on the sleeves and golden herons on the collar, was a twin to one of those Moiraine had arranged for him to receive in Fal Dara. The white shirt, laced across the front, was of Two Rivers make. *Callandor* on his back, the sword of Laman at his hip. It had been a long time since he’d chosen to wear that, but it felt appropriate.

The winds buffeted him, threatening to throw him from the heights. He pushed forward anyway, climbing the steep hill, gritting his teeth against the pain in his side. Time seemed to have less meaning here, and he felt as if he’d been walking for days when he reached the flat area before the cavern. He turned, resting one hand against the rock of the open maw, and looked out over the valley.

His forces in the valley seemed so fragile, so insignificant. Would they be able to hold it long enough?

“Rand…” Nynaeve said, taking his arm. “Perhaps you should rest.”

He looked down, following her eyes to his side. His wound, the old wound, had broken open again. He felt blood inside his boot. It had run down his side, down his leg, and when he moved his foot, he left a bloody footprint behind.

Blood on the rocks…

Nynaeve raised a hand to her mouth.

“It has to happen, Nynaeve,” Rand said. “You cannot stop it. The prophecy does not say anything about me living through this. I’ve always found that odd, haven’t you? Why would it speak of the blood, but not what comes after?” He shook his head, then unsheathed *Callandor* from his back. “Moiraine, Nynaeve, will you lend me your strength and join me in a circle?”

“Do you wish one of us to lead,” Moiraine said hesitantly, “so you can use that safely?”

“I’m not planning to be safe,” Rand said. “A circle, please.”

The two women exchanged a look. So long as he led the circle, another could strike and seize control of him. Neither liked the request, obviously.

He wasn’t certain if he should be pleased that the two of them had started to get along—perhaps, instead, he should worry about them teaming up against him.

That seemed like a thought from simpler days. Easier days. He smiled wryly, but knew that the smile did not reach his eyes. Moiraine and Nynaeve fed him their strength, and he accepted it. Thom kissed Moiraine, and then the three of them turned to regard the opening before them. It led back down, toward the base of the mountain, and the fiery pit that was the closest thing this world knew to the Dark Ones dwelling.

Shadows from a returned sun dimmed the cavern mouth around him. Wind tugged at him, his foot warm with his own blood. *I will not walk out of this pit alive,* he thought.

He no longer cared. Survival was not his goal. It had not been for some time.

He did want to do this right. He *had* to do this right. Was it the right time? Had he planned well enough?

IT IS TIME. LET THE TASK BE UNDERTAKEN.

The voice spoke with the inevitability of an earthquake, the words vibrating through him. More than sound in the air, far more, the words spoke as if from one soul to another. Moiraine gasped, eyes opening wide.

Rand was not surprised. He had heard this voice once before, and he realized that he had been expecting it. Hoping for it, at least.

“Thank you,” Rand whispered, then stepped forward into the Dark One’s realm, leaving footprints of blood behind.

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CHAPTER 24

To Ignore the Omens

Fortuona, Empress of the Seanchan Empire, studied her husband as he gave orders to their forces. They were arrayed outside the palace in Ebou Dar, and she herself sat upon an elaborate mobile throne, outfitted with poles at the bottom so she could be carried by a dozen soldiers.

The throne lent her grandeur, but also gave an illusion of immobility. An assassin would assume that she could not move quickly while wearing her formal silks, her gown draping down in front and tumbling toward the ground. They would be surprised, then, that she could break free of the outer garments at the flick of a wrist.

“He has changed, Greatest One,” Beslan said to her. “And yet he hasn’t. I don’t know what to make of him any longer.”

“He is what the Wheel has sent us,” Fortuona replied. “Have you considered what you will do?”

Beslan kept eyes forward. He was impetuous, often governed by his emotions, but no more so than the other Altarans. They were a passionate people, and were making a fine addition to the Empire now that they were properly tamed.

“I will do as has been suggested,” Beslan said, face flushed.

“Wise,” Fortuona said.

“May the throne stand forever,” Beslan said. “And may your breath continue as long, Greatest One.” He bowed, withdrawing to do as he should. Fortuona could march to war, but these were Beslan’s lands to govern. He so wanted to be part of the battle, but now he understood that he was needed here.

Selucia watched him go, nodding in approval. *That one is becoming a strong asset as he learns proper restraint*, she signed.

Fortuona said nothing. Selucia’s motions carried an implication, one that Fortuona would have missed save for their long association. Beslan *was* learning. Other men, however…

Mat started cursing up a storm nearby, gathered with the Seanchan commanders. She could not hear exactly what had set him off. What had she done, in yoking herself to him?

I have followed the omens, she thought.

She caught him glancing toward her before he returned to his raving. He *would* have to be taught restraint, but teaching him ... it would be difficult. Far more difficult than teaching Beslan had been. At least Selucia did not speak her condemnations out loud. The woman was now Fortuona's Truthspeaker, though Fortuna could sense that Selucia was finding the position grating. She would prefer to remain only Fortuona's Voice. Perhaps the omens would show Fortuona someone else fitting as a Truthspeaker.

Are we really going to do as he says? Selucia signed.

This world is chaos, Fortuona signed back. Not a straight answer. She did not want to give straight answers at the moment. Selucia would puzzle out the meaning.

The Seanchan commonly said “may she live forever” in regard to the Empress. To some, it was a platitude or a mere ritual of allegiance. Fortuona had always seen much more to it. That phrase encapsulated the strength of the Empire. An Empress had to be crafty, strong, and skilled if she was to survive. Only the fittest deserved to sit on the Crystal Throne. If one of her siblings, or a member of the High Blood like Galgan, managed to kill her, then her death served the Empire—for she had obviously been too weak to lead it.

May she live forever. May she be strong enough to live forever. May she be strong enough to lead us to victory. She *would* bring order to this world. That was her goal.

Matrim stalked past on the army’s gathering grounds, passing ten paces before Fortuona's throne. He wore an Imperial high general’s uniform, although not well. He kept snagging the paltron-cloths on things. A high general’s regalia was meant to give the bearer authority, to enhance his grace as cloth rippled in response to his careful movements. On Matrim, it was like wrapping a racehorse in silk and expecting him to run. He had a kind of grace, but it was not the grace of court.

Lesser commanders trailed after him. Matrim baffled the Blood. That was good, as it kept them off balance. But he also represented disorder, with his random ways and constant stabs at authority. Fortuona represented order, and she had married *chaos himself*. What had she been thinking?

“But what of the Sea Folk, Highness?” General Yulan said, stopping beside Matrim in front of Fortuona.

“Stop worrying about the bloody Sea Folk,” Matrim snapped. “If you say the words ‘Sea Folk’ one more time, I’ll hang you by your toenails from one of those *raken* you fly about on and send you off to Shara.”

Yulan seemed perplexed. “Highness, I…”

He trailed off as Mat yelled, “Savara, we’re leading with pikes, not cavalry, you goat-loving idiot! I don’t *care* if the cavalry thinks it can do a better job. Cavalry always thinks that! What are you, a bloody Tairen High Lady? Well, I’ll name you an honorary one if you keep this up!”

Matrim stormed off toward Savara, who sat her horse with arms folded, displeasure on her dark face. Yulan, left behind, looked completely bewildered. “How does one hang a person by their toenails?” Yulan asked, softly enough that Fortuona barely heard. “I do not think that is possible. The nails would break off.” He walked away, shaking his head.

To the side, Selucia signed, *Beware. Galgan approaches.*

Fortuona steeled herself as Captain-General Galgan rode up. He wore black armor rather than a uniform like Mat’s, and he wore it well. Commanding, almost towering, he was her greatest rival and her strongest resource. Any man in his position would be a rival, of course. That was the way of things—the proper way of things.

Matrim would never be a rival. She still did not know how to think of that. A piece of her—small, but not without strength—thought she should have him put away for that very reason. Was not the Prince of the Ravens a check upon the Empress, to keep her strong by providing a constant threat? *Sarabat shaiqen nai batain pyast.* A woman was most resourceful with a knife at her throat. A proverb uttered by Varuota, her great-great-great-grandmother.

She would hate to put Matrim away. She couldn’t until she had a child by him, anyway—it would be ignoring the omens to do otherwise.

Such a strange man he was. Each time she thought she could anticipate him, she was proved wrong.

“Greatest One,” Galgan said, “we are nearly ready.”

“The Prince of the Ravens is dissatisfied with the delays,” she said. “He fears we are joining the battle too late.”

“If the Prince of the Ravens has any *real* understanding of armies and battlefields,” Galgan said, his tone indicating that he didn’t believe such a thing was possible, “he will realize that moving a force of this size requires no small effort.”

Up until Matrim’s arrival, Galgan had been the highest-ranking member of the Blood in these lands other than Fortuona herself. He would dislike being superseded suddenly. As of yet, Galgan had command of their armies—and Fortuona intended to let him continue to lead. Earlier today, Galgan had asked Mat how he would gather their forces, and Mat had taken it as a suggestion to do just that. The Prince of the Ravens strode about giving orders, but he did *not* command. Not fully; Galgan could stop him with a word.

He did not. Obviously, he wished to see how Mat handled command. Galgan watched Mat, eyes narrowed. He did not fully know how the Prince of the Ravens fit into the command structure. Fortuona had yet to make a decision on that.

Nearby, a burst of wind carried away some dust. It revealed the small skull of a rodent, peeking from the earth. Another omen. Her life had been cluttered with them lately.

This was an omen of danger, of course. It was as if she strolled through deep grasses, passing between stalking *lopar* and among holes dug to catch the unwary. The Dragon Reborn had knelt before the Crystal Throne, and the omen of peach blossoms—the most powerful omen she knew—had accompanied him.

Troops marched past, officers shouting orders in time to the steps. The *raken* calls seemed timed to the beats of the falling feet. This was what she would be leaving for an unknown war in lands she barely knew. Her lands here would be virtually undefended, a foreigner of newly minted loyalty in command.

Great change. Her decisions could end her rule and, indeed, the Empire itself. Matrim did not understand that.

Summon my consort, Fortuona signed, tapping the armrest of her throne.

Selucia Voiced the order to a messenger. After a short time, Mat rode up on his horse. He had refused the gift of a new one, with good reason. He had a better eye for horseflesh than the Imperial stablemaster herself. Still. Pips. What a silly name.

Fortuona stood up. Immediately, those nearby bowed. Galgan dismounted and went down on his knees. Everyone else prostrated themselves to the ground. The Empress standing to proclaim meant an act of the Crystal Throne.

“Blood and ashes,” Matrim said. “More bowing? Have you folks nothing better to do? I could think of a few dozen things, if you cant.”

To the side, she saw Galgan smile. He thought he knew what she was going to do. He was wrong.

“I name you Knotai, for you are a bringer of destruction to the Empire’s enemies. Let your new name only be spoken from now into eternity, Knotai. I proclaim that Knotai, Prince of the Ravens, is to be given the rank of Rodholder in our armies. Let it be published as my will.”

Rodholder. It meant that should Galgan fall, Mat would have command. Galgan was no longer smiling. He would have to keep watch over his shoulder lest Mat overcome him and take control.

Fortuona sat down.

“Knotai?” Knotai said.

She glared at him. *Keep your tongue, for once,* she thought at him. *Please.*

“I kind of like it,” Knotai said, turning his horse and trotting away.

Galgan regained his saddle. “He will need to learn to kneel,” the general muttered, then kicked his horse forward.

It was an ever-so-small offense, deliberate and calculating. Galgan had not addressed the words to Fortuona directly, instead acting as if they were just a comment to himself. He sidestepped calling her Greatest One.

It was enough to make Selucia growl softly and wiggle her fingers in a question.

No, Fortuona signed, *we need him.*

Once again, Knotai did not seem to realize what she had done, and the risk inherent in it. Galgan would have to consult with him on their battle plans; the Rodholder could not be left out of meetings, as he had to be ready to take control at any moment. Galgan would have to listen to his advice and incorporate it.

She bet upon her prince in this, hoping that he could manifest again the unexpected genius in battle that had so impressed Furyk Karede.

This is bold, Selucia said. *But what if he fails?*

We will not fail, Fortuona replied, *for this is the Last Battle.*

The Pattern had placed Knotai before her, had shoved her into his arms. The Dragon Reborn had seen and spoken truth about her—for all the illusion of order, her rule was like a heavy rock balanced on its smallest point. She was stretched thin, reigning over lands unaccustomed to discipline. She needed to take great risks to bring order to chaos.

She hoped that Selucia would see it that way and not publicly denounce her. Fortuona really would need to find a new Voice or appoint someone else as Truthspeaker. Having one person fill both roles was drawing criticism in court. It—

Knotai suddenly came riding back, holding to his hat. “Tuon!”

Why is it so hard for him to understand names? Selucia asked with a wiggle of her fingers. Fortuona could almost read the sigh in those motions. “Knotai?” Fortuona asked. “You may approach.”

“Bloody good,” Knotai said, “since I’m already here. Tuon, we need to move *now.* The scouts just came back. Egwene’s army is in trouble.”

Yulan rode up just behind Knotai, then dismounted and bowed himself full to the ground.

“Rise,” Fortuona said. “Is this true?”

“The army of the *marath'damane* has suffered a grave defeat,” Yulan said. “The returning Fists of Heaven describe it in detail. This Amyrlin’s armies are scattered, in turmoil, and retreating at speed.”

Galgan had stopped nearby to receive a messenger, no doubt being given a similar report. The general looked at her.

“We should move in to support Egwene’s retreat,” Knotai said. “I don’t know what a Rodholder is, but from how everyone’s reacting, I think it means I have control of the armies.”

“No,” Fortuona said. “You are third. Behind me. Behind Galgan.”

“Then you can order a move right now,” Knotai said. “We need to go! Egwene is getting stomped.”

“How many *marath'damane* are there?” Fortuona asked.

“We have been watching this army,” Yulan said. “There are hundreds. The entirety of the White Tower that remains. They are exhausted, being driven forth by a new force, one we do not recognize.”

“Tuon…” Mat warned.

Great change. So this was the meaning of the Dragon’s omen. Fortuona could swoop in and all of those *damane* would be hers. Hundreds upon hundreds. With that force, she could crush the resistance to her rule back in Seanchan.

It was the Last Battle. The world hung upon her decisions. Was it truly better to support these *marath'damane* in their desperate fight here, or should she use the chance to retreat to Seanchan, secure her rule there, then defeat the Trollocs and the Shadow with the might of the Empire?

"You gave your word," Knotai said softly.

"I signed a treaty," she said. "Any treaty can be broken, particularly by the Empress."

"Some empresses might be able to do that," Knotai said. "But not you. Right? Light, Tuon. You gave him your *word"*

Order in one hand—something known, something she could measure—chaos in the other. Chaos in the form of a one-eyed man who knew Artur Hawkwing's face.

Had she not just told Selucia she would bet upon him?

"The Empress cannot be constrained by words on a paper," Fortuona said. "However ... in this case, the reason I signed the treaty remains, and is real. We will protect this world in its darkest days, and we will destroy the Shadow at its root. General Galgan, you shall move our forces to protect these *marath'damane*, as we will require their aid in fighting the Shadow." Knotai relaxed. "Good. Yulan, Galgan, let's get planning! And send for that woman, Tylee. She seems like the only bloody general around here with her head on her shoulders. And . . "

He went on talking, riding off, giving orders that he really should have allowed Galgan to give. Galgan studied her from horseback, his face unreadable. He'd consider this a grave mistake, but she… she had the omens on her side.

Those dreadful black clouds had been Lan's companion for far too long. He had grown weary indeed of seeing them each day, expanding toward infinity in all directions, rumbling with thunder like growls from the stomach of a hungry beast.

"The clouds seem lower today," Andere said, from his horse beside Mandarb. "The lightning is touching down. It doesn't do that every day."

Lan nodded. Andere was right; it did look bad. That didn't change a thing. Agelmar had chosen the place for their battle alongside the river roaring on their western flank, using it to protect that side. Nearby hills provided archer positions, and it was atop one of these that Lan and Andere waited.

Ahead, the Trollocs gathered for an assault. They would come soon. Closer by, Agelmar had placed heavy cavalry in the valleys for flanking attacks once the Trollocs charged, light cavalry behind the hills to help the heavy cavalry withdraw when the time came. Agelmar kept grumbling about not having any pikes, though it was the lack of foot that had facilitated their successful retreat.

For all the good it has done, Lan thought gloomily as he studied the near-endless sea of Trollocs. His men had picked their battles carefully, killing tens of thousands while losing only thousands, leaving Shienar burned and unable to sustain the Trolloc advance. None of it seemed to have mattered.

They were losing this fight. Yes, they had delayed the Trollocs, but not well enough—and not long enough. They would soon be trapped and destroyed, with no aid coming from Elayne's army, which was pressed just as badly.

The sky darkened. Lan looked up sharply. Those clouds were still there, but they grew much more ominous. The land was cast into deep shadow.

"Blast it," Andere said, looking up. "Has the Dark One somehow swallowed the sun? We'll have to carry lanterns to fight, even though it's the middle of the day."

Lan placed his hand to his breastplate; beneath the armor, Nynaeve's letter rested next to his heart. *Light! May her fight go better than my own.* Earlier today, she and Rand had entered the Pit of Doom itself.

Across the battlefield, the tired channelers, pulling their eyes from the terrifyingly dark sky, sent up lights. It wasn't much to see by, but it would have to do. But then the darkness receded, and daylight returned, clouded as had become usual.

"Gather the High Guard of Malkier," Lan said. That was what his protectors were calling themselves. It was an old Malkieri term for the King's battlefield guard. Lan wasn't certain what to make of the fact that Prince Kaisel, who was from Kandor, considered himself one.

Many of Lan's Malkieri had very little true Malkier blood—they came to him as an honor more than anything else. The Prince was another matter.

Lan had asked him and his companions if they should be swearing to a foreign king, no matter how friendly.

The only reply he'd received was, "Malkier represents the Borderlands in this war, Dai Shan."

Lightning flashed nearby; the clap of thunder beat against Lan like a physical thing. Mandarb barely stirred. The animal was growing accustomed to such strikes. The High Guard gathered, and Andere took up Lan's banner, affixing it in the socket on his saddle so that he could carry it, but still swing a sword.

Their orders arrived from Agelmar. Lan and his men would be in the very thick of the attack. Once the Trollocs charged, the heavy cavalry would hit the flanks to break up their momentum. Lan and his men would hit the creatures face-on.

As Lan preferred it. Agelmar knew better than to try to coddle him. Lan and his troops would hold the center ground before the hills, forcing the Trollocs to fight in such a way that the archers could lob volley after volley into their back ranks. Harrying forces would be held mostly in reserve, to prevent the enemy sweeping around their right flank; the river was on their left, a natural deterrent to the Trollocs. A good plan, if any plan could be considered a good one in the face of such overwhelming odds. Still, Agelmar was not making mistakes that Lan could see. He complained of troubled dreams lately, but considering the war they fought, Lan would have been more worried if the man *hadn't* dreamed of death and battle.

The Trollocs started to move.

"Forward!" Lan called as the trumpets sounded in the air, accompanied by thunder from above.

A short distance from the walls of Cairhien, Elayne rode Moonshadow along the front lines; the army had formed up according to Bashere's battle plans, but she was worried.

They had done it. A fast march upriver along the road to arrive at Cairhien in front of the Trolloc army. Elayne had positioned their force on the far northern side of Cairhien to face the Trolloc army coming in from that direction. She had also left some of the dragons and a company of bowmen downriver to deter the Trollocs trying to cross the river there; they would withdraw quickly northward when it became impossible to prevent the enemy from crossing.

Beat the army ahead; then face the one behind. It was their only chance. The Kinswomen were exhausted; Elayne had required many gateways to move her men. Their fatigue meant Elayne would have no channelers in this fight. The women would be hard-pressed to make small gateways to Mayene to deliver the wounded for Healing.

Elayne’s army was slightly larger than that of the Shadowspawn, but her men were exhausted. Amid the anxiety of a coming battle, some slumped in their lines, pikes tipping forward. Those who stood firm had reddened eyes nonetheless. They still had Aludra’s dragons. That would have to be enough.

Elayne hadn’t slept the night before. She’d spent the time searching for inspiring words, seeking something she could say this day that would have meaning. What did you say when all was coming to an end?

She halted Moonshadow at the front of the line of Andoran soldiers. Her words would be relayed, using weaves, to the entire army. Elayne was surprised to see that some of the Aiel were drawing close to listen. She wouldn’t have thought they’d care about the words of a wetlander queen.

She opened her mouth to speak, and the sun went out.

Elayne froze, looking upward with shock. The clouds had parted above them—they often did when she was near, one way the bond with Rand manifested—and so she’d been expecting an open sky and light for this battle.

The sun still shone up there, but occluded. Something solid and dark rolled in front of it.

All across her army, men looked up, raising fingers as they were swallowed by darkness. Light! It was hard to keep from trembling.

She heard cries through the army. Lamentations, worries, cries of despair. Elayne gathered her confidence and kicked her horse forward.

“This is the place,” she announced, enhancing her voice with the One Power to project across the field, “where I promise you we will win. This is where I tell you that days will continue, that the land will recover. This is the time when I promise you that the light will return, that hope will survive, that we will continue to live.”

She paused. Behind the army, people lined the top of Cairhien’s city walls: children, women, and the elderly who were armed with kitchen knives and pots to throw down, should the Trollocs destroy the army and come for the city. There had barely been time to contact them; a skeleton force of soldiers guarded the city. Now, their distant figures huddled down as darkness ate the sky.

Those walls offered a false safety; they meant little when the enemy had Dreadlords. She needed to defeat the Trolloc army quickly, not hide and allow them to be reinforced by the larger force to the south.

“I am supposed to reassure you,” Elayne shouted to the men. “But I cannot! I will *not* tell you that the land will survive, that the Light will prevail. Doing so would remove responsibility.

“This is our duty! Our blood that will be spilled this day. We have come here to fight. If we do not, then the land will die! The Light will fall to the Shadow. This is not a day for empty promises. Our blood! Our blood is the fire within us. Today, our blood must drive us to defeat the Shadow.”

She turned her horse. The men had looked away from the darkness above, toward her. She wove a light, high in the sky above her, drawing their attention.

“Our blood is our passion,” she shouted. “Too much of what I hear from my armies is about resistance. We cannot merely resist! We must show them our anger, our fury, at what they have done. We must not resist. Today, we must *destroy.*

“Our blood is our land. This place is ours, and we claim it! For our fathers and mothers, for our children.

“Our blood is our life. We have come to give it. Across the world, other armies are pushed back. We will not retreat. Our task is to spend our blood, to die *advancing.* We will not remain still, no!

“If we are to have the Light again, we must *make* it ours! We must reclaim it and cast out the Shadow! He seeks to make you despair, to win this battle before it begins. We will not give him that satisfaction! We will destroy this army before us, then destroy the one behind. And from there, we bring our blood—our life, our fire, our passion—to the others who fight. From there it spreads to victory and the Light!”

She honestly didn’t know what kind of response to expect from a battlefield speech. She’d read all of the great ones, particularly those given by queens of Andor. When younger, she’d imagined the soldiers clapping and shouting—the response given to a gleeman at a rowdy tavern.

Instead, the men raised weapons to her. Drawn swords, pikes lifted, then thumped back against the ground. The Aiel did give some whoops, but the Andorans looked at her with solemn eyes. She had not inspired them to excitement, but to determination. That seemed the more honest emotion. They ignored the darkness in the sky and turned eyes on the goal.

Birgitte walked up beside her horse. “That was quite good, Elayne. When did you change it?”

Elayne blushed, thinking of the carefully prepared speech she’d memorized last night while repeating it half a dozen times to Birgitte. It had been a work of beauty, with allusions to the sayings of queens through the ages.

She’d forgotten every word of it once that darkness had come. This one had spurted out instead.

“Come on,” Elayne said, looking over her shoulder. The Trolloc army was arriving opposite hers. “I need to move into position.”

“Into position?” Birgitte asked. “You mean that you need to go back to the command tent.”

“I’m not going there,” Elayne said, turning Moonshadow.

“Blood and bloody ashes, you aren’t! I—”

“Birgitte,” Elayne snapped. “I am in command, and you are my soldier. You *will* obey.”

Birgitte recoiled as if slapped.

“Bashere has the command tent,” Elayne said. “I’m one of the few channelers of any strength this army has, and I’ll be drawn and quartered before I let myself sit out the fight. I’m easily worth a thousand soldiers on this battlefield.”

“The babes—”

“Even if Min hadn’t had that viewing, I’d still insist on fighting. You think the babes of these soldiers aren’t at risk? Many of them line the walls of that city! If we fail here, they will be *slaughtered.* No, I will *not* keep myself out of danger, and no, I will *not* sit back and wait. If you think it’s your duty as my Warder to stop me, then I will bloody sever this bond right here and now and send you to someone else! I’m not going to spend the Last Battle lounging on a chaise and drinking goat’s milk!”

Birgitte fell silent, and Elayne could feel her shock through the bond. “Light,” the woman finally said. “I won’t stop you. But will you at least agree to back away for the initial arrow volleys? You can do more good helping the lines where they're weakened."

She allowed Birgitte and her guards to lead the way back to a hillside near Aludra's dragons. Talmanes, Aludra and their crews waited with more anxiety and eagerness than the regular troops. They were tired, too, but they'd also seen little use during the forest battles and the retreat. Today was their chance to shine.

Bashere's battle plan was as complex as any that Elayne had been a part of. The bulk of the army positioned itself almost a mile north of the city, beyond the Foregate ruins outside the city walls. The army's lines ran east from the Alguenya, across a hillside that sloped down across an approach road to the Jangai Gates on the flats, all the way to the ruins of the Illuminators' chapter house.

Ranks of foot soldiers—mostly Andorans and Cairhienin, but some Ghealdanin and Whitecloaks as well—bowed out like a half-moon across the front of Elayne's forces. Six squadrons of dragons rolled up atop the hill behind the foot.

The Trollocs would not reach the city without defeating this army. Estean had the Band's cavalry on one flank while the Mayener Winged Guards covered the other. The rest of the cavalry was held in reserve.

Elayne waited with patience, watching the Trolloc army prepare. Her biggest worry was that they'd just sit there, waiting for their fellow Trollocs to arrive from the south and attack Elayne simultaneously. Fortunately, that didn't happen—they had apparently been commanded to take the city, and they were planning to do it.

Bashere's scout reports indicated that the second army was a little over a day's march away, and could arrive late on the morrow if they marched hard. Elayne had until then to defeat this northern force.

Come on, Elayne thought. *Move.*

The Trollocs finally began to surge forward. Bashere and Elayne were counting on them to employ their usual tactic: Overwhelming numbers and sheer force. Indeed, today, the Trollocs crashed forward in a large mass. Their goal would be to overwhelm the defenders, shattering their lines.

Her troops stood firm, knowing what was coming next. The dragons began to bellow, each like innumerable hammers falling at exactly the same moment. Elayne was now a good hundred paces from them, and still she had the urge to cover her ears. Rolling clouds of white smoke began to fill the sky above the dragons as they fired.

The first few shots fell short, but Aludra and her men used the shots to adjust range. After that, the eggs fell among Trollocs, ripping through their ranks, tossing them into the air. Thousands of body parts fell to the crimson-splattered ground. For the first time, Elayne was frightened of the weapons.

Light, Birgitte has been right all along, Elayne thought, imagining what it would be like to charge a fortified position equipped with dragons. Normally, in war, at least a man could depend on one thing: that his skill would be placed against that of his foe. Sword against sword. Trollocs were bad enough. What would it be like for men to have to face this kind of power?

We'll make sure it doesn't happen, she told herself. Rand had been right to force that peace upon them.

The dragoners had trained well, and their reloading speeds were impressive. Each set off three volleys before the Trollocs hit the front lines. Elayne hadn't watched the exchange of arrows—she'd been too focused on the dragons—but she did see that some of her lines were struck with black-fletched arrows, and men were down and bleeding.

The Trollocs crashed into her front ranks of crossbowmen and pikemen, who were already fading back to make way for halberdiers. Nobody used swords and maces against Trollocs, at least not while on foot, if they could help it.

"Let's go," Elayne said, moving Moonshadow forward.

Birgitte followed; Elayne could sense the woman's reluctant resignation. They moved down off the hill through some reserve units and entered the battle.

Rodel Ituralde had almost forgotten what it was like to have adequate resources at his command.

It had been some time since he had commanded legions of men and full banners of archers. For once, his men weren't half-starved, and Healers, fletchers and good smiths stood ready to repair his troops and equipment nightly. What a wonder it was to be able to ask for something—no matter how unusual—and have it located and brought to him, often within the hour!

He was still going to lose. He faced a numberless host of foes, Dreadlords by the dozen and even some of the Forsaken. He'd brought his force into this dead-end valley, seizing the jewel of the Dark One's lands—his very footstool, the black mountain. And now the sun itself had gone out, though the Aes Sedai said that would pass.

Ituralde puffed on his pipe as he rode his horse along the ridge that edged the valley to the north. Yes, he was going to lose. But with these resources, he'd do it with *style.*

He followed along the ridge, reaching a point above the pass into Thakan'dar. The valley, deep in the heart of the Blasted Lands, ran east to west, with Shayol Ghul at the western side and the pass on the east. One could reach this vantage only after hours of very hard climbing—or one quick step through a gateway. Handy, that. It was perfect for surveying his defenses.

The pass into Shayol Ghul was like a large slot canyon, the top completely inaccessible from the eastern side except by gateway. With a gateway, he could reach the top and look down into the canyon, which was perhaps wide enough to march fifty men down shoulder-to-shoulder. A perfect bottleneck. And he could position archers up top here, to fire down on those coming through the pass.

The sun finally burned out from behind the blackness above, like a drop of molten steel. So the Aes Sedai had been right. Still, those swirling black thunderheads spun back, as if to consume all the sky.

Since Shayol Ghul lay in the Blasted Lands, the air was chill enough that Ituralde wore a woolen winter cloak and his breath was white in front of him. Fog hung over the valley, thinner than it had been when the forges worked.

He left the canyon mouth and moved back to a group of people that had come with him. Windfinders and other high-ranking Sea Folk stood in long coats that they had—hawkishly, of course—traded for before coming north. Colorful clothing peeked out beneath. It, and the many ornaments on their faces, seemed a strange contrast to the dull brown coats.

Ituralde was Domani. He'd had more than a share of dealings with the Sea Folk; if they proved half as tenacious in battle as they were in negotiations, he was happy indeed to have them with him. They had insisted on coming up here to the ridge so they could survey the valley below and the pass into it.

The woman at their front was the Mistress of the Ships herself, Zaida din Parede Blackwing. A short woman, she had dark skin, and gray strands wove through her short black hair. “The Windfinders send word to you, Rodel Ituralde,” she said. “The attack has begun.”

“The attack?”

“The Bringer of Gales,” Zaida said, looking toward the sky, where the dark clouds rumbled and churned. “The Father of Storms. He would destroy you with the force of his ire.”

“Your people can handle it, right?”

“The Windfinders already confront him with the power of the Bowl of the Winds,” Zaida said. “If it were not so, he would have destroyed us all with tempests already.”

She still watched the sky, as did many of her companions. There were only about a hundred Sea Folk with him, not counting the Windfinders. Most of the rest worked with the supply teams, relaying arrows, food and other equipment to the four battlefronts. They seemed particularly interested in the steamwagons, though Ituralde couldn’t fathom why. The devices couldn’t match a good team of horses. “Confronting the Dark One himself, gust for gust,” Zaida said. “We will sing of this day.” She looked back to Ituralde. “You must protect the Coramoor,” she said sternly, as if scolding him.

“I’ll do my part,” Ituralde said, continuing on his way. “Just do yours.”

“This bargain was sealed long ago, Rodel Ituralde,” she called after him.

He nodded, continuing back along the ridge. Men stationed at watchposts saluted as he passed. Well, the ones that weren’t Aiel. He had a lot of the Aiel up here, where they could use their bows. He’d put the bulk of his Tairens down below, where those pikes and polearms would be of maximum use. They would hold the path into Shayol Ghul.

A distant Aiel horn blew; a signal from one of the scouts. The Trollocs had entered the pass. It was time.

He galloped back along the ridge toward the valley, trailed by other commanders and King Alsalam. When they reached the point where he had set up his primary watchpost, a vantage from which he could see miles back into the pass, Ituralde took out his looking glass.

Shadows moved there. In moments, he could make out the Trolloc hordes charging forward, whipped to a frenzy. For a moment, he was back in Maradon, watching his men—good men—fall one by one. Overrun at the hill fortifications, pulled down in the streets of the city. The explosion on the wall.

Desperate act after desperate act. Killing as many as he could, like a screaming man clubbing wolves as they tore him to pieces, hoping to take at least one with him into the final darkness.

His hand, holding the looking glass, quivered. He forced himself back to the present and his current defenses. It felt as if he'd been fighting losing battles his entire life. That took a toll. At night, he would hear Trollocs coming. Snorting, sniffing the air, hooves on the cobbles. Flashbacks from Maradon.

"Steady, old friend," King Alsalam said, riding up beside him. The King had a soothing voice. He'd always been able to calm others. Ituralde was certain the merchants of Arad Doman had chosen him for that reason. Tensions could run high when trade and war were concerned—the Domani looked at the two as much the same beast. But Alsalam ... he could calm a frantic merchant who had just lost her entire fleet at sea.

Ituralde nodded. The defense of this valley. He had to keep his mind on the defense of this valley. He'd hold, not let the Trollocs boil out of the pass into Thakan'dar. Burn him, he'd hold for *months* if the Dragon Reborn needed it. Every other fight—every battle man had fought, and was fighting—would be meaningless if Ituralde lost here. It was time to pull out every trick he knew, every last-ditch strategy. Here, one moment of delay could earn Rand al'Thor the time he needed.

"Remind the men to remain steady below," Ituralde said, surveying through his glass. "Prepare the logs."

Attendants relayed the orders, which went through gateway to the squads involved. That terrible force of Trollocs continued onward, clutching enormous swords, twisted polearms, or catchpoles to pull down riders. They clamored through the pass, lightning streaking between clouds above.

First the logs, Ituralde thought.

As the Trollocs reached the middle of the pass, the Aiel on both sides untied piles of oiled tree trunks—there were so many dead trees in forests now that Ituralde had had no trouble fetching them through gateways— and lit them aflame.

Hundreds of burning logs rolled down the sides of the pass, crashing into the Trollocs. The oiled logs set flesh alight. The beasts yelled, howled and screeched depending on the orifice they'd been given. Ituralde raised his looking glass and watched them, feeling an intense satisfaction.

That was new. In the past, he'd never been satisfied to see his foes die. Oh, he'd been pleased when a plan worked. And, in truth, the point of fighting was to see the other fellow dead and your men alive—but there had been no *joy* in that. The longer you fought, the more you saw the enemy as being like yourself. The banners changed, but the rank and file were much the same. They wanted to win, but usually they were more interested in a good meal, a blanket to sleep on and boots without holes in them.

This was different. Ituralde wanted to see those beasts dead. He *lusted* after it. Without them, he'd never have been forced to suffer the nightmare at Maradon. Without them, his hand wouldn't shake when the horns of war sounded. They'd ruined him.

He'd ruin them in return.

The Trollocs pushed through the jumble of logs with great difficulty. Many of them had been set alight, and the Myrddraal had to whip them to keep them moving. Many seemed to want to eat the flesh of the fallen. The rank scent of it made them hungry. Cooked bodies. To them, it was like the aroma of fresh bread.

The Fades succeeded in driving them on, but the Trollocs soon reached the next of Ituralde's defenses. Figuring out what to do had been a trick. You couldn't plant spikes or dig ditches in that solid rock, not without running your channelers to exhaustion. He could have made piles of rock or earth, but Trollocs were big, and mounds that would slow men were less effective against them. Beyond that, moving so much earth and stone would have meant diverting workers from building real fortifications in the valley. He'd learned early that in a defensive war, you wanted the fortifications to grow progressively better. You lasted longer that way, as you kept the enemy from gaining momentum.

In the end, the solution had been simple. Brambles.

He'd remembered huge thickets of them, dry and dead, back in Arad Doman. Ituralde's father had been a farmer, and had always complained about the thorn thickets. Well, if there was one thing mankind was not lacking, it was dead plants. Another was manpower. Thousands had flocked to the Dragon's call, and many of these Dragonsworn had little battle experience.

He'd still set them fighting when that time came. For now, however, he'd sent them to cut down enormous thornbushes. They'd placed these across the pass, lashed together, in masses twenty feet thick and eight feet tall. The thorn bales had been relatively easy to place—far lighter than stones or dirt — yet amassed as they were, the Trollocs couldn't move them simply by pushing. The first ranks ran up against them and tried, but were rewarded with five-inch thorns biting into them. The creatures in the rear pressed forward, causing the front ranks to turn in anger and rise up against those behind.

This left the bulk of the Trolloc forces frozen in the pass, at his mercy.

He didn't have much mercy for Shadowspawn.

Ituralde gave the signal, and the Asha'man with him—Awlsten, one of those who had served under him at Maradon—shot a bright burst of red light into the sky. Along the sides above the pass, more Aiel came out and began to roll boulders and more burning logs down upon the trapped Shadowspawn. Arrows and stones followed—anything they could shoot, throw or drop onto those below.

Most of these attacks from Ituralde's men happened farther down the pass, in the middle of the bulk of Trollocs. That caused half to pull back and shy away, while the others pushed forward to get away—shoving their allies in front into the brambles.

Some Trollocs carried shields, and tried to protect themselves against the deadly hail. Wherever they formed together defensively and began to make a shield wall above themselves, Ituralde's channelers struck, tearing them apart.

He couldn't spare many channelers for the work—most were back in the valley, making gateways to move supplies and watching for enemy channelers. They'd already had a second run-in with Dreadlords. Aviendha and Cadsuane Sedai had those operations in hand.

Some of the Trollocs shot arrows at the defenders above, but casualties mounted as the Shadowspawn at the front tried to hack their way through the abatis of thorns. It was slow going.

Ituralde watched, cold inside and out, as the Myrddraal whipped the Trollocs into a stampede. That shoved the ones working on the thorns forward, impaling them, trampling them.

Blood became a stream running back down toward the eastern end of the pass, making the Trollocs slip. They pushed the front five or six lines, breaking the thorns on the bodies of the beasts there.

It still took them the better part of an hour to break through. They left thousands dead as they surged forward, then found a *second* abatis, thicker and higher than the first. Ituralde had placed seven at intervals in the pass. The second was the largest, and it had the desired effect. Seeing it made the Trollocs at the front pull up short. Then they turned and broke backward.

Mass confusion resulted. Trollocs behind cried and shouted, pressing forward. Those in front snarled and howled as they tried to cut through the brambles. Some stood dazed. All the while arrows and rocks and burning logs continued to fall.

“Beautiful,” Alsalam whispered.

Ituralde found that his arm was no longer quivering. He lowered his looking glass. “Let’s go.”

“The battle is not through!” the King protested.

“It is,” Ituralde said, turning away. “For now.”

True to his word, the entire Trolloc army broke behind him—he could hear it happening—and fled eastward down the pass, away from the valley.

One day held, Ituralde thought. They would be back on the morrow, and then they would be ready. More shields, better weapons at the front for cutting thorns.

They’d still bleed. Bleed dearly.

He’d make certain of it.

* * *

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CHAPTER 25

Quick Fragments

Siuan let out a long, relieved breath as the Amyrlin—with eyes as if on fire—strode through the gateway and into their camp with Doesine, Saerin and several other Sitters.

Bryne came through the gateway after them, hurrying up to Siuan. “What was decided?” she asked.

“We stand, for now,” Bryne said. “Elayne’s orders, and the Amyrlin agrees with them.”

“Were outnumbered,” Siuan said.

“And so is everyone else,” he said, looking westward.

The Sharans had spent the last few days gathering their forces, setting up a mile or two away from Egwene’s army, which was stationed with its back to the wide river that formed the border between Kandor and Arafel.

The Shadow hadn’t committed to an all-out attack yet, instead sending an occasional raiding group through gateways as they waited for the slower Trolloc army to catch up. The Trollocs were here now, unfortunately. Egwene’s force could have retreated again through gateways, but Siuan admitted to herself that would accomplish little. They had to face this force eventually.

Bryne had selected this place at the southeastern tip of Kandor because the terrain gave them an advantage, albeit a small one. The river that ran north-south on the eastern border of Kandor was deep, but a ford lay less than a quarter-mile away from the hills that ran east to west along the southern border of Kandor. The Shadow’s army would be making for the ford to enter Arafel. By stationing his forces at the ford and on the hills overlooking it, Bryne could engage the invading army from two directions. If pressed, he could withdraw across the ford to the Arafellin side, the water barrier putting the Trollocs at a disadvantage against them. It was a small benefit, but in battle, sometimes the small things made all the difference.

On the plains west of the river, the Shadow formed up the Sharan and Trolloc armies. Both moved across the field toward the beleaguered Aes

Sedai and troops under Bryne's command.

Nearby, Egwene surveyed the camp. Light, it was a relief to know that the Amyrlin had survived. Siuan had predicted it, but still… Light. It was good to see Egwene's face.

If, indeed, it was her face. This was the first time that the Amyrlin had returned to camp following her ordeal, but she had spent several quiet meetings with the Sitters in secret locations. Siuan had not yet had a chance to speak with Egwene in quiet.

"Egwene al'Vere," Siuan called after the Amyrlin. "Tell me where we first met!"

The others looked at Siuan, frowning at her temerity. Egwene, however, seemed to understand. "Fal Dara," she said. "You bound me with Air on our trip down the river from there, as part of a lesson in the Power I have never forgotten."

Siuan breathed a second, deeper sigh of relief. Nobody had been in that lesson on the ship but Egwene and Nynaeve. But Siuan had unfortunately told Sheriam, Mistress of Novices and Black Ajah, about it. Well, she still believed that this was in fact Egwene. Imitating a woman's features was easy, but prying out her memories was another story.

Siuan made certain to look into the woman's eyes. There had been talk, of what had happened at the Black Tower. Myrelle had spoken of it, of events shared by her new Warders. Something dark.

They said you could tell. Siuan would see the change in Egwene if it had happened to her, wouldn't she?

If we can't tell, Siuan thought, *then we're already doomed.* She would have to trust the Amyrlin as she had so many times before.

"Gather the Aes Sedai," Egwene said. "Commander Bryne, you have your orders. We hold at this river unless the losses become so absolutely unbearable that…" She trailed off. "How long have *those* been there?"

Siuan looked up at the *raken* scouts passing overhead. "All morning. You have his letter."

"Bloody man," Egwene said. The Dragon Reborns message, delivered by Min Farshaw, had been brief.

The Seanchan fight the Shadow.

He'd sent Min to them, for reasons the woman wouldn't quite state. Bryne had given her tasks immediately: She was working for the supply masters as a clerk.

“Do you trust the Dragon Reborn’s word regarding the Seanchan, Mother?” Saerin asked.

“I don’t know,” Egwene said. “Form up our battle lines anyway, but keep an eye on those things up there, in case they attack.”

As Rand entered the cavern, something changed in the air. The Dark One only now sensed his arrival, and was surprised by it. The dagger had done its job.

Rand led the way, Nynaeve at his left, Moiraine at his right. The cavern led downward, and climbing down it lost them all of the elevation they’d gained. The passage was familiar to him, from another’s memory, from another Age.

It was as if the cavern were swallowing them, forcing them down toward the fires below. The cavern’s ceiling, jagged with fanglike stalactites, seemed to lower as they walked. Inching down with each step. It didn’t move, and the cavern didn’t gradually narrow. It just *changed*, tall one moment, shorter the next.

The cavern was a set of jaws, slowly tightening on its prey. Rand’s head brushed the tip of a stalactite, and Nynaeve crouched down, looking upward and cursing softly.

“No,” Rand said, stopping. “I will not come to you on my knees, Shai’tan.”

The cavern rumbled. The cavern’s dark reaches seemed to press inward, pushing against Rand. He stood motionless. It was as if he were a stuck gear, and the rest of the machine strained to keep turning the hands on the clock. He held firm.

The rocks trembled, then retreated. Rand stepped forward, and released a breath as the pressure lessened. This thing he had begun could not be stopped now. Slowing strained both him and the Dark One; his adversary was caught up in this inevitability as much as he was. The Dark One didn’t exist within the Pattern, but the Pattern still affected him.

Behind Rand, where he had stopped, lay a small pool of blood.

I will need to be quick about this, he thought. *I can’t bleed to death until the battle is finished.*

The ground trembled again.

"That's right," Rand whispered. "I'm coming for you. I am not a sheep being led to the slaughter, Shai'tan. Today, I am the hunter."

The trembling of the ground seemed almost like laughter. Horrible laughter. Rand ignored Moiraine's worried look as she walked beside him.

Down they went. An odd sensation came to mind. One of the women was in trouble. Was it Elayne? Aviendha? He could not tell. The warping of this place affected the bond. He was moving through time differently than they, and he lost his sense of where they were. He could only feel that one was in pain.

Rand growled, walking faster. If the Dark One had hurt them… Shouldn't it be growing lighter in here? They had to rely on the glow of *Callandor* as he pulled *saidin* through it. "Where are the fires?" Rand asked, voice echoing. "The molten stone at the bottom of the path?"

"The fires have been consumed, Lews Therin," a voice said from the shadows ahead.

Rand stopped, then stepped forward, *Callandor* thrust out to illuminate a figure on one knee at the edge of the light, head bowed, sword held before him, tip resting against the ground.

Beyond the figure was… nothing. A blackness.

"Rand," Moiraine said, hand on his arm. "The Dark One wells up against his bonds. Do not touch that blackness."

The figure stood and turned, Moridin's now-familiar face reflecting *Callandor*'s glow. Beside him on the ground lay a husk. Rand could explain it no other way. It was like the shell some insects leave behind when they grow, only it was in the shape of a man. A man with no eyes. One of the Myrddraal?

Moridin looked to the husk, following Rand's gaze. "A vessel my master needed no longer," Moridin said. *Saa* floated in the whites of his eyes, bouncing, shaking, moving with crazed vigor. "It gave birth to what is behind me."

"There is nothing behind you."

Moridin raised his sword before his face in a salute. "Exactly." Those eyes were nearly completely black.

Rand waved for Moiraine and Nynaeve to stay a few steps back as he approached. "You demand a duel? Here? Now? Elan, you know what I do is inevitable. Slowing me has no purpose."

“No purpose, Lews Therin?” Moridin laughed. “If I weaken you even slightly, will my master’s task not be that much easier? No, I think I shall *indeed* stand in your way. And if I win, what then? Your victory is not assured. It never has been.”

I win again, Lews Therin…

“You could step aside,” Rand said, raising *Callandor*; the glow of its light shifting off Moridin’s black steel sword. “If my victory is not assured, neither is your fall. Let me pass. For once, make the choice you know you should.”

Moridin laughed. “Now? *Now* you beg me to return to the Light? I have been promised oblivion. Finally, nothing, a destruction of my entire being. An *end*. You will not steal that from me, Lews Therin! By my grave, you will not!”

Moridin came forward swinging.

Lan executed Cherry Petal Kisses the Pond—not an easy task from horseback, as it was not a form designed for the saddle. His sword slashed into the neck of a Trolloc, just an inch into the creatures skin. That was enough to make fetid blood blossom in a spray. The bull-faced creature dropped its catchpole, reaching up to hold its neck, and let out a gurgling half-scream, half-groan.

Lan danced Mandarb backward as a second Trolloc came for his side. He cut its arm off as he spun. The Trolloc stumbled from the blow, and Andere ran it through from behind.

Andere moved his horse up beside Mandarb; over the din of battle, Lan could hear his friend panting. How long had they been fighting here at the battles front? Lan’s arms felt like lead on his shoulders.

It hadn’t been this bad during the Blood Snow.

“Lan!” Andere shouted. “They keep coming!”

Lan nodded, then moved Mandarb back again as a pair of Trollocs shoved their way through corpses to attack. These two had catchpoles as well. That wasn’t uncommon for Trollocs; they realized that men on foot were far less dangerous to them than men on horseback. Still, it made Lan wonder if they were trying to capture him.

He and Andere let the Trollocs come through and attack, as two members of the High Guard rode in from the side to distract their attention. The

Trollocs came for Lan, and he lurched forward, swinging and cutting in half the shaft of each of their catchpoles.

The beasts didn't stop, reaching brutish fingers to try to pull him down. Lan could smell their putrid breath as he rammed his sword into the throat of one. How slowly his muscles moved! Andere had better be in position.

Andere's horse came in with a sudden gallop, slamming its armored flank into the second Trolloc, knocking it to the side. It stumbled, and the two mounted guardsmen butchered it with long-handled axes.

Those men were both bloodied, as was Andere. As was Lan himself. He only vaguely remembered taking that thigh wound. He was growing *so* tired. He wasn't in any condition to fight.

"We pull back," he announced reluctantly. "Let someone else take the point for now." Lan and his men were leading the heavy cavalry at the tip of the fight, pressing against the Trollocs in a triangular formation to shear through and pushing them to the sides for the flanking attacks to crush.

The others nodded, and he could sense their relief as he pulled himself and his fifty-something High Guards back. They retreated, and a group of Shienarans moved in to fill the point. Lan cleaned his sword, then sheathed it. Lightning rumbled above. Yes, those clouds *did* seem lower today. Like a hand, slowly pressing down upon the men as they died.

Lightning bolts cracked the air nearby, one after another. Lan turned Mandarb sharply. There had been a lot of lightning today, but those had been too close together. He smelled smoke on the air.

"Dreadlords?" Andere asked.

Lan nodded, eyes searching for the attackers. All he could see was the lines of men fighting, the swarming mass of Trollocs driving forward in waves. He needed higher ground.

Lan gestured at one of the hills, and heeled Mandarb toward it. Members of the rear guard watched him pass, giving a raised hand and a "Dai Shan." Their armor was stained with blood. The reserves had been rotated to the front, then back again, during the day.

Mandarb plodded up the hill. Lan patted the horse, then dismounted and trudged beside the stallion. At the top, he stopped to survey the battle. Borderlander armies made spikelike indentations of silver and color in the Trolloc sea.

So *many.* The Dreadlords had come out on their large platform again, the mechanism pulled by dozens of Trollocs as it rolled across the field. They needed height to see where to direct their attacks. Lan set his jaw, watching a series of lightning bolts strike the Kandori, hurling bodies into the air and opening a gap in their lines.

Lan’s own channelers struck back, hurling lightning and fire at the advancing Trollocs to keep them from pouring through the hole in the Borderlander line. That would work for only so long. He had far fewer Aes Sedai and Asha’man than the Shadow had Dreadlords.

“Light,” said Prince Kaisel, riding up next to him. “Dai Shan, if they rip enough holes in our lines…”

“Reserves are coming. There,” Andere said, pointing. He was still mounted, and Lan had to step forward to look around him to see what he was indicating. A group of Shienaran riders were making for the lines upon which the lightning bolts were falling.

“There too,” Kaisel said, pointing to the east. A group of Arafellin were making for the same place. The two forces became entangled as they both rushed to close the gap at the same time.

Lightning began to strike down from the sky, raining on the Dreadlords’ platform. Good. Narishma and Merise had been told to watch for the Dreadlords and try to kill them. Perhaps it would distract the enemy. Lan focused on something else.

Why had two groups of reserves been sent to plug that same hole? Either unit would have been large enough for the job; with so many, they had interfered with one another. A mistake?

He climbed into Mandarb's saddle, reluctant to make the horse work again so soon. He would check on this error.

Within the wolf dream, Perrin and Gaul stopped on a ridge overlooking a valley with a mountain at the end of it. Above the mountain, the black clouds spun in a terrible vortex that didn’t quite touch the mountains tip.

The winds ravaged the valley, and Perrin was forced to create a pocket of stillness around himself and Gaul, deflecting debris. Down below, they caught quick fragments of an enormous battle. Aiel, Trollocs and men in armor appeared in the wolf dream for moments as if out of twisting smoke and dust, swung weapons, disintegrated in midblow. Thousands of them.

Many wolves were here in the dream, all around. They waited for… for something. Something they could not explain to Perrin. They had a name for Rand, Shadowkiller. Perhaps they were here to witness what he would do.

“Perrin?” Gaul asked.

“He’s here, finally,” Perrin said softly. “He has entered the Pit of Doom.”

Rand was going to need Perrin at some point during this fight. Unfortunately, Perrin couldn’t just stand here; there was work to be done. Gaul and he had, with help from the wolves, found Graendal near Cairhien. She had spoken to some people in their dreams. Darkfriends among the armies, perhaps?

She was peeking at Bashere’s dreams before that, Perrin thought. *Or so Lanfear claimed.* He didn’t trust her for a moment.

Anyway, he’d found Graendal earlier today, and had been planning to strike, when suddenly she had vanished. He knew how to track someone in the wolf dream when they *shifted*, and he had followed her here, to Thakan’dar.

Her scent vanished sharply in the middle of the valley below. She’d Traveled back into the real world. Perrin wasn’t certain how much time had passed in the wolf dream; he and Gaul still had food, but it felt as if it had been days and days. Lanfear said that the closer Perrin came to Rand, the more time would distort. He could probably test that statement, at least.

He is here, Young Bull! The sending came, sudden and urgent, from a wolf named Sunrise, here in the valley. *Slayer comes among us! Hurry!*

Perrin growled, grabbed Gaul by the shoulder without a word and *shifted* them. They appeared on the rocky path leading to a gaping hole in the rock above, the passage down to the Pit of Doom itself.

A wolf lay nearby, arrow in its side, smelling of death. Others howled in the near distance. The horrible wind whipped at him; Perrin lowered his head and charged into it, Gaul at his side. *Inside, Young Bull,* a wolf sent. *Inside the mouth of darkness.*

Not daring to think about what he was doing, Perrin burst into a long, narrow chamber filled with jagged rocks projecting from the floor and ceiling. Ahead, something bright sent pulsing waves through the space. Perrin raised a hand against the light, vaguely catching sight of shapes at the end of the chamber.

Two men, locked in battle.

Two women, as if frozen.

And just a few feet from Perrin, Slayer, drawing his bow to his cheek.

Perrin roared, hammer in his hand, and *shifted* himself between Slayer and Rand. He slapped the arrow from the air with his hammer a split second after it was loosed. Slayer's eyes widened, and he vanished.

Perrin *shifted* to Gaul, grabbing the man by the arm, then *shifted* back to where Slayer had been and caught the scent of his location. "Be wary," Perrin said, then *shifted* them after the man.

They dropped into the middle of a group of people. They were *Aiel*, but instead of wearing normal *shoufa*, they had strange red veils.

The *shift* hadn't taken Perrin and Gaul far; this was a village of some sort, close enough for the peak of Shayol Ghul to be visible in the distance.

The red-veils attacked. Perrin wasn't particularly surprised to find Aiel on the side of the Shadow. There were Darkfriends among all peoples. But why identify themselves with the color of their veils?

Perrin swung his hammer in a wide circle, keeping a group of them at bay, then *shifted* behind them, crushing the head of one from behind. Gaul became a blur of spears and brown clothing, dodging around red-veils, stabbing, then vanishing—and then appearing and stabbing again. Yes, he'd learned quickly, more quickly than these red-veils apparently had, for they failed to keep up with him. Perrin smashed another one in the kneecap, then searched for Slayer.

There. He stood on a hillock above, watching. Perrin glanced at Gaul, who, between jumps, gave him a quick nod. There were eight red-veils left, but—

The earth underneath Gaul's feet began to heave, exploding upward as Gaul jumped. Perrin managed to protect his friend, creating a steel plate beneath him to deflect the blast, but it was a close thing. Gaul landed shakily, and Perrin was forced to *shift* to him and attack the red-veil coming at him from behind.

Take care, Perrin yelled at Gaul. "At least one of these fellows can channel!"

Light. As if Aiel fighting for the Shadow weren't enough. Channeling Aiel. Channeling Aiel *men*. Light!

As Perrin swung at another, Slayer arrived, a sword in one hand and a long hunting knife in the other—the type a man would use to skin his prey.

Growling, Perrin threw himself into the fight, and the two began a strange dance. One attacking the other, who vanished to appear nearby before attacking also. They spun about like that, one *shifting*,, then the other, each trying for an edge. Perrin just missed crushing Slayer with a blow, then nearly caught steel in his gut.

Gaul was proving very useful—Perrin would have had a horrible time trying to stand alone against both Slayer and the red-veils. Unfortunately, Gaul could do little but distract his foes, and was having a very difficult time managing that.

As a column of fire from one of the red-veils nearly took him, Perrin made his decision. He *shifted* over to Gaul—and almost took a spear through the shoulder. Perrin turned the spear to cloth, and it bent on his skin.

Gaul started, seeing Perrin, then opened his mouth. Perrin didn't give him a chance to speak. He grabbed his friend by the arm, then *shifted* them away. They vanished just as flames welled up around them.

They reappeared before the entrance to the Pit of Doom. Perrin's cloak was smoldering. Gaul was bleeding from the thigh. When had that happened?

Are you there? Perrin sent out, urgent.

Dozens upon dozens of wolves replied. *We are here, Young Bull.*

Do you lead us, Young Bull? The Last Hunt!

Watch for Moonhunter, Young Bull. She stalks you like a lion in the high grass.

I need you, Perrin sent to the wolves. *Slayer is here. Will you fight him, and the men with him, for me?*

It is the Last Hunt, one sent back as many others agreed to help him. They appeared on the slopes of Shayol Ghul. Perrin could smell their wariness; they did not like this place. It was not a place wolves came, not in the waking world, nor in the dream.

Slayer came for him. Either he realized Perrin would be guarding this place, or he intended to finish his attack on Rand. Either way, Perrin caught sight of him standing on the ridge up above, looking down into the valley—a dark figure with a bow and a black cloak whipping in the tempests winds. Beneath him, that battle still raged in dust and shadow. Thousands upon thousands of people dying, killing, struggling in the real world, only phantoms reaching this place.

Perrin gripped his hammer. "Come try me," he whispered. "You'll find me a different foe this time."

Slayer raised his bow, then loosed. The arrow split, becoming four, then sixteen, then a hail of shafts shooting toward Perrin.

Perrin growled, then attacked the column of air that Slayer had created to stop the wind. It dissolved, and the raging gale caught the arrows, spinning them about.

Slayer appeared in front of Perrin, brandishing knife and sword. Perrin leaped at him as the red-veils appeared nearby. The wolves and Gaul dealt with them. This time, Perrin could focus on his enemy. He swung with a roar, slapping Slayer's weapon away, then aiming for his head.

Slayer danced back and created stone arms that burst from the ground—throwing chips and shards of rock—to seize Perrin. Perrin concentrated, and they burst, tumbling back to the ground. He caught the sharp scent of Slayer's surprise.

"You're here in the flesh," Slayer hissed.

Perrin jumped for him, *shifting* in midleap to reach the man more quickly. Slayer blocked with a shield that appeared on his arm. *Mah'alleinir* left a large dent in the front as it was deflected.

Slayer vanished and appeared five strides back, on the rim of the pathway leading up to the cavern. "I'm so very glad you came hunting me, wolf pup. I was forbidden from seeking you, but now you are here. I skinned the sire; now the pup."

Perrin launched himself at Slayer in a blurring leap, like those he used to bound from hilltop to hilltop. He crashed into the man, throwing them both off of the ledge in front of the opening to the Pit of Doom, sending them tumbling dozens of feet toward the ground.

Perrin's hammer was at his belt—he didn't remember putting it there—but he didn't want to hit this man with the hammer. He wanted to feel Slayer as he slammed a fist into the man's face. The punch connected as they fell, but Slayer's face was suddenly hard as stone.

In that moment, the fight became not one of flesh against flesh, but will against will. As they fell together, Perrin imagined Slayer's skin becoming soft, giving beneath his punch, the bones brittle and cracking. Slayer, in response, imagined his skin as stone.

The result was that Slayer's cheek became hard as rock, but Perrin cracked it anyway. They hit the ground, and rolled apart. When Slayer stood, his right cheek looked like that of a statue hit with a hammer, small cracks moving out over the skin.

Blood began to trickle through those cracks, and Slayer opened his eyes in shock. He raised a hand to his cheek, feeling the blood. The skin became flesh again, and stitches appeared, as if sewn by a master surgeon. One could not heal oneself in the wolf dream.

Slayer sneered at Perrin, then lunged. The two of them danced back and forth, surrounded by churning dust that formed the faces and bodies of people struggling for their lives in another place, another world. Perrin crashed through a pair of them, dust streaming from *Mah'alleinir* as he swung. Slayer skidded back, creating a wind to blow him out of the way, then struck forward too quickly.

Perrin became a wolf without a thought, Slayer's sword passing over his head. Young Bull leaped into Slayer, slamming him backward through an impression of two Aiel fighting one another. Those exploded into sand and dust. Others formed to the sides, then blew away.

The howling tempest was a roar in Young Bull's ears, and the dust ground into his skin and eyes. He rolled across Slayer, then lunged for his throat. *How sweet it will be to taste this two-legs' blood in my mouth.* Slayer *shifted* away.

Young Bull became Perrin, with hammer at the ready, crouching on the plain of fragmentary fighting, changing people. *Careful,* he thought to himself. *You are a wolf, but more a man.* With a start, he realized that some of those impressions weren't completely human. He saw a couple that were distinctly snakelike in appearance, though they faded quickly.

Does this place reflect other worlds? he wondered, not certain what else to make of the phantoms.

Slayer came at him again, teeth clenched. Perrin's hammer grew hot in his fingers, and his leg throbbed where he'd been hit and then Healed during his last fight with Slayer. He roared, letting Slayer's sword close—letting it graze him on the cheek—as he crashed his own weapon into the man's side.

Slayer vanished.

Perrin followed through with the swing, and, for a moment, assumed he'd beaten the man. But no, his hammer had barely connected before Slayer disappeared. The man had been ready, waiting to *shift.* Perrin felt blood moving through the hair of his beard toward his chin; that graze had cut a gash on his cheek much in the same place as he'd landed that blow on Slayer's face.

He sniffed at the air, turning about, trying to catch the scent of Slayer's location. Where had he gone? There was nothing.

Slayer hadn't *shifted* to another place in the wolf dream. He knew that Perrin could follow him. Instead, he must have jumped back into the waking world. Perrin howled, realizing he'd lost his prey. The wolf railed against this, a failed hunt, and it was a struggle for Perrin to bring himself back under control.

It was a scent that brought him back to it. Burning fur. It was accompanied by howls of pain.

Perrin *shifted* himself back to the top of the pathway. Wolves lay burned and dying amid the corpses of red-veils. Two of the men were still up, back to back, and incongruously, they'd lowered their veils. They had teeth filed to points, and were smiling, almost with madness, as they channeled. Burning wolf after wolf to char. Gaul had been forced to take shelter beside a rock, his clothing smoldering. He smelled of pain.

The two smiling channelers didn't seem to care that their companions were bleeding to death on the ground around them. Perrin walked toward them. One raised a hand and released a jet of fire. Perrin turned it to smoke, then parted that by walking directly into it, the gray-black smoke eddying against him, then streaming off.

The other Aiel man also channeled, trying to rip the earth up beneath Perrin. Perrin knew that earth would not break, that it would resist the weaves. So it did. Perrin could not see the weaves, but he knew that the earth—suddenly far more solid—refused to budge as ordered.

The first Aiel reached for his spear with a growl, but Perrin grabbed him by the neck.

He wanted so badly to crush this man's throat. He had lost Slayer *again*, and wolves were dead because of these two. He held himself back. Slayer… Slayer deserved worse than death for what he had done. He didn't know about these men, and he wasn't certain if killing them here would kill them forever, without rebirth.

It seemed to him that everyone, including creatures like these, should have another chance. The red-veil in his hand struggled, trying with weaves of Air to envelop Perrin.

"You are an idiot," Perrin said softly. Then he looked to the other one. "You too."

Both blinked, then looked at him with eyes that grew slack. One started drooling. Perrin shook his head. Slayer hadn't trained them at all. Even Gaul, after only a… how long had it been? Anyway, even Gaul knew not to be caught like that, in the grip of someone who could change the very capacity of one's mind.

Perrin had to keep thinking of them as idiots to maintain the transformation. He knelt, seeking among the wolves for the wounded he could help. He imagined bindings on the wounds of those who were hurt. They would heal quickly in this place. Wolves seemed to be able to do that. They had lost eight of their members, for whom Perrin howled. The others joined him, but there was no regret to their sendings. They had fought. That was what they had come to do.

After that, Perrin saw to the fallen red-veils. All were dead. Gaul limped up beside him, holding a burned arm. The wound was bad, but not immediately life-threatening.

"We need to take you out of here," Perrin said to him, "and get you some Healing. I'm not certain what time it is, but I think we should go to Merrilor and wait for the gateway out."

Gaul gave him a toothy grin. "I killed two of those myself, Perrin Aybara. One could channel. I think myself great with honor, then you slide in and take two *captive*." He shook his head. "Bain would laugh herself all the way back to the Three-fold Land if she saw this."

Perrin turned to his two captives. Killing them here seemed heartlessly cruel, but to release them meant fighting them again—perhaps losing more wolves, more friends.

"I do not suspect these keep to *ji'e'toh*," Gaul said. "Would you take a man who could channel as *gai'shain* anyway?" He shuddered visibly.

"Just kill them and be done with it," Lanfear said.

Perrin eyed her. He didn't jump as she spoke—he had grown somewhat accustomed to the way she popped in and out. He did find it annoying, however.

"If I kill them here, will that kill them forever?"

"No," she said. "It doesn't work that way for men."

Did he trust her? On this point, for some reason, he found that he did. Why would she lie? Still, killing unarmed men… they were barely more than babies here to him.

No, he thought, considering the dead wolves, *not babies. Far more dangerous than that.*

"Those two have been Turned," she said, folding her arms, nodding to the two channelers. "Many are born to their life these days, but those two have the filed teeth. They were taken and Turned."

Gaul muttered something. It sounded like an oath, but it also sounded reverent. It was in the Old Tongue, and Perrin didn't catch its meaning. After that, however, Gaul raised a spear. He smelled regretful. "You spat in his eye, and so he uses you, my brothers. Horrible…"

Turned, Perrin thought. Like those men at the Black Tower. He frowned, walking up and taking the head of one of the men in his hands. Could he *will* the man back to the Light? If he could be forced to be evil, could he be restored?

Perrin hit something vast as he pushed against the minds of these men. His will bounced free, like a twig used to try beating down an iron gate. Perrin stumbled back.

He looked at Gaul, and shook his head. "I can do nothing for them."

"I will do it," Gaul said. "They are brothers."

Perrin nodded, reluctant, as Gaul slit the throats of the two men. It was better this way. Still, it ripped Perrin up inside to see it. He hated what fighting did to people, what it did to him. The Perrin of months ago could never have stood and watched this. Light ... if Gaul hadn't done it, he would have himself. He knew it.

"You can be such a child," Lanfear said, arms still folded beneath her breasts as she watched him. She sighed, then took him by the arm. A wave of icy Healing washed through him. The wound on his cheek closed.

Perrin took a deep breath, then nodded toward Gaul.

"I am not your errand woman, wolf pup," she said.

"You want to convince me that you're not a foe?" he asked. "That's a good place to start."

She sighed, then waved impatiently for Gaul to approach. He did so, limping, and she Healed him.

A distant rumbling shook the cavern behind them. She looked at it, and narrowed her eyes. "I cannot stay here," she said. Then she was gone.

"I do not know what to make of that one," Gaul said, rubbing his arm where the clothing was burned, but the skin healed. "I believe she is gaming with us, Perrin Aybara. I do not know which game."

Perrin grunted in agreement.

"This Slayer ... he will return."

"I'm thinking of a way to do something about that," Perrin said, reaching to his waist where he'd tied the dreamspike to his belt with straps. He freed it. "Watch here," he told Gaul, then entered the cavern.

Perrin walked past those stones like teeth. It was hard to escape the feeling that he was crawling into the mouth of a Darkhound. The light at the bottom of the descent was blinding, but Perrin created a bubble around himself that was shaded, like glass that was only translucent. He could make out Rand and someone else striking at one another with swords at the lip of a deep pit.

No. It wasn't a pit. Perrin gaped. The entire *world* seemed to end here, the cavern opening into a vast nothingness. An eternal expanse, like the blackness of the Ways, only this one seemed to be *pulling* him into it. Him, and everything else. He'd grown accustomed to the storm raging outside, so he hadn't noticed the wind in the tunnel. Now that he paid attention, he could feel it streaming through the cavern into that hole.

Looking into that gap, he knew that he'd never understood blackness before, not really. *This* was blackness. *This* was nothingness. The absolute end of all. Other darkness was frightening because of what it might hide. This darkness was different; if this engulfed you, you would cease completely.

Perrin stumbled back, though the wind blowing down the tunnel wasn't strong. Just… steady, like a stream running into nowhere. Perrin gripped the dreamspike, then forced himself to turn away from Rand. Someone knelt on the floor nearby, her head bowed, braced as if against some great force coming from the nothingness. Moiraine? Yes, and that was Nynaeve kneeling to her right.

The veil between worlds was very thin here. If he could see Nynaeve and Moiraine, perhaps they could see or hear him.

He stepped up to Nynaeve. "Nynaeve? Can you hear me?"

She blinked, turning her head. Yes, she could hear him! But she could not see him, it seemed. She searched about, confused as she clung to the stone teeth of the floor as if for life itself.

"Nynaeve!" Perrin yelled.

"Perrin?" she whispered, looking about. "Where are you?"

“I’m going to do something, Nynaeve,” he said. “I will make it impossible to create gateways into this place. If you want to Travel to or from this area, you’ll need to create your gateway out in front of the cavern. All right?”

She nodded, still looking about for him. Apparently, though the real world reflected in the wolf dream, it didn’t work the other way around. Perrin rammed the dreamspike into the ground, then activated it as Lanfear had shown him, creating the bubble of purple just around the cavern itself. He hurried back into the tunnel, emerging through a wall of purple glass to rejoin Gaul and the wolves.

“Light,” Gaul said. “I was about to go search for you. Why did it take so long?”

“So long?” Perrin asked.

“You were gone at least two hours.”

Perrin shook his head. “It’s the Bore playing with our sense of time. Well, at least with that dreamspike in place, Slayer will have trouble reaching Rand.”

After having Slayer use the dreamspike against him, it was satisfying to turn the *ter’angreal* against the man. Perrin had made the protective bubble just large enough to fit inside the cavern and shelter Rand, the Bore and those with him. The placement meant all of the borders of the dome save the one here at the front were inside rock.

Slayer would not be able to jump into the middle of the cavern and strike; he would have to enter through the front. Either that, or find a way to burrow through the rock, which Perrin supposed was possible here in the wolf dream. However, it would slow him, and that was what Rand needed.

“I need you to protect this place,” Perrin sent to the gathered wolves, many of whom were still licking their wounds. “Shadowkiller fights inside, hunting the most dangerous prey this world has known. We must not let Slayer reach him.”

We will guard this place, Young Bull, one sent. *Others gather. He will not pass us.*

“Can you do this?” Perrin sent an image of wolves spaced through the Borderlands, relaying messages quickly between themselves. There were thousands upon thousands of them roaming the area.

Perrin was proud of his sending. He didn’t send it as words, or as images, but as a concept mixed with scents, with a hint of instinct. With the wolves positioned as he sent, they could send to him through the network almost instantly if Slayer returned.

We can do it, the wolves sent.

Perrin nodded, then waved to Gaul.

“We are not staying?” he asked.

“There is too much happening,” Perrin said. “Time moves too slowly here. I don’t want the war to pass us by.”

Besides, there was still the matter of whatever Graendal was doing.

* * *

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CHAPTER 26

Considerations

"I don't like fighting beside those Seanchan," Gawyn said softly, coming up beside Egwene.

She didn't like it either, and she knew he would be able to sense that from her. What could she say? She couldn't turn the Seanchan away. The Shadow had brought the Sharans to fight under its banner. Egwene, therefore, would have to use what she had. Anything she had.

Her neck itched as she crossed the field to the meeting place about a mile or so east of the ford in Arafel. Bryne had already arrayed most of her forces at the ford. Aes Sedai could be seen atop the hills just south of the ford, and large squadrons of archers and pikemen were positioned below them on the slopes. The troops were feeling fresher. The days Egwene's force had spent retreating had relieved some of the pressure of warfare, despite attempts by the enemy to make them commit to combat.

Egwene's chances depended on the Seanchan joining the battle and engaging the Sharan channelers. Her stomach twisted. She had once heard that in Caemlyn, unscrupulous men would throw starving dogs into a pit together and bet on which one would survive the ensuing fight. This felt the same to her. The Seanchan *damane* were not free women; they could not choose to fight. From what she'd seen of the Sharan male channelers, they were little more than animals themselves.

Egwene should be fighting the Seanchan with every breath, not allying with them. Her instincts rebelled as she approached the gathering of Seanchan. The Seanchan leader demanded this audience with Egwene. The Light send it would be quick.

Egwene had received reports on this Fortuona, so she knew what to expect. The diminutive Seanchan Empress stood atop a small platform, watching the battle preparations. She wore a glittering dress whose train extended a ridiculous distance behind her, carried by eight *da'covale*, those servants in the horribly immodest clothing. Various members of the Blood stood in groups, waiting with careful poses. Deathwatch Guards, hulking in their near-black armor, stood like boulders around the Empress.

Egwene approached, guarded by her own soldiers and much of the Hall of the Tower. Fortuona had first tried to insist that Egwene come to visit her in her camp. Egwene had, of course, refused. It had taken hours to reach an agreement. Both would come to this location in Arafel, and both would stand rather than sit so that neither could give the impression of being above the other. Still, Egwene was irritated to find the woman waiting. She'd wanted to time this meeting so they both arrived at the same moment.

Fortuona turned from the battle preparations and looked at Egwene. It appeared that many of Siuan's reports were false. True, Fortuona did look something like a child, with that slight build and delicate features. Those similarities were minor. No child had ever had eyes so discerning, so calculating. Egwene revised her expectations. She'd imagined Fortuona as a spoiled adolescent, the product of a coddled lifetime.

"I have considered," Fortuona said, "whether it would be appropriate to speak to you in person, with my own voice."

Nearby, several of the Seanchan Blood—with their painted fingernails and partially shaved heads—gasped. Egwene ignored them. They stood near several pairs of *sul'dam* and *damane*. If she let those pairs draw her attention, her temper might get the better of her.

"I have considered myself," Egwene said, "whether it would be appropriate to speak to one such as yourself, who has committed such terrible atrocities."

"I have decided that I will speak to you," Fortuona continued, ignoring Egwene's remark. "I think that, for the time, it would be better if I see you not as *marath'damane*, but as a queen among the people of this land."

"No," Egwene said. "You will see me for what I am, woman. I demand it." Fortuona pursed her lips. "Very well," she finally said. "I have spoken to *damane* before; training them has been a hobby of mine. To see you as such does not violate protocol, as the Empress may speak with her pet hounds."

"Then I will speak with you directly as well," Egwene said, keeping her face impassive. "For the Amyrlin judges many trials. She must be able to speak to murderers and rapists in order to pass sentence upon them. I think you would be at home in their company, though I suspect they would find you nauseating.”

“I can see that this will be an uneasy alliance.”

“You expected otherwise?” Egwene asked. “You hold my sisters captive. What you have done to them is worse than murder. You have tortured them, broken their wills. I wish to the Light you had simply killed them instead.”

“I would not expect you to understand what needs to be done,” Fortuona said, looking back toward the battlefield. “You are *marath'damane.* It is… natural for you to seek your own good, as you see it.”

“Natural indeed,” Egwene said softly. “This is why I insist that you see me as I am, for I represent the ultimate proof that your society and empire are built upon falsehoods. Here I stand, a woman you insist should be collared for the common good. And yet I display none of the wild or dangerous tendencies that you claim I should have. So long as I am free from your collars, I prove to every man and woman who draws breath that you are a liar.” The other Seanchan murmured. Fortuona herself maintained a cool face. “You would be much happier with us,” Fortuna said.

“Oh, would I?” Egwene said.

“Yes. You speak of hating the collar, but if you were to wear it and see, you would find it a more peaceful life. We do not torture our *damane*. We care for them, and allow them to live lives of privilege.”

“You don’t know, do you?” Egwene asked.

“I am the Empress,” Fortuona said. “My domination extends across seas, and the realms of my protection encompass all that humankind knows and thinks. If there are things I do not know, they are known by those in my Empire, for I *am* the Empire.”

“Delightful,” Egwene said. “And does your Empire realize that I *wore* one of your collars? That I was once trained by your *suldam*?”

Fortuona stiffened, then rewarded Egwene with a look of shock, although she covered it immediately.

“I was in Falme,” Egwene said. “A *damane*, trained by Renna. Yes, I wore your collar, woman. I found no peace there. I found pain, humiliation, and terror.”

“Why did I not know of this?” Fortuona asked loudly, turning. “Why did you not tell me?”

Egwene glanced at the collected Seanchan nobility. Fortuona seemed to be addressing one man in particular, a man in rich black and golden clothing, trimmed with white lace. He had an eyepatch over one eye, black to match, and the fingernails on both hands were lacquered to a dark—

“Mat?” Egwene sputtered.

He gave a kind of half-wave, looking embarrassed.

Oh, Light, she thought. *What has he thrown himself into?* She galloped through plans in her mind. Mat was imitating a Seanchan nobleman. They must not know who he really was. Could she trade something to save him? “Approach,” Fortuona said.

“This man is not—” Egwene began, but Fortuona spoke over her. “Knotai,” she said, “did you know that this woman was an escaped *damane?* You knew her as a child, I believe.”

“You know who he is?” Egwene asked.

“Of course I do,” Fortuona said. “He is named Knotai, but once was called Matrim Cauthon. Do not think he will serve you, *marath’damane*, though you did grow up together. He is the Prince of the Ravens now, a position he earned by his marriage to me. He serves the Seanchan, the Crystal Throne, and the Empress.”

“May she live forever,” Mat noted. “Hello, Egwene. Glad to hear you escaped those Sharans. How’s the White Tower? Still… white, I guess?” Egwene looked from Mat to the Seanchan Empress, then back at him again. Finally, unable to do anything else, she burst out laughing. “You married Matrim Cauthon?”

“The omens predicted it,” Fortuona said.

“You let yourself draw too close to a *ta’veren*,” Egwene said, “and so the Pattern bound you to him!”

“Foolish superstitions,” Fortuona said.

Egwene glanced at Mat.

“Being *ta’veren* never did get me much,” Mat said sourly. “I suppose I should be grateful the Pattern didn’t haul me by my boots over to Shayol Ghul. Small blessing, that.”

“You didn’t answer my question, Knotai,” Fortuona said. “Did you know this woman was an escaped *damane*? If so, why didn’t you speak of it to me?”

“I didn’t think too much about it,” Mat said. “She wasn’t one for very long, Tuon.”

“We will speak of this on another occasion,” Fortuona said softly. “It will not be pleasant.” She turned back to Egwene. “To converse with a former *damane* is not the same as speaking to one recently captured, or one who has always been free. News of this event will spread. You have caused me… inconvenience."

Egwene regarded the woman, baffled. Light! These people were completely insane. "What was your purpose insisting upon this meeting? The Dragon Reborn says you will help our fight. Help us, then."

"I needed to meet you," Fortuona said. "You are my opposite. I have agreed to join this peace the Dragon offered, but there are conditions."

Oh, Light, Rand, Egwene thought. *What did you promise them?* She braced herself.

"Along with agreeing to fight," Fortuona said, "I will acknowledge the sovereign borders of nations as they are currently mapped. We will force the obedience of no *marath'damane* save those who violate our borders."

"And those borders are?" Egwene asked.

"As currently outlined, as I—"

"Be more specific," Egwene said. "Tell me with your own voice, woman. What borders?"

Fortuona drew her lips to a line. Obviously, she was not accustomed to being interrupted. "We control Altara, Amadicia, Tarabon, and Almoth Plain."

"Tremalking," Egwene said. "You'll release Tremalking and the other Sea Folk islands?"

"I did not list those because they are not of your land, but the sea. They are not your concern. Besides, they were not part of the agreement with the Dragon Reborn. He did not mention it."

"He has a lot on his mind. Tremalking will be part of the agreement with me."

"I wasn't aware we were making such an agreement," Fortuona said calmly. "You require our assistance. We could leave in a moment, should I order it. How would you fare against that army without our aid, which you so recently begged me to lend?"

Begged? Egwene thought. "Do you realize what happens if we lose the Last Battle? The Dark One breaks the Wheel, slays the Great Serpent, and all things will end. That's if we're lucky. If we aren't lucky, the Dark One will remake the world according to his own twisted vision. All people will be bound to him in an eternity of suffering, subjugation, and torment."

“I am aware of this,” Fortuona said. “You act as if this particular fight—here, on this battlefield—is decisive.”

“If my army were to be destroyed,” Egwene said, “our entire effort would be jeopardized. Everything could indeed hinge on what happens here.”

“I disagree,” Fortuona said. “Your armies are not vital. They are populated by the children of oathbreakers. You fight the Shadow, and for that I grant you honor. If you were to lose, I would return to Seanchan and raise up the full might of the Ever Victorious Army and bring *it* to bear against this… horror. We would still win the Last Battle. It would be more difficult without you, and I would not waste useful lives or potential *damane,* but I am confident we could stand against the Shadow on our own.”

She met Egwene’s eyes.

So cold, Egwene thought. *She’s bluffing. She must be.* Reports from Siuan’s eyes-and-ears said that the Seanchan homeland was in chaos. A succession crisis.

Perhaps Fortuona really did believe that the Empire could stand against the Shadow on its own. If so, she was wrong.

“You *will* fight alongside us,” Egwene said. “You made the treaty with Rand, gave him your oath, I assume.”

“Tremalking is ours.”

“Oh?” Egwene said. “And you have set up a leader there? One of the Sea Folk, to acknowledge your rule?”

Fortuona said nothing.

“You have the allegiance of most of the other lands you’ve conquered,” Egwene said. “For better or worse, the Altarans and Amadicians follow you. The Taraboners seem to as well. But the Sea Folk ... I have no reports whatsoever of a single one of their kind supporting you or living peacefully beneath your thumb.”

“Borders—”

“The borders you just mentioned, as they exist on maps, show Tremalking as Sea Folk land. It is not yours. If our treaty holds current borders as they are, you would need a ruler in Tremalking to acknowledge you.”

It seemed a tenuous argument to Egwene. The Seanchan were conquerors. What did they care if they had any kind of legitimacy?

However, Fortuona seemed to consider Egwene's words. She frowned in thought.

"This ... is a good argument," Fortuona finally said. "They have not accepted us. They are foolish to reject the peace we offer, but they have indeed done so. Very well, we will leave Tremalking, but I will add a condition to our agreement as you have."

"And your condition?"

"You will announce through your Tower and through your lands," Fortuona said. "Any *marath'damane* who wish to come to Ebou Dar and be properly collared must be allowed to do so."

"You think people would *want* to be collared?" She was insane. She had to be.

"Of course they would want to," Fortuona said. "In Seanchan, very occasionally one who can channel is missed in our searches. When they discover what they are, they come to us and demand to be collared, as is appropriate. You will not force anyone to stay away from us. You will let them come."

"I promise you, none will."

"Then you should have no trouble making the proclamation," Fortuona said. "We will send emissaries to educate your people on the benefits of *damane*—our teachers will come peacefully, for we will hold to the treaty. I believe you will be surprised. Some will see what is right."

"Do what you wish," Egwene said, amused. "Break no laws, and I suspect most will allow your… emissaries. I cannot speak for every ruler."

"What of the lands you control? Tar Valon? You will allow our emissaries?"

"If they break no laws," Egwene said, "I won't silence them. I'd allow in Whitecloaks, if they could say their piece without driving men to riot. But *Light*, woman. You can't actually believe…"

She trailed off, watching Fortuona. She did believe it. So far as Egwene could tell, she did.

At least she's sincere, Egwene thought. *Insane. Insane, but sincere.*

"And the *damane* you now hold?" Egwene said. "You'll let them go, if they wish to be released?"

"None who are properly trained would wish that."

"This must be equal on both sides," Egwene said. "What of a girl whom you discover to be able to channel? If she does not wish to be made *damane,* will you let her leave your lands and join ours?”

“That would be like letting an enraged *grolm* free in a city square.”

“You said that people will see the truth,” Egwene said. “If your way of life is strong, your ideals true, then people will see them for what they are. If they don’t, you shouldn’t force them. Let any who wish to be free go free, and I’ll let your people speak in Tar Valon. Light! I’ll give them room and free board, and I’ll see the same done in every city!”

Fortuona eyed Egwene. “Many of our *sul’dam* have come to this war anticipating the chance to capture new *damane* from among those who serve the Shadow. These Sharans, perhaps. You would have us let them, or your sisters of the Shadow, free? To destroy, murder?”

“To be tried and executed, under the Light.”

“Why not let them be put to use? Why waste their lives?”

“What you do is an abomination!” Egwene said, feeling exasperated. “Not even the Black Ajah deserves that.”

“Resources should not be discarded so idly.”

“Is that so?” Egwene said. “Do you realize that every one of your *sul’dam*, your precious trainers, is herself a *marath’damane*?”

Fortuona spun on her. “Do not spread such lies.”

“Oh? Shall we test it, Fortuona? You said you trained them yourself. You are a *sul’dam,* I presume? Put the *a’dam* on your neck. I *dare* you. If I am wrong, it will do nothing to you. If I am right, you will be subject to its power, and will prove to be *marath'damane*.”

Fortuona's eyes widened in anger. She had ignored Egwene’s barbs calling her a criminal, but *this* accusation seemed to dig into her ... so Egwene made certain to twist the knife a little deeper.

“Yes,” Egwene said. “Let us do it and test the real strength of your commitment. If you prove to be able to channel, will you do as you claim others should? Will you stroll up to the collar and snap it around your own neck, Fortuona? Will you obey your own laws?”

“I have obeyed them,” Fortuona said coldly. “You are very ignorant. Perhaps it is true, that *sul’dam* can learn to channel. But this is not the same thing as being a *marath'damane*—any more than a man who *can* become a murderer is to be considered one.”

“We shall see,” Egwene said, “once more of your people realize the lies they’ve been told.”

“I will break you myself,” Fortuona said softly. “Someday, your people will turn you over to me. You will forget yourself, and your arrogance will lead you to our borders. I will be waiting.”

“I plan to live centuries,” Egwene hissed. “I will watch your empire crumble, Fortuona. I will watch it with joy.” She raised a finger to tap the woman on the chest, but Fortuona moved with blurring speed, her hand grabbing Egwene’s by the wrist. For one so small, she certainly was quick.

Egwene embraced the Source by reflex. *Damane* nearby gasped, and the light of the One Power sprang up around them.

Mat pushed between Egwene and Fortuona and shoved them apart, holding one hand at each woman’s chest. Egwene wove by instinct, intending to remove his hand with a thread of Air. It fell apart, of course.

Blood and ashes, that’s inconvenient! She had forgotten he was there.

“Let’s be civil, ladies,” Mat said, eyeing one of them, then the other. “Don’t make me throw the pair of you over my knee.”

Egwene glared at him, and Mat met her eyes. He was trying to deflect her anger to him instead of Fortuona.

Egwene looked down at his hand, which was pressed against her chest uncomfortably close to her breasts. Fortuona was also looking at that hand.

Mat lowered both hands, but took his sweet time at it, as if completely unconcerned. “The people of this world need you two, and they need you levelheaded, you hear me? This is bigger than any of us. When you fight each other, the Dark One wins, and that is that. So stop behaving like children.”

“We will have many words about this tonight, Knotai,” Fortuona said. “I love words,” Mat said. “There are some deliciously pretty words out there. ‘Smile.’ That’s always sounded like a pretty word to me. Don’t you think? Or, perhaps, the words ‘I promise not to kill Egwene right now for trying to touch me, the Empress, may I live forever, because we really bloody need her for the next couple of weeks or so.’ ” He eyed Fortuona pointedly. “You really married him?” Egwene said to Fortuona. “Honestly?”

“It was ... an unusual event,” Fortuona replied. She shook herself, then glared at Egwene. “He is mine and I do not intend to release him.”

“You don’t seem the type to release anything, once you have your hands on it,” Egwene said. “Matrim does not interest me at the moment; your army does. Will you fight, or won’t you?”

“I will fight,” Fortuona said. “But my army is not subject to you. Have your general send us suggestions. We will consider them. But I can see you are going to have a difficult time defending the ford against the invader without a larger number of your *marath'damane.* I will send you some of my *suldam* and *damane* to protect your army. That is all I will do for now.” She started walking back toward her people. “Come, Knotai.”

“I don’t know how you fell into this,” Egwene said under her breath to Mat. “I don’t want to know. I’ll do what I can to help free you, once we are done fighting.”

“That’s kind of you, Egwene,” Mat said. “But I can handle this on my own.” He rushed off after Fortuona.

That was what he always said. She’d find some way to help him. She shook her head, returning to where Gawyn waited for her. Leilwin had declined to come, though Egwene would have expected her to enjoy seeing some of those from her homeland.

“We’ll need to keep them at arm’s length,” Gawyn said softly.

“Agreed,” Egwene said.

“You’ll still fight alongside the Seanchan, despite what they’ve done?”

“So long as they keep the Sharan channelers occupied, yes.” Egwene looked toward the horizon—toward Rand, and the powerful struggle he must be embroiled in. “Our options are limited, Gawyn, and our allies dwindling. For now, whoever is willing to kill Trollocs is a friend. That is that.”

The Andoran line buckled, and Trollocs ripped through, snarling beasts with stinking breath that clouded in the chill air. Elayne’s halberdiers nearby scrambled as they fell over themselves to escape. The first few Trollocs ignored them, howling and leaping over them to make room for more to pour through the opening, like dark blood from a gash in the flesh.

Elayne tried to gather what little strength she had left. She felt as if *saidar* would slip from her at any moment, but the men fighting and dying wouldn’t be any stronger than she at this point. They’d all been fighting for most of the day.

Somehow finding the strength to weave, she roasted the first few Trollocs with balls of fire, tripping up the flow through the wound in the human lines. Streaks of white, arrows from Birgitte's bow, followed. Trollocs gurgled, clawing at their necks where the arrows hit.

Elayne sent strike after strike from horseback, tired hands clinging to the saddle as she blinked eyes that seemed leaden. Dead Trollocs toppled, forming like a scab over the hole, blocking the others from ripping through. Reserve troops stumbled up, seizing ground and pushing the Trollocs back.

Elayne breathed out, wavering. Light! She felt as if she'd been forced to run around Caemlyn while pulling lead weights. She could barely sit upright, let alone hold the One Power. Her vision dimmed, then darkened further. Sound faded in her ears. Then… darkness.

Sound came back first. Distant yells, clangs. A very faint horn. The howls of the Trollocs. Occasional thundering from the dragons. *Those aren't firing as often,* she thought. Aludra had moved to a rhythm in her firing. Bashere would pull back one section of troops and let them rest. The Trollocs would pour through, and the dragons would bombard them for a short time. As the Trollocs tried to crawl up and destroy the dragons, cavalry would come in and smash them at the flanks.

It killed a lot of Trollocs. That was their job… kill Trollocs…

Too slow, she thought. *Too slow…*

Elayne found herself on the ground, Birgitte's worried face hovering above her.

"Oh, Light?" Elayne mumbled. "Did I fall off?"

"We caught you in time," Birgitte muttered. "You slumped into our arms. Come on, we're pulling back."

"I…"

Birgitte raised an eyebrow at her, waiting for the argument.

It was hard to make one, lying on her back mere paces from the front lines. *Saidar* had fled her, and she probably couldn't take hold of it again if her life depended on it. "Yes," she said. "I should… should check on Bashere."

"Very wise," Birgitte said, waving for the guard to help Elayne back onto her horse. She hesitated, then. "You did well here, Elayne. They know how you fought. It was good for them to see."

They began a hurried trip through the back lines. Those were very shallow; most soldiers were committed to the fight. They needed to win before that second Trolloc army arrived, and that meant throwing everything they had at this force.

Still, Elayne was surprised at the depleted reserves, the small number that could be spared to rotate from the front and rest. How long had it been?

The clouds had enveloped the open sky that often accompanied her. That seemed a bad sign. "Curse those clouds," she muttered. "What time of day is it?"

"Maybe two hours from sunset," Birgitte said.

"Light! You should have made me return to camp hours ago, Birgitte!"

The woman glared at her, and Elayne vaguely remembered attempts to do just that. Well, no use arguing about it now. Elayne was recovering some of her strength, and forced herself to sit straight-backed on her horse as she was led to the small valley between hills near Cairhien where Bashere gave battle orders.

She rode right up to the command post, not trusting her legs to be able to support her walking, and remained in the saddle as she addressed Bashere. "Is it working?"

He looked up at her. "I assume I can't count on you any longer on the front?"

"Too weak to channel for now. I'm sorry."

"You lasted longer than you should have." He made a notation on his maps. "Good thing. I half think you were the only thing that kept the eastern flank from collapsing. I'll need to send more support that direction."

"Is it *working*,?"

"Go have a look," Bashere said, nodding toward the hillside.

Elayne gritted her teeth, but nudged Moonshadow up to where she could find a vantage. She lifted her looking glass with fingers that shook *far* more than she would have liked.

The Trolloc force had hit their bowed line of defenders. The natural result of this had been the infantry falling back, the bowl inverting as the Trollocs pushed forward. This had let the Shadowspawn feel as if they were gaining the advantage, and had stopped them from realizing the truth.

As they pressed forward, the infantry line had wrapped up and surrounded the Trolloc sides. She'd missed the most important moment, when Bashere had ordered the Aiel to attack. Their quick sweep around to hit the Trollocs from behind had worked as hoped.

Elayne's forces had the Trollocs completely surrounded. An enormous circle of writhing Shadowspawn fought with her encircling force, pressing them together to constrict their movements and their ability to fight.

It was working. Light, it *was*. The Aiel beat against the back flanks of Trollocs, slaughtering them. The noose had been drawn.

Which of them was blowing those horns? Those were Trolloc horns.

Elayne searched through the Shadowspawn, but could not find the ones sounding the horns. She did spot some dead Myrddraal near the Aiel ranks. One of Aludra's dragons—attached to its cart and pulled by a pair of horses—was with the Band's horsemen. They had been positioning the carts on different hilltops to fire down into the Trollocs.

"Elayne . ." Birgitte said.

"Oh, sorry," Elayne said, lowering the looking glass and handing it to her Warder. "Have a look. It's going well."

"Elayne!"

With a start, she realized how worried the Warder was. Elayne spun, following the woman's gaze south, far beyond the city's walls. Those horns sounding… they'd been so soft, Elayne hadn't realized they were coming from behind.

"Oh, no…" Elayne said, hastily raising her looking glass.

There, like black filth on the horizon, approached the second Trolloc army.

"Didn't Bashere say they weren't supposed to be here until tomorrow?" Birgitte said. "At the earliest?"

"It doesn't matter," Elayne said. "One way or another, they're here. We need to get ready to turn those dragons the other way! Send the order to Talmanes, and find Lord Tam al'Thor! I want the Two Rivers men armed and ready. Light! The crossbowmen too. We have to slow that second army, any way possible."

Bashere, she thought. *I have to tell Bashere.*

She spun Moonshadow, moving so fast she became dizzy. She tried to embrace the Source, but it wouldn't come. She was so tired, she had trouble gripping the reins.

Somehow, she made it down the hill without tailing off. Birgitte had left to convey her orders. Good woman. Elayne rode into camp to find an argument in progress.

"—won't listen to this! " Bashere yelled. "I will *not* stand by and be insulted in my own camp, man!"

The object of his scorn was none other than Tam al'Thor. The steady Two Rivers man glanced at Elayne, and his eyes opened wider, as if he was surprised to see her there.

“Your Majesty,” Tam said. “I was told you were still out on the battlefield.” He turned back to Bashere, who grew red-faced.

“I didn’t want you going to her with—”

“Enough!” Elayne said, riding Moonshadow between them. Why was *Tam* of all people arguing with Bashere? “Bashere, the second Trolloc army is almost upon us.”

“Yes,” Bashere said, breathing deeply. “I just had word. Light, this is a disaster, Elayne. We need to pull out through gateways.”

“We exhausted the Kinswomen on our push up here, Bashere,” Elayne said. “Most can barely channel enough now to warm a teacup, let alone make a gateway.” *Light, and I couldn’t warm the tea.* She forced her voice to remain firm. “That was part of the plan.”

“I… That’s right,” Bashere said. He looked at the map. “Let me think. The city. We’ll retreat into the city.”

“And give the Shadowspawn time to rest, gather together, and assault us?” Elayne asked. “That’s what they’re probably *trying* to force us to do.”

“I don’t see any other choice,” Bashere said. “The city is our only hope.”

“The city?” Talmanes said, hurrying up, panting. “You can’t be talking about pulling back into the city.”

“Why not?” Elayne asked.

“Your Majesty, our infantry have just managed to surround a Trolloc army! They’re going at it tooth and claw! We have no reserves left, and our cavalry is exhausted. We’d never manage to disengage from that contest without sustaining heavy losses. And then our survivors would be holed up in the city, trapped between two armies of the Shadow.”

“Light,” Elayne whispered. “It’s like they planned it.”

“I think they did,” Tam said softly.

“Not this again,” Bashere bellowed. He didn’t seem like himself at all, though she knew that Saldaeans could have tempers. Bashere almost seemed like a different person. His wife had stepped up to his side, arms folded, and both confronted Tam.

“Have your say, Tam,” Elayne said.

“I—” Bashere began, but Elayne held up a hand.

“He knew, Your Majesty,” Tam said softly. “Its the only thing that makes sense. He hasn’t been using the Aiel to scout.”

“What?” Elayne said. “Of course he has. I read the scout reports.”

“The reports are faked, or at least tampered with,” Tam said. “I talked to Bael. He said that none of his Aiel had been sent on scouting duty the last few days of our march. He said he thought my men had been doing it, but they hadn’t. I talked to Arganda, who thought Whitecloaks had been doing it, but Galad said that it was the Band.”

“It wasn’t us,” Talmanes said, frowning. “None of my men have been used for scout details.”

All eyes turned to Bashere.

“Who,” Elayne asked, “has been watching our rear, Bashere?”

“I…” He looked up, anger flaring again. “I have the reports somewhere! I showed them to you, and you approved them!”

“It’s all too perfect,” Elayne said. She felt a sudden chill, right at the middle point of her back. It spread down through her body, a wave of icy wind blowing through her veins. They’d been trapped, perfectly. Channelers run to exhaustion, soldiers committed to a close-fought battle, a second army left to approach in secret a day ahead of where falsified reports said they would be…

Davram Bashere was a Darkfriend.

“Bashere is relieved of duty,” she said.

“But—” he sputtered. His wife put her hand on his arm, looking at Elayne with fire in her eyes. Bashere leveled a finger at Tam. “I did send the Two Rivers men! Tam al’Thor must be the culprit. He’s trying to distract you, Your Majesty!”

“Talmanes,” Elayne said, feeling cold to the bone. “Have five Redarms put Lord Bashere and his wife under guard.”

Bashere let out a string of curses. Elayne was surprised at how calm she felt. Her emotions were deadened. She watched him be dragged away.

There wasn’t time for this. “Gather our commanders,” Elayne said to the others. “Galad, Arganda… Finish off that Trolloc army above the city! Spread the word to the men. Throw everything we have into this battle! If we can’t crush the Trollocs in the next hour, we die here!

“Talmanes, those dragons can’t be much use against the Trollocs now that they’re surrounded—you risk hitting our men. Have Aludra move all of the dragon carts up on the tallest hill to pound the new enemy coming up from the south. Tell the Ogier to make a cordon around the hill the dragons are on; we can’t have them damaged. Tam, put your Two Rivers bowmen on the surrounding hills. And have the Legion of the Dragon form up the front lines, crossbowmen in the lead, heavy cavalry behind. Light willing, that will be enough to buy us time to finish off the surrounded Trollocs.”

It would be close. Light! If that second army surrounded her men… Elayne took a deep breath, then opened herself to *saidar.* The One Power flooded into her, though she could hold only a trickle. She could act as if she weren’t exhausted, but her body knew the truth.

She would lead them anyway.

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CHAPTER 27

Friendly Fire

Gareth Bryne strode through the camp he had set up on the Arafellin side, several hundred paces on the Kandor border east of the ford, ignoring soldiers who tried to salute him. Siuan hastened at one side, a messenger delivering reports at his other. They were trailed by a flurry of guards and attendants carrying maps, ink and paper.

The whole burning *place* shook with explosions of the Power. Crashing racket and calamity ... it was like being in the middle of a rockslide.

He'd stopped being bothered by the scent of smoke. It was pervasive. At least some of the fires were put out; those Seanchan channelers had set up by the river and were drawing out streams of water.

Nearby, a rack of polearms tumbled to the ground in a clatter as a surge of the One Power hit in the camp nearby. He stumbled, and earth sprayed around him and Siuan, pebbles clattering against his helmet and breastplate. "Keep talking, man," he snapped at Holcom, the messenger.

"Er, yes, my Lord." The spindly man had a face like a horse. "The Aes Sedai on the Red, Green, and Blue hilltops are all holding. The Gray have fallen back, and the White report that they're running out of strength."

"The other Aes Sedai will be tiring as well," Siuan said. "I'm not surprised that the Whites are the first to admit it. It won't be a point of shame to them, merely another fact."

Bryne grunted, ignoring another spray of earth as it fell over them. He had to keep moving. The Shadow had too many gateways now. They'd try to strike at his command centers. That was what he'd do, if he were them. The best counter to that strategy was to not *have* a command center, at least not one that was easy to find.

All things considered, the battle was going according to plan. It was a surprise, sometimes, when that happened; on a battlefield, you expected to have to rebuild your tactics from the ground up at every turn—but for once, everything had gone smoothly.

Aes Sedai were pounding the Sharans from the hilltops south of the ford, augmented by a steady stream of projectiles from archers stationed just below them on the slopes. Because of that, the Shadow's commander—Demandred himself—couldn't devote all his troops against the defenders at the river. Nor could he bring all his troops against the Aes Sedai—they would Travel away—so committing himself fully there would expose him with very little gain. Instead, he'd split his forces, sending the Trollocs off his right flank toward the hills—they would sustain heavy losses, but he'd keep the Aes Sedai pressed—and bringing his Sharans forward to engage the bulk of the White Tower troops at the river.

The Seanchan occupied most of the enemy channelers' attention. This did not prevent some Sharan channelers from lobbing fire at Bryne's camp across the river. There was no use worrying about being hit. He was as safe here as he would be anywhere, other than perhaps retreating all the way to the White Tower. He couldn't *stand* the idea of being safe in a room somewhere, miles from the battlefield.

Light, he thought. *That's how commanders will probably do it in the future. A secure command position accessed only by gateways.* But a general needed to feel the flow of the battlefield. He couldn't do that from miles away.

"How well are the pikemen on each of the hills doing?" he demanded.

"Very well, my Lord," said Holcom. "As well as can be expected after hours of holding off Trollocs." Bryne had placed defensive lines of pikemen halfway up each of the hills; any Trollocs that managed to get through the cordon could be picked off by archers above, without having to disturb the work of the Aes Sedai. "The pikes defending the Red Ajah on the middle hill will be needing reinforcement soon, though; they lost a fair number on the last assault."

"They'll have to hang on a bit longer. Those Reds are nasty enough to take care of any more Trollocs that break through the pike formations." He hoped. Another explosion flattened a tent nearby. "How about the archer squadrons up there?" Bryne kicked aside a fallen halberd.

"Some are getting low on arrows, my Lord."

Well, he couldn't do much about that. He glanced toward the ford, but it was a right mess of confusion. It rankled him to be this close to the fighting and not know how things were going for his troops.

“Does anyone have information about what’s happening at the ford?” he bellowed, turning toward his aides. “I can’t see a Light-blasted thing, just a churning of bodies and those balls of fire shooting back and forth, blinding us all!”

Holcom paled. “Those Seanchan women are channeling like they’ve got red-hot irons up ... I mean, they’re giving the Sharans a hard time, my Lord. Our left flank just took a lot of casualties, but they seem to be fighting back admirably now.”

“Didn’t I put Joni in command of the lancers there?”

“Captain Shagrin is dead, my Lord,” said another messenger, stepping forward. He had a fresh cut on his scalp. “I’ve just come from there.”

Burn me. Well, Joni had always wanted to fall in battle. Bryne kept his emotions in check. “Who commands now?”

“Uno Nomesta,” the messenger said. “He pulled us together after Joni fell, but sends warning that they’re being hard-pressed.”

“Light, Nomesta’s not even an officer!” Still, he’d been training heavy cavalry for years, and there probably wasn’t a better man in the saddle than him. “All right, get back there and tell him I’m giving him some reinforcements.”

Bryne turned back to Holcom. “Get over to Captain Denhold and have him send his cavalry reserve squadron across the ford to beef up our left flank. Let’s see what those Illianers can do! We can’t lose this river!”

The messenger rushed off. *I’ll have to do something to take the pressure off those Aes Sedai soon.* He bellowed, “Annah, where are you?”

Two soldiers talking nearby were pushed aside as a heavyset young woman—a former merchant’s guard and now foot soldier and messenger serving General Bryne—shoved through. “My Lord?”

“Annah, go beg that Imperial monster of a Seanchan leader if she’d be ever so kind as to lend us some of her bloody cavalry.”

“Shall I phrase it exactly that way?” Annah asked, saluting, a smile on her lips.

“If you do, girl, I’ll throw you off a cliff and let Yukiri Sedai test a few of her new falling weaves on you. Go!”

The messenger grinned, then dashed off toward the Traveling ground for passage.

Siuan eyed Bryne. “You’re growing grouchy.”

“You’re a good influence on me,” he snapped, glancing up as a shadow passed above. He reached for his sword, expecting to see another flight of Draghkar. Instead, it was only one of those Seanchan flying beasts. He relaxed.

A fireball knocked the creature from the sky. It spun, flapping burning wings. Bryne cursed, jumping back as the monstrous animal crashed into the path just ahead, where the messenger Annah was running. The animal’s corpse rolled over her and crashed through one of the supply tents, which was filled with soldiers and quartermasters. The *raken's* rider slapped the ground a fraction of a moment later.

Bryne recovered his wits and leaped forward, stooping beneath a fallen section of cloth and tent poles that covered the path. Two of his guards found a soldier half-pinned by the dead beast’s wing and pulled him free, Siuan kneeling and removing her *angreal* from her pouch to perform Healing.

Bryne moved to where Annah had fallen. He found her crushed where the fallen beast had rolled. “Burn it!” He shoved aside thought for the dead to consider what to do next. “I need someone to go to the Seanchan!”

Of his entourage, only two guards and one clerk remained in camp. He needed the Seanchan to give him some more cavalry; he was beginning to feel that a great deal depended on keeping those Aes Sedai on the hills safe. After all, the Amyrlin was up there with them.

“Looks like we’re going ourselves,” Bryne said, leaving Annah’s corpse. “Siuan, are you strong enough to make a gateway with that *angreal*?”

She stood, masking her exhaustion, but he could see it. “I can, though it will be so small we’ll have to crawl through. I don’t know this area well enough. We’ll have to move back to the center of camp.”

“Burn me!” Bryne said, turning as a series of explosions sounded from the river. “We don’t have time for this.”

“I can go find us some more messengers,” a guard said. The other was helping the soldier Siuan had Healed. The man stood on wobbly feet.

“I don’t know if there are more messengers to be had,” Bryne said. “Let’s just—”

“I'll go.”

Bryne saw Min Farshaw rising to her feet nearby and dusting herself off. He d almost forgotten that he’d set her helping as a clerk for one of the supply regiments.

“It doesn’t look like I’ll be clerking here in the near future,” Min said, inspecting the fallen supply tent. “I can run as well as any of your messengers. What do you want me to do?”

“Find the Seanchan Empress,” Bryne said. “Her camp is a few miles north of here on the Arafellin side. Go to the Traveling ground; they’ll know where to send you. Tell the Empress she needs to send me some cavalry. Our reserves are depleted.”

“I'll do it,” Min said.

She wasn’t a soldier. Well, it seemed half of his army hadn’t been soldiers until a few weeks back. “Go,” he said, then smiled. “I’ll count the day’s work toward what you owe me.”

She blushed. Did she think he’d let a woman forget her oath? It didn’t matter to him whose company she kept. An oath was an oath.

Min ran through the army’s back lines. The camp had more tents and carts — brought in from supply dumps in Tar Valon or Tear—to replace the ones lost during the initial Sharan assault. Those proved to be obstacles to weave around as she sought out the Traveling ground.

The ground was a series of roped-off squares, numbered with painted planks shoved in the ground. A quartet of women in gray shawls spoke together in hushed voices as one of their number held open a gateway for a supply cart laden with arrows. The placid oxen didn’t look up as a comet-like ball of fire hit the ground nearby, hurling glowing red stones into the air and across a pile of bedrolls, which began to smolder.

“I need to go to the Seanchan army,” Min said to the Grays. “Lord Bryne’s orders.”

One of the Gray sisters, Ashmanaille, looked at her. She took in Min’s breeches and curls, then frowned. “Elmindreda? Sweet thing, what are *you* doing here?”

“Sweet thing?” one of the others asked. “She’s one of the clerks, isn’t she?”

“I *need* to go to the Seanchan army,” Min said, breathing deeply from her run. “Lord Bryne’s orders.”

This time, they seemed to hear her. One of the women sighed. “Square four?” she asked the others.

“Three, dear,” Ashmanaille said. “A gateway could be opening to four from Illian any moment.”

“Three,” the first said, waving Min over. A small gateway split the air there. “All messengers crawl,” she noted. “We have to conserve strength; gateways need to be made as small as reasonable.”

This is reasonable? Min thought with annoyance, running to the small hole. She dropped to her hands and knees and crawled through.

She came out in a ring of grass that had been burned black to mark its location. A pair of Seanchan guards stood with tasseled spears nearby, their faces obscured by insectile helmets. Min started to walk forward, but one held up a hand.

“I’m a messenger from General Bryne,” she said.

“New messengers wait here,” one of the guards said.

“It’s urgent!”

“New messengers wait here.”

She received no further explanation, so she crossed her arms—stepping out of the black circle, in case another gateway opened—and waited. She could see the river from here, and a large military encampment stretched out along its banks. *The Seanchan could make a big difference to this battle,* Min thought. *There are so many of them.* She was far from the battle here, a few miles north of Bryne’s camp, but still close enough to see the flashes of light as channelers traded deadly weaves.

She found herself fidgeting, so she forced herself to remain still. Explosions from channeling sounded like dull thumps. The sounds came after the flashes of light, like thunder trailing behind lightning. Why was that?

It doesn’t really matter, Min thought. She needed cavalry for Bryne. At least she was doing something. She had spent the last week pitching in wherever she found that an extra hand was needed. It was surprising how much there was to do in a war camp other than fighting. It wasn’t work that had required her, specifically, but it was better than sitting in Tear and worrying about Rand ... or being angry at him for forbidding her to go to Shayol Ghul.

You’d have been a liability there, Min told herself. *You know it.* He couldn’t worry about saving the world and protecting her from the Forsaken at the same time. Sometimes, it was hard not to feel insignificant in a world of channelers like Rand, Elayne and Aviendha.

She glanced at the guards. Only one had an image hovering above his head. A bloodied stone. He'd die by falling from someplace high. It seemed like decades since she'd seen anything *hopeful* around a person's head. Death, destruction, symbols of fear and darkness.

"And who is she?" a slurred Seanchan voice asked. A *sul'dam* had approached, one without a *damane*. The woman held an *a'dam* in her hand, tapping the silvery collar against her other palm.

"New messenger," the guard said. "She has not come through the gateways before."

Min took a deep breath. "I was sent by General Bryne—"

"He was supposed to clear all messengers with us," the *sul'dam* said. She was dark of skin, with curls that came down to her shoulders. "The Empress — may she live forever—must be protected. Our camp will be orderly. Every messenger cleared, no opportunities for assassins."

"I am no assassin," Min said flatly.

"And the knives in your sleeves?" the *suldam* asked.

Min started.

"The way your cuffs droop make it obvious, child," the *suldam* said, though she was no older than Min herself.

"A woman would be a fool to walk a battlefield without some kind of weapon," Min said. "Let me deliver my message to one of the generals. The other messenger was killed when one of your *raken* was hit and fell from the sky onto our camp."

The *suldam* raised an eyebrow. "I am Catrona," she said. "And you will do exactly as I say while in camp." She turned and waved for Min to follow.

Min hurried gratefully behind the woman as they crossed the ground. The Seanchan camp was very different from Bryne's. They had *raken* to fly their messages and reports, not to mention an empress to protect. They had set their camp away from the hostilities. It also looked far tidier than Bryne's camp, which had been nearly destroyed and rebuilt, and which included people from many different countries and military backgrounds. The Seanchan camp was homogeneous, full of trained soldiers.

At least that was the way Min decided to interpret its orderliness. Seanchan soldiers stood in ranks, silent, awaiting the call to battle. Sections of the camp had been marked with posts and ropes, everything clearly organized. Nobody bustled about. Men walked with quiet purpose or waited at parade rest. Speak what criticism one would about the Seanchan—and

Min had a number of things she could add to *that* conversation—they certainly were organized.

The *suldam* led Min to a section of camp where several men stood at ledgers set on tall desks. Wearing robes and bearing the half-shaved head of upper servants, they quietly made notations. Immodestly dressed young women carrying lacquered trays threaded their way between the desks, placing on them thin white cups of steaming black liquid.

“Have we lost any *raken* in the last little while?” Catrona asked the men. “Was one hit by an enemy *marath'damane* while in flight, and could it have crashed into General Bryne's camp?”

“A report just came in of such a thing,” a servant said, bowing. “I am surprised that you have heard of it.”

Catrona’s eyebrow inched a little higher as she inspected Min.

“You hadn’t expected the truth?” Min asked.

“No,” the *suldam* said. She moved her hand, replacing a knife into its sheath at her side. “Follow.”

Min let out a breath. Well, she had dealt with Aiel before; the Seanchan couldn’t possibly be as prickly as they were. Catrona led the way along another path in the camp, and Min found herself growing anxious. How long had it been since Bryne had sent her? Was it too late?

Light, but the Seanchan liked things well guarded. There were two soldiers at every intersection of paths, standing with raised spears, watching through those awful helmets of theirs. Shouldn’t all of these men be out fighting? Eventually, Catrona led her to an actual *building* they had constructed here. It wasn’t a tent. It had walls that looked to be draped silk, stretched into wooden frames, a wooden floor and a ceiling covered with shingles. It probably broke down quickly to be transported, but it seemed frivolous.

The guards here were big fellows in armor of black and red. They had a wicked appearance. Catrona passed them as they saluted her. She and Min entered the building, and Catrona bowed. Not to the ground—the Empress wasn’t in the room, it appeared—but still deep, since many members of the Blood were inside. Catrona glanced at Min. “Bow, you fool!”

“I think I’ll be fine standing,” Min said, folding her arms as she regarded the commanders inside. Standing at their forefront was a familiar figure. Mat wore silken Seanchan clothing—she had heard he was in this camp—

but he topped it with his familiar hat. He had an eyepatch covering one eye. So that viewing had finally come to pass, had it?

Mat looked up at her and grinned. “Min!”

“I’m a total fool,” she said. “I could have just said I knew you. They’d have brought me right here without all of the fuss.”

“I don’t know, Min,” Mat said. “They rather like fuss around here. Don’t you, Galgan?”

A wide-shouldered man with a thin crest of white hair on his otherwise shaven head eyed Mat, as if uncertain what to make of him.

“Mat,” Min said, clearing her mind. “General Bryne needs cavalry.”

Mat grunted. “I don’t doubt it. He’s been pushing his troops hard, even the Aes Sedai. Man ought to be given a medal for that. I’ve never seen one of those women budge so much as to take a step indoors when a man suggests, even if she’s standing in the rain. First Legion, Galgan?”

“They will do,” Galgan said, “so long as the Sharans don’t manage to get across the ford.”

“They won’t,” Mat said. “Bryne has set up a good defensive position that should punish the Shadow, with a little encouragement. *Laero lendhae an indemela*.”

“What was that?” Galgan asked, frowning.

Min missed it, too. Something about a flag? She had been studying the Old Tongue lately, but Mat spoke it so quickly.

“Hmm, what?” Mat said. “You’ve never heard it before? It’s a saying of the Fallen Army of Kardia.”

“Who?” Galgan sounded baffled.

“Never mind,” Mat said. “Tylee, would you care to lead your legion on to the battlefield, assuming the good General approves?”

“I would be honored, Raven Prince,” said a woman in a breastplate standing nearby, four plumes rising from the helmet she held under her arm. “I have wanted to watch the actions of this Gareth Bryne more directly.”

Mat glanced to Galgan, who rubbed his chin, inspecting his maps. “Take your legion, Lieutenant-General Khirgan, as the Raven Prince suggests.”

“And,” Mat added, “we *need* to watch those Sharan archers. They’re going to move north along the river for a better shot at Bryne’s right flank.”

“How can you be certain?”

“It’s just obvious,” Mat said, tapping at the map. “Send a *raken* to make sure, if you want.”

Galgan hesitated, then gave the order. Min wasn’t certain that she was needed any longer, so she started to walk away, but Mat caught her by the arm. “Hey. I could… uh… use you, Min.”

“Use me?” she asked flatly.

“Make use of you,” Mat said. “That’s what I meant. I’ve had trouble with the words coming out of my mouth lately. Only the stupid ones seem to make it. Anyway, could you… uh… you know…”

“I don’t see anything new around you,” she said, “though I assume the eye on a balance scale finally makes sense to you.”

“Yes,” Mat said, wincing. “That one is bloody obvious. What about Galgan?”

“A dagger rammed through the heart of a raven.”

“Bloody ashes…”

“I don’t think it means you,” she added. “I can’t say why.”

Galgan was speaking with some lesser nobles. At least, they had more hair than he did, which was the Seanchan mark of a lesser. Their tones were hushed, and Galgan would occasionally glance over at Mat.

“He doesn’t know what to make of me,” Mat said softly.

“How very uncommon. I can’t think of anyone else who has reacted that way to you, Mat.”

“Ha ha. You’re sure that bloody dagger doesn’t mean me? Ravens… well, ravens kind of mean me, right? Sometimes? I’m the flaming Prince of the bloody Ravens now.”

“It’s not you.”

“He’s trying to decide when to assassinate me,” Mat said softly, gaze narrowing toward Galgan. I ve been put right beneath him in the army, and he worries I will supplant him. Tuon says he’s a dedicated soldier, so he’ll wait until after the Last Battle to strike.”

“That’s awful!”

“I know,” Mat said. “He won’t play cards with me first. I was hoping I could win him over. Lose on purpose a few times.”

“I don’t think you could manage that.”

“Actually, I figured out how to lose bloody ages ago.” He seemed to be completely serious. “Tuon says it would be a sign of disrespect if he didn’t try to kill me. They’re insane, Min. They’re all *bloody* insane.”

“I’m sure Egwene would help you escape if you ask, Mat.”

“Well, I didn’t say they weren’t fun. Just insane.” He straightened his hat. “But if any more of them bloody well try to—”

He cut off as the guards outside the door dropped to their knees, then completely prostrated themselves on the ground. Mat sighed. “‘Say the name of Darkness, and his eye is upon you.’ *Yalu kazath d’Zamon patra Dae-seia asa darshi.* ”

“… What?” Min asked.

“You don’t know that one either?” Mat said. “Doesn’t anyone bloody read anymore?”

The Seanchan Empress stepped through the door. Min was surprised to see her wearing not a dress, but wide silvery trousers. Or… well, maybe it *was* a dress. Min couldn’t tell if those were skirts that had been divided for riding, or if it was a pair of trousers with very enveloping legs. Fortuona’s top was of tight scarlet silk, and over it she wore an open-fronted blue robe with a very long train. It seemed the clothing of a warrior, a kind of uniform.

The people in the room fell to their knees, then bowed themselves down all the way to the floor, even General Galgan. Mat stayed standing.

Gritting her teeth, Min went down on one knee. The woman *was* the Empress, after all. Min wouldn’t bow to Mat or the generals, but it was only proper to show respect to Fortuona.

“Who is this one, Knotai?” Fortuona asked, curious. “She thinks herself high.”

“Oh, well,” Mat said idly, “she’s just the Dragon Reborn’s woman.” Catrona, who at the side of the room had bowed herself to the ground, made a strangled sound. She looked up at Min with bulging eyes.

Light, Min thought. *She probably thinks she’s offended me or something*

“How curious,” Fortuona said. “That would make her your equal, Knotai. Of course, you seem to have forgotten to bow again.”

“My father would be mortified,” Mat said. “He always *did* pride himself on my memory.”

“You embarrass me in public again.”

“Only as much as I embarrass myself.” He smiled, then hesitated, as if thinking through those words a second time.

The Empress smiled as well, though she looked distinctly predatory. She moved into the room, and the people rose, so Min climbed to her feet. Mat immediately began to push her toward the door.

“Mat, wait,” Min whispered.

“Just keep moving,” he said. “Don’t risk her deciding to snatch you up. She’s not particularly good at letting things go, once she has them in hand.” He actually sounded proud, saying that.

You’re as crazy as they are, Min thought. “Mat, a bloody flower.”

“What?” he said, still shoving her.

“A bloody flower around her head,” Min said. “A death lily. Someone is going to try to kill her very soon.”

Mat froze. Fortuona turned sharply.

Min didn’t realize that two guards were moving until they had her pressed against the ground. They were the odd ones in the black armor—though now that she was close, Min could see it was actually a dark green.

Idiot, she thought as they pressed her face against the floor. *I should have let Mat pull me from the room first.* She hadn’t made a mistake like that—speaking of one of her viewings loud enough for others to hear—in years. What was wrong with her?

“Stop!” Mat said. “Let her up!”

Mat might have been elevated to the Blood, but the guards obviously had no problem ignoring a direct order from him.

“How does she know this, Knotai?” Fortuona asked, stepping up to Mat. She sounded angry. Perhaps disappointed. “What is happening?”

“It’s not what you assume, Tuon,” Mat said.

No, don’t—

“She sees things,” Mat continued. “It’s nothing to get all angry about. It’s just a trick of the Pattern, Tuon. Min sees visions around people, like little pictures. She didn’t mean anything by what she said.” He laughed. It was forced.

The room grew very still. It was so quiet, Min could once again hear the explosions in the distance.

“Doomseer,” Fortuona whispered.

The guards suddenly let her free, backing away. Min groaned, sitting up. The guards had moved to protect the Empress, but one who had touched her pulled his gauntlets off and tossed them to the ground. He wiped his hand against his breastplate, as if trying to clean his skin of something.

Fortuona didn’t seem afraid. She stepped up to Min, lips parting, almost in awe. The young Empress reached out and touched Min’s face. “What he says ... it is true?”

“Yes,” Min said, grudgingly.

“What do you see around me?” Fortuona said. “Speak it, Doomseer. I would know your omens, and judge you true or false!”

That sounded dangerous. “I see a bloody death lily, as I told Mat,” Min said. “And three ships, sailing. An insect in the darkness. Red lights, spread across a field that should be lush and ripe. A man with the teeth of a wolf.” Fortuona drew in a sharp breath. She looked up at Mat. “This is a great gift you have brought me, Knotai. Enough to pay your penance. Enough for credit beyond. Such a grand gift.”

“Well… I . . ”

“I don’t belong to anyone,” Min said. “Except maybe Rand, and him to me.”

Fortuona ignored her, standing. “This woman is my new *Soe’feia*. Doomseer, Truthspeaker! Holy woman, she who may not be touched. We have been blessed. Let it be known. The Crystal Throne has not had a true reader of the omens for over three centuries!”

Min sat, stunned, until Mat pulled her to her feet. “Is that a good thing?” she whispered to him.

“I’ll be bloody in the face if I know,” Mat said back. “But you remember what I said about getting away from her? Well, you can probably forget about that now.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 28

Too Many Men

“Lord Agelmar sent us directly,” the Arafellin said to Lan. The man kept glancing toward the front line, where his companions fought for their lives.

Thunder shook the battlefield here in Shienar. The scent of burnt flesh was pungent in the air, alongside burnt hair. The Dreadlords didn’t care if their attacks killed Trollocs, so long as they hit men as well.

“You’re certain?” Lan asked from horseback.

“Of course, Dai Shan,” the man said. He wore his braids long, the bells painted red for some reason Lan did not understand. Something to do with the Arafellin Houses and their approach to the Last Battle. “If I lie, let me be whipped a hundred times and left in the sun. I was surprised by the order, as I thought my men were to guard the flanks. Not only did the messenger have the proper passwords, but the man I sent to the command tent returned to confirm.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Lan said, waving for him to go back to his men. He glanced at Andere and Prince Kaisel, both of whom sat nearby, looking confused. They had listened to Lan interrogate the Kandori banner leader just before this, and that man had made similar assertions.

Lord Agelmar had sent them both. Two reserve forces, sent separately, neither knowing the other was going to the same place. A cool breeze blew across the river to Lan’s right as he turned and rode toward the back lines.

The lands heat soon smothered that coolness. Those clouds above seemed so close, one could almost reach out and touch them.

“Lan?” Andere asked, as he and Kaisel trotted their horses up beside Mandarb. “What is this about?”

“Too many men sent to plug the same hole in our lines,” Lan said softly.

“It is an easy mistake to make,” Prince Kaisel said. “The worry that the Trollocs would punch through is a real one, now that the Dreadlords have joined the battle. The general sent two banners instead of one. Best to be safe. He probably did it intentionally."

No. It *had* been a mistake. A small one, but a mistake. The correct move would have been to pull the soldiers back and stabilize their battle lines. A single banner of cavalry then could ride in and cut off the Trollocs coming through. Two waves could have been coordinated, but without giving warning to the different captains, the risk was that they would trip one another up—which was what had happened.

Lan shook his head and scanned the battlefield. Queen Ethenielle's banner was not far away. He headed straight for it. The Queen waited with her honor guard, Lord Baldhere on one side, the Sword of Kirukan held with its hilt directly toward the Queen, though she had chosen not to ride into battle herself. Lan had half-wondered if she would follow Tenobia's lead on that point, but he shouldn't have. Ethenielle was a coolheaded woman. More importantly, she'd surrounded herself with coolheaded advisors.

Lord Ramsin—her new husband—spoke with a group of his commanders. A sly-looking fellow in the clothing of a scout brushed past Lan as he rode up, off to deliver orders. Lord Agelmar didn't usually give the squad-by-squad commands; his concern was the overall battle. He told his commanders what he wanted them to accomplish, but details of how they would carry out those objectives were left up to them.

A stout, round-faced woman sat beside the Queen, speaking calmly to her. She noticed Lan, and nodded. Lady Serailla was the Queen's primary advisor. Lan and she had had… disagreements in the past. He respected her as much as he could someone he occasionally wanted to throttle and toss off a cliff.

"Dai Shan," the Queen said, nodding to him. Ramsin, standing a little ways off, gave a wave. Thunder rumbled. There was no rain, and Lan didn't expect any, despite the thick humidity. "You are wounded? Let me send for one of the Healers."

"They are needed elsewhere," Lan said tersely as her guards saluted him. Each man wore a green tabard over his breastplate, the Red Horse embroidered on it, and each lance trailed red and green streamers. The helmets had steel face-bars, as opposed to Lan's own open-fronted, wide Malkieri helmet. "Might I borrow Lord Baldhere, Your Majesty? I have a question for him."

“You need but make the request, Dai Shan,” Queen Ethenielle said, though Lady Serailla narrowed her eyes at him. Obviously, she wondered what he needed of the Kandori queen’s Swordbearer.

Baldhere moved up to Lan, shifting the Sword of Kirukan to his other arm, to keep the hilt still pointed at his queen. It was a formality, but Baldhere was a formal man. Andere and Prince Kaisel joined the two of them, and Lan did not make them fall back.

“Lord Agelmar committed a good fourth of our reserves to a small opening in our lines,” Lan said softly enough that only Baldhere, Andere and Kaisel could hear. “I’m not certain all were needed.”

“He just gave orders for our Saldaean light cavalry to pull away from the eastern flank,” Baldhere said, “and hit the Trollocs’ left flank deep behind their lines, a surprise hit-and-run attack. He says he wants the Dreadlords’ attention spread out, and claims that making our defenses appear weaker than they are will tempt them into making a mistake.”

“Your thoughts?” Lan asked.

“It’s a good move,” Baldhere said, “if you intend to force the battle to go long. Alone, it wouldn’t worry me too much, not as long as the Saldaeans can get out with their necks intact. I hadn’t heard about the reserves. That leaves us enormously exposed on the east.”

“Let’s assume,” Lan said softly, carefully, “that one were in a position to sabotage the entire army. Let’s assume that one wanted to do so, but do it with great subtlety, as to not be suspected. What would you do?”

“Put our back to the river,” Baldhere said slowly. “Claim a position for the high ground, but leave us in danger of being surrounded. Commit us to a deadly fight, then expose an opening in our defenses and let us be split. Make each step seem rational.”

“And your next step?” Lan said.

Baldhere considered, looking troubled. “You’d need to pull the archers off the hills to the east. The land is rough over there, and so Shadowspawn could come around our scouts—particularly with everyone’s eyes up toward the front lines—and draw close.

“Archers would see them and raise the alarm, perhaps be able to hold the Trollocs back long enough for the other reserves to arrive. But if the archers were moved, and the eastern reserves committed, and the enemy could swing around our eastern flank and attack our back lines… our whole army would be pinned back against the river. From there, it would be only a matter of time.”

“Lord Mandragoran,” Prince Kaisel said, nudging his horse forward. He looked about, as if ashamed. “I cant believe I'm hearing this. Surely you don’t suspect Lord Agelmar of betraying us!”

“We can’t afford to leave anyone above suspicion,” Lan said grimly. “A caution I should have listened to with a keener ear. Perhaps it is nothing. Perhaps.”

“We’re going to have enough difficulty getting out of this position as it is,” Andere said, frowning. “If we get pinned against the river…”

“The plan originally was to use the reserve light cavalry to cover the retreat,” Lan said. “The infantry could retreat first, crossing the river on foot, then we could bring the heavy cavalry through gateways. The river is not swift, and the horses of the light cavalry could ford it, while Trollocs wouldn’t dare. Not until they were forced. It was a good enough plan.” Unless they got pressed too hard for the foot to disengage. Everything would fall apart then. And if they were surrounded, there was no way Lan would get his army out. They didn’t have enough channelers to move the entire army. The only way out would be to leave the foot, abandoning half of his army to the slaughter. No, he’d die before he let that happen.

“Everything Lord Agelmar has been doing lately *is* a good enough plan,” Baldhere said intensely. “Good enough to avoid suspicion, but not good enough to win. Lan… something is wrong with him. I’ve known him for years. Please. I still believe that he’s merely tired, but he *is* making mistakes. I’m right, I know I am.”

Lan nodded. He left Lord Baldhere at his post and rode, with his guard, toward the back lines and the command tent.

The sense of dread that Lan felt was like a stone stuck in his throat. Those clouds seemed lower than before. They rumbled. The drums of the Dark One, come to claim the lives of men.

By the time Lan reached the command tent, he had a hundred good men at his back. As he drew near, Lan spotted a young Shienaran messenger—unarmored, topknot streaming behind him as he ran—making for his horse.

At Lan’s wave, Andere dashed over and caught the man’s reins, holding them tight. The messenger frowned. “Dai Shan?” he asked, saluting as Lan rode up.

“You are delivering orders for Lord Agelmar?” Lan asked, dismounting. “Yes, my Lord.”

“What orders?”

“The eastern Kandori archers,” the messenger said. “Their hill is too far from the main part of the battlefield, and Lord Agelmar feels they would serve better coming forward and launching volleys at those Dreadlords.”

The archers probably thought that the Saldaean light cavalry were still back there; the Saldaeans thought the archers would stay; the reserves thought that both would hold after they’d been deployed.

It could still be a coincidence. Agelmar was being worked too hard, or had some greater plan that was beyond the eyes of other generals. Never accuse a man of a killing offense unless you were ready to kill him yourself, right then, with your own sword.

“Belay that order,” Lan said, cold. “Instead, send the Saldaean scouts out roving through those eastern hills. Tell them to watch for signs of a force of Shadowspawn sneaking in to strike at us. Warn the archers to prepare to shoot, then return here and bring me word. Be quick about it, but tell nobody but the scouts and archers themselves that you are doing it.”

The man looked confused, but he saluted. Agelmar was commanding general of this army, but Lan—as Dai Shan—had final word on all orders, and the only authority greater than his in this battle was that of Elayne.

Lan nodded to a pair of men from the High Guard. Washim and Geral were Malkieri whom he’d grown to respect a great deal during their weeks fighting together.

Light, has it only been weeks? It feels like months…

He pushed the thought away as the two Malkieri followed the messenger to make certain he did as told. Lan would consider the ramifications of what was happening only after he knew all of the facts.

Only then.

Loial did not know much about warfare. One did not need to know much to realize that Elayne’s side was losing.

He and the other Ogier fought, facing a horde of thousands upon thousands of Trollocs—the second army that had come up to crush from the south, skirting the city. Crossbowmen from the Legion of the Dragon flanked the Ogier, launching volleys of quarrels, having withdrawn from the front as the Trollocs hit their lines. The enemy had dispersed the Legion's heavy cavalry, exhausted as they had been. Companies of pikemen held desperately against the tide, and the Wolf Guard clung to a disintegrating line on the other hill.

He'd heard fragments of what was happening on other parts of the battlefield. Elayne's armies had crushed the northern force of Trollocs, finishing them off, and as the Ogier fought, guarding the dragons that fired from the hill above them, more and more soldiers came to join the new front. They came bloodied, exhausted and weak.

This new force of Trollocs would crush them.

The Ogier sang a song of mourning. It was the dirge they sang for forests that had to be leveled or for great trees that died in a storm. It was a song of loss, of regret, of inevitability. He joined in the final refrain.

"All rivers run dry,
All songs must end,
Every root will die,
Every branch must bend…"

He downed a snarling Trolloc, but another one sank its teeth into his leg. He bellowed, breaking off his song as he grabbed the Trolloc by the neck. He had never considered himself strong, not by Ogier standards, but he lifted the Trolloc and flung it into its fellows behind.

Men—fragile men—were dead all around his feet. Their loss of life pained him. Each one had been given such a short time to live. Some, still alive, still fought. He knew they thought of themselves as bigger than they were, but here on the battlefield—with Ogier and Trollocs—they seemed like children running around underfoot.

No. He would not see them that way. The men and women fought with bravery and passion. Not children, but heroes. Still, seeing them broken made his ears lie back. He started singing again, louder, and this time it was not the song of mourning. It was a song he had not sung before, a song of growing, but not one of the tree songs that were so familiar to him.

He bellowed it loud and angry, laying about him with his axe. On all sides, grass turned green, cords and ribbons of life sprouted. The hafts of the Trolloc polearms began to grow leaves; many of the beasts snarled and dropped the weapons in shock.

Loial fought on. This song was not a song of victory. It was a song of life. Loial did not intend to die here on this hillside.

By the Light, he had a book to finish before he went!

Mat stood in the Seanchan command building, surrounded by skeptical generals. Min had only just returned, after being taken away and dressed in Seanchan finery. Tuon had gone as well, to see to some empressly duty.

Looking back at the maps, Mat felt like cursing again. Maps, maps and more maps. Pieces of paper. Most of them had been sketched by Tuon’s clerks in the fading light of the previous evening. How could he know they were accurate? Mat had once seen a street artist drawing a pretty woman at night in Caemlyn, and the resulting picture could have been sold for gold as a dead-on representation of Cenn Buie in a dress.

More and more, he was thinking that battle maps were about as useful as a heavy coat in Tear. He needed to be able to *see* the battle, not how someone else thought the battle looked. The map was too simple.

“I’m going out to look at the battlefield,” Mat declared.

“You’re what?” Courtani asked. The Seanchan Banner-General was about as pretty as a bundle of sticks with armor bolted to it. Mat figured she must have eaten something very sour once and—upon finding the resulting grimace useful for frightening away birds—had decided to adopt it permanently.

“I'm going to go look at the battlefield,” Mat said again. He set aside his hat, then reached up over his head and grabbed the back of his rich, bulky Seanchan robes. He pulled the clothing, awkward shoulder pieces and all, over his head with a rustle of silk and lace, then tossed it aside.

That left him clad in only his neck scarf, his medallion and the strange breeches the Seanchan had given him, black and somewhat stiff. Min raised an eyebrow at his bare chest, which made him blush. But what did it matter? She was with Rand, so that made her practically his sister. There *was* Courtani, too, but Mat was not convinced that she was female. He was not convinced she was human, either.

Mat dug under the table for a moment, and pulled out a bundle he had stashed there earlier, then straightened up. Min folded her arms. Her new clothing looked very nice on her, a dress nearly as rich as the ones worn by Tuon. Min’s was a dark green shiny silk with black embroidery and wide, open sleeves that were at least long enough to stick your head into. They had done up her hair, too, sticking bits of metal into it, silver with inset firedrops. There were hundreds of them. If this whole Doomseer title did not work out for her, perhaps she could find work as a chandelier.

She was quite fetching in the outfit, actually. Odd. Mat had always considered Min on the boyish side, but now he found her appealing. Not that he looked.

The Seanchan in the room seemed stunned that Mat had suddenly stripped to the waist. He did not see why. They had servants that wore much less. Light, but they did.

“I’m tempted to do the same as you,” Min muttered, grabbing the front of her dress.

Mat froze, then sputtered. He must have swallowed a fly or something. “Burn me,” he said, throwing on the shirt he dug out of the bundle. “I'll give you a hundred Tar Valon marks if you do it, just so I can tell the story.”

That earned him a glare, though he did not know why. She was the one talking about striding about like a bloody Aiel Maiden on her way to the sweat tent.

Min did not do it, and he was almost sad. Almost. He had to be careful around Min. He was certain that a smile in the wrong place would earn him a knifing not only from her, but from Tuon, and Mat was much happier with only one knife stuck in him at a time.

The foxhead medallion rested comfortably against his skin—thank the Light, Tuon had understood that he did need it—as he tossed on his coat, also retrieved from the bundle.

“How did you retain those?” Captain-General Galgan asked. “I was under the impression that your clothing had been burned, Raven Prince.”

Galgan looked very silly with that one strip of white hair on his head, but Mat did not mention this. It was the Seanchan way. Folk could be funny, but he didn’t doubt Galgan could handle himself in a battle, however he looked.

“These?” Mat said, gesturing to his coat and shirt. “I really have no idea. They were just down there. I’m completely baffled.” He had been very pleased to learn that Seanchan guards—for all their stoic expressions and too-straight backs—responded to bribes like other people.

All but those Deathwatch Guards. Mat had learned not to try it with them; the glare they’d given him made him think that if he tried it again, he’d end up with his face in the mud. Perhaps it would be better not to even talk to a Deathwatch Guard again, as it was quite obvious that each and every one one of them had traded his sense of humor for an oversized chin.

In a pinch, though, he knew exactly who he would trust with Tuon's safety.

Mat strode out, grabbing his *ashandarei* from against the wall as he passed. Courtani and Min followed him out. It was too bad Tylee was so good at what she did. Mat would rather have kept her behind for company and sent the scarecrow instead. Maybe he should have. Some of the Trollocs might have mistaken her for one of them.

He had to wait as a groom ran for Pips, unfortunately, and that gave someone time to alert Tuon. He saw her approaching. Well, she had said she would return shortly anyway, so he had not really expected to avoid a confrontation.

Min shuffled, cursing softly at her skirts.

"Still trying to decide if you should run?" Mat asked Min under his breath as Tuon approached.

"Yes," Min said sourly.

"The beds are nice here, you know. And they know how to treat a fellow, so long as they don't end up beheading him. I still haven't figured out what keeps that from happening."

"Wonderful."

Mat turned to her. "You realize that if Rand were here, he'd probably ask you to stay."

Min glared at him.

"It's just the truth, Min. The bloody truth. I was there when Rand brought them to his side, and I can tell you, he was worried. The Seanchan and Aes Sedai don't get along too well, if you hadn't noticed."

"That's about as obvious as your pride is, Mat."

"Ouch. Here I'm trying to help. I tell you, Min. How much relief do you think it would bring Rand if he knew that someone he trusted had Tuon's ear, someone who could nudge her to play nicely with the Aes Sedai by giving the right omens' at the right time? Of course, you could be back at the camp hauling water and running messages. I'm sure that would be *just* as helpful as you would be keeping an eye on a foreign monarch and encouraging her to trust and respect the Dragon Reborn, building a bridge of friendship between her and the rest of the nations."

Min stood silently for a moment. "I hate you, bloody Mat Cauthon."

"That's the spirit," Mat said, raising a hand to greet Tuon. "Now, let's see which of my limbs she cuts off for throwing away her fancy clothing." Too bad about that. Nice embroidery on that robe. A man needed a little embroidery to keep him refined. Still, he was not *about* to wear that heap of cloth into battle. He would have better luck trying to fight while carrying Pips on his back.

The others did their usual bowing and scraping when Tuon walked up, though she had been gone only a few minutes. Mat gave her a nod. She took in his clothing with a long glance, up and down. Why was everyone so sour on a good shirt and jacket? He had not chosen the ratty one he had worn to visit Elayne. He had burned that.

“Greatest One,” Courtani said. She was of the High Blood, and could address Tuon directly. “May you always draw breath. The Raven Prince has determined that he himself must visit the battlefield, as he has judged our messengers and generals to be lacking skill.”

Mat hooked his thumbs into his belt, regarding Tuon, as a groom finally arrived with Pips. About bloody time. Had the boy stopped for lunch along the way, perhaps taken in a gleeman performance or two?

“Well, why are we waiting?” Tuon asked. “If the Prince of the Ravens wishes to see the battlefield, I would think that loyal servants of the Empire would have tripped over themselves in their haste to carry him there.”

Courtani looked as if she had been slapped. Mat grinned at Tuon, and she favored him with a smile. Light, but he liked those smiles.

“So, you’re coming along, then?” he asked Tuon.

“Of course. You see a reason why I should not?”

“Not a one,” Mat said, groaning inside. “Not a single bloody one.”

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CHAPTER 29

The Loss of a Hill

“Focus attention on the Fades!” Egwene said, releasing a burst of Air toward the Trollocs climbing up the hillside. The Trollocs had made a gaping hole in the ranks of pikemen defending the hill and were pouring through. Now accustomed to assaulting channelers, they squatted and braced themselves. That gave Egwene a good view of the fist and the Myrddraal hiding at the very center. It wore a brown coat over its usual clothing and held a Trolloc catchpole.

No wonder I had trouble spotting him, Egwene thought, destroying the creature with a weave of Fire. The Halfman writhed, shaking and screeching in the fire, its eyeless face turned toward the heavens. The fist of Trollocs dropped as well.

Egwene smiled in satisfaction, but her pleasure was short lived. Her archers were getting low on arrows, the pike ranks were tattered and some of the Aes Sedai were clearly fatigued. Another wave of Trollocs replaced those that Egwene had dropped. *Will we be able to stand another day of this?* she thought.

A banner of lancers suddenly broke from the left flank of Bryne's army fighting at the river. They flew the Flame of Tar Valon—that would be the unit of heavy cavalry that Bryne was proud of. He had cobbled them together under Captain Joni Shagrin out of a mix of seasoned veterans from the cavalries of other countries and those soldiers from the Tower Guard who wanted to join this elite fighting force.

The lancers skirted the Sharans opposite them and rode furiously toward Egwene’s hills, directly at the rear of the Trolloc army that was assaulting her position. Right behind them, a second cavalry unit followed in the dust of the first, this one displaying the dark green banner of Illian. It looked like the general was finally going to send her some relief.

But… Wait. Egwene frowned. From her vantage, she could see that the main army’s left flank was completely unprotected now. *What is he doing?*

Some… some sort of trap for the Sharans?

If there had been a trap planned, the jaws did not snap shut. Instead, a Sharan cavalry unit charged into Bryne’s exposed left flank and began to inflict heavy casualties on the foot soldiers defending that position at the river. And then Egwene saw another movement on the field below that really horrified her—an even larger Sharan cavalry banner had broken off the enemy’s right flank and was bearing down on the lancer unit that had come to help Egwene.

“Gawyn, get word to those lancers—it’s a trap!”

But there was no time to do anything. Within moments, the Sharan cavalry had begun slaying the White Tower lancers from behind. At the same time, the back ranks of Trollocs had turned around to face the lancer charge. Egwene could see that these Trollocs all carried long polearms that ripped through the flesh of man and horse. The front ranks of lancers went down in a bloody heap, and the Trollocs waded between the bodies to pull down and thrust their weapons through the cavalrymen behind.

Egwene shouted, drawing what Power she could and trying to destroy that Trolloc force—and the other women joined her. It was a massacre on both sides. There were just too many Trollocs, and the lancers were unprotected. In minutes, it was over. Only a few cavalrymen had managed to survive, and Egwene saw them riding at full bore toward the river.

It shook her. At times, the armies seemed to move at the turgid pace of enormous ships at dock—and then, in an instant, everything would burst and entire banners would have perished.

She looked away from the corpses below. The Aes Sedai positions on the hilltops had been compromised. As the Trollocs returned their attention toward her force, Egwene gave orders for gateways. She had the pikemen withdraw uphill through the gateways as her archers continued to shoot projectiles into the Trollocs below. Then, Egwene and the remaining Aes Sedai rained destruction down on the Trollocs long enough to get the archers through the gateways.

Before disappearing through the last gateway on her hill, Egwene gave a final look at the battlefield. What had just happened? She shook her head as Gawyn stepped up to her side, faithful as always. He hadn’t had an opportunity to draw his sword this battle. Neither had Leilwin; the two seemed to be having a little silent competition as to who could act as the better guard, remaining right by Egwene’s side. She’d have found it annoying, but it was better than Gawyn's sullen regret in previous battle engagements.

He *was* looking pale, though. As if at the start of a sickness. Had he been getting enough sleep?

"I want to go to the camp and find General Bryne," Egwene said. "I want to know why this was allowed to happen. And then I will go to our troops defending the ford, and avenge our people who just lost their lives here."

They both gave her frowns.

"Egwene…" Gawyn said.

"I have strength yet," Egwene said. "I have been using the *sa'angreal* to keep from having to work too hard. The men fighting in that quarter need to see me, and I must do good where I can. I will take as many guards as you wish me to take."

Gawyn hesitated, glanced at Leilwin, then finally nodded.

Lan dismounted and handed the reins to Andere, then continued past the guards—who seemed shocked to see him and his numerous guards, many of them bloodied—toward the command tent. The tent was little more than an awning now, open on all sides, with soldiers moving in and out like ants in a hill. The air was hot here in Shienar today. He had not received reports recently from the other battlefronts, but had heard his would not be the only desperate stand today. Elayne fought at Cairhien; the Amyrlin on the border of Arafel.

Light send that they were having a better time of it than Lan. Inside the tent, Agelmar stood with maps on the ground all around him, pointing at them with a thin pole and moving bits of colored stone around as he gave orders. Runners would come and give updates on the progress of battle. The best battle plans lasted only until the first sword was drawn, but a good general could work battles like a potter working clay, taking the ebbs and flows of soldiers and molding them.

"Lord Mandragoran?" Agelmar asked, looking up. "Light, man! You look like the Blight itself. Have you seen the Aes Sedai for Healing?"

"I am well," Lan said. "How goes the battle?"

"I'm encouraged," Agelmar said. "If we can find some way to stall those Dreadlords for an hour or two, I think we actually have a fair shot of turning the Trollocs back."

“Surely not,” Lan said. “There are so many.”

“It’s not about numbers,” Agelmar said, waving Lan over, pointing at a map. “Lan, here is a thing that few men understand. Armies *can* and often *do* break when they have superior numbers, superior battlefield advantage, and a good chance of winning.

“When you spend time commanding, you start to think of an army as a single entity. A massive beast with thousands of limbs. That’s a mistake. An army is made up of men—or, in this case, Trollocs—each one on the field, each one terrified. Being a soldier is about keeping your terror in check. The beast inside just wants to escape.”

Lan crouched down, inspecting the battle maps. The situation was much as he'd seen it, only Agelmar still had the Saldaean light cavalry watching the eastern flank on the map. A mistake? Lan had confirmed for himself that they were no longer there. Shouldn’t runners have brought Agelmar word that the map was wrong? Or was he somehow distracting them from noticing?

“I’ll show you something today, Lan,” Agelmar said softly. “I’ll show you what the smallest man on the practice yard must learn if he is to survive. You can make the larger enemy break if you convince him that he is going to die. Hit him hard enough, and he will run, and won’t return to let you hit again—even if you’re secretly too weak to hit again.”

“That’s your plan, then?” Lan asked. “Today?”

“The Trollocs will break if we show them a display of force that frightens them,” Agelmar said. “I know it can work. I’m hoping that we can bring down the leader of those Dreadlords. If the Trollocs assume they’re losing, they will run. They are cowardly beasts.”

Listening to Agelmar made it seem plausible. Perhaps Lan just wasn’t seeing the entire picture. Perhaps the great captain’s genius was beyond what others could fathom. Had he done right in countermanding the order to move the archers?

The messenger Lan had sent earlier came galloping back to the command center. One of Lan’s High Guard was there, too, holding his own arm, a black-fletched arrow stuck in it. “An enormous force of Shadowspawn!” the messenger said. “Coming in from the east! Dai Shan, you were right!”

They knew to come in that way, Lan thought. *They couldn’t have just noticed that we’d exposed ourselves, not with those hills blocking their* *view. It's come too quickly. The Shadow must have been told, or must have known what to expect.* He looked at Agelmar.

"Impossible!" Agelmar said. "What's this, now? Why didn't the scouts see it?"

"Lord Agelmar," one of his commanders said. "You sent the scouts in the east back to look at the river, remember? They were to inspect the crossing for us. You said the archers would . . " The commander paled. "The archers!"

"The archers are still in their positions," Lan said, rising. "I want the front lines to begin withdrawing. Pull the Saldaeans out of the fighting, ready to strike to help the foot soldiers disengage. Pull the Asha'man back. We'll need gateways."

"Lord Mandragoran," Agelmar said. "This new development can be used. If we pull apart and then smash them between us, we can—"

"You are relieved of duty, Lord Agelmar," Lan said, not looking at the man. "And, unfortunately, I must request that you remain under supervision until I can sort through what has happened."

The command tent grew silent, every aide, messenger and officer turning toward Lan.

"Now, Lan," Agelmar said. "That *sounded* like you are having me arrested."

"I am," Lan said, motioning to the High Guard. They moved into the tent, taking positions to keep anyone from escaping. Some of Agelmar's men did reach for swords, but most looked confused, and only rested their hands on the hilts.

"This is an outrage!" Agelmar said. "Don't be a fool. This isn't the time —"

"What would you have me do, Agelmar?" Lan barked. "Let you run this army into the ground? Let the Shadow take us? Why are you doing this? *Why?"*

"You're overreacting, Lan," Agelmar said, keeping his calm with obvious difficulty, his eyes burning. "What's going through your head? Light!"

"Why did you pull the archers off of the eastern hills?"

"Because I needed them elsewhere!"

"And does that make *sense?"* Lan demanded. "Didn't you tell me that guarding that flank was vital?"

"I . ."

“You drew away the scouts from that position too. Why?”

“They ... It ...” Agelmar raised a hand to his head, looking dazed. He looked down at the battle map, and his eyes widened.

“What’s wrong with you, Agelmar?” Lan said.

“I don’t know,” the man said. He blinked, staring at the maps at his feet. His face adopted a look of horror, eyes wide, lips parting. “Oh, *Light!* What have I done?”

“Pass my orders!” Lan said urgently to his high guard. “Bring Lord Baldhere to the command tent. Queen Ethenielle and King Easar as well.”

“Lan, you have to bring the ...” Agelmar stopped. “Light! I cant say it. I start thinking about what to do, and the wrong thoughts come into my head! I'm still trying to sabotage us. I’ve doomed us.” His eyes wide, he reached for his shortsword, sliding the blade free.

Lan caught the sword around the guard and the blade collar, stopping it just before Agelmar could ram it into his stomach and end his life. Blood seeped between Lan’s fingers from where one brushed the sharp edge of the blade, just below the collar.

“Let me die with honor,” Agelmar said. “I… I’ve destroyed us all. I’ve lost us this war, Lan.”

“Not the war, just the battle,” Lan said. “Something is wrong with you. A sickness, a fatigue or something of the Shadow. I suspect we’ll find someone has been tampering with your mind.”

“But—”

“You are a soldier!” Lan bellowed. “Act like one!”

Agelmar froze. He met Lan’s eyes, then nodded once. Lan removed his fingers from the blade and Agelmar thrust it back in its sheath. The great captain sat down cross-legged in the traditional Shienaran meditation posture, eyes closed.

Lan strode away, calling orders. Prince Kaisel ran up to him, obviously afraid. “What’s happening, Lord Mandragoran?”

“Compulsion, likely,” Lan said. “We’ve been like rabbits in a snare, with the line being drawn slowly—but snugly—around our necks. Someone please tell me the Asha’man still have enough strength for gateways! And bring me news of the eastern flank! Those archers will need support. Commit the rest of the reserves to protecting them.”

Prince Kaisel backed away as the orders continued, his eyes wide, his hand on his sword. He looked at Lord Agelmar, face pale. “We’ve really lost?” he asked Lan once the orders were out, messengers racing to deliver them.

“Yes,” Lan said. “We have.”

“Lan!” Agelmar said suddenly, opening his eyes.

Lan turned to him.

“Queen Tenobia,” Agelmar said. “I’ve sent her into danger without understanding what I’d done. Whoever put these plans into my head wanted her dead!”

Lan swore softly, bolting out of camp and up the side of the nearest hill. The scouts there made room for him as he reached the top, pulling his looking glass from his belt. He didn’t need it. He found the Queens flag while scanning the battlefield.

She was surrounded. Whatever support she had thought she would receive had not been sent. Lan opened his mouth to call orders, but they died on his lips as the Trollocs swarmed over the small flag of white and silver where she’d been fighting. It fell, and in seconds, he couldn’t pick out a living soldier in that section of the battlefield.

Coldness. He could do nothing for Tenobia. It was no longer about saving individuals.

He would be lucky to escape this day with any semblance of an army at all.

Mat rode with Tuon south toward the battlefield, along the banks of the river that was the western border of Arafel.

Of course, where Tuon went, so did Selucia. And now Min; Tuon wanted to keep her new Doomseer at her side at all times. Tuon kept asking for viewings, and Min kept reluctantly explaining what she saw.

Mat had tried to make her say she saw a hat floating around Mat’s head. That would persuade Tuon to stop trying to get rid of his, would it not? It would have been better than Min explaining about the eye on a scale, and the dagger, and all of the other bloody things she had seen about Mat.

Where Tuon went, a hundred of the Deathwatch Guards *also* went. And Galgan and Courtani, who felt chastised for not acting quickly enough to help Mat. Furyk Karede was along, too, leading the Deathwatch Guard. Being around Karede was about as pleasant as finding another man’s hand in your purse, but he was a good soldier, and Mat respected him. He would very much like to put Karede and Lan in a staring contest together. They could be at it for years.

“I need a better view,” Mat said, scanning the battlefield when they came within range. “There.”

He turned Pips and rode toward a rise close enough to where the opposing forces traded destruction at the river’s edge. Tuon followed him without a word. When they all reached the rise, he noticed Selucia staring daggers at him.

“What’s wrong?” Mat asked. “I’d have assumed you would be happy to have me back. It gives you someone else to scowl at.”

“The Empress will follow where you go,” she said.

“So she will,” Mat said. “As I’ll follow where she goes, I suppose. I hope that doesn’t lead us in too many circles.” He inspected the combat.

The river was not terribly wide—maybe fifty spans across but it was swift-moving and deep on either side of the ford. The water made a nice barrier, and not just for Trollocs. The ford, though, made for an easy crossing the water there was knee-deep and wide enough for at least twenty files of riders to cross at the same time.

In the distant middle of the Sharan army, a man sat upon a brilliant white horse. Mat could barely make him out with his glass; the man’s glistening armor didn’t seem like any Mat had seen, though the distance made it difficult to tell specifics. “I assume that’s our Forsaken?” he asked, gesturing with the *ashandarei.*

“He seems to be yelling for the Dragon Reborn,” Galgan said. Demandred’s voice boomed across the battlefield right then, enhanced by the One Power. He was demanding that the Dragon come and face him in a duel.

Mat inspected the fellow through the glass. “Demandred, eh? Has he gone a bit dotty, or what?” Well, Mat knew which part of the battle to bloody stay away from. He had not signed up to fight Forsaken. In fact, so far as he remembered, he had not signed up at all. He had been bloody *press-ganged* every step of the way. Usually by force, and always by one fool woman or another.

Egwene could deal with Demandred, or maybe the Asha’man could. Rand said the Asha’man were not going crazy anymore, but that was a shallow promise. Any man who wanted to wield the One Power was *already* crazy, so far as Mat considered it. Adding more crazy to them would be like pouring tea into an already full cup.

At least Tuon's *damane* had those Sharan channelers occupied. Their firefight ripped up the ground on both riverbanks. It was impossible to get a clear picture of what was going on, though. There was just too much confusion.

Mat pointed his looking glass southward along the river once more, and frowned. There was a military camp set up just a few hundred paces opposite the ford, but it wasn't the haphazard arrangement of tents that caught his attention. At the eastern edge of the camp was a large body of troops and their horses, just standing there. He picked out a figure pacing in front of the assembly, who appeared to be in a foul mood. Mat might have been missing an eye, but it was no difficult task to recognize Tylee.

Mat lowered the looking glass. He rubbed his chin, adjusted his hat and set his *ashandarei* on his shoulder. "Give me five minutes on my own, he said, then kicked Pips into a gallop down the hill, hoping that Tuon would let him go alone. For once, she did, though as he reached the base of the rise, he could imagine her up there watching him with those curious eyes of hers. She seemed to find everything he did to be interesting.

Mat galloped alongside the river toward Tylee's location. Explosions rang out, painful to the ears, announcing that he had neared the heart of the battle.

Mat nudged Pips to the left and rode directly toward the pacing general. "Tylee, you Light-blinded fool! Why are you sitting around here instead of making yourself useful?"

"Highness," Tylee said, falling to her knees, "we were ordered to stay here until we were called."

"Who told you to do that? And get up."

"General Bryne, Highness," she said, rising. He could sense the annoyance in her tone, but she kept her face under control. "He said that we were only a reserve force, and that under no circumstances were we to move from here until he gave the order. He said many lives depended on it. But look, you can see for yourself," she said, gesturing toward the river, "the battle is not going well."

Mat had been too caught up with Tylee to see the state of affairs across the water, but now he gave the field a wide sweep with his eye.

While the *damane* still seemed to be holding their own against the Sharan channelers, the regular troops were clearly in a bind. The defenses on Bryne's left flank downriver had completely broken down, and the soldiers there were being mobbed by Sharans.

Where was the cavalry? It was supposed to be protecting the flanks. And, as Mat had predicted, Sharan archers had moved out into the field and were sending arrows into Bryne’s cavalry on the right flank. It was all like a boil being squeezed, and Bryne's troops were the boil about to pop.

“This doesn’t make any bloody sense,” Mat said. “He’s spinning this more and more into a disaster. Where is the general now, Tylee?”

“I cannot say, Highness, I have people out looking for him, but so far there is no word. But I have reports that our side has had a major setback just south of here. Two large cavalry units of General Bryne’s have been wiped out by the Sharans just below the hills on the border. It is said they had been sent there to relieve the *marath'damane* on the hilltops.”

“Blood and bloody ashes.” Mat considered this information. “All right, Tylee, we can’t wait around any longer. Here’s what we are going to do. Have Banner-General Makoti take the Second Banner right up the middle. He has to work his way around our troops fighting there and push back those Sharans. You take the Third Banner and swing around to the right flank; take out those archers and any other goat-kissers that cross your path. I’m going to take the First Banner over to the left flank and put a patch on those defenses. Get going, Tylee!”

“Yes, Highness. But surely you aren’t going to get so close to the battle?”

“Yes I am. Now get going, Tylee!”

“Please, if I might make a humble suggestion, Highness? You are unprotected; let me at least give you some proper armor.”

Mat thought for a moment, then agreed that her suggestion was a prudent one. *A person could get hurt out there, what with arrows flying and blades swinging.* Tylee called over one of her senior officers who seemed to be about the same size as Mat. She had the man remove his armor, which was extremely colorful, overlapping plates lacquered green, gold and red, outlined with silver. The officer looked bemused when Mat handed him his coat in trade, saying that he expected it to be returned at the end of the day in the same condition. Mat put on the armor, which covered his chest, the back of his arms and the front of his thighs, and it felt comfortable enough.

When the officer held out his helmet, though, Mat ignored him, merely adjusting his wide-brimmed hat as he turned to Tylee.

"Highness, one more thing, the *marath'damane*…"

"I'll deal with those channelers personally," Mat said.

She gawked at him as if he were insane. Bloody ashes, he probably was. "Highness!" Tylee said. "The Empress . . " She stopped when she saw Mat's expression. "Let us at least send for some *damane* to protect you."

"I can take care of myself just fine, thank you very much. Those bloody women would just get in my way." He grinned. "Are you ready, Tylee? I would really like this over with before it's time for my bedtime mug of ale." In response, Tylee turned and yelled, "Mount up!" Light, she had a strong set of lungs! With that, thousands of bottoms hit their saddles, producing a slapping sound that reverberated across the legion, and each soldier sat at attention, eyes straight ahead. He'd give the Seanchan one thing— they trained bloody good soldiers.

Tylee barked out a series of orders, turned back to Mat and said, "On your command, Highness."

Mat cried out, "*Los caba'drin!*" Words most of those assembled did not understand, and yet instinctively knew to mean "Horsemen forward!"

As Mat spurred Pips into the waters of the ford, the *ashandarei* raised above his head, he heard the ground rumble as the First Banner closed ranks around him. The blaring Seanchan horns behind were giving the call to charge, each horn pitched slightly differently from the next, producing a grating, dissonant sound meant to be heard at great distances. Ahead, soldiers of the White Tower glanced over their shoulders at the noise, and in the seconds it took Mat and the Seanchan to cross the passage, soldiers were flinging themselves out of the way to make room for the riders.

Just a short veer to the left and the Seanchan were suddenly in the thick of Sharan cavalry, which had been grinding through Egwene's foot soldiers. The speed of their approach enabled the Seanchan vanguard to smash hard into the Sharans, their well-trained steeds rearing up just before crashing down on the foe with their forelegs. Sharans and their mounts fell, many crushed as the Seanchan cavalry continued their relentless forward motion.

The Sharans appeared to know what they were about, but these were heavy cavalry, weighted down with burdensome armor and equipped with long lances; perfect for eliminating foot soldiers with their backs up against a wall, but disadvantaged against a highly mobile light cavalry in such tight quarters.

The First Banner were a crack unit that used a wide variety of weaponry, and they were trained to work in teams. Spears thrown by lead riders with deadly accuracy plunged into the visors of the Sharans, a surprising number of which went through the slits and into faces. Pushing through behind were riders wielding two-handed swords with curved blades, slicing their weapons across the vulnerable space that separated helmets from the top of body armor, or at other times slashing the vulnerable chests of armor-clad Sharan mounts, bringing their riders to the ground. Other Seanchan used hooked polearms to pull Sharans out of the saddle while their partners swung spiked maces at the enemy, denting their armor so much that movement was severely restricted. And when the Sharans were on the ground, trying with difficulty to rise, the spikers would descend on them, lightly armed Seanchan whose job it was to pull up visors of the fallen and thrust a narrow dagger into exposed eyes. The lances of the Sharans were useless under these conditions—in fact, they were a hindrance, and many Sharans died before they could drop their lances and draw swords.

Mat ordered one of his cavalry squadrons to ride along the water's edge until they reached the far left edge of battle, and then to swing around the Sharan cavalry. No longer overwhelmed by Sharan lances, the White Tower infantry on the left-center were able to use their pikes and halberds again, and with the addition of the efforts of the Seanchan Second and Third Banners, defenses were slowly reestablished at the ford. It was dirty, slippery work, as the ground within several hundred paces of the river got beaten down and became an expanse of churned-up mud. But the forces of Light stood their ground.

Mat found himself washed into the thick of the fray, and his *ashandarei* never stopped spinning. He quickly found, however, that his weapon was not very useful; a few of his swings met with vulnerable flesh, but most of the time his blade glanced off the armor of his opponents, and he was forced to duck and twist in the saddle repeatedly to avoid being struck by a Sharan blade.

Mat slowly worked his way forward through the brawl, and had nearly reached the back lines of Sharan cavalry when he realized that three of his companions were no longer in their saddles. Odd, they had just been there a minute ago. Two others stiffened up, scanning from side to side, and suddenly they both went up in flames, screaming in agony and throwing themselves to the ground before going limp. Mat looked to his right just in time to see a Seanchan flung back a hundred feet in the air by an unseen force.

When he turned back, his eye met the gaze of a most beautiful woman. She was oddly clad in a black silk dress that stood out from her body, adorned with white ribbons. She was a dark-skinned beauty, like Tuon, but there was nothing delicate about her bold, high cheekbones and wide sensuous mouth, lips that seemed to pout. Until they curved up into a smile, a smile that was not meant to comfort him.

As she stared at him, his medallion grew cold. Mat breathed out.

Luck seemed to be with him so far, but he did not want to press it too far, any more than you wanted to press your best racehorse. He would still have a healthy need of that luck in the days to come.

Mat dismounted and walked toward her as the woman gasped, trying another weave, her eyes wide with amazement. Mat flipped the *ashandarei* around and spun it, sweeping her feet from beneath her. He brought the haft just below the blade back down to his right, cracking her on the back of the head as she fell.

She landed facedown in the mud. Mat did not have time to pull her out, as he was suddenly confronted by dozens of Sharans. Ten of Mats soldiers filled out around him, and he pressed forward. These Sharans only had swords. Mat fended them off with spinning blade and pole, and he and the Seanchan fought furiously.

The fight became a blur of sweeping weapons, his *ashandarei* spraying clods of mud into the air. Two of Mat’s men grabbed the facedown woman before she could suffocate in the mire.

Mat pushed forward.

Men yelled, calling for reinforcements.

Steps taken cautiously, but inevitably forward.

The ground was turning red.

Sharan soldiers replaced the ones who were slain, and the bodies of the fallen sank deeper in the mud. Soldiers often were a grim folk, but each of these Sharans seemed personally intent on killing him—until the Sharans stopped coming. Mat looked around him; there were only four Seanchan remaining at his side.

Despite the chaos of the fight, Mat felt he saw more clearly than he had before. And the lull in fighting gave him a chance to act like a commander again.

"Bind that woman's hands behind her back," Mat said, panting, to the men around him, "and tie a cloth around her eyes so that she cant see anything." He wiped the sweat from his brow—Light, there was enough of it for a second river. "We are going to push our way back to the ford with our prisoner. Ill see if I can find a few more of those bloody *damane* to throw into this battle. The Sharans were wrong to leave only one of their channelers by herself on the battlefield. But let's get out of here before any more of them show up."

Mat shook his hand; he had cracked one of his nails, splitting the fine lacquer. He turned to a Seanchan officer, one of those who had fought alongside him. The man wore an expression of awe, as if he were staring at the Dragon bloody Reborn himself. Mat looked down at the ground, not liking the man's expression, but he supposed it wasn't any worse than looking at the blood-soaked muck littered with Sharan corpses. How many had Mat killed?

"Highness…" the officer said. "Great Lord, no man in the Empire's service would ever dare question the Empress, may she live forever. But if a man *had* wondered about some of her choices, he would do so no longer. Prince of the Ravens!" He raised his sword, prompting a cheer from those behind.

"Get yourselves some bloody polearms," Mat said. "Those swords are next to useless for foot soldiers in this battle." He chewed a bit off the offending fingernail, then spat it to the side. "You fellows did well. Anyone see my horse?"

Pips was nearby and so, taking his mount's reins, he headed back toward the ford. He even managed to stay out of more skirmishes, for the most part. That Seanchan captain reminded him a little too much of Talmanes, and Mat had enough people following him about. *I wonder if he plays dice,* Mat thought idly, stepping into the water. His boots were good, but all boots eventually leaked, and his feet squished inside his stockings as he walked across the ford with Pips. There was a commotion far to his right on the bank, what appeared to be a gathering of Aes Sedai channeling toward the battlefield. But Mat had no intention of sticking his nose into their business. He had larger issues on his mind.

Ahead Mat saw a man standing by a tree, dressed in voluminous pants and a familiar-looking coat. He approached the man and, after a brief conversation, exchanged garb with him. Feeling good about being back in his Two Rivers coat, Mat heaved himself into the saddle, legs still dripping water, and rode back toward where he had left Tuon. His men had brought that Sharan channeler—by his order, they'd gagged her and blindfolded her. Light, what would he do with her? She'd probably end up as a *damane.*

He left his soldiers and passed the guards, now set up at the base of the little rise, with barely a nod. The battlefield spread out in his mind, no longer little drawings on paper. He could see the field, hear the men fighting, smell the rancid breath of the enemy. It was real to him now.

"The Empress," Selucia said as he reached the top of the rise, "would like to know—with great specificity—exactly why you saw fit to put yourself into the skirmish in such an irresponsible way. Your life is no longer your own, Prince of the Ravens. You cannot toss it aside as you once might have."

"I had to know," Mat said, looking out. "I had to feel the pulse of the battle."

"The pulse?" Selucia said. Tuon was talking through her by wiggling her fingers like some bloody Maiden of the Spear. Not speaking to him directly. Bad sign.

"Every battle has a pulse, Tuon," Mat said, still staring into the middle distance. "Nynaeve… she would sometimes feel a person's hand to check their heartbeat, and from there would know that something was wrong with their feet. It's the same thing. Step into the struggle, feel its motion. Know it..."

A servant with his head half-shaven stepped up to Tuon, whispering to her and Selucia. He had come from the ford.

Mat kept looking out, remembering maps, but overlaying them with the real combat. Bryne failing to use Tylee in combat, exposing his defenses' left flank at the ford, sending his cavalry into a trap.

The battle opened to him, and he saw tactics, ten steps ahead of what was occurring. It was like reading the future, like what Min saw, only with flesh, blood, swords and battle drums.

Mat grunted. "Huh. Gareth Bryne is a Darkfriend."

"He *what?"* Min sputtered.

“This battle is one step away from being doomed,” Mat said, turning to Tuon. “I need absolute control of our armies right now. No more arguing with Galgan. Min, I need you to send to Egwene and warn her that Bryne is trying to lose this battle. Tuon, she ll need to go in person. I doubt Egwene will listen to anyone else.”

Everyone looked at Mat with stunned expressions—everyone but Tuon, who gave him one of those soul-shaking stares of hers. The ones that had him feeling as if he were a mouse who had just been caught in an otherwise immaculately clean room. That made him sweat more than the battle had.

Come on, he thought. *There isn’t time.* He could see it now, like a grand game of stones. Bryne’s movements were complex and subtle, but the end result would be the destruction of Egwene’s army.

Mat could stop it. But he had to act *now.*

“It is done,” Tuon said.

The comment provoked almost as much surprise as Mat’s announcement. Captain-General Galgan looked as if he would rather swallow his own boots than have Mat in command. Min found herself being led away by a group of servants and soldiers, and she gave a squawk of annoyance.

Tuon moved her horse nearer to Mat’s. “I am told,” she said softly, “that in the battle moments ago, you not only claimed a *marath’damane* for yourself, but also raised one of our officers to the low Blood.”

“I *did*?” Mat asked, baffled. “I don’t remember that.”

“You dropped your nail at his feet.”

“Oh. That ... All right, maybe I did that. Accidentally. And the *channeler…* bloody ashes, Tuon. I didn’t mean for her to ... I guess. Well, you can have her.”

“No,” Tuon said. “It is well for you to have taken one of your own. You cannot train her, of course, but there are many *sul’dam* who will be eager for the chance. It is very rare that a man captures a *damane* personally on the battlefield, very rare indeed. Though I know of your particular advantage, others do not. This will greatly increase your reputation.”

Mat shrugged. What else could he do? Maybe, if the *damane* belonged to him, he could let her free or something.

“I will have the officer you raised transferred to be your personal retainer,” Tuon said. “He has a good record, perhaps too good. He had been assigned that duty at the ford because he was considered… potentially part of a faction who would have moved against us. He is now spouting your praises. I do not know what you did to change his opinion. You seem to have a particular skill at that.”

“Let's just hope I have as much skill for retrieving a victory,” Mat grumbled. “This is bad, Tuon.”

“Nobody else thinks so.” She said the words carefully, not arguing with him, really. Stating a fact.

“I’m right, anyway. I wish I wasn’t, but I am. I bloody am.”

“If you are not, I will lose influence.”

“You’ll be fine,” Mat said, leading the way back toward the Seanchan camp a few miles north at a brisk pace. “I may lead you wrong now and then, but in the end, you can be sure that I’m always a safe bet.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 30

The Way of the Predator

Perrin and Gaul did another dismayed round of Egwene’s camp—at least, the little of it that reflected in the wolf dream. Her army had been pushed far to the east, and the tents had not been placed long enough at the river to reflect strongly in the wolf dream.

The wolves had spotted Graendal here, but Perrin had not been able to catch her at whatever she was doing.

Three times now, Slayer had tried attacking the Bore, and the wolves had warned Perrin. Each time, Slayer had withdrawn before Perrin arrived. The man was testing them. It was the way of the predator, surveying the herd, searching for the weak.

At least Perrin's plan with the wolves had worked. Time progressed slowly in the Bore, and so Slayer—by necessity—was slowed down as he tried to reach Rand. That gave Perrin a chance to reach him in time.

“We need to warn the others about Graendal,” Perrin said, stopping in the center of camp. “She must be communicating with Darkfriends in our camps.”

“Perhaps we could go to those at the Bore? You managed to speak to Nynaeve Sedai.”

“Maybe,” Perrin said. “I don’t know if it would be good to distract Nynaeve again, considering what she is up to.” Perrin turned about, looking at the bedrolls that flickered, then vanished in the wolf dream. He and Gaul had checked at Merrilor for a gateway, but none was there currently. If he wanted to go back to the waking world, he’d need to camp there and wait for hours. It seemed like such a waste.

If only he could figure out how to *shift* back to the real world himself. Lanfear implied that he might be able to learn the trick, but his only clue in how to do so lay in Slayer. Perrin tried remembering the moment when the man had *shifted* out. Had Perrin sensed anything? A hint to how Slayer did what he did?

He shook his head. He'd gone over and over that, and had come to no conclusions. With a sigh, he quested out for the wolves. *Any sign of Heartseeker?* he asked hopefully.

The wolves sent amusement. He had been asking them too frequently.

Have you seen any camps of two-legs, then? Perrin sent.

This earned a vague response. Wolves paid attention to men only to avoid them; in the wolf dream, that didn't matter much. Still, where men congregated, nightmares sometimes ran wild, so the wolves had learned to keep their distance.

He would have liked to know how the other battles were progressing. What of Elayne's army, Perrin's men, Lord and Lady Bashere? Perrin led Gaul away; they ran with quick strides, rather than jumping to a place immediately. Perrin wanted to think.

The longer he remained in the wolf dream in the flesh, the more he felt that he should know how to *shift* back. His body seemed to understand that this place was not natural for it. He hadn't slept here, despite… how long had it been? He could not say. They were almost at the end of their rations, though he felt as though he and Gaul had been here only a handful of hours. Part of that sensation was caused by frequent approaches to the Bore to check on the dreamspike, but it was generally so easy to lose track of time here.

There was also an ache of fatigue inside him, growing stronger. He didn't know if he could sleep in this place. His body wanted rest, but had forgotten how to find it. It reminded him a little of when Moiraine had dispelled their fatigue while fleeing the Two Rivers all that time ago. Two years now.

A very long two years.

Perrin and Gaul inspected Lan's camp next. It was even more ephemeral than Egwene's; using the wolf dream for surveillance here was pointless. Lan moved with lots of cavalry, retreating at speed. He and his men did not remain in one place long enough to reflect in the wolf dream except in the most fleeting of ways.

There were no signs of Graendal. "*Aan'allein* is retreating too" Gaul guessed, surveying the rocky ground that they thought was Lan's camp. There were no tents here, just the occasional fleeting appearance of sleeping rings marked by a pole at the center where horsemen would hobble their animals.

Gaul looked up, scanning the landscape to the west. “If they keep falling back from here, they will eventually reach the Field of Merrilor again. Perhaps that is the goal.”

“Perhaps,” Perrin said. “I want to visit Elayne’s battlefront and—”

Young Bull, a wolf called to him. He found the “voice” of the sending to be familiar somehow. *She is here.*

Here? Perrin sent. *Heartseeker?*

Come.

Perrin grabbed Gaul by the arm and *shifted* them far to the north. Graendal was at Shayol Ghul? Was she trying to break in and kill Rand?

They arrived on a ledge overlooking the valley. He and Gaul went down immediately to their stomachs, peering over the edge, inspecting the valley. An old, grizzled wolf appeared beside Perrin. He knew this wolf, he was certain of it—the scent was familiar, but he could not place a name to him, and the wolf did not send one.

“Where?” Perrin whispered. “Is she in the cavern?”

No, the grizzled wolf sent. *There.*

The wolf sent an image of tents clustered in the valley just below the entrance to the cavern. She had not been spotted in this valley since that first time Perrin had caught her here.

Ituralde’s troops had been holding here for long enough that their tents were becoming more and more stable in the wolf dream. Perrin *shifted*, carefully, down below. Gaul and the wolf joined him as he prowled forward, relying on the wolfs Sending to lead him.

There, the wolf said, nodding toward a large tent at the center. Perrin had seen Graendal here before, at this tent, the tent of Rodel Ituralde.

Perrin froze as the tent’s flap rustled. Graendal stepped out. She looked as she had before, with a face like a slab of rock.

Perrin created a thin, painted wall to hide himself, but he needn’t have bothered. Graendal immediately created a gateway and stepped into the waking world. It was night there, though time passed at such a strange rate this close to the Bore, that might not mean much for the rest of the world.

Perrin could see the same tent darkly on the other side of the gateway, two Domani guards out front. Graendal waved a hand, and both stood up straighter and saluted her.

The gateway began to close as Graendal slipped into the tent. Perrin hesitated, then *shifted* to stand just in front of the gateway. He had a moment to decide. Follow?

No. He had to keep watch on Slayer. However, being this close, he felt something ... an awareness. Stepping through that gateway would be like…

Like waking up.

The gateway snapped shut. Perrin felt a stab of regret, but knew staying in the wolf dream had been right. Rand was all but defenseless against Slayer here; he would need Perrin's help.

“We need to send warning,” Perrin said.

I suppose I could take the message for you, Young Bull, sent the unnamed wolf.

Perrin froze, then spun, pointing. “Elyas!”

I am Long Tooth here, Young Bull. Elyas sent amusement.

“I thought you said you didn’t come here.”

I said I avoided it. This place is strange and dangerous. I have enough strangeness and *danger in my life in the other world.* The wolf sat down on his haunches. *But someone needed to check on you, foolish pup.*

Perrin smiled. Elyas’ thoughts were a strange mix of wolf and human. His way of sending was very wolflike, but the way he thought of himself was too individual, too *human.*

“How goes the fight?” Perrin asked eagerly. Gaul took up position nearby, watching, alert, in case Graendal or Slayer appeared. The field before them, the floor of the valley, was quiet for once. The winds had died down, the dust on the sandy ground stirring in small rifts and ripples. Like water.

I do not know of the other battlefields, Elyas sent, *and we wolves stay far from the two-legs. We fight, here and there, at the edges of the battle. Mostly, we have attacked the Twisted Ones and Neverborn from the other side of the canyon, where there are no two-legs except those strange Aiel.*

It is a grueling fight. Shadowkiller must do quick work. We have stood five days, but may not last many more.

Five days here in the north. Much longer had passed in the rest of the world since Rand entered to face the Dark One. Rand himself was so close to the Bore that it was likely only hours—maybe minutes—had passed for him. Perrin could feel how time moved differently when he drew near to where Rand fought.

“Ituralde,” Perrin said, scratching at his beard. “He’s one of the great captains.”

Yes, Elyas sent, smelling of amusement. *Some call him "Little Wolf."*

"Bashere is with Elayne's army," Perrin said. "And Gareth Bryne is with Egwene. Agelmar is with the Borderlanders and Lan."

I do not know.

"He is. Four battlefronts. Four great captains. *That's* what she's doing.

"Graendal?" Gaul asked.

"Yes," Perrin said, anger gathering. "She's doing something to them, changing their minds, corrupting them. I overheard her saying… Yes. That's it, I'm certain. Instead of fighting our armies with armies of her own, she plans to bring down the great captains. Elyas, do you know how a man can *shift* in and out of the wolf dream in the flesh?"

Even if I knew this thing—which I do not—I would not teach it to you, Elyas said with a growl. *Has nobody told you it is a terrible, dangerous thing that you do?*

"Too many," Perrin said. "Light! We need to warn Bashere. I must—"

"Perrin Aybara!" Gaul said, pointing. "He is here!"

Perrin spun to see a dark blur streak upward toward the entrance to the Pit of Doom. Wolves whimpered and died. Others howled, beginning the hunt. This time, Slayer did not back away.

The way of the predator. Two or three quick lunges to determine weakness, then an all-out attack.

"Wake!" Perrin called to Elyas, running up the incline. "Warn Elayne, Egwene, anyone you can! And if you cannot, stop Ituralde somehow. The great captains are being corrupted. One of the Forsaken controls their minds, and their tactics cannot be trusted!"

I will do it, Young Bull, Elyas sent, fading.

"Go to Rand, Gaul!" Perrin roared. "Guard the way to him! Do not let any of those red-veils pass you!"

Perrin summoned his hammer to his hands, not waiting for a reply, then *shifted* to confront Slayer.

Rand clashed with Moridin, sword against sword, standing before the darkness that was the essence of the Dark One. The cold expanse was somehow both infinite and empty.

Rand held so much of the One Power that he nearly burst. He would need that strength in the fight to come. For now, he resisted Moridin sword against sword. He wielded *Callandor* as a physical weapon, fighting as if with a sword made of light itself, parrying Moridin's attacks.

Each step Rand took dripped blood to the ground. Nynaeve and Moiraine clung to stalagmites as if something were battering them, a wind that Rand could not sense. Nynaeve closed her eyes. Moiraine stared straight ahead as if determined not to look away, no matter the price.

Rand turned aside Moridin’s latest attack, the blades throwing sparks. He had always been the better swordsman of the two, during the Age of Legends.

He had lost his hand, but thanks to Tam, that no longer mattered as it once might have. And he was also wounded. This place… this place changed things. Rocks on the ground seemed to move, and he often stumbled. The air grew alternately musty and dry, then humid and moldy. Time slipped around them like a stream. Rand felt as if he could see it. Each blow here took moments, yet hours passed outside.

He scored Moridin across the arm, drawing his blood to spray against the wall.

“My blood and yours,” Rand said. “I have you to thank for this wound in my side, Elan. You thought you were the Dark One, didn’t you? Has he punished you for that?”

“Yes,” Moridin snarled. “He returned me to life.” Moridin came swinging hard in a two-handed blow. Rand stepped backward, catching the blow on *Callandor*; but he misjudged the slope of the ground. Either that, or the slope changed on him. Rand stumbled, the blow forcing him down on one knee.

Blade against blade. Rand’s leg slipped backward, and brushed the darkness behind, which waited like a pool of ink.

All went black.

The distant Ogier song was comforting to Elayne as she slumped in her saddle atop the hill just north of Cairhien.

The women around her weren’t in any better shape than she was. Elayne had gathered all of the Kinswomen who could hold on to *saidar*—no matter how weak or tired—and formed two circles with them. She had twelve with her in her own circle, but their collective strength in the Power at the moment was barely more than that of a single Aes Sedai.

Elayne had stopped channeling in an attempt to let the women recover. Most of them slumped in their saddles or sat on the ground. In front of them extended a ragged battle line. Men fought desperately before the Cairhienin hills, trying to hold against the sea of Trollocs.

Their victory over the northern Trolloc army had been short-lived, as they now found themselves strung-out, exhausted and in serious danger of being surrounded by the southern one.

"We almost managed," Arganda said from beside her, shaking his head. "We almost made it."

He wore a plume in his helmet. It had belonged to Gallenne. Elayne hadn't been there when the Mayener commander had fallen.

That was the frustrating part. They *were* close. Despite Bashere's betrayal, despite the unexpected arrival of the southern force, they had almost pulled it off. If she'd had more time to position her men, if they'd been able to catch more than a moment's breather between defeating the northern army and then turning to meet this southern one…

But that was not the case. Nearby, the proud Ogier fought to protect the dragons, but the Ogier were slowly being overrun. The ancient creatures had begun to collapse, like felled trees, pulled down by Trollocs. One by one, their songs broke off.

Arganda held a bloodied hand to his side, pale-faced, barely able to speak. She didn't have the strength to Heal him. "That Warder of yours is a *fiend* on the battlefield, Your Majesty. Her arrows fly like light itself. I'd swear..." Arganda shook his head. He might never hold a sword again, even if Healed.

He should have been sent with the other wounded… somewhere. There wasn't really anywhere to take them; the channelers were too exhausted to make gateways.

Her people were fracturing. The Aiel fought in clumps, the White-cloaks nearly surrounded, the Wolf Guard in no better shape. The Legion of the Dragon heavy cavalry still rode, but Bashere's betrayal had shaken them.

Now and then, a dragon fired. Aludra had rolled them back up to the top of the highest hill, but they were out of ammunition, and the channelers didn't have strength to make gateways to Baerlon to fetch the new dragons' eggs. Aludra had fired bits of armor until her powder ran low. Now they had only enough for the occasional shot.

The Trollocs would push through her lines soon, fragmenting her army like ravenous lions. Elayne watched from one of the hilltops, guarded by ten of her Guardswomen. The rest had gone to fight. Trollocs broke through the Aiel to the east of her position, right near the dragoner hilltop position.

The beasts charged up the hill, killing the few Ogier defenders on that side, roaring their victory as the dragoners pulled out sabers and grimly stood to defend.

Elayne wasn't ready to let the dragons go yet. She gathered strength through the circle; women groaned around her. She took up barely a dribble of the Power, far less than she'd hoped, and directed Fire at the lead Trollocs.

Her attack arced in the air toward the Shadowspawn. She felt she was trying to stop a storm by spitting at the wind. That lone ball of fire hit.

The earth exploded beneath it, ripping the hillside and hurling *dozens* of Trollocs back in the air.

Elayne started, causing Moonshadow to shuffle beneath her. Arganda cursed.

Someone rode up beside her on a large black horse, emerging as if from smoke. The man was of medium build and had dark curls of hair down to his shoulders. Logain looked thinner than she remembered from last time she'd seen him, his cheeks sunken, but his face was still handsome.

"Logain?" she said, shocked.

The Asha'man gestured sharply. Explosions sounded all across the battlefield. Elayne turned to see over a hundred men in black coats marching through a large gateway on top of her hill.

"Pull those Ogier back," Logain said. His ragged voice was raw. Those eyes of his seemed darker now than they once had been. "We will hold this position."

Elayne blinked, then nodded for Arganda to pass the command. *Logain shouldn't give orders to me,* she thought absently. For the moment, she let it pass.

Logain turned his horse and rode to the side of the hilltop, looking down at her army. Elayne followed, feeling numb. Trollocs fell as Asha man called up strange attacks, gateways that seemed tied to the ground somehow. They stormed forward, killing the Shadowspawn.

Logain grunted. "You're in bad shape."

She forced her mind to work. The Asha'man were here. "Did Rand send you?"

"We sent ourselves," Logain said. "The Shadow has been planning this trap for a long time, according to notes in Taim's study. I only just managed to decipher them." He looked at her. "We came to you first. The Black Tower stands with the Lion of Andor."

"We need to get my people out of here," Elayne said, forcing her mind to think through the cloud of fatigue. Her army needed a queen. "Mothers milk in a cup! This is going to cost us." She'd probably lose half her force withdrawing. Better half than all of them. "I'll start bringing my men back in ranks. Can you make enough gateways to lead us to safety?"

"That wouldn't be a problem " Logain said absently, looking down the slope. His impassive face would have impressed any Warder. "But it will be a slaughter. There's no room for a good retreat, and your lines will grow weaker and weaker as you pull back. The last ranks will be overwhelmed and consumed."

"I don't see that we have any other choice," Elayne snapped, exhausted. Light! Here, help had come, and she was snapping. *Stop it.* She composed herself, sitting up straighter. "I mean to say that your arrival, while appreciated greatly, cannot turn a battle that is this far gone. A hundred Asha'man cannot stop a hundred thousand Trollocs on their own. If we could arrange our battle lines better, get at least a short rest for my men… but no. That is impossible. We must retreat—unless you can produce a miracle, Lord Logain."

He smiled, perhaps at her use of "lord" for him. "Androl!" he barked.

A middle-aged Asha'man hurried over, a plump Aes Sedai joining him. *Pevara?* Elayne thought, too exhausted to make sense of it. *A Red?*

"My Lord?" the man, Androl, asked.

"I need to slow that army of Trollocs long enough for the army to regroup and refield itself, Androl," Logain said. "How much will it cost us for a miracle?"

"Well, my Lord," Androl said, rubbing his chin. "That depends. How many of those women sitting back there can channel?"

It was a thing of legends.

Elayne had heard of the great works performed by large circles of men and women. Every woman in the White Tower was taught of these feats from the past, stories of different days, better days. Days when one half of the One Power had not been a thing to fear, when two halves of one whole had worked together to create incredible wonders.

She wasn't sure the days of legend had truly returned. Certainly, the Aes Sedai during those times hadn't been so worried, so desperate. But what they did now left Elayne in awe.

She joined in the circle, making the total fourteen women and twelve men. She barely had any strength to lend, but her trickle added to the increasingly large stream. More importantly, a circle had to have at least one more woman than it had men—and now that she had joined, Logain could come in last of all and add his considerable strength to the flow.

At the head of this circle was Androl, an odd choice. Now that she was part of the circle, she could feel his relative strength. He was extremely weak, weaker than many women who were turned away from the Tower, refused the shawl because of their lack of innate talent.

Elayne and the others had relocated to the far side of the battlefield. The rest of the Asha'man held back the attacking Trolloc horde as Androl prepared. Whatever he did, it would need to be swift. Elayne still had trouble believing anything could be done. Even with this much power, even with thirteen men and fourteen women working together.

"Light," Androl whispered, standing between her horse and Logain's. "Is this what it feels like to be one of you people? How do you handle so much of the One Power? How do you keep it from consuming you alive, burning you away?"

Pevara rested her hand on his shoulder in a gesture that was unmistakably tender. Elayne could barely rub two thoughts together amid her fatigue, but she still found herself shocked. She had not expected affection from a Red for a man who could channel.

"Move the soldiers back," Androl said softly.

Elayne gave the order, worried. The man beside her had never held this kind of power before. It could go to someone's head; she had seen it happen. Light send that he knew what he was doing.

The soldiers and others retreated, passing by Elayne's group. Several tired Ogier nodded to her in passing, their shoulders slumped, their arms scored with cuts. The Trollocs poured forward, but the Asha’man who weren’t in the circle disrupted their attack with weaves of the One Power.

It wasn’t enough. Though the Asha’man fought well, there were just *so* many Trollocs. The Asha’man could not stop this tide. What did Logain think could be done?

Androl smiled widely, and held his hands out in front of himself as if pressing against a wall. He closed his eyes. “Three thousand years ago the Lord Dragon created Dragonmount to hide his shame. His rage still burns hot. Today ... I bring it to you, Your Majesty.”

A beam of light split the air, easily a hundred feet tall. Moonshadow shied back and Elayne frowned. Why a column of light? What good would that… The beam of light began to twist in the air, rotating upon itself. Only then did Elayne recognize it for the start of a gateway. An enormous gateway, large enough to swallow buildings. She could have moved an entire wing of the Caemlyn palace through that thing!

The air shimmered in front of them, the way a gateway always looked from behind. She couldn’t see where the gateway was leading. Did they have an army waiting on the other side?

She could see the expressions on the slavering Trolloc faces as they looked into the opening. Absolute horror. They broke away, running, and Elayne felt a sudden heat, almost overpowering.

Something exploded out of the gateway, as if pushed by an incredible force. A column of lava a hundred feet in diameter, blazing hot. The column broke apart as the lava crashed down, splashing to the battlefield, gushing forward in a river. The Asha’man outside the circle used weaves of Air to keep it from splashing back on the circle and to shepherd it in the right direction.

The river of fire washed through the foremost Trolloc ranks, consuming them, destroying hundreds in an eyeblink. The lava *was* under pressure on the other side; that was the only way she could explain the force with which it sprayed from the enormous gateway, turning Trollocs into cinders, burning a large swath through their army.

Androl held the gateway for long minutes as the Shadow’s army pulled back. Asha’man to the sides used gusts of wind to blow the Shadowspawn back into the ever-widening river. By the time Androl finished, he had created a barrier of red-hot death between Elayne’s army and the bulk of the Trollocs, whose backs were against the northern walls of Cairhien.

Androl took a breath, closed the gateway, then pivoted and made two others in quick succession, one pointing southeast, the other southwest.

A second and third column of lava spurted forth—smaller this time, as Androl was obviously weakened. These went tumbling over the land to the east and west of Cairhien, singeing away dead weeds and casting smoke into the air. Some of the Trolloc army had pulled back, but many others had perished, boxed in, with the walled city on one side and lava on others. It would be some time before the Fades could organize the survivors to resume their attacks on Elayne's forces.

Androl let the gateway close. He slumped, but Pevara caught him.

"One miracle, my Lord," Androl said, voice soft, as if strained. "Delivered as requested. That should hold them back for a few hours. Long enough?"

"Long enough," Elayne said. "We will be able to regroup, bring through supplies for the dragons, and fetch as many Aes Sedai from Mayene as we can get to Heal our men and wash away their fatigue. Then we can sort through who is strong enough to continue and reposition our ranks for a much more effective battle."

"You intend to keep fighting?" Androl asked, surprised.

"Yes," Elayne said. "I can barely stand, but yes. We cannot afford to leave that Trolloc horde here intact. You and your men give us an edge, Logain. We will use it, and everything we have, and we *will* destroy them."

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CHAPTER 31

A Tempest of Water

Egwene looked across the river at the struggle raging between her forces and the Sharan army. She had arrived back at her camp on the Arafellin side of the ford. She was itching to join the battle against the Shadow again, but she also needed to talk with Bryne about what had happened at the hills. She had arrived to find the command tent empty.

The camp continued to fill with Aes Sedai and the surviving archers and pikemen who were coming through gateways from the hilltops to the south. The Aes Sedai were milling about and speaking to each other with some urgency. They all seemed worn out, but it was clear from their frequent glances toward the battle taking place across the river that they were as eager as Egwene was to rejoin the fight against the Shadow.

Egwene summoned the messenger who was standing in front of the command tent. “Get word to the sisters that they have less than an hour to rest. Those Trollocs we were fighting will be joining the battle at the river soon, now that we have left the hills.

She’d move the Aes Sedai downriver on this side, then attack them across the water as they moved across the fields to attack her soldiers. “Tell the archers they’ll be marching with us as well,” she added. “They may as well put their remaining arrows to good use, until we can get them another supply.”

As the messenger rushed off, Egwene turned to Leilwin, who was standing with her husband, Bayle Domon, nearby. “Leilwin, those look like Seanchan cavalry troops across the river. Do you know anything about that?”

“Yes, Mother, they are Seanchan. That man standing over there-” She pointed to a man with shaved temples standing by a tree down toward the river; he wore voluminous trousers and, incongruously, a tattered brown coat which looked as if it might have come from the Two Rivers. “—he told me that a legion commanded by Lieutenant-General Khirgan had come from the Seanchan camp, and that they had been summoned by General Bryne."

"He also said that they do be accompanied by the Prince of Ravens," Domon interjected.

"Mat?"

"He did more than accompany them. He do be leading one of the cavalry banners, the ones giving the Sharans a hiding on our army's left flank. He got there just in time, our pikemen were getting the worst of it before he showed up."

"Egwene," Gawyn said, pointing.

To the south, a few hundred paces below the ford, a small number of soldiers were hauling themselves from the river. They had stripped to their smallclothes and carried swords tied to their backs. It was too far to be sure, but one of their leaders looked familiar.

"Is that Uno?" Egwene frowned, then waved for her horse. She mounted and galloped, with Gawyn and her guards, along the river to where the men lay gasping on the bank, and the sound of one man cursing filled the air.

"Uno!"

"It's about bloody flaming time someone came!" Uno stood as he saluted in respect. "Mother, we're in bad shape!"

"I saw." Egwene gritted her teeth. "I was in the hills when your force was attacked. We did what we could, but there were just too many of them. How did you get out?"

"How did we flaming get out, Mother? When the men started dropping all around us and we figured we was goners, we flaming rode out of there like a flaming lightning bolt had struck our flaming hindquarters! We got to the frog-kissing river on the run, stripped and jumped in, swimming for all we were bloody worth, Mother, with all due respect!" Unos topknot danced as he continued to blaspheme, and Egwene could have sworn the eye painted on his eyepatch became a more intense red.

Uno took a deep breath and continued, a little more subdued. "I can't understand it, Mother. Some goat-headed messenger told us that the Aes Sedai on the hills were in trouble and we needed to go up the flaming backsides of the Trollocs attacking them. I said, who's going to mind the left flank at the river, and, for that bloody matter, our own bloody flank when we attack the Trollocs, and he said that General Bryne had that taken care of, reserve cavalry would move up into our position at the river, and the Illianers would watch out for our bloody flanks. Some protection they were, all right, one flaming squadron, like a flaming fly trying to fend off a flaming falcon! Oh, they were just waiting for us, like they knew we was coming. No, Mother, this can’t be the fault of Gareth Bryne, we’ve been tricked by some sheep-gutted milk-drinking traitor! With all due respect, Mother!”

“I can’t believe that, Uno. I just heard that General Bryne had brought in a legion of Seanchan cavalry. Maybe they were simply late getting here. We'll sort it all out when I find the general. Meanwhile, get your men back to camp so they can have a proper rest. Light knows you’ve earned it.”

Uno nodded, and Egwene galloped back toward camp.

Using Vora’s *sa’angreal*, Egwene wove Air and Water, spinning them together. A funnel of water surged up, drawn from the river beneath. Egwene blew her tornado of water into the Trollocs that were beginning their assault against her army’s left flank on the Kandori side of the river. Her tempest of water surged across them. It wasn’t strong enough to pull any of them into the air—she didn’t have the energy for that—but it drove them back, hands to their faces.

Behind her and the other Aes Sedai positioned on the Arafellin side of the river, archers loosed volleys of arrows into the sky. Those didn’t darken the sky the way she would have liked—there weren’t so many—but they did take down more than a hundred Trollocs with each wave.

To the side, Pylar and a couple of other Browns—all adept with weaves of Earth—caused the ground to erupt under the charging Trollocs. Spread out next to her, Myrelle and a large contingent of Greens wove fireballs that they lobbed over the water into bunched-up groups of Trollocs, many of whom continued to run a considerable distance before they collapsed, engulfed in flames.

The Trollocs howled and roared, but continued their relentless progress against the defenders at the river’s edge. At one point, several ranks of Seanchan cavalry moved out from the defensive lines and attacked the Trolloc onslaught head-on. It happened so quickly that many of the Trollocs were unable to raise their spears before contact was made; large swaths of the foe in the front ranks went down. The Seanchan swept to the side and returned to their lines at the river.

Egwene held to her channeling, forcing herself to work through sheer exhaustion. But the Trollocs didn't break; they grew enraged, attacking the humans with a frenzy. Egwene could hear their yells distinctly over the sounds of wind and water.

The Trollocs grew angry, did they? Well, they would not *know* anger until they had felt that of the Amyrlin Seat. Egwene pulled in more and more of the Power until she was at the very edges of her ability. She put heat into her tempest so that the scalding water burned Trolloc eyes, hands, hearts. She felt herself yelling, Vora's *sa'angreal* thrust before her like a spear.

What seemed like hours went by. Eventually, exhausted, she allowed Gawyn to talk her into pulling back for a time. Gawyn went to fetch her horse and as he was returning, Egwene looked across the river.

There was no doubt about it; her army's left flank had already been pushed another thirty paces. Even with the Aes Sedai aid, they were losing this battle.

It was long past time for her to find Gareth Bryne.

When Egwene and Gawyn got back to camp, she climbed from her horse and gave it to Leilwin, telling her to use it to help carry the wounded. There were plenty of those who had been dragged across the ford to safety, bloodied soldiers slumping against the arms of friends.

Unfortunately, she hadn't the strength for Healing, let alone a gateway to send wounded to Tar Valon or Mayene. Most of the Aes Sedai not busy at the riverbank didn't look as if they were doing any better.

"Egwene," Gawyn said softly. "Rider. Seanchan. Looks like a noblewoman."

One of the Blood? Egwene thought, standing and looking through camp toward where Gawyn pointed. At least he had the strength left to keep a lookout. Why any woman would voluntarily go without a Warder was beyond her.

The woman approaching wore fine Seanchan silks, and Egwene's stomach turned at the sight. That finery existed because of a foundation of enslaved channelers, forced into obedience to the Crystal Throne. The woman was certainly one of the Blood, as a contingent of Deathwatch Guards accompanied her. You had to be very important for…

"Light!" Gawyn exclaimed. "Is that *Min*?"

Egwene gaped. It *was*.

Min rode up, scowling. “Mother,” she said to Egwene, bowing her head amid her stone-faced guards in dark armor.

“Min… are you well?” Egwene asked. *Careful, don’t give out too much information.* Was Min a captive? Surely she couldn’t have *joined* the Seanchan, could she?

“Oh, I’m well,” Min said sourly. “I’ve been pampered, stuffed in this outfit, and offered all sorts of somewhat delicate foods. I might add that among the Seanchan, delicate does not necessarily mean tasty. You should see the things they *drink*, Egwene.”

“I've seen them,” Egwene said, unable to keep her tone from coldness. “Oh. Yes. I suppose you have. Mother, we have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Well, it depends on how much you trust Mat.”

“I trust him to find trouble,” Egwene said. “I trust him to find drinking and gambling, no matter where he goes.”

“Do you trust him to lead an army?” Min asked.

Egwene hesitated. Did she?

Min leaned forward, sparing a glance for the Deathwatch Guards, who didn’t seem *about* to let her draw any closer to Egwene. “Egwene,” she said softly, “Mat thinks that Bryne is leading your army to destruction. He says ... he says he thinks Bryne is a Darkfriend.”

Gawyn started laughing.

Egwene jumped. She would have expected anger from him, outrage. “Gareth Bryne?” Gawyn asked. “A *Darkfriend*? I’d believe my own *mother* to be a Darkfriend before him. Tell Cauthon to stay out of his wife’s royal brandy; hes obviously had too much.”

“I’m inclined to agree with Gawyn,” Egwene said slowly. Still, she could not ignore the irregularities in how the army was being led.

She would sort through that. “Mat is always looking out for people who don’t need to be looked out for,” she said. “He’s just trying to protect me. Tell him that we appreciate the… warning.”

“Mother,” Min said. “He seemed certain. This isn’t a joke. He wants you to turn your armies over to him.”

“My armies,” Egwene said flatly.

“Yes.”

“In the hands of Matrim Cauthon.”

“Um… yes. I should mention, the Empress has given him command of all the Seanchan forces. He’s now Marshal-General Cauthon.”

Ta'veren. Egwene shook her head. “Mat is a good tactician, but handing him the White Tower’s armies… No, that is beyond possibility. Besides, the armies are not mine to give him—the Hall of the Tower has authority for them. Now, how can we persuade these gentlemen surrounding you that you’ll be safe accompanying me?”

As little as Egwene wanted to admit it, she needed the Seanchan. She wouldn’t risk their alliance to save Min, particularly since it didn’t seem that she was in immediate danger. Of course, if the Seanchan realized that Min had sworn their oaths back in Falme, then fled…

“Don’t worry about me,” Min said with a grimace. “I suppose I’m better off with Fortuona. She… knows about a certain talent of mine, thanks to Mat, and it might let me help her. And you.”

The statement was laden with meaning. The Deathwatch Guards were too stoic to respond overtly to Min’s use of the Empress’s name, but they did seem to stiffen, their faces hardening. *Take care, Min,* Egwene thought. *You’re surrounded by autumn thornweeds.*

Min didn’t seem to care. “Will you at least consider what Mat is saying?”

“That Gareth Bryne is a Darkfriend?” Egwene said. It really was laughable. “Go back and tell Mat to submit his battle suggestions to us, if he must. For now, I need to find my commanders to plan our next steps.” *Gareth Bryne, where are you?*

A flight of black arrows rose almost invisibly into the air, then fell like a breaking wave. They hit Ituralde’s army at the mouth of the pass to the valley of Thakan’dar, some bouncing off shields, others finding flesh. One fell inches from where Ituralde stood atop a rocky outcropping.

Ituralde didn’t flinch. He stood, straight-backed, hands clasped behind him. He did, however, mutter, “Letting things draw a little close, aren’t we?” Binde, the Asha’man who stood beside him in the night, grimaced. “Sorry, Lord Ituralde.” He was supposed to keep the arrows away. He’d done well, so far. Sometimes, however, he got a distant look in his face and started muttering about “them” trying to “take his hands.”

“Stay sharp,” Ituralde said.

His head throbbed. More dreams earlier tonight, so real. He had seen Trollocs eating members of his family alive, and had been too weak to save them. He had struggled and wept as they ate Tamsin and his children, but at the same time had been lured by the scents of the boiling and burning flesh.

At the end of the dream, he had joined the monsters in their feast.

Put that from your mind, he thought. It was not easy to do so. The dreams had been so vivid. He had been glad to be awakened by a Trolloc attack.

He'd been ready for this. His men lit bonfires at the barricades. The Trollocs had finally pushed through his thorn fortifications, but their butchers bill had been high. Now, Ituralde's men fought at the mouth of the pass, holding the tides back from entering the valley.

They had applied their time well during the days the Trollocs had pushed their way through arduous barriers to the mouth of the pass. The entrance to the valley was now fortified with a series of chest-high earthen bulwarks. Those would be excellent for crossbowmen to use as cover, if Ituralde's pike formations were ever pushed back too far.

For now, Ituralde had split his army into groups of around three thousand men each, then organized them into square formations of pikes, billhooks and crossbows. He used mounted crossbowmen as skirmishers in the front and on the flanks, and had formed up a vanguard—about six ranks deep—of pikemen. Big pikes, twenty feet long. He'd learned from Maradon that you wanted to keep your distance from the Trollocs.

Pikes worked wonderfully. Ituralde's pike squares could pivot and fight in all directions in case they were surrounded. Trollocs could be forced to fight in ranks, but these squares—properly applied—could break up their lines. Once the Trolloc ranks were shattered, the Aiel could kill with abandon.

Behind ranks of pikemen he positioned foot soldiers carrying billhooks and halberds. Sometimes Trollocs fought their way through the pikes, pushing the weapons aside or pulling them down with the weight of corpses. The billhookmen then moved up—slipping between the pikemen—and hamstrung the leading Trollocs. This gave the leading foot soldiers time to pull back and regroup while the next wave of soldiers—more foot, with pikes moved up to engage the Trollocs.

It was working, so far. He had a dozen such squares of troops facing the Trollocs in the night. They fought defensively, doing whatever they could to break the surging tide. The Trollocs threw themselves at the pikemen, trying to crack them, but each square operated independently. Ituralde didn't worry about the Trollocs that made it through the gauntlet, because they would be handled by the Aiel.

Ituralde had to keep his hands clasped behind his back to conceal their shaking. Nothing had been the same after Maradon. He'd learned, but he'd paid dearly for that education.

Burn these headaches, he thought. *And burn those Trollocs.*

Three times, he had nearly given the order to send his armies in with a direct assault, abandoning the square formations. He could imagine them slaughtering, killing. No more delaying. He wanted *blood.*

Each time, he'd stopped himself. They weren't here for blood, they were here to hold. To give that man the time he needed in the cavern. That was what it was all about… wasn't it? Why did he have so much trouble remembering that lately?

Another wave of Trolloc arrows dropped onto Ituralde's men. The Fades had some of them stationed on the tops of the slopes above the pass, in places that Ituralde's own archers had once held. Getting them up there must have been quite an undertaking; the walls of the pass were very steep. How many would have dropped to their deaths making the attempt? Regardless, Trollocs weren't good shots with bows, but they didn't need to be, when firing at armies.

The halberdiers raised shields. They couldn't fight while holding those, but they kept them strapped to their backs for need. The falling arrows increased, plummeting through the lightly foggy night air. The storm rumbled overhead, but the Windfinders were at their task again, keeping it away. They claimed that at several moments, the army had been mere breaths away from an all-out storm of destruction. At one point, hail the size of a man's fist had fallen for about a minute before they'd wrested control of the weather again.

If that was what awaited them if the Windfinders weren't using their bowl, Ituralde was more than happy to leave them at their task. The Dark One wouldn't care how many Trollocs he destroyed while sending a blizzard, twister or hurricane to kill the humans they fought.

"They're gathering for another surge at the mouth of the pass!" someone yelled in the night air, followed by other calls confirming it. Ituralde peered through the mist, aided by light from the bonfires. The Trollocs were indeed regrouping.

“Withdraw the seventh and ninth infantry squads,” Ituralde said. “They’ve been at it too long. Pull the fourth and fifth out of reserve and have them take flanking positions. Prepare for more arrows. And ...” He trailed off, frowning. What *were* those Trollocs doing? They’d pulled back farther than he’d have expected, drawing into the darkness of the pass. They couldn’t be retreating, could they?

A dark wave slid out of the mouth of the pass. Myrddraal. Hundreds upon *hundreds of* them. Black cloaks that did not move, in defiance of the breeze. Faces with no eyes, lips that sneered, black swords. The creatures moved like eels, sinuous and sleek.

They gave no time for orders, no time for response. They flowed into the squares of defenders, sliding between pikes, whipping deadly swords.

“Aiel!” Ituralde bellowed. “Bring in the Aiel! All of them, and channelers! Everyone except for those who guard at the Pit of Doom itself! Move, move!”

Messengers scrambled away. Ituralde watched in horror. An *army* of Myrddraal. Light, it was as bad as his nightmares!

The seventh infantry collapsed before the attack, square formation shattering. Ituralde opened his mouth to order the primary reserve—the one defending his position—to give support. He needed the cavalry to ride out and draw pressure off the infantry.

He didn’t have much cavalry; he’d agreed that most of the horsemen would be needed on other fronts. But he did have some. They’d be essential here.

Except…

He squeezed his eyes shut. Light, but he was exhausted. He had trouble thinking.

Pull back before the attack, a voice seemed to be saying to him. *Pull back to the Aiel, then make a stand there.*

“Pull back . .” he whispered. “Pull . .”

Something felt very, *very* wrong about doing that. Why was his mind insisting upon it?

Captain Tihera, Ituralde tried to whisper. *You have command.* It wouldn’t come out. Something physical seemed to be holding his mouth shut.

He could hear men screaming. What was happening? Dozens of men could die fighting a single Myrddraal. At Maradon, he’d lost an entire company of archers—one hundred men—to two Fades who had slipped into the city at night. His defensive squads were built to deal with Trollocs, to hamstring them, to drop them.

The Fades would crack those pike squares open like eggs. Nobody was doing what needed to be done.

"My Lord Ituralde?" Captain Tihera said. "My Lord, what was it you said?"

If they retreated, the Trollocs would surround them. They needed to stand firm.

Ituralde's lips opened to give the order to retreat. "Pull the—"

Wolves.

Wolves appeared in the fog like shadows. They leaped at the Myrddraal, growling. Ituralde started, spinning, as a man in furs pulled himself up onto the top of the rocky outcrop.

Tihera stumbled back, calling for their guards. The newcomer in furs leaped for Ituralde and shoved him off the top of the rocks.

Ituralde did not fight back. Whoever this man was, Ituralde was grateful to him, feeling a moment of victory as he fell. He hadn't given the order to retreat.

He hit the ground not far below, and it knocked the wind out of him. The wolves took his arms in gentle mouths and pulled him off into the darkness as he slowly drifted into unconsciousness.

Egwene sat in the camp as the battle for the border of Kandor continued.

Her army held back the Trollocs.

The Seanchan fought alongside her troops just across the river.

Egwene herself held a small cup of tea.

Light, it was galling. She was the *Amyrlin.* But she was drained of energy.

She still hadn't found Gareth Bryne, but that wasn't unexpected. He moved about. Silviana was hunting him, and should have word soon.

Aes Sedai had been sent to take the wounded to Mayene. The sun drooped low in the sky, like an eyelid that refused to stay open. Egwene's hands shook as she held her cup. She could still hear the battle. It seemed that the Trollocs would fight into the night, grinding the human armies against the river.

Distant shouts rose like the calls of an angry crowd, but the explosions from the channelers had slowed.

She turned to Gawyn. He didn't seem tired at all, though he was strangely pale. Egwene sipped her tea and silently cursed him. It was unfair, but she wasn't concerned with fairness right now. She could grumble at her Warder. That was what they were for, wasn't it?

A breeze blew through camp. She was a few hundred paces east of the ford, but she smelled blood in the air. Nearby, a squad of archers drew their bows at their commander's call, launching a volley of arrows. A pair of blackwinged Draghkar plummeted moments later, hitting the ground with dull thuds just beyond camp. More would come, as it grew dark and they had an easier time hiding against the sky.

Mat. She felt strangely sick thinking about him. He was such a blowhard. A carouser, leering at every pretty woman he met. Treating her like a painting and not a person. He ... he ...

He was Mat. Once, when Egwene had been around thirteen, he'd jumped into the river to save Kiem Lewin from drowning. Of course, she *hadn't* been drowning. She'd merely been dunked under the water by a friend, and Mat had come running, throwing himself into the water to help. The men of Emond's Field had made sport of him for months about that.

The next spring, Mat had pulled Jer al'Hune from the same river, saving the boy's life. People had stopped making fun of Mat for a while afterward.

That was how Mat was. He'd grumbled and muttered all winter about how people made sport of him, insisting that next time, he'd just let them drown. Then the moment he'd seen someone in danger, he'd gone splashing right back in. Egwene could remember gangly Mat stumbling from the river, little Jer clinging to him and gasping, a look of pure terror in his eyes.

Jer had gone down without making a sound. Egwene had never realized that could happen. People who started to drown didn't yell, or sputter, or call for help. They just slipped under the water, when everything seemed fine and peaceful. Unless Mat was watching.

He came for me in the Stone of Tear,; she thought. Of course, he'd *also* tried to save her from the Aes Sedai, unwilling to believe she was Amyrlin.

So which was this? Was she drowning or not?

How much do you trust Matrim Cauthon? Min had asked. *Light. I* do *trust him. Fool that I am, I do.* Mat could be wrong. He often was wrong.

But when he was right, he saved lives.

Egwene forced herself to stand. She wavered, and Gawyn came to her side. She patted him on the arm, then stepped away from him. She would not let the army see its Amyrlin so weak that she had to lean against someone for support. “What reports do we have from the other battlefronts?”

“Not much, today,” Gawyn said. He frowned. “In fact, it’s been rather silent.”

“Elayne was supposed to fight at Cairhien,” Egwene said. “It was an important battle.”

“She might be too occupied to send word.”

“I want you to send a messenger by gateway. I need to know how that battle is going.”

Gawyn nodded, hurrying off. After he was gone, Egwene walked at a steady pace until she found Silviana, who was talking with a pair of Blue sisters.

“Bryne?” Egwene asked.

“In the mess tent,” Silviana said. “I only just had word. I sent a runner to tell him to stay put until you arrived.”

“Come.”

She walked over to the tent, the largest shelter in camp by far, and spotted him as she entered. Not eating, but standing beside the cook’s travel table with his maps spread out. The table smelled of onions, which had probably been cut there time and time again. Yukiri had a gateway open in the floor to look down on the battlefield. She closed it as Egwene arrived. They didn’t leave it open long, not with the Sharans watching for it and preparing weaves to send through it.

Egwene whispered very quietly to Silviana, “Gather the Hall of the Tower. Bring back any Sitters you can find. Get them all here, to this tent, as soon as you can.”

Silviana nodded, her face betraying no hint of the confusion she likely felt. She hastened off and Egwene sat down in the tent.

Siuan wasn’t there—she was likely helping with Healing again. That was good. Egwene wouldn’t have wanted to attempt this with Siuan glaring at her. As it was, she worried about Gawyn. He loved Bryne like a father, and already his anxiety streamed through their bond.

She would have to approach this very delicately, and she didn’t want to start until the Hall had arrived. She couldn’t accuse Bryne, but she couldn’t ignore Mat. He was a scoundrel and a fool, but she trusted him. Light help her, but she did. She'd trust him with her life. And things *had* been going oddly on the battlefield.

The Sitters gathered relatively quickly. They had charge of the war effort, and they met together each evening to get reports and tactical explanations from Bryne and his commanders. Bryne didn't seem to think it odd that they came to him now; he kept at his work.

Many of the women did give Egwene curious looks as they entered. She nodded to them, trying to convey the weight of the Amyrlin Seat.

Eventually, enough of them had arrived that Egwene decided she should begin. Time was wasting. She needed to dismiss Mat's accusations from her mind once and for all, or she needed to act on them.

"General Bryne," Egwene said. "Have you been well? We've had a difficult time finding you."

He looked up and blinked. His eyes were red. "Mother," he said. He nodded to the Sitters. "I feel tired, but probably no more than you. I've been all over the battlefield, tending to all kinds of details; you know how it is."

Gawyn hurried in. "Egwene," he said, his face pale. "Trouble."

"What?"

"I…" He took a deep breath. "General Bashere turned against Elayne. Light! He's a Darkfriend. The battle would have been lost had the Asha'man not arrived."

"What's this?" Bryne asked, looking up from his maps. "*Bashere*, a Darkfriend?"

"Yes."

"Impossible," Bryne said. "He was the Lord Dragon's companion for months. I don't know him well, but ... a Darkfriend? It couldn't be."

"It *is* somewhat unreasonable to assume ..." Saerin said.

"You can speak with the Queen yourself, if you wish," Gawyn said, standing tall. "I heard it from her own mouth."

The tent stilled. Sitters looked to one another with worried faces. "General," Egwene said to Bryne, "how was it that you sent two cavalry units to protect us from the Trollocs on the hills south of here, sending them into a trap and leaving the main army's left flank exposed?"

"How was it, Mother?" Bryne asked. "It was obvious that you were about to be overrun, anyone could see that. Yes, I had them leave the left flank, but I moved the Illianer reserves into that position. When I saw that Sharan cavalry unit split off to attack Uno's right flank, I sent the Illianers out to intercept them; it was the right thing to do. I didn't know there would be so many Sharans!" His voice had raised to a shout, but he stopped, and his hands were trembling. "I made a mistake. I'm not perfect, Mother."

"This *was* more than a mistake," Faiselle said. "I have just returned from speaking with Uno and the other survivors of that cavalry massacre. Uno said he could smell a trap as soon as he and his men started riding toward the sisters, but that you had promised him help."

"I told you, I sent him reinforcements, I just didn't expect the Sharans would send such a large force. Besides, I had it all under control. I had ordered up a Seanchan cavalry legion to reinforce our troops; they were supposed to take care of those Sharans. I had them staged across the river. I just didn't expect them to be so late!"

"Yes," Egwene said, hardening her voice. "Those men—so many thousands of them—were crushed between the Trollocs and the Sharans, with no hope for escape. You lost them, and all for no good reason."

"I had to bring the Aes Sedai out!" Bryne said. "They're our most valuable resource. Pardon, *Mother*; but you have made that same point to me."

"The Aes Sedai could have waited," Saerin said. "I was there. Yes, we needed out—we were being pressed—but we held, and could have held longer."

"You left thousands of good men to die, General Bryne. And you know the worst part? It was unnecessary. You left all those Seanchan across the ford here, the ones who were going to save the day, waiting for your order to attack. But that order never came, did it, General? You abandoned them, just like you abandoned our cavalry."

"But I ordered them to attack; they finally went in, didn't they? I sent a messenger. I ... I ..."

"No. If it wasn't for Mat Cauthon, they would still be waiting on this side of the river, General!" Egwene turned away from him.

"Egwene," Gawyn said, taking her arm. "What are you saying? Just because—"

Bryne raised a hand to his head. Then he sagged, as if suddenly his limbs had lost their strength. "I don't know what's wrong with me," he whispered, sounding hollow. "I keep making mistakes, Mother. They are the kind a man can recover from, and I keep telling myself that. Then I make another mistake, and there is more scrambling to fix it.”

“You’re just tired,” Gawyn said, voice pained, looking to him. “We all are.”

“No,” Bryne said softly. “No, it’s *more* than that. I’ve been tired before. This is like… my instincts are suddenly wrong. I give the orders, then afterward, I see the holes, the problems. I ...”

“Compulsion,” Egwene said, feeling cold. “You’ve been Compelled. They’re attacking our great captains.”

Several women in the room embraced the Source.

“How would that be possible?” Gawyn protested. “Egwene, we have sisters watching the camp for signs of channeling!”

“I don’t know how it happened,” Egwene said. “Perhaps it was put in place months ago, before the battle began.” She turned to the Sitters. “I move that the Hall relieve Gareth Bryne as commander of our armies. It is your decision, Sitters.”

“Light,” Yukiri said. “We… Light!”

“It must be done,” Doesine said. “It is a clever move, a way to destroy our armies without us seeing the trap. We should have seen… The great captains should have been better protected.”

“Light!” Faiselle said. “We need to send word to Lord Mandragoran and to Thakan’dar! This could involve them, too—an attempt to bring down all four battlefronts at once in a coordinated attack.”

“I will see it done,” Saerin said, moving toward the tent flaps. “For now, I agree with Mother. Bryne must be relieved.”

One by one, the others nodded. It was not a formal vote in the Hall, but it would do. Beside the table, Gareth Bryne sat down. Poor man. He was no doubt shaken, worried.

Unexpectedly, he smiled.

“General?” Egwene asked.

“Thank you,” Bryne said, looking relaxed.

“For what?”

“I feared I was losing my mind, Mother. I kept seeing what I’d done… I left thousands of men to die… but it wasn’t me. It wasn’t me.”

“Egwene,” Gawyn said. He covered his pain well. “The army. If Bryne has been *forced* to lead us toward danger, we need to change our command structure immediately.”

"Bring in my commanders," Bryne said. "I will relinquish control to them."

"And if they have been corrupted as well?" Doesine asked.

"I agree," Egwene said. "This smells of one of the Forsaken, perhaps Moghedien. Lord Bryne, if you were to fall in this fight, she'd know that your commanders would be next to take charge. They might have the same faulty instincts that you do."

Doesine shook her head. "Who can we trust? Any bloody man or woman we put in command could have suffered Compulsion."

"We may have to lead ourselves," Faiselle said. "Getting to a man who cannot channel would be easier than a sister, who would sense channeling and notice a woman with the ability. We are more likely to be clean."

"But who among us has the knowledge of battlefield tactics?" Ferane asked. "I consider myself well-read enough to oversee plans, but to make them?"

"We will be better than someone who may have been corrupted," Faiselle said.

"No," Egwene said, pulling herself up on Gawyn's arm.

"Then what?" Gawyn asked.

Egwene clenched her teeth. Then what? She knew of only one man she could trust not to have been Compelled, at least not by Moghedien. A man who was immune to the effects of *saidar* and *saidin*. "We will have to put our armies under the command of Matrim Cauthon," she said. "May the Light watch over us."

* * *

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CHAPTER 32

A Yellow Flower-Spider

The *damane* held open a hole in the floor for Mat. It looked down on the battlefield itself.

Mat rubbed his chin, still impressed, though he'd been using these holes for the last hour or so as he countered the trap that Bryne had laid for Egwene's armies. He had sent in additional banners of Seanchan cavalry to reinforce both flanks of his troops at the river, and additional *damane* to counter the Sharan channelers and stem the flood of Trollocs pressing against the defenders.

Of course, this still wasn't as good as being down on the battlefield himself. Maybe he should go out again and do a little more fighting. He glanced at Tuon, who sat on a throne—a massive, ten-foot-tall throne—at one side of the command building. Tuon narrowed her eyes at him, as if she could see right into his thoughts.

She's Aes Sedai, Mat told himself. *Oh, she can't channel—she hasn't let herself learn yet. She's bloody one of them anyway. And I married her.*

She *was* something incredible, though. He felt a thrill each time she gave orders; she did it so naturally. Elayne and Nynaeve could take lessons. Tuon did look very nice on that throne. Mat let his gaze linger on her, and that earned him a scowl, which was downright unfair. If a man couldn't leer at his wife, who *could* he leer at?

Mat turned back to the battlefield. "Nice trick," he said, stooping down to stick his hand through the hole. They were high up. If he fell, he'd have time to hum three verses of "She Has No Ankles That I Can See" before he hit. Maybe an extra round of the chorus.

"This one learned it," the *suldam* said, referring to her new *damane*, "from watching the weaves of the Aes Sedai." The *suldam*, Catrona, almost choked on the words "Aes Sedai." Mat couldn't blame her. Those could be tough words to speak.

He didn't look too hard at the *damane*, nor the tattoos of flowering branches on her cheeks, reaching from the back of her head like hands to cup her face. Mat was responsible for her being captured. It was better than her fighting for the Shadow, wasn't it?

Blood and bloody ashes, he thought to himself. *You are doing a fine job of persuading Tuon not to use* damane*, Matrim Cauthon. Capturing one yourself. . .*

It was unnerving how quickly the Sharan woman had taken to her captivity. The *suldam* had all remarked upon it. Barely a moment of struggle, then complete subservience. They expected a newly captured *damane* to take months to train properly, yet this one had been ready within hours. Catrona practically beamed, as if she were personally responsible for the Sharan woman's temperament.

That hole *was* remarkable. Mat stood right on the edge, looking down at the world, counting off the banners and squadrons as he marked them in his head. What would Classen Bayor have done with one of these, he wondered? Maybe the Battle of Kolesar would have turned out differently. He'd have never lost his cavalry in the marsh, that's for certain.

Mat's forces continued to hold back the Shadow at the eastern border of Kandor, but he was not pleased with the current situation. The nature of Bryne's trap had been subtle, as hard to see as a yellow flower-spider crouching on a petal. That's how Mat had known. It had taken true military genius to put the army into such a bad situation without it *looking* like the army was in a bad situation. That sort of thing didn't happen by accident.

Mat had lost more men than he wanted to count. His people were pressed up against the river, and Demandred—despite continuing to rave about the Dragon Reborn—was continually testing Mat's defenses, trying to find a weak spot, sending out a heavy cavalry raid against one side, then an attack from Sharan archers and a Trolloc charge on the other. Consequently, Mat had to keep a close eye on Demandred's movements to be able to counter them in time.

Night was coming soon. Would the Shadow pull back? The Trollocs could fight into the darkness, but those Sharans probably couldn't. Mat gave another sequence of orders, and messengers galloped through gateways to deliver them. It seemed like only moments passed before his troops below responded. "So fast . . Mat said.

“This will change the world,” General Galgan said. “Messengers can respond instantly; commanders can watch their battles and plan in the moment.”

Mat grunted in agreement, “I'll bet it still takes all bloody evening to get dinner from the mess tent, though.”

Galgan actually smiled. It was like seeing a boulder crack in half.

“Tell me, General,” Tuon said. “What is your assessment of our consort's abilities?”

“I don’t know where you found this one, Greatest One, but he is a diamond of great worth. I have watched him these last hours as he rescued the forces of the White Tower. For all of his… unconventional style, I have rarely seen a battle commander as gifted as he.”

Tuon did not smile, but he could see from her eyes that she was pleased. They *were* nice eyes. And, actually, with Galgan not acting so gruff, perhaps this wouldn’t be such a bad place to be after all.

“Thanks,” Mat said under his breath to Galgan as they both leaned over to study the field below.

“I consider myself a man of truth, my Prince,” Galgan said, rubbing his chin with a callused finger. “You will serve the Crystal Throne well. It would be a shame to see you assassinated too early. I will make certain that the first I send after you are newly trained, so that you may stop them with ease.”

Mat felt his mouth drop open. The man said it with perfect frankness, almost affection. As if he were planning to do Mat a *favor* by trying to kill him!

“The Trollocs here,” he pointed at a group of them far below, “will pull back soon.”

“I concur,” Galgan said.

Mat rubbed his chin. “We’ll have to see what Demandred does with them. I’m concerned that the Sharans may try to slip some of their *marath'damane* into our camp during the night. They show a remarkable dedication to their cause. Or a bloody foolish disregard for self-preservation.”

Aes Sedai and *suldam* weren’t particularly timid, but they *were* generally cautious. The Sharan channelers were anything but, particularly the men.

“Get me some *damane* to create lights for the river,” Mat said. “And put the camp on lockdown, with a ring of *damane* spaced through camp to watch for channeling. Nobody channels, not even to light a bloody candle.”

“The… Aes Sedai… may not like this,” General Galgan said. He too hesitated upon using the words Aes Sedai. They had started using the term instead of *marath'damane* by Mat’s order, one that he’d expected Tuon to rescind. She had not.

Figuring that woman out was going to be a real pleasure if they both survived this bloody mess.

Tylee entered the room. Tall and with a scarred face, the dark-skinned woman walked with the confidence of a long-time soldier. She prostrated herself before Tuon, her clothing bloodied and her armor dented. Her legion had taken a beating today, and she probably felt like a rug did after a good-wife had been at it.

“I'm worried about our position here.” Mat turned back and squatted down, looking through the hole. As he’d predicted, the Trollocs had begun to fall back.

“In what way?” General Galgan asked.

“We’ve run our channelers to the bone,” Mat said. “And we're backed up against the river, a difficult position to defend long-term, especially against such a huge army. If they channel some gateways and move part of the Sharan army to this side of the river in the night, they could crush us.

“I see what you mean,” Galgan said, shaking his head. “Given their strength, they will continue to wear us down, until we are so weak, they can throw a noose around us and tighten it.”

Mat looked directly at Galgan. “I think it’s time we abandon this position.”

“I agree, that seems to be our only reasonable course of action,” General Galgan said, nodding. “Why not choose a battlefield more to our advantage? Will your friends from the White Tower agree to a retreat?”

“Let’s see,” Mat said, straightening all the way up. “Someone send for Egwene and the Sitters.”

“They will not come,” Tuon said. “The Aes Sedai will not meet with us here. I doubt this Amyrlin will accept me into her camp, not with the protections I would require.”

“Fine.” Mat waved toward the gateway in the floor, which the *damane* was closing. “We’ll use a gateway and talk through it like a door.”

Tuon made no specific objection, so Mat sent the messengers. It took a little arranging, but Egwene seemed to like the idea well enough. Tuon entertained herself during the wait by having her throne moved to the other side of the room—Mat had no idea why. She then proceeded to begin annoying Min. “And this one?” Tuon asked as a lanky member of the Blood entered and bowed himself.

“He’ll marry soon,” Min said.

“You will give the omen first,” Tuon said, “then interpretation, if you desire.”

“I know exactly what this one means,” Min protested. She had been set on a smaller throne beside that of Tuon. The girl was so decked in fine cloth and lace that she could have been mistaken for a mouse hiding in a bale of silk. “Sometimes, I know immediately, and—”

“You will give the omen first,” Tuon said, her tone unchanged. “And you will refer to me as Greatest One. It is a high honor that you are given to speak with me directly. Do not let the Prince of the Ravens’ attitude prove a model for your own.”

Min quieted, though she didn’t look cowed. She’d spent too long around Aes Sedai to let Tuon bully her. That gave Mat pause. He had an inkling of what Tuon might be capable of, if she grew displeased with Min. He loved her—Light, he was pretty sure he did. But he also let himself be a little afraid of her.

He’d have to keep watch so that Tuon didn’t decide to “educate” Min.

“The omen for this man,” Min said, controlling her tone with—it seemed—some difficulty, “is white lace trailing in a pond. I know that it will mean his marriage in the near future.”

Tuon nodded. She wiggled her fingers at Selucia—the man they were discussing was of the low Blood, not of a high enough rank to speak directly to Tuon. His head was down so close to the ground as he bowed that it seemed that he had become fascinated with beetles and was trying to collect a specimen.

“Lord Gokhan of the Blood,” Selucia Voiced, “is to be moved to the front lines. He is forbidden to marry until the end of this conflict. The omens have spoken that he will live long enough to find a wife, and so he will be protected.”

Min grimaced, then opened her mouth, probably to object that it didn’t work that way. Mat caught her eye and shook his head, and she backed down.

Tuon brought in the next, a young soldier, not of the Blood. The woman had fair skin and not a bad face, though Mat couldn't see much else beneath that armor. Men's armor and women's armor didn't actually look much different, which he found a shame. Mat had asked a Seanchan armorer if certain areas of the female breastplate shouldn't be emphasized, so to speak, and the armorer had looked at him like he was a half-wit. Light, these people had no sense of morality. A fellow needed to know if he was fighting a woman on the battlefield. It was only right.

As Min gave her omens, Mat settled back in his chair, putting his boots up on the map table and fishing in his pocket for his pipe. She *was* rather fine-looking, that soldier, though he could not see some of the important parts. She might make a good match for Talmanes. That fellow spent entirely too little time looking at women. He was shy around them, Talmanes was.

Mat ignored the looks of those nearby as he tipped his chair back onto two legs, set his heels on the table and packed his pipe. Seanchan could be so touchy.

He wasn't certain what he thought of so many Seanchan women being soldiers. A lot of them seemed like Birgitte, which wouldn't be so bad. Mat would rather spend an evening in the tavern with her than half the men he knew.

"You will be executed," Tuon Voiced through Selucia, speaking to the soldier.

Mat nearly fell off of his chair. He grabbed the table in front of him, the chair's front legs slamming down on the ground.

"*What?*" Min demanded. "No!"

"You saw the sign of the white boar," Tuon said.

"I don't know the meaning!"

"The boar is the symbol of one Handoin, one of my rivals in Seanchan," Tuon explained patiently. "The white boar is an omen of danger, perhaps betrayal. This woman works for him, or will in the future."

"You can't just *execute* her!"

Tuon blinked once, looking straight at Min. The room seemed to drop into shade, feeling colder. Mat shivered. He didn't like it when Tuon got like this. That stare of hers ... it seemed like the stare of another person. A person without compassion. A statue had more life to it.

Nearby, Selucia wiggled her fingers at Tuon. Tuon glanced at them, then nodded.

"You are my Truthspeaker," she said to Min, almost reluctantly. "You may correct me in public. Do you see error in my decisions?"

"Yes, I do," Min said, not missing a beat. "You do not use my skills as you should."

"And how should I?" Tuon asked. The soldier who had been given a death sentence continued lying prostrate. She didn't object—she was not of a rank that could address the Empress. She was lowly enough that speaking to someone else in Tuon's presence would be a breach of honor.

"What someone *may* do is not grounds to kill them," Min said. "I intend no disrespect, but if you are going to kill people because of what I tell you, I will not speak."

"You can be made to speak."

"Try it," Min said softly. Mat started. Bloody ashes, she looked as cold as Tuon had a moment ago. "Let us see how the Pattern treats you, Empress, if you torture the bearer of omens."

Instead, Tuon smiled. "You take to this well. Explain to me what you desire, bringer of omens."

"I will tell you my viewings," Min said, "but from now on, the interpretations—whether my own, or those you read into the images—are to be kept quiet. Between the two of us would be best. You are allowed to watch someone because of what I've said, but not to punish them—not unless you catch them doing something. Set this woman free."

"Let it be so," Tuon said. "You are free," she Voiced through Selucia. "Walk in loyalty to the Crystal Throne. You will be watched."

The woman bowed lower, then retreated from the room, head down. Mat caught a trickle of sweat running down the side of her face. So she wasn't a statue.

He turned back to Tuon and Min. They were still staring at one another. No knives, but he felt as if someone had been stabbed. If only Min would learn a little respect. One of these days, he was going to have to haul her away from the Seanchan by her collar—a step in front of the headsman—he was certain of it.

A gateway suddenly split the air on the side of the room where Tuon had indicated it should go. Suddenly, it occurred to Mat why she had moved her throne. If that *damane* had been captured and forced to say where Tuon was sitting, an Aes Sedai could have opened a gateway where she sat, slicing her in two. It was so unlikely it was laughable—an Aes Sedai could sooner fly than kill someone who wasn't a Darkfriend—but Tuon took no chances.

The gateway opened to reveal the Hall of the Tower seated in a tent. Behind them, Egwene sat upon a large chair. The Amyrlin Seat itself, Mat realized. *Blood and ashes ... she had them fetch it.*

Egwene looked exhausted, though she was doing a good job of hiding it. The others were no better. The Aes Sedai had been strained to their limits. If she were a soldier, he'd never send her into battle. Blood and bloody ashes—if he had a soldier with that cast to his skin and that look in his eyes, Mat would send the fellow to bed rest for a week.

"We are curious to know the purpose of this meeting," Saerin said calmly.

Silviana sat in a smaller chair by Egwene's side, and the other sisters were organized by Ajah. Some were missing, including one of the Yellows, by Mat's best guess.

Tuon nodded to Mat. He was to lead this meeting. He tipped his hat to her, which earned him a half-raised eyebrow. Her dangerous look was gone, although she was still Empress.

"Aes Sedai," Mat said, standing up and tipping his hat to the Sitters. "The Crystal Throne appreciates you coming to your bloody senses and letting us direct the battle."

Silviana's eyes bulged as if someone had just stepped on her foot. From the corner of his eye, Mat caught a hint of a smile on Tuon's lips. Blood and bloody ashes, both women should know better than to encourage him so.

"You are as eloquent as ever, Mat," Egwene said dryly "Do you still have your pet fox?"

"I do," Mat said. "He's snuggled up nice and warm."

"Take care of him," Egwene said. "I would not see you suffer Gareth Bryne's fate."

"So it was really Compulsion?" Mat asked. Egwene had sent him word. "As near as we can tell," Saerin said. "Nynaeve Sedai can see the weaves on someone's mind, I'm told, but none of the rest of us can."

"We have our Healers looking at Bryne," said a stocky Domani Aes Sedai. "For now, we cannot trust any battle plans that he touched, at least not until we determine how long he's been under the Shadow's thumb."

Mat nodded. “That sounds good. Also, we need to withdraw our forces from the ford.”

“Why?” Lelaine demanded. “We have stabilized here.”

“Not well enough,” Mat said. “I don’t like this terrain, and we shouldn’t have to fight where we don’t want to.”

“I hesitate to give an extra *inch* to the Shadow,” Saerin said.

“A pace given up now could earn us two at the dawn,” Mat replied. General Galgan murmured in agreement, and Mat realized that he’d quoted Hawkwing.

Saerin frowned. The others seemed to be letting her lead the meeting. Egwene mostly stayed out of it, fingers laced before her, sitting at the back.

“I should probably tell you,” Saerin said, “that our great captain was not the only one targeted. Davram Bashere and Lord Agelmar also tried to lead their respective armies to destruction. Elayne Sedai did well in her battle, destroying a large force of Trollocs, but she was only able to do so because of the Black Tower’s arrival. The Borderlanders were crushed, losing nearly two-thirds of their numbers.”

Mat felt a chill. *Two-thirds?* Light! They were among the best troops the Light had. “Lan?”

“Lord Mandragoran lives,” Saerin said.

Well, that was something. “And what of that army up in the Blight?”

“Lord Ituralde fell in battle,” Saerin replied. “No one quite seems to know what happened to him.”

“This was planned very well,” Mat said, mind racing. “Blood and bloody ashes. They tried to crush all four battlefronts at once. I can’t imagine the amount of coordination that would take…”

“As I noted,” Egwene said softly, “we must be very careful. Keep that fox of yours near at all times.”

“What does Elayne want to do?” Mat said. “Isn’t she in charge?”

“Elayne Sedai is currently helping the Borderlanders,” Saerin said. “She has instructed us that Shienar is all but lost, and is having the Asha’man bring Lord Mandragoran’s army to a place of safety. Tomorrow, she plans to move her army through gateways and hold the Trollocs in the Blight.”

Mat shook his head. “We need to make a unified stand.” He hesitated. “Could we bring her through one of these gateways? At least contact her?” There seemed to be no good objection. In a short time, another gateway opened in the tent with Egwene and the Sitters. Elayne strode through, thick with child, eyes practically on fire. Behind her, Mat caught a glimpse of soldiers with slumped postures, trudging across a dim evening field. “Light,” Elayne said, “Mat, what is it you want?”

“You’ve won your battle?” Mat asked.

“Barely, but yes. The Trollocs in Cairhien have been destroyed. The city is safe, as well.”

Mat nodded. “I need to withdraw from our position here.”

“Fine,” Elayne said. “Perhaps we can meld your force with what’s left of the Borderlanders.”

“I want to do more than that, Elayne,” Mat said, stepping forward. “This ploy the Shadow tried ... it was clever, Elayne. *Bloody* clever. We’re bloodied and almost broken. We don’t have the luxury of fighting on multiple battlefronts anymore.”

“What, then?”

“A last stand,” Mat said softly. “All of us, together, at one place where the terrain favors us.”

Elayne quieted, and someone brought her a chair to sit beside Egwene. She maintained the posture of a queen, but her disheveled hair and clothing burned in several places indicated what she’d been through. Mat could smell smoke coming from her battlefield, where the gateway was still open.

“That sounds desperate,” Elayne finally said.

“We *are* desperate,” Saerin said.

“We should ask our commanders . .” Elayne trailed off. “If there are any we can trust not to be under Compulsion.”

“There’s only one,” Mat said grimly, meeting her eyes. “And he’s telling you we are finished if we continue as we have. The earlier plan was a good enough one, but after what we lost today… Elayne, we’re dead unless we choose one place to stand, gather together, and fight.”

One last toss of the dice.

Elayne sat for a time. “Where?” she finally asked.

“Tar Valon?” Gawyn asked.

“No,” Mat said. “They’d just besiege it and move on. It can’t be a city where we can get boxed in. We need a territory that will work in our favor, also a land that can’t feed the Trollocs.”

“Well, a place in the Borderlands should work for that,” Elayne said with a grimace. “Lan’s army burned almost every city or field they passed to deny the Shadow resources.”

“Maps,” Mat said, waving. “Someone get me maps. We need a location in southern Shienar or Arafel. Someplace close enough that the Shadow will see it as tempting, a place to fight us all at once . .

“Mat,” Elayne asked. “Won’t that be giving them what they want? A chance to wipe us out?”

“Yes,” Mat said softly as the Aes Sedai sent over maps. These had markings on them, notations that appeared to be in General Bryne’s hand, judging by what they said. “We have to be a tempting target. We have to draw them in, face them and either defeat them or be crushed.”

A drawn-out fight would serve the Shadow. Once enough Trollocs reached southern lands, there would be no containing them. He had to win or lose quickly.

One last toss of the dice indeed.

Mat pointed at a location on the maps, a place that Bryne had annotated. It had a good water supply, a nice meeting of hills and rivers. “This place. Merrilor? You’ve been using it as a supply dump?”

Saerin chuckled softly. “And so we go back where we began, do we?”

“It does have some small fortifications,” Elayne said. “The men built a palisade on one side, and we could expand it.”

“It’s what we need,” Mat said, envisioning a battle there.

Merrilor would put them where the two major Trolloc armies could come in, try to crush the humans between them. That would be tempting. But the terrain would be wonderful for Mat to use…

Yes. It would be like the Battle of the Priya Narrows. If he put archers along those cliffs—no, dragons—and if he could give the Aes Sedai a few days of rest… Priya Narrows. He had counted on using a large river to trap the Hamarean army at the mouth of the Narrows. But as he sprung the trap, the blasted river dried up on him; the Hamareans had dammed it up on the other side of the Narrows. They had stepped right over the riverbed, and got clean away. *That’s a lesson I won’t forget.*

“This will do,” Mat said, placing his hand on the map. “Elayne?”

“Let it be done,” Elayne said. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Mat.”

As she spoke, the dice started tumbling inside his head.

Galad closed Trom's eyes. He'd searched the battlefield north of Cairhien for over an hour to find him. Trom had bled out, and only a few corners of his cloak were still white. Galad ripped the officer's knots off his shoulder— amazingly unsoiled—and stood up.

He felt weary to the bone. He started back across the battlefield, passing heaps of the dead. The crows and the ravens had come; they blanketed the landscape behind him. An undulating, quivering blackness that coated the ground like mold. From a distance, it seemed as if the ground had been burned, there were so many carrion birds.

Occasionally, Galad passed men like himself who sifted through the corpses for friends. There were surprisingly few looters—you had to watch for those on a battlefield. Elayne had caught a few trying to sneak out of Cairhien. She'd threatened to hang them.

She's grown harder, Galad thought, trudging back toward camp. His boots felt like lead on his feet. *That is good.* As a child, she had often made decisions with her heart. She was a queen now, and acted it. Now, if only he could right her moral compass. She wasn't a bad person, but Galad wished that she—like other monarchs—could see as clearly as he did.

He was beginning to accept that they didn't. He was beginning to accept that it was all right, so long as they tried their best. Whatever he had inside of him that allowed him to see the right of things was obviously a gift of the Light, and holding others to scorn because they had not been born with it was wrong. Just as it would be wrong to hold a man to scorn because he had been born with only one hand, and was therefore an inferior swordsman.

Many of the living he passed sat on the ground in the rare spots where there were no corpses and no blood. These men did not look like the victors of a battle, though the arrival of the Asha'man had saved this day. The trick with the lava had given Elayne's army the breather it needed to regroup and attack.

That battle had been swift, but brutal. Trollocs did not surrender, and they couldn't be allowed to break and flee. So Galad and the others had fought, bled and died long past when it was obvious they would be victorious.

The Trollocs were dead now. The remaining men sat and stared out at the blanket of corpses, as if numbed by the prospect of searching out the few living among the many thousands dead.

The setting sun and choking clouds made the light red, and gave faces a bloody cast.

Galad eventually reached the long hill that had marked the division between the two battlefields. He climbed it, slowly, forcing down thoughts of how good a bed would feel. Or a pallet on the floor. Or some flat rock in an out-of-the-way place, where he could roll up in his cloak.

The fresher air atop the hill shocked him. He'd been smelling blood and death for so long that now it was the clean air that smelled wrong. He shook his head, walking past tired Borderlanders who were trudging through gateways. The Asha'man had gone to hold off the Trollocs to the north so Lord Mandragoran's armies could escape.

From what Galad heard, the Borderlander armies were a fraction of what they had been. The betrayal of the great captains had been felt most deeply by Lord Mandragoran and his men. It sickened Galad, for this battle had not gone easily for him or anyone else with Elayne. It had been horrible— and as bad as it had been, the fight had gone more poorly for the Borderlanders.

Galad kept his stomach settled with difficulty as his view from atop the hill let him see just how many carrion birds had come to feast. The Dark Ones minions fell, and the Dark One's minions glutted themselves.

Galad eventually found Elayne. Her passionate words, being spoken to Tam al'Thor and Arganda, took him by surprise.

"Mat is right," she said. "The Field of Merrilor is a good battlefield. Light! I wish we could give the people more time to rest. We'll have only a few days, a week at most, before the Trollocs reach Merrilor behind us." She shook her head. "We should have seen those Sharans coming. When the deck starts to look like it's stacked against the Dark One, of *course* he will just add a few new cards to the game."

Galad's pride demanded that he remain standing as he listened to Elayne talk to the other commanders. For once, however, his pride lost out, and he settled down on a stool and slumped forward.

"Galad," Elayne said, "you really should allow one of the Asha'man to wash away your fatigue. Your insistence upon treating them like outcasts is foolish."

Galad straightened up. "It has nothing to do with the Asha'man," he snapped. Too argumentative. He *was* tired. "This fatigue reminds me of what we lost today. It is an exhaustion my men must endure, and so I will, lest I forget just how tired they are and push them too far."

Elayne frowned at him. He had stopped worrying that his words offended her long ago. It seemed he couldn't claim that a day was pleasant or his tea warm without her taking offense somehow.

It would have been nice if Aybara hadn't run off. That man was a leader—one of the few that Galad had ever met—that one could actually talk to without worrying that he'd take offense. Perhaps the Two Rivers would be a good place for the Whitecloaks to settle.

Of course, there *was* something of a history of bad blood between them. He could work on that…

I called them Whitecloaks, he thought to himself a moment later. *Inside my head, that's how I thought of the Children just now.* It had been a long time since he'd done that by accident.

"Your Majesty," Arganda said. He stood beside Logain, the leader of the Asha'man, and Havien Nurelle, the new commander of the Winged Guard. Talmanes of the Band of the Red Hand trudged up with a few commanders from the Saldaeans and the Legion of the Dragon. Elder Haman of the Ogier sat on the ground a short distance away; he stared off, toward the sunset, seeming dazed.

"Your Majesty," Arganda continued, "I realize you consider this a great victory—"

"It *is* a great victory," Elayne said. "We must persuade the men to see it that way. Not eight hours ago, I assumed that our entire army would be slaughtered. We won."

"At a cost of half of our troops," Arganda said softly.

"I will count that a victory," Elayne insisted. "We were expecting complete destruction."

"The only victor today is the butcher," Nurelle said softly. He looked haunted.

"No," Tam al'Thor said, "she's right. The troops have to understand what their losses earned. We *must* treat this as a victory. It must be recorded that way in the histories, and the soldiers must be convinced to see it so."

"That is a lie," Galad found himself saying.

"It is not," al'Thor said. "We lost many friends today. Light, but we all did. Focusing on death, however, is what the Dark One wants us to do. I dare you to tell me I'm wrong. We must look and see Light, not Shadow, or we'll all be pulled under."

"By *winning* here," Elayne said, deliberately emphasizing the word, "we earn a reprieve. We can gather at Merrilor, entrench there, and make our last stand in our strength against the Shadow."

“Light,” Talmanes whispered. “We’re going to go through this again, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Elayne said reluctantly.

Galad looked out over the fields of the dead, then shivered. “Merrilor will be worse. Light help us… it’s going to get worse.”

* * *

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CHAPTER 33

The Prince’s Tabac

Perrin chased Slayer through the skies.

He leaped from a churning, silver-black cloud, Slayer a blur before him in the charred sky. The air pulsed with the rhythm of lightning bolts and furious winds. Scent after scent assailed Perrin, with no logic behind them. Mud in Tear. A burning pie. Rotting garbage. A death-lily flower.

Slayer landed on the cloud ahead and *shifted*, turning around in an eye-blink, bow drawn. The arrow loosed so quickly the air cracked, but Perrin managed to slap it down with his hammer. He landed on the same thunderhead as Slayer, imagining footing beneath him, and the vapors of the storm cloud became solid.

Perrin charged forward through a churning dark gray fog, the top layer of the cloud, and attacked. They clashed, Slayer summoning a shield and sword. Perrin's hammer beat a rhythm against that shield, pounding alongside the booming of thunder. A crash with each blow.

Slayer spun away to flee, but Perrin managed to snatch the edge of his cloak. As Slayer attempted to *shift* away, Perrin imagined them staying put. He knew they would. It was not a possibility, it *was*.

They both fuzzed for a moment, then returned to the cloud. Slayer growled, then swept his sword backward, shearing off the tip of his cloak and freeing himself. He turned to face Perrin, stalking to the side, sword held in wary hands. The cloud trembled beneath them, and a flash of phantom lightning lit the misty vapor at their feet.

“You become increasingly annoying, wolf pup,” Slayer said.

“You’ve never fought a wolf that can fight you back,” Perrin said. “You’ve killed them from afar. The slaughter was easy. Now you’ve tried to hunt a prey who has teeth, Slayer.”

Slayer snorted. “You’re like a boy with his father’s sword. Dangerous, but completely unaware of why, or how to use your weapons.”

“We’ll see who—” Perrin began, but Slayer lunged, sword out. Perrin braced himself, imagining the sword growing dull, the air becoming thick to slow it, his skin turning hard enough to turn the weapon aside.

A second later, Perrin found himself tumbling through the air.

Fool! he thought. He’d focused so much on the attack that he hadn’t been ready when Slayer changed their footing. Perrin passed through the rumbling cloud, breaking out into the sky below, wind tugging at his clothing. He prepared himself, waiting for the hail of arrows to follow him down out of the cloud. Slayer could be so predictable…

No arrows came. Perrin fell for a few moments, then cursed and twisted to see a storm of arrows shooting up from the ground below. He *shifted* seconds before they passed through where he’d been.

Perrin appeared in the air a hundred feet to the side, still falling. He didn’t bother to slow himself; he hit the ground, increasing his body’s strength to deal with the shock of the blow. The ground cracked. A ring of dust blew out from him.

The storm was far worse than it had been. The ground here—they were in the south, somewhere, with overgrown brush and tangled vines growing up the sides of the trees—was pocked and torn. Lightning lashed repeatedly, so frequent that he could hardly count to three without seeing a bolt.

There was no rain, but the landscape crumbled. Entire hills would suddenly disintegrate. The one just to Perrin’s left dissolved like an enormous pile of dust, a trail of dirt and sand streaking out into the wind.

Perrin leaped through the debris-laden sky, hunting Slayer. Had the man *shifted* back up to Shayol Ghul? No. Two more arrows pierced the sky, heading for Perrin. Slayer was very good at making them ignore the wind.

Perrin slapped the arrows aside and hurled himself in Slayer’s direction. He spotted the man on a peak of rock, ground crumbling to either side of him and whipping into the air.

Perrin came down with hammer swinging. Slayer *shifted* away, of course, and the hammer struck stone with a sound like thunder. Perrin growled. Slayer was too quick!

Perrin was fast, too. Sooner or later, one of them would slip. One slip would be enough.

He caught sight of Slayer bounding away, and followed. When Perrin jumped off the next hilltop, the stones shattered behind him, rising up into the wind. The Pattern was weakening. Beyond that, his will was much stronger now that he was here in the flesh. He no longer had to worry about entering the dream too strongly and losing himself. He had entered it as strongly as one could.

And so, when Perrin moved, the landscape shuddered around him. The next leap showed him sea ahead. They had traveled much farther to the south than Perrin had realized. Were they in Illian? Tear?

Slayer hit the beach, where water crashed against rocks; the sand—if there had been any—had been blown away. The land seemed to be returning to a primal state, grass ripped free, soil eroded, leaving only stone and crashing waves.

Perrin landed beside Slayer. For once, there was no *shifting.* Both men were intent on the fight, the swings of hammer and sword. Metal clanged against metal.

Perrin nearly landed a hit, his hammer brushing Slayer's clothing. He heard a curse, but the next moment, Slayer was rounding from his dodge with a large axe in hand. Perrin braced himself and took it on the side, hardening his skin.

The axe didn't draw blood, not with Perrin braced as he was, but it *did* carry a huge amount of force behind it. The blow tossed Perrin out over the sea.

Slayer appeared above him a second later, plunging down with that axe. Perrin caught it on his hammer as he fell, but the force of the blow flung him downward, toward the ocean.

He commanded the water to recede. It rushed away, churning and bubbling, as if pursued by a powerful wind. Perrin righted himself as he fell, landing and cracking the still-wet, rocky bottom of the bay. Seawater rose high to either side of him, a circular wall some thirty feet high.

Slayer crashed down nearby. The man was panting from the exertion of their fight. Good. Perrin's own fatigue manifested as a deep burning in his muscles.

"I'm glad you were there," Slayer said, raising his sword to his shoulder, his shield vanishing. "I had so hoped that, when I appeared to kill the Dragon, you would interfere."

"What are you, Luc?" Perrin asked, wary, *shifting* to the side, keeping opposite Slayer in the circle of stone with walls of sea. "What are you really?"

Slayer prowled to the side, talking—Perrin knew—to lull his prey. “I’ve seen him, you know,” Slayer said softly. “The Dark One, the Great Lord as some would call him. Both terms are gross, almost insulting, understatements.”

“Do you really think he’ll reward you?” Perrin spat. “How can you not realize that once you’ve done what he wishes of you, he’ll just discard you, as he has so many?”

Slayer laughed. “Did he discard the Forsaken, when they failed and were imprisoned with him in the Bore? He could have slaughtered them all and kept their souls in eternal torment. Did he?”

Perrin didn’t reply.

“The Dark One does not discard useful tools,” Slayer said. “Fail him, and he may exact punishment, but he never discards. He’s like a goodwife, with her balls of tangled yarn and broken teakettles hidden away in the bottoms of baskets, waiting for the right moment to return them to usefulness. That is where you’re wrong, Aybara. A mere human might kill a tool who succeeds, fearing that the tool will threaten him. That is not the Dark One’s way. He *will* reward me.”

Perrin opened his mouth to reply, and Slayer *shifted* right in front of him to attack, thinking him distracted. Perrin vanished and Slayer struck only air. The man spun about, sword splitting the air, but Perrin had *shifted* to the opposite side. Small sea creatures with many arms undulated near his feet, confused at the sudden lack of water. Something large and dark swam through the shadowy water behind Slayer.

“You never answered my question,” Perrin said. “What *are* you?”

“I’m bold,” Slayer said, striding forward. “And I’m tired of being afraid. In this life, there are predators and there are prey. Often, the predators themselves become food for someone else. The only way to survive is to move up the chain, become the hunter.”

“That’s why you kill wolves?”

Slayer smiled a dangerous smile, his face in shadows. With the storm clouds above and the high walls of water, it was dim here at the bottom—though the strange light of the wolf dream pierced this place, if in a muted way.

“Wolves and men are the finest hunters in this world,” Slayer said softly. “Kill them, and you elevate yourself above them. Not all of us had the *privilege* of growing up in a comfortable home with a warm hearth and laughing siblings.”

Perrin and Slayer rounded one another, shadows blending, lightning blasts above shimmering through the water.

“If you knew my life,” Slayer said, “you’d howl. The hopelessness, the agony ... I soon found my way. My power. In this place, I am a king.”

He leaped across the space, his form a blur. Perrin prepared to swing, but Slayer didn’t draw his sword. He crashed into Perrin, throwing them both into the wall of water. The sea churned and bubbled around them.

Darkness. Perrin created light, somehow making the rocks at his feet glow. Slayer had hold of his cloak with one hand and was swinging at him in the dark water, his sword trailing bubbles but moving as quickly as in the air. Perrin yelled, bubbles coming from his mouth. He tried to block, but his arms moved lethargically.

In that frozen moment, Perrin tried to imagine the water not impeding him, but his mind rejected that thought. It wasn’t natural. It couldn’t be.

In desperation, Slayer’s sword nearly close enough to bite, Perrin froze the water solid around both of them. Doing so nearly crushed him, but it held Slayer still for a precarious moment while Perrin oriented himself. He made his cloak vanish so he wouldn’t take Slayer with him, then *shifted* away.

Perrin landed on the rocky beach beside a steep hillside that was half broken away by the power of the sea. He fell on hands and knees, gasping. Water streamed from his beard. His mind felt… numb. He had trouble thinking the water away from him to dry himself.

What’s happening? he thought, trembling. Around him, the storm raged, the bark ripping from tree trunks, their limbs already stripped away. He was just so… tired. Exhausted. How long had it been since he slept? Weeks had passed in the real world, but it couldn’t actually have been weeks here, could it? It—

The sea boiled, churning. Perrin turned. He’d kept his hammer, somehow, and he raised it to face Slayer.

The waters continued to move, but nothing came from them. Suddenly, behind him, the hill split in half. Perrin felt something heavy hit him in the shoulder, like a punch. He fell to his knees, twisting to see the hillside broken in two, Slayer standing on the other side, nocking another arrow to his bow.

Perrin *shifted*, desperate, pain belatedly flaring up his side and across his body.

“All I’m saying is that battles are being fought,” Mandevwin said, “and we are not there.”

“Battles are always being fought *somewhere*,” Vanin replied, leaning back against the wall outside a warehouse in Tar Valon. Faile listened to them with half an ear. “We’ve fought our share of them. All *I’m* saying is that I’m pleased to avoid this particular one.”

“People are dying,” Mandevwin said, disapproving. “This is not simply a battle, Vanin. It is Tarmon Gai’don itself!”

“Which means nobody is paying us,” Vanin said.

Mandevwin sputtered, “Paying ... to fight the Last Battle… You knave! This battle means life itself.”

Faile smiled as she looked over the supply ledgers. The two Redarms idled by the doorway as servants wearing the Flame of Tar Valon loaded Faile’s caravan. Behind them, the White Tower rose over the city.

At first, she had been annoyed by the banter, but the way Vanin poked at the other man reminded her of Gilber, one of her father’s quartermasters back in Saldaea.

“Now, Mandevwin,” Vanin said, “you hardly sound like a mercenary at all! What if Lord Mat heard you?”

“Lord Mat will fight,” said Mandevwin.

“When he has to,” Vanin said. “We *don’t* have to. Look, these supplies are important, right? And someone has to guard them, right? Here we are.”

“I just do not see why this job requires us. I should be helping Talmanes lead the Band, and you lot, you should be guarding Lord Mat ...”

Faile could almost hear the end of that line, the one they were all thinking. *You should be guarding Lord Mat from those Seanchan.*

The soldiers had taken in stride Mat’s disappearance, then his reappearance with the Seanchan. Apparently, they expected this kind of behavior from “Lord” Matrim Cauthon. Faile had a squad of fifty of the Band’s best, including Captain Mandevwin, Lieutenant Sandip and several Redarms who came highly recommended by Talmanes. None of them knew their true purpose in guarding the Horn of Valere.

She would have brought ten times this number if she could. As it was, fifty was suspicious enough. Those fifty were the Band's very best, some pulled from command positions. They would have to do.

We're not going far, Faile thought, checking the next page of the ledgers. She had to look as if she were concerned about the supplies. *Why am I so worried?*

She needed only to carry the Horn to the Field of Merrilor, now that Cauthon had finally appeared. She'd already run three caravans from other locations using the same guards, so her current job wouldn't be suspicious in the least.

She'd chosen the Band very deliberately. In the eyes of most, they were just mercenaries, so the least important—and least trustworthy—troops in the army. However, for all of her complaints about Mat—she might not know him well, but the way Perrin spoke of him was enough—he did inspire loyalty in his men. The men who found their way to Cauthon were like him. They tried to hide from duty and preferred gambling and drinking to doing anything useful, but in a pinch they'd each fight like ten men.

At Merrilor, Cauthon would have good reason to check in on Mandevwin and his men. At that point, Faile could give him the Horn. Of course, she also had some members of *Cha Faile* with her as guards. She wanted some people she knew for certain she could trust.

Nearby, Laras—the stout mistress of the kitchens at Tar Valon—came out of the warehouse, wagging a finger at several of the serving girls. The woman walked to Faile, trailed by a lanky youth with a limp who was carrying a beat-up chest.

"Something for you, my Lady." Laras gestured to the trunk. "The Amyrlin herself added it to your shipment as an afterthought. Something about a friend of hers, from back home?"

"It's Matrim Cauthon's tabac," Faile said with a grimace. "When he found that the Amyrlin had a store of Two Rivers leaf left, he insisted upon purchasing it."

"Tabac, at a time like this." Laras shook her head, wiping her fingers on her apron. "I remember that boy. I've known a youth or two in my day like him, always skulking around the kitchens like a stray wanting scraps. Someone ought to find something useful for him to do."

"We're working on it," Faile said as Laras' servant placed the trunk in Faile's own wagon. She winced as he let it thump down, then dusted off his hands.

Laras nodded, walking back into her warehouse. Faile rested her fingers on the chest. Philosophers claimed the Pattern did not have a sense of humor. The Pattern, and the Wheel, simply *were*, they did not care, they did not take sides. However, Faile could not help thinking that somewhere, the Creator was grinning at her. She had left home with her head full of arrogant dreams, a child thinking herself on a grand quest to find the Horn.

Life had knocked those out from under her, leaving her to haul herself back up. She had grown up, had started paying mind to what was really important. And now… now the Pattern, with almost casual indifference, dropped the Horn of Valere into her lap.

She removed her hand and pointedly refusing to open the chest. She had the key, delivered to her separately, and she *would* check to see that the Horn was really in the chest. Not now. Not until she was alone and reasonably certain she was safe.

She climbed into the wagon and rested her feet on the chest.

"I still don't like it," Mandevwin was saying beside the warehouse.

"You don't like *anything*.." Vanin said. "Look, the work we're doing is important. Soldiers have to eat."

"I suppose that is true," Mandevwin said.

"It is!" a new voice added. Harnan, another Redarm, joined them. Not one of the three, Faile noticed, jumped to help the servants load the caravan. "Eating is wonderful," Harnan said. "And if there is an expert on the subject, Vanin, it is certainly you."

Harnan was a sturdily built man with a wide face and a hawk tattooed on his cheek. Talmanes swore by the man, calling him a veteran survivor of both "the Six-Story Slaughter" and Hinderstap, whatever those were.

"Now, that wounds me, Harnan," Vanin said from behind. "That wounds me badly."

"I doubt it," Harnan said with a laugh. "To wound you badly, an attack would first have to penetrate through fat to reach the muscle. I'm not sure Trolloc swords are long enough for that!"

Mandevwin laughed, and the three of them moved off. Faile went over the last few pages of the ledger, then began to climb down, to call for Setalle Anan. The woman had been acting as her assistant for these caravan runs. As she was climbing down, however, Faile noticed that not all three members of the Band had moved off. Only two of them had. Portly Vanin still stood back there. She saw him, and paused.

Vanin immediately lumbered off toward some of the other soldiers. Had he been watching her?

“Faile! Faile! Aravine says she has finished checking over the manifests for you. We can go, Faile.”

Olver scrambled eagerly into the wagon seat. He had insisted on joining the caravan, and the members of the Band had persuaded her to allow it. Even Setalle had suggested it would be wise to bring him. Apparently, they worried that Olver would find his way to the fighting somehow if he wasn’t constantly under their watch. Faile had reluctantly set him to running errands.

“All right, then,” Faile said, climbing back into the wagon. “I suppose we can be off.”

The wagons lumbered into motion. She spent the entire trip out of the city trying not to look at the chest.

She tried to distract herself from thinking about it, but that only brought her mind to another pressing concern. Perrin. She had seen him only briefly during a supply run to Andor. He’d warned her he might have another duty, but had been reluctant to tell her about it.

Now he’d vanished. He’d made Tam steward in his place, had taken a gateway to Shayol Ghul and had vanished. She’d asked those who’d been there, but nobody had seen him since his conversation with Rand.

All would be well with him, wouldn’t it? She was a soldier’s daughter and a soldier’s wife; she knew not to worry overly much. But a person could not help but worry a little. Perrin had been the one to suggest her as the keeper of the Horn.

She wondered, idly, if he had done it to keep her off the battlefield. She wouldn’t mind terribly if he’d done so, though she would never tell him that. In fact, once this was all said and done, she would insinuate that she was offended and see how he reacted. He needed to know that she would not sit back and be coddled, even if her true name implied otherwise.

Faile pulled her wagon, which was first in the caravan, onto the Jualdhe Bridge out of Tar Valon. About halfway across, the bridge trembled. The horses stomped and tossed their heads as Faile slowed them and glanced over her shoulder. The sight of swaying buildings in Tar Valon proved to her that the trembling wasn’t just the bridge, but an earthquake.

The other horses danced and whinnied, and the shaking rattled carts.

“We need to move off the bridge, Lady Faile!” Olver cried.

“The bridge is much too long for us to get to the other side before this ends,” Faile said calmly. She had suffered earthquakes in Saldaea before. “We’d be more in danger of hurting ourselves in the scramble than we will be here. This bridge is Ogier work. We’re probably safer here than we’d be on solid ground.”

Indeed, the earthquake passed without so much as a stone being loosed from the bridge. Faile brought her horses under control and started ahead again. The Light willing, the damage to the city wasn’t too bad. She didn’t know if earthquakes were common here. With Dragonmount nearby, there would at least be occasional rumblings, wouldn’t there?

Still, the earthquake worried her. People spoke of the land becoming unstable, the groanings of the earth coming to match the breaking of the sky by lightning and thunder. She had heard more than one account of the spiderweb cracks that appeared in rocks, pure black, as if they extended on into eternity itself.

Once the rest of the caravan left the city, Faile pulled her wagons up beside some mercenary bands waiting their turn at an Aes Sedai for Traveling. Faile could not afford to insist on preference; she had to avoid attention. So, nerve-racking though it was, she settled down to wait.

Her caravan was last in line for the day. Eventually, Aravine came up to Faile’s wagon, and Olver scooted over to make room for her. She patted him on the head. A lot of women responded that way to Olver, and he *did* seem so innocent much of the time. Faile wasn’t convinced; she narrowed her eyes at Olver as he snuggled up beside Aravine. Mat seemed to have had a strong influence on the child.

“I'm pleased with this shipment, my Lady,” Aravine said. “With this canvas, we should have enough material to put tents over the heads of most men in the army. We *are* still going to need leather. We know that Queen Elayne marched her men hard, and we will be getting requests for new boots.” Faile nodded absently. A gateway ahead opened to Merrilor, and she could see the armies, still gathering. Over the last couple of days, they’d slowly limped back to lick their wounds. Three battlefronts, three disasters of varying degrees. Light. The arrival of the Sharans was devastating, as was the betrayals of the great captains, including Faile’s own father. The armies of the Light had lost well over a third of their forces.

On the Field of Merrilor, commanders deliberated and their soldiers repaired armor and weapons, awaiting what would come. A final stand.

". . . will also need some more meat," Aravine said. "We should suggest some quick hunting trips using gateways over the next few days to see what we can find."

Faile nodded. It was a comfort, having Aravine. Though Faile still reviewed reports and visited the quartermasters, Aravine's careful attention made the job much easier, like a good sergeant who had made certain his men were in shape before an inspection.

"Aravine," Faile said. "You haven't ever taken one of the gateways to check on your family in Amadicia."

"There is nothing for me there any longer, my Lady."

Aravine stubbornly refused to admit that she'd been a noble before being taken by the Shaido. Well, at least she didn't act as some of the former *gai'shain* did, docile and submissive. If Aravine was determined to leave her past behind her, then Faile would gladly give her the chance. It was the least she owed the woman.

As they talked, Olver climbed down to go chat with some of his "uncles" among the Redarms. Faile glanced to the side as Vanin rode past with two of the Band's other scouts. He spoke jovially to them.

You're misreading that look of his, Faile told herself. *There's nothing suspicious about the man; you're merely jumpy because of the Horn.*

Still, when Harnan came to ask if she needed anything—a member of the Band did that every half-hour—she asked him about Vanin.

"Vanin?" Harnan said from horseback. "Good fellow. He can chew your ear off griping at times, my Lady, but don't let that sour you. He's our best scout."

"I can't imagine how," she said. "I mean, he can't move quickly or quietly with that bulk, can he?"

"He'd surprise you, my Lady," Harnan said with a laugh. "I like to rib him, but he really is skilled."

"Has he ever presented any disciplinary problems?" Faile asked, trying to choose her words. "Fighting? Lifting things from other men's tents?"

"Vanin?" Harnan laughed. "He'll borrow your brandy if you let him, then return the flask mostly empty. And truth be told, he might have had a bit of thieving in his past, but I've never known him to fight. He's a good man. You don't need to worry about him."

Some thieving in his past? Harnan, though, looked like he didn’t want to talk about it any further. “Thank you,” she said, but she remained worried.

Harnan raised a hand to his head in a kind of salute, then rode off. It was three more hours before an Aes Sedai came to process them. Berisha strolled over, giving the caravan a critical inspection. She was hard of features and lean of figure. The other Aes Sedai working the Traveling ground had already returned to Tar Valon by this point, and the sun was dipping toward the horizon.

“Caravan of foodstuffs and canvas,” Berisha said, examining Faile’s ledger. “Bound for the Field of Merrilor. We’ve sent them seven caravans today so far. Why another? I suspect the Caemlyn refugees could use this as much.”

“The Field of Merrilor is soon going to be a site of great battle,” Faile said, keeping her temper with difficulty. Aes Sedai did not like to be snapped at. “I doubt we can oversupply it.”

Berisha sniffed. “I say it’s too much.” The woman seemed chronically dissatisfied, as if annoyed at being left out of the fighting.

“The Amyrlin disagrees with you,” Faile replied. “A gateway, please. The hour grows late.” *And if you want to talk about a waste, why not consider how you made me march all the way out of the city and wait, instead of sending me straight from the White Tower grounds?*

The Hall of the Tower wanted a single Traveling ground for large troop or supply movements to keep better control over who entered and left Tar Valon. Faile could not blame them for the precaution, even if it was frustrating sometimes.

Bureaucracy was bureaucracy, and Berisha finally adopted a look of concentration in preparation for making a gateway. Before she could weave the gateway, however, the ground started to rumble.

Not again, Faile thought with a sigh. Well, there were commonly smaller quakes after an—

A series of sharp black crystal spikes split the ground nearby, jutting upward some ten or fifteen feet. One speared a Redarms horse, splashing blood into the air as the spike went straight through both beast and man.

“Bubble of evil!” Harnan called from nearby.

Other crystalline spikes—some thin as a spear, others wide as a person—ripped up through the ground. Faile frantically tried to control her horses.

They danced to the side, spinning her cart, nearly toppling it as she pulled on the reins.

Around her, madness ruled. The spikes punched up through the ground in groups, each sharp as a razor. One wagon splintered as crystals destroyed its left side. Foodstuffs spilled to the dead grass. Some horses went wild and other wagons overturned. The crystal spikes continued to rise, appearing all over the empty field. Shouts rose from the nearby village at the end of the bridge from Tar Valon.

"Gateway!" Faile screamed, still fighting her horses. *"Do it!"*

Berisha jumped back as spikes jutted out of the ground near her feet. She threw a pale-faced glance at them, and only then did Faile realize that something was *moving* inside the shadowy crystals. It seemed like smoke.

A crystal spike came up through Berisha's foot. She cried out, kneeling, just as a line of light split the air. Thank the Light, the woman held her weave, and—with what seemed glacial slowness—the line of light rotated and opened a hole large enough for a wagon.

"Through the gateway!" Faile shouted, but her voice was lost in the commotion. Crystals burst from the ground very near her left, tossing earth across her face. Her horses danced, then started to gallop. Rather than risking complete loss of control, Faile steered them toward the gateway. Right before they went through, however, she pulled them to a rearing halt.

"The gateway!" she shouted at the others. Again her voice was lost. Fortunately, the Redarms took up the call, riding down the disordered line, grabbing the reins of horses and steering wagons toward the gateway. Other men picked up those who had been tossed to the ground.

Harnan thundered past, carrying Olver. He was followed by Sandip with Setalle Anan clinging to him from behind. The frequency of the crystals increased. One jutted up near Faile, and with horror, she realized that the smoky movements inside had form. Figures of men and women, screaming, as if trapped inside.

She drew back, aghast. Nearby, the last working wagon rattled through the gateway. Soon the field would be nothing but crystals. Some straggling members of the Band helped the wounded onto horses, but two fell as the crystals started budding growths that shot out to the sides. It was time to go. Aravine passed by, grabbing Faile's reins to pull them to safety.

"Berisha!" Faile said. The Aes Sedai knelt beside the opening, sweat trickling down her pale face. Faile leaped from her wagon seat, grabbing the woman's shoulder as Aravine pulled the wagon through the gateway.

“Lets move!” Faile said to Berisha. “I'll carry you.”

The woman teetered, then fell to the side, holding her stomach. Faile realized with a start that blood streamed around the woman’s fingers. Berisha stared at the sky, mouth working, but no sounds came out.

“My Lady!” Mandevwin galloped up. “I don’t care where it leads! We must get through!”

“What—”

She cut off as Mandevwin grabbed her by the waist and hauled her up, crystals exploding nearby. He galloped through the opening, holding her.

The gateway snapped shut a moment later.

Faile panted as Mandevwin let her down. She stared at where the gateway had been.

His words finally caught up with her. *I don’t care where it leads…* He had seen something she, in her panic over getting everyone to safety, had not.

The gateway hadn’t led to the Field of Merrilor.

“Where ...” Faile whispered, joining the others, who stared at the horrid landscape. A sweltering heat, plants covered in spots of darkness, a scent of something awful in the air.

They were in the Blight.

Aviendha chewed on her rations, crunchy rolled oats that had been mixed with honey. They tasted good. Being near Rand meant that their food stores had stopped spoiling.

She reached for her water flask, then hesitated. She’d been drinking a lot of water lately. She rarely stopped to think about its value. Had she already forgotten the lessons she’d learned during her return to the Threefold Land to visit Rhuidean?

Light, she thought, raising the flask to her lips. *Who cares? It’s the Last Battle!*

She sat on the floor of a large Aiel tent in the valley of Thakan’dar. Melaine chewed on her own rations close by. The woman was near to term now with her twins, her belly bulging beneath her dress and shawl. Much as a Maiden was forbidden to fight while with child, Melaine was forbidden dangerous activity. She had voluntarily gone to work in Berelain’s Healing station in Mayene—but she regularly checked on the progress of the battle.

Many of the *gai'shain* had found their way through gateways to help as they could, though all they could do was carry water or soil for the earthen mounds Ituralde had ordered cast up to give the defenders some kind of protection.

A group of Maidens ate nearby, chatting with handtalk. Aviendha could have read it, but didn't. It would only make her wish she could join them. She'd become a Wise One and had forsaken her old life. That didn't mean she had purged herself of every bit of envy. Instead, she wiped out her wooden bowl and stowed it in her pack, stood up and slipped out of the tent.

Outside, the night air was cool. It was about an hour before dawn, and felt almost like the Three-fold Land at night. Aviendha looked up at the mountain that dominated the valley; despite the dark of early morning, she could see the pit leading inward.

It had been many days since Rand had entered. Ituralde had wandered back into camp the night before with a tale of being held by wolves and a man who claimed Perrin Aybara had sent him to kidnap the great captain. Ituralde had been taken into custody, and had not complained.

The Trollocs had not attacked the valley all day. The defenders still had them held in the pass. The Shadow seemed to be waiting for something. The Light send it was not another attack by Myrddraal. The last one had nearly ended the resistance. Aviendha had rallied the channelers once the Eyeless had emerged to kill the humans defending the mouth of the pass; they must have realized that exposing themselves in large numbers was unwise, and they fled back to the safety of the pass once the channeling began.

Either way, she felt grateful for this rare moment of rest and relative peace between attacks. She stared into that pit in the mountain, within which Rand fought. A strong pulse came from deep within it; channeling, in waves, powerful. Several days on the outside, but how long on the inside? A day? Hours? Minutes? Maidens who guarded the path up to the entrance claimed that after four hours of duty, they'd climb down the mountainside and find that eight hours had passed.

We have to hold' Aviendha thought. *We have to fight. Give him as much time as we can.*

At least she knew he still lived. She could sense that. And his pain.

She looked away.

As she did, she noticed something. A woman was channeling in the camp. It was faint, but Aviendha frowned. At this hour, with no fighting, the only channeling should have been happening on the Traveling ground, and this was in the wrong direction.

Muttering to herself, she started through the camp. It was probably one of the off-duty Windfinders again. They took turns rotating in and out of the group using the Bowl of the Winds, constantly, to keep the tempest at bay. That task was done atop the northern valley wall, well guarded by a large force of Sea Folk. They had to take gateways up there to change shifts.

When the Windfinders weren't on duty with the Bowl, they camped with the rest of the army. Aviendha had told them time and time again that, while in the valley, they were *not* allowed to channel for incidental reasons. One would think, after all the years they had spent never letting Aes Sedai see them use their powers, that they could be more self-controlled! If she caught another one of them using the One Power to warm her tea, she'd send her to Sorilea for an education. This was supposed to be a secure camp.

Aviendha froze in place. That channeling was *not* coming from the small ring of tents where the Windfinders made camp.

Had she sensed an incursion? A Dreadlord or Forsaken would probably assume that—in a camp this large filled with Aes Sedai, Windfinders and Wise Ones—no one would notice a tiny bit of channeling here or there. Aviendha immediately crouched beside a nearby tent, avoiding the light of a lantern on a pole. The channeling came again, very faint. She crept forward.

If this turns out to be someone heating water for a bath…

She moved between tents, across the hard earth. As she drew closer, she took off her boots and left them behind, then pulled her dagger from its sheath. She couldn't risk embracing the Source, lest she reveal herself to her prey.

The camp didn't truly sleep. Those warriors who were not on duty had trouble slumbering here. Fatigue among the spears, including the Maidens, was becoming a problem. They complained of terrible dreams.

Aviendha continued forward silently, slipping between tents, avoiding those that shone with light. This place disturbed all of them, so she was not surprised to hear of bad dreams. How could they sleep in peace so close to the Dark One's abode?

Logically, she knew that the Dark One was not nearby, not really. That wasn't what the Bore was. He didn't *live* in this place; he existed outside the Pattern, inside his prison. Still, bedding down here was like trying to sleep while a murderer stood beside your bed, holding a knife and contemplating the color of your hair.

There, she thought, slowing. The channeling stopped, but Aviendha was close. Draghkar attacks and the threat of Myrddraal slipping in at night had driven the camp leaders to spread the officers throughout the camp, in tents that bore no external sign of which belonged to a commander and which to a common foot soldier. Aviendha, however, knew this tent to belong to Darlin Sisnera.

Darlin had official command of this battlefield, now that Ituralde had fallen. He was not a general, but the Tairen army was the bulk of the defense, with the Defenders of the Stone their elite units. Their commander, Tihera, was good with tactics, and Darlin listened well to the man's suggestions. Tihera was not a great captain, but he was very clever. He, Darlin and Rhuarc had been devising their battle plans following Ituralde's fall…

In the darkness, Aviendha nearly missed the three figures crouched ahead of her, just outside Darlin's tent. They gestured to one another, silent, and she could see little about them—not even their clothing. She raised her knife, and then a bolt of lightning split the sky, giving her a better glimpse of one. The man was wearing a veil. Aiel.

They noticed the intruder too, she thought, stalking up to them and raising a hand to keep them from attacking. She whispered, "I felt channeling nearby, and I do not think it is from one of ours. What have you seen?"

The three men stared at her, as if stunned, though she couldn't make out much of their faces.

Then they attacked her.

Aviendha cursed, leaping backward as their spears came out and one threw a knife in her direction. Aiel Darkfriends? She felt a fool. She should have known better.

She reached out to embrace the Source. If a female Dread lord was nearby, she'd feel what Aviendha did, but there was no help for it. She needed to survive these three.

However, as Aviendha reached for the One Power, something snapped into place between her and the Source. A shield, with weaves she could not see.

One of these men could channel. Aviendha's reaction was instinctive. She shoved down her panic, stopped scrambling to touch the Source and threw herself at the nearest of the men. She caught his spear-thrust with her off hand—ignoring the pain as the spearhead sliced against her ribs— and hauled him forward to ram her knife in his neck.

One of the other two cursed, and Aviendha suddenly found herself wrapped in weaves of Air, unable to speak or move. Blood soaked into her blouse and pooled against her wounded side. The man she'd struck gasped and thrashed on the ground as he died. The other two did not move to help him.

One of the Darkfriends stepped forward, lithe, almost invisible in the darkness. He pulled her face close to inspect her, then waved his hand to the other. A very soft light appeared beside them, giving them a better look at her—and her at them. They wore *red* veils, but this one had taken his down for the fight. Why? What was this? No Aiel she knew did that. Were these the Shaido? Had they joined the Shadow?

One of the men made a few gestures to the other. It was handtalk. Not Maiden handtalk, but something similar. The other man nodded.

Aviendha thrashed against her invisible bonds. She slammed her will against that shield, biting down on her gag of Air. The Aiel on the right—the taller one, the one who probably held her shield—grunted. She felt as if her fingers were clawing at the edge of a nearly shut door, with light, warmth and power beyond. That door wouldn't budge an inch.

The tall Aiel narrowed his eyes at her. He let the light he'd summoned vanish, plunging them into darkness. Aviendha heard him take out a spear.

A foot fell on the ground nearby. The red-veils heard it and spun; Aviendha looked as best she could, but couldn't make out the newcomer.

The men stood perfectly still.

"What is this?" a woman's voice asked. Cadsuane. She approached, a lantern in her hand. Aviendha was jerked away as the man holding her weaves pulled her back into the shadows, and Cadsuane did not seem aware of her. Cadsuane saw only the other man, who stood closer to the pathway.

That Aiel man stepped from the shadows. He'd lowered his veil, too. "I thought I heard something near the tents here, Aes Sedai," he said. He had a strange accent, one that was slightly off. Only by a shade. A wetlander would never know the difference.

These aren't Aiel, Aviendha thought. *They're something different.* Her mind wrestled with the concept. Aiel who were not Aiel? Men who could channel?

The men we send, she realized with horror. Men discovered among the Aiel with the ability to channel were sent to try to kill the Dark One. Alone, they came to the Blight. Nobody knew what happened to them after that.

Aviendha began to struggle again, trying to make noise—any noise—to alert Cadsuane. The attempts were in vain. She hung tightly in the air, in the darkness, and Cadsuane wasn't looking in her direction.

"Well, did you find anything?" Cadsuane asked the man.

"No, Aes Sedai."

"I will speak to the guards," Cadsuane said, sounding dissatisfied. "We must be vigilant. If a Draghkar—or, worse, a Myrddraal—managed to sneak in, it could kill dozens before being discovered."

Cadsuane turned to go. Aviendha shook her head, tears of frustration in her eyes. So close!

The red-veil who had been with Cadsuane stepped back into the shadows, going up to Aviendha. In a flash of lightning, she caught a smile on his lips, mimicked by the one who still held her in the bonds.

The red-veil in front of her slid a dagger from his belt, then reached up for her. She watched that knife, helpless, as he raised it to her throat.

She sensed channeling.

The bonds holding her were gone instantly, and she dropped to the ground. Aviendha caught the man's knife hand as she fell, his eyes opening wide. Though she embraced the Source by raw, mad instinct, her hands were already moving. She twisted the man's wrist, snapping the bones where hand met arm. She caught the knife with her other hand, then slammed it into his eye as he started to scream in pain.

The scream cut off. The red-veil fell at her feet, and she looked with anxiety toward the one beside her—the one who had been holding her in weaves. He lay dead on the ground.

Gasping, she scrambled toward the path nearby, and found Cadsuane.

"It is a simple thing, to stop a man's heart," Cadsuane said, arms folded. She seemed dissatisfied. "So close to Healing, yet opposite in effect.

Perhaps it is an evil thing, yet I’ve always failed to see how it would be worse than simply burning a man to ash with fire.”

“How?” Aviendha asked. “How did you recognize what they were?”

“I am not a half-trained wilder,” Cadsuane replied. “I would have liked to strike them down when I first arrived, but I had to be certain before I could act. When that one threatened you with the knife, I knew.”

Aviendha breathed in and out, trying to still her heart.

“And, of course, there was the other one,” Cadsuane said. “The one that channeled. How many male Aiel warriors can secretly channel? Was this an anomaly, or have your people been covering them up?”

“What? No! We don’t. Or, we didn’t.” Aviendha wasn’t certain what they would do now that the Source had been cleansed. Men, certainly, should stop being sent alone to die fighting the Dark One.

“You’re certain?” Cadsuane asked, voice flat.

“Yes!”

“Pity. That could have been a large boon to us, now.” Cadsuane shook her head. “I wouldn’t have been surprised, after finding out about those Windfinders. So these were just run-of-the-mill Darkfriends, with one among them who had hidden his channeling ability? What were they about tonight?”

“These are anything but ordinary Darkfriends,” Aviendha said softly, inspecting the corpses. Red veils. The man who had been able to channel wore his teeth filed to points, but the other two did not. What did it mean?

“We need to alert the camp,” Aviendha continued. “It’s possible that these three merely walked in, unchallenged. Many of the wetlander guards avoid challenging Aiel. They assume that all of us serve the *Car’a’carn*.”

To many wetlanders, an Aiel was an Aiel. Fools. Though ... to be honest, Aviendha had to admit that her own first instinct upon seeing Aiel had been to think them allies. When had that happened? Not two years back, if she’d caught unfamiliar *algai’d’siswai* prowling about, she’d have attacked.

Aviendha continued her inspection of the dead men—a knife on each man, spears and bows. Nothing else telling. However, her thoughts whispered to her that she was missing something.

“The female channeler,” she said suddenly, looking up. “It was a *woman* using the One Power that drew me, Aes Sedai. Was that you?”

“I did not channel until I killed that man,” Cadsuane said, frowning.

Aviendha dropped back into a battle stance, hugging the shadows. What would she find next? Wise Ones who served the Shadow? Cadsuane frowned, as Aviendha scouted the area further. She passed Darlin's tent, where soldiers outside huddled around lamps and cast shadows that danced on the canvas. She passed soldiers in tight groups walking along the pathways, not speaking. They carried torches, blinding their eyes to the night.

Aviendha had heard Tairen officers remark that it was nice, for once, to have no worry about their sentries dozing on duty. With the lightning, the Trolloc drums in the near distance, the occasional raids by Shadowspawn trying to slip into camp… soldiers knew to be wary. The frosted air smelled of smoke, with putrid scents blowing in from the Trolloc camps.

She eventually gave up the hunt and walked back the way she had come, finding Cadsuane speaking with a group of soldiers. Aviendha was about to approach when her eyes passed over a patch of darkness nearby, and her senses came alert. *That patch of darkness is channeling.*

Aviendha began weaving a shield immediately. The one in the darkness wove Fire and Air toward Cadsuane. Aviendha dropped her weave and instead lashed out with Spirit, slicing the enemy weave just as it was released.

Aviendha heard a curse, and a quick weave of fire blossomed in her direction. Aviendha ducked as it lashed overhead, hissing in the cold air. The wave of heat passed. Her enemy ducked out of the shadows—whatever weave she'd been using to hide had collapsed—revealing the woman Aviendha had fought before. The one with the face almost as ugly as a Trollocs.

The woman dashed behind a group of tents just before the ground ripped up behind her—a weave that Aviendha hadn't made. A second later, the woman *folded* again, as she had before. Vanishing.

Aviendha stood warily. She turned toward Cadsuane, who walked up to her. "Thank you," the woman said, grudgingly. "For disrupting that weave."

"I suppose we are even, then," Aviendha said.

"Even? No, not by several hundred years, child. I will admit that I am thankful for your intervention." She frowned. "She vanished."

"She did that before."

"A method of Traveling we do not know," Cadsuane said, looking troubled. "I saw no flows for it. Perhaps a *ter'angreal*? It—"

A shot of red light rose from the front lines of the army. The Trollocs were attacking. At the same time, Aviendha felt channeling in different spots around the camp. One, two, three… She spun about, trying to locate each of the locations. She counted five.

"Channelers," Cadsuane said sharply. "Dozens of them."

"Dozens? I sense five."

"Most are men, fool child," Cadsuane said, waving a hand. "Go, gather the others!"

Aviendha dashed away, yelling the alarm. She would have words with Cadsuane later for ordering her about. Maybe. "Having words" with Cadsuane often left one feeling like a complete fool. Aviendha ran into the Aiel section of camp in time to see Amys and Sorilea pulling on their shawls, checking the sky. Flinn stumbled out of a nearby tent, blinking bleary eyes. "Men?" he said. "Channeling? Have more Asha'man arrived?"

"Unlikely," Aviendha said. "Amys, Sorilea, I need a circle."

They raised eyebrows at her. She might be one of them now, and she might have command by the *Car'a'carn's* authority, but reminding Sorilea of that would end with Aviendha buried to her neck in sand. "If you please," she added quickly.

"It is your say, Aviendha," Sorilea said. "I will go and speak with the others and send them to you, so you may have your circle. We will make two, I think, as you have suggested before. That would be for the best."

Stubborn as Cadsuane, that one is, Aviendha thought. The two of them could teach lessons on patience to trees. Still, Sorilea was not strong in the Power—in fact, she could barely channel—so it would be wise to use others as she suggested.

Sorilea began calling for the other Wise Ones and Aes Sedai. Aviendha suffered the delay with anxiety; already, she could hear screams and explosions in the valley. Streams of fire arced into the air, then dropped.

"Sorilea," Aviendha said softly to the elder Wise One as the women began to build the circles, "I was attacked in camp just now by three Aiel men. The battle we are about to fight, it will probably involve other Aiel who fight for the Shadow."

Sorilea turned sharply, meeting Aviendha's eyes. "Explain."

"I think they must be the men we sent to kill Sightblinder," Aviendha said.

Sorilea hissed softly. “If this is true, child, then this night will mark great *toh* for us all. *Toh* toward the *Car’a’carn, toh* toward the land itself.”

“I know.”

“Bring me word,” Sorilea said. “I will organize a third circle; maybe make some of those off-duty Windfinders join in.”

Aviendha nodded, then accepted control of the circle as it was handed to her. She had three Aes Sedai who had sworn to Rand and two Wise Ones. By her order, Flinn did not join the circle. She wanted him to be on the watch for signs of men channeling, ready to point the direction, and being in a circle might make that impossible for him to do.

They moved off like a squad of spear-sisters. They passed clusters of Tairen Defenders pulling on burnished breastplates over uniforms with wide striped sleeves. In one group, she found King Darlin bellowing orders. “A moment,” she said to the others, hastening to the Tairen.

“… them all!” Darlin said to his commanders. “*Don’t* let the front lines weaken! We can’t let those monsters spill into the valley!” It appeared that he’d been awakened from sleep by the attack, for he stood dressed only in trousers and a white undershirt. A disheveled serving man held out Darlin’s coat, but the King, distracted by a messenger, turned away.

When Darlin saw Aviendha, he waved her forward urgently. The serving man heaved a sigh, lowering the coat.

“I’d given up on them attacking tonight,” Darlin said, then glanced at the sky. “Or, well, this *morning*. The scout reports are so confused, I feel like I’ve been thrown into a coop full of crazed chickens and told to catch the one with a single black feather.”

“Those reports,” Aviendha said, “do they mention Aiel men, fighting for the Shadow? Possibly channeling?”

Darlin turned sharply. “It’s true?”

“Yes.”

“And the Trollocs are pushing with everything they have to force their way into the valley,” Darlin said. “If those Aiel Dreadlords start attacking our troops, we won t stand a chance without you lot being there to hold them off.”

“We’re moving,” Aviendha said. “Send for Amys and Cadsuane to make gateways. But I warn you. I caught a Dreadlord sneaking around near your tent . . ”

Darlin paled. “Like Ituralde… Light, they didn’t touch me. I swear it. I ...” He raised a hand to his head. “Who do we trust if we cannot trust our own minds?”

“We must make the dance of spears as simple as possible,” Aviendha said. Go to Rhuarc, gather your leaders. Plan how you will face the Shadow together, do not let one man control the battle—and set your plans in place; do not allow them to be changed.”

“That could lead to disaster,” Darlin said. “If we don’t have flexibility ...”

“What needs be changed?” Aviendha asked grimly. “We hold. With everything we have, we hold. We don’t pull back. We don’t try anything clever. We just *hold.”*

Darlin nodded. “I’ll send for gateways to put Maidens atop those slopes. They can take out those Trollocs shooting arrows down at our lads. Can you deal with the enemy channelers?”

“Yes.”

Aviendha returned to her group, then started to draw on their power. The more of the One Power you held, the harder it was to cut you off from the True Source. She intended to hold so much that no man could separate her from it.

Helplessness. She *hated* feeling helpless. She let the anger at what had been done to her rage inside of her, and led her group toward the nearest source of male channeling that Flinn could identify.

* * *

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CHAPTER 34

Drifting

Rand stood in a place that was not.

A place outside of time, outside of the Pattern itself.

All around him spread a vast nothingness. Voracious and hungry, it longed to consume. He could actually *see* the Pattern. It looked like thousands upon thousands of twisting ribbons of light; they spun around him, above him, undulating and shimmering, twisting together. At least, that was how his mind chose to interpret it.

Everything that had ever been, everything that could be, everything that could have been ... it all lay right there, before him.

Rand could not comprehend it. The blackness around it sucked on him, *pulled* him toward it. He reached out to the Pattern and somehow anchored himself in it, lest he be consumed.

That changed his focus. It locked him, slightly, into a time. The pattern before him rippled, and Rand watched it being woven. It was not actually *the* Pattern, he knew, but his mind saw it that way. Familiar, as it had been described, the threads of lives weaving together.

Rand anchored himself in reality again and moved with it. Time had meaning again, and he could not see ahead or behind. He still could see all places, like a man standing above a globe as it turned.

Rand faced the emptiness. “So,” he said into it. “This is where it will really happen. Moridin would have had me believe that a simple sword fight would decide this all.”

HE IS OF ME. BUT HIS EYES ARE SMALL.

“Yes,” Rand said. “I have noticed the same.”

SMALL TOOLS CAN BE EFFECTIVE. THE THINNEST OF KNIVES CAN STOP A HEART. HE HAS BROUGHT YOU HERE, ADVERSARY.

None of this had happened the last time, when Rand had worn the name of Lews Therin. He could only interpret that as a good sign.

Now the battle truly began. He looked into the nothingness and felt it welling up. Then, like a sudden storm, the Dark One brought all of his force against Rand.

Perrin fell back against a tree, gasping at the pain. Slayers arrow had impaled his shoulder, the arrowhead coming out his back. He didn't dare pull it free, not with…

He wavered. Thoughts came lethargically. Where was he? He'd *shifted* away from Slayer as far as he could go, but… he didn't recognize this place. The trees were odd-shaped on top, too leafy, of a variety he'd never before seen. The storm blew here, but far more weakly.

Perrin slipped and hit the ground with a grunt. His shoulder flared with pain. He rolled over, staring up at the sky. He'd broken the arrow when falling.

It's… it's the wolf dream. I can just make the arrow vanish.

He tried to gather the strength to do so, but was too weak. He found himself floating, and he sent outward, seeking for wolves. He found the minds of some, and they started, sending back surprise.

A *two-legs who can talk? What is this? What are you?*

His nature seemed to frighten them, and they pushed him out of their minds. How could they not know what he was? Wolves had long, long memories. Surely… surely…

Faile, he thought. *So beautiful, so clever. I should go to her. I just need to… need to close this Waygate… and I can get back to the Two Rivers to her…*

Perrin rolled over and crawled to his knees. Was that his blood on the ground? So much red. He blinked at it.

"Here you are," a voice said.

Lanfear. He looked up at her, his vision blurry.

"So he defeated you," she said, folding her arms. "Disappointing. I didn't want to have to choose that one. I find you much more appealing, wolf."

"Please," he croaked.

"I'm tempted, though I shouldn't be," she said. "You've proven yourself weak."

"I ... I can beat him." Suddenly, the shame of having failed in front of her crushed Perrin. When had he started worrying about what Lanfear thought of him? He couldn’t quite point to it.

She tapped one finger on her arm.

“Please…” Perrin said, raising a hand. “Please.”

“No,” she said, turning away. “I’ve learned the mistake of setting my heart on one who does not deserve it. Goodbye, wolf pup.”

She vanished, leaving Perrin on hands and knees in this strange place.

Faile, a piece of his mind said. *Don’t worry about Lanfear. You have to go to Faile.*

Yes… Yes, he could go to her, couldn’t he? Where was she? The Field of Merrilor. That was where he’d left her. It was where she would be. He *shifted* there, somehow gathering himself just enough to manage it. But of course she wasn’t there. He was in the wolf dream.

The portal Rand would send. It would be here. He just had to get to it. He needed… He needed…

He collapsed to the ground and rolled to his back. He felt himself drifting into the nothingness. His vision blackened as he stared up at the churning sky. *At least... at least I was there for Rand,* Perrin thought.

The wolves could hold Shayol Ghul on this side now, couldn’t they? They could keep Rand safe… They’d have to.

Faile poked a stick at their meager cook fire. Darkness had fallen, and the fire glowed with a faint red light. They hadn’t dared make it larger. Deadly things prowled the Blight. Trollocs were the least of the dangers here.

The air here smelled pungent, and Faile expected to find a rotting corpse behind every black-speckled shrub. The ground cracked when she stepped, dry earth crushing beneath her boots, as if rain had not been seen in centuries. As she sat in the camp, she saw a group of sickly green lights—like glowing insects in a swarm—passing in the distance, over a stand of silhouetted trees. She knew enough of the Blight to hold her breath until they passed. She did not know what they were, and did not want to know.

She had led her group on a short hike to find this place for a camp. Along the way, one caravan worker had been killed by a twig, another by stepping in what looked like mud—but it had dissolved his leg. He’d gotten some of it on his face. He had thrashed and screamed as he died.

They’d had to forcibly gag him to keep the sounds from bringing other horrors.

The Blight. They couldn’t survive up here. A simple walk had killed two of their members, and Faile had some hundred people to try to protect. Guards from the Band, some members of *Cha Faile* and the wagon drivers and workers from her supply caravan. Eight of the wagons still worked, and they’d brought those to this camp, for now. They would probably be too conspicuous to take farther.

She wasn’t even certain they would survive this night. Light! Their only chance of rescue seemed to lie with the Aes Sedai. Would they notice what had happened and send help? It seemed a very faint hope, but she did not know about the One Power.

“All right,” Faile said softly to those who sat with her—Mandevwin, Aravine, Harnan, Setalle and Arrela of *Cha Faile*. “Let’s talk.”

The others looked hollow. Probably, like Faile, they had been frightened with stories of the Blight since childhood. The quick deaths in their party soon after entering this land had reinforced that. They knew how dangerous this place was. They kept jumping at every sound in the night.

“I will explain what I can,” Faile said, trying to divert them from the death all around. “During the bubble of evil, one of those crystals speared Berisha Sedai’s foot right as she made the gateway.”

“A wound?” Mandevwin asked from his place beside the fire. “Would that have been enough to make the gateway go awry? Truly, I know little of Aes Sedai business, nor have I wanted to. If one is distracted, is it possible to create an accidental opening to the wrong place?”

Setalle frowned, and the expression drew Faile’s attention. Setalle was neither nobility nor an officer. There was something about the woman, however… she projected authority and wisdom.

“You know something?” Faile asked her.

Setalle cleared her throat. “I know… some little about channeling. It was once an area of curiosity to me. Sometimes, if a weave is done incorrectly, it simply does nothing. Other times, the result is disastrous. I have not heard of a weave doing something like this, working but in the wrong way.”

“Well,” Harnan said, watching that darkness and shivering visibly, “the alternative is to think that she *wanted* to send us to the Blight.”

“Perhaps she was disoriented,” Faile said. “The pressure of the moment made her send us to the wrong place. I’ve been turned about before in a moment of tension and found myself running in the wrong direction. It could be like that.”

The others nodded, but again, Setalle looked concerned.

"What is it?" Faile prodded.

"Aes Sedai training is very extensive in relation to this type of situation," Setalle said. "No woman reaches the level of Aes Sedai without learning how to channel under extreme pressure. There are specific… barriers a woman must clear in order to wear the ring."

So, Faile thought, *Setalle must have a relative who is Aes Sedai. Someone close, if they shared information so private. A sister, perhaps?*

"Then do we assume that this is some kind of trap?" Aravine sounded confused. "That Berisha was some kind of Darkfriend? Surely the Shadow has greater things to misdirect than a simple supply train."

Faile said nothing. The Horn was safe; the chest it was in now sat in her small tent nearby. They had circled the wagons, and had allowed only this one fire. The rest of the caravan slept, or tried to.

The still, too-silent air made Faile feel as if they were being watched by a thousand eyes. If the Shadow had planned a trap for her caravan, it meant the Shadow knew about the Horn. In that case, they were in very serious danger. More serious, even, than being in the Blight itself.

"No," Setalle said. "No, Aravine is right. This could not have been an intentional trap. If the bubble of evil hadn't come, we would never have burst through the opening without looking where it led. So far as we know, these bubbles are completely random."

Unless Berisha was simply taking advantage of the circumstances, Faile thought. Also, there was the woman's death. That wound in her stomach had not looked like one caused by the spikes. It had looked like a knife wound. As if someone had attacked Berisha once the Horn was through the gateway. To keep her from telling what she'd done?

Light, Faile thought. *I am growing suspicious.*

"So," Harnan said, "what do we do?"

"That depends," Faile said, looking toward Setalle. "Is there any way an Aes Sedai could tell where we'd been sent?"

Setalle hesitated, as if reluctant to reveal how much she knew. When she continued, however, she spoke with confidence. "Weaves leave behind a residue. So yes, an Aes Sedai could discover where we'd gone. The residue does not last long, however: a few days at most, for a powerful weave. And not all channelers can read residues—this is a rare talent."

The way she spoke, so commanding and authoritative… the way she projected an immediate sense of being trustworthy. *It wasn't a relative, then,* Faile thought. *This woman trained in the White Tower.* Was she, perhaps, like Queen Morgase? Too weak in the One Power to become Aes Sedai?

"We will wait one day," Faile said. "If nobody has come for us by then, we will head south and try to escape the Blight as quickly as possible."

"I wonder how far north we are," Harnan said, rubbing his chin. "I don't fancy going over mountains to get back home."

"You'd rather remain in the Blight?" Mandevwin asked.

"Well, no," Harnan said. "But it could take *months* to walk back to safety. Months traveling through the Blight itself. . "

Light, Faile thought. *Traveling months in a place where we're lucky to have lost only two in one day.* They'd never make it. Even without the wagons, the caravan would stand out in this landscape like a fresh wound on diseased skin. They'd be lucky to last another day or two.

She resisted the urge to glance back at the tent. What would happen if she didn't bring it to Mat in time?

"There is another option," Setalle said hesitantly.

Faile looked to her.

"That peak you see to the east of us," Setalle said, speaking with obvious reluctance. "That is Shayol Ghul."

Mandevwin whispered something quietly that Faile didn't catch, squeezing his eyes shut. The others looked sick. Faile, however, caught Setalle's implication.

"That is where the Dragon Reborn is making war against the Shadow," Faile said. "One of our armies will be there. With channelers who could get us out."

"Indeed," Setalle said. "And the area just around Shayol Ghul is known as the Blasted Lands, lands that the horrors of the Blight are said to avoid."

"Because it's so terrible!" Arrela said. "If they don't go there, it's because they fear the Dark One himself!"

"The Dark One and his armies might have their attention on the fighting," Faile said slowly, nodding her head. "We can't survive long in the Blight—we'll be dead before the week is out. But if the Blasted Lands are free of those horrors, and if we can reach our armies there…"

It seemed a far better hope—slim though it was—than trying to march for months in the most dangerous place in the world. She told the others she'd consider what to do and dismissed them.

Her advisors moved off to make their bedrolls, Mandevwin going to check the men on watch. Faile remained staring at the embers of the fire, feeling sick.

Someone did kill Berisha, she thought. *I'm certain of it.* The gateway's location really could have been an accident. Accidents happened, even to Aes Sedai, no matter what Setalle thought. But if there *was* a Darkfriend in the caravan, one who had ducked through the opening and seen that it went to the Blight, they could have easily decided to kill Berisha in order to leave the Horn and the caravan stranded.

"Setalle," Faile said as the woman passed, "a word."

Setalle sat down beside Faile, wearing a composed expression. "I know what you're going to ask."

"How long has it been," Faile asked, "since you were in the White Tower?"

"It has been decades now."

"Are you capable of making a gateway?"

Setalle laughed. "Child, I couldn't light a candle. I was burned out in an accident. I haven't held the One Power in over twenty-five years."

"I see," Faile said. "Thank you."

Setalle moved off, and Faile found herself wondering. How truthful was her story? Setalle had been very helpful in their days together, and Faile couldn't blame the woman for keeping secret her ties to the White Tower. In any other situation, Faile wouldn't have given the woman's story a moment of doubt.

However, there was no way out here to confirm what she said. If Setalle was Black Ajah in hiding, her story about being burned out could simply be that—a story. Perhaps she could still channel. Or perhaps she couldn't, but had been stilled as a punishment. Could this woman be an escaped prisoner of the most dangerous type, an agent who had waited decades for the right moment to strike?

Setalle had been the one to suggest they go to Shayol Ghul. Was she seeking to bring the Horn to her master?

Feeling cold, Faile entered her tent as several members of *Cha Faile* set up watch around it. Faile wrapped herself in her bedroll. She knew that she was being overly suspicious. But how else was she to be, considering the circumstances?

Light, she thought. *The Horn of Valere, lost in the Blight.* A nightmare.

Aviendha knelt on one knee beside the smoldering corpse, holding her *angreal*—the turtle brooch that Elayne had given her. She breathed through her mouth as she gazed down on the man's face.

There were a surprising number of these red-veils. Whatever their origins, they were *not* Aiel. They did not follow *ji'e'toh.* During the night's fighting, she had seen two Maidens take a man captive. He had acted like *gai'shain*, but had then killed one from behind with a hidden knife.

"Well?" Sarene asked, breathless. While those at the Field of Merrilor rested and prepared for their challenge ahead, this battle at Shayol Ghul continued. The red-veil attack had lasted all through the night, the following day and now into the night again.

"I think I knew him," Aviendha said, disturbed. "He channeled for the first time when I was a child, making *algode* grow when it should not." She let the veil fall down on his face. "His name was Soro. He was kind to me. I watched him run across the dry ground at sunset after vowing to spit in Sightblinder's eye."

"I'm sorry," Sarene said, though her voice was uncolored by any sympathy. Aviendha was growing accustomed to that in the woman. It wasn't that Sarene didn't care; she just didn't let caring distract her. At least, not when her Warder was elsewhere. The Aes Sedai would have made a fine Maiden.

"Let's keep moving," Aviendha said, taking off with her pack of channelers. During the days and nights of fighting, Aviendha's team had shifted, melded and split as women needed rest. Aviendha herself had slept sometime during the day.

By common agreement, the one leading the circle avoided drawing on her own power—thus Aviendha was still at reasonable strength, despite so many hours of fighting. This allowed her to remain alert, on the hunt. The other women became wells of power to be drawn upon.

She had to be careful not to drain them too far. Tire a woman, and she could sleep for a few hours and be back up to fight again. Drain her completely, and she could be useless for days. At the moment, Aviendha had Flinn and three Aes Sedai with her. She had learned the weave to tell her when a man was channeling nearby—it was moving through the Aes Sedai and Wise Ones—but having a male channeler with her was far more useful.

Flinn pointed toward some flashes of fire on the side of the valley. They loped in that direction, passing corpses and places where the ground smoldered. With the growing light of dawn, Aviendha could see through the cold mist that Darlin's forces still held the mouth of the valley.

The Trollocs had pushed forward to the low earthen mounds that Ituralde had built. Killing had been done there on both sides. The Trollocs had taken far more losses—but then, they were also far more numerous. It seemed from her quick glance that they had overrun one of the earthen bulwarks, but Domani riders had come in from the reserves and were pushing them back.

Bands of Aiel roved and fought in the mouth of the valley itself. Some with red veils, some with black. *Too many,* Aviendha thought, as she slowed her team with a raised hand. She then continued forward on her own, quietly. She could draw a few hundred paces away from the women and still have access to their power.

She picked her way through the barren rocky fields of the valley. There were three dead bodies to her right, two with black veils. She tested them with a quick Delving; she would not be caught by the old trick of hiding among the corpses. She had used that one herself.

These three were truly dead, so she continued on in a crouch. In addition to the place where the Tairens and Domani held the Trollocs back, they had a second force guarding their camp and the pathway up to where Rand fought. In the space between, Aiel and red-veils roved in bands, each trying to best the other. Only, some of the red-veils could channel.

The ground thumped and shook nearby. A spray of soil fell through the air. Aviendha crouched down lower, but quickened her pace.

Ahead, over a dozen *siswai'aman* were rushing the position of two red-veils, both channelers. The red-veils cast up the earth beneath the attackers, sending bodies flying.

Aviendha understood why the Aiel kept going. These red-veils were an affront, a crime. The Seanchan, who would dare take Wise Ones captive, were not as disgusting as these. Somehow, the Shadow had taken the bravest of the Aiel and made them into these… these *things*.

Aviendha struck quickly, pulling strength through her *angreal* and her circle, weaving two lines of fire and hurling them at the red-veils. She began new weaves immediately, casting up the ground beneath the two channelers, and started a third set of weaves. She threw fire at the red-veils as they stumbled; one jumped away as the other was caught in her earthen blasts.

She struck the one who had fled with spears of flame. Then she hit both corpses with an extra burst of power, just to make certain. These men no longer held to *ji'e'toh.* They were no longer alive. They were weeds to be pulled.

She moved forward to check on the *siswai'aman.* Eight still lived, three of them wounded. Aviendha was not particularly good with Healing, but she was able to save the life of one man, keeping a wound in his throat from bleeding out. The other survivors gathered the wounded and moved back toward the camp.

Aviendha stood above the two corpses. She decided not to look at them closely. Seeing one man she had known was bad enough. These—

A shock went through her, and one of her wells of power vanished. Aviendha gasped. Another one winked out.

She immediately released the circle, then dashed back to where she had left the women. Flashes and explosions shook her. Aviendha clung to the One Power, her own strength now seeming pitifully small compared to what she'd been using.

She stumbled to a halt before the smoldering corpses of Kiruna and Faeldrin. The hideous woman she had seen before—the woman that Aviendha was increasingly certain was one of the Forsaken—stood there smiling at her. The horrid woman had her hand on Sarene's shoulder; the slender White stood with her head turned toward the Forsaken, staring at her with vapid, adoring eyes. Sarene's Warder lay dead at her feet.

Both vanished, twisting upon themselves, Traveling without use of a gateway. Aviendha fell to her knees beside the dead. Nearby, Damer Flinn groaned and tried to pull himself free of the cast-up earth. His left arm was completely gone, burned away at the shoulder.

Aviendha cursed and did what she could to Heal him, though he slipped into unconsciousness. She suddenly felt very tired and very, *very* alone.

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CHAPTER 35

A Practiced Grin

Olver missed Wind. Bela—the stout, shaggy mare he now rode— wasn’t bad, really. She was just slow. Olver knew this because he kept trying to nudge her forward, but she continued plodding along behind the other horses. Nothing he did could make her go any faster. Olver wanted to ride like a storm. Instead, he rode like a sturdy log in a placid river.

He wiped his brow. The Blight was pretty scary, and the others—most of them didn’t have horses—walked as if each step was going to bring a thousand Trollocs down on them. The rest of the caravan spoke in hushed voices, and they looked at the hillsides with suspicion.

They passed a group of withered trees, with sap leaking from open sores in the bark. That sap looked too red. Almost like blood. Nearby, one of the caravan drivers stepped up to inspect it.

Vines snapped down from the limbs above—vines that looked brown and dead, yet moved like snakes. Before Olver could scream, the caravan driver was hanging, dead, from the upper branches of the tree.

The entire line of people froze in place, horrified. Above, the tree actually *pulled* the dead man into itself through a split in the bark. Ingesting him. Maybe that sap *was* blood.

Olver looked on, horrified.

“Steady,” Lady Faile said, a slight tremor in her voice. “I’ve told you, don’t draw close to plants! Don’t touch anything.”

They moved on, a solemn bunch. Sandip, riding nearby, muttered to himself. “That’s the fifteenth one. Fifteen men, dead in a few days. Light! We’re never going to survive this!”

If only it were Trollocs! Olver couldn’t fight trees and insects. Who could? But Trollocs, those he’d be able to fight. Olver had his knife, and he’d learned a few things about using it from Harnan and Silvic. Olver wasn’t that tall, but he figured that would make Trollocs underestimate him.

He could lunge low and go for their vitals before they knew what was happening.

He told himself this to keep his hands from shaking as he kicked Bela, hoping to move up by Lady Faile. In the distance, he heard a screeching sound, like something dying in a horrible way. Olver shivered. He'd heard that same sound earlier in the day. Did it sound closer now?

Setalle gave him a worried glance as he neared the front. The others tried everything they could to keep him from danger. He steeled himself, ignoring that horrid screeching off in the distance. Everyone thought Olver was fragile, but he wasn't. They hadn't seen what he had, growing up. In truth, he didn't like thinking about those times. It seemed as if he'd lived three lives. One before his parents died, one when he'd been alone and now this one.

Anyway, he was used to fighting people bigger than he was. It was the Last Battle. They kept saying everyone would be needed. Well, why not him? When the Trollocs came, the first thing he'd do was climb down off this slow mount. He could *stroll* faster than this animal could gallop! Well, the Aiel didn't need horses. Olver hadn't gone to train with them yet, but he would. He had it planned out. He hated all Aiel, but mostly the Shaido, and he would need to learn their secrets if he was going to kill them.

He'd go among them and demand to be trained. They'd take him in, and would treat him poorly, but eventually they'd respect him and let him train with their warriors. There were stories about that. It was how things happened.

After he knew their secrets, he'd go to the Snakes and Foxes and receive answers on how to locate the Shaido who had murdered his father. From there, tracking and killing them would be a quest worthy of its own story.

I'll take Noal, he thought. *He's been everywhere. He can be my guide. He* .. .

Noal was dead.

Sweat crawled down the side of Olver's face as he stared at the rocky path ahead. They passed more of those terrible trees, and now everyone gave them a wide berth. Beside the path, though, one of the men pointed out a large patch of that killing mud. It looked brown and thick, and Olver spotted several bones peeking out.

This place was horrible!

He wished Noal were here. Noal had gone everywhere, seen everything. He'd know how to get them out of this place. But Noal was gone. Olver had only heard the news recently, filtered through things that the Lady Moiraine had shared about what happened at the Tower of Ghenjei.

Everyone's dying, Olver thought, eyes still forward. *Everyone*…

Mat had run off to the Seanchan, Talmanes to fight alongside Queen Elayne. One by one, everyone in this group was being eaten by trees, mud or monsters.

Why did they all leave Olver alone?

He rubbed at his bracelet. Noal had given it to him, shortly before leaving. Woven of rough fibers, it was of a type warriors wore in a faraway land, so Noal had told him. It was the mark of a man who had seen battle and lived.

Noal… dead. Would Mat die, too?

Olver felt hot, tired and very frightened. He nudged Bela forward, and fortunately she obeyed, trotting a little faster up the slope so Olver moved up the line. They'd abandoned the wagons, then left for some place called the Blasted Lands, which required them to climb some foothills. In the morning, they'd entered a pass between the mountains. Though he felt warm, the air *was* getting cooler as they climbed. He didn't mind that at all. It still smelled awful, though. Like rotting corpses.

Their group had started with fifty soldiers and almost half as many wagon drivers and workers. There were also a handful of others like Olver, Setalle and the half-dozen members of Lady Faile's bodyguard.

So far, they'd lost fifteen people to hazards of the Blight, including five killed by some horrible three-eyed things that had attacked the camp yesterday morning. He'd overheard Lady Faile saying that she considered them lucky to have lost only fifteen so far, that it could have been worse.

It didn't seem lucky to Olver. This place was awful and he wanted to be out of it. The Waste wouldn't be as bad as this, would it? *Cha Faile's* men and women acted like Aiel. A little bit like Aiel. Maybe they'd done as Olver wanted to, and trained in the Waste. He'd have to ask them.

He rode on for another half-hour or so. Eventually, he coaxed Bela up to the front of the line. Lady Faile's brilliant black mare looked fast. Why couldn't Olver have been given a horse like that one?

Faile had Mat's chest tied to the back of her horse. At first, Olver had been pleased with that, as he figured Mat would want that tabac pretty badly. Mat always complained about not having good tabac. Then Olver had heard Faile explaining to someone else that the chest had simply been a convenient place to stow some of her things. Had she thrown away the tabac? Mat wouldn’t like that.

Faile looked at him, and Olver grinned, giving it as much confidence as he could. It wouldn’t do for her to see how scared he was.

Most women liked his grin. He’d been practicing it, though he didn’t use Mat’s grin as a model. Mat’s always made him look guilty. You learned grins when you were forced to fend for yourself, and Olver needed one that made him seem innocent. And he *was* innocent. Mostly.

Faile did not smile back. Olver figured that she was pretty good to look at, despite that nose. She wasn't very soft, though. Bloody ashes, but she had a glare that could rust good iron.

Faile rode between Aravine and Vanin. Though they spoke softly, Olver could hear what they were saying. He made sure to stare in the other direction, so they'd think he wasn’t eavesdropping. And he wasn’t. He just wanted to be out of the trail dust of the other horses.

“Yes,” Vanin was whispering. “It may not seem it, but we're close to the Blasted Lands. Burn my own mother, I can’t believe we're going there. But do you feel the air? Its getting cooler. We haven’t seen anything *really* nasty since those three-eyed things yesterday morning.”

“We are close,” Aravine agreed. “Soon, we will be near the Dark One, in a land where nothing grows, corrupted or not, where there is no life, not even the nastier things from the Blight.”

“I suppose that should be a comfort.”

“Not really,” Vanin said, wiping his brow. “Because the Shadowspawn up here are more dangerous. If we survive, it will be because there’s a bloody war going on. The Shadowspawn are all locked in battle. If we're lucky, the Blasted Lands, except right around Shayol Ghul, will be as empty as a man’s purse after a deal with the bloody Sea Folk. Pardon my language, my Lady.”

Olver squinted at the approaching mountain peak.

That’s where the bloody Dark One lives, Olver thought. *And that’s probably where Mat is, not Merrilor.* Mat talked about staying away from danger, but he always found his way to it anyway. Olver figured that Mat was just trying to be humble, but was bad at it. Why else would you say you don’t want to be a hero, then always bloody end up charging right into danger?

“And this path?” Faile asked Vanin. “You said there might have been traffic here recently. Wouldn’t that indicate that this place is far from as empty as you so colorfully described?”

Vanin grunted. “It does look used.”

“So someone has been moving wagons through the area,” Aravine said.

“I don’t know if that is a good sign or a bad one.”

“I don’t think there are *any* good signs up here,” Vanin said. “Maybe we should just pick someplace nearby and hole up, waiting.” He sighed, wiping his brow again, though Olver didn’t see why. It was growing pretty cold—he could tell, even through the course of the day. And there seemed to be fewer plants, too. He was just fine with that.

He glanced over his shoulder at the stand of trees that had taken that poor man’s life. There didn’t seem to be any others like it nearby, particularly not ahead of them along the path.

“We can’t afford to wait, Vanin,” Faile said. “I intend to get back to Merrilor, one way or another. The Dragon Reborn will be fighting at Thakan’dar. That’s where we need to go to get out of this forsaken place.”

Vanin groaned, but Olver smiled. He *would* find his way to Mat, and show how dangerous he could be in battle. Then…

Well, then maybe Mat wouldn’t leave him like the others had. That would be good, as Olver was going to need Mat’s help tracking down those Shaido. After all he’d learned training with the Band, he was certain nobody would push him around. And nobody would take those he loved from him ever again.

“There are accounts in the archives that explain what we saw.” Cadsuane picked up her cup of tea to warm her hands.

The Aiel girl, Aviendha, sat on the floor of the tent. *What I wouldn’t give to have that one in the Tower,* Cadsuane thought. These Wise Ones… they had fight to them. Real bite, like the best of the women in the White Tower.

Cadsuane was increasingly convinced that the Shadow for years had been carrying out a complex plan to undermine the White Tower. It went deeper than Siuan Sanche’s unfortunate unseating and Elaida’s reign. It might be decades, centuries, before they understood the extent of the Shadow’s planning. However, the sheer number of Black sisters—hundreds, not the few dozen Cadsuane had guessed—shouted of what had happened.

For now, Cadsuane had to work with what she had. That included these Wise Ones, poorly trained in using weaves but never lacking in grit. Useful. Like Sorilea, despite her weakness in the One Power, who sat farther back in the tent, watching.

“I have made some inquiries, child,” Cadsuane said to Aviendha. “What this woman does is *indeed* Traveling. However, the only fragments of documents mentioning it date back to the War of Power.”

Aviendha frowned. “I saw no weaves, Cadsuane Sedai.”

Cadsuane masked a smile at the respectful tone. The al’Thor boy had put this girl in command—and, in truth, better her than some others. However, he *should* have chosen Cadsuane, and Aviendha likely knew it.

“That is because the woman was not weaving the One Power,” Cadsuane replied.

“What else would it be?”

“Do you know why the Dark One was originally freed?”

Aviendha looked as if remembering something. “Ah… yes. Then they are channeling the Dark One’s power?”

“It is called the True Power,” Cadsuane said. “The accounts say that Traveling by True Power works in the way you have seen this woman move. Few saw it happen. The Dark One was miserly with his essence during the War of Power, and only the most favored were granted access. I surmise from this fact that this is *most definitely* one of the Forsaken. From your description of what she did to poor Sarene, I would suspect it is Graendal.”

“The stories never mentioned Graendal being so ugly,” Sorilea said softly.

“If you were one of the Forsaken, easily recognized by description, would you not wish to change your appearance to remain unknown?”

“Perhaps,” Sorilea said. “But then I would not use this… True Power, as you name it. That would defeat the purpose of my disguise.”

“From what Aviendha has told us,” Cadsuane noted, “the woman did not have much of a choice. She had to escape quickly.”

Cadsuane and Sorilea met eyes, and each nodded in agreement. They would hunt this Forsaken, the two of them.

I won't have you dying on me now, boy, Cadsuane thought, glancing over her shoulder toward where al'Thor, Nynaeve and Moiraine continued their work. Every channeler in the camp could feel that pulsing. *At least, not until you've done what you need to do.* Cadsuane had expected the Forsaken to be here. It was why she'd come to this battlefront.

Wind shook the tent, chilling Cadsuane down deep. This place was awful, even when the battle slowed. The dread that hung here was like that of a funeral for a child. It stifled laughter, killed smiles. The Dark One watched. Light, but it would be good to leave this place.

Aviendha drank her tea. The woman still looked haunted, although she had obviously lost allies in battle before.

"I left them to die," she whispered.

"Phaw," Cadsuane said to her. "You are not to blame for what one of the Forsaken did, child."

"You don't understand," Aviendha said. "We were in a circle, and they tried to break free—I felt them—but I didn't know what was happening. I held on to their Power, and so they couldn't fight her. I left them helpless."

"Well, from now on don't leave those in your circle behind," Cadsuane said briskly. "You could not have known what would happen."

"If you suspect this one is nearby, Aviendha," Sorilea said, "you will send word to Cadsuane, me or Amys. There is no shame in admitting that another is too strong to face alone. We will defeat this woman together and protect the *Car'a'carn"*

"Very well," Aviendha said. "But you will do the same for me. All of you."

She waited. Cadsuane reluctantly agreed, as did Sorilea.

Faile crouched in a dark tent. The air had grown even colder, now that they were close to Thakan'dar. She ran her thumb along the hilt of her knife, breathing in slowly and evenly, then releasing the breath in the same manner. She stared at the tent flaps, unblinking.

She'd placed the Horn's chest there with one corner sticking out into the night. She felt more alone here on the border of the Blasted Lands—surrounded by supposed allies—than she had in the Shaido camp.

Two nights ago, she'd been called out of her tent to inspect some odd tracks that had worried the men. They hadn't lost anyone since drawing so close to the Blasted Lands—that part of the plan was working—but tensions were still high. She'd been gone only a few minutes, but when she'd returned, the Horn's chest in her tent had been moved just slightly.

Someone had tried to open it. *Light.* Fortunately, they hadn't managed to break the lock, and the Horn had still been there when she'd looked.

The traitor could be anyone. One of the Redarms, a wagon driver, a member of *Cha Faile.* Faile had spent the past two nights being extra—even obviously—vigilant with the chest to frustrate the thief. Then, tonight, she'd complained of a headache and allowed Setalle to fix her some tea to help her sleep. She'd brought the tea back to her tent, had not taken a sip and now crouched, waiting.

The chest's corner would be obvious, poking out into the night. Would they try again? As a precaution, she'd removed the Horn from the chest and taken it when she went out to answer the call of nature. She'd hidden it there in a cubby of rock and, upon returning, had put *Cha Faile* on patrol duty for the night, away from her tent. They had not liked leaving her unguarded, but Faile had made it clear that she was worried about tensions among the men.

That would be enough. Light, let it be enough.

Hours passed with Faile crouched in that same position, ready to leap up and call the alarm the moment someone tried to enter her tent. Surely they would try again tonight, when she was supposedly ill.

Nothing. Her muscles ached, but she didn't move. The thief could be out there, in the dark, waiting. Wondering if this was the right moment to strike, to grab the Horn and run off to his or her masters. It—

A scream shattered the night.

Faile wavered. A distraction?

That scream, she thought, judging the direction. *It came. . . from just west of here.*

Near where she'd hidden the Horn. Faile cursed, making a snap decision. The chest was empty. If she took the bait and it really was just a distraction, then she would not lose anything. If, on the other hand, the thief had anticipated her… She darted from the tent as others scrambled from bedrolls. Members of *Cha Faile* raced through the camp. The yell came again.

It was accompanied by a haunting screech, a type that had been following them in the distance.

She crashed through some thin, Blight-stained weeds. Running through them was a foolish move in a place where a twig could kill, but she was not thinking clearly.

She arrived first on the scene, reaching the area where she'd hidden the Horn. There stood not only Vanin, but Harnan as well. Vanin clutched the Horn of Valere in thick arms while Harnan fought against some kind of beast with dark fur, shouting and swinging his sword.

Vanin looked at Faile and grew as pale as a Whitecloak's shirt.

"Thief!" Faile shouted. "Stop him! He has stolen the Horn of Valere!"

Vanin cried out, tossing the Horn as if it had bitten him, then dashing away. Light, but he could move quickly for one of his bulk! He grabbed Harnan by the shoulder, pulling him to the side as the beast screamed that haunting wail.

Other roars came in the distance. Faile skidded to the ground, grabbing the Horn and clutching it close. These men were no common thieves. They had not only seen through her plan, but anticipated exactly where she'd hidden the Horn. She felt like a farmgirl who had just fallen for a townsman's three-cup scam.

Those who had come running with her stood stunned, either by the sight of the Horn or the monster. The creature screeched—it looked like some kind of bear with too many arms, though it was larger than any bear Faile had seen. She stumbled to her feet. There was no time to look for the thieves as the beast smashed its way into Faile's guards. It ripped the head off a member of *Cha Faile*, screeching.

Faile shouted, flinging a knife at the thing as Arrela hacked at one of its shoulders with her sword. Just then, a *second* beast came lumbering over the rocks next to Faile.

She cursed, leaping away, flinging a knife. She hit it—or, at least, the thing cried out in what sounded like anger and pain. As Mandevwin rode up on horseback, bearing a torch, the light revealed that the horrible things had faces like those of insects, with a multitude of fanglike teeth. Faile's knife protruded from one bulblike eye.

"Protect the lady!" Mandevwin yelled, throwing spears to nearby Redarms, who rammed them at the first monster, pushing it back from Arrela—who scrambled away, bleeding. The woman hadn't lost her sword, though.

Faile fell back as *Cha Faile* organized around her, then looked down at what she held. The Horn of Valere itself, pulled from the sack in which she'd hidden it. She could blow it…

No, she thought. *It is bound to Cauthon.* To her, it would be just an ordinary horn.

"Steady!" Mandevwin said, dancing his warhorse back as one of the beasts lunged at it. "Verdin, Laandon, we need more spears! Go! The things fight like boars. Draw them forward, impale them!"

The tactic worked on one of the monsters, but as Mandevwin yelled, the other one charged at him and grabbed his horse by the neck. The beast brushed aside soldiers who tried to strike, and Mandevwin crashed to the ground, groaning.

Still clutching the Horn, Faile dashed past where a group of Redarms had managed to skewer the other beast. She grabbed a freshly lit torch and threw it at the other monster, lighting the fur on its back. The thing bellowed as fire raced up its spine, the fur burning like dry tinder. It dropped Mandevwin's dead horse, the head ripped nearly free, as it thrashed, yelling and howling.

"Grab the wounded!" Faile ordered. She took a member of the Band by the arm. "See to Mandevwin!"

The man looked down at the Horn she held, eyes wide, then shook himself and nodded, calling for two others to help him lift the man.

"My Lady?" Aravine asked, standing near the bushes behind. "What is happening?"

"Two Redarms tried to steal what I have been carrying," Faile said. "Now we're going to ride away into the night."

"But—"

"Listen!" Faile said, pointing into the darkness.

Distantly, a dozen different screeches sounded, responding to the cries of the dying beast.

"The screams will draw further horrors, as will the scent of spilled blood. We go. If we can get deeply enough into the Blasted Lands tonight, we might be safe. Rouse the camp and get the wounded onto horses. Prepare everyone else for a forced quick march. Quickly!"

Aravine nodded, scrambling off. Faile spared a glance in the direction Harnan and Vanin had gone. She longed to hunt them down, but tracking them in the night would require them to move slowly, and that would mean death this night. Besides, who knew what resources a pair of Darkfriends had access to?

They would flee. And Light, she hoped that she hadn’t been deceived more than it seemed. If Vanin had somehow known to prepare a dummy Horn, a replica to drop and leave for Faile to “rescue” as he fled…

She’d never know. She’d reach the Last Battle with a fake Horn, and perhaps doom them all. That possibility haunted her as the caravan’s members hastily moved into the darkness, hoping in Light and luck to escape the dangers of the night.

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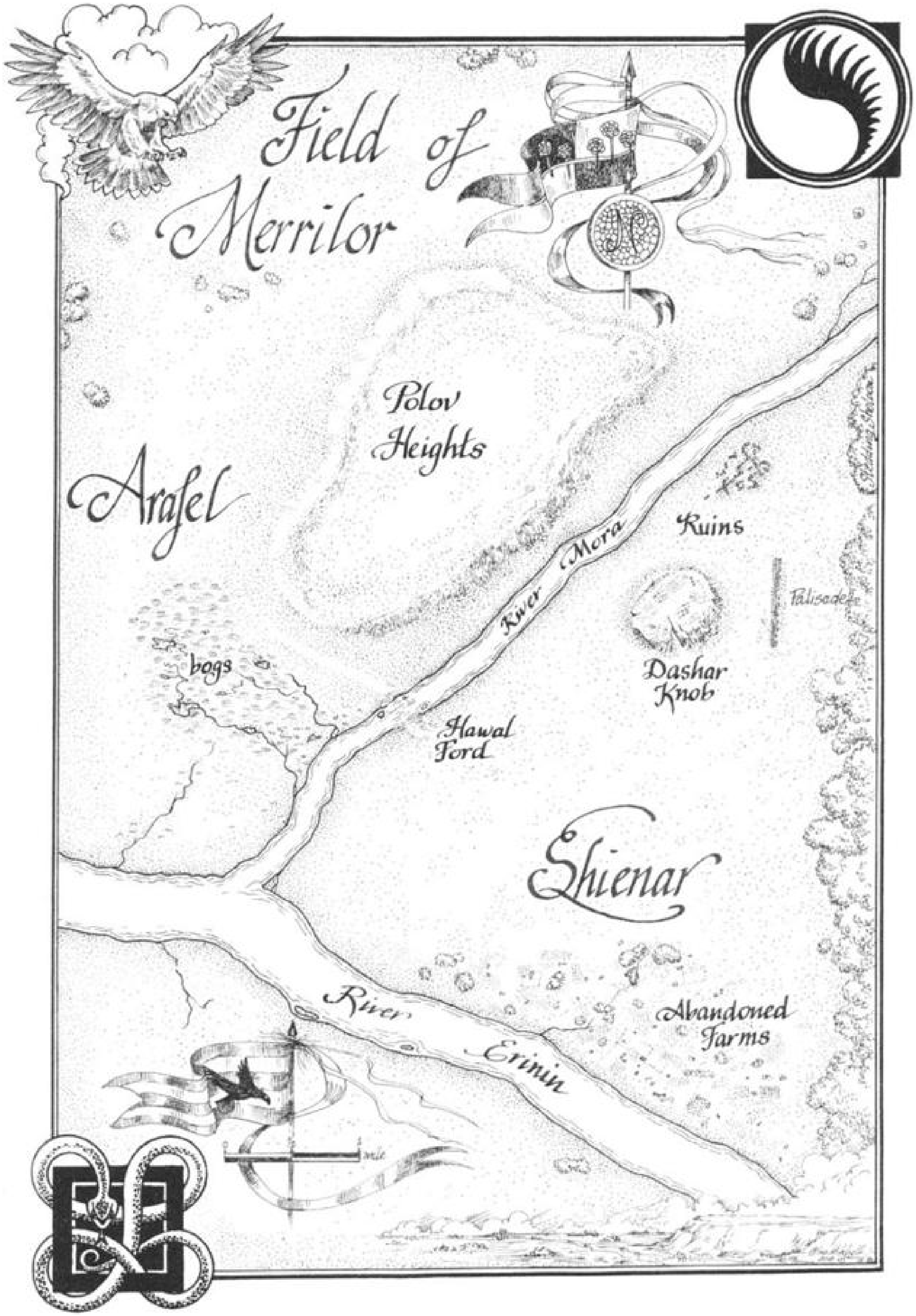
Field of Merrilor
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River Erinin
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CHAPTER 36

Unchangeable Things

Something was wrong with Rand.

Nynaeve clutched the stalagmite deep within the Pit of Doom, holding herself from being pulled by the winds into that nothingness in front of her. Moiraine had called it the Dark One’s essence, but wouldn’t that make it the True Power? Worse, if his essence was in the world, wouldn’t that mean that he had broken free? Whatever it was, its nature was pure evil, and it filled Nynaeve with a terror like none she had ever felt before in her life.

It pulled with a powerful force, drawing all that was nearby into it. She feared that if she let go, she would be yanked in. Already, it had stolen her shawl, making it vanish. If that nothingness pulled her in, her life would end. Perhaps her soul as well.

Rand! Nynaeve thought. Could she do something to help him? He stood before Moridin, the two of them locked together, sword against sword. Frozen as if in a moment. Sweat trickled down Rand’s face. He did not speak. He didn’t so much as blink.

His foot had touched the darkness. At that moment, he had frozen, and so had Moridin. They were like statues. The air howled around them, but did not seem to affect them as it did Nynaeve. They’d been standing like that, frozen, for a good fifteen minutes.

All in all, it had been less than an hour since the group of them had entered the pit to face the Dark One.

Nynaeve watched rocks slide across the ground, then be sucked into that blackness. Her clothing rippled and flapped as if in a strong wind, as did Moiraine s, who huddled nearby holding to her own tooth of stone. Mercifully, the stench of sulfur that had filled the cavern was drawn away here into the blackness.

She couldn’t use the One Power. Rand drew every bit of it she could hold, though he didn't seem to be doing anything with it. Could she reach

Moridin? He didn’t seem to be able to move. What if she took a rock to his head? It would be better than waiting.

Nynaeve tested her weight against the pull of the nothingness ahead, relaxing her grip on the stalagmite. She immediately started to slip, and pulled herself back.

I am not *spending the Last Battle dinging to a rock!* she thought. *Not the same one the whole time, at the very least.* She had to risk moving. Going directly forward seemed too dangerous, but if she moved sideways… yes, there was another stalagmite nearby to her right. She managed to let go of her hold and half-slip, half-scuttle to the next stalagmite. From there, she picked out another one, carefully eased off her hold and grabbed it instead.

The process was very slow. *Rand, you wool-headed fool,* she thought. If he’d let her or Moiraine lead the circle, then maybe they could have done something while he was fighting!

She reached another stalagmite, then stopped as she saw something to her right. She almost screamed. A *woman* huddled there, hidden against the wall, sheltered from the wind by the rocks. She appeared to be crying.

Nynaeve glanced at Rand, who was still locked in stasis with Moridin, then approached the woman. The greater number of stalagmites here meant that Nynaeve could crawl more safely, the stones blocking the pull of the nothingness.

Nynaeve reached the woman. She was chained to the wall. “Alanna?” Nynaeve shouted over the wind. “Light, what are you doing here?”

The Aes Sedai blinked reddened eyes at Nynaeve. Her eyes stared dully, as if she had no mind. As Nynaeve examined the woman, she noticed that the entire left side of Alanna’s body was bloodied from a knife wound to the gut. Light! Nynaeve should have known that from the paleness of the woman’s face.

Why stab her and leave her here? *She bonded Rand,* Nynaeve realized. *Oh, Light.* It was a trap. Moridin had left Alanna bleeding, then confronted Rand. When Alanna died, Rand—as her Warder—would be driven mad with rage, making him easy for Moridin to destroy.

Why hadn’t he noticed? Nynaeve fished at her pouches for herbs, then stopped short. Could herbs do anything at this point? She needed to use the One Power to Heal such a wound. Nynaeve ripped the woman’s clothing, making a bandage, then tried to draw *saidar* for Healing.

Rand had it, and he wouldn’t let go. Frantic, she tried to batter him away, but Rand held tight. Tighter, as she tried to push against him. He *did* seem to be channeling it, somehow, but she couldn’t see the weaves. She could feel something, but with the howling wind and the strange nature of the pit, it was like a tempest swirling around her. The Power was wrapped up in that somehow.

Blast it! She needed *saidar!* It wasn’t Rand’s fault. He could not give her any power while leading the circle.

Nynaeve pressed her hand against Alanna’s wound, feeling helpless. Dared she call for Rand to release her from the circle? If she did, Moridin would undoubtedly turn on her and attack Alanna.

What to do? If this woman died, Rand would lose control. That, likely, would be the end of him… and of the Last Battle.

Mat hacked at the wood with his axe to sharpen it to a point. “See,” he said, “it doesn’t need to be fancy. Save your pretty carpentry to impress the mayor’s daughter.”

The watching men and women nodded with grim determination. They were farmers, villagers and craftsmen, like people he’d known back in the Two Rivers. Mat had thousands of them under his command. He’d never have suspected that there would be so many. The good people of the land had come to fight.

Mat figured they were insane, to a person. If he had been able to escape, he would be hiding in a basement somewhere. Burn him, but he would have tried.

Those dice rattled in his head, just as they’d been doing ever since Egwene gave him control of all of the armies of the Light. Being bloody *ta'veren* was not worth two beans.

He kept at it, shaping his stake for the palisade. One fellow watched particularly carefully, an old farmer with skin so leathery that Trolloc swords would likely just bounce off. He looked familiar to Mat for some reason.

Burn these memories, Mat thought. Undoubtedly, this fellow resembled someone from one of those old memories Mat had been given. Yes, that felt right. He could not *quite* remember. A… cart? A Fade?

“Come on, Renald,” the fellow said to one of his companions—another farmer, Borderlander stock from the looks of him. “Let’s go on down the line, and see if we can hurry the other lads up.”

The two headed off as Mat finished his stake, then wiped his brow. He reached for another length of wood—he had better give these sheepherders another demonstration—when a *cadin’sor*-clad figure ran up along the mostly finished palisade wall.

Urien had bright red hair, kept short save for the tail in the back. He raised a hand to Mat as he passed. “They are agitated, Matrim Cauthon,” Urien said, not stopping. “I believe they are coming in this direction.”

“Thanks,” Mat called. “I owe you.”

The Aiel turned as he ran, jogging backward for a second and facing Mat. “Just win this battle! I have bet a skin of *oosquai* upon our success.”

Mat snorted. The only thing more discomforting than a stoic Aiel was a grinning one. Bet? On the outcome of this battle? What kind of bet was that? If they lost, nobody would live long enough to collect…

Mat frowned. Actually, that was a pretty *good* bet to be making. “Who did you find to take that bet?” Mat called. “Urien?” But the man was already too far away to hear.

Mat grumbled, but handed his axe to one of the people nearby, a slender Tairen woman. “Keep them in line, Cynd.”

“Yes, Lord Cauthon.”

“I’m no bloody lord,” Mat said by habit as he picked up his *ashandarei*. He walked off, then turned to look at the palisade being erected and caught sight of a handful of Deathwatch Guards walking along the rows of working people. Like wolves among the sheep. Mat hurried on.

His armies did not have much time left to prepare. Using gateways had put them ahead of the Trollocs, but they had not escaped. Light, there *was* no escape. Mat had been given his choice of battlefields, though, and this Merrilor place would work best.

Like picking the plot for your own grave, Mat thought. *Sure, I’d rather not have to choose in the first place.*

The palisade was rising in front of the woods east of the field. He did not have time to section off or surround the entire area with a palisade, and doing so would not make much sense anyway. With those Sharan channelers, the Shadow could rip through walls like a sword through silk.

But some palisades, with catwalks on top, would give his archers height to target Trollocs.

Mat had two rivers to work with here. The River Mora flowed in a southwest direction, running between the Heights and Dashar Knob. Its southern bank was in Shienar, the northern bank in Arafel. It joined the River Erinin, which ran directly westward at the southern edge of the field.

Those rivers would serve better than any walls, particularly now that he had the resources to defend them correctly. Well, if you could call them resources. Half his soldiers were as new as spring grass and the other half had fought near to death the week before. The Borderlanders had lost two men out of three—Light, two out of *three.* A lesser army would have disbanded.

Counting everyone he had, Mat would be outnumbered four to one when those Trollocs arrived, at least according to the reports from the Fists of Heaven. It was going to be messy.

Mat pulled his hat down further, then scratched at the side of the new eyepatch that Tuon had given him. Red leather. He liked it.

"Here now," he said, passing some of the new Tower Guard recruits. They were sparring with quarterstaffs—spearheads were still being forged to go on the ends. The men looked more likely to hurt themselves than the enemy.

Mat handed his *ashandarei* to a man, then took a quarterstaff from another as the first hastily saluted. Most of these men were not old enough to need to shave more than once a month. If the boy whose staff he had taken was a day over fifteen, Mat would eat his boots. He would not even boil them first!

"You cant cringe every time the staff hits something!" Mat said. "Close your eyes on the battlefield, and you're dead. Didn't you lot pay any attention last time?"

Mat held up the staff, showing them where to grip it, then put them through the blocking practice his father had shown him back when he had been young enough to think fighting might actually be fun. He worked up a sweat, hitting at each of the new recruits in turn, forcing each to block.

"Burn me, but you *will* figure this out," Mat said loudly to all of them. "I wouldn't care so much, as you lot seem to have the wits of stumps, but if you get yourselves killed, your mothers will be expecting me to send them word. I won't do it, mind you. But I might feel a little guilty between games of dice, and I hate feeling guilty, so pay attention!"

"Lord Cauthon?" said the lad who had given him the staff.

"I'm not—" He stopped. "Well, yes, what is it?"

"Can't we just learn the sword?"

"Light!" Mat said. "What's your name?"

"Sigmont, sir."

"Well, Sigmont, how much time do you think we have? Maybe you could wander out, talk to the Dreadlords and the Shadowspawn and ask them to give me a few more months' time so I can train you all properly."

Sigmont blushed, and Mat handed back his staff. *City boys.* He sighed.

"Look here, all I want is for you lot to be able to defend yourselves. I don't have time to make you great warriors, but I *can* teach you to work together, keep a formation, and not shy away when the Trollocs come. That will get you farther than any kind of fancy swordplay, trust me."

The youths nodded reluctantly.

"Get back to your practice," Mat said, wiping his brow and looking over his shoulder. Bloody ashes! The Deathwatch Guards were heading his way.

He grabbed his *ashandarei* and rushed off, then ducked around the side of a tent, only to stumble into a group of Aes Sedai approaching on the path.

"Mat?" Egwene asked from the middle of the group of women. "Are you well?"

"They're bloody chasing me," he said, glancing around the side of the tent. "Who is chasing you?" Egwene said.

"Deathwatch Guards," Mat said. "I'm supposed to be back at Tuon's tent." Egwene waved a few fingers, sending the other women off, except her two shadows—Gawyn and that Seanchan woman—who remained with her. "Mat," Egwene said in a suffering tone, "I'm glad you've finally decided to see reason and leave the Seanchan camp, but couldn't you have waited until *after* the battle was over to defect?"

"Sorry," he said, only half-listening. "But can we walk on toward the Aes Sedai quarter of camp? They won't follow me there." Maybe not. If all Deathwatch Guards were like Karede, maybe they would. Karede would dive after a man falling off a cliff in order to catch him.

Egwene started back, seeming displeased with Mat. How was it Aes Sedai could be so perfectly emotionless, yet still let a man know they disapproved of him? Come to think of it, an Aes Sedai would probably follow a man off a cliff, too, if only to explain to him—in detail—all the things he was doing incorrectly in the way he went about killing himself.

Mat wished so many of his thoughts lately did not involve feeling like he was the one jumping off the cliff.

“We’ll have to find a way to explain to Fortuona why you ran,” Egwene said as they approached the Aes Sedai quarter. Mat had placed it as far from the Seanchan as was reasonable. “The marriage is going to present a problem. I suggest that you—”

“Wait, Egwene,” Mat said. “What are you talking about?”

“You are running from the Seanchan guards,” Egwene said. “Weren’t you listening ... Of course you weren’t. It is pleasant to know that, as the world crumbles, a few things are completely unchangeable. *Cuendillar* and Mat Cauthon.”

“I’m running from them,” Mat said, looking over his shoulder, “because Tuon wants me to sit in judgment. Any time a soldier is seeking the Empress’s mercy for a crime, *I’m* the one who is supposed to bloody hear his case!”

“You,” Egwene said, “passing judgment?”

“I know,” Mat said. “Too much bloody work, if you ask me. I’ve been dodging guardsmen all day, trying to steal a little time for myself.”

“A little honest work wouldn’t kill you, Mat.”

“Now, you know that’s not true. Soldiering is honest work, and it gets men killed all the bloody time.”

Gawyn Trakand was apparently practicing to be an Aes Sedai sometime, because he kept giving Mat glares that would have made Moiraine proud. Well, let him. Gawyn was a prince. He had been raised to do things like pass judgment. He probably sent a few men to the gallows each day at his lunch break, just to keep in practice.

But Mat… Mat was not going to order men to be executed, and that was that. They passed a group of Aiel sparring together. Was this group what Urien had been running to reach? Once they had passed—Mat trying to make the others walk faster so the Seanchan would not catch up—he drew closer to Egwene.

“Have you found it yet?” he asked softly.

“No,” Egwene said, eyes forward.

No need to mention what *it* was. “How could you have lost the thing? After all the work we bloody went through to find it?”

“We? From the telling I hear, Rand, Loial and the Borderlanders had far more to do with finding it than you.”

“I was there,” Mat said. “I rode across the entire bloody continent, didn’t I? Burn me, first Rand, then you. Is everybody going to chivvy me about those days? Gawyn, you want a turn?”

“Yes, please.” He sounded eager.

“Shut up,” Mat said. “It seems that nobody can remember straight but me. I hunted down that bloody Horn like a madman. And, I’ll mention, it was me blowing the thing that let you all escape Falme.”

“Is that how you remember it?” Egwene asked.

“Sure,” Mat said. “I mean, I have some holes in there, but I’ve pieced it mostly together.”

“And the dagger?”

“That trinket? Hardly worth anyone’s time.” He caught himself reaching to his side, to where he had once carried it. Egwene raised an eyebrow at him. “Anyway, thats not the point. We're going to need that bloody instrument, Egwene. We’ll *need* it.”

“We have people searching,” she said. “We’re not sure exactly what happened. There was a Traveling residue, but it’s been a while and… Light, Mat. We’re trying. I promise it. It’s not the only thing the Shadow has stolen from us recently…”

He glanced at her, but she gave him no more. Flaming Aes Sedai. “Has anyone seen Perrin yet?” he asked. “I don’t want to be the one to tell him his wife has gone missing.”

“Nobody has seen him,” Egwene said. “I assume he is at work helping Rand.”

“Bah,” Mat said. “Can you make a gateway for me up to the top of the Knob?”

“I thought you wanted to go to my camp.”

Its on the way, Mat said. Well, sort of, it was. “And those Deathwatch Guards won’t expect it. Burn me, Egwene, but I think they’ve guessed where we were heading.”

Egwene after pausing for a moment—opened them a gateway to the Traveling ground atop the Knob. They stepped through onto it.

More than a hill, less than a mountain, Dashar Knob rose a good hundred feet into the air near the middle of the battlefield. The rock formation was unscalable, and gateways were the only way to reach the top. From here, Mat and his commanders would be able to watch the entire battle play out.

"I have never known anyone else," Egwene said to him, "who will work so hard to avoid hard work, Matrim Cauthon."

"You haven't spent enough time around soldiers." Mat waved at the men who saluted him as he walked out of the Traveling grounds.

He looked north toward the River Mora and across it into Arafel. Then northeast, toward the ruins of what had once been some kind of fort or watchtower. Eastward, toward the rising palisade and the forest. He continued to turn, southward to gaze at the River Erinin in the far distance, and the strange little grove of tall trees that Loial was so in awe of. They said Rand had grown those, during the meeting where the treaty had been signed. Mat looked southwest toward the only good ford on the Mora nearby, named Hawal Ford by the locals who had farmed this area; beyond the ford on the Arafel side was a large expanse of bogs.

Westward, across the Mora, lay Polov Heights—a forty-foot-tall plateau with a steep slope on the east and more gradual slopes on the other sides.

Between the base of the southwestern slope and the bogs was a corridor roughly two hundred paces across, well worn by travelers who used the ford to cross between Arafel and Shienar. Mat could use these features to his advantage. He could use them all. Would that be enough? He could feel something pulling on him, tugging him northward. Rand would need him soon.

He turned, ready to bolt, as someone approached across the top of the Knob, but it was not the Deathwatch Guards. It was just leather-faced Jur Grady.

"I fetched those soldiers for you," Grady said, pointing. Mat could see a small force coming through a gateway to the Traveling grounds near the palisade. A hundred men of the Band, led by Delarn, flying a bloody red flag. The Redarms were accompanied by some five hundred people in worn clothing.

"What was the point of this?" Grady asked. "You sent those hundred to a village in the south to recruit, I assume?"

That, and more. *I saved your life, man,* Mat thought, trying to pick Delarn out of the group. *And then you volunteer for this. Bloody fool.* Delarn acted as if it were his fate.

“Take them upriver,” Mat said. “The maps show there is only one good place to block the Mora, a narrow canyon a few leagues northeast of here.”

“All right,” Grady said. “There will be channelers involved.”

“You will have to handle them,” Mat said. “Mostly, though, I want you to let those six hundred men and women defend the river. Don’t risk your self too much. Let Delarn and his people do the work.”

“Pardon,” Grady said. “But that doesn’t seem like a very large force. Most of them aren’t trained soldiers.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Mat said. *I hope.*

Grady nodded reluctantly and moved off.

Egwene watched Mat with curious eyes.

“We can’t fall back from this fight,” Mat said softly. “We don’t retreat. There isn’t anywhere to go. We stand here, or we lose it all.”

“There is *always* a retreat,” Egwene said.

“No,” Mat said. “Not anymore.” He rested his *ashandarei* on his shoulder, his other hand out, palm forward. He scanned the landscape, memories appearing as if from light and dust before him. Rion at Hune Hill. Naath and the San d’ma Shadar. The Fall of Pipkin. Hundreds upon hundreds of battlefields, hundreds of victories. Thousands of deaths.

Mat watched figments of memories flash across the field. “Have you spoken to the supply masters? We’re out of food, Egwene. We can’t win a protracted war, fighting and falling back. The enemy will overwhelm us if we do that. Just like Eyal in the Marches of Maighande. We are at our strongest now, broken though we are. Fall back, and we resign ourselves to starvation as the Trollocs destroy us.”

“Rand,” Egwene said. “We just have to hold out until he is victorious.”

“That’s true in a fashion,” Mat said, turning toward the Heights. In his mind’s eye, he saw what could come, the possibilities. He imagined riders on the Heights, like shadows. He would lose if he tried to hold those Heights, but maybe… “If Rand loses, it won’t matter. The Wheel is bloody broken, and we all become nothing, if we’re lucky. Well, we can’t do anything more about it. But here’s the thing. If he does what he’s supposed to, we could still lose—we will lose, if we don’t stop the Shadow’s armies.” He blinked, seeing it, the entire battlefield spread before him. Fighting at the ford. Arrows from the palisade. “We can’t just beat them, Egwene,” Mat said. “We can’t just stand and hold on. We have to destroy them, drive them away, then hunt them to the last Trolloc. We can't just survive ... we have to *win."*

"How are we going to do that?" Egwene asked. "Mat, you're not talking sense. Weren't you just saying yesterday how outnumbered we'll be?"

He looked toward the bog, imagining shadows trying to slog through it. Shadows of dust and memory. "I have to change it all," he said. He could not do what they would expect. He could not do what spies might have reported he was planning. "Blood and bloody ashes… one last toss of the dice. Everything we have, piled into a heap…"

A group of men in dark armor came through a gateway to the top of the Knob, panting deeply, as if they'd had to chase down a *damane* to get them up here. Their breastplates were lacquered a deep red, but this batch did not need a fearsome display to be frightening. They looked furious enough to scramble eggs with a stare.

"You," said the lead Deathwatch Guard, a man named Gelen, pointing at Mat, "are *needed* at the—"

Mat held up a hand to cut him off.

"I will not be denied again!" Gelen said. "I have orders from—"

Mat shot the man a glare, and he stopped short. Mat turned northward again. A cool, somehow *familiar* wind blew across him, rippling his long coat, brushing at his hat. He narrowed his eye. Rand was tugging on him.

The dice still tumbled in his head.

"They're here," Mat said.

"What did you say?" Egwene asked.

"They're here."

"The scouts—"

"The scouts are wrong" Mat said. He looked up, and noticed a pair of *raken* speeding back toward the camp. They had seen it. The Trollocs must have marched through the night.

Sharans will come first, Mat thought, *to give the Trollocs a breather. They'll have arrived through gateways.*

"Send runners," Mat said, pointing at the Deathwatch Guards, "get the men and women to their posts. And warn Elayne that I'm going to change the battle plan."

"What?" Egwene said.

"They're *here!*" Mat said, turning on the Guards. "Why aren't you bloody running! Go, *go!"* Above, the *raken* screeched. Gelen, to his credit, saluted, then ran—pounding in that massive armor—with his companions.

"This is it, Egwene," Mat said. "Take a deep breath, a last pull on the brandy, or burn your final pinch of tabac. Have a good look at the ground before you, as it's soon going to be covered in blood. In an hour, we'll be in the thick of it. The Light watch over us all."

Perrin drifted in darkness. He felt so *tired.*

Slayer still lives, a piece of himself thought. *Graendal is corrupting the great captains. The end is near. You can't slip away now! Hold on.*

Hold on to what? He tried to open his eyes, but was so exhausted. He should.… should have gotten out of the wolf dream sooner. His entire body felt numb, except…

Except for his side. Moving fingers that felt like bricks, he touched the warmth. His hammer. It was blazing hot. That warmth seemed to move up his fingers, and Perrin took a deep breath.

He needed to wake up. He hovered at the edges of consciousness, as when he was close to sleep, but still partially aware. In that state, he felt as if he faced a forked pathway before him. One path led deeper into darkness. And one led… He couldn't see, but he knew that it meant ... It meant waking up.

Warmth from the hammer radiated up his arm. His mind gathered sharpness. *Awaken.*

That was what Slayer had done. He had… awakened… somehow…

Perrin's life was trickling away. Not much time left. Half within death's embrace, he gritted his teeth, drew in a deep breath and forced himself to *wake.*

The silence of the wolf dream shattered.

Perrin hit soft earth, and entered a place of shouts. Something about a battlefront, about preparing the lines…

Nearby, someone cried out. And then someone else. And others. "Perrin?" He knew that voice. "Perrin, lad!"

Master Luhhan? Perrin's eyelids felt so heavy. He couldn't open them. Arms grabbed him.

"Hang on. I have you, lad. I have you. *Hang on.*"

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CHAPTER 37

The Last Battle

> *Dawn broke that morning on Polov Heights, but the sun did not shine on the Defenders of the Light. Out of the west and out of the north came the armies of Darkness, to win this one last battle and cast a Shadow across the earth; to usher in an Age where the wails of suffering would go unheard.*
>
> —from the notebook of Loial, son of Arent
> son of Halan, the Fourth Age

Lan held his sword aloft as he galloped Mandarb through camp.

Above, the morning clouds began to bleed red, reflecting enormous fireballs rising from the massive Sharan army that was approaching from the west. They arced in the sky gracefully, seeming slow because of the great distance.

Groups of riders broke out of the camp, joining Lan. The remaining Malkieri rode just behind him, but his force had swelled like a tide. Andere joined him at the front, the flag of Malkier—the Golden Crane—acting as a banner for all of the Borderlands.

They had been bloodied, but not beaten. Knock a man down, and you saw what he was made of. That man might run. If he didn't—if he stood back up with blood at the corner of his mouth and determination in his eyes then you knew. That man was about to become truly dangerous.

The fireballs seemed to move more quickly as they dropped, crashing to the camp in bursts of red fury. Explosions shook the ground. Nearby screams rose to accompany the thunder of hoofbeats. Still men joined him. Mat Cauthon had spread word through all of the camps that more cavalry were needed to join Lan's advance and replace lost soldiers.

He had also disclosed the cost of doing so. The cavalry would be at the forefront of the fighting, breaking Trolloc and Sharan lines, and would find little rest. They'd carry the brunt of the casualties this day.

Still, men joined him. Borderlanders who should have been too old to ride. Merchants who had put aside the money pouch and taken up the sword. A surprising number of southerners, including many women, wearing breastplates and steel or leather caps, carrying spears. There weren't enough lances to go around.

"Half of those joining look like farmers more than soldiers!" Andere called to him over the hoofbeats.

"Have you ever seen a man or woman from the Two Rivers ride, Andere?" Lan yelled back.

"I can't say that I have."

"Watch and be surprised."

Lan's cavalry reached the River Mora, where a man with long, curling hair, wearing a black coat, stood with hands clasped behind his back. Logain now had forty Aes Sedai and Asha'man with him. He eyed Lan's force, then raised a hand toward the sky, crumpling an enormous falling fireball as if it were a piece of paper. The sky cracked like lightning, and the breaking fireball gushed sparks to every side, smoke churning in the air. Ashes drifted down, burning out, hitting the rushing river and scattering black and white on its surface.

Lan slowed Mandarb as he approached Hawal Ford, just south of the Heights. Logain thrust his other hand toward the river. The waters churned, then lurched up into the air as if flowing over an invisible ramp. They crashed down on the other side, a violent waterfall, while some of the water spilled over the banks of the river.

Lan nodded to Logain and continued on, guiding Mandarb under the waterfall and crossing the still-wet rocks of the ford. Sunlight filtered through the river waters above, sparkling down on Lan as he thundered through the tunnel, Andere and the Malkieri behind him. The waterfall roared down to his left, spraying a mist of water.

Lan shivered as he burst back out into the light, then charged through the corridor toward the Sharans. To his right rose the Heights, to his left the bogs, but there was a passage of solid, level ground here. Up on the Heights, archers, crossbowmen and dragoners prepared to release volleys at the oncoming foes.

Sharans at the front, a huge force of Trollocs gathering up behind, all directly west of the Heights. The thunder of dragonfire shook the air from the top of the Heights, and soon the Sharans had explosions of their own to contend with.

Lan set his lance, took aim at a Sharan soldier charging toward Polov Heights, then braced himself.

Elayne whipped her head up, turning to the side. That terrible song, a croon, a hum, beautiful yet terrible at the same time. She heeled Moonshadow, drawn toward that soft sound. Where was it?

It rose from somewhere deeper in the Seanchan camp at the base of Dashar Knob. Chewing out Mat for not telling her his plan of war could wait. She needed to find the source of that sound, that wonderful sound, that…

“Elayne!” Birgitte said.

Elayne kicked her horse forward.

“Elayne! Draghkar!”

Draghkar. Elayne shook herself, then looked up to find the creatures falling like drops of water into the camp around them. Guardswomen lowered their swords, eyes opening wide as the crooning continued.

Elayne wove a thunderclap. It burst from her, splitting the air, washing across the Guardswomen and making them cry out and cover their ears. Pain stabbed Elayne’s head and she cursed, closing her eyes at the shock. And then… then she heard nothing.

That was the point.

She forced her eyes open to see Draghkar all around, with their spindly bodies and inhuman eyes. They opened their lips to croon, but Elayne’s deafened ears could not hear the song. She smiled, then wove whips of fire, striking the creatures down. She could not hear their screeches of pain, which was a pity.

Elayne’s Guardswomen rallied, rising from knees, lowering hands from ears. She could tell from their dazed looks that they had been deafened. Birgitte soon had them striking at the surprised Draghkar. Three of the creatures tried to leap up and fly away, but Birgitte took each one with a white-fletched arrow, dropping the last so that it crashed into a nearby tent.

Elayne waved, getting Birgitte’s attention. The first Draghkar sounds hadn’t come from above, but from farther into camp. Elayne pointed, kicking Moonshadow into motion, leading her troops among the Seanchan. All about, men lay staring into the sky, mouths open. Many seemed to be breathing, but they stared with dead eyes. The Draghkar had consumed their souls, but left the bodies alive, like the crust cut off a rich mans bread.

Sloppy. This group of Draghkar—Light, there were well over a hundred of them—could have taken a man each, killed him, then retreated before their presence was discovered. The distant roars of the battle—the bleating horns, the booming dragons, the hissing fireballs, all of which Elayne now felt but could only barely make out with her broken ears—had covered the Draghkar attack. The creatures could have struck and fled, but they were greedy.

Her guards scattered, hacking at the surprised Draghkar—many of whom were holding soldiers. The beasts were not strong fighters if measured by strength of arm. Elayne waited, preparing weaves. Those Draghkar who tried to flee, she burned from the sky.

Once the last of them were dead—at least, the ones they could see—Elayne waved Birgitte to approach. The air smelled sharply of burned flesh. Elayne wrinkled her nose, and reached down from horseback to take Birgitte’s head in her hands, Healing the woman's ears. The babes kicked as she did so. Did they react to times when she Healed someone, or was that her fancy? Elayne reached down to hold her stomach with one arm as Birgitte stepped back, looking about.

The Warder nocked an arrow, and Elayne felt her alarm. Birgitte loosed, and a Draghkar stumbled back from cover inside a nearby tent. A Seanchan stumbled out, eyes glassed over. The feeding had been interrupted halfway through; the poor fellow would never be right in the mind again.

Elayne turned her horse and saw some Seanchan troops charging into the area. Birgitte spoke to them, then turned to speak to Elayne. Elayne just shook her head, and Birgitte hesitated, then said something else to the Seanchan.

Elayne’s guards grouped around her again, watching the Seanchan with distrust. Elayne understood the sentiment perfectly.

Birgitte waved her forward, and they continued on in the direction they had been going. As they did, a *damane* and *sul'dam* approached and—surprisingly—curtsied to Elayne. Perhaps this Fortuona had given them orders to respect foreign monarchs.

Elayne hesitated, but what was she going to do? She could return to her own camp for Healing, but that would take time, and it was urgent that she speak with Mat. What was the point of spending days drawing up war plans if he was going to throw them aside? She trusted him—Light, she had to—but she’d still rather know what he intended to do.

She sighed, then held out her foot to the *damane.* The woman frowned, then glanced to the *suldam.* Both seemed to take it as an insult. Elayne had certainly intended it as one.

The *suldam* nodded, and her *damane* reached to touch Elayne’s leg just above her booted foot. Elayne’s sturdy boots looked like something a soldier would wear, not a queen, but she didn’t intend to ride into battle wearing slippers.

A small icy shock of Healing ran through her, and her hearing returned slowly. The low pitches returned first. Explosions. The distant boom of dragonfire, the rush of the river nearby. Several Seanchan talking. Midranges came next, then a flood of sound. Flaps rustling, screams of soldiers, calls of horns.

“Tell them to Heal the others,” Elayne said to Birgitte.

Birgitte raised an eyebrow, probably wondering why Elayne wouldn’t just give the order herself. Well, these Seanchan paid very close attention to which people could speak to one another. Elayne would not give them the honor of speaking to them directly.

Birgitte relayed the order, and the *suldam s* lips drew to a line. She had had the sides of her hair shaved; she was highborn. Light willing, Elayne had managed to insult her again.

“I will do it,” the woman said. “Though why any of you would want to be Healed by an animal is beyond me.”

The Seanchan didn’t believe in letting *damane* Heal. At least, that was what they kept claiming—that hadn’t stopped them from reluctantly teaching the weaves to their captive women, now that they’d seen firsthand what an advantage it was in battle. From what Elayne had heard, the highborn rarely accepted that Healing, however.

"Let's go," Elayne said, riding forward. She waved for her soldiers to stay behind and be Healed.

Birgitte eyed her, but did not object. The two of them hurried on, Birgitte mounting her horse and riding with Elayne toward the Seanchan command building. One story, perhaps the size of a small farmhouse, it sat in a large, high-walled cleft at the southern base of Dashar Knob—they'd moved it from the top, as Mat worried it would be too exposed. The top would continue to be used for overseeing the battle at short intervals.

Elayne allowed Birgitte to help her dismount—Light, but she was starting to feel unwieldy. It was as if she were a ship in dry dock. She took a moment to properly compose herself. Smooth features, emotions in control. She picked at her hair, straightened her dress, then walked into the building.

"What," she bellowed as she stepped in, "in the name of a bloody, twofingered Trolloc haystack-grunter do you think you are doing, Matrim Cauthon?"

Unsurprisingly, the curse made the man grin as he looked up from the map table. He wore his hat and coat over some very nice silken clothing that looked as if it had been tailored to match the hat's color, and to include tooled leather at the cuffs and collar so as to not be so out of place. It smelled of some kind of compromise. Why was his hat banded with pink ribbon, though?

"Hello, Elayne," Mat said. "I figured that I could look forward to seeing you soon." He waved to a chair, bearing the red and gold of Andor, at the side of the room. It was extra cushioned, with a cup of warm tea steaming on the stand beside it.

Burn you, Matrim Cauthon, she thought. *When did you grow so clever?*

The Seanchan Empress sat on her own throne at the head of the room, Min at her side, draped in enough green silk to supply a shop in Caemlyn for two weeks. Elayne did not miss the fact that Fortuona's throne was two fingers higher than Elayne's. Bloody insufferable woman. "Mat. There are Draghkar in your camp."

"Burn it," he said. "Where?"

"I should say there *were* Draghkar in your camp," Elayne said. "We dealt with them. You need to tell your archers to keep better watch."

“I’ve told them,” Mat complained. “Bloody ashes. Somebody check on the archers, I—”

“Great Prince!” a Seanchan messenger said, skidding through the doorway. He went to his knees, then prostrated himself with a smooth motion, never stopping his narrative. “Archer bank is down! Hit by Sharan outriders— they masked their attack by smoke from fireballs.”

“Blood and bloody ashes!” Mat said. “Send sixteen *damane* and *sul’dam* down there now! Send to the northern archery units and bring squads forty-two and fifty down. And tell the scouts I’ll have them flogged if they let anything like this happen again.”

“Great One,” the scout said, saluting and scrambling to his feet, backing out of the room without looking up to avoid the risk of meeting Mat’s gaze.

All in all, Elayne was impressed by how easily the scout mixed his obeisance and his report. She was also sickened. No ruler should demand such of her subjects. A nation’s strength came from the strength of its people; break them, and you were breaking your own back.

“You knew I was coming,” Elayne said after Mat gave a few more orders to his aides. “And you anticipated the anger your changing of plans would cause. Burn you, Matrim Cauthon, *why* did you feel the need to do this? I thought our battle plan was sound.”

“It was,” Mat said.

“Then why change it!”

“Elayne,” Mat said, glancing at her. “Everyone put me in charge, against my will, because I cant have my mind changed by the Forsaken, right?”

“That was the general idea,” Elayne said. “Though I’d guess it has less to do with that medallion of yours and more to do with you having too thick a head for Compulsion to penetrate.”

“Bloody right,” Mat said. “Anyway, if the Forsaken are using Compulsion on people in our camps, they probably have a few spies in our meetings.”

“I suppose so.”

“So they know our plan. Our great plan, that we spent so long preparing. They know it.”

Elayne hesitated.

“Light!” Mat said, shaking his head. “The first and most important rule to winning a war is knowing what your enemy is going to do.”

“I though the first rule was to know your terrain,” Elayne said, folding her arms.

“That, too. Anyway, I realize that if the enemy knows what we're going to do, we have to change. Immediately. Bad battle plans are better than ones your enemy will anticipate.”

“Why didn’t you guess this would happen?” Elayne demanded.

He looked at her, expressionless. One side of his mouth twitched up, then he pulled his hat down, shading his eyepatch.

“Light,” Elayne said. “You *knew.* You spent this whole week planning with us, and you knew the entire time you’d throw it out with the dishwater.”

“That’s giving me too much bloody credit,” Mat said, looking back at his maps. “I think a part of me might have known all along, but I didn’t figure it out until just before the Sharans got here.”

“So what is the new plan?”

He didn’t reply.

“You’re going to keep it in your head,” Elayne said, her legs feeling weak. “You’re going to lead the battle, and none of us are going to know what in the Light you’re planning, are we? Otherwise, someone might overhear, and the news would travel to the Shadow.”

He nodded.

“Creator shelter us,” she whispered.

Mat scowled. “You know, that’s what Tuon said.”

On the Heights, Uno held his ears as the nearby dragons belched fire at the Trollocs and Sharans west of them. The scent of something pungent burned in the air, and the blasts were so deafening, he couldn’t hear his own bloody cursing.

Down below, Lan Mandragoran’s riders were sweeping the sides of the assault force, keeping them contained so that the dragons could do more damage. The Sharans had Trollocs with them. They’d have channelers with them, too, lots of them. Farther upriver, another large army of Trollocs, the ones that had done so much damage to Dai Shan’s forces, had come down from the northeast, and would soon reach the Field of Merrilor.

The dragons stilled momentarily, the dragoners stuffing the maws again with whatever it was that made them work. Uno wasn’t going to step bloody close to them. Bad luck, those were. He was certain of it.

The leader of the dragoners was a wiry Cairhienin, and Uno had never had much use for those folk. They bloody scowled at him whenever he talked. This one sat haughtily upon his horse, and didn't flinch when the dragons fired again.

The Amyrlin Seat had thrown her lot in with these men, and with the Seanchan, too. Uno wasn't going to flaming complain. They needed every sword they could get, Cairhienin and bloody Seanchan included.

"You like our dragons, Captain?" the leader—Talmanes—called to Uno. Captain. Uno had bloody been promoted. He now led a force of newly recruited Tower pikemen and light cavalry.

He shouldn't have been in charge of bloody anything; he had been happy as a regular soldier. But he had both training and battle experience, things that were in slim supply these days, or so Queen Elayne had said. So now he was a flaming officer, and leading cavalry *and* foot soldiers no less! Well, he knew his way around a pike, if he had to use one, though he usually preferred to fight on horseback.

His men were ready to defend the rim of the Heights should the enemy make it up the slope. So far, the archers situated in front of the dragoners had prevented that, but soon enough, the archers would have to pull back, and then it would be bloody regular soldiers doing the bloody fighting. Below, the Sharans pulled aside to let the main Trolloc forces storm up onto the slope.

The pikemen would advance, resisting the Trolloc attack, and pikes would work well here, as the Trollocs would be pushing uphill. Add in some flaming cavalry on their flanks, and some bloody archers shooting through those gateways made high up in the air, and they could probably sit here for days. Maybe weeks. When they were pushed off by superior numbers, they'd let go inch by inch, clinging to every speck of ground.

Uno figured there was no way he was going to survive this flaming battle. He was surprised he'd made it this long. Really, flaming Masema should have had his head, or the Seanchan near Falme, or a Trolloc here and there. He had tried to keep himself lean so he'd taste flaming terrible when they stuffed him in one of those flaming cookpots.

The dragons fired again, blasting enormous holes in the hordes of advancing Trollocs. Uno clapped his hands to his ears. "Warn a man when you do that, you flaming bits hanging from a goat's—"

The next shot drowned him out.

The Trollocs below were blown into the air, the dragons pulverizing the ground beneath them. Those eggs *exploded* once they were shot from those cursed tubes. What kind of thing, other than the One Power, could make metal explode? Uno was certain he flaming didn't want to know.

Talmanes stepped up to the rim of the Heights, inspecting the damage. He was joined by a Taraboner woman, the one who had invented these weapons. She looked over and saw Uno, then tossed him something. A small bit of wax. The Taraboner woman tapped her ear, then began speaking with Talmanes, gesturing. He might have command of the troops, but the woman had charge of the devices. She told the men where to position the dragons to fight.

Uno grumbled, but pocketed the wax. A fist of Trollocs had pushed through the blast, about a hundred strong, and he didn't have time to bother with his ears. Uno grabbed a pike, leveling it and signaling for his men to do the same. They all wore the white of the Tower; Uno himself wore a white tabard.

He shouted orders, readying his pike by standing sideways near the top of the slope, the heel of its shaft raised. One hand gripped the shaft in front of him to guide and reinforce the thrust; the other hand, palm down, gripping it an arm's length from the heel, would drive home the thrust as the Trollocs came into range. Several ranks of pikemen behind Uno stood ready to advance following the initial impact.

"Steady with the pikes, you flaming sheepherders!" Uno bellowed. "Steady!"

The Trollocs scrambled up the hill, crashing into the line of pikes. The beasts in the vanguard tried to knock the pikes aside with sweeps of their weapons, but Uno's men stepped forward, skewering Trollocs, often two pikes per beast. Uno grunted, pulling his pike back into line to catch a Trolloc through the throat.

"First rank, back!" Uno yelled, pulling his pike backward to free it from the Trolloc he'd killed. His companions did the same, pulling their weapons free and leaving the corpses to roll down the slope.

The pikemen in the front rank fell back as those in the second rank came forward between them, ramming pikes into snarling Trollocs. Each rank rotated up front in succession until, minutes later, the entire group of Trollocs was dead. "Nice work," Uno said, raising his pike to the upright position, a trickle of rancid Trolloc blood winding down the shaft from the pike head. "Nice work."

He glanced toward the dragoners, who were feeding more eggs down those tubes. He hastily pulled the wax out of his pocket. Yes, they could hold this flaming position. They could hold it well. They just needed to— A cry from above stopped him from putting the wax in. Something thumped to the ground beside Uno. A lead ball with streamers dropped from high up. "Flaming Seanchan goat!" Uno yelled, looking up and shaking his fist. "That nearly took me in the crown, you lover of rotting worms!" The *raken* flew off, probably without its rider hearing a word of what Uno had shouted. Bloody Seanchan. He stooped down, removing the letter from the ball.

Retreat down the southwestern slope of the Heights.

"You're bloody *kicking* me," Uno muttered. "Kicking me in the head while I'm sleeping. Allin, you bloody fool, can you read this?"

Allin, a dark-haired Andorman, wore a half-beard, shaved at the sides. Uno had always thought those looked flaming ridiculous.

"Retreat?" Allin said. "Now?"

"They've flaming lost their minds," Uno said.

Nearby, Talmanes and the Taraboner woman were receiving a messenger —and she was relaying the same news, by the looks of the Taraboner woman's scowl. Retreat.

"Cauthon had better bloody know what he's doing," Uno said, shaking his head. He still didn't understand why anyone would put Cauthon in charge of anything. He remembered that boy, always snapping at people, eyes sunken in his head. Half-dead, half-spoiled. Uno shook his head.

But he'd do it. He'd sworn to the bloody White Tower. So he'd do it. "Pass the word," he said to Allin, stuffing the wax in his ears as Aludra, at the dragons, prepared a last volley before leaving. "We're pulling back from the bloody Heights, and—"

A clap of sound hit Uno physically, vibrating through him, bloody near stopping his heart. His head hit the ground before he realized he'd fallen.

He blinked dust from his eyes, groaning and rolling over as another flash, then another, struck the Heights where the dragons were. Lightning! His soldiers were down on their knees, eyes shut, hands over ears. Talmanes was already up, however, shouting orders that Uno could barely hear, waving for his men to pull back.

A dozen fireballs, enormous and incredibly fast, rose from the Sharan army behind the Trollocs. Uno cursed and threw himself in a depression for cover, rolling into place moments before the entire hill shook like an earthquake. Clods of earth fell upon him, almost burying him.

Everything was coming at them. *Everything.* Every bloody Sharan channeler in the army seemed to focus on the Heights at once. His people had Aes Sedai, placed to protect the dragons, but from the look of things they would be hard-pressed to fight back against *that*\

The attack lasted for what seemed an eternity. When it subsided, Uno crawled free. Some of the flaming dragons were in pieces, and Aludra was working with the dragoners to salvage those and protect the rest. Talmanes, holding a bloody hand to his head, was shouting. Uno pried the wax from one of his ears—that had probably saved his hearing—and scrambled toward Talmanes.

“Where are your bloody Aes Sedai?” Uno shouted. “They’re bloody supposed to be stopping this!”

They had four dozen of them, ordered to cut weaves from the air or knock them aside to protect the dragons. They had claimed to be able to keep the Heights safe from anything but the coming of the Dark One. Now they were in shambles, the lightning strikes having fallen in their midst.

Trollocs were advancing up the hill again. Uno ordered Allin to form the pikewall and hold the creatures back, then ran toward the Aes Sedai with a few guards. He joined Warders, helping the women up, looking for their leader.

“Kwamesa Sedai?” Uno asked, finding the Aes Sedai in charge who was dusting herself off. The slender, dark-skinned Arafellin was muttering softly under her breath.

“What was *that*?” she demanded.

“Uh…” Uno said.

“That question wasn’t intended for you,” she said, scanning the sky. “Einar! Why didn’t you spot those weaves?”

An Asha’man rushed over. “They came so quickly. They were upon us before I had time to give warning. And… Light! Whoever sent them was strong. Stronger than I’ve ever seen, stronger than—”

A line of light split the air behind them. It was enormous, as long as the keep of Fal Dara. It rotated upon itself, opening a vast gateway that split the ground at the center of the Heights. Standing on the other side was a man in brilliant armor made of silver, coinlike rings, his helmetless head bearing dark hair and a strong nose. He held before him a scepter of gold, the top shaped like an hourglass or a fine goblet.

Kwamesa reacted immediately, raising her hand and releasing a stream of fire. The man waved his hand, and the stream of fire deflected; then he pointed—almost indifferently—and something thin, hot and *white* connected him to Kwamesa. Her form glowed, and then she was gone, motes drifting toward the ground.

Uno jumped away, Einar joining him as he rolled behind the rubble of a broken dragon.

"I come for the Dragon Reborn!" the figure in silver announced. "You will send for him. Either that, or I will see that your screams bring him."

The ground beneath the dragons heaved into the air just a few feet from Uno. He threw his arm up in front of his face, bits of wood and soil flying across him.

"Light help us," Einar said. "I'm trying to stop him, but he's in a circle. A *full circle.* Seventy-two. I've never seen such power before! I—"

A bar of white-hot light cut through the broken dragon, vaporizing it and striking Einar. The man was gone in an instant, and Uno scrambled back, cursing. He ducked away as the wreckage of dragons crashed to the ground around him.

Uno yelled for his men to fall back, whipping them into motion, delaying only long enough to grab a wounded man under the arm and help him away. He no longer questioned the order to retreat from the Heights. It was the finest bloody order any man had ever given!

Logain Ablar released the One Power. He stood beside the Mora, below the Heights, and felt the attacks up above.

Releasing the One Power today was one of the most difficult things he'd ever done. More difficult than the decision to name himself Dragon, more difficult than keeping himself from strangling Taim during their early days together in the Black Tower.

The Power drained out of him, as if his veins had been opened and he was bleeding out across the ground. He took a deep breath. Holding that much of the One Power—that of thirty-nine people in a circle—had been intoxicating. Letting go reminded him of his gentling, when the Power had been stolen from him. When every breath had encouraged him to find a knife and slit his own throat.

He suspected this was his madness: the terror that releasing the One Power would cause him to lose it forever.

“Logain?” Androl asked.

Logain turned his head toward the shorter man and his companions. They were loyal. Logain didn’t know why, but they were loyal. The whole lot of them. Fools. Faithful fools.

“Can you feel that?” Androl asked. The others—Canler, Emarin, Jonneth—were staring at the Heights. The Power being released there… it was amazing.

“Demandred,” Emarin said. “It must be him.”

Logain nodded slowly. *Such power…* Even one of the Forsaken could not be so strong. He must carry a *sa’angreal* of immense strength.

With such a tool, his thoughts whispered, *no man or woman could ever take the Power from you again.*

Taim had done it, during Logain’s imprisonment. Held him captive, shielded, unable to touch the One Power. The attempts to Turn him had been painful, crushing. But being without *saidin*…

Strength, he thought, watching that powerful channeling. The lust to be so strong almost drowned out his hatred of Taim.

“For now, we will not engage him,” Logain said. “Split yourselves into the prearranged teams.” Those would be one woman and five or six men in each team. The woman and two men could form a circle, while the other two offered support. “We will hunt the traitors of the Black Tower.”

Pevara, standing at Androl’s side, raised an eyebrow. “You mean to go hunting Taim already? Didn’t Cauthon want you here to help move men?”

“I’ve made it clear to Cauthon,” Logain said. “I will not spend this battle delivering soldiers around the field. As for orders, we have a directive from the Dragon Reborn himself.”

Rand al’Thor had called them his “last” orders for them, a note delivered with a small *angreal* of a man holding a sword. *The Shadow has stolen the seals of the Dark One’s prison. Find them. If you can, please find them.*

During their captivity, Androl had heard what he thought was Taim bragging about the seals. It was their only lead. Logain scanned the distance. Their forces were retreating from the Heights. Logain could not see the array of dragons from where he stood, but the thick lines of smoke did not speak well for their safety.

He still gives orders, Logain thought. *Am I inclined to obey them any longer?*

For the chance at revenge on Taim? Yes, he would follow Rand al'Thor's orders. Once he wouldn't have questioned doing so nearly as much. That had been before his captivity and torture.

"Go," Logain said to his Asha'man. "You have read what the Lord Dragon wrote. We must recover the seals at all costs. Nothing is more important than this. We must hope that Taim indeed has them. Watch for signs of men channeling, hunt them, kill them."

It didn't matter if those men channeling were Sharans. The Asha'man would help this battle by removing enemy channelers anyway. They had discussed the tactic earlier. When they sensed channeling from men, they could use gateway jumps to pinpoint where they were, then try to surprise them and attack.

"If you see one of Taim's men," Logain said, "try to capture him so we can pry out of him where Taim has set up his base." He paused. "If we're lucky, the M'Hael himself will be here. Be wary that he might be carrying the seals; it would not do to destroy them in our attack. If you see him, return and bring me word of his location."

Logain's teams moved off. They left him with Gabrelle, Arel Malevin and Karldin Manfor. It was well that at least some of his more skilled men had been absent from the Tower during Taim's betrayal.

Gabrelle looked at Logain with level eyes. "What of Toveine?" she asked.

"We will kill her if we find her."

"It is that simple for you?"

"Yes."

"She—"

"Would you rather live, Gabrelle, if you were she? Live and serve *him?"*

She closed her mouth, lips drawn tight. She still feared him; he could sense that. Good.

Was this what you wished for, his mind whispered, *when you raised the banner of the Dragon? When you sought to save mankind? Did you do it to be feared? Hated?*

He ignored that voice. The only times he had accomplished anything in life had come when he'd been feared. It was the only edge he'd had against Siuan and Leane. The primal Logain, that something deep inside that drove him to keep living, needed people to fear him.

"Can you sense her?" Gabrelle asked.

"I released the bond."

Her envy was sharp and immediate. It shocked him. He had thought that she was beginning to enjoy, or at least suffer, their place together.

But, of course, it was all an act so that she could try to manipulate him. That was the Aes Sedai way. Yes, he had felt lust from her before, perhaps even affection. He wasn't certain he could trust what he thought he'd felt from her. It seemed that for all he had tried to be strong and free, his strings had been pulled since he'd been a youngling.

Demandred's channeling radiated strength. Such *power.*

A loud boom sounded from the Heights. Logain laughed, throwing his head back. Bodies, like leaves, were thrown off the Heights and into the air.

"Link to me!" he commanded those who remained with him. "Join me in a circle, and let us hunt the M'Hael and his men as well. Light send that I can find him—my table deserves only the finest of meat, the head stag himself!"

And after that… Who knew? He had always wanted to test himself against one of the Forsaken. Logain seized the Source again, holding to the thrashings of *saidin* as if it were a serpent writhing and trying to bite him. He used his *angreal* to draw more, and then the Power from the others streamed into him. He laughed louder.

Gawyn felt so tired. This week of preparation would normally have rested him, but he felt today as if he'd hiked for tens of leagues.

There was no helping it. He forced his attention toward the gateway in the table in front of him, overlooking the battlefield. "You're certain they cannot see this?" he asked Yukiri.

"I'm certain," she replied. "It has been tested exhaustively."

She was becoming skilled with these viewing gateways. She had created this one on top of a table brought through to their camp from Tar Valon. He was looking down at the battleground as he would a map.

“If you have truly made the other side invisible,” Egwene said speculatively, “this might be useful indeed…”

“It would be easier to spot from up close,” Yukiri admitted. “This one is so high in the sky that nobody below will be able to make it out.”

Gawyn didn’t like Egwene standing there, head and shoulders hanging out over the battlefield. He held his tongue; the gateway was as safe as they could make it. He couldn’t protect her from everything.

“Light,” Bryne said softly, “they’re cutting us to pieces.”

Gawyn glanced at him. The man rebuffed suggestions—even strong ones—that he return to his estates. He insisted that he was still capable of holding a sword; he just couldn’t be allowed to lead. Besides, he argued, *any* of them could be under Compulsion. In a way, knowing that he was gave them an advantage. At least him they could watch.

And Siuan did, holding to his arm protectively. The only others in the tent were Silviana and Doesine.

The battle was not going well. Cauthon had lost the Heights already—the original plan had been to hold there as long as possible—and the dragons were in pieces. Demandred's attack with the One Power had come far more powerfully than any of them had anticipated. And the other large Trolloc army had arrived from the northeast and were pressing Cauthon’s defenders upriver.

“What is he planning?” Egwene said, tapping the side of the table. Distant yells drifted through the opening. “If this keeps up, our armies are going to be surrounded.”

“He’s trying to bait the trap,” Bryne said.

“What kind of trap?”

“It is a guess,” Bryne said, “and Light knows, my own assessment cannot be trusted as it once was. It looks like Cauthon is planning to heap everything into one battle, no delaying, no trying to wear the Trollocs down. The way this is going, it will be decided in days. Maybe hours.”

“That sounds exactly like something Mat would do,” Egwene said, resigned.

“The strength of those weaves,” Lelaine said, “that *power*…”

“Demandred is in a circle,” Egwene said. “Eyewitnesses say a full circle. Something that hasn’t been seen since the Age of Legends. And he has a *sa’angreal.* Some of the soldiers saw it—a scepter.”

Gawyn watched the fighting far below, his hand on his sword. He could hear men scream as Demandred aimed wave after wave of fire at them.

The Forsaken's voice boomed, suddenly, reaching high into the air. "Where are you, Lews Therin! You were seen at each of the other battlefields in disguise. Are you here, too? Fight me!"

Gawyn's hand tightened on his sword. Soldiers flooded down the southwestern side of the Heights, to cross the ford. A few small groups held on the slopes, and dragoners there—tiny as insects to Gawyn—led the remaining dragons to safety, pulled by mules.

Demandred flung destruction at the fleeing troops. He was an army unto himself, hurling bodies into the air, exploding horses, burning and destroying. Around him, his Trollocs seized the high ground. Their brutish cheers floated through the gateway.

"We're going to have to deal with him, Mother," Silviana said. "Soon."

"He's trying to draw us out," Egwene said. "He has that *sa'angreal.* We could build a circle of seventy-two ourselves, but what then? Fall into his trap? Be slaughtered?"

"What choice have we, Mother?" Lelaine asked. "Light. He's killing thousands."

Killing thousands. And here they stood.

Gawyn stepped back.

Nobody seemed to notice his withdrawal other than Yukiri, who eagerly stepped up and took his place beside Egwene. Gawyn slipped out of the tent, and when the tent guards glanced at him, said he needed some fresh air. Egwene would approve. She sensed how tired he was lately; she'd mentioned it to him several times. His eyelids felt as if they had weights of iron pulling them down. Gawyn looked toward the blackened sky He could hear the distant booms. How long would he just stand around and do nothing while men died?

You promised, he thought to himself. *You said you were willing to stand in her shadow.*

That didn't mean he had to stop doing important work, did it? He fished in his pouch and took out a ring of the Bloodknives. He put it on, and immediately his strength returned, his exhaustion fleeing.

He hesitated, then took out the other rings and slipped them on as well.

On the south bank of the River Mora, in front of the ruins northeast of Dashar Knob, Tam al'Thor summoned the void as Kimtin had taught him all of those years ago. Tam imagined the single flame, and poured his emotions into it. He grew calm, then the calmness left him, leaving nothing. Like a newly painted wall, beautiful and white, that had just been washed. Everything melted away.

Tam was the void. He drew his bow, the good black yew bending, arrow to his cheek. He took aim, but this was only a formality. When he was this strongly within the void, the arrow would do exactly as he commanded. He didn't *know* this, any more than the sun knew that it would rise or the branches knew that their leaves would fall. These were not things *known*\ they were things that *were.*

He released, bowstring snapping, arrow drilling through the air. Another followed, then another. He had five in the air at once, each one aimed in anticipation of the shifting winds.

The first five Trollocs fell as they tried to make their way across one of several of the raft bridges they had managed to place on the river here. Trollocs hated water; even shallow water daunted them. Whatever Mat had done to protect the river upstream, it was working for now, and the river was still flowing. The Shadow would try to stop it. Was *trying* to stop it. Occasionally a Trolloc or mule carcass floated past from far upriver.

Tam continued to launch arrows, Abell and the other Two Rivers men joining him. Sometimes they aimed into the mass, not picking out an individual Trolloc—though that was rare. A regular soldier might shoot unsighted and assume his arrow would find flesh, but not a good Two Rivers archer. Arrows were cheap to soldiers, but not to woodsmen.

Trollocs fell in waves. Beside Tam and the Two Rivers men, crossbowmen cranked their weapons and loosed wave after wave into the Shadowspawn. Fades behind whipped at the Trollocs, trying to urge them across the river—with little success.

Tam's arrow hit a Fade right where its eyes should have been. Nearby, a large man named Bayrd whistled in appreciation, leaning on his axe and watching the arrows fall. He was part of the group of soldiers set just behind the archers to move in and protect them, once the Trollocs were forced to cross.

Bayrd was one of the mercenary leaders who had drifted into the army, and though he was an Andoran, neither he nor the hundred or so men he led would speak of where they'd come from. "I need to get one of those bows," Bayrd said to his companions. "Burn me, do you *see* that?"

Nearby, Abell and Azi smiled, continuing to shoot. Tam did not smile. There was no humor within the void, though outside of the void, a thought did flutter. Tam knew why Abell and Azi had smiled. Having a Two Rivers bow did not make one into a Two Rivers archer.

"I think," Galad Damodred said from horseback nearby, "that you'd likely do more harm to yourself than to the enemy, should you try to use one of those. Al'Thor, how long?"

Tam released another arrow. "Five more," he said, reaching for the next arrow in his side quiver. He raised it, shot it, then continued. Two, three, four, five.

Five more Trollocs dead. In all, he'd loosed over thirty arrows. He'd missed once, but only because Abell had killed the Trolloc that Tam had aimed for.

"Archers, halt!" Tam yelled.

The Two Rivers men pulled back, Tam releasing the void, as a straggling group of Trollocs stumbled onto the riverbank. Tam still led Perrin's troops, to an extent. Whitecloaks, Ghealdanin and the Wolf Guard all looked to Tam for final say, but each had their own leaders as well. He personally commanded the archers.

Perrin, youd better heal up strong. When Haral had found the boy lying in the grass on the outskirts of camp the day before, bloodied and near death… Light, that had given them all a fright.

Perrin was safely in Mayene, where he would likely spend the rest of the Last Battle. A man didn't quickly recover from the type of wound the lad had taken, even with Aes Sedai Healing. It would probably drive Perrin near mad to miss the fighting, but sometimes that happened. It was part of being a soldier.

Tam and the archers retreated back to the ruins to get a better vantage to watch the battle, and he organized his archers in case they were needed while runners brought them more arrows. Mat had positioned all of Perrin's troops alongside the Dragonsworn, led by Tinna, a statuesque woman. Tam had no idea where she'd come from or why she was in command—she had the bearing of a lady, the build of an Aiel and the coloring of a Saldaean. The others seemed to listen to her. Dragonsworn made little sense to Tam, so he stayed out of their way.

Tam’s army had been told to hold. Mat had expected the Sharan and Trolloc attack from the west to be the strongest; therefore Tam was surprised to see Mat sending more reinforcements upriver from the ford. The Whitecloaks were a recent arrival, and their clothing rippled as they charged along the riverbank, cutting through the Trollocs stumbling off their unstable bridges.

Arrows started to fly from the Trollocs on the other bank toward Galad and his men. The clanks and pings of arrowheads on the Whitecloak armor and shields sounded like hail on a roof. Tam ordered Arganda to bring in their foot soldiers, including Bayrd and the mercenaries.

They didn’t have enough pikes, so Arganda’s men held halberds and spears. Men began to scream and die, Trollocs howling. Near Tam’s rearward position, Alliandre came riding up, surrounded by well-armed foot soldiers. Tam raised the bow to her, and she nodded, then settled back to watch. She had wanted to be here for the battle. Tam couldn’t blame her, nor could he blame her for ordering her soldiers to carry her off at the first sign that this battle was turning against them.

“Tam! Tam!” Dannil came riding up, and Tam waved for Abell to take command of the archers. He strode over to Dannil, meeting the lad in the shade of the ruins.

Inside those broken walls, Tam’s reserves watched the battle with nervousness. Most of them were archers pulled from among the mercenaries and Dragonsworn. Many of that latter group had never been in battle before. Well, neither had most of the Two Rivers men until a few months back. They’d learn quickly. Hitting a Trolloc with an arrow wasn’t so different from hitting a deer.

Though, if you missed the deer, it didn’t gut you with a sword a few seconds later.

“What is it, Dannil?” Tam asked. “Word from Mat?”

“He’s sending you infantry banners from the Legion of the Dragon,” Dannil said. “He says to hold the river here, no matter what.”

“What is that boy up to?” Tam said, looking toward the Heights. The Legion of the Dragon had good infantry, well-trained crossbowmen who would be useful here. But what was happening on the Heights?

The flashes of light reflected off columns of thick black smoke, rising from the Heights toward the clouds above. The fighting was in earnest up there.

"I don't know, Tam," Dannil said. "Mat… he's changed. I hardly think I know him any longer. He was always a bit of a scoundrel, but now… Light, Tam. He's like someone from one of the stories."

Tam grunted. "We've all changed. Mat would probably say similar things about you."

Dannil laughed. "Oh, I doubt that, Tam. Though I do wonder, sometimes, what would have happened if I'd gone with the three of them. I mean, Moiraine Sedai was looking for boys the right age, and I guess I was just a little too old…"

He seemed wistful. Dannil could say, and think, what he wanted—but Tam doubted he would have liked to endure the things that had forced Mat, Perrin and Rand to become the people they now were. "Take command of this lot," Tam said, nodding to the reserve archers. "I'll see that Arganda and Galad know we're being reinforced."

Thick Trolloc arrows sprayed around Pevara as she desperately wove Air. Her gust blew away the arrows like stones swept off the board by a furious player. Sweating, she clung to *saidar* and wove a stronger shield of Air, moving it into the sky to defend against further volleys.

"It's safe!" she yelled. "Go!"

A group of soldiers dashed out from underneath an overhang on the steep riverside slope of the Heights. More thick black shafts fell from above. They hit her shield; it slowed them to the point that once they passed through, they dropped as idly as feathers.

The soldiers she'd helped dashed for the rallying point at Hawal Ford. Others decided to stand and fight as Trolloc bands poured down the slopes.

Most of the Shadowspawn stayed atop the Heights to secure the position, and finish pushing humans off.

Where? Androl's furious thought came to her, a soft whisper inside her mind.

Here, she sent him. Not completely a thought, more an image, a sense of place.

A gateway split beside her, and he dashed through, Emarin on his heels. Both men carried swords, but Emarin spun and thrust his hand backward, a streak of fire shooting through the open gateway. Screaming sounded from the other side. Human screaming.

“You went all the way to the Sharan army?” Pevara demanded. “Logain wanted us to stay together!”

“So you care about what he wants, now?” Androl asked, grinning.

You're insufferable, she thought. Around them, arrows clattered to the ground. The Trollocs above hooted in anger.

“Nice weave,” Androl said.

“Thank you.” She glanced at the sword.

“I’m a Warder now.” He shrugged. “Might as well look like one, eh?”

He could cut a Trolloc in half with a gateway at three hundred paces, and summon fire from inside Dragonmount itself, and he still wanted to carry a sword. It was, she decided, a male thing.

I heard that, Androl sent her. “Emarin, to me. Pevara Sedai, if you’d graciously agree to accompany us…”

She sniffed, but joined the other two as they moved along the southwestern base of the Heights, passing some wounded stumbling toward the rallying point. Androl glanced at them, then wove a gateway back to their camp. The flagging men cried out in surprise and thanks, and shambled through it to safety.

Androl had grown… more confident since they had left the Black Tower. When they’d first met, he’d displayed hesitation about whatever he did. A kind of nervous humility. No more.

“Androl . . ” Emarin said, pointing up the slope with his sword.

“I see them,” Androl said. Above, Trollocs poured over the top of the Heights like pitch boiling over the side of a pot. Behind, Androl’s gateway closed, that group of soldiers safe. Others cried out as they saw it close.

You can’t save them all, Pevara thought sternly to Androl, sensing his spike of anguish. *Stay focused on the task at hand.*

The three of them moved through the soldiers, angling toward several channelers they could feel ahead. Jonneth, Canler and Theodrin were there, throwing fire at groups of Trollocs. Their position was being overrun.

“Jonneth, Canler, to me,” Androl said, charging past them and opening a gateway in front of him. Pevara and Emarin ducked through after him, finding themselves on the top of the Heights, a few hundred paces away.

Jonneth and the others followed, joining them as the group dashed past a group of startled Trollocs.

“Channeling!” Pevara yelled. Light, but it was hard to run in these skirts. Androl did know that, didn’t he?

Androl opened another gateway for them as a few bursts of flame came from the direction of some Sharans atop the Heights. Pevara ran through, beginning to pant. They appeared on the other side of the Sharans, who were firing at where Pevara had been moments before.

Pevara opened her senses, trying to spot—or feel—their quarry. The Sharans turned on them and pointed, but then cried out as Androl brought an avalanche of snow down on them from a gateway to the side. He had tried making those Deathgates that the other Asha'man used, but the weave was apparently just different enough that he had trouble. Instead, he stuck to what he was good at doing.

Groups of Tower Guards still fought atop the Heights, holding ground against orders. Pieces of the dragons, including the large bronze firing tubes, lay smoldering nearby amid burned corpses. Thousands upon thousands of Trollocs howled, most at the edges of the Heights, loosing arrows on those below. Their joyous roars set Pevara on edge, and she wove Earth and sent the flows toward the ground near a group of them. A large chunk of ground trembled, then split off, dumping two dozen Trollocs over the edge.

"We're drawing attention again!" Emarin said, setting ablaze a Myrddraal that had been slinking toward them. It thrashed in the flames, screeching in an inhuman voice, refusing to die. Sweating, Pevara lent her Fire to Emarin's, burning the creature until it was nothing more than bones.

"Well, that's not all bad!" Androl said. "If we draw enough attention, sooner or later, one of the Black Ajah or one of Taim's men will decide to confront us."

Jonneth cursed. "That's a little like jumping into an anthill and waiting to be bitten!"

"Actually, it's a *lot* like that," Androl said. "Keep watch. I'll deal with the Trollocs!"

That's quite a strong assertion, Pevara sent to him.

His answer was warm, like heat off a cooking plate. *It sounded heroic.*

I assume you could use some added strength?

Yes, please, he sent.

She iniated the link. He drew in her strength, taking control of their circle. As always, linking with him was an overwhelming experience. She felt her own emotions bounce back against him and to her again, and that made her blush. Did he sense how she was starting to regard him?

Foolish as a girl in knee-length skirts, she thought at herself—careful to shield her thoughts from him—*barely old enough to know the difference between boys and girls.* And in the middle of a war, too.

She found it hard to steel her emotions—as an Aes Sedai should— while linked with Androl. Their selves mixed, like swirling paints poured in the same bowl. She fought against it, determined to maintain her own identity. This was vital when linking, and she had been taught it time and time again.

Androl flung his hand forward at a group of Trollocs that had begun loosing arrows at him. The gateway went up, consuming the arrows. She glanced about, and found them falling on another group of Trollocs.

Gateways opened in the ground, dropping Trollocs through, making them appear hundreds of feet in the air. A tiny gateway split the head off a Myrddraal at the neck, leaving it to thrash about, pumping inky blood on the soil. Androl's team stood near the western section of the Heights, where the dragons had once been positioned. There were Shadowspawn and Sharans on all sides.

Androl, channeling! She could feel it, rising above them on the Heights. Something powerful.

Taim! Androl's immediate flare of anger felt as if it would burn her away. In it was the loss of friends, and fury at betrayal by one who should have protected them.

Careful, she sent. *We don't know it's him.*

The one attacking them was in a circle with men and women, otherwise Pevara would not have been able to feel him. Of course, she could only see the weaves of *saidar.* A thick column of air struck at them, fully a pace wide, the heat of it enough to redden the rocky ground beneath.

Androl put a gateway up in time, barely, catching the column of fire and directing it back the way it had come. Twin streams burned Trolloc corpses and caused weeds and patches of grass to burst alight.

Pevara didn't see what happened next. Androl's gateway vanished, as if ripped from him, and an explosion of lightning struck right next to them. Pevara hit the ground in a heap, Androl slamming into her.

In that moment, she let go of herself.

She did it by accident because of the shock of impact. In most cases, the link would have slipped away, but Androl had a powerful grip. The dam holding back Pevara's self from his own broke, and they mixed. It was like stepping through a mirror, then looking back on herself.

She forcibly pulled herself out again, but with an awareness she couldn’t describe. *We need to get out of here,* she thought, still linked with Androl. The others all seemed alive, but that would not last long if their enemy brought more lightning. Pevara began the complex weave for a gateway by instinct, though it wouldn’t do anything. Androl was leading their circle, so only he— The gateway snapped open. Pevara gaped. *She’d* done that, not him. This was among the most complex, most difficult and most power-intensive weaves she knew, but she’d done it as easily as waving her hand. While in a circle someone else was leading.

Theodrin stumbled through first. The lithe Domani woman tugged a stumbling Jonneth after her through the gateway. Emarin followed, limping, one arm hanging uselessly at his side.

Androl regarded the gateway, stunned. “I thought you aren’t supposed to be able to channel if someone else is leading a circle you are in.”

“You aren’t,” she said. “I did it by accident.”

“Accident? But—”

“Through the gateway, you knothead,” Pevara said, shoving him toward it. She followed, then collapsed on the other side.

“Damodred, I need you to stay where you are,” Mat said. He did not look up, but he heard Galad's horse snort through the open gateway.

“One is led to question your sanity, Cauthon,” Galad replied.

Mat finally looked up from his maps. He was not sure he would ever grow accustomed to these gateways. He stood in their command building, the one Tuon had erected in the cleft at the foot of Dashar Knob, and there was a gateway in his wall. Outside it Galad sat his horse wearing the gold and white of the Children of the Light. He was still positioned near the ruins, where a Trolloc army was trying to push its way across the Mora.

Galad Damodred was a man who could have used a few stiff drinks in him. He could have been a statue, with that pretty face and unchanging expression. No, statues had more life.

“You’ll do as you’re told,” Mat said, looking back to his maps. “You are to hold the river up there and do as Tam tells you. I don’t care if you think your place isn’t important enough.”

“Very well,” Galad said, voice as cold as a corpse in the snow. He turned his horse away, and Mika the *damane* closed the gateway.

“It’s a bloodbath out there, Mat,” Elayne said. Light, her voice was colder than Galad’s!

“You all put me in charge. Let me do my job.”

“We made you commander of the armies,” Elayne said. “You are *not* in charge.”

Trust an Aes Sedai to argue over every little word. It.… He looked up, frowning. Min had just said something softly to Tuon. “What is it?” he asked.

“I saw his body alone, on a field,” Min said, “as if dead.”

“Matrim,” Tuon said. “I am… concerned.”

“For once we agree,” Elayne said from her throne on the other side of the room. “Mat, their general is outmatching you.”

“It’s not so bloody simple,” Mat said, fingers on the maps. “It’s never that bloody simple.”

The man leading the Shadow *was* good. Very good. *It’s Demandred,* Mat thought. *I’m fighting one of the bloody Forsaken.*

Together, Mat and Demandred were composing a grand painting. Each responded to the other’s moves with subtle care. Mat was trying to use just a little *too* much red in one of his paints. He wanted to paint the wrong picture, but still a reasonable one.

It was hard. He had to be capable enough to keep Demandred back, but weak enough to invite aggression. A feint, ever so subtle. It was dangerous, possibly disastrous. He had to walk on a razor edge. There was no way to avoid cutting his feet. The question was not whether he would be bloodied, but whether he would reach the other side or not.

“Move in the Ogier,” Mat said softly, fingers on the map. “I want them to reinforce the men at the ford.” The Aiel fought there, guarding the way as the White Tower’s men and the members of the Band of the Red Hand retreated off the Heights per his order.

The command was relayed to the Ogier. *Stay safe, Loial,* Mat thought, making a notation on the map where he had sent the Ogier. “Alert Lan, he’s still on the western side of the Heights. I want him to swing around the back of the Heights, now that most of the Shadow’s forces are on top, and back toward the Mora, behind the other Trolloc army trying to cross near the ruins. He’s not to engage them; just stay out of sight and hold his position.”

The messengers ran to do his bidding, and he made another notation. One of the *so’jhin* brought him some *kaf* the cute one with the freckles. He was too absorbed by the battle to smile at her.

Sipping his *kaf* Mat had the *damane* make him a gateway on the table-top so he could see the battlefield itself. He leaned out over it, but kept one hand on the rim of the table. Only a bloody fool would let someone shove him through a hole two hundred feet over the ground.

He set down his *kaf* on a side table and took out his looking glass. The Trollocs were moving down the Heights toward the bogs. Yes, Demandred was good. The hulking beasts he had sent toward the bogs were slow but thick and powerful, like a rockslide. Also, a group of mounted Sharans were about to ride down from the Heights. Light cavalry. They would hit Mats troops holding Hawal Ford, and keep them from attacking the Trolloc left flank.

A battle was a sword fight on a grand scale. For every move, there was a counter—often three or four. You responded by moving a squad here, a squad there, trying to counter what your enemy did while putting pressure on him in places where he was thin. Back and forth, back and forth. Mat was outnumbered, but he could use that.

"Relay the following to Talmanes," Mat said, eye still to the looking glass. " 'Remember when you bet me I couldn't throw a coin into a cup from across the entire inn?' "

"Yes, Great One," the Seanchan messenger said.

Mat had responded to the bet by saying he would try it once he was drunker—otherwise, there would have been no sport to it. Then Mat had pretended to get drunk, and provoked Talmanes to up the bet from silver to gold.

Talmanes had figured him out and insisted he really drink. *I still owe him a few marks for that, don't I?* Mat thought absently.

He pointed the looking glass to the northern part of the Heights. A group of Sharan heavy cavalry had gathered to move down the slope; he could make out their long, steel-tipped lances.

They were preparing to charge down the slope to intercept Lan's men as they swung around the northern side of the Heights. But the order hadn't even reached Lan yet.

It confirmed Mat's suspicions: Demandred not only had spies in the camp, he had one in or near the command tent. Someone who could send messages as soon as Mat gave orders. That probably meant a channeler, here, inside the tent and masking their ability.

Bloody ashes, Mat thought. *As if this weren't tough enough.*

The messenger returned from Talmanes. "Great One," he said, prostrating himself nose to the floor, "your man says that his forces are completely ruined. He wishes to follow your order, but says that the dragons will not be available for the rest of this day. It will take weeks to repair them. They are… I'm sorry, Great One, but these were his exact words. They are worse off than a barmaid in Sabinel. I do not know what it means."

"Barmaids there work for tips," Mat said with a grunt, "but people in Sabinel don't tip."

That was, of course, a lie. Sabinel was a town where Mat had tried to make Talmanes help him win over a pair of barmaids. Talmanes had suggested that Mat feign a war wound to get sympathy.

Good man. The dragons could still fight, but they probably looked busted up something good. They had an advantage there; nobody knew how they worked except Mat and Aludra. Bloody ashes, and even he worried that each time one went off it would somehow blow up the wrong way.

Five or six dragons were completely functional; Mat had pulled them through a gateway to safety. Aludra had those set up south of the ford, aimed toward the Heights. Mat would use them, but leave the spy with the impression that the bulk of them had been destroyed. Talmanes could instead patch them up; then Mat could use them again.

But the moment I do, he thought, *Demandred will bring everything he has down on them.* It had to be just the right moment. Bloody ashes, lately his life had been completely *about* trying to find the right moments. He was running out of those kinds of moments. For now, he ordered Aludra to use the half-dozen functional dragons to pound Trollocs across the river who were coming down the southwestern slope of the Heights.

She was far enough away from the Heights, and she would keep moving, so Demandred would have a difficult time pinpointing her and bringing the dragons down. The smoke they made would obscure her position quickly.

"Mat," Elayne said from her throne on the side of the room. He noticed, with amusement, that in shifting it about for "comfort" she had somehow gotten Birgitte to wedge it up a few inches, so she now sat exactly level with Tuon. Maybe an inch higher. "Please. Can you at least explain *some* of what you're doing?"

Not without letting that spy hear, too, he thought, glancing about the room. Who was it? One of the three pairs of *damane* and j*'uI'darrii* Could a *damane* be a Darkfriend without her *suldam* knowing? What about the opposite? That noblewoman with the white streak in her hair looked suspicious.

Or was it one of the many generals? Galgan? Tylee? Banner-General Gerisch? She stood at the side of the room, glaring at him. Honestly. Women. She *did* have a nice backside, but Mat had only mentioned it to be friendly. He was a married man.

The fact was, there were so many people moving about, Mat figured he could have spread millet on the floor and had flour by the end of the day. Supposedly, they were all absolutely trustworthy and incapable of betraying the Empress, might she live forever. Which she would not, if spies kept slipping in.

“Mat?” Elayne said. “Someone else needs to know what you are planning. If you fall, we have to continue your plan.”

Well, that was a good enough argument. He’d considered it himself. Assured that his current orders were being followed, he stepped over to Elayne. He glanced about the room, then smiled to the others innocently. They need not know he was suspicious of them.

“Why are you leering at everyone?” Elayne asked softly.

“I'm not bloody leering,” Mat said. “Outside. I want to walk and take in some fresh air.”

“Knotai?” Tuon asked, standing.

He did not look toward her—those eyes could drill through solid steel. Instead, he casually made his way out of the command building. Elayne and Birgitte followed a few moments later.

“What is this?” Elayne asked softly.

“There are many ears in there,” Mat said.

“You suspect a spy inside of the command—”

“Wait,” Mat said, taking her arm, pulling her away. He nodded agreeably to some Deathwatch Guards. They grunted in reply. For Deathwatch Guards, that was downright talkative.

“You can speak freely,” Elayne said. “I just wove us a ward against eavesdropping.”

“Thanks,” Mat said. “I want you away from the command post. I’ll tell you what I’m doing. If something goes wrong, you’ll have to pick another general, all right?”

“Mat,” Elayne said, “if you think there’s a spy—”

“I know there’s a spy,” Mat said, “and so I’m going to use the fellow. It’s going to work. Trust me.”

“Yes, and you’re so confident that you’ve already made a backup plan in case you fail.”

He ignored that, nodding to Birgitte. She looked around them idly, watching for anyone who tried to draw too close.

“How good are you at cards, Elayne?” Mat asked.

“At… Mat, this isn’t the time for gambling.”

“It’s the *exact* time for gambling. Elayne, do you see how badly we’re outnumbered? Do you *feel* the ground when Demandred attacks? We’re lucky he didn’t decide to Travel directly to the command post here and attack us—I suspect he’s afraid that Rand is hiding here somewhere, and he’ll get ambushed. But blood and bloody ashes, he’s *strong*. Without a gamble, we’re dead. Finished. Buried.”

She grew silent.

“Here’s the thing about cards,” Mat said, holding up a finger. “Cards arent like dice. In dice, you want to win as many throws as possible. Lots of throws, lots of wins. It’s random, see? But not cards. In cards, you need to make the other fellows start betting. Betting well. You do that by letting them win a little. Or a lot.

“That’s not so hard here, since we’re outnumbered and overwhelmed. The only way to win is to bet everything on the right hand. In cards, you can lose ninety-nine times but come out ahead if you win that right hand. So long as the enemy starts gambling recklessly. So long as you can ride the losses.”

“And that’s what you’re doing?” Elayne asked. “You’re faking that were losing?”

“Bloody ashes, no,” Mat said. “I can’t fake that. He’d see through it. I *am* losing, but I’m also watching. Holding back for that last bet, the one that could win it all.”

“So when do we move?”

“When the right cards come along,” Mat said. He raised his hand, stilling her objection. “I’ll know, Elayne. I just will *bloody* know. That’s all I can say.”

She folded her arms above her swollen belly. Light, it seemed bigger every day. “Fine. What are your plans for Andor’s forces?”

“I already have Tam and his men committed along the river at the ruins,” Mat said. “As for the rest of your armies, I’d like you to go help at the ford. Demandred is probably counting on those Trollocs north of here to cross the river and herd our defenders downriver on the Shienaran side while the rest of the Trollocs and the Sharans come off the Heights to push us back across the ford and upriver.

“They’ll try to squeeze us tight, envelop us, and that will be that. Only, Demandred sent a force up the Mora to stop the river from flowing, and it’s going to succeed very soon. We’ll see if there’s a way to make that work for us. But once the river’s gone, we’ll need a solid defense in place to stop the Trollocs when they try to surge over the riverbed. That’s what your forces are for.”

“We’ll go,” Elayne said.

“We?” Birgitte barked.

“I’m riding with my troops,” Elayne said, walking toward the horselines.

“Its increasingly obvious that I wont be able to do anything here, and Mat wants me away from the command position. I’ll bloody go, then.”

“Into *battle*?” Birgitte said.

“Were already in battle, Birgitte,” Elayne said. “The Sharan channelers could have ten thousand men assaulting Dashar Knob, and this cleft, in minutes. Come. I promise I’ll let you put so many Guards around me that I won’t be able to sneeze without spraying a dozen of them.”

Birgitte sighed, and Mat gave her a consoling look. She nodded farewell to him, then walked off with Elayne.

All right, Mat thought, turning back toward the command building. Elayne was doing what she had to, and Talmanes had caught his signal. Now the real challenge.

Could he coax Tuon into doing what he wanted?

Galad led the cavalry of the Children of the Light in a sweeping attack along the Mora, near the ruins. The Trollocs had constructed more raft bridges here, and bodies floated as thick as autumn leaves on a pond. The archers had done their work well.

Those Trollocs that finally crossed now had the Children to contend with. Galad leaned in low, lance held firmly, as he split the neck of a hulking, bear-faced Trolloc; he continued forward, lance tip streaming blood, the Trolloc falling to its knees behind him.

He guided his mount Sidama into the mass of Trollocs, knocking them down or causing them to leap out of the way. The power of a cavalry charge was in numbers, and those Galad forced aside could be trampled by the horses following him.

After his charge came a volley from Tam’s men, who launched arrows into the main body of Trollocs as they stumbled onto the banks of the river. Those behind pushed over them, trampling the wounded.

Golever and several other Children joined Galad as their charge— which swept lengthwise across the front rank of Trollocs—ran out of enemies. He and his men reared and turned, lances up, galloping back to locate small groups of men separated and fighting alone.

The battlefield here was enormous. Galad spent the better part of an hour hunting out such groups, rescuing them and ordering them to the ruins so that Tam or one of his captains could form them into new banners. Slowly, as their numbers dwindled, original formations became mixed with one another. Mercenaries were not the only ones who now rode with the Children. Galad had Ghealdanin, Winged Guardsmen and a couple of Warders under his command. Kline and Alix. Both had lost their Aes Sedai. Galad didn’t expect those two to last long, but they were fighting with terrible ferocity.

After sending another group of survivors back toward the ruins, Galad brought Sidama down to a slow walk, listening to the horse’s labored breath. This field beside the river had become a bloody churn of bodies and mud. Cauthon had been right to leave the Children in position here. Perhaps Galad gave the man too little credit.

“How long have we been fighting, would you say?” Golever asked from beside him. The other Child’s tabard had been ripped free, exposing his mail. A section of links along the right side had been crushed by a Trolloc blade. The mail had held, but the stain of blood there indicated that many of the links had been driven through Golever’s quilted gambeson and into his side. The bleeding didn’t look bad, so Galad said nothing.

“We’ve hit midday,” Galad guessed, though he could not see the sun for the clouds. He was reasonably certain they’d been fighting for four or five hours now.

“Think they’ll stop for the night?” Golever asked.

“Doubtful,” Galad said. “If this battle lasts that long.”

Golever looked at him with concern. “You think—”

“I cannot follow what is happening. Cauthon sent so many troops up here, and he pulled everyone off the Heights, from what I can tell. I don’t know why. And the water in the river… does it seem to be flowing in fits and spurts to you? The struggle upstream must be going poorly…” He shook his head. “Perhaps if I could see more of the battlefield, I could understand Cauthon’s plan.”

He was a soldier. A soldier need not understand the whole of the battle in order to follow his orders. However, Galad was usually able to at least piece together his side’s strategy from commands given.

“Have you ever imagined a battle this large?” Golever asked, turning his head. Arganda’s infantry was crashing into the Trollocs at the river. More and more of the Shadowspawn were getting across—with alarm, Galad realized that the river had stopped flowing completely.

The Shadowspawn had gotten a footing in the last hour. It was going to be a tough fight, but at least the numbers were more even now, with all the Trollocs they had killed earlier. Cauthon had known the river would stop flowing. That was why he’d sent so many troops up here, to stem this onslaught from the other side.

Light, Galad thought, *I’m watching the Game of Houses on the battlefield itself* Yes, he had not given Cauthon nearly enough credit.

A lead ball with a red streamer suddenly fell from the sky about twenty paces ahead, hitting a dead Trolloc in the skull. Far overhead, the *raken* screeched and continued on its way. Galad heeled Sidama forward, and Golever climbed down to fetch the letter for him. Gateways were useful, but *raken* could see the battlefield in its expanse, search out banners for specific men and deliver orders.

Golever handed him the letter, and Galad pulled his list of ciphers from the leather envelope he carried in the top of his boot. The ciphers were simple—a list of numbers with words beside them. If orders didn’t use the right word and the right number together, then they were suspect.

Damodred, the orders read, *bring yourself and a dozen of the best men from your twenty-second company and move along the river toward Hawal Ford. Stop when you can see Elayne’s banner and hold there for more orders. P. S. If you see any Trollocs with quarterstaffs, I suggest you let*

Golever fight them instead, as I know you have trouble with those types. Mat.

Galad sighed, showing the letter to Golever. The cipher authenticated it; the number twenty-two and the word "quarterstaff" were paired.

"What does he want of us?" Golever asked.

"I wish I knew," Galad said. He really did.

"I'll gather some men," Golever said. "I assume you'll want Harnesh, Mallone, Brokel…" He continued through an entire list.

Galad nodded. "A good list. Well, I can't say I'm sad for this order. My sister has entered the field, it appears. I would keep watch on her." Beyond that, he wanted to look over another section of the battlefield. Perhaps that would help him understand what Cauthon was doing.

"As you order, Lord Captain Commander," Golever said.

The Dark One attacked.

It was an attempt to tear Rand apart, to destroy him bit by bit. The Dark One sought to claim the very elements that made up Rand's essence, then annihilate them.

Rand couldn't gasp, couldn't cry out. This attack wasn't at his body, for he had no true body in this place, just a memory of one.

Rand held himself together. With difficulty. In the face of this awesome attack, any notion of defeating the Dark One—of killing him— vanished. Rand couldn't defeat anything. He could barely hold on.

He could not have described the sensation if he'd tried. It was as if the Dark One was shredding him while at the same time trying to crush him entirely, coming at Rand from infinite directions, all at once, in a wave.

Rand fell to his knees. It was a projection of himself that did so, but it felt real to him.

An eternity passed.

Rand suffered it. The crushing pressure, the noise of destruction. He weathered it on his knees, fingers taut like claws, sweat streaming from his brow. He suffered it and looked up.

"That is all you have?" Rand growled.

I WILL WIN.

"You made me strong," Rand said, voice ragged. "Each time you or your minions tried to destroy me, your failure was like the blacksmith's hammer beating against metal. This attempt…” Rand took a deep breath. “This attempt of yours is nothing. I will not break.”

YOU MISTAKE. THIS IS NOT AN ATTEMPT TO DESTROY YOU. THIS IS PREPARATION.

“For what?”

TO SHOW YOU TRUTH.

Fragments of the Pattern… threads… suddenly spun before Rand, splitting from the main body of light like hundreds of tiny flowing streams. He knew this was not actually the Pattern, no more than what he saw as himself was actually his body. In interpreting something so vast as the fabric of creation, his mind needed some kind of imagery. This was what his consciousness chose.

The threads spun, not unlike threads in a weave of the One Power, only there were thousands upon thousands of them, and the colors were more varied, more vibrant. Each was straight, like a string pulled taut. Or a beam of light.

They came together like the product of a loom, creating a vision around him. A ground of slimy soil, plants speckled with black, trees with limbs that drooped like arms bereft of strength.

It became a place. A *reality.* Rand pushed himself to his feet, and could feel the soil. He could smell smoke in the air. Could hear… moans of sorrow. Rand turned, and found that he was on a mostly barren slope above a dark city with black stone walls. Buildings huddled inside, squat and dull, like bunkers.

“What is this?” Rand whispered. Something about the place felt familiar. He looked up, but could not see the sun for the clouds that dominated the sky.

IT IS WHAT WILL BE.

Rand felt for the One Power, but drew back in revulsion. The taint had returned, but it was worse—far worse. Where it had once been a dark film on the molten light of *saidin*, it was now a sludge so thick that he could not pierce it. He would have to drink in the darkness, envelop himself in it, to seek out the One Power beneath—if, indeed, it was even still there. The mere thought made bile rise in his throat, and he had to fight to keep his stomach from emptying.

He was drawn toward that fortress nearby. Why did he feel he knew this place? He was in the Blight; the plants made that clear. If that wasn’t enough, he could smell rot in the air. The heat was like that of a bog in the summer—sweltering, oppressive despite the clouds.

He walked down the shallow hillside, and caught sight of some figures working nearby. Men with axes, hacking at trees. There were maybe a dozen of them. As Rand approached, he glanced to the side, and saw the nothing that was the Dark One in the distance, consuming part of the landscape, like a pit on the horizon. A reminder that what Rand was seeing wasn't real?

He passed stumps of cut trees. Were the men gathering firewood? The *thock, thock* of axes—and the postures of the workers—had none of the steadfast strength Rand associated with woodsmen. The beats were lethargic, the men working with slumped shoulders.

That man on the left ... As Rand grew closer, he recognized him, despite the bent posture and wrinkled skin. Light. Tam had to be at least seventy, perhaps eighty. Why was he out working so hard?

It's a vision, Rand thought. *A nightmare. The Dark One's own creation. Not*

real.

Yet, while standing within it, Rand found it difficult not to react as if this were indeed real. And it was, after a fashion. The Dark One used shadowed threads of the pattern—the *possibilities* that rippled from creation like waves from a dropped pebble in a pond—to create this.

"Father?" Rand asked.

Tam turned, but his eyes didn't focus on Rand.

Rand took Tam by the shoulder. "Father!"

Tam stood dully for a moment, then went back to his work, raising his axe. Nearby, Dannil and Jori hacked at a stump. They had aged as well, and were now men well into their middle years. Dannil seemed sick with something awful, his face pale, his skin having broken out in some kind of sores.

Jori's axe bit deep into the bitter earth, and a black flood seeped from the soil—insects that had been hiding at the base of the stump. The blade had pierced their lair.

The insects swarmed out and sped up the handle to cover Jori. He screamed, batting at them, but his open mouth let them climb inside. Rand had heard of such a thing, a deathswarm, one of the many dangers of the

Blight. He raised a hand toward Jori, but the man slumped to the side, dead as quickly as a man could draw breath.

Tam yelled in horror and broke away, running. Rand spun as his father crashed into a thicket of brush nearby, trying to flee the deathswarm. Something jumped from a branch, quick as a snapping whip, and wrapped around Tams neck, jerking him to a halt.

"No!" Rand said. It wasn't real. He still couldn't watch his father die. He seized the Source, punching through the sickly darkness of the taint. It seemed to suffocate him, and Rand spent an excruciating time trying to find *saidin.* When he did grasp it, only a trickle came through.

He wove anyway, roaring, sending a ribbon of flame to kill the vine that had grabbed his father. Tam dropped from its grip as the vines writhed, dying.

Tam didn't move. His eyes stared upward, dead.

"No!" Rand turned on the deathswarm. He destroyed it with a weave of Fire. Only seconds had passed, but all that remained of Jori was bones.

The insects popped as he burned them.

"A channeler," Dannil breathed, cowering nearby, eyes wide as he looked at Rand. Others of the woodsmen had fled into the wilderness. Rand heard several scream.

Rand could not stop himself from retching. The taint ... it was so awful, so *putrid.* He could not hold to the Source any longer.

"Come," Dannil said, and grabbed Rand's arm. "Come, I need you!"

"Dannil," Rand croaked, standing up. "You don't recognize me?"

"Come," Dannil repeated, towing Rand toward the fortress.

"I'm Rand. Rand, Dannil. The Dragon Reborn."

No understanding shone in Dannil's eyes.

"What has he done to you?" Rand whispered.

THEY DO NOT KNOW YOU, ADVERSARY. I HAVE REMADE THEM. ALL THINGS ARE MINE. THEY WILL NOT KNOW THAT THEY LOST. THEY WILL KNOW NOTHING BUT ME.

"I deny you," Rand whispered. "I *deny* you."

DENYING THE SUN DOES NOT MAKE IT SET. DENYING ME DOES NOT PREVENT MY VICTORY.

"Come," Dannil said, towing Rand. "Please. You must save me!"

"End this," Rand said.

END IT? THERE ARE NO ENDINGS, ADVERSARY. IT IS. I HAVE CREATED IT.

"You imagine it."

"Please," Dannil said.

Rand allowed himself to be pulled along toward the dark fortress. "What were you doing out there, Dannil?" Rand demanded. "Why gather wood in the Blight itself? It isn't safe."

"It was our punishment," Dannil whispered. "Those who fail our master are sent out and told to bring back a tree they have cut down with their own hands. If the deathswarms or the twigs don't get you, the sound of cutting wood draws other things…"

Rand frowned as they stepped onto a road leading to the town and its dark fortress. Yes, this place *was* familiar. *The Quarry Road,* Rand thought with surprise. *And that ahead…* The fortress dominated what had once been the Green at the center of Emond's Field.

The Blight had consumed the Two Rivers.

The clouds overhead seemed to push down on Rand, and he heard Jori's screams in his head. He again saw Tam struggling as he was strangled.

It isn't real.

This was what would happen if Rand failed. So many people depended on him ... so many. Some, he had already failed. He had to fight to keep from going over in his head the list of those who had died in his service. Even if he saved others, he had failed to protect these.

It was an attack of a different kind from the one that had tried to destroy his essence. Rand felt it, the Dark One forcing his tendrils into Rand, infecting his mind with worry, doubt, fear.

Dannil led him to the walls of the village where a pair of Myrddraal in unmoving cloaks guarded the gates. They slid forward. "You were sent to gather wood," one whispered with too-white lips.

"I ... I brought this one!" Dannil said, stumbling away. "A gift for our master! He can channel. I found him for you!"

Rand growled, then plunged toward the One Power again, swimming in filth. He reached the trickle of *saidin*, seizing it.

It was immediately knocked from his grasp. A shield slid between him and the Source.

"It isn't real," he whispered as he turned to see who had channeled.

Nynaeve strode through the city gates, dressed in black. “A wilder?” she asked. “Undiscovered? How did he survive this long? You have done well, Dannil. I give you back your life. Do not fail again.”

Dannil wept for joy, then scrambled past Nynaeve into the city.

“It isn’t real,” Rand said as Nynaeve tied him in weaves of Air, then dragged him into the Dark One's version of Emond's Field, the two Myrddraal rushing in ahead of her. It was a large city now. The houses had the feel of mice clustered together before a cat, each one of the same, uniform dullness. People scuttled through alleyways, eyes down.

People scattered before Nynaeve, sometimes calling her “mistress.” Others named her Chosen. The two Myrddraal sped through the city, like shadows. When Rand and Nynaeve reached the fortress, a small group had gathered in the courtyard. Twelve people—Rand could sense that the four men in the group held *saidin*, though he only recognized Damer Flinn from among them. A couple of the women were girls he had known in the Two Rivers.

Thirteen of them. And thirteen Myrddraal, gathering beneath that clouded sky. For the first time since the start of the vision, Rand felt fear. Not this. Anything but this.

What if they Turned him? This wasn’t real, but it was a version of reality. A mirror world, created by the Dark One. What would it do to Rand if they Turned him here? Had he been trapped that easily?

He began to struggle, panicked, against the bonds of Air. It was useless, of course.

“You *are* an interesting one,” Nynaeve said, turning to him. She didn’t look a day older than when he had left her in the cavern, but there were other differences. She wore her hair in a braid again, but her face was leaner, more… harsh. And those eyes.

The eyes were all wrong.

“How did you survive out there?” she asked him. “How did you go undiscovered so long?”

“I come from a place where the Dark One does not rule.”

Nynaeve laughed. “Ridiculous. A tale for children. The Great Lord has always ruled.”

Rand could see it. His connection to the Pattern, the glimmering of halftruths and shadowed ways. This possibility ... it could happen. It was one path the world could take. The Dark One, here, had won the Last Battle and broken the Wheel of Time.

That had allowed him to remake it, to spin the pattern in a new way. Everyone alive had forgotten the past, and now knew only what the Dark One had inserted in their minds. Rand could read the truth, the history of this place, in the threads of the Pattern he had touched earlier.

Nynaeve, Egwene, Logain and Cadsuane were now members of the Forsaken, Turned to the Shadow against their will. Moiraine had been executed for being too weak.

Elayne, Min, Aviendha… they had been given over to torture, endlessly, at Shayol Ghul.

The world was a living nightmare. Each member of the Forsaken ruled as a despot over their own little section of the world. An endless autumn played out as they threw armies, Dreadlords, and factions against one another. An eternal battle.

The Blight had extended to every ocean. Seanchan was no more, ruined and scorched until not even rats and crows could survive there. Anyone who could channel was discovered as a youth and Turned. The Dark One did not like the risk that someone would bring hope back to the world.

And nobody ever would.

Rand screamed as the thirteen began to channel.

“This is your worst?” Rand yelled.

They pressed their wills against his own. He felt them, like nails being pounded into his skull, parting his flesh. He pushed back with everything he had, but the others started a thrumming pressure. Each thump, like the chop of an axe, came closer and closer to boring into him.

AND SO I WIN.

The failure hit Rand hard—the knowledge that what happened here was his fault. Nynaeve, Egwene, Turned to the Shadow because of him. Those he loved, becoming playthings for the Shadow.

Rand should have protected them.

I WIN. AGAIN.

“You think I am the same youth that Ishamael tried so hard to frighten?” Rand shouted, fighting down his terror and shame.

THE FIGHT IS OVER.

“IT *HAS NOT YET BEGUN!”* Rand screamed.

The reality around him shattered again into ribbons of light. Nynaeve’s face shredded, coming apart like lace with a loose thread. The ground disintegrated, and the fortress ceased to exist.

Rand dropped from bands of Air that had never been completely there. The reality the Dark One had created, fragile, unwove into its component parts. Threads of light spiraled out, quivering like the strings of a harp.

They waited to be woven.

Rand drew breath, deeply, through his teeth and looked up at the darkness beyond the threads. “I will not sit passively and suffer it this time, Shaitan. I will not be captive to your nightmares. I have become something greater than I once was.”

Rand seized those threads spinning about him, taking them—hundreds upon hundreds of them. There was no Fire, Air, Earth, Water or Spirit here, these were somehow more base, somehow more varied. Each one was individual, unique. Instead of Five Powers, there were thousands.

Rand took them, gathered them and in his hand held the fabric of creation itself Then he channeled it, spinning it into a different possibility.

“Now,” Rand said, breathing deeply, trying to banish the horror of what he had seen. “Now I will show *you* what is going to happen.”

Bryne bowed. “The men are in position, Mother.”

Egwene took a deep breath. Mat had sent the White Towers forces across the dry riverbed below the ford and around the western side of the bogs; it was time for Egwene to join them. She hesitated for a moment, looking through the gateway to Mats command post. Egwene met the eyes of the Seanchan woman across the table, where she sat imperiously on her throne.

I have not finished with you, Egwene thought.

“Lets go,” she said, turning, waving for Yukiri to close the gateway to Mats building. She fingered Vora’s *sa’angreal*, held in one hand as she strode out of her tent.

She hesitated when she saw something there. Something slight, on the ground. Tiny spiderweb cracks in the rocks. She bent down.

“There are more and more of those around, Mother,” Yukiri said, stooping down beside her. “We think that when Dreadlords channel, the cracks can spread. Particularly if balefire is used . . ”

Egwene felt them. Though they seemed like ordinary cracks to the touch, they looked down into pure nothing. Blackness, far too deep for simple cracks to have caused through shadows of the light.

She wove. All five powers, together, testing at the cracks. Yes…

She wasn't certain exactly what she did, but the fledgling weave covered the cracks like a bandage. The darkness faded, leaving behind only ordinary cracks—and a thin film of crystals.

"Interesting," Yukiri said. "What was that weave?"

"I don't know," Egwene said. "It felt right. Gawyn, have you…" She trailed off.

Gawyn.

Egwene stood up with a start. She vaguely remembered him leaving her command tent for some air. How long ago had it been? She turned around slowly, sensing where he was. The bond let her tell his direction. She stopped when she was pointing toward him.

She was looking toward the riverbed, just up from the ford, where Mat had positioned Elayne's forces.

Oh, Light…

"What?" Silviana asked.

"Gawyn has gone to fight," Egwene said, keeping her voice calm with effort. That wool-headed idiot of a man! Could he not wait an hour or two until her armies were in position? She knew that he was eager to fight, but he should have at least asked!

Bryne groaned softly.

"Send someone to fetch him," Egwene said. Now her voice *was* cold, angry. She could not make it otherwise. "He has apparently joined the Andoran armies."

I will do it, Bryne said, one hand on his sword, his other arm raised toward one of the grooms. "I cannot be trusted to lead armies. At least I can do this."

It made sense. "Take Yukiri with you," she said. "Once you've found my fool Warder, Travel to us west of the bogs."

Bryne bowed, then retreated. Siuan watched him, hesitant.

"You may go with him," Egwene said.

"Is that where you need me?" Siuan asked.

"Actually . . " Egwene lowered her voice. "I want someone to join Mat and the Seanchan Empress and listen with ears accustomed to hearing what is not spoken.”

Siuan nodded, approval—even pride—in her expression. Egwene was Amyrlin; she had no need of either emotion from Siuan, and yet it lifted a little of her grinding fatigue.

“You look amused,” Egwene said.

“When Moiraine and I set out to find the boy,” Siuan said, “I had no idea the Pattern would send you to us as well.”

“Your replacement?” Egwene said.

“As a queen ages,” Siuan said, “she begins to think about her legacy. Light, every goodwife probably starts to think the same things. Will she have an heir to hold what she has created? As a woman grows in wisdom, she realizes that what she alone can accomplish pales compared to what her legacy can achieve.

“Well, I suppose I cant claim you entirely as my own, and I wasn’t exactly pleased to be succeeded. But it is… comforting to know I’ve had a hand in shaping what is to come. And if a woman were to wish for a legacy, she could not dream of greater than one such as you. Thank you. I’ll watch this Seanchan woman for you, maybe help poor Min crawl out of the fang-fish net she’s found herself in.”

Siuan moved away, calling for Yukiri to make her a gateway before going with Bryne. Egwene smiled, watching her give the general a kiss. Siuan. Kissing a man in the open.

Silviana channeled, and Egwene climbed into Daishar’s saddle as a gateway opened for them. She embraced the Source, holding Vora’s *sa’angreal* before her, and trotted through behind a group of Tower Guards. She was immediately assaulted by the scent of smoke.

High Captain Chubain waited for her on the other side. The darkhaired man had always struck her as being too young for his position, but she supposed not every commander had to be silvered like Bryne. After all, they were entrusting this battle to someone only a bit older than she, and she herself was the youngest Amyrlin ever.

Egwene turned toward the Heights and found that she could barely see them through fires that were burning along the slope and the eastern edge of the bogs.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Flaming arrows,” Chubain said, “fired by our forces at the river. I thought Cauthon was mad at first, but I can see his reasoning now. He fired at the Trollocs to set the fields alight there on the Heights and at their base to give us cover. The undergrowth over there is dry and brittle as tinder. The fires drove the Trollocs and Sharan cavalry back up the slope for the time being. And I think Cauthon is counting on the smoke masking our movement around the bogs."

The Shadow would know someone was moving over here, but how many troops and in what configuration… they would have to rely on scouts, rather than their superior vantage atop the Heights.

"Our orders?" Chubain said.

"He didn't tell you?" Egwene asked.

He shook his head. "He just put us in position here."

"We continue on up the west side of the bog and come at the Sharans from behind," she said.

Chubain grunted. "This is fragmenting our forces a great deal. And now he assaults them on the Heights after relinquishing it to them?"

She didn't have an answer to that. Well, she had been the one—essentially—to put Mat in charge. She spared a glance across the bogs again, toward where she sensed Gawyn. He would be fighting at the…

Egwene hesitated. Her previous position had let her sense Gawyn in the direction of the river, but after moving through the gateway, she had a better sense of his position. He *wasn't* at the river with Elayne's armies.

Gawyn was on the Heights themselves, where the Shadow held the strongest.

Oh, Light! she thought. *Gawyn… What are you doing?*

Gawyn strode through smoke. Black tendrils of it curled around him, and the heat of smoldering grass warmed his boots, but the fire had mostly burned out here atop the Heights, leaving the ground dark with ash.

Bodies and some broken dragons lay blackened, like heaps of slag or coal. Gawyn knew that sometimes, to renew a field, farmers would burn the previous year's weeds. The world itself was alight now. As he slipped through the twisting black smoke—his kerchief wetted and tied across his face—he prayed for a renewal.

There were spiderweb cracks all over the ground. The Shadow was destroying this land.

Most of the Trollocs were gathering on the Heights overlooking Hawal Ford, though a handful busied themselves prodding at bodies on the slope. Perhaps they had been drawn by the scent of burning flesh. A Myrddraal emerged from the smoke and began scolding them in a language Gawyn did not understand. It lashed a whip at the Trollocs' backs.

Gawyn froze in place, but the Halfman did not notice him. It drove the stragglers toward where the rest of the Trollocs had gathered. Gawyn waited, breathing softly through his handkerchief, feeling the shadows of the Bloodknives wreathe him. The three rings had done things to him. He felt heady, and his limbs moved too quickly when he stepped. It had taken time to grow accustomed to the changes, to keep his balance each time he moved.

A wolf-featured Trolloc rose up from behind a nearby pile of rubble and sniffed the air, looking after the Fade. The Trolloc then crept out of hiding, a corpse thrown over its shoulder. It walked past Gawyn, passing not five feet away, where it paused and sniffed the air again. Then, hunching low, it continued. The body it carried over its shoulder trailed the cloak of a Warder. Poor Symon. He would never play another hand of cards. Gawyn growled softly, and before he could stop himself, leaped forward. He moved into Kissing the Adder, spinning and relieving the Trollocs shoulders of its head.

The carcass crashed down to the ground. Gawyn stood with sword out, then cursed himself, crouching and moving back into the smoke. It would mask his scent, and the twisting blackness his blurred form. Fool, to risk exposing himself to kill one Trolloc. Symon's corpse would end up in a cookpot anyway. Gawyn couldn't kill the entire army. He was here for one man.

Gawyn crouched, waiting to see if his attack had been noticed. Perhaps they wouldn't have been able to see him—he wasn't certain how much the rings clouded him—but anyone watching would have seen the Trolloc fall.

No warning call. Gawyn rose and continued. Only then did he notice that his fingers were showing red among the black of the ash. He had burned them. The pain was distant. The rings. He had difficulty thinking straight, but that didn't—fortunately—stop his ability to fight. If anything, his instincts were stronger now.

Demandred. Where was Demandred? Gawyn sped back and forth across the top of the Heights. Cauthon had troops stationed at the river near the ford, but the smoke made it impossible to see who was involved. On the other side, the Borderlanders were engaged with a Sharan cavalry unit. Yet here, on top, it was peaceful, despite the presence of Shadowspawn and Sharans. Now Gawyn crept along the back lines of the Shadowspawn, keeping to the rougher patches of deadwood and weeds. Nobody seemed to notice him. There were shadows here, and shadows were protection. Down below, in the corridor between Heights and bog, the fires were going out. That seemed too quick for them to have burned themselves out. Channeling?

He had intended to find Demandred by seeking the origin of the man's attacks, but if he was just channeling to put out fires, then—

The Shadow's army charged, racing down the slope toward Hawal Ford. Though the Sharans remained behind, the bulk of the Trollocs moved. They obviously intended to push over the now-dry riverbed and engage Cauthon's army.

If Cauthon had intended to lure all of Demandred's forces off the Heights, he had failed. Many Sharans remained behind, infantry and cavalry units, watching impassively as the Trollocs thundered toward battle.

Explosions pounded along the slope, throwing Trollocs into the air like dirt from a beaten rug. Gawyn hesitated, crouching low. Dragons, the few working ones. Mat had set them up somewhere across the river; it was difficult to see an exact position because of the smoke. By the sound, there were only half a dozen or so, but the damage they caused was enormous, particularly considering the distance.

A burst of red light from nearby atop the Heights launched toward the smoke of the dragons. Gawyn smiled. *Thank you kindly.* He put his hand on his sword. Time to test just how well these rings worked.

He dashed, low and quick, out of cover. Most of the Trollocs were piling down the slope, loping toward the dry riverbed. Crossbow bolts and arrows assaulted them, and another round of dragon fire came from a slightly different location. Cauthon had the dragons moving, and Demandred had trouble pinpointing them.

Gawyn ran between howling Shadowspawn. The ground thumped like a beating heart from the impacts along the ground behind him. Smoke whipped around him, thick in his throat. His hands had been blackened, and he assumed his face had been as well. He hoped that would help keep him hidden.

Trollocs turned about, screeching or grunting, but none of them fixed upon him. They knew something had passed, but to them, he was merely a blur.

Egwene’s anger poured through the bond. Gawyn smiled. He had not expected her to be pleased. As he ran, arrows slicing the earth around him, he found peace with his choice. Once, perhaps, he would have done this for the pride of the battle and the chance to pit himself against Demandred.

That was not his heart now. His heart was the need. Someone had to fight this creature, someone had to kill him or they would lose this battle. They could all see it. Risking Egwene or Logain would be too great a gamble.

Gawyn could be risked. No one would send him to do this—no one would dare—but it was necessary. He had a chance to change things, to really *matter*. He did it for Andor, for Egwene, for the world itself.

Ahead, Demandred bellowed his now familiar challenge. “Send me al’Thor, not these so-called dragons!” Another streak of fire flew from him.

Gawyn passed the charging Trollocs and came up behind a large group of Sharans with strange bows, almost as big as those of the Two Rivers. They surrounded a mounted man in interlinking armor of coins, bound at holes in the centers, with a gorget and armguards. The faceplate on his fearsome helmet was open. That proud face was eerily familiar to Gawyn, handsome and imperious.

This will have to be quick, Gawyn thought. *And Light, I'd better not give him a chance to channel.*

The Sharan archers stood at the ready, but only two of them turned as Gawyn slipped between them. Gawyn pulled his knife from his belt sheath. He’d have to drag Demandred off his horse, then go for the face with his knife. It felt like a coward’s attack, but it was the best way. Trip him, and Gawyn could—

Demandred spun, suddenly, and looked toward Gawyn. A second later, the man thrust his hand forward, and a beam of white-hot fire—thin as a twig—shot for Gawyn.

It missed, striking just beside Gawyn as he leaped away. Cracks opened all across the ground nearby. Deep, black cracks, that seemed to open into eternity itself.

Gawyn leaped forward, cutting at Demandred's saddle. So *fast.* These rings let him react while Demandred was still staring in confusion.

The saddle came off and Gawyn rammed his knife into the horse's side. The beast screamed and reared, throwing Demandred backward, saddle and all.

Gawyn leaped, bloodied knife out, as the horse bolted and the Sharan archers cried out. He loomed over Demandred, knife raised in two hands.

The Forsaken's body suddenly jolted, and the man was pushed to the side. Air blew about the blackened ground, raising flakes of ash, as weaves of air caught Demandred and spun him about, depositing him on his feet with a clink, sword unsheathed. The Forsaken crouched, and released another weave—Gawyn felt air spinning next to him, as if threads of it had tried to grab him. He was too quick, and Demandred obviously had trouble hitting him because of the rings.

Gawyn backed away and switched his knife to his off hand, unsheathing his sword in his right.

"So," Demandred said, "an assassin. And Lews Therin always spoke of the 'honor' of facing a man face-to-face."

"I wasn't sent by the Dragon Reborn."

"With Night's Shade surrounding you, a weave that none from this Age remember? Do you know that what Lews Therin has done to you will leak your life away? You are dead, little man."

"Then you can join me in the grave," Gawyn said.

Demandred stood up, taking his sword in two hands in an unfamiliar battle stance. He seemed able to track Gawyn somewhat despite the rings, but his responses were a hair slower than they should have been.

Apple Blossoms in the Wind, with three quick strikes, forced Demandred back. Several Sharans came forward with swords, but Demandred raised a gauntleted hand to warn them off. He did not smile at Gawyn— this man did not seem as if he ever smiled—but he performed something that was similar to Lightning of Three Prongs. Gawyn replied with The Boar Rushes Down the Mountain.

Demandred was good. With the edge granted by the rings, Gawyn narrowly escaped Demandred's riposte. The two danced through a small circle of open ground guarded by the watching Sharans. Distant booms threw iron spheres at the hillside, making the ground shake. There were only a few dragons still firing, but they seemed to be concentrating on this position.

Gawyn grunted, throwing himself into Storm Shakes the Branch, trying to push inside Demandred's guard. He would need to be close and ram his sword into the armpit or between the seams of the coin armor.

Demandred responded with skill and finesse. Gawyn was soon sweating beneath his mail. He felt faster than he'd ever been, his reactions like the darting movements of a hummingbird. Yet, try as he did, he could not land a hit.

"Who are you, little man?" Demandred growled, walking back with sword raised at his side. "You fight well."

"Gawyn Trakand."

"The little queens brother," Demandred said. "You realize who I am."

"A murderer."

"And has your Dragon not murdered?" Demandred said. "Has your sister never killed to keep, dare I say *seize,* her throne?"

"That's different."

"So everyone always says." Demandred stepped forward. His sword forms were smooth, his back always straight but relaxed, and he used the broad, sweeping movements of a dancer. He had absolute mastery of his sword; Gawyn had not heard that Demandred was known for his swordsmanship, but this man was as good as any man Gawyn had ever faced. Better, truly.

Gawyn performed Cat Dances on the Wall, a beautiful, sweeping sword form that matched Demandred's. Then he ducked in with The Serpent's Tongue Dances, hoping his previous form would have lulled Demandred into letting a thrust slip past.

Something crashed into Gawyn, throwing him to the ground. He rolled, coming up in a crouch. His breathing grew labored. He did not feel pain because of the rings, but he had probably broken a rib.

A rock, Gawyn thought. *He channeled and brought a rock in to hit me.* He had trouble hitting Gawyn with weaves, because of the shadows, but something large could be tossed at the shadows and still hit him.

"You cheat," Gawyn said with a sneer.

"Cheat?" Demandred asked. "Are there rules, little swordsman? As I recall, you tried to stab *me* in the back while hiding in a shroud of darkness."

Gawyn breathed in and out, holding his side. A dragon's iron sphere thumped into the ground just a short distance away, then exploded. The blast ripped apart some Sharans, their bodies shielding Gawyn and Demandred from the brunt of the blast. The soil rained down, like a spray of surf on the deck of a ship. At least one of the dragons was still working.

“You name me a murderer,” Demandred said, “and I am. I am also your savior, whether you wish it or not.”

“You’re mad.”

“Hardly,” Demandred walked around him, cutting the air with a few sweeps of his sword. “That man you follow, Lews Therin Telamon, *he* is mad. He thinks he can defeat the Great Lord. He cannot. That is simple fact.”

“You’d have us join the Shadow instead?”

“Yes.” Demandred’s eyes were cold. “If I kill Lews Therin, in victory I will be given the right to remake the world as I wish. The Great Lord cares nothing for rule. The only way to protect this world is to destroy it, and then shelter its people. Is that not what your Dragon claims he can do?”

“Why do you keep calling him *my* Dragon?” Gawyn said, then spat blood to the side. The rings… they urged him forward. His limbs pulsed with strength, energy. *Fight! Kill!*

“You follow him,” Demandred said.

“I do not!”

“Lies,” Demandred said. “Or perhaps you are simply fooled. I know that Lews Therin leads this army. At first I was uncertain, but no longer. That weave about you is proof enough, but I have a greater one. No mortal general has such skill as this day has shown; I face a true master on the battlefield. Perhaps Lews Therin wears the Mask of Mirrors, or perhaps he leads by sending messages to this Cauthon through the One Power. It does not matter, I see the truth. I dice with Lews Therin this day.

“I was always the better general. I will prove it here. I would have you tell that to Lews Therin, but you will not live long enough, little swordsman. Prepare yourself.” Demandred raised his sword.

Gawyn stood, dropping his knife, taking his sword in two hands. Demandred stalked toward him, using forms that were different from those Gawyn knew. They were still familiar enough for him to counter, but despite his greater speed, time and time again Demandred caught his sword and deflected it harmlessly to the side.

The man did not strike. He barely moved, feet set wide apart, sword in two hands, battering aside each and every attack Gawyn hurled at him. The

Dove Takes Flight, The Falling Leaf, Leopard's Caress. Gawyn gritted his teeth, growling through them. The rings should have been enough. Why weren't the rings enough?

Gawyn stepped back, then ducked backward as another stone came hurtling toward him. It missed him by inches. *Thank the Light for these rings,* he thought.

"You fight with skill," Demandred said, "for one of this Age. But you still wield your sword, little man."

"What else would I do?"

"Become the sword yourself," Demandred said, as if baffled that Gawyn did not understand.

Gawyn growled and came in again, battering at Demandred. Gawyn was still faster. Demandred didn't attack; he was on the defensive, then, although he didn't retreat. He just stood there, turning aside each blow.

Demandred closed his eyes. Gawyn smiled, then thrust in Black Lance's Last Strike.

Demandred's sword became a blur.

Something struck Gawyn. He gasped, pulling to a stop. He wobbled and fell to his knees, looking down at a hole in his gut. Demandred had thrust straight through the mail, then pulled his sword free in a single fluid motion.

Why can't… why can't I feel anything?

"If you do survive this and see Lews Therin," Demandred said, "tell him I am very much looking forward to a match between the two of us, sword against sword. I have improved since we last met."

Demandred whipped his sword around, catching the back of the blade in the crook between his thumb and forefinger. He pulled the sword across, stripping the blood from the steel and splattering it to the ground.

He slid the weapon into his sheath. He shook his head, then released a ball of fire toward a still-firing dragon.

It fell silent. Demandred strode away along the edge of the steep slope facing the river, his Sharan guard forming around him. Gawyn collapsed to the ground, stunned, spurting his life onto the burned grass. He tried to hold in the blood through trembling fingers.

Somehow Gawyn managed to push himself up to his knees. His heart cried out; he needed to return to Egwene. He began to crawl, blood mixing with the earth beneath him as it seeped from his wound. Through eyes clouded with cold perspiration, he spotted several cavalry mounts twenty paces ahead, poking at blackened tufts of grass at their feet and tethered to a picket-line. After minutes of struggle, an impossible interval of time that left him drained, he pulled himself up on to the back of the first horse he could reach and untether. Gawyn hunched over, dazed, grasping its mane in one hand. Summoning his remaining strength, he kicked his heel into the animal's rib cage.

"My Lady," Mandevwin said to Faile, "I have *known* those two men for years! They are not without a few spots in their past. No man comes to the Band without a few of those. But, Light provide, they are *not* Darkfriends!"

Faile ate her midday rations in silence, listening with as much patience as she could muster to Mandevwin's protests. She wished Perrin were here so she could have a good argument. She felt as if she would burst from pressure.

They were close to Thakan'dar, horribly close. The black sky rumbled with lightning, and they hadn't seen a living creature—dangerous or not—in days. Nor had they seen Vanin or Harnan again, though Faile set a double guard each night. The minions of the Dark One did not give up.

She now carried the Horn in a large bag tied to her waist. The others knew it, and moved between pride in their duty and horror at the import of it. At least she shared that with them now.

"My Lady," Mandevwin said, kneeling down. "Vanin is out there nearby somewhere. He is a very gifted scout, the best in the Band. We will not see him unless he wants us to, but I would swear that he is following us. Where else would he go? Perhaps if I call out to him, invite him in to tell his story, so we can resolve this."

"I will consider it, Mandevwin," Faile said.

He nodded. The one-eyed man was a good commander, but had the imagination of a brick. Uncomplicated men assumed others to have uncomplicated motivations, and he could not imagine someone like Vanin or Harnan helping the Band for so long—under orders, undoubtedly, to avoid suspicion—only to now do something so terrible.

At least now she knew that she hadn't been worried without cause. That look of pure terror in Vanin's eyes when he'd been caught was confirmation enough, if catching him with the Horn in his hands hadn't been. She had not expected *two* Darkfriends, and they had outsmarted her in their thievery. However, they had also underestimated the dangers of the Blight. She hated to think what would have happened if they hadn't drawn the attention of the bear-thing. Faile would have remained in her tent, anticipating the arrival of thieves who had already disappeared with one of the most powerful artifacts in the world.

The sky rumbled. Dark Shayol Ghul loomed ahead, rising out of the valley of Thakan'dar in a range of smaller mountains. The air had grown chill, almost wintery. Reaching that peak would be difficult—but one way or another, she was going to bring this Horn to the forces of the Light for the Last Battle. She rested her fingers on the sack at her side, feeling the metal within.

Nearby, Olver scampered across the lifeless gray rock of the Blasted Lands, wearing his knife at his belt like a sword. Perhaps she should not have brought him. Then again, boys his age in the Borderlands learned to run messages and carry supplies to besieged forts. They wouldn't go out with a war band or be given a post until they were at least twelve, but their training started much earlier.

"My Lady?"

Faile looked toward Selande and Arrela as they approached. Faile had put Selande in charge of the scouts, now that Vanin had revealed himself. The pale little woman looked less like an Aiel than many of the others in *Cha Faile.* But the attitude helped.

"Yes?"

"Movement, my Lady," Selande said softly.

"What?" Faile stood. "What kind?"

"Some kind of caravan."

"In the *Blasted Lands*?" Faile asked. "Show me."

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It wasn’t just a caravan. There was a *village* out there. Faile could make it out through the looking glass, though only as a smudge of darkness to indicate buildings. It was settled into the foothills near Thakan’dar. A village. Light!

Faile moved the looking glass down to where a caravan crept across the bleak landscape, heading toward a supply station set up a good distance outside the village.

“They’re doing what we did,” she whispered.

“What’s that, my Lady?” Arrela lay on her stomach beside Faile. Mandevwin was on her other side, peering through his own looking glass.

“It’s a central supply station,” Faile explained, looking over the stacks of boxes and bundles of arrows. “Shadowspawn can’t move through gateways, but their supplies can. They needn’t have carried arrows and replacement weapons as part of the invasion. Instead, the supplies are being collected here, then sent to the battlefields when needed.”

Indeed, down below, a ribbon of light announced a gateway opening. A large train of dirty-looking men trudged through it with packs on their backs, followed by dozens of others pulling small carts.

“Wherever those supplies are going,” Faile said slowly, “there will be fighting nearby. Those carts carry arrows, but no food, as the Trollocs are dragging corpses away to feast on each night.”

“So if we could slip through one of those gateways . .” Mandevwin said.

Arrela snorted, as if the conversation were a joke. She looked at Faile, and the smile slipped from her lips. “You’re serious. Both of you.”

“We are still a long hike from Thakan’dar,” Faile said. “And that village blocks our way. It might be easier to sneak through one of those gateways than try to work our way into the valley.”

“We’d end up behind the enemy lines!”

“We're already behind their lines,” Faile said grimly, “so nothing would change there.”

Arrela fell silent.

“That will be a problem,” Mandevwin said softly, turning his looking glass. “Look at the fellows approaching the camp from the village.”

Faile raised her looking glass again. “Aiel?” she whispered. “Light! The Shaido have joined with the forces of the Dark One?”

“Even the Shaido dogs would not do that,” Arrela said, then spat to the side.

The newcomers *did* look different. They wore their veils up, as if for killing, but the veils were red. Either way, sneaking past Aiel would be nearly impossible. Likely, only the fact that her group was so distant had saved them from discovery. That, and the fact that no one would expect to find a group like Faile's here.

"Back," Faile said, inching back down the hillside. "We need to do some planning."

Perrin awoke, feeling as if he had been tossed into a lake during winter. He gasped.

"Lie down, you fool," Janina said, putting her hand on his arm. The flaxen-haired Wise One looked as exhausted as he felt.

He was in someplace soft. Too soft. A nice bed, clean sheets. Outside the windows, waves broke gently against a shore and gulls called. He also heard moans echoing from some place nearby.

"Where am I?" Perrin asked.

"At my palace," Berelain said. She stood near the doorway, and he hadn't noticed her before. The First wore her diadem, the hawk in flight, and had on a crimson dress with yellow trim. The room was lavish, with gold and bronze on the mirrors, windows and bedposts.

"I might add," Berelain said, "that this is a somewhat familiar situation for me, Lord Aybara. I took precautions this time, in case you were wondering."

Precautions? Perrin sniffed the air. Uno? He could smell the man. Indeed, Berelain nodded to the side, and Perrin turned to find Uno sitting in a chair nearby, his arm in a sling.

"Uno! What happened to you?" Perrin asked.

"Bloody Trollocs happened to me," Uno grumbled. "Waiting my turn for Healing."

"Those with life-threatening wounds are Healed first," Janina said. She was the most accomplished of the Wise Ones at Healing; she'd apparently decided to stay with the Aes Sedai and Berelain. "You, Perrin Aybara, were Healed to the point of survival. Only just to the point of survival. It wasn't until now that we could take care of the wounds that did not threaten your life."

“Wait!” Perrin said. He struggled to sit. Light, he was exhausted. “How long have I been here?”

“Ten hours,” Berelain said.

“Ten hours! I have to go. The fighting…”

“The fighting will continue without you,” Berelain said. “I’m sorry.” Perrin growled softly. So *tired*. “Moiraine knew a method of wiping away a man’s fatigue. Do you know this, Janina?”

“I wouldn’t do it for you if I did,” Janina said. “You need sleep, Perrin Aybara. Your participation in the Last Battle is over.”

Perrin gritted his teeth, then moved to stand.

“Step out of that bed,” Janina said, turning her eyes toward him, “and I’ll bundle you in Air and leave you hanging there for hours.”

Perrin’s first instinct was to *shift* away. He began forming the thought in his head, and felt foolish. He’d somehow returned to the real world. He couldn’t *shift* here. He was as helpless as a babe.

He leaned back in his bed, frustrated.

“Be of good cheer, Perrin,” Berelain said softly, walking up to the bed. “You should be dead. How did you reach that battlefield? If Haral Luhhan and his men hadn’t spotted you lying there . .”

Perrin shook his head. What he’d done defied explanation for one who did not know the wolf dream. “What is happening, Berelain? The war? Our armies?”

She pursed her lips.

“I can smell the truth on you,” Perrin said. “Worry, anxiety.” He sighed. “I saw that the battlefronts had moved. If the Two Rivers men are at the Field of Merrilor as well, all three of our armies have been pushed back to the same place. Everyone but those at Thakan’dar.”

“We don’t know how the Lord Dragon is doing,” she said softly, gliding onto a stool beside his bed. Beside the wall, Janina took Uno by the arm. He shivered as the Healing coursed through him.

“Rand still fights,” Perrin said.

“Too much time has passed,” she said. There was something she wasn’t telling him, something she was dancing around. He could smell it on her.

“Rand still fights,” Perrin repeated. “If he had lost, we wouldn’t be here.” He leaned back, exhaustion deep in his bones. Light! He couldn’t just lie here while men died, could he? “Time is different at the Bore. I visited it and saw firsthand. It has been many days out here, but I'll bet it has only been a day for Rand. Maybe less."

"That is well. I will pass what you say to the others."

"Berelain," Perrin said. "I need you to do something for me. I sent Elyas with a message to our armies, but I don't know if he delivered it. Graendal is interfering with the minds of our great captains. Will you find out for me if his message arrived?"

"It arrived," she said. "Almost too late, but it arrived. You did well. Sleep now, Perrin." She rose.

"Berelain?" he asked.

She turned back to him.

"Faile," he said. "What of Faile?"

Her anxiety sharpened. *No.*

"Her supply caravan was destroyed in a bubble of evil, Perrin," Berelain said softly. "I'm sorry."

"Was her body recovered?" he forced himself to ask.

"No."

"Then she still lives."

"It—"

"She *still lives!"* Perrin insisted. He would have to assume that was true. If he didn't…

"There is, of course, hope," she said, then walked to Uno, who was flexing his Healed arm, and nodded for him to join her as she left the room. Janina was puttering around the washstand. Perrin could still hear moaning in the hallways outside, and the place smelled of healing herbs and of pain.

Light, he thought. Faile's caravan had carried the Horn. Did the Shadow now have it?

And Gaul. He *had* to return to Gaul. He'd left the man in the wolf dream, guarding Rand's back. If Perrin's exhaustion was any guide, Gaul couldn't hold much longer.

Perrin felt as if he could sleep for weeks. Janina returned to his bedside, then shook her head. "There is no good purpose in trying to force yourself to hold your eyes open, Perrin Aybara."

"I have too much to do, Janina. Please. I need to return to the battlefield and—"

"You will *stay here*, Perrin Aybara. You are of no use to anyone in your state, and will gain no *ji* by trying to prove otherwise. If the blacksmith who brought you here knew I'd let you stumble off and die on the battlefield, I believe he'd come try to hang me out the window by my heels." She hesitated. "And that one ... I almost think he could manage it."

"Master Luhhan," Perrin said, recalling faintly those moments before he blacked out. "He was there. He found me?"

"He saved your life," Janina said. "That man threw you on his back and ran you to an Aes Sedai for a gateway. You were seconds from death when he arrived. Considering your size, just lifting you is some feat."

"I don't really need sleep," Perrin said, feeling his eyes droop. "I need… I need to get…"

"I'm sure you do," Janina said.

Perrin let his eyes shut. That would convince her that he was going to do as she said. Then, when she left, he could stand up.

"I'm sure you do," Janina repeated, her voice growing softer for some reason.

Sleep, he thought. *I'm falling asleep.* Again, he saw the three paths before himself. This time, one led to ordinary sleep, another to the wolf dream while sleeping, the path he usually took.

And between them, a third path. The wolf dream in the flesh.

He was sorely tempted, but in the moment, he chose not to take that path. He chose ordinary sleep, as—in a moment of understanding—he knew that his body would die without it.

Androl lay, gasping for breath, staring up at the sky somewhere far from the battlefield, following their flight from the top of the Heights.

That attack ... it had been so powerful.

What was that? he sent to Pevara.

It wasn't Taim, she replied, standing up, dusting off her skirts. *I think it was Demandred.*

I purposefully brought us to a place far from where he was fighting.

Yes. How dare he move and interfere with the group of channelers attacking his forces?

Androl sat up, groaning. *You know, Pevara, you are unusually smart-lipped, for an Aes Sedai.*

He was surprised by her amusement. *You don't know Aes Sedai nearly as well as you assume.* She walked over to check on Emarin's wounds.

Androl took a deep breath, filled with the scents of autumn. Fallen leaves. Stagnant water. An autumn that had come too early. Their hillside looked down on a valley where, in defiance of the way the world was going, some farmers had tilled the earth in large squares.

Nothing had grown.

Nearby, Theodrin pulled herself up. “It’s *madness* back there,” she said, her face flushed.

Androl could feel Pevara’s disapproval. The girl should not have been so free with her emotions; she hadn’t learned proper Aes Sedai control yet.

She isn’t a proper Aes Sedai, Pevara sent him, reading his thoughts. *Regardless of what the Amyrlin claims. She hasn’t been through the testing yet.*

Theodrin seemed to know what Pevara thought, and the two kept their distance from one another. Pevara Healed Emarin, who took it stoically. Theodrin Healed a cut on Jonneth’s arm. He seemed bemused at the motherly ministration.

She’ll have him bonded before long, Pevara sent him. *Notice how she let one of the other women take her one of the fifty, then started following him about? We’ve barely been rid of her since the Black Tower.*

What if he bonds her back? Androl sent.

Then we’ll see if what you and I have is unique or not. Pevara hesitated. *We are stumbling upon things that have never been known.*

He met her eyes. She was referring to whatever had happened during their linking this last time. She had opened a gateway, but had done it as he would have.

We’re going to need to try that again, he sent her.

Shortly, she said, Delving Emarin to be certain her Healing had taken.

“I am quite all right, Pevara Sedai,” he said, courteous as always. “And if I might note, you seem as if you could use some Healing of your own.”

She looked down at the burned cloth on her arm. She was still timid about letting a man Heal her, but also annoyed at her own timidity.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice level as she let him touch her arm and channel.

Androl unhooked the small tin cup from his belt, and absently lifted his hand, fingers downward. He pressed his fingers as if pinching something between them, and when he spread them, a small gateway opened in the middle. Water poured out, filling the cup.

Pevara sat down beside him, accepting the cup as he offered it. She drank, then sighed. “As cool as mountain springwater.”

“That’s what it is,” Androl said.

“That reminds me, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. How do you do that?”

“Do this?” he said. “It’s just a small gateway.”

“That’s not what I mean. Androl, you just got here. You couldn’t possibly have had time to memorize this area well enough to open a gateway to some mountain spring hundreds of miles away.”

Androl stared blankly at Pevara, as if he had just heard a surprising piece of news. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s something to do with my Talent.” ”I see.” Pevara was silent a moment. “By the way, what happened to your sword?”

Androl reached by reflex to his side. The sheath hung there, empty. He’d dropped his sword when the lightning had struck near them, and he hadn’t had the presence of mind to grab it as they fled. He groaned. “Garfin would send me to grind barley at the quartermaster’s for weeks straight if he heard of this.”

“It’s not that important,” Pevara said. “You have better weapons.”

“It’s the principle,” Androl said. “Carrying a sword reminds me. It’s like… well, seeing a net reminds me of fishing around Mayene, and springwater reminds me of Jain. Small things, but small things matter. I need to be a soldier again. We have to find Taim, Pevara. The seals…”

“Well, we can’t find him the way we’ve been trying. Do you agree?”

He sighed, but nodded.

“Excellent,” she said. “I hate being a target.”

“What do we do instead?”

“We approach this with careful study, not with swinging swords.”

She probably had a point. “And… what we did? Pevara, you used my *Talent*.”

“We shall see,” she said, sipping from her cup. “Now, if only this were tea.”

Androl raised his eyebrows. He took the cup back, opened a small gateway between two fingers and dropped a few dried tea leaves into the cup. He boiled it for a moment with a thread of Fire, then dropped in some honey through another gateway.

“Had some back in my workshop in the Black Tower,” he said, handing the cup back. “It looks like nobody moved it.”

She sipped the tea, then smiled warmly. “Androl, you are *wonderful*.”

He smiled. Light! How long had it been since he’d felt this way about a woman? Love was supposed to be something for young fools, wasn’t it?

Of course, the young fools never could see straight. They’d look for a pretty face, and stop there. Androl had been around long enough to know that a pretty face was nothing compared to the type of *solidity* a woman like Pevara displayed. Control, steadiness, determination. These were things that only proper seasoning could bring.

It was the same way with leather. New leather was fine, but really *good* leather was leather that had been used and worn, like a strap that had been cared for over the years. You never knew for certain if you could rely on a new strap. Once it had been your companion for a few seasons, you knew.

“I’m trying to read that thought,” Pevara said. “Did you just… compare me to an old strap of leather?”

He blushed.

“I’ll assume it’s a leatherworker’s thing.” She sipped her tea.

“Well, you keep comparing me to… what is it? A bunch of little figurines?”

She smiled. “My family.”

“The ones killed by Darkfriends. I'm sorry.”

“It happened very, very long ago, Androl.” He could sense that she was still angry about it, though.

“Light,” he said. “I keep forgetting that you’re older than most trees, Pevara.”

“Hmm…” she said. “First I’m a strap of leather, now I’m older than trees. I assume that, despite the several dozen jobs you’ve had in your life, none of your training involves how to speak with a lady?”

He shrugged. When younger, he might have been embarrassed to have his tongue tied in such knots, but he’d learned that there was just no way to avoid it. Trying to do so only made it worse. Oddly, the way he reacted pleased her. Women liked to see a man flummoxed, he supposed.

Her mirth died down, however, as she happened to glance at the sky. He was reminded, suddenly, of the empty fields below. The dead trees. The growling thunder. This was not a time for mirth, not a time for love. For some reason, though, he found himself clinging to both precisely because of that.

“We should be moving soon,” he said. “What is your plan?”

“Taim will always be surrounded by minions. If we continue attacking as we have, we’ll be cut to ribbons before we can get to him. We need to reach him stealthily.”

“And how are we going to manage that?”

“That depends. How crazy can you be, if the situation warrants?”

The valley of Thakan’dar had become a place of smoke, mayhem and death.

Rhuarc stalked through it, Trask and Baelder at his sides. They were brothers of his from the Red Shields. He had never met these two before coming to this place, but they were brothers nonetheless, and their bond had been sealed by the spilled blood of Shadowspawn and traitors.

Lightning broke the air, striking nearby. As Rhuarc walked, his feet crunched on sand that had been turned to shards of glass by the lightning. He reached cover—some Trolloc corpses in a pile—and crouched down, Trask and Baelder joining him. The tempest had finally come, furious winds assaulting the valley, nearly enough to pull the veil from his face.

It was difficult to make out anything. The fog had blown away, but the sky had darkened, and the storm kicked up dust and smoke. Many people fought in prowling packs.

There were no more battle lines. Earlier in the day, a Myrddraal attack—and an all-out Trolloc assault afterward—had finally broken the Defenders’ hold on the mouth of the valley. The Tairens and Dragonsworn had pulled back into the valley, toward Shayol Ghul, and now most of them fought near the base of the mountain.

Fortunately, the Trollocs that had piled through didn’t have overwhelming numbers. The killing in the pass and the long siege had reduced the numbers of Trollocs at Thakan’dar. In all, the Trollocs remaining probably equaled the number of Defenders.

That still would be a problem—but in his opinion, the Honorless who wore red veils were a far greater threat. Those roved across the expanse of the valley, as did the Aiel. In this open killing field, obscured with fog and swirling dust to ruin visibility, Rhuarc hunted. Occasionally, he would run across Trollocs in groups, but most had been driven by the Fades to fight the regular forces, the Tairens and Domani.

Rhuarc waved to his brothers, and they moved through the tempest along one side of the valley. The Light send that the regular forces and the channelers could hold the path up to the mountain where the *Car'a'carn* fought Sightblinder.

Rand al'Thor would need to complete his battle soon, for Rhuarc suspected it would not be long before the Shadow won this valley.

He and his brothers passed a group of Aiel dancing the spears with the traitors who wore the red veils. While many of the red-veils could channel, it seemed that none in this group could. Rhuarc and his two leaped into the dance, spears thrusting.

These red-veils fought well. Trask woke from the dream during this fight, though he slew one of the red-veils as he fell. The skirmish ended when the remaining red-veils fled. Rhuarc killed one of them with the bow, and Baelder downed another. Shooting men in the back; it was a thing they would not have done if fighting true Aiel. These creatures were worse than Shadowspawn.

The three remaining Aiel they had helped nodded in thanks. They joined with him and Baelder, and together they moved back toward the Pit of Doom to check on the defenses there.

Thankfully, the army at this place still held. Many were of those Dragonsworn who had come to the battle last, and who were made up primarily of common men and women. Yes, there were some Aes Sedai among them, even some Aiel and a couple of Asha'man. However, most of them held old swords that hadn't seen use in years, or staffs that had probably once been farming tools.

They fought like cornered wolves against the Trollocs. Rhuarc shook his head. If the treekillers had fought so savagely, perhaps Laman would still have his throne.

A bolt of lightning came from the air, killing a number of the defenders. Rhuarc blinked the flash from his eyes, turned to the side, and scanned the surroundings through the blowing winds. *There.*

He motioned for his brothers to stay behind, then slipped forward in a crouch. He grabbed a handful of the gray, ashlike dust that covered the ground and rubbed it into his clothing and onto his face; the wind whipped some of it from his fingers.

He went prone on the ground, a dagger clenched in his jaw. His prey stood atop a small hill, watching the fight. One of the red-veils with his veil down, grinning. The creature's teeth were not filed to points. The ones with teeth filed to points could all channel; some without teeth like that could as well. Rhuarc did not know what that meant.

This fellow was a channeler, revealed as he summoned Fire like a spear and launched it toward fighting Tairens nearby. Rhuarc crept forward slowly, inching along the ground in a depression in the rocks.

He was forced to watch the red-veil killing Defender after Defender, but he did not speed up. He continued his excruciatingly slow crawl, listening to the fire sizzle as the red-veil stood with hands behind his back, weaves of the One Power striking around him.

The red-veil didn't see him. Though some of these men fought like Aiel, many did not. They were not quiet as they stalked, and did not seem to know the bow or the spear as well as they should. Men like the one in front of him… Rhuarc doubted they had ever had to move quietly, sneak up on a foe, kill a deer in the wilderness. Why would they want to, when they could channel?

The man didn't notice as Rhuarc slid around a Trolloc corpse near the red-veil's feet, then reached out and sliced the man's hamstrings. He dropped with a cry, and before he could channel further, Rhuarc cut his throat, then slipped back into hiding between two corpses.

Two Trollocs came to see what the fuss was. Rhuarc killed the first, then dropped the second even as it turned, before they had a chance to see him. Then, once again, he melted into the landscape.

No more Shadowspawn came to investigate, so Rhuarc retreated back toward his men. As he moved—rising to a crouching run—he passed a small pack of wolves finishing off a pair of Trollocs. The wolves turned to him, muzzles bloodied and ears raised. They let him pass, moving silently out into the storm of wind to find other prey.

Wolves. They had come with the rainless tempest, and now fought alongside men. Rhuarc did not know much of how the overall battle was going. He could see that some of King Darlin's troops in the distance still held formation. The crossbowmen had set up next to the Dragons worn. Last Rhuarc had seen, they'd nearly run out of bolts, and the strange steam-belching wagons that had been delivering supplies now lay in ruins. Aes

Sedai and Asha’man continued to channel against the onslaught, but not with the energy he had seen from them earlier.

The Aiel did what they did best: kill. So long as those armies held the pathway to Rand al’Thor, perhaps that would be enough. Perhaps…

Something hit him. He gasped, falling to his knees. He looked up, and someone beautiful stepped through the storm to inspect him. She had wonderful eyes, though the two were offset from one another. He’d never before realized how horribly balanced everyone else’s eyes were. Thinking of it nauseated him. And all other women had too much hair on their heads. This creature, with thinning hair, was far more marvelous.

She neared, wonderful, amazing. Incredible. She touched his chin as he knelt on the ground, and her fingertips were as soft as clouds.

“Yes, you’ll do,” she said. “Come, my pet. Join the others.”

She gestured toward a group following her. Several Wise Ones, a pair of Aes Sedai, a man with a spear. Rhuarc growled. Would this man try to take the affection of his beloved? He would *kill* the man for that. He would—

His mistress chuckled. “And Moridin thinks this face a punishment.

“Well, you don’t care what face I wear, do you, my pet?” Her voice grew softer, and at the same time harsher. “When I’m through, nobody will. Moridin himself will praise my beauty, for he will see through eyes that I grant him. Just like you, pet. Just like you.”

She patted Rhuarc. He joined her and the others and moved through the valley, leaving behind the men he had called brothers.

Rand stepped forward as a roadway formed itself from threads of light in front of him. His foot fell on a bright, clean paving stone and he passed from nothingness into majesty.

The road was wide enough to let six wagons pass one another at a time, but no vehicles clogged the roadway. Only people. Vibrant people, in colorful clothing, chatting, calling, eager. Sounds filled the emptiness—the sounds of life.

Rand turned, looking at the buildings as they grew around him. Tall houses lined the thoroughfare, ribbed with columns in front. Long and thin, they abutted one another, their faces toward the roadway. Beyond them lay domes and marvels, buildings that stretched toward the sky. It was like no city he had ever seen, though the workmanship was Ogier.

Partly Ogier work, that was. Nearby, workers repaired a stone facade that had broken during a storm. Thick-fingered Ogier laughed rumbling laughs as they worked alongside men. When the Ogier had come to the Two Rivers to repay Rand for his sacrifice, intending to build a monument here, the town's leaders had wisely requested help improving their city instead.

Over the years, the Ogier and Two Rivers people had worked closely together—to the extent that now, Two Rivers craftsmen were sought the world over. Rand walked up the roadway, moving among people from all nationalities. Domani trailing colorful, filmy clothing. Tairens—the division between commoner and noble vanishing more and more by the day—in baggy clothing and shirts marked by striped sleeves. Seanchan wearing exotic silks. Borderlanders with noble airs. Even some Sharans.

All had come to Emond's Field. The city now bore little resemblance to its name, and yet there were hints. More trees and open green spaces dotted the landscape than one would find in other great cities, like Caemlyn or Tear. In the Two Rivers, craftsmen were revered. And their marksmen were the best the world knew. An elite group of Two Rivers men, armed with the new firing sticks men were calling rifles, served with the Aiel in their peacekeeping campaigns in Shara. It was the only place war was known in the world. Oh, there were disputes here and there. The flare up between Murandy and Tear five years back had nearly given the land its first real war in the century since the Last Battle.

Rand smiled as he moved through the crowd, not jostling, but listening with pride to the joy in people's voices. The "flare-up" in Murandy had been dynamic by Fourth Age standards, but in truth it had been nothing. A single disgruntled nobleman had fired on an Aiel patrol. Three wounded, none dead, and this was the worst "fighting" in years, outside of the Sharan campaigns.

Above, sunlight broke through the thin cloud cover, bathing the roadway in light. Rand finally reached the city square, which had once been the Green in Emond's Field. What to think of the Quarry Road now that it was wide enough to march an army down? He walked around the massive fountain at the center of the square, a monument to those who had fallen in the Last Battle, crafted by the Ogier.

He saw familiar faces among the statuary in the center of the fountain, and turned away.

Not final yet, he thought. *This isn’t real yet.* He’d built this reality out of threads of what could be, of mirrors of the world as it now played out. It wasn’t set.

For the first time since entering this vision of his own design, his confidence shook. He knew the Last Battle wasn’t a failure. But people were dying. Did he think to stop all death, all pain?

This should be my fight, he thought. *They shouldn’t have to die.* Wasn’t his sacrifice enough?

So he’d asked time and time again.

The vision quivered, fine stones beneath his feet buzzing, buildings shaking and wavering. The people stopped in place, motionless, sound dying. Down a small side street, he saw a darkness appear like a pinprick that expanded, engulfing everything near it—sucking them in. It grew to the size of one of the houses, slowly expanding.

YOUR DREAM IS WEAK, ADVERSARY.

Rand asserted his will, and the quivering stopped. People who had frozen in place resumed walking, and the comfortable chatter sprang up again. Soft wind blew down the walkway, rustling banners on poles proclaiming celebration.

“I will see that it happens,” Rand said to the darkness. “This is your failing. Happiness, growth, love…”

THESE PEOPLE ARE MINE NOW. I WILL TAKE THEM.

“You are darkness,” Rand said loudly. “Darkness cannot push back Light. Darkness exists only when Light fails, when it flees. I will *not* fail. I will *not* flee. You cannot win so long as I bar your path, Shaitan.”

WE SHALL SEE.

Rand turned from the darkness and continued doggedly around the fountain. On the other side of the square, a large set of majestic white steps led up to a building four stories high and of incredible craftsmanship. Carved with reliefs, topped by a gleaming copper roof, the building was decked with banners. One hundred years. A hundred years of life, a hundred years of peace.

The woman who stood at the top of the steps had a familiarity to her features. Some Saldaean heritage, but also dark curls of hair that felt distinctly Two Rivers. Lady Adora, Perrin's granddaughter and mayor of Emond’s Field. Rand walked up the steps as she gave her speech of commemoration. Nobody noticed him. He made it so that they didn’t. He slipped like a Gray Man behind her as she proclaimed the day of celebration; then he entered the building.

It was not a government office, though it might seem so from the front. It was much more important.

A school.

To the right, grand hallways were hung with paintings and ornaments to rival those of any palace—but these depicted the great teachers and storytellers of the past, from Anla to Thom Merrilin. Rand strolled that hallway, looking in at rooms where any could come and gain knowledge, from the poorest farmer to the children of the Mayor. The building had to be large to accommodate all who wanted to learn.

YOUR PARADISE IS FLAWED, ADVERSARY.

Darkness hung in a mirror to Rand's right. It reflected not the hallway, but instead HIS presence.

YOU THINK YOU CAN ELIMINATE SUFFERING? EVEN IF YOU WIN, YOU WILL NOT ON THOSE PERFECT STREETS, MEN ARE STILL MURDERED AT NIGHT. CHILDREN GO HUNGRY DESPITE THE EFFORTS OF YOUR MINIONS. THE WEALTHY EXPLOIT AND CORRUPT; THEY MERELY DO SO QUIETLY.

“It is better,” Rand whispered. “It is good.”

IT IS NOT ENOUGH, AND WILL NEVER BE ENOUGH. YOUR DREAM IS FLAWED. YOUR DREAM IS A LIE. I AM THE ONLY HONESTY YOUR WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN.

The Dark One attacked him.

It came like a storm. A burst of wind so terrible, it threatened to rip Rand's skin from his bones. He stood tall, eyes toward the nothing, crossing his arms behind his back. The attack ripped away the vision—the beautiful city, the laughing people, the monument to learning and peace. The Dark One consumed it, and once again, it became mere possibility.

Silviana held the One Power, felt it flooding her, lighting the world. When she held *saidar*; she felt as if she could see all. It was a glorious feeling, so long as she acknowledged that it *was* merely a feeling. It was not truth. The lure of *saidar*'s power had coaxed many a woman into foolhardy gestures. Certainly many Blues had made them, at one point or another.

Silviana sculpted fire from horseback, leveling Sharan soldiers. She had trained her gelding, Stinger, to never be skittish around channeling.

“Archers fall back!” Chubain yelled from just behind her. “Go, go! Heavy infantry companies, advance!” The armored foot soldiers marched past Silviana with axes and maces to confront the disoriented Sharans on the slopes. Pikes would have been better, but they didn’t have nearly enough of those for everyone.

She wove one more burst of fire into the enemy, preparing the way, then turned her attention to the Sharan archers higher up on the slope.

Once Egwene’s forces had rounded the bogs, they had split into two assault groups. The Aes Sedai had moved in with the White Tower infantry, attacking Sharans on the Heights from the west. By this time, the fires had been extinguished and most of the Trollocs had moved off the Heights to attack below.

The other half of Egwene’s army, mainly cavalry, were sent into the corridor that skirted the bogs and led toward the ford; they attacked the vulnerable rear flanks of the Trollocs that had come down the slopes to hit Elayne’s troops defending the area around the ford.

The first groups main job was to make its way up the western slope. Silviana began aiming a careful series of lightning blasts at the Sharans who were advancing to repel them.

“Once the infantry has forced its way up the slope a ways,” Chubain said from beside Egwene, “we’ll have the Aes Sedai start… Mother?” Chubain’s voice had risen.

Silviana spun on horseback, looking with alarm at Egwene. The Amyrlin wasn’t channeling. Her face had grown pale, and she was trembling. Was she being attacked by a weave? Not one Silviana could see.

Figures gathered at the top of the slope, pushing aside the Sharan infantry. They began to channel, and lightning fell on the White Tower army, each with a crack shattering the air and a flash of light bright enough to stun.

“Mother!” Silviana kneed her horse up beside Egwene’s mount. Demandred must be attacking her. Touching the *sa’angreal* in Egwene’s hands for an extra boost of power, Silviana wove a gateway. The Seanchan woman who rode behind Egwene grabbed the Amyrlin’s reins and yanked the horse to safety through the gateway. Silviana followed, yelling, “Stand against those Sharans! Warn the male channelers of Demandred's attack on the Amyrlin Seat!

"No," Egwene said weakly, wavering in her saddle as the horses clopped into a large tent. Silviana would have liked to take her farther away, but she had not known the area well enough for a long jump. "No, it's not . .

What's wrong?" Silviana asked, pulling up beside her and letting the gateway vanish. "Mother?"

"It's Gawyn," she said, pale, trembling. "He's been hurt. Badly. He's dying, Silviana."

Oh, Light, Silviana thought. Warders! She had feared something like this from the moment she'd seen that fool boy.

"Where?" Silviana asked.

"On the Heights. I'm going to find him. I'll use gateways, Travel in his direction…"

"Light, Mother," Silviana said. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that will be? Stay here and lead the White Tower. I will try to find him."

"You can't sense him."

"Pass his bond to me."

Egwene froze.

"You know it is the right thing to do," Silviana said. "If he dies, it could destroy you. Let me have his bond. It will let me find him, and it will protect you, should he die."

Egwene was aghast. How dare Silviana even suggest this? But, then, she was a Red—and they concerned themselves little with Warders. Silviana did not know what she was asking.

"No," Egwene said. "No, I won't even consider it. Besides, if he dies, that would only protect me by shifting the pain to you."

"I am not the Amyrlin."

"*No.* If he dies, I will survive it and keep fighting. Jumping to him by gateway would be foolish, as you say, and I will not let you do it either. He is on the Heights. We will force our way up there, as ordered, and that way we can reach him. It is the best choice."

Silviana hesitated, then nodded. That would do. Together, they returned to the western side of the Heights, but Silviana stewed. Fool man! If he died, Egwene would have a very difficult time continuing to fight.

The Shadow didn't need to fell the Amyrlin herself to stop her. It just had to kill one idiot boy.

“What are those Sharans doing?” Elayne asked softly.

Birgitte steadied her horse, taking the looking glass from Elayne. She raised it, looking across the dry river toward the slope of the Heights where a large number of Sharan troops had gathered. She grunted. “They’re probably waiting for the Trollocs to be filled with arrows.”

“You don’t sound very certain,” Elayne said, retrieving the looking glass. She held the One Power, but wasn’t using it for now. Her army had been fighting here at the river for two hours. The Trollocs had surged into the riverbed all up and down the Mora, but her troops were holding them off from stepping onto Shienaran soil. The bogs prevented the enemy from swinging around her left flank; her right flank was more vulnerable and would need to be watched. It would be much worse if all the Trollocs were pushing to cross the river, but Egwene’s cavalry was hitting them from behind. That took some of the pressure off her army.

Men held the Trollocs back with pikes, and the small flow of water still trickling through the bed had turned completely red. Elayne sat resolute, watching and being seen by her troops. The finest of Andor bled and died, holding back the Trollocs with difficulty. The Sharan army appeared to be readying a charge off the Heights, but Elayne was unconvinced they would launch an attack just yet; the White Tower assault on the western side had to be a concern to them. Mat sending Egwene’s army to attack from behind the Heights was a stroke of genius.

“I’m not very certain of what I said,” Birgitte said softly. “Not at all. Not about much, any more.”

Elayne frowned. She’d thought the conversation over. What was Birgitte saying? “What about your memories?”

“The first thing I remember now is waking up to you and Nynaeve,” Birgitte said softly. “I can remember our conversations about being in the World of Dreams, but I cannot remember the place itself. It’s all slipped away from me, like water between my fingers.”

“Oh, Birgitte…”

The woman shrugged. “I can’t miss what I don’t remember.” The pain in her voice belied the words.

“Gaidal?”

Birgitte shook her head. “Nothing. I feel that I’m supposed to know someone by that name, but I don’t.” She chuckled. “Like I said. I don’t know what I’ve lost, so it’s all right.”

“Are you lying?”

“Bloody ashes, of *course* I am. It’s like a hole inside of me, Elayne. A deep, gaping hole. Bleeding out my life and memories.” She looked away.

“Birgitte… I’m sorry.”

Birgitte turned her horse and moved off a way, obviously not wanting to discuss the matter further. Her pain radiated its spikes in the back of Elayne’s mind.

What would it be like, to lose so much? Birgitte didn’t have a childhood, parents. Her entire life, all she remembered, usually spanned less than a year. Elayne started to go after her, but her guards moved aside to let Galad approach, attired in the armor, tabard and cloak of the Lord Captain Commander of the Children of the Light.

Elayne tightened her lips. “Galad.”

“Sister,” Galad said. “I assume that it would be completely futile to inform you how inappropriate it is for a woman in your condition to be on the battlefield.”

“If we lose this war, Galad, my children will be born into captivity to the Dark One, if they are born at all. I think fighting is worth the risk.”

“So long as you refrain from holding the sword personally,” Galad said, shading his eyes to inspect the battlefield. The words implied that he was giving her permission—*permission*—to lead her troops.

Streaks of light shot from the Heights, striking at the last dragons firing from the field just behind her troops. Such strength! Demandred had power that eclipsed Rand’s. *If he turns that power against my troops…*

“Why would Cauthon bring me down here?” Galad said softly. “He wanted a dozen of my best men . . ”

“You’re not asking me to guess the mind of Matrim Cauthon, are you?” Elayne asked. “I’m convinced that Mat only *acts* simple so that people will let him get away with more.”

Galad shook his head. She could see a group of his men gathered nearby. They were pointing toward the Trollocs that were slowly making their way upriver on the Arafellin bank. Elayne realized her right flank was in jeopardy.

“Send for six companies of crossbowmen,” Elayne said to Birgitte. “Guybon needs to reinforce our troops upriver.”

Light. This is starting to look bad. The White Tower was out there on the west slope of the Heights, where the channeling was most furious. She couldn’t see much of it, but she could feel it.

Smoke billowed over the top of the Heights, lit by splashing explosions of lightning. Like a beast of storm and hunger stirring amid the blackness, its eyes flashing as it woke.

Elayne was suddenly aware. Of the pervasive scent of smoke in the air, the cries of pain from men. Thunder from the sky, trembles in the earth. The cold air resting upon a land that would not grow, the breaking weapons, grinding of pikes against shields. The end. It really had come, and she stood upon its precipice.

A messenger galloped up, bearing an envelope. He gave the proper pass codes to Elayne’s guard, dismounted and was allowed to step up to her and Galad. He addressed Galad, handing the letter to him. “From Lord Cauthon, sir. He said you’d be here.”

Galad took the letter and, frowning, opened it. He slipped a sheet of paper from inside.

Elayne waited patiently—*patiently*—to a count of three, then moved her horse up beside Galad’s mount and craned her neck to read. Honestly, one would think he’d take concern for the comfort of a pregnant woman.

The letter was written in Mat’s hand. And, Elayne noticed with amusement, the handwriting was much neater and the spelling much better in this one than the one he’d sent her weeks ago. Apparently, the pressure of battle made Matrim Cauthon into a better clerk.

> *Galad,*
>
> *Not much time to be flowery. You’re the only one I trust with this mission. You’ll do what is right, even when nobody bloody wants you to. The Borderlanders might not have the stomach for this, but I'll bet I can trust a Whitecloak. Take this. Get a gateway from Elayne. Do what has to be done.*
>
> *Mat*

Galad frowned, then upended the envelope, dumping out something silvery. A medallion on a chain. A single Tar Valon mark slid out beside it.

Elayne breathed out, then touched the medallion and channeled. She could not. This was one of the copies she'd made, one of those she'd given Mat. Mellar had stolen another one. "It protects the wearer against channeling," Elayne said. "But why send it to you?"

Galad turned the sheet of paper over, apparently noticing something. Written on the back in a hastier scrawl was, *p.s. In case you don't know what "Do what needs to be done" means, it means that I want you to go bloody slaughter as many of those Sharan channelers as you can. I'll bet you a full Tar Valon mark— it's only been shaved on the sides a little—that you can't kill twenty. —MC*

"That's bloody devious," Elayne breathed out. "Blood and bloody ashes, it is."

"Hardly fitting language for a monarch," Galad said, folding the message and placing it in the pocket of his cloak. He hesitated, then put the medallion around his neck. "I wonder if he knows what he is doing by giving one of the Children an artifact that makes one immune to the touches of the Aes Sedai. The orders are good ones. I will see them carried out."

"You can do it, then?" Elayne asked. "Kill women?"

"Perhaps once I would have hesitated," Galad said, "but that would have been the wrong choice. Women are as fully capable of being evil as men. Why should one hesitate to kill one, but not the other? The Light does not judge one based on gender, but on the merit of the heart."

"Interesting."

"What is interesting?" Galad asked.

"You actually said something that doesn't make me want to strangle you. Perhaps there is hope for you someday, Galad Damodred."

He frowned. "This is neither the place nor the time for levity, Elayne. You should see to Gareth Bryne. He appears agitated."

She turned, surprised to find the aging general speaking with her guards. "General?" she called to him.

Bryne looked up, then bowed formally from horseback.

"Did my guard stop you?" Elayne asked, as he approached. Had word of Bryne's Compulsion spread?

"No, Your Majesty," he said. His horse was lathered. He had been riding hard. "I did not wish to bother you personally."

“Something is troubling you,” Elayne said. “Out with it.”

“Your brother, has he come this way?”

“Gawyn?” she asked, looking to Galad. “I haven’t seen him.”

“Nor I,” Galad said.

“The Amyrlin was certain he’d be with your forces…” Bryne said, shaking his head. “He went to fight on the front lines. Perhaps he came in disguise.”

Why would he… He was Gawyn. He would want to fight. Yet sneaking to the front lines in disguise didn’t seem like him. He might gather some men loyal to him and lead a few charges. But sneak? Gawyn? It was difficult to imagine.

“I will spread word,” Elayne said as Galad bowed to her, then withdrew on his mission. “Perhaps one of my commanders has seen him.”

Ah… Mat thought, face so close to the maps that it was nearly level with them. Then he waved to the side, having Mika the *damane* open a gateway. Mat could have Traveled to the top of Dashar Knob to get an overview. However, the last time he had done so, enemy channelers had targeted him, shearing off part of the summit; and, despite being so high, Dashar Knob did not allow him to see everything happening below the western side of Polov Heights. He scrambled over, hands on the lip of the gateway in the table, inspecting the landscape below.

Elayne’s line at the river was being pushed back. They had run archers to their right flank. Good. Blood and bloody ashes… those Trollocs had nearly the weight behind them of a cavalry push. He’d need to send word to Elayne to get her cavalry lined up behind the pikes.

Like when I fought Sana Ashraf at the falls of Pena, he thought. Heavy cavalry, horseback archers, heavy cavalry, horseback archers. One after another. *Taer’ain dhai hochin dieb sene.*

Mat could not remember being this engaged by a battle. The fight against the Shaido had not been nearly so gripping, though Mat had not been leading that battle entirely. The fight against Elbar had not been this satisfying, either. Of course, that had been on a much smaller scale.

Demandred knew how to gamble. Mat could sense it through the movements of troops. Mat was playing against one of the best who had ever lived, and the stake this time was not wealth. They diced for the lives of men, and the final prize was the world itself. Blood and *bloody* ashes, but that excited him. He did feel guilty about that, but it was exciting.

"Lan is in position," Mat said, straightening up and returning to his maps, making some notations. "Tell him to strike."

The Trolloc army crossing the riverbed by the ruins needed to be crushed. He'd moved the Borderlanders around the Heights to attack their vulnerable rear flanks while Tam and his combined forces continued to pound them from the front. Tam had killed large numbers of them before and after the river had stopped. That Trolloc horde was close to being broken, and a coordinated action on two sides could do it.

Tam's men would be tired. Could they hold long enough for Lan to arrive and hit the Trollocs from behind? Light, Mat hoped they could. If they didn't…

Someone darkened the doorway of the command position, a tall man with dark, curling hair, wearing the coat of an Asha'man. He had the expression of a man who had just drawn a losing hand. Light. A *Trolloc* would have found that stare unnerving.

Min, who had been speaking with Tuon, choked off; Logain seemed to have a special glare for her. Mat straightened, dusting off his hands. "I hope you didn't do anything too nasty to the guards, Logain."

"The weaves of Air will untie on their own in a minute or two," the man said, voice harsh. "I didn't think they were likely to allow me in."

Mat glanced at Tuon. She had grown stiff as a well-starched apron. Seanchan did not trust *women* who could channel, let alone someone like Logain.

"Logain," Mat said. "I need you to fight alongside the White Tower army. Those Sharans are *pounding* them."

Logain had locked eyes with Tuon.

"Logain!" Mat said. "If you haven't noticed, we're fighting a bloody war here."

"It is not my war."

"This is *our* war," Mat snapped. "Every one of us."

"I stood forth to fight," Logain said. "And what was my reward? Ask the Red Ajah. They will tell you the reward of a man abused of the Pattern." He barked a laugh. "The Pattern demanded a Dragon! And so I came! Too soon. Just a little too soon."

“Listen here,” Mat said, stepping up to Logain. “You’re angry because you didn’t get to be the Dragon?”

“Nothing so petty,” Logain said. “I follow the Lord Dragon. Let *him* die. I wish no part of that feast. I and mine should be with him, not fighting here. This battle for the little lives of men is nothing compared to the battle happening at Shayol Ghul.”

“And yet, you know we need you here,” Mat said. “You would already be gone, otherwise.”

Logain said nothing.

“Go to Egwene,” Mat said. “Take everyone you have and *keep those Sharan channelers busy!*”

“What of Demandred?” Logain asked softly. “He cries out for the Dragon. He has the power of a dozen men. None of us can face him.”

“But you want to try, don’t you?” Mat replied. “That’s why you’re really here, right now. You want me to send you against Demandred.”

Logain hesitated, then nodded. “He cannot have the Dragon Reborn. He will have to take me instead. The Dragon’s… replacement, if you will.”

Blood and bloody ashes… they're all insane. Unfortunately, what else was Mat going to do against one of the Forsaken? Right now, his battle plan revolved around keeping Demandred occupied, forcing the man to respond. If Demandred had to act as general, he couldn’t do as much damage channeling.

He would have to come up with something to deal with the Forsaken. He was working on that. He’d been working on it the whole bloody battle, and hadn’t come up with anything.

Mat glanced back through his gateway. Elayne was being pressed too hard. He had to do something. Send in the Seanchan? He had them positioned at the southern end of the field on the banks of the Erinin. They would be a wildcard to Demandred, preventing him from committing all his troops in the battles being waged below the Heights. In addition, he had plans for them. Important ones.

Logain didn’t have much of a shot against Demandred, in Mat’s estimation. But he’d have to deal with the man somehow. If Logain wanted to try, then so be it.

“You may fight him,” Mat said. “Do it now, or wait until he is weakened a little. Light, I hope we *can* weaken him. Anyway, I leave it to you. Pick your time and attack.”

Logain smiled, then made a gateway right in the middle of the room and strode through, hand on his sword. He had enough pride to be the Dragon Reborn, that was for certain. Mat shook his head. What he would give to be done with all of these high heads. Mat might be one of them now, but that could be fixed. All he had to do was convince Tuon to forsake her throne and run off with him. That would not be easy, but bloody ashes, he was fighting the Last Battle. Compared to the challenge he now faced, Tuon seemed to be an easy knot to untie.

"Glory of men…" Min whispered. "It's still to come."

"Someone go check on those guards," Mat said, returning to his maps. "Tuon, we may want to move you. This place never has been secure, and Logain has just proven it."

"I can protect myself," she said haughtily.

Too haughty. He raised an eyebrow at her, and she nodded.

Really? Mat thought. *This is what you want to fight about?* He was not certain the spy would buy it. Too flimsy a reason.

His plan with Tuon was to take a cue from what Rand had once done with Perrin. If Mat could fake a split between himself and the Seanchan, and in so doing make Tuon pull her forces back, perhaps the Shadow would ignore her. Mat needed an edge of some sort.

Two guards came in. No, three. That one fellow was easy to miss. Mat shook his head at Tuon—they needed to find something more realistic to argue over—and glanced back at his maps.

Something itched at him about the little guard. *Looks more like a servant than a soldier,* Mat thought. He forced himself to look up, though he really should not let himself become distracted by common servants. Yes, there the fellow was, standing beside Mats table. Not worth paying attention to, even if he was pulling a knife out.

A knife.

Mat stumbled back as the Gray Man attacked. Mat yelled, reaching for one of his own knives, just as Mika screamed. "Channeling! Nearby!"

Min threw herself at Fortuona as the wall of the command post went up in flame. Sharans in strange armor made of bands of metal, painted gold, ripped through the blazing opening. Channelers with tattooed faces accompanied them: the women in long, stiff black dresses, the men shirtless, trousers ragged. Min took this in just before she tipped Fortuona's throne over.

Fire burned through the air above Min, singeing her ornate silks and consuming the wall behind them. Fortuona scrambled out of Min's grip, lying low, and Min blinked in surprise. The woman had left her bulky costume behind—it was made to break away—and underneath wore sleek silken trousers and a tight shirt, both black.

Tuon came up with a knife in her hand, growling softly in an almost feral way. Nearby, Mat fell backward to the ground, a knife-wielding man on top of him. Where had that man come from? She didn't remember him entering.

Tuon ran for Mat as Sharan channelers began to pound the command post with fire. Min struggled to her feet in the awful clothing. She pulled a dagger out and huddled by the throne, putting her back to it as the ground heaved.

She couldn't reach Fortuona, so she forced herself out the back wall, which was made of the paperlike stuff the Seanchan called *tenmi*.

She coughed at the smoke, but now that she was outside, the air was clearer. None of the Sharans were here on this side of the building. They were all attacking from the other directions. She sprinted along the wall. Channelers were dangerous, but if she could put a knife in one, all of the One Power in the world wouldn't matter.

She peeked around the corner, and was surprised by a man crouching there, a feral look in his eyes. He had an angular face; his blood-red neck tattoos looked like claws, cupping his light-skinned head and chin.

He growled, and Min threw herself backward to the ground, ducking a ribbon of fire and throwing her knife.

The man caught it in the air. He prowled forward in a crouch, bestial, smiling at her.

Then he jerked, suddenly, and fell over, thrashing. A trickle of blood came from his lips.

"That," a woman said nearby, a sound of utter distaste in her tone, "is something I'm not supposed to know how to do, but stopping someone's heart with the One Power is quiet. It requires very little Power, surprisingly, which is pertinent to me."

"Siuan!" Min said. "You're not supposed to be here."

"Lucky for you I am," Siuan said with a snort, inspecting the body, staying low. "Bah. Nasty business that, but if you're going to eat a fish, you should be willing to gut it yourself. What's wrong, girl? You're safe now. No need to look so pale."

"You're not supposed to *be* here!" Min said. "I told you. Stay near Gareth Bryne!"

"I did stay near him, almost near as his own smallclothes, I'll have you know. We saved one another's lives because of it, so I guess the viewing was right. Are they ever wrong?"

"No, I've told you that," Min whispered. "Never. Siuan ... I saw an aura around Bryne that meant you had to stay together, or the two of you would die. It hangs above you, right now. Whatever you think you did, the viewing has not been accomplished yet. It's *still there*"

Siuan stood frozen for a moment. "Cauthon is in danger."

"But—"

"I don't care, girl!" Nearby, the ground trembled with the force of the One Power. The *damane* were fighting back. "If Cauthon falls, this battle is lost! I don't care if we both die from this. We *must* help. Move!"

Min nodded, then joined her as she moved around the side of the ragged building. The firefight outside was a raw mix of explosions, smoke and flames. Members of the Deathwatch Guard charged the Sharans, swords out, heedless of their companions being slaughtered around them. That, at least, was keeping the channelers busy.

The command post burned with such heat that Min had to shy back, raising an arm.

"Hold on," Siuan said, then used the One Power to draw a small column of water out of a nearby barrel, spraying them both. "I'll try to dampen the flames," she said, redirecting the small column of water to the command post. "All right. Lets go."

Min nodded, bursting through the flames, Siuan joining her. The *tenmi* walls inside had all started aflame, burning away quickly. Fire dripped from the ceiling.

"There," Min said, blinking away tears from the heat and the smoke. She pointed toward dark figures struggling near the center of the building and Mat's blazing map table. There seemed to be a group of three or four people fighting Mat. Light, they were all Gray Men—not just one of them! Tuon was down.

Min ran past the corpse of a *sul'dam* alongside several guards. Siuan used the One Power to haul one of the Gray Men away from Mat. Guards' corpses created shadows of firelight on the floor. One *damane* still lived, huddled in a corner, looking terrified, her leash on the floor. Her *sul'dam* lay a distance away, unmoving. Her grip had been knocked free, it appeared, and then she was killed as she tried to get back to her *damane.*

"Do something!" Min shouted at the girl, grabbing her by the arm.

The *damane* shook her head, crying.

"Burn you—" Min said.

The ceiling of the structure groaned. Min ran for Mat. One Gray Man was dead, but there were two others, wearing the uniforms of Seanchan guards. Min had trouble seeing the living ones; they were inhumanly average in every way. Utterly nondescript.

Mat bellowed, knifing one of the men, but he didn't have his spear. Min didn't know where it was. Mat pushed forward, reckless, taking a gash along his side. Why?

Tuon, Min realized, stumbling to a halt. One of the Gray Men knelt above her motionless form, raising a dagger, and—

Min threw.

Mat toppled to the ground a few feet from Tuon; the final Gray Man had him by the legs. Min's knife spun through the air, reflecting flames, and took the Gray Man over Tuon in the chest.

Min breathed out. Never in her life had she been so happy to see a knife fly true. Mat had cursed, turning about, booting his aggressor in the face. He followed that with a knife, then scrambled for Tuon, hauling her up onto his shoulder.

Min met him. "Siuan is here, too. She—"

Mat pointed. Siuan lay on the floor of the building. Her eyes stared sightlessly, and all the images were gone from above her.

Dead. Min froze, heart wrenching. Siuan! She moved toward the woman anyway, unable to believe she was dead, though her clothing burned from the explosion of fire that had taken her and about half of the wall nearby her.

"Out!" Mat said, coughing, cradling Tuon. He threw his shoulder against a wall that was only half-burned, breaking out into the air.

Min groaned, leaving Siuan's corpse, blinking away tears both from grief and from the smoke. She coughed as she followed Mat out into open air. The outside smelled so sweet, so *cold.* Behind them, the building groaned, then collapsed.

In moments, Min and Mat were surrounded by members of the Deathwatch Guard. Not a one tried to take Tuon—who was still breathing, if shallowly—away from Mat. From the look in his eye, Min doubted they'd have been able to do so.

Farewell, Siuan, Min thought, looking back as Guards ushered her away from the fighting below Dashar Knob. *May the Creator shelter your soul.*

She would send word to others to protect Bryne, but she knew—deep down—it would be futile. He would have gone into a vengeful rage the moment Siuan died, and discounting that, there was the viewing.

She was never wrong. Sometimes, Min hated her accuracy. But she was *never* wrong.

"Strike at their weaves," Egwene yelled. "I'll attack!"

She didn't wait to see if she was obeyed. She struck, holding as much power as she could, drawing it through Vora's *sa'angreal* and heaving three different bands of fire upslope at the entrenched Sharans.

Around her, Bryne's well-trained troops struggled to maintain battle lines as they fought Sharan soldiers, working their way up the western side of the Heights. The hillside was pocked with hundreds of furrows and holes, created by weaves from one side or the other.

Egwene fought forward desperately. She could feel Gawyn above, but she thought he was unconscious; his spark of life was so faint that she could barely sense his direction. Her only hope was to fight through the Sharans and reach him.

The ground rumbled as she vaporized a Sharan woman above; Saerin, Doesine and other sisters concentrated on deflecting the enemy weaves, while Egwene focused on sending attacks. She stepped forward. One step after another.

I'm coming, Gawyn, she thought, growing frantic. *I'm coming.*

"We come to report, Wyld."

Demandred ignored the messengers for the moment. He flew upon the wings of a falcon, inspecting the battle through the birds eyes. Ravens were better, but each time he tried using one of those, one Borderlander or another shot it down. Of all the customs to remember through the Ages, why did it have to be that one?

No matter. A falcon would work, even if the bird did resist his control. He guided it about the battlefield, inspecting formations, deployments, advancements of troops. He did not have to rely upon the reports of others.

It should have been an almost insurmountable advantage. Lews Therin could not use such an animal; this was a gift only the True Power could grant. Demandred could channel only a thin trickle of the True Power— not enough for destructive weaves, but there were other ways to be dangerous. Unfortunately, Lews Therin had his own advantage. Gateways that looked down upon a battlefield? It was discomforting the things people of this time discovered, things that hadn’t been known during the Age of Legends.

Demandred opened his eyes and broke his bond to the falcon. His forces were advancing, but each step was a grueling ordeal. Tens of thousands of Trollocs had been slain. He had to be careful; their numbers were not limitless.

He was currently on the eastern side of the Heights, looking down at the river below and northeast of the place where Lews Therin’s assassin had tried to kill him.

Here, Demandred was nearly opposite the hill that Moghedien said they called Dashar Knob. The rock formation rose high in the air; its base was a fine position for a command post, sheltered from attacks by the One Power.

It was so tempting to strike there himself, to Travel to it and lay waste. But was that what Lews Therin wanted? Demandred would fight the man. He *would.* However, Traveling into the enemy’s stronghold and possibly a trap, surrounded as it was by those high rock walls… Better to draw Lews Therin to him. Demandred dominated this battlefield. He could choose where their confrontation would occur.

The riverbed had been slowed to a muddy trickle below, and Demandred’s Trollocs fought to seize the southern bank. The defenders held for now, but he would have them soon. Far upriver M’Hael had done his work well in diverting that water, though he had reported unusual resistance. Townspeople and a small unit of soldiers? An oddity that Demandred had not yet deciphered.

He had almost wished for failure from M'Hael. Though Demandred himself had been the one to recruit the man, he had not expected M’Hael to rise to the rank of Chosen so quickly.

Demandred turned to the side. Before him bowed three women in black with white ribbons. Next to them, Shendla.

Shendla. He had thought himself long past caring for a woman again—how could affection thrive beside the burning passion that was his hatred for Lews Therin? And yet, Shendla… Devious, capable, powerful. Almost it was enough to change his heart.

“What is your report?” he asked the three bowing women in black.

“The hunt was a failure,” Galbrait said, her head low.

“He escaped?”

“Yes, Wyld. I have failed you.” He heard the pain in the woman’s voice, one was leader of the female Ayyad.

“You were not meant to kill him,” Demandred said. “He is a foe beyond your skill. You have disrupted his command post?”

“Yes” Galbrait said. “We killed half a dozen of his channelers, set the building aflame and destroyed his maps.”

“Did he channel? Did he reveal himself?”

She hesitated, then shook her head.

So he could not know for certain yet if this Cauthon was Lews Therin in disguise Demandred suspected he was, but there were reports from Shayol Ghul that Lews Therin had been seen there, on the slopes of the mountain. He had proven devious in the Last Battle before, jumping between battlefields, showing himself here and there.

The more Demandred maneuvered against the enemy general, the more he believed that Lews Therin was here. It would be very like Lews Therin to send a decoy north while coming to fight this battle himself.

Lews Therin had difficulty letting others fight for him. He always wanted to be doing everything himself, leading every battle—every charge if he could.

Yes . how else could Demandred explain the skill of the enemy general. Only a man with the experience of an ancient was so masterly at the dance of battlefields. At their core, many battle tactics were simple. Avoid being flanked, meet heavy force with pikes, infantry with a well-trained line channelers with other channelers. And yet, the finesse of it… the little details… these took centuries to master. No man from this Age had lived long enough to learn the details with such care.

During the War of Power, the only thing that Demandred had ever done better than his friend was as a battle general. It stung to admit that, but he would no longer hide from that truth. Lews Therin had been stronger in the

One Power. Lews Therin had been better at capturing the hearts of men. Lews Therin had taken Ilyena.

But Demandred… Demandred had been better at war. Lews Therin had never been able to correctly balance caution and boldness. The man would hold back and deliberate, worrying over his decisions, until boiling forward in a reckless military action.

If this Cauthon was Lews Therin, the man had grown better at that. The enemy general knew when to flip the coin and let fate rule, but did not let too much ride on each result. He would have made an excellent card player.

Demandred would still defeat him, of course. The battle would merely be more… interesting.

He rested his hand on his sword, considering his scan of the battlefield moments before. His Trollocs continued their attack at the riverbed, and Lews Therin had formed his pikemen, opposite them, into disciplined square formations, a defensive move. Behind Demandred, the shaking booms of channelers marked the greater war, that between his Sharan Ayyad and the Aes Sedai.

He held the advantage there. His Ayyad were far better at war than the Aes Sedai. When would Cauthon commit those *damane*? Moghedien had reported some dissension between them and the Aes Sedai. Could Demandred widen the fracture there somehow?

He gave orders, and the three Ayyad nearby retreated. Shendla remained, waiting his permission to leave. He had her scouting the area nearby and watching for more assassins.

“Are you worried?” he asked her. “You know now for which side we fight. So far as I know, you have not given yourself to the Shadow.”

“I’ve given myself to you, Wyld.”

“And for me you fight beside Trollocs? Halfmen? Creatures from nightmare?”

“You said some would call your actions evil,” she said. “But I do not see them as such. Our path is clear. Once you are victorious, you will remake the world, and our people will be preserved.” She took his hand, and something stirred within him. It was quickly smothered by his hatred.

“I would cast it all away,” he said, looking into her eyes. “Everything for a chance at Lews Therin.”

“You have promised to try,” she said. “That will be enough. And if you destroy him, you will destroy one world and preserve another. I will follow you. *We* will follow you."

Her voice seemed to imply that perhaps, once Lews Therin was dead, Demandred would be able to become his own man again.

He was not certain. Rule only interested him insofar as he could use it against his ancient enemy. The Sharans, devoted and faithful, were just a tool. But within him, there was something that wished it was not so. That was new. Yes, it was.

The air nearby *warped,* bending. No weaves were visible—this was a ripping of the fabric of the Pattern, Traveling by the True Power. M'Hael had arrived.

Demandred turned, and Shendla released his arm, but did not leave his side. M'Hael had been given access to the Great Lord's essence. That did not make Demandred jealous. M'Hael was another tool. Still, it made him wonder. Was anyone denied the True Power, these days?

"You are going to lose the battle near the ruins, Demandred," M'Hael said with an arrogant smile. "Your Trollocs there will be crushed. You had the enemy vastly outnumbered, and yet they still will defeat you! I thought you were supposed to be our greatest general, yet you lose to this rabble? I'm disappointed."

Demandred raised his hand casually, two fingers up.

M'Hael jerked as two dozen nearby Sharan channelers slammed shields between him and the One Power. They wrapped him in the Air, jerking him backward. He fought back, the air-warping aura of the True Power surrounding him, but Demandred was faster. He wove a True Power shield, building it from burning threads of Spirit.

The threads trembled in the air, each one barbed with twisting strands of energy so small, the ends vanished into nothing. The True Power was so volatile, so dangerous. A shield crafted from it had a strange effect, drinking in the power of another trying to channel it.

Demandred's shield stole M'Hael's power, and used the man like a conduit. Demandred gathered the True Power and wove it into a crackling ball of *force* above his hand. Only M'Hael would be able to see it, and the man's proud eyes opened wide as Demandred drained him.

It was not unlike a circle. The pulling of energy made M'Hael tremble, sweat, as he was held up by the weaves of Demandred's Ayyad. This flow could burn M'Hael out, if unchecked—could flay his soul with the rushing of the True Power, like a river surging beyond its banks. The twisting mass of threads in Demandred’s hands pulsed and crackled, warping the air, beginning to unravel the Pattern.

Tiny spiderweb cracks spread out on the ground from him. Cracks into nothingness.

He walked up to M’Hael. The man began to have a seizure, froth dripping from his lips.

“You will listen to me, M’Hael,” Demandred said softly. “I am not as the other Chosen. I do not care one *whit* for your political games. I don’t care which of you the Great Lord favors, which of you Moridin pats on the head. I care only for Lews Therin.

“This is my fight. You are mine. I brought you to the Shadow, and I can destroy you. If you interfere with what I do here, I will snuff you out like a candle. I realize you think yourself strong, with your stolen Dreadlords and untrained channelers. You are a child, an infant. Take your men, create what chaos you wish, but stay out of my way. And stay away from my prize. The enemy general is mine.”

M’Hael’s eyes, though his body betrayed him with trembles, were full of hatred, not fear. Yes, this one always had shown promise.

Demandred turned his hand and launched a stream of balefire with the gathered True Power. The white-hot line of liquid destruction burned through the armies at the river below, vaporizing each man or woman it touched. Their forms became points of light, then dust, hundreds of them vanishing. He left a long line of burned ground, like a furrow cut by an enormous cleaver.

“Release him,” Demandred said, allowing the True Power shield to unravel.

M’Hael stumbled back, keeping his feet, sweat dripping from his face. He gasped, hand raised to his chest.

“Stay alive through this battle,” Demandred said to him, turning away and beginning a weave to summon his falcon back. “If you do so, perhaps I will show you how to do as I just did. You may think you wish to kill me now, but know that the Great Lord watches. Beyond that, consider this. You may have a hundred pet Asha’man. I have over four hundred of my Ayyad. I am this world’s savior.”

When he looked back, M’Hael was gone, having Traveled away with the True Power. It was amazing that he could summon the strength, after what

Demandred had just done. He hoped he wouldn’t have to kill the man. He should prove useful.

I WILL WIN EVENTUALLY.

Rand stood before the blowing winds, stood strong, though his eyes watered as he stared into the darkness. How long had he been in this place? A thousand years? Ten thousand?

For the moment, he concerned himself only with defiance. He would not bend before this wind. He could not give in for a fraction of a heartbeat. THE TIME HAS COME, FINALLY.

“Time is nothing to you,” Rand said.

It was true, and it was not. Rand could see the threads swirling around him, forming the Pattern. As it formed, he saw the battlefields below him. Those he loved fighting for their lives. These were not possibilities; this was the truth, what was actually happening.

The Dark One wrapped around the Pattern, unable to take it and destroy it, but able to touch it. Tendrils of darkness, spines, touched the world at points all along its length. The Dark One lay like shadow upon the Pattern.

When the Dark One touched the Pattern, time existed for him. And so, while time was nothing to the Dark One, he—or it, as the Dark One had no gender—could only work within its bounds. Like… like a sculptor who had marvelous visions and dreams but was still bound by the reality of the materials he worked with.

Rand stared at the Pattern, resisting the Dark Ones attack. He did not move or breathe. Breath wasn’t needed here.

People died below. Rand heard their screams. So many fell.

I WILL WIN EVENTUALLY, ADVERSARY. WATCH THEM SCREAM. WATCH THEM DIE.

THE DEAD ARE MINE.

“Lies,” Rand said.

NO. I WILL SHOW YOU.

The Dark One spun possibility again, gathering up what could be, and thrust Rand into another vision.

Juilin Sandar was not a commander. He was a thief-catcher, not some nobleman. *Certainly* not a nobleman. He worked on his own.

Except, apparently, when he ended up on a battlefield, put in charge of a squad of men because he had successfully captured dangerous men as a thief-catcher. The Sharans pressed against his men, aiming for the Aes Sedai. They fought on the western side of the Heights, and his squad's job was to protect the Aes Sedai from Sharan infantry.

Aes Sedai. How had he ever gotten tangled up with Aes Sedai? Him, a good Tairen.

"Hold!" Juilin yelled to his men. "Hold!" He yelled it for his own benefit, too. His squad held to their spears and pikes, forcing the Sharan infantry backward up the slope. He wasn't sure why he was here, or why they were fighting in this sector. He just wanted to stay alive!

The Sharans shouted and cursed in an unfamiliar tongue. They had a lot of those channelers, but the outfit he faced was made up of regular troops who used a variety of hand weapons, mostly swords and shields. Corpses littered the ground, and that made it difficult for both sides as Juilin and his men followed orders, pushing against the Sharan troops while the Aes Sedai and enemy channelers traded weaves.

Juilin wielded a spear, a weapon he was only mildly familiar with. An armored Sharan squad forced its way between Myk and Charn's pikes. The officers wore breastplates, strangely wrapped in cloth of a variety of colors, while the common rank and file wore leather fitted with strips of metal. They all had their backs painted with strange patterns.

The leader of the Sharan troop wielded a wicked mace, smashing one pikeman, then the other. The man shouted at Juilin, curses he didn't understand.

Juilin feinted, and the Sharan raised his shield, so Juilin rammed his spear into the man's armor at the gap between breastplate and arm. Light, he didn't even flinch! He smashed his shield into Juilin, forcing him back.

The spear slipped from Juilin's sweaty fingers. He cursed, reaching for his sword breaker, a weapon he knew well. Myk and the others fought nearby, engaging the rest of this Sharan squad. Charn tried to help Juilin, but the crazed Sharan brought his mace down on Charn's head—splitting it in two like a cracked walnut.

"Die, you bloody monster!" Juilin cried, leaping forward and ramming his sword breaker into the man's neck just above the gorget. Other Sharans were moving quickly toward his position. Juilin fell back as the man in front of him collapsed and died. Just in time, as a Sharan to his left tried to take his head off with a broad swing of his sword. The tip of the sword went by his ear, and Juilin instinctively raised his own blade. His opponent's weapon broke in two, and he quickly dispatched the man with a backhand slice to the man's throat.

Juilin scrambled to pick up his spear. Fireballs fell nearby, attacks from the Aes Sedai behind and the Sharans on the Heights ahead. Soil coated Juilin's hair, and stuck in clumps to the blood on his arms.

"Hold!" Juilin shouted to his men. "Burn you, we need to hold!"

He attacked another Sharan who came at him. One of the pikemen raised his weapon in time to pin the man on the shoulder, and Juilin speared him through his leather-clad chest.

The air trembled. His ears rang faintly from all of the explosions. Juilin pulled back, yelling orders to his men.

He wasn't supposed to be here. He was supposed to be someplace warm, with Amathera, thinking about the next criminal he needed to catch.

He figured that every man on the field felt they should be someplace else. The only thing to do was keep on fighting.

You look good in black, Androl sent to Pevara as they moved through the enemy army on top of the Heights.

That, she replied back, *is something one should never,* never *say to an Aes Sedai. Ever.*

His only response was a sense of nervousness through the bond. Pevara understood. They—wearing inverted weaves of the Mask of Mirrors—walked among Darkfriends, Shadowspawn and Sharans. And it was working. Pevara wore a white dress and a black cloak over it—those weren't part of a weave—but anyone looking into her cloak's hood would see the face of Alviarin, a member of the Black Ajah. Theodrin wore the face of Rianna.

Androl and Emarin wore weaves that gave them the faces of Nensen and Kash, two of Taim's cronies. Jonneth looked very unlike himself, wearing the face of a nondescript Darkfriend, and he played the part well, skulking behind and carrying their gear. One would never have seen the good-natured Two Rivers man in that hawk-faced man with the greasy hair and nervous manner.

They moved at a brisk pace along the back lines of the Shadow's army on the Heights. Trollocs hauled bundles of arrows forward; others left the lines to feast on piles of corpses. Cookpots boiled here. That shocked Pevara. They were stopping to eat? Now?

Only some of them, Androl sent. *It's common for human armies too, though these moments don't make it into the ballads. The fighting has lasted all day, and soldiers need energy while fighting. Usually, you rotate in three batches. Your front lines, your reserves, and your off-duty—troops who will trudge away from the fight and eat as quickly as they can before grabbing a little sleep. Then back to the front lines.*

She'd once seen war differently. She'd imagined every man committed every moment of the day. A true battle, however, was not a sprint; it was an extended, soul-grinding trudge.

It was late afternoon already, approaching evening. To the east, below the Heights, battle lines extended far in both directions along the dry riverbed. Many thousands of men and Trollocs fought back and forth there. Large numbers of Trollocs fought there, but others were rotated back up the Heights to either eat or collapse into unconsciousness for a time.

She did not look too closely at the cookpots, though Jonneth fell to his knees and sicked up beside the path. He had noticed the body parts floating in the thick stew. As he emptied his stomach onto the ground, a passing group of Trollocs snorted and hooted in mockery.

Why are they pushing off the Heights to take the river? she sent to Androl. *It seems to be a better position up here.*

Maybe it is, Androl sent. *But the Shadow is the aggressor. If they stay in this position, it serves Cauthon's army. Demandred needs to keep pressing him. That means crossing the river.*

So Androl understood tactics, too. Interesting.

I've picked up a few things, he sent. *I wont be leading a battle any time soon.*

Just curious how many lives you've led, Androl.

An odd statement, coming from a woman who is old enough to be my grandmother's grandmother.

They continued along the eastern side of the Heights. Distant, on the far western side, the Aes Sedai were battling their way up to the top—but for now, the Heights were held by Demandred's forces. This area Pevara walked through was full of Trollocs. Some bowed in a lumbering way as

Pevara and the others passed, others curled up on the stones to sleep, with no cushions or blankets. Each one kept its weapon at hand.

"This does not look promising," Emarin said softly from behind his mask. "I do not see Taim associating with Trollocs any more than he has to."

"Ahead," Androl said. "Look there."

The Trollocs were separated from a group of Sharans who could be seen up ahead, wearing unfamiliar uniforms. They wore armor that was wrapped in cloth, so none of the metal showed except on the very back, though the shape of the breastplates was still obvious. Pevara looked to the others.

"I could see Taim being part of that group," Emarin said. "It's likely to smell far less putrid than over here among the Trollocs, for one thing."

Pevara had been ignoring the stench—she had learned to do that years ago, snuffing out powerful scents in the same way she ignored heat and cold. As Emarin said it, however, a hint of what the others were smelling seeped through her defenses. She quickly regained control. It was *awful.*

"Will the Sharans let us pass?" Jonneth asked.

"We shall see," Pevara said, setting off toward the Sharans; their group fell in around her. The Sharan guards maintained an uneasy line against the Trollocs, watching them as they would enemies. This alliance, or whatever it was, did not sit terribly well with the Sharan soldiers. They didn't try to mask their looks of disgust, and many had tied cloths around their faces to mask the odors.

As Pevara passed their line, a nobleman—or such she assumed him to be, from his armor of brazen rings—moved to confront her. A well-practiced Aes Sedai look staved him off. *I am far too important for you to bother,* that look said. It worked beautifully, and they were in.

The Sharan reserve camp was orderly as men rotated in from the west, where they fought the White Tower forces. The fierce channeling from that direction kept drawing Pevara's attention, like a bright light.

What do you think? Androl sent to her.

We're going to need to talk to someone. The battlefield is just too big for us to find Taim on our own.

He sent back his agreement. Not for the first time, Pevara found their bond distracting. She not only had to deal with her own nervousness, but Androl's as well. That crept from the back of her mind, and she had to constrain it forcefully, using breathing exercises she'd learned when first in the Tower.

She stopped in the center of the camp, looking about, trying to decide whom to approach. She could distinguish servants from nobles. Approaching the former would be less dangerous, but also less likely to yield results. Maybe—

"You!"

Pevara started, spinning around.

"You should not be here." The aged Sharan was completely bald, with a short gray beard. Twin sword hilts in the shape of serpents' heads peeked out over his shoulders; he wore the blades crossed at his back, and he carried a staff that had strange holes along its length. A flute of some sort?

"Come," the man said, his accent so thick, Pevara could barely make it out. "The Wyld will need to see you."

Who is the Wyld? Pevara sent Androl.

He shook his head, feeling as baffled as she did.

This could turn out very badly.

The old man stopped ahead of them with an annoyed expression. What would he do if they refused? Pevara was tempted to create a gateway for them to flee.

We follow, Androl thought, striding forward. *We're never going to find Taim in this unless we talk to someone.*

Pevara frowned as he walked after the man, the other Asha'man joining him. She hurriedly caught up. *I thought we had decided I was in charge,* she thought to him.

No, he replied, *I thought that we'd decided you would* act *like you were in charge.*

She sent back a calculated mix of cold displeasure and an implication that the conversation was not yet finished.

Androl sent back amusement. *Did you… just glare at me mentally? That's impressive.*

We're taking a risk, she sent back. *This man could lead us into anything.*

Yes, he replied.

Something smoldered inside of him, something only hinted at until now. *You want Taim that badly?*

… Yes. I do.

She nodded.

You understand? he sent.

I lost friends to him as well, Androl, she replied. *I watched the?n be taken right in front of me. We have to be careful, though. We cant take too many risks. Not yet.*

It's the end of the world\ Pevara, Androl sent back. *If we can't take risks now, when will we?*

She followed without further argument, wondering at the determined focus she sensed in Androl. Taim had awoken something inside of him by taking his friends and Turning them to the Shadow.

As they followed the old Sharan, Pevara realized that she didn't understand what Androl was feeling, not completely. Aes Sedai friends of hers had been taken, but it wasn't the same as Androl losing Evin. Evin had trusted Androl, looked to Androl for protection. The Aes Sedai with Pevara had been acquaintances, friends, but it was different.

The old Sharan led them to a larger group of people, many of whom wore fine clothing. The highest noblemen and women among the Sharans didn't seem to fight, for not one of them carried a weapon. They made way for the older man, though several looked at his swords and sneered.

Jonneth and Emarin moved in around Pevara and Theodrin, one to each side, like bodyguards. They eyed the Sharans, hands on weapons, and she suspected that both were holding the One Power. Well, that would probably be expected of Dreadlords who were walking among allies they didn't fully trust. They didn't need to protect Pevara in such a way, but it was a nice gesture. She *had* always thought it would be useful to have a Warder. She had gone to the Black Tower with the intention of taking multiple Asha'man as Warders. Perhaps…

Androl immediately felt jealous. *What are you? Some Green with a flock of men fawning over her?*

She sent back amusement. *Why not?*

They're too young for you, he sent back. *Jonneth is, anyway. And Theodrin would fight you for him.*

I'm considering bonding them, she sent back, *not bedding them, Androl Honestly. Besides, Emarin prefers men.*

Androl paused. *He does?*

Of course he does. Haven't you been paying attention?

Androl seemed baffled. Sometimes, men could be surprisingly dense, even observant ones like Androl.

Pevara embraced the One Power as they reached the center of the group. Would she have time to make a gateway if something went wrong? She did not know the area, but so long as she Traveled somewhere nearby, that wouldn’t matter. She felt as if she was walking up to a noose and inspecting it, deciding how well it would fit her neck.

A tall man in armor made of silvery discs with holes in the middle stood at the center of the group, dispensing orders. As they watched, a cup moved toward him through the air. Androl stiffened. *He’s channeling, Pevara.*

Demandred, then? It *must* be. Pevara let *saidar* flood her with its warm glow, letting it wash away emotions. The old man who had been leading them stepped forward and whispered something to Demandred. Despite the enhanced senses of *saidar*,; Pevara could not hear what was said.

Demandred turned toward the group of them. “What is this? Has M’Hael so quickly forgotten his orders?”

Androl dropped to his knees, as did the others. Though it galled her, Pevara went down as well.

“Great One,” Androl said, “we were merely—”

“No excuses!” Demandred yelled. “No games! M’Hael is to take all of his Dreadlords and destroy the White Tower forces. If I see *any* of you away from that fight, I will make you wish I’d given you to the Trollocs instead!”

Androl nodded eagerly, then began backing away. A whip of Air Pevara could not see—although she could feel his pain through the bond—cracked him in the face. The rest of them followed after him, scrambling away with heads low.

That was foolish and dangerous, Pevara thought at Androl.

And effective, he replied, eyes ahead, hand to his cheek, blood seeping between the fingers. *We know Taim is on the battlefield for sure, and we know where to find him. Let’s move.*

Galad scrambled through a nightmare. He had known that the Last Battle might be the end of the world, but now… now he *felt* it.

Channelers on both sides scourged one another, shaking Polov Heights. Lightning had struck so often that Galad could barely hear any longer, and his eyes watered from the pain of seeing blasts strike nearby.

He threw himself up against the hillside, digging his shoulder into the ground and ducking for cover as a series of explosions ripped up the earth in front of him. His team—twelve men in tattered white cloaks—dove for cover with him.

The White Tower's forces were strained under the attacks, but so were the Sharan forces. The power of so many channelers was incredible.

The main bulk of White Tower infantry and a large number of Sharan troops fought here on the western Heights. Galad stayed on the perimeter of that battle, looking for Sharan channelers alone or in small groups. In many places here, the battle lines on both sides had fractured. Not surprising; it was near impossible to maintain solid battle lines with all of that power being flung back and forth.

Bands of soldiers scrambled about, seeking cover in blown-out holes in the rock. Others protected groups of channelers. Nearby, women and men roamed about in small groups, destroying soldiers with fire and lightning.

These were what Galad hunted.

He raised his sword, pointing at a trio of Sharan women holding at the top of the Heights. He and his men were more than halfway up the slope.

Three. Three would be difficult. They turned their attention on a small band of men wearing the Flame of Tar Valon. Lightning struck the unfortunate soldiers.

Galad held up four fingers. Plan four. He leaped out of his hollow and dashed toward the three women. His men waited a count of five, then followed behind.

The women saw him. If they'd remained turned away, Galad would have gained the advantage. One raised a hand and summoned Fire, hurling the weave at him. The flame struck him, and though he could feel its heat, the weave unraveled and dissipated—leaving him singed, but mostly unharmed.

The Sharan's eyes opened with shock. That look… that look was becoming familiar to Galad now. It was the look of a soldier whose sword had broken in battle, the look of one who had seen something that should not be. What did you do when the One Power failed, the thing you relied upon to raise you above common folk?

You died. Galad's sword took the woman's head off as one of her companions tried to seize him with Air. He felt the metal grow cold at his chest, and sensed the rush of Air moving around him.

A *poor choice*, Galad thought, ramming his sword into the chest of a second woman. The third proved smarter, and she slammed him with a large rock. He barely raised his shield before the rock smashed into his arm, throwing him backward. The woman raised another stone right as Galad's team hit her. She fell to their swords.

Galad caught his breath, his head back, pain radiating from the impact of the rock. He groaned, sitting up. Nearby, his men hacked at the third Sharan woman's body. They didn't need to be so thorough, but some Children had strange ideas about what Aes Sedai could do. He'd caught Laird cutting off one of the Sharan women's heads to bury it separate from the body. Unless you did that, Laird claimed, they would return to life at the next full moon.

As the men butchered the other two corpses, Golever came over and offered Galad a hand. "Light burn me," Golever said, a wide grin splitting his bearded face, "if this isn't the finest work we've ever done, my Lord Captain Commander, I don't know what is!"

Galad stood up. "It is what must be done, Child Golever."

"I wish it had to be done more often! *This* is what the Children have awaited for centuries. You are the first to deliver it. The Light illumine you, Galad Damodred. The Light illumine you!"

"May the Light illumine a day when men need not kill at all," Galad said tiredly. "It is not fitting to take joy in death."

"Of course, my Lord Captain Commander." Golever continued grinning.

Galad looked across the bloody pandemonium of the western slope of the Heights. The Light send Cauthon could make some sense of this battle, for Galad certainly could not.

"Lord Captain Commander!" a frightened voice cried.

Galad spun about, hand on his sword. It was Alhanra, one of his scouts.

"What is it, Child Alhanra?" Galad asked as the spindly man ran up. No horses. They were on an incline, and the animals would not have reacted well to the lightning. Better to trust one's own feet.

"You need to see this, my Lord," Alhanra said, panting. "It's… It's your *brother.*"

"Gawyn?" Impossible. *No,* he thought. *Not impossible. He would be with Egwene, fighting on their front.* Galad ran after Alhanra, Golever and the others falling in around him.

Gawyn's body lay ashen-faced in a gap between two rocks on the top of the Heights. Nearby a horse was munching on grass, a trail of blood streaming down its side. By the looks of it, not the horse's blood. Galad knelt down beside the younger man’s corpse. Gawyn had not died easily. But what of Egwene?

“Peace, brother,” Galad said, resting a hand on the body. “May the Light—”

“Galad…” Gawyn whispered, his eyes fluttering open.

“Gawyn?” Galad asked, shocked. Gawyn had a nasty gut wound. He wore some strange rings. There was blood everywhere. His hand, chest… his entire body.…

How could the man still be alive?

The Warder bond’ he realized. “We need to carry you to a Healer! One of the Aes Sedai.” He reached into the hollow, scooping up Gawyn.

“Galad ... I failed.” Gawyn stared at the sky, eyes blank.

“You did well.”

“No. I failed. I should have ... I should have stayed with her. I killed Hammar. Did you know that? I killed him. Light. I should have picked a side…”

Galad cradled his brother and began running along the slope toward the Aes Sedai. He tried to shelter Gawyn amid the attacks of channelers. After only a few moments, an explosion of earth ripped up among the Children, flinging them aside, tumbling Galad to the ground. He dropped Gawyn as he collapsed to the earth beside him.

Gawyn trembled, eyes staring distantly.

Galad crawled over and tried to pick him up again, but Gawyn grabbed his arm, meeting his eyes. “I did love her, Galad. Tell her.”

“If you are truly bonded, then she knows.”

“This will hurt her,” Gawyn said through pale lips. “And at the end of it, I failed. To kill him.”

“Him?”

“Demandred,” Gawyn whispered. “I tried to kill him, but I wasn’t good enough. I’ve never… been quite good… enough . . ”

Galad found himself in a very cold place. He had seen men die, he had lost friends. This hurt more. Light, but it did. He had loved his brother, loved him deeply—and Gawyn, unlike Elayne, had returned the sentiment.

“I will bring you to safety, Gawyn,” Galad said, picking him up, shocked to find tears in his eyes. “I will not be left without a brother.”

Gawyn coughed. “You won’t be. You have another brother, Galad. One you do not know. A son of… Tigraine… who went into the Waste… Son of a Maiden. Born on Dragonmount.…”

Oh, Light.

“Don’t hate him, Galad,” Gawyn whispered. “I always hated him, but I stopped. I… stopped…”

Gawyn’s eyes stopped moving.

Galad felt for a pulse, then sat back, looking down at his dead brother. The bandage Gawyn had made for himself at his side seeped blood onto the dry ground below, which hungrily soaked it up.

Golever moved up to him, helping Alhanra, whose blackened face and burned clothing smelled of smoke from the lightning strike. “Take the wounded to safety, Golever,” Galad said, standing. He reached up and felt the medallion at his neck. “Take all of the men and go.”

“And you, Lord Captain Commander?” Golever asked.

“I will do what needs to be done,” Galad said, cold inside. Cold as winter steel. “I will bring Light to the Shadow. I will bring justice to the Forsaken.”

Gawyn’s thread of life vanished.

Egwene lurched to a stop on the battlefield. Something severed within her. It was as if a knife suddenly tore into her and scooped out the piece of Gawyn inside, leaving only emptiness.

She screamed, falling to her knees. No. No, it *couldn’t* be. She could feel him, just ahead! She’d been running for him. She could… She could…

He was gone.

Egwene howled, opening herself to the One Power and drawing in as much as she could hold. She let it out as a wall of flames toward the Sharans who were all around now. They had once held the Heights, the Aes Sedai below, but it was madness now.

She assailed them with the Power, clutching Vora’s *sa’angreal.* She would destroy them! Light! It hurt. It *hurt so badly.*

“Mother!” Silviana cried, seizing her arm. “You are out of control, Mother! You will kill our own people. Please!”

Egwene breathed in gasps. Nearby, a group of Whitecloaks stumbled by, carrying wounded down the hillside.

So *close!* Oh, Light. He was gone!

“Mother?” Silviana said. Egwene barely heard. She touched her face, and found tears there.

She had been bold before. She had claimed she could keep fighting through the loss. How naive that was. She let the fire of *saidar* die within her. With that gone, life went out of her. She slumped to the side, and felt hands carrying her away. Through a gateway, off the battlefield.

Tam used his last arrow to save a Whitecloak. It wasn’t something he’d have ever imagined himself doing, but there he was. The wolfish Trolloc stumbled back with the arrow through its eye, refusing to go down until the young Whitecloak pulled himself from the mud and struck at its knees.

His men were now positioned on the catwalks of the palisade, shooting volleys of arrows at the Trollocs that had surged across the riverbed here. Their numbers were depleted, but there were still so many of them.

Until this point, the battle had been going well. Tam’s combined forces spread out mightily along the river on the Shienaran side. Downriver the Legion of the Dragon, crossbow banners and heavy cavalry, stemmed the Trolloc advance. The same events were being played out here, farther upriver, with archers, foot soldiers and cavalry stopping the Trolloc incursion at the riverbed. Until the supplies began to dwindle and Tam was forced to withdraw his men to the relative safety of the palisade.

Tam looked to the side. Abell held up his bow, shrugging. He was out of arrows as well. All up and down the catwalk, the Two Rivers men held up their bows. No arrows.

“No more will be coming,” Abell said softly. “The lad said that batch was the last.”

The Whitecloak army fought desperately, mixed with members of Perrin’s Wolf Guard, but they were being pushed back from the riverbed in droves. They fought on three sides, and another force of Trollocs had just swung around to box them in entirely. The banner of Ghealdan flew closer to the ruins. Arganda held that position along with Nurelle and the remnants of the Winged Guard.

If this were any other battle, Tam would have had his men save their arrows to cover a retreat. There would be no retreat this day, and the order to loose had been the right one; the lads had taken their time with each shot. They’d likely killed thousands of Trollocs during the hours of fighting.

But what was an archer without his bow? *Still a Two Rivers man,* Tam thought. *And still not willing to let this battle be lost.*

"Off the catwalks and form up with weapons," Tam called to the lads. "Leave the bows here. We will fetch them when more arrows come our way."

More arrows wouldn't come, but the Two Rivers men would be happier pretending that they might go back to their bows. They formed up into ranks as Tam had taught them, armed with spears, axes, swords, even some scythes. Everything and anything they'd had on hand, along with shields for those with axes or swords and good leather armor for them all. No pikes, unfortunately. After the heavy infantry had been outfitted, there hadn't been any of those left.

"Stay tight," Tam said to them. "Form into two wedges. We'll push into the Trollocs around the Whitecloaks." Best thing to do—at least, the best Tam could come up with—was to hit those Trollocs that had just come around the back of the Whitecloaks, fragment them and help the Whitecloaks break free.

The men nodded, though they probably had very little understanding of the tactics. It didn't matter. So long as they kept disciplined ranks as Tam had taught them.

They started forward, running, and Tam was reminded of another battlefield. Snow, cutting into his face, blown by terrible winds. In a way, that battlefield had begun this all. Now it ended here.

Tam placed himself at the point of the first wedge, then put Deoan—a man from Deven Ride who had served in the Andoran army—at the point of the other. Tam guided his men forward briskly, not letting them, or himself, dwell too much on what was about to happen.

As they approached the hulking Trollocs, with their swords, polearms and battle-axes, Tam sought the flame and the void. Nervousness vanished. All emotion evaporated. He unsheathed the sword Rand had given him, the one with the dragons painted on the sheath. It was as fine a weapon as Tam had ever seen. Those folds in the metal whispered of ancient origin. It seemed too good a weapon for Tam. He had felt that way about every sword he'd ever used.

"Remember, hold formation!" Tam yelled back at his men. "Don't let them break us apart. If someone falls, one man steps up and takes his place while another pulls the fallen man into the center of the wedge."

They nodded back at him, and then they hit the Trollocs in the back, where they had surrounded the Children of the Light at the river.

His formations hit, pounding forward. The huge Trollocs turned to fight.

Fortuona waved away the *so’jhin* who tried to replace her regal clothing. She smelled of smoke from the fire, and her arms had been burned and scored in several places. She would not accept *damane* Healing. Fortuona thought Healing to be a useful development—and some of her people were changing their attitudes toward it—but she was not certain the Empress should submit to it. Besides, her wounds were not dire.

The Deathwatch Guards kneeling before her would need some form of punishment. This was the second time they had allowed an assassin to reach her, and while she did not blame them for the failure, to deny them punishment would be to deny them their honor. It twisted her heart about, but she knew what she would have to do.

She gave the order herself. Selucia, as her Voice, should have done it—but Selucia’s wounds were being tended. And Karede deserved this small honor of receiving his execution order from Fortuona herself.

“You will go to engage the enemy *marath'damane* directly,” she ordered Karede. “Each of you who was on duty. Fight valiantly for the Empire there, and try to slay the enemy’s *marath'damane*.”

She could see Karede relax. It was a way to continue serving; he would probably have fallen on his own sword, if given the choice himself. This was a mercy.

She turned away from the man who had cared for her during her youth, the man who had defied what was expected of him. All for her. She would find her own penance for what she must do later. At this point, she would grant him the honor she could.

“Darbinda,” she said, turning to the woman who insisted upon calling herself “Min” despite the honor of a new name that Fortuona had given her. It meant “Girl of Pictures” in the Old Tongue. “You have saved my life and possibly that of the Prince of the Ravens. I name you of the Blood, Doomseer. Let your name be venerated for generations to come.”

Darbinda folded her arms. How like Knotai she was. Stubbornly humble, these mainlanders. They were actually proud—*proud*—of their lowborn heritage. Baffling.

Knotai himself sat on a nearby stump, receiving battle reports and snapping out orders. The Aes Sedai battle for the western Heights was descending into chaos. He met her eyes across the small gap between them, then nodded once.

If there was a spy—and Fortuona would be surprised if there was not one—then now was the time to mislead them. Everyone who had survived the attack was gathered around. Fortuona had insisted on having them close, ostensibly for the purpose of rewarding those who had served her well and meting punishment to those who had not. Each and every guard, servant and noble could hear as she spoke.

“Knotai,” she said, “we have yet to discuss what I should do about you. The Deathwatch Guard has charge of my safety, but *you* have charge of the defense of this camp. If you suspected that our command post was not safe, why did you not speak earlier?”

“Are you bloody suggesting that this is *my* fault?” Knotai stood up and stilled the scouts’ reports with a gesture.

“I gave you command here,” Fortuona said. “The ultimate responsibility for failure is yours then, is it not?”

Nearby, General Galgan frowned. He did not see it this way. Others looked toward Knotai with accusing eyes. Noble sycophants; they would blame him because he wasn’t born of the Seanchan. Impressive, that Knotai had converted Galgan so quickly. Or was Galgan telegraphing his emotions purposefully? Was he the spy? He could have been manipulating Suroth, or simply have been a redundant plant if Suroth failed.

“I’m not taking responsibility for this, Tuon,” Knotai said. “You are the one who bloody insisted on watching from the camp when you could have been somewhere safe.”

“Perhaps I should have done just that,” she replied coldly. “This entire battle has been a disaster. You lose ground each moment. You talk lightly and joke, refusing proper protocol; I do not think you approach this with the solemnity befitting your station.”

Knotai laughed. It was a loud, genuine laugh. He was good at this. Fortuona thought she was the only one who saw the twin lines of smoke rising exactly behind him from the Heights. An appropriate omen for Knotai: a large gamble would yield large rewards. Or a great cost.

“I’ve had it with you,” Knotai said, waving a hand at her. “You and your bloody Seanchan rules just keep getting in the way.”

“Then I have had it with you as well,” she said, raising her head. “We should never have joined this battle. We would be better preparing to defend our own lands to the southwest. I will not let you throw away the lives of my soldiers.”

“Go, then,” Knotai snarled. “What do I care?”

She spun about, stalking away. “Come,” she said to the others. “Gather our *damane*. All but those Deathwatch Guards will Travel to our army’s camp at the Erinin, then we will all return to Ebou Dar. We will fight the true Last Battle there once these fools have bloodied the Shadowspawn for us.”

Her people followed. Had the ploy been convincing? The spy had seen her consign to death men who loved her; would that show that she was reckless? Reckless and self-important enough to pull her troops away from Knotai? It was plausible enough. In a way, she wanted to do as she said, and fight in the south instead.

To do that, of course, would be to ignore the breaking sky, the trembling land, and the Dragon Reborn's fight. These were not omens she could let pass her by.

The spy did not know that. It could not know her. The spy would see a young woman, foolish enough to want to fight on her own. So she hoped.

The Dark One spun a web of possibility around Rand.

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Rand knew this struggle between them—the fight for what *could* be—was vital to the Last Battle. Rand could not weave the future. He was not the Wheel, nor anything like it. For everything that had happened to him, he was still merely a man.

Yet, in him was the hope of humankind. Humankind had a destiny, a choice for its future. The path they would take… this battle would decide it, his will clashing with that of the Dark One. As of yet, what *could* be might become what *would* be. Breaking now would be to let the Dark One choose that future.

BEHOLD, the Dark One said as the lines of light came together and Rand entered another world. A world that had not yet happened, but a world that very well might soon come to be.

Rand frowned, looking up at the sky. It was not red in this vision, the landscape not ruined. He stood in Caemlyn, much as he knew it. Oh, there were differences. Steamwagons rattled down the streets, mingling with the traffic of horse-drawn carriages and crowds walking.

The city had expanded beyond the new wall—he could see that from the height of the central hill he stood upon. He could even make out the place where Talmanes had blown a hole in the wall. It had not been repaired. Instead, the city had spilled out through it. Buildings covered what had once been fields outside.

Rand frowned, turning and walking down the street. What game was the Dark One playing? Surely this normal, even prosperous, city would not be part of his plans for the world. The people were clean and did not look oppressed. He saw no sign of the depravity that had marked the previous world the Dark One had created for him.

Curious, he walked up to a stand where a woman sold fruit. The slender woman gave him an inviting smile, gesturing toward her wares. “Welcome, good sir. I am Renel, and my shop is a second home to all seeking the finest of fruits from around the world. I have fresh peaches from Tear!”

“Peaches!” Rand said, aghast. Everyone knew those were poisonous.

“Ha! Fear not, good sir! These have had the toxin removed. They are as safe as I am honest.” The woman smiled, taking a bite of one to prove it. As she did, a grubby hand appeared from under the fruit stand—an urchin hid underneath, a young boy that Rand had not noticed earlier.

The little boy snatched a red fruit of a type Rand did not recognize, then dashed off. He was so thin that Rand could see his ribs pressing against the skin of his too-small form, and he ran on legs so slender that it was a wonder the boy could walk.

The woman continued smiling at Rand as she reached to her side, took out a small rod with a lever at the side for her finger. She pulled the lever, and the rod *cracked*.

The urchin died in a spray of blood. He fell, sprawling, to the ground. People moved around him in the flow of traffic, though somebody—a man with many guards—did scoop up the piece of fruit. He wiped the blood off of it and took a bite, continuing on his way. A few moments later, a steam-wagon rolled over the corpse, pressing it into the muddy roadway.

Rand, aghast, looked back at the woman. She tucked away her weapon, a smile still on her face. “Were you looking for any type of fruit in particular?” she asked him.

“You just killed that child!”

The woman frowned in confusion. “Yes. Did it belong to you, good sir?”

“No, but . . ” Light! The woman didn’t show a hint of remorse or concern. Rand turned, and nobody else seemed to care in the slightest about what had happened.

“Sir?” the woman asked. “I feel as if I should know you. That is fine clothing, if a little out of style. To which faction do you belong?”

“Faction?” Rand asked, looking back.

“And where are your guards?” the woman asked. “A man as rich as you has them, of course.”

Rand met her eyes, then ran to the side as the woman reached for her weapon again. He ducked around a corner. The look in her eyes… utter lack of any kind of human sympathy or concern. She’d have killed him in a moment without a second thought. He knew it.

Others on the street saw him. They nudged companions, gesturing toward him. One man he passed called out, “Speak your faction!” Others gave chase.

Rand ducked around another corner. The One Power. Dared he use it? He didn’t know what was going on in this world. As before, he had trouble separating himself from the vision. He knew that it wasn’t completely real, but he couldn’t help believing himself part of it.

He didn’t risk the One Power, and trusted his own feet for now. He did not know Caemlyn terribly well, but he did remember this area. If he reached the end of this street and turned… yes, there! Ahead, he saw a familiar building, with a sign out front showing a man kneeling before a woman with red-gold hair. The Queen's Blessing.

Rand reached the front doors as those chasing him piled around the corner behind. They stopped as Rand scrambled up to the door, passing a brutish fellow standing to the side. A new door guard? Rand did not know him. Did Basel Gill still own the inn, or had it changed hands?

Rand burst into the large common room, heart thumping. Several men nursing pitchers of afternoon ale looked up at him. Rand was in luck; Basel Gill himself stood behind the counter, rubbing a cup with a cloth.

"Master Gill!" Rand said.

The stout man turned, frowning. "Do I know you?" He looked Rand up and down. "My Lord?"

"It's me, Rand!"

Gill cocked his head, then grinned. "Oh, you! I'd forgotten you. Your friend isn't with you, is he? The one with the dark look to his eyes?"

So people did not recognize Rand as the Dragon Reborn in this place. What had the Dark One done to them?

"I need to speak with you, Master Gill," Rand said, striding toward a private dining chamber.

"What is it, lad?" Gill asked, following after. "Are you in trouble of some sort? Again?"

Rand shut the door after Master Gill. "What Age are we in?"

"The Fourth Age, of course."

"So the Last Battle happened?"

"Yes, and we won!" Gill said. He looked at Rand closely, narrowing his eyes. "Are you all right, son? How could you not know…"

"I spent my time in the woods these last years," Rand said. "Frightened of what was happening."

"Ah, then. You don't know about the factions?"

"No"

"Light, son! You're in some meaty trouble. Here, I'll get you a faction symbol. You'll need one in a hurry!" Gill pulled open the door and bustled out.

Rand folded his arms, noticing with displeasure that the fireplace in the room contained a *nothingness* beyond it. "What have you done to them?" Rand demanded.

I LET THEM THINK THEY WON.

“Why?”

MANY WHO FOLLOW ME DO NOT UNDERSTAND TYRANNY.

“What does that have to do with—” Rand cut off as Gill returned. He bore no “faction symbol,” whatever that was. Instead, he’d gathered three thick-necked guards. He pointed in, toward Rand.

“Gill…” Rand said, backing away and seizing the Source. “What are you doing?”

“Well, I figure that coat will sell for something,” Gill said. He didn’t sound the least bit apologetic.

“And so you’ll rob me?”

“Well, yes.” Gill seemed confused. “Why wouldn’t I?”

The thugs stepped into the room, looking Rand over with careful eyes. They carried cudgels.

“Because of the law,” Rand said.

“Why would there be laws against theft?” Gill asked, shaking his head. “What manner of person are you, to think such things? If a man cannot protect what he has, why should he have it? If a man cannot defend his life, what good is it to him?”

Gill waved the three men forward. Rand bound them in cords of Air.

“You took their consciences, didn’t you?” he asked softly.

Gill’s eyes widened at the use of the One Power. He tried to run. Rand grabbed him in cords of Air as well.

MEN WHO THINK THEY ARE OPPRESSED WILL SOMEDAY FIGHT. I WILL REMOVE FROM THEM NOT JUST THEIR WILL TO RESIST, BUT THE VERY SUSPICION THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG.

“So you leave them without compassion?” Rand demanded, looking into Gill’s eyes. The man seemed terrified that Rand would kill him, as did the three thugs. No remorse. Not a bit of it.

COMPASSION IS NOT NEEDED.

Rand felt deathly cold. “This is different from the world you showed me before.”

WHAT I SHOWED BEFORE IS WHAT MEN EXPECT. IT IS THE EVIL THEY THINK THEY FIGHT. BUT I WILL MAKE A WORLD WHERE THERE IS NOT GOOD OR EVIL.

THERE IS ONLY ME.

“Do your servants know?” Rand whispered. “The ones you name Chosen? They think they fight to become lords and rulers over a world of their own making. Instead you will give them this. The same world… except one without Light.”

THERE IS ONLY ME.

No Light. No love of men. The horror of it sank deep within Rand, shaking him. This was one of the possibilities that the Dark One could choose, if he won. It didn’t mean he would, or that it had to happen, but ... oh Light, this was terrible. Far more terrible than a world of captives, far more terrible than a dark land with a broken landscape.

This was true horror. This was a full corruption of the world, it was taking everything beautiful from it, leaving behind only a husk. A pretty husk, but still a husk.

Rand would rather live a thousand years of torture, retaining the piece of himself that gave him the capacity for good, than live a moment in this world without Light.

He turned, enraged, upon the darkness. It consumed the far wall, growing larger. “You make a mistake, Shai’tan!” Rand yelled at that nothingness. “You think to make me despair? You think to shatter my will? This will not do it, I swear to you. This makes me sure to fight!”

Something rumbled inside of the Dark One. Rand yelled, pushing outward with his will, shattering the dark world of lies and men who would kill without empathy. It exploded into threads, and Rand was once again in the place outside of time, the Pattern rippling around him.

“You show me your true heart?” Rand demanded of the nothingness as he seized those threads. “I will show you mine, Shai’tan. There is an opposite to this Lightless world you would create.

“A world without Shadow.”

Mat stalked away, calming his anger. Tuon had seemed really angry at him! Light. She *would* come back when he needed her to, would she not?

“Mat?” Min said, hurrying up beside him.

“Go with her,” Mat said. “Keep an eye on her for me, Min.”

“But—”

“She doesn’t need much protecting,” Mat said. “She’s a strong one. Bloody ashes, but she is. She does need watching, though. She worries me, Min. Anyway, I have this bloody war to win. I can’t do that and go with her. So would you go and watch her? Please?”

Min slowed, then gave him an unexpected hug. “Luck, Matrim Cauthon.”

“Luck, Min Farshaw,” Mat said. He let her go, then shouldered his *ashandarei*. The Seanchan had begun leaving Dashar Knob, pulling back to the Erinin before leaving the Field of Merrilor altogether. Demandred would let them go; he would be a fool not to. Blood and bloody ashes, what was Mat getting himself into? He had just sent away a good quarter of his troops.

They’ll come back, he thought. If his gamble worked. If the dice fell as he needed them.

Only this battle was not a game of dice. There was too much subtlety to it for that. It was cards, if anything. Mat usually won at cards. Usually.

To his right, a group of men in dark Seanchan armor marched toward the battlefield. “Hey, Karede!” Mat yelled.

The large man gave Mat a dark look. Suddenly, Mat knew what an ingot of metal felt like when Perrin eyed it, hefting a hammer. Karede stalked up, and though he obviously was making an effort to keep his face calm, Mat could feel the thunder coming off him.

“Thank you,” Karede said, voice stiff, “for helping protect the Empress, may she live forever.”

“You think I should have kept her someplace secure,” Mat said. “Not at the command post.”

“It is not my place to question one of the Blood, Great One,” Karede said.

“You’re not questioning me,” Mat said, “you’re thinking of sticking something sharp in me. Entirely different.”

Karede breathed out a long, deep breath. “Excuse me, Great One,” he said, turning to leave. “I must take my men and die.”

“I don’t think so,” Mat said. “You’re coming with me.”

Karede turned back toward him. “The Empress, may she live forever, ordered—”

“You to the front lines,” Mat said, shading his eye as he scanned the riverbed, swarming with Trollocs… “Great. Where do you bloody think I’m going?”

“You ride to battle?” Karede asked.

“I was thinking more of a saunter,” Mat said. He shook his head. “I need a feel for what Demandred is doing… I’m going out there, Karede, and putting you fellows between me and the Trollocs sounds delightful. Are you coming?"

Karede did not reply, though he did not continue walking away, either. "Look, what are your choices?" Mat asked. "Ride out there and die for really no purpose? Or come try to keep me alive for your Empress? I'm *almost* certain that she's fond of me. Maybe. She's a hard one to read, Tuon is."

"You do not call her by that name," Karede said.

"I'll call her what I bloody well want."

"Not if we're to come with you," Karede said. "If I am to ride with you, Prince of the Ravens, I would not have my men hearing such from your lips. It would be a bad omen."

"Well, we wouldn't want any of those," Mat said. "Right, then, Karede. Let's dive back into this mess and see what we can do. In Fortuona's name."

Tam raised his sword as if to begin a duel, but found no honorable foes here. Only grunting, howling, ferocious Trollocs. Drawn away from the beleaguered Whitecloaks at this battle near the ruins.

The Trollocs turned on the Two Rivers men and attacked. Tam, holding the point of the wedge, fell into Reed in Wind. He refused to take a single step backward. He bent this way and that, but held firm as he broke the Trolloc line, slashing with his sword in quick movements.

The men of the Two Rivers pushed forward, a thorn to the Dark One's foot and a bramble to his hand. In the chaos that followed, they shouted and cursed, and fought to drive the Trollocs apart.

But soon their focus turned to holding their ground. The Trollocs surged around the men. The wedge formation, normally an offensive tactic, worked well here, too. Trollocs moved down the sides of the wedge, taking hits from the Two Rivers men with their axes, swords and spears.

Tam let the lads' training guide them. He would have preferred to be in the center of the wedge, calling out encouragement as Dannil now did— but he was one of the few who had any real battle training, and the wedge formation depended on having a point who could hold steady.

So hold steady he did. Calm within the void, he let the Trollocs break upon him. He moved from Shake Dew from the Branch, to Apple Blossoms in the Wind, to Stones Fall in the Pond—all forms that stabilized him in one position while fighting multiple opponents.

Despite practice over the last few months, Tam wasn't nearly as strong as he had been in his youth. Fortunately, a reed did not need strength. He was not as practiced as he once had been, but no reed practiced how to bend in the wind.

It simply *did.*

Years of maturing, years of age, had brought Tam an understanding of the void. He understood it now, better than he ever had. Years teaching Rand responsibility, years of living without Kari, years of listening to the wind blow and the leaves rustle…

Tam al'Thor became the void. He brought it to the Trollocs, showed it to them and sent them into its depths.

He danced around a goat-featured Trolloc, sweeping his sword to the side and slicing the beasts leg at the heel. It stumbled and Tam turned, letting the men behind take it. He flashed his sword up—the weapon trailing blood—and sprayed the dark droplets across the eyes of a charging Trolloc with nightmare features. It howled, blinded, and Tam flowed forward, arms out, and opened its stomach below the breastplate. It stumbled in front of a third Trolloc, who brought an axe down toward Tam, but hit its ally instead.

Each step was part of a dance, and Tam invited the Trollocs to join him. He had only fought like this once before, long ago, but memory was something that the void did not allow. He did not think of other times; he did not think of anything. If he knew that he'd done this once before, it was because of the resonance of his motions, an understanding that seemed to permeate his muscles themselves.

Tam stabbed the neck of a Trolloc with a face that was nearly human, with only a little too much hair on its cheeks. It fell backward and collapsed, and Tam suddenly found no more foes. He stopped, bringing his sword up, feeling a soft wind blow across him. The dark beasts were thundering away downriver in a rout, chased by horsemen flying Borderlander flags. Shortly they would hit a wall of troops, the Legion of the Dragon, and be crushed between them and the pursuing Borderlanders.

Tam cleaned his blade, leaving the void. The gravity of the situation hit him. Light! His men should be dead. If those Borderlanders hadn't arrived…

He placed his sword back into its lacquered sheath. The red and gold dragon caught sunlight, sparkling, though Tam wouldn't have thought there was anything to catch with that cloud cover above. He searched for the sun, and found it—behind the clouds—nearly at the horizon. It was almost night!

Fortunately, it looked like the Trollocs here at the battle by the ruins were finally breaking. Already weakened severely by the drawn-out river crossing, they now crumbled as Lan's men hit them from behind.

In a short time it was done. Tam had held.

Nearby, a black horse trotted up. Its rider, Lan Mandragoran—with standard-bearer and guards behind—looked over the Two Rivers men.

"I had long wondered," Lan said to Tam. "About the man who had given Rand that heron-marked blade. I wondered if he had truly earned it. Now I know." Lan raised his own sword in salute.

Tam turned back toward his men, an exhausted, bloodied group clutching weapons. The path of their wedge showed easily on the trampled plain; dozens of Trollocs lay behind where the wedge had cut into them. To the north, the men of the second wedge raised their weapons. They had been pushed back nearly to the forest, but they'd held there and some had survived. Tam couldn't help but see that dozens of good folk had died.

His exhausted men sat down right there on the battlefield, surrounded by corpses. Some weakly began tying their own bandages or seeing to the wounded they'd pulled into the interior of the wedge. To the south, Tam spotted a dismaying sight. Were those the Seanchan pulling out from their camp at Dashar Knob?

"Have we won, then?" Tam asked.

"Far from it," Lan said. "We've seized this part of the river, but it is the lesser fight. Demandred pressed his Trollocs hard here to keep us from drawing resources to the larger battle at the ford downriver." Lan turned his horse. "Gather your men, blademaster. This battle will not end with the setting sun. You will be needed again in the coming hours. *Tai'shar Manetheren"*

Lan thundered toward his Borderlanders.

"*Tai'shar Malkier,*" Tam called after him, belatedly.

"So… we're not done yet?" Dannil asked.

"No, lad. We're not. But we'll take a break, get the men Healed and find some food." He saw gateways opening beside the field. Cauthon had been smart enough to send a means for Tam to take his wounded to Mayene. It—

People poured through the openings. Hundreds of them, thousands. Tam frowned. Nearby, the Whitecloaks were picking themselves up—they'd been hit hard by the Trolloc attacks, but Tam's arrival had kept them from being destroyed. Arganda's force was forming up at the ruins, and the Wolf Guard hoisted their flag high, bloodied, heaps of Trolloc corpses surrounding them.

Tam trudged across the field. Now his limbs felt like dead weights. He felt more exhausted than if he'd spent a month pulling stumps.

At the first of the gateways, he found Berelain herself, standing with a few Aes Sedai. The beautiful woman was terribly out of place here in this mud and death. Her gown of black and silver, the diadem in her hair… Light, she didn't belong here.

"Tam al'Thor," she said. "You command this force?"

"Near enough," Tam said. "Pardon, my Lady First, but who are all of these people?"

"The refugees from Caemlyn," Berelain said. "I sent some people to see if they needed Healing. They refused it, and insisted that I bring them to the battle."

Tam scratched at his head. To the battle? Any man—and many women—who could hold a sword had already been drawn into the army. The people he saw coming through the gateways were mostly children and the elderly, and some matrons who had remained back to care for the young.

"Pardon," Tam said, "but this is a *killing field!*"

"So I tried to explain," Berelain said, a hint of exasperation in her voice. "They claim they can be of use. Better than waiting out the Last Battle huddled together on the road to Whitebridge, so they say."

Tam watched, frowning, as children scattered onto the field. His stomach lurched at them investigating the gruesome dead, and many did shy back at first. Others began picking through the fallen, looking for signs of those people who were still alive and could be Healed. A few aged soldiers who had been set to guard the refugees went among them, watching for Trollocs that weren't quite dead.

Women and children began to pick arrows out from among the fallen. That would be helpful. *Very* helpful. With surprise, Tam saw hundreds of Tinkers pour out of one gateway. They went searching for the wounded under the direction of several Yellow sisters.

Tam found himself nodding. It still worried him, allowing the children to see such sights. *Well*, he thought, *they'll see a worse sight if we fail here.* If they wanted to be of use, they should be allowed.

"Tell me, Tam al'Thor," Berelain asked, "is… Galad Damodred well?"

"I see his men here, but not his banner."

"He was called to other duties, my Lady First," Tam said. "Downriver. I haven't heard from him in hours, I'm afraid."

"Ah. Well, let's Heal and feed your men. Perhaps word of Lord Damodred will be forthcoming."

Elayne touched Gareth Bryne's cheek softly. She closed his eyes, one, then the other, before nodding to the soldiers who had found his body. They carried Bryne away, legs dangling over the edge of his shield, head hanging down on the other side.

"He just went riding off, screaming," Birgitte said. "Right into the enemy lines. There was no stopping him."

"Siuan is dead," Elayne said, feeling an almost overpowering sense of loss. Siuan.… Siuan had always been so strong. With effort, Elayne stilled her emotions. She had to keep her attention on the battle. "Is there word from the command post?"

"The camp at Dashar Knob has been abandoned," Birgitte said. "I don't know where Cauthon is. The Seanchan have forsaken us."

"Raise my banner high," Elayne said. "Until we hear from Mat, I'm taking command of this battlefield. Bring forward my advisors."

Birgitte moved to give the orders. Elayne's Guardswomen watched, shuffling nervously, as the Trollocs pushed against the Andorans at the river. They'd totally filled the corridor between Heights and bogs, and threatened to spill out on to Shienaran soil. Part of Egwene's army had hit the Trollocs from the other side of the corridor, which had taken some pressure off her own troops for a time; but more Trollocs had attacked from above, and it looked as if Egwene's men were getting the worst of it.

Elayne had had solid lessons in battlefield tactics, though little experience on the field, and she could see how badly things were going. Yes, she had received news that the Trollocs' position upriver had been destroyed by the arrival of Lan and the Borderlanders. But that brought scant relief with the situation here at the ford.

The sun began to slip beneath the horizon. The Trollocs made no sign of pulling back, and her soldiers reluctantly began to light bonfires and torches. Organizing her men into square formations made for better defense, but it meant giving up any hope of pushing forward. The Aiel fought here as well, as did the Cairhienin. But those pike squares were the core of their battle plan.

They're slowly surrounding us, she thought. If the Trollocs did so, they could squeeze until the Andorans popped. *Light, this is bad.*

The sun made a sudden blazing fire behind the horizon clouds. With night, the Trollocs gained another advantage. The air had grown cold in the advent of darkness. Her early assumptions that this battle would last days now seemed silly. The Shadow pushed with all of its might. Humankind did not have days remaining, but hours.

"Majesty," Captain Guybon said, riding up with her commanders. Their dented armor and bloodied tabards proved that nobody, not even the senior officers, could be spared from direct fighting.

"Advice," Elayne said, looking at him, Theodohr—commander of the cavalry—and Birgitte, who was Captain-General.

"Retreat?" Guybon asked.

"Do you really think we could disengage?" Birgitte replied.

Guybon hesitated, then shook his head.

"Right, then," Elayne said. "How do we win?"

"We hold," said Theodohr. "We hope the White Tower can win their fight against the Sharan channelers and come to our aid."

"I don't like just sitting here," Birgitte said. "It—"

A blazing beam of white-hot fire sliced through Elayne's guards, vaporizing dozens of them. Guybon's horse vanished beneath him, though he narrowly missed being hit himself. Elayne's horse reared.

Swearing, she wrestled her mount under control. That had been balefire!

"Lews Therin!" A power-enhanced voice rang over the field. "I hunt a woman you love! Come to me, coward! *Fight!*"

The earth exploded near Elayne, heaving her standard-bearer into the air, the flag bursting into flames. This time Elayne *was* thrown from horseback, and she hit hard, grunting.

My babes! She groaned, rolling over as hands grabbed her. Birgitte. The woman hauled Elayne into the saddle behind her, helped by several Guardswomen.

“Can you channel?” Birgitte asked. “No. Never mind. They’ll be watching for that. Celebrain, raise another banner! Ride downriver with a squadron of Guards. I will take the Queen the other way!”

The woman standing beside Birgitte’s horse saluted. It was a death sentence! “Birgitte, no,” Elayne said.

“Demandred has decided you’ll draw out the Dragon Reborn for him,” Birgitte said, turning her horse. “I’m not about to let that happen. Hya!” She pushed her horse into a gallop as lightning struck Elayne’s guards, blowing bodies into the air.

Elayne ground her teeth. Her armies were in danger of being overwhelmed, surrounded—all while Demandred laid down blast after blast of balefire, lightning and weaves of Earth. That man was as dangerous as an army himself.

“I can’t leave,” Elayne said from behind Birgitte.

“Yes you can, and you are,” she replied gruffly as their horse galloped on. “If Mat has fallen—Light send that isn’t the case—then we’ll need to set up a new command post. There’s a reason Demandred struck at Dashar Knob and then directly at you. He’s trying to destroy our command structure. Your duty is to assume command from someplace *safe* and *secret.* Once we’re far enough away that Demandred's scouts can’t sense you channeling, we’ll make a gateway and you *will* be back in control. Right now though, Elayne, you need to shut your mouth and let me protect you.”

She was right. Burn her, she was. Elayne hung on as Birgitte galloped across the battlefield, her horse churning clods of dirt behind them in a flight toward safety.

At least he’s making it easy to find him, Galad thought as he rode, watching the lines of fire streak from the enemy position toward Elayne’s army.

Galad’s heels dug into the flanks of his stolen horse, tearing across the Heights toward its eastern edge. Over and over, he saw Gawyn’s dying body in his arms.

“Face me, Lews Therin!” The thunder of Demandred’s shout shook the ground from up ahead. He had taken Galad’s brother. Now the monster hunted Galad’s sister.

The right thing had always seemed clear to Galad before, but never had it felt as *right* as this. Those streaks of light were like indicators on a map, arrows pointing his way. The Light itself guided him. It had prepared him, placed him here at this moment.

He ripped through the back lines of the Sharan force to where Demandred stood, just above the riverbed looking down on Elayne’s troops. Arrows sank into the earth around him, archers firing, heedless of the risk of hitting their own men. Sword out, Galad pulled his leg from the stirrup, preparing to leap free.

An arrow struck the horse. Galad threw himself from the animal. He hit hard, skidding to a stop, and sliced the hand from a crossbowman nearby. A growling male channeler came for him, and the foxhead medallion grew cold against Galad’s chest.

Galad rammed his blade through the man’s neck. The man raved, blood spurting from his neck with each beat of his heart. He didn’t seem surprised as he died, just angry. His howls drew more attention.

“Demandred!” Galad yelled. “Demandred, you call for the Dragon Reborn! You demand to fight him! He is not here, but his brother is! Will you stand against me?”

Dozens of crossbows were raised. Behind Galad, his horse collapsed, expelling a bloody froth from its nostrils.

Rand al’Thor. His brother. The shock of Gawyn’s death had numbed Galad to this revelation. He would have to deal with it eventually, if he survived. He still did not know if he would be proud or ashamed.

A figure in strange, coin-link armor stepped through the Sharan ranks here. Demandred was a proud man; one needed see only his face to know that. He looked like al’Thor, actually. They had a similar sense about them.

Demandred inspected Galad, who stood with bloody sword out. The dying channeler scraped the ground with clawed fingers before him.

“His brother?” Demandred said.

“Son of Tigraine,” Galad said, “who became a Maiden of the Spear. Who gave birth to my brother on Dragonmount, the tomb of Lews Therin. I had two brothers. You killed the other on this battlefield.”

“You have an interesting artifact, I see,” Demandred said as the medallion grew cold again. “Surely you don’t think that is going to keep you from meeting the same fate as your pathetic brother? The dead one, I mean.”

“Do we fight, son of Shadows? Or do we talk?”

Demandred unsheathed his sword, herons on the blade and hilt. “May you give me a better match than your brother, little man. I grow displeased. Lews Therin can hate me or rail against me, but he should *not* ignore me.”

Galad stepped forward into the ring of crossbowmen and channelers. If he won, he would still die. But Light, let him take one of the Forsaken with him. It would be a fitting end.

Demandred came at him, and the contest began.

Her back pressed against a stalagmite, seeing only by the light of *Callandor* reflected against the walls of the cavern, Nynaeve worked to save Alanna’s life.

There were those who, in the White Tower, had mocked her reliance on ordinary healing techniques. What could two hands and thread do that the One Power could not?

If any of those women had been here instead of Nynaeve, the world would have ended.

The conditions were horrible. Little light, no tools besides the implements she kept in her pouch. Still, Nynaeve sewed, using the needle and thread she always carried. She had mixed a draught of herbs for Alanna and forced it through her lips. It wouldn’t do much, but every little bit might help. It would keep Alanna’s strength up, help her with the pain, keep her heart from giving out as Nynaeve worked.

The wound was messy, but she had sewn messy wounds before. Though she trembled inside, Nynaeve’s hands were steady as she sewed up the wound and coaxed the woman back from the very precipice of death.

Rand and Moridin did not move. But she felt something thrumming from them. Rand was fighting. Fighting a fight she could not see.

“Matrim Cauthon, you bloody fool. You’re still alive?”

Mat glanced over as Davram Bashere rode up beside him in the early evening darkness. Mat had moved with the Deathwatch Guard to the back of the Andoran lines fighting at the river.

Bashere was accompanied by his wife and a guard of Saldaeans. Judging by the blood on her clothing, she had seen her share of fighting.

“Yes, I’m alive,” Mat said. “I’m usually pretty good at staying alive. I’ve only failed one time that I remember, and it hardly counts. What are you doing here? Aren't you…"

"They dug into my bloody mind," Bashere said, scowling. "That they did, man. Deira and I talked it over. I'm not going to lead, but why should that stop me from killing a few Trollocs?"

Mat nodded. At Tenobia's fall, this man had become king of Saldaea—but he had refused the crown, so far. The corruption in his mind had shaken him. All he had said was that Saldaea fights alongside Malkier, and told the troops to look toward Lan. The throne would be sorted out if they all survived the Last Battle.

"What happened to you?" Bashere asked. "I heard the command post fell."

Mat nodded. "The Seanchan have abandoned us."

"Blood and ashes!" Bashere cried. "As if this weren't bad enough. Bloody Seanchan dogs."

The Deathwatch Guards who stood around Mat made no response to that. Elayne's forces held along the riverbank, just barely—but Trollocs were slowly working around them upriver. Elayne's lines held only because of tenacity and careful training. Each huge square of men held pikes outward, bristling like a hedgehog.

Those formations could be separated if Demandred drove wedges between them in the right way. Mat employed cavalry sweeps of his own, including Andoran cavalry and the Band—trying to keep the Trollocs from penetrating the pike squares or surrounding Elayne.

The rhythm of the battle pulsed beneath Mat's fingertips. He *felt* what Demandred was doing. To anyone else, the end of the battle probably seemed a simple matter now. Attack in force, break the pike formations, crack Mat's defenses. It was so much more subtle.

Lan's Borderlanders had finished crushing the Trollocs upriver, and needed orders. Good. Mat needed those men for the next step in his plan.

Three of the enormous pike formations were flagging, but if he could place a channeler or two in each center, he could shore them up. Light shelter whoever had distracted Demandred. The Forsaken's attacks had destroyed entire pike formations. Demandred didn't need to kill each man individually; he needed only to launch attacks of the One Power to shatter the square. That let the Trollocs overwhelm them.

"Bashere," Mat said, "please tell me that someone has heard from your daughter."

“Nobody has,” Deira said. “I'm sorry.”

Bloody ashes, Mat thought. *Poor Perrin.*

Poor him. How was he going to do this without the Horn? Light. He was not certain he could do it *with* the bloody Horn.

“Go,” Mat called as they rode. “Ride to Lan; he’s upriver. Tell him to engage those Trollocs trying to move around the Andorans’ right flank! And tell him I’ll have other orders for him coming soon.”

“But I—”

“I don’t *care* if you’ve bloody been touched by the Shadow!” Mat said. “Every man has had the Dark One’s fingers on his heart, and that’s the bloody truth. You can fight through it. Now ride to Lan and tell him what needs to be done!”

Bashere stiffened at first; then—strangely—he smiled a broad smile beneath drooping mustaches. Bloody Saldaeans. They *liked* being yelled at. Mat’s words seemed to give him heart, and he galloped off, wife at his side. She threw Mat a fond look, which made him uncomfortable.

Now ... he needed an army. And a gateway. He needed a bloody gateway. *Fool,* he thought. He had sent the *damane* away. Could he not have at least kept one? Though they did make his skin crawl as if it were covered in spiders.

Mat halted Pips, the Deathwatch Guards stopping with him. A few of them lit torches. They had certainly gotten the drubbing they had wanted, joining Mat in fighting the Sharans. They seemed to itch for more, though.

There, Mat thought, heeling Pips toward a force of troops south of Elayne’s pike formations. The Dragonsworn. Before the Seanchan left Dashar Knob, Mat had sent this army to reinforce Elayne’s troops.

He still did not know what to make of them. He had not been at the Field when they had gathered, but he had heard reports. People from all ranks and stations, all nationalities, who had joined together to fight in the Last Battle, heedless of loyalties or national borders. Rand broke all vows and all other bonds.

Mat rode at a quick trot—the Deathwatch Guards jogging to keep up—around the back of the Andoran lines. Light, the lines were buckling. This was bad. Well, he’d made his bet. Now he could only ride the bloody battle and hope it did not buck too much.

As he galloped for the Dragonsworn, he heard something incongruous. Singing? Mat pulled to a halt. The Ogier had been caught up fighting the

Trollocs, and had pushed across the dry riverbed to help fight at Elayne’s left flank, across from the bogs, to keep Trollocs from coming around that way.

They stood their ground here, as immovable as oaks before a flood, hacking with axes as they sang. Trollocs lay in piles around them.

“Loial!” Mat yelled, standing up in his stirrups. *“Loial!”*

One of the Ogier stepped back from the fighting and turned. Mat was taken aback. His usually calm friend had ears laid low, teeth clenched in anger, and a blood-soaked axe in his fingers. Light, but that expression sent terror through Mat’s body. He would rather stare down ten men who thought he had been cheating than fight a single angry Ogier!

Loial called something to the others, and then rejoined them in the fighting. They continued to lay into the Trollocs nearby, cutting them down. Trollocs and Ogier were near the same size, but the Ogier somehow seemed to tower over the Shadowspawn. They did not fight like soldiers, but like woodsmen felling trees. Chop one way, then the next, breaking Trollocs. But Mat knew that Ogier hated felling trees, while they seemed to relish felling Trollocs.

The Ogier broke the Trolloc fist they’d been fighting, making them flee. Elayne’s soldiers moved in and blocked off the rest of the Trolloc army, and the several hundred Ogier pulled back to Mat. Among them, Mat noticed, were more than a few of the Seanchan Ogier—the Gardeners. He had not ordered that. The two groups fought together, but barely seemed to look at one another now.

Every one of the Ogier, male and female, had numerous cuts on their arms and legs. They did not wear armor, but many of the cuts seemed trivial, as if their skin had the strength of bark.

Loial walked up to Mat and the Deathwatch Guards, raising his axe to his shoulder. Loial’s trousers were dark up to the thighs, as if he had been wading in wine. “Mat,” Loial said, drawing a deep breath. “We have done as you asked, fighting here. No Trolloc got by us.”

“You did well, Loial,” Mat said. “Thank you.”

He waited for a reply. Something long-winded and eager, no doubt. Loial stood breathing in and out with lungs that could hold enough air to fill a room. No words. The others with him, though many were senior to Loial, offered no words either. Some lifted torches. The glow of the sun had vanished beneath the horizon. Night was fully upon them.

Quiet Ogier. Now *that* was strange. Ogier at war, though ... it was not something Mat had ever seen. He did not have any memory of it in the memories that were not his.

“I need you,” Mat said. “We have to turn this battle around or we're finished. Come on.”

“The Hornsounder commands!” Loial bellowed. “Up axes!”

Mat winced. If he ever needed someone to yell a message from Caemlyn to Cairhien for him, he knew who to ask. Only they would probably hear it all the way up in the Blight, too.

He heeled Pips into motion, the Ogier falling in around him and the Deathwatch Guards. The Ogier had no trouble keeping up.

“Honored One,” Karede said, “I and mine are ordered to—”

“To go die on the front lines. I’m bloody working on that, Karede. Keep your sword out of your own gut for the moment, kindly.”

The man’s expression darkened, but he held his tongue.

“She doesn’t really want you dead, you realize,” Mat said. He could not say more without revealing the plot to bring her back.

“If my death serves the Empress, may she live forever, then I give it willingly.”

“You’re bloody insane, Karede,” Mat said. “Unfortunately, so am I. You’re in good company. You there! Who leads this force?”

They had reached the back ranks, where the reserves of the Dragonsworn were located, the wounded and those who were resting from their time at the front ranks.

“My Lord?” one of the scouts said. “That would be Lady Tinna.”

“Go fetch her,” Mat said. Those dice kept rattling in his head. He also felt a pull from the north, a tugging, as if some threads around his chest were yanking on him.

Not now, Rand, he thought. *I’m bloody busy.*

No colors formed, only blackness. Dark as a Myrddraal’s heart. The tugging grew stronger.

Mat dismissed the vision. *Not. Now.*

He had work to do here. He had a plan. Light, let it work.

Tinna turned out to be a pretty girl, younger than he had expected, tall and strong of limb. She wore her long brown hair in a tail, though curls of it seemed to want to break out here and there. She wore breeches, and had seen some fighting, judging by that sword on her hip and the dark Trolloc blood on her sleeves.

She rode up to him, looking him up and down with discerning eyes. “You’ve finally remembered us, have you, Lord Cauthon?” Yes, she definitely reminded him of Nynaeve.

Mat looked up at the Heights. The firefight between Aes Sedai and Sharans up there had turned messy.

You'd better win there, Egwene. I’m counting on you.

“Your army,” Mat said, looking at Tinna. “I’m told some Aes Sedai joined you?”

“Some did,” she said cautiously.

“You’re one of them?”

“I am not. Not exactly.”

“Not exactly? What do you mean by that? Look, woman, I need a gateway. If we don’t have one, this battle could be lost. Please tell me we have some channelers here who can send me where I need to go.”

Tinna drew her lips to a line. “I’m not trying to irritate you, Lord Cauthon. Old habits make for strong ropes, and I have learned not to speak of certain things. I was turned out of the White Tower myself, for… complicated reasons. I’m sorry, but I do not know the weave for Traveling. I do know for a fact that most who joined us are too weak for that weave. It requires a great deal of the One Power, beyond the capacity of many who —”

“I can make one.”

A woman in a red dress stood up from the lines of wounded, where she had apparently been Healing. She was thin and bony and had a sour expression on her face, but Mat was so happy to see her, he could have kissed her. Like kissing broken glass, that would have been. He’d have done it anyway. “Teslyn!” he cried. “What are you doing here?”

“Fighting in the Last Battle, I believe,” she said, dusting off her hands. “Aren’t we all?”

“But the Dragonsworn?” Mat asked.

“I did not find the White Tower to be a comfortable place once I returned,” she said. “It had changed. I availed myself of the opportunity here, as this need superseded any others. Now, you wish a gateway? How large?”

"Large enough to move as many of these troops as we can, the Dragonsworn, the Ogier, and this cavalry banner from the Band of the Red Hand." Mat said.

"I'll need a circle, Tinna," Teslyn said. "No complaining that you can't channel; I can sense it in you, and all former allegiances and promises are broken for us here. Gather the other women. Where are we going, Cauthon?"

Mat grinned. "To the top of those Heights."

"The Heights!" Karede said. "But you *abandoned* those at the beginning of the battle. You gave them up to the Shadowspawn!"

"Yes, I did "

And now… now he had a chance to finish this. Elayne's forces holding along the river, Egwene fighting in the west… Mat had to seize the northern part of the Heights. He knew that with the Seanchan gone and most of his own troops occupied around the lower part of the Heights, Demandred would send a strong force of Sharans and Trollocs across the top to the northeast, to swing down across the riverbed and behind Elayne's armies. The armies of Light would be surrounded and at Demandred's mercy. His only chance was to keep Demandred's troops from coming off the Heights, despite their superior numbers. Light. It was a long shot, but sometimes you had to take the only shot you had.

"You're spreading us dangerously thin," Karede said. "You risk everything by moving armies that are needed here up to the Heights."

"You *did* want to go to the front lines," Mat replied. "Loial, are you with us?"

"A strike at the enemy's core, Mat?" Loial asked, hefting his axe. "It will not be the worst place I've found myself, following one of you three. I do hope Rand is all right. You do think so, don't you?"

"If Rand were dead," Mat said, "we'd know it. He'll have to watch out for himself, without Matrim Cauthon saving him this time. Teslyn, let's have that gateway! Tinna, organize your forces. Have them ready to charge through the opening. We need to seize the northern slope of those Heights fast and then hold it *no matter* what the Shadow tosses at us!"

Egwene opened her eyes. Though she shouldn't have been in a room at all, she lay in one. And a fine one. The cool air smelled of salt, and she rested on a soft mattress.

I'm dreaming, she thought. Or perhaps she had died. Would that explain the pain? Such terrible pain. Nothingness would be better, far better, than this agony.

Gawyn was gone. A piece of herself, snipped away.

"I forget how young she is." Whispers drifted into the room. That voice was familiar. Silviana? "Care for her. I must return to the battle."

"How docs it go?" Egwene knew that voice, too. Rosil, of the Yellow. She had gone to Mayene, with the novices and Accepted, helping Heal.

"The battle? It goes poorly." Silviana was not one to put honey on her words. "Watch her, Rosil. She is strong; I do not doubt she will pull through this, but there is always a worry."

"I've helped women with lost Warders before, Silviana," Rosil said. "I assure you, I'm quite capable. She'll be useless for the next few days, but then she will begin to mend."

Silviana sniffed. "That boy ... I should have known he would ruin her. The day I first saw how she looked at him, I should have taken him by his ears, hauled him to a distant farm, and set him to work for the next decade."

"You cannot so easily control a heart, Silviana."

"Warders are a weakness," Silviana said. "That is all they have ever been, and all they ever will be. That boy… that *fool* boy…"

"That fool boy," Egwene said, "saved my life from Seanchan assassins. I would not be here to mourn if he had not done so. I would suggest that you remember that, Silviana, when you speak of the dead."

The others were silent. Egwene tried to overcome the pain of loss. She was in Mayene, of course. Silviana would have taken her to the Yellows.

"I will remember it, Mother," Silviana said. She actually managed to sound contrite. "Rest well. I will—"

"Rest is for the dead, Silviana," Egwene said, sitting up.

Silviana and Rosil stood in the doorway of the beautiful room, which was draped with blue cloth below the ceiling of worked mother-of-pearl inlays. Both women folded their arms and gave her stern looks.

"You've been through something extremely hurtful, Mother," Rosil said. Near the doorway, Leilwin stood guard. "The loss of a Warder is enough to stop any woman. There is no shame in letting yourself deal with the grief."

"Egwene al'Vere can grieve," Egwene said, standing up. "Egwene al'Vere lost a man she loved, and she felt him die through a bond. The

Amyrlin has sympathy for Egwene al'Vere, as she would have sympathy for any Aes Sedai dealing with such loss. And then, in the face of the Last Battle, the Amyrlin would expect that woman to pick herself up and return to the fight."

She walked across the room, each step firmer. She held out her hand to Silviana, nodding toward Vora's *sa'angreal,* which she held. "I will be needing that."

Silviana hesitated.

"Unless the two of you wish to discover just how capable I am at present," Egwene said softly, "I would not suggest disobedience."

Silviana looked to Rosil, who sighed and nodded reluctantly. Silviana handed over the rod.

"I do not condone this, Mother," Rosil said. "But if you are insistent . . "

"I am."

" . . then I will give you this suggestion. Emotion will threaten to crush you. This is the danger. In the face of a lost Warder, summoning *saidar* will be difficult. If you do manage it, Aes Sedai serenity will likely be impossible. This can be dangerous. Very dangerous."

Egwene opened herself to *saidar.* As Rosil had suggested, it was difficult to embrace the Source. Too many emotions vied for her attention, overwhelming her, driving away her calm. She blushed as she failed a second time.

Silviana opened her mouth, undoubtedly to suggest that Egwene sit back down. At that moment, Egwene found *saidar,*; the bud in her mind flowering, the One Power rushing into her. She gave Silviana a defiant look, then began weaving a gateway.

"You didn't hear the rest of my advice, Mother," Rosil said. "You will not be able to banish the emotions troubling you, not completely. Your only choice is a bad one, to overwhelm those emotions of grief and pain with *stronger* emotions."

"That should not be difficult at all," Egwene said. She drew a deep breath, pulling in more of the One Power. She allowed herself anger. Fury at the Shadowspawn who threatened the world, anger at them for taking Gawyn from her.

"I will need eyes to watch me," Egwene said, defying Silviana's previous words. Gawyn had *not* been a weakness to her. "I will need another Warder."

“But—” Rosil began.

Egwene stopped her with a look. Yes, most women waited. Yes, Egwene al’Vere was pained from her loss, and Gawyn could never be replaced. But she *believed* in Warders. The Amyrlin Seat needed someone to watch her back. Beyond that, every person with a Warder bond was a better fighter than those without. To go without a Warder was to deny the Light another soldier.

There was a person here who had saved her life. *No,* a piece of her said, her eyes falling on Leilwin. *Not a Seanchan.*

Another piece of her, the Amyrlin, laughed at that. *Stop being such a child.* She would have a Warder. “Leilwin Shipless,” Egwene said loudly, “will you take this duty?”

The woman knelt, bowing her head. “I… yes.”

Egwene formed the weave for the bond. Leilwin stood, looking less fatigued, taking a deep breath. Egwene opened a gateway to the other side of the chamber, then used her immediate knowledge of this room to open another one to where her people fought. Explosions, screams and the beating of weapons against shields poured through.

Egwene strode back onto the killing fields, bringing the fury of the Amyrlin with her.

Demandred was a blademaster. Galad had assumed this would be the case, but he preferred to test his assumptions.

The two danced back and forth inside the ring of watching Sharans. Galad wore lighter armor, mail under his tabard, and stepped more quickly. The interwoven coins Demandred wore were heavier than simple mail, but good against a sword.

“You are better than your brother was,” Demandred said. “He died easily.”

The man was trying to enrage Galad. He did not succeed. Cold, careful. Galad moved in. The Courtier Taps His Fan. Demandred responded with something very similar to The Falcon Stoops, slapping away Galad’s attack. Demandred stepped back, walking around the perimeter of the ring, sword out to the side. At the beginning, he had spoken a great deal. Now he made only the occasional gibe.

They circled each other in the darkness, lit by torches held in Sharan hands. One rotation. Two.

“Come now,” Demandred said. “I’m waiting.”

Galad remained silent. Each moment he stalled was a moment Demandred was not sending destruction upon Elayne or her armies. The Forsaken seemed to realize it, for he came in swiftly. Three strikes: down, side, backhand. Galad met each one, their arms a blur.

Motion to the side. It came from a rock that Demandred had thrown at Galad by channeling. Galad dodged it, barely, then raised his sword against the blows that came next. Furious strikes downward, The Boar Rushes Down the Mountain, crashing against Galad’s blade. He held against that, but was not able to stop the following twist of the blade that cut his forearm.

Demandred stepped back, his sword dripping Galad’s blood. They circled around again, watching one another. Galad felt warm blood inside his glove, from where it had seeped down his arm. A little blood loss could slow a man, weaken him.

Galad breathed in and out, abandoning thought, abandoning worry. When Demandred next struck, Galad anticipated it, stepping aside and striking down with two hands, biting deeply into the leather behind Demandred’s knee guard. The sword glanced off the side of the armor, but cut true otherwise. As Galad whipped back around, Demandred was limping.

The Forsaken grimaced. “You’ve blooded me,” he said. “It has been a very long time since someone did that.”

The ground began to heave and break beneath Galad. Desperate, he leaped forward, getting close to Demandred—forcing him to stop channeling, lest he topple himself. The Forsaken grunted, swinging, but Galad was inside his enemy’s guard.

Too close to do a full swing, Galad raised his sword and bashed it—pommel first—at Demandred’s face. Demandred caught Galad’s hand with his, but Galad grabbed Demandred by the helmet, holding tightly, trying to force the helmet down over the Forsaken’s eyes. He grunted, both men locked, neither moving.

Then, with a sickening sound Galad heard quite distinctly, his muscle ripped in the arm where he’d been cut. His sword slipped from numb fingers, his arm spasming, and Demandred threw him backward and struck with a flash of the blade.

Galad fell to his knees. His right arm—severed at the elbow by Demandred’s slice—flopped to the ground in front of him.

Demandred stepped back, panting. He had been worried. Good. Galad held to his bleeding stump, then spat at Demandred’s feet.

Demandred snorted, then swung his blade once more.

All went black.

Androl felt as if he’d forgotten what it was like to breathe fresh air. The land around him smoldered and quaked, smoke churning in the wind, bringing with it the stench of burning bodies.

He and the others had moved up across the top of the Heights to the western side, searching for Taim. Much of the Sharan army fought here, contending with the White Tower army.

Groups of channelers drew fire from one side or the other, so Androl crossed the horrid landscape alone. He stepped over broken patches of smoking earth, crouching low, trying to give off the air of a solitary wounded man trying to creep to safety. He still wore Nensen’s face, but with his head down and his posture low, that mattered very little.

He sensed a spike of alarm from Pevara, who moved alone nearby.

What is it? he sent. *Are you all right?*

After a tense moment, her thoughts came. *I'm fine. A scare with some Sharans. I convinced them I was on their side before they attacked.*

It’s a wonder anyone can tell friend from foe here, Androl sent back. He hoped Emarin and Jonneth were safe. The two had gone together, but if they—

Androl froze. Up ahead, through the shifting smoke, he saw a ring of Trollocs protecting something. They stood on an outcropping of rock that jutted out of the hillside like the seat of a chair.

Androl crept forward, hoping to steal a peek.

Androl! Pevara’s voice in his mind made him jump nearly out of his skin.

What?

You were alarmed at something, she said. *I was reacting to you.*

He took a few calming breaths. *I've found something. Just a moment.*

He drew close enough, indeed, to sense channeling inside the ring. He didn’t know if—

The Trollocs parted as someone inside barked a command. Mishraile peered out, then scowled. “Its only Nensen!”

Androl’s heart thumped inside his chest.

A man wearing black turned from his contemplation of the battle. Taim. In his hands, he carried a thin disc of black and white. He rubbed his thumb across it as he overlooked the battlefield, sneering, as if disdainful of the lesser channelers struggling all about him.

“Well?” he barked at Androl, turning and dropping the disc into a pouch at his waist.

“I saw Androl,” Androl said, thinking quickly. Light, the others expected him to approach. He did so, walking past the Trollocs, putting himself right in the belly of the beast. If he could draw close enough ... “I followed him for a while.” Nensen always spoke in a rough, gravelly voice, and Androl did his best to imitate it. Pevara could have worked the voice into the weave, but hadn’t known it well enough.

“I don’t *care* about that one! Fool. What is Demandred doing?”

“He saw me,” Androl said. “He didn’t like me being over there. He sent me back to you and said that if he saw any of us away from this position, he’d kill us.”

Androl… Pevara sent, worried. He couldn’t spare the concentration to reply. It took all he had to keep from shaking as he stepped up close to Taim.

Taim rubbed his forehead with two fingers, closing his eyes. “And I thought you could do this simple thing.” Taim created a complex weave of Spirit and Fire. It struck like a viper at Androl.

Pain suddenly moved up Androl’s body, starting in his feet, surging through his limbs. He screamed, collapsing to the ground.

“Do you like that?” Taim asked. “I learned it from Moridin. I do think he’s trying to turn me against Demandred.”

Androl screamed in his own voice. That horrified him, but the others did not seem to notice. When Taim finally released the weave, the pain faded. Androl found himself groveling on the dirty ground, his limbs still spasming from the memory of the pain.

“Get up,” Taim growled.

Androl began to lurch to his feet.

I'm coming, Pevara sent.

Stay back, he replied. Light, he felt powerless. As he stood up, he stumbled into Taim, his legs refusing to work as they should.

"Fool," Taim said, shoving Androl back. Mishraile caught him. "Stand still." Taim began another weave. Androl tried to pay attention, but he was too nervous to catch the details of the weave. It hovered in front of him, then wrapped around him.

"What are you doing?" Androl asked. He didn't have to fake the tremor in his voice. That *pain.*

"You said you saw Androl?" Taim said. "I'm placing a Mask of Mirrors on you and inverting the weave, making you look like him. I want you to pretend to be the pageboy, find Logain, then *kill* him. Use a knife or a weave, I don't care which."

"You're… making me look like Androl," Androl said.

"Androl is one of Logain's pets," Taim said. "He shouldn't suspect you. This is an exceptionally *easy* thing I'm asking of you, Nensen. Do you think, for once, you could avoid making a complete mess of it?"

"Yes, M'Hael."

"Good. Because if you fail, I'll kill you." The weave fell into place and vanished.

Mishraile grunted, releasing Androl and stepping back. "I think Androl is uglier than that, M'Hael."

Taim snorted, then waved at Androl. "It's good enough. Get out of my sight. Return with Logain's head, or do not return at all."

Androl scrambled away, breathing heavily, feeling the others' eyes on his back. Once a good distance away, he ducked around some brush that was only mostly burned, and nearly tripped over Pevara, Emarin and Jonneth hiding there.

"Androl!" Emarin whispered "Your disguise! What *happened*? Was that Taim?"

Androl sat down in a heap, trying to still his heart. Then, he held up the pouch he had pulled off Taim's belt while stumbling to his feet. "It was him. You're not going to believe this, but…"

Arganda cupped the piece of paper, sitting in Mighty's saddle and pulling his list of ciphers out of his pocket. Those Trollocs kept launching arrows. So far, he'd avoided being hit. As had Queen Alliandre, who still rode with him. At least she was willing to stay back a little way with his reserves, where she was more sheltered.

In addition to the Legion of the Dragon and the Borderlanders, his force, along with the Wolf Guard and the Whitecloaks, had moved downriver following the battle at the ruins. Arganda had more foot soldiers than the others, and had trailed behind them.

They'd found plenty of fighting here, with the Trollocs and Sharans in the dry riverbed trying to surround the armies of Andor. Arganda had been fighting here for a few hours now as the sun set, bringing on the shadows. He'd pulled back once he got the message, however.

"Bloody awful handwriting," Arganda grumbled, flipping through the little list of ciphers and turning it toward a torch. The orders were authentic. Either that, or someone had broken the cipher.

"Well?" Turne asked.

"Cauthon's alive," Arganda said with a grunt.

"Where is he?"

"Don't know," Arganda said, folding the paper and tucking away the ciphers. "The messenger said Cauthon opened a gateway in front of him, threw the letter in his face, and told him to find me."

Arganda turned to the south, peering through the darkness. In preparation for night, his men had brought oil through gateways and set piles of wood alight. By the firelight, he could see the Two Rivers men heading his way, sure as the orders had said.

"Ho, Tam al'Thor!" Arganda said, raising a hand. He hadn't seen his commander since parting after the battle at the ruins, hours ago now.

The Two Rivers men looked as worn down as Arganda felt. It had been a long, *long* day, and the fighting was by no means over. *I wish Gallenne were here,* Arganda thought, inspecting Trollocs at the river as al'Thor's men approached. *I could use someone to argue with.*

Just downriver, shouts and clangs sounded from where the Andorans' pike formations held off—barely—the Trolloc waves. By now, this battle was strung out along the Mora, almost up to Dashar Knob. His men had helped keep the Andorans from being flanked.

"What news, Arganda?" Tam asked as he came over.

"Cauthon lives," Arganda said. "And that's bloody amazing, considering that someone blew up his command post, set fire to his tent, killed a bunch of his *damane*, and chased off his wife. Cauthon crawled out of it somehow.”

“Ha!” Abell Cauthon said. “That’s my boy.”

“He told me you were coming,” Arganda said. “He said you’d have arrows. Do you?”

Tam nodded. “Our last orders sent us through the gateway to Mayene for Healing and resupply. I don’t know how Mat knew arrows would be coming, but a shipment from the women in the Two Rivers came right as we were getting ready to return here. We have longbows for you to use, if you need them.”

“I will. Cauthon wants all of our troops to move back upriver to the ruins, cut across the riverbed and march up the Heights from the northeastern side.”

“Not sure what that’s about, but I suppose he knows what he’s doing…” Tam said.

Together, their forces moved upriver in the night, leaving behind the fighting Andorans, Cairhienin and Aiel. *Creator shelter you, friends,* Arganda thought.

They crossed the dry riverbed and began moving up the northeastern slopes. It was quiet on top, at this end of the Heights, but the glow from lines of torches was evident.

“That’s going to be a tough nut to crack, if those are Sharans up there,” Tam said softly, looking up the darkened slope.

“Cauthon’s note said we’d have help,” Arganda replied.

“What kind of help?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t—”

Thunder rumbled nearby, and Arganda winced. Most of the channelers were supposed to be fighting on the other side of the Heights, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t see any here. He *hated* that feeling, the sensation that a channeler might be watching him, contemplating whether to kill him with fire, lightning or earth.

Channelers. The world would be just plain better without them. But that sound didn’t turn out to be thunder. A group of galloping riders bearing torches appeared from the night, crossing the riverbed to join Arganda and his men. They flew the Golden Crane at the center of an array of Borderlander banners.

“Well I’ll be a bloody Trolloc,” Arganda called. “You Borderlanders decided to join us?”

Lan Mandragoran saluted by torchlight, silvery sword glistening. He looked up the slope. “So we're to fight here.”

Arganda nodded.

“Good,” Lan said softly from horseback. “I just received reports about a large Sharan army moving northeast across the top of the Heights. Its clear to me they want to swing down around behind our people fighting the Trollocs at the river; then we’d be surrounded and at their mercy. Looks like its our job to keep that from happening.”

He turned toward Tam. “Are you ready to soften them up for us, archer?”

“I think we can manage that,” Tam replied.

Lan nodded, then raised his sword. A Malkieri man at his side raised the Golden Crane high. And then they charged right up that slope. Coming toward them was a huge enemy army spread out in wide ranks across the landscape, the sky lit up by the thousands of torches they carried.

Tam al’Thor shouted for his men to line up and fire. “Loose!” Tam yelled, sending flights of arrows at the Sharans.

Then arrows began to be returned in their direction, now that the distance between the two armies had narrowed. Arganda figured that the archers wouldn’t be nearly as accurate in the darkness as they might have been by day—but that would be true for both sides.

The Two Rivers men released a wave of death, arrows as fast as diving falcons.

“Hold!” Tam yelled to his men. They stopped firing just in time for Lan’s cavalry to hit the softened Sharan lines.

Where did *Tam get his battle experience?* Arganda thought, thinking of the times he’d seen Tam fight. Arganda had known seasoned generals with far less sense of a battlefield than this sheepherder.

The Borderlanders pulled back, letting Tam and his men loose more arrows. Tam signaled to Arganda.

“Let’s go!” Arganda called to his foot soldiers. “All companies, forward!”

The one-two attack of archers and heavy cavalry was powerful, but it had limited advantage, once the enemy set their defenses. Soon the Sharans would get a solid shield-and-spear wall up to deflect the horsemen, or the archers would pick them off. That’s where the infantry came in.

Arganda unhooked his mace—those Sharans wore chain mail and leather—and raised it high, leading his men across the Heights, meeting the Sharans halfway, as they'd advanced to engage. Tams troops were Whitecloaks, Ghealdanin, Perrin's Wolf Guard and the Mayener Winged Guard, but they viewed themselves as one army. Not six months ago, Arganda would have sworn on his father's grave that men such as these would never fight together—let alone come to one another's aid, as the Wolf Guard did when the Whitecloak forces were being overrun.

Some Trollocs could be heard howling and began moving up alongside the Sharans. Light! Trollocs, too?

Arganda swung his mace until his arm burned, then switched hands and kept going, breaking bones, smashing hands and arms until Mighty's coat was flecked with blood.

Flashes of light suddenly launched from the opposite end of the Heights toward the Andorans defending below. Arganda barely noted it, consumed by the fighting as he was, but something inside of him whimpered. Demandred must have resumed his attack.

“I have defeated your brother, Lews Therin!” The voice boomed across the battlefield, loud as a crack of thunder. “He dies now, bleeding away his mortality!”

Arganda danced Mighty back, turning as a hulking Trolloc with an almost-human face shoved away the wounded Sharan beside it and bellowed. Blood streamed from a cut on its shoulder, but it didn't seem to notice. It twisted, heaving a short-chained flail with a head like a log covered in spikes.

The flail crashed to the ground right beside Mighty, spooking the horse. As Arganda fought for control, the immense Trolloc stepped forward and *punched* with its offhand, slamming a ham fist into the side of Mighty's head, knocking the horse to the ground.

“Have you any care for the flesh of this birth?” Demandred thundered in the distance. “Share you any love for the one who named you brother, this man in white?”

Mighty's head had cracked like an egg. The horse's legs spasmed and jerked. Arganda hauled himself to his feet. He didn't remember leaping free as the horse fell, but his instincts had preserved him. Unfortunately, his roll had taken him away from his guards, who fought for their lives against a group of Sharans.

His men were advancing, and the Sharans were getting slowly pushed back. He didn't have time to look, though. That Trolloc was on him.

Arganda hefted his mace and looked up at the towering beast before him, whipping its flail over its head as it stepped over the dying horse.

Never had Arganda felt so small.

"Coward!" Demandred roared. "You name yourself savior of this land? I claim that title! Face me! Do I need to kill this kin of yours to draw you out?"

Arganda took a deep breath, then leaped forward. He figured that was the last thing the Trolloc would anticipate. Indeed, the beast's swing went wide. Arganda scored a solid crack at its side, his mace hitting the Trollocs pelvis, crushing bone.

Then the thing backhanded him. Arganda saw white, and the sounds of battle faded. Screaming, pounding of feet, yelling. Screams and yells. Yells and screams… Nothing.

Sometime later—he didn't know how long—he felt himself being lifted up. The Trolloc? He blinked, intent on at least spitting in the face of his killer, only to find himself being hauled into the saddle behind al'Lan Mandragoran.

"I'm alive?" Arganda said. A wave of pain across his left side informed him that yes, indeed, he was.

"You felled a big one, Ghealdanin," Lan said, spurring his horse to a gallop toward their rear lines. The other Borderlanders were riding with them, Arganda saw. "The Trolloc hit you in its death throes. I thought you were dead, but I could not come for you until we had pushed them back. We would have been hard pressed if that other army hadn't surprised the Sharans."

"Other army?" said Arganda, rubbing his arm.

"Cauthon had an army lying in wait on the northern side of the Heights. By the looks of it, Dragonsworn and a banner of cavalry, probably part of the Band. About the time you were tussling with that Trolloc, they fell on the Sharan's left flank, breaking them all apart. It's going to take them a while to regroup."

"Light," Arganda said, then groaned. He could tell his left arm was broken. Well, he lived. Good enough for now. He looked toward the front lines where his soldiers still held their ranks. Queen Alliandre rode in their midst, back and forth through the ranks, encouraging them. Light. He wished she'd been willing to serve at the hospital in Mayene.

There was peace here at the moment—the Sharans had been hit hard enough that they had pulled back, leaving a section of ground open between the opposing armies. They probably hadn't been expecting such a sudden and strong attack.

But wait. Shadows approached from Arganda's right, oversized figures walking from the darkness. More Trollocs? He set his jaw against the pain. He'd dropped his mace, but he still had his boot knife. He'd not go down without… Without…

Ogier, he realized, blinking. *Those aren't Trollocs. They're Ogier.* Trollocs wouldn't carry torches as these beings did.

"Glory to the Builders!" Lan called up to them. "So you were part of the army Cauthon sent to attack the Sharans' flank. Where is he? I would have words with him!"

One of the Ogier let out a rumbling laugh. "You are not the only one, Dai Shan! Cauthon moves about like a squirrel hunting nuts in the underbrush. One moment here, another moment gone. I am to tell you that we must hold back this Sharan advance, at all cost."

More light flashed from the distant side of the Heights. The Aes Sedai and Sharans fought there. Cauthon *was* trying to box the Shadow's forces in. Arganda shoved aside his pain, trying to think.

What of Demandred? Arganda could now see another swath of destruction launched from the Forsaken. It burned through defenders across the river. The pike formations had begun to shatter, each burst of light killing hundreds.

"Sharan channelers in the distance on one side," Arganda mumbled, "and one of the Forsaken on the other! Light! I didn't realize how many Trollocs there were. They're endless.'' He could see them now, confronting Elayne's troops; blasts of the One Power showed thousands of them in the distance below. "We're finished, aren't we?"

Lan's face reflected torchlight. Eyes like slate, a face of granite. He did not correct Arganda.

"What will we do?" Arganda said. "To win… Light, to win we'd need to break these Sharans, rescue the pikemen—they will soon be surrounded by the Trollocs—and each man of ours would need to kill at least five of those beasts! That's not even counting Demandred."

No reply from Lan.

“We’re doomed,” Arganda said.

“If so,” Lan said, “we stand atop the high ground, and we fight until we die, Ghealdanin. You surrender when you’re dead. Many a man has been given less.”

The threads of possibility *resisted* Rand as he wove them together into the world he imagined. He did not know what that meant. Perhaps what he demanded was highly unlikely. This thing he did, using threads to show what could be, was more than simple illusion. It involved looking to worlds that had been before, worlds that could be again. Mirrors of the reality he lived in.

He didn’t create these worlds. He merely… manifested them. He forced the threads to open the reality he demanded, and finally they obeyed. One last time, the darkness became light, and the nothing became *something.*

He stepped into a world that did not know the Dark One.

He chose Caemlyn as a point of entry. Perhaps because the Dark One had used the place in his last creation, and Rand wanted to prove to himself that the terrible vision was not inevitable. He needed to see the city again, but untainted.

He walked on the road before the palace, taking a deep breath. The butterchain trees were in bloom, the bright yellow blossoms spilling out of the gardens and hanging over the courtyard walls. Children played in them, throwing the petals into the air.

Not a cloud marred the brilliant sky. Rand looked up, raising his arms, and stepped out from beneath the blossoming branches into the deep warming sunlight. No guards stood at the way into the palace, only a kindly servant who answered questions for some visitors.

Rand strode forward, feet leaving tracks in golden petals as he approached the entrance. A child came toward him, and Rand stopped, smiling at her.

She stepped up, reaching to touch the sword at Rand’s waist. The child seemed confused. “What is it?” she asked, looking up with wide eyes.

“A relic,” Rand whispered.

Laughter from the other children turned the girl’s head, and she left him, giggling as one of the children threw an armful of petals into the air.

Rand walked on.

IS THIS PERFECTION FOR YOU? The Dark One's voice felt distant. He could pierce this reality to speak to Rand, but he could not appear here as he had in the other visions. This place was his antithesis.

For this was the world that would exist if Rand killed him in the Last Battle.

“Come and see,” Rand said to him, smiling.

No reply. If the Dark One allowed himself to be drawn too fully into this reality, he would cease to exist. In this place, he had died.

All things turned and came again. That was the meaning of the Wheel of Time. What was the point of winning a single battle against the Dark One, only to know that he would return? Rand could do more. He could do *this.*

“I would like to see the Queen,” Rand asked of the servant at the Palace doors. “Is she in?”

“You should find her in the gardens, young man,” the guide said. He looked at Rand’s sword, but out of curiosity, not worry. In this world, men could not conceive that one would want to hurt another. It didn’t happen.

“Thank you,” Rand said, walking into the Palace. The hallways were familiar, yet different. Caemlyn had nearly been razed during the Last Battle, the Palace burned. The reconstruction resembled what had been there before, but not completely.

Rand strolled the hallways. Something worried him, a discomfort from the back of his mind. What was it…

Do not be caught here, he realized. *Do not be complacent.* This world was not real, not completely. Not yet.

Could this have been a plan of the Dark One? To trick Rand into creating paradise for himself, only to enter it and be trapped while the Last Battle raged? People were dying as they fought.

He had to remember that. He could not let this fancy consume him. That was difficult to remember as he entered the gallery—a long hallway, lined with what appeared to be windows. Only, those windows did not look out at Caemlyn. These new glass portals allowed one to see other places, like a gateway always in place.

Rand passed one that looked out into a submerged bay, colorful fish darting this way and that. Another gave a view of a peaceful meadow high in the Mountains of Mist. Red flowers pushed up through the green, like specks of paint scattered on the floor following a painter’s daily work.

On the other wall, the windows looked at the great cities of the world. Rand passed Tear, where the Stone was now a museum to the days of the Third Age, with the Defenders as its curators. None of this generation had ever carried a weapon, and were baffled by the stories of their grandparents having fought. Another showed the Seven Towers of Malkier, built strong again—but as a monument, not a fortification. The Blight had vanished upon the Dark One's death, and the Shadowspawn had fallen dead immediately. As if the Dark One had been linked to them all, like a Fade leading a fist of Trollocs.

Doors did not bear locks. Coinage was a nearly forgotten eccentricity. Channelers helped create food for everyone. Rand passed a window to Tar Valon, where the Aes Sedai Healed any who came and created gateways to bring loved ones together. All had everything they needed.

He hesitated beside the next window. It looked out at Rhuidean. Had this city ever been in a desert? The Waste bloomed, from Shara to Cairhien.

And here, through the window, Rand saw the Chora Fields—a forest of them, surrounding the fabled city. Though he could not hear their words, he saw the Aiel singing.

No more weapons. No more spears to dance. Once again, the Aiel were a people of peace.

He continued on. Bandar Eban, Ebou Dar, the Seanchan lands, Shara. Each nation was represented, though these days, people didn't pay much heed to borders. Another relic. Who cared who lived in what nation, and why would someone try to "own" land? There was enough for all. The blooming of the Waste had opened up room for new cities, new wonders. Many of the windows Rand passed looked at places he did not know, though he was pleased to see the Two Rivers looking so majestic, almost like Manetheren come again.

The last window gave him pause. It looked upon a valley in what had once been the Blasted Lands. A stone slab, where a body had been burned long ago, rested here alone. Overgrown with life: vines, grass, flowers. A furry spider the size of a child's hand scurried across the stones.

Rand's grave. The place where his body had been burned following the Last Battle. He lingered a long while at that window before finally forcing himself to move on, leaving the Gallery and making his way to the Palace gardens. Servants were helpful whenever he spoke to them. Nobody questioned why he wanted to see the Queen.

He assumed that when he found her, she would be surrounded by people. If anyone could see the Queen, wouldn't that demand all of her time? Yet when he approached her sitting in the Palace gardens beneath the boughs of the Palace's chora tree, she was alone.

This was a world without problems. A world where people worked out their own grievances easily. A world of giving, not dispute. What would someone need of the Queen?

Elayne was as beautiful as she'd been when they'd last parted. She was no longer pregnant, of course. A hundred years had passed since the Last Battle. She appeared to have not aged a day.

Rand approached her, glancing at the garden wall that he had once fallen over, tumbling down to meet her for the first time. These gardens were far different, but that wall remained. It had weathered the scouring of Caemlyn and the coming of a new Age.

Elayne looked at him from her bench. Her eyes widened immediately, and her hand went to her mouth. "Rand?"

He fixed his gaze on her, hand resting on the pommel of Laman's sword. A formal posture. Why had he taken it?

Elayne smiled. "Is this a prank? Daughter, where are you? Have you used the Mask of Mirrors to trick me again?"

"It is no trick, Elayne," Rand said, sinking down onto one knee before her so that their heads were level. He looked into her eyes.

Something was wrong.

"Oh! But how can it be?" she asked.

That wasn't Elayne… was it? The tone seemed off, the mannerisms wrong. Could she have changed so much? It *had* been a hundred years. "Elayne?" Rand asked. "What has happened to you?"

"Happened? Why, nothing! The day is grand, wonderful. Beautiful and peaceful. How I like to sit in my gardens and enjoy the sunlight."

Rand frowned. That simpering tone, that vapid reaction… Elayne had never been like that.

"We shall have to prepare a feast!" Elayne exclaimed, clapping her hands. "I will invite Aviendha! It is her week off from singing, though she is probably doing nursery duty. She usually volunteers there."

"Nursery duty?"

"In Rhuidean," Elayne said. "Everyone so likes to play with the children, both here and there. There is grand competition to care for the children! But we understand the need to take turns.”

Aviendha. Tending children and singing to chora trees. There was nothing wrong with that, really. Why shouldn’t she enjoy such activities?

But it was wrong, too. He thought Aviendha would be a wonderful mother, but to imagine her seeking to spend all day playing with other people’s children…

Rand looked into Elayne’s eyes, looked into them deeply. A shadow lurked back there, behind them. Oh, it was an innocent shadow, but a shadow nonetheless. It was like… like that…

Like that shadow behind the eyes of someone who had been Turned to the Dark One.

Rand jumped to his feet and stumbled backward. “What have you done here?” he shouted into the sky. “Shai’tan! Answer me!”

Elayne cocked her head. She wasn’t afraid. Fear did not exist in this place. “Shai’tan? I swear I remember that name. It has been so long. I get forgetful sometimes.”

“SHAITAN!” Rand bellowed.

I HAVE DONE NOTHING, ADVERSARY. The voice was distant. THIS IS YOUR CREATION.

“Nonsense!” Rand said. “You’ve changed her! You’ve changed them all!”

DID YOU THINK THAT REMOVING ME FROM THEIR LIVES WOULD LEAVE THEM UNALTERED?

The words thundered through Rand. Aghast, he stepped away as Elayne rose, obviously concerned for him. Yes, he saw it now, the thing behind her eyes. She was not herself… because Rand had taken from her the ability to *be* herself.

I TURN MEN TO ME, Shaitan said. IT IS TRUE. THEY CANNOT CHOOSE GOOD ONCE I HAVE MADE THEM MINE IN THAT WAY. HOW IS THIS ANY DIFFERENT, ADVERSARY?

IF YOU DO THIS, WE ARE ONE.

“No!” Rand screamed, holding his head in his hand, falling to his knees. “No! The world would be perfect without you!”

PERFECT. UNCHANGING. RUINED. DO THIS, IF YOU WISH, ADVERSARY. IN KILLING ME, I WOULD WIN.

NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, I WILL WIN.

Rand screamed, curling up as the Dark One's next attack washed over him. The nightmare Rand had created exploded outward, ribbons of light spraying away like streaks of smoke.

The darkness around him shook and trembled.

YOU CANNOT SAVE THEM.

The Pattern—glowing, vibrant—wrapped around Rand again. The real Pattern. The truth of what was happening. In creating his vision of a world without the Dark One, he had created something horrible. Something awful. Something worse than would have been before.

The Dark One attacked again.

Mat pulled back from the fighting, resting his *ashandarei* on his shoulder. Karede had demanded the chance to fight—the more hopeless the situation, the better. Well, the man should be bloody well pleased with this. He should be dancing and laughing! He had his wish. Light, but he did.

Mat sat down on a dead Trolloc, the only seat available, and drank deeply from his waterskin. He had the pulse of the battle, its rhythm. The beat it played was forlorn. Demandred was clever. He had not gone for Mat's bait at the ford, where he had positioned a smaller army. Demandred had sent Trollocs there, but held back his Sharans. Had Demandred abandoned the Heights to attack Elayne's army, Mat would have swept his own armies across the top of the Heights from the west and the northeast to smash the Shadow from behind. Now Demandred was trying to get his troops behind Elayne's forces, and Mat had stopped him for the time being. But how long could he hold?

The Aes Sedai were not doing well. The Sharan channelers were winning that fight. *Luck,* Mat thought. *We'll need more than a little of you today. Don't abandon me now.*

That would be a fitting end for Matrim Cauthon. The Pattern did like to laugh at him. He suddenly saw its grand prank, offering him luck when it meant nothing, then seizing it all away when it really mattered.

Blood and bloody ashes, he thought, putting away the empty waterskin, seeing only by a torch that Karede carried. Mat could not feel his luck at the moment. That happened sometimes. He did not know if it was with him or not.

Well, if they could not have a lucky Matrim Cauthon, they would at least have a stubborn Matrim Cauthon. He did not intend to die this day. There was still dancing to be done; there were still songs to be sung and women to be kissed. One woman, at least.

He stood and rejoined the Deathwatch Guards, the Ogier, Tam’s army, the Band, the Borderlanders—everyone he had put up here. The battle had resumed, and they fought hard, even pushing the Sharans back a couple of hundred paces. But Demandred had seen what he was doing, and had started sending Trollocs at the river up the slope to join the fray. It was the steep one—hardest to climb—but Demandred would know he had to pressure Mat.

Those Trollocs were a real danger. There were enough of them at the river to potentially surround Elayne *and* fight their way up to the Heights. If any one of Mat’s armies broke, he was done for.

Well, Mat h?d thrown his dice and sent out his orders. There was nothing more to do Dut fight, bleed and hope.

A spray of light, like liquid fire, flared from the western side of the Heights. Burning drops of molten stone fell through the dark air. At first, Mat thought that Demandred had decided to attack from that direction, but the Forsaken was still intent on destroying the Andorans.

Another flash of light. That was where the Aes Sedai fought. Through the darkness and smoke, Mat was certain he saw Sharans fleeing across the Heights from west to east. Mat found himself smiling.

“Look,” he said, slapping Karede on the shoulder and drawing the man’s attention.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Mat said. “But it’s setting Sharans on fire, so I’m mostly certain that I like it. Keep fighting!” He led Karede and the others in another charge against Sharan soldiers.

Olver walked hunched under the bundle of arrows tied to his back. They had to have real weight; he’d insisted. What would happen if one of the Shadow’s people inspected the goods, and found that his pack had light cloth stuffed in the middle?

Setalle and Faile didn't need to keep looking at him as if he’d break any moment. The bundle wasn’t *that* heavy. Of course, that wouldn’t stop him from squeezing some sympathy from Setalle once they were back. He needed to practice doing things like that, or he'd end up as hopeless as Mat.

Their line continued forward toward the supply dump here in the Blasted Lands, and as it did, he admitted to himself that he wouldn't have minded a pack that was a *little* lighter. Not because he was growing tired. How was he going to fight if he needed to? He'd have to drop the pack quickly, and this didn't seem the type of pack that let one do *anything* quickly.

Gray dust coated his feet. No shoes, and his clothing now wouldn't make good rags. Earlier, Faile and the Band had attacked one of the pitiful caravans trailing toward the Shadow's supply depot. It hadn't been much of a fight—only three Darkfriends and one oily merchant guarding a string of worn-out, half-fed captives.

Many of their supplies bore the mark of Kandor, a red horse. In fact, many of those captives had been Kandori. Faile had offered them freedom, sending them southward, but only half had gone. The rest had insisted on joining her and marching for the Last Battle, though Olver had seen beggars on the streets with more meat on them than those fellows. Still, they helped Faile's line look authentic.

That was important. Olver glanced up as they approached the supply dump, the path lined with torches in the cold night. Several of those red-veiled Aiel stood to the side, watching the line pass. Olver looked down again, lest they see his hatred. He'd known that Aiel couldn't be trusted.

A couple of guards—not Aiel, but more of those Darkfriends—called out for the line to stop. Aravine walked forward, wearing the clothing of the merchant they'd killed. Faile was obviously Saldaean, and it had been decided that she might be too distinctive to play the part of the merchant Darkfriend.

"Where are your guards?" the soldier asked. "This is Lifa's run, isn't it? What happened?"

"Those fools!" Aravine said, then spat to the side. Olver hid a smile. Her entire countenance changed. She knew how to play a part. "They're dead where I left them! I told them not to wander at night. I don't know what took the three, but we found them at the edge of camp, bloated, their skin black." She looked sick. "I think something laid eggs in their hollowed-out stomachs. We didn't want to find what hatched."

The soldier grunted. "You are?"

"Pansai," Aravine said. "Lifa's business partner."

“Since when has Lifa had a business partner?”

“Since I stabbed her and took over her run.”

What information they had on Lifa had come from the rescued captives. It was thin. Olver felt himself sweating. The guard gave Aravine a long look, then began walking down the line of people.

Faile’s soldiers were mixed among the Kandori captives. They tried their best to hold the right posture.

“You, woman,” the guard said, pointing at Faile. “A Saldaean, eh?” He laughed. “I thought a Saldaean woman would kill a man before letting him take her captive.” He shoved Faile on the shoulder.

Olver held his breath. Oh, blood and bloody ashes! Lady Faile wasn’t going to be able to take that. The guard was looking to see if the captives were really beaten down or not! Faile’s posture, her manner, would give her away. She was noble, and—

Faile slumped down, becoming small, and whimpered a reply that Olver could not hear.

Olver found himself gaping, then forced his mouth shut and looked down at the ground. How? How had a lady like Faile learned to act like a servant?

The guard grunted. “Go on,” he said, waving to Aravine. “Wait there until we send for you.”

The group shuffled to a patch of ground nearby where Aravine ordered everyone to sit down. She stood to the side, arms folded, tapping one toe as she waited. Thunder rumbled, and Olver felt an odd chill. He looked up, and into the eyeless face of a Myrddraal.

A shock ran through Olver, like he’d been dropped into an icy lake. He couldn’t breathe. The Myrddraal seemed to glide as it moved, its cloak motionless and dead, as it rounded the group. After a horrible moment, it moved on, back toward the supply camp.

“Searching for channelers,” Faile whispered to Mandevwin.

“Light help us,” the man whispered back.

The wait was nearly insufferable. Eventually, a plump woman in white clothing strode up and wove a gateway. Aravine barked for them all to climb to their feet, then waved them through. Olver joined the line, walking near Faile, and they passed from the land of red soil and cold air to a place that smelled like it was on fire.

They entered a ramshackle camp filled with Trollocs. Several large cookpots boiled nearby. Just behind the camp, a slope led up sharply to some kind of large plateau. Streams of smoke rose from the top of it, and from there and somewhere to Olver's left could be heard the sounds of combat. Turning away from the slope, the boy saw the darkened outline of a tall, narrow mountain far in the distance, rising from the flat plain like a candle in the middle of a table.

He looked back up the slope behind the camp, and his heart leaped. A body was plummeting down from the top of the slope, still clutching in its hand a banner—a banner that bore a large red hand. The Band of the Red Hand! The man and banner fell among a group of Trollocs eating sizzling pieces of meat around a fire. Sparks flew in all directions, and the enraged beasts yanked the intruder out of the flames, but he was long past caring what they did to him.

"Faile!" he whispered.

"I see it." Her bundle concealed the sack with the Horn in it. She added, more to herself, "Light. How are we going to reach Mat?"

They moved off to the side as the rest of her group came through the gateway. They had swords, but carried them bundled up like arrows, in packs, atop the backs of a few of the men as if they were tied-up supplies for the battlefield.

"Blood and ashes," Mandevwin whispered, joining the two of them. Captives whimpered from a pen nearby. "Maybe they'll put us in there? We could sneak out in the night."

Faile shook her head. "They'll take our bundles. Leave us unarmed.

"Then what do we do?" Mandevwin asked, glancing to the side as a group of Trollocs passed, dragging corpses harvested from the front lines. "Start fighting? Hope Lord Mat sees us, and sends help?"

Olver didn't think much of that plan. He wanted to fight, but those Trollocs were *big.* One passed nearby, and its wolf-featured head swung his way. Eyes that could have belonged to a man looked him up and down, as if hungry. Olver stepped back, then reached toward his bundle, where he'd hidden his knife.

"We'll run," Faile whispered, once the Trolloc passed. "Scatter in a dozen different directions, and in doing so, try to disorient them. Maybe a few of us will escape." She frowned. "What is delaying Aravine?"

Almost as she said it, Aravine strode through the gateway. The woman in white who had channeled followed her out, and then Aravine pointed at Faile.

Faile jerked into the air. Olver gasped, and Mandevwin cursed, throwing down his bundle and digging for his sword while Arrela and Selande shouted. All three were hauled into the air by weaves moment later, and Aiel in red veils ran through the gateway, weapons out.

Pandemonium followed. A few of Faile's soldiers fell as they tried to fight back with their fists. Olver dove for the ground, hunting for his knife, but by the time he had his hand on its hilt, the skirmish was over. The others were all subdued or tied in air.

So fast! Olver thought with despair. Why hadn't anyone warned him that fighting happened so quickly?

They seemed to have forgotten him, but he didn't know what to do.

Aravine walked up to Faile, still hanging in the air. What was happening? Aravine… *she* had betrayed them?

"I am sorry, my Lady,'' Aravine said to Faile. Olver could barely hear. Nobody paid any attention to him; the Aiel kept watch on the soldiers, shoving them into a group to be guarded. More than a few of their number lay bleeding on the ground.

Faile struggled in the air, her face growing red as she strained. Her mouth was obviously gagged. Faile would never remain quiet at a time like this.

Aravine untied the Horn's bag from Faile's back, then checked inside it. Her eyes widened. She pulled the sack tight at the top and held it close. "I had hoped," she whispered to Faile, "to leave my old life behind. To start fresh and new. I thought I could hide, or that I would be forgotten, that I could come back to the Light. But the Great Lord does not forget, and one cannot hide from him. They found me the very night we reached Andor. This is not what I intended, but it is what I must do."

Aravine turned away. "A horse!" she called. "I will deliver this package to Lord Demandred myself, as I have been commanded."

The woman in white walked up beside her, and the two started arguing in hushed tones. Olver glanced about. Nobody was looking at him.

His fingers started trembling. He'd known that Trollocs were big, and that they were ugly. But… these things were *nightmares*. Nightmares all around. Oh, Light!

What would Mat do?

"*Dovie'andi se tovya sagain*," Olver whispered, unsheathing his knife. With a cry, he threw himself at the woman in white and rammed his knife into her lower back.

She screamed. Faile dropped free of her bonds of Air. And then, suddenly, the captive pens burst open and a group of yelling men scrambled to freedom.

“Raise it higher!” Doesine cried. “Flaming quickly!”

Leane obeyed, weaving Earth with the other sisters. The ground trembled in front of them, buckling and slumping like a bunched-up rug. They finished, then used the mound for cover as fire dropped from upslope.

Doesine led the motley bunch. A dozen or so Aes Sedai, a smattering of Warders and soldiers. The men clutched their weapons, but lately those had proven about as effective as loaves of bread. The Power crackled and sizzled in the air. The improvised bulwark thumped as Sharans pounded it with fire.

Leane peeked above the defences, clutching the One Power. She had recovered from her encounter with the Forsaken Demandred. It had been an unsettling experience—she had been totally in his power, and her life could have been snuffed out in an instant. She had also been unnerved by the intensity of his ravings; his hatred of the Dragon Reborn was unlike anything she had ever seen.

A group of Sharans moved down the slope, and together they sent weaves at the makeshift fortification. Leane sliced one weave from the air, working like a surgeon cutting away withered flesh. Leane was much weaker in the One Power now than she had once been.

She had to be more efficient with her channeling. It was remarkable what a woman could achieve with less.

The bulwark exploded.

Leane threw herself aside as clods of soil rained down. She rolled through curling smoke, coughing and clinging to *saidar.* It was those Sharan men! She couldn’t see their weaves. She picked herself up, her dress tattered from the explosion, her arms scored by scratches. She caught a hint of blue peeking from a furrow nearby. Doesine. She scrambled over.

She found the woman’s body there. Not her head, though.

Leane felt an immediate, almost overpowering, sense of loss and grief. Doesine and she had not been close, but they had been fighting together here. It was wearing on Leane—the loss, the destruction. How much could they take? How many more would she have to watch die?

She steeled herself with difficulty. Light, this was a disaster. They had anticipated enemy Dreadlords, but there were hundreds upon hundreds of those Sharans. An entire nation's worth of channelers, all trained in war. The battlefield was strewn with bright bits of color, fallen Aes Sedai. Their Warders charged up the hillside, screaming in rage at the loss of their Aes Sedai as they were cut down by blasts of the Power.

Leane stumbled toward where a group of Reds and Greens fought from a hollowed out piece of ground on the western slope. The terrain protected them for now, but how long could the women hold out?

Still, she felt proud. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, the Aes Sedai kept fighting. This was nothing like the night the Seanchan attacked, when a fractured Tower had broken from the inside out. These women held firm; each time a pocket of them was scattered, they grouped back together and continued fighting. Fire fell from above, but nearly as much flew back, and lightning struck on either side.

Leane carefully made her way over to the group, joining Raechin Connoral, who crouched next to a boulder while launching weaves of Fire at the advancing Sharans. Leane watched for return weaves, then deflected one with a quick weave of Water, making the ball of fire burn away in tiny sparks.

Raechin nodded to her. "And here I thought you'd stopped being useful for anything other than batting your eyes at men."

"The Domani art is about achieving what you want, Raechin," Leane said coolly, "with as little effort as possible."

Raechin snorted and launched a few fireballs toward the Sharans. "I should ask advice from you on that sometime," she said. "If there really *is* a way to make men do as you like, I should like very much to know it."

That idea was so absurd as to nearly make Leane laugh, despite the terrible circumstances. A Red? Putting on paints and powders and learning the Domani arts of manipulation? *Well, why not?* Leane thought, striking down another fireball. The world was changing, and the Ajahs—ever so subtly—changing with it.

The sisters' resistance was attracting the attention of more Sharan channelers. "We'll have to abandon this position soon," Raechin said.

Leane only nodded.

"Those Sharans . . " the Red growled. "Look at that!"

Leane gasped. Many of the Sharan troops in this quarter had withdrawn earlier in the fight—something seemed to have drawn them away— but the channelers had replaced them with a large group of frightened-looking people and were herding them at the front of their line to absorb attacks. Many carried sticks or tools of some sort for fighting, but they bunched together, holding the weapons timidly.

"Blood and bloody ashes," Raechin said, causing Leane to raise an eyebrow at her. She continued weaving, trying to send lightning down behind the lines of the frightened people. It still hit many of them. Leane felt sick, but joined in the attacks.

As they worked, Manda Wan crawled up to them. Soot-stained and blackened, the Green looked horrible. *Probably much as I do,* Leane thought, glancing down at her own scratched and sooty arms.

"We're pulling back," Manda said. "Maybe we'll have to use gateways.

"And go where?" Leane said. "Abandon the battle?"

The three grew silent. No. There was no retreat from this fight. It was win here or nothing.

"We are too fragmented," Manda said. "We must at least fall back to regroup. We need to bring the women together, and this is the only thing I can think of. Unless you have a better idea."

Manda looked to Raechin. Leane was too weak in the power now for her opinion to hold much weight. She started cutting down weaves as the two continued to speak in hushed tones. The Aes Sedai nearby began pulling back out of the hollow and moving back down the slope. They'd regroup, make a gateway toward Dashar Knob and decide what to do next.

Wait. What was *that?* Leane sensed powerful channeling nearby. Had the Sharans created a circle? She squinted; they were well into night now, but enough of the landscape burned to give firelight. It also raised a lot of smoke. Leane wove Air to blow the smoke out of the way, but it lifted on its own, split as if by a powerful wind.

Egwene al'Vere strode past them up the slope, glowing with the power of a hundred bonfires. That was more than Leane had ever seen a woman hold. The Amyrlin walked forward with her hand thrust out, holding a white rod. Egwene's eyes seemed to shine.

With a burst of light and force, Egwene released a dozen separate flows of fire. A *dozen.* They battered the hillside above, throwing the bodies of Sharan channelers into the air.

“Manda,” Leane said, “I think we have found you a better rallying point.”

Talmanes lit a twig off the lantern, then used it to light his pipe. He took one puff before hacking and emptying the pipe’s bowl on the rock floor. The tabac had gone bad somehow. Horribly bad. He coughed and ground the offending tabac into the floor with his heel.

“You all right, my Lord?” Melten asked, walking past, idly juggling a pair of hammers with his right hand as he walked.

“I’m still bloody alive,” Talmanes said. “Which is far more than I likely have a right to expect.”

Melten nodded without expression and continued on, joining one of the teams working on the dragons. The deep cavern around them echoed with the sounds of hammers on wood as the Band did its best to reconstruct the weapons. Talmanes tapped the lantern, judging the oil. It smelled awful when it burned, though he was growing used to that. They had enough for a few more hours yet.

That was good, since—so far as he knew—this cavern had no exits to the battleground above. It was accessible only by gateway. Some Ashaman had known of it. Strange fellow. What kind of man knew of caverns that could not be reached, except through the One Power?

Anyway, the Band was trapped down here, in a place of safety but isolation. Only rare bits of information came in Mats messages.

Talmanes strained, thinking he could hear the distant sounds of channelers fighting above, but it was mere fancy. The land was silent, and these ancient stones had not seen the light since the Breaking, if then.

Talmanes shook his head, walking to one of the working teams. “How goes it?”

Dennel gestured toward a few sheets of paper Aludra had given him, instructions on how to repair this particular dragon. The woman herself gave precise directions to another of the work teams, her lightly accented voice echoing in the chamber.

“Most of the tubes are solid,” Dennel said. “If you think about it, they were built to withstand a little fire and an explosion now and then…” He chuckled, then fell silent, looking at Talmanes.

“Do not let my expression dampen your good humor,” Talmanes said, tucking his pipe away. “Nor let it bother you that we are fighting at the end of the world, that our armies are grossly outnumbered, and that if we lose, our very souls will be destroyed by the Dark Lord of all evil."

"Sorry, my Lord."

"That was a joke."

Dennel blinked. "That?"

"Yes"

"That was a joke."

"Yes."

"You have an interesting sense of humor, my Lord," Dennel said.

"So I have been told." Talmanes stooped down and inspected the dragon cart. The scorched wood was held together with screws and extra boards. "This does not seem very functional."

"It will work, my Lord. We won't be able to move it fast, though. I was saying, the tubes themselves fared well, but the carts… Well, we've done what we can with salvage and the supplies out of Baerlon, but we can only do so much with the time we have."

"Which is none," Talmanes said. "Lord Mat could call upon us at any moment."

"If they're still alive up there," Dennel said, looking upward.

A discomforting thought. The Band could end its days trapped down here. At least there wouldn't be many of those days. Either the world would end or the Band would run out of food. They wouldn't last a week. Buried here. In darkness.

Bloody ashes, Mat. You'd better not lose up there. You'd better not! The Band still had fight in them. They were not going to end this one starving underground.

Talmanes held up his lantern, turning to go, but noticed something. The soldiers working on the dragons cast a twisted shadow on the wall, like a man with a wide cloak and hat that obscured his face.

Dennel followed the glance. "Light. It looks like we're being watched over by old Jak himself, doesn't it?"

"That it does," Talmanes said. Then, in a louder voice, he shouted, "It's too quiet in here by far! Let's have some singing, men."

Some of the men paused. Aludra stood up, placing hands on her hips, and gave him a displeased glance.

So Talmanes started it himself.

“We’ll drink the wine till the cup is dry,
And kiss the girls so they’ll not cry,
And toss the dice until we fly,
To dance with Jak o’ the Shadows!”

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Silence.

Then they started it up:

“We’ll give a yell with a bloody curse,
And hug the maids, it could be worse,
As we ride away with the Dark One’s purse,
To dance with Jak o’ the Shadows!”

Their loud voices beat against the stones as they worked, furiously preparing for the part they would play.

And they *would* play it. Talmanes would make certain they did. Even if they had to blast their way out of this tomb in a storm of dragonfire.

As Olver stabbed the woman in white, Faile’s bonds vanished. She dropped to the ground, stumbling but remaining upright. Mandevwin dropped beside her with a curse.

Aravine. Light, *Aravine*. Docile, careful and capable. Aravine was a Darkfriend.

She had the Horn.

Aravine glanced at the fallen Aes Sedai that Olver had attacked, then panicked, grabbing the horse a servant had brought and jumping into the saddle.

Faile dashed for her as captives roared out of the nearby pens, throwing themselves at Trollocs and trying to wrestle weapons free. She had almost reached Aravine before the woman galloped away, carrying the Horn with her. She headed toward the gentler slopes that would allow her to ride to the top of the Heights.

“No!” Faile screamed. “Aravine! Don’t do this!” Faile started to run after her, but saw that that was no use.

A horse. She needed a horse. Faile looked around, frantic, and found the few pack animals they had brought through the gateway. Faile scrambled to Bela’s side, cutting free the saddle—and all of its burdens—with a few swipes of the knife. She leaped up onto the mare bareback and took the reins, then kicked her into motion.

The shaggy mare galloped after Aravine, and Faile leaned low on her back. “Run, Bela,” Faile said. “If you’ve kept any strength back, now is the time to use it. Please. Run, girl. *Run.*”

Bela charged across the trampled ground, hoofbeats accompanying thunder from above. The Trolloc camp was a place of darkness, lit by cook fires and the occasional torch. Faile felt as if she were riding through a nightmare.

Ahead, a few Trollocs burst onto the path to head her off. Faile leaned lower, praying to the Light that they’d miss when they attacked. Bela slowed, and then two horsemen charged up alongside Faile, bearing lances. One pierced a Trollocs neck, and though the other rider missed his mark, his horse shouldered another Trolloc aside, making way. Bela galloped between the disoriented Trollocs, catching up to two men riding ahead, one large of girth, the other lean. Harnan and Vanin.

“You two!” Faile yelled.

“Ho, my Lady!” Harnan said, laughing.

“How?” she yelled at them over the sound of the hooves.

“We let a caravan find us,” Harnan yelled back, “and let them take us captive. They brought us through the gateway a few hours back, and we’ve been preparing the captives to break free. Your arrival gave us the opportunity we needed!”

“The Horn! You tried to steal the Horn!”

“No,” Harnan yelled back, “we tried to steal some of Mats tabac!”

“I thought you had buried it to leave it behind!” Vanin yelled from the other side. “I figured Mat wouldn’t care. He owes me a few marks anyway! When I opened that sack and found the bloody Horn of Valere… bloody ashes! I’ll bet they heard my yell all the way in Tar Valon!”

Faile groaned, imagining the scene. The yell that Faile had heard was a yell of surprise, and *it* was what had drawn the bear-thing to attack.

Well, there was no going back to that moment. She clung to Bela with her knees, urging the horse forward. Ahead, Aravine galloped between Trollocs, heading toward where the steep slopes tapered off. Aravine yelled frantically for Trollocs to help her. The racing horses traveled faster than any Trollocs could, however.

Demandred. Aravine had said she would take the Horn to one of the Forsaken. Faile growled softly, leaning down further, and amazingly, Bela pulled ahead of Vanin and Harnan. She didn’t ask where they’d found the horses. She directed her entire attention toward Aravine.

A cry went up through camp, and Vanin and Harnan split off, intercepting riders who came for Faile. She cut to the side, urging Bela to leap a pile of supplies and charging through the center of a group of people in strange clothing, eating beside a small fire. They yelled after her with thick accents.

Inch by inch, she gained on Aravine. Bela snorted and puffed, sweat darkening her coat. The Saldaean cavalry was among the best in the land, and Faile knew horses. She'd ridden all breeds. In those minutes on the battlefield, she would have put Bela up against the Tairen best. The shaggy mare, of no particular breed of note, moved like a champion runner.

Feeling the rhythm of the hoofbeats beneath her, Faile slipped a knife from her sleeve. She urged Bela to jump over a small dip in the land, and they hung in the air for a moment, Faile judging the wind, the fall, the moment. She reached her arm back, and flipped the knife through the air right before Bela's hooves touched the ground.

The knife flew true, burying itself in Aravine's back. The woman slipped from the saddle, crumpling to the ground, sack sliding from her grip-

Faile leaped off Bela, landing while still in motion and sliding to a stop beside the sack. She untied the strings that secured its opening, and saw the glittering Horn inside.

"I'm… sorry…'' Aravine whispered, rolling over. Her legs did not move. "Don't tell Aldin what I did. He has… such terrible taste ... in women . . "

Faile stood up, then looked down with pity. "Pray that the Creator shelters your soul, Aravine," Faile said, and climbed back onto Bela's back. "For if not, the Dark One will have you as his. I leave you to him." She nudged Bela back into motion.

There were more Trollocs ahead, and they fixed their attention on Faile. They shouted, and several Myrddraal slid forward, pointing toward Faile. They began to shift around her, blocking her path.

She set her jaw, grim, and heeled Bela back in the direction she had come, hoping to meet up with Harnan, Vanin or anyone else who would help.

The camp was abuzz with activity, and Faile picked up riders chasing after her, yelling, "She has the Horn of Valere!"

Somewhere high atop the hill, Mat Cauthon's forces fought the Shadow. So close!

An arrow hit the ground beside her, followed by others. Faile reached the captive pens, the broken fence lying in pieces and bodies littered about.

Bela was huffing, perhaps at the end of her strength. Faile caught sight of another horse nearby, a roan gelding that was saddled, nudging at a fallen soldier at his feet.

Faile slowed. What to do? Switch horses, but then what? She glanced over her shoulder and then ducked down as another arrow passed overhead. She'd picked up some dozen Sharan soldiers on horseback, all chasing her, wearing cloth armor sewn with small rings. They were followed by hundreds of Trollocs.

Even with afresh horse, she thought, *I cant outrun them.* She led Bela behind some supply wagons for cover and leaped off, intending to dash for the fresh mount.

"Lady Faile?" a small voice asked.

Faile glanced down. Olver huddled beneath the wagon, holding his knife.

The riders were almost upon her. Faile didn't have time to think. She whipped the Horn from its sack and pushed it into Olver's arms. "Keep this," she said. "Hide. Take it to Mat Cauthon later in the night."

"You're leaving me?" Olver asked. "Alone?"

"I must," she said, stuffing some bundles of arrows into her sack, her heart thundering in her chest. "Once those riders pass, find another place to hide! They will come back to search where I've been, after…"

After they catch me.

She would have to take her knife to herself, lest they torture out of her what she'd done with the Horn. She gripped Olver by the arm. "I'm sorry to place this upon you, little one. There is no one else. You did well earlier; you can do this. Take the Horn to Mat or all is lost."

She ran into the open, making the sack she carried obvious. Some of those strangely dressed foreigners saw her, pointing. She lifted the sack high and climbed into the saddle of the roan, then kicked it into a gallop.

The Trollocs and Darkfriends followed, leaving the young boy and his heavy burden to huddle beneath a wagon in the middle of the Trolloc camp.

Logain turned the thin disc over in his fingers. Black and white, split by a sinuous line. *Cuendillar*; supposedly. The flakes that rubbed off beneath his fingers seemed to make mockery of its eternal nature.

"Why didn't Taim break them?" Logain asked. "He could have. These are as brittle as old leather."

“I don’t know,” Androl said, glancing at the others of his team. “Maybe the time wasn’t right yet.”

“Break them at the right time, and it will help the Dragon,” said the man who called himself Emarin. He sounded worried. “Break them at the wrong time… and what?”

“Nothing good, I suspect,” Pevara said. A Red.

Would he ever have his vengeance against those who had gentled him? Once, that hatred—and it alone—had driven him to survive. He now found a new hunger inside of him. He had defeated Aes Sedai, he had beaten them down and claimed them as his own. Vengeance seemed… empty. His long-building thirst to kill M’Hael filled a little of that emptiness, but not enough. What more?

Once, he had named himself the Dragon Reborn. Once, he had prepared himself to dominate the world. To make it heel. He fingered the seal to the Dark One’s prison while standing at the periphery of the battle. He was far to the southwest, below the bogs, where his Asha’man held a small base camp. Distant rumbles sounded from the Heights—explosions of weaves firing back and forth between Aes Sedai and Sharans.

A large number of his Asha’man had fought there, but the Sharan channelers outnumbered the Aes Sedai and Asha’man combined. Others prowled the battlefields, hunting down Dreadlords, killing them.

He had been losing men faster than the Shadow. There were too many enemies.

He held up the seal. There was a power to it. Power to protect the Black Tower, somehow? *If they do not fear us, fear* me, *what will happen to us once the Dragon is dead?*

Dissatisfaction radiated through the bond. He met Gabrelle’s eyes. She had been inspecting the battle, but now her eyes were upon him. Questioning. Threatening?

Earlier, had he really been thinking that he’d tamed Aes Sedai? The idea should have made him laugh. No Aes Sedai could be tamed, not ever.

Logain pointedly placed the seal and its fellows in the pouch at his belt. He drew its strings closed, meeting Gabrelle’s eyes. Her concern spiked. For a moment, he’d felt that concern of hers to be *for* him, not *because* of him.

Perhaps she was learning how to manipulate the bond, to send him feelings she thought would lull him. No, Aes Sedai could not be tamed.

Bonding them hadn’t contained them. It had made more complications.

He reached to his high collar, undoing the dragon pin he wore there, and offered it to Androl. “Androl Genhald, you have walked into the pit of death itself and returned. Twice now, I am in your debt. I name you full Asha’man. Wear the pin with pride.” He had already given the man back his sword pin, restoring him to Dedicated.

Androl hesitated, then reached out and took the pin in reverent hands.

“And the seals?” Pevara asked, arms folded. “They belong to the White Tower; the Amyrlin is their Watcher.”

“The Amyrlin,” Logain said, “is as good as dead, from what I have heard. In her absence, I am a fitting steward.” Logain seized the Source, subjecting it, dominating it. He opened a gateway back to the top of the Heights.

The war returned to him in full force, the confusion, the smoke and screams. He stepped through, the others following. The powerful channeling from Demandred shone like a beacon, the man’s booming voice continuing to taunt the Dragon Reborn.

Rand al’Thor was not here. Well, the closest thing to him was Logain himself. Another substitute. “I’m going to fight him,” he told the others. “Gabrelle, you will remain behind and wait for my return, as I may need Healing. The rest of you deal with Taim’s men and those Sharan channelers. Let no man live who has gone to the Shadow, whether by choice or force. Bring justice to the one and mercy to the other.”

They nodded. Gabrelle seemed impressed with him, perhaps for his decision to strike at the enemy’s heart. She did not realize. Not even one of the Forsaken could be as powerful as Demandred seemed to be.

Demandred had a *sa’angreal*, and a powerful one. Similar in power to *Callandor*; maybe stronger. With that in Logain’s hands, many things in this world would change. The world would know of him and the Black Tower, and they would tremble before him as they never had for the Amyrlin Seat.

Egwene led an assault the likes of which had not been seen in millennia. The Aes Sedai pulled themselves out of their defensive fortifications and joined with her, pushing up the western slope in a steady stride. Weaves flew in the air like an explosion of ribbons caught in the wind.

The sky broke with the light of a thousand bolts, the ground groaning and trembling with the hits. Demandred continued to fire upon the Andorans from the other side of the plateau, and each shot of balefire sent ripples through the air. The ground cracked with spiderwebs of black, but now tendrils of something sickly began to sprout from those cracks. It spread like a disease across the broken stones of the hillside.

The air felt alive with the Power, the energy so thick that Egwene almost thought the One Power had become visible to all. Through this, she drew as much strength as she could hold through Vora's *sa'angreal.* She felt as she had when fighting the Seanchan, only somehow more in control. Then, her rage had been fringed by desperation and terror.

This time, it was a white-hot thing, like a metal heated beyond the point of being worked by a smith.

She, Egwene al'Vere, had been given stewardship of this land.

She, the Amyrlin Seat, would not be bullied by the Shadow any longer.

She would not retreat. She would not bow as her resources failed.

She would fight.

She channeled Air, building a swirling storm of dust, smoke and dead plants. She held it before herself, obscuring the view of those above as they tried to pinpoint her. Lightning crashed down around her, but she wove Earth, digging deeply in the rock and bringing up a spurt of iron that cooled in a spire next to her. The lightning struck at the spire, sparing her as she sent the windstorm howling up the incline.

A movement at her side. Egwene felt Leilwin nearing. That one… that one had proven faithful. Such a surprise. Having a new Warder did not take the edge off her despair at Gawyn's death, but it did help in other ways. That knot in the back of Egwene's mind had replaced itself with a new one, very different, yet shockingly loyal.

Egwene raised Vora's *sa'angreal* and continued her attacks, moving up the hillside, Leilwin at her side. Ahead, Sharans huddled down, weathering the winds. Egwene struck them with ribbons of fire. Channelers tried to attack her through the windstorm, but their weaves went astray, their eyes clogged with dust. Three regular soldiers attacked from the side, but Leilwin dispatched them efficiently.

Egwene brought the wind around and used it like hands, scooping the channelers up and flinging them into the air. The lightning bolts from above took the men in a fiery embrace, and smoking corpses plummeted to the hillside. Egwene pressed forward, her army of Aes Sedai advancing, flinging weaves like arrows of light.

Ashaman joined them. Those had fought alongside the White Tower on and off, but now they seemed committed in force. Dozens of men gathered as she led the way The air became thick with the One Power.

The winds stopped.

The dust storm suddenly fell, smothered like a candle beneath a blanket. No natural force had done that. Egwene mounted a rocky outcrop, looking up toward a man in black and red standing at the top, his hand out. She had finally drawn out the one who led this force. His Dreadlords fought alongside the Sharans, but she sought their leader. Taim. M'Hael.

"He's weaving lightning!" a man yelled behind her.

Egwene immediately brought up a spire of molten iron and cooled it to draw the lightning that fell a moment later. She glanced to the side. The one who had spoken was Jahar Narishma, Merise's Asha'man Warder.

Egwene smiled, looking toward Taim. "Keep the others off me," she commanded loudly. "All but you, Narishma and Merise. Narishma's warnings will prove useful."

She gathered her strength and began to release a storm at the traitor M'Hael.

Ila picked through the dead on the battlefield near the ruins. Though the fighting had moved downriver, she could hear distant shouts and explosions in the night.

She hunted for the wounded among the fallen, and ignored arrows and swords when she found them. Others would gather those, though she wished they would not. Swords and arrows had caused much of this death.

Raen, her husband, worked nearby, prodding at each body then listening for a heartbeat. His gloves were stained red, and blood smeared his colorful clothing, because he had been pressing his ear against the chests of corpses. Once they confirmed someone was dead, they left an X drawn on a cheek, often in the person's own blood. That would keep others from repeating the work.

Raen seemed to have aged a decade in the last year, and Ila felt as if she had, too. The Way of the Leaf was an easy master at times, providing a life of joy and peace. But a leaf fell in calm winds and in the tempest; dedication demanded that one accept the latter as well as the former. Being driven from country after country, suffering starvation as the land died, then finally coming to rest in the lands of the Seanchan… such had been their life.

None of it matched losing Aram. That had hurt far more deeply than had losing his mother to the Trollocs.

They passed Morgase, the former queen, who organized these workers and gave them orders. Ila kept moving. She cared little for queens. They had done nothing for her or hers.

Nearby, Raen stopped, raising his lantern to examine a full quiver of arrows that a soldier had been carrying as he died. Ila hissed, lifting her skirts up to step around corpses and reach her husband. "Raen!"

"Peace, Ila," he said. "I'm not going to pick it up. Yet, I wonder." He looked up, toward the distant flashes of light downriver and atop the Heights where the armies continued their terrible acts of murder. So many flashes in the night, like hundreds of lightning bolts. It was well past midnight now. They'd been on this field, looking for the living, for hours.

"You wonder?" Ila asked. "Raen…"

"What would we have them do, Ila? Trollocs will not follow the Way of the Leaf."

"There is plenty of room to run," Ila said. "Look at them. They came to meet the Trollocs when the Shadowspawn were barely out of the Blight. If that energy had been spent gathering the people and leading them away to the south…"

"The Trollocs would have followed," Raen said. "What then, Ila?"

"We have accepted many masters," Ila said. "The Shadow might treat us poorly, but would it really be worse than we have been treated at the hands of others?"

"Yes," Raen said softly. "Yes, Ila. It would be worse. Far, *far* worse."

Ila looked at him.

He shook his head, sighing. "I am not going to abandon the Way, Ila. It is my path, and it is right for me. Perhaps… perhaps I will not think quite so poorly of those who follow another path. If we live through these times, we will do so at the bequest of those who died on this battlefield, whether we wish to accept their sacrifice or not."

He trailed away. *It's just the darkness of the night,* she thought. *He will overcome it, once the sun shines again. That's the right of it. Isn't it?*

She looked up at the night sky. That sun… would they be able to tell when it rose? The clouds, lit from the fires below, seemed to be growing thicker and thicker. She pulled her bright yellow shawl closer, feeling suddenly cold.

Perhaps I will not think quite so poorly of those who follow another path…

She blinked a few tears from her eyes. “Light,” she whispered, something twisting inside. “I shouldn’t have turned my back on him. I should have tried to help him return to us, not cast him out. Light, oh Light. Shelter him…”

Nearby, a group of mercenaries found the arrows and picked them up. “Hey, Hanlon!” one called. “Look at this!”

When the brutish men had originally started helping with the Tuatha’an work, she had been proud of them. Avoiding battle to help care for the wounded? The men had seen beyond their violent past.

Now, she blinked and saw something else about them. Cowards, who would rather pick through corpses and fish in their pockets than fight. Which was worse? The men who—misguided though they were—stood up to the Trollocs and tried to turn them back? Or these mercenaries who refused to fight because they found this path easier?

Ila shook her head. She had always felt as if she knew the answers in life. Today, most of those had slipped from her. Saving a person’s life, though… that she could cling to.

She headed back among the bodies, searching for the living among the dead.

Olver scuttled back under the wagon, clutching the Horn, as Lady Faile rode off. Dozens of riders followed her, and hundreds of Trollocs. It had grown so dark.

Alone. He’d been left alone again.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but that didn’t do much. He could still hear men screaming and shouting in the distance. He could still smell blood, the captives who had been killed by the Trollocs as they tried to escape. Beyond the blood, he smelled smoke, thick and itchy. It seemed that the whole world was burning.

The ground trembled, as if something very heavy had hit it somewhere close by. Thunder rumbled in the sky, accompanied by sharp cracks as lightning struck time and time again at the Heights. Olver whimpered.

How brave he had thought himself. Now, here he was, finally at the battle. He could barely keep his hands from trembling. He wanted to hide, dig deep into the earth.

Faile had told him to find another place to hide because they might come back, looking for the Horn.

Dared he go out there? Dared he stay here? Olver cracked his eyes open, then nearly screamed. A pair of legs ending in hooves stood beside the wagon. A moment later, a snouted face leaned down and looked at him, beady eyes narrowing, nostrils sniffing.

Olver yelled, scrambling back, clutching the Horn. The Trolloc yelled something, heaving the wagon over and nearly smashing it down on Olver. The wagon's contents of arrows went scattering across the ground as Olver dashed away, looking for safety.

There was none. Dozens of the Trollocs turned toward him, and they called to one another in a language Olver did not recognize. He looked about, Horn in one hand, knife in the other, frantic. No safety.

A horse snorted nearby. It was Bela, chewing on some grain leaked from a supply cart. The horse raised her head, looking at Olver. She didn't have a saddle on, only a halter and bridle.

Blood and ashes, Olver thought, running for her, *I wish I had Wind.* This plump mare would end him in the cookpot for certain. Olver sheathed his knife and jumped up onto Bela's back, seizing the reins in one hand, clutching the Horn in the other.

The pig-snouted Trolloc from the wagon swung, nearly taking off Olver's arm. He cried out, kicking Bela into motion, and the mare galloped out from among the Trollocs. The beasts ran behind with howls and yells. Other calls sounded throughout the camp, which was nearly emptying out as they converged on the boy.

Olver rode as he'd been taught, down low, guiding with his knees. And Bela ran. Light, but she *ran.* Mat had said that many horses were frightened of Trollocs, and would throw their rider if forced near them, but this animal did none of that. She thundered right past howling Trollocs, right through the center of the camp.

Olver looked over his shoulder. There were hundreds of them back there, chasing him. "Oh, Light!"

He'd seen Mat's banner atop those Heights, he was sure of it. But there were so many Trollocs in the way. Olver turned Bela to ride the way

Aravine had gone. Perhaps he could round the Trolloc camp and get out that way, then come up the back of the Heights.

Take the Horn to Mat, or all is lost.

Olver rode for all he was worth, urging Bela on.

There is nobody else.

Ahead, a large force of Trollocs cut him off. Olver turned back the other way, but others approached from that direction, too. Olver cried out, turning Bela again, but a thick black Trolloc arrow hit her in the flank. She screamed and stumbled, then dropped.

Olver tumbled free. Hitting the ground knocked the air from his lungs and made him see a flash of light. He forced himself to crawl to his hands and knees.

The Horn must *reach Matrim Cauthon…*

Olver grabbed the Horn, and found that he was weeping. “I'm sorry,” he said to Bela. “You were a good horse. You ran like Wind couldn’t have. I’m sorry.” She whinnied softly and drew a final breath, then died.

He left her and ran beneath the legs of the first Trolloc that arrived. Olver couldn’t fight them. He knew he couldn’t. He didn’t unsheathe the knife. He just ran up the steep slope, trying to reach the top from where he had seen Mat’s flag fall.

It might as well have been a continent away. A Trolloc grabbed at his clothing, pulling him down, but Olver ripped free, leaving cloth in its thick nails. He scrambled over broken ground, and with desperation, spotted a little cleft in a rocky outcrop at the base of the slope. The shallow crack looked up at the black sky.

He threw himself toward it, then wiggled in, clinging to the Horn. He barely fit. Trollocs milled around above him, then began to reach in for him, tearing at his clothing.

Olver whimpered and closed his eyes.

Logain hurled himself through the gateway, weaves already forming before him as he struck at Demandred.

The man stood on the smoldering slope that looked over the dried river and toward the failing Andoran pike formations. The Aiel, Cairhienin and Legion of the Dragon fought there as well, and all were in danger of being surrounded.

The pikes were all but shattered, now. It would soon be a rout.

Logain launched twin columns of fire toward Demandred, but Sharans threw themselves in the way, interfering with his attack. Flesh burned away, bones charring to dust. Their deaths gave Demandred time to spin about and lash out with a weave of Water and Air. Logain’s burst of fire hit that and turned to steam, then boiled away.

Logain had hoped that after so much channeling, Demandred would be weakened. Not so. A complex weave formed in front of the man, a weave such as Logain had never seen. It made a field that rippled in the air, and when Logain next attacked, his weave bounced free like a stick thrown against a brick wall.

Logain leaped to the side, rolling as lightning struck from the sky. Shards of rock pelted him as he wove Spirit, Fire and Earth, slicing at the strange wall. He ripped it down, then lobbed broken bits of stone from the ground to intercept fire from Demandred.

A diversion, Logain thought, realizing that Demandred had woven something else, more complex, behind the fire. A gateway opened and shot across the ground, opening to a maw of redness. Logain threw himself to the side as the Deathgate passed, but it left a trail of burning lava.

Demandred's next attack was a jet of air that hurled Logain backward, toward that lava. Logain desperately wove Water to cool the lava. He hit shoulder-first, passing a burst of steam that scalded his skin, but he had cooled the lava enough that it formed a crust atop the still-molten flow beneath. Holding his breath against the steam, he hurled himself to the side as another series of lightning bolts pulverized the ground where he had been.

Those bolts shattered the crust he’d made, reaching into the molten rock. Drops of lava splashed across Logain, searing his skin, burning pocks in his arm and face. He screamed and wove through his rage to send lightning down on his foe.

A slice of Spirit, Earth and Fire cut his weaves from the air. Demandred was just so *strong*. That *sa’angreal* was incredible.

The next flash of lightning blinded Logain, throwing him backward. He hit a patch of broken shale, the points of the rock biting into his skin.

“You are powerful,” Demandred said. Logain could barely hear the words. His ears… the thunder… “But you are not Lews Therin.”

Logain growled, weaving through his tears, hurling lightning at Demandred. He wove twice, and though Demandred cut one bolt from the air, the other struck true.

But… what was that weave? It was another that Logain did not recognize. The lightning hit Demandred, but vanished, somehow sent down into the ground and dissipated. Such a simple weave of Air and Earth, but it rendered the lightning useless.

A shield rammed between Logain and the Source. Through his wounded eyes, he watched the weave for balefire begin in Demandred's hands. Snarling, Logain grabbed a piece of shale from the ground beside him, the size of his fist, and hurled it at Demandred.

Surprisingly, the stone hit, ripping skin, causing Demandred to stumble back. The Forsaken was powerful, but he could still make the mistakes of common men. Never focus all of your attention on the One Power, despite what Taim had always said. In that moment of distraction, the shield between Logain and the Source vanished.

Logain rolled to the side, beginning two weaves. One, a shield of his own that he did not intend to use. The other, a desperate, final gateway. The coward’s choice.

Demandred growled, raising a hand to his face and lashing out with the Power. He chose to destroy the shield, immediately recognizing it as the greater risk. The gateway opened, and Logain rolled through, letting it snap closed. He collapsed on the other side, his flesh scalded, his arms flayed, his ears ringing, his sight almost gone.

He forced himself to sit up, back in the Asha’man camp below the bogs where Gabrelle and the others awaited his return. He howled in anger. Gabrelle’s concern radiated through the bond. Real concern. He *hadn't* imagined it. Light.

“Quiet,” she said, kneeling beside him. “You fool. What have you done to yourself?”

“I have failed,” he said. Distantly, he felt the strikes of Demandred’s power begin again as he continued bellowing for Lews Therin. “Heal me.”

“You’re not going to try that again, are you?” she said. “I don’t want to Heal you only to let you—”

“I won’t try again,” Logain said, voice ragged. The pain was horrible, but it paled compared to the humiliation of defeat. “I won’t, Gabrelle. Stop doubting my word. He’s too strong.”

“Some of these burns are bad, Logain. These holes in your skin, I don’t know if I can Heal them completely. You will be scarred.”

“That is fine,” he growled. That would be where the lava had splashed on his arm and the side of his face.

Light, he thought. *How are we going to deal with that monster?*

Gabrelle put her hands on him and Healing weaves poured into his body.

The thunder of Egwene’s battle with M’Hael rivaled that of the crashing clouds above. M’Hael. A new Forsaken, his name proclaimed by his Dreadlords across the battlefield.

Egwene wove without thought, hurling weave after weave toward the renegade Asha’man. She had not called upon the wind, but still it rushed and roared about her, whipping her hair and her dress, catching her stole and flipping it about. Narishma and Merise huddled with Leilwin on the ground beside her, Narishma’s voice—barely audible above the battle—calling out weaves as M’Hael crafted them.

Following her advance, Egwene stood upon the top of the Heights, on even ground with M’Hael. She knew, somewhere deep, that her body would need rest soon.

For now, that was an unaffordable luxury. For now, only the fight mattered.

Fire flared toward her, and she slapped it aside with Air. The sparks caught in the wind, swirling about her in a spray of light as she wove Earth. She sent a ripple through the already-broken ground, trying to knock M’Hael down, but he split the wave with a weave of his own.

He’s slowing, she thought.

Egwene stepped forward, swollen with power. She began two weaves, one above each hand, and spouted fire at him.

He responded with a bar of pure whiteness, wire-thin, which missed her by less than a handspan. The balefire left an afterimage in Egwene’s eyes, and the ground *groaned* beneath them as the air warped. Those spiderwebs sprang out across the ground, fractures into nothingness.

“Fool!” she yelled at him. “You will destroy the Pattern itself!” Already, their clash threatened that. This wind was not natural, this sizzling air. Those cracks in the ground spread from M’Hael, widening.

“He’s weaving it again!” Narishma cried, voice caught in the tempest.

M’Hael released this second weave of balefire, fracturing the ground, but Egwene was ready. She sidestepped, her anger building. Balefire. She needed to counter it!

They don’t care what they ruin. They are here to destroy. That is their master’s call. Break. Burn down. Kill.

Gawyn…

She screamed in fury, weaving column after column of fire, one after another. Narishma shouted what M’Hael was doing, but Egwene couldn’t hear for the rush of sound in her ears. She saw soon, anyway, that he had constructed a barrier of Air and Fire to deflect her attacks.

Egwene strode forward, sending repeated strikes at him. That gave him no time to recover, no time to attack. She stopped the rhythm only to form a shield that she held at the ready. A spray of fire off his barrier made him stumble back, his weave cracking, and he raised his hand, perhaps to attempt balefire again.

Egwene slammed the shield between him and the Source. It didn’t quite cut him off, for he held it back by force of will. They were near enough now that she could see his incredulity, his anger. He fought back, but was weaker than she. Egwene pushed, bringing that shield closer and closer to the invisible thread that connected him to the One Power. She forced it with all her strength…

M’Hael, straining, released a small stream of balefire upward, through the gap where the shield had not yet fallen into place. The balefire destroyed the weave—as it did the air, and indeed, the Pattern itself.

Egwene stumbled back as M’Hael directed the weave toward her, but the white-hot bar was too small, too weak, to reach her. It faded away before hitting. M’Hael snarled, then vanished, warping the air in a form of Traveling Egwene did not know.

Egwene breathed deeply, holding her hand to her chest. Light! She had almost been obliterated from the Pattern.

He disappeared without forming a gateway! *The True Power,* she thought. The only explanation. She knew next to nothing about it—it was the Dark One’s very essence, the lure that had coaxed channelers in the Age of Legends to drill the Bore in the first place.

Balefire. Light. I was almost dead. Worse than dead.

She had no way to counter balefire.

It’s only a weave… Only a weave. Perrin’s words.

The moment was past now, and M’Hael had fled. She would have to keep Narishma close to warn her if someone started channeling nearby.

Unless M’Hael uses the True Power again. Would another man be able to sense that being channeled?

“Mother!”

Egwene turned as Merise gestured toward where most of the Aes Sedai and Asha’man were still engaged in a resounding battle with the Sharan forces. Many sisters in colorful dresses lay dead across the hillside.

Gawyn’s death haunted her thoughts like an assassin in black. Egwene set her jaw and stoked her anger, drawing in the One Power as she launched herself at the Sharans.

Hurin, his nostrils stuffed with cloth, fought on Polov Heights with the other Borderlanders.

Even through the cloth, he smelled the war. So *much* violence, the scents of blood, of rotting flesh all around him. They coated the ground, his sword, his own *clothing.* He had already been ill, violently, several times during the battle.

Still he fought. He threw himself aside as a bear-snouted Trolloc crawled over the bodies and swung down at him. The beasts sword made the ground shake, and Hurin cried out.

The beast laughed an inhuman laugh, taking Hurin’s cry to indicate fear. It lunged, so Hurin scuttled forward and under its reach, then opened up its stomach as he ran past. The creature stumbled to a stop, watching at its own reeking innards pour out.

Have to buy time for Lord Rand, Hurin thought, backing away and waiting for the next Trolloc to come over the bodies. They were coming up the eastern side of the Heights, the river side. This steep slope was hard for them to climb, but Light, there were so *many* of them.

Keep fighting, keep fighting.

Lord Rand had come to *him,* making apologies. To him! Well, Hurin would do him proud. The Dragon Reborn did not need the forgiveness of a little thief-taker, but Hurin still felt as if the world had righted itself Lord Rand was Lord Rand again. Lord Rand would preserve them, if they could give him enough time.

There was a lull in the action. He frowned. The beasts had seemed endless. Surely they hadn't all fallen. He stepped cautiously forward, looking over the corpses and down the slope.

No, no they weren't defeated. The sea of beasts seemed near-endless still. He could see them by the light of fires below. The Trollocs had paused their climb because they needed to move corpses out of their way on the slope, many of whom had been cut down by Tam's archers. Below them, at the riverbed, the greater army of Trollocs fought Elayne's army.

"We should have a few minutes," Lan Mandragoran said to the soldiers from where he sat on horseback. Queen Alliandre rode nearby as well, talking calmly with her men. Two monarchs within sight. Surely they knew how to exercise command. That made Hurin feel better.

"They're preparing for a final charge," Lan said, "a push to force us away from the slope so they can fight us up here on even ground. Rest while they clear bodies. Peace favor your swords, friends. The next assault will be the worst one." The next assault would be the *worst* one? Light!

Behind them on the middle of the plateau, the rest of Mat's army continued pressing the Sharan army, trying to push them back to the southwest. If he could do that, and force them down the slope into the Trollocs fighting Elayne's forces, it could create a right mess that Mat could take advantage of. But for the moment, the Sharans were not giving an inch of ground; in fact, they were pushing back Mat's army, which was beginning to founder.

Hurin lay back, listening to the moans all around, the distant shouts and ringing of weapons hitting metal, sniffing the stink of violence hanging around him in an ocean of stenches.

The worst still to come.

Light help them…

Berelain used a rag to wipe the blood from her hands as she strode into the feast hall of her palace. The tables had been chopped apart for firewood to stoke the enormous hearths at either end of the long room; in place of the furniture lay rows upon rows of wounded.

The doors from the kitchens burst open and a group of Tinkers entered, some carrying litters and others helping wounded men limp into the room.

Light! Berelain thought. *More?* The palace was stuffed to bursting with the wounded.

"No, no!" she said, stalking forward. "Not in here. The back hallway. We're going to have to start putting them there. Rosil! We have new wounded."

The Tinkers turned toward the hallway, speaking in comforting tones to the wounded men. Only those who could be saved were brought back. She had been forced to instruct the leaders among the Tuatha'an women as to which types of wounds took too much effort to Heal. Better to save ten men with bad wounds than to expend the same energy trying to rescue one man who clung to life by a single blade of hope.

That moment of explanation had been one of the grimmest things she'd ever done.

The Tinkers continued moving in a line, and Berelain watched the wounded for glimpses of white clothing. There were Whitecloaks among them, but not the one she sought.

So many… she thought again. The Tinkers had no help moving the wounded. Every able-bodied man in the palace, and most women, had gone to the battlefield to fight or help the Caemlyn refugees gather arrows.

Rosil bustled up, her clothing stained with blood that she ignored. She immediately took charge of the wounded, eyeing them for any who needed immediate attention. Unfortunately, the doors to the kitchen burst open at that moment, and a group of bloodied Andorans and Aiel stumbled through, sent by the Kinswomen from another area of the battlefield.

What followed was near madness as Berelain chivvied out everyone she had—grooms, the elderly, some children as young as five—to help settle the newcomers. Only the worst of the Aiel came through; they had a tendency to remain on the battlefield as long as they could hold a weapon. That meant many who came to her were beyond help. She had to settle them in space she couldn't afford and watch them heave bloody gasps as they died.

"This is foolish!" she said, standing up. Her hands were wet with blood again, and she hadn't a clean rag left. Light! "We need to send more help. You." She pointed to an Aiel who had been blinded. He sat with his back to the wall, a bandage around his eyes. "You, the blind Aiel."

"I am called Ronja."

“Well, Ronja. I have some *gai’shain* here helping me. By my count, there should be a lot more of them. Where are they?”

“They wait until the battle is through so that they may minister to the victors.”

“We're going to fetch them,” she said. “We need every person we can get to help fight.”

“They may come to you here, Berelain Paendrag, and help with tending the sick,” the man said. “But they will not fight. It is not their place.”

“They will see reason,” she said firmly. “It’s the Last Battle!”

“You may be clan chief here,” the Aiel said, smiling, “but you are not *Car’a’carn.* Even he could not command the *gai’shain* to disobey *ji’e’toh*.”

“Then who could?”

That seemed to surprise the man. “No one. It is not possible.”

“And the Wise Ones?”

“They would not,” he said. “Never.”

“We shall see,” Berelain said.

The man smiled deeper. “I should think that no man or woman would wish to suffer your wrath, Berelain Paendrag. But if I had my eyes restored, I would put them out again before I watched *gai’shain* fight.”

“They don’t need to fight, then,” Berelain said. “Perhaps they can help carry the wounded. Rosil, you have this group?”

The tired woman nodded. There wasn’t an Aes Sedai in the palace who didn’t look like she’d sooner fall over than take another step. Berelain kept her feet by using some herbs she did not think Rosil would approve.

Well, she could do no more here. She might as well check on the wounded in the storage rooms. They had—

“My Lady First?” a voice asked. It was Kitan, one of the palace maids who had remained behind to help with the wounded. The slight woman took her arm. “There is something you need to see.”

Berelain sighed, but nodded. What disaster awaited her now? Another bubble of evil, locking away groups of wounded behind walls that hadn’t been there before? Had they run out of bandages again? She doubted there was a sheet, drapery or piece of smallclothes in the city that hadn’t already been made into a bandage.

The girl led her up the steps to Berelain’s own quarters where a few of the casualties were being nursed. She stepped into one of the rooms, and was surprised to find a familiar face waiting for her. Annoura sat at a bedside, wearing red slashed with gray, her customary braids pulled back and tied in an unflattering way. Berelain almost didn’t recognize her.

Annoura rose at Berelain’s entrance, bowing, though she looked about ready to fall over with fatigue.

In the bed lay Galad Damodred.

Berelain gasped, rushing to his side. It *was* him, though he bore a vicious wound to his face. He still breathed, but he was unconscious. Berelain lifted his arm to take his hand in hers, but found that the arm ended in a stump. One of the surgeons had already cauterized it to keep him from bleeding to death.

“How?” Berelain asked, clutching his other hand, closing her eyes. His hand felt warm. When she had heard what Demandred bellowed, defeating the man in white…

“I felt that I owed it to you,” Annoura said. “I located him on the battlefield after Demandred announced what he had done. I pulled him away while Demandred fought against one of the Black Tower’s men.” She sat back down on the stool beside the bed, then leaned forward, drooping. “I could not Heal him, Berelain. It was all I could do to make the gateway to bring him here. I’m sorry.”

“It is all right,” Berelain said. “Kitan, fetch one of the other sisters. Annoura, you will feel better once you have rested. Thank you.”

Annoura nodded. She closed her eyes, and Berelain was shocked to see tears at the edges of her eyes.

“What is it?” Berelain asked. “Annoura, what is wrong?”

“It should not concern you, Berelain,” she said, rising. “All are taught it, you see. Do not channel if you are too tired. There can be complications. I needed a gateway back to the palace, though. To bring him to safety, to restore…”

Annoura collapsed from her stool. Berelain dropped to her side, propping up her head. Only then did she realize that it wasn’t the braids that had made Annoura look so different. The face was wrong, too. Changed. No longer ageless, but instead youthful.

“Oh, Light, Annoura,” Berelain said. “You’ve burned yourself out, haven’t you?”

The woman had lapsed into unconsciousness. Berelain’s heart lurched. The woman and she had had differences recently, but Annoura had been her confidante—and friend—for years before that. The poor woman. The way Aes Sedai spoke, this was considered to be worse than death.

Berelain lifted the woman onto the room's couch and then covered her with a blanket. Berelain felt so powerless. *Maybe… maybe she can be Healed somehow…*

She went back to Galad's side to hold his hand for a time longer, righting the stool and sitting upon it. Just a little rest. She closed her eyes. He lived. It came at a terrible cost, but he lived.

She was shocked when he spoke. "How?"

She opened her eyes to find him looking at her.

"How am I here?" he asked softly.

"Annoura," she said. "She found you on the battlefield."

"My wounds?"

"Other Healers will come when they can be spared," she said. "Your hand…" She steeled herself. "Your hand is lost, but we can wash away that cut to your face."

"No," he whispered. "It is only ... a little cut. Save the Healing for those who would die without it." He seemed so tired. Barely awake.

She bit her lip, but nodded. "Of course." She hesitated. "The battle fares poorly, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"So now ... we simply hope?"

He slipped his hand from hers and reached under his shirt. When an Aes Sedai arrived, they would have to undress him and care for his wounds. Only the stump had been tended to so far, as it was the worst.

Galad sighed, then trembled, his hand slipping away from his shirt. Had he been intending to remove it?

"Hope…" he whispered, then fell unconscious.

Rand wept.

He huddled in the darkness, the Pattern spinning before him, woven from the threads of the lives of men. So many of those threads ended.

So many.

He should have been able to protect them. Why couldn't he? Against his will, the names began to replay in his mind. The names of those who had died for him, starting with only women, but now expanded to each and every person he should have been able to save—but hadn't.

As humankind fought at Merrilor and Shayol Ghul, Rand was forced to watch the deaths. He could not turn away.

The Dark One chose then to attack him in force. The pressure came again, striving to crush Rand into nothing. He couldn't move. Every bit of his essence, his determination and his strength focused on keeping the Dark One from ripping him apart.

He could only watch as they died.

Rand watched Davram Bashere die in a charge, followed quickly by his wife. Rand cried out at the fall of his friend. He wept for Davram Bashere.

Dear, faithful Hurin fell to a Trolloc attack as it struck for the top of the Heights where Mat made his stand. Rand wept for Hurin. The man with so much faith in him, the man who would have followed him anywhere.

Jori Congar lay buried beneath a Trolloc body, whimpering for help until he bled to death. Rand wept for Jori as his thread finally vanished.

Enaila, who had decided to forsake *Far Dareis Mai* and had laid a bridal wreath at the foot of the *siswai'aman* Leiran, speared through the gut by four Trollocs. Rand wept for her.

Karldin Manfor, who had followed him for so long and had been at Dumai's Wells, died when his strength for channeling gave out and he dropped to the ground in exhaustion. Sharans fell upon him and stabbed him with their black daggers. His Aes Sedai, Beldeine, stumbled and fell moments later. Rand wept for them both.

He wept for Gareth Bryne and Siuan. He wept for Gawyn.

So many. So *very many.*

YOU ARE LOSING.

Rand huddled down further. What could he do? His dream of stopping the Dark One ... he would create a nightmare if he did that. His own intentions betrayed him.

GIVE IN, ADVERSARY. WHY KEEP FIGHTING? STOP FIGHTING AND REST.

He was tempted. Oh, how he was *tempted.* Light. What would Nynaeve think? He could see her, fighting to save Alanna. How ashamed would she and Moiraine be if they knew that in that moment, Rand wanted to just let go?

Pain washed across him, and he screamed again.

“Please, let it end!”

IT CAN.

Rand huddled down, writhing, trembling. But still, their screams assaulted him. Death upon death. He held on, barely. “No,” he whispered.

VERY WELL, the Dark One said. I HAVE ONE MORE THING TO SHOW YOU. ONE MORE PROMISE OF WHAT CAN BE…

The Dark One spun threads of possibility one last time.

All became darkness.

Taim lashed out with the One Power, thrashing Mishraile with weaves of Air. “Go back, then, you fool! Fight! We will *not* lose that position!”

The Dreadlord ducked back, gathering his two companions and slinking away to do as ordered. Taim smoldered, then shattered a nearby stone with a surge of power. That Aes Sedai ridgecat! How *dare* she best him?

“M’Hael,” a calm voice said.

Taim… M’Hael. He had to think of himself as M’Hael. He crossed the hillside toward the voice that had called to him. He had taken a gateway to safety, panicked, across the Heights, and he was now at the edge of the southeastern slope of the Heights. Demandred used this location to monitor the battle below and to send destruction down into the formations of Andorans, Cairhienin and Aiel.

Demandred’s Trollocs controlled the entire corridor between the Heights and bogs, and were wearing down the defenders at the dry river. It was only a matter of time. Meanwhile, the Sharan army fought northeast of here on the Heights. It concerned him that Cauthon had arrived so quickly to stop the advance of the Sharans. No matter. That was a move of desperation for the man. He wouldn’t be able to stand up against the Sharan army. But the most important thing right now was destroying those Aes Sedai on the other side of the Heights. That was key to winning this battle.

M’Hael passed between suspicious Sharans with their strange dress and tattoos. Demandred sat, cross-legged, at their center. His eyes closed, he breathed in and out slowly. That *sa’angreal* he used ... it took something out of him, something more than just the normal strength required for channeling.

Would that provide M’Hael with an opening? How it galled to continue to put himself beneath another. Yes, he had learned much from this man, but now Demandred was obviously unfit to lead. He coddled these Sharans, and he wasted energy on his vendetta with al'Thor. The weakness of another was M'Hael's potential opening.

"I hear that you are failing, M'Hael," Demandred said.

Before them, across the dry riverbed, the Andoran defenses were finally starting to buckle. Trollocs were always testing to find weak points in their lines, and they were breaking through pike formations in various areas all up and down the river. The Legions heavy cavalry and the Cairhienin light were in constant motion now, making sweeps of desperation against Trollocs as they broke through the Andoran defenses. The Aiel were still holding them back down near the bogs, and the Legion's crossbowmen combined with Andoran pike were still keeping the Trollocs from sweeping around their right flank. But the pressure of the Trolloc onslaught was relentless, and Elayne's lines were gradually bowing out, moving deeper into Shienaran territory.

"M'Hael?" Demandred said, opening his eyes. Ancient eyes. M'Hael refused to feel intimidated, looking into them. He would *not* be intimidated! "Tell me how you failed."

"The Aes Sedai witch," M'Hael spat. "She has a *sa'angreal* of great power. I almost had her, but the True Power failed me."

"You are given only a trickle for a reason," Demandred said, closing his eyes again. "It is unpredictable for one unaccustomed to its ways."

M'Hael said nothing. He would practice with the True Power; he would learn its secrets. The other Forsaken were old and slow. New blood would soon rule.

With a relaxed sense of inevitability, Demandred stood. He gave off the impression of a massive boulder shifting its position. "You will return and kill her, M'Hael. I have slain her Warder. She should be easy meat."

"The *sa'angreal*…"

Demandred held out his scepter, with the golden goblet affixed atop it. Was this a test? Such *power.* M'Hael had felt the strength radiating from Demandred as he used it.

"You say she has a *sa'angreal*," Demandred said. "With this, you will have one as well. I grant you Sakarnen to take from you any excuse for failure. Succeed or die in this, M'Hael. Prove yourself worthy to stand among the Chosen."

M’Hael licked his lips. “And if the Dragon Reborn finally comes to you?”

Demandred laughed. “You think I would use this to fight him? What would that prove? Our strengths must be matched if I am to show myself the better. By all accounts, he cannot use *Callandor* safely, and he foolishly destroyed the Choedan Kal. He *will* come, and when he does, I will face him unaided and prove myself the true master of this realm.”

Darkness within… Taim thought. *He’s gone completely mad, hasn’t he?* Strange to look into those eyes, which seemed so lucid, and hear complete insanity from his lips. When Demandred had first come to M’Hael, offering him the chance to serve the Great Lord, the man had not been like this. Arrogant, yes. All of the Chosen were arrogant. Demandred's determination to kill al’Thor personally had burned like a fire within him.

But this… this was something different. Living in Shara had changed him. Weakened him, certainly. Now this. What man would willingly give such a powerful artifact to a rival?

Only a fool, M’Hael thought, reaching for the *sa’angreal*. *Killing you will be like putting down a horse with three broken legs, Demandred. Pity. I had hoped to vanquish you as a rival.*

Demandred turned away, and M’Hael pulled the One Power through Sakarnen, drinking gluttonously of its bounty. The sweetness of *saidin* saturated him, a raging torrent of succulent Power. He was *immense* while holding this! He could do anything. Level mountains, destroy armies, all on his own!

M’Hael itched to pull out flows, to weave them together and destroy this man.

“Take care,” Demandred said. His voice sounded pathetic, weak. The squeaking of a mouse. “Do not channel through that toward me. I have bonded Sakarnen to me. If you try to use it against me, it will burn you from the Pattern.”

Did Demandred lie? Could a *sa’angreal* be *attuned* to a specific person? He did not know. He considered, then lowered Sakarnen, bitter despite the power surging through him.

“I am not a fool, M’Hael,” Demandred said dryly. “I will not hand you the noose in which to hang me. Go and do as you are told. You are my servant in this thing, the hand that holds my axe to chop down the tree. Destroy the Amyrlin; use balefire. We have been commanded, and in this, we will obey. The world must be unraveled before we reweave it to our vision.”

M’Hael snarled at the man, but did as he was told, weaving a gateway. He *would* destroy that Aes Sedai witch. Then… then he would decide how to deal with Demandred.

Elayne watched in frustration as her pike formations were pushed back. That Birgitte had managed to convince her to remove herself from the immediate area of combat—a Trolloc breakthrough could come at any moment—did not sit well with her.

Elayne had retreated almost to the ruins, out of direct danger for the moment. A double ring of Guards surrounded her, most of them sitting and eating—gaining what little strength they could during the moments between fights.

Elayne did not fly her banner, but she sent messengers to let her commanders know that she still lived. Though she had tried to guide her troops against the Trollocs, her efforts had not been enough. Her forces were clearly weakening.

“We have to go back,” she said to Birgitte. “They need to see me, Birgitte.”

“I don’t know if it will change anything,” Birgitte said. “Those formations just cant hold in the face of both Trollocs and that bloody channeling. I…”

“What is it?” Elayne asked.

Birgitte turned away. “I swear I once remembered a situation like this.”

Elayne set her jaw. She found Birgitte’s loss of memory heart-wrenching, but it was only one woman’s problem. Thousands of her people were dying.

Nearby, the refugees from Caemlyn still searched the area for arrows and wounded. Several groups approached Elayne’s guards, speaking with them softly, asking after the battle or the Queen. Elayne felt a spike of pride at the refugees and their tenacity. The city had broken, but a city could be rebuilt. The people, the true heart of Caemlyn, would not fall so easily.

Another lance of light plunged into the battlefield, killing men, disrupting the pikemen. Beyond that, on the far side of the Heights, women channeled in a furious battle. She could see the lights flashing in the night, though that was all. Should Elayne join them? Her command here had not been good enough to save the soldiers, but it *had* provided guidance and leadership.

"I fear for our army, Elayne." Birgitte said. "I fear that the day is lost."

"The day cannot be lost," Elayne said, "because if it is, we all are lost. I refuse to accept defeat. You and I will return. Let Demandred try to strike us down. Perhaps seeing me will revitalize the soldiers, make them—"

A group of Caemlyn refugees nearby attacked her Guardsmen and Guards-women.

Elayne cursed, turning Moonshadow and embracing the One Power. The group she had, at first, taken for refugees in dirty, soot-stained clothing wore mail beneath. They fought her Guards, killing with sword and axe. Not refugees at all, *mercenaries.*

"Betrayal!" Birgitte called, lifting her bow and shooting a mercenary through the throat. "To arms!"

"It's not a betrayal," Elayne said. She wove Fire and struck down a group of three. "Those aren't ours! Watch for thieves in the clothing of beggars!"

She turned as another group of "refugees" lunged at the weakened lines of Guards. They were all around! They had crept up while attention had been focused on the distant battlefield.

As a group of mercenaries broke through, she wove *saidar* to show them the folly of attacking an Aes Sedai. She released a powerful weave of Air.

As it hit one of the men charging her, the weave fell apart, unraveling. Elayne cursed, turning her horse to flee, but one of the attackers lunged forward and drove his sword into Moonshadow's neck. The horse reared, squealing in agony, and Elayne caught a brief glimpse of Guards fighting all around as she fell to the ground, panicked for the safety of her babes. Rough hands grabbed her by the shoulders and held her against the ground.

She saw something silver glisten in the night. A foxhead medallion. Another pair of hands pressed it to her skin just above her breasts. The metal was sharply cold.

"Hello, my Queen," Mellar said, squatting beside her. The former Guardsman—the one many people still assumed had fathered her children — leered down at her. "You've been very hard to track down."

Elayne spat at him, but he anticipated her, raising his hand to catch the spittle. He smiled, then stood up, leaving her held by two mercenaries. Though some of her Guards still fought, most had been pushed back or killed.

Mellar turned as two men dragged Birgitte over. She thrashed in their grip, and a third man came over to help hold her. Mellar took out his sword, regarded its blade for a moment, as if inspecting himself in its reflective gleam. Then he rammed it into Birgitte's stomach.

Birgitte gasped, falling to her knees. Mellar beheaded her with a vicious backhand blow.

Elayne found herself sitting very still, unable to think or react as Birgitte's corpse flopped forward, spilling lifeblood from the neck. The bond winked away, and with it came… pain. Terrible pain.

"I've been waiting to do that for a long time," Mellar said. "Blood and bloody ashes, but it felt good."

Birgitte… Her Warder was dead. Her Warder had been killed. That tough yet generous heart, that tremendous loyalty—destroyed. The loss made it… made it hard to think.

Mellar kicked at Birgitte's corpse as a man rode up with a body draped across the back of his saddle. The man wore an Andoran uniform, and the facedown corpse dangled golden hair. Whoever the poor woman was, she wore a dress exactly like Elayne's.

Oh no.. .

"Go," Mellar said. The man rode off, a few others forming around him, fake Guardsmen. They carried Elayne's banner, and one started shouting, "The Queen is dead! The Queen has fallen!"

Mellar turned to Elayne. "Your people still fight. Well, that ought to disrupt their ranks. As for you… well, apparently, the Great Lord has a use for those children of yours. I've been ordered to bring them to Shayol Ghul. It occurs to me that you needn't be with them at the time." He looked at one of his companions. "Can you make it work?"

The other man knelt beside Elayne, then pressed his hands against her belly. A jolt of sudden fright pushed through her numbness and her shock. Her babes!

"She's far enough along," the man said. "I can probably keep the children alive with a weave, if you cut them out. It will be difficult to do right. They are young yet. Six months along. But with the weaves I was shown by the Chosen… yes, I think I can keep them living for an hour. But you will have to take them to M'Hael to get them to Shayol Ghul. Traveling with a regular gateway won't work there any longer."

Mellar sheathed his sword and pulled a hunting knife from his belt. “Good enough for me. We’ll send the children on, as the Great Lord asks. But you, my Queen… you are mine.”

Elayne flailed, but the men’s grip was tight. She clawed at *saidar* again and again, but the medallion worked like forkroot. She might as well have been trying to embrace *saidin* as reach *saidar*

“No!” she screamed as Mellar knelt beside her. “NO!”

“Good,” he said. “I was hoping you’d get around to screaming.”

Nothing.

Rand turned. He *tried* to turn. He had no form or shape.

Nothing.

He tried to speak, but he had no mouth. Finally, he managed to *think* the words and make them manifest.

SHAI’TAN, Rand projected, WHAT IS THIS?

OUR COVENANT, the Dark One replied. OUR ACCOMMODATION.

OUR ACCOMMODATION IS NOTHING? Rand demanded.

YES.

He understood. The Dark One was offering a deal. Rand could accept this ... He could accept nothingness. The two of them dueled for the fate of the world. Rand pushed for peace, glory, love. The Dark One sought the opposite. Pain. Suffering.

This was, in a way, a balance between the two. The Dark One would agree not to reforge the Wheel to suit his grim desires. There would be no enslaving of mankind, no world without love. There would be no world at all.

IT IS WHAT YOU PROMISED ELAN, Rand said. YOU PROMISED HIM AN END TO EXISTENCE.

I OFFER IT TO YOU, TOO, the Dark One replied. AND TO ALL MEN. YOU WANTED PEACE. I GIVE IT TO YOU. THE PEACE OF THE VOID THAT YOU SO OFTEN SEEK. I GIVE YOU NOTHING AND EVERYTHING.

Rand did not reject the offer immediately. He grasped the offer and cradled it in his mind. No more pain. No more suffering. No more burdens.

An ending. Was that not what he had desired? A way to end the cycles finally?

NO, Rand said. AN END TO EXISTENCE IS NOT PEACE. I MADE THIS CHOICE BEFORE. WE WILL CONTINUE.

The Dark Ones pressure began to surround him again, threatening to rip him apart.

I WILL NOT OFFER AGAIN, the Dark One said.

“I would not expect you to,” Rand said as his body returned and the threads of possibility faded.

Then the true pain began.

Min waited with the gathered Seanchan forces, officers walking down the lines with lanterns to prepare the men. They had not returned to Ebou Dar, but instead had fled through gateways to a large open plain that she did not recognize. Trees with a strange bark and large, open fronds grew here. She could not tell if they were truly trees, or just very large ferns. It was particularly hard to tell because of the wilting; the trees had grown leaves, but now they drooped down at the sides as if they had not seen water in far too many weeks. Min tried to imagine what they would have looked like when healthy.

The air smelled different to her—of plants she did not recognize, and of seawater. The Seanchan forces waited in strict formations of troops, ready to march, each fourth man with a lantern, though only one in ten of those were currently lit. Moving an army could not be done fast, despite gateways, but Fortuona had access to hundreds of *damane*. The retreat had been carried out efficiently, and Min suspected that a return to the battlefield could be accomplished swiftly.

If Fortuona decided to return, that was. The Empress sat atop a pillar in the night, lifted up to it on her palanquin, lit by blue lanterns. It was not a throne, but a pure white pillar, about six feet high, erected on the top of a small hill. Min had a seat next to the pillar, and could hear reports as they arrived.

“This battle is not going well for the Prince of the Ravens,” General Galgan said. He addressed his generals before Fortuona, speaking to them directly, so that they could respond to him without formally addressing the Empress. “His request for us to return came only just now. He has waited far too long to seek our aid.”

“I hesitate to say this,” Yulan said. “But, though the Empress’s wisdom knows no bounds, I do not have confidence in the Prince. He might be the chosen consort of the Empress, and he was obviously a wise choice for that role. He has proven himself reckless in battle, however. Perhaps he is overly strained by what is happening.”

“I’m sure he has a plan,” Beslan said, earnest. “You have to trust Mat. He knows what he’s doing.”

“He impressed me earlier,” Galgan said. “The omens seem to favor him.

“He is losing, Captain-General,” Yulan said. “Losing badly. The omens for a man can change quickly, as can the fortune of a nation.”

Min narrowed her eyes at the short Captain of the Air. He now wore the last two fingernails of each hand lacquered. He had been the one to lead the strike on Tar Valon, and the success of that attack had gained him great favor in Fortuona’s eyes. Symbols and omens spun around his head, like those above Galgan’s—and, indeed, Beslan’s.

Light, Min thought. *Am I really starting to think of “omens” like Fortuona? I need to leave these people. They’re mad.*

“I feel that the Prince views this battle too much as a game,” Yulan said again. “Though his initial gambles were keen ones, he has over extended himself. How many a man has stood around the table of *dactolk* and looked like a genius because of his bets, when really just random chance made him seem capable? The Prince won at first, but now we see how dangerous it is to gamble as he has.”

Yulan inclined his head toward the Empress. His assertions grew increasingly bold, as she gave him no reason to quiet himself. From the Empress, in this situation, that was an indication he should continue.

“I have heard… rumors about him ,” Galgan said.

“Mat’s a gambler, yes,” Beslan said. “But he’s uncannily good at it. He wins, General. Please, you need to go back and help.”

Yulan shook his head emphatically. “The Empress—may she live forever—pulled us away from the battlefield for good reason. If the Prince could not protect his own command post, he is not in control of the battle.”

Bolder and bolder. Galgan rubbed his chin, then looked at another person there. Min didn’t know much of Tylee. She remained quiet at these meetings. With graying hair and broad shoulders, the dark-skinned woman had an indefinable strength to her. This was a general who had led her people directly, in battle, many times. Those scars proved it.

“These mainlanders fight better than I ever assumed they would,” Tylee said. “I fought alongside some of Cauthon’s soldiers. I think they will surprise you, General. I, too, humbly suggest that we return to help.”

“But is it in the best interests of the Empire to do so?” Yulan asked. “Cauthon’s forces will weaken the Shadow, as will the Shadow’s march to Ebou Dar from Merrilor. We can crush the Trollocs with air attacks along the way. The long victory should be our goal. Perhaps we can send *damane* to fetch the Prince and bring him to safety. He has fought well, but he is obviously overmatched in this battle. We cannot save his armies, of course. They are doomed.”

Min frowned, leaning forward. One of the images above Yulan’s head… it was so odd. A chain. Why would he have a chain above his head?

He’s a captive, she thought suddenly. *Light. Someone is playing him like an instrument.*

Mat feared a spy. Min felt cold.

“The Empress, may she live forever, has made her decision,” Galgan said. “We return. Unless her mind, in its wisdom, has been changed… ?” He turned toward her, a questioning look on his face.

Our spy can channel, Min realized, inspecting Yulan. *That man is under Compulsion.*

A channeler. Black Ajah? Darkfriend *damane*? A male Dreadlord? It could be anyone. And the spy would be wearing a weave for disguise, too, in all likelihood.

So, then, how would Min ever spot this spy?

Viewings. Aes Sedai and other channelers always had viewings attached to them. Always. Could she find a clue in one of those? She knew, by instinct, that Yulan’s chain meant he was a captive of another. He wasn’t the true spy, then, but a puppet.

She started with the other nobility and generals. Of course, many of them had omens above their heads, and those types commonly did. How would she spot something out of the ordinary? Min scanned the watching crowd, and her breath caught as she noticed for the first time that one of the *so’jhin,* a youthful woman with freckles, carried an array of images above her head.

Min didn’t recognize the woman. Had she been serving here the whole time? Min was certain she’d have noticed earlier if the woman had come close to her; people who were not channelers, Warders or *ta’veren* rarely had so many images attached to them. Oversight or happenstance, though, she hadn't thought to look specifically at the servants.

Now, the cover-up was obvious to her. Min looked away so as to not raise the servant's suspicions, and considered her next move. Her instincts whispered that she should just attack, take out a knife and throw it. If that servant were a Dreadlord—or, Light, one of the Forsaken—striking first might be the only way to defeat her.

There was also a chance, however, that the woman was innocent. Min debated, then stood up on her chair. Several of the Blood muttered at the breach of decorum, but Min ignored them. She stepped up onto the arm rest of her chair, balancing there to put herself even with Tuon. Min leaned in.

"Mat has asked for us to return," Min said softly. "How long will you debate doing what he asked?"

Tuon eyed her. "Until I am convinced this is best for my Empire."

"He is your husband."

"One man's life is not worth that of thousands," Tuon said, but she sounded genuinely troubled. "If the battle really does go as badly as Yulan's scouts say…"

"You named me Truthspeaker," Min said. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It is your duty to censure me in public, if I do something wrong. However, you are untrained in the station. It would be best for you to hold yourself back until I can provide proper—"

Min turned to face the generals and the watching crowd, her heart beating frantically. "As Truthspeaker to the Empress Fortuona, I speak now the truth. She has abandoned the armies of humankind, and she withholds her strength in a time of need. Her pride will cause the destruction of all people, everywhere."

The Blood looked stunned.

"It is not so simple, young woman," General Galgan said. From the looks others gave him, it seemed he wasn't supposed to debate a Truthspeaker. He barreled forward anyway. "This is a complex situation."

"I would be more sympathetic," Min said, "if I didn't know there was a spy for the Shadow among us."

The freckled *so'jhin* looked up sharply.

I have you, Min thought, then pointed at General Yulan. "Abaldar Yulan, I denounce you! I have seen omens that prove to me you are not acting in the interests of the Empire!”

The real spy relaxed, and Min caught a hint of a smile on her lips. That was good enough. As Yulan protested loudly the accusation, Min dropped a knife into her hand and whipped it toward the woman.

It flipped end over end—but just before hitting the woman, it stopped and hung in the air.

Nearby *damane* and *sul’dam* gasped. The spy shot Min a hateful glare, then opened a gateway, throwing herself through. Weaves shot after her, but she was gone before most of the people at the meeting realized what was happening.

“I’m sorry, General Yulan,” Min announced, “but you are suffering from Compulsion. Fortuona, it is obvious that the Shadow is doing whatever it can to keep us from this battle. With that in mind, will you *still* pursue this course of indecision?”

Min met Tuon’s eyes.

“You play these games quite well,” Tuon whispered, voice cold. “And to think that I worried for your safety by bringing you into my court. I should have worried for myself, it appears.” Tuon sighed, ever so softly. “I suppose you give me the opportunity… perhaps the mandate ... to follow what my heart would choose, whether or not it is wise.” She stood. “General Galgan, gather your troops. We will return to the Field of Merrilor.”

Egwene wove Earth and destroyed the boulders behind which the Sharans had hidden. The other Aes Sedai struck immediately, hurling weaves through the crackling air. The Sharans died in fire, lightning and explosions.

This side of the Heights was so piled with rubble and scarred with trenches it looked like the remains of a city following a terrible earthquake. It was still night, and they had been fighting… Light, how long had it been since Gawyn died? Hours upon hours.

Egwene redoubled her efforts, refusing to let the thought of him pull her down. Over the hours, her Aes Sedai and the Sharans had fought back and forth across the western side of the Heights. Slowly, Egwene was pushing them eastward.

At times, Egwene’s side had seemed to be winning, but lately, more and more Aes Sedai fell from the effects of fatigue or the One Power.

Another group of channelers approached through the smoke, drawing on the One Power. Egwene could sense them more than see them.

“Deflect their weaves!” Egwene yelled, standing at the forefront. “I will attack, you defend!”

Other women took up the call, yelling it along their battle line. No longer did they fight in pockets alone; women of all Ajahs lined up to either side of Egwene, concentration on their ageless faces. Warders stood in front of them; using their bodies to stop weaves was the only protection they could offer.

Egwene felt Leilwin approaching from behind. The new Warder took her duties seriously. A Seanchan, fighting as her Warder in the Last Battle. Why not? The world itself was unraveling. The cracks all around Egwene’s feet proved that. Those had not faded, as earlier ones had—the darkness remained. Balefire had been used too much in this area.

Egwene launched a wave of fire like a moving wall. Corpses went up in flames as the wall passed, leaving behind smoking piles of bones. Her attack scored the ground, blackening it, and the Sharans banded together to fight back against the weave. She killed a few of them before they shattered the attack.

The other Aes Sedai deflected or destroyed their return weaves, and Egwene gathered her strength to try again. *So tired...* a piece of her whispered. *Egwene, you’re so tired. This is becoming dangerous.*

Leilwin stepped up, stumbling on broken rock but joining her at the front. “I bring word, Mother,” she said in that Seanchan drawl. “The Asha’man have recovered the seals. Their leader carries them.”

Egwene let out a relieved breath. She wove Fire and sent it forth in pillars this time, the flames illuminating the broken ground around them. Those cracks that M’Hael had caused worried her deeply. She began another weave, then stopped. Something was wrong.

She spun around as balefire—a column as wide as a man’s arm—ripped through the Aes Sedai line, vaporizing half a dozen women. Explosions all around appeared as if from nowhere, and other women went from battle to death in a heartbeat.

The balefire burned away women who had stopped weaves from killing us… but those women had been removed from the Pattern before they could weave those, and could no longer have stopped the Sharan attacks. Balefire burned a thread backward in the Pattern.

The chain of events was catastrophic. Sharan channelers who had been dead were now alive again, and they surged forward—men clawing across the broken ground like hounds, women walking in linked groups of four or five. Egwene sought out the source of the balefire. She had never seen such an immense bar of it, so powerful it must have burned threads a few hours back.

She found M'Hael standing atop the Heights, the air warped in a bubble around him. Black tendrils—like moss or lichen—crept out of gaps in the rock around him. A spreading sickness. Darkness, nothing. It would consume them all.

Another bar of balefire burned a hole through the ground and touched women, making their forms glow, then vanish. The air itself *broke*, like a bubble of force that exploded from M'Hael. The storm from before returned, stronger.

"I thought that I'd taught you to run," Egwene snarled, climbing to her feet and gathering her power. At her feet, the ground cracked and opened into nothing.

Light! She could feel the emptiness in that hole. She began a weave, but another strike of balefire coursed across the battlefield, killing women she loved. The trembling underfoot threw Egwene to the ground. Screams grew loud as Sharan attacks slaughtered Egwene's followers. Aes Sedai scattered, seeking safety.

The cracks on the ground spread, as if the top of the Heights here had been hit by a hammer.

Balefire. She needed her own. It was the only way to fight him! She rose to her knees and began crafting the forbidden weave, though her heart lurched as she did it.

NO. Using balefire would only push the world toward destruction.

Then what?

It's only a weave, Egwene. Perrin's words, when he had seen her in the World of Dreams and stopped balefire from hitting him. But it *wasn't* just another weave. There wasn't anything like it.

So exhausted. Now that she'd stopped for a moment, she could feel her numbing fatigue. In its depths, she felt the loss, the bitter loss, of Gawyn's death.

"Mother!" Leilwin said, pulling her shoulder. The woman had stayed with her. "Mother, we must go! The Aes Sedai have broken! The Sharans overrun us."

Ahead, M'Hael saw her. He smiled, striding forward, a scepter in one hand, the other pointed toward her, palm up. What would happen if he burned her away with balefire? The last two hours would vanish. Her rally of the Aes Sedai, the dozens upon dozens of Sharans she had killed…

Just a weave…

No other like it.

That isn't the way it works, she thought. *Two sides to every coin. Two halves to the Power. Hot and cold, light and dark, woman and man.*

If a weave exists, so must its opposite.

M'Hael released balefire, and Egwene did… something. The weave she'd tried before on the cracks, but of a much greater power and scope: a majestic, marvelous weave, a combination of all Five Powers. It slid into place before her. She yelled, releasing it as if from her very soul, a column of pure white that struck M'Hael's weave at its center.

The two canceled one another, like scalding water and freezing water poured together. A powerful flash of light overwhelmed all else, blinding Egwene, but she could *feel* something from what she did. A shoring up of the Pattern. The cracks stopped spreading, and something welled up inside of them, a stabilizing force. A growth, like scab on a wound. Not a perfect fix, but at least a patch.

She yelled, forcing herself to her feet. She would not face him on her knees! She drew every scrap of the Power she could hold, throwing it at the Forsaken with the fury of the Amyrlin.

The two streams of power sprayed light against one another, the ground around M'Hael cracking as the ground near Egwene rebuilt itself. She still did not know what it was she wove. The opposite of balefire. A fire of her own, a weave of light and rebuilding.

The Flame of Tar Valon.

They matched one another, in stasis, for an eternal moment. In that moment, Egwene felt a peace come upon her. The pain of Gawyn's death faded. He would be reborn. The Pattern would continue. The very weave she wielded calmed her anger and replaced it with peace. She reached more deeply into *saidar,*; that glowing comfort that had guided her so long.

And she drew on more of the Power.

Her stream of energy pushed its way through M'Hael's balefire like a sword thrust, spraying the Power aside and traveling right up the stream into M’Hael’s outstretched hand. It pierced the hand and shot through his chest.

The balefire vanished. M’Hael gaped, stumbling, eyes wide, and then he crystallized from the inside out, as if freezing in ice. A multihued, beautiful crystal grew from him. Uncut and rough, as if from the core of the earth itself. Somehow Egwene knew that the Flame would have had much less effect on a person who had not given himself to the Shadow.

She clung to the Power she’d held. She had pulled in too much. She knew that if she released her grip, she would leave herself burned out, unable to channel another drop. The Power surged through her in this last moment.

Something trembled far to the north. Rand’s fight continued. The gaps in the land expanded. M’Hael and Demandred's balefire had done its work. The world here was crumbling. Black lines radiated across the Heights, and her mind’s eye saw them opening, the land shattering, and a void appearing here that sucked into it all life.

“Watch for the light,” Egwene whispered.

“Mother?” Leilwin still knelt beside her. Around them, hundreds of Sharans picked themselves up off the ground.

“Watch for the light, Leilwin,” Egwene said. “As the Amyrlin Seat, I command you—find the seals of the Dark One’s prison and *break* them. Do it the moment the light shines. Only then can it save us.”

“But . . ”

Egwene wove a gateway and wrapped Leilwin in Air, shoving her through to safety. As she went, Egwene released the woman’s bond, severing their brief tie.

“No!” Leilwin cried.

The gateway closed. Black cracks into nothingness expanded all around Egwene as she faced the hundreds of Sharans. Her Aes Sedai had fought with strength and valor, but those Sharan channelers still remained. They surrounded her, some timid, others smiling in triumph.

She closed her eyes and drew in the power. More than a woman should be able to, more than was right. Far beyond safety, far beyond wisdom. This *sa’angreal* had no buffer to prevent this.

Her body was spent. She offered it up and became a column of light, releasing the Flame of Tar Valon into the ground beneath her and high into the sky. The Power left her in a quiet, beautiful explosion, washing across the Sharans and sealing the cracks created by her fight with M'Hael.

Egwene's soul separated from her collapsing body and rested upon that wave, riding it into the Light.

Egwene died.

Rand screamed in denial, in rage, in sorrow.

"Not her! NOT HER!"

THE DEAD ARE MINE.

"Shaitan!" Rand yelled. "Not her!"

I WILL KILL THEM ALL, ADVERSARY.

Rand bent over, squeezing his eyes shut. *I will protect you,* he thought. *Whatever else happens, I will see you safe, I swear it. I swear it.. .*

Oh, Light. Egwene's name joined the list of the dead. That list continued to grow, thundering in his mind. His failures. So many failures.

He should have been able to save them.

The Dark One's attacks persisted, trying to rip Rand apart and crush him all at once.

Oh, Light. Not Egwene.

Rand closed his eyes and collapsed, barely holding back the next attack.

Darkness enclosed him.

Leane raised her arm, shading her eyes against the magnificent burst of light. It washed the hillside of its darkness and—for a moment—left only brilliance. Sharans froze in place, casting shadows behind them as they crystallized.

The column of power rose high in the air, a beacon, then faded.

Leane dropped to her knees, one hand resting on the ground to steady herself. A blanket of crystals coated the ground, growing over broken rock, coating the scarred landscape. Where cracks had opened, they were now filled with crystal, looking like tiny rivers.

Leane climbed to her feet and crept forward, passing the Sharans frozen in crystal, dead in time.

At the very center of the explosion, Leane found a column of crystal as wide as an ancient leatherleaf tree, rising some fifty feet in the air. Frozen at its center was a fluted rod, Vora’s *sa’angreal*. There was no sign of the Amyrlin herself, but Leane knew.

“The Amyrlin Seat has fallen,” a nearby Aes Sedai cried amid the crystallized Sharans. “The Amyrlin Seat has fallen!”

Thunder rumbled. Berelain looked up from the side of the bed, then stood, Galad’s hand slipping from hers as she walked to the window set in the stone wall.

The sea churned and broke against the rocks outside, roaring, as if in anger. Perhaps pain. White foam sprayed, violent, toward clouds where lightning cast a fractured light. While she watched, those clouds grew thicker in the night, if that was possible. Darker.

Dawn was still an hour off. The clouds were so black, though, she knew she would not see the sun when it rose. She went back to Galad’s side, sat down and took his hand. When would an Aes Sedai come to Heal him? He was still unconscious, save for nightmare whispers. He twisted, and something sparkled at his neck.

Berelain reached under his shirt, taking out a medallion. It was in the shape of a fox’s head. She rubbed her finger across it.

“ . . back to Cauthon…” Galad whispered, eyes closed. “… Hope . . ”

Berelain thought for a moment, feeling that darkness outside as if it were the Dark One’s own, smothering the land and crawling in through windows, under doors. She rose, left Galad and walked quickly away, carrying the medallion.

“The Amyrlin Seat is dead,” Arganda reported.

Blood and bloody ashes, Mat thought. *Egwene. Not Egwene too?* It hit him like a punch to the face.

“What’s more,” Arganda continued, “the Aes Sedai report that they have lost over half their numbers. The ones remaining claim… and this is a quote… that they ‘couldn’t channel enough of the One Power to lift a feather.’ They’re out of the battle.”

Mat grunted. “How many of the Sharan channelers did they take?” he asked, bracing himself.

“All of them.”

Mat looked at Arganda and frowned. “What?”

“All of the channelers,” Arganda said. “All the ones that were fighting the Aes Sedai.”

“That’s something,” Mat said. But Egwene…

No. No thinking of that right now. She and her people had stopped the Sharan channelers.

The Sharans and Trollocs fell back from the front lines to regroup. Mat took the opportunity to do the same.

His forces—what remained of them—were strung out across the Heights. He had joined together everyone he had left. The Borderlanders, the Dragonsworn, Loial and the Ogier, Tam’s troops, the Whitecloaks, soldiers of the Band of the Red Hand. They fought hard, but their foe greatly outnumbered them. It was bad enough when they just had the Sharans to contend with, but once the Trollocs had broken through on the eastern edge of the Heights, they were forced to defend themselves on two fronts. Over the past hour they had been pushed back more than a thousand paces, in a northerly direction, and their back ranks had almost reached the end of the plateau.

This would be the last push. The end of the battle. With the Sharan channelers gone, Mat would not be wiped out immediately, but Light… there were still so many *bloody* Trollocs left. Mat had danced this dance well. He knew he had. But there was only so much a man could do. Even Tuon’s return might not be enough, if it came.

Arganda handled reports from the other areas of the battlefield—the man was wounded badly enough he could not fight, and there was no one with enough of the Power left to spare for Healing. He did his job well. Good man. Mat could have used him in the Band.

The Trollocs gathered for their push, again moving bodies out of the way, forming into fists with Myrddraal leading them. That would give Mat five or ten minutes to get ready. Then it would come.

Lan walked over, expression grim. “What would you have my men do, Cauthon?”

“Get ready to fight those Trollocs,” Mat said. “Has anyone checked with Mayene lately? Now would be a wonderful time to get back a few ranks of men who have been Healed.”

“I will check on it for you,” Lan said. “And then I will prepare my men.”

Mat dug in his saddlebags as Lan withdrew. He pulled out Rand’s banner, the one of the ancient Aes Sedai. He’d gathered it earlier, thinking perhaps it might have some use. “Somebody hoist this thing up. We’re fighting in Rand’s bloody name. Let’s show the Shadow we’re proud of it.”

Dannil took the banner, finding a spear to use as a pole. Mat took a deep breath. The way the Borderlanders spoke, they thought this would end in a glorious, heroic, suicidal charge. That was how Thom’s songs always ended… the kinds of songs Mat had hoped to never find himself in. Faint hope that was, now.

Think, think. In the distance, the Trolloc horns started blowing. Tuon had delayed. Was she going to come? He hoped, secretly, she would not. With the battle going so poorly, even the Seanchan might not be enough.

He needed an opening. *Come on, luck!* Another gateway opened, and Arganda went to collect the messenger’s report. Mat did not need to hear to realize the kind of news it was, as when Arganda returned, he was frowning.

“All right,” Mat said, sighing. “Give me your news.”

“The Queen of Andor is dead,” Arganda said.

Bloody Ashes! Not Elayne! Mat felt a lurch inside. *Rand… I'm sorry.* “Who leads there? Bashere?”

“Dead,” Arganda said. “And his wife. They fell during an attack against the Andoran pikemen. We’ve lost six Aiel clan chiefs as well. Nobody leads the Andorans or the Aiel at the riverbed. They’re crumbling fast.”

“This is the end!” Demandred’s augmented voice washed across Mat from the other end of the plateau. “Lews Therin has abandoned you! Cry out to him as you die. Let him feel your pain.”

They had arrived at the last few moves in their game, and Demandred had played well. Mat looked over his army of exhausted troops, many of them wounded. There was no denying it, they were in a desperate situation.

“Send for the Aes Sedai,” Mat said. “I don’t care if they say they can’t lift a feather. Maybe when it comes down to their lives, they’ll find a little strength for a fireball here and there. Besides, their Warders can still fight.” Arganda nodded. Nearby, a gateway opened, and two beleaguered-looking Asha’man stumbled out. Naeff and Neald bore scorch marks on their skins, and Naeff’s Aes Sedai was not with them.

“Well?” Mat asked the three.

“It is done,” Neald said with a growl.

“What of Tuon?”

“They found the spy, apparently,” Naeff said. “The Empress is waiting to return on your mark.”

Mat breathed in, tasting the battlefield air, feeling the rhythm of the fighting he had set up. He didn't know if he could win, even with Tuon. Not with Elayne's army in disarray, not with the Aes Sedai weakened to the point of being unable to channel. Not without Egwene, her Two Rivers stubbornness, her iron backbone. Not without a miracle.

"Send for her, Naeff," Mat said. He called for paper and a pen, and scribbled a note, which he handed off to the Asha'man. He shoved aside the selfish desire to let Tuon fly to safety. Bloody ashes, there was no safety, not anywhere. "Give this to the Empress, Naeff; tell her these instructions must be followed exactly."

Then Mat turned to Neald. "I want you to go to Talmanes," he said. "Have him move forward with the plan."

The two channelers left, off to deliver their messages.

"Will it be enough?" Arganda asked.

"No," Mat said.

"Then why?"

"Because I'll be a Darkfriend before I'll let this battle go without trying everything, Arganda."

"Lews Therin!" Demandred boomed. "Come face me! I know you watch this battle! Join it! Fight!"

"I sure am growing tired of that man," Mat said.

"Cauthon, look, those Trollocs have regrouped," Arganda said. "I think they are about to attack."

"Then this is it; lets form up," Mat said. "Where is Lan; has he come back yet? I'd hate to do this without him."

Mat turned, scanning the lines for him, as Arganda shouted orders. His attention was drawn back suddenly as Arganda grabbed his arm, pointing toward the Trollocs. Mat felt a chill as he saw in the light of bonfires a lone horseman on a black stallion charge into the right flank of the Trolloc horde, making for the eastern slope of the Heights. Toward Demandred. Lan had gone to fight a war on his own.

The Trollocs ripped at Olver's arm in the night, reaching into the crack, trying to pry him free. Others dug at the sides, and soil streamed in onto him, sticking to the tears on his cheeks and the blood flowing from his scratches.

He couldn’t stop shaking. He also couldn’t make himself move. He trembled, terrified, as the beasts pried at him with filthy fingers, digging closer and closer.

Loial sat on a stump, resting before the battle picked up again.

A charge. Yes, that would be a good way for this to end. Loial felt sore all over. He had read a great deal about battle, and had been in fights before, so he had known what to expect. But knowing a thing and experiencing it were completely different; that was why he’d left the *stedding* in the first place.

After more than a day of nonstop fighting, his limbs burned with a deep, inner fatigue. When he raised his axe, the head felt so heavy he wondered why it didn’t break the shaft.

War. He could have lived his life without experiencing this. It was so much more than the frantic battle at the Two Rivers had been. There, at least, they’d had time to remove the dead and care for their wounded. There, it had been a matter of standing firm and holding against waves of attacks.

Here, there was no time to wait, no time to think. Erith sat down on the ground beside his stump, and he put a hand on her shoulder. She closed her eyes and leaned against him. She was beautiful, with perfect ears and wonderful eyebrows. Loial did not look at the bloodstains on her clothing; he feared some of it was hers. He rubbed her shoulder with fingers so tired he could barely feel them.

Loial had taken some notes on the battlefield, for himself and for others, to keep track of how the battle had gone so far. Yes, a final attack. That would make for a good ending to the story, once he wrote it.

He pretended that he would still write the story. There was no harm to such a little lie.

One rider burst from the ranks of their soldiers, galloping toward the Trolloc right flank. Mat would not be happy about that. One man, alone, would die. Loial was surprised that he could feel sorrow for that man’s life lost, after all of the death he had seen.

That man looks familiar, Loial thought. Yes, it was the horse. He’d seen that horse before, many times. *Lan,* he thought, numb. *Lan is the one riding out alone.*

Loial stood.

Erith looked up at him as he shouldered his axe.

“Wait,” Loial said to her. “Fight alongside the others. I must go.”

“Go?”

“I need to witness this,” Loial said. The fall of the last king of the Malkieri. He would need to include it in his book.

“Prepare to charge!” Arganda yelled. “Men, form up! Archers at the front, cavalry next, foot soldiers prepare to come up behind!”

A charge, Tam thought. *Yes, that is our only hope.* They had to continue their push, but their line was so thin. He could see what Mat had been trying, but it wasn’t going to work.

They needed to fight it through anyway.

“Well, *he* is dead,” a mercenary said from near Tam, nodding toward Lan Mandragoran as he rode toward the Trolloc flank. “Bloody Borderlanders.”

“Tam…” Abell said from beside him.

Above them, the sky grew darker. Was that possible, at night? Those terrible, boiling clouds seemed to come lower and lower. Tam almost lost Lan’s figure atop the midnight stallion, despite the bonfires burning on the Heights. Their light seemed feeble.

He’s riding for Demandred, Tam thought. *But there’s a wall of Trollocs in the way.* Tam took out an arrow with a resin-soaked rag tied behind the head and nocked it into his bow. “Two Rivers men, prepare to fire!”

The mercenary nearby laughed. “That’s a hundred paces at least! You’ll fill him with arrows if anything.”

Tam eyed the man, then took his arrow and thrust the end into a torch. The bundled rag behind the head came alight with fire. “First rank, on my signal!” Tam yelled, ignoring the other orders that came down the line. “Let’s give Lord Mandragoran a little something to guide his way!”

Tam drew in a fluid motion, the burning rag warming his fingers, and loosed.

Lan charged toward the Trollocs. His lance, and its three replacements, had all shattered hours ago. At his neck, he wore the cold medallion that Berelain had sent through the gateway with a simple note.

I do not know how Galad ended up with this, but I believe he wished me to send it to Cauthon.

Lan did not consider what he was doing. The void did not allow such things. Some men would call it brash, foolhardy, suicidal. The world was rarely changed by men who were unwilling to try being at least one of the three. He sent what comfort he could to distant Nynaeve through the bond, then prepared to fight.

As Lan neared the Trollocs, the beasts set up a spear line to stop him. A horse would impale itself trying to push through that. Lan drew in breath, calm within the void, planning to slice the head off the first spear, then ram his way through the line.

It was an impossible maneuver. All the Trollocs would need to do was squeeze together and slow him. After that, they could overwhelm Mandarb and pull Lan from the saddle.

But someone had to destroy Demandred. With the medallion at his neck, Lan raised his sword.

A flaming arrow streaked down from the sky and hit the throat of the Trolloc right in front of Lan. Without hesitation, Lan used the fallen Trolloc as an opening in the line of spears. He crashed between the Shadowspawn, trampling the fallen one. He would need to—

Another arrow fell, dropping a Trolloc. Then another fell, and another, in quick succession. Mandarb crashed through the confused, burning and dying Trollocs as an entire *rain* of burning arrows dropped in front of him. “Malkier!” Lan yelled, heeling Mandarb forward, trampling corpses but maintaining speed as the way opened. A hail of light dropped before him, each arrow precise, killing a Trolloc that tried to stand before him.

He thundered through the ranks, shoving aside dying Trollocs, flaming arrows guiding his way in the darkness like a roadway. The Trollocs stood thick on either side, but those in front of him dropped and dropped until there were no more.

Thank you, Tam.

Lan cantered his steed along the eastern slope of the Heights, alone now, past the soldiers, past the Shadowspawn. He was one with the breeze that streamed through his hair, one with the sinewy animal beneath him that carried him forward, one with the target that was his destination, his fate.

Demandred stood at the sound of the hoofbeats, his Sharan companions rising in front of him.

With a roar, Lan heeled Mandarb into the Sharans that blocked his path. The stallion leaped, front legs driving the guards before him into the ground. Mandarb wheeled around, his haunches knocking down more Sharans, his forelegs coming down on yet others.

Lan threw himself from the saddle—Mandarb had no protection against channeling, and so to fight from horseback would be to invite Demandred to kill his mount—and hit the ground at a run, sword out.

"Another one?" Demandred roared. "Lews Therin, you are beginning to —"

He cut off as Lan reached him and flung himself into Thistledown Floats on the Whirlwind, a tempestuous, offensive sword form. Demandred whipped his sword up, catching the blow on his weapon and skidding backward a step at the force of it. They exchanged three blows, quick as cracks of lightning, Lan still in motion until the last blow caught Demandred on the cheek. Lan felt a slight tug, and a blood sprayed into the air.

Demandred felt at the wound in his cheek, and his eyes opened wider. "Who are *you!*" Demandred asked.

"I am the man who will kill you."

Min looked up from the back of her *torm* as it loped toward the gateway back to the battlefield at Merrilor. She hoped it would withstand the battle frenzy when they got there. Bonfires and torches shone in the distance, fireflies illuminating scenes of valor and determination. She watched the lights flicker, the last embers of a fire that would soon be extinguished.

Rand trembled, distant, far to the north.

The Pattern spun around Rand, forcing him to watch. He looked through eyes streaming with tears. He saw the people struggle. He saw them fall. He saw Elayne, captive and alone, a Dreadlord preparing to rip their children from her womb. He saw Rhuarc, his mind forfeit, now a pawn of one of the Forsaken.

He saw Mat, desperate, facing down horrible odds.

He saw Lan riding to his death.

Demandred's words dug at him. The Dark One's pressure continued to tear at him.

Rand had failed.

But in the back of his mind, a voice. Frail, almost forgotten.

Let go.

Lan held nothing back.

He did not fight as he had trained Rand to fight. No careful testing, no judging the terrain, no careful evaluation. Demandred could channel, and despite the medallion, Lan couldn't give his enemy time to think, time to weave and hurl rocks at him or open the ground beneath him.

Lan burrowed deeply into the void, allowing instincts to guide him. He went beyond lack of emotions, burning away everything. He did not need to judge the terrain, for he felt the land as if it were part of him. He did not need to test Demandred's strength. One of the Forsaken, with many decades of experience, would be the most skilled swordsman Lan had ever faced.

Lan was vaguely aware of the Sharans spreading out to make a broad circle around the two combatants as they fought. Apparently Demandred was confident enough of his skills that he did not allow interference from others.

Lan spun into a sequence of attacks. Water Flows Downhill became Whirlwind on the Mountain which became Hawk Dives into the Brush. His forms were like streams blending into a larger and larger river. Demandred fought as well as Lan had feared. Though the man's forms were slightly different from those Lan knew, the years had not changed the nature of a swordfight.

"You are… good…" Demandred said with a grunt, falling back before Wind and Rain, a line of blood dripping from his chin. Lan's sword flashed in the air, reflecting the red light of a bonfire nearby.

Demandred came back with Striking the Spark, which Lan anticipated, countering. He took a scratch along the side, but ignored it. The exchange set Lan back a step, and gave Demandred the chance to pick up a rock with the One Power and hurl it at Lan.

Deep within the void, Lan felt the stone coming. It was an understanding of the fight—one that ran deeply into him, to the very core of his soul. The way Demandred stepped, the direction his eyes flickered, told Lan exactly what was coming.

As he flowed into his next sword form, Lan brought his weapon up across his chest and stepped backward. A stone the size of a man's head passed directly in front of him. Lan flowed forward, arm moving into his next form as another stone flew under his arm, tugging wind with it. Lan raised his sword and flowed around the path of a third stone, which missed him by a thumb's width, rippling his clothing.

Demandred blocked Lan's attack, but he breathed hoarsely. "Who *are* you?" Demandred whispered again. "No one of this Age has such skill. Asmodean? No, no. He couldn't have fought me like this. Lews Therin? It *is* you behind that face, isn't it?"

"I am just a man," Lan whispered. "That is all I have ever been."

Demandred growled, then launched an attack. Lan responded with Stones Falling Down the Mountain, but Demandred's fury forced him back a few steps.

Despite Lan's initial offensive, Demandred was the better swordsman. Lan knew this by the same sense that told him when to strike, when to parry, when to step and when to withdraw. Perhaps if they had come to the fight evenly, it would be different. They had not. Lan had been fighting for an entire day, and though he'd been Healed from his worst wounds, the smaller ones still ached. Beyond that, a Healing in and of itself was draining.

Demandred was still fresh. The Forsaken stopped talking and engrossed himself in the duel. He also stopped using the One Power, focused only on his swordplay. He did not grin as he took the advantage. He did not seem like a man who grinned very often.

Lan slipped away from Demandred, but the Forsaken pressed forward with Boar Rushes Down the Mountain, again pushing Lan back to the perimeter of the circle, battering at his defenses, cutting him on the arm, then the shoulder, then finally the thigh.

I've only time for one last lesson…

"I have you," Demandred finally growled, breathing heavily. "Whoever you are, *I have you.* You cannot win."

"You didn't listen to me," Lan whispered.

One last lesson. The hardest…

Demandred struck, and Lan saw his opening. Lan lunged forward, placing Demandred's sword point against his own side and ramming himself forward onto it.

"I did not come here to win," Lan whispered, smiling. "I came here to kill you. Death is lighter than a feather."

Demandred's eyes opened wide, and he tried to pull back. Too late. Lan’s sword took him straight through the throat.

The world grew dark as Lan slipped backward off the sword. He felt Nynaeve's fear and pain as he did, and he sent his love to her.

* * *

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CHAPTER 38

The Place That Was Not

Rand saw Lan fall, and it sent a spasm of anguish through him. The Dark One pressed in around Rand. Swallowing him, shredding him. Fighting that attack was too hard. Rand was spent.

Let go. His fathers voice.

“I have to save them…” Rand whispered.

Let them sacrifice. You can’t do this yourself.

“I have to… That’s what it means…” The Dark One’s destruction crawled on him like a thousand crows, picking at his flesh, pulling it from his bones. He could barely think through the pressure and the sense of loss. The death of Egwene and so many others.

Let go.

It is their choice to make.

He wanted so badly to protect them, the people who believed in him. Their deaths, and the danger they faced, were an enormous weight upon him. How could a man just ... let go? Wasn’t that letting go of responsibility?

Or was it giving the responsibility to them?

Rand squeezed his eyes shut, thinking of all those who had died for him. Of Egwene, whom he had sworn to himself to protect.

You fool. Her voice in his head. Fond, but sharp.

“Egwene?”

Am I not allowed to be a hero, too?

“It’s not that . .”

You march to your death. Yet you forbid anyone else from doing so?

“I . . ”

Let go, Rand. Let us die for what we believe, and do not try to steal that from us.

You have embraced your death. Embrace mine.

Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Why?

"I've failed."

No. Not yet you haven't.

The Dark One flayed him. He huddled before that vast nothingness, unable to move. He screamed in agony.

And then, he let go.

He let go of the guilt. He let go of the shame for having not saved Egwene and all the others. He let go of the need to protect her, to protect all of them.

He let them be heroes.

Names streamed from his head. Egwene, Hurin, Bashere, Isan of the Chareen Aiel, Somara and thousands more. One by one—first slowly, but with increasing speed—he counted backward through the list he had once maintained in his head. The list had once been only women, but had grown to include everyone he knew had died for him. He hadn't realized how large it had become, how much he had let himself carry.

The names *ripped* from him like physical things, like doves aflight, and each one carried away a burden. Weight vanished from his shoulders. His breathing grew steadier. It was as if Perrin had come with his hammer and shattered a thousand chains that had been dragging behind Rand.

Ilyena was last. *We are reborn,* Rand thought, *so we can do better the next time.*

So do better.

He opened his eyes and placed his hand before him, palm against blackness that felt solid. His self that had fuzzed, becoming indistinct as the Dark One ripped at it, pulled together. He placed his other arm down, then heaved himself to his knees.

And then, Rand al'Thor—the Dragon Reborn—stood up once again to face the Shadow.

"No, no," the beautiful Shendla whispered, looking down at Demandred's body. Her heart sank down inside of her and she tore at her hair with both hands, her body swaying. As she gazed on her beloved, Shendla slowly drew breath deep into her chest, and when it released, it was a fearful shriek: "Bao the Wyld is dead!"

The entire battlefield seemed to grow still.

Rand faced the Dark One in that place that was *not*, surrounded by all time and nothing at the same time. His body still stood in the cave of Shayol Ghul, locked into that moment of battle against Moridin, but his soul was here.

He existed in this place that was not, this place outside of the Pattern, this place where evil was born. He looked into it, and he knew it. The Dark One was not a being, but a force—an essence as wide as the universe itself, which Rand could now see in complete detail. Planets, stars in their multitudes, like the motes above a bonfire.

The Dark One still strove to destroy him. Rand felt strong despite the attacks. Relaxed, complete. With his burdens gone, he could fight again. He held himself together. It was difficult, but he was victorious.

Rand stepped forward.

The Darkness shuddered. It quivered, vibrated, as if disbelieving.

I DESTROY THEM.

The Dark One was not a being. It was the darkness between. Between lights, between moments, between eyeblinks.

ALL IS MINE THIS TIME. IT WAS EVER MEANT TO BE. IT WILL EVER BE.

Rand saluted those who died. The blood running across rocks. The weeping of those who witnessed others fall. The Shadow threw all of it at Rand, intent on Rand's destruction. But it did not destroy him.

“We will never give in,” Rand whispered. “I will never give in.”

The vast Shadow thundered and shook. It sent jolts through and across the world. The ground rent, the laws of nature fractured. Swords turned against their owners, food spoiled, rock turned to mud.

It came upon Rand again, the force of nothingness itself trying to pull him apart. The strength of the attack did not lessen. And yet, suddenly, it felt like an idle buzzing.

They would not give up. It wasn’t just about Rand. All of them would keep fighting. The Dark One’s attacks lost meaning. If they could not make him yield, if they could not make him relent, then what were they?

Within the tempest, Rand sought the void as Tam had taught him. All emotion, all worry, all pain. He took it and fed it into the flame of a single candle.

He felt peace. The peace of a single drop of water hitting a pond. The peace of moments, the peace between eyeblinks, the peace of the void.

“I will not give up,” he repeated, and the words seemed a wonder to him.

I CONTROL THEM ALL. I BREAK THEM BEFORE ME. YOU HAVE LOST, CHILD OF HUMANKIND.

“If you think that,” Rand whispered into the darkness, “then it is because you cannot see.”

Loial was panting hard when he returned to the northern end of the Heights. He gave the news to Mat, about how Lan had fought so bravely before he went down, taking Demandred with him. Loial’s report affected Mat deeply, as it did all members of his army, particularly the Borderlanders who had lost a king, a brother. There was a disturbance among the Sharans as well; somehow, news of Demandred's death was already percolating through their ranks.

Mat forced down his grief. That wasn’t what Lan would have wanted. Instead, Mat raised his *ashandarei*. “*Tai’shar Malkier!*” he screamed with all the force he could. “Lan Mandragoran, you bloody wonderful man! You did it!”

His shouts rang in the silence as he charged toward the Shadow armies. Shouts rang behind him: “*Tai’shar Malkier!*” Shouts from all nationalities, all peoples, Borderlander and not. They surged across the Heights alongside Mat. Together, they attacked the stunned foe.

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CHAPTER 39

Those Who Fight

YOU CANNOT FATHOM IT, CAN YOU? Rand demanded of the darkness. IT IS BEYOND YOU. YOU BREAK US, AND STILL WE FIGHT! WHY? HAVEN’T YOU KILLED US? HAVEN’T YOU RUINED US?

YOU, the Dark One replied. I HAVE YOU.

Rand stepped forward. In this place of nothing, the Pattern seemed to swirl around him like a tapestry. HERE IS YOUR FLAW, SHAITAN—LORD OF THE DARK, LORD OF ENVY! LORD OF NOTHING! HERE IS WHY YOU FAIL! IT WAS NOT ABOUT ME. *IT’S NEVER BEEN ABOUT ME!*

It was about a woman, torn and beaten down, cast from her throne and made a puppet—a woman who had crawled when she had to. That woman still fought.

It was about a man that love repeatedly forsook, a man who found relevance in a world that others would have let pass them by. A man who remembered stories, and who took fool boys under his wing when the smarter move would have been to keep on walking. That man still fought.

It was about a woman with a secret, a hope for the future. A woman who had hunted the truth before others could. A woman who had given her life, then had it returned. That woman still fought.

It was about a man whose family was taken from him, but who stood tall in his sorrow and protected those he could.

It was about a woman who refused to believe that she could not help, could not Heal those who had been harmed.

It was about a hero who insisted with every breath that he was anything but a hero.

It was about a woman who would not bend her back while she was beaten, and who shone with the Light for all who watched. Including Rand.

It was about them all.

He saw this, over and over, in the Pattern arrayed about him. Rand walked through eons and ages, his hand passing through ribbons of the Patterns light.

HERE IS THE TRUTH, SHAITAN, Rand said, taking another step forward, arms out, woven Pattern spreading around them. YOU CANNOT WIN UNLESS WE GIVE UP. THAT’S IT, ISN’T IT? THIS FIGHT ISN’T ABOUT A VICTORY IN BATTLE. TAKING ME… IT WAS NEVER ABOUT BEATING ME. IT WAS ABOUT BREAKING ME.

THAT’S WHAT YOU’VE TRIED TO DO WITH ALL OF US. IT’S WHY AT TIMES YOU TRIED TO HAVE US KILLED, WHILE OTHER TIMES YOU DIDN’T SEEM TO CARE. YOU WIN WHEN YOU BREAK US. BUT YOU HAVEN’T. YOU CAN’T.

The darkness trembled. The nothingness shook, as if the arches of the heavens themselves were cracking. The Dark One’s shout was defiant.

Within the void, Rand continued forward, and the darkness trembled.

I CAN STILL KILL, the Dark One bellowed. I CAN STILL TAKE THEM ALL! I AM LORD OF THE GRAVE. THE BATTLE LORD, HE IS MINE. ALL ARE MINE EVENTUALLY!

Rand stepped forward, hand stretched out. In his palm sat the world, and upon that world a continent, and upon that continent a battlefield, and upon that battlefield two bodies on the ground.

Mat fought, Tam at his side with sword out. Karede and the Deathwatch Guard joined them, then Loial and the Ogier. The armies of a dozen nations and peoples fought, many joining him as he rushed across the plateau.

They were outnumbered three to one.

Mat fought, bellowing in the Old Tongue. *“For the Light! For honor! For glory! For life itself!"*

He slew one Trolloc, then another. Half a dozen in moments, but he felt he was fighting with the surf itself. Wherever he struck down blackness, more took its place. Trollocs moving in the shadows, lit only by the occasional lantern or burning arrow stuck in the ground.

The Trollocs didn’t fight as one. *We can break them,* Mat thought. *We have to break them!* This was his chance. Push now, while the Sharans were dazed at Demandred's fall.

THE SON OF BATTLES. I WILL TAKE HIM. I WILL TAKE THEM ALL, ADVERSARY. AS I TOOK THE KING OF NOTHING.

Blood and Bloody ashes! What was that nothingness in his head? Mat beheaded a Trolloc, then wiped his brow, Karede and the Deathwatch Guards covering him for a moment.

Mat could *feel* the battlefield in the night. There were a lot of Trollocs and Sharans, so many of them.

“There are too many!” Arganda called from nearby. “Light, they’ll overwhelm us! We need to fall back! Cauthon, can you hear me?”

I can do this, Mat thought. *I can win this battle.* An army could defeat superior numbers, but Mat needed momentum, an opening. A favorable toss of the dice.

Rand stood above the Pattern and looked down at the fallen men in a land where hope seemed to have died. “You have not been watching closely enough. About one thing, you are wrong. So very wrong…”

Cornered and alone, a boy huddled in a cleft in the rock. Horrors with knives and fangs—the Shadow itself made flesh—dug at his hiding place, reaching with nails like knives and ripping his skin.

Terrified, crying, bloodied, the boy raised a golden horn to his lips.

Mat squinted, the battle seeming to dim around him.

So very wrong, Shai’tan, Rand’s voice whispered in Mat’s mind.

Then the voice was no longer in Mat’s mind. It could be heard distinctly by everyone on the battlefield.

That one you have tried to kill many times, Rand said, *that one who lost his kingdom, that one from whom you took everything…*

Lurching, bloodied from the sword strike to his side, the last king of the Malkieri stumbled to his feet. Lan thrust his hand into the air, holding by its hair the head of Demandred, general of the Shadow's armies.

That man, Rand shouted. *That man still fights!*

Mat felt the battlefield grow still. All were frozen in place.

At that moment, there rang out a soft but powerful sound, a clear note, golden, one long tone that encompassed everything. The sound of a horn, pure and beautiful.

Mat had heard that sound once before.

Mellar knelt beside Elayne, pressing the medallion against her head to stop her from channeling. “This could have gone in a very different way, my Queen,” he said. “You should have been more accommodating.”

Light. That leer was an awful thing. He had gagged her, of course, but she did not give him the satisfaction of crying.

She *would* find a way to escape this. She had to shake free of the medallion. Of course, if she did, there was still the channeler. But if she could evade the medallion, then strike quickly…

“Pity that your little Captain-General isn’t alive to watch,” Mellar said. “Fool that she was, I really do think she *believed* that she was Birgitte from the legends.” Elayne heard a soft sound in the distance. The ground vibrated. An earthquake.

She tried to concentrate, but she could only think that Birgitte had been right all along. It was fully possible for the babes to be safe, as Min had foretold, while Elayne herself was left dead.

White mist climbed up from the ground around them, like the souls of the dead, curling.

Mellar stiffened, suddenly.

Elayne blinked, looking up at him. Something silvery jutted from the front of Mellar’s chest. It looked like ... an arrowhead.

Mellar turned, knife dropping from his fingers. Behind him, Birgitte Silverbow stood over her corpse, one foot to either side of the headless body. She raised a bow, bright as newly polished silver, and released another arrow, which seemed to trail light as it struck Mellar in the head and pitched him to the ground. Her next shot took Mellar’s channeler, killing the Dreadlord with a silver arrow before the man could respond.

All around them, Mellar’s men stood as if paralyzed, gaping at Birgitte. The clothing she now wore seemed to glow. A short white coat, a voluminous pair of pale yellow trousers and a dark cloak. Her long golden hair hung in an intricate braid, down to her waist.

“I am Birgitte Silverbow,” Birgitte announced, as if to dispel doubt. “The Horn of Valere has sounded, calling all to the Last Battle. The heroes have returned!”

Lan Mandragoran held aloft the head of one of the Forsaken—their battle commander, supposedly invincible.

The Shadow’s army could not ignore what had happened, none of them, wherever they were on the battlefield. The voice that had come out of nowhere had proclaimed it. That the attacker should stand while the Chosen lay dead ... it stunned them. Frightened them.

And then the Horn sounded in the distance.

“Press forward!” Mat yelled. “Press forward!” His army threw themselves ferociously on to the Trollocs and Sharans.

“Cauthon, what was that sound?” Arganda demanded, stumbling up beside Pips. The man still had one arm in a sling and carried a bloodied mace in the other hand. Around Mat, the Deathwatch Guard fought and grunted, cutting down Trollocs.

Mat yelled, throwing himself into the fight. “That was the bloody Horn of Valere! We can still win this night!”

The Horn. How had the bloody Horn been sounded? Well, it looked like Mat wasn’t tied to the thing any longer. His death at Rhuidean must have broken him from it.

Some other unlucky fool could bear that burden now. Mat howled a battlecry, shearing the arm off a Trolloc, then stabbing it through the chest. The Shadow’s entire army became disoriented at the sound of the Horn. Those Trollocs nearest Lan scrambled back, clawing over one another in desperate urgency to escape him. That left the Trollocs fighting along the slope spread thin, without reserves. And nobody seemed to be in charge.

Myrddraal nearby raised swords against their own Trollocs, trying to get those that were fleeing to turn back and fight, but flaming arrows shot by the Two Rivers archers fell from the sky and riddled the Fades’ bodies.

Tam al’Thor, Mat thought, *I’m going to bloody send you my best pair of boots. Light burn me, but I will.* “To me!” Mat shouted. “All riders that can hold a flaming weapon, to *me.*”

Mat kicked Pips into a gallop, shoving his way through Trollocs that were still fighting. Mat's attack opened the way for Furyk Karede and his few remaining men to punch the hole in the horde of Trollocs wider. Following that, the full force of the remaining Borderlanders poured through after Mat, toward Lan.

The Sharan army showed signs of weakening, but they continued their offensive, their discipline forcing them to do what their hearts were calling them to end. Lan's victory wouldn't win the battle outright—there were far too many enemies—but without Demandred, the Shadow had lost direction. Even the Fades were showing the lack of a leader. The Trollocs began to fall back and regroup.

Mat and the Borderlanders galloped southwest across the Heights and came to where Lan was standing. Mat jumped from his horse and grabbed Lan by the shoulder as the Malkieri king faltered. Lan looked at Mat with grim thanks, and then his eyes rolled back in his head and he started to fall, dropping Demandred's head to the ground.

A man in a black coat rode over. Mat hadn't realized that Narishma was still there, fighting alongside the Borderlanders. The Kandori Asha'man threw himself off his horse and took Lan by the other arm, then concentrated.

The brief Healing was enough to bring Lan back to consciousness.

"Get him on a horse, Narishma," Mat said. "You can work on him more when we get back to our army. I don't want to be stuck behind enemy lines if those Trollocs below decide to come back up the Heights."

They rode back northeast, laying into the back of the Trollocs' right flank with swords and lances as they swept past, which unsettled the beasts even more. Once past, the Borderlanders swung their mounts around and charged directly into the Trolloc hordes again, who were looking around in all directions, not sure where the next attack would be coming from. Mat and Narishma continued to ride toward their own back lines, with Lan in tow. Narishma eased the Malkieri off his horse and had him lie on the ground to continue the Healing, while Mat paused to consider their situation.

Behind them, mist gathered. Mat was struck with a terrible thought. He had ignored a terrible possibility. The Horn of Valere still called, a distant—yet unmistakable sound. *Oh, Light,* Mat thought. *Oh, bloody stumps on a battlefield. Who blew it? Which side?*

The fog formed, like worms crawling out of the ground after a rainstorm. It gathered into a billowing cloud, a thunderhead on the ground, and shapes on horses charged down it. Figures of legend. Buad of Albhain, as regal as any queen. Amaresu, holding aloft her glowing sword. Hend the Striker, dark-skinned, a hammer in one hand and a spike in the other.

A figure rode through the mists at the front of the heroes. Tall and imperious, with a nose like a beak, Artur Hawkwing carried Justice, his sword, on his shoulder as he rode. Though the rest of the hundred-odd heroes followed Flawkwing, one broke off in a streak of mist, galloping away. Mat didn’t get a good look at the rider. Who had it been, and where was he going so quickly?

Mat pulled his hat on tighter, nudging Pips forward to meet the ancient king. *I suppose I’ll know which side summoned him,* Mat thought, *if he tries to kill me.* Mat lifted the *ashandarei* across his saddle. Could he fight Artur Hawkwing? Light, could *anyone* beat one of the heroes of the Horn?

“Hello, Hawkwing,” Mat called.

“Gambler,” Hawkwing replied. “Do take better care of what has been allotted you. Almost, I worried we would not be summoned for this fight.”

Mat let out a relaxing breath. “Bloody ashes, Hawkwing! You needn’t have drawn it out like that, you bloody goat-kisser. So you fight for us?”

“Of course we fight for the Light,” Hawkwing said. “We would never fight for the Shadow.”

“But I was told—” Mat began.

“You were told wrong,” Hawkwing said.

“Besides,” Hend said, laughing. “If the other side had been able to summon us, you’d be dead by now!”

“I did die,” Mat said, rubbing at the scar on his neck. “Apparently that tree claimed me.”

“Not the tree, Gambler,” Hawkwing said. “Another moment, one that you cannot remember. It is fitting, as Lews Therin did save your life both times.”

“Remember him,” Amaresu snapped. “I have seen you murmur that you fear his madness, but all the while you forget that every breath you breathe—every step you take—comes at his forbearance. Your life is a gift from the Dragon Reborn, Gambler. Twice over.”

Blood and bloody ashes. Even *dead* women treated him the way Nynaeve did. Where did they learn it? Were there secret lessons?

Hawkwing nodded toward something nearby. Rand’s banner; Dannil still held it aloft. “We arrive here to gather at the banner. We can fight for you because of it, Gambler, and because the Dragon leads you—though he does it from afar. It is enough.”

“Well,” Mat said, looking at the banner, “I guess since you’re here, you can fight the battle now. I’ll pull my men back.”

Hawkwing laughed. “You think we hundred can fight this entire battle?”

“You’re the bloody heroes of the Horn,” Mat said. “That’s what you *do*, isn’t it?”

“We can be defeated,” said pretty Blaes of Matuchin, dancing her horse to the side of Hawkwing’s. Tuon couldn’t be mad if he looked a little at a hero, right? People were supposed to stare at them. “If we are wounded in dire ways, we will have to withdraw and recover in the World of Dreams.”

“The Shadow knows how to incapacitate us,” Hend added. “Bind us hand and foot, and we can do nothing to aid the battle. It doesn’t matter if one is immortal when one cannot move.”

“We can fight well,” Hawkwing said to Mat. “And we will lend you our strength. This is not our war alone. We are just one part of it.”

“Bloody wonderful,” Mat said. That Horn was still sounding. “Then tell me this. If I didn’t blow that thing, and the Shadow didn’t do it… who did?”

Thick Trolloc nails scored Olver’s arm. He kept blowing the Horn through his tears, eyes squeezed shut, in the small cleft in the rocky outcrop.

I'm sorry, Mat, he thought as a dark-haired hand scrabbled for a hold on the Horn. Another grabbed him by the shoulder, nails digging deeply, making blood pulse down his arm.

The Horn was ripped from his hands.

I'm sorry!

The Trolloc yanked Olver upward.

Then dropped him.

Olver tumbled to the ground, dazed, and then jumped as the Horn fell into his lap. He grabbed it, shaking and blinking away his tears.

Shadows churned above. Grunting. What was happening? Cautiously, Olver raised his head, and found someone standing above, one foot planted on either side of him. The figure fought in a blur, facing down a dozen Trollocs at once, his staff whirling this way and that as he defended the boy.

Olver caught sight of the man’s face, and his breath caught. “*Noal?*”

Noal clubbed a Trolloc arm, forcing the creature back, then glanced at Olver and smiled. Though Noal still appeared aged, the *weariness* was gone from his eyes, as if a great burden had been lifted from him. A white horse stood nearby, with a golden saddle and reins, the most magnificent animal that Olver had ever seen.

“Noal, they said you died!” Olver cried.

“I did,” Noal said, then laughed. “The Pattern was not finished with me, son. Sound that Horn! Sound it proudly, Hornsounder!”

Olver did so, blowing the Horn as Noal fought the Trollocs back in a small circle around Olver. Noal. *Noal* was one of the heroes of the Horn!

Galloping horses announced others, come to rescue Olver from the Shadowspawn.

Suddenly, Olver felt a deep warmth. He had lost so many people, but one of them… one… had come back for him.

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CHAPTER 40

Wolfbrother

Elayne’s captors looked at Birgitte, stunned, and Elayne took the moment to jerk her body sideways. She rolled to her knees; her pregnancy made her awkward, but she was hardly incapable. The medallion that Mellar had been holding against her slipped to the ground, and she found the glow of *saidar* awaiting her grasp. She filled herself with the Power, and held her belly.

Her children stirred within. Elayne wove flows of Air, knocking her captors backward. Nearby, Elayne’s Guards, having rallied, burst through Mellar’s soldiers. A few stopped when they saw Birgitte.

“Keep fighting, you daughters and sons of goats!” Birgitte yelled, loosing arrows at the mercenaries. “I might be dead, but I’m still your bloody commander, and you *will* obey orders!”

That spurred them into motion. The rising mist curled upward, fogging the battlefield. It seemed to glow faintly in the darkness. In moments, Elayne’s channeling, Birgitte’s bow, and her Guards’ work sent the remnants of Mellar’s Darkfriend mercenaries running.

Birgitte dropped six of them with arrows as they fled.

“Birgitte,” Elayne said through tears. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” Birgitte turned to her. “Sorry? Why do you mourn, Elayne? I have it all back! My memory has returned.” She laughed. “It is wonderful! I don’t know how you stood me these last few weeks. I moped worse than a child who’d just broken her favorite bow.”

“I… Oh, Light.” Elayne’s insides told her she’d still lost her Warder, and the pain of the bond breaking was not a rational thing. It didn’t matter that Birgitte stood before her. “Perhaps I should bond you again?”

“It would not work,” Birgitte said, waving her hand with a dismissive gesture. “Are you hurt?”

“Nothing but my pride.”

“Lucky for you, but luckier that the Horn was blown when it was.” Elayne nodded.

“I’m going to join the other heroes,” Birgitte said. “You stay here and recover.”

“Light burn *that!*” Elayne said, forcing herself to her feet. “I’m not bloody staying behind now. The babes are all right. I’m riding.”

“Elayne—”

“My soldiers think I’m dead,” Elayne said. “Our lines are breaking, our men dying. They have to see me to know that there is still hope. They won’t know what this mist means. If they have ever needed their queen, this is the moment. Nothing short of the Dark One could stop me from returning now.”

Birgitte frowned.

“You’re not my Warder any longer,” Elayne said. “But you’re still my friend. Will you ride with me?”

“Stubborn fool.”

“I’m not the one who just refused to stay dead. Together?”

“Together,” Birgitte said, nodding.

Aviendha pulled up short, listening to new howls. Those didn’t sound quite like wolves.

The tempest at Shayol Ghul continued. She didn’t know which side was winning. Everywhere lay bodies, some ripped apart by wolves, others still smoldering from attacks of the One Power. The storm winds whipped and raged, though no rain fell, and waves of dust and gravel washed across her.

She could feel channeling from the Pit of Doom, but it was like a quiet pulse, as opposed to the storm that had been the cleansing. Rand. Was he all right? What was happening?

The white clouds brought in by the Windfinders churned among the jet black storm clouds above, swirling together in a massive, writhing pattern above the mountain peak. From what she’d heard of the Windfinders— they had withdrawn up Shayol Ghul to a ledge far above the cave entrance, still working the Bowl of Winds—they were at a breaking point. More than two thirds of their numbers had collapsed from exhaustion. Soon, the storm would consume everything.

Aviendha prowled through the maelstrom, seeking the source of those howls. She didn’t have any other channelers with whom to link, now that Rafela had left to join the Dragonsworn’s last stand at the cavern. Out here, in the valley, different groups killed one another, shifting back and forth. Maidens, Wise Ones, *siswai'aman*, Trollocs, Fades. And wolves; hundreds of them had joined the battle so far. There were also some Domani, Tairens and Dragonsworn—though most of those fought near the path up to Rand.

Something hit the ground beside her, crooning, and she lashed out before thinking. The Draghkar burst into flames like a stick dried by a hundred days of sunlight. She took a deep breath, looking around her. *Howls*. Hundreds upon hundreds of them.

She broke into a run toward those howls, crossing the valley floor. As she did so, someone emerged from the dusty shadows, a wiry man with a gray beard and golden eyes. He was accompanied by a small pack of wolves. They glanced at her, then turned back in the direction they'd been going.

Aviendha stopped. Golden eyes.

"Ho, he who runs with wolves!" she called at the man. "Have you brought Perrin Aybara with you?"

The man froze. He acted like a wolf, careful yet dangerous. "I know of Perrin Aybara," he called back, "but he is not with me. He hunts in another place."

Aviendha walked closer to the man. He watched her, wary, and several of his wolves growled. It did not seem they trusted her or her kind much more than they trusted Trollocs.

"These new howls," she called over the wind, "they are from your… friends?"

"No," the man said, eyes growing distant. "No, not any longer. If you know of women who can channel, Aiel, you should bring them now." He moved off toward the sounds, his pack running with him.

Aviendha followed him, keeping her distance from those wolves, but trusting their senses above her own. They reached a small rise in the floor of the valley, one that she'd seen Ituralde use on occasion for overseeing the defense of the pass.

Pouring out of the pass were scores of dark shapes. Black wolves, the size of small horses. They loped across the rock, and though they were out of her sight, Aviendha knew they were leaving footprints melted into the stone.

Hundreds of wolves attacked the darker shapes, leaping on their backs, but were thrown free. They didn't seem to be doing much good.

The man with the wolves growled.

"Darkhounds?" Aviendha shouted.

"Yes," he called back, bellowing to be heard over the tempest. "This is the Wild Hunt, the worst of their kind. These cannot fall to mortal weapons. The bites of common wolves will not harm them, not permanently."

"Then why do they fight?"

The wolfbrother laughed. "Why do any of us fight? Because we must try to win somehow! Go! Bring Aes Sedai, some of those Asha'man if you can find them! These creatures will roll over your armies as easily as a wave over pebbles!"

The man took off down the slope, his wolves joining him. She understood why they fought. They might not be able to kill the Darkhounds, but they could slow the creatures. And that was their victory here—buying Rand enough time to do what he needed to.

She turned, alarmed, running to gather the others. The sensation of a powerful channeler wielding *saidar* nearby stopped her dead. She spun, looking toward the source of the sensation.

Graendal was *there,* up ahead—just barely visible. She calmly sent deadly weaves at a line of Defenders of the Stone. She had collected a small group of women—Aes Sedai, Wise Ones—and a few guards. The women knelt around her, and had to be feeding her their power, considering the strength of the weaves she unleashed.

Her guards were four Aiel men with black veils, not red. Under Compulsion for certain. Aviendha hesitated, wavering. What of the Darkhounds?

I have to take this chance, she thought. She wove, releasing a ray of blue light into the sky—the sign she, Amys and Cadsuane had agreed upon.

That, of course, alerted Graendal. The Forsaken spun on Aviendha and lashed out with Fire. Aviendha dodged, rolling. A shield came next, trying to cut Aviendha off from the Source. She desperately pulled in as much of the One Power as she could hold, drawing it through the turtle brooch. Cutting a woman off with a shield was like trying to snip a rope with shears — the thicker the rope, the more difficult it was to cut. In this case, Aviendha had taken in enough *saidar* to rebuff the shield.

She gritted her teeth, spinning weaves of her own. Light, she hadn't realized how tired she was. She almost slipped, the threads of the One Power threatening to drift from her control.

She drove them into place by force of will and released a weave of Air and Fire, although she knew that those captives included friends and allies.

They would rather die than be used by the Shadow, she told herself as she dodged another attack. The ground exploded around her, and she dove to the ground.

No. Keep moving.

Aviendha leaped to her feet and ran. That saved her life as lightning began to rain down behind her, its might sprawling her to the ground again.

She came up bleeding from several cuts on her arm, and started making weaves. She had to drop them as a complex weave came near her. Compulsion. If that seized her, Aviendha would become another of the woman's thralls, forced to lend her strength to overthrowing the Light.

Aviendha wove Earth into the ground in front of herself, throwing up chips of rock, dust, smoke. Then she rolled away, seeking a hollow in the ground, peeking out carefully. She held her breath, and did not channel.

The whipping winds cleared the diversion she'd created. Graendal hesitated in the middle of the field. She could not sense Aviendha, who had earlier placed upon herself the weave that masked her ability. If she channeled, Graendal would know, but if she did not she would be safe.

Graendal's Aiel thralls stalked outward, their veils up, searching for Aviendha. Aviendha was tempted to channel right then and there, to end their lives. Any Aiel she knew would thank her for that.

She stayed her hand; she didn't want to give herself away. Graendal was too strong. She could not face the woman alone. But if she waited…

A weave of Air and Spirit attacked Graendal, trying to cut her off from the Source. The woman cursed, spinning. Cadsuane and Amys had arrived.

“Stand! Stand for Andor and the Queen!”

Elayne galloped through groups of pikemen, now in disarray, her hair streaming behind her, shouting with a Power-aided voice. She held aloft a sword, though the Light only knew what she would do with it if she had to swing it.

Men turned as she passed. Some were cut down by Trollocs as they did so. The beasts were pushing through the defenses, reveling in the broken lines and the slaughter.

My men are too far gone, Elayne thought. *Oh, Light. My poor soldiers.* The tale she saw was one of death and despair. The Andoran and Cairhienin pike formations had folded after taking horrible casualties; now men held in little bunches, many scattering, scrambling for their lives. “Stand!” Elayne cried. “Stand with your queen!”

More men stopped running, but they didn’t go back to the fighting. What to do?

Fight.

Elayne attacked a Trolloc. She used the sword, despite just moments ago thinking that she’d be hopeless with it. She was. The boar-headed Trolloc actually looked surprised as she flailed at it.

Fortunately, Birgitte was there, and shot the beast in the forearm as it swung for Elayne. That saved her life, but still didn’t let her kill the blasted thing. Her mount—borrowed from one of her Guardsmen—danced around, keeping the Trolloc from cutting her down, as she tried to stab it. Her sword didn’t move in the direction she willed. The One Power was far more refined a weapon. She would use that if she had to, but she would rather fight for the moment.

She didn’t have to struggle long. Soldiers surrounded her, dispatching the beast and defending her from four others that had begun advancing on her. Elayne wiped her brow and pulled back.

“What was *that?*” Birgitte asked, riding up beside her, then loosing an arrow at a Trolloc before it could kill one of the soldiers. “Ratliff’s nails, Elayne! I thought I’d seen the extent of your foolishness.”

Elayne held up her sword. Nearby, men began to cry out. “The Queen lives!” they yelled. “For Light and Andor! Stand with the Queen!”

“How would you feel,” Elayne said softly, “if you saw your queen trying to kill a Trolloc with a sword as you ran away?”

“I’d feel like I needed to bloody move to another country,” Birgitte snapped, loosing another arrow, “one where the monarchs don’t have pudding for brains.”

Elayne sniffed. Birgitte could say what she wished, but the maneuver worked. Like a bit of yeast, the force of men she’d gathered grew, expanding to either side of her and building a battle line. She kept the sword raised high, shouting, and—after a moment of indecision—created a weave that made a majestic banner of Andor float in the air above her, the red lion to light the night.

That would draw direct fire from Demandred and his channelers, but the men needed the beacon. She would fight off attacks as they came.

They did not, as she rode down the battle lines, shouting words that gave hope to her men. “For Light and Andor! Your Queen lives! Stand and fight!”

Mat thundered forward across the top of the Heights with the remains of a once-great army, pushing southwest. The Trollocs were massed ahead on his left side, the Sharan army ahead on the right. Facing the enemy were the heroes, Borderlanders, Karede and his men, Ogier, Two Rivers archers, Whitecloaks, Ghealdanin and Mayeners, mercenaries, Tinna and her Dragonsworn refugees. And the Band of the Red Hand. His own men.

He remembered, within those memories that were not his, leading forces far grander. Armies that were not fragmented, half-trained, wounded and exhausted. But Light help him, he had never been so proud. Despite all that had happened, his men took up the shouts of attack and threw themselves into the battle with renewed vigor.

Demandred's death gave Mat a chance. He felt the armies surging, and through them flowed that instinctive rhythm of the battle. This was the moment he had been seeking. It was the card upon which to bet everything he had. Ten to one odds, still, but the Sharan army, the Trollocs and Fades had no head. No general to guide them. Different contingents took conflicting actions as various Fades or Dreadlords tried to give orders.

I’ll have to watch those Sharans, Mat thought. *They’ll have generals who can reinstitute command.*

For now, he needed to hit hard, hit powerfully. Push the Trollocs and Sharans off the Heights. Down below, the Trollocs filled the corridor between the bogs and the Heights, pressing hard the defenders at the riverbed. Elaynes death had been a lie. Her troops had been in disarray—they had lost more than a third of their soldiers—but just as they were about to be routed by the Trollocs, she rode into their midst and rallied them. Now they were miraculously holding their lines, despite being pushed back well into Shienaran territory. They could not resist much longer, though, with or without Elayne: more and more pikes on the front lines were being mobbed, soldiers were falling all across the field, and her cavalries and the Aiel were working furiously, with increasing difficulty, to contain the enemy. *Light, if*

I can push the Shadow off these bloody Heights into those beasts below, they'll fall all over each other!

"Lord Cauthon!" Tinna shouted nearby. She leveled a bloody spear from horseback, pointing to the south.

Light shone distantly, toward the River Erinin. Mat wiped his brow. Was that…

Gateways in the sky. Dozens of them, and through them poured *to'raken* in flight, carrying lanterns. A fiery flight of arrows launched at the Trollocs in the corridor; the *to'raken*, carrying archers, flew in formation over the ford and the corridor beyond.

Over the battle, Mat heard sounds that must have made the enemy's blood run cold: hundreds, maybe thousands of animal horns blared out in the night their call to war; a thunderstorm of drums began to beat out a unified cadence that became louder and louder; and a rumble of footfalls made by an advancing army, man and animal alike, slowly approaching Polov Heights in the dark. No one could see them in the pre-dawn blackness, but everyone on the battlefield knew who they were.

Mat let out a whoop of joy. He could see the Seanchan movements playing out in his mind's eye now. Half their army would march directly north from the Erinin, joining with Elayne's harried army at the Mora to crush the Trollocs trying to force their way into Shienar. The other half would swing to the west around the bogs to the western side of the Heights, crushing the Trollocs in the corridor from behind.

Now the falling hail of arrows was accompanied by glowing lights popping into existence in the air—*damane*, making more light for their army to see by—a display that would have done the Illuminators proud! Indeed, the ground shook as the massive Seanchan army marched across the Field of Merrilor.

Thunder shattered the air off Mat's right flank on the Heights—a deeper thunder. Talmanes and Aludra had mended the dragons and were firing directly from the cavern through gateways into the Sharan army.

The pieces were almost all in place. There was one more bit of business that needed tending to before the final toss of the dice.

Mat's armies pressed forward.

Jur Grady fingered the letter from his wife, sent with Androl from the Black Tower. He couldn't read it in this darkness, but that didn't matter, so long as he could hold it. He'd memorized the words anyway.

He watched this canyon ten or so miles to the northeast along the River Mora, where Cauthon had positioned him. He was well out of sight of the battlefield at Merrilor.

He didn't fight. Light, it was hard, but he didn't fight. He watched, trying not to think of the poor people who had died trying to hold the river here. It was the perfect place for it—the Mora passed through a canyon here, where the Shadow could stop the river. And it had. Oh, the men Mat had sent had *tried* to fight the Dreadlords and the Sharans. What a fool's task that had been! Grady's anger smoldered at Cauthon. Everyone claimed that he was a good general. Then he went and did this.

Well, if he was a genius, why had he had sent five hundred simple folk from a mountain village in Murandy to hold this river? Yes, Cauthon had also sent about a hundred soldiers from the Band, but that wasn't nearly enough. They'd died after holding the river for a few hours. There were hundreds upon hundreds of Trollocs and several Dreadlords at the river canyon!

Well, those folk had been slaughtered, to a man. Light! There had been *children* in that group. The townsfolk and the few soldiers had fought well, defending the canyon for far longer than Grady would have thought possible, but then they'd fallen. And he'd been ordered not to help them.

Well, now Grady waited in the darkness atop the canyon walls, hiding among a cluster of rocks. Distant from him, perhaps a hundred paces, Trollocs moved by torchlight—the Dreadlords needed that to see. They, too, were atop the canyon walls, which gave them the height and position to look down on the river below—which had become a lake. The three Dreadlords had broken up large chunks of the canyon walls and created the barrier of rock that dammed the river.

That had dried out the Mora at Merrilor and let the Trollocs cross the river with ease. Grady could open that dam in a moment—a strike with the One Power would open it up and release the water from the canyon. So far, he hadn't dared. Cauthon had ordered him not to attack, but beyond that, he'd never be able to defeat three strong Dreadlords on his own. They'd kill him and dam the river again.

He caressed his wife's letter, then prepared himself. Cauthon had ordered him to make a gateway at dawn to that same village. Doing so would reveal Grady. He didn't know the purpose of the order.

The basin below was filled with water, covering the bodies of the fallen.

I guess now will do as well as any time, Grady thought, taking a deep breath. Dawn should be almost here, though the cloud cover kept the land dark.

He'd follow his orders. Light burn him, but he would. But if Cauthon survived the battle downriver, he and Grady would have words. Stern ones. A man like Cauthon, born of ordinary folk, should have known better than to throw away lives.

He took another deep breath, then began to weave a gateway. He opened it at that village the people had come from yesterday. He didn't know why he was to do this; the village had been depopulated to make up the group that had fought earlier. He doubted anybody remained. What had Mat called it? Hinderstap?

People roared through the gateway, yelling, holding aloft cleavers, pitchforks, rusty swords. With them came more soldiers of the Band, like the hundred who had fought here before. Except…

Except by the light of the Dreadlords' fires, the faces of those soldiers were the *same* as the ones who had fought here before… fought here and died.

Grady gaped as he stood up in the darkness, watching those people attack. They were *all* the same. The same matrons, the same farriers and blacksmiths, the very same people. He'd watched them die, and now they were back again.

The Trollocs probably couldn't tell one human from another, but the Dreadlords saw it—and understood that these were the same people. Those three Dreadlords seemed stunned. One of the Dreadlords yelled out about the Dark Lord abandoning them. He started flinging weaves at the people.

Those people just charged on, heedless of the danger as many of their number were blown apart. They fell on the Dreadlords, hacking at them with farming implements and kitchen knives. By the time the Trollocs attacked, the Dreadlords were down. Now he could.…

Shaking off his stupor, Grady gathered his power and destroyed the dam blocking the canyon.

And in doing so, he released the river.

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CHAPTER 41

A Smile

"Cauthon has the dragons back and fighting again," Jonneth said, trying to peer through the smoke. "Listen to them!"

Pounding echoed across the top of the Heights. Pevara smiled. She, Androl, Jonneth, Emarin and Canler had joined Logain and the other Ashaman, along with some of the Aes Sedai who were bonded to them. They stood at the edge of the steep slopes opposite Dashar Knob, a half mile up from where Demandred's headless corpse lay.

Another round of dragonfire sounded across the Heights, though in the darkness, they couldn't see the smoke. "Those dragons won't last long, not if Taim's men have mixed in with the Sharans," Pevara said. "The dragoners can't defend themselves against channelers, and they're too easy to locate because of the noise."

"I doubt Cauthon has a choice but to use them," Androl said. "He can't hold anything back now."

"Asha'man!" Logain appeared through the smoke, striding among them, Gabrelle at his side. "It is time to move."

"We're going to go defend those dragons?" Androl asked. Around them, dozens of other exhausted Asha'man hauled themselves to their feet, turning to Logain.

"No," Logain said. "We're going to move west."

"To the west?" Pevara folded her arms. "That's *away* from the battle!"

"It is where your Amyrlin fought Taim," Logain said, turning away from her. "The ground there, as well as many of the Sharans, was entombed in crystal. I want every Asha'man, soldier and Dedicated to whom I have not given other specific orders to begin searching. There is—"

The ground shook, rumbling ominously, and Pevara stumbled. Androl caught her by the arm, though she sensed exhaustion through the bond to match her own. They didn't have much left in them.

As the trembling subsided, Logan continued. “Somewhere, inside that mass of crystals, is a golden scepter. Taim was said to have been holding it when Egwene al’Vere defeated him. we're going to find it. If any of you see it, do *not* touch it. Send for me.”

Logain shouted the same orders to the next group of Asha’man. Androl watched him go, and Pevara sensed his frustration.

“If that scepter is an *angreal* or *sa’angreal*,” Emarin said, “it could be of great use to us.”

“Maybe,” Pevara said. “I think those dragons need protecting more than we need that rod. I *swear* there’s something about that horn sounding. We should be attacking now, not searching for battle spoils…”

“The other Asha’man can do that,” Androl said. “We don’t have to.”

“What?” Canler said, scowling. “You’re going to disobey?”

“No,” Androl said. “He said this is for men who didn’t have any other orders. We do. Back at the start of the battle he told us to watch for Taim’s lackeys and to do something about them.”

“I’m not sure he remembers that order, Androl,” Emarin said, rubbing his chin. “And I don’t know that if he did remember, he’d want us to follow it now. He seems pretty intent on that scepter.”

“He gave us the order nonetheless,” Androl said.

“Androl,” Canler said, sitting on his heels, “I feel so tired, I could hardly gather the strength to curse you if I wanted. None of these lads look any better, and you struggle to open a small gateway. How are we going to stand up to Mishraile and the others?”

Androl frowned, but had no argument in return. However, something occurred to Pevara. A way, perhaps, to accomplish something while exhausted…

Androl perked up, and his eyes widened, and then he grinned. “You’re a genius, Pevara.”

“Thank you,” she said primly. “Canler, haul yourself to your feet. I’ll bet you gentlemen anything that we’ll find Taim’s men trying to destroy those dragons. We’re going to give them something of a surprise…”

What a mess this had become.

Moghedien kicked Demandred's corpse. It had been abandoned, the Sharans having gone to fight Cauthon’s army and avenge their leader.

Demandred. The fool had let himself become distracted. If you focused too much on personal grudges, or if you let yourself be entangled with the worms you worked with… well, Demandred had earned his reward. Death, and likely eternal punishment at the Great Lord's hands.

Now that Demandred was indeed dead, she reached for the One Power—and found something else. A glowing river ten times as powerful, ten times as sweet. With so many of the Chosen having fallen, the Great Lord had opened himself to her. Survival was truly the best way to prove oneself to him.

This changed her plans dramatically. First, she burned Demandred's corpse to powder. Then she quickly wove the Mask of Mirrors—oh, how sweet the True Power was!—and replaced her form with an image of Demandred's. She always made certain she could imitate the other Chosen. Demandred would be difficult, as he had changed so much recently, but she had paid close attention. No one touching her would be fooled; she would be careful.

Disguise in place, she Traveled to the back lines of the Sharan army fighting Cauthon's troops. Here were the reserve units, waiting to move forward, as well as supply carts and some of the wounded.

The Sharans stopped sorting supplies to look at her. Gaping. They had been preparing to flee the battlefield itself. They were aware, as was everyone, that the huge Seanchan army had joined in the fight. She noticed that there were a handful of Ayyad in this group—only three, she could see. Two women with tattoos, and a grimy male channeler who squatted at their feet. Most of the others had been killed in the conflict with the Aes Sedai.

The Seanchan. Thinking of them and that imperious leader of theirs made Moghedien writhe. When the Great Lord discovered the mess she'd made…

No. He had given her the True Power. Moghedien had outlasted the others, and only that mattered, for now. He could not see everywhere, and probably did not yet know that she'd been uncovered. How had that girl seen through her disguise? It shouldn't have been possible.

Someone must have betrayed her. Still, she had been working closely with Demandred during this battle, and though she had never been as good a tactician as he—none of the Chosen had been, except maybe Sammael—she understood the battle well enough to take charge. She hated to do it, as it left her exposed in a way she disliked. But desperate times made for desperate actions.

And actually, as she considered, she thought that events were going fairly well for her. Demandred down, defeated by his own pride. M'Hael, that upstart, was also dead—and had conveniently removed the leader of the Aes Sedai from the battlefield. She still had the bulk of Demandred's Shadowspawn and some Dreadlords, some of the Black Ajah and a dozen of the Turned men M'Hael had brought.

"This is not him!" said an older man wearing the robes of a Sharan monk. He pointed at Moghedien. "This is not our Wyld! It is—" Moghedien burned the man to nothingness.

As his bones fell in a heap, she remembered off-handedly from her eyes-and-ears that Demandred had shown that old man fondness. "Better you should die, old one," she said to the corpse, speaking as Demandred, "than live to denounce the one you should have loved. Does anyone else wish to deny me?"

The Sharans remained silent.

"Ayyad," Moghedien said to the three, "did you see me craft weaves?" Both women and the grimy man shook their heads.

"I kill without weaves," Moghedien said, "only I, your Wyld, could have done this."

She had to remember not to smile, even in victory, as the people bowed their heads. Demandred was always solemn. As the people fell to their knees, Moghedien had to hold in her joy by force. Yes, Demandred had done good work here, and had handed her the army of an entire nation to play with. This would go quite well indeed!

"Dragonslayer," said a kneeling Ayyad woman. She was weeping! How weak these Sharans were. "We saw that you had fallen…"

"How could I fall? You have prophecies, do you not?"

The women looked at one another. "They say you will fight, Dragonslayer," the woman said. "But…"

"Gather five fists of the Trollocs from the back lines," Moghedien said, turning to the commander of the reserve unit, "and send them upriver to the ruins."

"The ruins?" the man asked. "Only the Caemlyn refugees are in that direction."

"Exactly, you fool. Refugees—children, the elderly, women who search for the dead. They can't fight back. Tell the Trollocs to start slaughtering.

Our enemies are weak; an attack like this will force them to break off and protect the ones that true warriors would just let die.”

The general nodded, and she saw approval in his face. He accepted her as Demandred. Good. He ran off to give the order.

“Now,” Moghedien said as the dragons fired in the distance, “why haven’t any of our Ayyad gone to remove those weapons from the battle?”

The Ayyad kneeling before Moghedien bowed her head. “We have fewer than a dozen Ayyad left, Wyld.”

“Your excuses are weak,” Moghedien said, listening as the explosions stopped. Perhaps some of M’Hael’s remaining Dreadlords had just resolved the problem of the dragons.

She felt her skin itch as the Sharan commander strode toward a Myrddraal across the field. She *hated* being in the open like this. She was meant to remain in shadows, letting others lead battles. However, she would never have it said that when the situation demanded it, she was too frightened to go and—

A gateway split open behind her, and several of the Sharans yelled out. Moghedien spun, opening her eyes wide as she looked into what appeared to be a dark cavern. Dragons pointed out of it.

“Fire!” a voice yelled.

“Close the gateway!” Talmanes shouted, and the portal winked shut.

“This was one of Lord Mat's ideas, wasn't it?” Daerid yelled, standing beside Talmanes as the dragons were reloaded. They both had wax in their ears.

“What do you think?” Talmanes yelled back.

If the dragons were vulnerable when firing, what did you do? You fired them from a hidden location.

Talmanes smiled as Neald opened the next gateway in front of ten dragons. The fact that many of the dragon carts were too broken to roll well meant nothing when you could open a gateway in front of them, pointing them wherever you wanted.

This gateway opened up on several fists of Trollocs engaged in fierce combat against Whitecloaks. Some of the Shadowspawn turned horrified eyes toward the dragons.

“Fire!” Talmanes shouted, waving his hand down to give a visual cue, in case any of the men couldn’t hear him.

Smoke filled the cavern, explosions echoing against Talmanes’ earplugs, as the dragons recoiled, releasing a storm of death into the Trollocs. They broadsided the fists, sweeping them out of the way, leaving them broken and dying. The nearby Whitecloaks cheered and raised swords.

Neald shut the gateway, and the dragoners reloaded their weapons. Neald then made a gateway above them, facing downward, to vent the dragon smoke out of the cavern complex and away into empty air somewhere distant.

“Are you *smiling*,?” Daerid asked.

“Yes,” Talmanes said, satisfied.

“Blood and bloody ashes, Lord Talmanes… that expression is horrifying on you.” Daerid hesitated. “You should probably do that more often.”

Talmanes grinned as Neald opened the next gateway to a point on Dashar Knob where Aludra stood with spyglass and scouts, deciding on the next place to target. She yelled through a position, Neald nodded, and they set up the next shot.

* * *

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CHAPTER 42

Impossibilities

Aviendha felt as if the world itself were cracking, breaking apart, being *consumed.*

The lightning that fell on the valley of Shayol Ghul was no longer under control. Not by the Windfinders, not by anyone. It slew Shadowspawn and defender alike. Unpredictable. The air smelled of fire, burned flesh and something else—a distinctive, clean odor she had come to recognize as the scent of a lightning strike.

Aviendha moved like the twisting wind itself, trying to stay ahead of Graendal, who hurled bar after bar of white-hot balefire at her. With each shot, the ground *trembled.* Black lines spread all across the rocks.

The defenders of the valley had nearly fallen. Those people who had not retreated to the very back, near the path up the mountain, were being destroyed by Darkhounds. The ground shook, and Aviendha stumbled. Nearby, a group of Trollocs broke from the windy shadows, snarling. The creatures did not see her, but turned and attacked something else… Other Trollocs? They were fighting each other.

She wasn't surprised. It was not unusual for Trollocs to fight one another if not closely controlled by the Eyeless. But what was that odd mist?

Aviendha heaved herself to her feet and ran away from the Trollocs, moving up a nearby incline. Maybe from that vantage, she could pinpoint Graendal's location. At the top, she found that she was standing on an impossibility: an enormous chunk of rock that was floating precariously with very little underneath it. It had ripped from the ground and risen here.

All around the valley were similar impossibilities. A group of fleeing Domani horsemen galloped over a section of rock that rippled like water, and all four men and mounts sank into it, vanishing. That deep mist had started to enter the valley on one side. Men and Trollocs alike ran from it, screaming.

A liquid bar of balefire broke through the floating chunk of rock, passing just inches from her head. Aviendha gasped, falling flat against the ground. She heard a scrambling nearby, and she rolled over, preparing a weave.

Amys—her Wise One's clothing blackened and burned, the side of her face reddened—hurried up to Aviendha and huddled down beside her. "Have you seen Cadsuane or the others?"

"No."

Amys cursed softly. "We all need to attack the Shadowsouled at once. You go round the right; I will go left. When you sense me weaving, join in. Together, perhaps we can fell her."

Aviendha nodded. They rose and parted. Somewhere, fighting here, was Cadsuane's handpicked team. Talaan, a Windfinder who had somehow made her way to the Dragonsworn. Alivia, the former *damane*. They, with Amys and Aviendha, were some of the most powerful channelers the Light had.

The origin of the balefire was at least some indication of where Graendal was. Aviendha rounded the floating rock—the balefire had punctured it, rather than destroying it completely—growing disturbed as she saw other chunks of stone rising randomly across the valley. It was a bubble of evil, only on a much grander scale. As she crept, she heard a low *thrumming* sound coming from the mountain. The ground began to tremble, chips of stone bouncing about. Aviendha stayed low, only to see that the valley had begun to sprout—incredibly—new plants. The once-barren ground turned vibrantly green, the plants seeming to writhe as they grew tall.

Patches of those plants sprouted all across the valley, violent bursts of greenery. Above, the white and black clouds swirled together, white on black, black on white. Lighting crashed, then *froze* to the ground. The lightning, impossibly, seemed to have become a towering glass column, jagged, in the shape of the bolt that had struck, though it was no longer glowing.

Those clouds above formed a pattern that looked familiar. Black on white, white on black…

It's the symbol, she realized with a start. *The ancient symbol of the Aes Sedai.*

Under this sign… shall he conquer.

Aviendha held tightly to the One Power. That thrumming sound was him, somehow. The life growing was him. As the Dark One ripped the land apart, Rand stitched it back together.

She *had* to keep moving. She crouched as she ran, using the newly grown plants as cover. They had come right where she needed them to hide her approach. Happenstance? She chose to believe otherwise. She could feel him, in the back of her mind. He fought, a true warrior. His battle lent her strength, and she tried to return the same.

Determination. Honor. Glory. *Fight on, shade of my heart. Fight on.*

She came upon Graendal—still surrounded by minions under Compulsion—exchanging lethal flows of the One Power with Cadsuane and Alivia. Aviendha slowed, watching the three of them lob bursts of fire at one another, slicing at one another's weaves with Spirit, warping the air with heat and tossing weaves so quickly that it was difficult to make out what was happening.

She itched to help, but Amys was right. If she and Aviendha attacked together, particularly while Graendal was occupied, they had a better chance of killing the Forsaken. Assuming Cadsuane and Alivia could hold out, waiting was the better choice.

Could they hold out, though? Cadsuane was powerful, more powerful than Aviendha had thought. Those hair ornaments of hers included *angreal* and *ter'angreal* for certain, though Aviendha hadn't been able to handle them and tell for certain, using her Talent.

Graendal's women captives lay against the ground, obviously flagging. Two had collapsed; Sarene had fallen to her knees, and stared ahead with vacant eyes.

Cadsuane and Alivia didn't seem to mind if they hit the captives. That was the right choice. Still, could Aviendha somehow—

The tall brush beside her moved.

Aviendha spun without thought and wove Fire. She burned down a black-veiled attacker mere moments before his spear would have stabbed her in the neck. The weapon sliced the side of her shoulder as the man stumbled, then toppled forward, her strike having burned a hole in his chest as large as a fist.

Another channeler joined the melee, frantically sending out weaves. Amys had arrived. Fortunately, Graendal focused on her, rather than attacking Aviendha's just-revealed location.

That was good, for Aviendha was staring at the man she'd felled, a man Graendal had made to do her bidding through Compulsion. A man who looked familiar to Aviendha.

Horrified, trembling, she reached down and pulled aside the veil.

It was Rhuarc.

“I'm leaving,” Mishraile said with a scowl, looking at the backs of the charging Sharan cavalry. They were standing on the western side of the Heights, far off the left flank of the Sharan army. “Nobody told us we’d be fighting the bloody heroes of the Horn.”

“It is the Last Battle, child.” Alviarin sounded snide. She had taken to calling all of them child lately. Mishraile was about ready to strangle her. Why had M'Hael allowed her to bond Nensen? Why would a *woman* be put in command of them?

They stood in a small group, Alviarin, Mishraile, Nensen, Kash, Rianna, and Donalo, and Ayako—who had been Turned as he had. Mishraile didn’t know a lot about battlefield fighting; when he killed people, he liked to wait for them to stumble someplace dark, where nobody was watching. All of this open air battle, all of this chaos, made him feel as if a knife tip were pressed against his back.

“There,” Alviarin said to Nensen, pointing toward a flash of light as another explosion from those dragons sounded through gateways across the battlefield. “I think that came from the middle of the plateau. Make a gateway and go there.”

“We’re never going to—” Mishraile began.

“Go!” Alviarin said, face red with anger.

Nensen scrambled and did as she said. He liked following orders, feeling that someone was in charge.

I might have to kill her, Mishraile thought. *And Nensen as well.* Even without much experience of battle, Mishraile could see that this was not going to be an easy fight. The return of the Seanchan, the fall of Demandred and the Trollocs rampaging without any direction… Yes, the Shadow still had the numbers, but the fight wasn’t nearly as one-sided as he’d have liked. One of the first rules he’d learned in life was to never fight a man when you had an equal chance of losing.

The six of them piled through the gateway, coming out in the middle of the plateau. The ground burnt by dragons and channelers emitted smoke to mix with the strange fog that had arisen; it was hard to tell what was going on where. Holes in the ground, splayed open by the dragons.

Corpses… well, pieces of them… scattered about. An unusual scent in the air. It was after sunrise now, but barely any light came through the clouds.

Cries came from above, made by those strange flying creatures the Seanchan had brought. Mishraile shivered. Light. It was like standing in a house without a roof, knowing your enemy had archers positioned above you. He shot one of them down with a weave of Fire, satisfied with the way the wings crumpled and the beast spun about, swirling as it dropped.

Attacking like that exposed him, though. He really would have to kill the other Dreadlords, then escape. He was supposed to be on the *winning* side!

"To work," Alviarin said. "Do as I said. These are men making the gateways the devices fire through, so we will have to locate where the gateway was and have Donalo read the residue."

The men moved out, inspecting the ground, trying to find the place where the gateway had opened. People fought nearby, uncomfortably close—Sharans and men flying a banner with a wolf on it. If they came back this way…

Donalo fell in beside Mishraile as they searched, quickly, both holding to the Power. Donalo was a square-faced Tairen, with his graying beard in a point.

"When Demandred went down," Donalo whispered. "I figured this was a trap all along. We've been had."

Mishraile nodded. Perhaps Donalo would be an ally. They could escape together. Of course, then he'd have to kill Donalo. Mishraile wouldn't want any witnesses who could report back to the Great Lord what he had done.

He couldn't trust Donalo anyway. The man had joined them only because of that forced trick with the Myrddraal. If a man could change sides that quickly, what was to keep him from changing again? Besides, Mishraile didn't like the… feeling he got when looking at Donalo or the others who had been Turned. It was as if there was something unnatural deep within them, looking out at the world, seeking prey.

"We need to get out of here," Mishraile whispered. "Fighting here now is a fool's—" He cut off as they encountered someone moving through the smoke.

A tall man, with red-gold hair. A familiar man, scored with cuts, his clothing burned and blackened. Mishraile gaped and Donalo cursed as the Dragon Reborn himself saw them, started, then fled back across the plateau. By the time Mishraile thought to attack, al'Thor had crafted a gateway for himself and escaped through it.

The earth rumbled violently, and some chunks of earth actually broke apart, and a piece of the eastern slope went crashing down on to Trollocs below. This place was growing more and more unstable. Another reason to leave.

"That was the bloody Dragon Reborn!" Donalo said. "Alviarin! The bloody *Dragon Reborn* is on the battlefield!"

"What nonsense is this?" Alviarin asked, approaching with the others.

"Rand al'Thor was here," Mishraile said, still stunned. "Blood and bloody ashes, Donalo. You were right! That's the only way Demandred could have fallen."

"He did keep saying that the Dragon was on this battlefield somewhere," Kash noted.

Donalo stepped forward, cocking his head, as if studying something in the air. "I saw exactly where he made the gateway to escape. It was right here. Right here… Yes! I can feel the resonance. I know where he went."

"He defeated Demandred," Alviarin said, folding her arms skeptically. "Can we hope to fight him?"

"He looked exhausted," Mishraile said. "More than exhausted. He panicked when he saw us. I think, if he did fight Demandred, it took a lot out of him."

Alviarin regarded the space in the air where al'Thor had vanished. Mishraile could practically see her thoughts. If they killed the Dragon Reborn, M'Hael might not be the only Dreadlord raised to the Chosen. The Great Lord would be grateful to the one who struck down al'Thor. Very grateful.

"I have it!" Donalo cried, opening a gateway.

"I need a circle to fight him," Alviarin said. Then hesitated. "But I will use Rianna and Nensen only. I don't want to risk us being too inflexible, all in the same circle."

Mishraile snorted, gathering his power and leaping through the opening. What she meant was that she didn't want one of the men leading the circle, potentially stealing the kill from her. Well, Mishraile would see about that.

He stepped from the battlefield to a clearing he did not recognize. The trees here didn’t look as deeply under the Great Lord’s touch as they did other places. Why was that? Well, the same dark sky thundered above, and the area was so dark that he had to weave a globe of light to make anything out.

Al’Thor rested on a stump nearby. He looked up, saw Mishraile, and cried out, scrambling away. Mishraile wove a fireball that sprouted in the air and flew after him, but al’Thor managed to cut it down with a weave of his own.

Ha! He is *weak!* Mishraile thought, dashing forward. The others followed him through the gateway, the women linked with Nensen, who trailed after Alviarin like a puppy. Donalo came through last, calling for them to wait for him.

A moment later they stopped running.

It hit Mishraile like a wave of cold water—like running face-first into a waterfall. The One Power vanished. It left him, just like that.

He stumbled, panicked, trying to figure out what had happened. He’d been shielded! No. He sensed no shield. He sensed… nothing.

The trees moved nearby, figures stepping from the shadows. Lumbering creatures with drooping eyebrows and thick fingers. They seemed as ancient as the trees themselves, with wrinkled skin and white hair.

He was in a *stedding*.

Mishraile tried to run, but firm arms grabbed him. Ogier ancients surrounded him and the others. Ahead, in the forest, al’Thor stepped forward— but it wasn't him. Not any longer. It had been a trick. Androl had been wearing the Dragon Reborn’s face.

The others screamed and battered at the Ogier with their fists, but Mishraile fell to his knees, looking into that emptiness where the One Power had been.

Pevara moved next to Androl as the Ogier, those too ancient to join the battle, took the Dreadlords in strong hands and dragged them further into Stedding Sholoon. Lindsar—eldest among them, leaning on a cane as large as a man’s thigh—approached Androl.

“We will care for the captives, Master Androl,” Lindsar said. “Execution?” Pevara asked.

"By the eldest trees, no!" The Ogier looked offended. "Not in this place, no, no killing here. We will hold them, and not let them escape."

"These are *very* dangerous people, good Ogier," Androl said. "Do not underestimate how devious they can be."

The Ogier chuckled, limping toward the *stedding's* still beautiful trees. "Men assume that because we are calm, we cannot be devious ourselves," she said. "Let them see how crafty a mind can become with centuries worth of aging upon it. Do not worry, Master Androl. We will be careful. It will be well for these poor souls to live in the peace of the *stedding.* Perhaps a few decades of peace will change their outlook on the world."

She vanished into the trees.

Androl looked at Pevara, feeling her satisfaction pulse through the bond, though her face was calm. "You did well," he said. "The plan was excellent."

She nodded in satisfaction, and the two of them left the *stedding*—passing the invisible barrier back to the One Power. Though Androl was so tired he could barely think, he didn't have any trouble seizing *saidin.* He snatched it like a starving man taking a hunk of bread, though he'd only been without for a few minutes.

Almost, he felt sorry for what he had done to Donalo and the others.

Rest well here, my friend, he thought, looking over his shoulder. *Perhaps we can find a way to free you someday from the prison they put upon your mind.*

Well? Jonneth asked, running up.

"Done," Androl said.

Pevara nodded as they stepped out of the trees to overlook the Mora and the ruins outside the *stedding.* She stopped as they saw the area around the ruins before them, where the refugees from Caemlyn had been gathering the wounded and weapons.

It was now filled with Trollocs.

Slaughtering.

Aviendha knelt over Rhuarc's body.

Dead. She'd killed *Rhuarc*.

It was no longer him, she told herself. *Graendal killed him. Her weave might as well have burned him away. This is just a shell.*

It was just a…

It was just a…

It was just a…

Strength, Aviendha. Rand's determination filled her, radiating from the bond at the back of her mind. She looked up and felt all fatigue leave her, all distractions vanish.

Graendal was dueling with Amys, Talaan, Alivia and Cadsuane—and Graendal was winning. Weaves zipped back and forth, lighting the dusty air, but those coming from Cadsuane and the others were less and less vibrant. More defensive. As Aviendha watched, a storm of lightning fell around Amys, throwing her to the ground. Beside Graendal, Sashalle Anderly shook, then fell to the side; the glow of the One Power no longer surrounded her. Graendal had worn her out, pulling too much Power.

Aviendha stood up. Graendal was powerful and wily. She was *exceptionally* good at slicing weaves from the air as they were formed.

Aviendha held a hand out to her side, and wove Fire, Air, Spirit. A glowing, burning spear of light and fire appeared in her hand. She prepared five other weaves of Spirit, then dashed forward.

The thrumming of the trembling ground accompanied her footsteps. Crystalline lightning fell from the heavens, then froze in place. Men and beasts howled as the Darkhounds reached the final lines of humans defending the pathway up to Rand.

Graendal saw Aviendha and began to weave balefire. Aviendha slashed the weave from the air with a flow of Spirit. Graendal cursed, weaving again. Aviendha struck, cutting the weave apart.

Cadsuane and Talaan sent bursts of fire. One of the captive Aiel threw himself in front of Graendal, dying with a long cry as the flames engulfed him.

Aviendha ran swiftly, the ground a blur beneath her, clutching a spear of light. She remembered her first race, one of the tests to join the Maidens. On that day, she had felt the wind behind her, urging her on.

This time, she felt no wind. Instead, she heard the cries of the warriors. The Aiel who fought seemed to drive her onward. The sound itself carried her toward Graendal.

The Forsaken made a weave before Aviendha could stop it, a powerful weave of Earth directed beneath Aviendha.

So she leaped.

The ground exploded, rocks flying upward as the blast threw her forward into the air. Stones flayed her legs, carrying ribbons of blood up through the air around her. Her feet were ripped apart, bones cracking, legs burning.

She gripped the spear of fire and light in two hands amid the storm of rock, skirt rippling as it shredded. Graendal looked up, eyes widening, lips parting. She was going to Travel with the True Power. Aviendha knew it. The woman had only avoided it so far because this method of Traveling seemed to require her to touch her companions to take them with her, and she didn’t want to leave any.

Aviendha met the Shadowsouled’s eyes during that brief moment when she hung in the air, and she saw true terror therein.

The air began to warp.

Aviendha’s spear, point first, sank into Graendal’s side.

In a moment, both of them vanished.

* * *

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CHAPTER 43

A Field of Glass

Logain stood in the middle of a field of glass, hands clasped behind his back. The battle raged across the Heights. The Sharans appeared to be falling back from the onslaught of Cauthon's armies, and his scouts had just reported that the Shadow was being hit hard all across the Field of Merrilor.

"I guess they probably won't need you," Gabrelle said to him as his scouts retreated. "So you were right."

The bond sent dissatisfaction and even disappointment. "I need to look to the future of the Black Tower," Logain said.

"You aren't looking to its future," she said, soft, almost threatening. "You're looking to make certain you are a power in these lands, Logain. You cannot hide your emotions from me."

Logain shoved down his anger. He would not be subject to their power again. He would *not.* First the White Tower, then M'Hael and his men.

Days of torture. *Weeks.*

I will be stronger than any other, he thought. That was the only way out, wasn't it? *I will be feared.*

Light. He'd resisted their attempts to corrupt him, turn him to the Shadow… but he couldn't help wondering if they had broken something else inside of him. Something profound. He leveled his gaze, looking across the field of crystal.

Another rumble came beneath, and some of the crystals shattered. This entire area was going to collapse soon. And with it, the scepter…

Power.

"I'm warning you, mainlander," a calm voice said nearby. "I have a message to deliver. If I need see your arm broken to deliver it, I will see it done." *That's a Seanchan accent*, Logain thought, turning with a frown. A Seanchan woman, accompanied by a large Illianer, was arguing with one of his guards. The woman knew how to make her voice carry without shouting. There was a self-possession to her that Logain found curious.

He walked over, and the Seanchan woman looked up at him. “You have the look of authority about you,” she called to him. “You are the one called Logain?”

He nodded.

“The Amyrlin sends you her last words,” the Seanchan woman called. “You must deliver the seals up to the White Tower to be broken. The sign is the coming of light! She says it will be known when it arrives.”

Logain raised an eyebrow. He nodded to the woman, mostly to put her off, then walked back the other way.

“You don’t intend to do it,” Gabrelle said. “You fool. Those seals belong to—”

“To me,” Logain said.

“Logain,” Gabrelle said softly. “I know you have been hurt. But this is not a time for games.”

“Why not? Has the White Tower’s treatment of me been anything other than a great long game?”

“Logain.” She touched him on the arm.

Light *burn* that bond! He wished he’d never forced her to it. Tied to her as he was, he could sense her sincerity. How much easier his life would be if he could continue to regard all Aes Sedai with suspicion.

Sincerity. Would that be his downfall?

“Lord Logain!” Desautel called from nearby. The Asha’man Dedicated was as big as a blacksmith. “Lord Logain, I think I’ve found it!”

Logain broke eye contact with Gabrelle, looking toward Desautel. The Asha’man stood beside a large crystal. “It’s here,” Desautel said, wiping the crystal as Logain approached. “See?”

Logain knelt, weaving a globe of light. Yes… there, within the crystal. It looked like a hand, made from a slightly different type of crystal, sparkling in his light. That hand held a golden scepter, the top vaguely cup-shaped.

Logain gathered the One Power, smiling broadly. He let *saidin* flow from him into the crystal, using a weave to shatter it as he would a stone.

The ground trembled. The crystal, whatever it was, resisted. The harder he pushed, the more violent the shaking became.

“Logain . . Gabrelle said.

“Stand back,” Logain said. “I think I’ll need to try balefire.”

Panic surged through the bond. Fortunately, Gabrelle did not try to tell him what was forbidden and what was not. Asha’man need not obey White Tower law.

“Logain!”

Another voice. Would they not leave him alone? He prepared his weave. “Logain!” Androl was breathing deeply as he arrived. He fell to his knees, face scorched and burned. He looked worse than death itself. “Logain… the refugees of Caemlyn… The Shadow has sent Trollocs to kill them at the ruins. Light! They’re being murdered.”

Logain wove balefire, but held the weave in place, nearly complete as he looked at the crystal and its golden prize.

“Logain…” Androl said, pained. “The others with me stayed to fight, but they are too tired. I can’t find Cauthon, and the soldiers I went to are too busy fighting to help. I don’t think any of the commanders know that the Trollocs are up there. Light.”

Logain held his weave, feeling the One Power pulse within him. Power. Fear.

“Please,” Androl whispered, so soft. “Children, Logain. They’re slaughtering the children…”

Logain closed his eyes.

Mat rode with the heroes of the Horn. Apparently, having once been the Hornsounder gave him a special place among them. They joined him, called to him, spoke to him as if they knew him. They looked so, well, heroic, tall in their saddles and surrounded by a mist that glowed against the breaking dawn’s light.

Amid the fighting, he finally asked the question that had been haunting him for a long while now. “I'm not bloody… one of you, am I?” he asked Hend the Striker. “You know… since heroes are born sometimes, then die and ... do whatever you do.”

The big man laughed, riding a bay horse that could have almost gone shoulder-to-shoulder with a Seanchan boar-horse. “I knew that you would ask this thing, Gambler!”

“Well, then you should bloody well have an answer prepared.” Mat felt his face flush as he anticipated the reply.

“No, you are not one of us,” Hend said. “Be at ease. Though you have done more than enough to earn a place, you have not been chosen. I do not know why.”

“Maybe because I don’t like the idea of having to hop whenever anyone blows on that bloody instrument.”

“Maybe!” Hend grinned and galloped toward a line of Sharan spears.

Mat no longer directed troop movements on the battlefield. The Light willing, he had set things up well enough that direct control would not be needed. He rode across the plateau, fighting, yelling, joining the heroes.

Elayne was back, and she had rallied her troops. Mat saw Elayne’s banner glowing above them in the sky, crafted of the One Power, and caught a glimpse of someone who looked like her riding among the soldiers, hair glowing as if lit from behind her. She seemed a bloody hero of the Horn herself.

Mat let out a whoop of joy as he saw the Seanchan army marching north, about to merge with Elayne’s army, and he continued riding along the eastern slope of the Heights. Soon after, he slowed, Pips just having trampled a Trolloc. That rushing sound… Mat looked down below as the river returned in a swift crash of muddy water. It broke the Trolloc army into two parts, washing away many of them, as it surged back into its bed.

Snow-haired Rogosh watched the water flow, then nodded to Mat in respect. “Well done, Gambler,” he said. The river’s return had divided the Shadow’s forces.

Mat rejoined the battle. He noticed as he galloped across the plateau that the Sharans—what remained of them—were fleeing through gateways. He let them go.

When the Trollocs atop the Heights saw the Sharans fleeing, their resistance cracked, and they panicked. Boxed in and being swept across the plateau by Mat’s combined armies, they had no choice but to flee toward the long slope to the southwest.

It had become total mayhem off the Heights. The Seanchan army had joined with Elayne’s, and both groups lit into the Trollocs with an intense fury. They formed a cordon around the beasts and advanced quickly, not allowing one to escape. The ground quickly turned to a deep, red mud as Trollocs fell by the thousands.

But the engagement on the Shienaran side of the Mora was nothing compared to the struggle taking place on the other side of the river. The corridor between the bogs and Polov Heights was choked with Trollocs trying to escape the Seanchan attacking them from the far side of the corridor on the west.

The vanguard sent in first against the Trollocs in the corridor was not composed of Seanchan soldiers, but squads of *lopar* and *morat'lopar.* On their hind legs, the *lopar* were no taller than Trollocs, but they outweighed them considerably. The *lopar* came at the Trollocs, raising up and slashing with their razor-sharp claws. Once a *lopar* softened up its prey, it grasped the Trolloc behind the neck with its paws and bit the beast's head off at the neck. This gave the *lopar* great pleasure.

The *lopar* were withdrawn as the corpses of Trollocs began to stack up at the far end of the corridor. Next into this pit of carnage came flocks of *corlm*, large, wingless, feathered creatures with long curved beaks designed to shred flesh. These carnivores easily ran over the stacks of corpses toward Trollocs still fighting, to separate the beasts' meat from bone. The Seanchan soldiers took little part in these proceedings, only setting their pikes to ensure that no Trollocs escaped through the corridor or off the western side of the Heights. The creatures assaulting them so unnerved the Trollocs that few had any notion of running toward the Seanchan troops.

On the slope, terror-stricken Trollocs, fleeing from Mat's army charging down after them, threw themselves onto the Trollocs that filled the corridor. The monsters tumbled on top of one another, and they fought among themselves, trying to be the ones to reach the top of the pile and continue breathing a while longer.

Talmanes and Aludra had set up their dragons across from the corridor and commenced firing dragons' eggs into the roiling masses of terrorized Trollocs.

It was all over quickly. The numbers of living Trollocs diminished from the many thousands to the hundreds. Those that remained, seeing death snatching at them from three sides, fled into the bogs, where many of them were sucked down into the shallow waters. Their deaths were less violent, but equally horrifying. The remainder received a more merciful end, shot with arrows, spears and crossbow bolts as they slogged through the mire toward the sweet scent of freedom.

Mat lowered his bloodied *ashandarei.* He checked the sky. The sun was hidden up there somewhere; he was not certain how long he had been riding with the heroes.

He would have to thank Tuon for returning. He did not go looking for her, though. He had a feeling that she would expect him to perform his princely duties, whatever they might be.

Only ... he did feel that strange tugging inside. Getting stronger and stronger.

Blood and bloody ashes, Rand, Mat thought. *I've done my part. You do yours.* Amaresu’s words returned to him. *Each breath you take is at his forbearance, Gambler…*

Mat had been a good friend when Rand needed, had he not? Most of the time? Blood and ashes, you could not expect a fellow to not worry… maybe stay a little distant… when a madman was involved. Right?

“Hawkwing!” Mat called, riding up to the man. “The battle,” Mat said, drawing a deep breath. “It’s done, right?”

“You have sewn this one up tight, Gambler,” Hawkwing said, sitting his mount regally. “Ah… what I would give to go at you across the battlefield. What a grand fight it would be.”

“Great. Wonderful. I didn’t mean this battlefield. I mean the Last Battle. It’s done, right?”

“You ask that under a sky of shadow, atop an earth that trembles in fear? What does your soul say, Gambler?”

Those dice still tumbled inside of Mat’s head.

“My soul says I’m a fool,” Mat growled. “That, and a *bloody* sparring dummy, set up and waiting to be attacked.” He turned northward. “I need to go to Rand. Hawkwing, would you do me a favor?”

“Ask it, Hornblower.”

“Do you know the Seanchan?”

“I am… familiar with them.”

“I think their Empress would like very much to make your acquaintance,” Mat said, galloping away. “If you could go to speak with her, I’d appreciate it. And if you do, kindly tell her I sent you.”

YOU THINK I WILL RETREAT? the Dark One asked.

The thing that spoke those words was something that Rand could never truly comprehend. Even seeing the universe in its entirety did not allow him to understand Evil itself.

I NEVER EXPECT YOU TO RETREAT, Rand said. I BELIEVE YOU INCAPABLE OF IT. I WISH YOU COULD SEE, COULD KNOW, WHY IT IS YOU CONTINUE TO LOSE.

Beneath them, on the battlefield, the Trollocs had fallen, beaten by a young gambler from the Two Rivers. The Shadow shouldn’t have lost. It made no *sense*. The Trollocs had the greater force.

However, Trollocs fought only because the Myrddraal forced them—on its own, a Trolloc would no more fight something stronger than a fox would attempt to kill a lion.

It was one of the most basic rules among predators. Eat that which was weaker than you. Flee from that stronger than you.

The Dark One seethed with a boiling anger that Rand felt in this place as a physical force.

YOU SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISED, Rand said. WHEN HAVE YOU EVER INSPIRED THE BEST IN MEN? YOU CANNOT. IT IS OUTSIDE YOUR POWER, SHAI'TAN. YOUR MINIONS WILL NEVER FIGHT ON WHEN HOPE IS LOST. THEY WILL NEVER STAND BECAUSE DOING SO IS RIGHT. IT IS NOT STRENGTH THAT BEATS YOU. IT IS NOBILITY.

I WILL DESTROY! I WILL REND AND BURN! I WILL BRING DARKNESS TO ALL, AND DEATH WILL BE THE TRUMPET I SOUND BEFORE MY ARRIVAL! AND YOU, ADVERSARY… OTHERS MAY ESCAPE, BUT YOU WILL DIE. YOU MUST KNOW THIS.

OH, I DO, SHAI'TAN, Rand said softly. I EMBRACE IT, FOR DEATH IS—AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN—LIGHTER THAN A FEATHER. DEATH ARRIVES IN A HEARTBEAT, NO MORE TANGIBLE THAN A FLICKER OF LIGHT. IT HAS NO WEIGHT, NO SUBSTANCE—

Rand strode forward, speaking louder. DEATH CANNOT KEEP ME AT BAY, AND IT CANNOT RULE ME. IT COMES DOWN TO THIS, FATHER OF LIES. WHEN HAVE YOU INSPIRED A PERSON TO GIVE THEIR LIFE FOR YOU? NOT FOR THE PROMISES YOU GIVE, NOT FOR THE RICHES THEY SEEK OR THE POSITIONS THEY WOULD HOLD, BUT FOR YOU. HAS IT EVER HAPPENED?

The darkness grew still.

BRING MY DEATH, SHAI’TAN, Rand growled, throwing himself into the blackness. FOR I BRING YOURS!

Aviendha dropped to a rocky ledge far above the floor of Thakan’dar. She tried to stand, but her ruined feet and legs couldn’t support her weight. She collapsed on the ledge, the spear of light vanishing from her fingers. Pain climbed up her legs as if they’d been thrust into a fire.

Graendal stumbled back from her, gasping huge breaths, holding her side. Aviendha immediately wove an attack, flames of fire, but Graendal cut them down with her own weaves.

“You!” Graendal spat. “You vermin, you detestable child!” The woman was still strong, though wounded.

Aviendha needed help. Amys, Cadsuane, the others. Desperate, clinging to the One Power despite her agony, she began weaving a gateway back to where she had been. It was near enough that she did not need to know the area well.

Graendal let this weave pass. Blood gushed between the woman’s fingers. While Aviendha worked, Graendal wove a thin trickle of Air and stanched the wound with it. Then she pointed bloody fingers at Aviendha. “Trying to escape?”

The woman began weaving a shield.

Frantic, her strength waning, Aviendha tied off her weave, leaving the gateway open and in place. *Please, Amys, see it!* she thought as she countered Graendal’s shield.

She barely managed to block it; she was very weak. Graendal had been using borrowed power for their entire fight, while Aviendha had been using her own. Even with her *angreal*, in her state she was really no match for Graendal.

Graendal pulled herself upright, pain showing in her face. Aviendha spat at the woman's feet, then pulled herself away, leaving a trail of blood behind her.

Nobody came through the gateway. Had she made it to the wrong place?

She reached the rim of the ledge overlooking the battlefield of Thakan’dar below. If she went farther, she’d fall. *Better that than becoming another of her pets…*

Threads of Air wrapped around Aviendha’s legs and jerked her back. She screamed through her clenched teeth, then twisted about; her feet seemed little more than stumps of raw flesh. The pain washed over her, and her vision darkened. She struggled to reach the One Power.

Graendal held her off, but the woman flagged and growled, then slumped down, gasping. The weave stanching her wound was still in place, but the woman’s face grew pale. She seemed almost ready to faint.

The open gateway beside her invited Aviendha, a means of escape—but it might as well have been a mile away. Mind clouding, legs afire with pain, Aviendha slipped her knife from its sheath.

It fell from her trembling fingers. She was too weak to hold it.

* * *

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CHAPTER 44

Two Craftsmen

Perrin awoke to something rustling. He cracked his eyes open, wary, and found himself in a dark room.

Berelain's palace, he remembered. The sound of the waves had grown softer outside, the calls of gulls silent. Thunder rumbled, distant.

What time was it? It smelled like morning, but it was dark outside still. He had trouble picking out the dark silhouette moving through the room toward him. He tensed until he picked out the scent.

“Chiad?” he asked, sitting up.

The Aiel did not jump, though he was certain from the way she stopped that he’d surprised her. “I should not be here,” she whispered. “I push my honor to the very edge of what should be allowed.”

“It’s the Last Battle, Chiad,” Perrin said. “You are allowed to push some boundaries… assuming we haven’t won yet.”

“The battle at Merrilor is won, but the greater battle—that at Thakan’dar—still rages.”

“I need to return to work,” Perrin said. He was in his smallclothes only. He didn’t let that bother him. An Aiel like Chiad wouldn’t blush. He pushed off his blanket.

Unfortunately, the bone-eating weariness inside him had subsided only a little. “Not going to tell me to stay in bed?” he asked, tiredly searching out his shirt and trousers. They were folded with his hammer at the foot of the bed. He had to lean against the mattress as he walked there. “You’re not going to tell me I have no business fighting while tired? Every woman I know seems to think that is one of her primary jobs.”

“I have found,” Chiad said dryly, “that pointing out stupidity serves only to make men stupider. Besides, I’m *gai’shain.* It’s not my place.”

He looked at her, and though he couldn’t see her blush in the darkness, he could smell her embarrassment. She wasn’t acting much like *gai’shain.* “Rand should have just released you all from your vows.”

“He does not have that power,” she said hotly.

“What good is honor if the Dark One wins the Last Battle?” Perrin snapped, pulling up his trousers.

“It is everything,” Chiad said softly. “It is worth death, it is worth risking the world itself. If we have no honor, better that we lose.”

Well, he supposed there were things he’d say the same thing about. Not wearing silly white robes, of course—but he wouldn’t do some of the things the Whitecloaks had done, even if the world was at stake. He didn’t press her further.

“Why are you here?” he asked, putting on his shirt.

“Gaul,” Chiad said. “Is he…”

“Oh, Light!” Perrin said. “I should have told you earlier. I’ve scrap iron for a brain lately, Chiad. He was fine when I left him. He’s still in the dream, and time passes more slowly where he is. It has probably only been an hour or so in his time, but I need to return to him.”

“In your condition?” she asked, ignoring the fact that she’d said she wouldn’t chivvy him for that.

“No,” Perrin said, sitting on the bed. “Last time, I nearly broke my neck. I need one of the Aes Sedai to cure me of my fatigue.”

“This thing is dangerous,” Chiad said.

“More dangerous than letting Rand die?” Perrin said. “More dangerous than leaving Gaul without an ally in the World of Dreams, protecting the *Car’a’carn* alone?”

“That one *is* likely to stab himself with his own spear if left to fight alone,” Chiad said.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Hush, Perrin Aybara. I will try.” She left in a rustle of cloth.

Perrin lay back on the bed, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. He’d been far more certain of himself when he’d fought Slayer this last time, yet still he’d failed. He gritted his teeth, hoping Chiad would return soon.

Something moved outside his room. He revived, hauling himself up to a sitting position again.

A large shape darkened the doorway, then removed the shield from a lamp. Master Luhhan was built like an anvil, with a compact—yet powerful—torso and arms that bulged. In Perrin's mind’s eye, the man didn’t have so much gray in his hair. Master Luhhan had grown older, but he was not frail. Perrin doubted he ever would be.

“Lord Goldeneyes?” he asked.

“Light, please,” Perrin said. “Master Luhhan, you of all people should feel free to call me Perrin. If not ‘that worthless apprentice of mine.’ ”

“Here, now,” Master Luhhan said, walking into the room. “I don’t believe I called you that except once.”

“When I broke the new blade for Master al’Moor’s scythe,” Perrin said, smiling. “I was sure I could get it right.”

Master Luhhan chuckled. He paused beside Perrin’s hammer, which still lay on the table at the foot of the bed, and rested his fingers on it. “You have become a master of the craft.” Master Luhhan seated himself on a stool beside the bed. “One craftsman to another, I’m impressed. I don’t think I could have ever made something so fine as that hammer.”

“You made the axe.”

“I guess I did that,” he said. “It was not a thing of beauty. It was a thing of killing.”

“Killing sometimes needs to be done.”

“Yes, but it’s never beautiful. Never.”

Perrin nodded. “Thank you. For finding me, bringing me here. For saving me.”

“It was self-interest, son!” Master Luhhan said. “If we escape this, it will be because of you boys, mark my words on it as true.” He shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe it. One man, at least, remembered the three of them as youths—youths who, in Mat’s case at least, had been in trouble more often than not.

Actually, Perrin thought, *I'm pretty sure Mat’s* still *in trouble more often than not.* At least, at the moment, he wasn’t fighting but instead talking with some Seanchan, according to the spinning colors that resolved into an image.

“Chiad said that the fighting at Merrilor was finished?” Perrin asked.

“It is,” Master Luhhan said. “I came through, carrying some of our wounded. I should be getting back to Tam and Abell soon, but I wanted to check on you.”

Perrin nodded. That tugging inside of him ... if anything, it was stronger now than it ever would be. Rand *needed* him. The war wasn’t finished yet. Not by far.

“Master Luhhan,” Perrin said with a sigh. “I’ve made a mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“I ran myself ragged,” Perrin said. “I pushed myself too hard.” He made a fist, slamming it into the corner post of the bed. “I should know better, Master Luhhan. I always do this. I work myself so hard, I make myself useless the next day.”

“Perrin, lad?” Master Luhhan said, leaning forward. “Today, I’m more worried that there’s not going to *be* a next day.”

Perrin looked up at him, frowning.

“If there was ever a time to push yourself, this is it,” Master Luhhan said. “We’ve won one fight, but if the Dragon Reborn doesn’t win his… Light, I don’t think you’ve made a mistake at all. This is our last chance at the forge. This is the morning that the big piece is due. Today, you just keep working until it’s done.”

“But if I collapse…”

“Then you gave it your all.”

“I could fail because I’ve run myself out of strength.”

“Then at least you didn’t fail because you held back. I know it sounds bad, and maybe I’m wrong. But… well, everything you’re talking about is good advice for an average day. This isn’t an average day. No, by the Light it’s not.”

Master Luhhan took Perrin by the arm. “You may see in yourself someone who lets himself go too far, but that’s not the man I see. If anything, Perrin, I’ve seen in you someone who has learned to hold himself back. I’ve watched you hold a teacup with extreme delicacy, as if you feared breaking it with your strength. I’ve seen you clasp hands with a man, holding his hand in yours with such care, never squeezing too hard. I’ve watched you move with deliberate reserve, so that you don’t shove anyone or knock anything over.

“Those were good lessons for you to learn, son. You needed control. But in you, I’ve seen a boy grow into a man who doesn’t know how to let those barriers go. I see a man who’s frightened of what happens when he gets a little out of control. I realize you do what you do because you’re afraid of hurting people. But Perrin… it’s time to stop holding back.”

“I’m not holding back, Master Luhhan,” Perrin protested. “Really, I promise.”

“Is that the case? Well, maybe you’re right.” Master Luhhan suddenly smelled embarrassed. “Look at me. Here, acting like it’s my business. I’m not your father, Perrin. I’m sorry.”

“No,” Perrin said as Master Luhhan stood to leave. “I no longer have a father.”

Master Luhhan gave him a pained look. “What those Trollocs did . .”

“My family wasn’t killed by Trollocs,” Perrin said softly. “It was Padan Fain.”

“What? Are you certain?”

“One of the Whitecloaks told me,” Perrin said. “He wasn’t lying.”

“Well, then,” Luhhan said. “Fain… he’s still out there, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Perrin said. “He hates Rand. And there’s another man. Lord Luc. You remember him? He’s been ordered to kill Rand. I think ... I think they’re both going to try for him, before this is over.”

“Then you’ll have to make sure they don’t succeed, won’t you?”

Perrin smiled, then turned toward the footsteps outside. Chiad entered a moment later, and he could smell her annoyance that he’d sensed her coming. Bain followed, another figure in complete white. And after them…

Masuri. Not the Aes Sedai he would have chosen. Perrin felt his lips tighten.

“You do not like me,” Masuri said. “I know this.”

“I have never said that,” Perrin replied. “You were a great help to me during our travels.”

“And yet, you do not trust me, but that is beside the point. You wish to have your strength restored, and I am probably the only one willing to do it for you. The Wise Ones and the Yellows would paddle you like a babe for wanting to leave.”

“I know,” Perrin said, sitting down on the bed. He hesitated. “I need to know why you were meeting with Masema behind my back.”

“I come here to fulfill a request,” Masuri said, smelling amused, “and you tell me you won’t let me do you that favor until I respond to interrogation?”

“Why’d you do it, Masuri?” Perrin said. “Out with it.”

“I planned to use him,” the slender Aes Sedai said.

“Use him.”

“Having influence with one who called himself the Prophet of the Dragon could have been useful.” She smelled embarrassed. “It was a different time, Lord Aybara. Before I knew you. Before any of us knew you.” Perrin grunted.

“I was foolish,” Masuri said. “Is that what you wanted to hear? I was foolish, and I have since learned.”

Perrin eyed her, then sighed, proffering his arm. It was still an Aes Sedai answer, but one of the straighter ones he had heard. “Do it,” he said. “And thank you.”

She took his arm. He felt his fatigue evaporate—felt it get shoved back, like an old quilt being stuffed into a small box. Perrin felt invigorated, strengthened. Powerful again. He practically leaped as he came to his feet.

Masuri sagged, sitting down on his bed. Perrin flexed his hand, looking down at his fist. He felt as if he could challenge anyone, even the Dark One himself. “That feels wonderful.”

“I’ve been told I excel at this particular weave,” Masuri said. “But be careful, it—”

“Yes,” Perrin said. “I know. The body is still tired. I just can’t feel it.” And, as he considered, that last part wasn’t exactly true. He *could* sense his fatigue, like a serpent deep within its hole, lurking and waiting. It would consume him again.

That meant he had to finish his job first. He inhaled deeply, then summoned his hammer to him. It didn’t move.

Right; he thought. *This is the real world, not the wolf dream.* He walked over and slipped the hammer into its straps on his belt, the new ones that he had fashioned to hold the larger hammer. He turned toward Chiad, who stood by the doorway; he could smell Bain out there, too, where she’d retreated. “I will find him,” Perrin said. “If he is wounded, I will bring him here.”

“Do that,” Chiad said, “but you will not find us here.”

“You are going to Merrilor?” Perrin asked, surprised.

Chiad said, “Some of us are needed to bring the wounded in to be Healed. It is not a thing *gai’shain* have done in the past, but perhaps it is a thing we can do this time.”

Perrin nodded, then closed his eyes. He imagined himself close to sleep, drifting. His time in the wolf dream had trained his mind well. He could fool himself, with concentration. That didn’t change the world here, but it did change his perceptions.

Yes… drifting close to sleep… and there was the pathway. He took the branch toward the wolf dream in the flesh, and caught just a hint of a gasp from Masuri as he felt himself *shift* between worlds.

He opened his eyes and dropped into buffeting winds. He created a pocket of calm air, then hit the ground beneath with strengthened legs. Only a few teetering walls remained of Berelain's palace on this side. One of those broke apart, the stones shattering and pulled into the sky by the winds. The city beyond was mostly gone, heaps of rock here and there indicating where buildings had once stood. The sky groaned like bending metal.

Perrin summoned his hammer into his hand, then began the hunt one last time.

Thom Merrilin sat on a large, soot-blackened boulder, smoking his pipe, watching the world end.

He knew a thing or two about finding the best vantage to watch a performance. He judged this to be the finest seat in the world. His boulder was just next to the entrance into the Pit of Doom, close enough that if he leaned back and squinted, he could peer in and catch some of the lights and shadows playing inside. He glanced in. Nothing had changed.

Stay safe in there, Moiraine, he thought. *Please.*

He was also close enough to the edge of the path to overlook the valley below. He puffed on his pipe, knuckling his mustache.

Someone had to record this. He couldn't spend the entire time worrying about her. So, he searched his mind for the right words to describe what he was seeing. He set aside words like "epic" and "momentous." They were nearly worn out with overuse.

A wave of wind blew through the valley, ruffling the *cadin'sor* of Aiel fighting red-veiled enemies. Lightning surged, pounding at the Dragonsworn line holding the path up to the cave entrance. Those flashes sent men flying into the air. Then, that lightning started striking at the Trollocs instead. The clouds went back and forth like that, the Windfinders seizing control of the weather, the Shadow taking it back. Neither side yet had managed a clear advantage for long.

Hulking dark beasts ravaged the valley, killing with ease. The Darkhounds did not fall despite the work of dozens in concert. The right side of the valley was covered in a thick mist that, for some reason, the storm winds couldn't budge.

"Climactic"? Thom thought, chewing on the stem of his pipe. *No. Too expected.* If you used the words people expected, they grew bored. A great ballad needed to be unexpected.

Never be expected. When people start to expect you—when they started to anticipate your flourishes, to look for the ball you had hidden through sleight of hand, or to smile before you reached the twist line of your tale—it was time to pack up your cloak, bow once more for good measure, and stroll away. After all, that was what they'd least expect you to do when all was going well.

He leaned back again, peering into the tunnel. He couldn't see her, of course. She was too far in. But he could feel her, in his mind, because of the bond.

She stared at the end of the world, with grit and determination. Despite himself, he smiled.

Below, the battle churned like a meat grinder, ripping men and Trollocs into chunks of dead flesh. The Aiel fought at the periphery of the battlefield, engaging their Shadow-taken cousins. They seemed to be evenly matched, or they had been before those Darkhounds arrived.

They were relentless though, these Aiel. They didn't seem tired at all, though it had been… Thom couldn't put his thumb on how much time had passed. He'd slept maybe five or six times since they'd come to Shayol Ghul, but he didn't know if that marked the days. He checked the sky. No sign of the sun, though the channeling of the Windfinders—and the Bowl of the Winds—had summoned a great line of white clouds to crash into the black ones. The clouds seemed to be having a battle of their own, a reverse image of the fighting below. Black against white.

"Perilous"? he thought. No, that wasn't the right word. He'd make a ballad of this for certain. Rand deserved it. Moiraine, too. This would be her victory as much as it was his. He needed *words.* The right words.

He searched for them while he heard the Aiel beating spears against shields as they ran to battle. While he heard the howling wind inside the tunnel, and while he could feel her standing at the end.

Below, the Domani crossbowmen cranked frantically. Once, thousands of them had been shooting. Now only a fraction remained.

Perhaps… terrifying.

That was a right word, but not the right word. It might not be unexpected, but it was very, very true. He felt it to his bone. His wife fighting for her life. The forces of Light pushed almost to the brink of death. Light, but he was frightened. For her. For them all.

But the word was pedestrian. He needed something better, something perfect.

Below, the Tairens thrust their polearms desperately at attacking Trollocs. The Dragonsworn fought with numerous types of weapons. One last steamwagon lay broken nearby, carrying arrows and bolts brought through the last gateway from Baerlon. They hadn’t seen supplies in hours now. The distortion of time here, the tempest, was doing things to the One Power.

Thom took special note of the wagon—he would need to use it in a way that preserved its wonder, showing how its cold, iron sides had deflected arrows before its fall.

There was heroism in every line, in every pull of the bowstring and every hand that held a weapon. How to convey that? But how also to convey the fear, the destruction, the sheer strangeness of it all? The day before—in an odd sort of bloody truce—both sides had paused to clear away bodies.

He needed a word that gave the feel for the chaos, death, the cacophony, the sheer bravery.

Below, a tired group of Aes Sedai began moving up the pathway to where Thom waited. They passed archers keenly scanning the battlefield for Fades.

*“Exquisite*Thom thought. *That is the word. Unexpected, but true. Majestically exquisite. No. Not “majestically” Let the word stand on its own. If it is the right word, it will work without help. If it’s the wrong word, adding other words to it will just make it seem desperate.*

This was what the end *should* be like. The sky ripping apart as factions fought for control of the elements themselves, people from varied nations standing with their last strength. If the Light won, it would do so by the narrowest of margins.

That, of course, horrified him. A good emotion. It would have to go in the ballad. He drew on his pipe, and knew that he did so to keep himself from trembling. Nearby, an entire side of the valley wall exploded, showering rock down upon the people fighting below. He didn’t know which of the channelers had done that. There were Forsaken on this battlefield. Thom tried to stay out of their way.

This is *what you get, old man,* he reminded himself, *for not knowing when to let go.* He was glad that he'd not been able to escape, that his attempts to leave Rand, Mat and the others behind had failed. Would he really have wanted to sit in some quiet inn somewhere while the Last Battle played out? While she went in there alone?

He shook his head. He was as much a fool as any man or woman. He just had enough experience to recognize it. It took a few seasons before a man could put that together.

The approaching group of Aes Sedai broke apart, some remaining below, one limping tiredly up toward the cavern. Cadsuane. There were fewer Aes Sedai here than there had been before; casualties were mounting. Of course, most who had come here had known that death waited for them. This battle was the most desperate, and fighters here were the least likely to survive. Of every ten who had come to Shayol Ghul to fight, only one still stood. Thom knew for a fact that old Rodel Ituralde had sent a farewell letter to his wife before accepting this command. Just as well that he had.

Cadsuane nodded toward Thom, then continued on toward the cavern where Rand was fighting for the fate of the world. As soon as her back was to Thom, he flipped a single knife—his other hand still holding the pipe in his mouth—through the air. It hit the Aes Sedai in the back, right in the middle, severing the spine.

She dropped like a sack of potatoes.

That's an overused term it is, Thom thought, puffing on his pipe. *A sack of potatoes? I'll need a different simile there. Besides, how often do sacks of potatoes drop? Not often.* She dropped like… like what? Barley spilling from the ripped end of a sack, slumping to the ground in a heap. Yes, that worked better.

As the Aes Sedai hit the ground, her weave faded, revealing another face behind the "Cadsuane" mask she'd been using. He recognized this woman, vaguely. A Domani. What was her name? Jeaine Caide. That was it. She was a pretty one.

Thom shook his head. The walk had been all wrong. Didn't any of them realize that a person's walk was as distinctive as the nose on their face? Each woman who tried to slip past him assumed that changing her face and dress—maybe her voice—would be enough to fool him.

He climbed off his perch and grabbed the corpse under the arms, then stuffed it a hollow nearby—there were five bodies in there now, so it was getting crowded. He drew on his pipe and took his cloak off, placing it here so that it covered up the dead hand of the Black sister, which was peeking out.

He checked one more time down the tunnel—though he could not see Moiraine, it comforted him to look. Then he returned to his perch and took out a sheet of paper and his pen. And—to the thunder, the yells, the explosions, and the howl of the wind—he began to compose.

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CHAPTER 45

Tendrils of Mist

Dice tumbling in his head, Mat found Grady with Olver and Noal on the Heights. He carried Rand's bloody banner wrapped up in a small bundle, under his arm. Bodies lay scattered around, fallen weapons and pieces of armor, and blood stained the rocks. But the fighting was done here, the place empty of foes.

Noal smiled at Mat from horseback; Olver rode in front of him, clutching the Horn. Olver looked exhausted from Grady’s Healing—the Asha’man stood beside the horse—but also seemed proud as could be at the same time.

Noal. One of the heroes of the Horn. It bloody made sense. Jain Farstrider himself. Well, you wouldn’t find Mat trading places with him. Noal might enjoy it, but Mat wouldn’t dance at another man’s command. Not for immortality itself, no he wouldn’t.

“Grady!” Mat said. “You did a nice job upriver. That water came just when we needed it!”

Grady’s face was ashen, as if he’d seen something he had not wanted to. He nodded. “What… What were…”

“I’ll explain another time,” Mat said. “Right now, I need a bloody gateway.”

“Where to?” Grady asked.

Mat took a deep breath, pulling up. “Shayol Ghul.” *And curse me for a fool.*

Grady shook his head. “It can’t happen, Cauthon.”

“You’re too tired?”

“I *am* tired,” Grady said. “It isn’t that. Something’s happening at Shayol Ghul. Gateways opened there are deflected. The pattern is… warped, if that makes any sense. The valley isn’t one location any longer, but many, and a gateway can’t pinpoint it.”

“Grady,” Mat said, “that made about as much sense to me as playing a harp with no fingers.”

“Traveling to Shayol Ghul don’t work, Cauthon,” Grady said with annoyance. “Pick somewhere else.”

“How close can you send me?”

Grady shrugged. “One of the scouting camps a day’s hike out, probably.” A day’s hike out. The tugging pulled at Mat.

“Mat?” Olver said. “I think I need to go with you, don’t I? To the Blight? Won’t the heroes be needed to fight there?”

That was a piece of it. The tugging was insufferable. *Bloody ashes, Rand. Leave me alone, you—*

Mat stopped himself, a thought occurring to him. Scout camps. “One of those Seanchan patrol camps, you mean?”

“Yes,” Grady said. “They’ve been sending us status reports on the battle up there, now that the gateways are unreliable.”

“Well, don’t just sit there looking stupid,” Mat said. “Get a gateway open! Come on, Olver. We have some more work to do.”

“Ahhhh…” Shaisam rolled onto the battlefield at Thakan’dar. So perfect. So pleasurable. His enemies were killing one another. And he ... he had grown vast.

His mind was in every tendril of mist that rolled down the side of the valley. The souls of Trollocs were… well, unsatisfying. Still, simple grain could be filling in plentitude. And Shaisam had consumed quite a number of them.

His drones stumbled down the hillside, cloaked in mists. Trollocs with their skin pocked, as if it had boiled. Dead white eyes. He hardly needed them any longer, as their souls had given him fuel to rebuild himself. His madness had retreated. Mostly. Well, not mostly. Enough.

He walked at the center of the bank of mist. He was not reborn yet, not completely. He would need to find a place to infest, a place where the barriers between worlds was thin. There, he could seep his *self* into the very stones and embed his awareness into that location. The process would take years, but once it happened, he would become more difficult to kill.

Right now, Shaisam was frail. This mortal form that walked at the center of his mind ... he was bound to it. Fain, it had been. Padan Fain.

Still, he was vast. Those souls had given rise to much mist, and it—in turn—found others to feed upon. Men fought Shadowspawn before him. All would give him strength.

His drones stumbled onto the battlefield, and immediately, both sides took to fighting them. Shaisam quivered in joy. They did not see. They did not understand. The drones weren’t there to fight.

They were there to distract.

As the battle proceeded, he trailed his essence down in misty tendrils, then began stabbing it through the bodies of fighting men and Trollocs. He took Myrddraal. Converted them. Used them.

Soon, this entire army would be his.

He needed that strength in case his ancient enemy… his dear friend decided to attack him.

Those two friends—those two enemies—were occupied with one another. Excellent. Shaisam continued his attack, striking down enemies on both sides and consuming them. Some tried to attack him by running into his mists, his embrace. Of course, that killed them. This was his *true* self. He had tried to create this mist before, as Fain, but he had not been mature enough.

They could not reach him. No living thing could withstand his mist. Once, it had been a mindless thing. It had not been him. But it had been trapped with him, inside of a seed carried away, and that death—that wonderful death—had been given fertile ground in the flesh of a man.

The three entwined within him. Mist. Man. Master. That wonderful dagger—his physical form carried it now—had grown something delightful and new and ancient all at once.

So, the mist was him, but the mist was also not him. Mindless, but it was his body, and it carried his mind. Wonderfully, with those clouds in the sky he did not have to worry about the sun burning him away.

So *nice* of his old enemy to welcome him so! His physical form laughed at the heart of the creeping mists, while his mind—the mists themselves—gloried in how perfect everything was.

This place would become his. But only after he had feasted upon Rand al’Thor, the strongest soul of them all.

What a wonderful celebration!

Gaul clung to the rocks outside the Pit of Doom. The winds ripped at him, driving sand and chips of rock against his body, slicing gashes in his skin. He laughed at the vortex of blackness above.

"Do your worst!" he shouted upward. *"I* have lived in the Three-fold Land. I had heard the Last Battle would be grand, not a stroll to my mothers roof picking simblossoms!"

The winds blew harder, as if in retribution, but Gaul flattened himself against the stone, giving the winds no purchase on him. He'd lost his *shoufa*—it had blown free—so he had tied part of his shirt over his lower face. He held one spear. The others were gone, broken or pulled away.

He crawled toward the opening to the cavern, which lay exposed, a thin veil of purple barring the way forward. A figure in dark leather appeared in front of the opening. Near this man, the winds stilled.

Eyes squinting against the storm, Gaul crawled silently up behind the man and thrust his spear forward.

Slayer spun with a curse, turning aside the spear with an arm suddenly as strong as steel. "Burn you!" he shouted at Gaul. "Stay still for once!"

Gaul jumped back, and Slayer came for him, but then the wolves arrived. Gaul withdrew and faded into the rocks. Slayer was very powerful here, but what he could not see, he could not kill.

The wolves harried Slayer until he vanished. There were hundreds of them here in this valley, roving through the winds. Slayer had killed dozens; Gaul whispered a farewell to another who had fallen in this attack. He could not speak to them as Perrin Aybara did, but they were spear brothers.

Gaul crawled slowly, carefully. His clothing and skin matched the color of the rocks—it felt right for them to be that way, so they were. The wolves and he could probably not defeat this Slayer; but they could try. Try hard.

How long had it been since Perrin Aybara had left? Two hours, perhaps?

If the Shadow has claimed you, my friend, he thought, *I pray you spat in Sightblinder's eye before you awoke.*

Slayer appeared on the rocks again, but Gaul did not crawl forward. The man had sent decoys before made only of rock. This figure did not move. Gaul looked about—carefully, slowly—as several wolves appeared near the decoy. They sniffed it.

It started killing them.

Gaul cursed, breaking out of his hiding place. This, apparently, was what Slayer had been wanting. Slayer launched a spear—one of Gaul's own. It hit Gaul in the side. Gaul grunted, falling to his knees.

Slayer laughed, then raised his hands. A jet of air blew out from him, flinging wolves away. Gaul could barely hear the whimpers over the rushing wind.

“Here,” Slayer screamed into the tempest, “I am a *king!* Here, I am more than the Forsaken. This place is mine, and I will…”

Perhaps the pain of Gauls wound was addling him; he thought that the winds were starting to die down.

“Here, I will…”

The winds stopped.

The entire valley grew silent. Slayer stiffened, then turned worried eyes toward the cavern beyond. Nothing there seemed to have changed.

“You are not a king,” a soft voice said.

Gaul twisted about. A figure stood on a rocky protrusion behind him, wearing the greens and browns of a Two Rivers woodsman. His deep green cloak rippled faintly from the stilling winds. Perrin stood with his eyes closed, chin raised at a slight angle, as if toward the sun above—though, if there was one, it was blocked by clouds.

“This place belongs to the wolves,” Perrin said. “Not to you, not to me, not to any man. You cannot be a king here, Slayer. You have no subjects, and you never will.”

“Insolent pup,” Slayer snarled. “How many times must I kill you?”

Perrin drew in a deep breath.

“I laughed when I found that Fain had killed your family,” Slayer yelled. “I *laughed.* I was supposed to kill him, you know. The Shadow thinks him wild and rogue, but he’s the first one who has managed to do something meaningful to bring you pain.”

Perrin said nothing.

“Luc wanted to be part of something important,” Slayer shouted. “In that, we’re the same, though I sought the ability to channel. The Dark One cannot grant that, but he found something different for us, something better. Something that requires a soul to be melded with something else. Like what happened with you, Aybara. Like you.”

“We are nothing alike, Slayer,” Perrin said softly.

“But we are! That’s why I laughed. And you know, there’s a prophecy about Luc? That he’ll be important to the Last Battle. That’s why we’re here. We’ll kill you; then we’ll kill al’Thor. Just like we killed that wolf of yours.”

Standing on the rocky protrusion, Perrin opened his eyes. Gaul pulled back. Those golden eyes glowed like beacons.

The storm started again. And yet, that tempest seemed mild compared to the one Gaul saw in Perrin’s eyes. Gaul felt a *pressure* from his friend. Like the pressure of the sun at noon after four days without having any water to drink.

Gaul stared up at Perrin for a few moments, then held a hand against his wound and ran.

The wind whipped at Mat as he clung to the saddle of a winged beast hundreds of feet in the air.

“Oh, blood and bloody ashes!” Mat yelled, one hand on his hat, the other clutching the saddle. He was tied in with some straps. Two little leather straps. Far too thin. Could they not have used more? Maybe ten or twenty? He would have been fine with a hundred!

Morat’to’raken were bloody insane. Every one of them! They did this every day! What was wrong with them?

Tied into the saddle in front of Mat, Olver laughed with glee.

Poor lad\ Mat thought. *He’s so frightened he’s going mad. The lack of air up here is getting to him.*

“There it is, my Prince!” the *morat’to’raken*, Sulaan, called to him from her place at the front of the flying beast. She was a pretty thing. Completely insane, too. “We’ve reached the valley. Are you sure you want to set down in there?”

“No!” Mat shouted.

“Good answer!” The woman made her beast swoop.

“Blood and bloody—”

Olver laughed.

The *to’raken* brought them down over a long valley clogged with a frenzied battle. Mat tried to let his attention settle on the fighting, rather than on the fact that he was in the air flying on a lizard with two bloody lunatics.

Heaps of Trolloc bodies told that story as well as any map could have. The Trollocs had burst through defenses at the valley mouth behind Mat. He flew over that, toward the mountain of Shayol Ghul ahead, valley walls to his right and left.

It was mayhem below. Roving bands of Aiel and Trollocs moved through the valley, striking at each other here and there. Some soldiers, not Aiel, defended the way up to the Pit of Doom, but that was the only organized formation Mat could see.

Along the side of the valley a deep mist had begun to flood down onto its floor. At first, Mat was confused, thinking it had come from the heroes of the Horn. But no, the Horn was strapped to the saddle beside Mat's *ashandarei.* And this mist was too… silvery. If that was the right word. He thought he'd seen that mist before.

Then, Mat felt something. From that mist. A prickling cold sensation, followed by what he swore was whispering in his mind. He knew immediately what it was.

Oh, Light!

"Mat, look!" Olver called, pointing. "Wolves!"

A group of jet black animals, almost as large as horses, were assaulting the soldiers defending the path up to Shayol Ghul. The wolves were making quick work of the men. Light! As if things had not been difficult enough.

"Those aren't wolves," Mat said grimly. The Wild Hunt had come to Thakan'dar.

Maybe they and Mashadar would destroy one another? Was that too much to hope for? With the dice tumbling in his head, Mat was not going to bet on it. Rand's forces—what was left of the Aiel, Domani, Dragon-sworn and Tairen soldiers who had come here—would be crushed by the Darkhounds. If they survived, Mashadar would take them. They could not fight either one.

That voice in there ... It wasn't just Mashadar, the mindless mist. Fain was here somewhere, too. And the dagger.

Shayol Ghul loomed above. High in the air, clouds churned. Surprisingly, some white thunderheads had rolled in from the south, colliding with the black as they spun together. Actually, those two together looked an awful lot like the—

The *to'raken* turned and winged about, then swooped down lower, maybe only a hundred feet off the ground.

"Be careful!" Mat hollered, holding on to his hat. "Are you bloody trying to kill us!"

“Apologies, my Prince,” the woman yelled back. “I just need to find a safe place to put you down.”

“A *safe* place?” Mat said. “Good luck on that.”

“It’s going to be difficult. Dhana is strong, but I—”

A black-fletched arrow grazed the side of Sulaan’s head, loosed from somewhere down below, along with a flight of a dozen others that zipped around Mat, one hitting the wing of the *to’raken.*

Mat cursed, dropping his hat and reaching for Sulaan as Olver cried out in shock. Sulaan went limp, dropping the reins. Below, a group of red-veiled Aiel prepared another volley.

Mat undid his straps. He leaped—well, more crawled—over Olver and the unconscious woman and grabbed the reins of the panicked *to’raken.* This could not be too much harder than riding a horse, could it? He pulled as he had seen Sulaan do, turning the *to'raken* as arrows cut the air behind them, several taking the beast in the wings.

They veered straight toward the rock wall, and Mat found himself on his feet, standing on the saddle and gripping the reins tightly as he tried to keep the wounded beast from bloody killing them all. That turn nearly tossed him free, but he held himself in place with feet wedged and holding the reins even tighter.

The rush of air as they turned caught up Olver’s next words. The creature’s badly wounded wings beat wildly and it screeched wretchedly. Mat was not certain *either* of them were in control as the beast twisted toward the ground.

They hit the floor of the valley in a heap. Bones cracked—Light, Mat hoped they belonged to the *to’raken*—and he found himself tumbling end over end across the broken ground.

He finally came to a rest, flopping over.

He breathed in and out, stunned by it all. “That,” he finally groaned, “is the bloody worst idea I’ve ever had.” He hesitated. “Maybe the second worst.” He *had* decided to kidnap Tuon, after all.

He stumbled to his feet, and his legs still seemed to work. He did not limp too badly as he ran to the twitching *to’raken*. “Olver? Olver!”

He found the boy still tied in the saddle, blinking and shaking his head to clear it. “Mat,” Olver said, “next time I think you should let me fly it. I don’t think you did a very good job.”

“If there is a next time,” Mat said, “I’ll eat a whole bag of Tar Valon gold.” He yanked free the ties holding his *ashandarei* and Olver’s Horn, then handed the instrument to the boy. He reached for the pack with Rand’s banner, which he’d carried tied at his waist, but it was gone.

Panicked, Mat looked about. “The banner! I dropped the bloody banner!”

Olver smiled, looking up at the sign made by the swirling clouds. “It will be fine—we're beneath his banner already,” he said, then lifted the Horn and blew a beautiful note.

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CHAPTER 46

To Awaken

Rand broke free from the darkness and entered the Pattern fully again.

From his watching of the Pattern, he knew that although only minutes had passed here since he'd entered, in the valley outside this cavern, days had passed, and farther out into the world, it had been much longer.

Rand threw Moridin back from the position they'd held during those tense minutes with blades locked. Still full of the One Power, so sweet, Rand whipped the blade of *Callandor* at his old friend.

Moridin got his sword up in time to block, but only barely. He growled, pulling a knife from his belt and stepping back into a knife-and-sword stance.

"You don't matter any longer, Elan," Rand said, the torrent of *saidin* raging within him. "Let us finish this!"

"I don't?" Moridin laughed.

Then he spun and threw the knife at Alanna.

Nynaeve watched in horror as the knife spun through the air. The winds didn't touch it for some reason.

No! After she had coaxed the woman back to life. *I cannot lose her now!* Nynaeve tried to catch the knife or block it, but she moved just a hair too slowly.

The knife buried itself in Alanna's breast.

Nynaeve looked at it, horrified. This was not a wound that sewing and herbs could heal. That blade hit the heart.

"Rand! I need the One Power!" Nynaeve cried.

"Its… all right…" Alanna whispered.

Nynaeve looked at the woman's eyes. She was lucid. *The andilay*, Nynaeve realized, remembering the herb she'd used to give the woman strength. *It brought her out of her stupor. It awakened her.*

"I can . . " Alanna said. "I can release him…"

The light faded from her eyes.

Nynaeve looked at Moridin and Rand. Rand glanced at the dead woman with pity and sorrow, but Nynaeve saw no rage in his eyes. Alanna had released the bond before Rand could feel the effects of her death.

Moridin turned back to Rand, another knife in his left hand. Rand raised *Callandor* to strike Moridin down.

Moridin dropped his sword, and stabbed his own right hand with the knife. Rand twitched suddenly, and *Callandor* dropped from his grip as if *his* hand somehow hurt from Moridin's attack.

The glow emanating from the blade winked out, and the crystalline blade rang as it hit the ground.

Perrin did not hold back in the fight with Slayer.

He did not try to distinguish between wolf and man. He finally let everything out, every bit of rage at Slayer, every bit of pain at the deaths of his family—pressures which had been growing inside him unnoticed for months.

He let it out. Light, he let it out. As he had on that terrible night when he'd killed those Whitecloaks. Ever since then, he'd clamped a firm grip on himself and his emotions. Just as Master Luhhan had said.

He could see it now, in a frozen moment. Gentle Perrin, always afraid of hurting someone. A blacksmith who had learned control. He had rarely let himself strike with all of his strength.

This day, he took the leash off the wolf. It had never belonged there anyway.

The storm *conformed* to his rage. Perrin didn't try to keep it back. Why would he? It matched his emotions perfectly. The fall of his hammer was like claps of thunder, the flashing of his eyes like lightning bolts. Wolves howled alongside the wind.

Slayer tried to fight back. He jumped, he *shifted*, he stabbed. Each time, Perrin was there. Jumping at him as a wolf, swinging at him as a man, buffeting him like the tempest itself. Slayer got a wild look in his eyes. He raised a shield, trying to put it between himself and Perrin.

Perrin attacked. Without thought, now, he became instinct only. Perrin roared, smashing his hammer into that shield time and time again. *Driving*

Slayer before him. *Beating* the shield like a stubborn length of iron. *Pounding* away his anger, his fury.

His last blow threw Slayer back and flung the shield from the man's hands, sending it spinning a hundred feet in the air. Slayer hit the valley floor and rolled, gasping. He came to rest in the middle of the battlefield, shadowy figures rising all around him and dying as they fought in the real world. He looked at Perrin with panic, then vanished.

Perrin sent himself into the waking world to follow. He appeared amid the battle, Aiel against Trollocs in a furious fight. The winds were surprisingly strong on this side, and black clouds spun above Shayol Ghul, which rose like a crooked finger into the sky.

The nearby Aiel barely took time to notice him. The bodies of Trollocs and humans lay in heaps across the battlefield, and the place stank of death. The ground had once been dusty here, but now it churned with mud made from the blood of the fallen.

Slayer pushed through a group of Aiel nearby, growling, slashing with his long knife. He didn't look back—and it didn't seem that he knew Perrin had followed him into the real world.

A new wave of Shadowspawn pushed in off the slope, out of a silvery white mist. Their skin looked strange, pocked with holes, their eyes milky white. Perrin ignored these and barreled after Slayer.

Young Bull! Wolves. *The Shadowbrothers are here! We fight!*

Darkhounds. Wolves hated all Shadowspawn; an entire pack would die pulling down a Myrddraal. But Darkhounds they feared.

Perrin looked around to spot the creatures. Ordinary men could not fight Darkhounds, whose mere saliva was death. Nearby, the human forces broke before a tide of black wolves the size of horses. The Wild Hunt.

Light! Those Darkhounds were enormous. Scores of the jet black, corrupted wolves ripped through the defensive lines, throwing Tairen and Domani soldiers about as if they were rag dolls. Wolves attacked the Darkhounds, but in vain. They screamed and howled and died.

Perrin raised his voice alongside their cries of death, a ragged yell of rage. For the moment, he could not help. His instincts and passions drove him. Slayer. He *had* to defeat Slayer. If Perrin did not stop Slayer, the man would shift to the World of Dreams and kill Rand.

Perrin turned and ran through the fighting armies, chasing after the distant figure ahead. Slayer had gained a lead by Perrin's distraction, but the man had slowed a little. He had not yet realized that Perrin could leave the World of Dreams.

Ahead, Slayer stopped and inspected the battlefield. He glanced back and saw Perrin—then his eyes widened. Perrin couldn't hear his words over the din, but could read Slayer's lips as he whispered, "No. No, it can't be."

Yes, Perrin thought. I *can follow you now, wherever you run. This is a hunt. You, finally, are the prey.*

Slayer vanished, and Perrin *shifted* into the wolf dream after him. The people fighting around him became patterns in the dust, exploding and reforming. Slayer yelled in fright at seeing him, then *shifted* back into the waking world.

Perrin did likewise. He could *smell* Slayer's trail. Slick with sweat, panicked. To the dream, then to the waking world again. In the dream, Perrin ran on four legs, as Young Bull. In the waking world, he was Perrin, hammer held aloft.

He *shifted* back and forth between the two as frequently as he blinked, chasing Slayer. When he hit a patch of fighting bodies, he would jump into the wolf dream and crash through the figures made of sand and blown dust, then *shift* back into the waking world to keep on the trail. The *shifting* started to happen so quickly, he flickered between the two with each heartbeat.

Thump. Perrin raised his hammer, leaping off a small ridge after the scrambling form ahead.

Thump. Young Bull howled, summoning the pack.

Thump. Perrin was close now. Only a few steps behind. Slayer's odor was pungent.

Thump. The spirits of wolves appeared around Young Bull, howling their thirst for the hunt. Never had a prey deserved it more. Never had a prey done more damage to the packs. Never had a man been more feared.

Thump. Slayer stumbled. He twisted as he fell, sending himself to the wolf dream by reflex.

Thump. Perrin swung *Mah'alleinir*; emblazoned with the leaping wolf. He who soars.

Thump. Young Bull leaped for the throat of the killer of his brothers. Slayer fled.

The hammer connected.

Something about this place, this moment, sent Perrin and Slayer into a spiraling series of flickers between worlds. Back and forth, back and forth, flashes of moments and thoughts. Flicker. Flicker. Flicker.

Men died around them. Some of dust, some of flesh. Their world, alongside shadows of other worlds. Men in strange clothing and armor, fighting beasts of all shapes and sizes. Moments where the Aiel became Seanchan, who became something between the two, with spears and light eyes but helmets shaped like monstrous insects.

In all of those moments, in all of those places, Perrin's hammer struck and Young Bull's fangs grabbed Slayer by the neck. He tasted the salty warmth of Slayer's blood in his mouth. He felt the hammer vibrate as it hit, and he heard bones crack. The worlds flashed like bolts of lightning.

Everything crashed, shook, then pulled together.

Perrin stood on the rocks in the valley of Thakan'dar, and Slayer's body crumpled in front of him, head crushed. Perrin panted, the thrill of the hunt clinging to him. It was over.

He turned, surprised to find that he was surrounded by Aiel. He frowned at them. "What are you doing?"

One of the Maidens laughed. "You looked like you were running to a great dance, Perrin Aybara. One learns to watch for warriors like you on the battlefield and follow. They often have the most fun."

He smiled grimly, surveying the battlefield. It was not going well for his side. The Darkhounds ripped apart the defenders in a ruthless frenzy. The way up to Rand was completely exposed.

"Who commands this battle?" Perrin asked.

"Nobody, now," the Maiden said. He did not know her name. "Rodel Ituralde did first. Then Darlin Sisnera led—but his command post fell to Draghkar. I have not seen any Aes Sedai or clan chiefs in hours."

Her voice was grim. Even the stalwart Aiel were flagging. A quick scan of the battlefield showed Perrin that the remaining Aiel fought wherever they were, often in small groups, doing as much harm as they could before being cut down. The wolves who had fought here in packs were broken, their sendings those of pain and fear. And Perrin didn't know what those Shadowspawn with the pocked faces meant.

The battle was finished, and the side of Light had lost.

The Darkhounds broke through the line of Dragonsworn nearby, the last group who held falling before them. A few tried to flee, but one of the

Darkhounds leapt on them, pushing several to the ground and gnawing one. Frothing saliva sprayed across the others, and they dropped, twitching.

Perrin lowered his hammer, then knelt, pulling off Slayer's cloak and wrapping the cloth around his hands as he picked up his hammer again. "Don't let their spittle touch your skin. It is deadly."

The Aiel nodded, those with bare hands wrapping them. They smelled of determination, but also resignation. Aiel would run toward death if it was the only option, and would laugh while doing so. Wetlanders thought them mad, but Perrin could smell the truth on them. They were not mad. They did not fear death, but they did not welcome it.

"Touch me, all of you," Perrin said.

The Aiel did so. He *shifted* them to the wolf dream—taking so many was a strain, like bending a bar of steel—but he managed it. He immediately *shifted* them to the path up to the Pit of Doom. The spirits of wolves had gathered here, silent. Hundreds of them.

Perrin brought the Aiel back to the waking world, his *shift* placing him and his small force between Rand and the Darkhounds. The Wild Hunt looked up, corrupted eyes shining like silver as they fixed on Perrin.

"We will hold here," Perrin said to his Aiel, "and hope that some others aid us."

"We will stand," one of the Aiel said, a tall man wearing one of those headbands marked with Rand's symbol.

"And if we do not," another said, "and wake instead, then we will at least water the earth with our blood and let our bodies nourish the plants that will now grow here." Perrin had barely noticed the plants growing, incongruously, green and vibrant in the valley. Small, but strong. A manifestation of the fact that Rand still fought.

The Darkhounds slunk toward them, tails down, ears back, fangs exposed, gleaming like bloodstained metal. What was that he heard over the wind? Something very soft, very distant. It seemed so soft that he shouldn't have noticed it. But it pierced through the clamor of war. Faintly familiar…

"I know that sound," Perrin said.

"Sound?" the Aiel Maiden said. "What sound? The calls of the wolves?"

"No," Perrin said as the Darkhounds began to lope up the path. "The Horn of Valere."

The heroes would come. But upon which battlefield would they fight? Perrin could expect no relief here. Except…

Lead us, Young Bull.

Why must the heroes all be human?

A howl rose in the same pitch as that of the sounded Horn. He looked upon a field suddenly filled with a multitude of glowing wolves. They were great pale beasts, the size of Darkhounds. The spirits of those wolves who had died, then gathered here, waiting for the sign, waiting for the chance to fight.

The Horn had called them.

Perrin let loose a yell of his own, a howl of pleasure, then charged forward to meet the Darkhounds.

The Last Hunt had finally, truly arrived.

Mat left Olver with the heroes again. The boy looked like a prince, riding in front of Noal as they attacked the Trollocs and prevented anyone from climbing that path to kill Rand.

Mat borrowed a horse from one of the defenders who still had one, then galloped over to find Perrin. His friend would be among those wolves, of course. Mat did not know how those hundreds of big glowing wolves had entered the battlefield, but he was not going to complain. They met the Wild Hunt head-on, snarling and savaging the Darkhounds. Howls from both sides flooded Mat’s ears.

He passed some Aiel fighting a Darkhound, but the people did not stand a chance. They tripped the beast, hacking at it, but it pulled back together as if it were made of darkness and not flesh—then ripped into them. Blood and bloody ashes! Those Aiel weapons did not even seem to scratch, it. Mat continued galloping, avoiding the tendrils of silvery mist making their way across the whole valley.

Light! That mist was approaching the path up to Rand. It was picking up speed, rolling over Aiel, Trollocs and Darkhounds alike.

There, Mat thought, picking out a man fool enough to fight Darkhounds. Perrin slammed his hammer down on a Darkhounds head, cracking it and forcing it into the ground. When he raised his hammer, it trailed smoke behind it. The Darkhound, amazingly, remained dead.

Perrin turned, then stared. “Mat!” he called. “What are you doing here?”

“Coming to help!” Mat said. “Against my bloody better judgment!”

“You can’t fight Darkhounds, Mat,” Perrin said as Mat rode up beside him. “I can, and so can the Last Hunt.” He cocked his head, then looked toward the sound of the Horn.

“No,” Mat said, “I didn’t sound it. That bloody burden has passed to someone who actually seems to enjoy it.”

“It’s not that, Mat.” Perrin stepped up, reaching and taking him by the arm as he sat mounted. “My wife, Mat. Please. She had the Horn.”

Mat looked down, feeling grim. “The lad said… Light, Perrin. Faile was at Merrilor, and led the Trollocs away from Olver so he could escape with the Horn.”

“Then she could still be alive,” Perrin said.

“Yes. Of course she could,” Mat said. What else could he say? “Perrin, you need to know something else. Fain is here on this battlefield.”

“Fain?” Perrin growled. “Where?”

“He’s in that mist! Perrin, he’s brought Mashadar, somehow. Don’t let it touch you.”

“I was in Shadar Logoth too, Mat,” Perrin said. “I have a debt to settle with Fain.”

“And I don’t?” Mat said. “I—”

Perrin’s eyes opened wide. He stared at Mat’s chest.

There, a small white ribbon of silvery mist—Mashadar’s mist—had speared Mat from behind through the chest. Mat looked at it, jerked once, then tumbled off his horse.

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CHAPTER 47

Watching the Flow Writhe

Aviendha struggled on the slopes of the valley of Thakan’dar, trying to avoid the shield of Spirit Graendal was attempting to slip into place. A weave, like lace, defying her attempts to reach for the One Power. Her feet ruined, she could not stand. She lay, in pain, barely able to move.

She fought it off, but barely.

The Forsaken leaned against the rocks of the ledge, as she had been doing for a short time, muttering to herself. Her side bled bright red blood. Below them, in the valley, the battle raged. A silvery white mist was rolling across the dead and some of the living.

Aviendha tried to crawl toward her gateway. That lay open still, and through it she could see the valley floor. Something must have drawn Cadsuane and the others away—either that, or Aviendha had made the gateway to the wrong place.

The glow of *saidar* surrounded Graendal again. More weaves; Aviendha broke them, but they delayed her progress toward the gateway.

Graendal groaned, then pulled herself upright. She staggered in Aviendha’s direction, though the woman looked dazed by her blood loss.

Aviendha could do little to defend herself, weak as she was from blood loss. She was helpless.

Except…The Cave for her gateway, the one she had tied off. It still hung there holding the portal open. Ribbons of lace.

Carefully hesitant but desperate, Aviendha reached out mentally and pulled one of the threads loose in the gateway. She could do it. The flow shivered and vanished.

It was something the Aiel did, but something Aes Sedai thought terribly dangerous The results could be unpredictable. An explosion, a small shower of sparks… Aviendha could end up stilled. Or maybe nothing at all would happen. When Elayne had tried it, it had caused a devastating explosion

That would be fine with her. If she brought down one of the Forsaken alongside her, that would be a wonderful death.

She had to try.

Graendal stopped near Aviendha and grumbled to herself, eyes closed.

When the woman opened her eyes and began crafting another weave. Compulsion.

Aviendha picked faster, pulling two, three, half a dozen threads free of the gateway. Almost, almost…

What are you *doing*? Graendal demanded.

Aviendha picked faster, and in her haste, picked at the wrong thread. She froze, watching the flow writhe, setting off the others near it.

Graendal hissed, and began to set the Compulsion on Aviendha.

The gateway exploded in a flash of light and heat.

Shaisam seized the battlefield, his mist shoving through those wolves and men who thought to bar his way to al’Thor.

Yes, *al’Thor.* The one he would kill, destroy, feast upon. Yes, al’Thor!

Something trembled at one edge of his senses. Shaisam hesitated, frowning to himself. What was wrong there? A piece of him ... a piece of him had stopped sensing.

What was this? He ran his physical form across the ground through the mist. Blood trailed from his fingers, flayed by the dagger he carried, the wonderful seed, the last bit of his old self.

He came upon a corpse, one that his mists had killed. Shaisam frowned bending down. That body looked familiar…

The corpses hand reached up and grabbed Shaisam by the throat. He gasped, thrashing, as the corpse opened its eye.

“There’s an odd thing about diseases I once heard, Fain,” Matrim Cauthon whispered. “Once you catch a disease and survive, you cant get it again.”

Shaisam thrashed, panicked. No. No, this was not how a meeting with an old friend should go! He clawed at the hand holding him, then realized with horror that he’d dropped the dagger.

Cauthon pulled him down, slamming him to the ground. Shaisam called for his drones. Too late! Too slow!

“I’ve come to give you your gift back, Mordeth,” Cauthon whispered. “I consider our debt paid in full.”

Cauthon rammed the dagger right between the ribs, into Shaisam’s heart. Tied to this pitiful mortal form, Mordeth screamed. Padan Fain howled, and felt his flesh melting from his bones. The mists trembled, began to swirl and shake.

Together they died.

Perrin *shifted* to the wolf dream and found Gaul by tracing the scent of blood. He had hated to leave Mat with Mashadar, but was confident—from a look Mat had given him after falling—that his friend could survive the mist, and knew what he was doing.

Gaul had hidden himself well, pushed up into a split in the rock just outside the Pit of Doom. Gaul still carried one spear and had darkened his clothing to match the rocks around him.

He was nodding off when Perrin found him. Gaul was not only wounded, but had been in the wolf dream far too long. If Perrin felt an aching exhaustion, it must be worse for Gaul.

“Come, Gaul,” Perrin said, helping him out of the rocks.

Gaul looked dazed. “Nobody passed me by,” he mumbled. “I watched, Perrin Aybara. The *Car’a’carn* is safe.”

“You did well, my friend,” Perrin replied. “Better than anyone could have expected. You have much honor.”

Gaul smiled as he leaned on Perrin’s shoulder. “I worried… when the wolves vanished, I worried.”

“They fight on in the waking world.” Perrin felt a need to return here. Finding Gaul had been part of that, but there was something else, a *drive* he couldn’t explain.

“Hold on,” Perrin said, grabbing Gaul about the waist. He *shifted* them to the Field of Merrilor, then *shifted* them out of the wolf dream and appeared in the center of the Two Rivers camp.

People immediately locked on Perrin, yells rising. “Light, Perrin!” a man said nearby. Grady rushed up, deep bags beneath his eyes. “I nearly burned you to char, Lord Goldeneyes. How did you appear like that?”

Perrin shook his head, setting Gaul down. Grady eyed the wound in the man’s side, then called for one of the Aes Sedai to handle the Healing. They bustled around—some of the Two Rivers men calling out that Lord Goldeneyes had returned.

Faile. Faile had been here at Merrilor with the Horn.

I have to find her.

Rand was alone, unguarded in the wolf dream.

Burn it, that doesn't matter! Perrin thought. *If I lose Faile*…

If Rand died, he *would* lose Faile. And everything else. There were still Forsaken out there. Perrin wavered. He had to go look for her, didn't he? Wasn't that his duty, as her husband? Couldn't someone else look after Rand?

But ... if not him, then who?

Though it ripped him apart, Perrin sought the wolf dream one last time.

Moridin scooped *Callandor* up off the floor. It burst alight with the One Power.

Rand stumbled away, holding his aching hand to his chest. Moridin laughed, raising the weapon high. "You are mine, Lews Therin. You are finally mine! I…" He trailed off, then looked up at the sword, perhaps in awe. "It can amplify the True Power. A True Power *sa'angreal*? How? Why?" He laughed louder.

A maelstrom churned about them.

"Channeling the True Power is death here, Elan!" Rand yelled. "It will burn you to a cinder!"

"It is oblivion!" Moridin yelled. "I will know that release, Lews Therin. I will take you with me."

The sword's glow turned a violent crimson. Rand could feel the power emanating from Moridin as he drew in the True Power.

This was the most dangerous part of the plan. Min had figured it out. *Callandor* had such flaws, such incredible flaws. Created so that a man using it needed women to control him, created so that if Rand used it, others could take control of him…

Why was Rand to need a weapon with such flaws? Why did the prophecies mention it so? A *sa'angreal* for the True Power. Why would he ever need such a thing?

The answer was so simple.

"Now!" Rand yelled.

Nynaeve and Moiraine channeled together, exploiting the flaw in *Callandor* as Moridin tried to bring it to bear against Rand. Wind whipped in the tunnel. The ground quivered, and Moridin yelled, eyes going wide.

They took control of him. *Callandor* was flawed. Any man using it could be forced to link with women, to be placed in their control. A trap… and one he used on Moridin.

“Link!” Rand commanded.

They fed it to him. Power.

Saidar from the women.

The True Power from Moridin.

Saidin from Rand.

Moridin’s channeling the True Power here threatened to destroy them all, but they buffered it with *saidin* and *saidar*; then directed all three at the Dark One.

Rand punched through the blackness there and created a conduit of light *and* darkness, turning the Dark Ones own essence upon him.

Rand felt the Dark One beyond, his immensity. Space, size, time… Rand understood how these things could be irrelevant now.

With a bellow—three Powers coursing through him, blood streaming down his side—the Dragon Reborn raised a hand of power and seized the Dark One through the Bore, like a man reaching through water to grab the prize at the rivers bottom.

The Dark One tried to pull back, but Rand's claw was gloved by the True Power. The enemy could not taint *saidin* again. The Dark One tried to withdraw the True Power from Moridin, but the conduit flowed too freely, too powerfully to shut off now. Even for Shai’tan himself.

So it was that Rand used the Dark One’s own essence, channeled in its full strength. He held the Dark One tightly, like a dove in the grip of a hawk.

And light exploded from him.

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CHAPTER 48

A Brilliant Lance

Elayne trotted her horse among heaps of dead Trollocs. The day was won. She had everyone who could stand searching for the living among the dead.

So many dead. Hundreds of thousands of men and Trollocs, lying in piles all across Merrilor. The rivers banks were slaughterhouses, the bogs mass graves, floating with corpses. Ahead of her, across the river, the Heights groaned and rumbled. She'd pulled her people away from there. She could barely sit on her horse.

The entire plateau collapsed upon itself, burying the dead. Elayne watched, feeling numb, feeling the ground shake. It—

Light.

She sat up straight, feeling the swelling of power in Rand. Her attention flew away from the Heights, instead focused on him. The feeling of supreme strength, the beauty of control and domination. A light shot into the sky far to the north, so bright that she gasped.

The end had come.

Thom stumbled back from the entrance to the Pit of Doom, shading his eyes with his arm as light—radiant as the sun itself—burst out of the cavern. Moiraine!

"Light," Thom whispered.

Light it was, breaking out of the top of the mountain of Shayol Ghul, a radiant beam that melted the mountain's tip and shot straight into the sky.

Min raised her hand to her breast, stepping away from the rows of wounded for whom she'd been changing linens.

Rand, she thought, feeling his agonized determination. Far to the north, a beam of light rose into the air, so bright that it lit the Field of Merrilor even such a great distance away. The helpers and the wounded alike blinked, stumbling to their feet, shading their faces.

That light, a brilliant lance in the heavens, burned away the clouds and opened up the sky.

Aviendha blinked at the light, and knew it was Rand.

It drew her back from the brink of darkness, flooding her with warmth. He was winning. He was *winning.* He was so strong. She saw the true warrior in him now.

Nearby, Graendal stumbled to her knees, eyes glazed over. The unraveling gateway had exploded, but not with as large a blast as last time. Weaves and the One Power had sprayed out, just as Graendal tried to spin Compulsion.

The Forsaken turned to Aviendha, and she adopted an adoring gaze. She bowed down, as if worshipping Aviendha.

The explosion, Aviendha realized, numb. It had done something to the Compulsion weave. Honestly, she had expected that blast to kill her. It had done something else instead.

“Please, glorious one,” Graendal said. “Tell me what you wish of me. Let me serve you!”

Aviendha looked back to the light that was Rand and held her breath.

Logain stepped from the ruins, holding a toddler—maybe two years of age—in his arms. The child’s weeping mother took her son from his hands. “Thank you. Bless you, Asha’man. *Light bless you.*”

Logain stumbled to a halt amid the people. The air stank of burned flesh and dead Trollocs. “The Heights are gone?” he asked.

“Gone,” Androl said reluctantly from beside him. “The earthquakes took them.”

Logain sighed. The prize… was it lost, then? Would he ever be able to dig it out?

I am a fool, he thought. He had abandoned that power for what? To save these refugees? People who would spurn him and hate him for what he was. People who…

. . . who looked at him with awe.

Logain frowned. These were common people, not like folk from the Black Tower who were accustomed to men who could channel. In that moment, he wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference.

Logain watched with wonder as the people flocked around his Asha’man, weeping for their salvation. Elderly men took Asha’man by the hands, overcome, praising them.

Nearby a youth looked at Logain with admiration. A dozen youths. Light, a *hundred’* Not a hint of fear in their eyes.

“Thank you,” the young mother said again. “Thank you.”

“The Black Tower protects,” Logain heard himself say. “Always.”

“I will send him to you to be tested when he is of age,” the woman promised, holding her son. “I would have him join you, if he has the talent.”

The talent. Not the curse. The talent.

Light bathed them.

He stopped. That beam of light to the north… channeling like none he’d ever felt before, not even at the cleansing. Such *power.*

“It’s happening,” Gabrelle said, stepping up to him.

Logain reached to his belt, then took three items from his pouch. Discs, half white, half black. The nearby Asha’man turned toward him, pausing in Healing and comforting the people.

“Do it,” Gabrelle said. “Do it, *Sealbreaker*.”

Logain snapped the once unbreakable seals, one by one, and dropped the pieces to the ground.

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CHAPTER 49

Light and Shadow

Everything was dead. In the wolf dream, Perrin stumbled across a rocky wasteland without plants or soil. The sky had gone black, the dark clouds themselves vanishing into that nothingness. As he climbed atop a ridge, an entire section of the ground behind him crumbled— his stone footing shaking violently—and was pulled into the air.

Beneath that was only emptiness.

In the wolf dream, all was being consumed. Perrin continued forward toward Shayol Ghul. He could see it, like a beacon, glowing with light.’ Strangely, behind, he could make out Dragonmount, though it should have been far too distant to see. As the land between them crumbled, the world seemed to be shrinking.

The two peaks, pulling toward one another, all between shattered and broken. Perrin *shifted* to the front of the tunnel into the Pit of Doom, then stepped in, passing the violet barrier he’d erected earlier.

Lanfear lounged inside. Her hair was jet black, as it had been when he’d first met her, and her face was familiar. It looked as it once had.

I find that dreamspike annoying, she said. “Did you have to place it here?”

“It keeps the other Forsaken away,” Perrin said absently.

“I suppose it does that,” she said, folding her arms.

“He is still ahead?” Perrin asked.

“It is the end, she said, nodding. Something amazing just happened.”

She narrowed her eyes. “This might be the most important moment for humankind since we opened the Bore.”

“Let’s make sure nothing goes wrong, then,” Perrin said, walking forward down the long maw of stone, Lanfear at his side.

At the end of the tunnel, they found an unexpected scene. Someone else was holding *Callandor*.; the man that Rand had been fighting earlier.

Maybe that was Demandred? Perrin did not know. He was certainly one of the Forsaken.

That man knelt on the floor, with Nynaeve's hand on his shoulder. She stood just behind Rand and to the left. Moiraine was on Rand's right, all three of them standing tall, with eyes forward, staring into the nothingness ahead.

The mountain rumbled.

"Perfect," Lanfear whispered. "I couldn't have dreamed that it could come out this well." She eyed the two women. "We will need to strike quickly. I will kill the taller woman, you the shorter one."

Perrin frowned. Something about that seemed very wrong. "Kill… ?"

"Of course," Lanfear said. "If we strike quickly, there will still be time to seize control of Moridin while he holds that blade. With that, I can force Lews Therin to bow." She narrowed her eyes. "He holds the Dark One between his fingers, needing only one squeeze to pinch the life—if it can be called that—away. Only one hand can save the Great Lord. In this moment, I earn my reward. In this moment, I become highest of the high."

"You… you want to save the Dark One?" Perrin said, raising a hand to his head. "You joined us. I remember…"

She glanced at him. "Such an inferior tool," she said, smelling dissatisfied. "I hate having to use it. This makes me no better than Graendal." She shivered. "If they had given me more time, I would have had you fairly." She patted Perrin fondly on the cheek. "You are troubled. The taller one is from your village, I remember. You grew up together, I presume? I won't make you kill her, my wolf. You can kill the short one. You hate her, don't you?"

"I… yes, I do. She stole me away from my family. It's because of her that they died, really. I would have been there, otherwise."

"That's right," Lanfear said. "We must be quick. Our moment of opportunity will not last long."

She turned toward the two women. Nynaeve and Moiraine. His *friends.* And then… and then *Rand.* She would kill him, Perrin knew. She would force him to bow, and then she would kill him. All along, her goal had been to put herself into a position where the Dark One himself would be helpless and she could step in to bring him salvation.

Perrin came up beside her.

“We strike together,” Lanfear said softly. “The barriers between worlds have been broken here. They will be able to fight back unless we are quick. We must kill them at the same time.”

This is wrong, Perrin thought. *This is very, very wrong.* He couldn’t let it happen, and yet his hands rose.

IT IS WRONG. He didn’t know why. His thoughts wouldn’t allow him to think of why.

“Ready,” Lanfear said, eyes on Nynaeve.

Perrin turned toward Lanfear.

“I will count to three,” Lanfear said, not looking at him.

My duty, Perrin thought, *is to do the things Rand cannot.*

This was the wolf dream. In the wolf dream, what he felt became reality.

“One,” Lanfear said.

He loved Faile.

“Two.”

He loved Faile.

“Three.”

He loved Faile. The Compulsion vanished like smoke in the wind, thrown off like clothing changed in the blink of an eye. Before Lanfear could strike, Perrin reached out and took her by the neck.

He twisted once. Her neck popped in his fingers.

Lanfear crumpled, and Perrin caught her body. She *was* beautiful. As she died, she changed back to the other form she had been wearing before, her new body.

Perrin felt a horrible stab of loss. He hadn’t completely wiped what she’d done from his mind. He’d overcome it, perhaps overlaid it with something new, something right. Only the wolf dream and his ability to view himself as he *should* be had allowed him to accomplish that.

Unfortunately, deep within, he still felt love for this woman. That sickened him. The love was nowhere near as strong as his love for Faile, but it was there. He found himself crying as he lowered her body, draped in sleek white and silver, to the stone floor.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. Killing a woman, particularly one who wasn’t threatening him personally ... it was something he’d never have thought himself capable of.

Someone had needed to do it. This was one test, at least, that Rand would not need to face. It was one burden that Perrin could carry for his friend.

He looked up toward Rand. “Go,” Perrin whispered. “Do what you must do. As always, I will watch your back.”

The seals crumbled. The Dark One burst free.

Rand held the Dark One tightly.

Filled with the Power, standing in a column of light, Rand pulled the Dark One into the Pattern. Only here was there time. Only here could the Shadow itself be killed.

The force in his hand, which was at once vast and yet tiny, trembled. Its screams were the sounds of planets grinding together.

A pitiful object. Suddenly, Rand felt as if he were holding not one of the primal forces of existence, but a squirming thing from the mud of the sheep pens.

YOU REALLY ARE NOTHING, Rand said, knowing the Dark Ones secrets completely. YOU WOULD NEVER HAVE GIVEN ME REST AS YOU PROMISED, FATHER OF LIES. YOU WOULD HAVE ENSLAVED ME AS YOU WOULD HAVE ENSLAVED THE OTHERS. YOU CANNOT GIVE OBLIVION. REST IS NOT YOURS. ONLY TORMENT.

The Dark One trembled in his grip.

YOU HORRIBLE, PITIFUL MITE, Rand said.

Rand was dying. His lifeblood flowed from him, and beyond that, the amount of the Powers he held would soon burn him away.

He held the Dark One in his hand. He began to squeeze, then stopped.

He knew all secrets. He could see what the Dark One had done. And Light, Rand understood. Much of what the Dark One had shown him was lies.

But the vision Rand himself had created—the one without the Dark One—was truth. If he did as he wished, he would leave men no better than the Dark One himself.

What a fool I have been.

Rand yelled, thrusting the Dark One back through the pit from where it had come. Rand pushed his arms to the side, grabbing twin pillars of *saidar* and *saidin* with his mind, coated with the True Power drawn through Moridin, who knelt on the floor, eyes open, so much power coursing through him he couldn’t even move.

Rand hurled the Powers forward with his mind and *braided* them together. *Saidin* and *saidar* at once, the True Power surrounding them and forming a shield on the Bore.

He wove something majestic, a pattern of interlaced *saidar* and *saidin* in their pure forms. Not Fire, not Spirit, not Water, not Earth, not Air. Purity. Light itself. This didn't repair, it didn't patch, it *forged anew.*

With this new form of the Power, Rand pulled together the rent that had been made here long ago by foolish men.

He understood, finally, that the Dark One was not the enemy.

It never had been.

Moiraine grabbed Nynaeve beside her, moving only by touch, for that light was blinding.

She pulled Nynaeve to her feet. Together, they ran. Away from the burning light behind. Up the corridor, scrambling. Moiraine burst into open air without realizing it, and almost ran off the edge of the path, which would have sent her stumbling down the steep slope. Someone caught her.

"I have you," Thom's voice said as she collapsed into his arms, completely drained. Nynaeve fell to the ground nearby, gasping.

Thom turned Moiraine away from the corridor, but she refused to look away. She opened her eyes, though she knew that the light was too intense, and she *saw* something. Rand and Moridin, standing in the light as it expanded outward to consume the entire mountain in its glow.

The blackness in front of Rand hung like a hole, sucking in everything. Slowly, bit by bit, that hole shrank away until it was just a pinprick.

It vanished.

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EPILOGUE

To See the Answer

Rand slipped on his blood.

He couldn't see. He carried something. Something heavy. A body. He stumbled up the tunnel.

Closing, he thought. *It's closing* The ceiling lowered like a shutting jaw, stone grinding against stone. With a gasp, Rand reached open air as the rocks slammed down behind him, locking together like clenched teeth.

Rand tripped. The body in his arms was so heavy. He slipped to the ground.

He could . . . see, just faintly. A figure kneeling down beside him. "Yes," a woman whispered. He did not recognize the voice. "Yes, that's good. That is what you need to do."

He blinked, his vision fuzzy. Was that Aiel clothing? An old woman, with gray hair? Her form retreated, and Rand reached toward her, not wanting to be alone. Wanting to explain himself. "I see the answer now," he whispered. "I asked the Aelfinn the wrong question. To choose is our fate. If you have no choice, then you aren't a man at all. You're a puppet . . ." Shouting.

Rand felt heavy. He plunged into unconsciousness.

Mat stood up as the mist of Mashadar burned away from him and vanished. The field was littered with the bodies of those eerie pockmarked Trollocs.

He looked upward through the vanishing wisps and found the sun directly overhead.

"Well, you're a sight," he said to it. "You should come out more often. You have a pretty face." He smiled, then looked down at the dead man by his feet. Padan Fain looked like a bundle of sticks and moss, the flesh slipping from his bones. The blackness of the dagger had spread across his rotting skin. It stank.

Almost, Mat reached for that dagger. Then he spat. “For once,” he said, “a gamble I don’t want to touch.” He turned his back on it and walked off.

Three steps away, he found his hat. He grinned, snatched it up and set it on his head, then began whistling as he rested the *ashandarei* on his shoulder and strolled away. The dice had stopped rolling in Mat’s head.

Behind, the dagger, ruby and all, melted away into the mess that had been Padan Fain.

Perrin walked wearily into the camp they had set up at the base of Shayol Ghul after the fighting had ceased. He dropped his coat. The air felt good on his bare chest. He tucked *Mah’alleinir* away in its place at his belt. A good smith never neglected his tools, for all that sometimes, carrying them felt as if they would bear him down to the grave itself.

He thought that he could sleep a hundred days straight. But not yet. Not yet.

Faile.

No. Deep down, he knew he had to face something horrible about her. But not yet. For the moment, he shoved that worry—that terror—away.

The last spirits of the wolves faded back into the wolf dream.

Farewell, Young Bull.

Find what you seek, Young Bull.

The hunt ends, but we will hunt again, Young Bull.

Perrin plodded among rows of wounded men and Aiel celebrating the defeat of the Shadowspawn. Some tents were filled with moans, others with yells of victory. People of all stripes ran through the now-blooming valley of Thakan’dar, some hunting for the wounded, others crying in joy and whooping as they met with friends who had survived the last, dark moments.

Aiel called to Perrin, “Ho, blacksmith, join us!” But he did not enter their celebrations. He looked for the guards. Someone around here had to be levelheaded enough to worry about a rogue Myrddraal or Draghkar taking the opportunity to try for a little revenge. Sure enough, he found a ring of defenders at the center of camp guarding a large tent. What of Rand?

No colors swirled in his vision. No image of Rand. Perrin felt no more tugging, pulling him in any direction.

Those seemed like very bad signs.

He pushed through the guards, numb, and entered the tent. Where had they found a tent this large on this battlefield? Everything had been trampled, blown away or burned.

The inside smelled of herbs, and was partitioned with several hanging cloths.

"I've tried everything," a voice whispered. Damer Flinn's voice. "Nothing changes what is happening. He—"

Perrin pushed in on Nynaeve and Flinn standing beside a pallet behind one of the partitions. Rand, cleaned and dressed, lay there, eyes closed. Moiraine knelt beside him, her hand on his face, whispering so softly none but he could hear. "You did well, Rand. You did well."

"He lives?" Perrin asked, wiping the sweat from his face with his hand.

"Perrin!" Nynaeve said. "Oh, Light. You look horrible. Sit down, you lummox! You're going to fall over. I don't want *two* of you to tend."

Her eyes were red. "He's dying anyway, isn't he?" Perrin asked. "You got him out alive, but he's still going to die."

"Sit," Nynaeve commanded, pointing to a stool.

"Dogs obey that command, Nynaeve," Perrin said, "not wolves." He knelt down, resting a hand on Rand's shoulder.

I couldn't feel your tugging, or see the visions, Perrin thought. *You're no longer* ta'veren. *I suspect neither am I.* "Have you sent for the three?" Perrin asked. "Min, Elayne, Aviendha. They need to visit him a last time."

"That's all you can say?" Nynaeve snapped.

He looked up at her. The way she folded her arms made her look as if she were holding herself together. Wrapping her arms about herself to stop from crying.

"Who else died?" Perrin asked, bracing himself. It was obvious from her expression. She had lost one already.

"Egwene."

Perrin closed his eyes, breathing out. Egwene. Light.

No masterwork comes without a price, he thought. *That doesn't mean it's not worth forging* Still . . . Egwene?

"It's not your fault, Nynaeve," he said, opening his eyes.

"Of course it's not. I know it's not, you numb-brained fool." She turned away.

He stood up, embracing her and patting her back with his smith's hands. "I'm sorry."

"I left ... to save you," Nynaeve whispered. "I only came along to protect you."

"You did, Nynaeve. You protected Rand so he could do what he had to do."

She shook, and he let her weep. Light. He shed a few tears himself. Nynaeve pulled away sharply after a moment, then barreled out of the tent.

"I tried," Flinn said desperately, looking at Rand. "Nynaeve did, too. Together, we tried, with Moiraine Sedai's *angreal*. Nothing worked. Nobody knows how to save him."

"You did what you could," Perrin said, peeking around the next partition. Another man lay on the pallet there. "What is he doing here?"

"We found them together," Flinn said. "Rand must have carried him out of the pit. We don't know why the Lord Dragon would save one of the Forsaken, but it doesn't matter. We can't Heal him either. They're dying. Both of them."

"Send for Min, Elayne and Aviendha," Perrin said again. He hesitated. "Did they all survive?"

"The Aiel girl took a beating," Flinn said. "She came stumbling into camp, half-carried by a horrid-looking Aes Sedai who had made a gateway for her. She'll live, though I don't know how well she'll walk in years to come."

"Let them know. All of them."

Flinn nodded, and Perrin stepped out after Nynaeve. He found what he'd hoped to see, the reason why she'd left so quickly. Just outside the tent, Lan held her tightly. The man looked as bloodied and tired as Perrin felt. Their eyes met, and they nodded to one another.

"Several of the Windfinders have opened a gateway between here and Merrilor," Lan said to Perrin. "The Dark One is sealed away again. The Blasted Lands are blooming, and gateways can open here again."

"Thank you," Perrin said, passing him by. "Has anyone . . . heard anything about Faile?"

"No, blacksmith. The Hornsounder saw her last, but she left him and entered the battlefield to draw the Trollocs away from him. I'm sorry."

Perrin nodded. He'd already spoken with Mat, and Olver. It seemed to him that . . . that he'd been avoiding thinking about what must have happened.

Don't think about it, he told himself. *Don't you dare.* He steeled himself, then went to seek the gateway Lan had mentioned.

"Excuse me," Loial asked the Maidens sitting beside the tent. "Have you seen Matrim Cauthon?"

"Oosquai?" one of them asked, laughing, holding up the skin.

"No, no," Loial said. "I have to find Matrim Cauthon and get his account of the battle, you see. While its fresh. I need everyone to tell me what they saw and heard, so that I can write it down. There will never be a better time."

And, he admitted to himself, he wanted to see Mat and Perrin. See that they were all right. So much had happened; he wanted to talk to his friends and make certain they were well. With what was happening to Rand . . .

The Aiel woman smiled at him drunkenly. Loial sighed, then continued through the camp. The day was coming to an end. The day of the Last Battle! It was the Fourth Age now, wasn't it? Could an age start in the middle of a day? That would be inconvenient for the calendars, wouldn't it? But everyone agreed. Rand had sealed the Bore at noon.

Loial continued through the camp. They hadn't moved from the base of Shayol Ghul. Nynaeve said she was too worried to move Rand. Loial kept searching, peeking into tents. In the next, he found the grizzled general Ituralde, surrounded by four Aes Sedai.

"Look," Ituralde said. "I've served the kings of Arad Doman all of my life. I swore oaths."

"Alsalam is dead," Saerin Sedai said from beside the chair. "Someone has to take the throne."

"There is confusion in Saldaea," Elswell Sedai added. "The succession is messy, with the ties it has to Andor now. Arad Doman cannot afford to be leaderless. *You* must take the throne, Rodel Ituralde. You must do it quickly.

The Merchant Council . . ."

"All dead or vanished," another Aes Sedai said.

"I swore oaths . . ."

"And what would your king have you do?" Yukiri Sedai asked. "Let the kingdom disintegrate? You must be strong, Lord Ituralde. This is not a time for Arad Doman to be without a leader."

Loial slipped away and shook his head, feeling sorry for the man. *Four* Aes Sedai. Ituralde would be crowned before the day was out.

Loial stopped by the main Healing tent again to check if anyone had seen Mat. He had been to this battlefield, and people said he was smiling and healthy, but . . . well, Loial wanted to see for himself. Wanted to talk to him.

Inside the tent, Loial had to slouch lest he brush his head on the ceiling. A large tent for humans was small by Ogier standards.

He peeked in on Rand. His friend looked worse than before. Lan stood by the wall. He wore a crown—it was just a simple silver band—where the *hadori* used to rest. That wasn't odd, but the matching one Nynaeve wore did give Loial a start.

"It's not fair," Nynaeve whispered. "Why should he die, when the other one gets better?"

Nynaeve seemed troubled. She still had red eyes, but before, she had chivvied anyone who mentioned them, so Loial said nothing. Humans often seemed to want him to say nothing, which was odd for people who lived lives so hastily.

She looked at Loial, and he bowed his head to her.

"Loial," she said. "How goes your search?"

"Not well," he said with a grimace. "Perrin ignored me and Mat cannot be found."

"Your stories can wait a few days, Builder," Lan said.

Loial did not argue. Lan was a king now, after all. But . . . no, the stories could *not* wait. They had to be fresh so his history could be accurate.

"It's terrible," Flinn said, still looking at Rand. "But, Nynaeve Sedai . . . It's so strange. None of the three seem to care at all. Shouldn't they be more worried . . . ?"

Loial left them, though he did check in on Aviendha in a nearby tent. She sat while several women attended to her twisted, bleeding feet. She had lost several of her toes. She nodded her head to Loial; the Healings done so far had apparently taken away her pain, for though she seemed tired, she did not seem in agony.

"Mat?" he asked hopefully.

"I have not seen him, Loial, son of Arent son of Halan," Aviendha replied. "At least, not since you asked a short time ago."

Loial blushed, then left her. He passed Elayne and Min outside. He would get their stories—he had already asked a few questions—but the three *ta'veren* . . . they were most important! Why were humans always bustling around so quickly, never sitting still? Never any time to think. This was an important day.

It *was* odd, though. Min and Elayne. Shouldn't they be at Rand's side? Elayne seemed to be taking reports on casualties and refugee supplies, and Min sat looking up at Shayol Ghul, a far-off expression in her eyes. Neither went in to hold Rand's hand as he slipped toward death.

Well, Loial thought, *maybe Mat sneaked by me and went back to Merrilor.* Never staying put, these men. Always so hasty . . .

Matrim Cauthon sauntered into the Seanchan camp on the south side of Merrilor, away from the piles of the dead.

All around, Seanchan men and women gasped, hands to their mouths. He tipped his hat to them.

"The Prince of the Ravens!" Hushed tones moved through camp ahead of him, passing from mouth to mouth like the last bottle of brandy on a cold night.

He walked right up to Tuon, who stood at a large map table at the camp center talking to Selucia. Karede, Mat noticed, had survived. The man probably felt guilty about it.

Tuon looked at Mat and frowned. "Where have you been?"

Mat raised his arm, and Tuon frowned, looking upward at nothing. Mat spun and thrust his hand farther toward the sky.

Nightflowers began to explode high above the camp.

Mat grinned. Aludra had taken a little convincing, but only a little. She did so like to make things explode.

It was not truly dusk yet, but the show was still grand. Aludra now had half of the dragoners trained to build fireworks and handle her powders. She seemed far less secretive than she once had.

The sounds of the display washed over them.

"Fireworks?" Tuon said.

“The best bloody firework show in the history of my land *or* yours,” Mat said.

Tuon frowned. The explosions reflected in her dark eyes. “I’m with child,” she said. “The Doomseer has confirmed it.”

Mat felt a jolt, as sure as if a firework had gone off inside of his stomach. An heir. A son, no doubt! What odds that it was a boy? Mat forced a grin. “Well, I guess I’m off the hook, now. You have an heir.”

“I have an heir,” Tuon said, “but I am the one off that hook. Now I can kill you, if I want.”

Mat felt his grin widen. “Well, we’ll have to see what we can work out. Tell me, do you ever play dice?”

Perrin sat down among the dead and finally started weeping.

Gai’shain in white and city women picked through the dead. There was no sign of Faile. None at all.

I can’t keep going. How long had it been since he’d slept? That one night in Mayene. His body complained that it hadn’t been nearly enough. He’d pushed himself long before that, spending the equivalent of weeks in the wolf dream.

Lord and Lady Bashere were dead. Faile would have been queen, if she’d lived. Perrin shook and trembled, and he could not make himself move any more. There were hundreds of thousands of dead on this battlefield. The other searchers ignored a body if it had no life, marking it and moving on. He had tried to spread the word for them to seek Faile, but the searchers had to look for the living.

Fireworks exploded in the darkening sky. Perrin buried his head in his hands, then felt himself slide sideways and collapse among the corpses.

Moghedien winced at the display in the sky. Each explosion made her see that deadly fire again, tearing through the Sharans. That flare of light, that moment of panic.

And then . . . and then darkness. She’d awakened some time later, left for dead among the bodies of Sharans. When she’d come to, she had found these fools all across the battlefield, claiming to have won the day.

Claiming? she thought, wincing again as another round of fireworks sounded. *The Great Lord has fallen.* All was lost.

No. No. She continued forward, keeping her step firm, unsuspicious. She had strangled a worker, then taken her form, channeling only a tiny bit and inverting the weave. That should let her escape from this place. She wove around bodies, ignoring the stink to the air.

All was not lost. She still lived. And she was of the Chosen! That meant . . . that meant that she was an empress among her lessers. Why, the Great Lord was imprisoned again, so he could not punish her. And certainly most, if not all, of the other Chosen were dead or imprisoned. If that were true, no one could rival her in knowledge.

This might actually work out. This might be a *victory*. She stopped beside an overturned supply cart, clutching her *cour'souvra*—it was still whole, thankfully. She smiled with a wide grin, then wove a small light to illuminate her way.

Yes . . . Look at the open sky, not the thunderclouds. She could turn this to her advantage. Why ... in the matter of a few years, she could be ruling the world herself!

Something cold snapped around her neck.

Moghedien reached up with horror, then screamed. “No! Not *again!*” Her disguise melted away and the One Power left her.

A smug-looking *suldam* stood behind. “They said we could not take any who called themselves Aes Sedai. But you, you do not wear one of their rings, and you skulk like one who has done something wrong. I do not think you will be missed at all.”

“Free me!” Moghedien said, scratching at the *a’dam*. “Free me, you—”

Pain sent her to the ground, writhing.

“I am called Shanan,” the *suldam* said as another woman approached, a *damane* in tow. “But you may call me mistress. I think that we should return to Ebou Dar quickly.”

Her companion nodded, and the *damane* made a gateway.

They had to drag Moghedien through.

Nynaeve emerged from the Healing tent at Shayol Ghul. The sun was almost below the horizon.

“He’s dead,” she whispered to the small crowd gathered outside.

Saying the words felt like dropping a brick onto her own feet. She did not cry. She had shed those tears already. That did not mean that she didn’t hurt.

Lan came out of the tent behind her, putting an arm around her shoulders. She raised her hand to his. Nearby, Min and Elayne looked at one another.

Gregorin whispered to Darlin—he had been found, half dead, in the wreckage of his tent. Both of them frowned at the women. Nynaeve overheard part of what Gregorin said. ". . . expected the Aiel savage to be heartless, and maybe the Queen of Andor, but the other one? Not a tear."

"They're shocked," Darlin replied.

No, Nynaeve thought, studying Min and Elayne. *Those three know something I do not. I'll have to beat it out of them.*

"Excuse me," Nynaeve said, walking away from Lan.

He followed.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"You shall not be rid of me in the next few weeks, Nynaeve," he said, love pulsing through his bond. "Even if you want it."

"Stubborn ox," she grumbled. "As I recall, you are the one who insisted on leaving me so that you could march alone toward your presumed destiny."

"And you were right about that," Lan said. "As you so often are." He said it so calmly that it was hard to be mad at him.

Besides, it was the women she was mad at. She chose Aviendha first and stalked up to her, Lan by her side.

. . with Rhuarc dead," Aviendha was saying to Sorilea and Bair, "I think that whatever I saw *must* be able to change. It has already."

"I saw your vision, Aviendha," Bair said. "Or something like it, through different eyes. I think it is a warning of something we must not let happen."

The other two nodded, then glanced at Nynaeve and grew as still-faced as Aes Sedai. Aviendha was just as bad as the others, completely calm as she sat in her chair, her feet wrapped in bandages. She might walk again someday, but she would never fight.

"Nynaeve al'Meara," Aviendha said.

"Did you hear me say that Rand is dead?" Nynaeve demanded. "He went silently."

"He that was wounded has woken from the dream," Aviendha said evenly. "It is as all must do. His death was accomplished in greatness, and he will be celebrated in greatness."

Nynaeve leaned down. "All right," she said menacingly, embracing the Source. "Out with it. I chose you because you can't run away from me."

Aviendha displayed a moment of what might have been fear. It was gone in a flash. “Let us prepare his pyre.”

Perrin ran in the wolf dream. Alone.

Other wolves howled their sorrow for his grief. After he passed them, they would return to their celebrations, but that did not make their empathy any less real.

He did not howl. He did not cry out. He became Young Bull, and he ran.

He did not want to be here. He wanted slumber, true slumber. There, he could not feel the pain. Here he could.

I shouldn’t have left her.

A thought of men. Why did it creep in!

But what could I do? I promised not to treat her like glass.

Run. Run fast. Run until exhaustion came!

I had to go to Rand. I had *to. But in doing so, I failed her!*

To the Two Rivers in a flash. Back out, along the river. The Waste, then back, a long run toward Falme.

How could I be expected to hold them both, then let one go?

To Tear. Then to the Two Rivers. A blur, growling, moving as quickly as he could. Here. Here he had wed her.

Here he howled.

Caemlyn, Cairhien, Dumai’s Wells.

Here he saved one of them.

Cairhien, Ghealdan, Malden.

Here he had saved another.

Two forces in his life. Each had pulled at him. Young Bull finally collapsed near some hills somewhere in Andor. A familiar place.

The place where I met Elyas.

He became Perrin again. His thoughts were not wolf thoughts, his troubles not wolf troubles. He stared up at the sky that was now, after Rand's sacrifice, empty of clouds. He had wanted to be with his friend as he died.

This time, he would be with Faile where she had died.

He wanted to scream, but it would do no good. “I have to let go, don’t I?” he whispered toward that sky. “Light. I don’t want to. I learned. I *learned* from Malden. I didn’t do it again! I did what I was supposed to, this time.”

Somewhere nearby, a bird cried in the sky. Wolves howled. Hunting.

"I learned . . ."

A bird's cry.

It sounded like a falcon.

Perrin threw himself to his feet, spinning. *There*. He vanished in an instant, appearing on an open field he did not recognize. No, he *knew* this field. He knew it! This was Merrilor, only without the blood, without the grass churned to mud, without the land blasted and broken.

Here he found a tiny falcon—as small as his hand—crying softly, with a broken leg pinned beneath a rock. Its heartbeat was faint.

Perrin roared as he woke, clawing his way out of the wolf dream. He stood up on the field of bodies, shouting into the night sky. Searchers nearby scattered in fear.

Where? In the darkness, could he find the same place? He ran, stumbling over corpses, through pits made by channelers or dragons. He stopped, looking one way, then another. Where. *Where!*

Flowery soap. A hint of perfume in the air. Perrin dashed toward it, throwing his weight against the corpse of an enormous Trolloc, lying almost chest-high atop other bodies. Beneath it, he found the carcass of a horse. Unable to truly consider what he was doing, or of the strength it should have required, Perrin pulled the horse aside.

Beneath, Faile lay bloodied in a small hollow in the ground, breathing shallowly. Perrin cried out and dropped to his knees, cradling her in his arms, breathing in her scent.

It took him only two heartbeats to *shift* into the wolf dream, carry Faile to Nynaeve far to the north and *shift* out. Seconds later, he felt her being Healed in his arms, unwilling to let go of her even for that.

Faile, his falcon, trembled and stirred. Then she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

The other heroes were gone. Birgitte remained as evening approached. Nearby, soldiers prepared Rand al'Thor's pyre.

Birgitte could not stay much longer, but for now . . . yes, she could stay. A short time. The Pattern would allow it.

"Elayne?" Birgitte said. "Do you know something? About the Dragon?" Elayne shrugged in the waning light. The two stood at the back of the crowd gathering to watch the Dragon Reborn's pyre be lit.

"I know what you're planning," Birgitte said to Elayne. "With the Horn.

And what am I planning?"

"To keep it," Birgitte said, "and the boy. To have it as an Andoran treasure, perhaps a nation's weapon."

"Perhaps."

Birgitte smiled. "It's a good thing I sent him away, then."

Elayne turned to her, ignoring those preparing Rand's pyre. "*What?*"

"I sent Olver away," Birgitte said. "With guards I trust. I told Olver to find someplace nobody would look, a place he could forget, and toss the Horn into it. Preferably the ocean."

Elayne exhaled softly, then turned back toward the pyre. "Insufferable woman." She hesitated. "Thank you for saving me from having to make that decision."

"I thought you'd feel that way." Actually, Birgitte had assumed it would take a long time before Elayne understood. But Elayne had grown in the last few weeks. "Anyway, I must be far from insufferable, since you've done an excellent job of suffering me these last months."

Elayne turned to her again. "That sounds like a farewell."

Birgitte smiled. She could feel it, sometimes, when it was coming. "It is." Elayne looked sorrowful. "Must it be?"

"I'm being reborn, Elayne," Birgitte whispered. "Now. Somewhere, a woman is preparing to give birth, and I will go to that body. It's happening. "I don't want to lose you."

Birgitte chuckled. "Well, perhaps we will meet again. For now, be happy for me, Elayne. This means the cycle continues. I get to be with him again. Gaidai . . . I'll be only a few years younger than he."

Elayne took her arm, eyes watering. "Love and peace, Birgitte. Thank you."

Birgitte smiled, then closed her eyes, and let herself drift away.

As evening settled onto the land, Tam looked up across what had once been the most feared place of all. Shayol Ghul. The last flickers of light showed plants growing here, flowers blooming, grass growing up around fallen weapons and over corpses.

Is this your gift to us, son? he wondered. *A final one?*

Tam lit his torch from the small, flickering flame that crackled in the pit nearby. He went forward, passing lines of those who stood in the night. They had not told many of Rand's funeral rites. All would have wanted to come. Perhaps all deserved to come. The Aes Sedai were planning an elaborate memorial for Egwene; Tam preferred a quiet affair for his son.

Rand could finally rest.

He walked past people standing with heads bowed. None carried light save Tam. The others waited in the dark, a small crowd of perhaps two hundred encircling the bier. Tams torch flickered orange off solemn faces.

In the evening, even with his light, it was hard to tell Aiel from Aes Sedai, Two Rivers man from Tairen king. All were shapes in the night, saluting the body of the Dragon Reborn.

Tam went up to the bier, beside Thom and Moiraine, who were holding hands, faces solemn. Moiraine reached over and gently squeezed Tam's arm.

Tam looked at the corpse, gazing down into his son's face by the fire's light. He did not wipe the tears from his eyes.

You did well. My boy . . . you did so well.

He lit the pyre with a reverent hand.

Min stood at the front of the crowd. She watched Tam, with slumped shoulders, bow his head before the flames. Eventually the man walked back to join the Two Rivers folk. Abell Cauthon embraced him, whispering softly to his friend.

Heads in the night, shadows, turned toward Min, Aviendha and Elayne. They expected something from the three of them. A show of some sort.

Solemnly, Min stepped forward with the other two; Aviendha needed the help of two Maidens to walk, though she was able to stand by leaning on Elayne. The Maidens withdrew to leave the three of them alone before the pyre. Elayne and Min stood with her, watching the fire burn, consuming Rand's corpse.

"I've seen this," Min said. "I knew it would come the day I first met him. We three, together, here."

Elayne nodded. "So now what?"

"Now . . ." Aviendha said. "Now we make sure that everyone well and truly believes he is gone."

Min nodded, feeling the pulsing throb of the bond in the back of her mind. It grew stronger each moment.

Rand al'Thor—just Rand al'Thor—woke in a dark tent by himself. Someone had left a candle burning beside his pallet.

He breathed deeply, stretching. He felt as if he'd just slept long and deep. Shouldn't he be hurting? Stiff? Aching? He felt none of that.

He reached to his side and felt no wounds there. No wounds. For the first time in a long while, there was *no pain*. He almost didn't know what to make of it.

Then he looked down and saw that the hand prodding his side was his own left hand. He laughed, holding it up before him. *A mirror,* he thought.

I need a mirror.

He found one beyond the next partition of the tent. Apparently, he'd been left completely alone. He held up the candle, looking into the small mirror. Moridin's face looked back at him.

Rand touched his face, feeling it. In his right eye hung a single *saa*, black, shaped like the dragon's fang. It didn't move.

Rand slipped back into the portion of the tent where he'd awakened. Laman's sword was there, sitting atop a neat pile of mixed clothing. Alivia apparently hadn't known what he would want to wear. She had been the one to leave these things, of course, along with a bag of coins from a variety of nations. She hadn't ever cared much for either clothing or coin, but she had known he'd need both.

She will help you die. Rand shook his head, dressing and gathering the coins and the sword, then slipping out of the tent. Someone had left a good horse, a dappled gelding, tied not far away. That would do him well. From Dragon Reborn to horsethief. He chuckled to himself. Bareback would have to do.

He hesitated. Nearby, in the darkness, people were singing. This was Shayol Ghul, but not as he remembered it. A blooming Shayol Ghul, full of life.

The song they sang was a Borderlander funeral song. Rand led the horse through the night to get a little closer. He peered between the tents to where three women stood around a funeral pyre.

Moridin, he thought. *He's being cremated with full honors as the Dragon Reborn.*

Rand backed away, then mounted the dapple. As he did so, he noticed one figure who was not standing by the fire. A solitary figure, who looked toward him when all other eyes were turned away.

Cadsuane. She looked him up and down, eyes reflecting firelight from the glow of Rand's pyre. Rand nodded, waited for a moment, then turned the horse and heeled it away.

Cadsuane watched him go.

Curious, she thought. Those eyes had confirmed her suspicions. That would be information she could use. No need to keep watching this sham of a funeral, then.

She walked away through the camp, and there strolled directly into an ambush.

"Saerin," she said as the women fell in around her. "Yukiri, Lyrelle, Rubinde. What is this?"

"We would like direction," Rubinde said.

"Direction?" Cadsuane snorted. "Ask the new Amyrlin, once you find some poor woman to put into the position."

The other women continued to walk with her.

As it hit her, Cadsuane stopped in place.

"Oh, *blood and ashes*, no!" Cadsuane said, spinning on them. "No, no, *no"*

The women smiled in an almost predatory way.

"You always talked so wisely to the Dragon Reborn of responsibility," Yukiri said.

"You speak of how the women of this Age need better training," Saerin added.

"It is a new Age," Lyrelle said. "We have many challenges ahead of us . . . and we will need a strong Amyrlin to lead us."

Cadsuane closed her eyes, groaning.

Rand breathed a sigh of relief as he left Cadsuane behind. She did not raise an alarm, though she had continued to study him as he put distance between them. Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed her walking off with some other Aes Sedai.

She worried him; she probably suspected something he wished she did not. It was better than her raising an alarm, though.

He sighed, fishing in his pocket, where he found a pipe. *Thank you, Alivia, for that*, he thought, packing it with tabac from a pouch he found in the other pocket. By instinct, he reached for the One Power to light it.

He found nothing. No *saidin* in the void, nothing. He paused, then smiled and felt an enormous relief. He could not channel. Just to be certain, he tentatively reached for the True Power. Nothing there either.

He regarded his pipe, riding up a little incline to the side of Thakan dar, now covered in plants. No way to light the tabac. He inspected it for a moment in the darkness, then *thought* of the pipe being lit. And it was.

Rand smiled and turned south. He glanced over his shoulder. All three women at the pyre had turned from it to look directly at him. He could make them out, though not much else, by the light of the burning body.

I wonder which of them will follow me, he thought, then smiled deeper. *Rand al’Thor, you’ve built up quite a swelled head, haven’t you? Assuming that one, or more, would follow.*

Maybe none of them would. Or maybe all of them would, in their own time. He found himself chuckling.

Which would he pick? Min ... but no, to leave Aviendha? Elayne. No. He laughed. He couldn’t pick. He had three women in love with him, and didn’t know which he would like to have follow him. Any of them. All of them. *Light, man. You’re hopeless. Hopelessly in love with all three, and there's no way out of it.*

He heeled the horse into a canter, heading farther south. He had a purse full of coin, a good horse and a strong sword. Laman’s sword, which was a better sword than he’d have wanted. It might draw attention. It was a true heron-marked sword with a fine blade.

Did Alivia realize how much money she’d given him? She didn't know a thing about coins. She’d probably stolen the lot of it, so he wasn't just a horsethief. Well, he’d told her to get him some gold, and she’d done it. He could buy an entire farm in the Two Rivers with what he carried.

South. East or west would do, but he figured he wanted to go someplace away from it all for good. South first, then maybe out west, along the coast. Maybe he could find a ship? There was so much of the world he hadn't seen. He'd experienced a few battles, he'd gotten caught up in a huge Game of Houses. Many things he hadn't wanted anything to do with. He'd seen his father's farm. And palaces. He'd seen a lot of palaces.

He just had not had the leisure to have a real look at much of the world. *That will be new,* he thought. Traveling without being chased, or having to rule here or there. Traveling where he could just sleep in a barn in exchange for splitting someone's firewood. He thought about that, and found himself laughing, riding on south and smoking his impossible pipe. As he did so, a wind rose up around him, around the man who had been called lord, Dragon Reborn, king, killer, lover and friend.

The wind rose high and free, to soar in an open sky with no clouds. It passed over a broken landscape scattered with corpses not yet buried. A landscape covered, at the same time, with celebrations. It tickled the branches of trees that had finally begun to put forth buds.

The wind blew southward, through knotted forests, over shimmering plains and toward lands unexplored. This wind, it was not the ending. There are no endings, and never will be endings, to the turning of the Wheel of Time.

But it was *an* ending.

> And it came to pass in those days, as it had come before and would come again, that the Dark lay heavy on the land and weighed down the hearts of men, and the green things failed, and hope died. And men cried out to the Creator, saying, O Light of the Heavens, Light of the World, let the Promised One be born of the mountain, according to the prophecies, as he was in ages past and will be in ages to come. Let the Prince of the Morning sing to the land that green things will grow and the valleys give forth lambs. Let the arm of the Lord of the Dawn shelter us from the Dark, and the great sword of justice defend us. Let the Dragon ride again on the winds of time.
>
> —from *Charal Drianaan te Calamon,*
> *The Cycle of the Dragon.*

Author unknown, the Fourth Age.

He came like the wind, like the wind touched everything, and like the wind was gone.
—from *The Dragon Reborn*.
By Loial, son of Arent son of Halan,
the Fourth Age.

The End
of the Last Book of
The Wheel of Time

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About the Authors

Robert Jordan was born in 1948 in Charleston, South Carolina. He taught himself to read when he was four with the incidental aid of a twelve-years-older brother, and was tackling Mark Twain and Jules Verne by five. He was a graduate of the Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina, with a degree in physics. He served two tours in Vietnam with the U.S. Army; among his decorations are the Distinguished Flying Cross with bronze oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star with “V” and bronze oak leaf cluster, and two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Palm. A history buff, he also wrote dance and theater criticism. He enjoyed the outdoor sports of hunting, fishing, and sailing, and the indoor sports of poker, chess, pool, and pipe collecting. He began writing in 1977 and continued until his death on September 16, 2007.

Brandon Sanderson was born in 1975 in Lincoln, Nebraska. After a semester as a biochem major, Brandon came to his senses and recognized writing as his true vocation. He switched to English, graduating from Brigham Young University, then returning for a master’s in creative writing. During this time Brandon wrote thirteen novels, finally publishing his sixth, *Elantris*, in 2005. He has since released books for both adults and young readers, including the Mistborn trilogy, *Warbreaker, The Way of Kings,* and the Alcatraz series. He lives with his wife and children in Utah, where he often plays Magic: The Gathering, regularly eats mac-and-cheese, and occasionally teaches writing at BYU. Find more at www.brandonsanderson.com.

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